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6. FORCED LABOR ON THE HOME FRONT

The Gulag and Total War in Western Siberia, 1940–1945

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IN THE *GULAG ARCHIPELAGO* Alexander Solzhenitsyn writes that prisoners found out about the German invasion of the Soviet Union only through rumor.[1] Although this may have been the case for the Gulag's more remote "islands," and rumor was certainly an important form of communication in the camps, much of the Gulag was fully integrated into the local, regional, and national planned economy, and prisoners were well aware of what was going on and of their role. One Gulag memoirist recalled how the outbreak of war affected a small workshop in Tomsk, western Siberia:

> Until this time, there was a children's labor colony here. They sent them someplace and surrounded the territory with a high fence with barbed wire on top with towers on the corners for guards, fully in order. The zone itself was divided into two parts: one part with barracks for living, and the second part [for] production with workshops. When the colonists lived here, they had a mus[ical instrument] factory, making guitars, balalaikas, and mandolins.
>
> But for us *zek*s came something entirely different. . . . In these very workshops only, in the place of the joiners' benches, [they] added lathes, and, well, we prepared all for the front, all for the war![2] What we produced were called readymade mortar shells [*gatovye* (sic) *miny*].[3] But really what appeared were mortar shells prepared with our hands.[4]

A study of the Gulag in western Siberia during the Second World War combines two stories that have usually been told in isolation, if they are told at all. The first is the story of the Gulag at war, and the second is that of total war in the Soviet Union from the perspective of the home front. Essentially the present chapter asks what light a case study of a fairly typical Gulag camp can shed on these stories.

Roger Chickering argues that total war is an "ideal type" in the Weberian sense, never reaching full totality. Yet the Gulag during the Second World War approached that totality in its comprehensive support of the armed forces, even to the detriment of the prisoners' health and lives. While cautioning against overuse of the term "total war," Chickering defines the phrase, in a practical sense, as including "increasing size of armies, the broadening scope of operations, the growing comprehensiveness of the effort to support armed forces, and the systematic, calculated incorporation of civilians into the category of participants."[5] The Second World War was without doubt the harshest period of the Gulag's existence, and prisoners died in incredibly large numbers at the same time as they manufactured artillery shells, built airfields, sewed Red Army uniforms, and produced foodstuffs for the front, to name just a few of the myriad war-related economic activities of Soviet forced labor. These activities clearly fall under Chickering's definition.

The western Siberian camps were more or less "typical" Gulag camps. They were never prioritized as those of Noril′sk were, for example. They were not a synecdoche, as were the camps of Kolyma. They were in neither the harshest climate nor the most forgiving. More important, however, the camps of western Siberia included a wide range of economic activity and types. Many of the largest subdivisions were located within the limits of major cities, including Novosibirsk and Tomsk. Unlike some of the Gulag's more remote camp systems, the urban areas of western Siberia were already well established and did not owe their existence primarily to the forced labor network. The case study thus provides a fascinating look at how Gulag and Soviet society interacted. Western Siberia, moreover, was crucial for the Soviet home front, as one of two main regions for evacuated factories and one of the most important receiving areas for evacuated personnel. Unlike most European areas of the Soviet Union, western Siberia actually grew economically over the course of the Second World War. While the USSR's industrial output for 1945 was only 91 percent of what it was in 1940, western Siberia's industrial output was 279 percent of its level in 1940.[6]

Gulag wartime operations in western Siberia certainly give pause to the idea that the Gulag's central function was to help purify society by removing undesirable individuals and groups. Far from being removed from society, the region's camps and colonies were fully integrated into the local wartime economy, and prisoners regularly interacted with nonprisoners. By and large, moreover, the local focus was more on wartime production than on the isolation of enemies, although certainly we cannot completely separate economic and political motivations. Thus this case study questions both Amir Weiner's characterization of the Great Patriotic War as the key "purification" event of

the Soviet gardening state, and Steven Barnes's related argument concerning the Gulag's role in determining who belonged (and who did not belong) in Soviet society.[7]

The question of the Gulag's central function during wartime also allows for a preliminary discussion of the Gulag in comparative perspective. In terms of penal function, the mass mobilization of forced labor and the integrated nature of the Gulag mark the Gulag as at least a partial anomaly in modern criminal justice systems, where the stated role of the prison is related, in varying degrees, to deterrence, isolation, retribution, and rehabilitation. Certainly all four are present in the Soviet camp system, but the added emphasis on mass mobilization to aid the economy, plus a deemphasis on isolation (in practice) point to important differences in the Gulag. Moreover, as a wartime system of concentration camps the Gulag actually appears to have been *less* important to issues of state power and control than other camp systems in wartime, including those of Nazi Germany and the British during the South African War of 1899–1903. Unlike other concentration camps, it is not clear that the Gulag during the Second World War functioned as part of the "state of exception," in Giorgio Agamben's sense of the phrase.

The present chapter, then, offers an analysis of the wartime mobilization of forced labor in western Siberia, while including a preliminary discussion of how this aspect of the home front fits into both the Soviet system and a broader comparative framework.

The Gulag in Western Siberia: An Overview

Western Siberia's camp system was well established by the outbreak of the Second World War.[8] Encouraged by the perceived success of the Solovetskii camps, authorities created SibULON (the Siberian Administration of Camps of Special Significance) in 1929, even before GULag—the Main Administration of Camps—came into existence in April 1930. Initially charged with overseeing camps stretching all the way from Omsk to Krasnoiarsk, Siblag, as it became known, saw its jurisdiction shrink in size as western Siberia was divided administratively over the course of the 1930s. By 1937 Siblag was in charge of corrective labor camps, corrective labor colonies, and special settlements only in Novosibirsk oblast, which at the time comprised present-day Kemerovo, Novosibirsk, and Tomsk oblasts. Two separate camp systems—Gornoshorlag and Tomasinlag—existed in the region in the late 1930s and early 1940s, but both had been decommissioned, with many prisoners reabsorbed into Siblag, before the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. At the outbreak of Soviet involvement in the Second World War, the western Siberian camp system thus appears roughly as pictured in Figure 6.1.

