

# Study on the Role of the Artists

## World War I Prisoners in the Cultural Life of Siberia (in the City of Krasnoyarsk)

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**Abstract**—The article considers the role of the war prisoner artists in the cultural life of Siberian cities during the World War I, the city of Krasnoyarsk taken as an example. The work of artists jailed into specialized regional camps is understudied and still needs to be thoroughly researched. The war prisoner artists were active in the art process of Siberia taking part in exhibitions, working in workshops, for printing and decorating industries and even promoting the local art education. The research is based on archive documents and retrospective periodicals and the conclusion is made that the regional art life got a powerful push for its further development under the influence of the outside, mostly European culture.

**Keywords**—World War I (WW I); artist; war prisoner (POW); cultural life; POW camp; Krasnoyarsk; Siberia; art exhibition; art education; drawing school

### I. INTRODUCTION

The culture of Siberia is an inexhaustible object of humanitarian research. Thanks to a wide range interdisciplinary investigation, the gaps of the past are gradually filled with knowledge about certain historic events. They include World War I, the first global conflict, and the roots and results of it need current analysis and re-thinking.

The works devoted to World War I include researches studying the prisoners' influence on the culture of Russia. Among those referring to the theme there were M. L. Bershadskaya, A. I. Gergileva, T. S. Komarova, L. Radauer, N. V. Surzhikova, E. S. Tsareva and other Russian and foreign scholars. Nevertheless, the search of the material in the given field is still up-to-date and unexhausted. The discovered archive documents, retrospective periodicals and people's memoirs about the cultural process behind the bars need more thorough and objective analysis of the cultural life in Russian cities that used to have camps for foreign war prisoners. On the whole, the above-mentioned theme not only broadens the present-day idea of the Siberian cultural traditions development, but also highlights the prospects of studying the complicated art processes of the regional, Russian and world art histories.

### II. SIBERIAN CAMPS FOR WAR PRISONERS

There were more than 2,000,000 war prisoners in Russia during the WW I; they had flooded Russia practically since the first days of the war. The first war prisoners appeared in

Krasnoyarsk on September 18, 1914. Later, there were thousands of newcomers. For example, on September 24, 1918, more than 2,600 people were brought to Krasnoyarsk by three trains [1]. According to the local press, the people's interest in the foreigners was great, but the citizens were more astonished by the fast growth of prisoners' numbers in the city. The reporters wrote that there were more and more Austrians, Germans, Hungarians, Czechs, Romanians, Serbs, Poles, Italians, and Turks. "There are thousands of them convoyed by a few soldiers and Cossaks. And they seem to be carrying the breath of the terrible distant war with them. And it also seems that the war which was so far away from us yesterday; the war we can only read about in the newspapers - it seems to have become closer and is so realistic and strangely palpable... Here are the living participants of recent battles" [2].

The newcomers were placed in special camps; most of them were concentrated in Ural, Turkmenistan and Siberia. It is known that the Siberian camps located in Tobolsk, Novonikolaevsk, Chita, Omsk, Barnaul, Achinsk, Kansk, Krasnoyarsk and other cities held up to 35,000 people at a time.

As for Krasnoyarsk, the camp territory was located seven versts [1 verst=1.067 km] away from the city; it was called the army quarter. Initially, "a half of it was never completed, while the other consisted of dug-in barracks", that is, of dug-outs on the banks of the Yenissei river [3]. There were soldiers there behind the barbed wire. The officers used to live in stone barracks.

In the first years of the war, the prisoners "were provisioned and treated properly. The officers got a salary of fifty rubles a month at that time. The soldiers also lived quite decently <...> After the February revolution when the payments were over and many officers were broke, quarrels started among them. Soon the camp provision was stopped completely, only a ration smaller than the soldiers' one was given to the officers from time to time" [4]. A similar situation was characteristic of many Siberian camps. The prisoner officers used to write home in 1916, "Our life is good and I would like you to live like this, too" [5]. In 1917, the prisoners started writing that the money had gone down in value and they could hardly buy some food.

