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SYMBOLISM IN RUSSIAN  
CRIMINAL TATTOOS

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## SUMMARY

In my theses I am going to be looking into tattoos of the one of the worlds most dangerous and complex subcultures which is also known as *Vor v Zakone*, and is the biggest and oldest Russian criminal group. I am going to be concentrating on the way these tattoos have evolved over the history and I will explore what these symbols mean not just to someone who is a part of this complex group but also from a point of view of a common person. In the same time I am going to look at them from a perspective of the theory of the symbolism, which in this case is very different from tattoos in other cultures.

This subject gets even more interesting because of the lack of the information about it. But there are divine books, which are remarkable because of their great value; also films had been made referencing this complicated subculture.

From a point of view of a graphic designer where we tend to look at things differently as they may seem at first, I will look into not only the visual presentation, which is considered the most common way of looking at tattoos, but also, the historical, cultural and religious aspects, which play a very big role in development and meaning of Russian criminal tattoos.

## INTRODUCTION

I got interested in Russian criminal tattoos after getting a tattoo of my own. I always thought tattoos had a very deep meaning for the person who wears it, but I was wrong. Nowadays, it seems people do not think about tattoos the same way they did a few decades ago. Today, tattoos are considered as art. I remember when I was a child, my father told me those only prisoners, sailors and prostitutes wore tattoos. That way, he told me, it was possible to distinguish them from a common person. After getting a tattoo of my own, I was thus a bit concerned about what my father would think. I spent some time getting to know the cultural differences in common tattoos, when I stumbled across Russian criminal tattoos. I decided to explore them, as I was interested both by of their deep meaning within a social group and their rich history. Finally I got the chance to see for myself what was my father had been telling me years ago.

*Vor v zakone* (the thief in law) is the biggest and most complex criminal scene in Russia, and has the most intricate and meaningful tattoo language in the world: “The symbol does not merely equate; it must reveal some essential part of the subject to be understood...”<sup>1</sup>. For this reason, I am going to point out the symbolic meaning and history of this fascinating graphic language. Much like other aspects of life, these symbols are living and ever-expanding; therefore, their meaning has changed over the years.<sup>2</sup> It is very important to keep the understanding and interest of the Russian prison tattoos alive, because of their rich history, social knowledge and great input in modern society, especially considering how fast it has changed in the past decades. The history and meaning of this complex symbolic language have been travelling from one generation of convicts to another, only to be captured in few documentaries and a few books.

We can surely affirm, that Russian history plays an important part in the way these symbols have gained their meaning over many decades, and the reasons why they have been applied on the bodies of the convicts.

Branding (tattooing) did not only constitute a central component of the Russian penal complex but was also an important administrative measure wherewith officials ascribed status to individuals by literally marking their membership in various social groups.<sup>3</sup> Cooper says that the symbol can only be understood in a context of its religious, cultural or metaphysical background.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cooper, J.C, *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of traditional symbols*, Thames and Hudson LTD, London, 1978, page 7.

<sup>2</sup> Cooper, J.C, *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of traditional symbols*, page 8.

<sup>3</sup> Caplan, Jane, *Written On The Body, The tattoo in European and American history*, Reaction Books, Essay by Abby M. Shrader, London 2000, page 174.

<sup>4</sup> Cooper, J.C, *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of traditional symbols*, page 7

This subject is interesting to explore because is very little material about it around the world, perhaps because Russians used to be quite secretive about this aspect of their culture.

## RUSSIAN CRIMINAL TATTOOS

“Since early 18th century, Russian authorities perceived branding as a means of regulating the status of those who thought to subvert official attempts to construct their identities.”<sup>5</sup> This clearly served as identification for the mark of collective and personal ownership.<sup>6</sup> Decades later, convicts operated within a discursive structure that privileged social status groupings, and therefore appropriated tactics of bodily inscription deployed by Russian officials in an effort to forge their own particular identities and assert ownership over their own bodies.<sup>7</sup>

