THE GULAG AFTER STALIN

Redefining Punishment in Khrushchev's Soviet Union, 1953–1964

Jeffrey S. Hardy

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Contents

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction. A Gulag without Stalin 1

1. Restructuring the Penal Empire: Administration, Institutions, and Demographics 19

2. Reorienting the Aims of Imprisonment: Production, Reeducation, and Control 58

3. Oversight and Assistance: The Role of the Procuracy and Other Outside Agencies in Penal Operations 96

4. Undoing the Reforms: The Campaign against "Liberalism" in the Gulag 130

5. A Khrushchevian Synthesis: The Birth of the Late Soviet Penal System 160

Conclusions. Khrushchev's Reforms and the Late (and Post-)Soviet Gulag 201

Notes 209
Select Bibliography 261
Index 265

Introduction

A GULAG WITHOUT STALIN

Soviet prison is one of countless manifestations of tyranny, one of the forms of total, all-embracing violence. But there is beauty even in prison life. And if you only use dark colors you won't get it right.

—Sergei Dovlatov, *The Zone*

In September 1962, nine years after the death of Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, Aleksei Grigorevich Murzhenko was convicted of anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda for participating in a "neo-Marxist" student group. Although such a charge in the 1930s and 1940s often resulted in a decade or more behind barbed wire, Murzhenko only received a sentence of six years' imprisonment on "strict regimen." Sent to the Dubravnyi Corrective-Labor Camp (Dubravlag) in the Mordovian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, his appreciation for what incarceration during the reign of Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev meant began even on the train ride there. He encountered what appeared to be happy prisoners, with one female inmate passing him a little love note by way of a guard. He shared a large food package sent from his mother with his cellmate. And even though his new friend informed him that the golden age for prisoners of the mid-to-late 1950s was over, Murzhenko found conditions at Dubravlag more than bearable. The notorious thieves-in-law criminal gang had been eliminated; no one died of hunger, cold, or disease anymore; the workday was only eight hours; and the mostly young political prisoners exchanged their heterodox worldviews with remarkable freedom. As he concluded from his own experience and from conversations with fellow prisoners, "life generally [in the camps] was not the same as under the Mustache [a pejorative term for Stalin]."[1]

Such a proclamation stands in stark contrast to Anatoly Tikhonovich Marchenko's famous assertion in his 1969 memoir *My Testimony* that "today's Soviet camps for political prisoners are just as horrific as in Stalin's time."[2] Similar to Marchenko, Aleksandr Isaevich Solzhenitsyn declared in his landmark *Gulag*

Archipelago, "Rulers Change, the Archipelago Remains."[3] Yet Murzhenko's positive characterization of camp life under Khrushchev is far from unique; in fact, the idea of a dramatic transformation of the Soviet penal system—commonly referred to by its 1930s-era acronym, Gulag (short for Main Administration of Corrective-Labor Camps and Colonies)—is supported by other memoirs, and by many of the details in Marchenko's and Solzhenitsyn's own reminiscences. Whereas most memoirists from the Stalin-era Gulag dwell overwhelmingly on the physical and psychological destruction of the inmates, those of the Khrushchev era focus to a much greater extent on cultural and intellectual life; on the reforms that were making their existence more (though sometimes less) bearable; and on freedoms of various types, including release. As Boris Fedorovich Sporov, another Khrushchev-era memoirist confirmed, their imprisonment "was not for destruction—destruction was before our time."[4]

Surprisingly, this transition to a decidedly post-Stalin penal system has received little scholarly attention despite its importance for understanding Stalinism, de-Stalinization, and the ultimate fate of Soviet socialism. Western scholars have long been fascinated by the Soviet penal system, particularly since the appearance of *Gulag Archipelago,* which captured the Western imagination in the 1970s. The fall of the Soviet Union and availability of previously closed archives starting in the 1990s facilitated a new wave of Gulag scholarship that has greatly enriched our understanding of Soviet crime and punishment. Oleg Khlevniuk, Galina Ivanova, and Anne Applebaum have taken a comprehensive approach to studying the Gulag, focusing chiefly on the brutality and abuses of the system as experienced by its inmates.[5] Steven Barnes, Alan Barenberg, and others have provided detailed portraits of how individual camps operated, demonstrating significant tension between official policy and actual practice.[6] The Gulag was also, in their writing, the site of complex personal interactions, not just in terms of the inmates, as countless memoirs have illustrated, but among Gulag staff and leadership as well. Other scholars have focused more narrowly on particular topics such as sexuality, economics, science, and release.[7]

One commonality among these studies is that they focus heavily on the Stalin era. Those who have delved into the Khrushchev-era Gulag have focused on three main themes. First, considerable attention has been paid to the massive inmate uprisings of 1953–54.[8] Second, a number of scholars have written about the process of release and legal rehabilitation in the post-Stalin era.[9] Finally, a few scholars have investigated the process of Gulag-dominated regions transitioning to normal administrative and economic centers.[10] With the exception of a book chapter by Marc Elie, none have seriously investigated the course of Gulag reform beyond the first few years of the post-Stalin era.[11] In his last major work, renowned historian of the Soviet Union Moshe Lewin directed attention to this

omission, writing, "I have not come across a reliable monograph on the post-Stalinist prison system."[12] The purpose of this book, therefore, is to provide the first major study of the transformation of the Soviet penal system under Khrushchev and to elucidate the stated goals of punishment, the policies designed to ensure such aims, and the actual practices that resulted when attempts at reform were thrust upon an entrenched bureaucracy.

The primary contention of this book is that the post-Stalin leadership, having inherited a massive, inefficient, violent, and corrupt penal system, engaged in a serious and substantive reforming effort bent on transforming the Soviet Gulag both quantitatively and qualitatively. In terms of the former, which has already been well-documented by contemporary observers and more recent scholars, mass incarceration and violence as governing principles were clearly rejected.[13] Stalin's heirs released millions of inmates through a variety of early-release programs, as well as millions more who had been sent to special settlements or sentenced to internal exile. Meanwhile, they reduced average sentences for new criminal convictions and drastically lowered the number of convictions for political offenses. These reforms, which dramatically lowered the percentage of the Soviet population directly controlled by the Soviet criminal justice apparatuses, proved to be a durable legacy of the Khrushchev era.

The more qualitative aspects of post-Stalin penal reform, which are the primary focus and contribution of this book, had a decidedly mixed result. Generally speaking, post-Stalin legal reforms aimed at restoring "socialist legality" following the abuses of the Stalin years. For the Gulag this meant condemning the brutality and economic orientation of the past, and attempting to reorient the penal system around the ideas of reeducation (*perevospitanie*), respect for the rights of inmates, and multiple layers of oversight. Khrushchev's commitment to reform was sincere—it was not simply a function of the post-Stalin succession struggle—and it resulted in marked improvements to the living and working conditions of prisoners. Pressure on Gulag officials to meet production plan targets, however, did not diminish; moreover, reeducation proved difficult to quantify—a serious liability in a statistics-obsessed state—and it lacked a strong institutional backer at the central decision-making level. In fact, in the late 1950s a broad coalition of interest groups, both within and without the criminal justice system, voiced staunch opposition to the amelioration of conditions for inmates, resulting in the rollback of certain of the reforms of the mid-1950s. Ultimately, however, this counterreform campaign fizzled and many of its policies were in turn reversed in the early to mid-1960s. This final round of reform solidified the legacy of the Khrushchev era as one of mostly successful de-Stalinization in the penal sphere.

