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Corruption in the Gulag: Dilemmas of Officials and Prisoners

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Based on research in the archives of the Soviet penal camp system, this article addresses the phenomenon of corruption among officials of the Gulag in the period between 1945 and 1953. The Ministry of Internal Affairs, which oversaw the camp system, treated corruption as a harmful and dangerous phenomenon that was unacceptably pervasive. The article investigates the varieties and frequency of corrupt activities among camp officials, including bribery, theft of state property, participation in illegal markets and speculation, and embezzlement Gulag authorities' anti-corruption efforts included inspections, audits, and a large network of prisoner–informants. These anti-corruption campaigns were largely ineffective. The article concludes that corruption existed in significant quantities inside the camp system, and that the forms it took were largely the same as in the wider Soviet society.
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PARAMETERS OF THE STUDY

In this article, we review the phenomenon of corruption among Gulag officials, defined here as economic or official crime with the goal of enriching oneself at the state's expense. The study further examines campaigns by the leadership of the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs to fight corruption, a theme that has only been mentioned briefly in published work on the Gulag. The zenith of the Gulag system, the immediate post-war years of 1945–1953, is the focus of this article. Anecdotal evidence, located primarily in a voluminous memoir literature, has long pointed to widespread solicitation of

bribery and theft of property by officials in the camp system.[1] Prisoners recalled that their personal belongings, together with camp property, was frequently stolen by guards or supervisors and resold on black markets. Officials also demanded payoffs for favourable work assignments, breaks, and better food. Prisoners attest that a large proportion of their money went toward paying these bribes. In their influential 1947 book, *Forced Labor in Soviet Russia*, David J Dallin and Boris I Nicolaevsky also noted that corruption and bribery among camp officials were very widespread (Dallin and Nicolaevsky, 1947). Basing their conclusions primarily on interviews with former prisoners, Dallin and Nicolaevsky asserted that 'graft reaches outrageous proportions….' Not surprisingly, materials in the Gulag archives confirm that which innumerable memoirists have written over the years.

Indeed, materials from former Soviet archives add a great deal to our understanding of corruption and anti-corruption campaigns, both in the camps and in the broader society and polity. During the Soviet era, statistics on criminality in the USSR remained a state secret. With the opening of Soviet archives, data (albeit often incomplete and contradictory) on crime and anti-crime measures became available. These data allow opportunity for more analysis of the phenomenon of criminality in general – and official crime in particular – during the late-Stalin period. Archival materials make possible an initial study of the phenomenon of corruption and economic crime among camp officials. The dimensions of frequent 'campaigns' against corruption inside the penal camps can also be detailed. Furthermore, archive materials allow insights into the challenges faced by camp authorities in a central element of attempts to limit corruption – the problem of motivating prisoners to provide information about corrupt officials – as leading MVD officials reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of these informant networks and the quality of the information gathered through them.

On the basis of these archives, the first section of this article is devoted to an investigation of the types and quantity of official corruption in the camps. The second part of the article addresses Gulag authorities' anti-corruption efforts, which involved inspectors, auditors, and a sprawling network of informants. The article's final section addresses the camps' informant network in more detail, focusing on the authorities' problems in motivating prisoners to inform, and dilemmas prisoners faced in making decisions about cooperating with authorities.

In the 1940 s and 1950 s, the Soviet Union experienced corruption at all levels of society and economic life. In a wide variety of ways, government

[1] For a recent history that fruitfully uses this memoir literature, see Applebaum (2003), especially. pp. 344–360.

officials in civilian society enriched themselves at public expense. They stole and resold government property, embezzled funds, extracted and offered bribes, and traded access to privileges, offices, and scarce goods. They relied on informal friendships, '*blat*' (favours based on acquaintance), or patronage networks to cover up crimes or to obtain materials needed to successfully fulfil frequently unrealistic plan targets within an economy of shortage, bottlenecks, and hyper-centralised control. As such, officials exposed themselves to charges of embezzlement (*rastrata*), *vziatochnichestvo* (bribery), *spekuliatsiia* (speculation), *zloupotreblenie sluzhebnym polozheniem* (abuse of office), and other official crimes. It is useful to conceptualise corruption in the Gulag as part of this larger national phenomenon, which was a central feature of Soviet economic and social life throughout the Stalin period (and beyond). Of course, corruption has been a prominent feature in most nations in an era of expansive states and bureaucracies, and is by no means confined to Soviet-style economies. Nevertheless, the nature of the Stalinist economy – its nationalised property and infrastructure, strictly centralised planning system, chronic shortages, and one-party monopoly on power – provided bureaucrats with many opportunities and incentives to profit at the state's expense.

In his seminal 1957 treatment of Soviet industrial management, Joseph Berliner observed that the types of activities outlined above were rife among industrial administrators (Berliner, 1957, pp. 160–230). He also pointed out that often activities that were often regarded as 'economic crime' could be actually efforts taken by managers desperate to fulfil unreasonable plans amidst the chaos that typified the Soviet industrial and distribution systems. (On the basis of the Gulag archive materials I have been able to review, it is, unfortunately, impossible to determine the proportion of actions labelled as crimes that were informal measures taken simply to fulfil plans, rather than to enrich the official at the state's expense.) This article will focus on crimes that allowed officials to use their positions for private profit. Admittedly, reports by inspectors and prosecutors do not always make this distinction, and the widespread practice of political attacks in many instances confused the truth of the situation even further.

