Corruption in the Gulag: Dilemmas of Officials and Prisoners

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N.B. Simple archive references are left in the text, i.e. [9414, 1, 399, 5-6]. Lengthier references are in footnotes.

Parameters of the study

This article addresses the phenomenon of corruption among Gulag officials, defined here as economic or official crime with the goalh of enriching oneself at the state's expense. The study further examines campaigns by the Gulag administration to fight corruption among its employees, 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 favorable 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 noted that corruption and bribery among camp officials were very widespread in the Gulag.[2] Basing their conclusions primarily on interviews with former prisoners, Dallin and Nicolaevsky asserted that "graft reaches outrageous proportions…." Not surprisingly,

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[1] For a recent history that fruitfully uses this memoir literature, see Anne Applebaum, *Gulag* (New York, 2003), especially pp. 344-360.

[2] David J. Dallin and Boris I. Nicolaevsky, *Forced Labor in Soviet Russia* (New Haven, 1947).

materials in the MVD's 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. This data allows opportunity for more analysis of the understudied phenomenon of criminality in general—and official crime in particular—during the late-Stalin period. Archival materials also enable deeper investigations of several questions related to various "campaigns" against corruption in this period. The Hoover Institution's possession of a microfilm copy of most of the archive of the *Glavnoe upravlenie lagerei* MVD, or Gulag (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rosiiskoi Federatsii, or GARF, fond 9414), makes 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 unique insights into the challenges faced by camp authorities in motivating prisoners to provide information about corrupt officials, as leading MVD officials reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of these networks and the quality of the information gathered through them.

Based on those 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 section 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 informant network in more detail, focusing on the

authorities' problems in motivating prisoners to inform, and dilemmas prisoners faced in making that decision

In the 1940s and 1950s, the Soviet Union experienced corruption at all levels of society and economic life. In a wide variety of ways, government officials in civilian society enriched themselves at public expense. They stole and resold government property, embezzled funds, extracted and offered bribes, and sold or traded access to privileges, offices, and scarce or valuable goods. Others relied on informal friendships, "*blat,*" or patronage networks to cover up crimes or to obtain materials needed to successfully perform their jobs and fulfill unrealistic plan targets within an economy of shortage, bottlenecks, and hyper-centralized control. In so doing, officials exposed themselves to charges of *rastrata, vziatochnichestvo, spekuliatsiia, zloupotreblenie sluzhebnym polozheniem,* and other official crimes (which sometimes fell under the category of "*ekonomicheskie prestupleniia*"). It is useful to conceptualize 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 nationalized property and infrastructure, strictly centralized 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 corruption mentioned above were rife among industrial administrators.[3] He also pointed out that often activities that were often

[3] Joseph Berliner, Factory and Manager in the USSR (Cambridge, 1957), 160-230.

regarded as "economic crime" could be actually efforts taken by managers desperate to fulfill 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 labeled as economic crimes that would fall into the category of informal measures taken simply to fulfill plans, rather than to enrich the official at the state's expense.) Instead, this article will focus on economic crimes intended to allow officials to use their positions for private profit. Admittedly, reports by inspectors and prosecutors do not always make this distinction, and certainly politically motivated attacks on certain officials surely occurred, as they did in the civilian world.

Since Berliner wrote his book, scholars have devoted little attention to the questions of corruption and the state's anti-corruption measures during the pivotal post-war 1940s and 1950s. Nevertheless, I would suggest that some of the larger conceptualizations used by scholars investigating the better-studied 1930s and the Brezhnev era can usefully be applied to the post-war period.[4] Scholars have noted that this centralized 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 fulfill plans. Similarly, there were prolific opportunities for theft and self-enrichment in the confusion of the five-year plans. Amid the shortages common throughout Soviet society, and which were particularly chronic in the penal labor camps, "black markets" in scarce goods and services thrived. The social chaos and dislocation of the post-war years also encouraged the