By the time of Khrushchev's forced retirement in late 1964, the Gulag differed substantively from its Stalinist predecessor. Prisoners enjoyed on average more

rights, less violence, and much better living and working conditions than they did under Stalin, and this is not solely attributable to rising standards in society at large. It was a conscious choice made by the top decision makers in the Soviet Union and influenced by the various criminal justice agencies and experts that advised them. Moreover, the reforms of the Khrushchev era created the penal structures and policies that remained the backbone of Soviet and to some extent post-Soviet corrections. Without question the Soviet penal system remained a penal system, with all the oppression, corruption, periodic violence, and unfreedoms inherent therein. The "pains of imprisonment," in the words of American sociologist Gresham Sykes, remained in force in the post-Stalin Soviet Union as they did in the United States and elsewhere.[14] Ultimately, however, the Gulag of Khrushchev differed substantively and deliberately from its Stalinist predecessor.

In order to make proper sense of Khrushchev-era reforms in the penal sector, this book places them within three broader narratives. First, they were just one part, albeit a very important and lasting part, of an extensive reformist program instituted by Stalin's heirs and Khrushchev in particular. Second, they were part of a global postwar penal transition toward rehabilitation and greater leniency and respect for inmates. Finally, Khrushchev's Gulag should be understood within the broader context of Soviet crime and punishment, particularly in relation to the Stalin-era Gulag.

De-Stalinization and the Reforms of the Khrushchev Era

The Khrushchev era has long been known as a period of intense reform following the long reign of Joseph Stalin; indeed, this is precisely how Khrushchev himself presented it to his countrymen and to the world.[15] Without question, Stalin's death in March 1953 was the most significant event for the people of the Soviet Union since the end of World War II. Although the subsequent era came to be known as the period of de-Stalinization, the very fact of Stalin's death was perhaps the greatest "de-Stalinization" possible.[16] None of his potential heirs could match his revolutionary pedigree, his claim to Lenin's mantle of authority, his power cemented through control of information and appointments, his attention to detail, his force of character, or his command of Marxist-Leninist(-Stalinist) theory. He was the living embodiment of the revolution and of the Soviet Union itself. He had rapidly industrialized the country and defeated Hitler in the greatest military conflict of the twentieth century. He had, the Central Committee proclaimed the day after his death, "armed the Party and the entire people with a great and clear program of building communism in the USSR."[17]

In reality, Stalin left behind a notoriously mixed legacy of social mobilization, industrialization, militarization, imperialism, and, of course, repression. Although the Soviet Union had rapidly industrialized and then triumphed in World War II, postwar recovery had proven a difficult task. Resistance movements plagued the newly acquired Western borderlands into the 1950s. Living and working conditions for the majority of the Soviet population in 1953 remained low. Homelessness and begging remained persistent problems well into the 1950s; in 1953 alone the police apprehended 182,300 beggars, 70 percent of whom were invalids.[18] The economy, though expanding, was plagued by corruption, incompetency, and low productivity. The agricultural sector was barely producing enough to feed the Soviet population. And in terms of foreign affairs, while Stalin succeeded in gaining a bloc of sorts to support the Soviet Union's global ambitions, he also faced a series of crises and setbacks that threatened the long-term viability of the socialist world order.[19]

This mixed legacy left for Stalin's heirs fruitful grounds to enact reforms.[20] So too did the fact that Stalin, like Lenin before him, failed to choose an heir from among his lieutenants. Rather, he habitually set them against each other, demoted those who incurred his displeasure, and began introducing new blood in the top leadership ranks in the years before his death.[21] This set the stage for a contentious political transition that pitted his potential successors against each other, in particular Lavrentii Pavlovich Beria, Georgii Maksimilianovich Malenkov, and Khrushchev. This transitional period lasted until Khrushchev's triumph over the so-called Anti-Party Group in 1957, and helped shape the course of reform for the duration of these four years and beyond, from foreign policy to agricultural policy.[22] Indeed, reform became the primary mechanism through which first Beria and then Khrushchev sought to distance themselves from Stalin and from their rivals.

The Gulag reforms of 1953–64 were certainly among the most significant of the post-Stalin reforms, but they were certainly not the only thing occupying the attention of the post-Stalin successors. Agricultural reform was a prominent component of Khrushchev's struggle against Malenkov and his attempt to further the country along the road of socialism. His move to improve the living conditions of Soviet subjects through dramatically increased production of consumer goods and the construction of millions of private apartments were also a key facet of Khrushchev's reforming program. In administrative and economic terms he pursued a program of decentralization, which led to massive bureaucratic restructuring. Other reforms in education and the military, not to mention the intense pressure of charting a distinctively post-Stalin vision of foreign affairs, also competed for the time of Khrushchev and his top lieutenants, on top of the limited resources the Soviet state had to offer.[23] Thus, the Gulag reforms of

the 1950s and 1960s have to be understood as existing within a climate of frequent and at times contradictory reforms, combined with limited means to bring new policies and programs to fruition.

The Global Penal Context

In addition to the immediate domestic context, Khrushchev's reform of the Gulag also must be understood within the broader framework of crime and punishment, both within the Soviet Union (which will be discussed below), and within the global context.[24] Although for much of Stalin's reign and to a lesser extent thereafter the Gulag was shrouded in secrecy, the Soviet penal system nonetheless had roots in decidedly European conceptions of crime and punishment. At its root, the Gulag was a penal system that evolved out of existing institutions and philosophies combined with the ideological particularities of the Bolshevik regime. Its primary mission was crime control, which is one of the central functions of the modern state. Indeed, combating crime through new conceptions of loyalty and deviancy and through police forces and punishment systems in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was one of the most important elements in the rise of the modern state apparatus.[25] The conjuncture of a rise in crime associated with rapid urbanization and industrialization and a burgeoning middle class that clamored for a safe urban environment in which to live, work, and play produced societies obsessed with crime and criminals.[26] Sociologists and other scholars developed innovative conceptions of the origins and consequences of criminal behavior, such as Cesare Lombroso's biological determinism and Émile Durkheim's concept of anomie.[27]

By the 1950s and 1960s, this obsession with defining and categorizing crime and criminals had hardly diminished. Although Lombroso's ideas had been largely discredited, the concept of anomie still held much sway over international criminology. American sociologist Robert Merton, for instance, explained high levels of crime in the West as resulting from the disjuncture between lofty material aspirations held by society at large and unequal access to the means necessary for success in capitalist societies.[28] Also increasingly popular was Edwin H. Sutherland's theory of differential association, which posited that crime is not biological or structural, but is learned by association with intimate personal groups.[29] These theories, along with methods of combating crime, formed the basis of numerous international conferences organized by the United Nations (UN) from the 1950s onward at which legal experts, criminologists, penal officials, and lawmakers shared their research and proposals to reduce crime globally. Significantly, Soviet officials in the Khrushchev era began to participate in these

conferences and often found common ground with their Western counterparts in defining the causes of crime and the methods of preventing it.[30] Thus, not only did the Soviet Union after Stalin's death share similar conceptions of crime and its prevention with the West, it also in the Khrushchev era engaged in high-level transnational discussions about these topics.

