The Case for Soviet Prison Tattoos as Art

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As possibly the first, and certainly the most obvious, canvas upon which human differences can be written and read, skin has been a topic of continuous interest in anthropology and related disciplines from the earliest descriptions of exotic people to postmodern theorizing about the body in contemporary society.[1]

The fields of anthropology and art history have long been intertwined. Symbols are at the core of human communication and in order to decode a set of esoteric images, overlapping practices within the fields of anthropology and art history can be employed. The discovery of the remote practice of human bodily inscription by non-European people ignited a desire to uncover and understand the nature of the inscribed symbols. In the year 1691, English explorer, William Dampier transported a Fillipino slave covered in tattoos back to his home country.[2] The slave, Jeoly, became known as "Painted Prince Giolo" and was immediately put on display like some rare artifact.[3] Despite the curiosity surrounding Jeoly, it should be mentioned that human bodily inscriptions have been a part of ethnographic literature even before the genesis of anthropology as a discipline in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and before the development in the early twentieth century of art-historical techniques for interpreting symbols, such as "iconology."[4] The study of these inscriptions has almost exclusively dealt with remote indigenous

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[1] Enid Schildkrout, "Inscribing the Body," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004), 319.
[2] Thomas M. Curley, Review of *Omai, Pacific Envoy,* by E. H. McCormick," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 12 (Spring 1979): 429.
[3] Curley, Review of *Omai, Pacific Envoy,* by E. H. McCormick," 429.
[4] Schildkrout, "Inscribing the Body," 319. On the emergence of anthropology as a discipline, see Thomas Highland Eriksen, *Small Places, Large Issues: An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology*, 4th ed. (London: Pluto Press, 2015), 12. The influential art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) succinctly described the term "iconology" as being "the branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to their form" in *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 3.

tribes. However, as tattoo culture gains popularity in Western culture, scholars are beginning to look to tattoos as a repository of information regarding other groups, including, subcultures.

Within the last thirty years, the examination of Russian prison tattoos, under the Soviet regime, as a subject of anthropological study emerged. Soviet prison tattooing grew in popularity during the beginning of the twentieth century, and declined in practice during the end of the same century; this be the period which we are examining.[5] The cache of arcane images that have marked the bodies of inmates offers an untapped wealth of knowledge regarding the daily lives of the downtrodden who were subjected to harsh prison conditions, many for several years at a time. Understanding and legitimizing the study of the images that adorned the body of these inmates has taken time. It has only truly come to fruition as an area of study in the last two decades. Within the span of twenty years, experts have gathered a wealth of information regarding Russian prison tattoos and have been able to apply them to larger areas of interest, such as LQBT life and Russian expatriates. This study draws upon recent scholarship on Russian prison tattoos of the Soviet era to make the case that these tattoos are art and therefore valid subjects of art-historical study.[6]

The notion of marking one's body forever in order to convey some message or indicate some sort of esoteric knowledge is fascinating. While a large portion of this area of study has focused on “non-western” people who mostly have inhabited islands in the Pacific ocean, the oldest known bodily inscription actually belonged to a man who lived in the Ötztal Alps.[7]

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[5] Danzig Baldev, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia: Volume 3* (London: FUEL Publishing, 2008), 25, 43.

[6] For a discussion of the contemporary tattoo as art, see Marcia Tucker, "Tattoo: The State of the Art," *Artforum* 19, no. 9 (May 1981): 42-47. According to Tucker, who proposes that tattooing “is finally once again coming into its own as another aspect of the fine arts,” the act of tattooing possesses two aspects that are relevant ~~imperative~~ to its classification as art: subject/object relation, which she compares to contemporary art that uses the body as a medium, and highly skilled technique; “Tattoo: State of the Art,” 47.

[7] Constance Holden, “Isotopic Data Pinpoint Iceman's Origins,” *Science* 302 (2003): 759.

European crusaders and pilgrims got tattooed to prove they had made it to the Holy Land.[8] Even King Charles XIV of Sweden (1763-1844) had a tattoo that ironically read, "Death to all Kings!" [9] History has forgotten the rich tattoo culture of Europe.

