

Andrea Gullotta

A New Perspective for Gulag Literature Studies: the Gulag Press

Some of the latest studies dedicated to the history of Russian literature and published in the West have confirmed an ongoing tendency, that of a 'light ostracism' towards what is defined by the Russian academic community as '*lagernaja literatura*'. Literature that deals with Soviet repression (produced by former Gulag prisoners or by writers who have directly or indirectly been affected by Soviet repression) is still not considered as a literary phenomenon in itself, to be analysed in a genre perspective, regardless the contribution of Leona Toker's impressive work *Return from the Archipelago*. The authors of *lagernaja literatura* (for instance, Aleksandr Solženicyn, Varlam Šalamov or Vasilij Grossman) usually continue to be studied separately.

Many factors contributed to this situation, but two need to be emphasised. Firstly, a few historical conditions were decisive. The gradual surfacing of Gulag literature over many years caused an evidently uneven spectrum. Single works and single authors appeared at different moments, as pieces of a puzzle still nowadays far from being completed. As a consequence the attention of the international academic community focused separately on each author, whose works sometimes did not even appear as completed. Such was the case of Šalamov's *Kolymskie rasskazy*, that were published abroad during the course of seven years, thus sacrificing the complex architecture of the six collections of short stories, or of Grossman's *Žizn' i sud'ba*, whose first edition appeared in 1980 in an abridged version. Secondly, the sudden editorial boom of the *lagernaja literatura* works in Russia from 1985 onwards caused an overwhelming impact on the public that, within a few years, lost interest in these types of literary texts (Martini 2002: 47). Simultaneously, the ambiguous attitude of Russian society and Russian establishment towards Soviet repression has disintegrated the process of re-assessment of the past that had started in the years of Perestroika, thus obstructing the creation of a socio-cultural movement that could provide the background for the study of the literature related to the Gulags, as happened in Germany with Nazi camp literature.

Another obstacle for the assessment of *lagernaja literatura* as a genre is represented by the many particular conditions that characterize it, e.g. the long period of existence of the Gulag – one of the reasons why some of the works of *lagernaja literatura* are very

¹ See, for instance, Baruch Wachtel, Vinitsky 2009; Caramitti 2010.

different if put into comparison (see for instance Georgij Vladimov's *Vernyj Ruslan* and Aleksandr Solženicyn's *Odin den' Ivana Denisoviča*, that are set in two different moments of the history of Gulag) – and the philological problems of many *lagernaja literatura* works, often stored in the authors' or others' memory for years only to be published many years after their original composition. Although the existence of some unifying factors (such as the presence of recurring factors in those works, e.g. the spatial factor, that imposed in *lagernaja literatura* texts constant attention to the cold, the impossibility of escaping, the distance from the 'free world'², etc.) might have helped the critics assessing the genre, this never happened. These and other difficulties add to one of the main questions, that of the definition of genre borders. As Mauro Martini wondered (Martini 2002: 56), can works that deal directly or indirectly with the theme of Soviet repression, such as Mixail Bulgakov's *Master i Margarita*, be considered part of *lagernaja literatura*? And what about Anna Axmatova's *Rekviem*? Following Martini's argument, other works should be included in the genre: Osip Mandel'stam's epigram against Stalin, Jurij Trifonov's *Dom na naberežnoj* and Vladimir Bukovskij's *I vosvraščajetsja veter* can be classed as part of a genre whose borders most probably have to be widened and whose name can be changed from *lagernaja literatura* into *literatura sovetskoj travmy*, meaning all literary works that dealt with Soviet repression and with the traumas created as a consequence³.

The assessment of Russian *lagernaja literatura* is far from being completed also because some aspects have been neglected. Among the many *bebye pjatna* on the topic, one seems particularly evident, which is the lack of studies on the literary works created inside the prisons and camps and published on the press organs issued by the administration of those places of confinement.

The phenomenon of Gulag Press has been understudied, regardless of Alla Gorčeva's excellent monographs (1996; 2009), which proposed for the first time a survey on the topic, outlining the history and main characteristics of Gulag Press, lacking however adequate focus on the literary texts published in it⁴. It is indeed an incredibly stimulating topic, containing interesting aspects under a historical, literary, culturological and an artistic point of view.

The first prison newspapers and journals were founded during the establishment of the Soviet state. Although N. Stogov⁵ maintains that the *tjuremnaja pečat'* was created in 1921

² A way that Gulag subculture found to exorcise this distance is the notorious concept of 'zona', that linked camps and the rest of the USSR, the latter (big zone) seen as the ideal prosecution of the first (zone).

³ It is of interest to underline the effort made by the team of scholars of the University of Ivanovo, who are promoting a series of publications on the "potaennaja literatura" (Hidden literature) trying to find a common thread in the Russian long tradition of clandestine literature. The *lagernaja literatura* is one of the main topics of these publications. My statement is that this fruitful line of research does not take into account the specificity of *lagernaja literatura* works.

⁴ It is fundamental to underline how Alla Gorčeva is not a literary critic.

⁵ N. Stogov was Aleksandr Iosifovič Dobkin's pseudonym (1950-1998).

(Stogov 1978: 562), some newspapers and journals had already been published, as the list of prison publications included in Alla Gorčeva's book shows (Gorčeva 2009: 113).

