

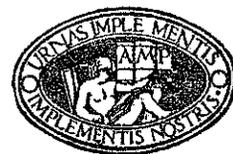
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An Island Hell:

A Soviet Prison in the Far North

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I and my four companions left the Solovetsky Islands (called in this narrative the "Solovky," the name by which they are commonly known) on May 18th, 1925, and crossed the frontier between Russia and Finland on June 15th. But it was not until eight days later that we reached Kuusamo and ascertained positively that we were in Finland, so that our journey lasted thirty-six days.

As I had supposed, I found that outside Soviet Russia the whole circumstances in which those transported to the Solovetsky Islands are compelled to live (or, it would be more correct to say, to die)—the whole life, regime, conditions of labour, food, and the other internal and external characteristics of the Solovky, were absolutely unknown.

The secrecy which enwraps the Solovky is quite comprehensible. The Soviet papers, concealing the grim truth from Russian readers, pass the

Solovky by in complete silence. Foreign newspaper correspondents are not allowed to go there. There had not been, till we got away, a single case in which a prisoner had succeeded in escaping across the frontier, whereby the public opinion of Europe could have learnt the truth about the Solovky.

Providence thought fit to rescue me, by a miracle, from this place of torment. And I count it my most sacred duty to tell the world what I saw, heard and went through there.

These notes, of course, make no claim either to literary qualities and beauty of style or to exhaustive completeness. I look upon them as the testimony of a fair witness who speaks the truth and only the truth. And if my testimony is recognised as worthy of consideration, and is accepted as a part of that gigantic indictment which the Russian nation, the whole of humanity, history and God will without doubt bring forward against the Soviet power, I shall consider that my duty has been discharged.

In confirmation of my claim to have been, to the best of my power, impartial in my exposition of the facts, I may say that when I showed these notes to my comrades who escaped with me they were of opinion that, in my description of the regime in the Solovetsky Islands, I had in many cases been too moderate.

CHAPTER II

FROM MONASTERY TO PRISON CAMP

The Famous Solovetsky Monastery—Its Wealth and Economic Strength—The Bolshevik Invasion—Destruction and Pillage—Organisation of the Solovky—The Camps and their Rulers.

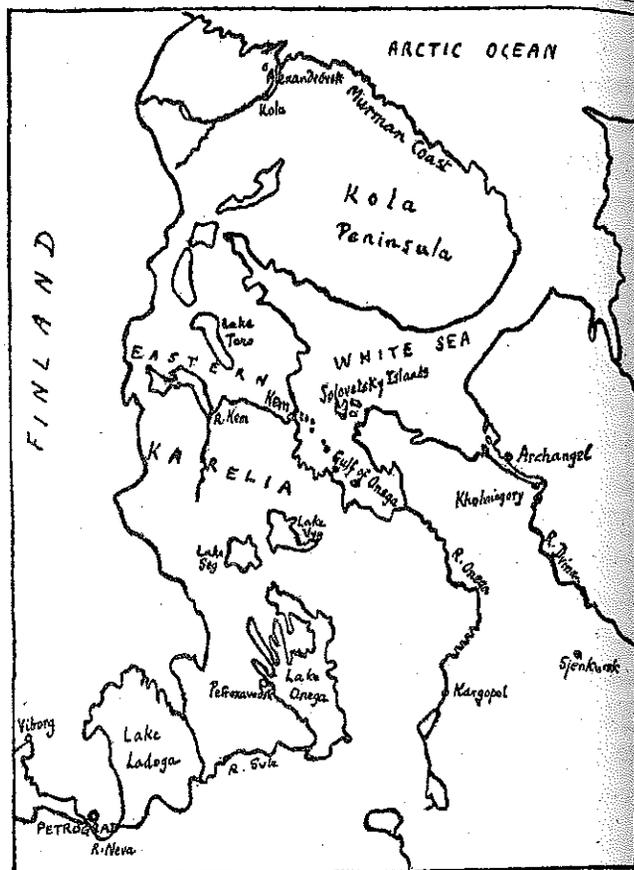
THE "Solovetsky" concentration camp received its name from the Solovetsky Monastery, founded in 1429 by Saints Sabbatius and Hermann, while Saint Zosima built the first church in 1436. The island, seventeen miles long by eleven broad, on which the monastery stands, is one of a group known by the collective designation Solovetsky Islands; there are, besides the principal island, five other large ones—Anzersk, Great and Little Zajatsk, Great and Little Muksalm—and a number of small ones. They lie in the White Sea, at the entrance to the Gulf of Onega, and close to the western coast of the Archangel Government.

