Legacies of Stalinism and the Gulag: Shame and Nostalgia

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Dmitrii Bykov, Justification (2005)

• I don’t understand though, maybe for the purpose of keeping up the fear.... or crushing the opposition, the arrests were truly necessary, but just not quite so many of them? Not on this scale? [...] I don’t see the principle. I cannot see the criteria he used to exterminate. (54)

• The repression acted as an immense filtering apparatus, and the few who bravely withstood torture, and did not confess to the (fabricated) crimes brought up during interrogation, were not shot or deported to the regular camps. They were medically treated, and after their wounds healed they were sent to special Siberian settlements, where they became members of a new elite, a “golden squadron” of unbreakable people. Many of whom assisted in the defense of Stalingrad. Stalin’s purges were a way of selecting the toughest people. (159)
In contrast, most of those kulaks, saboteurs, and enemies of the people who died in the Soviet camps disagreed with their jailors that they were kulaks, saboteurs, and enemies of the people. Some of them hated “enemies of the people” just as much as their jailors did. In the Stalinist camps, many political prisoners shared the principles of their perpetrators but clung to the belief that in their personal cases, they had been mistakenly identified. (204)
Alexander Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied*

- [...] one thing is clear: the very nature of the Soviet terror makes it difficult to comprehend, remember, and memorialize. (11)

- Trauma is a response to a condition that had been experienced by the self; mourning is a response to a condition of the other. (14)

Yevgenia Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*:

- Something like that was not thinkable, something like that could not happen.
Personal history in the sense of autobiography has a strictly defined role: loyal citizens of the Soviet state were supposed to recite their lives. [...] Life histories were also collected in order to buttress the official aetiology of the Soviet State. [...] In later decades of Soviet history, much testimony relating to experience of the Second World War was also collected.
(http://www.ehrc.ox.ac.uk/lifehistory/introduction.htm)

• Andrej: Have you seen him. What a bear! He certainly practices a fight sport. Certainly.
• Ivan: But where does he come from?
• Andrej: Just like that, he has returned. Are you not happy
• Ivan: Oh yes. But Mama once said that he was a pilot. But he does not look like a pilot.
• Andrej: Ach, he is on vacation, then he does not have to wear a uniform.

- Father: Ivan?
- Ivan: What?
- Father: What, Papa.
- Ivan: What?
- Father: Why don’t you say: What, Papa?
- Ivan: What, Papa.
- Father: Good, much better so. What is wrong? Are you ashamed to call your father father?
- Ivan: No.
- Father: Do not lie.
- Ivan: I do not lie.
- Father: Call me then father, like any son does. Understood?
- Ivan: Okay, Papa.
- Father: Very good, my little son.

- 18 min.

- Ivan: What did he say about eating fish? Where can anything like that happen?
- Andrej: I don’t know. Perhaps high in the north.
- Ivan: Did you notice that he did not say anything anymore when you asked him about it. Why would that be?
- Andrej: God may know. Perhaps he wants to forget.
- Ivan: But why?
- Andrej: Why, Why! You do not know another song?
- Ivan: What do I know? He is just lying!
- Andrej: That is not true. How do you know where he has passed his time?
- Ivan: Why are you laying it thick with him?
- Andrej: Who is laying it thick?
- Ivan: You are! Papa this, Papa that! As if he is the only one! You believe any of his words. But do you know who he is? Perhaps he is a gangster! It could well be that later somewhere in the woods he will cut our throats.
- [...] 
- Andrej: You are an idiot, little one
- Ivan: Wait until he pulls his knife. You do not get it. We are here completely alone with him. Why would he be our father? Idiot!

- 38 min.

- Father: Did they bite? (with irony) Put dry clothes on (with affection)
- Ivan: Why have you come? (he begins to cry) Why? Why did you take us with you? Why is it that you care for us? It all went Okay without you! With Mama and Grandmother! Why have you come? Why did you take us with you? Do you really care for us? Give me an answer!
- Father: Mother asked me so.
- Ivan: Yes! Mama has asked you to do it! But you! You yourself?
- Father: I also wanted it.
- Ivan: Why? To bully us!
- Father: Put dry clothes on. (with affection)