ABSTRACT

BITCHES AND THIEVES: GULAG GUARDS, ADMINISTRATORS, AND PROFESSIONAL CRIMINALS IN THE BITCHES’ WAR

by Adam Richard Rodger

Amongst the professional criminals imprisoned in the Soviet Gulag, a split developed between those who kept to the Thieves’ Law and those who broke the Law and collaborated with the State. This violent schism, the Bitches’ War, raged across the entire Gulag system, becoming most heated between 1948 and 1953, and implicated the camps’ guards and administrators as much as the prisoners themselves. This research examines primary and secondary sources, heavily incorporating Gulag survivor memoirs, to investigate the culture of the Thieves-in-Law, these professional criminals, and also to uncover the involvement, intentions, and guilt of the camp administration. This study argues that the Bitches’ War sheds light on the real purpose and function of the Gulag; that it was not primarily about ideological re-education, nor was it primarily about economics and production, but that the Gulag served as a model for social control through use of power, persuasion, and violence.
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Dedication

To my cohort, Mike, Luke, Courtney, Leigh, Dan, Gisel, Jake, and Zach; without whose support as sounding boards, editors, idea springs, and friends, this thesis would have taken much, much longer, and been much, much worse.
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I could not have accomplished this on my own; had I tried, the result would have been somehow both disastrous and dull. I had an enormous amount of help along the way, and a few of these helpers merit special mention. Of course, first among them are my family whose aid was invaluable. Thank you for supporting and reassuring me (though I know you’d have preferred I choose a happier subject!). I must also thank Dr. Jeff Hardy, my teacher and guide throughout my academic career, who introduced me to the terribly sad, yet endlessly fascinating world of Gulag Studies. In fact, it was in his class that I first learned of the Bitches’ War, and, upon reading that phrase, thought, well, that’s it, then. I’m going to write about that.

Dr. Stephen Norris, my thesis advisor, of course deserves special thanks. He consistently exhibited a confidence in me that I never felt was entirely warranted, but, hey, it worked out in the end. Dr. Amanda McVety, who spent the better part of a year observing and encourage the development of this project, also deserves my appreciation. Thanks go to Ed Cardoza, who off-handedly gave me two books that turned out to be absolutely critical to the central argument of this thesis. A debt of gratitude is also owed to Jan Adamczyk and the staff of the Slavic Collection at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, who allowed me to spend some time going through their collection and also provided supportive research thereafter, thereby giving me several “aha!” moments.
IN A SNOW-covered barracks of the Vorkuta Gulag camp, two professional Thieves, Grisha and Ivan, were reunited. They knew each other from previous prison terms, and had been friends. Ivan was a man of tall stature, but dressed in rags, while Grisha, though he was also a prisoner, wore the clothes of a well-to-do civilian. Things had clearly changed since last they’d met; in clear violation of the Thieves’ Law, Grisha held a position of authority in the camp, and therefore enjoyed the support of the camp administration. He was elated to see Ivan, and immediately appointed him the head of his barracks. “If anyone objects,” Grisha advised, “just beat the shit out of him.” With that, Grisha and his team left for the night.

They returned in the morning, shouting that the prisoners should rise to be counted. When Ivan remained on his high bunk, Grisha asked, “where’s the hut boss?” He approached Ivan, who had been mostly silent through the exchange but now spoke clearly and distinctly.

“Listen, you [bitch],” Ivan warned. “I’ll come down, but if one of you so much as raises a hand against me, I’ll tear his guts out.” Grisha’s attendants laughed, brandishing clubs. “Grisha, I’m warning you,” Ivan continued, “and you should know me.”

“Yes, Ivan,” Grisha responded, “I know you. You might have torn some guts out in your life, but you’re not in charge here. You come to us or we’ll tear your guts out.”

“That’s what you say. Watch out! I’m coming.” Suddenly, Ivan leapt from the bunk toward Grisha, flashing a hidden blade across his throat. Grisha’s lackeys stepped back, drawing their own knives, but they were too slow; eight of Ivan’s fellow Thieves dropped on them from the bunks, knocking them to the floor and kicking them in the head and chest. The fight was over
in a matter of seconds. Ivan stood over the bloodied, dying Grisha, and uttered a phrase too many prisoners would hear too many times:

“Death to the Bitches!”

The Soviet Gulag was one of the most violent institutions in a century that produced an unprecedented number of violent institutions. Slowly cobbled together from a collection of Marxist-Leninist ideological principles, pre-Revolutionary traditions and infrastructure, and simple, terrible necessity, it was a vast network of prisons and labor camps that stretched to all corners of the Soviet Union. Organs of the Gulag system could be found in Kaliningrad and Kamchatka, the frozen wastes of the Arctic Circle and the warm plains of Central Asia, and in the shadows of great cities like Moscow and Leningrad. The people imprisoned therein were forced to perform manual labor of kinds ranging from canal digging to coal mining, under inhumane working conditions, with precious little food or sleep. The word itself, Gulag, is an acronym standing for Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei, or “Main Camp Administration,” and, while it technically refers only to the administrative body that oversaw the far-reaching web of prisons and camps, it has since come to be used in reference to the entirety of the Soviet criminal justice system, as well as the individual camps themselves. Millions and millions of Soviet citizens made their way through this system, many of them never leaving, and its memory has left a dark shadow over the legacy of the Soviet Union.

For decades, scholarly attitudes relating to the Gulag were based almost exclusively on Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s tremendous work The Gulag Archipelago. Written in secret over decades, assembled out of meticulous research, numerous interviews, and Solzhenitsyn’s own personal experiences in the camps, and finally published in 1973, this was an eye-opening glimpse into the Soviet machine for the West. While Solzhenitsyn’s contributions to the field of Gulag studies through this book are nearly incalculable, one main idea shaped and challenged the prevailing image of what the Gulag was: his assertion that the Gulag was, or functioned like, an

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1 This vignette comes from Edward Buca’s account of his experiences as a prisoner in the Gulag camp at Vorkuta. Edward Buca, Vorkuta (London: Constable and Company Limited, 1976), 54-7.
3 It was not published in the Soviet Union until 1989, many years after the camps it describes had all but disappeared. Previous to that it was available only in secret. It would have still been eye-opening for its Soviet readers, however, because of both the depth and breadth of its research and analysis, but the horrors of the Gulag had by that time been exposed by many other Gulag survivor memoirs by that time.
archipelago. Using this metaphor, he describes a system of remote islands almost totally removed from the rest of the Soviet Union, internally bound together by a network of “great ports,” meaning the transit camps, and “sealed steel ships,” referring to the railroad cattle cars that carried prisoners from one camp to another. The result of this archipelagic structure is a narrative of distance, of separation, of isolation, both physical and mental, from society.

This is a sentiment which has been echoed time and again in Gulag memoirs, and sometimes even stretches into, not only a physical isolation from the rest of Soviet society, but also a mental isolation from the self. Varlam Shalamov captures it in his story “In the Night,” when a prisoner called Glebov reflects on his previous life as a physician which “seemed very far away. Had it ever existed?” he wonders. “Too often the world beyond the mountains and seas seemed unreal, like something out of a dream.” This sense of isolation, a total removal from society, from community, and even from time and one’s self, is an almost-universal feature of Gulag survivor writing. Many former-prisoners describe this sensation, the feeling that, within the camps, all the outside world fades away and the camp is all there is. Using this imagery of isolation, then, it makes sense that Solzhenitsyn’s view of the Gulag system would be so resilient in the field of Gulag studies.

More recent scholarship has taken different perspectives on the camps, their organization, and their relationships with the inmates and Soviet society in general. Wilson Bell, for instance, pointing out trends of non-criminals visiting the camps and of certain privileged criminals leaving the confines of the camp for work, argues that “if the ultimate goal of a concentration camp is to create a ‘closed universe,’ completely cut off from society, then the Gulag by and large failed at this goal.” Others have weighed in on a debate regarding the purpose of the Gulag. Officially, the Gulag was an institution aimed at the ideological re-education of Soviet criminals. Feliks Dzerzhinsky, head of Soviet secret police and an early architect of the Gulag,
described them as “schools of labor.”

The Soviet writer Maksim Gorky wrote of a visit he made to one camp, describing the prisoners as “healthy lads,” living a life which was not “over-regulated,” as if the camp were “inhabited by passengers rescued from a sinking ship.”

This model has, of course, been met with cynicism from many scholars, Solzhenitsyn certainly among them. Anne Applebaum presents a narrative wherein ideological re-education was simply a rhetorical tool to justify a system ideologically-incompatible with Soviet ideology. She argues that the camps were not “intended for [the prisoners’] own educational benefit,” but instead they were intended to boost the economy of the Soviet Union, accomplishing what could not be done under more humane conditions. Though in some years the camps were not even self-sustaining, let alone profitable, Applebaum writes, “the Solovetsky camps were perceived to be profitable – or at least Stalin perceived them to be profitable.”

This perception of profitability, she argues, was more important than the reality in which the camps were sometimes a burden, especially during the war. Steven Barnes, on the other hand, suggests a more complicated narrative, cautioning against a rejection of the reformative mission of the Gulag. Records indicate that release rates were much higher than death rates, Barnes shows, and camp officials sometimes went to great lengths to educate the prisoners. These efforts included political indoctrination sessions, as well as occasional approved film screenings or musical performances, which, Barnes argues, suggests that the rhetoric of “re-education through labor” was not simply an empty defense for an indefensible system, but that it was the (or, at least, a) genuine motive of those who designed and administered the camps. However, Barnes’ standard for what is considered “re-education” is concerning; low, he equates it with simply being

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8 *Istorichesky Arkhiv*, no. 1, 1958, p. 6-11.
9 Gorky allegedly said later that there was not a single sentence of his description of Solovetsky left “untouched by the censors’ pen.” If this was the case, which it very well could have been, then it would lend some credibility to accounts written by inmates who saw him during his visit which contradict his own. That said, whether he was truthful, deceptive, or forcibly false, this is the account which was presented to the public, meaning that it was how the Gulag administration wanted the Gulag system to be seen. Applebaum, 41-44. Originally located in Maxim Gorky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. XI, 291-316; Gheir Khesto, *Maksim Gorkii: sudba pisatelya* (Moscow, 1997), 244-45.
11 Applebaum, 54.
12 According to scholars’ best information, an estimated 18 million people passed through the Gulag during the Stalinist years, where there numbers were at the highest (seeing as how during the Khruschev era, the Gulag was all but shut down), and Barnes notes that the deaths of Gulag prisoners (including those who died during their post-camp exile years) are in the area of 2.6 million, meaning that the majority of people who entered the Gulag did leave it alive. While he does also argue that death was the intended result for certain prisoners who were considered irredeemable, his biggest contribution in this study is to a re-evaluation of re-education rhetoric. Steven Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 1-2.
released, setting up a dichotomy between re-education and death whereby a prisoner who survives must, by definition, have been successfully re-educated. This largely overlooks those prisoners who may have accepted re-education yet still died of malnutrition, overworking, or abuse, as well as those who ignored or resisted the ubiquitous ideological propaganda yet were still released when their sentence was served. That said, Barnes provides welcome perceptive complications to a widely-accepted, though perhaps over-simplified, Gulag narrative.

This study also seeks to examine the motivations and mindset of those who ran the camps, particularly those on the ground-level positions of camp guards and administrators. It accomplishes this by focusing on a specific, if wide-spread, conflict that slowly built in the Gulag until it overflowed in the late 1940s. This conflict, the Bitches War, was a violent schism within the world of Soviet professional criminals, a strange breed of fierce prisoners who populated the entire network of camps. The Bitches broke the law of the Thieves by cooperating with camp authorities, sealing in blood the declaration of war between the two factions. These criminals, called the Thieves-in-Law or the Honest Thieves, are even today poorly-understood within the academic community, and so the first chapter of this thesis will focus on them. It will unpack their laws and their culture, explaining who they were and giving much-needed context to the Bitches War. The second chapter will delve into the conflict itself, explaining its origins, its far-reaching and vicious nature, and the incriminating involvement of many camp guards, who often allowed and even encouraged the in-fighting and murder.