The urge to publish was strictly connected to the strong official position of the Soviet state on the allegedly innovative character of the Soviet prison system. The Soviet theoretical programme did not foreshadow the bloodshed that eventually took place across the Soviet Union. Theoretically, the primary objective of the Bolsheviks was not to punish but to re-educate prisoners through labour. This objective sprang from one crucial deviation from Marxist sociology which lays at the core of Soviet Communism, that of 'genetic categorization'. In accordance with this view, in the first years of the Soviet state the Bolsheviks transferred the very notion of crime from practical to theoretical categories – from behaviour to class belonging and ultimately from acting to being. Aside common criminals, that kept on being put into prisons, the criminal was consequently considered either as a representative of a social class that opposed the Revolution or as a potential enemy of the Revolution⁶. Redemption was only ensured by Socialist re-education, which was the only means to turn the prisoner into a 'socially close' rather than 'socially dangerous' individual⁷.

The newly born Soviet institutions set to work strictly following the above guidelines, and did not underestimate the cultural aspect of the question. The early post-Revolution years thus saw the publication of prison newspapers and journals, mostly written by prisoners, which supposedly testified to the success of re-education. As time went by, however, publications grew out of proportion. In his 1978 article, N. Stogov lists as many as 176 journals and newspapers published between 1921 and 1935 (Stogov 1978: 562-579). In the appendix of Gorčeva's 2009 updated version of *Pressa GULAGa*, publications reached a vertiginous 487 (Gorčeva 2009: 113-163)⁸.

In order to explain why so much energy was being wasted, it is important to point out how Communist theories resulted in the establishment of executive agencies. GUMZ (*Glavnoe Upravlenie Mestami Zaključenija*, 'Main Administration of Places of Detention') was the most important of these organs. A department of the NKVD, GUMZ was founded in 1922 to supervise the whole network of places of confinement. It was eventually replaced by the GULag (*Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerej*, 'Chief Administration of Corrective Labour Camps'), which marked the transition into a national camp system aimed at territorial and industrial expansion.

⁶ Prevention was a staple ingredient of the Soviet repressive system, that repressed individuals for their potentially evil deeds rather than actual deeds.

⁷ This distinction was crucial to the Soviet prison and camp system as a whole. 'Socially close' elements (thieves, murderers, and common criminals) enjoyed privileges, high-ranking positions and freedom of action. All of these were forbidden to 'socially dangerous' criminals ('counter revolutionaries' and 'political criminals'), a category that gradually came to include all those who were sentenced to prison or camps based on the notorious 58th article of the Criminal Code.

⁸ It is worth underlining that Gorčeva possessed more sources than Stogov/Dubkin.

The GUMZ's focus on prisoner re-education surfaces quite clearly in the 4042 collection of the *Gosudarstvennyj Arxiv Rossijskoj Federatsii* (GARF). Remarkable efforts were put forth to fulfil the 'educational' objective of the GUMZ, testifying to the centrality of culture in the management of places of detention, where the publications of newspapers and journals was but one of the many concrete activities.

Re-education also meant education. One of the GUMZ's favourite watchwords was the 'liquidation of illiteracy' (*likvidacija negramotnosti*): Soviet prison officials accordingly started to create schools and libraries within the prisons. The schools regularly sent reports on prisoners' degrees of education to the GUMZ. Libraries too were carefully established and managed. GUMZ provided funds for their establishment together with lists of banned and recommended books. Moreover, Moscow sent proposals to Soviet prisons for workshops to be held there⁹. Significantly, GUMZ provided prisoners with practical rather than exclusively theoretical education. All of them, especially the youngest inmates (in particular the *besprizorniki*)¹⁰, were offered professional training and the opportunity to work in a *trudkommuna*¹¹.

Theatre companies comprised of prisoners were likewise founded. It was up to GUMZ to select both the subject and the modalities of the *mise-en-scène*. A special preventive permit was required to start producing plays. It was quite difficult to obtain the permit, as the GUMZ's directives were quite strict. Some scenes, for example, were categorically forbidden. The 17 May 1924 newsletter required the following (GARFa: 118):

...необходимо принять во внимание, что зрелища вполне допустимые для граждан вообще, как, напр. киноленты изображающие авантюристические похождения, спектакли со сценами убийств, насилья, зрелища легкого жанра, комедии фарсового характера и т.д. совершенно недопустимы в местах заключения, где зрелища являются одним из средств исправительного воздействия на преступников¹².

⁹ To present-day readers these documents resemble a manager's proposal for an artist on tour, and therefore look quite bizarre. On 9 May 1924, GUMZ sent all Soviet prisons a proposal for a series of *mirozdanie* lessons by comrade Lavrov-Sokolov for 2 roubles (GARFa: 79).

¹⁰ In the years following the Revolution, the *besprizorniki* represented one of the major social evils in the Soviet Union. Most of them were orphans (their parents being the victims of either war or political repression) who wandered through the city, formed gangs, abused drugs, robbed and committed all types of crimes. The Bolsheviks soon had them regularly arrested and sent to labour camps, where most of them died of starvation, since some camp administrations did not give them food.

¹¹ *Trudovaja kommuna* was a labour camp for under-age inmates. The most famous was the Bolševo *commune*. They often turned into concentration camps.

¹² "...it is necessary to take into consideration that types of entertainment that are permissible for common citizens like, for instance, films that depict adventurous escapades, shows with scenes of murders or violence, entertainment of light genre, farcical comedies and so on are

Another newsletter stated more specifically (GARFb: 9): “Программа каждого развлечения, должна соответствовать задачам коммунистического просвещения и воспитания”¹³.

Soviet institutions strenuously carried out re-educational cultural activities: whenever they stumbled into unauthorised performances or plays containing forbidden scenes, prison directors were required to personally account for the crime (GARFa: 125).

