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The Gulag as a Reinvention of Serfdom in Soviet Russia

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Intractable for centuries, forced labor has proven to be an enduring legacy of Russian history. What began as a gradual restriction of peasant movement in earlier times became institutionalized within a state that ultimately relied upon coercion as a chief lever of economic policy in both the tsarist and Soviet periods. The most notable measure of unfree labor, the institution of serfdom, constituted the base of a pyramid that upheld the tsarist polity. But the endemic problems of a cash-poor economy and imbalanced labor supply did not end with the Bolshevik Revolution, and thus helped shape the outlines of the Soviet era. The idealism of October quickly gave way to a harshening of labor policy, culminating in the extreme response of Stalinism that essentially led to a reenservment of the peasantry and a pernicious expansion of the most repressive aspects of tsarism. The Gulag in particular encapsulated these trends and became the embodiment of Soviet coercion in the twentieth century.

The continuities between the tsarist and Soviet epochs were both obvious and subtle. Imprisonment, exile, and restriction of movement were to be found in both eras, albeit in an even more harsh form under Stalin. While trumpeting an idealistic and

liberationist rhetoric, the Soviet experiment in reality soon revived and expanded upon the economic and political coercion of its tsarist predecessor. Just as significantly, social and cultural parallels also were noteworthy. In spite of their progressive cant, Soviet bosses essentially formed a new ruling elite that contentedly reshaped the privileges of power and formed a revived aristocracy. The trappings of office and status, while initially hidden by egalitarian revolutionary goals, returned to an unabashed prominence in the Stalin era. Even a peculiar gentry culture reemerged, albeit in a philistine environment in which Soviet bureaucrats fostered a rather crude patronage of the fine arts. The heritage of serf artisans found rebirth as well among the prisoners, the population of which harbored at times brilliant creative talent.

One of the best windows on these Soviet realities is the history of Magadan, a city on the Pacific shores of Russia that was the headquarters of one of the largest subdivisions of the Gulag in the Stalin era. This entity was known as Dalstroi, an acronym for the euphemistic title of Far Northern Construction Trust. Throughout the Stalin period, such terms were utilized in nebulous fashion to conceal actual bureaucratic functions. In this case, the generic administrative outlines of a “state trust” hid the reality that such enterprises relied almost entirely upon prison labor. Dalstroi received the overwhelming majority of its workforce from the inmates supplied by Sevvostlag (Northeastern Camp Administration), an auxiliary wing with a far less prominent profile at both regional and national levels. The Soviet government built up Magadan in the 1930s as a new socialist metropolis hewn from the frozen north, but one that in key aspects reflected the repression and labor practices of old Russia.

As with serfdom and forced labor in general, the foundation of Magadan shared broad parallels with the tsarist past. In significant ways, much of the city's construction even encapsulated the legacy of St. Petersburg, the Imperial capital. In spite of its grandeur, St. Petersburg arose in the early eighteenth century upon a foundation of violence. As is well known, Peter the Great envisioned a new Russian capital on the banks of the river Neva as a "window to the West" for his poor and backward nation. Consistently short of free workers and the means to pay them, he conscripted hundreds of thousands of serfs, criminals, Cossacks, and others for the myriad and feverish construction projects involved in the raising of this new metropolis. Cathedrals, palaces, canals, roads, and numerous other structures came into being literally on the shoulders of these unfortunates, many of whom died in the grueling conditions of Petrine hard labor. In time, St. Petersburg reflected the glory of the tsars and represented the triumph of Peter's efforts. Yet it was a preeminence fashioned upon the bones of those involuntary laborers without whom such a city could never have been built. Such a tsarist heritage formed an integral part of the historical context for Magadan and its Gulag empire.

Albeit on a different scale than St. Petersburg, Magadan also came into being due to the will of a man who envisioned a revolutionary sort of empire. It can be argued that Stalin faced political imperatives similar to those Peter the Great had addressed over two centuries before him, especially the need for a large-scale modernization and industrialization of his country. Be that as it may, this northeastern city became part and parcel of the gigantic development projects that stand as a hallmark of Stalinism. Although Magadan did not match but rather mocked Petrine opulence on account of its regional isolation and poverty, this distant municipality nevertheless evoked the memory

of St. Petersburg on many levels. Both cities can be traced to the vision of a single figure; both rose along a barren coastline in an inhospitable region against precipitous odds; in terms of city planning and design, Stalin commissioned a team of Leningrad architects to craft Magadan's central district in a style and pastel coloring reminiscent of the former Russian capital, notwithstanding Soviet rather than tsarist symbols to adorn the buildings and grounds; most important, both municipalities took shape entirely from undeveloped land and through the overwhelming use of forced labor. Administrative offices, residential buildings, roads, bridges, and every other construction site in Magadan arose on the broken backs of Gulag inmates. Many thousands died under unimaginable conditions, even as the city became a citadel of the new Soviet civilization being hewn out of the remote vastness of the frozen north. Although hidden, Magadan stood as a capital of Stalin's true patrimony and thus can be seen as a kind of figurative Petersburg in Soviet times.