This conflict gives the historian a glimpse into the mind of these guards and administrators. I will argue that they were not primarily motivated by ideological re-education; they sided with the Bitches over the Thieves, despite the fact that neither can be said to have been re-educated under the Soviet model. I will also argue that they were not primarily motivated by economic production; the camps were never particularly profitable anyway, and when the guards and administrators did care about these things, it seems to have been more motivated by a desire to preserve themselves, rather than out of patriotic ideals. Instead, this study argues that

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13 Golfo Alexopoulos’ recent book Illness and Inhumanity in Stalin’s Gulag also weighs in on this debate, viewing it from a perspective focused on health, medicine, and treatment in the camps. She emphasizes the exploitative nature of forced labor in the Gulag, and, while my study was written before the publication of her book, our conclusions on the subject largely support each other. She describes the Gulag as “a willfully destructive institution to a degree not previously documented.” She echoes the sentiment of Anne Applebaum, as does this study, that “unless they were productive, their lives were worthless to their masters.” Golfo Alexopoulos, Illness and Inhumanity in Stalin’s Gulag (Yale University Press, 2017), 1-2; Applebaum, xxxix.
the Gulag served as a model for social control through the use of power, persuasion, and violence. The guards and administrators sided with the Bitches over the Thieves, not because they were better Soviet citizens or meaningfully more productive, but because the Bitches were willing to cooperate, and they could perform the dirty work, the intimidation, the violence, that camp officials could not.

In terms of methodology and sourcing, a large share of the evidence presented in this study comes from the memoirs written by Gulag survivors, a very traditional source base for Gulag historians. In recent years, however, there has been a marked shift in Gulag scholarship away from the more literary sources and toward the types of archival sources that are more common in other areas of history. Wilson Bell’s article about Solzhenitsyn’s archipelagic model is a clear example of this trend. This is, of course, an excellent movement and has resulted in a much more robust and nuanced understanding of this endlessly-complicated subject. Indeed, it seems to be a completely logical change to make; memoirs have something of a reputation, not entirely unearned, for being biased, for stretching the truth, or imposing meaning, significance, and structure over events where it does not belong. This is no new observation; Robert Liberles, the scholar of Jewish History, writes that, when dealing with similar problems, this is “only what a common-sense reading of memoirs would seem to require.” Out of convenience, however, historians easily forget this, so the reminder “is well worth our attention.”

However, it would be wrong to suppose that because memoir is prone to bias, archival documentation is somehow not. Such documents were also written by people, with their own perspectives, biases, and perhaps agendas. This is especially true in the Soviet case; Soviet official documents are lousy with artful language and obscuring vagueness, designed specifically to shroud the fact that things were worse than they were supposed to be. In her book on Gulag memoirs as a literary genre, Leona Toker points out that “even the franker of the secret police reports on camp conditions use an official newspeak” that renders an outsider almost incapable of understanding the reports. “An outsider can, perhaps, guess that ‘alimentary dystrophy’ means deadly slow starvation,” she writes, referring to cause-of-death certifications in the camps, “but it takes a veteran to explain to us that ‘absence of drying facilities’ translates into death by freezing

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14 Robert Liberles, ““She Sees that her Merchandise is Good, and her Lamp is not Extinguished at Nighttime”: Glikl’s Memoir as Historical Source,” Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues, No. 7, Autobiography and Memoir (Spring, 2004), 12.
in the padded clothes that had not dried on the prisoner’s body overnight.” Indeed, many Soviet documents, especially those coming from the prisons and labor camps, have a clear and noticeable bias that is at least as strong as those of the survivors. Yes, the memoirist’s mind is also clouded by time, but frequently these Gulag guards are not even trying to record the truth. In that regard, at least, the Gulag memoirs are the stronger source.

It is also true, of course, that a major reason for this study to focus on memoirs and personal accounts rather than archived official documents is that those documents, by and large, do not exist. Some of the little that does has been included herein, but the phenomenon of the Bitches War itself was simply not widely reported in official documents. Part of the explanation for this is likely that the administrators tried to downplay the amount of intra-camp murders that took place. The Bitches War, then, would be something to leave out. Another reason might be the fact that acknowledging the Bitches War, wherein camp officials tolerated and even encouraged those murders, would also mean acknowledging this very un-Soviet behavior. At any rate, while camp records are conspicuously silent on this issue, what remains is that nearly every memoir written by a Gulag survivor mentions the Bitches War to some degree. Their descriptions of its origins, its expanse, and its violence, largely agree with one another. The accounts written by these survivors open up a world at once rich and grim, vibrant and bleak, just as full of life as death, and one that historians of the Gulag may soon better understand.

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CHAPTER ONE – THE HONEST THIEVES

Upon learning that Alexander Dolgun had been sentenced to a term in a Gulag prison camp, his cellmate, Grigori Orlov, began to educate him, giving him rules for survival. “Never do today what you can put off till tomorrow,” he said, advising that Dolgun conserve his energy. “Never tell the truth if a lie will do,” came another proverb, counsel intended to confuse the captors. It was also important to find a productive position in the camp, such as in the kitchens, where he could steal food, either for his own benefit or to sell to the other prisoners.

He also warned Dolgun to watch out for the professional criminals who were commonplace in the camps. “They are truly very tough boys, Alex,” Orlov said. “They are organized all over the Soviet Union. They … live by stealing from the politicals.” When Dolgun expressed surprise, Orlov continued. “You’d better know about this. The [criminals] come to the prison ready-equipped … for survival. They have a code of laws that binds them together. They understand each other’s way of thinking. They have lived underground in a way that teaches them how to cooperate against a hostile world, and when they come inside it’s not that much different for them.”\footnote{\textit{Alexander Dolgun was an American citizen whose father went to Moscow for work, eventually bringing his family over as well, but was prevented from leaving once his job was finished. Dolgun grew up in Moscow during the purges of the 1930s, eventually finding work at the United States Embassy. He was eventually arrested by the MGB on charges of espionage. He was given a twenty-five year sentence, during which he was held in camps and prisons such as Sukhanovka and Dzhezkazgan, but was released in 1956. In 1971 he was finally able to obtain an exit visa, relocated to the US, and published his memoir. Alexander Dolgun, \textit{Alexander Dolgun’s Story: An American in the Gulag} (Knopf, dist by Random House, 1975), 109-110.}}

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16 Alexander Dolgun was an American citizen whose father went to Moscow for work, eventually bringing his family over as well, but was prevented from leaving once his job was finished. Dolgun grew up in Moscow during the purges of the 1930s, eventually finding work at the United States Embassy. He was eventually arrested by the MGB on charges of espionage. He was given a twenty-five year sentence, during which he was held in camps and prisons such as Sukhanovka and Dzhezkazgan, but was released in 1956. In 1971 he was finally able to obtain an exit visa, relocated to the US, and published his memoir. Alexander Dolgun, \textit{Alexander Dolgun’s Story: An American in the Gulag} (Knopf, dist by Random House, 1975), 109-110.
Some of the most dangerous prisoners in the entire Gulag system were the professional criminals, known as the *vory v zakone*, or the Thieves-in-Law.\(^{17}\) Unlike the “ordinary” criminals who were doing time for petty theft, violations of workplace regulations, or other small, nonpolitical crimes, the Thieves-in-Law were the building blocks of the Soviet criminal underworld. They were in the Gulag, not because of any significant ideological disagreement with the Soviet Union – in fact, paradoxically, some considered themselves good Soviet citizens – but because of their affiliations with organized criminal groups with origins stretching back all the way to the Tsarist era. These associations were generally fairly loose, but they permeated the Soviet Union to such an extent that Thieves-in-Law could be found in just about every Gulag camp from Moscow to Magadan. Records of them appear in almost every Gulag memoir, and the complicated power structure they developed appears to have been a ubiquitous and central part of Gulag life.

The Thieves-in-Law belonged to a deep-rooted tradition of criminal life, the beginnings of which are somewhat difficult to pin down. The most commonly-held narrative marks their origin in the pressure of the Gulag itself, a reaction against the overarching power and authority of the camp administration over the lives of the prisoners. Michael Schwirtz, in an article on the modern Russian criminal underworld, wrote that the *vory* were “forged in the Soviet gulags.”\(^{18}\) Similarly, a documentary exploring those same modern descendants of the Thieves claims that “the traditions of the Thieves Code began in Stalin’s Gulags of the 1930s.”\(^{19}\) Some scholars have more-or-less supported this notion over the years; Aleksandr Gurov, for instance, argues that the Thieves must not have existed in Russia before the revolution, at least not in the same state as those observed in the Gulag, because pre-revolutionary criminologists do not mention the term *vory v zakone* or Thieves-in-Law.\(^{20}\)

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\(^{17}\) Russian words such as *blatnye*, *urki*, and *vory v zakone* are generally translated as “thieves” or “thieves-in-law,” and from here on will be translated as such, unless they are used in a quote. A more proper translation might be “criminal,” as the term “thief” in English tends to refer to a pickpocket or burglar, and the definitions of these terms are much wider. That said, as the majority of scholarship and translations on the subject have rendered these words as “thieves,” I will continue to do so. While there are subtle differences in the meanings of these terms, they are not particularly important for our purposes.


\(^{19}\) Alexander Gentelev, *Ganavim Ba Hok (Thieves by Law)*, LE Vision Film – und Fersehproduktion [de], 2010.

There is actually substantial evidence, however, that the criminal class known as the Thieves-in-Law goes back well before the full development of the Gulag, and it is very likely that it has roots stretching deep into the Tsarist period. For instance, while Gurov is correct that pre-revolutionary criminological texts do not mention the vory by that name, Federico Varese notes that several other words used to refer to the Thieves were known to these criminologists before the Revolution. “V. F. Trakhtenberg records in 1908 the terms urka (big, daring thief) and oreburka (petty thief) in his celebrated dictionary of criminal jargon,” Varese writes. “Popov (1912) has the words blatnoï (criminal), urka and vozhak (leader).”21 These terms, with a history stretching back at least into the late imperial era, are used in Gulag memoirs just as frequently as vory to refer to the Thieves-in-Law. Jacques Rossi also writes of “the old noble thieves’ world, the world of real thieves,” which he also maintains existed in Tsarist Russia, and was not a development specific to the Soviet Union.22 Many commonly-recorded Thief practices, from card-playing and boasting to trading names to trick the prison guards into shortening their sentences, are also recorded among the criminals in Dostoevsky’s The House of the Dead, which was written in 1862.23 Furthermore, Mikhail Dyomin, one of the precious few Thieves who wrote down anything at all about their world, writes that his father had been associated with “the ‘grays,’ an old Rostov term for free peasant bandits.” Another Thief later speaks of the “grays” as a precursor to the Thieves-in-Law.24 Dyomin also notes some pre-Revolutionary Thieves who had studied in Odessa and beyond, in Central and Western Europe.25 It seems likely that, while the specific society of the vory v zakone may have coalesced into its more infamous form in the fierce environment of the Gulag camps, its traditions stretch back much further.26

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21 Varese’s opinion on the origin of the Thieves-in-Law seems to be a bit mixed, however; in his article on Thief culture and society, he describes them as “a peculiar type of criminal that emerged in the Soviet labour camps in the late 1920s.” Federico Varese, The Russian Mafia: Private Protection in a New Market Economy (Oxford University Press, 2001), 160.
24 Mikhail Dyomin, The Day is Born of Darkness (Knopf, dist. by Random House, 1971), 60, 121.
26 Interestingly, it appears that the absolute prohibition against cooperating with government authorities, with which this study will be more concerned later, may not have been quite as old as the Thieves’ society itself. A fair number of records have survived regarding Van’ka Kain, one of the earliest of these bandit-like people and something of a legendary Russian “Robin Hood” figure. After being caught for robbery several times but evading punishment, Kain turned himself in to the police, informing on and denouncing a large number of his fellow criminals, promising “to redeem his criminal past by helping to arrest them.” While Kain is held up as an early example of the Thieves’ World in Russia, and, by some tellings, a folk hero, this sort of behavior brought swift and violent retribution on those Thieves who engaged in it during and leading up to the Bitches War. This suggests that
The Thieves’ Law

The Thieves-in-Law, as their name suggests, bound themselves by a strict code of rules and honor. Breaking that code could result in anything from being stripped of one’s status as a Thief to being beaten or, not infrequently, killed. The specifics of the rules varies depending on which Thief is explaining them, but their essence remains the same. One former Thief, A. M. Bulatov, sent a report to the Procurator General of the USSR where he laid out the laws of the Thieves thusly:

1. A Vor should support another vor in any circumstances.
2. A Vor should not work in any state-owned industry… he might be on record as working at some post, but should not fulfill the necessary functions.
3. Vor should live only on what he has stolen, seized, acquired by deception, won at cards, only such a vor is considered to be honest and independent, a real vor.
4. The laws of the USSR do not exist for a vor, vor does not adhere to these laws.
5. The vor despises the members of the CPSU [the Communist Party of the Soviet Union].
6. Vory have their own laws and tribunals (skhodka). At the vory’s skhodka, all vory pronounce judgements up to death sentences by strangulation, axing, or other methods.
7. A vor should not serve in the army.
8. A vor should not be a witness in a court, he should not protect the vory’s honour in a court.

it is possible that this forbiddance to work with authorities was not always a “law” among Thieves. Alternatively, it is possible that history has simply forgiven Kain his betrayal because of the boldness and daring of his stories. Elizabeth Stenbock-Fermor, “The Story of Van’ka Kain,” The Journal of American Folklore 69, no. 273, Slavic Folklore: A Symposium (July-September 1956); 255.

