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Occasionally a book is published that reveals a subculture you never dreamt existed. More rarely, that book goes on to become a phenomenon of its own. The 2004 publication of the Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia was such a phenomenon, spawning two further volumes and alerting a fascinated readership worldwide to the extraordinary and hermetic world of Russian criminal tattoos (David Cronenberg, for example, made regular use of the Encyclopaedia during the making of his 2007 movie Eastern Promises). Now, Fuel has reprinted volume one of this bestselling series, whose first edition already fetches considerable sums online. The photographs, drawings and texts published in this book are part of a collection of more than 3,000 tattoos accumulated over a lifetime by a prison attendant named Danzig Baldaev. Tattoos were his gateway into a secret world in which he acted as ethnographer, recording the rituals of a closed society. The icons and tribal languages he documented are artful, distasteful, sexually explicit and sometimes just strange, reflecting as they do the lives and traditions of Russian convicts. Skulls, swastikas, harems of naked women, a smiling Al Capone, medieval knights in armor, daggers sheathed in blood, benign images of Christ, sweet-faced mothers and their babies, armies of tanks and a horned Lenin: these are the signs by which the people of this hidden world mark and identify themselves. With a foreword by Danzig Baldaev, and an introduction by Alexei Plutser-Sarno, exploring the symbolism of the Russian criminal tattoo.

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0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Five Stars

By MrSid

Not for the faint of heart !

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful.

Thrilling and educational read.

By B. Wolinsky

This three part book series on Russian criminal tattoos is the result of a Soviet prison guard's research. Danzig Baldaev didn't intend to become a prison guard; he was forced to take the job under the Soviet

regime. His ancestry is an illustrious one, and his family is an illustration of Russia's history. His ancestors were Mongols who became Christians, and had a perfectly good relationship with the Russian Czar. They were tough people, always ready to defend their families and property from the escaping criminals who frequently entered their area. But Communism destroyed his family; some fought for the Reds, others for the Whites, and they were both agents and victims of Soviet cruelty. Danzig would grow up in a boarding school for children of "enemies of the state," most of whom came from educated bilingual families. As an adult he would be assigned (by law not by choice) to be a prison guard. For decades, he drew the prisoners' tattoos. This book is the result.

The tattoos in this book are entirely political. They all have the same imagery; cats symbolize thievery, and the thieves were the top dog in the jails. Stars refer to the number of years served, and playing cards represent risk. But the designs show a great deal of anger as well. Anti-Soviet images are commonplace, with the faces of Lenin, Marx, and Stalin drawn with horns. Anti-Jewish and anti-Asian motifs figure among the tattoos, because the Asian and Jewish people were probably seen as unwanted foreigners. Nazi swastikas and SS runes are frequent, because they symbolize contempt for the Soviet system. A tattoo of a nude woman means that the wearer hates his last girlfriend, perhaps she betrayed him. American symbolism is common in this book as well. Skulls and cats wear cowboy regalia, the Statue of Liberty is shown covered in barbed wire. It appears that the anti-Soviet criminals looked at the USA a beacon of liberty, and since they hated the Soviets and the Soviets hated the USA, it was the perfect statement.

Soviet Justice was harsh. A teenage boy who got drunk and punched someone could get six years in jail, and on getting out would have no idea how to ask for a job or be on time for work. The depressing life of the Soviet Union probably drove people to alcoholism, and that would've led to crime. Food was scarce and people must have been hungry enough to steal from officials. I also have to wonder how many kids were born with fetal alcohol syndrome.

My hat's off to Danzig Baldaev for keeping this archive. You can learn a lot about a society by studying the prisons, and it makes sense to judge a nation by how they treat the prisoners. As for the book itself, it's part of a three part series, plus a set of cards that come with it. Perhaps we'll soon see books on prison tattoos from other nations as well.

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

Eye opening

By Hunyadi

Eye opening into the culture of Russia and its underground language of tattooing. In America, tattoos are seen as freedom of expression and the free-natured thought. In Russia, it's a rite of passage and one's personal history written on their bodies. The hand tattoos symbolize is the most interesting. Explains a lot about the tattoos seen in the movie "Eastern Promises."

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