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The Solovetsky Monastery, one of the most ancient and most held in honour of Russian monasteries, has long been noted for the peculiar ascetism of the life led by its inmates, the incalculable wealth of its churches and the large number of monks in the brotherhood, which is indicated by the fact that the number of boys sent by their relations to the monastery for a year reached in some years the figure of two thousand.

The monastery had, among other things, its own tannery, iron foundry, paper mill, match factory, saw mills, dozens of workshops of various kinds, a printing works (the workmen were all monks), a dock, a merchant fleet, and even a small navy for the defence of its shores. The monastery's infantry and artillery, consisting exclusively of monks, were also designed to serve this purpose.

The first years of the Revolution affected the organisation and economic strength of the monastery only to an insignificant degree, lying, as it did, to one side of the main road of Bolshevik pillage. Even at the time when the British were



MAP OF NORTH-WESTERN RUSSIA, SHOWING THE SOLOVETSKY ISLANDS.

in these parts—it will be remembered that the Archangel and Murmansk areas were for a time occupied by a Russian anti-Soviet army, under General Miller, and British troops—the monastery still lived its old industrious life.

The Soviet power destroyed this highly cultured advanced post of Russia in the Far North with characteristic violence and cruelty. In the autumn of 1922 all the wooden buildings of the monastery were burnt. The Bolsheviks began by murdering half the monks, including the Igumen of the monastery; the remainder they sent to forced labour in Central Russia. The treasures were plundered by the first Tchekists who entered the precincts. The decorations of the ikons were torn off, the ikons themselves blasphemously chopped up with hatchets for fuel. The bells were flung down from all the belfries and the fragments sent to Moscow to be melted down.

Besides a multitude of objects precious in a religious and material sense, the Soviet Huns destroyed treasures of immense historical value.

The Tchekists pillaged the library of the monastery, which during the five centuries of its existence had been filled with unique works. They heated the stoves with rare books, old documents and chronicles of the greatest antiquity. Finally, the dishonest methods of the new management, combined with the criminal plundering and inexperience of the Soviet administration, ruined the factories and workshops belonging to the monastery.

The ancient building was reduced to a heap of ruins. The Tchekists put up a barbed wire fence round it. The half-destroyed Kremlin, or main enclosure of the monastery, became the headquarters of the "Slon."* All the branches of the Solovky are under the direction of the office in question, viz., the Solovky camp itself, the Kem camp (on Popoff Island), the camp on Kond Island, and the places of exile in the Petchersk and Zyriansk regions.

* *Severnye Lageri Osobennavo Naznachenia* (Northern Camps for Special Purposes). *Slon* means "elephant" in Russian; the *double entendre* cannot, of course, be reproduced in English.

The Kem camp on Popoff Island (about a quarter of a mile from the shore and six miles from the town of Kem) is a base depot for the Solovky. In it are assembled, until navigation opens, thousands of new prisoners bound for the Solovky from all parts of Russia. The ordinary criminals who from time to time are amnestied are sent there from Solovetsky Island on their way south. Prisoners are continually being sent from the Kem camp to the monastery and from the monastery to Popoff Island for labour purposes—generally the latter, for most of the work is done on Popoff Island.

Before proceeding to a detailed account of the administration of the Solovky, I may mention that when I arrived in the domain of the Slon there were in the concentration camps over five thousand prisoners of the three categories defined in a previous chapter—"K.R.'s," "political and party men," and "*shpana*," or ordinary criminals.

In the monastery itself, the "K.R.'s" and criminals live in the cells and churches of the Kremlin which have escaped destruction, the

“politicals and party men” in the hermits’ caves which are scattered all over the island—three, six or eight miles from the Kremlin. On Popoff Island the prisoners are housed in hutments erected by the British—the “K.R.’s” and *shpana* together, the “politicals and party men” separately.

The supreme head of the administration of the Northern Camps for Special Purposes is a Moscow Tchekist, a member of the Vtsik, named Gleb Boky. (One of the Solovetsky steamers, by the way, has been re-named *Gleb Boky* in his honour.) He is a tall, thin man, apparently well educated. His bearing is generally gloomy, his eyes piercing; he always wears military uniform. He is the typical rigid Communist of superior education, with an element of cruelty in his disposition. He lives in Moscow, where he has some other employment in the Gpu, and only comes to the Solovky now and then.