Since the time that Berliner reported his findings, scholars have devoted little attention to the questions of corruption during the pivotal post-war 1940s and 1950s. Nevertheless, I would suggest that some of the larger conceptualisations used in research on the better-studied 1930s and the Brezhnev era can usefully be applied to the post-war period.[2] Scholars have

[2] On the 1930s, see, for example, Shearer (1996) and Shearer (1995). See also E Belova on economic crime and 'unofficial' behaviour among industrial managers investigated by the party's *Komitet partiinogo kontrolia* in the 1930s, in Gregory (2001); and Harris (1999).

noted that the centralised command-administrative economy was particularly likely to breed bribery, embezzlement, and other official crimes. In a strictly hierarchical and inflexible system, administrators had major incentives to evade the rules, especially in light of harsh punishments for failure to fulfil plans. Similarly, there were prolific opportunities for self-enrichment in the chaos of the 5-year plans. Amid chronic shortages, which were particularly extreme in the Gulag, 'black markets' inevitably thrived in both the pre-war and post-war years. Officials were often deeply involved in these illegal markets (Grossman, 1977).[3] In his classic work on the Soviet 'second economy' and its relationship to the Brezhnev-era 'kleptocracy,' Gregory Grossman noted the strong likelihood of 'a close organic connection between political–administrative authority, on the one hand, and a highly developed world of illegal economic activity, on the other'. (Grossman, 1977, pp. 32–33) In light of the tremendous drain on resources resulting from economic crime, central authorities were likely to crack down on the most egregious forms of criminality. Yet, studies of the 1930s by historians and of the 1970s and 1980s by economists and political scientists have shown that anti-corruption campaigns were likely to be selectively applied by the party-state, as members of the elite who were parts of strong patronage networks were usually excluded from prosecution (Belova, 2001; Lampert, 1984; Clark, 1993). Such lax or irregular prosecution might have encouraged more illegal behaviour. In light of these studies of the 1930s and the Brezhnev era, it should not be surprising to find widespread economic crime among officialdom (including officials employed in the Gulag) in the 1945–1953 period, accompanied by regular (if selective and, therefore, ultimately unsuccessful) state efforts to eradicate such activity.

In light of this previous research, this study adopts the following hypotheses. First, that corruption existed in significant quantities inside the camp system, and that the forms it took were largely the same as in the wider Soviet society and economy. Second, the state's efforts to fight various types of corruption, which were widespread (albeit unevenly enforced) in the civilian world, also had a place in the camps. Just as in other areas of Soviet life, then, one would expect that corruption and anti-corruption campaigns should have been common in the Gulag. The third hypothesis of this article is that anti-corruption efforts were carried out along the same lines as in non-camp society. Similar to campaigns outside the camps, efforts to combat official corruption should have been rooted in several key principles: that officials must strictly adhere to party discipline and 'party morality' and

[3] On the black market and theft by employees in the 1930s, see Osokina (1993). On the 'informal' but legal private sector between 1945 and 1953, see Hessler (1998).

observe 'socialist legality;' and they must be products of 'proper' upbringing (*vospitanie*), which included a 'correct,' 'communist' attitude toward their labour and discipline. Soviet authorities assumed that corruption would corrode morality among officials and society as a whole, as well as make the state's tasks more difficult (Lampert, 1984, pp. 366–385).

VARIETIES OF CORRUPTION IN THE GULAG

Data on the types of corrupt activity among officials come from the records of various Gulag departments responsible for investigating crimes and auditing the books. These materials include reports, audits, and correspondence. One of the most common kind of official crime was the theft of socialist property (*khishchenie sotsialisticheskoi sobstvennosti*). Camp officials stole camp property and resold it on the black market, or they oversaw groups that did so. For example, officials supervising guards were often charged with stealing construction materials and then selling them illegally in the closest city. A certain Tsaregorodtsev, the head of a convoy division, diverted several tons of coal to a nearby city and sold it on the black market.[4] At the ITL and construction site no. 508, goods with a value of more than 571 thousand rubles were stolen by officials working at the warehouse.[5]

Officials sometimes forged documents that covered up the diversion of camp funds and goods to illegal markets. In these and other cases, it could be necessary to bribe a long chain of officials in the camp hierarchy to ensure that schemes would succeed. In penal colony no. 12 UITLK MVD in the Belorussian SSR, several bookkeepers and cashiers were involved in an elaborate forgery scam. The perpetrators netted 90,000 rubles by establishing non-existent offices, payrolls, and even brigades of workers. The salaries allocated for paying these work brigades ended up in the hands of the embezzlers. These activities were only uncovered during an audit of the camps' books.[6] In another instance, cases of large-scale theft (generally defined as 20,000 rubles or more) occurred among a group of officials at the Kumzasski and Lyskovskii camps over the course of 1952. A group of 10 people operated under the leadership of Sherstnev, the head of the trade department, and the chief of the *Ch.I.S. Kumzasskogo OLP* (and Captain in the internal service) Lunin.

[4] GARF (*Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii*), f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 111, l. 336.
[5] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 662, l1. 27–29.
[6] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 111, ll. 57–58 and 202.

