

From Bounded to Juxtapositional—New Histories of the Gulag

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THE GULAG HAS long been approached as a bounded system, a network of camps isolated in the remote corners of the Soviet space. The main metaphor behind Solzhenitsyn's epochal 1973 *Arkhipelag GULAG* (Gulag Archipelago) of a vast chain of islands was, in part, intended to bridge the veil of silence that surrounded the camps much like water surrounds enclaves of land. Solzhenitsyn popularized the previously little-known acronym (Glavnoe upravlenie ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagerei i kolonii, or the Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps and Colonies of the GPU/NKVD and later MVD), turning it into a metonym for not just the NKVD network of labor camps but, by extension, all Soviet camps—and later, in its most expansive usages, Stalinist repression writ large. This symbolic meaning attached to the term no doubt helped reify the Gulag as a discrete entity separated from the Soviet mainland.

Early scholarly contributions to the history of the Gulag were not only heavily influenced by Solzhenitsyn's metaphor but often took a systemic approach by treating the network of camps and colonies as a whole. The most significant examples of this came before the “archival revolution” of the 1990s, which was marked by a statistical war over the total number of victims.¹ In addition, the history of the Gulag was very much bounded chronologically, largely by the years of Stalinism, since the camps as a mass system of forced labor arose under secret police supervision in 1930, shortly after Stalin consolidated sole power, and were radically reduced several years after his death during Khrushchev's Thaw.² Finally, there was little if any comparison to the history of camps or forced labor in other times and places.

Solzhenitsyn's archipelago metaphor was inspired by an actual archipelago, the White Sea islands of Solovki that were home to the Solovetskii lager' osobogo naznacheniiia (SLON). This camp complex remained under secret

police control during the New Economic Policy (NEP) and became the prototype for the expanding system of camps at the outset of the Stalin period. It assumed this role because it had first developed the mission and methods aimed at economically exploiting prisoner labor and colonizing the Far North, and its staff along with its model were exported to other camps during the rapid expansion of the Gulag network. One of the many famous inmates of Solovki, the future academician Dmitrii Likhachev, was arrested in 1928 and served five years. He recalled a much later time when he shared his notes on the history of the camp in the White Sea archipelago with Solzhenitsyn, who spent eleven years in the camps, as both were preparing their respective publications on the topic. In the course of three days, he told Aleksandr Isaevich about the Latvian camp boss Degtiarev, the self-styled “surgeon-in-chief” and “head of the troops of the Solovetskii archipelago.” Solzhenitsyn exclaimed: “That is what I need!” Thus, Likhachev recounted, “in my office the name for his book ‘The Gulag Archipelago’ was born.”³

This volume contributes and adds weight to an approach to the Gulag that is in many respects quite different from the one that reigned for a quarter-century after Solzhenitsyn’s magnum opus. Scholarship on the Soviet camp system, which began to grow relatively slowly after the opening of the former Soviet archives, has gained a momentum never before achieved. A noteworthy impetus to the field was the publication in 2004–2005 of a landmark, seven-volume, Russian-language documentary history, *The History of the Stalinist Gulag*.⁴ Since then, the pace in Gulag studies has accelerated internationally as new scholarship, especially in Russian, English, French, and German, has stimulated new vectors of analysis.

If one were to characterize the most novel element in the new wave of Gulag research, it could be dubbed juxtapositional. Even as much of the new scholarship is built on in-depth case studies rather than systemic coverage, scholars have become, first of all, acutely aware of just how many different types of camps with very different regimes the Soviet Union maintained. In 2007 Lynne Viola drew attention to the “unknown Gulag” of special settlements set up during forced collectivization, a peasant world quite different from the camps but also part of the Gulag.⁵ The camps themselves also differed greatly. To cite just one striking example of the range of camp regimes involved, Viazemlag (named after the city Viaz’ma in Smolensk oblast) was tasked in the mid-1930s to build the strategically important Moscow-Minsk highway. It was in many ways on the opposite end of the spectrum from such remote camps as Kolyma, within the Arctic Circle, the horrific and extreme conditions of which were described by Varlam Shalamov. Centrally located, Viazemlag in fact became a moving settlement that traveled as the highway

was constructed. There was contact with the local population and minimal security, due to relatively privileged conditions and utilization of prisoners about to be released.⁶ Future works will undoubtedly be concerned with further synthesizing the mounting number of case studies and juxtaposing the different types of camps.

Second, Solzhenitsyn's metaphor, so widely adopted and so longlasting, has been productively called into question in this later scholarship. Although by suggesting that Soviet life was made up of bigger and lesser zones, Solzhenitsyn in a way prefigured current approaches, the archipelago metaphor was often taken to presuppose a world that was as closed off as it was physically remote. By contrast, twenty-first-century scholarship emphasizes the "porous" boundaries of many camps and the mixing of free and nonfree populations.⁷ It also raises a significant comparative issue, discussed below: the blurred boundaries between free and unfree labor.

The scholarship of juxtaposition thus moves the Gulag, to use Kate Brown's phrase, "out of solitary confinement" and into the mainstream of Soviet history.⁸ To do this implies understanding connections, tracing interactions, and making parallels with the broader Soviet civilization beyond the barbed wire. This volume begins with an important effort by the eminent Russian historian of Stalinism, Oleg Khlevniuk, to think through the interconnections between the Gulag and the "non-Gulag." Khlevniuk therefore furthers the juxtapositional approach most explicitly and systematically, but it is also supported by almost all the other chapters in the book. For example, Wilson Bell discusses how the Siberian Gulag was integrated into the total war economy; Asif Siddiqi situates the scientific *sharashki* (teams of engineers and scientists in the Gulag) within the broader history of Soviet "specialists." Siddiqi describes how the illusion of cost-free forced labor even prompted the secret police to target members of the scientific and technical intelligentsia in professions "useful" for Gulag activities, such as geologists "recruited" through arrest to work in mining or industrial operations. Dan Healey, in turn, considers Gulag physicians and camps for invalids in the context of broader Soviet approaches to disability. Insofar as such connections are an intrinsic part of the authors' interpretations, they serve to "bring the Gulag back in" to Soviet history.

