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Small Victories: Identity, Autonomy, and Female Memory of Soviet GULAGs

*What's the point of faith to some fatherland,
 Why pretend that we've one settled home?
 Now, facing life's judgment, each one of us
 Is merciless, indigent, strong. - Anna Barkova¹*

Anna Barkova was one of the many women incarcerated in the Soviet GULAG² system who recorded her experiences in a memoir; this excerpt from an untitled poem written during her twenty years in prison reflects not only disillusionment with state power, but also the resilience of women under demoralizing prison conditions. Women's memoirs from the Soviet prison camp system between 1918 and the mid-1960s provide invaluable insight into their most vivid memories, many of which are centered around themes of sex, pregnancy, labor, and the "small victories" of everyday GULAG life. Memoirs, although often considered less "objectively truthful" than other sources due to the subjective nature of memory, can still provide a unique kind of history compared to official documents and records. Prison camp memoirs in particular can shed light on the intimate experiences of inhabitants left out of these official records.³ Furthermore, when considering the intimacy of control over prisoner's bodies and minds in the GULAG setting, memoirs can give powerful insight into how inhabitants, particularly women,

¹Anna Barkova, in *Till My Tale Is Told: Women's Memoirs of the Gulag*, ed. Simeon Vilensky, John Crowfoot, and Marjorie Farquharson, (Indiana University Press, 2001), 35.

² GULAG began as an acronym for "Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps and Colonies" but after Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, it became a term used to more loosely describe all Soviet prison camps.

³ The Gulag system, sometimes described as a "state within a state," presents its own research problems stemming from the falsification and later destruction of many official documents relating to inmates and daily life.

viewed their own roles and identities within the prison system. Recorded accounts which appear contradictory actually point to the diversity of prison camp experiences within the Soviet Union, drawing a fuller picture of what it meant to be a woman while incarcerated.

Apart from eminent works like Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* (1973) and Evgenia Ginzburg's *Into the Whirlwind* (1967),⁴ a general lack of access to and means of publication of memoirs made GULAG scholarship difficult before the Soviet collapse in 1991. However, Solzhenitsyn and Ginzburg's literature laid important groundwork for GULAG memoirists to come, establishing "voices from the GULAG" as an expose genre of the camp system. Furthermore, Solzhenitsyn's definition of the prison camp system as an "archipelago," separate islands of peripheral spaces connected only by their isolation, remained prominent in GULAG literature until very recently.⁵ A collection of the most contemporary scholarship, compiled in an anthology, *The Soviet Gulag: Evidence, Interpretation, and Comparison* (2016) by Dr. Michael David-Fox, explores the system of camps and prisons as an "incarnation of the Soviet system" as a whole. This new perspective complicates previous claims that the GULAGs existed in isolation to larger Soviet society, opening a more permeable boundary between the two spheres.⁶ In addition to David-Fox's work, this essay also takes into account Golfo Alexopoulos's *Health and Inhumanity in Stalin's Gulag: The Violence of Stalin's Labor Camps* (2017), which examines GULAG labor camps through the lens of health and medicine to offer a differentiated perspective from the common idea that the camps functioned with a mindset of efficiency, productivity, and low-mortality rates. She calls the Gulag system a "lethal system of human

⁴ Both *Gulag Archipelago* and *Into the Whirlwind* were first published in the West due to publication restrictions in the Soviet Union.

⁵Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-56: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, Vol. 3 (Random House, 2003).

⁶Michael David-Fox, ed. *The Soviet Gulag: Evidence, Interpretation, and Comparison*, (Pittsburgh University Press, 2016) 210.

exploitation” and “destructive by design” based on medical records and personal stories from survivors.⁷ Taking these foundational works into account, this paper offers a mitigated synthesis of ideas applied specifically to the genre of female GULAG memory, concluding that while the system reflected larger totalitarian aspects of Soviet society, GULAGs still existed as a more concentrated system of authoritarianism centered on efforts to dehumanize prisoners. However, examination of female memoirs reveals that many women exercised a surprising amount of autonomy by means of sex, pregnancy, work, and “small victories” of everyday resistance, identifying spaces of limited power within GULAG existence. Although these subjects often overlapped and intermingled in the lives, written memoirs, and oral histories of women in Soviet prison camps, they are separated here so as to examine each method used by women to express their limited autonomy in a GULAG setting individually.

SEX AND PREGNANCY

The state’s official treatment of pregnant women in GULAGs reflected slightly softened policy compared to other prisoners, but also highly discouraged contact between men and women. Veronica Shapovalov explains in *Remembering the Darkness: Women in Soviet Prisons* that pregnant prisoners were typically allotted comparatively lighter work eight weeks before and four weeks following giving birth. Additionally, infants were given a “child’s food ration” and the mothers were given a “mother’s ration,” which meant larger portions than other prisoners.⁸

⁷ Golfo Alexopoulos, *Health and Inhumanity in Stalin's Gulag: The Violence of Stalin's Labor Camps*, (Yale University Press, 2017) 1.