“Russian prison tattoos from the Soviet era are some of the most complex of these symbolic codes in the world and determine an offender’s place within the strictly organized and brutally enforced criminal social order.”<sup>8</sup> Tattoos have always been a big part of Russian prison subculture, but unfortunately, for most of the 20th century the Russian government has ignored them for many years. After an unsuccessful attempt to achieve criminal tattoos for identifying criminals in the middle of last century, the Russian government didn’t pay attention to these symbols for many years.<sup>9</sup> “The nation of Russia has undergone dramatic transformations in the past decade, and those metamorphoses have been starkly reflected in its infamous prisons.”<sup>10</sup> Even today Russian prisons are still rich in their laws and rituals.<sup>11</sup> Prison tattoos became more of a matter of interest following that, but because of their incredible abundance and structure, variety of motives of chosen drawings, richness of their subject matter, space and technology of application, most

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<sup>5</sup> Caplan, Jane, *Written On The Body, The tattoo in European and American history*, page 179

<sup>6</sup> Caplan, Jane, *Written On The Body, The tattoo in European and American history*, page 179

<sup>7</sup> Caplan, Jane, *Written On The Body, The tattoo in European and American history*, page 175

<sup>8</sup> Squidoo informative website, Accessed 29 December 2011 <http://www.squidoo.com/Russian-Criminal-Tattoos>

<sup>9</sup> Encyclopedia of gang tattoos, <http://tattoos.h16.ru/main.html>, Accessed 29 December 2011, (Translated from Russian)

<sup>10</sup> <http://lostinasupermarket.com/2010/02/russian-prison-tattoos/>, Accessed 2 May 2012, Posted By: Piter De Vries

<sup>11</sup> <http://lostinasupermarket.com/2010/02/russian-prison-tattoos/>, Accessed 2 May 2012, Posted By: Piter De Vries

researchers eventually wisely refused the idea of cataloguing and investigating criminal tattoos.<sup>12</sup> Even though the knowledge and understanding of these complex symbols might have helped the government solve many organized crimes.

Only a few decades ago, this was once again brought into the limelight when a book about Russian criminal tattoos, written by Danzig Baldaev, was published in London. His father was an educated man who spoke several European languages, and was arrested following the denunciation of down-and-out who had tried to court his mother before they married.<sup>13</sup> This fact made Danzig a son of an enemy of the state. However, he spent all his life documenting and redrawing tattoos from prisons all over the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup> His books are the only real documentation of this cruel, sadistic and graphically amazing subculture.

The stories behind these tattoos reveal the terrible truth about the Russian government over the past hundred years during a time when thousands of people were sent to prison camps for no more than just being an honest or educated man — doctors, technicians, teachers, engineers, land and mine surveyors — together with cruel and brutal criminals.<sup>15</sup>

This aspect of Russian history is reflected in the tattoos in various ways, making them one of the most complex symbolic codes in the world.<sup>16</sup>

## HISTORY

“The word ‘tattoo’ is said to have two major derivations — from the Polynesian word ‘ta’ which means striking something and the Tahitian word ‘tatau’ which means to mark something. The history of tattoos began over 5000 years ago and is as diverse as the people who wear them.”<sup>17</sup>

For hundreds of years the tattoo has been taken to mark off entire ‘civilizations’ from ‘barbarian’ or ‘savage’ neighbors declaring a convict's criminality, whether by branding him as a punishment through his own personal will to acquire a tattoo (thereby, ironically, marking himself).

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<sup>12</sup> *Encyclopedia of gang tattoos*, <http://tattoos.h16.ru/main.html>, Accessed 29 December 2011, (Translated from Russian)

<sup>13</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia Volume I*, Murray & Sorrel FUEL, London 2009, page 19

<sup>14</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia, Volume I*, page 20-21

<sup>15</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia, Volume I*, page 17

<sup>16</sup> *Punishment: the Russian prison yesterday and today*, Accessed 5 May 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJ0duvcxVf0>

<sup>17</sup> *DesignBoom Website*, Accessed 11 January 2012, [http://www.designboom.com/history/tattoo\\_history.html](http://www.designboom.com/history/tattoo_history.html)

More generally, tattoos were meant to inscribe various kinds of group membership, often in opposition to a dominant culture.<sup>18</sup>

“The tattoo is made apparent in the archaeological and written record between prehistoric times until some point in the early Middle Ages; it then become virtually invisible for several hundred years, before re-entering the field of vision in the 18th century”<sup>19</sup>

Tattoos first came to Europe in the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. They were then primarily used by carnival artists, to decorate and show painted bodies to the public for money. Later, circus artists adopted this technique for the same purpose. People noticed this unusual art and just a few decades later it was seen as something completely normal.<sup>20</sup>