[4] On the 1930s, see for example David Shearer's book and "wheeling and dealing" article on the industrial economy of the 1930s, Moshe Lewin on the peculiarities of Soviet state and society in the thirties, Belova on economic crime and "unofficial" behavior among industrial managers investigated by the party's *Komitet partiinogo kontrol'ia* in the 1930s, Stephen Kotkin on everyday life in Magnitogorsk, James Harris on industry and party politics in the Urals.

spread of black markets.[5] Officials were often deeply involved in illegal markets, protecting their continued existence and profiting from them.[6] In his classic work on the Soviet "second economy" and its relationship to the Brezhnev-era "kleptocracy," Gregory Grossman noted in the late 1970s 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."[7] In light of the tremendous drain on resources resulting from economic crime by officials, central authorities were likely to crack down on criminality. 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, excluding members of the elite who were parts of strong patronage networks.[8] Lax or irregular prosecution might tend to encourage more illegal behavior. 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 1945-53 period, accompanied by regular (if selective and ultimately unsuccessful) state efforts to eradicate that crime.

In light of this previous research, this study adopts as two of its 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;

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[5] Zubkova, date, pages.

[6] Gregory Grossman. "The 'Second Economy' of the USSR, "*Problems of Communism*, Sept-Oct. 1977, 25-40.

On the black market and theft by employees in the 1930s, see Elena Osokina, *Ierarkhiia potreblieniia. O zhizni liudei v usloviiakh Stalinskkogo snabzheniia: 1928-1935 gg* (Moscow, 1993). On the "informal" but legal private sector between 1945 and 1953, see Julie Hessler, "A Postwar Perestroika? Toward a History of Private Enterprise in the USSR." Slavic Review, vol 57:3 (Autumn, 1998) 516-542.

[7] Grossman, **"**The Second Economy," 32-33.

[8] Eugenia Belova, in "Economic Crime and Punishment," in Paul Gregory, ed., *Behind the Façade of Stalin's Command Economy: Evidence from the Soviet State and Party Archives* (Stanford: 2001); Nick Lampert, "Law and Order in the USSR: The Case of Economic and Official Crime," *Soviet Studies* 36: no. 3 (July 1984), 366-85; William A. Clark, *Crime and Punishment in Soviet Officialdom: Combating Corruption in the Political Elite, 1965-1990* (Armonk NY, 1993).

and (second) that 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;" they must remain true to notions of "Soviet legality;" and they must be products of "proper *vospitanie*, which included a "correct," "communist" attitude toward their labor and discipline on the job. Soviet authorities assumed that corruption would corrode morality among officials and society as a whole, as well as make the state's tasks in directing society all the more difficult.[9]

Varieties of corruption in the Gulag

Data on the types of corrupt activity among officials come from the records of various inspectorates and sections within the Gulag administration responsible for investigating crimes and auditing the books. These materials include reports, audits, and correspondence. One of the most common kinds of official crime was *khishchenie sotsialisticheskoi sobstvennosti*. Camp officials stole government property and resold it on the black market, or they oversaw groups that stole camp property and sold it on illegal markets. 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 *nachal'nik konvoia diviziona VSO efreitor* diverted

[9] See Nick Lampert, "Law and Order in the USSR," 366-85.

several tons of coal to a nearby city and sold it on the black market [9414, 1, 111, 336].

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 YUTLK MVD of 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 [9414, 1, 111, 57-58 and 202]. In another instance, cases of *krupnoe khishchenie* (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 ten people operated under the leadership of Sherstnev, the *nachal'nik torgovoi chasti*, the *nachal'nik Ch.I.S. Kumzasskogo OLP (and kapitan vnutrennei sluzhby)* Lunin. 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 [9414, 1, 662, 127-29].

Accounting officials or their bosses were able to steal massive amounts through relatively simple scams that involved forgery. In the late 1940s a certain Shul'gin, the chief bookkeeper of the Irkutsk office of MVD's Dal'stroisnab, embezzled the office's money by forging checks and other financial documents [9414, 1, 111, 56]. 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 25 years in a penal camp.

