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Simon Ertz*

Abstract

This paper asserts that approaches focusing on administrative agents and their policies are indispensable in identifying the essential functions of the Stalinist camp system. To illustrate this point, it presents three interrelated methods suited for research in this direction. Dwelling on the insights gained in the process, it proceeds to demonstrate that the Stalinist camp system, while operating within a set of politically and ideologically defined parameters, functioned largely according to economic principles, and concludes by explaining why this is not a paradox.

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I. Introduction

Since the early 1990s, the preconditions for in depth-studies of the Stalinist camp system have improved dramatically.¹ A veritable spate of recollections of former prisoners has poured out since the period of *Glasnost* and now supplements the numerous personal testimonies that had been available previously. The declassification of masses of records of the camp system's administrative organs, vast amounts of which have been acquired as microfilm copies by several Western research institutions and libraries and/or published in voluminous source editions, marks an even more significant watershed.² Access to these documents enables historians for the first time to thoroughly analyze the internal functioning of an institution that for decades has been regarded one of Stalinism's most notorious trademarks.

In response to the enormous broadening of the source base, various scholars have attempted to develop and establish new approaches to the subject. Among others, Oksana Klimkova, Kate Brown, and Stephen Barnes have posited the need to scrutinize complex social and cultural practices inside the camps and to relate them to characteristics and dynamics of the Soviet system at large. Moreover, they have called for a stronger contextualization of the Stalinist camp system with regard to historical precedents and legacies as well as to other historical phenomena, including National-Socialist concentration camps or even US-American practices of extralegal confinement, interrogation, and torture of the present day.³

¹ By "camp system" I refer, in the first place, to the system of "corrective labor camps" (*ispravitel'no-trudovye lageria, ITL*). However, with certain qualifications the approaches and the findings presented in this paper are equally applicable to the "corrective labor colonies" (*ispravitel'no-trudovye kolonii, ITK*) that existed alongside the camps throughout Stalinism, since their functions were at once kindred and complementary to the functions of the camps. For details, cf. Simon Ertz, "Lagernaia sistema v 1930-e – 1950-e gg.: evoliutsiia struktury i printsipov upravleniia," in *GULAG: Ekonomika prinuditel'nogo truda*, eds. Leonid Borodkin, Paul Gregory, and Oleg Khlevniuk (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2005), 90-128, here: 92-100.

² Representative of the state of knowledge prior to the opening of the archives is Ralf Stettner's industrious survey "*Archipel GULag. Stalins Zwangslager - Terrorinstrument und Wirtschaftsgigant: Entstehung, Organisation und Funktion des sowjetischen Lagersystems 1928-1956*" (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1996). Scores of unpublished testimonies of former prisoners are kept by branches of the society "Memorial" in Moscow, Petersburg, and elsewhere, while the Moscow Sakharov Center has made available online the full texts of more than 1,200 published memoirs: <http://www.sakharov-center.ru/asfcd/auth/>. The most voluminous and carefully prepared edition of archival documents is *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga: Konets 1920-kh – pervaiia polovina 1950-kh godov*, 7 vols., (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2004–5).

³ Oksana Klimkova: "GULAG: ot mifotvorchestva k izucheniiu," *Ab Imperio*, no. 3 (2005), 501-28; Kate Brown, "Out of Solitary Confinement: The History of the Gulag," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian His-*

Without doubt, such approaches can open up nuanced and diversified perspectives. But will they also allow to eventually clarify the function the camps were supposed to fulfill within the Stalinist system?⁴ Or will we abandon this question as hopelessly simplistic, once we will get used to construe the situation inside the camps as utterly multifaceted and shaped by diverse factors and dynamics? And will the opening of comparative perspectives erode the notion that there was something qualitatively distinct about the Stalinist camps?

This paper argues that the Stalinist camp system, all its complexity and all its parallels to and continuities with other historical contexts notwithstanding, had a number of essential and distinctive characteristics. It demonstrates that in order to discern these one needs to approach

tory, vol. 8, no. 1 (2007), 67-103; Stephen A. Barnes, "Researching Daily Life in the Gulag," *Kritika*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2000), 377-90.

⁴ This is not to downplay the significance of scholarship produced since the opening of the archives. For one, valuable case studies, such as Nick Baron, "Conflict and Complicity: The Expansion of the Karelian Gulag, 1923-1933," *Cahiers du Monde russe*, vol. 42, no. 2-3-4 (2001), 615-48; idem, "Production and Terror: The Operation of the Karelian Gulag, 1933-1939," *Cahiers du Monde russe*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2002), 139-80; or David J. Nordlander, "Origins of a GULAG Capital: Magadan and Stalinist Control in the Early 1930s," *Slavic Review*, vol. 57, no. 4 (1998), 791-812, have yielded nuanced insights into the development and operations of specific camps and into center-periphery dynamics. Other authors have tackled the camp system as a whole. Focusing on economic performance, institutional organization, and the impact of terror campaigns, Oleg Khlevniuk has tremendously enhanced our understanding of the working of the camp system's apparatus and brought to light multiple problems and dysfunctions that characterized it (*The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004); idem, "The Economy of the OGPU, NKVD, and MVD of the USSR, 1930—1953: The Scale, Structure and Trends of Development," in *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag*, eds. Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2003), 43-66, idem and Marta Kraveri, "Krizis Ekonomiki MVD (konets 1940-kh – 1950-e gody)," *Cahiers du Monde russe*, vol. 36, no. 1-2 (1995), 179-190). Yet perhaps precisely for this reason he has refrained from formulating a clear-cut, generalizing statement on the role of the camps in the Stalinist state. Galina M. Ivanova's work has been similarly pioneering in illuminating such crucial aspects as production issues and problems, cadres policies, and the camp system's internal court system (*GULAG v sisteme totalitarnogo gosudarstva* (Moskva: Moskovskii obshchestvennyi nauchnyi fond, 1997), which has appeared in an English translation as *Labor Camp Socialism: The Gulag in the Soviet Totalitarian System* (Armonk, NY & London: M.E. Sharpe, 2000) and in an updated and extended version as *Istoriia GULAGa, 1918-1958: Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskii i politiko-pravovoi aspekty* (Moskva: Nauka, 2006)). Unlike Khlevniuk, she clearly does attempt to arrive at a comprehensive explanation of the camp system by invoking historical (e.g. deficiencies in pre-revolutionary Russian legal culture), structural/organizational, and ideological factors (with the two former sets of factors being explored much more judiciously than the latter). However, her attempt to craft a coherent argument ultimately peters out—both because Ivanova merely accumulates these different factors (rather than integrating them) and because she repeatedly descends into moral judgments. Moreover, the analytical value of her work is blunted by the imprecise delineation of the subject matter, a common problem addressed in section II of the present paper. The same applies to Anne Applebaum's well-written survey *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003). While Applebaum, too, points to the influence of pre-revolutionary Russian and broader European traditions and trends, her account is quintessentially predicated on the premise that the Soviet camps were the outgrowth of a deeply inhumane ideological project. Therefore, Applebaum does not ask *why*, but merely *how* it happened that the Soviet system produced such a thing as the camp system. In fact, she endeavors, by describing the gruesome hardships, deprivations, and horrors of Soviet state terror and the camp system, to 'expose' the 'true,' 'evil' nature of the Soviet (Communist) system, faithfully reproducing the intellectual operation Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn performed thirty years earlier in his *Archipelag GULag: Opyt chudozhestvennogo issledovaniia* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1973-5). At the expense of delinquently downplaying or eliding numerous strengths and achievements of the enumerated works, I would maintain, then, that none of them contains a satisfactory answer to the question formulated above.

the camp system as an institution that operated in a certain field of action defined by parameters and expectations formulated by the political leadership. If one takes one step back, the relevance of such a perspective is blatantly obvious. Central and local camp authorities determined the living conditions to which prisoners were permanently exposed.⁵ Consequently, if we talk about camp deaths—prisoners who starved to death, were worked to death, died of sickness, or as a consequence of violence—we first and foremost blame the institutions that created and run the camps over more than two decades, alongside with the Stalinist system that brought them into being and was responsible for their operations, and rightly so. Yet basic questions concerning the roles, latitudes, and strategies of concrete administrative agents have attracted surprisingly little attention. Without answering them, however, it is all but impossible to name the reasons for the most significant outcome of the camps—the plight and the suffering of their inmates.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section II illustrates how premature generalizations can blur our understanding of the role of the camps during Stalinism. Sections III to V present three interconnected approaches suited to organize and pursue research in this direction. Section VI summarizes and sketches out the basic logic that determined the existence and the operations of the Stalinist camp system.

II. “Gulag”—The Analytical Pitfalls of a Catchword

Studying the roles and policies of administrative bodies requires an understanding of their organizational and functional delineation. Yet precisely such issues have often been

⁵ It goes without saying that factors like assistance and solidarity, or, contrariwise, animosity or hostility exhibited by other prisoners could, for better or worse, prove even more decisive with regard to the fate of *individual* prisoners. Yet even such arrangements or conflicts usually took place within a framework that was either positively (regulation of camp life and work processes, assignment of prisoners to specific functions, collusion with criminal prisoners, etc.) or negatively (neglect of control, corruption, failure to fight criminality within the camps, lack of resources, etc.) created and shaped by the institutions in charge of administering the camps. Thus, even though the social dynamics within the camps complicated the fundamental link between administrative action and conditions on the ground, they did not diminish its significance. Consider, for instance, that throughout Stalinism, prisoner mortality across the camp system was highly correlated with the degree to which resources were (made) available to the camps (I. V. Bezborodova, introduction to *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga*, vol. 4, *Naselenie Gulaga: chislennost' i usloviia sodержaniia*, 27-58).

glossed over in both research and general scholarly statements about the camp system.⁶ The single most important reason for this problem has been the rampant popularity of the term “Gulag,” derived from the acronym “GULAG,” the name of the main administration of camps (and, at times, colonies) within the OGPU/NKVD/MVD of the USSR, extant from 1930 to 1960. Needless to say that in official documents, “GULAG” was never used to denote anything else than *the* GULAG—a specific administrative body. Yet the term’s frequent appearance in various discursive contexts across the camps and colonies almost inevitably led many a prisoner to invest it with meanings that were at once less precise and more notorious and fateful than its official one. Thus it seems all but natural if Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in his seminal work on the Soviet camp system and the terror, authored from the viewpoint of prisoners, chose to refer to his subject (at once metaphorically and metonymically) as the “GULag archipelago” or (purely metonymically) as “the Gulag.” Henceforth it became common to use the term GULAG, GULag or Gulag⁷ as a shorthand for the whole spectrum of camps, colonies, prisons, and often further penal institutions (e. g. forced settlements) during Stalinism. Moreover, frequently authors writing about “the Gulag” cover, in addition to the enumerated institutions, penal legislation and judicial policies of the Soviet state⁸ as well as the practices and experiences of arrest, interrogation, and conviction.⁹

Such usage of the term might be appropriate if a description and analysis of various repressive elements of Stalinist rule, or of an array of individual or collective experiences of

⁶ Oksana Klimkova offers a partially kindred and much more sweeping critique of the recent literature, albeit her main point is that conceptual and methodological shortcomings have been impeding the study of the social and cultural history of the camp system (“GULAG,” 505-9).

⁷ In contemporaneous official documents, “GULAG” is the standard spelling. In most of the recent Western literature, however, “Gulag” has become the most widespread version.

⁸ Such an approach has also been chosen by the editors of the source editions *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga* and *GULAG (Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerej): 1918–1960*, eds. A. I. Kokurin and N. V. Petrov (Moskva: Materik, 2000).

