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# Gulag Voices

## An Anthology

Edited by Anne Applebaum

Yale UNIVERSITY PRESS

New Haven & London



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Designed by James J. Johnson and set in Sabon Roman type by Westchester Book Group.  
Printed in the United States of America.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Gulag voices : an anthology / edited by Anne Applebaum.

p. cm. — (Annals of communism)

ISBN 978-0-300-15320-0 (alk. paper)

1. Soviet Union—History—1925-1953—Biography. 2. Soviet Union—History—1953-1985—Biography. 3. Prisoners—Soviet Union—Biography. 4. Political prisoners—Soviet Union—Biography. 5. Glavnoe upravlenie ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagerей OGPU—History. 6. Prisoners—Soviet Union—Social conditions. 7. Political prisoners—Soviet Union—Social conditions. 8. Forced labor—Soviet Union—History. 9. Concentration camps—Soviet Union—History. I. Applebaum, Anne, 1964-

DK268.A1G84 2011

365'.45092247—dc22

2010033711

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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sleep I was able to steal each day barely kept me from caving in. I was constantly hungry. My weight dropped steadily. When they gave me back my hat, the hell I was living in became a hell I could survive, but it was still hell. I believe it was at that time that my eyes and my mouth began to settle into a grim cast which is still my normal expression when I am not excited or laughing, and even then I am told it lingers around my eyes. My iron mask never came off, and I can see that it never will.

## 3.

## ELENA GLINKA

Elena Glinka was a twenty-nine-year-old engineer when she was arrested in 1950. Imprisoned for six years, she returned to Moscow in 1956 and re-enrolled at the shipbuilding institute where she had been studying when she was taken away. From then on, in the words of one of her fellow students, she “said nothing at all about her life ‘over there.’” Occasionally, she would reminisce about some of the good people she had met, or about those who helped her, but she did not describe in detail the horrors she had experienced.

Perhaps her earlier reticence helps explain why the essay which follows, first published in the literary magazine *Neva* in 1989, came as such a profound shock to Glinka’s friends and family and to Russian readers in general. Until then stories of rape in the Gulag had been virtually taboo. Although many had witnessed such atrocities, they rarely mentioned them in published accounts. Glinka broke that taboo for good with this essay, which describes a mass rape

of prisoners from one of the ships en route from the Pacific port of Vladivostok to Magadan, the “capital” city of the Kolyma peninsula, home of the notorious Kolyma camps. Although the account is written in the third person, one of the characters described is clearly herself.

Glinka’s description of the phenomenon of mass rape has since been echoed by others, notably the Polish writer Janusz Bardach, who watched a group of criminal prisoners rip a hole in an interior wall of a Kolyma-bound ship in order to get at the female prisoners on the other side. In Bardach’s account, “hundreds of men hung from the bed boards to view the scene, but not a single one tried to intervene.” The mass rape on Bardach’s ship ended only when the guards on the upper deck sprayed water into the hold below; the dead women were then dragged out and presumably thrown overboard. “Anyone who has seen Dante’s hell,” wrote another surviving prisoner, “would say that it was nothing beside what went on in that ship.”

It is important to remember while reading the following account that although this scene certainly occurred “under the government flag, with government collusion,” as Glinka writes, these outrages were not ordered by Moscow. According to the Gulag’s own rules, transportation of prisoners was not supposed to be a form of punishment: convoy guards were explicitly told to ensure that prisoners arrived at camps healthy enough to work. But although the archives are full of reprimands, angry letters to commanders of convoy battalions who killed or starved too many prisoners in the course of transporting them east, in practice few were

punished. Mass rapes may not have been ordered, in other words—but they were easily tolerated by convoy guards who did not care enough to stop them, and administrators who were far away. Some of that indifference is conveyed in this account by Glinka’s carefully emotionless prose.

## The Kolyma Tram

There was a saying in the camps: the Kolyma tram is something that runs you over, but maybe, just maybe, you might come out alive.

