



Research Paper

Nazino Tragedy

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Abstract: This paper attempts to discuss the events that took place on Nazino island in Siberia which led to one of the most infamous episodes of cannibalism in modern history (“Nazinskaya tragediya”). Despite this, the tragedy remained largely hidden from popular historical imagination in Russia for a long time, becoming a forgotten episode of mass torture.

Keywords: Nazino island, Nazinsky island, cannibalism, Stalinism, NKVD, gulags, kulaks.

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Nazino, or Nazinsky island is located in the middle of the Ob river in Siberia. This island became a witness to the collective torture and subsequent gory deaths of thousands of people under the Soviet regime in the USSR.

It all started with the Soviet Union’s decision to revive the passport system that was abolished after the 1917 revolution¹. The Bolshevik leadership had abolished passports as a means of controlling people’s movement inside the country. This was done in order to ensure that a Soviet citizen could live and work in any place convenient to them.

¹ Egorov, Boris. *The Harrowing True Story Of The USSR’s ‘Cannibal Island’*, n.d., July, 2021.

Under Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin the passport system was revived in 1930. Subsequently, a huge number of sudden “mopping up operations” were carried out in cities across the USSR against those people who did not carry documents authorising their residence. The violators of the passport regime were labelled as “declassed elements” and included multiple categories of the population right from political prisoners and serious offenders to common people like students, former priests, beggars, prostitutes, and many others who were not considered to be socially productive by the authorities. These people were meant to be deported for providing services in gulags or forced labour camps created by the Soviet government for peasants who were against collectivisation of farming², especially kulaks^{3, 4}.

In 1933, Genrikh Yagoda, the head of NKVD⁵, had become part of a team overseeing collectivization and was tasked with implementing Stalin’s decrees without causing further famines and deaths. He thus planned to “resettle” 2 million dissidents in Siberia, give them tools, and make them build self-sustaining farms. In this way, the power believed they were killing two birds with one stone – cleaning the cities and populating Siberia⁶. The social program was less about establishing collective farms and more about eliminating “undesirables”⁷.

² When Stalin took over, Soviet agriculture was still dominated by small landowners and blighted by famines and inefficiency. Stalin attempted to modernise agriculture by instigating collectivisation – the grouping together of farms to be owned by the state. It was opposed by millions of ordinary farmers who resorted to killing livestock and secretly hoarding grain. Around five million people died in a series of famines. Nevertheless, Stalin believed that the end justifies the means and millions of small holders are killed or imprisoned. By the late 1930s farming was fully collectivised in the USSR. (*Joseph Stalin: National hero or Cold-Blooded Murderer?*, BBC, Teach, n.d., 2023).

³ Theoretically, Kulaks were wealthier peasants, though, in practice, Kulaks were any peasant who disagreed with collectivisation, which many people did. (Seaver, Carl. *Nazinsky: The Soviet Union’s Cannibal Island Gulag*, Astra Wordpress, 2023).

⁴ In the introduction to his book, 'The Harvest of Sorrow', which examines the history of collectivisation and the Ukrainian famine of 1932-33, Robert Conquest compares the crimes of Stalinism with those of Nazism. (Naimark, Norman. *Stalin's Genocides in Human Rights and Crimes Against Humanity* series, Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁵ Narsony Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs).

⁶ Tsankova, Aleksandra. *Nazino Tragedy: The Island of Death- Hell on Earth created by the Soviet Union*, n.d., October, 2022.

⁷ Cano, Rudy. *One Of Stalin's Gulags Was An Island Filled With Cannibals*, n.d., March, 2023.

Siberian authorities were unaware of the large number of prisoners who were being deported there. By this time, the gulags became over capacitated with just one of them in Tomsk housing almost 90,000 people. Hence, on the eighteenth day of May, the first batch of exiles who had gone against the passport system, over 5000 people, were deposited from barges on a small deserted island on the River Ob near the village of Nazino in Siberia.

They were supposed to be kept there temporarily, until the problem of accommodation at the labour camps were resolved. In this way, these "socially harmful and declassed elements" were left on the island for a month, waiting to be sent to special gulags further east. All this while, the area remained surrounded by machine gun crews, ready to shoot anyone who attempted to leave.

Nazino island was a "desolate swamp" with no infrastructure, no food and supply chain, and no sign of prior human existence. Dressed in the clothes in which they were caught, with no tools to make shelter, temperatures dropping below zero and rain, the detainees were defenceless against the elements, aimlessly searching for food⁸. By the time they reached the island, 27 people had already died. Nearly 300 people did not survive the first snowy night⁹. The only ration people were given was 200 grams of plain rye flour. Witness accounts articulate that when the people received the small quantity of flour and did not even have the resources to make proper food out of it, many of them desperately consumed it mixed with river water which lead to an outbreak of diarrhoea, while some of them even ate the flour directly, and subsequently died due to choking.

⁸ Somani, Avantika. *Hunger Games and Stalin's Island of Horrors*, n.d., January, 2023

⁹ Black, Annetta. *Nazino Island (Alexandrovsky District, Russia): Social outcasts and cannibalism in Stalin's Soviet Union*, Atlas Obscura, April 2013.

Lawlessness descended over the island quite swiftly. Gold extracted out of the teeth of dead bodies was traded by people for cigarettes. Many guards demanded sexual favours from the younger victims in exchange for bread. The extremely cold temperatures had begun causing several deaths just within days of arrival and the people who did manage to build fires often laid too close to it, being burnt to death.