⁹ Among the most typical examples are, again, Solzhenitsyn, *Arhipelag GULag*; Anne Applebaum, *Gulag*; Galina M. Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism*; idem, *Istoriia GULAGa*. Meanwhile, the appropriation of the term for ever more distant contexts continues unabatedly, as illustrated by book titles as Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005); Nghia M. Vo, *The Bamboo Gulag: Political Imprisonment in Communist Vietnam* (Jefferson, N.C. & London: McFarland, 2004); Mark Dow, *American Gulag: Inside U.S. Immigration Prisons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

people who were subjected to these policies and practices is intended.¹⁰ Serious problems arise, however, when such a broadly descriptive and collective conception of the “Gulag” is used as though it were a concrete analytical category. Two typical examples should illustrate this point. First, regardless of occasional and partial deviations from this rule, there *were* fundamental differences between various types of penal institutions under Stalin—regarding their inmates or subjects, their internal and external characteristics, their punitive, and, not least, their social and economic functions.¹¹ For instance, while the inmates of camps and colonies were permanently and rigorously coerced to perform forced labor, the victims of deportation and forced exile had to work, throughout most of the Stalinist period, under conditions that were, in economic terms, closer to those of regular workers in comparable industries and branches than to those of prisoners in camps and colonies¹². Inmates of prisons, in contrast, usually did not work at all, while those millions of Soviet subjects who had to perform “forced labor at the workplace” were not deprived of their physical freedom.

Second, we now know that, contrary to long-standing assumptions, arrests in the Soviet Union were never determined by a hypothetical need for forced laborers, but driven by political and ideological considerations. From the viewpoint of the camp system administrators, then, the number of inmates constituted a basically exogenous variable, often subject to unforeseeable vacillations that caused managerial problems.¹³ Hence, carrying out arrests and convic-

¹⁰ For a successful example of the application of the first approach cf. Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag*. Examples of the second approach are too numerous and variegated to be adduced here.

¹¹ For a brief overview see J. Arch Getty, Gabor T. Rittersporn, and Viktor N. Zemskov, “Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre-War Years: A First Approach on the Basis of Archival Evidence,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 98, no. 4 (Oct. 1993), 1017-49, esp. 1019-20.

¹² Of course, the appalling circumstances and conditions of the deportation of most exiles tended to eclipse the peculiarities of their new socio-economic status, which, in addition, became settled only after the early 1930s. Furthermore, given their *forced* relocation as well as the marked degradation of their living and working conditions it usually entailed, these persons often perceived their work as *forced* labor. However, since every Soviet subject *had* to work, it might be more accurate to say that exiles faced the application of this general compulsion under often abject living conditions that were forcedly imposed upon them. On labor regulations for forced exiles see the introduction to *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga*, vol. 5, *Spetspereselentsy v SSSR*, 23–94. For the prewar period, see also Khlevniuk, *History*, 12-8, 20-1, 270, 273.

¹³ For some examples of administrative correspondence that allow to draw this conclusion cf. State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF): *fond R-9414, opis' 1, delo 1140, listy 38, 130* (hereafter: R-9414/1/1140: 38, 130); R-9414/1/334: 191-4; *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga*, vol. 3, *Ekonomika Gulaga*, 257; GARF. R-9414/1/117: 14; Khlevniuk, *History*, 10, 24, 84, 244; Oleg Khlevnyuk: “The Economy of the Gulag,” in *Behind the Façade of Stalin's Command Economy*, ed. Paul R. Gregory (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2001), 111-29, here: 118.

tions, on the one hand, and the management of the camp system, on the other, were separate tasks fulfilled by distinct institutions, which, at times, did not even coordinate their actions remarkably well.

All too often, these insights are still not given due consideration in recent research. When, for instance, Golfo Alexopoulos observes that Stalin enacted the amnesty of 1945 against the resistance of Beria, at that time People's Commissar for Internal Affairs, who voiced concern over the arguably economically disruptive consequences of such a measure, and proceeds to conclude that the "gulag was, first and foremost," a penal institution and should be interpreted as such¹⁴, the question why, then, Stalin's penal policy was attacked,

See also Golfo Alexopoulos, "Amnesty 1945: The Revolving Door of Stalin's Gulag," *Slavic Review*, vol. 64, no. 2 (Summer 2005), 274-306, here: 284-6, 304-5; Peter H. Solomon, Jr., "Soviet Penal Policy, 1917-1934: A Reinterpretation," *Slavic Review* vol. 39, no. 2 (June 1980), 195-217, here: 209; Getty/Rittersporn/Zemskov, "Victims of the Soviet Penal System," 1036-7; Christopher Joyce: "The Soviet Penal System and the Great Terror," in *Stalin's Terror Revisited*, ed. Melanie Ilić (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 90-115.

Against this welter of evidence, the hypothesis that economic plans influenced the number of arrests—articulated, *inter alia*, by Stanislaw Swianiewicz in his *Forced labour and economic development: An enquiry into the experience of Soviet industrialization* (London & New York: Oxford University Press, 1965)—must be considered obsolete. Unconvincing, too, is Edwin Bacon's recent attempt to revive it by asserting (without references) that Five-Year Plans envisaged the availability of large numbers of prisoners in future periods. Not only does this observation not allow to establish any causal link, it also neglects the highly provisional character of Five-Year Plans, which were of little operational significance (Edwin Bacon: "Gulag," in *Encyclopedia of Genocide and Crimes against Humanity*, ed. Dinah L. Shelton (Detroit: Thomson Gale 2005), vol. 1, 422-7, here: 425; on Five-Year Plans and the nature of planning under Stalin see Paul R. Gregory, *The Political Economy of Stalinism: Evidence from the Soviet Secret Archives* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 111-25, Andrei M. Markevich, "Byla li Sovetskaia Ekonomika Planovoi? Planirovanie v Narkomatakh v 1930-e gg.," *Ekonomicheskaiia Istoriiia: Ezhegodnik 2003* (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2004), 20-55.

Unrelated are James Harris' observations that party and administrative organs in the Urals demanded more *deportations* among the peasant population in the years 1930/31 (James R. Harris, "The Growth of the Gulag: Forced Labor in the Urals Region, 1929-1931," *Russian Review*, vol. 56, no. 2 (April 1997), 265-80, here: 273-6.) Although the author discusses so-called "special settlements" for forced exiles, he claims to write about "the Gulag" and "camps." Obviously unaware of the various institutional differences between the former and the latter, he then generalizes his results to draw conclusions putatively applicable to the entire "camp system" (265-6, 279-80), delivering a vivid example for the confusion the indiscriminate use of the term "Gulag" can yield (the argument and fallacies are reproduced in Harris, *The Great Urals: Regionalism and the Evolution of the Soviet System* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999, 105-22)). Moreover, Harris' conclusions must be qualified even with regard to the special settlements he actually discusses: as Lynne Viola has shown, the "push factor"—the resolve to simply get rid of "kulaks"—was by far the dominant one in the process of their expulsion and deportation in the 1930s (Lynne Viola, *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin's Special Settlements*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. Cf. also Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag*, 12-8; Nicolas Werth, *Cannibal Island: Death in a Siberian Gulag* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007)).

Finally, one has to consider separately the targeted arrests of a number of scientists and engineers with the purpose of assigning these persons to selected enterprises of the People's Commissariat (since 1946: Ministry) of the Interior (NKVD/MVD) or to secret, isolated "*sharashki*," where they were forced to work upon projects of strategic importance, e. g. for the aircraft and armaments industries (Applebaum, *Gulag*, 55; Khlevniuk, *History*, 197-8; Jacques Rossi, *Spravochnik po Gulagu*, 2nd, enlarged ed. (Moskva: Prosvet, 1991), 452-3).

¹⁴ Alexopoulos, "Amnesty 1945," 303. A similar statement follows on p. 305: "The 1945 amnesty underscores the gulag's essential character as a penal institution." Obviously, Alexopoulos refers to the camp system as "gulag" and to the main administration (the GULAG) as "Gulag".

with recourse to *economic* arguments, by the key representative of the very “penal institution” meant to execute it remains unexplored.¹⁵

While these are just sporadic glimpses into a scholarly practice that is as pervasive as it is problematic, they should suffice to make palpable the fundamental analytical problems arising out of the subsumption of manifold different institutions and policies under the term “Gulag” and the subsequent application, to the resulting, inevitably *polymorphous* construct, of one-dimensional questions—e. g. for a single general, underlying rationale. This is not to deny that various links, policies, and trends transgressed and extended across institutional boundaries within the Stalinist repressive and penal apparatus. Nevertheless, historians should be cognizant that any generalization, lest it results in an undue simplification, presupposes a sufficiently thorough understanding of all various objects it is meant to cover. Hence, given the multifariousness of their subject matter, students of the camp system and other penal and repressive institutions during Stalinism would be well advised to attend to actually existing and acting institutions, rather than to introduce, *a priori*, an overarching, but diffuse, if not deceptive concept of “the Gulag.”¹⁶

If one focuses, then, on the Stalinist camp system and construes it as an institution designed to serve specific functions using a given scope of latitude and a certain set of resources, putative contradictions disappear and the question for its underlying rationale can be restated more precisely. From this perspective, one can easily concede that the Stalinist camp system was, indeed, a penal institution, owing its existence, as any penal institution, to the fact that prison sentences were meted out, and its growth to the unprecedented degree to which this happened under Stalin. This seemingly trivial, but nevertheless essential insight leads us to ask: according to what rules did the penal institution “camp system” operate, and what factors determined its structure, and, so to speak, its phenotype?

¹⁵ Ibid., 284.

¹⁶ For the sake of clarity, I have chosen to abandon the figurative use of the term “Gulag” altogether and to use the acronym “GULAG” exclusively for the said main administration within the OGPU/NKVD/MVD. The term “Gulag” figures in the title of this paper for the sole purpose of attracting the attention of potential readers.

III. Letting Institutions Speak for Themselves

The most obvious approach to tackle this question consists in asking how administrative agents understood their general tasks. Internal documents, particularly those relating to concrete management issues, are often quite instructive in this regard. To demonstrate this, I will discuss and contextualize several examples from various key moments throughout the existence of the camp system.

In July 1929, when the industrialization campaign was already in full swing, the USSR's Council of People's Commissars (SNK) decreed on Stalin's directive that henceforth *all* persons convicted to prison terms of three years and above would serve these in "corrective labor camps" subordinated to the OGPU and slated to solve challenging and strategically important economic tasks.¹⁷ In addition to their intended contribution to industrialization, the Bolsheviks hoped that these camps of a new type would achieve another major goal that had been formulated for all places of confinement in 1918 and had since played a prominent role in internal discussions: full cost recovery (*samookupaemost'*)¹⁸. From a letter from the NKVD of the RSFSR to the SNK of the USSR, dated April 4, 1930, we learn that

The main motive behind the fundamental decision on the transfer of [people] sentenced to [prison terms of] 3 years and above to the camps of the OGPU was the full cost recovery [achieved] in the camps of the OGPU; the colonies of the NKVD [of the RSFSR] at that point were not sufficiently developed, and there was no guarantee of a full exploitation of the labor force of the prisoners in [these] penal institutions.¹⁹

In face of this unambiguous statement, it should come as no surprise that the idea to "re-

¹⁷ Kokurin/Petrov, *GULAG*, 62–5. For more background cf. Simon Ertz, *Zwangsarbeit im stalinistischen Lager-system: Eine Untersuchung der Methoden, Strategien und Ziele ihrer Ausnutzung am Beispiel Norilsk, 1935-1953* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2006), 39–43.

¹⁸ Kokurin/Petrov, *GULAG*, 6, 31; Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism*, 15, 186; idem, *Istoriia GULAGa*, 145; Michael Jacobson, *Origins of the GULAG: The Soviet Prison Camp System, 1917-1934* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1993), 36, 50, 66, 86–8, 97–8; Peter H. Solomon, Jr., "Soviet Penal Policy, 1917-1934: A Reinterpretation," *Slavic Review* vol. 39, no. 2 (June 1980), pp. 195–217, here: 210.

