

THE COMMUNAL APARTMENT UNDER “SPECIAL SURVEILLANCE”: THE LEGACY OF THE SOVIET GULAG IN MULTIETHNIC CRIMINAL SUBCULTURES IN EASTERN SIBERIAN PRISON CAMPS

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This article explores modern Siberian discursive practices of interethnic divisions among prisoners, which are still based on the Soviet model of a multiethnic prisoner population. The contemporary Russian xenophobic image of the organized and anonymous mass of newcomers from Central Asia and the Caucasus clearly contrasts with the ethnic-difference-sensitive perception of “non-Russians” in Siberian prison camps. The effectiveness of forced nonethnic consensus is based on a well-established hierarchical code according to which all prisoners are expected to subordinate themselves regardless of their ethnicity. It is genealogically linked to the sociality established during the Gulag era and is entangled with a “cosmopolitan” Soviet ethnic policy. The comparative analysis of prisoners’ discourses on Eastern migrants offers an opportunity to identify traces of Soviet nationality policy as well as prisoners’ sociality in the Soviet Gulag camps in modern Russian criminal culture. This analysis is based on the author’s field research conducted in Eastern Siberia in 2012–2014.

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As opposed to you [the free ones], we have no ethnicity-related problems. We [prisoners] are all the same—we all differ, but still we are the same... (Sergei, age 28, Irkutsk)

This article explores the above-cited statement, made by a young Russian convict in Siberia, by placing it within both historical and synchronic contexts as a legacy of the Gulag¹ and its implications for contemporary inmates’ sociality. What does the

¹ I am using the term “Gulag legacy” in two different but connected contexts. First of all, we are dealing with the institutional, infrastructural, and personnel continuity of Stalinist repressive

sentence “We all differ, but still we are the same” mean in the reality of a Russian prison, with its social structure where the role of a prisoner’s ethnic affiliation is intentionally downplayed in favor of the so-called universal code of solidarity among inmates, a concept that originated in the Soviet Gulag? Why are ethnic divisions accorded less significance in the context of the contemporary Russian prison system? In what way do class, race (ethnicity), and “gender”² proscribe a world that simultaneously puts strong emphasis on the ethnic difference (heterogeneity) and unity (homogeneity) in contemporary Russian society? How can one illustrate the entanglement and embeddedness of their statements within the Soviet models of nationality-building policy that rendered them invisible? To answer these questions, this analysis will examine three interconnected issues: (1) the reasons for the continuation of Soviet models of national and cosmopolitan coexistence in contemporary Russian prisons; (2) the latter’s striking accordance with the Gulag model; and (3) the reasons for the preservation or reproduction of the Gulag legacy. From this perspective the relationship between the Soviet and the post-Soviet situation needs to be analyzed through dynamic categories that permit the study of ethnic manifestations in the given social and cultural context (Rabinow 1986).

Prisoner communities can resolve disagreements and tension among their ethnically diverse members through either direct confrontation or peaceful negotiation (Barth 1969; Vertovec 2009). The specificity of human behavior under conditions of incarceration would imply that the likelihood of any conflicts on the basis of interethnic hostility is quite high.³ However, despite widespread interethnic tensions and conflicts in the wider Russian society, paradoxically, prisons remain zones free of ethnic conflict; they appear to be heading towards increasingly sophisticated forms of cultural and “racial” integration. Siberian prisons happen to represent such cases.⁴ They cope surprisingly well with the challenge of diversity and xenophobic im-

institutions. Secondly, in the case of today’s prisoners we can talk about a special way of experiencing Gulag trauma, since they are forced to remain in similar (although not identical) conditions. This results in a radically different view of the essence and chronology of the Stalinist repression mechanisms.

² The gender division is used by prisoners as a metaphor for coercive imposition of social hierarchy between men through violent acts of rape. The “roles” in the sexual act are based on the division between the active (male) and passive (female) positions. As Caroline Humphrey (2002:105) wrote, “forcing a man to take the ‘female’ role in homosexual acts was an established punishment, or downgrading of status, in the camps.” This “gender” opposition and the permanent fear of rape constitute the quasi-caste system of social divisions in prison camps.

³ According to Coretta Phillips (2007), “Within the tense environment of the prison, then, it seems likely that ethnic, religious, national and cultural diversity could create the conditions for conflict and disorder.”

⁴ Siberian prisons are part of the Russian prison system. Together with the United States, Russia leads the world in terms of the number of prisoners per 100,000 citizens. The number has been decreasing in Russia in recent years—in 2009–2014 it dropped by 300,000 altogether. According to Aleksandr Smirnov, the former deputy minister of justice, there were 695,000 prisoners and 113,000 people under investigative arrest in the country in 2013 (RAPSI 2013). Prisons in Russia can be divided into four types: pretrial institutions, educative or juvenile labor colonies, corrective labor colonies (most common), and prisons *sensu stricto*.

pulses coming from the "free" world. Although prisoners themselves explain the phenomenon by referring to the specific code of behavior among prisoners that does not divide people on the basis of their places of origin or physical appearances, here we are dealing with a more complex model of diversity management that simultaneously emphasizes ethnic solidarity and prevents any form of disagreement with the help of tight control exerted by the higher caste of Russian prisoners.

The origin of this model dates back to the Stalinist era when the Soviet model of nationality policy was adapted by the new Soviet criminal subculture (Volkov 2005:164). Siberian prisoner communities have remained faithful to their Stalinist-era principles and have ignored the general post-1991 tendency to ethnicize all social and economic relationships. One of the explanations could be related to the functionality of the model and its connection with Soviet aspirations for equality among ethnic groups, which was evident in the division between "cosmopolitan" Russians and ethnic minorities.

