

How Soviet Prison Subculture Shapes the Russian Political Landscape

A symposium co-sponsored by the
UCLA Luskin Center for History and Policy and the
UCLA Department of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Languages and Cultures
Organizers: Marianna Petiaskina, Lydia Roberts

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This symposium gathers scholars, policymakers, civic activists, and human rights defenders to explore topics including:

- The impact of criminal logic and discourse on modern Russian political dialogue;
- Artistic and literary traditions that influence Russian societal views of criminality, authority, and prison life;
- The effect of the Soviet prison system and Gulag legacy on Russia's social dynamics and cultural identity;
- The implications of the above topics in the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, particularly the recruitment of soldiers from Russian prisons and the consequences of this strategy for the social fabric of former Soviet countries;
- Comparative analysis (regional and global) of these topics;
- Strategies for comprehensively understanding and addressing the interplay between criminal culture and political discourse in Russia.

The ongoing political crisis in the post-Soviet region necessitates reevaluating the cultural forces that shaped this scenario and our approach to it. The extended duration of the Russo-Ukrainian war signifies a stalemate in diplomatic negotiations, making the situation increasingly alarming. The behavior of the Russian government and its citizens frequently seems enigmatic and contradicts standard reasoning, with the war's aims remaining unclear. These subtleties and complexities are challenging to grasp, as certain developments there are beyond the comprehension of many commentators in Europe and North America.

The sudden onset and rapid conclusion of Yevgeny Prigozhin's “mutiny” led many observers to initially view it as a precursor to a civil war or a coup d'état, leaving the international community perplexed about these developments. However, it soon became evident that a different logic underpinned these events, understanding which requires a detailed analysis of the actors involved, their actions throughout each hour of the incident, and, most crucially, the political discourse. We believe that the Russian contemporary “political discourse” is largely shaped by the logic of the criminal world and its corresponding discursive mechanisms. Prigozhin, for instance, acted not as a politician but as a criminal seeking vengeance against his foes after a personal military campaign,

with the Russian government responding in a similar vein: revenge caught up with Prigozhin as swiftly as his mutiny ended. Most importantly, in our view, is that everything said by the opponents during the mutiny thoroughly explained and predicted this outcome. The logic of the criminal underworld, where grievances are not easily dismissed, and compromise is almost impossible (since truth invariably favors one party), has largely escaped the understanding of the Western public.

We suggest a detailed exploration of the motivations underlying Russian society, particularly regarding the justifications presented for acts of aggression in the public arena. We believe a crucial aspect in comprehending this matter is the paradoxical societal stance towards a gangster-like approach in managing social processes and a sympathy for the criminal world, seen as an alternative to any official culture, which is often shunned due to the oppressive Soviet legacy. In this context, the focus is not on seeking compromise but rather on demonstrating power and adhering to an abstract concept of “truth” based on resentment. This mindset hinders the potential for diplomatic resolutions, as it demands total vengeance (“imperial revanchism”) and sharply divides the world into “us” and “them,” with the latter viewed as adversaries.

Academic and political discourse often further muddle this stark distinction due to a pervasive, yet equally misleading, sense of shame linked to this historical context. This shame fosters an aversion to explicit discussions of criminality, violence, and sexual exploitation, as well as to topics that are considered inelegant or “too obvious,” whether in literature or other forms of expression. This trend is also evident in the literature about the Gulag camps from their inception. Authors frequently centered on the plight of their own social groups—counterrevolutionaries and intellectuals—who encountered criminal elements in the camps. They sought to minimize the impact of this criminality by “othering” the criminals, who often subjected them to equal or greater violence than the camp officials. Consequently, the study of criminality in the Gulag has been neglected despite its significant role in shaping both late Soviet and contemporary Russian culture.

We assert that the origins of this logic are embedded in the criminal history of both the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia, intricately linked with the development of their prison cultures. Additionally, the literary traditions of Russia, where texts contribute to shaping a collective history, are of significant importance. Our symposium will explore the connections between Russian and Soviet prison and criminal cultures and their influence on current political discourse and the governance of the Russian Federation. Furthermore, the symposium seeks to investigate the interplay between artistic and literary portrayals of criminal culture and the cultural codes that have emerged in Russia's society.

