



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

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The Gulag and Society in Western Siberia, 1930-1960

Topic of Research

The dissertation explores the interaction between the Gulag and Soviet society in Western Siberia, focusing on the mobilization of the Gulag in support of the war effort, 1941-1945. Many camp subdivisions in the area were located within the city limits of major urban centers such as Novosibirsk and Tomsk. The dissertation thus explores the extent of the interaction—both illicit and intentional—between the Gulag system and the surrounding locales. Not only were there many economic links (for example, the construction of the largest factory complex in Novosibirsk, Combine no. 179, was completed with the help of Gulag prisoners), but prisoners often found ways to negotiate the camp/worksite borders, either through the help of civilian workers and guards, or in official positions such as chauffeurs for camp officials.

The main purpose of the IARO program trip was to examine, in detail, individual prisoner files located in the State Archive of Tomsk *Oblast'* (GATO), as well as to gather more information about individual camp subdivisions during the war, using documents available at the Center for the Documentation of the Contemporary History of Tomsk *Oblast'* (TsDNI TO). The bulk of the dissertation research had already been completed prior to this research trip. Thus, the current research focused on prisoner files in order to gain a sense of the prisoner population in the area through an analysis of the

demographic information. Also, the prisoner files contain information on release, which has become one of the most contentious aspects of Gulag historiography. Were most prisoners released on time? If they were released early was it because they were too ill to work? What percentage of prisoners were only released well after their terms had ended?

Research Methodology

The research goal had been to examine as many prisoner files as possible (out of a total of approximately 350 files held in two collections, *fondy* R-1151 and R-1152 at GATO), in order to gather demographic and release information for a statistical analysis. In 2005, I had worked with 19 of these files, which all contain demographic data, reasons for arrest and sentencing, and information about release (or death, as the case may be). The files are often rich with other information, too: copies petitions sent to higher authorities and/or the responses to those petitions; letters from family members; information about the prisoner's behavior; health notations; information about the prisoner's personal items; and documents pertaining to privileges and punishments the prisoner may have received while in the camps.

Unfortunately, this trip, my access was somewhat restricted. Due to a stricter interpretation of privacy laws relating to the dissemination of personal information, I was unable to look at enough prisoner files for a statistical analysis. Instead of giving me the files directly, which had been done in 2005, the director permitted me to look only at photocopies with the names blacked out. This meant a considerable delay in receiving files as it caused extra work for the archivists, and thus limited the number of files I could order. My focus on the prisoner files changed from a statistical analysis to a deep reading of the files, with the idea that this would allow me to say something about the variety of experiences prisoners could have within the camp system. I was able to look at 40 files in detail during my short time in Tomsk.

My research at TsDNI TO was very successful in terms of gathering information on the response of local Gulag officials to the war effort. This information came primarily from the meeting protocols of various communist party organizations within local camp administrations, particularly the Asinsk camp station (*lagpunkt*), a forestry camp; Corrective-Labor Colony no. 5 (ITK-5), a Gulag-run artillery factory during the war, located in Tomsk; and the Zavarzino camp station, an agricultural camp just outside of Tomsk.

Preliminary Conclusions and Relevance to the Field

The individual prisoner files are an exciting resource for understanding how the Gulag functioned and the types of experiences prisoners could have. The files, however, have their limitations. Perhaps most importantly, the files appear to have followed the prisoner until he or she was released or died and thus came under the jurisdiction of the prisoner's last camp. In other words, these documents cannot be used to understand more about the prisoners who passed through these camp subdivisions and then were incarcerated at another camp. Also, these records were kept by the authorities, and are mostly from the administrative point of view. While this helps us understand what camp administrators emphasized (documents related to the prisoners' behavior, for example, tend to focus on positive or negative *production* output, underscoring the Soviet Union's use of labor as a measure of worth), there are important gaps in the files. For example,

there is almost no evidence of social networks that existed amongst prisoners within the camp system. Also, documentation often found its way to the file only if it was *not* directly related to the day-to-day routine of camp life: the prisoner receives a special privilege (such as unescorted status or a reduction in the length of his or her sentence) due to productive labor; the prisoner falls terribly ill, and spends time in the hospital; the authorities send a negative response to the prisoner's pardon petition, and so on. Some of the gaps in the files, moreover, may be misleading. For example, several of the files contain documents that the prisoners signed upon their release, stating that they would not reveal information about the camps to anyone, on penalty of re-arrest. Most, however, do not include this document, even though other release documents are present. One would be tempted to see this as evidence of the haphazard management of the camps – i.e., authorities only occasionally bothered to make the prisoners fill out all of the required documentation. While this would hardly be surprising, it is also possible that every prisoner signed such a document, but not all of these documents made it into the prisoner's official file. And, finally, the files stayed with the prisoner to the point of release. If a prisoner was re-arrested later, it seems that a new file was created.¹ In other words, it is very difficult to decipher the post-release history of the prisoners, except for evidence on release reports (*spravki*) as to whether or not the prisoner was to be sent back to his or her place of domicile.

