

The society of the vory-v-zakone, 1930s-1950s

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Abstract

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Résumé

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FEDERICO VARESE

THE SOCIETY OF THE *VORY-V-ZAKONE*, 1930s-1950s¹

Vory-v-zakone (thieves-in-law) were a peculiar type of criminal that emerged in the Soviet labour camps in the late 1920s. Many dissidents encountered the *vory* in the camps and described their behaviour. Dmitrii Likhachev, later to become one of the most prominent scholars of medieval Russian language and literature, met the *vory* while he was a convict at the Belomorsko-Baltiiskii canal construction site in the early 1930s.² After his release, Likhachev wrote a fascinating yet generally ignored essay on the language of the “thieves.” He observed that the *vorovskoi mir* (the world of thieves) at the Belomorsko-Baltiiskii canal construction site was far from anarchical: “Despite thieves’ apparent lack of discipline, their lives are governed by a network of strict regulations that extend to the most minute matters and ultimately by a system of ‘collective beliefs’ that is remarkably uniform among criminals with different ethnic roots.”³ The *vory* spent most of their lives in the labour camps, consistently refusing to work. They developed an ideology of monastic purity, a ritual for the initiation into the fraternity and achieved a leading role over the *blatnye*, professional criminals who aspired to become *vory*, the highest possible honour in the criminal world. The fraternity survived until the 1950s, when it was virtually destroyed by a new generation of criminals who rejected the rules of the fraternity and clashed and eventually killed almost all of its members. Camp authorities likely encouraged the “war” against the *vory*, known as *such’ia voina* (1948-1953).

Before their destruction, the *vory* formed a society of criminals comparable to more famous secret fraternities, such as the Neapolitan Camorra, the Sicilian Mafia and the Japanese Yakuza. A number of dimensions could be identified for detailed comparison, yet the basic facts concerning the *vory* must first be established. The aim of this paper is thus to present a preliminary exploration of a fascinating yet little-known chapter in Soviet history.⁴ Although a great deal of uncertainty still surrounds the life of *vory*,⁵ the memoirs of dissidents published in the sixties and seventies can now be supplemented with unpublished recollections by convicts and official documentation emerging from the Russian archives.⁶ Drawing upon some of that evidence, the first part of the paper sketches the main features of the *vory* society, while the second and the third consider its origin and fall.

The vory-v-zakone, 1930s-1950s

Maximilien de Santerre, a French-Russian “spy” born in 1924 and confined to the Gulag in 1946 for 12 years, observed that some criminals in the camp followed a peculiar dress code and mannerism.⁷ They wore “home-made aluminium crosses round their necks” and waistcoats.⁸ Santerre came to understand that these were “symbolic attribute[s] of a *vor-v-zakone*. Senior *vory* (the so-called *pakhany*) often were bearded and almost always wore their shirts outside the trousers with one or several waistcoats above.”⁹

The *vory* also had tattoos covering their bodies. The iconography of the tattoos varied. According to Santerre, “their chests are often tattooed with a picture of praying angels on each side of the crucifix; underneath are the words: ‘O Lord, save thy slave!’ or ‘I believe in God,’” indicating some respect for religion.¹⁰ Gamaiunov reports that, until the fifties, a typical *vory* tattoo depicted a heart, pierced by a dagger.¹¹ Gurov writes of a *vory* tattoo picturing the suits of aces inside a cross and symbolising membership into the society. In his view, criminals had tattoos “to prove their strength. The tattoo also had a ‘communication function’. It helped the recidivists recognise each other.” Accordingly, the *vory* sought to maintain exclusive use of their tattoo designs; non-*vory* found wearing them were punished by death.¹²

The *vory* spoke a language of their own (*fenia*), its grammatical structure being Russian, but with a different vocabulary. This idiom attracted the interest of Dmitrii Likhachev, who stressed the “magical nature” of the word for these criminals and drew a parallel between primitive people and *vory*. He also noticed that knowledge of the jargon enabled a *vor* to fully assert his position among other criminals.¹³ Chalidze provides a brief discussion of the origin of this language. He maintains that it emerged out of nineteenth-century criminal slang, which in turn was a combination of peddlers’ speech, sailors’ slang as well as Yiddish and Romany. He concludes that the jargon was greatly influenced by the advent of the Gulag camp system: “Today [...] there is a great deal of overlapping between prison speech and thieves’ slang.”¹⁴

A dress code, tattoos and even a language of their own would not distinguish the *vory* from any other human group that lives in a closed space, such as sailors, soldiers and ordinary convicts. The *vory* stand out among such groups because they formed a secret criminal fraternity, with its own code of behaviour and ritual for initiation of new members.¹⁵ Furthermore, the *vory* created rudimentary yet effective “courts” where members’ misbehaviour was judged and wrongdoers punished.

An early observer of the society, V.I. Monakhov, describes the gathering which would “crown” a *vor*, known as *skhodka* (meeting). Upon the recommendation of the members, the meeting accepted the novice into the society and the new *vor* swore an acceptance oath: “As a young lad, I set foot on the road of a thieves’ life. I swear before the thieves who are at this meeting to be a worthy thief, and not to fall for any trick of the members of the CheKa.”¹⁶ Monakhov’s version of the initiation ritual is supported by the account given by a *vor* called Ch. of his own crowning in 1951 at the age of 18.¹⁷ After swearing the oath, Ch. was warned by his mentors of the punishment he would incur if he failed to abide by the oath. A *vor* who did so became, in the eyes of the fraternity, a *legavyi*, the *vory* equivalent of *sbirro* (cop) and *infame* (traitor) for the Sicilian Mafia and the most vicious insult a *vor* could have thrown at him.¹⁸

A police document from the early fifties describes an initiation ceremony that took place in rather unusual circumstances, in a transit-prison in the Krasnoiarskii *krai*, where 10 cells had been set aside to house hardened criminals. Confined to isolation cells, the criminals were forced to conduct the ceremony in writing, by pen and paper.¹⁹ The pieces of paper were later confiscated by police, who then wrote a report of the incident. According to the report, a note (*ksiva*) recommending a novice (*maliutka*) was sent from one cell to the others.²⁰ It praised the “baby,” said to possess the right qualities to be admitted into the family of *vory*. In particular, his mentors wrote, “his behaviour and aspirations are totally in accordance with the *vory*’s world-view”; he “defied camp discipline for a long period of time and is practically never let out of the punishment cell”; he, “at the request of the members, collected money for several months from other prisoners in one of the camp’s sub-units” (the money was called “thieves’ blessing” — *blago vorovskoe* — and amounted to the payment of “protection” money to the *vory*); and “even though still young, his mind is remarkable and in accordance with our world-view. We are glad to welcome new thieves into our family.” The first cell that received the note was unambiguously positive in its response: “This guy will be a *vor-v-zakone*. God bless him.” The second cell was also in favour, although rather less enthusiastic: “If his soul is pure, let him in.” Apparently, without any objections from other *vory*, the novice became a new member of the fraternity.²¹

The *vory* were the inner circle of a wider criminal milieu. Those who aspired to become *vory*, or, in Sicilian Mafia jargon, to be “made” members, belonged to the same environment and abided by the same rules of behaviour as the “made” members. Thus to an external observer the *blatnye* and *vory* might have seem indistinguishable. Indeed, some sources use the two terms interchangeably. Within the *vory* itself, a distinction could be identified between junior and senior *vory*. For example, Ch. refers to senior members, the *pakhany*, who could have objected to his young age. Although the fraternity was a society of equals, the *pakhany* were older *vory* with a particular moral authority.²²

Nicknames were formally given in the course of the initiation ritual. The name the *vor* acquired at the ritual arguably was quite distinct from an ordinary nickname (*klichka*). It marked the new life the criminal was about to enter. Thus, following a practice common in other secret societies and religious orders (such as the Catholic Church), nicknaming amounted for the *vory* to a re-christening, as observed by Likhachev: “the adoption of a nickname is a necessary act of transition to the *vory*’s sphere (it amounts to a peculiar ‘taking of monastic vows’).”²³ Ch. recalls that at his crowning he could finally dispose of his “childish nickname *malys*h (the young one), and get an adult nickname, which I chose myself.” Reportedly, Ch. chose the nickname *likhoi* (dashing).²⁴

A *vor* might spend many years of his life in prison. “To them, prison is their native home,” writes Solzhenitsyn.²⁵ The length of time spent in prison was a source of prestige and a sign of distinction among the criminals who aspired to become *vory*. In this sense, the *vory* were a peculiar brand of criminal produced by prison culture, a feature that distinguishes them from Sicilian Mafiosi. Each *vor*, when out of prison, joined thieves’ communes known as *kodla*.²⁶ Santerre reports that *kodla* could reach the size of 20-30 people. Up to ten different specialties, such as pickpocketing, burglary, and motor vehicle theft, were often represented in a single commune. The communes were supposed to be united by ties of solidarity, fraternity and relatively

equal rights:²⁷ "In such groups (the *vory*'s communes), no direct leader exists. The *vory*'s *skhodka* is the organ of representation and control. Any member of the society could ask for a *skhodka* to be held."²⁸ While regional and local meetings were held, the regional *skhodki*, where general problems concerning the society were addressed, rarely were. This is not surprising, given the limitation on movement for ordinary citizens of the Soviet Union, let alone former convicts.

The *vory* were required to follow a strict code of behaviour in their interaction with each other. Members of the brotherhood were supposed to be honest and helpful to one another and always tell the truth to fellow members.²⁹ Thieves-in-law were supposed to avoid conflict among themselves and not to undermine each other's authority.³⁰

"All *vory* are honest and helpful in their dealings with one another, but the paracriminal population practice deceit and theft on one another and are chary with assistance. Observers of these classes have sometimes been misled into imagining that their behaviour is typical of the *vory*. However, the solidarity of the latter is well attested, and political prisoners in Stalin's camps are often surprised at the co-operation that developed between *vory* who had not known each other before."³¹

Vory were supposed to share all they had with fellow *vory*. Those who deviated from this norm would have been punished: a *vor* could have been brought to trial and consequently deprived of his thief's privileges for concealing cigarettes from fellow members.³² A thief had no right to insult or raise his hand against another thief.³³ Violence, without sanction from a proper *vory* "court," was prohibited.³⁴

A professional code of conduct regulated the interactions between the *vory* and the outside world. The *vory* considered the code to be part of their trade, as Likhachev notes in his 1935 essay on the thieves' language. Some elements of the code can be partially inferred from the notes exchanged at the transit prison in the Krasnoarskii *krai*. Prior to and following initiation, a *vor* was supposed to have acted as a social outcast. Activities that suggested the state had power over the criminal, whether serving in the Red Army, paying taxes or working in the camps, were strictly forbidden.

