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# Depicting the Camps in Words

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# A b s t r a c t s

## Depicting the Camps in Words

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Nicolas Werth

The Gulag through the Prism of the Archives
Approaches, Insights, Results

Since the first archival material became accessible in 1989 and 1990, knowledge about the Soviet camp system has grown considerably. The sources from within the Gulag bureaucracy itself now make it possible to clear up questions which were disputed for decades. In the early 1950s, at the peak of the camp system, 2.5 million people were in incarcerated, from 1930 to 1953, there were in all 20 million victims of repression. The significance of forced labour in the Soviet economy must be corrected downward. Its share of energy and industrial production never exceeded 8-10 percent. Its hallmarks were low productivity and disorganisation. Although the personnel files of the Ministry of the Interior and the secret police remain closed, initial studies about the perpetrators in the NKVD and Gulag nomenklatura have appeared. Of those who survived the Great Terror 1937-1939, none has ever been prosecuted.

Franziska Thun-Hohenstein

Poetics of Mercilessness
Varlam Shalamov: His Life and Work

Varlam Shalamov, whose 100th birthday will be observed this year, was forced to spend almost 20 years in forced labour camps and in Siberian exile. Convinced that the camp destroyed people, Shalamov immersed himself in his experiences in the camps of Kolyma for the rest of his life, employing the possibilities and limitations of literature. The philosophical level of his reflections on the existence of people under extreme conditions of hunger, cold, violence, and inhuman physical labour ended not in a settling of scores with the Soviet system. Shalamov sought to reveal the fragility of what we are used to calling civilisation or culture. In his Kolyma Tales, he drew the most radical aesthetic consequences and developed a poetics of the most extreme laconism and mercilessness, in order “to penetrate the camp’s presence.”

## Anne Hartmann

### "A Window on the Past"
Re-reading the Camp Literature

Camp literature has been marginalised: Society in Russia is fully pre-occupied with the present, and for the West, the sensation value of revelations about the Gulag was exhausted long ago. To prevent the loss of memory, it is necessary to read the camp anew, for Soviet civilisation is not to be grasped without its darker side. Beyond the established canon of memoirs, there is a literature to discover which is multifaceted and reacts idiosyncratically to the camp as a form of existence and thinking.

## Andrei Siniavskii

### Material Sample

The scent of death hangs over Varlam Shalamov's Kolyma Tales. But the word "death" means nothing here. Usually, we understand death in the abstract: the end, we all die. To imagine death as a way of life which drags on is much more appalling. It means "in the face of death." Shalamov's tales are in written in the face of life. And life is what is appalling. Shalamov's cutaway sample of human material shows its remaining qualities: chapped skin, muscles as thin as string, dried out brain cells, frozen fingers, festering sores. That is man. Man withered to the bones, with which the bridge to socialism is built.

## Ulrich Schmid

### Non-Literature without Morality
Why Varlam Shalamov Was Not Read

Varlam Shalamov (1907–1982) is without a doubt one of the most important writers to deal with the Gulag by means of literature. Unlike Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, however, he was unable to have a broad impact on Russia or the West. The reasons for this are his demanding poetics, his moral nihilism, his provoking revision of the Russian literary canon, and his political behaviour after rehabilitation. Only in recent years had Shalamov become recognisable as an author who combined avant-garde and realist techniques of expression to form a demanding and contradictory unity.

## Michail Ryklin

## The Cursed Order
### Shalamov, Solzhenitsyn, and the Criminals

Professional criminals played an important role in the Gulag camps. They were an order unto themselves with their own laws and practices. These criminals impressed Solzhenitsyn; Shalamov held them in contempt as barbarians. The ways and means by which they exercised their power reveals surprising parallels between these criminals and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, in which the political police, which understood itself as an order, was a key instrument of power. Their rule was based on the same methods: denunciation, fear, cynicism, and contempt of all human solidarity and private property. The convergence of Soviet ideology with the criminal milieu is not the result of some misunderstanding or a mistake; it is inherent in this ideology. And the shadows reach into the present.

