The Gulag System in Northern Siberia: The Creation and Evolution of Vorkuta, Norilsk, and Kolyma

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M.A. Thesis

University of Virginia Slavic Department

April 20, 2017

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my special appreciation and thanks to my advisor Professor Jeffrey Rossman. You have been an amazing mentor to me. I would like to sincerely thank you for your patience and encouragement, allowing me to grow as a researcher. Your advice and time have been priceless. I would also like to thank my second reader, Professor Dariusz Tolczyk. Your time and commitment to my research have been invaluable. I am honored to have worked with such great Professors and academics on my research and writing.

I would like to express a special thanks to my friends and family who have offered support and words of encouragement to me as well as read through different drafts of my thesis. I could not have done it without you.

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The Gulag system in the Soviet Union was created to achieve two main purposes: one, to catapult the economy into industrialization, and two, to incarcerate ordinary criminals and others who were perceived to be a threat to the regime. The Gulag system was officially active from 1923 through 1960 but had long-lasting effects that are visible today. One of the areas that the gulag transformed during this time period was Northern Siberia. Three of the largest and most notorious camp complexes were located in Northern Siberia; Vorkuta, Norilsk, and Kolyma.[1] The camps in these areas transformed the land and economy of the area as prisoners were forced to live in these previously sparsely inhabited locations and mine the valuable natural resources. Due to the remote locations, the most dangerous criminals and the most feared political prisoners were sent to these camp complexes. Vorkuta, Norilsk, and Kolyma are known for their high death tolls as well as their contributions of natural resources to the Soviet economy. Why were these specific locations chosen as labor camps? How did these camp complexes start and transition into integral parts of the Gulag system and Soviet economy? How did the Gulag system change the landscape, economy, and environment of these particular areas? What was living and working in these specific Gulag camps like? What types of prisoners were sent to these areas and what were the typical everyday conditions? These questions will be the focus of this research paper.

Great strides have been made to understand the complexity of the Gulag system and the functions of the Gulag camp complexes of Vorkuta, Kolyma and Norilsk. Previously, historians like Robert Conquest and more recently Anne

[1] Though Kolyma is located in Northern Siberia, its location is referred to by Russians as the Far East

Applebaum as well as Alan Barenberg have examined one of these camps individually, and the Gulag system as a whole, but the similarities between these three camps and their role in Soviet Union are too strikingly similar to ignore.

Robert Conquest was one of the first influential contributors to try to examine and explain the Gulag system in the 1970's. This was before the Soviet archives were open and although he made great progress on understanding the Gulag system as a whole, his statistics have since been proven to be inaccurate. Conquest also examined the Kolyma camp complex in depth, focusing on prisoner life and what little information was available about the day-to-day operations of the camp complex. In the early 2000's, Oleg Khlevniuk expanded on Conquests research once some of the Soviet archives were open to the public. Khlevniuk examined the Gulag system as a whole, also focusing on Stalin's role. Around the same time as Khlevniuk, Anne Applebaum added a very comprehensive look at prisoner life in the Gulag camps and the camp system. Most recently, Alan Barenberg has contributed an analysis of the Gulag system, as well as an in depth examination of the Vorkuta camp complex. This work hopes to build on the work of previous researchers and give a more comprehensive analysis of the Gulag camp system in Northern Siberia.

The formation of camps in Northern Siberia transformed Russia's landscape and created cities that exist to this day because of the work of prisoners of the Gulag system. The following chapters attempt to explain the similarities between the Kolyma, Vorkuta, and Norilsk camp complexes in Northern Siberia and explore the function of these labor camps from their formation, through to their closing.

Background on Siberia and the Gulag System

Siberia encompasses 77 percent of Russia's territory and stretches across eight time zones, spanning from the Ural Mountains to the Pacific Ocean.[2] Siberia's vastness and low population density have affected its development over time. Siberia stayed relatively the same until the 1900's, even as European Russia grew in population, large cities were built, and industry developed.

Since Siberia encompasses such a vast territory, Southern Siberia is significantly different from Northern Siberia in climate and hospitability. Northern Siberia is home to Oimiako, which is officially the coldest permanently inhabited settlement on Earth. It has an officially recorded low temperature of minus 71 degrees Celsius.[3] In contrast, Southern Siberia is known for having hot summers and fertile plains. For these reasons, peasants migrated voluntarily from European Russia and Ukraine to Southern Siberia from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries to acquire larger, more productive farms and improve their quality of life.[4] Although Northern Siberia had a vast number of valuable natural resources such as gold, nickel, and coal, technology and climate restraints made them virtually inaccessible, so there was no voluntary movement into Northern Siberia.

Siberia is known for extremes, whether in weather or human suffering. Siberia has a long history of being the location of choice for Russian rulers to send prisoners and exiles. Northern Siberia in particular has been ideal for this purpose

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[2] Janet M Hartley, *Siberia: A History of the People,* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2014), xiii
[3] Hartley, *Siberia: A History of the People,* xii
[4] Hartley, *Siberia: A History of the People,* xii

due to its remote location, harsh climate, and the impossibility of escape. Other than exiles and prisoners being sent to Northern Siberia, it has for the most part remained uninhabited with the exception of nomads and a few small settlements.

During the 1900's, the Soviet Union capitalized on the nearly free labor of prisoners in order to extract the valuable, but difficult to obtain natural resources in Northern Siberia for the extraction of which they would otherwise not have been able to hire laborers. Labor camps were set up in order to exploit the natural resources, which would help the Soviet Union revitalize its economy and contain some of the Soviet Union's worst and most feared prisoners. The Gulag system was an effective way for Stalin and other officials to capitalize on the cheap prison labor while working towards the completion of grand projects. Stalin's five year plans were not reviewed by economic specialists, and the focus was on achieving extravagant goals that would be the envy of the rest of the world, without regard for the economic reality of how much labor or capital would be required to complete the projects.[5] This resulted in many partially completed projects, abandoned projects or projects that cost more money to implement than expected, often leaving the Soviet Union with net financial loss.

The Gulag camps in Northern Siberia transformed the land and its economy as prisoners were forced to live in these previously uninhabited locations and mine the valuable natural resources. Along with the work of extracting resources, they were also forced to build towns and cities, which are inhabited by Russian citizens

[5] Editors: Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* (Hoover Institution Press: Stanford, California, 2003), viii

to this day and would not exist without the prisoners of the Soviet Union's Gulag system.

GULAG is an acronym for *Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei,* or the Soviet Union's "Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps." This system was a subordinate of the USSR Commissariat of the Interior, which operated under four different acronyms from the Bolshevik Revolution to Stalin's death in March of 1953. The first name was Cheka [Emergency Committee], under the first minister, Feliks Dzherzhinsky, until it was renamed the OGPU [Joint State Political Directorate] in 1922. The OGPU became the NKVD [People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs] in 1934 and was headed by Genrikh Yagoda from 1934 to 1936 and headed by Lavrenti Beria from 1938 to 1945. The NKVD was then renamed the MVD [Ministry of Internal Affairs] in 1946.[6] Although this administration changed names several times, it was still in charge of the same projects and remained the Soviet Union's secret police.

The Gulag system was a complex network of camps and sub-camps spread throughout the Soviet Union. This system was officially active from 1923 to 1960, though some camps functioned well into the 1980's.[7] Between 1929 and 1953 alone, eighteen million people passed through the Soviet labor camp system.[8] During the Second World War, in 1942-43, the Gulag system held four million people in labor camps and prisons in the Soviet Union at once.[9] This year was the

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[6] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 1
[7] Tomasz Kizny, *GULAG,* (Firefly Books, 2004), 9
[8] David Satter, *It Was a Long Time Ago and It Never Happened Anyway: Russia and the Communist Past,* (New Haven, 2012), 2
[9] Hartley, *Siberia: A History of the People,* 201

time of the highest average mortality rate in the Gulag, reaching 25 percent; one million prisoners died.[10] The opening years of the Gulag, beginning in 1923, were much more deadly for prisoners, especially in Northern Siberia. The camp system transformed over time from deadly places for prisoners to economic centers.

During the Soviet Union's existence at least 476 camp complexes were created, which consisted of thousands of individual camps. Each individual camp held between a few hundred to many thousands of people.[11] Gulag camps had their own laws, customs, and culture almost as if they created a separate civilization. Solzhenitsyn aptly referred to this phenomenon as the *Gulag Archipelago*. Each camp complex as well as the individual camps were so geographically diverse that the customs and practices varied between them. Even working conditions and camp life varied from camp to camp and could change within the same camp over time. Life in the remote, mass industrial camps of Northern Siberia was drastically different from life in the agricultural camps in the Soviet Union's south.

Prisoners in the Gulag camps across the Soviet Union were forced to work in some capacity in many different industries such as logging, mining, construction, and farming. Lavrenti Beria was the head of the secret police and therefore the Gulag system from 1939 until Stalin's death in 1953 and it was during this period that prisoners and the Gulag system were most heavily exploited for economic gain.[12] In theory, each camp was run in a way to make the prisoners the most efficient and productive at their job. In reality, prison conditions were poor and

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[10] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 79
[11] Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History,* (Doubleday, New York, 2003), xvi
[12] Applebaum, *Gulag: A History,* 184

food rations were low, so they were not as productive as they could have been under different circumstances. In fact, labor productivity in the Gulag's production administrations was only fifty to sixty percent of comparable civilian administrations. The Gulag lacked the proper equipment, skilled labor, and experienced specialists, all of which would have raised the cost of maintaining the Gulag.[13]

The Gulag system reached its economic peak in the early 1950's at which point it was producing "a third of the country's gold, much of its coal and timber, and a great deal of almost everything else."[14] This was due to the work of the 2.5 million Gulag prisoners in the camps in 1950.[15] According to Soviet Officials, these inmates were simultaneously revitalizing the economy, working toward the greater good of the Soviet Union, and becoming rehabilitated. The central function of most camps was work, meeting quotas, and exceeding their previous output. Daily life for prisoners was organized around the work schedule and the prisoners' well being was linked to their work output.[16] The harder a prisoner worked and the more output they produced, the more food and privileges they would receive in return.

Although there were prison camps all over the Soviet Union, the camps in Northern Siberia were the most notorious and feared camps. Vorkuta, Norilsk, and Kolyma were the three largest Gulag camp complexes in Northern Siberia. These complexes were extremely deadly and difficult for prisoners to survive, resulting in the highest death tolls. The creation of these complexes in Northern Siberia was

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[13] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 39
[14] Applebaum, *Gulag: A History,* xvi
[15] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 41
[16] Applebaum, *Gulag: A History,* 217

motivated by the government's desire for economic profit and to remove those who were seen to pose the greatest threat to the regime.

The People of Northern Siberia During Stalin's Rule

"Free" Siberian Citizens

Those who lived in Northern Siberia as free citizens during the time the Gulag system functioned, from 1923 to the 1980's, can be divided into three categories. There were indigenous people, the *komiaki*, or nomads who lived there before the Gulag camps; people who were forced to live there; and those who moved to Siberia for economic or personal reasons.

Those who were forced to live there were either former prisoners who were living a life in exile following their completed prison sentence, people from Soviet occupied countries who were deported to Northern Siberia and made to live there permanently, or people whose jobs for the Soviet government forced them to live in a particular location. This last group included guards, NKVD/MVD personnel, and other government workers.

Northern Siberia was a popular location for the Soviet government to deport people of Soviet occupied countries who had been uprooted from their homes. Exiled people included mass deportations of Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians after Soviet occupation in the Baltic States in 1940. In 1940, there was also mass deportation of West Ukrainians.[17]

[17] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 63

Since Northern Siberia had so few people living there before prisoners built the cities, the Soviet government offered bonus pay for people willing to move to Siberia and work. Arctic bonus pay or the "long ruble" was a salary more than double that of those living in the south. During a time of much terror and uncertainty in the Soviet Union, northern Siberia offered the promise of a new start, a better job, the opportunity to escape difficult family circumstances, or simply for a new adventure to break the monotony and restrictions of life in towns and villages of European Russia. When it was difficult to move from one's town or village without permission [Soviet citizens were required a passport to leave their hometown and closely tracked by the government] and there were severe housing shortages, Siberia was a rare opportunity for some Soviet citizens to start a new, possibly better life.

Free people were incentivized to move to Kolyma as a result of Dalstroi organization. Dalstroi, short for Far East Construction Project, was the state owned company in charge of developing the region of Kolyma and the surrounding areas. It consisted of two main directorates: the NKVD, which administered the labor camp system; and the Industrial Directorate, which oversaw industrial production and development.[18] Over time, Dalstroi grew to administer more than 130 camp facilities in a territory covering almost three million square kilometers, reaching the tip of the Bering Strait, and including the camp complexes of Vorkuta and Norilsk.[19]

At the end of 1931, Berzin, the head of Dalstroi at its creation, foresaw the difficulties in acquiring enough workers and organizing mass gold mining. He

[18] Bardach, *Man is Wolf to Man,* 200
[19] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 106

persuaded Stalin to grant incentives and privileges to voluntary technical-administrative personnel. In Russia's larger cities like Moscow, Leningrad, and Odessa, Berzin established Dalstroi agencies in order to purchase food, technical supplies, and to recruit voluntary personnel for Kolyma. The recruited personnel who worked in Kolyma under Dalstroi were signed to a three-year contract that included eight months of vacation with pay. Their pay was set at a minimum of sixty percent more than the salary established by the government. At the end of every six months, their pay was increased by ten percent until it doubled. On top of the pay incentives, transportation was paid for in both directions to move, as well as another month's pay as separation wages after completing the contract. All men serving in Kolyma were exempt from military service, which was potentially lifesaving during WWII. Even with all of those incentives, the most attractive aspect for workers of moving to Kolyma was protection from arrest. The NKVD had no right to arrest any voluntary worker in Kolyma without personal permission from Berzin.[20] This was an enormous benefit for people living in the Soviet Union at the time, as arrest for Soviet citizens was always a possibility, even if they had done nothing to warrant it.

