

The GULag and Laogai: A Comparative Study of Forced Labor through Camp Literature

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The Gulag and Laogai: A Comparative Study of Forced Labor through Camp Literature

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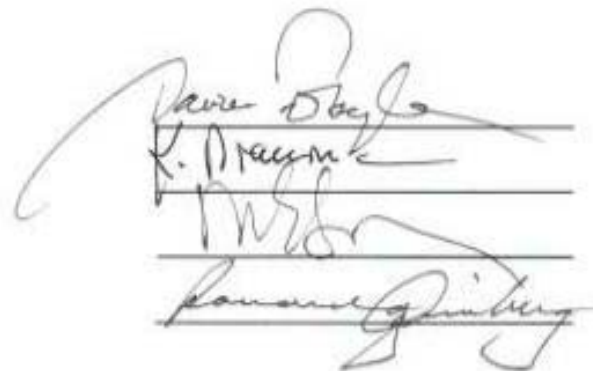
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The image shows four handwritten signatures, each written on a horizontal line. From top to bottom, the signatures are: 1. A signature that appears to be 'Dariusz Tolezyk'. 2. A signature that appears to be 'Katia Dianina'. 3. A signature that appears to be 'Mark Elson'. 4. A signature that appears to be 'Ronald Dimberg'.

Abstract

This is the first comparative study ever undertaken in an investigation of the history of forced labor in the Soviet Union and China. It makes no claims to be exhaustive, and serves mainly as a foundation to further work in this subject in the near future. Various historical works and documents have been utilized to create, firstly, an acceptable overview of the history of the practice of forced labor in both countries, followed by a short history of so-called ‘camp literature’, or memoirs written by survivors of forced labor, generally speaking. The main focus is to analyze several key similarities and differences as they are found in examples from both countries. Differences lead to several interesting points, discovered by observing the narrative persona in Soviet and Chinese examples. On the Chinese side, one can find a much more accepting narrator, who seems to view his situation as somehow necessary, whereas in the Soviet context the prisoner almost always condemns the government. Even when he does not, he at least suggests that some sort of mistake was made and rarely suggests his imprisonment is truly for his own good. This work aims to investigate the reason for this phenomenon and poses several reasons for its existence. It does not provide answers, only possibilities. Further research will be required, if it is even at all possible to answer a question that may, in fact, be impossible to prove. Namely, does one’s culture shape the way one tends to think? If not, why, in the Chinese context, does the prisoner seem to so willingly accept their situation?

*“...make use of the labor of those persons under arrest; for those gentlemen who live without any occupation; and for those who are unable to work without being forced to do so. Such punishment ought to be applied to those working in Soviet institutions who demonstrate unconscientious attitudes to work, tardiness, etc. ...In this way we will create schools of labor.”*¹ – **Dzerzhinsky’s public speech in 1919 concerning the re-education of the bourgeois.**

*“You will say, perhaps, that all this is too stupid to be true. But, unfortunately, it is true. And is it not stupid that 160,000,000 people have for eighteen years past been resident in a vast territory of good soil and starving most of the time? Is it not stupid that three families have to be crowded into a single room in Moscow, while the millions needed for housing are lavished on projects like the ‘Palace of Soviets’ (The Communist Tower of Babel), the ‘Dynamo’, etc.? Is it not stupid that the construction of the Dniepostroi Water Plant went on day and night, winter and summer, at enormous sacrifice of lives and money for years, and now functions at only twelve per cent of its capacity? Is it not stupid to let horses, cows, and pigs starve for lack of fodder while spending tens of millions importing and trying to breed rabbits, which are certain to succumb from unsuitable food and climate? Is it not stupid to try to domesticate Karelian elks and Kamchatka bears instead? Is it not stupid to import, in the vicinity of the Arctic Circle, for the purpose of building the White Sea-Baltic Canal, 60,000 Usbeks and Khirghizians from southern Russia who will probably perish within six months? All this is revoltingly stupid, but this stupidity is armed to the teeth.”*² – **Ivan Solonevich in *The Soviet Paradise Lost*.**

*“China’s basic goals in criminal reform are to turn offenders into a different kind of person, one who abides by the law and supports himself or herself with his or her own labor, and to reestablish these people as free citizens in society.”*³ – **Beijing’s official political statement concerning the existence of Laogai.**

*“If the reader finds it preposterous or exaggerated, he has never been inside a Chinese prison, and he is lucky. It is utterly typical of that country, even today... The first times I encountered prisoners actually thanking the government and their jailers for the sentences they had been given, I regarded them with a mixture of astonishment and scorn. Later, as with my Ideological Reviews in Prison Number One, I went through the same sort of motions, but maintained the small mental reserve that I was only protecting my skin: That was the form expected and the way to go through a sentence without trouble. Before I left the Chinese jails, though, I was writing those phrases and believing them.”*⁴ – **Bao Ruo-Wang in *Prisoner of Mao*.**

¹ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pgs. 9-10.

² Solonevich, Ivan, *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, pg. 100.

³ Wu, Harry Hongda, *Troublemaker*, pg. 135.

⁴ Ruo-Wang, Bao, *Prisoner of Mao*, pgs. 151 and 154-155.

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Part I

Introduction

The creation of forced labor systems seems to be a relative certainty for any political regime that attempts to force ideology onto its citizenry, or where one ideology requires constant support in order to survive. Nazi Concentration Camps are but one example of this phenomenon, and easily the most well-known in the West. But proof of the necessity of repressive regimes' creation of similar camp systems can easily be found in the history of the Soviet GULag prison system, as well as the history of the so-called 'Chinese GULag', or Laogai.⁵

The GULag no longer exists, and all we have are frozen memories of survivors, letters, and historical documents. In the Chinese context, these materials are more difficult to access. But out of all of these, memoirs are more common and offer a unique glimpse into camp life as it occurred, and also provide a glimpse into the effects of camp life on the human being's perception of self and others, especially thoughts towards the government responsible for their imprisonment. The history of Laogai has led to the creation of a number of memoirs in both English and Chinese to attest to the role the system played in China during the era of Mao, as well as today. And though the system still exists, it is possible to find original, unaltered memoirs published within China. In the Soviet Union, finding state-accepted memoirs published in their *original* form was all but impossible, and this issue is one of the factors at the heart of a comparison between these two systems.

⁵ Original Chinese: 劳改

In Russian studies, GULag survivor memoirs are some of the most familiar examples in modern literature about Soviet history. Even those with little knowledge of Russian history have heard the acronym ‘GULag’, which, in fact, is so common it has become a standard term over the years applied to any form of forced prison labor, so much it is even indicated in dictionaries under this very heading.⁶ Work with harsh overtones is often referred to jokingly in reference to the GULag in modern English slang.

Historically, the Soviet prison camp was an earlier development of the Soviet political model that developed almost immediately under the Bolsheviks and would stretch well into the later years of the regime, almost until its final collapse in the early 1990s. Its legacy stretched over several decades and affected millions of prisoners and their families. Even today, the political and social ramifications of the GULag camps are still felt in modern Russia. New survivor memoirs cannot exist by virtue of the fact that the system itself collapsed in the early 1990s.

Unlike the Russian GULag, China’s Laogai still exists. This presents a unique problem because, naturally, the majority of information concerning its existence can only be gathered largely from non-official sources. Documents concerning actual economic output and the true extent of prison work are in the hands of the Chinese government, and as such should naturally be considered suspect because what government would want to admit a system with potentially similar structure to the GULag exists? Thankfully, there are victims of the system who continue to write about their experiences, so the memoir phenomenon still plays a politically active role in the Chinese context. But, at the same

⁶ For one example, simply searching for ‘GULag’ on *dictionary.reference.com* yields the result of: “any prison or detention camp, especially for political prisoners”.

time, these memoirs should also be taken with a grain of salt, because some of them may obviously exist for political reasons.

Any study of Laogai, regardless if through history or literature, can serve to promote public recognition of the camp system to the same level of the GULag, if it is in fact similar in function. One difficulty in such a study is the general lack of public and historical materials, as already mentioned. In actuality, only the memoirs of survivors and the work of a few individuals can serve as a succinct picture of life in Laogai. By using their descriptions and comparing them to others, life in China's prison camp system can be explored, although in a rough form, or at least one that relies on individual testimony. These testimonies may be bent in a clear direction, but they are what we possess nonetheless, and balanced with official documents can at least provide a general picture for the purposes of comparison being presented here.

As for scholarly work on the subject, only a small number of writings exist, such as Harry Wu's *Laogai: The Chinese GULag*. But, again, considering the potential for these to function for political reasons, one must approach carefully. As found in Russian examples, memoirs from survivors of China's Laogai offer a unique field of research, but in the case of the latter one that is desperately in need of further study. This dissertation is the first work ever completed that seeks to compare the GULag with Laogai through the writings of survivors in both contexts. It should be stated clearly here, and the reader should pay attention, that the author is making no claim to be an expert on the history of either the GULag or Laogai. Our main goal will be to look at the history we possess of both systems, compare them, and then focus on camp literature from both contexts, which will form the main subject of analysis in this dissertation. This is in *no way* an exhaustive

study of the history of forced labor in either the Soviet Union or China, and it does not pretend to be. The primary goal is to provide a general background for the reader, look at a handful of examples of prison memoirs, and then compare and discuss the *possible* reasons for their differences.

Purpose

This work is an attempt to describe the system of Laogai, its relationship to the GULag, differences between the two, and how the individual in each context views the situation and its relationship to the government that created it through prison memoirs. We will focus especially on the attitudes, details, and themes found in camp literature in an effort to look at a broader picture of cultural differences between Russia and China and how they may have affected its consequent development.

As stated, the Russian GULag is generally well-known in the West, even outside of academia, and has been a major scholarly topic for some time, starting as early as Dallin and Nikolavsky's academic study in 1947.⁷ However, the Chinese system, generally referred to as 'Laogai', remains largely unstudied and unknown in the West. Even though numerous scholars are aware of its existence, as of yet only a handful of major works exist on the topic, only *one* of which is historical in nature and attempts to provide a complete view of how the system functions.⁸ Unfortunately, it is not entirely possible to remove the political intentions of said author from the information provided.

This is mainly because the current political system in China is still connected to its earlier, Communist-bureaucratic roots and obviously functioning in its best political interests. Revealing to the world that a part of the Chinese economy is built upon forced labor⁹ would not be expedient to a constantly rising position in the world market. At the same time, the drive for "revealing" this system through survivors would have an obvious

⁷ The work titled *Forced Labor in Soviet Russia*.

⁸ This would in fact be Harry Wu's work, *Laogai: The Chinese GULag*.

⁹ Some scholars and researchers, including Harry Wu, have placed the figure at upwards of 30-40% of China's economy. This number is, of course, not reliable necessarily without official documentation to back it up, but it should at least allow the reader to understand the density of the problem.

goal. As can be expected, the Chinese government is not interested in open discussions about a still active system, regardless of its true impact, and we can only accept so much from survivors at face value, especially those who come from the period in Chinese history known as the ‘Cultural Revolution’.

Even further and more enlightening in consideration of this topic, is that the existence of Laogai seems to be generally well-known to most Chinese *citizens*, considered by some to even be an integral piece of the Chinese socio-cultural system, but yet discussions of its true structure and effect on personal development are out of the picture, in spite of the government’s movement in the late 1970s and 1980s that allowed certain writings to enter publication. In China, in the opinion of some researchers and critics, the ‘accepted’ existence of the Chinese GULag is simply part of Chinese culture.¹⁰

This issue arises in the memoirs of Laogai survivors. The main issue that led to initial research into the subject was the strange opinion that writers of Chinese camp literature seemed to express. Namely, life in Laogai always seems for them to indicate a necessary development of the individual's political and social consciousness through Chinese 'reform through labor'. So, the large questions posed in this dissertation are as follows. Does culture shape the ways they experience the camps, how they write about them, or both? If so, what are the potential origins of this way of thinking and do the systems of the GULag and Laogai themselves play a part in its development or is it perhaps that the cultural mentality of Russians and Chinese are so vastly different that it could simply not be any other way? Is there something particular about Laogai that leads to significant differences vis a vis the GULag? This work sets out to compare the GULag

¹⁰ Saunders, Kate, *Eighteen Layers of Hell*, pg. 63.

to Laogai in hopes of answering these critical questions. The primary foundation on which this analysis will be built is in utilization of survivor memoirs, especially due to the fact that in the case of China they are the only sources we currently possess that provide a distinct picture from within the system. This, of course, needs to be balanced with available historical and official data.

Methodology

This work will begin from the history of the Russian GULag, including a brief introduction, general history, and the relationship to Russian camp literature. Next, it will move into the history of China's Laogai using a similar analysis leading into a discussion of its relationship to camp literature. Following this, we will compare major similarities and differences between the two systems, followed by differences in their respective literary examples. This section will pose several reasons for these differences including aspects of Russian and Chinese cultural and political history, followed by an analysis of the so-called 'Chinese' thought process and its relationship to cultural thinking about forced labor, an issue which may be critical to understanding the phenomenon of camp literature as it occurred in China. The former, of course, cannot be explicitly proven.

As such, this dissertation is interdisciplinary, utilizing two fields which are generally difficult to work with in comparative studies; literature and history. Both have different directions, the first dealing primarily with aesthetic analyses of literary works, often in social contexts, the other focusing on details of events and their effects. But they are by no means incompatible. As should be obvious, literature is deeply intertwined within history, and avoiding even a short background, as will be provided here, is foolish. Prison literature is perhaps even more involved in history than other literary forms, featuring stories of actual events and people, or alterations and fictionalized accounts based on them. For prison literature in both the Soviet Union and China, many different

aspects of each country's history played a large role in the later developments of camp literature, and avoiding a cursory discussion of their backgrounds is nearly impossible.

The focus, from this point, will be on selected major works in both GULag and Laogai camp literature, as well as historical documents in their respective source languages or available English translations for comparison. Quotes will be drawn primarily from versions in *English* in order to be accessible more for readers. Works included in this study for the Russian side are Ivan Solonevich's *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*. For the Chinese context, we will be looking primarily at Bao Ruo-Wang's *Prisoner of Mao* and Harry Wu's *Bitter Winds*. In addition to these, occasional references will be made to larger works such as Solzhenitsyn's *GULag Archipelago*, and lesser known examples such as Zhang Xianlang's *Agony is Wisdom* as well as his later *Getting Used to Dying* and Palden Gyatso's *The Autobiography of a Tibetan Monk*. Solonevich's work was selected because it is one of the earliest examples of Soviet camp literature, while Shalamov's work was chosen because it was written later (in the late 1950s and most of the 1960s), and also due to its literary importance, as well as its extensive depiction of life in the camps.

In consideration of the Chinese examples, Ruo-Wang *Prisoner of Mao* and Wu's *Bitter Winds* were chosen because they are the most important memoirs from Chinese survivors which follow this same format, the latter author's example being a later work. Interestingly, the former is available in China in its original form.¹¹ Also, in order to provide further context, we will reference works by Zhang Xianlang, who wrote some of the first Chinese memoirs from his Laogai experiences under the *permission* of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Wu's *Bitter Winds*, by contrast to Xianlang and Ruo-

¹¹ 毛泽东的囚徒, published in Beijing in 1989.

Wang, is not readily available in China due to his constant efforts to denounce the system in the West, an issue he frequently appears to discuss in front of the United States Congress.¹²

In addition to these major selections, this dissertation will also feature several famous and lesser known works from both Russia and China in order to further develop the idea of cultural influence in the light of camp experience. Lesser-known (in terms of the general public) memoirs such as Harry Wu's *Troublemaker* will be included. Similarities and differences in camp life are often not surprising, whereas differences in the prisoner's mind within a forced labor camp are often striking when comparing the Soviet and Chinese contexts.

Finally, the dissertation will end with a summary of previous sections and a brief discussion on the importance of this work as a whole. Being the first comparative study of camp literature from the Soviet Union and China, it stands as a foundation for possible work in the future. For our current purposes, its importance is clear, because it provides a unique glimpse into similar historical situations and personal tragedies that are strikingly different at the same time they are similar. It seems the argument can be made, in fact, that one's background has a large effect on how one views the world, on in this case on how one deals with extreme hardship. It is the author's hope that it will serve as a stepping-stone to future studies and publications.

¹² Wu is still relevant today in US/Chinese politics and currently is head of the Laogai Research Foundation, a group that constantly aims to expose Laogai and eventually end its existence. In addition, he is the main curator and owner of the Laogai Museum in Washington DC.

Part II

The GULag

In Russia, early examples of forced labor can be found in pre-modern periods. However, China has a much more extensive history with the practice (which we will detail in its own subsequent section), overshadowing much of what occurred in Russia prior to the formation of the Soviet Union. The GULag, in fact, is typically analyzed in the West in the context of this latter history; very little is known about forced labor prior to the Bolshevik revolution. For China, almost nothing is known to Westerners concerning the history of forced labor and as of yet, no concise history of it has been written. We start our analysis first with observations of the history of the practice in Russia.

Prior to 1917, Russia, as any other country, already had in place a prison system. Forced labor brigades existed in Siberia as far back as the 16th Century.¹³ Even in traditional peasant law, one can find elements of punishment by exile and forced labor. For example, when a serf was deemed by his master to be a detriment to the rest of the community, they were sometimes exiled, at times even creating ‘exile communities’ where they would engage in labor deemed impure in order to lead some sort of meager existence.¹⁴

In terms of general history, forced labor was known in Russia as far back as the Kievan period, but even then was generally frowned upon due to its conflict with

¹³ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. xvi.

¹⁴ Worobec, Christine, *Peasant Russia*, pgs. 5, 8.

Orthodox beliefs.¹⁵ But, Russia was also a feudal society functioning in a way similar to the system utilized by the Romans. Slavery and semi-slavery were, quite simply, a common practice throughout most of Russia's history. There are several examples of note in pre-revolutionary Russia involving forced labor, the most famous perhaps being Peter the Great's deployment of massive serf and prison labor in the aid of the state for "enormous feats of engineering and construction", such as the creation of St. Petersburg.¹⁶ The tsarist era in Russia includes a fairly well-documented history of forced labor, and, more importantly, "Siberian exile was never intended exclusively for criminals".¹⁷ In spite the 'common knowledge' of most, before the formation of the Soviet Union, Russia was no stranger to such practices. An American, George Kennan, once noted about the Russian usage of exile in his book *Siberia and the Exile System* that:

*"The obnoxious person may not be guilty of any crime...but if, in the opinion of the local authorities, his presence in a particular place is "prejudicial to public order" or "incompatible with public tranquility", he may be arrested without warrant, may be held from two weeks to two years in prison, and may then be removed by force to any other place within the limits of the empire and there be put under police surveillance for a period of from one to ten years."*¹⁸

Administrative exile was simply "an ideal punishment for not only troublemakers as such, but also for political opponents of the regime".¹⁹ Authors, often viewed as detrimental to the tsar's rule, were often targets of exile and imprisonment throughout Russian history, especially in the 1800s. Pushkin, for example, was exiled for a time due to his writings, and Dostoevsky was even sent to Siberia for a four-year term of forced

¹⁵ Verdansky, George, *Kievan Russia*, pg. 111.

¹⁶ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pgs. 52-53.

¹⁷ Ibid, pg. xxx, Introduction.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

labor, which he eventually wrote about in his work *The House of the Dead*. Regardless of who was sent into exile, which tended to be Siberia, the reason was simple, forced labor solved Russia's age-old problem of an underpopulated east, leading to a subsequent failure to exploit natural resources present there.²⁰ By forcing people to work in these areas, it avoided any significant effects on the economy while still providing access to much-needed minerals and ores. This would, of course, place the seeds for further developments during the Soviet period.

Another poignant example was the original conscription policies for the most able-bodied males in villages.²¹ Up into the 1860s, the usual length of service was *twenty five years*. Following this, reductions took place, but the extremely long conscription often left soldiers abandoned, exiled, and no longer considered part of the communities they left.²² Upon returning, they often found themselves at odd with their own families, living lives as outsiders and cultural rejects. Many would engage in banditry in order to glean some sort of income. These examples, of course, are not part of the history of forced labor, but they display a tendency within the Russian social structure to avoid those who have become 'outsiders', something important later on for the development of the concept of the 'political prisoner'. The Russian word for 'outsider' or 'the other'²³ is another example of this cultural artifact.

In order for the Soviets to create the GULag, they simply needed to work with models already present, which is essentially what occurred after the Bolshevik party took power in Russia in 1917. Real changes in the direction of the GULag, however, would

²⁰ Kaczynska, Elzbieta, *Syberia*, pgs. 43-63.

²¹ Ibid, pg. 49.

²² Worobec, Christine, *Peasant Russia*, pgs. 90-91.

²³ Чужой, see Margaret Paxson's interesting arguments about this term, its affects on the Russian mentality, and its opposition to 'svoi' (свой, or 'one's own') in her work of village studies entitled *Solovyovo*.

not begin until after the revolution. Similarly to China's Laogai, several different periods in the development of a forced labor system occurred before it fully developed into the historical system it became under Communist rule. We will go over these from the Russian perspective one by one, focusing on the Soviet period, since this is the most distinct junction in the development of forced labor in Russia.

Early Forced Labor in Russia

Russia, like China, had a history of forced labor long before the Soviet period came into existence, but it was much different than that found in the territories of its Eastern cousin. In fact, examples of atrocities committed to citizens under Stalin are remarkably similar to those in *ancient* China, whereas in Russia early forced labor tended to be utilized for different purposes and with less distinct cultural ideologies behind them.

Similar to the ancient Chinese, the ancient Slavs generally slew enemy men encountered during raids, but usually took all the women and children into slavery. They were either forced to work after resettling or were utilized for bargaining during further confrontations.²⁴ The groups being taken into Slavic bondage here were not Slavs in many cases, and sometimes they were simply used for sacrifices in pagan ritual.²⁵ But, even outside sources at this time indicate that slaves were sometimes treated in a positive fashion, and were even frequently given the opportunity to return to their homes after paying a ransom, or even becoming free citizens within Slavic society after completing their terms.²⁶ For the most part, early examples of forced labor in areas that would eventually become Russia were closely tied into military pursuits. Movements towards the implementation of forced labor would not really occur until after the reign of Ivan IV, when Russia significantly increased its land holdings to include its modern Eastern borders, especially the Pacific Coast, Kolyma, and Siberia. But even then, the push to

²⁴ Barford, P.M., *The Early Slavs*, pg. 58.

²⁵ Ibid, pg. 120.

²⁶ Ibid, pg. 148.

use forced labor was slow, and expansion into the area was largely through explorers and expeditions.²⁷

After this, some of the most important examples of earlier forced labor are found prior to the 1800s. Punishment for crimes could be *katorga* (forced labor) or *ssylka* (banishment, which could occur in a variety of ways). Typically, *ssylka* would occur after *katorga*. If found in violation of various laws, and thus a social outcast, the only probable life after forced labor was in exile in Siberia, typically under close surveillance by the authorities.²⁸ Prisoners were either placed into prisons or put to work in the mines in the area, which included foreign prisoners, religious statesmen, generals, and others who had fallen out of favor with those in power.²⁹

The practice continued for roughly three centuries, but most of the prisoners who had ‘fallen out of favor’ were more common towards the end of the 1700s through the end of the Romanov dynasty in 1917. Exile was, at times, not necessarily harsh, merely more of social banishment, where officials, for example, found themselves as minor heads of office in remote lands where they scarcely had any contact with Western Russia. For the gentry this was certainly less than favorable, but far from what political prisoners faced under the Bolsheviks.

Before this and into the reign of Peter the Great, it is important to note, the majority of prisoners being sent to Siberia for exile, imprisonment, or forced labor were mainly of the criminal element, including fugitive serfs and robbers, as indicated by the legal code of 1649.³⁰ But banishment to these areas in the Far East of Russia was not

²⁷ Mote, Victor L., *Siberia: Worlds Apart*, pgs. 43-44.

²⁸ Lincoln, Bruce W., *The Conquest of a Continent: Siberia and the Russians*, pg. 163.

²⁹ *Ibid*, pgs. 163-164.

³⁰ *Ibid*, pg. 164

simply to create a reserve of slave laborers as would be found in the Soviet period. On the contrary, it was used as a way to populate distant lands often avoided by European Russia due to their backwardness and lack of development; criminals were those who were committed to forms of labor.³¹ Involuntary settlement in the East, at this time, involved primarily soldiers, assigned peasants and state peasants, increases in the numbers of prisoners would not happen until the 18th century.³² There were cases, however, where serfs were even sent into forced labor because of religious beliefs, though such cases are not numerous. In one example, during 1765-1767, 232 serfs were “sentenced into forced labor and lifetime military service”.³³

This started primarily under Peter the Great,³⁴ who started to send criminals to the newly opened silver mines in Nerchinsk in order to utilize them in an effort to complete work otherwise avoided by local citizens due to the harsh conditions of the climate. This practice slowly grew reserves of criminals in the area, which would progressively build into a system of mines that the Soviets would exploit much later. Exiles were also sent into Siberia, but they only included roughly 22% of the population at this time.³⁵ There were, however, other earlier examples after Peter the Great that are important to note.

After Peter, Elizabeth II put into law at the end of 1760 that noblemen could deport serfs who were ‘causing problems’. They were often sent with their families due to the credit nobles would receive per individual. Thus, *ssylka* increased at this time, but again, punishment in this case was *banishment* or at least populating distant areas, it was

³¹ Lincoln, Bruce W., *The Conquest of a Continent: Siberia and the Russians*, pg. 164

³² Naumov, Igor V., *The History of Siberia*, pg. 99.

³³ Paert, Irinia, *Old Believers: Religious Dissent and Gender in Russia*, pg. 98.

³⁴ Mote, Victor L., *Siberia: Worlds Apart*, pg. 44.

³⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 45.

most certainly *not* for forced labor. Unfortunately, this would eventually lead to clerical errors and abuse of power by the gentry, and by the time of Catherine the Great sometimes people were sent into forced labor because they were “guilty of such misdemeanors as losing their identity papers or angering their masters”.³⁶ These cases are unfortunate, but not due necessarily to direct involvement from the Russian government. The majority of work in mines and factories in Siberia was completed by craftsmen and assigned peasants, exiles were actually limited in number.³⁷ Numbers would increase eventually, however, and from the 1830s and 1840s sources indicate roughly a population of 23,000 individuals sentenced to forced labor. The important factor was the need for a dramatic increase for labor in Russia’s increasing frontier, which would lead to massive increases in exiles.³⁸

By this time the industry for and due to forced labor had grown, but not nearly as considerably as during the Soviet period. Prisoners worked in salt mines, distilleries, and iron foundries, often until death. By 1840 in Irkutsk alone, over 16,000 men and women were living in exile after completing terms of hard labor. However, it is still important to remind the reader that, at this time, the majority of prisoners being sent into forced labor were *criminals* of some kind, very rarely were they of noble origin, and in the same regard they were just as rarely peasants selected for social reasons.

Near the end of the 18th century, things began to change, with a visible increase percentage wise, and exiles at the turn of the century accounted for roughly 55% of the population, which is part of the reason for the eventual push towards increasing forced

³⁶ Lincoln, Bruce W., *The Conquest of a Continent: Siberia and the Russians*, pg. 166.

³⁷ Naumov, Igor V., *The History of Siberia*, pg. 106.

³⁸ Mote, Victor L., *Siberia: Worlds Apart*, pg. 45.

labor.³⁹ As the population of exiles continued to climb, they were put to work, and for very important reasons. During this period in Russian history in the mid to late 1800s, the power of the Tsar was considered against the true will of the people and political upheaval began to slowly reach the boiling point, culminating in the Bolshevik rise to power in 1917 and the end of Tsardom. Such prisoners who were sent to the East were the first modern examples in the history of Russian forced labor of so-called ‘political prisoners’, those who were at odds with the status quo and were believed to pose a significant danger to autocratic rule, though they were not defined as such at the time.⁴⁰ Earlier the population of such types was small, but in the European sections of Russia their numbers eventually rose to the thousands and they began to pose a real threat, the most important group of which were the Decembrists. We will briefly turn to them as a means of illustration.

The Decembrists pushed for a constitutional monarchy in 1825, but were quickly overcome in a single day. Some were hung, others were sent into exile to serve in the military on the empire’s fringes, and the rest were placed into forced labor. However, in comparison to the Soviet era, the number is quite small, amounting to only ninety-six individuals in all (with their families), some of whom eventually returned to European Russia.⁴¹ In the regions they were forced to work, they were permitted to live in huts with no support from their serfs, often in conditions in which they forced their bound workers to previously live.⁴² The Decembrists, however, are only one such political group whose members were placed into forced labor and/or exile during this time.

³⁹ Mote, Victor L., *Siberia: Worlds Apart*, pg. 48.

⁴⁰ Lincoln, Bruce W., *The Conquest of a Continent: Siberia and the Russians*, pg. 166.

⁴¹ Ibid, pg. 167.

⁴² Mote, Victor L. *Siberia: Worlds Apart*, pgs. 61-64.

Another example, even more extreme, was the November Uprising that started in 1831 and led to Poland falling under Russian control. At this time, roughly 80,000 ordinary Poles were sent to Siberia, many forced to *walk* there in chains.⁴³ But, in general, the prison population involved in *katorga* was still primarily criminal in essence.⁴⁴ This begins to change further in the 1840s after the Decembrists and the November Uprising.

During this time a new surge in political prisoners entered the Eastern regions of Russia. One of the most famous, in fact, was Fedor Dostoevsky, who wrote about his experiences in his work *Notes from the House of the Dead*, which is still the most accessible memoir of forced labor under the tsar. This time period was the so-called 'Era of Censorship Terror' that placed a number of writers and political activists into forced labor and exile, including Dostoevsky.⁴⁵ Fears of revolution throughout Europe spread to Russia, and in order to quell potential developments the autocracy sent a number of individuals into Siberia and surrounding areas.

This was not the first time in Russian history when simply talking against official rule could lead to punishment, as in the case of Dostoevsky, such cases were known at least as far back as Ivan IV. In addition, the latter end of the 1800s witnessed another massive project accomplished at least partially by forced labor after Peter the Great constructed St. Petersburg, the Trans-Siberian railroad.⁴⁶ Though the project had problems, it would lead to easier emigration into Russia's eastern regions. Migration at this time was largely voluntary, though there were still of course prisoners whose labor

⁴³ Chapman, Tim, *Imperial Russia*, pg. 65.

⁴⁴ Lincoln, Bruce W., *The Conquest of a Continent: Siberia and the Russians*, pg. 175.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 177.