Klaus Städtke

## The Fall of Idols – The End of Humanism?
### Literary Models during the Thaw: Solzhenitsyn und Shalamov

Shalamov's protest against capitulating to totalitarian violence had its predecessors. At the start of the 20th century, the intelligentsia debated "ethical nihilism." Stalinism interrupted this debate, which Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov picked up again. Solzhenitsyn calls for a return to the old moral order, Shalamov discovers in the Gulag the devastating reverse side of human nature. While Solzhenitsyn embeds the camp in Russian history, Shalamov refrains from trying to explain the world and issuing programmatic designs.

Luba Jurgenson

## A Trace, a Document, a Prothesis
### Varlam Shalamov's Kolyma Tales

Varlam Shalamov's Kolyma Tales are a struggle against forgetting. They seek to leave a trace of memory where every memory of the camp has been wiped out. Furthermore, they address the difficulty of imparting to others the camp experience. The author's body, which enables him to document the validity of his words, is not entitled to do so: It is a completely different body than the one which endured the camp. Like Primo Levi, Shalamov resorts to the ambivalent metaphor of the prosthesis. On the one hand, memory is a "prosthesis" of experience; on the other hand, the maimed body could not speak without the prosthesis.

## Gabriele Leupold

### Anatomy of an Act of Restraint
Translating Varlam Shalamov

The translator – unlike the mere reader or even the literary critic – has to direct his attention to every single word of a text. By his very nature, he brings to light from his worm's eye view "technical" details which otherwise are easily overlooked. With Shalamov, who consciously uses a limited array of instruments for his Kolyma Tales, this view of how the text works and of course the way Russian and German languages differ shows how strongly the effect of the tales depends on decisions concerning small details – be it a cadence, a pause, a tense, or word choice.

## Tatjana Petzer

### An Olympus for Thieves
Collecting Clues in Varlam Shalamov and Danilo Kish

The early Soviet penal system assessed criminals as "socially close," who, in romanticising depictions, were taught in the camps to become good citizens of the new order. In fact the Gulag was a golden era of the criminal underworld. Criminals built up a counterculture in the camps. The monopoly of power in their hands, which served to watch over other prisoners, shows Stalinist disciplinary policy in a distorting mirror. Varlam Shalamov und Danilo Kish avoid the myth of the noble thief. They follow the transformation of the human psyche in the camp, collect the bloody evidence of crimes, and archive victim and perpetrator files from the vanished continent Kolyma.

## Pavel Nerler

### Strength for Life and Death
Varlam Shalamov and the Mandel'shtams

For Varlam Shalamov, Osip Mandel'shtam was an admired fellow writer and comrade in misfortune. The poet's death on the way to Kolyma is treated by Shalamov in the story "Cherry Brandy." He dedicated another story, "The Sentence," to Mandel'shtam's widow, Nadezhda. While the first story propels the reader towards death and bristles with apathy and resignation, a grain of hope and life is planted in the second. This is no coincidence, for Shalamov saw in Nadezhda Mandel'shtam's memoirs a document which erected a powerful, inspiring memorial to the Russian intelligentsia, a signal to return to life. The mutual admiration for the work of the other found expression in an intensive correspondence from 1965 to 1967 and survived their personal strife.

## Klaus Gestwa

### Built on Blood and Water
The Hydroelectric Archipelago Gulag, 1931–1958

The “terror of hydraulic despotism” had hardly ever found a more impressive expression than in the hydro-technical archipelago Gulag. Its story began in 1931 with the completion of the notorious Belomorkanal, when an army of forced labourers left behind a vestige of repression and exploitation in the landscape and history of the Soviet Union which could hardly be more visible. From then on, the construction of gigantic canals and power stations located on rivers made a significant contribution to the rise of the Gulag to economic empire. However, the increasing use of technology in construction raised quality standards for labour, so that the camp economy, starting in 1948, began to slide deeper and deeper into crisis. After Stalin’s death, the large construction sites and their camp complexes could no longer be reorganised by means of amnesties and reforms into education and re-socialisation centres.