Conceptually, this article is based on Caroline Humphrey's approach towards Soviet cosmopolitanism and Yuri Slezkine's idea of the USSR as a communal apartment. The relationship between Soviet and Western cosmopolitan epistemologies was described by Humphrey (2004) in "Cosmopolitanism and *Kosmopolitizm* in the Political Life of Soviet Citizens." This work is quite pertinent to my argument as it emphasizes the tensions between internationalism, cosmopolitanism, and *kosmopolitizm* (as an ideological product of the Soviet regime). I use the term "cosmopolitanism" (or Soviet *kosmopolitanizm*) in a specific sense as the possibility of nonethnic cultural models in a highly ethnicized post-Soviet world. It resulted from the complicated relationship between an internationally oriented ideology and nationalistically oriented practices in the USSR (Brubaker 1994; Martin 2006). In the Soviet world Russians (or generally Eastern Slavs in Siberia) were deemed to be superior "cosmopolitans" in contrast to inferior, "less cosmopolitan" ethnic minorities. From this perspective, cosmopolitanism reflects the hierarchical, hegemonic position of Russians in relation to inferior minorities, who represented "national" rather than "cosmopolitan" diversity. This form of cosmopolitanism implies a national hegemony of ethnic Russians, in which ethnic minorities were allocated a space but confined to "ethnic" structures where they were to preserve their own cultures. Slezkine (2006), in his article "The Soviet Union as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," describes the USSR as a communal apartment where each bigger nation had its *own* room (a Soviet republic) in a common space governed by political principles. This model was based on the ambivalent function of "the Russian room" that was construed as both common and ethnic.

Reproduction of the Soviet model of "cosmopolitan universalism," or rather hegemony, not only gives prison communities an opportunity to manage diversity based on an assumed Slav domination but also supports the primacy of the criminal law over ethnic and religious solidarity. This dual model of diversity management, in which the extreme concentration of ethnic differences was accompanied by an ideal of affiliation to one homogenous, monolithic community of prisoners, has been reflected in criminal culture and resulted in the development of an effective model of

prisoners' control of difference, including ethnic difference. In this context we are dealing not so much with discovering hidden layers of the Stalinist world in remote Siberian prison camps as with a particular model of universalism that contributed to a high level of "prisoner cosmopolitanism" that resisted increasing xenophobia and ethnic tension in the wider society. We are dealing here with a special form of "prisoner universalism," which proved to be more efficient than the ubiquitous policy of Soviet nationalities that failed to unite an ethnically diverse Soviet population and instead contributed to ethnic tension.

This analysis is based on two research hypotheses. The first is a neo-Marxist reading of ethnicity as a relationship shaped by the existing social conditions and historical experiences (Hopper and Webber 2009:175–176). This means that the current ethnic representations always constitute a part of a wider social structure and are subordinated to both the existing dominance mechanisms and the available frameworks of cultural representation. The ideological attempt to universalize an ethnically diverse population undertaken by Soviets proved to be successful within the space of the Soviet and post-Soviet prison.

The second hypothesis concerns the dependence of the public image of the past on current social and cultural needs (Bevernage 2011). As Christopher Kaplon-ski notes, "we can only know the past in the epistemological present.... The past is continually rewritten or re-remembered in various ways to suit the present situation" (1993:236). The debate about the Stalinist past in Russia in the 2000s entered a phase marked by a schizophrenic dialogue attempting to reach consensus in the academic world and incoherent historical policy aimed at commemorating the victims of Stalinist crimes accompanied by a growing nostalgia for the Soviet period (Greene 2010). Both in school education and mass-culture productions, the emphasis put on the victims of the repressive Stalinist policy has been subordinated to a new (imperial) reading of this traumatic period, where repressions were considered a side effect of the fight for the country's international position. Therefore, Russian practices of commemorating Stalinist crime victims have become hostage to the necessity of meeting two contradictory objectives: telling the truth about the repressions, as well as demonstrating the power of the country and its grand history (Anstett 2011:4–5). Serguei A. Oushakine (2013:275) has emphasized the mnemonic shift "from the playful retrofitting of the past in the late 1990s to the obvious attempts to envision 'history' as an assemblage of emotionally charged objects, undertaken during the past decade." Recognition of the Stalinist repressions now takes place in the context of a more important and superior event—the Great Patriotic War. In recent popular-culture productions the Stalinist era has become aestheticized and uplifted, which has indirectly normalized tragic events associated with the political purge as a necessary element of the period. This cultural context of the public presence or nonpresence of the trauma is quite essential to understanding the specificity of statements concerning the past made by the representatives of the analyzed group (prisoners). In this case, this specificity lies in their participation in Russian commemorative practices while being in a highly similar (in today's terms) situation as the victims of Stalinist repression

themselves. Serving time in a Siberian prison opens other ways of experiencing (or ignoring) the repressions-related trauma than the ones available to most of society. Most people have never spent a moment in prison, and thus the situation seems quite abstract to them, or perhaps is only known from the memories told by elderly family members and from literature. In other words, situations of forced incarceration in similar (although not identical) conditions result in prisoners taking radically different views of the essence and chronology of the Stalinist repression mechanisms. In this context imprisonment radically changed the perspective of the prisoners' understanding of mass terror. In popular discourses the unjust character of Stalinist repressions is accompanied by an assumption of the fairness of subsequent "rightful" convictions following Joseph Stalin's death in 1953. In the USSR inhabitants' collective memory, Stalin's death symbolizes a slow change into a fairer model of administering justice and the end of mass terror. In fact, the term "Stalinist repressions" itself relates the blind terror policy to Stalin personally, rather than to a political system or ideology. From today's perspective, the repressive potential of the USSR still remains quite large, but compared to the previous period—when thousands of citizens perfectly loyal to the party and the system had been punished on fabricated pretexts—the change seemed radical. From the prisoners' viewpoint the liberalization after 1953 was insignificant, since the character of punishment determined by the state remained unquestioned. The continuation of the surrounding objects and social mechanisms and the real or symbolic continuity of criminal culture result in the feeling that the situation has remained practically the same, undergoing only superficial changes. For a considerable number of prisoners it is definitely too early to reflect on the Gulag commemoration dilemmas—they still have doubts that it actually ended.