In her 2004 essay, "Inscribing the Body," Enid Schildkrout, an anthropologist employed by the Museum of Natural History in New York, made a claim that Western ideology is the reason behind the lack of knowledge surrounding European tattooing. Using what Schildkrout puts forth in her essay, one can formulate an idea surrounding the intrinsic and symbolic meaning within the iconographic language of Russian prison tattoos. According to Schildkrout, contemporary society believes that it is undergoing what some refer to as a "Tattoo Renaissance." [10] However, this notion creates a misleading impression of historical events within the world of Western tattooing.[11] She stresses that we must not view tattooing as a modern creation, but rather as a tradition with deep, widespread roots. To legitimize the study, Schildkrout states that it is not only historians and anthropologists who are interested in inscriptions on the skin. It has also been an area of great interest to psychoanalysts and philosophers. She states that the skin is an ambivalent boundary, as it provides agency to the wearer to perhaps subvert authoritative or penal systems.[12] This statement is of particular interest as the subversion of strict prison systems is perhaps the most essential aspect of Russian Prison tattoos.

A major component of the Russian criminal subculture is the connection to the "Other." Russian prisoners have long been aware of their status as outsiders, and rather than long for

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[8] Dunbar Plunket Barton, *The Amazing Career of Bernadotte, 1763-1844*(Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1930), 347.
[9] Barton, *The Amazing Career of Bernadotte, 1763-1844*, 347.
[10] Schildkrout, "Inscribing the Body," 335
[11] Schildkrout, "Inscribing the Body," 335
[12] Schildkrout, "Inscribing the Body," 325

acceptance they thrive and celebrate the fact that they operate beyond the bounds of traditional society.[13] Tattooing became an integral part of the celebration of "otherness." Once used as an agent of authority by those in power to mark prisoners and therefore to easily identify them, tattooing was reclaimed by the imprisoned.[14] The marks once used to deny the personal autonomy of the prisoner, were now being weaponized against the very establishment responsible for imprisonment.[15] The practice of reclamation truly grew in popularity during the mid twentieth century among those imprisoned in Soviet Gulag camps.[16]

The iconography of the tattoos carved into the skin of the Soviet prisoners was in itself highly anti-establishment. Nazi insignia and other jarring images were prevalent, as a means to celebrate the enemies of the Soviet Union.[17] The 1930s was a time within the camps when the anti-Soviet imagery really took hold.[18] It should be said that a majority of the tattoos created within the Gulag camps were the product of the "Thieves in Law."[19] The "Thieves in Law" are a professional criminal organization that ruled during the Soviet era from within prison camps.[20] The group had substantial membership and power, and thus was able to dictate the nature of many of the images inscribed on Russian prisoners. The tattoos worn by prisoners were highly codified and esoteric; the average Russian citizen would not understand the meaning behind most Russian prison tattoos. Imagery and placement are crucial factors that one must take into account when decoding the tattoos. For example, a spider crawling up the right shoulder of a

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[13] Julie S. Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2014), 79.
[14] Schildkrout, "Inscribing the Body,", 321.
[15] Schildkrout, "Inscribing the Body," 321.
[16] Baldev, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia: Volume 3*, 25.
[17] Baldev, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia: Volume 1*, 24.
[18] Baldev, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia: Volume 3,* 25.
[19] Michael Schwirtz, "Vory v Zakone has hallowed place in Russian criminal lore," *New York Times*, July, 29, 2008.
[20] Schwirtz, "Vory v Zakone has hallowed place in Russian criminal lore."

prisoner connotes that the wearer is a thief who is still active.[21] However, if the spider is crawling down the shoulder the thief has given up their life of crime.[22]

It is necessary that the iconographic aspects and decoding properties of Russian prison tattoos are mentioned. Outlining every single image and its meaning would be an impossible task and therefore I will focus on the inscriptions that mark the body of one Russian prisoner and the connotations of said inscriptions. The tattoos were heavily saturated with dark ink and produced in a crude manner. Infections were common, and some prisoners contracted bloodborne illnesses from the tattoo needles.[23] Despite the circumstances, the tattoos are quite artful and successful in conveying the intended image. The tattoos that emerged from Soviet prisons can be categorized based on subject matter. There are primarily four categories into which Soviet tattooing has been placed, in addition to any aesthetic significance.[24]

The first category deals with interpersonal relationships, which was a popular motif among lesbian prisoners.[25] Shared motifs, or the name of a lover were often the tattoos of choice for these women.[26] It is important to note that both men and women prisoners engaged in the practice of tattooing; however, overall themes of the tattoos differed greatly among the two genders. The tattoos of incarcerated women deal primarily with the emotions connected to a life

