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Articles

# Tried and Tatted

by Avery Carmichael



When applying for a job, most potential employers ask for a resume. (I can't think of a place that doesn't, but I don't want to be the one to make a sweeping claim without fact-checking. Journalism, son.) The average applicant provides information on his or her education, work experience, skills and interests. Good GPA? List it. Poor test scores? No need. The point is to provide a potential employer with the cold, hard facts of your life—to reduce oneself to a page of 11.5, Times New Roman details. An inflated resume is surprisingly common. Studied abroad in Vietnam? Know how to say 'Hello?' 'Cheers?' You're fluent! At least, according to your resume.

In Russia, the Vor v Zakone, or, Thieves in Law, like to showcase their criminal resumes on their bodies. However, a criminal resume, for the vory, is not one you can fudge. Tattooed to the hilt, the vory are a category of elite criminals in the Russian prison system that direct prison activities and control organized crime. This status is attained through multiple prison sentences, and a strict adherence to a code of conduct known as the Ponyatiya. (For a college student actively job searching, the Ponyatiya is your university's honor code. For a post-graduate, this is something like a background check, a confirmation of your legit-ness.) Only upon upholding these principles can one be perceived as a true vor. Tattoos are prison status symbols that both indicate one's criminal history and reaffirm one's position in the prison hierarchy. Therefore, if a vor is seen with an undeserved tattoo, an inflated resume, he or she will be punished severely, and the tattoo will be forcibly removed.

Organized crime in Russia is pervasive, and differs from the typical American conception of organized crime—*The Godfather* inspired mafia structure. No euphemistic 'sleeping with the fishes' or 'doing the job' exists in this world. Not only does the Ponyatiya demand complete loyalty to the vory, but it also prevents any vory from having familial attachments. No contact with one's mother, father, and absolutely no spouse or children. The Ponyatiya explicitly states that one must "forsake his relatives." As the vory system finds its roots in prison life, it abides by prison laws, even in the real world. Once you're in, you can't get out, and everyone knows, because your body is covered, truly covered, in tattoos. It's all very *Bellatrix Lestrange Goes to Azkaban*—the little known prequel to *Harry Potter*. Except, the Dark Mark is a chest tattoo of Lenin.

This symbolism of fear permeates Russian society today. While actor Viggo Mortensen was filming *Eastern Promises*, a movie about the Russian criminal underworld, his character had an extensive collection of vory tattoos. After consulting with an expert in vory culture, Mortensen had fake tattoos applied daily by a makeup artist. One evening during the shoot, Mortensen told *The New York Daily News*, "I went into a Russian restaurant in London. People saw the tattoos and stopped talking. They must have thought I was a real mafia man." The amount of

respect and fear commanded by these tattoos, even in a foreign country, conveys how seriously Russian citizens take the vory. It's hard to imagine a comparable group in the United States.



*A sample of the tattoos Viggo Mortensen sported as Russian hitman Nikolai Luzhin in Eastern Promises (2007)*

For the vory, no body part is off limits, and I *mean* that. I studied a copy of *Russian Criminal Tattoo Police Files*, a virtual encyclopedia of vory tattoos, and some inmates have tattoos on their eyelids. "Don't wake me up." ("не буди меня.") And their penises! What!? I could barely handle the pain of a cartilage ear piercing, and piercings are usually performed in A, a hygienic shop, with B, proper tools. If I had a penis, I doubt I'd tattoo it, and beyond that, I'm certain I wouldn't tattoo it in a prison basement. It should surprise no one that store bought tools and ink are hard to come by in Siberia.

In *Mark of Cain*, a 2001 documentary that explores the Russian prison system, one inmate describes the process behind illegal tattooing. First, the inmate melts down rubber from shoes. Then, he sifts it into a fine dust between a handkerchief. Finally, he mixes it with hot urine, traditionally from the person who is receiving the tattoo. This is supposed to prevent infection.

Oh. Phew.

With a sharpened guitar string, an electric razor, a pen cap and the urine-ink, inmates can tattoo beautiful, artistic images of cathedrals, Jesus and epaulets.

What can't be denied, especially in acknowledging the minimal resources available to prison tattoo artists, is the fact they are, seriously, artists. These are not the stick and poke tattoos of yore, but rather, full on, detailed images with depth, illusion and perspective. In one depiction of the Madonna, I was struck by how vivid the expression on her face was. Mournful yet hopeful. Imagine having the skill to produce a mournful yet hopeful Madonna in a jam-packed prison cell with a sharpened G-string! It's mind-boggling to think that these prisoners perform such incredible work under such immense duress. The tattoo artist from *Mark of Cain*, when asked if his work is comparable to Michelangelo's, brushes off the suggestion. Viewers know this man is a thief in the real world, and yet, you have to wonder—what if? What could have been?