His deputy, who lives permanently in the Kremlin of the monastery, is the real head of the Slon in practice; the fate of the prisoners in the

Solovky is completely in his hands. His name is Nogteff. He is also a member of the Vtsik, and was formerly a sailor in the cruiser *Aurora*. He is semi-educated, drunken, and rather deaf, with a conspicuously cruel physiognomy. He is universally known in the camps by the nickname *palatch* (executioner). When he goes round the hutments and caves of the “political and party” prisoners, they shout in his face “Go away, executioner!” (I will explain later how it is that they are able to do this with impunity.)

Nogteff’s right-hand man and deputy is an Estonian Communist named Eichmans. He suffers from “paradomania.” Of smart military bearing himself, he demands the same of prisoners in a state of permanent starvation. They are compelled to salute him. Immediately on his arrival in the Solovky he began to teach the prisoners, with blows when required, how to reply to his “good morning” in a brisk, military tone, at the same time coming to attention.

When I arrived in the Solovky, and until March,

1924, the commandant of the "Kemperraspredpunkt"* was one Gladkoff, a Tchekist, born at Kaluga, in Central Russia, and formerly a workman. He was notable for his open peculation of Government money and his astounding patronage of the *shpana*. Almost illiterate, coarse, addicted to cards and drink, he was really in no way different from these common criminals. It was thus on what might be termed ideological grounds that Gladkoff established and strengthened the dictatorship of the *shpana* over the "K.R.'s" and politicals, and all the violence we endured at their hands.

*This appalling portmanteau word, a fine flower of Soviet official phraseology, signifies *Kemsky peresylochno-raspredelitelnyi punkt* (Kem distributing centre for prisoners passing through). These long-winded official designations, of no interest to the general reader, are given here for the benefit of students of Soviet Russian affairs.

CHAPTER III

A GALLERY OF TCHEKISTS

Convicted Tchekists as Prison Staff—The "Public Prosecutor"—A Foreign Visitor's Fate—Bela Kun's Right Hand Man—"Smolensky Sticks"—Moscow Prison Riot—The "Mother" of the Criminals—An Unpunished Peculator.

IN March, 1924, a so-called "change of cabinet" took place. I will speak of this later, and continue my portraits of the ministers in the earlier combination.

Boky, Nogteff, Eichmans, Gladkoff—these were the men who had the power. They were sent to the Solovky from Moscow by Dshershinsky himself. The remainder of the *personnel* of the Solovetsky and Kem camps were Tchekist prisoners. There were several dozen of these at the monastery and on Popoff Island. When the corruption, fraud, violence or swinish drunkenness

CHAPTER IV

POPOFF ISLAND CAMP

Cold, Damp and Darkness—The Camp: its Geography and Amenities — Recent Improvements — Light Work for a High Bribe.

NATURE herself is against the exiles. The Northern Camps for Special Purposes lie in the farthest north. The climate is severe and damp. Summer lasts only two months, or two months and a half. It is very late before the snows melt and spring comes. There are frequent gales, snow-storms, biting northerly and north-easterly winds. For three-quarters of the year the Solovetsky Monastery is completely cut off from the outside world. The long, dark winter is most oppressive, especially as the lighting in the huts is so poor. The damp from the Solovetsky marshes has an injurious effect on the health of the prisoners, worn out by hard labour.

The Kremlin of the monastery, surrounded by

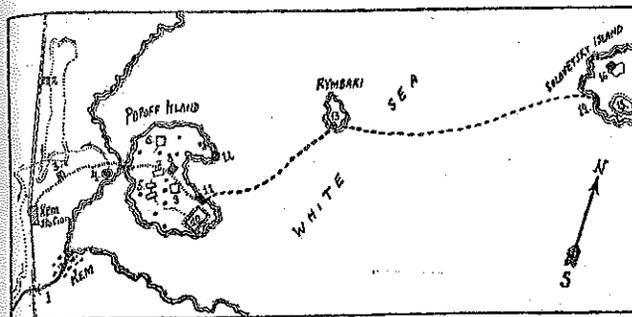
a high stone wall, reminds one of a fortress. In it the "K.R.'s" and *shpana* live in what once were the monks' cells, which they themselves have to provide with board-beds and tables, and to heat, and in the churches. The latter were plundered not long ago, and many of them have broken windows. Besides the principal ones (the Preobrajensky, Troitsky-Zosimo-Sabbatievsky, and Uspensky cathedrals, and the churches of St. Nicholas, St. Philip, and the Annunciation of the Holy Virgin) there are some ten other churches and chapels and numerous separate hermits' dwellings, in which the "politicals and party men" live. The Tchekists occupy the house of the Archimandrite and the best cells.