⁸ Veronica Shapovalov, *Remembering the Darkness: Women in Soviet Prisons*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 9.

This consideration for the condition of childbirth demonstrates the material allowance for new mothers, but also the economic burden of pregnant prisoners on the state. Alexopoulos comments on this, explaining that in the late Stalin period, pregnant and new mothers were often released early from gulags, so as not to weigh down the system, as they had “no value in terms of economic development.”⁹ If the official view of pregnancy was one of hindrance to workforce and economy as evidence suggests, this offers some explanation of the strict no-cohabitation laws enforced by GULAGs. Flora Leipman, a British-born citizen incarcerated in Kazakhstan from 1937 until 1945 recalled that as punishment for cohabitating, a woman would be “sent to the punishment cell and in the morning at roll call she would be reprimanded and maybe even separated from that particular barracks or moved to another camp.”¹⁰ The GULAGs, invested in maintaining a strong workforce unburdened by economically draining pregnant women, punished sexual contact accordingly.

In this context, some women who chose to be pregnant in Soviet prisons resisted state authority and asserted autonomy over their bodies by attempting to have unsanctioned children. One of these women, Hava Volovich, a Russian actress imprisoned for anti-Soviet agitation in 1937, gave birth to a child while incarcerated in 1942. Although she recognized the terrible conditions into which her child would be born, she wrote in her memoir:

Our need for love, tenderness, caresses was so desperate that it reached the point of insanity, of beating one’s head against a wall, of suicide. And we wanted a child - the dearest and closest of all people, someone for whom we could give up our own life. I held out for a relatively long time. But I did so need and long for a hand of my own to hold, something I could lean on in those long years of solitude, oppression, and humiliation to which we were all condemned.¹¹

Volovich, feeling the constant, everyday degradation of conditions in the GULAG system,

⁹ Golfo Alexopoulos, "Exiting the Gulag after War Women, Invalids, and the Family," *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas*, Neue Folge, 57, no. 4 (2009): 563-79.

¹⁰ Flora Leipman, *The Long Journey Home: The Memoirs of Flora Leipman*, (Bantam, 1987), 78.

¹¹ Hava Volovich, "My Past", *Till My Tale Is Told* (1999).

sought to resist control by creating a separate world within the prison environment to inhabit with her baby. This need for closeness and autonomy of body and existence manifested itself in unsanctioned childbirth and was, for a time, a source of hope and strength for Volovich. Even after the child died of malnutrition and illness, she traded three rations of bread for a toddler-sized coffin and a burial plot.¹² As David-Fox explains in *The Soviet Gulag: Evidence, Interpretation, and Comparison*, GULAGs were designed to “disperse offenders to peripheral ‘spaces of punishment,’” meant as a denial of individual personhood.¹³ Motherhood created a sense of identity and purpose for women like Volovich, representing a space to occupy outside of state control within Soviet prisons. Although not violent resistance in the traditional sense, within the prison camp setting, an intimate mother-child relationship became an act of subversion, pushing against totalitarian control in the dehumanizing punitive space of the GULAGs.

In *Gulag: A History*, Applebaum explains that other women who chose to become pregnant did so as a way to make their lives easier. They were often given larger portions of food, lighter work, and better living conditions.¹⁴ This idea of women exploiting motherhood for their own gain was looked down on by some female memoirists, such as a political prisoner named Nadezhda Joffe, who was arrested in 1929 for her Leftist¹⁵ oppositional views. In her memoir, Joffe lamented the selfish and criminal behavior of the camp “wet nurses” who gorged themselves on food and neglected the children in their care.¹⁶ Although she saw them as

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Michael David-Fox, ed. *The Soviet Gulag: Evidence, Interpretation, and Comparison*, (Pittsburgh University Press, 2016) 210.

¹⁴ Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 318.

¹⁵ The so-called “Left Opposition” was a dissident sector within the Bolshevik Party between 1923 and 1927, led by Leon Trotsky.

¹⁶ Nadezhda Joffe, *Back in Time: My Life, My Fate, My Epoch: the Memoirs of Nadezhda A. Joffe*, (Mehring Books, 1995), 124.

abhorrent, Joffe clearly acknowledged their ingenuity, referring to their scheme of making children as “a good business” and that, “in general, it was completely beneficial.”¹⁷ Despite her judgment, she attributed a sense of shrewdness bordering on entrepreneurship to these women, who essentially used their ability to wet nurse as a commodity. This is one example of women taking advantage of their limited choices to create a better living experience within the confines of camp life; in this case, their methods stretch beyond the realm of day-to-day survival to demonstrate autonomy within a specifically female realm of labor through their instrumental use of the female body. That Joffe interprets the wet nurse’s means of getting ahead in a similar way says much, considering her overall condemnation of their exploitation.

