

# Gay in the gulag



Historical information about the repression of gay men in the Soviet Union in the wake of the government's re-criminalisation of homosexuality in 1933, after its decriminalisation in 1922. Trigger warning for sexual violence.

Anal and genital contact between consenting males became a criminal offence in the USSR on 17 December 1933. On 1 April 1934, article 154 (later 121) was introduced specifying a punishment of up to five years imprisonment. One theory currently popular among Moscow gays has it that the adopted son of the leading proletarian writer, Maxim Gorky, was seduced by a homosexual and that Gorky's personal petition to Stalin led to the subsequent formal prohibition. On 23 May 1934, Pravda and Izvestiya published an article by Gorky declaiming, in language reminiscent of a political trial, that homosexuality was the result of pernicious influences from the Western bourgeoisie and German fascism. The article concluded with the slogan: "Destroy homosexuality and fascism will disappear!"

Article 154 quickly became a tool of reprisal against political dissent. In January 1934, homosexuals were arrested en masse in the Soviet Union's main cities. Among those imprisoned were many actors, musicians and artists. Historians have noted numerous suicides in the Red Army and a growing mood of panic among Soviet gays at that time.

In 1936 the Commissar for Justice, Nikolai Krylenko, declared homosexuality a political crime against the Soviet state and the proletariat. It became an object of NKVD (later transformed into KGB) investigations, possibly with a view to recruiting new informers from among known homosexuals.

In the mid-1930s gays flooded into Soviet camps in their thousands, and the influx apparently remained steady throughout the years article 121 was in force. Alexander Solzhenitsyn called it a 'sordid' bit of legislation. In the Gulag Archipelago, dedicated to 'all those who did not live long enough to tell the story', there isn't a word of sympathy for oppressed homosexuals. Just as there isn't in Varlaam Shalamov's Kolyma Tales. Most dissident authors, while exposing the inhumanity of life in the camps, hold on firmly to camp attitudes in their contemptuous dismissal of gays and of homosexuality in general. Until very recently the

issue remained taboo. Even when revelations about Stalinist repressions began to emerge, not a single human rights activist, neither in the USSR nor abroad, was seriously prepared to tackle the problem.

The fate of homosexuals in Soviet prisons and camps is unprecedented in the scope of its tragedy and brutality. Not only were the numbers vast, homosexual rape took place in every camp and prison without exception. Not only did the Soviet system fail to cure the 'foreign disease', it led to a dramatic growth in the numbers of homosexuals. Huge numbers of people who had not previously been gay became categorised as *opushchennye* (lit: crestfallen, degraded, downcast; also slang term for one who has been beaten up, raped and urinated upon).

In his book *The Mordovian Marathon* (Jerusalem, 1979), Eduard Kuznetsov devotes a chapter called *Queer Folk* to homosexuals in the camps.

“According to people in the know,” he writes, “90 per cent of convicts are homosexual. But only passive gays—about 10 per cent—are regarded as such. They are the so-called *kozly* (lit: billy goats, or customers of prostitutes) and *petukhi* (lit: cocks, or faggots). Active homosexuals are so commonplace they don't even merit a special name.”

“Passive homosexuals are not necessarily prisoners with gay inclinations”, writes Andrei Amal'rik in the book *Notes of a dissident* (Ann Arbor, 1982), “they are the unassertive, the timid, those who have lost a game of cards, those who have broken the camp code of ethics. Once you have the reputation of being a “cock”, it is impossible to get rid of it. It follows you from camp to camp. And if, after transfer to a new place a “fallen” prisoner fails to reveal himself, sooner or later it is bound to come to light. Then punishment is unavoidable, and it will take the form of a collective reprisal often ending in death.”