The Russian historian Evgenii Anisimov has referred to Peter the Great as the first Bolshevik.¹ It might be stated as well that Peter was the first Stalinist, more than two hundred years before the actual one came to power. Of course, Stalin and his chroniclers saw Aleksandr Nevskii (1252-1263), Ivan the Terrible (1533-1584), and several other rulers from Russia's past apart from Peter I (1682-1725) as his legitimate precursors. But Peter perhaps stands out most prominently due to the scale of his projects and the level of force used to carry them out. As a reformist tsar, he brazenly parted with ancient custom and pulled his reluctant subjects into a fearful and uncertain future. Peter demanded herculean efforts from a society often unwilling to provide them, thus transforming the

¹ See Evgenii V. Anisimov, "Progress Through Violence: From Peter the Great to Lenin and Stalin," *Russian History*, vol. 17, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 409-18.

state through coercion regardless of opposition or resistance. In most cases, he utilized compulsion and violence to achieve his goals. The same can be said for Stalin, who outdid even Peter on most scales of brutality and intemperance. The main point is that Anisimov refers to Peter as the first Bolshevik in order to disparage the means used to accomplish his ends. But if Peter were the first Stalinist, he was but a dim harbinger of what was to come. The Soviet 1930s appeared as a new epoch altogether, with Magadan becoming a paradigm of the methods then used to fashion Stalin's revolutionary world.²

In many respects, the Gulag reflected the Stalinist emphasis upon industrial growth and state-building that evoked the memory of the tsars. Seeking an inexpensive workforce for remote and inhospitable areas, Stalin began to apportion prisoners to industrial sites in a well-worn Russian tradition. Camp administrators likewise assumed the status of powerful Soviet barons, akin to their aristocratic antecedents, governing the fate of tens and soon hundreds of thousands of souls within their fiefdoms. Elements of serfdom reappeared in Soviet practice. Camp inmates found themselves tied not only to the soil but to a mine shaft, construction site, or processing plant that became the sum total of their world while in prison. Although more than two centuries later, this arrangement shared many similarities with the use of "ascribed" peasants at metallurgical factories such as the Demidov iron works during the Petrine era.³

In the early Stalin period, the key factor in the evolution of the Gulag was state economic need. Priorities in the era of Eduard Petrovich Berzin, the first camp boss in the

² For more historical context on the Petrine period, see Evgenii V. Anisimov, *The Reforms of Peter the Great: Progress Through Coercion in Russia*, translated with an introduction by John T. Alexander (Armonk, N. Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1993).

³ For more on such practices during the Petrine era, see Hugh Hudson, *The Rise of the Demidov Family and the Russian Iron Industry in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Oriental Research Partners, 1986).

Magadan region, focused upon labor exploitation rather than political repression. As a means of achieving industrial plans in the region, Dalstroi began to “import” ever larger contingents of inmates. In June 1932, the penal ships *Kashirstroi* and *Dneprostroi* arrived from Vladivostok with the first large prison boatloads to arrive in Nagaev Bay. By the end of that year, the Gulag in Magadan processed 9,928 prisoners to varying camp enterprises.⁴ Even the composition of these penal drafts signified Stalin’s initial, more practical aims that concentrated upon economic development in the territory. The overwhelming majority of these original inmates were not “politicals” but common criminals, with the rest including some “dekulakized” peasants from Soviet agricultural regions.⁵

Soviet authorities in the early 1930s did not yet ostracize and humiliate inmates because the focus in the Gulag centered upon industrial issues. Actual data for mineral production reveal the tremendous commercial benefits resulting from the employment of inmates in the region: between 1932 and 1934, Dalstroi increased its annual mining totals from 511 to 5,515 kilograms of pure gold.⁶ Although the latter did not represent a huge sum as yet, the ten-fold increase presaged a bountiful future. Such returns would prove significant for Stalin’s programs overall, since international gold sales became one of the chief means of raising foreign exchange to pay for the Soviet industrialization effort. Financial incentives provided the impetus for Dalstroi’s birth and evolution, a motive force that would not be matched until political considerations came to dominate events in the late 1930s.

⁴ GAMO (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Magadanskoi oblasti—State Archive of the Magadan Region), f. r-23ss, op. 1, d. 6, l. 55.

⁵ Aleksandr Kozlov, “Oni byli pervymi,” *Kolyma*, nos. 8-9 (1991): 56-60.

⁶ GAMO, f. r-23ss, op. 1, d. 5, ll. 14-20.

As inmate totals grew, Dalstroi spread its prisoners to mining and industrial sites throughout the region. Although Soviet authorities built the first camps along the Okhotsk coastline and then the Kolyma River, Gulag branches in time extended westward to the Lena River and eastward to the Chukotka Peninsula on the farthest tip of the nation. In 1932, however, camp officials concentrated prisoners in and around Magadan, as most construction activity in the early years focused upon the building of the city itself and the highway leading to the gold strikes in the interior. Following arrival at the port of Nagaevo by the penal ships now making regular runs from Vladivostok during the summer and fall, prisoners transferred to a transit station for registration and dispatch to work assignments. In order to accommodate the projects with greatest labor needs, Berzin ordered the establishment of various camp zones throughout the new metropolis and surrounding countryside that became the initial base of the Gulag along the shores of the North Pacific. By 1934, the state trust had established a number of hard labor camps as well at the rich mineral deposits to the north of Magadan in order to expand gold operations in the territory.⁷

The Soviet government provided Dalstroi with any means necessary to complete its mission, including ever larger prison contingents that soon formed the overwhelming labor base in all trust enterprises. In similar fashion, the tsarist state consistently attempted to ensure a labor supply for the estates of the nobility and industries of the merchants at the expense of the peasantry.⁸ Statistics reveal the staggering reliance of the regional economy on inmates in the Magadan region, a situation that would persist throughout the history of the state trust. Freely-hired personnel composed on average

⁷ Kozlov, “‘Zolotoi’ Iubilei,” *Politicheskaiia agitatsiia* (June 1989), 21-25.

