

## Hitler or Stalin

# WHICH WAS THE WORST?

### A Comparison in Concentration Camps

MARGARET BUBER-NEUMANN

I DIVIDED SEVEN YEARS of my life between the slave camps of Soviet Russia and those of Nazi Germany, and people often ask me: What are the differences? Which was the worst? Which would you choose if you had to start all over again?

In the attempt to answer, my mind goes back to the time I was delivered at the Nazi camp for women at Ravensbrueck.

It was a sunny day in August

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1940, and I was astonished at the scene before me: neat plots of grass, gay flower beds, freshly raked gravel paths. To the left of the gate was a great aviary with peacocks proudly displaying their plumage. The place seemed more like a pleasure resort than a prison camp. At least it seemed so to me, for I had just come from the Soviet slave camp at Karaganda in Siberia. Its images and smells were still close and vivid.

At Karaganda there had been no road at all, only casual tracks, and when it rained, these tracks were churned into quagmires by trucks and ox-carts. And what filthy quagmires! I do not believe any Westerner can imagine the filth of a Soviet concentration camp. There is nothing in our world to compare it to. At Burma, my first camp, I was appalled by the heaps of rotting

garbage and debris and human excrement surrounding the kitchen where we went for our food. And yet Burma was a model of cleanliness compared to the "punishment compound" where I spent practically the whole of my imprisonment. (I was "punished" for applying to the authorities for a reconsideration of my case!) Here neither prisoners nor guards made even a pretense of ordinary decency. Latrine pits had been dug, but no one bothered to use them. When I arrived they were unapproachable anyway, for they were surrounded by piles of human manure. The stench that pervaded the whole camp was terrible beyond belief.

The contrast at Ravensbrueck was yet more noticeable in the washroom. The first thing that happens to a prisoner when he comes into any concentration camp is delousing and washing. You might think this would be welcome, especially if you had not taken off your clothes, or even washed your face, for months. In one respect, the washroom in both camps was a horror. It was an invasion of that last tiny island of selfhood you had left, the privateness of your own body. But in the Soviet camps this miserable proceeding was attended by neither cleanliness nor a semblance of propriety. The male prisoners who doled out our half pail of warm water in the soggy-floored wash room thought it a great joke to go

around slapping our naked behinds. When we got back our ragged clothes, they would be shrunk to approximately two-thirds their size by the delouser, which did not, however, make them cleaner.

At Ravensbrueck there were separate showers, hot water and soap, women attendants in white uniforms. And when we came out, we were handed new clothes — coarse enough, but clean and our own.

ANOTHER CONTRAST was the quarters. At Ravensbrueck the "huts" had each a large toilet room, a washroom, tables, stools, lockers for our clothes! We were each given two woolen blankets, a clean sheet and pillow case, a monthly allotment of soap, and sixty carefully cut squares from a newspaper — our "toilet tissue" for the month. Since Ravensbrueck was a women's camp, we were also given six "napkins" and required to keep them scrupulously clean. In Russia this particular phase of a woman's life is ignored as though it did not exist.

At Karaganda I had slept on bare boards or a dirt floor. As covering, I had only the clothes I worked in, as a pillow a sack stuffed with the few bits of apparel I had managed to keep from the quick hands of camp thieves. And there was not a moment's rest from the vermin: bedbugs dropping like rain from the low ceilings of our clay huts; lice that nestled to our bodies in colo-

nies; fleas larger and greedier than I had ever seen. And rats! I lay awake many nights as they skipped madly over me in frantic search of the tiny bag of dried crumbs I had saved for my own hungriest moment.

At Ravensbrueck vermin were not considered normal to life, even for prisoners, and the necessary precautions were taken against them.