These incentives made working for Dalstroi in Kolyma a coveted position for many Soviet citizens. Despite the region's remoteness and the severe climate, securing a position as a Dalstroi employee became desirable. Many people used

[20] Vladimir Petrov, *Escape from the Future: The Incredible Adventures of a Young Russian,* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and London, 1973), 129

whatever connections they had to try to be selected as one of the Dalstroi workers in Kolyma.[21]

The living conditions for the voluntary workers in Northern Siberia were, however not much better than for prisoners. Most voluntary workers living in Northern Siberia lived in small barracks-like buildings with one room per family and a communal kitchen. In addition to poor living conditions, there was nowhere in Vorkuta, Norilsk, or Kolyma to spend money earned. In Magadan, the capital city of Kolyma, there was a small theatre, which usually showed movies, sometimes stage performances, but was too small to hold the number of people who wanted to attend. The sale of alcohol was rationed in Kolyma, so men were constantly in search of more, and when they found some they would usually drink themselves into unconsciousness. There were times when men had finished their voluntary work contract and could have left to go home, but they had drunk and gambled away all of their money.[22] Though most voluntary workers lived in humble conditions, the directors of labor camps were very well off. In Vorkuta, the director of each mine made 35,000 rubles per month, which was five hundred times more than the average free worker in Vorkuta. [23]

Reasons for Imprisonment

Arrests during Stalin's rule were targeted towards two types of people: ordinary criminals and enemies of the Soviet regime. The definition of enemies of the Soviet regime shifted over time. In the 1920's and 1930's, the Soviet regime

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[21] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 130
[22] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 132
[23] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 129

targeted kulaks, or prosperous Russian peasants, and shifted their focus to mainly political prisoners in the 1940's. In the 1940's, the number of political prisoners in the camps rose to compose 30-40 percent of the entire prisoner population.[24] By the time the Gulag system ended, political prisoners were the majority of the prisoner population. Political prisoners, often called politicals, not only included intellectuals, but anyone who had done, written, said, or been accused of doing, writing, or saying, anything that could be construed as negative to the state or could be labeled as counterrevolutionary. This could also include anyone with a foreign name or foreign connections, as simple as taking a holiday abroad. Anyone who had a relative or friend who had been arrested was also suspect.

The regime's logic in finding political prisoners was not always straightforward. Adam Joseph Galinski, a former Vorkuta prisoner, explained, "If the MVD knew that a man for whom they were looking had a beard, they would arrest all men with beards, and later on try to find him among them."[25] A vast majority of political prisoners were from territories that were part of the Soviet Union, but not from within the borders of Russia itself. Anyone who was a member of a suspect group or knew someone in a suspect group was in danger of being arrested. Some examples of class enemies were property owners, merchants, industrialists, priests and religious leaders. Those who may have acted against or been influenced against the Soviet regime included former officers of the tsarist administration or anti-Bolshevik political and social leaders, police officers, forest administrators, Polish underground fighters against Germany, anyone who had previously been released

[24] Hartley, *Siberia: A History of the People,* 211
[25] Galinski, *Soviet "Justice,"* 22

from a German concentration camp, White Russians, and Poles who fought in the 1920 Polish-Russian war.[26] While at Vorkuta, Joseph Scholmer, a Vorkuta prisoner in the late 1940's and early 1950's, asked a Russian why he was imprisoned for fifteen years of *katorga*, or the severest form of hard labor, and discovered that it was for repeating this joke about Stalin:

> One evening Stalin rang up Beria to say someone had stolen his briefcase. Beria promised to look into it right away. The next morning Stalin rang up to know how the inquiries were going on. 'We've arrested twenty-five of them,' said Beria. 'Seventeen have confessed, four have committed suicide, and we'll have the other four confessions by this evening.' When Stalin got to his office he found he had left his briefcase behind on his desk.[27]

This emphasizes how vulnerable people under Soviet power were at this time. Soviet citizens could be arrested and imprisoned over a simple misunderstanding. At any moment, someone could be arrested for something as seemingly insignificant as a joke. Many political prisoners were falsely convicted on coerced testimony for crimes they had not committed and ended up in the GULAG system for years.[28] For this reason, political prisoners who were deemed more dangerous than common criminals by the Soviet regime may not have committed any crimes but still became trapped in a society with ordinary criminals such as murderers and rapists.

Vladimir Petrov, a former Kolyma prisoner, captured the reality of life in the Soviet Union at this time:

> It is a well-known fact that the population of the USSR is divided into three categories, which are today [late 1960's] almost equal in numbers: prisoners, ex-prisoners, and future prisoners. It is difficult to find in the Soviet Union a company of three adult men, at least one of whom has not at some time been subject to repressions, either through investigation or trial, or imprisonment in a camp.[29]

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[26] Galinski, *Soviet "Justice,"* 23
[27] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 57
[28] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia*, 3; Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 2
[29] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 160

While an oversimplification, this quotation suggests that every single person in the Soviet Union was affected in some way by the Gulag system.

Prisoner Demographics

Due to their climates and locations, the camp complexes of Vorkuta, Kolyma, and Norilsk had what the Soviet regime considered the worst category of prisoners and those perceived to be the greatest threat to the regime. Most prisoners in these three camp complexes were men between the ages of twenty-five and forty sentenced to *katorga,* or hard labor, as political prisoners under paragraph 58 of Soviet law. Paragraph 58/1 was treason for the native population and 58/6 was espionage for foreigners.[30] In Vorkuta, women were a large part of the "free" population of Vorkuta, but only made up 5 to 15 percent of the prisoner population from 1939 to 1955.[31]

At their beginnings in the early 1930's, Vorkuta, Kolyma, and Norilsk mainly held kulaks, or Russian peasants. Over time, the prisoner demographic shifted from being mainly Russian peasants who resisted collectivization to instead be mainly political prisoners, convicted of anti-state or counter-revolutionary activity and common criminals. As the Soviet Union expanded, so did the GULAG system and the nationalities of its prisoners. Beginning in 1939, the nationalities represented by Vorkuta prisoners included Ukrainians, Russians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Poles, Estonians, Germans, Georgians, Armenians, Romanians, Soviet Greeks, Hungarians, Austrians, Chinese, Japanese, Finns, Yugoslavs, South Koreans, Persians, Dutchmen,

[30] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 34; Barenburg, *Gulag Town, Company Town,* 254
[31] Barenberg, *Gulag Town, Company Town,* 252

Frenchmen, Tibetans, and even a few Americans.[32] Since many of the countries under Soviet rule previously had political and historical conflict, people of the same nationality tended to stick together and be wary of people from other nationalities.[33]

Due to the change in prisoner demographics over time, prisoners in the beginning years of the Kolyma and Vorkuta camps were treated poorly, but it was not with the same vicious intent as the later years in the Gulag system in these locations. They were not starved and deprived of proper clothing and materials to kill them, because they were meant to serve an economic purpose in building the new cities and producing natural resources. Rather, they were deprived because everything else took priority over the prisoners' well being. They were forced to live in tents when they arrived at Kolyma and Vorkuta because there was nowhere else for them to stay until a better structure was built. Everyone in the Soviet Union at this time was short on food and supplies.[34] There were severe famines throughout Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and other important grain producing areas, and the prisoners were the first to suffer due in part to the disastrous collectivization policies of the Stalin regime. This was especially true for those in Northern Siberia who died without the proper amount of food or sufficient supplies.[35]

As camps for mainly political prisoners in the 1940's and 1950's, Vorkuta, Kolyma, and Norilsk contained many notable figures in the political and artistic world. Some more famous prisoners of Vorkuta included the former First Secretary of the Communist Party of Estonia, deputy ministers of East Germany and satellite

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[32] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 128; Barenburg, *Gulag Town, Company Town,* 264
[33] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 129
[34] Conquest, *Kolyma: The Arctic Death Camps,* (The Viking Press, New York, 1978), 42
[35] Conquest, *Kolyma: The Arctic Death Camps,* 42

countries, regional leaders of the Russian Communist Party, one of Trotsky's colleagues, a former Professor of History at the University of Leningrad, many former university students, an active Komsomol member from the University of Kiev, former Community Party members from East Germany, and two Spanish Communists who were in Odessa at the time of their arrest.[36] Kolyma was also known for its high level of intellectual prisoners, or political prisoners, in its later years. Michael Solomon, a prisoner in Kolyma during the late 1940's and the 1950's, recalled meeting university professors, composers, artists, writers, and journalists, including a prisoner who had been an editor of *Pravda*, as well as several political prisoners who had once taught Marxism-Leninism and had been trusted as fanatical supporters of Communism. Kolyma even held former members of the Russian Academy, and a former dean from the Leningrad Polytechnical Institute.[37] Many well-known writers, such as Varlam Shalamov and Alexander Solzhneitsyn, spent time in Kolyma as prisoners.

There was an unspoken cultural ranking among prisoners in the camp complexes. This was due to gang affiliation, as well as the numbers of each ethnicity or nationality present. This hierarchy included common criminals as well as political prisoners and was similar across the camps of Northern Siberia. Among the prisoners, Russians were the highest in the hierarchy and fluctuated around 50% of all Vorkuta prisoners throughout 1942 to 1958. Russians were followed by Ukrainians who represented only 10% of Vorkuta prisoners in 1942 but increased to 32% by 1955 before steadily declining. Poles were third in the hierarchy and

[36] Noble, *I Was a Slave In Russia,* 114
[37] Solomon, *Magadan,* 190

represented between 0.5% and 4% from 1942 to 1955. Soviet Germans were at the bottom of the hierarchy. They started out at 1.44% of the prisoner population in 1942 and reached 9.03% in 1950, before steadily declining.[38] Other ethnicities and nationalities fell somewhere in the middle of the hierarchy.

Gulag Camp Locations in Northern Siberia

Background: Climate and Location

The defining characteristics of the Gulag camps in Northern Siberia were their remoteness and inhospitable climates. These attributes were not accidental. They were essential to Vorkuta's, Kolyma's, and Norilsk's successes as labor camps.

The area of Vorkuta was set up with the city at its center and the labor camps surrounding it. The center of Vorkuta, the city and its labor camps, was located one hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle.[39] This means that the sun did not set from May to July and does not rise throughout December and January.

Kolyma is located in the far northeastern corner of Siberia, on the Pacific coast, and is possibly the most inhospitable part of Russia, with temperatures well below those in Vorkuta and Norilsk. Temperatures are regularly more than 49 degrees Fahrenheit below zero in the winter and the location is even more difficult to access than Vorkuta and Norilsk.[40] This is due to its location in the very northeastern part of Russia's territory. It lies above the 60th parallel, called *vechnaya merzlota* for permafrost.[41] It is separated from the rest of Russia and Siberia by thousands of miles of tundra and the Kolyma Mountain Range. The

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[38] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 6; Barenburg, *Gulag Town, Company Town,* 264
[39] Satter, *It Was a Long Time Ago, and It Never Happened Anyway,* 275.
[40] Applebaum, *Gulag: A History,* 85
[41] Solomon, *Magadan,* 167

Kolyma Range has peaks so high that they are covered in snow year round, making it impossible to build any sort of railroad or other infrastructure to connect Kolyma to the rest of the world. It was only accessible by boat to Magadan, the main port of the Kolyma region, or several other smaller ports along the Kolyma coastline. The ports are only accessible a few months of the year with heavy maintenance to clear any ice floes in the Sea of Okhotsk in June.[42]

Norilsk is the nickel-mining center of the far north and has temperatures as low as minus 50 degrees Celsius in the winter. There are snowstorms between 110 and 130 days of the year and it is dark for almost six months of the year.[43] Norilsk was officially founded in 1935 as the northernmost city in the world. It is located in the Krasnoyarsk Territory of Northern Siberia on the Taimyr Peninsula. Norilsk is still the northernmost major city in Russia and the second largest city above the Arctic Circle after Murmansk. It is accessible by rail to the Kara Sea, and products and minerals can be shipped through the Northern Sea.[44]

Winter in Vorkuta, Norilsk, and Kolyma lasts for eight months of the year, with temperatures reaching as low as seventy-five degrees Fahrenheit below zero. The other part of the year in these remote locations is summer, which is cold and rainy, and only reaches up to about thirty degrees Fahrenheit. The average year round temperature in Vorkuta is zero degrees Fahrenheit.[45] Since Vorkuta, Norilsk,

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[42] Solomon, *Magadan,* 98
[43] Hartley, *Siberia: A History of the People, 227*
[44] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 127
[45] Adam Joseph Galinski, *Soviet "Justice": "Showplace" Prisons vs. Real Slave Labor Camps,* By the Committee on Un-American Activities House of Representatives, Eighty-Sixth Congress Second Session, April 4, 1960, 35

and Kolyma are located in the tundra, they are covered in permafrost year round with snow waist high most of the year.

Work for the prisoners was always a long walking distance from the living barracks. John Noble, who was a Vorkuta prisoner in the late 1940's and early 1950's, recalled that work was a mile and a half from camp and it would take over an hour each way for the prisoners walking through snow up to their hips. Due to this extreme weather, hundreds of prisoners had missing fingers and toes, which were amputated from frostbite to prevent gangrene.[46] Walking through the snow posed a difficult problem because parts of the snow were covered in a hard shell of ice so prisoners could walk on top of the snow. However, other parts of the snow and ice shell were soft and prisoners sank through up to their hips. If they sank through, they were forced to walk as if swimming through the snow, cutting their bare hands on the sharp crust of the snow in the process.[47]

Frequent snowstorms, called *purgas*, erupted without notice in the Northern Siberian camp complexes. These storms had wind velocities up to thirty-seven meters per second [about eighty-three miles per hour]. They left visibility as low as six inches and work impossible.[48] During a *purga*, it was common for men to go missing and be found later frozen to death in the snow.[49] Janusz Bardach, a Kolyma prisoner describes his experience of being caught in a *purga* while working in a

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[46] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 98
[47] Buca, *Vorkuta*, 67
[48] John Noble, *I Was a Slave In Russia,* (The Devin-Adair Company, New York, 1958), 98
[49] Noble, *I Was a Slave In Russia,* 98; Edward Buca, *Vorkuta*, (Constable and Company Limited, London, 1976), 76 [see photo page 32]

quarry. He had to walk back to the barracks with his fellow prisoners, following watchdogs and holding on to a rope:

> I couldn't see anything beyond Yuri's back and clung to the rope as though it were a life preserver… With the familiar landmarks gone, I had no idea how much further we had to go and was sure we'd never make it back. My foot fell upon something soft – a prisoner who had let go of the rope. 'Stop!' I shouted. But there was no stopping. No one could hear my voice. I leaned down and pulled his arm towards the rope. 'Here!' I tried to link his hand with the rope. 'Hold on!' It was no use. The man's arm fell to the ground when I let go. Yuri's stern command to move on carried me forward…[50]

Purgas were a common occurrence in Northern Siberia during the winter. They could last for days at a time and prisoners lost in a *purga* were usually not found until spring. Even without a *purga*, snow could pile up seven or eight feet overnight, leaving roads and paths invisible.[51]

The brief Arctic summer, although warmer in temperature, is nearly as difficult to manage. It lasts about three months. In Kolyma, these short months were the only time when the uranium, tin, and gold could be transported out of the Kolyma peaks and down to the coast, 140 miles away. During the winter, most of the resources were removed by plane or secured until they could be transported in the summer.[52]

During summer, the snow and frost in the soil melt to a depth of about six feet. The permafrost creates a new problem in the summer, because there is nowhere for water to go. The melting snow and incessant rain cause floods on top of the still frozen ground. There was no drainage system created that was efficient enough to deal with the amount of water that accrued in the summer; as a result

