Society (2022) 59:278–281
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-022-00719-7

FORUM ARTICLE: RUSSIAN REGRESS: READING VICTOR ZASLAVSKY IN A TIME OF WAR

Shalamov's New Prose

Victor Zaslavsky [1,2]

Published online: 26 May 2022
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Abstract

Varlam Tikhonovich Shalamov, born in 1907, was a Soviet dissident author whose magnum opus, *Kolyma Stories*, reflects the fifteen years he spent in the Gulag, including six years as a slave in the gold mines of Kolyma. The article traces Shalamov's travails, beginning with his first arrest, in 1929, for participating in a student group that clandestinely published the so-called "Lenin's Testament," a text delineating the inadequacies of the Party leadership and recommending the removal of Stalin from the post of General Secretary of the Communist Party's Central Committee. In 1952 Shalamov, still in exile, succeeded in sending two collections of poetry written in Kolyma to Boris Pasternak, then living in Moscow. Pasternak received the poetry, which at the time had no chance of getting published, with enthusiasm. Thus began a correspondence between Pasternak and Shalamov about the dehumanizing effects of totalitarian rulership and the obligations of the writer to capture the political realities of the twentieth century.

Keywords Victor Zaslavsky · Varlam Shalamov · Boris Pasternak · Theodor Adorno · Kolyma Tales · Kolyma · Gulag literature · Totalitarianism

Varlam Tikhonovich Shalamov was born in 1907, into the family of an orthodox priest, in Vologda, the capital city of the eponymous northern Russian province. From early childhood he was interested in art and literature, dreaming of becoming a professional writer. As a university student in Moscow during the tumultuous 1920s, Shalamov observed and participated in the literary and political life of the capital.

Shalamov was arrested for the first time in 1929 for participating in a student group that clandestinely published the so-called "Lenin's Testament." This document, dictated in the form of a letter by the dying revolutionary leader early in 1923, was addressed to the 23rd Congress of the Communist Party. It clinically delineated the inadequacies of the Party leadership and recommended, among other measures, the removal of Stalin from the post of General Secretary of the Communist Party's Central Committee. The Congress delegates, the majority of whom were later murdered in the course of Stalin's purges, decided to prohibit the publication of the letter. The Testament thus became a state secret and, as a result, one of the first *samizdat* texts of the Soviet Union. In the stifling atmosphere of 1929, the year in which Stalin launched the collectivization of the countryside and "liquidation of the *kulaks* as a class," Shalamov's sentence of five years of forced labor for the crime of having participated in distributing Lenin's Testament would have seemed neither excessive, nor unusual.

As a labor camp inmate, Shalamov participated in the construction of a colossal chemical plant. He returned to Moscow in 1934, after completing his sentence. When the wave of the Great Terror commenced in 1937, Shalamov was arrested a second time for the same crime: "spreading the falsehood known as Lenin's Testament." This time he was sentenced to ten years in the Gulag and sent to the gold mines of Kolyma. Among the countless labor camps dotting the territory of the Soviet Union — from Siberia to Kazakhstan, from Moscow to Vladivostok — there was no camp worse than Kolyma. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in his detailed description of the infernal Stalinist Gulag system,

The author is deceased. Communication should be directed to the editor at dgordon@umass.edu

Originally published in Italian as the introduction to V. Salamov's (1990) *I racconti di Kolyma* (Palermo: Sellerio). The English translation is by Michael A. Zaslavsky. The copyright holder for the Italian translation rested with Sellerio. The publisher ceased to exist and has waived the rights for the translation. The copyright of the English translations is with Michael A. Zaslavsky.

✉ Victor Zaslavsky
dgordon@umass.edu

[1] Formerly professor at the Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, Canada

[2] Formerly professor at Luiss Guido Carli University, Rome, Italy

defined the mines of Kolyma, near the coldest inhabited regions of the planet, as the ultimate circle of this hell. Furthermore, in the diabolical ranking of sentences meted out by the Stalinist courts, Shalamov received one of the most terrifying: he was condemned to ten years of forced labor for "counter-revolutionary Trotskyite activities," a sentence just short of the infamous "ten years without right to correspondence" — a euphemism for immediate execution by firing squad. Following the saying "death solves all problems – no man, no problem," Stalin's administration ordered camp guards to use prisoners convicted of "counter-revolutionary Trotskyite activities" for "hard labor only." This signified a death sentence, merely deferred until the last drop of a prisoner's vital energy had been transformed into gold or coal extracted for the state.

