

Twenty Years In Beria's Hell: Memoirs of Soviet Rehabilitation

Quintessential years in societies are often recorded and momentous historical epochs described in startling detail. Nineteen thirty-seven is such a year in Soviet history. It was the black apex of the Soviet Union's Great Terror (Conquest 1990), and chilling portrayals of this infamous year are found throughout journalism, literature, and cinematography. These chronicles are testimonies of lasting value; yet, of even more value to historians—and the world—are first-hand accounts, testimonies of witnesses to the horrors that etch into the world's mind the epitome of Soviet horror, which were recorded by a small fraction of Gulag survivors ... voices from the Gulag exorcising pain and portending the fall of Soviet totalitarianism.

Leonid Petrovich Bolotov (1906-1987) is an eyed-witness who survived twenty years of Gulag hell and completed a compelling, three-hundred-page account of it in 1982 he titled *Twenty Years in Beria's Hell (Memoir of Soviet Rehabilitation)*. He dedicates the work to his wife, Nina Alexeevna Bolotova (1910-1979), who shares with him a joyous young life and, after 1937, the long nightmare of Soviet imprisonments.

The title of Bolotov's memoir is rooted in the first section, "Inferno" ("Hell"), of Dante's work, "The Divine Comedy" (1307), and it chronicles a chain of events that leads to the fallacy of dependence on a single political system replete with a totalitarian's regulations and absolute control over all aspects of life. Yet, Bolotov did not see this problem for many years as he clung to the Soviet's contention of 1937 that proclaimed the glory of human love and the struggle for societal justice via Communism.

Written in three parts—in addition to an introduction and conclusion—Bolotov's memoir consists of *Leningrad Prisons and Deportations, My Stay and Work in Kolyma, and Reunion With My Wife*.

In the introduction, he focuses on 1937 as it is his life's bifurcating point: all his outlooks are viewed from either *before* or *after* that year.

How can I forget nineteen thirty seven?! I cannot, I cannot! My lost friends will not let me do that! I saw the Kolyma of 1938 and "Homes of Communists" as we called the holes we dug where guards tossed the bodies of zeks, or enemies of the people. My memory flashed to an image of Leningrad in 1937. I could not stop my thoughts and imagination. I see; I hear; I feel 1937 again. It is going on. How, why did it happen? These thoughts are whirling through my head. [Bolotov 1987, p. 4].

Taken by Black Maria,¹ Bolotov's first night of incarceration, June 17, 1937, is spent in Shpalernaia Prison, a cold, brown, thick-walled, Tsarist prison crowded with thousands of prisoners jammed into 300 cells. While confined to a shoulder-wide holding cell, he reflects upon his happy family life, friends, desires and middle-of-the-night arrest. He feels defeated. He is unable to support his family, and over the next six weeks, he is tortured and questioned throughout long nights by interrogators attempting to extract a fabricated admission of threatening the lives of Stalin and others by signing a false confession. Weeks later, guards transferred Bolotov by Black Maria from Shpalernaia Prison to the dreaded Kresty Prison, an all-male prison on Konstantinogradskaiia Street. Here, Bolotov, without benefit of a jury trial,² was condemned to death on September 2, 1937. But again he refused to sign a false confession, and weeks later, the Soviet Supreme Court set aside his death sentence, replacing it with a ten-year sentence to hard labor in the infamous Kolyma³ penal camps. Guards then took him to a transit camp in Leningrad where 1350 other men awaited transportation to one of 650 Gulags⁴ across the Soviet Union. Years later, Bolotov learned his father was fired from his job the day after his arrest, his wife was arrested and sent to prison, and his mother fled Saint Petersburg with his children for Saratov to spare them being placed in Soviet orphanages

¹ The Black Maria was the long black 1931 Model A Ford, built by Ford Motor Company engineers at the Gorkovskii Avtomobilnyi Zavod, or GAZ-M1.

² In 1864 Russia instituted jury trials; Lenin abandoned them in 1917 and they were not used again until 1993.

³ Kolyma is both a river, a mountain range, a region, a city, and a metaphor. Like Auschwitz, Kolyma conveys images of the harshest of Soviet Gulags.

⁴ Gulag is an acronym for **G**lavnoe **U**pravlenie **I**spravitel'no-**T**rudovykh **L**agerei.

that renamed and brainwashed all children.

On November 16, 1937, soon after the Soviet holiday for the October Revolution,⁵ which had sent Bolotov's heart tripping with joy (he still believed in Communist goals, their vision of the future, and felt he had been arrested by mistaken authorities), on a dark and snowy night he, along with 1,350 other prisoners (he saw boards filled with their names), were herded onto cold, wet, dirty cattle cars at Leningrad's Sortirovochnaia Railway Station for the 7,000-mile trip through Siberia to the Pacific Coast and then on by ship to Kolyma. On the sixty-day Odyssey on the Trans-Siberian Railroad to Vladivostok, prisoners suffered from exposure, starvation, lack of sanitation, and many died en route, their bodies tossed into snow along the track. Arriving in late January 1938, Bolotov was confined to a holding area signed with the new Soviet slogan: *You're in Ezhov's⁶ Mittens Now!* He waits four months until the ice breaks in Nagayev Bay, adjacent to Magadan, when Kulu, the prisoners' transport ship, could make the 1,500-mile journey north.