**T**HEN THERE WAS THE FOOD. When we new prisoners at Ravensbrueck were first called to lunch, and ladled out sausage, white bread, margarine, bacon fat, cream of wheat with stewed fruit, I turned in astonishment to the woman next in line: "Do you always get so much to eat?" She was surprised at my surprise; she thought we weren't getting enough. How could she know, how can anyone who has not experienced it know, that in Soviet camps the near-starvation of the prisoners is a refined science. The size of the chunk of dry dark bread handed us at dawn as we set off for the fields was determined by the amount, not the hours, of work we had done the day before—the square metres of field hacked, or the number of bags shouldered. Thus we all had one constant thought—bread. Yet no matter how we strained our nerves and muscles fourteen to sixteen hours a day, we rarely achieved the full "quota" with its bread ration of twenty-five ounces. For my part I

never got above the last kitchen, which meant fourteen ounces of bread a day, a cup of sour soup at noon, a scrap of salt fish at night. This quota system was a Soviet invention for getting the last molecule of work out of the prisoners, and for some reason was not adopted by the Nazis.

At Ravensbrueck we all received the same three meals a day regardless of the amount or product of our work. There was always ample bread, besides meat, fats, cereal, dried fruits. It was not abundant, but it was adequate to keep away those pangs of hunger so deliberately exploited by the Soviet system.

Furthermore, at Ravensbrueck we never worked as long or as hard as in Siberia. When I arrived in 1940 the workday was eight hours, six days a week. We were free on Sundays. In Siberia prisoners in general were supposed to be off Sundays, but there was always "voluntary" work to be done for an extra fistful of bread, and being famished they always "volunteered." We prisoners in the "punishment compound" never had a chance to be off Sundays or holidays.

That was one big difference between the two camps. But it was characteristic of the Nazi camps to convert the regime of orderliness and cleanliness itself into a torture. As a recent slave of Stalin, it seemed to me the last touch of luxury to

have a clean straw mattress for my bunk, but under the Nazis this refinement became a daily misery. To distribute the straw in that mattress so as to please a hierarchy of relentless supervisors who pretended to know the exact position of every straw was a task for which I was unprepared either as wife and mother in Germany, or as prisoner in Siberia. Yet failure in this fantastic task of "bed-building" was punished by having to stand with aching joints "at attention" all evening long while your friends had their supper and were allowed to stroll about the barracks.

Another pretext for torture was the adjustment of the head kerchief in such a way as to leave exactly the prescribed number of millimeters of smoothly brushed hair showing. The penalty for failure here, unavoidable in those with naturally curly hair, was anything from a slap across the face to a shaved head and a term in the punishment block.

A more distinguishing feature of the Nazi torture was systematic flogging. Following Himmler's visit in 1940 it became a common event at Ravensbrueck to punish a prisoner with twenty-five lashes for the slightest offense against the regulations. For some reason, though Soviet inquisitors will club a prisoner almost to death while extracting a "confession," the guards in Soviet prison camps are rather tem-

perate. At least they are casual. Those who are ugly or quick-tempered might beat up a prisoner any time. But with the Nazis flogging was streamlined. Specially talented sadists were employed to do it, and the whole performance was conducted with typical German thoroughness.

THIS "GERMAN THOROUGHNESS" had a happy side too — in the handling of letters and packages. In Soviet camps prisoners in certain categories were supposed to have the right to send and receive letters and parcels. But what with the poor transportation facilities, bureaucratic inefficiency, universal thievery and indifference, few communications ever arrived. When I was in Russia, there was no possibility, of course, that letters to a foreign country would be delivered, so my mother and sisters in Germany had to think of me as dead for years before I could at last inform them I was a prisoner in our own country. During the five years I was in Ravensbrueck I communicated once a month with my family. My mother could have the comfort of making me little cakes filled with as much ground nuts and fruit and sugar and butter as she could pack into them. Certain categories of prisoners, I must add, were not allowed to communicate with their relatives. When arrested, they disappeared into "Nacht und Nebel" (darkness and

fog), as did the majority of the political prisoners in Soviet camps.

