

# THE GULAG IN VORKUTA: BEYOND SPACE AND TIME

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**This essay argues that the Gulag was fixed neither in space nor in time. Following recent trends in historiography, it describes the close connections between the Gulag and Soviet society as a whole, using the example of Vorkuta, an Arctic camp complex that was initially constructed in the 1930s. This camp complex would later become one of the largest prison camp complexes in the Soviet Union and later a Soviet company town. Looking at the twin processes of “zonification” and “dezonification,” the essay shows that the spatial relationships between Gulag camps and their surrounding communities were complex and fluid. Turning to the question of what happened to Vorkuta as it was transformed from a Gulag town into a company town, it demonstrates that people, social networks, and labor practices from the Gulag had a profound influence on the development of the city long after the mass releases of the 1950s. The essay concludes by suggesting ways in which scholars might reexamine the Gulag as a phenomenon embedded in Soviet society.**

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At the intersection of Moscow and Miner Streets, in the center of one of the oldest sections of the city of Vorkuta, stands a striking example of Stalinist architecture. It is the Vorkuta Children’s Hospital, a sprawling two-story building with neoclassical columns. The building stands at the center of Moscow Square, in what was once the center of Vorkuta, one of the Soviet Union’s (and now Russia’s) largest Arctic cities, located in the far northeastern corner of European Russia. The hospital is surrounded by other structures that made up the heart of Vorkuta in the 1950s and 1960s: the former headquarters of Vorkutaugol’, the entity in charge of running Vorkuta’s many coal mines; Pobeda (Victory) movie theater, where citizens once spent much of their leisure time; the Vorkuta city party committee (Gorkom) headquarters, once the seat of municipal power; and Sever (North) hotel and restaurant, where the city elite had dined and socialized. An imposing monument to Joseph Stalin stood in the midst of these buildings in the center of the square until one November night in 1961. After

Nikita Khrushchev renewed his criticism of Stalin and the “cult of personality” at the Twenty-Second Party Congress, the statue was removed and melted down, replaced soon afterwards by a monument to former Leningrad party boss Sergei Kirov. Built on permafrost and cleverly designed to look like it was built of stone rather than wood, the Vorkuta Children’s Hospital is an impressive architectural achievement and a continued source of pride for the city’s residents.



*Figure 1. Vorkuta Children’s Hospital (detail). Photograph by the author, May 2003.*

Like that of the city that it served, the history of the Children’s Hospital is closely intertwined with the history of the Soviet system of forced labor, or Gulag. Vorkuta was once the site of one of the Soviet Union’s largest and most notorious prison camp complexes, holding nearly 75,000 prisoners at the time of the hospital’s completion in 1950. Orders to build the hospital came not from a civilian administrator but from Aleksei Kukhtikov, a longtime official in the NKVD/MVD and director of both of Vorkuta’s prison camps, Vorkutlag and Rechlag. The building was designed by architect Vsevolod Lunev, an exile who had been sent to the city in 1943 as part of a group of former Red Army soldiers subjected to forced labor after being freed from German POW camps. The hospital was built by hundreds of prisoners from a nearby camp section using only basic tools. While the work might not have been quite as dangerous as that which was being done nearby in Vorkuta’s coal mines, it was certainly among the most challenging jobs to which one could be assigned, particularly during the long winter months in a city where snow often falls in June and August. The impressive exterior of the building and the positive nature of its current role mask a troubling past.

The story of this hospital and its construction seems to confirm standard literary and historical interpretations of the Gulag and its place in Soviet society. Here were prisoners working and suffering under compulsion to build an institution that

would provide services from which they would never themselves benefit: a hospital for the children of nonprisoners. It confirms not only the inhumanity of the system but also its separateness from Soviet society in spatial terms. This supposed division has been expressed in various ways by scholars and memoirists. Some have conceived of the distinction between the space of the Gulag and Soviet society in general as the difference between the “little zone” of the camps and the “big zone” of the Soviet Union as a whole (Rossi 1989:137). Memoirists frequently referred to the world of the Gulag as “there,” as separate from “here,” emphasizing its foreignness (Agranovich 2004:119). The most famous expression of this spatial separation is the notion of the Gulag as an “archipelago,” Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s master metaphor that places the Soviet system of prisons, camps, colonies, and special settlements apart from the “mainland” of Soviet life, a framework that continues to inform many scholarly and popular works on the Gulag (Solzhenitsyn 1974, 1:4; Applebaum 2003). Thus, the prevailing notion of the Gulag as distinct from the rest of Soviet space continues to permeate much of the literature on Soviet terror and repression. The story of the Children’s Hospital would seem to fit comfortably into this framework.

