



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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Russia

Title of Research Proposal: The Crumbling of Stalinism in the 'Capital of the Gulag': Political and Economic Transition in Magadan, 1953-1956

Topic of Research: Formed in 1930 to replace a patchwork of overlapping structures, the Main Administration of Camps, commonly known by its acronym, Gulag, served for thirty years as the primary penal institution of the Soviet Union. The camps of the Gulag ostensibly served political, economic, and ideological functions simultaneously by isolating enemies and potential enemies of the state; extracting labor from those confined; and reforming convicts into good, ideologically-sound Soviet citizens. By the beginning of the 1950s, however, the Gulag had largely been transformed into an economic machine. Throughout its existence, the Gulag struggled with the issue of how to best organize its operations so as to get the most productivity out of its work force, both free and unfree. The administrative structure was often changed to reflect alternating expansionary and rationalization campaigns; prisoners were alternately contracted out to other ministries and used on projects assigned directly to the MVD; different inmate work brigade formations were proposed and instituted; and a variety of awards and benefits were available at various times to administrators and prisoners alike.

In 1953, however, penal reforms led by Lavrentiia Beria transferred the majority of the MVD's economic projects to other ministries, leaving the Gulag relatively free from pressure to fulfill industrial plans. To fill this void, more and more attention began to be paid to the ideological work of rehabilitation, an aspect of the corrective-labor camps which had been largely absent since the mid-1930s. As the Gulag downsized its operations from 1953 to 1960,

the industries formerly served by forced labor were compelled to recruit free laborers, downsize, or mechanize their operations. These post-Stalin reforms caused considerable tension between the economic ministries, which still had strict production goals to fulfill, and the Gulag, focused now on issues other than industrial output.

The central purpose of this research was to identify the reforms which occurred in the Gulag system from 1953 to 1960. How and why did the structure and policies of the primary punitive organ of the Soviet Union change? Who instigated such reforms and what motives did they possess? At what instances and from whom did opposition arise to these reforms? To what extent were these reforms implemented at the local level?

Relevance and Contribution to Field: This subject is highly relevant to our knowledge of the Gulag and of Soviet penal policy in general. These topics in the period under discussion are still poorly understood as most scholars have focused on the Gulag and the repressions of the 1930s. This topic also sheds light on the definition and persistence of Stalinism, two longstanding debates among historians of the Soviet Union. Next, the study of this transition period aids in our understanding of how areas once dominated by the Gulag coped with its dismantling. Finally, the analysis of the interaction between the Gulag and Soviet economics is vital to comprehending the futility of seeking profits by means of forced labor.

Approach and research methodology; list of research sites: My chosen approach is primarily political, but also incorporates elements of economic and social history. Official documents therefore provide the majority of source material with memoir literature playing a less significant role. I spent the majority of my time reviewing the Dalstroi papers from the 1950s which provided insight into the workings of a major Gulag institution both before and after the death of Stalin. In order to gain comparative perspective I also studied documents relating to the camps from the 1930s and 1940s during Dalstroi's development and from the late 1950s and early 1960s after the liquidation of Dalstroi. During my grant period I focused my efforts on three institutions:

1. Gosudarsvennyi arkhiv Magadanskoi oblasti (GAMO)
2. Tsentr khraneniia sovremennoi dokumentatsii Magadanskoi oblasti (TsKhSDMO)
3. Oblastnaia biblioteka imeni Pushkina

Research findings and preliminary conclusions: One significant finding from this research trip is the degree to which various ministries bickered over the use of prison labor after Stalin's death. In the case of Dalstroi this is highlighted by the practice of one-man management (*edinonachalie*) by which the labor camp commander served simultaneously as the head of the economic enterprise which employed the prisoners. Under this arrangement the head of Dalstroi reported to one ministry for matters concerning camp operations and another ministry for the economic side of the operations. This principle also operated at lower management levels, making the hierarchical structure of Dalstroi both complex and contradictory. Significantly, as long as this arrangement lasted (until late 1955) these one-man managers consistently disregarded Gulag directives which called for a normalization of the camps in favor of ensuring that their economic plans were fulfilled. This confirms that as long as economics ruled the camps they would serve industrial rather than rehabilitative functions. That the debate over whether to keep or eliminate one-man management raged for years in both Moscow and Magadan also illustrates the fact that neither Stalin's heirs nor Gulag administrators had a clear

idea of how to reform the penal institutions of the Soviet Union. By studying this far-flung region of Russia I also began to appreciate how weak central control was over the periphery as late as the mid-1950s. It appears that the post-Stalin acts of creating Magadan Province and eliminating Dalstroi were aimed at strengthening this control by means of standardized bureaucratic institutions. It appears that only at this point did Moscow stop treating the Dalstroi area as a colony and begin incorporating it into the 'center.'

Another significant finding is that Beria's amnesty of 1953 was not an elaborate plan conceived prior to Stalin's death as some historians have proposed but rather a hastily composed attempt at reform. The Dalstroi papers illustrate that little was done to prepare for the release of 1.2 million Gulag prisoners, over 50,000 of them from the Dalstroi camps. The amnesty was in fact poorly organized and implemented, and some camp commanders even successfully resisted the amnesty for a matter of months in order to maintain their industrial output. This further confirms the conclusions that control over outlying areas was weak as best. It also strengthens the argument that economics took priority over the well-being of Gulag inmates, even after Stalin's death.

Future research agendas: I have a few research trips currently in the planning stages which I would like to realize over the next few years. Early next year I intend to return to the Hoover Institution to continue my work on the Gulag papers (Fond 9414) of the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF). This will help me better understand the view from the center. I am also contemplating a trip to Moscow next summer to investigate the remaining applicable collections at GARF and other archives. In preparation for my dissertation I would like to return to Magadan to access the classified documents at the TsKhSDMO and the UVD archive which were unavailable to me during this trip. I anticipate that they will confirm the declassified Dalstroi papers at GAMO, albeit from slightly different angles. In the near future I also hope to visit other cities which housed Gulag camps and colonies so as to ascertain to what extent the Dalstroi camps differed from the remainder of the Gulag.

Policy recommendations: As this topic is primarily historical it is difficult to conceive specific policy recommendations. However, just as during the immediate post-Stalin era, one of the most pressing areas for reform in Russia today is the judicial sector. While the Gulag has long disappeared, corrupt and inept justices continue to exert their arbitrary will over the general populace. Prisons are generally in poor conditions and serve as transmitters of communicable diseases. In addition, Russian citizens do not possess the same guaranteed civil rights as those in the West. The U.S. should exert as much aid and influence as possible in correcting these deficiencies so as to strengthen the rule of law and further the cause of democracy.