

Music and 'Re-Education' in the Soviet Gulag

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Abstract

After the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks announced a new human dimension of penal policy whose goal should be the so-called 're-education' of prisoners. The desired 're-education' was to be realised using two kinds of measures: the physical work of the prisoners, and 'cultural education work'. A varied musical life in groups, 'agitation brigades', ensembles, orchestras and choirs developed within the framework of the 'cultural education work'. Two camps responsible for building canals in the 1930s particularly adopted this musical life: Belbaltlag and Dmitlag. In the latter, a composition competition took place in 1936 in which, among others, the arrested composer Sergey Protopopov took part. Since the 1930s, the Gulag administration had publicised that the measures taken for 're-education' concerned primarily criminal prisoners, as opposed to 'political prisoners', who were labelled as foreign to socialist society. Although the 'cultural education work' would not have functioned as well as it did without the cooperation of 'political prisoners', since their participation did not fit into the prescribed ideology, they were often underappreciated or even completely concealed. The following is a depiction of the officially organised musical life in the Gulag in the 1920s and 1930s as a grey zone. Music making and listening represented not

only a source of strength for the prisoners, but also brought about situations that meant physical and psychological torture for them.

Key words: Gulag, torture, music, cultural education, agitation brigades

The concept of 're-education' ['vospitaniye or perevospitaniye' in Russian] played a key role in Soviet penal policy since its beginnings. Penitentiaries were proclaimed educational in nature, as stated in the decree of the People's Commissariat for Justice (Narodnyi komissariat yustitsii or NKYu), dated 23 July 1918, entitled 'O lishenii svobodī, kak o mere nakazaniya, i o poryadke otbivaniya takovogo' [Of detention as a penal measure and how to serve it].¹ This early edict defined the 'total re-education' of inmates as a fundamental principle of penal policy, and stipulated that every penitentiary had to establish one 'educational post' and hire so-called 'educationalists'. The 1919 programme of the Communist Party declared its intent to replace the existing catalogue of penalties with a number of educational measures in future detention. By doing so, the Bolsheviks wanted to distinguish themselves from the tsarist detention system and from that of 'capitalist countries' where, according to their critics, any attempt to influence the morale of the inmates was left to the representatives of the clergy.² (PP 175-7), 3 (p 15) The Bolsheviks, in their own words, wanted to bring a humane dimension to penal policy, something that had not been known before. They overlooked, or wilfully

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ignored, the fact that the attempt to educate and improve personal character had already been a key aspect of detention in the reform of criminal law in 18th century France.⁴ In fact, the idea of 're-educating' inmates was not even new in Russia. Intellectuals had discussed this as early as the 1860s, and those discussions had led to the Russian prison reforms. This caused an easing of living conditions in the prisons and camps. For example, in 1863 the branding of prisoners was abolished.⁵ What was new in Bolshevik detention, compared to tsarist detention, was the idea of 'cultural education work'. This idea had also been discussed in Russia in the 19th century,⁶ but had not been incorporated into official penal policy.

In the decree 'O lageryakh prinuditel'nikh rabot' ['On forced labour camps'], dated 17 May 1919, the All-Russian Central Executive Committee required the physical labour of every inmate.⁷ This labour was meant as an educational measure, but in reality it often involved torture, since the inmates were forced to work at gruelling labour under difficult conditions from which they could not escape. In fact, it had a bearing on their very existence, because their food rations were directly dependent upon the results of their work. No later than 1920, physical labour was accompanied by a second way of influencing the inmates, the so-called 'work of cultural enlightenment' ['kul'turno-prosvetitel'naya rabota'] or 'cultural education' ['kul'turno-vospitatel'naya rabota']. Circular no. 28 of the Central Administration of the Penitentiaries GUMZ [Glavnoye upravleniye mest zaklyucheniya], dated 29 June 1922, stipulated 'cultural education' in the prisons to be a key foundation of detention, alongside education by labour;² (p 178),⁸ thus, both pillars became concepts of equal weight.