Largely supported by forced labour and by oppressive practices, cultural re-education was so insistently pursued by the new government that a ‘methodological’ commission was created within GUMZ. The commission’s function was to issue directives on the educational and re-educational activities to be performed in Soviet places of confinement. The *metodičeskaja komissija*’s newsletters were quite detailed and even included specific instructions for stage settings (GARFc). Prison and camp directors had to brief the GUMZ about all the cultural activities performed within their jurisdiction and regularly reported the results of re-education to GUMZ. One of the most important entries concerned the prisoners’ newspapers and journals.

As mentioned above, the publication of prisoners’ journals and newspapers started immediately after the Revolution, and literally boomed in the aftermath of the Civil War, when publications were flourishing all over the prisons and camps of the Soviet Union. A letter sent by GUMZ to Glavlit (GARFd: 53) on 9 August 1926 sums up perfectly the guidelines that informed such profuse growth (re-education, distance from the Tsarist prison regime, juridical basis):

В числе средств воспитательного воздействия на заключенных, Исправительно-Трудовой Кодекс РСФСР предусматривает издание самими заключенными журналов, газет, сборников и т.д. и, действительно, как показывает опыт, на заключенных “свое слово”, слово, прочтенное в “своем” журнале, в “своей” газете, активными сотрудниками которых они состоят, оказывает гораздо сильнее воспитательное воздействие, чем общая периодическая печать. Это явление, уже давно подмеченное советскими педагогами, побуждает главное управление м.з. и его местные органы широко использовать издание стенных газет и журналов в целях пробуждения самостоятельности заключенных в деле их собственного исправления, в деле борьбы с пережитками старого тюремного быта¹⁴.

ABSOLUTELY FORBIDDEN IN PLACES OF DETENTION, where shows are one of the means of corrective action on criminals”. All the translations from Russian are by the author of the article.

¹³ “The programme of every type of amusement needs to correspond with the tasks of communist instruction and education”.

¹⁴ “Amongst the means of educational impact on prisoners, the Working-Correctional Code of the RSFSR allows for the publication of journals, newspapers, collection of texts and so on by the prisoners themselves. Actually, as our experience has shown, ‘their word’, the word that they read on ‘their’ journal, on ‘their’ newspaper, of which they are the active collaborators, has clearly more educational impact on prisoners than reading the common periodical press. This phenomenon, noted long ago by Soviet pedagogues, induces GUMZ and its local organs to

The passage hints at the *stengazety*¹⁵ or mural-newspapers, which represented one of the most widespread forms of publication in the Soviet prison world. Mural-newspapers offered the latest news from the camp (or prison), articles written by the prisoners and by the guards, poetry and satirical vignettes. Thanks to low production costs and circulation potential, the *stengazety* were successful from the very start. The administration would put them up on corridors (aisles, canteens and meeting places), where prisoners were only too eager to read them.

Technically and economically well-equipped places of confinement published not only *stengazety*, but also newspapers (*gazety*) and journals (*žurnaly*). Newspapers (which contained only basic information) were more widespread than journals, since the latter were much more demanding and consequently required a number of literate and professional prisoners which most prisons did not have. *Stengazety*, newspapers and journals typically lacked continuity and expired after a few issues. Some of them did not even survive the first opening issue due to lack of funds or paper, or even due to commanders' whims.

The very fate of publications, in fact, was closely linked to the fate of the prison/camp directors. The superior or inferior number of prison or camp publications (and consequently their quality) often depended on the individual commanders' more or less tight grip on cultural re-education. For example, the Vjatka-based "Za Železnoj Rešetkoj"¹⁶ (the most 'celebrated' newspaper of the first stage of Soviet prison press, CBSBa) owed its success to its promoter, Jurij Bexterev. Believing in the re-educational potential of Soviet prisons, Bexterev worked hard to pursue his goal, both as a director of the Vjatka prison, and in 1924, when he started his career in Moscow at GUMZ.

What were, however, the specific features of camp or prison press? The camp or prison administration typically appeared as the official publisher. The quality of publications depended on the administration's funds. Some texts were handwritten; some newspapers or journals were copied using polygraph machines; although most of the publications were typewritten using high-quality machines. Directors and members of the editorial board were usually chosen among management officers. At times, however, prisoners were assigned the task and consequently played a major role in writing the articles. Whereas the čekists and the guards generally wrote editorials and ideologically-charged articles, prisoners were given the task of working as reporters. They covered a wide range of subjects, from camp/prison news to special issues and cultural columns

suggest a wider distribution of the publication of newspapers and journals as much as possible with the aim of awakening the prisoners' self-motivation in their own correction, in the fight with the remains of the old prison life".

¹⁵ *Stennaya gazeta*: literally, 'Mural-newspaper'.

¹⁶ More information on "Za Železnoj Rešetkoj" can be found in Gorčeva's book (Gorčeva 2009: 30). The same name was given to other publications in Soviet places of detention. The Vjatka one was the most important journal, and it was the only one (together with the "Soloveckie Ostrova") that could be found abroad.

that typically included poetry and prose submissions by other prisoners. Several newspapers and journals gave significant space to the prisoners' *vospomnanija*, which included reflections on the Russian Civil War or the October Revolution as well as past meetings with important people. Prisoners were sometimes also responsible for the further, crucial task of selling their newspapers or journals in nearby towns (Gorčeva 2009: 28). In fact, the scope of *tjuremnaja pečat'* varied. Whereas several newspapers typically addressed those who lived within the camp, other newspapers or journals were also sold outside the camp. Nevertheless, they typically ended up in prisoners' hands, who often made great sacrifices in order to be able to buy a copy.