¹⁹ GARF. 5446/11a/725: 3. For the significance of the goal of full cost recovery at this juncture cf. also GARF. 5446/11a/725: 10, 10 overleaf (hereafter: 10of.); 5446/11a/555: 3, 5, 19, 32, 32of; "Rozhdenie GULAGa: Diskussii v verkhnikh eshelonakh vlasti," ed. S. A. Krasil'nikov, *Istoricheskii Arkhiv*, vol. 5, no. 4 (1997), 142–56, here: 143–5; M. B. Smirnov, S. P. Sigachev, and D. V. Shkapov, "Sistema mest zakliucheniia v SSSR: 1929–1960 gg.," in *Sistema ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagerei v SSSR, 1923–1960: Spravochnik*, ed. M. B. Smirnov (Moskva: Zven'ja, 1998) 25–74, here: 26, 28; Andrei B. Suslov, "Spetskontingent i prinuditel'nyi trud v sovet-skikh penitentsiarnykh kontseptsiiakh 1930-kh godov," *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, vol. 5 (2004), 81–96, here: 81–3. See also Solomon, "Soviet Penal Policy," 208, 210.

educate“ prisoners did not figure in debates of this period about the functions of the OGPU’s camps²⁰, the latter’s ostensibly programmatic new name notwithstanding²¹.

By the second half of the 1930s, the camps had vastly expanded in number and size and constituted the dominant type of places of confinement for convicts across the Soviet Union. Up to this point, the entire system of camps and colonies, as well as the often complex economic tasks their inmates fulfilled, had been administered by the GULAG. A universal management agency, the GULAG was responsible for the fulfillment of investment and production plans as well as for the camps’ punitive and disciplinary functions.²² Despite the main administration’s growing size and diversification²³, managing this welter of challenging and partly conflicting tasks became increasingly difficult. The ensuing conflict of goals was expressed at a party meeting of GULAG personnel in April 1937, when one of the camp system administrators articulated the state leadership’s primary expectation towards the GULAG: “Our fundamental task consists in putting to use [*izpol’zovat*] the people, their physical force.“ As he went on to argue that “our task is not only this, but also the re-education of those people,“ he at once criticized and acknowledged the order of priorities that was imposed—explicitly or implicitly—upon the camp administration by the political leadership.²⁴ The dominance of the goal to exploit prisoners’ labor force manifest in this statement is confirmed in a report on the state of the surveillance of prisoners, delivered by deputy head of the GULAG Dobrynin in late 1939, which explained the “unsatisfactory state of the regime in the colonies of the OITK²⁵,” first and foremost, by the fact that “the directors of OITK and colo-

²⁰ Smirnov/Sigachev/Shkapov, “Sistema mest zakljucheniia v SSSR,” 26-7.

²¹ The OGPU’s “concentration camps“ were relabeled “corrective labor camps“ in June 1929 (Kokurin/Petrov, *GULAG*, 62), even though it took several years until the former name completely disappeared from internal usage (Ivanova, *Istoriia GULAGa*, 164).

²² Ertz, “Lagernaia sistema,” 101-6; “Corrective labor codex“ of the RSFSR of August 1, 1933 (published in Kokurin/Petrov, *GULAG*, 73); “Regulation [*polozhenie*] on corrective labor camps“ of April 07, 1930 (ibid., 65–72); lecture by the chief of the GULAG, Nasedkin, at the NKVD Academy on October 5, 1945 (ibid., 298-9); internal lecture on the origins and the functions of the GULAG from May 12, 1947 (GARF. R-9414/1/374: 4).

²³ Ertz, “Lagernaia sistema,” 105-6; Khlevniuk, *History*, 242.

²⁴ Ivanova, *GULAG v sisteme totalitarnogo gosudarstva*, 104. I am offering here what I consider a semantically accurate translation of the quotation as provided in the original Russian version of Ivanova’s book. The English edition offers a translation that, by straightening out the syntax, distorts the meaning. Cf. Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism*, 89.

²⁵ Unlike the vast majority of camps, corrective labor colonies were not directly supervised by the GULAG, but

nies direct their main attention to production issues, entrusting secondary officials with [the maintenance of] the regime and the isolation of criminals.”²⁶

By this time a fundamental restructuring of the camp system’s administrative apparatus was underway. Since the end of the 1930s, separate administrations were being created within the GULAG to oversee the economic operations of the camp economy’s diverse branches.²⁷ In 1940 and 1941 these units were spun off from the GULAG and elevated to the status of autonomous main administrations within the NKVD. The GULAG was thus stripped of the responsibility for most of the NKVD’s enterprises and investment projects staffed by prisoners.²⁸ Aside from the supervision of the remaining economic activities—mostly in agriculture and light industry—the GULAG was left with non-economic functions, including the control over the surveillance, the accommodation, and the state of health of prisoners, the formulation and enforcement of disciplinary regulations, the organization of propagandistic-agitational activities, and, in conjunction with the new economic main administrations, the surveillance of the exploitation of the prisoners’ labor force.²⁹ Clearly, this administrative restructuring indicates the intention to disentangle the responsibilities for economic and non-economic tasks. To understand whether henceforth equal importance would be placed on these partly conflicting goals, one should ask how the new distribution of competences affected administrative policies.

Insights into the GULAG’s leadership’s strategies can be gained, for instance, from the stenogram of a meeting from June 28, 1945, at which GULAG chief Viktor Nasedkin con-

by departments (at times abbreviated “OITK”) within the regional NKVD administrations. These departments, in turn, reported to the GULAG (Ertz, “Lagernaia sistema,” 120-1).

²⁶ GARF. R-9414/1/2989: 61-2. It is indicative that Dobrynin passed such judgment over the colonies, even though these were generally fulfilling productive tasks of lesser significance than the camps (Ertz, “Lagernaia sistema,” 94-8).

²⁷ GARF. R-9414/1/846: 1.

²⁸ Ertz, “Lagernaia sistema,” 106-15.

²⁹ The overlap of competences for labor utilization can be explained by the fact that both enterprises (supervised by production main administrations) and camps (supervised by the GULAG) could be responsible for a low percentage of working prisoners—the former because of poor labor organization, the latter by failing to provide adequate clothing, health care, or armed guards (Ertz, “Lagernaia sistema,” 112-4).

vened his department heads to discuss the key tasks for the second half of the year.³⁰ This meeting took place in the wake of the post-war amnesty which had freed significant internal resources, thereby opening up a window of opportunity to normalize the conditions in the camps and colonies³¹ after the cataclysmic war years.³² Accordingly, the discussion centered around plans to improve the accommodation and surveillance of prisoners. Various speakers detailed measures and policies such as increasing norms for food and clothing or “purging” the armed guards from “sick, old, and morally degenerate” members.³³ The head of the GULAG’s sanitary department, a certain Loidin, envisaged the improvement of various hygienic and health-related indicators: “we must tell the camps upfront what their percentage of group ‘V’³⁴ must be and what [prisoner] mortality [should be] [...]: that mortality should not exceed 0,25%³⁵ and group ‘V’ should not exceed 8%.³⁶ It was also Loidin who condensed the GU-

³⁰ GARF. R-9414/1/329: 158-83of.

³¹ In his concluding statement, Nasedkin declared: “And what is very positive—let me be frank [*I chto otradno, -nado priamo skazat’*]—are the favorable conditions that are forming in the post-war period for the work of the GULAG, allowing us to raise the quality of our work to a higher level than before. The contingents [of prisoners] have been reduced by almost 50 %. This is a huge, big [*sic!*] alleviation with regard to the work of the apparatus in the center and on the ground.” GARF. R-9414/1/329: 181. Note that this stenogram documents the stance of the GULAG leadership, which differs markedly from the view of Beria presented by Golfo Alexopoulos (“Amnesty 1945,” 284), who spoke for the NKVD’s camp system as a whole, i. e. including its economic activities and obligations. This observation both underscores the need to attend to the functions and strategies of various administrative agents and exemplifies the relative significance the NKVD leadership attributed to economic as opposed to non-economic targets.

³² The war deeply shattered the camp system. About 750.000 prisoners were evacuated, often under chaotic circumstances, from places of confinement in the Western parts of the Soviet Union, hundreds of thousands of prisoners were sent to the Red Army (where they mostly served in penal battalions), while illness and mortality rates among the remaining prisoners reached catastrophic heights as a result of the extreme scarcity of resources and a simultaneous maximal intensification of the exploitation of their labor force. See, e. g., the report by Nasedkin “On the work of the GULAG throughout the War Years (1941-1944)” of August 17, 1944 (Kokurin/Petrov, *GULAG*, 272-96); Steven A. Barnes, “All for the Front, All for Victory! The Mobilization of Forced Labor in the Soviet Union during World War Two,” *International Labor and Working Class History*, vol. 58 (Fall 2000), 239-60; Ertz, *Zwangsarbeit*, 81, 109-11, 144-5, 153.

³³ GARF. R-9414/1/329: 171, 171of, 168.

³⁴ Group “V” [in Russian: “B,” the third letter of the Cyrillic alphabet] equaled the percentage of prisoners who were not working due to sickness in relation to the absolute number of prisoners in a camp or colony generally classified as fit for work (GARF. R-9414/1/125: 125-6).

³⁵ This corresponds to an annual mortality rate of 3 %, as the GULAG had switched to displaying mortality in monthly instead of annual rates in 1943 (Aleksandr Kokurin and Iurii Morukov, “GULAG: struktura i kadry,” *Svobodnaia mysl’ XXI*, no. 8 (2000), 127-8). To my knowledge, there exists no evidence that the GULAG ever used, or introduced, before or after this meeting, this kind of ‘target figures’ for mortality rates. Still, while an annual mortality rate of 3 % in 1945 might have appeared low if compared with the extremely high mortality rates the camp system had experienced during the war years, one should note that it significantly exceeded the natural annual mortality to be expected to occur, under peacetime conditions, among a control group corresponding to the demographic profile of the camp population, i.e. including no children (infant mortality of children born inside the camps was accounted for separately) and comparably few old people. For a detailed discussion of the reliability and the implications of the GULAG’s mortality statistics see Ertz, *Zwangsarbeit*, 89-117.

³⁶ GARF. R-9414/1/329: 162, 162of.

LAG's tasks in the formula of bringing the camps into "exemplary condition,"³⁷ which resonated well with his colleagues, including his superior. Summing up the meeting, Nasedkin reiterated that the GULAG had to endeavor to "enhance the qualitative state of the camp[s], with respect to bringing [them] into exemplary condition," to accomplish an improvement of the "domestic infrastructure and the establishment of order with respect to the conditions of their [the prisoners'] accommodation," as well as to "take advantage of the [post-war and post-amnesty—SE] situation to improve the alimentation of the prisoners."³⁸

Numerous archival documents from the post-war period—orders, circulars, vast numbers of acts of revisions of individual camps—document that the GULAG, indeed, stuck to this policy of "bringing the camps into exemplary order," which burned down to ensuring that prisoners would not escape, were accommodated under half-way acceptable conditions, were well-guarded and supervised, and served their terms while performing forced labor.³⁹ However, the question arises how this policies harmonized with those of the NKVD/MVD's economic main administrations in charge of investment and production?

To be sure, the shared responsibility for labor utilization of prisoners made for some common ground, as did the GULAG's preparedness to promote measures to increase labor productivity.⁴⁰ Yet the purely economic concerns of the economic main administrations did not harmonize well with many of the demands that the GULAG presented to the camps and

³⁷ Ibid., 163-4; see also 161, 161of. Loidin did not invent this formula though—four months earlier, the NKVD had demanded that a number of "exemplary" camps and colonies be created (ibid., 157). However, from now on Loidin (and other GULAG managers) were propagating that *all* camps ought to be "exemplary." This policy was officially proclaimed by MVD directive no. 165 of June 24, 1946 (see GARF. R-9414/1/26: 93).

³⁸ GARF. R-9414/1/329: 181, 181of. In addition, it is worth noting that the GULAG managers were well aware that in the wake of the amnesty various NKVD's economic main administrations and enterprises might be inclined to myopically and excessively use the labor force of the fewer, remaining inmates, thus jeopardizing the broader task envisaged by the GULAG, the "preservation of the contingent [of prisoners]," which, as Loidin argued, was the precondition for a 'reasonable' exploitation of their labor force. Given this danger, GULAG chief Nasedkin remarked: "And now, in face of an extreme shortage of labor force, violations and abuses [*zloupotrebleniia*] are on the increase, therefore our measures [to facilitate the physical recovery of prisoners and to improve their state of health] must be resolute." Ibid., 163.