CRIMINAL COSMOPOLITANISM

In 1995 I observed the activities of a developing multiethnic gang of criminals from Central Asia in Poland. Interestingly, they constantly used ethnic nicknames for each other, such as the Tatar, the Armenian, and so on. These nicknames however were never applied to the Slavs, who were always called by their first names or had nicknames unconnected with their ethnic origin. My later interviews with prisoners from the former USSR convinced me that this model was not coincidental. Informants' answers always constructed ethnicity in relation to the black box constituted by the Russian nationality. It was the only one unmentioned, and all others were constructed in relation to it. A criminal could work with Armenians, Yakuts, or Georgians, but not with Russians, because the latter were always called by their Christian names (not by ethnicity-based nicknames) and were socially defined.⁵ In this context a clear division between the socially defined world (the Slavs, or more rarely Russian citizens) and the ethnic one (involving ethnic minorities of the former USSR) can be

⁵ The terms "ethnic" and "social" are used as two opposing ways to describe divisions and hierarchies in prisoner communities based or not based on their members' ethnic origin.

made.⁶ This way of defining individuals based on an unspecified cosmopolitan model distinctly resembles the model of Soviet ethnic interactions described by Slezkine (2006). The relationship between political and national communities was highly complicated in the USSR, since the state had a dualistic status as an international political community of communists and an ethno-political structure with ethnic Russians having a special status (Vishnevskii 1998). This phenomenon was visible in the terminology: whereas the country's name did not have any geographic designation, all the republics had ethnically oriented names and the presumed status of a "homeland" for a given nation. According to Slezkine, the USSR was a communal apartment where each bigger nation had its own room, while the Union could perceive itself as the host. All nationalities were ranked theoretically along an evolutionary scale from tribe to nation and practically by territorial or social status:

The status of a given nationality could vary a great deal but the continuing use of ethnic quotas made sure that most practical advantages accrued to the members of titular nationalities residing in "their own" republics. Sixty years of remarkable consistency on this score had resulted in almost total "native" control over most Union republics: large ethnic elites owed their initial promotions and their current legitimacy (such as it was) to the fact of being ethnic. Dependent on Moscow for funds, the political and cultural entrepreneurs owed their allegiance to "their own people" and their own national symbols. (Slezkine 2006:338)

The whole system, according to Slezkine, was based on the special function of the "Russian room." It was, in a sense, common space just as others were, in a sense, Russian. It was this differentiation of perspectives that made solving ethno-political problems among other former-USSR rooms impossible.

Similar tensions could be observed in the relationships between Russian culture and the other cultures of the USSR. The division into cosmopolitan Russianness, which symbolized modernity, and other nationalities with distinct ethnic representations, which were shaped after 1945, entered the canon of nationality-related policy. In the postwar period nationalization of ethnicity and the hybrid nature of the "ideal USSR citizen" contributed not only to the re-Russification of the country's public space but also to the return (under new conditions) of the Russian imperial tradition, both related to the external world and to its own citizens (Zajęczkowski 2009). An ideal citizen was supposed to be universal and worldly but at the same time to have a deep connection with Russian culture (Humphrey 2004). In this context modernizing attitudes got separated from the ethnic context. All cultures and subcultures viewed as more Eastern or "backward"—compared to the generally approved norm associated with the so-called Russian high culture—were perceived through catego-

⁶ In reality, Russians often reveal regional identities that may or may not interact with ethnic groups present in particular regions. For instance, Russians from Siberia, Central Asia, or the Caucasus can optionally choose to stick to "their own people." In cases of advanced acculturation (concerning the Caucasus and to a lesser extent Central Asia) individuals are described as "their [ethnic group's] Russians" or "being almost like them." These individuals can, however, drop their ethnic designations at any moment to place themselves in the "cosmopolitan" world of the Slavs.

ries of oriental exoticism. There were similar attitudes regarding remote and isolated rural communities. This basic division determined the way the cultural dimensions of modernization were perceived in the periphery of the USSR.

In contrast to Central Asia, the "Siberian wasteland" was conceptualized not as the "sleepy Orient" but as a culturally exotic space. In this cultural context modernity in Siberia was implemented from the center to the periphery in a nonevolutionary way and in extraordinary forms. The specificity of Siberia lies in the half-military and disciplinary form of socialist modernization with almost total ideological tension in the local cultural field. This semiclosed world represented timeless Soviet cosmopolitanism, in which the past and the region's cultural specificity constituted nothing but exotic scenery for standardized models of social life. This version of frontier socialism was characterized by a closed-border policy, special attention from state authorities to the supervision of local communities, and a very strong connection between socialist modernization and militarization of the area.⁷

A key feature of socialist modernization was the routine use of violence both as a tool to eliminate existing sociocultural structures and as a basic mechanism of social regulation. For example, Soviet industrialization policy went hand in hand with practices aimed at creating the zone of special movement rights for different categories of citizens, a selective and discriminatory passport policy, and the new distribution of the right to live in cities. The Gulag camp network was an inseparable part of the fast industrialization program in Siberia and was joined with a strong security policy. The mass use of semislave labor transformed Siberia into a place of forced migration from all parts of the USSR.⁸ This forced internalization still plays an important role in interethnic relationships in Siberia. The application of this model provoked similar results: mass migration of new inhabitants, the special role of military and penitentiary institutions, and the transformation of local societies according to socialist modernization patterns (Ssorin-Chaikov 2003). In the case of Siberia, mass migration completely changed the regional ethnic situation (because of the "foreign" ethnic groups' migration). Indigenous inhabitants still played a nominal role in the symbolic and political life of the region, but generally most inhabitants had migrant origins and very weak ties to the presocialist period of the region's history and culture. In spite of the fact that Siberia was transformed into a place with a dominant Slavic population at the beginning of the twentieth century, only the So-

⁷ The influence of military-mobilization aesthetics on the socialist-modernization practices was very strong and it was widely recognized in the literature (Fitzpatrick 1976; Skocpol 1988; Vishnevskii 1998), but the specificity of the socialist border with the outside world (whether with a nonsocialist or fellow socialist country) provoked the "overmilitarization" of social life in the border area.

⁸ Siberia was a destination for prisoners and other forced migrants long before 1917. This image of "the carceral space" was crucial for popular imaginings of the area in Russia and abroad. The main differences between tsarist and Soviet times lie not only in the scale (much bigger) and conditions (much worse) of imprisonment but largely in the use of mass imprisonment as a modernization strategy for the region by Soviet authorities. Prisoners were viewed as cheap "tacit resources" for conducting large infrastructural and resource-oriented projects.

viet mass migration definitively completed the process of Russification. The mass migration based on the industrialization policy (shifting the industrial base to the east) and forced migration (imprisonment and exile) changed the demographic situation rapidly. For example, according to demographer Zhanna Zaiionchkovskaia (2003), "In the years 1926–1959 the population in Western Siberia increased by 1.5 times, in Eastern Siberia by 2 times, and by 3 times in the Far East, whereas in the Russian Federation the number only increased by 27 percent."

