

Paper Presented at the 2019 ASN World Convention, Columbia University 2-4 May 2019

Do No Cite Without the Permission of the Author

David Kaminsky  
State University of New York at Binghamton

### **Penal Landscapes: Memory and the Environment in the Soviet Gulag System**

#### **Introduction**

In Anton Chekhov's play, *Uncle Vanya*, the character Dr. Astrov laments how the other characters don't recognize the importance of the forests and how these forests, "enhance the beauty of the land, that man learns what's beautiful from them."<sup>1</sup> Decades later, how did Aleksander Solzhenitsyn feel that, "You come to hate this forest, this beauty of the earth, whose praises have been sung in verse and prose. You come to walk beneath the arches of pine and birch with a shudder of revulsion!"<sup>2</sup> What happened in between Chekhov's play and Solzhenitsyn's lamentations? The intention of this paper is to investigate how various Gulag memoirists wrote, thought, and remembered the penal landscape and environment they were held in. The paper follows a framework set by Christopher Ely in his work, *This Meager Nature*. Ely describes a dichotomy in perceptions of the Russian landscape, which was seen as miserable and yet admirable. This dichotomy was slightly altered through the Gulag experience as many came to see the landscape as deadly, yet admirable. The central questions this paper seeks to examine is how these memoirists came to understand the natural landscape in and around

---

<sup>1</sup> Anton Chekhov found in Stephen Brain, *Song of the Forest: Russian Forestry and Stalinist Environmentalism, 1905-1953* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), pg. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago Abridged: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, Reissue, Abridged edition (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2007), pg. 221.

their penal environment and what, if anything, does that illuminate about Soviet identity formation in response to life in the Gulag. Finally, the paper analyzes how the state weaponized nature and the environment to dehumanize and oppress convicts, as well as by the convicts as a means to humanize themselves and transcend the camp's borders and boundaries to past memories and experiences.

This paper is an initial foray into an area in which I hope to do further research-namely the Gulag's impact on the environment and how penal nature was used to forge a Soviet identity. I am interested in seeing how the central organs and administrators viewed the environment- that is, how did they regard the landscape to which they were sending scores of people to and how they understood the use of space/the environment as a tool of punishment. In short, this paper is intended to be a launching point for further investigations into how nature and the environment can be linked to political violence and how both the perpetrators and victims understood this nature.

To launch this investigation, I begin with analyzing memoirs. While memoirs contain their own sets of problems and memory is a notoriously tricky topic, they provide a unique insight into the perspective of inmates and their own interactions with the natural environment. Memoirs also portray how highly educated prisoners engaged with the legacy and lineage of the penal environment and landscapes in Russian literature, as seen in Ely's work. I examine a range of memoirs covering political dissidents, female and male experiences, as well as a more "common" criminal. Existing research into the Gulag has not yet fully dealt with the role of nature and it's use as a tool of repression and strength for inmates and its role in Russian identity formation and literature. This paper is an initial investigation to fill that gap.

### **Gulag Historiography**

Recent and seminal works on the Gulag have tended to wrestle with a few major questions concerning the administration, function, and culture of the camps. Some argue the camps were created purely out of economic need. Others contend that they were a logical ideological outgrowth of Bolshevik maxims, and still others claim that the Gulag's creation was a political venture launched with the sole purpose of ridding the state of real or imagined enemies. None, however, fully address the role of the penal environment in Soviet identity formation, though they do address the porous nature of the camps and the need for them to be seen as an important segment of Soviet society.

Anne Applebaum and Galina Ivanova both argue strongly that the Gulag has an inherently economic foundation. Applebaum contends that the camps were created, expanded, and ran for the most part for the purpose of economic extraction and for the colonization of isolated and underdeveloped areas. Camp administrative practices, such as regimes of punishment and reward, were developed and enacted to wring the most labor and production out of prisoners. Similarly, Galina Ivanova argued that, even though the camps were radically inefficient, they remained a vital part of the Soviet economy. Through the camps, labor was made available in every Oblast, and she stresses the importance of prison labor for various projects such as building Moscow and supplying the Red Army with supplies and munitions.<sup>3</sup> In

---

<sup>3</sup> Galina Mikhailovna Ivanova et al., *Labor Camp Socialism: The Gulag in the Soviet Totalitarian System: The Gulag in the Soviet Totalitarian System* (Routledge, 2015), 84-113, 189.

short, both contend that, while widely inefficient, the Gulag system was a vital cog to the Soviet system.