The hospital also serves as an example of the way that the Gulag is typically considered in temporal terms. The Vorkuta Children’s Hospital was the product of the cruel Stalinist political, economic, and social order. It was, after all, built in 1948–1950, during the period of “high Stalinism,” at the height of the Soviet Gulag, and should rightfully be considered an example of the cruelty spawned by such a system. It stands as a monument to the perverse utopian notions of those who ran the Gulag, the very notion that one could use millions of forced laborers to transform the vast Soviet space and usher in an era of freedom and plenty for Soviet society. The general arc of the Gulag’s existence in contemporary historiography most often begins during the first five-year plan, when plans for a new Soviet penal system were hatched and a rapid rise in the state’s population of prisoners and exiles led to the creation and expansion of a system of special settlements, prisons, and labor camps (Khlevniuk 2004; Viola 2007; Barnes 2011). Although some histories of the system simply do not cover the whole period of the Gulag (Khlevniuk 2004; Viola 2007), those that venture into the postwar period tend to end around 1953. A clear example of this is Steven Barnes’s recent study *Death and Redemption* (2011), which ends with the “crash” of the Gulag after Stalin’s death. Following this arc, it would make sense to place the Vorkuta Children’s Hospital at the very height of the system’s expansion in the late 1940s and early 1950s, just before radical reforms got rid of the Gulag. Here we see the cruelty and hubris of Gulag officials at their very height, just before the system was dismantled by the new Soviet leadership.

Yet a second look at the story of the hospital and its construction begins to complicate this picture of strict spatial and temporal boundaries surrounding the Gulag. While it is true that after the hospital was finished the building and its grounds became part of the city of Vorkuta, strictly delineated from the camp complex, during the many months of its construction it was located in a liminal area on the margins between camp and city. Hundreds of prisoners were brought there every day from a nearby camp “zone” under armed guard, crossing multiple borders during the journey

between camp and noncamp space. The prisoners' travel and labor were not hidden from city residents, who had a full view of the prisoners as they went about their business in the heart of the city. By that same token, prisoners on this and other projects in the heart of Vorkuta were able to observe the life of nonprisoners in the city, sometimes even its most intimate aspects (Scholmer 1955:91). Only once the hospital was opened to the public in 1950 did this space become clearly delineated as belonging to the city, separated from the prison camp complex. Thus, the process of building the Children's Hospital complicates the notion of the strict isolation and separation between the Gulag and Soviet society in spatial terms.

A deeper look at the hospital itself and its continued functioning in the decades following its opening in 1950 also undermines the notion that the Gulag was a phenomenon belonging exclusively to the Stalin era. This is true in a number of respects. While the Children's Hospital was indeed built at the height of postwar Stalinism by prisoners, it was also a major piece of urban infrastructure that continued to be used long after Stalin's death. It, like many other structures built by prisoners, stood as a physical manifestation of the continued effects of the Gulag in the lives of Soviet citizens. Further, the existence of the Children's Hospital shaped the lives of thousands of children and their families for decades. It was in this hospital that thousands of children received medical care that improved their lives. In addition, it was not only the children of camp officials and laborers recruited from outside the city that benefited from the hospital. As more prisoners were released from the Vorkuta camp complex over the course of the 1950s, a substantial proportion of the children receiving medical care were the offspring of former prisoners and exiles. Indeed, one wonders whether the irony of the situation was not lost on Vorkuta's residents in the 1950s and 1960s.

This essay uses the example of the Vorkuta camp complex, one of the largest forced labor institutions in the Soviet Union, and the city of Vorkuta, the company town created together with the camp, to argue that the Soviet Gulag was not bound in space or time. It follows recent historiographical trends pointing to closer connections between the Gulag and the Soviet "mainland," arguing that the relationship between Soviet penal institutions and Soviet society was far closer and far more complex than most historians and memoirists have allowed (Barnes 2011; Bell 2013; Barenberg 2014). Borders between the "inside" and "outside" were rarely as strict as they might seem. Prisoners, camp personnel, objects, and information constantly moved across such borders, rendering them porous. Further, borders were often not strictly delineated—despite regulations stipulating that Gulag "zones" be surrounded by barbed wire, this was often not the case both in the 1930s when the system was being established and also in the 1950s when it was being overhauled. In short, the case of Vorkuta demonstrates that camps were tightly embedded in Soviet society.

This essay also argues that one cannot think of the Gulag as having "crashed," ended, or disappeared just because the system was reformed in the 1950s. Thus, it is part of a historiographical trend to examine the longer-term effects of the Gulag on the Soviet system. Over the past two decades, scholars have been particularly inter-