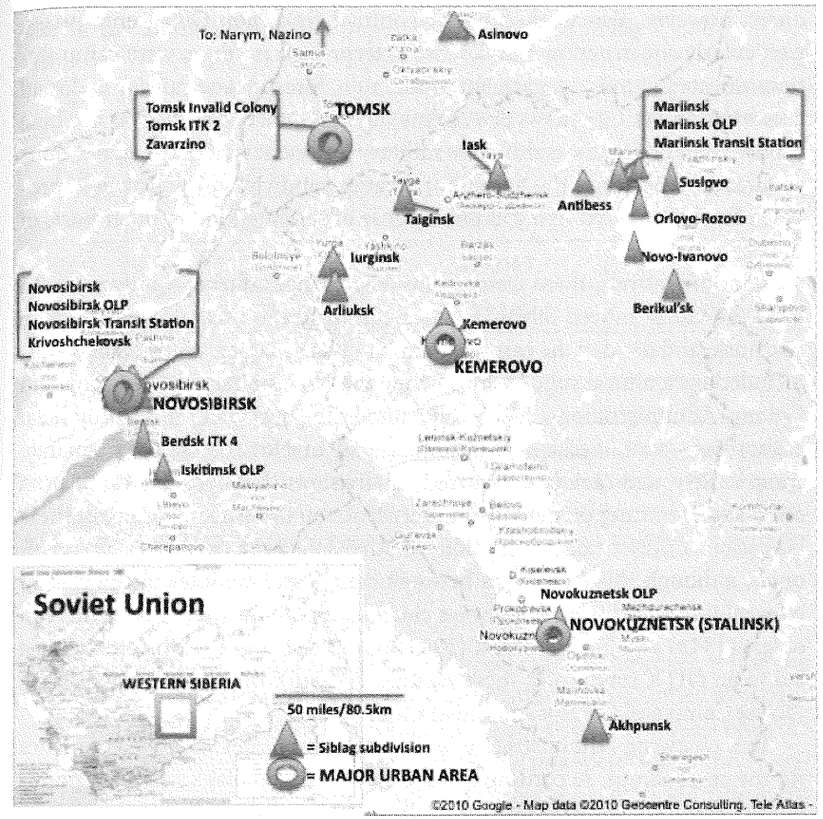


Figure 6.1. Key Siblag subdivisions, circa May 1941.

The author created this map using Google Maps, the map of the Soviet Union (1989) at http://theneosr.egloos.com/1109595, and Microsoft PowerPoint. The size of the triangle does not correspond to the size of the subdivision.

Note, however, that many of the camp subdivisions labeled on this map also had several stations (*punkty*), which were often a few kilometers apart from one another. As we can see from this map, camp subdivisions dotted the region, but all major urban areas had at least one subdivision, and many of the other subdivisions could be found in close proximity to the Trans-Siberian Railway. It was the special settlements, many of which were located in Narym, that tended to be far removed from the region's main cities and towns.

The region's camps were economically diversified, although agriculture predominated. Indeed Siblag, along with Karlag in Kazakhstan, was tasked with sending foodstuffs to camps throughout the Soviet Union. Many pris-

oners, however, also worked under contract from non-Gulag enterprises, particularly construction and defense enterprises, and there were camp stations devoted to mining, garment production, forestry, and railway and road construction. As I discuss below, following the outbreak of the war all these subdivisions and stations shifted to military production (if they had not done so already), including the agricultural camp subdivisions, which now provided food to the Red Army at the expense of sending food to other parts of the Gulag.

Administratively, there were several key changes during the war, too. In 1942 the Gulag moved Siblag's central administration from Novosibirsk to Mariinsk, and divided the camp system into two separate camps.[9] Siblag now included agricultural subdivisions, while the Novosibirsk Oblast Camp and Colony Administration—technically under the jurisdiction of provincial authorities—continued to be headquartered in Novosibirsk as a separate camp system and mainly comprised subdivisions that contracted out prisoner labor, focusing on defense and construction industries.[10] Many of these Novosibirsk oblast camp and colony subdivisions were corrective labor colonies, although the differences between camps and colonies in the case of Novosibirsk oblast were not always clear. Later, the formation of Kemerovo oblast (1943) and Tomsk oblast (1944) out of the larger Novosibirsk oblast led to an OITK for each of these regions, divided from the old Novosibirsk Oblast Camp and Colony Administration.

This changing administrative landscape complicates compiled statistics for the area's camps. According to published figures, Siblag's 1 January population from 1940 to 1945 is shown in Table 6.1.

Clearly, there are major discrepancies between Siblag and the Gulag in prisoner population changes from 1941–1942 and 1942–1943. The disproportionate increase in Siblag prisoners in 1941 was mostly due to the outbreak of the war. The NKVD evacuated close to 750,000 prisoners from corrective labor camps and colonies under threat from the Nazi invasion, and some of these prisoners ended up in Siblag or in one of Siblag's two transit stations, Novosibirsk and Mariinsk.[11] After the liquidation of Gornoshorlag in early 1941, moreover, the NKVD transferred many of the camp's eight thousand prisoners to Siblag.

The most striking change in Siblag's wartime population occurred over the course of 1942. The 1 January 1943 prisoner population was only 39.1 percent of the 1 January 1942 population, at first glance an astounding drop. For the Gulag as a whole, the 1 January 1943 population was 83.5 percent of the previous year's population, making the Siblag data stand out even more.

TABLE 6.1.1 January prisoner population, Siblag and Gulag

Year	Siblag (1 January population)	Gulag (1 January population)	Siblag population (percent of total)
1940	40,275	1,659,992	2.43
1941	43,857	1,929,729	2.20
1942	77,919	1,777,043	4.38
1943	30,463	1,484,182	2.05
1944	29,627	1,179,819	2.51
1945	39,455	1,460,677	2.70

Source: N. G. Okhotin and A. B. Roginskii, eds., *Sistema ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagerei v SSSR, 1923–1960: Spravochnik*, comp. M. B. Smirnov (Moscow: Zven'ia, 1998), 392. For Gulag statistics, see Aleksandr Bezborodov et al., eds., *Istoriia stalinskogo GULAGa: Konets 1920-kh–pervaia polovina 1950-kh godov. Sobranie dokumentov*, 7 vols. (Moscow: Rosspen, 2004–5), 4:129–30, Doc. no. 49.