In 1924, the first Corrective Labour

Code [Ispravitel'no-trudovoy kodeks] of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) was passed. This Code defined the key role 'cultural education' was to play in the 're-education' of inmates. The Code stated that work on 'cultural education and enlightenment' was to be done in every 'facility of improvement through labour' [ispravitel'no-trudovoye uchrezhdeniye]. The purpose of this work was to 'enhance the intellectual level and the developmental status of the inmates as citizens'. These measures were mainly aimed at imprisoned people of the working class, supposedly because they represented the proletariat, the very people on whom the Bolsheviks relied to support their power. Basically, however, no group of inmates was excluded.³ (p 28)

The focus of the 'cultural education work' was to provide school lessons and vocational training, and to convey knowledge about the structure of the Soviet society, including the rights and duties of a Soviet citizen. 'Cultural education' was to be done in places and facilities such as libraries and clubhouses, in the form of lectures or circles. In those circles, the inmates were to experience literature, music, sports, chess and so on. They would share these experiences with their fellow inmates through concerts, theatre performances, readings, physical exercise, book discussions and reviews, acted-out news presentations [zhivaya gazeta – literally, 'living newspaper'], and 'other cultural pleasures'.⁹

Musical theatres were founded in numerous camps between the 1920s and 1950s. However, an average of only about two percent of the inmates took part in the music and theatre circles, as research conducted for the present author's doctoral dissertation demonstrates. For example, in 1943 the Deputy People's Commissar for Inner Affairs, Vasily Chernishyov, found that

there were 22 'amateur arts circles' in the Bogoslovlag, in the Sverdlovsk area, in which 242 prisoners were involved. The number of prisoners in this camp amounted to 10,864 on January 1, 1943, according to official data, so that ca. two percent of them were active in the 'amateur arts'. According to the report of the Sevvostlag, in the Kolyma region, for the year 1951, 3,578 prisoners were involved in a total of 121 'amateur arts circles', which represents ca. two percent of all the Sevvostlag prisoners.^{10, 11}

The various aspects of the 'cultural education work' in the Gulag have been unevenly researched. Although there have been several studies concerning journalism, literary treatises, and theatres of the prisoners,¹²⁻¹⁴ musical practices outside theatre and painting have so far received only minimal consideration. This article will examine the forms the 'cultural education work' through music took in the 1920s and 1930s, and the role it played in the lives of the prisoners.

According to a report by the central administration, in 1926 there were 820 theatre circles as well as 520 circles of music and song inside the penitentiaries. At the same time, the number of circles of politics and sports were 438 and 177 respectively.^{3 (pp 29, 30)} Obviously, the 're-education' of the inmates was not just a propaganda slogan, since serious attempts were taken to achieve it.

The concept of 're-educating' the prisoners should be considered in a broad context. The creation of a new human being, a 'new human species', was also of great significance for people not held in detention in the Soviet Union. The catchphrase 're-education' was omnipresent in the 1920s and 1930s. It was an idea propagated daily that all Soviet citizens should be reformed into new human beings. In this sense, the Gulag must be seen as a part of this aspect of the

Soviet state, meant to contribute to the formation of a new human being.^{13 (p 38), 15-17}

Also, the phenomenon of 'cultural education' was in no way limited to forced labour camps. It also played an important role in the civil life of the Soviet Union over the entire period of its existence. According to the 'Bol'shaya sovetskaya ntsiklopediya' [Great Soviet Encyclopedia], the 'communist education' and 'political enlightenment' of the workers should be supported through 'cultural enlightenment work', their cultural level raised, creative faculties developed, and their free time configured.¹⁸ The model of 'cultural education work' that was developed in civil society was transferred to camp society.