Alan Barenberg, in his study of far northern city Vorkuta, also stresses the inefficient yet vital contribution of the camps to the Soviet economy in general and the Soviet war effort in particular. He also greatly contributes to the debate on how the Gulag camps were a mirror of Soviet society at large. He demonstrates that the line between the camp and free society was a porous one with much blurring and intermixing.<sup>4</sup> For example, the city of Vorkuta was built mainly by Gulag labor and it became nearly impossible to separate inmates, former inmates, and free citizens in the city. Oleg Khlevniuk also touches upon this theme. He claimed the camps were a revolving door of people entering and exiting and that society in the camps reflected society outside of it. He displays this by depicting how events outside the camps, such as Kirov's murder, WWII, and the Sovietization of newly acquired territories, all deeply impacted life inside the camps. He also contributes to the conversation of the inherent purpose of the camp system by arguing the central role Stalin played in the camps and how he crafted the system as a political tool to rid society of his political opponents.<sup>5</sup>

Aleksander Solzhenitsyn's seminal work on the Gulag contributed to both these debates as well. His view of the camps was highly ideologically driven, arguing that the only reason a person could commit acts of evil was in the name of ideology and that one of the main reasons the camps were created, defended, and maintained was through ideology. He maintained that ideology enabled people to torture, lie, and kill. The camps survived and were run because

---

<sup>4</sup> Alan Barenberg, *Gulag Town, Company Town* (Yale University Press, 2014), pg. 38, 65.

<sup>5</sup> Oleg V. Khlevniuk and David J. Nordlander, *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror* (Yale University Press, 2004), pg. 331.

ideology allowed people to act and excuse themselves after committing awful crimes.

Solzhenitsyn also argued that the camps were a hidden archipelago, with their own language, culture, and customs, running counter to both Barenberg's and Steven Barnes' perception of the camps that displays them as open and porous.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, historian Steven Barnes depicts how the camps were used to construct a Soviet society and to forge a "new man." His book demonstrated how those arrested were given one last chance to "redeem" themselves in the state's eyes. He also argued that the economic importance of the Gulag had been previously over emphasized as he saw the camps as a penal/corrective institution first and foremost. He also contends that the camps highly reflected life outside their confines. For example, he claims that education drives were remarkably similar inside and outside of the camps and broader societal trends were mirrored inside the camps.

While all of these works touch on myriad of themes regarding the Gulag and Soviet society, they all, more or less, leave untouched the role of nature and the environment in camp administrative practices and in prisoner experience. As previously mentioned, the forest has had an important place in Russian literature and identity. How did transforming these forests into a penal landscape affect Russian and Soviet cultural understanding of the forest? How might this question further the conversation about how the Gulag affected Soviet society and identity and about how people, who Barnes claimed could be redeemed and Barenberg claimed were able to move in and out of the camp and Soviet society at large, viewed the environment they were in. If, like Barnes argues, people were able to be redeemed, was the environment

---

<sup>6</sup> Solzhenitsyn, pg. 173.

redeemable? Or was it simply a tool of oppression? This paper will analyze in detail a few of these themes, particularly the dichotomies of the penal landscape, how those dichotomies affected Russian and Soviet identity, and how the environment was used to both humanize and de-humanize prisoners.

### **“Oh god, why did you create us?”: Framework and Context**

Christopher Ely’s work *This Meager Nature* provides a useful conceptual framework to analyze the relationship between people, landscapes, and national identity. Ely’s work highlights how Russian intellectual elites began to formulate their national identity through new understandings of a national Russian landscape. Russian intellectuals took European sensibilities regarding landscapes and landscape painting and added particular Russian features in an attempt to formulate a vision for the Russian nation via their nature. In other words, Russian elites were creating a “Russian nature” to unify a newly forming conscious Russian identity.<sup>7</sup>

A method in which this was done in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was to grant religious overtones to the natural landscape. The land was seen as meagre and modest, such as the serfs that inhabited it. This meagre land enabled a dichotomy between seeing the Russian land and nature as something meek and at times loathsome, as well as respected, appreciated, and enjoyed as something uniquely Russian. The outer gloom of the landscape was to provide for an inner beauty and introspection, creating an image of Russian nature as both miserable and admirable and something uniquely Russian.<sup>8</sup> In short, as Ely argues that creating a “Russian

---

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Ely, *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2009) pg.5-22.

<sup>8</sup> Ely, pg. 228.

nature” was a vital part to creating the modern Russian nation as it sought to create a unifying image of what was Russian.

Chekhov’s *Sakhalin Island* provides a valuable example of how Russian penal nature was viewed and understood before the Gulag and its legacy. Analyzing Chekhov’s work provides a better idea of how Russians saw the penal landscape, what that meant to Russian identity, and reveals a new aspect and relationship between prisoners and nature. In short, Chekhov’s work not only provides a useful context, but also plays a role in the lineage of how intellectual convicts understood the penal nature.

Chekhov undertook the arduous and dangerous trip to Sakhalin to witness the penal colonies first-hand. Throughout his works, he brings up a number of contradictions and dichotomies, many with their own contradictions and grey areas, though they provide a useful conceptual framework within which to work. The main contradictions Chekhov raises through his travels to and on Sakhalin Island fall within the dichotomy that Ely raises in his book, a mutual understanding of the Russian landscape as both miserable and yet admirable, the similarities and differences in understandings of the landscape between prisoners and intelligentsia, and the contradictory understanding of this landscape as both foreign and yet Russian.