It is not known when tattooing first became a common practice in Russian prisons and Stalinist Gulags. When Soviet researchers first discovered and studied this underground activity in the 1920s, photographs of prisoners from that period suggested an already elaborate and highly developed subculture (see image 01 and 02). More than simple decoration, the images symbolically proclaim the wearer's background and rank him within the complex social system of the jailed.<sup>21</sup> In light of these facts, it is therefore not surprising that tattooing (branding at that time) was a common practice in imperial Russia under the reign of Peter the Great. It was used to identify criminals who had escaped. Innovation at that time of the practice was branding convicts with the imperial symbols of the eagle.<sup>22</sup> The executioner would then rub gunpowder in the scars left by a red-hot iron stamp studded with needles.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Caplan, Jane, *Written On The Body, The tattoo in European and American history*, page xiv

<sup>19</sup> Caplan, Jane, *Written On The Body, The tattoo in European and American history*, page xv

<sup>20</sup> *Encyclopedia of gang tattoos*, Accessed 26 December 2011, <http://tattoos.h16.ru/main.html>

<sup>21</sup> *Foreign Prisoners Support Service Website*, Accessed 26 December 2011.

[http://www.phaseloop.com/foreignprisoners/exp-russian\\_tats.html](http://www.phaseloop.com/foreignprisoners/exp-russian_tats.html)

<sup>22</sup> Caplan, Jane, *Written on the body, The tattoos in European and American history*, page 179-181

<sup>23</sup> Caplan, Jane, *Written On The Body, The tattoo in European and American history*, page 179-183



01



02

01. This tattoo symbolizes two most important things in the life of the thief — love and death. (From early 19<sup>th</sup> century)

02. Woman with the devil symbolizes that love and hate are always close. (From early 19<sup>th</sup> century)

In 1828 Tsar Nicolas I refused to authorize branding on the grounds that all branding constituted punishment. However, he later approved branding fugitives with acronyms that denoted their status, and the place where they had been kept.<sup>24</sup> This became a way for convicts to conceive themselves and the way they ordered their lives. Authority appears to have played a role in shaping how convicts demarcated their own status and group identity in both Imperial and Soviet Russia.<sup>25</sup> It was then observed that Russian convicts occupied the most privileged status position within the extremely hierarchical world of the prison.

“Symbolism is an instrument of knowledge and the most ancient and fundamental method of expression, one which reveals aspects of reality which escape other modes of expression”<sup>26</sup>

Tattooing has existed in one form or another across the planet since time immemorial and the popularity of tattoo art is most likely to continue for centuries. Although the fundamental concept of tattoo has been constant throughout history, the styles and reasons for having a tattoo have evolved along with man's own development.

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<sup>24</sup> Caplan, Jane, *Written On The Body, The tattoo in European and American history*, page 179-183

<sup>25</sup> Caplan, Jane, *Written On The Body, The tattoo in European and American history*, page 182

<sup>26</sup> Cooper, J.C, *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of traditional symbols*, page 7



## VOR V ZAKONE

*Vor v zakone* is literary translated as ‘thief in law’, and indicates a “thief” (an offender, anyone who has committed a violent crime) is a criminal who is respected, has authority and a high ranking status within the criminal underworld in the old Soviet Union, Russia and the republics that formed the former Soviet Union. Thieves in law are the elite of the Russian world of organized crime: an equivalent of the rank ‘Godfather’ in the Italian mafia or the rank of a General in the army.<sup>27</sup>

It was probably around the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century or the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, that the term *Vor v zakone* first appeared. In the process of initiation in the prison environment, criminals used the same mechanism as official Russian culture, choosing these strategies in order to resist the autocratic power complex. By doing that, they sent a clear message to both authorities and other, less experienced inmates that they had the power to set the tone of prison and exile life.<sup>28</sup>

By mimicking official forms of justice, they upheld their own rules through violence. They appointed their own judges and executioners to deal with the lower rank criminals when they committed a crime in the prison — spied, compromised the prison authorities, and other crimes that flouted the criminal code of discipline.