Most prisoners who left written memories, and above all those who themselves made music in the camps, testify to the positive effects music had on their physical and psychiatric health. Boris Shiryayev asserts, for example, that in the 1920s music played an important role in the theatre on Solovetskiy Island, in the White Sea. For Shiryayev, music represented the restoration to the prisoners of their right to see themselves as human beings, and to feel inwardly free.¹⁹ But there are also known cases in which music was used as an integral component of the torture and ill-treatment that the prisoners had to endure as a part of their existence in the Gulag. In contrast to the National Socialist concentration camps, from which numerous cases of the perversion of music into an 'instrument of torture'²⁰⁻²² have been recorded, the misuse of music as an accompaniment to sadistic treatment in the Gulag was apparently much less widespread. Nevertheless, music was implicated in the oppression and humiliation of the inmates here as well.

One example from 1921 comes from the Arkhgb forced labour camp of the village

Kholmogorī in Arkhangel'sk, which was under the control of the secret police Ob'yedinyonnoye Gosudarstvennoye Politicheskoye Upravleniye (OGPU) [Unified State Political Administration]. In an undated letter, E. Filipchenko, who was imprisoned in Kholmogorī from August to November, wrote to the Moscow political Red Cross: '[...] the roll call ended with the singing of the Internationale. The overseers made sure that everyone sang and hit the right notes to some extent; otherwise, they threatened us with detention. The roll call lasted over thirty minutes, and in cold autumn evenings this caused many people to become sick'.²³ It is worthy of note that here the Internationale, which at that time functioned as the Soviet national anthem and simultaneously as a hymn of imprisoned social revolutionaries, whom the Bolsheviks treated as their enemies, was deployed for the humiliation of the prisoners.

A further example was recorded on the Solovetskiy Islands, where there was a brass band that not only used to give concerts in the second half of the 1920s, but was said to have performed 'brilliant' pieces on some occasion, such as when other prisoners had to saw down old crosses in the graveyard.²⁴ Here the musicians were forced to take up the task of cynically accompanying a blasphemous treatment with inappropriate music. Since they could not refuse such orders without suffering the consequences, music was perverted to an instrument of cruel and degrading treatment.

In 1930, a parliamentary control commission of the OGPU travelled to the Solovetskiy Islands for an inspection triggered by reports in the foreign press about the inhumane living conditions of the camp inmates. The goal of the inspection was to establish that individual people on the site were responsible for these conditions, rather

than the OGPU.²⁵ (pp 378–89) One passage in the concluding report states: 'The accused [the leader of a camp unit and sentry] kicked the prisoners with felt boots to which metal weights had been attached, to the sounds of an accordion [...]'. This is another example of the perversion of music and its misuse as an instrument of torture.

On 15 August 1930, the poet and author Sergey Alimov (1892–1948) described in his notebook how he had heard an English radio broadcast during the night in the barracks in Kem' on the shore of the White Sea. A waltz with which he was familiar was broadcast, with the text:

*I want [to] say good morning,
I don't want [to] say good-by[e].*

He had danced to this waltz many times when he was free. Everyone else in the barracks was asleep, but he could not sleep all night. Even the next day, he inwardly heard the waltz: 'The waltz melody was painfully screwed into my heart as though with a dentist's drill. The suffering still remains. [...] I wanted to flee from the violins, would not have heard them for anything in the world. That is probably the most horrible torture'.²⁶ This statement demonstrates that music could cause pain in camp inmates by evoking memories.

In March 1930, the All-Russian Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissioners stated that the 'cultural education work' in the camps was successful, and they decided to raise its budget.²⁷ In the 1930s, it became obvious that the idea of 're-education' gained momentum and was enforced. Now 're-education' was generally referred to as perekovka ['re-forging'], and it played a pivotal role in the propaganda of the 1930s. The aim of the perekovka was to create a new type of human being, and is

apparent in the history of two camps whose inmates were mainly employed in the construction of waterways: Belbaltlag, a camp mainly responsible for building the canal between the White Sea and the Baltic Sea between 1931 and 1933, and Dmitlag, in charge of building the Moscow-Volga-Canal between 1932 and 1938. The attempt to 're-educate' the inmates through music was implemented by founding several music groups such as brass and wind bands, for example, and by conducting a composition competition in 1936 during the construction of the Moscow-Volga-Canal.