Since the collapse of the USSR, the Russian Federation (as the most ethnically complex creation) still reflects the Soviet model of defining ethnicity in relation to Russian cosmopolitanism. From the perspective of my analysis an important factor is the extreme tension between the "nonethnic" Russian world and the ethnic non-Russian world. Nationalist discourses aiming at defending people from strangers refer directly to orientalist and xenophobic images of backward minorities. Cosmopolitan and urbanized Russians view themselves as victims of rural, traditional, and collectivist minorities (Aleksandrov 1999) who use the corrupt state for their own purposes. It is worth noting that because of the coexistence of the new (Russian) and old (Soviet) imagined divisions, the awareness of the civic community is determined by the old and new cultural divisions. Thus, the main subjects of aversion to migrants are Russian citizens from the Northern Caucasus, whereas the Belarusians and Ukrainians are mostly viewed as "regular citizens." There is, however, a considerable difference between ethnic antagonisms in the army or, increasingly, in multiethnic schools and the relative absence of ethnic conflicts in prisoners' statements. One of my informants said:

We [prisoners] do not have any ethnic conflicts, perhaps they occur somewhere in the republics.⁹ Here it is not a problem. Everybody behaves the same way. There are certain differences in behavior, especially when it comes to Muslims, but they are of secondary importance. (Aleks, age 30, Irkutsk)

The lack of conflicts does not mean that there are no clear divisions between Russian and non-Russian inmates. Another informant said more about this dualistic approach:

Informant: We do not have any nationality. We are together...

Interviewer: Then why do you constantly repeat that Murad is Kazakh and Dirshotan Uzbek?

Informant: I don't quite get what you mean by that—I'm just stating the facts. (Konstantin, age 29, Irkutsk)

Indeed we likely are dealing with two overlapping vocabularies: the universal (social) one applicable to everyone and the ethnic one used in relation to ethnic minorities, as the following comments suggest:

⁹ He was referring to ethno-political units within the Russian Federation with special rights for their titular nations.

I have done time with all kinds of people: Buryats, Chechens, Armenians, and the Kyrgyz. I have met architects, businessmen, and bursars. I had to share cells with bitches (*suki*), and I met real thieves. (Pavel, age 33, Ulan-Ude)

Here the informant combines an ethnic vocabulary with terms referring to life experience and leadership building based on relationships with the prison administration, in other words on the collaboration with or rejection of obedience to the criminal code and living "according to the code" (*po poniatiiam*).¹⁰ Representatives of both options could be Buryat, Chechen, Armenian, or Kyrgyz, but my informants always used a dual perspective regarding ethnic minorities (collective and individual) and a singular one in reference to the Slavs. Avoiding any ethnicization of conflicts was very clear in informants' statements—the enemy's nationality could be mentioned, but a conflict itself was never described from an ethnic angle:

Interviewer: Does one need to watch out for people of other nationalities here [in prison]?

Informant: One has to watch out for everybody. (Oleg, age 28, Chita)

In the case of minorities the information about nationality/ethnicity comes first, often followed by a given inmate's status and finally his first name or nickname.¹¹ This was an application of a cultural model rather than a utilitarian recognition of the adversary's cultural field. In most cases information about a prisoner's origin does not mean much since Siberian prisoners' knowledge about other nationalities is minor and stereotypical. Whereas Uzbeks, Georgians, or Armenians are perceived through clear stereotypes, Koreans, Yakuts, or the Evenki do not evoke any particular associations among "men" (*liudi*, the criminal hierarchy elite) from central Russia.¹² This does not mean, however, that their ethnicity is meaningless. An ethnic perspective characterizes people of Asiatic origin or those from indigenous Siberian groups as very hospitable and generous:

"Asians" are strongly supported by their families and they always share stuff. We respect them for their hospitality. Russians have drunk fathers and poor mothers and no help to count on. This support is the most important. The people you know from the outside sometimes determine your status here. (Oleg, age 28, Chita)

¹⁰ I use Humphrey's (2002) translation of the Russian criminal slang word *poniatiia* ("understandings"). The term can also be translated as "notions" and indexes an informal code of moral and juridical norms.

¹¹ For instance, "Kazakh Murad" or "Murad the Kazakh."

¹² Members of the latter group are often perceived as "Siberian natives," without any special ideas about ethnic differences in Siberia. The local (Siberian) Russians are aware of these differences among indigenous peoples in their regions of residence. The Tyva inhabitants are an exception here, since they are commonly known to be fearless warriors always ready to defend their position.

Hospitality is not only a feature but also an expectation of the possible connection between classic prison clan-like ties unrelated to one's origin and alleged or real Asian clan-based relations that enable one to obtain support from outside the prison. We are dealing with a performative description (Austin 1962) of a division that can, but does not necessarily have to, work in practice. Everyone uses both criminal and family-related support networks, and Russians generally find it much easier than migrants to get help from their friends or acquaintances. Nonetheless, the greater readiness to help that is revealed by Asians' families and friends is viewed as a manifestation of positive Orientalism (in Edward Said's sense).

Prisons are divided by prisoners into socially oriented and ethnically oriented populations. For instance, the category "Georgian thief" differs significantly from "a Georgian who is a thief." The first category refers to a socialization model open to any criminal from Georgia: anyone of Russian, Jewish, Greek, or other ethnicity. The second highlights the Georgian origin of a given criminal. At the same time, such categories as "a Russian criminal" or a "Russian criminal group" are used solely in association with foreign countries and usually include representatives of post-Soviet ethnic subcultures.

The specificity of prisoner communities lies in the extremely clear and special definition of "gender roles," as well as the inmates' social and ethnic status, in the framework of a broader interaction model based on quasi-caste divisions (Varese 1999). This means that social mobility in prison is determined by a currently occupied position. Losing this position equals irreversible degradation without a chance to make one's situation better again. From this perspective ethnicity is the most labile and the least dramatic element of one's social position. Whereas "gender roles" are negotiated in the framework of being vulnerable to rape and the victims' choice to live regardless of the humiliation suffered, and their social status is defined internally depending on the regime in a given prison (Chalidze 1977), ethnicity remains a sphere where the state's descriptive practices clash with individuals' cultural baggage and the local community's needs. This is the paradox of prison culture that creates a separate world not only within the limits imposed by the administration (the state) but through constant interactions with the administration.

The state's function is ambivalent, since it is a source of oppression and an object of rejection, as well as a source of national pride. In this context ethnic categories are dynamic and connect the worlds on both sides of the bars. Ethnicity is closely related to an individual's position in "gender" (in the sense described above) or social status-based hierarchies. Only if one has minimal rights within the community does one's ethnic status carry any more validity than information about their origin.