The same could be said on a more specific level about imprisonment. Just as every modern state defines various forms of deviance and polices society accordingly, every modern state imprisons those it considers to be criminals. Beginning in the early 1800s in Western Europe and the United States, incarceration became the dominant form of judicial punishment for felonies.[31] This form of punishment then spread to the rest of the world over the following century, often through colonial structures.[32] With roots in Christian notions of penance and enlightenment ideas of perfecting the individual, imprisonment in the modern era was designed not only to punish, but to rehabilitate. The failures of the prison to actually effect the psychological and behavioral transformations it promised to deliver have been well documented, and reforming efforts in the late 1800s and early 1900s aimed at reducing reliance on imprisonment by promoting the use of probation, parole, and other noncustodial forms of punishment.[33] These programs were intended to better use the reforming power of the community to reform convicts, yet they too met with only limited success.

Ultimately, imprisonment continued to be a widespread form of punishment in the interwar era, with penal officials becoming more concerned with administering orderly institutions than reforming their inmates. In the United States this period witnessed the rise of the Big Houses, massive penitentiaries built with the purpose of securely warehousing inmates at minimal cost.[34] In Europe, meanwhile, fascist Italy and Nazi Germany moved toward longer and harsher conditions of imprisonment in the name of state security and less emphasis on rehabilitation.[35] Even outside the fascist sphere, punishment was often retributive in nature, and limited funding ensured a lack of rehabilitational programming.[36]

Along with diminishing interest in rehabilitation and increased attention to retribution and state security, the interwar era also witnessed the rise of the camp as a place of detention. Western powers used concentration camps in colonial war settings in the late 1800s and early 1900s, most prominently during the Boer War, and both concentration camps and prisoner-of-war camps were deployed extensively during World War I.[37] These provided fascist and Soviet leaders in the interwar era with convenient and inexpensive models for how to isolate and, if desired, extract labor from large populations of potential enemies.[38] Yet the camp as a form of imprisonment also has a very different history that likewise began before World War I and then expanded in the interwar era. Often called "honor camps" or "honor farms" in the United States, these "open" institutions

housed not extrajudicial detainees but inmates sentenced to deprivation of liberty. The idea was to provide well-behaved inmates with the opportunity to live in communal quarters outside the penitentiary and to perform remunerative labor. While these honor camps certainly did not always live up to their promises of better living conditions and economic salvation, they were increasingly viewed by penal officials in the West as an improvement over the oppressive and crowded penitentiaries.[39] As one American penal official declared, "camps are by no means a cure-all to our correctional problems, but are an important adjustment of a modern correctional system."[40]

World War II and the Holocaust in particular provided deep impetus for penal reform in the late 1940s and 1950s.[41] The primary focus was to revive correctionalism through expanded use of noncustodial punishment programs such as parole, open-style institutions like honor farms, and a wide variety of educational, vocational, cultural, and athletic programs. Psychological and group counseling programs were instituted, corporal punishment where it still existed was abolished, and visitation and correspondence rights were expanded. These reforms were disseminated by the UN conferences mentioned above, and ideals of rehabilitative imprisonment spread to the decolonizing world. And it was precisely in this global conjuncture that the Soviet Union after Stalin began its own penal reform program that in many ways resembled the reforms of the West. The Western and Soviet penal systems in the 1950s and 1960s therefore experienced significant convergence as they worked toward a set of common aims.[42] And this was not simply coincidence. It was the product of a common criminological heritage, a shared experience in the devastation of World War II, and a united interest in improving their own societies according to what were becoming international norms for inmate incarceration.

Soviet Criminal Justice and the Stalin-Era Gulag

In addition to understanding the Khrushchev-era penal reforms through the lens of a broad international context, it is important to situate them within the particularities of crime and punishment in the Soviet Union prior to Stalin's death in 1953. Upon taking power in 1917, the Bolsheviks promised to oversee the eventual elimination of crime, but from the beginning the Soviet system tended to multiply rather than reduce deviancy. In part this was a perceptual issue stemming from vastly increased state capacity to police the population, but heightened levels of crime also resulted from the hopes and fears of a paranoid and dictatorial regime engrossed in constructing socialist modernity amidst capitalist encirclement.[43] Until the creation of a robust welfare state in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s, crime for many was seen as necessary for survival. For others, the nature of the Soviet party-state required participation in a massive black market that paralleled and complemented the official economy.[44] Some crimes in the USSR were politically driven; the incessantly paranoid Soviet system criminalized certain behaviors such as freedom of speech and religion that were protected by law in the West. Others, such as those targeted by the notorious labor discipline laws of 1938–40, emerged from the pressures of breakneck industrialization in an agrarian state and the pressure of the anticipated war with Nazi Germany. Finally, crime in many cases was motivated by a host of social and psychological issues common to the human experience such as greed, jealousy, envy, despair, alcohol, and peer pressure.[45]

Because of the pervasiveness of crime in Soviet society alongside the ultimate hope of eradicating crime, Soviet criminologists, like their counterparts in the West, were intently interested in what caused crime, how crime could be reduced, and how to reform criminals.[46] Such academic activity was especially fruitful in the 1920s. Criminological studies were conducted, academic journals devoted to these topics appeared, conferences were held, and a variety of theories were put forward to answer these questions. These issues were of great import for the new socialist experiment. More than just about creating safer streets, stemming economic losses, or even eliminating counterrevolutionary thought, crime control in the Soviet Union was a fundamentally existential question. The Soviet Union was by definition a modernist experiment, founded on enlightenment principles of progress that envisioned the eventual creation of a utopian, crime-free society.[47] This was an ideal shared by many in the West during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but the Soviet Union, explicitly founded as it was on this premise, bore the nearly unbearable weight of demonstrating its possibility (in an economically and educationally underdeveloped country, no less). If man and society could not be transformed through the implementation of socialism, which Stalin proclaimed achieved in 1936, then there would be little point struggling toward the ever-vague state of communism. The struggle against crime thus constituted a vital component within the broader goal of crafting a model socialist society.

Curiously, however, the vibrant Soviet criminological establishment of the 1920s was all but shuttered in the early to mid-1930s, and remained so until Stalin's death. In Stalin's mind, it seemed, there was no need for further exploration of a social phenomenon—crime—that was supposed to be withering away. Crime was viewed as the work of traitors to the Soviet cause or the psychological "remnants of capitalism."[48] Rather than study crime, therefore, Stalin was content simply to combat it. This struggle took many forms, from education and propaganda to policing and the use of state-sponsored terror, and ultimately tough-on-crime

attitudes became pervasive in the Soviet Union. Rather than engender sympathy for those suffering unjustly, Stalin's repressive regime actually succeeded in convincing the majority of Soviet subjects that harsh repression against lawbreakers was necessary. As Miriam Dobson and Brian LaPierre have shown, this psychological legacy became an important impediment to criminal justice reform in the Khrushchev era.[49]

Perhaps the most important aspect of crime control for the Soviet state, as was the case elsewhere, was the incarceration and "reeducation" of lawbreakers. From its birth amidst world war and civil war, the Soviet state relied heavily on imprisonment as a primary method of court-mandated punishment. Incarceration was seen as an appropriate way to remove harmful elements from what would eventually become a communist society. But the Soviet penal system existed not only to punish and to purify society through excision; like its counterparts in the West it was also given the fairly synonymous tasks of correction (*ispravlenie*), education (*vospitanie,* a term that implies a combination of positive socialization, character development, moral training, and cultural education), and reeducation (*perevospitanie*). In the 1930s the industrial terminology of reforging (*perekovka*) was also prominent in discussions of how to turn convicts into law-abiding socialist citizens. For the Soviet state and its criminal justice establishment, labor and the reforming power of the collective were especially prominent among ideas of how to reeducate criminals. Here the famous Soviet pedagogue Anton Semenovich Makarenko made his mark, reporting from personal experience that the power of collective life in particular could transform orphans and juvenile delinquents into conscientious Soviet citizens.[50]

