The Great Return: The Gulag Survivor and the Soviet System
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Introduction

"We were born to make fairy tale (skazka) fact"
- propaganda verse, extolling the heroism of the Soviet Air Force

"We were born to make Kafka fact"
- unofficial wit, reflecting the reality of the Soviet experience

In December of 1998 the Russian State Duma voted in an overwhelming majority to restore the statue of Feliks Dzerzhinsky to the platform in front of the Lubyanka from which the founder of Lenin’s Cheka (secret police) had been so ceremoniously dethroned seven years earlier. The Duma resolved that returning Dzerzhinsky to his place would prove an important step in the preservation of the "historical-cultural heritage of Russia", and would serve as a symbol in the struggle against crime. In 1991, this symbol had been hoisted by popular demand, and four cranes, from its perch, and dumped in a Moscow park alongside other fallen idols. The other monument -- to the victims of totalitarianism -- that had co-existed on the same square for one year, could finally stand alone in quiet vigil. This unsculpted boulder from Lenin’s first concentration camp challenged Russia to confront its history, and it seemed that the removal of "Iron Feliks" was a significant step in this process. But, as attested to by sentiments reflected in the Duma’s motion, Dzerzhinsky was not really dead and gone, he apparently only lay dormant. This confrontation of symbols is yet another powerful example of Anna Akhmatova’s "two Russias": those who were imprisoned and those who put them there.

Russia’s ambivalent struggle to come to terms with its repressive and onerous past has been going on for nearly half a century. On a political and societal level, starting in the fifties, entrenched officials attempted to address these issues in their efforts to distance themselves from the
Stalinist past. At the same time, Gulag victims returning to society confronted every individual with whom they came into contact with a reality about the nature of the system and the mentality it nurtured that many did not want to see or think about. Indeed the way in which the victims of Soviet terror returned and were returned to society touches upon some of the most complicated questions in Soviet history and in Russia’s continuing search for accountability and direction. What, for example, does it say about the credibility of a system in which many believed when an individual (or millions of individuals) endures 17 years in prisons and labor camps, and then is declared an "innocent victim", yet the perpetrator is left unnamed? In one sense, the perpetrator was, to borrow Havel’s argument, everyone -- neighbors, colleagues, friends, and family members who were induced to go along with the system for personal gain or out of fear. In another sense, the perpetrator was no one in particular. It was the system as a whole, with pervasive terror as its adaptive tool. The Soviet dictatorship lasted for over seven decades, so the pathology that extended from the top down, and from the bottom up, had a long time to take root and develop. These fundamental issues will be considered throughout the present work because they are at the very core of the Gulag returnee question.

This book will present accounts of how individual victims and the Soviet system survived after the Gulag. Through memory, memoir, extensive interviews, and official record and directive, we shall explore what the ex-prisoners experienced when they returned to society, how officials and others helped or hindered them, and how the questions surrounding the existence of these returnees evolved from the fifties to the nineties. We will begin by placing the Soviet returnee question in context (Chapter I). We shall then analyze society’s reaction to early returnees by presenting the experiences of those who were "liberated" into exile in Stalin’s time, since future attitudes toward ex-prisoners were
partially shaped in these years (Chapter II). The reforms, policies and practices of the Office of the General Procuracy in the mid-fifties serve to indicate the Soviet system’s adaptation to repression, and form the basis for the following discussion (Chapter III). Diverse aspects of the return, such as camp culture, family reunion, and the psychological consequences of the Gulag, will then be looked at in depth (Chapter IV). There follows an examination of the effects of the XX Party Congress on the lives of prisoners and ex-prisoners as well as issues involving the housing, employment, status and rights of returnees, and the return of their confiscated property (Chapter V). We shall next focus on belief in the Communist Party and the association between returnees and dissidents (Chapter VI). In the conclusion, we will examine the return of the returnee question in the eighties and nineties and reflect on the impact that these re-emerging people and issues had on the failing Soviet system (Chapter VII).

At the outset of this journey into the lives and fates of those who survived the condemnation of the Gulag, we should bear the following reality in mind: despite the fact that the "blank spots" in Soviet history have now largely been filled with knowledge of the atrocities committed under the Soviet regime, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was neither legally condemned nor morally indicted. In consequence, its symbols are not tabooed. While Dzerzhinsky may not come back, he is apparently not altogether unwanted. And Lenin is still resting on Red Square, as the Russian Communist Party enjoys some degree of popularity at the close of this century. Indeed, this Russian century did make Kafka fact.
References
