Political books

Intellectual Life and Literature at Solovki by Andrea Gullotta – Gulag poetry

A prison monastery on the White Sea was both a place of terror and great culture



Portraits of Gulag 'shock workers', by an anonymous artist © Alamy Robert Chandler APRIL 27, 2018

Solovki was a labour camp set up in the early 1920s in the buildings of the rich and splendid Solovetsky Monastery on the White Sea. The first camp run entirely by the secret police, it was the seed of what was to become the Gulag. From the Solovetsky archipelago, labour camps spread to Soviet Karelia — and from there to Kolyma, Kazakhstan, Siberia and the Urals, to constitute what Solzhenitsyn later termed the Gulag archipelago.

In this carefully researched study, Andrea Gullotta draws on numerous memoirs and archives, showing particular developments from a variety of perspectives. Taken as a whole, Soviet suffering under Stalin — collectivisation, the terror and famine of 1932-33 and the Gulag — constitutes a catastrophe of the same order as the Shoah. Yet in many respects the Soviet experience was very different. Unlike the Shoah, which Hitler clearly signalled in *Mein Kampf*, the Gulag developed in an extraordinarily chaotic manner.

This is especially apparent in its early days in Solovki, above all with regard to culture, which is Gullotta's focus. Solovki was a murderous world; many were tortured there, and many died. At the same time, it boasted an excellent library, stocked with books no longer available on the mainland. As the subtitle chillingly puts it, it was the "Paris of the northern concentration camps". In the late 1920s, the prisoners staged plays and produced journals that were less censored than anywhere else in the Soviet Union. One can only speculate as to why this was allowed. Fyodor Eikhmans, the camp's deputy director, may have hoped that an appearance of liberalism would counter negative accounts of Solovki in the European press. Or he may truly have been interested in literature. Cultural ambitions were widespread among the Soviet

political elite; in the mid-1930s, one of Moscow's liveliest literary salons was run by the wife of Nikolai Yezhov, the head of the NKVD secret police.

Remarkable poems were published in Solovki. Among them is a cycle of parodies by Yuri Kazarnovsky, who spent four years in the camp in the late 1920s. Brilliantly recreating their voices, he imagines what Pushkin, Mayakovsky, Yesenin and other poets might have written had they, or their characters, been sent to the camp. An example is his version of the first lines of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*:

My uncle is a man of honour.

When he "fell ill", quite suddenly,

He had to leave his Moscow manor

And serve a term on Solovki.

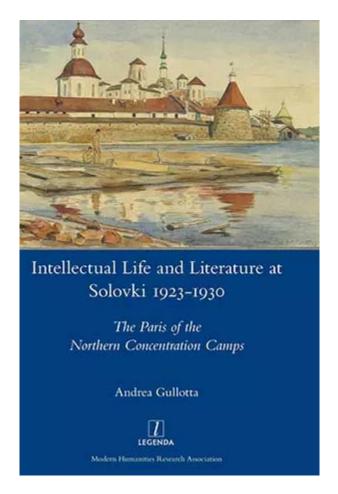
A man of property, he'd led

The easy life of lords and peers.

You know what rhymes with peers? Ten years —

And that's what his wise judges said!

The deftness and boldness of these lines, which closely track the original, are easy to appreciate. What I would not have known, without Gullotta's commentary, is that they are biographically accurate. In *Onegin*, the narrator's uncle simply falls ill and dies; in reality, Pushkin's uncle was imprisoned on Solovki from 1827 to 1832. From its first years, the monastery had doubled as a prison.



Small and remote as it is, Solovki has always been central to Russian culture. Nearly all the central themes of Russian history — the power and schisms of the Orthodox Church and its intimacy with the state; the development of the Gulag — are reflected, or more often anticipated, in its history. One of the more troubling developments in Vladimir Putin's Russia is the state's determination to take over the memory of the Gulag. Museums set up by human rights organisations are being closed. New state-sponsored ones convey the message that though there may have been needless sacrifices under Stalin, his legacy was positive: victory over Germany ultimately justified everything.

Events sponsored by the human rights organisation Memorial attract hostile attention from the police. The aim is to replace them by events at which only clergy or officials have a voice or that consist simply of singing and the laying of flowers.

Remembrance of victims is acceptable; questions about the perpetrators of the Terror are not. The writer and photographer Yuri Brodsky, author of *Solovki: Labyrinth of Transfigurations*, has received death threats for detailing how members of the clergy collaborated with the Bolsheviks. The Gulag section of the Solovki museum has been closed, and the abbot recently tried to evict Olga Bochkaryova, the museum's former director, from her apartment. Yuri Dmitriev, a historian who has devoted 30 years to discovering the main execution sites in Karelia, has been tried on trumped-up charges of child pornography. Encouragingly, a local court has just ruled in favour of Bochkaryova, and Dmitriev has just been acquitted.

The legacy of the Terror remains a battlefield. Books as scrupulously researched as Gullotta's are invaluable.

Intellectual Life and Literature at Solovki 1923-1930, by Andrea Gullotta, *Legenda*, *RRP£75*, *370 pages*

Robert Chandler is the translator of Vasily Grossman's 'Life and Fate'

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