Criminals started using their own technologies of bodily inscription to underscore their advantage in the criminal world. They applied tattoos on their own bodies, which functioned as ‘calling cards’, which helped them one from another.<sup>29</sup> (See image 03) These traditions have been passed on from one criminal to another and still have a great value today. The meaning of these symbols goes beyond the individual to the universal and is innate in the life of the spirit.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Wikipedia Foundation*, ‘Vor v Zakone’, Accessed 10 January 2012,

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thief\\_in\\_law](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thief_in_law)

<sup>28</sup> Caplan, Jane, *Written On The Body, The tattoo in European and American history*, page 184

<sup>29</sup> Caplan, Jane, *Written On The Body, The tattoo in European and American history*, page 183-184

<sup>30</sup> Cooper, J.C, *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of traditional symbols*, page 7

Spiritualizing these symbols bring their wearer to a closer relation with God and religion in general.



03

## THE THIEVES LAW

In the late 19th century, criminals functioned as convenient and appropriate role models for successive generations of outlaws. They successfully developed criminal folklore and history. They insisted on dealing only with members of their own groups, controlled prison environment and established law courts that enforced their rules with violence.<sup>31</sup>

The thief himself regards tattooed symbols, as they become the world he lives in — his only reality. For the thief, all his tattoos become ‘meaningful things’. The world of tattoos is one of symbolic sequences that are accepted as reality and which consequently shape the consciousness of the thief himself, because the tattoos are regarded by the thieves themselves as the effective constitution of the world of thieves — a fundamental law of the thieves society.<sup>32</sup>

The tattoos require the thief to conform to certain manners and also verbal and behavioral stereotypes. Additionally, tattoos set the rules of behavior towards the other thieves. When one becomes a thief, he or she has to live by the code, which is the ultimate thieves law. The thief as a member of the group has to forget his/her family and his/her relatives — he/she is no longer allowed to have family of his/her own, although he/she is allowed to have a lover. Instead, the community of thieves becomes his/her family. He/she is no longer allowed to work, no matter how

<sup>31</sup> Caplan, Jane, *Written On The Body, The tattoo in European and American history*, page 187

<sup>32</sup> Information system “*Technique for Special Services*” Website, Accessed 16 December 2011.

<http://www.bnti.ru/showart.asp?aid=760&lvl=02.09>.

much trouble this fact might bring. Instead, he/she is encouraged to master his/her craft in thievery. Committing a crime against other thieves is forbidden and is punishable.<sup>33</sup>

“Russian and Soviet convicts used, and continue to use, tattoos as one means of upholding long-standing traditions, signifying group solidarity, and conversing in a language which they attempt to keep secret from authorities.<sup>34</sup>” Understanding this code means understanding the criminal tattoos and a whole world around them. But to understand these primarily linguistic objects completely, one has to be a part of this complex and very dangerous social group.

## TECHNIQUE

The complexity and style of criminal symbols have changed a lot since the beginning of last century, when living conditions in Russian prisons became worse than inhumane. However, the applying technique has remained almost the same for many decades. In imperial Russia, the design was transferred from the original by positioning it on the tooth and pushing pins through it following the basic lines. Black was the most common pigment used by scrims handers. The preparation was made from lampblack or from other form of carbon. After the pigment had been rubbed into the engraved lines, excess pigment was removed with a cloth.<sup>35</sup> Presently, tattoos done in a Russian prison have a distinct bluish color and usually appear somewhat blurred because of the lack of instruments to draw fine lines with. The ink — called *mazut* (fuel oil), is often created from burning the heel of a shoe and mixing the soot with urine. The needle for applying tattoos is called *peshnya* (an ice pick), *shpora* (a spur) and many other names. This might seem unrelated to the actual tool, but make absolute sense to all the criminals. The device for applying tattoos is made from a mechanical or electric razor and is called *mashinka* (a typewriter), *bormashina* (dentist’s drill) or *shveinaya mashina* (a sewing machine).<sup>36</sup>

The reason for this unusual technique is that tattoos are banned in Russian prisons<sup>37</sup>; therefore inmates apply tattoos by any method and instrument that is accessible to them. Anyone who is caught making tattoos will be punished. But this is not a good enough reason for thieves to forsake their calling and follow the code, as is evident by the large number of Russian criminal tattoos.

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<sup>33</sup> Information system “*Technique for Special Services*” Website, Accessed 16 December 2011. <http://www.bnti.ru/showart.asp?aid=760&lvl=02.09>.