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[21] Baldev, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia: Volume 3,* 43.
[22] Baldev, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia: Volume 3,* 43.
[23] Pawel Maczewski, "The Visual Encyclopedia of Russia Prison Tattoos," *Vice News*, December 26, 2014.
[24] Kristina Sundberg and Ulrika Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," in *Journal of Documentation* 74, (January 2018): 30. The authors base their discussion of these categories on Clinton R. Sanders' study of commercial tattoos in "Drill and Fill: Client Choice, Client Typologies, and International Control in Commercial Tattoo Settings," in A. Rubin, ed., *Marks of Civilization: Artistic Transformation of the Human Body* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles, 1988), 219-32.
[25] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 30.
[26] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 30.

of crime, broken relationships and the separation from loved ones.[27] Men, on the other hand, were tattooed to convey authority and to demonstrate their place within the prison hierarchy.

From here on out, this paper will be discussing the tattoos of men, which fall within the other three categories into which Soviet tattoo imagery has been divided. The second category of Soviet tattoos comprises pictures that indicate one's participation in a group.[28] Images bearing insignia that denote the wearer as a thief, or professional criminal are examples of tattoos that indicate group inclusion. The third category is a collection of motifs that represent the wearer's own primary interest.[29] The images represented in the third category are largely the same as those in the second category, as it would often be beneficial for the wearer to align themselves with a larger affiliation.[30] The last category deals with tattoos that relate to the self-image of the wearer—personal details and memories that the prisoner deems worthy of being inscribed on their body.[31]

The sheer number of tattoos on the body of one prisoner, documented in a photograph showing a bared chest, shoulder, arm, and hand, suggests that this man has been a criminal for a long time (figure 1). This status can be validated through the examination of the stars present below the man's left shoulder.[32] Stars present on the body reveal that the wearer is a professional criminal.[33] Building upon the previous statement, the epaulette tattooed on the shoulder indicates that the man has a great deal of authority within the criminal hierarchy.[34] The man presents his

[27] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 30.
[28] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 30.
[29] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 30.
[30] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 30.
[31] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 30.
[32] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 24.
[33] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 25.
[34] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 25.

heavily tattooed hand for examination. On his ring finger is a black triangle split in two, which indicates this man grew up incarcerated.[35] The two black triangles on his middle finger suggest that he has a strong aversion to prison administrators and will not cooperate with them.[36] On his left arm is an inscription that reads "communism only produces victims." [37] It is interesting that this message is not encoded within some shroud of esoteric imagery; any Russian speaking person would understand its meaning.

Several of the tattoos present on the man's body are difficult to interpret, but this fact does not negate their meaning. An important component of Russian tattooing is the theory of "parts of a whole." [38] Certain tattoos cannot be understood as solitary images; these tattoos require others to play upon in order for the intended meaning to be revealed.[39] It is best to think of each tattoo as a chapter in a book, with that book ultimately being the wearer's identity.

It is common for an area of study to expand in subject matter and content included as it develops and garners validity. The study of Russian prison tattoos is no exception. Once experts began noticing the important cultural and social aspects of the tattoos, they began to look at them within different areas of focus. For example, in light of recent social reforms, it is no surprise that the images present within the iconography of Russian prison tattoos would be used in hopes of creating a broader understanding of the world of LGBT Russian inmates, specifically homosexual men.

The reality for homosexual men in Soviet prison camps was horrific and inhumane. Homosexuality was a punishable offense, and men sentenced for homosexual activity were

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[35] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 26.
[36] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 26.
[37] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 26.
[38] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 26.
[39] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 26.

automatically subjected to the lowest level of the prison's caste system, called the *opushcheny*.[40] People of this caste faced brutal beatings and were often starved and left without proper sleeping arrangements.[41] In addition, homosexuals of the *opushcheny* experienced forced tattooing.