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[50] Janusz Bardach, *Man is Wolf to Man: Surviving the Gulag*, (University of California Press, London, 1998), 232
[51] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 142
[52] Solomon, *Magadan*, 98

mines and ditches filled up and overflowed regularly.[53] The melting snow from March to June also created a blinding glare. This glare caused many prisoners to lose their sight for days at a time.[54] On the Kolyma Mountains, especially the Southern slopes, a swamp formed up to several feet deep.[55] This led to an excessive amount of insects, especially along the coastal region. One large type of gadfly could sting through deer hide and was a particular menace to the ill-equipped prisoners as well as to the dogs and horses used to transport equipment and supplies.[56]

The snow and ice provided Vorkuta, Norilsk, and Kolyma with their grey-white landscapes. Vorkuta's distinguishing features were the Ural Mountains in the distance and occasional Vorkuta sub-camps to break up the monotony of the tundra. For Kolyma, there were the Kolyma Mountains to the West, and the Bay and Ocean to the East. Norilsk was relatively flat. In these camp complexes, there were no trees, only shrubs, and all the timber needed for building was brought in from hundreds of kilometers away. For Vorkuta and Norilsk, this was on a single-line railroad track.[57] For Kolyma, this was by ship, once the timber made it across the Soviet Union to Vladivostok. These were the only connections from the camp complexes to the outside world besides the camp radios, which were used for important political information or propaganda.[58] The single-line railroad tracks were constantly being cleared of snow in order to compete with the climate and keep the only line for resources open. Food, prisoners, and timber were constantly

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[53] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 198
[54] Solomon, *Magadan,* 116
[55] Robert Conquest, *Kolyma: The Arctic Death Camps*, 37
[56] Conquest, *Kolyma: The Arctic Death Camps,* 37
[57] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 82
[58] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 229

being brought in and coal, gold, nickel, and other natural resources were being sent out. Edward Buca, a Vorkuta prisoner in the late 1940's and early 1950's, described the journey into Northern Siberia along this track on his way to Vorkuta:

> The forests grew sparser as we travelled on, and the trees more stunted. Then there were only low bushes and finally, the emptiness of the tundra: almost no vegetation except for moss, withered tufts of grass, and scrub. Everywhere there was snow – several meters deep in the valleys. Gradually everything became white as far as we could see.[59]

Although these remote locations appeared on the surface as barren landscapes, hidden beneath the snow and permafrost were valuable natural resources. Vorkuta had vast reserves of coal, Norilsk had large quantities of nickel, and Kolyma had some of the world's largest reserves of gold.

Discovery of Resources

The coal in Vorkuta was first discovered by Tsar Nicholas I's advisors, in the early 1800's, who suggested that he build a colony for exiles in the Vorkuta and Pechora region in order to extract the coal. No one would work in the Arctic of his or her own free will, therefore, the exiles were necessary for coal extraction. Nicholas I decided that due to the climate and location coal extraction was "too much to demand of any man that should live there."[60] However, the extreme push for industrialization during the Soviet era and the vast number of political prisoners arrested during this time made Vorkuta a more viable option in the 1930's than it had been in the mid 1800's. In August of 1930, geology student Georgii Aleksandrovich Chernov traveled up the Vorkuta River and found several seams of high quality coal. In 1931, thirty-nine people including geologists, prisoners, and a

[59] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 46
[60] Scholmer, *Vorkuta*, 61

few guards, arrived in Vorkuta and lived in tents as they began building the labor camp and town.[61] The first few years of the labor camp were the most dangerous and deadly time for prisoners due to a lack of sufficient shelters, food supply, healthcare, proper clothing, or efficient connection with the rest of the Soviet Union. Regard for prisoner life was nowhere near as important as the production of coal. By 1954, Vorkuta was producing 1/12th of the entire coal production of the Soviet Union.[62]

The Kolyma region had been exploited long before gold was found there. After the Kolyma basin had been explored in 1650, the area was named Nizhne-Kolymsk. The site near the mouth of the Kolyma river basin was founded as a trading post. The Kolyma River is the eastern-most navigable river in Siberia.[63] This made it a valuable location and there were small settlements throughout the area to engage in the profitable fur trading business, but no large towns or infrastructure.[64] The area was inhabited by nomadic tribes of deer-breeders and hunters, like the Tungus, Orochels, and Yukagirs to name a few. These tribes traded furs to the Fur Trust in exchange for necessities, not knowing how little they were actually getting in return for such valuable furs.[65] During the 17th and 18th centuries, Kolyma was a popular location for the tsars to exile people to.[66]

Hidden in Kolyma's rocky mountain ridges was an abundant supply of gold. The first record of exploration in the mountain area of this region was by the Pole,

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[61] Barenberg, *Gulag Town, Company Town,* 15
[62] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 61
[63] Mora, *Kolyma: Gold and Forced Labor in the USSR,* 3
[64] Conquest, *Kolyma: The Arctic Death Camps, 38*
[65] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 258
[66] Mora, *Kolyma: Gold and Forced Labor in the USSR,* 3

Jan Czersky, a czarist exile and a Siberian explorer who made it to the mountains of Kolyma in the late 19th century, but never uncovered gold.[67] The mountains he arrived at now hold his name and towards the end of the 1920's, gold was discovered in these mountains, which led to major transformation of the area in subsequent years. In 1931, Stalin personally assigned Eduard Berzin to organize the creation of the Kolyma labor camp in the Gulag system. Berzin was a Latvian who is known as being the organizer of the Kolyma complex. He gained his status in the Soviet Union and with Stalin because of his dedication to the Red Army, followed by his involvement in Cheka and role as head of construction at a labor camp in the Urals where he oversaw the work of 70,000 prisoners.[68]

To reach the camps in the Kolyma complex, prisoners had to travel across the entire Soviet Union by train, a trip sometimes lasting three months. From there, prisoners would have to make the rest of the trip by boat from the port in Vladivostok, north past Japan, through the Sea of Okhotsk, to finally reach the port of Magadan on the Eastern side of the Kolyma camp complex. This final leg of the trip usually lasted about ten days.[69] Over time, several other smaller ports were created along the Kolyma coastline.

Magadan is the capital of the Kolyma region and the largest port. The Kolyma region consists of the basin of the Kolyma River, which winds northwards from its source in the Kolyma mountain range until it reaches the East Siberian Sea near

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[67] Kizny, *Gulag*, 300; Mora, *Kolyma: Gold and Forced Labor in the USSR,* 4
[68] Kizny, *Gulag,* 300
[69] Applebaum*, Gulag: A History,* 85

Ambarchik, which is a vast area about the size of the Ukraine.[70] Berzin arrived in the port on Nagaevo Bay near Kolyma on February 4, 1932 with his closest collaborators, the first group of prisoners, mining engineers, and security guards. The steamship that brought them on the journey through the Sea of Okhotsk, *Sakhalin*, had to be guided by an icebreaker to reach the port.[71]

Berzin oversaw the building of the city of Magadan, which stands to this day on the edge of the area that was once the Kolyma camp complex. He also founded the gold mines and set up camps for tens of thousands of prisoners. Kolyma originally covered only the area that corresponds to today's Magadan province, but it was expanded over time to include, in total, about ten percent of the territory of the Soviet Union. It was one of the most important structures of the state economy until the mid-1950's.[72]

Like Vorkuta and Kolyma, the Norilsk region was abundant in natural resources. More than a third of the world's nickel reserves were located in Norilsk, as well as forty percent of the world's reserves of platinum and a significant amount of cobalt and copper.[73] There were several geological studies of the Norilsk area in the 1920's, but it wasn't until 1930 that the first large expedition of 250 experts was sent to investigate the Norilsk area.[74] This expedition was requested and organized by the Main Administration for Nonferrous Metal and Gold of the Supreme Council of the National Economy. They found from this expedition that Norilsk was a viable

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[70] Conquest, *Kolyma: The Arctic Death Camps*, 36
[71] Kizny, *Gulag,* 300
[72] Kizny, *Gulag,* 332
[73] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 127
[74] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 128

area to develop into a city and Gulag camp. By 1933, there were five hundred workers, employees, engineers, and technicians working to develop infrastructure in Norilsk. In 1935, control of the Norilsk area was transferred to the NKVD and its Gulag administration and this is when development of the area accelerated.[75] An NKVD decree in June 1935 made Norilsk a top-priority construction project that would be designed to produce 10,000 tons of nickel annually. The nickel in Norilsk was highly valued by the Soviet government, as it could be turned into stainless steel and used by the military.[76]

The difficult climate and lack of previous infrastructure to transport materials from other major cities to and from the new Norilsk camp complex made Norilsk a complex and costly project. A 1938 draft plan created by Soviet officials for capital expenditures called for 515 million rubles, which was raised to 1.1 billion rubles in 1939 and then 1.3 billion rubles in 1940. This change in cost also reflected new geological finds of more nickel than originally predicted and the need for a larger, more permanent industrial complex as opposed to an experimental plant.[77]

Impossibility of Escape

Vorkuta, Kolyma, and Norilsk became the ideal locations for some of the worst and most violent criminals of the Soviet Union due to the impossibility of escape. The climate, location, and intense security prevented the successful escape of prisoners but the torture of everyday life made attempts at escape a regularity.[78]

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[75] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 129
[76] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 130
[77] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 136
[78] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 66

Prisoners had all the time they wanted to plan an escape and hoped that their escape would be the single success story.

Inside the camps, MVD guards were unarmed for fear of having their weapons stolen, but they did have police dogs. Each sub-camp was surrounded by a twelve-foot-high barbed wire fence with towers constantly manned by guards with machine guns. A phone and electric alarm system connected each tower. A few yards inside the tall barbed wire fence was a three-foot-high barbed wire fence. The area in between was a strictly prohibited zone. This zone was lit up day and night. The guards were ordered to shoot anyone in this zone on sight.[79] During a *purga*, it was possible for prisoners to slip past the guards and leave the camp, but once out on the open tundra there were new problems. The taiga (forest in the tundra) was not too far from the camp and could provide berries for food as well as protection for escapees, but most prisoners had no weapon or skills for hunting. There were long distances between streams and ponds for water sources, no farms or villages for food or shelter, and it was difficult to move through the untamed forests.[80] This lack of food, water, and shelter made survival after escape impossible.

The climate and harsh working and living conditions left many prisoners with severe, in many cases deadly, medical conditions. For these reasons, many prisoners who were planning to escape were ones who had just arrived and hadn't had time to develop these medical problems, but saw from other prisoners who had been there, what their future could look like. Shalamov, a former Kolyma prisoner, wrote,

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[79] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 88
[80] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 125

> The convicts who tried to escape were almost always newcomers serving their first year, men in whose hearts freedom and vanity had not yet been annihilated, men whose reason had not yet come to grips with Far North conditions, so different from those of the mainland… Distressed to the very depths of their souls by everything they saw, the beatings, torture, mockery, degradation, these newcomers fled – some more efficiently, others less – but all came to the same end. Some were caught in two days, others in a week, still others in two weeks…[81]

Escape from Kolyma, Vorkuta, or Norilsk was nearly impossible, but hope of being the one success kept prisoners attempting escape. A prisoner who was escaping had to walk thousands of miles across the taiga and tundra to reach any civilization. In Kolyma, a prisoner could try and go west or south across the tundra and taiga or walk hundreds of miles east across taiga and tundra to try to sneak aboard a boat in one of the ports near Magadan. Both escape routes were nearly impossible. Prisoners in Kolyma, Vorkuta, and Norilsk, were occasionally willing to take the risk and would rather die trying to escape than to die slowly from cold, hunger, and exhaustion and risk becoming a *dokhodiaga,* or walking corpse.

The barriers to escape were so great and the odds of survival so small that planning and executing an escape still seemed like an abstract and ridiculous idea to many prisoners. Vladimir Petrov, a political prisoner in Kolyma for six years, reflected on a time that he was out in the tundra clearing a road of snow with a small group of prisoners and just a few guards:

> Had we wished to, we could easily have disarmed and killed them and regarded ourselves free. But such a wild thought never occurred to anyone: the geographic situation of the Kolyma camp, the snows and forests, and, in summer, the impassable swamps, was the best of guards.[82]

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[81] Shalamov, *Колымские Рассказы,* 345
[82] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 144

For many prisoners, thought of escape was pointless, because they would still be convicts in Soviet society and there were about two thousand miles between them and any civilization. The region that a prisoner would have to travel was desolate and trackless, and they would have no transportation. There are very few recorded cases in the history of Kolyma of even attempted escapes in comparison to how many prisoners spent time in the camp.[83]

Although the climate and location were enough to discourage many prisoners from attempting escape, there were also measures in place to recapture escaped prisoners in Northern Siberia. Dalstroi employed 500 mounted riflemen and 60 soldiers with dogs to patrol the tundra surrounding the camps.[84] Kukurushniki were observation aircrafts that patrolled the tundra around the camps looking for escaped prisoners.[85] Since there were no civilian settlements in the area and only labor camps, the kukurushniki knew that anyone wandering around the tundra was an escaped prisoner. The local population of nomads, known as Komiaki, was also notified when a prisoner had escaped. They were paid a bounty of 10,000 rubles for returning an escapee, which was a small fortune.[86] To receive the bounty, the Komiaki only had to produce the hand of an escaped prisoner, although many times they brought the whole corpse.[87]

There were also local groups designated to catching any escaped prisoners. Shalamov, a Kolyma prisoner, tells the story of Corporal Postnikov who was the

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[83] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 145
[84] Kizny, *Gulag,* 312
[85] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 125
[86] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 89
[87] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 168

commander of the local group designated to catching escapees. Shalamov wrote about an incident in the summer of 1940:

> Drunk with murder he fulfilled his task with zeal and passion. He had personally captured five men. As always in such cases he had been decorated and received a premium. The reward was the same for the dead and the living. It was not necessary to deliver the prisoners complete. One August morning a man who was going to drink at a stream fell into an ambush set by Postnikov and his soldiers. Postnikov shot him down with a revolver. They decided not to drag the body to the camp but to leave it in the taiga…For identification, Postnikov cut off the fugitive's hands with an axe…In the night the corpse got up. Pressing his bleeding wrists against his chest, he left the taiga following the train and reached the prisoners' tent…His padded coat, his trousers, his rubber boots were stained with black blood. They gave him warm soup, wrapped his chopped-off wrists in rags and took him to the infirmary. But already Postnikov and his men came running out of their little hut. The soldiers took the prisoner. He was not heard of again.[88]

The consequences for attempting escape were brutal, and there are no accounts of any prisoners escaping and surviving the journey out of the tundra.

