

Gulag and Laogai: Ideology, economics and the dynamics of space and scale¹

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this article is to start a conversation about comparing the Communist forced labour camps in the Soviet Union and China: gulag and laogai. More specifically, this article deals with the ideological and economic functions that the gulag and the laogai had within Soviet and Chinese society at large. Other than giving priority to ideological considerations on the one hand or economic interests on the other, a more flexible understanding of these components is put forward. Finally, this article will show how both functions related to the dynamics of space and scale, particularly concerning the localization of the camps, conflicting interests of central and local authorities, and social relations between prisoners and non-prisoners.

KEYWORDS

Gulag, Laogai, Labour, Camp, Communism

¹ I would like to thank Christian De Vito for his many insightful comments and suggestions.

Introduction

The year 1973 saw the publication of two ground-breaking memoirs about life in a Communist forced labor camp. One of them was Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, which revealed to the world the pain and suffering inside the Soviet *gulag*. The other one, Jean Pasqualini's *Prisonnier de Mao* (translated into English under the title *Prisoner of Mao*) was instrumental in exposing the *laogai*, the system of forced labor camps of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The publication of these memoirs initiated an on-going scholarly interest in the Communist forced labor camps, although both camp systems have, for the most part, been studied in isolation.² The aim of this article is therefore to open up a conversation about the similarities and differences between the history and development of the Soviet *gulag* and the Chinese *laogai*. Specifically, this article will start with a discussion about the ideological and economic role played by the Communist forced labor camps. It will show that, in the context of the *gulag* and the *laogai*, there was never a clear distinction between ideological considerations on the one hand and economic interests on the other. Finally, against the background of this rather flexible understanding of the connection between ideology and economy, the importance of a spatial perspective will be emphasized.

What, then, were the *gulag* and the *laogai*? The term *gulag* is an acronym for *Glavnoe upravlenie ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagerei*, meaning Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps. It denoted an enormous penal system comprised of different types of camps, including prisons, corrective labor camps, corrective labor colonies, special camps like transit camps, POW camps and "political" complexes, and the internal forced migrations to remote exile villages referred to as "special settlements." The term *laogai* is an abbreviation of *laodong gaizao*, which can be translated as "reform through labor"³ and represents a system of forced labor camps that stretches over China's vast territory. The *laogai* system consists of various forms of incarceration, but the inmates of the camps were split into three groups: *laogai* (reform through labor), *laojiao* (re-education through labor), and *jiuye* (forced

² The only comparative study about the Soviet *gulag* and the Chinese *laogai* that I know of is STEPANIC, Stanley J. (unpublished) doctoral dissertation entitled *The gulag and laogai: a comparative study of forced labor through camp literature*. University of Virginia, 2012. Stepanic examines the different attitudes found in survivor memoirs towards the Soviet and Chinese governments. No comparative work exists on the various functions the forced labor camps performed within the larger Communist system.

³ In the People's Republic of China, the term *gaizao* has long been interpreted as "remolding," because it implies a more complete transformation than mere "reform." See: WILLIAMS, P.F. & WU, Y. *The great wall of confinement: the Chinese prison camp through contemporary fiction and reportage*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, p. 40.

job placement). Additionally, there are detention centers, prisons and juvenile offender camps. Together, they function as the prison system of the CCP.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of the archives, numerous dissertations, monographs as well as new memoirs and documents about the gulag have been published. This has led to a greater empirical understanding of the Soviet system of forced labor. Moreover, recent scholarship has addressed the broader issue of the position of the gulag in the development of the Soviet socialist state. The new historiography has also provided new insights on matters of space and scale, dimensions this study will further build upon. Unlike the gulag, which is now a historical institution, the laogai is still in operation today. Consequently, even though several scholars have studied the Chinese prison system by examining internal documents, interviewing former prisoners, and visiting remote regions of China where labor camps abound,⁴ the laogai remains a subject about which there is much unreliable information. Besides, even though Chinese state media announced in January 2013 that the laogai will soon be transformed, there is little hope that laogai archives will become available for research in the near future. So while this study has attempted to rely on clear and established facts, it cannot guarantee to be free of errors.

Isolating and reforming the enemies of the state

One of the main purposes of the gulag and the laogai was the isolation of enemies of the state. Inspired by Marxist-Leninist ideology, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the CCP defined themselves and their enemies in terms of class. Michael Mann has aptly put it as follows: “the people was the proletariat, and classes opposed to the proletariat were enemies of the people”.⁵ It was the task of the state to “cleanse” the proletariat of its enemies, so they could no longer get in the way of social and economic development. In doing so, the state focused less on targeting individuals than groups of people. Indeed, the future Communist society was to be based upon a proletarian people disengaged from the influence of the bourgeoisie. Theory, however, did not always correspond to reality and the largest numbers of prisoners in the gulag and the laogai were not necessarily members of exploiting classes, but peasants, workers and career criminals.