Tattoos, which were a badge of honor for most inmates, became a punishment and sign of shame for homosexuals. The markings that were forced upon the bodies of homosexual men can be found within the iconography of Russian prison tattoos. For "active" homosexuals, a bee was often tattooed on the genitals.[42] "Passive" homosexuals were inscribed with an image of a beehive on the buttocks.[43] The message of the imagery is quite clear, one is the "stinger" and the other accepts the "sting."[44] The placement of the tattoos is very important, as it serves to remind the participants of their status as they engage in homosexual activity. Other forced tattoos include open eyes and a mouse being chased by a cat, both placed on the buttocks.[45]

It is curious as to why homosexual men were treated so horribly in the prisons. According to a study of 1,100 Soviet era prisoners between the ages of eighteen and eighty, serving sentences of one and a half years to ten years, ninety percent had homosexual contact.[46] Out of the population studied, only eight to ten percent belonged to the lowest caste, meaning they were classified as homosexual.[47] In addition to being treated horrifically in prisons, men classified as homosexual were also branded as "non-patriotic."[48] It was a common belief, originating in

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[40] Laurie Essig, *Queer in Russia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 8.
[41] Essig, *Queer in Russia,* 8.
[42] Efrat Shoham, " 'Signs of Honor' Among Russian Inmates in Israel's Prisons," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 54, no.6 (2010). 994.
[43] Shoham, " 'Signs of Honor' Among Russian Inmates in Israel's Prisons," 994.
[44] Shoham, " 'Signs of Honor' Among Russian Inmates in Israel's Prisons," 994.
[45] Shoham, " 'Signs of Honor' Among Russian Inmates in Israel's Prisons," 994.
[46] Essig, *Queer in Russia,* 8.
[47] Essig, *Queer in Russia,* 9.
[48] Essig, *Queer in Russia,* 9.

Stalinist Russia, that homosexuals were perverts and that perverts could never be patriots.[49] According to Russian society, homosexuals were inherently anti-nationalistic, something that was celebrated within the criminal culture.

Why then did criminal men, most of whom engaged in homosexual acts, hate and punish the homosexual prison population? The answer to this question above is simple: these men had everything taken from them. All they had left was their status. The men of the Russian prisons relied solely on their domineering masculine identities and hierarchical relationships to gain power and rank.[50] They could simply not rise in standing if they did not have anyone to rise above. A major way these upwardly mobile prisoners asserted dominance over the *opushcheny* was by use of forced tattooing; it solidified the status of the tattooer.[51]

The act of forced tattooing as a means to denote a person considered to be an "Other" did not originate with the inmates of the Russian prison system. Forced markings had long been used by the Russian penal system to distinguish the criminal from the citizen. Until the year 1846, Russian individuals sentenced to hard labor were branded on their face with the inscription "VOR," meaning "thief." [52] In an act of reclamation, beginning in the early twentieth century, prisoners began to use bodily alteration as their own form of self-expression.[53] Thus, the esoteric iconography of Russian prison tattoos was born. However, during the cycle of repossession, the prisoners adopted the atrocious practice that they had previously endured: forced tattooing. In order to try and understand the cruel and inherently hierarchical nature of the Russian prisoners, one would have to examine the conditions of criminal life in Russia.

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[49] Essig, *Queer in Russia,* 9.
[50] Shoham, " 'Signs of Honor' Among Russian Inmates in Israel's Prisons," 985.
[51] Shoham, " 'Signs of Honor' Among Russian Inmates in Israel's Prisons," 985.
[52] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 23.
[53] Baldev, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia: Volume 3*, 25.

The behavior of the Russian criminal can only be understood through the context provided by the Russian criminal underground. Russian criminals held the ideology that their profession also doubled as an artform.[54] Pickpocketing was regarded as the highest form of criminal activity, due to the high level of skill needed to be successful.[55] A good pickpocket is like an actor, wearing need-specific garb and performing in a methodical and time-sensitive way. In her autobiography, Praskovia Skachko writes of the luxurious life she and her husband were able to afford through the "art" of theft.[56] Skachko credits her ultimate downfall to a costume mishap that prevented her from playing her role as a thief.[57] The subject of "the criminal" became a source of fascination for many of Russia's general public.

Petty thieves became a recuring theme in *luboks*, a collection of graphic prints with a narrative.[58] *Luboks* are a compilation of *lubki*, which are the oldest form of Russian popular prints.[59] The *lubok* and *lubki* were extremely popular amongst the lower and middle classes, as they had multiple functions and were relatively inexpensive. The prints were dualistic, as they had the potential to be didactic as well as ornamental. Prints outlining the exciting tales of the lives of bandits adorned the walls of Russian commoners (figure 2). Unlike popular Western tales regarding thieves, i.e. Robin Hood, Russian bandits did not possess altruistic motives.[60] The tales laid out in the *lubki* were not allegorical, and no hidden code of morality could be derived from them. Instead, Russians looked to tales of thieves as a means to inspire freedom and rebellion