In one of his tales Shalamov recounts that another inmate, the camp's typist, managed to eliminate the word "Trotskyite" while retyping his verdict. In this way, Shalamov appeared to have been sentenced for counter-revolutionary activity only. Even so, such a sentence did not allow much hope, and at the Gulag Shalamov received yet another sentence after being accused by another detainee of having called Ivan Bunin, who emigrated after the Revolution and received the Nobel Prize in literature in 1933, a "great Russian writer." In the end, Shalamov managed to survive two decades in the worst of Stalin's camps. This miracle was due in part to his exceptional bodily strength, and in part to his extraordinary will to live, sustained by a personal goal: to narrate the Gulag experience, bearing witness to millions of forgotten victims. To Stalin's favorite aphorism, well known among Russian intellectuals, that "the death of one man is a tragedy, the death of millions a statistic," Shalamov responded with the central idea of his literary work: "there is nothing more ignoble in the world than forgetting these crimes."

Freed in 1951, the writer was still forced to remain in Kolyma, now as an exile, rather than a prisoner. After Stalin's death he was permitted to move to a remote corner of European Russia, where he worked extracting peat. In 1952 Shalamov succeeded in sending two collections of poetry written in Kolyma to Boris Pasternak, then living in Moscow. Pasternak received the poetry, which at the time had no chance of getting published, with enthusiasm. And thus began a correspondence between Pasternak and Shalamov which continued until 1956, when Shalamov was permitted to return to Moscow during Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign. This extraordinary correspondence has exceptional value, not only for the individual histories of the two writers, but also for the history of twentieth century literature. It coincided with a dramatic period in both authors' lives: Shalamov, back from the death camps, began writing *Kolyma Stories*, the *magnus opus* of his life, while Pasternak was finishing *Doctor Zhivago*. Both considered their correspondence "a discourse on what is most important": on the principles of literary work and on the novel character of literature demanded by the twentieth century.

Shalamov recreated for Pasternak the story of "corrective labor" camps as a central institution of Stalinist civilization. The first camp, wrote Shalamov, was created in 1924 for participants of the anti-Bolshevik Kronstadt rebellion — though only for sailors identified by even numbers. Those with odd numbers were executed on the spot after the revolt was suppressed. Subsequently, the camps multiplied like mushrooms together with the industrial complexes envisioned by the five-year plans. Blanketing the entire country, some grew to gargantuan proportions, capable of holding a million prisoners. Shalamov rejected any facile analogy to slave systems of antiquity, in which the slave represented something of value to the master who, for this reason, was motivated to afford the minimal conditions necessary for survival. In Stalin's society, the lives of prisoners were of no such value to the state because the security organs could procure an unlimited number of replacements. Moreover, the economic utility of detainees conflicted with their political status as enemies of the regime destined for elimination. As extermination camps, Stalinist camps were not as striking as the Nazi camps designed for that purpose. There were no gas chambers, nor other technologically advanced methods in use.

The contradiction between economic utility and political threat was resolved in a very simple manner: the detainee had to work until succumbing to an unsustainable work regime, freezing temperatures, malnutrition, and mistreatment by the guards. Yet the inventiveness of the camp authorities could be no less striking than the technological inventiveness employed in the Nazi project of mass extermination. Shalamov wrote of a camp commander who was able to "send six feet under" 90% of the camp's inmates in a span of six months; as a result he was promoted and decorated for excellent performance of duties. The guards of another camp, tasked with executing prisoners condemned to death, found that one bullet could be enough for two men. They had to pair prisoners of approximately the same height, but were rewarded for economizing ammunition. In his letters to Pasternak, Shalamov related a series of "random images" engraved in his memory that were to seed his *Kolyma Stories*. "The work-day lasts sixteen hours. People sleep on their feet, leaning against the spades. You can neither sit, nor lie down – you would be executed on the spot … Pale darkness with the blue tint of a winter night. Sixty degrees below. A band plays marches on silver trumpets in front of half-dead detainees. In the yellow light given off by enormous petrol torches, a guard reads the list of prisoners executed for not having fulfilled the productivity quota."

