

INTELLECTUALS, THE SOVIET REGIME, AND THE GULAG:
THE CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION
OF AN IDEAL

By

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This study seeks to examine the three distinct periods of Soviet history during which the regime permitted and at times even encouraged a discussion of the system of labor camps, commonly referred to as the Gulag (*Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei*, or Main Administration of Labor Camps). However this is not to imply that the discussion of labor camps was of the character that may occur in an open society, but instead was a highly-censored discussion that remained within the boundaries established by Soviet officials. Nevertheless, an analysis of these three distinct periods and the depictions of the labor camps in each instance reveals the contribution of intellectuals to governmental policy.

In the first instance labor camps were highly praised in the late 1920s and the early 1930s for their reformatory benefits, and as a result of the successful construction of the Belomor Canal (White Sea-Baltic Canal) in 1933, which relied on prison labor and served as the model for all future projects. The second instance was provoked by Josef

Stalin's death and continued roughly through the end of Nikita Khrushchev's premiership, often referred to as the "thaw," in an attempt to discredit Stalin and his methods. The last and most significant instance occurred during Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* and ultimately tested the limits of governmental control. Focusing on these three specific instances reveals not only one example of the many ways in which the Soviet regime sought to influence its citizens, but also the significant contribution of Soviet intellectuals to such efforts. Such an analysis also reveals how and why certain images of the Gulag were beneficial to the regime.

This study will primarily rely on legally permitted representations that were included in Soviet newspapers, literary journals, books, and films. By focusing on officially sanctioned works it is possible to observe the interaction and contestation between the regime and intellectuals as they each competed for their own version of society. However, the presence of *samizdat*, or underground, depictions will be considered as they serve to shed doubt on the official interpretation of the camps as provided by the regime and its more cooperative intellectuals.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Boris Yeltsin's campaign posters for the 1996 Russian presidential elections demanded that Russians "Vote or Lose!" They need only vote and the world would be theirs, as symbolized by a world globe directly above "vote." However, if they did not vote they would most certainly lose, signified by a mass of barbed wire; a thinly veiled reference to the labor camps of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party candidate Genadii Ziuganov. Yeltsin's campaign also included a poster of flowers, the stems of which were made from different types of barbed wire. The caption read "the Communist Party hasn't changed its name and it won't change its methods," again warning people from voting for the Communist candidate lest they wish to return to an oppressive era. In her study of Yeltsin-era politics, sociologist Kathleen Smith has referred to Yeltsin's campaign tactics as "campaigning on the past," and indeed the Yeltsin campaign reveals that political tacticians believed they could successfully draw upon the historical memory of Soviet labor camps to discredit the Communist Party.¹ However, President Yeltsin was not the first official to use the camps in a political manner.

In three distinct periods of Soviet history the regime permitted and at times even encouraged a discussion of the system of labor camps, commonly referred to as the Gulag (*Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei*, or Main Administration of Labor Camps).

¹Kathleen Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics and Memory during the Yeltsin Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 133-145.

However this is not to imply that the discussion of labor camps was of the character that may occur in an open society, but instead was a highly-censored discussion that remained within the boundaries established by Soviet officials. In the first instance labor camps were highly praised in the late 1920s and the early 1930s for their reformatory benefits, and as a result of the successful construction of the Belomor Canal (White Sea-Baltic Canal) in 1933, which relied on prison labor and served as the model for all future projects. The second instance was provoked by Josef Stalin's death and continued roughly through the end of Nikita Khrushchev's premiership, often referred to as the "thaw," in an attempt to discredit Stalin and his methods. The last and most significant instance occurred during Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* and ultimately tested the limits of governmental control. Focusing on these three specific instances reveals not only one example of the many ways in which the Soviet regime sought to influence its citizens, but also the significant contribution of Soviet intellectuals to such efforts. Such an analysis also reveals how and why certain images of the Gulag were beneficial to the regime.

This study will primarily rely on legally permitted representations that were included in Soviet newspapers, literary journals, books, and films. By focusing on officially sanctioned works it is possible to observe the interaction and contestation between the regime and intellectuals as they each competed for their own version of society. However, the presence of *samizdat*, or underground, depictions will be considered as they serve to shed doubt on the official interpretation of the camps as provided by the regime and its more cooperative intellectuals. As Vincent Lietch once wrote, "a space opens between an assigned meaning-whatever it may be-and the actual

reality.”² *Samizdat* literature makes this “space” apparent as it reveals the difference between the reality of the camps and their assigned meaning as defined by the Soviet government.

Before discussing the various and often purely ideological representations of the labor camps, the reality of life within the barbed-wire zone should first be addressed as well as those unfortunate individuals who found themselves imprisoned there. The acronym Gulag refers to a system of forced labor camps and colonies that existed in the Soviet Union primarily throughout the Stalinist period, although there is some debate among historians as to the official beginning and end of the Gulag. Galina Ivanova and Michael Jakobson each locate the beginning of the Gulag in the early Bolshevik period when concentration camps were created for the imprisonment of White Guardists and kulaks. On the other hand Oleg Khlevniuk insists that the first forced labor camp was established in 1929.³ Additionally, most historians place the end of the Gulag in 1959, when the administration was officially terminated. However, the Memorial Society dates the end in 1986, when Mikhail Gorbachev closed the camp at Perm, the last operating labor camp in the Soviet Union. Though it should be noted the camp at Perm housed largely political criminals and dissidents who were not subjected to the grueling physical labor and destruction of the Stalinist era camps. The greatest danger for such prisoners

²Vincent Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 5.

³Galina Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism: The Gulag in the Soviet Totalitarian System* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), 12; Michael Jakobson, *Origins of the Gulag: The Soviet Prison Camp System, 1917-1934*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 37; Oleg Khlevnyuk “The Economy of the OGPU, NKVD, and MVD of the USSR, 1930-1953: The Scale Structure, and Trends of Development,” in *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag*, eds. Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2003), 45.

was often self-initiated through hunger strikes, as in the case of Anatoly Marchenko who died in 1986 as the result of such a strike.

While there was undoubtedly a history of harsh exile and imprisonment in Imperial Russia, the system established during the Soviet period was unprecedented in a number of ways. The sheer numbers of persons imprisoned are staggering, especially when compared with the high-water mark of tsarist imprisonment of 142,000 in 1916.⁴ In contrast, there were 2.5 million people imprisoned in the Soviet Union by the early 1950s.⁵ How the Gulag population rose to such great proportions is attributable to a number of Soviet practices. For instance the de-kulakization and collectivization drives that began in earnest in 1930 resulted in the arrest of 330,000 persons, with 114,000 of them being sent to labor camps and colonies.⁶ The drives originated as a means to rid the peasantry of supposedly wealthy *kulaks* who were perceived as hostile to the regime and to organize the peasantry in collective farms referred to as *kholkozes*. Often those who were considered kulaks, or wealthy peasants, were viewed as such because of their nationality as Poles or Germans.⁷ Not all were arrested and placed in camps however. Approximately 1.8 million were exiled to eastern regions of the Soviet Union.⁸

⁴Michael Jakobson, *Origins of the Gulag*, p. 10.

⁵Paul R. Gregory, "An Introduction to the Economics of the Gulag," in *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag*, eds. Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2003), 11.

⁶Oleg Khlevniuk, *A History of the Gulag* (London: Yale University Press, 2004), 11.

⁷Terry Martin, "The Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing," *The Journal of Modern History* 70 (Dec., 1998), 837.

⁸Oleg Khlevniuk, *A History of the Gulag*, 18.

The Great Purge, or “Yezhovschina” named for Nikolai Yezhov, also resulted in a dramatic increase in the Gulag population. Although it is not necessary to recount the complete history of the Great Purge, a brief sketch would be useful. In 1934 Stalin ordered the assassination of Sergei Kirov, a member of the Politburo member and chair of the Leningrad Party. Stalin most likely ordered his assassination for fear of Kirov’s growing popularity and power. Following the assassination, Stalin ordered Nikolai Yezhov to implicate “Old Bolshevik” members Gregory Zinoviev and Nikolai Kamenev in the murder and in general to develop a case against the anti-Soviet Trotskyist Center, supposedly led by Karl Radek and Nikolai Bukharin. Yezhov duly followed Stalin’s instructions and carried out a thorough purge of the party, resulting in the execution of many Old Bolsheviks and leaving Stalin unopposed.

Stalin and Yezhov did not stop at only top party officials, but also targeted lower orders as well. Particularly chilling was Order #00447 of 1937, which, in addition to requiring the repression of kulaks and anti-Soviet elements, directed that all who had been previously arrested for such crimes be rearrested and investigated. Persons with ties to foreign nations, such as immigrants or members of national minorities such as Estonians and Latvians, were arrested en masse and accused of counterrevolutionary activities. But perhaps the most ominous provision of the order was that it set quotas for the number of persons to be arrested and provided instructions for increasing the quotas should NKVD officers find such an increase desirable. The results of this order were devastating; the original number to be arrested was set at 268,950, of which 72,950

were to be executed, but by the end of 1938 over 500,000 persons were arrested and sentenced to prison terms of eight to ten years.⁹

A third significant increase in the Gulag population was due to the Soviet Union's attitude toward returning Red Army soldiers taken prisoner during World War II.¹⁰ These soldiers, who were often forcibly repatriated by the Allies, were viewed as traitors and consequently were imprisoned upon their return to the Soviet Union. Such an attitude is clearly apparent in the 1943 edict, "On Measures of Punishment for Traitors to the Motherland and Turncoats, and on the Introduction of Hard Labor as Punishment for these Persons." Approximately 60,000 returning soldiers were thus sentenced to labor camps in the Vorkuta and Northeast camps, such as Novaya Zemlya and Kolyma.¹¹

Lastly it should be mentioned that many people were arrested during times of famine and financial hardship. For instance, 1931 and 1932 were years of famine and the situation was further exacerbated by laws against the theft of "socialist property," which were in fact directed at peasants resisting requisition orders.¹² As a result, nearly 200,000 peasants were arrested and sentenced to 10 year terms.¹³ Following the destruction of World War II, the Soviet Union again experienced famine in the years of 1946 and 1947.

⁹Ibid., 145-161.

¹⁰See Mark Elliott, *Pawns of Yalta: Soviet Refugees and America's Role in Their Repatriation* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

¹¹Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism*, 43.

¹²Oleg Khlevniuk, *A History of the Gulag*, 55.

¹³Ibid., 37.

As in the previous famine, a similar law on the theft of socialist property was once again issued, resulting in the arrest of approximately 337,000 persons.¹⁴

According to recent estimates, for the period of 1934-1953 approximately 18.75 million persons were imprisoned in the Soviet Union's labor camp system.¹⁵ And although this number is undoubtedly exaggerated as people were often arrested more than once, what could the regime have possibly gained from such large scale incarceration? Initially certain Soviet officials and intelligentsia viewed forced labor as a means to re-forge or re-educate class enemies, as will be shown in the discussion of the Belomorkanal, many others looked upon the Gulag as a "remarkable economic opportunity."¹⁶ Unlike free laborers who were scarce in the remote regions of the far Northeast and who required appropriate and functioning equipment, Gulag inmates could be forced to work in harsh and primitive conditions. Soviet authorities were well aware of this fact and consequently, as early as 1929 all persons convicted of terms of three or more years were sent to remote labor camps for the development of natural resources.¹⁷ Gulag labor was so pervasive in Kolyma that the prisoners were even used to build the capitol of the region, Magadan. Gulag labor was used for the construction of canals, railways, and factories, and also for mining natural resources such as gold and uranium.¹⁸

¹⁴Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism*, 49.

¹⁵Michael Ellman, "Soviet Repression Statistics: Some Comments," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 54 (Nov. 2002): 1158.

¹⁶Gregory, "An Introduction to the Economics of the Gulag," 21.

¹⁷Jakobson, *Origins of the Gulag*, 87.

¹⁸Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism*, 43.

However, as certain historians have demonstrated, Gulag labor was not always the most economical solution.

Mention should also be made of the deplorable living conditions of Gulag inmates. As Christopher Joyce stated, “the provision of food and medical supplies to the Gulag was subject to the unpredictability of the Soviet planned economy,” and therefore during times of crisis or famine the inmates suffered terribly.¹⁹ For instance, a 1935 NKVD report on labor camp inmates reported that of 741,599 persons, 90,000 were incapable of work due to illness and malnutrition.²⁰ Needless to say, NKVD officials were not known for their leniency in regarding persons as too ill to perform their labor requirements. Following Beria’s reforms, food rations were linked to worker output so that a worker performing at optimum levels received approximately 800 calories per day, mostly in the form of bread. However, if one was incapable of performing at this level, his or her rations were decreased, thereby rendering increased production impossible.²¹

Gulag inmates were particularly affected by World War II. Although many were freed and sent to the front, either of their own accord or through service in penal battalions, for those that remained imprisoned the conditions worsened considerably. Their food rations were curtailed severely, as were food supplies for the entire Soviet Union. However, what made life especially harsh for the inmates who remained in the camps, mostly political prisoners and persons too ill to serve in the army, was that they

¹⁹Christopher Joyce, “The Gulag in Karelia: 1929-1941,” in *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag*, eds. Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press), 185

²⁰Khlevniuk, *A History of the Gulag*, 86.

²¹Ibid., 201.

were expected to double their output to compensate for the reduction.²² Consequently, the poor conditions and increased labor resulted in an extremely high mortality rate. According to ministry reports approximately 1,005,000 inmates died between 1941 and 1945.²³

The beginning of the end of the Gulag came on March 27, 1953 when the Presidium of the Central Committee published an amnesty decree. Pursuant to the decree, which incidentally was drafted and proposed by Lavrenty Beria, 1.5 million persons were released from the Gulag.²⁴ However, the first prisoners released were common criminals, rather than political prisoners. It was not until 1954 or 1955 that political prisoners began to be released.²⁵ As Aleksei Tikhonov has argued, the amnesty was not granted for humanitarian reasons, but due to a general understanding among some Gulag officials that the current system was too expensive to maintain and that it would be more cost effective to convert inmate status to that of exile status. In Tikhonov's words, "the death of Stalin in March of 1953 provided the opportunity for the new leadership.....to make the political decision to dismantle the Gulag system."²⁶ Furthermore, Oleg Khlevniuk has also located documents within the state archives indicating that certain Gulag officials were seeking to convert prisoners to at least

²²Andrei Sokolov, "Forced Labor in Soviet Industry: The End of the 1930s to the Mid-1950s, An Overview," in *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag*, eds. Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2003), 39.