Conversely, other memoirs and illustrations suggested that some women refused the role of motherhood as a way of defying authority and retaining autonomy in the GULAGs. Evidence even exists of women choosing not to have children as a direct form of political protest. Speaking in the third person to protect herself, Anna Petrovna Skripnikova wrote in her memoir of imprisonment in Solovetskii camp from 1927 to 1931, “A syphilitic woman with a sunken nose, dying of starvation, was holding a skin-covered skeleton of a baby, her baby who was also dying of starvation... she [Skripnikova] made an oath to herself, an oath she would keep for her whole life: Never to be a mother under socialism.”¹⁸ Skripnikova directly associated the horrific conditions for mother and infant to the current regime, vowing never to bear children as an act of protest against the perceived outcomes of socialism witnessed in the prison. The question then becomes, which stance on prison childbirth should be considered subversion of state power? Examining memoirs and experiences of women in Soviet prisons weaves a less dichotomous, more holistic approach to resistance which factors in the individual agency of each woman.

¹⁷ Ibid., 125.

¹⁸ Veronica Shapovalov, *Remembering the darkness: women in Soviet prisons*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 81.

While Skripnikova vowed never to have children and Volovich conversely felt the necessity of motherhood while incarcerated, both women clearly viewed their respective choices as forms of control separate from state authority.

Furthermore, poor conditions contributed to some women rejecting motherhood in Soviet prisons by infanticide, killing their own babies to avoid imminent suffering. According to B.H. Bechtold in, “The Ties That Bind: Infanticide, Gender, and Society,” lack of sufficient care and food for infants were factors in instances of infanticide as a way for mothers to spare their children from prison horrors.¹⁹ One example of this comes from Evfrosiniia Kersnovskaia’s notebooks, which offer unique insight into GULAG life for women; she recorded her experiences along with over 680 accompanying illustrations done by Kersnovskaia herself. Not classically trained, her rudimentary, yet haunting, sketches capture “simple and shockingly frank incidents” witnessed as a camp prisoner.²⁰ A pencil drawing from the collection depicts a mother strangling her newborn soon after birth, her mouth open in anguish and outstretched arms holding the limp infant.²¹ The caption states that the mother committed infanticide in a camp hospital, where the administration also put her on trial. The illustration may therefore reflect the lack of care for newborns in many Soviet prison nurseries. Volovich’s memoir describes several aspects of poor care for children in these nursery facilities:

The nurses would get children up in the mornings forcing them out of their cold beds with shoves and kicks... pushing the children with their fists and swearing at them roughly, they took off their night clothes and washed them in ice-cold water. The babies didn’t even dare cry. They made little sniffing noises like old men and let out low hoots.²²

¹⁹ B. H. Bechtold and D. C. Graves, “The Ties That Bind: Infanticide, Gender, and Society,” *History Compass*, (Wiley Online Library, 2010), 704–717.

²⁰ Katya Pereyaslavskaya, “Gulag Art: Elusive Evidence from the Forbidden Territories,” *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 30, no. 1 (2011): 33–42.

²¹ E.A. Kersnovskaya, “Volume 4, figure 34,” digital image, Kersnovskaya Euphrosinia Antonovna, 2003, accessed March 11, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/albom/index.php?eng=&page=8&list=1&foto=9>.

²² Volovich, “My Past”, *Till My Tale Is Told*, 190.

Volovich laments the constant presence of sickness and malnutrition in babies; similarly, some mothers in GULAGs, like the one drawn by Kersnovskaia, were motivated by inhospitable conditions for raising children and high infant mortality rates to strangle or suffocate their newborns. By rejecting the motherhood role, either forced upon them as rape victims or through sex with other prisoners, these women sought to control the fate of their child in a way they could not control their own living conditions.

A debate about the role of prison camp sex as resistance to Soviet authority has emerged in both memoirs and scholarly readings. In several memoirs, women recalled using sex as a commodity to improve their conditions in prison, as well as a form of rebellion against rules that forbade male-female contact. Hava Volovich remembers, “there was only one thing that these stock-breeders from hell could not exterminate: the sex drive. Indifferent to regulations, to the threat of the punishment cells, to hunger and humiliation alike, it lived and flourished far more openly and directly than it does in freedom.”²³ Her interpretation of sex presents the idea that intimate relations represented a fire that could not be stamped out, even in the degrading conditions of GULAGs. Her statement represents a direct example of agency and resistance to state power in the GULAGs.