⁸ Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia: From the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 308-25.

only 15% of the total workforce, while the remaining 85% consisted of political prisoners and criminals. Between 1932 and 1934, regional labor figures for both free and involuntary workers nearly tripled, from 13,053 to 35,995. More striking is the fact that prisoner counts for the same years rose from 9,928 to 32,304, an even faster rate of increase that would at times make inmate averages approach 90% of the total workforce.⁹ Changing little throughout the 1930s, this ratio accentuated the unusual problems in creating a viable workforce for Magadan. Without the “human capital” provided by the Gulag, industrial development would not have proceeded in the territory. Dalstroi’s experience now framed earlier debates in the Politburo, Sovnarkom, and Narkomtrud on the potentially crippling labor shortage throughout the region, a problem that Stalin had resolved in his expansion of the Gulag network by the early 1930s. Magadan can be seen as a textbook study for the economic reasons behind the widespread exploitation of camp inmates in the Stalin era.¹⁰

From the arrival of the first prison boats, inmates indeed played the most crucial role in all aspects of industrial expansion throughout the region. From 1932 to 1934, however, Dalstroi concentrated its involuntary labor force on more narrow tasks that would establish a solid foundation for the state trust. Initial goals were three-fold: construction of an infrastructure in and around the city of Magadan, complete with housing and administrative structures for the Dalstroi hierarchy and prison camps for the inmates; creation of a highway linking the coastal capital with the industrial zones of the interior; and development of an agricultural network to help provision all enterprises in

⁹ GAMO, f. r-23ss, op. 1, d. 6, l. 55.

¹⁰ For more on the economic ramifications of Gulag labor in the region, see S. M. Mel’nikov, “Dal’stroi: Stranitsy istorii,” *Kolyma*, 1993 (nos. 9-10): 46.

the territory. By the middle of 1934, the success of these projects would lead to the tremendous growth of the gold industry and a concomitant rise in regional stature.¹¹

Aside from the emplacement of a regional infrastructure, Dalstroi had a clear mandate from the Kremlin that placed mineral excavation at the top of its agenda. Sevvostlag thus sent numerous prison contingents in the early 1930s by truck or even on foot hundreds of kilometers to the gold mines along the Kolyma River to tap the precious metal that formed the base of all operations in the region. Built upon the poor industrial foundation established by Soiuzzoloto beginning in the late 1920s, a project that had failed due to the problems of hired labor, inmates began to establish the groundwork for a far more serious mining effort. At first, however, these endeavors occupied a secondary concern for local Gulag authorities more pressed by the lack of roads and buildings. Many prisoners who arrived at the dawn of camp operations therefore never saw the infamous Kolyma, remaining instead at tasks in and around Magadan that would undergird the future of the gold industry in the area. As in later years, however, inmates often had to march or walk to their work site over long distances. Such practices again evoked the memory of “assigned” peasants, who in the eighteenth century often walked from home villages many times a year to meet their work obligations in the metallurgical factories of the Urals.¹²

The most obvious employment for Sevvostlag prisoners came in the heavy construction projects taking place in the vicinity of Magadan. Although eclipsed in later years by massive inmate contingents slaving in the mines of the interior, their employment in town started a trend in which prisoners played a major role in the growth

¹¹ See Kozlov, *Magadan: Konspekt proshlogo* (Magadanskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1989), 16-28.

¹² See Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia*, 313.

of Magadan itself. Since each edifice and road in the city came into being through the labor of camp inmates, it would not be an overstatement to contend that Gulag prisoners built most physical structures in Magadan before the mid-1950s. A similar mixture of criminals, inmates, and POW's had built St. Petersburg in Petrine times. When Dalstroi needed to construct piers and moorings at the harbor in Nagaevo Bay, facilities which ironically provided new dock space for future penal ships arriving from Vladivostok, prisoners from municipal camps supplied all the heavy labor. They also constructed the large network of administrative offices for Dalstroi, including a monumental edifice in downtown Magadan that became the local equivalent of the Lubianka, the secret police headquarters in Moscow. Prisoners erected more pedestrian buildings as well, including the local post office and hotel as well as staff housing for the local Gulag elite. Taken altogether, this architectural heritage left an overwhelming and powerful visual legacy of state repression during the 1930s and 1940s in the very center of this Stalinist citadel.¹³

Although large inmate contingents remained in town to build Magadan, camp authorities distributed many others to construction sites throughout the area. Even more difficult work awaited those prisoners sent out to construct the indispensable Kolyma Highway, one of the centerpieces of the earliest trust ventures in the region. Dalstroi had learned a harsh lesson from its predecessors, for previous mining endeavors had been upended by the intractable problems of transport and supply. This quandary indeed became catastrophic when chaos and starvation ensued under *Soiuzzoloto* in 1931 since workers could not survive, let alone meet plan targets, on the inadequate loads of food and heavy machinery hauled mostly by native reindeer teams in the winter and horse-

¹³ Kozlov, "K istorii vozniknoveniia i razvitiia Magadana (1929-1939gg.)," in S. G. Bekarevich, ed., *Kraevedcheskie zapiski* (1988): 3-27.

drawn carts in the summer. Having addressed this problem with the creation of the regional Gulag, Stalin hoped that the large numbers of camp inmates would preclude any future reappearance of such troubles.¹⁴