These two camps were chosen for closer inspection out of the countless camps in the 1930s, because the proclamation of the idea of *perekovka* experienced its zenith in Belbaltlag, and because Dmitlag represented, in various ways, a continuation of the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Sea-Canal. A section of the prisoners and some of the work equipment from Belbaltlag were used again in Dmitlag, and the management was identical at the onset of the Moscow-Volga-project. The last meeting of the shock workers, prisoners who exceeded the production plan quotas, of Belbaltlag took place in Dmitrov, in the administration centre of Dmitlag, where the building of the clubhouse from Belbaltlag was also installed.^{28, 29} (pp 580, 581, 596)

Belbaltlag was promoted as the 'first large school of *perekovka*'. In 1932, according to official reports, an 'educationalist', often an inmate released from all other duties, worked in each camp unit. The famous photographer Aleksandr Rodchenko left visual testimonies of the musical work in Belbaltlag. He was commissioned by the State Publishing House for Performing Arts, Izogiz, and travelled on business to the White Sea-Baltic Sea-Canal in February, March, and summer of 1933. He gained permission from the Belbaltlag

camp administration to take pictures of the inmates at work and also during their 'leisure time', and took around 4,000 pictures in all that, to my knowledge, have still not been subject to academic analysis.

However, in preparing the present study it was possible to trace four photos taken by Rodchenko that show musicians in Belbaltlag. One of the pictures is titled 'Rabota s orkestrom' [Working with the orchestra] and was shown in the exhibition 'Mastera sovet'skogo iskusstva' [Masters of Soviet Photography] in Moscow in 1935. Aleksandr Lavrent'yev, Rodchenko's grandson and specialist on his work, calls this photo one of the central pictures of Rodchenko's cycle on the canal works. Lavrent'yev reviewed it as a 'revealing document' which showed that even art was imprisoned during the canal construction.³⁰ And although music-making certainly presented easier work than building a canal, and helped prisoners to survive, what was happening was a type of mental torture, for the musicians thus commanded could not escape the music-making, and were forced to watch the gruelling and dangerous work of their fellow prisoners.

Three of Rodchenko's other pictures, which show musicians in Belbaltlag, were published in the special edition of the magazine 'SSSR na stroyke' [The USSR under construction], dedicated to the canal construction and co-designed by Rodchenko. One of the photographs shows inmates in a theatre performance, with a grinning accordion player in the foreground. His appearance obviously implies that he is from a lower social class. This was to give readers of this magazine, available for subscription both in the Soviet Union and abroad, the impression that people of a simple background, who had ended up in a criminal life due to unfortunate circumstances, could be 're-educated' during the canal construction.

This is reinforced by the picture's caption: 'These people were people from the underworld, people who had been dragged from the underworld. When they landed here, they thought: my life is over. But their real lives had only just begun. Here, not only Nature was being reshaped: human nature was being re-shaped, too. People of a dubious past turned into real workers.'³¹

Here 're-education' particularly focused on inmates labelled 'close to society' [sotsial'no-blizkiye], which included both professional and occasional criminals. This was in contrast to people sentenced according to section 58 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR, who were deemed to be 'dangerous to society' [sotsial'no-opasnīye] and 'enemies of the working class'.²⁵ (p 375),^{32,33} Section 58 provided sentences for so-called 'counterrevolutionary crimes'. Prisoners sentenced on the basis of this paragraph were often designated 'political prisoners', but in reality most were innocent.