While few records indicate the signs of cannibalism began appearing on the island just three days after the arrival of the detainees, some other suggest that it happened after one week when the camp doctor discovered five prisoners bearing signs of cannibalism and the news was relayed back to Tomsk, which promptly responded by sending 1,000 more prisoners to the island without any additional food¹⁰. Some other accounts suggest that the first cases of cannibalism on

Nazinsky Island took place on the tenth day after the deportees had been dumped there¹¹. This was initiated by criminals among the lot who had begun forming gangs. Some records also indicate cannibalism on the

Soviet documents preserved in the Gulag museum in Tomsk record the interrogations of some of the criminals who were at Nazinsky Island¹². One of them, upon being asked if he ate "human meat" responded, "No, that is not true, I only ate livers and hearts". His account contained graphic details of the entire process: "It was very simple. Just like shashlik. We made skewers from willow branches, cut it into pieces, stuck it on the skewers, and roasted it over the campfire. I picked those who were not quite living, but not yet quite dead. It was obvious that they were

¹⁰ Seaver, Carl. *Nazinsky: The Soviet Union's Cannibal Island Gulag*, Astra Wordpress, 2023.

¹¹ Egorov, Boris. *The Harrowing True Story Of The USSR's 'Cannibal Island'*, n.d., July, 2021.

¹² Filimonov, Andrei and Robert Coalson. *Cannibal Island: In 1933, Nearly 5,000 Died In One Of Stalin's Most Horrific Labor Camps*, Radio Liberty, July, 2018.

about to go – that in a day or two, they'd give up. So it was easier for them that way. Now. Quickly. Without suffering for another two or three days."

Feofila Bylina, a resident of the village of Nazino on the north bank of the Ob, recalled in an oral history in 1989: "Once a woman from the Island of Death was brought to our house, She was being taken to another camp. The woman was taken into the back room to spend the night and I saw that her calves had been cut off! I asked and she said, 'They did that to me on the Island of Death – cut them off and cooked them.' All the meat on her calves was cut away. Her legs were freezing because of this and she wrapped them up with rags. She was able to move on her own. She looked like an old woman, but really she was just a little over 40."

Many women and young girls were tied to trees, their breasts and thighs being cut off by the people while they were alive. A particular account describes the fate of a young girl who was allegedly falling into favour of one of the guards: "When he left, people grabbed the girl, tied her to a tree, and stabbed her to death, eating everything they could. They were hungry and wanted to eat. All over the island, one could see human flesh being ripped, cut, and hung on trees. The clearings were littered with corpses". There also exists the recollection of a thirteen year old girl from the neighbouring village who had gone to the island to collect bark and witnessed a woman tied up to a tree. "People cut off her breasts, calves, and any hefty piece of muscle. She bled to death after the guards discovered her"¹³.

¹³ Seaver, Carl. *Nazinsky: The Soviet Union's Cannibal Island Gulag*, Astra Wordpress, 2023.

A month later the survivors were evacuated from the island. However, their suffering did not end there as they were sent to Siberian settlements and gulags (labor camps). In the end, only 2,000 survived the ordeal.

In the month of August, a certain communist instructor by the name of Vasily Velichko had attempted to investigate the catastrophic events that had taken place on the Nazino island: "The grass on the island was head high," he wrote in his report. "But locals who went there to gather berries returned after discovering corpses in the grass and stick shelters full of skeletons". He submitted a report about this which was systematically sidelined by the Soviet government and he was removed from government employment. Having become a war correspondent, he survived World War II and wrote several novels about the socialist transformations in Siberia, but he never dared to write about the Nazino tragedy¹⁴. The general public learned about the

Nazino tragedy only in the late 1980s, shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union¹⁵. In 1989, the Tomsk branch of the Memorial human rights group sent an expedition to Nazinsky to gather oral histories.

Nicolas Werth in his study of the Island of Nazino, nicknamed the 'Island of Death' or 'Cannibal Island'¹⁶. In his work 'Cannibal Island : Death in a Siberian Gulag', he concludes that the Soviet Union's "omnipresent, invasive number culture" , fueled by faith in science and progress, led to utopian dreams, but a dystopian reality¹⁷. Cannibal Island, one which Werth

¹⁴ Tsankova, Aleksandra. *Nazino Tragedy: The Island of Death- Hell on Earth created by the Soviet Union*, n.d., October, 2022.

¹⁵ Egorov, Boris. *The Harrowing True Story Of The USSR's 'Cannibal Island'*, n.d., July, 2021.

¹⁶ Anstett, Élisabeth. *An anthropological approach to human remains from the gulags in Human Remains and Mass Violence: Methodological Approaches*, ed. Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Elisabeth Anstett, Manchester University Press, 2015.

¹⁷ Werth, Nicolas. *Cannibal Island: Death in a Siberian Gulag in Human Rights and Crimes Against Humanity* series, Princeton University Press, 2007.

drives home on nearly every page, is the ultimate futility and failure of planning in the Soviet Union¹⁸.

To conclude, the Nazino tragedy remains one of the most horrifying episodes in modern human history. It stands as a glaring example of one of the many ghoulish instances of our past that we would systematically want to remove in order to facilitate our imagination of a glorious past.

However, such gruesome and 'inhuman' events have taken place way more times in human history than we would like to remember.

¹⁸ Hardy, Jeffrey. *Hardy on Werth, 'Cannibal Island: Death in a Siberian Gulag'*, H-Russia, 2007.