Finally, the sharpness of the 1956–1958 divide in historical treatments of Gulag-related topics has also eroded with scholarly treatments of Gulag returnees, the integration of Gulag survivors into Soviet society, and the intertwined history of Gulag camps with their surroundings. All three factors were present, notably, in settlements and even cities that sprang up around the camps and that lived on after the era of Stalinist mass incarceration was

over.⁹ In this volume, Emilia Koustova's exploration of the reintegration of special settlers from Lithuania and western Ukraine into Soviet society and Judith Pallot's discussion of the afterlife of the Gulag in post-Soviet penal policies both make juxtapositions that transcend long-standing chronological boundaries in Gulag studies.

Perhaps the most novel and far-reaching set of juxtapositions in the current volume, however, derives from its inclusion of a richly suggestive comparative element. Perhaps because of the relative isolation of Soviet studies from other fields, perhaps because of the totalitarian paradigm's stress on exceptionalism (beyond the comparison with National Socialism and Fascism), and certainly because of the long dearth of empirically rich, archival studies, the history of the Gulag has been surprisingly, even startlingly underinformed by comparative history. One of the major purposes of this book is to begin to rectify this situation. Because German scholarship in recent years has become the pacesetter in pursuing the comparative history of concentration camps, a noted participant in this literature, Bettina Greiner, was invited to write the conclusion.¹⁰

Two chapters, those of Daniel Beer and Judith Pallot, further what might be called temporal comparisons in the Russian context. Their examination of the tsarist exile system and the post-Soviet Russian penal system—that is, the prehistory and posthistory of the Gulag—necessarily affect our understanding of the Soviet era by forcing us to reckon with some of the Gulag's features that predated and outlasted communism. Aidan Forth's work on British camps in Africa and India, exploring a "liberal empire" in the long nineteenth century, well before the era of "high modernism," was quite deliberately selected for inclusion here. Certain uncanny parallels with the Gulag—what Forth memorably calls a "family resemblance"—may well be the most revealing and, perhaps, unexpected part of this book for Soviet historians, who rarely look beyond twentieth-century history and who have grown up for so long on the Nazi-Soviet comparison.

If there is one comparative fact that Soviet historians do know about the Gulag, it is that Soviet camps were not extermination camps, and thus can be distinguished from the industrial killing camps of the Nazis. Dietrich Beyrau, however, returns to the hoary Nazi-Soviet comparison with a consideration of all the camps in the Third Reich, not only what he calls the "pure extermination camps" of Chelmo, Sobibor, Treblinka, Majdanek, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. The creation of these death camps came with the outbreak of the Second World War, roughly coinciding with the Final Solution; all the Nazi camps "before Auschwitz," however horrific, were not extermination camps.¹¹ Juxtaposing a more comprehensive coverage of the range of

German camps to a Soviet case considered on the basis of the new historiography, Beyrau is then able to identify many other similarities and differences. This reconsideration also comes at a time when our understanding of the Holocaust as primarily associated with “industrial” murder in the death camps has been transformed by newer understandings of the “Holocaust by bullets” in the East.¹²

For any updated comparison with the Nazi case, moreover, scholars will wish to take into account Golfo Alexopoulos’s powerful new material on how the Gulag camps systematically “managed, utilized, and discarded” people, releasing many on the verge of death in order to reduce mortality rates. Alexopoulos observes that “there exists a legitimate desire to avoid false equivalencies between the Nazi extermination camps and the Soviet labor camps,” and she acknowledges the differing severity of camp regimes. At the same time, Alexopoulos concludes that “exhaustive labor and punitive starvation rations” were a form of destruction that was systematic and, to the degree that it was predicated on total exploitation of human bodies, intentional: “The Stalinist leadership may not have planned to exterminate its camp prisoners, but it intended to extract all available energy, to physically exploit prisoners to the maximum degree possible.” Two other comparative cases explored here, those of China and North Korea, both show how camp systems that originally were heavily influenced both by the Soviet example and Soviet advisers diverged from the Gulag in noteworthy respects. The Laogai in China went far down the road of ideological reeducation and frenzied mass mobilization, for example, even as it largely replicated heavily economic functions of the Gulag, while North Korea has emphasized stigma and, evidently, could not replicate the economic role that forced labor played in Soviet forced industrialization.

A key issue that runs through the chapters of this volume, one that cries out for more comparative treatment, has to do with the modernity of the Gulag. Nineteenth-century innovations, both ideological and technological, were preconditions for twentieth-century camps. As Forth argues in his chapter, “British rule helped foster the structural and conceptual preconditions for the development and management of camps.” As Beyrau suggests, the First World War was, as in so many other areas, an international watershed in both the scale and duration of the camp experience that, like the Gulag itself, was quite diverse and encompassed many different types of camps. Forth makes a direct connection from the nineteenth to the twentieth century via the concept of modernity, arguing: “At a fundamental level, British and Soviet camps materialized within the structural conditions of a shared Western modernity. They developed according to similar frameworks of purity and contagion

and emphasized productive labor, fiscal restraint, and fears of social and political danger.” The Gulag, like the concentration camp, is quite often seen as a quintessentially twentieth-century, totalitarian, and therefore, by extension, modern phenomenon. Mark Levene’s comparative work on genocide in the European “rimlands” from 1939 to 1953 explicitly labels the NKVD, because of its relative efficiency and logistical capabilities in comparison to the Nazi SS, the “cutting edge of Soviet high modernism.”¹³

At the same time, when it comes to features of Stalinism that have not infrequently appeared as a *prima facie* argument about the atavism of the Soviet system, the sheer extent of Soviet political violence and the nature of the Gulag have loomed large. The fact that a significant sector of the Soviet economy and population were tied to what was essentially a form of slave labor, often using nonexistent or primitive tools, led Viktor Berdinskikh, a historian of the Gulag, to begin a paper with an analogy to the Egyptian pyramids. Alexander Etkind, to give a different example, views the Soviet system as “definitively anti-modern.” Operating in no small part on the history of the Gulag, Etkind advances the “concept of ‘counter-modernities’ or perhaps ‘anti-modern forces of modernity,’ modeled after Isaiah Berlin’s concept of Counter-Enlightenment.”¹⁴

Within the chapters of this book alone, there appears to be a spectrum of opinion on the modernity of the Gulag. Wilson Bell, for example, emphasizes the pragmatic adaptation of the Gulag into the wartime economy after 1941, and in his dissertation the large gap between central planning and on-the-ground realities in the Gulag leads him to label it a form of “neo-traditionalism.”¹⁵ On the other end of the spectrum, Beyrau, deploying notions of total institutions and absolute power, implicitly emphasizes illiberal modernity, even as for him the concept of camp “underlife” is needed to explain the inevitable gap between intentions and implementation. Alexopoulos’s description of a systematized, Gulag-wide regime of extreme physical exploitation necessarily affects our understanding of the Gulag’s modernity, because it could only be implemented on such a widespread scale by political authorities, camp administrations, and medical personnel—even while much of the labor was carried out with the most primitive of tools.

