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Female prisoners in Stalin's GULAG – Conditions and survival strategies

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Abstract
This article examines the conditions of female prisoners of GULAG labour camps and prisons during Stalin's era and analyses the culture and survival strategies those prisoners developed. The source material consists mostly of memoirs, as well as a few letters provided by the Memorial Archive from Moscow.

Its results show that women were less likely than men to get physically tortured or punished. Instead, psychological torture and humiliation were the most commonly used against female prisoners. However, they were more likely to be the victims of sexual assault, by either guards or fellow inmates. Men and women worked in many of the same fields of labour in the camps, but women were more likely to get light work, and to be genuinely proud of their work effort. The work environment was also the main place where the genders could interact, and build friendships and camp romances. The daily struggles of camp life, like getting enough food and acquiring light work, became the main focus and chief problem.

To overcome the mental and physical hurdles of camp and prison life, they developed a series of survival strategies. These included telling each other stories, singing or reciting poetry. They would bribe or lie their way into light work, cheat with the production numbers to get off with doing less work than expected or use sex as a commodity or leverage. The most common phycological survival strategy was apathy towards their surroundings. The most important and most uplifting way to manage camp life was to team up two and two, occasionally more, and work together. These groups would share food and resources, they would edge each other on and save each other from themselves or the dangerous work environment, ensuring survival.

Key words:
GULAG; Soviet labour camp; Stalin's Russia; prisoners; Women's History; Cultural History.

Introduction

According to NKVD's own reports more than 1.590.000 people perished in the Soviet labour camps between 1930 and 1953. This does not include prisoners who died during transport, in prison, or in exile.[1] The number must also be presumed somewhat inaccurate simply based on the source.

Even though the system of Soviet labour camps– popularly referred to as GULAG (Main camp administration)- wasn't as systematically deadly as the National-socialist concentration and extermination camps of the 1940's, they do represent a long, bloody and all together tragic part of Soviet history. This part of history didn't just affect men, but also a vast number of Soviet (and other) women who were sentenced to long prison- or labour camp sentences. This sort of fate came about not only for actual crimes or even actual anti-Soviet behaviour, but also simply for being at the wrong place at the wrong time, knowing the wrong person or having uttered the wrong thing, however harmless it seemed at the time.

Women were, like men, deported from their homes and exiled to distance places, simply because the state needed the workforce in one place, rather than in another. Women suffered the same fate, the same barracks, same prison cells, and in most cases, the same hard labour. When you look at the research conducted on the topic of National-socialist concentration- and extermination camps, you will find that the cultural history of female prisoners is also represented. Here, many examples have been found of how female prisoners developed their own survival strategies and culture.[2] This research inspired me to place a similar focus on female prisoners in Stalin's GULAG camps. Obviously, there are many differences between the two camp-systems, which one must keep in mind. The acclaimed GULAG historian Anne Appelbaum points out three main differences. Firstly, there was a far vaguer definition of the 'enemy' within the Soviet system, and so camp imprisonment could be utilized against anyone as long as the accusation was worded right. Secondly, the main purpose of GULAG was economic in nature, and so the system strived to keep prisoners in somewhat "working-condition". Finally, there were no actual death-camps in the Soviet system.[3]

[1] Anne Appelbaum, *Gulag – A History* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 518-519.
[2] Eg. Joan Ringelheim, "The Split between Gender and the Holocaust," in *Women in the Holocaust,* ed. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New York: Vail-Ballou Press, 1998), 340-350; Amy Neiberger, "An Uncommon Bond of Friendship: Family and Survival in Auschwitz," in *Resisting the Holocaust,* ed. Ruby Rohrlich (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 133-150.
[3] Appelbaum, *Gulag – A History*, 22-23. Richard Overy also does an extensive comparison of the two systems in his book *The Dictators. Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2004).

Despite these differences I believe it is relevant to look closer at the female experience of the Soviet forced labour camps. In the following article I will analyse the conditions female prisoners were subjected to and present the survival strategies they developed. *Survival strategies* might be considered a very grand term to use, but despite the fact that GULAG, on paper, strived to keep prisoners fit for work, there were still high casualty rates. Often, the work one was allotted could mean the difference between life, death, or invalidity post release. Aside from this, there was also the question of making it through the experience, not just physically intact but also mentally. So, by *Survival Strategies* I refer to both the methods women utilized to physically, as well as mentally improve their lot, during a long camp- or prison term.

I have chosen to work with the years 1930-1950 as they roughly cover the years Ioseph Stalin was in power. He greatly expanded the camp network and created the persecution, arrest and incarceration madness that have become the image of GULAG in popular culture to this day.

The historical context

Forced labour and deportations to Siberia were already in use during the reign of the Tsars - A system which the Bolsheviks happily carried over into their regime. Shortly after their seizure of power on the 26th of October 1917, the terror, which Lenin considered necessary in his new Russia, began. The first bloody years of the regime are referred to as The Red Terror, because of the sheer level of persecution and executions. In December of 1917 the Cheka (All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-revolution and Sabotage) was founded under the leadership of Felix Dzerzhinsky, who himself had spent 11 years of his life in Tsarist prisons and as forced labour.[4] The Cheka and its later incarnations GPU (State Political Directorate), OGPU (Joint State Political Directorate), NKVD (The People's commiserate for Internal Affairs) and MGB/MVD (The ministry of State Security and the ministry of Internal affairs) were above the law and therefore had a lot of freedom in the "fight" against counter-revolutionary activity.[5] One of this intelligence services responsibilities was the running of the concentration camps, later referred to as labour camps. The word *concentration camp* was already in use at the end of the 19th century, but these were military institutions and very different from the Bolshevik version, which had three unique features, as characterized by Harvard professor Richard Pipes. Firstly, they were permanent and were not removed after the conclusion of the civil war (1918-1921). Secondly, they were meant for use against the population itself, to crush internal resistance, rather than enemies of war. Lastly,

[4] Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: First Vintage Books Edition, 1990).
[5] Appelbaum, *Gulag – A History,* 32.

they had an economic function, as also emphasized by Appelbaum. They were not just meant to isolate prisoners from the world at large: they were also meant to exploit these prisoners as a force of labour. These camps were not only meant to incarcerate individuals but also groups, simply for being part of said group, such as the bourgeoisie, kulaks or dissidents – real or imagined.[6]

The first permanent camp was built on the Solovetskie islands in 1923 and became the model for the future camp network. Here they first decided to utilize this "free" labour in, amongst others, the foresting industry, which was the beginning of the prominent role that GULAG would come to represent in the Soviet economy. They also created the system of receiving rations based on work output – a cornerstone in the future system.[7]

In 1928 Stalin presented the first Five Year Plan, which included forced collectivisation and industrialization on an unprecedented scale. Mass arrest, executions and deportations followed in its wake.[8] The same year, a commission was established with the purpose of creating a more extensive camp network. It was this commission which handed over the responsibility of the labour camps to OGPU and came up with the, by now infamous, administration name GUL'ag: Glavnoye upravleniye lagerey = Main camp administration. The prisons, at the time, also fell under this administration's jurisdiction.[9]