ested in examining the legacies of the Gulag using the memoirs of former prisoners. For literary scholars like Leona Toker (2000), this has meant examining narratives of Gulag survivors to unearth the tropes and themes of their memoirs. Some have looked at the struggles of former prisoners to be reintegrated into Soviet society, paying particular attention to the systematic discrimination that they faced (Adler 2002, 2012; Weiner 2006; Elie 2007). Others, like Miriam Dobson (2009), have examined the effects that former prisoners had on society and politics after their release. But most of this work examining the legacies of the Gulag through released prisoners has focused on those prisoners who attempted to “return” to their former homes and, in particular, to major cities. Others have examined the evolution of penal institutions after Stalin’s death but focused primarily on the internal dynamics of this system (Hardy 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Elie 2013). But what about the many regions of the Soviet Union that were profoundly transformed by special settlements and forced labor institutions, where many prisoners remained after they were released from imprisonment or exile? Such questions have been comparatively understudied. Judith Pallot, a geographer, has examined the long-term effects of forced labor on some of the Soviet Union’s peripheral regions, where the legacies of the Gulag continue to shape regional economies and politics in the post-Soviet era (Pallot 2002, 2005; Pallot, Piacentini, and Moran 2010). But how did the Gulag shape individual communities? Using the example of Vorkuta, this essay will explore some of those long-term effects by examining how the Gulag transformed people and space on the micro scale. It is not an exhaustive discussion of the ways that the Gulag cut across spatial and temporal boundaries, but offers some illustrative examples and avenues for future research and discussion.

## **SPATIAL (RE)CONFIGURATION OF A GULAG TOWN**

Vorkuta provides a vivid example of how the construction and perpetuation of a forced labor institution drove the use of space. Among the many forced labor institutions created across the Soviet Union in the Stalin era, Vorkuta was somewhat unusual in that it was a virtual tabula rasa when building began. A geological expedition from Moscow first discovered coal on the banks of the Vorkuta River in the summer of 1930. To the geologists this area of Arctic tundra held boundless possibilities for development, never before settled by sedentary populations (although it had long been a stopping point for Nenets reindeer herders). Permanent settlement in Vorkuta began the following summer in 1931, when the first group of prisoners and nonprisoners arrived to begin the process of mining coal (Barenberg 2011, 2014). Prisoners began building barracks on the banks of the Vorkuta River where the first coal seams were discovered and where it seemed most promising to begin sinking mines. The area surrounding the first mine became known as Rudnik and would serve as the administrative center of a camp division (the “Usa section,” named after the nearby Usa River) that was only one part of the vast camp complex covering the northeast part of Komi ASSR (“Ukhta Expedition,” later Ukhtpechlag). Although Rudnik was the clear center of activity, construction quickly spread far across the tundra

in order to build new mines and engage in various other extractive activities. By the 1940s, this came to include several small mines, an electrical generating station, and various factories associated with coal production.

In fact, Vorkuta was developed not as a single concentrated city but as a ring of mines and adjacent settlements. By the 1950s, it was common among locals to talk about Vorkuta as a skull, since the outline of the railroad lines (and later, roads) linking the settlements resembled a human head. Of course, the macabre image of Vorkuta as a skull had other symbolism. The actual city of Vorkuta would be located in the southeast part of this ring, near one of Vorkuta's large mines (no. 40, later Vorkutinskaia). In terms of the basic spatial configuration of settlement in Vorkuta, there is nothing terribly unusual about its pattern of development—built without a master plan, settlements popped up wherever coal was found, so that the labor force could live near the mines where they worked. Later, there would be a “general plan” for building the city proper, but throughout most of the 1930s–1950s the haphazard spread of settlement was much like any other Soviet industrial town. The fact that Vorkuta was a Gulag outpost had little effect on where settlements and mines were placed.

Of course, the fact that the majority of those working in the mines were prisoners and exiles had important consequences for how space was configured *within* the ring, at least in theory. According to common practices in the Gulag, prisoners, and often exiles, were required to live within “zones” enclosed by barbed wire (Rossi 1989). Thus, camp sections and nonprisoner settlements surrounding these mines were supposed to be divided from each other, even if the residents of each actually worked together in the mines. It was not only prisoners but also exile populations, particularly those that were transferred to Gulag sites during and in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War (holding Soviet POWs, “mobilized” ethnic Germans, repatriates from German occupied territory), who were also supposed to be held within “zones,” although these were to be separated from both prisoners and nonprisoners. Yet, as explored in recent work by Wilson Bell and others, such zones were often porous, with people, information, and practices frequently crossing the borders between “inside” and “outside” (Barenberg 2009, 2014; Bell 2013). Further, many camp “zones” were not in fact enclosed as Gulag regulations required. Throughout the 1930s, little was done to strictly delineate borders between spaces of the camp complex and spaces of the city in Vorkuta.

Systematic efforts to separate camp from city spaces did not begin in Vorkuta until the early 1940s. For one thing, the camp complex was constantly short of the wood and barbed wire needed to delineate or create separate zones for prisoners, a process often called “zonification” (*zonifikatsiia*). The imperative to enclose all camp spaces came only with the outbreak of the Second World War and the increased suspicion of prisoner and exile populations that followed. In fact, investigations done following an armed uprising by prisoners and former prisoners from the Vorkuta camp complex in early 1942 revealed that thousands of prisoners there lived in areas that had not been “zonified” (Rogachev 1996; Barenberg 2014). The enclosure of camp sections proceeded more rapidly after this uprising in Vorkuta and across the Soviet



Union, as NKVD chief Lavrentii Beriia sent out explicit instructions for all camps to increase security and vigilance (Kozlov and Lavinskaia 2004:142–143). Yet the fact remains that throughout the first decade of the Vorkuta camp complex's existence many prisoners lived in spaces that were not in any way divided from those occupied by nonprisoners.