This mission of reeducation was placed on prominent display for foreign visitors who toured penal facilities in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as in various propaganda efforts aimed at external and internal audiences.[51] But it was also the admonition given to penal officers by high-level criminal justice authorities such as Stalin's notorious Procurator General Andrei Ianuar'evich Vyshinskii, who in 1934 argued for a correctional program based on labor, the inmate collective, primary and secondary education, self-governance, propaganda, vocational training, and cultural and sporting programs.[52] Ultimately, this commitment to correctionalism was not constant; it waxed and waned, but it never disappeared completely, even during the height of Stalin's repression.[53] Yet in this regard the Soviet penal system was not exceptional; inherent tension between the goals of correction and punishment produced similar challenges in Western prison systems.[54]

In the Soviet Union under Stalin, the primary administrative body tasked with incarcerating and reforming criminals from 1930 onward was the Gulag.[55] With the publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago,* this acronym became popularized in the West and has been used in a variety of ways, including in reference to other systems of detention.[56] It has also assumed various forms of capitalization: GULAG, GULag, Gulag, and gulag. In this book, the term Gulag will be used in the two ways in which Soviet administrators used it. First, it referred in a narrow sense to the central administrative body that managed the penal system. More broadly, it was used to denote the network of corrective-labor camps and corrective-labor colonies designed to hold those found guilty by law and sentenced to deprivation of freedom.

Scholars have differed in how they interpret the role of the Gulag in Soviet society. Some authors contend that the Gulag should be viewed as an organ of political repression.[57] Others argue that it was fundamentally an economic entity created to aid in the rapid industrialization of the country.[58] These aspects under Stalin were certainly not trivial, as will be discussed below, yet they alone cannot explain the Gulag's existence or its operations. Rather, the Soviet Gulag must be understood primarily on its own terms as a penal system, a place to send dissidents and deviants, criminals and counterrevolutionaries, for the purposes of isolation, punishment, deterrence, and reeducation.[59] In other words, it shared the same basic goals found in the penal systems of the West.

Yet the Gulag bore the imprint of more than just the Western criminology from which it largely sprang. It was also shaped by the authoritarian regime that created it, by the communist ideology that regime espoused, by the economic backwardness that regime was striving to overcome, and by a society prone to violence and other crimes. As such, it constituted an integral piece of the Soviet social fabric, a place where ideology, economics, politics, social justice, education, and reeducation all combined with a measure of coercion and repression.[60] In significant ways, therefore, it differed from its foreign counterparts. It was abnormally large, its mix of prisoners was quite different from most Western regimes, and it was unusually deadly. It featured a complex organizational structure that reflected the complexity of the Soviet party-state and its ideology. It was oriented strongly toward communal facilities rather than cellular prisons, and toward economic production in the context of rapid industrialization. Finally, to a much greater extent than other penal systems, it was constantly reforming and reinventing itself.

The most distinctive feature of the Soviet Gulag under Stalin was its size. Before the opening of Soviet archives to researchers, Western observers and historians vastly overestimated the number of inmates in the Gulag, thereby creating an enduring image of the Gulag as a mass institution.[61] And a mass institution it certainly was, even if one accepts the regime's numbers now available as approximating reality. Although the Soviet state in the 1920s did not incarcerate much more than its tsarist predecessor, with the increased repression of the 1930s the number of inmates soared.[62] By 1935 over 1 million prisoners were incarcerated in Soviet penal institutions, and by 1938 that figure approached 2 million. Wartime

deaths and releases brought the number of prisoners down to around 1.5 million in the mid-1940s, but the Gulag again began to expand sharply in the late 1940s due primarily to harsh antitheft laws passed in 1948.[63] On 1 January 1950 the population of the Gulag peaked at just over 2.5 million, making an incarceration rate of around 1,440 per 100,000.[64] Immediately prior to Stalin's death the Gulag had shrunk somewhat to a little under 2.5 million, but it still incarcerated a far larger percentage of the Soviet population and workforce than its Western counterparts.[65] The United States in 1950, for instance, held 166,165 inmates in state and federal prisons for an incarceration rate of just 109 per 100,000.[66] The Soviet Union's incarceration rate up to Stalin's death therefore was over ten times the comparable rate in the United States. The United Kingdom and other countries of Western and Northern Europe, meanwhile, typically had rates of imprisonment well below 100 per 100,000.[67]

In addition to size, the Soviet Gulag under Stalin was also unique due to large numbers of so-called political prisoners, a complicated term in a regime where everything was interpreted through a political lens. Most of these were convicted of "counterrevolutionary" crimes according to the infamous Article 58 of the Criminal Code, though others were convicted by an array of different statutes.[68] Without doubt some of these political prisoners were guilty of treason, espionage, conspiracy, and anti-Soviet propaganda, among various other antistate transgressions. The vast majority of them, however, as they protested during their trials and as the case reviews of the 1950s would demonstrate, were innocent of the crimes for which they were incarcerated. Caught up in the paranoid search for enemies that characterized the Stalin era, political prisoners in the Gulag numbered nearly half a million in the early 1940s, comprising around one-third of all inmates.[69] That number then grew to 539,483 by 1 January 1953, but the relative percentage dropped: on the eve of Stalin's death political prisoners accounted for just over 20 percent of all inmates.[70] The Soviet Union was certainly not the only regime that imprisoned for antistate crimes, but none imprisoned more than the Soviet Union and none imprisoned more that later turned out to be innocent of the crime with which they had been charged.[71]

Another aspect of the Gulag that made it unique among contemporary penal systems during the 1930s and 1940s was its deadliness. The combination of primitive and communal living conditions, overcrowding, harsh environment, exhausting labor, and at times insufficient rations that characterized the Gulag produced malnutrition, disease, physical deterioration, and death. This especially held true during the famine of 1933–34, the Great Terror of 1937–38, the first years of World War II, and the famine of 1946–47. The Gulag's high mortality rate also resulted from a culture of violence that pervaded the ranks of both inmates and guards. Although violence is endemic in most penal systems, it was

especially pronounced in the Gulag. Communal living quarters facilitated the formation and activity of criminal gangs, which preyed on other inmates. Gulag guards during the height of Stalinism, meanwhile, were taught that many of the inmates were "malicious enemies of the people," with the implication that abusing them would not constitute a crime.[72]

Like inmate population statistics, mortality figures were vastly overestimated before the opening of Soviet archives. Estimates of 20 million or more deaths in the Gulag alone were not uncommon.[73] Archival data, while not fully reliable, presents a picture of inmate mortality that, while far lower, was still extremely high by contemporary penal standards. In the 1930s, approximately 5 percent of Soviet inmates died each year, resulting in at least half a million deaths.[74] As many as 10 percent of prisoners were also unable to work due to illness or disability.[75] During the early 1940s, in the midst of the war, annual mortality rates in the Gulag spiked to over 20 percent, with nearly 300,000 inmates dying in 1943 alone.[76] By the early 1950s, with the chaos of rapid industrialization and the war years over, official statistics show annual mortality rates had been reduced to just under 1 percent per year.[77] Thus, whereas the number of prisoners at the time of Stalin's death was at near-record levels, the Gulag by this point had become much more survivable.