⁴ Among them are Richard Anderson, Jean-Luc Domenach and James D. Seymour. Harry Wu, founder of the Laogai Research Foundation, had the personal experience of spending 19 years in the laogai. After his release and emigration to the United States, he has made several undercover trips back to China in order to obtain more information on the Chinese penal system. He is thus a considerable source of data.

⁵ MANN, M. *The dark side of democracy: explaining ethnic cleansing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 320.

Moreover, during and after the Second World War, the Soviet authorities transported entire nationalities to the forced labor camps. At the same time, however, by isolating masses of potential troublemakers, the Communist regimes in the Soviet Union and China also protected and strengthened their own position. Mao in fact stated that “our success in eliminating counterrevolutionaries is undoubtedly an important reason for the consolidation of our state”.⁶

Yet the mere isolation of enemies of the state was not enough.⁷ Unlike the Nazi concentration camps (which were truly genocidal institutions), the gulag and the laogai were never designed or intended to be centers of extermination. Even though there were a few Soviet camps on the Arctic islands of Nova Zemlya from which no one returned and while the concept of “annihilation through labor” was certainly applicable to individual Communist camps, there were no official “euthanasia” programs in the Soviet Union or China like the “Special Treatment 14f13” and the related “Action T4” campaigns that approved the killing of the mentally ill, disabled, and prisoners unable to work in the Nazi system. Instead, the official aim of the forced labor camps in the Soviet Union and China was to have a political effect on their prisoners. According to the 1930 law on the Corrective Labor Camps, the gulag was, first and foremost, an institution for rehabilitation, engaged in “a struggle for Communist morals” against ordinary criminals and counterrevolutionaries.⁸ Likewise, the most important task of the laogai was the transformation of offenders into productive, socially responsible citizens. The slogan “Reform first, production second” was displayed in many laogai camps.⁹

In both the Soviet Union and China, labor was seen as the most important way of transforming prisoners. Labor was extremely politicized – both inside and outside the camps. The CPSU and the CCP saw labor as nothing less than the defining feature of human life. This view was based on a small essay written by Friedrich Engels in 1876. Engels had pointed out how, through labor, the hands of early human beings were formed, how the human brain had developed through the coordination of the hands’ action when using tools,

⁶ ZEDONG, Mao. “On the correct handling of contradictions among the people”. In: *Selected works of Mao Tse-Tung*, transl. [from the Chinese], 5 vols. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1961-1965, p. 397.

⁷ Steve Barnes has interestingly pointed out how criminality in the Soviet society can be viewed in terms of a disease of a unified social body. While isolation of the criminal could serve the cause of social sanitation, it was only through the healing of the criminal soul that the well-being of the whole social body could be ensured. See BARNES, S.A. *Death and redemption: the gulag and the shaping of Soviet society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011, pp. 13-14.

⁸ OVERY, R. *The dictators: Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2004, p. 597.

⁹ Laogai Research Foundation (LRF). *Laogai Handbook 2007-2008*. Washington: Laogai Research Foundation, 2008, pp. 1, 9-10.

and how language had evolved in the process of teamwork, giving yet another boost to the brain. The constant improvements that labor had brought had eventually led humanity into modern civilization.¹⁰ The meaning of labor for the Soviet and Chinese Communists therefore lay in its own transformative power. In this line of reasoning, labor was also seen as an essential method of transforming criminals. Contrary to the Nazi concentration camps, where a prisoner's work was defined as unproductive and humiliating, labor in the Communist camps was regarded as an opportunity for a criminal to reform himself in anticipation of his reinstatement into society.

The Soviet Union was the first country in the world to establish a unique type of criminal justice that combined Engels' and Marx's ideas about justice, crime and punishment as well as their characteristic interpretation of labor. The idea of labor as a means of reforming criminals was for the first time thoroughly discussed during the Sixth Soviet Congress in October 1918. From then onwards, it became the primary method for reforming prisoners in the Soviet Union.¹¹ Posters at the Solovetsky prison camp proclaimed that "Through work we shall return to society" and "Work redeems guilt."¹² In a similar fashion, Article 46 of China's Criminal Law (adopted in 1979 and revised in 1997) states that "any criminal who is sentenced to fixed-term imprisonment or life imprisonment shall serve his sentence in prison or another place for the execution. Anyone who is able to work shall do so to accept education and reform through labor". Moreover, the foreword to the 1992 White Paper entitled "Criminal Reform in China" stated that "China's basic goals in criminal reform are to turn offenders into a different kind of person, one who abides by the law and supports himself or herself with his or her own labor".¹³