²³Oleg Khlevniuk, "The Economy of the OGPU, NKVD, and MVD of the USSR, 1930-1953: The Scale, Structure, and Trends of Development," in *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag*, eds. Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2003), 51.

²⁴Aleksei Tikhonov, "The End of the Gulag," in *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag*, eds. Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2003), 67.

²⁵Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism*, 66.

²⁶Tikhonov, "The End of the Gulag," 71-72.

partially free prisoners due not only to the expense of maintaining the prisoners, but also the inability to motivate prisoners to work at the required levels. In this sense partially free indicates workers who would be required to work on certain projects for a specified period of time, but would remain free to reside in private residences with their families if they so chose.²⁷

²⁷Khlevniuk, "The Economy of the OGPU, NKVD, and MVD of the USSR, 1930-1953: The Scale, Structure, and Trends of Development," 57.

CHAPTER 2 LABOR CAMPS IN THE PERIOD OF 1929-1933: DEPICTIONS AND POLITICAL USES

The period of 1929-1933 witnessed the first significant development of the labor camp as an institution of re-education and reformation. Additionally, labor camps during this period received a great deal of attention in the official press for a number of reasons, all of which of course benefitted the regime. But without the involvement of prominent intellectuals like Maxim Gorky, it is doubtful that the idea of re-education would have gained such credibility or political capital. The following sections will therefore explore the origins of the Soviet idea of re-education through labor and its multiple incarnations as they appeared in the official press and literature. The reasons for such a shameless promotion on the part of the government will also be addressed through a contextual analysis of the individual texts in the attempt to understand why the government permitted and encouraged such a public discussion of its labor camps.

Although Soviet labor camps were obviously very harsh and destructive, they were not always seen in such a light and at times were even considered a humane alternative to Western penitentiaries. In the late 1920s Soviet intellectuals and government officials began to theorize that forced labor possessed a reformative quality that could transform previous class enemies into new Soviet men and women. Given the Soviet position that “social conditions, and not racial differences, determined human

development,” based on a Marxist understanding of history,¹ it is not surprising that certain members of the regime believed that removing the so-called kulaks and bourgeoisie from their current surroundings and forcing them to work in labor camps for the good of the state would transform them into ideal members of the Soviet proletariat. As early as 1919 Felix Dzerzhinsky suggested that placing “class enemies” in corrective labor camps would result in their transformation into “true proletarians.”² However, by 1929 the idea of reformation or re-education through labor had a much more developed and articulate theorist in Evsei Shirvindt, at that time Chief of the Places of Confinement, who published an extensive article delineating an entire system based on such a belief and arguing that in a few years time under such a system prisons would no longer be required.³

To emphasize the educative nature of Soviet labor camps, NKVD officials and others in influential positions, such as the father of Socialist Realism Maxim Gorky, presented a humane and nurturing vision of the labor camps. In fact, the first such positive description of a labor camp was the result of Gorky’s travel sketches of the “new” Russia, published in 1929 in the Soviet journal *Nashi Dositzheniia* (Our Accomplishments).⁴ Why Gorky chose to glorify the labor camp system and to present it in such laudatory terms has been the subject of much debate. After all, he openly criticized the Bolsheviks in *Untimely Thoughts*, originally published in the Leningrad

¹Francine Hirsch, “Race without the Practice of Racial Politics,” *Slavic Review* 61 (Spring 2002): 35.

²Felix Dzerzhinsky quoted in Dariusz Tolczyk, *See No Evil: Literary Cover-Ups and Discoveries of the Soviet Camp Experience* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 100.

³E. Shirvindt quoted in Jakobson, *Origins of the Gulag*, 87-88.

⁴Tolczyk, *See No Evil*, 105.

newspaper *Novaya Zhizn* throughout 1918. In his work on Soviet camp literature, Dariusz Tolczyk theorized that Gorky's about-face was the result of Lenin's death, whom Tolczyk describes as Gorky's "ultimate protector." Following Lenin's death Gorky glorified Soviet methods, he argues, so that Gorky might return to Russia for the "still possible prospect of literary fame in the Soviet Union."⁵ Others, however, suggested that Gorky had become disaffected with the Russian emigre community, Europe in general, and reacted against the increasing hostility toward the Soviet Union.⁶ Lidiia Spiridonova offers yet another possibility, arguing that Gorky was wooed back to the Soviet Union with a "fight for Gorky." In this fight, Stalin, his enemies, and allies all sought his endorsement so as to influence not only the Soviet public, but international public opinion as well.⁷ Thus, Gorky's decision to leave his sunny villa in Sorrento, Italy and return to the Soviet Union may have resulted from a multitude of explanations.

Throughout 1928 and 1929 Gorky visited factories, collective farms, Komsomol events, and workers' meetings to collect information and material for his series of articles published under the title of *In and About the Soviet Union*.⁸ Remarkably, the Soviet publishing house *Gosizdat*, which orchestrated all of Gorky's visits, even arranged for his visit to the labor camp on the Solovki Islands in the far norther region of European Russia.⁹ Although his interactions with workers and Komsomol members seems logical

⁵Ibid., 109.

⁶Andrew Barratt and Barry P. Scherr, *Maksim Gorky: Selected Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 220.

⁷Lidiia Spiridonova, "Gorky and Stalin (According to New Materials from A.M. Gorky's Archive)," *Russian Review* 54 (Jul., 1995): 415.

⁸Tolczyk, *See No Evil*, 105.

⁹Ibid., 111.

and relatively uncontroversial from the point of view of a regime seeking to inspire confidence and pride among its citizens, his 1929 visit to Solovki is an entirely different matter. Given the atrocious living conditions, frequent prisoner beatings, low rations, and near-absent medical care,¹⁰ it is quite amazing that such a visit was risked at all. And yet Gorky's glowing report of the camp defies all imagination. However, upon closer review it appears that the Soviet government actively sought a positive portrayal of its labor camps to influence world opinion and to discredit the memoir of Sergei Maslagov, a former inmate of Solovki who had escaped and published his account in England in 1926.¹¹ That Gorky was aware of such issues and in agreement with the government is evidenced by a 1927 letter in which he expresses great anger at England for breaking off diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union allegedly due to the use of prison labor. He states that "the events in London have made me so upset that I felt like going to Russia just so that I could enter into a swearing match with Europe from there," and hints that soon he will "occupy myself with journalism."¹²

However, why would the Soviet government concern itself over a prison memoir published in England? Public opinion abroad could severely restrict Soviet exports, particularly timber, which the government considered as a replacement for grain exports.¹³ In the years following the publication of Maslagov's memoir, reports of the labor camp on Solovki increased, and with them so did the Soviet Union's attempts to

¹⁰Roy R. Robson, *Solovki: The Story of Russia Told Through its Most Remarkable Islands* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 211-214.

¹¹Tolczyk, *See No Evil*, p. 118.

¹²Maksim Gorky, letter to E.P. Peshkova, 9 June 1927, quoted in Andrew Barratt and Barry P. Scherr, *Maksim Gorky: Selected Letters*, 283-284.

¹³Jakobson, *Origins of the Gulag*, 118.

deny the nature of the camp. To date, the 1947 work of David J. Dallin and Boris Nicolaevsky, *Forced Labor in Soviet Russia*, provides the best account of the public relations battle waged throughout 1930 and 1931.¹⁴ Although Dallin and Nicolaevsky considered the actions of numerous humanitarian groups that were concerned for Soviet inmates, such as the Anti-Slavery Society of England and the American Wage Earners' Conference, they found that ultimately certain "private and pecuniary trade interests" determined the outcome of trade relations with the Soviet Union.¹⁵ Coupled with the pressure from shipping interests to maintain open trade relations, the Soviet Union's invitations to foreigners for inspection of the camps helped to undermine the campaign against Soviet exports. Contrary to the memoirs published in England and in France, Premier Vyacheslav Molotov asserted at the Sixth Congress of Soviets on March 8, 1931, Soviet prisoners worked only eight hours per day, received sufficient rations, were paid each month, and that they even moved about freely in the camps. In fact he even referred to the living conditions as "excellent" when compared with the living conditions of "real slavery that exists in capitalist society."¹⁶

It may be that Molotov was inspired by Gorky's description of Solovki, for his description was certainly as colorful as that presented by Gorky in the journal *Our Accomplishments*. According to Gorky's account the prisoners lived in comfortable and spacious barracks "decorated with personal things: private blankets, pillows; on the walls hung photographs and postcards; on window sills there are flowers." Moreover, the

¹⁴David J. Dallin and Boris Nicolaevsky, *Forced Labor in Soviet Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), 217-230.

¹⁵Dallin and Nicolaevsky, *Forced Labor*, 221.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 223.

atmosphere of a prison is completely discarded as “there is no resemblance of a prison but instead it seems that these rooms are inhabited by passengers rescued from a drowned ship.”¹⁷ Neither did he refrain from describing the excellent working conditions of the “healthy lads in unbleached linen shirts and high boots.”¹⁸ Lastly, and particularly important for the further development of *perekovka*, he argued that through work in the camp “socially dangerous people are transformed into socially useful ones, professional criminals into highly qualified workers and conscious revolutionaries.”¹⁹

Gorky’s account of Solovki was not the only attempt to dissemble the true nature of Soviet labor camps. In 1929 Evgenii Cherkasov produced the propaganda film *The Solovki Prison Camp* (Solovetskii Lager). At the time it was filmed the Soviet government encouraged and preferred pseudo-documentary films that depicted life in the Soviet Union, albeit with glorified but simple messages. The Russian word for these films, *neigrovaia*, literally means unplayed, implying that the films were not scripted or acted.²⁰ As in Gorky’s account, the prison depicted by Cherkasov is presented in the best of light. The prisoners, who were shown as physically unhealthy at the beginning of the film, are depicted as considerably fitter by the end, and are shown working, reading, and engaging in musical entertainment and plays. The film also compares the Tsarist prison cells of Solovki with the new larger and lighter Soviet facilities.²¹ However, despite its

¹⁷Maxim Gorky quoted in Tolczyk, *See No Evil*, 137.

¹⁸Maxim Gorky quoted in Tolczyk, *See No Evil*, 138.

¹⁹Maxim Gorky quoted in Tolczyk, *See No Evil*, 143.

²⁰Graham Roberts, *Forward Soviet! History and Non-fiction Film in the USSR* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1999), 2.

²¹*Ibid.*, 109-110.

obvious and politically correct message, it is not clear that this film was ever shown to audiences. Soviet film historian Graham Roberts indicated that he could find no evidence that it was ever shown.²² Furthermore, Russian cinematographer Marina Goldovskaya who used Cherkasov's film in her 1988 documentary *Solovki Power* (Solovestkaia Vlast), stated that her presentation of the film was the first time it had been shown to anyone.

While it is difficult to determine the impact of Gorky's initial account of the Solovki camp, and obviously it is doubtful that Cherkasov's film had any effect whatsoever, the Soviet regime's decision to actively promote the construction of the Belomor Canal and to emphasize prison labor is a completely different matter. Not only was a collective literary work completed, but numerous newspaper accounts bombarded the Soviet public with stories of the great achievements of the Soviet Union and the OGPU.

As Russian historian Mikhail Morukov indicated in his brief study of the White Sea-Baltic Canal, the idea of a canal linking the Baltic and White Seas has existed in Russian imagination since the time of Peter the Great.²³ Although various individuals undertook preliminary surveys and construction plans, the canal was not seriously contemplated until the beginning of 1930 under the auspices of the Council of Labor and Defense of the Soviet Union. After a preliminary investigation the Council announced that the proposed canal would provide such strategic benefits as allowing for the transfer

²²Ibid., note 9, 163.

²³Mikhail Morukov, "The White Sea-Baltic Canal," in *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag*, eds. Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press: 2003), 152.

of navy ships to the northern seas and the economic benefits of the development of Karelia and transportation of goods from the northernmost regions of Russia.²⁴

However, the strategic function of the canal was largely excluded from official announcements regarding the project and provided the impetus for the canal's initial designation as "top secret." Needless to say, once the regime "recognized the true propaganda value of the Canal project" it was publicized with much fanfare.²⁵

The construction of the canal, which commenced in the spring of 1931, coincided with or possibly exacerbated certain internal struggles within the upper echelons of the Soviet regime. The construction of the project was entrusted to the OGPU (Unified State Political Administration - state security) by decree of the Politburo. However, the OGPU was not the only entity which relied upon prison labor, as the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) also used prison labor for their projects, road and railway construction for example. The initial construction plan submitted by the OGPU called for the employment of 276,000 workers but only 180,000 were available, and of those approximately 30,000 were incapable of work due to exhaustion and illness. To correct the shortfall, the OGPU proposed to transfer the needed prisoners from the NKVD camps, which of course was opposed by NKVD officials. Ultimately the matter was settled by Stalin who ordered the dissolution of the Republican NKVD offices, thereby establishing the OGPU as the primary authority of prison labor.²⁶

²⁴Ibid., 157.

²⁵Cynthia Ruder, *Making History for Stalin: The Story of the Belomor Canal* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 36.

²⁶Khlevniuk, *History of the Gulag*, 24-28.

Despite the OGPU's victory over the NVKD, the construction of the canal was not completed as originally designed. It was neither as wide, deep, nor grand as originally conceived, causing Stalin to laconically comment during the opening ceremonies that "it is not very big."²⁷ While the canal stretched 227 km long, quite impressive considering the rudimentary level of equipment used by the prisoners, in certain places it was only 20 to 25 meters deep and only 30 meters wide.²⁸ Nor was the economic potential ever achieved, as in 1940 the total transportation value was only forty-four percent of the original projected capacity.²⁹ However, all was not lost as the navy successfully transferred a number of ships prior to World War II through the canal and use of the canal reduced the travel time between Leningrad and Arkhangelsk from twenty days to only eight.³⁰ Completed only one month later than the original projection date of May 1920³¹ and within its projected budget, the successful construction of the Belomor Canal greatly influenced future Gulag projects.³² But before analyzing the myth of the Belomor Canal as it was depicted in Soviet discourse, it is first necessary to describe so to speak, the truth of the matter.

Who were these remarkable workers that accomplished so great a feat that even Peter the Great himself had not dared attempt it? Just as in Peter's day, the workers were primarily peasants. As a result of the collectivization and dekulakization drives

²⁷Ruder, *Making History for Stalin*, 23.