⁴⁶ Mote, Victor L. *Siberia: Worlds Apart*, pgs. 50-51.

power was being utilized, and settlers increased to roughly 2.5 million by 1916.⁴⁷ But these numbers hide the treatment of migrants at the hands of the local administration. In spite of the numbers who actively moved into Siberia, conditions were far from desirable, and a variety of important strikes took place up into the First World War, leading to social unrest, and eventually helped fuel at least part of the revolution that leads into our next topic.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Mote, Victor L. *Siberia: Worlds Apart*, pgs. 50-51.

⁴⁸ Naumov, Igor V., *The History of Siberia*, pgs. 148-150.

The Bolshevik Era

After Tsar Nicholas II abdicated the throne in 1917, Russia's government collapsed much faster than most people imagined. Various bureaucratic 'holes' existed, programs appeared suddenly useless, and several different factions were struggling to gain control of the country. There were, for example, those that supported the old regime but who were aiming for a parliamentary style of government, other groups like the Mensheviks, the Social Revolutionaries, anarchists, the Black Hundreds, and, of course, the Bolsheviks.

Most people in the West are familiar with the term 'Bolshevik', but most are unaware that during 1917 and during the fall of the tsarist regime, few Russians would have ever dreamed a generally small political party with little influence would control the nation.⁴⁹ Regardless, control they would, and Lenin and his followers managed to stage a coup on October 25th of the same year. They were, however, completely unprepared for their rise to power, and almost immediately a civil war erupted leaving Russia in a state of chaos until at least 1921.⁵⁰ It is during this time that the first Soviet-era camps began to develop.

Lenin's ideas were already ripe with potential for spreading forced labor. He believed, for example, that one of the main opponents to the revolutionary struggle was a vaguely defined 'bourgeois enemy' and saw criminals more as allies, since he considered their existence to be due to the pressures of the former, a "victim of society and a natural

⁴⁹ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 4.

⁵⁰ Pipes, Richard, *The Russian Revolution*, Parts One and Two.

ally of revolution".⁵¹ Remove the cause of crime, and you remove the criminal, or so the belief went. Along these lines he had written up preliminary plans on forced labor punishment of capitalists and also discussed what he called the 'class enemy', someone who opposed the revolution and worked to destroy it.⁵² A class enemy was thus based on not what you did, but who you were, something which was at times almost impossible to define and led to a dramatic increase in arrests following Lenin's coup in October.⁵³

Some individuals who fell under this broad, undefined category of 'class enemy' included bankers, merchants, anyone engaged in independent economic activity, or people with connections to the former tsarist government. Other earlier developments include the Red Army's tendency to force the bourgeois to engage in the digging of trenches and barricades before killing them.⁵⁴ But in spite of the lack of clarity, these early developments are important for the spreading of the idea of two distinct types of prisoners who would eventually be part of the GULag system: regular criminals and political prisoners.

Efforts, however, were scattered at first; political prisoners first shared space with common criminals, and then it was deemed necessary to place them in their own, special facilities.⁵⁵ These facilities will be explained in slightly more detailed throughout the rest of the GULag's history, since their form was not distinct in the beginning, it is simply important to note their consideration and creation at this time.

After their rise to power, the Bolsheviks rapidly increased repression through the country in order to combat perceived enemies. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, later known for

⁵¹ Jakobson, Michael, *Origins of the GULag: The Soviet Prison Camp System 1917-1934*, pg. 18.

⁵² Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pgs. 5-6.

⁵³ Jakobson, Michael, *Origins of the GULag: The Soviet Prison Camp System 1917-1934*, pgs. 20-23.

⁵⁴ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 6

⁵⁵ Leggett, George, *The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police*, pg. 180.

his monumental *GULag Archipelago*, documented this rapid growth starting from the establishment of courts and tribunals beginning in late 1917, followed by the creation of the Red Army in 1918 and the formation of military and police units.⁵⁶ Lenin himself had stated that “the most decisive, draconian measures in raising discipline” were necessary in the development of the Soviet state, so it should come as no surprise that any real or assumed resistance would be eventually thrown into labor camps.⁵⁷

Inevitable uprisings led to a quick proliferation of camp ideology; Lenin implementing punishments that included compulsory work. He further stated after an uprising in 1918 that the authorities needed to lock “up suspicious elements in a concentration camp”, adding that they need to “carry out merciless mass terror”.⁵⁸ Concentration camps had existed in some overseas colonies of European powers prior to Lenin’s rise, but imprisoning one’s own people in concentration camps for perceived or real political threats was a Soviet invention.⁵⁹

These so-called special camps were still very small in number in comparison to the Stalinist era, and the utilization of forced labor as both a method of reform and an economic expediency was not considered a goal by officials until at least after 1928, though the first system of camps was solidified by 1922. In this year, the Soviet government transported a mere 150 prisoners to Solovky, once the site of an old Russian Orthodox Monastery. They arrived on July 1st, 1923, but until as late as 1929 Solovky was the only system of Soviet concentration camps.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Solzhenitsyn, Alexander, *The GULag Archipelago III-IV*, pg. 9.

⁵⁷ Lenin, Vladimir, *Собрание сочинения*, Vol. 35, pg. 176.

⁵⁸ Ibid, Vol. 50, pgs. 143-144.

⁵⁹ Solzhenitsyn, Alexander, *The GULag Archipelago III-IV*, pg. 17.

⁶⁰ Rossi, Jaques, *The GULag Handbook*, pgs. 403-405.

Special prisons, as a general rule, were simple; they were used for “priests, former Tsarist officials, bourgeois speculators, [and] enemies of the new order”.⁶¹ These so-called ‘enemies’ were typically those who were members of other, non-Bolshevik political parties. In particular, this type of prisoner bothered Lenin the most, partially due to their differing ideologies, but also because of the difficulty in controlling them due to the fact that many had already spent years in Tsarist prisons and were familiar with exile, interrogation techniques, and how to disrupt order.⁶²

In addition, activities of many of these political prisoners was causing a stir in the foreign press, and since Lenin and his compatriots believed that Communism was destined to spread through the rest of the world in a few months, any bad press needed to be avoided at all costs. Naturally, this was done through anti-capitalist propaganda, drawing on references to capitalist prisons while making them seem worse than in reality. In addition, the Cheka simply sent unruly prisoners farther away from their contacts, similar to what was seen in instances of exile during the Tsarist era.⁶³ Still, these movements and actions did not have the desired effect in many cases, and the prisoners continued to revolt. In one case, authorities took the completely opposite approach and attempted to allow political prisoners to enjoy their demands, but eventually this failed due to contact via land routes. There was really only one solution, choose a location that was located on an island.

The chosen location was an old monastery at Solovetsky, an archipelago in the north of Russia near the White Sea. Previously, the monastery served as a prison for political opponents of the Tsar and monks who had dwelled there had engaged in a form

⁶¹ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 13.

⁶² *Ibid*, pg. 14.

⁶³ *Ibid*, pg. 15.

of forced labor that they believed led to the “plane of deification”.⁶⁴ ⁶⁵ As opposed to earlier developments in the forced labor system starting roughly around 1918, Solovetsky was the first camp to have an actual system, one that would actually provide profit to the Soviet government.

Political prisoners, however, still received special treatment in the camps and were separated from their less-desirable compatriots to avoid any further difficulties. The Political Red Cross, who previously attempted to keep their situation stable, was still permitted to send care packages, as well as relatives of the prisoners contained there. This, as Applebaum comments, “was the solution to the public relations problem posed by the political: give them what they want, more or less, but put them as far away from anyone else as humanly possible”.⁶⁶

As more prisoners came to the island, these conditions would naturally change as the Soviet government was certainly not going to tolerate exceptions for very long. Conditions became progressively worse in spite of the comparatively smaller prison population than in later years,⁶⁷ with some inmates cutting off their own hands and feet in order to gain rest from the harsh working conditions and disease.⁶⁸ The majority of such events occurred in the so-called ‘outer camps’, which were generally tree-felling camps with worse living conditions and harsher treatment. Even an investigating commission sent later in the decade to inspect the camps was horrified at the torture and sadism found there, which was so horrible that it was rarely found even in *later* GULag camps.

⁶⁴ Emmerson, Charles, *The Future History of the Arctic*, pgs. 27-29.

⁶⁵ Robson, Roy R., *Solovki*, pg. 7.

⁶⁶ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 22.

⁶⁷ Roughly 6000 prisoners were on Solovetsky at this time.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, pg. 23.

In spite of the harsh conditions, however, prisoners were given some modicum of culture. They were permitted to put on plays, often from memory, and they even had access to a library with over 30,000 books, as well as a botanical garden, and “club”, the latter which included a piano. Prisoners were also permitted to use the old lithography equipment of the monastery to produce their own magazines and newspapers. Even some of the original monks who survived became a sort of instructor class that helped prisoners to run farming and fishing enterprises.⁶⁹ Of course, these examples should not diminish the harsh life of the camps at Solovetsky, but they serve as a counterpoint to display the general tendency of the camps to not function on a self-supporting level, which greatly disturbed the Soviet government, in addition to their lack of focus on remodeling the individual.⁷⁰

Up until that point, the Soviet leadership seemed uncertain whether or not the main purpose of the camps was for profit, re-education, or punishment. As the 20s rolled on, however, it became clear that the success of the camps being self-sufficient was tied into a number of Soviet institutions. In spite of the truth of the matter, however, Solovetsky was eventually hailed for its economic success, and would become the model for the future of the GULag throughout the Soviet Union. Part of this push to economic stability, however, interestingly involved the general removal of re-education in order to focus primarily on production,^{71 72} something that would eventually be a big difference between Soviet and Chinese prison camps. Political prisoners were eventually even grouped with regular prisoners in order to keep work orders more consistent.

⁶⁹ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 27.

⁷⁰ Ibid, pg. 29.

⁷¹ Robson, Roy R., *Solovki*, pgs. 242-244

⁷² Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 37.

During 1928 and by the end of 1929, it is recorded that only roughly 30,000 prisoners were in the system, a huge leap from the starting population of only 150. This number may certainly be much smaller than in reality, but it is still a far cry from the eventual millions that would be interred in the GULag. The critical step in this development occurred with Stalin's rise to power in the Soviet Union.

Early Changes under Stalin

After Lenin's death in 1924, the movement of prisoners into the GULag and the creation of further camps increased dramatically, though this would take some time. By the end of the 1920s, however, this movement was in full sway. Stalin himself commented that,

*When the Bolsheviks came into power they were soft and easy with their enemies...we had begun by making a mistake. Leniency towards such a power was a crime against the working classes.*⁷³

Interestingly, one of the turning points in the development of the camps was Maxim Gorky's visit to Solovetsky in 1929. Though it is still unknown what his motives actually were, or if even if anything written was by his own hand, Gorky's description of the system in delightful and promising terms spread the notion throughout the Soviet populace that the camps were creating a new type of citizen who would be better prepared for the work necessary for the future of the Soviet Union.⁷⁴ Much like had viewed the development of Laogai later.

In addition, during this same time, Stalin would implement of the first of his 'Five Year' plans, a rapid industrialization of the Soviet economy that altered areas such as working hours and created a system where workers, factory owners, and so forth would compete to see who could create the greatest output, who could work the fastest, and who could create the most viable improvements. Of course, the actual result of this push to industrialization was in many ways a failure; primitive technology led to mistakes and

⁷³ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 41.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, pgs. 42-44.

then the blaming of “saboteurs” and forced collectivization in the countryside weakened Soviet agriculture significantly and led to devastating famines that killed roughly seven million people.

As some engineers had been labeled in industry as “saboteurs” using very loose definitions, naturally peasants who resisted collectivization were often labeled as “kulaks” using similar, loose categorizations and became a new sort of criminal who was against the progress of the Soviet Union. Millions were eventually exiled, and roughly 100,000 were arrested and put into the GULag.⁷⁵ Those forced by famine to steal and horde grain were also considered criminals and added to the prison population. Peasants eventually became the majority in Soviet prisons throughout the 1930s.

Naturally, these mass arrests caused a dramatic increase in the prison population in the camps, so soon the call for a rapid change and overhaul arose. In particular, the Soviet government faced great difficulty in the creation of new camps and still had difficulty convincing workers to move to the North, where natural resources were great but the conditions were harsh. In addition, the economic pressure created by the Five Year Plan demanded a great output of resources such as coal, gas, and wood, which were in plentiful supply in Siberia and far north.⁷⁶ Gold was also in demand for capital, which was available in large quantities in Kolyma, where temperatures were often freezing and conditions were primitive at best. In order to fill the need for prisoners, various government institutions gave up their prisoners, increasing the population from around 30,000 to 300,000 in a very short amount of time. In order to cope with this upsurge in

⁷⁵ Khlevniuk, Oleg, *The History of the GULag*, pg. 11.

⁷⁶ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 49.

the population and new demands placed upon the system, the OGPU reorganized its special camp department and renamed it the Main Camp Administration.

Thus, in 1931 the system finally received the name of ‘GULag’ (GULag OGPU SSSR), referring specifically to the Soviet system, not the prison camps found in Soviet republics, which continued to operate independently.⁷⁷ The system itself, though, largely had a very dizzying developmental process, which many are still uncertain today was a result of deliberate plan on the part of Stalin, or simply a necessity created by unrealistic work orders and demands. Ultimate goals for the camps never seemed entirely clear, but it is quite obvious that at this point the camps had a major economic function, and almost all of their ‘re-educational’ importance was put aside to focus on economic development for the country as a whole through the usage of the camps’ free labor system. A perfect example of this is anomalies such as the fact that as late as 1937, “many political prisoners were still kept in jails where they were explicitly forbidden to work”.⁷⁸ Ginzburg, who wrote *Journey into the Whirlwind* herself was actually a part of this phenomenon and received a prison sentence where work was not permitted.

Still, the push to use forced labor in an effort to complete massive building projects cannot be ignored. As the productivity and economic viability of the camps increased, naturally so did the prison population, and with Stalin given more power over arrests in 1931, naturally the capacity for the GULag to increase happened tenfold as projects became from frequent. There was even evidence of planning coming from Stalin himself, since he was actually given greater control overseeing the arrests of “certain

⁷⁷ Rossi, Jaques, *The GULag Handbook*, pg. 92.

⁷⁸ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 52.

kinds of technical specialists” at this time.⁷⁹ This period was in fact, one in the history of the GULag that included some of the most famous construction projects, such as the infamous White Sea Canal, one of the “grand” construction projects this period in camp history was so famous for.

⁷⁹ Nordlander, David J., *Capital of the GULag: Magadan in the Early Stalin Era*

The White Sea Canal Project and Expansion

In the 30s, the Soviet government widely published propaganda glorifying the prison camp system and expounding on its ability to reforge counter-revolutionaries and hardened criminals into new Soviet citizens. Contrary to popular belief, the main reason for this was not, in fact, pressure from the West to end ‘human suffering’, but largely economic. Great Britain and the United States, under pressure from various businesses, were beginning to push for a boycott of any goods made using forced labor. Of course, the Soviet Union could not allow a small decrease in profits earned from its far-from-lucrative prison system, so it made an effort to change its image. This is important, because typically only superficial changes occurred to give the *appearance* of a different set of circumstances.

For example, all public statements referring to the camps as ‘concentration camps’ were removed starting in 1930, and all official documents relating to the GULag would thereby refer to them specifically as ‘corrective-labor camps’. In the case of certain lumber camps, prisoners would be evacuated over night, often resulting in perhaps hundreds of deaths, in order to make it appear as though prison labor was no longer being used in certain areas. Once the prisoners were placed under the surface, still working, they would be returned to their original camps if possible when things cooled.⁸⁰ In order to circumvent the problems caused by the boycott on wood products, Stalin decided to shift the removed prisoners to an area where they could be openly discussed, and this then led to the decision to create the White Sea Canal.

⁸⁰ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pgs. 60-61.

The White Sea Canal was not the first large construction in the history of the GULag. Prior to this, the Soviet Union had already used forced labor to create cities and large factories. The White Sea Canal, however, was the first such project of its kind and easily the most important. One of the reasons for its fame was the fact that, historically, merchants in old Russia had previously drawn up plans for such a canal in order to transport wood and minerals.⁸¹ But as might be suspected, the project was never even started, simply because it seemed such an impossible and potentially dangerous task. In terms of simply the length, for example, the canal would need to stretch roughly 141 miles. This, of course, highly appealed to Stalin, who saw the project as a further method of spreading the Soviet production ideal.

The canal was eventually hailed as a great achievement, but this certainly would not be the case to the prisoners who worked on it by hand, literally. The White Sea Canal was essentially created entirely using low tech to the point that wooden spades and pieces of metal screwed onto sticks were used as tools.⁸² Dirt was even dug by hand at times and “trucks” were created using boards and logs on which to roll them. Food and working conditions were obviously no better either. At times the movement of prisoners to new sections of the canals was hasty, and they were often required to make their own barracks by hand, finding no food when they arrived. Even worse, in order to meet Stalin’s ridiculous 20-month deadline, camp commanders would force prisoners to work twenty-four or even forty-eight hours in a row.⁸³ In addition, camps engaged in the practice of using the ‘shockworker’ phenomenon, posting placards above ‘good workers’

⁸¹ Gorky, Maxim, *Belomor*, pg. 17.

⁸² Ruder, Cynthia Ann, *Making History for Stalin: The Story of the Belomor Canal*, pgs. 23 and 30.

⁸³ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 66.

sections in the cafeteria that read “For the best workers, the best food”. Above the other workers would be a sign reading “Here they get worse food: refusers, lazy-bones”.

Regardless of the conditions and harsh demands, the White Sea Canal was in fact completed. But this is not the only importance of its creation, for it was also the only large project created by forced labor in the Soviet Union that was purposely given attention at home *and* abroad under official consultation with the “full light of Soviet propaganda”.⁸⁴ Who better to choose for this project than Maxim Gorky, who had already written about Solovetsky. In August of 1933, he and a crew of 120 Soviet writers traveled the canal, eventually “creating” the work known today as *The Canal Named for Stalin*. Of course, it stands as good evidence of the corruption and influence placed on Soviet writers at this time, but its importance also lies in the fact that it spread the idea of the ‘new man’ created through forced labor, even though it really did not play out in practice. The idea of the new man is something, in fact, which would become centrally important for China later in the CCP’s approach to restricting traditional forced labor. Other works, such as the play *Aristokraty*, referred to the building of the canal and received attention outside of the Soviet Union

The function of such writings, of course, was to glorify the camps and their existence while covering over the true horror of daily life therein. Polish socialist Jerzy Gliksman, for example, saw *Aristokraty* and was even taken to a show camp outside of Moscow, where he believed he was being shown true camp life. Later, he would learn his lesson when he became a prisoner himself.⁸⁵ But the true irony of the White Sea Canal is that it was largely non-functional. Dug at a mere *12 feet*, it could barely take

⁸⁴ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 67.

⁸⁵ Gliksman, Jerzy, *Tell the West*, pg. 35.

barges, let alone ships and submarines. Its main importance, therefore, was not for its actual functional capacity, but rather for its ability to propagandize the notion of the GULag, which is exactly what it did.

Following the White Sea Canal and the amount of effort spent in its glorification, the true efforts of the GULag expanded. One of the first areas it expanded into, of course, was the vast north, which up to the last years of Tsarist Russia no one had even attempted to explore because “the climate was too harsh, the potential for human suffering too great, [and] Russian technology too primitive”.⁸⁶ This, of course, was not a problem for the Soviet government, which by then had thousands upon thousands of forced labor workers at hand. Projects to populate and exploit natural resources in such areas were undertaken, at great cost of life. In some cases, the creation of new camp projects was haphazard at best, at other times it even led to the creation of camps that “attained the size and status of industrial empires”.⁸⁷

In Ukhta, for example, the majority of city, including roads, offices, apartment buildings, and even parks and theaters, were built by forced labor. So harsh was the territory that not even barbed wire was used, since escape would be pointless. Another city, Vorkuta, was located even farther north and served as an important coal-mining center that was built almost entirely by hand. Both of these cities were in the northern Komi region of Russia, known for its vast taigas and unforgiving climate. It is also important for the fact that it was often used later as a camp center for Poles and Germans. So many, in fact, were brought to the area that it became known locally as ‘Berlin’, where populations of prisoners often worked, but did not live, in conjunction with

⁸⁶ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 75.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, pg. 77.

populations of exiles.⁸⁸ As such camps grew, their needs increased so prisoners would, over time, create their own hospitals, power plants, and factories. One city, Vorkuta, was built on permafrost and had to be repaired roughly every year, but in spite of harsh conditions it would eventually see the development of various cultural institutions such as libraries, radio clubs, health centers, and even gardens with fountains, all apparently in an effort to create new Soviet citizens.⁸⁹ As should be expected, while more camps developed and the demand for more prisoners arose, more arrests naturally occurred, leading to a vast expansion of the GULag system during this time period, roughly up until 1933-1934.

One of the largest, most important, and most notorious camp systems to arise during this time was in the most northeastern part of Russia, known as Kolyma. Stalin had shown an earlier interest in the area in 1926, primarily due to the vast resources of gold available there, which would be quite beneficial to funding the Soviet economy.⁹⁰ The gold mined there was traded to the West for much needed technology. And in spite of the incredibly harsh conditions, efforts were made to extend the lives of prisoners exiled there, large numbers of whom would die even before arrival.

Varlam Shalamov, who wrote *Kolyma Tales*, discussed later in this dissertation, mentioned this very effort. Over time, Kolyma became more advanced and technology increased, leading to the creation of the city of Magadan, which was built entirely using forced labor. In fact, efforts like those in these regions actually allowed Russia to expand into previously inhospitable locations. But of course, in the same respect, the amount of life and suffering on which such cities were built cannot be ignored. In spite of progress,

⁸⁸ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 83.

⁸⁹ Figs Orlando, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*, pg. 117.

⁹⁰ Bollinger, Martin J., *Stalin's Slave Ships*, pgs. 12 and 19.

however, the camps would soon face perhaps the worst period of all, the Great Terror, which would destroy any previous glory that may have existed, even if in the minds of only a few.

The Great Terror

The period of the Great Terror from roughly 1937 until 1938, served as an important turning point in the history of the GULag. Up until then, massive arrests were, of course, quite common, after as well. What makes this period different is the shift in how the camps themselves were managed. Up until that time, management had been generally indifferent, deaths being largely accidental at times due to poor planning, slow delivery of supplies, and the like. Starting in 1937, however, the system started to develop “genuinely deadly camps where prisoners were deliberately worked to death, or actually murdered, in far larger numbers than they had been in the past”.⁹¹

One of the most important events behind the start of the Great Terror and its subsequent effects on the GULag was the death of Sergey Kirov in 1934. Until this day, his death remains a mystery; some considering it purely murder, others outright assassination. Either way, its affect was clear, because “Stalin pushed through a series of decrees giving the NKVD far greater powers to arrest, try, and execute ‘enemies of the people’”.⁹² In a short amount of time, naturally, opponents of Stalin were arrested and many of their supporters were removed from Leningrad. This followed with mass arrests of various party members, leading to torture, interrogations, and the famous ‘show trials’ that made this short time period famous.

More importantly, the effect of Stalin’s broad sweep of the Party trickled down throughout the Soviet Union’s ranks, causing a plethora of arrests and executions. Many of these, not surprisingly, were based on actual orders issued by Stalin that listed *quotas*

⁹¹ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 93.

⁹² *Ibid*, pg. 94, 95.

of prisoners from certain areas that needed to be filled, often without providing any sort of cause for arrest.⁹³ Arrestees were placed into one of two categories; they were either sentenced to death, or confined to a GULag camp for a period of up to ten years, in theory. Plans of this type, such as one provided by Applebaum in her extraordinary work on the subject, *GULag: A History*, and mentioned briefly above, are shocking in the revelation of how many arbitrary numbers were used to collect prisoners throughout Russia. One listing, for example, indicates that 2,000 prisoners to be executed and 3,000 to be sent to camps had to be procured from the Georgian SSR. It should also be no surprise that Stalin occasionally, and just as arbitrarily, increased the numbers as he saw fit.

Soviet cities were sometimes in full belief of the mission, “shocked” to find that famous revolutionaries were actually confessing publically about their opposition to Stalin and the Party. Some even saw this as a reason to explain why the Soviet Union was still in such disarray in spite of Stalin’s Five-Year Plan and the push into industrialization. Others were simply too shocked by the speed of the Great Terror to even question why neighbors and friends would suddenly disappear in the night, never to be heard from again. This of course, merely reveals the impact on the populace and gives a general indication of its effect on the GULag’s population. What, however, about its actual effect on the GULag?

Surprisingly, many leaders and camp commanders involved in the GULag were *not* exempt from the push of the Great Terror. Genrikh Yagoda, for example, was one of the early developers and heads of the GULag who helped to vastly expand the camp system. In spite of this assumed position of importance, however, he was tried and

⁹³ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 95.

executed in 1938. Following this, his friends and subordinates were also disposed. Even his family was not exempt.⁹⁴

In another case, Matvei Berman, boss of the GULag from 1932 until 1937, and who had years of experience within the Party, was accused of sabotaging the camps and various construction projects. Following his arrest, mass conspiracy spread through the rest of the camps and various commanders and administrators were sentenced. Most of these cases, it may be easily assumed, were often shockingly ridiculous considering the history of the individuals undergoing trial and punishment. And, as is usually known about this time, “Nobody knew what tomorrow would bring. People were afraid to talk to one another or meet, especially families in which the father or mother had already been ‘isolated’”.⁹⁵

Aside from these factors, however, the most important issue during the time of the Great Terror is the sudden collapse of the GULag’s supposed original purpose, or at least the purpose the Soviet public was given. At this time the “propaganda about the glories of criminal re-education finally ground to a halt, along with any remaining lip service to the ideal”.⁹⁶

Whether or not this was due partly, at least, to the elimination of many Party members who had been responsible for this phenomenon is not important, because the shift happened nonetheless. In addition, “the political rhetoric grew more radical, as the hunt for political criminals intensified, the status of the camps, where these dangerous politicals resided, changed as well”.⁹⁷ They changed in the sense that the public was no

⁹⁴ Conquest, Robert, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*, pg. 83.

⁹⁵ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 99.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 100.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*.

longer informed, the camps became secretive and any discussion of their existence sank below the surface of Soviet life. The locations of camps became secret, and they even disappeared from official maps. These changes also occurred at the level of Soviet popular culture. *Aristokraty*, as well as Gorky's work on the White Sea Canal, were both banned until well after Stalin's death. More horrifying, however, were the now loose determinations for political enemies, who could essentially no longer be identified through openly expressed views.⁹⁸ The prisoners themselves lost any description of humanity, and were thereafter referred to as 'zeks'.⁹⁹

This dehumanizing approach was also evident in the living condition of GULag prisoners. In some cases, the changes were drastic. Bread rations were generally cut in half from one kilogram per day to four hundred grams. The upsurge in prison populations as a result of the Great Terror led to dangerous overcrowding, forcing prisoners to dig shelters in the ground. Many ate without bowls, spoons, and stood in huge lines while suffering and eventually dying from dysentery.¹⁰⁰ In addition, fatalities doubled due to large execution quotas, and quite often the murders were at random simply to fill lists of numbers. Inside the barracks the situation continued to grow worse with countless cases of attempted suicide and madness. All of this suddenly came to a halt in November of 1938.

At this time, Stalin suddenly seemed to change his opinion of the purge, or perhaps, more likely, he had simply found its effect sufficient by that time. But, it is important to note, the effects of the purges had caused a significant loss of profitability in

⁹⁸ Rossi, Jaques, *The GULag Handbook*, pgs. 278-279.

⁹⁹ Previously, it had been usual to refer to them as 'comrades'. Following the Great Terror, the term zeks came into existence. In Russian the term is zaklyuchoni (заключённый), which literally means 'one who is locked up'. The short form in official documents was з/к, which was pronounced as 'zek'.

¹⁰⁰ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 105.

the camps, which were then blamed on one man, Nikolai Yezhov.¹⁰¹ The mistakes Stalin hinted at in a speech given in 1939 were the sharp downward spiral in productivity in the camps, and their slowly developing lack of economic viability. Due to the mass shootings, random murders, madness, and sickness, camp production rapidly dropped. Even Kolyma's gold mines were failing, and an upsurge in criminals to the system did little to offset this deficit. Overall the "gross industrial production...dropped, from 1.1 billion rubles to 945 million rubles",¹⁰² which was a decrease of over 10%.

This unprofitability did not go unnoticed, and discussions on camp economics began to take place. Attempts were made to make prisoners, especially those in technical fields, more "productive", which usually involved providing them with periods of rest and more sufficient rations. Surprisingly, these efforts as well as others had a noticeable effect, increasing the economic activity of the GULag. Turnover in 1939, for example, was roughly 4.2 billion rubles, and by 1940 it had increased to 4.5 billion. Deaths were also halved from 1938 to 1939, which is surprising considering the increase in the number of camps as well as the overall surge in the prison population. By this time, one of the most important physical changes noticed by prisoners of the GULag was the alteration of the camps to purely industrial centers, which would be their permanent form.¹⁰³

By the beginning of the 1940s almost every region of the Soviet Union contained some form of camp system, whether temporary or permanent, and they created everything from toys to military vehicles. The industrial system that developed from the original GULag had turned into a full-fledged bureaucracy. All experiments had ended

¹⁰¹ Rogovin, Vadim, *Stalin's Terror of 1937-1938*, pgs. 413-420.

¹⁰² Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 109.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, pg. 114.

and the usual methods for running the camps persisted until Stalin's death. Major changes did take place, however, during the Second World War.

World War II

The major turning point in the development and history of the GULag, which slowly led to its eventual collapse, was the Second World War. For the Soviet Union, unlike most of the rest of the world, the actual start of the conflict is considered as 22 June 1941, when Hitler betrayed Stalin and began ‘Operation Barbarossa’. From there, life for prisoners in the camps began to change.

The first issue was the potential of further repression. ‘Enemies of the people’ included categories used earlier in the arrests of political prisoners, such as being deemed “socially dangerous”, but this widened to also include ethnic groups, groups from enemy nations, and “socially alien” groups from occupied areas.¹⁰⁴ Executions increased, though the exact number is currently unknown, and food rations were at least cut in half. On only the third day after the beginning of the war for the Soviet Union, *all* foreign prisoners were separated and moved, usually within the vicinity of their main camp, but separate from Russians. Prisoners were even denied letters, parcels, and newspapers, and radio amplifiers were dismantled. Even more troubling were prisoners who were set to be released from the camps. After the start of the war, at least 17,000 prisoners were affected, and “simply received a document instructing them to remain behind barbed wire during the war”.¹⁰⁵

As the war progressed, conditions became even worse. Longer working days were established, and refusing to work in spite of disease and starvation was considered treason. During this time, and due to the given reasons, this period in the history of the

¹⁰⁴ Viola, Lynn, *The Unknown GULag*, pg. 5.