Abstracts & Bios

Ilya Budraitskis

From «Notions» to Ideology: Patsan culture and its place in the ideology of Putin's regime

The claim that "it was cynicism that became the main ideology of the political system that emerged in Russia by the 2010s" (Lipovetsky, 2022) in one form or another is widespread among scholars. One can notice a certain contradiction in the given statement. After all, if we understand cynicism as the superiority of personal interest and disbelief in any common values, then it looks like a direct rejection of ideology as such. However, if we understand ideology as a material reality based on collective life experience, we can see how mass criminal culture has become the source of such practical ideology. Moreover, it constitutes the foundation on which the further evolution of Putinism towards ideological indoctrination of society in the spirit of "traditional values" and the spiritual clash of civilizations was based.

Bio:

Ilya Budraitskis is a political researcher previously based in Moscow. Currently he is a Visiting Scholar with the Program in Critical Theory, UC Berkeley. His articles on Russian politics, culture and intellectual history were published in academic journals such as *Radical Philosophy*, *New Left Review*, *Slavic Review* and *South Atlantic Quarterly*, and in media outlets including *Jacobin*, *London Review of Books*, *E-Flux*, *Le Monde Diplomatique* and others. Budraitskis's essay collection *Dissidents among Dissidents: Ideology, Politics and The Left in Post-Soviet Russia* was published by Verso in 2022.

Anastasia Gordienko

Harmonies of Discord: War Shansons

Grounded in the *blatnaia pesnia* canon, the popular musical genre now called the *shanson* (or Russian *shanson*) has not lacked political sentiments since it came out of the shadows in the early 1990s. Perhaps predictably, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has engendered a strong, almost unanimous, response among Russian *shansonniers*. This talk focuses mainly on their reaction to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, in interviews, performances, social media posts, while also analyzing *shanson* lyrics related to the war and examining the themes that both this genre and Russian propaganda consistently exploited long before the invasion.

Bio:

Anastasia Gordienko is Assistant Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at the University of Arizona. She is an author of *Outlaw Music in Russia: The Rise of an Unlikely Genre* (The UW Press, January 2023), which is the first full history of the shanson (Russian underworld music), from its tenuous ties to early modern criminals' and robbers' folk songs, through its immediate generic predecessors in the Soviet Union, including the bard song, to its current incarnation as the soundtrack for daily life in Russia. In addition, this book investigates the shanson as it exists in popular culture today: celebrated for rather than divorced from its criminal undertones (or overtones), favored by the common people while simultaneously enjoying a quid pro quo relationship with Putin's politics. Gordienko has taught a variety of graduate and undergraduate courses at UA, covering subjects such as Ukraine, fairy tales, criminal culture, and the Russian language.

Andrea Gullotta

The Gulag Resurfaces: Society, State Power, Literature and the Theme of Soviet Repression

In his 2013 monograph "Warped mourning", Alexander Etkind described the ways in which the theme of Soviet repression emerged in indirect ways in post-Soviet Russian culture. The book came out exactly when the situation was starting to change: in later years, the theme of the Gulag has become one of the most widespread in Russian literature, with works that have enjoyed a large success both among the public of readers and, after their "translation" into TV series, among the wider public. This happened against the backdrop of a memory war waged by the Russian state against independent societal actors working in the field of the memory of the Gulag. Delving deep into the complex dynamics at play between state power, culture and society at large, the present talk aims to highlight how different representations of the Gulag have produced diverse and sometimes surprising reactions among the public in recent years. It will also try to provide a wider framework to explain why the Gulag, after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, has become a wider point of reference for liberal Russians in relation to the mourning for Ukrainian victims.

Bio:

Andrea Gullotta is Senior Researcher at the University of Palermo. He has previously worked at the universities of Padua, Ca' Foscari Venice and Glasgow. He is the author of several publications on the literature, culture and memory of the Gulag and the editor of the journal "AvtobiografiЯ". He is also the co-chairman of the International "Memorial" Association, the heir organization of "Memorial International," which was liquidated by the Russian state in 2022 and was awarded the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize.

Lauren McCarthy

Law as a Tool for Putin’s Authoritarian Legitimation and as an Opportunity for Resistance

As Nonet and Selznick wrote in their 1978 book *Law and Society in Transition*, “repression is perfected when it can forgo coercion.” In Russia, the law has been one of the primary tools of Putin’s authoritarian consolidation. In this talk, I outline the legal tools and techniques that the regime has developed to perfect its repressive apparatus without having to rely on mass imprisonment. I also consider why the regime continues to care so much about the law and its procedural requirements for its own legitimacy. I then turn to the opportunities created by the system’s focus on proceduralism which enable ordinary citizens and activists to push back against the state through programs like the School for Citizen Legal Advocates (Shkola Obshestvennogo Zashchitnika), albeit in an arena that the state has designated and tilted in its favor.