In addition to the element of corrective labor, each camp in the Soviet Union had a Cultural-Education Department, or *Kulturno-Vospitatelnaya Chast* (KVCh). Inside the gulag, the KVCh organized the same types of cultural activities that simultaneously took place in Soviet society at large. They set up a campaign against illiteracy in the camps, made sure that every barrack

¹⁰ Engels' essay is entitled *Anteil der arbeit an der menschwerdung des affen*. See also KOLAKOWSKI, L. *Main currents of Marxism: its rise, growth, and dissolution*. vol. 1: The Founders. transl. [from the Polish] by P.S. Falla. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 133-134. The connection between Engels' and Marx's ideas and the Communist forced labor camps is well described by MÜHLHAHN, Klaus. *Criminal justice in China: a history*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009, pp. 149-151.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 153-154.

¹² BARNES. *Death and redemption. op.cit.*, p. 59.

¹³ "Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China" (version 14 March 1997), <http://www.china.org.cn/english/government/207319.htm> (viewed on 4 April 2013); Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 'Criminal Reform in China' (version August 1992), <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/criminal/> (viewed on 6 April 2013).

received the messages of Radio Moscow, sponsored political lectures, handed out newspapers, put up slogans, photographs and illustrations, and, in a few cases, organized films, theatres and concerts. Besides, the special settlements saw the establishment of socialist re-education schools, which became the main tool for “reforging” the children of the special settlers. The Soviet schools provided the children with political and ideological education and prepared them to become active participants in socialist construction. As such, the re-education schools differentiated the children from their parents, whom the government did not consider susceptible to reform.¹⁴ Certainly, not all gulag prisoners were believed to be redeemable and educational staff put much more time and energy in those who had a greater chance to return to Soviet society. Educational activities were therefore also a way to distinguish prisoners from one another. Besides, limited resources forced camp authorities to focus re-education activities on those considered being redeemable. Indeed, KVCh activities were consistently understaffed and underfunded, which made it altogether a rather marginal undertaking.¹⁵

The Chinese penal system seems to have known a more pervasive “thought reform” program, which tended to be most intense in the detention centers – which were the gates of the laogai where prisoners waited until the charges against them were drawn up. Typically, the prisoners in a detention center were divided up into small teams called *dui*. There were between 10 and 15 prisoners in each *dui*, among whom two older prisoners were selected as group leaders. One of them chaired a weekly meeting regarding living conditions, health, and the distribution of small items like toiletries and cigarettes. The other leader chaired the daily study sessions. Under his direction, the other members were mobilized to extract confessions from new inmates by applying group pressure. Anyone who insisted on denying guilt was punished by being forced to undergo struggle sessions or by being placed in solitary confinement. It was the task of the leader to keep notes of each meeting and to report to the appropriate Public Security cadre.¹⁶ The purpose

¹⁴ VIOLA, L. *The unknown gulag: the lost world of Stalin's special settlements*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 102-104. Other than the kulak youth, the children of the ethnic populations that were deported during and after WWII could never escape from their national identity and were consequently considered to be less redeemable.

¹⁵ BARNES. *Death and redemption. op.cit.* pp. 57-68. GETTY, J. Arch; RITTERSPORN, Gábor T. and ZEMSKOV, Viktor N. have demonstrated that in the period between 1934 and 1953, 20-40 percent of the inmates of the gulag were released each year. This supports the theory that (part of the) prisoners could be redeemed. See “Victims of the Soviet penal system in the pre-war years: a first approach on the basis of archival evidence” *The American Historical Review*, 98, October 1993, pp. 1017-1049.

¹⁶ Many of the techniques used to extract confessions from prisoners in the laogai closely resembled those used by the Soviets during the Great Terror. These methods included long and tedious interrogations and the major emphasis upon sin and guilt. See LIFTON, R.J. *Thought reform and the psychology of totalism: a study of brainwashing in China*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1961.

of these study sessions was not merely to aid in the extraction of confessions though; it was also a means to pass on the facts and ideology on which the prisoners were to base their new attitudes. As such, the daily study sessions combined confession with re-education. The sessions would usually start with one of the inmates reading a newspaper, a journal article, or the writings of Mao Zedong. Next, these materials gave rise to discussion and essay writing. The customary method for discussion in the laogai system was that known as “criticism and self-criticism.” This meant that everyone had to examine their own “reactionary” tendencies, and then search for the cause of these in their past life. Each inmate had to recall past “bourgeois” and “imperialistic” influences, as well as present “individualistic” traits. Meanwhile, the group leader encouraged the prisoners to criticize each other. If someone did not participate enthusiastically enough or showed any tendency to withstand full emotional involvement in the thought reform program, he or she was to be ruthlessly criticized.¹⁷