What compiled Siblag statistics do not make explicit, however, is that the Novosibirsk Oblast Camp and Colony Administration functioned as a large camp system after the division of Siblag.[12] In the spring of 1942, just after the division, Siblag reported a population of 33,737 prisoners, while the Novosibirsk Oblast Camp and Colony Administration housed 50,453 prisoners, the majority working in so-called contract camps.[13] The Novosibirsk Oblast Camp and Colony Administration remained a large system.[14] Adding together the figures for these two camp systems, then, the actual population for the camps in the area probably increased from 1 January 1942 to 1 January 1943, in contrast to the decrease seen across the Gulag, revealing the importance of the Gulag in the region to the wartime Gulag as whole.[15]

The Gulag at War

The Gulag at war has not been the subject of much in-depth analysis in the small but burgeoning subfield of Gulag studies. One of the first monographs about the Gulag based on declassified documents was Edwin Bacon's *The Gulag at War*. Overall, Bacon's account gives the impression of an economic rationale for Gulag operations. Yet Bacon's main purpose was to reveal what sort of information one can find on the Gulag in the archives, and he used the wartime framework mostly to limit the chronological scope of his analysis.[16]

Hence much remains to be said on the Gulag's role in wartime mobilization, especially considering the voluminous amount of scholarship on both the Gulag and the wartime Soviet Union that has appeared since Bacon's work.

In their study of Noril′sk during the war, Leonid Borodkin and Simon Ertz note that unfit prisoners were often turned away from this camp, which had a relatively low mortality rate and remained relatively productive.[17] For Noril′sk at least, it seems that economic concerns trumped penal ones.[18] Alan Barenberg's recent work on the Gulag in Vorkuta underscores the economic rationale behind Vorkuta's wartime expansion. It was the closest coal supply to the blockaded city of Leningrad, and the largest supply of coal in European Russia after the Nazi invasion and occupation of key coal-producing regions.[19] The Gulag administration, moreover, had divided in 1941 into various *glavki* (main administrations), based on *economic* function (e.g., GULDZhS, the Main Administration for Camps of Railway Construction) rather than political considerations.[20] Yet economics—that is, a ready supply of forced labor for crucial production activities—does not tell the whole story.[21] Gulag labor was very inefficient and, despite a stated goal of self-sufficiency, generally cost the state more than it gave back.[22]

The politics of release during the war also clearly indicate that penal and political concerns were crucial. Many thousands of prisoners—often relatively healthy young men—were released to fight on the front; this without question hindered the Gulag's economic production. Although the Gulag remained a "revolving door" for those with lighter sentences, the regime barred the release of counterrevolutionaries who had completed their sentences.[23] Article 58ers (political prisoners) tended to receive harsher treatment than other prisoner populations and were thus more likely to be unfit for work. They were, moreover, by definition politically unreliable and thus hardly the most likely candidates to help the camp system in the Soviet Union's war effort. As Steven Barnes describes, "at a time when it was mobilized for a total war, the Gulag consisted of a smaller, less healthy, less politically reliable, older, and more feminine detained population with a smaller . . . staff."[24] Golfo Alexopoulos has argued that this sort of evidence, along with the frequent release and arrests, shows that "penal practices fundamentally undermined economic production."[25] Barnes even takes this a step farther, pointing to the continued efforts at reeducation as evidence of the Gulag's role as a "transformer of man," part of the modern gardening state.[26] Alexopoulos's most recent work complicates the question of the rationale behind Gulag operations, as she argues that, by design, a fundamental aspect of the Gulag was the destruction of the health and lives of the prisoners. She shows that labor categories for prisoners, based on physical health and capabilities, were designed to work the prisoners to the point of death or near-death. Although an economic rationale may be apparent in this analysis, fundamentally Alexopoulos agrees with Solzhenitsyn's contention that the camps were "destructive labor" camps.[27]

These emphases (economic, penal, ideological) are, of course, not mutually exclusive. If camp authorities at Noril′sk received only the able-bodied prisoners, Siblag's administrators frequently complained about the poor physical condition of the arriving inmates. In a 1943 report on conditions at Camp Station no. 3 (in Novosibirsk) authorities blamed poor production results on the worsening food supply and the "huge" number of arriving prisoners who were physically able to perform only light tasks.[28] Taken as a whole, then, the motivation for camp operations may have varied from camp to camp, and even subdivision to subdivision.

Despite the poor condition of prisoners entering western Siberian camps, on balance the case study points to an economic rationale for Gulag operations, at least at the local level. On one hand, there was an immediate shift to wartime production, in some cases even in support of the Winter War with Finland; suspect groups and individuals were given positions of responsibility because of their economic contributions; prisoners in crucial industries had to remain in the camps even after the end of their sentences; and camp propaganda was geared mainly toward increasing economic production. The shift to wartime production itself is not surprising. Similar shifts happened in many non-Gulag enterprises, and a crucial aspect of Soviet defense planning for most of the 1930s was an emphasis on the convertibility of industry to military production.[29] On the other hand, these economic factors intertwined and often conflicted with political and other factors, as the release of healthy prisoners to the front suggests.