Chekhov describes the Eastern nature as both miserable and admirable through his constant frustration and recognition of the power of the nature on his travels. He consistently regales his readers with stories about roads that cannot be taken or boats that cannot be boarded because of floods, frost, or weather. While at times not unique to Siberia or the East, his stories admit that this nature eludes the control of humans. This at times frustrates Chekhov

and yet he seems to respect the power within these natural forces. Furthermore, while Chekhov describes Siberians as having no time for art or leisure as they battle against nature for survival, he claims that this nature needs to be escaped and conquered. In other words, the nature is not under control and in order to bring art and civilization this miserable land needed to be either escaped or tamed.<sup>9</sup>

Constantly throughout his journey Chekhov laments the monotonous, grey landscape, the pathetic, harsh woods, and the damned cursed land. For example, for 2,000 *versts* from Russia to Siberia the land's major characteristic according to Chekhov are that it is, "barren," "bleak," and snows in May. While he laments this cursed and miserable land, he also finds much to be admired in it. On the approach to Sakhalin, Chekhov can't help but be taken aback by the beauty of the landscape, by the whales and black volcanic cliffs, and suddenly struck with an impending sense of fear. On the island the beauty of this feared and wretched land is so striking that he suggests the very landscape painters that Ely studied should journey to Sakhalin to capture its beauty in paintings. Through his journey to Sakhalin and while upon the island Chekhov constantly either bemoaned the grey, paltry nature, or was in frustration or fear of the uncontrollable and imposing landscape. Simultaneously, he also recognizes not just a deep beauty in it, but a beauty unique for Russians. In describing the Takoay Valley he describes the fauna as livelier than in northern Russia, but it, "smiles and is sad...and arouses an indefinable feeling in a *Russian* soul [My italics]." This nature cannot be described as a blank canvas, but as

---

<sup>9</sup> Anton Chekhov, *Sakhalin Island* (Alma Books, 2018), pg11, 16, 29, 56-63.

something that will, according to Chekov, mean something unique to a Russian, whoever that is at this point.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the best way to summarize Chekhov's dichotomy of the nature in Russia's penal system is to quote how he described waves from the Pacific Ocean lapping upon the shore of Sakhalin. He portrays it as an eerie, sinister sound that draws one into its monotonous waves, dragging one to thought and introspection. The cold, grey, waves seemed to ask him, "Oh god, why did you create us?" while there is something sinister about them as well. Yet at the same time, Chekhov found something calming and peaceful in these waves, showing his contradictory understanding of the miserable yet admirable nature he takes in.<sup>11</sup> The uniquely Russian nature is not neutral, but sparks certain emotions in distinctly Russian souls, hinting at how the penal environment led to a national Russian consciousness.

As Chekhov shows us, intelligentsia exiles and ordinary convicts had nuanced views of this landscape. Intelligentsia exiles in Siberia bemoan the boring and monotonous nature of the landscape, though both the intelligentsia and the convicts agree that after the Yenisei is reached the taiga truly begins and the journey becomes beautiful. Both convict and intellectual sense the impending doom in the black cliffs as they approach Sakhalin, hinting at some unified opinion of the nature and a response to its representation of repression. While there are numerous occasions in which the intelligentsia and convicts come to similar understandings on how they view the landscape, they are just as many where they have divergent opinions. For instance, in one scene Chekhov admires the beauty of Sakhalin, comparing the sky to "back

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 34, 52, 121

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 196.

home” in European Russia and admires the cliffs. His convict coachman overhears him and responds, “It’s miserable here, Your Excellency. It’s better back home in Russia.”<sup>12</sup>

These divergences and agreements over the perception of Russia’s penal nature provide an example to how these views of the environment shaped the understanding and identity of Russianness at the time and how class both cut through understandings of the environment and did not. There was some unified thought on the beauty of the taiga, a fear of the Far East, and an understanding that the Far East was not the same as, “back home in Russia.” Similarly, throughout his journey, Chekhov compares what he sees in Sakhalin to “back home” in European Russia, just like his convict coachman did. On his journey to Sakhalin and once there, Chekhov consistently describes the environment as foreign, un-Russian, that there are no Russian names for the beauty of the taiga, and the environment is from another planet. This again, hints at a forming Russian identity. Chekhov is coming to terms with what is Russian and what is not. Is this land Russian, is this penal system Russian? Evgeniya Ginzburg, Nadezhda Mandelstam, and Varlam Shalamov come to terms with similar questions as well.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, Chekhov deals with the use of the nature as a penal method in and of itself. Nature intimidates and dehumanizes its inhabitants. He describes the process of silent, cold death for convicts in Siberia and how the taiga was a “green monster” with no end meant to drown escapees. Furthermore, the legend and impending cliffs of Sakhalin itself induced fear and brought tears to the eyes of approaching convicts. Lastly, Chekhov also speaks about how the lack of sun brought the worst out of people. The shortage of sunshine seemed to rob

---

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 34, 64.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 42, 115.

people of their morality and humanity. In short, Chekhov displays how this nature not only intimidated convicts but deprived them of aspects of their humanity such as control over their own morality. This topic will be probed further later in the paper.<sup>14</sup>

These complex and at times contradicting views of the nature and how nature was used to dehumanize in the penal system carried over into the Soviet Gulag experience. While nature still intimidated convicts its role grew to not only be seen as daunting yet beautiful, but to provide a tool to humanize and to survive. Nature would come to play an important role in connecting to a greater sense of humanity and transcending the camp's boundaries as well as contradictorily be weaponized to kill convicts.