Popoff Island is about three miles long and two miles broad. The strait, a quarter of a mile wide, between it and the mainland is very shallow, so that it has been found possible to build a bridge over it, on wooden piles, for the narrow-gauge railway which connects the island with the town of Kem—a local branch of the Petrozavodsk-Kem-

Murmansk line. The distance from Popoff Island station to Kem station—which is two miles from the town—is about eight miles; there is a halt on the way, nearer Kem. A wooden track, made of duck-boards laid down across the marshes, leads from the concentration camp to the island station, and similar tracks connect the various buildings.

On the eastern shore of Popoff Island are two wharves, the northern and southern. Only the latter is in use. It is about forty miles from Popoff Island to Solovetsky Island—twelve miles from Popoff Island to Rymbaki, and twenty-eight more on to Solovetsky Island. Between Popoff Island and Rymbaki the sea does not freeze in winter, but between Rymbaki and Solovetsky Island it does. There are a lighthouse and stores on Rymbaki.

The factory of the "Severoles" (Northern Timber Company) is close to the southern wharf. Prisoner labour is employed in it. The Red soldiers of the 95th Division occupy two large buildings near the camp, close to the wood store.



POPOFF ISLAND AND ITS SURROUNDINGS.

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|---|--|
| 1. River Kem. | 9. Building of the <i>Severoles</i> (Northern Timber Company). |
| 2. Railwayman's hut. | 10. Concentration camp, surrounded by wire fence. |
| 3. Railway halt. | 11. Southern wharf (in use). |
| 4. Point from which our flight began—the dotted line shows our route during the first week. | 12. Northern wharf (disused). |
| 5. Two buildings occupied by troops of the 95th Gpu Division. | 13. Lighthouse. |
| 6. Wireless station. | 14. Wharf. |
| 7. Wood store. | 15. Solovetsky Monastery, surrounded by wire fence. |
| 8. Popoff Island railway station. | 16. Sekirova hill, or Sekirka (place of punishment). |

On the northern shore is the wireless station, in winter the sole means of communication with Solovetsky Island. The wireless station of the monastery is in the Kremlin. In clear weather the notorious Sekirova hill, on Solovetsky Island, can be plainly seen from the Popoff Island wharf.

The concentration camp is a rectangular enclosure some two hundred yards long and one hundred and fifty yards wide. It stands on a marsh at the south-eastern corner of the island, with heaps of stones scattered about it. The marsh promotes the spread of malaria, scurvy and lung complaints. The prisoners are fearfully tormented by the peculiarly poisonous mosquitoes of the Solovetsky Islands, which breed in swarms on the marsh and give one no peace either by day or by night.

The camp is surrounded by a high wire fence; along this, at intervals, stand huts for the sentries, each containing eight men. The Red soldiers in the guardroom outside the camp, generally thirty-eight in number, form a reserve force, to assist or replace the guards outside if needed. The Tchekists on duty are quartered in the commandant's office inside the camp.

All entrance to and exit from the camp is through the main gate, which is guarded by special sentries. The second gate (marked 11 on the plan)

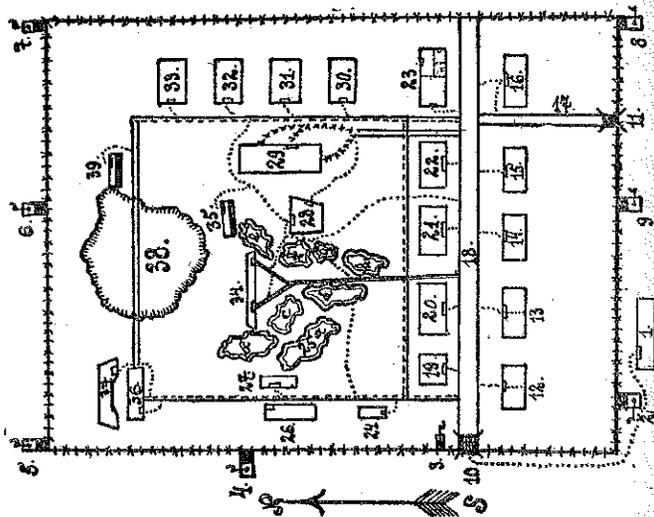
is kept permanently shut and is regarded as a reserve entrance.