¹⁰⁵ Yevgenia Ginzburg, author of *Journey into the Whirlwind*, in fact, received such a letter.

GULag featured the highest mortality rates in the camp system's history. According to official statistics, which are immediately suspect and probably grossly understated, 352,560 prisoners died in 1942, with an additional 267,826 dead within the next year. Later, unofficial estimates place the total dead during the war years at over two million. Sick prisoners, officially, supposedly accounted for 18-22% of the prison population. As deaths increased, the Soviet Union attempted to counterattack the massive drop-off of prisoners in order to save the "war effort" by creating a "special food fund", which was a simple increase in rations to stave off death as long as possible.

The actual affect of the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union also led to chaos spreading throughout the GULag, particularly in western regions of the Soviet Union. As Germany began to sweep into Russia, the NKVD began panicking and quickly removed prisoners from various camps, often leaving behind expensive materials and livestock. In other cases, some prisons attempted to kill off their population, slaughtering thousands they threw in shallow mass graves barely covered with sand, while others abandoned them altogether, which allowed prisoners to break free and escape.¹⁰⁶ Some remained, believing they would be executed by guards waiting outside, and were nonetheless gunned down when the guards did in fact return. Similar instances occurred across most of the border regions of the Soviet Union during the Nazi occupation of its western territories.

Further East into Russia, evacuations were slightly more organized, but still were often performed hastily while the Germans were in the process of invading. In some cases, trains were so quickly crammed with prisoners that many died from suffocation, and others perished when Nazi bombs struck their compartments. But most prisoners

¹⁰⁶ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 416.

were not permitted to even take trains during the evacuation, simply because most of the space was taken up by officials and guards. Due to the general lack of transport, the majority of prisoners who were evacuated were forced to march. Those who could not, were simply shot, and in many cases, simply due to slow movement or panic, the NKVD would kill them anyway. It is estimated that 890,000 prisoners were evacuated during the start of the war, but how many survived is still unknown.

In addition to evacuees, a large portion of the prison population was also given freedom through the war. Roughly around 12 July 1941, a month after the start of the war for the Soviet Union, “the Supreme Soviet ordered the GULag to free certain categories of prisoners directly into the Red Army”.¹⁰⁷ Typically, it was for those who were “sentenced for missing work, [as well as] ... ordinary and insignificant administrative and economic crimes”. At least slightly over a million prisoners were released based on these criteria.

But release was not necessarily a good thing. Though such prisoners were removed from the GULag, as may be assumed they were generally placed directly on the front lines in the most dangerous of positions. Often, they were sent with a shortage of weapons and ammunition. But in spite of these problems, many ex-prisoners actually distinguished themselves during the war. Some of them even took pride in their new position within the Red Army. One letter read:

¹⁰⁷ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 446.

*“First of all, I write to thank you sincerely for re-educating me. In the past, I was a recidivist, considered dangerous to society, and therefore was placed more than once in a prison, where I learned to work. Now, the Red Army has put even more trust in me, it has taught me to be a good commander, and trust me with fighting comrades. With them, I go bravely into battle, they respect me for the care I take of them, and for correctness with which we fulfill the military tasks we are set”.*¹⁰⁸

Even more shocking in certain cases were prisoners still within the GULag, who instead of expressing increased suffering due to food shortages, actually seemed downtrodden by the fact that they could not take part in the war, and others, such as Ginzburg, were willing to “forgive”. Within the GULag, however, prisoners not involved in the war still found an outlet by acting out against German prisoners. In some other cases, prisoners even performed heroic actions in defense of the motherland in spite of their treatment.

One case records how a prisoner committed suicide by driving a truck into a tank, thereby blocking the path for other tanks and saving the brigade of prisoners that was being evacuated. In another instance, a large group of prisoners who were stranded took the initiative to begin building defenses, working thirteen to fourteen hours every day.¹⁰⁹ Even within normal camp life in the Eastern part of the Soviet Union, propaganda and national pride led prisoners to work harder in order to supply products, especially gold, for the war effort. Throughout the war, the GULag did indeed supply a great deal of products for the war including uniforms, ammunition, gas masks, and field telephones.

Aside from the negative and positive stories from the war, the most important aspect of the GULag’s history during this period was the eventual spreading of

¹⁰⁸ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 448.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, pg. 449.

knowledge of the camps in the West. During the war, the treatment of Polish prisoners led to knowledge of the GULag becoming a matter of public interest, especially for the United Nations. Accounts of the Soviet Union's camps was considered shocking to many, in spite of the fact that information of their existence had been written many years prior, and the American Federation of Labor produced a body of evidence that was presented to the UN and effectively was one of the factors in the start of the Cold War.¹¹⁰

After the end of war, as seen throughout the world and in any country involved, tensions eased and the populace in the Soviet Union looked forwards to what they perceived as a better life. Even those in power felt that production should switch to a more consumer-based system, things that were lacking considerably in comparison to the rest of the world. In addition, a large amnesty in 1945 took place that released approximately 734,785 prisoners in July. Restrictions previously put in place, and many of those implementing during the start of the war, were lifted. But in spite of these developments and opinions, the Cold War had begun, and unfortunately, this played into Stalin's plans.

¹¹⁰ American Federation of Labor, *Slave Labor in Russia*, pgs. 22 and 109 have some particularly poignant examples of how the GULag was compared to Nazi atrocities committed during World War II.

The Cold War

After the war, a new enemy appeared for the Soviet Union, the United States. This problem began with American outcry over the GULag, but the most important factor was the proliferation of nuclear weapons. After the usage of the atomic bomb in Japan, America became the greatest threat to Soviet Union. This, of course, gave Stalin an excuse to further tighten control over the populace. The NKVD was reorganized after its somewhat slack function following the war and, naturally, the GULag slowly increased capacity again. In fact, this period would mark the apex of the camp system as a whole.

With the threat of nuclear war a reality, repression increased with a new series of arrests beginning around 1946. Treason could even in certain cases be due to marrying foreigners, an adjustment actually made to the Soviet constitution in 1947.¹¹¹ In addition, sharing information, such as scientific data, was considered a crime, and former prisoners who had been granted amnesty during the war were suddenly arrested again. Due to these developments, as well as countless others and the general fear of the West, the GULag reached its highest level of activity by the early 1950s. It contained over two million prisoners by this time, a large number of whom were now foreigners, including German and Japanese prisoners of war and Eastern Europeans from conquered countries. With the increase in prisoners, the focus again turned to its potential economic output.

But there was a problem. By this time, disillusioned and simply tired of life in the camps, a new criminal order had taken root, one that was functioning like a large gang in many respects. In addition, political prisoners began banding together to fight

¹¹¹ American Academy of Political and Social Science, *The Soviet Union Since World War II*, pgs. 33 and 36-37.

professional criminals who were dominating the camps.¹¹² Officials tried pitting one group against the other and even created new forms of special camps, all in an effort to increase the productivity of the GULag.¹¹³ But, at the same time, camp officials faced the problem of increasing economic output while tightening the level of repression in order to combat inner-camp turmoil. This, of course, simply revealed that the GULag had become an unprofitable venture. Conflicts between gangs of thieves, political prisoners, and guards had simply grown too large to combat while still retaining the economic foundations of the camps.

Stalin, however, seemed to refuse to see the problem for what it was, and continued to increase the power of the secret police well up to the year before his death.¹¹⁴ By that time it “accounted for 9 percent of the capital investment in Russia, more than any other ministry”.¹¹⁵ In order to further bolster support of the GULag and make it appear profitable, Stalin simply went back to his system of utilizing special projects as a form of propaganda, one of which was a new asbestos plant, something which required technical skill that the GULag was already poor in providing.¹¹⁶

Projects such as this, however, were “widely considered wasteful and grandiose”. There were no writers to further the conception of the GULag, and inner camp dissatisfaction was increasing. By 1951, “mass work refusals, carried out by both criminal and political prisoners, had reached crisis levels”.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, the kind of advanced technology the Soviet Union was in desperate need of was not being produced

¹¹² Barnes, Stephen A., *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*, pgs. 89 and 109.

¹¹³ Mochulsky, Fyodor, *GULag Boss A Soviet Memoir*, pg. 16.

¹¹⁴ Craveri, Marta, *The Crisis of the Gulag*, pgs. 320-343.

¹¹⁵ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 471.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 472.

in the GULag, as Beria's eventual replacement, S.N. Kruglov, noted in a speech.¹¹⁸ The kind of motivated and skilled workforce needed to create technology simply did not exist. As Stalin became increasingly paranoid with age his closest supporters never dared to take any action against his plans. Another wave of purges began, but thankfully was never fully carried out. As the GULag reached a stage of almost complete collapse, Stalin finally died on 5 March 1953.

Following his death, the response in the camps was at times exuberant, and at others, naturally so, hesitant. This was due to uncertainty in the future actions of Lavrenty Beria, who was chief of Soviet security under Stalin. Once he took power, however, it was evident he had other plans. Beria immediately began by aborting several GULag projects and essentially started the dismantling process.¹¹⁹ Even further, two weeks later he informed the Central Committee that there were "2,526,402 inmates, of whom only 221,435 were actually 'dangerous state criminals', and he argued in favor of releasing many of those remaining".¹²⁰ Releases of a variety of prisoners, including those only in the GULag for five years or less, started immediately.

But Beria's time in power was short. After his quick actions and vast reforms, he was arrested in June 1953 and died before the end of the year. After his death, some of his reforms were lifted, though large projects of the GULag and the amnesty he started were left as they were. But those in power were still aware of the camp system's negative impact on the Soviet Union's economy. Within the GULag itself, other changes began to take place as officials became aware that the majority of changes coming from Moscow were permanent. Prisoners who refused to do work were no longer punished,

¹¹⁸ Ivanova, Galina, *Labor Camp Socialism: The GULag in the Soviet Totalitarian System*, pg. 122.

¹¹⁹ Gregory, Paul R., *The Economics of Forced Labor*, pg. 41.

¹²⁰ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 479.

protests began to break out, and interrogations and investigations, in many cases, suddenly stopped. The only prisoner type that generally faced the same system they were used to was political prisoners. Their situation remained largely the same after Beria's reforms.¹²¹ This, as may naturally be assumed, eventually led to organized uprising.

By the time of Stalin's death, most of the camps had delineated into separate groupings of prisoner types. Not by means of the authorities, of course, but simply through the natural progression of camp life, prisoner movement, and internal conflicts.¹²² Ukrainians and Germans, for example, tended to stay together in their own distinct groups, obviously partially to solidify self-survival of individual prisoners. In addition, prisoners overall were divided in terms of their political leanings; some, in fact believed in communism, while others were strongly opposed. In order to deal with problems caused by these developments, GULag officials, especially in the case of special camps, engaged in movements of prisoners. These tactics lead to the directly opposite result of its intended purpose, spreading rebellion. In the spring of 1953, uprisings occurred north of the Arctic Circle, after many prisoners missed the amnesty passed earlier.

Due to a progressive building of tension, primarily through deaths caused by prison guards, by June 5th of the same year, 16,379 prisoners went on strike.¹²³ Similar processes began to occur in other camps as well, such as the mining complex at Vorkuta. Trains run by prisoners helped to further spread rebellion in this particular region, and camp after camp began to join the general movement, leading to roughly 15,604 prisoners who were on strike. In order to attempt to quell these insurrections,

¹²¹ Knight, Amy, *Beria: Stalin's First Lieutenant*, pg. 184.

¹²² Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 485.

¹²³ *Ibid*, pg. 488.

Khrushchev tried to win prisoners over with legitimate concessions, including, but not limited to: “a nine-hour working day, the removal of numbers from uniforms, permission to have meetings with relatives, permission to receive letters and money from home”.¹²⁴ This, however, led to a continuation of striking in many cases, so the Soviet government moved from negotiations to force.

Though not necessarily brutal, actions taken by authorities involved forceful removal of prisoners who did not submit peacefully. In some cases liquidation moved smoothly, with the majority of prisoners, sometimes including camp bosses, submitting to official recommendations. But things did not always end with a somewhat peaceful conclusion, in other cases guards were assaulted by prisoners during attempted liquidation, and they subsequently opened fire.

Efforts such as these and similar events did not quell the overall surge in prisoner protest, and soon almost no camp in the GULag was exempt from their activities. Hunger strikes, leaflet distribution, and direct threats of rioting spread through the system, all of which displayed a much bolder approach than had been seen in the GULag only a few years prior and certainly during the time when Stalin was still alive. Major unrest spread, including a famous uprising at the Steplag special camp where prisoners took over control of the entire facility even though they were faced by armed guards. In this case the prisoners even mobilized to create a ‘strike committee’ that was responsible for “negotiating” with the authorities, distributing food and supplies, creating entertainment, and of course keeping general control of the camp in the hands of the prisoners. In one famous incident, the prisoners even created a power source using a water tap after officials shut off the power to the camp in order to power a radio they made using parts

¹²⁴ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 491.

from other machines (such as movie cameras)¹²⁵. Solzhenitsyn referred to the entire event as “The Forty Days of Kengir”, the name being taken from a village nearby.¹²⁶

In May of 1954, negotiations continued, with prisoners demanding soldiers receive criminal charges if they had killed or shot anyone, as well as political demands that included reducing twenty-five-year sentences, a review of all political prisoners’ cases in order to determine their justification, if any, the liquidation of punishment cells and punishment barracks, more freedom of communication between prisoners and their relatives, the removal of the requirement of forced external exile for free prisoners, easier living conditions for women prisoners.¹²⁷ One month later, there would even be discussions of paying the prisons some form of wage and an amnesty of 50% of the prison population.¹²⁸

In an attempt to cause a faster conclusion of these difficult events, Soviet authorities started by conceding to lesser demands, such as minor issues like the removal of bars on windows in the barracks. Moscow eventually grew impatient, however, and kowtowing to the prisoners’ requests eventually was no longer an option. The brief allowance of male and female prison association, for example, was rescinded on June 4th due to the belief that this allowance had further incited prison revolt.¹²⁹ This small reversal, though certainly significant in its own regard, displays the Soviet leadership’s uncertainty in dealing with the GULag in the post-Stalin era. Frequent movements from harsh measures to the granting of concessions would occur quite frequently.

¹²⁵ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 500.

¹²⁶ Amis, Martin, *Koba the Dread*, from the section entitled ‘The Forty Days of Kengir’.

¹²⁷ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 502.

¹²⁸ Kulavig, Erik, *Dissent in the Years of Khrushchev: Nine Stories about Disobedient Russians*, pgs. 119-120.

¹²⁹ Barnes, Stephen A., *Death and Redemption: The GULag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*, pg. 220.

But harsh decision tended to have the most effect, and on June 25th of the same year, Soviet officials under the command of Kruglov, including almost 2,000 soldiers, almost a hundred dogs, and a few tanks, surrounded the camp and demanded an end to the uprising. The majority of prisoners, not expecting any ramifications, refused to submit, and the Soviet authorities entered the camp and began destroying everything, even going so far as to run over prisoners with tanks.¹³⁰ After little over an hour, the camp was then under control of the authorities. Over a thousand prisoners were shipped to other camps, while a few hundred were killed outright or taken to the taiga to be shot. In the end, however, this event led to a slow dismantling of the GULag. The prisoners may have lost this particular battle, but they started the process of winning their grand struggle.

¹³⁰ Solzhenitsyn, Alexander, *The GULag Archipelago*, Volume III, pgs. 327-330.

The Thaw

Roughly by mid-1954, the unprofitability of the GULag became an obvious problem, compounded by the effects of the strikes and changes in prisoner activities. A study done in June, in fact, revealed that they “were heavily subsidized, and that the costs of the guards in particular made them unprofitable”.¹³¹ In addition, the massive bureaucracy that developed as part of the camp system was proving itself to be largely incapable of functioning, not to mention that only some of the camps were still open, with significantly smaller populations.

Thus, in July of the same year, “the Central Committee issued a resolution, bringing back the eight-hour workday, simplifying the camp regimes, and making it easier for prisoners to earn early release through hard work”.¹³² Obviously, attempts were being made to make the GULag look more respectable towards prisoners, instead of earlier, more tyrannical techniques. In addition, the special camps were completely eliminated, and there was even a further slackening of permissible activity, such as the allowance of inner-camp marriage and clothing purchases, something which was largely unheard of before.

More importantly, earlier in 1954, Khrushchev had reviewed a report that detailed the number of “counter-revolutionaries” placed into the GULag since 1921, which included details of how many were still imprisoned. Though the numbers are certainly somewhat incomplete, based on the then-available materials, it appeared that at least 3,777,380 individuals had been found guilty of counter-revolutionary activity, 2,369,220

¹³¹ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 506.

¹³² *Ibid*, pg. 507.

of them had been sent to camps, 765,180 into exile, and 642,980 were executed, which even by the standards of official documentary would have been shocking.¹³³

And they were, because soon thereafter Khrushchev organized a special committee to review *all* the cases and oversaw the task. Releases began, though slowly, but at times certain prisoners were simply let go without any explanation. For example, those who had finished at least two thirds of their official sentences were occasionally released, which actually caused issues to arise in the housing market involving prisoners arriving home, the availability of places to live, and their status as Soviet citizens.¹³⁴ But still, despite the problems the GULag presented to the Soviet Union's economy, those who were deeply imbedded, and somewhat rely on, the system were not so quick to allow them to be dismantled.

This issue, however, quickly changed with Khrushchev's "secret" speech given in 1956 at the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party. Regardless of the content, the effect of the speech was massive, because never before had the Soviet Union ever given any public inkling of admitting to having committed a wrong. In addition, this led to a quick speeding-up of the process of amnesty. But still, some problems remained, mainly within the camp administration itself, leaving two factions essentially.

One found the GULag to be no longer viable and wanted to return to a system of "normal" camps where regular prisoners were isolated outside of society, as well as a system of prison colonies. The other group, however, was opposed to dismantling the GULag, believing prisoners should still be put to work as miners or foresters, to re-educate them in the spirit of honest working life of Soviet society, a jaded statement that

¹³³ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 507.

¹³⁴ Jones, Polly, *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization*, pgs. 107-109.

allowed some of the camp functions to remain.¹³⁵ So, regardless of movements to break down the system and despite massive releases, there were still many within the administration who wanted to keep the GULag running, at least in some form. This should not require explanation, their livelihood was at stake.

As a result of discussions between these two assumed groups, reforms occurred that led to an elimination of the Main Camp Administration, while retaining parts of the camp complex in the form of “mining, machine-building, forestry, [and] road-building”.¹³⁶ Slave labor, as an integral piece of the Soviet economy, was no longer to be in existence.

An interesting aspect of these changes, though there were of course some ‘steps backwards’, was their effect on Soviet citizens, who were suddenly faced with thousands of prisoners returning, often to families who had not seen them in years. As Anne Applebaum states in her thorough history, this small snippet not being nearly enough to understand the entirety of the situation:

Khrushchev’s speech had been a shock, but it was a remote event, directed at the Party’s hierarchy. By contrast, the reappearance of people long considered dead brought home the message of the speech in a far more direct way, to a far wider range of people. Stalin’s era had been one of secret torture and hidden violence. Suddenly, the camp veterans were on hand to provide living evidence of what had happened.

In addition, many returning prisoners began to tell their stories in written form, writing memoirs about their experiences. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, easily the most important figure in this regard, and who is discussed later in this dissertation, caused further waves that developed this phenomenon, with his writing and publication of *A Day*

¹³⁵ Ivanova, Galina, *Labor Camp Socialism*, pgs. 66-69.

¹³⁶ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 510.

in the Life of Ivan Denisovich. It was clear now, the GULag and everything it represented, was public. Furthermore, activities continued and more writers appeared, leading to the era of the ‘dissidents’ in Russian literary history, something which plays a part in the development of survivor memoirs discussed in this work.

The dissident movement was a natural progression in Russian culture, stemming from the alteration of the GULag system, specifically in terms of how arrests and interrogations were carried out after reforms implemented by Khrushchev. The camps themselves did not disappear, though there was certainly not such a large push in development as seen during the time of Stalin, but the nature of how prisoners were approached changed. In particular, political prisoners faced a few changes. As Applebaum states:

*“...the nature of the political prisoner evolved. In Stalin’s era, the repressive system had resembled a vast game of roulette: anyone could be arrested, for any reason, at any time – peasants, workers, and Party bureaucrats alike. After Khrushchev, the secret police still occasionally arrested people ‘for nothing’, as Anna Akhmatova once put it. But most of the time, Brezhnev’s KGB arrested people for something – if not for a genuine criminal act, then for their literary, religious, or political opposition to the Soviet system.”*¹³⁷

Thus, the Soviet system still sought to approach dealings with the public with some modicum of repression, although directly primarily towards those who openly acted against the Soviet Union. Early examples of this phenomenon included groups with religious ties, such as arrests of Soviet Baptists in the 1950s and later groups of Old Believers, who had already had a history of imprisonment within Soviet camps.¹³⁸ Including in such groups, as well as others, were children of “enemies of the people”,

¹³⁷ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 528.

¹³⁸ Solzhenitsyn, Alexander, *The GULag Archipelago*, Volume III, pgs. 366-368.

sons and daughters of those who had been imprisoned under Stalin. These individuals found life and adjustment within Soviet society quite difficult, and this led, of course, to a natural tendency to oppose a government that had slackened its earlier, tyrannical approach to political debate.

This new generation was situated around the figure of Joseph Brodsky, at least in terms of how it was represented to the general public. Previously, arrestees were often not placed into public ‘show trials’, if they were even given a trial at all. They were typically selected for whatever reason, or no reason, arrested, often at night, and that was essentially the end of it until if and when they came home. Brodsky early on rejected Soviet propaganda and instead devoted himself to poetry, which he would secretly distribute to friends and often read publically in private reading sessions held privately. Such activities, in the political climate of the time, naturally gained the attention of the secret police. Since Brodsky was not an “official” poet, meaning he was not part of the Writers’ Union, he was viewed as a ‘parasite’ and essentially arrested for lacking position in society. The trial became something of a sensation that would have the completely opposite result of its intended purpose.¹³⁹

Occurring in February of 1964, the trial included a number of state witnesses, who “were mostly unknown to Brodsky” and testified that he was “morally depraved, a draft-dodger, and a write of anti-Soviet verses”.¹⁴⁰ A number of famous poets and writers came to his defense, including Akhmatova, which seemed to reveal that the trial was actually being directed against “unofficial” writers as a group.¹⁴¹ In spite of the fact that he naturally lost and was even placed under hard labor in a camp, the trial was important

¹³⁹ Volkov, Solomon, *Magical Chorus*, pgs. 235-236.

¹⁴⁰ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 531.

¹⁴¹ Volkov, Solomon, *Ibid*.

in that Brodsky was the first dissident to win in the sense that he not only “publically [challenged] the logic of the Soviet legal system, but his challenge was also recorded for posterity”.¹⁴² Knowledge of the trial thus spread throughout Russia, and eventually the rest of the world, and his actions provided the model for dissidents and their approach to the Soviet system.

Brodsky’s trial was also followed by public trials of Andrey Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel in February of 1966, both of whom had published works abroad, and were tried for “not just vagrancy, but...the actual literary content of their work”.¹⁴³ As may be assumed, a pattern started to form, other trials began to appear involving individuals who had read what was essentially deemed inappropriate material, and of course this led to other dissidents to criticize the Soviet government and secret police. Party officials expected an organization of some sort between the dissidents that was never created and there were no real public demonstrations, but the outpouring of dissent among the public, usually through the intellectuals, was noticeable.

This problem for the Soviet government was compounded quite simply by the political climate of this time period. Under Stalin, “repression on a massive scale could be kept secret even from a visiting American Vice President. In the 1960s and 1970s, news of a single arrest could travel around the world overnight”.¹⁴⁴ Communication of course played a part in this, some of the methods of communicating around the world were not as present during the Thaw as they were in the Soviet Union under Stalin, but regardless, the political climate’s adjustment was mostly to blame in the proliferation of public knowledge about the GULag and the arrests surrounding its prisoners.

¹⁴² Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 531.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, pg. 534.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 535.

For the dissidents, this was further developed through ‘samizdat’, illegal works published abroad, a phenomenon that was not unknown throughout Russian literary history, even during tsarist times. But in the 60s, it became something of a popular, underground phenomenon. In 1971, the KGB had noted in a report to the Central Committee that “more than 400 studies and articles on economic, political, and philosophical questions, [which criticized the Soviet Union from various angles, advanced] various programs of opposition activity”.¹⁴⁵

But regardless of what the Soviet government did to quell rising tensions, the dissidents and samizdat continued to expand, so much so that an archive was started in Munich in 1971 after collecting had started in 1968.¹⁴⁶ Newsletters, transcripts of foreign broadcasts, and poetry spread through the country, spurred on by new technologies in the Soviet Union such as the tape recorder. Samizdat became the dissident’s perhaps main form of opposing the government. When smuggled abroad, stories and recordings were widely circulated in countries where such restrictions did not exist. As public knowledge increased, naturally, so did political knowledge, and this placed tension on the Soviet Union from abroad. In addition, dissident was still occurring within the GULag camp system in various forms similar to those in Stalinist times; hunger strikes, self-mutilation, general strikes, and the like.¹⁴⁷

In an effort to somewhat quell problems in the camps and possibly affect difficulties knowledge of them were causing abroad, the Soviet government began the so-called utilization of ‘special mental hospitals’ after 1967, which were primarily used to house political prisoners. This approach would have several benefits. First, it would

¹⁴⁵ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 535.

¹⁴⁶ Feldbruge, F.J.M., *Samizdat and Political Dissent in the Soviet Union*, pg. 5.

¹⁴⁷ Applebaum, *Ibid*, pgs. 441-446.

remove dissidents from regular the regular prisoner population, perhaps thereby reducing the dissident present in the GULag and the various forms of striking. Second, following this, it would allow the Soviet government to keep closer inspection on dissidents within a closed setting. Finally, and perhaps most important, labeling the dissidents as “insane” could potentially discredit their beliefs and activities. If this worked, it would naturally lead to foreign attention being directed away from Soviet practices and thus ease political tensions abroad.

The Soviet psychiatric system even welcomed this approach and created some new definitions of insanity, where they defined a previously “undiscovered” form of schizophrenia that manifested in abnormal behavior but yet did not have any effect on the intellect, an obvious false, empirical form of diagnosis that greatly troubled those seriously involved in mental health at the time, who often came across patients who were clearly part of the dissident movement and not insane at all.¹⁴⁸

This, of course, created a thorough way of categorizing any dissident as insane due to the loose nature of the wording. All of them, therefore, were no longer political prisoners, but simply “crazy”. Several well-known dissidents were thus tagged and imprisoned based on false diagnoses, which were often quite detailed, at least on the surface. After being claimed as insane, dissidents were then transported to a variety of clinics, where supposedly some psychiatrists were actually “sincere in their belief that their patients were mentally ill”.¹⁴⁹ Due to the nature of uncertainty surrounding mental illness and the tendency of doctors and staff to approach those deemed ‘insane’ as truly such, the approach worked quite well on paper. This was especially since Soviet doctors

¹⁴⁸ Szasz, Thomas Stephen, *Schizophrenia: The Sacred Symbol of Psychiatry*, pgs. 98-100.

¹⁴⁹ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 549.

did not believe in psychoanalysis and frequently used drugs and treatments that had been outlawed or deemed dangerous in the West since the 1930s, generally as a new form of interrogation, torture, or punishment.

But regardless of how this new approach to political prisoners seemed to Soviet officials, it did not have the desired effect. Most importantly in this regard, it did not do anything to lessen the West's perception of Soviet activities or knowledge thereof. This was further hampered by Western psychiatrists' outcries, which viewed these new definitions of schizophrenia as merely tools to use a "dominant philosophy [in regards] the responsibility of man".¹⁵⁰

Such statements from well-known western psychiatrists would lead to some releases from these facilities, but many in the upper ranks of the Soviet government still did not think it was a good idea. Among them was Yuri Andropov, chief of the KGB in the late 70s, who wrote a "secret memo" in 1976, which described foreign denouncements of the Soviet approach to the "insane" and suggested new attempts in their treatment in order to further prove the "truth" of the Soviet psychiatric system, all of course based on the opinions of party-line psychiatrists.¹⁵¹ Andropov was not seeking to remove the abuse of psychiatric methods in the treatment of political prisoners, rather he was seeking to make them harsher, and this was made priority when he eventually became General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party in 1982.

¹⁵⁰ Loeb, Laurence, *The Schizophrenic Syndrome*, pg. 277.

¹⁵¹ Ebon, Martin, *The Andropov File*, pg. 83.

The 1980s and the End

Andropov was seeking to take a step back in terms of the Soviet government's approach to political criminals, who he "believed...should be treated as a serious threat to Soviet power".¹⁵² Seeing the effect of the uprising in Hungary, which also became a potential threat to the Chinese Communist Party's power struggle, he sought great discipline through a stricter camp system and more intense methods of surveillance. Next to Stalin and the 'Red Terror' under Lenin,¹⁵³ this particular era in Soviet history is considered the most oppressive. In an attempt to finally bring about an end to the dissident movement, Andropov vastly increased repression in the Soviet Union:

*"Those even suspected of sympathizing with the human rights, religious, or nationalist movements stood to lose everything. Suspects and their spouses could be deprived not only of their jobs, but also of their professional status and qualifications. Their children could be denied the right to attend university. Their telephones could be cut off, their residence permits revoked, their travel restricted."*¹⁵⁴

These measures were a bit too late, because connections to the West had already been made throughout the Thaw. Even simple writings by prisoners describing issues like finding a worm in soup or the temperature of holding cells spread to the West, often appearing almost instantly outside of the Soviet Union and then appearing through secret broadcasts within.

But regardless, the effect was there, and throughout this period the dissident movement had grown small and weak. Outside dissidence may have been still fairly

¹⁵² Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 552.

¹⁵³ This occurred for roughly one month in 1918 (September to October). Some historians consider it to take place during the bulk of the Russian Civil War.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 553.

well-known, but it was not receiving much attention, and the few broadcasts and articles circulated were not receiving the same wide, public notice within the Soviet Union that they once did. In truth, though this short period was more repressive, it was not to last long, and the effect of the dissidents would lead to further changes within the Soviet system.¹⁵⁵ Andropov died in 1984, and most of his policies were eliminated.

After the end of Andropov, Mikhail Gorbachev was made General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party in 1985. Interestingly, he was different than previous men in his position; he came from a background of “enemies”, with important members of his family having served terms in labor camps as far back as the 1930s. It is easy to imagine the impact this had on his early life and mind, and in his memoirs it is quite clear:

*“Our neighbors began shunning our house as if it were plague-stricken. Only at night would some close relative venture to drop by. Even the boys from the neighborhood avoided me...all of this was a great shock to me and has remained engraved on my memory ever since.”*¹⁵⁶

His approach to foreign policy was also much different than his predecessors. After Chernobyl in 1986, he became convinced that the Soviet Union needed to be more open about its position and especially of any interior problems. This, of course, started the famous era known as ‘Glasnost’ in the West, a transliteration of the Russian term for ‘openness’. To many, this was an understatement, for it seemed as though the entire country had suddenly burst open into the forefront of the world, completely spilling its symbolic innards into the media. Gorbachev was not the first Soviet leader to speak

¹⁵⁵ Barker, Adele, *Consuming Russia*, pgs. 350-352.