A second imperative to strictly delineate and divide the spaces of the camp came with the official foundation of Vorkuta as a city with its own territory and population, a process that was initiated by camp director Mikhail Mal'tsev in 1943. Moving construction from Rudnik on the left bank of the Vorkuta River, he assigned the Vorkutlag Planning Department the task of beginning to build a city on the right bank of the river. After Vorkuta received the official administrative designation as a city in November 1943, Mal'tsev began to commission the city's first separate public spaces. The first such space was a park and boulevard built in honor of the Soviet Union's coming victory in the Second World War. Victory Park and Victory Boulevard were built predominantly by prisoners, with the nonprisoner population providing some "volunteer" labor on days off. By the time it had been completed in 1945, prisoners and nonprisoners had transformed an area of empty tundra into a space with walking paths, grass, birch and pine trees, as well as various small structures including a children's play area. Not surprisingly, the park was surrounded by a wooden fence, although this was clearly not for security purposes. Instead, it delineated this particular space as an area exclusively for nonprisoners and also as an area of leisure (Barenberg 2014).

The construction and delineation of Vorkuta's first public spaces was accompanied by the first attempts to build structures that were more ambitious than the ubiquitous single-story camp barracks that housed prisoners, nonprisoners, and administrative offices alike. For example, Mal'tsev charged architect Vsevolod Lunev with designing a building for the recently founded Vorkuta Musical Drama Theater. This structure, which was completed in 1946, featured an ambitious façade executed in Stalinist neoclassical style. Although it was built entirely of wood, the exterior was painted in such a way as to simulate stone (Barenberg 2014:76). Like the Children's Hospital discussed above, the theater was one of a series of structures built in the late 1940s and early 1950s that followed a similar pattern: built of wood in Stalinist neoclassical style, designed by prisoners and exiles, built by prisoners, and intended to be used primarily by nonprisoners. During construction the worksite was a liminal space, neither fully part of the camp nor part of the city, with prisoners brought to the worksite under armed guard each morning. It was only once construction was completed that the theater became a fully nonprisoner space, a designation indicated, as in the case of Victory Park, by a low fence around the structure. The theater, in fact, remained a largely liminal space over the next decade, as it was a site of constant encounter between the prisoner and nonprisoner populations. The majority of the performers on stage were prisoners, whereas the audience consisted only of nonprisoners. In this sense, the fault line between camp and noncamp spaces ran through the center of the theater itself in the division between stage and audience.

The complex configuration and reconfiguration of space in Vorkuta becomes even clearer once one turns from the process of “zonification” to its opposite, what one might call “dezonification”—that is, how parts of the camp became parts of the city. Once spaces had become more strictly delineated as belonging to camp or city, redesignating them required special effort. A frequent pattern for establishing new neighborhoods in the city of Vorkuta and surrounding settlements was not to build new structures and areas for nonprisoners (as in the case of monumental structures such as the theater or Children’s Hospital) but rather to redesignate camp “zones” as parts of the city. An early example of this took place in September 1945, when camp director Mal’tsev decreed that an entire camp section holding more than one thousand prisoners was to become part of the city instead. This was camp section 1, which had housed prisoners working primarily on the construction and operation of the first mine on the right bank of the Vorkuta River, Kapital’naia (no. 1). The order does not specify exactly what happened to the prisoners, but presumably they were moved to other zones nearby. In spatial terms, the outcome was clear: barbed wire fencing was dismantled, and nonprisoners moved into what had just been camp barracks (Barenberg 2014:77). This redesignation of an entire camp zone was not a unique occurrence—over the course of the next 15 years it would be repeated throughout the city and camp complex. As I have described elsewhere, the process was at its most intense in the middle of the 1950s, when large numbers of prisoners were given permission to live outside the camp “zone” before they were released, and as a result many camp sections became city spaces as barbed wire was moved (Barenberg 2009). But from the 1940s onward, the majority of nonprisoner spaces in the city were in fact created in this manner, through processes of “dezonification.”