I would suggest that attentive readers of these chapters will find it possible to break the vexed issue of modernity into more manageable historical and conceptual problems. One such issue that assumes key importance revolves around state capacity. Beer’s chapter on deportation to Siberia and the tsarist exile system is precisely about the “limits of state power” in the prerevolutionary Russian Empire. Even though the nature of both Gulag camps and special settlements was fundamentally about minimizing the number of

guards and personnel needed to produce forced labor from a large number of prisoners, the contrast between the tsarist and Soviet states was enormous. The ambitions of the Soviet state were, needless to say, far greater than its own capacity, but without those ambitions the sheer scale of the Gulag is also hard to imagine. A second issue relevant to the question of the modernity of the Gulag has to do with the significant role of science, medicine, and specialists, taken up in the chapters of Alexopoulos, Healey, and Siddiqi. A third issue revolves around the distinctive economic-ideological missions attached to Gulag forced labor from the First Five-Year Plan on. While the British camps, as Forth shows, not only used prisoner labor but reflected an entire ideology of labor, the centrality of the Gulag's forced labor to forced industrialization and internal colonization—what Christian Gerlach and Nicholas Werth have termed “developmental violence”—have to be considered a major facet of Soviet communism.¹⁶ Mühlhahn suggests in his contribution that the Chinese Laogai (the abbreviation for “reform through labor”) system shared a “strong, even dominant emphasis on the economic functions of camps” with the Gulag. This is yet another reason to consider Maoism a variation on Stalinism.

Perhaps the greatest issue deriving from the new juxtaposition between the Gulag and the non-Gulag within the Soviet system that cries out for more comparative investigation is the relationship between “free” and Gulag labor. Many of the chapters in this volume contain material that supports Barenberg's recent conclusion: “the straightforward distinction between ‘free’ workers (*vol' nonaemnye*) and prisoners (*zakliuchennye*) that one often encounters in archival documents and memoirs, and in much of the historiography of the Gulag, falls short of being able to describe the social intricacy of camp complexes and their surrounding communities.”¹⁷ For example, Khlevniuk discusses a “liminal space between the Gulag and non-Gulag” made up of tens of millions of people he describes as “half-free.” By “free” in this context one conventionally means, of course, a nonprisoner. However, the notion that it is hard to consider any labor in the Stalin period as truly free, in the sense of not being directly linked to coercion and compulsion, is hardly a novelty in the historiography of the non-Gulag. The entire collective farm system resulting from the collectivization of agriculture, carried out at the very same historical moment the Gulag was created, can be seen as a form of forced labor for the rural population. There is a large comparative dimension to this question, as well. Not just the authors of the new wave of scholarship on the Gulag (including Khlevniuk, Bell, and Siddiqi in this volume) but economic historians investigating other times and contexts are questioning a stark dichotomy between free and forced labor.¹⁸

Ultimately, the juxtapositional approach furthered here provokes reflection on the myriad ways in which the Gulag was intertwined with Stalinism—the definition and nature of which is in itself an important problem—and why the Gulag became an integral part of the Soviet system in the Stalin period.¹⁹ A good place to begin is the feedback loop between politics and economics, or more specifically the way the persecution of political enemies reinforced the exploitation of forced labor, and vice versa. Soviet authorities became addicted to a constant, seemingly inexhaustible flow of Gulag labor, even though camp administrators often underestimated the number of prisoners the political authorities would produce. To be sure, the Gulag, despite its huge size, was in all-union terms but one rather small part of the emergent command economy. But the importance of Gulag forced labor derived from the Gulag's place as a high-priority sector of that economy run by the powerful secret police: it was used for gold and mineral extraction, the monumental construction sites of the era, and strategically important projects. In the command economy, moreover, prisoner labor contractually supplied by the secret police was regularly directed to fill all sorts of needs outside the Gulag.²⁰

The broader point is that in the Stalin period the Soviet system became linked to the Gulag at the hip. This was in no small part because their entire worldview led the Stalinist leadership and Soviet authorities of the period into the illusory trap of assuming that forced labor came at little or no cost—or, perhaps more accurately, for decades operating as if those costs that existed were worth assuming.²¹ It is also because the cycles of revolutionary attack or crackdown, alternating with periods of retrenchment as the regime lurched from crisis to crisis starting with the unexpected consequences of collectivization circa 1930, were deeply intertwined with the conditions and population growth of the Gulag.²² Under Stalinism, there was rarely a shortage in the “supply” of prisoners produced by arrests and the campaigns that generated them. Did Stalinist political violence, which originally created the supply of Gulag slave labor and endowed the NKVD with its own economic empire, ultimately stimulate, in a cruel mimicry of market forces, the “demand” for arrests? Here causal relationships and levels of intentionality remain open to more research and interpretation. But the bigger point is that there existed an interlocking political-economic nexus in which political violence and forced labor were two sides of the Stalinist coin. The result was a camp system that exceeded all antecedents. This must be considered a component feature of the Soviet system as it crystallized under Stalin, and it therefore must be considered no small part of the construction of Soviet socialism as a noncapitalist shortcut to modernity.