27 The term “Thieves-in-Law” is a direct translation of the Russian phrase vory v zakone. This might give English-speaking readers the wrong impression, because it so resembles the “in-law” construction used to describe certain familial relationships (e.g. “father-in-law” or “mother-in-law”). The term has no relation to those ideas, and, in fact, the Russian words for those relationships (test’ and svekrov’ respectively) are not constructed similarly to their English counterparts, so this is a connection that a Russian would not make. The term “Thieves-in-Law” simply means that these were criminals bound to a certain code of ethics, or a law. I will continue to use this term, because it is a direct translation of what the Thieves were called at the time, it generally fits their self-perception, and it has been the established term used by scholars and memoirists thusfar.
9. … In case a vor is under very severe regime [of imprisonment] and has no opportunity to avoid working… he could – through the use of deception and cunning methods – become the leader of working brigada… and… rob honest workers of their records of work… These stolen records should be shared with the other vory who do not earn their ration by working.

10. Vory should take… a contribution from workers… who receive parcels, money, goods, etc. According to the vory’s law, they have to take the best half… the workers know the consequences of not giving to the vory what they wish to take. That is why workers are forced to give without resistance and even unconditionally. If the workers leave in solidarity… and refused to pay the ‘contribution’, vory have to kill one or, if necessary, two workers…

11. If vory in labour corrective camps or prison cannot follow the vory’s way of life due to the policies of the administration… vory have to [resist?] without taking anything into consideration even if it means killing somebody, calumniating and compromising the administration of the camp or prison in front of higher organs, and even the central Committee of the CPSU… In general, vory should use all their strength to make life easier for themselves…

12. Since it is known to the vory that each prison and administration fear, with all their heart, prison revolts, for which they could be punished by higher organs of the Soviet Power… vory ‘zakonniki’ [“lawful”] should play this trump card.

13. All vory are obliged to attract and win sympathy of the clever youth both free and when in places of imprisonment, in order to replenish the group of vory (vory have been giving special attention to this ‘paragraph’ in recent years).²⁸

The over-arching trends of the Thieves’ Law were two; the one being that the Thief should put himself, firstly, and other Thieves, secondly, before all others, and the second being that the Thief is absolutely forbidden from cooperating with the State in any way. This included, but was not limited to, performing manual labor in the camps, informing on other prisoners, and serving in the military. This second rule is likely the more important of the two, as, in the turbulence of the Bitches War, this line more than anything else separated friend from foe. This

²⁸ Varese, 152. Original document is located in GARF, 8131/32/4961/11–13; 7 July 1955.
rule was no different from the rest, of course, in that its specific enforcement varied slightly from place to place and teller to teller. One Thief boss said that they would have guards “sell the stuff we liberate from new arrivals, and we split it with them, and they buy us good food and tobacco in town and make sure we have what we need.” This was justified in his mind because he was cooperating with the guards, who he saw as being separate from the administration.

Similarly, Edward Buca describes a conversation he had with a Thief who explained that Thieves were allowed to work with an axe, a pick, a hammer, etc., but could not work in the kitchens, in administration, or in any capacity that could be seen to work against his fellow prisoners, such as building fences or manning watch towers. Dyomin states that, according to Russian Thieves’ Law, a Thief has no right to be in anyone else’s service or employ, and is only to make a living from his profession. “A thief thieves, a fraier [Thief slang for a freeman, peasant] plows,” he writes, quoting an old Thief proverb. Like the others, however, he offers a few exceptions: a Thief behind bars could work a “legitimate” job, but it could only be work out in the forest or the taiga, cutting trees or digging roads, so long as it was outside the physical confines of the camp. He acknowledges that the Thieves had to adjust their rules, however, when the “bloodletting” years of the Bitches War began. “After a good deal of doubt and dispute,” he writes, “they finally settled on several exceptions to the rules: thieves were to receive the right, in case of extreme need, to become team leaders and barbers. A team leader could always save and feed several friends at a time.” The choice of allowing Thieves to be camp barbers was similarly strategic, as they “have access to sharp-edged objects – razors and scissors – a distinct advantage during the period of intracamp bitch warfare.” The specific rules and their implementations varied, but the spirit behind them remained: aiding the State in any way was forbidden. “A true thief-in-law,” Applebaum writes, “refused to work, refused to own a passport, and refused to cooperate in any way with the authorities unless it was in order to exploit them.” This refusal to cooperate created a very tense relationship between the Thieves-in-Law and the Gulag guards and administrators, in part because the Gulag camps’ production quotas were set according to total prisoner population. Having a significant portion of the population refuse to perform any

29 Dolgun, 147-8.
30 Buca, 60.
31 Dyomin, 214-5.
32 Applebaum, 282.
33 Danzig Baldaev, Drawings from the Gulag (FUEL Publishing, 2010), 200.
labor made those production quotas difficult to meet, which caused immense stress to the administration.

It should be noted that the term “Thieves-in-Law” itself is somewhat misleading, in that it nearly suggests that the Thieves were all bandits and robbers; it was much more an indicator of status than of occupation. Each “Thief” was obligated to choose from a variety of “careers,” ranging from common pickpockets and marketplace swindlers to lockpickers, burglars, and safecrackers. Dyomin gives a detailed description of his own survey of various criminal professions, explaining to the reader their various degrees of success as well as their particular dangers. He considered becoming a pickpocket, which, while it doesn’t offer much in the way of riches, was respected in Thief circles for the artistry involved. He decided against it, however, because frequent droughts and arrests were part and parcel of the pickpocket’s life. Next he shadowed an apartment Thief, called a “locksmith” in Thief parlance. In this line of work the jobs were far more lucrative, but he quickly learned that they were also far more dangerous, noting that “if the life of a pickpocket led to scandal and public abuse, the locksmith’s trade ended far too often in blood.” He eventually settled on trainrobbing, remembering that “the life of the rails tempted [him] with its air of novelty and romance.” This is not surprising; the life of a Thief was, almost invariably, one of constant movement and migration, and in Dyomin, as the descendant of Cossacks and the son of a “gray,” the allure of this wandering nature was only compounded.

There remains a question as to whether or not murder could be considered a “profession” within the world of the professional criminals. Certainly the records indicate that they had little aversion to performing the act itself. Varese claims that “professional killers were not allowed to enter the fraternity” of the Thieves-in-Law. “The vor allegedly had a strong code against murder.” He also cites a 1994 letter published in *Dos’e 02*, a Perm magazine focused on criminal matters, wherein the author, a convict who had spent time among the criminals, “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 behavior is the fact that new vor are murderers. ‘Thieves-in-Law… do not exist anymore. If they are thieves, they are not in-law. …Thieves in the old time despised murderers, but now every second thief is a murderer. The thieves’ law exists no

34 Dyomin, 133.  
35 Dyomin, 135.
This prohibition on murder, Varese says, sets the Russian criminal underground apart from those in other countries.

However, this does seem to clash with Dyomin’s description of a friend of his, a Thief nicknamed the Maiden. As a young man, the Maiden was a newcomer to the criminal den at Archangel, and in 1944 took part in a group night-heist of a military trading post. When the getaway driver got nervous about guards, the Maiden led him away from the group and killed him and drove the getaway truck himself. “After this episode,” Dyomin writes, “the Maiden’s reputation as a ‘business-like’ fellow was strongly enhanced.” Despite his youth, older, more experienced Thieves spoke with him as an equal, and others considered it an honor to conduct robberies with the Maiden on their team. “He was usually employed on what were called “wet” affairs – killings,” Dyomin continues, clearly suggesting that, at least occasionally, jobs involving murder were sanctioned by the Thief society. He does admit that “murder is a far from popular art in the Russian criminal world,” but says that this is because it is a “dangerous” and “noisy” affair; by his telling, the Thieves-in-Law tended to lean more toward the artistry of skilled theft and robbery, but they were more than capable of respecting a good, dependable murderer. In fact, some accounts suggest that, once the death penalty was abolished in the Soviet Union, Thieves would occasionally kill other prisoners “knowing they’d be sent away for five or six months ‘rest’ to an investigatory prison while the killing was looked into,” getting them the nickname “murderer on holiday.” They would then receive a few more years to their sentence which, among the Thieves, was a badge of honor. These accounts regarding murder differ to some degree, but the general trend holds true; that the specifics of Thief Law vary from place to place and time to time, but the spirit of the Law remains.

The structure of the vorovskoi mir, or Thieves’ World, both within and outside of the Gulag camps, was somewhat paradoxical in nature. On the one hand, the Thieves took great pride in being independent, beholden to no official or authority, having no rulers or (at least official) leaders among them. “The criminal world… [is] organized along deeply democratic lines,” Dyomin says, “without leaders or dictators of any kind.” Certainly, the Thieves were proud of their free and relatively-structure-less society, and frequently insisted that they

36 Varese, The Russian Mafia, 155.
37 Dyomin, 295-297.
38 Baldaev, 199.
39 Dyomin, 46.
recognized no authority, even among their own kind. Other records make clear, however, that this isn’t strictly-speaking the case; while the Thieves’ command structure was very loose, especially compared to the family-based structure of their Italian counterparts, it still existed. In fact, it was by this very structure that they enforced their societal laws and customs, holding courts whenever a Thief was suspected of being disloyal to his fellows. Like many aspects of Thief life and culture, the courts went by different names; Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov called them pravilki, Robert Conquest used the term samosud, and the former Thief Bulatov preferred the word skhodka, but their purpose was the same. They were made up of pakhany, a loose sort of title denoting those who “were older vory with a particular moral authority.”

These pravilki were most frequently called for one reason: to decide the fate of the accused Thief. If he was found guilty, he could expect “a bloody reprisal. Of course, the judges do not do the killing,” Shalamov writes, “the young thieves kill. The ringleaders have always considered this ‘act’ useful for the young thieves: they gain experience, and are tempered.” A Romanian political prisoner witnessed one of these councils where a Thief named Sashka was found guilty of betraying his brethren, and was afforded the luxury of choosing his own method of execution: cutting or hanging. This barrack was used to grisly displays of violence; it had previously seen inmates suffocated with a sock, stabbed with makeshift knives, skulls split open with axe heads, but those had all been heated acts of anger. This, however, was noticeably different; the coldness of the scene was new to them. Sashka chose to be cut. Someone brought forth a water basin, and, as Sashka kneeled over it, his throat was slit quickly. As the blood drained into the water, the executioner washed his hands, kicked the body, and then banged on the door to alert the sentry that a prisoner had died.

Dyomin was once the defendant in one such trial, which very nearly cost him his life. He had accidentally let slip to one of the other Thieves that he had been in the army; as a Thief who had worn a uniform and fired a rifle on behalf of the State, he should by rights have been

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40 Varese, 150. Dyomin notes one other title used among the Thieves, which is patsan, a word used to describe a young potential Thief, or a person “still short of a mastery of their profession.” When the patsan was ready, they would be presented to a council such as the one described above. They would give a full account of their lives and achievements (one imagines, with a healthy dose of embellishment), and, if the pakhany approved, they would adjourn the meeting “with the ritualistic phrase, ‘Look on him, thieves, and look well! Remember, the sentence isn’t subject to appeal. We’re all responsible for him now!’” Dyomin, 124.


declared a Bitch. Another Thief, nicknamed Lenin because of his clever mind and shaven head, assembled a council of the Thieves and publicly accused Dyomin of this breach of Thief law. “How had he found out? the thought flashed through my mind,” Dyomin recounts. “That’s when the second thought came: I’m a dead man. Any thief who’s been in the army is, by definition, a bitch. And there’s a war going on with the bitches now. If I don’t clear myself… they’ll knife me right where I stand.” Through a combination of lies, deflection, and clever words, along with some help from his friends among the crowd of Thieves, Dyomin was able to escape the council unharmed, but he had made a very close brush with death. Interestingly, the Thieves among the council who actually decide Dyomin’s fate, presumably among the pakhany, are never named, which hints at the paradox of a pseudo-governing body with no one person at its head.