Nevertheless, hunger was not so hard for the people. They could endure crowded filthy barracks and the conflicts

that used to break out very often, but Siberian freeze was the most painful thing for them. Turks were especially sensitive to the winters; they “could not resist 30-40 degrees below zero and died” [6]. Cold, hunger and insanitariness caused epidemics of tuberculosis, scorbute, typhus and other diseases that were common in Russian cities carrying away masses of people’s lives. The epidemics were also widespread in the prisoners’ camps making the infections greater hazard for the civilians. In Krasnoyarsk, where the epidemic of typhus was quite long, there were several hospitals organized for the sick people, both locals and war prisoners. But the hospitals could not take in all the sufferers, and most of them were condemned. It seemed that “death had already come to the city and nobody or nothing could prevent it” [7].

### III. “MOST ARTISTS, MUSICIANS AND ACTORS WERE HERE”

In spite of physical sufferings, the problem of survival was mostly that of the people’s psychological condition. Most of them represented peaceful professions and were forced to take part in the war after mass mobilization; they were waiting for their future with terror. Their despair was increased with social and political cataclysms, “that black starving nightmare spread over the cities and villages of Russia” [8]. Some prisoners could not bear it; there were cases of suicide, insanity and breakout. Those out of mind were sent to Omsk, where there was a specialized camp [9]. The runaways were punished mercilessly by Czechoslovaks, Cossacks, Kolchak troops or partisans who had different parts of the railway under control.

The problems of survival were partially solved with work. The prisoners organized different production groups, for example, making footwear, small homeware and even icons. In Krasnoyarsk camp there was a pottery and a musical instruments workshop, where wood carvers were supposed to work [10] [11]. “By and by the prisoners’ camps were transformed into production centres of Siberia. <...> First, some goods of poor quality appeared in Krasnoyarsk, but later the central organisation disposed of them through a certain regulation of sales and control over the quality of goods. In November 1919, the amount of the goods produced by the Krasnoyarsk war prisoners reached as much as 2 million rubles, a great sum of money” [12]. After 1917 the camp was controlled by contractors who organized and distributed the people’s work. In such conditions, no military ranks were so significant, and the knowledge acquired before the war became especially valuable.

The prisoners could get a job in the city if their pre-war professional skills were in demand there. Taking into consideration the fact that men of Krasnoyarsk had been mobilized, the war prisoners became an important working resource, they balanced the gender disproportion that had appeared because of the war both on the social and personal levels. A special permit given by the camp administration allowed the war prisoners to live and work in the city.

There was much work in the army quarter of Krasnoyarsk, where “there were most artists, musicians and

actors <...> thanks to coincidence. That is why mass cultural work was especially vigorous among the prisoners of the camp” [13]. The military camp became a concert and theatre stage well-known in the city thanks to their art. In one of the barracks there was a stage, a wooden planking raised about an arshine high (about 70 cm), there were benches in front of it [14]. Choirs, a symphony orchestra and a folk orchestra used to perform there. Orchestras were also organized at two permanent theatres opened by Germans and Hungarians.

The performances needed staging made out of improvised materials. For example, clothes were made of sacks and then painted with oils, the curtain was made of a blanket [15] [16]. Make-up artists used to work with the choir singers and actors [17]. The artists used to make posters inviting people to performances, concerts, or exhibitions; thanks to that not only war prisoners attended the cultural events of the camp, but also “Russian officers and local civilians”, and even the province authorities used to applaud generously [18] [19]. Eventually, city businessmen started ordering display works. For example, the camp craftsmen made a shop sign for the barber’s shop of the Trud workers’ cooperative society; they got 150 rubles for it [20].

The prisoner artists were actively involved into publishing activities, they illustrated the “Yenissei” and “Ember” (Man) handwritten magazines, the Hungarian newspaper, “Vörös Fák” (The Red Torch) and other periodicals [21]. The artists used to make calendars in Russian and souvenir cards and also organized art exhibitions. The exposition included the works by craftsmen and applied arts alongside with sculptures, paintings, and graphics. The American historian Gerald Davis claimed that in Krasnoyarsk “all the arts were supported with lively sales of the local amateur craftsmen and artists’ works” [22].

