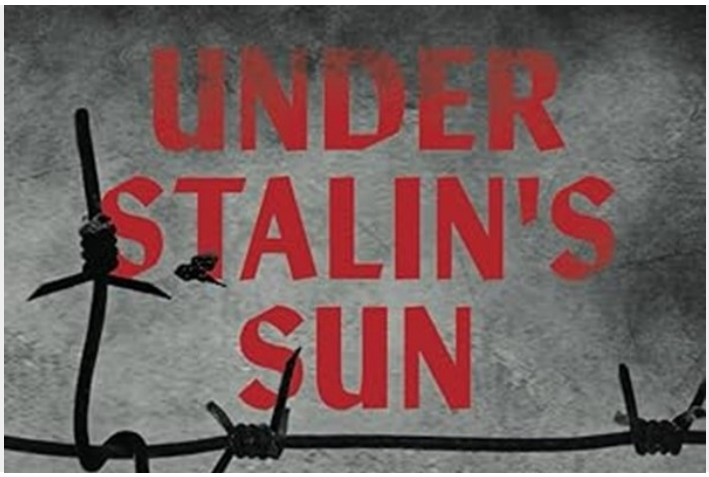
TRUE CRIME IS FIERCER THAN FICTION

Posted on February 25, 2024 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

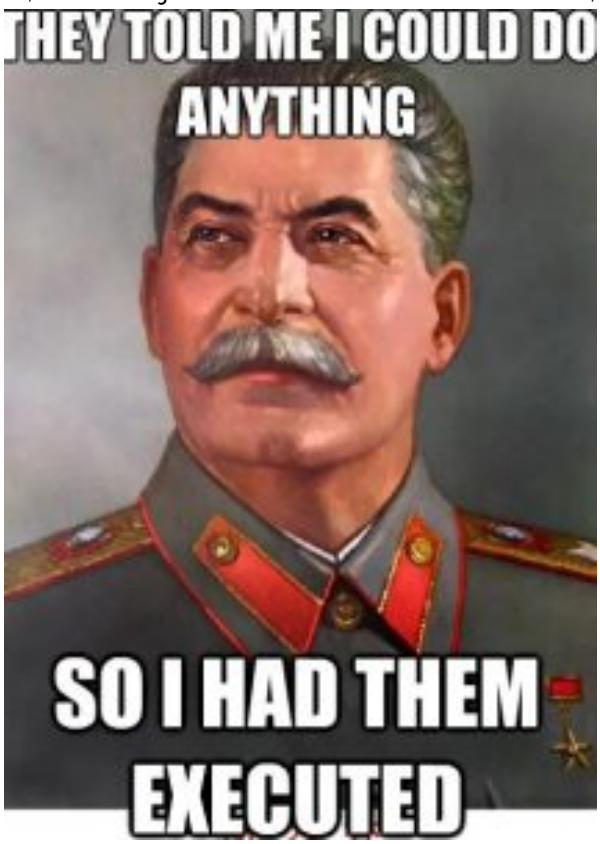
Book Review by **Lucine Kasbarian**, NJ USA, 17 February 2024

Under Stalin's Sun: My Escape from a Siberian Gulag By Suren H. Oganessian; Translated by Murad Meneshian; Foreword by Knarik Meneshian; Published by Pomegranate Music.

Gulags were forced labor camps run by the Cheka (Soviet secret police) under dictator Josef Stalin. From 1924 to the early 1950s, an estimated 40 million people passed through these camps. The total number of dead from murder, torture, exhaustion, disease and malnutrition is still not uniformly agreed upon but ranks in the millions.

Under Stalin's Sun is a 77-page autobiographical sketch written in a deceptively simple style. What lies beneath is a thoroughly perceptive and riveting account of the Syunik-born Suren Oganessian's arrest, incarceration and escape from the gulag system in the 1930s-40s.

Oganessian's literary contribution, translated by his son-in-law, the late journalist Mourad Meneshian, is not just a redeeming page turner. It's a vital addition to thesmall but growing number of first-hand Armenian accounts of the gulag system accessible to the English language reader. This harrowing tale is right up there with fact-based, superb political prisoner films such as *A Man Escaped* (1956) and *Escape from Pretoria* (2020).