The in-depth analysis of one Soviet camp journal might provide interesting insights into the *tjuremnaja pečat'* also under another point of view, that of the artistic and culturological features of the publications. The front cover of the third 1925 issue of the "Golos Zaključennogo"¹⁷, the journal of the Gomel 'Ispravtruddom'¹⁸, has several verses framed with flowers and two keys at the bottom, symbolism that is typical of Gulag press' output. The second page is entirely occupied by advertisements, an important part of prison press whereby the administration raised funds through sales revenue to invest in further publications. The first texts of the "Golos Zaključennogo" are devoted to politics: in particular, an article on May Day, an appeal to '*tovarišči zaključennye*'¹⁹ and a long essay on the Soviet fight against criminality. Page six is devoted to foreign politics, notably an important detail, since that was often the only way prisoners were updated on what happened in the outside world²⁰.

In the following page there is a report on the cultural and educational work of the Gomel camp, and a little poem at the bottom of the page. A short essay closes the following page, where the memoirs of a prisoner are also published. Page 9 and 10 are devoted to prisoners – photographs are followed by an essay on prisoners' appeals and a study on prison jargon. The utilization of photographs is indeed a peculiar feature of Gulag press, whereby the names of the prisoners (only common prisoners: political prisoners had no consideration in this sense) quoted in the press were 'confirmed' by their photo. This had a double effect: on the one hand, to put photos was intended to stimulate prisoners in 're-educating' themselves, giving them a moment of 'glory' – a moment which, in the case of some publications that were sold outside of the camp, could be fundamental for the relatives who read these press organs; on the other hand, it was aimed at giving facts on re-education, providing not only the stories of the prisoners who were re-educated, but also their faces on paper. Other subjects of the photos

¹⁷ The number quoted is included in the collection of *Lagernaja pressa* at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich (CBSBb).

¹⁸ *Ispravitel'no-trudovoj dom*. 'Institute for the Re-education through Labour'.

¹⁹ In later years, prisoners would eventually be denied the epithet *tovarišč* (which at the end of their sentence signalled their reintegration into society).

²⁰ External newspapers and radio bulletins were further sources of information for the prisoners. Not all of the prisons, however, had a radio.

in the Gulag press were scenes from camp life. While photos were simply documentary, the use of sketches and vignettes was more elastic. They could also be documentary, but their use was mainly satirical. Sketches were used also for propaganda needs, using all the visual features of communist imagery.

The interest in prison habits, jargon and ‘folklore’ represents a further, typical subject of Soviet prison press. As already mentioned, it is present also in the third 1925 issue of the “Golos Zaključennogo”, where more poetry, a *feuilleton*, and a text framed by drawings of crying women can be found in the pages that precede what the management deemed to be an important part of the journal, the résumé of school activities and radio programmes. The same page advertises a workshop on the liquidation of illiteracy, while the last pages are devoted to interviews, juridical advice for prisoners and letters sent to the editorial board.

The camp publishing activities were strictly controlled by camp or prison censors. From the end of 1924 onwards, ‘regionalism’ was finally overcome and GUMZ started to control the prison press. On 30 September, the Chief Administration of Places of Detention sent a newsletter to all regional departments as part of an investigation into prison presses. All prisons and camps had to inform the Direction about newspapers and journals published by them from 1918 through 1924, the price and the number of issues of any publications, the typewriting machines used, the reading public targeted by publications, the names of the director and of the editorial board, and the number of regular contributors (GARFa: 200).

This first request was followed by a request (19 November 1925) to send GUMZ copies of any journal edition (GARFd: 16). GUMZ’s requests met a number of requirements. Firstly, the need to centralise re-education across the Soviet Union; secondly, the need to control re-educational activities by either approving or correcting the choices of editorial boards; thirdly, the need to prevent any intervention from Glavlit, thus filtering the ever increasing (and threatening) interest of the greatest Soviet censorship institution in prison presses.

From 1926 onwards, Glavlit’s grip tightened. Camp and prison publications could not exceed 100 copies, a policy that led to the shutting down of a remarkable number of newspapers and journals (GARFd: 50). The verdict practically made publishing impossible, since production costs were impossible to cover with such a short circulation. GUMZ reacted fiercely against Glavlit’s instructions and supported many camp directors. Following Bexterev’s advice, GUMZ wrote a document carefully listing all the advantages of the *tjuremnaja pečat’*, thus defending many places of confinement which had opposed Glavlit’s decision (GARFd: 53).

Bexterev’s harsh reaction had no effect. Glavlit rejected GUMZ’s initiative without further explanation (GARFd: 54). It was a sign of the time. The first phase of camp press, its establishment and the government’s relatively liberal attitude towards it, was on the wane. Its decline coincided with the rise of Stalinism and with the tightening of the government’s grip on social and cultural activities. The following phase – the glorifica-

tion of the 'Great Construction Projects of Communism' – would see the subjugation of *tjuremnaja pečat'* to the Party's directives and to the 'Stalinization' of the Soviet Union²¹. The *tjuremnaja pečat'* would thus rapidly be reduced to nothing more than a warbling maid to Communism and its successes, created through the deaths of thousands of prisoners who worked at the building sites of the White Sea-Baltic Sea Canal, Moscow-Volga Canal, and the BAM²². Newspapers and journals, then, were soon to play a major role in the 'creation of the Soviet reader' and in Stalinist 'total art' (Groys 1992; Dobrenko 1997).