The sad fishing village of Bugurchan, a barely visible dot on the coast of Okhostk, consisted of five or six scattered log huts plus a pitiful town hall with three small windows and a flag—perhaps the village chairman had no spare red calico for a new one, who knows? At any rate that same bleached-out flag had probably flown over Bugurchan since long before the war. But the hammer and sickle in its corner still stood out as distinctly as the numbers on a prison jacket.

One day, a ship that regularly hauled supplies and workers to the villages and camps during summer navigation season brought in a holdful of female convicts, a “punishment brigade.” They disembarked to shouts and obscenities and the barking of guard dogs, and were driven to the town hall, where the guard detail diligently counted heads—after which the chief guard ordered them to stay where they were and went off to find the sole local representative of

government authority, the village chairman, in order to officially transfer custody.

The group consisted mainly of those convicted of petty crimes or workplace transgressions,<sup>1</sup> with a few hard cases thrown in—pitiful creatures who had suffered a common fate: parents executed or killed in the war; NKVD orphan-ages; escape to the streets, poverty, and hunger until at some point they were picked up for pilfering a potato or a carrot from a shop counter. Branded as criminals, rejected by society, they soon turned into the genuine article. Among them there were some recidivists, hardened criminals who in camp slang were called *zhuchki*, “bugs.” Now here they all were, planted in front of the town hall, bickering with one another, rifling through their bundles and pestering their guards for cigarettes.

The camp authorities had tossed another ingredient into this hash of ruined lives: three political prisoners convicted under Article 58.<sup>2</sup> One was an older woman, the wife of a disgraced diplomat; the second was a middle-aged seamstress; the third was a student from Leningrad.<sup>3</sup> None had any record of defying or disrupting camp discipline—it was just that the punishment brigade was thrown together in a hurry and the number of troublemakers did not meet the quota set out in the directive. So in order to make the

1. In Russian, *bytovichki*.

2. Article 58 was the legal statute under which political prisoners were convicted.

3. Glinka was the student from Leningrad.

required head count, the authorities had included some “heavyweights”: inmates who had been sentenced to twenty-five years.

“Women in Bugurchan!” The news spread like wildfire throughout the taiga, stirring the area up like an anthill. Within an hour men began flocking to the town hall—first the locals, then men from farther afield, some on foot, some on motorbikes. There were fishermen, geologists, fur trappers, a team of miners and their Party boss, and even some convicts, thieves and criminals who had bolted from their logging camp. As the men began to arrive, the *zhuchki* began to stir, buzzing, trading barbs—brassy prison slang heavily laced with obscenities.

The guard detail bellowed at the *zhuchki* to stay where they were and ordered the others to keep their distance; somewhere in the shouting was a threat that the militia had both dogs and firearms at their disposal and were ready to use them, but since almost all the men knew their way around the camps, they didn’t push their luck (all the more so because someone had already sweetened the guards’ mood with liquor). The guards didn’t bother to chase them off completely, just yelled at their retreating backs, and settled themselves nearby.

The *zhuchki* were cadging loose tobacco and tea for brewing *chifir*;<sup>4</sup> they offered homemade tobacco pouches in trade. Most of the men had already stocked up on supplies

4. A form of strong tea with narcotic properties.

either at home or the village store. Over the women's heads, into the crowd, flew packs of cigarettes and packets of tea, chunks of bread, cans of food. Tossing a crust of bread to a famished prisoner was an act that suggested political unreliability, a punishable act if committed back *there*, in long-suffering Mother Russia; *there* one was supposed to patriotically lower one's eyes, walk on by, and forget. But here—perhaps because almost all the local men had a prison past—a different law prevailed. A group of fish salters and the one and only cooper in the village (already fairly drunk) had brought a parcel of cured salmon and proceeded to cut it up and toss the pieces to the female prisoners.

Worn down by seasickness and two hungry days in the hold, the women caught these handouts on the fly, hurriedly stuffed them into their mouths and swallowed without chewing. The zhuchki, coughing hoarsely, took long drags on their Belomors.<sup>5</sup> For a time, all was quiet. Then bottles began to clink, and several of the men, as if on command, retreated to one side and sat down to drink with the guard detail.