By the camp gates, guards took overcoats from the prisoners who had been officers, cut them off at the knees, and threw the shortened coats back to the officers. [Bolotov, p.85].

Every day the special trains brought new prisoners to the Vladivostok camp. We realized that a state machine was annihilating people, especially former Bolsheviks who worked with Lenin. [Bolotov, p.87].

When new prisoners arrived in the Vladivostok camp, they were constantly asked, "What is going on in Russia, in Moscow? They looked at the new prisoners with great astonishment. They could not match the reality of what they saw with the political slogans, posters, and Party Congresses of the Communist Party that told people how happy they were! [Bolotov, p.88].

On May 24, 1938, Bolotov and other prisoners arrived in Magadan⁷ and walk to the prison camp. While on the streets, local people shout questions about their relatives. It was still cold in May at this latitude, and guards in thick-twill overcoats accompanied freezing prisoners wearing rags.

Guards in thick, twilled overcoats were brutal to us as Kolyma was; they chased us and punished us. [Bolotov, p. 101].

The second part of the memoir, *My Stay and Work in Kolyma*, focuses on Bolotov's talks with

⁵ The October Revolution occurred, according to the old Julian calendar, on October 25, which is fourteen days earlier than the Gregorian calendar used today and why it is celebrated in November.

⁶ Ezhov, Nikolay Ivanovich (1895-1940) was the USSR People's Commissar of Internal Affairs from 1936 to 1938. His last name is rooted in the Russian word *ezh*, which means 1) a hedgehog, 2) barbed wire entangled with stakes or iron bars, and conveyed the idea that people lived behind the iron bars and barbed wire.

⁷ Magadan, a 1933, zek-built town on permafrost has grown into the capital of Kolyma

innocent prisoners of different nationalities also convicted of being “enemies of the people,” his life, the horrors of camp life: food, sanitation, deaths, and hard labor at the Ayan-Uriakh River Gold Mine in Kolyma (Shalamov 1990; Solzhenitsyn 1965). Ten years later, Bolotov was sentenced to another ten years of external exile and was held in the cell of a condemned man in Magadan.

The deported prisoners from Uzbekistan and Georgia arrived in Vladivostok. I saw many dark-skinned people wearing ethnic clothes. They carried possessions in rags tied in big knots. They came to our camp enclosed in barbed wire. When guards took their knots, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Turkmens yelled at them, but the guards continued and herded them into the camp. These Oriental men were hot tempered and could not be appeased. One tall Georgian prisoner waved his arms and said, ‘You are from different places. But Stalin is our relative. Look at us! What is he doing to us, his fellow Georgians!?’ [Bolotov, p.89].

Guards wearing thick-twilled overcoats played a significant role in the second and third parts of Bolotov’s memoirs as they symbolized endless power in Kolyma camps. They supported hardened criminals, often rapists and murderers, who often stole the food and scant possessions of zeks and were the mortal enemies of all political prisoners. Also, guards constantly demanded that zeks overfill their gold production quotas, and food was issued based on the attainment of these rarely-met goals.

‘Twill-coats’ (Guards) stopped by the overpass and looked at the board where our manager marked a number of wheelbarrows. He said in rude tone, ‘It is not enough,’ then he took the manager’s board and yelled, ‘You work slowly. We will not feed you scums!’ [Bolotov, part 2, p.19].

Guards in thick-twilled overcoats, jailer, or VOKhORs,⁸ and escort guards used violence against prisoners, and then they were promoted and received new uniforms with their new ranks (Rossi 1989).

Many people, some estimate ten million or more, did not survive the harsh conditions of weather and hard labor in the Gulags. Bolotov describes the climate, temperature, and time in Kolyma.

All prisoners had their own distinctive description of the bitter cold. You can ‘smoke’ at minus 40 Celsius. But if you are going to take off your mittens at minus 50, you’ll freeze your fingers. I felt the frost in my legs, head and stomach. [Bolotov, part 2, p.43].

All days are different. They have their own specifics. Life changes people. Young boys at age 18-20 became adults who knew the price of life, labor, and friendship. ‘Enemies of the people’ realized that regular destruction of professionals would not work well for Soviet power; however, we worked 16 hours every day. [Bolotov, part 2, p.54].

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VOKhR is the term for the jailer staff (Rossi 1989, 532).

Technical equipment did not appear in Kolyma until 1940. How many nameless people died in mines because of overwork and being underfed in these horrible conditions? Bolotov lists friends and colleagues⁹ who died in Kolyma.