After 1935, Soviet prisons and camp press 'returned behind bars': many press organs continued to be published within the lagers up until Stalin's death, maintaining the guidelines imposed during the First Five-Year Plan. After 1953, many of the internal publications of the Gulag ceased, while another cultural activity far from being assessed, that of Gulag theatre, gained momentum. The last years of existence of the Gulag system saw a general lack in camp press organs, whose life span can be limited to the period 1918-1955, i.e. the time frame wisely chosen by Gorčeva for her book.

One of the most important aspects of Gulag press is the literary one. The literary texts published within it have always been neglected, apart from a few poems published in Gulag poetry anthologies (see, for instance, Vilenskij 2005). Although often not of high quality under a literary point of view, those texts are interesting indeed for their historical-cultural value, since they offer a glimpse of the life in the Soviet camps. Moreover, they sometimes show 'on the battle field' the fight between the power and the intellectuals, typical of all Russian Literature and in particular of Soviet times, and the efforts of the latter to maintain intellectual freedom.

As mentioned above, the authors of the literary texts were all prisoners, who were usually entitled to write journalistic texts as well as creative (poems, tales, etc.), while the Čekists wrote ideological-political contributions. The thematic frame of the works written by *uzniki* and published in the press organs of camps and prisons is narrow, admitting only, as mentioned, texts related to re-education (i.e. hymns to detention, seen as forms of 'therapy'; descriptions of the positive effect of the Soviet prison system on the individual, who becomes socially reborn and redeemed of his previous errors; and sketches of non re-educated prisoners, derided and ridiculed, in opposition to the common prisoners, such as criminals, prostitutes and other 'pure social elements') and those – more typical of conventional prison literature – about the expression of the desperation and negative feelings about reclusion. The first type of texts was aimed at showing the positive and beneficial results of re-education, the second at dissuading readers from fighting against the power. Albeit the readers, in general, were the fellow

²¹ My chronology follows Gorčeva's paradigm: *Tjuremnaja pressa* (1918-1927), *Pečat' velikix stroek kommunizma* (1928-1934), *Lagernaja pressa* (1935-1955).

²² More building sites were built after the foundation of the White Sea-Baltic Canal, though the above-mentioned were by far the largest ones. BAM was an acronym for *Bajkalo-Amurskaja Magistral'*, one of the biggest railway networks in the Soviet Union.

prisoners of the camp/prison, though many publications were sold outside the camps and a few of them were even sent abroad.

An example of ‘politically correct’ Gulag press literary text was published on the first 1923 number of the “Novaja žizn’ domzaka” (issued by the prison of Maykop, CBSBc). It is B. Neroslev’s *✓ masterskoj domzaka* (Neroslev 1923: 6):

Стучат станки! Гудят моторы!
 От горнов дым идет столбом...
 Сверкает сталь, железа горы
 Глушит рабочий молотком!
 Спросил кого-то, что не устали?
 Но только искры летят в ответ,
 Ведь в гордом царстве труда и стали
 Нет скуки праздной и праздных нет!²³

Other texts were indeed quite surprising, showing a relative freedom of speech. During the first period of Soviet prison/camp press existence, the censorship system was still being formed. This caused the rare possibility for the authors to use terms, images and concepts far from the ones imposed by ideology. This way, a few texts contained unexpected features, such as *Naši vstreči*, a short poem by Evgenij Dolgorukov, published in the journal “*Za Železnoj Rešetkoj*”, entirely dedicated to a theme far from being ideological, that of love (Dolgorukov 1924):

Наши встречи минутны, наши встречи случайны,
 Но жду их, люблю их, а ты?
 Никому не открою нашей маленькой тайны,
 Нашей тайны под сводом тюрьмы.
 Разве можно приказом запретить улыбаться?..
 Нет!.. Улыбка, пробьется, светя.
 Стоит нам увидаться, стоит нам повстречаться,
 И я снова влюбился в тебя²⁴.

²³ “Tools strike! Engines roar! / The smoke rises out from the belching furnaces... / The steel sparkles, the iron of the mountain/ the worker with the hammer suppresses! // Someone asked, are you tired? / But only sparks fly in response, / Since in the proud realm of work and steel / there’s no idle boredom, no idle people at all!” No biographical records have been found on B. Neroslev.

²⁴ “Our meetings are fleeting, our meetings are random, / But I wait for them, I long for them, and you? / I won’t reveal our little secret to anyone,/ our secret under the vault of the prison.// Could they ever forbid a smile with a decree?../ No! The smile will come up, shining./ It is worth trying to meet, it is worth crossing each other,/ and I fell in love with you again”. No biographical records have been found on Evgenij Dolgorukov.

Notwithstanding the poor literary quality of the text, it is the very theme that is surprising, as it overcomes the limits imposed by censorship, especially in that hint at the decree that forbids smiling, a device that will be repeated by Solženicyn in his *Ivan Denisovič*²⁵.

Whereas texts like this, that are interesting only under a culturological point of view, usually represented an exception in the general panorama of the *lagernaja pressa*, in one single place such works were regularly published in the camp's press organs, bringing to the fore not only the freedom of expression, but also quality poetical production.

On the Solovki islands, where the first Gulag was established, an unexpected mix of historical conditions created a sort of 'intellectual citadel'. The mass confinement of intellectuals on the Northern archipelago, the role played by some members of the administration of the camp (particularly by the vice-director Fedor Èjxmans)²⁶ and the experimental character of the lager contributed to the formation of an intellectual community that, after a long battle, was able to gain a high degree of freedom of speech.

