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Dantsig Baldaev. Gardien de camp: Tatouages et dessins du Goulag. Edited by Elisabeth Anstett and Luba Jurgenson. Geneva: Edition des Syrtes, 2013. 128 pp. ISBN 978-2-940523-02-3.

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A true immersion into the Gulag world and into Soviet reality in general, *Camp Guard: Tattoos and Drawings from the Gulag* is a unique source not only for historians but for sociologists and art historians as well. Composed in 1989 by Dantsig Baldaev (1925–2005), an employee of the Soviet Interior Ministry, it is a scrapbook that comprises two parts, both of which convey a common reflection on violence. The first part is a classification of some of the prisoners' tattoos; the second part is a look at camp life through drawings made by Baldaev during the second half of the twentieth century, based on his own observations as well as on collected accounts. Centered on the time of Joseph Stalin but encompassing the whole Soviet era up until the war in Afghanistan, these 74 pages offer a remarkable graphical representation of daily life in the Gulag, including its most violent aspects (living and working conditions, torture, humiliations, executions, corpse management). Beyond the drawings themselves, the singularity and strength of this work lie in the dynamic articulation of the words and images, in a subtle play on language that expresses itself through a meticulously crafted layout interweaving original illustrations, collages of newspaper clippings and postcards from the Brezhnev years, and captions and parodic intertexts that twist the meanings of propaganda slogans. Unlike previous volumes based on Baldaev's drawings (e.g., Baldaev 2010), the book under review is a complete collection of plates, which respects their initial order and the original decorations.

What makes this album unusual is not only its graphical form (akin to the comic book genre, which was nearly nonexistent, disregarded, if not denigrated in the USSR) but also its multiple aims, the most obvious of which is documentary. Highly knowledgeable about the Gulag world where he spent his entire career, the author uses drawing to expose its inner workings. By depicting the inside of it, he addresses a significant deficiency in terms of camp images (whether they be photography, film, or graphic art). Extremely detailed, his drawings act like photographs; they provide a look into scarcely represented places. Furthermore, the book has a true sociological scope owing to Baldaev's subtle approach to the Gulag's population and to one category in particular: the Soviet criminal underworld, which, though seldom studied, outnumbered the political detainees among whom it spread terror. The compilation of tattoo images is not dissimilar to an ethnologic, scientific endeavor, considering its systematization and historical scope

(see Baldaev 2006). It does enable a comprehensive look into the world of common criminals; all the more valuable an effort as, formerly, this specific class of prisoners had mostly been portrayed from a specific, antagonistic standpoint—that of the intellectuals they oppressed (see, e.g., *Kolyma Tales* by Varlam Shalamov). By unveiling this collection of coded “visiting cards” whose purpose borders on self-labeling, Baldaev allows their owners to bear witness, and he offers a genuine sociology of the penitentiary world depicting its hierarchy and essential moral rules (such as: “Disown your family”; “Have no family but take a mistress, for that does not commit you to anything”; “Do not work, live on income from criminal activities”; “Do not betray your accomplices”; “Know the mobster slang well and use it properly”; “Do not lose control of yourself due to drinking”). Baldaev’s work is of linguistic interest, too, for what it reveals of the prison lexicon and of propaganda language (moreover, Baldaev also authored mobster slang dictionaries: see Baldaev, Belko, and Isupov 1992; Baldaev 1997). It is a window into a multilingual Gulag, resounding with acronyms, neologisms, bureaucratic jargon, and mobster slang. Lastly, on a purely aesthetic level, this album shows obvious graphic mastery: the author’s ever-confident stroke and ever-acute delineation evince his excellence in terms of drawing as well as the passion he applies in composing and beautifying this perfectly accomplished work.