In the camps, the *vory* thus systematically refused to work.³⁵ In particular, they refused to "take part in the construction of a prison, disciplinary barracks, stretch a barbed wire or clean the prohibited zone."³⁶ Systematic refusal to work was punished by camp authorities and Soviet courts.³⁷ Nevertheless, camp authorities generally avoided direct confrontation with the *vory*.³⁸

A proper *vor* should not, prior to initiation, have been involved in political activities and, upon entering the fraternity, should have severed all links with society, including familial ties. His family was the *vory* brotherhood.³⁹ Professional criminals who remained attached to their families were called *domashniki* and on that basis could be refused entry into the brotherhood.⁴⁰

Despite this prohibition against family ties, the *vory* exhibited an outward cult of motherhood, as seen in the tattoo born by many *vory* with the words "I won't forget my own mother." Varlam Shalamov, who spent a total of fifteen years in the camps (1937-1953) and is one of the most important writers of camp literature, identified a puzzling contrast between that professed cult of motherhood and the actual indifference shown by *vory* towards their natural mothers.⁴¹ As Shalamov observes, "there is one woman who is romanticised by the criminal world, one woman who has

become the subject of criminal lyrics and the folklore heroine of many generations of criminals. This woman is the criminal's mother." At the same time, however, "no criminal has ever sent so much as a kopeck to his mother or made any attempt to help her on his own." Shalamov thus concludes that the cult of the mother, although surrounded by a poetic haze, was "nothing but a pack of lies and theatrical pretence. The mother cult [was] a peculiar smoke-screen used to conceal the hideous criminal world."⁴² Gurov provides a different explanation of the same phenomenon. The "mother" invoked by the *vory*, Gurov argues, was not the natural mother but rather a metaphor for the *vory* brotherhood, their new family.⁴³

Women had no place in the hierarchy of thieves. "A third- or fourth-generation criminal learns contempt for women from childhood," writes Shalamov. "[...] Woman, an inferior being, has been created only to satisfy the criminal's animal craving, to be the butt of his crude jokes and the victim of public beatings."⁴⁴ A *vor* might have had a wife, but any real attachment to her was viewed as detrimental to the member's dedication to the society.⁴⁵ The *vory* code did not preclude monogamy, yet such faithfulness to one's wife was seen as a sign of weakness and "seldom lasting."⁴⁶

Chalidze points out that the wife of a thief was allowed practically no social relations with others from outside the criminal world; she was the property of her husband. If he went to prison, she generally would have cohabited with one of his fellow thieves, while continuing to take an interest in his welfare. Although wives were not despised as much as prostitutes and female citizens not connected with the criminal world, they had no special rights: "the relation of a thief to his wife is that of a master to his slave, except that the slave has voluntarily chosen her lot."⁴⁷ While the wife may have chosen voluntarily to join the criminal community, she was unable to secede from it. If the criminal's wife failed to meet her obligations, she was warned; if she failed again she was punished.⁴⁸ According to Shalamov, there were no *ménages à trois* involving either lawful wives or prostitutes. Both prostitutes and legal wives could have been told to satisfy the needs of others, but the understanding was that there was always only one "owner."⁴⁹

Women criminals — their bodies, like the men's, covered with tattoos⁵⁰ — existed and were referred to with a variety of words, including *vorovka*, *blatnaia*, *blatniachka* and *vorovaika*.⁵¹ Like the men, they refused to work and occasionally took part in crimes committed by the *vory*. They were not, however, allowed to enter the male fraternity.⁵² It remains unclear whether they formed a separate fraternity of their own.⁵³

Thieves did not cultivate paternal feelings or care much about children. The *vory* took for granted that "a thief's son will become a thief and his daughter a companion of thieves, although this does not always happen, especially nowadays."⁵⁴ The son of a thief could therefore benefit from the reputation of his father, even though he was subject to the same initiation ritual as everybody else.⁵⁵

Although passive homosexuality was strictly forbidden, active homosexuality was allowed.⁵⁶ Drugs also were allowed and could be freely taken: "thieves often suffer from epilepsy and drug addiction. In the prison drug stores they get ether, luminal, drugs mixed with cocaine, morphine and opium."⁵⁷

The attitude of the *vory* towards property seems to have derived from the prohibition against entering into obligations with the non-criminal world. Property bound criminals to the material world, reducing their commitment to the *vorovskoi*

mir. The *vory* were supposed to show contempt towards the accumulation of assets. Only short-term use of stolen cash or goods was allowed. The *vory* could use property that was at the disposal of their group but were not to own anything on a long-term basis.⁵⁸ A related rule of behaviour concerned stolen property: a *vor* who had found another *vor*'s property was not obliged to return the find to its owner.⁵⁹

As a matter of course, detachment from the outside world included detachment from the most despised officials, law enforcers. A recruit was to have had no connections with law-enforcement agents in his past in order to be eligible for admittance into the society. Even the most insignificant act of camaraderie towards officials would have been sufficient cause for expulsion from the fraternity: "the laws of *blatnye* prevent one to offer any help to a chekist, and to accept presents or tips from them. For instance, one old *blatnoi* was deprived of his rights as *vor* only because he accepted a pack of tea from one camp guard."⁶⁰ The rumour that a criminal had contacts with police officers was considered enough to infer that he was bargaining for a softer sentence and intended to betray fellow criminals.⁶¹ The prohibition against contacts with law-enforcement officials thus extended to a prohibition against holding the position of headman or foreman in the camp: "the *vor* who occupies such a position ceases to be a *vor*. He steps outside the law (*zakon*)."⁶²

Professional killers were not allowed to enter the fraternity. The *vor* allegedly had a strong code against murder.⁶³ During his activities he was supposed to refrain from using violence. He was supposed to steal and rob without bloodshed. It was acceptable to kill only in order to defend one's honour or one's life.⁶⁴ Still, any thief who committed murder had to justify the act to the society.⁶⁵

A *vor* was allowed to leave the fraternity, but under no condition was he allowed to betray old fellows.⁶⁶ In this regard, *vor* Ch. challenges the plot of the Soviet film *Kalina krasnaia* (1974) by Vasilii Shukshin. The protagonist in the film, Egor Prokudin, is killed by *vory* because he decided to leave the fraternity and lead an honest life. To this Ch. responds that, "I respect Shukshin, but he was wrong. This rule never existed. If a thief assassinated another thief because of this, he would himself be accused of unruly behaviour and killed."⁶⁷

The *vory* were supposed to acquire a leading role in the camps, to rule over criminals "according to the *vory* rules" and to search for recruits. "Candidate members" (usually referred to, in camp jargon, as *patsany*) were asked to perform tasks on behalf of the *vory*, mainly connected with raising funds for *obshchak*, the communal fund to support group activities, bribe officials and care for the families of the imprisoned. The *obshchak* was financed both by extortion from inmates and contributions from the outside. The gang members operating outside collected money and goods and gave them to *vory* inmates, who in turn distributed them in the prison.⁶⁸ Once free, the *vor* was supposed to earn his living only through illegal activities and never to work. Because the *obshchak* was supposed exclusively to serve the *vory* in prison, the free *vor* could not rely upon it for support. In fact, the free *vor* was obliged to contribute to the *obshchak*.⁶⁹

An acceptable way to earn money for all *vory*, besides stealing, was by winning at card games. Card playing was widespread in the camps. Shalamov recollects that "every night the criminal element in the camp gathered [...] to play cards."⁷⁰ Likhachev writes that winning a game was considered a good omen and "good omens may impel a thief to commit a daring theft, a bad omen stops him from carrying out his plans."⁷¹ Card playing was also a vicarious form of fortune telling: "usually the

thieves carry one or two packs of cards with them, which they use to tell fortunes, playing *shtos* [...] He will use the cards to decide his future and his next enterprise. If he wins, he is sure to complete his criminal plan in a lucky way. If he loses, he loses self-confidence as well."⁷² Being good at cards was a sign of good fortune and capacity to bring good fortune to the gang: "a lucky card player will be taken by a thief as a companion for his gang in the hope that he will bring them luck (even if the card player uses sharp practices, since they are acceptable among thieves ...)."⁷³

A thief could put at stake in a card game anything he had, including his finger, an arm, the promise to carry out a daring act or even his own life. If he lost his stake, it had to be redeemed immediately, no matter what it was. The penalty for defaulting was expulsion from the fraternity or, in some cases, death.⁷⁴

Questions concerning the brotherhood were discussed, including "crimes" and punishments, at the *skhodka*, the *vory* meeting. Likhachev refers to courts managed by criminals. These courts dealt with any breach of the *vory* code of conduct: "behaviour among thieves is regulated and circumscribed by innumerable rules, standards and notions of propriety and good manners, all interrelated in an intricate hierarchy. Any violation of these rules is punished by a thieves' court, which has its own procedure. The penalty is always severe and is inflicted without delay."⁷⁵

Shalamov confirms Likhachev's early findings that thieves' courts operated in the camps.⁷⁶ For instance, disputes over a woman (usually a prostitute) would be settled at a *skhodka*: "there are instances when hot tempers and the hysteria characteristic of all criminals will make him defend 'his woman.' On such occasions the question is taken up in a criminal court, and the criminal prosecutors will cite age-old traditions, demanding that the guilty man be punished."⁷⁷

Santerre refers to these meetings as *tolkovishcha*, where the *vory* "discuss all questions concerning them. All the most important solutions are taken there." As a rule, the meetings were closed, with women and non-members not allowed to attend.⁷⁸