As evidenced by Mikhail Grigor′evich Gorbachev, quoted near the outset of this chapter, the shift to military production had a profound effect on the region's camp system. The Tomsk Corrective Labor Colony, which Gorbachev describes, became an important part of the NKVD's munitions production. A plan for November 1941, for example, called for the production of ten thousand 50mm shells at the Tomsk plant, out of a total of sixty-five thousand for the Gulag as a whole.[30] Pre-June 1941 munitions plans for the NKVD had not even included the Tomsk Corrective Labor Colony, revealing the rapid shift to military production in the region.[31]

Alongside the Tomsk Corrective Labor Colony, the Iask subdivision had been sewing Red Army uniforms since the second half of 1940.[32] Another corrective labor colony near Tomsk ceased manufacturing furniture and began to produce skis for the Red Army. According to one Novosibirsk party

committee (*obkom*) document, Siblag engineers even devised a way to attach a machine-gun system to skis, an invention that was tested and approved by the administration of the Siberian Military District.[33] In Novosibirsk prisoners at the large Krivoshchekovsk subdivision worked on the construction of the enormous munitions factory People's Commissariat of Munitions Combine no. 179, and under contract in the combine's various workshops, producing artillery and other munitions.[34] Prisoners stepped up construction on Chkalov Aviation Factory no. 153—another key defense enterprise—and on a local airfield.[35] Even the agricultural subdivisions played an important role for the front by sending food and horses to the Red Army. In early 1943, as camp mortality rates reached their highest recorded levels, one of Siblag's wartime slogans was, "Give the country and the front more vegetables, more foodstuffs."[36]

Central authorities clearly recognized the usefulness of prisoner labor for the war effort. On 30 July 1941 the NKVD in Moscow noted that a significant proportion of Gulag prisoners working on airfields and airports were nearing the end of their terms. The NKVD ordered freed prisoners to remain until the completion of the work, even if their sentences had technically ended.[37] Local camp authorities also recognized this economic imperative. At the Tomsk Corrective Labor Colony mentioned above, authorities granted permission to a convicted Trotskyist to live outside the camp zone, without guard, because he was a trained engineer and held a crucial position as the foundry shop's acting chief.[38] The practice of placing so-called counterrevolutionaries in key camp economic positions and giving them considerable privileges was common throughout the wartime Gulag and went against regulations.[39] In November 1941 the Novosibirsk party committee specifically called on Siblag's director, G. N. Kopaev, to send "qualified engineers and workers, sentenced for daily life *and* counterrevolutionary crimes," to the region's defense enterprises.[40] In these cases the economic rationale for camp operations, as opposed to political imperatives, is readily apparent.

Even camp propaganda, where one might expect a political rationale to be most visible, emphasized economic production. Of course, the economic and political are difficult to separate in the Soviet context, as proving oneself politically often meant performing competently in economic production roles, while the opposite was also true: authorities often viewed poor economic performance as evidence of political unreliability. Wartime camp propaganda focused on inspiring or shaming prisoners to work harder. In particular, camp authorities attempted to inspire prisoners by revealing the exploits of ex-prisoners on the front. As in Steven Barnes's description of Karlag at war, ex-Siblag prisoners supposedly sent letters back to Siblag, recounting their

experiences and telling their former campmates that "idlers or saboteurs" were "direct helpers of the enemy." The prisoners who read and/or heard the letters were then reportedly inspired to work "selflessly on the home front for the rout of the enemy."[41]

While we should no doubt be skeptical about the truth of these reports—after all, conditions were terrible in most subdivisions, especially in 1942 and 1943—there are, indeed, numerous examples of ex-prisoners who received awards for their exploits at the front. Several even attained recognition as heroes of the Soviet Union.[42]

Another direct incentive was the practice of early release as a reward for productive labor. Even though the formal practice of reducing a prisoner's sentence by giving credit for days worked had ended in 1939, prisoners continued to receive early release for fulfilling and overfulfilling their work norms. In 1939 the Politburo had explicitly stated that prisoners must serve their full terms, with incentives in the form of rewards (higher rations, better barracks, etc.), rather than early release.[43] Local authorities, however, recognized the need for strong positive incentives. Although this practice in some ways reinforces Barnes's argument that the Gulag was not only about death but also about redemption, we should be somewhat cautious about such a clear-cut binary. First, many of these released prisoners worked in the camps, in the same position, after their release. Second, we will see later that the reasons for wartime release were quite complex. In any case, however, camp propaganda attempted to show prisoners that early release was a possibility if they overfulfilled their work norms. Many camp cultural reports include a section on "early release and reduced sentences."[44] In the second half of 1943 the Novosibirsk Oblast Camp and Colony Administration allowed the early release of 161 prisoners and reduced the sentences of another 262. Part of the work of the Cultural-Educational Department was to inform prisoners that only through "selfless labor and excellent behavior in daily life [*v bytu*] can they receive conditional early release."[45]

If Gulag propaganda in western Siberia as evidence for an economic or political rationale for Gulag operations is somewhat contradictory, there are some compelling reasons to view the Gulag primarily through a political lens. Perhaps most important, the extremely high mortality rates in the region during the Second World War attest to the lack of emphasis authorities placed on productive labor, while the upkeep of Gulag prisoners and personnel was also quite expensive. From January 1942 through August 1943 the Novosibirsk Oblast Camp and Colony Administration lost no less than 1.87 percent of its prisoners per month, with a high of 3.52 percent in May 1942.[46] In 1943 the Novosibirsk party committee formed an inspection brigade to

examine the conditions of prisoners working in defense industries.[47] The brigade's report notes huge increases in mortality and invalid rates, particularly at the third Krivoshchekovsk division, in charge of construction at Combine no. 179. In January 1943, 2.2 percent of prisoners in the region's defense industries died; in February the figure was 2.9 percent; and in March 2.6 percent. At the third Krivoshchekovsk division, in March alone 5.4 percent of prisoners died. These percentages reflect monthly, rather than annualized, death rates and would translate into huge yearly mortality figures, well in excess of the average for the Gulag as a whole.