³⁹ For examples that contain the expression "exemplary," see GARF. R-9414/1/97: 69, 118. Acts of revision are kept in the archival funds of the GULAG's inspectorate group/department ("*kontrol'no-inspektorskii ot-del'*" / "*gruppa otvetstvennykh inspektorov*," GARF. R-9414/1 and R-9414/1d.). A report prepared by the referent of the GULAG chief, Lebedev, from May 1950 summarizes that "the task to transform the corrective-labor camps into exemplary corrective-labor institutions [...] constituted, indeed, the essence of all the work of the GULAG in the post-war period." GARF. R-9414/1/368: 55.

⁴⁰ Ertz, "Lagernaia sistema," 112-4.

colonies. In the late 1940s, ensuing tensions led to plans to reorganize the central administrative apparatus of the camp system. It is highly indicative that instead of strengthening its position, they provided for the GULAG's complete disbandment and for the transfer of the wholesale management of the camps and colonies to the economic main administrations. In a letter to the Minister of the Interior, Sergei Kruglov, from November 10, 1949, GULAG deputy chief Bulanov sought to avert this outcome. Guardedly arguing that "any economic main administration, given the best of intentions, inevitably, as experience has shown, concerns itself first of all with issues of production," he reminded the minister that the camps, besides serving economic purposes, should also comply with disciplinary regulations enacted by the MVD. Given that the GULAG had difficulties enforcing these against the interests of the economic main administrations even under the current arrangements, Bulanov contended, its disbandment would only make matters worse.⁴¹

Ultimately, the GULAG escaped liquidation. Yet its policies continued to encounter significant resistance on the ground, which was compounded by the fact that the separation of responsibilities for economic and non-economic tasks was much less pronounced at the level of individual camps and the appertaining enterprises and investment projects than in the central apparatus. In branches such as forestry or agriculture, the camp and the productive sector usually were not even administratively separated. But even in branches where they were, both sectors were normally headed by one and the same person.⁴² The GULAG's chances to implement its agenda under such conditions can be inferred from Dobrynin's circular from May 24, 1949, which pointed out that various directors of MVD camps and building sites "up to the present do not devote the necessary attention to the camp sector and to its consolidation with adequate cadres."⁴³ One year earlier, the "Main Administration of the Camps in Forestry" (GULLP), one of the MVD's production main administrations, had bolstered its de-

⁴¹ GARF. R-9414/1/100: 94-5.

⁴² Ertz, "Lagernaia sistema," 114-5. This pattern was referred to as *edinonachalie*, which might be translated as "unified management" or "one-man rule."

⁴³ GARF. R-9414/1/97: 118.

mand to transfer the maintenance costs of the camp system to the state budget with the prediction that “this will fundamentally change the current state of affairs, in which economic interests sometimes hold sway over the tasks of State security, which causes deficiencies in the state of the camps.”⁴⁴ Finally, in June 1953, Dolgikh, then chief of the GULAG, formulated an even more sweeping statement:

Previous practice has shown that the chiefs of the administrations of the ITL of the MVD construction projects and enterprises were mainly preoccupied with productive activity, while failing to devote necessary attention to the issues of ensuring proper prison conditions for and control over the prisoners, which led to negative consequences and to infractions of the [i. e. the GULAG’s] demands regarding the accommodation [*soderzhaniiia*] of prisoners.⁴⁵

Evidently, such behavior suggests that the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of economic tasks had graver consequences for local administrations of camps and MVD enterprises than the camps’ performance as “exemplary” penitentiaries, let alone re-educational institutions. This, in turn, indicates that the choices of local administrations reflected the preferences prevailing at higher political levels—in the MVD leadership and above.

To be sure, it might be argued that some internal documents offer divergent perspectives. Consider the example of an internal lecture from 1951 authored by V. S. Liamin, at this moment head of the GULAG’s organizational department, on the “organization of the exploitation of the labor of prisoners in the camps and colonies of the MVD.” Although Liamin’s lecture, too, states that the camp system’s basic task consisted in utilizing the labor force of “criminals” under conditions of their strict isolation from society, it simultaneously stresses the purported educational effects of forced labor, which is characterized as the principal instrument to discipline prisoners and to condition them to a working life in a socialist society.⁴⁶

Couldn’t one argue, then, that there must have been some substance behind such rheto-

⁴⁴ GARF. R-9414/1/334: 76. Note the use of “sometimes” as opposed to the declaration that the described conflict led to deficiencies in “the” (not: “some”) camps and the prediction that the proposed reform would “fundamentally change” the situation. Obviously, the author of the letter knew that its recipient—the head of the GULAG—was perfectly aware of the scope of the problems that the prevalence of economic goals caused on the ground.

⁴⁵ GARF. R-9414/1/585: 85. This statement was made shortly after the majority of the MVD’s economic projects, in the wake of Stalin’s death, had been transferred to civilian ministries. See Ertz, “Lagernaia sistema,” 115-8. For more evidence see *ibid.*, 125-6. Cf. also Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism*, p. 122-3.

⁴⁶ GARF. R-9414/1/502: 203

ric? One could—if we did not know a little more about Liamin’s background as a camp system administrator. In fact, Liamin had been preoccupied with the conflict between the camps’ and colonies’ economic and penal functions for many years. Particularly revealing is an episode from late 1946, when he was serving as deputy head of the GULAG’s department for accounting and distribution of prisoners. At this time, repeated observations of the perfunctory isolation of various categories of prisoners from each other prompted Liamin to conduct a remarkable inquiry, for which he requested the personal files of some 3,800 prisoners with more than one conviction on their record, randomly selected from a dozen camps. Analyzing these data, Liamin found that the overwhelming majority of those among these prisoners who had initially been sentenced for less severe offenses was subsequently sentenced for more serious crimes.⁴⁷ For him, this was proof enough that the exposure to the milieu of “bandits” and “counterrevolutionaries” in camps and colonies transformed many petty and often young first offenders into hardened and dangerous criminals. Liamin detailed these findings in a report to the Minister of the Interior, Sergei Kruglov. As a counterstrategy, he proposed a much more case-sensitive treatment of prisoners according to the ‘real’ danger they represented to the state and to their predicted future development than was both instituted in the legislation and implemented in the camps.⁴⁸ Hardened criminals and “counterrevolutionaries” were to be kept under strict isolation, whereas first offenders were to be subject to much less strict surveillance. Particular emphasis should be given to the goal of reeducating young (including underage) and malleable inmates through labor.⁴⁹

Three weeks after it had been submitted, Liamin’s report was discussed at a meeting of

⁴⁷ Out of the 3,825 prisoners in the sample, 1,035 had received their first conviction for what Liamin classified as relatively benign offenses, such as “petty hooliganism,” unexcused absences from work, non-fulfillment of military or state obligations. Out of these 1,035, more than 90 % were subsequently sentenced for “particularly dangerous” crimes, including “counter-revolutionary crimes,” robbery, and “banditry.” GARF. R-9414/1/26: 97-9.

⁴⁸ As mentioned above, the basic principle underlying the distribution of prisoners stipulated that inmates sentenced to three or more years of confinement were to be sent to camps, whereas all convicts with shorter terms were to be confined in colonies. While this rule was observed for the large majority of prisoners, in a significant minority of cases it was disregarded—often for reasons of economic exigency (Ertz, “Lagernaia sistema,” 94, 98-9). Moreover, using examples of a number of individual prisoners, Liamin illustrated that this rule missed its effect to the extent to which the Stalinist penal system handed out long prison terms even for relatively benign offenses.

⁴⁹ GARF. R-9414/1/26: 93-111.

the MVD leadership, at which, besides himself, deputy Minister of the Interior Chernyshov and GULAG chief Nasedkin participated. By and large, Liamin's superiors rejected his conclusion that the camps were a hatchery of serious criminals and "counterrevolutionaries"—with recourse to rather specious arguments.⁵⁰ Yet whether or not they genuinely believed that the camp system did not produce the negative social effects Liamin had outlined, they made it perfectly clear that any such confidence was based on the deterrent function that a stay in the camps exerted for offenders petty and serious and for prisoners current and past: "Even though to this day the political-educational work of the camps is totally insufficient to re-educate the prisoners, at any rate the punishment of [performing forced] labor in the camps and colonies is sufficiently serious to prevent the huge majority of convicts from the repeated commitment of crimes."⁵¹ Accordingly, Liamin's suggestions to widen the specter of punishments, to establish a more sophisticated categorization of prisoners, and to redistribute them accordingly across the country were dismissed as unnecessary.⁵²

Liamin, then, had been exceptionally well-acquainted with the state of affairs in the camps and colonies for many years. Not only was he perfectly aware that the camps, the way they were organized and run, did neither succeed in re-educating prisoners, nor in effectively isolating them from each other. He also knew that his superiors had neither the intent nor a mandate from the political leadership to fundamentally alter these conditions. Thus, when he incorporated slogans about re-education and correction through labor into his lecture in 1951, few people knew better than he did how distant such rhetoric was from current and past practice.

Even the limited number of internal documents presented so far allows to draw the pre-

⁵⁰ A brief protocol of the meeting signed by Chernyshov argued that from about 400,000 prisoners who had been released from the camps and colonies over the course of the year 1946, "only several thousand" had returned to the camps. Since this statement was made in the second week of January 1947, it ignored the possibility that many more might follow in subsequent periods. GARF. R-9414/1/26: 113.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Implicit in this appraisal was the fact that the topography of the camp system was determined by economic necessities, since camps were generally set up at places where prison labor was needed to fulfill a significant economic task (Ertz, "Lagernaia sistema," 95-6), which made a reorganization of the camp system on the basis of security concerns alone appear quite out of question.

liminary conclusion that economic goals played a central role in the policies of camp system administrators. While this does not mean that other considerations were absent—as has been shown, throughout the 1940s the GULAG consistently sought to improve the camps’ performance as penitentiaries—there is strong evidence that economic objectives tended to effectively hold sway over these.

IV. Probing for the System Directors’ Objective Function

A second method to identify the rules according to which the Stalinist camp system functioned has already been broached in the previous discussion: analyzing observable forms of behavior. Studying the choices that camp system directors made allows us to inductively conclude what their underlying preferences were, even in the absence of stated intent. In the following I shall demonstrate the potential of this method through an analysis of a specific policy that was applied at various times throughout the existence of the Stalinist camp system: so-called “workday credits” (*zachety rabochikh dnei*). Workday credits meant that prisoners received a reduction of their effective term of confinement for every day on which they fulfilled or overfulfilled production norms.⁵³ The amount of the reduction was determined by a coefficient that varied depending on different factors, including the degree of norm fulfillment. Elsewhere I have shown that the concrete specifications of this instrument reveal that the camp system directors *de facto* prioritized cost reduction or profitability over total output targets.⁵⁴ Here, I will ask what the application of workday credits reveals about the camp system’s functioning more broadly.

The practice of granting workday credits originated prior to the emergence of the Stalinist camps: the “Corrective-labor codex of the RSFSR” from October 1924, effective for all places of confinement under Republican supervision, stipulated that for prisoners exhibiting high

⁵³ For earlier remarks on this topic cf. Oleg Khlevnyuk, “The Economy of the OGPU, NKVD, and MVD of the USSR, 1930—1953,” 49, 55; Leonid Borodkin and Simon Ertz, “Coercion versus Motivation: Forced Labor in Norilsk,” *ibid.*, 75-104, here: 92-5.