When considered more directly as a testimony, this effort raises questions, chiefly that of the identity of the author-narrator, whose camp-guard status is one of the many singularities of the book. Most Gulag testimonies—including the graphic ones—come from former prisoners, thus leaving out the point of view of camp administration employees. Admittedly, this historiographic gap had already been partially filled, prior to the publication of Baldaev’s scrapbook, by the diary of Ivan Chistiakov (Tchistiakov 2012; Chistiakov 2014), a camp guard in charge of the prisoners building the Baikal–Amur railroad line in the 1930s. Both accounts tend to show that the concepts of “executioner” and “victim” are not easily applicable to the Stalinist regime, under which, as is well known, one could frequently switch from one category to the other (which, incidentally, proves problematic with respect to the commemoration of Stalinist repressions). Indeed, Baldaev’s biography and enunciative stance illustrate how much more extensive the notion of a “gray zone” turns out to be within the context of the Gulag than in Primo Levi’s definition of it (Levi 1989:42). On the one hand, Baldaev was a loyal and helpful collaborator of the Soviet militia, a position he seemed to fully accept. What is more, part of his artistic work was destined for the personnel of the Interior Ministry, since his collection of tattoos had received the endorsement of the KGB to serve as an operational manual for internal use (bearing the notice “Secret”), as he explained in an interview given to Hungarian ethnographer Ákos Kovács in 1988 (Kovács and Sztrés 1989:51). Therefore, Baldaev’s first readers were police officers. On the other hand, he can also be considered a victim. The Stalinist terror did not spare his family: his father, Buryat ethnologist Sergei Baldaev, was arrested and detained in the 1930s, which led the young Baldaev and his sister to spend time in an NKVD-controlled orphanage. In addition to this trauma, he subsequently had to endure being

stigmatized as the son of an “enemy of the people.” It is thus a twofold experience that Baldaev shares in his album: an intimate as much as a professional one. This arguably accounts for his all-embracing vision and ability to render the attitudes and emotions of both guards and prisoners.

Moreover, the ambivalence of his position is manifested by the clandestine and transgressive character of this document. The images and texts carry a highly subversive charge indeed. This stems, on the one hand, from the explicitly sexual nature of the brutality he depicts—some drawings verge on pornography—when sexuality was largely absent from the Soviet visual culture; on the other hand, from the moral and political critiques studding the album (not the least of which is the dedication of one plate to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn). Not only does Baldaev highlight the omnipresence of repression in Soviet lives, but, more broadly, he points out the discrepancy between reality and the party line, ironically contrasting Soviet slogans with drawings of this repression. His feat consists in his denouncing the establishment and deconstructing its discourse by using its own language and images, without it being necessary to add any comments. The glorification of Soviet power is thus consistently set alongside representations of the violence wielded by this power, thereby reflecting the dual reality everyone had internalized. The Soviet system comes out looking more grotesque and hypocritical than ever. Baldaev also brings to light the permeability of the boundaries between the camp world and the rest of the country; he even goes so far as to draw an implicit parallel between the violence of the Soviet era and that of the Nazi era, by having red stars, swastikas, and death’s heads coexist within the pages of the album.

All of this explains why, even in the perestroika period, this work was far too subversive to be published in Russia and why Baldaev, being aware of this, offered the book to French ethnologist and specialist in Siberian shamanism Roberte Hamayon. To this day, the album is still mostly unknown in Russia, although some of his drawings were part of the 1995 exhibition *Art of the Gulag: On Both Sides of the Bars* (*Iskusstvo GULAGa: Po obe storony tiuremnoi dveri*) that took place at the Research and Information Centre Memorial of Saint Petersburg.

Can this album be considered an expression of “cultural resistance”—that is to say, an expression of the permanence of the camps’ underground culture, which has been described in the Soviet camp literature (by Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov among others)? The question remains. Nevertheless, this work, whose originality lies in its content and visual strength as much as in its author’s status and in its transgressive charge, affords a true reflection on violence established as a norm and on the remembrance of the Gulag, which was experienced by tens of millions of Soviets. In conclusion it should be noted that the original material has been considerably enriched by introductory chapters from the two editors of the book, anthropologist Elisabeth Anstett and camp literature/Russian literature specialist Luba Jurgenson—the latter also having had to carry out the difficult task (in view of the slang lexicon) of translating the text into French. Their analyses allow for the numerous questions raised by this atypical document to be usefully put in context and perspective.

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