Whether or not it was truly possible to remodel the lifestyle and thoughts of counterrevolutionaries and criminals into enthusiastic members of the new Communist societies, both Soviet and Chinese central authorities took re-education activities seriously and there were undoubtedly efforts in this direction. According to Barnes, “prisoners did quickly learn at least to mouth the language of redemption. Perhaps this was all that was required.”¹⁸ This tendency towards conformist behavior was also found in the Soviet and Chinese societies as a whole. Indeed, the pervasive threat of punishment in the gulag or the laogai was used as a way to compel compliance with Communist rule.¹⁹ The forced labor camps in the Soviet Union and China were an institution of the totalitarian state.

Contributing to the economic goals of socialism

One of the basic problems of Soviet as well as Chinese Communists was how they would apply their revolutionary vision of a future industrial society to a country that at the time was predominantly agrarian.²⁰ In this line of thinking, the gulag and the laogai were seen as one way of accelerating industrialization. The forced labor camps were therefore not only to have a

¹⁷ FYFIELD, J.A. *Re-educating Chinese anti-Communists*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982, pp. 77-99.

¹⁸ BARNES. *Death and redemption. op.cit.*, p. 65.

¹⁹ See for example, ADLER, N. “Enduring repression: narratives of loyalty to the Party before, during and after the gulag”. *Europe-Asia studies*, 62, 2010; WILLIAMS, P.F. & WU, Y. eds. *Remolding and resistance among writers of the Chinese prison camp: disciplined and published*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

²⁰ MANN. *The dark side of democracy. op.cit.*, p. 318.

reformatory function, but they also had to contribute to the realization of the economic goals of socialism.

In the Soviet Union, prison labor was already widely used before the Communist takeover and throughout the 1920s. However, by the end of that decade, the authorities established a fundamentally new system of the gulag economy. In 1923, Felix Dzerzhinsky, the first leader of the Cheka (the Bolshevik secret police),²¹ had already suggested that “we will have to organize forced labor (penal servitude) at camps for colonizing underdeveloped areas that will be run with iron discipline”.²² Five years later, Commissar of Justice Nikolai M. Janson repeated these ideas in a proposal to employ prisoners in the timber industry in the Soviet far north. His recommendations were based on the observation that it was almost impossible to maintain a free labor force in the north and the fact that existing prisons were bursting at their seams.²³ On 27 June 1929, the Politburo issued a foundational decree “On the Use of the Labor of Convicted Criminals” that provided for the establishment of a network of new camps in the Soviet Union’s northern and eastern territories for the purpose of colonization and economic exploitation.²⁴ At a conference of higher prison officials in October of that same year the following announcement was made:

The Five-Year Plan (...) requires tasks involving a great demand for unskilled labor. Local conditions sometimes present serious obstacles to the recruitment of labor. It is here that the places of confinement, having at their disposal excess labor in great quantities and engaged in production near the places of confinement, can come to the assistance of those economic enterprises which experience a labor shortage.²⁵

The 1929 resolution stated that the newly created camps would accommodate 50,000 inmates in total. Nevertheless, as a result of the policy of

²¹ The Bolshevik secret police was created on 20 December 1917. It was then named the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission to Combat the Counterrevolution, Speculation and Sabotage, abbreviated as Cheka. During the period until the collapse of the USSR in 1991, it would change its name to GPU (State Political Administration), OGPU (Unified State Political Administration), NKVD (People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs), MGB (Ministry of State Security), MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs), and eventually KGB (Committee on State Security).

²² IVANOVA, G.M. *Labor camp socialism: the gulag in the Soviet totalitarian system*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2000, p. 186.

²³ VIOLA. *The unknown gulag. op.cit.*, pp. 58-59.

²⁴ KHLEVNYUK, O.V. “The economy of the OGPU, NKVD, and MVD of the USSR, 1930-1953: the scale, structure, and trends of development”. In: GREGORY, P.R., & LAZAREV, V.V. eds. *The economics of forced labor: the Soviet Gulag*. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2003, p. 45.