⁵⁴ Simon Ertz, “Trading Effort For Freedom: Workday Credits in the Stalinist Camp System,” *Comparative Economic Studies* vol. 47, no. 2 (June 2005), 476–491.

labor productivity and acquiring professional skills in custody two workdays should be counted towards three days of their prison term. However, a condition reserving these benefits for “prisoners from the sphere of workers” lent them a ‘social-hygienic’ touch, as it privileged persons that were, from a Bolshevik viewpoint, socially ‘desirable.’⁵⁵

In contrast, the design of workday credits introduced in the OGPU’s “corrective-labor camps” in the early 1930s suggests that economic concerns played a more significant role than social or ideological motives. After having been tested among the prisoners of the “Vaigach expedition” that operated under particularly harsh conditions north of the Polar circle⁵⁶, workday credits were introduced in all OGPU camps in mid-1931. At the top-priority, gargantuan construction project of the White Sea-Baltic Channel, completed by more than a hundred thousand forced laborers, they prove their effectiveness in boosting labor productivity.⁵⁷ Although (postulated) class affiliation still brought the advantage of a slightly more beneficial ratio for the calculation of credits, it was no more necessary precondition for their receipt.⁵⁸

For individuals and forced exiles performing “corrective labor” at the workplace as well as for the “corrective labor colonies,” the new “Corrective labor codex” from August 1933 defined more advantageous ratios for the calculation of workday credits.⁵⁹ Almost identical conditions were adopted for the OGPU’s Vaigach expedition in 1934.⁶⁰ Both regulations failed to mention ‘class affiliation’ or social background. In January 1935, the conditions for receiving workday credits were once again revised for all places of confinement under the authority of the NKVD of the USSR (now including the colonies). The degree of term reduction was now to be calculated by multiplication of the number of actual workdays with coefficients ranging from 6/5 to 2/1. The least advantageous of these (6/5) was reserved to camp inmates sentenced for particularly ‘serious’ “counter-revolutionary” offenses—such as “es-

⁵⁵ Kokurin/Petrov, *GULAG*, 38.

⁵⁶ GARF. R-9414/1/369: 45.

⁵⁷ Mikhail Morukov, “The White Sea-Baltic Canal,” in Gregory/Lazarev, *Economics*, 151-162, here: 161.

⁵⁸ *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga*, vol. 3, 79-80.

⁵⁹ Kokurin/Petrov, *GULAG*, 83, 90.

⁶⁰ GARF. R-9414/1/8: 80n/o.

pionage,“ “terror,“ and “direction of counter-revolutionary groups.“ The ratio 5/4 was the basic coefficient for all other prisoners. It could be improved by one step (i. e. in both numerator and denominator) respectively for ‘class affiliation’ (which thus once again figured as one factor among others) and for “Stakhanov-“ and “Shock Workers.“ Prisoners in colonies had to accept a lowering of coefficients by one step, which was justified with their generally shorter terms and the fact that they performed, “in their majority, no works of union-wide significance.“ The highest coefficient of 2/1, however, was reserved for the inmates of a number of economically particularly important camps.⁶¹ These regulations remained in effect throughout the following four years, and the GULAG displayed earnest concern, as it had done earlier, to ensure the correct implementation of this incentive system and to prevent misuses (which occurred both to the advantage and disadvantage of prisoners).⁶²

Workday credits remained in effect until mid-1939, when Lavrentii Beriia, the new People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs, effectuated not only their abolishment, but also the cancellation of all credits prisoners had accrued up to this point. Beriia justified this step with the need to tackle “the most serious task of ensuring the maximum possible exploitation of the camps’ labor force.”⁶³ Confronted with an acute shortage of forced laborers in face of a rising number of demanding construction and investment projects assigned to the NKVD, Beriia reckoned that high labor productivity could be achieved without workday credits, which had the ‘costly’ side-effect of reducing the number of prisoners in the long run.⁶⁴ Accordingly, he simultaneously demanded the intensified use of material incentives such as improved nutrition and housing conditions (which were, however, already in effect) and tougher coercive meas-

⁶¹ *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga*, vol. 3, 126-32. The prisoners of the latter camps were used in gold-mining in the Far East (North-Eastern Camp), railroad construction in Eastern Siberia (BAM-Camp), and in the exploitation of rich coal and nickel-ore deposits in the Far North (camps in Vorkuta and in Norilsk, Vaigach-expedition; *ibid.*, 128; Top Secret NKVD Order no. 00239 of June, 25, 1935).

⁶² Ertz, “Trading Effort,” 479-80; *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga*, vol. 3, 534-5.

⁶³ GARF. R-5446/23a/121: 9.

⁶⁴ This incident represents the only known instance when the camp system’s administrators exerted influence on prisoners’ releases in response to economic needs. However, note that Beriia *reacted* to the assignment of investment projects to the GULAG that its managers perceived as unrealizable given the labor resources at their disposal.

ures.⁶⁵

The question of workday credits was raised again in internal discussions during the war years. Leading NKVD officials, seeking ways to enhance the catastrophic conditions inside the camps, extolled workday credits as the single most effective incentive to boost labor productivity. Yet in the wartime context, this amounted to wishful thinking, as the camp system administrators' key concern was not the productivity of *working* prisoners, but rather the high number of sick, emaciated, and incapacitated inmates. Since the main reason for the appalling physical conditions of these prisoners lay in the lack of material resources (about which, as NKVD officials acknowledged, nothing could be done), an immaterial incentive would hardly have been a remedy.⁶⁶ There was little reason, then, why the political leadership should have deviated from its strategy, applied to Soviet society and economy at large throughout the war years, to overcome the catastrophic shortages of resources by relying primarily on coercive measures.⁶⁷

Discussions on workday credits resurfaced with more tangible results in the second half of the 1940s, when the MVD's camp system was assigned numerous new challenging investment projects. Given the simultaneous considerable inflow of prisoners, the availability of forced laborers was now less of a concern than their work performance, and the cancellation of workday credits in 1939 came to be regarded as a mistake.⁶⁸ Hence, in December 1946, they were re-introduced in several camps of the MVD's "Main Administration of Camps in Industrial Construction" (*Glavpromstroï*)⁶⁹, and since March 1947 prisoners building the (never completed) railroad Chum-Salekhard in Northwest-Siberia were entitled to receive

⁶⁵ Kokurin/Petrov, *GULAG*, 116; Secret NKVD order no. 0168 of June 15, 1939; Ertz, "Trading Effort," 488-9.

⁶⁶ See the notes of an internal discussion hosted in September 1943 by deputy NKVD head N. S. Kruglov, reproduced in Kokurin/Morukov, "GULAG," *Svobodnaia mysl'* XXI, no. 7 (2000), 117-8.

⁶⁷ Mark Harrison, "The USSR and Total War: Why Didn't the Soviet Economy Collapse in 1942?" in *A world at total war: global conflict and the politics of destruction, 1937-1945*, eds. Roger Chickering, Stig Förster, and Bernd Greiner (Washington, D.C. & Cambridge: German Historical Institute/Cambridge University Press, 2005), 137-56.

⁶⁸ GARF. R-9414/1/334: 23. The articulation of such views might have been boosted by Beria's replacement as People's Commissar/Minister of the Interior by Sergei Kruglov in January 1946. Cf. also *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga*, vol. 3, 297.

⁶⁹ *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga*, vol. 3, 283-7; Ertz, "Trading Effort," 480. *Inter alia*, Glavpromstroï was involved in the Soviet nuclear project.

credits in the amount of up to three days for one workday⁷⁰. One year later, the Central Committee and the Council of Ministers passed a joint decree on the reintroduction of workday credits in the camps of Dal'stoi. During the following two years, these regulations were expanded to 19 further camps and an additional 40 colonies.⁷¹ Eligibility depended—the absence of infractions of the disciplinary regime aside—exclusively on the percentage rate of norm fulfillment. Thus, “counter-revolutionary” and “katorga” prisoners had the same chance to receive term reductions as inmates sentenced according to ‘ordinary’ articles of the criminal code.⁷²

All these facts suggest that the reintroduction of workday credits in the post-war period was primarily motivated by economic considerations. Internal MVD correspondence supports this impression: the fulcrum of the argumentation used by camp system administrators to propagate workday credits on higher political levels was the need to increase labor productivity at MVD enterprises and construction sites.⁷³ After their reintroduction, reports on their effects emphasized—similarly to analogous documents from the 1930s⁷⁴—primarily the positive development of productivity and other economic indicators⁷⁵, while an internal memo from 1950, signed by interim GULAG chief Trofimov, spells out that workday credits were intended for “camps pertaining to especially important MVD enterprises and construction projects.”⁷⁶ Indeed, requests from directors of camps of lower economic priority for permis-

⁷⁰ *Stalinskie stroiki GULAGA: 1930–1953*, eds. A. I. Kokurin and Iu. N. Morukov (Moskva: Materik, 2005), 303.

⁷¹ Top Secret TsK/SM Decree no. 1723-688ss of May 22, 1948; Top Secret MVD/Office of the Procurator General Order no. 00683/150ss of July 21, 1948; GARF. R-9414.1d.151: 281, *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga*, vol. 3, 289-91.

⁷² “Katorga” was a special form of punishment introduced in 1943 for treason or collaboration with the occupying power. Katorga-prisoners were sentenced to perform hard physical labor under particularly harsh prison conditions. One should note, however, that only one of the Special Camps, created in 1948 to isolate, under strict surveillance and the compulsion to perform hard physical labor, those among the “counter-revolutionary” prisoners deemed most dangerous, was among these, namely Special Camp no. 5, which was located in the Far East (*Beregovoi lager*). The inmates of the remaining eight (later: ten) Special Camps were barred from receiving workday credits (GARF. 9414/1/369: 45).

⁷³ For typical statements see GARF. R-9414/1/334: 194; *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga*, vol. 3, 289-92, 563.

⁷⁴ See, for instance, GARF. R-9414/1/8: 80n/o.

⁷⁵ *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga*, vol. 3, 283-6, 291-2; GARF. R-9414/1/326: 6, 43, 53; GARF. R-9414/1/369: 36; GARF. R-9414/1/502: 222. In addition, these documents often stress declines in infractions of the disciplinary regime.

⁷⁶ GARF. R-9414/1/369: 36. For the most part, this description matches the camps in which workdays were actually enacted in this period (*ibid.*, 48-9). Indeed, there was some concern that not all of these camps and colonies

sion for the application of these incentives were often turned down⁷⁷, so that by early 1953 they were available only to 40.4 % of all inmates of the MVD's camps and colonies.⁷⁸ In the post-war period, then, the MVD acknowledged both the benefits and costs of workday credits. While selectively using them to increase the productivity of forced labor at important economic projects, it simultaneously sought to limit the inevitable side-effect, the mid- and long-term reduction of the labor force, which might have jeopardized the ministry's ability to fulfill its economic tasks in the future. It was Stalin's death that obviated the need for such caution: in summer 1954 workday credits—with more advantageous scales than ever before—were introduced in all remaining camps and colonies of the MVD.⁷⁹

The story of the use of workday credits in the camp system thus illuminates how a pre-Stalinist policy designed to facilitate and accelerate the return to society of prisoners deemed socially acceptable from a Bolshevik viewpoint became increasingly subjected to economic paradigms since the early 1930s. Both in the 1930s and in the late 1940s, workday credits were first introduced in camps of particular economic significance, while the criterion of norm fulfillment clearly dominated, and eventually almost totally superseded political considerations. These insights exemplify the potential of targeted analyses of specific institutional policies pursued within the camp system. Furthermore, they serve to corroborate the hypothesis formulated above—the preponderance of economic goals in the system's directors' objective function.

V. Case Studies—When Policy Meets Practice

A third method to analyze the function of the Stalinist camp system consists in investiga-

qualified as “especially important” (*Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga*, vol. 3, 289).

⁷⁷ *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga*, vol. 3, 288-9, 292-3, 562-3. It deserves mentioning that Beria, at that moment Politburo member and Deputy Chair of the Council of Ministers, launched another—this time futile—attempt to abolish workday credits in March 1948 (*ibid.*).

⁷⁸ GARF. R-9414/1/507: 54.

