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Los Angeles

“Islands of Death and Torture”:

The Solovetsky Islands in Labor Camp Memoirs, 1925–1939

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Languages and Cultures

by

Lydia Hart Roberts

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This study examines representations of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp (SLON) in memoirs published by survivors of the camp in the 1920s and 1930s. The introduction identifies the memoirs in generic and historical context, arguing that authors wrote their memoirs of SLON from a unique position in between Russian and non-Russian publishing. A detailed literary survey places the early memoirs in the context of the twentieth century, which saw an explosion of interest in the Solovetsky Islands and former labor camp, but also saw the original texts describing the camp increasingly maligned. The memoirs capture the transformation of the camp from its peak as a propaganda tool and notorious labor camp to its decline in the 1930s. They also represent a similar narrative structure across the otherwise diverse texts. This “SLON

metanarrative” is the focus of the dissertation's first chapter, which outlines the different elements of the largely chronological narrative that memoirists used to orient readers and describe their own experiences. The second chapter describes elements of SLON imagery that exist outside of the chronological narrative, highlighting the ways that memoirists described the islands and camp. The conclusion focuses on the more abstract techniques that memoirists used to explain the camp and the Solovetsky Islands (Solovki) to readers as a site of systemic repression and a focal point of international condemnation. This dissertation positions the Solovetsky Islands within a broader cultural context, contrasting Soviet appropriation of the region's resources with émigré critiques of its ruination and exploitation of prisoner labor. The analysis focuses on the formal features of early texts, isolating the origins of the Solovetsky mythos before its later reinterpretation in post-WWII and post-GULAG discourse. Through this lens, the study offers an exploration of camp literature, emphasizing the earliest narratives of Soviet repression. This isolates and highlights the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp as it was portrayed before World War II, *The Gulag Archipelago*, and later memorialization efforts such as the “Solovetsky stones.” By analyzing the composition, imagery, and stylistic language of these early narratives, the study explores the development of the Solovetsky mythos and its influence on cultural memory.

The dissertation of Lydia Hart Roberts is approved.

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To all those who suffered: those who wrote about it and those who could not.

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List of Acronyms

SLON	Solovetskii Lager' Osobogo Naznachenii, Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp
VSU	Viacheslav Umniagin, ed. <i>Vospominaniia solovetskikh uznikov</i> . 10 vols. Solovki: Spaso-Preobrazhenskii Solovetskii Stavropigial'nyi Mikhailo-Arkhangel'skii Monastyr', 2013–2022.

Glossary

Solovetsky Islands, Solovki, Solovetsk

“Solovetsk” is an anglicized shorthand for “The Solovetsky Islands” and was widely used from the nineteenth century until WWI, when “Solovki,” the transliteration of the common Russian nickname, became the primary colloquial term used in English.

Cheka, GPU, OGPU, NKVD, and “Chekist”

“Chekist” comes from the abbreviated name for the *Vserossiiskaia cherezvychainaia komissii* (Cheka, All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage), the first version of the Soviet secret police founded by Felix Dzerzhinsky in 1917. In 1922, the secret police was reorganized as the *Gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie* (GPU, State Political Directorate) under the *Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennikh del* (NKVD, People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs). A reorganization of the GPU into the OGPU (Joint State Political Directorate) followed in 1923, although memoirists tend to use GPU rather than OGPU when referring to the organization, and “Chekist” to refer to individual agents within the GPU/OGPU. The term continues to be used in Russian to refer to agents of the secret police regardless of agency.

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1. Introduction: The Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp in Early Memoir

The aim of the present study is to analyze narrative representations of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp (SLON) in memoirs by survivors of that camp in order to explore depictions of the camp and Solovetsky Islands (often referred to as Solovki) as a site of systemic repression and focal point of international condemnation. Through its focus on composition, imagery, and stylistic language, this study underscores the enduring significance of these early narratives in shaping the mythos of the Solovetsky Islands, offering a nuanced understanding of their place in cultural memory and their place in a literary canon spanning the twentieth century. As laid out in the literature survey in this introduction, the notoriety of the Solovetsky camp reached its first peak in the 1920s and 1930s, when memoirists combined the rich traditions of escape and survival memoirs and Russian prison literature to convey their experiences at Solovki to Western audiences. In the 1920s and 1930s, memoirists of the Solovetsky camp, one of the earliest and most prominent Soviet labor camps in the twentieth century, tasked themselves with describing their experiences to reading audiences. Their tools for the task—the conventions of memoir—are also addressed in this introduction.

These memoirs are early entries in the genre of Soviet camp literature, a genre that developed in response to the increasing use of concentration and death camps in the twentieth century. During World War II, few accounts of the camp were published (and these were overwhelmed by the number of war- and camp-related memoirs that followed the war), but in the years that followed a number of authors kept the topic of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp alive. It was only in the 1960s, however, that the camp was reevaluated as a symbol of early and systematic Soviet repressions. Since then, its prominence grew to another series of peaks—the

work of Dmitry Likhachev and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the appearance of Solovetsky Stones across Russia, the numerous scholarly evaluations of the camp and, in 2014, the appearance of Zakhar Prilepin's blockbuster novel *The Monastery*. The rich tradition of the Solovetsky Islands as a symbol in the post-Soviet landscape began, however, with a set of lurid first-hand accounts of the camp published in the 1920s and 1930s. This is the first examination of SLON memoirs that emphasizes pre-war accounts and outlines how the imagery of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp was developed by memoirists.

The memoirs addressed here were published or written in the 1920s and 1930s, when the camp was operational and the Soviet labor camp system was expanding across the country, while outside of the Soviet Union efforts to bring awareness to the camps and the prisoners laboring in them were at their pre-WWII height across the world.¹ Émigré memoirists documented the life cycle of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp from its heyday in the 1920s (when SLON was the most populous labor camp, a showpiece of Soviet propaganda, and the most notorious place of confinement) to its gradual withering in the 1930s, after the first Five Year Plan redirected prisoners and other resources elsewhere. During this period, the twentieth-century mythos of the Solovetsky Islands was developed on both sides. The Soviets valued the space for its remoteness and abundance of lumber, taking advantage of its natural resources while, according to memoirists, gleefully perverting its centuries-long religious significance. Memoirists and their supporters abroad fulminated against this ruination of Russia's Christian heritage and exploitation of prisoner labor, treating the labor camp as a synecdoche for systematic repression

¹ See Dariusz Tolczyk, *Blissful Blindness: Soviet Crimes Under Western Eyes* (Indiana University Press, 1999), 40–42; and Mark Vincent, *Criminal Subculture in the Gulag: Prisoner Society in the Stalinist Labour Camps, 1924–1953* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 6–7, 33.

across the Soviet Union. The depiction of the islands and their symbolic value are the main topics of this study, explored in terms of composition, imagery, and stylistic usage in the earliest memoirs of the camp.

The purpose of this framing is to isolate the origins of the SLON mythos from its later reinterpretations. Readers familiar with the imagery, symbols, and figurative language that characterize the Solovetsky Islands today may be surprised to find that early memoirists do not treat the stones on the Solovetsky islands as symbolic objects, among other examples. The problem of writing about the Gulag (and the related problem of writing about the Holocaust) is a key issue in twentieth century literature. Early memoirists of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp constantly run up against this difficulty, commending on the near-impossibility of explaining their experiences in a satisfactory and comprehensible way. These features are largely absent from later accounts, which benefited from more time and consideration. Thanks to their immediacy, these early accounts show camp literature in its infancy, relying on a simple narrative structure, familiar elements of autobiographical writing, and a limited set of images and figurative devices to convey an experience that is totally new and unbelievable to most readers.

To that end, this dissertation works almost exclusively from early texts and catalogues the formal features of these texts to demonstrate how these writers tried to represent their experiences. The detailed literature survey included in this introduction demonstrates the active development of this topic over the twentieth century; the body of the dissertation, in contrast, presents the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp in its original telling by survivors of the camp. As such, it represents a unique effort to recover and highlight camp literature before WWII made the Holocaust the main topic and point of reference for this genre, before Alexander Solzhenitsyn revolutionized literary methods for discussing the GULAG, and before Dmitry Likhachev and

other representatives of the Russian intelligentsia developed the Solovetsky Islands into an international symbol for the memorialization of Soviet repression.

This dissertation addresses a crucial and underexamined aspect of the Solovetsky labor camp's history through the earliest representations of the camp. I argue that these sources are formative but maligned, with historians mining them for factual claims and cultural scholars discussing them in broad strokes. In contrast, I highlight these memoirs as a unique corpus with remarkable formal similarities. What should follow from this foundational examination of the earliest accounts of the camp is further work on representations of Solovki across the twentieth century, and particularly discussions of the nationalized views of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp that have developed in Central and Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union. This dissertation, which outlines the development of the Solovetsky Islands as a symbolic space in the twentieth century, represents an essential piece of the life cycle of camp literature. The return of the Solovetsky Islands, at one time purported to be an international symbol of Soviet repression, to a narrowly defined Russian Orthodox space, reflects the collapse of all such efforts to recognize and commemorate Soviet Repressions. In this dissertation, I focus on the development of this kind of international coordination; all of the memoirs were published outside of the Soviet Union by necessity, and many were originally published in a language other than Russian. It was precisely in this period, I maintain, that the Solovetsky Islands became an international symbol of Soviet repressions.

The seemingly obvious significance of SLON is somewhat illusory upon examination. The camp itself was prominent for a short but significant time and is often framed as the first

camp of the Gulag.² The camp was notorious, but not the deadliest; even in the realm of rumor early memoirists describe SLON's predecessor camps at Pertominsk and Kholmogory as more torturous and deadly to its prisoners³; the massive labor projects that followed SLON (White Sea Canal, Moscow Canal etc.) grew more severe and efficient in extracting labor from their prisoners; and today the notoriety of SLON is eclipsed by that of Kolyma, a word that has become synonymous with the Gulag. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, outlining the same distinctions among these symbolic Gulag camps, playfully posits that they might make up a "Hegelian Triad": "Solovki—Belomor—Kolyma? Thesis, antithesis, synthesis? The negation of a negation, but enriched?"⁴ Since the publication of *The Gulag Archipelago* in 1973, Solzhenitsyn's treatment of the Solovetsky labor camp has irrevocably influenced perceptions of SLON worldwide. One purpose of this dissertation is to synchronically isolate the SLON depicted before Solzhenitsyn, and before World War II and attendant comparisons to the Nazi concentration camps.

The real keys to the significance of SLON turn out to be threefold: 1) the timing of the camp's notoriety in the first fifteen years following 1917, when people across the world were intently following the successes and failures of the new Soviet government; 2) the makeup and significance of the prison population, many of whom were famous, well-educated, and politically literate; 3) the fact that many of these prisoners survived and were either reintegrated into Soviet

² See Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, "The Archipelago Rises from the Sea" in *The Gulag Archipelago* vol. 2 (Harper Perennial, 2020), 25–70; and Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (Random House, 2007).

³ See, for instance, Sozerko Malsagoff, *An Island Hell: A Soviet Prison in the Far North* (A.M. Philpot Ltd, 1926), 43–51; Boris Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka* (Houghton and Mifflin Company, 1929), 290; Mikhail Zakharovich Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga: Zapiski solovchanina*, ed. Alexander Amfiteatrov (Sofia: Izdatel'stvo NTSNP, 1938), 103–104.

⁴ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 3–4:127.

society or escaped the country and wrote about their experiences. This last factor resulted from a combination of shorter sentences (three-year sentences were common in the early 1920s); progressive sentence reductions until 1926 for both criminals (*ugolovniki*) and counterrevolutionaries; and, of course, the fact that many survivors wrote about their experiences.

The purpose of isolating this corpus of SLON memoirs from the 1920s and 1930s, before the work of Boris Shiriaev, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Dmitry Likhachev, and Zakhar Prilepin, is to identify the earliest narrative techniques, imagery, and symbolic elements of the islands developed while the camp was still functioning. Memoirists' focus on readers' ability to comprehend their sometimes-unbelievable claims reflects in the comparisons they make and explanations they give. The tropes and devices that I identify and discuss below reflect the nexus of symbolic associations that are generally agreed to characterize the Solovetsky Islands, particularly in Russian cultural memory.

In his dissertation, Viacheslav Umniagin identified a shifting set of features that characterize the "image-symbol" of the Solovetsky monastery and islands in the Solovetsky metatext, the concept that forms the basis of his examination of the islands in the twentieth century. For Umniagin, the "traditional image of Solovki" includes its role as the threshold of hell, a place of punishment and spiritual transformation, a "land sanctified by ancient religious rituals," a realm of spiritual and physical fears and achievements, and "a space where the principles of Russian statehood were challenged and understood."⁵ These features can be found in the first accounts of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp, but memoirists tend to represent

⁵ Viacheslav V. Umniagin, *Obraz Solovkov v russkoj literature XX veka (na materiale vospominanij solovetskikh uznikov i romannoju prozy 2000-kh gg.)* (PhD diss., Institut Mirovoj Literatury Rossijskoj Akademii Nauk, 2018), 93–94, 127.

the camp in novel and varied ways that often differ from the general pattern developed and refined over the twentieth century by influential chroniclers of the islands.

Crucial, in this respect—and perhaps most important in the contemporary context of cultural memory of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp—is the fact that few of the early memoirists represent themselves as Russian Orthodox believers. Umniagin's line of inquiry rests, generally, on evaluations of the monastery's significance as a longstanding place of faith, piety, and monastic labor. Over the twentieth century, a long line of memoirists, many of them clergymen, addressed the significance of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp as part and parcel with the repression of Russia's Orthodox heritage. This perspective is represented in the early memoirs, primarily in connection with Ivan Zaitsev's stirring condemnations of Soviet profanation of the sacred monastery, but also with Yuri Bezsonov's grim predictions for the fate of Russian Christianity. However, the real key to this perspective is Boris Shiryayev, whose blockbuster memoir *The Undying Light* was not published until the 1950s and not popularized in Russia until the late 1980s. Although the memoirists addressed here tend to mention the monastery's history and significance, their treatments of the spiritual importance of the monastery tend to be somewhat removed. As the discussion throughout this dissertation reveals, these memoirists came from a variety of backgrounds and display a diversity of viewpoints regarding their experiences. Umniagin's observations on the Solovetsky metatext, painstakingly developed over years of study, represent a holistic and religiously-informed perspective on an issue narrowly tailored to a national audience. My work, by contrast, isolates the most outwardly- and internationally-focused of the SLON memoirs to determine the difference between early attempts to describe the camp and later efforts to reevaluate its importance in Russian cultural memory.

The introduction to this dissertation is aimed at quickly orienting readers in the historical context of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp and the memoirs' generic context, outlining scholarship regarding the problematics of memoir as a genre and placing this group of memoirs in the context of SLON literature and Soviet camp literature more broadly. The introduction concludes with a brief survey of information about the memoirs addressed here.

The first chapter ("The SLON Metanarrative") addresses the compositional techniques that memoirists developed to guide readers to their arrival at the Solovetsky Islands. Memoirists tend to follow the chronological flow of incarceration, from life before arrest through arrest, interrogation, sentencing, and transit (*etap*) to the islands. The initial memoirists of "Solovki," however, never went to the islands, escaping from the mainland transit point at Kem. While Yuri Bezsonov barely mentions the islands in his 1929 book *My Twenty-Six Prisons and My Escape from Solovetski*,⁶ his fellow escapee Sozerko Malsagoff foregrounds the islands throughout his earlier book, *An Island Hell: A Soviet Prison in the Far North*,⁷ embedding secondhand accounts of the islands in a narrative that followed his own arrest, transit to the Kem subcamp, and escape. Malsagoff's dilemma lay in his limited but real experience of the camp combined with the urgency he expresses in the book to bring awareness of the camp to international audiences. Later authors, even those who spent years on the islands as prisoners at SLON, dealt with the same dilemma of authority to different degrees. They remedied the limitations of their individual experiences by supplementing secondhand accounts heard at the camp and post factum information available in emigration. This resulted in memoirs that contain a mix of what Renate Lachmann identified as "encyclopedic" and "diegetic" ("narrative reproduction of the past")

⁶ Youri [Yuri] Bezsonov, *My Twenty-Six Prisons and My Escape from Solovetski* (London: Butler & Tanner LTD, 1929).

⁷ Sozerko Malsagoff, *An Island Hell: A Soviet Prison in the Far North* (A.M. Philpot Ltd, 1926).

techniques for capturing the past.⁸ Each memoirist uses a hybrid of chronological narrative and encyclopedic summaries of various topics (i.e., “Women at SLON,” “Hygiene,” “Criminality”) to represent his or her experiences. This first section outlines the compositional techniques along two lines of inquiry: how memoirists anticipate arrival to the Solovetsky Islands and how memoirists present themselves in relation to the forces of state repression. Drawing from Lachmann and other scholars of cultural memory, along with Erich Auerbach’s work on the representation of reality in literature and broader scholarship on autobiography and memoir,⁹ I analyze each composition in terms of the author’s insertion and characterization of him- or herself.

The second chapter (“SLON Imagery: Descriptions of the Islands and Camp”) identifies the memoirists’ imagery of the islands and camp, ranging from reluctant appreciation of the environment to strong condemnation of the living conditions and punishment cells. Key in this section is the development of contradictory and paradoxical symbols through the imagery of the monastery, forests, and workshops on the islands. The last chapter addresses language itself, outlining the stylized language that authors employ to describe, contextualize, and ultimately create an image of the Solovetsky Islands on the world stage.

This study situates the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp within the broader historical, symbolic, and literary frameworks that shaped its depiction in the interwar period. My emphasis on the complexities of memoir, particularly the earliest memoirs of the camp, highlights how SLON became both a powerful symbol of Soviet repression and a focal point of international critique. The interplay of firsthand experience, secondhand accounts, and literary techniques

⁸ Renate Lachmann, “Cultural memory and the role of literature” *European Review* 12, no. 2 (2004): 165–178.

⁹ See below.

highlights the difficulty of capturing a unified narrative of SLON, as memoirists grappled with their limited perspectives and the weight of representing a collective tragedy.

A. Historical context

The Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp (*Solovetskii lager' osobogo znachenii*; SLON) was located in the former Solovetsky Monastery from 1923–1939. The monastery, established by Saint Zosima in 1436, is located on the Solovetsky Islands, an archipelago consisting of six islands and more than 100 smaller islands in the White Sea. Long before the Bolsheviks transformed the monastery into a labor camp, this topos has contained a series of seeming paradoxes from its extreme northern location and surprisingly mild climate to its outsized role in Russian history despite its geographical isolation. The islands have also been characterized by a contradictory mix of extreme piety, brutal violence, and constant sacralizing labor.

Zosima himself was not the first to dedicate the islands to monastic work; he was preceded by Saints Savvaty and Herman. After Savvaty died in 1435, Herman recruited Zosima to continue their monastic mission by emphasizing the islands' natural abundance and remote location: "Zosima, listening to the story about the saint, and about the location of the island, and about places suitable for creating a monastery: about land for cultivation, and about trees for construction, and about many fishing lakes and places for catching sea fish—listening to Herman about all this, Zosima rejoiced in spirit [...]"¹⁰ Once on the islands, the monks encounter a series of difficulties related to the islands' remoteness and harsh climate. The fitful start to the monastery, as told in the *Lives of Saints Zosima and Savvaty*, is repeated in stories of people

¹⁰ See R. P. Dmitrieva, ed., *Zhitiia Zosimy i Savvatiia Solovetskikh*, translation and commentary by O. V. Panchenko, in *Biblioteka literatury Drevnei Rusi* vol. 13, ed. D. S. Likhachev, L. A. Dmitrieva, A. A. Alekseeva, N. V. Ponyrko (Nauka, 2005).

arriving to the islands, being forced to leave due to lack of supplies then finding it impossible to return, and in general the intensive labor required to maintain human life on the islands.¹¹

The earliest inhabitants of the islands were fishermen who visited in warm weather, but their repeated attempts to maintain human life on the islands year-round were often disrupted by severe isolation of the winters, cut off from contact for up to six months of the year. Still, they returned every year when the ice broke to take advantage of the islands' surprising natural abundance. In contrast, the *Lives*, "remarkable for [their] precise adherence to the hagiographic canon,"¹² present the islands as empty of permanent residents up to the arrival of Savvaty and Herman. In the *Life of Saint Savvaty*, the Pomorye people living across from the islands only begin to desire them when the monks settle there.¹³ The Pomorye then dispatch a family to settle the islands as well, although the two monks do not notice their arrival until two angels viciously beat the fisherman's wife, a miraculous event purported to have happened on the hill "later called Sekirnaya."¹⁴ The woman is cast down, beaten by two angels who admonish her to quickly leave the islands as the space has been prepared for the monastery. In this version of the tale, the monks arrive first and the fishermen attempt to compete with them for control of the island, leading to divine intervention in favor of the monks. This story, combining misogynist violence and divine intervention, continues to define the monastic legacy of the islands to this day.¹⁵

As the monks slowly developed the islands over the next four centuries, they replaced evidence of pre-Christian habitation with chapels and marked sacred spaces—like the site of the fishwife's beating—with crosses. N. M. Terebikhin, a philosopher and ethnographer who

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Umniagin, *Obraz Solovkov v russkoj literature XX veka*, 128.

¹⁵ Dmitrieva, ed., "Zhitiia Zosimy i Savvatiia Solovetskikh," n.p.

conceptualized the “metaphysics of the (Russian) North,” writes that such crosses were placed strategically: “The works (monuments) of Russian hierotopic art (crosses, chapels, churches, monasteries) were erected right in the place of the sacred sites belonging to the indigenous inhabitants of the North to stay embedded in the very *heart* of the pagan sacredness manifested in the island topos.”¹⁶ Later, the Bolsheviks would make the same attempts to repurpose the space by tearing down crosses and church bells, replacing them with stars, “red corners,” and other indications of the transformed state of the country. This transformation of the space is a topic of frequent interest for memoirists, who often point to instances where the signs of the past reveal themselves like a palimpsest.

On their arrival to the islands, the early monks faced frequent natural disasters. Just as the monks had once repurposed pagan sites, they found themselves repeatedly rebuilding their own dwellings, frequently damaged or destroyed by fire or powerful storms. The conditions on the islands make renewal a necessity and impel the salvific labor that characterizes the Solovetsky monastic brotherhood. This labor will be repeated and transformed over the next six centuries, with the essential concept of the monastery increasingly reified by means of physical structures such as the monastery itself, built 1584–1594; the canal system—dug by the monks—that connects the islands’ many lakes; and the many smaller chapels and huts that dot the islands. Destruction and rebuilding can characterize any space, especially from a long historical perspective. The Solovetsky Islands are set apart in the earliest texts that characterize them by the pious labor undertaken to rebuild the monastery and by the angelic violence that justifies the project of building a religious settlement in such a forbidding place.

¹⁶ A.M. Tamitsky and N.M. Terebikhin, “Island as a memorial site in the sacral landscape of the Arctic regions of the Russian North,” *IOP Conference Series Earth and Environmental Science* 302, no. 1 (2019), 4.

After the northern front of the Russian Civil War subsided in the early 1920s, the monastery's religious function was curtailed by the Bolsheviks, although some of the monks tried to stay on as workers at the collective farm established on the island in May 1920. By the time the monastery kremlin caught fire in May 1923, the island was already being repurposed again into a prison camp, with the surviving monks, carriers of Solovetsky traditions and lore, mostly exiled from the islands or killed. The monastery was repopulated with criminals and counterrevolutionaries, while political prisoners (socialists opposed to the Bolshevik party) were housed at former hermitages across the islands, including the Savatieevo skete.¹⁷ The landscape was thus repurposed once again to serve economic and carceral functions for the new government.

The camp fulfilled practical as well as symbolic functions for the new Soviet government: in 1923, the GPU began to gather political prisoners from other camps in the Russian North on the islands, viewing the remote islands as an ideal location for isolating troublesome prisoners from international audiences. The notoriety and remoteness of the camps, combined with the symbolic weight of a former monastery transformed into a Soviet “reeducation” camp, attracted interest in the Soviet Union and outside of it, especially among the socialists in emigration who closely tracked the fates of their imprisoned comrades.

As the camp grew, so did its notoriety in the Soviet Union and abroad, with GPU interrogators threatening to send detainees to Solovki and international audiences learning about the “Island of Death” from escapees and anticommunist agitators. As the 1920s progressed, the economic role of the camps grew in importance for the Soviet Union, with SLON and other

¹⁷ Irina Flige, “Prisoners of the Solovetsky Islands. Part I: Forced Labour, Theatre and Self-Sufficiency in the Soviet Model Camp,” *Communist Crimes*, Estonian Institute of Historical Memory, January 22, 2021.

camps providing the slave labor for lucrative cash exports while the GPU worked to conceal the origins of the lumber and gold. As the GPU labor camp system expanded across the country, the Solovetsky Islands were gradually depopulated; as the islands' once-lush forests were exhausted, prisoners were sent across the Russian north on lumbering crews. In 1931, most of the camp's prisoners and equipment were transferred to the next showpiece mass labor site, the White Sea Canal. In 1933, the camp was refashioned from a labor camp into a prison (STON), and in 1939 the rump prison was emptied and transformed into a military training camp in preparation for the impending war.

B. SLON memoir in generic context

To date, firsthand accounts of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp remain one of the main sources of information about life inside the camp.¹⁸ Many SLON survivors who made it abroad in the 1920s and 1930s published an account of their experiences, whether in a newspaper article or book. These memoirs, particularly those published before the advent of World War II, are the subject of this dissertation. About a third of the accounts addressed here were written by non-Russians: two were published in Polish in Interwar Poland; one Polish account was written in the 1930s but not published until 2006; and one compilation of Ukrainian-language accounts was published in Warsaw in 1931. Two of the accounts are from non-Russian survivors of the camp whose stories were published in Russian translation in émigré newspapers. The rest of the memoirs (nine in total) were written by self-identified Russians who emigrated from the Soviet

¹⁸ Other viable sources are contemporaneous Soviet publications (including newspapers, literary journals, and scientific books and articles published at the camp), more recent publications related to the camp (see Natalia Kuziakina's notes to *Theatre in the Solovki Prison Camp* (Routledge, 1995), 147–157), and archival materials (see Andrea Gullotta's list of archival sources in *Intellectual Life and Literature at Solovki 1923–1930* (Legenda, 2018), 332–335).

Union and published their accounts in Western publishing markets as newspaper articles and monographs (originally in Russian, French, or English). The resultant memoirs reflect the fusion of two distinct literary and publishing traditions across the Russian-“European” divide. In the next section, I outline memoir as a genre in its Russian and Western literary contexts and discuss the use of memoir as a historical and literary source cross-linguistically and cross-culturally (and across disciplines).

1. What is memoir?

Memoir in its simplest definition is “a narrative composed from personal experience.”¹⁹ Julie Rak sums up the “traditional” understanding of memoir as “the record of a public life or as a telling of a person’s life in terms of an event.”²⁰ While the term is broad and somewhat fungible, memoirs tend to be works authored by a single narrator who purports to have witnessed or participated in events he or she considers of historical or cultural relevance, recent or distant. In the longstanding critical tradition, autobiographies were comprehensive life stories with introspective and philosophical emphasis written by authors with some claim to literary skill or historical importance, while memoirs typically addressed a specific period or event and could be written by anyone, public or private.²¹ Today, the distinction has been collapsed or reversed, depending on the context.²² Combining the individual perspective and historicity, memoir blends

¹⁹ *Merriam-Webster*, “memoir.”

²⁰ Julie Rak, “Are Memoirs Autobiography? A Consideration of Genre and Public Identity,” *Genre* 37, no. 3–4 (2004): 305.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 306.

²² Ben Yagoda, “Author’s Note: By Way of Definition” in *Memoir: A History* (Riverhead Books, 2009): 9–11. Yagoda argues for the conflation of the terms “memoir,” “autobiography,” and even “memoirs” in contemporary usage.

public and private life and is popular among broad audiences for this reason.²³ Perhaps memoir is best understood as a phenomenon of the publishing industry and its popular context, a position that placed memoir at odds with the long traditions of both history and literary studies. Due to real problems with memoir as a historical and literary source (for the former, it is typically unreliable and for the latter, it is typically unliterary) memoir tends to be used in limited contexts or systematically erased. Perhaps because the form is historically popular among reading audiences, particularly in the UK and US,²⁴ and open to authors of all kinds, memoir was long considered a problematic source among scholars of literature and historians. Still, due to the abundance and flexibility of memoirs, they have broad use across disciplines that does not necessarily correlate to their perceived value.

While there are many subgenres within memoir and life-writing, key in this dissertation is the captivity narrative, which stems from the first Christian confessional texts (such as the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine) and developed over the centuries into a uniquely cross-cultural form of writing. Although, I will argue, the Russian authors of these books were uniquely informed by the Russian prison literature, their works were typically published for foreign audiences and advertised to readers as exciting, excruciating, or edifying.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I identified fifteen accounts written in the 1920s and 1930s by self-identified survivors of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp (SLON). All but one were published outside of the Soviet Union in the same period (Fr. Wincenty Ilgin composed his

²³ Rak, “Are Memoirs Autobiography?,” 306: Rak argues that the “unstable meanings” of memoir (“between public and private, between ‘auto’ and ‘bio,’ and between literary discourse and what early theorists of autobiography sought to keep out of the genre, namely non-literary writing”) are the source of memoir’s popularity at the time (2000s) and the impetus for contemporaneous scholarly reevaluation of those sources.

²⁴ Ben Yagoda, *Memoir: A History* (Riverhead Books, 2009): 16–17.

memoir in the 1930s but it was only published in 2006.) Twelve of the accounts are memoirs in the strictest definition: first-person accounts of a historically significant period in the memoirist's life, published in monograph. These accounts make up the bulk of the analysis in this dissertation. The other three (Said Qureshi and Alexander Grube's accounts, published as series of newspaper articles; Levko Chykalenko's compilation of Ukrainian peasants' accounts) are included as relevant in my treatment of imagery and language, but the composition of these accounts is quite different from the other memoirs and is not addressed to a significant degree in the first chapter on the SLON metanarrative.

2. Memoir as historical source

The possibilities of memoirs for reconstructing historical events, particularly regarding public opinion and individual perspectives on important moments in history, meant that memoir was always an important source for historians, but not a privileged one. Official documents have long been historians' preferred sources, while memoirs and personal accounts, even those written by key figures in historical events or providing unique information, require qualification when entered into the historical record.²⁵ Thus, historians who utilize memoir as a source tend to 1) emphasize its unreliability; 2) cull verifiable claims from their broader context; 3) heavily contextualize the sources (temporally, politically, etc.); and 4) summarize across memoirs to build an aggregate picture. These tendencies spring from the texts themselves, which 1) are often written by laypeople with limited access to verifiable historical sources; 2) can contain flawed or

²⁵ See Jan Plamper, "Foucault's Gulag," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 3, no. 2 (2002): 255–280, for a discussion of Michel Foucault's preference for legal documents as the source for his "genealogical method" and the limitations of these sources for examining Russia and the Soviet Union.

false claims while remaining popular among the reading public; 3) can be published by anyone with any ideological agenda; 4) each recollect a different perspective of one and the same event.

Although memoirists and historians both inhabit the fluid position of simultaneously participating in history, observing history, and writing history, historians try to mitigate their intrusion into the subject matter. As Hayden White notes, “it is a convention of historical writing since Herodotus” to treat the historical narrative (“story-meaning” and plot) as “inherent in the events themselves and [...] simply ‘discovered’ rather than ‘invented’ by the author [...]”²⁶ While memoirists typically present themselves as relatively passive observers of historical events,²⁷ their narrative credibility depends on the opposite presentation of a self-authenticating authorial position so subjective and integrated into world-historical events as to be trustworthy to readers. (Readers, on the third hand, read for more esoteric reasons like prurience, the availability of popular publications, and interest in novel perspectives on familiar events.) Historians and popular audiences evaluate author’s credibility differently, although both groups consider credibility (in terms of perceived veracity) when evaluating a work of memoir,²⁸ while literary scholars are at liberty to prioritize a text’s literary qualities and cultural import over its veracity.

²⁶ Hayden White, “Symbols and Allegories of Temporality,” in *The Ethics of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1998–2007*, edited by Robert Doran, (Cornell University Press, 2022), 25.

²⁷ Georg Misch, *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, vol. 1 (Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1950), 15, originally published as *Geschichte der Autobiographie* (B.G. Teubner, 1907).

²⁸ See the treatment of memoirs as historical sources in Russophone source studies (*istochnikovedenie*): V. S. Golubtsov, *Memuary kak istochnik po istorii sovetskogo obshchestva* (Nauka, 1970); S. S. Mints, “Ob osobennostiakh evoliutsii istochnikov memuarnogo kharaktera (k postanovke problemy),” *Istoriia SSSR*, no. 6 (1979): 60–72; S. S. Mints, *Memuary i rossiiskoe dvorianstvo* (Dmitrii Bulanin, 1998); N. G. Georgieva, “Memuary kak fenomen kultury i kak istoricheskii istochnik,” *Vestnik RUDN. Seriya: Istoriia Rossii*, no. 1 (2012): 126–138; and E. V. Kolesnikova, *Istoriko-revoliutsionnaia memuaristika (1917–1935 gg.) kak massovyi istochnik po istorii russkikh revoliutsii (Metodika kolichestvennogo analiza)* (Ural University Press, 2009).

Many of the memoirs addressed in this dissertation remain in circulation exclusively thanks to their role as commonly cited historical sources. Certain of the SLON memoirs addressed in this dissertation have served as key historical sources for investigations of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp, and Soviet labor camps more generally, since their publication. Natalia Kuziakina's *Theatre in the Solovki Prison Camp* (1995) is a touchstone work of scholarship that meticulously tracks the history of the different theatrical troupes at SLON using a vast array of personal accounts of the camp, along with some Karelian archival sources. Kuziakina's emphasis is on the cultural history of the camp, but historians with an interest in confirming quantitative information about the camp's population and its death toll are unable to employ these sources without significant explanation and correction. Other scholars of the camp cite from archival materials when available and reference personal accounts more sporadically. As an example, Sozerko Malsagoff's *An Island Hell* was the first SLON memoir to be published in English in 1926, and it has been subsequently referenced by journalists and historians up to the present. Gulag historian Mikhail Nakonechnyi encapsulated the difficulties of working with Malsagoff as a source as recently as 2022, which I quote here at length:

[...] Imperial army officer Sozerko Mal'sagov, an ex-prisoner of Solovki camp and one of the first successful escapees into Finland, estimated that the death rate of the early Soviet concentration camps in the Russian European North was 90%. Citing "eyewitness testimonies," he claimed that at least 10,000 prisoners were executed in Kholmogorskii and Petrominskii concentration camps alone. [...] conditions in Soviet northern concentration camps in 1920–1921 were certainly disastrous. However, Mal'sagov's

extremely high figures remain uncorroborated and have not been crosschecked by archival evidence. Nonetheless, historian Iurii Doikov uncritically replicated Mal'sagov data as putatively valid in 2011. These exaggerations could be partly explained not only by bias, but also by the total classification of the archives by the Soviet state and resultant impossibility of free scholarly inquiry before 1991.²⁹

Here, Nakonechnyi demonstrates the complex tasks historians face when using a source like Malsagoff, necessitated by limited access to Soviet archives. Malsagoff's unique position as the first and most widely available English-language account of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp, combined with his choice to make statistical claims about the scale of the early Soviet prison camps, means that contemporary Gulag historians still reckon with his claims. Although Malsagoff seems to appear more frequently than other memoirists, SLON accounts, including those of Kiselev-Gromov and Nikonov-Smorodin, also continue to be cited across Gulag history, but always strongly contextualized.

3. Memoir as literature

This dissertation does not deal with autobiography (with the possible exception of Yuri Bezsonov's introspective and explicitly confessional book) but, due to its source material and formal analysis of plot and imagery, does contend with the mass of scholarship contextualizing memoir as a source. In the case of literary studies, until the second half of the nineteenth century

²⁹ Mikhail Nakonechnyi, "The Devil Is in the (Statistical) Details: Why Does the Quantitative History of Russian Civil War Incarceration Still Matter in 2021?," *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 63, no. 1 (2022): 212.

memoir was compared unfavorably to the high genre of life-writing, autobiography. Scholars including Roy Pascal and William Spengemann built the critical tradition of autobiography, as Julie Rak argues, “by doing what critics of the novel had done,” i.e., establishing “a canon for autobiography studies that was based on literary value and on ideas about the primacy and uniqueness of the self and the creativity of the artist that originated in Romanticism.”³⁰ Memoirs, in contrast, keep the author’s interiority in the background and emphasize the progress of historical events, relying on formulaic chronological narratives to convey information. That memoirs are frequently authored by laypeople rather than “real writers” only adds to the perception of memoirs as potentially unliterary.

Examples of this contrastive treatment of autobiography versus memoir are replete from antiquity to modernity, although the critical tradition of autobiography studies seems strongest in its postwar phase. In his seminal *L’Autobiographie en France*, for example, Philippe Lejeune does not list any critical sources before 1952, and Julie Rak’s list of “studies of autobiography that rely on (and in some cases built) canonicity” begins in 1960.³¹ In the English and American traditions, critics such as Roy Pascal and Georges May culled the best works of autobiography from the mass of memoirs and other life-writing (correspondence, diaries, and autobiographical fiction).³² In France, Lejeune worked a bit later and in a more formalist vein, publishing *L’Autobiographie* in 1971. While these scholars acknowledged the near impossibility of delineating cleanly between “autobiography” and “not autobiography” (including memoir and the even thornier autobiographical novel), they developed heuristics for evaluating works along

³⁰ Rak, “Are Memoirs Autobiography?,” 307.

³¹ See Rak, “Are Memoirs Autobiography?,” 306n2, for the author’s footnote listing “studies of autobiography that rely on (and in some cases built) canonicity.”

³² Paul John Eakin, “Foreword,” in *On Autobiography* by Philippe Lejeune, translated by Katherine Leary (University of Minnesota Press, 1989), viii.

these lines. Lejeune, for example, proposed “the autobiographical pact,” summarized by Paul John Eakin as a “contract between author and reader in which the autobiographer explicitly commits himself or herself not to some impossible historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and to understand his or her own life.”³³ Scholars of the autobiographical genre emphasized authors’ interiority and holistic perspective on their own lives over the historicity, immediacy, or salaciousness that tend to characterize popular memoirs.

In the late 1970s, Paul De Man and Candace Lang began publishing “post-structuralist critiques of Romanticism in autobiography criticism,” a reevaluation of the canonicity of autobiography as a genre that included total refutations of the autobiographical genre.³⁴ In his introduction to the 1989 English translation of Lejeune’s *On Autobiography*, Eakin concisely outlines the vacillations of this period, then quotes Linda H. Peterson’s sagacious conclusion that, whether autobiography is a genre or not, those who wrote autobiography “believed themselves to be participating in a distinctive generic tradition.”³⁵ This refutation of a literary and scholarly tradition (in this case the primacy of autobiography among life-writing genres) followed by acceptance of the prior significance of that tradition (and thus its continued necessity in scholarship) is the eventual conclusion of most post-structuralist furors.

Concomitant with the deconstruction of autobiography as the “high” genre of life writing came the democratization of source materials. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, feminist and other theoretical reexaminations of marginalized sources reached the critical tradition of

³³ Ibid., ix.

³⁴ Rak, “Are Memoirs Autobiography?,” 307n2.

³⁵ Eakin, “Foreword,” viii.

autobiography—see, for example, Rak’s argument that memoir is the “Derridean supplement” to autobiography.³⁶ Memoir was reclaimed, albeit fitfully, as an object of literary analysis.

A similar transformation happened on the historical side, with a new emphasis on social and cultural history elevating subjective sources like memoir and other “ego documents” in the historical discipline, where objective sources have long served as the factual source *par excellence*. The rise of anthropological-sociological methods of investigating the same documents birthed new heuristics for working with these sources, and the attendant rise in interdisciplinary inquiry also created new space for memoir in scholarship generally. Despite this democratization of scholarship, memoirs’ inferiority as works of literature and factual sources cannot be totally effaced due to the real flaws of this material (i.e., most memoirs are historically unreliable and can be unliterary, and are aimed at a reading public that does not mind these flaws).

Regardless of any scholarly context, of course, the mass production of memoirs continued unabated and has increased in popularity over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a fact that continues to draw scholars of all disciplines to these texts. Still, the scholarship tends to utilize memoir as a source rather than treating memoir as the main topic of analysis, and the most comprehensive history of memoir to date (Ben Yagoda’s *Memoir: A History*) is oriented to popular audiences.

4. *Memoir: a brief history*

Yagoda’s conflation of autobiography and memoir follows the general trend in memoir studies while addressing aspects of popular publishing markets that were dismissed by earlier

³⁶ Rak, “Are Memoirs Autobiography?,” 317–323.

scholars. In doing so, he weaves the autobiographical canon back into the popular context of memoirs and other forms of life-writing. He mentions autobiographical writing in the Old and New Testaments and quotes from Julius Caesar's *Commentaries* on the Gallic War. Caesar's firsthand account of the war was written in the third person and, with its limited purview and emphasis on historical events over the author's internal perspective, is the true predecessor of most of the SLON memoirs discussed in this dissertation. However, Caesar's account merits only brief mention in most of the critical works on autobiography and memoir that I surveyed.³⁷

The Confessions of Saint Augustine

Yagoda next mentions *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, calling it “the inescapable example—indeed, one of the most remarkable autobiographies of all time.”³⁸ Yagoda's reference to the *Confessions* is critically necessary; Augustine's work is the basis of autobiography studies and the starting point for many critical histories of autobiography as a genre.³⁹

William Spengemann also begins his *Forms of Autobiography* with the *Confessions of Saint Augustine*, fashioning “The Formal Paradigm” of autobiography at the heart of his book from Augustine's three modes of authorship: Historical self-recollection (“surveying in the memory its completed past actions from an unmoving point above or beyond them”); philosophical self-exploration (“moving inquisitively through its own memories and ideas to some conclusion about them”); and poetic self-expression (“performing a sequence of symbolic

³⁷ Cf. Lejeune, *Autobiography*, 6; Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2nd ed. (University of Minnesota Press, 2010): 5.

³⁸ Yagoda, *Memoir*, 36–61.

³⁹ See Lejeune, *Autobiography*, 147, on the critical canon: “[Francis R.] Hart and [William L.] Howarth speculate on a fixed corpus of autobiographies: Hart, from Rousseau to our day; Howarth, since Saint Augustine.”

actions through which the ineffable self can be realized[...]).⁴⁰ Spengemann extrapolates from Augustine on, insisting that “the sequence of forms in *The Confessions* and the reasons behind its formal modulations from history, to philosophy, to poetry rehearse the entire development of the genre from the Middle Ages to the modern era.”⁴¹

Erich Auerbach also assigns key influence to Augustine in his discussion of parataxis, discussing the same innovations in perspective and authorial process that Spengemann outlines from a historical perspective, comparing *The Confessions* to works like Caesar’s *Commentaries*: “The urgently impulsive element in [Augustine’s] character makes it impossible for him to accommodate himself to the comparatively cool and rational procedure of the classical, and specifically of the Roman, style, which looks at and organizes things from above.”⁴²

(Remarkably, the same distinction can be seen when comparing Sozerko Malsagoff’s concise but evocative *An Island Hell* to Yuri Bezsonov’s confessional *Twenty-Six Prisons*.) For Auerbach, the simple conjunctions of parataxis were the first means of writing reality, and Augustine’s break with the Roman narrative perspective represents a major step in the “mimicking” of the “real” in literature.

From just three examples of discussions of *The Confessions*, the critical interest in this work is clear: Augustine innovated a mode of life-writing that drew from and referenced early Christian texts, broke away from the “rational procedure” of classical life-writing, and developed a series of methods for analyzing and presenting his life’s story to readers. Even among popular audiences, Augustine’s engaging writing, combining scandalous stories from his youth and sober

⁴⁰ Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography*, 32.

⁴¹ Ibid., 32.

⁴² See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, translated by Willard R. Trask, (Princeton University Press, 1953).

reflections as a converted Christian, contribute to the book's early and continued success among Western readers to this day.

From St. Augustine's Confessions to captivity narratives

In his examination of the confessional side of memoir, Yagoda emphasizes the classical, early Christian, and medieval origins of life-writing in sequence, highlighting Augustine's *Confessions* ("one of the most remarkable autobiographies of all time") and *The Life of Benvenuto Cellini* ("the first autobiography that feels utterly modern.").⁴³ From there, he focuses on English-language conversion narratives and the works of Daniel Defoe before ending the chapter with captivity narratives, an influential and very popular genre in the Americas.⁴⁴ Yagoda highlights the connection between confessional and captivity narratives to explain readers' fascination with the genre.⁴⁵

For authors, the experience of captivity, which can be interpreted rather broadly, seems to drive many people to write. Frequently cited examples of writers who incorporated their experience in captivity in modern European and American history include Miguel Cervantes, the Marquis de Sade, and Fedor Dostoevsky. The topic of captivity is broad, encompassing many works of Holocaust literature and prison memoirs by notable figures such as Nelson Mandela,

⁴³ Yagoda, *Memoir*, 37, 42.

⁴⁴ Vincent Carafano connects the early success of captivity narratives in the American colonies to "the manufacturing capabilities of the printing press, a hunger of the Europeans to digest news from abroad, and the immediacy of these narratives to colonists[.]" *Incarceration Memoirs and the Captivity Genre*, Master's Thesis, 2016.

⁴⁵ Yagoda, *Memoir*, 56–57. Yagoda credits American-Canadian literary critic Annette Kolodny for the term "captivity narrative." Many studies related to this subgenre are related to white American or Canadian settlers held by Native American tribes.

but can also include more attenuated forms of captivity like Jean-Dominique Bauby's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, which depicts the author's life after his total paralysis.

It is not overly simplistic to suggest that captivity narratives are essentially Christian: first-person captivity narratives are necessarily written by people who survived the experience, and the internal logic of the scenario falls apart if the central character does not return from captivity (whether the tomb or a pirate ship). In this way, memoirists reenact Christ's sacrifice and reenact his successful return to life. At the same time, captivity narratives can be read with layered meanings for the in-group and out-groups; in this overview, for example, I address the ways that historians, literature scholars, and popular readerships approach the same texts. The memoirs addressed in this dissertation were designated for broad potential audiences, but memoirists also acknowledge their potential scrutiny of their peers (fellow survivors) and GPU agents as potential readers.

5. Memoir in Russian and Soviet context

Although captivity narratives represent one model for the SLON memoirs discussed in this dissertation, it is not the only one. Solovetsky camp memoirs, written by recent escapees from the Soviet Union, reflect the author's precarious place between where they came from—imperial Russian culture at the end of the long nineteenth century—and where they ended up—stranded in émigré communities across Europe and compelled to publish an account of their experiences, whether out of a compunction to justify their own actions during the events depicted, bring awareness of the Soviet Union's abuses to foreign audiences, or a desperate need for cash.

The influence of Augustine's *Confessions* in the Orthodox realm cannot be compared to his importance for Western Christianity. Although Augustine is accepted as a saint by the Orthodox Church, the Orthodox tradition is generally more wary of autobiographical writing compared to the Roman tradition.⁴⁶ Consequently, the popularity and importance of Augustine's *Confessions*, along with his other theological writings, were not as significant in Russia.⁴⁷ A different canon of autobiographical and confessional writings was developed in Russian literature, although rooted in Christianity as in the West. The genre of Saints' Lives (*zhitie*) was an important component of early Russian literature, and a confessional component (*ispoved'*) was typically included in this genre.⁴⁸ Other early life-writing genres included chronologies and biographical stories. For example, *The Instruction of Vladimir Monomakh (Pouchenie)* includes a first-person chronology of his military career titled "a tale of journeys and hunts." The *Instruction*, written in the early twelfth century, was later inserted in the text of the Primary Chronicle in the Laurentian Codex (1377) or its lost protographs. Innovative authors like Avvakum began writing their own "lives," combining confessional and life-writing elements from a first-person perspective.

⁴⁶ In his introduction to *The Life of Paisij Velyckovs'kyj*, Anthony-Emil N. Tachiaos posits a few reasons for the maligned status of that text, despite being a valuable early autobiography of an important Orthodox father. For one, a descriptive and highly personal autobiography had little place in the Orthodox liturgy, limiting its relevance for monastic life, where the autobiography was written and remained, mostly undistributed, until the eighteenth century (xix–xxi). Until then, livelier aspects of the autobiography were generally excised from the Orthodox biographies that drew from it. Augustine's theological positions, including his support for the filioque, also made him controversial in the Orthodox church. See Rev. Dr. George C. Papademetriou, "Saint Augustine in the Greek Orthodox Tradition."

⁴⁷ Fr. Pavel Khondzinskiy, "Blazhennyi Avgustin v russkoy dukhovnoy traditsii XVIII veka," *Vestnik PSTGU I: Bogoslovie. Filosofiya*, no. 1 (33) (2011): 22–36.

⁴⁸ A. N. Vasilenko, "Ispoved' kak zhanroobrazuyushchiy komponent 'Zhitiya protopopa Avvakuma'," *Religovedenie*, no. 4 (2009): 156–160.

Memoir and Russian literature

The 1896 Brockhaus and Efron encyclopedia includes an entry on “memoirs” alongside its definitions of “autobiography” and “biography,” an inclusion that source scholar Natalia Georgieva calls “the first step in the scholarly [*nauchnyi*] definition of the concept of ‘memoirs’” (in Russia).⁴⁹ This entry mentions Xenophon and Caesar as classical examples of memoir, although the bulk of its analysis relates to the French tradition of memoir writing going back to the thirteenth century (“The true motherland of m[emoir] is *France*.”⁵⁰) The entry also outlines Russian memoirs in detail, beginning with Prince Kurbsky’s autobiographical history of his exile from Russia written in the sixteenth century.⁵¹ The entry emphasizes memoirists’ reactive and biased motivations for writing memoirs, effectively arguing that memoirs tend to cluster around historical events and important personalities (for example, “the beginning of Peter’s reign gave rise to a whole series of notes [*zapiski*]” and a list of texts that illustrate “the history of the intellectual development of society under Catherine II”). As in France, the note argues, memoirs emerged from educated (literate) social milieus where such works had the potential for influencing public opinion, particularly surrounding court cultures. The number of memoirs published in Russia increased dramatically in the nineteenth century, albeit, the entry notes, “partially to the detriment of their content and significance.”⁵²

On the Russian and Soviet side, memoirs were historically less popular than in the US and other “Western” publishing markets. While Russian court culture produced great literature,

⁴⁹ N. G. Georgieva, “Memuary kak fenomen kul'tury i kak istoricheskiy istochnik,” 128.

⁵⁰ “Memuary,” *Entsiklopedicheskiy slovar' Brokgauza i Efrona*, vol. 19, 1896, 201–202.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

the scale of publication was limited in comparison to the French court. Sluggish industrialization and widespread illiteracy delayed the development of a middle-class reading public until the mid-nineteenth century, another possible explanation for the limited popularity of candid memoirs relating an individual perspective on historical events. Georgieva includes the 1896 encyclopedia entry in a list of early sources on memoir that demonstrate growing public and scholarly interest in the genre thanks to the increasing publication of memoirs in the popular press, whether in periodicals or monograph. This was late compared to Western European publishing markets.

However, the same conditions made literature a primary medium for Russian political discourse. It should come as no surprise, then, that Russian writers would adapt Western literary forms to suit the particular needs of Russian literature, encapsulating the Russian imperial system of prison and exile (*katorga*) in a hybrid genre that aimed to mitigate the limitations of memoir in terms of its unreliability as well as its limited purview (tied in both instances to the conceit of a single author relating his or her individual experiences). The importance of autobiographical novels as a form was also highly influential in this context. Thus, instead of publishing a memoir of his time in Siberian exile, Fedor Dostoevsky published *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1861–1862) as a novel; in fact, the book is an innovative literary form that combines a semi-fictional narrative of the author’s experiences with a fictional frame story. Thirty years later, Anton Chekhov forged an equally innovative work of literature, *Sakhalin Island*, from exhaustive statistical reports and anecdotes gleaned from his three months on the prison island in 1890. Both works belong to a “microgenre” that Alexander Solzhenitsyn called, with some irony,

the “literary encyclopedia,”⁵³ to which he himself would contribute with his *The Gulag Archipelago*, still the best encapsulation of the extent and abuses of the Gulag.

In the Soviet period, memoirs were popular during a few “memoir booms” (primarily following the October Revolution and World War II) but the changing “epistemological situation” in the country, as Natalia Georgieva euphemistically calls the strong centralized influence of the Communist party over literature and publishing practices, determined publication patterns rather than popular demand.⁵⁴

The memoirs addressed in this dissertation were published in the West and straddle the typical memoir form popular there and the Russian literary tradition developed specifically to capture the type of exile to camps practiced in remote areas of the Russian (and Soviet) empire. Following Dostoevsky and Chekhov, and anticipating Solzhenitsyn, they attempt to outline the archaeology of the labor camp system within their individual captivity narratives. The various authors who attempt this difficult task are successful to different degrees. The first chapter of this dissertation outlines the SLON “metanarrative” as it appears across early SLON memoirs.

6. *Credibility of memoir*

Early memoirs of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp (published between 1925 and 1939) exhibit many formal similarities, including their narrative structures, authorial voices, and thematic emphases. These works, whether short informational sketches or longer autobiographical accounts, follow a chronological progression from arrest to arrival at the camp,

⁵³ Natalia Pervukhin, “The ‘Experiment in Literary Investigation’ (Čexov’s *Saxalin* and Solženitsyn’s *Gulag*),” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 35, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 494.

⁵⁴ Georgieva, “Memuary,” 128.

after which authors typically use topical groupings to organize their experiences at the camp. This largely chronological narrative style and the widespread emphasis on factual detail enhance the perceived credibility of these accounts, collectively offering a comprehensive and multifaceted perspective on the brutal realities of life in the Soviet labor camps.

However, there are aspects of this reality that memoirists tend to elide. An additional complication that must be noted is the motive for self-preservation that leads authors to conceal certain aspects of their own behavior (meaning collusion with the state and other ethical compromises that allowed their survival). Authors are reluctant to betray their venality and instead portray themselves as honorable fools, tricked at every turn by the evil Chekists.

Across their accounts, memoirists emphasize their own credulity and minimize elements of collaboration with or toadying to the Bolshevik regime. It is hardly remarkable that memoirists would cast themselves in the most favorable light and efface their own problematic behavior. For example, none of the memoirists admit to making a false confession, or even to capitulating to their interrogators during their intense and often torturous interrogation sessions. Considering the preponderance of false or forced confessions coerced out of detainees by the GPU/NKVD in the 1920s and 1930s,⁵⁵ the memoirists' insistence on their own fortitude casts doubts on the veracity of this group of memoirs as a historical source.

Because this dissertation is not a historical inquiry, the veracity of each memoir is not key to my analysis; however, memoirists' credibility is at issue in various aspects of the memoirs and an inevitable factor in evaluating each account. My familiarity with the authors' texts and

⁵⁵ Lynne Viola comments on the frequency of recanted coerced testimony in her work on the Great Terror, drawn primarily from legal documentation rather than personal narrative. See, for example, "New Sources on Soviet Perpetrators of Mass Repression: A Research Note." *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 60, no. 3–4 (2018): 592–604.

biographies, along with subsequent scholarship related to these, informs my assessment of their credulity. The cumulative and comparative nature of my analysis also provides ample opportunity to directly address conflicting claims by different authors. Thankfully, many of the claims made by various authors have already been evaluated by historians and other chroniclers of the camp.

Key in this evaluation is the work of Mikhail Rozanov, who applied the same technique in his 1979 survey of SLON memoirs, which compares many of these same sources. His thorough discussion of the claims made by these authors has served as a touchstone for me as I examined the memoirs myself. He also contributes his personal knowledge about different memoirists, and where possible he adds context that the memoirists often leave out, whether because they see no need to include it or they are intentionally obscuring it. Similarly, the series of SLON accounts edited by Fr. Viacheslav Umniagin, *Vospominaniia solovetskikh uznikov* (VSU, 2013–2022) includes critical biographies of many of the authors therein; I reference those analyses throughout as well.⁵⁶

Briefly, certain authors are more trustworthy than others for reasons both literary and historical. A degree of fictionalization is necessary for turning real life into a narrative, and memoirists use different techniques to present real experiences to readers. Some rely on mimesis (Boris Cederholm, for example, recreates dialogue after dialogue), others rely more on diegetic narrative (Julia Danzas, in comparison, summarizes her experiences and only quotes very specific and memorable moments). Most use a combination of techniques, and all rely on secondhand accounts to some degree or another. Claims of steadfastness during torturous

⁵⁶ Viacheslav Umniagin, ed., *Vospominaniia solovetskikh uznikov*, 10 vols. (Solovki: Spaso-Preobrazhenskii Solovetskii Stavropigial'nyi Mikhailo-Arkhangelskii Monastyr', 2013–2022). Hereafter abbreviated as VSU.

interrogations is one example of a topic that elicits questions about an author's trustworthiness. Essentially, a memoirist can err into overfictionalizing him- or herself for understandable reasons, leading to distrust from readers.

One author whose credibility is often questioned is Julia Danzas, whose account of the camp drew critique from fellow prisoners Rozanov and Dmitry Likhachev, who also responded to various SLON memoirs in his writings about the camp. Likhachev in particular disputes many of her claims about work conditions in the camp museum. Based on my reading of Danzas' work, I posit that her fickle and domineering personality warped her experiences and her different version of events might have resulted from these circumstances. Another author whose claims deserve scrutiny, in my opinion, is Alexander Grube. Like Malsagoff, Grube reports secondhand stories without clearly defining what he actually saw and what he heard secondhand. However, Malsagoff's general statements are mostly accurate, while Grube reproduces wild rumors. For example, Grube's claim that Gleb Boky shot a coupletist named Kondratiuk during a performance in the SLON theatre is simply not true. Umniagin, who republished Grube's account for the first time in his anthology of Solovetsky prisoner memoirs, evaluates Grube positively while admitting that some of his claims are erroneous.⁵⁷ While Umniagin's justifications for Grube's erroneous claims are largely convincing, his account is still one that I treat with great skepticism. To be frank, it is worth considering every memoir addressed here with a degree of skepticism, one reason why I present the works in aggregate, as did Rozanov.

For the most part, memoirists are aware of the difficulties of their position and attempt to mitigate readers' distrust by openly discussing what elements of distortion, concealment, and "encryption" they felt were necessary to present their experiences. The two most frequent layers

⁵⁷ Viacheslav Umniagin, "Rasskazy cheloveka z 'togo sveta,'" in *VSU* vol. 3, 191.

of concealment that memoirists address are 1) hiding the real names of other prisoners who are still trapped in GPU camps and prisons and 2) refraining from giving the whole story, whether because they believe readers will not accept the truth, or because they do not want to relive the experience themselves. On the other hand, memoirists also insist that their accounts are true, anticipating that readers will find their claims overblown or unbelievable. They also differentiate between their accounts and fictional accounts, typically by downplaying their writing abilities and by contrasting the veracity of what they portray to fictional stories. Nikonov-Smorodin, for example, instructs readers: “Do not look for interesting fictions or romantic stories in these essays: life in its manifestations surpasses any fiction. This book is a document and only a document, testifying to the Bolshevik atrocities, to life under the Soviets, full of hardships and misfortunes, to a life of struggle with dark forces under a mask.”⁵⁸ Such warnings are common across the corpus of SLON memoirs.

Key to the question of memoirists’ credibility is the question of their guilt. Explaining the Soviet penal system, where prisoners could be accused of crimes that never happened and convicted of conspiracies with people they never met, is a thorny issue for each memoirist, typically addressed in the interrogation sequence. While some earlier memoirists, typically those who were part of one of the “White” armies, admit to direct counterrevolutionary activity, later memoirists who were not anti-Bolshevik agitators find themselves accused of nebulous claims of counterrevolution. Their attempts to explain the topsy-turvydom of Soviet criminal investigations, the perverse incentives that led GPU agents to fabricate massive conspiracies, and the immense guilt and confusion that detainees experienced as they fought the claims against them are part and parcel of the larger effort to convey the reality of Soviet life to foreign

⁵⁸ Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 11.

audiences. Memoirists struggled to moderate their experiences in order to draw readers into a world where the unbelievable occurred daily.

On the historical side, there is the issue of making disprovable claims and providing too many falsifiable statistics; Rozanov forthrightly explains that he views former SLON administrator Nikolai Kiselev-Gromov's figures for the camp population as wildly inflated; the example of Sozerko Malsagoff's own inflated numbers was discussed above. In many cases, memoirists make claims about certain events or people that can easily be refuted or corrected thanks to the research materials available today. Such refutable claims, unless they are particularly egregious, do not draw general readers' criticism to the same degree that obvious fictionalization does. Unpicking these factual claims remains the realm of historians.

7. Conclusion

SLON memoirs in the 1920s and 1930s represent the least distance between the experience of the camp and drafting of the memoirs and can therefore be read as both accounts of contemporary events and as reflecting a contemporary ethos of publishing. This group of memoirs sits alongside contemporaneous journalistic and polemical publications critical of the Soviet Union, providing personal accounts of the camps as they existed at the time. At the same time, these memoirs reflect the Russian tradition of prison literature, particularly works like Dostoevsky's *House of the Dead* and Chekhov's *Sakhalin Island* that model a comprehensive approach to describing the camps. The fourteen memoirs surveyed here are variously situated in this landscape of personal experience, literary influence, the author's writing skill, the author's financial or moral incentive to produce their account, and the influence of the contemporary publishing landscape. Some of the memoirs influence or anticipate the contours of post-war

memoirs of the camp, which themselves anticipate Solzhenitsyn's successful encapsulation of the Gulag for Russian and foreign audiences in the 1970s. Many of these accounts have been thoroughly digested (perhaps exhausted) as historical sources and now serve as fodder for popular literature. The purpose of isolating these memoirs and examining them in their own context is to establish the poetics of the Solovetsky islands and labor camp as it existed before World War II, a poetics that will be variously reinforced and deconstructed in later retellings.

C. Literature Survey

This section is a brief outline of post-1917 literature, history, and scholarship related to the Solovetsky Islands, with the aim of introducing and contextualizing the memoirs surveyed for this dissertation. The history of SLON memoirs cannot be limited to the memoirs themselves, as the majority were produced in three waves (the 1920s and 1930s, at issue in this dissertation, the post-war memoir boom, and the memory carnival that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union), and personal accounts were always accompanied by journalistic, scholarly, and even fictional appraisals of the same material. Outside of the Soviet Union, the success of the memoirs was always tied to public perceptions of the country. Inside the country, political currents dictated how openly the former labor camp was discussed. Although the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp is frequently referenced in general histories of the Gulag, it remains a relatively minor area of specialization. As such, a few individual contributors have developed and preserved the memory of the camp to an outsized degree over the past century. These include Sozerko Malsagoff, Boris Shiriaev and Semen Pidhajnyj, Mikhail Rozanov, Dmitry Likhachev, Yuri Brodsky, Viacheslav Umniagin, and Zakhar Prilepin.

1. 1917–1924

From 1917–1923 there are just a few mentions of the Solovetsky Monastery in the international press describing the monastery and its former residents as victims of Soviet economic or cultural transformations.⁵⁹ However, English-language accounts of Soviet prisons appeared as early as 1921 with Marguerite E. Harrison's *Marooned in Moscow*, in which Harrison, a spy for US military intelligence under cover as a journalist, insists that she was treated well during her detention in the RSFSR.⁶⁰ Outside of Russia, opinions of the new government were mixed, but interest was high. The émigré press across Europe closely monitored developments in Russia as much as possible. However, it was the socialist press that brought global attention to Bolshevik repressions against other socialists, who were then classified as political prisoners.⁶¹

A survey of *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik*,⁶² a bimonthly Menshevik newspaper published in emigration from 1923–1924 shows the growing awareness and then horror related to the Soviet

⁵⁹ See, for example, Robert Wilton's mention of the Solovetsky Monastery in a discussion of the effects of the Bolshevik revolution for the membership of the Russian Orthodox Church in *Russia's Agony* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1919), 26.

⁶⁰ Marguerite E. Harrison, *Marooned in Moscow: The Story of an American Woman Imprisoned in Moscow* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1921); Amber Paranick, "Marguerite Harrison: Debutante, Newspaperwoman, and Undercover Spy," *Library of Congress Blogs: Headlines & Heroes*, December 5, 2023.

⁶¹ Bolshevik leadership maintained many legal protections for political prisoners in the early years of the new government. Yekaterina Peshkova's Political Red Cross was able to intervene in certain political prisoners' matters, although numerous accounts from its period of greatest activity (from 1918 to the early 1920s) complain of ineffective and limited assistance from this organization. Placing high profile political prisoners on the Solovetsky Islands, inaccessible to the world during the winter, helped the Bolsheviks curtail communication between political prisoners and the outside world. See Stuart Finkel, "The 'Political Red Cross' and the Genealogy of Rights Discourse in Revolutionary Russia," *The Journal of Modern History* 89, no. 1 (March 2017): 79–118.

⁶² This was a Menshevik newspaper, initially published in Berlin and edited by Raphael Abramovitch, Fedor Dan, and Iulii Martov that was published from 1921–1965.

labor camps. At the beginning of 1923, the newspaper uses the tsarist-era terms *katorga* and *ssylka* to describe prisoners' exile, but by spring the more contemporary words *kontsentratsionyi lager* and *kontslager* appear. Over the year, the newspaper tracks the fate of socialist political prisoners in a standing section titled "Po Rossii" that notes the progress of Mensheviks' arrest, sentencing, and exile by the Bolsheviks. Additional feature stories about concentration camps become more common as the year goes on.

The first reference to the Solovetsky Islands' repurposing as a concentration camp for socialists appears in the "Po Rossii" section in August 1923.⁶³ From then on, the Solovetsky camps are mentioned along with Pertominsk, Kholmogory, and "The Northern Camps," although a certain rhetorical flourish tends to accompany mentions of the famed former monastery. In issue 15, for example, a report laments the fate of "those thousands of Social Democrats who are rotting in prisons, in desolate places of exile, on the remote Solovetsky Islands."⁶⁴ A few issues later, the monastery and camp are referenced on the front page of the newspaper.

In October 1923, the most significant and extensive coverage of the Solovetsky camp appeared on the pages of the *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik*. The October 1 edition of the newspaper opens with a cover story identifying the Solovetsky Islands as the place where political prisoners are being concentrated, moved there from the other northern camps and across the Soviet Union.⁶⁵ The story includes a call to action for readers, asking them to publicize the topic and call for amnesty for socialists at the camp. This double issue also includes an article titled "Soviet Schlisselburg"⁶⁶ that explains the Solovetsky camp in comparison to the tsarist prison

⁶³ "Po Rossii," *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik* 14, August 16, 1923, 15.

⁶⁴ "Istoricheskoe delo," *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik* 15, September 1, 1923, 1.

⁶⁵ "Pod znakom istrebleniia," *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik* 17–18, October 1, 1923, 1.

⁶⁶ "Sovetskii Schlissel'burg: Ostrov uzhasa," *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik* 17–18, October 1, 1923, 15–16.

fortress, and a notice that newspaper cofounder Fedor Dan has republished “Soviet Schlisselburg” in “a number of foreign socialist newspapers” about the “Solovetsky *katorga* for socialists.”⁶⁷

Updates in the *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik* at the end of 1923 predicted violence against the political prisoners during the winter period, when prisoners would be cut off from the rest of the world. Indeed, the February 10, 1924 issue of the newspaper reports the shooting of seven political prisoners at the SLON camp on December 19, 1923.⁶⁸ This mass execution at the Savvatieevo hermitage would spark outrage in the socialist press and was a key topic in the *Letters from Soviet Prisons* collection published in 1925. The Soviet press was forced to acknowledge the deaths in *Izvestiia*, first noting the deaths in January of 1924 then announcing an investigatory commission into the matter in February of that year.⁶⁹ Although this event caused outrage among international socialists and destabilized relations between the Bolsheviks and other socialist bodies around the world,⁷⁰ the event essentially defanged the political prisoners on the islands themselves. This massacre remains a touchstone event in the history of the camp as it demonstrates the beginning of the end of political prisoners’ special treatment in the Soviet Union and highlights the Chekists’ unique monopoly on violence at the Solovetsky camp, so far away from foreign view, that contributed to the Solovetsky camp’s fearsome reputation.

⁶⁷ “Novye izdaniia,” *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik* 17–18, October 1, 1923, 15.

⁶⁸ “Boinia v Solovetskom monastyre” *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik* 3, February 10, 1924, 1.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Tolczyk, *Blissful Blindness*, 80. Some evidence of this breach can be found in the introduction to *Letters from Soviet Prisons*, a 1925 book that includes firsthand accounts of this massacre. The introduction features mixed responses to the *Letters* from luminaries of the European and American socialist movements.

2. 1925–1933

In his *Blissful Blindness: Soviet Crimes Under Western Eyes*, Dariusz Tolczyk outlines the mix of support, ambivalence, willful ignorance, and deliberate falsification practiced by Western observers of the Soviet Union throughout its existence, particularly regarding the labor camps. While the Soviets touted the accomplishments of the camp to a wider national and international audience, the notoriety of the horrific living conditions, deadly labor practices, and political repression that prisoners faced on the islands also spread quickly across the Soviet Union and the world. A particular touchstone for Tolczyk is the book *Letters from Russian Prisons*,⁷¹ which was published in 1925 by the International Committee for Political Prisoners and edited by Isaac Don Levine.⁷² The book is remarkable not only for its reproduction of 140 documents related to Soviet prisons, but also for its extensive list of introductory comments by high profile Western leftists including Upton Sinclair, Thomas Mann, and H. G. Wells. Their responses to the letters are varied, from outright denunciations of Bolshevik violence to “whataboutism” comparing Soviet prisons to those in California.⁷³

The year 1925 was a watershed for documentation of the Soviet labor camps in English-language publications. A firsthand account of the camp by “V.N.I” appeared in the Parisian émigré newspaper *Vozrozhdenie*.⁷⁴ Anti-Bolshevik writer George Popoff published an exposé of the Soviet security apparatus titled *The Tcheka: The Red Inquisition* that features the camp

⁷¹ Isaac Don Levine, ed., *Letters from Russian Prisons: Consisting of Reprints of Documents by Political Prisoners in Soviet Prisons, Prison Camps and Exile, and Reprints of Affidavits Concerning Political Persecution in Soviet Russia* (London: The C. W. Daniel Company, 1925).

⁷² Tolczyk, *Blissful Blindness*, 75–80.

⁷³ “Letters by Celebrated Intellectuals” in *Letters from Russian Prisons*, 5–16; Tolczyk, *Blissful Blindness*, 75–80.

⁷⁴ V. N. I., “Solovetskii kontslager’ (so slov ochevidtsa),” *Vozrozhdenie*, no. 120 (1925).

prominently.⁷⁵ That same year, the socialist-oriented *Letters from Soviet Prisons* appeared, as did Sergei Melgunov's *Red Terror in Russia*.⁷⁶ Although the former demonstrates the hesitance of representatives of the international leftist movement to undermine the Bolshevik project, voices of those who had been victimized by the regime began to emerge. Melgunov, a Cadet and then a Socialist Revolutionary, was vehemently opposed to the Bolshevik regime from its origins and frames his experiences in Soviet prisons as an explicit indictment of it.

As Tolczyk outlines in *Blissful Blindness*, the more explicitly anti-Bolshevik an account was, the more easily it was rejected by an international audience inclined to support the Communist project. The survivor accounts that began to emerge in 1925, many of which are addressed in this dissertation, were explicitly and unequivocally anti-Bolshevik. The first several memoirs of the camp were written by former Whites who had fought against the Bolsheviks during the Civil War.

Sozerko Malsagoff, *An Island Hell* (1926)

In March of 1925, Sozerko Malsagoff and four other prisoners escaped the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp, leaving the Kem transit point on the mainland and making their way across the Finnish border over the course of thirty days. By the end of the year, Malsagoff had published an account of the camp in a Russian-language émigré journal in Riga. In 1926, an English translation of his full-length account was published in London and New York by A.M. Philpot, the same press that published Popoff's *The Tcheka* a year earlier.

⁷⁵ George Popoff, *The Tcheka: The Red Inquisition* (London: A.M. Philpot Ltd. 1925).

⁷⁶ Sergei Melgunov, *Red Terror in Russia* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1925). Melgunov's work to bring attention to the Soviet labor camps and repressions going on in the country make him a recurring and influential figure in this sphere from the 1920s to his death in 1956.

Malsagoff's *An Island Hell* is a mixture of firsthand experiences and second- or thirdhand accounts of the camp itself (where Malsagoff never actually went—he escaped from the Kem transit camp). Although the basic chronology of Malsagoff's imprisonment structures the text, the author attempts to provide a comprehensive history of the origins of the camp (drawn from conversations with former prisoners of Kholmogory and Pertominsk sent to SLON in 1923) and a detailed description of the islands and camp. The book often reads like a military intelligence dossier, with hand-drawn maps of the camp and detailed information about the camp's size and materiel. Secondhand information is not always specified clearly, and firsthand information about Malsagoff's subjective experiences is minimized in comparison to information about specific camp administrators and policies. In the final section of the book, an account of his nearly fatal escape, Malsagoff reproduces selections from the journal that fellow escapee Yuri Bezsonov kept during their march to the Finnish border. His post-factum analysis of his experiences, which punctuates nearly every personal story throughout the account, moves between ironic disbelief and angry predictions of greater calamity from the Bolshevik regime.

Malsagoff's account immediately impacted the worldwide conversation about the Soviet prison camps, both in Russia and outside of it. The Soviets, who kept a close eye on their international reputation, refuted Malsagoff's account in a volley, with articles like Mikhail Kol'tsov's "Slon Pishet" in *Pravda* in April 1926 and a 1928 documentary, *Solovki (The Soviet Special Purpose Camp)*, that presented the camp in the best possible light.⁷⁷ These efforts were

⁷⁷ Mikhail Kol'tsov, "SLON pishet," *Pravda*, no. 75 (3304), April 2, 1926, 1; *Solovki (Solovetskie lagerya osobogo naznacheniya)*, documentary film, produced by Sovkino, directed by A. A. Cherkasov, 1928.

not unsuccessful,⁷⁸ although readers' appetite for more accounts of Soviet prisons, and of SLON in particular, was apparent.

Yuri Bezsonov, *My Twenty-Six Prisons and My Escape from Solovetski* (1929)⁷⁹

Malsagoff's fellow escapee Yuri Bezsonov published his memoir in 1929. The book was published in Russian, French, and English over the course of that year. This is the first SLON book that can be categorized as an autobiography rather than a memoir in the canonical sense addressed above: Bezsonov's presents a complex narrativization of his life with an introspective emphasis. Rather than a limited description of his time in the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp, Bezsonov presents the story of his conversion to Christianity against the backdrop of a changing Soviet society, albeit spending most of his time in prison or exile. While Malsagoff's emphasis is always on his time as a prisoner of the Soviets, Bezsonov's emphasizes his interiority and treats his internment at SLON as just one element of the more important conversion experience that drives his narrative.

Bezsonov's book reflects an aim far beyond bringing awareness to the camp like Malsagoff—it includes elements of religious confession and is, overall, an exciting story with lots of heroism, carousing, romantic intrigue, and clandestine treasure hunting. The narrative voice that describes former-Bezsonov is sober and reflective; narrator-Bezsonov takes a religious and philosophical approach to his own experiences, clearly informed by both his renewed

⁷⁸ Aliakhnovich's mother saw the film in Minsk, then wrote to her son: "I saw your life in Solovki in the cinema. I calmed down a lot. I see that it is not as bad as I thought..." Franciszek Olechnowicz [Frantsishak Aliakhnovich], "Kino" in *Prawda o Sowietach (Wrażenia z 7-letniego pobytu w więzieniach sowieckich r. 1927–1933)* (Warsaw: Self-published, 1937), 116–117.

⁷⁹ Youri [Yuri] Bezsonov, *My Twenty-Six Prisons and My Escape from Solovetski* (London: Butler & Tanner LTD, 1929).

religious faith and his familiarity with the works of Fedor Dostoevsky. Bezsonov bares his literary references, explicitly comparing his experiences against Dostoevsky's *Notes from the House of the Dead*. Bezsonov also reproduces documentary texts (including the same diary that Malsagoff had in his book). His literary instincts are more apparent as well: he frames the book with a letter written to his sister upon his arrival in Finland and comments extensively on the excerpts from the journal he kept during his escape.⁸⁰

Said Qureshi, "Five years in Soviet prisons" (1927)⁸¹

In 1927, a unique account of the camp was published across eight issues of the Parisian newspaper *Poslednie novosti*.⁸² Said Qureshi [Курейши], an Indian businessman and British citizen, describes in largely chronological order the bewildering ordeal of his arrest on suspicion of being a Japanese spy and subsequent exile to the Solovetsky Islands. Providing very little historical context for the islands and monastery, Qureshi emphasizes his subjective experiences and frequently draws upon his Muslim faith and the concept of *kismet* to explain how he endured the experience.⁸³

⁸⁰ Bezsonov had allowed Malsagoff to republish extracts from the journal he kept during their harrowing trip from Kem to Finland, and he did the same in his own memoir, supplementing the brief journal extracts with his recollections and commentary.

⁸¹ Said Qureshi [S. Kureishi], "Piat' let v sovetskikh tiur'makh i lageriakh," *Poslednie novosti* (Paris), 1927, published across several issues: November 25, 27, 29 (Nos. 2438, 2440, 2442); December 2, 4, 6, 9, 10, 11, 13 (Nos. 2445, 2447, 2449, 2452–2454, 2456). Republished with commentary in *VSU* vol. 2, 90–148. Citations throughout are to *VSU*.

⁸² This newspaper, published from 1920–1940, was an influential part of the Russian émigré press. Edited by Pavel Miliukov, the newspaper was an organ of the Constitutional Democratic Party (Cadets).

⁸³ Qureshi, "Piat' let," 98–99.

Boris Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka* (1928)

In 1928, Boris Cederholm, a Finnish citizen, published his monograph *Au pays du Nep et de la Tcheka: dans les prisons de l' U.R.S.S.*, retitled to the more dramatic *In the Clutches of the Tcheka* for the English translation that followed in 1929. Cederholm was a Russified Swede whose family had served the Russian monarchy for generations. He served in the Russian army in WWI and as an officer in the White Army, although his Finnish citizenship eventually led to his release from SLON.⁸⁴ Cederholm's experience combines the cultural familiarity of other Russian accounts with the "preferential" treatment of foreigners that can be gleaned from Qureshi's account; these two types of memoir (Russian and non-Russian) will increasingly diverge in content, audience, and tone over the next decade. Cederholm, a well-educated aristocrat, composed a detailed and rather long memoir (345 pages compared to Malsagoff's 223) notable for its many scenes depicting extensive recalled dialogue. Cederholm's dandyish personality and arch but baffled perspective on the Bolshevik transformation of Russia is certainly unique compared to Malsagoff's harsher invective.

Pavel Rasskazov, *Notes of a Prisoner* (1928)⁸⁵

Pavel Rasskazov was a journalist and trade unionist who was arrested by the Whites in 1918 and held on the island of Mudiug near Archangelsk with hundreds of other prisoners. In 1928, six years after the author's death, Rasskazov's memoir was published in Archangelsk. This memoir makes an interesting counterpoint to the SLON memoirs discussed here; Rasskazov depicts the same chronology of events as the SLON memoirists, including his arrest,

⁸⁴ S. V. Volkov, "Vospominaniia B. L. Sederkhol'ma," in *VSU* vol. 2, 662–664.

⁸⁵ Pavel Rasskazov, *Zapiski zakliuchennogo* (Archangelsk: ISTPART i AGITPROP ARKhGUBKOMA VKP(b), 1928).

interrogation, and life at the island prison. Just as other memoirists detail their escape attempts, Rasskazov describes his role in the mass escape from the island in 1919. Later, Rasskazov is taken to France as a prisoner, then eventually exchanged back to the Soviet Union in 1920. For the next two years, Rasskazov wrote a series of books, plays, and articles along with his memoirs while he worked for the RSFSR, although he did not join the Communist party. He died of typhus in 1922.

The formatting and substance of Rasskazov's memoirs represent a clear response to the proliferation of SLON memoirs in the mid-1920s. Rasskazov's memoir follows the same pattern as the SLON memoirs, although the language reflects his leftist leanings, and the discussion of his White captors relies on materialist analysis rather than the Christian metaphysics that most of the émigré memoirists use to structure their analysis of the Soviet state. The book is otherwise interchangeable with the SLON memoirs, emphasizing the deadly conditions, poor rations, cruel treatment of prisoners, and forbidding landscape of the island prison camp.

Alexander Grube, "The Story of a Man from 'That World'" (1929)⁸⁶

The years 1928–1931 saw even more memoirs of the camps published, with authors increasingly commenting on prior accounts. Escapees and survivors of the camp were hungry for more information about the camp after they left the Soviet Union, and they often shared stories and developed a shared history of the camp. In turn, these accounts found international audiences in the Russian émigré and foreign press.

⁸⁶ Alexander Robertovich Grube, "Rasskaz cheloveka s 'togo sveta': Istoriia Aleksandra Grube, bezhavshego iz Solovkov," *Novoe russkoe slovo*, 1930, nos. 6478–6481, 6483; Grube, "Rasskaz cheloveka s 'togo sveta,'" in *VSU*, vol. 3, 194–216. Citations throughout are to *VSU*.

According to Umniagin's biographical note on the author,⁸⁷ Alexander Robertovich Grube began to publish accounts of his escape in émigré newspapers across Europe (Riga, Paris, and Belgrade) in 1929. Originally published as a series of newspaper articles, Grube's story is written as an oral tale related to an interlocutor. The account, reproduced in full for the first time in volume 3 of Umniagin's compilation *Воспоминания соловецких узников*, is scattershot but largely chronological.

Grube describes himself as Latvian sailor who defected to the Soviet Union in the early 1920s on the basis of Soviet propaganda. Once he had defected from his US-based ship, he was quickly arrested for espionage and sent to Solovki. Grube, like Bezsonov, is a chronic escaper of prisons, and he describes at least four attempts to leave detention before his successful escape, an incredible tale of stowing away onto a foreign ship docked at SLON and nearly suffocating while wedged into the lumber that filled its hold.

Mieczysław Lenardowicz, *On the islands of torture and death. Diary of Solovki* (1930)⁸⁸

In 1930, the first Polish account of the camp was published in Warsaw, titled *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci. Pamiętnik z Solówek* and attributed to Mieczysław Lenardowicz. The account itself has little information about the author aside from some names of GPU contacts in Minsk and references to the abuses he suffered for being Polish.⁸⁹ Lenardowicz writes in a polemical

⁸⁷ Umniagin, "Rasskazy cheloveka z 'togo sveta,'" in *VSU* vol. 3, 190.

⁸⁸ Mieczysław Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci. Pamiętnik z Solówek*, Biblioteczka Społeczna no. 4 (Warsaw: Wojskowy Instytut Naukowo-Wydawniczy, 1930). As noted in the *Book Formatting and Illustrations* section below, there are two editions of Lenardowicz's book from 1930. Page numbers reference to the Biblioteczka Społeczna version.

⁸⁹ Lenardowicz's second book, *Za czerwonym kordonem: Wspomnienia z pobytu w Rosji sowieckiej* (Warsaw: Wojskowy Instytut Naukowo-Wydawniczy, 1931), is a memoir of his time in exile after his release from SLON and, because it depicts his relative freedom to move around the country, albeit illicitly, is more illustrative of the author's roguish personality.

style that, above all, highlights the experiences of fellow Polish detainees at the camp—the book is largely chronological and follows the outlines of Lenardowicz’s own arrest, interrogation, exile, and release, but also features long anecdotes and stories about the camp related to the author by fellow detainees.

The most shocking part of the book is a series of stories about the mass executions of political prisoners rumored to have taken place at the camp in December 1923 (the same mass execution that the *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik* predicted and reported on in winter 1923–1924 above). Lenardowicz retells a night of systematic shootings as reported by two Polish medical orderlies who were witnesses to the massacre.⁹⁰ The medical orderlies are later sent to the punishment cells on Sekirka Hill, where a doctor witnesses their execution; he then relays the tale to Lenardowicz. The book ends with a martyrology of Polish prisoners who died at SLON, one of many examples of Lenardowicz’s commitment to honoring the Poles he met while at the camp.

Ivan Zaitsev, *Solovki. A Communist katorga or place of torture and death*, 1931⁹¹

Published in Shanghai and written in pre-reform Russian orthography, Ivan Matveevich Zaitsev’s book would become the next touchstone account of SLON following Malsagoff’s memoir. Zaitsev essentially picks up the thread of Malsagoff’s memoir and describes the furor that the earlier book had created among GPU administrators at the camp and in Moscow.

⁹⁰ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 26–30.

Mieczysław Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci. Pamiętnik z Solówek*, Biblioteczka Społeczna no. 4 (Warsaw: Wojskowy Instytut Naukowo-Wydawniczy, 1930), 26–30. As noted in the *Book Formatting and Illustrations* section below, there are two editions of Lenardowicz’s book from 1930. Page numbers reference to the Biblioteczka Społeczna version.

⁹¹ Ivan Matveevich Zaitsev, *Solovki. Kommunisticheskaia katorga ili mesto pytok i smerti* (Shanghai: Slovo, 1931).

Zaitsev, another White officer, had accepted the summons to join the Red Army (unlike Bezsonov) and quickly been arrested and exiled to SLON regardless. He gives this context in the introduction and follows with a two-part book. The first half begins with a history of the camp (chapter 1) followed by a brief history of the monastery and description of the islands' climate (chapter 2). Chapter 3 is a detailed description of the GPU and its function within the Soviet economy. The agency's perverse incentives and monopoly on cheap labor are of particular interest to the author. Chapters 5–7 describe Zaitsev's own transit (*etap*) to the camp, the politics of work assignments and unsatisfactory rations allotted to prisoner-laborers, and daily life at the camp. The second part of the book is divided into chapters that highlight groups at the camp—from clerics (“Martyrs for the Bright Name of Christ”) and women prisoners to the particulars of loggers and shock-workers (*udarniki*); it also includes a detailed description of the camp isolator on Sekirka Hill. The book concludes with a long plea to support the Anti-Communist League, to which the book is also dedicated.

Other publications

Several other notable works related to the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp were published in this period (1925–1932), including two journalistic monographs that placed the camp in the broader context of the Soviet Union. Raymond Duguet, a French author who carved a niche for himself bringing Bolshevik atrocities to French audiences, published *A Penal Colony in Red Russia: Solovki, the Island of Hunger* in 1927, based on interviews with a French survivor of the camp.⁹² Anne Applebaum characterizes the book as “surprisingly accurate.”⁹³ In 1929,

⁹² Raymond Duguet, *Un bagne en Russie rouge: SOLOVKI. L'Ile de la Faim, des Supplices, de la Mort*. (Paris: Éd. Jules Tallandier, 1927).

⁹³ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 149.

Maxim Gorky visited the camp and published a travel sketch (*ocherk*) dedicated to the camps in a series titled *Po Soiuzu Sovetov*.

Levko Chykalenko's 1931 book *Solovets'ka katorga*, published in Ukrainian in Warsaw, presents nine separate accounts from Ukrainians, anonymized except for their location, who had been exiled to SLON.⁹⁴ These are shorter accounts, although they usually include an autobiography of each author. This format emphasizes the scale of repressions of Ukrainians at the time, a growing phenomenon that will be reflected in the increasingly nationalized representations of the camp, particularly after World War II.