²⁸Ibid., 12.

²⁹Morukov, "The White Sea-Baltic Canal," 161.

³⁰Ruder, *Making History for Stalin*, 34.

³¹Ibid., 31.

³²Morukov, "The White Sea-Baltic Canal," 162.

beginning in 1929 and overall increased repression, the labor camps of the Soviet Union rapidly expanded. In 1930 alone 330,000 persons classified as kulaks were arrested.³³ The struggle to survive the famine of 1931 increased the number of peasants in the labor camps as they were frequently arrested for “theft of socialist property.”³⁴ In addition to peasants, the OGPU arrested a number of engineers on alleged “wrecking” and sabotage charges. Beginning in February of 1931 they were placed under house arrest and held at the Liublianka Square in Moscow.³⁵

By the time construction commenced in 1931, there were more than 100,000 prisoners at the Belomor labor camp. Sadly, by the end of the year at least two percent of the camp population had died due to poor working conditions, exhaustion, accidents, and illness. Some prisoners worked up to sixteen hours a day, a deadly situation considering that the prisoners survived on only 800 calories per day. The successive famines, resulting from the process of collectivization, were particularly hard on the prisoners as supplies to the OGPU were restricted. The prisoners lacked sufficient mechanized equipment for the task of digging the canal and had to rely heavily upon improvisation, ingenuity, and brute force. The only motivating factor was the option of work credits for fulfillment of OGPU labor norms. Under the work credit system prisoners could receive a reduction in their sentences based upon the successful and timely, by OGPU standards, completion of their assigned tasks.³⁶

³³Khlevniuk, *History of the Gulag*, 9-24.

³⁴Ibid., 55.

³⁵Ruder, *Making History for Stalin*, 20.

³⁶Morukov, “The White Sea-Baltic Canal,” 159-162.

Unsurprisingly, the press coverage of the Belomor Canal and its attendant camps depicted a completely different image. Initially, the articles in the main party newspaper, *Pravda*, focused solely on the role of the OGPU and its remarkable success. On May 25, 1933 the paper reported that the canal would be built in the record time of 18 months and went on at length about L.I. Kogan, the OGPU official in charge of the construction. Kogan is praised for the ingenuity of the construction and the wise use of inexpensive and readily-available wood. Although the article was quite lengthy and included a photograph of the canal, it did not describe the workers.³⁷ However, by June the paper had shifted its focus and began describing the “heroes of zeal, enthusiasm, and consciousness” who had constructed the canal.³⁸

Finally, on June 29, 1933, Soviet citizens were given a truly remarkable description not only of worker life at the camp, but also of educational value of such experiences.³⁹ Indeed, it painted such a picture of camp life that it was reminiscent of Gorky’s 1929 descriptions of Solovki. The article, which again began with praise of the OGPU and statistics of the construction process, discussed the many cultural activities available to canal workers somehow without mentioning the fact that the workers were prisoners. Rather, they were referred to as *udarniki*, meaning shock-workers. According to the reporter, the *udarniki* were able to attend camp plays and orchestras, and certain workers were even creating “new songs of harmony and victory.” The article also retold the story of Mitka, who had come to the camp as a philistine and runaway collective farm

³⁷“Nakanune puska Belomorskovo kanala,” *Pravda* (May 25, 1933), 142, 4.

³⁸“Novyi vodnyi put,” *Pravda* (June 25, 1933), 173, 3.

³⁹“Trudovaia Letopis,” *Pravda* (June 29, 1933), 177, 3.

worker. Through work Mitka had learned the error of his ways and had even become a shock-worker himself, “earning shock-worker rations and comradely friendship.” The article then went on to state that there were “thousands” of stories just like Mitka’s.

Although there were numerous other accounts in Pravda and Izvestia, none could top the narrative produced by Gorky’s Writer’s Brigade. Cynthia Ruder’s 1998 study of the brigade, *Making History for Stalin: The Story of the Belomor Canal*, chronicles the journey of the writers to the Belomor site and their subsequent work *The History of the Construction of the Stalin White Sea-Baltic Canal* (1934), hereinafter *The History*. Ruder’s work, which is based on archival materials, personal interviews, and memoirs, is driven to disprove the claim that the writers brigade was comprised of “hack writer(s) who complied with every state mandate.” On the contrary, Ruder’s work demonstrates that “some of the best and brightest Soviet writers” worked on the Belomor project and actually subscribed to the rhetoric of perekovka.⁴⁰

Ruder argues that the idea for the writers brigade originated with Maxim Gorky at a meeting at his house in late 1932.⁴¹ Gorky, along with other Soviet writers, was joined by Politburo members Viacheslav Molotov, Klim Voroshilov, and none other than Joseph Stalin himself to discuss the role of Soviet writers, and it was at this meeting that Stalin famously concluded that writers were to become the “engineers of human souls.”⁴² The idea to collectively write the account complemented the theme of collectivization that

⁴⁰Ruder, *Making History for Stalin*, 85.

⁴¹Ibid., 42.

⁴²Arlen Viktorovich Blium, “O chem nel’zia pisat’: tsenzurnye tsirkuliary,” *Za kulisami “Ministerstva Pravdy”: Tainaia istoriia sovetskoi tsenzury, 1917-1929*, transl. Donna M. Farina (Saint Petersburg: “Akademicheskii proekt,” 1994), in *Book History* 1.1 (1998): 274.

was present in Soviet society at the time; for the canal was to be constructed by the collective efforts of Soviet citizens, therefore it was only logical that the writing of its history should take a collective form as well. Additionally, the Socialist Realist canon that Gorky and other prominent writers were developing called for new methods and literary forms worthy of Soviet Communism that would rival, if not surpass, the great literature of other world systems.⁴³ Over the course of the following year, 120 writers were chosen to visit the Belomor Canal and to contribute to the writing of its history. Although it is not exactly clear how the final decision was made, it seems most likely that this decision fell to Gorky, the OGPU, and the editorial board for the publishing house *The History of Factories and Plants*, under whose auspices *The History* was to be published. Among the writers chosen for the project were such prominent and popular personages as Alexy Tolstoy, Valentin Kataev, and Alexander Avdeenko.⁴⁴

The writers assembled on August 17, 1933 to begin their two week journey, without Gorky who contrary to *The History* did not travel with the Writers Brigade to the Belomor Canal.⁴⁵ However, the date of departure is noteworthy as the canal was completed in July and the majority of the prisoners had already been dispersed to other projects. Therefore, it is not surprising that the writers did not actually meet with many prisoners but instead relied on OGPU reports and accounts for much of their narrative. While the writers did attend the inmate-staffed camp theater, their limited meetings with prisoners were arranged by OGPU officials and those whom they did meet with were not

⁴³Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, third edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 36.

⁴⁴Ruder, *Making History for Stalin*, 44-46.

⁴⁵Ibid., 46.

political prisoners but common criminals.⁴⁶ Also casting a dubious shadow is the fact that one of the most prominent contributors to the Belomor volume, Sergei Alymov, was incapable of being in the Writers Brigade as he was an inmate at the camp and furthermore the editor of the camp newspaper *Perkovka*.⁴⁷

The History was rushed into print so as to be complete in time for the Seventeenth Party Congress in January, 1934, otherwise designated the “Congress of Victors” to celebrate the achievements of the First Five-Year Plan. Four thousand copies were reserved for the delegates to the congress and provided to them prior to the congress where possible. A public edition was run in March 1934 and sold approximately 80,000 copies, and again in 1935 approximately 30,000 copies were sold. However, following the purges of 1937 *The History* was banned as it explicitly praised the work of Genrikh Yagoda, Semyon Firin, and other prominent OGPU officials who were either imprisoned or executed.⁴⁸ Neither Yagoda nor Firin lived to see the end of 1938.⁴⁹ As the main censorship agency of the Soviet Union, *Glavlit*, expressly forbid the publication of the names of “enemies of the people,” the disappearance of *The History* and the labor camps from the official discourse is not surprising in the least.⁵⁰ There were simply too many such names in the work.

Katerina Clark argued in her seminal study of Socialist Realism that “literature is

⁴⁶Ibid., 49-50.

⁴⁷Ibid., 54.

⁴⁸Ibid., 86-88.

⁴⁹Marc Jansen and Nikita Petrov, *Stalin's Loyal Executioner: People's Commissar Nikolai Ezhov, 1895-1940* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2002), 61-64.

⁵⁰Blium, “O chem nel'zia pisat': tsenzumye tsirkuliary,” 275.

not merely the handmaiden of politics, not even in times of severe repression,”⁵¹ and this argument is certainly true with respect to *The History*. The Writers Brigade presented a very carefully constructed image of Soviet labor camps with their own, very specific aims in mind. But while it is true that this image was crafted under the watchful eye of Maxim Gorky, it should also be remembered that Semyon Firin, Chief of the OGPU, served as an editor. As *The History* itself indicates, many of the stories that the writers related were provided to them by OGPU reports. Additionally, given the strict censorship of the Soviet regime for it to have even appeared in print indicates that the Politburo perceived the volume to be useful in some manner or other. In other words, the publication of such an account “verified the fact that the work was viewed by the authorities as promoting the regime’s own point of view.”⁵² Though literature in this case may not have been the regime’s handmaiden, it certainly was not a hindrance either.

What image was put forth in *The History* and how was it useful to the regime? The Belomor volume presented a similar picture as depicted in the newspaper articles announcing the canal, but obviously with much more detail and idealism. A close analysis of the text reveals at least four broad and interwoven themes: 1. pride in Soviet accomplishments, 2. supremacy of Socialism over capitalism, 3. wisdom and righteousness of the OGPU, 4. reform of criminals and social enemies through labor. As can be expected, the camps are treated as very humane and caring institutions. In fact, they are so humane and caring that there is only mention of two deaths in the entire work,

⁵¹Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 20.

⁵²Tolczyk, *See No Evil*, 10.

which is comprised of some three hundred and forty pages.⁵³ Needless to say, this picture is at odds with the fact that 2,000 prisoners had died by the end of 1931.⁵⁴

Aside from the obvious exaggerations and embellishments, what Soviet accomplishments did *The History* present? As only those blessed with a great imagination can do, the Writers Brigade discovered pride in a situation that others would have found embarrassing. As had been mentioned in the *Pravda* articles, the Belomor Canal was constructed not only without foreign aid and assistance, but also without foreign machinery. More importantly, it was also largely constructed without Soviet machinery. Therefore, the writers focused on the novelty of constructing the flood gates and locks out of native Karelian timber. Under the pens of the Writers Brigade the Soviet Union's technical disadvantage was turned on its head and engineers found great amazement that they were the first to use such methods as "wooden sills and flood gates of locks for deep-sea vessels have never been made by anyone, anywhere in the world, and that science has no formulae for any such construction."⁵⁵ And to all who would patronize their wooden works, after the successful construction of the first lock, an engineer asserts that "wood gates are not inferior to iron ones."⁵⁶ Not only are the wooden gates of equal quality of those iron gates of the West, but "America and Europe

⁵³Maxim Gorky, L. Auerbach, and S.G. Firin, eds. *Belomor: An Account of the Construction of the New Canal Between the White Sea and the Baltic Sea* (New York: Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, 1935); the first of these instances is on p. 274 where the prisoner Tuchkov dies through a mining accident that is without blame. The second instance is mentioned on p. 335 by a woman shock-worker as she is receiving her medal. In her speech she mentions that her father died while working on the canal, but she does not mention how.

⁵⁴Morukov, "The White Sea-Baltic Canal," 159-162.

⁵⁵Gorky, *History*, p. 157

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 158.

gasped and took off its hat” to the workers who built the canal using “rough-hewn pickaxes.”⁵⁷ The engineers even created a new science in the process, that of “Socialist hydrotechnology.”⁵⁸

The Belomor volume also focused on the benefits of the new Socialist mode of life as compared to the disadvantages of life under the tsars or capitalism. Of primary importance was the fact that under the Russian tsars the canal had not been built, but the “Soviet Union succeeded where tsarist Russia had failed.”⁵⁹ According to the authors of Belomor, the idea of the canal had dated back to the sixteenth century and implied that where the tsarist government was denied “eternal glory,” it would be rightfully granted to the Soviet Union.⁶⁰ Also in contrast to construction projects of the tsarist era, where workers were denied the right to enjoy that which they had created, the canal would be available to the workers. Rather than traveling alongside the tsar’s road where it was “ditch after ditch, bump after bump,” the workers would be able to take leisurely sails through the canal to Karelia.⁶¹

The old way of life, be it tsarism or capitalism, is portrayed in *The History* as the reason for criminality among Soviet citizens. As in traditional Marxist thinking, people are conditioned by their social environment, and by implication the Socialist environment of the Soviet Union will not produce criminals. A former criminal even looks forward to

⁵⁷Ibid., 302.

⁵⁸Ibid., 159.

⁵⁹Ibid., 18.

⁶⁰Ibid., 307.

⁶¹Ibid., 235.

the day when the OGPU will announce “there are no more criminals!”⁶² The Belomor volume includes a number of individual accounts that attribute the criminal behavior to capitalism or tsarism. For instance, engineer Budassy’s criminal behavior, he was after all discovered cheating the Soviet state of its timber, is attributed to the former society and the “engineering circles of the capitalist era, in which Budassy lived and worked, must bear the full responsibility for him.”⁶³ Rothenburg, a former thief, learns from an OGPU officer that life had forced him into thievery and that it was no fault of his. However, he does come to understand that under Socialism he has been given another chance and that it would be his fault should he continue thieving.⁶⁴

A further difference between Socialism and capitalism is the nature and goal of the prisons in each system. The reader is led to the conclusion that under Socialism prisons are meant to rehabilitate prisoners and provide them with new modes of life, unlike those in Western, bourgeois countries. The story of Rothenburg, the reformed thief mentioned above, demonstrates the senselessness of British prisons and the ineffectiveness of menial labor. After one year under their system Rothenburg has learned nothing and returns to his life of crime.⁶⁵ Furthermore, under the Soviet system prisoners feel no shame of their time served. At the end of their sentences at Belomor, they are perceived of as heroes who are rewarded with an early release. An engineer who was concerned for what his children would think was thus reassured upon his release.⁶⁶

⁶²Ibid., 332.

⁶³Ibid., 122.