²⁵ DALLIN, D.J. & NICOLAEVSKY, B.I. *Forced labor in Soviet Russia*. London: Hollis and Carter, 1948, p. 208.

dekulakization, more than 500,000 peasants were sent into exile by May 1930 – 180,000 of whom ended up in the corrective labor camps. The big question for the OGPU was how to make economic use of all these new prisoners and special settlers. Oleg V. Khlevnyuk maintains that the development of the gulag economy was greatly influenced by its first major assignment: the White Sea Canal, an ambitious project carried out between 1930 and 1933 that connected the White Sea and the Baltic. For the first time, the “benefits” of using penal labor were revealed: large units of workers were quickly brought together in the right place and the OGPU could take advantage of the prisoners under any circumstances. Besides, the White Sea Canal gave the OGPU the opportunity to further develop its techniques for managing large projects. Thereafter, other major economic projects were set up or handed over to the OGPU. These included the prospecting of gold in Kolyma, the creation of a canal between the Volga and the Moskva River, the development of the Baikal-Amur Mainline in the Far East, and the formation of the Ukhta-Pechora Trust for the production of coal and oil.²⁶ In the second half of the 1930s, the NKVD began with the development of the Norilsk region for the production of nickel, platinum, cobalt and copper.²⁷

In China, the resolution adopted after the Third National Public Security Conference, which was held in May 1951, established the organizational structure for the development of the laogai. It was based on the penal system in the Soviet Union as well as on the concrete local history of the former revolutionary bases of the CCP in Jiangxi and Yan’an. Mao himself personally revised the document and added the following amendment:

The large number of people who are serving their sentences is an enormous source of labor. In order to reform them, in order to solve the problem of the prisons, in order that these sentenced counterrevolutionaries will not just sit there and be fed for nothing, we should begin to organize our laogai work. In the areas where this work already exists, it should be expanded.²⁸

Soon afterwards, Luo Ruiqing, founding Minister of Public Security, again emphasized the enormous labor potential of the laogai: “Looking at it from an economic perspective, these counterrevolutionary criminals, if not executed right off, are a source of labor, and if we organize them and force them into the service of the nation [...] they will have a definite effect on

²⁶ KHLEVNYUK, O.V. “The economy of the gulag”. In: GREGORY, P.R. ed. *Behind the façade of Stalin’s command economy: evidence from the Soviet state and party archives*. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2001, p. 115.

²⁷ ERTZ, S. “Building Norilsk”. In: GREGORY, P.R., & LAZAREV, V.V. eds. *The economics of forced labor: the Soviet gulag*. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2003, pp. 127-150.

²⁸ LRF. *Laogai Handbook*. pp. 7-8.

national development”.²⁹ The same rationale appeared in various legal documents too. For example, Article 30 of the Labor Reform Regulations (promulgated in 1954) stated that “the production of labor reform should serve in the development of the national economy, and should be included in overall national production planning”.³⁰

As in the Soviet Union, the forced labor camps in China carried out large-scale labor-intensive projects, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s. Among these were the building of a hydroelectric dam on the Hui River, a wasteland reclamation project in the Heilongjiang River Valley, an irrigation project in Subei, the building of public roads and the cultivation of new lands in Xinjiang and Qinghai, various mining operations in Shanxi, and the construction of railway lines in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Gansu, Shaanxi, Szechuan and Yunnan.³¹

Yet how successful were the economic policies of the gulag and the laogai? Despite the scarcity of economy-wide data in both countries and while the available official statistics are beset by major problems, some analysis of the economic efficiency of the gulag and laogai is possible.³² For instance, the Great Terror of 1937 and 1938 seriously disturbed the reasonably successful growth of the gulag economy. Within a period of approximately two years, nearly 700,000 people were executed, a great part of which were physically strong and capable men as well as highly qualified experts. The NKVD constantly needed these people at their projects, but the primary goal of the Great Terror was the physical extermination of enemies of the state and not their use as “cheap” labor. This example thus clearly shows that ideological considerations took priority over economic interests. The gulag economy further deteriorated as a result of the arrests of many camp directors and a rapid increase in the mortality rate and physical exhaustion of prisoners. Consequently, despite the influx of new camp inmates during the years of the

²⁹ WU, H. *Laogai: the Chinese gulag*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1992, p. 34.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

³² China regards all statistics related to the laogai as state secrets and has consistently denied international organizations like the Red Cross access to the camps. Besides, Carsten A. Holz and Yi-Min Lin call attention to three specific problems concerning available Chinese official data. First, they may have been misreported on purpose. Second, their economic significance is uncertain because of the way in which they are constructed. Third, economic variables and enterprise categories have frequently been redefined, which has led to inconsistencies in time series data. See HOLZ, Carsten A. and LIN, Yi-Min. “Pitfalls in China’s industrial statistics: inconsistencies and specification problems” *The China Review*, 1, 2001, p. 30. Despite the fact that information on the gulag is much better available since the opening of the archives, these problems are also applicable to the Soviet Union.

