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# RELIGIOUS THOUGHT AND EXPERIENCE IN THE PRISON CAMPS

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## INTRODUCTION

‘If you look back, all of our history, both Soviet and post-Soviet, is a huge common grave, a sea of blood’. These words belong to the Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich, 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature (Overchenko, Nevelskii 2017), but can be easily referred to earlier periods of Russian history. The impact that mass crimes, wars, revolutions, dictatorships and state-induced famines have had on Russian history, culture and society is indeed impressive – it can be argued that it shaped some of the peculiar traits of Russian culture, including the relationship between individual and state. On this point, the novelist Liudmila Ulitskaia has said that ‘state power works in a way that makes the individual a criminal, a partner in crime, and this is a deeply-rooted Russian tradition’ (Sharipkin 2017), while Alexievich added to the sentence quoted above that all Soviet and post-Soviet history is an ‘eternal dialogue of executioners and victims’. It would not be incorrect to say that, more than a dialogue, it is a conversation which involves also God.

As can be seen from these quotes, taken from two of the most relevant Russian language writers of our time, the debate generated by historical traumas (both at a collective and an individual level) is still particularly lively, especially when it touches upon the crimes caused by state power, such as the Great Terror (the wave of purges occurred between 1936-1939, which caused hundreds of thousands of victims), the Holodomor (i.e. the state induced famine which killed in 1932 and 1933 between three and eight million people in the Ukraine), and the Gulag. These traumatic events have also triggered the spiritual reflections of a number of individuals – religious thinkers, writers, lay philosophers – which have left a significant trace in Russian culture, helping (at least partly) to shape the development of Russian religious thought. While a similar phenomenon can be seen in other historical periods and areas, a peculiar trait to the Russian case is the extensive use of prison

camps in both Tsarist and Soviet times. Remote, isolated and separated from the rest of the society, these places served as a stage for mass destruction, but also – paradoxically – as a small society in which, thanks to the specificity of its conditions, religious thought was nurtured.

## PRE-SOVIET PROTOTYPES

The road to the use of concentration camps was paved by the practice of sending elements hostile to the state to faraway places of detention. One of the first victims of such practice was the Protopope Avvakum Petrovich, who in the eighteenth century was condemned to exile in Siberia and later burnt at the stake for his opposition to Patriarch Nikon's reforms of the Orthodox liturgy. Avvakum described his sufferings in the outstanding *Zhitie Propotopa Avvakuma im samim napisannoe* (*Life of the Protopope Avvakum Written by Himself*), an autobiography written following the *topoi* of hagiography. Other than having a huge influence on Russian culture – it is indeed the first ever Russian autobiography – Avvakum's *Zhitie* has been a reference for the Old Believers. Avvakum's acceptance of his martyrdom, as well as his wife Anastasiia Markovna's devotion even in the worst moments, have contributed to showing a path characterized by acceptance of God's will even in spite of humanity's evil which – as shall be seen – was going to be of primary importance to many people hit by state repression.<sup>1</sup>

While Avvakum experienced exile, torture, prison and deportation, he did not live in a prison camp, although they were established in late seventeenth century (Brokgauz and Efron 1895, v. 14, 756-59). Known under the name of *katorga* (from the Greek *katargon* [κάτεργον], 'galley', Gentes 2010, 41), the forced labour camps were created with the twofold aim of isolating dangerous

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<sup>1</sup> The following exchange serves as an example of Anastasiia Markovna's role. 'Will these sufferings last for a long time?', she asks her husband, and upon his reply 'Until death', Anastasiia Markovna sighs and says: 'Good enough, Petrovich, let's keep going then'. See Avvakum 2002, 28.

prisoners and colonizing the Far East of the Russian Empire. Tsarist *katorga* soon became infamous for the terrible living conditions of the prisoners (see the latest research monograph on the topic, Beer 2016), which were depicted for the first time in all their inhumanity in Fedor Dostoevsky's *Zapiski iz mertvogo doma* (*Notes from a Dead House*, commonly – and mistakenly – translated as *The House of the Dead* or *Notes/Memoirs from the House of the Dead*), a fictional account of his experience in a *katorga* camp (Dostoevsky 1985).