In addition to the sheer number of inmates and their high rate of mortality, another defining feature of the Gulag was its convoluted organizational structure. The structure of many Soviet institutions was quite complex, in part due to the dual reporting mechanisms inherent in the party-state, and the penal system in this regard was no different. The Gulag itself reported to the Unified State Political Organization (OGPU), which was renamed the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) in 1934, which was then renamed the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) in 1946. The MVD, in turn, reported to the Council of Ministers. Yet the Gulag was not the only organization administering incarceration, nor was its own administrative structure straightforward. Prisons in the Soviet Union, many of them inherited from the tsarist regime, were at times operated by the Gulag, but at other times were managed by a distinct Prison Department within the MVD. Places of forced internal exile called "special settlements" were also under the Gulag for a time but mostly fell under a separate administration within the MVD. For several years under Stalin one of the largest camp complexes in the Soviet Union—Dal'stroi—reported directly to the MVD, thus bypassing the Gulag administration. And in the 1940s many of the Gulag camps were under the control of economic administrations within the MVD, while still reporting to the Gulag as well.[78]

In terms of where the prisoners actually lived, the majority of them were housed in "corrective-labor" facilities. These belonged to one of two types of

mid-level administrative structures under the Gulag: the corrective-labor camp (of which there were 105 holding over 1.5 million prisoners in 1951) and the division of corrective-labor camps and colonies (of which there were 97 with nearly 1 million prisoners in 1951).[79] The latter were organized within province- or republican-level MVD apparatuses, although they also reported to the Gulag.[80] Thus, penal facilities could literally be found all over the Soviet Union. Within each division of corrective-labor camps and colonies were several camp branches (*otdelenie*), which were sometimes broken down further into "camp points," and corrective-labor colonies; these three institutions—camp branches, camp points, and colonies—were where the prisoners were actually housed. Technically the colonies were for inmates sentenced to terms of under three years, although in practice this guideline was not always followed. Moreover, due to ever-increasing sentence lengths under Stalin—in 1951 only 300,000 out of 2.5 million inmates were sentenced to fewer than three years—the number of colonies remained small.[81] The final type of institution found in the provincial Gulag administration was transit prisons for inmates coming to or leaving the area. The Estonian Department of Corrective-Labor Camps and Colonies, to give one example of a provincial Gulag organization, on 1 March 1953 held 9,022 prisoners in 7 camp branches, 2 colonies, and 1 transit prison.[82]

Corrective-labor camps, by contrast, were not part of a provincial MVD apparatus but reported solely to the Gulag. Located near exploitable natural resources (the most common of which being gold, coal, and timber) or large construction sites (including dams, railroads, and factories), the camps tended to be in sparsely inhabited and climactically unpleasant areas of the Soviet Union: the Far East, Far North, Siberia, Kazakhstan, and the Urals. They also differed from the divisions of corrective-labor camps and colonies in size; the camps were often much larger than their provincial counterparts and their subunits were usually more dispersed geographically. Like the province-based divisions, each camp was broken down administratively into camp branches and camp points.[83] The Krasnoiarskii Corrective-Labor Camp (Kraslag) in late 1956, to give one example, had 22,583 prisoners divided into 9 camp branches and 35 camp points (one of which was a designated transit point and another was the camp hospital).[84] The word camp (*lager*) in Soviet penal lexicon referred therefore to an administrative level between the central bureaucracy in Moscow and the camp branches and camp points where the inmates were held. However, it was also commonly used in the plural, such as in the stock phrase "camps and colonies," as shorthand for all camp branches and points, whether attached to a corrective-labor camp or a division of corrective-labor camps and colonies.

The Gulag in the early 1950s operated around 3,500 camp branches, camp points, and colonies, with an average population of 715 inmates per institution.[85] In their physical appearance, the camp branches, camp points, and colonies were quite similar. Prisoners were housed in barracks, usually one-story wooden constructions, although some were built of brick, stone, or other material and they were occasionally two stories high.[86] Barracks were typically built in rows with each holding dozens if not hundreds of inmates. Each camp branch or colony was also supposed to be outfitted with a variety of other buildings: headquarters, a kitchen, dining room, club, bathhouse, locker room, drying room (for wet clothing), barber shop, laundry room, and store. These were all surrounded with watchtowers, barbed wire and lighting, with a guardhouse and gate on one side. Separated from the main zone by fencing and barbed wire stood the penalty isolator and sometimes penalty barracks, as well as the medical unit and supply depot. Some camp units and colonies also had their own production zone, which was also separated from the living quarters with barbed wire.[87] Most inmates under Stalin, however, were marched to work at a separate location from the living zone.

This method of incarcerating inmates in camps and colonies highlights another defining feature of the Soviet Gulag: its emphasis on communalism. Whereas cellular confinement with one or two inmates per cell was typical of prison systems in the West, with the exception of the honor camps already noted, the Soviet Union preferred barracks that housed dozens of prisoners in common quarters. Inmates worked together, ate together, and generally moved freely within the confines of the camps. They were also organized into communal work brigades of typically one or two dozen inmates, and these brigades defined much of the prisoner's life. Their sleeping arrangements, their work duties, and even their rations were dependent on the brigade. This communal life in the Gulag was both a function of ideology and exigency. There were simply not enough prisons inherited from the Russian empire to hold the far higher inmate populations of the Soviet era, and constructing new brick-and-mortar prisons to hold millions of prisoners would divert far too many resources away from industrialization. But philosophically, the Bolsheviks believed that communal life exerted a better rehabilitative influence than cellular confinement. It taught unselfishness and humility and allowed for the prisoner "collective" to exert a positive influence on each individual offender.

That is not to say that the Soviets did not use prisons at all. In the early 1950s several hundred prisons scattered across the country held over 150,000 prisoners.[88] Most of these prisoners were pretrial detainees, but the prisons also housed three categories of posttrial inmates: those waiting execution, those sentenced to solitary confinement for committing particularly egregious offenses, and those transferred to prison after causing too much trouble in the camps. Here punishment was administered individually rather than collectively, and few opportunities for labor or

other reeducational opportunities existed.[89] Prison was viewed by the Soviet regime, therefore, as a worse punishment than the corrective-labor camp, and was used quite sparingly.

A fourth distinctive feature of the Soviet Gulag under Stalin was its heavy emphasis on labor. As already noted, labor was seen by Soviet criminologists as the primary method for rehabilitating convicts. Yet labor also served another purpose. The primary reason for creating the Main Administration of Camps (Gulag) from the fragmented penal systems of the 1920s was to engage inmates more fully in the process of rapid industrialization. The Gulag's explicit mission was to send prisoners to labor on great works projects such as the Belomor Canal or to use them to extract natural resources such as coal and gold from remote and inhospitable areas of the Soviet Union. Thus, while prisoners were not incarcerated for the express purpose of exploiting them as unpaid labor, once they were in the penal system their capacity for work was readily exploited. To the Soviets the idea of forcing prisoners to work, usually in difficult climactic conditions, did not present a contradiction. One of the founding philosophies of the Soviet Union, an avowedly workers' state, was "he who does not work shall not eat."[90] Labor was viewed in Soviet society, therefore, as both a right and an obligation. During the 1930s and 1940s, when all Soviet citizens were expected to sacrifice for the purpose of constructing socialism through rapid industrialization and collectivization, there was certainly no reason to exclude prisoners. In fact they posed a solution to the problem of recruiting free citizens to the harsh climates of places like Siberia, the Far North, and Kazakhstan.