In 1930 Stalin began another expansion of the camp network, among other reasons, so that the increased amount of forced labour could be used in the industrialization process. Forced labour was for instance used in the building of the White Sea Canal, equipped only with primitive tools.[10] An estimated 25.000 prisoners perished during this project alone.[11]

The Great Terror, as the years 1937-1938 are remembered as, was already well underway, but was greatly escalated by a speech in the Central committee held by Stalin in March 1937. In this address, he announced that there were spies and enemies of the people hiding everywhere in Soviet society and that to stop the countries progress towards true communism, these enemies were conducting constant sabotage.[12]

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[6] Ibid, 794, 832-833.
[7] Appelbaum, *Gulag – A History*, 39, 51-55.
[8] Fyodor Vasilevich Mochulsky, *Gulag Boss,* Translation by Deborah Kaple, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), XXI-XXII.
[9] Appelbaum, *Gulag – A History,* 35, 67.
[10] Mochulsky, *Gulag Boss,* XXII.
[11] Appelbaum, *Gulag – A History,* 79.
[12] Erik Kulavig, *KGB – Den russiske sikkerhedstjeneste fra Ivan den Grusomme til Vladimir Putin* (Copenhagen: Aschehoug Dansk Forlag, 2007), 84-85.

This led to mass arrests, and hasty judgments by "troikas" – commissions under the intelligence service, consisting of three people – without further trial.[13] At the height of The Great Terror, especially party members were arrested and persecuted on the ground of article 58: Counter-revolutionary crimes, which was defined as any action meant to undermine or weaken the Soviet Union.[14] Many sections under this article were worded extremely vaguely and left room for interpretation, thereby giving the intelligence service relative freedom in the choice of who to arrest and why – Especially so, when in 1937, Stalin started giving arrest quotas to fill.

The Great Terror was far from the first or the last arrest "wave"; in the 1920s oppositional politicians were arrested in large numbers. Then in the 1930s kulaks, party members and a range of different nationalities were arrested.[15] In the 1940s, wives of previously arrested were arrested themselves, for not having initially turned in their spouses. After the Second World War, soldiers who had *allowed* themselves to be taken captives were also arrested at their return to the Motherland.[16] Finally in the late 1940s a series of previous prisoners, were rearrested without new charges.

Anne Appelbaum estimates that around 28.7 million people made their way through the GULAG system between 1930 and 1953.[17] In 1942, 13 % of the prison population were women. That number had, for various reasons related to the war, grown to 30 % by 1945.[18] These are the women whose story I wish to bring to light.

The research and source-material

In the west, the research on the GULAG has split into two schools: the revisionist and the traditional. To briefly explain them, the latter believes that the terror was enforced solely from the top, whereas the revisionist believes it was more of a social contract between the leaders and the people they were leading.

In later years quite a few recognizable works on the GULAG have emerged, such as a collection of essays, edited by Paul Gregory and Valery Lazarev, with the title *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag*,[19] published in 2003, the same years as the prizewinning and highly

[13] Kulavig*, KGB – Den russiske sikkerhedstjeneste fra Ivan den Grusomme til Vladimir Putin*, 82 and 86-87.
[14] Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic Penal Code, *article 58, section 1,* 1927.
[15] Appelbaum, *Gulag – A History*, 104, 195.
[16] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago,* Abridged. Translation by Thomas Whitney and Harry Willets, (London: The Harvill press, 2003), 31-33.
[17] Appelbaum, *Gulag – A History*, 518-519.
[18] Ibid, 2.
[19] Paul Gregory and Valery Lazarev, ed., *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag* (Hoover Institution Press, 2003).

acknowledged *Gulag - A History* by Anne Appelbaum – a work that also briefly touches on the female experience.

The following year, in 2004, Oleg Khlevniuk, who worked in the state archive of the Russian Federation, published the book *The History of the GULAG: From Collectivization to the Great Terror*[20]. Khlevniuk, Appelbaum and the various authors behind *The Economics of Forced Labor* take a very traditionalist view of the GULAG, displaying the brutality and the apathy shown by the system towards the prisoners and the use of forced labour, as well as emphasizing the high casualty figures.

In 2011 Steven A. Barnes came out with the book *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society,*[21] in which he takes a more revisionist stance, showing how the economic profitability of the system could have been much improved had there not always been a focus on rehabilitation, re-education and reintroduction into Soviet society in the treatment of the prisoners, especially the criminal ones.

My findings have led me to side mostly with the traditional school. However, I will add that the survival strategies employed by prisoners suggest that they often knew how to use the official structures of the system to improve their own situation, which gives some credence to the revisionist view of Soviet history.

There is an obvious lack of academic research and works that deal with the female prisoners of the GULAG-system. The works that do exist, such as Simeon Vilensky's *Dodnes' tjagoteet* (*Till my tale is told: Women's memoirs of the Gulag*) [22] from 1999 and Paul Gregory's *Women of the Gulag: Portraits of Five Remarkable Lives* from 2013,[23] are mainly collections of excerpts of women's memoirs. They were published to bringing attention to lesser-known witness accounts, but they are completely without commentary or academic considerations. Of course, female prisoners are discussed in larger works about the system as a whole, but mostly in a shallow fashion – which is why I reckon further study on the subject is needed.

The majority of my sources consist of memoirs, which can, of course, be problematic. They were written long after the events and the authors often found inspiration in each other's accounts,

[20] Oleg Khlevniuk, *The History of the GULAG: From Collectivization to the Great Terror,* Translation by Vadim. A. Staklo. (Yale University Press, 2004).
[21] Steven Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).
[22] Simeon Vilensky, ed., *Till my tale is told -Women's memoirs of the Gulag,* Translation by John Crowfoot, Marjorie Farquharson, Catriona Kelly, Sally Laird and Cathy Porter (London: Virago Press, 1999).
[23] Paul Gregory, *Women of the Gulag: Portraits of Five Remarkable Lives* (Hoover Institution Press, 2013).

which has created a tendency if not an outright *genre*. Aside from this, all my sources are written by the same kind of prisoners; Intellectual, middle-class women, convicted under article 58: Counter-revolutionary crimes. Memoirs of criminals are basically non-existent. Despite these inherent issues, memoirs are one of the best sources available. These women present very similar narratives, and therefore I will limit myself to presenting a singular prisoner in detail here.