There are other indications at a more far-reaching hierarchical structure among the Thieves-in-Law, and perhaps the most intriguing of these also comes from Dyomin’s record. This is what he calls “an all-European Thieves’ Conference,” which he attended as a delegate from his Thieves’ den in Lvov, Ukraine. Talk of calling a Thieves’ Conference had floated around for years, with some Thieves writing letters to their foreign counterparts to hammer out logistical and organizational details, but nothing had ever come of it until now. The conference was called to settle a dispute that had developed over the course of the Second World War, when Thieves from various different countries found themselves, for the first time, in foreign jails. This was a problem, especially for the Russian Thieves, because in other countries, “even in the truly thief countries of Poland and Italy, even in the Italian Mafia itself,” no significant prohibition against cooperation with the State existed. Therefore, when, in the course of the chaos of war, Russian Thieves found themselves in jails in Poland, Italy, and other countries, they were appalled to see the local professional criminals forming mutually-beneficial alliances with the prison guards and administrators. Even worse, when foreign thieves ended up in Soviet prisons, mostly in Russia and Ukraine, their disinterested attitude toward the Thieves’ Law “was considered ambivalent and intolerable,” Dyomin says. “It contradicted the general norm and

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43 Granted, he was in the Red Army before he really joined the Thieves-in-Law, so it might be argued that he could not be held to a criminal code he had not sworn to yet, but, judging from his reaction when his fellow Thieves heard about his past, Dyomin did not seem to have much confidence that they would be swayed by this argument. Dyomin, 245.

44 Dyomin, 248-253.
moved the thieves of the Motherland to sharp protests.” Resolving this international issue was the reason for which the Russian Thieves arranged the Thieves’ Conference in Lvov.\(^45\)

The conference took place in a run-down section of the city. It is unclear exactly who was in attendance, and from where, but from the way Dyomin has written about the international criminal world it is reasonable to presume that there were representatives from, at least, Italy, Poland, and Germany, though it seems likely that delegations from other countries were present as well.\(^46\) As Dyomin entered the hall he saw that it “was proceeding noisily and – as is the case with most conferences – unproductively.” The ideological differences between the various breeds of criminal were proving too sharp, the divides too wide to bridge. “Each of the sides was insisting on its own infallibility and refusing to compromise,” Dyomin laments. “The only healthy decision the thieves came to went something like this: ‘At home everybody’s free to do what he wants, but on foreign soil, he has to abide by the prevailing laws.’” He notes that the Russian Thieves were initially displeased by this, but soon reconciled themselves to it.\(^47\) What exactly this would mean for Russian Thieves while abroad remains unclear; would they be expected to engage in bitchcraft such as forming alliances with prison guards? If they did so, would they have to face the consequences of their actions when they returned to their native soil? One hopes not, but the ramifications are not recorded. What is made clear here, however, is that the Thieves-in-Law (or, at least, a few of them) were connected to a vast network of pan-European criminal organizations.\(^48\) The fact that their authority to call such a conference was recognized further suggests a structural hierarchy that, while perhaps not as rigid and concrete as that in other countries, was still more substantial than most accounts of Thief life let on.

**The Thieves’ Culture**

The political prisoners, who tended to be intellectuals from the worlds of art or academia, often regarded the professional criminals as uncultured, ignorant, and simple. While it was true that they almost invariably had not had much in the way of formal education, and they knew

\(^{45}\) Dyomin, 215-6.

\(^{46}\) France, for example, is not mentioned in conjunction with the conference, but several Thieves with whom Dyomin was associated had connections in Paris, so it is well within the realm of possibility that French thieves were in attendance as well.

\(^{47}\) Dyomin, 219.

\(^{48}\) Of course these connections were not only limited to Europe; many Thieves, Dyomin included, also had strong connections to criminal organizations in the Middle East and Central Asia. In fact, these relationships were often easier to develop as a number of these regions were part of various Soviet republics.
little of classical philosophy or fine art, evidence of a deep and rich culture among the Thieves abounds. They had an abiding love of stories and literature (and certainly had specific tastes), they wrote folk songs about their lives, sorrows, and travels, and adorned their bodies with detailed and meaningful tattoos that conveyed important messages to anyone who knew how to interpret them. The Thieves even had their own language that pervaded the camps to such an extent that guards and administrators were reprimanded for using it. Danzig Baldaev, an artist and author who worked as a Gulag prison guard, writes that this culture reflected “the sins of the state.” He adds that these sins “are manifest in the world of the prisons and camps, in the terrible plague patches of tattoos, in the obscenities of thieves’ jargon, the criminal obsessions and depraved notions of the structure of society and social ideology.”

The Thieves-in-Law were the product of a terrible and violent world, but what they created, while still terrible, violent, and at times uncivilized, was at the same time rich and alive.

One of the first things most writers note when they begin describing the Thieves to their readers is the intricate and unique dialect of the Thieves. Sometimes referred to as fenya, this was a language constructed out of slang and jargon, using some words that were repurposed from Russian and others that were wholly invented, and it was entirely specific to the Thieves’ world and the Gulag camps. “The language of the [Thieves] is a completely separate branch of the philological tree,” Solzhenitsyn writes, “which has nothing like it or akin to it.” Some words, such as ksiva, which meant “document,” or marochka, which meant “handkerchief,” were born among the Thieves. Other words in the Thieves’ tongue were taken from Russian and augmented with code meanings. For instance, svistet’ means “to whistle,” but to the Thieves it meant “to tell a lie.” The Russian word fitil’ means “a wick,” but when a Thief said it he meant “a prisoner [who was] worn down and dying.” Solzhenitsyn wrote that the best phrase in the Thieves’ lexicon was na tśirlakh, which he says cannot easily be translated, but is used in reference to performing a task, and means to do so “on tiptoe, and headlong, and with heartfelt

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50 Solzhenitsyn maintains that these words were invented in the camps and have no philological connection to the Russian language, and in my research I have found no evidence to the contrary. Still, neither I nor Solzhenitsyn are philologists, so it would be valuable for a linguist to do a study of the Thieves’ language to confirm or refute this claim.
zeal and eagerness.” He seems almost too surprised to note that the language of the criminals is vivid, precise, and comprehensible.51

The Thieves’ tongue was recognizable to anyone who had spent time in the camps; Shalamov writes that no one “who has been to Kolyma has failed to carry away from Kolyma the peculiar slang of the criminals.”52 Some parts of this criminal language became so widely-known in the camps that the guards and administration began using them, which deeply concerned Soviet leadership. A document entitled “Order no. 50 for the construction site of the Moscow-Volga canal and the administration of the Dmitrovsky camp,” counsels camp employees on the real danger of criminal words, such as blat, meaning “using illegal methods for procuring privileges,” or filon’, “an idler or slacker.” The incorporation of such terms into the camp’s daily vocabulary, the document states, “is a result of the corresponding phenomena becoming commonplace.” Everyone from the secret police to the prisoner himself, the order insists, must be vigilant to stamp out these kinds of practices, and the first step was to have the cultural and education department “wage a campaign to eliminate from the camp lexicon such words as… blat.” Anyone who used such words was, implicitly, encouraging these abuses. The heads of the Gulag believed that they could eliminate the illegal practices of the camps if only they could first eliminate the Thieves’ words which described them.53

Also mentioned in nearly every account that deals with the Thieves is their evocative traditional tattoos. Tattoos covered the bodies of the Thieves, and served a multitude of purposes, but they were generally intended to convey a message of some kind. The lexicographer Alexei Plutser-Sarno writes that “the tattoo-covered body of a vor v zakone (Thief-in-Law) is primarily a linguistic object.” He explains that language of the tattoos, along with the complex rules for interpreting them, resemble the Thieves’ language and have been transmitted through oral tradition. The first purpose of the tattoos is to identify the bearer as a Thief; Plutser-Sarno likens them to a military uniform. Not unlike the medals on a soldier’s jacket, these tattoos contain the Thief’s “service record,” a compilation of his successes, and even sometimes his

52 Shalamov, Kolyma Tales, 413.
failures. They also often contain a history of the Thief’s arrests and journeys within the Gulag system, a mark the Thief would often wear with a sort of rebellious pride. “Anyone not initiated into the secret meanings of Thieves’ tattoos takes them for a chaotic jumble of symbols,” Plutser-Sarno writes, but they are in fact a volumetric and multidimensional iconographical language all their own.

The range of subjects for the tattoos was almost incomprehensibly vast. Some tattoos were political in nature, depicting anti-Soviet imagery, anti-Fascist imagery, and some even pro-Fascist imagery. Others portrayed religious figures and scenes, saints and devils, playing cards, graphic sex acts or genitals, symbols of death and fate, prison symbols such as fences and razor wire, and the list goes on. Dyomin mentions that after being cheated out of all his money and clothes by a card swindler, he had an ace of clubs tattooed on his shoulder as a reminder of his oath never to play cards again. He says that he chose the ace of clubs because that was the card that had finalized his defeat, but Plutser-Sarno notes that, in tattoos depicting playing cards, the suit of clubs was a common symbol for the Thieves. Dyomin also describes a female Thief he met in Odessa bearing a tattoo on her thigh which read “Death to the cops, life everlasting to the thieves!” and another, across her lower belly, that said “Welcome!” Other tattoos bore words that acted as code, sometimes as acronyms with hidden meanings. For example, a tattoo of the word Bog, Russian for “God,” instead stood for budu opiat’ grabit’, or “I will rob again.” Similarly, another tattoo secretly defies attempts to reform its bearer, saying Mir, Russian for “peace,” but in fact standing for meniša izmenit rasstrel, or “I will be changed by shooting.” A third example given by Plutser-Sarno is a tattoo reading “NKVD,” which secretly stood for nichts ne krepke vorovskoi druzby, or “Nothing is stronger than Thieves’ friendship.” To the ignorant viewer, whether he be fellow prisoner or guard, many of these tattoos would appear to be either too vulgar to think on or simply meaningless, but between knowing Thieves these messages spoke volumes.

While often tattoos were applied to signify a Thief’s career or his great deeds, sometimes more shameful tattoos were applied as punishment, such as if the recipient had betrayed his fellow Thieves to the authorities or if he was the ‘passive’ partner in a homosexual relationship. These were applied against the recipient’s will, and at best would result in isolation from his fellow Thieves, but would frequently eventually get him killed.

Dyomin, 174.
Murray and Sorrell, 43.
Dyomin, 209.
Murray and Sorrell, 29.
Those with experience and talent in reading and making these tattoos enjoyed a high reputation in the Thieves’ world. The devices used to engrave the tattoos were extremely precious as they were very difficult to come by. It was usually made of parts from a mechanical or electric razor, and in the Thieves’ argot it was called many names, including “typewriter,” “dentist’s drill,” and “sewing machine.” The ink is especially difficult to make, often composed of soot or rubber melted down to a liquid, though, if these are not available, the Thieves frequently were able to find another way of honoring their traditions. This entire process, so often done within the confines of a prison cell or a labor camp barrack, demonstrates the uncanny inventiveness and creativity of the Thieves. “An experienced prisoner,” Dyomin writes, “is in fact as wily and resourceful as a beast at bay. He is hounded into bondage and stripped of his most elementary possessions. All the same, by circumventing every ban, he manages to get everything he needs.”

This tradition of tattoos which are meaningful in terms both of personal significance and in the sense of being a message and identifier to other Thieves has carried on to the present day, and it is still common to see professional criminals in Russia similarly adorned. Thusfar we have only discussed male Thieves, but, while the vast majority of Thieves do appear to have been men, it is clear from many accounts that a number of female Thieves also lived both within and without the camps. These women are widely reported as having been just as vicious and mean as their male counterparts. Ginzburg, on her way to Kolyma, reports being joined by a few hundred of these female Thieves, wondering if describing them as “human beings… is the right name for those appalling creatures, the dregs of the criminal underworld.” Immediately the Thieves began to terrorize and bully the political prisoners, happy to see that someone else was more hated by the Soviet justice system than they. The female Thieves experienced a culture that seems roughly equivalent to that of their male counterparts; upon meeting them, one Polish survivor who gives her name as Irina describes them as having the vocabulary of the Thieves and being covered in tattoos. “On their arms and backs they had [tattooed] indecent words,” she recalls, “and on their cheeks their lovers’ initials. One had ‘Stalin’ tattooed on her left shoulder and ‘Lenin’ on her right one, and a complicated design

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60 Murray and Sorrell, 31.
61 Dyomin, 15.
62 Ginzburg, 353-4.
depicting pigeons on her chest.”63 Most likely these were not the only aspects of Thief culture that were shared across gendered boundaries.