¹⁵⁶ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 556.

openly about problems in Soviet history, but he was the first one to do it on national television.

Following his public speech concerning “blank spots” in Soviet history, he began approaching the Soviet public more openly than had previously been seen, so much so that “new revelations began appearing in the Soviet press every week”.¹⁵⁷ Books previously banned officially were now widely available to the public. Works originally published in samizdat form only suddenly started to appear, and at times sold hundreds of thousands of copies. Archives also made many of their materials public. In addition, the rehabilitation process of prisoners, naturally, resumed and was placed in full swing by 1987, and even a “database of the repressed” was formed, which would eventually lead to the construction of several monuments and memorials, such as the eventual ‘Mask of Mourning’ in Magadan finally completed in 1990, which was dedicated to those who died at and had been imprisoned in Kolyma.¹⁵⁸

Gorbachev, however, was a stern believer in the Soviet system. Regardless of how he may have appeared outside of the Soviet Union and even within, his activities were not intended to dismantle the Soviet government. But it seems he was unaware of the impact this release of information would have. Quite simply, the system itself, and of course the GULag, was built on secrecy and repression. Without it, it could simply no longer exist.

Gorbachev’s speech was followed shortly after by the death of Anatoly Marchenko, a prisoner who once tried to escape the country and wrote a memoir concerning his stay in the GULag. Public outcry spread throughout the world, and in an

¹⁵⁷ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 557.

¹⁵⁸ Leong, Albert, *Centaur: The Life and Art of Ernst Neizvestny*, pg. 208.

effort to quell rising tensions with the West, as well as gaining more support in the Soviet Union, Gorbachev officially granted pardon to all Soviet political prisoners in 1986. This was the official end of the GULag, a system that had seen millions of prisoners since its first early inceptions during the Bolshevik Revolution. Up through February of 1987, more prisoners would be released, with 2,000 “insane” prisoners released from psychiatric facilities in that month alone.

Attempts were made in the echelons of Soviet power to retain at least some of the structure of the GULag, but it was too late, the system was essentially meaningless after 1986. With its decline and end in the 1980s came the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union itself. The GULag was perhaps one of the major reasons for the end of the political entity in 1992. Gorbachev seemed unaware of the impact it would have when information about its existence, especially in archives, was publically revealed. His attempt at openness led to complete dismantling and decline. What he failed to realize was “that a full and honest discussion of the Soviet past would ultimately undermine the legitimacy of Soviet rule...He was unable to see...that ‘socialism’, in its Soviet form, was about to disappear altogether”.¹⁵⁹ The myth of the Soviet Union seemed to be an integral part of the myth of the GULag. Once envisioned as a method for reeducation, then a significant part of the economy, the eventual truth of which made it impossible for the country, or rather political system that perceived it, to exist. We are lucky that survivors, even early on, were willing to discuss their experiences within Soviet prison camps, because it is through their memoirs that we can learn about actual life and effects on the self from within.

¹⁵⁹ Applebaum, Anne, *GULag: A History*, pg. 563.

Russian Survivor Memoirs

Literary inquisitions in Russian history are nothing unusual, nor were they new during the rise and fall of the Soviet Union. Censorship of literary works was a general trend in Russian literature starting from the time writing was first introduced in the country in 988AD and church works eventually started to surface, many of which went through a number of curious revisions.¹⁶⁰ Students of Russian literature are also well-aware of various cases of censorship throughout the history of imperial Russia. An important example from the 19th century includes the banning of stage productions of Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* and Tsar Nicholas I acting as his personal censor.¹⁶¹ Another poignant example that details the sweeping, often ridiculous efforts of the Censorship Code is quite fully revealed in works such as Nikitenko's *Diary of a Russian Censor*, which started to appear in print around 1888.¹⁶² Naturally, the inborn tendency to censor works of literature that were at least viewed as in opposition to authority would also rear its head during the Soviet period, as GULag memoirs, especially earlier examples, clearly display. We will be first briefly observing the history of survivor memoirs in Russia, and then move on to the history of Chinese forced labor, which will then be followed by a similar history of camp literature in China. An actual discussion of the content of the works mentioned earlier in this dissertation, and in particular the possible source of

¹⁶⁰ Stacy, Robert H., *Russian Literary Criticism: A Short History*, pg. 10.

¹⁶¹ Goldstein, Robert Justin, *The War for the Public Mind: Political Censorship in Nineteenth Century Europe*, pg. 264.

¹⁶² This work consists of a number of historical explanations on the part of the translator in the case of the English version, but the bulk of Alexander Nikitenko's work concerns a collection of memoirs and personal diary entries of sorts that explain some of the various activities he took part in, particularly around the mid-1800s.

differences, will occur later in order to show clear distinctions simultaneously between Russia, China, and subsequent memoirs of each.

Out of the various influences the GULag had on Russian cultural development, including everything from industrial progress to film and music, literature has remained one of the primary examples of the system's impact on Russian society, specifically in the form of survivor memoirs. Most students of Russian studies are well aware of the period of creative restriction known as 'Socialist Realism', which led to a variety of literary developments counter to the officially accepted norms, many of which had to be published illegally both inside and outside of the Soviet Union. This was, in part, due to sweeping attempts at imposing literary regulations on everything from anti-Soviet material to children's books that evoked 'superstition' and fairy tales, to film and stage productions.¹⁶³

Considering these official restrictions on literature, it is only natural to see an upsurge in anti-Soviet thought through the memoirs of individuals who survived the GULag, especially post-1953. This, in fact, is one of the first and most powerful areas of Soviet dissent in the history of Russian literature, spanning several decades and including some of Russia's most well-known writers. However, memoirs had existed well before the 1950s, and a brief history of their development is now necessary before discussing the works chosen for this dissertation.

In the Soviet Union, one of the most important and earliest works was Ivan Solonevich's *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, which was published abroad. Written after his escape from the camps and published in 1936 as an intended part of a two-volume work, the second never completed. Solonevich's main goal in his work was informing

¹⁶³ Ermolaev, Herman, *Censorship in Soviet Literature: 1917-1991*, pg.s. 6 and 9.

westerners of the atrocities being committed in the Soviet Union prison camps, using the format of a straightforward beginning starting from his arrest and leading up to his plans of escape. Other early works, also published out of the Soviet Union at first, took a similar approach. *I Chose Freedom*¹⁶⁴ was one that was actually written at the hands of a Soviet defector, Victor Kravchenko, who had encountered Soviet prison camps in an official capacity before leaving the country.¹⁶⁵ Kravchenko, though, was not a survivor, merely a witness to GULag atrocities, so his work functions on something a different level with the narrator taking more of an ‘outsider’ view, but it does display an early example of dissidence even among Party ranks. Like Kravchenko, there is a strong element of informing the world about the GULag, but Solonevich is more important because his attempts were published within a few years of his escape, whereas Kravchenko’s work was published ten years later, in 1946.

Following some of the earliest memoirs from the 30s, other examples began to appear. One of the, what we shall call middle-period (roughly during WWII and after) of camp literature was written by a Polish-Belorussian Jew named Julius Margolin. Margolin left for Palestine and returned to Poland in 1939 where he was imprisoned by the NKVD after the Soviet invasion of Poland, apparently imprisoned due to a formality concerning his lack of a passport.¹⁶⁶ Following his release in 1945 he moved back to Palestine and immediately began work on *A Travel to the Land of Ze-Ka*. It should be noted, however, that this work reads more like an adventure novel of sorts than an actual memoir, with particular focus given to the prisoner’s inner life, told in a fashion similar

¹⁶⁴ Russian title: «Я выбрал свободу».

¹⁶⁵ Dallin, David J. and Nicolaevsky, Boris I., *Forced Labor in Soviet Russia*, pgs. 84 and 313.

¹⁶⁶ Dwork, Deborah, and Pelt, Robert Jan, *Flight from the Reich*, pg. 227.

to travel literature of the 1700s, with a generally obvious Zionist bent, so its intentions are slightly different than a work like *The Soviet Paradise Lost*.¹⁶⁷

But his descriptions were clearly taken from experience, and following early attempts at publication he publically denounced the Soviet Union's practice of forced labor and made attempts to make knowledge of the GULag's existence public.¹⁶⁸ But though *A Travel in the Land of Ze-Ka* was finished in 1947, it had gone largely unnoticed, most likely because the Allies, seeking to quell any hostility towards the Soviet Union, made publication of the work and public discourse on the topic of the GULag nearly impossible.¹⁶⁹ Margolin also found difficulty publishing his memoirs in Israel, due to the often negative depictions of Jews in the work, so it remained unpublished until 1952 in the United States, whereas works like *The Soviet Paradise Lost* had been published in the 1930s. But it was certainly not the last example to surface, nor would any attempts to quell the rise in information on Soviet prison camps succeed, at least until the 60s.

Prior to the final date of publication for *A Travel to the Land of Ze-Ka*, Gustav Herling wrote his memoirs, entitled *A World Apart*. *A World Apart* features vivid descriptions of prison life with a particularly strong focus on "reactions to life in an inhuman place".¹⁷⁰ But in spite of its more clear direction, so to speak, Herling found, as Margolin once did, that publishing his work during the time was difficult. His work too was largely ignored by cultural establishments in Western countries due to pressures from Russian sympathizers.¹⁷¹ In fact, Herling's memoirs were almost immediately dismissed

¹⁶⁷ Toker, Leona, *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of GULag Survivors*, pgs. 38-39.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, pgs. 39-40.

¹⁶⁹ Марголин, Ю. Б., *Ю. Б. Марголин на Западе: Статьи и обращения 1946-1954*, 1951-1. Ю. В. Margolin "Paris Report" Б. Марголин "Парижский отчет"

¹⁷⁰ Applebaum, Anne, and Miller, Jane Ann, *GULag Voices: An Anthology*, pgs. 105-106.

¹⁷¹ Herling, Gustav, *A World Apart*, pgs. 256-257.

as biased and anti-Soviet since they were written by a Pole.¹⁷² Following this and its eventual publication in 1951 in Great Britain, the book still received little attention and was even discredited at times.¹⁷³ These few mentioned here were not the only major or minor at the time that discussed the conditions of the GULag and experiences of the prisoners incarcerated within its confines, but it would be some time before any other publications were created that received any attention at all.

It was not until the publication of Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch* (1962)¹⁷⁴ that the subject of forced prison labor in the Soviet Union received worldwide attention, leading into his most impressive work with Soviet camp memoirs, *GULag Archipelago*. This massive, three-volume work was written from the late 1950s up to the late 1960s, but was not officially published in the West until 1973, after the original manuscripts were handed over to a professor in Leningrad,¹⁷⁵ and finally in the Soviet Union in 1989, right before its collapse. It was impossible to publish the work originally in Russia before this time due to the obvious pressures of the Soviet government, so it was first published abroad like many early memoirs. When this happened, it sparked a fury of debate and led to Solzhenitsyn's exile shortly thereafter. Considered one of the greatest works of camp literature due to its immensity and wide variety of sources, *GULag Archipelago* is even utilized as a required reading today in Russian schools, and encompasses a massive three volumes of hundreds of pages that detail the rise and downfall of the Soviet prison camp system.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Applebaum, Anne, and Miller, Jane Ann, *GULag Voices: An Anthology*, pg. 106.

¹⁷³ Herling, Gustav, *A World Apart*, pgs. 252-253.

¹⁷⁴ Original Russian: “Один день Ивана Денисовича”.

¹⁷⁵ Feldbrugge, Ferdinand Joseph Maria, *Samizdat and Political Dissent in the Soviet Union*, pgs. 180-182.

¹⁷⁶ Murav, Harriet, *Russia's Legal Fictions*, pg. 157.

In addition to Solzhenitsyn's massive work, one of the most important works in camp literature occurred at roughly the same time, Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*.¹⁷⁷ Unlike *GULag Archipelago*, Shalamov's work takes a different approach, combining both real events with 'stories heard', creating a type of fiction echoing the work of Chekhov, with the speaker taking an objective stance and the reader not entirely sure which parts are fact and which are fiction.¹⁷⁸ But Shalamov's idea is still clear, and the view of Kolyma as a morally corrupting nothingness that "has never given anything to anyone" is evident through the separate stories grouped into particular sections,¹⁷⁹ some of which will be commented on later in this dissertation. Like earlier works, though, parts of *Kolyma Tales* were first smuggled out of the Soviet Union and published in the United States in 1966. In 1989 the full version was published in the Soviet Union in book form. So it is clearly evident that from the beginning, the Party in Russia was not interested in engaging the public in open discussion or permitting open discussions about the camps. This is in spite of the fact that Shalamov's novel is but one of hundreds of works about the GULag, and is even lesser known than others.

To take a general approach to our topic from this brief history, it is clear that the phenomenon of camp literature functions as an important link between politics, the individual, and writing. Typically, most works in Russian camp literature include brief or often detailed explanations of the history of the GULag (or more specifically the areas the particular writer was imprisoned), coupled with personal memories and meetings with various people in order to provide both a historical and an emotional picture of the Soviet

¹⁷⁷ Original Russian: "КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ".

¹⁷⁸ Davoliute, Violeta, *Shalamov's Memory*, Canadian Slavonic Papers, Vol. 47, No. ½, March-June 2005, pgs. 1-2.

¹⁷⁹ Shalamov, Varlam, *A New Book: Memoirs, Notebooks, Correspondence, Police Dossiers*, pgs. 263-268.

system. Often, the writer attempts to give a large picture of the GULag through smaller stories, each of which highlight particular aspects of camp life, and in other cases straight memoir format was used, something like a diary. Sometimes this revolves around starvation, brutal treatment at the hands of Soviet guards, the role of common criminals in camp life, the role of political prisoners, and a variety of other topics. But the format of storytelling used by authors is not our focus here, because in the examples we will be considering later, it is clear that similar experiences occurred.

Russian prison memoirs all essentially function as a concise whole which attempts to provide a glimpse of life in the GULag. In *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, Solonevich provides the reader with a clear picture of his stay in the camps, starting from his imprisonment and moving in a chronological fashion. In *Kolyma Tales*, however, Shalamov provides the reader with a series of generally short vignettes about camp life in Kolyma, such as one that focuses on how to reuse the clothing and implements of a corpse, that in totality represent both his life and overall impression of the Soviet forced labor prison system. The stories are very loosely linked, serving mainly as separate glimpses into an overall harsh existence instead of taking the more linear approach of Solonevich. Solzhenitsyn's *GULag Archipelago*, by contrast, is largely filled with direct interpretations of memoirs in order to give a concise picture of life in the system and the history of the system in totality. So it serves as more of a cohesive whole than a story collection that functions as a general picture. Regardless, though, all of these works display similar pictures of life in the GULag; obsessions with food, punishments, the role of criminals, the relationship to officials, and in particular the importance of re-education

and political ideology. The latter feature is something we will find entirely different in the Chinese context.

In general, camp literature is unique in that it is a bridge at times between Russian culture and outside countries, most easily seen in works like *A World Apart*, which reads and functions in the same way as the works of other writers who survived the camps, displaying a similar phenomenon as one can find in Holocaust survivor memoirs. The general goal in the case of Soviet prison memoirs, regardless of the individual's country of origin, has always been an exposure of the system and a condemnation of it. As evident from the censorship of these works and their limited, illegal publications within the Soviet Union, it should be clear that they were in no way endorsed by the government. Solzhenitsyn, for example, was very careful in accepting this Nobel Prize for literature in 1970 in order to avoid being exiled from Russia, which did in fact happen anyway. His goal of bringing the atrocities of camp life to the West, however, was successful, and works like *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* helped to further the exposure of the system, leading to its eventual downfall. This, however, was almost forty years after works like *The Soviet Paradise Lost* were published, so the truth of the GULag was a long time coming in the West.

Camp literature is universal and singular at the same time, embodying ideas that cross cultural boundaries, while at the same time being flavored by the individuals who wrote them. It is not, however, a Russian phenomenon alone. In a variety of contexts where forced labor became a reality, such as Nazi Germany or North Korea, survivor memoirs are almost an expected outcome. It seems that in any sort of repressive regime, there will always be at least one person who is against its goals, and they will do

everything in their power to make the rest of the world understand. This is especially true in China, to which our discussion now moves. After taking a similar approach as provided here in the Russian historical sections, we will then analyze key examples from several different memoirs in order to understand how the individual narrator perceives their situation, what the differences are, and what may account for these differences. The differences are the main focus for our major discussion in this dissertation, and are quite shocking in certain regards when compared to the Russian examples we have selected for this particular comparison.

Part III

China's 劳改

China, or more properly speaking The People's Republic of China is currently the world's largest functioning socialist republic. Its population, expansion, and power are beginning to rival even the greatest industrialized countries in the world, especially the United States. But, in spite of its recent growth, China still possesses a side not seen in democratic countries and one that is generally unheard of in the West. Like Russia during the Soviet period, China has a prison system with roots in forced labor. This unfortunately appears to be a necessary component of regime first started as a dictatorship, and as Harry Wu notes, "...every dictatorship must be accompanied by a prison system, whether it be a concentration camp (in which the death of the prisoner is the ultimate goal) or a labor camp (in which the prisoner's work is exploited for economic gain)".¹⁸⁰

But contrary to what some may believe, the issue and existence of forced labor in China is not a new concept, nor is it due to the influence of Stalinism and the involvement of the Stalinist-era political organs of Russia on Chinese cultural development. Though Stalin did in fact aide the Chinese in creating a system similar to the GULag, this was merely an addition to what was already present for perhaps thousands of years, by the arguments of some, and a building-on to a system that had been under construction by the Communists during the Chinese Civil War between the

¹⁸⁰ Wu, Hongda Harry, *Laogai: The Chinese GULag*, pg. xii.

Communist Party and Kuomintang. Much like the Russians used their criminal system and experiences of exiles during the Tsarist era as a backbone for the GULag, the Chinese, with the help of the Russians after China was officially Communist in 1949, merely used a system already in place as the foundation on which a small economic industry was built. But this system itself has been present in Chinese politics and life for an incredibly long portion of the country's history, some argue for centuries, though this is arguable.

This section will detail, for the first time, China's history with forced labor, and then slowly move towards modern developments into the present system of Laogai as it exists in China. The reader should note, from the outset, that 'Laogai' is a *modern* term and cannot be applied to the past. As in the GULag section, we will be moving through several periods in the history of forced labor in China, starting from the earliest known examples.

Early Forced Labor in China

Records of forced labor in China stretch back nearly three-thousand years, with evidence existing as far back as the Chou¹⁸¹, China's third-known dynasty in historical records, but the second earliest one of which we have significant documentation from the period.¹⁸² Though later evidence is much clearer, there are still a few examples from earlier periods that hint at similar traditions.

One of the first comments on forced labor known in Chinese literature, during a time when Chinese writing was still developing, appears in China's most famous work from the Chou period, the *Book of Changes* or more properly *Classic of Changes*¹⁸³, generally known as the *I Ching* in most Western references. In section sixty-four, for example, referenced as 'Wei-chi', meaning "before completion", there is a particularly poignant reference.

In line 64.5, the anonymous author¹⁸⁴ states: "...It will be glory for the nobles. There will be a capture." At first glance this simple statement may seem devoid of meaning, so an explanation of this small segment is necessary to elucidate on the issue. These short lines contain the character *fu*, which frequently refers to the "capture in battle of enemy prisoners or booty" during this period.¹⁸⁵ This reference is important because "[captives] in the Shang and early Chou often became either sacrificial victims or [were conscripted to] forced labor".¹⁸⁶ Though the idea of using prisoners for forced labor is

¹⁸¹ The Chou Dynasty ruled from approximately 1100 BC until roughly 200 BC.

¹⁸² See the appendix of this dissertation for a full timeline of the Chinese dynasties.

¹⁸³ Original Chinese: 易经

¹⁸⁴ Most sections of the *Classic of Changes* are assumed to have been primarily transmitted orally for several hundred years before they were written down.

¹⁸⁵ Mair, Victor, *The Shorter Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature*, pg.s. 9-10.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

certainly not a Chinese invention, this simple quote shows how ancient the idea was in China, perhaps stretching back before written records.

Further on in China's history, various ancient writings mention the importance of labor for the good of the state, known as *corvée* labor, which functioned like a tax for lower-income citizens, generally. It was useful, quite simply, because free labor equaled more money for the government ultimately and a stronger foundation. Due to difficulties faced by the nobility in creating massive building projects, very early Chinese emperors began using forced labor as a way to expand territory and architectural plans of ancient China, such as several such important projects during the Qin dynasty.¹⁸⁷ But, the distinction should be made that such citizens were nonetheless free, outside of the labor being performed.

Some of China's most famous architectural and cultural achievements, such as the system known collectively as the 'Great Wall',¹⁸⁸ were built almost entirely through *corvée* labor. This particular project, in fact, is commonly known as having been built 'out of bones',¹⁸⁹ and it is well-documented that corpses of those who died during parts of its construction were thrown into its foundations.¹⁹⁰ Often the ruling class for its various civic projects and constructions used criminals, but in times of great need, such as in the construction of the wall system to protect China's territories from warring tribes, the Chinese government would use certain members of the populace to complete huge projects at the expense of thousands of lives, similar to forced military conscription in

¹⁸⁷ Luo Zhewen and Zhao Luo, *The Great Wall of China in History and Legend*, pg. 6.

¹⁸⁸ It should be noted, since it is not generally common knowledge, that the Great Wall is not in fact one large wall but a system of several walls built in several key locations in China. Systems are actually still in the process of discovery due to the fact that some have been buried over the years.

¹⁸⁹ It should be noted, similar comments have been made about the construction of St. Petersburg and the White Sea Canal.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, pg. 12.

tsarist Russia, with the exception that the Chinese would have been essentially free otherwise.

Early on, corvée labor was a significant piece in Chinese social history, and served as a means to avoid increased production costs and economic backlash, and if included into a general history of forced labor in China, it makes it clear that evidence of it is “virtually unbroken over three millennia”.¹⁹¹ Quite obviously, forcing someone to do work for nothing, or the ‘glory of the country’ as some may like to believe, was hardly a burden on the economic system. In fact, early on, this helped to increase the Chinese monarchy’s money reserves. But, regardless of the purpose of corvée labor, the fact is that it has been a piece of Chinese history for centuries and continued well after the Chou, but it should be considered both similar and different in comparison to modern forced labor or anything close to Laogai.

After the Chou dynasty,¹⁹² some of China’s more famous written works began to appear, and many of them contain references to both forced labor and submissiveness to the government. In the *Analects of Confucius*, for example, this idea is featured prominently in several exerts, and one can find similar ideas in the great daoist work the *Dao De Ching*. In the former, one can find a simple quote in Book II, Section V concerning respect for one’s government stating that being filial means “Never fail to comply”.¹⁹³ Mao restated and reiterated this same line of thinking hundreds of years later in one of his quotes written in 1938 from his *Selected Works*. He stated “the individual is subordinate to the majority”, suggesting yet again the importance of obeying the

¹⁹¹ Williams, Philip F. and Wu, Yenna, *The Great Wall of Confinement*, pg. 34.

¹⁹² Lasted and ended with the Eastern Chou around 221BC.

¹⁹³ Confucius, *The Analects*, original Chinese and translation, pgs. 10 and 11.

government, in this case the Party line.¹⁹⁴ Overall, the Chinese seem to have believed for a long time that the individual is subservient to the state in some form; difficult to fully prove, but nonetheless evident.

However, though there are examples of what may be considered early forced labor throughout Chinese history, the type used prior to the fall of the monarchy was never approached as a method for removing political prisoners out of the populace and utilizing them to reduce economic burden. Punishments prior to the Han dynasty for such people involved a variety of methods for mutilation, such as removal of the genitals, nose, and other body parts.¹⁹⁵ Corvée labor before the Han was generally a means to move the populace into action without pay, the phenomenon of forced labor as it is still found today did not yet exist in ancient China, but changes would soon occur that slowly led the process into the modern era.

One of the best known examples of this phenomenon, and one often told with a sense of criticism, are the labor practices implemented by Qin Shi Huang. Qin Shi Huang was a statesman who helped bring about the fall of the Chou and the rise of the Qin dynasty, becoming the country's first emperor. During this time, conscription for wall building, which was seen as essential to unification, involved garrisoned soldiers, common people, widows (if there were not enough able-bodied men left), and prisoners.¹⁹⁶ Qin Shi Huang's effort are frequently referred to as draconian, and simple references to the numbers involved is usually enough to prove this fact. Chen Lin, a writer during the Han dynasty, which ruled after the Qin, stated in a poem: "Never give

¹⁹⁴ Tsetung, Mao, *Quotations of Chairman Mao*, pg. 144.

¹⁹⁵ Williams, Philip F. and Wu, Yenna, *The Great Wall of Confinement*, pg. 24.

¹⁹⁶ Luo Zhewen and Zhao Luo, *The Great Wall of China in History and Legend*, pg. 23.

birth to boys, but feed girls with meat, for don't you see the white bones that hold the Great Wall from underneath"?¹⁹⁷

Estimates based on documents from this time place the number of citizens involved in forced labor surrounding the wall system at around 2,800,000, though the number may be much higher. Accurate numbers of how many perished during this time seem lacking in available data, but one may assume several hundred thousand at least based on the practice of forcing widows into work after their husbands and sons died in the task. Some estimates place the number at roughly one million for the Great Wall project alone, not including other construction endeavors.¹⁹⁸

Death rate estimates are further backed by writings such as *The Book of the Principle of Huainan*, where it was written that “ditches on the roadside were filled with the corpses of men who had been forced into the construction of the Great Wall”.¹⁹⁹ The Qin also created a term to refer specifically to corvée labor including both convicts and peasants, *chengdan*.²⁰⁰ The term had such a negative connotation, in fact, that the later Ming dynasty would use another term for ‘wall’ in order to avoid mentioning anything about the harsh conditions under the Qin.²⁰¹ But for all its fame and purpose, the Great Wall would ironically be the downfall of the dynasty. The extreme conditions the peasantry were forced to work in, starvation caused by a lack of sufficient agricultural

¹⁹⁷ Luo Zhewen and Zhao Luo, *The Great Wall of China in History and Legend*, pg. 12.

¹⁹⁸ Hucker, Charles O., *China's Imperial Past: An Introduction to Chinese History and Culture*, pg. 45.

¹⁹⁹ Luo Zhewen and Zhao Luo, *The Great Wall of China in History and Legend*, pg. 6.

²⁰⁰ In the original Chinese: 承担

²⁰¹ Williams, Philip F. and Wu, Yenna, *The Great Wall of Confinement: The Chinese Prison Camp through Contemporary Fiction and Reportage*, pg. 22.

manpower, and the endless movement of troops led to inner turmoil that would soon collapse their rule.²⁰²

Due to the harsh conditions and severe punishments, as well as the detriment to economic productivity, a small group of peasants formed the first uprising against Chinese power in 209BC, following the death of Qin Shi Huang, which would start the downfall of the Qin. Two soldiers named Cheng Shang and Wu Guang were hampered in official duties due to weather, but regardless of this fact would be executed by requirements stated in official laws. In order to avoid punishment, and to fight for freedom, they created a small uprising of peasants, using the general disgust towards corvée labor conditions as a method for increasing their ranks. The uprising started in Daze Village, from where it derives its name, but accounted for numbers somewhere near a mere 900, who were in fact conscripted peasants led by Shang and Guang in their military endeavors. Due to poor training, the rebellion was squashed within a year, Shang and Guang dying at the hands of their own rebels.²⁰³

The Qin dynasty would end soon thereafter, partially from what was perceived as the nobility's loss of the 'mandate of heaven', as well the mass burnings of various writings, the Daze Village Uprising, and more importantly inner intrigues that led to a destabilization of the ruling class.²⁰⁴ Regardless, the importance for the history of corvée labor in China is that the Qin was the first, at least in existing historical records, dynasty to implement such labor on a grand scale, including the Great Wall system already

²⁰² Liu, An (in translated form), *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China*, pg. 745.

²⁰³ Pirazzoli-t'Serstevensm, Michèle, *The Han Dynasty*, pg. 35.

²⁰⁴ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 41.

mentioned, large-scale road-building projects, and a rather extensive irrigation canal system.²⁰⁵

The projects that led to this small rebellion were, however, not a hindrance to further usages of corvée labor in the dynasties after the Qin. Major changes, in fact, occurred under the Han. During the Han Dynasty, alterations were made to the legal code to remove the aforementioned mutilation practices, putting in its place the punishment of labor or exile.²⁰⁶ The Han realized, through practice, that permanent labor camps were highly effective in reducing the state's fiscal burden from imprisonment.²⁰⁷ Following this movement to change the legal code, another Great Wall project was undertaken, which was much larger than previous and included older portions with additions and completely new sections.²⁰⁸ Another benefit of this practice was the presumed redemption through Confucian ideals, making “correcting one's fault and renewing oneself” the theoretical mantra of the push to increase the usage of corvée labor.²⁰⁹

There was, naturally, some resistance to the increase, so in order to continue to implement it, the Han improved on methods used under the Qin dynasty, specifically the encouragement to “live in frontier areas, open up the land, build water conservancy works, and plough the earth in order to bolster a wartime economy”.²¹⁰ The goal was quite successful, in fact, and was highly effective in fortifying the frontiers while at the same time developing frontier culture and economics, something which had been difficult

²⁰⁵ Schinz, Alfred, *The Magic Square: Cities in Ancient China*, pgs. 98-99.

²⁰⁶ Williams, Philip F. and Wu, Yenna, *The Great Wall of Confinement*, pg. 24.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, pg. 25.

²⁰⁸ Evans, Tammy, *Great Wall of China: Northern Beijing and China*, pg. 6.

²⁰⁹ Williams, Philip F. and Wu, Yenna, *The Great Wall of Confinement*, pg. 26.

²¹⁰ Luo Zhewen and Zhao Luo, *The Great Wall of China in History and Legend*, pgs. 7-8.

prior. Utilizing government resources to cause immigration into other areas was useful in furthering the Han's goals, and offering "incentives" helped to make later usages of *corvée* labor more acceptable.

Interestingly, this movement to utilize forced labor in areas previously untapped for their resource potential, as well as creating whole villages and eventually cities around them, was used by the Soviets during the Stalinist era. The Han dynasty ended up lasting a much shorter time in comparison to other dynasties due to confrontations with barbarian tribes. It collapsed in 220AD, followed by long periods of foreign intervention and inner turmoil that started with the 'Three Kingdoms Period' in 220. Labor practices at this time did not undergo significant change.