Wartime shortages and overwork meant that the struggle for survival in the camps entered a harsher stage, and prisoners often fought one another for the scarce food available. One prisoner, D. E. Alin, who worked at Chkalov Aviation Factory no. 153, remembered that although rations were drastically reduced after the beginning of the war, at first it was possible to live on the miniscule 260–460 grams of bread per day, plus a small amount of kasha, and that many prisoners supplemented this ration with food sent in packages from relatives.[48] As the war dragged on, however, the situation became dire. By the beginning of 1942 the prisoners in Alin's camp split a regular ration five ways. The prisoners began to smuggle and hide crowbars and other items (even axes) that could be used as weapons, not to try to escape but to defend their own rations and intimidate other prisoners into giving their rations away. Alin recalls an incident when he found a new arrival at the camp, who happened to be a distant cousin, with his head bashed in, murdered for his small bowl of kasha. Alin himself became so ill and malnourished by the fall of 1942 that he lost consciousness one day at work and considered himself lucky to survive the camp hospital, where patients were "dying like flies."[49]

Many prisoners became invalids and simply could not work, and some prisoners in this category received early release. The Novosibirsk Oblast Camp and Colony Administration's 1943 inspection brigade, when discussing invalids, noted, "This contingent, on the basis of the instruction of the NKVD of the USSR, the NKIu of the USSR, and the procurator of the [Soviet] Union from 23 October 1942, no. 467/18-71/117s, is released from camp ahead of schedule, as it is a large burden for the camp. By 1 April of t[his] y[ear], the medical commissions under the ITL, as a result of physical examination, had recognized as invalids 7,491 persons. Of these, 2,917 were released ahead of schedule, and 875 have died."[50]

In a 1944 report based on 1943 inspections of the area's camps and colonies, the procurator overseeing camp operations, A. Kondrashev, actually *encouraged early release for invalids as a way to help improve the camp's mortality statistics*. His statement provides a local example that supports Alexopoulos's

contention that large numbers of prisoners were released to die and underscores the utter disregard for the human misery of the camps—which, while not surprising, is especially galling considering his role as an inspector.[51] As Kondrashev wrote, "it is worth noting that the Camp Administration as well as the procurator in the first half of 1943 paid insufficient attention to fulfilling the directives of the NKVD and procurator of the USSR, [and] as a consequence in August there was a high mortality rate in the camp, whereas people could have been released in a timely way [*svoevremenno*], thereby considerably reducing the death rate."[52] Kondrashev went on, however, to suggest that the political reliability of those released must be considered and cited with disapproval two cases of release—one an Article 58er and one sentenced under article 162.d (theft of state property)—where "state security has not been observed."[53]

We see here that wartime release was not only about rewards for productive labor or about providing more soldiers for the front but was often related to relieving local camps of the need to care for dying and severely ill prisoners.[54] On one hand, that authorities frequently released dying prisoners conceivably swings the pendulum back toward an economic explanation for Gulag operations—these prisoners, after all, were a burden economically and could not help production quotas. On the other hand, if Gulag economic production had been a top priority, one might expect authorities to place more emphasis on maintaining the prisoners' health. Although the central NKVD early in 1942 ordered the creation of "preventive health" camp stations for every camp, designed to be well lit, spacious, and with access to increased rations, ostensibly to nurse unhealthy prisoners back to the position of productive laborers, it is clear that local authorities lacked the resources to create such stations.[55]

The upkeep of prisoners required expenses—including medical infrastructure and living quarters as well as the upkeep of personnel and guards, who were often demobilized soldiers. Camp Commander Kopaev complained in 1941, for example, that Siblag spent 11 million rubles/year maintaining the nine thousand invalid prisoners in the camp.[56] Siblag's budget for that same year allotted 25 million rubles for the upkeep of the camp's approximately four thousand guards, which, as Kopaev pointed out, was enough "to build a decent-sized factory [*nemalen'kii zavod*]."[57] The discrepancy in funding between guards and invalid prisoners is telling, especially considering that invalids would have required considerable medical expenses.

The issue of prisoners' ill health is central to the discussion but once again complex. From late 1941 through at least the first half of 1943 the Soviet Union was fighting for its very existence, and resources were scarce for ev-

eryone. The peak year for mortality in western Siberia's non-Gulag population was 1942, the same year that the Gulag also reached its highest recorded mortality rates (2.69 and 24.9 percent, respectively).[58] Even outside the camps evacuees to Novosibirsk oblast received less bread than the amount the Gulag prisoner technically should have received before the war began.[59] Oleg Khlevniuk has demonstrated that, in certain times and places, rations in the Gulag were even better than in surrounding towns and villages for certain types of food.[60] So the lack of emphasis on prisoner health is not surprising given the general circumstances in the country. Nevertheless, it appears that priority camps—such as Noril′sk, Vorkuta, and even those in the Kolyma region—may have fared better than more typical camps like Siblag and others in western Siberia, precisely due to perceived economic necessity. Noril′sk received only able-bodied prisoners, for example, and its mortality rate peaked at 7.2 percent in 1943, compared with an overall Gulag mortality rate of 22.4 percent during that year. The mortality rate in the Kolyma region in 1943 was 12.4 percent, which was similar to that of Vorkuta.[61] As discussed above, the western Siberian camps experienced mortality rates that well exceeded the Gulag average.

The western Siberian camps thus show us that, at least as far as the evidence on mortality is concerned, both economic and political factors motivated camp operations, and this motivation varied from camp to camp. The rapid shift to military production, as well as the flexibility in labor use of prisoners and the incentives provided to exhort prisoners to work harder, tips the balance in favor of an economic motivation in the region. In contrast, the inefficiencies point to more political concerns, as inefficiency in labor and upkeep is not a problem if isolation is the key goal. Yet the close interaction between free and forced labor suggest that one of the main political concerns—isolation of those deemed dangerous to society, a common component of most prison systems—was not the most crucial element of Gulag operations. We see this interaction most clearly when considering issues surrounding the Gulag and total war.

Total War

If most modern penal systems are designed with some degree of emphasis on deterrence, isolation, retribution, and rehabilitation, the total war experience of the Soviet Gulag points to peculiarities of the Soviet system.[62] Certainly, the Gulag contained within it all four of these justifications for imprisonment. Yet although many modern penal systems use some form of forced labor, the Gulag's focus on prisoner labor in key economic sectors is unusual.