Accounting officials or their bosses were able to steal massive amounts through relatively simple scams that involved forgery. In the late 1940s, the chief bookkeeper of the Irkutsk office of MVD's Dal'stroisnab, embezzled the office's money by forging checks and other financial documents.[7] Shul'gin would forward checks to the administration for signature, leaving a small space in front of the sum of the check. In this way, a check approved by the administration for 7000 rubles would quickly become a check for 47,000 rubles when Shul'gin wrote in a '4' in front of the 7000. In this way he managed to embezzle 340,000 rubles. Shulgin was charged in 1951 and ultimately received a sentence of 25 years.

Archives also testify to camp administrators' theft and resale of prisoners' property, especially clothing and food, a phenomenon frequently reported in the memoirs of former prisoners. Prisoners admitted into camp hospitals would commonly have their possessions taken by the hospital administration and never returned.[8] Numerous schemes were carried out for stealing prisoners' belongings. A certain Sysoev-Varfolomeev, a bookkeeper in Kargopol'lag MVD, illegally acquired over 27,000 rubles by sending forged letters to prisoners' families. These letters requested that the relatives withdraw sums from the prisoners' personal accounts and forward the money to them at the camp.[9] Leading camp officials (including party members) would sometimes team up with prisoners to steal. The head of the *podkomandirovki komendantskogo lagernogo punkta* Moskalev (a candidate member of the VKP (b)) and another official collaborated with prisoners working in the kitchen to steal hundreds of kilograms of bread, flour, and other products.[10]

THE COSTS OF CORRUPTION

A question that cannot be fully answered in this article is precisely how significant the losses from corruption were relative to the overall Gulag economy. Nevertheless, we can assert that Moscow inspectors considered the losses due to Gulag officials' abuse of office to be significant. This concern is evidenced by the alarmed tone expressed by the Gulag leadership in their discussions of data gathered during investigations, as well as by the waves of anti-corruption campaigns that swept over the camps in reaction to these

[7] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 111, l. 56.
[8] See, for example, the circular forbidding this in GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 97, ll. 51–54.
[9] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 111, l. 242.
[10] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 324, l. 47 ob.

reported losses. Moreover, one must conclude that a huge quantity of economic crime among officials – certainly the great majority of such crimes – went undetected and unreported. The unreported losses would greatly increase the actual total. For this reason, we should regard the statistics cited below with a good deal of caution.

What was the total monetary cost of corruption in the GULag system? Despite the incomplete nature of the data, we can draw a general picture on the basis of certain documents from the late 1940s and early 1950s.[11] In 1947, the Third Administration prepared for the new chief of the Gulag, General-Major Dobrynin, a calculation of the losses due to theft of state property in the Gulag system during the year's first half.[12] This report was based on several thousand unannounced audits of camps during this period, just before the large jump in the camp population resulting from the June 1947 Decrees of the Supreme Soviet instituting harsh punishments for theft of state and personal property. The report stated that of the civilian ('free'–*vol'nonaemye*) labour force, 9,305 people had committed theft (these figures apparently do not include embezzlement). This group of criminals comprised 5.7% of the civilian staff employed in the camp system (which comprised a total of 161,864 persons). Thus, nearly 6 percent of the Gulag's civilian workers were accused of some kind of economic crime in the first half of 1947. The total quantity of reported theft reached 8.922 million rubles, or an average of 959 rubles per person. Among prisoners, 8,382 were accused of theft; the total value of material stolen by prisoners amounted to 2,320,000 rubles. Of all prisoners, 0.8 percent admitted theft, for an average of 277 rubles per thief. The report further noted that between 1946 and 1947 the proportion of thieves and embezzlers among the free population increased from 4.8% to 5.7%, and among prisoners from 0.7% to 0.8%. Thus, relative to their proportion of the camp population, free workers were seven times more likely to be accused of stealing state property than prisoners. The average theft by free workers was more than three times the value of the average theft by a prisoner. A separate report lists the total losses from theft and embezzlement at 15.35 million rubles for the entire year of 1947. If illegal disposal of goods (*promoty*) is added, an official total of 20.84 million rubles is reached.[13] (These statistics only include camps and colonies in the

[11] In the first quarter of 1949, 2519 people were charged, including 90 bookkeepers and cashiers; of them 517 were free and 2002 were prisoners. 1873 proceedings were instituted; of those 407 were group cases. 4018 people were removed from their jobs, including 824 free workers. GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 362, ll. 4–5.

[12] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 338, l. 228.

[13] These data are not complete, as it includes only the 76 subdivisions that submitted annual reports.

jurisdiction of the 4-oe Upravlenie.) As a way of normalising this figure, we note that the average yearly wage of a worker in the civilian economy in 1950 was 7704 rubles. Thus, this figure was the equivalent of the average annual income of 2705 workers.

An annual report of the Gulag's Second Administration declared that during the first nine months of 1948, the quantity of stolen valuables and embezzled cash in the camps and colonies of the Gulag equaled 25.415 million rubles.[14] This represented a decrease of three million rubles in comparison with the previous year (the 1947 total was 28.572 million rubles). Again, to offer some perspective on these numbers, the 25.415 million rubles reported as stolen in 1948 was equivalent to the annual income of 3,297 workers.