Also in 1931, Protopresbyter Mikhail Polski, a SLON survivor and close confidante of Patriarch Tikhon, self-published *The Position of the Church in Soviet Russia: An Essay by a Priest Who Escaped from Russia*. Polski's essay tracks the fate of the Orthodox church in Russia through the interactions of its hierarchs with the GPU. A key theme is the struggle for independent church authority against the coercion and manipulation of the Soviets, particularly through the Renovationist movement (*obnovlenchestvo*). Polski does not emphasize his own story except when he is a key actor or witness to events (for example, he explains his decision to escape Russia after recognizing that his impending "freedom" from years of exile meant either compromise with the GPU or another, harsher sentence to Solovki). He also discusses his "Epistle of Solovetsky Confessors," a letter to Soviet authorities signed on September 27, 1926, by seventeen bishops imprisoned at SLON.⁹⁵ Polski explains why he composed the letter, describes the pessimistic response from other clergymen on the islands, and ultimately concludes that the letter "was not only not accepted, but turned out to be completely unnecessary and

⁹⁴ Levko Chykalenko, ed., *Solovets'ka katorga: Dokumenty* (Warsaw, 1931).

⁹⁵ This letter was first translated into English and printed in Paul Anderson, *People, Church and State in Modern Russia* (Student Christian Movement Press, Ltd., 1944), 70–74.

superfluous.”⁹⁶ From then on, Polski retreats from direct conflict with the authorities, realizing that, “like Christ at the trial: conversations are a formality, the fate is predetermined, let them do what they want.”⁹⁷ Once abroad, Polski would continue to publish work on the fate of the Russian Orthodox church until his death in 1960.

In 1932, Lev Nussimbaum, a prolific and controversial⁹⁸ German-language author, published a book titled *OGPU: The Plot Against the World* under his pen name Essad Bey. The book outlines the OGPU’s origins, structure, and methods, highlighting the organization’s flagship labor camp on the Solovetsky Islands in an extensive chapter. The book followed Nussimbaum’s earlier biography of Stalin (1931) and monograph on the plight of the White Russian émigrés (*White Russia: People Without a Homeland* (1932)). The book, which Tolczyk calls “sensational, though undoubtedly embellished,” was translated into English and published in 1933.⁹⁹

Conclusion

This period saw a surge in publications exposing the horrific conditions of the Soviet Gulag system, particularly at SLON, the system’s largest and most notorious camp. The accounts discussed above, written by survivors and escapees, were designed to spread awareness of the brutal labor practices, political repression, and inhumane treatment of prisoners at the Soviet Union’s flagship labor camp. Despite the growing evidence of Soviet atrocities, many Western intellectuals and leftists exhibited a mix of support, ambivalence, and willful ignorance toward

⁹⁶ Mikhail Pol'skii, *Polozhenie tserkvi v Sovetskoi Rossii* (Jerusalem, 1931), 31.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 32–33.

⁹⁸ For more on Nussimbaum see Tom Reiss, *The Orientalist: Solving the Mystery of a Strange and Dangerous Life* (New York: Random House, 2005).

⁹⁹ Tolczyk, *Blissful Blindness*, 107.

the Bolshevik regime. *Letters from Russian Prisons* (1925) included commentary from prominent figures on the political left who downplayed Soviet crimes. From the Soviet side, Rasskazov's *Zapiski zakliuchennogo* (1928) represents the same effort to downplay the situation at SLON through comparison to atrocities committed by others (in Rasskazov's case, the White movement, which many of the SLON memoirists were affiliated with).

Memoirs from this period came from a variety of authors, including former White Army officers, foreign nationals, and religious figures. Each account offered unique insights, such as Boris Cederholm's aristocratic perspective in *In the Clutches of the Tcheka* (1928) and Said Qureshi's emphasis on his Muslim faith in "Five Years in Soviet Prisons" (1927).

These memoirs provided detailed descriptions of camp life, escape attempts, and the psychological toll on prisoners, often framed as indictments of the Soviet regime. Formally, the works of Malsagoff, Lenardowicz, and Cederholm are narrowly focused on a single, historically significant period in the author's life (their time at SLON). While Yuri Bezsonov's expansive and introspective work can be categorized as autobiography and Qureshi and Grube's interviews with newspaper editors are slightly piecemeal, the rest of the memoirs published in this period combine personal narrative with broader analysis of Soviet prisons and labor camps.

The memoirs and exposés from this period played a significant role in shaping global perceptions of the Soviet Union. They exposed the contradictions between the Bolsheviks' revolutionary ideals and the reality of their oppressive policies, contributing to a growing critique of the regime. The Soviet government actively worked to discredit these accounts, publishing rebuttals and producing propaganda like the 1928 documentary *SLON* to present the camps in a positive light. Despite these efforts, the international appetite for lurid accounts of Soviet prisons grew.

By the time that General Ivan Zaitsev's memoir appeared in 1931, the discourse surrounding the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp had deepened; he comments on the strong reaction to Malsagoff's memoir at the camp and responds to many of the earlier author's claims. In the introduction to his book, Zaitsev explains that he organized his book in response to earlier works on the camp, and he does avoid relying on his personal narrative for the first several chapters of the book. However, as he leaves for SLON, Zaitsev reverts to tracing his own chronology and making more general observations using this basic narrative structure. While in some ways these early memoirs set the formal pattern for memoirs of Soviet labor camps, for the most part they reflect the already-formalized experience of incarceration and a mix of generic norms drawn from captivity narratives, the Russian literary tradition, Christian theology, and long-established life-writing practices more generally.

3. 1934–1939

Although the camp's function had been radically changed after 1931 and many prisoners removed from the islands and forced to help dig the White Sea Canal, a prison continued to operate on the islands until the outbreak of war in 1939. Accordingly, the memoirs published about the camp became increasingly retrospective. Four more accounts were published between 1934 and 1939, and one was composed but not published (its author, Fr. Wincenty Ilgin, died shortly after completing the manuscript). Other than Vladimir Tchernavin and his wife Tatyana, these memoirists had been exiled to the islands in the 1920s and published their accounts many years after their return from the camp.

Tatyana Tchernavin, *Escape from the Soviets* (1934)¹⁰⁰

In 1934 and 1935, Tatyana and Vladimir Tchernavin published dual accounts of their escape from SLON across the Finnish border with their young son. Vladimir had been sent to SLON in May 1931 and plotted the successful escape a year later in 1932. As a skilled ichthyologist, he was able to move freely in the territories under the purview of the expanded SLON administration, now headquartered at Kem on the mainland. Both accounts were first published in English, translated from the Russian in which they were composed. The two accounts are separate and complementary.

The first to be published was Tatyana's *Escape from the Soviets*, which begins with the revolution and the birth of her son. Her account emphasizes her view of herself as a mother, wife to a political prisoner, and member of the rapidly repressed Russian intelligentsia. She describes her work at Peterhof and the Hermitage as rewarding but difficult experiences due to the high demands placed on cultural workers and the increasingly harsh and suspicious treatment of the same workers by Soviet authorities in the 1920s.

After her husband's arrest, Tatyana herself was imprisoned and threatened with exile to Solovki but eventually released without charge. She then visits her husband at the camp twice, where they plan and ultimately execute their escape. Like Malsagoff and Bezsonov, Tatyana depicts her escape in agonizing and surprisingly suspenseful detail. The book ends with the family's arrival in Finland, where a hospital-bound Tatyana quickly composes her memoir. Although Tatyana and her husband describe their initial support for the Bolshevik revolution, their memoirs detail the breakdown of Russian society as a consequence of the Communist reorganization of cultural, scientific, and financial institutions.

¹⁰⁰ Tatyana Tchernavin, *Escape from the Soviets* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1934).

In the English-language press, Tatyana Tchernavin's 1934 memoir was quite impactful at the time of its publication. Tolczyk quotes a review from that year in the *New York Times* that called her memoir "one of the most moving and convincing testimonies of the human experience" the reviewer, J. Donald Adams, "had ever encountered."¹⁰¹ However, Tolczyk explains, the influence of Tatyana's book (along with contemporaneous accounts by Ante Ciliga and Julia de Beausobre) was "negligible in comparison with the influence of Soviet propaganda," citing the stock market crash of 1929 as a source of political instability and "[a]ntibourgeois sentiments."¹⁰²

Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent* (1935)¹⁰³

In his subsequent book, *I Speak for the Silent: Prisoners of the Soviets*, Vladimir resolutely avoids rehashing material covered in Tatyana's book including life after the October Revolution and the family's escape. Instead, he begins with the GPU's uncovering of a (false) conspiracy among the Northern Fishing Group, where he is third in command, and the realization that he will, sooner or later, be accused of the same conspiracy and imprisoned or executed.

Tchernavin emphasizes the workings of Soviet industry and the machinations of the GPU, in particular its role in providing both skilled and unskilled prisoner labor to other Soviet industries at unbeatably low rates. His deep interest in the workings of the fishing industry is more than apparent, and he even continues to influence the region's fishing practices while incarcerated at SLON.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 107–108.

¹⁰² Ibid., 108–109.

¹⁰³ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent: Prisoners of the Soviets* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1935), n.p.

Vladimir Tchernavin fulfills the promise of the book's title, "speaking" for the prisoners he meets and other victims of the Soviet government throughout. The book is divided into three broad sections: "We are Workers at Murmansk," "We are Prisoners in Leningrad," and "We are Convicts of Solovki." Tchernavin's class consciousness is similar to that of his wife and equally well-articulated throughout, displaying sympathy for peasants and common criminals. The book reflects an interest in telling the stories of peasants and fisherman, not just in the camps but across the Russian North, where he worked at various fisheries

Tchernavin's narrative demonstrates the author's insight and force of will, a rare combination that makes his memoir one of the more readable of those discussed in this chapter. His wife also displays a gift for narrative, and together the couples' writing presents a valuable and comprehensive picture of young, educated people who were initially supportive of the Soviet project, then brutally disillusioned by the failures and violence of the new government.

Julia Danzas, *Red Gaols* (1935)¹⁰⁴

Julia Danzas, the daughter of the Russian charge d'affairs in Greece and great-niece of Alexander Pushkin's second in his fatal duel, Konstantin Danzas, was a well-published writer before the turn of the century and, after 1907, a maid of honor to Empress Alexandra. A correspondent of Maxim Gorky, who read her 1906 book on Gnosticism (*V poiskakh za bozhestvom*), Danzas volunteered with the Red Cross during the first world war and continued her intellectual pursuits after the October Revolution.

¹⁰⁴ Julia Danzas, *Red Gaols: A Woman's Experiences in Russian Prisons* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1935).

Despite her favor with prominent cultural figures, including Gorky, Danzas ran into trouble with Soviet authorities after she converted to Catholicism in 1921. Arrested in 1923, she was charged with belonging to a counterrevolutionary Catholic conspiracy (including accusations that she had corresponded with the pope) and sentenced to ten years' exile. She was first sent to Irkutsk, then to the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp, and finally moved to the White Sea-Baltic Canal in September 1932. In the latter two camps, Danzas did clerical work, which helped to preserve her delicate health. She emigrated in 1932 (with assistance at home and abroad) and spent the last ten years of her life in various émigré and Catholic communities in Germany, France, and Italy.

In contrast to the Tchernavin's long memoirs, suffused with the authors' personal experiences and reflections, Danzas' 1935 memoir *Bagne rouge: Souvenirs d'une prisonnière au pays des Soviets* is a brief and mostly straightforward account of her time in the camp. In 67 octavo pages (with wide margins), Danzas chronicles her ten years of Soviet incarceration. Providing little analysis and few details, aside from some particulars about the food rations and cell conditions, the key emotions expressed in the book are indignation and disgust—Danzas is not shy about her aversion to prisoner society and the deleterious conditions of the prisons and labor camps she experiences.

Frantsishak Aliakhnovich, *In the Claws of the GPU* (1935)

Playwright Frantsishak Aliakhnovich, a Belarusian nationalist from Vilnius and theorist of Belarusian theatre, had moved with relative freedom between Vilnius and Soviet Minsk in the years following the October Revolution. He was arrested in January 1927, accused of spying for the Polish government, and sentenced to three years at the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp. At

the camp, he found work as a reader in the famed SLON theatre and met many of the cultural figures who served time there, including fellow Belarusians and Ukrainian intellectuals and artists. In 1933, Aliakhnovich was exchanged for Belarusian linguist Branislav Tarashkevich, then imprisoned by the Second Polish Republic. After his arrival back in Vilnius, he began working on an account of his experiences for publication, which appeared in Polish in 1935.¹⁰⁵

The majority of the book is, like the other texts I discuss, a largely chronological account of the author's own life with sections devoted to particular topics and anecdotes drawn from the author's own experiences as well as from secondhand accounts. Where Aliakhnovich differs is in his use of a dramatic mask, which he calls the "Poputchik" [fellow traveler] and which in the Polish and Belarusian versions of the text is used from the beginning of the book until Aliakhnovich's arrest.

Aliakhnovich separates his authorial persona almost entirely from Poputchik, presenting the narrative mask in the third person as he navigates his lonely days in Minsk, when everyone but him seems to understand his fate, and in his GPU interrogations. Even after he drops the mask, Aliakhnovich draws a scant portrait of himself as a person—his autobiographical writing moves between a blank eyewitness to history and recognition and gratefulness for his relative luck in his fate, an appreciation that deepens over time. Aliakhnovich produced several redactions and translations of his memoir between 1935 and 1942, with significant amendments to the final Belarusian version. His philosophical and political influences demonstrably shift between redactions, reflecting the changing atmosphere in his milieu of Belarusian nation-builders and in his native Vilnius, where he was assassinated by Soviet agents in 1944.

¹⁰⁵ Andriej Moskwini, "Powieść dokumentalna Franciszka Alachnowicza '7 lat w szponach GPU': geneza utworu, cztery wersje," *Białorutenistyka Białostocka* 11 (2019): 47–48.

Wincenty Ilgin, *Memoirs of a Chaplain from Solovki* (1936–1937)¹⁰⁶

Wincenty Ilgin (1886–1937) was a Catholic priest who served Polish Catholics across the Russian empire.¹⁰⁷ He was born in Dyneburg (now Daugavpils), and educated in Saint Petersburg. From 1910 to 1926, Ilgin was assigned to a series of parishes and administrative positions in what is now eastern Belarus. Arrested in 1926 for performing religious rites without authorization, Ilgin was sent to Butyrka and, in 1927, sentenced to three years at SLON. He arrived there that year and was transferred to Archangelsk in 1929, then transferred again to Belbaltlag in 1930. In 1933, he was transported back to Butyrka and released as part of a prisoner exchange with Lithuania. Ilgin drafted his memoirs after finally moving to Poland in 1936, where he died of a heart attack a year later. His memoirs, with an introduction by Fr. Roman Dzwonkowski, were published by Norbertinum (Lublin) in 2006.

Ilgin begins the memoir with a brief biography describing his life up to 1926, mostly in terms of the priesthood hierarchy that led to his role as the apostolic administrator¹⁰⁸ of the recently formed Kharkiv Diocese. He discusses his time serving Polish Catholics in the Soviet Union up to his arrest, then outlines the stages of his exile (chapter titles: “In Soviet Captivity,” “Prison in Kharkiv,” “On the Way to Solovki”). Ilgin then spends a chapter on “Life in Exile in Solovki” before he is transferred to Archangelsk. He describes a brief period of freedom before he is transferred out of the Soviet Union. Following this chronological section, the book includes

¹⁰⁶ Fr. Wincenty Ilgin, *Wspomnienia kapłana z Solówek. Jak to było w raju Bolszewickim. Charków — Solówki — Piniega — Moskwa — Warszawa (1917–1933)*, edited by Fr. Roman Dzwonkowski (Lublin: Norbertinum, 2006).

¹⁰⁷ “Father Wincenty Ilgin,” *Book of Remembrance*, University of Notre Dame Archives.

¹⁰⁸ Priest or bishop appointed to head a diocese that is temporarily without a bishop. Pl: “apostolski administrator.”

a chapter titled “Observations and Conclusions from My Stay in the USSR (1917–1933)” broken into three sections: “On Political Relations,” “On Economic Relations,” and “On Religious and Moral Relations.”

The structure and contents of the memoir are in line with the other memoirs addressed here, but some differences can be related to Ilgin’s religious training. Ilgin’s religious life and duties within the church shape his response to the changing conditions in Ukraine, and his role as a church leader makes him a target for the Soviet authorities. His religious faith is a constant source of strength and comfort for the priest as he endures his time at the camp. Ilgin frequently invokes scripture and writes in a structured, sermon-like way, especially in the thematic chapter on Soviet life that ends the book.

Ilgin’s memoir follows a more personal chronology than Polski’s account, which is essentially a hagiographic text emphasizing his time among what the “New Russian Martyrs.” Still, Ilgin’s structured, sermon-like prose, frequent references to fellow clergymen, and constant intrusion of his own religious sensibilities give the book an undeniably religious bent. The concluding essays decrying the destruction of the Roman Catholic church in the new Soviet Union underscore this sentiment.

Nikolai Kiselev-Gromov (Karpov), *Lageri smerti v S.S.S.R* (1936)¹⁰⁹

Written by a former camp official, this was the second major SLON book to be published in Shanghai after Zaitsev’s *SOLOVKI* (1931). Kiselev-Gromov’s perspective, particularly his understanding of his fellow Chekists’ mindset, the breadth of his experiences in different parts of

¹⁰⁹ Nikolai Kiselev-Gromov, *Lageri smerti v S.S.S.R* (Shanghai: Knigoizdatel'stvo N. P. Malinovskogo, 1936).

the camp and among different groups is quite unique among SLON memoirists. Throughout the book, Kiselev-Gromov offers specific data about the number of people imprisoned and killed at SLON, along with other “inside information” that shores up his perceived legitimacy as a source. A preface by Sergei Maslov corrects many of the statistics Kiselev-Gromov provides in the book and moderates the author’s claims, including his total for the number who died at the camp.¹¹⁰ Maslov also places the book in the context of earlier memoirs of SLON, including Zaitsev’s account, emphasizing the unique importance of Kiselev-Gromov’s perspective despite certain problematic aspects of his work.¹¹¹ Maslov, apparently one of the editors of Kiselev-Gromov’s manuscript, outlines how the manuscript was significantly edited, rearranged, and reduced in size for publication.¹¹² The final book consists of ten thematic chapters: “General Information,” “Categories of Prisoner,” “Travel and Day One,” “On Work Assignment,” “General Living Conditions,” “On Solovki,” “Kond Island,” “Individual Scenes and Facts,” “SLON Administration,” and “Solovki in the Chekist Image.” The final chapter is appended by a short martyrology titled “Mortality at SLON,” which features Kiselev-Gromov’s estimate of the total number of deaths at the camp from 1925 to the end of 1929: 183,490. This is one of many claims that Maslov disputes in the introduction to the book and cannot be confirmed.

Kiselev-Gromov inhabits a birds-eye view of the camp and, as the chapter titles indicate, emphasizes process and general trends, although he frequently includes individual anecdotes to illustrate his points. Because he spent three years working at different places across the camp, Kiselev-Gromov is also able to convey the transformation of the camp over time. He is most

¹¹⁰ Sergei Maslov, “Preface” in Kiselev-Gromov, *Lageri smerti*, i–xii.

¹¹¹ Maslov also discusses Chykalenko’s “brochure,” dismissing the accounts as “merely a collection of scattered recollections by ordinary prisoners” and decrying the brochure’s focus on Ukrainian peasant accounts as “petty politicking.” Maslov, “Preface,” viii.

¹¹² Maslov, “Preface,” xii.

interesting in his explanations of Chekist behavior and mindset, explaining the incentive structure and other experiential causes that foster their cruelty and abuses of the prisoners. Kiselev-Gromov is also unique for his frequent reproduction of poems and songs from the Solovetsky Camp. While Aliakhnovich quotes a few lines from verses written for SLON theatre and musical productions, Kiselev-Gromov quotes these texts at length.

Mikhail Zakharovich Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga* (1938)

One of the most remarkable works of SLON memoir, published at the end of the 1930s, is that of Mikhail Zakharovich Nikonov-Smorodin. Early in the Civil War, Smorodin led a peasant uprising, after which he spent nearly a decade living in the Soviet Union under a pseudonym. He was eventually caught and sentenced to 10 years at SLON, where he spent a few years before being transferred to the mainland to supervise a rabbit farm, the same occupation he had held at SLON. In 1933, Nikonov-Smorodin escaped across the Finnish border from the rabbit farm he ran on Lake Onega.

His memoir *Red Katorga: Notes of a Solovetskian* appeared in Sofia in 1938, published by the editorial arm of the National Alliance of Russian Solidarists (NTS), an organization of White émigrés based in Serbia.¹¹³ It was edited and introduced by Alexander Amfiteatrov, a well-known writer and dedicated anti-Bolshevik. Amfiteatrov proposes that *Red Katorga* is a fitting companion to Ivan Solonevich's *Russia in Chains*, calling Nikonov-Smorodin "a resident and chronicler of the village," while Solonevich "tells primarily about the city." Together,

¹¹³ This was a predecessor to the organization's publishing arm, Posev, founded after WWII. Mikhail Rozanov published his memoirs through Posev in 1949 (*Posev* journal) and 1951 (Posev publisher), and Ekaterina Olitskaia published her memoirs with Posev (publisher) in 1971.

Amfiteatrov writes, “[t]hese two books give a terrible picture of Soviet reality.”¹¹⁴ Nikonov-Smorodin also compares his memoir to *Russia in Chains*, stating that his goal is to “contribute to the exposure of the Soviet lies about the life of the Soviets,” like Solonevich’s influential work.¹¹⁵ For Nikonov-Smorodin, who had arrived in Europe in 1934, a key goal was to bridge the disconnect between those who lived under the Soviets and émigrés who left the country nearly two decades before.

Nikonov-Smorodin is a skilled writer who evokes the atmosphere of prisons, camps, and transit through brief but effective characterizations of the people he meets rather than describing these settings in detail. His emphasis is on life and experiences rather than conveying a detailed analysis of administrative structure of the camp. Although he includes mimetic reproductions of dialogue that occasionally strain credulity, he uses colloquial, concise language rather than unrealistically florid and expositive dialogue.¹¹⁶ In other instances, however, his writing is excessively lyrical—for example, he includes two separate passages describing the sudden arrival of spring at the camp.¹¹⁷

The format of the book follows the author’s life in the simple chronological style already discussed throughout this section. In an editorial note, Amfiteatrov explains that Nikonov-Smorodin composed a much longer autobiographical text that he titled *Zapiski solovchanina*, but that the portion published in 1938 was limited to the period from his arrest to his escape. It follows that Nikonov-Smorodin wrote substantially more about his early life, his experience leading the peasant rebellion, and his life after escaping from Soviet Russia, but the editor carved

¹¹⁴ Alexander Amfiteatrov, “Introduction” in *Krasnaia katorga*, 4.

¹¹⁵ Nikonov-Smorodin, “K chitateliu” in *Krasnaia katorga*, 11.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 176, 221.

a captivity narrative out of the more autobiographical manuscript. This rare insight into the editorial process that shaped the finished publication reflects the constraints and priorities of the publishing houses that produced such memoirs.

Ivan and Boris Solonevich

Ivan Solonevich's *Rossiia v kontslagere* (1936) is an important entry in the Gulag literary canon. His brother Boris had spent years at Solovki, and Ivan writes frequently about the importance of the camp in the development of the OGPU and the impact that imprisonment had on his brother. Boris himself also published an account of his time at SLON titled *Molodezh' i GPU (Zhizn' i bor'ba sovetskoi molodezhi)* (Sofia: Golos Rossii, 1937). At the end of the decade, the outbreak of World War II effectively stopped the publication of such accounts.

Conclusion

By the mid-1930s, most of the prisoners had been moved from the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp to a series of camps and mass labor projects across the Soviet Union. The camp was no longer the most notorious, most numerous, or most important economically. In the 1920s, memoirists rushed to publish accounts of the camp to draw immediate attention to the Soviet labor camp system, while memoirists in this period took more time to compose their accounts. They also typically spent time at more than one camp, making SLON the point of comparison for later labor camps rather than the singular focus of the memoirs. As a result, SLON memoirs published from 1934–1939 reflect a maturing of the Gulag literary canon, characterized by increasingly retrospective narratives, stronger comparisons across the Soviet system, and innovative literary techniques.

These works showcase a blend of personal testimony, historical analysis, and literary experimentation. Ilgin concludes his personal narrative with a series of essays on economic and religious life in the Soviet Union. Tatyana Tchernavin and Nikonov-Smorodin interweave precise psychological portraits of Chekists and fellow prisoners with suspenseful, detailed escape narratives. Julia Danzas and Frantsishak Aliakhnovich make philosophical observations and critique Soviet repression. Vladimir Tchernavin attempts to describe the failures of Soviet industry from top to bottom, along with sympathetic portrayals of the criminals and peasants he meets in prison. Kiselev-Gromov provides a unique insider's view with his statistical claims and emphasis on the psychology of his fellow Chekists. The simple chronologies of the earlier period are replaced with more complex and reflective accounts of life in Soviet labor camps and prisons.

4. Post-War

After World War II, several new accounts of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp appeared as part of the general memoir boom that followed the war.¹¹⁸ The influence of the war changed memoirists' perception of their time at the camp in the 1920s and 1930s, evidenced by frequent comparisons between the Soviet camps and the Nazi camps. At the same time, perceptions of the Soviet Union were rapidly changing and typically bifurcated among Allied nations. The memoirists and journalists who published books about SLON and the Soviet labor camps in this period took even sharper political stances against the Soviets in their work, contributing to a polarized information environment that Tolczyk claims was ultimately

¹¹⁸ Georgieva, "Memuary," 128. These "booms" follow major events and tend to elicit firsthand accounts from people who see themselves as a part of history.

ineffective at opposing the nexus of support for the Soviet Union following Allied success in WWII.¹¹⁹ A key example is the Soviets' swift and concerted effort to repatriate "displaced persons" who fled the country during the war, including citizens of Poland. Those displaced persons, including several of the memoirists described below, vociferously fought against deportation back to the Soviet sphere of influence.¹²⁰

In 1947, SLON survivor and Social Democrat Boris Sapir contributed a narrative of his time at SLON to a chapter titled "The Northern Camps of Special Designation" in *Forced Labor in Soviet Russia*, edited by David J. Dallin and Boris Nicolaevsky. Dallin's preface opens by placing Soviet labor camps in line with slavery in ancient Rome and "the fate of the Jews" in Germany "during the last decade" and decries any "picture of Russia today which does not include a description of the system of labor camps and exile" as "deliberately misleading."¹²¹ In the chapter on the northern camps, Sapir's personal narrative follows a brief but thorough introduction to the OGPU islands, monastery, and prison there. Sapir's eyewitness account of the repression of political prisoners (he was among the group at the Savvatieevo Hermitage during the mass shooting in December 1923) harkens back to the earliest accounts of the camp from the 1920s.

In 1949, Mikhail Polski, protopresbyter and SLON survivor, followed his 1931 essay about the Russian Orthodox Church with hagiographic work, publishing the first volume of *New*

¹¹⁹ Tolczyk, *Blissful Blindness*, 253.

¹²⁰ See Boris Shiriaev, *Di-Pi v Italii: Zapiski prodavtsa kukol* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta "Dorrego," 1952), a memoir of the author's time as a displaced person in Italy and his strenuous efforts to avoid being repatriated to Russia; see also Tolczyk, *Blissful Blindness*, 241–249.

¹²¹ Boris Sapir, "The Northern Camps of Special Designation," in *Forced Labor in Soviet Russia*, ed. David J. Dallin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1947), 4th printing, 168–190.

Russian Martyrs,¹²² a compendium of clergymen and others who were martyred in the 1920s and 1930s in the Soviet Union. The book, mostly drawn from Polski's personal experience with these clergymen, includes a chapter dedicated to the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp and many individual profiles of priests, monks, and hierarchs who were sent to SLON. Volume 2 of the collection was published in 1957, and Polski indicated that he was working on a third volume before his death in 1960.¹²³ His publications were distributed among believers in the Soviet Union in samizdat in the 1970s and 1980s,¹²⁴ and his work was used by representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) in the successful campaign to canonize many of the "New Russian Martyrs" in 1981.¹²⁵

Mikhail Rozanov, *Zavoevateli belykh piaten'* (1949)

Also in 1949, GULAG survivor Mikhail Rozanov published his first account of his time at SLON and other labor camps (notably Ukhtpechlag in the Komi Republic¹²⁶) in *Posev*, a

¹²² Archpriest Mikhail Pol'skii, *Novye mucheniki rossiiskie*, vol. 1 (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1949); —, *Novye mucheniki rossiiskie*, vol. 2 (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1957).

¹²³ While a third volume never appeared, the two volumes were translated into English and published by Montreal's Monastery Press in 1972 and 1976, respectively.

¹²⁴ E. A. Alexandrov, *Russkie v Severnoi Amerike: Biograficheskii slovar'*, ed. K. M. Alexandrov and A. V. Tereshchuk (Hamden, CT, San Francisco, CA, and Saint Petersburg, Russia, 2005), 404.

¹²⁵ In the 1990s, efforts were underway to canonize the "New Russian Martyrs" in the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as well, which was officially accomplished in 2000. Protodeacon Serafim Gan, "The Canonization of the New Martyrs by the Council of Bishops," Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia.

¹²⁶ Mikhail Rogachev, the head of the Komi Republic branch of Memorial, wrote in an introduction to Rozanov's memoirs that the author was the first published memoirs of a prisoner from Ukhtpechlag (Ukhtinsko-Pechorsky Corrective Labor Camp). M. B. Rogachev and E. A. Zelenskaia, "Zavoevatel' belykh piaten: Mikhail Rozanov i ego kniga" in *Pokaianie: Komi respublikanskii martirolog zhertv massovykh politicheskikh repressii*. Vol. 8, part 2. Syktyvkar: Komi knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 2001, 17–31.

monthly journal of the National Alliance of Russian Solidarists (NTS).¹²⁷ In 1951, the Posev publishing arm released Rozanov's memoirs as a monograph titled *Conquerors of White Spots*.¹²⁸ The book is somewhat akin to Zaitsev's memoir in composition, consisting of an introductory outline of the history of the Gulag followed by a largely chronological and biographical second part. Mikhail Rogachev, the longtime leader of the Komi branch of Memorial and prolific chronicler of Ukhtpechlag (the Ukhtinsko-Pechorsky Corrective Labor Camp), briefly summarized the introduction to Rozanov's book in Volume 8 of *Repentance: The Komi Republican Martyrology of Victims of Mass Political Repressions*.¹²⁹ Rogachev praises Rozanov for his contributions to camp literature, especially his analysis of the Soviet regime and periodization of the Gulag from 1917 to 1939. However, Rogachev explains that the limited scope of the *Repentance* project meant discarding the sections of Rozanov's work not related to Ukhtpechlag, including the introduction and the first four chapters of part two (subtitled "Solovetsky trading posts, 1930–1932"), which cover Rozanov's time at SLON.¹³⁰

Rozanov, an experienced journalist, writes in an engaging and sophisticated literary language. The chapters about the SLON begin *in media res* with Rozanov arriving at Loukhi Station, 180 kilometers north of Kem. He tends to generalize about fellow prisoners (especially criminals) and detail his interactions with camp authorities, describing his fitful rise in the ranks

¹²⁷ The National Alliance of Russian Solidarists (NTS) is an anti-Communist organization founded in 1930 by White émigrés in Serbia. Its publishing arm, Posev, was a significant source for anti-Soviet publications in the west, and known for its support of samizdat publications in the Soviet Union. Many SLON memoirs discussed in this section were published by Posev.

¹²⁸ Mikhail Rozanov. *Zavoovateli belykh piaten*. (Limburg: Posev, 1951).

¹²⁹ Mikhail Rozanov, "Iz Zavoovateli belykh piaten," in *Pokaianie: Komi respublikanskii martirolog zhertv massovykh politicheskikh repressii*, vol. 8 part 1 (Syktyvkar: Komi knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1998–2021), 32–180.

¹³⁰ Rogachev and Zelenskaia, "Zavoovatel' belykh piaten," 17–31. Only the first three chapters address Rozanov's time at SLON, with chapter four ("Who is 'developing' the North and how") outlining Ukhtpechlag's role in the structure and productivity of the northern camps.

of the prisoners from ordinary laborer to worksite head and later technical editor of the SLON newspaper. In chapter 3 (“Island—Symbol”), Rozanov describes his own life at the camp in a series of anecdotes about his successful work as a newspaper editor and the high level of education among the prisoners. He describes the beauty of the islands but writes that the “external beauty of the island somehow failed to register in the minds of the prisoners” because “[t]heir attention was focused primarily on what directly concerned them,” including their work quotas and treatment by camp administration.¹³¹ Regarding the title of this chapter, Rozanov examines the symbolic weight of “Solovki”: “Solovki is a symbol of the dictatorship of the VKP(b) [All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)], a symbol of the punitive practices of triumphant communism. The name of the island gave rise to a grand enterprise that shifted its center from the island to the mainland. The word ‘Solovki’ has transcended its geographical confines.”¹³² This blend of personal experience and broader commentary allows Rozanov to capture both the tangible realities of life at SLON and the profound symbolic resonance of Solovki within the Soviet punitive system.

Rozanov spent less than a year on the islands and ends his time there after a devastating fire in the monastery led to the end of the relatively relaxed regime at the camp.¹³³ He quickly left the Solovetsky Islands for Ukhtpechlag in October of 1932.¹³⁴ Rozanov’s reflections, though rooted in a relatively brief period on the islands, underscore the duality of Solovki as both a labor

¹³¹ Rozanov, *Zavoievateli*, 47.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Although this second major fire is not fully documented (in comparison to the 1923 fire), Dmitry Likhachev mentions it in his 1966 article on the monastery's architecture. Dmitry Likhachev, “Zadachi izucheniia solovetskogo istoriko-kul'turnogo kompleksa,” in *Tezisy dokladov i soobshchenii k nauchnoi konferentsii v g. Arkhangelske “Pamiatniki kul'tury russkogo severa”* (Moscow: Ministerstvo kul'tury SSSR, 1966), 27.

¹³⁴ Rozanov, *Zavoievateli*, 57.

camp and an enduring symbol of Soviet oppression, cementing its place in the collective memory of the Gulag.

Boris Shiriaev and Semen Pidhainyi

By far the two most prolific chroniclers of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp in the postwar era were Boris Shiriaev and Semen Pidhainyi, who each published more than one volume about their time at the camp. Both men were well-educated individuals whose lives intersected via SLON, although they were never at the camp simultaneously. Shiriaev, who fought for Russia in WWI and then against the Bolsheviks, was sentenced to ten years at SLON in 1922. He played a prominent role in cultural activities at the camp until he left in 1927. The younger Pidhainyi, whose father and brother were killed by Bolsheviks in 1922, spent the 1920s studying in Kyiv. He was sentenced to ten years at SLON in 1932, arrested for participating in a fabricated Ukrainian nationalist group. He was removed from the islands in 1938 after major changes to the structure and function of the camp, including its reclassification from a labor camp to a prison. The two authors' experiences at SLON reflect the evolving dynamics of Soviet repression. While Shiriaev witnessed the heyday of the Russian intelligentsia at the camp, Pidhainyi was part of the systematic oppression of the Ukrainian intelligentsia, later culminating in mass executions at Sandarmokh.

After leaving SLON, both authors collaborated with Nazi occupiers during World War II, driven by their vehement opposition to the Bolsheviks. This collaboration marked a formative experience for both writers, shaping their later attempts to justify and contextualize their wartime choices. At the end of World War II, Shiriaev and Pidhainyi fled with the retreating Germans and eventually settled in Canada and Italy/Argentina, respectively. They became active members of

their national émigré communities, engaging in political advocacy through various organizations. Each wrote prolifically and published extensively in the 1940s and 1950s.

Pidhainyi's first monograph on the topic of the Solovetsky Islands is the 1947 *Ukraińs'ka inteligentsiia na Solovkakh*, consisting of a historical introduction to the camp emphasizing the waves of repressed Ukrainians sent there in the 1920s and 1930s, followed by biographical sketches of Ukrainians who were exiled to the islands. These are divided into four groups: "Those whose names are not recorded in history," "State and Party Figures of Soviet Ukraine," "Ukrainian Scholars and Artists," and "Galicians on Solovki."¹³⁵ He followed it in 1949 with a two-part memoir titled *The Unshot* (1949). In 1953, Pidhainyi published the English translation of his memoir (*Islands of Death*) along with the first volume of *Black Deeds of the Kremlin: A White Book*, a compilation of essays and personal accounts of Soviet crimes (particularly the Holodomor) that Pidhainyi edited. He also contributed an article dedicated to SLON to this volume. A second volume followed in 1955. Pidhainyi continued to publish on this and other political topics until his death in 1965, including an article listing the Belarusians he encountered at SLON that was republished in a Belarusian journal in 2013.¹³⁶

Shiriaev, whose aims were more literary than journalistic, took a different tack in his writing on the Solovetsky islands and camp, although he also addressed the subject multiple times in the 1950s. In 1952, he published a near-contemporaneous memoir of his time as a displaced person in Italy (*Displaced Person in Italy. Notes of a Doll Seller*) in which Shiriaev describes writing his SLON memoir in Pompeii, comparing the ancient gravesite to the more

¹³⁵ Notable figures include Mykola Zerov and Les' Kurbas, among many others.

¹³⁶ Semen Pidhainyi, "Belarusy na Solovkakh," *Dziady: Digest of Publications on Belarusian History*, no. 12 (2013): 163–170.

recent one on the Solovetsky Islands.¹³⁷ In 1953 he published two books, first *I Am a Russian Person!*, a set of short stories from his life in the Soviet Union between his return from the camps and the outbreak of war, then *Illuminators of the Russian Land*, a set of essays on Russian spiritual life. The essays touch on Russian Orthodoxy in Rome and the Mount Athos Monastery, but the majority are centered on topics drawn from Shiriaev's time on the Solovetsky Islands. Finally, in 1954 Shiriaev published *The Undying Light*, a memoir of the author's experiences at the Solovetsky Special Purpose camp that includes thematic chapters on camp life (particularly the multiple theatre troupes and newspaper at the camp) along with essays originally included in *Illuminators*. Though Shiriaev's book has been criticized for the inaccuracy of the author's recollection of events and for the author's potential collaboration with the Bolsheviks and the Nazis,¹³⁸ the book has been an undeniable best seller compared to other SLON memoirs, with more than twenty print editions since 1990. The popularity of the book is certainly due to its religious content and championing by religious presses; Shiriaev's thesis is a hopeful interpretation of the Russian Orthodox people's spiritual strength. Notably, most of the post-Soviet editions of Shiriaev's book have been published by ecclesiastical presses. Shiriaev did not

¹³⁷ Shiriaev, *Di-Pi v Italii*, 186.

¹³⁸ Likhachev (*Mysli o zhizni: Vospominaniia* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Vremia," 2001, 240) and Rozanov (*Solovetskii kontslager' v monastyre, 1922–1939 gg.: Fakty, domysly, "parashi": Obzor vospominanii solovchan solovchanami v dvukh tomakh* vol. 1 (Self published, 1979), 16–17) both characterize *The Undying Light* as a limited or flawed work, with Likhachev calling it a "novel" ("Но роман есть роман, и это надо иметь в виду, читая книгу Б. Ширяева"). At least one critique of Prilepin's *The Monastery* rests almost entirely on negative characterizations of Shiriaev's book and character, as well as allegations that Prilepin "cribbed" from Shiriaev's work. See Evgeny Renkans, "*Obitel'*." *Obzor knigi Zakhara Prilepina. "Obitel'" i kniga predatelia Shiriaeva "Neugasimaia lampada"*, Rutube, September 29, 2021. In my estimation, Prilepin references widely from many SLON memoirs including those of Shiriaev, Aliakhnovich and Nikonov-Smorodin.

live to see his book become a success, but did continue to write until his death in 1959, leaving behind memoirs, short stories, and poems.

Conclusion

A final publication to note in this period is *Concentration Camps of the USSR*, a publication of the Munich-based Institute for the Study of the History and Culture of the USSR. Compiled by Nikolai Troitsky under his pseudonym Boris Yakovlev, the book outlines the origins, development, and administration of the Soviet labor camps, emphasizing their role in political repression and economic exploitation. More than half of the 250-page book is a list describing every known Gulag camp in detail, followed by forty pages of reproduced documents related to the camps. The Solovetsky camp is noted a few times in the book as “one of the first” and for the dramatic execution of many camp administrators in 1929,¹³⁹ and also listed as one of 165 camps in the USSR.¹⁴⁰ Both Shiriaev and Pidhajnyj’s works on SLON are cited as “Referenced Russian Literature,” along with a handful of other authors mentioned so far: Yuri Bezsonov, Mikhail Rozanov, and Ivan Solonevich.¹⁴¹

5. Thaw and Solzhenitsyn

In the 1960s, Khrushchev’s secret speech spread around the world, as did Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Dissidents and defectors who spoke out against the Soviet Union received renewed international attention.¹⁴² At the same time, as Roy Robson notes

¹³⁹ Boris Yakovlev [Nikolai Troitsky], *Kontsentratsionnye lageri SSSR*, *Issledovaniia i materialy* 1, no. 23, (Munich: Institut po izucheniiu istorii i kul'tury SSSR), 28–31.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 67, 178–179.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 241–244.

¹⁴² Tolczyk, *Blissful Blindness*, 278–333.

in his comprehensive book on the Solovetsky Islands, “curiosity began to grow regarding Solovki.”¹⁴³ This new interest was spurred in large part by the efforts of SLON survivor and famed Soviet scholar Dmitry Likhachev, who visited the site of the camp for the first time since his incarceration during a conference in 1966.¹⁴⁴

Returning from the conference, Likhachev penned a programmatic note titled “Objectives in the study of the Solovetsky historical and cultural complex.”¹⁴⁵ Likhachev argues for the importance of the Solovetsky Islands in the study of Russian history and lays out a set of objectives for their study, including interdisciplinary scholarship to guide the work of the museum on the islands. Likhachev explains that this will require systematic study of the architecture, archives, and documents related to the monastery, the compilation of a list of the icons once located on the islands, and even a description of the skilled trades practiced on the islands. While Likhachev does not once mention the labor camp in the article, its contours are evident throughout; he mentions the infrastructure developed by prisoners at the camp, discusses the fire of 1932 (but not the bigger fire of 1923 that coincided with the camp’s opening), and references icons lost in the 1920s (there are many stories of precious icons being burned for fuel in the early days of the camp). Likhachev’s neutral academic tone belies the radical nature of this short text, and its call for scholars to investigate the history of the islands was certainly met in the decades that followed. Although Likhachev would not publish anything else on the Solovetsky Islands until 1980, his programmatic note signaled the growing interest in the

¹⁴³ Roy R. Robson, *Solovki: The Story of Russia Told Through Its Most Remarkable Islands* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 254.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Dmitry Likhachev, “Zadachi izucheniia solovetskogo istoriko-kul'turnogo kompleksa” in *Tezisy dokladov i soobshchenii k nauchnoi konferentsii v g. Arkhangel'ske “Pamiatniki kul'tury russkogo severa”* (Moscow: Ministerstvo kul'tury SSSR, 1966), 25–28.

islands' history, and the scholarship he proposed in the 1960s would begin to appear in the ensuing years.

On the topic of tourism to the islands in the 1960s, Yuri Kazakov's 1996 *ocherk* stands out. Titled "Solovetsky dreaming," Kazakov compares the empty monastery he visited ten years earlier to the "fashionable" Solovki of the mid-1960s.¹⁴⁶ Kazakov outlines the rapid transformation of the islands over the past decade, highlighting efforts to preserve and rehabilitate the buildings. His meditations on the scenery of the islands place the author in a peculiar harmony with the screeching seagulls and crumbling monastery, and he writes of the monastic heritage of the islands with a wink that hints at a Boymian "restorative nostalgia": "I would give a lot to live in [the monastery], if I were a monk!"¹⁴⁷

Although many published references to the Solovetsky Islands in the 1960s were related to its monastic history¹⁴⁸ or the scientific study of the islands' flora and fauna,¹⁴⁹ the former labor camp on the Solovetsky Islands also began to reemerge in the international press. One example is a 1966 article titled "The First Death Camps: A Footnote to Mihajlo Mihaljlov"¹⁵⁰ in *Foreign Service Journal*.¹⁵¹ The author, US diplomat Peter Bridges, argues for reexamining the Soviet

¹⁴⁶ Yuri Kazakov, "Solovetskie mechtaniia," *Solovetskoe more* 3 (2004).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ G. M. Manizer and P. A. Tel'tevskii, *Arkhitektura Solovetskogo monastyria* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1969).

¹⁴⁹ German Avgustovich Kluge, *Bryozoa of the Northern Seas of the USSR* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1975); *Bird Migration* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1976); Dmitrii Vasil'evich Nalivkin and Mikhail Ivanovich Budyko, *Hurricanes, Storms and Tornadoes: Geographic Characteristics and Geological Activity* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1982).

¹⁵⁰ Mihajlov's 1965 article in the Yugoslav journal "Delo" led to his imprisonment for its frank depiction of the Soviet Union.

¹⁵¹ Peter Bridges, "The First Death Camps," *Foreign Service Journal* 43, no. 7 (1966): 22–27. This periodical has been published by the American Foreign Service Association since 1950. Bridges went on to serve as the US Ambassador to Somalia.

camps as the legacy of Lenin, not just Stalin.¹⁵² To do this, he introduces a group of texts that give evidence of the Soviet “death camps” from the earliest days following the October Revolution, in particular “Letters from Soviet Prisons.”¹⁵³

Bridges invokes the Solovetsky Islands as part of this article, quoting one of the letters from the 1925 book describing the treatment of socialists at the Solovetsky camp.¹⁵⁴ He then contrasts a recent (1965) article in *Izvestiia* advertising the islands as a tourist attraction.¹⁵⁵ In the conclusion to the article, Bridges discusses the publication of *Ivan Denisovich* and observes that “much more remains to be said and done” in terms of publicizing the pre-Stalin history of Soviet labor camps. He then quotes extensively from another section of *Letters*, directly comparing Solzhenitsyn and the unnamed letter writer: “Solzhenitsyn in 1962 was no more revealing—and no more tragic—than this letter written on the Solovetsky Islands in the year of Lenin’s death.”¹⁵⁶ The quotes from *Letters* that Bridges chooses sums up the notable aspects of the island camp that are at issue in this dissertation, from the visual transformation of the monastery (crosses and bells replaced with stars and slogans) to the harsh climate and deadly conditions prisoners faced at the hands of cruel administrators.¹⁵⁷

The camp continues to be referenced across a variety of works of history and social science that appeared in this period, including *The Bridge and the Abyss: The Troubled Friendship of Maxim Gorky and V. I. Lenin* by Bertram David Wolfe (1967), *The Dynamics of Soviet Society* by Walt Whitman Rostow (1967), *Twentieth Century Russia* by Donald W.

¹⁵² Ibid., 16.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. See also *Letters from Russian Prisons*, “Three Arctic Camps,” 162–177.

¹⁵⁵ Bridges, “The First Death Camps,” 16.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 17.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 17. See also *Letters from Russian Prisons*, “More about Solovetz,” 188–191.

Treadgold (1976), and John Laffin's *The Anatomy of Captivity* (1968). Laffin's book surveys dozens of accounts of political captivity, presenting thematic groupings of ideas drawn from sources across Europe along with a few case studies.¹⁵⁸ In relation to Solovki, Laffin references Malsagoff (1926) and Melgunov (1925), but doesn't linger on a particular case study from the islands. It is also worth noting that Mikhail Bulgakov mentioned Solovki in *Master and Margarita* (written in the 1930s) which was published in the Soviet Union in a censored serial form in 1966–1967, then as an uncensored monography in 1967 abroad.

Serious historical studies of the early Soviet Union also began to appear in this period, particularly in the influential works of Robert Conquest. In the late 1960s, he edited a series titled *The Contemporary Soviet Union Series: Institutions and Policies*. In 1968, two pamphlets from the series made cursory but critical mention of the Solovetsky labor camp. The first, *The Soviet Police System*,¹⁵⁹ labels SLON the most “notorious” example of concentration camps for the detention of political prisoners (Social Revolutionaries, Mensheviks, and Anarchists) but differentiates these concentration camps from the corrective labor camps that make up the (then-extant) GULAG camps.¹⁶⁰ In another pamphlet from the same series and the same year, *Religion in the U.S.S.R.*, the “notorious Solovetsky concentration camp” is named as the destination for scores of repressed clergymen.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Jeffrey Lafferty, *Anatomy of Captivity* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1968).

¹⁵⁹ Conquest is listed as editor of the series and credited for the introductions but claims that the material is “essentially an array of primary source material, set in the appropriate historical and organisational framework.”

¹⁶⁰ Robert Conquest, ed., *The Soviet Police System* (New York: Praeger, 1968), 78.

¹⁶¹ Robert Conquest, ed., *Religion in the U.S.S.R.* (London: Macmillan, 1969), 20.

That same year, Conquest published his monumental work, *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties*.¹⁶² The emphasis of this book is on the 1930s, so mentions of the Solovetsky camp, which had its heyday in the 1920s, are limited. However, Conquest does not ignore the camp; he outlines the history of SLON in a comprehensive paragraph and mentions “the Solovetsk”¹⁶³ as the place where many Ukrainian intelligentsia were sent to die in the 1930s.¹⁶⁴ Conquest, a historian whose work preceded access to the Soviet archives, limits his use of published personal narratives in his work, instead citing other works of scholarship and the US congressional record.¹⁶⁵

SLON memoirs

In 1971, the memoirs of Socialist Revolutionary Ekaterina Olitskaia, already circulated widely in samizdat, were published by Posev in Frankfurt.¹⁶⁶ From 1924–1956 Olitskaia had been almost continuously imprisoned or in exile, with about five years total as a free person during that time. She spent the first two years of her imprisonment at SLON (1924–1926), which she depicts in a 100-page chapter titled “Exile to Solovki” in the first volume of her expansive memoirs.

¹⁶² Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties* (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

¹⁶³ See **Glossary**.

¹⁶⁴ Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 335, 325.

¹⁶⁵ For example, he refers to the *Tenth Interim Report of Hearings before the Select Committee on Communist Aggression*, House of Representatives, 88th Congress, Second Session (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1954).

¹⁶⁶ Ekaterina Olitskaia, *Moi vospominaniia*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt-on-Maine: Posev, 1971).

Another primary account published for the first time in 1971 was Yugoslav Communist Karlo Štajner's *7000 Days in Siberia*, originally published in Serbo-Croatian.¹⁶⁷ Štajner describes spending two years at the Solovetsky prison from 1937 until the camp was finally closed in 1939. In Štajner's experience, the islands had been transformed from an exploitive and overcrowded labor camp into a small and well-functioning prison. He tells stories of people dying and suffering at the camp, but also describes adequate rations and humane treatment from many of the guards. His account reflects the experiences of many prisoners who were at SLON briefly in the 1930s before being sent further east to the newer camps in Siberia. For such memoirists, their time on the Solovetsky Islands is a culmination of their experience of arrest and a period of harsh but useful education. During their years of exile in Siberia, these memoirists tend to harken back to their time at Solovki.

The Gulag Archipelago

In 1973, Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation* was published in France in Russian. Although Solzhenitsyn had completed the manuscript in 1958, he delayed publication hoping for the right conditions in the Soviet Union.¹⁶⁸ At the end of 1973, the Soviet government forced his hand and it was published abroad, creating an absolute sensation across the world and changing forever not only the world's understanding of the Gulag, but how the Gulag was written about in the Soviet Union and abroad. In Western apprehension, according to Tolczyk, *The Gulag Archipelago* became “the breaking point beyond which Soviet communism never regained the aura of moral

¹⁶⁷ Karlo Štajner, *7000 dana u Gulagu* (Zagreb: Globus, 1971); Karlo Štajner, *7000 Days in the Gulag*, translated by Richard Robinson (London: Collins Harvill, 1989).

¹⁶⁸ Tolczyk, *Blissful Blindness*, 320.

legitimacy in the West.”¹⁶⁹ It also brought the former labor camp on the Solovetsky Islands to the attention of a wide group of readers for the first time in decades.

The Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp features significantly across Solzhenitsyn’s monumental work, beginning with a moving tribute to “the old Solovetsky Islands prisoner Dmitry Petrovich Vitkovsky” who “was to have been editor of this book.”¹⁷⁰ In Volumes 1–2, Solzhenitsyn mentions the Solovetsky Islands and Solovki about thirty times, referencing the islands as a threat used to intimidate prisoners in interrogation¹⁷¹ and detailing the massacre of political prisoners at the Savatieevo Hermitage in December 1923. He describes a “great boulder” inscribed with the names of the victims that was placed on the mass grave, adding in a footnote that “[i]n 1925 the stone was overturned, and the names on it were thus buried too.” Solzhenitsyn’s ire for the tourists who had begun visiting the “offbeat tourist destination”¹⁷² in the 1960s shines through in the second half of his footnote on this monumental Solovetsky stone: “Any of you who clamber about Solovki—seek it out and gaze upon it!”¹⁷³

The key theme that Solzhenitsyn develops regarding the Solovetsky Islands and labor camp there is the camp’s unique place in the history of the Gulag. He describes why Soviet authorities found the camp so ideal when it was established—the need for a larger place to concentrate political prisoners in the early 1920s, their established pattern of appropriating monasteries for such camps, the allure of a place cut off from the rest of the world for half the

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 14.

¹⁷⁰ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* 1-2:xi.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 105: “Intimidation was very widely used and very varied. It was often accompanied by enticement and by promises which were, of course, false. In 1924: ‘If you don’t confess, you’ll go to the Solovetsky Islands. Anybody who confesses is turned loose.’ In 1944: ‘Which camp you’ll be sent to depends on us.’”

¹⁷² Roy Robson, *Solovki*, 256.

¹⁷³ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* 1–2:463, 463n9.

year¹⁷⁴—and explains how quickly the camp outgrew the islands due to the number of prisoners and the GPU’s rapidly expanding prisoner labor brokerage: “Only the size of SLON [...] limited for the time being the scale of the Voikov draft. But the Gulag Archipelago had already begun its malignant life and would shortly metastasize throughout the whole body of the nation.”¹⁷⁵ In this example and throughout the book, Solzhenitsyn employs the metaphors of the archipelago (literal in the case of the Solovetsky Islands) and cancer in relation to the Solovetsky labor camp.

The second half of the book (volumes 3–4) contains more than four times the number of references to the Solovetsky islands and the Solovetsky camp features prominently in chapters 1–4¹⁷⁶ of Volume 3. The more cursory references include an example of the word “zek” being used at the Solovetsky camp in 1931 (based on a story related to him by Dmitry Likhachev) and a brief mention of Gorky’s visit to the camp.¹⁷⁷

Chapter 2, “The Archipelago Rises from the Sea,” is a comprehensive history of the camp that quotes from firsthand accounts. Solzhenitsyn places SLON in context of earlier camps, describing the site as ideal in the eyes of Soviet authorities who had repurposed other monasteries across the country but found the camps at Pertominsk, Kholmogory, and Archangelsk too small and easy to escape. He discusses the public knowledge of the camp in the 1920s:

Solovki was not kept secret in the twenties, and in actual fact ears buzzed with Solovki. They openly used “Solovki” to scare people with. They were publicly proud of Solovki. (They had the brass to

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 462, 462–466; Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* 3–4:18–19.

¹⁷⁵ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* 1–2: 43.

¹⁷⁶ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* 3–4: “1. The Fingers of Aurora,” “2. The Archipelago Rises from the Sea,” “3. The Archipelago Metastasizes,” “4. The Archipelago Hardens.”

¹⁷⁷ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* 3–4:506n4, 523.

be proud of it!) Solovki was even a symbol. There were as many jokes about it in vaudeville acts as you can imagine. After all, classes had already disappeared (whither?), and Solovki itself was soon to come to an end. Subscriptions to the internal camp magazine, *The Solovetsky Islands*, were boldly sold throughout the Soviet Union.¹⁷⁸

In this chapter and those that follow, Solzhenitsyn references back to Solovki as a frequent point of comparison for his description of the expansion of the Gulag across the Soviet Union, calling the camp the “Solovetsky mother tumor” and “the Solovetsky cancer,” which “began to creep outward” as the camp grew and “even in dying [...] threw off one last metastasis.”¹⁷⁹ Despite the malignancy of the “Gulag’s alma mater,” Solzhenitsyn explains that aspects of the camp were preferable to prisoners in comparison to conditions at the White Sea Canal and in other camps of the Gulag across the country.¹⁸⁰ He names the “incessant mother oaths and the savage din of quarreling mingled with indoctrinational propaganda” as annoyances compared to the “quiet of Solovki,” with the increasing propaganda and “educational” requirements a key frustration for prisoners.¹⁸¹

Solzhenitsyn also highlights SLON prisoner Naftaly Frenkel, often credited with tying rations to labor quotas, as “the nerve of the Archipelago”: he “was one of those successful men of action whom History hungrily awaits and summons to itself.”¹⁸² Due, perhaps, to the expansive and polyvocal nature of his “literary encyclopedia,” Solzhenitsyn is uniquely able to

¹⁷⁸ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* 3–4:19.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 70, 72, 138.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 137, 98; this conforms with the claims of Mikhail Rozanov, who describes his year on the Solovetsky Islands (1931–1932) as quite calm.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 98, 102–103.

¹⁸² Ibid., 76.

convey the contingent and circumstantial nature of the Solovetsky labor camp's role in the development of the Gulag system via Frenkel's role as an architect of the camp system: "It would seem that there had been camps even before Frenkel, but they had not taken on that final and unified form which savors of perfection. Every genuine prophet arrives when he is most acutely needed. Frenkel arrived in the Archipelago just at the beginning of the metastases."¹⁸³

Building on Solzhenitsyn's monumental analysis, subsequent scholars and writers extended the discourse on Soviet labor camps, often positioning Solovki at the beginning of their evaluations of both the camps themselves and the cultural production that emerged through them.

In *The Concentration World and Soviet Literature* (1974), Mikhail Heller, for one, discusses the Solovetsky labor camp widely. The camp is central to his analysis of Soviet camp literature as it developed in tandem with the Soviet labor camps: "Solovki serves as a kind of testing ground for new forms and methods of depriving a person of freedom, new forms and methods of coercion."¹⁸⁴ In his discussion of SLON, Heller, an émigré scholar working in France, references Solzhenitsyn, Melgunov, and Vasily Grossman,¹⁸⁵ along with a series of SLON memoirs, including those of Bezsonov, Ekaterina Olitskaia, Anton Klinger, and Shiriaev. Heller also analyzes Gorky's *ocherk* about the Solovetsky Islands in depth, calling it the "first example of Soviet apologetic camp literature."¹⁸⁶

Together, Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* and Heller's *The Concentration World and Soviet Literature* provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the dual legacy of

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Mikhail Heller, *Kontsentratsionnyi mir i sovietskaia literatura* (London: Overseas Publications Interchange Ltd., 1974), 81.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 82.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 95.

the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp: as a foundational site of Soviet repression and as a symbolic touchstone for examining the broader Gulag system. By weaving firsthand accounts, philosophical reflections, and literary analysis, these works highlight the profound historical and cultural significance of Solovki, ensuring its place in the global memory of the Soviet regime's atrocities.

In 1974, Thomas P. Whitney's English translation of *The Gulag Archipelago* reached audiences worldwide. Subsequent works of journalism and scholarship frequently mentioned the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp in their references to Solzhenitsyn's literary encyclopedia.¹⁸⁷ Prominent defector Roy Medvedev also discussed the Solovetsky labor camp in various works published in the late 1970s and 1980s.¹⁸⁸

In general, mentions of "Solovetsky" in Russian publications saw a slight bump in 1974, while mentions of the word "Solovetsky" in English print media, which had increased sharply in 1969, remained steady until 1979.¹⁸⁹ To be sure, the former labor camp was not the only topic related to the islands mentioned in this period. There were also frequent mentions in the context of the monastic history and scientific study of the islands. In 1975, journalist Georgie Anne Geyer published *The Young Russians*, which included enthusiastic depictions of young Soviet men and women traveling to the Solovetsky Islands to investigate the remains of the monastery,

¹⁸⁷ For example, Niels Christian Nielsen, *Solzhenitsyn's Religion* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1976).

¹⁸⁸ Roy Medvedev, *Political Essays* (London: Pan Books, 1976); F. Barker, *Solzhenitsyn: Politics and Form* (London: Harvard University Press, 1977).

¹⁸⁹ Based on Google ngram evaluation. The volume of mentions of "Solovki" in Russian remained about 90 times more than English mentions of "Solovetsky" (presumably a broader search term) in the same period.

hardly mentioning the former labor camp.¹⁹⁰ The thread of Solovetsky Island tourism literature has continued to this day.

6. *SLON after The Gulag Archipelago*

The Gulag Archipelago opened up a new awareness of the Gulag in the Soviet Union and abroad, leading to new avenues for discussing the impact of widespread imprisonment on Soviet society. While the importance of criminal subculture in Soviet and Russian society remains an underappreciated topic, individual accounts of Soviet criminality have found success with broad reading audiences. In 1976, a book by a formerly imprisoned criminal (that is to say, not a political prisoner or counterrevolutionary) named Mikhail Demin (anglicized as Dyomin) appeared in English translation. (It was originally published in German in 1971). Demin had not been imprisoned at SLON, but throughout his fictionalized memoir, *The Day is Born in Darkness*, he emphasizes the camp's outsized importance in the development of the Soviet penal *systema* and the attendant rise in criminal culture.¹⁹¹

In terms of popular culture, one can also note the proliferation of English-language historical fiction about the Russian revolution that mentions the Solovetsky labor camp to some degree or another.¹⁹² One example is *Blood on the Snow* (1975), the first in a trilogy of historical novels by Emanuel Litvinoff, in which a secondary character is sent to SLON. Litvinoff sets several scenes on the islands, emphasizing a few aspects of the camp as a fictional setting: first,

¹⁹⁰ Georgie Anne Geyer, *The Young Russians* (New York: Doubleday, 1975). To give a sense of the book, in another section she discusses a Vladimir Vysotsky song in which a young man travels to Magadan “not because he *has* to but because he *wants* to” (51).

¹⁹¹ Mikhail Dyomin [Demin], *The Day is Born of Darkness: A personal account of the Soviet criminal underworld*, translated by Tony Kahn (Toronto and New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 42–43, 334–335.

¹⁹² Harrison E. Salisbury, *The Gates of Hell* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

the high level of intellectual discourse among the well-educated prisoners there; second, the constant dread of death among prisoners, whether from the cold, sickness, or execution; finally, the monastery and natural features of the camp. He places his political prisoner, Joseph Frumkin, not at one of the hermitages where political prisoners were actually housed at the time but inside the monastery, in what would have been a highly prized former monastic cell. Litvinoff emphasizes, above all, the extreme climate and impossibility of escape from the remote camp: “Outside, beyond the high walls of the monastery prison, a limitless world of ice, snow, frozen seas and petrified forests was embedded in a silence as hard and crystal as diamond.”¹⁹³ The final book of the trilogy, *The Face of Terror* (1978), continued to explore the aftermath of Frumkin’s time at the camp.

On the Soviet side of the publication landscape, interesting works were also being published related to the Solovetsky Islands, although mostly scientific and historical in nature. An example from 1979 is Georgii Frumenkov’s *Prisoners of the Solovetsky Monastery*. Frumenkov’s book is a set of historical essays on the prisoners held there from the sixteenth to nineteenth century. Although the work is based on Frumenkov’s dissertation, the book was written for popular audiences and uses a biographical essay format to introduce famous prisoners of the Solovetsky monastery throughout its history (while rarely mentioning its 20th century use as a labor camp and prison). The book conforms to Soviet ideological requirements of the time, evidenced by a brief introduction to the volume describing the book as having “great anti-religious significance and [value] to anyone interested in the history of their native land.”¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ Emanuel Litvinoff, *Blood on the Snow* (London: Collins, 1975), 138.

¹⁹⁴ See Georgii Georgievich Frumenkov, [*Uzniki Solovetskogo monastyrya: Politicheskaia ssylka v Solovetskii monastyr' v XVIII–XIX vekakh*](#) (Moskva: Mysl', 1979).

Exactly thirty years after the initial publication of his “Recollections” in *Posev*, Mikhail Rozanov self-published a unique work titled *The Solovetsky Concentration Camp in the Monastery. 1922–1939. Facts—Speculations—“Parasha.” A Review of Solovetsky Memoirs by Solovetsky Inmates*.¹⁹⁵ In the foreword, the “compiler”¹⁹⁶ enumerates the reasons for the book. First, to clarify reality from among the various firsthand accounts of the camp for future scholars, who will soon be left without eyewitnesses of the camp in the 1920s. Second, to supplement the historical record, as “there is little, almost no, hope that Lubyanka will preserve the archives of the Solovetsky concentration camp.”¹⁹⁷ Third, to supplement and partially correct Solzhenitsyn’s claims about the camp in *The Gulag Archipelago*, albeit without “belittling” Solzhenitsyn’s “capital work [...] Sisyphean labor[,] and talent.”¹⁹⁸ Rozanov emphasizes the modest aims of the book, intended only for “people who are particularly interested in this topic” rather than “a wide range of readers,” and with no intention of recouping any of the costs of publication.¹⁹⁹ Rozanov goes on to list fifteen firsthand accounts of the camp, most of which have been listed already in this review,²⁰⁰ and systematically interrogate the claims presented by the authors.

Rozanov’s book is invaluable as a source for historians, who indeed are faced with the lack of eyewitnesses and the vagaries of the different firsthand accounts available as sources. Its format and argumentation also make clear the important shift that had finally, and only in the

¹⁹⁵ Mikhail Rozanov, *Solovetskii kontslager' v monastyre, 1922–1939. Fakty — domysly — “parashi”*. *Obzor vospominanii solovchan solovchanami*. 2 vols. USA: Self-published, 1979.

¹⁹⁶ Rozanov, *Solovetskii kontslager* I, 7.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 8.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 8–9.

²⁰⁰ See **Bibliography**, where firsthand accounts that Rozanov investigated in this book are marked with an asterisk.

post-Thaw era, shifted the emphasis of accounts of the Solovetsky camp from awareness to preservation. While many firsthand accounts of the camp had yet to be published, Rozanov's work is the coda to the SLON memoir and a sourcebook for the emergent SLON novel. And, while scholarship and fictionalized accounts of the camp had already been published, the trend shifted towards those works as the number of new individual accounts of the Solovetsky labor camp, now sixty years hence, slowly trickled to a halt. However, a set of new and important authorities on the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp were set to emerge in the 1980s and 1990s.

7. 1980s

Many of the seeds sown in the Thaw era related to the study of the islands came to fruition in the 1980s, particularly in terms of scholarship, increasing tourism to the islands, and the beginnings of the restoration of the monastery.²⁰¹ The program that Likhachev outlined in 1966 was slowly fleshed out in Soviet scholarship, including a book that Likhachev edited, *Architectural-Artistic Monuments of the Solovetsky Islands*, that was published in 1980.²⁰² Likhachev introduces the book with a remarkable piece of Aesopian writing titled "Solovki in the History of Russian Culture." Likhachev asserts that, throughout its history, the "Solovetsky complex" was "[s]haken by internal contradictions" and "served as a place of exile and imprisonment for religious and political figures disfavored by the government, who played an outstanding role in its cultural life."²⁰³ He repeatedly compares past to present, which makes the

²⁰¹ Committee for the Defense of Persecuted Orthodox Christians. *The Orthodox Monitor*. Washington, D.C.: Committee for the Defense of Persecuted Orthodox Christians, 1983: 15; "Folk Art," *Soviet Life*, no. 1 (352) (January 1, 1986): 54.

²⁰² Dmitry Sergeevich Likhachev, *Arkhiturno-khudozhestvennye pamiatniki Solovetskikh ostrovov* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1980).

²⁰³ Likhachev, "Solovki v istorii russkoi kul'tury," in *Arkhiturno-khudozhestvennye pamiatniki Solovetskikh ostrovov* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1980), 11.

missing references to the 1920s stand out even more starkly. For example, in the penultimate section, titled “Exiles and prisoners of the Solovetsky monastery,” he writes that “for almost its entire existence, *with the exception of the first few years after 1903*, [Solovki] was a place where a wide variety of people were exiled and imprisoned, deemed in need of ‘spiritual correction’ by civil and church authorities (emphasis mine).”²⁰⁴ The “first few years after 1903” implies, of course, that the islands once again served as a prison in the 20th century. The last few pages of the essay are replete with such pointed and darkly ironic references to the Soviet labor camp.²⁰⁵ Likhachev even concludes the essay with a damning quote from Lenin:

V. I. Lenin wrote: “Historical merits are judged not by what historical figures have failed to provide in comparison with contemporary demands, but by what they have provided that is new in comparison with their predecessors.” This statement by V. I. Lenin applies not only to the evaluation of the activities of historical figures but also provides a correct criterion for assessing the significance of historical phenomena in general.²⁰⁶

Comparing the two essays from 1966 and 1980, it is clear that the basis of scholarship on the islands had increased significantly in the interim, and that Likhachev was emboldened in his near-frankness regarding the existence of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp and its place in the history of the islands. But the situation inside the Soviet Union still disallowed explicit discussion of the topic.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 37.

²⁰⁵ Another line that struck me from Likhachev's article is his rather brutal reference to execution: “[Историю Соловецкого монастыря] можно рассматривать как попытку ‘в лоб’ перевернуть елейное церковное изображение событий монастырской жизни” (Ibid., 40).

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 41.

In the West, the topic continued to be mentioned fairly frequently. There were mentions of the islands in a series of Ukrainian works providing evidence of the Holodomor, many citing Pidhajnyj's work.²⁰⁷ Similar to Robert Conquest's invocation of the islands, the camp was mentioned in biographies of important individuals who had been at the camp such as Gorky and Pavel Florensky (or in, the case of Mikhail Bakhtin, sentenced to exile there but never sent to the islands).²⁰⁸ The camp also appeared in an anecdote translated and published in John Kolasky's *Laughter Through Tears: Underground Wit, Humor, and Satire in the Soviet Russian Empire* (1985).²⁰⁹ In 1987, Rostislav Pletnev cited Shiriaev's *Neugasimaia lampada* as a particularly interesting example of camp literature in his *History of Russian Literature in the 20th Century*.²¹⁰

Other authors on the Western side treated the Solovetsky camp as integral to their assessments of the Soviet Union or more general philosophical arguments. As to the latter, for example, Scottish sociologist Harvie Ferguson develops an argument in his 1983 *Essays in Experimental Psychology* partially based on Solzhenitsyn's description of prisoners seated on poles in the Sekirka isolator.²¹¹ As to the former, Mikhail Heller continued to reference the camp

²⁰⁷ Ukrainian National Association, ed., *The Great Famine in Ukraine: The Unknown Holocaust: In Solemn Observance of the 50th Anniversary of the Ukrainian Famine of 1932–33* (Jersey City, NJ: Ukrainian National Association, 1983): 72; Vasyl I. Hryshko, *The Ukrainian Holocaust of 1933* (Toronto: Bahriany Foundation, 1983); Mykhailo H. Marunchak, *Natsiia v borot'bi za svoie isnuvannia: 1932 i 1933 v Ukraini i diiaspori* (Vinnipeg: Nakladom UVAN v Kanadi, 1985), 127.

²⁰⁸ Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984): 140–143; Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 108; Robert Slesinski, *Pavel Florensky: A Metaphysics of Love* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 23; Dan Levin, *Stormy Petrel: The Life and Work of Maxim Gorky* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1986), 269.

²⁰⁹ John Kolasky, *Laughter Through Tears: Underground Wit, Humor, and Satire in the Soviet Russian Empire* (Bullsbrook, Western Australia: Veritas Publishing, 1985), 72.

²¹⁰ See Rostislav Pletnev, *History of Russian Literature in the 20th Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

²¹¹ Harvie Ferguson, *Essays in Experimental Psychology* (London: Routledge, 1983), 4, 29, 67.

in the 1980s. His 1982 *Utopia in Power: The History of the Soviet Union from 1917 to the Present*, written with Alexander Nekrich, discusses the fate of clergymen who were exiled to SLON and examines the symbolic weight of the Solovetsky Islands as the Soviet Union's "archetypal camp" in several sections.²¹² Heller cites Cederholm and Popoff, although more for their use of "Chekha/Tchekha" in the titles of their books than their description of Soviet prisons and labor camps.²¹³ In the 1986 English translation, Heller explains that:

Until the appearance of Hitler's camps, the Solovki served as a symbol of arbitrariness, cruelty, and tyrannical power. "Here, we don't have Soviet power; we have Solovetsky power." That was how the head of the camp greeted the prisoners. "Solovetsky power" was the power of the GPU, but after all, that was the quintessence of Soviet power.²¹⁴

"Here you will find not Soviet power, but Solovetsky power" is repeated in various permutations across accounts of arrival at the camp. For camp administrators, as frequently quoted by memoirists, "Solovetsky power" was a super-synechdoche for Soviet power, used to emphasize prisoners' complete isolation and vulnerability to the Solovetsky regime while on the islands. Perhaps the concision and vividness of this phrasing induced Soviet filmmaker Marina Goldovskaia to title her groundbreaking 1988 documentary *Solovetsky Power* [*Vlast' solovetskaia*].

²¹² Mikhail Heller [Geller] and Aleksandr Moiseevich Nekrich, *Utopia in Power: The History of the Soviet Union from 1917 to the Present*, translated by Phyllis B. Carlos (New York: Summit Books, 1986), 164, 264.

²¹³ Heller and Nekrich, *Utopia in Power*, 220: the book traces the expansion of the Soviet security apparatus and is precise as to the different names and responsibilities of the various bodies colloquially described as the "Chekha."

²¹⁴ Heller and Nekrich, *Utopia in Power*, 220.

Premiering sixty years after the appearance of *Solovki (The Soviet Special Purpose Camp)*, the documentary opens with footage of volunteer historians scouring the monastery's ruins for artefacts of the 1920s and 1930s, arguing for the preservation and reevaluation of the camp era. Goldovskaia includes footage from the earlier documentary and interviews with several survivors of the camp, including Dmitry Likhachev and memoirist Oleg Volkov. Goldovskaia's film renewed interest in the islands and labor camp, but also exposed the strained relationship between the Orthodox church, then lobbying for control of the monastery, and secular historians interested in publicizing the Soviet crimes perpetrated there.

Screened in the Soviet Union and internationally, the documentary was immediately impactful in the Glasnost-era debates regarding the legacy of the Soviet Union, the role of the Russian Orthodox Church, and the work of secular preservationist societies, most notably Memorial. In one example from 1989, Kent R. Hill's *The Puzzle of the Soviet Church: An Inside Look at Christianity and Glasnost*, the section devoted to "The Solovetsky Memorandum" authored by Mikhail Polski cites Solzhenitsyn, Malsagoff, and Vera Tolz's review of Goldovskaya's documentary.²¹⁵ In 1989 and after, mentions of "Solovki" became more prevalent in Soviet publications; for example, the word "Solovki" was printed in the prominent Soviet literary journal *Voprosy literatury* just three times from 1960 to 1988, and eight times from 1988–1989, nearly tripling the number. Mentions of the islands and camp only increased in the 1990s.

²¹⁵ Kent R. Hill, "A Twentieth-Century Classic: The Solovetsky Memorandum" in *The Puzzle of the Soviet Church: An Inside Look at Christianity and Glasnost*, 111–113 (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press; Washington, D.C.: Institute on Religion and Democracy, 1989): (119n24).

8. 1990s

As the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence was disintegrating in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Solovetsky Islands became a site of interest for a number of groups in Russia and outside of it. During this “carnival of memory,” to quote cultural anthropologist Zuzanna Bogumił, the Solovetsky Islands came to form the key semantic association of “Gulag memory infrastructure in the European part of the Russian Federation.”²¹⁶

The main symbol of the islands became the “Solovetsky stones” placed by Memorial across the country. In 1990, a Solovetsky stone was placed in Moscow’s Lubyanka Square; the stone became the site of the organization’s annual “Returning of the Names” ceremony dedicated to victims of Soviet repressions. That same year, control of the monastery was returned to the Russian Orthodox Church, which continued to press for its renovation. The tensions and eventual divisions between the Russian Orthodox Church and secular groups, who advocated for different interpretations of the islands’ significance in cultural memory, were apparent in this early period. Additional efforts to preserve the history specifically of repressed Ukrainian intelligentsia known as the “executed renaissance” resulted in close collaboration between Ukrainian and Russian actors in this period. In 1992, the islands were declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, adding another layer of recognition to the site.

It was during this period too that more than a dozen SLON memoirs were published (outside of samizdat) for the first time. Some key texts include the memoirs of Nikolai Antsiferov, Yuri Chirkov, and Oleg Volkov.²¹⁷ In Poland, Walenty Woronowicz’s memoir of his

²¹⁶ Zuzanna Bogumił, *Gulag Memories: The Rediscovery and Commemoration of Russia's Repressive Past* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), 7, 24.

²¹⁷ Nikolai Pavlovich Antsiferov, *Iz dum o bylom: Vospominaniia* (Moscow: Feniks: Kul'turnaia initsiativa, 1992); Yuri Chirkov, *A bylo vse tak...* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1991); Oleg Volkov, *Pogruzhenie vo t'mu: Iz perezhitogo* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1992).

time at SLON and Kolyma appeared.²¹⁸ A number of memoirs from Russian clergymen appeared from various publishing houses in Russia,²¹⁹ including a notable series of Pavel Florensky's writing.²²⁰

Anthologies of Gulag memoirs began to appear more frequently as well, with two notable collections bookending the decade, both edited by Simeon Vilensky.²²¹ The Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp is mentioned in both. Additionally, at least two SLON memoirs from the 1920s and 1930s were republished in this period, with Sozerko Malsagoff and Tatyana Tchernavin's memoirs translated back into Russian in 1991 and 1996, respectively. Boris Shiriaev's *Neugasimaia lampada* saw three new editions in this decade.

In addition to the reappearance of previously published works, a new genre, memoirs written by the children of former Gulag prisoners, also emerged in this period. One example is that of Natalia Borisovna Bogdanova, the daughter of a political prisoner who was sent from Kholmogory to the Solovetsky Islands when the camp opened there in 1923. Her book, *My father was a Menshevik*, appeared in St. Petersburg in 1994.

²¹⁸ Walenty Woronowicz, *Przypadki XX wieku: 20 lat na Wyspach Solowieckich i Kołymie, 1935–1955*, edited by Wiktoria Śliwowska and Małgorzata Giżejewska (Warszawa: Instytut Historii PAN, 1994).

²¹⁹ Archimandrite Feodosii (K. Z. Almazov), *Moi vospominaniia: Zapiski solovetskogo uznika*, edited by M. I. Odintsova, notes and commentary by I. V. Solovev (Moscow: Krutitskoe Patriarshee Podvorie, 1997); Pavel Chekhranov, *sviaschennik*, “Dve tiuremnyye Paskhi. Iz vospominanii” in *Pravoslavie na Solovkakh*, edited by I. A. Reznikova (St. Petersburg, 1993), 43–46.

²²⁰ Pavel Florensky, *Detiam moim: Vospominaniia proshlykh dnei; Genealogicheskie issledovaniia; Iz solovetskikh pisem; Zaveshchanie* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1992); —, *Pisma s Dalnego Vostoka i Solovkov* (Moscow: Mysl, 1994); Pavel Florensky and A. I. Oleksenko, *Oro: Liricheskaia poema, Zabaikalie 1934, Solovki 1934–1937*, (Moscow: Paideia, 1998).

²²¹ Simeon Vilensky, ed., *Soprotivlenie v GULAGe: vospominaniia, pis'ma, dokumenty* (Moscow: Vozvrashchenie, 1992); Simeon Vilensky, ed., *Till My Tale Is Told: Women's Memoirs of the Gulag* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

Dmitry Likhachev continued to publish regularly on the topic until his death in 1999, not just in his personal memoirs,²²² but also in his more publicistic writing.²²³ Mentions of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp grew across a few specialized fields of study, including Arctic studies, documentary studies (in relation to Goldovskaia's film), literary studies (often in relation to Mikhail Bulgakov, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Maxim Gorky), and in the growing movement to document the Holodomor.²²⁴

In terms of history and cultural studies of the Gulag and the Solovetsky labor camp, several important figures emerged in the 1990s. These include Jacques Rossi, whose *GULAG Handbook* was first published in 1991, and Nanci Adler, who published a short history of the Memorial movement in 1993 with mentions of the Solovetsky stones. Michael Jacobson's influential *Origins of the Gulag: The Soviet Prison System, 1917–1934* appeared in 1993, followed by another innovative work of scholarship related to camp culture, *Gulag Folk Songs as Historical Source, 1917–1939*, which he cowrote with his wife Lydia and which appeared in Moscow in 1998. Yuri Brodsky, a historian and key figure in SLON studies over the past three decades, published *Solovki, the islands of martyrdom: From monastery to the first Soviet concentration camp* in Milan in 1998.²²⁵

²²² Dmitry Likhachev, *Ia vspominaiu: Solovetskie zapisi*. Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1991; —, *Stat'i rannikh let* (Tver': Tverskoe oblastnoe otделение Rossiiskogo fonda kul'tury, 1993); —, *Vospominaniia* (St. Petersburg: Logos, 1995).

²²³ Dmitry Likhachev, *Ob intelligentsii* (St. Petersburg: Logos, 1997).

²²⁴ Borys Hryvachevskiy, ed., *Lysty z Solovkiv* (Kyiv: Molod', 1992); *Portret temriavy: Svidchennia, dokumenty i materialy u dvokh knyzhkakh*, vol. 1 (Kyiv: M. P. Kot, 1999); Oleksandr Serhiiiovych Rubl'ov and Yurii Anatoliiovych Cherchenko, eds., *Stalinschyna i dolia zakhidnoukrains'koi intyhelyhentsii 20–50-ti roky XX st.*, (Kyiv: Naukova Dumka, 1994); Ihor Buhaiyevych, ed., *Dozhylasia Ukraina: Narodna tvorchist' chasiv holodomoru i kolektyvizatsii na Ukraïni* (Kyiv: Naukova Dumka, 1993).

²²⁵ Yuriy Brodskij [Yuri Brodsky], *Solovki: Le isole del martirio. Da monastero a primo lager sovietico* (Milan: La Casa di Matrona, 1998).

A number of works that dealt with the Solovetsky Islands and the labor camp in particular were published in this decade. These include Mikhail Veniaminovich Butorin and Al'bert Vasilievich Smetanin's *GULAG in the North* (1991), a historical photobook titled *Solovki—history, architecture, nature* (1994), and Irina Reznikova's *Orthodoxy on Solovki: Materials on the history of the Solovetsky camp* (1994). In terms of cultural studies, Natalia Kuziakina's influential *Theatre in the Solovki Prison Camp* appeared in 1995 in English, and then in Russian two years later. A number of articles related to the cultural significance of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp were published over the course of this decade, particularly in relation to Ukrainian figures such as Les Kurbas.²²⁶ Interest in the islands' role in the repression of the Ukrainian intelligentsia in the 1930s, referred to as the "executed renaissance," led to increased mentions of the camp in Ukrainian-language works and the republication of Semen Pidhajnyj's *Ukrainian Intelligentsia at Solovki* in Kyiv in 1990.

On the popular literature front, a few historical novels related to the islands appeared or were republished in Russia, including Mikhail Abramovich Filippov's historical novel *Patriarch Nikon* (1885, republished in 1992) and the final novel of Vladimir Tolmasov's *Solovki* trilogy, published in 1993.

On the non-Russian side, interest in the Russian North seemed to grow. William Craft Brumfield, already an established historian of Russian architecture, published his first book of photographs from the Russian North in 1995.²²⁷ His work documenting Russian architecture and landscapes, including photographing the Solovetsky Islands, has been supported by Russian and American organizations, governmental and civil, ever since.

²²⁶ R. Skaly, "Les Kurbas: Doroga na Solovki," *Teatr*, no. 4 (1992): 58–62.

²²⁷ William Craft Brumfield, *Lost Russia: Photographing the Ruins of Russian Architecture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

One genre that emerged near the end of the decade was travel memoirs by journalists who spent time in post-Soviet Russia, many of which include discussions of the Solovetsky Islands. Polish journalist Mariusz Wilk's *Wilczy notes* (1998) is certainly the splashiest of the : Wilk lived on the Solovetsky Islands while working as a correspondent for the eminent Polish émigré journal *Kultura*. Wilk was hardly the only writer to describe his time on the islands. That same year, American journalist Fen Montaigne published a well-regarded memoir titled *Hooked: Fly-fishing through Russia*, advertised as both a travel memoir and history of the Gulag. In 1999, an Irish man named Wallace Clark self-published a book about his father's journey around Russia titled *Sailing round Russia: The Story of Miles Clark's Unique Voyage*. Whether self-published or supported by an established publisher, these books reflect a common interest in exotic locales such as the Solovetsky Islands, a destination that was now available to visitors from outside of Russia.

9. 2000–2012

In the 2000s, the threads of scholarship and popular literature related to the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp identified in the 1990s only deepened. Russian Orthodox theologians and historians explored the monastery's significance to the Russian Orthodox Church albeit with limited mentions of the labor camp, secular historians and cultural scholars developed the islands' symbolic role for dissident movements before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and foreign travel writers continued to publish firsthand accounts of their trips to the islands.

American writers with a deep affection for the islands were well-represented in this period, most notably Roy Robson, whose *Solovki: The Story of Russia Told Through Its Most Remarkable Islands* is a comprehensive tribute to the Solovetsky Islands throughout their

history. Relative to the camp period, Robson references the memoirs available, relying most often on “English translations and easily accessible texts,” including Cederholm, Klinger, Zaitsev, and Pidhajnyj. He addresses the problematic aspects of these sources in a footnote, first quoting Likhachev (via Kuziakina) regarding memory and memoir:

There are inherent risks in using memoirs to reconstruct the past. As Likhachev himself said, he could remember many things about his time in Solovki, “but to arrange them all in chronological order is most difficult. As if my memory keeps photographic and audio records of events and conversations, but all in disarray... The most imprecise in memoir literature are conversations written down from memory. Unless the writer kept a diary, all that appears in inverted commas as direct speech is largely fantasy.”²²⁸

Still, Robson notes, “the various memoir accounts of Solovki’s Gulag period are remarkable in their agreement on both big and small issues—from the rituals of roll call at the Kem Transfer Point to the variations in work meted out to various companies in the Kremlin.”²²⁹ Robson cites most frequently from Likhachev, using his memoirs as a vehicle for discussions of the camp period and the later commemoration of the Solovetsky camp in Soviet memory, to which Likhachev was an active contributor. He also references liberally from Michael Jakobson’s *Origins of the Gulag* and Jacques Rossi’s *Gulag Handbook*, both key sources for Gulag historians to this day.

²²⁸ Robson, *Solovki*, 285–286n4.

²²⁹ Ibid.

This period was a heyday for glossy photobooks documenting the islands' natural beauty and gloomy monastic ruins. Historian Yuri Brodsky's lavishly illustrated *Solovki: Twenty years of Special Designation* appeared in Russia for the first time in 2002.²³⁰ Brodsky's comprehensive examination of the labor camp, illustrated with his own photographs of the islands, was an important contribution to the documentation of the camp and islands. Another influential photographer of the islands is Tomasz Kizny, whose *Gulag* was published in 2003, then republished in Russia in 2007.²³¹ In 2005, Brumfield began a long collaboration with the Kennan Institute and Moscow-based publisher Tri Kvadrata, a series of photobooks titled *Discovering Russia*. The series includes more than a dozen books, including *Solovki: Architectural Heritage in Photographs*, which was published in 2008.²³² Another entry in this genre from 2012, published by the Solovetsky Monastery Press, is *Solovki in the eyes of a monk*, a photo album credited to Onufry, a local monk.²³³

From 2000–2010, Boris Shiriaev's *The Undying Light* saw a remarkable ten editions, mostly from religious presses. In 2007, Russian-Italian scholar Mikhail Talalai published an article titled "Boris Shiriaev: another singer of Russian Rome" in *Toronto Slavic Quarterly*. Talalai's dedication to Shiriaev's literary legacy led him to nearly two decades of editing and publishing Shiriaev's various books, articles and stories, including a critical edition of *The*

²³⁰ Yuri Brodsky, *Solovki: Dvadtsat' let Osobogo naznacheniiia* (Moscow: Rossiiskaia politicheskaiia entsiklopediia, 2002).