All prisoners who attempted escape were either found dead, or brought back to camp and used as an example to the other prisoners to discourage any more escape attempts. Joseph Scholmer was a prisoner of Vorkuta in the early 1950's and from all of the prisoners he met and talked to and his own time there, there was only one prisoner, a Finn, who escaped and was not found. This Finn's escape may have been successful, but it is more than likely that he died in the snow and his body was never found.[89]

Buca, a Vorkuta prisoner, described a situation he observed regarding two prisoners who attempted to escape. These two were found on their twelfth day of freedom and brought back to the camp by Komiaki. They were then beaten by guards and tied behind galloping reindeer where they were dragged to death. Their

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[88] Varlam Shalamov, *Колымские Рассказы*, 378
[89] Scholmer, *Vorkuta*, 66

lacerated bodies were thrown just outside the camp gate and left for three days as a warning to the other prisoners who would see the consequences every day on their walk to work. The notice placed beside their bodies read, "Death to fascists and criminals! If you want to look like this – escape!" Anyone paying special attention to the dead men was punished, including two of their friends and the brother of one of the dead men.[90]

Even with the threat of torture and death, prisoners still dreamt up different escape plans. Each prisoner had his own ideas, but many plans had similar components. One such component for an escape from Northern Siberia was the idea of a "walking supply." The prisoners of these camps knew that civilization was so far away, that it would not be possible for them to carry enough food for a several weeks or even months journey to an area with enough population to stay and live. This resulted in the common idea of a "walking supply," which was a fat prisoner, usually a cook since they were the only ones with an easily accessible food supply and therefore the only ones able to overeat and not work strenuously, to be taken along as an accomplice. Two or more prisoners would escape together and bring as much food as possible. Eventually when the food ran out the prisoner who planned the escape would kill his "walking supply" and eat him. It was called a "walking supply" because the food carried himself during the journey.[91] Shalamov mentions this concept in his short story, "Condensed Milk," based on real experiences during his time as a Kolyma prisoner. When one prisoner is trying to figure out why

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[90] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 168; Adam Joseph Galinski, *Soviet "Justice": "Showplace" Prisons vs. Real Slave Labor Camps*, (By the Committee on Un-American Activities House of Representatives. Eighty-Sixth Congress Second Session. April 4, 1960), 31

[91] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 126

another has asked him to be part of an escape plan, he thinks, "Could he be taking me along as food?"[92] This idea was well known among prisoners and was a seemingly logical solution for them to solve the impossible of how to plan a successful escape. Self-preservation and the hope of survival were the motivations behind even the worst part of plans.

Prisoners sent to the Kolyma gold mines, the Vorkuta coalmines, and Norilsk nickel mines often arrived after being tortured and deprived of food in jail during a long investigation period. Their resistance had been undermined in jail and their bodies could not adapt to Northern Siberia's harsh and violent pace of work and harsh climate quickly enough to survive.[93] This would sometimes encourage their thoughts of escape in order to survive. Prisoners knew they would not survive long in the camp, under such harsh environments, so they hoped that escape could be their way to survive even against all of the odds.

Some prisoners figured that even if they died trying to escape, they would rather die trying to be free than working to death. After the purges of 1937 and 1938, some former Red Army officers who weren't killed were sentenced to hard labor in Kolyma.[94] Officers from the army who had not been killed during the purges and were sent to Kolyma had the knowledge to survive out in the taiga and the ability to plan and execute a difficult maneuver, such as an escape. These officers were hardened by the difficulties of war and serving their country. Many refused to work under the hard labor conditions to which they were sentenced. For

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[92] Shalamov, *Колымские Рассказы,* 82
[93] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 189
[94] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 240

them, escape was the only option. As Shestakov, a Kolyma informer and provocateur working for the camp authorities, aptly says when talking about escape plans with another prisoner, "'The important thing is to begin. I can't live like this any longer. Better to die on your feet than live on your knees.'"[95]

Two such former officers, Andrey K. and Nikolay B., were sentenced to eight years of hard labor in Kolyma. They convinced another Kolyma prisoner, Petrov to attempt an escape with them. The three men gathered provisions and fashioned skis. They also procured several days of planned absence, for the former army men, and a week for Petrov, in which they would not be missed. They started their escape in the winter, however the army men were not worn down from years of hard work yet, unlike Petrov, who had only a year left of his sentence.

After traveling for two nights, and sleeping during the day, Petrov was already exhausted and the men calculated that they had covered about fifty miles. In total, they had to cross 1,300 miles in a straight line, but the mountainous region, made the actual distance greater than this. If they could cover this distance, they would reach the Yakutsk region where they could hopefully set up new lives for themselves. The men were only able to procure and carry enough food for twenty days, or about 500 miles. Petrov realized at this point, that he was too weak to even hope to make it to Yakutsk and that he had a better chance of going back to the camp before the end of the week, trying to explain a reason why he didn't accomplish the task he was given the time for, and to try to survive his last year in Kolyma.[96] It is highly unlikely that unless the army men were able to find more food, that they

[95] Shalamov, *Колымские Рассказы,* 82
[96] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 245

would have survived the escape. It is unknown how their escape ended. Petrov was under suspicion by camp officials of helping the former army men escape and was punished. He was sent to work in the Eighth Unit of the Kolyma camp complex, Shturmovoy, notoriously the most deadly and ill-equipped mine in the whole Kolyma camp complex.[97]

Shalamov, a former Kolyma prisoner, wrote a short story based on real events, about a group of army men led by Major Pugachov who planned an escape. These army men knew that although they were not executed during the purges, they were sent to Kolyma to die doing hard labor. Shalamov wrote,

> Major Pugachov clearly realized that they had been delivered to their deaths – to replace these living corpses. They had been brought in the fall. With winter coming on, there was no place to run to, but in the summer a man could at least die free even if he couldn't hope to escape completely.[98]

The twelve army men took their chances, planned every detail, and began to execute their escape. They even managed to raid the guards' gun supply, but their escape was discovered and this led to a deadly shootout between the escapees and the guards. All of the army men died during the shootout except for Pugachov, who managed to be severely injured, but drag himself to a safer area where he was not found. He recalled each of the eleven army men and thought, "And in this northern hell, they had found within themselves the strength to believe in him, Pugachov, and to stretch out their hands to freedom."[99] He reminisced on what they accomplished together by even getting that far with their escape plan before he shot himself.

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[97] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 249
[98] Shalamov, *Колымские Рассказы,* 243
[99] Shalamov, *Колымские Рассказы,* 255

Escape was the unobtainable, but constantly thought about and attempted goal of many Gulag prisoners in Northern Siberia. Shalamov comments on the idea of escape from Kolyma and it holds true for Norilsk and Vorkuta as well, "There were always plenty of escape attempts in Kolyma and they were all unsuccessful, because of the particularly severe nature of the polar region."[100]

Constructing the Northern Siberian Gulag

Deadly Early Years

The first few years after Kolyma, Vorkuta, and Norilsk opened as labor camps were the most deadly for prisoners. These remote locations lacked sufficient shelters, food supply, healthcare, proper clothing, and efficient connection with the rest of the Soviet Union. Before the first prisoners were brought to these areas in the early 1930's, there were no buildings or any kind of infrastructure. Small groups of prisoners had to live in poor quality tents as they built the labor camps and cities.[101] Between 1931 and 1956, about three million prisoners were brought into Vorkuta and between 500,000 and one million of these prisoners died.[102]

The winter of 1932 to 1933 was especially severe. Vorkuta, Kolyma, and Norilsk were in the beginning stages of being set up and the areas were often completely cut off. In Kolyma, they were unable to communicate with anyone and unable to receive supplies, so by the time contact was restored, no one was left alive - not even the dogs. Survivors of the first year of Kolyma said that only one out of

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[100] Shalamov, *Колымские Рассказы, 344*
[101] Barenberg, *Gulag Town, Company Town,* 15
[102] Satter, *It Was A Long Time Ago and It Never Happened Anyway,* 259

fifty or one hundred men sent to Kolyma survived.[103] The summer of 1933 also took its toll on the prisoner population, claiming many lives as a result of the heavy work on new roads and newly opened mining areas. In 1934, there was an improvement of living and working structures in Kolyma.

Kolyma had a reputation among prisoners in the Gulag system for being a final destination for prisoners in the 1930's and early 1940's. Kazimierz Zamorski, a Kolyma prisoner who wrote under the pen name Silvester Mora, remembered first hearing about Kolyma in 1940 in a Kharkov prison transfer. He recalled, "Kolyma had a special connotation: it was the most dreadful and most final destination to which a prisoner could be sent."[104] It was the worst location for a prisoner to be sent in the gulag system and many men did not survive the deadly first few years of the camp.

From 1936 to 1938, quotas and production targets in the Gulag camps were raised and clothing quality was reduced to cut costs and raise output. This period of time also saw the shift from kulaks and common criminals being arrested to a majority of the criminals being politicals in the Gulag camps in Northern Siberia. Political prisoners had typically never done hard physical labor, since their previous professions included scientists, artists, politicians, educators, and leaders of industry, trade, and government.[105] Petrov, a veteran prisoner of Kolyma explained,

> Their faces all showed signs of frostbite, although the winter was only three months old and the most severe frosts were yet to come. The majority of them were so dirty looking I was willing to wager that some of them had not washed their faces for weeks… The men had starved, worn-out faces, quiet voices, were completely

[103] Conquest, *Kolyma: The Arctic Death Camps,* 42
[104] SIlvester Mora, *Kolyma: Gold and Forced Labor in the USSR,* (Foundation Pamphlet No. 7, Foundation for Foreign Affairs, Washington, DC, 1949), 1
[105] Conquest, *Kolyma: The Arctic Death Camps,* 50

> absorbed in themselves and uncommunicative. Their range of interest was limited to work and food, and more food, and food again… The sight of these creatures who had almost lost the image of man made me feel distinctly uncomfortable. The possibility of becoming one of them seemed anything but attractive.[106]

The political prisoners who were reduced to nothing more than a corpse in search of food, were commonly referred to in the Gulag system as *dokhodiagi*, or walking corpses. The root of the word is derived from the verb, *dokhodit,* which means to arrive or to reach. Petrov had to have explained to him the meaning of this term, and he was told that the *dokhodiagi* were people who had already arrived at Socialism and were the finished type of citizen in the Socialist society.[107] This meant that they were weak and complacent. These workers had been worn down mentally and physically until they were of limited value in the Gulag system. They could no longer focus on work or accomplish tasks, so they were constantly reprimanded by guards and other camp officials.

Buca, a Vorkuta prisoner, recalled the uselessness of the punishment of reducing a prisoner's ration when they didn't meet a quota for work,

> Faced with starvation, they didn't work harder, they simply lost any sense of individuality and human dignity and devoted all their energies to begging for a piece of bread. They were called *dokhodiagi* – walking corpses.[108]

This punishment was used in Kolyma and Vorkuta, yet the political prisoners who were not used to hard physical labor and could not compete with the extreme climate and quotas were destined to life as a *dokhodiagi.*

Conditions for political prisoners deteriorated over time as fear of political prisoners increased and more prisoners sent to Northern Siberia were politicals.

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[106] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 178
[107] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 181
[108] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 110

World War II began in 1941 and for Kolyma this meant an increase in hours of work per day and a decrease in rations. Any failure to meet the quotas meant instant death. Even after the war ended, there was still a fear of invasion by Americans or British in the late 1940's and early 1950's. Prisoners were shot at random to spread terror and orders for mass shootings were issued at minor slowdowns. Execution for suspected sabotage became a common, everyday occurrence.[109]

Creating Cities and Infrastructure

The prisoners and those exiled to the areas of Vorkuta, Norilsk, and Kolyma built the cities in these locations. The sites started as labor camps and the residential sites were built for guards and free citizens. Everything in the cities was serviced by prisoners. Adam Joseph Galinski, a Vorkuta prisoner in the late 1940's and early 1950's, explained, "Before the concentration camps were built in this particular region, there were no villages or towns there. They were built by prisoners or by the Soviet government…"[110] He referred to Vorkuta, but his comment applies to Kolyma and Norilsk as well. These cities expanded as the Gulag camp complexes grew larger in order to accommodate more guards, free citizens, and government officials.

By the 1940's, Vorkuta, a town built on permafrost, where roads had to be resurfaced and pipes repaired every year, had acquired a university, geological theatre, swimming pools, nurseries, theaters, and puppet theaters.[111] By 1950, Vorkuta had more than forty coalmines and twenty more planned. The sub-camps

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[109] Conquest, *Kolyma: The Arctic Death Camps,* 64
[110] Galinski, *Soviet "Justice,"* 13
[111] Applebaum, *Gulag: A History,* 84

of Vorkuta were numbered according to the number of the coalmine corresponding to where the prisoners worked. The mines were in a radius of the town center of about twenty-five miles.[112] Buca explained, "The whole of the Vorkuta economy was based on coal. There was little financial reward in buildings, since they did not provide coal, but were only aimed at increasing production of that material which was the final purpose of Vorkuta – coal."[113]

The coalmines of Vorkuta required the largest amount of labor and coal was the primary output for the area, but Vorkuta also had iron foundries, brickworks, and a cement plant located next to the Vorkuta River, which was close to the lime plant.[114] There was a single electric station located next to the dam on the Vorkuta River, which supplied electricity to the whole Vorkuta camp complex and town.[115] In 1947, Noble stopped in the town of Vorkuta on his transit to the sub-camp where he was going to be working. He recalled that the town was comparatively modern; there were street lamps, cobblestoned roads, and planked wooden sidewalks. There was a bronze statue of Josef Stalin in the middle of the town extending greetings to the Komsomol membership for their help in building the town. Hard at work were a few hundred prisoners with pick axes repairing streets and breaking ground for new apartments for MVD officials.[116]

Expanding at the same time, the Kolyma region grew to have several settlements as the camp complex expanded and guards and officials needed to live

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[112] Galinski, *Soviet "Justice,"* 12
[113] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 109
[114] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 94
[115] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 86
[116] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 85

closer to the new camps. However, the capital of Kolyma was Magadan. The town was founded in 1933, less than a year after Berzin led the first group to the area to create the labor camp. The city, like most built during this time, was built swiftly and inefficiently. The main avenue, Prospekt, featured the main administration buildings. The streets radiating out from Prospekt were where any residents of the city lived, but the houses sagged due to a lack of proper foundations. This area was mostly occupied by people who had been relocated to Siberia or finished serving their sentence in the Gulag system and now lived in permanent exile. Vladimir Petrov, a Kolyma prisoner remarked, "Magadan, as I saw it in 1936, was a rather sad sight."[117] The town consisted of three brick buildings; the post office, the automobile repair plant, and the power station. The other structures in the town were made of wood, mostly logs. The only paved road was the Kolyma Highway, and the unpaved streets were difficult to navigate and impossible to drive on after heavy rain turned them into mud. Only a few corners had streetlights, so the streets were not well lit at night. Three-quarters of the population of Magadan at this time were prisoners. Robberies and crime were rare, but anyone caught stealing was immediately sent to the gold mines, which was considered a heavy punishment.[118]