### IV. THEY WERE DISTINGUISHED BY THEIR ‘OUTSTANDING TALENT’

The creative people busy with arts attracted attention at the camp because they were distinguished with their “outstanding talents” [23]. There is information about some of them. For example, the Czech Alfred Kunft; before the war, he used to work for the Shkip brothers’ Liberec publishing house; he belonged to the high-rank officers of the Austro-Hungarian army. In 1916 he was taken prisoner, was in many Siberian camps including the Krasnoyarsk one. Together with the war prisoner Hans Tuma he painted a café in Krasnoyarsk [24]. Later Kunft got to Vladivostok where he organized art exhibitions to save money to go back home. The graphic works by the artist, such as “A Skeleton over the City Destroyed by War”, “In Front of the Transport”, “Vladivostok”, were presented at the exhibition, “To Siberia!”, organized in the gallery of the town of Liberec (Czech Republic) in 2015 [25]. Besides Kunft’s works, there were also those by other European masters who had survived the Siberian camps of WW I: Franz Gruss, Alexander Drobik, Hans Tuma, Hans Kleinert, Victor Bem, Ferdinand Michl [26]. It is known that the Austrian artists, Ferdinand Michl and Arthur Jakobovich, used to work at a Krasnoyarsk drawing school.

The school that was opened in 1910 had had financial difficulties since the very first day of its existence. In 1918, there was a problem with lack of teachers caused by lack of men in Krasnoyarsk. Then the City Duma invited the engravers, Michl and Yakobovich, to work at the art school; “according to the local masters they were a great art power” [27]. The citizens of Austria-Hungary had been teaching there for not more than a year; in the same 1918, a special commission considered the lists of 56 war prisoners that were working in state offices and for private enterprises. Practically no foreigners were allowed to continue the work. According to new regulations, all the war prisoners had to go back to the camp. Austrian artists were among those few who had avoided that. They were allowed to work as teachers of graving “until the course is over, i.e. until the end of school year. It is also known that the European masters were active in their relations with Krasnoyarsk art society - the Yenissey European society of artists and applied arts workers” [28] [29].

It is likely that the Hungarian Ripszas, Henrikh Henrikhovich, born in the town of Nimet Boy (illegible) contacted the members of the society. He filled in a standard prisoner’s form in which he wrote that he had graduated from Academy of arts (the city is not mentioned), had worked in Budapest as an artist for 10 years, was a member of the Salon of national art [30]. In 1915, he was taken prisoner at the age of 31 [31]. He was most probably the master mentioned by the Krasnoyarsk artist Venedikt Lvovich Petrakov in 1927, though the latter named him ‘Rapsha’ instead of ‘Ripszas’. The distortion might have been caused by time lap or mistakes of the Russian record clerks who were making the lists of foreign war prisoners. So, Petrakov claimed that “Rapsha (Hungarian) was a gifted and skilled artist. He reflected a number of revolutionary motives eye-witnessed by him, as well as the periods of the Soviet power and struggle in his technically perfect works in graphics, water-colours and ornamental designs. Departing he organized an exhibition. Nobody bought anything from him. Also, we did not get a chance to preserve his works for the museum. He had taken everything with him” [32].

According to archive documents, Ripszas was deported to Hungary in 1920. His compatriot, the artist Sandor Bokus, returned home the same year [33]. He was captured on June 8, 1915 at the age of 30 [34].

Ferdinand Michl, Alfred Kunft and Voeslav Mole went back to their native lands. After coming back home the Slovenian poet and art expert Mole published his book of poems called “Tristia ex Siberia” where he told about his life in Siberia [35]. The number of repatriates from Russia was significant in 1920; some of the foreigners took their Russian wives home. Having gained their liberty, others chose to get Russian citizenship, like the Polish artist Vladislav Porankevich [36]. There were also those who still lived in the camp, where the life was changing rapidly.

#### V. IN THE STREAMLINE OF ALIEN CULTURE

In 1920, the Krasnoyarsk army quarter was renamed concentration camp. It consisted of several sections: stone

three storey buildings with officers’ flats, two storey soldier’s barracks and earthwork structures. 40,000 convicts lived in the camp at that time. The cramped camp was even worse as “starving horses were roaming around the camp, and they all soon died. The whole territory and all the sheds were filthy. Next to the hospitals there were dead bodies piled high; the people had died of jail fever” [37]. At that background, the artistic life of the camp was boiling over. Previously, it had been initiated by separate enthusiasts; at that time it was planned and centralized. The camp had a magazine editorial office and a library; there was also a scientific, theatre and musical and vocal sections. The camp authorities appointed the sections’ supervisor who had a special food ration [38].