Shalamov concluded that the Gulag represented the very essence of the Stalinist system. The worst consequence of the Gulag, as of Stalinist society in general, was "the corruption of mind and heart, as the idea that it is possible not only to live without meat, sugar, clothing, shoes, but also without honor, conscience, love, and duty is inculcated day by day in an increasingly convincing manner to the vast majority of people.

Man is completely stripped of his humanity." This terrifying denudation was the truly novel experience that Stalinist society proposed to humanity.

The recurring theme in the correspondence of Shalamov and Pasternak concerns the role of literature with respect to this new reality. Both agreed that literature remained the most suitable means for preserving and conveying this new experience. But what kind of literature? In articles, notes, and diaries written after Pasternak's death that remained unpublished before his own, Shalamov repeatedly asserted the inadequacy of classical literature, whether Russian or international, for the mission at hand. He wrote: "I have no right to speak for anyone, except maybe for Kolyma's dead. I want to express my opinion on human behavior in specific circumstances, not in order to lecture anyone. But I think that whoever reads my stories will realize just how futile are the old ideas and schemas of traditional literature."

Shalamov knew that "art requires constant innovation." From youth he had been blessed with an extraordinary memory for literary texts, and had constantly wrestled with correspondences and comparisons between his own efforts and the "suggestions, plots and ideas of others." But after the Gulag, he no longer felt this necessity or doubted his abilities: "I have accumulated such a reserve of novelty as to not fear repetition."

Shalamov was convinced that the Russian author who would make sense of this new type of existential experience must oppose two types of deceit, two kinds of lie. The first was the lie of the dominant ideology shaping contemporary literature — the lie that "beginning with kindergarten, convinces the young that the world they inhabit is the best possible achievement of humanity, and that any doubt in this regard is only the dangerous delirium of the old." Yet, for the writer, there was also a second lie, even more difficult to defeat as it constitutes an integral component of the contemporary literary system: "There is a profound absence of truth in the transformation of suffering into an object of art, in the idea that blood, suffering and pain can be presented in paintings, verses, novels. This is a complete and utter falsehood. The worst thing for a writer is when the writing signifies distancing from pain and alleviating one's own suffering."

Shalamov discerned in the advent of a new kind of reader the principal *raison d'être* of a new kind of prose: "The reader of the 20th century does not want to read invented stories. He does not have time for invented destinies." Theodor Adorno famously declared that after Auschwitz writing poetry is barbaric. Shalamov's experience led him to a similar conclusion: "It seems to me that the man of the second half of the 20th century, who has survived the wars, the revolutions, the atomic explosion at Hiroshima, and above all the betrayal and shame of Kolyma and Auschwitz, cannot but face art in a different manner than in the past." Shalamov gave himself the task of creating a new prose corresponding to a new reality and a new reader. In a series of essays — "Poetry as a Universal Language", "About My Prose", "On the New Prose" — he analyzed his own works and the status of contemporary literature, formulating principles of the "new prose" inherent in the *Kolyma Stories* and other works. Above all this new prose had to be based on documentary material, on the true "lifeblood of the times." "I have charged myself with the duty of creating a documentary testimony of my epoch that conserves all possible persuasive emotional force," he often repeated. Shalamov formulated the role of literature as a mode of participation and witness: "the new prose is the event itself, the struggle, and not its simple description. That is the document, the direct participation of the author in the happenings of existence. Prose lived as document." The writing called for by the new reality could no longer be approached with the methods of conventional psychological literature, no matter how refined.

Shalamov represented the human being "in the gravest of circumstances, never heretofore described, when man approaches a state beyond the human." The writer Lev Timofeev, who spent two years in the Gulag, albeit in the incomparably more favorable conditions of the Gorbachev era, understood this characteristic of Shalamov's prose better than others. "Death is the compositional foundation of Shalamov's prose," stressed Timofeev. "Before Shalamov, death, its threat or proximity, was often the driving force of a plot, and the moment of death, its end." But in Shalamov's prose "death, non-being, constitutes that world where the action takes place. The moment of death precedes the plot. The boundary between life and death is crossed by the characters even before the book is opened."

The world of the Gulag is a world of the condemned, held in inhuman conditions, who slide inexorably towards death. Though in one sense its denizens live on the cusp of death, in another they have already been rendered dead by the omnipotent regime that has condemned them. The artist, wrote Shalamov, is "Pluto who ascends from Hades, not Orpheus who descends there." And he defined his own work as a precise "recording of what little remained in the individual" under these conditions.