Resolved not to repeat the mistakes of the past, Dalstroi set out in July 1932 to build a durable road of at least 500 kilometers from Magadan to the remote industrial zones along the Kolyma River. Berzin intended to finish this highway within two years so that tractors and heavy trucks could begin provisioning the interior not only to salvage current operations, but also to expand all gold production in the region. The state trust therefore dispatched some of its largest Gulag units to slave on this vital artery, its length made all the more difficult by the mountains, swamps, and permafrost that had to be traversed for a successful completion of the route. When the pace slackened amid innumerable logistical problems, Berzin appointed his key assistant Rodion I. Vas'kov, the head of Sevvostlag, to serve as building supervisor and expedite the completion of the project. This made perfect sense since Vas'kov already commanded prison contingents who performed all the manual work. Needless to say, the heavy labor proved to be among the most grueling for inmates in the region and led to some of the highest mortality rates for any local camp venture up to that point. Many prisoners did not survive such brutal outside work.¹⁵

One of Berzin's straightforward directives, on 5 February 1934, indeed reveals the severity of conditions faced by camp inmates. From Magadan to the signpost at 152

¹⁴ Party organizations in the region had continually grappled with this problem. For example, see the stenogram from the meeting of Dalstroi's Party Collective Bureau on 7 March 1932 in TsKhSDMO (Tsentr khraneniia sovremennykh dokumentov Magadanskoi oblasti--Center for the Preservation of the Modern Documents of the Magadan Region, formerly the Magadan Party Archive), f. 1, op. 2, d.17, ll. 1-2.

¹⁵ Construction of the highway began directly from the port of Nagaevo. See Kozlov, "Kolymskoe shosse," *Magadanskaia pravda*, 23 April, 1989, 4. On Vas'kov's appointment, see Kozlov, "Dom Vas'kova," *Reklamnaia gazeta*, 14 November 1989, 8.

kilometers along the highway, work would only be halted if the temperature fell to 45 degrees below zero Celsius (- 49 Fahrenheit); beyond the signpost at 152 kilometers to the Kolyma River, work would continue down to 55 degrees below zero Celsius (-67 Fahrenheit). The differences reflected the fiercer wind chill factor along the Sea of Okhotsk in Magadan, and thus made the situation nearly equivalent for both demarcated zones. Many inmates died of exposure as a result and met burial right where they fell, although not at the rate that came during the era of the Great Purges in the late 1930s. But the tragedy of this project, which did succeed in reaching the mines by 1934, became a mournful reminiscence for future prisoners who passed the mass graves of these early forebears along the roadside on the way to their own unfortunate fates in the camp archipelago run by Sevvostlag.¹⁶

No less crucial than industrial goals, agriculture also received major attention from Gulag bosses and formed another parallel with the tsarist past. As a final remaining task to solidify its regional foundation, Dalstroi needed to establish the means of partially provisioning itself since not all supplies could be sent by ship to support the state trust. Although in limited numbers, several early inmates in the region had been arrested during the “dekulakization” campaign that accompanied the collectivization drive. Apparently wishing to maximize the agricultural experience of these prisoners, Dalstroi put many to work in the raising of foodstuffs. As on the manors of old, such inmates lacked mobility and had to perform tasks set by an overseer. While they may have been moved or reassigned to other tasks within the Gulag network over time, these prisoners remained tied to a farm or enterprise until the end of their camp terms.

¹⁶ For Berzin’s instructions to Sevvostlag regarding weather conditions under which camp labor operations in the region must be halted, see GAMO, f. r-23, op. 1, d. 7, l. 95.

This regional Gulag agricultural effort proved extensive, even though the ultimate payoff turned out to be unpredictable in so hostile an environment. Tsarist authorities throughout Russian America and Siberia had faced the same problem at least a century earlier. Russian administrators in Alaska established Fort Ross in Northern California to help solve this problem for their arctic colony, while Siberian authorities developed farmlands in southern Siberia or sought trade with Central and East Asian middlemen. Soviet times witnessed a repeat of these same dilemmas, and indeed brought no respite from this age-old problem of empire. The only apparent advantage Dalstroï held in comparison to its prerevolutionary antecedents was the fact that it possessed a ready-made and large prison workforce to implement “novel methods” aimed at resolving this issue once and for all.¹⁷

Since it would have been impractical and prohibitively expensive to transmit all food items to Magadan from the center or even other parts of Siberia, Berzin created a state farm (*sovkhöz*) in 1932 known as “Dukcha” a few kilometers outside city limits. He assigned newly-arrived prisoners as its labor force, especially those with some expertise, such as S. K. Makhinov. In short order, camp inmates began raising the inaugural sheds, barracks, and supply buildings for this agricultural venture. Although just one of many prisoners functioning in the same capacity, Makhinov is an excellent case study not only of the early inmates in general, but of the “dekulakized” peasants in particular who formed the core laborers of the new state farm. The party branded him with all manner of “crimes,” although most of these as yet did not carry the weight of later years. Born and raised in Voronezh province, Makhinov had been arrested in 1930 as a “kulak,”

¹⁷ Many of these “dekulakized” prisoners arrived on the first boats in June 1932. See Kozlov, “On stroil ‘Dukchu’,” *Reklamnaia gazeta*, 2 May 1989, 8.