### **Conspiratorial Nature: Shalamov**

Varlam Shalamov spent almost two decades in the most remote and harsh camps in the Gulag penal system and wrote a series of Chekhovian short stories about his experience. Shalamov picks up on many of the themes of 19<sup>th</sup> century painter and writers-- notably, the contradictory view of nature and how nature was used to both take away convicts' humanity and how it provided inspiration as well. However, unlike Chekhov and Ely, the contradiction that Shalamov writes about does not concern a nature that is meager and yet admirable, but rather one that is beastly and yet beautiful. Shalamov grapples with how this landscape can be so beautiful and yet at times deadly, complicit in the state's punishment regime.

There are many instances where Shalamov describes the beautiful landscape that surrounded him. For example, on his marches out to work he describes the sugary snowy hills and the intense yet simple colors of the taiga. One of his favorite subjects in nature, however,

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 4, 35, 110.

was the Siberian dwarf cedar. It was a sign of the changing seasons, the bellwether for the ephemeral spring and was, “always green, always alive,” and a model for survival in the harsh conditions.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, Shalamov depicts the seemingly magical qualities of the earth, describing how trees were able to grow out of and endure the rocks and permafrost, offering a lesson in how to survive in the taiga. Shalamov also noted that, “Only the shorter twisted trees, tormented from following a constantly shifting sun and warmth, manage to stand firm...they have kept up such an intense struggle for existence for so long that their tortured, gnarled wood is worthless.” Even the indiscriminate northern construction firms would not touch this wood, nor would people looking for firewood exhaust themselves over them. Thus, they took, “their vengeance for their broken northern lives,” as they out survived the others.<sup>16</sup> In short, Shalamov saw in these trees a way to survive the harsh world of Kolyma. The nature was miserable yet admirable in its suffering, in a way a window into Shalamov’s understanding of his own story.

If, as other scholars have argued, the Gulag was a reflection of Soviet society, then these ideas about the Siberian dwarf cedar might have had some impact on Soviet identity formation. With so many people returning from, to use Khlevniuk’s term, the revolving door of the camps, these ideas about survival and what it takes to manage in the modern Soviet state that Shalamov saw through these trees could have come back to the main land. It is important to keep in mind, however, as Barnes points out, that these intellectual prisoners, such as

---

<sup>15</sup> Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales* (Penguin UK, 1994), pg. 25.

<sup>16</sup> Shalamov, pg. 36-39.

Shalamov, were often faced with the harshest circumstances and were moved the slowest through the revolving doors. That being said, Shalamov's interpretation of the nature around him contributed to intellectual and literary traditions regarding the Russian penal landscape as seen in Chekhov.

While Shalamov saw commendable traits in the nature around him at Kolyma, he also depicted danger and bewilderment. For example, he continues his observations of trees and notices a prisoner who hangs himself from one or another one who cuts off his fingers on a tree stump in an attempt to be sent to a hospital ward. The trees, in a sense, were always there, always watching as bystanders.<sup>17</sup> These trees, while the short and gnarled survived, the largest were often knocked down as they were, "barely able to hold themselves upright in the inhospitable earth of the permafrost, and storms easily rip[ed] them loose, tearing up their roots, toppling them to the ground."<sup>18</sup> The trees could be a metaphor for Soviet society, the large trees are easy to topple in the volatile ground and the roots are easy to rip up in harsh soil much like how many top officials were arrested or how difficult it is to grow a healthy society in such a violent environment and so forth. It is difficult to ascertain what exact metaphor Shalamov saw in the trees, perhaps to him they represented the strongest prisoners who worked to fulfil the norms and died off first as he mentions in his tales, but regardless trees played an important intellectual and spiritual role in Shalamov's writings.

Shalamov wasn't the only one who saw a connection with the trees and people. That state seemed to understand this linkage as well. Shalamov writes of a telegram sent to deliver

---

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 46.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 86.