Sated, the women struck up a song, first "The Long Road," then "Sister," and the men replied with the famous camp song "Tsentralka."<sup>6</sup> After this group sing everyone perked up and began to mingle with no thought for the guards, who by now had shed their rifles, tied their dogs to

5. A cheap brand of cigarette named after the White Sea Canal, a Gulag camp in the 1930s.

6. "The Central Prison."

the trees, and were busy drinking hard with their chief and the village chairman.

But it was only the zhuchki, the criminal women, who showed much enthusiasm. The petty thieves and offenders who made up the majority of the brigade were quieter. They kept largely to themselves. Granted, they just as eagerly took the handouts; they entered into conversations, but they seemed somehow absent. Their thoughts were elsewhere; many were now doing short time, and, unlike the politicals, they did not face exile after camp. The short-time zhuchki also were counting down the days, and although none of them had anywhere to go or anyone to turn to, and the idea of freedom frightened some (automatically dooming them to helplessness and indifference to their own fate), the prospect of future sorrows seemed not to exist. Freedom was freedom, that was the main thing, and that itself gave them hope. The political "heavyweights" had no hope at all; the Gulag had swallowed them forever.

The three politicals sat apart from the crowd: the student, the seamstress, and the wife of an "enemy of the people." They already knew the purpose behind the whole debauch, the carousing with the guards; they had realized this long before, one by one, the soldiers passed out dead drunk, and before the men, whooping and hollering, rushed the women and began to haul them into the building, twisting their arms, dragging them through the grass, brutally beating any who resisted. The tethered dogs yipped and barked and strained at their leashes.

The men knew their business; the operation was coordinated and confident. One group pulled up the benches nailed to the floor and tossed them onto the stage; a second group boarded up the windows; still others rolled in small kegs and set them upright along the walls, then hauled in water by the bucket; a fourth group brought grain alcohol and fish. That done, they nailed planks crosswise over the doors, spread out whatever rags or blankets they had at hand—padded vests, bedrolls, mats—and began throwing the women to the floor. A line of about a dozen men formed by each woman, and so began the mass rapes known as the “Kolyma tram.” They were by no means rare in the Stalin era, and everywhere they happened in the same way—under the government flag, with government collusion.

I offer this documentary account to all the die-hard Stalinists who to this day do not want to believe that the lawlessness and sadism of these reprisals were consciously encouraged by their idol. Let them at least for a moment imagine their wives, daughters, and sisters in that Bugurchan brigade; after all, it was purely by accident that we, not they, ended up there.

It was rape on command: a “tram driver” would raise his arms and shout “Mount up!” Then at the command “Show’s over!” the man would pull away, reluctantly ceding his place to the next in line, who was standing at full attention in all senses of the word.

The dead were dragged away by their feet and piled next to the doors; the survivors were doused with water from the buckets and revived. Then the lines formed up again.

But Bugurchan wasn’t the biggest tram; it was just an average, “middleweight” car, so to speak . . .

By nightfall the men were all dead to the world; some occasionally got up and stumbled around, tripping over sleeping bodies, gulping water from the barrels, puking, then flopping back down to the floor or onto the nearest victim.

Was there ever anything like this even in those dream-times when we first raised our front legs off the ground and began to walk upright, when our primitive ancestors lived by animal and herd instinct alone? I don’t think so.

The beautiful and stately seamstress took the heaviest blow during this first pass of the Kolyma tram. The wife of the enemy of the people was spared the worst of it thanks to her age: her “partners” were for the most part impotent old men. Only one of the three was relatively lucky. The miners’ Party boss chose her for himself, took her for both days. The miners respected him: he was fair, he was straight with them, man to man, politically reliable, morally strong. They accepted him as their leader, and his ride on the tram somehow justified and united them all: just like us, they are, our *politruk*<sup>7</sup> and our state. Out of respect for him none of his crew even approached the student, and the Party boss even gave her a little gift—a new comb, the rarest of things in the camps.

Unlike the rest of the women, she didn’t end up screaming, fighting back, trying to pull away: she thanked God that she’d become the property of just one.

7. Political commissar of a military unit.