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Closure of Soviet Concentration Camps Where 'Arbeit Macht Frei' First Appeared Recalled

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VIENNA &mdash The theft of the sign, "Arbeit Macht Frei," which hung over the entrance to the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz has not only sparked international outrage but also called attention to the place where those words first hung at a place of detention of the innocent in the 20th century &mdash the Solovetsky Camps of Special Assignment in the USSR.

Seventy years ago this month, Yury Brodsky writes in today's Novaya Gazeta, Stalin's secret police chief Lavrenty Beria shut down the Solovetsky camps &mdash but not before they both destroyed much of Russia's intellectual and political elite and established the horrific precedent that Hitler drew from.

The Solovetsky Camps of Special Assignment &mdash known by the Russian acronym "SLON" &mdash were established in February 1920 in the prison in a monastery in northern

Russian first erected and used by Ivan the Terrible to imprison anti-Soviet White Russian officers and men, Brodsky reports.

The name the Lenin-era officials chose is significant, he points out. "A priori, Solovki was intended not for people who had committed crimes. The obvious enemies of the Bolsheviks were usually killed immediately." Instead, the SLON was "in the first instance for questionable people who represented a potential threat for Soviet power by the very fact of their existence."

Among these "victims of the class struggle" sent there without trial were "lawyers who knew the basis of classical Roman law with its presumption of innocence, ... historians [who knew a history that the Bolsheviks denied], ... [and] officers capable of taking part in uprisings and clergy of all confessions, bearers of an ideology alien to the Bolsheviks."

The Solovki prisons were "a forge of cadres" and "a school of advanced experience" for future concentration camps of the 20th century, Brodsky writes. The slogan "Arbeit Macht Frei" first appeared not in Auschwitz but on the Nikolsky Gates of the Solovetsky Kremlin. And but for one man, it could have become the first place with gas chambers for killing the innocent.

In the 1920s, the Novaya Gazeta journalist says, Soviet jailors at Solovki had built up supplies of poisonous gas, but a certain Dr. Nikolai Zhilov, who served in the medical review facility there, "at his own risk destroyed this gas," using it to disinfect the clothes of prisoners rather than to kill them.

Conditions at Solovki were brutal, and anyone who violated any rule or failed to fulfill the norms for work in the forests and mines could be "destroyed" as "a wrecker." But one curious feature of SLON was that the secret police arrested particular and often prominent intellectuals to do particular jobs there.

In 1937-38 alone, some 1800 of the inmates of SLON were shot, including, among others, the scholar P.A. Florensky, the restoration specialist A.I. Anisimov, the inventor L.V. Kurchevsky, the lawyer A.V. Bobrishchev-Pushkin, the pan-Islamic ideologue I.A. Firdeks, the academician S.L. Rudnitsky, as well as many other intellectuals and churchmen.

Indeed, Brodsky said, there are "hundreds of names" on the death lists, hundreds of the "mind, honesty and conscience" of Russia, and not only of Russia. But the Soviet powers that be gave out awards to those who did the killing, with one NKVD captain decorated for killing 180 to 265 people per day throughout the fall of 1937.

In 1937, at the peak of the killings, the Solovetsky Camp was transformed into the Solovetsky Prison, a place if possible even more notorious for its cruelty and the viciousness of its guards than the camp had been, according to academician Alexander Bayev, who was one of the inmates of both.

"Seven decades ago," Brodsky writes, "Solovki ceased to be called a jail. [And] the physical evidence of this example of the medieval life of the 20th century almost does not remain." The restorers have covered over many things, and "the archive of the prison has been hidden

no one knows where."

"In a country were a moral assessment of the crimes of Stalin has not been given, where pride in the great Soviet past is cultivated, it is alas not considered appropriate to recall [this] great tragedy of the 20th century."

Indeed, the FSB recently confiscated a manuscript on the Solovki camps being prepared by historian Mikhail Suprun.

The attitude of the Russian authorities is tragically clear: "The deputy director of the Solovetsky State Museum-Park, which is responsible for the exposition devoted to the history of the camps of special assignment, is convinced that the Solovetsky camps were a brilliant form of defense of the state from all kinds of dissidents."

And his view, Brodsky points out, is "apparently shared" by those who control the books on display at Solovki for sale to tourists and pilgrims: They offer books that praise Stalin rather than condemning him for his role in the operation of this concentration camp. As a result, the tragedy of Solovetsky is becoming "the tragedy of Russia."

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