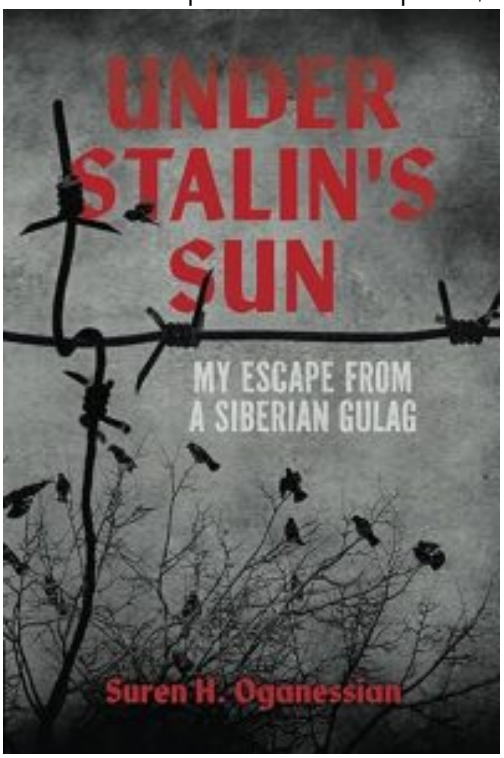
Gulags were designed to isolate, repress, exploit and eliminate those who were seen as threats to the Soviet experiment. The bourgeoisie, kulaks, religious adherents, clergy, perceived political opponents, and nationalists from all over the USSR—not just hardened criminals—were targeted for arrest and herded away. The abuse of prison labor was also profitable from a commercial point of view. The Soviet economy benefited greatly without investing much capital for the maintenance of

the labor camp population.

In Oganessian's account, many detainees were hauled to Siberia and elsewhere with no specific charge on their arrest warrants. The Cheka recruited not only felons and petty criminals for the prison camps but also pursued anyone who chided the Soviet system, landowners and farmers who refused to join collectives, and practically anyone who had a patriotic bone in his body. Political prisoners got the worst treatment of all. Most arrested were never brought to trial but sent to the camps by administrative decree. In precise and pithy language, the author describes how he and his peers were packed into penal train compartments and underground prison cells that would put claustrophobic cattle slaughterhouses to shame. Ill-clothed or naked, forced to live in filth, inmates were fed watered-down slop, their rations depending on how long and productively they performed hard labor in subzero temperatures.

Oganessian narrates the details of his incarceration with the precision of photographic memory. If an inmate spoke of the tortures endured in prison camps, he would be executed. If detainees possessed information of value to the Cheka, they were urged to confess to save their families from detention. After confession, the relatives would be incarcerated or killed anyway and the detainees would be murdered.

Prisoners were also encouraged to inform on each other and to submit to catch-22 interrogation techniques. Soviet citizens living near a labor camp would be rewarded if they ratted out runaway inmates. If a prison term expired, the authorities got the inmate's hopes up only to fabricate a story to remand him further. The Cheka liberally used physical torture, humiliation and mind games to break the wills of the inmates. The reader will accurately conclude that convict life in a gulag was a fate worse than death. There were more than 500 such camps interspersed throughout the Soviet Union. That said, Oganessian mounted an electrifying escape in spite of every disadvantage.



The author observes that in all the time he was transferred from prison to prison, the two ethnic groups that seemed to be missing from the inmate rosters were Georgians and Turks from Azerbaijan. Among the majority of detainees in the gulags were Ukrainians and Armenians, both known for their patriotism. It was clear to Oganessian that the Soviets and Turkey were working hand-in-glove and that the Soviets were doing everything they could to denationalize and Russify the Armenians, taking cues from Turkey, who had attempted the same with repressive laws and Turkification policies.

Tellingly, the tortures and dirty deals described in this memoir have carried over to the political techniques imposed on Armenia by Russia, Turkey and Azerbaijan today. History will bear out that this triumvirate has not engaged with Armenia with genuine diplomacy, negotiation, peace, cooperation or honest brokering but rather the opposite.

In the words of Oganessian's daughter, Knarik Meneshian, who authored the book's' Foreword, "Will we, the Armenians, ever be able to live freely and in peace on our own lands? Imagine the wealth of talent, ingenuity and creativity we've lost over the centuries and continue to lose."

The mettle and grit we witness from Oganessian and his generation are truly from another world. This literary endeavor was written by a modest man who, despite forced exile, exhibited natural pride in his homeland, culture and people to the very end. He shows us what it means to sacrifice for one's nation in the absence of ego, personal gain or exhibitionism.

In spite of the hardships he endured, Oganessian remained positive in outlook. He believed in faith, perseverance, optimism, hard work, kindness and generosity. These are the traditional Armenian traits that we must cling to in the dark hours we face yet again.

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Lucine Kasbarian *is a journalist, book publicist and political cartoonist.*

Comments

Lucine – 2024-04-01 20:36:59
Publisher Raffi Meneshian will give a talk about his grandfather, the author of "Under Stalin's Sun," on April 9th at 7 pm EST via Zoom. To register, visit this link. https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_LiFeRwpKQSSwLLHOQAFCZw#/registration



Keith Garebian – 2024-02-26 21:52:26
A perceptive, cogent review by the very talented Lucine Kasbarian!

Tavit – 2024-02-26 21:09:12
Lots of good lessons in here about Russian leaders.