200 more people to the mines in Kolyma that called for 200 more trees to be sent. It is illuminating to see that the state apparatus used the code name “trees” for people, hinting at an equivalence of the two. Both were to be used for the same purposes interchangeably.<sup>19</sup>

Shalamov’s contradictions didn’t end with the trees. He also noted the anxious and eerie silence the forest can produce as well as a sense of danger and bewilderment. He also noted how beautiful scenes, such as the previously mentioned trees, the mountain tops, and the glowing sunsets can be warped to be seen as sharp, unfriendly, and never allowing a sense of warmth.<sup>20</sup> In essence, his understanding of nature could shift depending on the time, place, and atmosphere. What in one instance was beautiful could easily become depressing in the next. In other words, Shalamov depicted the dichotomies and contradictions that both Ely and Chekhov analyzed and produced. Nature in Kolyma was both beautiful and an example of how to survive and was also deadly, cold, sharp, and dangerous. These contradictions took a symbol of Russian identity like the forest and fostered it into a way to understand the Gulag. They also continued legacies of understanding Russian penal nature as seen in Chekhov.

Though Shalamov demonstrated more clearly how the environment was used to dehumanize and strip the convicts of a sense of their humanity, he also depicted how nature *restored* humanity. For example, he noted when he had softer jobs rest consisted of paying attention to the, “sun, the forest, and the pale-blue tall sky.”<sup>21</sup> He also writes about his need to survive to see the cold, tall, sky, a reminder of an outside world. In other words, rest consisted of re-connecting with the nature around and being able to comprehend it as beautiful and not

---

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 157.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 286.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 41.

harmful. The ability to understand nature as something pleasant seemed to be a basic tenant of what it meant to be human.

However, for the most part Shalamov notes how the nature was used as a penal method. Much like Chekhov, he describes how the cold could freeze the brain, the soul, and morals, stripping people of their humanity. The Kolyma morning was the same as the Kolyma night, constant darkness or constant light, that caused bewilderment that reminds of the methods of interrogation in Solzhenitsyn and Ginzburg's works. The environment seemed to be so perfectly enabled for punishment that Shalamov exclaimed, "Nature in the north is not impersonal or indifferent, it is in conspiracy with those who sent us here."<sup>22</sup> The cold, the wind, the light, seemed to work against the prisoners themselves and alongside the desires of the state. This view of nature also instrumentalized both the prisoners and the environment they were in. Prisoners were seen as tools to implement policies while nature was viewed as a tool to both punish and extract resources from.

One of the more moving and disturbing contradictions Shalamov displays was a vignette about burying bodies in Kolyma. Like Chekhov, Shalamov described the permafrost and rock as foreign, not of this planet, something that couldn't fully be comprehended. The rock and permafrost, according to Shalamov, could not keep secrets. Bodies could not be buried in the permafrost and rock; they were rejected from the earth and provided an unnatural death for the victims of Kolyma and robbed them of their humanity in their last act. Grass and summer could forget, but not constant winter and rock. These kept the secrets of Kolyma alive as a corpse was easily preserved and recognizable ten years later as. Shalamov wrote that, "the

---

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 76.

north resisted with all its strength...not accepting the corpses into its bowels.” He claimed that the bodies needed the earth to be buried to reach their final resting point, while the permafrost wasn’t earth but a foreign object, rejecting the corpses final grasp at humanity.<sup>23</sup> In other words, the permafrost both rejected the corpses final attempts at a proper burial, but also maintained their faces and identity allowing these crimes to never be fully hidden.

In conclusion, Shalamov depicted both the contradictions of nature and of its use to both dehumanize and to provide humanity to prisoners. He saw the environment as something to look to for comfort and for advice on how to survive in Kolyma, yet he also saw nature as a co-conspirator with the regime that sent him there in the first place. Shalamov nicely fits into a slightly modified version of Ely’s contradiction of Russian nature. Instead of viewing nature as meager and yet admirable, Shalamov saw it as deadly and admirable and as a means to transcend his camp life back into a broader sense of humanity.

Following the revolving door theory of the Gulag, Shalamov’s depictions of nature gives a glimpse at wider Russian re-interpretations of nature, their relationship to it, and their identity. Shalamov also contributes to a growing literary tradition coming out of the Gulag from intellectuals and how they understood their experience in penal nature. Finally, Shalamov displayed how the state used the environment to rob people of their humanity. People were seen the same as trees, as an instrument to be used, while the cold was meant to kill, the lack of sunlight meant to bewilder. At the same time, Shalamov looked to survive for another glimpse at the pale-blue sky and found relief at paying more attention to the beautiful nature that surrounded him; the trees, mountains, and rivers. In other words, Shalamov’s work

---

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 281-283.

provides a clear picture of how Russian identity evolved from Chekhov in their understanding of Russian penal nature. The same contradictions that Ely raised were still there, just slightly modified.

### **A Reason to Live: Ginzburg**

Evgeniya Ginzburg spent years in solitary confinement and then considerable time in the Far East at Kolyma. Arrested for “associations” with a former colleague, Ginzburg also contributes to the conversation about the contradictions of Russian penal nature and how the environment was used both to dehumanize and was longed for to remind oneself of humanity.