"Once his honesty is put into question, the fate of a *vor* is decided at the *tolkovishcha*. [...] A *tolkovishcha* may often go on for several days, during which hot arguments are voiced, the slightest details are remembered, even of things and events that happened many years ago. Depending on the crime, a *vor* is sentenced."⁷⁹

Data gathered by Monakhov testifies that major criminal *skhodki* took place in Moscow in 1947, Kazan in 1955 and Krasnodar in 1956. Monakhov reports an estimated attendance of 200 to 400 people.⁸⁰

From the various accounts of such meetings, four types of punishment handed down by the *vory* "courts" can be identified. First was a prohibition against boasting in public, described by Likhachev. Boasting and story telling were common among *vory*.⁸¹ According to Likhachev, the purpose of the story was less to convey truth than to portray the characters, especially the victims, in humorous ways and to demonstrate the smartness, shrewdness and boldness of the *vor* telling it.⁸² Likhachev notes that "to stop and expose the lies of a story-teller is a deep insult. It is considered an infringement of the thieves' force and dignity." It was an open challenge. Only when the *vor* infringed the code, may have he been stopped:

"It is possible to object to the story teller only in one case: if he has somehow broken the thieves' ethics, the thieves' rules (laws). One punishment, although not severe, is to be forbidden boasting, which is considered as bad as exile from the [thieves'] sphere. In this

case the thief no longer has the right to tell stories about his heroic deeds. Everyone has the right to stop him, even if what he says is true."⁸³

A second punishment was a public slap in the face, inflicted for minor offences, such as having insulted another *vor*. To slap a *vor* in the face in front of everybody was a severe blow to his reputation.⁸⁴ A third and more serious punishment, especially for those living in the camp, was permanent expulsion from the brotherhood. The expelled *vory* would join the caste of the *muzhiki*, the common convicts. The criminal elite in the camps could freely victimise the *muzhiki* and steal their belongings without asking permission from anyone.⁸⁵

A fourth possibility was corporal punishment, usually 50 hits with a stick, according to Santerre. In one such case, a *vor* who had been insulted by another and was supposed to carry out the punishment failed to perform the ritual properly: before starting the execution he should have said, "I'm not taking responsibility for bruises and blood!" He did not and was himself punished in place of the original perpetrator.⁸⁶

The death penalty was inflicted for grave breaches of the *vory* code of behaviour, such as informing on fellow *vory* or repeatedly cheating on them.⁸⁷ Santerre reports that the sentence was carried out according to the following ritual: first the guilty person was "rotated," thereby taking away his soul: the victim would then be given the chance to die as a *vor* by standing with his back to the wall, tearing his shirt open, and addressing his several executioners armed with knives, saying: "take my soul."⁸⁸

The *vory-v-zakone* exhibited a distinct style of dress, had their bodies covered with tattoos and spoke a peculiar slang. What made the society of the *vory* a peculiar and significant criminal phenomenon however was their secret initiation ritual and the abidance to a set of rules of behaviour. "Courts" existed to make sure members followed them and punished wrongdoers. Although an individual *vor* might have had an interest in punishing a fellow member, that task was the exclusive responsibility and prerogative of the *vory* meeting.

The origin of the vory

The evidence presented thus far refers mainly to the *vory* in places of confinement from the early 1930s to the early 1950s. It is also a static picture, depicting the society as it would have appeared to other convicts. Data from the 1930s testifies to the existence of the society of *vory-v-zakone*. Gurov, drawing on classified Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) material, concludes that "the *vory-v-zakone* were firmly established by the beginning of the 1930s."⁸⁹ According to MVD data, in the 1950s the vast majority of the *vory*, 80%, were professional pickpockets. The percentage of thieves-in-law did not exceed 6 to 7% of the total number of professional criminals and recidivists.⁹⁰ Precise geographic and ethnic details of the phenomenon are more difficult to provide. Gurov writes that *vory* operated within the territory of the Russian Soviet Republic and were of Slavic origin. *Vory* of Central Asia, Georgia or the Baltic were few and had been in prison in Russia.⁹¹ Drawing on some of the available evidence, this section attempts a preliminary account of when and where the society and the term associated with it emerged.

Rossi maintains that the society existed in tsarist Russia. He writes that *staryi blagorodnyi vorovskoi mir* "is the old noble thieves world, the world of real thieves.

Many legends tell of the heroics of the old noble thieves' world that existed in tsarist Russia and even into the 1930s.⁹² Santerre believes that "the *vory* existed in Russia long before the revolution." He adds, however, that "the Soviet reality, and especially its social and economic system, created the specific conditions, in which a criminal world with its completely peculiar features was born and flourished."⁹³ Gurov takes an opposing view, noting that pre-revolutionary criminologists (such as B.S. Utevsii, S.N. Krennev and I. N. Iakimov) refer neither to the phenomenon nor to the term *vory-v-zakone*. He comes to the conclusion that the *vory-v-zakone* did not exist in tsarist Russia and emerged only after the revolution.⁹⁴

As far as the origin of the term is concerned, Gurov seems to be correct. V.F. Trakhtenberg records in 1908 the terms *urka* ("big, daring thief") and *oreburka* ("petty thief") in his celebrated dictionary of criminal slang.⁹⁵ Popov in 1912 has the words *blatnoi* ("criminal"), *urka* and *vozhak* (leader).⁹⁶ A dictionary published in 1927 contains the word *zakonnyi*, meaning "real, of good quality," and *vozhak*.⁹⁷ Likhachev, writing in a Soviet academic journal in 1935, calls criminal leaders *vozhaki* and *golovki* (heads), common words with no specific connotation. However, Likhachev uses the adjective *vorovskoi* to refer to the sector of the underworld these leaders control: *vorovskoi prestupnyi mir* (thieves' criminal world) and *vorovskaia sreda* (milieu).⁹⁸ Official documents refer in the late 1940s to "*vory-retsidivisty*"⁹⁹ and, by 1953, to "so-called *vory*."

Shalamov, writing at the end of the 1950s and referring to the "war" against the *vory* that began in the 1940s (the *such'ia voina*, see below), uses the form *zakonnyi vor* and *vor-v-zakone*.¹⁰⁰ Ivan P. Vorida, the author of a Soviet *sbornik* of criminal expressions published in 1971, records the terms *vor-v-zakone* and *vor-zakonnik* and notes that such criminals ceased to exist in the fifties.¹⁰¹ The *vor* Ch., giving his testimony in the late 1980s and referring to the early 1950s, discusses the *bratstvo* (fraternity) of the *vory-v-zakone*. Only at the time when the society was about to disappear, was the form "*vory-v-zakone*" recorded.

The origin of the phenomenon thus must be searched under a different name or names. Prison life during the tsarist period has been described by a number of sources, including Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the house of the dead*, based on the author's experience as a convict in Omsk from 1850 to 1854.¹⁰² Dostoyevsky portrays the criminals' passion for card playing, boasting and vanity.¹⁰³ He also describes the practice of swapping places: one convict would pay another to take his place and serve his sentence. Once the prisoner had agreed to swap and had already spent the money, he could not change his mind. If he tried to, he would be punished by the other convicts for not keeping his promise.¹⁰⁴ The fact that other prisoners took upon themselves the burden of punishing somebody with whom they had not been dealing testifies to the existence of norms of behaviour ("keep thy word") and collective punishment. Rossi also mentions that professional criminals in tsarist Russia would "keep their word."¹⁰⁵

Vlas Mikhailovich Doroshevich (1864-1922), who visited Sakhalin penal colony at the end of the nineteenth century, writes of a type of prisoner "who wanted to gain the respect of his comrades and become an 'Ivan', the hero of the colony." Such prisoners would do so by defying prison rules and bravely enduring the ensuing punishment.¹⁰⁶

There is also evidence that senior prisoners forced newly-arrived convicts to pay them a tribute. In 1900, prisoners Averkiev, Utkin and Bashmakov were terrorising

new convicts, extorted food and money from them in the Nikolaevskaia corrective prison in Ekaterinburg, as detailed in a report dated 24 October 1901 of the prison head to the prison inspector of the Perm' region.¹⁰⁷

Individual and sporadic defying of prison rules and forcing newly-arrived convicts to pay a tribute are near-universal features of prison life. Neither the writings of Dostoyevsky, Doroshevich nor the archival evidence I have been able to consult refer to organised groups of convicts that systematically refused to work or collaborate with the authorities and, most importantly, that possessed an initiation ritual, strict rules of behaviour and criminal "courts" to enforce such rules across different prisons.

Outside camp walls, however, a fraternity more similar to the *vory* may have existed at that time. Russian juridical literature refers to *arteli* (guilds) of ordinary thieves, including horse thieves, from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards.¹⁰⁸ Iakushkin, the author of a reference book on customary law published in 1896, describes a beggars' *artel'* as follows:

"All the beggars here and for some distance beyond make up a regularly organised association known as the 'beggars' guild', with an elected guild-master and its own laws, custom and language. New members are nominated by their comrades and must accept the obligations of the guild. A person entitled to practise as a beggar by reason of physical deformity or disablement is apprenticed for a time to a fellow beggar, after which he is enrolled on a list and has to pay a subscription. As a rule, the term of apprenticeship is six years and the subscription 60 kopecks; but an apprentice may elect to serve a shorter term and pay a higher subscription. Membership in the guild is effected by a special ceremony. The aspiring member is brought into the assembly, and after mutual greetings, the guild-master tests his knowledge of the prayers, beggars' songs, and the special language of the fraternity. The apprentice bows and kisses the hand of each person present and is then admitted as member and assigned an area where he can beg. A feast is given in his honour, and, on this occasion, he is allowed to sit with the others for the first time. The guild-master is elected for an indefinite period and is generally a blind beggar; he convokes the guild for necessary business, including the punishment of transgressors. This used to take the form of a beating but is now usually a fine for the purchase of church candles. The most ignominious punishment consists of slitting the offender's wallet, signifying that he is no longer entitled to practise as a beggar. A steward is elected to look after funds and expenses. Both extraordinary and annual assemblies are held, the latter on the first Monday of Lent or on Whitsunday, when a new candle is placed in the Church on behalf of the fraternity. The funds accumulated by the guild are generally devoted to church purposes [...] The beggars have a language of their own, which they endeavour to keep secret from outsiders."¹⁰⁹

The *artel'* described by Iakushkin was a group operating independently, in competition with other groups. This does not exclude the possibility that *arteli* at times joined forces or maintained relations with one another. Sergei Maksimov, for example, reported a case in his *Fatherland notes* in which some beggars' *arteli* joined together to exclude a rival group from a fairground.¹¹⁰

The *arteli* resemble the *kodla*, the thieves' communes described above. Yet, four significant differences can be identified between the *vory* communes and the nineteenth century *arteli*. First, the *artel'* was a group of people involved in the same business, who organised and accepted the leadership of a fellow-member. It exercised a localised monopoly over a certain sector of the underworld. The members of a *kodlo*, by contrast, were not all specialised in one sector of the underworld. Different professions were represented in a single *kodlo*. This means that a *kodlo* was not an

association that aspired to obtain a monopoly over a specific sector of the underworld and in a specific territory, as was the *artel*'.

