

Survival in Soviet Gulags: A Secondary Analysis

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Introduction

What is it to essentially be human? What is it to be a part of the human race? In our philosophy, and perhaps in our everyday life, this question is often asked. However, this question is very difficult to answer.

Is it human to care, to love, to laugh, to nurture? Is it human to hate, neglect, and harm others? It becomes a complicated question of what it means to be man or woman, what it means to be a member of the human race, *Homo sapiens*. It is complicated and difficult because there are no answers, yet several answers at once. What it is to be human cannot be summarized in just a few words or phrases. It is important to ask this question and to search for its true ideal answer.

On the back side of the cover to *Martyrs of Magadan: Memories of the Gulag* by Father Michael Shields, this question is fundamentally imperative. To understand what it is to be human is left up to question. It is especially left to question when the description of this book asks, "In an unmarked grave our lives have ended. Who could forget about us if he is a human being?"¹ Are we human beings if we forget about an important period of our history? Do we have the integrity and honor to be considered *Homo sapiens* if we forget the evil that we do upon each other? Or are we beyond that? Are we monsters for forgetting those who have died and fallen at the hands of something so large and expansive it is almost incomprehensible to understand?

¹ Father Michael Shields., *Martyrs of Magadan: Memories of the Gulag* (Sutton: UK, 2007), back cover.

During World War II there were widespread tragedies that spread on several sides. The Holocaust happened; many people suffered in Germany, Poland, Russia, and Japan. While traveling the world, this war may be looked at through different names. In Soviet Russia, they saw it as the Great Patriotic War. No matter the names attached to this war, there were many lives lost and many changed. A number of stories about these lives have already been told, but many others have not.

During the era of the Soviet gulags, otherwise known as the prison camps or labor camps of the Soviet period, unspeakable torments occurred. Today, the details of most of these torments are still not known. Those who live in the areas of the former prison camps may not think about their country's history. They simply may not know what happened there, or why or how it happened. However, depending on the region of Russia that they live in now, it is entirely possible that their ancestors lived through this dreadful period. Their own family history, as well as those who lived through the prison camps and are still living, may contain narrative of what happened to their loved ones during the 1930s, all the way up to the early 1950s.

In 1953, life for those who were in the camps changed. Joseph Stalin, the persecutor behind such tragedies, died that year. The mystery behind his death is still not solved and remains a controversial subject yet today. Along with his death came the freedom from persecution for many of those that were placed into the camps.

Those who were put into the camps were most often accused under a Soviet penal code that was expanded in the 1930's. This code was called Article 58 and was part of the Criminal Codes of the Union republics. Those convicted under Article 58 were considered political

prisoners who had conducted counterrevolutionary acts . Most often they were not actually guilty. Depending on the actions and pleas of others, they may have known they may have been accused of treason or actions of terrorism. While they often were not guilty, one of the arguments remains for why the gulags happened. This argument is that prisoners were seen as a source of free labor for the government. The government had a quota to meet, and without the appropriate number of prisoners at its disposal, it would fall behind in labors such as mining and lumber production.

Literally, anyone could potentially become a danger to someone else. What was said, what was whispered behind closed doors, could become dangerous if it was heard by the wrong person. Wife would turn against husband, husband against son, coworker against employer. If someone confessed the wrong thing during interrogation in the camps, in order to try and save themselves or reduce their own sentence, they could potentially be condemning other people to death. It is estimated that 22.5 million people were placed into these labor camps. It is also argued by some historians that this number is much higher². At least 1.6 million perished in these camps according to the Stalin project³. This number is also debated about in many sources. It was truthfully a dark, difficult, and evil time in history. It was a time that, unless someone searches it out specifically, little is known about it. Through this secondary analysis, it has been my hope to change that.

In order to provide a context in which to understand these horrific tragedies, they shall be discussed through Raphaël Lemkin's definition of genocide. By breaking down his definition

² John Glad, introduction to *Kolyma Tales*, by Varlam Shalamov. (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 1994); x.

³ "The Stalin Project," last modified 2008, http://www.stalinproject.com/third_level.php?id_topic=32&id_category=10&id_subject=4.

of genocide, it allows for there to be three ideas or forms of structure in which to describe the different types of tragedies that happened in the gulags. These three forms are: cultural, biological, and physical genocide.