⁶⁴Ibid., 145.

⁶⁵Ibid., 145.

⁶⁶Ibid., 312.

And according to the writers of the *History*, the prisoners “have been set free from guilt, from ‘police records,’ from the prostitutes’ ‘yellow ticket,’ from a bad reputation.”⁶⁷

Directly related to the nature of the Soviet prison system as it is depicted in the Belomor account, is the wisdom and righteousness of the OGPU, a major theme of the narrative. There are a number of chapters dedicated solely to OGPU officers L. Kagan (Kogan), Yakov Rappoport, Dmitri Uspensky, and Naftali Frenkel. As if to further emphasize the competition between the OGPU and NKVD for control of the prisoners, the account includes a chapter entitled “The G.P.U. Men Need the Prisoners.”

Throughout the volume the OGPU officers, or Chekists as they are referred to, appear to primarily be concerned with the physical and mental welfare of the prisoners. Kagan is quoted as stating that “the men and their comforts are every bit as important as the obligatory fulfilment of the production programme set by the State Political Department,”⁶⁸ and Dmitri Uspensky later exhorts his assistant to keep the men clothed and “supplied with clean linen.”⁶⁹ Not only do the authors use the OGPU officers to assert such concern, they also use the words of the prisoners. For instance, Rothenburg relates that thanks to the Chekists he has good clothes and boots and that they are all “properly looked after.”⁷⁰ A female prisoner reassures a newcomer that should she get sick she will be provided with medicine and permitted to rest.⁷¹

However, the OGPU men are presented as more than just fair wardens. The

⁶⁷Ibid., 318.

⁶⁸Ibid., 104.

⁶⁹Ibid., 108.

⁷⁰Ibid., 146.

⁷¹Ibid., 293.

OGPU men are considered exemplars of the new Soviet man. They are beyond reproach in their moral values and quest for social justice. Although they “dressed as officers, they live like monks: you never see them drunk, and they don’t hang around the girls,” or least so attested one prisoner.⁷² But, what else could one expect from the “bodyguard of the proletariat,” as Gorky named them.⁷³ The writers establish the revolutionary pedigree of the OGPU men by describing their various encounters with White Guardists and counter-revolutionaries, numerous stints in prisons, and battle wounds. Accordingly, “they know what the truth is, they know what Socialism is - they have been defending it for the last fourteen years, the true soul of their Party, gallant Bolsheviks.”⁷⁴ They are also presented as forgiving, as demonstrated by Yakov Rappoport’s treatment of the man who denounced him for being a Bolshevik during their school days. Rappoport merely observes the man, now a prisoner, rather than confronting him as he appears to be on the correct path to redemption.⁷⁵ And in their spare time they study trigonometry and mechanics!⁷⁶

Not content to care only for the bodies of their prisoners, the OGPU officers are shown by the writers of *The History* to be concerned for their minds as well. Social clubs were organized to help workers and engineers understand the need for mass work. OGPU officers even personally invited persons to attend such clubs and gatherings.⁷⁷

⁷²Ibid., 315.

⁷³Ibid., 338.

⁷⁴Ibid., 71.

⁷⁵Ibid., 116.

⁷⁶Ibid., 108.

⁷⁷Ibid., 174.

The OGPU organized study circles, reading circles, and correspondence courses for the prisoners so that they do not remain illiterate and so that they could acquire professions rather than return to thievery, banditry, or prostitution.⁷⁸ There are also efforts to prevent those sentenced for common crimes, such as theft, prostitution, or living as kulaks, from “falling under the influence of the counter-revolutionaries, who have been sent here for entirely different things.”⁷⁹ However, counter-revolutionaries are virtually non-existent in *The History* and the reader is never provided with a description of their activities. They remain a mystery.

Through the heroic and successful efforts of the OGPU men, the prisoners are re-forged, the fourth and most prominent theme of the Belomor volume. The re-forging aspect was present in Gorky’s account of Solovki, but in *The History* it is much more prominent. Although the ideology of re-education or re-forging, *perekovka* in Russian, was mentioned by Dzerzhinsky in 1919 and further developed by Gorky, the Belomor volume declares that “Stalin was the initiator of the G.P.U. labour communes and the policy of reform through labour.”⁸⁰ Therefore, it is to Stalin that the reformed thieves and prostitutes should turn in gratitude. In return for their reformed lives the re-forged men and women are called upon by the OGPU to “help us to care for and re-educate the counter-revolutionaries.”⁸¹ However, again it must be mentioned that the narrators of

⁷⁸Ibid., 271.

⁷⁹Ibid., 53.

⁸⁰Ibid., 20.

⁸¹Ibid., 53.

Belomor do not discuss in detail or mention who is a counter-revolutionary and how they are to be discovered.

There are numerous stories of re-forging throughout *The History*. Some are great, such as the re-forging of Naftali Frenkel, the former criminal who rose through the ranks to become an OGPU officer in charge of construction at the Belomor camp.⁸² Others are less spectacular, such as the account of former thief Zinaida Yurtzeva, who eventually becomes a shock-worker, exceeding the expected output of work by fifty percent.⁸³ Not only common, uneducated prisoners were reformed, but also engineers such as Maslov, who through the design of unprecedented wooden locks and gates experienced a “reconstruction of his conscience.”⁸⁴ However, despite the previous social standing of the person that is re-forged or their level of education, they all come to understand and accept the new regime and the importance of the construction. In what now seems a tired cliché, those that were re-forged not only constructed a canal, but also Socialism in the Soviet Union. The writers do not offer a definite reason for each reformation, as their concept of criminality is that it is a social illness. In this reasoning, once an individual is placed in a healthy social environment, all criminality will cease. Therefore, the reader is provided with the poignant example of engineer Zubrik who although a son of proletarians, had rejected this most superior class to attain a place in bourgeois society. Through working in the Socialist environment at the camps, provided for by the OGPU, Zubrik then underwent a re-molding and “cast aside all his former views, illusions, and

⁸²Ibid., 230.

⁸³Ibid., 232.

⁸⁴Ibid., 158.

prejudices - all that with which the bourgeoisie had once poisoned this young proletarian, sprung from the very heart of an oppressed class.”⁸⁵

How could the aforementioned four themes be useful to the Soviet regime and why would its members wish to promote such a work? The praise of Soviet accomplishments, although in the name of Socialism, strikes the reader as patriotism or nationalism. The writers do not present the construction of the canal as a model for the international proletariat or as a means to inspire the international proletariat, but rather it is a demonstration that “our country is magnanimous, beautiful, and strong, that the people are strong and sane, that it can and should accomplish wonderful things.”⁸⁶ Statements such as this are certainly at odds with the views on national chauvinism espoused by Lenin in the early 1920s, but they are in perfect accord with Stalin’s new focus on “Socialism in one country.”⁸⁷ Additionally, the Belomor volume served to discount stories in the international press of the horrors of Soviet labor camps. In an era of “Socialism in one country” and of normalized relations with other nations, public opinion was important. It is quite telling that *The History* was translated into English by Soviet authorities and distributed to England and the United States.

Dariusz Tolczyk stated that the glorification of the labor camp, as presented in *The History*, was an “attempt to verify in practical terms the totalitarian claim to total control over the human mind.”⁸⁸ Of course, Tolczyk’s view of the Soviet Union is that

⁸⁵Ibid., 165.

⁸⁶Ibid., 71.

⁸⁷Nicholas Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, sixth edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 495.

⁸⁸Tolczyk, *See No Evil*, 10.

the ideas presented by the writers of *The History* came from the top down, as it were, and not from any other source. In his opinion, it appears that literature is the “handmaiden of politics,” to once again use Clark’s phrase. On the contrary, a much simpler answer is quite plausible in this instance. Might the answer of why the Soviet regime would wish to glorify labor camps be to inspire the confidence and pride of its citizens, and to use whatever tools were at hand? The canal was presented as part of Stalin’s First Five-Year Plan, which was touted as successful. Although percentages were exaggerated, it did result in a significant increase in industrial output and quality. Unfortunately, the collectivization of the countryside resulted in resistance, famine, and untold numbers of peasants executed or arrested.⁸⁹ By praising Soviet methods and Soviet accomplishments, the population would begin to see that despite the problems in the countryside, the regime was leading them in the right direction and that conditions would improve. Furthermore, from the regime’s view the chances of success for the Second Five-Year Plan could only increase with a cooperative populace.

The focus on the OGPU and their re-forging methods also served the pragmatic purpose of promoting cooperation among the population. As is well known, the Soviet regime encouraged its citizens to denounce not only one another, but also family members, and Soviet officials. In 1932 the young Pioneer Pavel Morozov was murdered for the denunciation of his father, or at least that is what the Soviet press reported. According to the Soviet accounts, Pavel denounced his father for assisting kulaks and therefore opposing the Communist Party. As a consequence of Pavel’s bravery he was

⁸⁹Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, 497.

immortalized in statues throughout the Soviet Union and praised as a hero for his act.⁹⁰

Sheila Fitzpatrick has noted however that the denunciation of parents by their children was in fact very rare and that the archives simply do not reveal this type of activity.

What is more common is the denunciation of unrelated individuals on the basis of their class. For instance, kulaks and former managers were often targeted in denunciation letters.⁹¹

By presenting the labor camp and OGPU officers in such a just and useful manner, *The History* could only encourage those who were reluctant to inform on others. Potential informers were reassured by the account that those who were arrested would be treated fairly. All that would be expected was that they work for the common good of the Soviet Union. According to the authors, socially alienated kulaks would be reformed and learn useful trades, thereby contributing to the growth and prosperity of society. Likewise, for those that had strictly personal motives for denunciation, such as revenge or profit motives, the account of Belomor assured that denunciation would not mean the total destruction of the arrested individual. The practice of denunciation was a powerful tool, not only for the state to monitor its population, but also for individuals seeking state action on their behalf. It is, as Jan Gross has pointed out, the “privatization of the public realm,” and the “real power of the totalitarian state.”⁹²

⁹⁰Yuri Druzhnikov, *Informer 001: The Myth of Pavlik Morozov* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 22-25.

⁹¹Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Signals from Below: Soviet Letters of Denunciation of the 1930s,” in Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, eds. *Accusatory Practices: Denunciation in Modern European History, 1789-1989* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 103.

⁹²Jan T. Gross, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 117-120.

As mentioned previously in this study, the Gulag as a literary topic was forbidden following the Great Purges of 1937-1938. The mass arrests of that time were in direct opposition to the utopian ideas put forth by the authors. Though a new society had been constructed crime had not ceased as promised. In fact, if the charges brought forth in the purges were to be believed, crime had instead increased. The presence of the camps was further shrouded in secrecy by laws that required individuals to remain in exile for up to twenty-five years following the completion of their sentences and release from labor camps. After the purges the emphasis on reform through labor and the description of prisoners as shock-workers was no longer accepted in any of the prison labor institutions.⁹³

⁹³David Norlander, "Magadan and the Economic History of Dalstroi in the 1930s," in *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag*, eds. Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2003), 124.

CHAPTER 3 KHRUSHCHEV'S THAW: LABOR CAMPS AND DE-STALINIZATION

During Khrushchev's "thaw," the labor camps were again brought to the forefront of official discourse through the publication of numerous camp stories, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962) being the most prominent and best remembered. As with the accounts of the 1930s the government, or specifically certain individuals in the government, sought to use these accounts for their own purposes. Although it is doubtful that the intellectuals and government actors involved in the official discourse at this time were in agreement over the meaning and origins of the Gulag, it must be stressed that the image of the camps that emerged at this time was the product of their interaction. The following will address two camp accounts published during the thaw, each representing one end of the permissible spectrum, in order to determine how and why the government sought to make use such accounts. Also included in the analysis are a number of *samizdat* accounts, which were published outside of the official realm and therefore highlight the variance of intellectual opinion regarding Soviet labor camps. Such accounts additionally serve to demonstrate what the regime found acceptable and provide a further indication of why certain depictions were deemed appropriate and others were not.

The labor camp did not make another appearance in the official discourse again until November 6, 1962 when Aleksei Adjupei, Nikita Khrushchev's son-in-law and

editor of *Izvestia*, published Georgy Shelest's Kolyma short story, "A Nugget."¹ Later that month *Novyi Mir*, the premier liberal "thick journal" of the time, published Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, hereinafter *One Day*.² Solzhenitsyn later criticized Aleksandr Tvardovsky, the editor of *Novyi Mir*, for not publishing a chapter from his novel *First Circle* during the high-tide of anti-Stalinism. In Solzhenitsyn's opinion, the publication of his chapter on Stalin would have "stripped him down much more thoroughly," and "made it much more difficult to touch him up again in glowing colors." In short, "literature could have accelerated history."³ Obviously Solzhenitsyn believes himself important in this particular episode, but would the publication of a piece lambasting Stalin have been possible and would it have made such a great difference? A survey of government actions during Khrushchev's tenure indicate a resounding no.

Shortly after Stalin's death, Minister of Interior Lavrenty Beria drafted an amnesty for the release of all prisoners with sentences of up to five years. The decree was soon published in *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, and approximately 1.5 million prisoners were released.⁴ In 1955 the Kremlin began to investigate the cases of those arrested for anti-Soviet activities, the so-called 'politicals,' and by the end of the year thousands had

¹Tolczyk, *See No Evil*, 188.

²Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Odin dne Ivana Denisovicha," *Novyi Mir*, Nov. 1962.

³Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Oak and the Calf: Sketches of Literary Life in the Soviet Union*, transl. Harry Willetts (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1979), 32.

⁴Aleksei Tikhonov, "The End of the Gulag," in *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag*, eds. Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, CA, 2003), 67.

returned home.⁵ In Anna Akhmatova's apt phrase, the "two Russias looked each other in the eye: the one that sent people to the camps and the one that was sent away. Although the release of the prisoners was certainly a promising sign for the liberalization or reform of the Soviet regime, the future was anything but certain.

Stalin's death in 1953 resulted in a power struggle among top party officials, and much to his surprise, Lavrenty Beria was the first victim. In fact, Nikita Khrushchev, Viacheslav Molotov, Georgy Malenkov, and other central committee members used Beria as a "scapegoat..... for the worst of Stalinism while leaving Stalin's reputation intact and cleansing their own hands in the bargain."⁶ Beria was subsequently executed on December 24, 1953 following a closed and predetermined trial. Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" was not meant merely to denounce Stalin, but also to taint his fellow committee members with the crimes of Stalinism and at the same time preserve his own image. By focusing on the repression of the Communist Party member of the 1934 Congress, he ever-so-slightly indicated Molotov and Kaganovich in Stalin's crimes.⁷ Khrushchev continued the de-Stalinization campaign with the decree of June 1956 "On Overcoming the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences," which announced the official party position and authorized public criticism of the crimes of Stalinism.⁸ Khrushchev also encouraged the creation and revival of numerous 'thick journals,' which served as a

⁵William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2003), 275.