Archives also testify to camp administrators' theft and illegal 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.[10] 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 forged letters requested that prisoners' relatives withdraw sums from the prisoners' personal accounts and forward the money to them at the camp [9414, 1, 111, 242]. Leading camp officials (including party members) would sometimes team up with prisoners to steal. The *nachal'nik 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 [9414, 1, 324, 47 ob].

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 from a financial perspective, losses due to Gulag officials' abuse of office were regarded by Moscow inspectors as significant. This concern is evidenced by the alarm expressed by central Gulag administrators in their

[10] See, for example, the circular forbidding this in 9414, 1, 97, 51-54.

discussions of data gathered during investigations, as well as by the waves of anti-corruption campaigns that swept over the Gulag in reaction to these reported losses. Moreover, one must conclude that a huge quantity of economic crime among officials—almost certainly the great majority, including embezzlement and theft of state property—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, because they are most likely gross understatements of the quantity of official corruption.

What was the total monetary cost of corruption in the GULag system? Our data is not yet complete. Nevertheless, we can draw a general picture on the basis of partial data from the late 1940s and early 1950s.[11] In 1947 the Third Upravlenie presented a calculation of the losses due to *khishchenie* in the Gulag system during the year's first half to its new chief, *General-Maior* Dobrynin [9414, 1, 338, 228]. This report was based on several thousand *vnezapnye revizii* of camps from the first half of the year (before the large jump in the camp population resulting from the June 1947 *Ukaz Verkhovnogo Soveta* instituting harsh punishments for theft of state property). The report stated that of the *vol'nonaemye* labor force, 9305 people *dopustivskhikh khishcheniia* and *nedostachi* (these figures apparently do not include *rastraty*). This group of criminals comprised 5.7% of the *vol'nonaemyi sostav* employed in the camp system (which comprised a total of 161,864 persons). Thus, nearly six percent of the Gulag's free 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. On average, each thief stole property valued at 959 rubles. Among prisoners, 8382 *dopustilis'*

[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 [f. 9414, op. 1, d. 362, ll. 4-5].

khishcheniia; the total value of material stolen by prisoners amounted to 2,320,000 rubles. Of all prisoners, 0.8 percent "*dopustilis'" khishcheniia i nedostachi,* for an average of 276.79 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 *khishchenie, nedostachi, i rastraty* at nearly 15.351 million rubles for the entire year of 1947. If *promoty* is added, an official total of 20.84 million rubles is reached.[12] (These statistics only include camps and colonies in the jurisdiction of the 4-oe Upravlenie.) As a way of normalizing 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 2-oe Upravlenie declared that during the first nine months of 1948 the quantity of stolen valuables and embezzled cash *po lageriam koloniiam GULAG-a i po vsem drugim glavkam* was 25.415 million [9414, 1, 345, 94].[13] 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 3297 workers.

Official statistics from 1952 provide a similar portrait. In a January 1953 letter to MVD chief Kruglov, the head of the Gulag's 2-oe Upravlenie expressed frustration

[12] This data is not complete, as it includes only the 76 *podrazdeleniia, predstavivshim godovye otchety*.
[13] The report also states that methods for retrieving stolen money and valuables had improved.

that levels of crime among officials remained high despite extensive efforts to combat it: "*Nesmotria na usilenie repressii za rastraty i khishcheniia, poslednie po svoim razmeram prodolzhaiut ostavat'sia ves'ma zhachitel'nymi*" [9414, 1, 507, 12]. In 1951, he continued, 20.6 million rubles worth of state property were stolen or embezzled from camps and colonies. Another source provides a similar figure. Zamestitel' nachal'nik Gulaga MVD SSSR General-Maior P. Okunev wrote a spravka of the results of "*agenturno-operativnoi raboty po bor'be s khishcheniiami i rastratami sotsialisticheskoi sobstvennosti za 1951*" [9414, 508, 1, 290-94]. The spravka gave a slightly higher figure than the previous document, citing a total quantity of khishcheniia and rastrat in camps, colonies, and all glavki of 21.44 million rubles. Once figures for Dal'stroi were included, the total leapt to over 41 million rubles.