Among the prisoners there were representatives of art, too: the Hungarian artist Joszef Buda (28 years old); the Hungarian artist Henrikh Riyman (32 years old); the Austrian lithographer Guszta Miksika (41 years old); the German architect Bruno Kolgard (33 years old); the Hungarian architect Gyula Langa (28 years old) and others [39] [40] [41] [42] [43].

Apart from the foreigners there were Russian citizens placed in the camp because of their hostility towards the Soviet power. There were civilians among them, the refugees who had left the central part of the country for the east to be farther from military takeovers, hunger and epidemics. There were also army men who had mostly been fighting against the Red Army [44]. The professions of some newcomers were connected with artwork, and Siberian camps were in the streamline of alien culture brought from Europe and different territories of Russia. Among the representatives of the Russian art serving their sentences in the camp there was Ivan Ivanovich Preobrazhensky, a stage designer; Yevgeni Nikolaevich Rakikt, an artist; Solomin (the name is unknown), an artist (his wife was in the camp with him helping to make clothes and decorate the stage); Mikhail Nikolaevich Shishlakov, a potter; Ivan Ivanovich Lyakhov, a professional graphic artist and others [45] [46] [47] [48] [49].

Lyakhov was born in the Saratov province; during WWI he was in the German prison, and then he served in Kolchak army. But he was in the battlefield against his will dreaming of art only; that “former White officer” told about it in the standard form filled in by the camp prisoners [50]. After his discharge, Ivan Ivanovich was deep in art process, having connected his life with Siberian culture forever. Lyakhov was among the first to understand and specify the role of artists-WWI prisoners in the cultural life of Krasnoyarsk.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

The delegates of the First congress of Siberian artists (1927, Novosibirsk) called the years of the First World War, October Revolution and Civil War the “Ice Age” [51]. The regional artists associated that period with death, hunger, cold, epidemics, emigration, and absence of demand and stagnation of Siberian cities. But the Krasnoyarsk citizens were of another opinion. In 1927 Lyakhov became chairman of the Krasnoyarsk branch of the All-Siberian “Novaya Sibir” (New Siberia) art society; speaking at the congress, he

mentioned the active art life of Krasnoyarsk “because of a great number <...> of trapped newcomers together with imprisoned Hungarians and Germans. <...> there were up to 70 artists of different professional fields” [51]. He considered them to have significantly influenced the art processes of the city.

Foreign masters contributed not only to intensity of cultural events, but also to diversity of Krasnoyarsk art life. “...graphic artists, landscapists, easel painters. They had influenced and introduced something of their own throughout three or four years”, they had enriched the local culture with new creative traditions [51]. It is important that the war prisoners promoted the art education in Krasnoyarsk. The Austrian engravers, Ferdinand Michl and Arthur Yakobovich presented European art to the students of the local drawing school. Even the manufacture for making children’s wooden toys opened in January 1919 influenced the esthetic education of young citizens. It is known that seven war prisoners, masters of decorative-applied art, were engaged in the production. Their craftwork was in demand not only in Krasnoyarsk, but also in Kansk, Minusinsk, Tomsk, and Novonikolaevsk: the toys were very well made and were distinct in strength and low price [52]. There was a similar manufacture in Tomsk, too. Creative work, both at the level of handicrafts and in the most elevated meaning, was saving the prisoners from despair and gave them psychological force to live further, apart from their small income. At the same time, art was a kind of mental therapy for the local population, which was relaxing the difficulties of wartime life.

The local artists eagerly communicated with the war prisoners representing different European art schools. The foreign painters who had arrived in Krasnoyarsk “from the washed-up and polished foreign nature”, soon started admiring the local landscape and reflecting the image of Siberia in their paintings [53].

Throughout several centuries, the regional culture had been developing as a dialogue of cultures. The local artists used to say that “by nature a Siberian is a crossbreed, whose blood is a blend” of different art traditions [53]. Their diversity is mainly connected with the culture of exiles: the mass flow of Decembrists and Poles in the 19th century, the WW I captives and Stalin repressions of the 20th century. Though the scale of historic and individual tragedies was great, the region was getting a powerful art feeding. The alien cultures encouraged the renaissance of Siberian creative forces, promoted new traditions of its artistic life and gave a new impulse of the cultural development. Siberian art was getting “a genetic renovation” and then reflected in the works of many artists including the foreign ones who had come through Siberian “way in chains”.

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