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Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia Volume I



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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.

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