[54] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag*, 76.
[55] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 76.
[56] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 76.
[57] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 77.
[58] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 77.
[59] Hubertus F. Jahn, *Patriotic Culture in Russia During World War I* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 12.
[60] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag*, 77.

against the institutions responsible for unfavorable societal situations.[61] The fictionalized bandit struggled internally between the conflicting themes of wanting freedom and having a place in mainstream society.[62] However, it should be noted that such stories did not idealize a life of crime, as many ended with the bandit committing an act of redemption through patriotism or state service.[63]

The famous Russian poet, Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837), wrote "art clings to life through death, sin and lawlessness."[64] Arguably, the most apparent example of the truth to this statement can be seen in twentieth century Russia. The correlation between crime and art was glaringly obvious. Art, paired with labor, was seen as the most efficient way to remold the common criminal and was employed by the Soviet regime in Gulag camps.[65] Officials of the Soviet Union devised a metallurgical analogy—*perekovka,* or "reforging"— to describe their means of inducing loyalty to the state.[66] *Perekovka* was based upon the notion that humans, much like elements of industry, could be created according to blueprints.[67]

The philosophy of *perekovka* was put on display at Belomor, a Gulag camp dedicated to the construction of Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal (figure 3).[68] Armed with the understanding of the importance of individual expression, Officials enforced that the inhabitants of the camp use forced labor as a means of inspiration. Prisoners were encouraged to write of the personal transformations they endured through the means of autobiographical sketches.[69] A camp

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[61] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 77.
[62] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 77.
[63] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 77.
[64] Alexander Pushkin, as quoted in Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 77.
[65] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 77.
[66] Julie S. Draskoczy, "The *Put*' of *Perekovka*: Transforming Lives at Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal," *The Russian Review* 71, (January, 2012): 30.
[67] Draskoczy, "The *Put'* of *Perekovka*: Transforming Lives at Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal," 30.
[68] Draskoczy, "The *Put*' of *Perekovka*: Transforming Lives at Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal," 30.
[69] Draskoczy, "The *Put*' of *Perekovka*: Transforming Lives at Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal," 31.

newspaper was also provided to prisoners, as well as opportunities to circulate original poetry and produce plays.[70] At a surface level, the aforementioned elements seem to conform to modern ideologies regarding the rehabilitation of incarcerated individuals; providing numerous means of self expression is beneficial to the individual. However, *perekovka* was not a process devised to be advantageous to the individual. The sole purpose of *perekovka* was to brutally destroy the previous life of the prisoner in order to make room for a new one that would benefit the Soviet Union.[71] When confronted with a system that wants to erase one's past, acts of individual expression are seen as most radical.

The sordid inner workings of *perekovka* relied heavily on deceit and the selfish nature of the prisoners. First, a department was created to facilitate the education and reforging of the convicts.[72] This department was divided into smaller sections, and each of these sections was headed by an educator, or *vospitatel.*[73] The *vospitateli* were also prisoners, and were given special privileges, such as the ability to neglect extra work or to indulge in a drunken card game, as a reward for their assistance in the reforging process.[74] The fact that officials turned a blind eye to the indulgences of the *vospitateli* is an indication that the Soviet Union did not fully believe that *perekovka* would work. They were willing to allow certain prisoners to exist outside of code if it meant control over the greater population. It is without doubt that they hoped *perekovka* would mass produce the perfect member of society, but it is unlikely that they actually believed that this was possible.

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[70] Draskoczy, "The *Put*' of *Perekovka*: Transforming Lives at Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal," 31.
[71] Draskoczy, "The *Put'* of *Perekovka*: Transforming Lives at Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal," 36.
[72] Draskoczy, "The *Put*' of *Perekovka*: Transforming Lives at Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal," 32.
[73] Draskoczy, "The *Put*' of *Perekovka*: Transforming Lives at Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal," 32.
[74] Draskoczy, "The *Put*' of *Perekovka*: Transforming Lives at Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal," 32.