²³¹ Tomasz Kizny, *Goulag: Les Solovki, le Belomorkanal, l'expédition de Vaïgatch, le théâtre au goulag, la Kolyma, la Vorkouta, la Voie morte* (Paris: Acropole, 2003).

²³² William Craft Brumfield, *Solovki: Architectural Heritage in Photographs* (Moscow: Tri Kvadrata, 2008). In 2014, Brumfield was awarded the D. S. Likhachev Prize. See "Sokurov stal laureatom premii imeni Likhacheva," Interfax-Russia.

²³³ Onufrii (Porechnyi), *Fotoal'bom "Solovki glazami inoka"* (Solovetsky Monastery Press, 2012); "Solovki: Ot pros'motra fotoal'boma monakha prosto zakhvatilo dukh: 40 perefotografirovannykh fot," *iRecommend*, July 10, 2013.

Undying Light, his best-known work. In 2012, Frantsishak Aliakhnovich's *In the Clutches of the GPU* saw a new edition in Minsk, translated into Russian by Anatol' Taras. Several other previously published SLON memoirs were reissued in the 2000s, including the works of Pavel Florensky and Olga Adamova-Sliozberg. *The Gulag Archipelago* was also given a new English edition in 2007.

Compared to the 1990s, relatively few new memoirs of the camp were published in monograph in the 2000s aside from those of Father Wincenty Ilgin and a memoir by Malsagoff's daughter titled *Second life: notes of a female special settler* (2011). However, a half dozen anthologies of Gulag memoirs appeared, most of which included accounts of SLON. Two influential Gulag historians bookended this period with anthologies: Anne Applebaum's *Gulag Voices: An Anthology* in 2000, which featured an excerpt of Likhachev's memoirs as the first chapter; and *Voices from the Gulag*, a selection of memoirs curated by Solzhenitsyn together with Kenneth A Lantz.²³⁴ In Russia, Maia Evgenievna Babicheva published a new anthology of SLON memoirs and literature punningly titled "*A Red Elephant [SLON] in the White Sea*" (2003).²³⁵ In addition, two important indices of Gulag memoirs appeared: Marina Aleksandrovna Smirnova's *SLON-STON: The Solovetsky camps and prisons of special designation, 1923–1939: A reference index* as well as an annotated catalog of Memorial's extensive library of Gulag memoirs.²³⁶

²³⁴ Anne Applebaum, ed., *Gulag Voices: An Anthology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Kenneth A. Lantz, eds., *Voices from the Gulag* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009).

²³⁵ M. E. Babicheva, "*V belom more krasny SLON*": *vospominaniya uznikov Solovetskogo lagerya osobogo naznacheniya i literatura o nem* (Petrozavodsk, Russia: Periodika Publishers, 2006).

²³⁶ M. A. Smirnova, *SLON – STON: Solovetskie lageri i tyurmy osobogo naznacheniya, 1923–1939: rekomendatelny ukazatel literatury* (Arkhangelsk, Russia: Arkhangelsk State Scientific

In terms of scholarship, the research into the Solovetsky Islands and labor camp expanded considerably. On the Russian side, Alla Gorcheva's examination of the Gulag press, which prominently features the SLON newspapers and literary journals, spurred an interest in the SLON press in this period that eventually led to Andrea Gullota's comprehensive examination of the literature of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp (2018).²³⁷ A number of religiously inflected examinations of the camp also appeared in this period.²³⁸ An important entry in the Ukrainian documentation of the Solovetsky Special Purpose camp, Dmytro Viedienieiev and Serhii Shevchenko's *Ukrainian Solovki*, was published in Kyiv in 2001. In 2009, Polish literary scholar Arkadiusz Morawiec published his first longer work on camp literature titled *Literature in the camp, the camp in literature*.²³⁹ He continues to publish on the topic, including a recent set of articles on Mieczysław Lenardowicz's memoir and its publishing context.²⁴⁰

On the anglophone side, several key texts were published in the 2000s, each a major contribution to the study of the Gulag and each with some degree of emphasis on the role of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp. Leona Toker's *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors* (2000) offers a framework for interpreting Gulag literature. Nanci Adler

Library, 2003); *Memuary o politicheskikh repressiyakh v SSSR, khranyashchikhsya v arkhive obshchestva "Memorial": annotirovanny katalog* (Moscow: Memorial Society, 2007).

²³⁷ Alla Gorcheva, *Pressa GULAGa: 1918–1955: Spiski E. P. Peshkovi* (Moscow: Moscow University Press, 2009); Andrea Gullotta, *Intellectual Life and Literature at Solovki 1923–1930* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2018).

²³⁸ Ioann Bereslavskii, *Solovki—vтораia golgofa: Solovki v istorii Rossii* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Novyi Svet," 2002); O. Vtorova-Iafa, "Avgurovy ostrova," in *Mironositsy v epokhu GULAGa: sbornik*, compiled and with commentary by P. G. Protsenko (N. Novgorod: Izd-vo Bratstva vo imia sv. Aleksandra Nevskogo, 2004), 239–464; A. Andreev and Sergei Shumov, *Russkii Sever: ot Solovkov do Valaama* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Algoritm," 2007); Antonina Listopad, *Solovki: poeticheskaia epopeia* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Veche," 2009).

²³⁹ Arkadiusz Morawiec, *Literatura w lagrze, lager w literaturze: fakt, temat, metafora* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Akademii Humanistyczno-Ekonomicznej w Łodzi, 2009).

²⁴⁰ Arkadiusz Morawiec, "Pamiętnik z Sołówek' Mieczysława Lenardowicza," *Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Litteraria Polonica* 2022, no. 1: 229–253.

analyzes the cultural memory of Soviet repressions in her 2004 book *The Gulag Survivor: Beyond the Soviet System*. That same year, Oleg Khlevniuk published his influential *History of the Gulag*; three years later Anne Applebaum published her widely cited *Gulag: A History*. These works remain the backbone of scholarly examinations of Gulag history, culture, and literature to this day.

In 2010, a few more works of scholarship appeared, including Vilensky and Cathy Frierson's *Children of the Gulag*, O. Panchenko's *Literary legacy of the Solovetsky Monastery*, and D. B. Pavlov's *Repressed intelligentsia, 1917–1934*, which emphasizes the destruction of the Russian intelligentsia.²⁴¹ In 2011, Steven Barnes published *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*, a remarkable work that marked the next generation of anglophone Gulag studies. Barnes mentions the Solovetsky Islands a few times in reference to Naftaly Frenkel and his role in developing labor practices at the camp, a topic addressed by Solzhenitsyn as well.

10. 2013–2021

The periodization of this section reflects several relevant factors: first, the end of the Medvedev “thaw” in 2012 and the subsequent reassertion of Russian hegemony in Georgia and Ukraine, culminating with Russia's seizure of Crimea; second, the emergence of several notable individuals who raised cultural awareness of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp in Russia. The former signaled the decline, gradual then sudden, of efforts toward shared recognition of the Gulag and Soviet repression in “post-Soviet” nations. Zakhar Prilepin's *The Monastery* and Evgeny Vodolazkin's *Aviator*, two major works of fiction related to SLON, addressed the legacy

²⁴¹ D. B. Pavlov, *Repressirovannaia intelligentsiia, 1917–1934* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2010).

of the 1920s for Russian history and culture.²⁴² Key texts from this period are Oleg Khlevniuk's "The Gulag and the non-Gulag as One Interrelated Whole," published in *Kritika* in 2015, and Alexander Etkind's *Internal Colonization* (2013) and *Warped Mourning* (2016).²⁴³ Etkind's discussion of the 500-rouble note, which features an image of the Solovetsky Monastery, remains an emblematic piece of writing from this period.

While a few light-hearted travelogues with stopovers on the Solovetsky Islands like Byron MacWilliams' *With Light Steam: A Personal Journey Through the Russian Baths* (2014) were published in this period, the mood shifted, and critical examinations of Soviet repressions from outside of Russia increasingly ran against hardening opinions inside the country. At the same time, critical attention to the Gulag resulted in significant new publications related to the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp in Russia and abroad.

Fr. Viacheslav Umniagin

Of the individuals who contributed to the recognition and preservation of SLON history, the two most notable are Fr. Viacheslav Umniagin, a priest at the Solovetsky Monastery and indefatigable chronicler of the islands and labor camp, and novelist Zakhar Prilepin. (Prilepin's novel set at SLON, *The Monastery*, is discussed below.) From 2013 to 2022, Umniagin edited and published *Memoirs of Solovetsky prisoners* (VSU), an exhaustive ten-volume series that includes accounts of the Solovetsky Camp, introduced with essays and biographical sketches by

²⁴² Zakhar Prilepin, *Obitel'* (Moscow: ACT, 2014); Evgeny Vodolazkin, *Aviator* (Moscow: ACT (Elena Shubina), 2016).

²⁴³ Oleg Khlevniuk, "The Gulag and the Non-Gulag as One Interrelated Whole," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 16, no. 3 (2015): 479–498; Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011); —, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2013).

historians and scholars from around the world. This invaluable series of books has been a vital source for this dissertation and is cited widely throughout. Umniagin's efforts to collect and popularize accounts of the Solovetsky Islands, monastery, and labor camp include collaborations with other scholars including Mikhail Talalai, a key advocate for Boris Shiriaev's work over the past two decades.²⁴⁴ In 2018, Umniagin completed his dissertation, *The image of Solovki in Russian literature of the twentieth century (based on the memoirs of Solovetsky prisoners and novelistic prose of the 2000s)*, which served as the basis for his 2021 monograph *Solovki. Landscape of Russian heterodoxy (based on the memoirs of Solovki prisoners and novelistic prose of the 2000s)*. His most recent publication, published in 2023, was dedicated to the hundredth anniversary of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp and titled *In search of unity: on Solovki and more*.

In many ways, this dissertation responds to Umniagin's 2018 dissertation. His textual analysis allows for a broad evaluation of the image of Solovki in its mytho-historical context, and the influence of Umniagin's framework is clearly reflected here. Like Rozanov before him, Umniagin presents a survey of SLON memoirs; his work, however, is an analysis of the Solovetsky metatext based largely on Russian formalist methods.

As indicated in the title of the dissertation, Umniagin's emphasis is on Russian novels related to Solovki, and narrows his use of memoiristic sources to serve this focus. Umniagin uses the phrase "otechestvennaia literatura" in some places, includes non-Russian sources at other times, and in other circumstances names the "goal of the research" as outlining descriptions of

²⁴⁴ Talalai, who has focused on Shiriaev throughout his career, is another key figure in the scholarly effort to bring accounts of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp to broader attention.

the White Sea region. These are not competing claims, but they do reflect his emphasis on Russian literature and cultural context.

Umniagin argues that individual prisoners, thrust into the camp, were stripped of their individuality and forced to adopt the “paleosemantics” of the ancient world still present on the islands (both physically and metaphysically).²⁴⁵ This point is borne out in several accounts of the camp, especially the ones that have become quite prominent (Shiriaev, Likhachev); this type of transformation cannot, however, be said to be universal in SLON accounts (and is likely even less common in the lives of those who did not survive the camp, write a memoir about their experience, and then go to the effort of publishing that account). Many of the Russian accounts emphasize the detrimental and nonspiritual atmosphere at the camp, while non-Russian accounts lack this shading; instead, authors like Lenardowicz, Aliakhnovich, and Qureshi draw harsh contrasts between Solovki and their homelands in terms of natural landscape and spiritual significance.

Prilepin

Zakhar Prilepin’s *The Monastery* (2014) follows Artem Gorianov’s survival of the Solovetsky camp’s hellish landscape through a combination of chance and wit. Prilepin’s work is a “big Russian novel” in every sense, from its 750 pages to the author’s expansive depiction of Soviet society and the human condition through Artem and the other characters at the camp, and even in its impact on Russian literature and culture. The book received rave reviews, earned the

²⁴⁵ Umniagin, *Obraz Solovkov v russkoj literature XX veka*, 15.

2014 Big Book Award (*Bolshaia kniga*), and was adapted into a hit television series starring Sergei Bezrukov as camp commander Fedor Eikhmanis in 2021.²⁴⁶

Prilepin's extensive research into the camp is clear throughout the book. While critics often connected the novel to Boris Shiriaev's *The Undying Light*, certainly the best-known SLON memoir in Russia, intertexts with the memoirs of Nikonov-Smorodin, Zaitsev, and Aliakhnovich are also apparent. The significance of Prilepin's novel for awareness of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp is enormous and multi-faceted. Because the novel is so precise in detail and so expansive in scope, it essentially summed up the camp for anyone curious about it. Just as Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* successfully catalogued the Gulag for readers and became the key reference point and mode of understanding the Soviet labor camps, Prilepin's novel became the most comprehensive reference point for the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp. For that reason, perhaps, Prilepin's novel is a central concern for Umniagin, whose critical work in his dissertation and subsequent monograph addresses the image of the Solovetsky monastery and camp in Russian culture. Umniagin also addresses a second important work of fiction related to the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp that appeared in 2014, Evgeny Vodolazkin's *Aviator*.

Evgeny Vodolazkin and Dmitry Likhachev

Although Likhachev passed away in 1999, his legacy remains a topic of scholarship, and posthumous evaluations of his life and legacy were published well into the 2000s and up to the present. In 2006, Likhachev's former student Evgeny Vodolazkin edited a volume titled

²⁴⁶ Benjamin Sutcliffe, "'Pravdy ne khvataet': Obitel' Z. Prilepina: dokumental'nost' i roman vospitaniia," *Slovo. Journal of Slavic Languages, Literatures and Culture* 55 (2015): 206.

Likhachev i ego epokha: Vospominaniia. Esse. Dokumenty. Fotografii. A decade later, Vladislav Zubok debuted an English-language monograph on Likhachev titled *The Idea of Russia: The Life and Work of Dmitry Likhachev*. Aside from works dedicated to Likhachev, his efforts to bring attention to the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp continue to be reflected in scholarship related to the islands—citations from Likhachev feature prominently in Roy Robson’s *Solovki* (2004), Anne Applebaum’s *Gulag: A History* (2004) and *Gulag Voices* anthology (2000), and general histories such as Andrea Pitzer’s *One Long Night: A Global History of Concentration Camps* (2017).

Vodolazkin went on to become a successful novelist, with his 2012 novel *Lazarus* also winning the Big Book award. His follow-up, *Aviator*, was another best-seller and won the Big Book award as well. Vodolazkin’s work interrogates time and space in ways that resonate with Likhachev’s scholarly program, frequently dealing with memory, medieval chronotopes and island settings. While *Lazarus* takes place in a medieval time-space that is foreign to contemporary readers, *Aviator* moves across the 20th century. The protagonist of the novel, thirty-year-old Innokenty Petrovich Platonov, was cryogenically frozen at SLON in 1927 and successfully revived in 1999. Written as a collective diary, the book depicts Platonov as he recovers his memories while building a new life in post-Soviet Russia.

Vodolazkin’s use of SLON as a setting is quite different in scope from Prilepin’s expansive and historically precise version of the camp, but both highlight the different experiences that prisoners could encounter at the camp; SLON could be hell or heaven depending on a prisoner’s connections, skills, and luck. Where Artem moves from the quarantine barracks to a series of good positions as he moves around the camp, Platonov sees the worst of the camp—a dirty quarantine barracks—and the best—a clean laboratory where he enjoys good

food and conversation as he prepares for the cryogenic freezing. Vodolazkin's choice of SLON as a setting places the twentieth century in perspective, as the reunion between Platonov and a former camp official, now one hundred years old, amply demonstrates.

At issue for both Prilepin and Vodolazkin is the end of imperial Russian society and the attempts to resurrect this legacy in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse. Both authors choose a single, politically neutral young man as their protagonist, and both contrast this protagonist with a representative of the SLON administration. Vodolazkin confronts Platonov with a former guard, and the centenarian's unchanged air of authority and self-assurance are unsettling to Platonov, whose resurrected body is deteriorating quickly in comparison to the frail but well-preserved former officer. Platonov is a time capsule from the end of the Silver Age, and the end of the book is a race to find out whether it can be preserved. Prilepin's protagonist, in contrast, is frustrated by the intellectual chatter of his fellow prisoners and fascinated by the camp's commander, the aristocratic Eikhmanis.²⁴⁷ And while Artem is the book's protagonist, everything turns on Eikhmanis himself; the narrator ends the book with an account of a purported conversation with Eikhmanis' daughter, a diary by Eikhmanis' mistress (centering Eikhmanis), and Eikhmanis' biography. With these framings, both authors seem to enact the scenario posited by Anna Akhmatova in 1956, when prisoners began to return from the Gulag: "Now the prisoners will return, and the two Russias will look each other in the eye: the one that

²⁴⁷ In his novel, Prilepin changed the camp commander's name slightly from Eikhmans to Eikhmanis, another variant of the original German name 'Eichmann' as transliterated into Russian via Latvian.

imprisoned, and the one that was imprisoned.”²⁴⁸ In both novels, the result of this confrontation, decades too late, remains unresolved.

A quite different entry in the fictional canon of the Solovetsky Islands is James L. May's *The Body Outside the Kremlin*, which appeared in 2020.²⁴⁹ May's book, set in and around the Solovetsky Monastery, is a detective story and historical novel that follows a young political prisoner at the camp as he investigates a murder. As in Prilepin's novel, May's extensive research into the workings of the camp is apparent throughout, and he creates an impressive amount of tension depicting his protagonist moving about the camp and interrogating various real-life and fictional figures there. While the book did not receive much critical attention, it likely represents the first English-language “Solovki novel.”

Memoirs

In terms of SLON memoirs, the publication landscape was dominated by Umniagin's comprehensive series *Memoirs of Solovetsky Prisoners* (VSU) and eight editions of Shiriaev's *The Undying Light*. Perhaps in response to Prilepin's bestselling book, three separate editions of Shiriaev's book were released in 2014 alone, followed by an edition from the Solovetsky Monastery's publishing arm in 2015. A critical edition appeared in 2019, edited and introduced by Mikhail Talalai and with commentary by Umniagin. Additionally, 2020 saw a new edition of Aliakhnovich's memoir in Russian, and French author Michel Niqueux's critical edition of Julia Danzas' writing (*Julia Danzas: From the imperial court to the red jail*) including a biography of the author, number of her publications, and her memoir in the original French.

²⁴⁸ Lidiia Chukovskaia, *Zapiski ob Anne Akhmatovoi*, vol. 2 (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1980), 190.

²⁴⁹ James L. May, *The Body Outside the Kremlin* (Delphinium Books, 2020).

Scholarship

In Russophone scholarship, an important branch of semiotics related to the Russian North developed around the Northern (Arctic) Federal University in Archangelsk. Key contributors include Nikolay Terebikhin, Marina Meliutina, and Larisa Mikhailovna, who in 2015 published an article on the “Semiotic cultural spaces of Solovki.” This line of scholarship has been influential, particularly as it reflects the impact of Umniagin’s work. Another line of inquiry follows the formal features of camp publications. Kristina Zingis, who specializes in content analysis of early labor camp newspapers, has published steadily on this topic since 2015, following Alla Gorcheva’s work on the camp press.²⁵⁰

In anglophone Gulag scholarship, 2017 and 2018 were absolute heydays, with a number of indispensable works of history published, like Golfo Alexopoulos’ *Illness and Inhumanity in Stalin’s Gulag* and Zuzanna Bogumił’s *Gulag Memories*, referenced above. Olivier Rolin’s *The Meteorologist* appeared in English translation in 2017, continuing its critical and popular success. A more controversial book, Giles Udy’s *Labour and the Gulag: Russia and the Seduction of the British Left*, made some interesting arguments that were better fleshed out in Dariusz Tolczyk’s *Blissful Blindness: Soviet Crimes Under Western Eyes* (2023). While it received less critical attention, Andrea Gullota’s *Intellectual Life and Literature at Solovki 1923–1930: The Paris of the Northern Concentration Camps* (2018) is an ideal summation of SLON camp literature, also following Gorcheva’s line of inquiry into camp publications. Paired with

²⁵⁰ See, for example, Kristina A. Zingis, “Izdatel'skaia deiatel'nost' zakliuchennykh: kontent-analiz gazety ‘Novye Solovki,’” *Solovetskoe more* 15 (2016): 87–95; —, “Publikatsii zakliuchennykh: kontent-analiz gazety ‘Novye Solovki’ (1925–1930 gg.),” *Istoricheskaiia informatika*, no. 3–4 (2015): 45–55.

Kuziakina's *Theatre at Solovki* (which, incidentally, saw a second edition in 2014), Gullota's work presents the broad landscape of the camp's various newspapers, literary journals, and other outlets for expression in a usable format. Arkadiusz Morawiec continued his work on the Polish aspects of the Soviet labor camps with a 2018 book, *Polish literature against genocide*. Additionally, Jeffrey Hardy's award-winning article "Of pelicans and prisoners: avian-human interactions in the Soviet Gulag" in *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, which deals in part with the famous Solovetsky gulls, appeared in 2018.

In the years that followed, reappraisals of Soviet repressions in light of the body of scholarship appeared on the Russian and anglophone sides. These include the English version of Etkind's *Warped Mourning* (2020), Todd H. Nelson's *Bringing Stalin Back In: Memory Politics and the Creation of a Useable Past in Putin's Russia* (2019), and Mark Vincent's *Criminal Subculture in the Gulag: Prisoner Society in the Stalinist Labour Camps, 1924–1953* (2020). All three discuss the Solovetsky Special Purpose camp as one of the origins of the Gulag and a symbol for its wider development in the 20th century. Vincent, additionally, highlights ethnographic research on prisoners (primarily criminals) produced by other prisoners (educated people like Likhachev) at the camp.

A few more publications of note appeared in 2021: Irina Flige, the head of the St. Petersburg Memorial branch and expert on the Solovetsky Islands, published *Sandarmokh: dramaturgy of meanings*; Victoria Malko published *The Ukrainian Intelligentsia and Genocide: The Struggle for History, Language, and Culture in the 1920s and 1930s*; and Martin C. Putna, released a book titled *Rus, Ukraine, Russia: Scenes from the Cultural History of Russian Religiosity* that discusses the islands' conflicted legacy as it stands today.

11. 2022–present

Over the past few years, scholars have continued to publish robustly in relation to the Solovetsky Islands and prison camp, and interest in the camp does not seem to have flagged. The final volumes of Umniagin's *Memoirs of Solovetsky Prisoners* appeared in 2022. Morawiec published his *Polish Literature and Genocide* in English translation in 2022, then a new work in Polish, *Polish camp literature*, in 2023.²⁵¹ This monograph appeared in English translation in 2025.²⁵² Jeffrey Hardy's *Finding God in the Gulag: A History of Christianity in the Soviet Penal System* (2024) includes a chapter on the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp, and last year, Niqueux's critical edition of Julia Danzas's writing appeared in Russian translation.²⁵³ Renate Lachmann, referenced above in relation to memory studies, published *Camp and Literature: Testimonies of the GULAG* in Russian in 2024, and Alexander Etkin's *Warped Mourning* saw a second edition in Russia.²⁵⁴

At the time of writing in March 2025, the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp has already merited mention in a few Russian and English publications this year. Oleg Kirichenko briefly discusses the camp as a symbolic space in his ambitious *Ideology and Ideological Forms: Eurasianism and Scythianism, Soviet Slavophilism and Westernism, Sophianism and Secular*

²⁵¹ Arkadiusz Morawiec, *Polish Literature and Genocide* (New York and London: Routledge, 2022); ——. *Polska literatura obozowa. Rekonesans* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2023).

²⁵² Arkadiusz Morawiec, *Polish Camp Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2025).

²⁵³ Jeffrey S. Hardy, *Finding God in the Gulag: A History of Christianity in the Soviet Penal System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024); Michel Niqueux and Nataliia Markova, *Iuliia Danzas (1879—1942): Ot imperatorskogo dvora do krasnoi katorgi* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2024).

²⁵⁴ Renate Lachmann, *Lager' i literatura. Svidetel'stva o GULAge* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2024); Alexander Etkin, *Iskazhyonnyi traur: istorii o nezhivyykh v strane ne pokhoronennykh* (St. Petersburg: Aleteiia, 2023).

Hesychasm, Nihilism and Social Optimism, Secular and Church Eschatology.²⁵⁵ A tourism marketing textbook tentatively claims that the islands “symbolize the Russian North.”²⁵⁶ Perhaps most interestingly, two different “romantasy” books related to Solovki have been published this year, one in English and the other in Russian. The first, Cristin Williams' *The Whisper of Stars*, features two young political prisoners on the Solovetsky Islands solving a murder with the help of a treacherous witch. The book traverses Russian history via the mystery of a diary of the Stenka Razin rebellion.²⁵⁷ The second, Alena Velt's *By Right of Blood*, is a witches' bildungsroman set in a fantasy version of Russia, concludes in a village named “Solovki.”²⁵⁸ The continued appearance of Solovki and versions of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp in popular literature demonstrates the continued relevance and flexibility of the islands as a symbol. That this theme appears in English as well as Russian texts also speaks to the sustained interest in the topic across cultures.

12. Conclusion

In the 1920s, the first accounts of the camp were aimed at a popular readership with an interest in the emerging Soviet Union and its treatment of political prisoners on the left (fellow Socialists) and right (“Whites”). The proliferation of memoirs in the 1920s and 1930s represents a gradual evolution of the SLON memoir from urgent, informational texts to more general reflections on the transformation of Russian society under the Bolsheviks. Journalistic accounts

²⁵⁵ Oleg Viktorovich Kirichenko, *Ideinost' i ideinye formy: Evraziistvo i skifstvo, sovetskoe slavyanofil'stvo i zapadnichestvo, sofianstvo i svetckii isikhasm, nigilizm i sotsial'nyi optimizm, svetskaia i tserkovnaia eschatologiya* (Saint Petersburg: Aleteia, 2024), 143, 247.

²⁵⁶ Elena Dzhandzhugazova, *Marketingsovyte tekhnologii v turizme: marketing turistsskikh territory 4-e izd., ispr. i dop. Uchebnik dlia SPO* (2025), 192.

²⁵⁷ Cristin Williams, *The Whisper of Stars* (London: Gollancz (Orion Publishing Group), 2025).

²⁵⁸ Alena Velt, *Po pravu krovi* (Self published, 2025).

from this period draw from these memoirs incidentally, haphazardly, and uncritically, reproducing the memoirs' lurid descriptions of life at the camp and elaborating on the memoirist's words with terrifying metaphors of the labor camps as a hell within a hell, the GPU as a poison or cancer to Soviet society, and the Solovetsky Islands as the symbol of Orthodox Russia destroyed.

However, larger political currents undermined these efforts to demonize the Soviet Union by raising awareness of the Solovetsky labor camp. By the late 1930s, some memoirists had already drawn comparisons between SLON and their new lives under Nazi occupation in their accounts of the camp. While publication of SLON memoirs essentially ceased after 1939, the authors who revived the topic in the late 1940s and 1950s returned with a sharply nationalized lens. Although Boris Shiriaev and Semen Pidhajnyj purport to represent Russia and Ukraine from emigration, and their interpretations of the labor camp and monastic history differ accordingly, the intensity of their efforts to publicize the camp were equally strong.

During the 1960s, the locus of SLON memory moved back to Russia for the first time. Likhachev's early programmatic note on the Solovetsky Islands signaled a new flowering of historical inquiry into the islands, mostly focused on its medieval past. Tourism to the islands also increased in this time, and the ability to visit the islands allowed some freedom of discourse and historical preservation to take place.

From Russia, Solzhenitsyn encapsulated the SLON memoir twice over—first in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, which miraculously sidesteps the formulaic chronology of a typical Gulag memoir by isolating the narrative to the classical unities of time, setting, and action. By contrast, the *Gulag Archipelago* presents the Soviet labor camps in their most total, encyclopedic form. Solzhenitsyn's innovative work, adapted in form from Chekhov's *Sakhalin*

Island, spurred Rozanov to complete his own comprehensive survey of SLON memoirs based on many of the texts published in the 1920s and 1930s. Thus, the revival of the history of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp coincided with the first revival of the earliest memoirs of the camp.

On the anglophone side, pioneering historians of the Soviet Union, beginning with Robert Conquest, began to make their names with monumental histories of Soviet repression. Such works always include the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp, whether a few mentions, an introductory chapter, or a longer case study. This form of historical inquiry prioritizes archival sources over personal accounts, although the lack of such sources often forced historians into dealing with memoirs and other ego-documents, always with heavy qualifiers. On the side of literary scholarship, efforts to contextualize Gulag memoirs have been dominated by the problematization of comparisons to Holocaust literature and inadequate analysis of these works in Russian literature, aside from the Solzhenitsyn-Shalamov dichotomy.

The end of the Soviet Union meant an explosion of sources, both newly published memoirs and newly opened archives, and scholars on both sides have spent the last three decades dealing with this bounty. Series of anthologies and compilations of firsthand accounts appeared in abundance, useful for anglophone scholars and instructors. Memorial as well as independent Russian scholars worked to catalogue accounts of the Gulag held in archives and private collections for decades, and to solicit new testimonies from remaining survivors and their children.

In many cases, the conclusions of earlier writers like Conquest, Likhachev, and Solzhenitsyn were totally validated by newly available archival material. Once the hypotheses of the Cold War period were fully investigated, the anglophone side settled into increasingly narrow

investigations of aspects of the Gulag (such as culture at the Solovetsky Special Purpose camp). On the Russian side, Viacheslav Umniagin and Mikhail Talalai, among many others, have worked tirelessly to publish the work of Boris Shiriaev and other SLON memoirists, and Yuri Brodsky's compelling interpretation of the islands' place in Russian history continues to inform chroniclers of the camp. Interesting work in the spheres of content analysis and semiotics in relation to the camp continues to appear in Russophone scholarship, although this research does seem to be rather marginalized.

While Prilepin is not the last word on the topic of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp, his effort to write a "big" Russian novel set at the camp clearly succeeded, achieving widespread success. That his work draws from an array of the earliest memoirs of the camp, including many of the memoirs addressed in this dissertation, represents another important revival of these sources and reinterpretation of their place in Russian history.

D. Memoirs addressed here

In his survey of SLON memoirs, Rozanov notes that each prisoner at the camp had access to a narrow slice of life there, constrained as much by the timing of his or her detainment as by the specific conditions they were subjected to.²⁵⁹ The initial group of memoirists were a core group of escapees from the Kem transit point—many of whom had spent little or no time on the islands themselves—then, in the late 1920s and 1930s, accounts from those who had served sentences on the islands became more common.

These most dramatic stories serve a persuasive function, and several memoirists exhibit a compunction to expose the tortures and abuses going on at the camp. But in doing so, they repeat

²⁵⁹ See Rozanov, *Solovetskii kontslager*, for an assessment of many of these texts.

rumors and half-truths gathered from GPU agents and fellow prisoners whom they meet along the way to SLON. In emigration, a body of rumors, facts, and conjecture regarding the camp was developed among former prisoners and reified with the publication of these early works, many of which have a similar structure—simple, chronological plots based on the memoirist’s real life, with separate chapters for different topics of interest to readers (“Women at the Camp,” “Daily Life at SLON,” etc.). Later works that are more complex compositionally still include the key plot elements that make up a common SLON metanarrative.

The memoirists who published accounts of the camp in exile are a diverse group, ranging in nationality and ethnicity as well as political and religious orientation. Moreover, arrestees, were often targeted on the basis of their identities rather than any actual crimes against the state. In such cases, memoirists correspondingly emphasize their nationality or religion to explain their circumstances. While this diversity of viewpoints is highlighted throughout, this dissertation considers the accounts in light of their formal unities, including the incarceration *fabula*—a key unifying feature—and the poetics of the islands themselves, including their natural features, historical significance, and the dramatic transformations on the islands related to the prison camp.

These early accounts are not comprehensive presentations of the camp and lack endurance in cultural memory. These early memoirs are limited in scope and drained of tension by the nature of their genre—no matter how harrowing the circumstances, a memoir based on a narrative of prison, captivity, or escape requires that the prisoner survive his experiences to write about it. This biological necessity is a generic constraint of such memoirs, as is the limitation of individual apprehension of events, no matter how momentous the occasion. One individual’s experiences can never be comprehensive, even if they are representative, and memoirists who

aim to make their work believable must admit when they are relating secondhand stories about the camp.

The tension of memoir is located in the author's self, or, rather, refracted across different versions of the author's self: author, narrator, protagonist, editor, witness, accomplice. But the essential story is the same: I was arrested, I went to SLON, I was freed, and then I wrote this book. This dissertation emphasizes this simple narrative, delving into the different versions produced by the memoirists discussed here. The purpose of this exercise is two-fold: to highlight what has been ignored from this period (or, at best, mined for facts by later writers) and to emphasize the shared features of these accounts.

1. Language and publishing

Many of the authors surveyed here (Boris Cederholm, Tatyana Tchernavin, Vladimir Tchernavin, and Julia Danzas) were Russians in exile who initially published their accounts in English or French in order to reach a broader reading public. Some Russian survivors did publish their memoirs in Russian, often in newspapers targeting émigré audiences who could directly relate to and understand the context of the Soviet regime's oppressions. Sozerko Malsagoff and Yuri Bezsonov's books were originally published in Russian, then translated into English and French.²⁶⁰ Malsagoff and Cederholm's books were both translated by the same person, F.H. Lyon.²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ Rozanov (*Solovetsky kontslager*, 15) mentions Anton Klinger's 1926 article in an émigré journal and books by journalists Raymond Duguet and Essad Bey.

²⁶¹ There is little biographical information about Lyon available, let alone from the texts, where his editorial intrusions are minimal. His treatment of the SLON/slön (elephant) homonym is discussed below. Other translators are typically identified on the title page of these books. Bezsonov's book was translated from Russian to English by E. Semenoff, Danzas's work was

Zaitsev, who escaped across the Chinese border from Siberia, published his memoir in Shanghai in 1931. The book is written in pre-reform Russian orthography, edited and printed quickly (based on the many typographical errors).

Non-Russian authors Said Qureshi and Alexander Grube gave interviews with Russian émigré newspapers that were likely translated from the original language of the interviews. Both accounts were likely edited for readability and cultural intelligibility for Russian readers. Despite the intrusion of translation (both accounts include Russian idioms and other examples of strong editing), both accounts offered unique perspectives on the international dimension of the Soviet penal system to Russophone readers.

The interwar Second Polish Republic was a unique publishing market for accounts of Soviet prisons and labor camps. Writing for a native audience, Lenardowicz emphasizes the experiences of fellow Polish prisoners in his memoirs, while Ilgin focused on his Catholic faith and the communities he served in Belarus and Ukraine rather than his Polish identity.

Aliakhnovich also wrote in Polish for Polish audiences, although he originally prepared the manuscript in Belarusian. As Andriej Moskwin details in a 2019 article, although Aliakhnovich originally wanted to publish his memoir in Belarusian, he struggled to find a publisher among the generally pro-Soviet Belarusian left and eventually entrusted the book to his friend, Polish publisher Józef (“Cat”) Mackiewicz.²⁶² The 1935 Polish edition is geared toward a Polish audience and the author either explains or downplays Belarusian culture, especially compared to the deeper discussion of politics within the Belarusian national movement in the subsequent Belarusian edition (1937).

translated from French to English by “O.B.,” Tatyana Tchernavin's from Russian to English by N. Alexander, and Vladimir Tchernavin's from Russian to English by Nicholas M. Oushakoff.

²⁶² Moskwin, „7 lat w szponach GPU,” 48.

The diverse linguistic choices and publishing contexts of these memoirists reflect their circumstances after release and the varied audiences they sought to reach. The translators and editors of these accounts played crucial roles in shaping these works for non-native audiences, sometimes altering the texts to suit the expectations of foreign readers. Ultimately, these memoirs stand as cross-cultural testaments to the widespread suffering within the Soviet penal system, enduring through the challenges of language and publication.

2. Titles

Book titles are usually changeable, and authors often relinquish the final decision as to a book's title to editors, publishers, and translators. The section that follows is not intended qualitatively and merely gives some context about the books surveyed here, encompassing 28 books (including translations and differently titled editions) published from 1925–1937.²⁶³ Survivors who could quickly produce accounts of Soviet prisons and labor camps were in demand, not to mention that these writers often describe a sense of duty to warn the rest of the world about what they had experienced. Labeling these books with key words like “soviet,” “communist,” “Solovetsky,” “labor camp,” etc. allowed publishers to market the books to the eager reading public. Most of the titles are sensationalistic and evoke captivity narratives that were quite popular at the time, such as P. C. Wren's *Beau Geste* (1924) or the 1935 movie *Escape from Devil's Island*.

Of the 28 books surveyed, 13 included some version of the words “Russian/Soviet/Communist/Red” and some version of “jail/prison/camp/exile”—among them

²⁶³ Fr. Wincenty Ilgin's memoir is the only exception on the list: he returned to Poland from the Solovetsky Islands in 1936 and composed his memoir between his return and his death in 1937, but the manuscript was not published until 2006.

Letters from Russian Prisons; The Solovetsky concentration camp (as told by an eyewitness; Solovetsky Hard Labor. Notes of an Escapee; A Soviet Prison in the Far North; In the Land of the NEP and the Cheka: In the Prisons of the U.S.S.R.; SOLOVSKI. Communist Hard Labor or a Place of Torture and Death; and Red gaols: a woman's experiences in Russian prisons.

Nine of the titles, including Ilgin's, mention "Solovki" or "Solovetsky" in some form, beginning with Sozerko Malsagoff's *An Island Hell: A Soviet Prison in the Far North*. Zaitsev's title identifies the camp as a "place" [*mesto*] of torture and death instead.

Three authors evoke the Soviet security forces in their titles, beginning with Boris Cederholm's *In the Land of the NEP and the Cheka* (1928), changed to the more lurid *In the Clutches of the Tcheka* for the 1929 English translation. Essad Bey's journalistic account, titled *OGPU: The Plot Against the World* in its 1933 English translation, reflecting the organization's name since 1923. Frantsishak Aliakhnovich published four redactions of his memoir of the camp, with the initial Polish edition (1935) and the subsequent Belarusian version (1937) titled *In the Clutches of the GPU*. The second Polish edition (1937) was more soberly titled *Truth about the Soviets*.

Aliakhnovich, and Qureshi highlight the length of their time at the camp in the titles *Seven years in the clutches of the GPU* and *Five years in Soviet prisons*, respectively. Bezsonov, meanwhile, emphasizes the number of prisons he had spent time in with *Twenty-Six Prisons*. Bezsonov is one of three authors who highlight the theme of "escape" in the titles of their books. The other two are Anton Klinger (*Solovetsky Hard Labor. Notes of an Escapee* (1926)) and Tatyana Tchernavin (*Escape from the Soviets* (1934)).

Eight of the titles reflect the author's eyewitness perspective, from Klinger's parenthetical (*as told by an eyewitness*) to Mieczysław Lenardowicz's *Solovki Diary* and Julia

Danzas's subtitle *A Woman's Experiences in Russian Prisons*. Rather than emphasizing his own perspective, Vladimir Tchernavin makes a claim to "*Speak for the Silent*" with his title, and the contents of the book do reflect an effort to convey the experiences of his fellow prisoners.

Aliakhnovich's *Truth about the Soviets* reflects a similar truth-telling impulse that goes somewhat beyond the eyewitness perspective highlighted in the majority of the titles, making a general claim to authority in speaking about the Soviets.

Whether they left the Soviet Union in the early 1920s or the mid 1930s, émigré memoirists were immediately plunged into communities, whether made up of Russian exiles or foreign readers, that were eager for news about the mysterious Bolshevik state. These titles identified the memoirs as accounts of the Soviet Union and advertised the books to potential reading audiences.

3. Book formatting and illustrations

Across this dissertation, with its focus on memoir as a genre, I emphasize published monographs and mention accounts published in circulars at minimum. However, many of the memoirs discussed in this chapter were originally published in some form in newspapers and journals, and I note that where relevant and at times compare different versions of a text.

The earliest accounts of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp are connected by similarities of genre and production—fast production schedules, inexpensive publishing techniques, simple chronological narratives, eyewitness accounts that presented unconfirmed information about the camps, immediate advocacy regarding the situation in the Soviet Union prioritized over autobiographical reflection. As subsequent chapters will show, the framing of SLON memoirs would change considerably after WWII, with authors increasingly arguing for

the relevance of their experiences rather than presenting fresh eyewitness accounts of an ongoing phenomenon. Pre-war accounts, in contrast, reflect the urgency of their publication schedules.

This urgency, in turn, leads to a certain degree of ephemerality in accounts produced.

Vyacheslav Umniagin's ten-volume series *Memoirs of Solovki Prisoners* reflects the quick production cycles and multiplicity of accounts in the 1920s and 1930s—many accounts in the series are republished for the first time from the émigré newspapers where they were originally published and translated from different languages back into Russian, the language of the series.

Although shorter narratives by Anton Klinger and Said Qureshi deserve mention for their uniqueness and importance to future authors, the real emphasis of this dissertation is on the production of book-length accounts of the camp and the formal similarities across these longer works. In my estimation, the final published versions of camp memoirs are uniquely informative in the formation of a holistic picture of SLON.

These early memoirs have minimal extratextual matter, with brief forwards, rare afterwords, a few key footnotes (typically explaining criminal slang), and occasional maps and charts. Half of the books were published in cheaper small formats on now-disintegrating brown paper and listed in series of related books. For example, the version of Mieczysław Lenardowicz's *Solovki Diary* published by the Military Scientific Publishing Institute is listed as number 4 in the "Social Library" series.

While later editions of SLON memoirs tend to have eye-catching covers and engaging imagery, most of the works addressed here were minimally illustrated.²⁶⁴ Only four of the books

²⁶⁴ Based on my examination of the books in various print and scanned versions.

surveyed feature cover images. The cover of Ilgin's memoir, published in 2006, is a close-up photograph of a rough gray stone, evoking the Solovetsky stones already widespread around Russia by then. The editors of Ilgin's book included a photo of the priest, a few unattributed hand-drawn maps of the camp, and photos of the monastery and islands taken by historian Yuri Brodsky. The first Belarusian edition of Aliakhnovich's memoir includes a small etching of the Solovetsky monastery's main gate.

Nikonov-Smorodin's book, published in 1938, prominently features the seal of the Bratstvo russkoi pravdy, a White émigré group founded by the book's editor, Alexander Amfiteatrov (among others). The book features a frontispiece portrait of Nikonov-Smorodin, maps of the camp on the Big Solovetsky Island and "the Kingdom of the Gulag" (different labor camps) across the USSR, two pencil drawings of the Solovetsky monastery attributed to L. Sorrin, a picture of Soviet ration cards, and a photograph of the Karelian forests through which the author escaped.

Nikolai Kiselev-Gromov's 1936 *Lageri smerti v S.S.S.R.* features the most evocative cover of the books surveyed here. The title is written in large white letters on a black background, which merges into a scene of a clear-cut forest. A man in light clothing for the snowy weather lies hunched over two logs that form a cross. The man, either exhausted or already dead, lies with his right arm splayed to the side. A few feet from his hand is a small axe that seems to have been thrown to the side. Aside from this dramatic cover image, the book features no illustrations.

Most of the books were minimally illustrated; the original newspaper editions of Qureshi and Grube, for example, were published without illustrations, and Umniagin's critical edition

features no new images for these accounts.²⁶⁵ Both Malsagoff and Zaitsev published a series of hand-drawn maps of the islands and camps in their accounts, although neither included an author photo or cover image. These maps are detailed and skillfully drawn, with numbered and labeled buildings and other features, and contribute to the accounts' shared emphasis on tactical urgency and information over emotion.

Bezsonov's book includes a frontispiece portrait of the author as a young imperial Russian officer and no other illustrations. Tatyana Tchernavin's book also features a frontispiece, a photo of her son Andrei. A publisher's note appended to the portrait reads: "We are unable to reproduce photographs of the author or her husband as they fear that this might enable the OGPU agents in Finland to trace them."²⁶⁶ Tatyana also includes a hand-drawn map of the family's escape route. Vladimir's book, published the year after Tatyana's, features two photographs of the entire family: two of the author (a frontispiece portrait and a photo taken after his arrival in Finland), one of Andrei, and one of Tatyana. A publisher's note explains the change in circumstance, albeit rather perfunctorily:

When [Tatyana's] book was published the reproduction of photographs of either Professor Tchernavin or his wife was considered unwise, as it might enable the GPU agents in Finland to trace them. We are fortunate to have obtained the author's permission now to reproduce photographs of himself, of his wife, and of their son Andrey.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁵ Each entry in Umniagin's edited collection features an image of the monastery with barbed wire superimposed over it, and each page is also decorated with a barbed wire motif.

²⁶⁶ Tatyana Tchernavin, *Escape*, 2, 5.

²⁶⁷ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, n.p.

Vladimir Tchernavin includes a professional map of the White Sea and Russian North (encompassing Leningrad and Novaia Zemlia) at the beginning of the book, and a hand-drawn map of the prison camp in the end matter. Tatyana also includes one map, a neatly hand-drawn map indicating the family's escape route across the Finnish border.

Chykalenko's pamphlet is presented without illustration or cover photo, as is the Biblioteczka Historyczno-Geograficzna edition of Lenardowicz's *Memoir from Solovki* (Rój, 1930). The Biblioteczka Społeczna edition from the same year, published by the Wojskowy Instytut Naukowo-Wydawniczy, features three illustrations that match the content of Lenardowicz's account: a mass of prisoners huddled into a prison cell, guards whipping a prisoner in the snow, and, near the end of a book, a man standing at the stern of a ship with an island in the horizon. These images are unattributed and seem to have been commissioned for this edition of the memoir.

The 1935 English edition of Julia Danzas' *Red Gaols* has no cover art, but features four photographs (one unattributed photo of a contemporary lumber camp in the Soviet Union, three photos of the Solovetsky Monastery taken before 1917) and four of the author's own sketches. The French edition also features no cover images. Danzas's crude sketches include the interior of a prisoner transport train car, the inside of an Irkutsk prison cell, and a scene of women prisoners forced to march in formation at SLON. Danzas also includes a drawing of the monastery from an elevated view. Although the professional drawings in Lenardowicz's book reflect and magnify the emotional impact of his account, Danzas' amateurish drawings are less effective at conveying the pathos of her experience.

Aliakhnovich's 1937 Polish edition, *Prawda o Sowietach*, includes eight photo plates, none of which seem to be related to the Solovetsky Islands or the author himself. Instead, the

publishers included an escalating series of photos from contemporary Soviet life that underscore the deprivation and destruction taking place in the country. The first images are rather benign photos of queues and outdoor markets, followed by images of trams, railways, and a postal carrier. Images of makeshift shelters and a truck hopelessly stuck in the mud appear, then pictures of purportedly homeless children (*bezprizornye*) and a gaunt beggar. The final two photo plates feature graphic images of skeletal victims of famine, a pile of dead bodies, and a dead horse. These are somewhat related to the topics Aliakhnovich addresses in his book, but more complementary than illustrative of the text. Reading through the book, the photos add a gradual but persistent sense of horror that combines effectively with Aliakhnovich's account.

In contrast to the extensive photographs in Aliakhnovich's book, Cederholm's 1929 book includes a few photos of architectural monuments connected to the author's own experiences (The Bourse and Catherine Canal in Saint Petersburg, and the Moscow Kremlin) and two photos of Cederholm: one of the authors at the time of publication, the other taken when he returned from the Soviet Union. The few images reinforce Cederholm's account to a certain degree but do not attempt to color readers' perception of events as forcefully as the images in Aliakhnovich's book.

The visual elements in the memoirs of SLON survivors vary significantly in quantity, quality, and purpose. Many of the books include a portrait of the author, a map of the camp, and some imagery of the islands or the Soviet Union more generally. Julia Danzas' book is the most creative in this sense, including images of the monastery before its transformation into a prison, the author's sketches of her experiences, and a photo of a contemporary Soviet lumber operation. The inclusion of maps, sketches, and photographs often serves to ground the reader in the physical and emotional realities of the authors' experiences, whether through tactical depictions

of camp layouts or evocative imagery of suffering and resilience. While some editions, like Aliakhnovich's *Prawda o Sowietach* and Lenardowicz's *Pamiętnik z Solówek*, incorporate striking illustrations or photographs to amplify the emotional and historical impact of their narratives, others, such as Bezsonov's and Chykalenko's works, remain largely unillustrated, relying solely on the power of the written word.

4. Stated purpose of memoirs

Memoirists tend to state their reasons for writing about their time at SLON in the introductory materials (preface, author's note, first pages of their account) or at the end as they reflect on the totality of their experiences and speak directly to readers. Not every memoirist addresses the question of why he wrote an account, though, particularly Ilgin, whose memoirs were not published in his lifetime, and Grube and Qureshi, who related their experiences to a third party (émigré newspaper editors).

In his memoir, Ilgin does not explicate his motivation for writing the book, although the book's structure (a narrative of Ilgin's life centered around his incarceration followed by thematic essays about the Soviet Union) demonstrates the intent to inform contemporary readers about life under the Bolsheviks. Ilgin does not emphasize the process of writing in his account as many others do. The editor of the posthumous volume, Fr. Roman Dzwonkowski, outlines the history of Polish priests' accounts of Soviet prisons and labor camps in his preface to Ilgin's account. Dzwonkowski also explains that he added the ironic subtitle to Ilgin's memoirs (*What it Was Like in the Bolshevik Paradise*), which serves as a clear hint at his interpretation of Ilgin's purpose: to demonstrate the failures of the Soviet Union to potential readers.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁸ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 14.

Grube and Qureshi, whose accounts were only published serially in Russian émigré newspapers before Umniagin compiled them for his series *Memoirs of Solovetsky Prisoners*, also reach readers through overt editorial intervention. Qureshi's account begins with his emphasis on how much he learned about the USSR during his time there, establishing himself as an authority whose implicit motivation is to convey what he learned to audiences abroad. While Qureshi's account is written from a first-person perspective throughout and follows the chronology of his life, Grube's account speaks of him in the third person at times, and has a more associative (i.e., not strictly chronological) composition. Rather than Grube emphasizing his motivation for telling these stories, Grube's editors introduce his account with their reasoning for publishing the account, emphasizing the fearsome reputation of "Solovki" and describing a four-hour interview with Grube regarding his experiences there. Occasionally, specific dialogue between the journalists and Grube are referenced or reproduced.

Most writers who published monographs about their time at SLON are clear about why they wrote their accounts. Lenardowicz explains that after his return from the Soviet Union, he views his experiences there as a kind of "hellish" (*ciężki*) dream, "one that is remembered with regret," but he chose to write a memoir "to enlighten my compatriots about what present-day Russia truly is, what this 'Bolshevik paradise' looks like, and the destruction the red rulers of the Kremlin bring to the civilization of the world."²⁶⁹ While many writers clearly state their reasons for writing, others leave their motivations more implicit, offering insight through the structure of their memoirs. Aliakhnovich, a professional writer, does not justify or explain why he is writing about his experiences: he wrote the book because he needed money²⁷⁰ and to tell others about his

²⁶⁹ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 79.

²⁷⁰ Compared to other memoirists, there is more information about the publication of Frantsishak Aliakhnovich's book, including his impecunious state upon return to Vilnius and his attempts to

experiences. The title of his book's second Polish edition, *Truth about the Soviets*, conveys something about his motivation but conceals other aspects of it.

In contrast, Malsagoff and Zaitsev, who each produced highly informative and detailed accounts of the camp, are also explicit in their reasoning for composing them. Malsagoff, writing just after his escape from Kem in 1925, underscores the importance of informing the outside world about the dire conditions at SLON. He writes, "I found that outside Soviet Russia the whole circumstances in which those transported to the Solovetsky Islands are compelled to live (or, it would be more correct to say, to die)—the whole life, regime, conditions of labour, food, and other internal and external characteristics of the Solovky, were absolutely unknown."²⁷¹ Because Malsagoff was able to escape the camp ("Providence thought fit to rescue me, by a miracle, from this place of torment"), he takes on the responsibility of writing his account: "And I count it my most sacred duty to tell the world what I saw, heard and went through there."²⁷² Malsagoff's account, however, relates many aspects of life on the Solovetsky Islands that he could not have seen, heard, or experienced.

In 1931, Ivan Matveevich Zaitsev published a response to Malsagoff's memoir, describing the furor that the 1926 book had created among GPU administrators at the camp and in Moscow. Zaitsev's "Short Introduction" is a tightly framed argument for composing his own account. He explains that the information available (through Malsagoff and other accounts) was incomplete, missing "facts of the most brutal atrocities, not to mention the systematic nightmarish mockery and abuse of the prisoners' dignity, and other such things that deserve to be

publish his work with Belarusian presses, who were mostly pro-Bolshevik and uninterested in his account (Moskwin, „7 lat w szponach GPU,” 85).

²⁷¹ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 7.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 8.

noted and made public.”²⁷³ The missing information, Zaitsev continues, will be of interest to contemporary readers and valuable to future historians and future generations. He continues by explaining the need for a “a detailed, accurate, and truthful description of the Solovki regime”, which “can only be provided by someone who has personally gone through all the stages of Solovki hard labor.”²⁷⁴ Next, he gives his own bona fides as the person capable of writing this account: “During my time at Solovki, I personally endured a great deal; I suffered a lot, so very much [...] I saw, heard, and observed many things.”²⁷⁵ Finally, he explains that “Now I intend to bring everything to public attention for the judgment of civilized nations.”²⁷⁶ He writes that this is a task he has taken on for himself for the “moral satisfaction of fulfilling the passionate desire of my former comrades—the prisoners.”²⁷⁷ This approach to validating their experiences aligns with Zaitsev’s forceful reasoning, which highlights the urgency of recording untold stories for contemporary awareness and posterity.

Danzas gives a simple explanation: her experience in Soviet jails “entitles” her to speak of them, and of the Soviet regime.²⁷⁸ She implies that she is representative of the “hundreds of thousands of people” living under that regime “whose innocence is incontestable,” but is not explicit in the claim, especially compared to the Tchernavins, who describe their story as representative of the repressed intellectual class in the Soviet Union.²⁷⁹

In the introduction to his book, Cederholm also implies that his experiences warranted writing the book, explaining that this was an extreme and noteworthy experience but not

²⁷³ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 4.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁷⁸ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 1.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*; Tatyana Tchernavin, *Escape*, 9; Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 1.

claiming to refute erroneous information or pronouncing his solemn duty to share information about the camp with the world. Cederholm's reasoning reflects his indignant disbelief, decrying the "shameless cynicism and cruelty of [his] treatment in Soviet Russia" and refuting potential naysayers by including documentary evidence to prove his point: "I have thought it necessary to quote a few extracts from the correspondence between the Finnish Consulate-General in Petrograd and the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs regarding my 'case', as well as one or two other documents."²⁸⁰ Like Zaitsev, Cederholm insists on providing evidence, but his focus lies more on refuting disbelief, perhaps including his own.

In Bezsonov's framing, his purpose in writing his memoir is to convey his experiences to a very narrow audience: his sister. He opens his memoir with a heartfelt "Letter to My Sister" where he expresses his joy at having escaped Russia and his renewed faith in God, then explains that "while all the past is fresh in my memory, I want to tell you about my life there, so that everything may be clear to you. I am going to tell you all that I saw, felt, lived through; just exactly as it all happened: all the truth and only the truth."²⁸¹ This personal framing is belied by the memoir's wide circulation and translation from Russian into French and English, and can be characterized as part of the memoir's confessional compositional structure.

Stated motivations for writing and publishing these accounts thus varied across authors. Some, like Malsagoff and Zaitsev, framed their accounts as moral duties, using their personal suffering as a lens to reveal the atrocities of Soviet labor camps. Others, like Ilgin and Bezsonov, offered more implicit or personal justifications, leaving readers to interpret their intent.

²⁸⁰ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 7.

²⁸¹ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 10–11.

5. *Intended audiences*

As the above discussions of paratextual matter and stated motivations for composing these memoirs shows, most authors wanted their works to be read and appreciated by a variety of possible audiences. For some, like Lenardowicz, this was largely a national—Polish—audience, whether intentionally or not: he emphasizes his interactions with other Polish prisoners, he relates tragic stories about the camp as told to him by fellow Poles, and the book ends with a martyrology of Polish prisoners who died at SLON, a unique feature that portends the nationalized memories of SLON that will become prominent in the 1990s and continue to the present.²⁸² In comparison, Aliakhnovich gears the different translations of his memoir (which he did himself) to different audiences—he writes for Belarusians in Belarusian and Poles in Polish (evidenced by his explanations and elisions of Belarusian features in his Polish translations).

Others geared their work to Russian émigré audiences. Newly arrived in the émigré world, Nikonov-Smorodin realized the difficulty of this task and directed his account toward bridging this gap, writing in his introduction:

The émigré ideas about today's Russia correspond to the reality to the same extent that the ideas of the Soviet people about the émigrés correspond to the émigré reality. And so, if my work, [...] will contribute to the exposure of the Soviet lies about the life of the Soviets, I will consider my goal achieved.²⁸³

Qureshi and Grube's accounts, published in Russian émigré newspapers, were also aimed at this audience. The accounts draw on the memoirists' unique position inside and outside Russian

²⁸² The account is unconfirmed and, following Mieczysław Lenardowicz's pattern, likely a compilation of secondhand stories presented by two "eyewitnesses."

²⁸³ Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 11.

culture. (Qureshi even jokes that he is surprised by his ability to remember so many Russian names.) These memoirs emphasize shared suffering and collective memory, offering detailed accounts that were meant to resonate with those familiar with Soviet oppression.

Yet others write for broad audiences of “foreigners.” Zaitsev recalls thinking intensely about this audience while he was at the camp: “There were times on Solovki, during nightmarish experiences, when we prisoners, driven to complete frenzy by mockery and abuse, would nervously, with tears in our eyes, exclaim: ‘Oh God! Can it really be that the outside world knows nothing of our suffering here, is it truly powerless to exert any influence to free us from this torment?’”²⁸⁴ Finally free and able to speak to this audience in his book, Zaitsev asks the “compassionate and empathetic” reader to “imagine that my simple and truthful stories are echoed there, on Solovki, by the cries and groans of many convict prisoners, exhausted under the weight of forced labor and enduring a variety of insidiously subtle mockery and abuse.”²⁸⁵

Like Zaitsev, Malsagoff and Vladimir Tchernavin assume the crucial role of revealing the unknown aspects of the camp to foreign audiences. Their emphasis is on producing documents that will be useful to politicians, historians, and even military strategists. Malsagoff’s detailed historical context and sharp analysis of Soviet efforts to destroy the island’s heritage are quite to the point here, offering a broader understanding of the political and social implications of the camp’s existence for non-Russian audiences. His narrative avoids the personal “I” to maintain an objective tone, except when recounting his arrival at the camp, providing a balance between personal experience and broader historical analysis.

²⁸⁴ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 6.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

Beyond contemporary audiences, some memoirists speak to future generations. Zaitsev and Danzas write directly to future historians, hoping that their works will be read and utilized as documentation of the Soviet camps. Both authors express a conviction that historical narrative, not individual memoirs like their own, will be the only way to truly convey what went on at the camp, with Danzas adding: “Some day that history may be written, and its readers will blush for mankind.”²⁸⁶

As authors crafted their narratives for different audiences—whether national, émigré, or international—these memoirs also strive to engage readers rhetorically in order to prompt emotional or moral responses. They do so in three main ways: directly (in the second person), ironically, and apophatically (explaining that certain elements of their experience are impossible to depict).

The memoirists tend to use the second person at the end of sections, or at the end of their books, to call on readers for various purposes. Aliakhnovich and Lenardowicz both use the second person to predict readers’ disbelief. Aliakhnovich, for example, writes that “here, my pen pauses for a moment” because “I fear that the reader will not believe what I am about to describe—it is so monstrous.”²⁸⁷ After highlighting the insanity of what he has depicted, anticipating readers’ objections, he insists: “And yet it is a fact, and not an isolated one.”²⁸⁸

Lenardowicz, after detailing the names and crimes of more than a dozen individual guards at the camp, anticipates the same objections and speaks to readers in the second person, asking, “Do you wonder, readers, that I remember the names of those Soviet thugs so well?!”²⁸⁹

²⁸⁶ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 60.

²⁸⁷ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 68.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 31.

Lenardowicz's use of the second person sets up the next point, which emphasizes the disturbance and mental injury that these guards caused to the author: "I repeated them to myself every day at Solovki, and I still recall them every day now, because I strongly believe that the moment of just punishment will come for them."²⁹⁰ By addressing disbelief directly, these authors create a dynamic interaction with readers, inviting them to grapple with the seemingly unbelievable horrors and, in doing so, build credibility for their narratives.

Tchernavin and Qureshi also address readers in the second person, but do so in order to call for action, appealing to the moral conscience of their readers and urging them to act on behalf of those still suffering under oppressive regimes. Tchernavin, who presents his account as representative of the repressed intelligentsia in the Soviet Union, is clearly an unusual person in terms of his intelligence and self-assurance. In the author's note at the beginning of his book, Tchernavin asks readers to remember a few points:

As you read, please remember that I speak of myself only because it enables me to tell the story of others. Remember, also, that, in the Soviet Union, innocent people are still being tried for "wrecking" and that intelligent men are still being forced by torture to "confess" to crimes which they never committed.

Remember, too, that thousands of Russian men and women of education are still languishing in the filthy cells of the GPU prisons and in the cold barracks of the concentration camps, poorly clad and

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

starving, breaking with exhaustion under the hardships of inhuman slavery.²⁹¹

Tchernavin's plea is meant to resonate deeply with readers, as he highlights not only his personal suffering but also the collective agony of those still imprisoned. His call for action emphasizes the responsibility of the global community to confront such atrocities. At the end of the book, he makes the same point, but explains that his difficult experiences pale in comparison to the experiences of "the majority of educated people in the U.S.S.R." who received harsher sentences, suffered worse tortures, or were executed.²⁹² He laments that "these prisoners and their families, and the widows and fatherless children of executed 'wreckers,' still think that the world does not know what is happening to them." Tchernavin ends the book with a plea for action from "civilized" societies outside of the Soviet Union, explaining that the Russian people "cannot believe that a Christian civilization will knowingly permit such monstrous cruelties to continue."²⁹³ Qureshi also ends his account on this note, pleading with "the women of the civilized world" to bring attention to this cause.²⁹⁴

When direct language falls short, memoirists turn to apophatic descriptions to express the inexpressible, emphasizing that certain events are too horrific or incomprehensible to fully articulate. Zaitsev, for instance, refrains from depicting the full tragedy of the Solovki prisoners, focusing instead on vivid highlights of camp life. Danzas similarly insists that even if documents later emerge to confirm her accounts, those who have not endured such horrors will struggle to

²⁹¹ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 1.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 357–258.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁴ Qureshi, "Piat' let," 147–148.

believe them. Unable to fully convey their suffering, memoirists such as Zaitsev and Cederholm, employ, instead, restrained description, leaving the unspeakable horrors to the imagination of the reader and thus underscoring the inadequacy of language to represent the extreme conditions of imprisonment.

Grube takes this approach further, suggesting that any attempt to describe life in the camps would resemble the ravings of a delirious mind, so far removed are these experiences from the concepts of culture and freedom. This failure of language becomes a recurring theme, one explored by later Gulag writers such as Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn.

6. Author-narrator and author-protagonist

The most important aspect of narrative voice in these memoirs is the differentiation of the author-narrator and the author-protagonist. Hardly a simple divide, both sides of the memoirist change and interact dynamically over the course of a book-length account—the protagonist responding to his experiences and the narrator employing different compositional strategies.

In his 1980 book *The Forms of Autobiography*, William Spengemann outlines three autobiographical forms devised by Saint Augustine in his *Confessions* “from which every subsequent autobiographer would select the one most appropriate to his own situation.” These are “historical self-recollection, philosophical self-exploration, and poetic self-expression.”²⁹⁵ From Augustine, Spengemann outlines the development of the form in terms of narrative voice and the interrelated question of personal outcomes for the author-protagonist. Essentially, autobiography adapts along with the rest of literature to move “the source of the narrator’s knowledge about the protagonist’s life from somewhere outside that life to the life itself, and the

²⁹⁵ Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography*, 32.

concomitant relocation of the narrator, from a timeless ground above the protagonist's life to a point further along in the time of that life." Augustine's narrator, writing from a position of conversion, writes from the position of ultimate truth while his protagonist's actions "are treated with unremitting contempt." Dante expands the narrative consciousness by allowing his protagonist to "[enact] the truth that his narrator understands, and these actions lead directly to the narrator's understanding."²⁹⁶

Each of the memoirists treats this problem in his or her own way, but in general the protagonist and narrator are separated by some degree of distance, often an ironic one. Aside from obvious instances of dramatic irony (particularly during arrest and interrogation), the ironic distance between the two sides of the memoirist fulfills the function of irony as outlined by Hayden White in his essay "Interpretation in History": "irony sanctions the ambiguous, and possibly even the ambivalent, statement. It is a kind of metaphor, but one that surreptitiously signals a denial of the assertion of similitude or difference contained in the literal sense of the proposition, at least sets a crucial qualification on it."²⁹⁷ Irony blunts the insanity and incomprehensibility of the memoirists' experiences, especially in the context of the utterly new and disorienting socialist state.

The memoirists discussed here adopt a variety of narrative personae to reflect their unique perspectives and experiences. As noted above, many memoirs resort to a limited and authoritative voice, with authors like Malsagoff, Ilgin, Zaitsev, and Vladimir Tchernavin presenting their accounts with a clear sense of purpose, often aiming to document and expose the harsh realities of the camp. Others seem almost reluctant to describe their experiences—Julia

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 35.

²⁹⁷ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 73.

Danzas is a key example, and her disgust for the conditions at the camp, particularly being forced to socialize with a debauched criminal milieu, drenches the pages of her short memoir.

Yuri Bezsonov's *My Twenty-Six Prisons and My Escape from Solovetski* (1929) is a more complex narrativization of the author's life compared to Malsagoff's SLON-centered carceral narrative. The narrative voice that describes former-Bezsonov is sober and reflective; narrator-Bezsonov takes a religious and philosophical approach to his own experiences, clearly informed by both his renewed religious faith and his familiarity with the works of Fedor Dostoevsky.

Other memoirs feature quite complex narrative personae. Aliakhnovich adopts a cynical and detached persona (most overtly in the use of a narrative mask named "Poputchik," perhaps as a coping mechanism against his own foolishness for believing that the Soviet Union would welcome and foster Belarusian nation-building. Poputchik's encounters with Soviet life, particularly his naiveté and bewilderment, recall Antoni Słonimski's "Enthusiast" in his 1929 book *My Journey to Russia*. Unlike Słonimski, whose narrative personae serve as interlocutors to his observations of the Soviet landscape, Aliakhnovich separates his authorial persona almost entirely from Poputchik, presenting the narrative mask in the third person as he navigates his lonely days in Minsk, when everyone but him seems to foresee his fate, and during his GPU interrogations. Even after he drops the mask, Aliakhnovich does little to characterize himself—at times he is the blank eyewitness to history, other times its victim. In later redactions of the memoir, Aliakhnovich will add scenes from his life in Vilnius that shed more light on his personality and family life. His philosophical and political influences demonstrably shift over the different redactions and translations of the text, reflecting the changing atmosphere in his milieu of Belarusian nation-builders and in his native Vilnius, where he was assassinated (supposedly by Soviet agents) in 1944.

Like Aliakhnovich, Tatyana Tchernavin grapples with internal contradictions and moral dilemmas of the changing society in which she lives. Unlike Aliakhnovich, who includes one brief farewell scene with his sons in the Belarusian edition of the memoir, Tchernavin is totally focused on her son's welfare throughout the memoir. Andrey features prominently in both of his parents' books, with both parents lamenting his early maturity due to the difficulties of his life (at one point, the twelve-year-old has two parents in prison and spends his time searching for food and supplies to send to them).

7. Authors describe themselves

Memoirists who reflect on their role as writers tend to emphasize their dedication to the truth over literary style. Malsagoff emphasizes his moral imperative to write his account of SLON and insists that he makes “no claim either to literary qualities and beauty of style or to exhaustive completeness.” He emphasizes the truth over style, hoping that his “testimony” will be “recognised as worthy of consideration, and [...] accepted as a part of that gigantic indictment which the Russian nation, the whole of humanity, history and God will without doubt bring forward against the Soviet power[...].”²⁹⁸ Bezsonov also emphasizes the truth over literary technique, insisting that he is going to tell “all that I saw, felt, lived through; just exactly as it all happened: all the truth and only the truth.”²⁹⁹

Memoirists generally downplay their writing abilities and try to lower readers' expectations about what can reasonably be conveyed about such a uniquely horrible experience. The limited capacity to keep records of the experience also affects their ability to describe the

²⁹⁸ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 8.

²⁹⁹ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 10–11.

experience. Qureshi laments that his notes were taken from him as he left the island, apologizing for the lack of detail in his account. He insists that the account he is able to produce at the point of writing is much poorer for the loss of these notes: “Now I am forced to write solely from memory, and many details that should have been made public have vanished from my mind and are forgotten forever.”³⁰⁰

Once abroad, some authors do describe the writing process as productive or even cathartic. Tatyana Tchernavin, who is immediately hospitalized when she arrives in Finland, explains that she wrote the book there over a few months while she convalesced: “[...] I wrote most of this book, feeling as completely at peace with the world as though I had been born again.”³⁰¹

While these authors reveal aspects of their identities through their reflections on writing, their memoirs also vary in the degree to which they provide biographical context, offering readers different levels of insight into their lives. Some memoirs, such as that of Mieczysław Lenardowicz, include practically no biographical details about their authors. In a 2022 article, Polish literary scholar Arkadiusz Morawiec outlined the book in its three editions (two in Polish, 1930, then a Ukrainian version in 1931) and discussed the author’s identity, which is still unconfirmed and, unusually enough for Polish “camp literature,” likely to be pseudonymous (Morawiec leaves the question open).³⁰²

Other memoirs contain some biographical context, giving readers insight into the authors’ backgrounds and how they came to be in the camps. This category includes the works of Anton Klinger, Sozerko Malsagoff, Alexander Grube, Ivan Zaitsev, Julia Danzas, and Fr. Wincenty

³⁰⁰ Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 137.

³⁰¹ Tatyana Tchernavin, *Escape*, 318.

³⁰² Morawiec, “Pamiętnik z Solówek Mieczysława Lenardowicza,” 230–232.

Ilgin. Lastly, there are memoirs that offer extensive biographical information, allowing for a deeper understanding of the authors' lives before, during, and after their time in the camps. This group includes the memoirs of Yuri Bezsonov, Said Qureshi, Boris Cederholm, Vladimir Tchernavin, Tatyana Tchernavin, and Frantishak Aliakhnovich.

Non-Russian memoirs, such as Said Qureshi's serialized account in *Poslednie novosti* and Frantsishak Aliakhnovich's *In the Claws of the GPU*, emphasize the authors' foreign identities and the unique challenges they faced as outsiders in a Soviet labor camp. These works often incorporate elements of cultural and religious reflection, as seen in Qureshi's frequent references to his Muslim faith and concept of kismet.

Writing for a Polish audience, Mieczysław Lenardowicz describes his longing to return to his homeland and the fear that he and his compatriots will never return: "What awaits us? Will we return from these islands of torture and death? Will we see Poland, Warsaw? Tears welled up in my eyes... My old parents appeared before my eyes, as if they were alive."³⁰³

Cederholm, although a Finnish citizen, was a member of a Russified Swedish family that had served the Russian monarchy for generations.³⁰⁴ He went to the Soviet Union in the 1920s as a businessman, hoping to establish a trading relationship between Soviet and Finnish industries. Cederholm is both native to Russian culture and foreign to Soviet culture, although his defining characteristics are probably determined by his aristocratic origins as much as any other aspect of his life.

Belarusian playwright Frantsishak Aliakhnovich also emphasizes his cultural background, expressing longing for his homeland through evocative descriptions of the natural

³⁰³ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 18.

³⁰⁴ S. V. Volkov, "Vospominaniia B. L. Sederkholma," in *VSU* vol. 1, 662–664.

beauty and cultural heritage he misses. His memoirs, translated into multiple languages, highlight the emotional and psychological impact of imprisonment, contrasting sharply with the more stoic and factual recounting by others.

Authors also reflect their personalities in a variety of ways across the text. Yuri Bezsonov, for example, focuses his memoir on his internal struggles to renew his Christian faith against the background of brutal prison conditions and the degeneracy of his adopted criminal milieu. The author presents himself as a rakish, Esenin-like bohemian in the beginning of the story, given to drinking and dabbling in treasure-hunting while living on the run in NEP-era Leningrad. Like Augustine's pear episode, Bezsonov's scandalous behavior heightens the contrast before and after his religious conversion.

Qureshi's sensitive and aristocratic nature is evident in his close friendships and the profound suffering he endures when his friends are harmed. His resilience, attributed to his upbringing and endurance, stands in stark contrast to the often brutal and dehumanizing conditions he describes. Lenardowicz also seems to make friends wherever he goes, although his account has almost no information about its author's background.³⁰⁵ Zaitsev, on the other hand, mentions his status at the camp more than once, explaining that he was often targeted for his notoriety as a White General turned Red Army officer turned prisoner. When he describes himself at the beginning of the book, his military status is the first information he gives.³⁰⁶ In addition to his military bearing, Zaitsev employs a Russian Orthodox ethic that gives the book a

³⁰⁵ Morawiec examines the limited information available about Lenardowicz in his article "‘Pamiętnik z Sołówek’ Mieczysława Lenardowicza." Lenardowicz's second book conveys much more about the author himself, perhaps because he is much freer in exile and able to make choices that demonstrate his priorities and weaknesses (as when he helps a friend escape his domineering Communist wife by sleeping with her).

³⁰⁶ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 5.

simple and effective moral framework. His sensitivity to religious offense is one of the major throughlines of his memoir.

More generally, memoirists frequently mention their sensitivity to the conditions at the camp. This is evident in the works of Ilgin and Alakhnovich, who both deplore the frequent swearing (*mat*), describing its use as a typically Russian habit. Julia Danza similarly deplores the use of swearing among female prisoners, albeit from a class position rather than a national one. Her narrative is marked by a disdain for both the authorities and her fellow prisoners, particularly those from lower social classes such as prostitutes and drunks.

Several of the memoirists are forced to characterize themselves through suffering, whether in terms of punishments meted out to them, or health issues they endured at the camp. Zaitsev and Grube describe their horror at what they experience in solitary confinement, for example, but still tend to downplay their own physical hardships in favor of describing general conditions, the difficulties suffered by everyone, and their effects on other prisoners. Health issues are a bit more widely depicted, especially in terms of the lasting effect of conditions experienced or acquired at SLON. Tchernavin, Danzas, and Ilgin describe health problems that continue to plague them after they are freed from the camp.

2. The SLON Metanarrative

This chapter presents, first, a narrative schema for analyzing early memoirs of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp and, second, the poetics of the camp developed in these memoirs. The schema, developed from the memoirs themselves, is essentially the metaplot of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp based around a narrative outline and associated elements of plotment found commonly across the corpus. The schema proposed in the first half of the chapter is an analytical tool that highlights the methods that authors use to introduce, describe, and contextualize SLON and the Solovetsky Islands. This analysis is, I believe, a necessary preliminary for the second part of the chapter, which deals with the imagery of the camps as presented in the memoirs.

This chapter deals primarily with the composition of the memoirs. After problematizing the representation of reality in Gulag memoirs, I outline the SLON metanarrative from arrest to release from the camp. The final section of this chapter presents aspects of carceral life (daily routines, discrete events, and groups of people) that memoirists address variously, with a discussion of how authors represent these aspects of camp life in their work.

Here I will note three integral elements of the composition of each memoir: First, the memoirist him- or herself, as outlined above. This includes authors' national, cultural and class origins; age; education; literary skill; experiences before, during and after imprisonment; and self-described reasons for publishing a memoir. Second, the practices of the Soviet carceral system, including major changes in that system in the two decades covered by these memoirs. This factor, the actual practices of the Soviet repressive mechanism, is the *fabula* of every memoir addressed here. Because each memoirist is different, and because the Soviet carceral

system changed so quickly over a short time, the reality of what prisoners experienced at SLON is different for each author and changed quickly in the intense conditions at the labor camp.

Added to that is the fundamental opposition of life-writing—an expression of the self—to the dehumanizing and de-individualizing Soviet carceral system, which traded in prisoners' lives to supply the needs of the Bolshevik regime and its expanding bureaucratic apparatus.

The third compositional element is made up of the conventions of memoir and life-writing more broadly. Some authors are more explicit or self-conscious than others of their use of these techniques; although written and published quickly, some of the earliest accounts discussed here are sophisticated works of literature that employ complex narrative techniques, while other memoirs are designed for brevity and use a simple chronological structure to convey critical information about the camp. As the twentieth century progressed, the distance between experience and composition, always a complicated factor in memoir, continued to increase. In this early period, however, the numerous and varied accounts of the camp are invaluable for tracing the expansion of imagery of the camp in the twentieth century.

The interrelation of the three elements listed above means that a simple question like “how do SLON memoirs depict the Solovetsky islands?” has a complicated answer. Each author contrasts his perception of the place with his expectations, and moreover depicts his perception of the place in writing for readers. The physical characteristics of the place are given personal and historical weight in each author's account. One concept, for example the islands' natural features and climate, turns out to be a system of related images, symbols, stories, and rhetorical methods of connecting these images; this fusion of form and content is poetics. As Vladimir Propp articulated in his discussion of folklore, poetics is the key to articulating a genre: “<In the broad sense of the word, a genre is a group [series or collection] of monuments [artifacts] united

by a common [the totality of its] poetic system.> [...] Poetics refers to devices used for expressing artistic goals and reflecting the emotional and intellectual world; it is form in connection with a specific content (the plot and the message that goes with it).”¹ The early memoirs discussed here are the basis of a genre of “SLON book” that combines memoir, narrative, and essay. In this first period the author’s chronology of time at the camp and urgent warnings to international readers are the most prominent, but over time the essayistic and analytical elements become quite prominent in eyewitness accounts.

Life-writing is problematized throughout this chapter based on two fundamental guides: first, that textual depictions of reality are always inadequate to some degree and, as Hayden White has noted, each attempt at a mimetic text invites response and correction from readers “with more or less authority”²; second, that the specific experience discussed in this dissertation—being sent to the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp as a prisoner—is impossible to convey, going beyond the limits of mimesis and toward the problematics of Gulag literature developed by Varlam Shalamov in his essays and stories.³ The memoirists discussed here acknowledge the difficulties of translating their experiences to reading audiences, but attempt to inform audiences, by combining the subjective and objective experience of incarceration, expressed using the conventions of life-writing to allow readers to understand the incomprehensible. White describes understanding as “a process of rendering the unfamiliar [...]

¹ Vladimir Propp, *The Theory and History of Folklore*, translated by Ariadna Y. Martin and Richard P. Martin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 40.

² White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 3.

³ See Svetlana Boym, “‘Banality of Evil,’ Mimicry, and the Soviet Subject: Varlam Shalamov and Hannah Arendt,” *Slavic Review* 67, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 344: “Shalamov, like Primo Levi and Hannah Arendt, speaks repeatedly about ‘changed scales’ for understanding the camp experience that apply to all human emotions and relationships—friendship, love, decency, freedom—and require new modes of understanding.”

familiar” via “the exploitation of the principal modalities of figuration,” i.e., “metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony.”⁴ To further this point, I highlight the figurative language employed in each element of the SLON metanarrative at the conclusion of each section.

In his dissertation, Fr. Vyacheslav Umniagin outlines a “similar motive structure” across accounts of the camp, consisting of the circumstances of arrest, the investigation of their case (primarily jailhouse interrogations), etap (transit to camp), arrival in places of imprisonment, the end of imprisonment, and the “first and subsequent steps in freedom.”⁵ Accepting Umniagin’s observation, I have used the same basic structure to discuss these accounts throughout this dissertation insofar as it mostly follows the author’s life story in chronological order, highlighting the sequence of events that took them into and out of the Soviet penal system. However, Umniagin’s basic outline ignores the elements of camp life that memoirists address outside of simple chronology, which I categorize as “Daily Life at SLON.”

The camp memoir consists of three sections, recalling the simple and effective plot structure of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from a Dead House*. In this model, two sections of chronological narratives (arrest through arrival at the camp and leaving camp) sandwich a middle section that incorporates a wider range of compositional strategies, i.e., the varied chronotopes of daily life under a prison regime: imposed routine (roll call, work detail, inadequate rations), boredom, and anticipation (whether anticipation for leaving the camp or anticipation of the

⁴ White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 5.

⁵ Umniagin, *Obraz Solovkov v russkoj literature XX veka*, 6. He continues: “Воспоминания, написанные спустя годы после освобождения, как правило, представляют собой развернутую автобиографию, гораздо более детализированы, знакомят читателя со многими подробностями предметного и духовного мира Соловецкого лагеря и погружают в его разноплановый исторический и культурный контекст.”

frequent but unpredictable violence from both camp guards and the “criminal element”). The composition of these passages moves from long anecdotes about specific events to the quick passage of many years, and often linger on profiles of fellow prisoners or stories related by them.

The flexibility of this means of composition reflects the reality of memory; the experiences that make up Umniagin’s “motive structure” (arrest, interrogation, sentencing, and *etap*) were burned brightly into memoirists’ minds, but the day-to-day life of the camp, monotonous by design, tended to blur into larger categories marked by associated anecdotes. As Aliakhnovich explains: “The years of hard labor are so similar to each other, time flows so monotonously that the chronology of events does not stick in memory; only strong impressions remain—unfaded, yet not closely linked in time.”⁶ From a practical standpoint, conveying years spent in a labor camp to readers requires a different compositional strategy than walking readers through the chronological process that takes them from arrest to the camp. Each memoirist develops a unique way of conveying information about the camps in these extra-chronological sections of their accounts. Throughout, the writer meditates on themes of human nature, government and authority, and imprisonment, often speaking directly to readers about the urgency of sharing information about the camp or the impossibility of conveying their experiences there.

The camp life section can be structured variously. Aliakhnovich, for example, tends to hop from topic to topic associatively—an anecdote begets a feeling, which begets a related anecdote or observation. Zaitsev, on the other hand, describes the Soviet carceral system more generally for the first few chapters of his book, then follows his own timeline from transit to arrival at SLON, with the second part of the book composed of a series of long topical essays

⁶ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 112.

that are typically centered on the author's own experiences, but not exclusively.⁷ A frequent strategy, is the use of topical groupings like "Women at the Camp," "Logging Work," "Camp Theatre," etc., which allow authors to organize these more diffuse experiences, but these topics are not typically confined to sections titled under that name. For example, four memoirists have chapters dedicated to women prisoners, but also append information about women's separate treatment to descriptions of male prisoners' experiences throughout their books.

A. Arrest, Interrogation, Prison, and Sentencing

1. Introduction

This section is intended to summarize elements of the SLON metanarrative that bring the author into the carceral system, each one a step on the way to his or her inevitable arrival to the Solovetsky Islands. Moments in time like arrest, sentencing, and arrival at SLON tend to serve as narrative turning points, while other elements of the narrative (here interrogation, transport by stages [*etap*], and life in prison) can be presented chronologically, thematically, anecdotally, or as repeated sequences. In this section, arrest and sentencing are two such narrative turning points, while prison and interrogation tend to blur together in between.

2. Arrest

The moment of arrest is key in carceral narratives.⁸ Whatever is foreshadowed in the first pages of the memoir is borne out during the arrest sequence. The tensions that built up prior to

⁷ Zaitsev's essayistic format is similar to the one later employed by Boris Shiriaev in *The Undying Light* (1954).

⁸ For example, Carafano identifies an "arrest-to-captivity model of incarceration memoirs" that describes "state-directed captivity" in his 2016 MA thesis "Incarceration Memoirs and the Captivity Genre" (University of Denver), 18.

arrest are either relieved or displaced onto the next set of fears and apprehensions. Depictions of arrest tends to entail strong tonal shifts, vivid imagery, figurative language to convey the novel and incomprehensible to readers, and dramatic techniques such as dialogue, detailed descriptions of settings, and even depictions of gestures akin to stage directions.

No matter how inevitable the arrest may seem to be, arrest by Cheka officials is the mechanism that brings the author into the carceral system, where they exchange free life for the circumscribed existence of incarceration. Arrest is the moment when the individual is brought into the carceral system against his will and loses his freedom, an extreme shift that Cederholm highlights with a metaphor: “I was locked up in a prison cell for the first time in my life, and I felt that all that had gone before had been but a prelude to my sufferings.”⁹ Arrest is not only a temporal threshold but also a spatial one, marking a shift from open, unpredictable environments to confined, controlled spaces where the memoirist’s loss of agency becomes palpable. These spatial dynamics add texture to the narrative, rooting abstract fears in tangible settings.

Some memoirists describe being followed in the street prior to arrest by anonymous agents, and some receive an official summons to meet with an investigator several times before their arrest. The threat of investigation then localizes at the memoirist’s apartment or in another enclosed space—Aliakhnovich is trapped in a train car, for example, and Qureshi is cajoled into joining the GPU as a collaborator in a cab. Memoirists describe in detail the apartments, GPU offices, and train cars where they are cornered and arrested. The Tchernavins list each belonging in their small apartment as the GPU agents riffle through them. Aliakhnovich orients readers precisely in the train car where he sits, trapped by three Chekists and their trained attack dog.

⁹ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 93.

Even Julia Danzas mentions her papers and other belongings in her brief account of being seized at her apartment.

Vladimir Tchernavin's arrest in winter 1930 and the search of the couple's small apartment is one of the few moments that overlap in his and his wife's accounts. Tatyana describes the process of waiting for inevitable disaster: "A catastrophe always comes suddenly, however long one may have been expecting it. We had endured a month of agony at nights, listening to every sound, and it happened almost in the daytime, as we came home from our work."¹⁰ The Tchernavins, having waited for the arrest for months, both relate a sense of relief when the Chekists finally arrive at their door.

When Tatyana is arrested a few months later, she presents the experience in a detached style where her emotional responses to arrest and interrogation are subordinated to practical considerations (particularly regarding her son's welfare) and to her broader assessment and quick adaptation to her circumstances, no matter how outlandish. The initial expectation of her husband's arrest took precedence in her narrative, and in comparison was the more novel and memorable experience of arrest.

Some memoirists, like Malsagoff, instead take themselves to jail. Following a 1922 amnesty extended to "all opponents of the Soviet Power," Malsagoff turned himself in: "On April, 1923, I presented myself at the Tcheka offices at Batoum."¹¹ Malsagoff immediately regrets his credulousness when he is interrogated and arrested on the spot. This fatal error—the reason for his imprisonment—haunts the rest of Malsagoff's account, and is the source of regret and bitter irony for the author.

¹⁰ Tatyana Tchernavin, *Escape*, 58.

¹¹ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 19.

Malsagoff portrays his act as completely voluntary and erroneous, but other memoirists describe being drawn inevitably into the “clutches” of the GPU. Cederholm and Ilgin, aware that they are under surveillance but not sure when they will be arrested, are summoned to interviews at the GPU offices which they voluntarily attend, only to be arrested. Memoirists emphasize their credulousness in these sequences, like innocent flies tricked into spiders’ webs. This adds to their portrayal as innocent victims; aside from the most cynical authors (Bezsonov and Malsagoff) most of the memoirists believe that the GPU will find them innocent of any conspiracy before their arrest. Each eventually loses hope that his innocence will be discovered, although this occurs for different memoirists at different turning points in their narratives, whether at the point of arrest or sentencing, or in interrogation or prison.