It matters greatly, however, whether one investigates the modernity of the Gulag simply in terms of features the Soviet case shared with other modern phenomena or whether one instead conceives a particular, alternative Soviet modernity with its own particular characteristics, at once recognizably modern and part of a distinctively Russian-Soviet historical trajectory.²³ This book can only hope to stimulate thought on such theoretical problems, since the comparative history surrounding the Gulag is at a nascent stage. The comparative agenda, moreover, is complemented by questions raised most explicitly in this volume by Forth about an equally underdeveloped research agenda: to what extent did countries that organized camps and forced labor learn from one another's experiences and practices? Any answer to this question demands a shift from comparative to transnational investigation.

Lev Trotskii, as is well known, was familiar with the British concentration camps in South Africa from his coverage of the Boer War. The first references to "concentration camps" in Russia, as Peter Holquist has shown, derived from the attention paid by both Russian military personnel and the Russian press to the British precedent. By the time the Cheka and military commissariats were tasked with creating concentration camps for defeated White officers and Cossacks in the Don in 1920, for example, Soviet authorities shifted to class analysis of suspect populations and "vastly expanded the use of such camps."²⁴ These particular linkages, however, represent just tiny pieces of a vast phenomenon. As Mühlhahn has suggested in a discussion of the "dark side of globalization," the "global spread of institutions of mass internment illustrates how, within a relatively short time span, these institutions and their underlying concepts were appropriated across borders, as ruling elites around the globe looked for potent strategies to end opposition and resistance to their projects of expansion and consolidation." He goes on to state, "The simultaneous emergence of modern institutions of mass confinement in Latin America, Africa, Russia, Japan, and China was not a belated replication of a European model so much as the synchronous appropriation of a globally circulating idea."²⁵ At the same time, the appropriation of practices and models always involves interpretation, domestication, and, almost certainly, adaptation as those practices are implemented in a different context. Any transnational agenda in Gulag studies does not only concern precedents that influenced the Russian and Soviet experience in the era of wars and revolutions. It also concerns the export of the already formed Gulag model to countries, such as China, North Korea, and East Europe, where Soviet advisers, Communists who had spent time in the Soviet Union, and the model of Stalin's USSR were influential.

Both the transnational and comparative history surrounding the Gulag

stands at a nascent stage. As we acknowledge how much work remains to be done, let us turn in more detail to the contributions of the individual chapters that compose this book.

Oleg Khlevniuk opens the volume with the biggest juxtaposition of all: a sweeping, big-picture reinterpretation of the relationship between the Gulag and the Soviet system, “The Gulag and the Non-Gulag as One Interrelated Whole.” The scale of the question he raises prompts Khlevniuk to divide it into four manageable vectors of analysis: the Gulag’s boundaries, its channels of interaction with the outside world, its role as model for the non-Gulag, and its place in a stratified, hierarchical Soviet society. Among Khlevniuk’s principal conclusions are that those boundaries contained a large, liminal zone of semifree laborers; the channels of connection were “robust,” as tens of millions moved between Gulag and non-Gulag; and the Gulag-as-model inspired a broader strategy of internal colonization in the Soviet periphery as the Gulag’s distinctive subculture was spread through concentrations of former prisoners. But it is in terms of the last vector of analysis, the sociopolitical hierarchy of the Gulag, that Khlevniuk advances his most far-reaching conclusions. The way the Gulag produced various strata of victims, beneficiaries, and party-state “prosecutors” inside and outside its borders, he suggests, did not only affect the period from the 1930s to the 1950s but held consequential long-term ramifications. The aftereffects played themselves out in cycles of de-Stalinization and re-Stalinization, in turn creating constituencies of apologists and critics of Stalinism. This legacy, he suggests, has survived and directly influences the conservative revival in Putin’s Russia.

Golfo Alexopoulos’s important intervention on mortality, rationing, and health policy in the camps raises no fewer far-reaching questions than the work of Khlevniuk. She argues that Solzhenitsyn’s grim yet clever *bon mot*, revising the official term *ispravitel’no-trudovye lageria* (corrective labor camps) as *istrebitel’no-trudovye lageria* (destructive labor camps), was in fact an accurate description of a camp regime that was destructive by design. Bringing to bear new material on the Gulag Sanitation Department’s “List of Illnesses” over time, Alexopoulos describes a ladder-like and evolving system by which weaker inmates with declining work abilities were allocated fewer calories. The class of inmates at the bottom of the ladder, the so-called “goners,” or *dokhodiagi*, were routinely released from the camps before death, leading Alexopoulos into an extended discussion of Gulag mortality rates and the percentage of prisoners released as incurables. Alexopoulos describes a regime of medico-political exploitation (in the sense that Gulag physicians were subordinated to administrative and camp authorities) that escalated in

brutality over the course of the Stalin period, peaking in the postwar expansion of the Gulag to its greatest size in the years before Stalin's death. But the framework itself was stable and was put in place at the beginning of the Stalin period with the birth of the Gulag.

Among the many issues for further debate and research that Alexopoulos's chapter should spark, I will mention only two. First, the systematic destruction that Alexopoulos describes as embedded in the system prompts us to reexamine the ideology of *perekovka*, or reformatting, which became a kind of official ideology of correctional (as opposed to destructive) labor. Turning this into the official orthodoxy was in no small part the contribution of Maksim Gor'kii, the architect of Stalinism in culture, after his visit to Solovki in 1929.²⁶ Alexopoulos does not explicitly address how her findings should influence our understanding of the ideology of rehabilitation surrounding the Gulag.²⁷ In his book Alan Barenberg points to a camp director's cynicism about the uses of this ideology. He quotes a screenwriter who recalled his visit to Vorkutlag in 1946 and was met by the camp director, Mal'tsev: "So, you're going to write—pause—about *perekovka* [reformatting]? . . . In response I muttered something incomprehensible. . . . 'That's right,' the general snorted and added measuredly, 'This is a camp. Our task is the slow murder of people.'" Barenberg's conclusion: "If Mal'tsev truly said this, it was a remarkably accurate assessment of the camp, although the destruction of human life was hardly 'slow.'"²⁸ However, even if Mal'tsev did utter these words, it hardly means that the ideological justification for the Gulag was irrelevant despite the growing, blatant disparity between pervasive ideology and pervasive practices. It means, rather, that we must reinterpret their relationship and the gulf between them.²⁹

Second, as Alexopoulos mentions in passing, the politics of food distribution in the non-Gulag became especially acute during the unprecedented crisis of the Second World War on the Eastern Front. In those years in particular, Soviet administrative decisions about food supply held life-and-death ramifications for nonprisoner populations. Yet in a new and illuminating book on the politics of food on the Soviet home front, the Gulag is only rarely mentioned.³⁰ Clearly, there is room for more juxtapositional research.