Definitions of Genocide

Lemkin's definitions of genocide are used to provide a precise and feasible definition of genocide. By no means is his definition perfect. However, it at least provides a context in which to understand the types of tragedies that occurred in the gulags. I will use three case studies and compare them to Lemkin's definition of genocide. Lemkin's definitions are quoted in Ward Churchill's book *Kill the Indian Save the Man, The Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools*.

Through these three case studies, that I acquired by using a secondary analysis approach, I will show that cases of biological, cultural, and physical genocide did exist. They existed in particular situations where Lemkin's definition is particularly useful to understand them. While there are other definitions of genocide that exist and have been used by scholars, Lemkin's are accurate by being simple, short, and concise.

The Kolyma Tram and Biological Genocide

Raphaël Lemkin defines biological genocide through reference to the control of reproduction. His definition of biological genocide is "involuntary sterilization, compulsory abortion, segregation of the sexes, and obstacles to marriage."⁴ These and other policies are intended to prevent births within a target group. The following story of Elena Glinka in Anne

⁴ Lemkin, *Axis Rule* quoted in *Kill the Indian Save the Man*, 6.

Applebaum's book *Gulag Voices: An Anthology* will be used as an example of biological genocide⁵.

Anne Applebaum provides several biographies of individuals who survived the gulags. In Elena Glinka, a better understanding of the dark side of human nature is given. Elena Glinka is important because she stands as a symbol of someone who had great courage; she broke the taboo of telling about rape. While she had to write about it in the third person in order to write her story at all, she still broke the taboo.

Until 1989, discussion and stories of rape in the gulags had been virtually taboo. Many had been witness to these events, but did not mention them or publish them⁶. Elena broke that taboo with her essay when she described mass rape. Applebaum also mentions other authors who touched on the subject⁷. One, a Polish writer named Janusz Bardach, wrote that he saw criminal prisoners rip a hole into the interior wall of a ship headed to the Kolyma region so that they could get access to the women prisoners that were on the other side. Many saw and watched this rape by hanging from bed boards; no one tried to intervene. Finally, this rape ended when the guards on the upper deck sprayed water into the hold below. The women that had died in this rape were dragged out and thrown overboard. Another witness to this event said that if anyone has seen Dante's hell, it was nothing compared to what happened on that ship.

⁵ Anne Applebaum, *Gulag Voices: An Anthology* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2011), 39-47.

⁶ Applebaum, *An Anthology*, 39.

⁷ Applebaum, *An Anthology*, 40.

Another example of the Kolyma tram, or gang rape, is what happened to Elena herself. Elena explains that the entire experience that was the Kolyma tram was a deliberate act. Soldiers would pass out drunk after partying with men. When the soldiers had passed out, the male prisoners would whoop and holler in celebration. It was the prime time to act. The obstacle to their main affection was now out of the way. The men would run to the women. Three of these women were political prisoners that had been condemned by Article 58. They hauled these women and others into a building by dragging them through the grass. Any who resisted received a severe beating. The guard dogs, tied during all of this, found it to be an exciting time. They yanked, barked, and pulled against the strain of their leashes.

What was the intent of these men? Well, it was to conduct gang rape, to participate in the *Kolyma Tram* of course. A tram driver would yell out and raise up his arms "Mount up!" The man who was at the front of the line would conduct rape first. Then when the tram driver shouted, "Show's over!" the front man would *reluctantly* give up his place and the next person who was standing at attention would prepare to "mount up."

During this entire debacle, the dead women were hauled off by their feet and left in piles by the door. Those women who had lived were doused with water from buckets and "freshened up" for the lines to form all over again. Each of the three political women had a different experience. The seamstress took the worst blow during the first pass of the tram. The wife of an enemy of the people did not receive it as bad as the others. Her "partners" consisted of old men who were rather impotent.

The final of the three was paired with the miners' party boss. This man was respected. He was fair, straight, reliable in his politics, and he was known to be *morally* strong. He was accepted as a leader of the men and as such, his participation in the tram was known to unite them all. He was the commissar of a military unit and a representative of the state. Another who respected him approached the woman (Elena) that he had claimed as his and gave her a gift, rare in the camps, a comb.

When it finally came down to the dirty deed, Elena did not scream. She did not fight or pull away. No, instead she thanked God. She thanked Him because she was the property of just one.

Applebaum explains that Elena wrote about the rape emotionlessly. The author relates this to the very indifference that is shown through the convoy guards or administrators who did not care enough to stop the rape, or were too far away to do anything to put an end to it. However, I am not sure Applebaum is entirely correct in that impassiveness on Elena's part is really a part of prose. Perhaps it is the only way that Elena can write about, much less recollect, thoughts and memories of this experience.