Second, no one could "buy" the title of *vory*, although it might have been the case that young criminals worked under the protection of a *vory* in a *kodlo*, and entered a sort of apprenticeship relation. Third, the *kodla* apparently were associations of *primi inter pares*, meaning no recognised hierarchy existed above the *vory*. The *skhodka* was the collegial organ that discussed matters and settled disputes among *vory*. The fourth and most significant difference relates to the national scale of the fraternity of the *vory*, which far exceeded that ever achieved by *arteli*. There is no evidence that pre-revolutionary *arteli* had created a systematically-organised structure with the purpose of co-ordinating their activities. Nor is there evidence that the *arteli* merged into a single national organisation or that entry into one *artel*' meant automatic recognition by other *arteli*. Likhachev, Shalamov, Santerre and many others met organised criminals in camps that were as far apart as the Belomorsko-Baltiiskii canal construction site in European Russia and Kolyma in the Arctic, facing Alaska. This is a formidable achievement for a criminal fraternity, considering the vastness of the country and the scope of its activities: devising rituals, policing behaviours, settling disputes among members and protecting insiders from outside challengers.

A question follows from the above: how could such a society succeed where the *arteli* failed, namely in forming a national network? In order to answer this question, one must consider the nature of both the *arteli* and the *vory*. Both aimed to supply members with a valued "good": those who joined would benefit from a privileged position in their trade or in the camps. The crucial condition for such an organisation to exist would therefore be a possibility to distinguish members from non-members and to punish both those who faked membership and those who misused the organisation's privileges or violated its code of behaviour. This in turn would require close proximity, potential for repeated interaction among members and the presence of information channels. The localised nature of the *artel*' provided these conditions and enabled the *artel*'s leadership to levy a fee on entrants, distinguish members from non-members and punish wrongdoers. Despite appearances to the contrary, these conditions were also well provided by the Gulag system. Furthermore, the scale of the Gulag archipelago allowed for the spread of the fraternity's rules and punishments, enabling the society to reach a national dimension.

The camp system was a fairly integrated system: it supplied a source of contacts for criminals and an opportunity to share their experiences and devise ways of promoting their common interests. By the middle of the 1930s, the network of corrective labour camps was already fairly extensive. The northern camps, situated in the former Komi-Zyrianskaia *oblast*', held some 41,000 prisoners. In the far eastern camps, some 15,000 people were engaged in the building of the Boguchinskaia railway, as well as fishing and forestry. The Visherskie camps, which were chiefly involved in chemical, paper and timber production, held a further 20,000 prisoners. There were 24,000 prisoners in the Siberian camps and 40,000 in the oldest of the Solovetskie camps, building the road from Kem' to Ukhta.¹¹¹ A recent estimate suggests the total number of those repressed in Gulag camps and colonies in the period 1934-1952 reached over 18 million.¹¹² Prison numbers were not static within and between camps: inmates entered the camps, left the camps and were transferred around the camps. Recently disclosed data places the number of intra-Gulag camp transfers for the period 1934-1947 at around 3 million.¹¹³

Intra-Gulag transfers allowed not only repeated interaction but also the spread of information, another crucial requirement for the group to persist. The sharing of precise information was necessary in order to inform the prison population about new entries into the *vory* brotherhood, check reputations, expose frauds and monitor convicts' transfers. In fact, news spread quickly among the different camps, as in the following story taken from the memoirs of General A.V. Gorbатов, a Soviet Army general detained in 1939 in a camp in Maldiak, Kolyma region, containing 400 political prisoners and some 50 criminals:

"Boris is nicknamed 'The Careerist.' He got his name in one of the northern camps because he made himself out to be a big criminal, with six murders and five major robberies to his credit. He is believed and is appointed a senior prisoner. Then it turned out that he is simply an independent, petty thief. There is a great fuss and he is demoted and given his nickname."¹¹⁴

In a similar incident, Iadviga Iosifovna Verzhenskaia learned the fate of her husband through the criminals' information network. Arrested in 1938 as a member of the family of a traitor of the Motherland, she was very anxious to know the fate of her husband, arrested the year before. While discharging her duties in the camp hospital, she befriended some criminals, who offered to help her find information about her husband. After some time, she received "a tiny piece of paper" with news about his fate (he had been executed immediately after arrest).¹¹⁵ Apparently, a sophisticated system for transmitting coded information between different camps existed, perfected by many generations of criminals. The system attracted the attention of the police, who claimed that they had broken the code and that it consisted of a cryptographic language.¹¹⁶

Transfer was not a sure escape from a "sentence" passed by a *skhodka*. Convicts could arrange for a criminal to be punished by fellow criminal authorities in the destination camp. In one case, a criminal (*urkagan*) lost his left hand at playing cards but could not bring himself to cut it and tried to run away. The authorities re-captured him and transferred him to another camp, but his fate was sealed. The criminals found out where he had been sent and arranged for the sentence to be carried out there. He was killed.¹¹⁷

As the population of the camps grew in size, the Gulag became an even more significant source of contact between criminals scattered across the Soviet Union. The camps quickly became the best possible medium for the swift dissemination and maintenance of *vory* rituals and traditions.¹¹⁸ While the fraternity surely drew upon the rich pre-revolutionary underworld culture, such a milieu never produced a national organisation. A crucial factor for the existence and the endurance of the *vory* was the Gulag system, as it developed from the 1920s onwards. This by itself does not answer fully the question of the emergence of the *vory*; rather it points to the presence of a crucial and necessary condition.

The fall of the vory

The *vory* society did not survive for long. It was almost entirely destroyed by the end of the 1950s during what came to be known as *such'ia voina* (bitches' war).¹¹⁹ Various sources evidence their downfall: Gurov writes that by the mid-fifties, 300 *vory*

were known to reside in Soviet prisons; by the end of the 1950s, the *vory* had “virtually disappeared.”¹²⁰ According to Bukovskii, a political dissident who served his sentence in a camp in the Perm’ region in 1973-1974, only a “few dozen” survived in the entire Soviet Union.¹²¹ Perushkin uses a similar figure: “the number of thieves-in-law who survived the bitches’ war did not exceed two dozen.”¹²² We shall now turn to this specific event of Soviet camp history.

With the onset of the Second World War and the seemingly unstoppable progress of the German Army into Soviet territory, a number of Soviet convicts were granted early release on the condition that they join the army. Roughly one million inmates left the Gulag during the war to enter the armed forces.¹²³ Although most of the people who had been granted early release in order to fight the Nazis were serving sentences for absenteeism and “insignificant work-related or economic crimes,” some hardened criminals and even *vory* may have ended up at the front. In that vein, Shalamov maintains that during the war “many *vory*-recidivists and *urki*” were sent to the front and that, in particular, the army headed by Marshal Rokossovskii was comprised of former inmates.¹²⁴

The outflow of the camp population did not last long. The system experienced an influx of convicts from 1944 onward. The total number of prisoners in corrective labour camps and colonies rose from 1.2 million in January 1944 to 1.7 million in 1946, more than a 40% increase.¹²⁵ In 1947, a total of 626,987 new inmates entered the Gulag. This trend continued until 1953, when it reached its peak of 2.45 million inmates. In this period, the prison population also changed in character. In the years 1939-1940, the Soviet Union annexed the Baltic republics, western Belorussia, Moldavia and western Ukraine. Especially in western Ukraine and the Baltic republics, hostile nationalist movements resisted annexation (for instance, annexation was fiercely opposed by the Organisation of Ukrainian nationalists, the OUN). Soviet authorities repressed these nationalist organisations and, as a consequence, the percentage of inmates from the Ukraine and the Baltic regions increased in the years 1944-1946 by 140 and 120%, respectively.¹²⁶

The camp system saw also the arrival of the Soviet soldiers and officers who had allowed themselves to be captured by the enemy, some 360,000 individuals.¹²⁷ To this number should be added the survivors of the army put together by general Vlasov, who had fought with the Nazis in order to free his country from the Bolshevik regime. Ordinary citizens, starving peasants and criminals also entered the Gulag in great numbers, mainly as a consequence of the newly-adopted strict laws on the protection of property.¹²⁸

The new inmates were not the political dissidents, intellectuals, party officials, clerks and peasants of the 1930s. They formed a pool of people trained in the use of violence who were able to pose a serious threat to the traditional criminal world.¹²⁹ Even those who had been convicted for crimes unrelated to nationalist activities and surrendering to the enemy were likely to have served in the war and therefore to have combat experience. For instance, Grigorii Antonov had been demobilised from the army and was working at the Groznyi Oil Institute when, in the summer of 1951, he was arrested. He recalls how in the Pechorskaia transit prison, “we found ourselves in a barrack where most of the inmates are criminal offenders and one of them took a fancy to my high collared naval jacket. Since I did not want to give it up voluntarily, a fight broke out.” Antonov managed to hold on to his jacket but at the cost of being stabbed in the chest:

"I have told this story in some detail because it is my 'camp baptism.' It is then that I decided how I would act and react and this enabled me thereafter to keep my head above water, earn the respect of those around me, and win friendship and loyalty of my comrades in captivity. I became, in camp jargon, an 'experienced pigeon.' Life had almost no value for me, and I was afraid of nothing and of no one. No one could insult or offend me or my comrade without answering for it."¹³⁰

Convicts like Antonov were "not at all the shy type," as a political convict in the Kengir camp in 1953-1954 put it; they were "a united mass of people, ready to repel [the criminals]."¹³¹ This is in sharp contrast to the past, when criminals — whether *vory* or ordinary criminals — could easily terrorise the political prisoners and ordinary citizens caught up in the repression.