Dostoevsky was arrested in 1849, aged 27, for taking part in the meetings of the Petrashevskii circle, a group of young intellectuals who discussed progressive ideas in a secret circle organised by the revolutionary Mikhail Petrashevskii (Bel'chikov 1971). Dostoevsky's exposure to state repression was fundamental for his career as a writer: after his initial works, mainly devoted to the depiction of the lives of socially degraded and overall misunderstood people belonging to the lower classes, Dostoevsky found himself first in prison, then in front of a firing squad during a mock execution, and finally in a prison camp in Omsk, Siberia. These events left a profound mark in the young writer: while in prison, Dostoevsky read both Christian texts (the Bible and the Passion Week services) and the Koran (Pyman 2001, 107-08) and started a long reflection on his beliefs which led to the eventual rejection of his fascination for progressive ideas and a full embrace of Christianity (Losskii 1953). While the mock execution that Dostoevsky was subjected to on 22 December 1849 on the Semenovskii Square in St. Petersburg was reflected repeatedly in Dostoevsky's works (especially in *Idiot* [*The Idiot*, Dostoevsky 2004] and *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* [*Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky 1998]), it was the experience of exile and imprisonment in the prison camp that had the most enduring effect on the writer's works and his spiritual views. Irina Kirillova points out that Dostoevsky received the Gospel in Siberia and shows its importance for the writer's intellectual path, as well as for his practices (the writer 'was never parted from his copy of the Gospel', he would single out 'passages of significance to him' and also open it at random and see 'providential guidance in the passages that presented themselves in his way', Kirillova 2001,

42-43). This goes against the view proposed by Boyce Gibson, who, against what he perceives as the 'customary' opinion that 'Dostoevsky re-learned Christianity in Siberia' (Boyce Gibson 1973, 19), points out that 'On the one hand, his attitude when he left Russia was at least formally Christian. On the other, he did not emerge a changed man, nor had he shed his devastating doubts' (Boyce Gibson 1973, 19). Boyce Gibson though agrees that 'Siberia did leave its mark; it did something, though superficially not a great deal, to strengthen his Christian conviction' (Boyce Gibson 1973, 19). Other than the 'killing of Schillerism' ('It was long before Dostoevsky could look Utopia in the face again' [Boyce Gibson 1973, 19]), it is undeniable that the camp experience in Siberia was pivotal to the creation of a series of pillars of Dostoevsky's art and religious thought. As Pyman puts it, while in prison Dostoevsky 'formed an intense admiration for the stoicism of the common prisoners which, he felt, came from their Russian Orthodox faith' (Pyman 2001, 107-08): indeed, the writer's 'discovery' of the Russian people was of fundamental importance for him. Jackson, quoted in Friesen, seem to confirm that their Orthodox faith was the key factor in Dostoevsky's discovery of the people, as the writer saw the 'true greatness of the Russian people' in relation to the Christmas play described in the *Notes from a Dead House*, when they 'rediscovered their own human image – their iconic form – in a way that even centuries of barbarism could not conceal' (Friesen 2016, 101).

While many of the prisoners encountered in the camp served as models for some of the characters that populated his novels in the years to come, the experience in Omsk was fundamental also for the development of some of the key themes of Dostoevsky's poetics, including those of hope, freedom and the meaning of suffering. However, none has been so decisively shaped by the *katorga* as the theme of the acceptance of suffering: it resonates throughout Gorianchikov's reflections in the *Notes from a Dead House*, and it is further explored in the ending of *Crime and Punishment*, when Sonia – whose role in sharing a partner's fate recalls Avvakum's Anastasia Markovna – repeatedly insists on the importance of accepting the torments of camp life. A similar stance can be found in

the episode of the *Notes from a Dead House* of the holy fool (*iurodivyi*) who ‘reads the Bible all night long’ and then ‘throws a brick at a prison official, intentionally missing his target, for the sole purpose of “accepting his suffering”’ (Cassedy 2005, 61).