In world literature it is difficult to find analogies to Shalamov's almost clinical analysis of how camp inmates lose the capacity to perceive the surrounding world and the order in which human sentiments evaporate. In rare cases of prisoners' return to normal life, he notes the succession in which human sentiments reappear ("compassion for animals reemerges before compassion for fellow human beings"), as well as the reawakening of the capacity to distinguish oneself from objects, the recall of long-lost words, and their reconnection to objects and phenomena.

Shalamov considered the experience of the camps absolutely negative. He stressed that the Gulag experience was for naught and that much of what was learned in the camp

suffocated the will to live: “Our epoch demonstrates that life has no rational foundation.” Yet, he sought meaning of his literary work, and of his very existence, in “willing myself to recall all that I have seen.” And paradoxically, his prose, despite the desperate quality of the events represented by this terrible and tragic period of Russian history, leaves not only a sense of bitterness in the reader, but also a sense of catharsis, of renewal. The writer Frida Vigdorova, known for her human rights activism during the Brezhnev period, described this effect eloquently: “Your stories are the cruelest I have ever read, the most bitter, the most desperate. Your men are without a past, without biography, without memories. Your stories show that disgrace does not unite men, that a man of the Gulag thinks only of himself, of his survival. And yet why, after closing your manuscript, does one still believe in honor, in goodness and in human dignity? It is a secret I do not know how to explain; I do not know how it comes about, but it is so.”

The freed Shalamov did not, in his lifetime, have a happy literary destiny. While appreciated by some of Russia’s cultural elite, he remained practically unknown to the reading public. Soviet censorship impeded the publication of his work and, with the exception of a few collections of his poetry, nothing was published in his motherland during his lifetime. *Kolyma Stories* appeared only abroad, first in Russian and then in translation. In 1972 political pressure at home constrained the sixty-five-year-old writer to sign a letter, appearing in the *Literaturnaya Gazeta* weekly newspaper, protesting the publication of his short stories abroad (because, the letter claimed, “such issues are no longer relevant.”) In intellectual circles this letter was read as a recantation. Shalamov had hoped that the compromise embodied by the letter would permit publication of his work in the Soviet Union. But the authorities never forgave nor conceded anything. He continued to live alone, receiving a miserly pension, supported by friends who were just as poor.

In his final years Shalamov suffered from Parkinson’s disease, impeding his writing, as well as from a “hunger syndrome” typical of Gulag survivors. He bought as much food as he could afford, stashing it in a closet in his communal apartment. When the food deteriorated and started to rot, he could not bring himself to throw it away. He was moved to a sanatorium for invalids where, until his final days, he dictated new verses to friends who continued to visit. KGB agents continued to surveil him in an effort to prevent further publication of his works abroad, intimidating both his friends and the administrators of the sanatorium, until the latter, to get rid of their inconvenient patient, transferred him to an asylum for the chronically insane. In mid-January of 1982 he was transferred in secret, and by force, to the asylum. Being only lightly dressed during the cold of the Moscow winter, he fell ill and died of pneumonia just three days later. He was buried in a Moscow cemetery, not far from the tomb of his friend Nadezhda Mandelstam, to whom he had dedicated one of his best stories.

Now that official Soviet literature, with its thousands of Writer’s Union members,[1] innumerable publishing houses, and ranks of literary bureaucrats, has collapsed, Shalamov’s greatness is recognized by readers and literary critics across Russia.

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Victor Zaslavsky (1937–2009) was a political sociologist and creative writer. Born in Leningrad, he was forced to emigrate from the Soviet Union in 1975. Among his books are *The Neo-Stalinist State: Class, Ethnicity, & Consensus in Soviet Society* (1982) and *Class Cleansing: The Massacre at Katyn* (first published in Italian, 1998; English translation, 2008). The German translation of *Class Cleansing* (2007) received the Hannah Arendt Prize in political thought from the Heinrich Böll Foundation. The book explores the truth and cover-up of the murder of 25,000 Poles by the Soviet Secret Police in the Katyn Forest. Zaslavsky held academic appointments at the Memorial University of Newfoundland, the Free International University for Social Science in Rome, Stanford University, and the University of California, Berkeley.

[1] Founded in 1934 by decree of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the Union of Soviet Writers, by officially recognizing professional writers, poets, critics, and other literary workers, extended Party and State control over Soviet literature.