Additionally, women's memoirs contain many instances of performing sexual favors in exchange for food, better living conditions, early release, or protection in prison.²⁴ Flora Leipman recalled in her memoir, “We could also get favors from the guards, who were always looking for girlfriends... Every several weeks’ babies were born and taken away to the camp nursery. That is how some women survived.”²⁵ Leipman uses the term “girlfriends,” but clearly,

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ David-Fox, *The Soviet Gulag: Evidence, Interpretation, and Comparison*, 191.

²⁵ Flora Leipman, *The Long Journey Home: The Memoirs of Flora Leipman*, (New York: Bantam, 1987), 70.

these “agreements” were of a sexual nature and children resulted. Several women also refer to taking on prison “husbands” with whom they had sex in order to obtain protection from other prisoners or special favors. Valentina Grigorievna Ievleva-Pavlenko was picked by a brigade leader as his new “wife” and he courted her by giving her good food. She remembers her dilemma: “On the one hand, I could not afford to be on bad terms with the brigade leader; on the other, deep in my heart, I had no liking for the man.” After being assigned to felling timber for holding out, she “realized that he was bent on having me, by hook or by crook. So I agreed.”²⁶ Although clearly granted special privileges by her superior in prospect of a prison camp relationship, the threat of harder working conditions factored strongly into her decision to agree to a “prison wife” arrangement.

This situation brings into question the coercive power dynamic in GULAGs between authority figures and prisoners which must be factored into the larger context of sexual arrangements. Although Wilson T. Bell, who draws upon Dr. Anna Hájková's theory of barter and agency, argues that women used sex as a form of power and resistance in the GULAGs, this claim must be evaluated more closely in the context of a coercive prison environment.²⁷ For instance, an interrogation officer offered Leipman a shorter sentence, after which he attempted to assault her on his office couch; for refusing, he sent her to the punishment cell.²⁸ Whether Leipman chose to acquiesce to this offer or not, considering this situation a potential for barter or empowerment poses difficulty in the setting of forced incarceration. Typically, in the memoirs, the men involved in “exchanges” held positions of greater power than the women they propositioned. Olga Viktorovna Iafa-Sinakevich compared the head of a camp punishment cell

²⁶ Valentina Grigorievna Ievleva-Pavlenko, in *Remembering the Darkness*, ed. Veronica Shapovalov, 330.

²⁷ Bell, “Sex, Pregnancy, and Power in the Late Stalinist Gulag,” 224.

²⁸ Leipman, *The Long Journey Home*, 6.

with a belt full of keys to the Satyr from a Turgenev poem, surrounded by his unclothed “nymphs” (former prostitutes sent to the camp to be reformed).²⁹ Iafa-Sinakevich conspicuously references the guard’s keys in her metaphor, a reminder of his control over special favors given to the women. Although these examples demonstrate that the system of “favors” occurred in the greater context of a power imbalance, women’s individual navigation of this system still factors into consideration of sex exchange in Soviet prison camps. As Hájková states, “even if they were limited, in refusing them the possibility of choice, we refuse them agency.”³⁰ In other words, to deny women in GULAGs use of their sexuality as a form of barter would strip them of power to influence their situation at all, which, from the memoirs, does not appear to be the case. Leipman fought sexual coercion and Ievleva-Pavlenko eventually acquiesced to the demands of her new “husband,” but both women surprisingly maintained a sense of sexual autonomy in their limited choices.

In addition to a mitigated kind of sexual power, many women also retained a sense of identity through what can be referred to as “small victories,” navigating prison conditions by associating forms of subversive resistance with a larger role in spiritual resilience. Many instances of this subversion, like the examples above, are connected to specifically female realms of sex and the physical body. The GULAG memoir of Aida Issakharovna Basevich, retrieved and translated from the Memorial archives in St. Petersburg by Veronica Shapovalov, demonstrates how written accounts of women’s lives delve into this personal struggle with bodily autonomy and self in a prison environment.³¹ Born in 1905 in St. Petersburg to the family of a well-known construction engineer, Basevich grew up attending the liberal Vyborg

²⁹ Olga Viktorovna Iafa-Sinakevich, in *Remembering the Darkness*, 299.

³⁰ Anna Hájková, “Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide: Negotiating the Sexual Economy of the Theresienstadt Ghetto,” *Signs* 38, no. 3 (2013): 503.

³¹ Shapovalov published only the beginning excerpt of Basevich’s memoir, covering her life from birth in 1905 to the middle of her time in prison, in 1941.