The idea of compulsory labor for prisoners, as already noted, was not unique to the Soviets. In the Western penal systems of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it was used as a means to partially recoup the cost of maintaining prisons, as a way to teach factory-style discipline, and as a rehabilitative tool. In fact, virtually all criminologists of the twentieth century agreed that labor was essential to rehabilitation and to the smooth operation of penal facilities.[91] Various factors mitigated against this, however. For one thing, cellular prisons were not conducive to meaningful labor, and most Western prison regimes were hesitant to allow inmates beyond prison walls for the purposes of work. Moreover, organized labor protested against competition from low-wage inmates, and in the United States successfully petitioned for laws prohibiting prison-made goods from entering the private market.[92] As a result, many prisoners in the West did not work. Therefore, while considered important, inmate labor was not an overriding ideological concern in the West, nor were policies of state-managed rapid industrialization being pursued.

In addition to its centrality in penal philosophy and in the Soviet Union's rapid industrialization, Gulag labor was unique in how it was administered. Inmates worked very long hours with few days off, pushed hard to fulfill specific

production quotas. It was, without question, "the merciless exploitation of prisoners" in the name of economic development.[93] Moreover, one's labor performance fed into a range of other facets of camp life, including rations: those who failed to fulfill the norm for the day were not given their full ration that evening.[94] Indeed, it came to be practically the only indicator of an inmate's "correction," which was important for determining the possibility of early release.[95] Meanwhile, as the 1930s progressed, other aspects of reeducation receded in importance and labor itself began to lose its reeducational value.[96] For camp commanders and inmates alike, plan fulfillment trumped all other concerns. This overwhelming emphasis on labor as a vehicle of production persisted from the late 1930s to the end of Stalin's reign and rightly came to be viewed by scholars and memoirists alike as the defining Gulag experience. As Solzhenitsyn declared, "the life of the [prisoners] consists of work, work, work."[97]

The primacy of economics in the Stalin-era Gulag can also be viewed in how Gulag inmates and free workers often labored together. Although one of the purposes of penal systems generally and the Gulag specifically was to isolate criminals from the rest of society and thereby prevent them from committing further crimes, this ideal was frequently compromised in Stalin's Soviet Union. Gulag inmates often mixed openly with free workers on the jobsite; many were given special passes that allowed them to travel outside the camps without armed escort; and some prisoners were even given permission to live outside the barbed wire. All of these exceptions to the idea of strict isolation were done in the name of economic production. As Alan Barenberg has found, economic managers in charge of Gulag labor "were convinced that prisoners granted the privilege of living outside the 'zone' would be more productive than those who were not."[98] The borders of the Gulag, therefore, were rather flexible and porous. Rather than isolated from society, Gulag inmates were in many places more or less integrated into the local society and especially the local economies.[99]

A final aspect of the Soviet Gulag that contributed to some extent to its uniqueness among penal systems globally was its pervasive reforms. Reform in the enlightenment and Marxist sense of progress toward a better future was deeply embedded in the Soviet psyche, and from 1917 to 1991 incredible energy was poured into endless proposals and actual reforms aimed at transforming the state, the economy, the natural environment, Soviet society, and the Soviet citizen. With rare exception in Soviet history the status quo was considered unacceptable; progress toward communism, after all, was the Soviet Union's raison d'être. And the Soviet Union's authoritarian state structure made reforms relatively easy to initiate.[100]

Although the idea of persistent reformism, based on the periodic realization that prisons never achieved their intended aims, has been noted in Western penal

systems as well, the Soviet Gulag was the site of constant experimentation.[101] Policy changes were frequent in the 1920s and 1930s as penal experts and administrators attempted to figure out what precisely incarceration should mean in the socialist context. The dramatic social upheavals combined with state-sponsored terror and the resultant rapid expansion of the Gulag in the 1930s also served to inject volatility into the system. Regulations were constantly being revised, often with the result of making imprisonment harsher. As Oleg Khlevniuk has noted, the prisoners of the early 1930s "were relatively well-off and free compared to those unfortunate enough to be imprisoned in the later period of starvation, mass shootings, and war."[102] Indeed, in the midst of the Great Terror, prisoners were subject to arrest and execution; moreover, certain stimuli for good behavior—parole and workday credits most prominently—were rescinded after nearly two decades of constant tinkering with these systems.[103] The war years also witnessed constantly changing policies and regulations in regard to labor, rations, release, and so forth.

This climate of constant reformism persisted even in the 1945–53 era of late Stalinism, which is typically known for its lack of reforming vitality.[104] Certainly some efforts at reform were stifled by Stalin, who was hesitant during these years to sanction radical restructuring in the political and economic structures of the Soviet Union. Most notable among these blocked reforms were two radical plans drafted by S. S. Mamulov (likely on the orders of Beria, patron of the Soviet security apparatus) in 1949 and 1951 to turn the majority of inmates into internal exiles.[105] Yet several significant changes to the Soviet penal system were made in the late 1940s and early 1950s. A massive amnesty freed hundreds of thousands of inmates in 1945, signifying perhaps a shift toward lower levels of incarceration.[106] But harsh antitheft laws passed in 1947, which mandated five years' imprisonment for theft and seven for embezzlement, meant a rapid expansion of the Gulag system.[107] In order to better isolate and control political prisoners, many of them from the newly acquired Western borderlands, a network of "special camps" with particularly onerous living and working conditions was created in 1948.[108] For nonpolitical prisoners, at least in certain camps, prisoner wages and workday credits aimed at increasing inmate productivity were reintroduced after being abolished in the late 1930s.[109] Finally, in the early 1950s there was a widespread campaign to enforce tighter discipline in the camps.[110] The Soviet Gulag, including in the late Stalin era, thus experienced constant experimentation in terms of policy and practice. In this respect the post-Stalin changes to the penal system, while truly transformative, were made possible in part by an existing climate of persistent reformism.[111]

1

RESTRUCTURING THE PENAL EMPIRE

Administration, Institutions, and Demographics

One has to feel sorry for them, too—you can imagine the oceans of paper they're floundering in! And the sea of lies!

—Evgeniia Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*

On 5 March 1953, four days after suffering a massive stroke, Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin died. Over the radio classical music played, in the streets people wept openly. Stalin's death had great meaning for all of Soviet society. It opened up the possibility of a succession struggle among Stalin's lieutenants. As Georgii Maksimilianovich Malenkov later remarked, "Stalin's mistake was that he had not trained anyone to fill his position."[1] Just as important as a new leader was the possibility of policy changes that would impact the daily lives of the Soviet citizenry. As Andrei Sakharov recalled, "It was a shattering event. Everyone understood that something must soon change, but no one knew in what direction."[2] Many in the various Soviet bureaucracies anticipated that the "self-perpetuating cycle of stalled reforms" that characterized the late Stalin era could be broken.[3] More broadly, people hoped for better housing and nutrition, and more consumer goods. And they yearned for a lessening of repression, a relaxation of the climate of fear and secrecy that had pervaded Soviet society since the early 1930s.[4] As Vera Dunham found, the burgeoning Soviet middle class after the war desired contentment, stability, and security. They were interested not in ideology or revolutionary zeal, but in cars and careers.[5] And while Stalin began the process of delivering on these desires, his death only raised the possibility of attaining them more quickly.[6]

Although Stalin's death was important for all of Soviet society, perhaps nowhere was its potential impact felt more keenly than in the Gulag. As in the broader population, many prisoners were greatly saddened by Stalin's passing. Inmate A. P. Butkovsky later recorded that there was no rejoicing among the

however, the final reforms of 1963–64 were the very ones that ended the era of penal experimentation and achieved relative equilibrium.