The above discussion demonstrates that spaces in the camp and city were frequently redesignated throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Even as concerted efforts were made to “zonify” camp areas, such areas were likely to be later “dezonified” so that they became part of the city. The alternation of these processes might best be considered a counterpoint of “zonification” and “dezonification,” one that in fact contributed to the ambiguity of special designations rather than their reinforcement. The fact that buildings under construction did not clearly belong to either category further contributed to this uncertainty over space. Thus, the case of Vorkuta suggests that the notion that spaces were clearly delineated as belonging to the Gulag or the “outside,” whether expressed in the form of the archipelago metaphor or the division between the “little zone” and the “big zone,” is not sufficiently nuanced and complex to describe the relationship between camp and city spaces. Further, although one can discern general trends in the delineation of space, there was no unidirectional process by which camp became city. Instead, there was an ebb and flow as parts of the camp became parts of the city and vice versa. This suggests that while camp and city seemed to be separated and mutually exclusive categories, in fact the relationship between them was largely symbiotic (or perhaps parasitic): they grew in concert, however unevenly. From the early 1930s until late 1940s, the growth of the camp far out-



paced the growth of the city. But from the late 1940s onward, it was the city that grew far more quickly, largely by swallowing parts, and indeed populations, from the camp complex.

## **THE GULAG TOWN IN THE COMPANY TOWN: RETHINKING TEMPORAL BOUNDARIES OF THE GULAG**

In what ways did the Gulag break free of its temporal boundaries? An obvious way to look at the Gulag's legacies in communities like Vorkuta follows the above discussion of space and how it was configured: many structures and spaces that began in the camp later became part of the city. This was true of the humblest camp barracks and monumental buildings like the Children's Hospital. The former usually were "transformed" into workers' dormitories, often after only the most minimal renovations. The latter were built for nonprisoner populations in the first place, and it was upon completion that they essentially became part of the Gulag's legacy. Thus, the Gulag broke free of its temporal boundaries because, in a very concrete sense, structures that were built by forced labor (and often used by prisoners) continued to stand for months, years, and frequently decades. Even in the twenty-first century one does not have to go far in the city of Vorkuta to see a structure or space that was built with prison camp labor.

Another clear way in which the Gulag did not "end" in the 1950s can be seen in the millions of former prisoners and exiles who remained in Gulag cities, towns, and villages across the Soviet Union. Cities like Vorkuta that grew alongside camp complexes were a frequent place for former prisoners and exiles to settle. It was here that tens of thousands of former prisoners and exiles attempted to reintegrate themselves into Soviet society and build new lives for themselves. In 1953–1958 alone, approximately 105,000 prisoners were released from the Vorkuta camp complex (Barenberg 2014:203). While not all of these former prisoners remained in the city, a conservative estimate would suggest that at least one third of the population of Vorkuta at the end of the 1950s consisted of former prisoners and exiles (I have found few hard statistics on this in the archives). These former prisoners were joined by tens of thousands of outside recruits, mainly demobilized soldiers and Komsomol volunteers who came to the city as part of various campaigns of volunteer labor mobilization, such as Khrushchev's "social call-up" launched in 1956. The second half of the 1950s became a time of rapid demographic transformation for Vorkuta, with tens of thousands of recruits, former prisoners, and free migrants coming and going from the city each year. With the population in flux, former prisoners and exiles provided the social backbone of the city.

With so many former prisoners and exiles remaining in Vorkuta, social networks among these groups became a powerful force in the city. Archival and memoir evidence suggests that, not surprisingly, social networks formed within the camp tended to be transposed outside the "zone" after release. Ex-prisoners came to rely on other ex-prisoners to help get established on the "outside," particularly when looking for jobs and housing. Such assistance could take the form of having a temporary place

to stay while looking for permanent housing, a sympathetic consideration for a job applicant, or help finding permanent housing in a dormitory. The memoirs of former prisoners often attest to the importance of such aid in getting reestablished, especially given the rampant institutional discrimination against former prisoners. Such aid was not always looked upon favorably by the party leadership or by the security organs, and Vorkuta's local party committee frequently saw discussions critical of ex-prisoners hiring other ex-prisoners. Yet there is little doubt that social networks of former prisoners operated in Vorkuta for decades.

Nationality played a particularly important role in the constitution of such networks of former prisoners and exiles. As Barnes and others have pointed out, national networks became ubiquitous in the Gulag during and after the Second World War due to a large influx of prisoners from the Western borderlands of the Soviet Union, particularly prisoners from the Baltic states and the Western Ukraine (Barnes 2011; Barenberg 2014). Many of these prisoners had fought actively against the establishment or reestablishment of Soviet power in their countries and therefore were well prepared to operate clandestine networks in the postwar Gulag. Such national prisoner networks often continued after release, since the kind of assistance that they could render remained as important in the city of Vorkuta as it had been in the camp complex. In fact, such national networks were likely strengthened by the discrimination that former prisoners faced after release. As Amir Weiner (2006) has demonstrated, fear of unrest in the Western borderlands led authorities to request that released prisoners and exiles be sent back to their previous places of imprisonment or exile. Thus, many former prisoners found themselves unable to return to the Western borderlands because of suspicion, and the experience undoubtedly reinforced a sense of national identity in their sites of reexile.