Official statistics from 1952 provide a similar portrait. In a January 1953 letter to Minister of Internal Affairs S.N. Kruglov, the head of the Gulag's Second Administration expressed frustration: 'Despite a strengthening of repression against embezzlement and theft, their levels continue to remain extremely significant.'[15] In 1951, he continued, 20.6 million rubles worth of state property were stolen or embezzled from camps and colonies. In a summary report on the results of 'operational work in the struggle with theft and embezzlement of socialist property for 1951,' the Deputy Chief of the Gulag, General-Major P Okunev, gave a slightly higher figure than the previous document, valuing the total quantity of theft and embezzlement in camps, colonies, and all glavki at 21.44 million rubles. Once figures for Dal'stroi were included, the total leapt to over 41 million rubles.[16]

CAMPAIGNS AGAINST CORRUPTION

On the basis of interviews with former prisoners, Dallin and Nicolaevsky concluded in their 1947 book: 'The system of bribery and gifts has become so prevalent that Moscow has actually ceased fighting it.'[17] The general sense among prisoners, and among observers such as Dallin, has been that

[14] The report also states that methods for retrieving stolen money and valuables had improved. GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 345, l. 94

[15] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 507, l. 12.

[16] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 508, l1, 290–294.

[17] Dallin and Nicolaevsky, 245. Anne Applebaum briefly mentions that archives contain reports by inspectors detailing large-scale theft by administrators, pp. 344–360. In *Gulag v sisteme totalitarnogo gosudarstva*, GM Ivanova also asserts that officials (especially party members) were rarely punished for abuse of office. The exceptions were 'especially significant cases' or if '*nachal'nik komu-to ne ugodil, i ego nuzhno bylo ubrat*'' (p. 170).

corruption was rampant but that the Gulag leadership did little or nothing to combat it. Dallin and Nicolaevsky, like the former prisoners they interviewed, were apparently not aware that anti-corruption campaigns were regularly undertaken. Scholars who came after them have only rarely discussed anti-corruption efforts in the camps. Of course, Dallin and Nicolaevsky did not have access to archives, nor could they interview individuals inside the Gulag administration. Former prisoners, on the other hand, may not have known that prisoner-informants were informing not only on other zeks, but also on camp officials.

The Soviet government was concerned about pervasive corruption in all parts of Soviet society and devoted extensive resources to fighting it. The MVD and the civilian police, together with the procuracy, fought and prosecuted various forms of corruption. The archives of the Gulag reveal discussions about corruption among MVD officials, an element that was largely hidden both to prisoners themselves and to scholars before the opening of archives.

Within the Gulag, the audit-inspection (*revizionnyi-inspektorskii*) apparatus of the Third (or general supply) Administration used financial tools to uncover corruption. Employees in the Third Administration oversaw the camps' financial affairs, undertaking inspections and auditing the books. One weapon for fighting corruption was an increased number of unannounced inspections, a strategy deemed successful in exposing criminals among bookkeepers and managers.[18] As was the case with all campaigns in the Stalin era, Moscow repeatedly sent instructions pushing the leadership of camps and colonies to move strongly ahead in the battle with corruption.[19] For example, a 1947 MVD *prikaz* (order no. 0412, from 14 July 1947) demanded, among other things, 'major prophylactic work to cleanse the trade–supply and accounting–bookkeeping apparatuses of people earlier convicted of embezzlement and theft, and of other untrustworthy people.'[20] The MVD leadership issued this order immediately after the June 1947 *Ukaz* of the Supreme Soviet instituting harsh punishments for theft of state property.

In the period under study, thousands of Gulag officials were charged with economic crimes that would fall under the rubric of 'corruption'; thousands more were fired but not brought up on criminal charges. A 1948 report, for

[18] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 112, l. 214. See the report by the Norilsk ITL in late 1953, which stated that unannounced inspections had served to eliminate large-scale theft and embezzlement. GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 729, l. 55.

[19] For 1949, see GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 363, l. 194, citing MVD instruction 554–549g; see also circular of August 6, 1952: GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 507, ll. 36–37.

[20] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 345, l. 93.

example, asserts that 9,444 people were removed from positions as bookkeepers and accountants and from their duties safeguarding material valuables, not counting several thousand others who had been charged with a crime. The report notes that, at the same time, repressive measures against theft of socialist property were strengthened. In the first 9 months of 1948, according to incomplete data, 7,946 people were charged with a crime, of whom 2,007 were civilian labour. Of those, 395 were accounting employees.[21] (Of course, the degree to which the Procuracy actually prosecuted these cases, and the sentences assigned, is an important subject for further research). In 1952, the *rezhimno-operativnyi otdely* of the ITL and UITLK-OITK opened 2,548 criminal cases against thieves of socialist property; 665 of these were cases involving 'groups.' In these cases, 3,293 people were charged with a crime, and of this group 1,343 were civilians. Of those charged with embezzlement and misappropriation in 1952, 2,429 were convicted. Also that year, 18,586 'untrustworthy individuals' were purged from the accounting–bookkeeping apparatuses and apparatuses connected with the safekeeping of valuables.[22]