<sup>34</sup> Caplan, Jane, *Written On The Body, The tattoo in European and American history*, page 187

<sup>35</sup> Caplan, Jane, *Written On The Body, The tattoo in European and American history*, page xxiii

<sup>36</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia, Volume I*, page 31

<sup>37</sup> Lambert Alix, *The Mark of Cain*, Documentary, 2001

## THE MEANING

As Cooper mentions, a symbol need not arise from any one source, but adapt or respond to different ages, religions, cults and civilizations.<sup>38</sup> Where Russian convict tattoos are determined in very complex manner at the interface of linguistics, visual, social communicative and psychological context.<sup>39</sup> Unlike ordinary speech where words are arranged in linear space, in convict tattoos symbols appear in various ways — often inside one another. The text and the signs in a tattoo are not linear but volumetric and multidimensional. The tattoos can incorporate the most varied kind of signs — verbal, representational, allegorical and also symbolic.<sup>40</sup> The body is already charged with meaning, so convicts carefully choose the part of the body for applying tattoos, because the meaning of the tattoo is changing depending on which part of the body it is laid upon.<sup>41</sup> Bodies are often decorated with rings, crosses, chains, star-shaped badges, crowns etc. One of the most popular body parts for applying tattoos is the chest, which is charged with a special and even sacred meaning to its wearer. Most of the time, tattoos on the chest are: a naked woman, a cathedral, images of saints, biblical characters, skulls, animals (most often lions and tigers), devils, tomb crosses, crucifixes, portraits of political leaders, knights and gladiators. Cats are also tattooed on the chest, symbolizing agility and the thief's luck.

The back is usually left for horseshoes, musical instruments as well as cathedrals and spiders. In that case the tattoo of a cathedral holds the same meaning as when it is applied to the chest. Common tattoos on the arms and legs are knives, snakes, chains, anchors ships and stars.<sup>42</sup> A tattoo of stars usually indicates the rank of the thief within a group, and is applied only when the thief has earned them by committing crimes of various degrees and being loyal to law of the thieves.

Head and forehead is usually used for applying forced tattoos — starting with swastikas and ending with genitals.<sup>43</sup> Most of the time these tattoos are applied after losing a card game, and not being able to pay the debt, or if one has committed a sexual crime within the criminal group.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> J.C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of traditional symbols*, page 8

<sup>39</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoos Encyclopedia Volume I*, page 31

<sup>40</sup> Information system “*Technique for Special Services*” Website, Accessed 16 December 2011, <http://www.bnti.ru/showart.asp?aid=760&lvl=02.09>.

<sup>41</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoos Encyclopedia Volume I*, page 31

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.bnti.ru/showart.asp?aid=760&lvl=02.09>. Accessed 19 December 2011

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.bnti.ru/showart.asp?aid=760&lvl=02.09>. Accessed 19 December 2011

<sup>44</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoos Encyclopedia Volume I*, page

“Tattoos are a unique language of symbols and the rules for reading them are transmitted via oral tradition. Esoteric in nature, this language resembles thieves’ argot and it performs a similar function by encoding secret information to protect itself against uninitiated outsiders.”<sup>45</sup> Tattoos act as a symbol of public identity, social self-awareness and collective memory. They also shape stereotypes of the group behavior and set out the rules and rituals needed for maintaining the order in the world of thieves.<sup>46</sup> Anyone who doesn’t belong to the criminal world may take these symbols for a random assortment of unrelated images.<sup>47</sup>

## INFLUENCES

Images chosen by the prisoners are borrowed from popular art and the rich tradition of Russian icon paintings. Churches, kittens, images of saints or the Madonna and Christ, portraits of Russian political leaders and Soviet architecture, skulls and barbed wire are transmuted into a clandestine social and political language that can be decoded by fellow inmates and by ex-convicts outside of the prison walls.<sup>48</sup>

These symbols have also been influenced by the rich Russian culture and history. Russia has always been a very religious country; therefore it is hard to believe that someone who has killed, lied, stolen from someone and abandoned his family can consider himself a religious person. But even a thief has very strong beliefs; if not in God, then in his own set of rules, which in this case becomes his religion.