Such national networks appear to have included not only former prisoners and exiles but also many of the new recruits coming to Vorkuta in the second half of the 1950s and first half of the 1960s to replace departing prisoner labor. Such was the suspicion, at least, of KGB officials who conducted surveillance of former prisoners. For example, Vorkuta's KGB chief complained in 1958 of a birthday celebration that had involved both Lithuanian former prisoners and a Lithuanian demobilized soldier. The partygoers had allegedly sung Lithuanian nationalist songs, an example of how the pernicious influence of former prisoners might corrupt the idealistic Soviet youth who were arriving in the city by the thousands (Barenberg 2014:211). Regardless of the veracity of these particular allegations, they do suggest that nationality often trumped other aspects of identity in patterns of socializing. Social networks formed in the Gulag not only continued to exist outside of it but expanded and adapted to new circumstances. This is an important example of how the Gulag continued to shape Soviet society long after the mass releases of the 1950s.

It was not only former prisoners and exiles who stayed in the city. Various nonprisoner employees of the camp complex and its attached industries also remained in Vorkuta during its transition from Gulag town to company town, and

they continued to play important roles in city life. For example, Kseniia Plastinina, a nonprisoner who started her working life in Vorkuta, came to the city from nearby Ukhta to work as a coal miner in 1936, working her way up to the position of mine director in 1954–1957. After this she served as the head of the cadres department for the Vorkuta mining complex (Kombinat Vorkutaugol') and thus was responsible for managing personnel in the city's largest company (Barenberg 2014:169). Perhaps the most vivid example was Aleksandr Popov, an official who scaled the very heights of power within Komi ASSR. Born and educated in Leningrad, Popov began working in the Gulag system in 1939. Transferred to Vorkuta in 1947, he became one of the most powerful officials in the Gulag town, serving as deputy and then head of the Vorkutlag political section or *politotdel*, essentially the top party official in Vorkuta. During the transition from Gulag town to company town, he moved from the camp party leadership to the city party leadership. In 1957–1963 he served as First Secretary of the Gorkom, the top official in the local government of the largest city in Komi ASSR. Later he would serve in various key posts in the Komi Obkom as one of the top officials in the region as a whole (Roshchevskii 1997–2000, 2:482–483). When the largest coal mine in European Russia was opened near Vorkuta (in Vorgashor) in November 1975, it was Popov who gave a speech marking its opening (Barenberg 2014:231). Like Plastinina and Popov, thousands of other nonprisoner managers and political officials of various kinds remained in the city long after Stalin's death, wielding significant authority in local governance and management of economic affairs. As was the case for many former prisoners, Vorkuta also provided nonprisoners with opportunities for social mobility.

Continuity in both the prisoner and nonprisoner populations had a wide variety of effects on the social and economic practices of the company town, demonstrating some of the many ways that the Gulag was not temporally bound. For example, archival and memoir sources suggest that various practices surrounding the labor process continued to be deeply influenced by the legacy of forced labor. In Vorkuta, as in other places where prisoner and exile labor had predominated, there were frequent complaints that bosses continued to treat workers as they had treated prisoners. This problem was noted by nonprisoners, particularly new recruits who had been brought to the area to replace departing prisoners. Such recruits, often young Komsomol volunteers, were shocked by their poor treatment at work-sites. Young volunteers from the Yaroslavl' region who were recruited via the "social call-up" of 1956 to work on railroad construction near Vorkuta complained repeatedly of their rough treatment by bosses. They concluded that this was due to the officials' habits formed through working with prisoners (Barenberg 2014:181). A Komsomol official in one of Vorkuta's mines made similar observations, stating that "those who worked under the MVD have retained the same methods of work: cursing, threats, and rush jobs."<sup>1</sup> Such complaints are not surprising given that the entire city and mining complex had been based on a social and occupational hier-

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<sup>1</sup> Gosudarstvennoe uchrezhdenie Respubliki Komi "Natsional'nyi arkhiv Respubliki Komi," fondokhranilishche no. 2, f. 1791, op. 1, d. 108, l. 81.

archy in which “bosses” had wielded extraordinary power over both the prisoners and nonprisoners, backed with the ever-present threat of violence. It would take more than a few months or even years for habits to change.

If the treatment of workers by managers continued from a previous time, so apparently did the behavior of workers on the job. As has been widely noted by historians of the Gulag, the practice of *tufta*, or cheating to fulfill high production quotas, was common for prisoners who tended to be rewarded at a relatively flat rate for plan fulfillment and not adequately incentivized for overfulfillment. The result was that most workers and brigades used any method possible to do less work and still fulfill labor norms (Rossi 1989:455–457; Khlevniuk 2004:338–339). Such practices clearly continued after the mines had been converted to nonprisoner labor, much to the frustration of managers and officials. Low productivity and poor coal quality were endemic, and long-standing practices of attempting to manipulate production numbers were difficult to eliminate. To be fair, many of the practices that constituted *tufta* were common throughout the Soviet economy, but they were particularly acute and widespread in the Gulag and remained so in former Gulag industries. With tens of thousands of former prisoners working in various mining occupations and serving as brigade and mine section leaders, many aspects of the working culture of the Gulag remained ubiquitous in Vorkuta long after the transition to nonprisoner labor.