Dyomin also gives us a couple of glimpses into the lives of the female Thieves. He claims that, though some female Thieves involve themselves in occupations such as prostitution, which the Thieves’ world did not hold in high regard, those who avoid such work are considered “partners in work… [and] are treated with much greater respect.”64 Similarly, of the female Thieves, Shalamov writes that their world "acknowledges only two types of women: thieves…and prostitutes,” confirming that the latter enjoyed much less respect among Thieves.65 While he was ill from malnutrition, Dyomin spent some time in a camp at Tauisk populated mostly by women and invalid men. He records a run-in he had with some female Thieves who introduce themselves by pressing a knife blade to his throat. When they led him back to their barracks, he “realized it was a den of female thieves.” In describing it, he presents a picture almost identical to that of the male Thieves; a table in the center of the room bearing “glittering bottles of vodka, a steaming pot of chifir [a drink commonly enjoyed among Thieves], and a scattered deck of cards.” The only difference he noted was that makeshift curtains had been hung over the windows. The female Thieves had colorful nicknames just like any other Thieves, the two that Dyomin names being called Satan and Cigarette Butt, and the leader of the female Thieves bore a deep scar from her mouth to her ear, suggesting that she had the experience to back up the implicit threat of the knife on his throat.66

There is even some evidence that the female Thieves participated in the Bitches War. This would make sense; as part of the same criminal underworld as the men, they would have been held to the same Thieves’ Law. Conquest mentions two female Bitches who acted as commandants in the camps, who were “hellishly hard and bad…and extremely well-dressed.

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63 Irina’s story is recorded in Anonymous (with preface by T.S. Eliot), *The Dark Side of the Moon* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1947), 162.
64 Dyomin, 177.
66 Dyomin appears to have undermined somewhat his claim that female Thieves are treated with respect, however, because, though he notes that one female Thief has the nickname Cigarette Butt, he continues to refer to her by her given name, Alyona. Contrast this with his treatment of his fellow male Thieves, to whom he almost invariably refers by their criminal nickname. This may hint at an underlying disparity of respect of which Dyomin himself may not have been entirely aware. Shalamov may support this idea; he writes with contempt for the treatment of female Thieves by their male counterparts, how they were used “only to satisfy the criminal’s animal craving, to be the butt of his crude jokes and the victim of public beatings.” This image does not quite synch up with that which Dyomin presents, but, considering the passionate hatred which Shalamov held for the Thieves, it is possible that the truth lay somewhere in the middle. Dyomin, 282-4; Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, 419.
when out of uniform.” He also notes a female Bitch who served as a labor team leader, and who was considered “particularly praiseworthy since, after in effect commandeering someone’s woolen jacket,” would put the jacket’s original owner on light work for a few weeks to make up for the theft. Conquest even lays out some terminology which appears to have been unique to the female Thieves; they called the Bitches by the contemptuous name rozochki, meaning “little roses,” whereas the Thieves called themselves fiūalochki, which Conquest translates as “violets.” Though nearly all accounts of the Bitches War come from the perspective of the male Thieves, it is clear that it was far from unknown among their female contemporaries.

**The Lead-Up to War**

The Thieves-in-Law were fierce predators, often recorded eating the food or wearing the coats they’d stolen from weaker prisoners. It was most often in the political prisoners that the Thieves found their prey, as Martin J. Bollinger writes, “stealing their few possessions and in some cases engaging in mass violence” against the politicals. They were fairly easy targets, usually being educated people of an intellectual background, and generally lacked the strength or ruthlessness it took to stand against the hardened criminals. This predatory relationship has almost certainly colored what understanding historians have had of the Thieves; just about every Gulag survivor memoir was written by one of these political prisoners, and the bitterness they felt toward their predators seeps through deep and thick. Evgenia Ginzburg, for instance, described them as “appalling creatures, the dregs of the criminal world: murderers, sadists, and experts of every kind of sexual perversion.” Janusz Bardach recounts a run-in he had with a Thief who intimidated him with threats and harsh, vulgar language: “He squatted and peered at my face. ‘You look at me when I piss, but don’t open your mouth or I’ll piss in it.’ He let out a high-pitched snort and looked at his friends back on the bed board. I tried to ignore him but was growing tenser by the moment, afraid of what I might do if he hit or touched me.” The Thieves beat the politicals, stole from them, and forced them to perform the Thieves’ manual labor on their behalf.

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67 Conquest, 183.
68 Martin J. Bollinger, *Stalin’s Slave Ships: Kolyma, the Gulag Fleet, and the Role of the West* (Naval Institute Press, 2008), 49.
69 Ginzburg, 353–4.
71 In an interview on the Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives website, Nadezhda Joffe, herself a Gulag survivor, recalls how the prisoners refused to work, often forcing the other prisoners to fill the daily production...
The Thieves were not the only ones in the camps with a violent eye toward the political prisoners. During this period, guards and administrators first began to use the Thieves to their own ends, turning a blind eye to their brutality, and even actively encouraging it. Shalamov recalls an instance where the Thieves were called in by camp administrators for the purpose of dealing with a group of old Trotskyists; “the Thieves killed and beat the helpless old men,” he writes. Solzhenitsyn agrees, writing that the camp administration encouraged this predatory behavior: “the Thieves were egged on against the [politicals], permitted to plunder them without any obstacles.” They became something like an uncommissioned and unchecked police force, allowed the freedom to do what they would to the politicals. Stories of this sort of tone abound, and with this power dynamic, the Thieves-in-Law were able to stay on top of the politicals in the Gulag camps, and the guards and administrators laid the foundation of the Bitches War.


73 This account of Thieves acting with the tacit, and sometimes explicit, approval of camp authorities initially appears to be contrary to the Thieves’ Law, as they seem to be cooperating. While it is possible that these accounts refer to some form of Bitches or another, more likely this was one of countless slight deviations in the Law which are observed all over the Soviet Union, this one probably having been justified by the fact that this was something the Thieves wanted to do anyway. Solzhenitsyn, 3:126.
VARLAM SHALAMOV TELLS the story of a doctor on call at a Gulag hospital’s emergency room. He entered the emergency room just as the nursing staff carried in a new patient. The man’s skin was covered in the distinctive tattoos of a professional criminal, and punctured with fresh, bleeding wounds that painted the sterile floor a deep red. The doctor knew just from looking at it that the blood would leave a stain. The wounds were small, perhaps inflicted by a knife, or a nail; the doctor had seen this kind of thing before. He could tell from the man’s paling cheeks and sluggish movements that his internal injuries were even more severe.

A nearby NKVD officer, hastily taking notes on a sheet of paper, demanded to know who the patient was before he could receive medical treatment. “Who are you?” he shouted, kneeling beside the wounded man. “Who?”

The wounded man seemed to understand the question. His eyes fluttered open, and he opened his parched lips. “Su-u-ka,” he exhaled, and lost consciousness.74

In 1948, the power dynamic among the prisoners in the Gulag underwent a subtle yet critical shift. The USSR Council of Ministers issued an order for the creation of “special” Gulag camps intended almost exclusively for holding political prisoners.75 In the following months, these politicals were emptied from the “regular” camps and sent to these “special” camps. Solzhenitsyn seems to believe that this was done to separate “the socially acceptable thieves and

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delinquents from the socially irredeemable [politics].” Of course, if the protection of the Thieves was Stalin’s goal, the policy shift was a colossal failure. The Thieves-in-Law faced a new problem; now, with the sudden absence of the political prisoners, preying almost exclusively on their defenselessness was no longer an option. A slow-burning power struggle began to brew as divisions developed and sharpened among the Thieves, leading to conflicts within their ranks. Of these conflicts, the Bitches War was the most widespread, fierce, and deadly, and camp administrators and guards used this to their advantage. “It takes a thief to catch a thief,” says the old proverb, recounted by Solzhenitsyn, and this was exactly the administration’s plan. Using the intense pressure of the in-fighting, the camp officials were able to turn some of the Thieves into allies.

Sometimes they accomplished this by means of persuasion; as Applebaum describes it, “the method was straight-forward – privileges and special treatment were offered to those professional criminals – the Thieves-in-Law – who would abandon their ‘law’ and collaborate with the authorities.” These privileges often involved easier labor assignments than what most prisoners received, and occasionally even positions of moderate control within the camps, such as kitchen workers, barracks supervisors, labor team leaders, etc. They took these jobs to avoid the hard labor common to the Gulag; “anything to prevent them from being sent to work at the hard labour sites, where… life expectancy was short.” The were also frequently given the first pick of food rations, taking the best morsels and leaving the rest for the other prisoners. Other Thieves began cooperating with the administration in response to a decree made by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet on 6 July 1947 assigning mandatory twenty or twenty-five year sentences for theft and robbery. A few others were turned by accepting the offer of freedom in return for serving in a World War Two penal battalion.

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76 Solzhenitsyn, 3:34.
77 Solzhenitsyn, 3:422.
78 Applebaum, 469.
79 Barnes, 175.
80 Baldaev, 199.
81 Buca, 181.
82 The establishment of World War Two penal battalions, called Shtrafbaty, was ordered by Stalin in his Order No. 227. Shalamov writes of many Thieves who “were taken into the Army and sent to the front.” They were very effective, he says; “their natural tendency toward risk-taking, determination, and audacity made them valuable soldiers.” Konstantin Rokossovsky, a prominent Red Army officer, commanded the 16th Army, which was the first Soviet army group comprised entirely of these penal battalions. Shalamov says that the Rokossovsky Army gained notoriety specifically because of the criminal element within its ranks. That said, it does seem that the majority of
The Thieves who were converted in this manner and agreed to cooperate with the camp administration were called the *suki*, or Bitches, a spiteful epithet given to them by their former-fellow Thieves. Prisoners who cooperated with and worked for the prison administration received the fierce hostility of the Thieves, and none more so than the Bitches. That said, they often enjoyed relative freedom of movement, and sometimes even a degree of authority in the everyday affairs of the camp. One Gulag memoirist, Lev Kopelev, claimed that these converted Thieves actually had immense power over the lives of their fellow prisoners. “Inside the camp,” he writes, “in the barracks, the yurts, the dining room, the bathhouse, the ‘streets,’ – our lives were under the direct control of the ‘trusties.’” He even describes these cooperative prisoners investigating a prisoner-on-prisoner murder, which, legally, should have been investigated by camp authorities. In fact it was, in the sense that these prisoners were camp authorities in some measure. Using the positions of influence they gained through their cooperation, these converted Thieves could more easily ensure their own safety, while still being able to prey on those below them.

Persuasion was not always enough to turn a Thief, however, and when that failed, the guards and administrators would often resort to threats, intimidation, and violence. Edward Buca mentions a prisoner named Komar who refused to perform any labor. “They hung him up by his feet,” Buca writes. “When they finally took him down, and he refused to work again, he was strung up again. After a few months of occasional torture like this, Komar broke down and became a suka.” Alexander Dolgun, an American who survived the Gulag, quoted a Thief boss named Valentin Intellighent who described this coercive practice thusly: “They went into the camps and began to terrorize some of the less staunch *urki* [a common word for “Thief”] by violence and threats… until they had some of the poor guys so cowed they’d do anything… They forced some of these *urki* to do jobs that were absolutely against the code of the underworld… Anything that helped the prison… No self-respecting *urka* will ever do that… So they forced them to break their own unwritten laws… Forced them to be a foreman in a work project.

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83 “Trusties” was a colloquial name for prisoners who were entrusted by the administration with various low-level positions of power and authority in the camp. Trusties were often also Bitches, and the two appear to have been virtually indistinguishable in terms of the Thieves’ reaction to them. Lev Kopelev, *To Be Preserved Forever* (Lippincott, 1977), 234-7.