The cruelty and inhumane conditions of Russian prisons, which prisoners are forced to adapt to, has brought its share to the meaning of tattoos.<sup>49</sup>

Like in other countries there is a mania for tattoos among criminals, but in Russia they attach much more meaning to these signs on their bodies interpreted as a part of the biography of the tattoo's owner; both police and criminals are able to look at the body and decipher all of the owner's deeds. According to the convicts, “These days there is more freedom allowed in decorating their bodies in such way, but during the Soviet regime a person could earn big disgrace from his friends if he made a tattoo not according to the rules.”<sup>50</sup>

## EXPLANATION

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<sup>45</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoos Encyclopedia Volume I*, page 27

<sup>46</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoos Encyclopedia Volume II*, page 33-41

<sup>47</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoos Encyclopedia Volume I*, page 29

<sup>48</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia, Volume II*, page 33

<sup>49</sup> Lambert Alix, *The Mark of Cain*, Documentary, 2001

<sup>50</sup> *English Russia Website*, Accessed 26 December 2011, <http://englishrussia.com/tag/russian-tattoo/>

The language of tattoos is considered both highly social and political.<sup>51</sup> In thieves jargon, the traditional set of tattoos is known as '*frak s ordenami*' (a tail coat with decorations)(see image 04), which sometimes appears literally as a coat with decorations — epaulettes or shoulder-straps with stars or skulls are used to indicate the rank of the thief.<sup>52</sup> These symbols embody a thief's complete service record, his entire biography — his passport, case file, and award record — his full set of official bureaucratic documents. In the thief's world, a man with no tattoos is a man with no social status at all.<sup>53</sup>



04

04. "Military insignia and epaulet tattoos are often used to signify criminal accomplishments or some other aspect of a prisoner's history. Skulls generally designate murderers. The crest in the drawing above refers to the White Guard— troops who fought against the Red Army in the Russian Revolution— and can mean that a prisoner was a high ranking criminal or had some special status as a criminal before their incarceration. The epaulet in the drawing below indicates that a prisoner has done time in solitary confinement. Nazi imagery is very common. An SS insignia can indicate that a prisoner is respected for never having confessed to anything."<sup>54</sup>

Understanding text and symbols of this kind is extremely difficult in the beginning, especially since it is in general difficult to break down the visual objects themselves into separate signs and interpret them into words. All these images, for instance the combination in a single tattoo of a rose, barber wire and a dagger, may seem comprehensible, but in reality tattoos of this kind have nothing to do with flowers or cold steel. One may think that these symbols can be separated

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<sup>51</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoos Encyclopedia Volume I*, page 27

<sup>52</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoos Encyclopedia Volume I*, page 27

<sup>53</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoos Encyclopedia Volume I*, page 27

<sup>54</sup> Foreign Prisoners Support Service Website, Accessed 26 December 2011.

[http://www.phaseloop.com/foreignprisoners/exp-russian\\_tats.html](http://www.phaseloop.com/foreignprisoners/exp-russian_tats.html)

and understood, but these complex combinations of symbols are inseparable one from another. In order to understand them, one has to have knowledge of the Russian political and social history.<sup>55</sup>

## I SYMBOLS vs. BODY

Tattoos signifying the complex ‘demotion’ of a thief may employ depiction of a sexual act, for instance the suit of hearts and or diamonds. These tattoos signify the act of ‘lowering’, automatically evoking the repression of their ‘owner’ by the world of thieves and bringing the thieves’ system of punishment to action. “There is a whole series of shameful marks which their owner tries to destroy by any means when he leaves the prison: finger ring form tattoos for a ‘shaggy thief’, also known as ‘shaggy safe-breaker, ‘sexual bandit’ and ‘drowned in the cunt’ are used to mark individuals convicted for sexual crimes. Usually such tattoos were applied compulsorily, accompanied by violence.”<sup>56</sup> (See image 05)

Since the body cannot lie, it acts like a genuine traitor or executioner towards its owner. This way the body pronounces its own sentence, condemns itself to suffering. It is only the body that the thief can trust.<sup>57</sup>



05

## II SYMBOLIC BIRTH

Referring to the thieves law — the thief is symbolically born into the life of thieves as a result of an ‘initiation’ and performs numerous symbolic functions in the reality of tattoos, which is also where his social death occurs when he is deprived of his status — as a thief for having tattoos that are brands of disgrace or medals of honor. In this case one is accepted into or rejected by the new family of thieves.<sup>58</sup>