Bio:

Lauren A. McCarthy is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science and Legal Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She received her PhD (2011) in Political Science from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research focuses on the relationship between law and society in Russia, law enforcement institutions, citizen oversight, authoritarian law, and the issue of human trafficking. She is the author of *Trafficking Justice: How Russian Police Enforce New Laws, from Crime to Courtroom* (Cornell University Press, 2015). Her research has been supported by the Fulbright Institute for International Education and the Kennan Institute. Her work on Russian law and the legal system has appeared or is forthcoming in *Post-Soviet Affairs*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Punishment & Society*, *Demokratizatsiya*, *Washington Post*, *PONARS Eurasia*, and other outlets. She is also a member of PONARS (Program on New Approaches to Research and Security in Eurasia).

Marianna Petiaskina

Yevgeny Prigozhin’s “March of Justice” against “Bespredel”

In June 2023, Yevgenii Prigozhin’s “rebel” actions attracted substantial attention. People outside the country were eager to understand what was happening, questioning whether it was a coup d’état or if a change in Russia’s regime or leadership was imminent. Amidst this curiosity, the crucial task of closely examining Prigozhin’s statements, understanding the motivations behind his actions, and comprehending the context of his performance was often neglected. To grasp “what is transpiring,” I attempted to translate Prigozhin’s message. While the essence of his arguments might appear straightforward, the real challenge lies in interpreting the jargon he uses and the concept known to Russians as “жизнь по понятиям” (living according to unwritten criminal rules rather than the law).

My presentation explores Prigozhin's "March of Justice," including its motivations, insights into public sentiment, and the presidential response. I analyze the sequence of events during the mutiny and the logic of its leader's discourse within the context of the Russian Federation's criminal culture, a concept familiar to nearly all residents of the country and which makes such events as this mutiny possible.

Bio:

Marianna Petiaskina is affiliated with the Department of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Languages & Cultures at UCLA and with the Luskin Center for History and Policy. Her research spans intellectual history, 19th and 21st-century studies, and discourse analysis. She focuses on the emancipatory practices of marginalized communities under authoritarian regimes, exploring the centralization of authority and the institutionalization of culture. Over the past decade, she has collaborated with organizations such as the "Coming Out" community ("Vykhod"), OVD-Info, and Helping to Leave.

Igor Pilshchikov

The Evolution of Russian Criminal Slang and its Influence on Russia's Public Discourse

After the 1917 Revolution, the Russian language and its subcultural idioms underwent rapid changes. One example is the evolution of criminal slang. The 1920s and 1930s witnessed mass migrations and displacements, leading to the amalgamation of the "cants and patters" of diverse professional groups, including criminals, into a unified criminal argot. Subsequent repressions resulted in large numbers of non-criminals being incarcerated in labor camps alongside criminals, leading to the acquisition and later dissemination of the elements of criminal slang into everyday speech, particularly after the amnesties of 1939-40 and 1953. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the weakening authority of standard Russian enabled the pervasive incorporation of criminal jargon in civilian life, extending to media and the lexicon of top government officials, beginning with the president. I will exemplify the varied trajectories of former criminal slang terms in the Russian public sphere by the paths of the words *мочить* 'to kill; literally, make wet', *лох* 'a non-criminal', and *мудак* ('originally, same; later, an asshole').

Bio:

Igor Pilshchikov is Professor and Chair of the Department of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Languages & Cultures at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is editor of the Fundamental Digital Library of Russian Literature & Folklore (FEB-web.ru), the information system on Comparative Poetics and Comparative Literature (CPCL.info), and the journals *Studia Metrica et Poetica* (University of Tartu Press) and *Pushkin Review* (Slavica Publishers). He has

authored three books and numerous articles on the history of Russian literary language, Russian poetry, poetics, comparative literature, literary theory, and digital humanities.