The main publications of the SLON (*Soloveckij Lager' Osobogo Naznačeniia*) were the journals "Soloveckie Ostrova" (since 1924 known as "SLON") and the *gazeta* "Novye Solovki". Publications started after the creation of the camp theatre (1923), which achieved huge success among the Čekists. Thanks to this, the intellectuals imprisoned in the Solovki prison camp gained the constantly increasing trust of the administration, who conceded them many small privileges, the most important being that of the exemption from forced labour, which saved the life of many of them. At the same time, those intellectuals managed to obtain a progressively wider freedom of expression. The theatre could therefore stage non-ideological or even prohibited plays and prisoners-playwrights managed to write a few satirical plays²⁷. This process highly affected the press of the camp. The first press organ, the journal "SLON", that mainly hosted ar-

²⁵ This happens when Ivan Denisovič argues with Bujnovskij about the legal hour. Ivan Denisovič sees the sun at the zenith and believes it's twelve o'clock. Bujnovskij replies that it's one o'clock, after the Soviet state has promulgated a decree on the legal hour. Suxov's harsh comment is: "Неуж и солнце ихим декретам подчиняется?" [How come also the sun obeys their decrees?] (Solženicyn 1971: 32).

²⁶ Fedor Ivanovič Èjxmans (1897-1938) was a former Latvian rifle-man, who entered the Čeka in 1918. In 1923 he became the head of the *admčasi*' and vice-director of the SLON, maintaining this position until 1929 and even working as director for short periods. He was transferred to Moscow, where he became the head of the 3rd special office of the OGPU and then the first director ever of the GULag. He left the capital to organize the Vaigač expedition (1930-1932). Arrested in 1937, Èjxmans was executed on 3 September 1938.

²⁷ The most famous of them was Boris Glubokovsky's *Solovetskoe obozrenie*, the text of which is lost, as happened with many others. Part of the songs that composed the play have been published on the "Solovetskies Ostrova", as highlighted by Svetlana Tyukina (Tyukina, 2003). Boris Glubokovsky (1894-?) was an actor of the Tairov Chamber Theatre and a writer who spent seven years (1925-1932) in the SLON, becoming one of the most prominent cultural figures of the camp.

ticles on ideological subjects, was replaced by the “Soloveckie Ostrova”, a journal that within a few months became a sort of literary almanac. The works published in it by the prisoners became more and more open, until they reached an almost unlimited freedom. This way, Boris Rado (Rado 1926: 6) could write such a poem, pervaded by the image of Mephistopheles with a “*Krasnoarmeeč’s* mouth”:

Вот-вот у кованых ворот,
Склонив точено-острый профиль,
Скривив красноармейский рот,
Вслед захохочет Мефистофель²⁸.

Late in 1926 the journal was suspended, together with the *gazeta* “Novye Solovki”. Inaugurated in 1925, the “Novye Solovki” maintained a more conventional profile under a literary point of view, but hosted the gripping disputes within the Solovki camp between the defenders of freedom of speech and their opponents, that were close to the more radical wing of the camp administration.

Unexpectedly, in 1929, the two main press organs of the SLON were re-established. While the “Novye Solovki” became an ideological *gazeta* (a typical example of the period of Stalinist *lagernaja pressa*), the “Soloveckie Ostrova” kept the features that it had before its suspension. In fact, it kept on publishing above all literary works, whose level of freedom of speech remained intact. Satirical poems, classical reminiscences and post-romantic verses filled the pages of the journal, giving it a special place on the map of contemporary Soviet literature. The two main poets of this ‘second season’ of Solovki publications were Jurij Kazarnovskij and Vladimir Kemeckij.

Kazarnovskij²⁹ was a gifted poet and an extraordinary humorist. He wrote poems and light-hearted articles which eased the reader of the “Soloveckie Ostrova” from the literary and the economic-scientific ‘load’ of the journal. His typical texts were the literary parodies, which were by far his most successful work and brought him fame within the camp.

As Lixačev suggests (Lixačev 1995: 254), Kazarnovskij had an excellent knowledge of Russian poetry, from which he drew from largely. He filtered it through his *vis comica*.

²⁸ “In a moment, at the forged gates, / Bending his keen-sharpened profile, / Twisting his *kerasnoarmeets* mouth, / Sneers along Mephistopheles”. No biographical records have been found on Boris Rado. Most probably, it was Georgy Rusakov’s pseudonym. Rusakov, a student of the Saint Petersburg Polytechnical University who was arrested twice, was a prisoner of the SLON from 1925 to 1928. No other biographical records have been found on him.

²⁹ Jurij Kazarnovskij (1905-1956?) was a writer and a university student when he was arrested in 1927 in Rostov-na-Donu. He spent two years in the Solovki prison camp. Transferred to the Belomorkanal camps, where he worked in the propaganda office, Kazarnovskij was freed in 1932. Arrested again in 1937 and sent to Kolyma, he was the last to see Osip Mandel’štam before his death (Mandel’štam 1999: 444-449). Drug addicted, mutilated (he lost all his toes due to frostbite) and psychically unstable, Kazarnovskij spent his last years as a beggar.

through his review and parody of the leitmotifs of a few famous Russian authors who were committed to a purely imaginary confinement at the SLON, Kazarnovskij managed to address a wide range of urgent and even controversial camp-related topics, lending a comical edge to dramatic situations. Superposition was a recurring trait in the poet's parodies. The letter 'Kazarnovskij's Esenin' writes to his 'mother' is a perfect specimen of literary mimesis, being almost literally moulded to Esenin's 1924 poem *Pis'mo materi* (Esenin 1995: 179). Esenin's original poem has this quatrain:

Ничего, родная! Успокойся.
 Это только тягостная бредь.
 Не такой уж горький я пропойца,
 Чтоб, тебя не видя, умереть³⁰.