Work building the city of Magadan was a huge task for the prisoners. This consisted of digging deep foundations into the permafrost for the MVD's new, multi-floored buildings. This work was not only difficult because of the extreme weather, but because digging through the permafrost was like digging through solid granite rock. Instead of shovels, the prisoners were given the same tools used in the

[117] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 132
[118] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 132

quarries. One man would hold a pair of tongs around a chisel-like bar, while another would hit it with a sledgehammer. This process was inefficient and it would take prisoners an hour to dig a half-yard ditch. Power tools would have been more effective, but the administration used the limitless, cheap labor to their advantage instead of paying for more productive tools. Soviet production was based on quantity, not quality, and quick results, not long-term reliability. Many resources for building materials were wasted.[119]

Although mining gold was the primary task of Kolyma prisoners, prisoner work was not restricted to mining gold. The prisoners in Kolyma were used to build structures in an area previously devoid of any permanent infrastructure. Prisoners built and then operated ports on the bays of Nagaevo, Vanino, Muchka and Vesolaya, and in Chukhotka. In addition, prisoners of the Gulag built the prison camps, camp administration buildings, apartment and municipal buildings in Magadan, and structures in other villages and towns in the region. The Kolyma Highway from Magadan to the gold-mining sites, the Magadan Highway to Yakutsk (stretching 1,850 kilometers), and other local roads totaling over 3,000 kilometers were all built by prisoners. Prisoners built airports at Magadan, Pevek, and in several other locations. They built power lines, thermal and hydro-electric stations, a railroad from Magadan to Palatka, a shipyard on the Kolyma River, and they built and operated auxiliary enterprises, including cement plants, glass plants, brickyards, and steel foundries, among others.[120]

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[119] Solomon, *Magadan,* 167
[120] Kizny, *Gulag*, 332

By the 1940's, Magadan had exponentially increased in size and infrastructure. The city housed 70,000 inhabitants, had electrical workshops, a small shipbuilding works at Nagayevo, and a 'House of Culture,' which held a cinema, stage, ballroom, and library. There were also many offices for Dalstroi and the NKVD and a large transit camp where all prisoners were first brought as a gateway to all of Kolyma's camps and mines.[121]

Michael Solomon, a Kolyma prisoner during the 1950's, described his first impression upon arriving in Magadan, "The houses look like camels sitting in the midst of the vast expanse of concrete. No trees in sight. A few four- and five- story buildings house the security forces, the police, and the mines administration."[122] The city of Magadan was not an exciting or pleasing city to see. There was a Gorky theatre for permanent residents and a couple factories and repair shops for the free citizens of the city to work in.[123]

Dalstroi was based in Magadan, after the city was founded, and had the primary goal of producing as many natural resources as possible.[124] Kolyma gold was valuable to the Soviet government because it was a perfect resource to trade in the international market for machinery and other more advanced tools that would help in the overall goal of Soviet industrialization.

As the head of both directorates of Dalstroi, the enterprise created to manage the far east of the Soviet Union, Berzin had unlimited power over a vast amount of

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[121] Conquest, *Kolyma: The Arctic Death Camps,* 105
[122] Solomon, *Magadan,* 98
[123] Solomon, *Magadan,* 99
[124] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 106

Northeastern Siberia, including all of Kolyma. He was the head of all the prisoners of Kolyma in exchange for as much gold as possible for the Soviet government.

Although Berzin built Kolyma into a functioning prison camp complex out of nothing but an icy and mountainous wasteland, he became a target of suspicion in the eyes of upper officials. He was suspected of counterrevolutionary espionage after a holiday abroad in Western Europe and was promptly arrested. On August 1, 1938, he was sentenced to death in Lubianka prison in Moscow and executed with a gunshot to the back of the head on the same day.[125] This was the cycle of violence perpetrated by Stalin in order to keep even the highest and most successful officials loyal to him out of fear that they could meet a similar fate. Nikolai Yezhov took over control of Kolyma after Berzin was removed from power. Yezhov was known for his cruelty as the head of the NKVD from 1936 to 1938.[126]

Building the city of Norilsk presented the same problems and difficulties as building Vorkuta and Kolyma. Although there are not accounts of the city growing and being built like there are of Kolyma and Vorkuta, the climate and permafrost were the same. Those building the city of Norilsk encountered the same problems as those building Vorkuta and Kolyma. Prisoners were sent to Norilsk to mine nickel, but had to build a city for free citizens, administrators, and guards to live in. The purpose of the city was not to be long lasting or an architectural masterpiece.

The cities of Northern Siberia were built simply to house people that would work in some capacity to increase the production of the natural resources in these areas. Buildings and infrastructure were not built to last in such a severe climate as

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[125] Kizny, *Gulag,* 301
[126] Conquest, *Kolyma: The Arctic Death Camps,* 48

there was no technology available to create infrastructure that would last. Work building infrastructure in Kolyma, Vorkuta, and Norilsk was done by prisoners and was quick, inefficient, and difficult.

Prisoner Life

Working in the Mines

Work for the prisoners was usually working in some capacity in one of the mines in Vorkuta, Norilsk, and Kolyma. Vorkuta was focused on mining coal, Kolyma was focused on mining gold, and Norilsk was focused on mining nickel. Upon arrival in Kolyma, prisoners were greeted with a welcome address given by the post-war head of Dalstroi, General Derevenko, which captures the attitude of officials regarding prisoner work in the mines:

> Convicts! This is Kolyma! The law is the taiga, and the public prosecutor is the bear! Never expect to eat soup and bread together. What comes first, eat first! What's gone from your hands is lost forever. You are here to work, and work hard! You must repay with your sweat and tears the crimes perpetrated against the Soviet State and the Soviet people! No tricks, no monkey business. We are fair with those who co-operate, pitiless with those who don't. We need metal, and you must produce this metal according to The Plan. The fulfillment of The Plan is our sacred duty. Those who do not fulfill The Plan are saboteurs and traitors, and we show them no mercy![127]

Although this address was given directly to prisoners arriving at Kolyma, the same attitude was present in officials at Vorkuta and Norilsk. Mining the natural resources was the most important aspect of these camp complexes above regard for prisoner life.

Working the mines was a deadly job because the mines were poorly equipped and lacked the necessary machinery, there was no concept of safety, and

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[127] Michael Solomon, *Magadan,* (Toronto, 1971), 89

the mines were poorly maintained.[128] Safety in the mines was secondary to fulfilling the quotas in these three camp complexes. Cave-ins occurred almost every week because there were not enough wood posts used to keep the mineshafts open. Prisoners put the posts farther apart than they should in order to do less work and guards liked having the extra wood to sell or to save on monthly reports for a government bonus. Once in the coalmine in Vorkuta that Noble was working at, twenty-four men were carrying an electric cable on their shoulder through the mine since there was no spool. The cable was coated with tin but there was a defect at one point in the coating. The men were wet due to sweat and the thawing ice dripping from the ceiling and all twenty-four died from an instantaneous electrocution.[129] Regard for human life was minimal, since more people could easily be arrested and sent to Vorkuta to replace the prisoners who died.

The tunnels inside the mines were so narrow that two people could not comfortably walk side by side and a man of average height would have to walk bent over. Some areas of the mines were so poorly excavated that in order to move, the workers had to advance on their hands and knees. Until the late 1950's, when Humphrey's safety lamps were distributed to prisoners, prisoners working in the mines had to use a rusted tin with a wick dipped in grease for light. This provided poor lighting and was often snuffed out in the common drafts of wind. These makeshift lights were highly dangerous as the naked light would often come into contact with gases emanating from crevasses and other cracks in the mine's walls,

[128] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 103
[129] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 125

causing an explosion.[130] The primitive lifts used by the prisoners to descend and ascend into and out of the mines were also hazardous. The cables holding the lifts were old and rusty and would sometimes snap under the load of the prisoners using them. In fact, not a single day would go by without an accident being reported in one of the many mines of Kolyma. A power supply would fail, prisoners would get stuck halfway into the mine, a cable would snap and the lift would crash, or miners who all wore fur hats instead of proper headgear would be hit with large falling stones.[131] Accidents in the mines, even fatal ones, were a daily part of life in Northern Siberia and were treated as such by prisoners and the administration.[132]

Due to the nature of the work and the lack of safety regulations, many prisoners were permanently disabled from working in the mines. At sub-camp number six in Vorkuta in 1952, 1,700 out of the 3,500 prisoners were permanently disabled and deemed useless to the labor force. The oldest of these men were between seventy and eighty years old and every week a few were buried in the tundra. The only work for these men was to bury each other. They did not contribute to the Gulag and Soviet production and were only using more resources for the Soviet government to keep them alive in the labor camps. Even though they posed no threat, the Soviet government refused to grant them freedom.

Scholmer, a former Vorkuta prisoner, recalled a conversation he had with an officer of Russian Security Forces in 1946 in Vorkuta and his response to this situation. The officer was surprised by Scholmer's inquiry and answered as if it

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[130] Solomon, *Magadan,* 114
[131] Solomon, *Magadan,* 115
[132] Mora, *Kolyma: Gold and Forced Labor in the USSR,* 26

should have been obvious, "Before we can start building communism properly, the whole of this older generation has got to be wiped out."[133] This only emphasized how little the Soviet government regarded the life of prisoners and how valued the cause of communism was to the officers. The successful spread of communism was more important than even the industrial output of coal, nickel, and gold.

Prisoners were often physically unfit for the type of work they were doing. They were not qualified for the type of work they were assigned to, and they had very limited and primitive equipment. Some of the oldest and weakest prisoners were assigned to the hardest forms of manual labor. Prisoners characterized their work as hard, unproductive, and even pointless.[134]

The climate also affected the mining processes in Norilsk, Kolyma, and Vorkuta. Mining during the winter months was even more dangerous than mining during the few short months of summer. Even so, much of the work was completed during the subzero temperatures of winter. [135] There were new dangers that the prisoners had to be cautious about. Prisoners were only released from work when the temperatures dropped below negative fifty degrees Fahrenheit, but wind chill was never taken into account.[136] Breathing became more difficult and frostbite would quickly set in if the prisoners weren't constantly in motion with their ineffective clothing. Touching a metal tool with a bare hand could tear skin off and even going to the bathroom was a dangerous task.[137]

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[133] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 175
[134] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 148
[135] Solomon, *Magadan,* 167
[136] Bardach, *Man is Wolf to Man,* 233
[137] Bardach, *Man is Wolf to Man,* 233

There was also the problem of *purgas* and according to GULAG regulations, prisoners were not supposed to work if it was less than forty degrees Fahrenheit below zero. Even if the temperature dropped below the official regulated temperature to stop working, bosses ignored it in order to meet their quotas and receive bonuses. Noble worked the coalmines of Vorkuta and recalled that one day his crew was forced to work for three hours in negative ninety degree Fahrenheit conditions with no gloves.[138] The working day was twelve hours, so there were two shifts switching back and forth but eventually this was cut to three eight-hour shifts so that prisoners would have more time to walk back to the camp, eat, and sleep to rest for their next shift and hopefully be more productive.[139]

The temperature regulations also did not apply to prisoners working indoors or in the mines, so they had to walk through the severe weather and purgas to get to work. According to meteorological data, the harsh weather regulations would have resulted in at least thirty-three days of no work between October and May each year in Norilsk. In reality, Norilsk camp prisoners only had two days off for severe weather in 1947 and six days off in 1949.[140]

On Buca's first day at a Vorkuta coalmine, a guard explained the mining process to the men:

> First you'll dig through a few meters of soil, then you'll come to about the same amount of sand, then slate, and then loam, which is rock hard because of the permafrost. After that you'll come to more earth, gravel, and, and really hard stone. These layers will be repeated – but the final layer of rock is thin, and beneath it you'll find the coal.[141]

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[138] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 102
[139] Galinski, *Soviet "Justice,"* 32
[140] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 88
[141] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 71

The mining process consumed a great deal of time and labor yet the coal pits of mines № 9 and № 10 each produced 1,500 to 1,800 tons of coal a day in 1951. Coal from Vorkuta was the cheapest coal in the world as the equipment was minimal and labor was cheap.[142]

The gold in Kolyma was even more valuable than the coal in Vorkuta. Gold was especially profitable at this time for the Soviet Union, due to a recent change in the world economy. The major world powers at this time, the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain, had adopted the gold standard as the foundation for their currencies. This accelerated the search for and mining of gold in South Africa, Alaska, and in Siberia.[143]

The quotas increased exponentially each year with little regard for their toll on the prisoners or the number of deaths caused by the work. The gold mines themselves were located several hundred kilometers away from the city of Magadan on a mountainous terrain without roads. Magadan is located near the port and was the only connection to the rest of the Soviet Union as there were no railways or roads leading straight into Kolyma. During the short summer months, supplies and equipment were transported in to the camps and mines by packhorses and floated along the rivers. In the winter, for most of the year, supplies and equipment travelled on sleds drawn by dogs or reindeer. It would take a food caravan 25-50 days to reach the Central Kolyma camps in the winter, depending on the weather. In

[142] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 84
[143] Henry Wallace, *Soviet Asia Mission,* (Reynal and Hitchcock Publishers, New York, 1946), 35

1936, Dalstroi, the overseers of Northeastern Siberia, had 5,300 horses, 4,500 reindeer, and 900 dogs to transport equipment and supplies.[144]

In Northern Siberia, prisoners were forced to continue mining into the winter months in order to meet impossible quotas. During the winter in the mine drifts, the workers would bore and blast the sands and then rake the loosened chunks into a pile. In Kolyma, steamhoses connected to boilers just outside the barrack were put into the pile. Steam was released and the sand chunks were partially thawed. The workers transported these semi-thawed sands in wheelbarrows to the panning unit. Carloads of ice were also thawed out by steamhoses, and the sand was then washed with this water. The steamhoses never thawed out these sands properly, and the apparatus was too primitive to work efficiently. Geological analysis established that almost three-fourths of the gold was carried off instead of being retained by the apparatus. Each gram of gold obtained in the winter cost approximately four times the number of working hours as required in the summer. Officials had quotas to meet and higher officials to report to, so despite the knowledge of the inefficiency of gold mining in the winter, the winter panning continued.[145]

No less than two-thirds of the prisoners transported to the Kolyma area worked in the gold mines, which was the most important branch of Kolyma's mining industry. Mora, a former Kolyma prisoner, conservatively estimated that over a period of fifteen years, three million prisoners were brought into the Kolyma area and no more than half a million survived. Nearly two million of these prisoners