Dan Healey also looks at a previously almost unstudied topic, Gulag doctors, but his chapter takes an in-depth look at the camps' significant medical infrastructure, specifically the Gulag's large-scale Sanitation Department, which included significant numbers of imprisoned physicians, nurses, and paramedics. Healey takes great care in explaining and qualifying his adaptation of the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics to the Stalinist case. Despite the obviously illiberal, noncapitalist, and even irrational nature of the Gulag's

penal-economic regime, Healey maintains that the concept of biopolitics can encompass the rationale Gulag medicine pursued in allocating resources relating to food, shelter, clothing, sanitation, and medicine in order to optimize camp populations for production. While there certainly is overlap in the chapters of Alexopoulos and Healey—she acknowledges differing camp regimes, while he highlights atrocious mortality rates and brutal exploitation of weak and disabled prisoners—the differences between the two treatments are impossible to ignore. Alexopoulos sees Solzhenitsyn as fundamentally right about the destructive nature of the camps, while Healey takes issue with Solzhenitsyn's contempt for Gulag medicine by describing the extent of weak-prisoner and recovery teams, as well as separate camps for invalids. Perhaps this divergence will stimulate future research that will shed light on the issues raised.

Lurking behind these disagreements is, in fact, one rather fundamental issue: if the Gulag was so geared around the exploitation of prisoner labor, would it not have some interest in at least prolonging *zek* health? Alexopoulos emphasizes how the “meat grinder” of the Gulag treated humans as raw material that could be utterly depleted, in part because there was an inexhaustible supply. By contrast Healey, discussing how weak and disabled prisoners were almost always required to be involved with production, is implicitly emphasizing that Gulag “biopolitics” was still geared around not their destruction *per se* but their utilization. Thus “refeeding of the exhausted” and medical care for the weak and disabled, however constrained, was sometimes possible; but feeding people back to health was remorselessly reserved for the “recoverable worker body, and if possible, on a prophylactic basis to avoid long-term convalescence.” Healey portrays the Gulag's prioritizing of production and harshness toward the disabled as an even crueler, criminal variation of the “bleakness of official policies applied to the disabled in civilian Soviet society.” Thus he concludes, “Soviet civilian biopolitics and the Gulag version came to resemble each other in important ways.”

Asif Siddiqi's chapter represents the most substantive exploration to date of the *sharashki*, or camps for scientists, the existence of which has been widely noted but that have rarely been examined in depth. Siddiqi attracts our attention to intelligentsia and other relatively privileged inmates and, by examining scientists and applied “specialists” often working on projects with military applications, calls attention to the role of intellectual labor more generally in the Gulag. This role originated in the 1920s at Solovki, which became famous for its imprisoned intellectuals and clergy, and was not only limited to scientists, engineers, and technical specialists. But several developments at the outset of the Stalin period and the birth of the Gulag shaped

the mobilization of imprisoned scientists and specialists for high-speed, high-priority, applied projects. Around 1930, the year of the Industrial Party (Prompartii) show trial, the Soviet engineering corps was decimated. This attack coincided with a broader crackdown on “bourgeois specialists.” Indeed, the entire academic and scientific establishment was under siege in the era of forced industrialization, as it was reoriented toward an emphasis on applied, state-driven priorities even as it was wracked by a sociopolitical assault on enemies. The NEP-era specter of an independent-minded, specialist “technocracy,” as Loren Graham so memorably described, was crushed and replaced by a breakneck, myopic, Stalinist-style technocracy aimed at the monumental transformation of nature.³¹ The sharashki were one reflection and byproduct of this fateful shift.

One of Siddiqi’s key findings is that the sharashka phenomenon was a practice that peaked and reoccurred during distinct moments in the Stalin period, which corresponded to intense purging of the intelligentsia: the early 1930s, the Great Terror, and the late 1940s. In the early 1930s, Siddiqi shows, the secret police system of using scientists and specialist prisoners led to conflicts with industrial management, and the period of relative relaxation after 1931 led to the temporary disbandment of the sharashki. A second and a third wave of coercive renewal came in the late 1930s and late 1940s. The fact that imprisoned scientists worked alongside nonprisoner specialists in the prison science system only underscores the relevance of this discussion for the blurred boundaries between carceral and noncompulsory labor. But Siddiqi’s most far-reaching conclusions have to do with the way the sharashka phenomenon “cast a long shadow over the Soviet economy” long after it was gone. A generation of elite scientists and engineers during the Cold War were “alumni” of the Gulag and dominated research and development in the Soviet military-industrial complex. This transmitted what Siddiqi calls a distinct organizational mentality: “Their adoption and occasional enthusiasm for certain traits of the organizational culture of the Soviet scientific and engineering system—extreme secrecy, strict hierarchies, coercive practices, rigid reporting protocols—owed much to their shared experiences with similar peculiarities characteristic of the sharashka system.”

Wilson Bell’s chapter adds to the scholarship on the Gulag at war.³² Its focus on western Siberia, in particular, gives us a regional perspective on the mass mobilization of forced labor for the most total of total wars. But Bell’s chapter also engages most explicitly the scholarly debate about the function of the Gulag—how we should understand the multiple functions and characterize the nature of the network of camps and colonies over time. Indeed, this deceptively simple problem appears to inform many recent scholarly inter-

ventions. Bell does not downplay the penal, political, and repressive roles of the camp system, which punished and “isolated,” in Soviet parlance, a broad variety of criminal, ethnic, and political categories of people. He notes, for example, that while many prisoners were released to fight on the front, political prisoners received harsher treatment and were barred from release. But on balance Bell emphasizes the economic function as the Siberian Gulag immediately shifted to wartime production after the Nazi invasion. At the same time, he also concludes that Gulag labor, incredibly inefficient first and foremost because of atrocious conditions and high mortality, was still only a relatively marginal part of the region’s home front economy.