OFFICIAL REASONS FOR PERSISTENT CORRUPTION

Authorities responsible for fighting corruption among camp employees offered several reasons for its pervasiveness, the most important of which nearly always came down to a problem of 'weak human material.' This concern with poor personnel typically was couched in terms either of weak supervision of wayward officials by their superiors, or as the defective '*vospitanie*' or moral degeneration of the criminals themselves. Investigators usually placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of local officials. As Dallin and Nicolaevsky first pointed out, there were never enough qualified administrators in the camps (Dallin and Nicolaevsky, 1947, pp. 244–245). The pay and education of Gulag personnel were often quite poor. Gulag officials complained that the worst employees of the MVD were dumped into the camp system. Many camp personnel had suffered disciplinary infractions

[21] The summary report for 1947 noted that prophylactic measures (meaning informants' information) had prevented thefts of material valuables and money worth a total of 3.9 million rubles. Nearly 1.4 million rubles were reclaimed from thieves during arrests and searches. These figures were typical for the postwar years: for the first 9 months of 1947, 3.7 million rubles worth of theft was 'prevented'; another 2.8 million rubles were seized during arrests and searches. GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 349, l. 17. Another source notes that during the first half of 1952, 966 prisoners were charged with theft of state property and handed over for prosecution, while 562 civilian employees were similarly charged. GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 507, ll. 12–13.

[22] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 662, ll. 125–126.

in their previous jobs, ranging from drunkenness, to stealing, to incompetence. They were reassigned to administrative positions in the Gulag as a type of punishment.[23] At a conference of camp chiefs in April 1948, the Deputy Chief of the Gulag VM Kozyrev lamented the moral corruption and political illiteracy of much of the Gulag staff. In 1947, almost 10 percent of all Gulag personnel were disciplined. 'Certain leadership cadres, instead of fighting against every kind of crime, themselves took the path of abuse of office and moral corruption.'[24]

Poor management in the accounting, bookkeeping, and supply departments was also frequently blamed for persistent official crime.[25] For example, local officials were accused of doing a poor job monitoring the storage of material valuables. Much of the theft occurred during the transportation and storage of food and other goods, especially at harvest time. Special supervision by managers (and vigilance by informants) was urged during these vulnerable periods.[26] The Gulag central administration urged vigorous prosecution of those supervisors who 'through their inaction' had failed to protect socialist property. Officials were chastised for failing in the difficult work of supervising employees in an active and engaged manner. 'Work in the camps is not a desk job,' as one leading administrator observed, with a large dose of understatement.[27]

Officials who were responsible for the safekeeping of material valuables and money at their workplaces were supposed to be subject to prior verification of their work credentials; laxity in such verifications was frequently blamed for criminal activity. According to an investigation of the Omskstroi complex, a shortage of qualified personnel forced the personnel department to put 'untrustworthy' people in positions where they oversaw valuable property. Even more galling to inspectors, bookkeepers and storehouse personnel were often themselves prisoners who in civilian life had been convicted for theft of state property.[28] In light of the fact that on 1 January 1953 more than 723,000 prisoners in camps and colonies were serving time for convictions under the June 1947 Decree on the theft of socialist property,[29] it is not surprising that some prisoners convicted for white-collar crimes ended up with responsibilities as bookkeepers and accountants. In such positions, they would have ample opportunity to repeat

[23] See also Ivanova, *Gulag v sisteme*, 140 ff; Applebaum, *Gulag*, 258–261.
[24] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 356, l. 230.
[25] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 507, l. 13.
[26] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 116, l. 12 (Sept. 1952).
[27] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 506, l. 210.
[28] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 507, l. 37.
[29] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 1398, ll. 9–10; f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 118, l. 96.

their original offenses. In an April 1946 order (*prikaz*), Gulag chief Nasedkin revealed the case of a coordinated group of thieves in Tadzhikstan. In that case, the head of the supply department of a labour colony and his associates, including bookkeepers and supply inspectors, stole 2.153 million (pre-reform) rubles between 1943 and 1945.[30] In 1949, in the Abanskoi agricultural penal colonly in Krasnoiarsk krai, 15 prisoners convicted of theft and robbery worked in various positions in which they supervised and accounted for food storage.[31] In the Indigirskii camp of Dalstroi, a prisoner Borotnikov worked as a bookkeeper even though he had been sentenced to 20 years for theft of socialist property.[32]

We must point out that, for obvious reasons, many causes of persistent corruption in the Gulag were not mentioned in official reports. These included the chronic shortages exacerbated by the hyper-centralised Stalinist planning system; the inbred political relationships among members of the ruling party that muddied prosecutorial efforts; the overly friendly clientelistic relationships, including the power of *blat* (sometimes known as *znakomstvo i sviazi* – acquaintances and connections – or simply *zis*), among local party leaders, economic planners, police, and prosecutors; an over-reliance on a huge network of camp informants (to be discussed below) whose loyalties often were not on the side of the government; and the possibility that the eradication of pilfering and routine wheeling and dealing might have so disrupted the actual mechanisms by which goods and services were produced and distributed that the economy might have collapsed.

THE INFORMANT NETWORK

The MVD leadership singled out the organization of effective networks of secret informants as crucial for rooting out or preventing corruption. Considering the lack of memoirs by admitted informants, we are dependent for evidence about them 'we are dependent upon archive materials'. Although the files of the Gulag department that managed the informant network are still closed, certain relevant documents have, nevertheless, turned up in various parts of the Gulag archive.