Commercial school in Petrograd.³² She described both herself and her schoolmates as very politically active children.³³ Significantly, after a short introduction, she begins her memoir immediately during her school years in Petrograd between 1912 and 1919. This starting point should be noted within the historical context of revolutionary times in Russia, but it is also important in the sense that Aida saw this period as the marked beginning of her own revolution, of *How I Became an Anarchist* (the title of her memoir). By setting the scene for her coming GULAG experience in the time she felt “literally infected with politics,” Basevich indicates that, from the beginning, her schooling planted seeds of dissidence and critical thinking that later grew into her sense of political identity. Shortly after joining an anarchist group at university in 1924, she was arrested for opposition to Soviet power.³⁴

Taking a closer look at the text, her writing, while carrying the stark narrative style that characterizes many GULAG memoirs, sets itself apart by the frank addressal of taboo subjects like menstruation and single motherhood. In this passage from 1941 in Tula Prison, Basevich describes four days on what she calls “the assembly line” (a virtual gauntlet of torture) to force her to name her co-conspirators:

At some point, the blood vessels in my legs burst. Only once, they let me go back to my cell. As soon as I had lain down, they took me to interrogation again. It was even more difficult then to stand during interrogation. I could barely walk. I had my period, and I was covered in blood. I was not allowed to change. Moreover, I could go to the toilet only once in twenty-four hours and only accompanied by a guard; it was impossible to do anything in his presence. I had such heavy bleeding then, I was very happy that I totally ruined their rug.³⁵

She illustrated in deft tone the horrors of GULAG interrogation and the pain she experienced, but more surprisingly, Basevich topped off her description with a punch of vindictive pleasure at having bled all over “*their*” rug. By clearly identifying the carpet as belonging to the GULAG

³² During WWI, St. Petersburg was renamed Petrograd because it sounded less German. .

³³ Aida Issakharovna Basevich, *How I Became an Anarchist*, trans. Veronica Shapovalov, 128.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

interrogation officers, or perhaps as a part of the GULAG itself, she made a choice to direct her secret happiness at destruction of a part of the system that detained her. Though perhaps more of an accident than an outright act of resistance, her phrasing of the recollection in conjunction with preceding emphasis on the guard's surveillance suggests that a sense of autonomy or self in opposition to her tormentors existed. Through her narrative, the unintentional stain became a symbol of both anguish and defiance in the author's memory, demonstrating how women's GULAG memoirs, although in some cases written years later, can help paint a clearer picture of the way these women interpreted their own actions in the context of GULAG life. Similarly, the title of her piece, *How I Became an Anarchist*, serves as a destination for this roadmap of formative moments, directing her memories of the GULAG towards a "political self." Whether or not her elation at ruining the rug post-dates the event itself is less important in the memoir's context than her eventual association between small victories (like a bloody rug) and her identity as an anarchist against the Soviet regime.

LABOR

Almost all female GULAG memoirs explore themes of work and camp labor at length, focusing on ways this force shaped their time of incarceration, as well as their sense of identity connected to work. Historians like Anne Applebaum interpret this connection as being a result of larger Soviet rhetoric centered around the importance of labor, especially for inmates.³⁶ In the same way that the state organized Soviet society around labor and citizen identity associated with labor, so the GULAG inmates' association between work and identity was formed by state rhetoric. Furthermore, GULAG labor went beyond the Soviet norm in an attempt to strip the

³⁶ Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 230.

prisoners of dignity and human qualities. As Alexopoulos explains, official medical documents never used the Russian word for “health” in reference to prisoners, instead categorizing them by “physical labor capability” to emphasize the priority of meeting labor quotas.³⁷ Alexopoulos uses this example to demonstrate the dehumanizing and destructive practices of GULAG labor on morale and health, an idea also reflected in female memoirs.

Solzhenitsyn, in *The GULAG Archipelago*, described the connection between work and physical body as a weakness for women in particular, a kind of vulnerability specific to the female form. Of the stringent labor practices, he observed that “the body becomes worn out at that kind of work, and everything that is feminine in a woman, whether it be constant or whether it be monthly, ceases to be.”³⁸ Was GULAG labor the antithesis of female identity, as Solzhenitsyn suggests? While the grueling and dehumanizing aspects of women’s labor in the GULAG should not be dismissed, women’s memory of labor in the GULAGs can also be interpreted as pointing to a greater sense of power and autonomy connected with varied practices of labor than Solzhenitsyn attributes. He associates femininity with the condition of the female body; however, for many women, their physical bodies became a means, whether through sex, pregnancy, or labor, used to create spaces of limited choice and subversion in the GULAGs. Women’s memoirs discuss these spaces of autonomy in relation to camp labor in different ways. Some navigated the system to ease the burden of work, using gender to their advantage to occupy more specialized jobs. Others embraced hard labor as a method of creating a sense of self separate from the dehumanization of the GULAG regulation on daily life. Despite the apparent conflict of these interpretations, female memory surrounding labor demonstrates a spectrum of experiences. Clearly, interpretation of written memories as primary sources does not reveal a

³⁷ Alexopoulos, *Health and Inhumanity in Stalin's Gulag*, 64.