As the penitentiary developed in Europe during the nineteenth century, labor became an integral part of daily life, but it was usually meant as part of the punitive or rehabilitative process. At most, economically speaking, authorities hoped the products of prisoner labor could offset the costs of running the penitentiary or give convicts necessary skills for future reintegration.[63] For Foucault forced labor was not economic at all but part of the disciplinary mechanism carried out on and through the prisoners' bodies. As he writes, "the prison is not a workshop; it is, it must be of itself, a machine whose convict-workers are both the cogs and the products."[64] The Gulag, however, was different in its application of forced labor, and this difference is especially evident in wartime. It *was* a workshop, and its specific products (artillery shells, uniforms, and so on) were intended to be useful to the state—perhaps even more useful than the convicts themselves, who died in large numbers.

Gulag prisoners sacrificed their health, and in many cases their lives, to support the Soviet war effort. In western Siberia, where agricultural camps predominated, prisoners even produced foodstuffs for the front while they themselves were malnourished and lived on the brink of starvation. If we understand the "totality" of total war in the Weberian sense, as a pure state not actually possible in reality, Gulag wartime production came close to reaching that state. There was almost nothing left over.

Certainly the shift to wartime production in the region, outlined above, points to the role the local Gulag played in the Soviet total war effort. The widespread use of forced laborers in defense industries seems to have helped production, at least from the regime's point of view. For the Gulag as a whole, from mid-1941 to the end of 1944 prisoners produced over twenty-five million shells, thirty-five million hand grenades and fuses, nine million mines, and a hundred thousand bombs, not to mention other military material such as telephone cable, skis, rafts, gas masks, and uniforms. As one scholar writes, "it was prison labor that filled many of the gaps created by the vast expansion of the Red Army during World War II."[65] Novosibirsk Oblast Camp and Colony Administration documents proudly report the awarding of the Order of Lenin to Combine no. 179 in November 1943 and give credit to prisoners for helping to make this happen.[66]

Combine no. 179 and Chkalov Aviation Factory no. 153 were two of the most important defense enterprises located within the city limits of Novosibirsk. Combine no. 179, situated on the left bank of the enormous Ob′ River, was a sprawling complex of factories and barracks and home to the largest camp subdivision in the region (fig. 6.2). On the eve of the war in May 1941 Krivoshchekovsk, with its various camp stations, held 7,807 prisoners.[67]



Figure 6.2. In the foundry of Combine no. 179 (1943). *Source:* The Museum of the City of Novosibirsk (Muzei goroda Novosibirska).

The degree to which forced and free labor overlapped in Combine no. 179 is striking, lending weight to Kate Brown's assertion that we should understand forced and free labor in the Soviet Union not as a binary but as a continuum, with various degrees of coercion and incentives provided in almost all contexts.[68]

Most striking is that provincial authorities, when organizing the workforce for military production, do not appear to have viewed Gulag labor much differently from labor from non-Gulag sources. All were simply a resource. Already before the war, in constructing Combine no. 179, the Novosibirsk party committee in December 1940 called for the transfer of five thousand Siblag prisoners as well as six thousand workers from the Soviet Union's central provinces to complete the project.[69] The Winter War against Finland necessitated the increased production of war materials, and local authorities sought to step up the production of this key industrial complex. The resolution's listing of these numbers one after another emphasizes the authorities' wide-ranging ability to draw on human resources for specific projects and blurs the distinction between free and forced labor.

Even central party authorities drew on a combination of Gulag and non-Gulag sources to help build Combine no. 179. In late December 1940

the Politburo itself discussed the amount of funding to supply for capital investment in Combine no. 179, and central plans called for production of eight hundred thousand shell casings (*korpusy snariadov*) of various types, as well as numerous other munitions, to be produced in 1941. The Politburo charged L. P. Beria, head of the NKVD, with increasing the number of Gulag prisoners working at the combine to ten thousand. The Politburo also ordered squared beams and saw timber (*brusa i pilomaterialy*) to be removed from the recently decommissioned Tomasinlag and shipped to the combine to aid in construction. Authorities in Novosibirsk and Kirov oblasts, Altai krai, and the Bashkir ASSR had to send eleven thousand free workers in the first half of 1941.[70] The Politburo ended this particular discussion by calling for the inclusion of Combine no. 179 as one of the "country's especially important construction projects."[71] Wartime orders continued to redirect human resources in a similar manner.[72] The key issue was having enough hands to complete the task, not whether that labor was free or forced. And if free laborers could be forced to relocate for specific projects, this was not free labor in the technical sense of the term, even if it was far preferable to the horrors of Gulag life.[73]

The oblast party committee also placed a considerable burden on Siblag to supply laborers as quickly as possible. At a 10 September 1941 meeting, the committee directed Kopaev to send an additional three thousand prisoners to Combine no. 179: a thousand by 13 September, a thousand by 20 September, and the final thousand by 1 October. Not surprisingly but again attesting to poor planning, a month later the party committee criticized Kopaev for not having done enough to build proper barracks for the incoming contingents.[74] Given the extremely short time he had in which to transfer the prisoners, the Party's demands must have seemed completely unrealistic. The story does not end there, however. In December the party committee then ordered Kopaev to clear most of these prisoners from the barracks to make room for demobilized Red Army soldiers.[75]

Evidently there was much opportunity for interaction between prisoners and nonprisoners in these contract camps. Central and local authorities dealt with numerous issues involving deconvoyed prisoners during the war, including many who took advantage of their unescorted status and smuggled correspondence and black market items or even escaped.[76] On 18 January 1943 the Gulag in Moscow issued an order to all camp and colony directors, asking them to take measures to prevent interaction at contract camps, as many prisoners were stealing items and foodstuffs from the civilian populations, both at the production sites and while on transfer or moving through settlement points.[77] D. E. Alin recalls that, on the way to the worksite, the

prisoners at Chkalov Aviation Factory no. 153 stopped and waved to mobilized soldiers heading to the front by train. The soldiers talked to them sometimes and even occasionally threw them food.[78] Thus the evidence suggests that while there may have been some attempts at isolation, there was room for considerable interaction and overlap between prisoners and nonprisoners. Isolation was less important than production in the total war effort.