“saboteur,” and “counterrevolutionary” who carried on a “concealed struggle against Soviet power.” Found guilty under Article 58 of the Soviet Criminal Code, a statute that became infamous in the later 1930s when used to cite similar political transgressions against legions of people including Evgeniia Ginzburg, he received a ten-year sentence to the Dalstroi camps. Makhinov arrived in Nagaevo Bay on 20 June 1932, along with hundreds of similar prisoners on the OGPU cruiser *Dneprostroi*.¹⁸

As a worker in the new state farm of “Dukcha,” Makhinov became part of a broad agronomic initiative in the frozen wastelands of the region. State ideology had already fashioned a heroic myth for these agricultural operations, which seemed proof of the sheer inventiveness of Soviet power in the face of area climatic conditions. Camp administrators mixed revolutionary symbolism with the “miraculous” notion of raising new crops and animals in the subarctic territory. Dalstroi created many state and collective (*kolkhozy*) farms in its first few years with optimistic names such as “New Life,” “Dawn,” and “Way of the North.” The boastful state posturing, however, belied the actual prospects for these area ventures since none had an auspicious start.¹⁹ Numerous indicators presaged a troubled future, including the reality that the severe climate would limit the possibilities for crop and livestock production and the fact that natives of the region had never farmed in the traditional European sense. Berzin had little choice but to try, however, since national authorities had indicated the difficulty and cost of fully provisioning the territory from afar. Perhaps emboldened by the rosy promises of

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ginzburg would serve as a prisoner as well on one of these Dalstroi farms in later years. See Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979), 48-69.

party rhetoric, regional Soviet bosses felt assured of solving the long-standing predicament that had undermined their tsarist predecessors.²⁰

While northern climatic realities of course menaced any agricultural endeavor, camp officials in Magadan indicated that they nevertheless believed in the transformative potential of Soviet efforts. Faced with the pressing need to help provision his industrial enterprises, Berzin projected a resolute faith in the public exhortations meant to inspire prisoners and free civilians alike to achieve the unthinkable. State ideology assured that the Soviet government could overcome all obstacles in the “opening” of the distant territory, a promise the trust director trumpeted at venues across the region. Dalstroï consequently undertook several ambitious, though questionable, projects in the early 1930s that presaged some of the large-scale crusades of later years throughout the USSR. Camp administrators at this time instructed Makhinov and his fellow prisoners at “Dukcha” to attempt the “acclimitization” (*akklimizatsiia*) of southern plants and animals to northern latitudes, even though the similar national campaign spearheaded by T. D. Lysenko had yet to begin in earnest. Such incipient developments of Lysenko’s claims in places such as Magadan may prove significant, for they can show that the combustible mixture of necessity and ideology set the groundwork for the widespread Soviet acceptance of Lysenko’s dubious methods. While never proving the scientific basis of its official propaganda claims, Lysenkoism reached powerful heights across the USSR from the late 1930s until the 1960s due to the patronage of both Stalin and

²⁰ The ebullience of Soviet authorities on solving this agricultural problem became well reflected in the local press, an optimism that gradually faded as the climatic realities which had upended tsarist agencies began to cave in around Dalstroï as well. For example, see *Dal'stroevets*, 18 April 1935, 3.

Khrushchev.²¹ In this regard, Soviet agricultural methods interacted within a framework of modern pseudo-science that never affected tsarist practice but indeed had consequences for Gulag prisoners.

Dalstroi's early implementation of Lysenko's theories of course proved completely ineffectual. Such failings in the labor camps often became disastrous for Gulag inmates. Prisoners at "Dukcha" tried to acclimatize sheep, goats, rams, cattle, and horses with no ultimate success as the herds simply withered under the effects of extreme winter weather. Makhinov worked with poultry, but achieved exceedingly poor results due to the relentless climate that disproved Lysenko's bogus ideas. Over the course of his ten-year imprisonment, this inmate from Voronezh nevertheless continued to apply Lysenkoist methods to increase the hardiness of chickens and ducks. As the Soviet political atmosphere chilled later in the 1930s, such negative results often placed prisoners at odds with Gulag bosses who interpreted the problem as one of "sabotage" requiring severe punishment.²² In the early 1940s, Makhinov received a further six-year sentence for "improperly handling the fowl," a development that no doubt reflected both the perspective of Gulag administrators blinded by their own rhetoric and Dalstroi's need to retain such laborers and "experts" for continual attempts at bizarre animal husbandry in the future.²³

²¹ Methods utilized at the "Dukcha" state farm may have predated Lysenko's rise in the mid-1930s, and could help to reveal that such theories had circulation even before official Soviet recognition of Lysenko. For a study of Lysenkoism, see David Joravsky, *The Lysenko Affair* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970).

²² This fits well with Rittersporn's contention that party authorities, blinded by their own official discourse, often interpreted standard problems as emanating from covert resistance and "sabotage." See Gabor T. Rittersporn, "The Omnipresent Conspiracy: On Soviet Imagery of Politics and Social Relations in the 1930s," in J. Arch Getty and Roberta Manning, *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 109.

²³ Kozlov, "On stroil "Dukchu"," 8.

The progression of the decade brought a dramatic and definite worsening in the fate of camp inmates. Political repression greatly intensified following the onset of the Stalin Terror in 1937-38. A venomous political rhetoric at all levels heralded the most ominous transformation in Magadan by the close of 1937, whereafter the city remained in the grips of the Great Purges for nearly a year-and-a-half. By comparison, the initial period of Dalstroi's history seems in retrospect to have been rather mild. Gulag bosses in the early 1930s referred to the economic value of prisoners rather than their outcast status, an emphasis confirmed by the fact that release and legal rehabilitation could be expected upon fulfillment of the average camp sentence, unlike a few years later. While political considerations largely displaced economic motives by 1937-38, financial calculations and the "return" on Gulag investments appeared paramount to the Soviet hierarchy in the Berzin era.