Official documents record tensions between the new "working prisoners" and "criminal-bandit elements," like the traditional *vory*. For the first time, the "working prisoners" managed to fend off the criminals. "In Obskii MVD corrective labour camp, construction site no. 501, a group of bandits entered the barrack and tried to seize a parcel and money from two prisoners on 10 January 1951. The two convicts resisted, and one of them was wounded by the bandits. Other prisoners rose to defend them, with nearly 400 people taking part in the assault against the bandits. As a result, 4 people were killed and 9 wounded."¹³² In the Vanino transit camp in September 1953, a large-scale fight broke out between ordinary prisoners and a small group of 10-15 criminals who were trying systematically to rob and steal from other inmates. The guards had to use firearms to separate them.¹³³ In November 1953, the "working contingent of prisoners" put up an "organised rebuff of the bandit elements" in the camp unit no. 19 of the sixth department of Pechorskii corrective labour camp.¹³⁴

A special report on the Burminskii department of the Karagandiskii camp gives details of a fight between the two groups:

"Working prisoners organised themselves in order to drive out of the zone those prisoners who belong to a group of criminal-bandits. With this aim in mind, they disassembled plank-beds in the living quarters of the barracks, armed themselves with boards, canes and some of them with knives and other objects and attacked the prisoners 'vory', who lived in separate barracks, and beat them."¹³⁵

The following extract, recounting another episode that occurred in 1953, again refers openly to the *vory*:

"In the camp unit no. 6 of the Suslovskii department 21 prisoners belonging to the *vory* grouping organised a mass robbery of prisoners who honestly perform their working duties. [...] After the arrest and isolation of the above-mentioned group, in the same camp unit a remaining group of 40 prisoners, who rotate around the group of *vory*, headed by bandit Nikolaev, tried to organise a reprisal of the victims-prisoners, but were rebuffed. As a result, some *vory* were beaten with canes and fists. The *vory* were isolated and transferred to the other camp units. Instigators of the attempted execution were punished."¹³⁶

Life for the criminals had certainly become harder in these new times. Some criminals and even some *vory* must have realised early on that they could now maintain their position in the camps only with the direct support of the authorities. To seek such support, however, would have violated the *vory* code of behaviour and required an open break with past practices.

Even without the challenges from the new inmates, the fraternity already was under strain. Reportedly, some *vory* had served in the Second World War. According to the thieves' laws, all the *vory* who fought for their country during the war stepped outside the "law." Their "crime" was to have put on uniforms and carried rifles, two symbols of a prison warden's authority.¹³⁷ Upon their return to the camps, they were nicknamed *voenshchina* (soldiery) and expelled from the brotherhood.¹³⁸ Shalamov maintains that, as a form of retaliation, the leaders of the *voenshchina* announced a "new law" in a transit prison in Vanino bay in 1948. This new "law" allowed criminals to work as prison trustees, headmen and foremen, and to occupy various other positions of responsibility within the camp.

General Serov, deputy minister of Interior Affairs, acknowledged that "signs of repentance" appeared among "criminal-bandit elements," in an order sent to Republican governments and the Gulag administration in February 1950. He instructed the administration to identify roughly 15-20 prisoners of this type in each camp and to transfer each one of them from strict regime to ordinary regime camps. Informants for the camp administration were to be recruited from this pool of people.¹³⁹

At the same time, criminals in camps of strict regime also were collaborating with the authorities. For instance, a report sent to G. M. Malenkov, the Secretary of the Central Committee, dated 14 May 1952, indicates that "in some camp sub-units of the strict regime the administration of Dal'stoi camp recruited dangerous criminals-recidivists in the camp service. Although they had been sentenced several times, some of these criminals were appointed prisoner representatives."¹⁴⁰ Similarly, in Viatlag, "a group of recidivists, headed by a camp clerk,¹⁴¹ prisoner Kurochkin, and some foremen occupied all the most important positions in the camp."¹⁴² In the Viatskii labour corrective camp, "criminal-bandit elements have been recruited as camp service staff and lower level production supervisors," recites a report dated 10 May 1954.¹⁴³ In a far-away forestry unit in Kolyma, "deep in the taiga," criminals took over and were running the plant, terrorising the local population, until the criminals were liquidated in 1953 by the authorities.¹⁴⁴

The *suki* not only worked for prison authorities and harassed working prisoners, with negative consequences for camp life and productivity,¹⁴⁵ but they also directly targeted unrepentant *vory*, with the support of local camp authorities. According to Shalamov, Korol', the leader of the *voenshchina* responsible for the "new law," was used by the prison authorities to expose *vory*. In 1948, all the prisoners of the Vanino bay transit prison were lined up and forced to strip. The *vory* were recognised by their tattoos. If they wanted to save their lives, they had to reject the old law and go through a new ritual that would mark their entrance into the group of the *suki*.¹⁴⁶ If they refused, they were killed. Many *vory* refused and, apparently, a massacre ensued. News spread quickly through the camps and reached Kolyma, where Shalamov was a convict. There, the *vory* prepared themselves to face this formidable challenge. A fully-fledged "war" broke out when Korol' and his assistants were given permission by camp authorities to visit other transit prisons. They went as far as Irkutsk (Solzhenitsyn arrived in the Gulag when the conflict was under way and was informed of it on his journey there).¹⁴⁷

Santerre recounts a clash between *suki* and *vory* in the summer of 1948 in a camp in the Inta region involving 100 *vory* and 150 *suki*. The authorities allowed the two sides to come into contact, but only the *suki* were allowed to carry their weapons. Few *vory* survived.¹⁴⁸ In another instance, in 1949, a captain Kobets personally

armed a group of *suki* and encouraged them to attack the *vory* being held in a disciplinary barrack.¹⁴⁹

Official documents confirm that mass disturbances were taking place in various camps. In the Voronezh region in August 1952, a prisoner was killed. The report of this incident adds that this murder was part of a grander plan of the "criminal-bandit elements" to carry out "physical execution of prisoners, foremen and their assistants."¹⁵⁰ In a different instance, "on 4 September 1952 group disturbances took place and 4 prisoners were killed in department no. 10, the Peschanyi MVD camp, as a result of the fact that groups of prisoners who are at enmity with each other are kept together."¹⁵¹

Inspectors cited camp authorities and their failure to keep the different criminals separate as the cause of two other serious incidents. On 4 December 1952, at construction site no. 508, fifty-one "*byvshie* (former) *vory*" came into contact with 42 prisoners that "were hostile to them." A "mass disturbance" broke out, with the camp guards firing at the convicts that were trying to find refuge in the prohibited zone. Six people were killed and 29 severely wounded.¹⁵² On 10 November 1953, in the Pechorskii corrective labour camp, 24 prisoners were killed and 29 wounded when "hostile attitudes between different groups of prisoners had not been taken into consideration" and the groups had been allowed to mix.¹⁵³

New groupings formed, and some of their labels are recorded. Gurov refers to the *krasnaia shapochka* gang and *bespredel'shchina* gang.¹⁵⁴ A report of 14 October 1953 refers to "a group of bandit-prisoners who call themselves '*bespredel'niki*' and includes 40 people."¹⁵⁵ In the Sibirskii corrective labour camp, a report notes, there were four groups that were hostile to each other: "two of them are bigger and are at enmity with each other. The first group calls itself '*vory*' and includes more than 800 people. The second calls itself in the camp jargon '*piatiblochniki*' and it consists of nearly 600 people."¹⁵⁶ Officials were at pain to discover who belonged to which group. On 28 January 1953, in a Kizellag sub-unit, criminal proceedings were instituted against two camp supervisors for having beaten a convict almost to death. They had been trying to compel the convict to disclose "to which one of the groups that are at enmity with each other he belongs."¹⁵⁷

At least at a certain point in time, a camp would either be under the control of *suki* or *vory*. Reportedly, the prison camps in the Vorkuta area were under the control of bitches,¹⁵⁸ whereas the Aleksandrovskaia transit prison and "the prison camps of Pot'ma and the Ust'-Vymtag were under the control of *blatnye*."¹⁵⁹ In the Aleksandrovskaia transit prison, in fact, an expedition of bitches "met with misfortune."¹⁶⁰ In July 1953, a group of 218 prisoners arriving in the Pevek settlement of the Chaun-Chukotskii camp were greeted with the following words: "Hurrah to *vory*! We'll kill *suki*!"¹⁶¹ To end up in the camp where the enemy group was in control could have been dangerous. A report notes that prisoners who belong to the group that happens to be losing in a certain camp seek refuge "in the isolation wards and penalty isolation wards [...] in order to escape reprisal."¹⁶²

A report on the "state of affairs in the corrective labour camps and colonies," sent to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, gives a rather alarming yet partial total of the camp disturbances: "During January, February and March [1954], 129 murders were committed in the camps and colonies, due to gangsterism, personal reckoning, revenge, and *enmity between groups of criminals-recidivists*."¹⁶³ Among those who died over the years of this "war," there were Korol' himself, who was

blown up with explosive smuggled from a mining site, and some prominent *vory*, such as Poltora Ivana Balabanov and Poltora Ivana the Greek.¹⁶⁴

Conclusion

The *vory-v-zakone* bore tattoos and spoke a language of their own. They also followed well-defined rules that regulated interaction among members and between *vory* and outsiders, such as family, strangers and officials. Most importantly, a ritual marked entry into the brotherhood. “Made” members who did not follow the rules were summoned to a rudimentary tribunal, where their crimes would be discussed and, if the defendant was found guilty, a sentence passed. The sentence was carried on behalf of the society as a whole, not of the single member who had been insulted or put in danger by the lawbreaker. These features place the *vory* alongside more famous criminal fraternities, such as the Sicilian Mafia, the Neapolitan Camorra and the Japanese Yakuza.