It may be difficult to see this as an act of biological genocide. But if women and men were separated like they were on the ships, they were most likely not supposed to breed. While they were not forced to have abortions like women were in the holocaust, the experience of orphanages, where children of prisoners were taken after they were born, could be argued to be a latent act of abortion. It did the same thing. Children of prisoners died.

A lot of children were born in the Gulag or were brought into it by nursing mothers. 503,000 women were officially imprisoned in the gulag system and of them 9,300 were pregnant; 23,790 of them had small children that lived with them⁸. So that children could be tended to while their mothers were prisoners and working, nurseries were created. The state was supposed to take care of the offspring, even if they were criminals. There were stern instructions made that stated that only toys that were washed or boiled or made of rubber, celluloid, or bone were permitted.

Mothers were provided with short twenty minute breaks from work to visit the nursery and breast feed. Because many of the orphanages were subpar, many infants who lived with strict breast-feeding schedules ended up dying. Those who made it up to one year of age became irreparably damaged. Many of the children could barely speak because they did not have enough human contact. The powerful impassiveness and lack of care or empathy by those who ran the camp meant that many children suffered a fate that lead to death.

Physical Genocide

Lemkin also describes physical genocide. He describes it as “direct/immediate extermination, (a la Auschwitz and the nazis’ einatzgruppen operations in the USSR)”⁹. It also contains, “‘slow death measures,’ those that cause ‘subjection to conditions of life which, owing to lack of proper housing, clothing, food, hygiene and medical care or excessive work or physical exertion are likely to result in the debilitation [and] death of individuals.’”¹⁰

⁸ Applebaum, *An Anthology*, 96-97.

⁹ Lemkin, *Axis Rule* quoted in *Kill the Indian Save the Man*, 5.

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The case I shall use to describe physical genocide is of Giuli Fedorovna Tsvirko Geith and Jolluck's book *Gulag Voices: Oral Histories of Soviet Incarceration and Exile*¹¹. Her child's death traumatized her for the rest of her life. It was inferred by Geith and Jolluck that she first may have been raped to conceive the child. While this could potentially be tied to the Kolyma tram that was just described in the previous section and attempts at biological genocide, it is also an example of physical genocide. She describes that the very idea of birth was impossible. Giuli was so emaciated that she hardly had an abdomen; she was all skin and bones - no fat. Doctors were merciful on her and took her to a hospital. It remains though that she did not have enough nutrition to sustain her own body, much less that of a healthy baby.

Her male child was born weighing only one and half kilograms (around 3.3 pounds.) His face was blue upon birth and he had the eyes of an adult. This seems to refer to his gaze as one that was perhaps haunting and taunt. She believed from that moment on, when she first met her child, that he was doomed. He died eight months later. She recounts during the telling of her story how she had a son, a son whose eyes she saw but never raised. She did not wish to have a child. It may have been forced on her. However, this did not matter. She loved and missed him anyway. After all this, she became distraught and confused. She was very sick and not able to find meaning in life anymore. She wished to die.

It is easy to see that biological genocide existed. The conditions of the gulags were horrible for children. They were mistreated, abused, hardly fed, or if fed they were forced to

¹¹ Jeanne M. Geith, and Katherine R. Jolluck *Gulag Voices: Oral Histories of Soviet Incarceration and Exile* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 87-97.

swallow hot porridge. Those administering the camps were indifferent to the children's conditions. The children's physical growth and mental growth was stunted. When they were at an age where they should be walking or speaking, most could not.

Even if attempts at separating men and women were made in the ships or at prisons, pregnancies and births happened. The latent affects of abortion, which is an example of biological genocide, seemed to happen anyway. The conditions of the gulag led to physical genocide in the lack of proper housing, clothing, food, hygiene and medical care. For the children who died in orphanages, they definitely experienced slow deaths, faced starvation, and did not receive proper medical care; especially when they were abused.

Cultural Genocide

Finally, when looking at Lemkin's definition of cultural genocide it is important to notice that children were placed into exile through the orphanages they were placed in. Mothers were allowed to visit their children and breast feed them up to one year old, then they stayed in the orphanages. Different acts may be included in this genocide from the forced "transfer of children to the forced exile" of those that were representative of certain groups. There may also have been "restrictions from using the national language, from having books or religious documents printed in that language"¹².