The main reason for this phenomenon was the general chaos that surrounded the Chinese empire from 220-265AD. China at this time was largely occupied in civil wars, and grand construction projects were placed to the side, though some early writings seem to indicate plans to continue further construction of walls, at least for basic fortifications.²¹¹ *Corvée* labor that occurred at this time was utilized in defense of various regions, but as one may easily assume, aside from the lack of writings on the subject, the citizenry, soldiers, and even prisoners²¹² would have likely willingly engaged in defense of the country simply as a matter of self-preservation, though of course with some element of patriotism, similar to prisoners in the GULag fighting for the Soviet Union. Turmoil, largely political and of no real consequence to the citizenry, leaves no information concerning early forced labor in China until at least 420AD. This was simply due to the lack of direction, general chaos, and the necessity in focusing on

²¹¹ Turnbull, Stephen, *The Great Wall of China 221BC – AD1644*, pg. 11.

²¹² Meaning: former criminals.

immediate defense, not anything unforeseeable, and certainly not on any further projects that were expedience to defense.

The next period in early forced labor occurs during the so-called ‘Era of the Three Kingdoms’, when China was largely divided into three main states.²¹³ This was further compounded by general anarchy within the northern kingdoms in what is known as the ‘Sixteen Kingdoms’, due to the complex fighting between various warring tribes.²¹⁴ However, contrary to what may be assumed, corvée labor practices still existed during this time period. Examples can be found with the Northern Wei dynasty, known historically as the ‘Toba’, to consider but one of the kingdoms, which lasted from roughly 386 until 589AD. The Toba were originally a nomadic tribe that had developed a fairly structured feudal system. After gaining power, and in an effort to hinder attacks from a northern tribe known as the Rouran, the Wei decided to refocus their attention on defense, using previous methods made famous during the Qin and Han dynasties, creating walls that amounted to roughly 776 miles of new construction that required an incredible amount of manpower to be completed.²¹⁵

This figure is compounded further by the Northern Qi, a division of the Toba Empire,²¹⁶ who built several systems of walls in the Eastern Wei Empire amounting to roughly double the amount of the miles of construction undertaken by the Northern Wei in an effort to defend their interests.²¹⁷ Various conflicts and changes in rule would lead to similar projects of smaller size, as well as grand, up through the Yuan dynasty, which lasted until 1368AD. Less information exists concerning this period in consideration of

²¹³ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 65.

²¹⁴ Ibid, pg. 67.

²¹⁵ Luo Zhewen and Zhao Luo, *The Great Wall of China in History and Legend*, pg. 8.

²¹⁶ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 75.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

forced labor, but there are a number of well-known projects that involved massive conscription, as well as examples of changes in the rulers' approaches throughout the various dynasties that existed before the Mongolian invasion.²¹⁸

A period of relative stability was achieved after the turbulence of the Three Kingdoms, starting with the Sui dynasty. During this time, a huge workforce of *corvée* laborers was utilized in building and agricultural projects such as the famous Grand Canal opening between 605-610AD, which became *the* major method for transporting goods throughout China, created a vast system of waterways, and successfully linked various areas with the Yellow River.²¹⁹ It also served to connect the Northern and Southern parts of the empire and helped to successfully develop culture and increase prosperity. The similarity to Stalin's White Sea Canal project should be briefly recalled in consideration of this event. The numbers of laborers involved, based on earlier figures provided here, were certainly no less. The Sui was followed by a generally minor change in power that led to the Tang dynasty, where further examples of similar labor practices can be easily found.

The Tang dynasty period was the first dynasty that implemented some changes in the usage of *corvée* labor. There was some elimination of the practice, but it remained largely the same as previous dynasties other than a few minor details that serve mentioning. Relative peace is largely responsible for the decrease, but the necessity in keeping laborers on their own land was made a priority due to several years of bad crops.²²⁰ Due to events such as these a slight slackening of the implementation occurred,

²¹⁸ They were, of course, the founders of the Yuan dynasty.

²¹⁹ Heng, Chye Kiang, *Cities of Aristocrats and Bureaucrats: The Development of Medieval Chinese Cityscapes*

²²⁰ Karetzky, Patricia Eichenbaum, *Court of the Tang*, pg. 14.

where peasants could be exempt from the duty if they paid a tax, since itself corvée labor was a form of tax, or would only need to work for shorter periods. Exemption, for example, could be gained through the payment of certain amounts of silk, and labor would sometimes be as little as twenty days, much shorter than the years or entire lifetimes spent in previous dynasties.²²¹ Later near the end of the Tang dynasty, political intrigues within the court would lead to further slackening, though obviously as a way to gain popular support. The Empress Wu, for example, was lauded for her promotion of populist policies, which included a reduction in forced labor.²²² Even further were the reforms of the official Liu Yan, which included the unprecedented abandonment of forced labor in favor of wage laborers.²²³

The Tang dynasty would eventually collapse, one of its major problems being the constant spreading of military power on the empire's peripheries, which in essence created outlying, semi-autonomous provinces that developed their own forms of government.²²⁴ After a period of division known as the 'Five Dynasties', the Song eventually came into power and one can find further reductions in the usage of corvée labor.

During the middle of the Song, the famous statesman Wang Anshi would implement a number of economic reforms, including a reduction of the concentration of land holdings in the hands of the landlords.²²⁵ In addition, he also created a system whereby forced labor could be avoided through tax substitution, the implementation of

²²¹ Weichao Yu, *A Journey Into China's Antiquity: Sui Dynasty, Tang Dynasty, Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period, Northern and Southern Song Dynasties*, pg. 48.

²²² Fukuyama, Francis, *The Origins of Political Order*, pg. 298.

²²³ Killion, Ulric, *A Modern Chinese Journey to the West: Economic Globalization and Dualism*, pg. 39.

²²⁴ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 97.

²²⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 136.

which was well-received by the peasantry, since forced labor had been re-implemented after the Tang during the Five Dynasties period.

Following the Song, China went through further dynasty changes, forced labor making an appearance through all of them. During the Yuan dynasty, which lasted from 1271 until 1368AD, for example, the Mongols improved on the transportation systems created under the Song and Tang, using massive amounts of conscripted labor to clear canals and repave roads, part of the reason being the necessity in improving communication, as well as the general impact it would have on the empire's economy.²²⁶ The Yuan dynasty, in fact, is the one largely responsible for reintroducing the practice into Chinese economics.²²⁷

More akin to what is known about modern Chinese labor, and especially Laogai, would be the Ming dynasty's implementation of corvée labor in its rapidly growing market economy. For example, they utilized the practice in at least twenty-four state factories where silk fabric was created almost entirely using corvée laborers.²²⁸ So, clearly, the issue of some form of 'forced labor' was nothing new to China some time before the rise of the Chinese Communist Party. The few examples provided here illustrate the extensive history of similar practices for the Chinese and the reader should keep in mind the brevity utilized here and consider the above as only a few examples before the Communist Party of China was even a basic idea. The history of forced labor in China can be argued, due to these issues, as having a long history, illustrated above in brief. Quite simply:

²²⁶ Veeck, Gregory, Pannell, Clifton W., and Smith, Christopher J., *China's Geography: Globalization and the Dynamics of Political, Economic, and Social Change*, pg. 154.

²²⁷ Dillon, Michael, *Dictionary of Chinese History*, pg. 45.

²²⁸ Tong, James, *Disorder Under Heaven: Collective Violence in the Ming Dynasty*, pg. 142.

For approximately two and a half millennia, traditional Chinese political and legal culture has countenanced and institutionalized for both public works civilian conscripts (corvée labor) and prisoners. Of particularly ancient provenance, conscript labor has a history of over three millennia in China.²²⁹

The impact of this history on the prison camp system further developed under Mao should be all the more clear based on the information provided here, but even before Mao would rise to power, China would see one final dynasty which afforded several changes in the usage of corvée labor leading into communist practices. Some methods were built on earlier models that had existed for hundreds of years, whereas others were based on modern applications due to the encroachment of Western ideas and culture into China. The period of China's final dynasty, the Qing, deserves more background since it bridges the gap between historical China and modern China, especially towards the eventual development of what is today known as Laogai.

²²⁹ Williams, Philip F. and Wu, Yenna, *The Great Wall of Confinement: The Chinese Prison Camp Through Contemporary Fiction and Reportage*, pg. 17.

The Qing Dynasty

The rise of the Qing dynasty occupies a fairly large span of almost eight decades, occurring mainly due to the Manchus, who successfully invaded China after a disastrous attack on their leader at the hands of the Ming.²³⁰ From roughly 1618 until at least 1680AD the Manchus slowly developed their power base and absorbed Chinese culture and administrative practices. The Manchus, being a foreign tribe in essence that already had animosity towards the Chinese, were remembered for ruthless acts such as the Jiangyin tragedy, where a small, disjointed uprising developed due to an opposition to the imposed Manchu hairstyle.²³¹ During the massacre approximately 100,000 individuals were branded as ‘bandits’ and killed.²³²

This, however, was merely the start of the dynasty’s approach. China had a very rocky history of war against outside tribes, which is actually the main reason for the vast system of walls that was created over the centuries and earlier advancements in corvée labor.²³³ Naturally, as seen with the Yuan dynasty,²³⁴ the Manchus were not immediately accepted into the Chinese way of life, being another form of ‘barbarian’ in essence.²³⁵ In addition, this was of course supported by the previous Ming rulers in an effort to regain control, but there was simply no chance the Manchus could be defeated.²³⁶

²³⁰ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pgs. 188-189.

²³¹ Various Authors, *Conflict and Control in Late Imperial China*, pg. 43.

²³² Bandits were an issue frequently confronted by the Qing and an important component in their methods for approaching criminals and commoners. Further discussion of this issue occurs in this same chapter. Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 192.

²³³ Lovell, Julia, *The Great Wall: China Against the World*, pgs. 36-38.

²³⁴ The reader is reminded here that the Yuan were the Mongolians.

²³⁵ Ibid, pg. 256.

²³⁶ Various Authors, *From Ming to Ch’ing: Conquest, Region, and Continuity in Seventeenth Century China*, pg. 20.

In contrast, the Manchu leader Nurhaci actually made efforts towards equality, but frequent poisonings of officials and a Chinese revolt in 1625 changed matters.²³⁷ Unlike previous revolts in Chinese history, the Manchus approached this one with a different outlook. Earlier revolts had involved political uprisings within the court, where as others were simple squashed by China's military with little concern over who was involved. This revolt, however, was a different matter and the most serious of this time period, changing the government's approach thereafter.²³⁸

During the ninth lunar month of 1625, the Chinese "killed Manchu soldiers, messengers, and people", in addition to recruiting members of the Ming in order to overthrow Manchu rule.²³⁹ This time, the dynasty distinguished between two main groups: those who were previously part of the Ming but yet held no office under the Manchus, and the common people. The latter group was generally considered innocent, but the Manchus considered that though they may not have been directly responsible for the uprising, "neither were they reliable".²⁴⁰ This led to the first purge, to use a modern term, in China's history, where the common people were investigated regardless of assumed culpability, leading to the death of many intellectuals and commoners.²⁴¹

The Manchu also implemented racial discrimination in order to further separate them from the Chinese, as well as including exile within the framework of corvée labor.²⁴²²⁴³ Under them, conscription would continue in much the same way, other than the mentioned addition, especially in public works projects to protect the stability of

²³⁷ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 191.

²³⁸ Various Authors, *From Ming to Ch'ing: Conquest, Region, and Continuity in Seventeenth Century China*, pg. 19.

²³⁹ Ibid, pgs. 19-20.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, pg. 20.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 191.

²⁴³ Williams, Philip F. and Wu, Yenna, *The Great Wall of Confinement*, pg. 27.

works like the Grand Canal, which was still in use,²⁴⁴ but various policies and dealings with the outside world would change the effects on corvée labor leading up to the revolution.

Several years after the death of Nuhaci, in 1632, efforts were made to adjust conscript quotas to both commoners *and* officials while still utilizing the racial divisions, specifically in an effort to reduce the animosity towards the Manchu created through the 1625 purge.²⁴⁵ This would soon change, however, and in 1655 the emperor Shunzhi increased the number of males liable to forced labor service by an incredible 60%.²⁴⁶ This was, apparently, in response to inner turmoil partially due to earlier Qing practices mentioned in this chapter, as well as problems with ‘bandits’, groups of pirates and thieves who had former ties to the Ming or were in some cases forced into thievery due to smallpox outbreaks, droughts, famines, locusts, and a flood in the same year.²⁴⁷

Thus far, the Qing dynasty’s practices were not entirely unusual, but were certainly much more divided in comparison to previous dynasties. As shown, earlier examples of corvée labor for public works projects were implemented for short periods of time or usually at the hands of outsiders who gained control of the country. The Manchu, however, would continuously alter policies, going from periods of reduced quotas to increased exemptions, and then back again in order to quell potential rebellions in an effort to solidify power.

²⁴⁴ Huang, Pei, *Autocracy at Work: A Study of the Yung-Cheng Period 1723-1735*, pg. 126.

²⁴⁵ Various Authors, *From Ming to Ch’ing: Conquest, Region, and Continuity in Seventeenth Century China*, pgs. 24-25.

²⁴⁶ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 194.

²⁴⁷ Wakeman, Frederic, *Great Enterprise: The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in China*, pg. 7 and pgs. 846-847.

For example, starting from Manchu expansion in 1620, the dynasty made an effort to eliminate previously problems with eunuch influences at court, implementing a new system of bondservant usage that included as type of “forced” work in the personal affairs of the emperor, financial positions, as well as communications within the court.²⁴⁸ This change, though it solidified the dynasty’s potential for survival, also served to strengthen “the trend towards autocracy”, which would later prove disastrous.²⁴⁹ Problems for China, as throughout its past, would come from the outside, pressure from remaining barbarian threats, and then the West.

Issues continued to rise with outsider forces, or ‘barbarians’ as previously indicated, well into the late 1700s. Eleven years before the turn of the century, for example, China was engaged in its first treaty with a Western power, coincidentally Russia, in order to stop the growing threat of the Dzungar in the west which threatened both China and Russia’s borders. This treaty was known as the Treaty of Nerchinsk, and unlike future dealings with other countries, it is one of the few examples of an ‘equal treaty’ between China and outside powers, something which would play a role in the rise of the Communist Party much later.²⁵⁰

This was not the end of outside aggression around China’s borders, however. The Dzungar, in an effort to regain the potential to attack China’s outer borders following Russia’s involvement, allied with Tibet, leaving them as the last major threat to the Qing dynasty.²⁵¹ As a result, China sent several expeditions against the Tibetans, finally securing a permanent garrison in Lhasa by 1728 with permanent imperial residence, a

²⁴⁸ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pgs. 198-199.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, pg. 198.

²⁵⁰ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 197.

²⁵¹ Rossabi, Morris, *China and Inner Asia: From 1368 to the Present Day*, pgs. 120, 145.

move that would eventually double the empire's territory.²⁵² Of course, this is the beginning of China's eventual struggle with Tibet in the 20th and 21st centuries. Problems with these expeditions were mainly felt in China's economic spheres, and in order to maintain the burden of controlling its borders, the dynasty once again restructured its policies towards corvée labor, this time to create a more stable system for future use. In 1712, emperor Kangxi used the previous year's land tax figures in order to create a permanent basis for computing labor quotas.²⁵³

This change was important, because increases in land taxes and the rather frequent alterations to conscription policies were previously a reason for instability throughout China's various dynasties. It was, for example, one of the major reasons for the previously discussed Daze Village uprising. On the surface the measure was likely viewed as a method to gain more confidence in the people as well as showing a tendency towards the elimination of labor quotas, but the reality was, in fact, simply a "legacy of chronic fiscal shortage[s]" due to a severely impoverished peasant economy that had already been battered by centuries of corvée labor and various land tax adjustments.²⁵⁴ This change in 1712 was unrealistic²⁵⁵ due to how revenue then had to be gathered²⁵⁶ and would slowly force China to deal more with the imperialistic expansion of western powers such as Portugal and Great Britain.

Furthermore, this system of taxation led to a then unforeseen problem that would come to a head during the rise of the Communist Party in China. Up to 1729, the

²⁵² Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 198.

²⁵³ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 200.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Zelin, Madeline, *The Magistrate's Tael: Rationalizing Fiscal Reform in Eighteenth Century Ch'ing China*, pgs. 253-259.

²⁵⁶ Briefly, it forced the government to collect silver, which had traditionally been used by local administration. Doing so caused various surcharges to be added to a variety of goods and services.

peasants were further embittered due to tax practices resulting from problems with expansion and labor policies already mentioned. By this time, the fiscal system further impoverished the common people and enriched wealthy landowners.²⁵⁷ The peasants had already been embittered through the centuries, but in 1729 during the reign of Yinzhe, attempts were made to reform the tax system in order to both improve state finances and enhance the common people's 'well-being'.²⁵⁸ Still, in addition to these reforms, the Qing still took a cautious approach to any perceived threats from the inside, and a literary inquisition that started in 1773 led to the forced exile and imprisonment in the colder, northeast portions of the empire. A contemporary observer remarked that the harsh conditions and lack of food led the majority of exiles and prisoners there to "look like kindling".²⁵⁹

Thus the reforms, though perhaps superficially important to the peasants, would not make up for a simple, important fact. China was largely agrarian, lacked real industrial power, and was essentially backwards. Much like Russia, after several hundred years of peasant abuse, limited outside trade, a lack of industrial development, and a significantly high tax on agriculture made it generally impossible for controversial practices towards the peasantry to be avoided.²⁶⁰ Practices had already been in place for several hundred, or even several thousand years, and changes would not be quick to come. Obviously to avoid further inner turmoil, and with no further options due to its slow encroachment, China turned to the West.

²⁵⁷ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 203.

²⁵⁸ Huang, Pei, *Autocracy at Work: A Study of the Yung-Cheng Period 1723-1735*, pgs. 19, 247.

²⁵⁹ Williams, Philip F. and Wu, Yenna, *The Great Wall of Confinement*, pgs. 27-28.

²⁶⁰ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 204.

By this time, imperialistic tendencies of Europe were already well-known in China. The first Portuguese, for example, had arrived in 1514 and by 1574 had settled primarily in Macao after the ban on foreign trade was lifted in 1567 to stop rampant piracy.²⁶¹ The Chinese responded to their presence by walling in the enclave located there, much as they had walled themselves in during various conflicts with barbarians.²⁶² This sort of approach would mark later dealings with the West, but the importance here is noting the feasibility of Western expansion into China as far back as the 16th century. Following this, Western powers would continue to arrive in China, and the growing market economy, which lacked the industrial capabilities of many European countries, would essentially force China into dealing further with the West.²⁶³

In addition, to compensate for its failings, *corvée* labor was still under usage by the start of the 19th century, with horrifying consequences seen even among peasant *children*, who were often exploited due to a lack proper laws; they were frequently used for brick making, fabric-dying, and other forms of what we would now call ‘sweat shop’ labor.^{264 265} Furthermore, the gentry further distanced themselves from the peasantry by frequently abusing their position to avoid land taxes and conscript labor taxes.²⁶⁶ Issues such as these caused the Chinese to further consider trade with Europe.

However, China was not necessarily willing to openly engage in trade with Western powers. As its history has already shown, struggles with outside forces were likely the major reason for the downfall of previous dynasties. The Qing, of course, were

²⁶¹ Huang, Ray, *1587, A Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline*, pg. 163.

²⁶² Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 185.

²⁶³ *Ibid*, pgs. 232-233.

²⁶⁴ Various Authors, *Child Labor: A Global View*, pgs. 43-44.

²⁶⁵ As a side comment, it should be interesting, but no surprise, to the reader that China also has a rather extensive history of cheap labor, especially in the development of its more modern market economy under the Qing dynasty.

²⁶⁶ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 233-234.

interested in avoiding this, and western encroachment, naturally, was both seen as a necessity and a burden, primarily due to “the growth of piracy and the encroachment of Western missionaries”,²⁶⁷ the latter being a direct threat to centuries of Chinese thought. Tensions, though mainly through trading practices, would lead to a series of events typically referred to as the ‘Opium Wars’.

We will not be looking at this point in China’s history in detail, it only serves to note that this period led to three things. First, China, through its nationalistic policies towards the West, caused an abuse of border trading that would erupt into a series of conflicts. Second, these conflicts would expose the true instability of the Qing dynasty, as well as its lack of defense in the face of European military might. Three, due to China’s insistence on approaching European trade in an often demeaning fashion,²⁶⁸ this led to the so-called ‘unequal treaties’, where Great Britain and other European powers succeeded in forcing China to sign treaties that were highly detrimental to the Chinese economy, as well as forcing the Qing to abandon their previous approach to outsiders while simultaneously serving imperialist interests.²⁶⁹ This led to further struggles, further treaties, and a further encroachment of the West upon China.

In addition to these problems, China also had experienced a few rebellions starting in the late 1700s. Of these, the most important, and one which necessarily occurred during the end of the Opium Wars, was the Taiping Rebellion. During this time, a failed examination candidate by the name of Hong Xiuquan went through a religious conversion to later create a group known as the ‘God Worshippers’.²⁷⁰ As leader of the

²⁶⁷ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 246.

²⁶⁸ Ibid, pg. 253.

²⁶⁹ Kuo, Pin-Chia, *A Critical Study of the First Anglo-Chinese War*, pgs. 187, 199, 300, and 302.

²⁷⁰ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 269.

group he claimed the title of ‘Heavenly King’ a position which was directly confrontation to the Qing.²⁷¹

But the Qing, though still powerful, will not able to immediately end the rebellion. The Taiping were able to secure Nanjing as their ‘Heavenly City’ and began to create a new social order that involved segregation of the sexes, banishment of opium, and other revolutionary ideas.²⁷² However, they were to also implement a harsh practice that would eventually find favor under Chinese Communists. The wealthy class, specifically merchants in most cases, was utilized in forced labor projects, which were not corvée in nature, in order to create the “paradise” the Taiping were seeking.²⁷³ One merchant in Shanghai, who was suddenly under threat of a takeover by the Taiping, said, with an eerie sense of the future:

*“The long haired bandits have taken Nanjing. Have you heard what they’re going to do with Nanjing? Every single day, they’re dragging out merchants to do physical labor. They’re poor farmers and charcoal makers from Guangxi, and they despise businessmen. They look at people who earn money without a drop of sweat on their brow as criminals.”*²⁷⁴

Naturally, however, and thanks to foreign intervention by Great Britain, the Qing slowly broke apart the rebellion at great loss of life within Nanjing, causing an end to the movement and Xiuquan by 1864.²⁷⁵

The Taiping Rebellion, however, was only one of a few that also occurred around this same time period. The consequences of these rebellions, of course, weakened the

²⁷¹ Reilly, Thomas H., *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom: Rebellion and the Blasphemy of Empire*, pgs. 66 and 94.

²⁷² Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 270.

²⁷³ Chin, Shunshin and Fogel, Joshua A., *The Taiping Rebellion*, pg. 528.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 273.

Qing's control over China, weakened the economy, and caused a loss of balance between central power and outlying provinces.²⁷⁶ The most important aspect, however, and one that would foretell the Communist Party of China's approach to Rightists in the future (discussed in a later chapter), was the large increase in the gentry population in the 1850s.

The gentry had served as the largest reason for the Qing's success in ending the various rebellions of this period.²⁷⁷ In order to further bolster their foundations, the decision was made to increase exam quotas in order to essentially, and artificially, increase the number of available gentry.²⁷⁸ Though it enabled the Qing to persist, the effect of this population increase would reduce the power of central government, leading to an increase in the power of the regional elite and a loss of control over the gentry,²⁷⁹ an issue that would reverberate in the future with the Communists when they viewed personal history and the abuse of the workers at the hands of the wealthier classes, as well as an animosity towards the Kuomintang's approach to eliminating them by relying on the wealthy as the Qing had once done.²⁸⁰

The rebellions of the late 1800s and issues such as those just discussed would eventually mold the Communist approach to forced labor, though the Qing dynasty had yet to end, but its foundations were crumbling by the time of the rule of Empress Cixi, a concubine who unofficially took control of the throne in 1861.²⁸¹ In spite of efforts to strengthen the dynasty, Qing policies were taking their toll on the populace, and a series of devastating conflicts with outside forces only further revealed the weakness of China's

²⁷⁶ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 277.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Wright, Mary Clabaugh, *Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism the T'ung Chih*, pgs. 125-131.

²⁷⁹ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 278.

²⁸⁰ Wright, Mary Clabaugh, *Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism the T'ung Chih*, pg. 308.

²⁸¹ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 280.

monarchy. Furthermore, corvée labor was still being used in China and with the difficulty in controlling the gentry, further abuses occurred in order to sustain an already burdened, antiquated economy.

For example, due to the abolition of the slave trade in America in the late 1800s, Chinese laborers became a replacement in certain areas. Over 100,000 peasants were sent into harsh conditions, often forced to work beyond “contracts” and in some cases, such as an example from Peru, laborers were forced to dig guano and many later died of miasma.²⁸² Due to such abuses, rampant imperialism, and eventually the Boxer Rebellion, which was manipulated by Cixi, the Qing faced complete collapse. A summary of the Boxer Rebellion and the political climate of forced labor can be best summarized in the following selection:

“[The rebellion] constituted just one of many expressions of the profound malaise gripping the countryside and of the insecurity that reigned there. Recurrent natural calamities, whose effects were steadily worsening as a result of the failure to keep hydraulic equipment in good working order and the degradation of the ecological environment, were compounded by the misfortunes of war. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers had been sent to fight the Japanese in Manchuria. Demobilized without pay after the treaty of Shimonoseki, these formed roving bands, looting and holding for ransom holds towns and villages. Rumors of imminent foreign invasion were rife, causing panics in which whole populations took flight. Along with attacks against missions and missionaries, there were hunger riots and revolts against taxation and forced labor.”²⁸³

This short selection clearly displays the turbulence of this period in Chinese history. Thousands of years of abuse by the monarchy, corvée labor, and an outdated economic model compounded by foreign intervention slowly led to a disintegration of the

²⁸² Wu, Guo, *Zheng Guanying: Merchant Reformer of Late Qing China and His Influence on Economics, Politics, and Society*, pg. 126.

²⁸³ Bergère, Marie-Claire and Lloyd, Janet, *Sun Yat-sen*, pg. 46.

“embalmed mummy” that was China.²⁸⁴ By 1911, it was time for change, and the final rebellion that led to the end of the Qing dynasty began the progress towards the formation and domination of China by the Chinese Communist Party.

The process of collapse occurred quite quickly, but was not unlike many similar incidents of dynasty changes in China’s past, with the exception that the Qing, much like the reign of Nicholas II in Russia, was the swansong of the monarchy. One of the reasons for the Chinese’s slow overthrow of the ruling class seems to stem from what has been called a lack of nationalism in China.²⁸⁵ For the most part, the lower classes were concerned with work, and those who were politically aware were more interested in retaining Confucian values than survival of the Chinese state. As had been shown in the past, the concern was not over which dynasty was in power, simply that there was one functioning under the mandate of heaven.

However, the Manchus, through their various practices, issues like the continuation of corvée labor, and problems with imperialism, weighed heavily on the populace. The Qing had attempted early on to attach their rule with Confucian culture, but in spite of their best efforts and some honest approaches and providing a better life for common citizens, anti-Manchu sentiment never disappeared.²⁸⁶ Further, anti-foreign sentiments at what many Chinese viewed as a kowtowing²⁸⁷ to outsiders began to reach their height after the Opium Wars.²⁸⁸ The monarchy had tried, right before the turn of the century, to implement a series of reforms known as the ‘Hundred Days’ Reforms’, but

²⁸⁴ Mackerras, Colin, *Western Images of China*, pg. 110.

²⁸⁵ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 317.

²⁸⁶ Grieder, Jerome B., *Intellectuals and the State in Modern China*, pgs. 156 and 170.

²⁸⁷ This term is important, because previously the nobility had used the kowtow as a way for foreigners to show respect to *them*. It involves a series of prostrations and touching the head to the floor in front of typically a great leader, although also elders and other important figures. Naturally, if the monarchy was viewed as kowtowing to outsiders, the reversal and disgust should be evident.

²⁸⁸ Lewis, Charlton M., *Prologue to the Chinese Revolution*, pg. 30.

though some were quite important and against the old order, most of them were soon manipulated by Cixi, who viewed inner court problems and issues with the gentry as a threat to China's established social order.²⁸⁹

Further problems led to the famous 'Boxer Uprising'²⁹⁰ and the Qing moved to start a constitutional monarchy. As seen in Russia's history, the relaxing of pressure is what led to the eventual downfall of the Qing, not previous oppression. Though it was intended to be fully put into function while retaining control of the monarchy by 1913, the Chinese people had had enough, and on 10 October 1911, a mutiny led to the abolition of the Qing, the end of China's dynasty system, and the creation of the Republic of China.²⁹¹

In 1911, the Qing dynasty, China's last monarchy, collapsed and left the country in the hands of various warlords who continued to battle for control. In 1910 with some legal reforms, corvée labor fell to the wayside and would not be seen again in such an extensive fashion until the formation of the Chinese Communist State and the implementation of forced labor.²⁹²

²⁸⁹ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 323.

²⁹⁰ The West typically refers to the event as the *Boxer Rebellion*, which is a different matter entirely because it assumes a resistance to the monarchy, when in essence it was a resistance to foreign encroachment into China, which many viewed as beyond the limit by the beginning of the 1900s.

²⁹¹ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 333.

²⁹² Williams, Philip F. and Wu, Yenna, *The Great Wall of Confinement*, pg. 30.

The Rise of the Chinese Communist Party

But the peasantry was not without problems in spite of this decline in conscripted labor that occurred after the fall of the Qing. The majority of Chinese peasants were living in much the same way as they had for several hundred years.²⁹³ Corvée labor was essentially non-existent by the fall of the Qing, mainly because the gentry, who would ironically be blamed for many wrongs in Chinese history later by the Communists, had most of the control of the empire.²⁹⁴ Labor through the gentry was through salary, though often it was quite low, and they were in charge of many projects previously built under corvée labor hundreds of years prior and had control of a great portion of state income.²⁹⁵ China, unfortunately, descended into the so-called ‘Warlord Period’.

The Warlord Period lasted until roughly 1930 and involved seven hundred conflicts up into 1933.²⁹⁶ Anti-Manchu sentiments of the past hundred years previous to this time led to the formation of the Kuomintang, or KMT in 1894, headed by Sun Yat-Sen²⁹⁷. Early on, Yat-Sen had attempted to receive Western aid in the fighting of the warlords, but was never given the proper support (an issue that would certainly haunt the West for years to come). He then approached the Soviet Union for aid, who backed both the KMT and the Communist Party of China.²⁹⁸ This dual support led to the period known as the Chinese Civil War and tensions between Stalin and Mao that would surface later in the countries’ political struggles began to develop.