Change came again to Magadan in 1939, when Ivan Fedorovich Nikishov became the local Gulag boss. In particular, the renewed prominence of rank and status evoked further memories of the tsarist polity. While World War II caused privation and suffering across the USSR, the new Dalstroi administrators began showing a predilection for the benefits of standing within the Soviet *nomenklatura*.²⁴ To an extent not seen among their immediate predecessors, they became absorbed with privilege. Nikishov himself had been assigned as a candidate member of the Central Committee and a deputy of the Supreme Soviet in Moscow, honors reflecting his rising stature as well as the growing political clout of the secret police following the Eighteenth Party Congress in March

²⁴ For a classic description of such officials, see Vera S. Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

1939.²⁵ That gathering, which served as a defining forum for Stalinism at the end of a tumultuous decade, witnessed the official ascendancy of the NKVD within the Soviet Union. Represented by fifty-seven delegates at the Kremlin meeting, the secret police placed eight of its own, including Nikishov, as candidate members of the Central Committee. Beria and his deputy, Merkulov, became full members of the Central Committee, while Beria also assumed the role of a candidate member in the Politburo. In effect, such appointments revealed how Stalin rewarded the NKVD for a job well done during the Great Purges.²⁶

In concert with this official elevation of the secret police in Moscow, the Dalstro elite began also to assume the prerogatives of power. As members of a generation pampered by the Kremlin for its obeisance, they were likewise forerunners of the ossified Stalinist bureaucracy that by the close of the 1940s became preoccupied with privilege. Based upon his role as head of the local camps, Nikishov demanded a large personal security force, luxury automobiles, sweeping offices, and a magnificent dacha overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Although Berzin had a comfortable home and Rolls Royce at his disposal, he never lived on the flamboyant scale of Nikishov. Unused to the deprivations of revolution and civil war, the men who formed the new Gulag hierarchy in Magadan behaved like a class of nobles from the tsarist era. In the words of two authors,

²⁵ Interpreting these appointments as a national sign of respect for Magadan, the local press made constant reference to them. For example, see *Sovetskaia Kolyma*, 5 December 1940, 1.

²⁶ Judging from official protocol, the secret police had indeed risen in prominence by 1939. Never had so many security agents served as delegates to a party congress, let alone been nominated to candidate or full membership of the Central Committee. Moreover, by contrast to Beria's rapid rise in stature, Ezhov had not received candidate membership in the Politburo for more than a year after he became NKVD commissar. See Amy Knight, *Beria: Stalin's First Lieutenant* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 94.

Nikishov served as a “general-grandee” (*general-vel'mozha*) that typified the attitudes of many regional Soviet leaders who shaped the ethos of late Stalinism.²⁷

As one sign of this, ever more stately edifices sprouted up to accommodate the Dalstroi officialdom. While many trust employees continued to live in barracks-style housing and even tents,²⁸ the upper echelons of regional Gulag management moved into generous apartments on downtown streets. Even prisoners, many of whom served on work crews to forge the new infrastructure, noticed the difference. In later years, following her release from the camps, Ginzburg commented upon the striking municipal growth in the 1940s that resulted in “multistory buildings, limousines, bustling streets How it had grown, and how handsome it had become during my seven years' absence, our Magadan!”²⁹ By contrast with the surrounding bleakness of the territory, the main thoroughfare in town was lined with the homes of the regional NKVD “nobility” adjacent to the official residence of the Dalstroi chief. City planners used a rectangular grid to fashion wide boulevards, accompanied by tree-lined squares and public malls, that helped set off central administrative offices and other structures. They also designed major landmarks of the city in a triumphant style evocative of the tsarist past, replete with columns, cornices, and associated flourishings superficially similar to imperial construction albeit with Soviet symbols such as the hammer and sickle as well as the red flag. Borrowing from the very heritage they served in other ways to destroy, camp

²⁷ Shirokov and Etlis, *Sovetskii period istorii Severo-Vostoka Rossii* (Magadan: Mezhdunarodnyi pedagogicheskii institut, 1993), 8.

²⁸ As of 10 December 1939, Sovnarkom noted that more than sixty percent of Magadan residents still lived in tents and other “temporary” structures. See GARF (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii—State Archive of the Russian Federation), f. 5446, op. 23a, d. 182, ll. 4-8.

²⁹ Ginzburg's observations came in 1947. See Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, 201.

administrators sought a visual manifestation of their importance that for lack of competing motifs drew upon the legacy of the tsars.³⁰

Historical continuities went beyond the residential fashion of the Dalstroï bosses, however, for the prerevolutionary inheritance could be seen across the territory. In particular, Gulag “estates” sprouted throughout the region as Soviet equivalents to the manor. Living in homes emplaced above or just outside prison boundaries, camp commandants acted as modern-day overseers who monitored work output and employed inmates in unusual capacities that replicated the household chores of their serf precursors. Since prisoners possessed numerous talents and capabilities, Sevvostlag administrators often made use of their skills as machinists, plumbers, or carpenters, to name but a few vocations.³¹ The Gulag in many ways relied upon such incidental expertise, as had cottage industries of the manor that depended upon serf cobblers and tailors.³² While the majority of Soviet inmates slaved in the gold mines, some Dalstroï prisoners worked in specialized capacities that made use of their abilities or previous experience. Serving as a nurse and teacher aside from more menial tasks, Ginzburg epitomized this practice.³³

Gulag bosses likewise assumed the bearing of a local nobility as they strove for titles and medals befitting their status. Several Dalstroï officers became “captains” or

³⁰ See Kozlov, “Poluchil status goroda,” *Magadanskaia pravda*, 25 June 1989, 4.