THE GULAG'S INFLUENCE ON THE COSMOPOLITANISM OF SOVIET CRIMINAL CULTURE

The above-described model of interethnic relations strikingly resembles criminal culture models shaped in the Gulag that were universal in the USSR (both within and outside the prison camps). Gulag is the acronym applied to the whole system of

Stalinist prison camps that in fact became one of the most effective and terrifying death factories in the history of humanity. The combination of harsh climate, a lack of effective healthcare, and hard labor conditions drastically minimized the chance of survival and resulted in escalating prisoner violence directed towards both the camp administration and other inmates. The high percentage of political convicts emphasized the division between the "hosts" (the criminal elite) and the "visitors" (accidental criminals or political convicts). Post-Gulag trauma was common and rather egalitarian—the threat of terror haunted all social classes and ethnic groups in the USSR.¹³ The noble slogans of Soviet internationalism were reflected in the universality of repression—northern and Asian regions of the USSR hosted forced migrants from all parts of the country. Difficult living conditions and the cultural diversity of prisoners transformed prerevolutionary Russian criminal culture into its more modern and internationalist Soviet version based on the imperative of cultural and institutional autonomy from communist ideology and Soviet moral role models. Criminal principles contradicted the communist ideal of a worker loyal to the party (Varese 1999; Humphrey 2002; Volkov 2005). Since early childhood *liudi* ("men," those occupying the higher levels of prison hierarchy) were supposed to ignore Soviet political organizations and refuse to work for the state or perform military service (Glazov 2002). They were not allowed to start their own families either. They were expected to act for the benefit of their *obshchina* ("criminal community") and to be absolutely honest in using their common treasury (*obshchak*). Humphrey describes the fundamentals of the informal criminal code as follows:

One of the most important of the laws was the injunction not to compromise with state or the Party. It was forbidden to work for any state organization, to serve in an army, or to have residence permit; even having worn a Pioneer scarf or a badge of Lenin as a child was enough to disqualify a man from reaching the highest rank and becoming a thief in law. Attachments to the ordinary world in general were not allowed. A thief therefore should not marry. In this highly gendered world, liaisons with women from inside the Thieves World were common, and women could be members of the bands, but they were held in low esteem and usually badly treated.... Someone who it was discovered had compromised with the state authorities was punished violently and called a bitch (*suka*). (2002:105)

Obeying these rules was more important not only than one's own affairs but also one's life. Criminal folklore clearly emphasizes and glorifies a chosen death over resigning from following the code (*poniatii*).

According to Vadim Volkov, the power of the Soviet criminal subculture was directly related to the scale of the state's violence towards criminals: "The harder and more repressive the Soviet political and legal regime became, the stronger and more organized the criminal world turned" (2005:166). It was this ability to systemati-

¹³ Available Gulag statistics show the increasingly multiethnic composition of inmate populations. On October 1, 1937, there were 38 nationalities represented in the Gulag, whereas by October 1, 1938, there were already 66 (Kokurin and Petrov 2000:411).

cally build their autonomy through obeying their own rules, which often proved life-threatening, that caused the establishment of criminals' alternative ethics that, in turn, also influenced the free world. The existence of an internal multiethnic prisoner community that within its confines openly negated Soviet social order proved shocking to both the state and its citizens. This phenomenon appeared in the popular imagination, although information about it was hardly accessible. Official and semiofficial discourses stigmatized criminals as people with a primitive mentality (Likhachev 1935), as neurotic sociopaths (Shalamov 2009), or, in a more Marxist sense, as victims of growing up in a pathological environment. These perceptions have remained unchanged since the collapse of the USSR. Criminals—according to both “visitors’” memories and the current infrastructure of Gulag commemoration—appear as demons that lack human features or the slightest empathy. Their voices are completely absent and ignored. They only serve as background players in the drama of political prisoners and their oppressors.¹⁴ Nonetheless, some crimes were often fabricated, just like political offences, and many “criminals” served long sentences for appropriating small amounts of grain from kolkhoz fields or other minor infractions. These who did time for criminal offences constituted a highly diverse and conflicting group (Kokurin and Petrov 2000).

In addition, the Gulag's criminal world was confronted with a powerful heresy connected to the institutionalization of a separate hierarchy based on criminals who collaborated with the prison administration (*suki*). Prisoner-collaborators were supported by the administration and were, in fact, permitted to eliminate followers of the informal criminal code. The plan, however, proved unsuccessful. After violent conflicts provoked by the administration and later called “the war of the bitches”¹⁵ it became clear that the alternative hierarchy supported by the state could only exist in select prisons with a large number of *suki* (the so-called “red” prisons).

The power of the Gulag criminal culture was based on the demand for absolute obedience to its moral code that imposed active alternative centers of power in prisons, essential to preventing conflicts. At the same time the idea of the code's superiority to prisoners' origins or religious beliefs emerged. Ethnic solidarity played a minor role compared with the criminal code solidarity. Multiethnic criminal circles overcame the threat of ethnic wars using method still popular in Russian prisons: making any sign of ethnic solidarity dependent on a given individual's status and on his absolute acceptance of the code, or *poniatii*, as the superior idea of

¹⁴ The current Russian infrastructure of Gulag commemoration mainly concentrates on the victims' (political prisoners') experiences. Both emotionally and discursively public representations of the Gulag trauma have a Soviet (dissident) origin and are still shaped by an opposition between those “unfairly” and “fairly” sentenced. The tendency has strengthened since 2000, when the Great Patriotic War myth created by the state subjected public representations of the trauma to the new imperial interpretation of Russian history (Anstett 2011:4–5).

¹⁵ The “war of the bitches” is a commonly used term referring to serious tragic incidents that occurred in 1945–1953 within the Gulag criminal communities. The conflict was provoked by the support that collaborating criminals received from prison administration as regards mass killings of “thieves in law” (*vory v zakone*).

criminal solidarity. Prisoners collaborating with the prison administration adapted the model to their own situation: the "red" prison principles left no room to demonstrate ethnic solidarity except for the forms created by its own caste system, partly accepted by the thieves (mutual respect is the status of lower castes). The above situation caused the creation of a model that closely corresponded to Soviet policy regarding nationalities described by Slezkine (2006):¹⁶ the emphasized cultural diversity remained under the control of both the informal code and its executors who lacked ethnic sentiments and acted to the benefit of the "men" or "thieves" (*liudi*) and the "nonthieves" (*fraera*). That caused the establishment of a dual system that was simultaneously cosmopolitan and ethnic but did not exclude manifestations of solidarity (controlled through definitions of *poniatiia*). Thus, a cosmopolitanized model could be created that did not require an ethnic uprising or learning to subordinate national sentiments to political preferences. It was, in a sense, a modernization process through which former peasants and nomads learned to dialectically combine the universal and the particular in the framework of a common criminal subculture model.

