

# Uncovering the Hidden World of Criminal Tattoos

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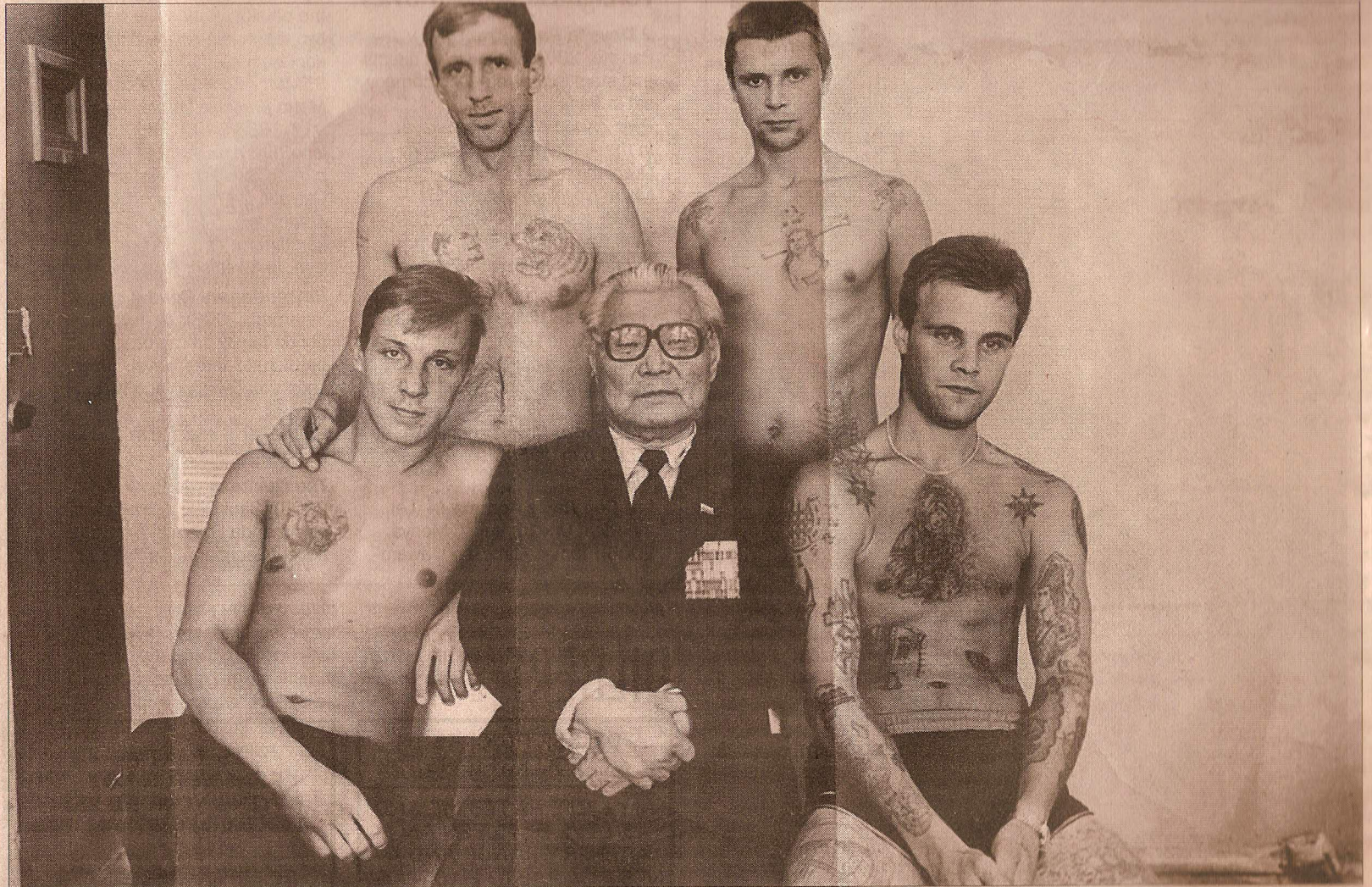
There is a cliché — one too readily employed with regard to contemporary Western culture — to the effect that such and such an artist has “pushed boundaries” or has “broken taboos.” Most people, if they are honest with themselves, would admit that aesthetic boundaries are exceedingly porous in liberal democracies, wherein bold statements are more likely to bring accolades than rebukes.

Consider, by way of contrast, the fate of a Russian convict described in Edward Kuznetsov’s 1973 “Prison Diaries,” upon whose forehead prison surgeons operated three times to remove a political tattoo:

“The first time they cut out a strip of skin with a tattoo that said ‘Khrushchev’s Slave.’ The skin was then roughly stitched up. After he was released, he tattooed ‘Slave of the USSR’ on his forehead. Again, he was forcibly operated on to remove it. [The] third time, he covered his whole forehead with ‘Slave of the CPSU’ [Communist Party of the Soviet Union]. This tattoo was cut out and now, after three operations, the skin is so tightly stretched across his forehead that he can no longer close his eyes.”

Russian criminal tattoos have, in some small but significant way, begun to infiltrate and influence the Western creative class’ ideas of Russia at its most outre. In recent years, they have been depicted in David Cronenberg’s film “Eastern Promises” and in Martin Amis’ novel of the Great Terror, “House of Meetings.”

That anyone outside Russia should know anything about the phenomenon is due in no small part to the ef-



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Danzig Baldayev, a guard at St. Petersburg’s Kresty Prison, made detailed copies of the tattoos of hundreds of prisoners he encountered during his tenure.

Murray and Sorrel had an acquaintance working for a Russian publisher who showed them drawings by Danzig Baldayev, a guard at St. Petersburg’s Kresty Prison who was also a talented amateur anthropologist and folklorist.

demon the manner in which Russian convicts typically depicted “Jews” being crucified and roasted over a burning copy of Marx’s “Capital” by two angels. The text below reads, “God’s trial for the leader of the world’s pro-