Lydia Roberts

Russian Criminality in Early Gulag Memoirs

This presentation delves into the complex landscape of Russian criminality as depicted in early Gulag memoirs, focusing on depictions of the 1920s and 1930s. Using firsthand accounts from survivors of the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp, this study explores the post-imperial intellectual milieu and its confrontation with criminal society in prison, in transit (*etap*), and at forced labor camps. The memoirs and accounts, although rarely written by self-identified criminals, serve as a primary source to examine the varied roles criminals played within the camps, both as perpetrators and victims of the harsh conditions and brutal governance. This presentation highlights how criminal elements within the camps often mirrored and sometimes amplified the authoritarian practices of the Soviet regime, revealing a microcosm of broader societal trends in Soviet Russia during this era. The analysis further considers the impact of criminal hierarchies on the social structure and survival strategies within the Gulags, offering insights into the complex dynamics of power, survival, and resistance. By situating these narratives within the broader historical context of Soviet penal policy and social change, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the role of criminality in shaping the lived experiences of Gulag detainees.

Bio:

Lydia Roberts is a doctoral student in the Department of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Languages and Cultures at UCLA. She is interested in the literature of East and Central European prisons and labor camps in the 20th century. She is currently writing a dissertation about the Soviet labor camps of the 1920s. Lydia has taught introductory Russian, introductory Polish, and content courses related to Slavic history and culture. She was awarded a Eugene V. Cota-Robles Fellow upon entry to her doctoral program and is currently a University of California Office of the President (UCOP) Dissertation Year Fellow.

Olga Romanova

The Russian Penitentiary System after Russia's Full-Scale Aggression Against Ukraine

What did the Russian penal system resemble before the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine? Russian prisons, a direct legacy of the Gulag, trace their origins to the Anglo-Boer War at the end of the 19th century, which introduced the concept of prison camps. Given this historical backdrop,

why did Putin maintain such an outdated system? Penal reform, arguably simpler than judicial reform, could have enhanced his humanitarian image. Yet, he persisted, recognizing the strategic utility of prisons as a reservoir for cannon fodder in preparation for war.

Throughout the conflict, the prison has emerged as the institution most transformed. Prisons and camps are shutting down due to a lack of inmates, as many have been conscripted to the front. Legislative changes now allow for the conscription of individuals directly from crime scenes, bypassing traditional judicial processes. Ironically, prison officials have adopted an anti-war stance, and routine torture has ceased—not from a renewed commitment to human rights, but to preserve the physical condition of those destined for combat. Looking forward, the disconnect between crime and punishment poses a long-term societal challenge in Russia.

Bio:

Olga Romanova, a Moscow Financial Institute alumna, began her career at the Bank for Foreign Economic Activity of the USSR before moving to journalism in 1989 with the Novosti Press Agency. She has since worked at 'Segodnya' newspaper and on television, earning two TEFI awards. Dismissed in 2006 for refusing to censor news, she later founded 'Russia Behind Bars' (Rus Sidyashaya) in 2008, which supports prisoners and their families and became a registered charity in 2015. She leads this organization and also founded 'For Your and Our Freedom' (Czechia), My Russian Rights (Germany), and Russland hinter Gittern (Germany). She manages the MRR YouTube channel, which has 100,000 subscribers. A past Moscow City Duma candidate, Romanova has received several awards, including the Yegor Gaidar, Artem Borovik, Bucerius, Sappho, Moscow Helsinki Group, and Theodor Heuss awards. She is the author of "Butyrka. Prison Notebook," "Russia Sitting," and "Protocol." Forced to emigrate, she has lived in Berlin since 2017.

Gavin Slade

The Gulag Reputation System in Post-Soviet Society

Using extensive interview data with former prisoners in former Soviet countries today, the paper will build on the conceptualization of the informal norms and institutions of criminal subculture as a reputation system. The conditions of the Gulag produced elaborate practices for the transmission of individual reputations to coordinate exchange as well as supply governance functions (conflict resolution, protection, and the distribution of resources). The reputation system involved the construction and maintenance of 'castes' - status categories - within prisoner society. Reflecting on research from across the former Soviet Union, it is argued that these status categories may be used as a frame of reference in certain types of, often conflictual, interactions to determine social positions.

Bio:

Gavin Slade is an associate professor of sociology at Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan. His most recently completed project was called *In the Gulag's Shadow: Perceiving, Producing and Consuming Prisons in the former Soviet Union* funded by the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK. This study looked at the culture of punishment in Russia and Kazakhstan through elite interviews, public opinion surveys and ethnographies at prison museums in the two countries. He has also conducted a comparative study of prison gangs under reform conditions in Lithuania, Moldova, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. The results of this research have been published in the *British Journal of Criminology*, *Theoretical Criminology*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, *Current Sociology*, and the *European Journal of Criminology*.