When then did the society form? A definite answer has not been given so far. Surely the *vory* emerged from the rich Russian underworld, which had developed a culture of its own over the centuries. I have, however, pointed out to crucial differences between the *vory-v-zakone* on the one hand and professional guilds of criminals and prisoners that lived in the tsarist period on the other. The Soviet Gulag system seems to have provided some crucial conditions for the society to exist, but other elements must also have been at work. We might speculate that when unemployment and rising crime rates followed the Russian Revolution, professional criminals faced formidable competition from a new breed of individuals who had entered the criminal world, such as the *besprizornye* and impoverished middle class. The relative strength of each traditional criminal *artel'* in fencing off penetration from unorganised criminals was surely put to test and new loyalties forged in hardship. An incentive to distinguish professional criminals and new entrants might have emerged at that point. A national-level organisation able to intervene and settle disputes among its members as well as with other organisations and independent criminals operating in the country might have emerged at this point in history, although further research is necessary to confirm this hypothesis.

We know that the traditional *vory* were almost decimated in the early 1950s. The *such'ia voina* was the last episode in the history of the original fraternity. A peculiar phenomenon occurred at that time: ordinary convicts started to sympathise with the *vory*, who were heavily harassed by a new class of criminals and by the authorities. The myth of the *vory*, the dashing heroes of the criminal world who preferred to die not to betray their “ideals” was born at this moment. A new fraternity appeared in the 1980s and, as every observer of things criminal in Russia knows, the new *vory-v-zakone* became a worrying feature of post-communist Russia.

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2. On this episode of Russian history, see M. Gorky, L. Averbakh, S.G. Firin, A. Williams-Ellis, *The White Sea Canal. Being an account of the construction of the new canal between the White Sea and the Baltic Sea* (London: John Lane, 1935).

3. D.S. Likhachev, "Cherty pervobytnogo primitivizma vorovskoi rechi," *Iazyk i myshlenie*, Proceedings of the USSR Academy of Science, III-IV (1935): 47-100, here p. 55.

4. On the *vory* in English, see J. Serio, V.S. Razinkin, "Thieves professing the code," *Low Intensity Conflict & Law Enforcement*, 4, 1 (1995): 72-88 and M. Galeotti, "Criminal Russia: The traditions behind the headlines," *History Today*, 44, 8 (1994): 12-14.

5. A.I. Gurov has aptly remarked: "Literary sources as well as USSR Ministry of Interior data dealing with norms of behaviour (the so-called 'laws') and the criminal activities of this criminal association are extremely poor and often rather contradictory." *Professional'naia prestupnost'* (Moskva: Iuridicheskaya literatura, 1990): 108.

6. I have collected evidence in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF, mainly the Gulag fund no. 9414, the MVD fund no. 9401, and the Procurator fund no. 8131 and the Khrushchev personal files, OPKh), the State Archive of the Perm' Region (GAPO) and the Memorial Archive of repressed people (Memorial). Hereafter I will cite the relevant archive followed by numbers that refer, respectively, to the fund (*fond*), the list (*opis'*), the file (*delo*) and the sheet numbers (*list*).

7. Maximilien de Santerre, *Sovetskie poslevoennye kontslageri i ikh obitateli* (Munich: Institut po izucheniiu SSSR, 1960): 88. The Soviet government abducted the author in 1945. Because of his unruly behaviour and escape attempts he was put among prisoners, usually criminals, "refusing labour and discipline" (*otritsalovka*). This gave Santerre an opportunity to mix mainly with criminals (p. 3). On *otritsalovka*, see J. Rossi, *The Gulag handbook* (New York: Paragon House, 1989): 286.

8. M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 92, see also D.S. Likhachev, *art. cit.*: 62.

9. M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 63. In some instances, *vory* showed compassion and respect towards men of the church, as they showed high spirituality (*ibid.*: 80); see also Y. Glazov, "'Thieves' in the USSR as a social phenomenon" [1976], in Id., *The Russian mind since Stalin's death* (Dordrecht-Boston-Lancaster: D.Reidel Publishing Company, 1985): 39.

10. M. de Santerre, *op.cit.*: 89; Y. Glazov, *art. cit.*: 39.

11. I. Gamayunov, "Thieves-in-law: Devils dressed as Robin Hood," *The Moscow Times* (11 January 1995): 9.

12. A.I. Gurov, *op. cit.*: 111. Prisoners' tattoos would require a separate study. See A.G. Bronnikov, *Tatuirovki u prestupnikov v Rossii* (Perm': mimeo, 1996).

13. See especially D.S. Likhachev, *art. cit.*: 63.

14. V. Chalidze, *Criminal Russia. Essays on crime in the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 1977): 57.

15. Rituals also mark the entry in other organised criminal groups, such as the Japanese Yakuza, the Hong Kong Triads, the Sicilian Mafia and American Cosa Nostra. The extent to which individual members do actually follow the code of conduct is a different issue.

16. Quoted in A.I. Gurov, *op. cit.*: 110. V.I. Monakhov, an investigator at the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) published a book for internal circulation in the mid-fifties that explored the features of organised crime. Gurov extensively draws on Monakhov's work for his treatment of criminality in the period 1930-1950.

17. Ch. was arrested in 1981 and, in the 1980s, was serving his sentence in the Voronezh region. His criminal career includes 7 convictions and 25 years behind bars. He agreed to reveal the traditions and rules of the *vory* and completed 13 notebooks. A.I. Gurov collected this evidence and relied on this material for the treatment of the *vory* in his book, *Professional'naia prestupnost'*.

Later, A.I. Gurov and V. Riabinin published extracts of the notebooks in A.I. Gurov, V. Riabinin, "Isproved' vora v zakone," *Na boevom postu*, 12 (1990): 50-62; 1(1991): 75-84; Id., *Isproved' vora v zakone* (Moskva: Rosagropromizdat, 1991).

18. See G. Falcone, M. Padovani, *Cose di Cosa Nostra* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1991): 100. For the meaning of *legavyi*, see Iu. Dubiagin and E. Teplitskii, *Kratkii slovar' ugovnogo zhargona* (Moscow: Terra, 1993).

19. Discipline in the Krasnoiarskii *krai* prisons had been the subject of some concern. According to a report dated August 8, 1939, "there is practically no cell isolation between prisoners in Krasnoiarskii common prison. By use of threads, cords, ropes and even planks, prisoners systematically pass correspondence, objects and products from one cell to another. Meetings between prisoners from different cells during transfers became a common practice." GARF, 9401/1a/0252/10-11. For a similar report for prison 1 in the Saratovskii region see GARF, 9401/1a/0251/6-7.

20. M. de Santerre also refers to *ksivy*. "Blatnye refer to their letters as *ksivy* and attach them the importance of a document [...] Such letters are always written by a collectivity and signed *bratsy vory* or *bratsy urki*" (*op. cit.*: 90).

21. A.I. Gurov, *op. cit.*: 110-111.

22. A.I. Gurov and V. Riabinin, *art. cit.*: 82. "According to the law, there is a complete democracy among *blatnye*, however a scarcely noticeable yet very strong gradation of hierarchy exists. At the top there are the so called *pakhany* (*pakhan* means father in the *vory* jargon)." M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 64, see also 63.

23. D.S. Likhachev, *art. cit.*: 61.

24. See Appendix A in F. Varese, *op. cit.*, where I have analysed 254 *vory* aliases.

25. A. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag archipelago 1918-1956* (Glasgow: Collins-Fontana, 1974): 516. See also Id., *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 5: *Arkhipelag GULag, 1918-1956* (Vermont-Paris: YMCA-Press, 1980): 492 and M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 68, 86.

26. M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 55.

27. M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 55, Y. Glazov, *art. cit.*: 39, and A.I. Gurov, *op. cit.*: 115. V. Bukovskii wrote of the *vory* of the fifties: "Thieves traditionally lived in 'families' and regarded one another as 'brothers.'" V. Bukovskii, *To build a castle. My life as a dissenter* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1978): 245.

28. A.I. Gurov, *op. cit.*: 115.

29. A.I. Gurov, *op. cit.*: 113. A related rule, reported by D.S. Likhachev (*art. cit.*: 58), is that a *vor* is not supposed to ask a direct question to another *vor*. "We must note that the rules of proper *vory* behaviour do not allow a thief to ask questions." Likhachev continued: "This is not only a precautionary measure in order to keep secrets. This rule lies deep in the language consciousness of thieves and is connected with their subconscious belief in the magic power of the word." These rules should be evaluated in the context of camp life, where a well-oiled network of informers operated (A. Graziosi, "The great strikes of 1953 in Soviet labor camps in the accounts of their participants. A review," *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique*, 33, 4 (1992): 428.)

30. A.I. Gurov, *op. cit.*: 111. The rule prohibiting quarrelling with other members is the fourth rule (out of eight) recited during the Sicilian initiation ritual. See P. Arlacchi, *Gli uomini del disonore. La Mafia siciliana nel racconto del pentito Antonio Calderone* (Milano: Mondadori, 1992): 57.

31. V. Chalidze, *op. cit.*: 54. V. Shalamov, *Kolyma tales* (London: Penguin Books, 1994): 413, noticed that newly-acquainted *vory* supported each other.

32. M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 92.

33. *Ibid.*: 62.

34. The rule prohibiting the use of violence between members of the society is shared by the Japanese Yakuza, the Hong Kong Triads, the Sicilian Mafia and American Cosa Nostra.

35. See M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 51, 64, 111 and Y. Glazov, *art. cit.*: 54, 239.

36. M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 63. Refusal to work put the *vory* in the same position as radical Christians, the so-called *Krestiki*, who categorically refused to obey any order coming from the Soviet regime. *Ibid.*: 53.

37. Official documents refer to hardened criminals who "systematically refused to work" (GAPO, R-1461/28/2, date: 1940) and went as far as mutilating themselves (e.g. GARF, 9401/1a/179/48-49, date: 08 April 1943).