A very representative faith is that of *Olga Adamova-Sliozberg*. She was born in 1902, the daughter of Jewish parents in the Russian city Samara. She was a married economist, with two children. In 1936 she was arrested shortly after her husband had likewise been so, and was sentenced to eight years of prison and four years without rights. She was convicted of anti-communist terrorism, the harshest conviction under article 58, because she "possibly" had overheard the planning of an anti-communist plot. In 1939 she was transferred to a camp in Kolyma. After having spent time in various camps, she was released in 1944, without permission to leave the Kolyma-area. In these years she wrote down the majority of her memoirs. After an extended, illegal stay in Moscow, she was rearrested in 1949 and sent into exile in Kazhakstan. Not until 1956 was she rehabilitated, meaning that the government acknowledged that her arrest had been a mistake. Because of the political climate her memoirs, *Put' (My Journey)* were first published in the West in 1991 and in Russia, not until 2002.[24]

Aside from Adamova-Sliozberg, I have worked with the memoirs of a series of women with similar stories, these being: *Eugenia Ginzburg,* who in 1937 was sentenced to 10 years in isolation for terror activity which after a couple of years was changed to a camp sentence;[25] the Dutch *Elinor Lipper,* who, also in 1937, was sentenced to five years in a labour camp;[26] the Polish *Urzula Muskus*, who few years after having been deported from her homeland to Kazhakstan in 1940, was convicted of espionage and sentenced to 10 years in a labour camp;[27] and *Tamara Petkevich*, who in 1943 was convicted of anti-Soviet propaganda, for which she received a seven-year sentence in a labour camp.[28]

I also utilized *Till my tale is told*, mentioned earlier, which include memoirs and poems of amongst others; Nadezhda Grankina, Vera Shulz, Galina Zatmilova, Nadezhda Surovtseva, Yelena

[24] Olga Adamova-Sliozberg, *My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag,* trans. Katharine Gratwick Baker. (US: Northwestern University press, 2011).
[25] Eugenia Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind,* Translation by Paul Stevenson and Max Hayward (San Diego: Harvest, 1975).
[26] Elinor Lipper, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps* (London: Hollis & Carter. 1951).
[27] Urszula Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag* (Scotland: Sandstone press, 2010).
[28] Tamara Petkevich, *Memoirs of a Gulag Actress,* Translation by Yasha Klots and Ross Ufberg (Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010).

Sidorkina, Tamara Petkevich, Tatyana Leshchenko-Sukhomlina, Hava Volovich, Nadezhda Kanel, and Zaiara Vesyolaya.

Finally, I also had access to a few letters written by the prisoner *Alexandra Stogova*[29], who after her husband's arrest in 1937 was arrested herself, on charges of being a family member of an enemy of the people. For this crime, she was sentenced to five years in a labour camp. Her letters bring insight into the events which the memoirs, written long after them, simply cannot. The problem with this sort of source material, however, is that they underwent censorship, and so, Stogova was not able to write openly about the conditions within the camp, had she wished to.

Arrest, prison life and interrogation

In an apartment in Moscow, from which a professor of biology had already been dragged away, only his wife now remained, with their two children and their housekeeper. Until it knocked on the door again… Adamova-Sliozberg described how she, at her arrest in 1936, continued her party work, while her apartment was being searched. She experienced a sense of alienation from the situation and could not face what was happening – could not face losing her children or being arrested on charges she did not understand, just like her husband had been weeks earlier. So, she continued transcribing her notes from a party conference, from which she had just returned.[30] Already *here*, the alienation from reality, which would become a common survival strategy, began. Muskus writes that she considered the whole thing a misunderstanding.[31] A notion repeated by Yelena Sidorkina[32] and Petkevich.[33] It brought them hope all the way from their arrest to the moment the sentence fell.

For most arrested, the interrogation happened during a stay in prison, and for all, the wait from the end of interrogations until the sentence was given, had to be spent in prison as well. These prisons were mainly described as overcrowded. Lipper paints a picture of a cell in the Butyrka prison in Moscow, built to a capacity of 24 prisoners, which, when she arrived, held 70. These prisoners sat and slept on a wooden platform, which covered the stone floor of the cell.[34] Vera Shulz also describes a crowded cell, where nine women slept in a combined three beds and the

[29] Alexandra Stogova, *Letters to her mother and daughters. Письма Стоговой Александры Георгиевны из Темниковского ИТЛ, Мордовия* (Moscow: The Memorial Archive).
[30] Adamova-Sliozberg, *My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*, 6-10.
[31] Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 57.
[32] Yelena Sidorkina, "Years under Guard", in *Till my tale is told -Women's memoirs of the Gulag*, 194
[33] Petkevich, *Memoirs of a Gulag Actress*, 105.
[34] Lipper, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, 7.

rest slept on the floor in a strict hierarchy, where the newest arrival slept by the slop bucket.[35] They also describe a very paranoid attitude towards each other, as there was often (or there was believed to be) informants in the cells.[36] This atmosphere of course, wasn't improved by the many searches of the cells or their persons:

> From time to time, approximately once every ten days, about five women guards from inspection would burst into the cell, strip off all our clothing and conduct a search. The search was unbelievably humiliating. They searched our hair, our mouths, and even worse. Dirty fingers touched our bodies. (…) In the end we fell into apathy.[37]

This apathy, here described by Adamova-Sliozberg, is the early days of apathy and alienation as a survival strategy. This, presumably, was the most common and universally used strategy. Petkevich tells that interrogations were mainly carried out at night and that despite this, prisoners were still forced to get up early in the morning and were not allowed to sleep or even lie down during the day.[38] Exhaustion was a common tool, utilized in the interrogation process, and often prisoners were interrogated for many consecutive nights, and possibly during the day as well. Ginzburg calls this the conveyer belt.[39]

Others describe similar experiences of single interrogation sessions taking up several days.[40] This, however, appears the most used form of torture utilized against female prisoners, except for two examples, which I will get back to.

Adamova-Sliozberg describes the interrogations as full of verbal abuse, but also that women were rarely exposed to physical violence, unless their case was considered especially important.[41] Shulz and Muskus likewise describe being yelled at and threatened but never physically assaulted.[42] Zayara Vesylaya writes that the inmates of her cell, in 1949, told her that they too were yelled at during interrogation but that she never heard of anyone who was physically violated or tortured.[43] As explained by Adamova-Sliozbergs, rather than physical violence, threats were preferred against female prisoners. Women were especially threatened with the fate of their children – who, as explained by the interrogators, would get placed in orphanages and have their names changed,

[35] Vera Shulz, "Taganka", in Vilensky (ed.), *Till my tale is told -Women's memoirs of the Gulag*, 155.
[36] Lipper, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, 72-73.
[37] Adamova-Sliozberg, *My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*, 58-59.
[38] Petkevich, *Memoirs of a Gulag Actress*. 110.
[39] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 83.
[40] Sidorkina, "Years under Guard,", 195; Galina Zatmilova, "A Part of History", in *Till my tale is told -Women's memoirs of the Gulag*, 176 and Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 67.
[41] Adamova-Sliozberg, *My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*, 20-22.
[42] Shulz, "Taganka", 167; Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 67.
[43] Zayara Vesyolaya, "7:35", in *Till my tale is told -Women's memoirs of the Gulag*, 304.