Ginzburg writes about how beautiful the nature she was witnessing was, but she is also more matter-of-fact about Shalamov’s symbol: the trees. She describes felling trees without much mention of any other understanding of the trees as anything more than a norm to be met and as an impediment to full rations. However, she describes at various points the beauty of sunsets and sunrises or the feeling and smell of sand on the journey to Kolyma as pleasant and reminding her of her childhood. When she arrived at Kolyma, the landscape was simultaneously described as marvelous and beautiful, like a Japanese painting (it’s noticeable that it is described as a *Japanese* painting, not a Russian one) yet later in her journey she describes a feeling of being trapped by the Sea of Okhotsk and the volcanic hills. These hills were, like the painting she described, seen as foreign and distinctly not Russian. This seems to follow Chekhov’s understanding of the Far East as something alien and not quiet Russian.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, Ginzburg describes her journey to the Elgen *kolkhoz*, or state farm, as both simultaneously beautiful and yet miserable and mournful--again, harkening back to Chekhov’s

---

<sup>24</sup> Eugenia Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002), pg. 191, 330, 359.

understandings of Russian penal nature. She describes the journey as out of a fairy tale full of sugar loaf hills and as something like that out of an adventurous Jack London novel. As she approached the camp, however, she noted that the landscape became drab and mournful. Again, this contradictory view of nature gives a glimpse into views of penal nature and its impact on identity formation. There is an understanding that the land that makes up this foreign-yet-Russian land is both beautiful and yet dreadful, mournful, and dangerous. It both distracts and provides hope and takes away hope at the same time.<sup>25</sup>

Ginzburg also wrote often about how the environment gave her hope and a longing to transcend the camp boundaries to reach a broader sense of humanity and, yet, it was simultaneously used as a tool to dehumanize and punish the prisoners. For instance, in most of these Gulag memoirs the sky was a recurring theme and Ginzburg was no different. One of Ginzburg's greatest fears upon entering solitary confinement was forgetting the color of the sky and the flow of the Volga. The color of the sky and the sound of a river represented some of the most basic aspects of what it meant to be human. Like Shalamov, being able to appreciate nature seems to be a basic human need. At a stop while being transported out from prison Ginzburg wrote of drinking in the Volga air and listening to the seagulls that brought her a reprieve. The river and its animals reconnected her to a life outside of the prison and gave her a sense of humanity again.<sup>26</sup>

While in prison the sliver of the pale-blue Yaroslavl sky from the window in her cell gave her something to look forward to and reach for. During her exercise and walks in the prison

---

<sup>25</sup> Ginzburg, pg. 396-397.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 191-192.

yard the prisoners constantly attempted to glean a look upward towards the sky, towards the reminder of what it meant to be human by connecting to a broader sense of nature. This was illegal and guards enforced them to look at the ground instead, thus attempting to sabotage their attempts at connecting with the sky. In other words, the sky was seen as something beyond prison life and something that could bring back a sense of humanity and the guards did their best to rob the prisoners of this sense of humanity. On the ground there were at times weak flowers that would grow through the cement. This sign of life outside of the prison, a sign of previous humanity, was stomped on and destroyed by one of the guards, bringing Ginzburg to tears. Normally, destroying a flower would not bring a person to tears, but due to the control over the prisoners lives and their access to nature the destruction of this flower was heart-breaking and seen as a destruction of hope.<sup>27</sup> In essence, these examples demonstrate how nature was deployed and controlled to restrict prisoners access to an outside sense of humanity.

Ginzburg also had a more hopeful view of Kolyma than Shalamov. Perhaps it was due to her extended time in solitary confinement, but she longed for fresh air, the wind, and landscape of Kolyma. She also saw Kolyma almost as a redemptive landscape, echoing Barnes' work. She hoped that hard work at Kolyma, outside in nature, would lead to an early release. On one of her first nights there she fell asleep outside and claimed that the fresh air and stars brought a sense of freedom and calm. How can this be, this penal landscape that was meant to kill, break, torture, and dominate prisoners be seen as something beautiful and calming? Ginzburg answers that question rather nicely as she describes the first sunrise she witnessed at Kolyma.

---

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 194-196, 234, 258.

She wrote that the sunset was full of beautiful mauve and lilac shades and she, “felt all of a sudden, a strange lightness and acceptance of my fate. True, this was a cruel and alien land. Neither my mother nor my sons would find the way to my grave. But all the same, it was part of mother earth.” In short, Ginzburg depicts this contradiction of the Russian penal landscape by demonstrating her awe in the beauty of it while simultaneously recognizing that the land was not only foreign, but deadly while she eventually came to a place of acceptance over it. The land was cruel yet had redeeming qualities.<sup>28</sup>

She is even more explicit later on about the role the environment played in providing her something to look forward to and reconnect to a sense of humanity. Not only were the “nettles...so beautiful, and the burdocks so kind and trusting,” but they reminded her of her childhood in Moscow. The nature provided her an outlet to transcend the confines of the camp and remember her previous life. She wrote that she had surrendered herself to the, “intoxicating reunion with nature,” and a great sense of calmness came to her. Nature not only brought calm but provided a reason to live. She claimed that, “We still took pleasure in the fugitive mists of morning, the violet sunsets that blazed over us as we returned from the quarry,” and she felt, “instinctively that as long as I could be stirred to emotion by the sea breeze, by the brilliance of the stars...I would still be alive, however much my legs might tremble...It was preserving all these treasures in our minds that we should resist the onslaught of the horrors around us.”<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 360.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 337, 343.