The legacy of the Gulag was also clearly present in personnel matters. Former prisoners and exiles were subject to increased scrutiny on the part of party and police officials, and they faced periodic campaigns of discrimination in the workplace. As I have described elsewhere, the second half of the 1950s was marked by a series of purges of former prisoners from managerial and specialist positions in the company town (Barenberg 2013, 2014:216–220). Former prisoners were considered to be both politically suspect and inadequately trained for positions of responsibility in Vorkuta’s mines, and many were fired or demoted in order to satisfy political imperatives imposed on the mines by local and regional party officials. Such discrimination was never entirely systematic, and former prisoners still remained in some managerial positions—but over time, fewer former prisoners held such positions, and the limits on how high they could scale the hierarchy became increasingly strict. Thus, despite the fact that ex-prisoners had been released from incarceration, having once been a prisoner continued to be a marker of identity that had negative connotations in the company town. Further, because of the general continuity in party and management cadres throughout the 1950s and 1960s, it was often former Gulag officials who made decisions to fire or demote ex-prisoners, a situation that was likely to perpetuate practices and behaviors from the Gulag.

On the other hand, being a former prisoner or exile could be an asset when looking for a job in Vorkuta and other former camp cities. While there was indeed periodic, intense scrutiny of former prisoners occupying important specialist or management positions, the same was not necessarily true for mid-level or low-level positions. Thus, there was frequent criticism of managers giving preferential treatment to former prisoners. A Komsomol official in March 1956 complained that

managers would only hire former prisoners, one example in a litany of complaints about ex-prisoners preferring to hire their own (Barenberg 2014:180). Local party and Komsomol authorities seemed to see this as a corrupt and potentially dangerous practice by which ex-prisoners could spread heterodox political views. But from an economic perspective this was a perfectly rational solution to a key problem of the 1950s and early 1960s, which was finding sufficient qualified workers to replace departing prisoners. Ex-prisoners were often a known quantity to managers, since they were trained, experienced, and much more likely to remain in the city than the Komsomol volunteers and demobilized soldiers who came to the city in droves but also left it in large numbers.

It is easy to see in these examples of work and hiring practices oppositional relationships between managers and workers, former camp officials and former prisoners. Indeed, there was clear antagonism expressed in speeches by management and party officials against former prisoners, and the persistent labor culture of *tufta* could be characterized accurately as a form of resistance. But it is important to point out that despite the fact that antagonisms did often come to the surface, there was a great deal of mutual accommodation in the relationships between management and workers, ex-prisoners and former camp staff. First of all, it was not so simple to divide the social hierarchy into “us” versus “them.” Despite discrimination against former prisoners, some continued to work in management positions. By that same token, former camp employees also worked alongside former prisoners in the mines and on assembly lines. And the fact that an increasingly large proportion of the population of the city came from outside recruits further complicated the social fabric and perhaps diluted social tensions. All of those living in the city stood to benefit from the successful operation of the coal mines, and this factor seems to have gone a long way to maintaining relative social harmony in the company town.

The examples described above are admittedly limited. But they do demonstrate that continuities in populations and labor practices meant that many of the institutional, social, and economic relationships of the Gulag town continued to have a life after the mass releases of the 1950s and the rapid transformation of the Gulag. The continued presence of so many former prisoners, exiles, and camp officials meant that many relationships and practices that had begun in one particular political economic context continued to exist in the company town, albeit in somewhat changed forms. Just as the camp complex was not clearly bounded in space, it was not limited in time either, and it continued to have long-term effects on Vorkuta and on thousands of communities with connections to the Gulag across the Soviet Union.

## **TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED HISTORY OF THE GULAG IN THE USSR**

Release from the Gulag was often considered to be a key turning point in the lives of prisoners, and rightfully so. It meant an immediate change in social and economic status for the individual. It might include the possibility of reuniting with friends and family, perhaps for the first time in decades. It is often described in memoirs and

literature produced by ex-prisoners as a deeply emotional experience (Ginzburg 1981:173). Yet in some memoirs and retrospective sources release is described as a remarkably seamless experience. Take, for example, Stepan Semegen, a prisoner who worked in one of Vorkuta's mines in 1953–1958. This is how he described his release in the spring of 1958 for a collection of memoirs published in 2002: "In 1957–1958 the substitution of prisoners for free workers gradually began, and as of April 1958 I also began to work as a free worker. But my production status was not affected by this: I had been a tunneling brigade leader and remained one" (Bernshtein 2002:226–227). While we ought to be critical of how seamless this transition truly was, it does point to some interesting questions about what being released from the Gulag actually meant for individuals. How far, spatially and conceptually, did prisoners travel when released? Did they cross any borders upon release, and if so, how easy were these crossings? How separate was the Gulag from the rest of Soviet society?