Bell is well aware that the economic, penal, and ideological functions of the Gulag “are, of course, not mutually exclusive.” However, while economic factors are certainly distinguishable for analytical purposes, it is easy to lose sight of how thoroughly economic missions were intertwined with the core ideological agendas of state socialism. One must add that there were multiple economic missions associated with the Gulag, some far more utopian than others. These ranged from dreams of internal colonization of vast swaths of the periphery, which were salient and even decisive when the Gulag crystallized, to the immediate crisis of wartime production that Bell describes. Economic motivations were therefore multiple and are hard to fully disaggregate from the Gulag’s other functions. The interconnection of multiple functions, as opposed to their analytical separation, is worth further exploration in the debate about the nature of the Gulag.

Bell’s chapter also contains a noteworthy comparative dimension. He maintains that the Gulag “appears to have been *less* important to issues of state power and control than other camp systems in wartime”; he questions whether the Gulag fits into Giorgio Agamben’s fashionable description of concentration camps as an extralegal “state of exception” brought into being using the pretext of war or emergency. As Bell notes, much of Agamben’s concept derives from the writings of Carl Schmitt, later the crown jurist of the Third Reich, whose theories are frequently and strangely dehistoricized rather than understood as deriving from their political-ideological context. Here it is worth reflecting on the fact that Bolshevism and Stalinism were already engaged in a kind of ersatz, internal class war, or a mobilization against political and social enemies reminiscent of wartime. The scale of the Great Terror in peacetime, albeit in anticipation of war, is also extraordinary in comparative perspective. Considering the relationship more generally between the subperiod of the war and Stalinism writ large is quite revealing.

Stalinism responded to war in at least three distinct ways. First, it made

certain ideological and political compromises in the general tradition of long-established cyclical patterns. Second, it matched those concessions with repressions and adaptation to the war of annihilation on the Eastern Front. Finally, it mobilized for the new demands of the most total war to date with a scale and intensity that brought to new levels those features that it had already displayed before. What Stalinism did *not* do during the Second World War was somehow reveal its true nature, find an outlet for long-standing aspirations, or attain a culmination of deep-seated ideological trends that needed the spark of war to be released. Here the contrast with Nazism is at its most stark. If the radical or revolutionary energies in Bolshevism and Stalinism became directed primarily inward, toward a profound, revolutionary reordering of society, the racist and martial revolutionary dreams of National Socialism were from the start thoroughly intertwined with war and became primarily directed outward toward domination, racial colonization, and *Lebensraum*.³³

Emilia Koustova's exploration of special settlers from Lithuania and western Ukraine turns our attention to the ethnic dimension of Soviet repression. Based on an interview project carried out in Irkutsk, the chapter uses oral history to restore the voices and recover the lived experience of former special settlers. Most of the interviewees were born in the 1930s and were deported to special settlements after the Second World War, when they were children or adolescents. Many of them were talking about their deportations for the first time and lacked big-picture collective narratives to structure their stories. These special settlers, in sum, were not part of the collectivization-era peasant Gulag described by Lynne Viola. They were nationally distinct as well as strangers to the area, but they perceived that the surrounding locals in the non-Gulag "lived only marginally better than the settlers." These deportees had a chance at integration into Soviet society and at overcoming stigma.

How these postwar special settlements could become a vehicle for Sovietization, in fact, represents the little-studied central topic of the chapter. It is concerned, first and foremost, with the "mechanisms and limits of the integration of postwar deportation victims into Soviet society." The chapter's concern with the conditions of the special settlements, labor, the national dimensions of the deportees' outlooks and, not least, their long, arduous attempts to improve their conditions opens up a realm in the history of Soviet everyday life. The reader of Koustova's work will find both a fluid line between the *spetsposelentsy* and Soviet citizens—that is, between the deported and the locals, between Gulag and non-Gulag—and evidence that stigma and the discriminatory logic behind the repressions persisted even in the

late 1980s, long after the special settlements were disbanded. One feature of Koustova's contribution, therefore, is that it asks us to look beyond the boundaries of a Gulag strictly conceived.

Aglaya Glebova's "theses" on visual history and the Gulag bring us primarily into the realm of representations, and her contribution thus stands out from the other chapters. But it is a necessary inclusion that originated during a search for images of the Gulag for this volume. As Glebova states in her first sentence: "We have no photographs of the Gulag as atrocity." In this essay, Glebova explains why this is the case. The "archival revolution" after 1991 has made accessible abundant visual records of the Gulag, but the comprehensiveness of the Soviet ideological-cultural regime assured that none of the photographs were about human destruction and all were to some extent staged. Glebova's essay, however, opens up a way to engage and not simply discard the visual record that does exist. First, she uses it as a means to analyze a certain mode of visibility that was not only strongly imprinted by Socialist Realism but extended the late imperial legacy of "curating visibility." She argues, for example, that the Russian models and displays of the Fourth International Penitentiary Congress in 1890 prefigured the kind of crafted images later used by Soviet propaganda. As she describes it, the Stalinist visibility that did emerge was a function of Socialist Realism and of modernism, and therefore was reflected in both the "little zone" and the "big zone" (the Gulag and non-Gulag). Second, Glebova notes that the two types of visual sources most often displayed in post-Soviet publications about the Gulag—mug shots of prisoners and records from the propaganda extravaganza surrounding the Belomor Canal—only scratch the surface of the visual record now available. Even staged, curated, and filtered photographs are "unruly," as she puts it, open to contextualization and signification that is "up to us." The photographs displayed throughout this book were selected by Glebova in conjunction with the texts of the other chapters. They assume meaning in conjunction with the texts and in this way receive the contextualization for which Glebova calls. They become a useful if inherently limited kind of historical source.

The comparative section of the volume begins with Daniel Beer's research on the tsarist exile system, a work that does not make explicit comparisons with the Gulag but allows us to consider significant continuities between tsarist and Soviet penal practices. By focusing on deportation convoys to Siberia, Beer's work provokes consideration of a spatial dimension in the history of penal practices in Russia, and by extension the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. Historical geography, notably the "Mapping the Gulag" project,

has established what Judith Pallot calls a striking “spatial continuity” in the topography of incarceration lasting especially from the 1930s to the present day.³⁴ Beer takes us back to more long-term continuities. His concentration on deportation convoys within the tsarist exile system vividly evokes how movement across great space—forced mobility or coerced movement—was itself a deeply entrenched component of Russian penal practice. This continuity existed despite the fact that in the tsarist era, as Beer demonstrates, the state did not conceive of the convoy in and of itself as punishment, viewing it merely as a logistical preamble to exile and hard labor (*katorga*).