³⁸ Solzhenitsyn, *The GULAG Archipelago: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, 235.

consensus of ideas among women, but collectively, these memories reflect specific choices made to create spaces of individuality in reaction to GULAG conditions.

In most cases, camp administration expected women to work the same kinds of jobs as men, either alongside them or in separate platoons.³⁹ Flora Leipman recalled that, “Other prisoners, including women, were put to work clearing the forests and cutting wood, all of which was done by hand.”⁴⁰ Although Leipman recalls observing only men digging ditches and canals, several 1932 photographs from the *Belomorkanal*,⁴¹ or White Sea Canal, depict an all-female construction brigade of GULAG prisoners doing excavation work. The women, mostly in skirts and protective head coverings, are surrounded by wheelbarrows full of excavated earth and can be seen swinging pick axes and shoveling dirt on the steep incline of a freshly dug bank.⁴² Women not only worked on the same backbreaking projects as men, but also under extreme conditions. One drawing from Evfrosiniia Kersnovskaia’s notebooks shows a woman in a snowy forest surrounded by a ring of felled trees, wiping her brow with one hand while the other holds a saw half her height.⁴³ However, not all jobs involved hard physical labor. GULAG administration also assigned female prisoners a vast array of more specialized positions, like nursing in camp hospitals or operating phone boards. In both cases, memoirs record a diverse range of ways women used their positions to carve out spaces of autonomy in their daily lives as camp inmates.

³⁹ Emma Mason, "Women in the Gulag in the 1930s," in *Women in the Stalin Era* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2001), 140.

⁴⁰ Leipman, *The Long Journey Home*, 36.

⁴¹ A canal opened in 1933 which connects the White Sea, in the Arctic Ocean, to the Baltic Sea. Construction was almost entirely undertaken by forced GULAG laborers, of which approximately 12,000 died during construction according to official records.

⁴² Construction Works at Belomorkanal, 1932, Memorial Moscow, International Memorial Society, (In *GULAG: Many Days, Many Lives*, 2008), Accessed June 1, 2017, <http://gulaghhistory.org/items/show/179>.

⁴³ E.A. Kersnovskaya, "Volume 4, figure 37," digital image, Kersnovskaya Euphrosinia Antonovna, 2003, accessed March 11, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/albom/index.php?eng=&page=8&list=1&foto=9>.

Some political prisoners, typically educated and trained in specialized jobs before their arrests, saw general labor as an insult to their professional status and skills. Applebaum notes that “political,” although all technically arrested under Article 58⁴⁴ of the Criminal Code indicating counter-revolutionary crimes, were often non-partisan and even pro-Soviet citizens who became caught up in mass arrests.⁴⁵ Few were active dissidents, but due to the selective nature of recorded memory, intellectuals who opposed the regime on these grounds were more likely to write cohesive memoirs about their GULAG experiences. For example, Varvara Ivanovna Brusilova, granddaughter-in-law of the famous General Brusilov, went on several hunger strikes during her imprisonment, sending petitions for better living conditions and refusing to participate in agricultural labor.⁴⁶ She attempted not only to use her physical body as an instrument of resistance, but also her identity as a professional worker. While in solitary confinement during 1937, she insisted among her demands that she “would rather die of hunger while struggling for meaningful cultural life and work in camp for the remaining five years of my sentence than exist among thieves, prostitutes, foul language bed bugs, and lice in the barrack on the twenty-first kilometer. I absolutely refuse to perform general labor.”⁴⁷ Not only did she consider her position above normal work, but she felt that her life could not be meaningful in a cultural sense unless the camp administrators allowed her to work in her trained field as a nurse. In fact, Brusilov even equates terrible living conditions like bed bugs and lice to deprivation of her professional identity. Although far from the norm, Brusilova’s petition and hunger strike represent extreme active resistance to GULAG authority on the grounds of identity and humanity

⁴⁴ Several memoirists use the phrase “58ers” to describe political prisoners as a cohesive group, which was apparently a commonly used term among prisoners and camp authorities.

⁴⁵ Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 292.

⁴⁶ In all, she spent 142 days on hunger strikes and on September 2nd, 1937, was sentenced to execution by firing squad.