De-Stalinization radically changed the situation of political prisoners but did not considerably influence that of criminal convicts. A general improvement of prisoners' living conditions, as well as a gradual relinquishment from their inhumane exploitation in the 1960s, was accompanied by other disciplinary mechanisms unknown in the Stalinist period, such as using outlaw prisons and psychiatric hospitals as *resocialization* places for recidivists (Chalidze 1977). New models of interaction in prison communities appeared involving brutal cell-entrance initiations, institutionalization of homosexual rape, and such, which were commonly associated with the Gulag but in fact developed and turned more brutal in the post-Stalinist era. Therefore, from the criminals' viewpoint, the Gulag did not disappear following 1953, and both the form and social structure of prison camps did not change either.

The criminal cosmopolitanism model that developed in the Gulag was reproduced not only after Stalin's death but also following the collapse of the USSR. The Soviet ethnic policy has remained in the former USSR territories, and especially in Russia, to this day. The idea of prisoners' equality under the criminals' code and the notion of leaving extreme ethnic prejudice outside the prison walls made Russian institutions differ considerably from those in the United States where ethnic conflicts commonly occur. This does not mean, however, that Russian facilities were any less dangerous or oppressive.

¹⁶ Post-Stalinist Soviet policy regarding nationalities was as follows: "Deriving its legitimacy from the 'really existing' ethnoterritorial welfare state rather than future communism and past revolution, the new official discourse retained the language of class as window dressing and relied on nationality to prop up the system. Every Soviet citizen was born into a certain nationality, took it to day care and through high school, had it officially confirmed at the age of sixteen and then carried it to the grave through thousands of application forms, certificates, questionnaires and reception desks. It made a difference in school admissions and it could be crucial in employment, promotions and draft assignments" (Slezkine 2006:337).

In the 1990s the division of criminal hierarchies into “red” and “dark blue”¹⁷ was complemented by the subculture of violent crime aimed at effective action outside prisons and despising the prison way of life. Regardless of a certain advantage gained by bandits in the free world outside prisons (Volkov 2005), the latter remained the domain of the old (thieves’) hierarchies, which made violent entrepreneurs accept their basic principles. This acceptance of the rules of interethnic coexistence remained unchanged regardless of brutal competition between particular ethnic groups in the 1990s. In this respect, prisons remained faithful to their Stalinist-era principles and ignored the general post-1991 tendency to ethnicize all social and economic relationships.

Although it lost its dominant position in the criminal world outside prisons, Soviet prison culture has become an important element of popular culture in the Russian periphery. Books, films, and music (prison ballads called *shansony*) have been enjoying popularity, and elements of criminal culture have gained a new life. Prison-related mythology still contributes to a widespread construct of masculinity, which in turn has resulted in a unique phenomenon of criminalization “from a distance.” The distance in this context means the path of criminality, which does not depend on having prison experience or growing up in a pathological social environment but rather on exposure to books, songs, and movies about prison. Many young men, especially in Siberia, try to live according to these discursive patterns even though they have no real experience of criminal life. In trying to mimic criminal life they only select some of its elements¹⁸—the idea of brotherhood, a strong homophobic attitude (based on the above-mentioned opposed “gender” roles in the prison conditions), a hatred of police, and the perception of prison experience as a test of masculinity.

Even in increasingly xenophobic Russia (Zajączkowski 2009) prison discourses are universalist, which eliminates the possibility of ethnic conflicts. A 35-year-old Buryat without a criminal record and, consequently, without any prison-related experience interpreted an ethnicity-related murder in Ulan-Ude through his knowledge of the *poniatiia*:

My Russian neighbor who had just been released from prison was standing peacefully in the street. He was approached by a drunken Buryat rudely demanding a cigarette. My neighbor asked him to go away, but the Buryat wouldn’t listen to him. The Russian reached for his knife and killed him. And it is perfectly understandable—a *man* should be asked for things, not demanded to give them... (Bair, age 35, Ulan-Ude)

¹⁷ “Dark blue” (*sinii*) refers to “men” and stems from their right to have tattoos. It is completely different from untouchable “light blues” (*goluboi*), the term used for “passive” homosexuals.

¹⁸ The elements are chosen to adapt prison subculture to free life, which is the opposite of imprisonment (the latter includes mobility control, chronic limits on satisfying the basic needs, daily contact with prison administration, and constant danger of violence). My informants were quite distrustful of the mimicry of prison life by people lacking prison experience and treated such attitudes as parodies of their “hard life in prison.”

The story requires special explanation, as the place about which my interlocutor is speaking is located in the Buryat Republic, an ethnically diverse region. The culture of Ulan-Ude streets, well described in the literature (Badmaev 2002; Karbainov 2009), reveals three main divisions of the city residents: into Buryats and non-Buryats, into city-born residents and newcomers from villages, and according to a criminals' code modified to suit city life. The code of criminal behavior offers an opportunity to maintain common grounds for negotiations and resolution of conflicts between fellows and strangers. The narrator chose the latter (quasi-criminal) interpretation of the situation assuming that in Ulan-Ude ethnic affiliation or belonging to ethnic criminal groups were unlikely to be key factors in negotiations over the accidental murder. The striking element here is his explanation of the murder grounded in *poniatiia* rather than in the recognition of interethnic tension. A former prisoner's compliance with the code of criminal solidarity and its laws provides the conflict with a completely different undertone, putting his explanation outside of the framework of interethnic tensions.