As can be seen from this brief description, Dostoevsky’s intellectual path was deeply influenced by his experience in a Tsarist camp, as was his spiritual path. His fictional account of his term in Siberia shows the first traces of Dostoevsky’s discussion on guilt, human suffering and redemption, as well as some of the insights that will inform his thought and art – just to quote another instance, Dmitrii Karamazov’s voluntary sacrifice engages with the question of human and divine justice. It would be hard to tell if ‘Dostoevsky re-learned Christianity in Siberia’; rather, the experience of the camp – a closed society, isolated from the world, where he could get in touch with people of the lowest classes and most dreadful of fates – gave him the opportunity to reflect on some questions related to Christianity on the background of that unique social fragment which eventually informed most of his art. Joseph Frank, one of the most influential Dostoevsky scholars, has framed the importance of Dostoevsky’s experience of repression for his path in a noteworthy quote. In his *Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt, 1821-1849*, devoted to the works written by Dostoevsky before his arrest, Frank writes that the

truly tragic dimension of the later Dostoevsky is still lacking, the sense of the immitigable and the irreconcilable, the clash of contending values each with its claim to absolute hegemony—love and justice, faith and reason, the God-man and the Man-God—which Dostoevsky alone of all the great novelists has known how to convey with such unrivaled force. Most of what the great Dostoevsky was to accomplish is already present schematically in his work of the 1840s; but the experiences he was soon to undergo would enable him to fill out and expand these schemas into the monumental forms we admire. And these experiences will include, not only his agonizing purgatory as an individual, but also the agitated upheaval of Russian social-cultural life that coincided with the resumption of

his literary career. Dostoevsky returned to Russia at a time when the age-old moral-social norms of his society were being challenged more radically (...) and Dostoevsky reacted to these changes in terms of the lessons he believed he had learned about human life, and about the Russian people, in the house of the dead' (Frank 1976, 367-68).

The *Notes from the Dead House* had a huge success and **helped inspire** a debate on the penitentiary institutions of the Russian Empire which involved some of the most outstanding personalities of Russian culture. Tolstoy regarded the *Notes from the Dead House* as the only truly genuine work of Dostoevsky (Tolstoy 1984, v. 18, 876) – this is not surprising, considering the attention devoted to the theme of state punishment in his works. It was a sign of the times: Tolstoy's *Voskresen'e* (*Resurrection*, Tolstoy 2007) came at the end of a decade marked by Anton Chekhov's astonishing trip to the remotest of places of the Russian Empire, the Sakhalin Islands, to visit its *katorga* colony. **The** playwright would dismiss with annoyance the text he wrote as a result of his trip (*Ostrov Sakhalin* [*Sakhalin Island*], Chekhov 2007), **commenting that** 'My Sakhalin is an academic work ... Medicine cannot now accuse me of infidelity ... I rejoice because the rough garb of the convict will also be hanging in my (literary) wardrobe. Let it hang! [Borny 2006, 33]). **However,** the very fact that one of the most prominent Russian intellectuals decided to embark on a seven and a half months trip to visit the remotest penal colony of the Russian Empire testifies for the importance of the theme in *fin de siècle* Russia. **The importance of the journey to Sakhalin is indicated by the fact that the writer** was already heavily suffering from the health issues that would mark all his earthly existence (Borny writes that the 'arduous journey to Sakhalin almost certainly shortened Chekhov's life,' but 'was important to the writer that he make some useful contribution to his society', [Borny 2006, 33]).

## RELIGIOUS REPRESSION AND THE GULAG

With the outburst of the October revolution the newly formed state made extensive use of state violence to initially fight for its survival during the Civil War and later to consolidate its power. The intensity, scope, and extent of state violence during the Soviet experience were immensely stronger than under the Tsars. Although there are no **definitive statistics** about the number of victims, in a recent article the historian Oleg Khlevniuk has estimated that **some sixty million citizens were** targeted by direct (arrest, execution or camp) or indirect (exile, loss of civil rights, deportation) repression **in the years 1930-52** (Chlevnjuk 2011). Although it is customary to identify Stalin **as chiefly** responsible for state violence, it is a matter of fact that Soviet repression started under Lenin. **From** the October Revolution onwards, thousands of people were arrested, to the point that the state found itself in the position of having to find new spaces to locate the masses of prisoners (Applebaum 2003). This resulted in the creation of concentration/forced labour camps which, **through** the 1920s, developed into a system which, after the publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Arhipelag Gulag* (*The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn 1974), would become generally known as the Gulag (from the acronym of the institution – *Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei*, Main Administration of Camps – that was created in 1930 to supervise the extension of the camps to all the corners of the USSR). The nature of Soviet repression was completely different from **that** of Tsarist repression: the Soviet state would target categories of people who were deemed dangerous for its existence, regardless of their actual acts (Graziosi 2007). **In** other words, people who belonged to categories **that** were ideologically and socially irreconcilable with the newly formed state were arrested, sent to the camps, or exterminated **without their having committed any acts** against the state but **solely on account of their character** as 'enemies' of the state (one of the most used formula to identify arrested people under Stalin was 'enemies of the people'). Needless to say, in the new, atheist state believers and members of the clergy or of other religious institutions were considered at odds with the Soviet state and heavily repressed (see Knox in this volume). The