Campaigns against corruption

Based on their 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."[14] The general sense among prisoners, and among observers such as Dallin, has been that corruption was rampant but that the Gulag administration did little or nothing to combat most types of bureaucratic malfeasance. Dallin and Nicolaevsky, like the prisoners they interviewed, were apparently not aware that regular anti-corruption campaigns were undertaken by Gulag authorities. 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

[14] Dallin and Nicolaevsky, 245. Anne Applebaum briefly mentions that archives contain reports by inspectors detailing large-scale theft by administrators, pp. 344-60. In *Gulag v sisteme totalitarnogo gosudarstva*, G. M. Ivanova also asserts that officials (especially party members) were rarely punished for *zloupotreblenie sluzhebnym polozheniem*, including *rastrata* and *khishcheniia*. The exceptions were "especially significant cases" or if "*nachal'nik komu-to ne ugodil, i ego nuzhno bylo ubrat'*" (170).

administration; no Gulag administrators have written memoirs. 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 official corruption in all parts of society and devoted extensive resources to fighting it. The secret police and the civilian police, together with the procuracy, fought and prosecuted various forms of corruption. The archives of the GULag administration of the MVD reveal the perception of corruption among MVD officials, an element that was largely hidden both to prisoners themselves and to scholars before the opening of archives. Moscow's concern about corruption in the camps is revealed in the following warning from the Chief of the Gulag Administration, I. Dolgikh, sent to all heads of the rezhimno-operativnye otdely ITL UITLK i OITK MVD-UMVD in July 1951: *"Preduprezhdaiu, chto vpred' o rabote nachal'nikov rezhimno-operativnykh otdelov (otdelenii) ITL, UITLK I OITK, GULAG MVD SSSR budet sudit' po rezul'tatom bor'by s khishcheniimi sotsialisticheskoi sobstvennosti"* [9414, 1, 111].

Within the camp administration, the *revizionnyi-inspektorskii* apparatus of the *3-oe Upravlenie* used financial tools to uncover corruption. The 3-oe Upravlenie oversaw the camps' financial affairs. Its employees undertook inspections, audited the books, and investigated potential criminal activity. One weapon that was judged successful for fighting corruption was an increased number of unannounced inspections, a strategy deemed successful in exposing criminals among bookkeepers and managers.[15] As was the case with all campaigns in the Stalin era, Moscow repeatedly sent instructions pushing Gulag officials to move strongly ahead in the

[15] 9414, 1, 112, 214. See the report by the Norilsk ITL in late 1953, which stated that unannounced inspections had served to eliminate large-scale *khishcheniia*, *rastrat* and *nedostach*. 9414, 1, 729, 55.

battle.[16] For example, a 1947 MVD *prikaz* (no. 0412, from 14 July 1947) called for localities to undertake, among other things, "*bol'shaia profilakticheskaia rabota po ochishcheniiu torgovo-snabzhencheskogo i chetno-bukhgalterskogo apparatov ot lits ranee sudimykh za rastrary i khishcheniia i ne vnushaiushchikh doveriia*" [9414, 1, 345, 93]. The MVD leadership issued this *prikaz* immediately after the June1947 *ukaz Verkhovnogo Soveta* instituting harsh punishments for theft of state property. Each year, thousands of people were fired, arrested, and/or turned over to the courts for prosecution for various activities that fall under the rubric of corruption.

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. In 1948, for example, a report asserts that 9444 people were removed from positions in the accounting-bookkeeping apparatuses and from *materialno-otvetstvennykh* duties, not counting several thousand others who had been charged with a crime. The report notes that, at the same time, repressive measures against *khishchenie* of socialist property were strengthened. In the first nine months of 1948, according to incomplete data, 7946 people were charged with a crime, of whom 2007 were *vol'nonaemnye* labor. Of those, 395 were *schetno-bukhgalterskikh rabotnikov*.[17] (The degree to which the *Prokuratura* 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

[16] For 1949, see 9414, 1, 363, 194, citing MVD instruction 554-49g; see also circular of August 6, 1952: 9414, 1, 507, 36-37.