⁶Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 257.

⁷Nikita S. Khrushchev, "Secret Speech Delivered by the First Party Secretary at the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union," February 25, 1956, Moscow, full text available at Modern History Sourcebook, Fordham University, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1956khrushchev-secret1.html>

⁸Tolczyk, *See No Evil*, 185.

forum for the discussion of Stalinism. During the period of 1955-1957, twenty-seven such journals were created or revived.⁹

However, Khrushchev and his Kremlin cohorts undertook numerous actions that indicated the repressive policies of Stalinism were not at an end but simply a new phase. The brutal oppression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was certainly a stunning example of the regime's unchanging nature. Throughout 1957 hundreds of protestors were arrested and sentenced to terms of up to seven years for counterrevolutionary crimes. Liberalization appeared to be a long way off on the cultural front as well. In a meeting with the Writers Union in May of that same year, Khrushchev attacked various works and insulted numerous writers. He followed the debacle at the Writers Union with another, even more disastrous encounter at his dacha, originally intended to soothe the tensions between the intelligentsia and the government.¹⁰

Following the coup attempt of 1957, Khrushchev's policies continued to waver between Stalinism and anti-Stalinism. According to Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, who was himself lambasted by Khrushchev at a meeting with the Writers Union, "Khrushchev's tragic flaw was that he was both a Stalinist and an anti-Stalinist."¹¹ This 'flaw' was clearly visible in his policies throughout his term as First Party Secretary. In 1958 he encouraged the attack on Boris Pasternak following the author's Nobel prize award for *Doctor Zhivago*.¹² But at the Twenty-Second Congress in October 1961 he

⁹Yitzhak Brudny, *Reinventing Russia: Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998.), 31.

¹⁰Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 303-309.

¹¹Yevgeny Yevtushenko, "Introduction," Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, transl. Ralph Parker (Signet Classic: New York, 1998), x.

¹²Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 385.

again attacked Stalin and called for the removal of his body from Lenin's mausoleum on Red Square. And in another about-face, he authorized the use of force in June of 1962 on protesters in Novocherkassk who were protesting price increases and wage decreases.¹³ And yet it was this same Khrushchev who was undoubtedly instrumental in the publication of the most famous Soviet labor camp story to date, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

Solzhenitsyn recounted the publication of *One Day* in his 'sketch' *The Oak and the Calf*, previously cited in this essay. However, his account implies that Aleksandr Tvardovsky merely needed to place a telephone call to Khrushchev to gain approval. As demonstrated in the previous discussion, Khrushchev's commitment to liberal policies was in no way certain. Furthermore, Tvardovsky was well aware that the novel would not pass muster with *Glavlit*, which explicitly prohibited the subject of 'places of detention' in print.¹⁴ At the Twenty-Second Party Congress in October 1961, he had given an impassioned speech calling for greater quality and truth in literature, and denouncing the "varnishing" effect of Socialist Realism. He also attacked the stock hero of Socialist Realism, "who lacks one vital quality: the charm of a human being."¹⁵ As can be expected from such exhortations, Tvardovsky was quite taken with Solzhenitsyn's novella and took great care in its publication.

¹³Ibid., 514-520.

¹⁴Vladimir Lakshin, "Solzhenitsyn, Tvardovsky, and Novy Mir," in *Solzhenitsyn, Tvardovsky, and Novy Mir*, eds. and transl. Michael Glenny (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1980), 4.

¹⁵Aleksandr Tvardovsky quoted in Peter Rudy, "The Soviet Russian Literary Scene in 1961 – A Mild Permafrost Thaw," *The Modern Language Journal* 46 (Oct., 1962): 248.

According to Vladimir Lakshin, who was a literary critic and member of the editorial board at *Novyi Mir* in the 1960s, the entire editorial board unanimously agreed that Solzhenitsyn's work should be published. As it was understood that *Glavlit* would never approve such a story, Tvardovsky decided to appeal to Nikita Khrushchev, through his well-known liberal aide Vladimir Lebedev.¹⁶ To gain support for the novella Tvardovsky sent copies to certain influential members of the literary intelligentsia, such as Ily'a Ehrenburg, Kornei Chukovsky, and Venhamen Kaverin, and requested that they write letters in praise of the work. Tvardovsky then sent the letters along with the novella to Lebedev who read portions of the novel to Khrushchev sometime in September 1962.¹⁷ Apparently Khrushchev was "smitten" with the simple peasant hero of the novella and called the Presidium together twice in October to discuss the work. Ultimately the Presidium consented and Khrushchev personally contacted Tvardovsky to inform him of the magnanimous decision.¹⁸

As with *The History*, publication of Solzhenitsyn's novella and other works of the time served the Soviet regime in some fashion. Although his work was considerably different from other writings, such as Georgy Shelest's *Kolyma Notes*, Yuri Pilyar's *People Remain People*, or Boris Dyakov's *The Story of What I Lived Through*, they were all stories of the labor camp and they were all published within the years of 1962-1964.¹⁹

¹⁶Lakshin, "Solzhenitsyn, Tvardovsky, and Novy Mir," 4.

¹⁷Mary Chaffin, "Alexander Tvardovsky: A Biographical Study," in *Solzhenitsyn, Tvardovsky, and Novy Mir*, 106.

¹⁸Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 527.

¹⁹Tolczyk, *See No Evil*, 189.

The question is then what made these so very different works acceptable and appealing to the Soviet regime? Additionally, how is their presentation of the Gulag different or similar to that presented in the earlier camp works?

From a post-*Gulag Archipelago* stance it might be difficult to imagine that any of Solzhenitsyn's works were ever determined appropriate for Communist consumption. But in 1962 he was virtually unknown until the publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Furthermore, despite Solzhenitsyn's later criticisms of the Soviet Union he was thoroughly disappointed in 1964 when he did not receive the Lenin Prize for Literature.²⁰ It is also worth noting that his novella was not considered objectionable by Nikita Khrushchev or Aleksandr Tvardovsky, who in addition to being the editor of *Novyi Mir* was also a Communist and member of the Central Committee.²¹ The beauty of Solzhenitsyn's story lies in its very ambiguity; it can be interpreted as a condemnation of the labor camps, but it can also appear to affirm certain communist values. Certainly the hero of the novel, peasant-soldier Ivan Denisovich Shukhov, must have appealed to Khrushchev and Tvardovsky who were each of peasant origins themselves. As a peasant, Ivan Denisovich behaves in a virtuous and honorable manner, yet manages to survive under harsh conditions. He considers his squad companions his "brothers," and even though he has spent eight years in the camp he is not wasteful as "nothing must be wasted without good reason."²² Additionally, Shukhov has never taken nor given a bribe

²⁰Michael Scammell, *Solzhenitsyn: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984), 496.

²¹Chaffin, "Aleksandr Tvardovsky," 105.

²²Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, transl. Ralph Parker (New York: Signet Classic, 1998), 85-88.

because “easy money weighs light in the hand and doesn’t give you the feeling that you’ve earned it.”²³ Ivan Denisovich is also quick to sacrifice his needs for those of his family and admonishes his wife not to send parcels of food since it would only deprive his children.²⁴ Truly, Shukhov is a character to inspire the nation with his peasant wisdom!

Solzhenitsyn’s hero is an extremely hard worker, another virtue that would have been well-received in communist circles. In fact, he is such a hard worker that in the novel it appears the only time that he is completely happy is when he is working. Not only is he the lead worker of his squad, but he refuses to leave the wall he is constructing after the alarm has been sounded to return to the camp. He “felt the cold no longer.....nothing else mattered,” only his wall and the mortar. A fellow worker even challenges him at one point, he is after all the lead worker, to “see who’s working hardest.”²⁵

Solzhenitsyn mentions communism only once in his novella and it is through the protestations of Captain Buinovsky that the subject is briefly broached. Infuriated that the prisoners are being strip searched in the cold, Buinovsky yells at the guards that they are “not behaving like Soviet people, you’re not behaving like communists.”²⁶ Of course, Buinovsky’s implication is that good communists would not degrade the prisoners or put them at risk in such a manner. However, Shukhov knows better and understands that

²³Solzhenitsyn, *One Day*, 35.

²⁴Ibid., 107.

²⁵Ibid., 74-79.

²⁶Ibid., 28.

they are at the guards' mercy. Nevertheless, there are various moments throughout the novella that could appear to promote socialism or communism, without explicitly mentioning the terms. The previously mentioned competition between Shukhov and his fellow prisoner to see who was worker harder is reminiscent of the socialist competition stories of the Belomor Canal. At one point Shukhov's squad and their guards together raced another column back to camp. The prisoners viewed the escort "now as a friend rather than the foe."²⁷ Again, this incident would seem to confirm the earlier view of camp guards and their relations with the prisoners.

As with communism, Stalin too receives scant mention in *One Day*. He is referred to as "Old Whiskers" by a prisoner who is discussing his chances of release with another. Unsurprising they decide that the chances of Stalin taking pity are decidedly slim.²⁸ However, more importantly Solzhenitsyn strips the veneer of the labor camp myth first propagated under Stalin. In Shukhov's world there is no *perekovka*, no development of class consciousness or learning through work. Although there is a transformation, it is not Shukhov but the communist Buinovksy who is transformed. Contrary to the images of Belomor, Buinovksy's experience did not reaffirm his faith or belief in communism, but instead transformed him "from an eager, confident naval officer with a ringing voice into an inert, though wary, zek."²⁹ Gone as well are the high ideals and morals presented in the early thirties, and in their place food and cigarettes become

²⁷Ibid., 100.

²⁸Ibid., 122.

²⁹Ibid., 65.

the ruling force of a zek's life. Freedom is no longer important when compared to a bowl of cabbage soup which was "dearer than life itself, past, present, and future."³⁰

The life that Solzhenitsyn presents is not filled with socialist competitions, awards, or gleeful shockworkers, but wary zeks who must somehow "prove that work which hadn't been done had been done" so that they could receive a decent amount of food, which the camp authorities would cheat them of anyways.³¹ It is a world filled with persons who are only given a chance to bathe every ten days, who are only allowed one pair of shoes at a time, and in Shukhov's case who are only allowed two letters from home per year. The guards who inhabit Shukhov's world are in some ways no better off as they receive minimal rations as well. They are held responsible if a prisoner escapes and as Shukhov states, if you are a guard and "there was one head short when they got past the barbed wire, you had to replace it with your own."³² In other instances however, the guards are the worst of the system as it is they who place people in solitary confinement or beat the prisoners at will. Nor are the guards exemplars of socialist behavior, for they too steal from the construction site in an effort to supplement their meager income.

Solzhenitsyn's account also brings to light the injustices suffered by the returning POWs. For instance, Ivan Denisovich volunteered for the front twice during World War II, and yet after escape from German captivity he is sentenced as a German spy, a traitor to his homeland. Shukhov is, in effect, a "prison-made" spy forced to confess for fear of

³⁰Ibid., 105

³¹Ibid., 49.

³²Ibid., 94.

execution. However, compared to his companions who were shot by their own men upon return, Shukhov considers himself lucky.³³ Throughout the account Solzhenitsyn makes allusions to those newcomers, “just in from the front,” who undoubtedly comprised a significant portion of the camp population. There is also no guarantee of release once an inmate has served his time. Shukhov mentions those prisoners who were to be released during the war but were somehow held for another five years “pending special instructions.”³⁴ Even if a prisoner is released it is unlikely that he or she will ever be permitted to return home. As for Ivan Denisovich, he didn’t know whether to wish for freedom or not because freedom meant home to him, and he would surely be exiled upon his release.³⁵

Solzhenitsyn’s novella is unique compared with the other camp accounts released during Khrushchev’s “thaw.” His story is not told from a communist point of view, nor does it overtly espouse communist or socialist ideology, although it was interpreted by many in exactly such a fashion. Georgy Shelest’s “The Nugget,” which appeared mere days before *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, is a story of communist affirmation and is typical of published labor camp stories of the early 1960s. Eventually Shelest’s complete cycle, *Kolymskie Zapisi*, or *Kolyma Notes*, was printed in the journal *Znamia*.³⁶ Zhores Medvedev, who traveled in the same intellectual circles as Tvardovsky, noted that “The Nugget” was originally submitted to Tvardovsky at *Novyi Mir*, but that he rejected

³³Ibid., 55.

³⁴Ibid., 54.

³⁵Ibid., 136.

³⁶Georgy Shelest, “Kolymskie Zapisi,” *Znamia*, 9 (1964), 164-180.

it because “the writing was bad” and it “did not ring true.”³⁷ And indeed while the world described by Shelest is as harsh and destructive as Solzhenitsyn’s, the heroes who inhabit Shelest’s story never question their beliefs, but always adhere to their communist principles. The camp life is forever in the background and serves only to demonstrate the virtue of his characters.

In Shelest’s first story, “The Nugget,” the prisoners’ communist faith is tested when they find a rather large nugget of gold, hence the title. The prisoners, all self-professed communists of course, discuss their options and how they could improve their lives by selling the nugget instead of turning it in to their work leader. For instance, they could purchase tea, extra rations, and even tobacco. However Dushenov, a former Red Army general, gives an impassioned speech stating that they should hand over the nugget because they are communists. Quoting Lenin he argues that they should “consider the facts of the situation,” and the fact is that “there is a war.” And although “someone with a nasty disposition had charged them and hidden them away to mine gold,” their job as communists was to support the war effort. In Dushenov’s words, “we are communists.....this is our life.” At the end of the day, in true form, Dushenov thanks his fellow communist prisoners for their “working days and assistance to the Soviet people.”³⁸

Communist ideals are further advanced in “The Meeting,” in the form of Aleksei Ivanovich Zaborskii, an intellectual and former party official. When the camp commander learns who Aleksei is, he invites Aleksei to his office and asks if there is

³⁷Zhores A. Medvedev, *Ten Years After Ivan Denisovich*, transl. Hilary Sternberg (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 14.