The historian Natal'ya Kuzyakina noted that there were a huge number of 'agitation brigades' in Belbaltlag. Information on the 'agitation brigade' Povenetskaya, named after the village Povenets, has been officially documented: initially, it consisted of 18 members, mostly inmates 'close to society', and included an ensemble consisting of two guitars, two accordions and one mandolin. Eventually, the brigade grew to 57 people, and was employed where work progress was slow, playing during the morning roll call or taking on some of the labour themselves. Supposedly, they played at night to motivate the inmates to continue working even after 42 hours of work. The descriptions of the brigade were intended to make clear that the criminal inmates particularly excelled. One project described as very courageous had been to integrate inmates from solitary isolation into the brigade and to 're-educate'

them by appealing to their conscience¹⁴ (pp 112-114),²⁹ (p 475). This represents an idealisation of the lives the criminal inmates led and, in addition, a marginalisation of their criminal record which was very much in line with the official dogma of the inmates 'close to society'.

The name of one song's writer is given under its lyrics, but only in brackets; after a few pages this person is casually referred to as the head of the brigade. The person in question was Igor Terent'yev (1892–1941), a poet, painter, actor and theatre director, who had founded the Futuristic group 41°, together with Aleksey Kruchyonikh and the brothers Il'ya and Kirill Zdanevich, on the eve of the October Revolution. In the 1920s, he had managed his own experimental theatre in Leningrad. He was arrested in 1931 and sentenced to five years of labour camp according to section 58.^{34,35}

Terent'yev's 'agitation brigade' was promoted as the 'first true camp agitation brigade', and as a role model for entire Belbaltlag. Their lyrics fully complied with what the perekovka propagandists expected: they sang about the quality of the work and work improvement; they taunted foreign countries and praised the shock workers; they called bad workers by name and castigated them; they criticised the conditions in the camps in which less high-ranking personnel were in charge, e.g. in the kitchens.²⁹ (pp 473–6)

This 'agitation brigade' serves as an excellent example of the crucial contribution 'political inmates' made to the success of 'cultural education work' in the Gulag, as Igor Terent'yev did here. Their efforts were often exploited by the camp administration, but, compared with the criminal inmates, not acknowledged accordingly or even ignored.

The official internal records of Dmitlag on the construction of the Moscow-Volga-

Canal state that in January 1934 there were six brass and wind bands with a total of 145 musicians in this camp. In May 1934, their number had grown to 204 musicians. In 1934, an average of 156,319 inmates were imprisoned in Dmitlag.^{36, 37} The task of these brass and wind bands was to play during the roll calls, when the best workers brigades left for work, when they returned, and even to accompany their work. The task of the conductors was to organise and lead circles for plucked string instruments and choirs at every work section. Moreover, they had to hold evenings of mass singing, mass games and dancing.

According to an order issued by the chief camp administrator dating May 31, 1934, a musician of the brass and wind band had to do the following on any given day: play for one hour during roll call; accompany the work of other inmates for three hours; practise for two hours; play another three hours in the club, the barracks of the best workers or outside; and practise for one hour together with the singers or the players of the plucked string instrument circles. In total, this added up to a ten-hour working day, an ordeal for any brass or wind musician and a further example of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment in the Gulag. The brass and wind bands were to be organised like a military brass band using 'strictest discipline'.

The musicians were provided with good uniforms that were supposed to be supplemented by warm clothes in the winter, a privilege not granted to the other inmates. Moreover, they were supposed to get better food. Remarkably, a huge distinction was made between the musicians of brass and wind bands and those of symphony orchestras. At the end of May 1934, a decree was issued in which every job or activity in the camp was assigned to a catering category.³⁸

According to this decree, only conductors and brass and wind band musicians were assigned to the highest 'enforced supply category' of all the inmates engaged in 'cultural work'. Directors, actors, members of 'agitation brigades', 'educationalists' etc. were classified in the middle category whereas pianists, musicians of symphony orchestras and librarians were allocated to the lowest category together with the majority of the inmates. Obviously, brass and wind band musicians were the most appreciated.