[17] The summary report for 1947 noted that prophylactic measures (meaning informants' information) had prevented thefts of material valuables and money worth a total of 3,921,800 rubles. 1,363,000 rubles were reclaimed from thieves during arrests and searches. These figures were typical for the postwar years: for the first nine months of 1947, 3.7 million rubles worth of theft was prevented; another 2.8 million rubles were seized during arrests and searches [9414, 1, 349, 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 vol'nonaemnye employees were similarly charged [9414, 1, 507, 12-13].

opened 2548 criminal cases against thieves of socialist property; 665 of these were "*gruppovye*" *dela*. In these cases, 3293 people were charged with a crime, and of this group 1343 were *vol'nonaemnye*. Of those charged with embezzlement and misappropriation in 1952, 2429 were convicted. Also that year, 18,586 "*lits, nevnushaiushchikh doveriia*" were purged from the *schetno-bukhgalterskikh apparatov i apparatov sviazannykh s khraneniem i vydachei tovarno-material'nykh tsennostei* [9414, 1, 662, 125-6].

Official reasons for persistent corruption

Authorities responsible for fighting corruption offered several reasons for its pervasiveness among camp employees. Most explanations centered on the poor quality of officials. In explanations of the central administration, corruption nearly always came down to a problem of weak human material. This concern with poor personnel typically was couched in terms either of ineffective 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, accusing them of poor administration or supervision. As Dallin and Nicolaevsky first pointed out, there were never enough qualified administrators in the camps.[18] Pay was low. The education of Gulag personnel was often quite poor. Gulag officials complained that the worst employees of the MVD were dumped into the camp system. Much of the camp personnel had suffered disciplinary infractions in their previous jobs, ranging from drunkenness, to stealing, to incompetence. They were reassigned to administrative positions in the Gulag as a

[18] David Dallin, *Forced Labor in Soviet Russia*, 244-45.

type of punishment.[19] At a *soveshchanie* of republican and oblast' camp *nachal'niki* in April 1948, the *zamestitel' nachal'nik* Gulaga MVD SSSR tov. Kozyrev lamented the moral corruption and politically illiteracy of much of the Gulag *sostav*. Almost 10 percent of the lichnogo sostava v 1947 bylo *"privlecheno k distsiplinarnoi otvetstvennosti.*" He went on: *"Otdel'nye rukovodiashchie rabotniki, vmesto bor'by so vsiakogo roda prestupleniiami, sami stali na put' zloupotreblenii sluzhebnym polozheniem i moral'no-bytovogo razlozhenii"* [9414, 1, 356, 230].

Poor management in the accounting, bookkeeping, and supply departments was also frequently blamed for persistent official crime [9414, 1, 507, 13]. For example, local officials were accused of doing a poor job organizing and monitoring the storage of *tovarno-materialnye tsennosti*. Much of the theft occurred during the transportation and storage of food and other goods. At harvest time, investigators reported many major cases of theft during the gathering and transportation of produce to storage facilities. Special supervision by managers (and vigilance by informants) was urged during these vulnerable periods [9414, 1, 116, 12 (Sept. 1952)]. 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," [9414, 1, 506, 210] as one chief of a *rezhimno-operativnyi otdel* observed, with a large dose of understatement.

Persons 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

[19] See also Ivanova, *Gulag v sisteme*, 140 ff; Applebaum, *Gulag*, 258-261.