²⁹³ Smith, Arthur Henderson, *Village Life in China*, pg. 312.

²⁹⁴ Roberts, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pg. 333.

²⁹⁵ Wakeman, Frederic E., *The Fall of Imperial China*, pg.s. 31 and 233.

²⁹⁶ Jowett, Philip and Walsh, Stephen, *Chinese Warlord Armies 1911-1930*, pg. 1.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid*, pg. 5.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid*, pg. 16.

At first, it should be noted, the KMT and CCP were allies in the struggle against the Chinese warlords. Over time however, and mainly due to political pressures and atrocities committed by the KMT, the two groups began to fight against each other for control of China. Over a series of battles, struggles, mass slaughters, and even during the Second World War (where the KMT refused to aid the CCP) the animosity between the 'rightists' and 'leftists' grew. Unfortunately, by the time the West had gotten involved in China's problems, it was too late. The CCP had grown in power and eventually overcame the KMT. With backing from the Soviet Union and using supplies from the defeated Japanese military, the Communists slowly took control and the People's Republic of China was officially declared a political entity, at least in China, by 1949 when Mao gave an official speech in Beijing.

This period becomes important for the formation of Laogai and the complete restructuring of what may be considered forced labor as it had existed in China previously. After imprisonments, torture, and slaughter at the hands of the KMT, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) retaliated when they gained full control. Following the war, Mao began to lead the country to stand against assumed 'reactionaries', declaring in a speech on August 13th 1945, "As for the reactionaries in China, it is up to us to organize the people to overthrow them. Everything reactionary is the same; if you don't hit it, it won't fall. This is also like sweeping the floor; as a rule, where the broom does not reach, the dust will not vanish of itself".²⁹⁹ Anyone suspected of or having loose connections to the KMT were quickly arrested and placed into prisons, which is quite similar to the conflict between the 'Whites' and the 'Reds' during the Russian Civil War that was discussed earlier in this dissertation.

²⁹⁹ Tsetung Mao, *Quotations of Chairman Mao*, pg. 6.

In addition to the above, Mao made a stand against the class system in China. Before the completion of the Chinese revolution, he stated that the struggle could only be won by learning how to distinguish ‘real enemies’. “To distinguish real friends from real enemies, we must make a general analysis of the economic status of the various classes in Chinese society and of their respective attitudes towards the revolution”.³⁰⁰ This becomes important, because not only did Mao include prisoners of war with KMT associations suspect, he began to integrate into his idea of cleansing society certain societal elements, namely the bourgeois.

The above quote comes from a speech in 1926, by 1949 and the formation of the CCP he began to take ‘class elimination’ to a new level. “Classes struggle, some classes triumph, others are eliminated”.³⁰¹ He began what Harry Wu would later title ‘classicide’, the elimination of an entire class in order to bring about cultural change through violence. This two-fold approach to political enemies with relationships to the KMT and class struggle would begin the foundations of the Laogai system.

At first, Laogai was simply based on the already structured prison system of China, which has been displayed here to have existed in a number of forms throughout most of China’s history. Though, as already mentioned, such prison systems with a focus on forced labor had existed previously, it was not until the formation of the PRC that political leaders began to seriously consider moving political prisoners into forced labor as a permanent piece of the country's economy, similar to corvée labor but without the freedom outside of work. But in the 1930s, when the Communists began their armed revolution, they “would first capture territory and establish a power base”, which

³⁰⁰ Tsetung Mao, *Quotations of Chairman Mao*, pg. 7.

³⁰¹ *Ibid*, pg. 5

included smaller-scale camp systems for prisoners who were against their cause”.³⁰² So, by the end of the Qing dynasty, Chinese history with forced labor would lead into the Communist era. Generally, there is a path of development leading up to 1949 that is critical in the eventual solidification of the Laogai camp system. Harry Wu refers to it in three major steps; the *Second Revolutionary Civil War Period*, the *War of Resistance Against Japan Period*, and the *War of Liberation Period*³⁰³, which we will now analyze briefly.

During the first stage, which occurred earlier to some of the events described briefly prior to this chapter, what would be eventually known as Laogai began to develop. Harry Wu refers to the first phase in this process as the *Second Revolutionary Civil War* (1927-1937). During this time, the communists were “subjected to a campaign of encirclement and annihilation by the Kuomintang and were practicing a strategy of guerrilla warfare”.³⁰⁴ People confined during this period were “guilty of plotting to overthrow or destroy the Soviet regime and power of the peasant and worker democratic revolution – counterrevolutionaries hoping to preserve or restore the rule of the landlord and capitalist classes”.³⁰⁵

The majority of prisoners, as may be assumed, was members of the Kuomintang or associated with them, and thus most were executed immediately or died due to harsh torture or maltreatment during interrogation.³⁰⁶ Those convicted of less serious crimes, which amounted to belonging to the rich peasant or landlord classes, were organized into “hard labor teams” that “were sent to the front to perform military logistics duties as a

³⁰² Wu, Harry Hongda, *Laogai: The Chinese GULag*, pg. 54.

³⁰³ *Ibid*, pgs. 54-61.

³⁰⁴ Wu, Harry Hongda, *Laogai: The Chinese GULag*, pg. 54.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 55.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid*.

special form of punishment...referred to [in] practice as ‘adapting to the needs of a revolutionary war’³⁰⁷ Wu provides an example from 1932, where evidence shows that over 900 hard labor convicts were forced to work at a central base in Jiangxi Province, referring to it as “the ancestor of the Communist LRC [Labor Reform Camp]”³⁰⁸ Obvious similarities to treatment of the gentry during the early 1900s before the official end of the Qing dynasty can be seen in this example.

Later in 1932, the Communists started to utilize slave labor in central production plans. A document from June of 1932 discusses the creation of a labor ‘reformatory’, which was considered “an organization to educate and reform criminals...and also function as a work unit...in order to further strengthen the People’s Economic Organizations’ control over labor reform production”³⁰⁹ Even then, forced labor was developing, as it had in the imperial era, as “an important supplementary force in supplying materials to Central Base”, eventually producing “a great deal of consumer and military products [which]...relieved the financial burden of the regime [and] increased the government’s income”³¹⁰ Chinese history has already displayed in the brief commentaries provided in this work that the dynasties frequently used corvée labor in massive construction projects and a variety of other areas. Any threats in the prison populace simply led to quick executions to keep the system running smoothly. Soon, further developments took place during the war with Japan.

³⁰⁷ Wu, Harry Hongda, *Laogai: The Chinese GULag*, pg. 55.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Ibid..

³¹⁰ Ibid.

The second stage, the *War of Resistance against Japan Period* (1937-1945), represented an important time for the Communist party to stabilize. In order to do so, naturally, they had to take further steps to eliminate opposition to the party line. Because of this, the “number of jails and detention centers in liberated areas [that is areas under CCP control] increased dramatically”.³¹¹ However, the system of Laogai itself, as a modern implementation, was still beginning to form. On November 6th of 1942, an important policy was passed that mentioned “a blending of harsh and lenient political measures” that is the origin of the CCP’s current emphasis on “leniency with those who cooperate, harshness with those who resist”.³¹² Laogai was thus slowly beginning to develop, but another critical feature would appear at this time that would change the direction of the ‘Chinese GULag’ altogether, thought reform.

Along with forced labor, the Chinese began to implement something seen earlier in the Soviet camps at Solovky. They started to emphasize “thought reform as a basic goal to attain a change in political standpoint, so that through true repentance one can become a new man”.³¹³ This, subsequently, led to increased production in the camps as they became more organized and the CCP’s thought control system took hold. Labor reform expansion at this time was rapid.³¹⁴ Thought control will be dealt with when our actual analysis of memoirs occurs later in this work.

Following this was the third stage, the *War of Liberation Period* (1945-1949), which represents the final solidification of the CCP’s rise to power. During this time, the Communists gained control of “a large number of municipal jails and needed to deal with

³¹¹ Wu, Harry Hongda, *Laogai: The Chinese GULag*, pg. 57.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Ibid, pg. 58.

a large number of political counter-revolutionary criminals”.³¹⁵ They also introduced the so-called ‘Three In Order Tos’. They were: “In order to reform prisoners, in order to overcome difficulties, and in order to prevent counter-revolutionary activists from sitting inactive and getting a free meal from the state”.³¹⁶

Several factories with a nearly all-political prisoner labor unit were created, of which roughly 73% of the income “was submitted to the government or used to finance additional production”.³¹⁷ As political and military needs increased during the civil war between the CCP and Kuomintang, naturally the number of political counter-revolutionary prisoners increased in response. Due to the huge influx, the Chinese government began to move prisoners from the cities and into villages in order to give them closer access to fields and farms where they would work.³¹⁸ This increase in farm and mine-type camps would become the main model for Laogai into the 1990s, with a variety of mines that focused on coal and farms that focused on tea as only two examples. When the CCP officially came to power in 1949, the further proliferation and solidification of Laogai was necessary for the regime’s survival, as evidenced by the announcement that “these prisoners will quickly become a major source of labor for society”.³¹⁹

After the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949 was the time when the term ‘Laogaidui’ was invented in Mandarin, which is generally translated as ‘labor reform camps’, hereby referred to as ‘LRC’.³²⁰ Literally, it carries more of a meaning of

³¹⁵ Wu, Harry Hongda, *Laogai: The Chinese GULag*, pgs. 58-59.

³¹⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 59.

³¹⁷ *Ibid*.

³¹⁸ *Ibid*.

³¹⁹ *Ibid*, pg. 60.

³²⁰ 劳改队 in the original Chinese.

‘team’ as opposed to ‘camps’, but it refers to “a labor reform camp or prison under the control of the CCP Public Security Ministry”.³²¹ The term ‘team’ used here in the original Chinese is rather important, because quite early on Mao believed that it was ingrained in the Chinese to submit to authority as a communal entity, which would further strengthen the possibility of reforming one’s way of thinking for the betterment of the communist state.³²² Before the CCP came to power, and during the Cultural Revolution, the term Laogaidui could also refer to “cowsheds”, “May 7 cadre schools”, and “bases for sent-down”. All of these terms obviously reference their structure, purpose and major function.

However, ironically, in spite of its previous existence and growth through the early Communist period, Laogai, like many Chinese institutions by that time, was generally in shambles due to the low availability of resources after the civil war. China, once the PRC was officially established, turned to the Soviet Union again for support in rebuilding itself. Mao, seeing the potential problem of the existence of remaining KMT rebels, as evidenced by their presence in Taiwan, decided to turn the previous state prison system into a repository and forced labor institution for political prisoners as well based on earlier success and developments. This is similar to what Stalin did during the formation of the GULag from 1929-1930.

³²¹ Wu, Harry Hongda, *Laogai: The Chinese GULag*, pg. 6.

³²² Tsetung, Mao, *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, pg. x.

Laogai

In order to increase the importance of its prison system, China needed to first restructure them, so Mao turned to Stalin and models used in the GULag for help in restructuring Laogai. Mao and Stalin's historical meeting in 1949 led to this development, since the necessary restructuring of the camps was essentially a requirement to keep China's political climate stable as its industry was slowly rebuilt. Obvious tensions between the people and the CCP due to famine and poor management would need to be overcome, and if not, the people themselves would need to be overcome. With the involvement of the Russians, the Chinese system was reborn and revitalized, altered to fit the general framework the Soviet Union had already been using for roughly twenty-five years. With the help of the Soviet Union, and by June 1952, 640 labor reform farms and 217 mines as well as large labor reform units involved in water conversation and railroads had been formed.³²³

The most important step in the development of Laogai occurred after the Communist Party's rise to power in China when Mao turned to Stalin for aide. From 1949 until 1950, Mao embarked on an extended visit to the Soviet Union to establish an economic and political alliance. Russia and China's political situation was somewhat shaky at the time, primarily due to the Soviet Union's treaty with the Kuomintang and Chang Kai-Shek, as well as Stalin viewing Mao as a potential threat to his hopes of bringing about global communism, or at least being the one at the head of its "eventual" development.

³²³ Wu, Harry Hongda, *Laogai: The Chinese GULag*, pg. 60.

Mao first arrived in the Soviet Union (specifically Moscow) in mid-December 1949. Historical documents on both sides display quite different views on the attitudes of both Stalin and Mao during this first meeting. From the Russian point-of-view, Mao was overly anxious and somewhat infantile, whereas the Chinese viewed the meeting as Mao displaying his lack of fear of Stalin. Regardless, this likely highlights the fact that both leaders had their own way of thinking. The Russian focus earlier adopted by Lenin was industrial-centric, which was devastating to agriculture, whereas the Chinese focus was primarily on agriculture first, industry second. Both leaders were not exactly ready to sign any sort of treaty, but nonetheless it occurred in 1950.

The 1950 treaty was a mutual defense treaty, as well as a guarantee for aid to war-racked China. Mao was offered help by the Soviet government to rebuild and restructure China, and willingly accepted the proposal. Early Russian and Chinese political tension seemed greatly decreased by this time. A popular song sung in both Russia and China (Moscow-Beijing), included the lines ‘Russians and Chinese are brothers forever’. Stalin once stressed to Ivan Arkhipov, chief Soviet advisor to China, that he “...and [his] team should always remember that’.³²⁴ This would certainly hold true, at least for awhile, because over the next few years a large number of Soviet advisors were sent to China to rebuild the country and assist in its eventual status as a communist world power. Obviously, among the institutions focused on was the system of forced labor camps that would eventually become known as Laogai.

Once the system was in place, the PRC generally focused on those who had ties with the KMT, as well as members of the previous ‘ruling class’, which follows with the CCP’s class struggle theory, where for the same crime a landlord would be punished,

³²⁴ *CNN Cold War*, “Red Spring”, pgs. 1-2.

whereas someone of peasant background of part of the Party would generally be exempt from disciplinary action.³²⁵ Criminals, in particular, received leniency for the same reasons in the Soviet Union, they were viewed as “victims” of the system, and thus were “not at fault” for their actions. If the reader recalls from earlier, Lenin once made a similar argument concerning criminals in Russia.

Over time, however, Mao began to extend the standards of political prisoner capture to broader definitions, though publically the CCP has traditionally only referred to these prisoner types as counter-revolutionaries.³²⁶ The usage of broader definitions did not really occur, though there were indications in Mao’s earlier works and speeches of it, until the conclusion of the famous ‘Hundred Flowers Campaign’. In 1941 Mao made a public speech declaring that communists should listen to the views of anyone who does not agree with them in order to foster understanding and a further strengthening of the communist ideal.³²⁷ This and similar ideas would lead to the notorious Hundred Flowers Campaign.

Seeing Stalin’s repression as extreme and the Chinese vision as more pure,³²⁸ Mao wanted to take China a step further, and decided the best path would be through the intellectuals, who were largely inactive and disinterested due to the harsh self-criticism plan implemented by Mao in 1951.³²⁹ Mao decided to take a new path, one that would allow the intellectuals to move the country further through open dialogs and discussions of CCP policies.

³²⁵ *CNN Cold War*, “Red Spring”, pg.23.

³²⁶ *Ibid*, pg.21.

³²⁷ Tsetung Mao, *Quotations of Chairman Mao*, pg. 158.

³²⁸ *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, pg. 4.

³²⁹ *Ibid*, pg. 5.

The ‘Hundred Flowers Campaign’, as it is known, was a radical departure from Soviet practice. Lasting from January 1956 until June 1957, it sought to take a more liberal approach to intellectuals and anyone who disagreed with the Party’s policies.³³⁰ After victory in the agricultural plans by 1955, Mao realized that if China was going to further develop, he needed more support from the intellectual community, who were largely in charge of the bureaucracy that could drive the country forward.

Encouraged by the Khrushchev Thaw, and not having a good history with Stalin either due to his assistance of the KMT, Mao believed that by allowing intellectuals the opportunity to speak freely on matters of politics and policy, China’s resistance to become open and thus develop could be overcome. He wanted to primarily encourage debate, realizing that “economic progress would be held back if the regime persisted in imposing a stultifying conformity on its best brains”.³³¹ He said “let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools contend”, a quote that would haunt millions of Chinese citizens thereafter, though even today it is not clear whether or not the resulting backlash was planned by Mao.

His movement to allow a more liberal approach to intellectuals was not really widely accepted, at least at first. It failed to convince some of the most important, senior-level intellectuals that the CCP was indeed open to criticism, and the majority remained largely silent for obvious reasons. Only minor issues were really disputed, and the only attempt at public outcries against party policy was a short story entitled “Young Newcomer to the Organization Department”, by Wang Meng, which caused something of

³³⁰ *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, pg. 6.

³³¹ *Ibid.*

a stir and fear of literature, which Mao believed could affect the entire country if not properly controlled.³³²

Mao was not completely convinced the Hundred Flowers Campaign was a potential threat to the CCP, unlike some of his colleagues. However, in October of 1956 he had more reason to consider the problem of political dissidents. In Poland, Wladyslaw Gomulka was rehabilitated, one of the leading victims of the Stalinist purges. He was put into the position of first party secretary, and Khrushchev made a vain attempt to keep him from gaining power, which the Chinese viewed as “great nation chauvinism”.³³³ In addition, Khrushchev’s ‘de-Stalinization campaign’ in 1956 set off student uprisings in Hungary, which caused Mao to gain some fear of the intellectual community. Even today, the report on his speech is banned in mainland China.³³⁴

The potential threat of political uprising was further proven to Mao through the resultant surge in anti-CCP attitudes and public outpourings of debate in China in May and early June of 1957, roughly a month after Mao gave his last speech calling for the Hundred Flowers Campaign to continue.³³⁵ Earlier fears were then suddenly justified, and fearing the worst when he saw the huge outpouring of anti-CCP sentiment, Mao took action and instituted the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957. Quite obviously, anyone who had participated in the Hundred Flowers Campaign was now under serious consideration for interment in Mao’s prison camps.³³⁶ Criticisms had become something of a Chinese way of life at that point, utilized during the early years of the CCP to round up landowners and condemn them in front of whole villages, but Mao greatly

³³² *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, pg. 7.

³³³ *Ibid*, pg. 8.

³³⁴ Wu, Harry Hongda, *Laogai: The Chinese GULag*, pg. 84.

³³⁵ *Ibid*, pgs. 8-12.

³³⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 13.

underestimated the intellectuals' distaste of CCP control, or at least it seems this is what occurred.

This was especially true of students, who were essentially part of the rising intellectual class, but still in-flux due to the short span of the CCP's existence and the memories of the previous political system. Most students, in addition, were coming from wealthy backgrounds, which had proved disastrous during the Chinese Civil War to some families. Other students were simply disinterested in becoming a Party member, regardless of their support for its cause. Harry Wu, for example, was questioned by members of the Youth League concerning his background, in particular the "fact" that his father was part of the 'exploiting class', to which Wu did not agree, causing his relationship with the Party to essentially end, but was further backed by his preference for playing baseball instead of engaging in politics.³³⁷

The official statements concerning the Hundred Flowers Campaign were generally taken cautiously by most students, especially those with backgrounds similar to Wu's. Members of the Youth League began to hold public gatherings in schools calling for criticisms, even stating that they themselves would "examine their own work style".³³⁸ Later, the *People's Daily* "made it clear that few were responding to Chairman Mao's call for criticism".³³⁹ Throughout March and April of 1957, school party leaders continued to encourage others to engage in criticism and candor. Events such as these increased the students' enthusiasm for change, and caution eventually gave way to excitement.

³³⁷ Wu, Hongda Harry, *Bitter Winds*, pg. 18.

³³⁸ *Ibid*, pgs. 19-20.

³³⁹ *Ibid*.

It seems possible neither Mao, his closest followers, nor less-significant party members such as those at schools were not ready for what would occur. At first, the majority of China's citizens (students and teachers in particular) were reluctant to respond and little activity took place. However, little by little, people began to speak out. "A few...penned wall posters, stating their questions and opinions boldly on sheets of newsprint provided by the Party committee."³⁴⁰ "Sometimes they took issue with the school's leaders or called for greater independence from the student union".³⁴¹ "Sometimes the students expressed their objection to the severity of the Elimination of Counterrevolutionaries campaign in 1955 or even dared to criticize the nation's blind reliance on the Soviet Union".³⁴²

Public notices were placed on walls with various claims against the Chinese government and its policies, and the Hundred Flowers Campaign soon exploded into a whirlwind of dissent. By mid May of 1957 "the early trickle of criticisms had become a torrent, prompting a directive from Party leaders on May 19 to suspend university classes citywide so that students and faculty could participate full-time in the rectification movement".³⁴³ By June of 1957, the Party had already taken notice of the huge amount of criticism, and the *People's Daily* began to refer to those engaged in the debates as 'counterrevolutionary rightists', or simply 'rightists'.³⁴⁴

Mao, of course, was responding harshly to the effects of the Hundred Flowers Campaign. Due to events in Poland, and especially student protests in Budapest the year prior, the Chairman foresaw the potential for total political collapse if the problem was

³⁴⁰ Wu, Hongda Harry, *Bitter Winds*, pg. 19.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Ibid, pg. 23.

³⁴⁴ Ibid, pgs. 26-27.

not quickly eliminated.³⁴⁵ This led to one of the most oppressive periods in Chinese history, known as the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the subsequent implementation of “re-education through labor policies”.³⁴⁶ Historically speaking, it is still unclear whether or not Mao truly intended the Hundred Flowers Campaign to be a carefully constructed ruse to pinpoint suspected anti-communist sympathizers, but regardless he made it seem as such. During the Anti-Rightist Campaign he maintained it was always part of his plan to “lure ‘poisonous weeds’ into the open so he could cut them down”.³⁴⁷ Whether or not he was telling the truth is beside the point, because he acted against perceived rightists nonetheless. He himself later argued that, in fact, that “the hundred schools were in reality only two, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie”.³⁴⁸

Thus, any previous activity during the Hundred Flowers Campaign immediately singled out the individual as a rightist, someone who through his or her actions supported the previous imperialistic regime and its values. Of course, all of this was assumed based on actions, and any attempts at criticizing the CCP during the Hundred Flowers Campaign was cause for suspicion, regardless of how strongly an individual may have believed in the Party and attempted to honestly make an effort towards its betterment.

At this time, in addition to student and teacher activity during the Hundred Flowers Campaign, the CCP implemented a system referred to as the ‘five black families categories’, a system that singled out one’s rightist tendencies based simply on your upbringing, specifically your parents. The categories were largely arbitrary. If one came

³⁴⁵ *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, pg. 8.

³⁴⁶ Wu, Harry Hongda, *Laogai: The Chinese GULag*, pg. 85.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid*, pg. 13.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

from a family with a landlord, rich Capitalist, counter revolutionary, Rightist or ‘bad element’ then your whole past became suspect.³⁴⁹

Personal stories abound from this time of fathers, mothers and generally any family member suddenly being swept away for what could at times be decades of hard labor. One recalls his father’s arrest at a bank in which he worked in 1958. He was detained at the bank for seven days and then was abruptly sent away to Laogai for seventeen years, the first ten of which were without any contact whatsoever with his wife or family.³⁵⁰ Such stories are not unusual, relatives would often disappear suddenly, to which the majority of Chinese would seemingly accept without reservation, merely stating “they have gone for Laogai”.³⁵¹

The Anti-Rightist Campaign reached its climax by September of 1957. Essentially, anyone who had said anything against the Chinese communist government was a target, and even the most benign of statements or actions lead to imprisonment. Students and teachers were given rightist ‘caps’ or labels, and where once were posters discussing issues of the CCP or Mao’s policies were now posters disseminating information about those individuals who had been tagged as rightist.³⁵² Dissident Harry Wu, for example, was brought to trial and imprisoned because of his lack of participation in rallies and his attempts to see his girlfriend without Party support.³⁵³ On October 20 of 1957, after several mock student trials, he found a group of students staring at him awkwardly in front of a bulletin board. When they pulled back without speaking, he noticed a banner in large letters proclaiming his ‘counterrevolutionary crimes’. Below,

³⁴⁹ Saunders, Kate, *Eighteen Layers of Hell*, pg. 21.

³⁵⁰ Saunders, Kate, *Eighteen Layers of Hell*, pg. 19.

³⁵¹ Ibid, pg. 1.

³⁵² Wu, Harry Hongda, *Bitter Winds*, pg. 30.

³⁵³ Ibid, pg. 28.

sheets of paper itemized his activities against the state. One aspect, however, caught his attention, a large, red 'X' over his name, a symbol that previously was used to signify a criminal who had been executed. Now, it signified the individual had been "removed from the 'ranks of the people' and relegated to the political status of outcast and enemy".³⁵⁴ It was clear that the process had begun as thousands of similar situations occurred across China.

As time went on, people suspected of harboring anti-communist sentiments, just as found during the Stalinist era, were thrown into re-education camps, followed by movement to Laogai camps. Mao suddenly began to publically state that his plan all along was a 'weeding out' of anti-communist elements, much to the dismay of many intellectuals. However, even in its early phases, Laogai was still not as repressive as found in the Soviet Union under Stalin.

Regardless, the Anti-Rightist Campaign increased the capacity of Laogai much like Stalin's Purges and the Great Terror. This, however, is nothing entirely new in China. In Russia, rulers have a history of using excessive force in order to control the populace that stretches back to the Kievan period and likely much further. This phenomenon is due mainly to Russia's slow development in comparison to the rest of the world, the Mongol-Yoke period that led to the loss of countless lives, cities, buildings, and culture, and a medieval period that lasted until the 1700s. This cultural stagnancy has plagued Russian politics for some time. In China, you see a similar system of excessive force utilized by the monarch, or generally speaking the ruling powers, but the development seems to have been cultural as well as historically influenced.

³⁵⁴ Wu, Harry Hongda, *Bitter Winds*, pg. 32.

In terms of what is referred to now as Laogai, the system has existed for roughly only fifty years, but information on its actual history is difficult to acquire. This is due to several factors. First, “the basic laws essential to legitimize a nation [here referring exclusively to China] have never been formulated”.³⁵⁵ The Chinese Constitution, for example, has been rewritten four times in forty years, and “has not only lost authority and integrity due to these constant revisions it has also never...achieved any real respect.”³⁵⁶ In addition, any official documents should be naturally slightly suspect, and even memoirs detailing aspects of the system should be considered carefully.

What serves as the guiding principle of the people, in theory, are the numerous policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As Wu notes, a popular saying in mainland China is “policy is better than law, and leadership is better than policy”.³⁵⁷ Due to this, information on Laogai is constantly under change, and any documents in existence before a certain time may be meaningless after, or at least appear that way as China’s ruling party constantly cycles through various statements. It is unclear the reason for this phenomenon.

For example, in official documents “convicted labor reform” has been the subject of over thirty-six discussions “at the central level of authority since 1949, according to Chinese Communist Party sources”.³⁵⁸ Of these, only four have been approved by the National People’s Congress and “only two have the status of law”. Now, however, local organs of the Laogai system make their own determinations and do not “rely on these two documents but operate under the provisions of Experimental Methods in Re-education

³⁵⁵ Wu, Hongda Harry, *Laogai: The Chinese GULag*, pg. xiii.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

Through Labor, formulated in 1982 by the Public Security Bureau (and labeled as an internal document of the central authorities)”³⁵⁹.

Of course, as found in the Soviet Union, discussions of Laogai are not allowed in national or local newspapers, magazines, etc., thereby compounding any potential for accurate analyses of the system’s development. The only rare instances of Laogai appearing in the public sphere, in spite of the seemingly contradictory knowledge of its existence, occur in the form of what one may assume is propaganda, or writings at least created to display the benefits and reasoning behind the ‘necessary’ creation of the Laogai camp system. Zhang Xianliang’s *Getting Used to Dying*, for example, has been viewed as an example instance of this, displaying how a properly reformed political prisoner should act and how they can in fact function in society after Laogai. This issue will be discussed more thoroughly in the section following this.

China has been said by some to have a long-standing tradition of leader worship, perhaps one that is significantly stronger than anything ever seen in Russia. This veneration of the “leader” extends into families, schools, work, and of course up into the upper rungs of Chinese political rule. Ideas of authority in Chinese thought stretch back thousands of years, but proving this cultural difference in thinking is difficult, if at all possible. What is noticeable, however, is a clear difference in the thought processes of survivors present within camp literature.

In Russia, the tendency tends to be one of disbelief, or the idea that the government has simply made a mistake. Never in any examples of Russian camp literature will you find a denial of the self in the face of political power, the line of thought is always that the Soviet authorities somehow made an error or simply do not

³⁵⁹ Wu, Hongda Harry, *Laogai: The Chinese GULag*, pg. xiv.

have the facts to properly imprison the individual. There are, of course, also plenty of examples have staunchly loyal Communists who published their stories in the Soviet Union, many during the Thaw.

In China, however, imprisonment in Laogai appears to be taken as something of a necessity in most cases. The individual constantly views himself as wrong, and not the state, and even some of the most vocal advocates for the abolition of the Laogai system display this tendency in their writings. The only examples of dissent towards the Chinese government while imprisoned occur in the cases of Tibetan prisoners *only*, obviously due to the general level of antagonism towards Tibet and vice versa. But even then kowtowing to the Chinese is more common than defiance.

Even more surprising, and perhaps as an argument for the system itself and against cultural background, is that *both* foreigners and Chinese citizens imprisoned in Laogai reach a point of considering themselves wrong, or in need of re-education. In some cases this is so profound that the individual actually accepts imprisonment rather willingly. In Zhang Xian Liang's *Agony is Wisdom*, for example, he at one time escapes from Laogai, but willingly decides to return, considering his previous decision incorrect. Upon returning, he spends the rest of his sentence performing his duties until he is eventually released.

So perhaps there is something implicit in the Chinese way of thought that allows this process to occur, and if so, this did not change from pre-Communist times into the Communist era. Previously, the power of the monarchy was looked at as a given, something that was simply part of Chinese life. This concept was not new when Mao came into power and the era of Communism began. The idea that Mao was simply a

replacement for the old monarchy was evident, the Chinese people generally accepted him as the new figure to obey. In spite of the dissidence expressed during the Hundred Flowers Campaign, the general idea was still that the Communist party was the new leader of the country, and thus to be obeyed and respected as any other system that came before. Even in the face of the brutality of the Anti-Rightist Campaign Chinese citizens, though likely with personal reservation, willingly accepted the events that unfolded. Harry Wu, for example, discusses his family's general opinion of him after he was arrested. He was essentially totally rejected, forgotten by his girlfriend, disowned by his brother, and literally cast aside as they accepted the rule of the state over the love for their son, brother, and lover.

