

In Russia's Vorkuta, the remnants of a gulag town carry on

Reportage. From gulag to near-deserted industrial center, Vorkuta has defied modernity, continuing to produce top-quality coal on the backs of migrant workers from Central Asia and Ukraine.

written by Yurii Colombo Photos Giampiero Assumma

“Vorkuta is the capital of the world,” goes an old Russian saying. It’s really hard to believe it when you arrive in this town, on the 67th parallel, a far outpost of the Komi Republic and the northernmost city in Europe. A pack of feral dogs is ambling around in front of the railway station, and all around we see derelict residential buildings and factories long abandoned to their fate. You have to know the history of this place to know why it was once called “the capital of the world.”

Vorkuta is the most famous gulag city in Russia. Here, in the most famous gulag (together with that of Kolyma), prisoners of 47 different nationalities worked and died between 1932 and 1956 to dig up the coal needed to fulfil the Soviet five-year plans. The world of the concentration camps was that place where “one is persuaded every day that one can live with no meat, no sugar, no clothes, no shoes, but also with no honor, no conscience, no love, no duty,” wrote Vaarlam Shalamov in *Kolyma Tales*. It’s a world where “everything is laid bare, but the final revelation is a terrible one.”

“Stalin wanted to prove that communists can do everything,

even produce something in an impossible environment where the winter temperatures drop to -55 degrees Celsius, with only two hours of daylight and with tundra that is miserly for anyone who wants to cultivate it," says Alexander Kalmykov, a geologist, who emigrated here from Siberia in 1968.

The deported used to live in shacks, and initially dug out the coal with their bare hands. From the first shipment of 1,500 prisoners, only 84 survived. Then came the city, with lots of theaters and jazz clubs to entertain camp guards and free workers in their leisure time. Among the many deported here, there were also some Italians. The most famous of them, Dante Corneli, a Communist worker who was accused of Trotskyism, later told his tragic story in the book *Il Redivivo Tiburtino*, published by La Pietra in 1977.

In 1953, as Stalinism came to an end, the prisoners rebelled, went on strike and demanded better working conditions. This was "the Vorkuta uprising": the guards in the towers of the concentration camp opened fire on the workers, killing 53 and wounding 127. In the meadow where the dead were buried (if they even were), other crosses would be added later: more who were shot, more who died as involuntary builders of the "socialist paradise."

Then came the time of the dismantling of the camps and the end of slave labor, when Khrushchev and Brezhnev did everything to convince regular workers to move to Vorkuta. The wages were twice as high as those of university professors in Moscow and workers at the spas in Crimea, for those who agreed to work underground in Vorkuta.

"My father was one of them," Sergey tells us during the long train journey that takes us from Syktyvkar to Vorkuta. "Thirty-six years underground. Now I know that in Europe, by law, you go into the mine for a maximum of 10 years. He died two years after he retired, as many of his work colleagues

did," he stresses. "I was always the best-dressed kid, we didn't want for anything, we would go on holiday on a cruise on the Black Sea—but in the end, is all of that worth giving your life?" Sergey is still asking himself.

Generations have passed, and the young people in Vorkuta know almost nothing of their roots. "I've heard about that story from an old person," says Viktoria, 17, a waitress in the only sushi bar in town who dreams of learning English and leaving.

In Vorkuta, the only thing left is the coal mines, but their number has been shrinking over time. In 1988, there were 19; now there are only four left, and coke production has decreased from 28 million to seven million tonnes per year. Since 1992, the population has fallen to less than half.

Today, only 59,000 people still live in Vorkuta. "However, our coal is of the highest quality, so it's not used as an energy source, but in the metal industry," says Viktor Telnov, director of the Economic and Mining College in the city. He takes us to visit an exact replica of a coal mine that the school has built in the basements for training and practice for the students. "They come to see it from all over the world," he says proudly. Who knows if his model school will survive the inexorable advancing tide of deindustrialization.



In 2016, 36 miners died underground in a mine north of the city. The mine was closed and the investigation is still ongoing, but no one believes that anyone will be brought to account: all that remains is a large plaque with photos of these men and fresh flowers that someone is taking care to replace often.

The problem of the future of Vorkuta is also—or, rather, most of all—one of political will, and, to use a dirty word, of business profitability. Severstal, the holding company that owns the four mines of Vorkuta, is controlled by the oligarch Alexey Mordashev. Over the years, Mordashev has curtailed funding for investments and innovation to the absolute minimum, closing the mines approaching depletion one after the other, and he seems to have no intention to revive the city's economy.

Pursuing this near-zero business risk policy for his company with a turnover of around \$7.7 billion per year has made Mordashev the fourth richest man in Russia, according to *Forbes*, with a personal fortune of \$20.5 billion. “And still, there would be high-quality coal here for at least another 300 years,” says Kolmykov, the geologist. But nobody's going to make a bet on this island in the taiga. Severstal is donating \$300,000 per year to the city, and that's not even enough to fill the potholes that have opened up in the streets, or to install decent benches at bus stops.



*Lenin Street, a strip of asphalt in the form of an inverted L, cuts through the city, while the working class neighborhoods all around are on dirt roads: dilapidated old condos tower above a small playground where a little girl is crying disconsolately as kids walk by wearing counterfeit sneakers. "It certainly doesn't look like we're in Rio De Janeiro," in the words of Ostap Bender, the antihero of Ilf and Petrov's literary masterpiece *The Twelve Chairs*.*



Another aspect that makes the future of Vorkuta problematic is the fact that it's hard to find people willing to go underground, even for a very respectable wage for Russia, because occupational diseases and workplace accidents are the norm here. "The vast majority of the 6,000 miners in Vorkuta are migrants. They come here to work, mainly from the Central Asian republics and Ukraine, attracted by salaries ranging

from €1,500 to €2,000 per month, 4 to 5 times higher than the national average. But they send all the money back home. There's little of it that stays here," says Igor Kurbatov, the head of the independent miners' trade union.

One can't see any miners around the city. They're picked up by Severstal buses in the morning and driven back home at night. "The working day is six hours, but that doesn't take into account the time for daily physical examinations, which includes alcohol testing, and the descent and ascent from the wells," Kurbatov explains. In winter, this means they never see the light of day, as the sun only peeks out between noon and 2 p.m. The union organization is strong in Vorkuta, but it still suffers under the prevailing corporatism.



"We organize half of the miners, about 3,000 workers: the wage gains also benefit non-members, but everything else, including medical services of a certain quality, are available only to those who pay their dues," the union leader argues with conviction. This policy has allowed some workers to gain power and benefits, but it marginalizes non-union workers.

"There will be no one left here in 10 years," a taxi driver tells us with a grin. He's spent half his life in the mines. Indeed, perhaps one day the only people who are still here will be criminals and people too poor to emigrate. The gulag city would come full circle, turning into something akin to John Carpenter's New York: a place where modernity meets head

to head with the abyss.