qualified personnel forced the personnel department to put untrustworthy people positions as the *materialno-otvetsvennye litsa*. 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 [9414, 1, 507, 37]. In light of the fact that in 1952 more than 439,000 prisoners in camps and colonies were serving time for convictions under the June1947 ukaz on *khishchenie* of socialist property [9414, 1, 507, 69], it is not surprising that some individuals convicted for white-collar crimes ended up with responsibilities as Gulag bookkeepers and accountants. In such positions, they would have ample opportunity to repeat their original offenses. In an April 1946 *prikaz*, Gulag chief Nasedkin revealed the case of a coordinated group of thieves in Tadzhikstan. In that case, the head of the supply section of a labor colony and his associates, including bookkeepers and supply inspectors, stole 2.153 million (pre-reform) rubles between 1943 and 1945 [9414, 1, 79, 42-43]. In 1949, in the Abanskoi agricultural ITK UITLK UMVD in Krasnoiarsk krai, 15 prisoners convicted of *khishcheniia* and *grabezh* worked in positions in the accounting and *okhrana veshchdovol'stviia* [9414, 1, 97, 52]. In Lagpunkt no. 1 priiska "Marshal'skii" of the Indigirskii ITL of Dalstroi, a certain prisoner Borotnikov worked as a bookkeeper even though he had been sentenced to 20 years for theft of socialist property [9414, 1, 491, 203].

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 tremendous shortages exacerbated by the hyper-centralized 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*, or *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 Gulag corruption. Considering the lack of memoirs by admitted informants, we are dependent for evidence about them upon archive materials from various parts of the Gulag administration, especially those that supervised informants. Still closed are the files of the Gulag administration that managed the informant network. Certain relevant documents have, nevertheless, turned up in other locations in the Gulag archive.

The deployment of informants to thwart crime or, failing that, to uncover the deeds after the fact, was called *operativno-profilakticheskaia rabota* or *agenturno-operativnaia rabota*. Such work was carried out under the auspices of the pervyi otdel or otdelenie—known as the *Rezhimno-operativnyi otdel* or *Operativno-rezhimnyi otdel*)—of the *1-oe Upravlenie* of camps and colonies. The 2-i otdel, or sledstvennyi otdel, of the 1-oe Upravlenie also had responsibilities for directing rabotoi po bor'be s khishcheniiami of socialist property in the camps and colonies [9414, 1, 507; and 9414, 1, 374, 7-8]. 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. Trofimov's instruction of 1949 called for the "*pervye otdeleniia*"

to assign workers to special *operativnye* duties, presumably the job of recruiting and supervising the informants charged with rooting out crime [9414, 1, 362, 5]. Camps with particular problems with theft and embezzlement were ordered to heighten their struggle against crime by strengthening their *operativnaia rabota* [9414, 1, 363, 194]. 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.[20] These recurrent orders have the ring of desperation.

In the Soviet Union, the primary organization charged with rooting out economic crime was the *Otdel bor'by s khishcheniem sotsialisticheskoi sobstvennosti* (OBKhSS), a department of the MVD. OBKhSS had its own informants in the camp system [9414, 1, 490. 363-64]. Data on the total number of OBKhSS informants in the camp system have not yet surfaced. In 1952, at one small, strict-regime *lagpunkt* with 523 prisoners in the Norilsk complex, there were five OBKhSS informants [9414, 1, 462, 97]. According to a September 1951 investigation, at Maglag Dal'stroia MVD SSSR, a camp with a total of 13604 prisoners, five *rezidenty*, 2 *agenty*, and 108 *sekretnye osvedomiteli* were involved with informing about theft of socialist property [9414, 1, 491, 9].

Moscow authorities believed that there were, in the 1952 words of the Zam. Nachal'nik 1-ogo Upravleniia Polkovnika Nikulochkina, *"riad grubeishikh nedostatkov v agenturno-operativnoi rabote, kotorye, k sozhaleniiu, ostaiutsia do segodniashego dnia i svoevremenno ne ustraniaiutsia"* [9414, 1, 513, 151].

[20] The MVD issued other *prikazy* on this theme in 1949: no. 0842-1949 and no. 811-1949—see 9414, 1, 373, 132 for a frustrated discussion of the ineffectiveness of no. 811 in Saratov oblast'; and see 9414, 1, 115, ll. 276-78 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 of 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 [9414, 1, 363, 194].

Complaints about informants were ubiquitous. In 1951, inspectors in the Chaun-Chukotskii upravlenie ITL of DC (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, informants often were on the payroll, but completely out of touch (*vnesviazi*) with their supervisors, offering little or no useful information [9414.1.491.182-83; see also 9414, 1, 490, 363-76]. Like their MVD colleagues in civilian society, 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.