GERMAN THOROUGHNESS also worked for us in the matter of "free time." In Siberia we could do no more after the day's work than stagger exhausted to our huts. In Ravensbrueck we had strength left in the evenings, as well as on Sundays, to walk back and forth on the gravel paths, talking together, exchanging opinions and hopes. There was naturally a good deal of dissension — after all, it was a camp for women! As an ex-Communist I was particularly hounded by the animosity of those prisoners who still retained their fanatical belief in the "Socialist fatherland." They shunned me as a pariah. Nevertheless, I found friends with whom I could freely discuss my political views as well as the joys and sorrows of our daily life. In Soviet camps such friendship was all but impossible. The moment you let slip some remark about your real feelings, you were seized by the fearful thought: Suppose he's a spy, suppose he tells on me! And nine times out of ten he would at least be a person trying to "get in" with the authorities — your gesture of friendship would mean removal to a punishment camp. This constant fear of informers, a daylong nightmare, did not exist in the Nazi camps. Though the prisoners might quarrel and fight among themselves, they

maintained on the whole a firm solidarity against their guards and oppressors.

A less agreeable result of German thoroughness was this: if a Nazi court sentenced a prisoner to a certain term, the prisoner would be released punctually on the day and hour when the term expired. For this reason, the Nazis did not as a general rule sentence political prisoners to any definite term at all. They were simply thrown into the concentration camps and left there without any hope except for the defeat and overthrow of the Nazi regime. In Soviet Russia, on the contrary, prisoners were always sentenced for a definite term. For political prisoners there was very slight prospect of release when the term expired. Some excuse would usually be found for renewing or extending it, if only that the "papers" had not yet "come through." Still we could and did cherish, and almost live on, the hope that ultimately something of a more or less juridical nature might happen.

As the Nazis began to lose their cocksureness of victory, conditions at Ravensbrueck deteriorated seriously. With 36,000 instead of the 7,000 prisoners for whom the camp had been built, cleanliness pretty much disappeared. We worked longer hours, had less food. The vermin moved in. By the end of 1944 things were declining to a Siberian level, and there was not a great deal

of difference left between Ravensbrueck and Karaganda.

IT WOULD BE HARD, I think, for a prisoner to choose between the refined, law-abiding sadism of the Nazi persecutors and the blundering, often stupid brutality of the ruffians who stood over us with guns in Siberia. There was one cruel and bitter feature of the Soviet camps, however, which had no parallel in the Nazi and no place in the Nazi mores or ideology. That was the ever-present, dread tyranny of the criminals. As a result of the peculiar distortion of Marxian ideas which holds sway in the Soviet Union, these delinquent or depraved characters, who have been committed for rape, theft, robbery, murder, etc., constitute a privileged class in the prison camps. Since they are hand-in-glove with the guards, many of whom are themselves former criminal prisoners, they rob, attack, and torment the "politicals" with no fear of punishment. This aristocracy without noblesse oblige — indeed with the very opposite idea of their role — continue in camp to practice the arts that brought them there. They are particularly expert at thieving. Your few pitiful belongings are not safe even when you sleep on them. I was once nearly kicked to a pulp by a woman criminal simply because she was bored with her own field work. I felt somehow I must retaliate. But

I was warned by the guards to ignore the whole incident if I hoped to survive. There is no opposing the vicious and often insane whims of this aristocracy of convicted criminals — which is certainly without precedent in history.

The Nazi camps also held a horror unparalleled in the history of civilization: the sportive vivisection of human beings. Prisoners were mutilated and maimed in the pretended interest of science, but in ways that had no relation to any genuine problem. It was a case of grown men *playing laboratory* with living men and women as their victims — a perversion of the highest scientific culture that is not to be found in the Russian camps.