Arrival at the GPU jail represents memoirists’ final transformation from free to carceral space, and memoirists depict this transformation via the immediate intensification of their unequal relationships with GPU agents. Lenardowicz and Aliakhnovich both show benign and obsequious GPU agents transforming in an instant into malicious and threatening jailers once they cross the threshold of the jail. The malevolence of these agents will intensify during memoirists’ depiction of interrogation (below).

Although mentions of SLON and the threat of the Solovetsky Islands sometimes appear in memoirists’ lives leading up to their arrest, the moment of arrest does not typically include threats about where a detainee will be sent if convicted of whatever crime they are accused of. The abstracted fear of being exiled to SLON tends to appear as a direct threat during interrogation or as a point of discussion among prisoners waiting for their sentences in jail.

3. Interrogation

Depictions of arrest, search of belongings, and interrogation depend on the author's experiences and compositional strategy. Although the experience of being in prison for the first time and the process of interrogation are usually presented in tandem by memoirists, here and in the next section I have separated them for individual examination, beginning with interrogation.

Some of the authors meet with an interrogator once or twice before sentencing, while others are subjected to months of grueling interrogations with a series of GPU agents assigned to develop a case against them or coerce them into cooperating with the state. The individual circumstances and timing of these interrogations, tightly connected to the ever-changing procedures of the Soviet security apparatus, meant that each memoirist had a very different experience of this process and each wrote about it in his own way. As such, this section is organized by author.

However, many similarities can be identified among accounts, including: identifying one or two interrogators, often by name, and depicting an ongoing adversarial relationship with this interrogator; emphasizing the author's personal fortitude and refusal to falsely confess; mentioning torture he or she has experienced without going into detail; and describing threats of death and false or mock execution in greater detail. In some cases, authors describe a moment of total disillusionment regarding the Soviet regime during their arrest, but the process of interrogation is equally fertile ground for this transformation.

Perhaps the most interesting similarity across accounts is that authors never admit to confessing to the crimes they are accused of, even under the most intense interrogations. In the Introduction, I briefly addressed credibility as a factor in my analysis of these books and generally concluded that memoirists' credibility is subordinated here to the literary features of

each text. However, in relation to interrogation, the uniform refusal of authors to confess to any weakness under interrogation stands out as a formal feature or even requisite of a common narrative pose that such memoirs support or perhaps even demand. More laconic memoirists like Julia Danzas give short descriptions of fruitless interrogations, while more verbose memoirists build two threads: the interrogations themselves and, back in the cells, the free-flowing debates among prisoners about whether to confess. Many of the memoirists contrast themselves, implicitly and explicitly, to cautionary tales of fellow prisoners who confessed and were quickly shot, treated ignominiously by fellow prisoners, or went insane due to their weakness in this and other regards. This contrastive framing draws sympathy for anecdotal cases while distinguishing the memoirist him- or herself as a uniquely trustworthy and integrous individual. Perhaps this framing is successful for establishing a memoirist's credibility on an individual basis, but in the aggregate the uniformity of memoirists' intransigence elicits some doubt.

Another of the central problems of this section, and the related descriptions of prison conditions, is the near-universal claim that these experiences are impossible to fully communicate to readers. While authors insist on the incommunicability of their experience, they still attempt to communicate it to readers. For example, Malsagoff hints at the "moral and physical sufferings" he endured between his detention and interrogation but explicitly declines to provide any detail about this period, instead drawing a general picture apophatically: "I will not describe in detail my moral and physical sufferings, the blows, the insults, the attempts to extract information from me by provocateur methods, which I endured while in the custody of the Batoum Tcheka."¹² Like Malsagoff, Qureshi does not detail his time in holding, but he additionally claims that this experience was indescribable: "No matter how vividly I describe the

¹² Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 20–21.

horrors of that time, it will never be enough: the torment and suffering I endured can only be understood by someone who has lived through it themselves.”¹³ Almost every memoirist makes this claim to some degree or another, although more pragmatic authors emphasize the physical experience and more introspective authors emphasize the emotional experience of spending time in Soviet prisons and labor camps. This has a similar effect as the refusal to confess—affirming the author’s unquestionable authority to address this subject matter.

Ivan Zaitsev

Zaitsev’s discussion of interrogation practices is more informational than personal and retains an emphasis on describing the GPU and its function. Zaitsev explains the GPU’s internal processes and incentives rather than describing himself as a bewildered victim of this process, and relates secondhand summaries of interrogation practices rather than recounting his own experience. In fact, his emphasis is on the other side of the process; he tracks the fate of the confessions and case files through the GPU tribunals, repeatedly insisting that he learned this information from former GPU investigators.¹⁴

Julia Danzas

As with her arrest, Danzas checks off this critical plot point in brief. On page 2 of her book, Danzas claims that the only question she was asked during interrogation was “Where had [she] hidden the letters written [her] by the Pope?”¹⁵ A few pages later, Danzas does recount her interrogation in more detail: “After a few questions regarding my past, my parentage, the official

¹³ Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 92.

¹⁴ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 29.

¹⁵ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 2.

said I was too learned to believe in God, declaring that my devotion to the Church could only be due to political reasons. I answered that people far more learned than myself had believed and did believe in God.” Danzas and her unnamed interrogator continue in this vein, debating the existence of God under these unusual circumstances. Danzas places herself in control of the conversation as it ends: after the interrogator “concluded by saying [she] was a strong polemicist and that he was anxious to continue the discussion some other day,” Danzas ask him “what crime was imputed to [her], since no Soviet law forbade belief in God and loyalty to the Church.”¹⁶ The interrogator gives a noncommittal answer (“We’ll talk that over another time,”) and sends her back to the cell. Danzas seems to relish the exchange, concluding: “This was the only interrogation I was ever subjected to; no other questions were asked and it was even considered useless to formulate any accusation against me. This interview was the only one to break the monotony of life in the cell of the ‘interior prison.’”¹⁷

Alexander Grube

Grube’s narrative is the most scattershot of any addressed here. He mimetically recounts in remembered detail the conversation with Vladivostok border guards regarding his attempt to stay in the Soviet Union but conveys in a few diegetic paragraphs his arrest, sentence, and *etap*: “After the GPU announced our sentence we were sent to prison and then transferred through a series of transit prisons, eventually reaching Moscow.”¹⁸ Then, in a section titled “Playing the Piano,” Grube recounts the beatings he endured from Chekists while still in Vladivostok. The

¹⁶ Ibid., 5. For clarity, I replaced the translation of the original French “polémiste” with a contemporary English word; the 1935 English translation has “controversialist.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Grube, “Rasskaz,” 197.

beatings serve as a topical rather than chronological segue to his time at Solovki: “This is done ‘unofficially,’ as beating prisoners is officially prohibited. I learned how this prohibition is enforced once I arrived at Solovki.”¹⁹ This transports readers directly to his time on the islands.

Sozerko Malsagoff

During his interrogation, Malsagoff is asked to recount his biography and list ten accomplices (noting the specificity of the number with his characteristic irony.). Refusing to name accomplices or admit any guilt, Malsagoff is threatened with a revolver and then taken to the execution yard, where he witnesses three executions and is again threatened with death. Malsagoff recounts his executioners’ demand for him to confess: “I was silent. For some reason they did not kill me. Probably my life was still useful to them in some way.”²⁰ After this, Malsagoff is transferred to Tblisi, beginning his transport in stages [*etap*].

Yuri Bezsonov

Bezsonov’s autobiographical composition and knack for suspense gives his interrogation sequence a unique importance in his book. While in jail, he renews his Christian faith in a stirring scene and is immediately taken to an interrogator. During interrogation, he presents himself as outwitting the OGPU agent by revealing his true identity: “If I had refused to tell him my real name he could [...] have got up an accusation of espionage against me. [...] I would be shot and his future career assured, for having discovered a dangerous spy. As it was, he had lost

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 22.

this time.”²¹ In Bezsonov’s telling, his resolve to serve God clarifies his decision-making in this and other crucial moments.

Bezsonov names his interrogator (Lange) and describes three meetings with him: the first experience is a polite exchange, and Bezsonov feels oddly elated afterwards; then he spends six weeks in solitary confinement with little food (he recognizes this as an attempt to weaken him morally and physically). At the second meeting, Lange shows Bezsonov two options for his sentence, giving him a semblance of choice. Bezsonov refuses to cooperate. At the third meeting, Bezsonov is threatened with execution but still refuses to cooperate or sign anything. Bezsonov sums up the experiences with his interrogator with characteristic self-valorization and a reference to his most-cited text, Dostoevsky’s *House of the Dead*: “Lange thought that, if I were kept long enough, I should end by saying all they wanted. Dostoyevsky calls prison a school of patience. Lange had no idea that I had had a respite and company and decent food for some time.”²²

In this sequence, Bezsonov’s confession narrative is at odds with his self-characterization as a witty rogue. Immediately after his moment of conversion, rather than throwing himself to the lions by confessing to crimes that he admits to in the book, Bezsonov shows himself outsmarting his hapless interrogator. Bezsonov does not consider the interrogator’s motives or tactics during the discussion, such as the possibility that the interrogator was playing into his ego. The ego-narrative and confessional narrative clash rather noticeably at this dramatic moment in Bezsonov’s account.

²¹ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 173.

²² *Ibid.*, 192–193.

Aliakhnovich discusses the different cells he is moved through in the first weeks of his time in jail, then describes his first interrogation without any detail about his interrogator, only a discussion of the article that he is charged under and the potential punishment for that charge (death). The discussion is akin to Bezsonov's in the sense that Aliakhnovich acknowledges that the Soviets have standing to accuse him of counterrevolution, leading to a conversation with his interrogator about the specifics of the charge. Like Danzas and her interrogator, Aliakhnovich debates the possibility of truly changing one's political orientation. He admits to belonging to "associations that were hostile toward the Soviets, although I was never politically involved" in the past but affirms that he is now a "staunch supporter of the Soviet order."²³ His interrogator responds "with an ironic smile":

— And don't old sins need to be atoned for?

— But I received a Soviet visa before leaving! So you agreed to my arrival, which means you acknowledged that you don't consider me your enemy!

Instead of a reply, I saw the same ironic smile on the lips of the Chekist interrogating me.²⁴

At this moment Aliakhnovich finally, bitterly realizes that the entire situation had been a trap: "All of this was done with the aim of ultimately arresting me and... What they would do with me next, I did not know."²⁵ Interrogation scenes, especially written in dialogue, lend themselves to dramatic tension even for unskilled writers. Aliakhnovich, a career playwright, is

²³ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 19.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 20.

even more effective than, for example, Cederholm and Bezsonov in drawing a sympathetic portrait of himself despite the obvious problems with his story—he admits to affiliation with anti-Bolshevik groups in Vilnius, and with accepting Soviet citizenship in the hopes of greater profit—but in scenes like this interrogation and other points leading up to his arrest, Aliakhnovich draws himself as a haplessly single-minded artist rather than a savvy opportunist.

Said Qureshi

After his arrest Said Qureshi, like Bezsonov, witnesses the search of his apartment and is then taken to a holding cell for an unspecified period of time. Qureshi describes how close he was to suicide at this time and writes about the vision of his mother chiding him that interrupted his attempt to strangle himself. After that, he opens his eyes and

remembered that I was a Hindu-Muslim, and our law does not allow suicide under any circumstances. My mother's love and warning compelled me to pull myself together. Her love supported me throughout, and I emerged victorious. Now, I am far from the horrors of the GPU.²⁶

This is the first passage in Qureshi's account where he invokes his faith. As in Bezsonov's narrative, Qureshi's moment of overcoming his weakness through faith is followed immediately by interrogation. Throughout his torturous interrogation, Qureshi is frank and insistent that he has done nothing wrong.

For Qureshi, interrogation is a destabilizing and extremely frustrating process, not to mention his quickly worsening health under the severe conditions in the jail. In the sequence

²⁶ Qureshi, "Piat' let," 92.

Qureshi relates, he is summoned to his first interrogation the same day as his suicide attempt. Qureshi's first interrogator ("Kling") must speak to him through a young female translator, who translates between English and Russian for Qureshi, whose Russian remains quite minimal throughout his experiences.

Qureshi's interrogator tries to tie him to the Japanese government, as Qureshi had spent years living and working in Japan. He denies any awareness of a few American and English companies but remains loyal to his friends who seem to be implicated in the conspiracy.²⁷ Qureshi is tortured for a few more hours, then sent back to his cell, then continually interrogated with little chance to sleep for the next few days. Qureshi, who refuses to admit any guilt, is then threatened with execution. Qureshi's poor understanding of Russian continues to complicate these exchanges:

The investigator took a watch out of his pocket and demanded something from me, but I didn't understand what. He explained with gestures that I should turn around and face the wall. In a fit of agitation, I snatched the watch from him, threw it to the floor, tore my shirt open and shouted: "I am a Hindu, and I am not afraid to look death in the eye. If you have the right to shoot me, then shoot, but I will not turn my back on you." At that moment, a gunshot rang out. My nerves gave out and I collapsed unconscious.²⁸

After a few days' recovery from the shock of this faux execution, Qureshi is moved to a new interrogator, Belsky, who uses a conciliatory approach and even promises Qureshi that he

²⁷ Ibid., 93.

²⁸ Ibid., 94.

will soon be released. And he is, the next day—only to be sent by novel means (Qureshi himself is quite confused about the process) across the Soviet Union as an employee of the GPU. On his way to Omsk, in the same train as Dzerzhinsky himself, another traveler posits that he is being groomed to work for the GPU’s Eastern service. Qureshi is horribly offended and confused by the prospect. When he arrives in Moscow, he is quickly rearrested and sent to Lubyanka, then a GPU holding cell, and finally to Butyrka in a “Black Crow.”²⁹

Boris Cederholm

Cederholm recounts the techniques outside of the interrogation room used to demoralize him and the other prisoners—interminable and unexplained waits between interrogations, sleep interrupted by all-night interrogations, poor food, extreme heat and cold in cells, and other poor treatment. Cederholm spends a week in a cell without any lights, which only leads him to learn the prisoners’ knocking code and make the acquaintance of his neighbors despite his apparent solitude. Cederholm acknowledges that the mental strain of his imprisonment was quite demoralizing. The question of his guilt is paramount to Cederholm, who worries that his captors have strong evidence of a crime that he had no idea he committed:

It seemed that the Tcheka, in taking the daring step of arresting me, had been impelled by some very weighty reasons. I worried myself to death, racked my brain in endeavours to solve the riddle; and I suffered unbearable moral and physical torments, to which I could see no end.³⁰

²⁹ Ibid., 86.

³⁰ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 105.

Cederholm presents his interrogations as full dialogues with his interrogator, Fomin. Cederholm also recounts in dialogue the dramatic scene when he is confronted by the man at the center of the conspiracy he is accused of participating in, his former employee Koponen. Refusing to acknowledge his guilt for participating in the conspiracy, Cederholm is returned to his cell. In Cederholm's narrative, he remains circumspect, if shocked:

Not till I had reached my cell did I realize the full horror of what had happened to me. The noose flung by the Tcheka had caught me by the neck, and it was clear that, for some reasons I could not understand, the Tcheka had taken a firm grip of me. Not for a moment was I stirred by the slightest feeling of reproach with regard to Koponen. The man's dreadful appearance told more eloquently than any words of all that he had had to go through from the moment of his arrest, and I knew from my own experience under what conditions he had been kept in prison.³¹

Cederholm is reminiscent of Aliakhnovich in this sequence; although more descriptive in his emotional vacillations, he presents himself slowly and painfully realizing that his faith in the Soviet criminal justice system has been horribly misplaced. The wide-eyed naif routine is a bit more believable for Cederholm, a jovial and slightly daffy aristocrat, than the streetwise Aliakhnovich.

³¹ Ibid., 109–110.

Tchernavin, like Cederholm, gives a detailed and lengthy account of his time in prison, including several recounted conversations between himself and his interrogators. Tchernavin presents the arrest itself as unsurprising, but like other memoirists he describes the unexpected aspects of life in jail along with detailed accounts of his interrogations. The first few interrogations are presented as recalled conversations, and Tchernavin gives a typical narrative of events (recalling Dostoevsky's framing in *House of the Dead*), moving from chronological events to anecdotes from prison life, portraits of fellow inmates as gleaned from jailhouse conversations, and broader observations about the Soviet carceral system.

Like Bezsonov, Tchernavin presents his interrogations as battles of wit with his examining officer ("Barishnikoff") that he inevitably wins. For example, he writes: "A few days later the examining officer informed me of the official accusation against me. He was evidently afraid to continue our previous conversation, fearing that it might lead to a final loss of his prestige."³² At other times, Tchernavin betrays his frustration and despair with his circumstances, although he always presents himself as an active and capable participant in his own fate. For example, Tchernavin makes a detailed plan to kill his interrogator, aware that he would be killed immediately for the attempt, successful or not. He discusses the plan with a mentor figure who convinces him to remain circumspect.

After this, Tchernavin remains in the jail for many months. Here in the chronology, he places a longer chapter titled "Novelists" that examines the conditions and psychology of those prisoners who have falsely confessed to crimes against the Soviet state. He also discusses the physical and psychological hardships of the prisons, especially lice and scurvy, as tools used

³² Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 175.

against the prisoners by the GPU. He also describes tortures that he was not subjected to but learned about from others, including the “standing test” (Tchernavin does stand for two hours, but describes others who stood for days on end and suffered severe injuries as a result) and the “conveyor” or “lice cell” used to extract money from certain prisoners (mostly Jewish merchants, craftsmen, and bankers suspected of possessing foreign currency or other valuables).

Despite the host of torturous tactics he describes, Tchernavin is only really demoralized and weakened when his wife Tatyana is arrested as a hostage to force him to confess. He still avoids confessing but describes the strain of these circumstances—his worries about his wife, now in prison, and the fate of his child—as driving him to obsessive thoughts about escape.

Tatyana Tchernavin

Because Tatyana is imprisoned in relation to her husband’s case and the interrogator has little to accuse her of, her interrogator instead insults and berates her in a “séance of intimidation.”³³ Tatyana, just as wily as her husband, treats the spectacle with contempt: “I felt disgusted, but not in the least frightened, because it was too theatrical.”³⁴ Tatyana’s circumspectness and analytical approach to her own life, at least in her post-facto writing, convey an ability to ironize her situation in the moment. The interrogator’s aggression and threats, in her telling, become fanciful antics that hardly achieve the intended effect of scaring Tatyana into a confession.

This irony is certainly dependent on the positive outcome of her time in prison. Tatyana is summoned to an exit interview with her interrogator, who reveals that Vladimir has been

³³ Tatyana Tchernavin, *Escape*, 113.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

sentenced and sent away (he lies to Tatyana about where). Because her function as a pawn in the case against Vladimir is now exhausted, Tatyana is soon released from prison without charge.

Mikhail Zakharovich Nikonov-Smorodin

Nikonov-Smorodin depicts his interrogations as brief and perfunctory. He describes a short conversation with an investigator, who merely announces that he will be sent on to another prison. Then at Butyrka, he meets with a second interrogator and quickly confesses his true identity. This takes the winds out of the interrogator's sails a bit; Nikonov-Smorodin then refuses to testify and fills out a form listing his reasons for refusal. Nikonov-Smorodin is immediately taken to an empty cell, where he resigns himself to the inevitable: "By refusing to testify, I was, in essence, sacrificing myself."³⁵ In a few sentences, he shows himself pacing his cell and thinking through his fate, exhausting himself physically and mentally: "I wish I could burst into tears like a child, but there are no tears on my face, and the pain in my soul does not cease."³⁶ He does eventually fall asleep, noting: "one can get used to anything."³⁷

Mieczysław Lenardowicz

After his arrest, Lenardowicz is immediately placed in solitary confinement for three days, then taken to his first interrogation with the same interrogator, "Peterson," who arrested him. Lenardowicz characterizes Peterson as demonic and devilish throughout their interactions. When he refuses to confess after his first interrogation, he is taken to a "wet cell," where he is stripped to his underwear and "locked in a dark cell full of water up to the knee." He sat in this

³⁵ Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 82.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

cell for three days, “shivering with cold.”³⁸ This experience is traumatic for Lenardowicz: “It is hard to describe how much I suffered during those three days. I will remember that suffering all my life.”³⁹ He is returned to Peterson, where he still refuses to confess. It becomes clear that the terrible conditions Lenardowicz is subjected to in the Minsk prison are part of the overall effort to force him to confess to spying for Poland. Peterson, “laughing devilishly,” asks how he likes “our Soviet bathtub?” Lenardowicz responds: “Your bathtubs are terrible [...] but they won’t force me to sign reports with false testimony.”⁴⁰ After refusing again to sign a false confession, Lenardowicz is sent back to solitary confinement.

Although he depicts the process in brief, Lenardowicz describes his interrogation as long and brutal: he is threatened with execution, taken to be executed, witnesses the execution of two other prisoners, a bullet (or blank) is shot in his direction, and after the operation he is released back to his cell.⁴¹ Lenardowicz presents himself responding to interrogation just as boldly as Tchernavin, Cederholm, Malsagoff, and Bezsonov, totally rejecting the claims against him and refusing to falsely confess. In his depiction, Lenardowicz matches wits with the GPU in various ways but he never gives in to the pressure to confess.

Wincenty Ilgin

Ilgin recounts that, after he is placed under arrest, he was asked to confess his guilt as an “agent of the Pope” and, when he refuses, is presented with eleven detailed charges, the first one dating back to 1919. The charges are reproduced in the memoir. Despite the overwhelming

³⁸ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 8.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 11–13.

weight of the “evidence” against him, Ilgin makes it clear that the GPU agent is more interested in pressuring him into working for the Soviet state than actually sending him to a labor camp. The agent reminds Ilgin of his poor health, of his responsibility to his family and parishioners, and tries to convince the priest to work with the GPU instead of going to almost certain death in the labor camps. Ilgin continues to refuse, wryly explaining: “I thanked him for the advice but refused the proposition.”⁴²

Ilgin is interrogated sporadically over the next few weeks, in which time his interrogators go through each of the eleven charges and Ilgin is forced to explain seemingly banal aspects of church administration to the interrogators, who interpret every response in bad faith. Ilgin explains, for example, that traveling clergy typically lodge at the local parochial residence rather than staying in hotels, disputing the GPU agents’ claim of some conspiracy related to this practice. Ilgin is surprised and frustrated by the constant attempts to manipulate him and pressure him to work for the secret police but does not give in despite his poor health and confusion.

Like other memoirists, Ilgin describes a combative but intellectually stimulating series of exchanges with his interrogators, and with fellow prisoners. As a Catholic surrounded by mostly Orthodox and Muslim prisoners, Ilgin finds himself defending the Catholic faith and even finding converts in the prison. Ilgin also describes the importance of prayer as his “one consolation and solace” in the nerve-wracking circumstances of his incarceration.⁴³

Like all the other memoirists, Ilgin refuses to confess and encounters great difficulty as a result of his insistence on his innocence in the conspiracy he is accused of. He is interrogated over several weeks and becomes quite ill as a result of the late nights, lack of sleep, and poor

⁴² Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 41.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 53–54.

food. After his sentence is handed down, Ilgin receives a visit from his only living relative, a young nephew who begs the priest to agree to work for the GPU instead of going to the camp. After an emotional scene where Ilgin once again refuses to collaborate, he is sent to SLON the next day.

Conclusion

In the interrogation phase, memoirists tend to deepen the characterization of their interrogators and explain the combined effect of the disorienting interrogation process with their jail conditions. Many of the memoirists describe their interrogation in a detached tone that highlights the absurdity of the scenario. Danzas presents herself as essentially outsmarting her interrogator and seems to relish the debate about religious faith, only regrets that she was interrogated just once. Compared to Danzas' pride, Tatyana Tchernavin responds rather soberly to the threats against her: "I felt disgusted, but not in the least frightened, because it was too theatrical." Her husband is a bit more affected by the interrogation process, especially when he learns of his wife's arrest, but his response to every problem is to find a solution, so every piece of bad news furthers his plan to escape. Other memoirists admit to feeling despair during the process, as when Said Qureshi attempts to kill himself.

Memoirists establish initial relationships with GPU agents and interrogators at this point, and often reproduce dialogues between these interrogators and themselves. In Cederholm, Lenardowicz, and Aliakhnovich's dialogues, they illustrate the deceit and malice of their interlocutors while maintaining their protagonist's naiveté. Lenardowicz also uses morally charged language ("venemously smiling," "laughing devilishly," "asked cynically," "Peterson's

voice, cackling with devilish glee, boomed above us”⁴⁴) to characterize his interrogator almost every time he appears in the story. Other authors like Danzas, Bezsonov, Ilgin , and the Tchernavins present themselves as skilled debaters whose interrogators essentially give up and concede the author’s point, usually in regards to religion.

As with prisons and, later, with conditions at SLON, memoirists insist that interrogation is essentially unrepresentable and will be unbelievable to readers who have not experienced something like it. GPU interrogators employed a variety of methods to break down each memoirist, which are represented in these accounts, along with the intense speculation about the intention of these methods that prisoners discuss among themselves and memoirists comment on after the fact. Protagonist-Aliakhnovich’s realizations about what is happening to him seem to unfold gradually, too gradually for narrator-Aliakhnovich, who shows his frustration with his earlier naiveté. Other memoirists insist on their refusal to cooperate with interrogation and maintain their unyielding moral strength during the process.

4. Jail and Prison

In the section below, I address imprisonment during interrogation and before/during *etap*. Once arrested, prisoners were moved through a complex carceral system that involved small municipal jails, regional prisons, central prisons in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, transit prisons, and other smaller places of detention along their journey. Some memoirists work to outline the administrative complexities highlighted above,⁴⁵ while others emphasize the shock of being

⁴⁴ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 7: “uśmiechając się zjadliwie”; 8: “śmiejąc się szatańsko”; 10: “zapytał cynicznie”; 13: “zagrzmiął nad nami głos, rechoczącego z szatańskiej uciechy, Petersona.”

⁴⁵ Cederholm (*In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 337), for example, highlights the distinction between municipal jails and jails and camps run by the Cheka, explaining that the “regular” jails

confined to a prison cell for the first time. These sequences bring the memoirists into the new world of prison, and they recount how the intertwined experience of imprisonment and interrogation harmed them both physically and psychologically.

Memoirists address this period variously, typically following a chronological order for their interrogations and interspersing events from jail life into that narrative. Several memoirists devote more attention to their time in prison than to their interrogations, outlining the social structure of their cells and detailing life under the constrained conditions of incarceration.

In comparison, Lenardowicz's account of his time in prison is, more than other accounts, deeply tied into the framework of his interrogations; Lenardowicz builds tension throughout his interrogation and jail sequence via the central relationship with Peterson and depicts his time in the cell as psychological preparation for the next encounter with his interrogator. Other memoirists draw a stronger contrast between their time in the cell and their time in interrogation. Memoirists continue to use dramatic techniques to depict scenes in the prison, along with vivid imagery to describe overcrowded, damp, and smelly cells. While interrogations are tense, time spent waiting for a sentence is marked by dread of the future and constant fear of sudden execution. Memoirists' socialization into the prisons is typically depicted in their physical surroundings and encounters with new groups of people. These include interrogators, prison guards, and fellow detainees, who can range from sympathetic coequals to criminals and stool pigeons.

were much better for prisoners due to regularized, albeit illicit, commerce run by prison administrators and guards: "Herein was the radical difference between this prison on the one hand and the Tcheka prisons and the Solovky on the other. There an iron discipline prevails and the staff is astonishingly well drilled. Here, in 'Reformatory No. 2', we were a regular family party. The warder traded in vodka; one could send him into the city with a note for a rouble and buy a gramme of cocaine for five roubles."⁴⁵

Guards

While interrogators are often highlighted and characterized as personal antagonists to memoirists, the guards who maintain order in the jails are rarely named and are not particularly antagonistic to the prisoners in this group of memoirs. Memoirists focus on the process of their interrogation and their socialization to prison through other prisoners, while anonymized guards carry out duties like food distribution and moving prisoners around the cell. In their most fearsome role, guards accompany prisoners to their execution, but even this duty is typically portrayed as routinized and anonymized on the guards' side. In their most positive interpretations, guards allow certain leniency with prisoners, as when Tchernavin is allowed to bring several apples into the jail. In their most negative, they represent the cruelty and ideological intransigence of the Bolshevik regime. This is clearest in accounts from obvious ideological "enemies" of the Bolsheviks like clergymen. For example, when Ilgin is processed into the jail, he is subjected to a humiliating body search. When the soldier conducting the search learns that Ilgin is the local Catholic priest, the guard increases his brutality and abuse: "He mocked, indulging in vulgar jokes interspersed with insults directed at God, the Virgin Mary, and the Saints."⁴⁶ Even in this highly personal encounter, however, Ilgin does not individualize this guard to any strong degree, instead portraying his antireligious sentiments as broader reflections of Soviet culture. In comparison, certain notorious guards at SLON tend to be described in detail.

⁴⁶ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 42.

Criminals

A critical but still relatively under-studied aspect of Gulag studies is the Gulag's place in the development of Soviet criminal culture, particularly in the first two decades of the camps' existence.⁴⁷ One difficulty of studying the criminal milieu is that many sources of information about Soviet criminals come from people like the memoirists addressed here, *déclassé* aristocracy and *chinovniki*, now enemies of the state, who were placed directly at odds with the criminal milieu by the Soviet government. Depending on their circumstances, memoirists typically encountered the criminal world for the first time in jail or right before their transport [*etap*] to exile.

The contemporary Russian word that memoirists use to describe the milieu of petty criminals is *shpana*. Like prison guards, *shpana* are mostly drawn as threatening but undifferentiated masses rather than individuals. Zaitsev, for example, describes the atmosphere of *shpana* prison quarters as “constant noise, racket, shouting, cursing, frequent fights, lewd stories, pornographic songs, and incessant crude street language.” He adds with disgust that “the administration not only does not prohibit the continuous swearing of the *shpana*, but even encourages mockery and abuse directed at members of the clergy.”⁴⁸

The situation was different in the camps, where criminals essentially run rampant—there, memoirists characterize the career criminals they encounter as bestialized and subhuman, albeit crafty: always gambling, always naked and filthy, always violent. In prison, however, memoirists tend to characterize the *shpana* as young, savvy regarding Soviet law, and relatively privileged thanks to their “ideological closeness” to the Bolsheviks.⁴⁹ Accused counterrevolutionaries and

⁴⁷ See Vincent, *Criminal Subculture*, 11–15.

⁴⁸ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 97.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

criminals were both under close watch from guards and confined in cells, in comparison to the freer conditions at the camp. In prison, the constant movement of prisoners from cell to cell made it difficult to maintain the hierarchies that facilitate criminal organizations and the crowded conditions forced all detainees to cooperate in order to maintain the basic functions of society. Tchernavin's account of his jail cell is the fullest description of such a cell, filled far past capacity—every day, the prisoner with the greatest seniority kept track of more than 120 cellmates as they took turns relieving themselves, washing, eating, and sleeping.

Aside from Bezsonov and Tchernavin, few of the memoirists discussed here approached the criminals they encountered with curiosity or empathy (understandably; prison and camp authorities allowed criminals to loot and abuse the counterrevolutionaries nearly unchecked at this time). In Malsagoff's formulation, the weak and unorganized counterrevolutionaries are constantly victimized by the *shpana* (and shown up by the well-organized political prisoners). However, in his first encounter with the criminal masses, Malsagoff presents a story of gallant military officers using intelligence and strength to protect themselves from a bestial mass of criminals:

we were met by nearly a hundred shpana with deafening yells and menacing cries. In a corner sat five men of the educated classes, including a colonel on the General Staff; the shpana had stripped them naked in one night.

Luckily there were men among us who had been through every imaginable experience. One of them drew a chalk line on the floor, dividing the room into two spheres of influence, political and criminal, and shouted to the shpana:

“If one of you crosses this line, I’ll kill him!”

He was a man of gigantic stature; the *shpana* were intimidated.

When night came, we posted sentries on the frontier of our sphere of influence. But for events taking this turn, the money and other things which our relations had managed to send us when on the way to Rostoff—by means of substantial bribes to the guards—would have been stolen from us.⁵⁰

The inclusion of this story demonstrates Malsagoff’s view of how to effectively deal with the *shpana*, a symbolic reestablishment of prior social hierarchies supported by the threat of force. The closed jail cell where this battle takes place, and the pathetic prize (the prisoners’ own belongings, most of which are stolen at the next opportunity) indicate the relatively small effect of the hard-won victory in the grand scheme of his experience, but the officers’ futile resistance clearly impressed Malsagoff. Malsagoff demonstrates no curiosity about the criminal milieu and rarely presents individual criminals as sophisticated agents, rather presenting them in faceless masses and rather easily cowed by the stature and assuredness of the White Officers. He is forthright about his own moral compromises, such as giving bribes, perhaps because the naked and thieving *shpana* demonstrate how vulnerable a prisoner is without clothes, food, and money.

In comparison, Tchernavin depicts himself as not just interacting with petty criminals in his jail cell, but learning from them and sharing his precious apples with them.⁵¹ He continues to make friends among the criminals in transit and exile. Bezsonov goes even further, joining the criminal underground after his first few arrests and becoming totally acculturated to the Saint

⁵⁰ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 35–36.

⁵¹ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 111.

Petersburg NEP-era criminal milieu, making more than one important acquaintance among the bosses (according to him). Bezsonov seems to relish his proximity to criminality and, once in prison, uses his knowledge of criminal argot to his advantage more than once.

The depiction of the criminal milieu in Soviet prisons and camps reveals a profound tension between the memoirists' own values and the chaotic, often brutal world they encountered. While many memoirists, like Malsagoff, frame their interactions with the *shpana* as battles for survival, others, such as Tchernavin and Bezsonov, offer glimpses of curiosity and even adaptation to the criminal culture. These contrasting portrayals highlight the diverse strategies employed by prisoners to navigate the treacherous social hierarchies imposed by the Gulag system, from resistance to reluctant collaboration.

Counterrevolutionaries

Memoirists demonstrate their introduction to the new world of prison through harrowing interactions with insane people and criminals, who represent the deformations brought about by prison, or, “honest” and “civilized” prisoners, who educate newly arriving memoirists as they navigate prison for the first time. In fact, memoirists typically find friends and acquaintances among their cellmates and develop new relationships with those who can empathize with them and offer explanations for what is happening, whether accurate or not. “Honest” and “civilized” prisoners can be found among prisoners of a similar education level, social class, and political viewpoint to the memoirists, always compared favorably to the criminals, disreputable women, and insane people that distress the memoirists. Russian and Ukrainian peasants are treated with a respectful distance. Danzas, for example, explains that these “victims of enforced

collectivization” were mostly “good and honest women, intercourse with whom made a restful change from our relations with the dregs of humanity.”⁵²

Moreover, they begin to interact with and draw characterizations of the new groups of people around them. When he arrives to a new prison or camp, Malsagoff lists the groups he encounters there (counterrevolutionaries, criminals, guards, Chekists) to emphasize the diversity of the social structure. Memoirists meet people who are like them (such as Lenardowicz, who always befriends other Poles in his cell) and people who are quite different (like Aliakhnovich’s ironic recounting of an incomprehensible conversation between an old Orthodox Jew and a prison guard). Grube, initially imprisoned with a group of Japanese fishermen, conveys the isolation of his position outside this group and their mutual inability to comprehend their situation. Qureshi’s outsider status drives his experience and his self-characterization almost uniformly throughout his time in prison and later at the camp—although his Russian remains poor, he seeks out linguistically compatible prisoners to speak with in English, Japanese, and Hindi when possible.

However complex their journey, memoirists tend to focus on one or two significant jails or even cells where they spent time or had significant experiences. Understandably, memoirists tend to emphasize their first cell, first meetings with fellow prisoners, and first night in captivity. For example, when Tchernavin meets her first cellmate, a suicidal woman who has been in jail for over a year, she writes: “As I listened to her I felt that she was introducing me to a new, special world, created by the prison, and our conversation no longer seemed mad to me.”⁵³ Tchernavin is perversely reassured by her conversations with the odd woman, who explains what

⁵² Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 51.

⁵³ Tatyana Tchernavin, *Escape*, 103–104.

it feels like to starve yourself in a hunger strike and details her suicide attempts. In contrast, Ilgin demonstrates the quick deterioration of his own physical and mental wellbeing. At first, he describes bearing himself up well, placing his trust in the Lord, but the cramped conditions take their toll on his body and he is unable to rest. On his first night at the Kharkiv prison, Ilgin is held with a psychotic who screams into the night, threatening to kill his cellmates and preventing them from sleeping.⁵⁴ Ilgin, who frequently describes his poor health and intense pain, suffers greatly from the crazed man's violent threats, and from the lack of sleep.⁵⁵ Writing years later, Ilgin proposes that this lunatic might have been a plant, feigning madness to prevent the prisoners from sleeping. Almost as soon as the man is removed from the cell, the exhausted Ilgin is taken for his first interrogation.⁵⁶

In general, though, Ilgin meets friendly people in his cells. Throughout his account, Ilgin is aware that he has more resources than many of his fellow prisoners thanks to the support of his parishioners, and he generously shares with those in need. He describes, for example, sharing the various gifts from his parishioners, including a holiday meal, with other prisoner during the Christmas season: "Thanks to this, I was able to help everyone who did not receive support from home, thereby winning the hearts of my fellow prisoners."⁵⁷ Through his generosity, Ilgin makes an impression on those around him, engaging with fellow prisoners in religious debates and discussing the relative principles of the Catholic and Orthodox faith with eager interlocutors.⁵⁸ Still, his physical and mental suffering is immense due to his prior medical conditions and the

⁵⁴ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 42. Ilgin and other memoirists express their suspicions that placing new arrivals with psychotic ones, whether their illness real or feigned, was a psychological tactic of the GPU.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 54:

⁵⁸ Ibid.

explicitly anti-religious sentiments expressed by the Bolshevik guards, not to mention the abusive language and immoral behavior of the criminals he is housed with.

Stool pigeons

Many of the memoirists discuss the presence of stool pigeons and provocateurs in their cells. Malsagoff, for example, mentions “provocateur methods” in the litany of abuses he suffered in jail, and describes an agent provocateur placed in the Metekh castle in Tblisi, a Kuban Cossack named Zozulia, who was discovered and killed by the prisoners.⁵⁹ Danzas hints that she was falsely accused of being a secret agent for proselytizing in jail, and Bezsonov encounters a number of Bolshevik agents in his life and is suspected of being one himself.⁶⁰ Tchernavin discusses the role of stool pigeons or “spies” placed in the cells in a chapter titled “Gepeists, Spies and Foreigners,” although he does not admit to having been personally duped by any spies while in prison.⁶¹ These spies not only pass on information they learn from other prisoners, but solicit useful information and try to manipulate their cellmates to falsely confess. According to Tchernavin, spies were usually discovered quickly and sent on to another cell.

Lenardowicz, on the other hand, admits to an unfortunate encounter with a provocateur placed by the GPU, a narrative thread that guarantees his downfall in the interrogation proceedings. After his mock execution, Lenardowicz is placed in a general cell with other Poles and begins to plan an escape with an agent provocateur named Antoni Miljanowicz. Lenardowicz shows himself being outwitted by the GPU in this exchange. Confronted in the interrogation room by Milianowicz, Lenardowicz responds with sudden violence: ““Oh, you

⁵⁹ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 31–32.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 21; Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 39; Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 85–90.

⁶¹ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 149–155.

scoundrel!’ I yelled at him in Polish... And before the Chekists could react, I grabbed a marble paperweight from Peterson’s desk and smashed it with all my strength into Miljanowicz’s skull.”⁶² Lenardowicz’s violent outburst leads to a ferocious beating by the GPU agents in the room, but his guilt in the plot is secured by the incident. Summing up the failed escape plot, Lenardowicz regrets that his plan would have saved “108 people, including 29 women and 79 men, mostly of Polish nationality.”⁶³

Aliakhnovich also realizes that his cellmate is working with the GPU, repeating their conversations to Aliakhnovich’s interrogators. Unlike Lenardowicz’s ferocious response to his betrayal, Aliakhnovich responds with a muted disapproval and a measure of understanding: “Corrupted by terror, he pushed forward with his Judas-like work, hoping that by doing so he could save his own life.”⁶⁴ In general, memoirists express various degrees of understanding and disapproval of the choices of those who collaborate with the Chekists. While the examples of such betrayals are often quite stark in the prison context, they will occur more frequently and more openly at the camp, where every man and woman is faced with compromising with the regime in order to survive.

Memoirists’ accounts of stool pigeons and provocateurs highlight the pervasive mistrust and manipulation within Soviet prisons. These individuals, whether subtly deceptive or overtly antagonistic, embody the psychological warfare waged by the prison system against inmates. The presence of spies erodes the solidarity that memoirists often seek with fellow prisoners, casting suspicion on even the most seemingly genuine relationships. For some, like Lenardowicz, these

⁶² Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 15.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶⁴ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach* 18.

encounters lead to devastating consequences, underscoring the intricate and calculated cruelty of the system.

Women prisoners

While male prisoners were typically grouped by crime and sentencing status, which kept common criminals separate from counterrevolutionaries, the smaller population of female prisoners tended to be grouped together. This meant that women counterrevolutionaries and political prisoners were almost always grouped with prostitutes, bootleggers, and thieves.

Tatyana Tchernavin and Danzas both describe their encounters with women accused of these crimes; Danzas is uniformly horrified and disgusted by their poor hygiene and promiscuity, while Tchernavin is more empathetic. Throughout her account of jail, Tatyana Tchernavin emphasizes the treatment of women prisoners, particularly those who were essentially collateral used to threaten their husbands, brothers, sons, and other men implicated in the Soviet prison system. She compares imperial prisons to the Soviet system and highlights the ironies of Soviet claims about “bourgeois” prisons and the treatment of political prisoners in Poland.⁶⁵ Male memoirists sometimes encounter women in jail and prison, but are more likely to describe their interactions with women prisoners at the camp.

Child prisoners

Children are a rare but notable feature of some memoirists’ time in jail; innocent children were occasionally housed with their parents, while other child prisoners were criminals themselves. The latter were rampant in post-Revolutionary Russia, and the issue of orphaned

⁶⁵ Tatyana Tchernavin, *Escape*, 122.

children who resorted to crime was a major social problem at various periods in the history of the Soviet Union.

Whether the children were criminals or not, memoirists describe their presence in prisons to evoke reader's shock and horror. Child prisoners never appear casually or incidentally; they are a rare sight, especially for male prisoners, and memoirists highlight their presence and proleptically refute anticipated denials of their existence in jails. Cederholm, for example, explains that "child criminals are a regular feature of Soviet Russian life, and are much more dangerous than adult criminals. We were robbed during our first hour in the room, I of my teapot and Ilintky of his extra pair of boots."⁶⁶

More often, memoirists note children who are caught up in the affairs of their parents. Malsagoff groups "old men, women, and children" among the "defenseless people" (supporters of the Whites subject at the time to mass Bolshevik reprisals) who were held in Tblisi.⁶⁷ Bezsonov, referencing the same groups, describes the tactic of arresting suspects' families as the Bolsheviks' "favourite method of striking at what is most dear and precious to all." According to Bezsonov, "[f]ew can withstand this particular ill-usage."⁶⁸ In the preface to her book, Tatyana Tchernavin makes the Bolshevik's tactics even more explicit: "To wipe out the intellectuals as a class it was necessary to get hold not only of the men but of the women as well, and, incidentally, of their children."⁶⁹

In fact, holding an innocent child in jail with its mother was regarded as a special privilege for female criminals; the children of accused counterrevolutionaries were typically sent

⁶⁶ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 337.

⁶⁷ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 29, 45.

⁶⁸ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 45.

⁶⁹ Tatyana Tchernavin, *Escape*, 9.

to orphanages where they often lost contact with their parents. Tatyana Tchernavin explains that her examining officer threatened her with sending her son to such an institution, contrasting her loss of contact with her son with the presence of children in her jail.⁷⁰

Although memoirists who encounter children in prison are mostly empathetic to their situation, Danzas manages to blame the (mostly criminal) mothers of these children for their presence in the jail, characteristically emphasizing the low morality of the women she is imprisoned with: “It was heart-breaking to see children in those abominable surroundings: there were always some fifty mites the mothers had brought into prison, not only babies but older children up to ten years, who saw and heard all the filth, and who were taught obscenity.”⁷¹ Danzas, whose brittle and judgmental approach to fellow women prisoners is perhaps her most consistent characteristic throughout her account, attempts to intervene in the “corruption” of these children but finds herself thrown in solitary confinement.⁷²

Tatyana Tchernavin and Aliakhnovich are the two memoirists who discuss the children in prisons most empathetically. Both memoirists are themselves parents; while Aliakhnovich’s two sons are presumably safe with their mother in Vilnius, he is tormented by the fear that they traveled to Minsk to join him, unaware of his arrest. Unable to sleep due to this worry, he begins to hallucinate his own sons among the imprisoned children he sees running around the prison.⁷³

Tchernavin, whose husband was already arrested, was forced to leave her twelve-year-old son alone when she was detained.⁷⁴ She leaves him in the care of indifferent and antagonistic

⁷⁰ Tatyana Tchernavin, *Escape*, 30.

⁷¹ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 18–19.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 23.

⁷⁴ According to Tatyana Tchernavin (*Escape*, 130) the policy was that children up to the age of 10 could be housed with their mothers in jail.

neighbors, and she fears for Andrei's safety while mourning his loss of innocence—the child often demonstrates a cynical world-weariness that Tatyana and Vladimir find alarming. Because “the OGPU forgot [her] existence for four and a half months,”⁷⁵ Tchernavin waits in jail for some resolution of her case, all the while witnessing the surprising and heartbreaking conditions of women and children in the prisons.

The first appearance of a child in their prison is a bittersweet moment for Tatyana and her cellmate: “The first time that we heard a child's voice in the yard we could hardly believe our ears. [...] Both my fellow prisoner and I had sons left at home, and it gave us an extraordinary thrill of joy to hear a child's voice, though it was horrible to think of a child being in prison.”⁷⁶ The experience of merely seeing a child gives Tatyana a few moments of joy but otherwise disrupts Tatyana's life: “The appearance of children in prison was an exciting event, and the minutes of watching them passed quickly, but afterwards hours again seemed like years.”⁷⁷ Tchernavin's skillful depiction of her own experiences as a mother in the early Soviet Union and relatable observations of the difficult choices offered to mothers are unique among the memoirists.

Of course, considering the small number of children reported in the jails, most of the parents held there were separated from their children. Tatyana Tchernavin and Aliakhnovich both describe the unendurable, inhuman weeping of women separated from their children that can be heard throughout the prison in several chapters of the memoir.⁷⁸ Aliakhnovich compares their weeping to ritualized wailing, a part of Belarusian funeral practices. After outlining the

⁷⁵ Tatyana Tchernavin, *Escape*, 125.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁷⁸ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 23.

practice, he compares the “practiced wail” of the funeral practice to what he heard in prison: “a genuine cry of despair, bursting from the chest of someone in deep misery. It was a terrifying improvisation of a woman from the people, in a moment of extreme nervous tension, expressing her anguish in rhythmic tirades.”⁷⁹

Despite their relatively small footprint across the pages of the memoirs, child prisoners occupy a unique and unsettling space in the memoirs of Soviet-era incarceration. Their presence, whether as innocent victims swept into their parents’ fates or as young criminals shaped by societal collapse, serves as a powerful symbol of the dehumanizing effects of the Soviet penal system. Memoirists leverage their accounts of these children to elicit shock, empathy, and condemnation from their readers, underscoring the moral and emotional toll of such practices.

The narratives of Tatyana Tchernavin and Aliakhnovich highlight the profound anguish of separation from one’s children and the resilience required to endure such loss, while Danzas’s moralistic judgments remind readers of the deep divisions even among prisoners themselves. Ultimately, these stories not only humanize the prisoners but also reveal the broader societal failures and systemic brutality that allowed children to suffer within the prison system, leaving a lasting impression of the harrowing realities of life under Soviet repression.

Through vivid and often harrowing depictions of their interactions with other prisoners, from criminals and stool pigeons to friendly faces, memoirists illustrate the fragmented and deeply stratified social fabric of Soviet prisons. Whether forming tenuous alliances with “honest” prisoners, navigating the chaotic behavior of criminals and the insane, or falling prey to the manipulations of stool pigeons, these experiences reveal the immense psychological and emotional toll of incarceration.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 23.

Suffering and inhumanity

In prison, memoirists experience new levels of physical and moral suffering, although these eventually pale in comparison to what they experience on the Solovetsky Islands. They begin to plant the seeds of this future suffering through the onset of aches and pains, dental problems, lack of sleep, and the intense mental strain of their surroundings. Certain memoirists including Aliakhnovich, Qureshi, and Tchernavin emphasize the affective aspects of prison life generally. In one section, “Psychosis,” Aliakhnovich discusses how detrimental the effects of GPU confinement is on himself and other prisoners: “The shock to the nervous system in GPU prisons is so intense that nightmarish dreams become inseparable companions for life.”⁸⁰ Like Aliakhnovich, Tatyana Tchernavin emphasizes the mood among prisoners generally, and specifically in a chapter titled “Tears” where she discusses crying, wailing, and weeping among women prisoners, both in the abstract and using examples of episodes she witnessed or overheard while in the jail.

Preparation for death

A frequent topic of discussion among prisoners is the threat of death, whether from illness and malnutrition or by execution. Aliakhnovich recounts such frank discussions among prisoners, who frequently discuss how executions are conducted, and emphasizes the role of execution rumors among the prisoner population. Malsagoff also describes the psychological effect of worrying about his own impending death for months on end. He spends several months at the Metekh castle, where the prisoners are terrified by a “shooting night” every week, to the

⁸⁰ Ibid., 28.

extent that they are unable to eat the next day.⁸¹ Before describing his transfer from Tblisi to Vladikavkaz, Malsagoff writes: “I spent four months and a half in the Metekh, and prepared myself for death every Tuesday.”⁸²

Aliakhnovich makes a similar point in a story he relates from his time in a two-man cell. First, Aliakhnovich’s cellmate explains to Aliakhnovich that it is the scheduled day for executions. As they play chess, they hear a truck pulling into the prison yard and park with its motor running. The cellmate grows frightened and explains to Aliakhnovich that this truck will transporting prisoners to Komarowski Forest to be shot. Like Malsagoff, Aliakhnovich conveys how powerfully the weekly executions—predictably scheduled but randomly applied to prisoners—affected the inmates:

In the corridor, there’s a brief scuffle, a muffled cry forced back into the throat... Again, the hurried steps of several pairs of feet. The sound of the engine fades into the distance. Silence returns. Everyone has pale faces, eyes gleaming with terror. Yet, after a while, the cell’s occupants return to the usual routine of prison life. But the breath of death lingers for a long time. Because the night still lies ahead. The truck might return during the night. And tomorrow is Tuesday. Sometimes, executions also take place on Tuesdays, when, for some unknown reason, they fail to finish everything on Monday. Only on Wednesday can one breathe freely again—until the next Monday...⁸³

⁸¹ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 31.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 32.

⁸³ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 26.

This omnipresent fear of death not only heightens the impact of actual executions but also paves the way for the equally devastating practice of mock or threatened executions—another tool in the psychological arsenal of the Soviet penal system.

Mock executions

Mock executions are a recurring theme in several memoirs, serving as a chilling illustration of the psychological warfare waged against prisoners. Aliakhnovich does not experience a mock execution himself but recounts witnessing a prisoner before and after the experience: “He returned after a few hours, pale, with a look of madness in his eyes and nervous shivers running through his body. For the time being, we couldn’t get any information from him about what had happened to him.”⁸⁴ Although his life was spared on that night, the prisoner was shot two months later. Similarly, Ilgin also describes mock executions, mentioned by other memoirists: “the condemned are taken to the cemetery, placed in front of a dug grave, a few shots are fired into the air, and then they are brought back to the GPU for interrogation.”⁸⁵

Memoirists who emphasize the threat of death in Soviet prisons present readers with the variety of psychological manipulations that they faced in GPU custody; the individual undergoing interrogation was threatened and degraded on every front, physically, mentally, and socially. Mock executions, in particular, exemplify the cruelty of a system designed to instill hopelessness, as they stripped prisoners of any sense of safety or predictability. The routinization of unpredictable violence, and the casual use of death threats in interrogation settings underscores the torturous instability of detainees’ situation. Memoirists attempt to convey the

⁸⁴ Ibid., 27–28.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 48–49.

totality of this indescribable experience by highlighting the extreme aspects of their life in jail. The haunting aftermath described by memoirists—shaken bodies, madness in the eyes, and the knowledge that actual death might still follow—are further attempts to convey the validity of their claims to potentially disbelieving audiences.

Solitary confinement in prison

A frequent topic is solitary confinement and other more unusual methods of unusual punishment. Several of the memoirists were subjected to torturous methods to extract their confessions and describe the experiences in detail. Others list the specific and unusual methods that were practiced at their prisons.

Bezsonov, for example, spent six months in solitary confinement. He grapples with the excruciating experience by keeping track of his time in the cell. It is during his solitary confinement that Bezsonov experiences his transformative conversion, renewing his Christian faith. He concludes that this arrest was divine intervention to prevent him from carrying out the “infernal” “plan of action” he had in mind just before his arrest. While in solitary confinement, Bezsonov contemplates Dostoevsky’s *Memoirs from the House of Death*, rethinks his previous poor treatment of women, and discusses the effects of hunger on his consciousness. Just before he is introduced to a new cellmate, Bezsonov concludes his experiences in solitary confinement: “I will say outright: ‘In this case God saved me.’ I was in despair, I had lost all hope and was suffering from cold and hunger. I tried my best to turn to Him, but was weak and human. At that moment God helped me, relieved my sufferings and kept me from complete desperation.”⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 186.

Bezsonov describes himself as mentally prepared for what will come thanks to his transformative experiences in the solitary cell.

Qureshi is also kept in solitary confinement for months, a great hardship for the amiable and social man. In Qureshi's case, solitary confinement meant the total absence of human interaction (even the guards are forbidden from talking to him), terrible food, no exercise, no paper or books, not even the use of a washroom: "For two months, I hadn't been to the bathhouse, nor could I change my underwear. The stinking slop bucket [*parasha*] was constantly in my cell. Lice and bedbugs filled every crack of my dwelling."⁸⁷ After two months, Qureshi is returned to a general cell with no explanation. Qureshi now considers the general cell much better in comparison: although still difficult in the general cell, prisoners are given better food, allowed to bathe, and treated more politely."⁸⁸

Boris Cederholm is also subjected to solitary confinement. At times, it seems that Cederholm's rich interior life (reciting poetry, singing operas, and doing calisthenics in his cell) protects him from the intended psychological torment of solitary confinement. In other times, though, Cederholm is deeply affected by his confinement and even begins to hallucinate under the strain of the experience. He deals with intense pain and begins to see the faces of people he knows in the crumbling plaster walls of his cell.⁸⁹ When he finally sees a doctor regarding the hallucinations, the doctor's dismissal of his condition greatly offends Cederholm, leading to an unexpected cure:

An hour and a half after the doctor's visit a bottle containing a mixture was brought me, I tasted it, and realized that the doctor had

⁸⁷ Qureshi, "Piat' let," 100.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 130.

sent me bromide. This so infuriated me that I called the warder and hurled the bottle out into the corridor, accompanying my action with appropriate expressions.

From that moment I regained my peace of mind.⁹⁰

Cederholm's ability to snap out of his hallucinations emphasizes the buoyancy of his personality without undermining the seriousness of the conditions he describes.

Solitary confinement emerges as a potent method of dehumanization in the memoirs, a place where prisoners confront both external deprivation and their inner demons. For some, like Bezsonov, the solitude facilitates spiritual transformation, as he finds solace in his faith and literature. Others, like Qureshi, endure the crushing absence of human interaction, battling filth, hunger, and despair. Even Cederholm, who uses poetry and opera to sustain himself, eventually succumbs to hallucinations under the strain. These depictions reveal solitary confinement as not only a tool of control but also a crucible of character, leaving lasting marks on those who survived it.

Conclusion

The prison experiences described in memoirs are as varied as they are devastating, shaped by a common set of conditions that reflect the inhumanity of the Soviet penal system. Some common features of these accounts include: the initial shock at cell conditions, specific and inhumane circumstances (120 men stuffed in a cell designed for 30, meager rations or spoiled food, the social sphere and hierarchies within cells, the effects of threats and rumors on prisoners, and the discussion of stool pigeons and provocateurs placed in cells. Memoirists also

⁹⁰ Ibid., 131.

emphasize their bewilderment at their circumstances, especially their doubts and fears about what is to come. Most are convinced of their innocence and do not anticipate being sentenced and sent to a camp, although some relate threats of being sent to the Solovetsky Islands during their interrogations or report discussion of the camp among detainees at the prison. Typically the prisoners discuss the threat of execution more, especially in conversation with other prisoners, and express some temporary surprise and relief when they learn they will be exiled instead.

Throughout, however, rage and violence suffuse the space, whether perpetrated by guards and interrogators (Lenardowicz's "ferocious beating" after his outburst against the GPU provocateur); present in cells filled to the brim with exhausted, hungry people; or experienced by the memoirists themselves (Cederholm's "raging, irreconcilable hatred" toward his tormentors). Small symbols of hope (like Tchernavin's apples, unexpectedly allowed in by the guards) are overwhelmed by the regularity of violence (like the executions that Malsagoff describes, which grip the entire prison population on a weekly basis). Prison seems to be irregular and haphazard for memoirists, who might spend up to six months in solitary confinement, or they might find themselves moved from cell to cell without explanation.

Memoirists give readers a bit more insight into their character and priorities in these prison sections thanks to the flexibility and variety among their depictions of prison. For Bezsonov, his last stint in prison was the crucial turning point of his life, and his narrative oscillates between despair and spiritual resilience, reflecting his inner turmoil as he moves toward his recommitment to his Christian faith. Bezsonov also references the literature that inspires him in prison, especially the lengthy contemplation of Dostoevsky's "Memoirs from the House of the Dead" during his solitary confinement.

Some memoirists also use their depiction of prison to make larger observations about the Soviet penal system, like Tatyana Tchernavin's comparison of Soviet prisons to imperial prisons that ironize Soviet claims about the "bourgeois" nature of imperial prisons and Aliakhnovich's comparison of women's weeping to Belarusian funeral practices, likening it to ritualized mourning.

Through their depictions of suffering, violence, and fleeting moments of hope, memoirists present a multifaceted account of the Soviet penal system's cruelty and its profound effects on the human spirit. Their experiences of prison—ranging from physical torment to spiritual renewal—serve as both personal testimonies and broader critiques of the system.

5. Sentencing

Sentencing is a critical narrative element in most of the memoirs and is depicted in sharp detail in most accounts. Memoirists typically provide as much specific information as possible, including the date, time, location, the name and title of the person handing down the sentence, and its exact wording. When possible, (more often in memoirs published after 1939), documentation supporting the sentence is reproduced as an appendix to the memoir. In this chapter only Ilgin's posthumous memoir, published in 2006, has such an appendix.⁹¹

Although the outcome of these sentences is inevitable (except in the case of Tatyana Tchernavin), sentencing is a narrative turning point for prisoners that results in the prisoners' removal from familiar surroundings (holding cells in GPU prisons where interrogations take place) to new transit cells, beginning their transport to the islands. The prisoner has now been officially convicted by the state, a change in status that some authors address in their writing.

⁹¹ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 115–125.

Memoirists reproduce their sentencing experience in distinctly mimetic ways, including the realistic chronological composition, the tight narrative framing, the specific descriptions of real spaces and identification of people involved, and reproduction of the actual text of their sentences. More figurative language also appears in author's ideas of what the Solovetsky Islands will be like. Earlier memoirists describe their fear and apprehension; Lenardowicz calls the archipelago "islands of torture and death" and Bezsonov predicts that the harsh environment there will lead to his death. Tatyana Tchernavin, arrested in 1931, hears something quite different from her interrogator: "It's a fine place. The sea, forest all round."⁹² Her husband is even more sanguine about the islands, concluding that his familiarity with these surroundings will be the key to his escape.

Sozerko Malsagoff

Malsagoff does not reflect on his sentence or explore its broader context, treating the sentence as one stage in a series of ironic "amnesties" that began with his imprisonment in Batoum: At last, on November 30th, 1923, i.e., seven months after I had been "amnestied" by the Batoum Tcheka, the examining judge of the Vladikavkaz Tcheka finally "amnestied" me in the following terms[.]⁹³ Malsagoff then repeats the exact wording of his sentence and moves directly into describing his time in the transit cells, continuing to use the Soviet's own term, "amnesty," ironically.

⁹² Tatyana Tchernavin, *Escape*, 150–151.

⁹³ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 33.

Alexander Grube

In a section titled “Prison,” Grube specifies that on his fourth day under arrest, he and the 80 Japanese fishermen who shared his cell were all sentenced to 10 years at Solovki, followed by five years’ exile in Siberia. All are accused of international espionage. Grube follows with a few lines about the cynicism of the Chekists: “The Chekists could not comprehend that we sincerely believed in the Soviet paradise and wanted to stay in the USSR. To them, it seemed absurd that people would leave a good life to descend into hell.”⁹⁴ Grube, like other memoirists who describe themselves as duped by the Soviet Union (e.g., Malsagoff and Aliakhnovich) comments on the cynicism of the people who actually run the country, their realism regarding the Soviet Union, and compare it to their own innocence or foolishness in believing that the country was not just different from bourgeois countries, but superior to them. Grube completes this short section with a brief outline of his transit from Vladivostok to SLON.

Julia Danzas

Danzas addresses her sentence in two parts, first explaining her eventual sentence in the context of widespread repression of Catholics at the time, writing that this group was “generally” accused of “[a]ctive participation in an organization, the aim of which is to support the international *bourgeoisie* in its struggle against the Soviet power.”⁹⁵ The organization, of course, was the Catholic Church.⁹⁶ Danzas was a fairly recent convert to the church, but relatively high profile in the Soviet context thanks to her friendship with Maxim Gorky.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Grube, “Rasskaz,” 197.

⁹⁵ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 2.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Michel Niqueux, “Soeur Justine” in *Julia Danzas (1879-1942): De la cour impériale au bagne rouge* (Paris: Éditions des Syrtes, 2020), 95–122.

When she is handed her sentence six months after her arrest and interrogation, Danzas again places herself in the context of the absurdities underlying the repression of utterly normal people accused by the state of “conspiracy” and other counterrevolutionary crimes. Arriving at Butyrka in May 1923, she seems to survey the cell in her mind and recall its inhabitants:

I found some fifteen ladies preparing for deportation. One was accused of illicit trading, because she had sold a dress in order to buy bread. Another had tried to earn her own and her daughter’s living by baking patties which she sold in the street, a crime of ‘speculation.’ Two young girls were accused of ‘espionage’ because they had danced at a party given by the British Consul. Others were accused of ‘relations with foreign countries’ because they had received letters from émigré relatives.⁹⁸

Unable to resist an ironic jab at her most hated milieu (female *shpana*), she continues: “All these ‘criminals’ were awaiting their fate in the company of half a dozen thieves and prostitutes.” Finally, Danzas describes her own sentencing:

As for myself I was given to read my sentence in three lines copied out from the official report of the G.P.U. I was declared guilty of “active participation in a counterrevolutionary organization” and by virtue of Article 61⁹⁹ of the Code condemned to a ten years' term of

⁹⁸ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 8–9.

⁹⁹ Danzas (*Red Gaols*, 2) was arrested in 1923 under Article 61 and gives this context: “Since the modification of the Criminal Code in 1927 this article has become paragraph 4 of Article 58 which comprises all ‘political crimes.’”

imprisonment. . . . Two days later I was led away with a group of prisoners leaving for Siberia.¹⁰⁰

Danzas includes all the characteristic features of this event (specific wording, where and how the sentence was handed down) and follows it with the brief but narrative-forwarding sentence about beginning her transport to Siberia (Danzas will spend three years in Irkutsk before being transported to SLON in 1927).

Mieczysław Lenardowicz

Lenardowicz, sent to the tribunal with two fellow Poles, specifies the date, location, and name of the tribunal head (Pik) and outlines the sentence (three years at SLON). He follows this brief explanation with a longer description of the sadness and pain that accompanies the sentencing among the three compatriots: “We all listened to him with heavy hearts, for it was a cruel sentence. Each of us was sentenced to three years of hard labor on the Solovetsky Islands.”¹⁰¹ Lenardowicz, Kazik, and Włodek lament their fates, asking why they were given such a sentence and deciding that it is “only because we are Poles and do not consider ourselves Chekists.”¹⁰² Lenardowicz concludes the story by recentering the fearsome reputation of the Solovetsky Islands for readers: “The Solovetsky Islands had an established reputation among all Soviet prisons. Their very name—‘Islands of Torture and Death’—vividly described their purpose. But what else could be done?”¹⁰³ They are quickly prepared for transport to the islands.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 8–9.

¹⁰¹ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 17.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

For Lenardowicz, Polish identity and Polish company are critically important to his understanding of events. Arrestees, especially those accused in vague and far-reaching “conspiracies” against the Soviet state, were more often targeted based on their identities rather than any actual crimes against the state. Just as Danzas was identified as Catholic by the state and charged with conspiracy for her association with the religion, Lenardowicz is charged with espionage because of his national origin.

Yuri Bezsonov

Bezsonov, a frequent escapee from Soviet prisons, is perhaps the only example among the memoirists of someone who committed an actual crime.¹⁰⁴ Bezsonov describes his actual sentencing as the beginning of a two-fold process of first defying the sentence, then making peace with his fate. The specifics of the sentencing are given in brief: “On the 16th of March I was ordered to appear at the office. I was told to sign a paper, on which I read that I had been found guilty, under paragraphs 220, 61 and 95 of the Penal Code, and was sentenced to be shot, but that the sentence had been commuted to a term of three years’ penal servitude in the Solovetski ‘special’ camp.”¹⁰⁵ Bezsonov immediately refuses to sign the sentence, refuting two of the charges (keeping firearms and counterrevolution) while admitting to the third (escaping from jail). He asks, “Why was I accused of two crimes I had not committed, and why was the sentence mitigated?” but follows immediately with resignation: “But it is no use asking why, in Soviet Russia.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Bezsonov (*Twenty-Six Prisons*, 196) admits to many crimes, including his participation in the Kronstadt Rebellion, but denies the charge of “counterrevolution.”

¹⁰⁵ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 195–196.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

Bezsonov continues to refuse and demands an audience with his interrogator, Lange. Here Bezsonov describes another fiery argument between the two men that seems to place them on equal ground, although Lange has no answers for Bezsonov's questions about the sentence and denies making the final decision regarding it ("I asked him why he had added paragraph 220 to my accusations; his answer was: 'I knew nothing about it.'"¹⁰⁷) Bezsonov proudly describes how he angered Lange with an insouciant threat to escape again and turn himself in at Lange's private home: "That was the first time I saw him really angry; his eyes flashed, his hands shook, but he restrained himself and only said: 'I strongly advise you to do nothing of the sort! Good-bye.'"¹⁰⁸

As these accounts demonstrate, prisoners were often moved quickly toward their destination after sentencing. Bezsonov is scheduled to depart for SLON on the evening he was sentenced, but he finds a moment to "reflect upon the time [he] had passed in solitary confinement" and further contemplate the fearsome reputation of the camp where he was headed. He is sure that he will die of exposure, especially without any outside sources of food and supplies. Of course, Bezsonov bears himself up thanks to his Christian faith:

I would not be able to stand it. Yes, I would though! "You are morally stronger than you ever were before," said I to myself. "God knows what we can stand; He does not try us beyond our strength; you must accept this change of circumstances joyfully, as coming from Him. God is sure to be with you."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 195–196.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 196.

Cederholm gives a date and time for his sentencing, as well as the physical context (where he is located, what it sounded like). This conveys quite effectively how disoriented Cederholm was by his sentence. He gives basic information about his sentence but does not mention the article or specific crime:

One evening at the beginning of October [1924] I was called out into the corridor and an individual read to me, rapidly and in a low voice, the sentence pronounced by a “special session of the Central College of the Tcheka”. Of all that he read to me I understood one thing only—that for all sorts of crimes against the Soviet power I was sentenced to three years’ imprisonment in the Solovetsky Islands concentration camp, not counting my period of preventive detention, and without the right to petition for the revision of my sentence or for the exercise of mercy.¹¹⁰

Cederholm then recounts the calculations that he performed in his head upon receiving the sentence: realizing that he will be sent off within 10 days, then cut off from contact in the months when the Solovetsky Islands are inaccessible from the mainland, he decides to go on hunger strike and demand contact with the Finnish consulate.¹¹¹ Unlike Bezsonov’s relatively unsuccessful protest against his sentence, Cederholm’s hunger strike successfully delays his transport to the islands by nearly a year.

¹¹⁰ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 170.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 170–172.

Said Qureshi

Qureshi and Ilgin are the targets of coercion by the Soviets to collaborate with the state; their exile to SLON is, as their interrogators frequently state, the result of their resistance to this collaboration rather than the commission of an actual crime. For this reason, their sentences are handed down as a coercive measure rather than a final judgement and in fact open the door for further negotiation between the prisoner and their interrogator. In Qureshi's case, the GPU continue to try to convince him to join their agency, and Qureshi continues to refuse these entreaties and suffer for his choice. When he is handed a sentence, he gives the following details: "Finally, in July 1923, I received a document stating that I had been transferred to the jurisdiction of the GPU for the third time, and on September 18, 1923, a resolution from the NKVD dated September 14, 1923, arrived: 'to exile Mahomet Ali Qureshi to a concentration camp for three years,' i.e., to Solovki."¹¹² In this short passage, Qureshi outlines the administrative bodies that are handling his case (he is placed in the custody of the GPU and sentenced to a camp run by the NKVD) and gives a quote from his sentence. He does not mention which article of the criminal code he is sentenced under, but does discuss the accusations against him and, in a later installment of the series, contrasting the article of the criminal code he was sentenced under (Article 58) to Article 49, which deals with criminal offenses.¹¹³ His reaction to the sentence was typically sanguine:

When my comrades read this document to me, I did not get upset but calmly said: 'Kismet!' and asked them to write on the back of the paper what I dictated:

¹¹² Qureshi, "Piat' let," 105.

¹¹³ Ibid.

I am not Mahomet Ali Qureshi but Said Qureshi.

If I am guilty of anything and your country has laws, then judge me
and, for even the slightest offense against Soviet power, execute me.

I ask for no mercy.

If, however, there is no guilt or crime on my part, then I demand to
be set free.¹¹⁴

The letter continues with his protests, and he indicates his refusal to submit to this sentence, writing that he is guilty of nothing and would prefer to be summarily executed than to proceed with this punishment. Qureshi's protests are ignored, of course, and he is sent to Solovki in a few weeks.

Mikhail Zakharovich Nikonov-Smorodin

Long resigned to his fate, Nikonov-Smorodin reports being thrilled when he is summoned to GPU headquarters to receive his sentence: "if they are calling for the verdict to be announced, then that means there will be no execution."¹¹⁵ He is marched through the streets of Kazan to a small cashier's window and briefly able to hold and read his actual sentence. He reproduces the text directly from the paper it is written on:

Protocol of the meeting of the Special Council of the OGPU
Collegium
May 11, 1928. No. 000

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 86.

Heard: Case No. 0000 concerning the charges under Article 58, Section II, against citizen S.V. Smorodin, transferred based on the decree of the Council of People's Commissars dated April 18, 1928. Resolved: To impose the highest measure of punishment—execution, with a commutation to ten years in the Solovetsky labor camp.¹¹⁶

He signs the paper and is marched back to prison, where his cellmates congratulate him for not being executed. Although in hindsight he feels that he is only lucky by virtue of circumstance; his prior involvement in a peasant rebellion could easily have led to his execution, he slipped through as the Chekists were busy creating other, more recent, conspiracies.

According to Nikonov-Smorodin, his reaction to a sentence of ten years at SLON is surprisingly positive: “I took a deep breath and felt a surge of vigor and energy.” That night, he claims to have “felt with all [his] heart the joy of existence, the joy of living and feeling. Only here, in this vale of suffering, can one truly appreciate the blessing of life. So let us live, let us hope! I, who had condemned myself to death, was now coming back to life.”¹¹⁷

Wincenty Ilgin

Ilgin is coerced in a more dramatic manner than Qureshi. As he describes it, one day he is taken to an interrogator who announces that the investigation of his case is complete and he must now wait for a sentence. Awaiting his sentence for a month, Ilgin writes that this period is a relief after his interrogations, “which were worse than torture”¹¹⁸ His fear of the unknown,

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 87.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 87–88.

¹¹⁸ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 53.

however, worsens as he waits for a conclusion to his case: his physical health is strained by a lack of sleep, and his mental state is worsened by “[t]he fear of not succumbing, not breaking, not abandoning my beliefs and faith under the influence of the investigators’ ‘subversive work’ and their premeditated schemes [...]”¹¹⁹ Ilgin finds solace in prayer, which he credits with restoring him from the brink of insanity.¹²⁰

When he is finally taken back to the interrogator, Ilgin expects to hear his sentence, but instead see his nephew, brought into the jail to try to convince Ilgin to save himself by working with the GPU, who up to that point had refused all visits to the priest by his parishioners.¹²¹ The day after this dramatic scene, Ilgin is officially sentenced. He reproduces the language of the sentence in his memoir: “By decision of the Special Council at the GPU (without a trial, without confiscation of property, administratively), I was sentenced to three years of strict isolation on Solovki Island for violating the Ukrainian Criminal Code of 1926 (Article 58, Sections 10, 17, and 18).”¹²² Ilgin’s actual sentencing is hardly the centerpiece of this episode, instead serving as punctuation for the more dramatic narrative about his deteriorating emotional state as he waits for sentencing and his final meeting with his nephew.

Vladimir Tchernavin

Tchernavin depicts his sentence with a date and time, the place where the sentence is announced, the person who reads the sentence, and its exact wording: The 25th of April, in the middle of the day, the warden entered the cell, called out my name, and read: “Excerpt from the

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 53–54.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., 55.

minutes of the meeting of the OGPU Council April 13, 1931. Case No. 2634 of Tchernavin, V. V., accused according to Article 58, Paragraph 7. Sentence: Deportation to a concentration camp for a term of 5 years. The case to be filed.”¹²³ After signing the verdict, Tchernavin quickly sends a telegram to his son and arranges a final visit with the boy. A notable difference between Tchernavin’s sentence and earlier sentences reproduced in this section is that his destination is not specified. Increasing secrecy about where prisoners were being sent is characteristic of the treatment of arrestees who were sentenced in the late 1920s and 1930s. As such, Tchernavin must use the clues available to learn his destination: “The same day I was taken to a medical examination and while the doctor was entering his report I succeeded in reading from the form on which he was writing: ‘*Destination: Solovetzki camp at Kem. Regime: Ordinary.*’”¹²⁴

Here we can see the changes in the organization of SLON during the first Five-Year Plan; Tchernavin is sent to the “Solovetzki camp at Kem” rather than the Solovetsky Islands. Indeed, Tchernavin is never sent to the islands themselves while imprisoned at SLON. Unphased by this information, Tchernavin reveals that the news actually “pleased him greatly”:

It was in a country familiar to me from my numerous expeditions: the deep fiords of the White Sea, the archipelagoes, the endless labyrinth of bays and straits, cliffs, granite rocks piled up in disorder, the nearly impassable forests and swamps. If I could only get to the sea—there I would be a match for the guards. “How far is it from the frontier?” I speculated, trying to visualize the map. “About 200–300 kilometers of completely uninhabited forest and swamp.

¹²³ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 225.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

Perfect. Just what I need.” And at that very moment I made up my mind that I would escape to Finland.¹²⁵

This supremely confident paragraph is followed by a space, then a paragraph in which Tchernavin acknowledges the significance of his sentence for his self-perception and status: “I was a convict now—no longer a citizen.” Tchernavin writes that he had striven to be a productive citizen of the USSR but that his reward for his efforts to “be of both scientific and practical assistance to the industry for which [he] worked” was prison, interrogations, and exile or execution. He ends with a note of defiance: “I had not confessed, because I was not guilty; in all their records there was not a hint of any crime committed by me. And yet they convicted me. Five years in concentration camp!”¹²⁶

Tatyana Tchernavin

Tchernavin has a chapter titled “The Charge” which is a thorough rundown of the types of charges that women in Soviet prisons receive (recalling Danzas’ brief compendium noted above), along with typical sentences handed down and their general treatment. She describes receiving her own charge, giving a date and noting who gave her the charge:

Three weeks after my arrest I was taken again to the examining officer who interviewed me in the first instance. He had just come into the room and was unlocking his case, pulling out of it bundles of pinkish papers. These were the “accusations” which, to save time, were prepared wholesale. He silently handed me one of them. It was

¹²⁵ Ibid., 226.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 226.

marked by a number exceeding a thousand, though we were still in the third month of the year; it had written on it that I was accused of “furthering economic counterrevolution.”¹²⁷

Because she was arrested entirely to coerce her husband’s confession, and because she was likely forgotten somehow within the system, Tchernavin is never sentenced. Instead she is released with little fanfare or explanation. The absence of a sentence, otherwise inevitable under the circumstances, is emphasized in the account of her release: the Chekists who handle her are described as slightly confused and sheepish. The last encounter with her unnamed interrogator is quite curious. He begins with the terrible news that Vladimir has been exiled to an unspecified camp, then asks: “Where shall we send you? We thought of Solovki. What do you say to that?” Tatyana doesn’t respond, so he continues chattering: “Yes, yes. We thought of Solovki. It’s a fine place. The sea, forest all round.”¹²⁸ Hearing the news, Tatyana is devastated and numb: “I did not hear and could not force myself to listen or to think of my own fate. They have sent my husband away. He doesn’t tell me where nor when. I haven’t been allowed to see him, they didn’t let us say good-bye.” Then the interrogator continues with an about-face, remarking: “We thought of Solovki, but we took pity on you. You have a son, you know. We’ve been keeping an eye on him. He is not a bad boy, but we don’t want homeless children. So you’ll have to work for the present, yes, to work.”¹²⁹

The interrogator follows by trying to explain to Tatyana that she will be released and should try to get her old job back after months in prison:

¹²⁷ Tatyana Tchernavin, *Escape*, 124.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 150–151.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

You are of no interest to us now. What did you think? They showed you some sort of charge against you, didn't they? That's nonsense! We just write out those charges when necessary. You can forget about that. I repeat, we are no longer interested in you and you are no use to us. It's true. I was very much annoyed with you and seriously wanted to send you to Solovki. I have no patience with the way one has to wring out every word from you. It's beyond everything! However, we've decided to let you off and you may go.¹³⁰

In this dialogue, the interrogator demonstrates the cynicism of the system in which he works to a numb, exhausted and confused Tatyana. She is then freed without charges and expected to return to regular life. As she waits for the final bureaucratic processes to conclude before she is sent off, she muses: "I was in no hurry either. I did not long for freedom. There can be no freedom in U.S.S.R. You go away from one prison to get into another, bigger one; you escape from the OGPU, but are surrounded in every place of work by its secret agents."¹³¹

Ivan Zaitsev

As discussed above, Zaitsev's book is quite disciplined in its lack of personal detail in the first few sections of the book, describing the formation and administration of the SLON camp from a bird's eye view. Zaitsev does not discuss his own sentence aside from mentioning is

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., 153.

length (three years) and he does not write about the events of his own sentencing aside from the brief lines in the “Short Introduction” to the book.¹³²

Later in the book, however, once he arrives on the islands, he describes his persistent curiosity about the inconsistencies of the sentences handed down by the GPU. He discusses the question with former Chekists imprisoned at the camp, who explain the large discrepancies between sentences handed down for ostensibly equivalent crimes as the direct result of the corruption and dissolution of those responsible for the sentences.¹³³ Zaitsev’s discussion of sentencing outside of the typical autobiographical-chronological sequence reflects his general tendency to try to answer the larger questions that emerge from his individual experiences and demonstrate his wide-ranging curiosity about the function of the camp. It may also demonstrate a reluctance to discuss the specifics of his early experiences of arrest and interrogation. In some ways, he is a highly compromised person; his brief time serving at a high rank in the Red Army made him, as he acknowledges, a hybrid figure (both former Bolshevik and former anti-Bolshevik) who is an object of curiosity and greater scrutiny at the camp.

Frantsishak Aliakhnovich

Aliakhnovich doesn’t give an exact date or the precise wording of his sentence (although he does give similar information earlier in the book when he describes the charges against him). Rather than using the sentence as the beginning of his *etap* sequence (like other accounts addressed here) or even using the sentencing as a key point in his own story (like, say, Tchernavin), Aliakhnovich presents his sentencing as a minor punctuation to far more dramatic events going

¹³² Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 3–6.

¹³³ Ibid.

on outside the prison. First, he discusses Boris Kowerda's assassination of Petr Voikov, the Soviet ambassador to Warsaw.¹³⁴ Then he tells a story about a second high-profile death of a Soviet functionary that happened on the same day: a Minsk GPU agent, Iosif Opanski, died when his car crashed into a train. His chauffeur also died in the crash, while the Polish spy they were transporting escapes. Aliakhnovich describes how the news made it into the prison:

The Soviet press attributed the cause of the disaster to the work of saboteurs; however, rumors circulated around the city (which also reached us behind bars) that the true cause of the disaster was the excessive speed ordered by the drunken Opanski.

During this same period, my sentence from the GPU in Moscow arrived, condemning me to ten years in a concentration camp on the Solovetsky Islands.¹³⁵

Opanski's death, framed by the Bolshevik press as a Polish counterrevolutionary plot, is more than incidental to the fate of Poles in the Soviet Union. Both events were major controversies in the Second Polish Republic and Soviet Belarus at the time, with serious implications for the Belarusian nationalist movement.¹³⁶ Aliakhnovich's account of his sentences

¹³⁴ Kowerda's act of violence was overdetermined regarding motive and endlessly interpreted by Soviet and Western observers: Russian monarchists accused Voikov of contributing to the murders of the royal family, and Kowerda was a Socialist Revolutionary and Belarusian nationalists who worked with Aliakhnovich at a Belarusian newspaper in Vilnius. Most importantly for Aliakhnovich, the Kowerda affair led to a crackdown on Poles and Belarusians in the Soviet Union.

¹³⁵ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 31.

¹³⁶ Nina Stuzhynskaia, "Belaruskyy teraryst uzoru 1927 hoda: Barys Kaverda" in *Belarus' miatsezhnaia. Z historyi uzbroyenaga antysavetskaga supratsivu u 1920-ia hh.*, 2nd ed. (Vilnius: Nasha Buduchynia, 2011), 291–306.

places his story temporally and orients readers to the author's awareness of and ties to the Belarusian national movement and other groups of anti-Soviet partisans in Vilnius and Minsk.¹³⁷

Conclusion

Irony is perhaps the most common device across these accounts, and the need to signal ambiguity and present two views at once is quite clear in the juxtaposition of reality with the unreal but official pronouncements of the state. Objects of memoirists' frequent ire (Malsagoff's bitter "amnesty" and Danzas's hatred of the morally repugnant prostitutes and female thieves) are identified ironically, as is the true innocence of the many accused prisoners whom memoirists meet in their jail cells.

The most frequent form of irony in this section is, however, the use of official language. More than two thirds of the memoirists surveyed here present some version of the "exact" text of their sentence, and several provide the exact article of the Criminal Code under which they were sentenced. The exceptions are Tatyana Tchernavin, who substitutes the specific text of her charges, and Zaitsev and Aliakhnovich, who tend to deemphasize elements of their own experiences in the service of their unique compositional impulses. Zaitsev emphasizes his structural analysis of the camp, although not without providing his bona fides and unique experiences as a relatively significant figure. Aliakhnovich highlights his political milieu and the more exciting acts of political violence that certainly overshadowed his experience of sentencing. Both also seem to skim over moments of possible collaboration with the Soviet regime (a thorny issue that will only intensify in memoirs published after this period).

¹³⁷ Aliakhnovich expands on these topics in the Belarusian redaction of 1942, including the connections between himself and Kowerda through the *Belarusian Word* newspaper run by double agent Arsen Paulukevich.

The other authors provide the exact text of their sentences in their accounts to lend authenticity to their accounts and convey, with formal language, the gravity of the sentence and severity of punishment. On the other side of the coin, the vague official language of the sentences combined with the author's bewilderment and frustration, highlights the absurdity and injustice of these harsh, often deadly punishments for nonexistent crimes. For some authors, the exact wording of their sentences becomes a point of reflection or defiance. Qureshi and Bezsonov describe themselves challenging their sentences, reasserting themselves and finding spiritual value in resisting their sentences and describing this resistance in religious terms. Cederholm, the most successful in challenging his sentence, acts by immediately starting a hunger strike after hearing his sentence.

Sentencing and the individual's reaction to his or her sentence can form a point in the narrative when a memoirist reflects on his or her situation and provides some insight or proof of character to readers. Reflecting on the larger issues of the Soviet penal system's injustices and absurdities is common at this point, as is documenting the fear and apprehension that the author felt contemplating his or her future time at SLON. The camp's reputation is just as prominent at sentencing as in interrogations, and at least three accounts (Qureshi, Tatyana Tchernavin, and Ilgin) demonstrate how the Solovetsky Islands were invoked as a threat meant to coerce prisoners into confessing or otherwise collaborating with the Soviet security apparatus.

B. Etap

Etap (travel by stages) is a novel and contradictory time-space in Gulag narratives that combines movement and waiting, an extreme expression of the novelty and boredom of travel generally. Danzas, who was sent to Irkutsk for the first few years of her sentence, gives a brief

overview of etap in her chapter titled “Journey by ‘Stages.’” She insists that this type of travel is “almost impossible to convey.” Prisoners are moved from place to place, stopping at “stages” when a change of escort is required. Danzas writes:

between Moscow and Irkutsk, my ultimate destination, there were five stages (Ekaterinburg, Tyumen, Omsk, Novosibirsk, and Krasnoyarsk). In each of these places the prisoners were marched off to the local prison, there to await the new escort which was to convey them to the next station. Such halts lasted on average from ten to fifteen days, during which time prisoners were kept huddled together, for all gaols were full to overflowing.¹³⁸

The actual time a person might spend in transit varied widely, even judging from these few accounts. Some, like Danzas, spent months in transit, while those who started their journeys in St. Petersburg were sent directly to Kem by rail, a journey of about three days. Whatever their experience, memoirists tend to describe their first experience of etap in detail, then summarize subsequent journeys, simply listing places where they have been and noting particularly bad places or experiences along the way.

Grube, for example, does not discuss his etap aside from a basic geographical outline. He mentions seeing thirty or so prisons between Vladivostok and the Solovetsky Islands, including the Lubyanka and Butyrka prisons in Moscow, and summarizes the rest as “and some other places too.”¹³⁹ Malsagoff, whose account of his *etap* to SLON is suffused with his characteristic irony,¹⁴⁰ initially goes into more detail about his transit north, especially in his discussion of the

¹³⁸ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 10.

¹³⁹ Grube, “Rasskaz,” 197.

¹⁴⁰ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 34.

prisons in Tblisi. After some description, though, he starts to simply list a series of transfers: after two prisons in Tblisi¹⁴¹ he went to Baku, Petrovsk, Grozny, and Vladikavkaz. He summarizes this grand tour of the Caucasus: “Everywhere was the same total suppression of human personality, the same torture by nocturnal interrogations, starvation and blows, the same lawless, indiscriminate shootings.”¹⁴² Whatever distinguishes one prison from the next, or one prisoner train car from the next, it is not worth it to Malsagoff to describe.

Etap is a category of travel writing that appears in almost every Gulag memoir.¹⁴³ Many aspects of *etap* combine to formulate this unique chronotope. Of course, the fact of travel itself is critical: travel in almost any form combines novelty and monotony, leading to the travelogue’s pattern of assembling goods and people, arranging them in the means of transportation, then moving to the stopping place. This facilitates conversation and discussion of both the travel at hand, and other topics of interest.