thereby making them impossible to track down later.[44] A potent threat in the face of motherhood. As I mentioned earlier, I have, however, come across two examples of physical violence against female prisoners during interrogation. One of my sources Tatyana Leshchenko-Sukhomlina, claims that she was kicked during interrogation.[45] In the light of the many statements of never having encountered physical violence against women, her claim can seem outlandish, but much depended on the individual interrogator, the time, and the case. Ginzburg too, mentions a cellmate who once returned bloody and beaten after an interrogation, of which she took note as this was the only time she ever experienced this, during her prison time.[46] Especially her emphasis on only experiencing such an occurrence once, and the fact that it happened to someone else, makes the claim appear believable. Both Vera Shulz, Petkevich, and Lipper write that they heard screams coming from the interrogation rooms at night,[47] so it would seem torture indeed did occur, but was more likely a more used tool in the interrogation of male prisoners. Because of the high rate of arrests, many were forced quickly through the processing, with sentence falling not long after the initial arrest. A signed confession was however still considered necessary, a fact which Appelbaum speculates might have helped legitimize the high number of arrests.[48] Many also found themselves pressured to accuse others in their social circle.[49]

Sentence and Transport

The actual court cases were described by many witnesses as extremely short; Lipper recollects that a new woman was called into the courtroom every three minutes,[50] while Ginzburg describes the court cases as taking an average of seven minutes,[51] and Adamova-Sliozberg writes that they were given a whole 10 minutes per case. The latter recalls giving a passionate speech in her own defence, which did nothing more than shorten the time allocated the following case even further, while she herself was still convicted of terrorism.[52] Ginzburg describes a guard, who stood behind her, obviously ready to catch her in case of a faint when her sentence was read out.[53] Several women describe a guard with such a purpose, though none of them admit to fainting.[54] This precaution

[44] Adamova-Sliozberg*, My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*, 22.
[45] Tatyana Leshchenko-Sukhomlina, "Selections from "My Guitar"", in Vilensky (ed.), *Till my tale is told -Women's memoirs of the Gulag*, 232.
[46] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 124.
[47] Shulz, "Taganka", 156; Petkevich, *Memoirs of a Gulag Actress,* 118; Lipper, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, 22.
[48] Appelbaum, *Gulag – A History*, 139 and142.
[49] Hava Volovich, "My Past," in Vilensky (ed.), *Till my tale is told -Women's memoirs of the Gulag*, 250.
[50] Lipper, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, 67.
[51] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 171.
[52] Adamova-Sliozberg, *My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*, 40-43.
[53] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 173.
[54] Eg. Adamova-Sliozberg, *My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*, 40.

does not appear to have been utilized in the court cases of male defendants. For some the sentence was a further prison term, [55] for others, the journey continued onwards to a labour camp.

There were naturally various modes of transporting prisoners, and often several such methods were used, as journeys were divided into sections. On the first place, there were trucks, disguised as delivery vans, in use in the cities, ominously nicknamed *Black Ravens*. Also, there were two types of train wagons in use in the transport of prisoners across the great landmasses of Russia; Stolypin-wagons, named so after a Tsarists prime minister, and then cattle-wagons. The first were normal train cars meant for passengers, slightly refurbished for prison transport, the others were empty wagons, which, if you were lucky, contained a small oven.[56]

Cries, mixed with the Polish national anthem could be heard when Muskus and many other Poles were being forcedly deported from their homeland by train. This form of transport was not much different from prison transports. Muskus describes the journey as overcrowded – there were shelves on which they could lie, but most of them just had to find a space on the floor.[57] Aside from the close quarters, there was usually a lack of sufficient water for the many prisoners, [58] who were also, often fed overly salted soup,[59] or fish, [60] which only made the thirst worse. Ginzburg describes a woman whose drinking mug was broken during the journey, meaning that she could not receive her ration of water. She cried, according to Ginzburg, as though she had lost a child, which was considered appropriate by the other prisoners, who understood the seriousness of her plight.[61]

If the prisoners were bound for the Kolyma region, they would be transported by ship, where they would be kept like cargo in the hold. Here they lay in bunks of up to three tiers, [62] or sat close together on the floor.[63] Finally, between camps of relatively proximity, prisoners were marched on foot. On these marches, the treatment is described as brutal.[64] Muskus recounts how those that

[55] Eg. Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind* and Adamova-Sliozberg, *My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*.
[56] Appelbaum, *Gulag – A History*, 160-163.
[57] Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 22.
[58] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 277; Hava Volovich, "My Past", en Vilensky (ed.), *Till my tale is told -Women's memoirs of the Gulag*, 267; Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 80.
[59] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 298.
[60] Volovich, "My Past", 267; Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 80.
[61] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 320.
[62] Nadezhda Grankina, "Notes by Your Cotemporary", in Vilensky (ed.), *Till my tale is told -Women's memoirs of the Gulag*, 138.
[63] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 355.
[64] Tamara Petkevich, "Just one Fate," in Vilensky (ed.), *Till my tale is told -Women's memoirs of the Gulag,* 223.

fell were hit by the guards, using the blunt end of their rifles, or forced onwards by guard dogs. Those who stayed down were left for dead.[65]

The camp conditions

All camps were naturally different – different climates, regimes, work quotas and rules. The most famous camp area was Kolyma in Siberia, where prison labour was used to mine gold under harsh conditions.[66] What the camps had in common was that they consisted of a *zone*; a square surrounded by a fence, containing the structures of the camp and an open space where the prisoners could be counted several times a day. In their spare time, the prisoners were allowed to move around freely within the zone, contrary to in the National-socialist concentration camps.

The prisoners slept in crowded barracks, which the first prisoners on sight, had often had the honour of building themselves, containing rows of bunks and utilizing primitive lighting and heating as well as poor hygiene.[67] Lipper describes two tiers of platforms down either side of the barracks, which swayed under the combined weight of the women lying closely together.[68] Hava Volovich vividly describes a rat-infested barracks,[69] while Muskus emphasizes the "thousands upon thousands" of insects who drank their blood at night.[70]

The days were divided into sections – first siren: get up. Second siren: The end of breakfast. After this, the prisoners were gathered and organized into work brigades, consisting of between 4 and as many as 400 *zeks,* as prisoners were called, led by a brigade leader from among the prisoners themselves. They were then marched out to their respective work sites. Once they returned home again, there was supper, after which they were once again counted, and then bedtime.[71] The barracks were searched by the guards every time the prisoners returned to camp, which in reality meant once or twice a day according to Lipper.[72] This, of course, meant it was often difficult for the prisoners to gather resources and keep these safe.

[65] Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 123.
[66] Lipper, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, 99.
[67] Appelbaum*, Gulag – A History*, 180-192.
[68] Lipper, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, 84.
[69] Volovich, "My Past", 268.
[70] Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 86.
[71] Appelbaum, *Gulag – A History*, 209, 186-187.
[72] Lipper, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, 205.