⁴⁷ Varvara Ivanovna Brusilova, in *Remembering the Darkness: Women in Soviet Prisons*, 92.

associated with the classification of work for female intellectuals. This forceful attempt to create a space of labor autonomy, however small, in the GULAG system can also be seen, albeit less explicitly, in other female memoirs.

While some women navigated the Gulag system of labor in forms of both passive and active resistance, others used labor as a way to retain, or perhaps form a sense of self or identity in the prison camps. Several of the memoirs suggest that a sense of self tied to GULAG labor existed, if not opposed to, then at least separate from the idea of GULAG and state authority. For instance, in 2004 Robert Latypov recorded the oral history of Sira Stepanovna Balashina, a dekulakized peasant, asking a series of questions about work during her time in a Stalinist forced labor camp in the Urals.⁴⁸ Although she performed backbreaking forced labor, mostly logging and forest clearing, for over twenty years, Balashina responded with marked pride in her accomplishments; she had earned several state medals for her Stakhanovite⁴⁹ work in the camp. The majority of GULAG scholarship defines labor as “the central function of most Soviet camps,” so how can Balashina’s commitment to her assigned work reflect a sense of autonomy separate from this official expectation?⁵⁰

While the author’s introduction to this piece emphasizes internalized Soviet notions of purging her bourgeois past through work, a connection can also be drawn between Balashina’s fond memory of her “shock work” and formation of an identity linked to labor. The interviewer asked, “Did everyone cope with that?” (meaning the long-term, isolated tree cutting) and she

⁴⁸ Sira Stepanovna Balashina, in *Gulag voices: Oral Histories of Soviet Incarceration and Exile*, edited by Jehanne Gheith and Katherine Jolluck, (New York: Springer, 2011), 19. The interview was conducted in the village of Vaia, Krasnovishersk raion, Perm oblast (Southeastern region of European Russia).

⁴⁹ A term used to describe excellent or “shock” workers in the Soviet Union who exceeded production quotas, named for Aleksei Grigorievich Stakhanov, a miner who mined fourteen times his coal quota in five hours.

⁵⁰ Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 217.

responded, “Some did, some didn’t... I have four medals over there, I hung them on the wall... For valiant labor.”⁵¹ By way of answering how she dealt with the extreme environment of GULAG labor, Balashina did not give a complex answer, but simply pointed to her awards. In the context of the whole interview, throughout which she brings almost every question back to the subject of work, this excerpt demonstrates her deep association between labor and an idea of differentiated “self.” When considering David-Fox’s interpretation of the GULAG’s purpose to erase identity in a peripheral space of punishment, Balashina’s example seems to run contrary to this purpose.⁵² She indicates that she lived her life in almost a sense of indifference to her situation, felling logs for years as a fact of existence as opposed to cleansing herself from her Kulak past, as official discourse might have suggested.⁵³ Although she did not explicitly define this drive to achieve a high standard of timber felling as an act against her incarceration, her presentation of the alternative (that some did not work as hard as she did) implies that, as a means of survival, she differentiated herself from other inmates based on her achievements in labor. Perhaps not a means of resistance or even subversion, her recollection establishes labor as a source of individual identity for female prisoners, possibly even within the framework of Soviet rhetoric.

In her memoir *My Journey*, Olga Adomova-Sliozburg associated her agricultural “peasant” work in a Kolyma labor camp with a limited sense of relief from GULAG confines. She recalled discovering another inmate destroying the cabbage crop she worked so hard to plant, writing furiously in response, “Labor was the only human activity left to us. We didn’t have families, there were no books, we lived in filth, stench, and darkness... Labor was human

⁵¹ Sira Stepanovna Balashina, in *Gulag voices: Oral Histories*, 25.

⁵² David-Fox, *The Soviet Gulag: Evidence, Interpretation, and Comparison*, 191.

⁵³ Ol’ga L’vovna Adamova-Sliozberg, *My Journey: How One Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag*, (Northwestern University Press, 2011), 99.

and clean.”⁵⁴ The author’s dichotomous comparison between dehumanizing GULAG regulations and the freedom of labor created a space for her to occupy apart from these conditions.

Adomova-Sliozburg’s memory kept her agricultural work separate from demoralizing aspects of the GULAG, considering it her own sphere of humanizing activity in which to create identity.