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[144] Kizny, *Gulag*, 307
[145] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 202

were assigned to the gold mines, and no more than 300,000 of these prisoners survived.[146]

Gold was the Soviet priority and transportation of the gold was an especially important job. The amount of gold transported was kept secret from the prisoners even though the prisoners were the ones mining and moving it. One of the camps in the Kolyma complex, Khattynakh, housed the shop that was responsible for making special cases to transport the gold. Dried ash boards were brought in from other areas of the Soviet Union in order to construct these special cases. The cases had to be made to a specified size and be accurately built. Any boxes with even the smallest cracks or knots were thrown out. The cases were built year round and in the summer NKVD representatives collected the boxes and brought them to the central gold-receiving office in Kolyma. Each box was then filled with a double leather bag containing twenty kilograms of gold dust, the lid to the box was screwed down, and the box along with its precious contents was sent to the airport where it was flown directly to Moscow. In 1936, approximately 4,000 of these cases were delivered to the NKVD.[147]

There was a single road built between Magadan and the mining sites/camps, which wound over two thousand miles across the mountain ridges. Tens of thousands of people died during the construction of the road during the war and men and women shoveled snow day and night to keep the road usable.[148] Even with constant attention, the snow would sometimes make the road impassable. Petrov

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[146] Mora, *Kolyma: Gold and Forced Labor in the USSR*, 17
[147] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 158
[148] Solomon, *Magadan,* 114

recalled the winter of 1938-1939 when the mine he was working at was cut off from Magadan because there was too much snow on the road. The officials even pulled some of the workers in the mine and transferred them to clear the road, but it was not enough. During the time that the road was unusable, food reserves were exhausted. Famine set in as thousands of men were forced to continue working twelve-hour shifts in the mines with no food. During the five days without food, fifteen or twenty men died every day.[149]

Former vice president of the United States Henry Wallace recalled his trip along this highway in 1944: "From the airport about thirty miles from Magadan, we drove into town over the Kolyma highway, and it reminded me of the gravel roads we had in Iowa about forty years ago."[150] Even in this state, the Kolyma highway was a much better road than others that Wallace travelled on during his visit to the Soviet Union. The highway at the time had about 1,000 men working on road construction and improvement while Wallace was there.[151]

The goal of extracting as much gold at any price, including human lives, left the average life of a Kolyma prisoner in the 1930's and early 1940's at about four months from the time of their arrival. No more than fifteen per cent of prisoners survived the first winter. "Three-year men," prisoners who had survived three Kolyma winters were very rare. They were recognized by other prisoners by their

[149] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 216
[150] Wallace, *Soviet Asia Mission,* 73
[151] Wallace, *Soviet Asia Mission,* 73

dark-colored cheeks and numerous frostbites. They were idolized by other prisoners for their success in the struggle for existence.[152]

During the years 1940-1942, the death rate in Kolyma was 30 percent at a conservative estimate. This was the average across Kolyma, but the actual death rate for each individual camp varied. This figure depended on the degree of development of the camp structures, location, altitude, the type of mine, and the attitude of camp officials and guards.[153]

Norilsk and Vorkuta had equally harsh conditions, but were smaller complexes in comparison to Kolyma. Fewer prisoners perished in these locations because there was less expansion into previously uninhabited areas to build more mines and there were fewer prisoners being sent to these camp complexes. Even so, mining in any of the three main camp complexes in Northern Siberia was a dangerous and potentially deadly job.

Lend/Lease Act

In the early 1940's, the Soviet Union received many machines and tools from the United States as a result of the Lend-Lease Act. These machines and tools were designated for Soviet use in WWII, but were instead sent to locations in the Gulag system, like Norilsk, Kolyma, and Vorkuta, to be used by prisoners.

By 1941, many of the Kolyma camps were using American-made machines sent to them through the Lend-Lease Act. When the Vice President of the United States, Henry Wallace, went on a tour of Asia, which included a visit to camps in Kolyma, he was surprised to find that the miners were wearing rubber boots

[152] Mora, *Kolyma: Gold and Forced Labor in the USSR,* 18
[153] Mora, *Kolyma: Gold and Forced Labor in the USSR,* 19

manufactured in the United States. Under US policy, no Lend-Lease products were to be used anywhere in world for gold mining, including Siberia.[154] Nonetheless, many US-made goods and machines were sent to Kolyma to be used in gold mining.

Three excavators that were used at one of the gold mines Petrov, a former Kolyma prisoner, worked at, were sent to the Soviet Union under the Lend-Lease Act and arrived at Kolyma in 1941. Even with these sophisticated machines from the United States, there were problems. Tools and machines were regularly broken or went missing due to the hard permafrost, blasting operations, and indifference by the workers. One of the excavators at the gold mine Petrov was working at even went missing. Petrov reveled in the unlikeliness of this, because how is it possible for workers to lose such a large, expensive machine. He recalled:

> The fact that picks and shovels, wheelbarrows and wagons were lost by the hundreds in the blasting operations, to the complete indifference of everyone, that the rails of the mechanical tracks rusted through and vanished under piles of rock and ore, that building timber was burned in the ovens and boilers – all this was perfectly normal and taken for granted in every Soviet enterprise. But an excavator![155]

There was no reason for anyone to steal the excavator and it was broken because there were no skilled mechanics able to fix it. Officials searched for days for the missing excavator before placing blame on a former warehouse keeper. Months later, the excavator was found by accident, buried under a pile of frozen earth, too damaged to fix. The warehouse keeper was already imprisoned, and his case was not reopened after the discovery of the missing excavator.[156] Cases like this with missing and broken machinery, though usually nothing as large as an excavator,

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[154] Wallace, *Soviet Asia Mission*, 35
[155] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 230
[156] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 231

were common occurrences in camps. Inefficient use and carelessness when it came to machinery and tools caused unnecessary losses to the Gulag system. Some prisoners even mined with their bare hands, such as when the shovels were too bent and broken and the picks were too dull.[157]

Output and Production

Gold output in Kolyma increased drastically each year. During the first year of the Kolyma camp complex in 1931, Berzin sent 500 kilograms of ore to Moscow; three years later, he sent fourteen metric tons.[158] In 1936, the prisoners of Kolyma extracted 33 metric tons of gold. Mora estimates that in 1932, there were 40,000 prisoners mining gold who produced 20,000 kilograms of gold. By the year 1946, there were 200,000 prisoners engaged in gold mining and they had a total output of 300,000 kilograms. The quotas for gold production were significantly different for summer and winter. In 1932, the summer daily quota, for the seventy days of Kolyma summer, was five kilograms per day. The winter quota, for 295 days, was one kilogram per day. In 1946, the summer quota was fifteen kilograms per day and the winter quota was three kilograms per day. The average production per year for this fifteen-year period was about 250 tons of gold.[159]

In June of 1935, the Gulag system prioritized construction of the Norilsk Nickel Integrated Plant.[160] Norilsk was one of the largest and highest-priority Gulag camps, producing metals vital to Soviet industry and the military. By 1954, when Norilsk was transferred from MVD to civilian industry, Norilsk produced one

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[157] Petrov, *Escape from the Future,* 250
[158] Kizny, *Gulag,* 301
[159] Mora, *Kolyma: Gold and Forced Labor in the USSR,* 50
[160] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 48

quarter of all Soviet nickel.[161] By 1938, when the second management team took control of Norilsk's production, there had been significant transportation links and mining operations put in place. In 1939, Norilsk produced 5,050 tons of ore, 30,130 tons in 1940, and 81,099 tons in 1941.[162]

Prisoner Populations

Within the first year of Kolyma opening as a camp complex, in December 1932, there were 11,100 prisoners working in the Kolyma camp complex and ten percent of the prisoners worked in the mining sector, while others worked on infrastructure. In December 1933, there were 27, 390 prisoners in Kolyma and 3,392 "free" workers. On January 1, 1934, there were 29, 659 prisoners and the percentage of prisoners working in the mines increased to 22 percent. On January 1, 1935, there were 36, 313 prisoners in the Kolyma camp complex.[163] By 1941, the number of prisoners total was 187,976 and 79 percent of the prisoners were working in the mines. The number of prisoners working in the Kolyma camp complex peaked in 1952, when it was recorded that there were 199,726 prisoners.[164] The high volume of "human capital" in Kolyma was responsible for industrial development of the area.[165] At its largest, in 1950, the Vorkuta camp complex, held 77,700 prisoners.[166]

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[161] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag*, 75
[162] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 148
[163] Kizny, *Gulag,* 333
[164] Kizny, *Gulag,* 335
[165] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 110
[166] Barenberg, *Gulag Town, Company Town*, 253

From 1935, when Norilsk was opened as a labor camp and construction of infrastructure began, to 1953, Norilsk housed one-third of a million prisoners.[167] The prisoners constructed all of the facilities, infrastructure, and residential structures and then mined and processed minerals.

The population of Norilsk camp prisoners increased rapidly and steadily until the end of 1950 with only two years of decline in 1937 and 1944. At the beginning of 1951, the Norilsk camp complex was at its peak, housing ninety-two thousand prisoners in twenty-four camp divisions, twenty-three separate and regular camp centers, and six other units, including the mining camp.[168] Even during years when the overall Gulag camp population declined, the population of prisoners at the Norilsk camps rose, reflecting the high priority and importance of mining.

Due to Norilsk's high priority production of metals for industry and the military, prisoners reported that although living conditions were harsh in Northern Siberia, the conditions were somewhat better than at other camps. This is confirmed by a relatively low death rate of prisoners in Norilsk compared to other camp complexes. In 1942 to 1943, when 25 percent of camp prisoners died on average among the camps, Norilsk had about a 5.5 percent death rate. This can be partially attributed to healthier prisoners being sent to Norilsk in the first place, but also since the mining was so important, prisoner conditions were slightly better than elsewhere.[169] Norilsk's priority status can also be seen its higher than average

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[167] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 127
[168] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 77
[169] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 79

rate of free prisoners working in the complex. In 1936, there were 223 free workers compared to 4,552 prisoner workers, and in 1937 there were 384 free workers and 8,658 prisoners.[170]

Prisoner Relations

The Gulag camps in Northern Siberia were noted for their high populations of political prisoners. Mixed among the political prisoners in Northern Siberia were *urkas,* the professional criminals who had devoted themselves to a life of crime. The *urkas,* who would have been in prison even without the Gulag system, ruled over the camps. Most of these criminals were former *bezprizorny,* vagrant children who went around stealing and had been a component of the Soviet Union since the revolution in 1917.[171]

The *urkas* were divided into two distinct groups. There were the *suki* (literally "bitches") and the *blatnye.*[172] Both groups were hardened criminals, but the *suki* had betrayed the code of the criminals, which was a set of laws that were part of every camp in the Soviet Union and known by the criminals. The code for the *urkas* was that they could not work in the administration or the kitchen, they could not build things that could be used against other prisoners - such as fences, watchtowers, isolation cells, etc. - and they could not be in a supervisory role over other prisoners.[173]

Suki were the criminals who broke these unwritten rules. They were usually given positions of trust by the guards because they were willing to cooperate with

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[170] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 81
[171] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 60
[172] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 80
[173] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 60

the guards and camp administration. They were trusted by the guards in these positions of power because they were not "saboteurs, spies, wreckers, or counterrevolutionaries," and so were not seen to be as threatening to the guards as the political prisoners.[174] Since the guards could rely on the *suki* to help keep the rest of the prisoners in line, there were a few interposed in almost all groups of prisoners. They were especially powerful in the camps in Northern Siberia. These camps contained the most feared political prisoners, so to counterbalance this, the government sent the most dangerous *urkas* to this region as well as a higher percentage than might be in other camps around the Soviet Union.

Urkas - both *suki* and *blatnye* - had less of a desire to escape because they had the comfort of food and shelter that they had tried to steal outside of the GULAG system, as well as a degree of power.[175] They could do what they wanted with little or no consequence. This was partially due to each member's gang dedication and partially due to the way that the punishment system was set up in the GULAG. Gang dedication was based on each gang member's willingness to kill for their gang or the understanding that they would be killed if they were not loyal.

Urkas formed gangs inside the camps and sub-camps based on various criteria - nationality, ethnicity, and the type of crime committed. A group of fifty or sixty gang members could terrorize a sub-camp of 5,000 or 6,000 inmates.[176] *Blatnye* would never work; they would sleep, steal, and do virtually whatever they wanted. In the amount of sleeping space in the barracks allotted for sixteen

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[174] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 77
[175] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 77
[176] Galinski, *Soviet "Justice,"* 38

prisoners, the *blatnye* would sleep only five and anyone who opposed the *blatnye* would be knifed in the ribs.[177] In the camps of Northern Siberia, the chief of a gang was better off than the guards.[178]

Urkas were able to get away with blackmail, murder, and other crimes, because they were already sentenced to the worst possible punishment in the GULAG system. The worst possible sentence for a prisoner was twenty-five years of *katorga*. There was no death sentence, and the sentencing could not be longer than twenty-five years. This left the system vulnerable for the hardened criminals to take advantage of it. For example, Ivan was an *urka* sentenced to the harshest punishment and had only served six months of his sentence when he killed a guard and injured five others. The process of setting up and conducting a trial for him to begin his sentence over and, in effect, having only the six months he had already served added back onto his sentence did not make sense with the time and resources available. He was thus "immune" to punishment and there were no consequences for his actions.[179] The worst punishment would be solitary confinement or another form of torture for several days, but many of the guards did not want to cross the *urkas.* By punishing a fellow gang member, that guard would be at risk of retaliation of another member of the gang. If the *urka* committed a crime or killed a political prisoner when no guards were around, he would never be

[177] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 80
[178] Galinski, *Soviet "Justice,"* 38
[179] Buca, *Vorkuta*, 55

prosecuted. No political prisoner would dare intervene, testify, or come forward as a witness as it would mean certain death.[180]

Political prisoners were commonly harassed and blackmailed by the *urkas*. In Vorkuta sub-camp № 3, there were 4,500 political prisoners who were unofficially ruled by 250 *urkas*.[181] The chief of a gang in Vorkuta personally targeted Vorkuta prisoner John Galinski for blackmail. He was forced to go to the dentist and fake a toothache to get his tooth with a gold crown pulled. The *urka* chief would then sell it on the black market for food, clothes, tobacco, or alcohol. If Galinski had refused, he would have been murdered and the chief would have taken his tooth with the gold crown once he was dead.[182]

Political prisoners were only exempt to harassment and blackmail by the *urkas* if they were valuable. This was a rare occurrence and usually only came from the ability to recite adventure novels or other exciting stories. Michael Solomon, a prisoner in Kolyma, recalls earning his daily bread on the long train ride from Moscow to Vladivostok by retelling the *urkas* Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo.* The other political prisoners on the train had their bread taken by the criminals.[183]