³⁸Shelest, “Samarodok,” in *Kolymskie Zapisci, Znamia*, 167.

anything that he would like. Aleksei humbly asks only for the six volume set of Lenin's writings. The camp commander is so impressed that he graciously provides the volumes to Aleksei and also gives him a good bit of tobacco. Shelest writes that Aleksei Ivanovich was a great man of purpose and a legend in the camp, for he had been to the office of the commander and returned. To further amazement, each night after a full day of work, Aleksei diligently reads the works of Lenin.³⁹ As is typical of other stories in Shelest's cycle, Aleksei and his fellow communists refuse to address each other by any other title than *tovarish*, or comrade, which was strictly forbidden in labor camps. In another story, "The Novice," the hero who is aptly named Vladlen,⁴⁰ laments that he can no longer read the works of Lenin, nor gaze upon the portrait of his namesake that hung in his library.⁴¹ Leaving no stone unturned, Shelest even includes a communist named Nikita in the work brigade that Vladlen is assigned to.

Unlike Solzhenitsyn's work which mentions Stalin only once, in Shelest's work he is straightforwardly blamed for their imprisonment. It is because of Stalin that the communists in the camp are not fighting at the front and it is because of Stalin that Aleksei Ivanovich no longer has a position in the Party. Hinting at the immorality of Stalin's acts, the narrator declares that "Aleksei could never become accustomed to Stalin," and that "Stalin carried out his own policies and Aleksei Ivanovich - his own."⁴²

³⁹Shelest, "Vctrecha," *Kolymskie Zapici, Znamia*, 170-171.

⁴⁰A combination of Vladimir and Lenin.

⁴¹Shelest, "Novichki," *Kolymskie Zapici, Znamia*, 178-179.

⁴²Shelest, "Vctrecha," *Kolymskie Zapici, Znamia*, 171.

In short, Stalin's name is constantly associated with repression, while Lenin is revered as the wise and knowing leader.

A number of other camp survivors were also motivated or inspired to submit their stories for publication during Khrushchev's Thaw, although their works were fated to appear only in *samizdat* for the time being. Varlam Shalamov began working on *Kolyma Tales* following his release from prison in 1956, and it is likely that this collection of short stories was submitted to *Novyi Mir* sometime in 1962.⁴³ However, it was denied publication as were works submitted by Vasily Grossman and Eugenia Ginzburg. Grossman's account so upset the authorities that his apartment was searched and not only were all copies of the offensive novella, *Forever Flowing*, confiscated, but the KGB also took his carbon paper and typewriter.⁴⁴ Grossman understood that his story would not be published during his lifetime and therefore continued to expand the novella, the original manuscript of which was a mere seventy-eight pages, until upon his death he had written over two hundred pages.⁴⁵ In Eugenia Ginzburg's case it seems that even though the journals *Yunost* and *Novyi Mir* each refused to publish her story, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, a member of one staff or the other felt that her account should be made available to readers as it "suddenly appeared in *samizdat*." She began to receive not only

⁴³Michael Scammell, *Solzhenitsyn: A Biography*, 441.

⁴⁴Riitta H. Pittman, "Perestroika and Soviet Cultural Politics: The Case of the Major Literary Journals," *Soviet Studies* 42 (Jan., 1990): 121.

⁴⁵John Garrard, "The Original Manuscript of *Forever Flowing*: Grossman's Autopsy of the New Soviet Man," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 23 (Summer, 1994): 273-275.

letters and books from well-respected authors such as Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Ily'a Ehrenburg, but also from former inmates who had read her book.⁴⁶

The works of Shalamov, Grossman, and Ginzburg were undoubtedly considered inappropriate for a number of reasons, but the primary difference between their works and those of Solzhenitsyn or Shelest is that the camp life does not reaffirm the values of its inhabitants. The camps of the unpublished writers do not present an experience that can be effectively overcome, nor do they present inmates that will be as useful to society as they were before their imprisonment. In contrast to Solzhenitsyn or Shelest, who each present inmates that work together in order to achieve greater rations or other ends, Shalamov asserts that in the camps “they immediately learned not to defend or support each other.”⁴⁷ Both Shalamov and Grossman highlight the degradation of morals and values by discussing the various, and invariably violent, homosexual relationships that develop among the women and men when separated from members of the opposite sex for long periods of time.⁴⁸ Ginzburg thoroughly destroys the image of the honorable Communist in various passages, describing the “patronizing” tone that Communists take with other prisoners and their unfounded hostility and suspicion towards non-Communists.⁴⁹

⁴⁶Eugenia Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, transl. Ian Boland (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 420.

⁴⁷Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, transl. John Glad (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 242.

⁴⁸Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, 160; Vasily Grossman, *Forever Flowing*, transl. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1970), 117, 129.

⁴⁹Eugenia Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, transl Paul Stevenson and Max Hayward (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1967), 115, 154.

Particularly objectionable in the works of Ginzburg and Grossman, are the issues of blame and responsibility. Whereas Khrushchev and other like-minded individuals found Stalin solely responsible for the transgressions against the Soviet population, and conversely praised the Communist Party for exposing the heinous crimes, Ginzburg and Grossman pressed deeper into the matter. Ginzburg mentions Stalin and his responsibility, but she does not dwell on the matter and instead focuses on the “tortures which *human beings* inflict on one another.”⁵⁰ As a communist she feels “burning shame” and wonders when she would “stop feeling ashamed and responsible for all this?”⁵¹ Grossman’s protagonist, Ivan Grigoryevich, not only questions his own responsibility in the terror and imprisonment of millions of citizens but also that of the “patron saint and martyr” of the Party, Vladimir Lenin.⁵² When pondering the history of the Soviet Union, Ivan Grigoryevich no longer saw Stalin as responsible but instead thought that “all the cruelty inflicted upon the nation also lay - tragically - on Lenin’s shoulders.”⁵³ Obviously such an account was completely at odds with Khrushchev’s campaign to return the nation to the path of Lenin.

In contrast to the *samizdat* writings mentioned above, neither Shelest’s nor Solzhenitsyn’s account overtly suggested a reassessment of Communism or Soviet society in general in the manner of the *samizdat* writers. Rather, they could be interpreted as direct attacks on Stalinism and were therefore useful to Khrushchev and other party

⁵⁰Ibid., 113.

⁵¹Ibid., 181-182.

⁵²Garrard, “The Original Manuscript of Forever Flowing,” 272.

⁵³Grossman, *Forever Flowing*, 195.

officials who sought only to reform certain policies and not to question the entire system of government. As the crimes and injustices described in each account took place during Stalin's rule they could be blamed, if one wished, directly on Stalin. For Khrushchev it seems that the anti-Stalinist rhetoric was a matter of practical politics. By encouraging and permitting the publication of such stories, he presented himself in opposition to Stalin, his methods, and his supposed supporters. In this sense he repented, ever so subtly, in order to gain public support for his various programs, such as the Virgin Lands scheme, whereby uncultivated land in the East would be used for agricultural production. Faced with protests and strikes resulting from the June price increases, Khrushchev's popularity was on the wane in 1962. Therefore the easing of censorship restrictions later that year may have been an attempt on his part to improve his image and relations with not only the masses, but also with the intelligentsia. By allowing the development of camp literature, Khrushchev was able to draw in the intelligentsia, if only for brief periods, and gain their support. To borrow Ken Jowitt's term, Khrushchev was practicing the "politics of inclusion."⁵⁴

However, the role of intellectuals should not be overlooked as it was not just Khrushchev who took aim at Stalinism. The image of the gulag in the early 1960s may have been useful to Khrushchev and thus he encouraged it, but it was created by an ideologically diverse intelligentsia, meant to serve their purposes as well. Solzhenitsyn's work drew attention to the plight of the peasantry, former POWs, and seemingly average people who were unjustly accused and imprisoned. Shelest on the other hand, and completely in line with Khrushchev's 'secret speech,' presented wrongfully imprisoned

⁵⁴Ken Jowitt quoted in Brudny, *Reinventing Russia*, 15.

communists who had somehow remained true to their ideals. The characters, and by extension the actual prisoners, were not enemies of the people, but enemies of Stalin. Furthermore, each account, through the presentation of positive values, demonstrated that the intelligentsia could be trusted to assist the regime in guiding the public. Shukhov did not appear destroyed by the camps and had managed to maintain his natural values, thereby assuring readers that the camps had not produced thousands of common criminals. The same could be said for Shelest's heroes as well.

Despite Khrushchev's attempts, his politicking was unsuccessful and he was removed from office in October 1964. Although he painted his fellow Politburo members as Stalinists, he was not removed simply because they were committed Stalinists and therefore opposed his policies. Rather it was the policies themselves, exacerbated by the Cuban Missile Crisis, that led to his downfall. In a revealing quotation from Zhores Medvedev, Khrushchev's downfall resulted from the use of:

his popularity in traditional fashion to strengthen his personal power. He was removed by a collective initiative, out of which there grew a truly collective leadership in the country. For the country as a whole this was a very positive phenomenon, because it promoted more cautious and considered solutions to important political and economic problems. It meant that the Minister of Agriculture, for example, was given more opportunity to take independent decisions without fearing that he would be forced, for instance, to provide for the cultivation of maize in the Leningrad and northern, Archangel, regions, while the Minister of Foreign Affairs was better able to work towards establishing international equilibrium now that he no longer had to worry lest his Head of State should suddenly arrive at the United Nations, take off his shoe and start banging it on his desk in front of the General Assembly.⁵⁵

Following Khrushchev's ouster, Leonid Brezhnev became First Party Secretary on October 14, 1964. Although some historians have argued that Brezhnev did not initially end the limited thaw that had begun under Khrushchev, repressions began

⁵⁵Medvedev, *Ten Years After*, 57.

relatively early and well before the Prague Spring of 1968.⁵⁶ For instance, the poet Joseph Brodsky was tried and sentenced in 1964 for ‘parasitism,’ and in 1965 the writers Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel were arrested for the publication of certain works that were considered harmful under Article 70 of the Criminal Code. Notably, Sinyavsky criticized Socialist Realism and Daniel published a short story implying the responsibility of society for the various purges and arrests carried out under Stalin. They were later tried in 1966 and their works were judged to be “agitation or propaganda carried out with the purpose of subverting or weakening the Soviet regime.”⁵⁷ They each received seven year sentences in hard labor facilities, although reportedly such facilities were officially closed in 1959 for not fulfilling their primary function, “the rehabilitation of prisoners by means of labor.”⁵⁸ Additionally, *Glavlit* and the Writers Union became more active under Brezhnev. Beginning in 1966 editors of journals and newspapers were advised that they would no longer be able to publish materials that addressed labor camps or crimes committed under Stalin.⁵⁹ Authors who had previously addressed the issue of Stalinism and gained approval for publication were forbidden to publish further on the subject and

⁵⁶See Mark Sandle, “A Triumph of Ideological Hairdressing? Intellectual Life in the Brezhnev Era Reconsidered,” in Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle, eds., *Brezhnev Reconsidered* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2002), p. 143, Sandle emphasizes the “moves that were afoot to deepen the process of economic reform and de-Stalinisation.” See Dmitry Shlapentokh and Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Soviet Cinematography, 1918 - 1991: Ideological Conflict and Social Reality* (Walter de Gruyter, Inc.: New York, 1993), p. 131, Shlapentokh argues that the first thaw existed between 1954 and 1968, “since Brezhnev continued the thaw for almost four years - until the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.”

⁵⁷Leopold Labedz and Max Hayward, eds. *On Trial: The Case of Sinyavsky (Tertz) and Daniel (Arzhak)* (London: Collins and Harvill Press, 1967), 33-43.

⁵⁸Andrei Sokolov, “Forced Labor in Soviet Industry: The End of the 1930s to the Mid-1950s, An Overview,” in *The Economics of Forced Labor*, 42.

⁵⁹Medvedev, *Ten Years After*, 59.

were continuously hounded by KGB officials searching for incriminating evidence. Historian Roy Medvedev, famed author of *Let History Judge*, was expelled from the Communist Party for his work. Concurrently, certain officials were calling for the rehabilitation of Stalin and an adjustment in official party policy.⁶⁰ There was simply no place in such a constrictive atmosphere for the discussion of the Gulag. Ironically the regime still had labor camps at its disposal for the removal of socially harmful elements from society, but it could not permit their appearance in print.

⁶⁰Mark Sandle, "A Triumph of Ideological Hairdressing?" 149.

CHAPTER 4
PERESTROIKA, LABOR CAMPS, AND THE EMERGENCE
OF A PUBLIC DISCOURSE

In the spirit of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, General Party Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev encouraged, once again, a public discussion of the Gulag when he broached the topic of Stalin's repressions at the seventieth anniversary celebration of the October Revolution.¹ As with the resurgence of the Gulag in the official discourse of Khrushchev's thaw, Gorbachev too was motivated by a desire to achieve certain aims. However, unlike the previous discussions in the late 1980s the topic did not remain confined to the official discourse but became part of the *public* discourse largely in part due to the efforts of intellectuals. The term *public* is used here in the sense indicated by Jürgen Habermas whereby private individuals "claim(ed) the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage in a debate over the general rules governing relations."² In fact numerous intellectuals and activists refused to limit their descriptions and interpretations of the Gulag to those proscribed by the authorities and instead chose to challenge the official position of the Stalinist nature of the camps and thereby the very nature of the Soviet system.

¹Nanci Adler, *The Gulag Survivor: Beyond the Soviet System* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 5.

²Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, transl. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991) 27.

Mikhail Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the Communist Party in March 1985, following the death of his predecessor, Konstantin Chernenko. While this event certainly did not indicate the imminent demise of the Soviet Union, by April Gorbachev had intimated that the Soviet Union was “verging on crisis.” This crisis was visible, in Gorbachev’s opinion, in the stagnation of the economy, lack of sufficient healthcare, and total disrespect for the law among some Soviet officials.³ Therefore, to correct these issues and to prevent possible political instability, various reforms were initiated under the guise of *perestroika*, restructuring, and *glasnost*, or openness. Specifically, Gorbachev emphasized the role of the intelligentsia in overcoming the shortcomings of Soviet society and indicated that the mass media would be permitted to undertake previously forbidden topics. Although as with Khrushchev’s thaw, Gorbachev’s early speeches and writings focus only on the repressions of intellectuals under Stalin. For instance, in *Perestroika* he writes that “the intelligentsia, including intellectuals in the Bolshevik Party, suffered enormous, at times irretrievable losses because of the violations of socialist legality and the repressions of the 1930s.”⁴

Vladimir Shlapentokh argued in 1988, and the remaining years of the Soviet Union have proven his argument to some extent, that Gorbachev’s reforms were of a “preventative” nature and therefore “frail, inconsistent, and superficial.”⁵ Gorbachev’s tenure, like Khrushchev’s, was fraught with contradictions as he attempted to allow the

³Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1987), 19-25.