The examples of cultural genocide that I will use are of Boris Israelovich/Sur'evich Faifman and Aunt Zhenya. Boris Israelovich/Sur'evich's example is taken from the book *Gulag Voices: Oral Histories of Soviet Incarceration and Exile*. The example of Aunt Zhenya is taken from *Martyrs of Magadan: Memories of the Gulag*. Faifman grew up an orphan because both of

¹² Lemkin, *Axis Rule* quoted in *Kill the Indian Save the Man*, 6.

his parents, who were considered enemies of the people, were arrested. He grew up bitter about the way he was raised. He acquired three death certificates of his parents, but had no grave to visit.

Gheith and Jolluck explain that children were reformed into Soviet men and women-just like they were being processed in a steel mill¹³. Children were considered units to process and then be distributed. This was part of the mechanical worldview of the 1920s and 30s yes, but the authors also claim it was a dehumanizing system that labels them or treats them like machines to be processed.

Faifman was absent family and educational opportunities. He held close to the relationships he could build and focused on becoming an excellent toolmaker. He had a lack of education, lack of interaction with other victims of the repression, and lack of mental resources to process his experiences. This is shown in how he phrased and framed the memories he had about his experiences; his recollections jumped around and often he would start and then stop in midsentence.

He was not able to have a proper education, was not able to grow up with a family, was kept from learning about his people, from being educated by them, and from being able to continue on to be educated if he wanted. The orphanage did not provide these opportunities to him. He did not have the ability to choose a profession and education, like other children of the repressed who may have stayed home after one of their parents was convicted.

¹³ Gheith and Jolluck, *Gulag Voices*, 118.

In *The Martyrs of Magadan: Memories of the Gulag* there is another example of cultural genocide; this is the case of Evgenia Alexandrovna Vadova of Krosun, Kiev province in Ukraine¹⁴. Another name that she uses is Aunt Zhenya. She writes that after working all day there were no lights in the barracks to do anything and there wasn't anything to do anyway. Books, movies, and theaters did not exist. They were not permitted to write. They lived in walls with a floor, no needles for sewing available to them. Therefore, an education was valued and stories would be shared. Since they were kept from having books or from printing them through being able to write, they needed good storytellers instead. She told stories so everyone could understand and became known in the camps as Aunt Zhenya, the storyteller. Her reputation spread and she explains that this helped her along with her faith.

Although books, movies, and theaters did not exist in the camps, prisoners still tried to find a way to maintain a connection to their culture and former lives through storytellers. Individuals like Aunt Zhenya and the famous Evgenia Ginzburg who wrote two novels about her gulag experiences, held people and their cultures together through their ability to weave narratives and tell stories. In a sense, these two individuals became celebrities in the camps, known from one camp to the next for their abilities. Even if attempts were made to keep their past cultures and ethnicities from them, the prisoners fought back. They found ways through reciting poetry, singing songs, and sharing stories with one another to remember who they were. This is an example of how they were still human, more human than the number that became their name and was stamped on their back.

¹⁴ Shields, *Martyrs of Magadan*, 173-196.

Conclusion

Three different types of genocide have been discussed in this article; I have used case examples for each of them. Through these case examples it has been shown how there have been events in the gulag that fit each individual type of genocide. However, I have also given examples of how such events as the types of abuse and neglect of children and the treatment of women may be examples of two types of genocide within the same case. In the case of what happens to children, this is both an example of a type of latent biological genocide and direct physical genocide. This demonstrates that while Lemkin's definition of genocide is perhaps simple and concise, it is not in itself a solution to the dilemma of describing mass murder.

Rather, the debate will most likely continue on defining just what genocide is. Many scholars will try to find adequate descriptions themselves in order to find a better definition. What happened in the USSR during WWII is simply too complicated to try and fit into a little box. The gulags contained over sixty ethnicities. With a multitude of people from different regions and republics, they each had their own stories and backgrounds. This makes it difficult for any one definition of genocide to provide an adequate description of the events that transpired in the Soviet gulags.

Rather, I argue that although Lemkin's definition is limited, it is a good foundation in which to explore this idea. The gulags may be a case where mass murder happened. However, so did several other significant events from birth to rapes to abuse and neglect. Some of these attributes are described through his definitions, yet others are not. Further analysis and research needs to be done to see just what definition of genocide describes the events of the

gulags most accurately. This is a new and rather exciting transformation in research and discovery for generations to come. For now, Lemkin's definition of genocide may be the easiest and most precise way in which to describe the mass murders and tragedies of the gulag.

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