In her memoir, Hava Volovich remembers using manual labor as a form of protest against the administration’s treatment of prisoners. After being assigned one of the easiest jobs in camp at a telephone switchboard, she became more and more outraged observing the conditions of the women’s brigade, recalling, “The sight of it filled me with dread, but also with shame. I was ashamed to be sitting in the guardroom wearing my earphones while other people were smashed to bits on the bumpy ground, slaving away felling trees, and giving their all to clear the road, before dying of exhaustion, heat stroke, or hunger.”⁵⁵ Shortly after, she quit her more privileged job to join the hard laborers in solidarity with their plight and resistance to the “state favor” she had been granted. Some might argue that Volovich’s recollection simply embellishes a routine job change with a more heroic narrative. Certainly, labor reassignments were frequent and prisoners usually had no say in their destination. However, even if this was the case, her association (in memory or in reality) between labor status and resistance represents an acknowledgement of autonomy over work spaces and the body in the GULAGs. Volovich’s view of labor in this instance certainly contradicts the state line on the meaning of labor in prison camps.

Both Soviet society and GULAG administration emphasized labor as a patriotic practice. In her book, Alexopoulos ironically cites the Soviet Constitution as proclaiming, “Labor is the obligation of all citizens of the republic,” an idea which relates to the more general idea of

⁵⁴ Ibid., 104.

⁵⁵ Volovich, “My Past,” *Till My Tale Is Told*, 259.

corrective labor in the Soviet Union, a transformation of self through work that both the state and camp administration applied to criminals.⁵⁶ Therefore, despite prisoners' official categorization as "state enemies," GULAG administration still expected inmates to work "for the glory of the socialist motherland" by all standards of camp labor and work quotas.⁵⁷ Examining memoirs and oral histories of women like Adomova-Sliozberg and Balashina seems to suggest that some women saw work as a space separate from (if not necessarily opposed to) state obligation or glorification, a humanizing means of identifying oneself with productive work and a sense of purpose. Of course, this is not to discount the numerous examples of backbreaking, inhumane, and often lethal labor forced on Gulag prisoners and their resistance to this labor. These instances simply point to the diversity and often paradoxical instances of female memory and labor, attributing navigation of camp work systems, in both resistance and compliance, to the ways women viewed identity and autonomy within the GULAG system.

One expects a certain amount of hardship when reading a GULAG memoir; images of deprivation, rape, solitude, and abuse come to mind with these kind of narratives, especially concerning women in prison camps. Solzhenitsyn described this view of female frailty in the face of the demoralizing day to day life in the GULAGS. Certainly, camp horrors were of great importance in the lives of these women and crushed a countless number indefinitely. But most unexpectedly, examination of female GULAG memoirs reveals ways in which women identified spaces of limited power and autonomy by means of sex, pregnancy, work, and "small victories" of everyday subversion. These memoirs not only preserve how female prisoners viewed the system they were incarcerated within, but also their own roles and identities within this system. Memoirists wrote and published at different times across numerous spaces throughout the Soviet

⁵⁶ Alexopoulos, *Health and Inhumanity in Stalin's Gulag*, 19.

⁵⁷ Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 237.

Union, but for survivors, creation of memory through personal recollection worked as a unifying practice of self-definition. However, many human rights organizations today argue that the current regime in Russia opposes the preservation of GULAG memory.

Since its creation in 1989, the Moscow-based human rights group Memorial has aimed to uncover Soviet repressions and defend rights in the new Russia, as well as preserving the memory of political prisoners and those purged by Stalin.⁵⁸ Many of the GULAG memoirs examined in this work came from the Memorial archives in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Nanci Adler, in “The Future of the Soviet Past Remains Unpredictable: The Resurrection of Stalinist Symbols Amidst the Exhumation of Mass Graves,” describes Memorial’s struggle against Putin’s regime to create monuments, research prisoners for rehabilitation, and lobby for inclusion of GULAGs into textbooks, with no government funding or support.⁵⁹ In October 2014, Russia’s justice ministry announced it would appeal to the courts to “liquidate” Memorial — on a legal technicality.⁶⁰ The memory of GULAG prisoners is inconvenient for Putin’s government, which, as Arsenii Roginsky, head of Memorial, stated, stems from the fact that “Putin leans on the myth of the Soviet past, and what the Soviet Union once meant,” an interpretation that often leaves out undesirable aspects of Soviet history.⁶¹ For women in the GULAGs, remembering what they lived through (and others did not) represented in itself a way to create a space of female power against the backdrop of the Soviet regime. To forget this would silence voices that need to be heard, now more than ever.

⁵⁸ Nanci Adler, “The Future of the Soviet Past Remains Unpredictable: The Resurrection of Stalinist Symbols Amidst the Exhumation of Mass Graves,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 57, (2005), accessed 12 June, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130500351100>

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1096.

⁶⁰ Charles Maynes, “Human rights group Memorial is too ‘inconvenient’ for Putin’s new Russia,” Public Radio International, November 12, 2014, Accessed June 14, 2017, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-11-12/russian-rights-group-memorial-inconvenient-organization-putins-new-russia>.

⁶¹ Adler, “The Future of the Soviet Past Remains Unpredictable,” 1107.

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