⁴*Ibid.*, 81.

⁵Vladimir Shlapentokh, “The XXVII Congress: A Case Study of the Shaping of a New Party Ideology,” *Soviet Studies*, 40 (Jan., 1988): 4.

participation of the intelligentsia in civil society, and at the same time restrict their parameters of opinion and action. For instance, he refused to allow Andrei Sakharov, the founder of the Soviet nuclear program, to return from exile in Gorky until December of 1986. Additionally, he continued the restriction on Jewish emigration, an aspect that was duly noted by the same intellectuals that he sought to influence.⁶ On the other hand he made key changes among top level positions, recruiting liberal party members to supervise and develop cultural aspects of Soviet society. Perhaps the most influential person appointed during this time was Aleksandr Yakovlev, who became the overseer of culture within the Secretariat of the Central Committee and was believed to be responsible for the showing of controversial documentaries and feature films, such as *Repentance* (1986).⁷

Perestroika witnessed the publication of many, previously banned works that specifically addressed the Soviet labor camps. Portions of Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* were printed, as were Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* and Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*, which in similar fashion to the previously mentioned *Forever Flowing* addressed the responsibility of Lenin in the country's tragic history.⁸ However, the system of censorship was no yet defeated and a number of works were edited for content. As such, the actions of the NKVD were omitted or condensed so as to hide incidents of extreme cruelty and torture.⁹ Despite the incidents of censorship and negative reactions

⁶Ibid., 12.

⁷Pittman, "Perestroika and Soviet Cultural Policies: The Case of the Major Literary Journals," *Soviet Studies* 42 (January 1990): 114.

⁸Pittman, "Perestroika and Soviet Cultural Politics," 121.

⁹Herman Ermolaev, *Censorship in Soviet Literature: 1917-199* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), 240.

from certain conservative journals, such as *Nash Sovremennik* or *Molodaya Gvardiya*, the image of Soviet labor camps once again surfaced and was to a certain extent encouraged by Gorbachev. In particular there were two films which drew a great deal of attention to the history or repression in the Soviet Union: Marina Goldovskaya's 1988 documentary *Solovky Power*, about daily life in the labor camps on Solovky, and Tengiz Abuladze's 1986 feature film, *Repentance*, about a ruthless dictator in Georgia.¹⁰

The story of Marina Goldovskaya's 1998 documentary *Solovky Power* is very similar to Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in that it required help from above, so to speak. Just as Khrushchev intervened and presented Solzhenitsyn's novella to the Central Committee, Gorbachev performed a similar function for Goldovskaya. According to Goldovskaya, she was inspired to make the film after finding Cherkasov's earlier propaganda film about the Solovky labor camps. She began to locate survivors of Solovky and conducted interviews not only with former prisoners, such as the historian Dimitri Likachev, but also with former security officers. Although she proceeded with interviews and research, she knew that the time was not right for such a film and that the current administration would never allow it to be shown to audiences. Following Gorbachev's election and the onset of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, she and her crew decided that the time was right. However, she still remained cautious and unsure as her father, also a filmmaker, was arrested in 1938 and imprisoned for a short time. Therefore, when she finally presented her script to *Goskino*, the state film office, she submitted a work that was primarily about the culture, history, and religion of the Solovky Islands. And while she did mention the prisons on Solovky, her script indicated

¹⁰Repentance, 1986, color, 151 minutes, producer Gruziafilm

that she would film only the tsarist prisons. Needless to say, once she gained approval she set about filming a completely different picture than the one presented to *Goskino*.

The film was completed in early July of 1988 and was submitted to the Ministry of Culture for review. Alexander Kamshalov, who was at that time responsible for reviewing the content of films produced in the Soviet Union, stated that the ministry was pleased with the film but requested several alterations before the film could be shown. He was particularly concerned that the Soviet camps, army, and guards not be presented in a fascist light. Therefore, he requested that she remove footage of survivors discussing the fascist elements of the camps and a scene of the Red Army marching through Red Square, ostensibly because they looked like fascists. Lastly, at one point in the film the narrator laments that there is no literature on the camps available in Russian other than Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. Solzhenitsyn was still persona non grata and mention of his name in such a film was not permissible. As Goldovskaya refused to make the changes, the Ministry of Culture effectively banned her film.

The Khrushchevian moment arrived when Goldovskaya contacted Gorbachev's press secretary, who happened to be a friend from her university days, and told him of her dilemma. He then showed her film to Gorbachev and presumably other prominent members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Within two months she received a request for three copies to be provided to the Central Committee and subsequently approval to show her film. The film was released theatrically in the latter part of 1988 and additionally Goldovskaya and the script writer Viktor Listov visited numerous universities and colleges throughout the Soviet Union. She indicated that at these early screenings there were numerous clashes between viewers, who often included

former prisoners and relatives of former prisoners, and hardline communists. She likened these clashes to an emerging “emotional civil war.”¹¹

Solovky Power begins with the rediscovery of history as archivists are shown uncovering prisoner letters that were obviously never sent. The prisoners write that conditions are deplorable and express concern that they have been forgotten. Goldovskaya then juxtaposes camp conditions with early footage of a lively and cheerful Moscow, filled with banners, speeches, and Red Army soldiers. To further emphasize the contrast, she films survivors as they view and respond to the Cherkasov propaganda film. As previously mentioned, the first Solovky film depicted clean barracks, healthy and fulfilling meals, and humane treatment; completely at odds with the recollections of former prisoners and guards. Unlike the early film, the survivors that Goldovskaya interviewed describe in detail the daily tortures and hunger, often unable to continue in their retelling as the subjects becomes too emotional to discuss. By showing Cherkasov’s film and the survivor reactions, Goldovskaya draws attention to the duplicitous nature of the Soviet regime and the hidden history of the Soviet Union.

The title, *Solovky Power*, is a phrase taken from one of the prisoners who stated that the guards constantly reminded them that they were not held by Soviet power, but by Solovky power. This fact is highlighted throughout the film and Solovky is referred to as an “autonomous region,” with its own administration, cultural department, and even newspaper. It is presented as a power unto itself and regulated not by any power but its own. It is this aspect that is at the heart of Goldovskaya’s film. She adamantly denied that her film is simply about the Gulag or Stalin’s crimes, but rather that it is instead

¹¹Interview by the author with Marina Goldovskaya via telephone on March 28, 2006. Also see Marina Goldovskaia, *Zhenshchina s kinoapparatom* (Moskva: Materik, 2002).

about the totalitarian nature of the Soviet Union. Contrary to the Ministry of Culture, which was disconcerted by the image of Red Army soldiers who in 1930 resembled a fascist army, Goldovskaya argued that this image should be acknowledged precisely because the Soviet Union was a totalitarian regime and in fact had much in common with fascism.¹²

Tengiz Abuladze also faced difficulty in gaining approval for his 1986 film *Repentance*, a fictional account of a ruthless dictator in a small Georgian town. Abuladze filmed the movie entirely on location in Georgia and was able to secure the protection of Eduard Shevarnadze, then head of Georgia's Communist Party. The distance from Moscow provided a degree of independence and the film was shown on Georgian television, which was permitted three hours of local programming time, in 1986. With Shevarnadze's assistance, and as previously mentioned the intervention of Yakovlev, Abuladze was able to release his film throughout the Soviet Union in 1987 to a rather wide and receptive audience. Film historians Josephine Woll and Denise Youngblood indicate that approximately thirty million tickets were sold, indicating "an exceptionally large number for a difficult picture."¹³ The film was considered so significant in the development of *perestroika* and *glasnost* that in August 2004 a group of prominent Russian directors, producers, critics, and screenwriters gathered in Moscow to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the release.¹⁴

Abuladze's film centers around the life of Ketii, a woman who at the beginning of

¹²Interview of March 28, 2006.

¹³Josephine Woll and Denise Youngblood, *Repentance*, KINOfile Film Companion (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 91.

¹⁴"Dvadstat let bez Pokayaniya," *Isskustvo Kino*, 11 (Nov.30, 2004): 117.

the film is shown as an adult, and her reaction to the death of the dictator Varlam Aravidze. Through flashbacks of Keti's life, viewers learn that her parents were artists who refused to cooperate with Aravidze and were therefore repressed. After Aravidze's burial, Keti digs his body up and places it in the courtyard of his son's estate. The body is returned to its grave only to be dug up again by Keti. Eventually Keti is discovered and brought before a court for trial. Through her testimony Aravidze's grandson, Tornike, learns of his grandfather's crimes and is driven to suicide because of the associative guilt that he feels, which has apparently bypassed his father Abel. Only after Tornike's suicide does Abel come to admit the crimes of his father and deny him an honorable resting place in the family cemetery.

As can be imagined from this brief description, numerous comparisons can be made between Varlam Aravidze and Joseph Stalin, between his rule over the Georgian town of the film and Stalin's rule over the Soviet Union, and between the reactions of citizens in each location to the death of their respective dictator. However, while the comparisons between Aravidze and Stalin may be the most obvious, they do not comprise the most compelling aspects of the film. The most compelling aspect of the film is Abuladze's treatment of repression, whether through imprisonment or execution. He does not actually provide a depiction of life in the camps or an execution but instead uses fantasy and surrealism to imply denunciation, torture, and imprisonment. And rather than narrowly focus on the dictator, Abuladze chooses to address the living; those who remain after the disappearance or death of their loved ones and those who remain after the death of Varlam. And it is in the exploration of this theme that Abuladze effectively and eloquently addresses the Gulag.

In arguably the most powerful scene of the film, part of Keti's flashback when she describes to the court why she will continue to desecrate Varlam's grave, she and her mother visit a railroad station where timber from labor camps has arrived. Prisoners have carved their names and locations in the ends of the logs, and Keti and her mother go there hoping to find a trace of Keti's father, Sandro. The station is filled with thousands of logs, and as Keti and her mother search for Sandro's name they see other women searching hopelessly for signs of their relatives. At one point Keti plays among broken sticks and sawdust, representing the broken prisoners and an allusion to one of Stalin's favorite proverbs, "when you chop down a forest, chips fly."¹⁵ To further the point, Abuladze includes a shot of logs being run through a mill, uselessly producing sawdust. Keti and her mother sit among the logs and cry, while around them other women embrace logs as if embracing husbands and fathers. In yet another reference to the camps, women wait in line outside of a prison with parcels, hoping to discover whether or not their relatives live or if they have been sentenced to "ten years without the right of correspondence," which in Stalin's time indicated execution.

As can be inferred from the title, a central theme of his film is repentance for the crimes of the past. Abuladze uses the relationship between Varlam's son Abel, and Abel's son Tornike to remind viewers that repentance for a crime can only come after one has acknowledged the crime. Following Keti's testimony in the courtroom, Tornike questions whether or not Abel knew of Varlam's crimes. Abel responds using the standard denials and justifications; "it was a very different time," "we were surrounded by enemies," "what is the life of one man when the happiness of millions is at stake," and

¹⁵Woll and Youngblood, *Repentance*, 45.

so forth. Eventually Abel comes to the conclusion that Varlam's actions were morally reprehensible and repents by throwing Varlam's body off of a cliff, but only after the death of his son. Abuladze's implied question is what must happen before the crimes of the past are recognized and atoned for.

The Gulag was further brought to the forefront of public discourse by the actions of Memorial, an "all-union voluntary organization dedicated to historical and educational work." According to Dmitrii Iurasov the group was founded in 1987 by a few people seeking to construct a monument to the "victims of Stalinist repressions." Their goal was to submit a petition for such a monument at the upcoming Party Conference. To gain support for the project Memorial took to the streets and in November seven members were arrested carrying signs on the Arbat, a very popular pedestrian mall in Moscow. In Iurasov's account "from this moment (the moment of arrest), Memorial existed: we had publicly stated the fact and purpose of our existence."¹⁶ After the arrest representatives from Memorial met with officials from the Propaganda Department of the Moscow Party organization to seek permission for public meetings. Although their request was denied they decided to continue demonstrating in hopes of becoming a mass movement and to subsequently "recruit respectable members of the liberal establishment."¹⁷

Eventually Memorial was successful in gaining the assistance of well-known and respected liberals, such as the scientist and human rights activist Andrei Sakharov, historian Roy Medvedev, poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, and Boris Yeltsin, who was at the

¹⁶Stephen Kotkin, "Terror, Rehabilitation, and Historical Memory: An Interview with Dmitrii Iurasov," *Russian Review* 51 (Apr., 1992), 239.

¹⁷Kathleen Smith, *Remembering Stalin's Victims: Popular Memory and the End of the USSR* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 87-89.

time admired for his attacks on the privileged elite of the Communist Party. Although they were prohibited on numerous occasions from holding a founding congress, their worst defeat came at the hands of the Ministry of Culture, which in January 1989 announced a competition to design a monument to the victims of Stalin's repressions and confiscated 500,000 rubles that Memorial had raised for the construction of a monument and a center dedicated to further study of Soviet repressions.¹⁸ However, by 1990 members of Memorial became concerned that as a monument had yet to be constructed that many camp survivors might not live to see the construction of a monument in their honor. Therefore, they petitioned the Moscow city authorities to place a large stone from the Solovky Islands on the Liubianka Square, in direct view of the KGB headquarters. The city agreed and the dedication ceremony was held on October 30, 1990. The date was significant as dissidents and human rights activists in the Soviet Union honored October 30 as Political Prisoners Day.¹⁹

Although their initial focus was on the victims of Stalinist repression, the dedication on the monument is "in honor of the millions of victims of the totalitarian regime." As David Remnick observed, Memorial's definition of repression broadened to include persons executed under Lenin's orders and also dissidents imprisoned under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, most obviously inspired by the example of the dissident writer Anatoly Marchenko who died in a labor camp in 1986 as a result of a hunger strike. Remnick notes that "members were beginning to speak not merely of the

¹⁸Ibid., 91-98.