The harsh and brutal “processions of misfortune” that the convoys represented, so impervious to much improvement through technocratic reform since the days of Mikhail Speranskii, thus highlight the coercion of spatial displacement that continued in the Soviet (and post-Soviet) era. But in the course of his discussion Beer identifies other key continuities between tsarist precedents and the Gulag. For example, he points to the use of incarceration in labor sites beginning with Peter the Great, to the aim of using imprisonment to further colonization in Siberia starting under Catherine the Great, and to rehabilitation as an explicit justification for the penal system beginning with the Great Reforms. Beer also pursues the revealing and, in both the Russian and Soviet contexts, necessary topic of differing and overlapping modes of penalty (which he labels, in terms of the tsarist exile system, sovereign, economic, colonial, and disciplinary). In the end, what Beer describes most vividly will be familiar to any Soviet specialist: the yawning gulf between state intentions and unexpected consequences, continually reinforced by inadequate resources and leading directly to disease and overcrowding, corrupt and self-interested local officialdom, and informal practices that grew up alongside official ones. In the end, Beer’s chapter inspires reflection on how geography—great distances, the ample availability of remote space for any system of punishment, often extreme environmental conditions, and lack of infrastructure—informed the penal systems that arose under tsarism and in later periods.

In “Britain’s Archipelago of Camps,” Aidan Forth provides a genealogy of the birth of the concentration camp in the British colonial context. In terms of the British Empire, the storyline moves from workhouses for the poor in the imperial metropole, which became a “template” for future camps, to British India as the “primary arena of encampment” in the nineteenth century. The criminal tribal camps, after the famine and plague emergencies of the 1890s, in turn produced models for the first places to be called concentration camps in the Anglo-Boer War. From this genealogy emerge several important corollaries. First, there was a live interplay between the metropole and

the colonial periphery, between workhouses in the center and camps in the periphery, between discourses of class and race. This can provide an analogy, *mutatis mutandis*, for further investigation of the interplay between Soviet center and periphery, between Gulag and non-Gulag. Second, it was not only Britain but other colonial powers that “assembled many of the cultural, material, and political preconditions of forced encampment” in the long nineteenth century. Notably, army camps in the Napoleonic Wars provided some of the organizational framework for concentration camps for civilians. Third, as in the Soviet case, those cultural preconditions encompassed powerful metaphors of purity and pollution.

The distant yet noticeable “family resemblance” stretching from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries that Forth lays out, even as he aptly warns against simplistic comparisons, thus includes not only administrative and organizational technologies but cultural and ideological motivations that stretched from centers of power to peripheral sites of the abuse of power. Camps were created by states across the political spectrum, but despite radically different political ideologies the deeper cultural-ideological logic underpinning the camps appears eerily similar. At the same time, to extend Bell’s discussion of “states of exception,” Forth makes clear that the British camps were “expedient products of emergencies” such as famine, disease, and war, and they were predicated on extrajudicial exemption. They appear, therefore, to uphold the argument about modern camps as “states of exception” in a way the Gulag, arguably and anomalously, does not. Either way, Forth is on target when he calls for comparative agendas that go beyond the “usual suspects” and for comparative agendas that might unsettle “comfortable distinctions” between liberal and illiberal states.

In addition to prompting us to rethink the Nazi-Soviet comparison, as discussed above, Dietrich Beyrau contributes to the tradition of analyzing camps as a “total institution” that became a linchpin and symbol of the two most totalizing dictatorships in the short twentieth-century age of extremes. One feature of his chapter is the attention paid to quantitative estimations of the size of the two camp systems. The overall size of the Gulag grew steadily in the Stalin years, from 1.2 million in camps and colonies in 1936 to 1.7 million in 1940 and 2.3 million in 1953. All in all, in the Soviet case, Beyrau reports that 18–19 million people passed through the Gulag between 1934 and 1953, and in the war years prisoners made up 3–4 percent of the overall Soviet labor force. The well-known exception to linear growth in the size of the Gulag was in fact the period of the war, when invalids were released from camps and penal battalions composed of released prisoners were sent to fight at the front. By contrast, a mere four thousand inmates were held in German

concentration camps in 1935 and thirty thousand in 1939. But war and external racial domination directly triggered the murderous right-wing revolutionary and utopian potentialities of National Socialism. According to the figures cited by Beyrau, the total population of the twenty-four concentration camps and one thousand satellite camps in the Reich and occupied Europe is estimated between 2.5 and 3.5 million. While Forth effectively argued that we must move beyond the Nazi-Stalinist comparison alone, the sheer scale of these two systems and their importance to their respective movement-regimes demand continuing comparative attention.

With his concept of “camp worlds,” Beyrau attempts an overview and comparison of the Nazi and Soviet camps that, despite the range of camps in each system, synthesizes their main features as institutions. Both were striking in the small numbers of guards and staff used to oversee large numbers of prisoners—effectively subcontracting out power to often criminal gangs. Even in what Beyrau describes as total institutions, then, genuine total control remained elusive and central authorities remained far from fully directing the space inside the barbed wire. However, those in charge certainly were instrumental in establishing the hierarchies in the camps that are the centerpiece of Beyrau’s analysis. Those hierarchies in the Nazi case were primarily racial, but those with delegated authority, the “prison functionaries,” had greater privileges. In the Soviet case, nationality certainly played an increasing role, and the distinction between political and criminals is well known.³⁵ In the camps of both highly ideological regimes, which became locked in mortal combat in the ideological war on the Eastern Front, Beyrau also concludes, “special conditioning in the form of ideological indoctrination played no major role.” Beyrau’s evocative analysis of broad similarities between Nazi and Soviet camps includes a number of specific differences: Soviet class and political classification of prisoners was “less rigid” than the Nazis’ racial categorization, and in the Soviet case the status of prisoners was more “fluid.” The gulf between guards and personnel and the imprisoned, so vast in the German case, was smaller in the Soviet context. Last but not least, camps explicitly dedicated to genocide or outright extermination did not exist under communism.