The most formidable challenge in the camps was to get enough to eat. Food was delegated based on how you fulfilled your work quotas.[73] Almost all my sources starved[74] or suffered from scurvy[75] at some point during their camp stays. There seems to have been an unspoken code among the prisoners, of respecting each other's bread rations. If that rule was broken, according to Muskus, could result in death at the hands of your fellow prisoners. She also points out that the extra hard work often made the hunger far worse, despite the higher rations if one could fulfil the quota.[76]

The obsession with food, especially bread is clearly shown in an anecdote written by Adamova-Sliozberg, who based on the negative light in which she places herself must be considered truthful. She explains that she once was told by a guard that something special was waiting for her on her bunk. Expecting to find bread she happily hurried back, but to her disappointment found only letters from home. She soon became ashamed of her disappointment – but the incident beautifully shows that bread and daily survival had become the main worries,[77] just like the incident with the lost water mug on the train. Rather than spend years pondering their fates and the possibilities of the lives they left behind, the women became integrated into camp society. Even though she put it in more artistic words, Muskus too expresses that she worried about and missed her children continuously less over the years.[78]

The above have been some of the general tendencies, but it is naturally difficult to discuss the camps as though they were a homogenous unit. Muskus, for instance, describes working in minus 35 – minus 50 degrees Celsius[79] whereas Petkevich fought the heat and sun in more southern parts.[80] Aside from that, there was also the Katorga camps, where prisoners were transported in chains, and had no names but rather a number, and were not allowed correspondence with the outside world. For female prisoners, there was a disciplinary camp at Elgen, where the regime was far stricter than in the normal camps.[81] Ginzburg saw a work brigade from this camp and had a hard time determining their gender: "They were indeed sexless, these workers in padded breeches and footwear made of cloth, with caps pulled down low over their eyes, and rags covering the

[73] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 405.
[74] Eg. Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 103 and Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 407.
[75] Petkevich, *Memoirs of a Gulag Actress*, 209.
[76] Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 88 and 103.
[77] Adamova-Sliozberg, *My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*, 95-96.
[78] Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 306.
[79] Ibid., 101.
[80] Petkevich, *Memoirs of a Gulag Actress*, 166.
[81] Lipper, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, 255 and 124.

lower part of their brick-red, frostbitten faces."[82] Their exhaustion had robbed them of their feminine features.

Criminal and political prisoners

Prisoners in the camps, commonly called *zeks*, can be divided into two categories; criminal (*urki*) and political (*contriki*). The politicals were the ones judged under article 58. *Contriki* made up about a quarter of the general prison population[83] and they are deeply overrepresented in the memoirs. Most political prisoners were not even real dissidents, but ordinary people who had found themselves at the wrong place, at the wrong time.[84]

The criminals were usually not what we today would consider real criminals either. Most of them consisted of people who had committed petty theft or had arrived late at work, one too many times. The ones who did live up to the title *criminal* were often negatively described by the political prisoners.[85] The criminal prisoners were at the top of the prisoner hierarchy. They received easier work and were considered easier to rehabilitate, seeing as they were, after all, not enemies of the people. They were used by the camp administration to keep track of other prisoners, and their slang became the dominant language among the prisoners.

Seeing the accounts of just political prisoners, as all my sources are, naturally provides a somewhat skewed image of the *urki*, and their relationship to the *contriki*. Almost all *urki* are portrayed as brutal, perverse people, with no other purpose than making the existence of the *contriki* miserable, by stealing their resources and/or otherwise picking on them.[86] They are thereby described as a homogenous group, who all had the same heartless nature.

However, especially Muskus provides a far more nuanced image of the criminal prisoners. She writes that when she was stumbling with exhaustion on a march from one camp to another, a couple of young female *urki* took her under their arms and helped her the rest of the way, despite their own exhaustion.[87] She also describes a *contriki* by the name of Lusia, who used to steal eggs and milk, which she then shared with the rest of her barracks. According to Muskus, *urki* would often join Lusia on these pilferings and were happy under her leadership.[88] Ginzburg similarly

[82] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 396-397.
[83] Kulavig, KGB – *Den russiske sikkerhedstjeneste fra Ivan den Grusomme til Vladimir Putin*, 136.
[84]Appelbaum, *Gulag – A History*, 272
[85] Ibid., 263-264
[86] Eg. Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 354 and Lipper, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, 95.
[87] Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 124.
[88] Ibid., 141.

recounts her time in a camp hospital where the urki she encountered were calm and cheerful, often asking the *contriki* present to retell novels they had read.[89] The stereotype of them as a homogenous group of self-assured bullies does not appear to be altogether true.

Labour

Labour in the camps was divided into two categories; physical labour and *Pridurki*. *Pridurki* were the prisoners with the "easy" job, such as working in the administration, kitchen, or the likes. These prisoners not only avoided the hard-physical labour in the mines, forests or fields but also had access to food and other resources that could be traded. It is important to remember that prisoners were fed based on how they fulfilled their work quota – quotas that were usually unrealistically high, and the reaching of which was often hindered by poor organization and dress, as well as near-constant accidents.[90]

Ginzburg found herself wondering how a male dishwasher she encountered had acquired such a "women's"-job. As it turned out, the man was deaf and had thus managed to acquire light work.[91] The incident indicates that in Ginzburgs experience, labour in the camps was somewhat determined by gender. Hava Volovitch similarly writes that only women and elderly men worked with sewing, [92] which also indicates a division between genders. The male prisoner Aleksandr Sokolenko indicates something similar, but adds that women too were made to drive timber downstream – which was some of the hardest and most dangerous work.[93]

There was most likely rather a divide between those prisoners deemed able to perform hard physical labour, and those not deemed able. This is supported by Muskus, who writes that the women who did not work in the office in the Berazniki camp had various other tasks: The strongest worked in the camp's stock or shovelled snow, the rest weaved baskets. During the summer all women at this camp worked the fields.[94]

Female prisoners, like their male counterparts, worked in many different fields and with many different tasks. Adamova-Sliozberg, amongst other things, worked with gathering timber in rafts to be sent downstream, and also she worked for a time with something as different as cultivating

[89] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind,* 364-365.
[90] Appelbaum, *Gulag – A History*, 208-209 and 214-217.
[91] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 384.
[92] Volovich, "My Past", 256.
[93]Aleksandr Konstantinovich Sokolenko, *Keep Forever,* Translation by Alex Lane, (US: Createspace and Feht, 2008), 62 and 66.
[94] Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag* (Scotland: Sandstone press, 2010), 128 and 138.

cabbage.[95] Ginzburg worked with earth improvement, which basically meant she picked at the frozen Kolyma earth from morning till night with a spade.[96] In warmer parts, in the Belovodsk camp, Petkevich fought the harsh conditions of factory work in a robe factory, where the prisoners walked around in hemp fibres which gnawed their way into their skin.[97] Petkevich also worked for a time with digging the foundations for a sugar factory. Her, Lipper, Ginzburg and Adamova-Sliozberg were all, at some point, dispatched to fell trees in the vast Siberian forests.[98] Ginzburg and her work partner had a daily quota of eight cubic metres between them – they both ended up in a punishment cell for being unable to pile such a vast amount of timber daily, as this was considered a willful act of sabotage.[99] Most of my sources ended up in *pridurki work*,[100] which probably did a lot to ensure their survival and ability to retell their stories later in life.