Depictions of *etap* reflect the unique circumstances of carceral travel. While prisoners’ lack of choice is a fundamental element of the process, memoirists more often highlight the lack of information provided to them. In the process, fear and anticipation are allowed to build. Zaitsev writes of the emotional burden that prisoners bore while waiting for transport: “All future Solovetskians remain in an agitated and nervous state. Some are writing farewell letters to their relatives and acquaintances; others are anxiously awaiting visits from close family members: wives, mothers, sisters; to see them, perhaps for the last time in their lives.”¹⁴⁴ Zaitsev’s efforts to objectively characterize the process of transporting prisoners to SLON seems to give way at

¹⁴¹ Malsagoff, “Chapter III: Horrors of Tiflis Prison” in *An Island Hell*, 27–32. He describes the medieval Metekh prison-fortress in Tblisi in detail.

¹⁴² Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 32.

¹⁴³

¹⁴⁴ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 36.

this point in his account, especially when he draws broad conclusions about the psychology of prisoners that seem to describe his own mindset: “We are waiting in a queue. Our anxious mood transforms into one of resolve. Such is human psychology—when anticipating misfortune or great danger and knowing that the inevitable is coming, after the initial waves of anxiety one begins to long for it to happen sooner.”¹⁴⁵

The strength and creativity of Zaitsev’s figurative language comes to the forefront in this section, his first foray into describing his own experiences. He takes particular care describing the final prisoner count: prisoners are lined up in the corridors of the prison and counted, then led to the transit cells, which are “packed with prisoners, quite literally like sardines in a barrel.”¹⁴⁶ Conditions in this cell are literally maddening: “the noise there, the invective—it all leads to complete exhaustion.”¹⁴⁷

Guards are trained not to volunteer information about their itinerary or answer complaints about meagre food and the lack of water, and at the prison detainees are given very short notice between sentencing and departure. (The same will be true when prisoners are freed from SLON.) Tchernavin conveys the frustrations of this practice in the sequence from his sentencing to his departure. As soon as he is sentenced, he demands to send a telegram to his son and spends his remaining money on the message. Tchernavin emphasizes the confluence of luck, preparedness, and quick thinking that made this visit possible. He meets with Andrey the next day, then is sent to Kem the day after. Tchernavin is one of few memoirists to depict such a scene. Ilgin is

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 36–37.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 37.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

allowed a few audiences with parishioners and his nephew before he leaves, but most of the memoirists had no one to see them off, even if the possibility presented itself.¹⁴⁸

As he leaves Moscow for Solovki, Qureshi describes the crowds of relatives and friends who see the prisoners off, while he, “as the lone Hindu, no one saw me off and no one cried for me.”¹⁴⁹ Qureshi demonstrates an endless capacity to make friends wherever he goes, but also emphasizes his loneliness as the only person of his kind (Indian, “Hindu-Muslim,” British citizen, Japanese businessman). He concludes this lament poetically, with the image of nature mourning for him instead: “But nature did not forget me—it was pouring rain.”¹⁵⁰

More than one memoirist lingers on the confused spectacle of prisoners being marched across Moscow or Saint Petersburg from the prison to the train station. Tchernavin describes the experience as a pointless and exhausting game of cat and mouse, where prisoners are shunted into side streets and moved from one platform to another.¹⁵¹ Then the prisoners are stuffed into specially outfitted prisoner train cars, often called “Stolypin cars.” Ilgin describes being taken in the middle of the night and literally stuffed into these train cars: “We were packed into prison wagons, into iron cages, where we could neither sit nor lie down because of the overcrowding.”¹⁵²

Bezsonov describes his various experiences with transit leading up to his arrest and sentence to SLON, and when he reaches his final transit to SLON, he is reflective and describes

¹⁴⁸ Malsagoff, Zaitsev, and Bezsonov are displaced White Officers, and besides that Bezsonov is a fugitive from justice. Grube and Qureshi are foreigners with no support system in the country (although both make friends wherever they go). Aliakhnovich and Cederholm describe being abandoned by their friends in Minsk and Saint Petersburg, although Aliakhnovich adds a final audience with his elderly mother in the Belarusian translation of his memoir.

¹⁴⁹ Qureshi, “Piat' let,” 108.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 233–235.

¹⁵² Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 56.

everything in contrast to previous experiences. Due to his religious experience while in solitary confinement, Bezsonov's mindset is also completely changed from his previous *etaps*. He is quite explicit on this point: "Everything was the same outwardly: the prison yard, the escort, the railway station; but I was different, my ideas and general outlook on life were changed. I think my thoughts were clearer and simpler; [...] I was trying to be a Christian in the true sense of the word."¹⁵³ His journey to Kem takes three days by train and goes rather smoothly. While traveling, he is particularly attentive to the experiences of others in his cabin, particularly a group of women; he listens to their stories and witnesses the sexualized degradation of these prisoners by guards and officers.

Among the memoirists, Bezsonov is lucky in his neighbors. In the transit cells and train cars, prisoners have little choice in whom they spend the journey. As the memoirists present it, the makeup of prisoners during *etap* is more haphazard than in the prisons: memoirists are exposed to new groups of prisoners (especially convicted former Chekists) and reunite with old friends. Zaitsev describes cells "packed with prisoners from all walks of life":

all categories of criminality: here were the intelligentsia, the highest clergymen—archbishops, bishops—and alongside the, in overwhelming numbers, representatives of the criminal underworld—murderers, robbers, horse thieves, swindlers, pickpockets, and other criminals; all together in one seething crowd.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 198.

¹⁵⁴ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 37.

Here Zaitsev lists the variety of prisoners who are perhaps most relevant to him: his peers among the intelligentsia, respected clergymen, and a remarkable variety of criminals. Memoirists frequently use such lists to emphasize the diversity of prisoners they encountered, all dependent on their personal observations and interests. Ilgin also highlights the confluence of clergymen and criminals, for example, while Lenardowicz lists the Poles he encounters. Qureshi notes groups of students, anyone who speaks English, and anyone who is Japanese or “Hindu-Muslim.” Tchernavin and Danzas mention Russian peasants as a positive group in contrast to the criminals that surround them, and Aliakhnovich depicts the broad diversity of nationality, ethnicity, and religious confession that surrounds him to emphasize the extent of the GPU’s hold over the Soviet population.¹⁵⁵

As part of this diversity, every memoirist is exposed to the criminal milieu at this point in the narrative. While some memoirists, especially Bezsonov, were already familiar with the criminals who make up a large portion of those heading to SLON, for Aliakhnovich, etap is his first encounter with the “criminal element.”¹⁵⁶ With little emotion, Aliakhnovich points out that criminals housed with political prisoners quickly take the upper hand, robbing and threatening the “politicals.” Prison authorities are no use, he notes, and appealing to the guards or wardens only risks “bloody revenge” (*krwawa zemsta*) from the criminals.¹⁵⁷ Like Aliakhnovich, many memoirists remark on the small number of guards compared to the number of prisoners, realizing their defenselessness against attacks from fellow prisoners.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 99.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 31.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 32.

¹⁵⁸ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 35–36; Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 297; and Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 337.

When Cederholm hears that his transit company might include criminal prisoners, and he explains the changes in GPU practices that led to a glut of criminals being sent to SLON along with the political prisoners. According to Cederholm, the GPU had been ordered to crack down on rising criminality and hooliganism and had responded by making repeat offenders eligible for exile to the Solovetsky Islands or Siberia.¹⁵⁹ Luckily, Cederholm's party has only a few criminals and he writes, "as they were only a small minority, we were assured at least of peace among ourselves."¹⁶⁰ Cederholm and his fellow prisoners' apprehension and anticipation of what is to come informs the phrase "at least."

Immediately after he is sentenced, Ilgin is prepared for transport to the Solovetsky Islands. He briefly returns to his cell and gathers his things, saying farewell to the men he has spent almost three months with in the cell. Then he is taken to a transit cell in a different part of the jail. The contrast between his previous accommodations and this cell is stark: "I ended up in a truly hellish cell, filled with all sorts of scum awaiting exile. They were mostly criminals, bandits, and thieves who speculated in foreign currency. This is where the real hell began: the vilest curses, quarrels, disputes, and fights."¹⁶¹ In total, Ilgin's journey lasts nearly three weeks under difficult and physically dangerous conditions. But as Ilgin describes it, the most difficult part of the journey was bearing the company of the "animal-people (criminals)."¹⁶²

Malsagoff also meets face-to-face with the Russian criminal milieu at this point in his narrative. He refers to them as *shpana*, defining this term as "the ordinary criminals who play so

¹⁵⁹ Cederholm (*In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 255–256) cites an order from 1924, likely related to the October 1924 adoption of a new criminal code with harsh punishments for both counterrevolutionaries and criminal defendants.

¹⁶⁰ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 267.

¹⁶¹ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 55.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 56.

singular a role in all the Russian prisons, camps and places of exile.”¹⁶³ Malsagoff describes them as “[c]ompletely bestialised,” compulsively gambling away their belongings, naked (their clothes lost at cards) and covered in lice, suffering from scurvy, constantly robbing the other prisoners and always at odds with the prison guards, who beat them mercilessly.

Zaitsev, too, is exposed to criminals and criminality at this stage, and over several pages he describes the special treatment granted to the “criminal element” in the Soviet Union, from special privileges while in prison to early release.¹⁶⁴ Zaitsev lays out the distinctions among political prisoners, counterrevolutionaries, and criminals in a simple and well-informed way, explaining the origins of this situation with some irony:

In the proletarian state, the criminal element (in its pure form, without counterrevolutionaries) is considered the pride and glory of the proletarian state. Not a few high-ranking figures of the proletarian dictatorship have emerged from its ranks, and the criminal world has provided many to serve in the ranks of the GPU. How, then, could they suddenly be isolated as people of the lowest moral standing, as depraved individuals. Come now!! That would be an insult to the proletarian state.¹⁶⁵

Zaitsev’s insights into the privileged status of criminals within the Soviet system reveal a deeper irony about the state’s values, where common criminals were upheld as pillars of the proletariat. This sharp contrast between the treatment of political prisoners and criminals sets the stage for the frustrations and tensions that often erupted during etap. The harsh conditions of transport—

¹⁶³ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 34.

¹⁶⁴ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 37.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

marked by deprivation and uncertainty—only amplified these divisions, leading to organized protests by political prisoners, as Malsagoff vividly recounts in his description of their defiant resistance en route to SLON.

During the journey, the lack of food, water, fresh air, and information about what is happening gives rise to speculation and frustration, and revolts are common among groups of prisoners who quickly organize protests. Malsagoff, for example, admiringly describes the political prisoners' principled protests on the train to SLON and mentions two other groups of students who revolt in transit to SLON.¹⁶⁶

Etap is also one of the crucial periods when memoirists learn from fellow prisoners about the Solovetsky Islands and the camp there, and the diversity of prisoners that can be encountered in transit means that former prisoners of SLON meet future prisoners and describe the camp to them, whether in transit prisons or in the likely event that a released prisoner is being returned to the camp to serve another sentence.

Another key aspect of etap is that death is very frequent, much more frequent than in prisons. In prison, executions happen regularly, but prisoners rarely encounter the corpses of their fellow prisoners. In transit, prisoners are forced to walk long distances, travel in the most uncomfortable and unsanitary conditions, and illnesses and injuries are left untreated. Extremely limited rations, often distributed once before a journey of several days, and a severe lack of water heighten the danger of starvation. Guards, outnumbered and with little control over the situation themselves, leave prisoners in insane and deadly conditions. Horrific and preventable situations are common, as when entire train cars, stuffed with two or three times the number of people the car is designed for, die for lack of air.

¹⁶⁶ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 126–127.

The inherent ironies of movement in captivity are reflected in the circularity and smallness of *etap*. During *etap*, memoirists describe a desire for the next stage, hoping for relief from its privations. However, arrival at one's destination is no relief from the relentless difficulties of incarceration; memoirists quickly learn that *etap* is a fairly good indicator of what life is like at the camp. For example, the Chekists and criminals that memoirists encounter in transit usually prove to be significant upon arrival. While there are major differences between *etap* and camp, memoirists report a false expectation among prisoners that things will be better at the camp. As Cederholm writes: "We all heaved a sigh of relief when we reached Kem station. Alas! Our real sufferings were only beginning."¹⁶⁷

Etap, a form of travel writing embedded in these carceral narratives, takes memoirists from sentencing to arrival at SLON by "stages." Some memoirists, particularly those writing for foreign readers, explain this unique system of prison transport (one with a long tradition in the Russian empire). Still, Danzas insists that "It is almost impossible to convey any idea of the prisoners' journey 'by stages.'"

The narrative tone in these sequences varies greatly. Some authors maintain their credibility with impersonal language, like Malsagoff and Zaitsev's insistence on detached observation of the difficult conditions. Others, like Lenardowicz, insist on detail and specificity in their accounts, which lends a sense of realism to the narrative. Bezsonov is quite reflective, thinking about his personal transformation and finding particular empathy for the women and children in his train car. Vladimir Tchernavin invokes some unexpected pathos in his farewell with his son, but quickly moves back into a detailed but less emotional description of his

¹⁶⁷ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 276.

experiences in transit. Others, like Cederholm, give in to the despair of the moment. Despite his efforts to delay being sent to SLON, he is trapped “in the clutches of the Tcheka.” Likewise, Qureshi expresses his intense loneliness when there is no one to give him a farewell on his way to SLON.

As the conditions of etap are typically more disgusting and deadly than conditions in prison, the imagery of this section tends to be quite graphic, even when the tone is direct, dry, or ironic. Ilgin’s direct comparisons to hell and Cederholm’s shit-stained breadcrumbs are certainly at the forefront in this regard. Ilgin’s use of religious imagery underscores the extreme suffering and moral corruption of the prison environment, while Cederholm’s visceral depictions of filth evoke horror and disgust in readers.

The appearance of petty criminals who steal from and beat their fellow prisoners adds to the chaos and fear in the overstuffed train cars and transit cells. Malsagoff contrasts the gallant former White Officers with the bestialized “mass” of criminals, other memoirists (Bezsonov and Tchernavin) are open to making the acquaintance of these prisoners and depict positive interactions with them.

The unwilling convergence of many different groups (counterrevolutionaries, criminals, political prisoners and former Chekists) leads to a diversity of interactions that portend future social hierarchies at the labor camp. The political prisoners are almost an alien society to most of the memoirists, who describe their group solidary and vocal protests with a mixture of envy and annoyance. While the criminals are a relatively stable threat in transit and later at the camp, the memoirists also interact in relatively benign ways with the ex-Chekists who will become their future guards at the camp. Cederholm’s unlikely acquaintance with the cocaine-sniffing ex-Chekist is a particularly dramatic example of this phenomenon, while Tchernavin writes that he

and his fellow counterrevolutionaries are surprised to learn that their former cellmates, now revealed to be members of the OGPU, will serve as their future guards, foreman, “and especially educators.”¹⁶⁸

Because *etap* is so hellish for so many of the memoirists, this section is often characterized by declarative statements of purpose and conclusions about human nature. Religious memoirists (Danzas, Ilgin, Bezsonov, Qureshi) express their faith and core beliefs, and Ilgin gives thanks to god for preserving him throughout the ordeal.

For some additional context, Tatyana Tchernavin, who was never subject to *etap*, gives an interesting account of civilian travel to Kem. A key difference between carceral and non-carceral travel to Kem is of course the agency that Tatyana exercises throughout the planning of the visit—she and her son Andrei pore over maps and discuss the geography of the Russian North. However, she describes her choices as limited and emphasizes the lack of information available to her. Like the other memoirists, she is forced to solicit information about the journey from other travelers and less than helpful railroad agents. This necessitates the same kind of secondhand information sharing (gossip, rumors, and speculation) that prisoners resort to inside the Stolypin cars. Instead of being deprived of food by guards, there is simply no food for her to buy, for example, and nowhere to rest when she reaches Kem. Despite the stark difference in agency, Tatyana Tchernavin’s civilian journey shares striking parallels with the prisoners’ *etap*, as both experiences are marked by uncertainty, deprivation, and a reliance on fragmented, secondhand information—revealing how even those outside the carceral system grappled with the broader inefficiencies and hardships of early Soviet infrastructure.

¹⁶⁸ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 241.

C. Arrival to Kem

Kem, a small village on the White Sea, was the last stop on the mainland for prisoners headed to the Solovetsky Islands. Most memoirists spend time at the Popov Island transit camp just outside Kem on their way to the Solovetsky Islands; even prisoners who spend just a few days there experience an inspection, their first quarantine in the dismal wooden barracks, and some form of work assignment at the camp. Memoirists, who refer to this site as both “Kem” and “Popov Island,” note the terrible conditions in the barracks and the brutal treatment of prisoners by camp leaders. For those who never went to the Solovetsky Islands, the SLON transit camp a few miles from the village of Kem on Popov Island is their final stop before escape or release. Memoirists who did go to the islands and were sent back to the mainland via Kem as well, so some amount of time at Kem/Popov Island bookends every trip to the islands.

Most of the memoirists describe the geography and climate of the Solovetsky archipelago in detail, but descriptions of the Popov Island camp tend to be less thorough. Bezsonov, who does not describe the main archipelago at all, does give a thorough overview of Popov Island. First, he categorizes Popov Island as “one of the Solovetski group” and gives its dimensions (“it covers an area of about two by one and a half miles.”) Bezsonov then gives some historical context that other memoirists reserve for depictions of the islands in this description: “In former times it used to serve as a place of embarkation for monks and pilgrims, on their way to the well-known monastery of Solovetski. Now it is the worst ‘penal camp’ of the whole group.”¹⁶⁹

Bezsonov and Tchernavin give the most thorough descriptions of the Popov Island camp, and neither are particularly flattering to the place. Tchernavin explains that it is a tidal island

¹⁶⁹ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 202–203. It is not clear whether “the whole group” refers to all the GPU camps or the camp sites that make up SLON.

covered in and surrounded by swamps and declares that “Once it had been thickly wooded, but now only a few crooked trees remain.” Aside from the camp itself, the island is covered with “polar birches spread along the ground and moss bogs alternat[ing] with enormous granite rocks polished by ice floes.”¹⁷⁰ Bezsonov, writing half a decade earlier, also notes the lack of trees and bushes, at least on the half of the island where the camp was located.¹⁷¹ They also list the buildings and structures that make up the camp. Bezsonov mentions the watchtowers, main office, and various barracks for different groups (Chekists, women convicts, and male convicts). Along with these living quarters, the camp has a few workshops, a bathhouse, and kitchen facilities. (Tchernavin, writing years later, also describes a huge sawmill and ports for foreign ships exporting lumber.¹⁷²) Bezsonov explains the origins of the camp, “begun during the construction of the Petrograd-Murmansk railway” and used by the British during their occupation of Karelia during the Civil War. Bezsonov notes with bitter irony that the railway workers built the barracks, the British installed electricity at the camp, “and last of all the Bolsheviks added the cells. That was their only contribution!”¹⁷³

1. *Prison gates*

Another important feature of the camp for memoirists is the Popov Island camp’s entry gate, which often serves as a jumping-off point for larger reflections on the memoirists’ experiences or the nature of Soviet imprisonment. Cederholm’s account sweeps through the village of Kem to “an open space surrounded by several lines of barbed wire.” Then he notes the

¹⁷⁰ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 240.

¹⁷¹ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 202–203.

¹⁷² Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 240.

¹⁷³ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 202–203.

“yellow wooden gates [...] adorned with the Soviet arms, the sickle and hammer, and below these was the inscription ‘Special clearing station of the administration of the Solovetsky camps for special purposes.’” Then the gates were “opened wide” and the prisoners enter the camp. The camp beyond this gate is unimpressive, “a wide space with a flooring of planks, on both sides of which were six long wooden one-storied huts. A fine rain was still falling, and beyond the huts we could see a grey, uninviting sea, some rocks, and scanty marshland vegetation.”¹⁷⁴ Years later, when Tchernavin arrives at the same camp, the plain yellow gates have been decorated with fir branches and boast two placards: “LONG LIVE MAY 1ST, THE HOLIDAY OF THE WORKERS OF THE ENTIRE WORLD!” and “WELCOME!” Tchernavin responds incredulously: “I could not help laughing; Soviet hypocrisy and conceit cannot be excelled. ‘What do you think,’ asked my neighbor, ‘is it a joke, for foreigners or for a moving picture?’”¹⁷⁵ The gate, a seemingly mundane structure, takes on an extraordinary role in these memoirs, symbolizing both the brutal control of the Soviet regime and the slim hope of freedom.

In his memoir, Bezsonov presents the gates of various Soviet prisons as charged spaces that evoke both fear and hope, offering a deeper glimpse into the psychological toll of imprisonment. He depicts several important scenes at the gates of various prisons across the Soviet Union. These are accounts of emotionally charged partings of friends that emphasize Bezsonov’s loneliness and fear of separation from loved ones. The gates of the SLON camp are quite different in Bezsonov’s account, and the distinction lies in the differences between prisons and labor camps. The crux of this difference can be explained by the to the concept of the “Big Zone” and “Little Zone” that developed in the twentieth century, although the distinction is not a

¹⁷⁴ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 278.

¹⁷⁵ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 240–241.

feature of these early accounts. While prison gates separate prisoners from the outside world, especially family members and loved ones waiting outside, labor camp gates connect the prisoners to forced labor at worksites outside the actual camp. Prisoners move through the gates every day, leaving and returning on a regular schedule.

When Bezsonov first arrives at the Popov Island camp, he does ascribe a similar feeling of dread, finality, and fate to the experience of walking through the camp gates that he expresses in earlier references to prison gates. However, once he enters these gates, the experience of being at SLON is totally new and topsy-turvy. Instead of chaos waiting outside the gates, chaos meets them inside:

The prison authorities received us inside the gates; they counted and inspected us. Members of the Cheka, the local ‘aristocracy,’ came to meet us; they were dressed in various costumes, but all had some red on their caps or somewhere about them. They amused themselves by reviewing and drilling us. It was a hideous spectacle; they made game of us, jeered, howled, imitated military commands. There were about a hundred of us, hungry, exhausted, half-frozen men; they must have been about twenty-five; what they wanted and what we were expected to do, neither we nor they knew. They were utterly degraded; brutalized creatures who found pleasure in screaming, shrieking, yelling and taunting us.¹⁷⁶

The gate is also the symbol of Bezsonov’s eventual escape. Shortly after his arrival, Bezsonov begins to plot his escape in collaboration with Malsagoff and two other prisoners. The camp

¹⁷⁶ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 203.

gates, the last place where camp authorities scrutinize prisoners as they leave for work, begin to symbolize the dangers of their plan: they debate whether to bring supplies through the gate for fear they will be searched, and on the day of the escape they narrowly avoid an encounter with a company commander with a particular hatred for Malsagoff.¹⁷⁷ Bezsonov's anxiety reaches a tipping point as they cross the camp gate:

I expected him to stop us, to prevent Malsagov from going out of the camp, and also, to search us. Suspicion would be aroused; we would all be shot! Luckily he was looking the other way, when we passed him.

We went through the gate. It was a lovely spring day; the sun shone brightly.¹⁷⁸

Although their task is not completed when they leave the camp gates, suddenly their escape seems possible once they are outside of the camp. The group does manage to escape, and after a month of hiking across Karelia they arrive in Finland much worse for the wear.

Memoirists describe the gates at the Popov Island camp in literal and metaphorical terms as a barrier between the camp and the outside world. Bezsonov's account demonstrates the transformation of the prison gates as a symbolic space in the Russian prison tradition. For memoirists like Cederholm, Tchernavin, and Bezsonov, these gates represent more than mere entrances or exits—they embody the tension between entrapment and liberation. Whether marking the start of brutal labor, the end of personal autonomy, or the hope for an uncertain escape, these gates are pivotal to understanding the experience of Soviet imprisonment.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 226, 228.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

2. Arrival to Kem

According to Cederholm, the trip between the Kem train station and the “clearing camp” (presumably Popov Island) was about 7.5 miles.¹⁷⁹ He spends a few days at the camp and describes the routine there—breakfast, inspection, work assignments, lunch, etc. Cederholm is particularly interested to learn that most of the camp is staffed by imprisoned ex-Chekists, with only a few free men on site. He illustrates the internal order of the camp with a shocking story: as soon as the convoy of prisoners arrives, all the ex-Chekists, even the cocaine-addled ex-Chekist that Cederholm sat with on the train, are recruited from among the ranks to serve as barracks heads and guards.

Bezsonov describes arriving at the Kem train station at dusk (4 pm), then the prisoners walk “only a mile” to the Popov Island camp, where they see “the high wooden wall and solid gateway of the Solovetski ‘special camp.’”¹⁸⁰ While marching into the camp, Bezsonov depicts a gloomy mood among the prisoners, reflecting that: “The thought of entering that notorious jail, from which there was very little chance of ever escaping, made us all feel very dejected and downhearted; *even the real criminals*, who always make the best of everything and feel at home in all kinds of prisons, looked depressed and melancholy” (emphasis mine).¹⁸¹

Arriving at the Popov Island camp, Ilgin is subjected to a typical “welcome” scene: newly arrived prisoners undergo a thorough and humiliating search of their persons and belongings, then the group is lined up in extreme weather (in Ilgin’s case, extreme cold) to

¹⁷⁹ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 277; Below, Bezsonov and Zaitsev will give different estimates of the distance between railway and camp.

¹⁸⁰ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 201; other memoirists will describe the same march as incredibly onerous.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 202.

undergo a “ceremony” in which the exhausted prisoners are instructed in the ways of the camp. Ilgin notes in particular the blasphemous contents of this introductory speech: “His entire speech was interwoven with the vilest curses directed against God and the Saints. He insulted everyone, calling them the lowest scoundrels and rascals, hurling the filthiest curses and insults.”¹⁸² While Ilgin’s first encounter with the camp is marked by a dehumanizing ceremony and the blasphemous rants of the guards, Zaitsev’s arrival at Kem highlights a different form of degradation, as he is mocked for his belongings and forced to endure hours of exposure while his possessions are searched—a harbinger of the mistreatment awaiting him at SLON.

Zaitsev arrives at Kem early in the morning and must carry his significant baggage (two suitcases and a few other bags) by himself from the train station to the camp, which he describes as a long trip.¹⁸³ All the while, the guards mock him for his excessive baggage and promise that he’ll be dealt with harshly at the camp. Zaitsev’s notoriety and special status begins to become clear in his account of these interactions.¹⁸⁴ The prisoners arrive at the Kem camp and stand outside for five hours on the wooden planks between the barracks while their bags are searched.

Zaitsev also describes the quasi-military introduction to the camp, calling it a “drill”: the entire group of prisoners stands for at least an hour and shouts “Zdra!”¹⁸⁵ over and over until the guards are satisfied with the exhausted prisoners’ performance. The prisoners are then divided into work details based on health and skill, and Zaitsev, assigned to the lowest category of labor, helps to move wheelbarrows full of sand along with a group of clergymen. They work from 2 pm to 7 pm, then are able to return to the barracks, where Zaitsev manages to find room for all his

¹⁸² Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 56.

¹⁸³ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 47.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁸⁵ Shortened form of “Здравствуйте” used commonly in military settings.

baggage in his assigned 20 centimeters of bunk space thanks to the “inventiveness” of soviet prisoners.¹⁸⁶ After a pitiful dinner of black bread and hot water, the prisoners are subjected to an evening search.

3. Barracks

The flimsy and disgusting barracks at Kem are the most commented on feature of the camps. For a writer as concise as Danzas, it is notable that the barracks are almost the only thing she mentions. She arrives at Kem in September when it is still possible to transport prisoners across the White Sea, and only spends “two or three days in an awful hut with two storeys of nary as overcrowded as those of the car” before her transport to the Big Solovetsky Island.¹⁸⁷ Like Danzas, Qureshi arrives in summer and is slated for quick transport to the archipelago, but at Kem he imagines how difficult it would be to stay in the flimsy wooden barracks over the long northern winter.¹⁸⁸

Grube also focuses on these barracks in his account of the camp, emphasizing that few people outside of the camp could have any idea that such conditions were possible.¹⁸⁹ Grube highlights the impossible number of prisoners and the freezing cold in his description:

No imagination can fathom what happens in these barracks. It is impossible to leave them at night. And in the mornings, when we are woken up, we have to walk over people’s heads, arms, and chests. They sleep in several layers, like railroad ties stacked

¹⁸⁶ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 49–50.

¹⁸⁷ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 29.

¹⁸⁸ Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 114.

¹⁸⁹ Grube, “Rasskaz,” 205.

together, just to keep warm. For the barracks remain unheated in 45 degree frost.¹⁹⁰

Grube's observations seem slightly impressionistic and under-informed. He hazards a guess as to the origins of the barracks: "These barracks resemble wartime field barracks for prisoners."¹⁹¹ He writes that, while he was at Kem, barracks intended for 200–300 people are stuffed with up to 2,000 prisoners.

Zaitsev is a bit more informed regarding the barracks and gives an overview of their issues: the eight barracks on the islands were built in 1918 by British troops and were intended as temporary summer quarters, housing 120 people per barracks. Just as the prisons and train cars were severely overcrowded, so were the barracks: the Soviets had outfitted these flimsy wooden buildings with rows of bunks accommodating 500 prisoners, each of whom was entitled to about 20 centimeters' width of one bunk. Zaitsev understatedly remarks: "On such a narrow plank of the bunk, one can only lie on their side, and even then, only if they are of a small build."¹⁹²

Ilgin also describes the living conditions as "horrible," explaining that the barracks were built by the British during the occupation of Archangelsk and describing the unbearable atmosphere inside them: "downright deadly stuffiness" due to the overcrowding; nowhere to sit, only room to lie down on one's side in the allotted 25 centimeters of bunk, the only "privileged place" being the floor under the bunks, and freezing cold mitigated only by the heat of "human bodies like living furnaces."¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 49–50.

¹⁹³ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 57.

Bezsonov's description of the same barracks is just as evocative, describing the overstuffed room where:

People slept almost on top of each other; the air was stifling. Moans and cries were often heard; whether they proceeded from those who were asleep, or those awake, it was hard to say; what was certain was that they were cries of distress and suffering. The men who had toiled all day in the frost had their well-earned rest: 14 inches of hard boards in a stinking, crowded, draughty den. This was the "merciful prison regime."¹⁹⁴

Worse than the overcrowding for Bezsonov is the overpowering stench in the barracks ("unwashed humanity, fish, old clothes, bad tobacco and damp; it was a combination of all these smells").¹⁹⁵ He observes his fellow prisoners, taking in their "worn and exhausted" faces as they crowd near one of two dim lamps and pick the lice off their clothing.

After he arrives at Popov Island, Lenardowicz's exhaustion is overwhelmed by his visceral reaction to the smelly, slimy, wet bunks: "It was difficult to sleep in such conditions, but fatigue overcame us and we soon fell into the sleep of the righteous."¹⁹⁶ Lenardowicz supposes that these conditions were somehow designed to "prepare prisoners for the worse conditions that awaited them on the Solovetsky Islands,"¹⁹⁷ but the claim is rather speculative. In the case of the Kem barracks and other unbearable situations that prisoners are subjected to, contingency, graft, and neglect seem to be the overarching cause rather than intentional cruelty.

¹⁹⁴ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 207.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁹⁶ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 19.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

4. Comparison to/expectation for Solovetsky Islands

At Kem, prisoners' fears about the Solovetsky Islands grow, intensified by the knowledge that many of them will soon be sent there. The closer they get to the islands, the more reality replaces speculation, heightening their sense of isolation and dread. Not every prisoner will be sent to the islands from Kem: prisoners who arrive at Kem during the winter may never make it to the islands for a variety of reasons (illness, death, transfer to another part of SLON¹⁹⁸), while other prisoners may be stationed permanently at Kem as tree fellers. As the 1920s wore on, the islands became less central to the function of the camp, and the headquarters of SLON were even transferred to Kem briefly in 1929. By the time Tchernavin arrives in the 1930s, he does not expect to be sent to the islands at all.¹⁹⁹

In the "heyday" of the camp on the islands, however, prisoners were kept in limbo regarding their fate. The day after Zaitsev arrives at Kem in June 1925, the prisoners are divided into those who will stay there and those who will go to the Solovetsky Islands. As Zaitsev writes, the odds are high that he will be sent to the islands along with the other counterrevolutionaries, the clergymen and, "in short, the entirety of the intelligentsia, for the most part, is exiled to the

¹⁹⁸ Aliakhnovich, for example, is moved from Kem to Miah, another island in the White Sea, where he spends several months working in the forests before he is eventually transported to the Solovetsky islands.

¹⁹⁹ Vladimir Tchernavin, a fishing expert, is assigned to Kem and spends time at a series of work sites along the Karelian coastline. Another author not discussed here, Walenty Woronowicz, was sent to SLON in the 1930s and worked as an accountant in the Kem office, expresses a desire to visit the islands while he is there. He does manage to visit on a three-day work trip before he is sent to Kolyma. As a counterexample, Semen Pidhajnyj was sent to the islands in the mid-1930s and stayed there until the camp was emptied of prisoners in 1937.

Solovetsky Islands, where they drain the cup of suffering.”²⁰⁰ At Kem, he writes, Zaitsev and his fellow prisoners are more and more isolated from the outside world.²⁰¹

While most prisoners hope to avoid being sent to the Solovetsky Islands, Qureshi insists on being sent there despite his poor health. When he arrives at the transit camp, the doctor who heads the hospital immediately tries to send him back to Saint Petersburg, but he insists on going to Solovki. He recounts the conversation:

I want to send you back to Peter[sburg].

For God’s sake, don’t do this,—I pleaded,—let me get to Solovki!

She thought about it and agreed: “Well, okay, there will be a steamer tonight. Be ready.”²⁰²

Qureshi is sent over on the *Neva*, and is immediately taken to the monastery hospital upon arrival at the Bay of Felicity. Qureshi does not fully explain his insistence on going to SLON, although his distaste for the Popov Island camp may have contributed to it.

While some prisoners endure harsher conditions at Kem, others like Cederholm are left in a temporary state of limbo, awaiting their fate at the transit barracks. Cederholm is and his convoy are eventually taken to their barracks, which he describes as “quite empty,” explaining that while the other huts “were all crammed,” this barracks was reserved for “parties passing through to the Solovetsky camp.” Cederholm’s description of the barracks is rather unemotional and he doesn’t mention any disturbing smells or abject misery, at least in the barracks where he

²⁰⁰ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 51.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁰² Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 114.

stays in his short time at Kem. The unfortunate prisoners in the other eleven barracks, he explains, will remain at Kem over the winter on lumber detail in the forests around the camp.²⁰³

Whether destined for the infamous islands or left behind at Kem, prisoners faced an unpredictable future. Zaitsev, Qureshi, and Cederholm illustrate the diverse responses to their time at Kem: resignation, insistence, and quiet observation of worse conditions for other prisoners.

5. Vladimir and Tatyana Tchernavin

The Kem of the Tchernavins' time (1931–1932) has many differences from the Kem that earlier memoirists saw, thanks in large part to changes in the camp administration that moved the center of the camp's operations away from the Solovetsky Islands and onto the mainland, first at Kem and later at Medvezhka. However, many of its features remained the same, including the barracks built for "temporary use" in 1918.

Like Zaitsev, Tchernavin explains the significance of the Popov Island camp as the main transit point for the Solovetsky Camp (by the 1930s when Tchernavin went to SLON, much of the camp's operations had been moved to this camp from the islands). He also discusses the camp's significance in the lumber trade, drawing a stark picture of a deforested and swampy tidal island with little charm. As he walks into the camp, Tchernavin lingers for a moment on the camp's gates (see above).²⁰⁴ Tchernavin finds the camp to be full of further hypocrisies and contradictions, along with the expected poor treatment of prisoners. Prisoners are first sorted: ex-

²⁰³ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 279.

²⁰⁴ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 239–241.

Chekists and former Red Army soldiers are identified for future work at the camp, the criminals are separated from the counterrevolutionaries:

“Who will these be?” I asked my neighbor. We could not then imagine that these criminals would become the rank and file of our guards, supervisors, foremen and especially educators. Now only peasants, intellectuals and workmen were left—they were the real prisoners and would have to work.²⁰⁵

In the same procedure that Cederholm reported in the 1925, Tchernavin watches the former GPU and Red Army prisoners change into guard uniforms and begin to corral the other prisoners while the camp commandant begins a long speech that ends with his insistence that “I’ll inject proletarian psychology into you!”²⁰⁶ This is a version of the same arrival speech that Ilgin described in the late 1920s.

After a dismal lunch, the prisoners are taken to the bathhouse and shaved, treated to another pathetic meal (Tchernavin writes that this is the beginning of a case of scurvy that will plague him for the rest of his life).²⁰⁷ Then another humiliation, when a plucky young prostitute comes into the barracks to shake the prisoners down for a “voluntary subscription” to a loan scheme. To Tchernavin’s surprise, many of his fellow prisoners subscribe, promising money they don’t have to appease the scornful proletarian.

Because Tchernavin was sent to the camp relatively late, in 1931, we can see the changes in Soviet practices and at the camp. The camp commandant mentions nothing of “Solovetsky Power” as in earlier accounts, instead emphasizing the proletarian emphasis of the camp and the

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 241.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 244.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 246.

requirement that prisoners submit to re-education. The various schemes that prisoners are subjected to (later a barber arrives at the barracks and offers to repair the poor work of the bathhouse attendants for a fee) reveal the grey market that had grown along with the camp.

While Vladimir's experience in the camp exposes the harsh realities of life as a prisoner, Tatyana's journey to Kem highlights the challenges faced by civilians trying to navigate the convoluted and disorganized system surrounding the camps. Once at Kem, Tatyana describes the confusion and limited resources available to civilians, even those rare people with money to spend. The train arrives at 3 am and the usual bus into Kem, scheduled for 8 or 9 am, has been cancelled because the bus is broken down. The train station itself is full of a seething mass of human bodies, which Tatyana Tchernavin depicts in visceral terms:

People were going in and out of the creaking station door and immediately disappearing in the darkness. We went in and drew back in alarm, but we were being pushed from behind, and so had to move forward. The whole place was completely filled with people, lying and sitting on their bags and wooden boxes. The foul-smelling air was thick and steamy. A small lamp was burning dimly under the ceiling. People were going through the room, stepping over those who slept on the floor. My son was frightened. He did not know how to move without stepping on someone. In the corner two men were quarrelling, on the point of a fight.²⁰⁸

Tatyana and her son spend a few moments in the less-crowded buffet until they are cleared out ("It's the rule," The attendant answers when Tatyana asks why the buffet is closing.

²⁰⁸ Tatyana Tchernavin, *Escape*, 180–181.

“The buffet opens for half an hour when the train comes in and then shuts again.”²⁰⁹) In the meantime, a local peasant woman has made Tatyana’s acquaintance and offers to let her stay with her during the visit (at the rate of 3 rubles a day).

After a long march through the mud to from the train station to the village, they settle in at their boarding house. The house itself is warm, cozy and very clean, a shock to the exhausted and filthy Tchernavin family.

Due to the recent move of administrative headquarters from Kem to Medvezhka, there is a lot of confusion over whether Tatyana and Andrei will be permitted to speak to Vladimir. They are able to see him regardless, as all the prisoners in the small village of Kem walk past the house where Tatyana is staying on their way to work. Most of their day is spent trying to communicate with Vladimir in nods and clandestine conversations, or in the various GPU offices trying to find out the status of the permit allowing them to visit. By the afternoon, the permit has been approved and the family is allowed to meet openly. The machinations required to set up the meeting, and the meeting itself where they decide to escape together, are the focus of the rest of the section.

Once the family decide to attempt to escape from SLON to Finland, Tatyana and Andrei are totally consumed in the preparations and the details of their travel arrangements to and from the camp are subsumed into the greater issue of securing supplies that will help them escape the country. Tatyana writes that “[t]here was so much to do before going away that I hardly noticed how the weeks passed. I felt as though I had not had time to look round before we found ourselves in the train, going along the route that we remembered only too well.”²¹⁰ Indeed, she

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 181.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 218.

spends very little time describing this trip, only presenting an anecdote about their traveling companion, a group of ill-equipped students from the Forestry Institute whom Tatyana teaches about the general geography of Karelia. As soon as they arrive, the escape (and the many complications they suffer in the process) becomes the only topic of interest for Tatyana and Vladimir.

Vladimir and Tatyana's parallel struggles at Kem illustrate the pervasive dysfunction of the Soviet penal system, both for those trapped within its confines and for their loved ones on the outside. Their eventual decision to escape underscores the desperation bred by such a system, as well as the courage required to defy it. In the end, their shared determination to reunite and break free from this oppressive world becomes the heart of their story.

6. Conclusion

The first arrivals, to Kem, is one of confusion and expectation followed by harsh realities. Despite furious discussions of what is to come at the camp, none of the memoirists are prepared for the conditions and treatment of prisoners there. They meet for the first time with the quasi-military organization of the labor camp and see the juxtaposition of drunken camp administrators and miserable, exhausted prisoners. Memoirists describe these scenes and settings in detail, creating a vivid mental picture for readers. The key settings are the gates of the camp, the barracks, various worksites, and the muddy ditch between barracks where roll call is conducted.

The trope of expectation vs. reality is present throughout these descriptions of arrival to the camp. Prisoners arrive to their barracks only to stand for hours shouting "Zdra!" and listening to camp commanders' contradictory statements about the nature of power and what prisoners should expect at the camp. Memoirists might respond to this with indignation (like Ilgin's horror

at the blasphemous “litany”), but more often demonstrate some ironic distance from these experiences, like Tchernavin’s bitter laugh at the high-minded phrases on the camp gates or discussions of the litany.

D. Arrival to islands

Four of the authors surveyed here (Sozerko Malsagoff, Yuri Bezsonov, Vladimir and Tatyana Tchernavin) were never on the Solovetsky Islands proper (escaping from peripheral camps on the mainland). The Tchernavins do not attempt to describe the islands or camp there, only making reference to the camp in terms of its notoriety (Both are threatened with being sent to SLON repeatedly during their interrogations). Despite having only secondhand information about the islands and the camp there, Malsagoff still describes the conditions there, and his account in particular was influential in perceptions of the Solovetsky Islands at the time they were published.²¹¹ As such, his descriptions of the camp are included here.

Arrival entails transport across the White Sea on one of a few named ships, unloading at the Bay of Felicity, initial impressions of the monastery and natural surroundings, the separation and categorization of prisoners, seemingly endless inspections and roll calls by camp authorities, a trip to the bathhouse for disinfection, and assignment to a barracks. As at Kem, prisoners are sent for some kind of work assignments as soon as possible, whether unloading the cargo from ship, moving rocks and dirt around, or doing some other manual labor around the camp.

²¹¹ Perhaps the best example of this influence is the reaction to Malsagoff’s 1926 book, which began a furious Soviet campaign to refute his claims via the 1928 documentary film “Solovki” and Maxim Gorky’s fêted trip to the camp in 1929. Zaitsev emphasizes the stir caused by Malsagoff’s book in the introduction to his own account (*Solovki*, 3–4).

At this point in the SLON metanarrative, the overarching chronology of the memoirist's life is exchanged for thematic and anecdotal descriptions of life at the camp, and at this critical point in the composition the writer—expressed in his thoughts, ideas, invectives, laments—tends to come to the forefront. Most of the authors write this experience across two sections, ending one section with their travel towards the islands and beginning a new chapter or section with arrival at the Big Solovetsky Island. This is followed by some combination of the author's first impressions of the surroundings and his or her version of the history of the monastery and camp.

1. Travel over the White Sea

Memoirists mention the White Sea almost exclusively in conjunction with their transit to or around the islands. Their impressions of the sea vary according to their experience in transit; Cederholm produces a lyrical description of his daytime journey, when he and fellow prisoners were unexpectedly allowed to sit and rest while enjoying the view, while Danzas, who was stuffed into the ship's cargo hold with no fresh air or light for the duration of her journey (4–5 hours), hardly mentions the sea (she writes only that “even in fine weather the sea is rough and the journey is very hard for prisoners densely packed in the hold”).²¹² Ilgin splits the difference, complaining that the guards threatened to throw prisoners into the sea for demanding they open the hatch and allow some air into the compartment, explaining that he was trapped in the hold for much of the journey,²¹³ but he also recounts some pleasant images from his journey across the White Sea: “After a short rest, a few prisoners, along with their convoys, were already sailing on

²¹² Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 29.

²¹³ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 57.

the surface of the calm, azure sea. Here and there, beluga emerged from the water, searching for food in the sea's currents."²¹⁴

Zaitsev and Aliakhnovich both layer anticipation onto the sea journey. Aliakhnovich presents a general nervous anticipation of potentially better conditions on the islands, especially among prisoners with acquaintances there: "the propellers roared, the chimney spewed thick clouds of smoke, and the 'Neva,' tossed by the waves, carried us toward the unknown yet so desired Solovki."²¹⁵ Zaitsev, in contrast, describes a somber mood among prisoners fearful of what is to come. As they move away from the shore, Zaitsev writes, "each of us, silently bidding farewell to the dear earth of our forsaken native homeland... sent a final 'farewell,' parting for a long time from the familiar mainland—for a minimum of three years and up to a maximum of ten years..."²¹⁶

Grube's account is similar to Zaitsev's, writing from a collective perspective that "our hearts tightened as the steamer approached Solovki."²¹⁷ Their hearts sank because "we already knew what a terrible place it was from the stories of the prisoners, and we had some to realize for ourselves that there was no escape from this grim island of blood and tears, that surviving ten years of imprisonment was impossible, and therefore we regarded ourselves as buried alive."²¹⁸ Grube's account, recounted to a journalist in the office of an émigré newspaper, betrays some editorial interference in this gloomy image of prisoners as the living dead sailing towards inevitable pain and suffering.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 69.

²¹⁵ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 60.

²¹⁶ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 52.

²¹⁷ Grube, "Rasskaz," 198.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

Cederholm's description of the sea inverts these somber contemplations. Rather than despairing over the bleak future on the islands, Cederholm's beautiful surroundings invoke a longing for past freedom:

Leaning over the bulwarks, I gazed on the silvery surface of the expanse of sea. This sea, on a clear, sunny day, fully justifies its name "White". Far ahead could be seen the faint outlines of scattered groups of islands, to the right the vault of sky blended almost imperceptibly with the sea; to the left of our course, beyond the scarcely visible horizon, the Arctic Ocean began. The fresh sea air and the creaking of the chains of the steering-gear recalled to me my long years of service at sea, and my yearning for liberty became painfully acute.²¹⁹

In reflecting on these memoirs, the White Sea emerges not just as a geographical feature, but as a multifaceted symbol, shaped by the prisoners' varied experiences and emotional states. For some, like Cederholm, it becomes a fleeting moment of beauty and a poignant reminder of lost freedom. For others, such as Danzas, Ilgin, and Grube, it is the grim prelude to a feared and inevitable fate. Whether approached with anxious anticipation or despair, the sea journey serves as a threshold, marking the prisoners' transition from the known to the unknown—a powerful metaphor for their impending struggles on the islands.

²¹⁹ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 287.

2. Initial impressions of the monastery

The first glimpses of the Solovetsky Monastery evoke a mixture of awe and unease among several of the memoirists, as its grand yet decaying presence looms over the approaching prisoners. Cederholm is entranced by the romantic image of the monastery appearing on the horizon:

Despite the horrible desolation of the camp, the former monastery is astonishingly beautiful, seen from the steamer's deck. Over the green fir-woods rise, scattered here and there, little white chapels with bright-green conical roofs, while to the right the golden cupolas of the Kremlin cathedrals and a few green church spires are seen. As we approached the shore the Kremlin became clearer and clearer; we could plainly see the ancient moss-grown walls with towers springing out of them at the corners. All these cupolas, shorn of their characteristic emblem, the cross, make a strange impression.²²⁰

Aliakhnovich hits the same notes more concisely: “at dawn we saw the island with the silhouettes of church spires rising above it: we were approaching the mysterious Solovki.”²²¹ Both authors emphasize the eerie scene presented by the half-ruined monastery stripped of its crosses. Qureshi adds some grotesquerie to the gothic scene of the monastery walls; like Grube,²²² he writes in the collective: “our chests tightened at the sight [of the island]. A row of towers glowered at us like sentries.”²²³ Qureshi’s walls, not fully personified but compared to

²²⁰ Ibid., 292.

²²¹ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 61.

²²² Because both authors dictated their stories to different Russian émigré newspaper publishers, it is likely that this fixed phrasing reflects the editorial hand.

²²³ Qureshi, “Piat' let,” 115.

human sentry guards, are quickly replaced by the real guards, “Chekists with revolvers” waiting for the new arrivals at the pier.

Danzas and Ilgin both end one chapter with brief declarations that they arrived at SLON and begin the next chapter with comprehensive but impersonal descriptions of the islands, monastery and camp. Whether a result of this compositional strategy or the fact that both were locked in the hold on their voyages to the islands, neither author describes his or her initial impressions of the islands or their first glimpse of the monastery.²²⁴ Grube also mentions nothing in this regard. Zaitsev goes into detail about the process of arriving to the islands but does not give an impression of the monastery itself until after his arrival, focusing instead on the camp administration building located near the docks (outside the kremlin walls).

3. Arrival at the docks

Zaitsev goes beyond an initial impression of the islands, depicting the process of the ship sailing towards the Solovetsky Islands by naming each element as it becomes visible and recording the prisoners’ reaction to it. He explains that some of his fellow prisoners had already spent time on the islands, so they eagerly introduced various “objects of the opening Solovetsky panorama” to the newcomers. First and most striking is the lighthouse on Sekirnaya Gora, which returning prisoners explain is a punishment cell. Zaitsev briefly describes the conditions there and promises to describe his own experiences in “this hell of communist hell” later in the book. After considering the lighthouse, the prisoners are greeted by the Solovetsky seagulls (which

²²⁴ Perhaps these authors, all presumably Catholic (Grube was Latvian), were simply indifferent to the monastery in comparison to Russian Orthodox memoirists. Aliakhnovich, also Catholic, reports all interesting tableaux and admits that his admiration for the islands’ beauty and interest in the monastery is slightly perverse (see **SLON Imagery** below).

inspire several paragraphs, see below), then they enter the Bay of Felicity, which Zaitsev calls the “Kremlin Bay.” After their long sea voyage full of dread and anticipation, arrival at the docks seems to spur only muted curiosity. Zaitsev walks readers through the ship’s arrival at the docks, describing the location of the Kremlin administration and noting: “The Kremlin administration is waiting for us at the pier. There is no continuous cordon around the landing site, as is the case on the mainland.”²²⁵ Zaitsev goes on to detail the futility of any escape attempt from the islands.

For Qureshi, the foreboding tower-sentries in the distance are quickly replaced by the real guards, “Chekists with revolvers” waiting for the new arrivals at the pier. A crowd of curious onlookers watch as the new arrivals are sorted into groups. Sorted into a group of invalids, Qureshi completes the extended metaphor that fuses past and present, human and monastery, by calling the guard who takes them to the monastery a “‘Solovetsky Archangel’ with a rifle and bayonet.”²²⁶

The sentences that follow are in bold; Zaitsev’s narration moves to the present with the observation that many of those sent to the islands never returned, even those with short sentences. He tells readers what awaits the prisoners there: death, and ignominious burial: “Their bones are now rotting in a dump pit of human bodies (A ‘dump pit’ because in my time on Solovki, pits with a capacity of 30 human corpses were dug for burying the dead).” The chapter ends with a lament: “God, how many similar dump pits with the corpses of unknown Russians there are now on Solovki...”²²⁷

²²⁵ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 54.

²²⁶ Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 115.

²²⁷ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 52.

4. Conclusion

Arrival at the Big Solovetsky Island is both an end to the carceral journey that began with arrest and a beginning to the next stage of the prisoner's life: the dreaded Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp on the Solovetsky Islands. The narrative techniques employed at this point vary according to memoirists' compositional strategy, whether they continue to chronologically narrate their first few days at the camp or jump from arrival to topical descriptions of daily life there. Associative and anecdotal mentions of camp "lore" begin to appear more frequently in this transition, such as Aliakhnovich's aside about the future sinking of the *Neva*, as do forewarnings about what awaits prisoners at the camp (most often, death).

Memoirists are stunned by their sea voyages and curious to see the monastery for the first time, and describe these experiences in strong visual imagery. Cederholm's beautiful lines about "green fir-woods," "little white chapels," and "golden cupolas" make a striking contrast with the foreboding interpretations of the monastery walls from Aliakhnovich and Qureshi.

In their attempt to convey the place and their experiences there to readers, the memoirists employ a number of comparisons. Qureshi's use of the SLON metaphor is unique in its placement here, and certainly unique his real experiences with the animal, which he uses to explain that while a regular elephant works for people, the SLON makes people work for it. This is an interesting and very characteristic metaphor for Qureshi, but quite different from the use of this same metaphor (SLON—elephant) by Russian and European authors. The authors also use similes to compare conditions in different places (this car is as overcrowded as another, that worksite is worse than that one) and both Cederholm and Grube describe the prisoners they meet on the islands as "like the living dead." It is hard to accuse any of these authors of hyperbole, however, even when they make extreme statements, because it is true that many prisoners never

returned from SLON, and also true that a train car or ship hold with no outlet for fresh air could lead to the suffocation of those inside.

The tone of these passage moves between curiosity and somber observation, reflecting novelty of visiting this long-awaited place, quickly eclipsed by the harsh conditions there. As always, the use of irony allows prisoners to depict something and simultaneously negate it, contrasting expectations and reality. Zaitsev and Qureshi take particular note of the seagulls, first introducing them in an estranged manner (not realizing at first what they are) then remarking on the situation irony of the gulls begging for food from the starving prisoners.

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Solovetsky Island, first impressions of the surroundings, and a history of the monastery and camp.

Each memoirist takes the moment of arrival to present his or her own impressions of the camp, often developing a metaphor or reflecting on the circumstances that brought them to this point. This is a section when the overarching chronology of the memoirist's life is exchanged for thematic and anecdotal descriptions of life at the camp, and at this critical point in the composition the writer—his thoughts, ideas, invectives, laments—tends to come to the forefront.

E. Daily Life at SLON

Because many aspects of daily life at SLON are examined across this dissertation, this section is not meant to be a comprehensive review of life at the camp. Instead, a few crucial elements described by different memoirists are examined here in depth. While cultural life at the camp was remarkably vibrant, a phenomenon ably examined by Natalia Kuziakina and Andrea Gullota, among others, this section emphasizes the other side of life at SLON, from the camp personnel and rampant criminality to the daily routine imposed on prisoners.

1. Camp Personnel

The transition from prison and transport to the labor camp entails a shift in the type of supervision that prisoners are subjected to. Transit convoys are quite different from prison guards: memoirists categorize them by groups and characterize the groups as particularly fearsome, lenient, or indifferent, rarely assigning them individual agency. The convoys' indifference relates to the complex logistics of their task, compounded by the limited resources afforded to these transports that frequently leads to starvation, chaos, and death. Convoys are

only with a group of prisoners for a relatively short and proscribed term, which can also explain the mutual indifference and resentment between them and the memoirists.

At the camp, guards and officials take on new dimensions in the memoirists' characterization. Memoirists are forced into closer quarters with both guards and camp administrators. This begins as memoirists describe their arrival to the labor camp. Several give their initial impressions of the camp personnel, who tend to greet their arrival at the camp. While Qureshi presents a relatively orderly scene (a "crowd of curious onlookers" at the dock waiting behind a row of armed Chekists), Bezsonov describes the crowd of Chekists in carnivalesque terms: "they were dressed in various costumes, but all had some red on their caps or somewhere about them. They amused themselves by reviewing and drilling us. It was a hideous spectacle; they made game of us, jeered, howled, imitated military commands."²²⁸ This sort of topsy-turvydom of a farcical military order imposed on the wretched prisoners is a topic of frequent comment for memoirists. Bezsonov follows this passage with an intense and confused meeting of the prisoners and Chekists: "There were about a hundred of us, hungry, exhausted, half-frozen men; they must have been about twenty-five; what they wanted and what we were expected to do, neither we nor they knew. They were utterly degraded; brutalized creatures who found pleasure in screaming, shrieking, yelling and taunting us."²²⁹ This scene, along with the "SLON litany" or "SLON roll call," is quite typical of these accounts.

Along with elements described above, such as physical sensations, interactions with the criminal milieu, and explanations of the structure and function of the camp, memoirist emphasize the "revolving door" of Chekists who are sent to the camp as prisoners but serve as guards and

²²⁸ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 203.

²²⁹ Ibid.

administrators. No less than nine of the memoirists surveyed emphasize this point, and in very similar fashion. Malsagoff writes that “Boky, Nogteff, Eichmans, Gladkoff—these were the men who had the power. They were sent to the Solovky from Moscow by Dshershinsky [*sic*] himself. The remainder of the personnel of the Solovetsky and Kem camps were Tchekist prisoners. There were several dozen of these at the monastery and on Popoff Island.”²³⁰ Malsagoff names and characterizes the higher-ups but lands on the critical point about the nature of the camp’s personnel: they were prisoners like the counterrevolutionaries and criminals, but with the unique opportunity to change their circumstances by returning to their prior occupation.

Other memoirists emphasize the strikingly small number of “free” men at the camp. Bezsonov writes that “there were only three [free] men on Popov Island [...]; all the other posts were occupied by convicts,” a statement echoed by Cederholm: “In the whole territory of the Solovetsky concentration camp [...] there are only three free men [...]. All the other employees, whether members of the administrative staff or warders, are without exception Tchekist prisoners.”²³¹ Likewise, Ilgin names two free men at SLON (presumably limited to the islands, excluding the commander of Kem).²³² Other memoirists write of several dozen free workers on the islands: Grube writes that only the “heads” of the camp are free, while Danzas mentions a single regiment of free Red Army soldiers on the islands.²³³ Tchernavin actually interacted with imprisoned laborers and their imprisoned guards years before his arrest, and he describes the activities, conditions and public perception of both groups in his memoir.²³⁴ Zaitsev, the most pessimistic of the authors, emphasizes that no one on the islands was actually free, explaining

²³⁰ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 61.

²³¹ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 272.

²³² Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 58–59.

²³³ Grube, “Rasskaz,” 198; Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 32.

²³⁴ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 38–46.

that: “Even the Chief of all the Solovetsky camps was one of the exiled senior, particularly active Chekists, sent there to atone for his guilt. (What guilt? Only his senior colleagues—the Chekists—know the answer to that.)”²³⁵ Aliakhnovich makes a similar claim, explaining that no one arrived at the camp voluntarily.²³⁶ Although SLON was a hell for most of its prisoners, it also functioned as a purgatory for former Chekists (of all ranks) who found there the opportunity to redeem themselves in the eyes of the Soviet security service.

These unusual circumstances elicit two questions for memoirists: why these Chekists were imprisoned in the first place, and why they agreed to serve in these supervisory roles over other prisoners. The former, when addressed, is explained variously; Ilgin confidently explained that former Chekists at SLON arrived there “for embezzlement,” for example, while Grube and Aliakhnovich are vague, citing “various offenses.”²³⁷

More of the memoirists give some explanation for the latter. Grube, for instance, describes the former Chekists’ hope “to earn the favor of the authorities and get back to the mainland” and Danzas makes a similar point: “Needless to say that in order to demonstrate their zeal and obtain reward, especially the reduction of their term, they compete in brutality towards the prisoners.”²³⁸ Like Danzas, many memoirists highlight the unique cruelty of these former/future Chekists, assigning the cause of this cruelty to their desperation for improved conditions. The relatively good conditions that former Chekists enjoyed is a frequent topic among the memoirists. Cederholm explains that the “senior Tchekist prisoners are very well off. Although officially they receive no pay they are allowed a ‘special ration’ and clothing, and are

²³⁵ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 18.

²³⁶ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 71.

²³⁷ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 58–59.

²³⁸ Grube, “Rasskaz,” 198; Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 31–32.

lodged in special quarters which are quite comfortable.”²³⁹ Bezsonov is quite reflective regarding this phenomenon of human behavior:

there were only three men on Popov Island who were officially invested with authority from the Government; all the other posts were occupied by convicts; that is, by those of them who were willing to tyrannize over and persecute the other poor wretches; in return for this dirty work they were better fed and had a sleeping-berth to themselves; the others were only allowed 4 inches of sleeping-room, on the shelves. Some cannot resist the temptation, and it is difficult to blame them; hunger and fear of death often force men into mean and dastardly actions! This system the Bolsheviks have adopted and practise in all departments, but it is especially useful to them in the Solovetski “Penal Camp.”²⁴⁰

A few pages after this, Bezsonov toys with the idea of becoming a camp guard; after he watches a Chekist named Osnova brutally beat a weak older man Bezsonov asks himself, “Was I going to turn a coward and bully like Osnova, was I going to ill-treat and tyrannize over my present fellow-sufferers?”²⁴¹ Of course, Bezsonov immediately concludes that “that solution was out of the question” and resolves to kill himself before agreeing to such a compromise. He characteristically resolves to “do what [is] honourable and leave the rest to God.”²⁴²

²³⁹ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 303.

²⁴⁰ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 200–201.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid., 208.

Bezsonov presents his relationship with Osnova as rather intimate, though—the prisoner’s bunk is opposite Osnova’s partitioned section of the barracks, and the two men “used to lie looking at each other, but seldom spoke.”²⁴³ Finally, Osnova offers the option of joining the camp guard to Bezsonov, who politely refuses. Osnova presses the question and Bezsonov explains that he “consider[s] it base to build my career on other people’s misery.”²⁴⁴ The conversation continues and the two men discuss the “spiritual side of man,” which leads Bezsonov to advise Osnova to reject his life at the camp and strive to help “his fellow-creatures.” Bezsonov writes, “His answer was as unexpected as it was strange; he suddenly fell down on his bed and went off into a fit of convulsions, shaking and trembling all over, and finally ended in losing consciousness.”²⁴⁵ Following this attack, Osnova avoids Bezsonov; when he finally approaches him a few days later, he asks: “Well, Bezsonoff, when are you going to run away? Do not look so surprised, it is the only possible way out for you.”²⁴⁶ I repeat this curious exchange because it demonstrates Bezsonov’s preferred type of interaction to present in his narrative; where Malsagoff likes to represent heroic individuals in successful confrontation with authority, Bezsonov prefers this more complex exchange between subordinate and authority, where the author can expound on his philosophical views with an authority and “win” the interaction. Bezsonov’s intimate exchange with a higher up proves his importance to himself and the people around him.

Exchanges with camp personnel can be explorations of authority and tend to characterize both the camp official and the memoirist, who chooses how and why to mention any given camp

²⁴³ Ibid., 218.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 219.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

guard or higher up. Depicting camp personnel, often in detail, is a universal practice among the memoirists surveyed. Every memoirist names more than one guard or camp official and relates a story about that person. This contrasts with many memoirists' choice to obscure the identities of fellow prisoners, particularly those who remained in the Soviet Union and would be endangered if named in their books. Malsagoff and Zaitsev are the most prolific as far as the former is concerned, naming dozens of camp personnel in their works, but every author inserts a few. (Aliakhnovich obscures the names of some camp officials, but names others.)

Memoirists also comment on their decision to name camp officials and describe their actions. Malsagoff, the most overt example, includes a chapter titled "A Gallery of Chekists" that begins with the Chekists on the islands being punished only at the point when their "corruption, fraud, violence or swinish drunkenness [...] cannot possibly be concealed from the public eye."²⁴⁷ He then details the crimes of these Chekists, emphasizing the egregious behavior of the men he lists. He peppers the list with asides such as "another commander of a labour company, Grakholsky, must not be passed over in silence,"²⁴⁸ lending imperative urgency to the chapter's list.

In contrast to Malsagoff's almost legalistic framing of his detailed list of crimes perpetrated by camp officials on the Solovetsky Islands who, we must recall, he never encountered at the Kem camp, other authors write with more open personal resentment against their captors. Lenardowicz, addressing his readers, asks rhetorically: "Do you wonder, readers, why I remember the names of those Soviet thugs so well?! I repeated them to myself every day in Solovki, and I still recall them daily, because I strongly believe that the moment of their just

²⁴⁷ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 61–62.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

punishment will come.”²⁴⁹ Lenardowicz’s vengeful response to what he has witnessed at the camp is directed squarely at the people who inflicted these cruelties on him and his fellow prisoners.

The sections below highlight depictions of high-profile camp authorities, then moves to an overview of how and why SLON personnel are depicted across the memoirs.

Alexander Nogtev

Nogtev, the first head of the camp, was noted for his sadism and dissolution.²⁵⁰ He headed the camp from its foundation in October 1923 to May 1925, when he was sent back to Moscow to head the entire OGPU camp system. He returned to run SLON for a year from May 1929–May 1930, replacing his successor in the post, Fedor Eikhmans. Grube (1926) and Tchernavin (1931–1932) were not on the islands at the same time as Nogtev and do not otherwise mention him. Three of the authors who were at the camp during Nogtev’s time there do not mention him: Bezsonov (February–May 1925); Qureshi (1924–1926); Ilgin (1926–1929); Danzas (1928–1931). Aliakhnovich (1927–1933) mentions the head of the camp who was removed in May 1930, which was certainly Nogtev, but refers to him as “Zaryn.”²⁵¹ Aliakhnovich does not characterize the crimes, rather he describes how rumors spread across the island that the head of the camp was to be exiled for ten years to Turkestan, then that the rumors (to the prisoners’ surprise) turned out to be true.²⁵²

²⁴⁹ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 31.

²⁵⁰ This characterization is widely repeated among memoirs and in secondary sources. See, for example, “Nogtev, Aleksandr Petrovich” in *Almanac: Biographical Dictionary*, Alexander Yakovlev Foundation.

²⁵¹ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 91. He uses this pseudonym in all versions of his memoir. It is unclear why.

²⁵² Ibid.

The remaining four memoirists (who do describe Nogtev) are Malsagoff (1924–1925), Cederholm (1925–1926), Lenardowicz (1924–1927), and Zaitsev (1925–1928). Malsagoff gives a general (secondhand) characterization, just as he had for Boky:

His deputy, who lives permanently in the Kremlin of the monastery, is the real head of the Slon in practice; the fate of the prisoners in the Solovky is completely in his hands. His name is Nogteff. He is also a member of the Vtsik,²⁵³ and was formerly a sailor in the cruiser Aurora. He is semi-educated, drunken, and rather deaf, with a conspicuously cruel physiognomy. He is universally known in the camps by the nickname palatch (executioner).²⁵⁴

Cederholm gives a similar characterization: “The commander of this division is a Tchekist named Nogteff, formerly a Kuban Cossack, exiled to the Solovky for ten years for drunkenness and disorderly conduct.”²⁵⁵ Lenardowicz and Zaitsev describe him in comparison with other guards; Lenardowicz calls Nogtev and Vasko(v) “villains among villains”²⁵⁶ and Zaitsev explains that the drunken antics of a camp official named Barinov (riding a horse twenty steps up into the cathedral) were probably met with approval by Nogtev: “Undoubtedly, for such tyranny, Barinov received nothing more than friendly jokes from Nogtev, the Head of the Administration and a Chekist just like him.”²⁵⁷

²⁵³ VtsIK (ВЦИК, Vserossiiskii Tsentralnyi Iсполnitelnyi Komitet Sovetov, *All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Soviets*. The VtsIK was the highest legislative, administrative, and supervisory body of the RSFSR and then the USSR 1917–1938.

²⁵⁴ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 58–59.

²⁵⁵ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 294.

²⁵⁶ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 47: “łotr[y] nad łotry”

²⁵⁷ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 90.

Authors who devote space to Nogtev describe him in stories, attempting to convey his abusive personality and the farcical cruelty of his drunken antics through exemplary tales. Usually only one or two short accounts suffice, and these tend to be unverifiable and verging on unbelievable. In fact, Cederholm will tell the same story that Zaitsev attributed to Barinov, but with Nogtev as the horse rider:

Our divisional commander, Nogteff, a Tchekist and a Kuban Cossack, had got very drunk in the course of an inspection of the women's hut, and to freshen himself up had ordered a horse to be brought; he then rode up the forty-seven steps leading to the stone gallery and began to make the round of the companies under his charge.²⁵⁸

Cederholm's account is a bit more detailed and, interestingly, lists a different number of steps leading into the cathedral and refectory where four of the camp's brigades were quartered. This characterization of Nogtev shows the camp commander moving from vice to vice, with allusions to a drunken orgy in the women's hut followed by his imperious treatment of his orderlies and horse in order to inspect his domain.

Lenardowicz's elaborate description of the *pirozhki* begins with Nogtev, who "often hosted" the "so-called 'pirożki.'"²⁵⁹ Lenardowicz places responsibility on Nogtev as the head of the camp and principal organizer of both the *pirozhki* and a later mass execution in which Lenardowicz serves as a gravedigger, but the author tends to emphasize the cruelty of actors below Nogtev in the camp hierarchy, those with whom Lenardowicz was more likely to interact.

²⁵⁸ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 314–315.

²⁵⁹ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 30.

Like Lenardowicz, Zaitsev tends to mention Nogtev as an organizer of abhorrent practices at the camp, but not usually as the main actor. He describes a travesty of a religious service, for example, when the Holy Relics of the monastery's founders were unearthed and blasphemed, as "by order of the Head of USLON (Camp Administration) Nogtev," with the actual ceremony conducted by another Chekist named Kogan.²⁶⁰

Malsagoff describes Nogtev's involvement in the political prisoners' uprising from 1923–1925 in a series of vignettes: first Nogtev orders a platoon of Red Army soldiers to fire on a group of hapless political prisoners at the ice skating rink, killing nine. Malsagoff's half-envious, half-incredulous description of the political prisoners' relative privilege compared to counterrevolutionaries shines through in this depiction of Bolshevik camp commander versus a group of non-Bolshevik socialists. After the murders, the political prisoners go on a hunger strike, and Nogtev tries to convince them to end the strike. They drive him out of the building with shouts of "executioner"; then their heroic leader Bogdanov sends Nogtev away with, "Is that all you have to say?" Bogdanoff replied. "Take me back into hospital. I don't want to talk to a murderer."²⁶¹ Malsagoff expresses begrudging admiration for the political prisoners' organization and group solidarity, along with one of his favorite tropes, the depiction of a heroic individual who staves off a threat against his group.²⁶² After the climactic confrontation of Nogtev and Bogdanov, Nogtev is investigated by a GPU commission for his conduct, but the sequence ends with Nogtev's acquittal. In his depiction of the story, Malsagoff's distaste for the political prisoners wins out at the end: "But the Socialists did not get from the commission what

²⁶⁰ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 107.

²⁶¹ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 124–125.

²⁶² For another such story see references to Malsagoff in "Etap" above.

they expected. Nogteff was not punished in any way for shooting the nine persons. The commission found that he had acted in *self-defence!*”²⁶³

Fedor Eikhmans

Eikhmans, who presided over the camp during its period of greatest notoriety, is the best known of the SLON commandants today, and Prilepin’s fascination with this figure is central to *The Monastery*. Prilepin even appends a lightly fictionalized chronology of Eikhmans’ life to the end of his novel. In contrast to this interest, which developed over time, only four authors among this early group of memoirists mention Eikhmans, who was Alexander Nogtev’s second in command until November 1925.

Perhaps this is simply an ideological choice—surely Aliakhnovich, Danzas, and Cederholm, all highly observant and well-connected prisoners, were aware of Eikhmans and possibly interacted with him. In relation to Grube and Ilgin, a certain myopia can be noted—they tend to emphasize their immediate surroundings without drawing larger structural conclusions beyond their own needs and fears. Perhaps the activities of the camp head, noted for his frequent excursions away from the islands, were too abstract or distant for their consideration. Bezsonov, in contrast to Malsagoff, barely notes any of the organizational intricacies of the camp and does not name Nogtev either. Bezsonov’s narrative emphasizes his interiority over everything else, especially in the later portions of the book. The Tchernavins arrived at SLON two years after Eikhmans was promoted off the islands, but it is likely that Vladimir was aware of Eikhmans’ continued role in the OGPU administration of the Russian North.

²⁶³ Malsagoff. *An Island Hell*, 125; emphasis original.

Once again, Malsagoff gives a general characterization of a camp administrator from his secondhand sources, emphasizing his pretensions to military bearing at the camp:

Nogteff's righthand man and deputy is an Estonian Communist named Eichmans. He suffers from "paradomania." Of smart military bearing himself, he demands the same of prisoners in a state of permanent starvation. They are compelled to salute him. Immediately on his arrival in the Solovky he began to teach the prisoners, with blows when required, how to reply to his "good morning" in a brisk, military tone, at the same time coming to attention.²⁶⁴

Eikhmans (who was Latvian, not Estonian), had served under Gleb Boky in Turkestan during the civil war and was very different from Nogtev in temperament, as reflected in the memoirists' characterizations. Although, to be sure, Zaitsev promises that "the whole of Turkestan still remembers his atrocities, committed together with Gleb Boky."²⁶⁵ Compared to Nogtev's drunken rapes of women prisoners and quick reversion to violence, Eikhmans is presented as a more subtle captor. As an example, Qureshi relates that an escaped Cossack, Dorogun, hid in the forests for months until Eikhmans ran into him while hunting. Rather than killing him on sight, Eikhmans returned Dorogun to the camp and had him shot a few days later, releasing all the coconspirators who had returned to the camp voluntarily.²⁶⁶ To be sure, the escapee was still executed, but the contours of the story are more "civilized" than, for example, Nogtev's unprovoked murders.

²⁶⁴ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 59.

²⁶⁵ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 18.

²⁶⁶ Qureshi, "Piat' let," 132.

Eikhmans' obsession with the trappings of an aristocratic military order (at odds with the rough appearance and behavior of the Red Army soldiers who served under him) tends to dominate characterizations by memoirists. The memoirist who was closest to Eikhmans is Zaitsev, who details several interactions with the camp commandant. In March 1926, Eikhmans requested that Zaitsev write "something from the Civil War period for publication in the journal *Solovetsky Islands*."²⁶⁷ When Zaitsev demurs from this assignment, he is removed from a comfortable work assignment and reassigned to general labor detail. Later, Eikhmans blames Zaitsev for a small forest fire and sentences him to three months in the punishment cell on Sekirnaia Gora.²⁶⁸ (Zaitsev explains that the real reason for his harsh sentence was his attendance of a church service, an activity that was technically allowed to non-clerical prisoners, but harshly punished.) Finally, Zaitsev details how Eikhmans and other camp leaders reward female prisoners who become their mistresses:

If the chosen prisoner [*kaerka*] accepts the love proposal of a high-ranking Solovetsky person, for example, Eichmans himself, then she will earn great benefits for herself: in addition to being released from hard forced labor, she can count on a reduction in her prison term.²⁶⁹

According to these memoirists' accounts, there is something more restrained and complex in Eikhman's behavior compared to Nogtev and other camp officials. While Nogtev is described in harrowing stories, Eikhmans is characterized by a mix of stories and descriptions of his ongoing behavior and demonstrated aesthetic and behavioral preferences.

²⁶⁷ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 65.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 114.

Camp personnel behavior

Personnel who were sent to SLON due to criminal behavior such as fraud often continued these behaviors in their new positions. Malsagoff is particularly incensed by such crimes and details two significant practitioners in his chapter “A Gallery of Tchekists.” Both are the assistants of Gladkov, mentioned above. The first, Klimov, is assigned to the islands as punishment for excessive bribe-taking. Malsagoff writes ironically that “men of talent come to the front everywhere. At the Solovky, Klimoff continued to occupy himself with his speciality, taking bribes.”²⁷⁰ Malsagoff’s other assistant, Mamonov, “flagrantly” steals state property from the Kem camp.²⁷¹ Malsagoff’s cynicism, expressed with the ironic use of quotation marks throughout this section, stems from the lack of punishment for these crimes. Although both are quite open about their activities, Klimov is simply reassigned to a different part of the SLON camp and Mamonov goes unpunished, according to Malsagoff. Even Gladkov, their supervisor, serves just two days of a punitive sentence handed down for his disastrous management of the camp. Prisoners anticipate that the replacement for these corrupted administrators, a man named Kirilovsky, will prove a more honest and just administrator, but Malsagoff is quickly disillusioned: “Gladkoff stole openly, Kirilovsky under a camouflage of ‘honesty.’”²⁷²

Aside from outright fraud, camp personnel might be noted for their hatred, toadiness, and duplicity. Malsagoff details Smolensky’s “violent Polish Chauvinism,” for example, and Lenardowicz depicts Vaskov’s condescension toward Polish intellectuals (above). Many guards are also noted for their stupidity and crudeness.²⁷³

²⁷⁰ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 71–72.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 150.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 148–149.

Memoirists with strong religious sensibilities tend to note individual camp personnel who persecute clergymen in particular. While most of the memoirists (Ilgin, Danzas, Aliakhnovich, Qureshi) typically emphasize the perspective of the clergymen, Zaitsev does name particular officials who humiliate and endanger the lives of the priests and monks at the camp. These include Osnova, who singles out the bishop of Voronezh, Vladyka Gleb; Voronov, who uses blasphemous language to mock the clergymen in his brigade; and Kogan, who conducts a blasphemous ceremony and disinters the relics of Saints Zosima and Savvaty.²⁷⁴

Sexual violence

There are no mentions of male homosexual behavior at the camps in any form, and a few mentions of female homosexuality by Ilgin and Danzas. There are many more accounts of male-on-female sexual assaults and various degrees of sexual exploitation by camp personnel, from the lowest ranked guard to the head of the camp. While many female prisoners sent to the camp for prostitution continued their trade at SLON (leading to frequent outbreaks of sexually transmitted diseases), Zaitsev emphasizes the higher-ups' particular cruelty towards female counterrevolutionaries (*kaerki*), explaining that they could essentially force any woman that caught their eye to become an "object of lust."²⁷⁵

Memoirists differentiate between mutually beneficial sexual relationships between camp officials and female prisoners, such as Eikhman's reduction of his lovers' sentences or Vaskov's purported marriage to a female prisoner, and rape. The former is described systematically as a typical practice, such as Chistakov's harem of housekeepers ("Tchistakoff [...] not only has his

²⁷⁴ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 48, 49, 107.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

dinner cooked and his boots cleaned by women, but they even have to *wash* him!”) or Toropov’s harem of wives (“Apart from his devastating stupidity, his principal characteristic is that he gets married everywhere he goes.”)²⁷⁶ Memoirists contrast women who acquiesce, bettering their own situations, with women who refuse, who typically brutalized anyways, and assigned to dangerous or humiliating work assignments. Either way, memoirists explain, female prisoners suffered.

Officers help procure women for each other, as when Kuchma drunkenly rides to Savvatievo, where women are housed, and demands that the headman at Savvatievo, Osnova, allow him to “inspect” the women’s barracks.²⁷⁷ Kiselev-Gromov discusses a specific instance of this practice, the Chekists’ “hunt” [*okhota*], an annual event that coincided with the arrival of an inspection commission from Moscow. While most prisoners were ordered to prepare the camp for the commissioners’ arrival, according to Kiselev-Gromov, “the most beautiful women” were selected from the prisoners to provide food and sexual services for the arriving commission members, with the women participating under threat of death.²⁷⁸

Lenardowicz is more frank than Kiselev-Gromov in his account; he outlines the frequency and similarity of these drunken orgies and explains how the entire hierarchy of the camp functions to facilitate them. According to Lenardowicz, camp head Nogtev frequently organized these “pirozhki.” These events included the “dignitaries” of the SLON camp regime, from Nogtev and Eikhmans to the heads of various divisions across the camp.²⁷⁹ Lenardowicz’s account of a typical orgy started with the rape of several women, then the women were “driven out naked into the frost and snow, whipped all the way back to the women’s barracks,” after

²⁷⁶ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 134–135, 148–149.

²⁷⁷ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 111.

²⁷⁸ Kiselev-Gromov, *Lageri smerti*, 146.

²⁷⁹ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 30–31.

which the Chekists took up their weapons and “amused themselves by shooting at prisoners.”

After his lengthy description of these “pirozhki”, Lenardowicz speaks directly to readers: “Do you wonder, readers, why I remember the names of these Soviet brutes so well? I repeated them to myself every day on Solovki, and I still recall them daily, because I firmly believe the time of their just punishment will come.”²⁸⁰

Consequences or lack thereof

For the most part, memoirists explain, the camp personnel never suffer for their crimes against the prisoners. Other failures on the job might result in punishment, however. Bezsonov describes a former White officer, Vanka T-v, who became a Chekist but ultimately failed to “persecute his fellow counterrevolutionaries” and was eventually executed: “he was not bad enough for the post he occupied and, being useless to the Government, they got rid of him, in the surest way.”²⁸¹ Memoirists, focused as they are on the importance of Chekist whims for prisoners' living conditions, highlight Chekist behavior and speculate as to their motivations and internal procedures. Lenardowicz, for example, describes how a young doctor went to the highest authorities in the GPU to report another doctor, Doctor Drago, for his murderous and violent practices. When he returns to the camp, Drago reports that Kirilenko and Yagoda had responded: “If there were more people like Rejwa, we would have dealt with the internal counterrevolution long ago. He deserves a reward, not punishment, and you, doctor, are too soft.”²⁸² Rejwo is soon

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 31.

²⁸¹ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 200–201.

²⁸² Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 71.

promoted off the islands. Lenardowicz concludes: “The greater the thug, the bloodier the executioner, the faster he advances in the Soviets.”²⁸³

In the case of Naftaly Frenkel and several of his assistants at the camp, management decisions that lead to greater productivity at the expense of prisoner lives are typically rewarded with reduced sentences and better assignments. Zaitsev asks incredulously: “Is there any country in the world where prisoners, whether in jail or in forced labor camps, are rewarded for mocking, tormenting, and beating their fellow inmates? Certainly not, and there never has been...”²⁸⁴

Still, sometimes the abuses going on at the camp reach a point where outside intervention is required. Memoirists write about the investigative committees that visited the camp on a regular basis and detail the internecine conflicts of camp administrators. Changes to the camp’s administration directly affected prisoners, as when Lenardowicz, who worked in the camp hospital, details the changes to hospital personnel effected by a major upheaval in the camp administration. Malsagoff’s “Change of Guard” is the key to his chapter “A Gallery of Chekists,” but results in few actual consequences for the camp personnel aside from a reshuffling of their positions.²⁸⁵

Greater intrigues going on outside of the camp lead to major changes in camp leadership and personnel, especially as international scrutiny of the forced labor camps grew in the late 1920s and 1930s.²⁸⁶ Aliakhnovich’s depiction of the camp head’s exile and punishment in 1930s reflects the prisoners’ surprise at the sudden removal of the camp’s head and another hundred camp personnel. Tchernavin provides an example of a notorious leader of the lumber detail who

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 20.

²⁸⁵ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 147.

²⁸⁶ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 279.

was eventually executed for his deadly treatment of the prisoners under his care, with the lumber workers answering Tchernavin's questions about the work detail:

No, dear man, there's no danger of it now. Beating is not allowed any more—they stopped it a year ago. Did you hear about Kourilko? When he was operating here on Popoff Island what a number of people he crippled and killed! It will soon be a year since he was shot. It's your luck that you got here after he had gone, after 1930.²⁸⁷

A final but rare version of consequences for camp officials depicted by memoirists is the revenge fantasy. Lenardowicz's friendship with Napolski and Dec ends with such a story: the female doctor who witnessed their deaths at the hands of Sokolov confesses to Lenardowicz that she arranged his death (via the unwitting Lenardowicz, of course) in revenge for her beloved Roman's death.

2. Quasi-Military Organization of Camp life

Memoirists frequently discuss the quasi-military organization of the camp, highlighting the cruel irony of the various scenarios where camp officials force half-dead prisoners to stand at attention for hours, march in formation, or otherwise adhere to a quasi-military protocol rather than the protocols that newly arrived prisoners learned in jail. Of course, there is a broad overlap between the two: roll calls are standard in both prison and military contexts, for example as is the expectation of strict obedience to orders from above. When Tchernavin arrives at the camp in 1931, the reasoning for this “semi-military” organization is explained as a disciplinary process

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 253.

that allows guards to quickly identify and punish infractions of camp regulations.²⁸⁸ However functional it was intended to be, the trappings of military order stand out as overwrought and often silly, and seem to demand memoirists' commentary. In particular, memoirists discuss the guards' and officials' approximation of military bearing, the organization of the camp into *roty* ("squads," "companies" or "bands"), and the military-style drills that prisoners are forced to participate in.

Zaitsev, a former White general, explains that most of the prisoners (civilians generally, including clergymen and women) were unfamiliar with military procedures, but still "required to stand in formation and move according to commands."²⁸⁹ He is personally incensed by the experience, "outraged by the absurd demand for knowledge of military procedures from people who had no connection to military service in the past and who were now not only not being taught anything but were not even given any explanations."²⁹⁰ Prisoners are forced to go through the motions of saluting, shouting "zdra" in unison, and standing at attention. Failures on the part of the prisoners are met with violence.²⁹¹ For Zaitsev, the humiliation is total:

We would stand there, from time to time shouting 'Zdra.' Your humble servant, the author of these lines—by rank, a General of the General Staff, a full Knight of St. George, awarded the Officer's Cross of St. George and a 'Georgian' weapon for the World War—stood many times as part of the company 'at attention,' shouting 'Zdra.' Is this not mockery?!?!..²⁹²

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 243.

²⁸⁹ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 48.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 48–49.

²⁹¹ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 59.

²⁹² Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 88.

Memoirists note an excessive dedication to military aesthetics on the part of certain commanders and groups of guards. At Kem, Bezsonov explains the “military basis” on which the prison is run, claiming that the organization of prisoners into troops was “to tyrannize over us with more semblance of right.”²⁹³ However, memoirists often depict the Chekists as failing dismally in their attempts at military bearing. Later, Bezsonov observes a group of Chekists in unnecessary spurs, loudly jangling them as they “aped military proceedings.” Bezsonov contrasts the “ludicrous and comical” effect of the Chekists’ awkward bearing with the sobering reality: “All our lives depended on the merest caprice of any one of these mountebanks.”²⁹⁴ Danzas discusses the same, describing the “GPU soldiers” who mostly staff the camp as “common murderers with a short military training, and drilled to supervise the other prisoners, especially the ‘politicals.’” Because these Chekists guards are themselves prisoners, who hope to reduce their own sentences, they “compete in brutality towards the prisoners” as a demonstration of zeal and loyalty.²⁹⁵

Longtime camp commandant Fedor Eikhmans in particular is described as having a fascination with military aesthetics. Malsagoff, who never saw Eikhmans in person, reports that Eikhmans, “[o]f smart military bearing himself, [...] demands the same of prisoners in a state of permanent starvation.”²⁹⁶ Both Malsagoff and Cederholm compare Eikhmans to the military absurdities of the reign of Paul I. Malsagoff claims that the camp commandant’s “dream was to turn the camps into military colonies of the Araktcheeff epoch,” and in service of this obsession he “paraded the starving prisoners, including women and children, several days in succession,

²⁹³ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 204.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 206.

²⁹⁵ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 32.

²⁹⁶ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 59.

and made them execute movements, obey words of command, and so on, in military style.”²⁹⁷

Cederholm describes the same process, which he participated in himself while at SLON, as lengthy and unpleasant, comparing: “I do not think that such military discipline as that enforced by the ‘USLON’ existed even in the Emperor Paul’s 1 Gatchina regiments.”²⁹⁸

Danzas, who was on the Solovetsky Islands during Eikhman’s tenure as camp commandant, describes her own experience as a forced participant of the military drills, contrasting the pitiful female prisoners to the guards who ran these drills. In one such scene, she decries the “rigid officer in his tight uniform playing at soldiers with a lot of scared women” who conducted a military drill (“marching, turning round, etc.”). She depicts an array of frightened women (“pale and thin ladies,” “stout bewildered peasants,” “venerable old nuns,” and “flappers in short skirts”), all forced to “line up, shout in unison, turn right and left, and obey the brutal orders of a boy intoxicated with power, and sometimes also with alcohol.”²⁹⁹

Introductory inspection and daily roll call

Memoirists meet with the overwrought procedures around roll call and as soon as they arrive at SLON. At Kem and then on the Solovetsky Islands, prisoners are immediately initiated into SLON procedures with a rollcall that can last hours, with prisoners standing outside and shouting “Zdra” until the capricious guards are satisfied. This is often a harsh introduction to the place; memoirists recall their introduction to the camp as long lectures about how to act at the camp. Ilgin describes a painful and exhausting experience, where the camp official greeting the new arrivals spends hours “lecturing on the ‘art of war,’ drilling us on how to greet the

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 147–148.