pages of many memoirs by survivors are filled with the torture, executions, and severe repression of believers of many faiths (see, for instance, the depiction of the tortures inflicted on a non-identified sectarian group of Christians that Oleg Volkov calls ‘Khristosiki’, who were tortured for refusing to have any interaction with the Soviet authorities and for their disregard of physical pain in the name of their faith, in Volkov 1989, 56-57). The experience in the camps, however tragic and at times devastating, was for some of them an unexpected occasion to strengthen their faith.

Many Christians were sent to the Solovki (Reznikova 1994), where a ‘Special Purpose Prison Camp’ was set up in 1923 (Brodsky 2008, Gullotta 2018). The ‘purpose’ of this camp was to find a profitable way of using forced labour – in this sense, and also somewhat in a symbolical sense, the Solovki camp (known with the acronym ‘SLON’) was the ‘laboratory of the Gulag’ (Liechtenhan 2004). Most of its prisoners managed to use faith to cope with the horror of the camp, as can be seen in a variety of texts. Like many other clergy, the priest Aleksei Lozina-Lozinskii composed oral poems which find a sense for the repression he and fellow believers were undergoing thanks to his unshakeable faith in God’s eventual victory (‘The day will come, and in the hour of reckoning | For years of blood and worries | Once crucified on earth | God will descend to earth once more. || With a cross as a symbol of salvation, | He will raise both heaven and hell: | And then, behold, the stones will crumble, | Then, behold, the depths will proclaim their mysteries.’ Lozina-Lozinskii 2005, 59). Boris Evreinov was allowed to publish his poems in publications produced in the camp, composing verses in which his faith was used to find reassurance in the future beyond his earthly life. In the poem *Voskresnym dnem* [*On the Lord’s Day*], for example, he proposed a gentle hypostasization of death by imagining the return of a ‘sea’ whose waves sing a ‘Book of Hours’ and cancel the trace of the drag-nets (probably, a reference to his condition as a prisoner – the poet felt trapped like a fish in the net): ‘And going towards the sea, which erases all the margins | Where on the sand are the traces of the drag-nets, | Lie down in the sun, day-dreaming without desires, | And listen to the waves’ melodious Book of Hours.’ Evreinov 1926, 33). In Ol’ga Vtorova-Iafa’s

memoirs, just as in many other memoirs written by religious people, there are numerous references to the importance of faith in the harshest moments of her detention – having already been on the Solovki as a pilgrim before the revolution, Vtorova-Iafa considered her second spell on the archipelago not a term in one of the hardest Gulags, but a ‘tour’ (Vtorova-Iafa 1978, 133).

Survivors’ memoirs **preserve** insights **into** how some religious people faced repression with dignity and at times even with joy, as recounted by Iurii Chirkov: ‘Father Vasili, a priest from Riazan’, with a beard that looked greenish from age, was kneeling in a corner, praying and crying. I could not bear it and went down to console the old man. It turned out that he was crying for joy, since he was going to die not anywhere in the taiga, but on the land made holy by Zosima and Savvatii’ (Chirkov 1991, 12-13). The experience of repression in the camps, **including the Solovki Prison Camp**, was important also for a lesser-known philosopher, Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Meier, who wrote the philosophical work *Mysli pro sebia* (*Thoughts about Myself*, Meier 1982) **during and after detention**. This was an important reflection on the importance of culture and on its inner nature in various religions. The experience of repression in a camp had the effect of stimulating Meier’s reflections on culture and God, as can be seen by the large space devoted to the theme of sacrifice. Discussing Christian asceticism, and **affirming the value of the ascetic principle**, Meier states that ‘it must be understood that the sacrificial and purifying renunciation is not tantamount to denial or indifference. In order to learn to love life, even the “immanent”, it is necessary to gain freedom from any attachment or slave “love” for things and for the world’ (Meier 1982, 416).