To receive a lighter workload could often mean the difference between life and death, seeing as the work itself, aside from causing exhaustion and hunger, was often dangerous. For instance, the driving of timber downstream caused many fatal accidents. Muskus, paints a picture of women who worked in a quarry, or who gathered clay and sand for the production of bricks.[101] Most of them were not used to the hard, physical labour, and many died because of the earth - or rock falls. Petkevich' memoirs too contain a graphic description of bloody factory accidents, which she describes as far from uncommon.[102]

Harassment

The physical harassment already started with the first intrusive person search shortly after the initial arrest and, thereafter, the many searches of the cells as previously mentioned by Adamova-Sliozberg. Female guards usually performed these, in the female prison blocks. On the other hand, there is a series of stories that describe being forced into showers in transit camps or at arrival, and at this occasion being marched naked past rows of watching, male guards. These types of incidents

[95] Adamova-Sliozberg, *My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*, 123 and 103.
[96] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 366-367.
[97] Petkevich, "Just one Fate," 225.
[98] Petkevich, *Memoirs of a Gulag Actress*, 183 and 198; Lipper, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, 172; Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 403; Adamova-Sliozberg, *My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*, 93.
[99] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 405-408.
[100] Eg. Ibid, 370-371; Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 176; Petkevich, *Memoirs of a Gulag Actress,* 26; Hava Volovich, "My Past", 259.
[101] Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 231-232.
[102] Petkevich, "Just one Fate," 255.

are described by Ginzburg, Adamova-Sliozberg, Nadezhda Grankina and Muskus, and thereby seems a standard procedure, with no other discernible purpose than humiliation.[103]

A fellow prisoner in a transport Ginzburg was on commented that the guards didn't see them as women so, why be shy? [104] By seeing these attempts at dehumanisation for what they were, some women were able to distance themselves from it and, thereby, ignore them. This kind of mental survival strategy is very similar to the apathy described by Adamova-Sliozberg regarding the intrusive searches. Aside from marching the naked women past rows of guards, there are also several instances of them being forcedly shaved in intimate areas by male barbers.[105] When she protested this, Muskus ended up spending several days in a punishment cell. She likewise recounts a story of a group of women in the camp, imprisoned for religious activities, who were punished by being undressed by guards and then marched around the camp for all to see, and eventually being taken to a punishment cell.[106]

Humiliation and dehumanisation seemed to have been preferred when dealing with the female prisoners, but that does not mean that there were no instances of physical violence towards them too.[107] The fact that women were humiliated, whereas men were subjugated to harsher physical punishment can be observed in a comment made by Muskus. She believed that women complained about the camp conditions when they were unhappy with them, unlike men, who didn't dare for fear of being beaten or thrown in the punishment cell.[108]

This dehumanisation which the female prisoners experienced, was however not entirely combatable with apathy. Especially Adamova-Sliozberg puts this point well:

> They hammered us on the head so long and so stubbornly with the idea that we were not people but just trash. Not only the guard whom we despised did this but also the newspapers (Which we hadn't lost the habit of believing), leaders of the Party, and the country. So we ourselves began to feel that we were somehow guilty of something.[109]

The system's attempts at dehumanisation naturally affected on the female prisoners, and most likely their male counterparts too.

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[103] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 316; Adamova-Sliozberg, *My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*. 74; Grankina, "Notes by Your Contemporary", 134. Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 84.
[104] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 317.
[105] Lipper, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, 83.
[106] Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 105 and 259.
[107] Eg. Petkevich, "Just one Fate," 222; Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 223-224.
[108] Ibid, 255.
[109] Adamova-Sliozberg, *My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*, 56.

Relationship to men

In the few camps where both men and women were kept, they were officially kept separately. But as the previous camp administrator Fyodor Mochulsky writes, they always found a way to mingle despite the official regulations.[110] According to Varlam Shalamov, men and women were free to interact in hospitals as well as in transit camps.[111] Moreover, though most work brigades were divided according to gender, there are many stories of men and women working side by side. Petkevich felled trees side by side with male brigades,[112] and Muskus worked in a factory alongside male prisoners.[113] There were also a few brigades consisting of both genders. Petkevich, for instance, worked in such a brigade, removing rocks from a stretch, where a railway was being built.[114] So despite the official restrictions, there were plenty of opportunities for the genders to interact.

Muskus writes that not even a barbed wire could stop men and women who wished to be together, especially not prisoners of the criminal variety. She also described a wonderful way of smuggling messages between the male and female part of the Spask camp – hidden in the ear of an ox. This illustrated the level of creativity which was utilized in order to communicate freely and, in light of this, it hardly seems surprising that sex flourished within the camp walls. Sex was however hard to keep private, and a lot of prisoners, simply stopped trying to achieve privacy, and so it was often openly enjoyed in the crowded barracks.[115]

Where there is the possibility for any sexual activity, unfortunately, there will also be the possibility of sexual assault, which was especially problematic for female prisoners. According to the male prisoner Shalamov, the guards were the greatest threat to female prisoners,[116] as described by Ginzburg, who a prison guard attempted to rape in a punishment cell.[117] Rape internally in the prison population was also a real danger, as described by, among others, Lipper, who recounts how the guards on the ship transporting them to Kolyma were bribed by the male criminal prisoners to hand over a couple of female prisoners.[118]

[110] Mochulsky, *Gulag Boss,* 147.
[111] Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales,* trans. John Glad, (St Ives plc: Penguin Books, 1994), 420.
[112] Petkevich, *Memoirs of a Gulag Actress,* 199.
[113] Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 209.
[114] Petkevich, *Memoirs of a Gulag Actress*, 178-179.
[115] Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 90, 264 and 363.
[116] Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales,* 354.
[117] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 218.
[118] Lipper, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, 95.

An especially horrifying group rape is described by Petkevich, who is the only one of my sources to speak openly of her own sex life during her years in labour camp. She tells of an intense romance with a fellow prisoner, by the name of Nikolai. They could spend time together as they both worked in the camp theatre, where it was easy for men and women to interact. When she was released in 1950, she settled close to the Knyazh-Pogost camp, where they had been inmates together, to be close to Nikolai until he too had served his sentence. He, however, died before his release.[119] Adamova-Sliozberg, while working in an office in Magadan, off the main campsite, formed an intense friendship with the criminal prisoner Igor Khorin, who shared her love of literature. She describes this friendship as a truly happy highlight of her years within the camps.[120]

To some degree, relationships between the two genders became primitive within the camps. Sexuality flourished in the open, and rape was far from uncommon. Friendships of course occurred but were made troublesome by the official separation of men and women. All examples of friendship and genuine romantic relationships I have encountered, have been between people who had the opportunity of working together, often with *pridurki* work.

Survival Strategies

One of the most common survival strategies has already been mentioned several times, that being the ability to mentally distance yourself from the situation. Through this apathy and alienation, many female prisoners found a sense of peace from the constant harassment and were thus able to endure their time isolated from society at large. It is, therefore, an important survival strategy, which was widely used among prisoners, but there were several other uplifting ways which the female prisoners utilized.