Despite these limitations, the prisoner files without question enhance our understanding of the Gulag. While a definite conclusion cannot be reached about release, given the small sample, there are some noteworthy preliminary findings. Almost all of the prisoners received their release either on-time or early (including many who did so as part of the 1945 amnesty following the conclusion of the war). Several prisoners received early release due to a re-examination of the cases against them, including three who had been sentenced as counter-revolutionaries during the Great Terror of 1937/38. In these cases, petitions from the prisoners themselves played a role in their eventual release. Although there is evidence elsewhere to suggest that the Gulag frequently freed prisoners who were too ill to work, in my small sample there was only one such prisoner, at least as far as can be determined thus far. Late release, although infrequent in this small sample, appears to have been directly a result of wartime conditions, when certain categories of prisoners (particularly counter-revolutionaries) were not allowed to leave the camps at the end of their terms. Of course, it is possible that some release-dates were manipulated in the official record – evidence in other official documents suggests that Gulag administrators frequently failed to free prisoners on time, as they had difficulty tracking the various release dates. In any case, the prisoner files suggests that, for many prisoners, the Gulag functioned as (a particularly harsh) prison system, with on-time or early release a distinct possibility. This supports the recent research of Golfo Alexopoulos on the Gulag as a “revolving door” and points to the huge variety of Gulag experiences, where for some, most notably those sentenced under Article 58, the so-called counter-revolutionaries, release was a remote prospect, while for others, short sentences and frequent release were widespread.

Indeed, it is the evidence of the *variety* of experiences that is the most compelling information in these documents. For example, there was the Komsomol (Communist youth) who had been arrested and sentenced, along with his lover, in the mid-1930s to ten years for the murder of his lover's husband. In some ways, however, the now ex-

¹ Several of the files I examined were for prisoners who had been arrested a second time; these files included no information about their previous incarceration periods, aside from the nature of the sentence.

Komsomol flourished in the camp system, quickly becoming a brigade leader and later an educator within the camp's Cultural and Educational Section, a rare position for a prisoner. However, he lost his position as educator due to an affair with a prisoner, an act seen as inappropriate for the position (even though he himself was still a prisoner!). Nevertheless, he continued to work productively, all the while sending petitions to various authorities asking that his case be re-examined. Eventually, this happened, and both he and his former lover (held elsewhere) were released early following a ruling in their favor, after serving about half of their sentences.

Then there is the prisoner whose initial medical reports indicated good health and an ability to perform hard manual labor. Over the course of her incarceration, however, her deteriorating physical condition is present in subsequent reports, which categorize her as a light-laborer and then as an invalid, and then a light-laborer once again. She even spent several months in a penalty isolator in Karlag (Kazakhstan) because of an escape attempt. From Karlag, where she had been classified as an invalid, she was sent to Tomasinlag outside of Tomsk, where she spent one year and was pronounced healthy and released at the end of her term. The reasons for her improved health are unclear, but these types of documents help illustrate the ups and downs of camp experience. At times, authorities had characterized her as a good worker; at other times she had been admonished for shirking her duties.

Many of the shorter files I examined, moreover, were for prisoners who had been arrested towards the end of the war with relatively light sentences (usually under three years), whom the authorities released only months later in the 1945 amnesty. Their experience of the Gulag would have been far different from that of a counter-revolutionary prisoner. The types of Gulag experiences suggest that to speak of *the* Gulag is misleading at best, especially considering the connotations of this term suggest unjustified, lengthy, politically-motivated incarceration. Yes, this was present and yes, Gulag conditions *were* horrendous, especially during the war, when mortality rates reached 25 per cent even by official records and were likely much higher. The overall picture, however, is highly complex.