³¹ For an example on the need for carpenters within the camps, see Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 15-20.

³² The Gulag did not quite replicate the great diversity often seen among household serfs, some of whom held very specific positions within the manor during tsarist times. For more on this, see Priscilla Roosevelt, *Life on the Russian Country Estate: A Social and Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 103-8.

³³ For more on such work assignments, see Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, 3-11, 116-25, and 370-83. While in exile following her release from the camps, Ginzburg pursued similar vocations in Magadan. See OSF ITs UVD (Otdelenie spetsialnykh fondov, Informatsionnyi tsentr Upravleneniia vnutrennykh del--Department of Special Fonds, Information Center for the Administration of Internal Affairs), f. 1, op. 1, d. 29763.

“majors” of state security, while Nikishov assumed the standing of a “general” in the secret police. The official listing of positions within the regional Gulag in many respects even read like the tsarist Table of Ranks, with categories evocative of those from Petrine times.³⁴ In a manner similar to prerevolutionary aristocrats who proudly bore the various orders named after Orthodox saints and tsarist heroes, camp administrators displayed their Soviet commendations with great fanfare. Nikishov’s voluminous medals in particular became legendary throughout Magadan. In numerous photographs from the period, he can be seen wearing a tunic bedecked with rows of medals, including two Orders of Lenin and an Order of the Red Banner. Since World War II revived still more tsarist traditions, Nikishov thereafter began to sport additional emblems such as the Order of Kutuzov in honor of the military general instrumental in the defeat of Napoleon.³⁵

Along with the higher lifestyle in Magadan came a rise in the cultural pretensions of its ruling hierarchy. While Berzin and his staff had resigned themselves to the hardship status of their assignment, members of the Nikishov administration saw no reason to continue in the same vein. They envisioned a “Golden Age” of achievements that would reflect their own power and social profile, whereby Magadan would be transformed from a camp outpost to a more cultured municipality.³⁶ Equating the presence of an orchestra or theater troupe with the rising significance of their position,

³⁴ For example, see *Spravochnik: diferentsirovannykh dolzhnostnykh okladov dlia inzhenerno-tekhnicheskikh rabotnikov, sluzhashchikh i mladshogo obsluzhivaiushchego personala po otrasliam khoziastva Dals'troia NKVD SSSR* (Magadan: Izdatel'stvo “Sovetskaia Kolyma,” 1945). On the Petrine Table of Ranks, see N. I Pavlenko, *Petr Velikii* (Moscow: Mysl', 1994), 441.

³⁵ On Nikishov’s various awards, see AOSVZ (Arkhivnoe otdelenie Severovostokzoloto— Archival Department for the Association of Northeastern Gold, formerly Dalstroi institutional archive), d. 36915, l. 1.

³⁶ Aside from being a pampered generation, members of Nikishov’s cohort took seriously Stalin’s admonition that all workers and peasants should become “cultured and educated” even if they did not appreciate what that meant. For more on this, see Fitzpatrick, “Stalin and the Making of a “New Elite”, 1928-1939”, *Slavic Review*, vol. 38, no. 3 (September 1979): 399.

prison officials at this time began to build playhouses, music halls, and movie theaters throughout Magadan.³⁷ Gulag bosses now wanted to be seen as patrons of the fine arts, Sheremetevs of the Soviet age. The irony was that members of Nikishov's generation, like counterparts from Stalin's "new elite" across the Soviet Union, were cultural philistines who had little appreciation for the refined pursuits of music or drama.³⁸ Although Berzin had been both cosmopolitan and well-educated, particularly since he had matriculated at an art school in Berlin before World War I, the first Dalstroi chief constructed only the most rudimentary of cultural institutions in this Gulag municipality. As a twist of fate, Magadan received a serious artistic infrastructure only after the most urbane management in the history of Dalstroi had been purged.³⁹

In spite of the aesthetic pretensions of the Nikishov administration, local cultural pursuits remained limited by remote location and financial resources. Extra funding from the state could hardly be expected, since Stalin's emphasis upon gold extraction implied little Kremlin sympathy for other concerns. Gulag officials hired a few artists,⁴⁰ but otherwise created theater troupes and orchestras from among camp inmates. While inexpensive and convenient, such a solution ironically did not imply a lessening of artistic standards. Having targeted many luminaries from the intellectual and cultural elite, the Great Purges delivered some of the foremost Soviet actors and musicians of the

³⁷ This culminated in the construction of a massive stone playhouse, the Gorky Theater, in downtown Magadan. See Kozlov, *Teatr na severnoi zemle: Ocherki po istorii Magadanskogo muzykal'no-dramaticheskogo teatra im. M. Gor'kogo (1933-1953gg.)* (Magadan, 1992).

³⁸ See Dunham, *In Stalin's Time*, 132.

³⁹ Although a number of lesser artistic endeavors had commenced in the Berzin era, the actual flowering of cultural life in Magadan only began under Nikishov. See also Kozlov, *Ogni lagernoi rampy: Iz istorii Magadanskogo teatra 30-50-z godov* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Raritet," 1992), 43-54.