Managers of groups of informants were also the targets of Moscow authorities' venom. In the spring of 1952, the USSR Minister of Internal Affairs, S. N. Kruglov, complained about the poor work of *rezhimno-operativnye otdely* to a *soveshchanie nachal'nikov rezhimno-operativnykh otdelov* ITL MVD [9414, 1, 506, 208-213]. In his remarks, Kruglov sketched out how the informant networks and their supervisors were supposed to operate. He emphasized that the rezhimno-operativnyi otdel must oversee internal discipline and must enforce strict order inside the camp. *"Lagernye rabotniki stali kakimi-to kantseliaristami, prikhodiat k sebe v cabinet, sidiat tam, u nikh tam knopki, sekretari i oni dumaiut, chto mozhno upravliat' lagerem iz etogo kabineta…"* Furthermore, in many camps the supervisors of the rezhimno-operativnykh otdely were poorly educated and lacked initiative. There are *"mnogo pozhilykh liudi, imeiushchikh nizkuiu obshche-obrazovatel'nuiu podgotovku, kotorye*

imeiut za plechami bol'shoi stazh raboty, no seichas oni nemnogo ustali." Informants' supervisors were often drunks or otherwise morally compromised.[21]

The prisoner's dilemma

Yet, there were additional, 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 ostracized, 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 to the prison population, usually with disastrous results. This failure to maintain secrecy could lead to the deaths of informants. For example, one member of the *operativnyi sostav* in the Shushtolepskogo OLP Iuzhkuzbasslaga MVD somehow "lost" a list of four *rezidenty* and 37 informants under his supervision. 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: *"Gr-n nachal'nik, nashli v lagere "Kundel'", oznakomilis', bol'she ne uronite. Nashi 27/XII-51 g. zakliuchennye"* [9414, 1, 513, 155-56]. One can imagine the fate of the exposed informants. Such stories surely circulated among prisoners in many camps, acting as a

[21] Accusations along these lines were leveled at the Maglag supervisors [date?] (9414, 1, 491, 8-9).

strong disincentive to cooperate with camp inspectors. The commonplace murder by zeks of prisoners suspecting 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 in this period by examining a major turning point in the history of the 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. Indeed, an August 13, 1953 *prikaz* (no. 153) from the Gulag chief General-Lieutenant Dolgikh echoes language previously used by the MVD, urging the strengthening of *agenturno-operativnaia* work in uncovering *rastrata i khishcheniia tovarno-materialnykh tsennostei i denezhnykh sredstv*. [For the prikaz, see GARF, 9414, 1, 139, 162-165]. Dolgikh notes that since Stalin's death reports of theft of state property had increased, at least in certain places about which he had information, including the Kuneevsk ITL, in Azerbaidzhan SSR camps, and in Voronezh oblast' camps.

The prikaz condemned the poor quality of informants' work intended "prophylactically" to uncover plots and prevent theft. Moreover, the *prikaz* blamed the *rezhimno-operativnye* sections in many camps because they "*plokho rukovodiat imeiushcheisia agenturno-osvedomitel'oi setiu po bor'be s khishcheniiami, ne osushchestvliaiut reguliarnuiu s nei sviaz', dolzhnym obrazom ne instruktiruiut*."[22] Informants, Dolgikh went on, are not paying proper attention to evidence of serious accounting irregularities. Nor are they properly supervising the storage and outflow of material valuables and money. When workers of the *rezhimno-operativnye* apparatuses did receive incriminating information from informants, they often did not

[22] A Ministry of Justice prikaz of 25 June 1953 also expressed frustration over the unsatisfactory conidion of agenturno-operativnaia rabota po bor'be s raskhititeliami. [9414, 1, 139, 162].

follow through with investigations or audits. Criminals were never apprehended. In other instances, investigations stretched out for too long, allowing criminals to continue their illegal actions and "*nanosit krupnyi material'nyi ushcherb gosudarstvu*."[23] These failures indicate that supervision was *"ochen' slabo"* carried out.