The Soviet Union's skepticism regarding *perekovka* is perfectly illustrated in the life of Igor Terentiev. Terentiev was a poet and theater director best known for daring and obscene work.[75] He was a prominent member of the Futurist group, 41°, which aimed to radically transform the world and the language used to express it.[76] He was imprisoned at Belomor from April 1931 until the completion of the canal two years later, and should have been an exemplary example of the capability of the reforging process.[77] Once imprisoned, Terentiev wrote for and led an agitational brigade.[78] The purpose of the brigade was to motivate the prisoners through the use of music, and from all accounts he was highly effective in this line of work.[79] In addition to leading the brigade, Terentiev fulfilled 400% of the work norm, and wrote for the camp's newspaper.[80] His actions did not go unnoticed, which resulted in Terentiev being awarded separate living quarters and an early release from Belomor.[81] After he was released from the camp, Terentiev moved to Moscow where he participated in the creation of agitation brigades at the Moscow-Volga Canal.[82] Terentiev, as a free man, chose to live at the local Gulag camp in order to further his work in agitational theater.[83] He was arrested in Moscow on charges of including anti-Soviet themes in his productions, and was executed in June of 1937.[84] There was no proof that the claim that led to his arrest had any validity, and by all accounts Terentiev was

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[75] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag*, 96.
[76] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 96.
[77] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 99.
[78] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 96.
[79] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 100.
[80] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 100.
[81] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 100.
[82] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 100.
[83] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 100.
[84] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 100.

truly "reforged." [85] The Soviet regime may have executed one of few known convicts who actually experienced the desired transformation.

There is no way of knowing how many prisoners were legitimately re-forged, as most did not leave behind physical documentation of their lives. However, through a closer look into the tattoo iconography prevalent at Belomor, it is certain that a sizable population of prisoners did not subscribe to the ideas presented in *perekovka.* As previously stated, many of the tattoos that marked the bodies of prisoners were anti-establishment. A prisoner could not subscribe to both the methods of *perekovka* and the criminal code. A choice had to be made, and through the examination of the tattoos, it is evident that many prisoners chose to align themselves with criminal culture.

In many ways, the act of tattooing embodies the prisoner's experience at Belomor: creation, destruction, and violence. The Soviet regime implemented an entire system dedicated to the eradication of "non-beneficial" characteristics in prisoners, and the prisoners responded by permanently covering their bodies with images that celebrate the fruits of their "non-beneficial" behavior. The physical body was a subject of great admiration in Soviet society and was seen as an essential feature of a good Soviet citizen. [86] On "Physical Culture Day," parades that ran through Red Square displayed the well-built physiques of the Soviet youth.[87]

The prisoners created a poignant statement, when they chose to mark their capable and strong bodies with anti-Soviet imagery. It conveys the sentiment that their bodies are not for the consumption of the Soviet regime. The inherently permanent nature of tattoos ensures that no amount of reforging can erase the past, and no matter how reformed the criminal has become,

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[85] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 100.
[86] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 21.
[87] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 21.

they will always be reminded of previous actions. Russian prison tattooing is paradoxical in that it is a method of both alienation and acceptance— alienation from mainstream society and acceptance from the criminal realm.[88]

Many of those belonging to the criminal underworld found themselves at Belomor, and as a result, images of life at the camp were popular within the iconography of Russian prison tattoos.[89] Tattoos depicting life at Belomor often brought to light the neglect the prisoners endured. Highlighting the lack of available food, one tattoo consists of a star-shaped ration cup, which is labelled "the extra rations of a convict-hero of socialist labor." [90] The cup is outlined with barbed wire and carnations, and the only contents within are a hammer and a sickle and shackles.[91] The wearer of this tattoo is making the statement that the prisoners are only being fed Soviet ideology and forced labor.[92]

Tattoos depicting such objects as this ration cup gave the wearer a unique outlet for self-expression. Belomor was a "total institution," meaning that there was no distinguishable boundary between sleep, leisure, and work; prisoners lacked the ability to perceive the natural progression of time.[93] Officials wanted the lack of time-related boundaries to break the prisoners. To cope with the disorienting nature of the camp, many prisoners adopted multiple personalities. [94] The lack of concrete personality was essential for the "stripping" process that criminals underwent at Belomor.[95] Officials were so eager to begin the "stripping" process that they

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[88] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 106.
[89] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 105.
[90] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 105.
[91] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 105.
[92] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 105.
[93] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 20.
[94] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 20.
[95] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 20.

removed the clothes, hair, and names of convicts upon their arrival at the camp.[96] In the climate present at Belomor, the act of tattooing served more than an aesthetic purpose, it was imperative in the act of self-preservation.