One of these "experiments" at Ravensbrueck involved the transfer of bones and muscles in Polish girls, picked out for their physical perfection. Those strong young athletic girls came out of the "laboratory" on crutches — many of them without calf muscles, many able to walk only on their toes. Their one consolation was that now they would surely be saved from execution. This hope, of course, proved false; they were not excluded from the executions and death chambers. Another merciless deed was the forcible aborting of women who came into the camp pregnant by "non-Germans." Though the pregnancy might be in the seventh or eighth month, no exception was

made. Often during these operations the momentary cry of a newborn child could be heard.

These particular examples will perhaps seem mild to those who know of certain experiments on men in more notorious Nazi camps. To us at Ravensbrueck, they were convincing enough of the depravity of our masters.

THERE WAS, of course, one thing even worse — the gas chambers. To the outside world this invention of the Nazis is associated primarily with Hitler's anti-Semitic lunacy. Actually, the first to go, from Ravensbrueck at least, were the sick and the afflicted — those who had some "physical or mental defect," or were incapable of work. Any deformity or serious illness would condemn a prisoner to the "sick transports."

The second group to be condemned was the "inferior races." One spring evening in 1942 when the whole camp was lined up for roll call, the prisoners suddenly froze with horror when shots pounded in their ears from nearby and they realized that the period of executions had begun at Ravensbrueck. Ten Polish women were "liberated" in this manner. Subsequently we had to line up many evenings and stand rigid and tense listening to shots, and sometimes cries, from the other side of the wall.

Soon this ordeal was replaced by

the transport of truck-loads of prisoners to the gas chambers of Auschwitz and Dessau. At first we did not understand, but when their clothes and personal effects, such as their combs and false teeth, came back, we knew with horror what it meant. The first transports were made up of Jewish women. Later, as more and more prisoners were brought in from the occupied countries, they included large numbers of Poles and other East Europeans, and members of the French Resistance. I do not know whether a gas chamber was built in at Ravensbrueck; it is fairly certain that from time to time a mobile gas chamber was used. At any rate, in the last years, two crematoriums were built, and the guards were fond of pointing to the black belching smoke that poured out of them day and night and telling us our only way out of Ravensbrueck would be "up the chimney."

In the winter of 1944-45 the glow at nights was almost always there. Every woman of fifty, every woman with grey hair, every woman who had been ill, trembled when the SS doctor-in-charge came around. It was said that he just took a glance at face and hair and passed his verdict of life or death on that. Women with grey or white hair made frantic efforts to dye it as best they could with a paste made from water and soot. But then word went around that the SS doctor was judging solely by the legs. A woman with

thin, bony legs or with thick ankles and swollen legs was lost. There was nothing anyone could do about that. The only salvation was to get into one of the workshops or one of the labor gangs, as the victims were chosen from those who were left behind as unfit for work.

WITH ALL THEIR HORROR these transports headed for the gas chambers were never quite the shock to me that they were to the other prisoners and the outside world. For in Stalin's camps I had become familiar with death by extermination. The methods of the NKVD were more clumsy, less abrupt, and therefore less immediately shocking. But they were equally deliberate and equally sure. Moreover, there was less difference in the kind of victims selected for transportation than the outside world imagines. In Russia there were also "sick transports," though not so called. A Soviet prisoner who is sick or old or too weak to work is loaded into a truck some morning and whisked off to what is called an "invalid camp." The name sounds harmless — the Communists have a way of adopting the terms of civilized morality — but the ration in that camp is 200 grams of bread a day, and death supervenes in one to two months. We all knew this at Karaganda, and when one of our fellow prisoners left for the "invalid camp," we said goodbye with the same tearful finality as when a "sick

transport" at Ravensbrueck carried off a friend or bunk-mate.