84 Buca, 180.
Absolutely taboo… Accept a job like that and you’ve practically committed suicide.” Regardless of whether it was by persuasion or coercion, the Thief was now a Bitch. He no longer had the right, as far as the Thieves’ law was concerned, to steal from other prisoners, or to protection from other Thieves when they were in danger; in fact, the faithful Thieves were almost encouraged to be violent toward the Bitches.\textsuperscript{85} Whether out of opportunism or cowardice, they had turned on their own laws by collaborating with the Gulag guards, and according to the unwritten law of the Thieves they were to be killed for their crimes against criminals. “Anytime a \textit{suka} is discovered,” the boss Valentin told Dolgun, “he usually loses his head.”\textsuperscript{86}

The division between the Bitches and the Thieves was not only fierce and violent, but actually surprisingly wide-spread throughout the whole Gulag system.\textsuperscript{87} Reports of clashes between the two groups pop up everywhere from Kolyma in northeastern Siberia to Karaganda in Kazakhstan. Frequent prisoner transfers allowed the conflict, referred to as the \textit{Such ‘i a Voina}, or the Bitches War, to expand into all corners of the Soviet Union. An account written by Mikhail Dyomin, one of precious few thieves who wrote anything at all, records that fighting between bitches and thieves was “all over the place.” A thief nicknamed the Goblin claimed that “half of every camp point is bitches… Bitches in Sasuman and Korkodon, too. And in Markovo and Anyuisk. And all along the main route. They’ve got their dens all over!”\textsuperscript{88} Kopelev describes a battle he witnessed which occurred between “two newly-arrived groups – a bunch of thieves and a crew of ‘bitches’ who had tangled in another camp… Sasha [Kopelev’s friend who was also a bitch and a trustie] gave [him] a lively account of how the combatants hacked away at each other with axes, knives, and bits of glass, and bashed each other’s heads in with bricks and shovels.” Sasha said that things were more dangerous in the camp than they’d been at the front in the second world war. “They tell us to maintain order,” Sasha lamented, speaking of the guards he worked for as a trustie. “They let us have sticks, but what good are sticks against knives, axes, [and] crowbars?”\textsuperscript{89}

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\textsuperscript{85} Kopelev, 217. 
\textsuperscript{86} Dolgun, 148. 
\textsuperscript{87} While the Thieves-in-Law and the Bitches were by far the most prominent factions in this divisive conflict, Solzhenitsyn also mentions several others who were active at the time: “There were also the No-Limiters, the Makhrovtsy, the Uporovtsy, the Pirovarovtsy, the Red [Caps], the \textit{Fuli Nam!}, the Crowbar-Belted – and that is not the end of them.” Solzhenitsyn, 5:243. 
\textsuperscript{88} Dyomin, 241. 
\textsuperscript{89} Kopelev, 244-5. 
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There are countless examples from Gulag records and memoirs of Bitches and Thieves clashing with violent, and often lethal, results. Danzig Baldaev depicts one instance where a Bitch who had betrayed the Thieves’ code was executed with a hacksaw in the camp utilities yard. Solzhenitsyn writes of several such accounts. In Vorkuta, he writes, “everyone went around with knives. The bitches and the thieves cut each other up every day.” One Bitch was brought to the camp on the orders of the administration to take care of unruly Thieves; “the very first night he and his gang knife three thieves and things began to quiet down a little.” While the Thieves sometimes gained the upper hand, the general trend of the war leaned toward the Bitches. Dyomin recounts a Thief who burst into his barracks one night, dropped a bloodied axe on the floor, and announces “Boys … I’ve just axed one of the bitches. Right in their own barracks, in front of everybody.” He was arrested later that night, taken to a punishment cell, and found dead in solitary the next morning, his body run through and mangled, his eyes gouged out.

Shalamov recounts one instance where a leader of Bitches, whom Shalamov refers to as korol’ka, or “king,” attempted to forcibly convert a number of Thieves. Forcing a group of prisoners to strip down, he identified the Thieves by their characteristic tattoos, and then ordered his men to kick them, and beat them with truncheons and brass knuckles. Then, in a bizarre ritual which Shalamov suggests may have been inspired by the novels of Sir Walter Scott, which were popular in the camps, the “king” of the Bitches insisted that the Thieves kiss his knife as a way of being “knighted,” or converted into the ranks of the Bitches. “Kiss the knife,” the king repeated, “kiss the knife.” Some agreed, and were considered “accepted into the new faith,” losing their rights as Thieves-in-Law in the criminal world forever. Those who refused to convert were beaten a little more and then killed, “painted with knives” by their former comrades. This illustrates not only the dramatic nature of the conflict and its participants, but also the enmity between the two factions, and the devotion with which some Thieves clung to their code, even unto death.

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90 Baldaev, 137.
91 Solzhenitsyn, 2: 422.
92 The fact that he was in solitary confinement at the time of his murder suggests that someone in camp administration, presumably a guard, let the Bitches in to do their grisly work. Dyomin, 316.
93 This religious terminology is not surprising; Dyomin records several instances of Thieves using similar terms to refer to their own code and ways. For instance, on Thief known as the Redhead describes a Bitch as “anyone who renounced our faith and betrays his own kind.” Dyomin, 23.
Other records of the Bitches War have survived in the form of official camp documentation. Historian Steve Barnes notes that records from the Karlag camp describe numerous clashes between the Thieves and two distinct splinter groups of Bitches. In February 1950, a Thief killed a Bitch, and, in attempting to prevent the murder, a guard accidentally shot a camp employee. A document from May of that year refers to several so-called “bandit murders,” one of which took place in a medical clinic, leaving four prisoners dead (though it is unclear whether it was the Bitches or the Thieves doing the killing). Another incident that same month saw two Thieves beating a Bitch to death with a piece of iron. “At the time,” Barnes writes, “the murdered prisoner was helping camp employees in the barracks get the other prisoners out for work. When the two bandits began their attack, the camp employees fled, leaving their prisoner assistant at the mercy of the attackers.” The Bitch was killed, and the camp employees were reprimanded for “cowardice.”

The horror of the Bitches War helps to clarify and expose the motivation of camp guards and administrators on the ground level of operations. While there were certainly some who truly believed in the Gulag’s commission to the ideological re-education of its prisoners, reforming them into proper Soviet citizens in keeping with Soviet ideology, that is not the picture overwhelmingly presented in these records. This is evidenced by the simple fact that, once a Thief was turned into a Bitch, the guards had no problem with them. As long as they were willing to perform some kind of labor, whether that was informing on fellow prisoners, supervising labor projects, or working small miscellaneous jobs, the guards were not concerned with what else they did. To be clear, the Bitches certainly had not been ideologically re-educated, made into proper Soviet citizens; those who lived in the camps with the Bitches recall them being just as nasty and violent as any Thief-in-Law. The prisoner Anatoliĭ Zhigulin wrote that the Bitches “were indeed truly terrible for ordinary prisoners… They behaved like beasts toward ordinary workers, fleeced them of their possessions, took their clothes down to the last thread. Bitches were not only informers: they would also carry out murder in accordance with the camp directors. The lives of prisoners living in camps run by Bitches was very difficult indeed.” A. V. Gorbatov, a former Red Army general sent to the Gulag for alleged political crimes, noted that at one point a pair of trusties approached him and stole his boots out from under his head.

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95 Barnes, 177.
96 Anatoliĭ Zhigulin, Chernye Kamni (Knizhnaya Palata, 1989), 135.
(he’d been using them as a pillow). “One of them hit me hard on the chest,” Gorbatov writes, “and then on the head and said with a leer: ‘Look at him – sells me his boots days ago, pockets the cash, and then refuses to hand them over!’” The two walked away laughing, the boots in hand.  

Solzhenitsyn also considered the Bitches to be nearly indistinguishable from the Thieves in terms of their violence and cruelty. “No matter how much I saw of one and the other,” he writes, “I never could see that one rabble was nobler than the other. [They] knocked gold teeth out of Estonians’ mouths with a poker… drowned Lithuanians in the toilet for refusing to turn over a food parcel… [They] used to plunder prisoners sentenced to death… No, you’ll not get fruit from a stone, nor good from a [former] Thief.” The only apparent difference between the Thieves and the Bitches was the Bitches’ willingness to work, which helped the camp meet its production quota, and it was they who received comparative support from the camp administration. These prisoners were not reformed in any ideological sense, converted to socialism and remade in the proper Soviet image; the only sense in which they were reformed is that now they were helping the camp’s bottom line. This was enough to convince them to support one side over the other in a conflict in which, ideologically, they ought to have suppressed both sides.

Furthermore, there are accounts that suggest that guards and camp employees themselves seem to have played an active, or at least implicit, role in the Bitches War, such that Barnes writes, “in a number of murders the role of the camp employee may have been more sinister. Many cases of prisoner-on-prisoner murder were facilitated by camp employee incompetence so blatant that it may indicate complicity in the murders themselves.” In February 1951, for instance, prisoners Reshtanenko and Ostrikova arrived in a new camp and were placed in a zone

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98 Solzhenitsyn, 2:438. In some memoirs whose authors did not interact as much with the Thieves, it is common for memoirists to describe “criminals,” who, judging by their description, were almost certainly among the Bitches. For instance, Ginzburg mentions a criminal nicknamed Goldilocks who dressed in nice clothes and stood alongside the commanding officer, helping to decide what work each prisoner would be given for the day. Ginzburg uses the term “criminal” to describe this prisoner, but the rest of the description suggests that this must have been a Bitch. Ginzburg, however, does not appear to have noticed the distinction between the two. Ginzburg, 302.
99 In fact, further evidence that ideological re-education was not the reason the Bitches were favored over the Thieves can be found in the fact that at least some of the Thieves considered themselves to be loyal Soviet citizens. Valentin Intelligenth, the Thief boss who took Alexander Dolgun under his wing said that “somehow the MVD consider us enemies of the people, like the fascists. We’re loyal Soviets. We don’t want to overthrow the system, for God’s sake. We just happen to be in a different field of endeavor.” Dolgun, 147.
100 Barnes, 177.
alongside other prisoners with whom they had known and had a hostile relationship in a previous camp. They even carried documentation signed by their previous camp’s administration saying that it would be unnecessarily dangerous to place them with these hostile prisoners, but this warning was ignored. Their enemies murdered them within four days; Reshtanenko was strangled with a sheet and Ostrikova was beaten to death with a gridiron. Barnes even notes that the head of this camp was aware that many prisoners possessed gridirons as early as two days before the murder took place, but did not bother to perform a search.¹⁰¹

Baldaev writes that on numerous occasions he witnessed camp authorities “deliberately place criminals of opposite ‘suits’ [Bitches and Thieves] together in the same cell. Packed with two or three times more inmates than they could hold, the fighting in these common cells was fatal. Once the administration decided there were enough dead and seriously injured, they would intervene, taking the bodies to the mortuary and the wounded to the prison hospital.” He claims that the motivation for doing this was “to reduce the quantity of inmates,” many of whom were Thieves and did not contribute to the production in the camps.¹⁰² He claims that he saw the results of clashes such as this one, wherein the guards and administrators were directly responsible, in camps at Irkutsk, Krasnoyarsk, Omsk, Kirov, and others, and that it was not uncommon for them to result in “up to a hundred injured or dead.”¹⁰³ In a similar instance of negligence, if it can even still be termed “negligence,” Buca writes that when one group of Thieves arrived at a new camp, a gang of Bitches “moved in, whistling and shouting, beating, kicking and clubbing their victims… As the guards leaned from their towers to watch the spectacle, corpses and near-corpses, stripped of their clothing, were thrown on to the open ground.”¹⁰⁴ Many memoirs written by Gulag survivors contain similar accounts wherein camp guards tolerate, overlook, and even encourage such violence.¹⁰⁵

This sort of lethal inaction was not exclusively directed at the Thieves-in-Law; Barnes notes the murder of Alexei Gerasimovich Podsokhin, a Karlag prisoner aligned with one faction

¹⁰¹ Reshtanenko and Ostrikova were actually female Thieves, and if their murderers were as well (as the fact that they had interacted in a previous camp would suggest), this is one of few recorded cases of female Thieves who had become Bitches. Barnes, 178. Original document located in AOTsPSI (Arkhiivnyi Otdel Tsentra Pravovoĭ Statistiki I Informatsii pri Prokurature Karagandinskoĭ Oblasti) f. Karaganda, sv. 1 s. pr., ll. 164-165.

¹⁰² Solzhenitsyn mentions a secret NKVD order circulated that effectively instructed the administrators to “reduce the number of prisoners.” This order was issued in 1938, some years before the time frame in question here, but it does seem to establish a precedent for actions so motivated. Solzhenitsyn, 3:126.

¹⁰³ Baldaev, 199-200.

¹⁰⁴ Buca, 180.

¹⁰⁵ Bollinger, 49.
of Bitches. Podsokhin had been caught trying to escape the camp, and as punishment was transferred to a cell full of Thieves, where he was strangled.\textsuperscript{106} The aforementioned account given by Baldaev about guards placing prisoners in opposing ‘suites’ suggests that the Bitches were occasionally victims in those situations, not just the Thieves. That said, the Bitches were supported by the camp administration; in fact, Solzhenitsyn writes that at times the camp custodial staff was cut back to next to nothing, replaced almost entirely by Bitches, who were “more effective than any custodial staff... [because] there was no prohibition on their beatings.”\textsuperscript{107} So, while the Thieves-in-Law were not the only targets of the Gulag guards’ inaction (or, occasionally, action), they were by far its most common victims. This is the real instructive point of the Bitches War for historians; it presents two groups of prisoners, the Bitches and the Thieves, who are discernably different in only one respect: the Bitches were willing to cooperate with the camp administration in a way that helps meet production quotas, and the Thieves were not. This was not a matter of ideological re-education; the Bitches were every bit as vile, dishonest, and murderous as the Thieves. The guards supported the Bitches over the Thieves, in some cases even actively aiding the murder of the Thieves. This is not the behavior of people interested in the ideological re-education of prisoners, in rebuilding them in the image of the Soviet man. Regardless of what the intent of the architects of the Gulag might have been, the guards and administrators on the ground level were concerned, before anything else, with meeting their production quotas, and they were more than willing to do away with anyone who made that more difficult.