⁴⁰ Nikishov, often intervening in artistic productions to keep costs down, kept a careful watch over cultural expenditures even as he encouraged new performances. For example, see B. Savchenko, "Preodolenie," *Magadanskaia pravda*, 10 April 1988.

time to the Gulag. Dalstroi received many such artistic giants who performed as prisoners in Magadan over the years, including the actor G. S. Zhzhenov and the ballerina I. I. Mukhina.⁴¹ The most famous regional inmate troupe became known as the “Sevvostlag Club” (*Klub USVITL*), the name of which reflected the prison origins of its cast members. While this group served primarily to entertain the Dalstroi elite in Magadan, related “cultural brigades” performed for satellite officials and inmates stationed in the mining zone. The “Sevvostlag Club” and associated casts appeared as the local rebirth of “serf theater” in Stalinist guise, with camp inmates regaling their Gulag overlords in much the same manner as serf actors who had performed for their owners on tsarist manors across old Russia.⁴²

“Gulag theater” met with enthusiasm across the territory since it offered both the prisoners and their jailers an enriching distraction from the boredom and misery of the camp environment. Like “serf theater” of the past, however, the formation of these artistic casts implied neither an improvement in living conditions nor the cessation of onerous physical labor for many of the actors and musicians who participated in the presentations.⁴³ Although civilian artists lived as free residents in Magadan, most of their troupe associates remained behind barbed wire. Following the close of a performance, at which the Gulag elite applauded the rare talents of their captives, prison guards transported inmate cast members back to the camps until summoned for another show. In

⁴¹ See Kozlov, *Magadan: Konspekt proshlogo*, 90-91.

⁴² Kozlov, *Teatr na Severnoi zemle*, 9-19. For more on “serf theater,” see Roosevelt, *Life on the Russian Country Estate*, 262-67.

⁴³ The realities of “serf theater” offered a dramatic parallel to those of its Gulag equivalent. Roosevelt mentions the case of the talented serf actor Mikhail Shchepkin, who in the early nineteenth century performed on stage while simultaneously fulfilling the role of a house serf. Beaten from time to time by overseers in spite of his talent, Shchepkin can be seen as a typical variant of this tsarist phenomenon which had correlations within the Gulag. *Ibid.*, 265.

relation to other prisoners, inmate actors as a rule did receive more food and might on occasion be granted some liberties of which their fellow prisoners only dreamt, such as unescorted walks. But often unspared from the hardships and dangers of Gulag existence, these artists also suffered and perished alongside their camp brethren. In her memoirs, Ginzburg described the fate of an actor who had worked in Moscow with the famous dramatist Vsevolod Meyerhold. Arrested and sent to Magadan in the late 1930s, he endured the horrors at the infamous gold mine of *Burkhala* while serving in its “cultural brigade.”⁴⁴

Aside from the realities of “Gulag theater,” the legacy of serfdom provided the most ready template for shaping other labor practices and inmate-commandant relationships within the camps. Tied to a specific enterprise in the Dalstroï apparatus, prisoners engaged in heavy manual tasks, lacked any and all mobility, and served at the whim of their masters. If inmates had rare talent, including artistic ability, then prison barons could insist on command performances like their aristocratic predecessors. As a pampered regional elite, post-Terror administrators in Magadan represented a layer of Stalinist officialdom that assumed many prerogatives in society similar to those held before the October Revolution by members of the tsarist nobility. In this regard, Magadan was but a microcosm of the USSR. At the same time, Nikishov and his staff personified what Vera Dunham termed “the resiliency of *meshchanstvo*,” or the petty bourgeois mentality which had deep roots underlying bureaucratic privilege in both Russian and Soviet life.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, 16.

⁴⁵ See Dunham, *In Stalin's Time*, 129-33.

In practical terms, the appearance of a “Golden Age” in Magadan rested upon the resuscitation of industrial production by the state trust. Stalin allowed, and perhaps even encouraged, an increasingly ostentatious lifestyle among his subordinates so long as they fulfilled plan targets. The camps had grown significantly as well. In 1932, the Gulag contained 268,700 prisoners overall, of whom 9,928 worked in the labor camps of the Magadan region. By September 1940, the aggregate Gulag figure rose to 1,388,679 prisoners, of whom 190,503 served within the Dalstroi network. Later in the 1940s, annual Gulag inmate totals would approach nearly two million, while Sevvostlag numbers went well over 200,000 at any one time.⁴⁶ In the early 1940s, the reemphasis upon mining accomplishments implied that Dalstroi officials would again be scrutinized according to financial indices rather than political considerations. Spurred by the looming threat of war, which caused numerous changes in Gulag activities, Moscow authorities once again focused upon reviving economic output in Magadan.⁴⁷ As in the Berzin era, rewards and commendations from the Kremlin were based upon the attainment of record quantities of gold or tin and other industrial achievements. In response to such pressures from above, local Gulag bosses returned Dalstroi operations to the productive framework of the early-to-mid 1930s. In the process, they recreated a culture that on many levels replicated the heritage of the tsarist past.

⁴⁶ The totals for both the Soviet labor camp system in general and Dalstroi in particular are from the Gulag’s own internal statistics kept biweekly in central and regional record books. For 1932 statistics in Magadan, see GAMO, f. r-23ss, op. 1, d. 6, l. 55; for 1940 statistics, refer to GARF (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii—State Archive of the Russian Federation), f. 9414, op. 1 supplement, d. 364, ll. 1-70. See also S. S. Vilenskii, *Soprotivlenie v GULAGe: Vospominaniia. Pis'ma. Dokumenty*. (Moscow: Vozvrashchenie, 1992), 121, and Shirokov and Etlis, *Sovetskii period istorii Severo-Vostoka Rossii*, 14.

⁴⁷ At the same time, Moscow continued to send supplementary materials and funding to Magadan so that Dalstroi could attain these economic goals. See GARF, f. 5446, op. 23a, d. 184, ll. 66-69.