After Stalin's death in 1953, the Kremlin passed a new law that any prisoner who killed another person would pay for it with his or her own death. This caused

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[180] Solomon, *Magadan,* 137
[181] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 90
[182] Galinski, *Soviet "Justice,"* 36
[183] Solomon, *Magadan,* 138

the criminal underground in the Gulag camps to become less dangerous and violent.[184]

Guards were accepting of the *urkas* keeping the political prisoners in fear since it made their job easier.[185] Scholmer commented, "Most of the soldiers [guards] at Vorkuta are simple creatures, who are really just as much prisoners of the tundra and victims of the cold as the prisoners themselves."[186] The guards were divided into two groups; "the Reds" were the NKVD camp guards who wore red caps and "the Blues" worked in the administration. "The Reds" lived in barracks and were mainly young soldiers doing military service. There was one "Red" for every twelve prisoners. "The Blues" lived in villages near the camp, were unarmed, and rarely came into contact with prisoners. There was also a police force for the "free" population of Vorkuta, so the total men under arms in Vorkuta, including "The Blues," was about 12,000 in 1950.[187]

Like the prisoners, the guards also had a hierarchy. Each level had its own privileges and punishments, with demotion as the most severe form of punishment. Each level would push the level below to fill the quota and the brigade chiefs being the lowest were the ones who punished the workers by beating them with clubs, reducing the rations of slow workers, or lengthening shifts if the quotas were not met.[188] Many of the guards felt guilty about beating the prisoners, but if their

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[184] Solomon, *Magadan,* 139
[185] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 93
[186] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 167
[187] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 165
[188] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 109

supervisor saw that the guard was not being strict enough, then the guard would be beaten by his superior.[189]

The Soviet government realized the dangers of guards and prisoners fraternizing so conversations between guards and prisoners were forbidden. Guards were prisoners of the Arctic just as the prisoners themselves, being forced to make their work quotas and live in almost identical conditions as those of the prisoners. Scholmer explains, "Six month's day to day contact with the prisoners is often enough to obliterate the effect of a whole decade of propagandist political training."[190] It was one thing for guards to be told about being a proper communist and the evil of the prisoners through propaganda, but living in similar conditions as the prisoners and bonding with men who were intelligent and had committed no violent crimes made many guards see the prisoners in a different way. No amount of propaganda could take away the reality of life in the Arctic and the bond that men formed living in such extreme conditions, spending almost twenty-four hours a day living and working together to survive. Guards did not choose the Arctic as their place to live, so many did not want to be there and suffered greatly in the climate and conditions and could empathize with the prisoners. Therefore, the law forbidding prisoners and guards from fraternizing did not stop conversation between the two groups entirely and prisoners bonded with guards and found that many guards were ready to help the prisoners in the event of an uprising.[191]

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[189] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 167
[190] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 170
[191] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 167

The hierarchy system of political prisoners and *urkas,* along with unofficial rules among the prisoners meant that knowing the right people could mean the difference between survival and death. This network was created through *blat,* which was key to survival in Vorkuta, Norilsk, and Kolyma and common throughout the Soviet Union as a system of informal agreements. It was a way to network with others by exchanging favors. Through this system, prisoners were able to obtain slightly better jobs, a little more food, and protection from gangs. Noble was the only American in his sub-camp of Vorkuta and knew no Russian, so he kept to himself at first. He realized after a couple months that he could not survive without help from his fellow inmates, so he started learning Russian and making friends. As one Ukrainian told him, "Johnny, everything in Vorkuta depends on who you know."[192]

Everyday Life

Transfers of prisoners to different camps and sub-camps were abrupt, common, and almost always during the middle of the night. The list of prisoners being transferred was always kept secret until the last possible moment to make any prearranged plans of revolt or escape difficult and to prevent information flow from one camp or sub-camp to another. Prisoners were told about the transfer, searched, and on their way within thirty minutes.[193] Even so, information still moved from one camp to another via the prisoners and numerous underground organizations.[194] The more prisoners a man knew and was friendly with, the more

[192] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 112
[193] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 173
[194] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 189

likely he was to see at least one friend at whatever camp or sub-camp he was transferred to and thus secure help in surviving and adapting to the new environment.

As a tactic of survival, Buca would try to make friends with older men who were more experienced in camp life.[195] Since physical possessions were prohibited, the only way for prisoners to have an identity was through their reputation and connections with each other.

Scholmer's rules for surviving camp life in Vorkuta, which applies to Norilsk and Kolyma as well, were to:

> 1. Do as little work as possible. 2. Eat as much as possible. 3. Get as much rest as possible. 4. Take every opportunity you can to get warm. 5. Don't stand any nonsense from anybody. 6. If anyone hits you, hit back immediately without a moment's hesitation.

His rules proved successful for his survival. They also helped in the case of a sixty-two-year-old Jew, Moireddin, who was new to the Vorkuta camp complex. Scholmer helped Moireddin by telling him his survival rules since Moireddin was new to the GULAG system. The first day of work, the brigade leader gave Moireddin the hardest job in the mine and Moireddin told the guard to give the job to a younger, stronger man. The guard pushed Moireddin, so following Scholmer's advice he attempted to throw slag, output from the coal mine, into the guard's face. Moireddin was sent to the isolation cell for five days, but he had established his reputation as one not to be pushed around. The prisoners respected him and the guard treated him politely and never gave him a difficult job after this incident.[196]

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[195] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 95
[196] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 106

Friendships with other prisoners and *blat* were crucial in getting enough food and clothing to survive. The food and clothes given to prisoners were insufficient for the strenuous work and climate, but prisoners could get more of each on the black market or from other prisoners who had enough to share with close friends.

Upon arrival at a Gulag camp in Northern Siberia, each prisoner was issued a prisoner outfit common to all prisoners in the GULAG system. It consisted of a blue cotton-padded jacket, cotton padded pants, and a cotton hat with flaps for the ears. Each political prisoner was given an identifying number that was sewn onto each item of clothing in several spots over holes. This way, if a political prisoner ripped off their identifier, there would be a noticeable hole in their clothing.[197] They were not given a change of clothes and the clothes were usually already used, so they were worn down and dirty. The shoes were synthetic with rubber soles and not warm enough for the Northern Siberian weather.[198]

Prisoners were on average given 1400 calories of food per day, which was less than half of what men this age and with this level of physical activity should have been consuming. The average weight of men in Vorkuta was 75 to 115 pounds. After just seven months in Vorkuta, Noble weighed only 95 pounds. In three months living and working in Vorkuta, Scholmer lost more than twenty-eight pounds.[199]

Prisoners in the Gulag in Northern Siberia suffered rapid malnutrition; they had ribs sticking out, thin legs, and their arm and shoulder muscles were eaten away

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[197] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 84
[198] Galinski, *Soviet "Justice,"* 35; Buca, *Vorkuta,* 70
[199] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 105

from undernourishment.[200] Malnutrition also resulted in teeth rotting from lack of vitamins. The only dental care for this was extraction, so most men had half their teeth missing.[201]

There were thirteen categories for food rations based on the amount of work completed, but these rules were not followed. [202] "After only three weeks most of the prisoners were broken men, interested in nothing but eating." Their thoughts were limited to their next meal and getting warm.[203] Reduced rations were used as a punishment for not meeting the work quota but most prisoners were too apathetic and exhausted to be motivated by this.

Due to their power, the *urkas* could order extra food from the kitchen to avoid becoming a *dokhodiagi.* Denial by the cook meant murder. Many times the *urkas* couldn't finish all their food and so brawls erupted over the little extra that was left in their bowls. This was a daily event in the canteen and it was encouraged by the *urkas* for their entertainment.[204]

The more dignified way for prisoners to get extra food was through *blat* or friendship. Prisoners could befriend the cook and receive extra food from him or from food packages that were sent to friends by their friend's family. Only Soviet citizens were allowed parcels.[205] The only reason parcels of food were allowed in the camp was that it was cheaper for the Soviets to have prisoners receive food from home than to have them sick and malnourished and unable to work. However this

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[200] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 121
[201] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 105
[202] Galinski, *Soviet "Justice,"* 34; Buca, *Vorkuta,* 79
[203] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 79
[204] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 130
[205] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 94

was not enough motivation to give prisoners any more food, since prisoners were easily replaceable.

This mentality was carried over to the healthcare system in Vorkuta, Norilsk, and Kolyma. The hospitals were understaffed and had unqualified doctors,[206] had few amenities, and lacked proper equipment.[207] According to GULAG regulations, only a small percentage of the work force could be sick on any given day, so the doctors had to turn away dying men from the hospital.[208] Doctors who exceeded the percentage and admitted too many prisoners would be taken off of their medical duties and made to work in a hard labor position.[209] Due to the physical and mental strain of the living conditions, many prisoners had high blood pressure, which could not be treated at the camp. The two most common illnesses in the Gulag camps of Northern Siberia were heart strain, caused by high blood pressure, and tuberculosis, caused by weakened immune systems and overcrowded living quarters. The pressure fluctuations from the Polar Regions also resulted in continuous, severe headaches for many prisoners.[210]

There were other dangerous diseases that prisoners were prone to get from living and working in such a severe climate. Pneumonia was common among prisoners and many cases of pneumonia were followed by tuberculosis. Frostbite, gangrene, and scurvy were also common for prisoners who spent a winter in Kolyma. A third disease, often associated with avitaminosis, led to an ulceration of the limbs and abdomen. Dysentery, edema, and heart disease were frequent among

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[206] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 161
[207] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 124
[208] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 107
[209] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 169
[210] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 155

prisoners. Medical care was minimal and kept prisoners just well enough to work, but not enough to heal them of their afflictions.[211]

Injuries were common due to the nature of the work, but many workers would deliberately injure themselves to get into the hospital or be assigned lighter work. There were two prevalent ways to do this; one was with a *mastryka* or injection of benzene and petrol[212] and the other was by having a friend smash the prisoner who wanted to be admitted to the hospital's hand with a piece of wood.[213] The *mastryka* was effective in producing a fever and creating swelling around the injection sight. Buca tried this to get out of a "special" job that would be impossible to complete and massaged the poison from his foot up his leg to have it be the most severe reaction possible. He had an operation, which successfully removed the toxins, but kept rubbing salt into his wounds to keep them from healing and to have the maximum amount of time off from work.[214] Having your hand smashed was also effective in hospital admittance, as long as the prisoner pretended it had occurred on the job and had friends say that they were witnesses to the event.[215]

In order to prevent these incidents and make a hospital stay less attractive, prisoners in the hospital were given less than half a ration of food each day.[216] This had the unintended effect of patients trying to conceal their fellow patient's death for as many days as possible in order to get the deceased's rations.[217] After a week

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[211] Silvester Mora, *Kolyma: Gold and Forced Labor in the USSR,* (Foundation Pamphlet No. 7. Foundation for Foreign Affairs, Washington, DC, 1949), 23
[212] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 150
[213] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 142
[214] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 150
[215] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 142
[216] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 123
[217] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 150

in the hospital, prisoners would no longer be exhausted, but tormented by hunger. Scholmer describes his time as a patient in a Vorkuta camp hospital, "All day long I saw the enormous plum cakes that we used to have at home in the Rhineland when I was a child."[218] It is clear that the healthcare system in the Gulag camps of Northern Siberia was not intended to be especially efficient in bringing patients back to good health, but to make them just healthy enough that they were able to return to work.

One way many prisoners coped with life in the Northern Siberian Gulag was through religion. However, religious practices were prohibited and the most serious crime in the camp was possession of a Bible, which would result in one month in the camp jail. Still, for some prisoners it was necessary for survival. In Vorkuta, a group of Baptists would always pray before meals, a group of Protestants moved each week to hold mass in different barracks and many times it was easier for guards to pretend not to see. If two or more guards saw any form of religious activity, they would be forced to punish those participating. One Lithuanian priest in sub-camp № 3 of Vorkuta was regularly arrested. He was thrown in jail for two months and once released, returned to preaching only to be thrown in jail again.[219]

The camp jail was one of several forms of punishment that could be inflicted on prisoners. Punishment rations were commonly given to prisoners who did not meet their work quotas. These were less than half the normal diet and resulted in a vicious cycle. Prisoners did not meet the work quota, received less food, were too weak to meet the quota the next day, and stayed on punishment rations.[220] A more

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[218] Scholmer, *Vorkuta,* 123
[219] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 116
[220] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 106

severe form of punishment that was part of the camp jail was reserved strictly for political prisoners and called the isolator or the cold cell.[221] Prisoners sent to this cell would be stripped of their clothes and chained up in an unheated cement room where they would grow numb from the cold.[222] Another method of punishment that Galinski heard of was one in which prisoners were forced to wear chemical filled shirts that upon drying would form a corset so tight that it broke bones from contraction.[223]

The Closing of the Gulag Camps

Revolts

As time progressed, the network of experienced prisoners who had survived the Northern Siberian Gulag for multiple years grew. These prisoners knew they were strong enough and had enough support to take action against the their imprisonment. In the 1950's hunger strikes, work strikes, and revolts slowly spread from camp to camp throughout the Gulag system. Prisoners in one camp would hear of any of these types of events and any positive results, no matter how minimal, and were inspired to take action of their own. The first big revolt noted in Northern Siberia occurred in Vorkuta in 1947, six years before Stalin's death. Stalin's death only encouraged many more prisoner revolts as leadership changed and there was a chance for people to speak out against their imprisonment. Stalin's death created a change in attitude of administrators and prisoners and a glimpse at an end to the

[221] Galinski, *Soviet "Justice,"* 17; Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 106
[222] Galinski, *Soviet "Justice,"* 17; Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 106
[223] Galinski, *Soviet "Justice,"* 17

Gulag system completely. Although this end was not realized until much later, the Gulag in Northern Siberia changed drastically with Stalin's death.[224]

Despite the threat of punishment and death, Vorkuta's underground network of prisoners and their desire to escape the extreme conditions of everyday life led, in 1947, to the first major revolt in Northern Siberia that was almost a success. Vorkuta is better known for the 1953 uprising following Stalin's death on March 6, 1953, a larger and more successful uprising, which was inspired by the 1947 revolt. The 1947 revolt became a Vorkuta legend told from one prisoner to the next.[225] It was coordinated by three army officers who were imprisoned in Vorkuta for previously being prisoners of war in Germany. Their goal was to liberate all of the Ural and Vorkuta sub-camps to create an army to take down Stalin in Moscow. The three officers managed to liberate four sub-camps by killing all guards and civilians so that they could not warn other sub-camps of the revolt. One guard faked death and once the army of prisoners was on the way to the next sub-camp, the guard used the emergency phone line to contact the other Vorkuta sub-camps. The guards at the next sub-camp were ready and waiting for the revolting prisoners and executed many of them on the spot out in the tundra in a surprise ambush. Only 120 of the revolting prisoners survived and surrendered but not before several thousand prisoners died. The three officers who organized the uprising were kept alive for interrogation and after this near success, authorities implemented new systems to divide prisoners and crush planning for rebellion.[226]