REASONS FOR REPRODUCING THE LEGACY OF CRIMINAL COSMOPOLITANISM

The conformity of the above-described Russian model of diversity management with cosmopolitan Gulag culture raises questions about both the mechanisms of transmission and the reasons for reproduction of the model. Critical to this discussion is the way the trauma of the Gulag is present in prisoners' consciousness and shapes their attitudes toward the models of prison behavior created in Stalin's time. The main reason for the popularity of the Soviet model of controlled cosmopolitanism is its connection with the current order of criminal domination (Serio and Razinkin 2002) and the Soviet and Russian culture models (Zajączkowski 2009). Combining the idea of "nations' friendship" with ideologically nonethnic prison hierarchy systems, the criminal cosmopolitanism model subordinated ethnicity to universal patterns of behavior and clearly determined the limits of ethnic solidarity. That turned the criminal cosmopolitanism model into an internal norm of behavior differentiating the "egalitarian" criminal world from the pervasive nationalism outside prisons. The effectiveness of the cultural forms developed in the Gulag is strengthened by the lack of stimuli that would weaken the "cosmopolitanism" of the dominant ethnic group. This happens because the main reason for the radicalization of xenophobic attitudes in today's Russia is the impression that an atomized and individualistic society is being invaded by organized and well-integrated migrant groups. This feeling causes a sense of insecurity and leads to the demonization of communities from Central Asia and the Caucasus.¹⁹

¹⁹ The official Soviet ideas about internationalism and peoples' friendship were not able to prevent either ethnic conflicts or xenophobia exhibited by the Slav majority towards people coming from the Caucasus or Central Asia. The main difference between today's situation and the one in the Soviet era lies in the simultaneous occurrence of Orientalist generalizations and the sense of danger from the "strangers" that strengthen the negative stereotypes of migrants.

Russian prison communities constitute the most integrated part of the Russian nation (Starikov 1996). The imperative of solidarity and the clear hierarchy make the prison model a pattern for other informal models of integration. Therefore, Russian prison communities do not feel directly endangered by cultural diversity. Their higher organizational skills are accompanied by more subtle ways of controlling non-Russians—all forms of integration are subject to the ones that originated from Russian culture and to criminal models of behavior enforced by Russians. Unlike the situation in the “free” world, in Russian prisons ethnicity is of limited significance and conforms to the existing hierarchies. Social degradation or imposing an oppressive model of “gender” roles on individuals, however, ultimately excludes them even from the most integrated ethnic networks and the solidarity imperative is not able to change that. In this context the ethnic situation in prisons resembles the USSR rather than today’s Russian Federation, in that there are common “beyond ethnic” ideas of social organization; Russians control the limits of non-Russians’ ethnic solidarity by combining social and ethnic divisions aimed at the elimination of potential conflicts between organized minorities and the unintegrated majority.

The functionality of this solution stems not only from the effectiveness of the Soviet nationality policy and the continuing presence of its elements in collective consciousness but also from the normative character of Soviet models of management in closed penitentiary institutions. Because of personnel, institutional, and material continuities, as well as the lack of public control, penal institutions have remained reservoirs of Sovietness, which tend to be even stronger on the periphery. The remoteness and deep embeddedness of penal institutions in the social life of the towns near which they are located and that provide them with necessary services have resulted in only minor changes since 1991. Anthropological and sociological research on the Russian periphery (Ericson 2000; Humphrey 2002) has shown the continuation of old forms under new conditions and the fast adaptation of new forms to the mental maps and expectations of economic agents. The new forms of economic activity must function in a special social context and play a role supplementary to the old “normal Soviet life.”

In 2004 one of my informants was moved from a city prison camp to a remote camp in Western Siberia. The first thing he noticed entering the prison was the Soviet flag in the barrack square. He told me: “I felt as if I was back in the USSR. Everything remained unchanged, as if nothing had happened outside” (Sasha, age 38, Irkutsk). Using the image of symbolic continuity my informant mainly meant the features attributed to Soviet prison camps: harsh discipline, limited rights, and isolation from the outside world promoted by the administration. In this context the transition from Soviet to Russian reality proved incredibly smooth. To this informant, the greatest tragedy was the post-Soviet system of collaboration between prisoners and the prison administration. He was transferred from the “normal” prison and was shocked by the presence of prisoners in charge wearing red armbands. He was trying to explain to himself this difference between the freedom of the regional center and Soviet-style “enslavement” in the periphery. Thus,

he continued—just like the Gulag inmates—to link red armband-wearing collaborators with the camp administration and the freedom-limiting ideology of communism. In stigmatizing this vestige of the past he reproduced an ideology that was nonetheless deeply rooted in the past.

The lack of a dividing line between the present and the past was even more evident in prisoners' statements concerning Stalinist repression. Imprisonment radically changed prisoners' perceptions of mass terror. Contrary to terrified ordinary citizens, the prisoners view the state's ability to apply a regime of sovereignty that results in the mass transfer or repatriation of people to remote closed areas as an obvious fact of life. In the case of the analyzed group we are dealing with a unique situation of forced presence in a remote place, routine experiences of outlaw regimes, and general uncertainty about representations of the Gulag (with the division into the guilty and the innocent or its clear end in the 1950s).

The key division of Gulag victims into the innocent and the criminals, present in "free-world" (non-incarcerated) discourse, is completely absent here. My informants perceive the Gulag as a manifestation of the Soviet state's desire to control the population by imprisoning the innocent. Nowadays the notion of a political (noncriminal) prisoner or a political dissident is replaced by the term "unjustly convicted," which blurs the gap between the contemporary image of the criminal and the formerly innocent victims of the Gulag era. In the post-Soviet context Gulag stands for the overproduction of injustice and oppression that still constitutes the daily reality of prison camps. Thus, the Gulag is perceived as a relic of the past, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, as a contemporary phenomenon that is still maintained and preserved in the social codes of criminals. The prisoners' experience of a lack of rights when it comes to their relationships with the prison administration is often described as a continuation of the practices of enslavement and humiliation originating in the Gulag era. The administration uses excessive violence and treats inmates as objects that can be exchanged in the course of "transactions" among penal institutions. As one informant stated: "My colleagues and I were once sent to work in a prison camp in a different part of Siberia in exchange for some equipment needed in our camp. Well, it might be the twenty-first century, but... nothing really seems to have changed" (Armen, age 40, Krasnoyarsk). Temporal regimes tend to overlap, and prisoners live in the permanent present created by the specificity of space and the organization of social relationships. Neoliberal modernity gets mixed with late-Soviet elements, and the general opinion is that a regular Soviet prison camp *is still there*.