²⁹⁸ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 282.

²⁹⁹ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 44.

commanders when meeting them, how to salute, march in formation, and run.”³⁰⁰ As with burdensome work quotas, only the younger and healthier prisoners are able to complete the required exercises, while the elderly and infirm were punished for their weakness with violent reprisals.³⁰¹

A version of this introductory sequence is repeated every day at roll call, when prisoners are handed work assignments, announcements are made, and executions are announced on a weekly basis. Memoirists focus on the procedure of shouting “zdra!” in unison, or more precisely the punishment when the leader of roll call decides that the prisoners have failed to shout “zdra!” in unison, or with sufficient volume and zeal. Danzas says that “[o]ften the officer found we did not shout loud enough and forced us to shout ten or fifteen times over, or he would declare that the whole battalion was to stand to attention for half an hour or an hour as a punishment.”³⁰² Zaitsev, who calls the daily roll call an “absurd monkey-like comedy,” describes the same procedure happening in the punishment cell at Sekirka, with the only difference being the extreme cold of the isolation cells; according to Zaitsev, this “physical abuse” compounded the “moral humiliation” of the punishment.³⁰³ Elsewhere, Zaitsev describes the daily roll call as an “opportunity to mock the intelligentsia and clergy”:

On Solovki, we, the intelligentsia, all acknowledged that the puppet-like comedy of inspections with its ceremonies was carried out solely for one purpose—to mock the dignity of archpastors, pastors, generals, former governors, and others. After all, there are no such

³⁰⁰ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 56–57.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 42–44.

³⁰³ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 148–149.

ceremonies in Soviet prisons, and their absence does not harm the prison regime in any way.³⁰⁴

The quasi-military organization of life in SLON, as described by memoirists, emerges as a grim spectacle of dehumanization, humiliation, and absurdity. While cloaked in the guise of discipline and order, the camp's protocols primarily served as tools of psychological and physical oppression, stripping prisoners of individuality and subjecting them to arbitrary violence under the pretense of maintaining military decorum. The rigid drills, incessant roll calls, and forced salutes were not designed to instill order but to degrade, mock, and break the spirits of prisoners, particularly targeting the intelligentsia, clergy, and other symbolic figures of resistance to the regime.

At the heart of these accounts lies the stark contrast between the pompous military posturing of the guards—often described as untrained, violent, and ridiculous caricatures of real soldiers—and the pitiable state of their captives, many of whom were elderly, infirm, or entirely unfamiliar with military practices. The memoirists' detailed observations of these rituals underscore not only the cruelty of such measures but also their futility, as these performances of power added nothing to the camp's functioning or security.

3. Work Detail

Prisoners' days are strictly regimented, from an early roll call to long hours at various work assignments, with paltry meals interspersed. At night, they sleep in barracks, cells, and monastery outbuildings, some in relative comfort and privacy, others in crowded and noxious barracks. There was plenty to do at the camp. Ilgin lists "factories, sawmills, tanneries,

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 71.

brickworks, and various workshops” at the camp, adding that “thousands of prisoners worked there, producing goods for state institutions. Prisoners also worked in the camp administration and its enterprises.”³⁰⁵ After describing a typical day, Nikonov-Smorodin remarks that “the days in [the camp] drag on like a heavy dream. All the time is allocated in advance for continuous work. So little time is given for rest, as if on purpose so that we do not have time to come to our senses and look around.”³⁰⁶

Arriving at the camp, prisoners were divided into labor categories. Tchernavin describes the system in place when he was at the camp: “the first group, those fit for any manual labor; the second, those fit for lighter work; and the third, those unfit for any kind of hard labor.”³⁰⁷ Most prisoners, even sickly ones, were sent to hard labor; memoirists describe the difficulty of being assigned to the second or third category. (And even those prisoners in the lower categories were still required to work, whether that was office work, cleaning the camp or doing skilled labor at the camp’s workshops.) Danzas, for example, arrives at SLON after nearly dying from scurvy and is assigned to the second category. She is “spared the most painful manual work” but subjected to regular medical examinations in order to maintain this status.³⁰⁸ Danzas, a skilled and highly educated person, is tasked with office jobs at SLON and later at the White Sea Canal project. Notwithstanding her poor health, her stability in these positions is hardly guaranteed due to her status as a counterrevolutionary, which meant that her meager and hard-won privileges could be easily revoked due to the vagaries of Soviet politics.

³⁰⁵ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 59.

³⁰⁶ Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 176.

³⁰⁷ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 261.

³⁰⁸ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 47.

Memoirists typically work a variety jobs at the camp. Cederholm and Zaitsev seem to have tried out every job at the camp, and each describes a variety of different assignments during their time at the camp. Zaitsev occupies several positions of responsibility at the camp, and he is allowed to move about the islands freely until he loses favor with Eikhmans, who sends him back to lumber work.³⁰⁹ Cederholm's favorite assignment was guarding one of the vegetable gardens at the camp, but he also envied the sailors who manned the SLON steamships, because they "were able to do the work to which they were accustomed, to live on board ship the whole navigation season, and to come into only slight and occasional contact with all the cruelty, criminality, and treachery of camp life."³¹⁰

Although technically discouraged, counterrevolutionaries were often given office jobs. Although memoirists describe different attempts to give the easier office jobs to criminals, considered "politically close" to the Bolsheviks, such experiments tend to be short and disastrous; when the criminals in charge of various warehouses, stores, and kitchens continue to commit crimes in their posts, camp administration eventually concede and return the jobs to counterrevolutionaries. Clergymen, especially former monks, were especially trusted by camp administrators.

Ilgin, a Catholic priest, did a variety of work just in his quarantine period: "I worked in the brickworks, the tannery, the alabaster factory, the sawmill, in the forest, and digging peat."³¹¹ He reflects on the exhaustion he experienced, describing his "total apathy" and physical weakness: "I was so drained that I couldn't even think about eating. My fellow prisoners helped

³⁰⁹ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 63.

³¹⁰ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 331.

³¹¹ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 62.

me climb to my designated spot on the bunks, and I fell asleep from sheer exhaustion after a sleepless night. It was only with God's help that I survived this hardest period of quarantine."³¹²

Prisoners combatted the unreasonable demands of the labor assignments by any means. Both "blat" (informal influence) and "tufta" (falsification of work quotas) are critical to survival at the camp. Describing labor practices at the camp, some memoirists use the concepts of *blat* and *tufta* to explain how prisoners tried to mitigate the labor quotas, although many simply avoid these unfamiliar words and describe the concepts to readers in other words. Aliakhnovich defines *blat* as "privileged status in Solovki slang," while others simply define it as "legkaia rabota" ("easy" or "light" work).³¹³ Zaitsev, who worked as a foreman for a time, explains the importance of *tufta* for his crew's survival and details some of the clever ways that prisoners tricked the guards.³¹⁴ Aliakhnovich explains that his fairly good conditions at the camp are the result of his connections: "Maybe tomorrow they'll send me to the forest to saw wood. Right now, I'm an actor and have 'blat' (privileged status in Solovki slang), living with friends in a warm monastic cell." Despite his good fortune, Aliakhnovich emphasizes the instability of his position: "But tomorrow, I could end up in a cold barrack in the middle of the Karelian forests."³¹⁵

Prisoners' objective was survival, and they attempted to find work assignments that gave them some added benefit, whether access to food, better accommodations, or security from thieves. Although the labor camp employed the majority of prisoners in hard labor (felling lumber, construction, and digging graves and ditches), the diversity of the camp's economic

³¹² Ibid., 60.

³¹³ Frantsishak Aliakhnovich, *U kaptsiurokh GPU: Apovests'* (Minsk: Mastatskaia litaratura, 1994), n.p.

³¹⁴ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 68.

³¹⁵ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 122.

structure and the dearth of free workers there meant that many prisoners worked in positions of relative freedom and authority. Some workers were able to continue working in their pre-SLON fields; the example of actors, artists, and journalists in camp cultural life has been addressed in depth by Kuziakina and Gullota, of course, but the camp's role as a proto-sharashka cannot be ignored, either. Imprisoned scientists, engineers, and managers were in demand at the camp, and over the 1920s the GPU developed its command over the prison camps into a kind of labor brokerage system. Through this labor brokerage system, the labor of imprisoned specialists could be purchased for a specified term by various businesses and government offices. Tchernavin, who worked in the fishing industry in the Russian North, saw both sides of this system in the 1920s and 1930s, first working alongside imprisoned specialists, then becoming one himself.

Hard labor

Each day after roll call, labor squads were announced from among the prisoners. Although the labor at the camp could be quite diverse thanks to the variety of workshops, fisheries, and experimental projects going on at the camp, most prisoners worked felling trees in the forest. They were sent out in small squadrons accompanied by a few guards and assigned to cut down, process, or transport a certain quota of trees. These quotas are universally characterized as physically impossible for all but a small number of young, healthy men at the camp. Prisoners who did not complete their quotas were forced to remain in the freezing forests overnight; mortality and injury in this assignment were reportedly very high (see below). Just as with the roll call and military drills, prisoners did their forced labor at the end of a rifle. Danzas depicts the daily horror of “[o]ld and sick men begg[ing] to be exempted from the awful work—

they were beaten with rifle-butts and made to march, and at night their corpses were brought back.”³¹⁶

Memoirists tend to depict physical labor in detail, whether they are assigned to clean the camp in anticipation of an investigative commission or sent into the forests to cut and process lumber for export. Cederholm, for example, describes carrying railway tracks across a swamp in excruciating detail: “Walking three by three across the bog, carrying in our hands a section of railway track weighing 350 lb., was unbearable torment. If one of the carriers stumbled, the other two immediately stumbled as well, and dropped the rail on the ground. Our hands refused service, for the cold iron cut our palms. Towards ten o’clock three old men collapsed altogether.”³¹⁷ Lenardowicz recalls working for 25 hours without a break, while monitored constantly by the guards: “We were driven relentlessly, not even allowed to light a cigarette. If someone dared to stop for a moment, the rifle butts of the zealous Chekists would immediately rain down on them. This is what an ‘eight-hour workday’ in the Soviet Union looks like.”³¹⁸ The physical exhaustion of working long shifts in the heat and cold is accompanied by pitiful rations that are hardly able to support the nutrition needs of the workers. Despite their exhaustion, Lenardowicz explains that the threat of violence kept them working: “I was collapsing from exhaustion, moving forward on my last strength. Sleep weighed down my eyelids, but I had to keep working because, at any moment, a rifle butt could shatter my skull.”³¹⁹

³¹⁶ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 34.

³¹⁷ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 296.

³¹⁸ Lenardowicz. *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 25.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

Lumbering

Building a harsh contrast between free and forced labor, Zaitsev maintains that logging work “under normal conditions, in a peaceful and calm environment,” is not particularly difficult and can even be “healthy, physically strengthening labor.”³²⁰ At Solovki, of course, the conditions are extreme, the quotas are impossible to meet, and the punishments meted out are violent and frequently deadly. The importance of lumber exports for the Soviet economy meant that such work was critical and heavily scrutinized by camp personnel. As Zaitsev puts it, “lumber operations overshadow everything” at the camp.³²¹ Zaitsev, who worked as a logging foreman, explains that camp administrators’ intense scrutiny of logging work led to even worse treatment of the loggers, “much harsher, more cruel, inhumane, and merciless” in comparison to other laborers at the camp.³²² Memoirists universally agree that felling and transporting lumber was the deadliest and most unpleasant work assignment at the camp. The quotas assigned to lumber crews were impossible to achieve without *tufta*, and the slightly increased rations given to lumber workers did not make up for the exhausting work. Grube put the cost of SLON logging operations in stark perspective for his interviewer: “I assure you [...] that every log exported abroad costs at least 10 human lives!”³²³

During the long winters, workers lived in unheated barracks and spent most of their time in the forests felling half-frozen trees. Loggers received additional food rations to supplement the intense physical labor, but the supplementary food was rarely sufficient to make up for the energy expended at logging, and these rations could be easily rescinded as punishment for failure

³²⁰ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 119.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

³²² *Ibid.*, 119.

³²³ Grube, “Rasskaz,” 198.

to meet the labor quotas. Malsagoff gives a visceral description of the experience: “Huge tree-trunks, cut away with axes, fall on the prisoners, sometimes killing them on the spot. Clad in rags, with no mittens, with only bast shoes on your feet, hardly able to stand for weakness caused by under-nourishment, your hands and whole body are frozen stiff in the bitter cold.”³²⁴ In summer, warm weather brought swarms of mosquitoes that plagued workers, and the task of moving logs through the islands’ canals toward the harbor meant spending hours neck deep in cold water.³²⁵

Zaitsev explains the difficulty of reaching these quotas in stark terms: “exhausted, emaciated, and often sick loggers are unable to fulfill their work quotas. In cold weather, dressed in pitiful rags with bast shoes and foot wrappings made from old sacks, they freeze and must focus on not freezing to death or losing their hands or feet to frostbite. Cases of frostbite are numerous...”³²⁶ Failure to meet labor quotas meant that prisoners were left in the forests overnight, where they could easily freeze to death.³²⁷ Other prisoners die at the hands of guards while at their remote work assignments, a somewhat opaque situation that drew no concern from camp administrators:

There have been numerous instances when the overseers received a group of workers of a certain number, but returned from work with one or two fewer. When the camp duty officer asked, “Where is the missing prisoner?” the usual response was, “He fell ill, remained in the forest...” or, “He died suddenly; the body was buried in the

³²⁴ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 156.

³²⁵ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 299.

³²⁶ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 125.

³²⁷ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 36.

forest...” Why he fell ill and why he was left to recover in the forest instead of being brought back, or why he died suddenly, is a mystery known only to the “overseers” and a few of the prisoners who worked with them.³²⁸

As Tchernavin reports in his memoir, by the 1930s, outrage over the use of prisoner labor for Soviet lumber exports led to efforts to hide these practices: “The prisoners were kept out of sight of foreigners and so, although lumber was cut and prepared by convicts, all the work on the wharves and ships was done by free hired labor.”³²⁹ Conditions also reportedly improved in this period, with one former SLON prisoner reporting to Tchernavin that the violence and deadly treatment of loggers at the camp had improved significantly after a particularly violent overseer was executed for his excesses: “We, the novices, asked a question: ‘Isn’t it true that in lumber camps “work assignments” are allotted which no one can accomplish, and that this means death?’ ‘No, dear man, there’s no danger of it now. Beating is not allowed any more—they stopped it a year ago.’”³³⁰ However reassuring this may be to Tchernavin, he follows this claim with several pages of reports from the same prisoner about the deadly conditions at the camp in the 1920s.³³¹

³²⁸ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 73.

³²⁹ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 251; A key example from the period are the Reed-Smoot Tariffs (1930), which were designed as a sanction on lumber exports produced with prisoner labor.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 253–257.

Food

Food at the camp was generally no better than food in prison, but there was a greater variety in the availability of food, and the distribution of food to different categories of prisoners. The inequalities at the camp represented a deep irony to memoirists, and this tended to be conceptualized through food.³³² As Nikonov-Smorodin puts, referring to food at the camp, “The ‘classless camp’ created by the Marxists and Bolsheviks presented a picture of glaring class contradictions.”³³³ He goes on to outline the different procedures across the camp for feeding prisoners. First, the general laborers and those who worked near a “common kitchen” receive a daily bread ration and breakfast, lunch, and dinner: “In general, the food was coarse and meager. In the morning they were given boiling water, for lunch—gruel soup and for the second—porridge with vegetable oil. For dinner—porridge or potatoes.” Nikonov-Smorodin, like all memoirists who address food at the camp, emphasizes how terrible the food was: “Neither in quantity nor in quality, this food could not only satisfy a working man, but it did not even help him to deceive hunger.”³³⁴ Cederholm described a typical meal for such workers: “Supper was brought in two wooden tubs; it consisted of thick buckwheat porridge cooked in sunflower oil, Each of us received several spoonfuls of the porridge.”³³⁵

Second, those who worked outside the camp and received food as a “dry ration” every other week. Memoirists explain that this method of receiving rations was much preferable to the communal kitchen as they were able to enjoy a greater variety of food and exercise more control over their diets.³³⁶

³³² See, for example, the discussion of Solovetsky herring below.

³³³ Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 167.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 167–168.

³³⁵ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 298.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 319.

In the NEP era, certain prisoners were able to purchase food and other supplies from a camp store, a practice that was eventually restricted. Nikonov-Smorodin lists these “privileged convicts” as the third category, who received a monthly voucher that allowed them to buy food in the special store, or at different food suppliers at the camp. Nikonov-Smorodin notes that these products disappeared in 1931, after which “a time of famine set in” (other memoirists list the year of this changeover as 1929).³³⁷ At least in the 1920s, money retained its value at the camp, and prisoners with greater resources were able to help themselves, whether purchasing better food, warm clothing, or bribing their way out of dangerous work assignments. Danzas explained that the disappearance of purchasable goods at the camp “spelt starvation” due to the paltry rations available to prisoners: “buckwheat porridge, sour cabbage in water, occasionally salted fish or pickled horseflesh.”³³⁸ Supplementing the meals provided by the camp was not a luxury but a necessity, according to Cederholm: “The prisoners cannot possibly exist on the State rations issued to them. Those prisoners who cannot spend even 15 roubles a month on food die of scurvy in their first year in the Solovetsky camp.”³³⁹

Food at the camp, aside from its importance for sustaining life, represented the inequalities and contradictions inherent in the system for memoirists. The varying quality and distribution of rations highlighted the deep divisions among prisoners, with some enduring meager and inadequate meals while others, through privilege or resources, could secure better provisions. The disappearance of purchasable goods changed this system without improving conditions for prisoners.

³³⁷ Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 168.

³³⁸ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 33.

³³⁹ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 283.

4. Illness and death

Disease was a function of the entire GPU system, from arrestee's first intake into jail. Scurvy from poor nutrition and typhus from pathogenic lice are the most commonly mentioned diseases. Memoirists address this topic in many ways, a reflection of how widespread and unavoidable illness was at the camp. Many describe their own experiences with illness or time spent in the camp hospital, while others worked at this hospital and depict it from that perspective. Death is as common a feature of the camp and is treated variously. Even more frequently than working at the hospital, many prisoners are assigned to move bodies or dig graves, an experience that is well represented among accounts.

For the most part, memoirists treat illness as a feature of the camps that is encouraged or at least sanctioned by the GPU, and place illness in parallel with executions as a cause of death at the camp. Cederholm explains that at the Kholmogory camp, a predecessor to SLON, "the prisoners were gradually exterminated by epidemics and mass shootings."³⁴⁰ In Ilgin's phrasing, "apart from the barbaric methods devised to get rid of criminals, typhus claimed an enormous number of victims every year."³⁴¹ The growing number of prisoners being sent to the camps, the unstable financial position of the camps in the 1920s, and the isolation of the Solovetsky Islands in winter all contributed to yearly typhus epidemics of greater and lesser severity (significant epidemics at the camp are discussed below). Lenardowicz takes a different tack, however, listing all the diseases present on the islands but concluding that "the most terrifying thing for the unfortunate prisoners, however, are the tortures invented for them by the Solovetsky Chekists."³⁴² For Lenardowicz, whose emphasizes personal interactions and long revenge arcs in

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 305

³⁴¹ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 64.

³⁴² Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 21.

his account, negligence leading to disease cannot compare to brutal treatment by camp personnel.

Descriptions of disease and the pathogenic conditions at the camp tend towards hyperbole, as when Ilgin writes, “Across the entire island, in all sections, this plague decimated the ranks of the convicts. The hospitals were overcrowded with the sick, who had neither care nor medical supplies.”³⁴³ Ilgin follows this statement by comparing conditions inside the camp to deficiencies in medical supplies outside the camp: “If there were no essential medicines available in the free world, then what could be said about the GPU camps?”³⁴⁴

Memoirists' own illnesses

The experiences of illness among memoirists vary significantly, with some managing to avoid severe sickness while others were not so fortunate. Those that managed to avoid serious illness suffered other physical hardships nonetheless. Malsagoff, for instance, endured severe frostbite during his escape but does not describe any illness while in prison or the camp. Tchernavin, like Malsagoff, only mentions the early symptoms of scurvy during his escape attempt but does not detail any significant illnesses while incarcerated. For the most part, these memoirists describe the suffering of other prisoners without directly contrasting their own good health.

Bezsonov also remained mostly healthy, though he did suffer from malnutrition and mental strain during his solitary confinement. Although he spent time in the hospital for a hunger strike and later fell ill at Kem, Cederholm does not focus heavily on his physical condition at the

³⁴³ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 64.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

camp. Instead, he recounts his discomfort with the monastery hospital's environment, where the stench was unbearable, and even witnessed a photographer staging photos of fake sick prisoners outside the hospital.³⁴⁵ Like Bezsonov, his most physically precarious time was in solitary confinement during his interrogation rather than at the camp.

Grube and Aliakhnovich both describe themselves as lucky to have avoided illness. Grube explains that islands' extreme climate contributed to a high mortality rate, but that he was fortunate not to contract scurvy or tuberculosis, which were rampant in the camp.³⁴⁶ Aliakhnovich, too, managed to avoid being physically destroyed by hunger, typhus, scurvy, and other diseases during nearly seven years of captivity. When he is transferred off the island, he is given no indication that he will be exchanged to Poland, and he weighs his luck (staying relatively healthy at the camp) against his fears of incurring new charges and a second sentence.³⁴⁷

Many memoirists were not as fortunate and experienced severe illness during their imprisonment. Ilgin, who was frequently sick with a heart condition, noted that his health was often used against him as a form of threat during interrogations.³⁴⁸ His frailty often resulted in his reassignment from one subcamp to another, although he does not describe life in the camp hospitals in particular detail. Zaitsev explains that he contracted scurvy and consulted with a knowledgeable friend when deciding whether to enter the camp's hospital. He decides against it, considering the hospital environment more dangerous than attempting to treat himself on his own.³⁴⁹ Qureshi, who had described his sickliness long before arriving at the camp, became

³⁴⁵ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 323.

³⁴⁶ Grube, "Rasskaz," 214.

³⁴⁷ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 133–134, 136.

³⁴⁸ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 40.

³⁴⁹ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 85–86.

gravely ill just before being sent to SLON and spent extended periods in the hospital there, treating it as a familiar rather than a mysterious or dangerous place. He writes that he only truly began to understand life at SLON after leaving the monastery hospital, where he spent the first few months after his arrival.³⁵⁰ He continues to suffer severe “attacks” that cause temporary paralysis, often triggered by traumatic events or terrible news.³⁵¹ Qureshi’s sensitivity with regard to others makes him vulnerable to such attacks.

Danzas suffered from a severe bout of scurvy while imprisoned in Irkutsk and continued to experienced severe health consequences after recovering. At SLON, her poor condition means she is assigned to lighter clerical work, which likely saved her life. Just as her gender and status as a counterrevolutionary (rather than a political prisoner) cause Danzas immense frustration, her health concerns also cause her to lose out on good jobs and better conditions. (Ilgin is similarly frustrated when his health concerns lead to his removal from an isolated camp with other clergymen.) At one point she is assigned to a good job outside of the monastery, for example, but falls ill and brought back to Solovki, where she was mistakenly believed to be dying and left alone in the hospital. Remarkably, despite enduring months in this nightmarish hospital, Danzas writes that her “strong constitution” eventually pulled her through, and she returned to work shortly after recovering.³⁵²

Lenardowicz also became seriously ill and was subjected to brutal treatment, including being forced to swim in freezing water and run back to the barracks while sick. His time working in the hospital exposed him to the dire conditions and the suffering of sick prisoners and guards alike, further illustrating the harsh realities of illness in the camps.

³⁵⁰ Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 117.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 49.

Clinics and hospitals

The memoirists uniformly assert that healthcare in the camps was virtually nonexistent, and they paint a bleak picture of the conditions in the so-called hospitals. Many memoirists describe the utter lack of effective medical care in the camps. Zaitsev emphatically states that from 1923 to 1926, there was no real medical assistance for the prisoners in Solovki, emphasizing that any semblance of healthcare was completely absent during this period.

Cederholm, despite initially being impressed by the number of doctors on the island, soon realized that the hospital was grossly under-resourced.³⁵³ Not only were proper medications unavailable, but the food was almost inedible and provided little to no nourishment, further exacerbating the already dire conditions for the sick. The abundant number of medically trained prisoners could not make up for the pathogenic conditions prevailing at the camp.

The fear of the camp hospitals was pervasive among the prisoners, whether they were sick or not. Memoirists' opinions of the hospitals varied, but apprehension was a common theme. Malsagoff notes that political prisoners and those accused of counterrevolutionary activities dreaded the Solovetsky hospitals as if they were the plague. Many prisoners, desperate to avoid the hospital, would rather die in their huts than be taken to what they perceived as a place of certain death. This fear was so strong that only common criminals, who had little regard for their own lives, would willingly go to the hospital, resulting in many dying daily, primarily from scurvy.

Cederholm's reluctance to enter the hospital is similarly telling; the conditions were so appalling that patients were often found lying on the floor in the corridors, surrounded by an

³⁵³ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 283–284.

unbearable stench. Zaitsev once considered going to the hospital after falling ill with scurvy but was strongly dissuaded by his friend Iupovich. Iupovich warned him that the GPU had methods of killing prisoners in the hospital, recounting instances where political enemies, particularly those from socialist factions like the Mensheviks and Left SRs, were allegedly murdered through "medical procedures."

Memoirists provide a mixed portrayal of the medical personnel in these hospitals. While some doctors were viewed with contempt, others were respected for their dedication despite the challenging conditions. Qureshi, for example, had a contentious relationship with a doctor named Alexander Abramovich Shiriaev, but he also speaks highly of Dr. Simonov and Dr. Sergey Ivanovich Lapin, who were both exiled to Solovki and who provided him with care during his hospital stay. Tchernavin, on the other hand, highlights the brutal policies enforced by the camp authorities, where even a single louse found on a prisoner after a "disinfecting" treatment could result in severe punishment for the medical staff, as the priority was to prevent epidemics and maximize the prisoners' labor output rather than truly caring for their health.

The memoirists also recount tragic stories of their fellow prisoners in the hospital. Qureshi shares the heartbreaking tale of his friend, Khoroshavin, who fell seriously ill after contracting an ear infection from harsh labor conditions. Despite the best efforts of the camp doctors, including Simonov, Lapin, and a beloved doctor named Maria Vasilyevna, to secure his transfer to the mainland for proper treatment, the GPU remained unyielding. Khoroshavin's mother, who had traveled from Moscow to see her dying son, was only allowed to stay for one week before being forced to leave him to his fate. This story underscores the cruel indifference of the camp authorities towards the lives of the prisoners, even in their final moments.

Poor nutrition leads to scurvy

While GPU prisoners were inarguably worse off than free people in the Soviet Union, diseases of malnutrition like scurvy were rampant across the country in the 1920s. On the outside, efforts to combat famine (in Russia) were combined with education campaigns to teach people about proper nutrition and therefore avoid scurvy, which is caused by a lack of Vitamin C. Inside the prison, rations were limited and fresh, nutritious food exceedingly scarce. Vladimir Tchernavin, who had the longest historical perspective on the camps, is a lucid observer of the GPU's practices regarding disease. When he is allowed to bring a few apples into prison, he learns from fellow prisoners that fresh fruit and vegetable are strictly prohibited to induce scurvy in prisoners. He deduces that "[a]lthough sufficient in quantity [prison food] is intentionally lacking in vitamins and contains almost no fats—hence scurvy and boils."³⁵⁴

Expanding from basic descriptions of the disease, Tchernavin argues that scurvy is intentionally induced in order to weaken the prisoners physically and mentally: "Sufferers from scurvy are more compliant, more amenable to the 'exhortations' of examining officers than healthy ones, and can be made to sign anything."³⁵⁵ Desperation for the smallest scrap of fruit or vegetable induces prisoners to humiliation and disorder, and fierce conflict over job assignments in the kitchen.³⁵⁶ Other authors mention scurvy, as when Bezsonov depicts prisoners at different stages of the disease: "Many of our companions had scurvy; only just beginning with some, their gums being swollen; but others could hardly move and were all doubled-up."³⁵⁷ Tchernavin mentions experiencing the early symptoms of scurvy during his escape attempt but not in jail or

³⁵⁴ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 132.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 134

³⁵⁷ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 210.

at the camp, while Danzas writes of a severe bout she contracted in Irkutsk. She continues to suffer from the effects of the disease at SLON.³⁵⁸

Quarantine/lack of sanitary measures

The horrific sanitary conditions in the camps further exacerbated the suffering of prisoners. Malsagoff vividly describes the deplorable state of the facilities, noting that not only were the huts, kitchens, and latrines in an “incredible state of filth,” but even the so-called “hospitals” were nothing more than breeding grounds for epidemics.³⁵⁹ The damp, marshy environment, combined with contaminated water and swarms of mosquitoes and lice, created an ideal setting for the spread of disease. Prisoners, already weakened by chronic under-nourishment and hard labor, were in no condition to resist these illnesses.

Danzas also recounts the dehumanizing “sanitary measures” that were imposed when the authorities decided to combat vermin, dirt, and infectious diseases. All women, regardless of their social standing, were subjected to these measures, which were “insulting for any who did not belong to the very dregs of society.”³⁶⁰ Despite their pleas, prisoners were only granted access to a single tap located in an unheated passage, which for most of the year resembled a “grotto of icicles.”³⁶¹ Washing in their rooms was forbidden and could result in severe punishment if discovered.

Grube paints a grim picture of the overcrowded barracks, where the conditions were so unbearable that those sleeping on the upper bunks would break the windows for air, while those

³⁵⁸ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 25, 47.

³⁵⁹ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 162–163.

³⁶⁰ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 59.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

on the lower bunks froze in the cold.³⁶² The poor ventilation and the inability to clean the barracks more than once a month led to a situation where prisoners were either suffocating from the heat or suffering from frostbite.

Cederholm adds to this bleak account by describing a scene where a group of prisoners from Sekirka were taken to work in a cemetery filled with victims of scurvy and typhus. The cemetery itself was a source of infection, as an underground stream eroded the shallow holes where prisoners were buried “like homeless dogs.”³⁶³ The sight of the emaciated, brutalized men, some wearing sacks due to the lack of clothing and none with proper footwear, highlighted the extreme neglect and brutality faced by those imprisoned in the camps.

These conditions only worsened when the camp’s prisoner population was increased by tenfold from 1927 to 1930. The overcrowding resulted in unsustainable conditions for everyone at the camp:

“Everywhere was terrible filth, a breeding ground for all kinds of epidemics and plagues. Typhus, stomach infections, dysentery, and scurvy— not to mention the less severe flu— decimated the people. Corpses were discarded at the cemetery daily. Burials took place at night to avoid offending the eyes of the chief officials.”³⁶⁴

³⁶² Grube, “Rasskaz,” 205.

³⁶³ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 305.

³⁶⁴ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 69.

Epidemics

Epidemics were frequent at the camp in the 1920s, usually typhus linked to the unsanitary conditions at the camp.³⁶⁵ Epidemics tended to worsen in the winter, when prisoners were forced into closer quarters and the islands were cut off from additional medical supplies and fresh food. Prisoners who witnessed epidemics firsthand tend to mention them. Of the earlier memoirists, Qureshi and Lenardowicz were both at the camp for the Winter 1925–1926 typhus epidemic. Grube likely arrived in spring 1926 after the worst of the epidemic had passed. Ilgin, Danzas, and Aliakhnovich experienced the epidemic of 1929–1930.

The 1925 Typhus Epidemic

The typhus epidemic of 1925–1926 was one of the most severe outbreaks in the camp's history. Qureshi describes how the mass deportation of beggars and other socially marginalized individuals to Solovki in 1925 directly contributed to the epidemic that erupted in early 1926. The camp authorities' negligence in isolating the sick or taking even the most basic preventive measures allowed the disease to spread unchecked. Qureshi notes that it was only by sheer luck that the entire camp population did not succumb to the epidemic, as the authorities failed to show any concern for the prisoners' well-being.

Lenardowicz, who was stationed at the Isakovo island subcamp during the same period, recounts the daily toll of the epidemic, with dozens of prisoners dying every day. The fear was so pervasive that even the Chekists, despite their routine violence against prisoners, were gripped

³⁶⁵ V. A. Smirnova, "Epidemii v GULAGe v vospominaniakh byvshikh zakliuchennykh," *Istoricheskaia etnologiia* 14, no. 4 (2022): 93–113.

by panic at the prospect of death from the disease, perhaps sensing their own doom awaiting them in the afterlife.

The 1929–1930 Typhus and Dysentery Epidemic

The epidemic of 1929–1930, which included both typhus and dysentery, was another catastrophic event in the camp's history. Ilgin attributes this outbreak to the sudden increase in the camp population from 7,000 to 70,000 prisoners and the lack of corresponding health measures. The overcrowding, combined with appalling filth and the absence of any effective health measures, created a breeding ground for disease. Ilgin vividly recounts how typhus, dysentery, and scurvy decimated the prisoner population, with bodies being discarded daily in the cemetery, and burials conducted at night to avoid disturbing the camp authorities.

Danzas provides a chilling account of the horrors of the epidemic, stating that the atrocities she witnessed were so incredible that they would be difficult to believe even if documented evidence were to surface. Aliakhnovich also describes the rampant spread of the disease, noting that despite efforts like bi-weekly disinfection of the barracks, these measures were futile, and the epidemic continued to claim more lives. He details how prisoners, especially those awaiting new sentences, were left to fend for themselves in special barracks, where the authorities abandoned them to their fate amidst the epidemic.

Aftermath of Epidemics

The aftermath of these epidemics left a lasting impact on both the survivors and the camp administration. Tchernavin, who witnessed a deadly typhus epidemic among prisoner-laborers at Murmansk in the early 1920s, reflects on how the authorities' primary concern was not the

prisoners' health but the uninterrupted continuation of labor. He notes that by the early 1930s, the practice of allowing epidemics to run rampant had been somewhat curbed, as the authorities realized that maximizing labor output required keeping the prisoners alive and relatively healthy.

However, Tchernavin also recounts how the threat of typhus remained a constant fear in places like Shpalerka prison in 1930. The prison's overcrowded and lice-infested conditions were ripe for an epidemic, which could have easily spread to the surrounding city. The temporary efforts to control the lice population were only half-hearted, and as soon as the immediate threat of an epidemic passed, the prisoners were returned to the previous harsh regime. Tchernavin emphasizes that the authorities used both lice and scurvy as tools for controlling and weakening the prisoners, with epidemics serving as a grim reminder of the ever-present danger in the camps.

Venereal disease

A set of diseases that were equally common at SLON, but treated much differently in the memoirs, is venereal disease. Discussions of VD typically accompany discussions of women at the camp, as when Aliakhnovich claims that 80 percent of women at the camp suffer from some type of venereal disease. He attributes this to the proliferation of prostitution at the camp in the late 1920s and explains that only half of those infected seek medical help. Such help would be limited, however, by the lack of supplies to contain these diseases (and by the limited treatments available before the advent of antibiotics).

Of the memoirists, Zaitsev is particularly harsh in his descriptions, condemning the women involved as “[t]hese demi-mondaines of Moscow’s foul swamp, known among the rabble

as ‘under-carriage prostitutes’”³⁶⁶ He is repulsed by their presence, noting that “[t]here is no doubt that all these loose women are infected with venereal diseases, often of a malignant and highly contagious nature, left untreated.”³⁶⁷ Moreover, he laments that “by necessity, unfortunate intellectual prisoners must share meals with them from common containers, such as shared buckets.”³⁶⁸

Zaitsev also tells a striking story related to venereal disease. During a rendition of the hymn “Praise the name of the Lord,”³⁶⁹ in the refectory, the chanting is interrupted by a woman’s cries: “Oh god! Why? Why?” Zaitsev explains the heartbreaking outburst: the woman, Nazhivina, is the mother to five children, now orphaned as she has been sent to SLON for 10 years and her husband shot. The final humiliation for Nazhivina, however, was being raped by a group of Chekists, who infected her with a “malignant” venereal disease. Witnessing this scene, Zaitsev asks, “one wonders—will the human mind find a way to invent yet another suffering for her?”³⁷⁰ Zaitsev continues to contemplate the scene, concluding: “after such moments of deep emotional outpouring, after spiritual communion with the Lord Creator, the unfortunate prisoners experience moments of heartfelt tenderness, humble submission, and physical relief...”³⁷¹

Although she is clear in her distaste for the prostitutes in her company, Danzas refers to venereal disease only obliquely, a practice that is in harmony with her general avoidance of describing anything too visceral in great detail. Rather, she emphasizes her horrified reaction to scenarios, using that to convey how awful things were at the camp (in this and other regards).

³⁶⁶ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 44.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Malsagoff takes an interesting approach to venereal disease, recounting a story of a “compassionate Tchekist” doctor whose syphilis treatments are well-intended but ultimately ineffective. His conclusion that “[h]e evidently still needs practice [...] for syphilis is on the increase in the camps, and the mortality from it is growing steadily” emphasizes the doctor rather than those who suffer from the disease.³⁷² To be fair, the treatments available at the time were limited, even if doctors had had access to them at SLON (penicillin was discovered in 1928 and only became widely used during and after WWII).

Climate and Environmental injuries

More than one memoirist writes of the climate and environment on the Solovetsky Islands as being particularly pathogenic or otherwise harmful to prisoners’ health. The subarctic climate of the islands and nearby mainland is cold and wet in spring and fall, and winters are icy and extremely windy. The poorly constructed barracks at Kem and outside the monastery walls provided little protection from the elements at night, and outdoor laborers were subjected to the weather in the daytime as well.

Malsagoff makes an interesting claim that “[t]he water of the Solovetsky Islands has in it some quality which ruins the teeth,” causing toothaches that are “intensified by cold and the draughts in the huts.”³⁷³ He concludes that a dentist is needed at the camp. Sections like this one exemplify the difficulty of conveying the ongoing physical misery of life at the camps—the idea of suffering from unending toothache on top of the other difficulties of life at SLON is something that a fiction writer would be able to convey much more effectively than a memoirist.

³⁷² Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 168.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 167.

Lenardowicz writes of the frosts causing “enormous havoc” among the working prisoners, causing frostbite to their extremities. Without proper medicine, the “feldshers” (camp medics) were unable to treat these conditions, leading to gangrene “worsened by dirt and vermin.”³⁷⁴ Zaitsev writes with irony that lumber workers strove to “somehow protect themselves from the cold,” but their “miserable old duds” (*zhalkaia vetkhaia odezhonka*) were insufficient: “Many freeze to death, many suffer frostbite on their hands and feet.”³⁷⁵ Prisoners who did not make their quotas were left outside to complete their assignment, frequently dying of exposure. Zaitsev shifts from irony to a religious syntax when he writes that those who die “freeze to death, leaving Solovetsky land and freeing themselves from torment and suffering...”³⁷⁶

Labor categories

At some point after arriving at the camp, prisoners were divided into work details based on health and skill. Tchernavin lays out that while he was at the camp (1931–1932) there were three groups: “the first group, those fit for any manual labor; the second, those fit for lighter work; and the third, those unfit for any kind of hard labor. This classification was changed from time to time; once there was another group of those who could not walk unaided.”³⁷⁷ Prisoners assigned to a lower group were periodically reevaluated and often reassigned to higher groups. Danzas, who arrived at the camp in 1928, writes of three groups as well; she was “classed in the

³⁷⁴ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 36.

³⁷⁵ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 120.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁷⁷ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 261.

second category” based on the long-term damage to her legs from her months-long bout of scurvy. She was “spared the most painful manual work” and never recategorized into a higher labor category, although she was evaluated for this purpose biannually.

Memoirists emphasize the irregularity of these categorizations, the unfair nature of the examinations (prisoners were often revised into higher categories, but almost never revised down), and the strenuousness of labor assigned even to lower categories. Zaitsev, for example, is assigned at one point to a “lighter” detail moving wheelbarrows full of sand for hours.³⁷⁸ At the end of the day, the labor quotas trumped all other considerations (especially the prisoners’ health and abilities): “Every day, among the able-bodied, they sent [to hard labor] the disabled, cripples, and the seriously ill—those who belonged in the hospital. For example, they often sent scurvy sufferers with swollen legs and ulcerated wounds; often, they sent them barefoot.”³⁷⁹

Labor leads to illness and death

Whether sick or healthy, prisoners were subjected to dangerous and unhealthy conditions everywhere at the camp. However, those who did physical labor were undoubtedly at the greatest risk of physical danger. Memoirists draw a straight line between the labor practices at the camp and the injury, illness, and death of prisoners. Ilgin explains that prisoners’ health deteriorated due to heavy labor like felling lumber and digging peat: “as the prisoners’ health deteriorated, they fell ill with scurvy and rheumatism.”³⁸⁰

An ordinary cold or fever could lead to long-term physical damage under these conditions. Lenardowicz experiences this himself when he gets sick while on lumber duty: one

³⁷⁸ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 62.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁸⁰ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 64.

winter day he develops a high fever and a guard allows him to stay behind in the barracks, but shortly thereafter another group of guards insists that he go to work. He is marched to the field assignment, but it is clear he will be unable to complete heavy physical labor. The guards finds another task for him: Lenardowicz is forced to jump into the icy water and run back to the barracks. He describes the excruciating experience then explains that his health never fully recovered from this treatment.³⁸¹ Lenardowicz explains that the guards' damaging attitude to prisoners' health is hardly incidental: "But what did the Chekists care about our health?! In fact, they deliberately planned such labor to drive us into illness and destroy us physically."³⁸² Zaitsev recounts another such story secondhand, where a group of guards brutally beat a sick prisoner working in the forest. His partner, unable to lift the logs alone, mutely watches the beating until a guard forces him to also beat the sick man. Refusing, the healthy man is then beaten himself. Finally he joins in and begins to beat the sick man: "The poor, sick man, barely able to stand on his feet, bursts into wild sobs and throws himself headfirst into a deep snowdrift, as if seeking refuge from the beatings..."³⁸³

Insanity and self-inflicted injuries

Aside from physical illness, the mental effects of camp life could quickly affect prisoners. Tchernavin and other memoirists charge the prison authorities with allowing the pathogenic conditions to keep prisoners compliant and using psychological warfare to break prisoners' sanity. The tactics used during interrogation had lasting effects on prisoners who made

³⁸¹ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 39–42.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁸³ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 125.

it to SLON, not to mention the difficult conditions at the camp. Tchernavin and Aliakhnovich are particularly focused on the mental warfare practiced on prisoners throughout the camp system.³⁸⁴

Self-inflicted injuries can be presented as rational or resulting from insanity, or some combination of both, i.e., prisoners driven to insane action by their circumstances. Lenardowicz explains the phenomenon of cutting off a finger or hand to avoid labor as an attempt to save one's life. Zaitsev describes the same act as somewhere between rational and madness, emphasizing the punishment devised for these "*samouvechniki*": a year in one of the Sekirnaya Gora isolation cells. He punctuates this story with a grim note that most of these prisoners did not survive their injuries anyways, so the punishment was moot. Lenardowicz explains that the first few self-injuries got the desired outcome for prisoners, but "when these incidents began to multiply, the ruthless Chekists left the maimed prisoners to their fate, denied them medical assistance, and drove them back to work in the forest."³⁸⁵ If the practice was ever a rational response, the Chekist response was to punish it so furiously that it moved back to the domain of the insane, temporarily or not. It seems to have been a contagious practice that broke out on occasion. Danzas, who was at the camp after Lenardowicz and Zaitsev's release, reported the same phenomenon and explained the Chekists' response to its escalation: "when self-mutilation increased, it was declared that this would be considered as 'refusal to obey,' consequently punishable by the death penalty, which many suffered."³⁸⁶

Memoirists are divided on the question of suicides at the camp. Zaitsev describes escapes for the purpose of suicide as occurring on occasion.³⁸⁷ On the other hand, Aliakhnovich insists

³⁸⁴ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 188.

³⁸⁵ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 36.

³⁸⁶ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 34–35.

³⁸⁷ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 7.

that at the camp, “everyone clings to life feverishly”—he reports just three cases of suicide during his seven years at the camp.³⁸⁸ Whether such suicides are frequent or rare, memoirists highlight particularly tragic incidents that they witnessed or heard of. Lenardowicz, for example, tells the odd story of a man from his own labor crew: felling lumber in a trio in the forest, one of the three begins to beg his workmates to cut off his finger. As their workday progresses, Koralev begins to ask them to help him kill himself instead. They refuse and debate the question with him, but he insists that he wants to die. Finally, Koralev throws himself under a falling tree and is crushed. Lenardowicz concludes that “similar incidents occurred almost daily among the groups cutting the Solovetsky forest.”³⁸⁹

Death and burial

The treatment of the deceased in the camps was marked by a complete lack of respect and dignity. Ilgin recounts how corpses were routinely discarded at the cemetery, with burials taking place at night to avoid offending the sensibilities of the camp’s higher authorities.³⁹⁰ This clandestine approach to dealing with the dead underscores the inhumane conditions within the camps, where even in death, prisoners were denied basic decency.

Danzas provides a chilling account of the daily procedures surrounding the dead. The high death rate meant that every morning, bodies were collected, stripped of their clothing, and subjected to further indignities.³⁹¹ Prison officials would pry open the mouths of the deceased in search of gold teeth, which were then crudely extracted. The naked bodies were dragged away to

³⁸⁸ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 80.

³⁸⁹ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 38.

³⁹⁰ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 69.

³⁹¹ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 49.

a shed in full view of other prisoners, where they were loaded onto carts or sledges and transported to mass graves. Only in the rarest of cases were families or friends permitted to retrieve the bodies for a proper burial, highlighting the utter disregard for the lives—and deaths—of those in the camps.

F. Leaving SLON

Of the memoirists, six escaped from the camp and the others left by some administrative means. Three left directly via diplomatic exchange: Cederholm, a Finnish citizen; Qureshi, a British subject; and Aliakhnovich, exchanged to the Second Polish Republic. Danzas, Ilgin, and Nikonov-Smorodin were both transferred out of SLON to another labor camp, Danzas to the White Sea Canal headquarters and Nikonov-Smorodin to a rabbit farm on Lake Onega. After spending some time at the canal project, Nikonov-Smorodin was returned to the rabbit farm, whence he escaped in 1933. Danzas and Ilgin later emigrated with the help of émigré relatives and the Catholic church, respectively. Lenardowicz and Zaitsev both escaped from their places of exile, Lenardowicz returning to Poland and Zaitsev crossing from Siberia into China.

The following section addresses departure from the camp, whether via escape or some official means. Memoirists who escape demonstrate their agency in the process and tend to depict the process in detail; escape narratives comprise anywhere from 15–30% of the books where they are included. Memoirists who leave the Solovetsky Islands by official means, whether completing their sentence, being transferred to another camp, or, in the best-case scenario, being rescued diplomatically by their home country, tend to depict the process in less detail and much more briefly, emphasizing the lack of information and confusion of their journey back. Both groups of memoirists create some dramatic tension depicting their release, whether

they fear capture during escape or suddenly being returned to the camp for opaque reasons. After leaving the camp, memoirists rarely discuss their lives in detail; instead, they briefly wrap up their life narratives and conclude their books with sweeping pronouncements about the Soviet Union and calls to action aimed at their readers.

Key to this section is the clash between the hope for survival and fatalism, based on the unpredictable practices of the Chekists and the deadly conditions at the camp. Memoirists demonstrate this fatalism throughout; for example, arrival sequences often include gloomy predictions about the survival rates at the camp. Upon arrival to SLON, whether to Kem or to the Solovetsky Islands, memoirists contemplate the slim chance of survival, let alone the possibility of being released from the camp. As he enters the gates at Kem, for example, Bezsonov wonders “whether [he] could perhaps be shut up in that gloomy place for all the rest of [his] life.”³⁹² At Kem, Nikonov-Smorodin depicts the counting of “half-dead and barely standing” prisoners who are then loaded onto a steamer for the islands: “Few of the 150 were destined to set foot on the mainland again.”³⁹³

Departing Kem for the islands, Zaitsev expands on this fear, discussing the high mortality rates at the camp. While their sentences ranged from 3 to 10 years, in reality:

Many, even those with short sentences, said their final “farewell” at that time, leaving their homeland forever, for eternity, as they met their death there in the labor camps... Their bones now decay in a mass grave of human bodies. (A “mass” grave because, during my

³⁹² Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 202.

³⁹³ Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 95.

time on Solovki, pits were dug to accommodate 30 human corpses
for burial).³⁹⁴

The grim reality that Zaitsev and others highlight upon arrival to the camp underscores the inescapability of the system, where survival itself is often a temporary reprieve. Against the odds, prisoners held onto the slim hope of having their sentences reduced or otherwise being able to eventually leave the camp. For this reason, the arrival of the yearly sentence reduction commission entailed great hope and great disappointment among convicted counterrevolutionaries (convicted criminals were treated with exceptional leniency, particularly in the NEP era).³⁹⁵

Even those who survive and leave the camp are often handed another sentence in transit back to Saint Petersburg or Moscow from the camp. Malsagoff explains the process in grim terms, directly to readers: “whatever ‘offence’ you have been found guilty of, however you have conducted yourself in the Solovky, you will never be released. Every person transported by the Soviet Government is doomed to die on his journeyings from prison to prison, from one place of forced exile to another.”³⁹⁶ Qureshi reports meeting prisoners who had been sent to Solovki “two or even three times” in transit.³⁹⁷ Cederholm and Aliakhnovich both describe their anxiety about being resentenced for a new infraction while being transported back to Saint Petersburg for release to their respective consulates. Other memoirists provide anecdotes of this happening to prisoners they know. Nikonov-Smorodin emphasizes the hopelessness of returning to one’s previous life:

³⁹⁴ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 52.

³⁹⁵ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 51; Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 66; See also Peter H. Solomon, “Soviet penal policy, 1917-1934: a reinterpretation,” *Slavic Review* 39.2 (1980): 198–199.

³⁹⁶ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 184.

³⁹⁷ Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 134.

First of all, once a prisoner ends up in the camp, they will never return to their previous place of residence and will never be free from the supervision of the GPU. This is the main rule of the Chekist system. It is, in fact, understandable: in the basements and camps, one can see Soviet power without its mask, and anyone who has been in a camp knows exactly what that power truly represents.³⁹⁸

Having been a part of this system, there is no way for the memoirists to truly return to what they knew before. Moreover, the swift transformation of the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s meant that the home they once knew might be totally changed or even destroyed. Although the memoirists themselves are often already displaced and alienated from their families and communities when they are arrested, they emphasize even worse cases encountered during their time in Soviet prisons and camps. Their perspectives on the destruction of what once was change over time; for example, Vladimir Tchernavin and Nikonov-Smorodin, who both wrote their memoirs in the late 1930s, emphasize the total destruction of Ukrainian and Russian peasant communities that resulted from the mass collectivization campaigns of the early 1930s.³⁹⁹

The churn of human capital across the GPU camp system, and the low chance of emerging from the system into freedom means that memoirists are constantly running into familiar faces, sharing updates about their lives in the camp system and discussing those who have died in the interim. Memoirists often describe meeting former SLON inmates en route to and from the camp; “Old Solovetskians” are afforded a special gravitas in these groups of prisoners due to the camp’s fierce reputation across the Soviet Union and in Soviet prisons.

³⁹⁸ Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 96–97.

³⁹⁹ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 29, 325; Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 257.

These meetings facilitate the exchange of information between future and former Solovetskians in transit, which helps to generate the camp lore (called “parasha” after the slop buckets located in each cell and barracks) that prisoners rely on for survival. Prior to arrival, every memoirist discusses the reputation of the camp to some degree, and Nikonov-Smorodin’s depictions of these critical gossip sessions among prisoners are particularly interesting and well-written.

1. Considering Escape

Accounts of escape are an integral aspect of SLON narratives, and even memoirists who did not escape recall escape attempts that they heard of or witnessed, usually unsuccessful. Very often, a memoirist will place a story of an escape attempt, whether successful or failed, before a discussion of his own plans to escape. Six of the memoirists represented here escaped from SLON and three others escaped from their places of exile after being released from the camp, an enormous overrepresentation of successful escapees.⁴⁰⁰ Kiselev-Gromov, a former camp administrator, claims that only “two or three people out of a thousand prisoners” attempt to escape, and those are usually captured, tortured, and killed.⁴⁰¹ (Kiselev-Gromov escaped from the camp himself in 1930, but does not address the experience to a significant degree.) Malsagoff echoes the rarity of escape from the camp: “a successful escape from the Solovky is a miracle, a fabulous piece of good fortune, granted to a few out of scores of thousands.”⁴⁰² Memoirists who do successfully escape often describe it as the only reasonable chance for their own survival and depict themselves weighing the gamble of escape against their chances of survival at the camp.

⁴⁰⁰ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 70–71.

⁴⁰¹ Kiselev-Gromov, *Lageri smerti*, 152.

⁴⁰² Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 185.

The prospects of escape from SLON were grim, especially from the islands, although attempts were always made. The islands are remote, the climate conditions are deadly in winter and unpleasant in summer. Crossing the White Sea is difficult for steamships, let alone the smaller crafts that escapees had a chance of taking. Memoirists realize that Kem is the better option for an escape attempt, although some learn this lesson more easily than others. Once he arrives on the islands, Cederholm dismisses the possibility of escape from Solovki out of hand, comparing the two locations: “I know now that Kem is as perfect a hell as the Solovky; but nevertheless it has one important advantage over the Solovetsky camp—escape can be attempted, as Kem is not cut off from the outside world even in winter.”⁴⁰³ Grube, on the other hand, claims to have paddled eighteen versts across the White Sea on a makeshift raft during an escape attempt. After hours of paddling, he was easily spotted “from the Sekirnaya tower” and recaptured by guards in a motorboat. From this experience, Grube affirms that “[e]scape from Solovki is impossible” because “the islands are surrounded on all sides by water, which no human can swim across—an ideal place for a prison.”⁴⁰⁴

Prisoners who are suspected of attempting to escape were kept on the islands, a practice that former camp administrator Kiselev-Gromov noted.⁴⁰⁵ Following his two attempts to escape from the islands, Grube is also kept on the islands while other prisoners are transferred back to the mainland for work assignments. Hoping to escape from the mainland, Grube describes sneaking back to Kem under an assumed identity. When a camp administrator catches him at Kem, he is detained but manages to escape before he is sent back to the archipelago.

⁴⁰³ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 172.

⁴⁰⁴ Grube, “Rasskaz,” 194.

⁴⁰⁵ Kiselev-Gromov, *Lageri smerti*, 32.

The prospects for escape were a little better at Kem, although the Karelian borderland was embedded with Red Army soldiers and local peasants incentivized to catch escapees.⁴⁰⁶ As Aliakhnovich put it, “[e]scaping from the island is impossible, but from the mainland, successful escapes occasionally happen.”⁴⁰⁷ Bezsonov resolves to escape as soon as possible, and he and Malsagoff do escape from Kem in March 1925. Grube also eventually escapes from Kem, not the islands.

Criminals vs. counterrevolutionaries

The different treatment of criminals and counterrevolutionaries across the Soviet system applies in the case of escape attempts as well. Criminals are depicted as escaping often, as when Malsagoff describes a “revolving door” of criminality: “Robbers on a large and a small scale, burglars, murderers, horse-thieves, coiners, vagabonds—are flung in whole divisions from one prison to another, serve their term or escape by bribing their guards, but soon get into gaol again.”⁴⁰⁸ Qureshi and Danzas also discuss the preferential treatment of prisoners during this period in Soviet penal policy. Qureshi explains the policy that allows frequent amnesties and sentence reductions,⁴⁰⁹ while Danzas inveighs against the unequal treatment of “common criminals” compared to “politicals” in reference to sentence reductions.⁴¹⁰ Tchernavin, a more sympathetic interlocutor of the criminal class, highlights the frequency and success of criminal escapes compared to that of counterrevolutionaries and explains the difference en route to Kem. After witnessing an unsuccessful escape attempt in another train car, Tchernavin discusses the

⁴⁰⁶ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 319–320.

⁴⁰⁷ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 128.

⁴⁰⁸ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 34.

⁴⁰⁹ Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 134.

⁴¹⁰ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 66.

strategy of escape with his new criminal acquaintances. In an informative exchange with the young thieves, Tchernavin asks: “Why don’t you escape abroad?” and they give a well-reasoned response:

They’ve plenty of their own riff-raff there; we’re immediately caught and sent back. Politicals should escape abroad. They can’t conceal themselves here. But if they’re caught in the act of escaping, it’s the end for them. They’re killed. If we’re caught escaping we only get an extension of our term—for one or two years, that’s all.⁴¹¹

Memoirists constantly emphasize the particularly venomous treatment of counterrevolutionaries, perhaps in an attempt to convince unbelieving Western audiences of the inhumane treatment they endured. Tchernavin’s discussion of this aspect of Soviet prison dynamics highlights the existential nature of escape for counterrevolutionaries compared to the relative unseriousness of the offense for prisoners.

Considering escape

Although escape is a common theme across the memoirs, more than a few memoirists deny any inclination to escape, typically the older and sicker ones who were not likely to survive the physical strain of a month-long trek to the Finnish border. Although Danzas frequently appeals to various authorities and influential friends for relief, she rarely discusses escape, providing one tragic anecdote of a woman shot for aiding her husband’s escape attempt and a brief discussion of punishment for escape attempts.⁴¹² Ilgin, similarly, does not consider the

⁴¹¹ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 237.

⁴¹² Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 38, 46.

possibility of escaping, and is even reluctant to request an exit visa after he is freed from the camp. Ilgin expresses a desire to continue his parochial work and his joy in meeting with former parishioners, indicating that he would have continued to suffer the persecutions of the Soviet regime if his clerical advisors had allowed it.

Qureshi, who is desperate to leave the country, responds curiously to the prospect of escape. He consistently downplays and denies the possibility of escape attempts, labeling escape plots Chekist inventions or explaining instances of presumed escape as unintentional: “The factory administration regarded this as an escape, and a pursuit was organized for them. In reality, there was no escape at all; it was merely a desire to take a brief rest from the unbearable labor [...].”⁴¹³ The lack of successful or even intentional escape attempts in Qureshi’s account is curious and runs counter to the majority of accounts discussed here.

Aliakhnovich insists several times in his account that he never seriously considered escaping. He doesn’t deny the option; in fact, he frequently considers it and rejects the possibility. When he is initially detained, Aliakhnovich contemplates bolting from the train car but is deterred by the presence of a guard dog. On the way to SLON, he writes, “The thought of escape—in these conditions, an unrealistic thought—never once crossed my mind. I assume it was the same for my companions as well.”⁴¹⁴ He characterizes those who attempt to escape as people with nothing to lose such as criminals and starving peasants. Aliakhnovich clearly views himself as someone with something to lose, and he works to survive the camp by competing for better work positions and favors, probably a more sustainable approach and certainly one that matches Aliakhnovich’s personality. At SLON, he is pleased when, “[a]fter six years of

⁴¹³ Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 132.

⁴¹⁴ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 39.

imprisonment, I was no longer regarded as a dangerous prisoner, that is, one who might attempt an escape.”⁴¹⁵ This designation allows him to be moved to a better work position on the mainland.

Most of the other memoirists, even those who did not successfully escape, demonstrate an inclination to escape or describe an attempt to do so. Grube’s repeated escape attempts demonstrate his singleminded persistence and intense desire to free himself. Lenardowicz foolishly discusses a massive escape plot, aimed at freeing all the Poles in his prison, with a stool pigeon. Tchernavin’s obsession with escape permeates his book, and his internal debates regarding his own escape are a key theme throughout. Once he arrives at Kem, every decision he makes is meant to further his aim of escaping with his wife and child.

Malsagoff depicts Bezsonov proposing an escape attempt in their first interaction at Kem, and Bezsonov’s frequent escapes form the title of his book. At SLON, Bezsonov depicts himself as wrestling with the prospect of escape, framing his options upon arrival at Kem as a choice between suffering at the camp (and fulfilling his Christian duty) or taking on a supervisory role at the camp to survive (and oppressing other prisoners). Weighing the two options, he reverts to form: “There was no middle course. But there was, though. There was the possibility of escape!”⁴¹⁶

The thought of escape had a strong psychological effect on prisoners that memoirists often depict and reflect on in their accounts. While in prison in Kazan, for example, Nikonov-Smorodin is clued into a vast escape plot and, even though he is not part of the actual escape plan, he feels elated by the prospect of its success: “From that very day [...] overwhelmed by

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 128.

⁴¹⁶ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 217.

inner joy, I forgot about my hard lot and my backbreaking work: if only I could somehow hold on until the desired moment. I greeted each new day with the thought: is it today?”⁴¹⁷ Nikonov-Smorodin repeats the same thought process several times in his memoir; each time he contemplates the possibility of escape, he feels the power of freedom for a moment. In a Kazan prison, he uses the thought of escape as a distraction: “‘To escape’ was the only thought that took possession of me. During my half-hour daily walks around the prison yard, I diligently examined the prison walls with the only thought—would there be an opportunity to escape.” As he is transported through Moscow, he again contemplates escape, but quickly sees the futility of the plan: “I couldn’t help but think about jumping from the car onto the pavement and disappearing. I peered into the crowded streets, saw policemen hanging around everywhere, soldiers scurrying about in the crowd, and the impossibility of my undertaking became clear to me.” Various escape plots and conspiracies take up his time and interest at SLON as well, although he eventually escapes from a work assignment on the mainland. For Nikonov-Smorodin, the thought of escape is an introspective topic throughout his account. On the morning of his escape, he realizes that his “desire to escape” had also distracted him from the inevitable loss of his homeland: “now, at the moment of separation, this feeling, against my will, awoke with special force, and my heart sank sadly.”⁴¹⁸

While he is held in prison, Cederholm constantly evaluates the possibility of escape from the various places he is held. Like Nikonov-Smorodin, he often identifies a place as possible to escape from, allows himself to formulate a plan for escape, then methodically outlines why the plan would fail.⁴¹⁹ When he is finally transported to SLON, Cederholm loses this hope of escape:

⁴¹⁷ Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 24.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 342.

⁴¹⁹ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 201.

“I felt that every turn of the wheels was making my escape from the clutches of the Tcheka more and more impossible. I was now completely in ‘their’ power. I felt that all hope of returning to my country was gone, and that a slow, horrible death by torture awaited me.”⁴²⁰

Stories of escapes

As they think through the possibility of escape, memoirists present stories of escape attempts, failed and successful. As mentioned above, these stories are often given in conjunction with the memoirists’ own thoughts of escape; stories of successful escapes give hope and possible examples of how to escape, but failed escapes are more common and impart more lessons for potential escapees. Once he resolves to escape, Bezsonov makes the point clear: “My mind was made up. There were only the details to be fixed upon and decided. It was to be done thoroughly this time; I would not let the Bolsheviks catch me in one of their traps as they had done twice before. I saw many examples of how things ought not to be done.”⁴²¹ Next, he relates a typical unsuccessful escape attempt from the Kem barracks:

One day we heard shots outside and all flew to the windows: we saw a wide expanse of ice and snow, a man running with all his might over it. A soldier was running after him and firing shots at him. I, of course, wished the man to succeed with all my heart. He ran on and the distance that separated him from his pursuer seemed to grow; but he suddenly stopped, flew in one direction, then tried another, and then stopped dead; the soldiers came up and began to strike him

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 268.

⁴²¹ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 220–221.

on all sides. He was hit with rifles, fell down, got up again and was brought back, the soldiers beating him all the way. Osnova broke a stick on his back the moment he came into camp and afterwards he was shot.

This was a lesson to us not to run away, without plenty of forethought and preparation.⁴²²

Bezsonov's apprehension was totally appropriate, as preventing and punishing escape attempts was one of the Chekists' main tasks at SLON and generally. In transit, for example, Cederholm and Qureshi both mention that strict searches of prisoners were to prevent prisoners from keeping hold of anything that they could throw in convoys' faces to facilitate their escape.⁴²³ At SLON, prisoners were accompanied by guards when they left their barracks. Kiselev-Gromov describes prisoners having to strip down before leaving the barracks to relieve themselves "as a precaution against escape."⁴²⁴ In the region around Kem, peasants were threatened and bribed to turn escapees in. According to Grube, the promise of "a sack of bread and one gold coin for every fugitive they catch" turned the locals into professional escapee hunters: "They spend entire days and nights lying in ambush with rifles, waiting for their prey. Not a single person has managed to escape through the fields and forest paths from those who have attempted it."⁴²⁵ Grube, who escaped by sea, is clearly exaggerating here. Prisoners who actually escape in this region report a wider variety of responses from locals; some assist the escapees while others immediately report them to the Bolsheviks. However, the tide turns against escapees over the

⁴²² Ibid. Malsagoff relates a very similar story, but reports that the escape attempt happened at the Solovetsky Monastery. Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 144–145.

⁴²³ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 234; Qureshi, "Piat' let," 107.

⁴²⁴ Kiselev-Gromov, *Lageri smerti*, 62.

⁴²⁵ Grube, "Rasskaz," 208.

1920s, and the difference in helpfulness of locals between Malsagoff's escape (1925) and Tchernavin's (1932) is stark; by the 1930s, locals are extremely reluctant to help escapees, while in the mid-1920s they are more willing to assist their escape efforts.

Although, as Malsagoff reports, the statutory punishment for escape is simply the prolonging of the prisoner's sentence,⁴²⁶ the real punishment is often execution or torture, as in Bezsonov's story above. Such executions were extrajudicial, although tacitly sanctioned by the camp administration and higher-ups in the OGPU. At best, prisoners who survive their escape attempt are sent to the Sekirka isolator.⁴²⁷ Kiselev-Gromov discusses the harsh punishment for escape attempts from the guards' perspective and tries to explain the intensity of their anti-escape efforts:

How they rejoice when they catch a fugitive, how they beat him, and how they boast about their heroics in their wall newspapers and monthly squad journals—it's hard to convey. One must know Chekists in general, and those of SLON (Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp) in particular, to understand this.⁴²⁸

Even with his extensive experience among these guards, Kiselev-Gromov still expresses some bewilderment at their attitude: "I, having spent more than 10 years with Chekists, still cannot fully grasp the psychology of a SLON Chekist-guard."⁴²⁹ He continues:

To a greater or lesser extent, almost all of them are sadists.

Torturing prisoners and killing them, especially during escape

⁴²⁶ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 144

⁴²⁷ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 78.

⁴²⁸ Kiselev-Gromov, *Lageri smerti*, 140–141.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

attempts, is their favorite topic of animated conversations. They talk for months about killings during escape attempts, savoring the factual details and inventing things that never happened.⁴³⁰

The guards are aided in their anti-escape efforts by informers, seemingly everywhere at the camp, who often spoil escape plots and implicate conspirators.⁴³¹ Prisoners could be labeled conspirators in an escape attempt for minimal involvement before or after the fact, such as knowledge of a plot or, in a case reported by Nikonov-Smorodin, for simply expressing approval of escape attempts in front of an informer.⁴³² Of course, the escape plan did not have to be real to punish prisoners for it; escape plots were fabricated by Chekists as a pretext for summarily executing prisoners. Prisoners who got lost in the forests or at a remote worksite could easily be accused of attempting to escape, for example. Lenardowicz and a group of workers become stranded in the forest during the winter and, when they drag themselves to the hospital in poor condition, are immediately investigated as escapees. Luckily, a doctor defends the group and the case against them is dismissed.⁴³³ Many others were not so lucky.

Qureshi gives an example of the execution of a girl he met in the hospital accused of plotting to escape with five other prisoners. News of her death pushes Qureshi to a nervous breakdown. He insists that he “knew for certain that the report was falsely made by the Chekists to curry favor and secure an early release. None of them had even considered escaping.”⁴³⁴ Zaitsev gives an even more extreme example at the end of his book. He describes the Chekists’ ritualized sacrifice of five prisoners when GPU head Felix Dzerzhinsky died, claiming that the

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 164.

⁴³¹ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 306.

⁴³² Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 128.

⁴³³ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 62.

⁴³⁴ Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 117.

top administrators on the islands ordered the prisoners to go on a bizarre overnight fishing trip, then accused them of escaping and summarily executing them. Memoirists report that such extrajudicial executions were sometimes covered up as typhus death.

On the other side of the coin, prisoners sometimes used an escape as a means to commit suicide. Kiselev-Gromov discusses one such escape plot, claiming: “This was not an escape; it was merely a demonstration of an escape, calculated with the expectation that they would be shot and killed. The calculation proved correct.”⁴³⁵ The idea that a prisoner could become desperate enough to deliberately injure or kill himself is not impossible (see above). Zaitsev discusses such cases frequently, reporting that prisoners would go into the forests to hang themselves, or drown themselves in the numerous lakes surrounding the monastery. In particular, Zaitsev claims that prisoners sentenced to long terms at Sekirka chose quick suicides over “the terrible prolonged torment” of the isolator.⁴³⁶

None of this is to say that prisoners did not actually attempt to escape. Nikonov-Smorodin confirms the existence of a huge escape plot that totally destabilized the camp in late 1929, leading to a major investigation into and change of the camp’s administration just as the prisoner population was tripling and a typhus epidemic was on the upswing. (This extensive escape plot forms a major part of Prilepin’s *The Monastery*.) In Nikonov-Smorodin’s account, the aftermath of the plot affected the whole camp: “Ominous rumors spread across Solovki. Prisoners were being arrested by the dozens. The special isolation ward in the Kremlin was overflowing. Gloom and despair hung over the island of tears.”⁴³⁷

⁴³⁵ Kiselev-Gromov, *Lageri smerti*, 131.

⁴³⁶ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 144.

⁴³⁷ Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 195.

Successful escapes were rare, each one teaching prisoners and guards about new techniques for plotting and preventing escape attempts. Malsagoff reports that a prisoner was able to escape from the Kholmogory camp in 1922 and get to Cheka headquarters, where he pleaded with Kalinin: “Do what you like with me, but turn your attention to the horrors in the northern camps!”⁴³⁸ According to Malsagoff, a commissioner named Feldman was sent there and effected the dispersal of the camp: administrators reassigned, criminals amnestied, and political prisoners sent on to the Solovetsky camp. Another successful escape that Malsagoff discusses in depth is the disappearance of a friend into the “interior of Russia.”⁴³⁹ Malsagoff considers the possibility but determines that the risk for rearrest would be too great, and he remains at the camp, planning his own escape, while his friend disappears.

2. Actual escapes

Grube

Grube’s first unsuccessful escape attempt is an ill-advised swim/row across the White Sea. He is spotted and captured, then taken to the punishment cell on Sekirka. Later, he runs into the forest and lives there for a few days before ingratiating himself into a criminal barracks and remaining hidden there for a while longer. In his final attempt, he sneaks over to Kem by taking on another prisoner’s identity. Although he is caught as soon as he steps off the ship, Grube sneaks away before he can be sent back. He tricks the guards several times as they chase him across the camp, then stows away on one of two foreign ships docked at Kem. The sailors on the ship help him hide. He stuffs himself deep in the hold and remains there for a week, waiting for

⁴³⁸ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 50.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 185–186, 189.

the ship to depart. He barely survives the ordeal but is free once the ship leaves the harbor. The ship takes him to England, where he is eventually repatriated to Latvia.

While Grube is safely on his way abroad and nourished back to health by friendly sailors once the ship leaves port, the other escapees make their way overland and experience extreme difficulty as they pick their way through the forests and try to conceal themselves from prowling Red Army Soldiers.

Malsagoff, Bezsonov, et. al.

Malsagoff's depiction of the escape from Kem takes up 40 pages, about 18% of the book's length.⁴⁴⁰ The harrowing escape, which began on May 18, 1925, leaves Malsagoff badly frostbitten and exhausted. After weeks on the run, the escapees are still not sure that they have actually arrived in Finland until the evidence that they are not in the Soviet Union accumulates beyond reasonable doubt: "We had noticed during the past week a certain change in our surroundings, signs of order and culture; and we had found a cigarette box with an inscription that was not in Russian. The workmen on the river bank were much better clothed than Russian workmen are. After long hesitation and uneasiness we decided that the frontier lay behind us."⁴⁴¹ A key moment in Malsagoff's account of the escape is when Bezsonov writes the word "Finland" in his diary of the escape on June 23, 1925.

Malsagoff and Bezsonov both depict their escapes in detail, and their narratives line up well. Both reproduce and comment on parts of Bezsonov's escape diary, and Bezsonov comments on Malsagoff's depiction of him in the earlier book. Both emphasize the importance

⁴⁴⁰ Malsagoff, "Our Escape" in *An Island Hell*, 183–223.

⁴⁴¹ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 215.

of luck and skill in the success of their escape, and highlight the difficulties they faced along the way. Both emphasize the role of faith in their successful journey, although Malsagoff downplays his Islamic beliefs where Bezsonov emphasizes his Christianity. Introducing the escape, Malsagoff writes:

Only a miracle, a direct act of God, could make the impossible possible. But we—I and my four comrades—believed in miracles, and prayed to God for one. And He led us for thirty-five days through the marshes of Karelia and the forests of the border region, and on the thirty-sixth day brought us to Kuusamo, in Finland.⁴⁴²

The escape plot is rather simple: Malsagoff, whose job is to assign prisoners to work units, will assign the conspirators to a small work unit headed into the forests. The success of this endeavor is critical and both memoirists imbue it with sufficient tension. Once outside of the gates, they walk into the woods and disarm the guards, then continue walking, leaving the guards a few miles down their path. Bezsonov refuses to allow Malsagoff to kill the guards, even though it would simplify their escape plan. Malsagoff frames the incident as the moment when Bezsonov establishes his moral and practical leadership over the group, while Bezsonov highlights the guards' pitiful pleas to be left alive.⁴⁴³ Once the guards are able to raise an alarm, they expect to be pursued relentlessly until they reach the Finnish border. As they leave the camp, the five men are well-appointed with some food, a compass, good boots, and a guard's rifle.

Malsagoff emphasizes Bezsonov's fortitude and quick thinking throughout the escape, during which the group meets with many difficulties. They have no map and frequently go the

⁴⁴² Ibid., 187.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 195–196; Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 229.

wrong way and get stuck crossing rivers and lakes; they are being actively hunted by the patrols of Red Army soldiers and locals, all heavily incentivized to capture them; they run out of provisions and are forced to steal from locals; and Malsagoff becomes severely frostbitten, which impedes his ability to walk. However, they do make it to Finland, where they are treated well despite having to spend some time in prison for their theft of a Finnish peasant's food. As Malsagoff relates, Finnish "prison seemed paradise to us after the Solovky and the Karelian jungles!"⁴⁴⁴ The escapees are eventually freed and disperse to émigré communities across Europe.

Tatyana and Vladimir Tchernavin

Tatyana, whose memoir was the first to be published in May 1934, depicts the family's escape in full. Her account of the escape takes up about 30% of the 320-page book. Vladimir Tchernavin describes some of his preparations for escape but does not give a full account of the experience, writing that, "My wife has told the story of our escape—how we started in the leaky row-boat, patched by my own hands, how, without compass or map, we walked over wild mountains, through forests and across swamps, to Finland and freedom."⁴⁴⁵ Tatyana's account of the escape is akin to that of Malsagoff and Bezsonov, although the family's escape together gives Tatyana's account a different texture and meaning; rather than five men who met within the past year banding together for survival, the Tchernavins demonstrate a cohesive and heartbreaking effort to survive together. Tatyana's emphasis on family dynamics throughout her memoir plays out to great effect in her escape sequence, particularly when mother and son get sick near the

⁴⁴⁴ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 222.

⁴⁴⁵ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 357.

Finnish border and Vladimir sets out alone to find help. Eventually, and with great difficulty, Vladimir convinces the Finnish authorities to send rescuers, who bring Tatyana and their son Andrei to a nearby village. In Finland, Tatyana is hospitalized for several months, where she writes the memoir, while Vladimir and Andrei adjust to life outside the Soviet Union.

Escapes from Exile

Kiselev-Gromov escaped to Finland in 1930, but does not substantively discuss his own escape in his account, focusing instead on prisoners' escape attempts. Three other memoirists, already released or transferred away from SLON, escape from exile. Nikonov-Smorodin escapes with three other prisoners from a rabbit fur farm on Lake Onega. He is on the run for 38 days and gets separated from his companions near the Finnish border. Nikonov-Smorodin's account is exciting and well-paced, similar to Malsagoff and Bezsonov's account in composition. Zaitsev only mentions his escape to China from Siberian exile. Lenardowicz, exiled to Penza, escapes back to Poland, although he only hints at this outcome at the end of his first book (1930), *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci. Pamiętnik z Solówek*: "Nevertheless, I did not lose hope that I must escape from this decay and Bolshevik swamp. I began to devise plans to flee to a country that, at that moment, seemed to me like a true paradise and the ultimate dream of my life."⁴⁴⁶ Lenardowicz depicts his escape in a second book, *Za czerwonym kordonem: Wspomnienia z pobytu w Rosji sowieckiej* (1931).

⁴⁴⁶ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 79.

3. Leaving the islands

Memoirists who left the islands under official sanction emphasize their relief and apprehension of what is to come, describe their final views of the islands, and relate the often confused and rushed process of gathering their things for travel back to the mainland. Cederholm and Qureshi were both released back to their home countries after months of negotiations behind the scenes, but given little notice of their impending release. Cederholm describes an exciting and discombobulating scene:

The warder told me to collect my things immediately and run to the steamer, which was to leave for Kem at any moment. With a violently beating heart, fearing to put trust in my newly awakened hopes of liberation, I collected my things, which were scattered about in different parts of the Kremlin, and dashed off to the steamer, escorted by a Tchekist.⁴⁴⁷

Qureshi notes the same practice:

It should be noted that on Solovki, it became customary to notify individuals leaving the camp, for one reason or another, only 10 to 20 minutes before the steamer's departure, leaving them barely enough time to prepare for the long journey. Understandably, with such haste, any farewells with friends and acquaintances were out of the question.⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁷ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 332.

⁴⁴⁸ Qureshi, "Piat' let," 136.

Qureshi posits that the practice, which undercut efforts to transfer letters or even oral messages to the outside world, “was likely rooted in a desire to prevent any form of communication between the prisoners remaining in the camp and the outside world.”⁴⁴⁹ After he leaves the camp, Qureshi is deprived of all the notes he took during his imprisonment, which the memoirist describes as a huge loss.

As they sail away from the camp, both memoirists watch as the islands recede into the horizon. Qureshi notes a large crowd of prisoners and free individuals that “had gathered to see [him] off and wish [him] a safe journey.”⁴⁵⁰ Cederholm has few well-wishers and instead notes a few familiar faces among the “groups of ragged, emaciated men” and “insolent Tchekists in their long cavalry overcoats” as the boat leaves. He then gives his farewell to the islands:

Farewell, Solovky, island of tears, of torment, of the Red nightmare!
May you be accursed for ages to come! Farewell, ancient Russian
temples, thus defiled! Farewell, dear suffering friends and fellow-
captives! Will many of you be alive next year, and is any one of you
destined to taste freedom again?⁴⁵¹

Cederholm’s farewell emphasizes the historical context of the Solovetsky Islands and presents his fear for the wellbeing of the acquaintances he left behind at the camp.

Qureshi, on the other hand, relies on his well-demonstrated interest in fate or kismet in his departure sequence: “The thick, dark clouds that had obscured the star of my destiny for so many years had finally dispersed, and that star now shone brightly in the sky. A happy summer

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 138.

⁴⁵¹ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 332.

of 1926 had arrived for me.”⁴⁵² Qureshi highlights the transition from the islands to the mainland, suffusing his description with symbolic weight: “A fresh tailwind was blowing, as if fate itself were driving me toward the mainland.” In his description, it seems that Qureshi was making these symbolic associations while in transit away from the islands: “I often turned back to look at Solovki, gradually disappearing into the misty distance. Only the tower of the cursed *Sekirka* remained visible on the horizon until we arrived in Kem.”⁴⁵³ He noted this tower on arrival as well; the Sekirka lighthouse thus marks his time on the Solovetsky Islands. As he watches the islands fade into the horizon, another symbolic element of camp life appears when he notes “the lame old steamer *Gleb Boky*, carrying a new transport of prisoners to the camp.”⁴⁵⁴

Nikonov-Smorodin, perhaps the best writer among the memoirists who addressed this experience in detail, gives a strong description of his departure from the islands, reproduced here at length:

The dawn is breaking. The steamship *Gleb Boky*, maneuvering between the fairway markers in the form of large crosses, slowly leaves the Bay of Felicity. Here is the last cape with a guard post. To the left, the Zayatsky Islands are black, and ahead, in the west not yet illuminated by the sun, numerous stone islands are black with jagged edges. These islands were probably just as inhospitable thirteen years ago, when the bow of the steamship was inscribed not with *Gleb Boky*, but with Archangel Michael.

⁴⁵² Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 135.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

I can't tear myself away from the view of the sea. A wonderful wind blows right into my face and I can't get enough of its fresh streams. The terrible Solovki are left behind. We are moving west towards the mainland. I greedily drank in new sensations and was completely in the grip of an inexplicable, unbridled joy.⁴⁵⁵

The memoirists' accounts of leaving the Solovetsky Islands are a poignant blend of relief, reflection, and trepidation, capturing the profound psychological toll of their experiences and the symbolic weight of their departures. Each narrative conveys a unique perspective: Cederholm's bitter farewell frames the islands as a cursed monument to human suffering, while Qureshi's departure is infused with hope and a sense of renewal, his metaphors elevating his journey to a turning point shaped by destiny. Nikonov-Smorodin, with his vivid prose, paints the departure as both a physical and emotional liberation, his newfound joy contrasting sharply with the grim realities left behind. Their next step is arrival at Kem, where some memoirists are held for weeks under quarantine, while others are quickly transferred to their next destination.

4. Leaving Kem

As they leave Kem, the escapees (Malsagoff, Bezsonov, and Grube) are not sentimental about the place, describing their journeys without reflecting on Kem. The Tchernavins escaped from a different campsite and do not refer back to Kem either. For prisoners who were routed off the islands according to GPU procedure, their second time at Kem typically merits some mention. Qureshi and Danzas do just that, briefly mentioning their time at Kem on the way back to Saint

⁴⁵⁵ Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 226–227.

Petersburg (for Qureshi) and on to the White Sea Canal (for Danzas).⁴⁵⁶ Zaitsev and Cederholm both spend enough time at Kem to be quarantined and assigned to a work detail. Zaitsev responds to this with indignation and refuses to work, which causes some trouble on his way out of the camp.⁴⁵⁷ Cederholm responds quite differently, arriving at Kem “along the now familiar road to the clearing station”:

There I was told that I was to be sent to Petrograd with the next transport and placed at the disposal of the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs. The transport was to leave on October 12th, till when I should have to live in the clearing camp. Now that the vision of liberty was taking shape more and more clearly before my eyes, I was ready to live not merely in the clearing camp, but with the devil himself. What could astonish or frighten me now, after all I had been through?⁴⁵⁸

While Cederholm felt a sense of relief and hope as his departure from Kem approached, viewing it as a long-awaited step toward freedom, Ilgin, by contrast, remained haunted by the camp’s psychological grip even when freed. Ilgin is incredulous when he and a companion are released from the Kem camp and sent to the railway station without a guard. They stand there for hours, exhausted and unable to believe that they were sent there without a “guardian angel”: “On the way, we kept looking back to see if they were chasing us and would drag us back to the camp. Fear gripped us both; we felt like small children left without care, that is, without guards

⁴⁵⁶ Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 138; Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 62.

⁴⁵⁷ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 79.

⁴⁵⁸ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 334.

watching over us. We couldn't get used to the idea that we were already free."⁴⁵⁹ Ilgin's disbelief reflects how difficult it would have been to shake off the learned habits of suspiciousness and dread that prisoners developed in the labor camp. The emotional toll of years spent under constant surveillance and harsh conditions left even those granted freedom suspicious of their release. Not to mention that the life most prisoners faced on release was continued exile to remote places and probation-like supervision, with requirements to frequently check in at the local GPU office.

Lenardowicz, who is sent into exile at the end of his term at SLON, ends his narrative of his time at the camp with his departure from Kem. He explains that "Kemi was the last point reminiscent of the Solovetsky Islands. I will also end my story there."⁴⁶⁰ For many of the memoirists, Kem was not just a physical waypoint but a psychological threshold—a final echo of the oppressive Solovetsky Islands, from which their memories and narratives could finally move on, as Lenardowicz does, concluding his account with his departure from this place.

G. Life after SLON

At the end of their memoirs, authors do two things to greater and lesser degrees: they reflect on their physical well-being and speak directly to readers with broad conclusions about the trajectory of the Soviet Union based on their experiences at SLON. Within this general pattern, each memoirist emphasizes different aspects of his or her experiences and chooses different ways of connecting the camp to the Soviet government and the rest of the world.

⁴⁵⁹ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 74.

⁴⁶⁰ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 77.

With the exception of Bezsonov, who frames his memoir with introductory and concluding letters, this is all done right at the end of the chronological life narrative. As such, most of the memoirs end rather abruptly, with a few kind words for the foreign government that took the memoirist in and, about half the time, an exhortation for some kind of action on behalf of those still trapped at SLON. A few take the opportunity to make some final pessimistic predictions about the future of Russia. Many express their appreciation for the sudden return of basic physical comforts—a soft bed, a hot dinner, and new clean clothing. A few—Ilgin, Kiselev-Gromov, and Zaitsev—offer more extensive analysis of the Soviet Union in the form of essays and statistical claims about the labor camp's population and death toll.

1. Escapees

Malsagoff and Bezsonov

Malsagoff briefly outlines the further fate of the escapees, highlighting their humane treatment by the Finnish government and comparing their experience in Soviet prison to their time in Finnish prisons (they were kept in jail for a month as they stole supplies from a Finnish farmer during their escape). He describes the fate of the different escapees according to their nationality, noting with some irony that the Soviet citizens were processed out more quickly than the Polish citizens.⁴⁶¹

Bezsonov, whose framed narrative is more elaborate than Malsagoff's, ends his main account with his desire for simple material comforts upon leaving the Finnish prison: "In outward appearance I am a homeless vagabond: dirty, sunburnt, thin and in rags. At present all I can think of is a pint or two of cocoa, a pound or two of white bread and a comfortable chair in a

⁴⁶¹ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 223.

convalescent home.”⁴⁶² Although he wishes for this simple luxury, he recognizes a greater need to provide for himself and writes that he “started working next day.”⁴⁶³ Still, he concludes triumphantly: “I was free, and Life was before me!”⁴⁶⁴

Bezsonov bookends the memoir with letters to his sister, the first one introducing the book and the last one more of a meditative conclusion on the fate of Russia; he depicts a conversation at SLON with a prisoner who expresses his hope that Russia will be able to return to its Christian faith and reclaim its spiritual heritage. The unnamed young man, an anarchist Christian, discusses his hopeful predictions for the re-baptism of Russia. Bezsonov is inspired by the conversation and connects the moment with a beautiful sunrise:

The camp was still asleep; the sun was not yet up, but the first signs of approaching dawn were visible. The East was tinged with faint streaks of pale pink; the watch-towers showed like two dark spots on the horizon. I felt hopeful for the future of ... my country, a new dawn was in sight!⁴⁶⁵

The next line — the final sentence of the book — sums up the distressing contrast of the hopeful prisoner and the jaded escapee: “Here I no longer see the walls and watch-towers of the convict 'camp,' nor do I see Russia and the coming dawn ...”⁴⁶⁶

Together, Malsagoff and Bezsonov demonstrate very different methods of concluding their memoirs. While Malsagoff is willing to draw comparisons and make sharp observations about the fate of Russia throughout his memoir, he ends the book rather abruptly and with some

⁴⁶² Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 279.

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 288.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

political expediency regarding his Finnish benefactors. Bezsonov's work is more introspective, lyrical, and complex in its composition; he does not miss the chance to end his memoir on a profound note of reflection that ties up his experiences quite effectively.