There were other sure places of extermination in Russia — "death camps," the prisoners called them, places in the far north or northeast where conditions were such that the hardest peasants could survive only a year or two. If two political prisoners became friends, one of them was practically sure to be sent to such a camp. To be a foreigner — a Pole, Czech, German, Austrian, Hungarian — was also a presumption in favor of this "death sentence." For although the ideology supporting it differs, there is the same intolerance of foreigners in Russia as there was in Nazi Germany. As early as 1938, when the world was first aroused against Hitler's insane persecution of Jews, thousands of men in the Soviet Union were being condemned to death at hard labor for the sole crime of being born of a foreign parent. Hundreds of ardent Communists — Czech, German, Austrian, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian — who had made the pilgrimage to Moscow as to Mecca, were arrested and thrown into prison soon after their arrival because they were foreigners. In the Soviet prisons and camps I met women who had been sentenced to five or ten years of hard labor because they had once been married to a man of foreign origin, though the marriage may have ended twenty years be-



fore. Since the war this discrimination against foreigners has grown more extreme. Trainloads of prisoners are today being carted off regularly from the occupied countries. And Soviet citizens who were captured by the Nazis are shipped off to the remotest death camps of Siberia on the ground that they have been contaminated by their stay in a capitalist — a foreign — country.

**T**HUS, to one who experienced them both, the difference between the prison camps of Stalin and Hitler were not profound. In a gen-

eral way they stemmed from the differences between the two countries: one industrialized, cultured, famed for efficiency, opulent and up-to-date; the other backward, poor, unlettered, untrained in the refinements of civilized society. If you ask which camps were worse, the Nazi or the Soviet, the answer must obviously depend on the nature and habits of the person you ask. For my part, I find the idea of a choice between these two hideous destinies unbearable. I could not, in my right mind, *choose* either one.

### ***The Other Half***

On their road to Susa [the two Spartans] presented themselves before Hydarnes. This Hydarnes was a Persian by birth, and had the command of all the nations that dwelt along the sea-coast of Asia. He accordingly showed them hospitality and invited them to a banquet, where, as they feasted, he said to them, "Men of Lacedaemon, why will you not consent to be friends with the king? You have but to look at me and my fortune to see that the king knows well how to honor merit. In like manner you yourselves, were you to make your submission to him, would receive at his hands, seeing that he deems you men of merit, some government in Greece."

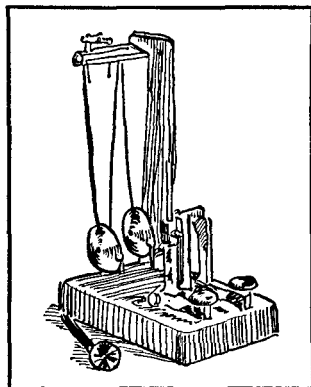
"Hydarnes," they answered, "you are a one-sided counsellor. You have experience of half of the matter, but the other half is beyond your knowledge. A slave's life you understand, but never having tasted liberty, you can not tell whether it be sweet or no. Had you known what freedom is, you would have bidden us fight for it, not with the spear only, but with the battle-axe."

HERODOTUS, PERSIAN WARS, VII:135

# Opinions

## from

### the Chronoscope



*From the most popular "information" program on television — Longines Chronoscope — THE MERCURY brings its readers each month a few carefully selected opinions. The program is televised each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 11 p.m. Eastern Standard Time by CBS (Channel 2). William Bradford Huie, THE MERCURY's editor, conducts the discussions on these programs, which feature leading national and international figures, with a guest editor. The opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the editor or sponsor.*

#### **Mr. Dulles on U. S. Policy, China and MacArthur**

MR. HUIE: Mr. Dulles, you have a splendid reputation for objectivity among most Americans, and I am sure that our audience tonight would like your views on the general world situation. Now, sir, in your opinion are we stronger this year as against Russia than we were last year?

MR. DULLES: I think probably not. It's pretty hard to judge these things, but my estimate would be that the tide is still running against us. Everywhere I look around the world the question is what maybe we are going to lose

JOHN FOSTER DULLES

BEVERLY BAXTER, M.P.

GOVERNOR EARL WARREN

SENATOR ESTES KEFAUVER

next. We seem to be on the defensive and they're on the offensive.

MR. HUIE: The question is what are we going to lose each year, more