\textbf{End of the Bitches War}

How exactly the Bitches War came to an end is still somewhat unclear, but it is apparent that it was devastating for the Thieves-in-Law. “The [Thieves’] society was almost entirely destroyed by the end of the 1950s,” writes Federico Varese, as a direct result of the Bitches War.\textsuperscript{108} Specific numbers of how many Thieves survived the conflict are hard to come by, but some have tried to make an estimate. Gurov stated that by the mid-1950s, only about three hundred Thieves remained in Soviet prisons, and by the end of that decade they had all but

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{106} Barnes, 177.
\bibitem{107} Solzhenitsyn, 3:126.
\bibitem{108} Varese, 165.
\end{thebibliography}
disappeared. A political dissident named Bukovskii, who served his time in the 1970s, claimed that only a few dozen of them survived in the whole Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{109} What happened to these prisoners, to make their numbers decline so rapidly? The answers remain foggy, but there are a few hints. In the early 1950s, Varese writes, Gulag populations were rising, and many of these new prisoners were not so easy for the Thieves (or the Bitches, for that matter) to oppress as the politicals had been. Buca tells the story of Fyodor Tshaban, a Red Army officer who was captured by the Germans in the Second World War. “Tshaban was a loyal Communist,” Buca reports, “and after he was freed [from a German POW camp] he never thought of doing anything but returning to the Soviet Union.” Upon reaching the Soviet border, he was greeted by friendly-faced Soviet officers and boarded a train with thousands of other liberated POWs like himself. “Among the returning soldiers there was a feeling of enthusiasm and freedom” as they rode homeward. They stopped several times on their journey to switch to separate trains bound for their specific destinations, and everything appeared to be going quite well.

One morning, however, Tshaban and his companions disembarked from their train under armed guard, “were told they were under arrest,” and were stripped of all their personal belongings. They were given no further explanation; just a quick “trial” and a sentence of twenty-five years in the Gulag. “This,” Buca writes, concluding the story, “is how thousands and thousands of Tshabans returned to the Soviet Union at the end of the war.”\textsuperscript{110} These were the sorts of people pouring into the Gulag now, “instead of the meek ‘Trostkyites’ of the earlier period,” Conquest writes. “The new intake consisted of hard-bitten soldiers, fully prepared to stick together and fight back, and equally tough Ukrainians and other nationalists.”\textsuperscript{111} The Thieves’ numbers were not being replenished well enough, either; “they had no rising generation behind them, no reinforcements in sight, no one eagerly tiptoeing after them.”\textsuperscript{112} They were dying off faster than they could replenish their ranks, a major contributing factor to their eventual downfall.

Another possible explanation for the end of the Bitches War comes from Baldaev, whose service as a Soviet prison guard began in 1948. This was the same year that the Council of Ministers ordered the political prisoners removed from the regular camps, effectively starting the

\textsuperscript{109} Vladimir Bukovskii, \textit{To Build a Castle: My Life as a Dissenter} (London: Andre Deutsch, 1978), 246.
\textsuperscript{110} Buca does mention that Tshaban was eventually killed by a Bitch. Buca, 184.
\textsuperscript{111} Conquest, 86.
\textsuperscript{112} Solzhenitsyn, 5:71.
Bitches War. While working as a guard at a prison in Leningrad, Baldaev received this account from two friends and coworkers, Vanya Mikhailov and Sasha Fiodorov, who had also served as guards at the Gulag camps. They explained that, as has been mentioned earlier, the production quotas for the camps were set according to total population. This caused a great deal of stress to the administrators because a non-negligible portion of their prisoners, the Thieves-in-Law, refused to work, which made it more difficult to meet those quotas. “Many senior camp chiefs complained to the heads of the Gulag and MVD” about this situation, going directly to Lavrentiy Beria, who was then the minister in charge of the MVD. In response to this problem, in the summer of 1948, Beria “issued an order to move [the Thieves-in-Law] to seven camps in the Sverdlovsk (Ekaterinburg) region.” Beria knew the mentality of the Thieves-in-Law, and expected that pooling that many of them together would inevitably lead them to fight and kill one another, a prediction which would prove “deadly accurate.” The camp administrators obeyed his order gladly.

According to the story relayed by Baldaev, his friends Mikhailov and Fiodorov were both stationed at one of these seven camps, guarding it from tall observation towers. “They were told it contained especially dangerous thieves and criminal ‘authorities,’” Baldaev writes, “who had been imprisoned there to help them correct their ways.” Here we see the camp administrators still clinging somewhat to rhetoric about the ideological re-education of prisoners, but there was not much in the way of re-education happening at this particular camp. Unlike other camps in the Gulag system, these did not have production quotas, and the prisoners were not required to do any work. Soon the settling of scores began, as the administrators knew it would; camp-wide fighting broke out for leadership of the camp. “Criminals from Sverdlovsk attacked those from Chelyabinsk, while criminals from Irkutsk attacked those from Vorkuta,” and other similarly regionally-based conflicts raged between gangs from different parts of the Soviet Union, until the killing reached a level Baldaev describes as a “massacre.”

All through this horror and bloodshed, the administration did not respond. When a fire broke out in the canteen, which burned their barracks and a food depot, the fire brigade was not dispatched. When the prisoners began to starve, because their food had been burnt, driving them to hunting and cannibalizing each other, the guards were ordered not to act, but to observe from their towers. The closest thing to an intervening influence they displayed was a special team of forty prisoners from a neighboring camp who were sent in to load the corpses onto trucks and
haul them out of the camp to be buried. The wounded were left where they had fallen, to be carted out after they died. The whole process lasted until December of 1949, and all told, Baldaev recounts, about one hundred Thieves survived this process, out of the 20-25,000 who were moved to these Sverdlovsk camps. He is also careful to note that no Bitch was sent to these camps; their cooperation with the camp administration spared them.\footnote{Baldaev, 200-201.}

It is important to note that there are some concerns within this story for the historian. For one thing, the number of dead Baldaev reports is almost certainly hugely inflated. There appear to be no direct references to this event in other Gulag memoirs, and if the numbers he reports were accurate, that would be all but impossible. The timeline also seems a bit short; if the Bitches War really began in earnest in 1948, as most sources seem to suggest, then for the Thieves to nearly all be dead by the end of 1949 seems like it would not be enough time for the Bitches War to have become the noteworthy conflict that it was. In addition, because Baldaev’s book was written many years after the events described therein occurred, it would not be surprising for him to have smudged and exaggerated certain details. That is, after all, the greatest difficulty with using memoir as a source; the veil of time hangs over old memories, obscuring them somewhat from the present reader.

That said, the account is not without support of any kind. For instance, it would seem to corroborate the claim offered by Varese and Gurov that the Thieves-in-Law were almost completely eliminated by the middle of the 1950s. Igor Kuznetsov appears to reference the special camps for Thieves, or something very similar to them; he mentions that “a special camp was created near Sverdlovsk where almost all the Thieves were rounded up,” and that many of these Thieves ended up starving.\footnote{Igor Kuznetsov, \textit{NKVD-MVD: gody 30-50-e, gody 30-e}, last accessed 9 December 2016, \url{http://www.belvpo.com/ru/32803.html}} The Ukrainian journalist Aleksandr Kuchinsky wrote a history of organized crime in Russia which dealt with the Bitches War, and in it he also mentions “seven camps in Nizhny Tagil,” which is located in the Sverdlovsk Oblast. He also discusses “experimental camps” set up near Sverdlovsk specifically for Thieves, which “invoked disgust and hatred” in the Thieves, saying that “therein reigned chaos.”\footnote{Aleksandr Kuchinsky, \textit{Prestupniki i prestupleniya zakony prestupnogo mira Pakhany. Avtoritety. Vory v zakone}, last accessed 11 December 2016, \url{http://coollib.com/b/150704/read}.}
Some Gulag memoirists even make references to camps that resemble the one from Baldaev’s story. For example, Buca writes of a similar-sounding camp at Istvestkovy which he calls “a ‘terminal’ camp for die-hard [Thieves].” He goes on to say that the only ones who survived this camp were those who became Bitches “by kissing the stiletto and killing their former comrades,” a ritual that seems to recall Shalamov’s tale of the Bitch king.\textsuperscript{116} Dyomin also reports being personally sent, as a Thief, to a camp where, as another Thief put it, “ninety-nine weep for each man that laughs.” In this camp, unnamed in the text, the administration never interfered in the prisoners’ business, nor imposed any labor quotas on them. When disputes between the Thieves and the administration did arise, guards on the watchtowers raked their machine guns over the camp until crowds dispersed. Of the effect this had on the society of the Thieves, Dyomin says, “the den fell apart. The traditional ties were destroyed. Mutual enmity and fights that often led to bloodshed were common, everyday occurrences.”\textsuperscript{117} These accounts are, of course, not sufficient evidence to say that these events transpired exactly as Baldaev’s friends said they did, but it does appear to be well within the realm of possibility. These accounts certainly seem to paint a picture of a Gulag administration, from the ground level all the way to the top, that was much more concerned with meeting production quotas than with the ideological re-education of its prisoners. At any rate, further research into this question is certainly warranted; if the events described by Baldaev occurred at even a tenth the scale of what he reports, this discovery would fundamentally alter historians’ characterization of the Stalinist Gulag.

Reflections on the Bitches War

The Bitches War was an unprecedentedly bloody and violent conflict in one of the most bloody and violent institutions of human history. It clearly colored in an indelible fashion the lives of those who witnessed it; nearly every Gulag memoirist mentions the way that the Bitches and Thieves affected their experience to some degree or another. These effects were not always negative, either; Alexander Dolgun won the respect and protection of the Thieves by beating up one of the lower-ranking criminals.\textsuperscript{118} In an interview with Applebaum, Marlen Korallov, who

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{116} Buca, 179.
\item \textsuperscript{117} Dyomin, 358.
\item \textsuperscript{118} He also recounted to them stories of classic literature, which many Gulag memoirists agree was a beloved pastime of the Thieves-in-Law, and several political prisoners survived because of their literary knowledge.
\end{itemize}
had been a political prisoner, describes how he was also noticed by a Thief boss because of a fistfight, and invited to take a respected seat in the barracks. “The camp understood,” Korallov said, “if I become part of the troika around Nikola [the boss], then I become part of the camp elite… all attitudes to me changed instantly.”\textsuperscript{119} That said, of course, the vast majority of prisoner and guard interactions with the Thieves and the Bitches War were violent and destructive. Lev Razgon, echoing the sentiments of so many other memoirists, summarizes both “castes” as “cold-blooded killers, vicious rapists, and organized robbers.”\textsuperscript{120} Shalamov clearly harbored a hatred for them; he says that the Thieves “are not human,” and that the evil acts they committed in the camps were “insurmountable.”\textsuperscript{121} It was a bitterness that many prisoners never got over.

The Bitches War is also incredibly telling about the experiences of guards in the camps. Whether Baldaev’s version of the Bitches War’s end is accurate or not, the fact that these guards considered the account believable means that it lined up with their experience of the Gulag. The relative support that the guards and camp administrators gave to the Bitches, and their antagonism of the Thieves, makes clear where their interests really lay. They were not concerned with the ideological re-education of their prisoners nearly so much as they were with meeting their production quotas. This motivation was most strong, most prevalent, at the ground level, because that is where the institution of the Gulag most interacted with the criminal underworld, but there is some evidence that this attitude rose all the way to the highest levels of the Gulag. In the end, whatever the ideological motivations of those who administered Soviet justice through the Gulag, for those imprisoned there the camps were not the “schools of labor” allegedly envisioned by Feliks Dzherzhinsky.\textsuperscript{122} Instead, the Bitches War, engineered and encouraged by the guards and administration, turned the Gulag camps into an extermination chamber for the Thieves-in-Law. At this point, it was not about re-education, but eradication for the sake of meeting production quotas.

\textsuperscript{119} Applebaum, 283.
\textsuperscript{120} Lev Razgon, \textit{True Stories} (Dana Point, California: Ardis Publishers, 1997), 184.
\textsuperscript{121} Varlam Shalamov, \textit{Kolyma Tales}, 411.
\textsuperscript{122} \textit{Istorichesky Arkhiv}, no. 1, 1958, p. 6-11.
“Is the world any different from what it once was?” So asks the interviewer in Alexander Gentelev’s documentary film Ganavim Ba Hok, which is to say, Thieves By Law.

“No, no, no, no, no,” comes the immediate response from Leonid Bilunov, a modern-day professional criminal who has agreed to be interviewed. “I don’t think it’s that different.” Likening his own experiences in prison to those of the Thieves-in-Law of the Stalinist period, he continues. “If someone with a particular tattoo arrived in prison, everyone realized who he was. Each tattoo has enormous significance. It’s actually that person’s ID. It describes what he is, who he is, his very essence.”

The interviewer indicates the extensive tattoos covering Bilunov’s arms. “What does your tattoo mean?”