As I have demonstrated in this essay, evidence from Vorkuta suggests that the Gulag was bound neither by space nor by time. The twin processes of "zonification" and "dezonification" meant that buildings and spaces were frequently shifted back and forth between the camp complex and the city. This could not help but have a profound effect not only on the landscape of Vorkuta but also on the everyday lives of the many prisoners, nonprisoners, exiles, camp officials, and others in the area. By that same token, the Gulag did not simply disappear after the reforms of the 1950s. Not only did institutions of forced labor continue to exist—people, social networks, and practices did as well. All were transformed by the new social, economic, and political context of the post-Stalin era. As Dobson (2009) has demonstrated, this was an extremely fluid time when many individuals had difficulty adjusting to rapidly shifting political winds. But as the examples given above show, neither former prisoners nor former camp officials found their footing by simply dispensing with social practices and relationships that they had developed and used during Stalin's lifetime. Instead, they often relied on tried-and-true methods and relationships to meet the challenges of the new times. Such continuities also affected new recruits and migrants to the city as they were integrated into the social fabric of Vorkuta. The legacies of the Gulag had a profound influence on the company town of Vorkuta and its citizens for decades to come.

Examining the Gulag as a phenomenon that was not bound by space or time unlocks many other possibilities for understanding its complex legacies that are beyond the scope of this essay. One avenue of research, which has been suggested by the work of Dobson (2009) and Michael Jakobson and Lidia Jakobson (1998), is to examine the profound influence of the criminal cultures that were given wide diffusion throughout Soviet society after the mass releases of the 1950s. Rather than simply look at social networks of former prisoners as I have suggested above, one could examine what kinds of cultural practices were transmitted through these networks and later became part of mainstream Soviet culture. Another equally important approach is to examine the memory of the Gulag and its effects on various populations across multiple generations. While some scholars have begun the process of examining the issues of history and memory of the Gulag, this is a topic with



many avenues yet to be explored (Gheith and Jolluck 2011; Barenberg 2014). How did the memory of the Soviet system of forced labor shape the experiences of millions of Soviet citizens from the 1950s onward? How were such memories transmitted between generations, and what effects did these memories have on how Soviet and post-Soviet citizens understood their cities, regions, and countries?

Finally, I would like to suggest that the complex legacies of the Gulag are best understood by looking at problems on the micro scale. The reappraisal of the Gulag over the past 30 years, driven by grand political changes, the availability of new sources, and the application of new approaches and methods, has gone a long way towards understanding the “big picture” of the Gulag. Yet, this has meant the relative neglect of small-scale social, economic, and social relationships in forced labor institutions and their surrounding communities. The legacies of the Gulag, often subtle, may be difficult to discern in large-scale studies. Instead, focusing on particular communities, social groups, and individuals can help to illuminate many of the hidden ways that the Gulag continued to shape life in the Soviet Union, and continues to shape lives in the post-Soviet successor states.

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## Г УЛАГ В ВОРКУТЕ: ЗА ПРЕДЕЛАМИ ПРОСТРАНСТВА И ВРЕМЕНИ

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Исследования, на основе которых написана эта статья, проводились за счет выданного Советом по библиотечным и информационным ресурсам гранта имени Меллона на изучение первоисточников с целью написания диссертации по гуманитарным наукам, Евразийской программы Совета по исследова-

*ниям в социальных науках, финансируемой Госдепартаментом США в рамках программы «Title VIII» по исследованиям и обучению специалистов по Восточной Европе и независимым государствам – бывшим членам Советского Союза, а также при поддержке Чикагского университета.*

В этой статье приводятся доказательства того, что ГУЛАГ не был ограничен пространственно-временными рамками. Подобно другим недавним историографам, автор описывает ГУЛАГ и советское общество как единое целое, иллюстрируя свой тезис на примере Воркутлага и Речлага – заполярного лагерного комплекса, сооруженного в 1930-х годах. Впоследствии этот комплекс стал одним из крупнейших исправительно-трудовых лагерей в Советском Союзе, а после закрытия лагерей превратился в промпоселение. Автор, рассматривая взаимосвязанные процессы «зонификации» и «де-зонификации», показывает в своей работе сложность и изменчивость пространственных взаимоотношений между лагерями ГУЛАГа и окружающими их сообществами. Отвечая на вопросы о том, что произошло с Воркутой, когда из лагерного города она превратилась в промышленный поселок, автор приходит к выводу, что выходцы из ГУЛАГа, привычные им социальные связи и лагерные рабочие практики оказали сильнейшее влияние на развитие города и после массовых амнистий 1950-х годов. В заключение высказываются предложения о методах исследования ГУЛАГа, трактуемого как неотъемлемая часть советского общества.

**Ключевые слова:** ГУЛАГ; Воркута; пространство; границы; наследие; социальные связи; бывшие заключенные