Although conditions were certainly much worse for prisoners, free workers also experienced horrendous living conditions in the region. In Siberia's urban areas the mortality rate for regular citizens increased by over 25 percent in the first year of the war, and Novosibirsk oblast saw huge increases in diseases such as typhoid fever, dysentery, typhus, and whooping cough.[79] Due to these conditions, Combine no. 179 suffered from shockingly high turnover of its free workers, despite extremely harsh wartime labor laws, especially in defense industries.[80] In 1942, 11,497 persons arrived to work at the factory, whereas 9,324 left. In 1943, 7,703 arrived and 7,600 left, approximately 5,000 of whom deserted.[81]

Many free workers in the region also left key industries to join the ranks of the Red Army. Indeed, some five hundred thousand persons left Novosibirsk oblast for the front during the war. Kuzbass Coal lost eleven thousand miners to the Red Army in the second half of 1941 alone.[82] By January 1943 in Novosibirsk oblast there were only thirty-five men for every hundred women.[83]

Due to the high turnover, the party committee's turn to forced labor as a partial solution is not surprising. Indeed, not only prisoners worked at Combine no. 179 but also exiles. Volga Germans—now called on to help the very war effort against which they had supposedly collaborated—as well as exiled Kalmyks, special settlers from Narym, and even prisoners of war (POWs) worked at Combine no. 179. By the second half of 1942 over 20 percent of the workforce in munitions (*boepripasy*) in Novosibirsk oblast was made up of prisoners.[84] By the end of the war this percentage had fallen somewhat but was still significant. On 1 May 1945 Combine no. 179's 25,117 workers included 3,120 prisoners (12.4 percent), 1,100 exiled Volga Germans (4.4 percent), 822 POWs, 106 former "kulaks" from Narym, and 98 exiled Kalmyks.[85]

The use of forced labor created its own problems, as authorities worried about possible counterrevolutionary activity among prisoners and exile groups. In November 1941 Comrade I. V. Ivanov, head of the Special Settlement Department of the NKVD, instructed NKVD officials in western Siberia and neighboring regions to use exiled Volga Germans in their areas of expertise. At the same time, Ivanov reported instances of roaming groups of Volga Germans who, without permission, went to various organizations and establishments looking for work. No doubt these Volga Germans were merely trying to survive, to make the best of a bad situation, but from the authorities' point of view this posed problems: "At times this vagrancy [*brodiazhnichestvo*] by fascist elements is used to establish connections with counterrevolutionary goals."[86] Novosibirsk oblast saw an increase in death sentences for counterrevolutionary activity in the first six months of the war, but starting in 1942 there was a sharp decline in the number of such sentences (especially death sentences) in the region, suggesting a relaxation of repressive measures.[87]

The regime also saw the Volga Germans as potentially useful. In January 1942 the GKO called for the mobilization of 120,000 exiled Volga German males, fit for physical labor, into "work columns" for the duration of the war. Later in 1942 the GKO expanded this mobilization order to include a greater age range of Volga German males (from fifteen to fifty-five), as well as females aged sixteen to forty-five, excluding pregnant women and mothers with children under three. These Volga Germans were placed in so-called special zones in Gulag camps, not as prisoners but as labor soldiers (*trudarmeitsy*). In western Siberia the labor soldiers worked mainly in forestry and in railroad construction.[88]

In these examples, then, we see that forced labor was an important aspect of Soviet total war, although just how much emphasis should be placed on forced labor in the context of the home front deserves further examination. According to Mark Harrison's data, forced labor accounted for roughly 2 percent of the Soviet Union's total (including agricultural) workforce before the war and held steady at 2 percent during the war, despite a decline in absolute numbers.[89]

In western Siberia authorities were able to make use of forced labor in military production and certainly saw it as an important component of available human resources. Yet in terms of sheer numbers we must view the Gulag as of only marginal importance to the region's economy and, therefore, to the Soviet home front. Evacuees and evacuated factories had a larger economic impact. Whereas the area's camps held seventy thousand to eighty thousand prisoners at any one time, the almost half-million evacuees, even if they included many children and elderly, helped compensate for the loss of workers to the front in much greater numbers. Of the evacuees many worked in agriculture, which was crucially important considering German advances into Ukraine.[90] The city of Novosibirsk itself received 150,000 evacuees in the first year and a half of the war, significantly more than better-known evacuee locations such as Tashkent.[91] The huge state investment required to relocate factories to the region also stimulated the economy and forced the state to recognize the centrality of the region to the Soviet Union's economy as a

whole. In August 1943, by a decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR, Novosibirsk joined a select group of cities as a republican city (even as one evacuee noted, "only the very center of Novosibirsk resembled an actual city").[92]

The mass mobilization of the region's women and elderly into the workforce played an enormous role, too. As Isupov writes of the workforce in western Siberia, "the labor soldiers of work columns, prisoners, and POWs played an important but secondary role. The main labor resource of the Soviet Union was its own civilian [*grazhdanskoe*] population." In 1939 in western Siberia alone there had been almost eight hundred thousand women who were not in the workforce, as well as six hundred thousand persons over the age of sixty. Many of these people were put to work during the war.[93] Thus there was a large pool of "free" labor mobilized for the war effort.

Even if one focuses only on forced labor, however, the numbers are misleading. By 1 April 1943 the Novosibirsk Oblast Camp and Colony Administration was reporting that 51 percent of its prisoner contingent was unable to work due to poor physical condition.[94] A 1944 inspection of Corrective Labor Colony no. 8 in Tomsk, to cite another example, found that 437 of the 1,028 prisoners in the colony were unfit for physical labor, and this was not even during the harshest time of the war.[95] These figures are significantly higher than Gulag wartime averages, which saw 25–30 percent of prisoner contingents in this category.[96] Gulag labor was incredibly inefficient. Given Alexopoulos's work showing that even those deemed fit for physical labor often suffered from serious diseases and were in extremely poor physical shape, much of the prisoner contingent in western Siberia clearly was on the verge of death.[97]