⁷⁹ Ertz, “Trading Effort,” 481. To receive the maximum reduction of 3 days for 1 workday (which meant that one could reduce one's prison term by almost two thirds), a plan fulfillment of 121 % was now sufficient—until then this quota had stood at 151 %.

tions of specific camps or camp complexes. Studies of this kind, particularly if they relate the specific case with larger administrative practices and policies, permit to weigh against each other intentions, policies, and outcomes—the latter including the living and working conditions inside the camps. In the following I will outline some findings from a case study of the camp complex in Norilsk, which existed from 1935 until 1956. During this period it grew from small beginnings into one of the largest camp complexes in the Soviet Union and housed altogether more than 270,000 prisoners. Assigned to build from scratch and under arctic conditions an enormous nickel combine to exploit some of the world’s largest deposits of non-ferrous metals, it exemplified all but the ideal type of a Stalinist camp as formulated by the 1929 decree.⁸⁰

Given its remote location in Eastern Siberia and above the Arctic Circle, the Norilsk camp complex was particularly well-suited and extensively used to isolate from society prisoners deemed a particular political or social threat. At various times, it housed disproportionately high numbers of both hardened criminals and inmates sentenced for “counter-revolutionary” and other ‘political’ offenses.⁸¹ After the war, the Norilsk camp was one of the few camps housing “katorga” prisoners and comprising a camp department of “severe [disciplinary] regime” (*strogii rezhim*)⁸². Moreover, in 1948 a “Special Camp” was created in Norilsk.⁸³ In sum, the penal and political functions of the Norilsk camps were more pronounced than those of most other Stalinist camps. At the same time, the economic significance of the Norilsk construction project and, as soon as it started its operations, the nickel combine, was considerable: since the early 1930s, the USSR’s fast-growing heavy industry experienced an ever-increasing need for nickel⁸⁴, and the uniquely rich Norilsk deposits occu-

⁸⁰ The following passages are largely based on Ertz, *Zwangsarbeit*.

⁸¹ For concrete numbers from various years between 1938 and 1952 see GARF, R-9414/1/1140: 141; R-9414/1/1160: 6, 14, 16, 19; R-9414/1d/378: 3, 6, 8, 11; R-9414/1d/459: 1, 1of, 6, 11; R-9414/1d/486: 1, 3of.

⁸² On *katorga*-prisoners, see above, footnote 71. Camp departments of “severe regime” were set up in a number of selected camps in late 1948 with the purpose of isolating the toughest violent criminals and diehard recidivists from the remaining prisoners.

⁸³ See above, p. 12, footnote 72. The inmates of this camp, the Special Camp no. 2 (or *Gornyi lager*’), were forced to perform particularly harsh physical labor, mostly in ore and coal mining and in construction.

⁸⁴ Nickel was and still is mainly used to produce high-quality steel needed by machine-building and defense

pied a central place in the leadership's strategy to create a self-sufficient supply of this resource.

What, then, were the policies defined and pursued by central and local administrations in Norilsk, and what were their results? Analysis of qualitative and quantitative archival data and testimonies of former prisoners yields a number of observations. First and foremost, and contrary to what might be expected given the extremely harsh climatic conditions, prisoner mortality in Norilsk was on average significantly lower than in the camp system as a whole.⁸⁵ One factor contributing to this outcome was the practice of shipping to Norilsk only such prisoners who were deemed fit for work under arctic conditions. At least of equal importance, however, were the—slightly—higher nutrition rates that Norilsk camp inmates received and the in some respects—slightly—better living conditions they were granted in comparison with the overwhelming majority of other camps. Taken together, these policies affected not only mortality rates, but also resulted in rates of ill and non-working prisoners consistently below, and rates of labor exploitation consistently above the aggregate indicators for the entire camp system.⁸⁶

Furthermore, both central and local camp authorities devoted particular attention to the problem of labor productivity in Norilsk. In the 1930s, prisoners there were granted workday credits according to the highest available ratio, and in 1950, Norilsk became one of the camps that saw their reintroduction. Moreover, the director of the nickel combine and the camp, Vladimir Zverev, single-handedly modified the scales for the calculation of workday credits for prisoners in the core production sectors, arguing that the standards defined by the center were too difficult to meet under the conditions in local coal mines and the nickel smelter. After the establishment of a wage system for working prisoners in all MVD camps⁸⁷ and colonies in mid-1950, Norilsk prisoners received higher payments than inmates of most other

industries. Besides nickel, the Norilsk combine extracted significant amounts of copper, cobalt, and metals from the platinum-group.

⁸⁵ Norilsk stood out in this respect until the late 1940s, when aggregate mortality rates reached unprecedentedly low levels across the entire camp system. For concrete data cf. Ertz, *Zwangsarbeit*, 238-41.

⁸⁶ In Norilsk, the share of prisoners working in production, as opposed to those working within the camp sector and those who did not work due to illness or other reasons, usually fell in the range between 80 and 85 %, which was, in most periods, at least 10 % higher than the respective figure for the entire camp system.

⁸⁷ With the exception of the Special Camps, which saw their introduction two years later (i. e. in 1952).

camps, since wage differentiation favored forced laborers in mining and metallurgy.⁸⁸

To be sure, slightly better food rations and comparably more attractive work incentives notwithstanding, prisoners in Norilsk were forced to perform utterly harsh labor. Regardless of the statistically higher chance of survival they were facing throughout most of the time, suffering and deprivation were the order of the day, and malnutrition, consumption, and accompanying illnesses caused many deaths among the inmates. Thus, it would be erroneous to attribute the described ‘preferential’ treatment of prisoners in Norilsk to a supposedly more ‘humane’ approach to them either on the part of the central administrative agencies that sanctioned these measures, or on the part of the local direction of the camp and the nickel combine that implemented them.

The actual motivation behind the management of the Norilsk economic project and camps emerges from internal correspondence between central and local authorities. Whereas the NKVD/MVD’s main administration for the camps of mining and metallurgical enterprises (GULGMP) which supervised the Norilsk combine’s economic activities since 1941 had little reason for dissatisfaction as investment and production plans were overfulfilled year after year⁸⁹, the GULAG repeatedly reprimanded the Norilsk camp administration for its neglect of most non-economic issues. In early 1951, the head of the GULAG declared that

the director of the [Norilsk] camp [and of the combine—SE], engineer-colonel Zverev, still devotes little attention to the work of the camp sector, disregards issues of supervision, disciplinary regime, and operative work [i.e. gathering intelligence] and does not fulfill the MVD’s demands about the need to transform Noril’lag [shorthand for Norilsk camp] into an exemplary corrective-labor institution.⁹⁰

Half a year later, this situation had hardly changed, if we are to believe a revision act from November 1951:

The MVD [...] has repeatedly established that its orders regarding the consolidation of the surveillance, the conditions of detention, and the isolation of prisoners have been being gravely infringed upon in the Norilsk corrective labor camp for a long time, positive indica-

⁸⁸ Upon the introduction of wages, Norilsk camp and combine director Zverev promoted measures to enhance their effectiveness, such as broadening the range of goods available for purchase in camp stores.

⁸⁹ With the exception of 1943, when the combine had to cope with war-related shortages.

⁹⁰ GARF. R-9414/1d./151: 116.

tors in the fulfillment of production and investment plans notwithstanding [...] the management of the camp and the political department directed its main attention [...] not at the fundamental improvement of the work within the camp, but at the solution of productive-economic tasks. For precisely this reason they showed no insistency in bringing the disciplinary regime, the isolation, and the accommodation of prisoners in order.⁹¹

To what extent Zverev's focus on pure production figures caused him to neglect almost any other realm emerges from a detailed letter from December 1952 in which his deputy, I. P. Korol'kov, apprised the heads of the GULAG and the GULGMP of the sorry state of the camp's infrastructure. Inter alia, Korol'kov deplored the absence of canteens in almost all camp departments, a lack of sleeping places, bathrooms and kitchens for the inmates that were "totally unusable" or simply "collapsed," and the absence of wards in many camp departments.⁹² These and other egregious problems represented clear infractions of MVD orders and instructions that had been in force for many years. However, the repeated reprimands they earned Zverev failed to impact his strategies. This is not surprising, given his position was apparently unassailable as long as investment and production plans were fulfilled. In contrast, his deputy in charge of the "camp sector" was exchanged six times during Zverev's tenure from 1947 until 1953. One of these seven was I. P. Korol'kov.⁹³

The described problems were not linked to Zverev's person, but had structural roots. This is not only confirmed by the fact that they persisted even after Zverev had been replaced as camp director in spring 1953⁹⁴, but also spelled out in a report by the GULAG's Executive Inspector M. M. Markeev from January 1954. To be sure, this document was written after Stalin's death and the subsequent amnesty that had reduced the number of inmates at Norilsk by ca. 40 %. Yet Makreev's main point was that the fundamental problems at Norilsk had not changed a bit. Throughout the entire 18 years of its existence, the author deplored, the Norilsk

⁹¹ GARF. R-9414/1/461. 7–9.

⁹² GARF. R-8361/1/273: 120-2.

⁹³ GARF. R-9414/1/730: 190; R-9414/1/461: 53.

⁹⁴ There is no evidence that anyone of the directors of the Norilsk nickel combine and prison camp was replaced because of a failure to comply with the "camp-related" directives of the NKVD/MVD. While the first director of the project was removed and punished for the failure to fulfill the investment plan (Simon Ertz, "Building Norilsk," in Gregory/Lazarev, *Economics*, 127–150, here: 142-3), his successors went on to occupy, after having left Norilsk, high positions in industrial ministries, so that none of these replacements could be qualified as a demotion.

camp had never lived up to the center's demands regarding its role as a penitentiary. Despite recurrent inspections, reports, admonitions, and orders by the GULAG, the isolation, surveillance, and proper accommodation of prisoners had been perpetually neglected. Moreover, according to Makreev, Norilsk was no exception in this regard, but rather representative of other camps.⁹⁵

Such assessments should eliminate any doubts that both the privileges (a more able-bodied workforce, enhanced procurement norms, and the authority to use effective labor incentives) central authorities granted the administration of the Norilsk camp and the latter's earnest attempts to raise the prisoners' productivity served purely utilitarian goals. In the context of an economic project combining exceptionally adverse conditions, outstanding economic significance, and high expectations of the political leadership, these measures stemmed from a strategy to ensure maximum exploitation of the available labor force to achieve ambitious economic targets. Although prisoners in Norilsk were, by Soviet standards, particularly dangerous and 'unreformable,' they were not treated with exceptional vigilance. Instead, central and local camp directors, driven by economic concerns, made somewhat more rational use of their workforce, as a result of which prisoners faced, on average, a somewhat higher chance of survival. As Evfrosiniia Kersnovskaia, a 'political' prisoner and author of one of the most informative and incisive memoirs on the Norilsk camp (where she had performed forced labor between 1944 and 1952 in diverse positions, including the camp hospital's surgical ward), summed up: "They treated us like chattel [*nas ne shchadili, s nami ne tseremonilis*'], they were not all too sad in case of our death, but they gave medical treatment to those who had suffered injuries at the workplace, demanding their recuperation and their promptest return to work."⁹⁶

What does a case study of Norilsk reveal about the strategies that underlay the functioning of the camp system in general? Although Norilsk was not an average camp, broader con-

⁹⁵ GARF. R-9414/1/730: 188-93.

⁹⁶ Evfrosiniia Kersnovskaia, *Skol'ko stoit chelovek*, vol. 4 (Moskva: Fond Kersnovskoi, 2001), 58.

clusions can be drawn on its basis for at least three reasons. First, Norilsk represented in almost every respect the ideal type of a Stalinist camp as defined by legislative acts and programmatic documents: its economic and punitive functions were exceptionally pronounced. Second, the central institutions whose behavior has been studied for the case of Norilsk were the same that administered the camp system as a whole. Third, most of the strategies implemented in Norilsk were not fundamentally different from those applied throughout the entire camp system. Rather, general policies based on an overarching strategy of the exploitation of prisoners were slightly adapted to the specific difficulties and the extraordinary significance of this project. Taken together, these facts suggest that principles governing the functioning of the entire camp system crystallized in Norilsk more clearly and visibly than at other places.

