

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Danzig Baldaev (2010) *Drawings from the Gulag*. London: FUEL, ISBN: 0956356249, pp.240, £ 17.95**

This is an extremely interesting book that 'describes' life in the Soviet Gulags since their inception in 1918. The particular book seems to be an extension of Danzig Baldaev's trilogy on 'Russian Criminal Tattoos', a simply remarkable series – to say the least - which offered the reader j u s t one aspect of the cultural treasure that is the so called Russian 'underworld': tattoos. In contrast to the Russian Tattoo Encyclopedia trilogy for which the drawings were produced over a series of years by Baldaev working as a prison warden, however, the material of the current book is *partly* a product of the author as a *prisoner*. In the very beginning, the book starts with a very brief and rudimentary biography of the author, which however, contextualizes in my view the whole work. Baldaev, born in 1925 in Ulan-Ude (Buryatia, East Russia) and son of an ethnographer, had nothing of an idyllic upbringing. As a child, he was brought up in an orphanage for the children of 'political criminals' or 'enemies of the people'. In this book he illustrates a great variety of scenes of everyday life in a Gulag. Essentially an ethnographic project, the work draws its strength primarily from a phantasmagoric gallery of 134 black-and-white drawings which are embellished with their original caption in Russian and translated in English, and quotes and footnotes researched and written by the editors, Damon Murray and Stephen Sorrell. A large number of the drawings are the product of the Baldaev's first-hand experience, and the rest of his interaction with other inmates who narrated their stories and suffering, interviews with NKVD (The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) officers and other documentary research.

The vast majority of the drawings are disturbing and the prevailing themes are death, torture, maltreatment, gang-rapes and, generally, suffering. In one of the drawings imprinted in my memory, for instance, a number of women are depicted as suffering from prolapse of the uterus from overstrain and starvation, while only two drawings are full of hope (pages 76 and 182-183). Granted, the drawings may neither be completely accurate depictions of what actually happened in the Gulag nor as powerful as the equivalent photographs would have

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been; but they still have a great power. In addition, the book is dense with information that is directly or indirectly relevant to life in the Gulag, and many times the captions verge to the encyclopedic. For example, in one of the captions information about the official Soviet champagne (*Sovetskoe Shampanskoe*) is offered (p.37), whereas on page 47 the readers are briefly introduced to the officially sanctioned scientist Trofim Lysenko and his theory of inheritance of acquired characteristic. Towards the end of the book Baldaev offers seven 'chapters' of varying length on issues such as the 'settling of scores in the Gulag', 'forms of torture', 'terms used to describe prisoners' sadistic games and jokes', etc.

While reading the book, in my opinion, the readers get a glimpse of the atmosphere in these camps. The book grips the reader's attention from the very first moment; however, it is overwhelming and visually heavy, and perhaps it is better read in small chunks. In terms of the value of the drawings, the book is a treasure in the sense that it is a record of the atrocities that took place in these camps, atrocities which have not been adequately documented visually, while simultaneously emphasizing the role art can play in sociological, criminological and historical research. On a slightly philosophical note, the book continuously exposes the 'capacity' of humans to commit evil in the name of ideology among other such 'justifications'. *Drawings from the Gulag* is clearly not an academic piece of work and should not be perceived as such. However, it is certainly a book that you are going to cherish. Finally, a note should be mentioned about the publishing house, FUEL. They are to be congratulated not only for the elegance of their productions, but also for providing a home for this book (and the other three volumes on Russian Criminal Tattoos), and making this part of history and culture available to the public.