Once the Anti-Rightist Campaign was in full swing, Mao began to further strengthen the Laogai prison camp system. Before this time, as stated, a system did in fact exist, used frequently for massive building projects. However, until Mao, the system was mainly used for conscription. The majority of prisoners were not political, but actual criminals. Members of the populace were forced to work, certainly, but if they succeeded in finishing their task, which many of course did not, they were permitted to return home. So what can be looked at as forced labor prior to the rise of Communism in China was at once part prison, and part conscription. It was largely an actual prison system with aspects of conscripted labor until Mao's rise to power, and from there, and after the Anti-Rightist Campaign, he began to change it to include political prisoners.

In order to restructure Laogai, and in the presence of a damaged economy, Mao turned to the Soviets, an issue previously tackled by which deserves a quick reiteration here. Stalin, who was in power at the time, welcomed China into the communist

“family” and almost immediately sent various experts in Soviet science, economy, and prison systems to help in the structuring of the Laogai. The restructuring was simple. Using the already-present prison system, Mao, with the help of the Soviets, expanded Laogai to include political prisoners. Regular criminals were still part of the system, but their lives in Laogai were largely unchanged. Though they would be moved around from Laogai to work communities and then eventually restricted home status if they were lucky, this was not entirely different from what they experienced before.

Political prisoners, however, were placed in Laogai for entirely different reasons. Crimes were related to their thoughts and actions as perceived by the Chinese Communist Party. Something as simple as arguing with a party official about a simple policy concerning vermin reduction could be looked at as a political “crime”, leading to imprisonment of the individual and a totally incomprehensible feeling of abandonment. Political prisoners were generally not treated any differently than common criminals in terms of how their sentences played out, but they were, however, generally more harshly punished than their criminal counterparts.

Political prisoners, on the other hand, were more often forced to engage in political rallies in camp, watch political movies, engage in shock sessions where they would ridicule certain individuals for not being revolutionary enough, and otherwise would have their entire life, even down to their own thinking, dominated. Criminals were generally exempt from this treatment, though they would take part in political struggle sessions and rallies.

Over time the system of Laogai was a solid, but arguably small part of the Chinese economy in spite of the estimation of some. As time went on, the Chinese

government realized the economic viability of Laogai. Consider the United States prison system, for example. Though prisoners in the United States engage in corrective labor (clothing, license plates, etc.), they do so at a salary (unpaid labor in a prison is considered slavery) and their work is generally directly implemented in state affairs. License plates, for example, are not a commodity but a legal necessity, and the issuing of them is not done as a “good” but as part of the licensing process to which they are attached.

In China, however, Laogai is used to create a variety of products, usually of cheap quality. Tea, Christmas tree lights, clothing, block-and-tackles, and car parts are but a few examples. Harry Wu, in his yearly Laogai handbook, outlines all of the known Laogai centers and production output, which includes everything from Cherokee Jeep brand engines to batteries. Due to the fact that the Chinese do not involve prisoners in human rights as you see in the United States, often these prisoners are performing work and creating products in deplorable conditions. Harry Wu brought back several pictures, for example, the he captured of Laogai prisoners wading waist-deep and naked in chemical baths used for making batteries. Today, Laogai is still active, but the Chinese government is obviously very careful in its continuation of products and the development of new ones for production.

In the Soviet Union, prison labor was mainly used for ore, timber, and construction projects, not as big of a focus was on consumer goods. In China, a building labeled as “Tea Factory Shandin Providence Number 253” could in fact be a part of Laogai hidden in plain view. Working conditions have improved since the Maoist era, but regardless stories of horrible atrocities and human rights violations continue to exist

as China relies on Laogai for at least a small fraction of its economy. It is possible to find in US public documents, for example, a meeting before the United States Congress in 2005 where Harry Wu detailed before those present the usage of some parts in Jeep Cherokee engines that were created via forced labor³⁶⁰. Prisoners are paid nothing, are apparently at least given enough to survive, but that is generally the extent to which the government is willing to go on their behalf. The PRC would say otherwise, obviously, so we must take both sides carefully and assimilate them to create some idea of the ‘truth in the middle’. However, luckily, we do have some methods for looking more closely at Laogai, one of which is prison memoirs, to which we now turn our attention.

³⁶⁰ House Hearing, 109th Congress, “Forced Labor in China”, 22 June 2005.

Chinese Survivor Memoirs

One similarity between Russia and China is the presence of survivor memoirs. Numerous examples exist from both countries, Russia being more prominent in this regard for the simple fact that the GULag no longer exists and the opening after the fall of the Soviet Union led to a proliferation of countless examples. In China, however, the system of Laogai is still very much alive, information on it is restricted, and survivor memoirs are not as well-known or in certain cases even possible to find in translation. Regardless, both countries have their share of survivor stories and memoirs, but in the case of China the development has been much different in a few important regards we will discuss in our formal comparison at the end. First, we shall be focusing on the general history of the development of camp literature in China.

Camp literature serves as some of the first evidence of the existence of these systems, as survivors make an attempt to have their voice heard to influence change. Change is usually slow to come, and in the case of China thousands of years of cultural development surrounding what has become forced labor may be largely to blame. Whether or not certain facts are true will eventually come to light, and like the time of the Soviet Union, it can be difficult for anyone to openly discuss these topics considering the political goals of both sides and the lack of honest information.

The history of prison literature in China has reverberations much farther back than the Mao era. As mentioned in the historical section, early Chinese writings indicate in poetry the usage of slave labor, and much further on in Chinese history inklings of open discussion about conscripted labor could be found in famous works such as *The Dream of*

the Red Chamber, one of the 18th century Chinese literary masterpieces, which details the fall of an aristocratic family.³⁶¹ But most early examples revolve around famous construction projects and typically take the form of poetry, it is not until much later that ‘camp literature’ appears in China, almost thirty years after the formation of the Peoples Republic of China.

Until the appearance of this type of literature, discussion about forced labor and any mention of prison life in writing, whether or not fictionalized, was forbidden, and even foreigners would encounter difficulty, though unlike Russia the Chinese were more cautious in their approach to foreign opposition, restricting punishment to things like slowed Visa processing.³⁶² Until the late 1970s prison literature did not exist, so successful was the CCP’s move to silence discussion about Laogai. However, much like the work of the Russian dissidents in the 1960s, a new form of literature appeared in China that would eventually lead to the publication of numerous Laogai memoirs.

At this time, so-called ‘Scar Literature’ began to appear, which had the goal of exposing the negative impact of the Cultural Revolution as well as the general effect of political movements on Chinese youth.³⁶³ The title of ‘Scar Literature’ itself is derived from an early example of this phenomenon, though not the first, Liu Xinhua’s short story *The Scar*, which was published in a Chinese newspaper in August of 1978.³⁶⁴ The story focuses on a female member of the Red Guard who abandons her mother after the latter is branded a traitor. The story caused a sensation that led to further slackening in Chinese literature and more open discussions of the Cultural Revolution.

³⁶¹ Original Chinese: 红楼梦.

³⁶² Williams, Philip F. and Wu, Yenna, *The Great Wall of Confinement*, pg. 154.

³⁶³ Ying, Li-Hua, *Historical Dictionary of Modern Chinese Literature*, pg. 162.

³⁶⁴ Davis, Edward Lawrence, *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture*, pg. 502.

This slackening led to an increase in anti-Cultural Revolution writings, as well as art, and further developments led into literary discussions of Chinese prison camps. However, such works were not readily accepted or even permitted in China. Writers who would eventually publish their works much later were in fact writing prior to this period, but they would remain silent until the mid-1980s, so far as camp literature was concerned.³⁶⁵ Early examples began or even finished in the 1950s. It was not until 1979, during the period that Scar Literature became prominent in Chinese culture, that the first real piece of camp literature would appear in China, Cong Weixi's *Reddish Magnolia Blossoms Beneath the Prison Wall*.

Published after his release from imprisonment for being dubbed a 'rightist' in his earlier writings, Cong's novella, *Reddish Magnolia Blossoms Beneath the Prison Wall*, is in sharp contrast to later works of Chinese camp literature, such as *Punishment of the Sea*, but for a very important reason. This was a period of social change and uncertainty. After Mao's death in 1976, various authors, as well as artists and the like, attempted to push the boundaries of discussion about the CCP and the PRC, much like what was seen with the Dissident movement in the Soviet Union during the Thaw. *Reddish Magnolia Blossoms Beneath the Prison Wall* was Cong's first piece of camp literature, but not his last. Unlike *Punishment of the Sea*, which focuses on the individual's mental torture, Cong's work took a much different approach. The focus instead "champions the...idealized patriotism of a model prisoner".³⁶⁶ The reason, however, is that writers were uncertain how far their criticisms of China's political climate and past wrongs could

³⁶⁵ Of particular interest is Wumingshi's *Punishment of the Sea*, first written upon his release in 1958, but not published until 1985.

³⁶⁶ Williams, Philip F. and Wu, Yenna, *Remolding and Resistance Among the Writers of the Chinese Prison Camp*, pg. 125.

go before they were once again imprisoned. The period was, as one author put it “like between the sperm of a primitive and an egg so as to conceive new life”.³⁶⁷

Thus, *Reddish Magnolia Blossoms Beneath the Prison Wall* is a hesitant approach in terms of criticisms, with half-truths that obscure the true nature of the prison system in an effort to promote the idea of the ‘reformed man’,³⁶⁸ something much clearer is one compares this novella to a later work by Cong, *Heading Towards Primordial Darkness*, which feature, by contrast, various scenes of the harsh reality of prison life instead of the moral direction taken by his novella.³⁶⁹ Regardless, *Reddish Magnolia Blossoms Beneath the Prison Wall* is the first modern example of Chinese literature concerning forced labor, and is viewed as the first true example of ‘camp literature’ in Chinese history.

Following this, authors took a similar approach to discussions about Laogai, the majority writing novellas and short stories, the latter appearing in a variety of publications, which, it should be noted, were not illegal in China. This may be explained by the partial didacticism found in these works, which is never clearly used as a tool for publication, so the reader is never clear whether or not the particular author in question is pretending to believe in the Party to publish or actually believes in what it is doing. In 1978 when the term ‘Scar Literature’ first came into use to describe this literary movement, various works of this nature were actually sanctioned by the government and increased in quantity.³⁷⁰ At the same time ‘unofficial literature’ existed that took on a more candid form, and was thus repressed.³⁷¹ So, clearly, the issue of discussing prison

³⁶⁷ Huang, Yibing, *Contemporary Chinese Literature: From the Cultural Revolution to the Future*, pg. 4.

³⁶⁸ Hong, Zicheng, *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*, pg. 308.

³⁶⁹ Watson, Andrew, *Economic Reform and Social Change in China*, pg. 99.

³⁷⁰ McDougall, Bonnie S. and Clark, Paul, *Popular Chinese Literature and Performing Arts of the Peoples Republic of China*, pg. 302.

³⁷¹ *Ibid*, pg. 303.

life in China starting in 1978 involved some sense of ‘morality’, where the narrator himself or in explanations of events attempts to show the “good side” of Laogai, specifically the remolding factor that had been an important part of Chinese culture since the time of Confucius. But even in the case of accepted camp literature, it is not entirely evident whether or not the author actually believes what they are saying.

It was clear that discussions of prison life were limited publically to those that were viewed as beneficial to the development of one’s social consciousness, as far as the CCP was concerned, and even attempting to publish outside of China works which did not fit into this mold would lead to further imprisonment within forced labor camps.³⁷² Prison literature, however, was largely unsuppressed in China for reasons not entirely succinct. By the early 1980s, a genre had formed that was commonly referred to as ‘prison wall literature’ after part of the title of Cong Weixi’s novella, which may likely have some connection to the condemnation of the ‘Gang of Four’ in 1981 and an offshoot of the ‘democracy wall’ movement, where activists promoted democratic change in China by plastering posters voicing a need for reform.³⁷³ One of the most controversial works in the ‘prison wall’ movement was discussed quite thoroughly in a huge volume of critical essays in 1988.³⁷⁴ The novel discussed in this particular volume was Zhang Xianlang’s *Half Man is Woman*.

Zhang Xianlang, released from prison and ‘rehabilitated’ in 1979, would encapsulate the general trend of prison wall literature in China, and perhaps the majority of its output up into the 1990s, though he only published a few works including the aforementioned novel. But surprisingly, the controversy surrounding the publication of

³⁷² Williams, Philip F. and Wu, Yenna, *The Great Wall of Confinement*, pg. 154.

³⁷³ Robers, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pgs. 159-161.

³⁷⁴ Li Qian’s *Prison Wall Literature of a Certain Period*.

Half Man is Woman was mainly due to the implied sexuality of the title and erotic scenes found in the body of the work, not the descriptions of prison scenes as a Westerner familiar with Russian camp literature may expect.³⁷⁵

However, the Democracy Wall movement had not gone unnoticed, and Deng Xiaoping attempted to put a stop to the writings attached to it, though primarily for the political discussions, not the discussions of prisoners or life within the camps that appeared in certain cases.³⁷⁶ In fact, prison wall literature was allowed to continue, but specific actions were taken against those involved in the Democracy Wall movement and subsequent literary developments surrounding it in the spring of 1979.³⁷⁷ Deng had previously supported the movement quite heavily, but its obvious turns to a political direction troubled China's leadership.³⁷⁸

In fall of the same year, Deng organized a congress that specifically tackled the issue of artistic creation, and promoted "new modes of expression".³⁷⁹ This soon changed, however, and by spring of 1981 Deng had taken an approach more similar to Mao's earlier thoughts on literature, banning any writings that contravened the "line, principles, and policy of the CCP Central Committee".³⁸⁰ Obviously, opening the gates led to further pushes for freedom of expression, and Deng's attempts to retain support of the intellectuals in a tug-of-war between intellectual freedom and the Party line would lead to the Tiananmen massacre in 1989.³⁸¹

³⁷⁵ Gilmartin, Christina K., *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State*, pg. 175.

³⁷⁶ Williams, Philip F. and Wu, Yenna, *Remolding and Resistance Among the Writers of the Chinese Prison Camp*, pg. 30.

³⁷⁷ McDougall, Bonnie S., and Louie, Kam, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century*, pg. 334.

³⁷⁸ Vogel, Ezra F., *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, pg. 254.

³⁷⁹ McDougall, Bonnie S., and Louie, Kam, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century*, pg. 334.

³⁸⁰ Various Authors, *Issues and Studies: Volume 32, Issues 1-6*, pg. 93.

³⁸¹ Vogel, Ezra F., *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, pgs. 264-265.

The obvious struggle with democratic movements in China and expression in the arts reached a boiling point on June 3rd, when Deng Xiaoping ordered troops to break up protests at the square and at least a few hundred Chinese citizens were killed. The event was quickly hushed, any evidence of a ‘massacre’ was removed, and following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1992, China was hesitant to allow freedom of speech to move further in fear of the dangers of political compromise, and political dictatorship again took control while China’s industry moved towards the plan for a ‘socialist market economy’.³⁸²

Surprisingly, within this political climate some writers were permitted to persist. Zhang Xianliang is the most poignant example of this phenomenon. *Half Man is Woman* was published in the latter part of 1985, followed by *Getting Used to Dying* in 1989 and eventually *Agony is Wisdom* in 1992. Clearly, the persistence of these works hints at a troubling and difficult problem concerning camp literature in China. This is further bolstered by the fact that, early in the 1980s, Zhang was made a member of the People’s Political Consultative Conference³⁸³ and a member of China’s Writers Association in 1986. Following this time, Zhang was chair of the Ningxia Federation of Literary and Art Circles.

So clearly, Deng’s earlier promotion of certain modes of expression continued. The question, however, is why certain writers, such as Zhang, were permitted to continue writing, while others, such as Harry Wu, were rejected and expelled from the country. Wu’s writings would appear in America in his memoirs, *Bitter Winds*, in 1994, two years after the Chinese publication of *Agony is Wisdom*, and other writings such as Palden

³⁸² Robers, J.A.G., *The Complete History of China*, pgs. 462-463.

³⁸³ One of China’s most important political advisory organs.

Gyatso's *The Autobiography of a Tibetan Monk* in 1997 would never see publication in China. The majority of discussions concerning forced labor in China are still taboo, but authors such as Zhang Xianliang are still writing in China. The reasons for this interesting phenomenon are not immediately clear, and this then moves us into the final part of our discussion, a comparison of forced labor in Russia and China, using memoirs as evidence for various features of both systems and how they agree and differ. Certain aspects of Chinese cultural and political history, as well as an important focus on thought reform in Laogai, appear to be critical in consideration of major differences found in camp literature from both the Soviet Union and China. We will now move to the final section of this work, where we will look at four particular examples of camp literature, two from each country, look at their similarities, and then major differences that appear and the possible reasons for these differences.

Part IV

Russian and Chinese Camp Literature: A Comparison

Now our discussion will move into an analysis of the differences in the Russian and Chinese prison camp systems, utilizing camp literature as our main groundwork. This is the first time such an undertaking has been performed, but it is best to remember a few points. One, this is in no way a thorough or complete presentation of the history of either system. Two, the author is by no means, at least not yet, an expert Russian or Chinese history. Though substantial research has been done in both areas, there remains a great deal of further work to create a more detailed comparison. This, then, must be noted for what it is, a foundation into future studies and writing. The best method foreseeable to compare these systems presently will take us through five separate areas, selected due to the ease of utilizing them in order to compare the GULag with Laogai effectively.

First, we will consider cultural differences behind the development of forced labor in Russia and China. Second, considerations will be given to how these systems were applied in both cases. This includes the focus prisoners have on food, living conditions of the camps, the types of work performed, and punishments. Third, we will be looking at the focus in each case on political teaching. That is, we will be observing how Russia and China viewed and implemented actual re-education. Fourth, we will take a focus of these examples to include a discussion of how these things appear in various memoirs, using examples in context (not in a separate section, but as we move along through our

discussion). In particular, we will be focusing on four different memoirs; two from Russia, and two from China. From Russia, the selected major works will be *The Soviet Paradise Lost* and *Kolyma Tales*. From China, the selected major works will be *Prisoner of Mao* and *Bitter Winds*. In addition to these, brief references will be used mainly for points of contrast and similarity, looking at works such as *The Autobiography of a Tibetan Monk* and *A World Apart*. The final section of this chapter will look at these differences in totality in an effort to derive possible conclusions about why the Russian and Chinese systems were similar but yet so different. This should serve as a stepping stone for a planned work of greater proportions than found here, as well as additional studies on the history of camp literature and forced labor in China.

First, let us briefly consider the general development of forced labor in both countries throughout history in order to refresh. Both Russia and China had examples of prior usages of some form of what may be considered 'forced labor'. Both countries had a history of the practice prior to the 20th century, and in certain cases labor camps were used in a similar fashion. For example, one can find a usage of the practice in order to populate outer regions inaccessible or undesirable, as well to exploit natural resources. It was also used in the construction of various grand projects. There are major differences, however. In Russia, you see a less extensive history of forced labor, and there is also a lack of political prisoners overall until much later. In China, by contrast, corvée labor had become a common cultural practice of the monarchy for several hundred, perhaps thousand years, and political prisoners were considered part of the system much earlier. It can thus be easily argued that China already had a much more extensive history of such labor practices than Russia, and the potential for a higher tendency towards cultural

acceptance of the practice should be obvious, though not easy to argue since it would require a look into actual mental processes which we simply do not, and may never, possess.

For both Russia and China, later usages of forced labor are generally the same and even follow similar lines of development. Both countries, for example, saw a rise in forced labor as the Communist party started to take control, in both cases after a period of civil war. For the Soviet Union, this led to those who were in support of forces against the Bolsheviks to be labeled as counter-revolutionary, and similarly for the Chinese anyone who was not in support of the Chinese Communist Party were easily singled out for the same reason.

The continuation of forced labor's use for construction projects is also clearly evident, as well as the nearly identical approach to political prisoners. Small differences exist, such as relatively loose rules for what we can call 'politicals' in the Soviet Union prior to Stalin. But regardless, these are more due to differences in time and leadership. Chinese forced labor, as Laogai, started with Mao, and with the PRC's early connection to the Soviet Union during its formation, it should be no surprise that repression of political prisoners under him was nearly identical to his Soviet counterpart. China may not have had a, let us say, slack period for political prisoners, but this is simply due to the implementation of the practice by Chinese Communists. With a Stalin-like figure in power, it could be argued that it was simply natural for the system to take on the later version of the Soviet camps.

In terms of the end product of forced labor under Communism, Russia and China are largely the same, forced labor was used for a variety of minor functions, but there are

some differences. The Russian system tended to focus mainly on construction products, infrastructure, and often pointless bureaucracy, at least under Stalin. In *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, for example, Solonevich at one point worked organizing huge stacks of paper, and was engaged in putting together lists of those who are unfit for work, which were then simply altered in order to meet prisoner movement quotas.³⁸⁴ He also comments about how such bureaucracy led to completely useless projects such as the White Sea Canal, with millions “worked...to death on stupidly arranged jobs, quite beyond their capacity”.³⁸⁵

In other cases, prisoners were so weakened from low food rations and the climate that they were unable to perform much of anything, even in spite of the fear of working in harsher conditions. In *Kolyma Tales*, while describing an instance where he and some compatriots had to fell trees to clear a road, Shalamov states that: “The stacks grew slowly and by the end of the second difficult day it became evident that we had accomplished little, but were incapable of doing more... We had accomplished 10 percent of the norm”!³⁸⁶

Along with pointless small tasks and grand projects that either failed or performed under their intended purpose, forced labor helped to fill out parts of the Soviet economy that were based on raw materials, not consumer goods. Consumer goods did exist, but they were fairly limited in comparison to larger construction projects, gathering natural resources, and factories. One of the most notorious camps, Kolyma, for example, was created to mine and sell gold ore. The GULag was never used strictly for consumer goods.

³⁸⁴ Solonevich, Ivan, *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, pgs. 184-185.

³⁸⁵ Ibid, pg. 175.

³⁸⁶ Shalamov, Varlam, *Kolyma Tales*, pg. 63.

In China, however, forced labor tended to be utilized in construction of further camp structures and infrastructure, with a rather significant focus on consumer goods. There are much fewer instances of what would be deemed ‘pointless’ work, all work within Laogai has some sort of meaning, regardless of how small, and this also likely plays into ideas of the importance of the work under the watchful eye of the State, as well as their usage of re-education, which we will consider in this section shortly later. Other than roads and further barracks added to prison camps, there are very few examples of expansive projects in China’s Laogai. Most work involves minor handicrafts, objects, and food, things which do not require a high level of craftsmanship and can be produced cheaply without lack of benefit, though often prisoners were not provided with a reason for why they were working.

In *Prisoner of Mao*, for example, Ruo-Wang is involved, for one extensive part of his imprisonment, at putting together thousands of leaves every day for books, even though he is never aware of what the actual content is of the books on which he was working.³⁸⁷ Later in his prison term, his work is clearer by virtue of what it is when he is placed to work on a farm that deals in various foods, such as fruits and the raising of pigs for meat.³⁸⁸ Similarly, Harry Wu in *Bitter Winds*, earlier in his sentence, was sent to work in a laboratory where he first spends his days carrying materials for testing back and forth from the lab to the chemical factory workshop,³⁸⁹ and then slightly later drying chemicals. He states of the task: “This third assignment required me to stand at a

³⁸⁷ Ruo-Wang, Bao,, *Prisoner of Mao*, pgs. 85-96.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid*, pg. 199.

³⁸⁹ Wu, Harry, *Bitter Winds*, pg. 56.

workbench all day drying a white mash of chemicals into powder. I had no idea what the substance was”³⁹⁰.

But there are no examples of forced labor utilized in grandiose construction projects lacking in meaning, shall we say, most of the focus for China appears to be various goods or projects that further the infrastructure of the camps. Whereas Stalin utilized projects like the White Sea Canal as a form of propaganda, propaganda for the Chinese is seen as the prisoner performing minor tasks for the good of the Party. Forced labor was and is used more for consumer goods, such as hand-bound copies of Mao’s ‘Little Red Book’, weaving of rugs, cigarettes, and household items such as pots and pans. These items, in turn, would be used by the populace. Foods and various chemicals are also common, as commented on above. This becomes important later on, because China would slowly grow to utilize forced labor for minor consumer goods, which would eventually include items such as batteries and lights, which may be assumed, in a fashion similar to corvée labor under the dynasties, helped to relieve financial burdens and increase economic stability. The Chinese were well aware that forced labor produced generally adequate goods at the hand of those who were largely unskilled, so focusing on minor items was important.

Conditions and features of camp life are also similar in both Russia and China, which should come as no huge surprise. Camps tended to receive the bare minimum by means of resources and camp literature is generally filled with discussions about the importance of food, for example. It often becomes a central focus for prisoners, an all-consuming goal to the extent that a single, rotting root or a dead snake is considered a delicacy on a diet consisting mainly of thin broth with a few drops of oil or a single piece

³⁹⁰ Wu, Harry, *Bitter Winds*, pg. 60.

of spoiled cabbage. Prisoners have a singular focus on food, and the intention of using food as a form of weapon seems quite deliberate on the part of both the Soviets and Chinese, but more so for the latter. Control of such a simple, biological need can easily yield the desired result of compulsion to work, especially when said work involves awards equaling larger or higher-quality food rations.

In Solonevich's memoirs, for example, he mentions how food is "allotted strictly in accordance with the amount of work performed".³⁹¹³⁹² In extreme cases of shortages, he further indicates, in order to keep rations fairly stable, horses were given feed made from twigs, so outside forces affecting the rest of the country sometimes came into play.³⁹³ Later, some of these animals were even eaten by prisoners after camp organization started to fall apart and the creatures died. Similarly, in *Kolyma Tales*, Shalamov mentions how bread rations would be cut or increased based on the amount of work the individual prisoner performed.³⁹⁴ In addition, several examples occur that exemplify the importance of food to the prisoner, as how rations would need to be carefully divided in order to gain their maximum benefit. He states: "The preparation of food is a special joy for a convict. To prepare food with one's own hands and then eat it was an incomparable pleasure, even if the skilled hands of a cook might have done it better".³⁹⁵ Further: "We understood that death was no worse than life, and we feared neither... Today they would promise an extra kilo of bread as a reward for good work, and it would be simply foolish to commit suicide on such a day".³⁹⁶

³⁹¹ Solonevich, Ivan, *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, pg. 132.

³⁹² It should be noted here that this system was put into place at Solovki by Naftaly Frenkel and was then implemented throughout the GULag.

³⁹³ *Ibid*, pg. 137.

³⁹⁴ Shalamov, Varlam, *Kolyma Tales*, pg. 67.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 56.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 57.

When we look at China, we see many similar instances involving food. In *Prisoner of Mao*, Ruo-Wang comments that food is “the single greatest joy, chagrin, and motivating force in the entire prison system”.³⁹⁷ Food was used by the Chinese as a method for successful interrogation³⁹⁸ or as found in the Soviet Union, it served the purpose of rewarding harder workers or increasing camp morale.³⁹⁹ So focused are prisoners in Laogai, they are able to determine the changes in seasons in solitary confinement based on the vegetables that appear in their soup.⁴⁰⁰ In *Bitter Winds* one can easily find a similar obsession with food, as when Harry Wu remembers a fellow prisoner who was so obsessed with it, that on one day when the camp was given a “better” portion of soup due to a nation holiday, after a scuffle that caused the pot to be overturned he went onto all fours to lick what he could off of the dirt floor.⁴⁰¹ In another instance, Wu himself is left without food for three days in solitary confinement, and we again see food used to induce him to fall into stride, more gruel provided throughout his punishment as he begins to confess.⁴⁰²

Camp conditions are also largely the same in both cases. Prisoners tended to live in tight, compact spaces with the bare minimum in terms of clothing and basic supplies other than food. In *The Soviet Paradise Lost* Solonevich describes the train excursion to his camp as though everyone was inside an animal cage, fighting for spaces above the floor, which develops patches of icy snow that fills through the cracks, and at one point the group is side-tracked at a station for over twenty hours in the freezing cold with

³⁹⁷ Ruo-Wang, Bao,, *Prisoner of Mao*, pg. 45.

³⁹⁸ Ibid, pg. 46.

³⁹⁹ Ibid, pg. 87.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Wu, Harry, *Bitter Winds*, pg. 65.

⁴⁰² Ibid, pgs. 181-182.

neither food or water or even wood to use their stove.⁴⁰³ In *Kolyma Tales* we learn that the prisoners are only permitted to bath roughly three times a month and in the crowded conditions an infestation of lice is not considered serious until “the lice can be brushed off one’s clothing, when a wool sweater stirs all by itself through flea power”.⁴⁰⁴

In China, conditions are naturally similar because of how the camps work, with the exception that in Laogai officials sometimes slowly reward prisoners with better conditions in order to elicit further compliance. Ruo-Wang, to use one example, was crammed into a small room with fellow workers at the start of his sentence, moving their plank beds to make space for where they would fold their book leaves.⁴⁰⁵ Later, he is moved to the ‘number one prison’ in China where work is more relaxed, prisoners are given times to rest, and food rations were significantly better. He comments upon arriving that, “It was the beginning of the happiest months of my entire period of incarceration”, and one page later that “Only a madman would wish to exchange this paradise against any other place of detention”.⁴⁰⁶ It seems strange when a prisoner refers to any part of their forced labor term as a “paradise”. We find Wu in a similar case if we recall the earlier example of food and solitary confinement. After his seventh day in confinement, he is asked “Are you making progress with your self-criticism?” To which he replies, “I am guilty...I committed a crime against the Party, a crime against the people...I beg the government’s forgiveness”.⁴⁰⁷ Later, even though he does confess further, he is so weak he has to be force-fed through a funnel.

⁴⁰³ Solonevich, Ivan, *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, pgs. 64-65.

⁴⁰⁴ Shalamov, Varlam, *Kolyma Tales*, pgs. 40-41.

⁴⁰⁵ Ruo-Wang, Bao,, *Prisoner of Mao*, pg. 85

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid, pgs. 134-135.

⁴⁰⁷ Wu, Harry, *Bitter Winds*, pg. 182.