The Gulag was one piece in the puzzle of a country-wide and regional total war effort. Comparatively speaking, however, the somewhat muted role of the Gulag highlights the Soviet camp system as significantly different from other wartime camp systems. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to consider the comparative aspect in detail, a few words are in order. Soviet authorities appear to have placed less significance on the concentration camp than many other twentieth-century wartime belligerents. In this sense the Gulag fits only marginally into Giorgio Agamben's currently fashionable argument surrounding the concentration camp and war.[98] For Agamben, the concentration camp occurs as modern states use the pretext of war and/or emergency to place certain unwanted citizen-subjects and/or groups into a "state of exception," where they are confined in a liminal legal state in the sense that they are defined by their extralegal status, thus existing outside the

law but only in relation to the law. Agamben bases much of his argument on the work of the interwar German political theorist Carl Schmitt, who argued in his 1922 *Politische Theologie* (Political Theology) that the sovereign is "he who decides the exception," and therefore that the exception is central to the operation of the modern state.[99]

Soviet authorities, however, did not present the Stalin-era Gulag as something exceptional, at least not at first; indeed, it was supposedly a model of humane penal reform. Gulag inmates, moreover, were charged and convicted (however harsh the laws and/or the interrogation methods) of crimes that violated Soviet law. They were not extralegal; they had, in the eyes of the state in any case, committed illegal acts. In this sense no doubt the special settlements come closer to the "state of exception" in Agamben's meaning. Here were groups of people—first peasants, later ethnic groups—forced to resettle in remote areas, restricted in their rights, but not formally charged with anything. But perhaps most important for our purposes, unlike other twentieth-century wartime belligerents, such as the British during the South African War or the Nazis during the Second World War, the Soviet Union appears to have placed less emphasis on repressive measures like the Gulag *during* the war than it had beforehand (or afterward).

Even in the cases of the British camps and the Nazi camps, moreover, Agamben's theories have encountered difficulties when applied to aspects of these systems. Jonathan Hyslop, for example, finds fault with Agamben's emphasis on biopolitics. In the South African case Hyslop demonstrates that the moment when the British government actually became interested in monitoring the health of camp populations was precisely when the situation improved, not when those interned were reduced to bare life.[100] In the Nazi case, to cite one example, Mark Mazower critiques Agamben's work for not acknowledging the vast changes over time, and even from place to place, within the Nazis' network of camps, among other issues.[101] Nevertheless, Hyslop agrees with Agamben's focus on wartime and/or emergency measures as being key to the creation of the camps, and Mazower discusses Agamben in the context of "wartime paradigms" of power. What the case of the Gulag shows, curiously in the comparative context, is that wartime emergency in the Soviet Union did not necessarily play a crucial role in the formation and expansion of the exception.

Thus we can question the extent to which the Second World War in the Soviet Union actually represented the "pursuit of purity," as Weiner argues, or whether the Soviet state used the war as a pretext to define and exclude "the exception," as Agamben's arguments concerning the concentration camp

suggest.[102] The Gulag actually decreased in population during the war, dropping from approximately 1.9 million prisoners on 1 January 1941 to a low of 1.2 million prisoners on 1 January 1944.[103] At the very least it would be hard to argue that the Soviet state relied *more* on the Gulag during the war than it had during peacetime. As mentioned, the Gulag's economic contribution during the war was similar, proportionately, to its prewar contribution.[104] In western Siberia specifically the prisoner contingents increased during the war, but the mobilization of other human resources was more important than Gulag labor, and local authorities exhibited a pragmatic approach to forced labor contingents.

Thus the Soviet state did not use the war as a pretext to expand a repressive camp system except, once again, if we focus on the special settlements. Even here, however, the situation is far from clear-cut. During the war, authorities reinstated most citizenship rights of the original special settlers, the so-called kulaks who had been exiled in the 1930s.[105] Many thousands of special settlers from Novosibirsk oblast and elsewhere were mobilized to fight in the Red Army, too.[106] So while the wholesale exile of certain suspect ethnic groups during the war—such as the Volga Germans, Chechens, and Kalmyks—appears to confirm Agamben's hypothesis and to support Weiner's argument, the special settlements were arguably less repressive than they had been in the 1930s. The Volga Germans, in particular, became relatively integrated into the local economies of places like western Siberia and Kazakhstan, in part because their labor was in high demand. They were not completely excluded.[107]

One could argue that the harsh labor laws of the war created another state of exception. These laws, however, were clumsily enforced: many workers sentenced for absenteeism, for example, were sentenced in absentia and never sent to the camps. These laws also existed alongside policies toward religion and even the cultural elite that suggest a partial relaxation of repressive measures.[108]

That prisoners worked in such close proximity to nonprisoners, and local authorities saw prisoner labor as just one piece in the human resource puzzle, also provides evidence that the wartime Gulag was not particularly about the removal of undesirable elements from Soviet society or about using the pretext of war to gain more control. Local authorities were even willing to use so-called enemies (counterrevolutionaries, exiled populations) to help support the war. At least as far as our case study is concerned, the total war effort as it included the Gulag appears to have been quite straightforward: an effort to mobilize all available resources to support the military, with little care for the actual cost in human lives.

The case study of the western Siberian camps during the Second World War ultimately highlights the tragedy of the Gulag. Prisoners had little choice but to give their health and frequently their lives to the war effort, but in the end human resources such as evacuees and underutilized groups were more important to the regional home front, especially considering the inefficiencies of forced labor. Although the camps proved marginally useful in terms of numbers of shells, uniforms, and so on that were produced, the human cost was staggering. Even so, the interaction between free and forced labor in the region, the quick and total shift to military production, and the pragmatic labor use of those labeled ideological enemies of the regime all suggest that economic motivations for Gulag operations were more important than political motivations during the Second World War.

Indeed, although the Gulag reached a turning point during the war, it did not, ultimately, turn. The more pragmatic approach to forced labor and the concentration camp system—comparatively unusual in twentieth-century wartime history—gave way, in the postwar years, to increased repression and greater levels of isolation, as the Gulag reached its peak population and created a series of special camps with incredibly harsh regimens. Even so, as has been argued elsewhere, central camp authorities became increasingly aware of the Gulag's inefficiencies and took immediate steps to reduce the size and scope of the Gulag after the death of Stalin.[109]