As can be seen from this brief overview, some of the general features relative to the impact that prison camps have on religious thought are: (a) **stimulating** a serene acceptance of the prisoner’s personal fate, thus providing the ground for reflections on the meaning of life; (b) **fostering** reflections on martyrdom, **on God’s will, and on the supremacy of God’s justice and judgment over that of human beings**; and (c) **providing** individuals with an ‘intellectual weapon’ against the horror, thus helping them go through their difficult situation. This three-fold reaction can be seen in the

works of more important religious thinkers who were targeted by Soviet repression and spent their term in the Gulag. While other chapters in this Handbook focus on their ideas, we shall here focus more particularly on how these ideas were influenced by the experience of repression.

## KEY FIGURES

Pavel Florensky was arrested in 1933. He spent the last period of his life in the Solovki prison camp, before being transferred to the mainland and executed in 1937. During his time in the Gulag, the philosopher sent many letters to his dear ones in which, against the gloomy background of life in the camp, he considered some philosophical questions that seem to have been triggered by the awareness of his inescapable fate. These letters are not only a valuable source for the reconstruction of Florensky's life, but are also his last philosophical works, a sort of final evaluation of his experience on earth, in which some themes are assessed in depth, one of them being eternity. In a letter written on 7-8th April 1935, Florensky writes that 'Everything passes, but everything remains. This is my most intimate feeling: that nothing is lost forever, nothing vanishes, but is stored somewhere and somehow. What is valuable remains, although we cease to perceive it. Also the great achievements, even if forgotten, somehow remain and give their fruits. This is why, although we all miss the past, we sense its eternity. I did not say goodbye to the past forever, but only temporarily' (Florensky 1998, v. 4, 203).

Lev Karsavin spent the last three years of his life in a Gulag in the remote Komi Republic. Soon after arriving there, he was transferred to the hospital in which he spent most of his time in the Gulag, before dying from tuberculosis. During all this time, Karsavin continued to think and produce: his already rich list of publication terminated with a few sonnets and short works. Thanks to the memoirs of the person who was with him for the last period of his life, we know how Karsavin 'married' his philosophy of sacrifice, death and love (Vaneev 1990). The *Venok sonetov* (*Crown of Sonnet*) he composed while in the camp testifies to his complete commitment to his

theory of sacrifice as perfect love until the end: ‘But, I know, I can save You, | Although, like You, O eternal, I am dying. | After all, You will die in my blooming, | Growing all in me, and all as if only mine | Then shall my other life rise. | My “I” is already dying, and in it | Like bees, everything is teeming, swarming | So Your life may revive in me’ (Karsavin 1972, 298).

Literature played an important role in the development of religious thought in connection to the experience of the Gulag. The two most prominent Gulag writers, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Varlam Shalamov, had opposed views on the significance of the experience of the Gulag, which eventually caused their rift. While the author of the *Kolymskie rasskazy* (*Kolyma Tales*, Shalamov 2018) believed that the Gulag was the lowest manifestation of humanity, in which all human values and achievements are mortified and hopeless, Solzhenitsyn believed that there was a glimpse of light in suffering, and that salvation could be achieved. For instance, in his famous *Odin den’ Ivana Denisovicha* (*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn 2000) Solzhenitsyn uses the character of the Baptist Alesha, who reads the Bible while in the camp, to show a path through suffering made by the acceptance of one’s fate as a result of full trust of God’s will. In many of his works, Solzhenitsyn does indeed aim to show the purifying effect of sufferance. As Inessa Medzhibovskaya puts it, ‘Solzhenitsyn echoes Kierkegaard’s sarcasm toward scholars sermonizing on the topic of suffering, and he praises the capacity for finding spiritual support and communion’ (Medzhibovskaya 2014, 142-143). The son of a priest, Shalamov was not a believer. However – going full circle in the history of state repression and religious thought – his spiritual path through the horrors of the Kolyma was influenced by the example left by the Old Believers, and, in particular, by Avvakum, to whom he devoted a long poem (translated recently by Robert Chandler, from whom the following quote is taken). In this poem, the Protopope’s sacrifice is seen as a victory over earthly evil: ‘Through cold and hunger, | through grief and fear, | towards God, like a dove, | I rose from the pyre’ (Chandler, Dralyuk and Mashinski 2015, 394).