The deployment of informants to thwart crime or, failing that, to uncover the deeds after the fact, was called operational-prophylactic work (*operativno-profilakticheskaia rabota* or *agenturno-operativnaia rabota*).

[30] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 79, ll. 42–43.
[31] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 97, l. 52.
[32] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 491, l. 203.

Work with informants was carried out under the auspices of the *Pervyi otdel* (or *otdelenie*) – known as the *Rezhimno-operativnyi otdel* of the First Administration (*Pervoe Upravlenie*) of the Gulag.[33] In a 1949 letter, the deputy chief of the Gulag, General-Maior Trofimov, urged that all parts of the camp system diligently pursue the struggle against corruption, including the assignment of workers to special operational duties, presumably the job of recruiting and supervising the informants charged with rooting out crime.[34] Camps with particular problems with theft and embezzlement were ordered to heighten their struggle against crime by strengthening their work with informants.[35] Moscow's emphasis on the use of informants in rooting out corruption in the camps is reiterated in an instruction that I Doglikh, the Chief of the Gulag Administration, sent to heads of all the *rezhimno-operativnye otdely* in the camps and colonies in July 1951: 'I am warning you that in the future the work of the heads of the *rezhimno-operativnye otdely* of the camps and colonies of the Gulag will be judged primarily by the results of their work combating the theft of socialist property.'[36]

Similar injunctions from the Gulag leadership indicate the seriousness with which Gulag bosses regarded the problem. Nevertheless, in light of the quantity of repeated orders urging a strenuous fight against corruption one must question the effectiveness of these central directives.[37] These recurrent orders ring more of desperation than success.

One archival source notes the total number of informants of all types on 1 July 1947. According to a report of 2 September 1947, signed by Gulag Chief General-Lieutenant Nasedkin, there were a total of 138,990 informants in the colonies and camps (from a total prison population of 1,967,085). Included in this group were 60,225 prisoners who were to inform about escape plots. It is not stated explicitly how many of the remaining approximately 79,000 informers

[33] The *Vtoroi otdel*, or *Sledstvennyi otdel* (investigations department), of the First Administration also had responsibilities for directing efforts to combat the theft of socialist property. GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 507; and GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 374, ll. 7–8.

[34] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 362, l. 5.

[35] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 363, l. 194.

[36] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 111.

[37] The MVD issued other *prikazy* on this theme in 1949: no. 0842–1949 and no. 811–1949 – see GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 373, l. 132 for a frustrated discussion of the ineffectiveness of no. 811 in Saratov oblast'; and see GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 115, ll. 276–278 for the weak implementation of both *prikazy* in Siblag; see also the decisions of the soveshchanie of the leadership of MVD SSSR, no. 708–1950 g., on the need to preserve socialist property. A letter by the Gulag chief GP Dobrynin declares that the actions taken as a result of the 1949 instruction had made a positive impact on reducing corruption, although at present no other sources verify or challenge this claim. GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 363, l. 194.

were supposed to provide information about official corruption or economic crime among the administration (Kokurin and Petrov, 2000, pp. 318, 320).

The primary organisation charged with rooting out economic crime in the Soviet Union was the *Otdel bor'by s khishcheniem sotsialisticheskoi sobstvennosti* (the Department for Combating the Theft of Socialist Property, or OBKhSS), a department of the MVD. OBKhSS had its own informants in the camp system.[38] Data about the total number of OBKhSS informants in the camps are still unavailable. In 1952, at one small, strict-regime camp point with 523 prisoners in the Norilsk complex, there were five OBKhSS informants.[39] According to a September 1951 investigation, at one of the camps of Dal'stroia, in which were confined a total of 13,604 prisoners, five residents (*rezidenty*,) two agents (*agenty*,) and 108 secret informers (*sekretnye osvedomiteli*) were involved with informing about theft of socialist property.[40]

Moscow authorities believed, however, that there were, in the 1952 words of the Deputy Chief of the First Administration Col. Nikulochkin, 'a whole series of flagrant problems in *agentno-operativni* work, which, unfortunately, remain to the present day and are not being eliminated in a timely manner.'[41] Complaints about informants were ubiquitous. In 1951, inspectors in one camp in Dalstroi expressed their frustration that informants were not located in those parts of the camp administration that were most likely to be the scenes of illegal activities, such as in the warehouses, storerooms, kitchens and dining rooms. Additionally, prisoners were counted as informants but were completely out of touch (*vnesviazi*) with their supervisors, offering little or no useful information.[42] Like their MVD colleagues in other areas of Soviet life, camp authorities expressed frustration with the quality and reliability of the informants under their supervision. Although tips from informants were credited with foiling numerous escape plots, investigators also blamed informants for rarely preventing corrupt activity before it occurred. Authorities also faulted informants for their unwillingness to turn in those officials whom they witnessed undertaking criminal acts.