¹⁹Kotkin, "Terror, Rehabilitation, and Historical Memory," 242-243.

aberration of Stalin but a criminal regime.”²⁰ However, it should be noted that some members were reluctant to subscribe to such a broadened definition for fear of retaliatory acts by the authorities and insisted that the focus be on victims of the Stalin era.²¹

Memorial’s political actions were limited to endorsing candidates such as Andrei Sakharov and other liberals in their quests for parliamentary seats. The goal of the organization was, and continues to be, the preservation of the memory of those individuals repressed by the Soviet regime. For instance, in 1988 they helped to organize the Week of Conscience whereby a memorial wall was created with one thousand photographs of repressed individuals brought to the event by survivors and relatives. Additionally members of their organization created an information center in Moscow to provide assistance to those searching for information on repressed family members or friends. Throughout the remaining years of the Soviet Union Memorial continued to participate in demonstrations and conferences with the many other liberal organizations dedicated to filling in the “blank spots” of Soviet history. Through their efforts at least thirty-three provincial Memorial societies were created throughout the Soviet Union in places such as Novosibirsk, Vladivostok, and Murmansk.²² And in the latter part of 1989 Memorial began providing medical services to victims and their family members through

²⁰David Remnick, *Lenin’s Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 136.

²¹Vladimir Brovkin, “Revolution From Below: Informal Political Associations in Russia 1988-1989,” *Soviet Studies* 42 (Apr., 1990): 241.

²²Anne White, “The Memorial Society in the Russian Provinces,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 47 (Dec., 1995): 345.

Compassion, a branch office consisting of doctors and psychiatrists serving on a voluntary basis.²³

As can be seen in the films of Golodovskaya and Abuladze and in the actions of Memorial, the resurgence of the Gulag in the public discourse of the *perestroika* years was significantly different than that which appeared in the *official* discourse of the 1930s and 1960s. In each film the director moves beyond simply placing blame on Stalin and questions the role of society to some extent. Goldovskaya's film, which largely used the accounts of prisoners, demonstrated that camp guards and officials were not simply following Stalin's orders when they tortured and beat prisoners, but were instead acting upon some internal drive. Though their unnecessarily cruel behavior may have been rewarded by the regime, it was not required. Additionally, it should be remembered that in the film she likened the Soviet Union to a fascist regime and considered the Solovky labor camp a metaphor for the Soviet power in general. On the surface Abuladze's film appears to strongly imply Stalin's guilt in the repressions, but on a deeper level the film addresses the responsibility of society by depicting such taboo topics as denunciation and the number of victims. Gorbachev was certainly not ready for the open and frank discussion of the repression that these films implied, as can be seen in his contention that under Stalin "thousands" of communists and Soviet citizens had been repressed.²⁴

While Gorbachev undoubtedly sought favor with the intellectuals so as to motivate support for his various economic and social reforms, he failed spectacularly

²³Nanci Adler, *The Gulag Survivor*, 116.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 5.

with respect to the Memorial group. However, it is also obvious that he and other government officials were more concerned with the actions of Memorial than any other group addressing the topic of repression. As previously indicated their funds were seized and their reason for being, the construction of a monument to honor the victims of repression, was usurped by the government. Gorbachev was correct to see the inherent challenge to authority, as members such as Andrei Sakharov and Iurii Afans'ev did manage to acquire seats in the Duma. The most striking example of this challenge is found in the person of Boris Yeltsin, under whose presidency Russia's secession would occur.

CHAPTER 5
SOVIET LABOR CAMPS: HISTORIOGRAPHY AND
CONTESTED MEANINGS

Throughout the Soviet period labor and into the post-Soviet present labor camps have been subjected to a number of different interpretations. For some, such as Maxim Gorky, the labor camps represented all that was possible and desirable under Socialism. Re-education through labor would eliminate criminality and provide a better world for all members of society. For some, such as Solzhenitsyn or Goldovsakaya, the camps came to represent all that was wrong with the Soviet system, while for others the camps were simply a demonstration of the evils of Stalinism. Likewise the origins of the Gulag have been the subject of much debate: in Grossman's account they are inherent in Leninism, but for Shelest they are a purely Stalinist creation.

The various meanings, interpretations, and scope of the Gulag have not been agreed upon by historians and scholars either. Although Hannah Arendt famously compared the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, originally published in 1948, historians are still debating this particular aspect.¹ For instance, in her Pulitzer Prize winning work *Gulag: A History* (2003), Anne Applebaum makes the comparison by expressing displeasure at the sight of "Americans and West Europeans" buying "Soviet paraphernalia" in Prague. What she finds objectionable is the sight of the hammer and sickle, which in her opinion are as much a "symbol of mass murder" as the swastika. She writes "the lesson could not have been clearer: while the

¹Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Harcourt, Inc., 1994).

symbol of one mass murder fills us with horror, the symbol of another mass murder makes us laugh.”²

Applebaum’s comparison does not take into consideration the time duration of seventy-four years of Communist rule as compared to the restricted time period of Hitler’s rule. Nor does she consider the differences inherent in each system. Unlike Hitler’s camps, the camps in the Soviet Union were not necessarily directed at the total destruction of a particular people. Rather, the Gulag was much more ambiguous in its creation, evolution, and purpose. The Russian historian Oleg Khlevniuk has noted that the camps were used primarily for two purposes: the isolation of possible opponents and the development of remote areas.³ Additionally, according to Soviet propaganda the camps were used for the re-forging of individuals and creating useful Soviet men and women from bourgeois class enemies.

Recently there has been considerable debate regarding the numbers of prisoners that passed through the Soviet labor camp system and the number of resulting deaths as well. The fall of the Soviet Union and the opening of the archives has reanimated rather than settled the matter, as could be expected. In December 1996, Stephen Wheatcroft initiated a very heated debate by comparing Nazi and Soviet repressions and killings for the period of 1930-1945.⁴ Although his primary focus was the comparison of the tighter concentration camps of Nazi Germany and the labor camps of the Soviet Union, in the process he questioned earlier mortality figures suggested by historians such as Robert

²Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), xviii.

³Khlevniuk, *History of the Gulag*, 18.

⁴Stephen Wheatcroft, “The Scale and Nature of German and Soviet Repression and Mass Killings, 1930-1945,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 48 (Dec., 1996).

Conquest and Charles Maier. Wheatcroft concluded that “the Gulag was neither as large nor as deadly” as it has often been presented, particularly by Conquest, and furthermore that Conquest’s figure of seven million deaths for the time period under consideration was far too high.⁵ Robert Conquest published a reply in November of 1997, following which Wheatcroft published another article, which of course was followed by another reply from Conquest.⁶

The source of contention between the two historians has been the nature of the sources and which sources can be trusted. Conquest’s work has relied heavily on first-hand accounts and memoirs, notably Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago*, whereas Wheatcroft has considered such works to possess only literary value as opposed to historic value. Additionally, Conquest has argued contrary to Wheatcroft that the famine of 1931 was deliberately caused by Stalin and that the victims therefore should be included with the victims who perished as a result of the labor camps. The debate was very fairly and eloquently summarized by Michael Ellman in 2002, who pointed out that while Conquest’s original figures were too high, so were many others and that Conquest’s “main aim was to give a qualitative picture of the enormous horrors to the general public, and in this he succeeded admirably.”⁷ That being said, Ellman also took Conquest to task on his sources, arguing that relying on memoirs provides a false impression of the Gulag as being primarily filled with political prisoners, which in

⁵Ibid., 1348.

⁶Robert Conquest, “Victims of Stalinism: A Comment,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 49 (Nov., 1997). Stephen Wheatcroft, “Victims of Stalinism and the Soviet Secret Police: The Comparability and Reliability of the Archival Data: Not the Last Word,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 51 (Mar., 1999). Robert Conquest, “Comment on Wheatcroft,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 51 (Dec., 1999).

⁷Michael Ellman, “Soviet Repression Statistics: Some Comments,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 54 (Nov. 2002): 1157.

Ellman's assessment is incorrect, as only in 1946 and 1947 were counterrevolutionaries in the majority. As he rightfully points out, "if more use had been made of the experience of the criminals our image of the Gulag would be substantially different."⁸

Ellman also calls into question Conquest's reliance on figures released by the Russian historian D. Volkogonov in 1992, when according to Ellman, the "political demand was for high figures for Stalinist repression."⁹ In closing he argues that the range for repression deaths between 1937 and 1938 was most likely 950,000 to 1.2 million. Ellman also draws attention to the common misconception that the majority of the prisoners were convicted of political crimes and argues that in fact the majority were incarcerated for criminal activity, such as theft or assault. However this statement is qualified by his questioning the Soviet categorization of crimes. After all, is one who is homeless or jobless guilty of a crime or simply the victim of a repressive regime? Likewise, is a person who has resisted collectivization truly an enemy of the people and therefore a counterrevolutionary?¹⁰ Although, given that trials were held throughout the country to convict counterrevolutionaries and kulaks it is doubtful that Soviet citizens would have made such a differentiation between those convicted of political crimes and those convicted of ordinary crimes.¹¹ Nor would citizens have necessarily assumed that it was incorrect to arrest persons for political crimes as this was certainly not a novel

⁸Ibid., 1156.

⁹Ibid., 1158.

¹⁰Ibid., 1162-1164.

¹¹Khlevniuk, *History of the Gulag*, 147.

practice. In fact, many leaders of the Revolution were themselves convicted and exiled for such crimes.

In certain respects the Soviet regime's nationalities policies were intertwined with the Gulag, and this connection is repeated in the historiography and resultant debates. Pavel Polian's work on forced migrations of nationalities and ethnic minorities within the Soviet Union draws attention to the fact that exiled and deported persons were often used as forced laborers in a manner similar to that of Gulag prisoners. Polian notes that a division between the two groups was "discernable, though not always clear cut." The significant difference being that exiled persons were sent to areas of a milder climate than those subjected to Gulag imprisonment.¹² Additionally, the presumed leaders of any exiled or deported group, its "prominent members," were arrested and thereby imprisoned rather than being sent into exile with their community.¹³

Because Soviet policy focused on certain nationalities and ethnic groups, such as Germans, Poles, Tatars, and Chechens, Eric Weitz suggested that the Soviet regime resembled that of Nazi Germany in some aspects. In his opinion, although the Soviet Union was not a genocidal regime per se, the "drive to remake the very composition of its citizenry, to remove targeted population groups from the social body, to cast certain nations as pariahs for eternity, and to drive them into internal exile, does invite legitimate comparisons with Nazi policies."¹⁴ Weitz also took Soviet historians to task for not

¹²Pavel Polian, *Against Their Will: The History and Geography of Forced Migrations in the USSR*, transl. Anna Yastrzhemskba (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004), 48.

¹³Ibid., 6.

¹⁴Eric Weitz, "Racial Politics without the Concept of Race: Reevaluating Soviet Ethnic and National Purges," *Slavic Review* 61 (Spring, 2002): 24

recognizing what he viewed as racial aspects of Soviet policy.¹⁵ Weitz's foray into Soviet history, he is after all a German historian, sparked a debate on the pages of *Slavic Review* and produced resounding rebuttals from both Francine Hirsch and Amir Weiner.

Francine Hirsch essentially turned Weitz's thesis on its head and argued that the Soviet regime did have a concept of race, but that it did not in fact practice racial policies such as those of Nazi Germany. As she noted, the Soviets "by contrast, did not aspire to eliminate races, genotypes, or racial traits," but rather they aimed to "control or eradicate all forms of nationalism - and to wipe out the national territories, languages, cultures, and histories of those nationalities that it considered a threat."¹⁶ Amir Weiner countered Weitz's comparison by arguing that in contrast to Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union did not operate death camps, nor did they call for the "total physical destruction" of groups such as the nobility, bourgeoisie, or kulaks. Instead, the initial goal of labor camps, exile, and special settlements was for the reeducation of these very groups.¹⁷

It is doubtful that a consensus will soon be reached among historians or Russian intellectuals over the meaning or origins of the Gulag. As of 2005 a plan for the monument which will one day grace Liubianka Square has yet to be decided upon. Although thousands of entries were submitted in the early 1990s for the design of such a monument, the Memorial committee which is now in charge of the selection process has not been able to come to an agreement. Independent actions, such as the sphinx monument dedicated to victims of political persecution in St. Petersburg and funded by

¹⁵Ibid., 3.

¹⁶Francine Hirsch, "Race without the Practice of Racial Politics," *Slavic Review* 61 (Spring, 2002): 40.

¹⁷Amir Weiner, "Nothing But Certainty," *Slavic Review* 61 (Spring, 2002): 44.

Mikhael Chemiakin, have drawn severe criticism from members of Memorial and survivors alike. In the case of Chemiakin's sphinx, survivors objected because they were not included in the dedication ceremony nor were they consulted regarding the design.¹⁸

While the debates may be frustrating to survivors and historians alike, they are indicative of the plurality of opinion surrounding the Gulag, particularly during the Soviet period. The interpretations presented by Soviet intellectuals provided the regime with a voice and a manner in which to influence its population. The inherent differences in each interpretation allowed the government a greater choice in its articulation of desired values and a broader public, so to speak. For instance, by allowing the publication in the 1960s of decidedly loyalist accounts by writers such as Georgy Shelest and the more ambiguous account of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the government reached out to liberal intellectuals and reform-minded communists. But as Katherine Verdery noted in her study of the relationship between Romanian Communism and intellectuals, in a socialist system intellectuals are "both necessary and dangerous: necessary because their skills are implied in determining social values, and dangerous because they and the center have potentially different notions of what intellectual practice should consist of."¹⁹ Khrushchev and Gorbachev each recognized this danger and attempted to define and restrict the parameters of acceptable discourse. However, by the late 1980s Soviet intellectuals were simply not willing to abide by such restrictions any longer. And in their rejection of official Soviet ideology, they were joined by large numbers of the

¹⁸Kathleen Smith, "Conflict over Designing a Monument to Stalin's Victims: Public Art and Political Ideology in Russia, 1981-1996," in *Architectures of Russian Identity: 1500 to the Present*, eds. James Cracraft and Daniel Rowland (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 199-202.

¹⁹Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Practices in Ceaușescu's Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 88.

population who were no longer able to accept the disparity between Socialist rhetoric and Socialist reality that was so artfully depicted in the work of Marina Goldovskaya or Tengiz Abuladze. In such works and through the efforts of the Memorial Society, Soviet intellectuals finally destroyed the ideal image of the Gulag their predecessors had worked so hard to create.

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