Great Terror (from 1.2 million to 1.7 million), the gulag economy was experiencing a severe crisis.³³

As the Great Terror abated, the gulag economy steadily increased until early 1941. During the Second World War, the Soviet government handed over various plans on the construction of military enterprises and facilities to the NKVD. Throughout the war, gulag prisoners worked on the construction of railroads in the Far East and the European North, the development of hydraulic-engineering projects, the establishment of new oil installations and the formation and renovation of more than 250 airfields.³⁴ Nevertheless, as Edwin Bacon puts it, “from a purely economic point of view the resource of laborers in the camps was wasted through a failure to maintain their physical well-being”.³⁵ When it came to the provision of food, clothes, and medicines, prisoners continued to suffer a low priority. Besides, the government kept pushing the gulag authorities to “do more with less” and to make more efficient use of the existing prisoner work force. As a result, the overwhelming majority of prisoners were ill, emaciated and exhausted, and the mortality rate in the camps rose to exceptional heights. Between 1941 and 1945, 1,005,000 prisoners died in the gulag.³⁶

Overall, despite various efforts over the years to improve the gulag’s profitability, scholars generally agree that “the gulag was a financial catastrophe for the Soviet state. [...] One must consider that the gulag was in fact a penal institution first, and a productive institution second”.³⁷

In *New ghosts, old ghosts*, James D. Seymour and Richard Anderson have analyzed the laogai economy in China’s North-Western provinces of Gansu, Xinjiang and Qinghai. The latter two have long received many prisoners from eastern China. This has led to higher production levels in the laogai camps in Xinjiang and Qinghai, but not necessarily to more profit. Besides, in Qinghai, laogai enterprises have usually been less productive than similar privately managed enterprises. The grain production per capita at Ge’ermu Prison

³³ KHLEVNYYUK. “The economy of the OGPU, NKVD, and MVD of the USSR, 1930-1953”. *op.cit.*, pp. 48-49. In addition to the fact that many able-bodied men were executed, Barnes notices that gulag authorities were in fact “always running behind the curve, trying to find ways to make productive economic use of their burgeoning prisoner population” and he considers the arrests of children, the elderly and invalids as an argument against the idea that arrests were mainly driven by the need to obtain a greater labor force. See BARNES. *Death and redemption*. *op.cit.*, pp. 35-36.

³⁴ KHLEVNYYUK. “The economy of the OGPU, NKVD, and MVD of the USSR, 1930-1953”. *op.cit.*, pp. 49-50.

³⁵ BACON, E. *The gulag at war: Stalin’s forced labor system in the light of the archives*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994, p. 126.

³⁶ KHLEVNYYUK. “The economy of the OGPU, NKVD, and MVD of the USSR, 1930-1953”. *op.cit.*, p. 51.

³⁷ BARNES. *Death and redemption*. *op.cit.*, p. 39. Also see for reference, GREGORY, P.R. & LAZAREV, V.V. Lazarev. eds. *The economics of forced labor: the Soviet Gulag*. *op.cit.*

Farm, for example, was only 312 kilograms in 1964. Yet after the prison farm was converted into a local cooperative, productivity increased to 2,983 kilograms per capita in 1993.³⁸ Qinghai province has, in fact, decided to increase per capita production by scaling down the laogai. Of the three provinces described in *New ghosts, old ghosts*, Gansu is the most similar to the rest of China. In this province, the share of the laogai in the entire agricultural and industrial output was 0.190 percent in 1993, 0.122 percent in 1994, and merely 0.079 percent in 1995. Since the mid-1990s, this percentage has further declined. Between 1995 and 1999, Gansu's economy grew at a rate of 9.6 percent, whereas laogai production grew only at 4.8.³⁹

Elsewhere, Seymour and Anderson actually claim that, from the outset, the costs of running the laogai have been much higher than what has been generated by prisoner labor.⁴⁰ Their conclusion (which is based on classified CCP statistics, Chinese and Western literature, and interviews with former inmates) stands in stark contrast with the official position of the Chinese government, which has long been that prisons were funded by their own enterprises. Besides, critics of the laogai have claimed that the forced labor camps produce huge profits for the Communist regime. Still, Seymour and Anderson point out that claims of laogai profitability tend to speak of "profit" when actually describing "cash flow" and that salaries of prison personnel, as well as the money invested to build the camps are often not included in the equation.⁴¹ In 1993, the CCP changed its position with regard to the laogai economy and adopted a resolution that stated that wages for prison wardens and guards as well as the costs for the maintenance of prisoners were from then on to be funded by the central government. Additionally, the government agreed to raise the salaries of prison personnel, create new funds for prisons and camps in poor regions, and increase the subsidies for construction and renovation. In 1994, these intentions were enshrined in the new Prison Law.⁴² In the end, the economic function of the laogai, like that of the gulag, turned out to be subordinate to its isolating and reforming tasks.