Handlers of groups of informants were also the targets of Moscow authorities' venom. In the spring of 1952, the USSR Minister of Internal Affairs, SN Kruglov, criticised the poor work of *rezhimno-operativnye otdely* to a conference of chiefs of *rezhimno-operativnykh otdelov* ITL MVD.[43] In his remarks, Kruglov emphasised that the *rezhimno-operativnyi otdel* must

[38] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 490, ll. 363–364.
[39] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 462, l. 97.
[40] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 491, l. 9.
[41] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 513, l. 151.
[42] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 491, ll. 182–183; see also GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 490, ll. 363–376.
[43] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 506, ll. 208–213.

oversee internal discipline and must enforce strict order inside the camp. 'Camp employees have become a kind of bureaucrat. They come to their offices, they sit there. They have their buttons and their secretaries, and they think that they can run the camp from this office.' Furthermore, the supervisors of the *rezhimno-operativnykh otdely* in many camps were poorly educated and lacked initiative. There are 'many old people, who have low educational preparation, who have been working for a long time, but by now they're a little tired'. Informants' supervisors were often drunks or otherwise morally compromised.[44]

THE DILEMMA OF PRISONER-INFORMANTS

Yet, there were further important reasons why prisoners failed to provide the authorities with information that would uncover corrupt officials. The evidence indicates that potential informants often gained more from *not informing* on camp officials than from speaking out. For example, a potential informant might believe that the negative consequences of informing – being discovered and then beaten or even killed by other prisoners – outweighed the promised benefits of providing information to authorities. Prisoners' fear that the 'conspiracy' [*konspiratsiia*] ensuring their anonymity might somehow be compromised was a great counterincentive to informing. Supervisors' sloppiness or incompetence resulted in 'the nonobservance of the most elementary rules of conspiracy.' In other words, informants' identities were inadvertently exposed, usually with disastrous results. This failure to maintain secrecy could lead to the deaths of informants. For example, one supervisor of informants in the Iuzhno-Kuzbas camp somehow 'lost' a list naming 41 informants. Shortly afterwards, the list appeared, arriving by regular mail in the office of the MGB of Kemerovskoi oblast'. Together with the list of informants, the envelope contained a note: 'Citizen Chief, we found this in the 'Kundel' camp. We have acquainted ourselves with [the list]. Don't lose it again. [Signed] We the prisoners, December 27, 1951.'[45] One can imagine the fate of the exposed informants. Such stories surely circulated among prisoners in many camps, acting as a strong disincentive to cooperate with camp inspectors. The commonplace murder by zeks of prisoners suspected of informing would have served the same purpose.

One can learn a great deal about the role of informants in anti-corruption efforts in the camps by examining a major turning point in the history of the

[44] Accusations along these lines were leveled at employees in Dal'stroi, among other camps. GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 491, ll. 8–9.

[45] GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 513, ll. 155–156.

Gulag: the immediate aftermath of the death of the dictator. Significantly, after Stalin had died and the Gulag had been transferred to the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice, the Gulag's chiefs urged camp directors to continue to rely on the informant network as the main pillar of efforts to expose corruption. An 13 August 1953 *prikaz* (no. 153) written by the Gulag chief General-Lieutenant Dolgikh echoes language previously used by the MVD, urging the strengthening of *agenturno-operativnaia* work in uncovering theft of socialist property.[46] Dolgikh notes that reports of theft of state property had increased, at least in certain camps about which he had information, including the camps of Kuneevsk, Azerbaidzhan SSR, and Voronezh oblast'.

The order condemned the poor quality of informants' work intended to prevent theft and also blamed the *rezhimno-operativnye* departments in many camps for 'poor direction of the informant network engaged in the struggle with theft, not maintaining regular connections with it, and not affording it proper instruction.'[47] Informants, the prikaz noted, are not paying proper attention to evidence of serious accounting irregularities and also fail to properly supervise the storage and outflow of material valuables and money. When workers of the *rezhimno-operativnye* departments did receive incriminating information from informants, they often did not follow through with investigations or audits, and the criminals were not apprehended. In other instances, investigations were delayed, allowing criminals to continue their illegal actions and 'inflict major material harm to the government.'[48]

At this point in the order, Dolgikh reached the complex problem of the relationship between the camp administration and its informants. He observes that thousands of informants had been released from camps under various amnesties between March and June 1953, which set free about 1.5 million of the Gulag's approximately 2.5 million prisoners.[49] The *rezhimno-operativnye* apparatuses had failed to adjust to the loss of informants by

[46] For the *prikaz*, see GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 139, ll. 162–165.

[47] A Ministry of Justice prikaz of 25 June 1953 also expressed frustration over the unsatisfactory condition of informant work in the struggle with thieves of socialist property GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 139, l. 162.

[48] The *rezhimno-operativnye otdely* had responsibilities for some investigations, but these moved very slowly, according to the prikaz, so that the criminals continued to work in their jobs. As defined in this document, a 'slowly moving' investigation took more than a month. Thus, in the first quarter of 1953 in just four camps 144 investigations had been going on more than a month, including 94 in the camps of Dal'stroi, 27 in Nizhne-Donskoi, 15 in Kraslag, and 8 in Kizellag.

[49] See *GULag (Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei), 1918–1960 gg.*, 786–793.

recruiting new agents who would take up the slack. The order pressures them to find new informants.