While never being arrested, Vasilii Grossman **made** a huge contribution to the development of religious thought in connection to the horrors of the camps, both the Holocaust and the Gulag. An ideologically-committed Soviet writer in his early years, Grossman followed the Red Army in Stalingrad and then in its path towards Berlin, along which the Red Army liberated the survivors of the Nazi camps. Grossman was deeply affected by this event: he rediscovered his Jewishness and developed an original moral theory **that** foreshadows Hannah Arendt's *The Banality of Evil* (Arendt 2006) and even goes beyond **Arendt** in recognizing the similarity between the Soviet and Nazi powers, and between the Holocaust and the Gulag. **This theory opposes small, individual and concrete acts of goodness to the horrors caused by a great, abstract and general good and finds in these small acts the only possibility of salvation.** The theory is fully exploited in his last works, and particularly in *Zhizn' i sud'ba* (*Life and Fate*, Grossman 2006), a work which has been rediscovered recently and is still being debated within the wide community of scholars and thinkers (see the three volumes of studies Maddalena and Tosco 2007, Tosco 2011 and Calusio, Krasnikova and Tosco 2017).

## CONCLUSION

The Tsarist *katorga* and the Soviet Gulag have left a huge trace in Russian history, culture and society. While they have tragically affected millions of lives **and partially shaped the way the individual relates to state power**, they have also triggered the creation of some of the greatest works in Russian literature, art and philosophy. In the extreme conditions of the camp, separated from the wider society but still in a small society with its own rules and codes, some religious thinkers and intellectuals have managed to be inspired by their experience of repression, to be a guide for fellow prisoners, and to produce works which have left a significant trace in Russian culture and specifically in the development of Russian religious thought. Their heritage, and in particular the **aspect of their life and work that relates to the Gulag**, is today at risk. **Under President Putin**, Russia

is promoting the creation of monuments to the victims and institution devoted to the study of the Gulag **but is at the same time** targeting independent research centres and NGOs (such as the Nobel Peace Prize Candidate NGO ‘Memorial’, or the ‘Sakharov Centre’) which have for many years kept the memory of the Gulag alive. The Russian Orthodox Church seems to be on Putin’s side, and this is **not only** suggested by the constant presence of Church authorities at such initiatives – for instance, Patriarch Kirill was together with Putin at the inauguration of the ‘Wall of Grief’ in Moscow in October 2017. The Solovki islands offer an exemplary instance of the Church’s ambivalence. While the Church is promoting a series of extremely valuable actions to commemorate the victims and the *novomucheniki* of the camp (see, for instance, the excellent series of memoirs by Gulag survivors published by the Solovki monastery), it is targeting Iurii Brodskii, a photographer and historian of the camp, who argues that the church is trying to ‘erase a blood history’ by removing or hiding traces of the camp on the Solovki archipelago. Accused of ‘religious hatred’ **by a group of Orthodox activists**, Brodskii’s book **was placed** under scrutiny: a local prosecutor launched an investigation against the writer, which is still ongoing **at the time of writing** **(Vasilyeva 2018)**. It is yet another page of the ‘memory war’ **regarding** the Gulag which has seen also the Law on Foreign Agents (a law aimed at targeting independent NGOs, **including those working on the history of the Gulag**) and the arrest of the historian Iurii Dmitriev, kept in custody for paedophilia on the basis of **false** accusations which have been dismissed by a judge in **2018** **(for more on this case, see <https://dmitrievaffair.com/>)**. The trial has now restarted: the memory war continues and, while the memory of the Gulag is at stake, the works of the religious thinkers who went through it or died in the camps acquire an even stronger significance.

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