The dynamics of space and scale

Both the gulag and the laogai had an ideological as well as economic function. In fact, there were many similarities between the two systems of forced labor

³⁸ SEYMOUR, J.D. & ANDERSON, R. *New ghosts, old ghosts: prisons and labor reform camps in China* Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1998, pp. 143-146.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 36; SEYMOUR, J.D. & ANDERSON, R. "Profit and loss in China's contemporary prison system". In: WILLIAMS, P.F., & WU, Y. eds., *Remolding and resistance among writers of the Chinese prison camp: disciplined and published. op.cit.*, pp. 161-162.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 170.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 158.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 163-164.

camps. This is not surprising, since the CPSU and the CCP adhered to the same political ideology and the development of the laogai was organized along and inspired by the gulag. Indeed, the Statute on Laogai, which formed the legal basis of the Chinese penal system, was created with the help of Soviet penologists. Nevertheless, in the context of the Communist forced labor camps, there was never really a strict separation between ideological considerations on the one hand and economic interests on the other. Even though at certain times there was considerable tension between these two objectives (e.g. during the Great Terror, when many able-bodied men were executed while their labor was needed in the camps), most of the time the dichotomy between ideology and economics became irrelevant. This was primarily the result of the specific meaning the Communists attached to the notion of labor, which “was not only the means but also the measure of an inmate’s reform”.⁴³ As such, the element of “corrective labor” or “reform through labor,” as it was respectively called in the Soviet Union and China, essentially bridged the gap between the ideological and economic components of the Communist penal system.⁴⁴

Furthermore, in both countries, the labor value of a prisoner varied greatly from farm to factory and depended on the geographical location of the camp. In fact, the ideological and economic functions of the gulag and the laogai were in various ways related to the dynamics of space and scale.

At one level, the localization of forced labor camps, colonies, and special settlements revealed ideological and economic goals. Generally speaking, the perceived level of dangerousness of prisoners determined the extent to which they had to be isolated from society. The most serious offenders did not even make it to the labor camps of the gulag and the laogai, but were held in solitary confinement in prisons. Compared to the camps, there was a greater degree of strictness and a higher level of security in the prisons. The second most dangerous prisoners ended up in the labor camps. In the Soviet Union, the corrective labor camps were typically located in the most distant parts of the country. Within this category, a further distinction was made on the basis of the remoteness of the camps. Those in particularly remote regions of Siberia, the Far North, and Kazakhstan received more dangerous prisoners, with Kolyma being reserved for the most dangerous ones. Inmates were, in fact,

⁴³ BARNES. *Death and redemption. op.cit.* p. 16.

⁴⁴ Consult WAGNER, J.-C. Wagner. “Work and extermination in the concentration camps”. In: CAPLAN, J. & WACHSMANN, N. eds. *Concentration camps in Nazi Germany: the new histories*. London: Routledge, 2010. Jens-Christian Wagner has also proposed a more dynamic interpretation of the function of ideology and economics in the context of the Nazi concentration camps. According to Wagner, the balance between ideology and economics varied per time, place, and definition of prisoner.

continuously threatened with relocation to Kolyma.⁴⁵ In China, the various institutions of the laogai were dispersed across its vast territory, but the largest camps (housing up to tens of thousands of prisoners) were located in the remote northwestern provinces of Xinjiang and Qinghai. With the exception of these two provinces (which have for long periods of time “imported” prisoners from the eastern part of China), however, it seems to have been more common for criminals to be sentenced to a penal institution in their own province.

From an economic point of view, the establishment of corrective labor camps, colonies, and particularly the special settlements in the Soviet Union was directly linked to the colonization of the remote resource-rich areas in the far north and east. These resources were desperately needed in order to carry out Stalin’s plans for industrialization and modernization and it had turned out that no permanent free labor force could be maintained there. Since the existing prisons were overcrowded and because labor was understood as a means of re-education, it seemed efficient to let the gulag prisoners do the work. After all, “prisoners sitting idly in isolation would have been contrary to the tenor of the age”.⁴⁶ Not much is known about the economic reasons behind internal prisoner migration in China, but Seymour and Anderson do point out that the many prisoners that were brought to the northwestern provinces in the 1950s were required to help with the agricultural reclamation of wasteland. The situation changed dramatically in the 1980s, when the central government actually paid the Xinjiang *bingtuan* (an economic and semi-military governmental organization) 500 million *yuan* in order to assume responsibility for the transportation and incarceration of prisoners from the east.⁴⁷