These passages demonstrate that nature and the environment were not neutral in Ginzburg's mind. They provided a reason to live, a bridge to a previous time, and a connection to humanity at large. As long as these beautiful scenes remained beautiful to her she would maintain a sense of her own humanity. Again, one gets the feeling that the ability to appreciate nature in both Shalamov and Ginzburg is something that inherently makes a person human. Shalamov's rest consisted of enjoying the trees and mountains of Kolyma while Ginzburg sought to salvage her humanity from the horrors around her by drinking in the beauty that she could manage to see.

Throughout her work, however, Ginzburg provides a contradictory image of nature. It is seen as something both drab and terrifying and also something she looks forward to and longs for. Nature provided the ability to reconnect to her humanity. She was brought back to memories of her childhood or previous life and she feared that she would forget the sky or the Volga, or perhaps her previous life in general. Conceivably we can take Ginzburg's relationship to nature as a window to how other people in the Soviet Union saw the environment. The penal nature was a way to forget one's predicament, if only for a moment, and think of previous times at the Volga or in the forest. Ginzburg longed for this environment while she was in prison. She highly anticipated the fresh air and work at Kolyma and once there she used the nature to safe-guard her humanity. If only she could pause and still see the environment as beautiful and something that could still be enjoyed, then she could hold onto a piece of her humanity and survive.

### Solzhenitsyn, Mandelstam, and Others

In Mandelstam's *Hope Against Hope*, Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, and other diary compilations the environment is spoken about much less explicitly. Both Mandelstam and Solzhenitsyn saw Kolyma and the far east as purely a mechanism to punish and instill fear. For their part, both Solzhenitsyn and Mandelstam are much more pragmatic about the environment. For Solzhenitsyn, the sole purpose of the environment was to punish. Camps were created in the middle of taiga in order to kill the convicts while the environment was used to torture prisoners by making them sleep outside in the cold, sit out on boulders in the summer to be eaten alive by mosquitoes, and work in freezing mud and other harsh conditions. Geography was used not only to keep escapes down, but to maim and torture.<sup>30</sup>

That being said, Solzhenitsyn also saw some beauty and humanity in nature as well. He wrote about the beauty of a spring sky in prison and on one of his first nights of freedom sleeping outside under the stars next to a horse provided him a tremendous sense of freedom. For Solzhenitsyn, however, the environment fits in with his general understanding of the camp system. According to Solzhenitsyn, the Soviet system and ideology corrupted Russia and also its landscape. Of the forest he wrote, "You come to hate this forest, this beauty of the earth, whose praises have been sung in verse and prose. You come to walk beneath the arches of pine and birch with a shudder of revulsion!" The Soviet system had taken something beautiful and quintessentially Russian, the forest, and it turned it into something that generated revulsion and hatred.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago Abridged: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, Reissue, Abridged edition (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2007), pg. 160, 172, 186-188.

<sup>31</sup> Solzhenitsyn, pg. 221.

Mandelstam also saw the environment in pragmatic terms. Things like nature could not be enjoyed in life and death circumstances. She described white nights as hell to exiles and saw the taiga as something that was purely punitive and penal without any redeeming qualities. Mandelstam even went so far as to hint that exile had become synonymous with the forest. In other words, the forest and exile were interchangeable in her mind, one meant the other. For Mandelstam, much like Solzhenitsyn, the primary purpose of the environment was to punish and kill.<sup>32</sup>

Andrei Stepanovich Arzhilovsky, on the other hand, had a much different view of the woods. Arzhilovsky, a peasant farmer from Chervishev, Tyumen Oblast, was arrested and sentenced to ten years of hard labor for counter-revolutionary activity. He was eventually released after seven years, re-arrested, and then executed by a firing squad. After the camp he was serving in was vacated, he wrote in his diary that life in the woods at the camp wasn't so bad. In fact, the woods were beautiful and full of berries, "Those woods have a wealth of berries!" he exclaimed. In the end, when he was sent back home to the, "old grey Urals," he was disappointed.<sup>33</sup> Arzhilovsky saw enough redemptive qualities in the woods that he even preferred them to going "home" to the Urals. Given what eventually happened to Arzhilovsky, death from a firing squad, it is hard to not blame him to want to remain isolated in the woods than back at home in larger society.

Solzhenitsyn, Mandelstam, and Arzhilovsky all add to the conversation about how people viewed the penal nature and environment they were sent to. For Solzhenitsyn and

---

<sup>32</sup> Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, *Hope Against Hope: A Memoir* (Modern Library, 1999), pg. 30, 196.