In real life a thief is most often identified not by the features of his face and his figure, but by the tattooed surface of his body, so in a way a thief’s tattoos become his face. The tattoos

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<sup>55</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoos Encyclopedia Volume II*, page 34

<sup>56</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia, Volume II*, page 38-39

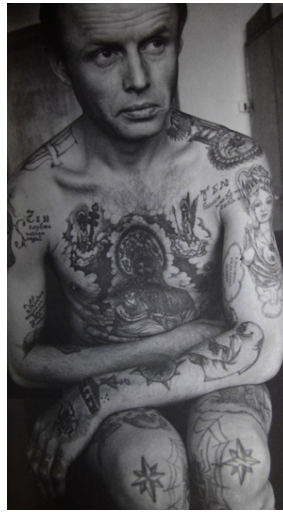
<sup>57</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia, Volume II*, page 39

<sup>58</sup> Caplan, Jane, *Written On The Body, The tattoo in European and American history*, page 189

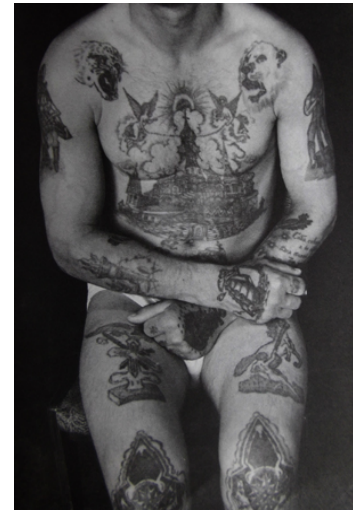
determine all the events of his criminal life and actualize specific behavioral stereotypes with the people around him. As mentioned before — tattoos become the convict’s passport.<sup>59</sup> At this point, literal communication is unnecessary, because tattoos speak for themselves whether it is to fellow thieves or the authority.<sup>60</sup>



06



07



08

### III ACRONYMS AND CHARACTERS

“The tattoos broadcast certain information to the world of thieves simultaneously from many points on the surface of the thief’s body.”<sup>61</sup> In exactly the same way as argot is a disguised language — neutral words with coded meaning — tattoos convey secret symbolic information through the use of allegorical images, which at first glance may seem familiar to everyone.<sup>62</sup>

For instance, an epaulette with the Russian acronym ZUR signifies that the thief has been gone through the intense regime zone, but BUR signifies intense regime barracks. Another example is a tattoo of a shoulder strap on the shoulders indicating the thief’s convictions and his position — a rank among the thieves. The inscription on the feet — usually toes — inform about the place where a prisoner served his sentence, such as MVD Lake Camp and Vorkuta convict, and many more.<sup>63</sup> (See image 09)

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<sup>59</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia, Volume II*, page 41

<sup>60</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia, Volume II*, page 41

<sup>61</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia, Volume II*, page 43-44

<sup>62</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoos Encyclopedia Volume I*, page 27

<sup>63</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia, Volume II*, page 43-44





09

09. The Russian acronym OMYT signifies “It is hard to leave me”. The letters on the fingers represent wearer nickname: panther. The ring on the index finger: malignant intruder; on the middle finger: thieves cross; on the ring finger: crosses on the little finger means he has killed someone in the circle of thieves. The grinning animal means the wearer is angry at the state.

Only the most seasoned and experienced convict who had distinguished himself ‘by virtue of his crimes and bloody deeds’ earned the right to have tattoos on his chest.<sup>64</sup> Most often the symbols on the chest are stars with between seven and sixteen points, which symbolize terms of prison time. Also tattoos of predators such as lions, tigers, wolves etc. symbolize the rank of the thief. A crucifix on the chest signifies that the wearer is a thief, and literally means prince of thieves, which is considered a highly honorable tattoo.<sup>65</sup>

#### IV THE MESSAGE

Sometimes, tattoos literally carry a specific message, sort of letter right into the zone tattooed on a body of another thief who deliberately takes on the appropriate crime and is thereby delivered to the correct part of the zone.<sup>66</sup> These symbols often serve as a message to the authorities — all tattoos of grinning animals belong to this type. Sometimes a tattoo is the speech of biblical characters, addressed to the entire world of thieves, for instance ‘It was a Jew who sold Christ! Beat the Jews!’ or the Virgin Mary appeals, holding a dying Christ on her knees.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Caplan, Jane, *Written On The Body, The tattoo in European and American history*, page 185