Determining the stability of the aforementioned model of ethnic diversity management causes certain difficulties, since it depends on a number of factors. First, a systematic flow of prisoners with nationalistic attitudes can make consensus between ethnic minorities impossible. Second, the Soviet cultural matrix (that conditions the reproduction of the model) is increasingly less obvious to younger inmates who grew up in a post-Soviet cultural situation. Third, the erosion of nonmarket criminal principles—such as limits on performing certain jobs,

having a family, and public cooperation with state authorities or bodies of any kind (Volkov 2005)—inevitable in a market economy, and the decreasing gap between prisoners and free citizens in terms of expectations and attitudes can cause the emergence of different interaction models based on the decentralization or competition between ethnic and quasi-caste networks. Finally, slow but steady changes to the lingering Soviet model of the Russian prison system may contribute to the transformation of both the daily situation of prisoners and their image in society. Nonetheless, so far the existing model has been excluding prisons from the space of ethnic conflicts. Reproducing Soviet patterns of intercultural coexistence offers a chance to control interethnic solidarity effectively and guarantees order that is accepted by the majority.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary xenophobic image of the organized and anonymous mass of newcomers from Central Asia and the Caucasus clearly contrasts with the ethnic-difference-sensitive perception of “non-Russians” in Siberian prison camps. Modern Siberian discursive practices of interethnic divisions among prisoners are still based on the Soviet understanding of a multiethnic prisoner population. The modern Siberian discourse regarding “non-Russians in prison” is not only a remnant of the Soviet nationality policy but also a result of widespread ideas about the international character of the criminal and prisoner community, which finds its origin in the Gulag era. In the community of prisoners, ethnic affiliation has never been a factor in a prisoner’s position in the prison hierarchy. The analysis of prisoners’ discourses about Eastern migrants offers an opportunity to identify traces of Soviet nationality policy as well as prisoners’ experience of the Soviet Gulag camps in modern Russian criminal culture.

The specificity of Eastern Siberia lies in the radical demographic and cultural changes caused by Soviet industrialization policy. The latter was the reason for the coexistence of both “ethnic” and “cosmopolitan” elements, which made the model described above work and last longer. The remoteness of the prisons also explains why the remnants of the Gulag are part of everyday reality in the prisons. Being in a place connected in collective memory with the Gulag and the presence of both its traces (ruins of the prison camps) and communities (in accordance with the penitentiary policy certain locations or districts were settled with large numbers of former prisoners) make Stalin’s era continuous and unending. The effectiveness of the forced cosmopolitan consensus is based on a well-established hierarchical code, to which all prisoners are expected to subordinate themselves regardless of ethnicity. It is genealogically linked to the sociality established in the Gulag era and is entangled with Soviet ethnic policy that deployed cosmopolitan patterns.

Thus, the lack of ethnic conflicts common in the prison context is a long-term effect of the Gulag system that subjected all prisoners to the norms of criminal culture. The dominant social code of criminals put interethnic tensions under tight con-

trol. Soviet cosmopolitanism appears to be a mechanism that allows for a deemphasizing of ethnicity in favor of the prisoners' code of behavior. In this context the lack of ethnic conflicts in prisons and the increasing manifestations of xenophobia outside prisons constitute different reactions to similar attitudes towards interethnic relationships. This case study demonstrates that in a situation when any form of expression of ethnic difference is under tight control of the prisoners' code there is no space for the expression of xenophobic attitudes. It suggests that the Soviet model of cosmopolitanism depended on existing cultural hierarchies, such as the prisoners' hierarchy, and their ability to control interethnic solidarity.

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**LIST OF INTERVIEWEES
(PSEUDONYMS OF INFORMANTS, NATIONALITY, AGE,
PRISONER STATUS AT THE TIME OF INTERVIEW,
PLACE AND DATE OF THE INTERVIEW)**

Note: Unstructured interviews were conducted in 2012–2014 with former and current inmates and one person without a criminal record from Irkutsk, Krasnoyarsk, Chita, and Ulan-Ude. The interviews (20 in total; 8 are referenced in this paper) were conducted concerning the memory of Stalinist crimes among marginal and invisible communities in Eastern Siberia. The questions

asked mainly concerned the communities' recollections of the Stalinist past and its influence on their contemporary perception of the world. The information provided should not compromise the anonymity of the informants.

Aleks, a male Russian from Eastern Siberia, age 30, prisoner status: current, Irkutsk, August 2013.
Armen, a male Armenian from Western Siberia, age 40, prisoner status: current, Krasnoyarsk, August 2013.
Bair, a male Buryat, age 35, prisoner status: never imprisoned, Ulan-Ude, July 2012.
Konstantin, a male Russian from Eastern Siberia, age 29, prisoner status: former, Irkutsk, October 2014.
Oleg, a male Russian from Eastern Siberia, age 28, prisoner status: former, Chita, October 2013.
Pavel, a male Russian from Eastern Siberia, age 33, prisoner status: former, Ulan-Ude, October 2013.
Sasha, a male Ukrainian from Eastern Siberia, age 38, prisoner status: current (died in prison in 2014), Irkutsk, July 2012.
Sergei, a male Russian from Eastern Siberia, age 28, prisoner status: current, Irkutsk, July 2013.

КОММУНАЛЬНАЯ КВАРТИРА «СТРОГОГО РЕЖИМА»: НАСЛЕДИЕ ГУЛАГА В МНОГОНАЦИОНАЛЬНОЙ КРИМИНАЛЬНОЙ СУБКУЛЬТУРЕ МЕСТ ЗАКЛЮЧЕНИЯ В ВОСТОЧНОЙ СИБИРИ

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В этой статье рассмотрена проблема межнациональных отношений в местах заключения на территории Восточной Сибири. Проблема анализируется в перспективе сохранения и воспроизведения наследия советской криминальной субкультуры. В работе разобраны причины сопротивления сообществ заключенных «вирусу» ксенофобии, поразившему российское общество, представлены социальные функции советской модели «универсализма», позволяющей одновременную манифестацию этнической принадлежности и контролирующей возможности этнической солидарности. На основе исследования, проведенного в Восточной Сибири в 2012–2014 годах, автором сделаны выводы о сохранении советских культурных матриц в тюремной субкультуре России и о глубокой связи между опытом заключения и способами восприятия травматического периода сталинских репрессий.

Ключевые слова: Сибирь; сибирские пенитенциарные учреждения; межэтнические взаимоотношения; наследие ГУЛАГа