Nikonov-Smorodin

Nikonov-Smorodin's time at SLON ends in the middle of his book; after he finally leaves the island for the mainland he was still a prisoner of the GPU and spent two years working at the rabbit farm near Lake Onega and at the Belomorkanal. He depicts both of these experiences in detail, along with an excellent account of his escape across the Finnish border. Nikonov-Smorodin's account ends, quite abruptly, with his arrival in Finland. He emerges from the forest onto a wide road and walks until he meets a man chopping wood. He walks up to him “determinedly” and asks: “Is this Finland?” The man confirms that they are in Finland, and Nikonov-Smorodin immediately “covers his face with his arms and weeps, weeps...”⁴⁶⁷ It is not clear to me whether this was Nikonov-Smorodin's original ending or Amfiteatrov's editorial choice. Either way, it makes a stark and compelling ending to the memoir.

Tatyana and Vladimir Tchernavin

Tatyana ends her book with her time in a Finnish hospital, where she praises the kindness of the Finnish medical staff and discusses writing her memoir: “In that hospital, [...] I wrote most of this book, feeling as completely at peace with the world as though I had been born again.”⁴⁶⁸ Tatyana, a compelling memoirist with unapologetically motherly concerns, makes the

⁴⁶⁷ Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 371.

⁴⁶⁸ Tatyana Tchernavin, *Escape*, 318.

connection between her sudden material comfort in the hospital and the return of her psychological security. At the end of the book, she makes clever segue from the clean new clothes she was given at the hospital and her impetus for writing the book:

I was disgracefully reluctant to leave the hospital but the doctor completely cured me; besides, he provided me with a dress, a coat, a hat and a pair of shoes. All that I had on when I arrived was only fit to be burned.

I wish I could also burn the memory of all that I have been through during those fifteen years in U.S.S.R.!

But no, I have no right to do that. We have been spared so that we might tell of the terrible plight of our country, once so prosperous, and remind those who have not been through the misery and servitude of Soviet life that they do not sufficiently value their blessings.⁴⁶⁹

Her husband Vladimir expresses a similar sense of responsibility to convey his experiences to a wider audiences, but once again complements his wife's account with his emphasis on issues outside the family context. After demurring from describing their escape, Vladimir concludes his book with a warning to readers that his experiences, although difficult, were “less severe than those of the majority of educated people in the U.S.S.R.” He explains this claim: “Many who suffered torture and execution were older than I was and of much more importance to science.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 319–320.

My sentence - five years of forced labor — was far lighter than the usual punishment.”⁴⁷⁰ He concludes the book with a final appeal to “the world” to respond to the situation in Russia:

The faith of Russians in world justice may be childish, but these prisoners and their families, and the widows and fatherless children of executed "wreckers," still think that the world does not know what is happening to them. They cannot believe that a Christian civilization will knowingly permit such monstrous cruelties to continue.⁴⁷¹

Like Bezsonov, Tchernavin contrasts pessimistic and optimistic views of the outcome of the Bolshevik revolution for Russians, and both invoke Christianity as the natural counter to communism. However, Bezsonov's conclusions emphasize his place within Russian culture and how his absence from the country has made it harder for him to have clarity on the situation there. Tchernavin, reflecting his well-established persona of an active and determined advocate, speaks for a final time on behalf of his countrymen.

2. Foreign nationals return home

Cederholm

Cederholm is transported from SLON back to Saint Petersburg and held in the Shpalernaya for a few days. He is finally released and maintains a low profile, staying at the Finnish consulate until his exit visa and paperwork is completed. He depicts just one interaction

⁴⁷⁰ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 357–358.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 358.

with a resident of Saint Petersburg, a frank conversation with the cab driver who transports him from the prison to the Finnish consulate.

It was a calm, frosty night — a real Christmas night. A ragged old cabman with a small, weary-looking horse had halted near the prison gate. I got into the sleigh, and noticing that the driver looked hard at me, said with a laugh: “What are you staring at? Don't be afraid, I'm not a bad lot. Drive me to the Finnish Consulate in the Ekaterinhofsky Prospect; you'll be paid there.”

“I wasn't thinking of that! The Lord be with you! As if we didn't know what sort of people they put into that gaol! I looked at you because you seemed so cheerful. Have you been in prison for long?”

“Two years; I've come from the Solovky.”

The cabman turned round, looked me straight in the face, and said, as only a Russian man of the people can say it :

“O Lord, my God, Christ save us and have mercy on us!”⁴⁷²

When Cederholm finally arrives on Finnish soil about a week after his release, he remembers “the words of the cabman, the last Soviet citizen with whom I had talked”: “O Lord, my God, Christ save us and have mercy on us!”⁴⁷³ Cederholm does not attempt a final prognostication about the future of the Soviet union, a lament, or a martyrology. Although Cederholm's memoir ends a bit abruptly with his arrival on Finnish soil, the book also includes an index and an

⁴⁷² Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 339–340.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, 341.

appendix with reproduced newspaper articles about Cederholm's arrest and correspondence between the Finnish and Soviet governments regarding his arrest.

Qureshi

Like Cederholm, Qureshi has some trouble obtaining the documents necessary to leave the country once he is released from prison, and he details the events that took him from SLON all the way to the border of the Soviet Union. He meets with difficulty in completing the necessary paperwork because he was released just before the anniversary of the October Revolution (November 7). He presents the scenario with no little irony: “I could once again enjoy the sounds of the Internationale, contemplating the red flags of the USSR, but for business this day was lost.”⁴⁷⁴ Where Cederholm remains inside the Finnish consulate while other functionaries take care of his paperwork, Qureshi depicts himself in the streets of Moscow, running into old friends (some former prisoners), visiting the Latvian embassy and British Mission, requesting various paperwork, and extracting his seized money from the GPU. On November 10, he is finally able to leave Moscow, “and on the morning of the 12th I was already in Riga. Only then did I clearly understand that I had returned to the cultural world and was beyond the reach of the GPU. My torment was over.”⁴⁷⁵

Qureshi, or more likely the newspaper editors who compiled and published Qureshi's account, ends his story with an appeal to the “women of the civilized world”: “If your heart has not become completely hardened, if your feminine feeling of compassion for human misfortune has not died out, remember that hundreds of thousands of unfortunate women languish in the

⁴⁷⁴ Qureshi, “Piat' let,” 146.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 147.

GPU prisons of the USSR, without any guilt.”⁴⁷⁶ The imperative that Qureshi employs in this section is sudden but not inconsistent with his observations throughout his account.

Qureshi explains his sudden focus on women in this final exhortation with a conditional formulation: “If men are deaf to human suffering, if narrow selfish interests are more important to them, you women must enter into the fight against this world disaster and force men to come out of their indifference and inaction, which is incomprehensible to me, a Hindu.”⁴⁷⁷ He then discusses the repression of clergymen in the Soviet Union and appeals to “priests of all religions” to stop this treatment of the elderly clergymen he met while in prison. Finally, Qureshi ends the account with a statement on the veracity of his account (“Everything I have reported is nothing more than a collection of facts that I have personally seen or experienced”) and an explanation for his ability to survive this experience physically and mentally: “It was only thanks to my exceptional endurance and my Hindu upbringing that I did not go mad from all the horror I had experienced.”⁴⁷⁸

Lenardowicz

Lenardowicz is released from the camp after finishing his sentence. He goes to Petersburg and spends time with his acquaintances there. While he is happy to be there, he expresses his desire to return to Poland. When he attempts to cross the border, he is prevented from leaving and learns that he has been sentenced to exile in the Penza province for three additional years. His time in Penza and eventual escape is chronicled in his second book, entire

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 148.

goal over the next few years is to return to Poland, which he eventually does in his second book, *Za czerwonym kordonem: Wspomnienia z pobytu w Rosji sowieckiej*.⁴⁷⁹

At the end of *Pamiętnik z Solówek*, Lenardowicz briefly explains that he was able to return to Poland, where he wrote his memoirs. He concludes with a comprehensive statement about his time in the Soviet Union, noting his constant hope of escape from “this decay and Bolshevik mire.” Lenardowicz compares the Soviet Union to interwar Poland, hinting at the instability of that country but nevertheless deciding in Poland's favor. When he finally escapes to Poland, Lenardowicz, writes, “Only then did I breathe freely at last. My experiences in Bolshevik Russia appeared to me like a heavy dream, one that is unpleasant to recall.” Despite the difficulty of reliving his experiences, Lenardowicz explains, he “decided to write these memoirs to make [his] compatriots aware of what present-day Russia truly is, what this ‘Bolshevik paradise’ looks like, and the destruction that the red rulers of the Kremlin bring to the civilization of the world.”⁴⁸⁰

Aliakhnovich

Aliakhnovich's memoir confronts readers with the typical difficulties of a literary work published in multiple redactions by a zealous and self-interested author. The general contours of his experience form the basis of the text, of course. After he arrives back in Moscow, Aliakhnovich describes a dramatic transfer ceremony where he and Bronislau Tarashkievich walk past each other as the two Belarusians are traded by their respective governments. Aliakhnovich presumably gets on a train and heads straight to Poland, as the next thing he

⁴⁷⁹ Lenardowicz, “Na wolności” in *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 78–79.

⁴⁸⁰ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 79.

depicts is a sumptuous dinner in a Polish tavern. Aliakhnovich describes the moment with a literary comparison:

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, reportedly, said upon his return from captivity by Algerian pirates that the greatest happiness a person can experience on earth is the joy of regained freedom. This is precisely the happiness I felt on September 6, 1933. I speak of my joy. Thank you... I am choking on my words... My throat is gripped with emotion...⁴⁸¹

Aliakhnovich is the only memoirist who translated his own book, producing an initial Polish version in 1937 and an amended Belarusian edition in 1937; although he changed little of his substantive account, he does elaborate on his original ending. The 1937 book is brief and full of excitement for the future: “And the next day—a meeting with friends at the train station in Vilnius... Now—to a new life, to new work! The nightmare was over. THE END.”⁴⁸² In the Belarusian edition published in Nazi-occupied Minsk in 1942, Aliakhnovich commented on the original ending to his 1937 memoir in a footnote and a few added lines reflecting the onset of World War II. These lines also telegraph at his approval of the Nazi occupation. The footnote reads: “*These memoirs were written in 1934. At that time, it never even crossed my mind that I would have to meet the Bolsheviks again.”⁴⁸³ Then, after the original line “The nightmare was over,” he adds:

And now I had to experience a moment of great happiness once again in my life.

⁴⁸¹ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 150.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Aliakhnovich, *U kaptsiurokh GPU*, n.p.

When, like a hunted beast, hiding so as not to fall into Bolshevik hands again, after a year of such a terrible life, I finally heard the roar of German bombs and saw the Bolsheviks fleeing, I experienced a moment of joy that was not inferior in its emotionality to that of September 6, 1933.⁴⁸⁴

Aliakhnovich, unique among the memoirists as a previously established writer and overt yet politically malleable Belarusian nationalist, demonstrates an expedient flexibility in depicting and commenting on his experiences across the different versions of his memoir.⁴⁸⁵ To Aliakhnovich's chagrin, one can assume, the Bolsheviks eventually retook Minsk, where the playwright was assassinated in 1944.

3. Broader claims and analysis

Danzas

Danzas does not really address her life after completing her sentence. The scope of her "pamphlet" is very tight, dealing with her time in Soviet prisons and at SLON almost exclusively. This applies to her discussion of Belomorcanal, where Danzas was sent in 1931. She briefly describes working in accounting for the project and expresses gratitude for the ability to sleep in the accounting office rather than at the barracks, where office workers are housed with the petty criminals and prostitutes she most reviles. Danzas write that she could give a lot of specific details about her time at the White Sea Canal, but that this is "beyond the scope of my

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁵ Moskwin's „7 lat w szponach GPU,” is the most thorough analysis of the author's evolving presentation of his experiences via this text.

present pamphlet."⁴⁸⁶ Still, she claims that more than 300,000 people died during construction of the canal.⁴⁸⁷

The book ends with her release. Her sentence is shortened without her knowledge thanks to the intervention of influential friends.⁴⁸⁸ She is summoned to the administrative office and learns that she is now free, more than nine years after her arrest. However, the circumstances of her release are far from easy: "The glass showed 47 degrees below zero, I was clad in rags and had just a few pennies in my pocket. I was obliged to ask the 'favour' of spending two or three nights more in the camp until I could discover where to stay."⁴⁸⁹ She manages to find a room and some work in a nearby village and slowly begins her new life outside of the camps. However, she quickly realizes that "freedom for me consisted in being able to discover that the whole of Russia had become one huge prison and that the lot of 'free' citizens scarcely differed from that of the innumerable convicts!"⁴⁹⁰ The book closes with this concise and damning summation of the country.

Grube

In its most accessible format, which is the version published in Umniagin's *Vospominannia solovetskikh uznikov* (VSU), the volume's editors places Grube's initial account of his time on Sekirka (discussed above) at the end of Grube's section. This is an effective editorial choice that ends Grube's account with the most stirring and probably best-edited piece of his various publications related to SLON.

⁴⁸⁶ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 64.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 66.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 67.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

Ilgin

After Ilgin is released from SLON, he details his peregrinations across the Soviet Union. First, he goes to Moscow to consult with the bishop there about his next steps. He is sent to Krasnodar and back, visiting his former parishioners in Kharkhiv on the way. He eventually, reluctantly, decides to apply for an exit visa to Latvia because he has been barred from working as a priest and the threat of rearrest is growing stronger. He cannot stay in any one place for very long before he draws the attention of the authorities (this was in 1933).

Ilgin is inevitably rearrested in August 1933.⁴⁹¹ He spends another few months in jail awaiting any news, expecting to be sent back to SLON at any moment.⁴⁹² Instead, he is exchanged to Lithuania in October of 1933. He reports finally arriving in his hometown of Daugavpils in January of 1934, where he convalesces at his sister's home.⁴⁹³

Ilgin's book ends with his thematic essays about life under the Bolshevik regime titled "On Political Relations," "On Economic Relations," and "On Religious and Moral Relations." The essays are interesting artefacts of the mid-1930s and reflect Ilgin's experiences in the first two decades of the Soviet Union, geared toward an interested Polish reading audience. The essays range from 2,000–3,500 words and significantly annotated by the book's editor, Fr. Roman Dzwonkowski. Ilgin's scattershot use of Soviet terminology and loose references to then-familiar events and concepts is the focus of most of Dzwonkowski's footnotes in the 2006 edition.

⁴⁹¹ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 87.

⁴⁹² Ilgin, "Więzienie w Moskwie i wymiana na Litwę" in *Wspomnienia*, 87–90.

⁴⁹³ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 90.

Kiselev-Gromov

While Kiselev-Gromov draws from his own life story in his account, his emphasis is mostly analytical and aimed at producing an account of the treatment of prisoners at the camp. The final chapter of his book deals with “SOLOVSKI IN CHEKIST DEPICTION. Excursions. The Film *Solovki*. M. Gorky's Visit. Mortality.” The conclusion to the book is a series of statistical claims about the number of prisoners who died at SLON, meant to describe as starkly as possible the immense human toll of the camp.⁴⁹⁴

Zaitsev

Zaitsev ends his account of SLON with a characteristically weighty statement about his account, suffused with formal, slightly antiquated, and evangelical language:

“The duty bequeathed by the Solovetsky martyrs has been fulfilled.

Having completed my grim narrative about the regime of the Solovetsky camp, I have fulfilled a moral duty to my colleagues, the Solovetsky prisoners.”⁴⁹⁵

Zaitsev follows this expression of his religious duty to complete the memoir with a long conclusion dedicated to the World Anti-Communist League. In this conclusion, Zaitsev presents his analysis of the situation in Communist Russia and ascribes Russia's downfall to the loss of religious belief in Russia. Zaitsev explains that the limp international response to this

⁴⁹⁴ Kiselev-Gromov, *Lageri smerti*, 190–191. These claims have been scrutinized by historians since their publication. See also Steven Rosefielde, “An Assessment of the Sources and Uses of Gulag Forced Labour, 1929-1956,” *Soviet Studies* 33, no. 1 (Jan. 1981), 51–87.

⁴⁹⁵ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 153.

crises is the result of the death of religion and rise of materialism in the (Western, Christian) countries that should have mounted a response.

Finally, he relates a secondhand story from a Chekist acquaintance at SLON about the execution of five prisoners a few days after Dzerzhinsky's death. He accuses the highest-ranking Chekists at the camp of committing ritual murders of these five men in honor of Dzerzhinsky. Zaitsev stops short of accusing them of occult motivations,⁴⁹⁶ but categorizes the Chekists as barbaric cult members: "From the history of all countries and peoples we know that during the period of barbarism, together with the dead despots and leaders, their wives, servants and confidants were buried, but then—it was a popular cult." He continues, asking "how can we explain the admissibility of barbaric atrocities in our cultural twentieth century?" According to Zaitsev, "There is only one explanation for this—progressive moral decline, when people are immersed more and more in petty animal materialism."⁴⁹⁷

Because conclusions, as a compositional element of nearly any text, fall outside of the chronological metanarrative of imprisonment, authors have a great degree of flexibility in the presentation of these sections. Each author covers the essential points (survival and condemnation) in their own way. The conclusions to these memoirs reassure readers of the memoirist's survival and call them to action, reminding readers for a final time of the deadly situation going on in the Soviet Union at the time. Most authors end on a lurid note, such as

⁴⁹⁶ The occult history of the Bolshevik party, and the Cheka in particular, is occasionally mentioned in accounts of the early Soviet Union, particularly in relation to Gleb Boky, a noted occultist, but this line of inquiry has largely been excluded from serious academic investigation. Stephen E. Flowers dedicates several pages to "Gleb Boky and the Search for the Red Shambhala" in *The Occult Roots of Bolshevism: From Cosmist Philosophy to Magical Marxism* (Lodestar, 2022).

⁴⁹⁷ Zaitsev, "Solovki (Kommunisticheskaia katorga, ili Mesto pytok i smerti)," in *VSU* vol. 2, 330. Umniagin's edition of Zaitsev's memoir includes material that was not published in the first edition.

Kiselev-Gromov's exaggerated death figures, Zaitsev's tale of a senseless mass murder by camp officials, Ilgin's reluctant abandonment of his parishioners to save his own life, and Danzas' realization, anticipating Khlevniuk, that life outside of the camp was eerily similar to life inside.

H. Conclusion

Solovki is a concept that does not translate—in fact, the moment of comparison across cultures reduces the depth of “Solovki” as understood in Russia—immediate associations with the islands' long monastic past, their significance as a pilgrimage site, the Solovetsky stones, the 500-ruble note, and Prilepin's novel—to a recognizable but flat trope: prison island, island of death. Pidhaynyj and Shiriaev, memoirists of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp who published extensively on the camp after World War II, helped to outline the cultural significance of the Solovetsky Islands along national and confessional lines, a project that has only deepened over the past seventy years. Likhachev's work to promote the history of the islands, along with Solzhenitsyn's metaphors of the Gulag drawn from the islands (archipelago, cancer, and hell) and the islands' true role as “first” among the Gulag camps, meant that the Solovetsky Islands retained a prominent place in the efforts to reclaim the memory of the Gulag intermittently from the 1960s to the 2000s. While the problem has not been resolved, per se, the political climate in Russia changed dramatically since 2014, effectively stanching international and even secular Russian efforts to study the labor camp on the Solovetsky Islands. Today, the problematics of the Solovetsky Islands remain regionally topical (with most accounts emerging from Russia's “European North”) and marginally relevant to international researchers of the Gulag.

For memoirists writing before 1939, however, the Solovetsky Islands were the center of the world, and the center of their struggle against the Soviet state. Their efforts to publicize their

experiences and draw attention to Soviet repressions centered on the islands and prison camp there. The collective project, a series of individual memoirs of the camp, tend to follow a formulaic pattern outlined exhaustively in this dissertation. What this metanarrative represents is the inevitable failure of individual accounts to convey the totality of the labor camp experience, because the central tension of the SLON memoir is between the memoirist and the collective experiences he or she attempts to convey. The simplest chronological narrative, embedded with secondhand stories and explanations for various terminology and procedures, is often the most appropriate. However, memoirists tend to detail the process of being taken to the camps while subsuming life at the camp itself to a series of scattershot anecdotes. The middle of the story, SLON itself, seems to splinter off into a series of memorable anecdotes and character studies, while the metanarrative, broken into individual moments from arrest to arrival, survives in the memory and writing process. The immense amount of exposition that many memoirists find necessary to convey their journeys toward the islands precludes a narrow focus on the islands themselves.

3. SLON Imagery: Descriptions of the Islands and Camp

A. The Threat of SLON

Memoirists who were at SLON in the 1920s tend to describe the camp's reputation as reported to them before their arrival, and then validate the rumored poor conditions there in their accounts. Grube, for example, draws on the general awareness of the camp when he declines to describe the particular conditions: "Everyone already knows how they feed [people] at Solovki and how they treat [them], but there are no words to accurately describe prisoners' existence [zhit'e]." ¹ Memoirists tend to place such considerations of the camp's reputation in introductory sections, at the point of sentencing (when the convict's destination is often announced), or when the camp is used as a threat during interrogations. For example, when Bezsonov is sentenced to three years at SLON, he emphasizes the reputation of the camp: "My destination was the celebrated convict 'camp' of Solovetski, renowned for its exceptionally severe regime. It was the worst of all the Bolshevik convict prisons and there was not much hope of ever coming back to life [...]" ²

While all the memoirists mention the labor conditions at the camp, a few emphasize the camp's economic role in the early Soviet Union, effectuated by that prisoner labor. Of those who spent time at the camp in the 1920s, Zaitsev is the most thorough. He explains that the export of lumber products is the main source of funding for the camp, which is self-supported and receives a pittance from the state for its own upkeep. ³ He insists that the factories and workshops built at the camp are for show, with unwilling laborers making low quality products. The only source of

¹ Grube, "Rasskaz," 191.

² Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 197.

³ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 117.

money for the camp are the natural resources, and the camp's business model is to ruthlessly export these resources, especially the lumber.⁴ He describes the prisoners laboring in forests "watered with tears and sometimes covered with blood from battered loggers."⁵ (Grube makes a similar point when he emphasizes that "every log exported abroad costs no less than 10 human lives!"⁶) Zaitsev also details the supply chain that provides cheap lumber from the Solovetsky Islands to European trade partners, starting with the docks at Kem where cheap lumber is exported "exclusively abroad" to England, Germany, Poland, France, Denmark and Holland.⁷

Tchernavin and Danzas are the two later memoirists (imprisoned there after the first five-year plan) who highlight the camp's labor practices in terms of economic function. Danzas is characteristically concise, describing her own work as an accountant at SLON and later at the White Sea Canal Project.⁸ She echoes Grube in her estimation of the human cost of such projects, although she emphasizes the mortality rate at the White Sea Canal over SLON. Tchernavin, who describes the workings of Soviet industry across his book, writes about his earliest awareness of the SLON camp from articles in *Pravda* denouncing accounts of the camp disseminated abroad (including Malsagoff's memoir). Before Tchernavin's arrest, he describes his previous exposure to prisoner laborers brokered via SLON to his worksite in Murmansk in the mid-1920s. Tchernavin's relatively informed awareness of the camp before and after his time there allows him to compare the past and present conditions, concluding that the situation in the 1930s is on the whole safer and better regulated, with intense fear of poor publicity leading to regular inspections of camp procedures and restrictions on the visibility of prisoner labor. Still,

⁴ Ibid., 117–118.

⁵ Ibid., 118.

⁶ Grube, "Rasskaz," 198.

⁷ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 118.

⁸ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 48, 61–62.

he emphasizes the distorting effect of the GPU's enormous power as a labor broker on Soviet industry, with "free" state bodies forced to compete with the GPU's essentially free labor.⁹

Malsagoff, whose memoir has a more informational framing than Bezsonov's autobiographical account, emphasizes the camp's reputation from the outset of his book, contrasting the camp's reputation inside Soviet Russia with the limited awareness of SLON that he found upon escape to Finland: "As I had supposed, I found that outside Soviet Russia the whole circumstances in which those transported to the Solovetsky Islands are compelled to live (or, it would be more correct to say, to die)-the whole life, regime, conditions of labour, food, and the other internal and external characteristics of the Solovky, were absolutely unknown."¹⁰ Malsagoff explains that the "secrecy which enwraps the Solovky is quite comprehensible" as the topic is forbidden in the Soviet press and foreign reporters are not allowed to visit the camp. According to Malsagoff, there were no successful escapes from the camp before his own, meaning that foreign audiences could never have learned "the truth about the Solovky" until his and Bezsonov's arrival abroad.¹¹

Like Malsagoff, Qureshi gives his account an urgent and informational framing, explaining to readers that the "unfortunate, deceived Russian people are in complete slavery to the GPU—the executive organ of the Third International."¹² Qureshi identifies SLON as the worst place in this enslaved nation, a "true hell."¹³ He reports being repeatedly threatened with

⁹ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 280.

¹⁰ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 7-8.

¹¹ Ibid.; Malsagoff seems to be unaware of *Letters from Russian Prisons*, which includes accounts of SLON from political prisoners, that were smuggled abroad and published in 1925.

¹² Qureshi, "Piat' let," 90.

¹³ Ibid., 120.

exile to the Solovetsky Islands to coerce him to work with the GPU, but he refuses and is punished with exile there.

Ilgin makes a similar point by emphasizing the widespread use of SLON as a threat based on its fearsome reputation, in his own experience and as reported to him by his parishioners. The threat seems to be effective; before his arrest, a parishioner confesses to Ilgin that he has agreed to inform on the priest to the OGPU in fear of being sent to Solovki. After his arrest, the GPU uses same threat on Ilgin. He refuses to capitulate, however, even when his nephew pleads with him to collaborate with the Soviet security forces. Like Qureshi, Ilgin resists the threat and is sentenced to three years at SLON.

The terror of SLON was a potent tool used during interrogations, with memoirists underscoring the psychological impact of knowing one's fate lay in such a feared place. The Tchernavins' dual accounts demonstrate the breadth of SLON's reputation as a threat during interrogation. Tchernavin, who refuses to falsely confess to any crime, learns that his wife has been detained to pressure him. The interrogator asks Vladimir: "You, of course, understand what fate awaits a woman at Solovki? [...] You know they're not very considerate of women out there[...]." Tchernavin, "holding [him]self in hand as best [he] could," merely asks in response: "Well, what can I do about it?"¹⁴ Tchernavin's restrained response to his interrogator belies his strong internal reaction to this implication of his wife's rape.

Tatyana is also threatened with exile to SLON in one of her final interrogations, although her interrogator takes a much softer approach. After announcing that her husband has been exiled to parts unknown, the interrogator asks: "Well, what about you? Where shall we send you? We thought of Solovki. What do you say to that?" When Tatyana does not respond, he continues:

¹⁴ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 220.

“Yes, yes. We thought of Solovki. It’s a fine place. The sea, forest all round.”¹⁵ Like her husband, Tatyana remains calm as the interrogator continues “chattering,” but she is devastated to learn her husband’s fate. Each Tchernavin’s anecdote shows how SLON was used as a threat during interrogation.

False perceptions of the camp

Memoirists, writing in emigration, are particularly exercised by the false perceptions of the camp perpetuated by the GPU, whether in the Soviet Union or abroad. This is generally attributed to Soviet leaders’ fears of bad publicity about the camp and their reaction to accounts smuggled abroad (such as Malsagoff’s). In the 1920s, memoirists decried Soviet efforts to represent the camp as a well-functioning and productive place of rehabilitative labor. More than one author describes a feeling of frustration at the thought that such efforts could be successful, as when Bezsonov imagines a visit from foreign inspectors, who would be shown a false version of the camp and “go away with an impression of ‘a mild and humane prison regime.’”¹⁶ He follows this subjunctive thought with a fantasy of exposing this imaginary foreign commission to the realities of the camp: “The only way of really finding out the truth is to see for oneself, to really want to know the truth; for instance, to try and lead the life of a convict in the Solovetski camp for a few weeks; that would be a thrilling and. truly instructive experience for some; they would see much that would surprise them.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Tatyana Tchernavin, *Escape*, 150.

¹⁶ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 211. Cederholm has a similar thought process when he considers the false impression of calm industriousness he sees outside the monastery (see below).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Zaitsev expresses the same thought process when he writes about the filming of a documentary film about the camp in 1927–1928: “In my time Sovkino filmed Solovetsky life. My God!... The most impudent and vile staging of all kinds of scenes!” He decries any positive perception of the camp by uninformed outsiders and indulges in a similar fantasy of exposing the “real” SLON: “It would be wonderful to film the real Solovetsky life and show it to foreign audiences.”¹⁸ Throughout his memoir, Zaitsev also expresses his indignation at positive accounts of the camp and Soviet Union in the Soviet press, emphasizing the curated and false nature of any version of Soviet life expressed in such propaganda.

Aliakhnovich, who arrived at SLON in June 1927, also touches on the misleading and fabricated filming of the documentary. Aliakhnovich emphasizes prisoners’ experience pretending to laugh and enjoy themselves while filming the documentary. He discusses his own participation in the filming and then describes the unusual experience of seeing “our happy faces” when the documentary was shown at the SLON cinema. Aliakhnovich contrasts the muted and bemused reaction at the camp to the film’s reception in the Soviet Union and concludes that “The film achieved its goal.”¹⁹ His mother, who watched the film in Minsk, wrote to Aliakhnovich: “I saw your life in Solovki in the cinema. I calmed down a lot. I see that it is not as bad as I thought...” Aliakhnovich cannot refute her misapprehension due to the censorship of inmates’ mail.²⁰

Former camp administrator Kiselev-Gromov also discusses this film, admitting that it captures the landscape of the Islands and “features many beautiful Solovetsky landscapes with

¹⁸ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 79.

¹⁹ Aliakhnovich, “Kino,” in *Prawda o Sowietach*, 116–117.

²⁰ Ibid.

forests, lakes, the sea, and other harsh beauties of northern nature” but concluding, of course, that “it lacks the main thing”:

there is no Kond Island, no dug-out “screamers’ pits,” no “Sekirka,” no women dressed in sacks (they live on Anzersky Island); you will not see prisoners with severed fingers or hands; you will not see “shirkers” screaming on tree stumps; or a self-harmer coming from the forest to the infirmary for bandaging, carrying a pass written on a two-pound log... In general, there are no tears, blood, great suffering, or deaths, which fill the real life of the actual prisoners of SLON.²¹

Memoirists vehemently criticize the Soviet state’s false portrayal of SLON as a rehabilitative labor camp, reflecting on experiences when they as prisoners became acutely aware of the facade. While fantasizing about exposing the “real” SLON to the outside world, prisoners sometimes glimpsed the production of false images of the camp. A few memoirists describe the film production and Maxim Gorky’s visit, for example, and Cederholm gives an amusing anecdote about walking into a photoshoot at the monastery hospital. Working as a courier on a winter day, he walks up to the hospital courtyard sees “patients” sitting in the cold. Smelling a rat, Cederholm explains: “The fact was that among the patients who sat there posing there was not in reality one sick person. They were ‘supers’ chosen from among the Tchekists and arranged thus in order to be photographed.” Cederholm is immediately noticed and rushed out of frame: “My most unimpressive aspect, in a battered hat, short fur coat, and felt boots, must have spoilt the idyllic charm of this picture of happy patients reposing in the spring (or summer?)

²¹ Kiselev-Gromov, *Lageri smerti*, 184.

sunshine. One of the regisseurs shouted at me twice: ‘You there, with the beard! Go to the devil! Clear out!’”²²

After describing an incident that required two icebreaker ships to travel to the islands over the winter freeze, Qureshi writes that the free sailors from those ships were invited to the camp’s elaborate New Year’s celebration held in one of the camp theatres. Qureshi imagines how they saw the festivities; without seeing anything else of the camp, they might come away thinking that “in Solovki there is no prison at all, in the generally accepted sense of the word, but some kind of communist idyll,” after seeing the camp administration sitting “side by side” with the prisoners as equals and enjoying the elaborate spectacle.²³ Like Bezsonov and Zaitsev above, Qureshi imagines how different these sailors’ impressions of the camp would have been if they could “have at least acquainted themselves with the immediate surroundings of the theatre!” where prisoners “languish in inhuman conditions.”²⁴ He continues to build a stark contrast between the revelry in the theatre and the misery next door:

Going there, the sailors would have seen bona fide [*podlinnyi*] prisoners lying on the bare floor, in inhuman filth and picking at lice, while the few lucky ones from their midst (mostly Chekist prisoners) drank wine with the administration and danced. Here they drank themselves into a stupor; there in the companies, tormented by fatal diseases and abandoned without any care, they also lost consciousness—not until they sobered up, but forever.²⁵

²² Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 323–324.

²³ Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 126.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

The disconnect between reality and propaganda was often stark, as seen in anecdotes of foreign visitors who left with a falsely positive impression of SLON, unaware of the horrific conditions concealed behind the carefully curated image. However, not all foreigners were fooled by the facade. Grube describes a different circumstance entirely, when the English sailors on a lumber export ship expressed their indignation at the treatment of imprisoned laborers and effectively stopped work at the camp until their labor conditions and pitiful rations were improved. However, when the camp authorities decide to bring in some extra soup, the English sailors are shocked by its disgusting smell and reject it on behalf of the prisoners. Grube explains that the exiles would have eaten the soup despite the smell, but were ultimately unable to benefit from the foreign sailors' agitation on their behalf.²⁶ Later, once he escapes the camp by stowing away on a German ship, Grube finds himself unable to fully describe the experience to the German sailors who helped him escape: "The sailors were horrified when I told them how tens of thousands of living corpses live and suffer on Solovki."²⁷ External reactions efforts to improve conditions at the camp, as this anecdote reveals, could lead to superficial changes or, on the other hand, even worse conditions for prisoners.

Repercussions for camp administrators were also limited, even when information about real atrocities at the camp came to on a national or international level. Danzas, emphasizing the workings of the GPU and Soviet bureaucracy, describes how administrators were reshuffled "[w]hen the camp atrocities transcend all limits and it is feared that rumours of the scandals might come to the knowledge of the Press abroad." She gives the example of the 1929–1930 typhus and dysentery epidemic, claiming that over 20,000 prisoners died in this period. A

²⁶ Grube, "Rasskaz," 200–201.

²⁷ Ibid.

commission was sent from Moscow and a group of convicts in administrative positions were blamed and executed, while their superiors were moved to different assignments “Their services were too valuable, and the G.P.U. could not afford to lose them.”²⁸

Tchernavin is less pessimistic about changes to the camp and GPU system over time. He explains the real reforms that he observes at the camp as the result of the increasing ineffectiveness of propaganda techniques:

Soviet counter-agitation, such as the badly staged film, *Solovki*, and a few articles in Soviet journals, where Solovki was represented as a resort offering a pleasant rest to prisoners, had no success whatever. To continue the destruction of prisoners behind such a thin screen had become impossible.²⁹

In these examples, memoirists illustrate how SLON was perceived by those outside the camp, whether within Soviet Russia or abroad. They grapple with the false image of SLON as a productive and rehabilitative labor camp, emphasizing the disconnect between these fabricated depictions and the grim reality of the camp. Memoirists are particularly interested in the perceptions of foreign visitors, fearing that they will leave the camp with positive impressions. By engaging in fantasies about showing the “real” SLON to such visitors, memoirists grapple with the layers of deception surrounding SLON, showing how it was manipulated as a propaganda tool to obscure the suffering within, ultimately revealing the deep divide between perception and reality.

²⁸ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 54.

²⁹ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 259.

B. Geography of Islands

In the *Lives of Saints Zosima and Savvaty*, miracles are written into the landscape of the Solovetsky Islands. The life-writer, Spiridon-Savva, emphasizes the selection of proper locations to build huts and chapels, and heights are particularly important (Savvaty and Herman's second dwelling is built on what is now called Sekirnaya Gora).³⁰ The islands' unique natural features combined with their prohibitive remoteness and the difficulty of traveling to the islands (often accomplished or prevented by divine intervention). Its natural bounty is equally important, and ultimately attracts Savvaty to the the archipelago. From the Vyg monastery, he hears of an island "landscaped with everything necessary" and "favorable for the life of people who want to settle there."³¹ He is attracted by the abundance of freshwater fish, the lush forests, which include: "a variety of berries [that] grow in the valleys, and huge pine trunks [...] suitable for the construction of temples."³²

This description of the islands' environment from the sixteenth century remains quite accurate today, and certainly describes the conditions on the islands at the beginning of the twentieth century: the natural diversity of the landscape and its abundance of trees and fish (both saltwater and fresh water) are protected by the prohibitive difficulty of accessing the islands in winter (nine months of the year). Savvaty, the first to settle on the island with his companion Herman, sought solitude on the remote archipelago. On their arrival, they immediately built a hut, dedicated it with a prayer, and erected a cross there. With a temporary dwelling established, they continued to search for a permanent place to settle and eventually decided on a tall hill one

³⁰ Dmitrieva, ed., "Zhitiia Zosimy i Savvatiia Solovetskikh," n.p.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

verst from the sea.³³ Fr. Vyacheslav Umniagin, a key historian of the monastery and labor camp, carefully refers to this hill as “later called Sekirnaia” (see below)³⁴

When he learns that he will be sent to SLON, Tchernavin announces that the news “pleased [him] greatly.” Thanks to his “numerous expeditions” in this region, he recalls the familiar landscape: “the deep fiords of the White Sea, the archipelagoes, the endless labyrinth of bays and straits, cliffs, granite rocks piled up in disorder, the nearly impassable forests and swamps.”³⁵ He begins to dream about reaching the sea, then speculates about the distance to the Soviet-Finnish border: “‘About 200–300 kilometers of completely uninhabited forest and swamp. Perfect. Just what I need.’ And at that very moment I made up my mind that I would escape to Finland.”³⁶ As Tchernavin imagines the wilderness as his path to freedom, his focus on the terrain mirrors a broader trend among memoirists.

Geographical descriptions of the Solovetsky Islands like Tchernavin’s are common among the accounts surveyed; more than half of the memoirists give detailed descriptions of the geography of the Solovetsky Islands. They describe the islands that make up the archipelago and the locations of various buildings and sites across the camp, from the monastery-fortress to the administrative buildings and various repurposed skits and chapels that dot the islands, and the location of the notorious chapel/lighthouse on Sekirnaya Gora. Geographical descriptions, along with overviews of the camp’s setup, quickly convey a lot of information about the camp, whether to orient readers or to provide information for future strategic or historical use. The memoirists juggle their awareness of the potential political or historical value of their accounts with the

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Umniagin, *Obraz Solovkov v russkoj literature XX veka*, 128.

³⁵ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 225–226.

³⁶ Ibid.

personal elements of their stories, and each finds a different balance. Sections like this one, a mostly general description of easily observable structures and geographical features, which appear in most accounts, tend to be more similar across accounts than more personal or individualized topics. Malsagoff, Danzas, Cederholm, Aliakhnovich, and Lenardowicz all start from an approximation of the Big Solovetsky Island's dimensions. They list the different islands that make up the archipelago, the location of the archipelago in the White Sea, and in a few cases the different camp sites that make up SLON.

The other memoirists make some effort to describe the location and size of the islands and camp, but they tend to describe the camp in ways that seem more personally motivated, focusing on the specific places where they spent time (Bezsonov, for example, only describes Popov Island) or distances they actually traversed. Qureshi and Grube both estimate the distances between certain parts of the camp in versts, by the 1920s a colloquial method of measuring distance: 1.5 versts from the monastery to the brickworks, 12 versts to the Sekirka isolation cells, and even Grube's 18 verst swim across the White Sea during his first escape attempt. These experiential measurements contrast with the bird's-eye view of the islands that other memoirists attempt to provide.

All the surveyed memoirists describe the geographical features of the camp where they spend time. The tendency of camp officials to separate groups onto different islands, and to move people around quite frequently, meant that each small island and remote worksite developed its own reputation in prisoners' lore. Anzer, the second largest island in the archipelago, was a punishment regime for women prisoners equivalent to the isolation cells on Sekirnaya Gora, and the Isakovo worksite about 10 kilometers from the monastery kremlin figures prominently in Lenardowicz's accounts of Chekist violence.

Kond Island

Kond Island, an island south of the Solovetsky archipelago in the Onega Bay, is mentioned for its special purpose as a place of punishment for those who collaborate with the camp administration. Qureshi (on the islands 9/1924–9/1926) writes that “In Solovetsky language this island is called the ‘rest home for informers [*stukachi*’ [...] Distinguished Chekists and other scoundrels who informed on other prisoners like themselves in order to receive early release are sent there.”³⁷ Aliakhnovich, who was at SLON from June 1927 to September 1933, first describes Kond as a place where administrators sent “cripples and others completely unable to work” including those who mutilated themselves to escape work, then adds that “Kond Island was also the place of exile for the Solovetsky administration for various transgressions committed at the camp.”³⁸ Lenardowicz, however, doesn’t mention anything about the makeup of the prisoners at Kond when he discusses this island; instead, he alleges that in 1927 the commander of this island killed more than 1200 prisoners through neglect, allowing them to freeze to death. Ilgin, who was sent to Kond as a medical orderly sometime after this incident, describes the island in detail:

Kond is a small island in the Onega Bay. The former skit belonged to the Solovetsky monks in the tsarist era. They also had a church, several residential buildings, a two-story house for pilgrims, buildings for dead- and livestock. The church stood on a high hill. It was burned down last year by prisoners in answer to locking them

³⁷ Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 121.

³⁸ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 77.

in the belltower during the worst frosts of the winter. Several dozen of them paid for it with their lives.³⁹

Kond Island thus emerges in these memoirs as a multifaceted symbol of suffering, serving variously as a place of punishment, neglect, and death, where the harshness of both the elements and the camp's administration converged in brutality. It serves as a comparison point to the much harsher conditions on Sekirnaya Gora (on the Big Solovetsky Islands).

The Solovetsky Islands and their surrounding areas, including Kond Island, play a pivotal role in the narratives of those who endured SLON. Whether depicted as a potential route to freedom, a place of severe punishment, or a setting where human suffering and nature's harshness intertwined, the geography becomes an inescapable part of each memoirist's story. The detailed descriptions of the islands—often intertwined with personal and political struggles—serve not only to orient the reader but also to underscore the physical and psychological isolation of the camp's inhabitants. Through these accounts, the landscape is transformed into a key character, shaping both the experiences and memories of those who survived. Memoirists' treatment of the islands' climate will further reflect this tendency.

C. Climate

The memoirists' accounts of the Solovetsky Islands show that their unique natural beauty, while undeniable, is all but lost on those condemned to endure the suffering imposed by the camp system. What might have been a landscape of awe and wonder becomes a backdrop of

³⁹ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 61.

torment, where the natural world plays its part in the prisoners' ongoing battle for survival. The harsh climate, especially the long winter, makes it difficult to sustain human habitation.

Ilgin gives a neutral and comprehensive description of the climate: "The climate in the island zone is not harsh, the warm Gulf Stream has a beneficial effect on the islands and the entire coast of the Kola Peninsula. Summer there lasts three months, autumn two months, spring one month, while winter lasts as long as six months and is very cold, with frosts in the range of 25–35 degrees."⁴⁰ Malsagoff is a bit more dramatic, beginning the chapter "The Popoff Island Camp" with the line: "Nature herself is against the exiles."⁴¹ While Ilgin identifies the island's unique microclimate, which is milder than the surrounding mainland, Malsagoff seems to extrapolate from his experience at Popov Island to describe the climate across "The Northern Camps for Special Purposes":

The climate is severe and damp. Summer lasts only two months, or two months and a half. It is very late before the snows melt and spring comes. There are frequent gales, snowstorms, biting northerly and north-easterly winds. for three-quarters of the year the Solovetsky Monastery is completely cut off from the outside world. The long, dark winter is most oppressive, especially as the lighting in the huts is so poor. The damp from the Solovetsky marshes has an injurious effect on the health of the prisoners, worn out by hard labour.⁴²

⁴⁰ Ibid., 58.

⁴¹ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 74.

⁴² Ibid.

The memoirists' recollection tend to portray the climate on the Solovetsky Islands as part and parcel of their punishment there, emphasizing the long, cold winters and the disease-bearing pests that flourish in the short summers. They are rarely complimentary of the islands; Nikonov-Smorodin, for example, portrays the space as half-frozen, half-dead, and sickly: "Tundra and cold sea surround Solovki and no matter where the wind blows from, it is always cold. The sky cap seems to be completely pulled down over the sickly Solovetsky forests. The winter sun only appears above the horizon for half an hour on rare days and again, after its setting, there is still the same half-light."⁴³ Whether they use poetic language or not, memoirists connect the setting with illness and deadly cold. Bezsonov, upon learning he will be sent to SLON, names "that awful climate" as one reason he fears he will never return from the camp, along with the isolation and privations of the camp.⁴⁴ Lenardowicz writes that prisoners cannot adjust to the extreme climate along with their exhausting labor quotas, leading to thousands of deaths due to exhaustion and illness.⁴⁵

Aside from general characterizations of the climate and its dangers to prisoners' lives, memoirists frame certain anecdotes as occurring during particularly bad weather, which contributes to the poor morale and often deadly conditions. For example, Ilgin gives an account of a miserable rainy work assignment: "During heavy rain on a muddy road by the lake shore, we loaded huge poles into wagons prepared for this purpose. The work lasted a whole week in terrible conditions: rain, terrible mud, no food."⁴⁶ Unloading ships in the wind and rain, or

⁴³ Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 221.

⁴⁴ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 197.

⁴⁵ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 21.

⁴⁶ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 60.

moving heavy loads over the rocky shores of lakes and beaches, are often prisoners' first work assignment upon arrival to the islands.

The most common setting for these stories, where unbearable labor quotas combine with extended exposure to extreme cold and heat, is the forest. Zaitsev is particularly lyrical in his descriptions of the forest, where, "All the life of hard labor and exile has now been transferred to worksites somewhere in the dense Solovetsky forest. [...] There, in the wilderness of the silent Solovetsky forest, tears unknown to the world flow and innocent human blood is shed with impunity."⁴⁷ He continues to reflect on the Solovetsky forests in a later section, describing the typical procedures of the camp day as prisoners are separated into work details and led into the forests:

The parties, heading along different paths, enter the raging
[*bushuiushii*] forest...

The snowstorm does not subside... To warm up, they clap their
hands, run in place...

The forest is pitch dark... The wind throws snow in the face like a
shovel, plastering over the eyes...

The depths of the forest are a seething cauldron... ceaseless—din...
rumble... crackling... whistling... howling...⁴⁸

While Zaitsev vividly captures the eerie, oppressive atmosphere of entering the Solovetsky forest every day, Ilgin gives a harrowing account of a single dangerous journey through the forest. Transported against his will from Anzer island back to the Big Solovetsky

⁴⁷ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 74.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

Island, Ilgin contrasts the “calm azure sea” to the dark, muddy, and dangerous forest: “This journey was truly deadly. We kept walking through the forest the entire time. Because of the darkness, the mud, the ruts, all the uneven ground, I fell into the swamp several times.”⁴⁹ Recalling Qureshi’s transition from the personified monastery walls to facing the armed guards when he arrives at the camp, Ilgin moves from the muddy forest straight into the arms of the “Chekist-Cerberi standing guard at the gates of the Kremlin.”⁵⁰ These juxtapositions of natural danger and Chekist threats show that nature is just one adversary that prisoners face, and hardly the worst.

The forest is especially difficult to navigate in winter. Lenardowicz tells the story of a unforgettable snowstorm in December 1924, as he and 17 other prisoners were forced to dig a road in the forests to transport urgently needed food and supplies back to a remote worksite: “The storm was indeed mighty. Masses of snow, thrown by a powerful wind, lashed us in the face and buried the transport every moment. Nothing could be seen around, only our ears caught the terrifying whistling of the wind, which howled like madmen throwing masses of snow in every direction.”⁵¹ Here, Lenardowicz repeatedly invokes the wind and compares it, in the second repetition, to howling madmen—he personifies the mighty storm, perhaps to emphasize the stakes of the battle that he and the other prisoners wage against this storm in order to survive. Lenardowicz ends the story by decrying the guards who sent him and the other prisoners on this suicide mission: “these executioners, who tortured defenseless prisoners in a terrible way, were common cowards and were afraid to face the snowstorm.”⁵² In some ways, the islands’ climate

⁴⁹ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 69.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 32.

⁵² *Ibid.*

affected prisoners and guards equally, such as the frequency of mosquito-borne diseases, the dangers of sea travel, and the difficulty of retrieving food and supplies from the mainland. In other ways, as Lenardowicz depicts in this story, the guards were insulated from the wild storms and harsh climate while they forced prisoners into deadly situations.

Aside from the freezing cold and strong winds, winter on the islands meant severe limitations in contact with the outside world. Malsagoff emphasizes that the “sole means of communication with Solovetsky Island” is a wireless station,⁵³ while Ilgin describes the risky and frequently deadly attempts to bring mail and supplies to the islands in winter.⁵⁴ Lenardowicz describes a slow-motion disaster in winter 1926/1927, when supplies were running out on the islands and authorities tried to move a ship across the icy sea. The result was a stranded ship, a stranded icebreaker sent to help, and several drowned prisoners, sent out to try to bring supplies back to the camp.⁵⁵ Qureshi details a similar situation in 1925, writing that two icebreakers had to be sent to rescue the “unfortunate old” Gleb Boky steamship. The mission failed, but expenses for the icebreakers still had to be paid by prisoner labor.⁵⁶

Harrowing accounts of winter illustrate how isolation and the relentless forces of nature compounded the already brutal conditions on the islands, transforming the task survival into a life-threatening ordeal. As winter approaches each year, memoirists describe a sense of dread that seems to seize every person and every natural feature. Aliakhnovich writes that “this long polar winter fills the prisoner with a truly monstrous fear. One would like to stop the earth in its

⁵³ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 77.

⁵⁴ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 58.

⁵⁵ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 67–68.

⁵⁶ Qureshi, “Piat' let,” 125.

revolution around the sun!”⁵⁷ Unfortunately, there is no relief from the relentless turning of the seasons, which Alayakhnovich describes as a gradual freezing of movement:

The rains begin, endless rains, day and night, without a break, for weeks. Finally, snow comes in turn. For a long time, the sea resists the formation of an icy coating, but eventually it helplessly surrenders and the island is surrounded by ice several meters thick for ten kilometers around. Further out, an ice floe driven from the Arctic Ocean wanders the sea, or the so-called “shuga” (i.e., fine ice mixed with snow) floats. The ships lie in their wintering grounds at the docks.⁵⁸

Cederholm also describes this feeling of dread, emphasizing his own fears about being trapped on the islands with his captors: “The thought of spending the winter in the Solovky horrified me. To be cut off from the outside world for nearly seven months! Nearly six months of Arctic night in the power of degenerates and executioners!”⁵⁹ As winter encroached, the cold and wind seeped into every part of camp life. Prisoners, isolated from the world, braced for a season that seemed to heighten the already grueling challenges they faced.

On the other shore, prisoners at Kem wait for spring, dreading the final stage of their journey to SLON. This motivates Bezsonov and Malsagoff’s decision to escape from Kem in March of 1925: “we decided to [...] run away from work, outside the camp, on the first possible occasion. It was early spring in these regions, although it was late in the month of May. There

⁵⁷ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 93.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 308.

was no time to be lost; as soon as the White Sea was navigable, we were to be taken to the central camp on another island.”⁶⁰

Natural beauty of the Solovetsky Islands

Some memoirists do allow themselves to appreciate the extraordinary features of the Solovetsky Islands. Amid the brutality of camp life, there are moments where the beauty of the Solovetsky Islands emerges—whether in the vibrant colors of autumn or the serene “white nights” of summer—offering a brief reprieve from the relentless hardships.

Aliakhnovich, who earlier in his narrative lamented the loss of his native home, admits that the SLON landscape is “picturesque, especially in autumn, when the deciduous trees are decorated in golden color, shining with bright spots against the background of fir green.”⁶¹ Zaitsev gives a painterly description of the white nights as he arrives on the islands: “The Kem coast disappeared over the horizon... Quiet, bright, ‘white’ polar night... It’s midnight now, but it’s so light that you can easily read and write. The sky above the horizon has a fiery yellow color, as if the sun had just set.”⁶² Nikonov-Smorodin meditates on the contrast between “[t]he wretchedness of the stunted forests and swamps” and “the regal grandeur of the sky,” asking: “Was it not these contrasts between earth and sky that drew the holy ascetics here, to the north, where they founded the great ancient Solovetsky Monastery?”⁶³

The natural environment of the Solovetsky Islands is a frequent theme for Nikonov-Smorodin. While at times he notes the “sparse northern grass” and “sickly forests,” he also

⁶⁰ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 224.

⁶¹ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 61.

⁶² Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 53.

⁶³ Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 89–90.

waxes poetic about the spring at the camp more than once in his account. He begins these passages with the sudden end of winter:

The chain of winter days seems endless in its murky monotony and when it suddenly ends with long polar sunny days—everything comes to life and really wakes up from winter sleep. In the forests, hummocks overgrown with lingonberries and moss begin to bristle from under the snow, water appears on the ice of the bay. The ice does not last long either. The high tide will lift it, it will crack, begin to break, if there is a wind—the ice is carried away to the open sea.⁶⁴

The transformation is abrupt and dramatic, suffused with sudden and forceful life:

Spring comes suddenly to Solovki. It is spring daylight all day long and the growth of plants does not stop during the day. That is why deciduous trees and bushes blossom as if by magic. Thickets of dwarf birch against the background of yellow moss cushions tenderly green with fresh, just unfurled leaves.⁶⁵

However magical the transformation, though, Nikonov-Smorodin ends his passage with a reminder that prisoners were limited in their enjoyment of this season: “we see all this only on the way from the barracks to the plant. We have no time for spring miracles of nature.”⁶⁶

Along with the white nights of summer, memoirists describe the northern lights in winter. Ilgin calls them “notable and unusual,”⁶⁷ while Aliakhnovich contrasts the new arrivals’ reaction

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 176.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 58.

to the phenomena with the “old Solovetskians”: “The novices [...] run out into the street, stare with curiosity at the unseen phenomenon,” while more experienced prisoners react with a trained indifference:

Meanwhile the “old Solovetskian” already looks with an indifferent eye at those bright clouds flashing in the sky, or pillars of light shooting out from the horizon or—the most spectacular variety—a huge semicircle with jagged teeth that burn, flash, like some pale eerie flames, covered by a shield...⁶⁸

Aliakhnovich contrasts the real natural wonders of the place with the indifference trained into prisoners by years dehumanizing treatment at the camp. The spark of curiosity exhibited by newcomers contrasts painfully with the other prisoners’ inability to appreciate natural wonders. In this passage, Aliakhnovich conveys what prisoners truly lose in the camps: their natural sense of wonder, their interest in the world outside of mere survival.

Cederholm makes an inverse point about the beauties of the islands when he stops to observe the monastery on his way to the bathhouse. He pauses and sees a beautiful day, sunny and crisp, filled with Breugel-like provincial industriousness: “I met prisoners, singly and in groups, engaged in various tasks. Smoke was pouring from the chimneys of the factories and workshops. The narrow-gauge railway train crept snake-like from the edge of the forest.”⁶⁹ Struck by the scene, Cederholm tries to put himself in the position of a casual observer “ignorant of the hidden side of Solovetsky camp-life.” Looking from this vantage point, he sees “a peaceful, well-nigh idyllic picture of a working community.” Cederholm posits that such a scene

⁶⁸ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 96.

⁶⁹ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 317.

could easily be presented to foreign observers as a model prison.⁷⁰ While Aliakhnovich emphasizes the dehumanization of the prisoners with the old Solovetskians' indifference to the northern lights, Cederholm's recognition of the camp's superficial charm leads him to a deeper recognition of the cynicism and falsehoods perpetuated by Soviet authorities regarding the camp.

D. Animals, Edible Plants, and Pests

Mosquitoes, flies, fleas, infectious diseases, swarms of birds and small creatures that live on the islands free from natural predators—these are the constant companions of the human inhabitants of the islands from its earliest recorded history to now.⁷¹ Major fires, accidental or not, that periodically damaged key monastic infrastructure have also had an enormous impact over the centuries; these include the siege of the monastery during the Schism between Nikonian reformers and Old Believers (1667–1767) and the attacks from Northern enemies of Muscovy (including a supposed attack on the monastery during the Crimean War), and at least two major fires in the twentieth and twenty-first century (1923 and 2007⁷²) that bookended the Soviet period and destroyed most of the archives stored on the islands.

Natural phenomena like seagulls, forests full of wild berries, and other living elements of the islands are a key structural component of these memoirs; memoirists describe their proximity to these phenomena, explain the restrictions on their interactions with them, and contemplate them as real phenomena and as symbols of their time at the camp. Stories about seagulls, berry

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ An article by Jeffrey Hardy (“Of pelicans and prisoners: avian–human interactions in the Soviet Gulag” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 60, no. 3–4 (2018)) is a narrow examination of this phenomenon, but the Solovetsky mosquitoes and Solovetsky gulls are constant features of accounts of the islands and are of course noted in recent historical and speculative fiction set on the islands.

⁷² Solovetsky Monastery, “Letopis vrozozhdeniia.”

picking, lice, and mosquitoes are some of the most directly identifiable influences on descriptions of the islands in contemporary fiction. In *The Monastery* (2014), Prilepin develops a symbolic system from the berries, gulls, and other natural phenomena he describes; for example, the protagonist repeatedly interacts with an inmate's pet dog and a wild deer that live in the courtyard of the monastery, begging for food. These animals signal the passage of time at the camp, eventually disappearing and dying when the camp administration is violently changed by order from Moscow. Perhaps the inspiration for Prilepin's pet dog,⁷³ Aliakhnovich writes about a dog kept by a camp administrator during the NEP era, also using its appearance to signal the dramatic changes to life at the camp when NEP policies were discontinued and a major change of guard led to the execution of many camp officials, including the dog's owner.⁷⁴

As Aliakhnovich reports it, there were rumors of a quelled conspiracy among the guards that led to the imprisonment of dozens of people at the Sekirka isolation cells. The prisoners know little about the situation aside from rumors, until the dog appears one day, interrupting the usual evening chorus of seagulls with a "terrible howl." Explaining how a section head at SLON could keep a pet, Aliakhnovich uses circumlocutory language to emphasize the irony of the situation: "It was the NEP era; we did not yet know hunger in the camp, so those who did not live in general companies could afford such a luxury as keeping a dog."⁷⁵ The pet's "new owner" (evidently another Chekist) then appears and removes the dog. That same night, Aliakhnovich writes, "life at the camp came to a standstill"⁷⁶: the prisoners are kept in their barracks, with

⁷³ In the introduction to *The Monastery*, Prilepin's narrator explains that he heard about this dog in stories from his grandfather. However, the similar narrative function of a pet dog that signals changes in human life at the camp recalls Aliakhnovich's composition.

⁷⁴ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 76.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 76–77.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

commanders ensuring that no one “stuck their nose into the street,” even at active worksites. Evidently, the camp authorities were making a concerted effort to prevent anyone from seeing the prisoners as they were led to be executed. The dog, however, manages to escape once again and uses his “sixth sense” to give a final farewell to his owner as he is led to execution.

Prilepin’s fictional dog also relies on a “sixth sense” to disappear when the political tides shift at the camp, signaling the end of the book’s first part. Where Prilepin mitigates the irony of the scenario by eliminating the dog’s problematic owner, introducing the dog early in the book and frequently depicting the dog as friendly, creating an affinity for the creature that heightens the emotion of its disappearance, Aliakhnovich discusses the dog once as the symbol that ties together his explanation of the events at the camp.

Animals, edible plants, and pests were more than just part of the landscape at the camps; they were intertwined with daily survival, power dynamics, and the psychological toll on prisoners. These memoirs illustrate how the prisoners’ relationships with the natural world around them were complex and fraught with irony. On one hand, animals and plants symbolized freedom and abundance—seagulls flying freely, forests teeming with berries—while on the other hand, prisoners were denied access to this natural bounty, whether through restrictions or because of the pests that plagued their bodies and spaces. These elements, as described by Aliakhnovich, Zaitsev, and others, come alive in their narratives, not only as physical phenomena but as powerful symbols of their captivity. This section delves into these interactions, exploring how memoirists depict the islands’ natural inhabitants and edible plants.

1. Birds

While a variety of birds could be found on the islands,⁷⁷ the Solovetsky gulls are the birds most frequently invoked by memoirists; in memoirists' accounts these gulls become multifunctional symbols of movement and change; they serve as guides on the way to the island and represent the natural freedom of movement that is denied to prisoners.

Aliakhnovich mentions the gulls a handful of times in his book, always as a symbol of regularity and natural order. In the story of the dog above, for example, the daily chorus of seagulls' cries is broken by a dog's howling. Aliakhnovich never betrays any affinity for the gulls; the dog's cry is a new but "equally unpleasant voice" compared to the seagulls.⁷⁸ In two other instances, Aliakhnovich uses the gulls to signal the change of the seasons (in the section "Spring") or the changes to the camp (in the section "Commission from Moscow"), with the gulls as the first signs of renewed contact with the mainland after a long winter.

Two other memoirists, Zaitsev and Cederholm, spend more time describing the gulls and drawing comparisons between the gulls and the prisoners, although Cederholm does use the seagull's seasonal migration away from the islands as a stark contrast to his own imprisonment. In one example, Cederholm writes of the dread he felt for his first winter at SLON:

It became colder and colder every day; the gulls flew away southward, and the birds which still wandered about the square had not succeeded in growing wings with which to take flight. . . . The

⁷⁷ In one of his passages about spring at Solovki, Nikonov-Smorodin (*Krasnaia katorga*, 221) highlights the variety of birds: "Seagulls returned to the Kremlin and drove the black ravens that had spent the winter there back into the forests. Large gray ducks, eiders, flew to our islands; they lay eggs, larger than chicken eggs, in nests lined with their warm and soft down, so prized at the market."

⁷⁸ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 76.

thought of spending the winter in the Solovky horrified me. To be cut off from the outside world for nearly seven months! Nearly six months of Arctic night in the power of degenerates and executioners!

Like the flightless birds, Cederholm is trapped on the islands. Unlike the hapless birds, however, Cederholm is cognizant of the dangers of his situation, not just environmental factors but the fearsome human captors, “degenerates and executioners,” who could do anything to Cederholm under the cloak of the “Arctic night” and cut off from the rest of the world. The prisoners are just as vulnerable as the flightless birds, but at least the birds are not cognizant of the danger.

Such comparisons between gull and human experience are common, as when Zaitsev encounters the gulls on his voyage to the Big Solovetsky Islands and makes a direct comparison between the hungry gulls and the hungry prisoners.⁷⁹ He notes with irony that the hungry birds expect food from the hungry prisoners, contrasting the birds’ natural logic with the perverse logic of the camps, which keeps prisoners starving on purpose. A few paragraphs later, Zaitsev expands on the topic of seagulls. As they move towards the islands, the birds (“our future cohabitants on Solovki”) are the first to “greet” the prisoners, perhaps meaning the first living creatures. Zaitsev describes an emotional response to their arrival: “with what sadness we envied those free, wild birds.”⁸⁰ The near repetition in the words *volnyi* and *svodobnyi* contrasts the prisoners’ lack of freedom and increasing isolation from any chance of escape, or even survival. He continues to emphasize their freedom: “They are not only free in their movements, but, having been with us in summer, they fly off to other lands. We cannot take a step without

⁷⁹ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 52.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

convoys, for many years at that.”⁸¹ As he contrasts the prisoners and the birds, he creates a plane of comparison that emphasizes the birds’ autonomy, seemingly a human characteristic, with the prisoners’ unnatural lack of freedom. The next step in Zaitsev’s line of thinking is to move towards a contemplation of the religious significance of his experiential observation. Indeed, he explains that, for the majority of those headed to the islands, they were guilty of nothing except being subject to the Satanic power of the Bolshevik state and refusing to “be branded with the hateful name of the apocalyptic beast.” He returns briefly to the gulls, moving the narrative along by explaining that the “place of their imprisonment” is growing closer, then notes that during the time of the Solovetsky Monastery the gulls were considered “protected, inviolable birds” by the monks and became domesticated.⁸² After his arrival, Zaitsev does not return to the topic of seagulls at the camp.

As Zaitsev’s comparison between the prisoners and the seagulls highlights the crushing disparity between freedom and captivity, Cederholm’s accounts of these same birds take on a more personal, almost confrontational tone. His evolving relationship with the gulls reflects the gradual breakdown of his mental and emotional resistance to the camp’s dehumanizing environment.

Cederholm, although an experienced sailor, at first cannot recognize these birds as gulls; when he first encounters them, he emphasizes the strangeness of their “sharp, piercing” cries. Cederholm tracks his own acculturation to the camp through his views on the gulls; first he writes that “[o]ne gets accustomed to it after a time, but for the first few weeks the screaming of those birds is enough to drive one mad,”⁸³ and later, while working as a shop attendant, he gives

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 293.

up feeding scraps to the gulls when a couple of starving inmates beg him to give them the crumbs instead. In the first story, the birds represent the hellish and inhuman, unfamiliar aspects of life at the camp. As he grows accustomed to the place, the birds shrieks become familiar to him. The estrangement of the gulls' eerie, humanoid shrieks is resolved with time, but Cederholm emphasizes the initial insanity of the situation. In the second story, Cederholm's practice of feeding crusts to birds, a totally normal and familiar practice to readers, becomes untenable after he is confronted by starving prisoners fighting over scraps for animals. Despite the general dehumanization of prisoners at the camp, Cederholm is shocked into changing his behavior when the degraded prisoners come into direct comparison with the gulls.

2. Comestibles

In addition to the ironic contrast of personified animals and dehumanized prisoners, memoirists note the irony of starving prisoners surrounded by edible plants and animals. The prisoners were at the mercy of their jailers in this regard, limited in what they could eat and restricted from accessing much of the natural bounty.

The camp leaders are shown as either hoarding or wasting the natural abundance of the islands. For the latter, Aliakhnovich and Tchernavin note the famed Solovetsky herring, a staple of the tsar's table and, in the camp era, still smoked and packed using techniques perfected by the Solovetsky monks; at SLON only the highest echelon of Chekists were entitled to these "tasty treats" as they were earmarked for export, and those who did have access to these herring were known to hoard them as favors for their higher-ups. For the former, Aliakhnovich also notes that prisoners were strictly forbidden from fishing in the lakes due to a frivolous and ultimately failed plan to raise a kind of water muskrat on the islands; Aliakhnovich betrays a low

opinion of this “type of large rat”⁸⁴ when he explains that these creatures are easily killed by catching onto a fishing hook.

The abundant wild berries in the forests, for example, were forbidden to prisoners who worked there felling trees. Qureshi recounts how escaped prisoners survived on these berries for months at a time, hiding in the forest and hoping for a slim chance of survival (despite the near impossibility of making it off the islands).⁸⁵

The forests were also abundant with small animals and deer, and the most privileged groups on the islands frequently hunted in these forests. The general topic of hunting in the lush forests of the islands is usually attached to descriptions of and stories about camp leaders Nogtev and Eikhmans. Lenardowicz reproduces his conversations with one of these leaders’ hunting assistants, but even those are stories about something else set on a hunt, rather than describing the hunt itself. Qureshi, for example, shows Eikhmans finding an escaped prisoner while hunting, and several memoirists describe drunken revelry revolving around these hunts that spilled out into the barracks or common spaces in the monastery kremlin. In particular, these hunts are a form of entertainment for the frequent examining commissions that visit the islands; whatever their actual task (either investigating Chekist crimes or reviewing prisoners’ sentences for early release), memoirists show commissioners spending most of their time hunting or in the women’s barracks. This view of the hunts frames the islands as a playground for a few Chekists and graveyard for the prisoners, with the animals and plants populating the natural surroundings serving as real referents and symbols at various points for different memoirists.

⁸⁴ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 62.

⁸⁵ Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 132; These berries are also the opening setting of Prilepin’s novel and Artem’s rejection of the comfortable berry-picking squad sets the rest of the events in motion.

3. Vermin

Where the hunt inspires memoirists to discuss camp leaders' control over the islands and all creatures on them, memoirists describe the pervasive presence of vermin (bedbugs, lice, mosquitoes, and horseflies are most frequently referenced) to emphasize prisoners' vulnerability to environmental factors and the impossibility of defeating this constant threat due to authorities' inability or unwillingness to improve sanitary practices at the camp.

Memoirists present painful and disease-carrying pests as integral to the natural surroundings and man-made buildings at the camp. Malsagoff, for example, explains that the climate and marshy conditions on the islands promote "the spread of malaria, scurvy and lung complaints," adding that "[t]he prisoners are fearfully tormented by the peculiarly poisonous mosquitoes of the Solovetsky Islands, which breed in swarms on the marsh and give one no peace either by day or by night."⁸⁶ Memoirists also emphasize that the persistent infestations of bedbugs and lice are nearly unabated inside the buildings that make up the camp. Uninsulated wooden barracks outside the monastery provide no protection from the elements, and while the buildings inside the monastery are sturdier, they are stuffed with unwashed prisoners and even more conducive to the spread of lice and bedbugs. Aliakhnovich regularly uses the adjective "zapluskowany" (covered in lice) to describe the walls of various barracks and cells that he encounters at SLON and elsewhere, treating insect infestations as a descriptive feature of prisoners' surroundings.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 78; this is not a new phenomenon, of course, as the abundance of mosquitoes on the Solovetsky Islands was mentioned in the *Lives of Saints Zosima and Savvaty* (Dmitrieva, ed., "Zhitiia Zosimy i Savvatiia Solovetskikh," n.p.).

⁸⁷ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 82, 102.

At least in the 1920s, sanitary measures proscribed from above were harsh but ineffective, mostly a pretext for humiliating prisoners, enriching the bathhouse attendants, or giving thieves the opportunity to plunder. For Danzas, the sanitation process was mostly humiliating: “Thus, when it was decided to fight vermin, dirt, infectious disease, all women were subjected to the same horrible ‘sanitary measures,’ insulting for any who did not belong to the very dregs of society.”⁸⁸ Danzas’ indignation stems from the fact that prisoners who underwent delousing were not supplied with clean clothing and were simply returned to infested barracks, so the entire procedure was less than useless. She describes different efforts to convince the camp authorities to allow prisoners to segregate themselves or supply barracks with hot water and soap, all of which are denied. No matter how strenuously prisoners attempted to keep themselves free of pests, the effort was futile. Lenardowicz writes that the prevalence of vermin contributed to the poor health of sick and injured prisoners, contributing to infection and gangrene.⁸⁹

Ilgin concurs, writing that the pest infestation in the Anzer barracks was the worst aspect of an otherwise positive worksite consisting of mainly clergy. Their best, concerted efforts to rid themselves of the pests failed: “We declared a fight to the death against them, but it was futile, as the wooden house had already been infested by vermin living in every crack of the walls, ceiling, and floor.”⁹⁰ Ilgin’s declaration of “a fight to the death” only toes the line of hyperbole under these extreme conditions, where it begins to seem like every part of the camp was suffused with these pests.

⁸⁸ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 59.

⁸⁹ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 36.

⁹⁰ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 66.

In one instance, Aliakhnovich playfully ascribes intentionality to the pests: “A prisoner stands next to the wall and listens. Ah, a tear wells up in his eye. It’s good that no one can see: his comrades are asleep. He dreams... The bedbugs sense their prey... They hurry toward the dreamer pressed against the wall... Crawling under his collar—they bring him back to reality...”⁹¹ In this scene, the bedbugs take advantage of a prisoner’s moment of vulnerability; while they are drawn towards him by their scent instinct, Aliakhnovich gives their march towards him an almost military efficiency and purpose. Aliakhnovich does not fully personify the bedbugs, but he does portray them as having some organization and intention: they approach their victim in secret and break his reverie by attacking him “through the collar.” This clever scene marks the bedbugs as allies of the camp authorities in the task of making prisoners miserable at all times, even in a rare moment of solitude.

In most instances, memoirists either make insects a permanent and unavoidable characteristic of the camp environs or present pests as numberless hordes that attack prisoners indiscriminately.⁹² Frightening stories about the use of pests as punishment populate these memoirs from the moment of arrest, with mentions of “lice cells” used to coerce people into giving up suspected money and detainees being eaten alive by bedbugs.⁹³ The abundance of mosquitoes on the Solovetsky Islands lends itself to the unique SLON version of this type of rumored punishment. Malsagoff, recounting secondhand rumors, claims that “To the

⁹¹ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 131.

⁹² Memoirists do not, as a rule, describe the effects of vermin infestations on the guards or camp officials. Lenardowicz does address hospitalized Chekists and mentions their fear of catching typhus (a disease spread both by pests and contact with infected feces) (*Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 38).

⁹³ Even Vladimir Tchernavin, one of the more credible memoirists, writes that the use of these punishments had only been discontinued in the 1930s when the economic incentives of keeping prisoner-laborers alive began to take precedence.⁹³ This seems to confirm the prior use of such punishments, although such accounts are uniformly secondhand and seem to stretch credulity.

Mosquitoes!” was a “very popular” form of punishment among the “Solovetsky Tchekists.” He explains the process, explaining that the prisoner was stripped naked and led to a “particular stone opposite the commandant’s office.” Then the prisoner is threatened with other punishments and eventually stands “absolutely still” while mosquitoes “cover the poor wretch’s body as with a thick black crust.” After several hours, “the victim’s body is one huge sore from the bites of the poisonous insects.” According to Malsagoff, weaker prisoners die from this punishment while stronger ones survive in extreme pain.⁹⁴ While Malsagoff’s “thick black crust” of mosquitoes is at least somewhat exaggerated, it is impossible to discount stories like this entirely. Mikhail Rozanov clarifies that such a punishment of exposing naked prisoners to the outside elements was practiced in summer (when mosquitoes were prevalent) and winter (when wind and cold could prove fatal), although not exclusively in front of the commandant’s office: such punishments were imposed ad hoc at lumber worksites outside of the monastery, hence Rozanov’s frequent references to “mosquito stumps.”⁹⁵ Danzas also writes that she heard rumors of such punishments in summer, “when the forests are infected with a plague of mosquitoes.” The rather than a stump, Danzas reports that naked prisoners were tied to a tree for a few hours and “left to the mercy of these pests.” She describes another similarly climate-based punishment used in the fall, when prisoners were left in freezing water up to their necks for “fifteen minutes, or more.”⁹⁶ Danzas’ vivid descriptions of these torments highlight how nature itself was weaponized against prisoners.

This theme of relentless pest infestation extends beyond the forests. Memoirists emphasize the constant battle against lice and bedbugs, which, much like the mosquitoes, were

⁹⁴ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 171–172.

⁹⁵ Rozanov, *Solovetskii kontslager*, 169.

⁹⁶ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 36–37.

not merely irritants but true disruptors of any chance for rest. Five memoirists discuss how pests disturb one's sleep to various degrees of detail. Ilgin is brief: "Thousands of different insects and vermin prevented sleep [*nie dawały zasnąć*]." ⁹⁷ Lenardowicz uses the same common phrasing, differentiating between daytime annoyances ("By day we were bitten by 'blondies' (horseflies)") and nighttime ones ("bedbugs and other vermin wouldn't let us sleep"). ⁹⁸ Bezsonov tells a story about nighttime in the barracks; he seems to be scanning over the crowd of weary men before focusing on the crowds forming around a few lamps: "[the crowd] was composed of naked bodies; their owners were catching and killing the lice they found on their clothes!" ⁹⁹ Zaitsev describes his own difficulty sleeping: "However dead to the world I slept, my sleep was soon interrupted. I wake up... And, oh horror. My whole face, neck and arms are covered with bedbugs. For protection, I wrapped my face and neck with a towel, and put gloves on my hands. We all slept completely dressed." ¹⁰⁰ This story follows Zaitsev's pattern of presenting an element of camp life through his own experiences and then making larger conclusions about practices.

Aliakhnovich, the most writerly of the memoirists, uses bedbugs to bookend an exploration of prisoners' dreams and sleep. The bugs form part of the fairytale-like construction that introduces the section: "A potem—gdy noc zapadnie, gdy pluskwy zaczynają wylazić ze swych kryjówek, gdy cisza zalegnie na pryczach—więzień marzy." ¹⁰¹ The dreamy rhythm of the polysyndetonic "gdy" contrasts with the threatening emergence of the bedbugs from their "hiding places." The dream sequence ends with an invocation of the same imagery of bugs: "And then—something terrible happens—awakening!... Once again, the prison bunks, once again, the

⁹⁷ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 66.

⁹⁸ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 35.

⁹⁹ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 204–205.

¹⁰⁰ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 51.

¹⁰¹ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 97.

stifling air from sweaty bodies, once again, the snoring all around or the groans of someone trapped in a nightmare... Someone stirs. They strike a match and fight off the attacking bedbugs. Another has taken off their shirt and is searching for lice.”¹⁰² Whether asleep or awake, it seems, vermin are a constant annoyance that make up a part of the prisoners’ routine, however unpleasant.

Despite its futility, memoirists seem to agree that individual effort was the only way to fight the pests. A certain vigorousness of mind was necessary in this two-front battle against pests and guards. Lenardowicz reports one interesting argument that a guard made against providing clean underwear to prisoners: “Changing one’s underwear is a ‘bourgeois whim’ we were constantly told whenever we asked for clean underwear.”¹⁰³ The real reason was probably a lack of supplies and indifference to prisoners’ comfort and health. In one example, Qureshi relates a story about his admission into the camp hospital. He refuses the unwashed, lice-ridden hospital-issue underwear and argues with the doctor, who insists that he must change into the garment. Qureshi writes: “It ended with me catching a louse, placing it on his hand and saying: ‘Do what you like, but I don’t intend to wear such underwear.’”¹⁰⁴ The doctor shrugs and allows him to wear his own garments. Qureshi seems to retell the story with a bit of insouciance, consistent with his tone throughout his account, but the story also reveals his presence of mind and strength of conviction, or perhaps simply his overwhelming frustration with the privations of the camp. The doctor’s resigned response was the best reaction prisoners could hope for inside the monastery.

¹⁰² Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 99.

¹⁰³ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 35.

¹⁰⁴ Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 116.

The best solution to infestation for prisoners was to get themselves assigned out of the monastery and into better conditions with fewer prisoners. Zaitsev and Aliakhnovich both detail the incentives to do so,¹⁰⁵ while Cederholm manages to be reassigned and details the sanitary procedures that he undergoes as he moves from one company to another:

As I was covered with vermin from head to foot and my things were swarming with them, I was sent to the baths, which are outside the Kremlin. I handed over all my things to two prisoners who were acting as corridor warders—one of them a former employee of the Okhrana, the other an ex-sergeant of gendarmes. In return for three pounds of sugar, five packets of coarse tobacco, and two cakes of soap they promised to clean and shake out all my things, and to sprinkle them carefully with turpentine, for which I would pay. I felt immediately that I was at last in civilized surroundings—for how long?¹⁰⁶

Cederholm's emphasis on "civilized" surroundings is key to the problem of pest infestations for prisoners; aside from the potential for contracting a deadly illness from these creatures, the daily frustration of living with lice and bedbugs was a constant reminder to prisoners of their status as, essentially, non-humans at the camp. Most prisoners made daily efforts to rid themselves of pests, and those who did not were sometimes noted for their lassitude. Malsagoff names two prisoners who were "famous throughout the camp" for their overwhelming infestations of lice, for example, and Qureshi, without naming the victim, writes that "I myself witnessed how one

¹⁰⁵ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 68; Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 63–64.

¹⁰⁶ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 316.

unfortunate man was literally eaten to death by lice.”¹⁰⁷ This kind of extreme and tragic story, attested to by an eyewitness, remains an effective means of sparking outrage about horrendous jail conditions to this day.¹⁰⁸ Beyond simply marking the inhumane conditions at the camp, memoirists describe the incredible amount of time and energy that prisoners spend in the attempt to slightly mitigate the pest issues they live with. The pests weaken healthy prisoners and bring sickly prisoners to the brink of death. Live prisoners who are complacent to their overwhelming infestations of bedbugs or lice perhaps represent early depictions of the “walking dead” [*dokhodyagii*], a phenomenon that later Gulag writers would explore in greater detail.

E. Transformation of islands to camp

Most of the memoirists give some explanation of the monastery’s history and the transformation of the monastery into a Soviet labor camp. Although the two parts are important elements of each memoirist’s argument about the nature of the camp, and often presented in tandem, the former is addressed below as part of the language of SLON, while I address the latter here in terms of memoirists’ depiction of the transformed physical space of the former monastery. Kiselev-Gromov, a former camp official, put this transformation in stark terms:

And where priests once prayed to God, the builders of the new, communist society—all members of the League of Militant Atheists—now dance, sing blasphemous songs, engage in sexual acts in the dark corners of the former church, enroll new members

¹⁰⁷ Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 118.

¹⁰⁸ The most recent case in the USA was in 2023 in Fulton County, Georgia. See Deena Zaru and Tesfaye Negussie, “Georgia Man Found Dead in Bed Bug-Infested Jail Cell Died of ‘Severe Neglect’: Independent Autopsy,” *ABC News*, May 22, 2023.

into the League of Militant Atheists, gouge out the eyes of Jesus Christ, defecate on icons and throw them into latrines, and write posters declaring that “religion is the opium of the people”...¹⁰⁹

The total transformation of the space through its repopulation, repurposing, and the overt acts of desecration performed by its new Bolshevik overseers is a source of incredible anger and frustration for memoirists. They depict themselves constantly noticing and lamenting the obvious changes to the space, and discuss this transformation as indicative of the Bolshevik’s political and aesthetic program. Nikonov-Smorodin discusses the transformation of the space along these lines, asserting that “The Solovetsky labor camp is entirely a product of Bolshevik creativity.” With no restrictions for the implementation of “the principles of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism to transform harmful social ‘parasites’ into useful entities worthy of a socialist system,” Nikonov-Smorodin claims, the Bolsheviks failed to build a “benevolent cultural laboratory” and instead produced “the worst of penal colonies, marked throughout its short history by the shameful stigma of communist impotence to build a ‘new life.’”¹¹⁰

While SLON was a uniquely well-known camp, the project of transforming sacred spaces into prisons and labor camps was hardly new, even in the recently established RSFSR. Zaitsev begins his explanation with the Bolsheviks’ urgent “need” for prisons across the RSFSR and explains that a majority of monasteries, “and there were not a few of them in Holy Russia,”¹¹¹ were transformed into “various kinds of places of detention.” In fact, Zaitsev continues, many existing buildings across the country were being converted into prisons and labor camps, whether former imperial barracks or all manner of churches and religious buildings. Zaitsev attributes the

¹⁰⁹ Kiselev-Gromov, *Lageri smerti*, 21–22.

¹¹⁰ Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 103.

¹¹¹ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 83.

formation of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp to the “geographical position” of the islands: “The Solovetsky Islands [...] represent the most favorable place in all respects for the application of the GPU punitive system” due to its remoteness and abundant natural resources.¹¹² The place is so ideal for the rapidly expanding prisoner population that, according to Zaitsev: “the GPU set itself the next task of expanding the Solovetsky camp to colossal sizes and began intensive construction on the Solovetsky Islands.”¹¹³ The construction was done by the prisoner laborers, of course.

Malsagoff also attributes the formation of SLON to “the Soviet Government” and emphasizes its place in the short history of labor camps in the Russian North.¹¹⁴ Malsagoff explains that the Solovetsky Camp was formed in response to the abuses and backlash against practices at the Kholmogory and Pertominsk camps.¹¹⁵ He ascribes his information to survivors of these early camps who were then sent to SLON, detailing conditions at the camp in much the same way he describes life on the Solovetsky islands: in great detail and secondhand. After his section on the earlier camps, Malsagoff gives his version of the history of the monastery, explaining that the Bolsheviks seized the monastery as soon as the British retreated from the region and immediately pillaged the monastery for valuables: “The treasures were plundered by the first Tchekists who entered the precincts. The decorations of the ikons were torn off, the ikons themselves blasphemously chopped up with hatchets for fuel. The bells were flung down from all the belfries and the fragments sent to Moscow to be melted down.”¹¹⁶ After the monastery was “reduced to a heap of ruins,” Malsagoff explains, “The Tchekists put up a barbed

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 43.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 44–47.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 55.

wire fence round it [and] [t]he half-destroyed Kremlin, or main enclosure of the monastery, became the headquarters of the ‘Slon.’”¹¹⁷

Lenardowicz also gives his version of the camp’s history: “Before the Bolshevik revolution this island was inhabited by monks. In 1922 Felix Dzerzhinsky, the chief commander of the Cheka and infamous for his crimes, came here; he drove out the monks and took the island and monastery for a prison.”¹¹⁸ The logic of these two sentences is striking and imputes “ownership” of the prison camp on the Solovetsky Islands to Felix Dzerzhinsky in a way that other memoirists do not.¹¹⁹

Memoirists who were sent to the Solovetsky Islands in the early/mid-1920s arrived to the burnt ruins of the former monastery, which caught fire more than once in the year before the camp was officially opened. Most of the archives were burnt in largest of these fires, and the interiors of the cathedrals were also destroyed, with only one small chapel on the opposite wall remaining intact. This chapel later served as the camp museum. Over the years, the prisoners gradually rebuilt the fortress into a labor camp. Several memoirists use this fire to frame their histories of SLON.

Cederholm echoes Zaitsev’s point about the remote location of the islands presenting “an ideal place of imprisonment” for the Cheka.¹²⁰ He focuses on the changes to the physical space from the time of the Bolshevik revolution to the formation of the camp and claims that at least 2,000 prisoners were housed at the monastery in the years before the camp’s official formation in

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 56.

¹¹⁸ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 20.

¹¹⁹ Cederholm even recalls a personal conversation with Dzerzhinsky during his interrogation phase, (*In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 140–142) but does not ascribe such an active role to Dzerzhinsky in the formation of the camp.

¹²⁰ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 291.

1923: “The buildings, as the result of five years’ neglect, had been reduced to such a condition that the prisoners were irrevocably condemned to death from hunger and cold; and in 1922 a mutiny and a fire broke out in the camp.”¹²¹ Cederholm, then, seems to attribute the fire to neglect and possibly the action of the prisoners themselves. Grube and Malsagoff seem to blame the GPU or its agents for the fire, but neither makes the claim directly. Qureshi writes that in 1923 “this camp was deliberately burned and looted” and explains that the Chekists who were guarding the building at the time were all punished for the fire.¹²² Malsagoff writes that “[i]n the autumn of 1922 all the wooden buildings of the monastery were burnt” and attributes the destruction of “this highly cultured advanced post of Russia in the Far North” to “the Soviet power.”¹²³ Malsagoff presents the monastery as totally conquered: “The ancient building was reduced to a heap of ruins. The Tchekists put up a barbed wire fence round it. The half-destroyed Kremlin, or main enclosure of the monastery, became the headquarters of the ‘Slon.’”¹²⁴ Malsagoff, who slightly personifies the monastery by connecting the acronym “SLON” to its literal meaning of “elephant” in this section,¹²⁵ uses his most expressive language in his descriptions of the ruined monastery (see below).

Once destroyed, the monastery could be rebuilt and outfitted for the purposes of the GPU. Zaitsev wryly admits that the Chekists did eventually complete the task of rebuilding the islands using slave labor: “Still, one must be fair and impartial and note that the OGPU has recently undertaken very intensive construction on Solovki with the aim of significantly expanding the

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 117.

¹²³ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 55.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 56.

¹²⁵ See “Elephant” below for a discussion of the translator’s note that hints at Malsagoff’s use of the elephant metaphor here.

Solovetsky camp for forced labor (penile servitude).”¹²⁶ As he completed his term and was sent to exile “in the tundra,” Zaitsev writes, “all the uninhabited monastic buildings—churches, chapels, warehouses etc. have been repurposed for prison use.”¹²⁷ Additional outbuildings were constructed of all types: kitchens, bakeries, bathrooms, shops, and many barracks. Still, Zaitsev concludes, the fast pace of construction cannot meet the needs of the camp “as the number of victims caught by the GPU does not decrease but continues to grow steadily, increasing in strict proportion to the length of the Bolshevik dictatorship.”¹²⁸

Memoirists who spend time in these renovated buildings often list the buildings and rooms that were repurposed for the camp. Qureshi and Cederholm are very specific in this regard, with Cederholm explaining exactly where in the Rozhdestvensky Cathedral he was bunked (“The space we occupied had formerly been an integral part of the altar”) and Qureshi detailing where each group was housed across the campus (counterrevolutionaries in the Rozhdestvensky Cathedral, *shpana* in the sacristy and two other cathedrals).¹²⁹

Zaitsev also emphasizes the repurposing of buildings within the monastery, but he focuses on the degradation of these holy spaces.