Thus, the *prikaz* raises an important and heretofore unnoticed consequence of the amnesties of 1953. The release of hundreds of thousands of inmates (and among them, thousands of informants) stripped from the Gulag administration a critical source of information about corrupt practices among its own officials. Thus, the amnesty of zeks emphasises the degree to which the Gulag *administration* had to count on *prisoners* to provide information about corruption in the ranks of its own officials. This situation also illustrates how releases of prisoners actually served to hinder Moscow's goal of eradicating (or at least controlling) corruption in the camps. The possibility of amnesty ruined prisoners' incentive to inform. In light of the strong disincentives to confess as long as one had to continue to live in the prison milieu, many prisoners would simply remain silent, either from fear of reprisals, or because their silence had been 'bought' by corrupt officials.[50]

This state of dependence was a mixed bag for both parties. Some people could be counted on to inform. They did so for many reasons, including idealistic motives such as patriotism or the dream of building a socialist society. The majority of informants were motivated by a desire for a reward such as money, a reduced sentence, or other material rewards. Yet disincentives were also at work, and these complicated the Gulag administration's quest for information from informants.[51] Amid the shortages and deprivation, informants or potential informants might have something to gain by *refusing* to cooperate in exposing corrupt officials. A potential informant, for example, might be bought off by a corrupt official to keep him silent.[52] The shortages and material hardships created conditions in which regular people in the informant pool could relatively easily be bribed or 'bought' by camp administrators – that is by the official criminals

[50] In a similar example of incentives working at cross purposes, the promise of early release for prisoners who overfulfilled work norms drained the camps of their best workers. Borodkin and Ertz (2003), in Gregory and Lazarer, the economics of forced labor (2003).

[51] For a discussion of the complex relationship between incentives and punishment for the purpose of stimulating prison labor, see Borodkin and Ertz (2003).

[52] See the facts of the 'violation of revolutionary legality' in camps in Leningrad oblast', where employees Korotkevich and Piskarev took bribes to set up healthy prisoners in easy work intended for the sick. (GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 45, ll. 40–41. Letter to the Nachal'nik Upravlenie NKVD po Leningradskoi oblasti, st. maior Gosbezopasnosti tov. Lagunov. From zamestitel' Narodnogo komissara vnutrennykh del soiuza SSR Komissar Gos. Bezopasnosti 3-ego ranga Kruglov. Dated June 6, 1941.) In the Ust'-Luzhskom lagpunkt in Kingisepskii region, the deputy chief of the Khitrikov camp point stole prisoners' personal effects. Theft of food led to death in ten instances. *Ibid*.

themselves.[53] Camp officials controlled not only an extremely large quantity of resources, including food, clothing, and packages sent to prisoners, but they also controlled a commodity they could trade on a 'black market': an easier work regime, a commodity upon which the life of the prisoner often depended. Often the informant's position was precarious; if his boss did not like him, he could quickly be sent to the heavy work detail – or to a punishment or isolator cell. The informant, on the other hand, also possessed a 'commodity,' namely information, which could be 'sold' as well. He might be able to exchange compromising information to inspectors, for example, a reduction in sentence. Conversely, a promise *not* to report information about the corrupt official could be bartered for a soft work position, or food, or other benefits. In other words, the investigating authorities had to offer incentives that were more appealing than those offered by the corrupt official. Sometimes this could be done by telling an informant that if he did not cooperate, he would be sent to do the heaviest, most dangerous work. To a certain degree, this situation could put the prisoner in position to trade information (or silence) about rampant criminality for leniency or other benefits.

In other cases, patronage networks, *blat*, and other personal connections created a kind of shield, which camp authorities apparently had little power to penetrate. In addition, of course, the supervisors themselves could become members of criminal networks; outside the Gulag, we see this in the widespread corruption of police, prosecutors, and judges.

CONCLUSIONS

Using material from the Gulag archive, this article has discussed the varied forms of official malfeasance in the system of camps and colonies between 1945 and 1953, while attempting to evaluate its costs. Only with the use of archives can historians explore many elements of this phenomenon. Although the materials are admittedly incomplete, we can begin to draw some conclusions. We have shown that Camp administrators were concerned about what they considered to be high levels of theft. In the view of the MVD leadership, widespread theft and embezzlement reduced the camps' productivity, interfered with the Gulag's ability to fulfill its plans, and signified a general breakdown in discipline and 'morality' among officials. Anti-corruption campaigns in the camps were more widespread

[53] For example, the Zam. MVD Kruglov wrote in 1941 that employees were being bribed to give prisoners light work. GARF, f. r-9414, op. 1, d. 45, ll. 40–41.

than generally noted by prisoners in memoirs, or in the work of historians. Archives show that informants were deployed not just to foil prisoners from escaping, but to root out crime among the camp administration. The materials produced during these campaigns are a very useful source of information about the nature of official malfeasance in the camp system. There were major, if flawed, efforts to fight large-scale corruption, involving repeated orders, audits, and especially the creation of a large and secret network of informants. Anti-corruption campaigns were ineffective for a number of reasons, including camp directors' over-reliance upon the prison population for information about corrupt bureaucrats. Prisoners faced numerous disincentives to informing, and Gulag chiefs had difficulty offering prisoners sufficient incentive to provide information about criminal administrators, especially in light of the possibility of release *without* cooperating with officials. The evidence indicates that this peculiar state of dependence was characteristic throughout the economy and country. Law enforcement and police officials were dependent on ordinary citizens to inform them about the criminal activities of state employees. Motivating individuals to inform, in light of many countervailing incentives, was a major challenge facing Soviet authorities, including the Gulag administration.

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