Most of the huts in the camp were erected by the British troops which co-operated with the Russian Northern Army under General Miller. A few were constructed by prisoner labour under the Soviet regime. Until 1925 the camp possessed no latrine, hospital, electric power station, or workshops. There were no tracks, either of boards or of earth. Until quite lately the prisoners used to sink into the sticky slime of the marsh, and the huts were flooded with liquid mud.

The wooden tracks consist of boards and planks, supported by small piles sunk in the marsh. There are in all five of these roads or paths. The principal road runs from the main gate to the eastern side of the wire fence, and is called the Nevsky Prospekt. Others run from the reserve entrance to the Nevsky Prospekt, from the Nevsky Prospekt to the latrine, from the Nevsky Prospekt to hut No. 1 (marked 29 on the plan), where the politicals live, and from the last store hut to the hospital hut (marked 36 on the plan).

THE CAMP ON POPOFF ISLAND

1. Guard-room.
- 2-9. Huts for sentries (8 men in each) along wire fence.
10. Main gate.
11. Reserve gate.
12. Women's hut (in two compartments).
13. Camp clerks and Tcheckists.
14. 2nd labour company.
15. 1st labour company.
16. Specialist labour company.
21. 3rd labour company.
22. —
17. Wooden track from reserve gate.
18. Nevsky Prospekt.
19. Commandant's office.
23. Prison, quartermaster on duty, etc.
24. Smithy.
- 25, 26, 27. Heaps of stones.
26. Workshops.
27. Electric power station.
28. Kitchen.
29. Political's hut.
- 30-33. Stores.
34. Latrine.
35. Refuse box.
36. Hospital.
37. Horses, carts, etc.
38. Ravine.
39. Hay store.



* "K.R.'s" and ordinary criminal.
 Wooden tracks are indicated by double lines, earth tracks by single lines, broken fences and smaller paths by dotted lines.

Earth tracks run from the Nevsky Prospekt along the line of store huts (30 to 33 on the plan), from the Nevsky Prospekt past the kitchen, workshops, and electric power station to the hospital, and from the commandant's office past the huts where the *shpana* and "K.R.'s" are quartered. Besides these there are a few narrow, rough tracks through the marsh—from the political's hut to the kitchen, and elsewhere.

The commandant's office is in hut No. 2 (marked 19 on the plan). This hut is divided off into several compartments for the use of the various branches of camp government—administrative, economic, etc. The "specialist company," which is quartered in hut No. 4 (marked 20 on the plan), consists of tailors, bootmakers, joiners, and so on, who satisfy the requirements of the administration and the Red soldiers.

The electric power station is in charge of an engineer named Krassin. He was previously in the Customs service, but was dismissed for speculation and sent to the Solovky. The workshops are

under an "adherent of Savinkoff," the kitchen is in charge of an ex-colonel named Rashevsky, and the stables of another "K.R." named Larin.

The business manager of the camp is one Pavloff (Nikolai Nikolaevitch), a corrupt rascal. He takes bribes on the auction principle; he who offers most carries the day. I give one example. There is no water on Popoff Island; it has to be brought from Kem, and two carts with cisterns are kept for this purpose. As fetching water is easier work than digging up tree-stumps, there is great competition for this job. Pavloff asked openly who would give most for it. There were three prisoners who had managed to bring a good deal of money with them; they offered more than anyone else—150 roubles between them—and they were still fetching water to the camp when I got away.

The higher camp authorities live in a small fishing settlement of about seventy cottages, a short distance outside the wire fence. The senior official on duty is quartered in the camp.

CHAPTER V

THE TYRANNY OF THE CRIMINALS

The "Distributing Hut"—Robbed the First Night—Criminals' Unwritten Code—Punishment of a Traitor—The Professor's Parcel—Successful Blackmail.

ALL newly arrived prisoners are sent first of all to the "distributing hut" of the camp on Popoff Island.

Hardly have you set foot on the now accursed soil of the Solovky before you feel the power of the *shpana*. When our party, consisting of "counter-revolutionaries" from the Caucasus, bishops and monks, a group of Casino-ites and many others, arrived at hut No. 6 (the "distributing hut"), we were met by armed Tchekists, themselves prisoners. They wanted to know first of all whether there were any Gpu employees or any criminal agents among us, for if so they might