We were grouped in six ranks on a vast elevated porch in front of the majestic cathedral, once a highly revered sanctuary of the Russian people, but now a harsh and cruel prison, serving as a reception stage for all arriving new convicts; here they first taste the cup of spiritual anguish and physical torment.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 83.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 295; Qureshi, “Piat' let,” 117–118.

¹³⁰ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 54.

Zaitsev and the other memoirists portray the monastery as a rich historical and cultural landmark, only to be destroyed by the Soviet regime. This sharp juxtaposition of grandeur and ruin underscores the deliberate nature of the camp's formation. The Bolsheviks, as depicted, transformed once-holy places into spaces of imprisonment, signifying not just the physical repurposing of the monastery but the ideological desecration of its religious and cultural legacy.

Before its ruin, the Solovetsky Monastery was famed for the richness of its holdings, including precious icons, ornate decorations, and a library full of rare books. They also emphasize the removal of church bells and crosses, in the changing landscape of the monastery. Memoirists depict the systematic destruction of these treasures in their remonstrations against the current state of the monastery, typically naming the "Chekists" as the source of this destruction. Malsagoff underscores this characterization of the Bolsheviks as a destructive mob by referring to them as plunderers and "Soviet Huns."¹³¹ He uses expressive language to emphasize the destruction:

The decorations of the ikons were torn off, the ikons themselves blasphemously chopped up with hatchets for fuel. The bells were flung down from all the belfries and the fragments sent to Moscow to be melted down. [...]

The Tchekists pillaged the library of the monastery [...] They heated the stoves with rare books, old documents and chronicles of the greatest antiquity. Finally, the dishonest methods of the new management, combined with the criminal plundering and

¹³¹ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 55.

inexperience of the Soviet administration, ruined the factories and workshops belonging to the monastery.¹³²

The systematic destruction of valuable icons, rare manuscripts, and church relics at the hands of the Cheka illustrates a deeper symbolic assault on Russian Orthodoxy. These memoirists paint the Bolsheviks not merely as conquerors but as agents of chaos and desecration. Their deliberate reduction of a place of worship into a prison camp encapsulates the broader destruction of a spiritual and cultural world.

Memoirists question what treasures remained in the monastery to be plundered, hinting that much of the destruction was wanton, devoid of any pragmatic reason beyond erasing the monastery's sacred role. The overall impression is of waste and profanation for its own sake. The treasures of the monastery were invaluable because they were living relics of the Holy Russian past. The vivid descriptions of the devastation reveal an image of pure profanation, highlighting the tension between the Bolsheviks' desire to erase the past and their inability to fully comprehend the value of what they destroyed.

The two Muslim memoirists (Qureshi and Malsagoff) emphasize this point repeatedly. Zaitsev, who is certainly the most Orthodox of the memoirists surveyed here,¹³³ also makes the profanation and ruin of the monastery a key theme in his account. He employs a religious tone when describing the destruction of the monastery's treasures, constructing an ironic parable of the Chekists' failed plunder using slightly archaic language: "Naturally, the Chekists were deceived in their selfish desires to uncover the fabled treasures of the Solovetsky Monastery."¹³⁴ Here, the second half of the sentence is quite long and Zaitsev uses religiously marked language

¹³² Ibid., 55–56.

¹³³ Bezsonov does not describe the monastery's destruction in his book.

¹³⁴ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 107.

(“*korystrykh vozhdeleniakh*,” “*obitel*” rather than *monastyr*”) and some ironic fairytale imagery (“*skazochnye sokrovishcha*”) to set up the twist: “nothing was found.” The Chekists, failing to recover fabulous wealth at the monastery, resort to common grave-digging: “A few Chekists removed the pectoral crosses from the remains of the buried hieromonks, placed with them in their coffins.”¹³⁵

The religious imagery that was once ubiquitous within the monastery walls was either whitewashed over or replaced with Soviet “decorations.” When he is taken to the monastery hospital, Qureshi sees that the walls and ceilings are crudely whitewashed to cover up the “magnificent frescoes” that are painted there. (Memoirists report that the frescoes at Sekirka isolator were also whitewashed.) He explains that the prisoners “carefully and surreptitiously washed off the chalk, so that all the sacred images were revealed,” although those who were caught were severely punished for this action.¹³⁶ Outside of the hospital, he notes that the poorly maintained walls are “covered in foul dampness,” the “crosses on all the cathedrals have been torn down,” and “on the tallest dome of the central cathedral, instead of a cross, the USSR flag flutters.”¹³⁷ While the grand “Tsarskoi” bell still stands opposite the Holy Gates, the prisoners are awoken each day by a buzzer from the electrical station.

While less religiously oriented memoirists emphasize the wasting of history and the degradation of the Bolshevik’s treatment of the space, Zaitsev emphasizes the deliberate profanation of the former monastery. Outside of the monastery in the forests, Chekists use the many chapels filled with icons and statues of Christ for target practice.¹³⁸ The Chekists’ speech is

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 116.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 118.

¹³⁸ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 105.

infused with incendiary and blasphemous language, designed to provoke the sensitivities of believers (Ilgin also notes his frequent distress at this language).¹³⁹ Zaitsev sums this up as “it was nothing less than an orgy of deranged individuals desecrating a holy place that had only recently been highly revered by the Russian people.”¹⁴⁰ Understandably, Zaitsev is particularly provoked by the use of holy sites as latrines. His horror builds as he explains that a small annex once dedicated to St. Zosima is now used as a toilet, then that prisoners are assigned to cart away the filth as punishment. It turns out, he writes, the first prisoner assigned to this work was a clergyman.¹⁴¹ Zaitsev notes the same profanation at the Sekirka isolator, where the former holy altar is now the designated place for the slop bucket [*parasha*]. Following this revelation, Zaitsev speaks to believers directly: “Tremble, believers!.. It seems there is no further depth to which this cynical and blasphemous mockery can descend.”¹⁴²

The Fate of the Solovetsky monks

Along with the destruction of the monastery’s physical space, memoirists discuss the fate of the monks who once populated it. While many of the camp’s prisoners are clergymen sent from other parts of the Soviet Union, memoirists write that the Solovetsky monks were either killed or exiled far away from their island home.¹⁴³ Their removal was violent and highly disputed. As Zaitsev explains, the pillaging of the monastery (described above) took place in front of the Solovetsky monks:

¹³⁹ Ibid., 57; Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 55–56.

¹⁴⁰ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 57.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid., 105.

¹⁴³ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 55.

This entire satanic bacchanalia was carried out in the presence of the monks. The poor monks were paralyzed with horror; many wept, some sobbed and raised their prayers to the Lord God their Creator, asking that He, seeing the unprecedented blasphemous iniquities, turn His anger away from the Monastery and forgive those who committed these crimes, for in the satanic time that had come to Rus', these people, having lost their human image and likeness, had turned into beasts possessed by demons.¹⁴⁴

Of the 1,000 monks that once lived at the Solovetsky monastery, only a few dozen remained in the 1920s. In his overview of the camp's buildings, Qureshi explains that 25–30 “remaining unfortunate monks” live on the first floor of a hostel outside the monastery, otherwise occupied by camp administrators. “At present,” Qureshi writes forebodingly, “they hold various positions and live as free people. Prisoners are not allowed to have any contact with them.”¹⁴⁵ Qureshi's account includes a later section titled “The Solovetsky Monks” that further examines their fate. He recounts a conversation with one of these monks in the cemetery. The monk takes a liking to Qureshi and exclaims: “It's a pity that you didn't come to Solovki in the old days. We never had any Hindus here. If you had come then, we would have held a solemn service for you in the Transfiguration Cathedral and seated you in a place of honor beneath the icons.”¹⁴⁶ Reflecting on the encounter, Qureshi contrasts the monk's subjunctive fantasy with reality: “Unfortunately for me, I ended up at Solovki when it was no longer run by the monks, but

¹⁴⁴ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 107.

¹⁴⁵ Qureshi, “Piat' let,” 119.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

by the GPU, who had no intention of seating me beneath the icons, but rather somewhere far away, preferably forever.”¹⁴⁷

Zaitsev, who took a great interest in the Solovetsky monks and writes of his familiarity with these men, explains their fate in greater detail. He explains that while most of the monks were sent away, the Chekists allowed the elderly monks to remain on the islands “out of fear of publicity, and consequently, unwanted attention,” and on the agreement that the monks would work “equal to the prisoners.”¹⁴⁸ The monks, whose only concern was remaining near the monastery, “happily agreed.”¹⁴⁹ The monks were able to get a few concessions from the GPU, including the use of a chapel inside the Kremlin cemetery. Zaitsev explains that this was not a sign of generosity from the GPU but rather a small concession of an otherwise useless and unproductive space, as they could do nothing with the church anyways.¹⁵⁰ However, the monks who were lucky enough to remain at the monastery were also forced to witness its destruction. Describing just one aspect of this destruction, the razing of the forests for export, Zaitsev considers their perspective: “The poor monks who remained at Solovki groan as they witness the barbaric destruction of the forests.”¹⁵¹

The fate of the monks mirrors the fate of the monastery itself. Once revered custodians of this sacred place, the surviving monks were either exiled or forced to work under brutal conditions, helpless witnesses to the destruction of their spiritual home. In reflecting on their plight, memoirists evoke a sense of loss—not only of the physical monastery but of an entire

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 133.

¹⁴⁸ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 98.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 100.

¹⁵¹ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 117–118.

way of life, as the Solovetsky Islands were transformed from a symbol of Russian Orthodoxy into a site of Soviet terror.

F. The State of the Solovetsky Monastery

Depicting the former monastery as they found it, memoirists emphasize the haphazard transformation of cathedrals and other monastic spaces (particularly the refectory) into bunk space for hundreds and hundreds of prisoners. Ilgin explains that the camp was divided into five sections, with the main section located in the kremlin and the rest divided among different churches and buildings across the archipelago.¹⁵² The many gates of the kremlin were closed aside from one small gate on the northern side of the fortress walls, and entry or exit required a special pass. The administration of the camp was located outside of the kremlin in the former hotel for pilgrims that stands next to the docks. Danzas emphasizes the size and sturdiness of the kremlin walls, which “stood two long sieges” in the past and explains that “all the buildings and numerous churches and chapels have been converted into barracks with two or three storeys of nary.”¹⁵³ Aliakhnovich also emphasizes the kremlin’s importance, calling it the center [*ośrodek*] of Solovetsky life. Like Danzas, he writes that everything—“former churches, cathedrals, and monks’ cells—all have been converted into dungeons where prisoners are held.”¹⁵⁴ Like Ilgin, he explains that only one gate is open, and that prisoners are only allowed in or out with a proper pass.¹⁵⁵ These long and systematic explanations of specific changes across the monastery highlight the total transformation of the space. The stark contrast between the monastery’s

¹⁵² Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 58.

¹⁵³ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 31.

¹⁵⁴ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 62.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

historical significance and its grim repurposing as a prison camp are made clearer with each subsequent transformation. What once stood as a center of spiritual and communal life had undergone a relentless transformation, its sacred spaces now filled with the bleak routines of imprisonment.

The general overview of the transformed monastery gives way to a more intimate, on-the-ground perspective as memoirists move from outside its walls to within. Cederholm, upon passing through the gates, offers a visceral account of the desolation inside, vividly contrasting his earlier impressions with the harsh realities of life at SLON. After his lyrical initial impressions of the monastery from afar (see above), Cederholm enters the monastery gates and sees the reality of life at SLON firsthand:

My first impression was that we were in an old-clothes market on the outskirts of a large town. We saw thousands of terrible creatures in rags, emaciated and filthy, with sores on their faces and watery eyes. Evidently the prisoners were going off to work, for while we were passing through the square crowds of people were falling in, one batch after another. Birds of a species unknown to me were walking about the square, uttering now and then a sharp, piercing cry. [...] The half-ruined, devastated cathedrals, the thousands of emaciated, ragged people with no light in their eyes, walking like shadows, and the sharp cries of the gulls as they stalked about freely among those tortured outcasts!¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 293.

The grim transformation of the monastery into a prison camp is further underscored by descriptions of the barracks made from former holy spaces. Memoirists tend to move inward, shifting from the prisoners' presence in the monastery's open spaces to their confinement inside its sacred walls, admitting the horrors of the transformation. While the exterior evokes a sense of loss and desecration, the barracks within reveal the full extent of this relentless repurposing. The former refectory and cathedral, once spaces of communion and reverence, now house the suffocating misery of the prisoners—offering a stark contrast to the flimsy barracks at Kem and further emphasizing the degradation of these holy places.

The massive contrast between the barracks at Kem (flimsy and overstuffed wooden sheds) and the initial barracks at the monastery impels descriptions of these barracks, which are built into the cavernous former refectory and Rozhdestvensky Cathedral inside the kremlin. The conditions in the 13th company were overwhelming, according to Ilgin:

We were taken to the 13th company, located in a former church.

What a horrific sight met our eyes. As soon as we opened the entrance doors, waves of foul, nauseating air rushed out at us. From the very doorway, on the floor, in the passageways and under the bunks, people lay everywhere. They slept in various positions, looking like bodies on a battlefield. With great difficulty, I made my way to the duty officer, who was dozing at a small table.¹⁵⁷

Zaitsev concurs, writing that in the former cathedral there were about 720 people, who created an unbearable and constant noise: “The room was filled with constant noise, shouting, and

¹⁵⁷ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 69.

swearing—all blending into one continuous hum.”¹⁵⁸ Cederholm emphasizes the size of the Rozhdestvensky cathedral in particular, writing that it could “easily hold 1,500 worshippers.” During his time in this barracks, Cederholm reports 850 prisoners living in the cathedral “in a horrible state of filth and overcrowding. Semi-darkness always prevails, as light enters only through windows cut in the vaulted roof, and there is always a mist from the prisoners’ wet clothes and the general dampness.”¹⁵⁹ The conversion of the cathedral into a barracks was conducted hastily: “all that was done was hurriedly to whitewash over all the images of the saints and all the frescoes, and place beds, consisting of unplanned boards on wooden trestles, in all the open places.”¹⁶⁰

Zaitsev explained that conditions were not just loud and uncomfortable but also unsanitary, with no access to wash basins or toilets in the chronically overcrowded barracks.¹⁶¹ Cederholm writes “the stench in the place was nauseating.”¹⁶² Noting the sanitary deficiencies in the former monastery, Cederholm writes of the “one simple hygienic measure” that the camp administration had “limited itself to”: “On the south wall of the cathedral was an inscription in enormous letters: ‘Without education and cleanliness there is no road to Socialism.’” Cederholm continues to mentally scan the room, remembering the other signage: “On the north wall another no less edifying inscription struck the eye: ‘Work strengthens a man’s soul and body.’ Right over the altar, where the image of Christ had once been, there was now Lenin’s portrait with these words in ancient Slav letters below it: ‘We are showing mankind a new road. Labour will be the master of the world.’” The author ends this passage with a shocking and ironic turn: “The day

¹⁵⁸ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 57.

¹⁵⁹ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 294.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 70.

¹⁶² Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 300.

before we arrived at the Solovetsky camp the corpse of a prisoner who had died of exhaustion was found, stiff and stark, under the board beds in our cathedral.”¹⁶³ This juxtaposition of ideological slogans with the grim reality of death and decay in the barracks starkly underscores the cruel irony of life inside the former monastery.

Prisoners strove to get out of these overstuffed cathedral-barracks if possible, hoping to move into a former monk’s cell (the most comfortable accommodations at the camp) or to be sent outside of the kremlin to a different barracks or repurposed chapel. Although they suffered from certain difficulties at these barracks away from the kremlin—like ever-present lice and bedbug infestations, as well as exposure to the outside elements—memoirists explain that these places were preferable to remaining in the 13th or 14th companies. For Ilgin, the barracks outside of the kremlin were “more bearable” for their relative privacy, which allowed him to conduct religious services: “From time to time, I was able to celebrate Mass in the small roo, after prayers and services in the chapel had been officially prohibited.”¹⁶⁴

Across the islands, the transformation of the once-sacred space into a brutal prison camp was striking to memoirists. What had once been a haven for monks and pilgrims was now overrun with prisoners, and the monastery’s spiritual tranquility was replaced by the bleak, relentless machinery of Soviet repression. Reminders of the monastery’s former purpose were present throughout the space, but moments of reconnection with this heritage (like prisoners slowly revealing the whitewashed frescoes) were met with brutal reprisals. However, any brief solace stood in stark contrast to the overwhelming reality that the monastery had been fully subsumed by the camp, its holy spaces now corrupted by the harsh routines of imprisonment.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 298.

¹⁶⁴ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 63.

G. Places of Punishment

At SLON, all punishment flowed towards the Sekirka lighthouse, universally regarded as the worst place any prisoner could be on the islands, but practically any part of the camp could become a place of punishment. The long history of the Solovetsky monastery had always intertwined sacralized labor and secular punishment. The monastery was reinforced into a fortress at the behest of the Romanovs during years of conflict with the Swedes, and these walls outlasted the siege of the Old Believers (1668–1676) and a few cannonballs during the Crimean War two centuries later.¹⁶⁵ In part due to the latter, the monastery was aggressively marketed as a pilgrimage site by an enterprising archimandrite in the years following the Crimean War.¹⁶⁶ The monastery became a place of interest due to its long monastic history, its history as a fortress, and its status as a prison for noteworthy persons, often sent there directly by the tsars.¹⁶⁷ Pilgrims toured the sacred sites and the notorious medieval dungeons, hearing lurid stories of the tortures inflicted on prisoners sent there by vengeful tsars.¹⁶⁸ The truth of these claims were limited; an historian writing in the 1800s already debunked most of them.¹⁶⁹ In reality, many of the “torture devices” that tourists saw were mischaracterized: chains used to keep livestock, small cells for storing grain, etc. However, in the 1920s the enterprising guards at SLON did make use of these spaces for punishing prisoners. In this way, the Bolshevik appropriation of the monastery led to a

¹⁶⁵ Yuri Brodsky, *Solovki: Labyrinth of Transformation* (Moscow: Novaya Gazeta, 2017), 214.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 253–256.

¹⁶⁷ Famous prisoners included Petro Kalnyshevsky, the last Koshovyi Otaman of the Zaporozhian Host, and Pavel Isaakovich Gannibal, a relative of Alexander Pushkin.

¹⁶⁸ Rozanov, *Solovetskii kontslager*, 152–153.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

perverse process where the purported torture devices at the monastery were repurposed for actual torture of the prisoners.¹⁷⁰

One case in point are the “stone sacks,” small receptacles built into the stone walls of the monastery that Malsagoff claims were used to torture prisoners.¹⁷¹ Malsagoff lists these stone sacks as the fourth of five “chief punishments” at the camp along with the Sekirka isolation cells, mosquito torture, “Prolongation of the term of imprisonment,” and “Shooting.”¹⁷² Of the memoirists surveyed, Malsagoff is the only one to mention them—as with the “mosquito torture” above, Rozanov confirms the limited use of the technique but walks back the extraordinary claims that Malsagoff and Kiselev-Gromov make about torturous punishments in his chapter titled “The Ninth Circle—In the Forests.”¹⁷³ As with the mosquito torture, Malsagoff makes specific assertions as to the practices on the island:

The Tchekists take the prisoner to the “sack,” and ask him: “How’ll you get in—head first or feet first?”

If the prisoner gets into the “sack” head first, he is beaten with “Smolensky sticks”¹⁷⁴ on the back and legs; if he gets in feet first, he is beaten about the head and face. The beating goes on till his

¹⁷⁰ A related process is the reclaiming of spaces, like the “Izolatsiya” art center in Donetsk, that are later appropriated back to their original function (invading Russian troops used the art center as a prison once again). The Solovetsky Islands are a dramatic example of this repurposing, but such intermittent reuse of the same potential carceral spaces can be found nearly anywhere; along with other administrative buildings, these seem to be the first spaces appropriated by new/invading groups. As Foucault puts it, prison “is the detestable solution, which one seems unable to do without” (*Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage books, 1995), 232)

¹⁷¹ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 172–173.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁷³ Rozanov, *Solovetskii kontslager*, 138–173.

¹⁷⁴ According to Malsagoff (*An Island Hell*, 67), these were sticks devised by Chekist Marian Smolensky used to beat prisoners. Malsagoff, again, is the only to name these batons.

whole body is inside the “sack.”. The “sack” is too narrow for him to sit, and too low for him to stand up straight, so that he is obliged to stand with his knees bent and his head poked forward. He is imprisoned in the “sack” for a period varying between three days and a week. The rations are the same as at the Sekirka. Few people can endure this medieval punishment.¹⁷⁵

The transformation of the Solovetsky Monastery into a Soviet labor camp marked the physical and ideological destruction of a once-sacred space. However, the monastery’s history as a place where labor and punishment were intertwined endured in a twisted form under Soviet rule. What had once been a site of pilgrimage and symbolic suffering became a literal place of torment for the prisoners at SLON. This brutal repurposing of sacred and historical spaces set the stage for even harsher realities. The monastery’s long-standing association with punishment culminates at the Sekirka lighthouse, where the camp’s most severe punishments were carried out.

One task of prison memoirs that each author seems to intuit is the need to overcome the bias against convicted prisoners that is widespread across potential reading audiences. There was also plenty of sympathy for the Bolshevik cause in the 1920s and 1930s, as the introduction to *Letters from Russian Prisons* demonstrates: the publisher sent the letters to dozens of prominent reviewers, and they reacted variously, some reluctantly supporting the book’s publication, others denouncing the project as undermining the socialist cause. And that book deals exclusively with political prisoners *stricto sensu*, mostly socialists. The shift to convicting dissenters as counterrevolutionaries gave ideological cover to outside observers and complicated KRs’ views

¹⁷⁵ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 172–173.

of their own criminal convictions. Dariusz Tolczyk deftly outlines this delicate mental balance in his work on Gulag memoirs.¹⁷⁶ The fact that these early SLON memoirs continue to be dismissed as biased accounts from White Officers demonstrates the continued efficacy of this tactic.

Memoirists therefore try to explain and justify their situations by explaining the nearly unbelievable reality that most of their convictions were invented by prosecutors working on quotas to fabricate as many “enemies of the state” as possible, and then express the insanities of camp life. They argue that harsh punishments meted out at the camp were baseless and unjustifiable. Grube even uses unjustifiable beatings of prisoners as the segue between detention in the Far East and the Solovetsky Islands. He describes being beaten in the dungeons of the Vladivostok detention prison then explains that such beatings “are done ‘unofficially’, as beating prisoners is officially forbidden. I learned how this prohibition is enforced once I arrived at Solovki.”¹⁷⁷

The camps were not a free-for-all when it came to killing prisoners—every official execution was sanctioned and recorded in Moscow—so unofficial means of effecting prisoners’ deaths were practiced in conjunction with the overall disregard for prisoners’ lives that caused many deaths at the camp. Bezsonov describes the gradual systematization of prisoner executions in his own time in Soviet prisons, but emphasizes that prisoners are still tortured, beaten, and shot on the flimsiest pretexts.¹⁷⁸ Ilgin concurs regarding the clandestine nature of many prisoner deaths (“various kinds of torture and torment were devised to get rid of them without incurring the costs of execution”) but writes that these methods were reserved for “incorrigible”

¹⁷⁶ See Dariusz Tolczyk, *See No Evil: Literary Representations of Concentration Camps in Poland and Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

¹⁷⁷ Grube, “Rasskaz,” 197.

¹⁷⁸ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 215.

prisoners.¹⁷⁹ Ilgin lists solitary confinement, starvation rations, and exposure to extreme cold as the methods employed.

Malsagoff and Bezsonov, two early escapees who essentially invented how to speak to people outside of the Soviet Union about their time at SLON, underscore the arbitrariness at work across the entire prison system. Malsagoff writes directly to readers on this topic, explaining that “[i]t would be a mistake to suppose that one must commit some kind of offence to be sent to the Sekirka, the ‘sacks’ and the mosquitoes, or to be shot. The prisoners are handed over by the central authorities to the unchecked caprice of the camp administration.”¹⁸⁰ Bezsonov explains the same phenomenon to readers from the side of the Bolsheviks: “But the Bolsheviks know a man can be beaten, once or twice, and then become callous and less susceptible to fear, so they do not often resort to these measures; but the dreadful thing is that you can be beaten, tortured or shot at any moment, and for no special reason. This is what keeps men in subjection and continual fear. The dreadful fact is, that irresponsible despotism exists.”¹⁸¹

Cederholm makes very similar rhetorical moves, addressing the arbitrary nature of the disciplinary process that landed prisoners on “mosquito stumps,” in “dark dungeons,” or sent to the Sekirka isolator. He explains to readers that the slightest action or inaction could lead to arbitrary punishment. Beyond the isolation, loss of freedom, threat of disease, and dangerous climate, Cederholm insists that “[t]he most terrible feature of life in the Solovetsky camp is that no prisoner ever knows what the next minute has in store for him. Nothing is fixed and definite. No one knows exactly what is allowed and what is not.”¹⁸² Cederholm goes on to give examples

¹⁷⁹ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 64.

¹⁸⁰ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 174.

¹⁸¹ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 216.

¹⁸² Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 304.

that defy logic: a team is sent to do a task but not given sufficient tools for the job. Asking for more equipment could lead to punishment, doing the job without tools could be seen as sabotage leading to punishment, and beyond that, “[t]he slightest comment results in disciplinary measures being taken against the offender.”¹⁸³ In the next paragraph, Cederholm describes the quick progression of punishments, beginning with the “lightest punishment” (thirty days in a “dark dungeon”) and ending with transfer to Sekirnaya Gora.¹⁸⁴

Not every memoirist describes these punishments as totally arbitrary. Grube and Zaitsev both describe punishments they received after committing actual offenses (Grube made several escape attempts and Zaitsev openly attended a church service, something allowed only to clergymen at the camp). Lenardowicz explains that prisoners who failed to fulfill their work quotas could land at Sekirka, and Ilgin writes that prisoners were sent to isolation if “they were guilty of something or behaved poorly, for example, stealing or committing abuses.”¹⁸⁵

Sekirka

The isolation cells in the Sekirka chapel/lighthouse are such an unusual feature of the Solovetsky camp that eight of the memoirists describe it, including the two prisoners who spent time there.¹⁸⁶ Its features include two round chapel-cells equipped with bunks that seem to reach infinitely high, nearly naked prisoners forced to sit on these bunks still and silent for hours at time, extremely cold temperatures that lead to dozens of prisoners freezing to death every day,

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 64.

¹⁸⁶ Zakhar Prilepin sends his protagonist to the Sekirka isolator, where the “body stacking” process becomes a scene of intense spiritual transformation for several characters, making this a key setting in the novel.

and the prisoners' unique method of coping with the cold nights: "stacking" themselves on top of each other to conserve body heat. Additional punishments were devised for these prisoners, such as spending time exposed to extreme wind and cold on the bell tower at the top of the chapel. Memoirists also note the isolation of prisoners, the deadliness of the punishment cells, and the meagre rations apportioned to prisoners there.¹⁸⁷

Memoirists often introduce the isolation cell at first sight of the lighthouse, which Malsagoff and Bezsonov explain is visible from the Popov Island camp.¹⁸⁸ The view of the lighthouse inspires prisoners to discuss the place at length, with the few who survive the place describing it in detail for other prisoners. Zaitsev sees the lighthouse as he sails towards the Big Solovetsky Islands, and other prisoners describe to him the "prisoners sit barefoot, half-naked, wearing only underpants, in a cold room, on a starvation ration, etc."¹⁸⁹ Zaitsev will later witness these things for himself as a prisoner there.

The notoriety of the place has a universal chilling effect on prisoners at SLON. As Grube puts it, "there is a place on Solovki that all 50,000 prisoners of the Cheka's SLON think about or speak of with dread every hour. That place is Sekirka."¹⁹⁰ Grube describes the isolation cells located in a "once-majestic temple" set on top of the highest hill on the islands. He emphasizes the changes to the place: the cross at the top of the lighthouse removed, the thick stone walls representing the sacralized labor of generations of Solovetsky monks "turned into the most vile place of abuse and torture by cold and hunger."¹⁹¹ Grube's description is full of movement and contradiction. He continues: "There is only one way out of Sekirka—to the grave. Every inch of

¹⁸⁷ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 170–171.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁸⁹ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 53–54.

¹⁹⁰ Grube, "Sekirka," 212.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

land there is soaked with the blood and tears of tens of thousands of victims of triumphant sadists. When the red beacon lights flare up in the central tower at night, it seems as if the blood of the tortured flows in a wide stream from Sekirka across the entire island, far into the sea and to the mainland, crying out for vengeance.”¹⁹² Grube’s portrayal of the site emphasizes its transformation from a sacred space into one of gruesome torture, where every stone seems to echo with the suffering of countless victims. This sentiment is echoed by memoirists such as Qureshi, Zaitsev, and Lenardowicz, each using language that underscores Sekirka as a place of ultimate despair—a prison within a prison and a hell within a hell.

Memoirists tend to draw metaphors to contextualize the place and underscore its particular danger against the already bleak background of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp. Qureshi begins to describe the isolation cell by explaining “although ‘SLON’ is a true hell, this hell also has its own special hell—‘Sekirka.’”¹⁹³ Zaitsev calls the punishment cell “a kind of super-solitary confinement”¹⁹⁴ and a “monstrous horror for all Solovetskians.”¹⁹⁵ The constant fear of being sent to Sekirka for a variety of violations, large or small, is echoed by Lenardowicz, who calls it “a terror for all the prisoners.”¹⁹⁶

Grube writes that “thousands” are sent to Sekirka each year but only “dozens return.” His encounters with those who had been there were foreboding. Grube calls returnees from Sekirka “refugees from the other world,” half-dead returnees from hell, underscoring the extremity of conditions there and the burden that survivors carried when returned to the general population at the camp. While Grube is in contact with such prisoners from his first days at the camp, they

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 53–54.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 105.

¹⁹⁶ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 26.

“kept a deep silence about everything they had endured.” Before his own experiences at Sekirka, Grube could only “read the full horror of what they had been through” “in the heavy, terribly pleading looks in their eyes.”¹⁹⁷

Just as memoirists emphasized the arbitrariness of punishment generally at the camp, they report prisoners being sent to the isolation cells for relatively minor infractions. Qureshi also writes of a Ukrainian friend who was sent to Sekirka in the middle of his mother’s visit there for nodding at a woman he encountered at the camp. Qureshi builds up to the revelation of the insignificance of the prisoner’s crime and adds: “That was enough.”¹⁹⁸ Grube, who admits to being punished for several escape attempts with a few days in detention cells in the monastery, describes his imprisonment at Sekirka as “completely unexpected,” a punishment for an unnamed crime for which he was “completely innocent.”

In an account published separately from his general account of his time at SLON, Grube describes his admission into the Sekirka isolator in detail, from his march up the hill to his first night in the freezing cold cell. His account of entering the first chamber of the former chapel is shocking:

Horror and despair gripped me at the sight of the scene before me.

In an immense hall, with a high dome and galleries beneath it, six rows of benches stretched out in pairs like ribbons. On them, shivering from the terrible cold, often in completely unnatural poses, pressed back to back, wearing only underwear, sat half-frozen prisoners. The room was filled with an eerie, truly tomblike silence,

¹⁹⁷ Grube, “Sekirka,” 212.

¹⁹⁸ Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 125.

and if not for the gazes of four thousand terrified, bloodshot eyes fixed on you and the faint, barely perceptible movements here and there in the endless rows, one might think we had been brought not into a prison cell, but a mortuary.¹⁹⁹

Entering the room, Grube creates an image of infinite, silent suffering, a panopticon of fearful eyes in “endless rows.”

Other memoirists describe the conditions at Sekirka without having been there, to various degrees of success. Danzas explains that prisoners had to sit totally still in the daytime: “[t]his was the torture of immobility: the prisoners sat on benches, their hands spread on their knees, forbidden to move.”²⁰⁰ Lenardowicz, who arrived at SLON a few years before Grube in 1924, describes an unfurnished and icy cold building. “With an asphalt floor, no windows, and no doors, it was as cold as an icebox. Inside the church there were no furnishings: no bunks, no stools, no benches, or any other equipment.”²⁰¹ Continuing to emphasize the bareness and deprivation of the place, Lenardowicz explains that prisoners sent to the former chapel were stripped to their underwear before entering. Ilgin seems to have an even more attenuated idea of how prisoners spend their days at Sekirka: “These offenders were placed in a former church, unheated and empty, high up near the ceiling on a pole stretched across its entire width. The unfortunate person had to perch on the pole like a bird, trying to maintain their balance. If they lost it or became dizzy, they would inevitably fall to their death.”²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ Grube, “Sekirka,” 213.

²⁰⁰ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 36.

²⁰¹ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 26.

²⁰² Ilgin, *Wspomnienia*, 64.

The nighttime body-stacking procedure mentioned above seems too crazy to be true, but both prisoners who spent time at Sekirka describe the ritual. Zaitsev, who was at Sekirka from September 20–December 10 of 1926, explains the entire procedure and makes it seem logical and not particularly odd. The procedure is allowed by the guards and consists of four people pressing their backs to each other and warming each other’s bodies with rhythmic clapping moves. Zaitsev remarks that “we even developed techniques resembling group gymnastics,” explaining that prisoners did these warming procedures “on command.”²⁰³ In her version of this process, Danzas will emphasize the “command” part of this equation, writing that the whole thing was supervised by the guards, with prisoners moving on their command throughout the night. Danzas attributes this survival strategy to outside force, describing the body stacking as part of guard duty: “In the night the men had to lie still, closely pressed together, and every two hours at a given order they turned simultaneously on the other side... Some went insane, and in a paroxysm of despair attacked their guards: then they would be shot.”²⁰⁴ Zaitsev’s first-person account is simpler and more logical than Danzas’ version, and he explains the value of the procedure: “and it worked well... it was much more convenient than each person slapping themselves individually and disturbing others...”²⁰⁵

Grube, who does not specify when he was at Sekirka during his time at SLON (1926–1928), gives depicts a different procedure entirely. Rather than sitting at each other’s backs, Grube describes actual “stacking,” reproduced here at length:

the prisoners lie down in three-layered heaps, 30–50 people in each.

Before forming the heap, everyone ties their shirts over their heads,

²⁰³ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 151.

²⁰⁴ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 36–37.

²⁰⁵ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 151.

securing the ends of the shirts with ropes into a knot below their feet. In this way, they create a kind of sack for themselves, and then they arrange themselves into a heap. By drawing lots or following an established turn, some of the prisoners lie on their sides, tightly pressed against each other on the bare floor, with their heads toward the wall. The next group forms a second layer, lying on top of them, and finally, the remaining participants in the group, forming the third layer, cover them like a blanket. Once arranged this way, the heaps fall silent for a time. In the middle layer, warmed by the body heat of others, prisoners fall asleep almost instantly, while the groaning complaints of those in the bottom layer and the shivering, moaning, and grumbling of those in the top layer are occasionally interrupted by snoring and delirious mutterings. After an hour or two, the gray heap of bodies begins to stir—it's time for reshuffling. Amid arguments, complaints, pleas, cries, and curses, the middle layer slowly moves down one by one, those on the bottom crawl out and reposition themselves, and the frozen ones from the bare floor on the top layer move down to take their place in the middle.²⁰⁶

Lenardowicz, who emphasizes the extreme cold in his description of the isolation cells on Sekirka, gives a similar outline of the procedure. The prisoners “arranged themselves in a pile, one on top of the other” to conserve heat and change places once in the middle of the night.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ Grube, “Sekirka,” 215.

²⁰⁷ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 26.

Lenardowicz explains that, unfortunately, “this method of warming oneself with body heat did not always help. Often, those on top were found frozen to death, while those underneath were suffocated by the excessive weight.”²⁰⁸ Grube also emphasizes the low success rate of this horrifying process and conveys the dehumanizing nature of this effort when he summarizes the prisoners efforts: “thus, these gray creatures live and squirm until 6 o’clock in the morning.”²⁰⁹ Yet prisoners still attempt to survive the frozen nights, however hopeless it may seem. Every night of collective horror is followed by another painful day, following the procedures of the place.

Grube also notes that aside from daily deaths from the cold, the prisoners at Sekirka are often stricken with scurvy and typhus. In warmer months, their bodies are carried off the hill daily, and in winter, their bodies pile up around the chapel. At Sekirka, the distinction between alive and dead is of little concern to the captors:

In my presence, 20 to 25 corpses were carried out daily from the “first division,” and often those who were frozen stiff but still alive were also thrown into the cart like logs. Those who were frozen, unable to move their limbs or speak, were considered dead at Sekirka. No attempts to revive them were made, and with animalistic indifference they were thrown directly from the cart into graves along with the corpses.²¹⁰

Although they highlight the frequency of prisoner deaths at Sekirka, both Grube and Zaitsev survive their time there. Grube explains “I would probably have perished at Sekirka if,

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Grube, “Sekirka,” 215.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 214.

after a month, my complete innocence had not been proven and I had not been released from that Bolshevik torture chamber.”²¹¹ This sentence ends his separate account of the place. Zaitsev, on the other hand, describes his time on Sekirka in the larger context of his time at SLON, and writes that even when he was released from the isolation cell, he was unable to leave the site. All of his belongings were stolen during his time at Sekirka, he explains, leaving him without any warm clothing to make the 11-verst march back to the camp in December.

After he is released from Sekirka, Zaitsev finds himself unable to leave:

The administration was ashamed, or rather afraid, that my appearance at the Kremlin in such a state would spark rumors among the prisoners. I looked terrible—as they say, “better suited for a coffin”... But as the saying goes, “every cloud has a silver lining”,—I was kept on at Sekirka as a watchman of the Solovetsky lighthouse. It was the most “*blatnaya*” (light) duty at Solovki. And so, while at the Solovetsky lighthouse, I was free to walk around the surrounding forest.²¹²

Echoing the contradictions of the Sekirka isolation cells that Grube outlined at the beginning of this section, Zaitsev explains that the guards feared reprisal from the prisoners if Zaitsev were to be sent back to the monastery in inadequate clothing, and writes that the work he was assigned to do at Sekirka was the easiest (“самая «блатная»”) at the camp. Comparing firsthand and secondhand accounts of the punishment regime at the Sekirka isolator, it seems that there was

²¹¹ Ibid., 216.

²¹² Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 130.

little distance between reality and rumor, but this unusual end to Zaitsev's time there adds another layer of contradiction.

4. Conclusion: *Memoirists sum up SLON*

The two previous chapters dealt with the SLON metanarrative and the imagery of the camp and islands, while this concluding section deals with the literary devices that memoirists employed in their work. This analysis is cumulative, building from the narratives and imagery outlined in earlier sections. Although I worked to identify the four "master tropes" as outlined by Hayden White, following Giambattista Vico, the ordering and logical flow of these tropes as presented below follows a heuristic derived from the texts themselves. Rather than listing every trope, metaphor, and instance of irony across the memoirs, this section is narrowly focused on the devices that memoirists use to explain the camp to readers on a conceptual, rather than literal, level.

In this section, I begin with more incidental comparisons, including the primary symbolic association of the camp in the 1920s and 1930s—the elephant [*slon*]. From there, I move to more systematic metaphorical conceits that memoirists use to convey the camp to readers, culminating in a discussion of the frequent comparisons of the camp to hell. This is followed by a discussion of forms of irony most frequently encountered in the books—particularly in the authors' attempts to convey the inconceivable to disbelieving readers. The section ends with the increasingly abstract and capacious metonymic and synecdochic invocations of the camp that memoirists use to describe the state of the Soviet Union to Russian émigré and foreign readers. A fitting end might be a discussion of the Solovetsky stone as a universal symbol of Soviet repression; however, this concept did not appear in SLON memoirs until the 1950s.

A. SLON/Elephant

The acronym SLON, meaning “elephant” in Russian, Polish, and virtually all Slavic languages, was widely used by the GPU as a branding tool—literally, visually—in the 1920s, when the camp was openly advertised as a model of Soviet penal reforms. The camp's trademark, stamped on its export goods and decorating the prisoners' newspapers, could be seen throughout the Soviet Union. Tchernavin, who frequently explains Soviet commercial practices in his memoir, invokes “The Sign of the Elephant” in the title to his chapter on industry at the camp. He explains that the camp underwent a major reorganization in 1930 that included a new, unwieldy name (“Solovetzki and Kem Working Corrective Camps”) with an even less pronounceable abbreviation: SIKTL. Following the general trends of Soviet abbreviation practices, the new name was used when necessary, but the old name remained in common use. The elephant trademark also remained in use, and, Tchernavin points out, could “be found on many goods in the U.S.S.R.” in the 1930s.¹

Without abstracting away from the SLON trademark featuring an elephant, Tchernavin uses the “sign of the elephant” as a signifier of the camp's work product and its pervasive presence in the economy of the USSR. Tchernavin, who is not the writer to zoomorphize the SLON-elephant, simply notes the vestigial sign of the elephant as a through-line connecting past versions of the camp to present ones. The disappearance of this trademark from internationally exported goods is also notable for Tchernavin, who tries to explain to international readers that the impact of contemporary tariffs and other restrictions on prisoner-made goods only resulted in better concealment of the origins of such goods.²

¹ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 258

² *Ibid.*, 279.

As Tchernavin's discussion highlights, the Soviet state apparatus was the body that facilitated and perpetuated the SLON-elephant imagery. Aside from the trademark, the image was memorably invoked in Mikhail Kol'tsov's 1926 *Pravda* article, "The Elephant Writes" (*slon pishet*) a defense of the camp against accounts like Malsagoff's and other "sinister exercises of the White Guard press."³ Kol'tsov begins the article with the conceit indicated in the title, claiming ironically that "our Soviet elephants [...] write [...] and even print [...] publish and distribute a monthly magazine."⁴ He continues in this vein for several paragraphs before revealing that his topic is the maligned island and camp, and that, counter to the adversarial foreign press, this "elephant speaks about itself" via the camp press. Kol'tsov miraculously pulls off the questionable wordplay at the heart of the article, developing the image of the camp and its prisoner-authors as a collective elephant struggling to contradict the false claims of the foreign press, then drawing examples from the real camp newspaper to refute claims about conditions on the islands. Kol'tsov's article, published in *Pravda*, indicates that the imagery developed around the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp's acronymic elephant was mostly the purview of the Soviet state. In fact, most of the memoirists discussed here make no mention of the SLON-elephant connection.

For many early SLON memoirists, this is a simple question of language and cultural associations; the connection between "SLON" and "elephant" is obvious in Russian but demands explanation in English and French. It is possible that authors tried to make this connection in their original drafts, but references to this Russian wordplay were excised by translators and editors. Some evidence of this effacement can be found in the accounts of Malsagoff and

³ Kol'tsov, "Slon pishet," *Pravda* (1).

⁴ Ibid.

Cederholm, whose memoirs were both translated by F. H. Lyon. There is a hint of personification, perhaps due to Lyon's phrasing of “the Slon”, in Malsagoff's description of the ruined monastery, where he writes that “the half-destroyed Kremlin [...] became the headquarters of the ‘Slon.’” Lyon footnotes the word “Slon,” giving the camp's full name and explaining that “Slon means ‘elephant’ in Russian; the double entendre cannot, of course, be reproduced in English.”⁵ When Cederholm introduces the acronym “Slon” in his own account—with no hint of personification—Lyon inserts the same footnote, almost down to the word.⁶ In the eventual translation of Malsagoff's memoir into Russian, presumably drawn from the English text and not the original manuscript, the same line is reproduced with no zoomorphism and Lyon's footnote, understandably, omitted.⁷ It seems in these cases that a mirage of SLON-elephant connection has been evoked and dismissed by an overly conscientious translator, rather than the authors themselves.

Among the memoirists, two authors (both published in Russian rather than English) do make broader allusion to the SLON-elephant. In a few instances, Zaitsev describes the camp and its subsidiaries as an enormous elephant, mostly in relation to the working day at the camp. For example, he depicts the Solovetsky Kremlin, “the head and body of the ‘Elephant,’ [...] preparing for a new hard day's work.”⁸ Zaitsev uses the elephant metaphor to emphasize the enormity of the camp and zoomorphize the camp as a living being, and seems to mostly describe the function of labor across the camp. For example, he describes “the enormous ‘ELEPHANT,’ having settled its enormous body not only on the Solovetsky Islands but also on the mainland,

⁵ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 56

⁶ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 288.

⁷ S. A. Malsagov [Malsagoff], “Adskii ostrov: sovetskaiia tiur'ma na dalekim severe,” in VSU vol. 1, 384.

⁸ Zaitsev, “Solovki” (VSU), 327.

sleeps soundly, exhausted by the hard labor of the past day.”⁹ Throughout the book, Zaitsev's elephant develops a sympathetic persona, hardworking and often taking a deserved rest from its endless duties.

Compared to Zaitsev, Qureshi treats the elephant metaphor quite literally. Qureshi seems to compare the SLON-elephant to his real experiences with elephants as a beast of burden in his native India. According to Qureshi, SLON, “unlike other elephants, does not work for people, but makes people work for itself.” He continues with this series of contradictions, expanding away from more literal aspects of elephant behavior (“people do not ride on its back, but it rides on their necks”) to more abstract ones that seem to transform the typical elephant into a benevolent benefactor of humanity, compared to the SLON elephant, which “feeds them poorly, does not clothe them, and keeps them in disgusting, dirty premises.” Qureshi concludes with a rhetorical flourish that seems to abandon any connection to real elephants, writing that the SLON elephant's “love” for its prisoners is “even more terrible: it squeezes the people who have fallen into its arms so tightly that it does not want to part with them and leaves hundreds and thousands of people forever with itself, in a quiet, former monastery cemetery, far from family and homeland.”¹⁰ Qureshi's extended elephant metaphor has a deeply personal framing that contrasts with the abstracted and ironic references to elephants in Kol'tsov's article. For Qureshi, elephants signify homeland and elicit a stirring condemnation of the camp's treatment of his fellow prisoners, while the Soviet writer uses the same wordplay more superficially.

⁹ Ibid., 326.

¹⁰ Qureshi, “Piat' let,” 85.

B. Recurrent comparisons

1. *Island of...*

Although epithets like “An Island Hell” and “a place of torture and death” appear with some regularity in the book titles, likely inserted by editors and publishers, the memoirs themselves contain relatively few such phrases. Several memoirists use positive appellations to describe the islands, such as “holy” and “picturesque.”¹¹ A few do tend to use strong language, however: Grube calls the Big Solovetsky Island “that dark island of blood and tears,” and Nikonov-Smorodin, possibly referencing the title of Zaitsev's earlier book, refers to the “island of torture and death” in quotation marks and calls the Big Solovetsky Island the “island of tears (and blood)” several more times in his book.¹² Cederholm concludes his time on the islands with an impassioned farewell to “Solovky, island of tears, of torment, of the Red nightmare!” adding “May you be accursed for ages to come!”¹³ The relative infrequency of these epithets in the pages of the memoirs, compared to their relative frequency on the covers, demonstrates the generally limited use of such figurative language by memoirists themselves.

2. *Mockery/comedy/tragedy*

Memoirists build contrasts designed to demonstrate the extremes of the camp, among other aspects of Soviet life, to readers. A common device, invoked to some degree by about half of the memoirists, is to label the situation a comedy, tragedy, or mockery. For the most part, memoirists use this phrasing to highlight the hypocrisy, perversity, or absurdity of a particular scenario rather than drawing larger conclusions about the camp or Soviet Union generally. Most

¹¹ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 13; Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 184.

¹² Grube, “Rasskaz,” 198; Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 19.

¹³ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 332.

often, this is applied to GPU and Soviet procedures that memoirists witness before they arrive at the camp, such as their arrests and trials, and other smaller scenes that take place during their interrogations and time in prison.¹⁴ More broadly, memoirists label larger projects or events within the country as comedies and farces, such as the Belomorkanal construction (Danzas) and the Shakhty Trials (Tchernavin).¹⁵

With reference to the camp itself, Zaitsev and Danzas both label the roll calls and military drills as humiliating farces, and Zaitsev goes on to say that every element of the camp's daily procedure constitutes a "monkey comedy."¹⁶ Danzas and Tatyana Tchernavin also emphasize the mockery of women prisoners through invasive and humiliating procedures, with Danzas decrying the frequent intrusions of men into the women's bathhouse at the camp, "alleging necessary repairs to the water-pipes," as a mockery: "for there too we had only a couple of taps!"¹⁷

Zaitsev and Grube also describe the blasphemous transformation of the former monastery as a mockery, although still limiting this to particular instances and spaces. Grube's description of the Sekirka chapel, for example, represents the transformation of grandiose and sacralized monastic labor into "the most vile place of mockery and torture by cold and hunger."¹⁸ Zaitsev also uses this framing to emphasize instances where camp guards mock and abuse prisoners' religious sensitivities; he describes a particularly harrowing ceremony where the relics of St. Zosima were removed and defiled by gleeful camp administrators.¹⁹ Still, memoirists rarely

¹⁴ Qureshi, "Piat' let," 134, 131; Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 56; Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 110, 128, 150, 235–236; Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 5–6, 27.

¹⁵ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 64; Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 360.

¹⁶ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 148.

¹⁷ Tatyana Tchernavin, *Escape*, 127; Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 59.

¹⁸ Grube, "Sekirka," 212.

¹⁹ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 104.

extend the concepts of mockery, comedy, and tragedy to the camp as a whole, let alone as their means of summing up the situation across the Soviet Union. Only Zaitsev, who regularly calls the Bolshevik revolution the “Great Russian tragedy,” makes this comparison systematically. Solovki, for him, is just one “nightmarish act from the Great Russian tragedy,” which “must be described in detail, accurately and impartially”;²⁰ more than just a prison, it is an inevitable consequence of historical decline, a scene within a greater, unfolding catastrophe.

3. Soviet/GPU Experiment

Covering as they do the first decades of the Soviet Union, these memoirs encompass the total transformation of their authors’ way of life. As memoirists describe it, the immense scale of this transformation and the rapidity of the changes make it difficult to convey to foreign and even émigré readers (with some insisting that the émigrés, relying on their own memory of Russia, are the most resistant to their message). Memoirists label the new rulers of the country variously, referring generally to “Bolsheviks” and “Soviets” and, in discussions of the Soviet labor camps, narrowly to “Chekists” and “the GPU”. Whether discussing the country as a whole or the camp system, memoirists tend to represent the Soviet power that operates within it as unified and overwhelming, almost a force of nature. Malsagoff, for example, writes that “Soviet power destroyed this highly cultured advanced post of Russia in the Far North with characteristic violence and cruelty.”²¹ In keeping with the us vs. them mentality that understandably structures their accounts, the memoirists admit, contrary to the hopes of émigré audiences, that the transformation of Russia into the Soviet Union has succeeded and will not be easily reversed.

²⁰ Ibid., 5.

²¹ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 55.

Within the Soviet Union it seems, particularly to memoirists caught up in the labor camp system, that the most powerful government organ within the country is the security apparatus. Memoirists attempt to explain to readers how much influence the GPU apparatus has inside the country, frequently positing that the GPU is not just a synecdoche for the Soviet Union, but the most exemplary piece of the whole. Cederholm makes this case when describing the dysfunctional prison hospital: “In our prison hospital, as in all prisons under the management of the Narkomjust, there was an ‘educational section’; but, like everything in Soviet Russia except the Tcheka, it existed in name only.”²² Tchernavin goes further in describing the GPU as a “state within a state,” echoing the idea that at the camp the power was not Soviet but Solovetsky: “The GPU has its own troops, its own navy, millions of its own subjects (the prisoners in camps), its own territory where Soviet authority and laws do not function.”²³

Zaitsev tends to focus his discussion of this transformation on the Solovetsky Islands themselves, which “represent the most favorable place in all respects for the application of the GPU punitive system.”²⁴ The expansion of the Solovetsky camp to “colossal dimensions” represents an existential threat to Russia overall, of course.²⁵ The GPU's experiment at the camp (“can Russians get used to and endure the conditions of the Solovetsky communist hell”) in turn threatens the rest of the country.²⁶

These opinions about the outsized power held by the GPU were not unique or unfounded and are in fact reiterated throughout the memoirs. Qureshi, emphasizing his foreign perspective, reports seeing a waiter threaten a drunken worker “with three letters that had magical powers in

²² Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 214.

²³ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 294

²⁴ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 83.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 81.

the USSR—GPU.” Qureshi's dirty, drunken worker responds with a rather eloquent speech about language and government administration:

Until now, I thought that there was a socialist Soviet government in Russia, but now I see that there is no government other than the GPU. I was told that the bourgeoisie were offended when, after the revolution, three letters were thrown out of the alphabet (“Ѣ”, “Ѥ” and “Ѧ”) and left Russia, and they agreed to return only if they threw out three more letters: “Ѧ”, “Ѧ” and “Ѧ”.²⁷

Later, Qureshi offers his own opinion that “in the former Russia there is no ‘national’ power and that the unfortunate, deceived Russian people are in complete slavery to the GPU – the executive organ of the Third International.”²⁸

Memoirists consistently portray the GPU not merely as an arm of Soviet power but as its defining force, an entity that operates beyond and above the state itself. Their accounts suggest that, while the broader Soviet system is characterized by dysfunction and ideological contradictions, the GPU functions with ruthless efficiency, embodying the true mechanics of control. The metaphor of an “experiment” captures both the deliberate nature of the regime’s repressive strategies and the uncertain limits of its ambitions—Solovki, in this framing, is a testing ground for methods of subjugation that could be extended across the country. The perception that Soviet rule had fully supplanted old Russia, as reluctantly acknowledged by many memoirists, reinforces the idea that the GPU’s dominance was not temporary but intrinsic to the new order. In defining the regime through its security apparatus, memoirists present a

²⁷ Qureshi, “Piat’ let,” 139.

²⁸ Ibid., 90.

vision of Soviet power that is not ideological but coercive, where governance is not about administration but about surveillance, enforcement, and survival.

4. *Europe/not Soviet*

Along with these characterizations of the Soviet state follow comparisons to Europe and the “civilized” world; conditions in the Soviet Union are so different that they are hardly comparable, according to memoirists. A key issue are the basic living conditions available to Soviet citizens. Lenardowicz regularly writes about conditions at SLON that would be totally unacceptable in Poland, including prisoner rations that would serve only as pig slop in his home country.²⁹ For Bezsonov on the other hand, the key difference between “there” and “here” is a working man's freedom to earn a living without participating in politics.³⁰ A frequent point of comparison is the prisons themselves. For example, Cederholm writes that a few weeks on the Solovetsky Islands is equal to “many years in the severest of European prisons.”³¹ Malsagoff concurs after spending a few weeks in Finnish prison, which “seemed paradise to us after the Solovky and the Karelian jungles!”³² Tatyana Tchernavin makes a similar point, comparing the horror stories about Polish prisons disseminated in the Soviet press to the reality of her time in Soviet prisons.³³

A final point of comparison among the memoirists is the relative insanity of each place. Kiselev-Gromov, describing the violent and bloodthirsty head of the camp, posits that “if such a guy appeared on the street of any European city, he would be immediately sent to a psychiatric

²⁹ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 36.

³⁰ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 216–217.

³¹ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 7.

³² Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 222.

³³ Tatyana Tchernavin, *Escape*, 122.

hospital or a mental institution,” although in the GPU hierarchy he has a place of relative prominence and at SLON “he is the king and God over the fates of 600-800 people.”³⁴ For Kiselev-Gromov, “any European city” represents sanity and has the administrative capacity to prevent such people from wreaking havoc. Zaitsev, indignant at the lack of response from European society to the atrocities being committed at the camp, takes the opposite tack. He admonishes readers that it is “time for the world to learn the truth and shudder at the horrors of the communist hell on Solovki,” which “is happening before the eyes of enlightened peoples in a real cultural age, and not in the era of the life of wild peoples.”³⁵ Zaitsev's indignation at the destruction of his country is palpable, as when he claims that conditions at SLON, in particular at the Sekirka isolation cell, were designed “with the goal of killing the moral and spiritual being in a person, making him like earthly creatures,” and ultimately killing him, “thus free[ing] the GPU from an unnecessary burden...”³⁶

Along this line of comparison, memoirists describe conditions at the Solovetsky camp and, extrapolating outward, in the Soviet Union as barbaric and animalistic, with the Soviets and GPU in particular represented as “hordes”; Zaitsev warns of an “invasion of the new Huns, surpassing in the sophistication of their crimes all that we know from the times of Attila and Genghis Khan.”³⁷ Malsagoff, describing the desecration of the Solovetsky Monastery, makes the same comparison, decrying the destruction of “treasures of immense historical value” by “the Soviet Huns.”³⁸ For Grube, the Chekists are worse than wild animals and “there is no place in the world more terrible, more terrifying than Solovki.” According to Grube, “the impenetrable

³⁴ Kiselev-Gromov, *Lageri smerti*, 166.

³⁵ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.

³⁸ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 55–56.

jungles of African forests, teeming with wild animals, are less dangerous for a person than Solovki” because “you can protect yourself from a wild animal, but there is no escape from a Chekist.”³⁹

For Tchernavin, on the other hand, it is the mass of prisoners kept on the islands that resembles a horde, a pathogenic mass that proved impossible to conceal “without the news of it leaking out and spreading.”⁴⁰ Nikonov-Smorodin makes another striking comparison, describing the Kremlin as “the nest of a disgusting spider, sucking our blood and stupefying us with the poison of melancholy and despair.”⁴¹

C. Metaphors of Paradise and Hell

Comparisons to hell are frequent throughout the memoirs and range from incidental references to complex and religiously informed representations of the camp and islands as places of Christian suffering. Just as often, memoirists contrast the “worker’s paradise” promised by the socialist revolution to the real hell that exists on the islands. The “paradise” compared to reality is often the Soviet Union broadly, as in the ironic title of Ilgin’s memoir, *Jak to Było w Raju Bolszewickim* (appended by the book’s editor, see above). This line of characterization seems to appeal to editors; for example, Amfiteatrov writes in his introduction to Nikonov-Smorodin’s memoir that “the paradises of [Soviet] constructions are no good, but the hells with which they

³⁹ Grube, “Rasskaz,” 194.

⁴⁰ Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent*, 259.

⁴¹ Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 195.

have strewn Russia are the height of perfection: incomparably adapted to the purpose of poisoning human life and turning it into slow death.”⁴²

Memoirists not only contrast the Soviet Union’s promised paradise with its grim reality but also highlight the personal disillusionment of those who arrived expecting utopia, only to find themselves trapped in a living nightmare. The phenomenon of hopeful new arrivals to the country finding themselves in prison, not paradise is frequently invoked across the memoirs: several of the memoirists describe their own false expectations of the country as the key to their downfall; others relate similar stories secondhand. Due to this circumstance, memoirists regularly express a desire to puncture the idea of the Soviet Union as a worker’s paradise, and they do this with layers of irony. Lenardowicz forcefully concludes his memoir with a desire to escape back to troubled interwar Poland (“a country that, at that moment, seemed to me like a true paradise and the ultimate dream of my life”) and the compunction to destroy any illusions about “what present-day Russia truly is, what this 'Bolshevik paradise' looks like, and the destruction that the red rulers of the Kremlin bring to the civilization of the world.”⁴³ Today, this may seem unnecessary, but in the context of tumultuous Second Polish Republic and, more broadly, a world where many socialists supported the Bolshevik project despite reports of labor camps and other violence and repression coming out of the country, Lenardowicz’s defensiveness in contrasting the Soviet Union and Poland becomes more understandable.⁴⁴

⁴² Amfiteatrov, “Introduction” in *Krasnaia katorga*, 3. Perhaps surprisingly, Amfiteatrov is the only author who contributed to the memoirs discussed here to directly reference Dante in comparing the Solovetsky camp or the Soviet Union to hell.

⁴³ Lenardowicz, *Na wyspach tortur i śmierci*, 79.

⁴⁴ See Tolczyk, *Blissful Blindness*, for a discussion of the dilemma faced by socialists around the world in this period. See also Antoni Słonimski’s *Moja podróż do Rosji* (Warsaw: Rój, 1932), in which the author bifurcates his narrative persona into a critic and a sympathizer with the Soviet cause, developing arguments for each side through the device.

On the Soviet side, memoirists depict cynical Chekists and other Soviet officials, fully aware of the grim reality of Soviet life, reacting incredulously to hopeful new arrivals. Citizens of the Soviet Union quickly adapted to the bifurcated state that held Soviet reality and the fantasy of communism together, but memoirists describe meeting confusion and resistance from people outside the country, who had no idea of this new state of being. As discussed below, the device that allows memoirists to present these different realities simultaneously is irony. The mashup of heaven and hell, and expectation and reality, that memoirists attempt to describe in their accounts depends on a deft depiction of many layers of irony, in particular from Chekists (as interlocutors between the Soviet state and the memoirists) and from the memoirists themselves (as narrators of their experiences to readers). In the case of defections to the USSR and the consequences of this decision, both Chekists and narrators are particularly harsh. Grube, who defected to the country, describes meeting resistance and skepticism from Soviet authorities at every turn. Looking back on the experience, he explains that “the Chekists could not comprehend that we sincerely believed in the Soviet paradise and wanted to stay in the USSR. To them, it seemed absurd that people would leave a good life to descend into hell.”⁴⁵ Kiselev-Gromov, the only Chekist represented among the memoirists, expresses the same opinion in reference to a group of Polish communists who fled “the Polish ‘capitalist hell’ to their ‘proletarian fatherland’” only to be sent to SLON. With some understatement, he concludes: “And they fled back—again to ‘hell.’”⁴⁶

In many other cases, the purported “paradise” is not just the Soviet Union, but the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp itself. The camp was advertised by the Soviet press as a humane and innovative place where prisoners could be peacefully reeducated and do light work.

⁴⁵ Grube, “Rasskaz,” 197.

⁴⁶ Kiselev-Gromov, *Lageri smerti*, 93.

This was accomplished by a variety of methods, including staged photographs and the documentary advertising the camp's humane conditions.⁴⁷ Cederholm discusses the case of an accomplished artist, imprisoned at the camp, whose job was to sketch the camp for Soviet publications:

Every time he returned from an inspection of his work by the censorship he set himself, with a bitter sigh, to restore (in his sketches) the dilapidated churches and beautify the ugliness of camp-life. These drawings were intended for a Soviet publication which was to reflect, in pictures and drawings, the heavenly existence led by prisoners in the gaols and camps of the U.S.S.R.⁴⁸

As notorious as the camp was, many prisoners expected the camp to have better conditions than the prisons, and certainly to be somewhat better than *etap*—and in many cases, particularly for prisoners with connections, money, or skills, this could be true. Still, the camp is no paradise, a point that memoirists frequently make. Arrival to the camp is a moment when any expectations a memoirist might have about the camp, whether previously established are not, are contrasted with reality. This is another point where memoirists describe the camp as a version of hell. Nikonov-Smorodin, for example, drawing a sharp contrast between his previous conditions and SLON, writes that “the prison seemed like paradise compared to the camp.”⁴⁹ Qureshi, using more figurative language, presents the scene at the entrance to the monastery as “the gates leading to the GPU paradise, from where no one is allowed out.”⁵⁰ Although none of the

⁴⁷ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 24.

⁴⁸ Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 323.

⁴⁹ Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 19.

⁵⁰ Qureshi, “Piat' let,” 115.

memoirists actually mention Dante (only Amfiteatrov makes the reference), they characterize their movement toward the heart of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp with a familiar concentric structure, each stage leading them closer to the “real” Solovki.

One of the most unique comparisons to hell across the memoirs is Nikonov-Smorodin's concept of “hell construction” [*adostroi*] a clever appropriation of a common portmanteau in Russian. Playing on the ubiquity of the formulation,⁵¹ Nikonov-Smorodin writes that the Bolsheviks have largely failed in their ambitious projects to build and reform the country, but

in the construction of a meat grinder that exterminates people, the communist builders have shown themselves to be unsurpassed geniuses... the construction of hell [*adostroi*], which is what the camp is, and the entire so-called punitive policy of socialist justice, proceeded, so to speak, with giant strides and there is no example of it in history.⁵²

Nikonov-Smorodin's framing of the camp as a meticulously constructed “hell” underscores a recurring theme across memoirs: the notion that suffering at Solovki was not merely incidental but deliberately engineered. This idea finds further support in descriptions of specific locations within the camp, where conditions were so extreme that they were often labeled as “hells within hell.”

⁵¹ The suffix “строй,” derived from the word строить (to construct), was used long before the Soviet era (with the iconic concept of “домострой” likely the most recognizable word). Soviet affection for both large-scale building projects and portmanteaus led to an explosion of this formulation. Nikonov-Smorodin references “Днепрострой” and “Волховстрой,” and other examples from the period include “Турксибстрой,” “Магнитострой,” and the general term “Оргстрой” (Организационный строй).

⁵² Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 96.

While Nikonov-Smorodin's *adostroi* is a sustained metaphor, one referenced and reiterated by Alexander Amfiteatrov in his introduction to Nikonov-Smorodin's book, most memoirists invoke hell in a more incidental manner, using the comparison to highlight particularly horrific aspects of camp life rather than to construct a comprehensive allegory. Danzas, for example, calls SLON an "inferno of suffering and lies," and Cederholm writes that "Kem is as perfect a hell as the Solovky."⁵³ This type of casual comparison to hell is most frequent across the memoirs, although several memoirists avoid even this, rather minor, comparison. In Malsagoff's case, although his book is titled *An Island Hell*, the term "hell" and other variants of the concept do not appear in the book—instead, he refers to the camp as a "place of torment."⁵⁴

The hyperbolic phrasing of a "hell within a hell" is used to characterize a few specific places at the camp, particularly the quarantine barracks inside the monastery, a crowded and unsanitary place that prisoners are desperate to leave as soon as they arrive at the camp.⁵⁵ Another "special hell" at SLON was the Sekirka isolation cell, highlighted above, which appears in memoirs as an icon of the camp, visible from the mainland, and a symbol of the worst tortures practiced on prisoners there. The word "inferno" [*peklo*] often appears in these descriptions of this "hell of communist hell" a few kilometers from the Solovetsky kremlin. Memoirists also discuss "Golgotha," a secondary isolation cell for women located on Anzer Island that was named so already by the Solovetsky monks. Although several memoirists discuss the name of the place and its role as an isolation cell,⁵⁶ only Aliakhnovich discusses the naming coincidence,

⁵³ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 39; Cederholm, *In the Clutches of the Tcheka*, 172, 333.

⁵⁴ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 205.

⁵⁵ Qureshi, "Piat' let," 124; Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 110.

⁵⁶ Kiselev-Gromov, *Krasnaia katorga*, 98–99; Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 88.

writing that “the name fully suited their fate. The "Golgotha" of Anzer was for [prisoners sent there] a veritable Golgotha.”⁵⁷

On the other hand, Zaitsev makes liberal references to the biblical Golgotha, directly calling the Solovetsky labour camp the “Golgotha of Russian suffering” at least three times.⁵⁸ For Zaitsev, the comparison to Golgotha is apt, particularly due to the proximity of criminals: “Just as our Lord Jesus Christ once walked to Golgotha alongside the robbers, so now, in the 20th cultural century, they, these unfortunate high hierarchs, follow in the company of the most criminal people to the Golgotha of the Russian people on Solovki.”⁵⁹ Zaitsev’s invocation of Golgotha as a site of suffering reinforces his broader vision of Solovki as a site of profound national and spiritual martyrdom.

Of the memoirists from this period, only Zaitsev makes such Biblical connections in an overt and systematic matter. Rather than making incidental comparisons to hell, Zaitsev fashions an allegory of the desecration of the Solovetsky Monastery and the transformation of Russia by the Bolsheviks in Christian terms. The connection is hardly surprising—aside from the entire context of the monastic setting and apocalyptic conditions on the islands, Zaitsev was surrounded by clergymen who interpreted the situation along the lines of Christian scripture. Zaitsev embeds these conversations in his memoir as support for his predictions about the fate of the Russian people. In one instance, the author witnesses an elderly monk prophesy that “the Holy Monastery, by the predestination of Divine Providence, served as the Golgotha of the suffering of the Russian people.”⁶⁰ Despite Zaitsev's efforts to systematically outline the function of the

⁵⁷ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 106.

⁵⁸ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 41, 45–46, 99.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

camp in the book, it is this line of allegorical reasoning that comes to the foreground in his pronouncements about the camp.

Among the early memoirists, Zaitsev's emphasis on the fate of Russia as an Orthodox nation is certainly unique. Considering the battles over the Solovetsky Islands between secular and Orthodox groups from the 1960s to the present, and the strong literary and cultural traditions supporting both secular recognition of the camp and Orthodox defense of the monastery's longer historical context, this might seem surprising. However, among the early memoirists only a few describe themselves as Russian Orthodox Christians—Ilgin is a Catholic priest, Danzas is a converted Catholic, and Bezsonov's highly individual and self-actualizing version of Christianity seems to draw more from the Protestant tradition. A few memoirists concern themselves with the fate of the Russian nation to the same degree as Zaitsev, but they represent a younger and more secular generation. Rather than drawing an allegory from the Christian tradition, the Tchernavins and Nikonov-Smorodin take a more class-based approach in their interpretations of the fate of the country, having assimilated socialist reasoning more fully than Zaitsev. While Zaitsev emphasizes the fate of Russia as a Christian nation, Vladimir and Tatyana decry the systematic destruction of the Russian intelligentsia, the Ukrainian peasantry, and other groups that were repressed by the Soviet state. Their concerns portend to some degree the later work of more secular commemorations of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp that emphasize the destruction of hundreds of academics, writers, artists, and scientists at the camp, of various nationalities and ethnicities represented at the camp. On the other hand, Zaitsev's Russian Orthodox apprehension of the legacy of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp portends the general trends in Russian interpretations of the camp that would develop in the twentieth century.

D. Irony

Irony allows writers to describe the indescribable by introducing ambiguity, doubt, and humor, and allowing both readers and writers some distance between the experience and its depiction. This technique is much more frequent than the use of pathos, designed to evoke the opposite effect.⁶¹ In many ways, the Bolshevik project depended on irony from the beginning, as its projected outcome, a society of dignity and equity, was fashioned from words. The Soviet project was founded on a denial of reality, leading to the stark contrast between the projected Soviet “paradise” and the actual Soviet “hell”—one and the same thing—discussed above. Whether memoirists began as opponents or supporters of the Bolsheviks, they assimilated to this doubled perception of reality inherent to Soviet discourse. No matter their audience or the parameters of their memoirs, each memoirist makes an effort to convey this dual reality to readers, typically using irony to, appropriately, convince readers of the ironies of the situation.

A common and simple ironic device that appears frequently across the memoirs is the use of quotation marks to indicate an ambiguous meaning for a particular word. Malsagoff is perhaps the worst in this regard, employing the technique frequently across his book—the technique is particularly useful for his purposes, as Malsagoff's account was among the first intended for English-speaking audiences who, unlike Russian émigré audiences, were presumed to be unfamiliar with the ironies of Soviet life. In one example, Malsagoff discusses a pamphlet about the camp. The pamphlet, a total fabrication, was intended for external audiences and presented

⁶¹ Although pathos is evident throughout the memoirs and in this dissertation, across the corpus the memoirists tend to exert a great deal of restraint, often signaling that they will not or cannot describe some event or feeling. As addressed in the introduction, the memoirists tend to depict themselves as writers without the literary skill to “trick” readers with pathos. Pathos seems to be regarded as a trick, while irony seems to prove the sophistication of both reader and audience. The upshot of this limited and downplayed use of pathos is, unfortunately, a rather muted sense of the real tragedies and horrors of the experience across the corpus.

the camp as a well-appointed “paradise.” To cement the humiliation of such a false and misleading document for prisoners, the pamphlet was actually distributed at the camp. Malsagoff, who calls this cruel event an “open mockery,” makes his indignation clear: “A large number of copies of the pamphlet were sent to the Solovetsky camps and distributed to us—to us, who were tasting every minute of every day the “liberty,” the “excellent food” and “more than lenient” treatment by the administration [...]!”⁶² Here, Malsagoff quotes the pamphlet in order to highlight the complete opposite—not liberty but slavery, disgusting food in starvation amounts, and inhumane cruelty from the guards and camp leaders. Malsagoff’s irony has an inoculatory effect, akin to the irony of Kol’tsov’s “Slon pishet” discussed above; while the device is quite simple, it allows readers to draw sharp conclusions about not just conditions at the camp, but about the duplicity of the Soviet accounts that they may encounter outside of the text.

Above, in the section titled “Author-Narrator and Author-Protagonist,” I quoted from Hayden White’s discussion of irony as a “kind of metaphor [...] that surreptitiously signals a denial of the assertion of similitude or difference contained in the literal sense of the proposition, at least sets a crucial qualification on it.”⁶³ When memoirists attempt to explain the whole of the Soviet system, or the importance of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp within that system, they encounter the difficulty of conveying the unconceivable to an uncomprehending audience. For SLON memoirists, irony proves a necessity across their different attempts to either convey the entirety of their experiences or, often, their use of rhetorical irony, asserting that they cannot or will not present the entirety of the camp to readers.

⁶² Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 130.

⁶³ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 73.

Such assertions are quite frequent, and often relate to aspects of camp life. These tend to be hopeless, frustrating, and disempowering moments. Zaitsev, for example, outlines the islands' harsh climate and begins to describe certain practices for surviving the extreme cold, but then demurs: "I will not describe the entire tragedy of the Solovki convicts in their helpless efforts to somehow shield themselves from the atmospheric troubles of the harsh polar climate. It would be both long and boring. I will limit myself to pointing out the most striking facts from the Solovetsky reality."⁶⁴ In another section on special punishments at the camp, Zaitsev also resists further description: "I will refrain from describing in detail these catacombs of the Solovetsky penal servitude, much darker and harsher than the cages for wild animals..."⁶⁵ Zaitsev is hardly alone in this practice, although other memoirists tend to reference their own psychological limitations as the reason for stopping a particular explanation or story. Bezsonov, for example, explains that he "can hardly bear to recall those days and will speak of them in as few words as possible."⁶⁶ Danzas, discussing the humiliating medical examinations that women prisoners were subjected to, refuses to give details: "suffice it to say that all decent men were shocked and sometimes attempted to protest against the treatment inflicted upon the women."⁶⁷ Qureshi also stops short of describing the, presumably sexual, humiliations inflicted on women at the camp: "They are not allowed to leave anywhere and are forced to endure such humiliations and insults that I am ashamed to describe. The reader is left to guess what rude, impudent, depraved guards can do to defenseless young women."⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 77: here Zaitsev evokes pathos by the use of rhetorical irony, limiting his remarks on a difficult subject.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁶⁶ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 101.

⁶⁷ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 60

⁶⁸ Qureshi, "Piat' let," 125.

In other case, memoirists do not refuse to describe some aspect of camp life but insist that it is indescribable. In his account, Grube asserts that true representation of life in prison and at the camp was impossible: “there are no words to accurately describe the life of prisoners. It would seem like the delirium of a sick person, as it does not fit with the concept of culture and freedom.”⁶⁹ The cause of this inability to write is not always negative; Bezsonov writes in his introductory Letter to My Sister that he “cannot bring [him]self to write coherently” because he is so ecstatically happy to be free.⁷⁰ But his happiness is not the only cause for his reluctance to discuss his experiences. Referencing his time in the Soviet Union, Bezsonov claims to have “lost the habit of expressing myself freely; my mind is not clear.”⁷¹ In the immediate aftermath of his escape, he depicts his inability to comprehend the overwhelming experience that he so recently escaped: “I try to concentrate it on the more important facts and they all seem equally important.”⁷² Later, of course, composing the memoir, he has clearly gained some perspective on the experience, along with the curatorial gaze that allows him to depict his experiences.

Danzas and Tchernavin both appeal to authority at certain moments, regretting that they cannot give a full account and imploring future historians to take up the task. Danzas posits that such a historian would need both archival sources and the “calm impartiality” of a person “without any experience of the abominable nightmare” to “give a comprehensive idea of what Solovki and its camp actually were.” Danzas concludes her plea with a warning that “some day that history may be written, and its readers will blush for mankind.”⁷³ Danzas tends to appeal to documents and written history, but acknowledges that the real extent of the things she witnessed

⁶⁹ Grube, “Rasskaz,” 198.

⁷⁰ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 9.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Danzas, *Red Gaols*, 60.

at SLON (and later at the Belomorkanal project) will be difficult for anyone who was not there to believe.⁷⁴

In other instances, writers speak to readers, predicting that readers will not believe a certain detail or story just presented. Again, this technique is inoculatory. Aliakhnovich, for instance, presents one authorial intrusion as a literal pause in writing: “Here my pen pauses for a moment. I fear that the reader will not believe what I am describing—it is so monstrous. And yet it is a fact and not an isolated one.”⁷⁵ Other memoirists use the technique to a lesser extent, as when Bezsonov describes a fantastical experience, then asserts that “the reader is at liberty to believe it or not and to explain it as he will,” or when Grube asserts that “no imagination can imagine what goes on in these barracks.”⁷⁶ Later, Grube goes a bit further and asserts that the reality of life at SLON cannot be adequately described and, moreover, “would seem like the delirium of a sick person.”⁷⁷

Irony in these memoirs functions as both a narrative strategy and a coping mechanism, allowing authors to expose the contradictions of Soviet life while also acknowledging the limits of representation. The very attempt to describe Solovki is itself laden with irony—memoirists struggle to convey the reality of the camp, yet repeatedly insist that it is beyond words. The Soviet system, which claimed to create a utopian workers’ state, instead produced a dystopian nightmare that memoirists highlight through inverted language, quotation marks, and deliberate understatement. Readers are drawn into the accounts thanks to this irony, which allows closer

⁷⁴ Ibid., 56.

⁷⁵ Aliakhnovich, *Prawda o Sowietach*, 68.

⁷⁶ Bezsonov, *Twenty-Six Prisons*, 195; Grube, “Rasskaz,” 205.

⁷⁷ Grube, “Rasskaz,” 198.

access to stories so extreme that they defy belief, forcing memoirists to preempt skepticism by, in many cases, paradoptically denying their own ability to communicate.

E. Metonymy and Synecdoche

Memoirists frequently use metonymy and synecdoche to articulate their experiences in Solovki, condensing the vast realities of the Soviet penal system, and even the Soviet Union itself, into singular images, locations, and structures. These rhetorical devices allow authors to connect the specifics of their personal experiences to broader historical and political realities. Whether by presenting a single building as an emblem of the camp's inhumane conditions, using the GPU as shorthand for the entire Soviet state, or depicting Solovki as a microcosm of Russia, these memoirs construct meaning through representative details.

Malsagoff exemplifies this approach in his detailed description of the distributing hut, a structure he presents as the essence of camp life, insisting that "nothing could be more characteristic of the whole conditions in the Solovetsky camps."⁷⁸ This passage condenses the larger brutality of Solovki—masses of humiliated prisoners kept in inhumane conditions—to a single, universally shared experience. This strategy reflects a broader tendency in these memoirs: rather than attempting to capture the totality of the camp in sweeping terms, memoirists distill its essence into depictions of concrete locations, processes, and stories.

Just as it served as the ultimate "hell within a hell," Sekirka serves as an even more intense metonym for Solovki. For many memoirists, Sekirka does not merely represent one site of suffering; it *is* Solovki, its horrors encapsulating the camp's broader role within the Soviet system.

⁷⁸ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, 84.

Metonymy also extends beyond the camp to encompass the Soviet state itself. Several memoirists equate the GPU with the entire structure of Soviet governance, framing it as the true ruling force of the USSR, a state governed not by ideology or by its official institutions, but by its security apparatus, a force that extends from Solovki outward.

Zaitsev, for instance, describes forced labor on Solovki in a way that suggests its inefficiency is not an exception but a model for the entire country: “Following the example of the Soviet Union, and on Solovki, all enterprises open to forced labor are absolutely unproductive.”⁷⁹ Solovki’s dysfunctional labor system is thus not an aberration but a reflection of broader Soviet economic practices. Similarly, Tchernavin expresses the idea that the GPU has destroyed the country and rendered any remnants of Russian culture or civilization meaningless: “So long as Russia is ruled by the OGPU no one wants it, and it only leads people to prison and exile.”⁸⁰ Tchernavin’s cynicism regarding the development of the Soviet state is hard won, tied in to the systematic destruction of his beloved fishing industry that takes up the first third of his book. Throughout his memoir, Tchernavin highlights the interplay of carceral labor and the Soviet economy, ultimately concluding that, through the increasingly powerful intervention of the GPU, they are fatally and inextricably intertwined.

The relationship between Solovki and the Soviet Union is also expressed through synecdoche, with the camp standing in for the Soviet Union itself. Nikonov-Smorodin, for example, describes the roads to the camp as an artery in the diseased body of the Soviet state, with each part of the “country’s organism” “engulfed by the communist plague.”⁸¹ For Nikonov-

⁷⁹ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 66.

⁸⁰ Tatyana Tchernavin, *Escape*, 94–95.

⁸¹ Nikonov-Smorodin, “K chitateliu” in *Krasnaia katorga*, 9.

Smorodin, every part of the country's brief but violent past feeds into every other part, just like a living organism with a beating heart:

The feeling of this pulse beat left different impressions at different times. In other years, it seemed that the strain of people's patience had reached its limit and that a great tornado was about to arise, sweeping away all obstacles in its path. The horror of "dekulakization," the destruction of peasant wealth, the devastation of collective farms—all this could be seen with extraordinary clarity in the places where all the paths of the Soviet citizen crossed, and especially in the focus of these—the Solovetsky concentration camp.⁸²

For Nikonov-Smorodin, the camp does not just reflect the Soviet Union—it is inseparable from it. The suffering at Solovki is not contained within the islands but pulses outward, connecting every Soviet citizen to its horrors. This portrayal reinforces the idea that the brutality of the camps is not an isolated phenomenon but the defining feature of the Soviet experience.

The ultimate extension of this rhetorical strategy is the portrayal of Solovki as a microcosm of the entire Soviet Union. Zaitsev explicitly draws this parallel, insisting more than once that that “Solovki is a reflection of the Soviet Union—in organizational terms it is a miniature copy of it.”⁸³ This comparison aligns with other memoirists’ descriptions of forced labor and survival in the Soviet Union. Nikonov-Smorodin echoes this sentiment when he quotes

⁸² Ibid., 9–10.

⁸³ Zaitsev, *Solovki*, 61.

an imprisoned professor at the camp who describes Solovki as a smaller version of the socialist state, where prisoners mirror the struggles of Soviet workers:

Some invisible hand moves this society, which boasts that it creates life "with its own hands" and builds hell. Just as here a prisoner storms a canal for a piece of "tearful bread," so throughout the entire space of the socialist fatherland the enslaved collective farmer, the worker squeezed in the vice of "shock workers," works for the same piece of "tearful bread."⁸⁴

These representations suggest that the core dynamics of the Soviet system—deception, coercion, and suffering—are fully realized within Solovki. The camp functions as both a model and a warning, a place where Soviet policies are taken to their logical extreme.

F. Conclusion

The Solovetsky Islands hold an enigmatic charm that cannot be denied. Visitors to the islands quickly learn the term *osolovet'* — a pun on a word meaning “to grow dumb, tongue-tied, or sleepy-eyed” that, in this context, means something like “to be overwhelmed by Solovki.” This is a location that thrills with its deep history, its remoteness and beauty, and its stunning contrasts. Great men and women have written about the islands over the past century. Blockbuster novels, a TV series, and dozens upon dozens of memoirs of the islands and labor camp have appeared over the years, each demonstrating a fascination with Solovki and affirming its lasting significance. Endless appropriations of the island’s history and efforts to draw its symbolic power to one or another cause have given the islands, monastery, and former labor

⁸⁴ Nikonov-Smorodin, *Krasnaia katorga*, 319.

camp a cachet that, while fading across the post-Soviet landscape, remains relevant in contemporary Russia.

Why, then, focus in this dissertation on an oddball group of lurid and hastily published memoirs, filtered through various languages, blunted into easily digestible formats, and limited by the literary skills of their mostly untrained authors? Although these memoirs have long been eclipsed by subsequent SLON texts, they represent a critical and largely forgotten stage in the development of camp literature, a genre that became essentially synonymous with Holocaust literature following World War II. The fusion of camp literature and writing about the Nazi Holocaust gave the genre new models for describing this form of incarceration and new frameworks for investigation that remain relevant today. The next stage of development for camp literature revolved around Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who cleverly sidestepped the issue of chronological narrative discussed in this dissertation by depicting just *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. His later formulations for discussing the *Gulag Archipelago*, modeled as it was on the Solovetsky Islands, were so significant that to this day Gulag literature has been centripetally reoriented to respond to Solzhenitsyn on Solzhenitsyn's terms. (Rozanov, for example, uses Solzhenitsyn's model and responds to Solzhenitsyn's claims about SLON in his 1979 survey of camp memoirs.)

Against the background of what was to come, then, early SLON memoirs represent a foundational body of work in the literature of Soviet repression. Through a close analysis of their composition, imagery, and stylistic language, this study has demonstrated how these texts describe the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp as both a physical site of suffering and a symbolic space of totalitarian violence. Unlike later camp literature, these early accounts attempt to capture the immediate experience of imprisonment because their authors felt that their task

was an immediate one: the camp, after all, was still functioning to some extent until 1939. They speak directly to readers, pleading for international intervention and attempting to make the experience they had recently endured somehow comprehensible to uncomprehending readers.

A key finding of this study is that these early memoirists, drawing from the Russian literary tradition, used Dostoevsky and Chekhov as models for navigating between personal testimony and collective narrative. The authors employ various rhetorical strategies—including figurative language, intertextual allusions, and documentary precision—to expand their accounts beyond the limits of individual memory and evoke the broader historical consciousness necessary for their call to action. As Dariusz Tolczyk argues in *Blissful Blindness*, the significance of *Ivan Denisovich* was that it originated in the Soviet Union and therefore seemed credible and moderate to international audiences.⁸⁵ These memoirs faced the inverse challenge: because of their position as exiles, escapees, fugitives with an axe to grind against the Soviet Union, early memoirists of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp found themselves justifying and moderating their claims for both international and émigré audiences. As hybrid texts—personal and public, urgent and reflective—their narratives represent both a personal reckoning with suffering and an act of cultural transmission, shaping how the camp system was first understood beyond Soviet borders.

The broader implications of this study extend beyond SLON itself. The evolution of Solovki's representation within literature and cultural memory mirrors broader trends in how historical atrocities are recorded, mythologized, and interpreted over time. The study of these memoirs, therefore, not only enhances our understanding of early Soviet labor camp literature but also contributes to discussions of the role of testimony in shaping historical consciousness.

⁸⁵ *Blissful Blindness*,

Future research could expand on these findings by conducting a comparative analysis between SLON memoirs and other early testimonies of forced labor systems, such as Imperial Russian penal colonies or Nazi concentration camps. Additionally, an exploration of how Solovki has been represented in non-Russian literary and historical narratives could provide further insights into the transnational reception and reinterpretation of Soviet repression. Finally, with the increasing accessibility of digital archives and unpublished memoirs, further studies could incorporate other available sources to deepen our understanding of the diversity of experiences within SLON.

With this foundational work on the metanarrative and early symbolism of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp completed, the next step for this research should emphasize cross-national ideas of Soviet repression. Efforts to build international solidarity, symbolized by Solovetsky Stones, have largely collapsed against the increasingly nationalized and, in many cases, anti-Russian sentiment attached to memorializations of the Soviet Union and Soviet repressions. My research on the “Polish Solovki,” “Belarusian Solovki,” and above all “Ukrainian Solovki” has been enlightening as to the relative usefulness and relevancy of the concept across several national memory cultures in Eastern and Central Europe; those aspects of the camp were, however, rarely represented in this corpus of texts and therefore do not appear in a sustained manner across this dissertation. To my mind, a monograph outlining a series of national case studies of iconic places of repression for different cultures and ethnicities affected by Soviet repression, not limited to or excluding the Solovetsky Islands, is the next step in this project.

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