At another level, there was the question of scale. The forced labor camps cannot be thoroughly understood purely based on the official ideology and directives emanating from the center. These instructions were in fact not always in agreement with one another and went through a complex structure of provincial and local authorities before they reached the camp administrators, who were subsequently left to decide which of the directives held priority. Therefore, in both the Soviet Union and China, considerable discrepancy existed between theory and practice. One example forms the establishment of the Soviet schools for the children of the special settlers, which usually had problems finding qualified teachers who were willing to work in the distant exile villages. As a result, many of the teaching positions

⁴⁵ BARNES. *Death and redemption. op.cit.*, p. 17. Additionally, corrective labor colonies (which held prisoners with a sentence under three years and consequently very few political inmates) were usually less remote geographically.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40. See also VIOLA. *The unknown gulag. op.cit.*, pp. 58-9.

⁴⁷ SEYMOUR & ANDERSON. *New ghosts, old ghosts. op.cit.*, pp. 114-116.

were filled by the adult settlers, who were given the paradoxical task of reforming their own children.⁴⁸ More generally, however, a distinction can be made between the center, which prioritized the punitive and reformatory functions of the camps, and local camp directors, who typically considered the efforts aimed at reeducation to be a waste of time and material in reference to more concrete economic goals. Therefore, even though in theory the gulag and laogai were first and foremost institutions of rehabilitation and reformation, in everyday reality production usually proved to be more important. Moreover, in the case of the special settlement in the Soviet Union, a notable conflict of interest existed between the central government and local economic enterprises responsible for the construction of the exile villages. Whereas Moscow aimed for the establishment of long-lasting settlements and the development of the necessary infrastructure in the Soviet hinterlands, the industrial enterprises more often than not chose to exploit the most resource-rich areas for short periods of time and viewed the settlers as an inexhaustible form of cheap labor.⁴⁹

Finally, the separation between prisoners and non-prisoners was also not always as strict in practice as it was in theory. While geographic remoteness seemed to ensure the isolation of prisoners from the rest of society, recent scholarship has demonstrated that social relations between prisoners and free workers actually existed on a regular basis. Alan Barenberg, for example, shows that a special category of prisoners called *zazonniki* was allowed to move and sometimes even live outside the territory of the gulag, which resulted in social interaction with the local population. *Zazonniki* also received a small salary, which served as an incentive to improve production.⁵⁰ Additionally, Wilson Bell describes a category of prisoners called *raskonvoirovannye*, or “de-convoyed,” which had the right to move outside the gulag without being escorted by a guard. In the case of these unescorted prisoners, economic considerations again played an important role. On the one hand, prisoners were de-convoyed because there was simply not enough prison personnel to guard them all. On the other, inmates were de-convoyed because they were needed in specialist positions.⁵¹ In China, there was also considerable integration of inmate and civilian workforces. Moreover, laogai and civilian projects were not always clearly distinguished from one another.

⁴⁸ VIOLA. *The unknown gulag. op.cit.* pp. 102-104. Anne Applebaum actually writes that many of the children who grew up in the gulag later became members of the Soviet Union’s widespread criminal class. See *Gulag: a history of the Soviet camps*. London: Allen Lane, 2003, p. 333.

⁴⁹ VIOLA. *The unknown gulag. op.cit.* pp. 97-102.

⁵⁰ BARENBERG, A. “Prisoners without borders: *Zazonniki* and the transformation of Vorkuta after Stalin”, *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 57, 2009, pp. 513-534.

⁵¹ BELL, W.T. “Was the gulag an archipelago? De-convoyed prisoners and porous borders in camps of western Siberia”, *The Russian Review*, 72, January 2013, pp. 116-141.

In the case of Tang'gemu Labor Reform Farm, inmates are actually far outnumbered by the non-prisoner population.⁵²

A more dynamic understanding of the ideological and economic functions of the gulag and the laogai, in combination with an analysis of the elements of space and scale, allows for an interpretation of the forced labor camps as being an integral part of the Soviet and Chinese societies at large. Rather than forming an archipelago, or a closed universe, the aim of the gulag and laogai was to remake their prisoners into new persons that could be reinstated in socialist society – while making an economic contribution to that society in the process. Moreover, such an interpretation questions the isolating function of the forced labor camps as well as the absolute power of the CPSU and the CCP, since plans did not always correspond with possibility and theory with practice.

⁵² SEYMOUR & ANDERSON. *New ghosts, old ghosts. op.cit.* pp. 159-160.