<sup>65</sup> Cronenberg David, Steven Knight, *Eastern Promises*, 2007

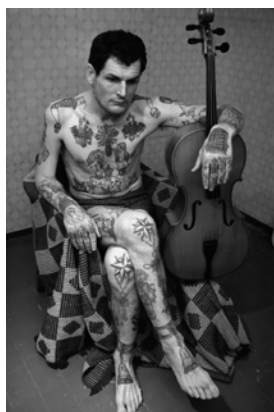
<sup>66</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoos Encyclopedia Volume I*, page 29

<sup>67</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoos Encyclopedia Volume II*, page 44

The more sacred the object of the tattoo is, the greater the status and the message is not just to the thief himself but also to the rest of the world.<sup>68</sup>



10



11

10. The text below the caricature says: “The chief great Russian swine!” The wearer’s grudge stemmed from a conviction for speculating with foreign goods bought from merchant seamen.

11. Tattoos on this convict’s body are the most complex and meaningful of all. He is a thief in law, who will never abandon his true nature.

#### V HOME vs. DEATH

Prison is the thief’s symbolic home; the genuine thief is both born in prison (sometimes symbolically, sometimes actually) and dies there, and can therefore wear a tattoo saying ‘I was born in prison... and I shall die in prison’. The thieves themselves regard their new condition as a symbolic death.<sup>69</sup> The theme of death is central to criminal tattoos. A candle in a tattoo is also a symbol of death, which is interpreted by thieves as ‘I am alive as long as my candle burns’ or ‘I shall not be happy in this sinful world, but in the next’. The thief himself is the face of death, a character from hell or the world beyond. In the world of thieves prison is clearly interpreted as the grave, the world beyond, and visiting this symbolic grave is an important stage in the life of every thief.<sup>70</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

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<sup>68</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoos Encyclopedia Volume II*, page 47

<sup>69</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoos Encyclopedia Volume II*, page 49

<sup>70</sup> Baldaev, Danzig, *Russian Criminal Tattoos Encyclopedia Volume II*, page 45

Russian criminal tattoos are a fascinating though dying subculture. As Russia changes, so does its criminal organizations and the importance once ascribed to the tattoos is slowly being lost, perhaps because there are different ways to codify your intentions in modern times. However, it is fair to say that even though tattoos are used by many criminal societies all over the world, Russian criminal tattoos represent some of the most complex and symbolic of all. The meaning of these tattoos used to be something very important for the criminal subculture all over Russia. A thief could not get a tattoo without proving that he has earned it. Especially nowadays when anyone who has money can buy himself or herself a pass to become a 'legitimate thief'.

After reading different sources, watching some documentaries and films about Russian criminal tattoos, I encountered quite a big problem in my research. The sources I used might seem a bit unreliable, but to be honest, there is little to be found about this subject, especially in English. But luckily, I could find many sources in Russian and use knowledge I got from my father. Through photographs and films, I saw how sad and violent the world behind Russian criminal tattoos was. It is no wonder at all that these tattoos have gained so much meaning for everyone involved.

From what I have read and seen, I can truly say the Russian criminal tattoos are very complicated, and extremely interesting. The symbolism in these tattoos varies from pretty simple to deep and complicated, which makes it even more fascinating. Even the smallest detail has its unique meaning. There are many different stories behind every single tattoo on a thief's body. It is a unique language that needs to be understood and remembered. Understanding this language can be useful, most of all for the Russian police, but also for everyone who is curious about tattoos in general and for someone who is thinking of getting a tattoo of his own.

For me as a graphic designer, it was interesting to see the different styles in these tattoos. Every prison camp had its own tattoo artist with his own unique style, which can be recognized, in the outside world as well as in other prison camps. Looking at some pictures, it was easy to guess what the meaning was, but in other pictures, it was harder to see the meaning. It seems that back then, people were thinking more about symbolical meaning than they do now. It would be great if it was somehow possible to save this slowly dying tattoo culture, even though it might be a bit dangerous to do so, because of its sacred meaning to the Russian criminal world. Since every legitimate thief believes in the power of these tattoos, it would be quite dangerous to walk around with one of these symbols tattooed onto your skin.

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