Prisoners were also forced to work in harsh conditions, whether it was extreme climates or conditions that would otherwise be dangerous to the human body. So harsh were conditions at times that prisoners were willing to harm themselves in order to avoid work or movement to a camp known for being a place of death. In Solonevich's memoirs, some prisoners, in order to avoid harsh conditions and receive better transport, would chop off their hands or feet or break their own knee-caps.⁴⁰⁸ Shalamov frequently discusses the harsh conditions of his camp, one instance where the cold causes frost to appear on the feet of prisoners within the barracks,⁴⁰⁹ and in another, recounting the experiences of another prisoner, he comments on the cold leaving him "breathless with pain".⁴¹⁰

Disease, suffering, and parasites are also a rampant feature in the Soviet GULag, and discussions about conditions like dropsy and tuberculosis, as well as infestations of lice and other parasitic organisms are common in camp literature. In certain cases, disease is just an accepted form of prison life, provided the individual can still work, at least in theory. In *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, for example, Solonevich mentions an instance where a man with severe dropsy is written off by a criminal as 'fit for work' in order to meet a quota.⁴¹¹ He also comments on starvation and disease frequently, such as an instance earlier where he mentions "...the unfortunate peasants, who receive no consideration in any quarter yet have died by the million from starvation and typhoid"⁴¹² and later even discusses outsiders who would come begging to the camp after famine caused during Collectivization, such as an instance where he gives a shriveled peasant

⁴⁰⁸ Solonevich, Ivan, *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, pg. 170.

⁴⁰⁹ Shalamov, Varlam, *Kolyma Tales*, pg. 83.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid*, pg. 33.

⁴¹¹ Solonevich, Ivan, *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, pg. 184.

⁴¹² *Ibid*, pg. 66

girl his frozen pot of spoiled soup because of her extreme hunger.⁴¹³ In terms of disease to use another example, in *Kolyma Tales* one of the first segments involves a short story about collecting pine needles from dwarf cedars, which were used as the only source of vitamin C to treat scurvy.⁴¹⁴

The only real difference that can be found between the Soviet camps and China is the generally colder winters in Russia. China has its share of cold conditions in the north east, but simply due to geographical location the temperature is generally higher than found in Russia. This, however, is obviously a difference that can have a drastic effect on the human body, and there are frequent examples in the Soviet context of the extreme temperature used for its ability to contain prisoners. In *The Soviet Paradise Lost* Solonevich comments that “...Camp guards are merely a formality – there is no place to which the prisoners can escape in this snowy waste...”⁴¹⁵ But even in China there were a number of examples of extreme cold and its effects on the human body. In *Prisoner of Mao*, for example, Ruo-Wang discusses the horrible mistakes of new, inexperienced prisoners, who “died from simply inhaling...without a mask, their lungs and throats frozen”.⁴¹⁶

In terms of disease, various parasites, and death through disease and famine, things are also almost identical. In *Prisoner of Mao*, the reader learns of certain areas of China where camps are placed that are rampant with mosquitoes able to bite through two layers of shirts,⁴¹⁷ and prisoners were even forced in certain areas to meet quotas of

⁴¹³ Solonevich, Ivan, *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, pg. 213-215.

⁴¹⁴ Shalamov, Varlam, *Kolyma Tales*, pg. 24.

⁴¹⁵ Solonevich, Ivan, *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, pg. 81.

⁴¹⁶ Ruo-Wang, Bao,, *Prisoner of Mao*, pg. 91.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid, 91

killing flies, some instead saving them to barter for cigarettes because of their value.⁴¹⁸ In *Bitter Winds* Harry Wu comments how it was often difficult to distinguish the “living from the dead” and provides a story of a friend who nearly dies, is found conscious, and then dies after eating a piece of bread slightly richer than to what his weakened body was accustomed.⁴¹⁹ And similar to *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, we learn from Ruo-Wang that famine outside of the camps was just as bad as inside,⁴²⁰ while Harry Wu describes being surprised by the first appearance of death in the camps, in spite of their conditions, when he begins to see the effects of rampant tuberculosis, diarrhea, and malnutrition.⁴²¹

The structure of camp life is also similar, in fact nearly identical in the Soviet Union and China. A central administration takes control of the entire camp system, which is then broken down into separate camps, camp officials, guards, prisoners who take charge of cadres, and then of course individual prisoners themselves. In the Soviet context, however, you see mingling between prisoners and officials more frequently, perhaps as a method for continuing the appearance of a system of order to elicit more response out of the workers, but in other cases it is clearly a breakdown in the actual meaning of the function of the camps. In *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, for example, Solonevich engages in a lengthy conversation with a Chekist official that would have been dangerous and foolhardy in Laogai.⁴²² During their time together one night, the author even goes so far as to criticize politics and complain about the camp administration, with the Chekist only briefly taken aback and never abusive. But such instances are still not necessarily dominant, though examples of defiance are. In *Kolyma*

⁴¹⁸ Ruo-Wang, Bao, *Prisoner of Mao*, pg. 179.

⁴¹⁹ Wu, Harry, *Bitter Winds*, pgs. 122-126.

⁴²⁰ Ruo-Wang, Bao, *Prisoner of Mao*, pg. 208.

⁴²¹ Wu, Harry, *Bitter Winds*, pg. 78.

⁴²² Solonevich, Ivan, *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, pgs. 219-257.

Tales Shalamov directly confronts a guard for beating another prisoner, but is then punished by being forced to stand naked in the snow while soldiers point their rifles at him, then beat him and cause him to lose his ‘first tooth’, utilized as the title for this segment of his memoirs.⁴²³ So, in his case, standing up against the powers of the camp led to further difficulties.

In Laogai, such instances are quite rare, though they do exist. In Harry Wu’s case, he commits an act of defiance by concealing a copy of *Les Miserables* (which he had actually previously buried and hid) because “...some inner resolve made me refuse to give up the one thing of value I still possessed”.⁴²⁴ A few days later he is put through a struggle session where a fellow prisoner breaks his wrist with a spade, a scar that he still carries today.⁴²⁵ In *Prisoner of Mao* one of the few instances the reader will discover in the text is an instance where Ruo-Wang admitted during a ‘mini-Hundred Flowers campaign’ in the barracks that he believed “...the government’s alleged concern for our spiritual well-being was a sham. All it really wanted from us was cheap slave labor, working for the highest production”.⁴²⁶ Right before he writes of this event, he comments “I was still naive. I still shudder at the memory of that moment of idiocy”.⁴²⁷ These, however, are examples of some more “extreme” cases of defiance in Laogai. In comparison to the GULag (especially the quote provided on the second page of this dissertation), it becomes clear things are much different.

Punishment also takes on a rather sinister form in both Soviet and Chinese camp literature. Torture is common, as well as outright brutality, but in general torture appears

⁴²³ Shalamov, Varlam, *Kolyma Tales*, pgs. 147-149.

⁴²⁴ Wu, Harry, *Bitter Winds*, pgs. 222-223.

⁴²⁵ Ibid, pg. 226.

⁴²⁶ Ruo-Wang, Bao, *Prisoner of Mao*, pg. 124.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

to be used with more purpose in China, not simply at the whims of a guard, but for a greater function. Specifically, this always seems to be in order to further mold the Chinese prisoner's way of thinking. This is absent in the Soviet context, but punishment is quite similar, solitary confinement serving as one illustration of this similarity. In *The Soviet Paradise Lost* Solonevich describes his confinement:

*“My cell is dark and moist. Every morning I wipe off, with a rag, little streams of water from the walls and mop up little pools from the floor...My daily rations are thrust into the cell through a small window in the door. They consist of a pound of scarcely edible black bread, with a cup of boiling water, at 7 a.m.; a small plate of barley porridge at noon; a plate of liquid, supposed to be soup...Four steps forward and four steps back mark the limits of the narrow cell. Exercise outside the cell is forbidden...No intercourse with the outer world is permitted.”*⁴²⁸

Compare this, then, to Ruo-Wang's experiences in solitary confinement, provided here in small parts:

*“The opening between the sill and the top of the doorway was hardly more than three feet and the cell itself was about four feet long...it was impossible to stand or lie down...The door had two openings, a small peephole for the guard near the top and another, even smaller, circular hole near the base – just big enough for the food spout to fit through...There was no food at the normal lunch period, though I could hear mush being poured into some of the other cells...From another cell I heard moaning. I stayed there daydreaming until I could avoid reality no longer. I had to piss. Even that, I saw, was part of the punishment.”*⁴²⁹

And, it should be no surprise, similar character types occur in both cases. You have those who utilize their connections to the guards to earn better conditions and more food, you have criminals receiving special treatment, you have political prisoners receiving the greatest abuse, and you have those who are fervent believers in the ideology that placed them there in the first place.

⁴²⁸ Solonevich, Ivan, *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, pg. 25.

⁴²⁹ Ruo-Wang, Bao,, *Prisoner of Mao*, pgs. 127-128.

Solonevich describes activist types like Starodubtsev, who function like stoolies who often fall into the Party and camp administration's favor by spying on the "bourgeois" or "...spring at your throat for no reason whatever simply out of class hatred".⁴³⁰ You see similar character in *Kolyma Tales* that appear to follow the Party line in at least their actions, but are yet surrounded by the ridiculous quality of the camps. At one point, Shalamov describes an unnamed "gray-haired official" who arrives at the Surgical Block because the authorities are there "...to investigate traumatism. The rate of injuries is terrible. Anybody who has received such injuries, tell my aide...'How about frostbite sir?' 'No frostbite, only beatings'".⁴³¹ Shortly thereafter a conversation occurs with another prisoner: "'A soldier broke my arm.' 'A soldier? Can it be that our soldiers beat the prisoners? You can't mean a guard, but some convict work gang leader.' 'Yeah, I guess it was a work gang leader'. 'See what a bad memory you have? My arrival here is not a run-of-the-mill kind of thing. I'm the boss'".⁴³²

In the Chinese context similar characters exist, but overall complacency is the norm, so it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between one prisoner and the next. Through various struggle sessions and posters covering walls or in strategic places reading things such as "PUNISHMENT TO ALL THOSE WHO REFUSE THE GOVERNMENT'S REEDUCATION",⁴³³ differentiating between one criminal playing 'lip service' and another who really believes it is difficult. However, in spite of this difference, which we will discuss in further detail within a few pages, one character type

⁴³⁰ Solonevich, Ivan, *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, pg. 128.

⁴³¹ Shalamov, Varlam, *Kolyma Tales*, pgs. 131-132.

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ Ruo-Wang, Bao, *Prisoner of Mao*, pg. 125.

is clearly evident in both the Soviet and Chinese camps, and said prisoners are the criminals.

Criminals usually have a particularly strong position in forced labor camps, often permitted to falter in their work quotas or even abuse other prisoners without punishment. In *The Soviet Paradise Lost* prisoners organize into groups and take advantage of their position.⁴³⁴ One comments that: “We are a social element akin to the Bolsheviks, because we are against property”.⁴³⁵ This mindset is common and in fact Soviet and Chinese political thought both consider prisoners as a “free” group, in the sense that they were not at fault in their position, it was of course the fault of the bourgeois. In *Kolyma Tales* a criminal, after a political refuses to give up a treasured sweater during a card game, kills him and takes the bloody clothing off of his body for future use.⁴³⁶

In the Chinese context we can first turn to *Bitter Winds*, where we find a criminal whose occasional, bold maneuvers enable him to receive better treatment because of his peasant background.⁴³⁷ In *Prisoner of Mao* instances occur as well, and slight differences seem to depend on the time period in question. Earlier in Ruo-Wang’s term, we learn that criminals were typically separated from political prisoners,⁴³⁸ whereas later a group of juvenile delinquents are separated again because they torment other prisoners and waylay them for their food, but got away with it.⁴³⁹

Based on the few examples discussed here, it should be obvious the similarities between Soviet and Chinese forced labor camps are numerous, with occasional, minor

⁴³⁴ Ruo-Wang, Bao, *Prisoner of Mao*, pg 70.

⁴³⁵ Ibid, pg. 73.

⁴³⁶ Shalamov, Varlam, *Kolyma Tales*, pgs. 111-112.

⁴³⁷ Wu, Harry, *Bitter Winds*, pgs. 65-67.

⁴³⁸ Ruo-Wang, Bao, *Prisoner of Mao*, pg. 145.

⁴³⁹ Ibid, pg. 241.

details that differ due to location and the time period in question. There is, however, a striking difference between Soviet and Chinese forced labor that is critical in understanding the most important difference. In Laogai, there is an overwhelming presence of the importance of ideology, something that is typically nothing more than ‘lip service’ in the Soviet context. Aside from all the similarities and minor differences discussed in this section, the largest difference, and easily the most important, is that Chinese prisoners of forced labor, even *foreigners* such as Tibetans or Koreans, largely *accept* the political indoctrination that takes place and the political system behind it. Ruo-Wang himself was actually half Chinese and French, but considered a foreigner, and even he falls into the sway of Chinese Communist ideology, writing his memoirs *after* his term of imprisonment while in France, but still displaying a complacent psychological outlook. The question is, why?

If we look at Russia, even in our earliest example used for our study, *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, the main player in the memoir, Ivan Solonevich⁴⁴⁰ is clearly anti-Soviet throughout his term. Earlier in the work he comments about the useless quality of Soviet stock-phrases,⁴⁴¹ how the “enthusiasm” of the Soviet people is only confined to print and not reality,⁴⁴² or he even goes so far as to comment that “Those who, like myself, remained in Russia, have no belief in Bolshevism nor any similar system, and are little concerned with the future prospects of the Revolution”.⁴⁴³ Such phrases are rampant throughout these particular memoirs including commentary on how Soviet paradise is a

⁴⁴⁰ As well as his brother and son who are with him in the camps, it should be noted.

⁴⁴¹ Solonevich, Ivan, *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, pg. 116.

⁴⁴² *Ibid*, pg. 30.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid*, pg. 284.

lie⁴⁴⁴ and the Revolution itself is complete madness,⁴⁴⁵ which Solonevich discusses with the Chekist, Chekalin, during their lengthy discussion one night. And in *Kolyma Tales*, though Shalamov tends to write in a more ruminating, matter-of-fact fashion, similar instances can be discovered, such as a conversation with an investigator where he says: “There is no difference between the criminals who rob us and the government who robs us”.⁴⁴⁶ Such an event rarely occurs in Laogai, if at all, and one poignant quote from *Prisoner of Mao* should sufficiently serve to illustrate this point (bold added by the author of this work for extra emphasis):

*“The only way to survive in jail is to write a confession right away and make your sins look as black as possible. Always accuse yourself harshly – exaggerate, even. **But don’t ever hint that the prison authorities or the government share any of the responsibility**”*.⁴⁴⁷

Even meetings with the usual players in the political game are rare. In China you see a much bigger focus on political ideology. Fewer in Chinese forced labor are the prisoners who are outright against the system. Even those, such as Tibetans, who you would expect to be more outwardly anti-Chinese, only oppose the system in certain cases; most also fall to the Chinese machine. ‘Lip service’ for the Chinese context seems to be entirely different, and we find prisoners, guards, officials and the like, acting as though there is some grand scheme behind everything that everyone at least pretends to believe in, but will never outwardly show that they do not. For some reason, in Chinese forced labor camps prisoners have a much greater tendency to accept the political ideology

⁴⁴⁴ Solonevich, Ivan, *The Soviet Paradise Lost*, pg. 183.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid, pg. 206.

⁴⁴⁶ Shalamov, Varlam, *Kolyma Tales*, pg. 192.

⁴⁴⁷ Ruo-Wang, Bao,, *Prisoner of Mao*, pg. 167.

running their lives, resistance is not accepted. Even outside contact is usually absent or strictly guarded to avoid any family support.

Contact with the outside seems to take the form of further mental conditioning, making generally any form of defiance almost impossible. Harry Wu during his term in the camps received a rather cold letter with his brother ending with “We have drawn a clear line to separate ourselves from you. You must follow Chairman Mao’s teachings and work hard to reform yourself through labor”.⁴⁴⁸ Still shocked by the biting form the letter took, he then received one from his sister a few weeks later that included: “Continue to study Chairman Mao’s thought and work hard at your reform”.⁴⁴⁹

Thus, it is somewhat alarming at first to see Chinese prisoners and citizens apparently believing in Laogai, and even Tibetans, for example, outwardly denouncing the Dalai Lama or their own compatriots or family members in an effort to kowtow to these beliefs. This is by no means meant to be a complete discussion of this topic, merely a beginning into larger studies to investigate this troubling fact further, but for now, in preparation for the future, let us now discuss possible reasons for this strange phenomenon. There appear to be several important factors behind the development of this mindset of ideological acceptance in the Chinese context.

In China, considering what has already been discussed about Soviet Russia, some differences give an indication of perhaps a larger cultural background. Conscripted labor had existed in China well before the rise of communism, and accepting the rule of authority in the face of forced labor was apparently a recognized part of Chinese political stability; it was not an alien idea when Laogai was further developed under Mao. Laogai

⁴⁴⁸ Wu, Harry, *Bitter Winds*, pg. 174.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

and indoctrination within its walls also seems to follow the Chinese tendency to submit to authority, often suggested by authors of these memoirs. Ruo-Wang, for example, comments earlier in his memoir how entering into the system made him feel like a school boy again, eager to please his teachers.

*“...I felt an old familiar emotion welling up in me, compounded of confusion and anxiety, but also of a certain expectant excitement. It was exactly the same feeling as when I first went away to the mission schools – there were so many routines to learn, so many pitfalls to avoid, such a great effort to be made in so many directions. Already I was beginning to slip into the role of the well-intentioned pupil, eager to reassure the masters of his good behavior...As a Chinese I recognized the desire to perform well and display good faith and willingness. It is a typical national characteristic”.*⁴⁵⁰

In a similar vein, and though he is often quite anti-CCP in *Bitter Winds*, Harry Wu in his personal story of becoming a dissident, *Troublemaker*, provides several interesting comments:

*“I believe there is something intrinsic about the Chinese personality, something that allowed the Chinese to shift from emperor to chairman, something that allows us to treat our own people as slaves”.*⁴⁵¹

*“There is no such thing as an equal relationship in China. In America, a son can call his father Dad or maybe even by his nickname or real name, but in China everything is formal. Master is Master, servant is Servant, husband is Husband, wife is Wife, child is Child. This mentality goes back a thousand years and has shaped our political culture as well.”*⁴⁵²

*“This is the tradition of China. You must love your motherland, which meant both Mao and the party. You must not question. They kept telling us this was a new order, but to me it was just a repetition of the past three thousand years, with Mao as the uncrowned emperor...The Chinese people cannot distinguish between government and the motherland.”*⁴⁵³

⁴⁵⁰ Ruo-Wang, Bao,, *Prisoner of Mao*, pg. 33.

⁴⁵¹ Wu, Harry, *Troublemaker*, pg. 16.

⁴⁵² *Ibid*, pg. 33.

⁴⁵³ Wu, Harry, *Troublemaker*, pgs. 50-51.

This kind of mentality simply does not exist to this extent in the Soviet context. Very few, in fact, are such examples that even suggest it. Perhaps there is something within the cultural mindset of the Chinese that allows for this kind of thought, but this, of course, can probably never be proven since it would require some method for analyzing the function of the mind. More importantly, cultural background would not explain why foreigners would follow the same steps as their native-born Chinese compatriots within the camps. On the contrary, one would expect outsiders to be more readily antagonistic towards these systems.

But in almost every case, the individual in Laogai memoirs, regardless of background, will at least once express the fact that *they* were at fault, not the government, and that their sentence of forced labor, no matter how ridiculous, no matter how altered or extended over their term, no matter how long, is somehow necessary for personal development, in spite of the fact that they generally will not be able to live a normal life in China after they are released, if it ever happens. Even family members express this same opinion for the most part and generally reject loved ones who are put into forced labor camps, some who commit suicide in desperation when they find they are left with less life than they had in the camps. Harry Wu's own family denounced him, as revealed in several instances in *Bitter Winds*. In many cases, after release, prisoners of Laogai find suicide the better option than attempting to live in society. Even more shockingly, other prisoners in certain cases actually *return* to the camps because it has become their only semblance of consistency and acceptance. In *Prisoner of Mao* the following short story is provided:

“Over the next few days I pulled the painful story from him bit by bit. He had been released with seven yuan and a one-way ticket in his pocket. When he arrived in the village, his own father cursed him as a criminal element and ordered him to remain seated on a stool under the sun until he checked with the police to see if the letter of medical release he bore was really valid. After a week of being coldly tolerated by his family, taunted by children and scorned by the rest of the village, he decided that the only home he had was Liangxiang [his camp]. He took what money he had left, bought a return ticket and literally begged Warder Tien to allow him back inside the gates.”⁴⁵⁴

The system itself either crushes the spirit of the individual, the cultural tendency to respect authority takes precedence, or a more likely combination of the two comes into play. However, there is one important aspect that appears to be largely responsible for the molding of these two or the complete overthrow of one’s previously assumed beliefs, something that allows similar events to happen.⁴⁵⁵

In the Chinese context, the actual usage of re-education appears to have always been much stronger than in the history of the Soviet GULag. One would expect a strong focus on ideology early on, before obvious faults of the political system became too difficult to ignore or when the camps appeared as ridiculous as they really were. But in even the earliest Soviet camps at Solovky, such examples are rare. It was established in 1923 to both eliminate the religious life there, and as a method for dealing with political prisoners, who were typically left apart from regular criminal types so they would not affect the attitudes of the latter.

However, in spite of this, they were actually permitted to engage in political discussions and, moreover, their work sentences were actually comparatively lighter than criminals and later examples of political prisoners. Torture was often cruel and common but in general political prisoners, and criminals of course, were permitted the freedom of

⁴⁵⁴ Ruo-Wang, Bao, *Prisoner of Mao*, pg. 302.

⁴⁵⁵ The reader should be reminded that Zhang Xianlang escaped from the camps at one point and comes back of his own volition in *Agony is Wisdom*.

their own minds, so to speak, and were not placed under extreme forms of political indoctrination. The only real examples of this are perekovka in Solovki and the movement under Brezhev to deal with political prisoners as “insane”, where some prisoners were given heavy, mind-altering drugs and were influenced to publically denounce their views. The Chinese would use similar tactics, but even from the beginning, the CCP’s Laogai camps would include extremely thorough methods of re-education.

One finds a much greater focus on mental reformation in the Chinese context. Prisoners in Laogai, both criminals and politicals, though more so the latter, were frequently brainwashed as part of their terms, most often every day in at least some capacity. Prisoners were expected to engage in frequent ‘struggle sessions’, where the goal was to criticize and condemn fellow prisoners (usually a single individual) for their lack of political belief and a lack of adherence to socialist policies. Furthermore, prisoners were required to frequently condemn themselves. Throughout various meetings with authorities, prisoners were required to admit their faults, and most would fall into admitting to minor errors in an effort to prove they were committed to socialist ideals while avoiding harsher punishments or reductions in food rations. Something as simple as going to the latrine one too many times could be construed as laziness, and prisoners would often purposefully make such selections in their personal denouncements in order to ease punishments and avoid them altogether in certain cases.

Furthermore, prisoners within Laogai are constantly subjected to political discussions, usually in a format quite similar to struggle sessions. This also occurred in the Soviet Union, but in the Chinese context the constant mental battery seems to create

an internationalization of ideas rather than pretending. Readings from local communist newspapers are discussed, most likely those written within the camps themselves, which tended to have their own special newspaper. Even “free” time within Laogai was surrounded by political ideology.

If a prisoner was not able to submit, they would be tortured, if this did not lead to an admittance of guilt and a responsibility to acknowledging the Party’s “leniency”, they would be executed, which is much more radically than what is the usual in the Soviet context. Self-criticism and at least putting on the mask of political acceptance is critical to the Chinese prisoner of early and modern forced labor. They would often *not* even be sent to a camp to begin their sentence until they “admitted” to their wrongdoings, and of course this was critical in their release. Throughout every prisoner’s sentence, they were submitted to continual evaluations of their past wrongs and “progress”, new confessions compared to old confessions and kept in a special file for each prisoner. This continual focus on one’s political beliefs and the “reasons” for admittance to Laogai seems to be so overbearing that it collapses even the strongest willed.

Not unusually after considering how it works, this focus on political indoctrination even collapsed the will of the strongest anti-Chinese and/or anti-Communist advocates of all of the prison population, Tibetans. Though, of course, they were more likely to oppose the system, even then they were sometimes the most fervent in their “acceptance” of their sentencing and in their denouncement of others. Even national pride appears unable to withstand the focus on re-education under China’s forced labor system. Later examples from *The Autobiography of a Tibetan Monk* show that the Chinese were more lenient, but unwilling to accept revolt, so young Tibetan prisoners

were separate to avoid confrontations, given harsher interrogation sessions, and were even outright killed in certain cases.

So, it should be clear at this point that the intensity of political indoctrination, or brainwashing as we commonly refer to it, is the major difference between Russian and Chinese camp life, the major cause for differences in ideology present in camp literature, and the most likely reason for differences in how the individuals views themselves and others as elucidated through prison memoirs. Russian camp literature is a statement against the government (with a few exceptions), a way to spread knowledge about the GULag in addition to the purging of emotions by the writer. *The Soviet Paradise Lost* was written in order to inform the rest of the world about the horrors of the Soviet Union, *Prisoner of Mao*, as both the author and assistant note in the introduction, was meant to simply recall experiences and was not viewed as a method for denouncing Communist China. In China, camp literature is primarily a chronicle of events; very rarely do you ever find any negative comments about the Communist Party or its practices. Even when they appear, they are much slighter than found in the Soviet context.

Prisoner of Mao was meant to inform the outside world of Chinese policies, but even within the pages it is difficult to find any open denouncements of Mao or China, which is strange if one remembers that Ruo-Wang published the work *outside* of China initially. Other examples, such as *Agony is Wisdom* were first published *in China* and with the support of the CCP. So, it is clear even China has a usage for memoirs; they obviously serve as a method for displaying the truth of re-education, regardless of one's opinions on it, through Laogai. Even examples previously published outside, such as *Prisoner of Mao*, can actually be found in China today. *Only* in the case of writers like

Harry Wu or Palden Gyatso do such works mainly serve the purpose of informing the rest of the world of perceived atrocities within modern Chinese camps. Both *Bitter Winds* and *The Autobiography of a Tibetan Monk* are unavailable in China currently for this reason, as well as the participation of both of these men in demonstrations against China in the West. Whether or not this is because they shed an incorrect light on Chinese policies is not something we are discussing here.

In China itself, most of these works are obviously unpublished due to their purpose abroad, but those that are, such as Zhang Xianliang's *Getting Used to Dying*, are seemingly used by the Chinese government itself to show proper re-education of an individual who is in opposition to the government, whether consciously or not. Obviously, part of this could be due to the present existence and thus expected secrecy surrounding Laogai, a similar situation that occurred during earlier exposes on the GULag outside of the Soviet Union, but in general, focusing on the writing style and actual content of Chinese camp literature, one finds what seems to be mainly a purging of emotion, almost as though the writer is trying to educate the reader as to why camp life itself is or was necessary at the time, completely ignoring political ideas for the most part or making any assumptions about the current state of Chinese politics.

There is a persistent sentiment and opinion in Chinese camp literature that the individual is below the government, or at least should follow its rules, and any forced activity is simply a part of life should it happen. At times this sentiment is clearly being utilized to avoid punishment, but regardless, the role is played. Evidence of the power of Chinese re-education can be found in the fact that there has never been an uprising in Laogai as was found in the Soviet Union, even after the death of Mao, where you may

expect a similar series of events such as occurred after the death of Stalin. The only instance of an uprising from the examples utilized in this writing occurs in *The Autobiography of a Tibetan Monk*, where several younger prisoners are angered at the death of one of their compatriots and march on the guard barracks, to only be dispersed, separated, and a in a few cases, even killed with bayonets.

The reasons for these differences do not seem to be even in part due to the political systems in which they developed. If one considers the political system, one would assume, like in the Soviet Union, a strong hesitation in the mental processes of Chinese prisoners to actually *accept* their position. The Russian and Chinese communist governments in many ways tried the same policies and had the same general direction of development down to propaganda design, cultural purges, and even agricultural production plans, though some argument is made for the persistence of thought control in the Chinese context. Perhaps the differences are due to things that have been taught and repeated for centuries, differences in how the Russians and Chinese think about authority and themselves. This general tendency of thought is found in many examples in Chinese culture, though there is of course always deviation, and seems to be the major reason for the differences found in Chinese camp literature and thought about Laogai from survivors and native-born Chinese citizens both there and abroad. But this is something reserved for future work.

UP to the present day, Harry Wu appears to be the only vocal prisoner who was not “reformed”. Zhang Xian Liang, for example, was actually permitted by the state to write books about his experiences in Laogai and became one of China’s most well-known and respected modern writers. He is one of the few writers, in fact, known outside of the

country because of his work specifically in the genre of camp literature. Based on an analysis of his writings, it is possible he is being used as something of a tool and is maybe even aware of it, but regardless it was a position he willingly accepted, even after over twenty-two years of hardship, near death experiences, starvation, torture, and abuse the likes of which most people would be unable to bear.

To date, this writing is the first work that compares both the Russian and Chinese forced-labor prison camp systems. The area of GULag studies is well-known outside of Slavic and Russian studies, but the area of Laogai is rarely studied and remains less known. This work has the primary goal of providing a grounding for future studies, and is in no way meant to change the political climate of current relations between the US and China. It is merely a comparison based on historical facts and the memories of labor camp survivors.

Future studies are an absolute necessity, and the existence of only one work comparing the two is a travesty because the knowledge that can be gained from such a simple comparison is immense. This work is thus something of a springboard into future studies. Currently, I am planning on expanding the materials presented here under the direction of Harry Wu to complete the first comparative study of the GULag and Laogai ever done in book form, as well as the first historical analysis of the development of forced labor in China. We will leave our topic as it stands for the future.

Appendix

Timeline of Chinese Dynasties

The following is a simple list of the Chinese dynasties, leading into the modern era. Certain dynasties had a rather confusing set of rulers, so for these separate dates for different periods have been indicated.

2100-1600 BCE	Xia (Hsia) Dynasty
1600-1050 BCE	Shang Dynasty
1046-256 BCE	Zhou (Chou)
	Western Zhou (ca. 1046-771 BCE)
	Eastern Zhou (ca. 771-256 BCE)
	Spring and Autumn Period (770-ca. 475 BCE)
	Warring States Period (ca. 475-221 BCE)
221-206 BCE	Qin (Ch'in) Dynasty
206 BCE-220 CE	Han Dynasty
	Western/Former Han (206 BCE-9 CE)
	Eastern/Later Han (25-220 CE)
220-589 CE	Six Dynasties Period
	Three Kingdoms (220-265 CE)
	Jin Dynasty (265-420 CE)
	Period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties (386-589 CE)
581-618 CE	Sui Dynasty
618-906 CE	Tang (T'ang) Dynasty
907-960 CE	Five Dynasties Period
960-1279	Song (Sung) Dynasty

Northern Song (960-1127)

Southern Song (1127-1279)

1279-1368 Yuan Dynasty

1368-1644 Ming Dynasty

1644-1912 Qing (Ch'ing) Dynasty

1912-1949 Republic Period

1949- People's Republic of China

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