At this point in his *prikaz*, Dolgikh reaches a critical moment, one which highlights the complex relationship between the camp administration and its informants. Dolgikh observes that thousands of informants had been released from camps under the various amnesties between March and June 1953, which set free about 1.5 million of the Gulag's approximately 2.5 million prisoners.[24] The *rezhimno-operativnye* apparatuses had failed to adjust to the loss of informants by undertaking the "*verbovka*" (recruiting) of new agents who would take up the slack. Dolgikh pressures them to find new informants.

This *prikaz* raises an interesting 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 emphasizes 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 was fatal to prisoners' incentive to inform. The strongest

[23] 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 "slow" 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.

[24] See *GULag (Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei), 1917-1960 gg*. Sost. A.I. Kokurin and N.V. Petrov (Moscow, 2000), 786-793.

incentive to inform would have been a promise of release *if and only if* one informed. 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.[25]

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. Other informants were motivated purely by a desire for a reward such as money, a reduced sentence, or other material incentives. Yet other incentives and disincentives were also at work, and these complicated the Gulag administration's quest for information from informants.[26] In many cases, for example, criminal officials could pay off potential informants to keep them silent. Amid the shortages and deprivation, informants or potential informants might have a great deal to gain by *refusing* to cooperate in exposing corrupt officials. An informant, for example, might be bought off by a corrupt official. After all, officials could often provide them with goods, protection, or access—to food, rest, lighter work, or contact with family members.[27] I would argue the shortages and material hardships created conditions in which regular people in the informant pool could relatively easily be bribed or "bought" by camp

[25] 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, "Coercion versus Motivation."

[26] For a discussion of the complex relationship between incentives and punishment for the purpose of stimulating prison labor, see Leonid Borodkin and Simon Ertz, "Coercion versus Motivation. Forced Labor in Norilsk," in Gregory and Lazarev, eds., The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag (Palo Alto, 2003), 75-104.

[27] 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 people in easy work intended for sick prisoners. (9414, 1, 45, 40-41. Letter to the Nachal'nik Upravlennie 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 zam nachal'nik of the lagpunkt Khitrikov took personal things. Theft of food led to death in ten instances [Ibid].

administrators—that is by the official criminals themselves.[28] After all, the camps themselves controlled very large resources, including food, materials, and packages sent to prisoners. In addition, in light of the extreme coercion of labor in dangerous, even life-threatening conditions, authorities controlled a commodity they could trade on a "black market": an easier work regime. They could "sell" this commodity for the silence of the potential informants, working side by side with them in offices. 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 had 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 inside the camp. In other words, the investigating authorities had to be able 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.

In some ways, this situation could put the prisoner in an advantageous position, able 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 police 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.

[28] For example, the Zam. MVD Kruglov wrote in 1941 that employees were being bribed to give prisoners light work. 9414, 1, 45, 40-41.

Conclusions

Using material from the MVD's Gulag archive, this article has discussed the varied forms and substantial costs of official malfeasance in the system of penal camps and colonies between 1945 and 1953. Only with the use of archives can historians fully 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 system. In the view of the central Gulag bureaucracy, widespread theft and embezzlement reduced the camps' productivity, damaged 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 than generally noticed by prisoners at the time, or by historians since the Gulag's dissolution. Archives show that informants were deployed not just to foil prisoners from escaping and to otherwise rat on prisoners, but to root out crime among the camp administration. These anti-corruption efforts and the records they produced are a very useful source for information about the nature of official malfeasance in the camp system. There were major, if flawed, efforts to fight large-scale corruption, involving repeated prikazy and campaigns, revizii, and especially the solicitation of information from a large and secret (from other prisoners) 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 inform, and Gulag chiefs had difficulty offering prisoners sufficient incentive to provide information about criminal administrators, especially in light of the possibility of release *without* informing. Evidence from outside the camps indicates that this

peculiar state of dependence was repeated 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. The task of using material and moral incentives to motivate individuals to inform, despite the many countervailing incentives, was a major challenge facing the central Gulag administration.