Prison conditions, at least from viewing *Mark of Cain*, are abhorrent. Officials claim that there are five inmates to each one, available, spot. Overcrowding is a serious issue, with no foreseeable solution. Officials stare blankly into the camera when confronted with specifics. Close quarters also impact the rampant spread of diseases like tuberculosis, as well as skin infections and lice. One difficult scene at the infamous White Swan prison depicts an inmate serving lunch to his peers. For a 34-person cell, which is really a 20-person cell, the prison provides two loaves of stale bread, and a watery, vegetable soup. With such minimal funding allocated towards the maintenance of these prisons, many prisoners compare their conditions to those in Stalin's Gulags.

For those who aren't well versed in Russian history, Gulags were state-sponsored Soviet labour camps introduced by Josef Stalin in the 1930s. There, millions of inmates were essentially worked to death, forced to labour indefinitely under extreme weather conditions with primitive tools. In fact, many of the main, industrial cities in Russia were formally Gulags. Labourers from Norillag, a camp near Norilsk, built the Norilsk mining complex—now known as Norilsk Nickel. Norilsk Nickel, built on the backs of imprisoned petty thieves and political opponents, is now worth billions of dollars.

Norilsk is located above the Arctic Circle, and is, by all accounts, freezing. As someone who barely leaves her home in the winter months, I cannot begin to imagine. To top it off, most of the Norillag inmates were not violent criminals, but political prisoners, acting in defiance of the new, Communist regime. Currently,

there are monuments at most Gulag sites, so if contemporary prisoners find their circumstances comparable, then history will not treat the modern Russian prison system kindly.

It is believed that the first hints of vory culture find their roots in the Gulag system. In an effort to gain some semblance of control over their lives, many of the more violent criminals established the Ponyatiya. With this, they were able to create their own, ruling society within the Gulags. Demanding that political prisoners do their bidding, colluding with guards to curry favour with the Gulag administration, many vory lived easier lives than their political compatriots. The vory were successful in their bids for a monopoly on criminal control until the end of World War II.

After this, a quasi-war took place within the Gulags between the vory and the suki —‘the bitches.’ Suki represent the former-vory that chose to fight in World War II, thus violating part of the Ponyatiya that demands pure loyalty to vory life. The Bitch Wars, I know, I can't believe this is real either, wiped out a large number of vory. Still, the vory were ultimately victorious, and continue to exist as the elite class of criminals in Russia. In many cases, free-vory, those not in prison, take part in high-powered money laundering, gambling and retail schemes.

At this point in history, the cost of displaying an underserved tattoo is less extreme. While an underserved tattoo might have meant death in a 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian prison, nowadays, more prisoners, like more students, tend to fudge their resumes. There's been a cultural shift as government usage of prisoner informants has skyrocketed. Loyalties are tested, and the Ponyatiya doesn't carry as much weight. Still, while adherence to the code is less strict, the meanings behind most tattoos remains the same.

Some examples: inmates often tattoo detailed cathedrals to indicate the number of times they've been incarcerated. Each cupola signifies one prison term. During the early 1900s, many prisoners chose to tattoo images of Lenin and Stalin on their chests. This was an effort to avoid death by firing squad. Presumably, no firing squad would aim for an image of the country's leader. Also, if a prisoner has an image of an executioner and a woman on his or her chest or thigh, the prisoner has been convicted of killing a woman or else a woman has driven him or her to a commit a crime.

A surprisingly helpful guide for determining tattoo meanings? The one prepared by Alaska State Troopers in 2001. Supposedly, after an influx of Russian immigrants entered Alaska, State Troopers took note of their varied, numerous tattoos, creating a guide for fellow law enforcement. Just imagine a bunch of state troopers in the

arrivals terminal of a local Juneau airport. My fantasy troopers are a cross between Police Chief Marge Gunderson from *Fargo* and Sarah Palin. It makes me think, maybe she really could see Russia from her house...No. Just kidding. Can't even make that joke.

Beyond being a powerful status symbol, vory tattoos can also reflect one's position in the prison hierarchy as a 'downcast.' Inmates in *Mark of Cain* explain that the downcast are the lowest of the low in the prison system, members of the lowest 'caste.' They are classified as such for being gay, weak, a snitch or, in some cases, to repay a debt. The downcast are the untouchables of the Russian prison system. To indicate this, an inmate will tattoo a derogatory word on a downcast's cheek. As a result, no matter what, the downcast cannot escape the stigma of his past actions or inaction. Versus the incredible vory tattoos in *Mark of Cain*, the downcast's tattoos are less works of art and badges of honor than carved signs of inferiority.

Criminal tattoos are not unique to Russia. Think about the facial tattoos of the Aryan Brotherhood, or the full body tattoos of the Yakuza in Japan. Spanning a swath of locales and cultures, expressing one's loyalties through body art is not uncommon. While the cache of tattooing seems to have worn off a bit in Russian prisons, the penalties being minimized for underserved tattoos, the influence of the vory still remains. In and outside of the prison system, the vory are still held in high esteem, at least by their fellow criminals. And, if not held in esteem, recalling Viggo Mortensen's London experience, they are still recognized and feared.

One inmate in *Mark of Cain* noted how nice it is to be immediately recognized and understood by fellow prisoners. With a tattooed resume, what else is there to say? You've either got it or you don't.

*Illustration by Zanna Wolff.*





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