The one always highlighted in what little research there is on the topic is sexuality. This is a difficult subject to shed light on with my particular sources, as most of them avoid mentioning the phenomenon or write condemningly about it.[121] There are however a series of hints to the role played by sexuality. Sex could, and was used, as a commodity, to be bargained with among prisoners, in exchange for resources or services.[122] Petkevich recounted how some women attempted to avoid work by seducing the prisoner in charge of labour division.[123] These also had

[119] Petkevich, *Memoirs of a Gulag Actress,* 174, 264 and 389.
[120] Adamova-Sliozberg*, My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*, 85-88.
[121] Eg. as seen in Adamova-Sliozberg, *My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*, 105.
[122] Lipper, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, 295.
[123] Petkevich, *Memoirs of a Gulag Actress,* 160.

access to more food, with which they could negotiate themselves to a mistress.[124] Petkevich, as already mentioned, writes openly of her own sexual experiences in the camps, among which she mentioned a doctor who took a sexual payment for allowing her a spot at the hospital, though she was clearly very sick with scurvy.[125] Sex could also be used to establish a position of power,[126] or simply provide companionship, comfort, and intimacy.[127]

This need for partnership, in some women, manifested as a need for a child.[128] That women wished to birth children during a stay at a labour camp can seem counterintuitive, but pregnant women were given more food and less work.[129] And even though mothers and small children were quickly separated, these women often felt an overwhelming need to have someone in their lives who was truly theirs.[130]

Another popular way of passing the time and forget the situation was by telling stories, reciting poetry, sing to one another, or retell dreams.[131] Especially for prison inmates who did not have labour to stimulate them, books and storytelling was an important part of the day to day life.[132] The character of *the storyteller* is, in my experience, to be found in all camp memoirs: "The storyteller is the only person in camp who is loved and respected by all prisoners equally, no matter whether they are *contriki* or criminals".[133]

Both Adamova-Sliozberg and the male prisoner Sokolenko identify themselves as such storytellers,[134] a service for which Sokolenko writes that his fellow prisoners shared food with him. His ability as a storyteller made it possible for him to collect more resources. As this shows, both men and women were storytellers and, in both the male and female barracks, they were revered and often paid for their services.

An especially integrated part of camp life was *Tufta* – the art of cheating.[135] As a camp expression, it mainly came to mean cheating with the allotted work quotas. When Ginzburg was put to work, felling trees, the more experienced prisoners showed her how the forest was full of timber piles

[124] Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 109.
[125] Petkevich, *Memoirs of a Gulag Actress,* 215.
[126] Adamova-Sliozberg, *My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*, 116.
[127] Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 384.
[128] Volovich, "My Past," 260.
[129] Mochulsky, *Gulag Boss*, 147.
[130] Petkevich, *Memoirs of a Gulag Actress*, 309-310, 249.
[131] Ibid, 121.
[132] Adamova-Sliozberg, *My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*, 49.
[133] Lipper, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, 221.
[134] Adamova-Sliozberg, *My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*, 53-54; Sokolenko, *Keep Forever,* 8.
[135] Lipper, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, 149-150.

that were not kept proper track of. These could easily be dragged to a new place and presented as one's own work.[136] The prisoners thereby fulfilled their quota and received a higher ration while avoiding the exhausting work, the high quota of which was often very difficult to achieve honestly.

Aside from avoiding hard labour by cheating, it was of course also possible to be allotted easier *pridurki* work, even if this wasn't easily achieved. You could, however, often bribe someone in charge of labour division to accomplish this goal, even if only temporarily.[137] An extreme way to avoid work was to get oneself hospitalized or to self-mutilate to such a degree that one was permanently out of the hard-labour game. Lipper describes this phenomenon in more detail than other writers seem comfortable doing. She recounts how prisoners, for instance, would wrap their hands or feet in wet rags and then go perform a day's work in the permafrost of Siberia. They thereby accomplished a third-degree frostbite, which would disable their digits for good. Another used method was by simply chopping off fingers.[138] She does not mention the gender of the prisoners who did this.

An important part of holding on to pre-prison identity was the maintenance of morality. Even the criminal prisoners helped others from time to time,[139] and thereby clung to the values of the outside world. By not giving in to an everyone-for-themselves mentality, these prisoners succeeded in holding on to their previous identities and self- image. They accomplished this by sharing resources, even with strangers,[140] helping each other removing lice from their hair[141] or memorizing contact details of family members of dying inmates, so that they could be contacted in the future.[142] There are also many examples to be found of male prisoners, helping my female sources, especially in potential rape situations. Ginzburg, for instance, recounts how the aforementioned deaf dishwasher helped her avoid being raped by the cook.[143]

Another side to good deeds was optimism and humour. Nadezhda Kanel describes her cellmate in prison Alia, like a joker. She writes that Alia had an endlessly good mood and that she used humour as a defence, she would for instance parody the guards.[144] Humour provided them with a

[136] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 410.
[137] Ibid, 370-371.
[138] Lipper, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, 256.
[139] Nadezhda Surovtseva, "Vladivostok Transit", in Vilensky (ed.), *Till my tale is told -Women's memoirs of the Gulag,* 186.
[140] Grankina, "Notes by Your Cotemporary", 137.
[141] Shulz, "Taganka", 164.
[142] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 167-168.
[143] Ibid, 392.
[144] Nadezhda Kanel, "A Meeting at the Lubyanka", in Vilensky (ed.), *Till my tale is told -Women's memoirs of the Gulag*, 282.

way to escape their prison reality in the same way that storytelling did for larger groups of prisoners. It robbed the situation of seriousness and, thereby, of danger too.

There were also the prisoners who found a sort of independence in their work in the camps, and who performed this with pride. Lipper describes a group of female inmates who cultivated cabbage fields. They spoke proudly of their fields and their cabbage.[145] In the same style, Ginzburg proudly relates how she found work washing for a free family, as she made money independently of the camp in which she was a prisoner, regaining a bit of freedom and independence in the process.[146] Stogoda, who was permitted to continue her artistic profession of stage design in the camps, wrote home that she enjoyed her work. She describes a concert her theatre troupe was to perform, the profit of which went to the war effort: "We are terribly happy to be able to do our part."[147]

Taking pride in camp labour was possibly more widespread among women because it was easier for them to obtain less physically harsh and exhausting labour. This sense of pride, however, helped bring meaning to their internal camp existence, despite the incarceration. A kind of prisoner describe by the majority of my sources, who also utilized a sort of continual sense of pride, were the still convinced communists.[148] For these almost religiously faithful to the regime, their faith in their government and the Party was a way to survive; sure, they were cut off from their loved ones, but they could still serve the system and the building of communism. A primary example of this was Alexandra Stogoda, who wrote to ask her mother to send some of her poems to publication. These poems were an homage to Stalin himself and were dedicated to the Red Army in times of war.[149]

However, the most important survival strategy, as far as my sources indicate, to be found among the female prison population, was the creation of groups to get comfort and help. In the research of National-Socialist concentration camps these groups have been referred to as *camp sisters.*[150]

[145] Lipper, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, 210.
[146] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 377.
[147] Stogova, *Letters to her mother and daughters. Письма Стоговой Александры Георгиевны из Темниковского ИТЛ, Мордорила*, 10/12 - 1939 and 18/2 - 1942
[148] Eg. mentioned by Adamova-Sliozberg, *My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*, 34 and Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, , 107.
[149] Stogova, *Letters to her mother and daughters. Письма Стоговой Александры Георгиевны из Темниковского ИТЛ, Мордорила*, 15/1 1942, 2.
[150] Myrna Goldenberg, "Memoirs of Auschwitz survivors - The Burden of Gender", in *Women in the Holocaust,* ed. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J.Weitzman, (New York: Vail-Ballou Press, 1998), 327-339.