If these principles were to be summarized, one would, once again, have to point out the primacy of economic targets, namely plan-fulfillment. The central and the local camp administration cared for the prisoners insofar as they represented a key resource required for realizing an ambitious task. In managing ‘its’ use, central and local managers sought to ensure ‘its’ effective exploitation while ensuring, to a certain degree, ‘its’ preservation. Thus, the well-being of prisoners *in itself* was not a primary goal for central agencies, and even less so for local camp administrators, particularly if its achievement would have required the diversion of significant material resources that could be used for immediate production purposes instead. The same logic speaks from the recurrent violations of rules meant to regulate the camp’s functioning as a penitentiary. Needless to say that the resulting, purely productive-oriented policy pursued by various Norilsk directors did not reflect the sum of demands formulated by various central agencies—ideally, the Norilsk combine was to overfulfill its plans *and* the camp to become an “exemplary” one. However, the choices made by Norilsk directors once again strongly suggest that economic goals enjoyed higher priority on the level of the ministry as well.

VI. The Role of the Camps in the Stalinist System

In this paper I have demonstrated that jettisoning the indiscriminate use of the term “Gulag” for a focus on concrete institutions and their policies is indispensable to reveal the logic according to which the Stalinist camp system operated. Three variants of such an approach outlined in this paper—attending to institutions’ intentions as articulated in operational contexts, analyzing concrete examples of their policies with regard to underlying preferences, and studying the choices made in the process of managing specific camps—have proven their potential to contribute to a coherent picture of the camp system’s *modus operandi*.

From all these angles it has become clear that the exploitation of prisoners’ labor force for productive purposes was a primary goal in the Stalinist camp system, often tending to overrule other functions the camps were supposed to serve. *De facto*, camp administrators treated and regarded prisoners in many ways as a resource needed to fulfill productive tasks.⁹⁷ This approach was fundamentally distinct from an exterminatory one, since it subjected the treatment of the prisoners to a functional rationality. At the same time, it was clearly not geared towards the preservation, at any cost, of the life of individual inmates. Even less did it provide for the avoidance, or even minimization of individual hardships the prisoners experienced in the camps.

This is not to say that prisoners in the Stalinist camp system were always and exclusively treated in this way—as has been shown, the GULAG also attempted, with mixed results, to make the camps function as penitentiaries.⁹⁸ Nonetheless, throughout Stalinism prisoners were in key issues—namely those that determined their chances of survival—confronted with policies in which they figured as a mere economic resource. This approach set the stage for their

⁹⁷ Anne Applebaum arrives at a similar assessment on this point, cf. her *Gulag*, xxxviii-xxxix.

⁹⁸ Along these lines, one might argue that the GULAG’s policies at times *did* imply attention towards individual prisoners, since they included the expectation that, ideally, every prisoner would be well-fed, well-guarded, and not subject to any abuses. Yet statements such as Loidin’s remark from 1945 concerning a ‘maximum tolerable’ annual mortality rate of 3 % indicate that, when it came to defining practical targets, GULAG managers, too, were inclined to classify prisoners as a mere “contingent“ of forced laborers, thus adopting the approach that underlay NKVD/MVD policies more broadly (see above, p. 11). In addition, one might note that rhetoric on purportedly “reforging,” i. e. “corrective” effects of forced labor never totally disappeared throughout the Stalinist period. This is hardly surprising, though: even if the motivation that had originally produced it had foundered long ago, there was no reason why this discourse should have been abandoned given it could still serve to consciously or subconsciously vindicate actual administrative strategies and actions. See above, pp. 15-7

concrete physical suffering, the degree of which depended on a variety of exogenous and endogenous parameters and variables.⁹⁹

* * *

Before we proceed, some epistemological clarifications are in order. Thus far, the argument has been a quintessentially analytical one. Simply put, analysis in historiography can be understood as the application, on the grounds of logically sound premises, of commonly accepted heuristic procedures to the available evidence. Consequently, findings obtained through analysis can be corroborated or falsified: their validity stands and falls with the validity of the chosen premises and methods. Since the premises and methods used throughout this paper are hardly controversial, it should be difficult to attack its findings on analytical grounds: the validity of the premises that, first, to explain the *Erscheinungsformen*, i.e. the phenomenological manifestations, of an institution, it is essential to ask for its *raison d'être*, its internal logic, and its *modus operandi*, and that, second, to determine these for an institution that was brought into being and managed by a vast state apparatus, it is essential to study the actions of the system's operators, should be self-evident. As for the methods applied, it should suffice to note that all of them form part of the elementary methodical toolkit used by historians across all fields. Moreover, one can easily formulate conditions under which the hypothesis that the camp system's leaders primary concern had been economic/production issues would have been disproved, namely, if analysis of their internal debates had yielded the preeminence of different concerns, if analysis of their observable behavior had revealed not economic, but other underlying preferences, and if local camp directors had not so clearly prioritized economic targets. Thus, the findings are potentially falsifiable and fulfill Karl Pop-

⁹⁹ Exogenous (from the viewpoint of the camp system) factors were, inter alia, geographical conditions, country-wide shortages and famines, war, campaigns and waves of terror. Endogenous factors included, inter alia, adverse selection in the recruitment and brutalization in the everyday service of camp personnel, dysfunctional behavior, especially in the mid- and lower ranks of the administrative apparatus, corruption and theft, intrinsic inefficiencies and mismanagement. However, as far as the last two factors are concerned, one should note that the misallocation of resources and the mismanagement of their utilization was one of the key sore spots of the Soviet economy. Once we acknowledge that the camp administrators treated the prisoners, in many regards, as an economic resource, it should come as no surprise that these intrinsic problems occurred on a significant scale within the camp system as well, where they were compounded by excessive secrecy and the resulting difficulties to establish tight central control—with often fatal consequences for the camp inmates.

per's requirements towards valid empirical statements.¹⁰⁰

Besides analysis, however, historians employ another basic mode of argument: interpretation; by which I understand the arrangement (or emplotment) of more or less soundly established historical "facts" in a coherent order. In contrast to analytical findings, then, the persuasiveness of interpretations stems not from the methodological soundness of the heuristic procedure, nor can they be corroborated or falsified in a Popperian sense. Instead, their persuasiveness hinges primarily on the sharing, by author and readers, of more fundamental (e. g. philosophical or ideological), consciously or subconsciously held assumptions and beliefs. Nevertheless, interpretations are highly popular among historians and their audiences, since they allow what analysis alone can rarely accomplish: providing readers with a palatable, graspable, "meaningful" narrative. Historians, then, are well advised to produce arguments that supplement analysis with interpretation, with the former informing, supporting, and accompanying the latter.¹⁰¹

Therefore, I shall use the remainder of this paper to suggest how the findings presented so far can be integrated in a simple interpretive framework that accommodates both other well-known features and current interpretations of the Soviet and the Stalinist system. In particular, I will demonstrate that there is no contradiction between the finding that camp system administrators treated prisoners primarily as an economic resource, and the fact that the camp system came into existence and developed within purely political parameters—namely, the dictator's politically and ideologically motivated decisions to arrest millions of subjects (and, at times, to release some of them).

Key to the interpretation I am offering is the proposition that, within the utopian project of a fundamental transformation of society that the Bolsheviks pursued, the population came

¹⁰⁰ Karl R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, 3rd, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 40-2.

¹⁰¹ Virtually all historiography can be understood through the stylized triad of *description* (which every historian has to provide to some extent), *analysis*, and *interpretation*. Some historiographical works can be classified as merely descriptive (and thus fact-saturated, but potentially dull), others as descriptive and analytical (and thus informative and persuasive, though not necessarily enlightening and inspiring), still others as descriptive and interpretive (and thus perhaps imaginative and intriguing, but not necessarily convincing). Ideally, then, historiography should be at once descriptive, analytical, *and* interpretive. Needless to say that this is not always easy to achieve.

to play the ambiguous role of being *at once an end and a means*. An end it was insofar as it would, at some point, constitute the conflict-free society beyond class struggle, exploitation, inequality, and any cultural and ideological remnants of any previous order that *was* the Bolsheviks' ultimate (if elusive) goal. Yet simultaneously, the population represented a means, since, according to Marxist ideology, this goal was to be achieved through a transformation and a reorganization of the material world that would both be accompanied by and effectuate the simultaneous transformation of individual man—a process that could only be achieved through the mobilization and deployment of the incumbent population. In other words, in the Bolshevik project the population figured as 'raw material,' the value, or, respectively, dispensability of which was defined through its usefulness for and its contribution towards the ultimate, utopian goal.

It is a truism to state that the population that actually was at the Bolsheviks' disposal was utterly heterogeneous. *Inter alia*, it included a certain number of urban, literate, organized industrial workers, a vast, in its majority still illiterate, culturally distinct peasantry, and a considerable number of individuals whom the Bolsheviks considered inveterate enemies of their rule. In other words, this population consisted of parts that seemed to be closer, parts that seemed to be more distant, and parts that seemed to be diametrically opposed to the Bolshevik ideal of a Soviet Man—a person that would be both a reliable builder and a future member of Socialist society. From this vantage point, it was all but logical for the Bolsheviks to treat these various parts of the population differently.

To determine (from their perspective) or ascribe (from our perspective) the usefulness or value of various parts of the population for their purposes, the Bolsheviks used manifold institutions and practices. Many of these were common to other—previous and contemporaneous—historical contexts, and most of them were applied, although often in various intensity, throughout the pre-Stalinist and the Stalinist period.¹⁰² Two institutions, however, stood out

¹⁰² Bolshevik policies in many realms—agriculture, industry, the social sphere, culture, trade and consumption—were replete with explicit and implicit discriminatory practices affording certain groups preferential treatment

during Stalin's undisputed rule—and together they laid the ground for the emergence of the *Stalinist* camp system: the political and the criminal justice. These institutions were assigned with the singling out of “class enemies,” “wreckers,” “enemies of the people,” breakers of rules, troublemakers, not to forget criminals—in sum, individuals that the Bolsheviks saw, in one way or another, infringing upon the social order they envisaged or obstructing the process of socialist construction and development. While both the criminal and the political justice and their methods and policies originated and took shape prior to Stalin's emergence as an undisputed dictator, it was he who elevated them to unprecedented salience.¹⁰³ Stalin exerted a crucial influence on their design and operations¹⁰⁴, which meant that these institutions were executing his immediate political will and orders. For individuals sentenced by the Stalinist political or criminal justice, it was established beyond doubt that their chances to turn into “Soviet people” were, if not zero, then at least much lower than for the rest of society.¹⁰⁵

over others. Some of the criteria used in the process were reasonably stable in salience and meaning throughout Stalinism (e.g. urban vs. rural dwellers, employees in heavy industry vs. those in the service sector), whereas others saw significant changes and shifts (e.g. ethnic, national, and social origin, personal conduct). The literature supporting this point is vast. For just some relevant treatments from various conceptual vantage points, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Ascribing Class: The Construction of Social Identity in Soviet Russia,” *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 65, no. 4 (Dec., 1993), 745-770; Peter Holquist, “‘Information Is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work’: Bolshevik Surveillance in Its Pan-European Context,” *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 69 (September 1997), 415-50; Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000); Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Golfo Alexopoulos, *Stalin's Outcasts: Aliens, Citizens, and the Soviet State, 1926-1936* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2003); Julie Hessler, *A Social History of Soviet Trade: Trade Policy, Retail Practices, and Consumption* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Barbara Falk, *Sowjetische Städte in der Hungersnot 1932/33: Staatliche Ernährungspolitik und städtisches Alltagsleben* (Köln: Böhlau, 2005).

¹⁰³ Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism*, chapter 1, similarly: idem, *Istoriia GULAGa*, chapters 2, 3. See also Nicolas Werth, “A State Against Its People: Violence, Repression, and Terror in the Soviet Union,” in *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, eds. Stéphane Courtois et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 33-260, here: 169-202, 233-5.