Kazarnovskij superposed life at the SLON camp with Esenin's bohemian life, thus hinting at the question of the 'camp boheme', i.e. the group of poets and artists who were working for the press or in the theatre and received privileges such as permission to join and participate in the camp club (Kazarnovskij 1930: 64):

Ничего, родная, успокойся...
 Не грусти на дальнем берегу.
 Я, хотя отчаянный пропойца.
 Но без водки – спиться не могу³¹.

Vladimir Kemeckij's poetry was completely different from Kazarnovskij's, being imbued with feelings of sadness and disillusionment. A former communist sent to the camps upon his return from Europe³², Kemeckij understood that his fate was doomed and, after accepting this traumatizing fact, found relief in poetry. This is evident by the blood-drenched toast the poet describes in *Моей Музе* (Kemeckij 1930: 23):

Позволь же, гостя, за твое здоровье
 Наполненный незримых гроздьев кровью
 Поднять воображаемый бокал³³.

³⁰ "Don't worry, mother, take comfort / It's only a foolish fancy. / I'm not such a bitter drunkard, / To die without seeing you again".

³¹ "Don't worry, mother, take comfort / Don't be saddened on the faraway shore. / Call me a reckless drunkard, / But I can't become an alcoholic without vodka".

³² Vladimir Svešnikov-Kemeckij (1902-1938), son of an emigrated White Army officer, lived in Paris and Berlin, where he entered a few poetical circles of the Russian emigration. Upon his return on the USSR in 1927, he was arrested as a spy and sent to the Solovki prison camp, where he stayed up until 1931. Arrested again in 1937, he was executed in January 1938 together with poet Nikolaj Bruni.

³³ "Allow me, host, to your health / the full of blood invisible grapes / imaginary chalice to raise".

Another poem, *Ispej vina sozvezdij*, with muffled rage against his fate and indirectly against the Soviet power and in its use of neologisms and challenging metaphors, which verge on arresting synaesthesia, recalled stylistic elements of two currents of Russian Futurism, Ego-Futurism and Imaginism, showing some of Kemeckij's typical stylistic (e.g. the delicate iambic rhythm) and poetical features (Kemeckij 1929: 8):

Испей вина созвездий и лучей,
Цветов и трав. И радостно спокоен
Да будешь ты, как неистомный воин
В бушующем скрепении мечей³⁴.

The freedom from the obligation of writing ideological texts ceased soon after. The Solovki press was shut down in 1930 and merged into the White Sea-Baltic Canal Gulag press, where the control of the censor was by far stricter. Only perfectly ideological texts were published, causing a collapse in the literary quality of the texts published in it. Typical of these publications were texts like Arsenij Pečejkin's *Naši dni* (Pečejkin 1935: 1), published on the second 1935 issue of the journal "Perekovka" (CBSBd):

Как же тут не петь любому парню,
Не сказать спасибо лагерям?
Стал сегодня рекордист-ударник,
Кто в шалманах юность потерял³⁵.

As can be seen, the text is filled with the ideological weight of propaganda and uses terms imposed by the historical moment, such as "*udarnik*", while boasting a mendacious joy about reclusion and celebrating the vexations that the prisoners had to endure on the building sites of the White Sea-Baltic Canal, where thousands of them died of starvation and cold.

Humour, sadness, submission to power and rebellion, use of personal stylistic features or adherence to the propaganda aesthetics: as shown by this brief selection of poems, Gulag press literature offers a wide spectrum of texts, whose cultural value is high, showing some dynamics and images of cultural life within camps that can be of primary importance also for the historical reconstruction of the events. Although their literary quality is often low, many interesting features of Gulag press literature (e.g. the utilization of Aesopian language, the authors' different expressive choices in such a narrow context, the influence of communist rhetoric on the poetical language, etc.) can

³⁴ "Drain the wines of constellations and rays, / Of flowers and herbs. And happily tranquil / You will be, like an unlangourishing warrior / In the stormy intersection of swords".

³⁵ "How not to sing to any friend, / Not to praise thanks to the camps? / Those who lost their youth on the joints / Today they became recordmen-shock workers". No biographic records have been found on Arsenij Pečejkin.

be underlined and studied, above all in comparison with clandestine Gulag poetry that has recently been put under more systematic attention by researchers. An assessment of literature that deals with Soviet repression should take into consideration also these texts, whose analysis can provide unexpected results, as is the case of the literary works published in the Solovki prison camp press. It is a new and fertile territory for Gulag literature studies.