Camp sisters

According to the writer, and previous prisoner Shalamov, friendships among male prisoners were impossible, because of the cold, the hunger and the exhaustion.[151] This, however, hardly seems the case among the female prisoners, who would often band together two and two, or on occasion more, finding that companionship and cooperation made prison- and camp life far more tolerable.

These "family"-units or "camp sisters" are to be found in all female GULAG memoirs that I have worked with, and they seem as important a part of prison as well as camp life. Regarding her rearrest in 1949, Adamova-Sliozberg writes of such a community. By then she had become the older, more experiences inmate, which made her the centre of a group of young, female and naturally scared prisoners. She recounts how a kind of girls-club came to be on her bunk and though she was scared that one of them might be a snitch, which would mean another camp sentence rather than just exile for her, she could not turn her back on these girls who needed comfort. Because of this community, she remembered her time in the Butyrka prison in Moscow fondly – because she felt truly needed.[152] These units helped each other gather resources, like Ginzburg and her cellmate Julia Karepova, who over a couple of months managed to gather enough sugar to properly celebrate New Year's eve in their prison cell,[153] or like a young female prisoner described by Lipper, who didn't need to worry about hunger because she had a group of friends who kept each other supplied with sugar, bread, and alcohol.[154]

In the places where men and women could work together, nothing stopped them from creating these groups across genders. Hava Volovich, for instance, worked in a camp theatre where men and women could interact freely. She writes of a time when she fell very ill with pneumonia, against which the doctors could do nothing for lack of resources. The so-called culture brigade (the artists) however, were permitted to leave the camp area, and so they went scouring the area for sulpha-tablets. After succeeding in bringing some back, they sat by her side till they started to take effect. She writes of her time in the culture brigade as a very happy one for her: "the difficulties here had united us into one big family, where jokes and laughter reigned and where we played silly tricks and looked out for each other".[155]

[151] Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales,* 22.
[152] Adamova-Sliozberg, *My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*, 179 and 181.
[153] Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 451.
[154] Lipper, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, 155.
[155] Volovich, "My Past," 269.

Many women teamed up with their work partners, and helped each other carry out the hard work, thereby ensuring their ration. Adamova-Sliozberg for a time worked felling trees in the Taiga area, along with her partner and friend Galia. Their norm was eight cubic metres worth of timbre a day, which was near impossible, and with every passing day became harder to accomplish, as they moved further and further away from camp, to find trees. Galia insisted and forced Adamova-Sliozberg to finish the work every day so that they would receive their full ration and ensure their survival. On the day in question, they had five kilometres back to camp, on foot, in the frost. Every day they strayed further from camp and could initiate their journey home a little later than the last. On this day, Galia fell on the journey home, having lost consciousness. Adamova-Sliozberg succeeding in finding help and getting her home, thereby saving her life.[156] It is an excellent example of how prisoners, for the family-unit, were able and willing to help each other despite the danger it often meant to themselves.

Galia's insisting on always finishing the work, is an often-seen behaviour in various disguises throughout the memoirs – the strongest among the camp sister, would force the weaker to continue, to ensure their own best interest, and their chances of survival, even if it seemed an insurmountable effort at the time. Adamova-Sliozberg had yet another memorable incident of the sort, when her then work partner and friend Raia Ginzburg was offered lighter work in an agricultural colony. At first, she didn't want to leave Adamova-Sliozberg but was forced. When Adamova-Sliozberg herself later ended up in that same colony, with the possibility of being selected as part of the permanent workforce, her friend immediately stepped up to help her. Adamova-Sliozberg had grown truly exhausted from hard labour and needed the lighter work to ensure her survival. During the selection trials she worked side by side with Raia, who forced her to walk briskly, despite her feebleness: "Every time we went past him, Raia anxiously watched me and implored me: "You have such an unhappy face, can't you walk vigorously for just a few meters? Smile, please!"[157]

Raia lent her strength to Adamova-Sliozberg, to ensure her welfare and survival, which can be compared to women in National-socialist camps, who helped each other through selection. As can be understood from the above, women often banded together with a cell- or a workmate, but they also often grouped within nationalities, [158] as Muskus, who was close with other Polish inmates,

[156] Adamova-Sliozberg*, My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*, 88-94.
[157] Ibid, 125-127.
[158] Appelbaum, *Gulag – A History*, 273.

who for instance celebrated Polish Christmas in the barracks.[159] Also, women arrested on the basis of their religion tended to stick together. The orthodox of the kind were known as *monashki* – little nuns,[160] and they refused to work on the religious holidays, a refusal which was easier to stick to in small groups: "They called one another sisters, slept, ate, worked, prayed together, and almost every Sunday or church holiday sat together in the isolation cell".[161]

Conclusion

In many ways, women were exposed to the same conditions as men – the same overfilled prisons and transports, the same vermin-infested barracks and for the most part, the same hard labour. There were however a few areas in which women were treated markedly different. Physical punishment was rarely used towards women during interrogation though it appears, that torture was still in use, meaning it must have been more prevalently used against men. Women, on the other hand, were verbally abused, threatened, and kept awake for days on end. In the camps, physical punishment was also relatively rarely used against female prisoners. Instead, the system preferred humiliation and dehumanisation. It seems likely that it was easier for women to be awarded lighter work, though female prisoners, to a larger degree than their male counterparts had to struggle with the constant threat of sexual violence, which was prevalent in the camps.

To survive these conditions, physically as well as mentally, they devised a series of survival strategies. Among these were apathy, alienation, sexuality – which was cultivated openly in the camps – and storytelling, a popular pastime in both the female and male barracks. To avoid the exhausting work, survival strategies such as *tufta* were devised, by which the prisoners cheated in various ways to achieve their allotted work quotas. Aside from these strategies, which actively fought the system, some prisoners decided to go in the other direction and found some pride in doing their camp work well. There were also the prisoners who still believed in the communist dream and who were happy to serve this idea, even if from within the barbed wire. The most cheerful and life-affirming of the survival strategies I have come across have been the formation of camp-sisters or family units. As seen both in Stalin's GULAG as well as in the National-socialist concentration- and extermination camps, female prisoners banded together two and two or in small groups, to help each other, as well as provide a sense of security within an incredibly hostile environment.

[159] Muskus, *The Long Bridge – Out of the Gulag*, 266.
[160] Lipper, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, 143-144.
[161] Adamova-Sliozberg, *My Journey – How one Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*, 112.

Where men and women were free to interact, they created groups across gender lines, but these sorts of grouping do appear more prevalent among female prisoners. These groups helped each other gather resources and food, which they happily shared. They cheered each other up and convinced each other to carry on, as well as provided each other with company, comfort, and intimacy, within the camp walls. This paper has shown how female GULAG prisoners, created a wide camp- and prison culture and created a series of varied and creative survival strategies, in answer to the conditions they found themselves under.

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