<sup>33</sup> Andrei Stepanovich Arzhilovsky, *Diary of Andrei Stepanovich Arzhilovsky*, In Veronique Garros, Natlia Korenevskaya, and Thomas Lahusen, *Intimacy and Terror* (The New Press, 1995), pg. 116-117.

Mandelstam, it was mainly pragmatic. The nature was meant to punish and kill. Nature and punishment became so intertwined that to Mandelstam the forest and woods became interchangeable with the word exile itself. For Solzhenitsyn, the forest was something beautiful that was in folktales and Russian culture that had become used and corrupted under the Soviet system. The Soviet state took something beloved and drove people to hate and be repulsed by it. For Arzhilovsky, however, the woods were something to still be cherished. In fact, when he was sent home from the camps, he seemed disappointed to be leaving the woods and the life he had fantasized for himself there. All of these writers display less of a dichotomy of misery and admiration but more of either misery or admiration. To them the environment was either something used to punish or something that could provide freedom from the state.

### **Conclusion**

This paper begins to tackle the place of environment studies in Gulag history. The historiographical debates have taken place over what the primary focus of the camps were and how they were a reflection on Soviet society. While the paper has not touched on the purpose of the camps, it does provide insight into how the environment was used both to intimidate and dehumanize. Nature was weaponized, through neglect or premeditated thought, to deliberately harm prisoners. Similarly, nature, or controlling the access to nature and how it could be interpreted, was another way to rob prisoners of their humanity. In prison cells the sky and access to nature were restricted while at Kolyma prisoners at times were seen as being interchangeable with trees and supplies.

If, as Oleg Khlevniuk, Barnes, and others have claimed, that the Gulag was a revolving door of people coming in and out, then it is conceivable that more common criminals as well as

literary understandings of the environment would be shaped by this penal regime. For example, people returning from camps and their tales of the environment and nature they saw could have affected how people saw Kolyma and perhaps even their own local woods or parks. In other words, did returnee's tales of the nature they witness affect how the society in general viewed the forest? I look forward to investigating these claims further with more research.

This paper has also sought to continue a dialogue started by Christopher Ely in his work *This Meager Nature* about how nature has been understood in Russia, and more specifically how it has contributed to Russian national identity. Ely's discussion of the contradictions and dichotomy of Russian nature, namely that it is seen both as meager and miserable as well as admirable, lends itself nicely to how some remembered their time in Russian or Soviet penal landscapes. If we follow Ely's argument, that creating a national landscape helped foster the Russian identity, then perhaps ruminations and reflections about how that relationship evolved can tell us something about how Russian identity changed through their changing understanding of nature. For example, what does Shalamov's conversation about the large trees that can't survive the storms in weak soil and the small, gnarled, mangled Siberian dwarf cedar that survives say about Russian and Soviet society and identity at the time?

Lastly, this paper has discussed how nature was both a survival tool for those caught up in the Soviet penal system and a penal tool of the state. Nature allowed people to transcend the bounds of the prisons or camps they were held in. Memories of childhood or past lives were brought up by the landscape and the nature even provided some, such as Ginzburg, for a reason to live and a mechanism to feel human again. Nature became something to respect, appreciate, and reconnect to. While the beauty of the nature could be seen as dangerous,

sharp, and clinical, almost working as a co-conspirator with the perpetrators of the camps, at times it could also be seen as something beautiful, peaceful, and calm. Whether to kill, punish, or provide hope, nature in the Soviet penal system was seldom neutral.

### Works Cited

- Applebaum, Anne. *Gulag: A History*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2007.
- Barenberg, Alan. *Gulag Town, Company Town*. Yale University Press, 2014.
- Barnes, Steven A. *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*. Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Brain, Stephen. *Song of the Forest: Russian Forestry and Stalinist Environmentalism, 1905-1953*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011.
- Chekhov, Anton. *Sakhalin Island*. Alma Books, 2018.
- Ely, Christopher. *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia*. Northern Illinois University Press, 2009.
- Ginzburg, Eugenia. *Journey into the Whirlwind*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002.
- Ivanova, Galina Mikhailovna, Donald J. Raleigh, Galina Mikhailovna, and Carol A. Flath. *Labor Camp Socialism: The Gulag in the Soviet Totalitarian System: The Gulag in the Soviet Totalitarian System*. Routledge, 2015.
- Khlevniuk, Oleg V., and David J. Nordlander. *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror*. Yale University Press, 2004.
- Korenevskaya, Natalia, Thomas Lah, and Veronique Garros. *Intimacy and Terror*. The New Press, 1995.
- Mandel'shtam, Nadezhda. *Hope Against Hope: A Memoir*. Modern Library, 1999.
- Shalamov, Varlam. *Kolyma Tales*. Penguin UK, 1994.
- Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. *The Gulag Archipelago Abridged: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*. Reissue, Abridged edition. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2007.