When trying to understand Russian prison tattoos, one must leave behind all preconceived notions of tattooing. It is important to understand that many Soviet era prisoners felt an extreme amount of pressure to get tattooed, as inmates without tattoos were seen as having no authority, masculinity, or status within the prison.[97] In Russian prisons, as Kristina Sundberg and Ulrika Kjellman have proposed, tattoos acted as a document, or archive, of the past actions and memories of the wearer. It was a way for prisoners to gauge the validity and authority of other prisoners; it was important to the hierarchical nature of the prisons. The tattoos served as absolute truths, and were taken as such.[98] Having a tattoo that was based on a false event could result in the tattoo, or even limb, being cut off the wearer.[99] Russian prison tattoos were taken this seriously because they were virtually all the prisoners had.

The tattoos served multiple functions and had the power to sustain, create, and enforce an identity within the given social context; the tattoo was a living thing, capable of performing many tasks.[100] One of the roles given to tattoos was the job of courier.[101] Prisoners lived by their own set of values and moral codes, and often this set of rules was exemplified via tattoos.[102] Tattoos could also be an agent used in expressing one's personal identity. If one were privy to the language of these tattoos, one could find information regarding the personal life of the

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[96] Draskoczy, *Belomor:Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag,* 20.
[97] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 30.
[98] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 21.
[99] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 24.
[100] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 24.
[101] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 24.
[102] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 24.

prisoner, such as time served and agreements entered.[103] The images held the capacity to be both individualistic in purpose and universal; they were both internal and external.[104] Russian prison tattoos facilitated the development of dignity by allowing prisoners to mark their own set of values and ethics on their body.[105]

The study of Russian prison tattoos has progressed tremendously over the last twenty years. Enid Schildkrout's argument for the validity of tattoos as an area of study is no longer needed, as the wide array of material on the subject proves. When taking into account the severity of the Soviet prison system, it is remarkable that a wealth of information regarding the tattooing that went on there exists. Before embarking on this area of study, I would have assumed that the practice of tattooing would not have been permitted within Russian prisons. Even more surprising is that the subjects of most tattoos were quite obviously in opposition to the government. It begs the question, did the authorities not understand the severity to which they were being scrutinized by the prisoners, or did they simply not care? I would believe that they would care as the whole point of *perekovka* was the reformation of the prisoner into a productive member of society. Tattoos expressing the hatred one has towards the government is not the mark of a reformed individual. However there were tattoos depicting clear messages that any Russian citizen could read, including prison administration (see figure 1). Perhaps the authorities permitted tattooing as it would have caused an uprising within the prison population if they were to crack down on the practice and perhaps the authorities did not find such mark-making to be a real threat.

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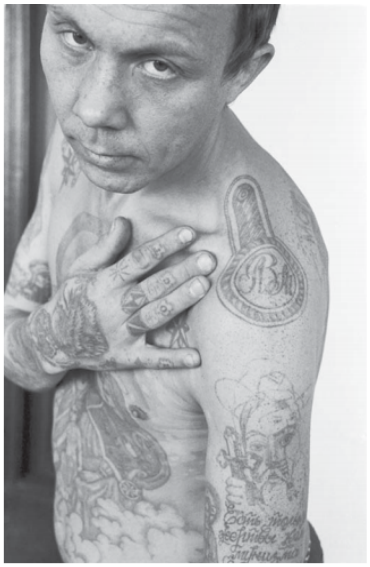
[103] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 29.
[104] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 29.
[105] Sundberg and Kjellman, "The Tattoo as a Document," 31.

It is because of the willingness of the wearer to incorporate meaning into their images, and the inherently artistic nature of the motifs, that I would categorize Russian prison tattoos as art. The images have a clear audience in other prisoners and specific meanings. The prisoners used their bodies as a medium to portray their life story and to expose the corruption they faced at the hands of Russian authority. In some instances, they risked infection and disease in order to convey messages within the images on their bodies. In addition, they managed to create a series of esoteric images that compose a specific iconographic language. This language relates to different aspects of life: imprisonment, love, sexuality, hardship. Prisoners used the tattoos as a creative outlet to express themselves and their realities.



Source: © Sergei Vasiliev/FUEL Publishing

Figure 1: Sergei Vasiliev. Russian Prisoner. Photograph. Undated.

fuel-design.com/russian-criminal-tattoo-archive/photographs/sergei-vasiliev/print-no-32/.

Figure 2: *Nightingale the Robber.* Woodcut. First half of the 18th century. Russian National Library, St. Petersburg.

Figure 3: Prisoners of Belamor, constructing the White Sea-Baltic Canal. Photograph. Undated. http://www.gulag.eu/gulag/storm.html

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