List of abbreviations

CBSB	Collection of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich
GARF	<i>Gosudarstvennyj Arxiv Rossijskoj Federacii</i>
Glavlit	<i>Glavnoe Upravlenie po Delam Literatury i Izdatelstv</i>
GULag	<i>Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerej</i>
GUMZ	<i>Glavnoe Upravlenie Mestami Zaključenija</i>
NKVD	<i>Narodnyj Komissariat Vnutrennix Del</i>
OGPU	<i>Ob"edinennoe Gosudarstvennoe Političeskoe Upravlenie</i>
SLON	<i>Soloveckij Lager' Osobogo Naznačeniija</i>

Bibliography

- Baruch Wachtel, Vinitsky 2009: A. Baruch Wachtel, I. Vinitsky, *Russian Literature*, Cambridge 2009.
- Caramitti 2010: M. Caramitti, *Letteratura russa contemporanea: la scrittura come resistenza*, Bari 2010.
- CBSBa: “Za Železnoj Rešetkoj” – Žurnal zaključennyx vjatskago ispravtruddoma, CBSB, Film P 2000.673 n° 024, 025, 050, 051.
- CBSBb: “Golos Zaključennogo” – Zhurnal zaklyuchyonnyx gomelskogo ispravtruddoma, CBSB, Film P 2000.673 n° 002.
- CBSBc: “Novaja žizn' domzaka” – Literaturno-xudožestvennyj ežeme-sjačnyj žurnal, CBSB, Film P 2000.673 n° 001.
- CBSBd: “Perekovka” – Organ KVO Dmitlaga NKVD SSSR, CBSB, Film P 2000.673 n° 417.
- Dobrenko 1997: E. Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature*, Stanford 1997.
- Dolgorukov 1924: E. Dolgorukov, *Naši vstreči*, “Za Železnoj Rešetkoj”, 1924.
- Esenin 1995: S. Esenin, *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij v 7 tomax*, I, Moskva 1995.

- GARFa: Postanovlenija Sovnarkoma RSFSR i Vseukrainskogo centralnogo ispolkoma i Sovnarkoma Ukrainskoj SSR, doklady gubernskix inspekcij mest zaključenija i perepiska s nimi ob izdaniu gazety "Golos Zaključenennogo", ob uvolnenii sotrudnikov, o periodičeskix izdanijax, GARF, f. 4042, op. 4, d. 63.
- GARFb: Položenie ob upravlennii mestami zaključenija pri rabočej časti, cirkuljary GUMZ i instrukcii po učebno-vospitatel'noj časti v mestax zaključenija Respubliki, GARF, f. 4042, op. 4, d. 65.
- GARFc: Protokoly №№ 1-16 zasedanij metodičeskoj komissii pri kul'turno-vospitatel'noj časti GUMZ za oktjabr'-dekabr' 1924 g. i janvar'-maj 1925 g. (podlinniki i priloženija k nim). GARF, f. 4042, op. 4, d. 64.
- GARFd: Perepiska s gubernskimi ispravitel'no-trudovymi domami o vypuske žurnalov, izdavaemyx zaključennymi, ob assignovanii sredstv na izdanie (3.10.1925-16.12.1926), GARF, f. 4042, op. 4, d. 126.
- Gorčeva 1996: A. Gorčeva, *Pressa Gulaga*, Moskva 1996.
- Gorčeva 2009: A. Gorčeva, *Pressa Gulaga. Spiski È.P. Peškovej*, Moskva 2009.
- Groys 1992: B. Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, Princeton 1992.
- Kazarnovskij 1930: Ju. Kazarnovskij, *Literaturnye parodii*, "Soloveckie Ostrova", 1930, 1, p. 64.
- Kemeckij 1929: V. Kemeckij, *Ispej vina sozvezdij*, "Soloveckie Ostrova", 1929, 1, p. 8.
- Kemeckij 1930: V. Kemeckij, *Moej Muže*, "Soloveckie Ostrova", 1930, 4, p. 23.
- Lixačev 1995: D. Lixačev, *Vospominanija*, Sankt-Peterburg 1995.
- Mandel'stam 1999: N. Mandel'stam, *Vospominanija*, I, Moskva 1999.
- Martini 2002: M. Martini, *Oltre il disgelo: la letteratura russa dopo l'URSS*, Milano 2002.
- Neroslev 1923: B. Neroslev, *V masterskoj domzaka*, "Novaja žizn' domzaka", 1923, 1, p. 6. (Fund of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich, Film P 2000.673 № 001).
- Pečejkin 1935: A. Pečejkin, *Naši dni*, "Perekovka", 1935, 2, p. 1 (Fund of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich, Film P 2000.673 № 417).
- Rado 1926: B. Rado, *Černoe ozero*, "Soloveckie Ostrova", 1926, 5-6, p. 25.
- Solženicyn 1971: A. Solženicyn, *Odin den' Ivana Denisoviča*, London (Canada) 1971.
- Stogov 1978: N. Stogov, *Tjuremnaja pečat' 1921-1935 godov*, "Pamyat", 1978, 1, pp. 527-580.

- Toker 2000: L. Toker, *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors*, Indianapolis 2000.
- Tjukina 2002: S. Tjukina, *Teper' vy v Solovkax (lirika vremen SLONa)*, "Soloveckoe more", 2003, 2, pp. 181-186.
- Tjukina 2005: S. Tjukina, "Krome, kak v USLONe, nigde ne xoču sidet'". *Mirovaja i ruskaja literatura v soloveckoj lagernoj poëzii*, "Soloveckoe more", 2005, 4, pp.167-171.
- Vilenskij 2005: S. Vilenskij (ed.), *Poëzija uznikov GULaga*, Moskva 2005.

Abstract

Andrea Gullotta

A New Perspective for Gulag Literature Studies: the Gulag Press

This article focuses on a fruitful line of research that has so far been largely neglected, namely literary production within the Soviet prisons and camps. After a few considerations on the state of research on *lagernaja literatura*, the article delves deep into the history of the press in the Soviet places of detention, depicting the ideological and historical context that made such publications possible. A description of its features, followed by the presentation of a few poetical compositions found in certain Gulag publications, aims to show the academic community a number of samples of the literary texts that were published within the camps. The article is based on a few unpublished archival documents.

Keywords

Gulag Press, Gulag Studies, Gulag Literature