## Ivan Panikarov

### Kolyma
Dates and Facts

In its spatial dimensions, the enormous number of prisoners and dead, and the extremely harsh prison conditions, the camp region in Kolyma takes an extraordinary place among the “islands” of the archipelago Gulag. In order to secure the economic success of the state construction combine Dal’stroi, the labour force – prisoners from Sevvostlag, the correctional labour camp northeast – was systematically expanded, starting in the early 1930s. The consequences of the political terror of 1937 were felt all the way out to Kolyma. The numbers of those imprisoned and murdered, which the archives in Magadan began divulging in the early 1990s, may be lower than those circulated previously, but they bear true witness to the tragic reality of Kolyma. But speculation about the numbers provided in the camp literature and the media cannot do justice to the victims.

## Simon Ertz

### Forced Labour in Noril’sk
An Atypical, Ideal Camp Complex

The central characteristic of the Stalinist camp system was forced labour. It is impossible to understand the camp system without analysing its function. In the example of Noril’sk, an industrial site in Russia’s far north built and run by forced labourers, it can be shown that prisoners were considered and handled as a matter of priority as an economic resource. Economic interests tend to force the tasks

of isolating, punishing, and disciplining camp inmates into the background. This intentional hierarchy applied not only to Noril'sk, but to the Stalinist camp system as a whole. On the basis of the ideal type of the Noril'sk camp, however, this hierarchy stands out particularly clearly.

## Inna Klause

### Music by Decree
Official Cultural Life in Stalin's Forced Labour Camps

In the Soviet understanding of itself, forced labour camps served to re-educate people. Culture was to make a contribution to that end. The secret police and camp administrations maintained cultural-political sections, which tried to regulate in detail cultural activities within the camps. But, between the idea and the reality, there lay a gulf: Music served less as propaganda or education than as entertainment for the camp personnel. Musicians and actors had a better chance of surviving the camp. The dividing line between camp and civilian life blurred. Incarcerated artists worked with one another in concert venues and in theatres outside the camps.

## Jascha Nemtsov

### "I Have Been Dead for Ages"
Composers in the Gulag: Vsevolod Zaderatskii and Aleksandr Veprik

There is an extensive international literature about composers persecuted by the Nazi regime. By contrast, musicology has so far ignored composers in the Gulag. The widespread assumption that musicians were not persecuted under Stalin is a myth. Even among composers, there were many victims. Two fates serve as examples: that of Aleksandr Veprik, a protagonist of the national Jewish school in Russia, and that of Vsevolod Zaderatskii, one of the most important representatives of Russian modern music.

## Manuela Putz

### The Lords of the Camp
Professional Criminals in the Gulag

Under Stalin, criminals were sentenced to prison in "correctional labour camps." There professional criminals encountered prisoners from other cultural and social backgrounds. They found in them prey for their games, feuds, and excesses. Officials and prisoners alike perceived them as a hierarchical organised community of criminals, so-called vory v zakone. Cloaked in prison folklore and a certain code of honour, "honourable thieves," gangs, and criminal groups could assert

themselves in the camps by means of violence. They undermined the official structures of camp life. This opened up a new room for manoeuvre in a realm of life which was allegedly strictly regulated – not only for the community of thieves but also for their fellow inmates and guards.

## Wladislaw Hedeler

## Resistance in the Gulag
Mutiny, Insurgency, Escape

In the history of the Gulag, from 1922 to 1960, the forms of resistance on the part of the prisoners varied according to the camp, the prevailing prison regime, and category of prisoner. Source editions now allow us to gain an overview of resistance in the correctional labour camps and special camps. The view of the camp administration and the memoirs of former prisoners differ. That is seen in the literary treatment of the camp system in Varlam Shalamov's "Major Pugachev's Last Battle" and the official reports from a special camp.