¹⁰⁴ See, for instance, Peter H. Solomon, *Soviet criminal justice under Stalin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Oleg Khlevniuk, “Stalin i organy gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti v poslevoennyi period,” *Cahiers du Monde russe*, vol. 42, no. 2-3-4 (2001), 535-48; V.N. Kudriavtsev and A.I. Trusov, *Politicheskaia iustitsiia v SSSR*, 2nd, rev. & enl. ed. (Sankt-Peterburg: “Turidicheskii Tsentr Press”, 2002); *Lubianka: Stalin i BChK-GPU-OGPU-NKVD, Ianvar' 1922—dekabr' 1936*, *Lubianka: Stalin i glavnoe upravlenie gosbezopasnosti NKVD, 1937-1938*, *Lubianka: Stalin i NKVD-NKGB-GUKR “Smersh”, 1939-mart 1946*, 3 vols., eds. V. N. Khaustov, V. P. Naumov, and N. S. Plotnikova (Moskva: “Materik,” 2003-6).

¹⁰⁵ Hence, for instance, the notorious ‘infallibility’ of the OGPU/NKVD in identifying “enemies”: it resulted not as much from the sophistication of its investigative procedures, but rather from the fact that the secret police was simply executing the directives and thus the immediate political will of the leadership. This is not to deny the latitude the secret and the “regular” police could (and had to) use when targeting individuals, particularly during periods of mass terror, or the criminal and the political justice when sentencing defendants. However, the basic logic remains unaffected: if the OGPU/NKVD or a criminal judge passed a verdict over an individual, they acted on behalf of the political (and ideological) leadership and thus authoritatively attested to this person's lesser fitness or value for the socialist project.

From the Stalinist perspective, there were two straightforward options of treating such individuals. The first was to dispense with them, in other words: to exterminate them. There is no need to recall that this option had been used by the Bolsheviks virtually from the moment they took power and was relied upon under Stalin more extensively than ever before or afterwards. Yet there was a second option which gained significance in the light of another fundamental problem the Bolshevik enterprise faced—scarcity of resources. This problem was compounded by the need to reconcile the goal of building “socialism in one country,” which implicitly required autarky, with the extremely ambitious plans to create a modern industry that would allow the creation of a socialist, proletarian society and the build-up of a military potential needed to counter foreign threats. The Stalinist system was utterly self-conscious about the dilemma ensuing out of its resolve to realize this agenda in extraordinary short time with a limited set of resources. Not only were Stalin’s brutal agricultural policies driven by the dogged, if ultimately failed attempt to force a transfer of resources from the countryside to the expanding industrial sector. In fact, the entire command economy established under Stalin was based on the vision of creating effective mechanisms for allocating scarce resources to politically and ideologically defined and prioritized ends.¹⁰⁶ From this perspective, it was just one more step to recognizing that even individuals that had little or no value for the present or future Soviet body social could still be of some use in the Bolshevik attempt to create a socialist utopia.

This is the path the Bolsheviks pursued under Stalin with unprecedented resoluteness: through the systematic exploitation of what one might call the *residual value* of “enemies,” criminals, and social outcasts—their sheer physical labor force—for their ideologically motivated industrialization drive, they hoped to substitute prison labor for capital expenditure.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Gregory, *Political Economy*.

¹⁰⁷ Repeatedly, scholars have pointed to the persistently low degree of mechanization of work processes in the camp economy, which was one of the main reasons for the considerably lower labor productivity of forced laborers as opposed to free laborers in certain branches (cf., e. g., Ivanova, *Istoriia GULAGa*, 424-5; Andrej K. Sokolov: “Prinuzhdenie k trudu v sovetskoj ekonomike: 1930-e – seredina 1950-kh gg.,” in Borodkin/Gregory/Khlevniuk, *GULAG*, 17-66, here: 63). Yet one can argue that the disinclination of the Stalinist state

Straightforwardly, they used forced labor to carry out exceptionally daring industrial and infrastructural projects under particularly adverse conditions to which free labor would have been hard, and in some cases impossible to attract. The fact that the inmates of Stalinist camps and colonies figured primarily as a mere resource thus does not in the least contradict the proposition that the existence of the camp system was predicated on the politically and ideologically motivated policy of temporarily or permanently removing millions of persons from society. Indeed, only the combination of these two aspects allows to fully comprehend the camp system's institutional logic: given the unshakable, ideologically informed conviction that there was a benefit to, or even a need for the arrest of millions of people—be it to isolate and neutralize proven or potential political enemies, to punish individuals not compliant with the strict rules necessary to make society work, or to preemptively purge society from dubious 'elements'—the decision to put these persons to economic use for the purpose of industrialization made perfect sense. Eventually, both these policies were directly geared towards speeding up the realization of the ultimate goal: a new, conflict-free society as promised by Marxist ideology.

Two further remarks are in place. First, the strategy to exploit the 'residual value' of prisoners was applied to various categories of them in various shades.¹⁰⁸ In its clearest form, it was applied to prisoners who had, from the Bolsheviks' perspective, practically forfeited their chances to ever return to Soviet society. These included *katorga*-prisoners, sentenced for treason and collaboration with the enemy during World War II, as well as the arguably most dangerous and inveterate political offenders. The former were confined to special camp depart-

to devote more capital to the camp economy merely reflected the system's inherent preferences, according to which prison labor was a less valuable resource than the labor of free workers.

¹⁰⁸ The distinctions in the treatment of prisoners according to their sentences and their social background are carefully explored in Steven A. Barnes, *Soviet Society Confined: The Gulag in the Karaganda region of Kazakhstan, 1930s–1950s*, Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 2003. I agree with Barnes in that the Bolsheviks applied a gradient in assessing the value of individual members of the population with regard to the larger goal of building and creating a socialist society. However, while Barnes considers this practice a, if not *the* primary function of the "Gulag" (which he defines broadly to encompass all types of places of confinement), I argue that the decisive act of 'sorting out' happened at the moment when a verdict to serve a term in the camps was passed over an individual. Accordingly, I suggest that distinctions in the treatment of categories of prisoners that took place inside the camps should not be considered the camp system's primary purpose, which was, as this paper has shown, the exploitation of the prisoners' labor force.

ments, the latter to “Special Camps,” created from 1948 onwards. Both these groups of prisoners were to be used *exclusively* for harsh physical labor. In addition, all of them were ostentatiously stripped of their individualities as they were assigned numbers that were sewn onto their clothes and that they had to pronounce if called upon by guards or camp officials.¹⁰⁹ On the other end of the specter, prisoners sentenced to shorter terms for offenses considered less grave were generally incarcerated in corrective labor colonies, the economic activities of which were generally of lesser priority than those of the camps. This, however, was not only partly due to the much higher rate of inmate turnover in the colonies, it also did not prevent economic interests from trumping punitive goals there, too.¹¹⁰

Second, the findings of this paper call for a reevaluation of the long-debated issue of the camp system’s economic effectiveness and efficiency. For the NKVD/MVD leadership, the costs of the exploitation of forced labor equaled the camp system’s maintenance costs. To achieve full cost recovery, recurrent and serious efforts to raise prisoners’ labor productivity were made throughout the Stalinist period. The burden that the arrests of enormous numbers of people and their subsequent ruthless exploitation inside the camps imposed upon Soviet society was thus completely disregarded.¹¹¹ To be sure, many economic projects based on forced labor, and at times the camp system as a whole incurred losses even if measured by these standards.¹¹² Given the Stalinist system’s inherent preferences, however, any such losses were still outweighed by the perceived political benefits stemming from the isolation of the prisoners from society. Therefore, even a partial or temporary non-fulfillment of its internal economic goals could not shake the camp system’s fundamental operating principles.

¹⁰⁹ The message was not missed on those it affected—in recollections, few former *katorga*-prisoners or inmates of Special Camps failed to comment on this experience. During the uprisings in Special Camps after Stalin’s death, among revolting prisoners’ key demands was the removal of these numbers and the recognition of their names.

¹¹⁰ Ertz, “Lagernaia sistema,” 97-8. See also above, p. 9.

¹¹¹ Needless to say that these “costs,” which include demographic losses, the loss of human capital, the disruption of social structures, the destabilizing impact the camp system had on the rest of society, not to speak of the suffering of individual prisoners and their relatives, defy any quantification.

¹¹² Partly these “losses” were the result of idiosyncrasies of the Soviet planning and pricing system, although more significant factors were, unsurprisingly, systemic inefficiencies and dysfunctionalities. For a discussion of various methods to gauge the economic ‘utility’ derived from the exploitation of forced labor in Norilsk and in the camp system in general see Ertz, *Zwangsarbeit*, 221-7.

If anything, these principles became ever more apparent as Stalin's rule progressed. In the late years of Stalinism, camps and colonies housed more prisoners whose average prison terms were much longer than ever before.¹¹³ At the same time, the MVD was assigned new, ever more ambitious economic tasks, while the goals of high productivity and cost efficiency were not only upheld, but pursued with renewed determination.¹¹⁴ Thus both the (primarily ideological) parameters for the camp system's existence and the (primarily economic) goals it was supposed to achieve within these remained, in their essence, constant throughout all periods of Stalin's rule. For this reason, various projects to fundamentally revamp and downsize the camp system, prepared by individual NKVD/MVD officials, had no chance of being realized as long as Stalin was alive.¹¹⁵ Intended to make the tasks handed down from above more manageable, they did not conform to the political and ideological premises on which the very existence of the Stalinist camps hinged. To set off the protracted process of transforming and dismantling the camp system of Stalin's making¹¹⁶, a fundamental shift in political parameters was necessary that only the dictator's death would bring about.

¹¹³ Viktor Zemskov, "GULAG (istoriko-sotsiologicheskii aspekt)," *Sotsiologicheskie Issledovaniia*, vol. 6 (1991), 10-27, here: 14; vol. 7 (1991), 3-16, here: 12. The length of the average sentence of all prisoners in camps and colonies rose continuously throughout the last years of Stalin's rule (Ivanova, *Istoriia GULAGa*, 317). For more details on Stalinist repressive policies in the post-WWII USSR, see *ibid.*, chapter 7.

¹¹⁴ Smirnov/Sigačev/Škapov, "Sistema mest zaključeniia v SSSR," 55-6; Marta Kraveri/Oleg Chlevnjuk: "Krizis Èkonomiki MVD (konec 1940-ch – 1950-e gody)," *Cahiers du monde russe*, vol. 36, no. 1-2 (Jan.-Juin 1995), 179-90; Kokurin/Morukov, *Stalinskie stroiki GULAGa*; Ertz, *Zwangsarbeit*, 167-71, 176-88; *idem*, "Trading Effort."

¹¹⁵ Again, the main focus of these suggestions was on improving the effectiveness of the camp system with regard to its economic purposes. See Yoram Gorlizki and Oleg Khlevniuk, *Cold Peace: Stalin and the Soviet Ruling Circle, 1945 – 1953* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 127-33; Aleksei Tikhonov, "The End of the Gulag," in Gregory/Lazarev, *Economics*, 67-73. It is also worth mentioning that MVD officials' repeated calls for a transfer of the entire camp system to the state budget remained fruitless throughout Stalinism. This step would have yielded the advantage of a "soft budget constraint," but it would also have meant the abandonment of the economic aspirations that were linked to the camp system throughout Stalinism. See Leonid Borodkin and Simon Ertz, "Forced Labour and the Need for Motivation: Wages and Bonuses in the Stalinist Camp System," *Comparative Economic Studies* vol. 47, no. 2 (June 2005), 418-36, here: 427.

¹¹⁶ For an overview of this process that emphasizes the more resilient parts of the Stalinist legacy see Marc Elie, "Khrushchev's Gulag: Camps, colonies and prisons in the USSR, 1953-1964," paper presented at the conference "The Thaw: Soviet Society and Culture during the 1950s and 1960s," University of California, Berkeley, May 12-15, 2005.