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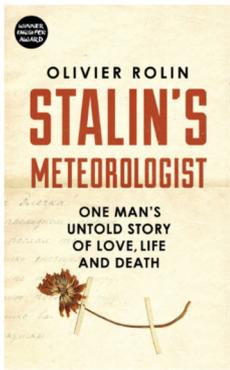
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**Stalin's Meteorologist** by Olivier Rolin. Translated by Ros Schwartz.

Reviewed by Andrea Gullotta

Between 27 October and 4 November 1937 more than a thousand prisoners of the Solovki prison camp were executed in the forests of Karelia in one of the bloodiest massacres of Gulag prisoners ever recorded. To tell this story of horror is one of the hardest tasks for an author: facing the silent flatness of numbers, authors often try their best to convey the personal tragedies on the background of collective tragedies – Anna Akhmatova's desire to 'call all the victims by name' in the epilogue of *Requiem* sums this feeling. Historians, sociologists, novelists, poets, journalists have tried along the years to find a way to solve this terrifying knot, but few have succeeded as Olivier Rolin has in his book *Le météorologue* (Paris: Seuil, 2014), published in English by Harvill Secker in the excellent translation provided by Ros Schwartz.

Touched by the letters and drawings sent to his wife and daughter by Aleksei Vangengeim – the meteorologist of the title – Rolin has decided to dig deep into the biography and biographical material of Vangengeim with the intention to tell the story of a life, a family, a community devastated by state violence under Stalin. Rolin's first close encounter with the Gulag dates back to 2013 when he traced down the library of the Solovki prison camp, which had been lost for more than 70 years, in the remote village of Ertsevo, where one of the many 'Northern camps' (the one in which the Polish writer Gustaw Herling-Grudziński spent most of his detention) was situated. The library of the Solovki prison camp was unique: it featured almost 30.000 books, some of which were prohibited in the Soviet Union. This because the collection was comprised of the books sent to the prisoners by their dears, by donations and even by the books confiscated to people arrested. The library of the Solovki camp was one of many cultural wonders (together with thriving theatres, outstanding publications, respectable research centres etc.) produced in the archipelago in the Northern Sea during most of the years in which it was used by the Soviet state as a prison camp (1923-1939). Such a lively cultural scene was parallel to horror: the Solovki prison camp was one of the most horrific Soviet camps, the 'laboratory' of the Gulag (i.e. the place entrusted to the political police with the specific aim of creating a profitable system for the use of the prisoners' forced labour) where most of the techniques that were going to be implemented in the Gulag system were tested and sometimes created (such as Naftalii Frenkel's use of forced labour outside of the camps as a mean to industrialise the country).

Vangengeim's life epitomises the horrors and paradoxes of the Solovki prison camp and, more generally, those of a consistent number of Soviet people, and of the Soviet experience overall. A respected scientist, Vangengeim was arrested on false accusations and sent to the camp in the Northern Sea, where he would work mainly in the library before being taken to the mainland and executed. During

his whole period of detention, Vangengeim kept on sending letters to his wife Varvara and his daughter Eleonora, letters which chronicle the anguish of a father (they often included drawings, riddles and small lectures for his daughter), a husband, a disgraced professional, a loyal communist, an individual devoured by Stalinism. Rolin initially proposes a 'tentative biography' of the early years of Vangengeim based on the scarce information at his disposal on the scientist's life before arrest. He then masterly chronicles the detention period lived by Vangengeim by fusing together the scientists' words and his own, in an interplay, or rather a dialogue, which is of great significance – it is indeed a duet sung along the lines, where the reader constantly loses the perception of who is writing between the victim and the mediator. Rolin devotes the third part of his book to the detailed – and crude – description of the martyrdom of Vangengeim and of many other prisoners, as well as the aftermaths, starting from the ignominious lies by the Soviet state to his widow, and arriving to the long battle fought by some researchers (mainly Iurii Dmitriev, Irina Flige and Veniamin Iofe) to find the mass graves in Sandarmokh, where Vangengeim and thousands of other victims are buried. After a series of reflections on the significance of his book on the backdrop of the memory of the victims of the Gulag, as well as of the relationship that Western intellectuals have had with the Soviet dream, Rolin closes *Stalin's Meteorologist* with the sad tale of Vangengeim's daughter's suicide in 2012, 78 years after her father's arrest, a way to underline how the trauma of the Gulag can remain alive in the people involved for all their lives.

Inspired, touching, shocking and profound, Rolin's book is a milestone in the memory of the victims of the Gulag. By telling one story in depth – the story of what he calls an 'ordinary man' – Rolin adopts the same device as Solzhenitsyn, who wrote *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* after arriving to the conclusion that the best way to describe life in the camps was to describe one day of an ordinary prisoner. And it is only deplorable that more than 30 years after the closure of the Gulag system and some 80 years after the Great Terror we still need books like Rolin's to cherish the innumerable victims of the Gulag, while some of the people and NGOs who are actively involved in the preservation of their memory in Russia are put under pressure.

*Dr. Andrea Gullotta is author of 'Intellectual Life and Literature at Solovki 1923-1930: The Paris of the Northern Concentration Camps' (Legenda 2018). To be reviewed in the next issue of this magazine.*

*He is Lecturer in Russian at the University of Glasgow.*

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