38. "It is strange, but the camp administration almost always takes into consideration what the *blatnye* are supposed and not supposed to do, thus avoiding sure troubles." M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 63.

39. A.I. Gurov, *op. cit.*: 108.

40. M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 56.

41. V. Shalamov is well known in the West as a literary figure for his book *Kolyma tales*. He is also the author of eight essays on the criminal world written in the late fifties and now printed in the Russian edition of his completed works: V. Shalamov, *Kolymskie rasskazy*, vol. 2: *Ocherki prestupnogo mira* (Moskva: Sovetskaya Rossiya, 1992): 5-96. Hereafter, we shall refer in particular to his "Such'ia voina" and "Zhenshchina blatnogo mira" (the latter is translated as "Women of the Criminal World" in V. Shalamov, *Kolyma tales*, *op. cit.*: 415-31).

42. V. Shalamov, *Kolyma tales*, *op. cit.*: 428-429. V. Chalidze, on the contrary, takes the cult of motherhood at face value and adds: "Cases are known in which a thief who is hard pressed by the police risked arrest in order to visit and help his mother." V. Chalidze, *op. cit.*: 53.

43. A.I. Gurov, *op. cit.*: 111.

44. V. Shalamov, *Kolyma tales*, *op. cit.*: 419. See also M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 92.

45. It appears that indifference to the natural family is greater among the traditional *vory* than in other criminal organisations, such as the American Mafia, Cosa Nostra and the Yakuza. Commitment to the "family" should be the criminal's primary concern, but attachment to one's own natural family is considered acceptable. See O. Demaris, *The last Mafioso* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981): 4; P. Arlacchi, *op. cit.*: 58 and D.H. Stark, *The Yakuza: Japanese crime incorporated*, Ph.D. Thesis (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1981): 89-90.

46. V. Chalidze, *op. cit.*: 52.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*: 51-52.

49. V. Shalamov, *Kolyma tales*, *op. cit.*: 420.

50. M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 89.

51. *Ibid.*: 92; Ia. A. Tregubov, *Vosem' let vo vlasti Lubianki* (Munich: Possev-Verlag, 1959): 147, quoted in Y. Glazov, *art. cit.*: 238.

52. "According to the law, a woman cannot enjoy the rights of *blatnye*, even less has she the right to interfere with the affairs of *vory* or discuss their behaviour. There are no *blatnye* women as such. There are the so-called *vorovaiki*. Most often they, even taking part in thefts, are reckoned as transitional wives of *vory*." M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 92.

53. This would be the subject of a separate study.

54. V. Chalidze, *op. cit.*: 53.

55. Cosa Nostra in Sicily operates according to a similar logic: "One becomes a Man of honour mainly as a family inheritance, but not as straightforwardly as in the aristocracy (where the succession is automatic from father to son)." The candidate is under scrutiny for years, before being finally admitted into the organisation (P. Arlacchi, *op. cit.*: 7).

56. A. Vardi, *Podkonvoyni mir* (Munich: Possev-Verlag, 1971): 31, quoted by Y. Glazov, *art. cit.*: 238.

57. Y. Glazov, *art. cit.*: 44; A. Solzhenitsyn, *Arkhipelag GULag, 1918-1956*, *op. cit.*, III-IV: 429.

58. V. Chalidze, *op. cit.*: 47. Soviet citizens were entitled to own items of personal property, as stated by art. 10 of the 1936 Soviet constitution. See F. Varese, "Is Sicily the future of Russia? Private protection and the rise of the Russian Mafia," *Archives européennes de Sociologie*, 35 (1994): 235.

59. M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 95.

60. *Ibid.*: 62.

61. Both the Yakuza and Cosa Nostra have rules against appealing to the police or law. See D.H. Stark, *op. cit.*: 240 and P. Arlacchi, *op. cit.*: 57.

62. V. Shalamov, *Ocherki prestupnogo mira*, *op. cit.*: 61.

63. A letter published in Perm's weekly magazine devoted to criminal matters *Dos'e 02* (14 September 1994) also testifies to this. The author, a convict, regrets that the criminals of the 1990s who claim to be the heirs of the traditional society have betrayed the old rules. As an indicator of such betrayal is the fact that new *vory* are murderers. "Thieves-in-Law [...] do not exist any more. If they are thieves, they are not *in-laws*, but rather *in-pen*. Thieves in the old times despised

murderers, but now every second thief is a murderer. The thieves' law exists no more." Though a restraint on the use of violence is typical of other organised criminal groups, an explicit rule against murder is peculiar to the *vory*.

64. M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 56.

65. *Ibid.*; Y. Glazov, *art. cit.*: 45.

66. Y. Glazov, *art. cit.*: 43. V. Chalidze, *op. cit.*: 52, seems to take the opposing view on this issue.

67. A.I. Gurov and V. Riabinin, "Ispoved' vora v zakone," *Na boevom postu*, 1 (1991): 78. *Kalina krasnaia* (The red snowball tree, USSR, 1974, 100 mins), directed by Vasilii Shukshin, starring V. Shukshin, and Lydia Fedoseeva. After Egor is killed, a woman from the gang regrets his death. The gang's boss says: "He was just a *muzhik*. There are a lot of them in Russia."

68. This fund was also called *chernaia kassa*, the black fund. See A.I. Gurov, *op. cit.*: 231.

69. *Ibid.*: 115.

70. V. Shalamov, *Kolyma tales*, *op. cit.*: 5. See also V. Shalamov, *Ocherki prestupnogo mira*, *op. cit.*: 60.

71. D.S. Likhachev, *art. cit.*: 56.

72. *Ibid.* On *vory* playing *shtos*, see also V.P. Artem'ev, *Regim i okhrana ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagerei MVD* (Munich: Institute for the Study of the USSR, 1956): 96.

73. D.S. Likhachev, *art. cit.*: 56.

74. V.P. Artemev, *op. cit.*: 96-97; Y. Glazov, *art. cit.*: 44. "On August 14, prisoners of the camp sub-department no. 7 UITLK Karpov, Foteev, Mitnikov, Makushin (all of them are *vory*-recidivists, sentenced many times, serving their sentence according to decree dated 04 June 1947) were playing cards. Karpov lost 12,000 roubles to Mitnikov. They agreed that Karpov could redeem his debt by killing prisoner Perchikov. Karpov and his accomplice Foteev both hit Perchikov three times with a brick on the head on 16 August 1948. Perchikov was sent to the hospital in serious condition. Makushin knew of the murder's plans and didn't inform the camp administration. All of them were sentenced to different terms." GAPO, R-1366/3/177/14. Women had similar rules. In March 1948, three hardened female criminals were charged for the killing of another female inmate in the Kus'inlag camp. By playing cards the four of them had decided who should carry out a "sentence" they had passed on the deputy head of the camp. The designated murderer refused and was punished accordingly. See GAPO, R-1366/3/177/3-4.

75. D.S. Likhachev, *art. cit.*: 55.

76. V. Shalamov, *Ocherki prestupnogo mira*, *op. cit.*: 60.

77. V. Shalamov, *Kolyma tales*, *op. cit.*: 420.

78. "Only in rare cases, when a *tolkovishcha* takes place in a prison cell with other convicts, strangers may witness similar meetings." M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 57.

79. *Ibid.*: 58.

80. A.I. Gurov, *op. cit.*: 115.

81. *Vory* were very sensitive to their public performance. D.S. Likhachev (*art. cit.*: 59) notes that a popular motto of the *vory* was: "In public, even death is beautiful." By contrast, "bragging and showing off" are prohibited among members of Cosa Nostra. See P. Arlacchi, *op. cit.*: 57.

82. D.S. Likhachev interprets *vory* boasting as a shamans' practice. "Boasting among thieves shares characteristics of the shamans' practice. They are boasting in order to strengthen their own power, self-control, self-confidence and at the same time to consolidate their power over their subordinates. The majority of thieves' songs also bear an imprint of this boasting. The thieves' song is usually the story of a thief and his heroic deeds, often it is in the first person, singular or plural" (*art. cit.*: 59-60).

83. *Ibid.*: 59.

84. *Ibid.*; A.I. Gurov, *op. cit.*: 113.

85. According to M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 58, this penalty was called "earthing" (*zemlenie*).

86. *Ibid.*: 62-63.

87. For such cases, see e.g. A.I. Gurov, *op. cit.*: 114.

88. M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 58 and Y. Glazov, *art. cit.*: 40. It might have been the case that the meeting decreed that a lawbreaker was unworthy of being killed as *vor*, and ordered to "strangle or kill him with logs." Nevertheless, he would never have been killed while asleep. M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 58.