Indeed, the outcome of penal experimentation of the Khrushchev era may be seen dialectically as a synthesis between the initial thesis of liberalism as a means of correction and the subsequent antithesis of retribution and harsh regimen conditions. The counter-counterreforms of the mid-1960s—increased rations, heightened use of parole and deconvoying, greater focus on various reeducational programs, colony-settlements, and "chemistry"—forged this synthesis of the two competing post-Stalin narratives and decisively rejected the Stalinist vision of punishment as retribution and labor power. And it was this synthesis, embodied by a partial commitment to "progressive" principles, which remained the guiding philosophy for the duration of the Soviet Union.

Conclusions

KHRUSHCHEV'S REFORMS AND THE LATE (AND POST-)SOVIET GULAG

Prison 'reform' is virtually contemporary with the prison itself: it constitutes, as it were, its programme.

—Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

In the final analysis, how does one assess Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev's reforms in the penal sphere? According to the most optimistic of the regime's aims, as expressed in Vasilii Aleksandrovich Samsonov's 1962 report on the future withering away of the Soviet penal system (detailed at the beginning of chapter 5), the reforms ultimately failed. Soviet society in the 1960s and 1970s was riddled with crime—people committed murders and assaults, they stole from one another, they drove while intoxicated, they brewed moonshine, they embezzled money or property from their workplace, and they violated the law in a variety of other ways.[1] And despite efforts to promote noncustodial sanctioning in places of imprisonment, ultimately the Soviets were unwilling to reject state-mandated incarceration as the backbone of the penal system. Yet even though this audacious dream, reminiscent of early Soviet criminology, was once again possible thanks to the post-Stalin Gulag reforms, it is ultimately not the best measuring stick for assessing these reforms.

According to many of the more realistic aims expressed by Khrushchev and other top Soviet officials from 1953 to 1956, the penal reforms of the Khrushchev era achieved remarkable success. Quantitatively, the Gulag was much smaller in 1964 than it was in 1953, and the number of political prisoners in the system had declined sharply. Millions of people removed from society during the Stalin years, together with hundreds of thousands more required to administer and guard them, were released. Despite scarce resources in an age of pervasive reforms, most of the large corrective-labor camps were eliminated in favor of smaller colonies, complete with onsite worksites. Inmates in 1964 were more often imprisoned in

their home provinces, rather than being shipped to distant locations such as Kolyma, Vorkuta, and Karaganda. Prisoners enjoyed better living and working conditions in the mid-1960s than they did in the early 1950s, and they had been granted a number of rights not previously enjoyed. Mortality and sickness rates declined, as did the level of violence in the system. The three competing aims of the penal system had been rebalanced, with Khrushchev's Gulag placing much greater emphasis on reeducation than its predecessor. And various oversight bodies, especially the Procuracy, ensured that Gulag workers were held accountable for their actions.

The Gulag, in other words, had taken crucial steps toward correcting the problems with the Stalinist camps identified by Presidium members in their February 1954 meeting (as detailed in chapter 1). By 1964 the Gulag devoted far less energy to "construction," and more "to the correction of people," than it did in the last years of Stalin's life. Although economic concerns continued to play an important role in penal facility operations, no longer did central economic planners treat the Gulag simply as "a source of labor power." There were fewer inmates incarcerated for petty crimes, which prevented them from being "ruined" by the penal experience. The transition to colonies with their own productive bases fulfilled to some extent Khrushchev's desire for a "return to Dzerzhinskii's system of factories and workshops." The Gulag had, to a great extent, been "rebuilt anew."[2] According to Khrushchev and his peers along with the Gulag administration itself, therefore, the reformation of the penal system in the post-Stalin era was a rejection of Stalinism. As Gulag political worker A. Ermolaev declared in his review of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, that terrible era of lawlessness had been decisively rejected.

A number of historians, however, have dismissed the de-Stalinization of the Gulag as fleeting and ultimately inconsequential. Solzhenitsyn, speaking of the post-Stalin reforms, famously quipped, "Rulers change, the Archipelago remains."[3] Robert Conquest, who wrote extensively on the Gulag and all things repressive under the Soviet Union, argued that "however one looks at it, the penal and police systems were reformed in the Khrushchev period. Equally, however one looks at it, they did not undergo essential change, did not become truly liberal."[4] More recently, Anne Applebaum, in her Pulitzer Prize-winning history of the Gulag, speaks of "half-baked reforms, new privileges which were quickly removed, and public discussions which were immediately hushed up." By the mid-1960s, she asserts, "it was clear that the neo-Stalinists had triumphed."[5]

Certain pieces of evidence seem to support these contentions. The Gulag still imprisoned a high percentage of the Soviet population in relation to other countries (although the United States would eventually surpass it in this regard). Political prisoners, sentenced by an at times orchestrated justice system, still inhabited the Soviet Gulag of the 1960s and would continue to do so until the fall of communism.[6] The basic organization of camps and colonies remained relatively unchanged (barracks, barbed wire, guards). Production by means of inmate labor remained a serious if not overriding concern for camp administrators. Corruption was never fully stamped out, and guards and inmates alike at times engaged in beatings, rape, and other forms of violence. Ethnic rivalries and a very limited amount of gang affiliation among prisoner groups remained. The Gulag staff was only minimally professionalized. Finally, new efforts at reeducation failed to significantly lower the recidivism rate. In other words, the reforming programs of the 1950s were left partially unfulfilled. Yet this should not be surprising. The very fact that the Soviet penal system remained a penal system ensured a high degree of continuity in policy and practice. In fact, one wonders what Solzhenitsyn, Conquest, and others would have proposed as an alternative to the system they condemned. What, in fact, did Conquest mean by a "truly liberal" penal system?

Criminologists globally in the postwar era promoted a variety of penal measures that avoided incarceration or that placed inmates in "open" institutions, and the Soviets were very much engaged in such efforts.[7] Yet no country, in the East or West, was able to displace incarceration as the backbone of their penal system. From Western Europe to the United States to apartheid South Africa, prisons and their equivalents remained the punishment of choice. And these were not "liberal" institutions, but ones in which compulsory labor, corruption, beatings, and prisoner-on-prisoner violence abounded. Moreover, they were often places of severely curtailed rights and arbitrary rule. Some commentators from the period poignantly noted that prison systems in the West were in essence "totalitarian" islands in otherwise free societies. As N. A. Polanski argued in relation to the U.S. prison system, "the maximum security prison represents a social system in which an attempt is made to create and maintain total or almost total social control. The detailed regulations extending into every area of the individual's life, the constant surveillance, the concentration of power into the hands of a ruling few, the wide gulf between the rulers and the ruled—all are elements of what we would usually call a totalitarian regime."[8] This is not to defend the atrocities committed by and in the Gulag under Stalin and to a lesser extent under Khrushchev, which Solzhenitsyn masterfully exposes, but to remind that some of what he describes is endemic to prisons in general, not to Soviet institutions in particular. When the worst problems are corrected, therefore, one should not be surprised to still find oppression, corruption, confusion of aims, and disparities between rhetoric and reality, for such are the realities of virtually every system of incarceration.