In the second part, Bolotov uses his wife's story of being in a female jail, exiled to Kemerovo Province in southern Siberia, and her arrival in Saratov in 1944. Her story is significant as it displays the "human rights" of released prisoners. When Nina receives the document permitting her to leave exile and rejoin her children, the train conductor did not allow her to board the train, and she clung to the door handle, standing on the footboard for three hours until another conductor feels compassion for her and lets her come inside and stand. When she arrives in Saratov, local police tell her to take her children and move to a rural area on the Volga River. She did.

In the third part, Bolotov describes his new camp, Berlag, the first forced labor camp in Kolyma (Rossi 1989, 21), and later he speaks about his life when Nina joins him in Nizhny Seimchan after he has been sentenced to external exile in 1950. Seven years later, he talks about his release and their long-awaited meeting with their children in the spring of 1957:

The fast-train's windows vibrated like my coalminer's jackhammer against my cheek crammed into corner-glass watching Leningradsky Station fade into Moscow's glowing lights and June's long white night. The clickity-clacks grew faster, taking me home, home from the horrors of Kolyma, home to Leningrad. As Moscow's lights flicked off for good, I saw home. Home after twenty years! I will see my home for the first time since 1937. Home in seven more hours to see my children. What do they look like? I have not seen them for twenty years... Will we understand each other? [Bolotov, p.1].

Mentioning of twenty years becomes a significant trait in Bolotov's narrative as it recalls his past and merges it with the present. He is constantly evaluating the slogans of the October Revolution, the Civil War, Communist ideology, and the changes after the 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party after Stalin's death in 1953 when Nikita Khrushchev, in 1956, sharply criticized Stalin. As Soviet policy now recognizes the fallacies of Stalin, Bolotov feels a new sense of being correct in maintaining his innocents in 1937 and not signing a false declaration of guilt. In this sense, Bolotov's

⁹ Their names are in the archives of the Russian president in Moscow. See, <http://stalin.memo.ru/images/aut>.

Chapter, *Verdict*, the first part of his memoir, is significant as it tells us about his first and only meeting in 1937 with the first Soviet officials, Ivan Matulevich (1895-1961), vice-president of the Military Board of the Supreme Court of the USSR, Nikolay Rychkov (1897-1959), the commissar of Justice of RSFSR, and comrade Kostyushko (1900-1947), the military jurist of the first rank, in the dark basement of the prison on Shpalernaia Street. Bolotov denies their verdict, which prosecuted him in false attempts upon the lives of Stalin, Molotov, Voroshilov, and Kaganovich. Also, they “revise” Bolotov’s biography and his moral principles. According to new Bolshevik propaganda, Bolotov becomes a foreign spy, son of the rich peasant (*kulak*), saboteur, and fascist. He feels deeply the effect of this Soviet terminology over his life and these labels will not let him be released after the 20th Party Congress as the new generation adopts Stalin’s ideology. Soviet judges completely destroy his illusions and belief in his future, his family’s future, and the future of all simple Soviet citizens. In the Chapter, *My Cell*, Bolotov renders a small episode, which connects the three Bolotov’s generations and their faith in Communism,

My father was proud of my son, Gennady, as he was my father’s first grandson. He took Gennady to Saratov and went to the Institutskaia Plaza with him. My father clasped Gennady to his chest and said, ‘Here the Tsarist gendarmes flogged me. My grandson will see new life.’ So, this ‘new life’ came to us, I thought in the cell.

Despite the unfair verdict, Bolotov keeps his presence of mind and follows his father’s advice, “Be steady!” His moral fortitude is displayed in all three parts of his memoir. Bolotov codifies the moral rules of his life as a Communist and rejects Stalin’s ideology as it is based upon blood and the destruction of human personality. He distinguishes Soviet leaders from their romantic ideals that were proclaimed in the October Revolution. Throughout his years in prisons, Leonid Bolotov remains a symbol of honesty and kindness and never loses his high standard of morality and desire to help others in need.

Bolotov’s memoir focuses not only on his individual experiences, but also on stories relayed to him

by other prisoners. Together, they create an unofficial version of Soviet history in 1937, that strange and bloody year when the old and the new, the past and the present, the Communists' posters and the monuments to Russian tsars were quaintly interwoven in Saint Petersburg (renamed Leningrad in 1924) and mixed up in people's minds as millions were falsely arrested. In his memoir, we see how a young Soviet family admires the beauty of Tsarist Saint Petersburg and unreservedly adopts the Communists' ideology of Lenin. Their thoughts of Tsarist views and its opposition to Communism and Leninism, which symbolize the bright future without violence and cruelty, are naïvely viewed today. It will take twenty years for Bolotov and his wife to realize that 1937 turned their dreams upside down, though they eventually discovered the truth about the proletarian dictatorship in the world's first socialist state.

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