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[224] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 89; Buca, *Vorkuta,* 174
[225] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 89; Buca, *Vorkuta,* 174
[226] Buca, *Vorkuta,* 174

After Stalin's death in 1953, there was a more peaceful and successful strike in Vorkuta that resulted in many changes. Although the rebellion failed in freeing any prisoners, the fact that prisoners were able to organize and execute a strike at all was a success. In total, 7,000 prisoners were arrested for the strike, 300 were executed without a trial, 1,000 were transferred to the Far East, mostly to the Kolyma camp complex, and the rest were given an additional three to five years of incarceration.[227]

Stalin's death brought a lot of uncertainty to the Gulag system and many prisoners, like the ones in Vorkuta, saw this as an opportunity to fight for their freedom. Norilsk is famous for a rebellion orchestrated by the prisoners in May 1953, just two months after Stalin's death. The rebellion in Norilsk occurred around the same time as the one in Vorkuta. This rebellion was larger and more well known than the Vorkuta rebellion of 1947 and 1953. Ringleaders of the Norilsk strike worked in secrecy to rouse all of the camps in the entire area of Norilsk so that the strike was large enough that remedial action would need to be taken by the authorities. The strike spread among the 55,000 men and women prisoners and then to the entire industrial area of Norilsk. The purpose was among other things, to have more prisoner privileges, such as contact with their families, letters and parcels, the end of the numbers system [prisoners would no longer be assigned a number but instead be referred to by name], and new, fair trials.[228] General Derevenko was flown in a few days after the strike began, promising that the strikers' demands would be met if they returned to work. The prisoners refused,

[227] Noble, *I Was A Slave In Russia,* 140
[228] Solomon, *Magadan,* 183

however, and they demanded to meet with officials from Moscow. Any ruses tried by General Derevenko and other local camp officials to trick the strikers into working again were in vain. The strike lasted fifty-five days. It cost the camp sixty million rubles a day. This prompted the camp director to contact Moscow and get a few of the lesser demands approved, such as the ability to receive letters, but the prisoners on strike refused to compromise and they held the power.

Three days after the compromise was offered, the officials issued an ultimatum: the prisoners were to return to work at five in the morning the next day or drastic action would be taken. The next morning, when the prisoners remained on strike, MVD troops entered the camp with fixed bayonets. Some prisoners dug their own graves and stood proudly next to them; waiting for the MVD to reach them, others attempted to fight off the sharp blades of the bayonets. Prisoners were shot and stabbed until two hours later when more than a thousand were killed and the survivors and those who had surrendered were rounded up. About half of the strikers were sent to Magadan, and about half remained in Norilsk. Those who had orchestrated the rebellion were put on trial and executed, which was information released to all of the camps in the Soviet Union in order to discourage other camps to follow the example of Norilsk.[229]

News of the rebellion travelled throughout the Gulag system as prisoners were transferred from camp to camp, though the details of what had occurred were kept secret. Before long, prisoners in Magadan learned that survivors of the Norilsk

[229] Solomon, *Magadan,* 184

rebellion on the Taimyr Peninsula were going to be brought to Magadan.[230] The survivors of the rebellion were carefully brought into Magadan and kept secluded from other prisoners and often put into solitary confinement in order to crush any lingering thoughts of rebellion and freedom. The Norilsk rebellion was the end of General Derevenko's rule over northern Siberia, as he was deemed incompetent for not being able to quell the rebellion more quickly. Instead of sitting through a trial, he chose to commit suicide.[231]

The Norilsk strike was more widely known throughout the Gulag system than the strike in Vorkuta. The thought that prisoners could take action to promote change seemed plausible, especially after Stalin's death. This led to smaller strikes across the Gulag system. Michael Solomon, a Kolyma prisoner, used a strike to his advantage after seeing survivors of the Norilsk strike in Magadan. After being told that foreigners were being transferred out of Kolyma and sent to their home country on New Year's Day in 1955, months passed as the foreign prisoners continued to be forced to work in Magadan on different projects. According to Soviet law, any strike in the camps was considered mutiny and could result in lifelong imprisonment. However, the Norilsk strike inspired Solomon and the other foreigners to go on strike so that they could meet with an official to inquire about release. Two days after they began their strike, they were summoned to meet with the top camp officials to discuss their demands, which were to know when and where they were going. Luckily, the Colonel decided to consider their strike a two day extra "holiday"

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[230] Solomon, *Magadan,* 182
[231] Solomon, *Magadan,* 186

from work and listen to their demands.[232] Their strike only resulted in a meeting in which the camp executives said that they would be sent home when it happened and that they would return to work immediately or face dire consequences. Most of the prisoners returned to work: however, some refused and continued the strike. The leader of the strike from this point on, Mikhail Dimitrovich Antonovich, was sentenced to an additional ten years of hard labor. Nothing came of the smaller strike in Magadan, but the fact that the prisoners were able to organize a strike at all and be able to meet with officials was an accomplishment. The strikes and rebellions alluded to the major changes in the Gulag system, including its end, which was soon to come.

Change

After Stalin's death in 1953, the Gulag system became more lenient in its policies until closing.[233] Beria, who had worked closely under Stalin, had seen firsthand the drawbacks and ineffectiveness of the economics of the Gulag. This included the ineffectiveness and low labor productivity of forced labor as well as the unprofitability of many of the Gulag projects.[234] Large labor projects were the first to be shut down, as well as production administrations, such as the administrators overseeing the projects being shut down. Prisoners with sentences up to five years were granted amnesty and examinations of many of the political prisoner cases

[232] Solomon, *Magadan,* 193
[233] Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, xvii
[234] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 41

began.[235] Gulag uprisings in camps like Vorkuta and Norilsk accelerated the process of Gulag camp reevaluation.

Within three months of Stalin's death, about 1.5 million prisoners, sixty percent of the entire Gulag prisoner population, were released.[236] Camps were slowly emptied and closed over time. Norilsk was one of the first to officially close as a labor camp in 1956.[237] It wasn't until the 1980's that the last Gulag camp was closed.[238]

Although the Gulag system no longer existed and the last camp was closed, the legacy of the camps and their impact on the landscape and the people remains. Throughout the 1970's and 1980's camps were repurposed and redesigned as prisons.

Many of the prisoners, once finishing their prison sentences in the Gulag, were forced to live in permanent exile in Northern Siberia. Therefore, many of the major towns in Siberia, like Vorkuta and Magadan, are home to former prisoners of the Gulag system and their descendants. During the 1940s, as prisoners were finishing their prison terms and being released, many prisoners were assigned to live and work in Norilsk, Kolyma, and Vorkuta in exile and issued internal passports that barred them from ever leaving the city limits.[239] A 1950 report by the director of the Norilsk camp complex, V.S. Zverev, stated that only twenty percent of Norilsk's "free" workers were actually free to leave if they wanted to. Out of the

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[235] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 42
[236] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 67
[237] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 128
[238] Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, xvii
[239] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 81

25,000 supposedly free workers at the Norilsk plants production facilities, 15,000 were ex-convicts, 3,997 were special settlers, and 1,000 were exiles.[240]

Stalin's death in 1953 did not bring any major, immediate changes to Kolyma. There was a boost in prisoner morale, but it wasn't until the mid 1950's that notable change started to occur.[241] In the second half of the 1950's, most of the Kolyma camps were closed. However, some of them were still operating into the 1960's. In the 1970's, Kolyma was still a place of exile for political prisoners though it was not an official Gulag camp site.[242]

Vorkuta was a changed camp after the second revolt in 1953 and without Stalin leading the Soviet Union, the Vorkuta camp complex slowly went into decline. In the late 1950's, thousands of prisoners were freed from Vorkuta but they had to sign an agreement saying that they would not discuss what happened or acknowledge being in a labor camp. The biggest wave of liberations for Vorkuta was in 1956, the same year that Norilsk was officially closed, and at this time, much of the barbed wire encircling the sub-camps was removed. Villages began to grow on former labor camp sites.[243] For many prisoners, Vorkuta was now all they knew; moreover, their homeland had been destroyed or changed drastically. They had no way of finding their family and no home to return to so many former prisoners stayed in Vorkuta and continued working in the coal mines as free men. In 1960, Vorkuta officially changed from being a Gulag camp to a corrective labor colony. As a corrective labor colony, it never held more than a few thousand prisoners at one

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[240] Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag,* 83
[241] Conquest, *Kolyma: The Arctic Death Camps,* 65
[242] Kizny, *Gulag,* 332
[243] Satter, *It Was A Long Time Ago and It Never Happened Anyway,* 266

time. Those held prisoner in Vorkuta when it was a corrective labor colony were convicted of serious crimes such as rape and murder.[244]

Historian David Satter writes of his trip to Vorkuta in 2008, "Official histories did not mention that Vorkuta had been built by prisoners. Yet reminders of the camp were everywhere. There were burial grounds in and around the rebuilt settlements and children regularly found skulls and bones."[245] As the modern city of Vorkuta began to be built in the 1940s and 1950s by Vorkuta prisoners, it was built over existing cemeteries and burial grounds.[246]

Today in Magadan's central square, there is a bronze bust of Edward Berzin, erected in 1989, on the 50th anniversary of the granting of a municipal charter to Magadan. An elementary school and one of the city's streets also bear Berzin's name, as he was the founder of the Kolyma camp complex, the largest network of Gulag camps in the Soviet Union.[247] There is also a monument dedicated to the victims of Kolyma, which is a sculpture of human faces, about twelve meters tall, that points north, the direction that tens of thousands of prisoners were sent and never returned.[248]

The impact the Gulag system had on Siberia can be seen in the exponential population growth and economic growth. In 1926, 12.6 million people lived in Siberia, in 1939, 16.5 million people, in 1959, 22.4 million people and in 1989, the population reached 32 million people.[249] The opening of coal, nickel, gold, oil, and

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[244] Barenberg, *Gulag Town, Company Town*, 204
[245] Satter, *It Was A Long Time Ago and It Never Happened Anyway,* 266
[246] Satter, *It Was A Long Time Ago And It Never Happened Anyway,* 257
[247] Kizny, *Gulag*, 303
[248] Kizny, *Gulag*, 303
[249] Hartley, *Siberia: A History of the People,* 219

gas reserves transformed the landscape and provided new opportunities. By the 1980's, Siberia was the source of over 80 percent of the Soviet Union's oil resources and 90 percent of its gas.[250] New cities were founded and the population of existing cities massively increased moreover, suburbs expanded into the forest and tundra.

Norilsk was officially founded in 1935 as the northernmost city in the world, in order to mine the largest nickel deposits in the world and Magadan, the capital of Kolyma, was founded in 1929 and both grew into towns with over 150,000 inhabitants.[251] Norilsk's population peaked in 1985 with 183,000 residents. In 2005, there were only 131,900 residents. This is because life remains difficult in Northern Siberia and Norilsk was listed as one of the most polluted places on earth in 2007. Berries and mushrooms found in a 48-kilometer radius from the town were found to be toxic.[252]

The economic collapse in the 1990's after the disintegration of the Soviet Union had a huge negative impact on Northern Siberia. The populations of major cities and towns dropped drastically. Some towns were even abandoned because there wasn't enough money or the labor to support the infrastructure. The population of Magadan dropped to half its size.[253]

Conclusion

Michael Solomon, a Kolyma prisoner, reflected on his time in the Gulag, drawing the conclusion in 1971 when his memoir was published, "With few changes, the aim of Russia's repressive apparatus remains what it was 20 years ago:

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[250] Hartley, *Siberia: A History of the People,* 219
[251] Hartley, *Siberia: A History of the People,* 220
[252] Hartley, *Siberia: A History of the People,* 227
[253] Hartley, *Siberia: A History of the People,* 238

the physical destruction of its opponents. The higher the status and prestige of the prisoner, the more savage the methods to annihilate him."[254] This quote perfectly encapsulates the Gulag system in Northern Siberia though it is important to remember that the Gulag camps were not "death camps." The harsh and remote climates of the camps of Norilsk, Kolyma, and Vorkuta were ideal for the prisoners who the Soviet Union deemed most dangerous.

A more complete examination of the formation and evolution of Vorkuta, Kolyma, and Norilsk was obtained by reading various primary and secondary sources. These sources included memoirs by former prisoners, interviews conducted by the United States House of Representatives and representatives of Harvard University with former prisoners, Soviet literary figures who spent time in the labor camps of Northern Siberia, an account written by former United States Vice President, Henry Wallace as well as secondary sources written by historians, economists, and one by an anthropologist. Though these cities and labor camps were located thousands of miles apart, their similar climates and vast abundance of natural resources vital to the Soviet Union's industrialization plan made them similar in many ways. The labor camps were the first permanent structures in these areas and they were all formed in the early 1930's. The three camp complexes grew exponentially in size and quickly became crucial parts of the Soviet Union and Gulag system for their natural resources and containment of the Soviet Union's most feared criminals.

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[254] Solomon, *Magadan,* 225

The work in Vorkuta, Kolyma, and Norilsk was primarily mining and the living conditions across these camps were almost identical. Conditions varied in the specific sub-camp in each camp complex, but the climate and limited materials gave the cities and camps similar structures and features. Prisoner friendships were crucial to survival in each of the camps and an awareness of friends and enemies was important for prisoners to make it out of the Gulag system alive.

Each Gulag camp can be examined individually, but it is the similarities between the camps, especially the three largest camp complexes in Northern Siberia, that are crucial in understanding the creation and function of the Gulag system and these cities in Soviet society. Northern Siberia is an especially unique case, because there were no permanent structures and civilizations in these areas until the Soviet government created Gulag camps there. Though this research focuses on the three largest camp complexes in Northern Siberia, Vorkuta, Norilsk, and Kolyma, there were many other camps and camp complexes that were created in Northern Siberia. Since none of these camps were as large or had as many prisoners pass through them, there is significantly less information available.

The Gulag system in Northern Siberia was created to extract valuable resources through forced labor, and to contain the Soviet Union's largest threats to a political and social utopia. Michael Solomon, a former Kolyma prisoner remarked, "If I do look back at those years of torture and terror in Kolyma, I can only ask myself: 'Is there anything in the world more splendid, more precious, more irreplaceable than freedom?'"[255]

[255] Solomon, *Magadan,* 207

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Шишкин В.И. Актуальные проблемы истории советской Сибири, Академия наук СССР, 1990, ISBN 5-02-029631-7