## Marc Elie

## Impossible Rehabilitation
The 1956 Revision Commissions and the Uncertainties of the Thaw

On the periphery of the XXth Party Congress in 1956, Khrushchev introduced revision commissions. These were to review in decentralised fashion the countless prisoners in custody who were innocent. The commissions fulfilled their tasks only conditionally. They may have released a large number of prisoners, but they rehabilitated only very few. The members of the revision commissions were led by various considerations. As a result, there was no consensus about how to deal with prisoners who were convicted during the Second World War for "nationalism" or "treason," the majority of political prisoners in custody in 1956. In late 1956, the work of the commissions came to an end amid a tense political atmosphere. Soviet leaders, unsettled by the uprisings in Poland and Hungary, began imprisoning without trial a good number of those who had been released, in order to make them scapegoats for a crisis-ridden year and to draw attention away from policy failures.

## The Year 1937 and the Present

## Memorial's Theses

The year 1937 has become a symbol for the mass murder and repression organised by the Soviet state and carried out against its own people. Seventy years later, the ominous influence of this catastrophe is still palpable. It has entered the

people's individual and collective subconscious and influences practices of the state and attitudes among the population. To overcome this legacy, a legal evaluation of the Great Terror as well as a comprehensive reassessment of the past is necessary. Only in this way is a consolidation of society and state possible.

## Stephen Fortescue, Vesa Rautio

## From Labour Camp to Global Market Leader
### A Company Portrait of Non-Ferrous Metal Works Norilsk Nickel

The non-ferrous metal works Norilsk Nickel reflects the history of the Soviet Union and Russia in the 20th century like no other enterprise. The Noril'sk combine was established in the 1930s in the wake of the forced industrialisation campaign. In the Brezhnev era, Noril'sk was expanded and became an enormous centre of mining and heavy industry. The collapse of the Soviet Union hit this economically unprofitable combine hard. By means of a contentious privatisation during the Yeltsin era, it became the property of the industrial magnates Vladimir Potanin and Mikhail Prokhorov. Today, the conglomerate is one of the ten largest and most profitable companies in Russia and a global market leader in nickel production.

## Irina Shcherbakova

## Memory on the Defensive
### Schoolchildren in Russia on the Gulag and Repression

A broad reassessment of Stalinism with its terror, repression, and Gulag system got underway during perestroika. But the hope proved deceptive that knowledge of this history would lead to Russia overcoming this aspect of its past forever. The political and social climate has changed. It is difficult for schoolchildren to learn about the repressions. Memory of the repressions is being increasingly marginalised, responsibility suppressed. Politics and television are creating myths and instrumentalising Stalin and the Soviet past. The last representatives of the generation which experienced this past are dying, visual materials from the Gulag are lacking. But there are the first signs of a remembrance culture. That it is possible to tie into these and pass on memory is shown by the contribution of schoolchildren in history competitions sponsored by Memorial.

## Natal'ia Konradova

## Search for Form
### Gulag Monuments in Russia

The history of commemorating the victims of Stalinist repression is a short one. In 1988, the first memorial stone was erected in Vorkuta. In terms of typology, memorials to the victims of repression lean on war memorials. In the choice of the materials and the design of the memorials, there are recurrent elements. Cracks and cavities express the victims' disappearance. But one tradition of commemora-

tion has yet to establish itself. To this day, there is no central monument in Russia which could serve as a symbol for reassessing the Stalinist terror and the Gulag.

## Elfie Siegl

## Surviving in the Taiga
The People of Magadan (Audio CD)

Magadan, once the gates of hell, the doorway to the penal camps of Kolyma and at the same time the fields of gold in the hinterland, is today one of Russia's most costly cities and one of its poorest. This port city, an eight-hour flight from Moscow, lies at the farthest reaches of the east on the Sea of Okhotsk. In the Stalin era, the port was the final destination for untold numbers of ships full of prisoners sent to extract gold, silver, wolfram, and coal. The prisoners, once released, continued to work in the gold industry. Today, these witnesses live in poverty, isolation, and indignity. Many remain silent. Those who tell their life story bear witness to the officially suppressed past. In Kolyma, none of the camp sites have been preserved. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, most of the gold mines and pits were closed because they were unprofitable. The people lost their jobs. Those who can, leave; those who stay, are prisoners of the north.