The first convicted homosexual to come out was the Leningrad poet Gennady Trifonov. In December 1977, he sent the following open letter to *Literaturnaya Gazeta* from Camp No. 398/38 in the western Urals:

“I have experienced every possible nightmare and horror; it is impossible to get used to it. Over a period of 18 months I have seen daily what it is to be a convicted homosexual in a Soviet camp. The position of gays in the death camps of the Third Reich was nothing compared to this. They had a clear prospect for the future—the gas chamber. We lead a half-animal existence, condemned to die of hunger, nursing secret dreams of contracting some deadly disease for a few days peace in a bunk in sickbay.

“I know people who have either forgotten the end of their prison term, or who have not managed physically to survive that long. Their bodies were taken off the electric wire; they were found hanging in prison cells, tortured to death by prisoners in bestial mood or beaten by guards, mad. I know their names; I have access to the written evidence of witnesses. In a year and a half of this hell I have carefully studied 22 convictions for homosexuality in the USSR. If this information reaches the West, I will be accused of slander and physically liquidated. It won't take much. They will set a group of convicts who have lost all semblance of humanity against me and certify my death ‘in the natural way’.”

Trifonov's letter was not published in the Soviet Union. But once his name became known in the West, the camp authorities treated him less cruelly...

Pavel Massalsky from Moscow, a man of middle height with close cropped hair, aged about 35, was convicted with his boyfriend in 1984. Until then his name had been filed with the special department of the militia that was formed 'to fight against homosexuality'. This was where all information about Moscow's gays was collected. Pavel recalls occasions when militiamen from the Department blackmailed and sexually harassed him and other gay men.

In order to imprison Pavel and his boyfriend, a neighbor's denunciation was enough. There was not even any need for evidence of a homosexual act, normally compulsory in these cases. The court hearing was closed, like most cases dealing with 'sexual crimes' in the USSR. After the hearing Pavel and his boyfriend were sent away to different prisons. After nine months, Pavel was moved to a camp where out of 1,500 men about 200 were categorized as opushchennye.

“In our camp the petukhi lived with everyone else but we had a separate table, separate crockery, and a separate place in the queue-at the very end. The administration regards the opushchennye in the same way as the prisoners: it helps them less, does not give them the opportunity to work on good jobs. Sometimes if they see that a man is being taunted beyond endurance they move him on to another zone to get rid of him.

“The administration treated me worse than the others. They found taunting me rather diverting; they would follow me around, summon me up to headquarters-which is the worst thing possible in a zone because everyone thinks you're squealing. They suggested that I become an informer but I refused and because of that I spent about three months in penal isolation cells. After that they left me alone, and I began to go up in the eyes of the convicts and became a prostitute. It was the only way out: it was impossible to live otherwise.”

Valery Klimov from Nizhny Tagil is a slightly stout man of about 35, with grey hair. He was arrested for a relationship with a boy who was under age. When Valery was called to the prosecutor's office, the investigator offered him two options: suicide or plea guilty. He was threatened with reprisal against his friends if he refused. Klimov took all the blame on himself and got three years.

”I was able to stand for myself in prison and in camp, but there were about 10 occasions when gays were murdered before my eyes. One was beaten to death in a prison in Sverdlovsk. There were 100 men in our cell; three or four raped him every day and then chucked him under the bunks. It was bestial, a nightmare. Once 10 of them raped him and then jumped on his head. I nearly went mad there; my hair turned grey. That's how people lose their sanity; many never recover even after they leave.

“Homosexuality exists at all levels in the camp. It isn't only the opushchennye who do it; the prison staff does it as well. In prison conditions heterosexual males can easily turn into homosexuals. Sometimes it isn't only a physical urge, but real emotion. I saw displays of love and affection between partners. Our team leader, Viktor Popov, declared his love for me and asked me to be with him; I was the active partner. Until then he had thought of himself as 100 per cent 'natural' (straight). Now he is married and has children. Sometimes he still visits me though.”

*Translated from the Russian by Irena Maryniak*

*Taken from <http://slavamogutin.com/gay-in-the-gulag/>*