The wartime documents for the camp subdivisions located in and around Tomsk reveal the inefficiency with which the camp system was run. An administrator in the Asink camp station, for example, was kicked out of the communist party for visiting relatives in Tomsk when he was supposed to be on a business trip to Novosibirsk in order to resolve problems back at the camp. He blamed technical problems with the airplane, but allegedly spent the whole weekend drinking. Even ITK no. 5, a munitions factory that was first praised for its stellar results, came under increasing criticism when it failed to adapt quickly enough to the production of a new type of munitions. Also, it is noteworthy that the Tomsk city party committee (*gorkom*) was very involved with the camp's activities, giving rewards for good results, admonishing the leadership for not taking proper safety precautions to prevent fires, and so on. In light of these types of materials, the camps at the local level can hardly be seen as something separated from Soviet society. Local camp subdivisions were intimately involved in the economic activities of their respective locals, and took orders from local, non-Gulag, officials.

These wartime documents are also fascinating for understanding how local officials dealt with the appalling death rates in the camps during the war years. For example, at a meeting of the party committee of the Zavarzino subdivision from 4 January 1943 the head of the camp's medical-sanitary services, along with a camp doctor, reported on the

high mortality rates. They discussed the complete lack of certain important foods, claiming that prisoners received only 1200 calories/day instead of 3500, and mentioned that there was no butter, eggs, or milk. Out of a contingent of 32 children, all under 5 years of age who had arrived at the camp with their mothers, moreover, all but 8 were dead within 10 days. Yet the discussion that follows does not directly address the problem: one commentator mentions that more political work had to be done amongst nurses, to keep them from sleeping with prisoners and smuggling items. The next speaker notes that many young people are dying, but blames the medical-sanitary services for not taking enough preventative measures. In sum, the camp officials for the most part deflect blame from themselves and ignore the root problems. These documents thus provide valuable insight into the day-to-day running of the camps: administrators bumbled their way through problems, deflecting blame and rarely offering concrete solutions. Indeed, it is striking the number of times “increased political vigilance” was listed as a way to solve major camp issues, when more concrete measures (warmer barracks, better food, consistent fuel supply) might actually have given the desired results.

The party documents from the local subdivisions, then, give a rare glimpse into the camp administration – what it thought of itself, what it thought of the prisoners, and how it responded to important issues. This is a crucial contribution to the field as, to date, there has been very little scholarly analysis of guards or those who ran the camps.

A study of the Gulag at the local level thus gives researchers an understanding of the system as it operated on the ground. Central archives in Moscow contain important information about the camps, but little about the day-to-day activities of prisoners and camp officials. Local prisoner files and party documents from camp organizations both provide useful information in this regard. The picture that emerges is highly complex, as the documents point towards a bumbling bureaucracy and a wide variety of prisoner experiences.

Suggestions for Future Research

The original aim of my research trip—to collect enough demographic and release data from the prisoner files in order to conduct a statistical analysis—continues to be an important project for future research. Such an analysis, perhaps conducted in several archives around the Soviet Union where prisoner files are available, would help to settle debates in the historiography about release (were prisoners usually released on-time, late, or early, and why?), which in turn would give us important insights into the nature of the Gulag and Soviet repression.

Recommendations for US Policy Community

Understanding the Gulag is important for understanding the nature of Soviet repression, but it also has important implications for policy considerations. The Gulag, after all, was at least at one level a system for using prisoners in important economic activities. At the very least, this provided authorities with little incentive to reduce repressive measures – after all, there was an impression of economic gain. Thus, the US policy community, in order to help prevent repressive regimes, could focus on promoting penal practices worldwide that do not have significant economic components. We also know that large numbers of prisoners found themselves in the camps on the basis of false confessions, often extracted through torture. In order to prevent such occurrences in the future, the

US should promote an end to all forms of torture in criminal justice and penal institutions worldwide.

Furthermore, Russian NGOs such as the Memorial Society and the Sakharov Center are conducting important work in uncovering the history of the Gulag and in present-day human rights issues within Russia. While in Tomsk, I attended a conference devoted to the anniversary of the Local Studies Museum; part of this conference covered the history of the Gulag, with various local academics, school-teachers, and even relatives of victims presenting and in attendance. It was very encouraging to see the wide range of activities (from travelling museum exhibits to informal monuments) commemorating this part of Russia's past. Thinking critically about the past is, I believe, crucial for the development of civil society and healthy political debate. Therefore I encourage the US policy community to support the activities of Memorial and the Sakharov Center as much as possible.