In March 1936, the department of cultural education [kul'turno-vospitatel'niy otdel (KVO)] of Dmitlag called for submissions to a composition competition. This initiative can possibly be ascribed to the fact that the party newspaper *Pravda* organised competitions for the best popular song for the masses 'in freedom' (i.e. not in a camp) in 1936, with the Union of Soviet Writers and the Union of Soviet Composers.^{39, 40} On 12 June 1936, the camp manager Semyon Firin, who was very satisfied with how the competition had been conducted, announced the results. 112 works, composed by 73 inmates, had been submitted and evaluated by a jury of 'highly important Soviet composers such as Ivan Dzerzhinsky, Viktor Bely, Dmitry Kabalevsky, Boris Shekhter, Nikolay Chemberdzhii and Mikhail Starokadomsky'. They had selected twenty pieces, prizes for which were now to be awarded.

The song "Marsh betonshchikov" [March of the Concrete Workers] was awarded first place, and Firin decided to present 500 roubles each to its composer, Nikolay Tsedrik, and lyricist, Veniamin Kalent'yev, who had written the lyrics to most of the songs submitted for the competition. The second prize, 250 roubles, and the third prize, 150 roubles, were awarded twice. Eight inmates were given a certificate of

honour; another such certificate was given to the brass and wind band of the Khlebnikovskiy district for recording the tunes of inmates who could not notate music. The imprisoned composer Sergey Protopopov (1893–1954) was supposed to receive the badge of the shock worker and a sum of 100 roubles for the recording of songs and for his ‘good musical work’.

As the ‘music inspector’ of Dmitlag, Mikhail Chernyak, writes in his preface to the publication of selected songs from the competition, the first prize winner, Nikolay Tsedrik, played the trumpet in the brass and wind band of the central camp district. ‘The tune of this piece’, writes Chernyak, ‘will be easily learned by every circle, every brigade of concrete workers. There can be no doubt that Tsedrik’s march [...] will become the most popular song of every section’.⁴¹

The rhythm of the first two lines of the march’s melody strongly corresponds with that of the Internationale. The lyrics deal with the construction of a dam and appeal to the joy of work using expressions such as ‘we are marching on towards a cheerful life’. The last stanza translates as follows:

*As we say goodbye to our bleak existence
Now we can look cheerfully at the world,
A world in which a firm and free path of concrete
Will lead us into a great life.*

In an in-camp newspaper from Dmitlag, the composer Dmitry Kabalevsky praised the tune of the march, but complained about the harmonic complexity of the accompaniment, and that the accompaniments of the songs submitted for the contest were not written by the song composers themselves. In his catalogue of works, compiled in 1953, the composer Sergey Protopopov mentioned that he had revised the March of the Concrete Workers and written an accompaniment for it.⁴²

This shows that the competition was not fair. It was supposed to demonstrate the successful ‘re-education’ of inmates without higher musical education. Professional musicians such as Sergey Protopopov were necessary for the contest, because they could arrange accompaniments for the simple tunes of the other inmates and also rework those tunes to bring them into a more meaningful shape. Those musicians, however, were only marginally rewarded. In conclusion, this example reveals that the whole competition was staged, and that the concept of ‘cultural education’ had failed in this case.

For Protopopov, participation in musical work in the Gulag meant hopes of survival, because through this work he was better accommodated and better cared for than the other prisoners, and could avoid hard work. However, it should not be overlooked that his involvement in the contest represented a form of coercion. He was forced to arrange songs extolling life in the camp in which he was imprisoned and thereby robbed of his freedom. Moreover, he was not appreciated as the author of the accompaniment, nor recognised for his contribution to the winning piece, which was an attack on his rights to copyright.

It may be deduced that official musical activity in the Gulag in the 1920s and 1930s represented a grey zone, and also contributed to the character of the Gulag as a grey zone in general, being messy and disorganised.^{13 (p 32)} On the one hand, musical practice was a grey zone for the inmates because it simultaneously represented a source of strength and a chance for survival, but was also a means of torture, and many stages in between. On the other hand, it was a grey zone for the camp officials, as could be shown in the treatment of Protopopov or Terent’yev. Musical practices officially were intended to show the humane side of the

Gulag, but their function there was complex and ambivalent.

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