89. A.I. Gurov, *op. cit.*: 108; see also Id., *Krasnaia mafia* (Moskva: Miko Kommercheskii Vestnik, 1995): 104.
90. Quoted in A.I. Gurov, *op. cit.*: 115.
91. *Ibid.*: 116.
92. J. Rossi, *op. cit.*: 23.
93. M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 60-61.
94. A.I. Gurov, *op. cit.*: 108.
95. V.F. Trakhtenberg, *Blatnaia muzyka (zhargon tiurmy)* (St. Petersburg, 1908).
96. *Slovar' vorovskogo i arestantskogo iazyka*, compiled by V.M. Popov (Kiev, 1912).
97. *Slovar' zhargona prestupnikov (blatnaia muzyka)*, compiled by S.M. Potapov (Moscow, 1927).
98. D.S. Likhachev, *art. cit.*: 47, 49, 55, 58.
99. GAPO, R-1366/3/177/14, date: 1948.
100. See V. Shalamov, *Ocherki prestupnogo mira*, *op. cit.*: 64, 66, 68, 69, 70.
101. Ivan P. Vorida, *Sbornik zhargonnykh slov i vyrazhenii, upotrebliaemykh v ustnoi i pis'mennoi rechi prestupnym elementom* (Alma-Ata, 1971): 1, 5.
102. *Zapiski iz mertvogo doma* is based on the author's Siberian notebook, a series of 522 entries that he was able to write down while still in prison.
103. See respectively F.M. Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the house of the dead* (London: Penguin Books, 1985): 41, 32, 84, 87.
104. *Ibid.*: 101.
105. J. Rossi himself however refers to this as a "legend." "Legend has it that, during tsarist times, the chief of a prison, without vacillating, would release even the most inveterate thief or killer, if the latter gave his word to come back ..." J. Rossi, *op. cit.*: 55.
106. V. M. Doroshevich, *Sakhalin: Katonga* [1903] (Parizh: Biblioteka "Illustrirovannoi Rossii," 1935): 37-38.
107. GAPO, 164/1/19/314.
108. See C. Frierson, "Crime and punishment in the Russian village: rural concepts of criminality at the end of the nineteenth century," *Slavic Review*, 46, 1 (1987): 62. *Arteli* were of course not a feature of the criminal world only. For instance, Russian hunters in eastern Siberia in the seventeenth century organised themselves in *arteli*. See O.V. Bychkov, "Russian hunters in eastern Siberia in the seventeenth-century life-style and economy," *Arctic Anthropology*, 31, 1 (1994): 72-85.
109. E. Iakushkin, *Obychnoe pravo* (Iaroslavl': Tipo-Litografiia Gubernskoi Zemskoi Upravy, 1896), quoted by V. Chalidze, *Criminal Russia*, *op. cit.*: 40-41.
110. S. Maksimov, *Otechestvennye zapiski*, 12 (1869).
111. E. Bacon, *The Gulag at war* (London: Macmillan, 1994): 47. In order to have the full picture of forced labour in the Soviet Union between 1932 and 1947, one should add roughly two million forced to reside in labour settlements.
112. E. Bacon, *op. cit.*: 37; see also pp. 27 and 11.
113. V.N. Zemskov, "Arkhipelag GULag: glazami pisatel'ia i statistika," *Argumenty i fakty*, 45 (1989): 6-7.
114. A.V. Gorbato, *Years off my life* (London: Constable, 1964): 141.
115. Memorial, 2/1/33/1-109.
116. See A.G. Bronnikov, *Tainye sposoby sviazi prestupnikov* (Perm': UVD Permskoi Oblasti, 1994) and A. Gurov, "Tradizioni e tipologie della criminalità russa," *Modernizzazione e Sviluppo*, 4, 1-2 (1993): 38.
117. V.P. Artemev, *op. cit.*: 97.
118. The importance of prison as a source of contacts and as a vehicle for the dissemination of information is noted by Reuter in connection to the American Cosa Nostra. See P. Reuter, *Disorganised crime. The economics of the visible hand* (Cambridge-London: MIT Press, 1983): 158. Having been a prisoner provides an inexpensive signal of reliability to other Mafiosi. Once out of prison, interactions are less risky.
119. The use of "suka" to mean "turncoat thief" appears to date from the late 1920s. During the tsarist period, "suka" was used to describe policemen (see, e.g., *Slovar' vorovskogo i arestantskogo iazyka*, *op. cit.*: 83). J. Rossi (*op. cit.*: 441) points out that the meaning of "turncoat thief" is not

recorded in the *Slovar' solovetskogo uslovnogo iazika* by N. Vinogradov (1927). I have found it used by Leonid Leonov in his novel *Vor* (Moskva-Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1928: 313). M. de Santerre offers a rather imaginative etymology: supposedly, it refers to special she-wolves trained to bring a wolf over to the hunters (*op. cit.*: 77).

120. A.I. Gurov, *op. cit.*: 119-120.

121. "In short, there are no thieves 'under the law' nowadays, except perhaps for a few dozen living out their lives in various jails (I managed to meet a few in Vladimir)." V. Bukovskii, *op. cit.*: 246.

122. V. Perushkin, "Vory i avtoritety," *Argumenty i fakty*, 6, 747 (February 1995): 5.

123. See decrees of the Supreme Soviet adopted on 12 July and 24 December 1941, E. Bacon, *op. cit.*: 105 and N. Werth, "Violenza, repressioni, terrori nell'Unione Sovietica," in S. Courtois, ed., *Il libro nero del comunismo* (Milano: Mondadori, 1998 : 213), transl. of *Le livre noir du communisme* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1997). It should be noted that the *Livre noir* gives a very partial view of *communisme*. Although Werth's contribution lends credibility to this overall view, it provides an outstanding investigation of the Soviet camp history.

124. V. Shalamov, *Ocherki prestupnogo mira*, *op. cit.*: 57. Moreover, convicts who had served their sentence were also sent to the front.

125. A.N. Dugin, "Gulag: otkryvaia arkhivy," *Na boevom postu* (27 December 1989): 3-4 (quoted in E. Bacon, *op. cit.*: 91); E. Bacon, *op. cit.*: 38 and N. Werth, *art. cit.*: 214.

126. N. Werth, *art. cit.*: 215. See also M. Craveri, "Krizis GULaga. Kengirskoe vosstanie 1954 goda v dokumentakh MVD," *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 36, 3 (1995): 320.

127. See Stalin's order no. 270 (16 August 1941), E. Bacon, *op. cit.*: 93.

128. See the decree adopted in 1946 "on the protection of state corn crops" and the two decrees adopted in 1947 "on the protection of socialist property" and "on the protection of personal property of citizens." In application of the 1947 decrees, 300,000 people were convicted in the period 1947-1952. V. Zemskov, "GULag," *Sociologicheskie issledovaniia*, 6 (1991): 10-11; N. Werth, *art. cit.*: 220.

129. A. Graziosi, *art. cit.*: 423: "The decisive change [in the composition of the camp population], however, came about during, and immediately after, World War II, with the arrival of prisoners many of whom had military and organisational experience, including many officers: men used to fighting and difficult to handle."

130. Grigorii Antonov, Letter to Vladimir Murav'ev, July 1989, reprinted in S. Vilenskii, ed., *Resistance in the Gulag 1923-56. Memoirs. Letters. Documents* (Moscow: Vozvrashchenie, 1992): 122. On the Kengir revolt of 1954, see M. Craveri, *art. cit.*

131. Varashak Batoyan, "My recollections of Kengir," in *Resistance in the Gulag*, *op. cit.*: 103.

132. GARF, 8131/32-III/3027/79.

133. GARF, 8131/32/3030/61.

134. GARF, 8131/32/3030/40.

135. GARF, R8131/32/3025/139, date: 08 November 1953.

136. GARF, 8131/32/3030/137. For a similar case, see GARF, 8131/32/3030/177.

137. D.S. Chalidze, *op. cit.*: 49.

138. According to V. Shalamov (*Ocherki prestupnogo mira*, *op. cit.*: 63), the *vory* explained their actions as follows: " — You have been in the war? That means that you are a bitch, and should be punished according to the law. You are also a coward. You had no will-power to refuse to serve; you should have taken a new sentence or even died, but you should not have gone to the front." Shalamov maintains that these renegades ended up in Magadan and Ust'-Tsil'ma camps. Gurov records *otoshedshie* as another word for the *suki*. A.I. Gurov, *op. cit.*: 117.

139. GARF, 9401c/12/145/55, date: 25 February 1950.

140. GARF, 8131/32-III/3027/164.

141. The *nariadchik* was a person working in the Accounting and Distribution section of the camp. See J. Rossi, *op. cit.*: 246.

142. GARF, 8131/32/3030/18, date: 06 December 1953.

143. GARF, 9401/12/0281/373.

144. GARF, R-8131/32-III/3033/155.

145. Invariably, the above quoted reports castigated local executives for using dangerous recidivists in official positions. The authorities had tried to cope with the growing unrest in the

Gulag by creating special camps for political prisoners (order dated 16 March 1948) and for especially dangerous criminals (order dated 31 December 1948), and rewarding those who repented. It should be added that this period of camp history (1947-1956) was also marked by the first uprisings in the Gulag. At least 14 incidents have been recorded. On these events, see at least A. Graziosi, *art. cit.*, M. Craveri, *art. cit.*, and S. Vilenskii, ed., *op. cit.*

146. According to V. Shalamov, the ritual consisted in kissing a knife that would knight them as "new *vory*." Shalamov suggested that the new ritual is taken from a Walter Scott novel, a popular author in the camps (*Ocherki prestupnogo mira*, *op. cit.*: 65).

147. When the group of prisoners Solzhenitsyn was part of encountered the *suki*, a convict explained to the newly arrested captain: "These are the *bitches* — the ones who work for the prison. They are enemies of the *honest thieves*. And the honest thieves are the ones imprisoned in cells." A. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag archipelago*, *op. cit.*: 544. See also Arkhipelag GULag, 1918-1956, *op. cit.*: 517.

148. M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 59.

149. *Ibid.*: 60.

150. GARF, 9401c/12/851/239, date: 12 December 1952.

151. "Contrary to orders of MVD of the USSR no. 00840-1951 and no. 0043-1952 those groups of prisoners that are at enmity with each other aren't isolated, continue to be kept together and terrorise the camp population." GARF, 9401c/12/791/223, date: 10 October 1952.

152. GARF, R8131/32-III/3025/225-227.

153. GARF, 8131/32/3030/25.

154. See J. Rossi, *op. cit.*: 181; A.I. Gurov, *op. cit.*: 118.

155. GARF, R8131/32/3025/230.

156. GARF, 8131/32/3030/129. The 800-people estimate is either an exaggeration or, more likely, it refers to the entire milieu of individuals who rotated around the *vory* proper.

157. GARF, R8131/ 32-III/3025/7.

158. M. de Santerre, *op. cit.*: 71.

159. *Ibid.*

160. A. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag archipelago*, *op. cit.*: 581; see also V. Shalamov, *Ocherki prestupnogo mira*, *op. cit.*: 68.

161. GARF, R-8131/ 32-III/3033/175.

162. GARF, 8131/32/3030/263.

163. GARF, OPKh/2/450/472 (emphasis added), date : 26 May 1954.

164. V. Shalamov, *Ocherki prestupnogo mira*, *op. cit.*: 69. It should not come as a surprise that criminals could come in possession of explosives. According to one report, 7 kilos of explosives and 810 knives had been found in the possession of convicts in the Bodaibinskii MVD corrective labour camp in the first half of 1951. GARF, 8131/ 32 (III)/ 3027 (vol.1)/76.