Mühlhahn’s contribution in this volume, together with his other investigations into the Chinese penal system and camps in the twentieth century, allows us to consider Soviet influence along with several key factors shaping the formation and evolution of the Laogai. In his *Criminal Justice in China*, Mühlhahn explained that certain “broad approaches and basic concepts” were “learned from the Soviet example, even if these elements were later partly modified in China.” The Soviet model, accepted by Chinese Commu-

nists as valid, was never “imitated blindly and uncritically.” In Chinese penal policy, such broad approaches deriving from the Soviet model included combining incarceration with economic functions, specifically a major role for penal labor in industrialization, as well as the stress on reeducation and a functionalist approach to law.³⁶

Other influences in the shape of the Laogai, however, loomed as large or larger than Soviet influence. The Chinese Communists, for one thing, fought for decades in a revolutionary movement that provided formative experiences long before they came to power. As early as the late 1920s, and then more systematically after the Long March in 1934–1935, they developed their own revolutionary courts and law.³⁷ Equally important were historical legacies from precommunist China. Nationalist China cooperated closely with Nazi Germany in 1933–1936; Guomindang figures were interested in Nazi camps and attempted to imitate them in China. Leading Shanghai juridical experts and criminologists looked to both Germany and the USSR, praising corrective labor in internment camps as progressive. Camp Xifeng (Alarmfire), created in 1938 and disbanded in 1946, was a major concentration camp that Mühlhahn portrays as a key precedent. It was not just the “totalitarian” powers that influenced it, moreover, since US intelligence agencies visited concentration camps in Republican China and the Guomindang relied on US intelligence cooperation. The techniques and practices of Xifeng resembled those of the later Laogai and lived on after the camp was disbanded.³⁸

The results of these various influences, as Mühlhahn concludes in his chapter, were at least three major differences between the Laogai and the Gulag. First, there was no central Chinese administration of the camps equivalent to that of the NKVD. Second, practices of reeducation and ideological remolding became crucial to the way the Chinese camps were run, to a vastly greater extent than in the Soviet case. Third, and related to these other points, “frenzied mass mobilization,” while finding “some analogues” in Stalinism and Soviet history, was present to a qualitatively greater extent and constituted a “decentralized method of coercion and pervasive voluntarism among both victims and victimizers.” Here, once again, a comparative perspective on the Gulag leads us into thought-provoking reflections on the broader nature of Stalinism. It also raises questions about the formative decades of Chinese communism at a time when Sino-Soviet transnational and comparative history remains, for linguistic and historiographical reasons, far too rare.

Sungmin Cho adds an even rarer, indeed unique treatment of the camps of North Korea in comparative contrast with the Soviet experience. The North Korean prison camp system still exists today and, at the time of this publication, has persisted roughly twice as long as its Soviet antecedent. While some

documentation from the early postwar years of North Korea is available to scholars, most of the information about this highly secretive and isolated regime comes from testimonies of those who escaped. Cho sets what is known about the North Korean camps against the history of the Soviet Gulag. While his approach is therefore by necessity synthetic and comparative, he does add some intriguing details on how the Soviet model influenced the North Koreans. When Moscow set up a communist government in Pyongyang in 1945 and dispatched an advisory group there, it included security personnel and a Soviet-born chief of North Korean security, Pang Hak-se, who took a leading role in setting up the North Korean camp system in the years that followed. In the end, Cho concludes that the economic role of the North Korean camps has been far more modest than it was in the context of Stalin-era industrialization. The North Korean camp system also seems to have diverged from the Soviet model as a result of the familial-based tenets of the ruling *juche* ideology.

Judith Pallot's chapter on the legacy of the Gulag for the post-Soviet penal system in the Russian Federation is a fitting conclusion to the volume, for it gives us tools to look at continuities in Russian penal practices stretching back before 1917 and persisting after 1991. Indeed, her long-standing interest in geographical displacement as a form of punishment links directly with Beer's chapter on the Siberian exile system, since the boundary between exile and imprisonment was blurred well before the Bolshevik revolution. Collectivism, encompassing communal housing and administratively overseen prisoner self-organization as the basis of group management of prisoners, can be traced back to the principle of collective responsibility (*krugovaia poruka*) that was a key feature of Russian serfdom. Russian regimes of incarceration were "harsh," a condition Pallot defines in explicit and comparative terms, before 1917 and after 1991. But Pallot makes clear that the specific "geographical division of labor" in the contemporary Russian penal system and the physical organization of carceral space is rooted in the 1930s–1950s.

If the Gulag in its scale, multiple functions, and integration into Stalinism's non-Gulag can be seen in many ways as exceptional or distinctive in both Russian and indeed world history, how can we explain these long-term continuities? Pallot's chapter, notable for its depth in positioning itself theoretically, considers the assumptions of modernization theory, Foucauldian discipline, and the cultural turn in penology. Tilting toward the latter in accounting for harsh punishment and other Russian-Soviet continuities, Pallot suggests that they cannot be easily explained as part of teleologies of either modernizing penal systems or waxing disciplinary power. They become more comprehensible, she suggests, if punishment is seen as rooted in cultur-

al values and penal institutions are understood as sites of ritual performance. However, Pallot avoids making “culture” into the cause of causes, hastening to add that economic and political factors as well as technology clearly shape penal regimes.

Perhaps the most thought-provoking dimension to Pallot’s work is the section on how “collectivist” practices present across the boundaries between imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet history have been “polyvalent,” or explained and recoded in very different ways across the different regimes of the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. This phenomenon gives insight into how similar penal practices have been justified and presented in different ways and couched in very different ideological formulations. I would add that such recodings can potentially serve to disguise continuities but also, as in the recent conservative turn in Putin’s Russia, invoke and thus perpetuate “tradition.” Pallot’s chapter thus assumes significance for anyone grappling with the complicated conceptual questions surrounding continuity and change across the major turning points of Russian and Soviet history. It is one of the conceptual dividends resulting from this volume’s attempt to juxtapose the Gulag—chronologically, geographically, and thematically.