“It means,” Bilunov answers, “I’m not loyal to people who collaborate with prison authorities.”

In the years following the rapid collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia saw a swift and dramatic rise in the activity of its criminal underground. With the fall of Communism, the country’s economic system was changing, and many people had difficulty adjusting to it, but the Thieves thrived. In the former USSR, writes Serguei Cheloukhine, “an extreme shortage in food and consumer goods was growing fast, as was the amount of unused cash in the hands of the population. It was the organized crime groups that set about supplying the population’s growing

123 Ganavim Ba Hok, directed by Alexander Gentelev (LE Vision Film- und Fernsehproduktion, 2010).
demands through its illegal sources and methods.”

They were so successful that they were even able to stretch outside of the former Soviet Union, establishing presences in most major cities in Europe and the United States. These criminal organizations had been operating for some years, particularly as government corruption rose under Brezhnev and such criminal enterprises were able to avoid crackdowns, primarily through bribery. They are, in many ways, a direct result of the Bitches War and the defeat of the “Honest Thieves.” It would be reasonable to conclude that the Bitches were able to live out their sentences in the camps, most likely being released during Khrushchev’s Thaw and disappearing into society once more until the negligence of the late Soviet period and the chaos of the 1990s allowed them to re-emerge.

It is clear from the interview with Bilunov that, while certainly the face of the criminal world has changed, its nature has carried over into the modern era. Bilunov may even complicate the presumption that the Bitches won the Bitches War; his assertion that his tattoos signify a refusal to cooperate with state authority sounds like a near-exact repetition of the Thieves’ Law, which the Bitches had mostly disregarded. The film makes it clear that Bilunov’s life, and those of the other professional criminals interviewed, is very different from that of the earlier Thieves-in-Law; living in an enormous seaside mansion in Antibes, France, Bilunov looks more like the CEO of a successful multinational corporation, and, in a way, he is. This is a long way from the dirty Thieves’ dens of Rostov described by Dyomin, or the underbellies of train cars where he hid before and after a robbery. Yet there remains a powerful connection between the old Thieves’ World and the criminal organizations of the modern day, even if only in the minds of the criminals. Whether Bilunov’s criminal pedigree can actually be traced back to Dyomin’s era, or even the Tsarist bandits and criminals of whom Dostoevsky and others wrote, is unclear. What is clear, however, from the meaning he derives from his traditional tattoos, and from his insistence that the world of the Thieves is not much different now than then, is that Bilunov believes in that connection. He, and many modern Thieves like him, respects this tradition and considers himself to be a part of it, the evidence that this criminal underground survived the Bitches War and remains today.

The contention of this study is that the Bitches War is significant to the academic understanding of the Gulag because of what this conflict reveals, both about the Thieves

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themselves, an oft-misunderstood class of Soviet society, and also about the guards and administrators at the ground level. Their stated purpose was the ideological re-education of their prisoners, the work of shaping them into proper Soviet citizens. This purpose broke down, however, when it met with the Thieves-in-Law, especially under the weight of a world war. The pressure of production quotas, combined with a significant portion of the prison population who refused to perform any labor at all, caused camp officials to encourage and take advantage of the schism developing in the Thieves world, siding with the Bitches over the Thieves. This was not because the Bitches were more re-educated, more proper Soviet citizens, but only because they were willing to contribute something, anything, no matter how little, to the camps. This was still rarely actual labor; often it was informing on fellow prisoners, rounding up work gangs, even carrying out murders that the camp administration could not do itself. At any rate, they were willing to cooperate, to take some of the pressure off of the administration, and so the administration sided with them in the Bitches War, to devastating result for the Thieves.

The objection might reasonably be raised, however, that if the Bitches were willing to perform some form of labor, however small, is that not then an indication that they had been, in some measure, reformed? Barnes, after all, notes that documents kept by the Kulturno-Vospitatel’naià Chast’, or Cultural-Educational Department, “reveal repeatedly the institution’s responsibility for labor productivity … [which was] always tied to the task of reforging criminals.” If the Gulag was a “school of labor,” as Dzerzhinsky had called it, and the Cultural-Educational Department was responsible for not only that re-education but also labor productivity, it is clear that the labor itself was seen as an integral part of the re-education process. Therefore, one might conclude, if a prisoner enters the Gulag refusing to perform any labor whatsoever, and, at some point during their time in the camps, becomes willing to perform labor of some kind, even to the small extent of the Bitches, that prisoner must be undergoing the re-education process. “After all,” Barnes continues, “what was a better indication of full involvement in Soviet society than being a productive laborer?”

The first problem with this objection has already been discussed to some degree, but it bears repeating: if historians can describe the Bitches as having been even partially re-educated because of the “labor” that they performed, because of their contributions to the camp, then they are setting the standard for re-education alarmingly low. The sorts of jobs they accepted varied

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125 Barnes, 58.
widely, from informants to barracks supervisors to enforcers, but there is hardly a single recorded case of a Bitch agreeing to go to the labor site and mine for coal or fell trees. They might go out to the labor site as a supervisor, but they would not partake in the work itself. When they did accept a position that actively contributed to the camp’s productivity, it was usually something like kitchen work, where they would be in relative comfort, and could steal food from the kitchens to take back to their barracks. If the degree to which they were willing to contribute to the camps was this abysmally low, then so also must have been the ideological change wrought within them by the Cultural-Education Department, such as it was.

This, however, gets to the more important problem with suggesting that the Bitches had been, to some extent, re-educated under the Soviet model. The process of re-education was, at its heart, an internal process; it describes a change in attitude toward the state and the Soviet system. A re-educated prisoner would, ideally, leave the Gulag with an enthusiasm for the building of Communism and a love for the Soviet Union that he had lacked upon entering. There was certainly a change in attitude taking place within the Bitches over the course of the Bitches War, but that change was not in relation to the state. Rather, it was in relation to the Thieves’ Law. Those Thieves who became Bitches, at least the ones who did so willingly by way of serving in the Army or being persuaded by camp authorities, believed the Thieves’ Law to be antiquated, a relic of a different time, and no longer useful in the Soviet era.126

This is most clearly demonstrated by a Bitch from Rostov named Vikta Gusev, known by the nickname the Goose. He was encountered by Dyomin in the Kharkov Central Distribution Prison, and, knowing he was outnumbered as a Bitch, initially tried to disguise himself as a true Thief. The Goose was convincing, and quickly assimilated into a cell which held Thieves exclusively. Soon, however, Dyomin received a message from another Thief elsewhere in the prison informing him that The Goose was actually a Bitch. The writer of the message, called the Gypsy, had seen the Goose in military uniform in 1945 at Gorlovko. “It grieves us and insults us to look on your cell and see,” the note said, “among its worthy thieves, scum of that sort.” Dyomin read the note aloud in the cell, and all the Thieves turned on the Goose.

126 Admittedly, those Thieves who were converted into Bitches by force did not necessarily have this attitude toward the Thieves’ Law, and would have remained Bitches because once they had been converted, there was no returning. They would have been “legal” targets of any Thieves at that point, without any course to redeem themselves. However, the point still stands, in that these Thieves, perhaps even more so than those who converted willingly, did not contribute to the camps out of a change in attitude toward the state, but, in their case, it was out of necessity.
“You were in the service?” a Thief asked him.
“I was.”
“With a uniform on?”
“What else?”

The group of Thieves interrogated the Goose on his military service, and he admitted that he had been a soldier in Rokossovsky’s army, which was made up largely of men who had been picked straight out of the Gulag. They accused him of being a Bitch, of “renounc[ing] our faith and betray[ing] his own kind,” language reminiscent of the religious terminology sometimes used when Thieves “converted” into Bitches. “A real thief doesn’t have to serve the authorities,” another Thief chimed in. “That’s the law.”

The Goose, quite tellingly, could only offer one point in his defense. “But the law’s unfair,” he insisted. The Thieves, of course, had no interest in listening to his arguments, and chased him out of the cell.127 His words, however, bear a profound importance. He did not try to argue that serving the state was acceptable, that the state was not really so bad. He did not try to argue that, in a time of war, everyone needed to contribute, even the Thieves. He argued that the Thieves’ Law was unfair, that it did not serve its purpose, that, perhaps at least in his case, it should not apply. This represents a significant change in the Thieves’ attitude toward the their Law, which had been considered absolute and immutable for generations. Shalamov describes this shift, writing about former Thieves who returned from the war to find themselves labeled as Bitches, just as was done to the Goose. “If the old law will not accept them,” Shalamov writes, “they will declare a new one.”128 They would declare a new Thieves’ Law to replace the old one, and in this schism raged the Bitches War. A re-educative process had indeed taken place within the Bitches, but it was not in reaction to the state, and it was not perpetrated by the camp administrators and guards, or the Cultural-Educational Department of the Gulag. These Thieves-turned-Bitches cannot rightly be said to have been ideologically re-educated under a Soviet understanding of those terms.

Of course, regardless of what changed within these Thieves’ perception of their Law or the State, and what caused that change, the fact remains that the camp guards and administrators did, to some degree, support the Bitches over the Thieves. At the very least, they permitted this

127 Dyomin, 22-25.
conflict to spread throughout the Gulag system. It is clear that they did not do so out of a concern for the ideological re-education of the Thieves, because the Bitches, who did enjoy comparative support, had not been meaningfully re-educated in the Soviet sense. It might be closer to the truth to say that these guards and administrators supported the Bitches for more economic reasons; the Thieves contributed nothing toward meeting production quotas, and, while the Bitches did not contribute much to the camps, they were more useful than the Thieves, and so they received comparative support.

This is not to say that the guards and administrators were concerned with meeting production quotas for the sake of building the Soviet state through efficient production and profitability. The Gulag was, by and large, a widely unprofitable operation.\(^\text{129}\) What is much more likely is that the guards and administrators were concerned with meeting production quotas for their own sakes, in the interest of self-preservation. They likely understood the thin veil which separated them from their prisoners, a veil which any failure to meet demands might breach. Fyodor Mochulsky, a Gulag prison guard who wrote down his experiences as a young man in the camps, describes this very fear when, on the way to his first assignment, one of the horses assigned to him and his companions dies in a pool of quicksand. He describes a feeling of dread as they realize that they could all easily and quickly become prisoners in the very system that they had been sent to guard.\(^\text{130}\) Other Gulag memoirists, such as Ginzburg, mention guards and administrators who, because of anything from a serious mistake to a change in the political wind, end up on the other side of the system as prisoners. Cynthia Hooper, in her discussion of Mochulsky’s memoir, notes that the description of this phenomenon is one of the most intriguing parts of the account. “Over the ensuing months,” she writes, “Mochulsky learns that such close calls are an unavoidable ingredient of Gulag life.”\(^\text{131}\) With the position of guards and administrators so potentially precarious, it is clear why they might have sided with the Bitches.

\(^\text{129}\) Applebaum has said that the Solovetsky camps where the Gulag began were never profitable, but that what was more important was that Solovetsky was perceived to be profitable, at least by Stalin. Relatedly, Valerey Lazarev writes that the Gulag, in the 1950s, “found itself unprofitable: its revenues were not sufficient to cover the cost of its active labor force and the maintenance of the nonworking part of the Gulag population.” This last sentence may even be a reference to the Thieves and any other prisoners who may have refused to perform labor in the camps. Applebaum, 54. Paul R. Gregory and Valerey Lazarev, eds., *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2003), 196-7.


over the Thieves, and why they may have even gone so far as to coordinate such murderous enterprises as Baldaev describes; it was for self-preservation above all else.

The one question that perhaps remains is this: why did they side with either group? Why not kill the Bitches and the Thieves equally? As we have explored, the Bitches were comparatively more productive than the Thieves, but the amount they actually contributed toward meeting production quotas would have been small and difficult to measure, to say the least. This may be impossible to answer with certainty, but it seems likely that the answer lies in the exploitation of power and violence for social control. The Bitches were much more valuable to the Gulag system as a way to control the Thieves than they were as means of production. They represented the power and authority of the camp administration, in the sense that they had the support of the guards and administrators, but they were able to do things that the guards themselves were not able or willing to do. For example, while this rule was broken at times, guards were not allowed to kill prisoners without cause. A Bitch, on the other hand, could do this freely, and the threat of a criminal investigation or incarceration would cause him no fear. This will remain speculation until records left by guards and administrators, such as Baldaev or Mochulsky, are found to describe the Bitches War. What is apparent at this time, however, amid the blood and violence of the Bitches War, is that the Gulag guards and administrators were not primarily concerned with the ideological re-education of the prisoners or the economic production of the camps. They were much more concerned with the meeting of production quotas, along with the use of violence and power in the camps, for the ultimate purpose of exerting social control and preserving their own security.
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