The problem with the assessments of Solzhenitsyn, Conquest, and Applebaum, in other words, is that they judge the Gulag of the 1950s and 1960s

against an undefined and ultimately unrealistic standard of what a penal system should look like. In this light it bears noting that comparisons with the Stalinist Gulag persist even now. The partner of a prisoner held in a corrective colony in Mordovia, when asked about conditions there in 2004 remarked, "read Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*; it's just the same today—nothing has changed."[9] And even the current minister of justice, Aleksandr Konovalov, while discussing a proposed set of reforms to the Russian penal system in 2011, complained that Russian prisons "are terribly archaic—they resemble the Gulag or even pre-revolutionary penal servitude."[10] It seems likely, therefore, that the image of the Stalinist Gulag persisting into the Khrushchev era and beyond is used by Solzhenitsyn, Conquest, Applebaum, and others not as an objective basis for comparison, but rather as a symbol to discredit the entire Soviet experiment (and post-Soviet regime).

In the final analysis, therefore, when assessing the Khrushchev era it is important that one not base one's judgments on the regime's failure to live up to its own ideologically driven fantasies for the future, or on some ill-informed conception of how Western prison systems operate. It is certainly true that Khrushchev failed to fully implement his de-Stalinization program in the penal sphere. But in fact the reforms of the Khrushchev period *did* have an important lasting effect on the Soviet penal system. Whereas most of Khrushchev's reforms in agriculture (the meat and milk campaign in particular, along with the push for corn), administration (the party reforms of the early 1960s and the councils of the national economy), and even the legal sphere (campaigns against hooliganism, speculation, and corruption), not to mention the partial and temporary relaxation of censorship that gave the "Thaw" its name, were short-lived and largely ineffective, the reform of the Gulag constituted an important instance of substantive and permanent transformation. This certainly holds true in terms of the Gulag's permanent reduction in size, but it also applies to the reorientation of Gulag aims and the resultant improved conditions experienced by its inmates. Most crucially, although certain inmate privileges were reduced or eliminated in the early 1960s at the culmination of the "camp is not a resort" campaign, many of the most important prisoner-friendly reforms of the 1950s, such as parole and the eight-hour workday, remained. Despite certain continuities, therefore, the Gulag did not return to a state of unchecked (and even abetted) violence, grueling labor, and oppressive living conditions—the defining features of the Stalinist penal system. De-Stalinization in the penal sphere was a real and enduring legacy of the Khrushchev era.

Khrushchev's Reforms beyond Khrushchev

On 14 October 1964 Khrushchev was formally removed from power by Leonid Brezhnev and a number of other high-level conspirators. His hold on power had been tenuous since 1960, with his increasingly erratic governing style and "harebrained scheming" ultimately alienating even his staunch supporters. Yet the forced retirement of Khrushchev did not have nearly the same effect as the death of Stalin nearly twelve years previously. The ensuing succession struggle was muted, there was no "secret speech," and the post-1964 reforms were mostly focused, in the words of Khrushchev's successors, on undoing various "hasty decisions and actions divorced from reality."[11] Lacking among the general population too was the great sense of dread and anticipation that accompanied Stalin's death.

In the Gulag, the reaction to the transfer of power among prisoners and guards alike was also devoid of the passion that defined the announcement of Stalin's death. As Leonid Sitko recorded in his memoir, "We didn't mourn: everyone had for a long time been sick of him."[12] But if there was no mourning, neither was there much celebrating. Anatoly Marchenko recalled some cheering when Khrushchev's portraits were removed from the camp, and in fact a few inmates successfully applied for pardon for their crime of cursing Khrushchev. According to Valdimir Osipov, for example, one who was released had been convicted of writing "communism without Khrushchev" on the wall of his house. Upon Khrushchev's removal, this no longer presented any offense.[13] Part of the reason for the muted reaction to Khrushchev's ouster was that, unlike eleven years previously, no one in the penal system expected dramatic change. And indeed, change was not forthcoming.[14] Documents from the Gulag from late 1964 and 1965 reflect a desire to perfect certain programs, to reform around the edges, but not to change the system wholesale.

In 1969 the Supreme Soviet passed the "Principles of Corrective-Labor Law," a project in the making since the mid-1950s, which was followed by new corrective-labor codes in the fifteen union republics.[15] These codes not only replaced the corrective-labor statute of 1961, they served as the legal replacement of the old 1933 penal code, and as such were published in the national press rather than being issued only as top secret documents as were the three statutes of the Khrushchev era. The new codes reflected the synthesis achieved as a result of the initial reforms of the mid-1950s, the counterreform movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the subsequent steps taken to weaken the harshest elements of the 1961 statute.[16] They solidified in legal form, in other words, the reforms of the Khrushchev era.

While the few dissident memoirists of the Brezhnev period do not write favorably of their time in corrective-labor colonies and prisons—they were not just prisoners, after all, but prisoners of conscience—there is a marked difference between their certainly unpleasant yet somewhat mundane experiences and the intense trials endured by inmates of the Stalinist Gulag.[17] Marchenko's famous assertion in his 1969 memoir *My Testimony* that "today's Soviet camps for political prisoners are just as horrific as in Stalin's time" simply does not stand up to careful scrutiny.[18]

Significantly, the correctional reforms of the Khrushchev era also outlasted the Soviet Union itself; the penal system of the post-1991 Russian Federation is readily discernible as the remnant of its Soviet predecessor. Though shorn of Marxist-Leninist ideology and transferred to the Ministry of Justice in 1998 (in a move reminiscent of the short-lived 1953 move to the same ministry), its physical plant has hardly changed. Visitors and new inmates are confronted with the same drab collection of buildings that foreigners witnessed in the 1950s (complete with fading Soviet slogans admonishing prisoners to high productivity), a result of perpetual underfunding by higher authorities.[19] Penal facilities remain under the same system of classification, consisting primarily of corrective-labor colonies with the same standard, strict, and special regimen types solidified in the Khrushchev era, along with the colony-settlements that originated in 1963 and a few prisons.[20] The philosophy of incarceration as a means of retribution, isolation, and reeducation likewise remains constant.[21]

The post-Soviet penal system since the fall of communism has also exhibited very similar reformist impulses to those witnessed in the Khrushchev era. As Laura Piacentini explains, in the 1990s "new legislation was introduced that aimed at making regimes more humane; the rights of prisoners have been safeguarded; and legal and judicial reform has accelerated so that conditions are brought into line with international standards."[22] Such reforms are also evident in other post-Soviet republics eager to throw off the legacy of Soviet repression.[23] Yet there is also more recent evidence of a counterreform effort designed to make imprisonment harsher.[24] In another parallel, just as in the period following the 1953 amnesty, prison officials in the post-Soviet world struggle with persistent overcrowding caused by a high conviction rate, with the total inmate population rising from around 760,000 (including remand prisoners) in 1992 to a post-Soviet peak of over 1 million prisoners in June 2000; to cope with this problem administrators, like their predecessors in the 1950s, resorted to a series of amnesties over the following years, which has somewhat successfully held the inmate population to well under a million in the recent decade.[25] Moreover, one of the primary challenges that penal officials face is the same question posed by those of the 1950s and 1960s: how to provide work for each inmate.[26] It is interesting here that prison labor in the logging industry of Perm Province, the last remnant of the Gulag camps in the Khrushchev era, persists even today.[27] Despite a monumental change in the political regime in 1991, much within Russian prisons today can be traced to the Soviet era and to the pivotal Khrushchev years in particular. This is the ultimate legacy of Khrushchev's Gulag.