

Gulag Tourism: Khrushchev's "Show" Prisons in the Cold War Context, 1954-1959

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In 1959 a judge from New York visited a small corner of the vast Soviet penal apparatus commonly known as the Gulag.¹ Impressed with what he saw compared with the oppressive prisons back home, Samuel S. Leibowitz penned a laudatory report that quickly graced the pages of the 8 June 1959 issue of *Life* magazine. This created a bizarre juxtaposition. After reading about John Foster Dulles' funeral, complete with an editorial extolling his fight against communism (including Khrushchevism, with its shrewd "mixture of terror and talk"), and after digesting the feat of the "native American" monkeys Able and Baker, "the first living passengers to return safely from a ballistic journey through space," American readers were treated to the spectacle of "healthy and robust" Russian prisoners who were "laughing and enjoying themselves" while engaged in a friendly game of soccer. "You have to know intimately the sickly, sullen atmosphere of the average American prison exercise yard," Leibowitz declared, "to appreciate what I saw and what I *felt* as I watched these Russian convicts on this brilliant, sunny day."² The judge questioned to some extent whether he had been duped, but in conclusion still averred, "the whole Russian prison system has undergone a remarkable transformation in the past five years."³ Not long after the *Life* article appeared, it received a favorable review in *Izvestiia*; before reciting Leibowitz's infamous words of praise for the Soviet penal system, the author of the article, L. Sheinin, introduced him as "an intelligent, observant and experienced penologist."⁴ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, however, had a different and more influential take: "Oh, fortunate New York State, to have such a perspicacious jackass for a judge."⁵

Writing about the Soviet Gulag was, and to some extent continues to be, a contentious subject fraught with the well-known perils of polarized Cold War historiography. Far more than

¹ In this paper the term Gulag, actually a bureaucratic acronym standing for Main Administration of Camps, will refer both to the central penal administration of the Soviet Union and more broadly to the entire penal apparatus.

² Samuel S. Leibowitz, "The Two Faces of Justice in Russia," *Life* 46, no. 23 (8 June 1959): 156; Don Schanche, "Able and Baker, U.S. Heroes, Come Back," *Life* 46, no. 23 (8 June 1959): 40; and Editors, "Dulles the Peace Keeper," *Life* 46, no. 23 (8 June 1959): 46B.

³ Leibowitz, 160.

⁴ L. Sheinin, "Believe in Man," *Izvestiia*, 22 January 1960, 6.

⁵ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, vol. 2, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 147.

an arms race or space race, the Cold War was a global competition among two universalizing ideologies (or three, if one includes Maoism along with Marxism-Leninism and democratic capitalism), fought on a host of social, economic, political, and cultural levels.⁶ Indeed, for the Soviet Union the Cold War was a total war, a matter of mobilizing all resources toward demonstrating the superiority (or at least rapid ascendancy) of the socialist system. Everything had to be superior to its counterpart in the West, from milk consumption to kitchen appliances, from athletics to academics. And while all of these minor competitions fed into the larger question of which socioeconomic system would eventually encompass the globe, a few matters were of existential importance for the Soviet Union. First, the “worker-owned,” non-market, planned economy had to eventually outpace its capitalist counterparts.⁷ And second, man, through a combination of science and society, had to be shown to be reformable, even perfectable.⁸ If man could not be perfected, if the stains of capitalism could not be bleached from his character, then there was little point struggling toward communism, which presupposed such a transformation. Although the perfectability of man could be demonstrated in a variety of spheres, including education and athletics, the penal system and its correctional facilities were in a sense ground zero for proving not only that man was malleable, but that the Soviets understood how to excise the remnants of capitalism and mold him into an honest, working, socialist man. After all, the penal system was where the greatest transformation—re-education (*perevospitanie*) rather than just education or upbringing (*vospitanie*)—had to occur. Moreover, given their inherently repressive nature, penal institutions boasted a controlled environment where the full range of educational and re-educational tools, both persuasive and coercive, could be applied.

In addition to demonstrating the ability to reform man within the context of the Soviet socialist system, the penal system of the U.S.S.R. was an appealing avenue for promotion (and

⁶ On this see, for instance, Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997); David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Supremacy During the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Lorenz Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁷ This philosophy of production stemmed by Karl Marx himself, who theorized that while capitalism was doomed to cyclical crises and prices determined by scarcity, “socialism would eliminate the need for such signals by planning for ‘continuous relative overproduction’ in conditions beyond all scarcity.” Richard B. Day, *Cold War Capitalism: The View from Moscow, 1945-1975* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), 8.

⁸ Indeed, these two existential questions were well understood by Khrushchev, whose primary goals were “molding the New Man and building communism.” Cited in Amir Weiner, “The Empires Pay a Visit: Gulag Returnees, East European Rebellions, and Soviet Frontier Politics,” *Journal of Modern History* 78 (June 2006), 374.

investigation) for more universal reasons. As David Caute notes, the Cold War struggle for moral, ideological, and cultural supremacy was possible only because of greatly overlapping values between East and West, both founded as they were on classical European culture and the ideas of the Enlightenment.⁹ Such values extended to conceptions of what penal institutions were supposed to look like and how they were supposed to function; moreover, many people of this time regardless of patriotic allegiance or political persuasion, but especially those who saw themselves as reformers, progressives, and modernizers, accepted the old adage that the true measure of a civilization is how it treats its most vulnerable members, including prisoners. So even without the question of how to achieve communism by means of socio-economic and deeply personal transformations, a “progressive” penal system that treated inmates with respect and prepared them to succeed as members of a broader society could help demonstrate that the socialism of the Soviet Union in the 1950s was a humane alternative to the capitalist world.

Curiously, however, while in the 1920s and early 1930s the Soviets comprehended the importance of demonstrating to the world the supremacy of their penal system, inviting thousands of foreigners to visit its prisons and labor colonies, from the late 1930s until Stalin’s death in 1953, little to this end was accomplished. The infamous Stalinist Gulag, as hundreds of memoirs and official documents attest, not only lost sight of its proclaimed primary mission of rehabilitating convicts, it became shrouded in multiple layers of secrecy.¹⁰ As production and wartime concerns became paramount both within and without the Gulag, and as paranoia regarding foreigners peaked and became institutionalized during the Great Terror, the Soviet Union in essence withdrew its claim of world leadership in penal affairs.¹¹ Rather than hearing conflicting reports on the nature of the Soviet Gulag as before, therefore, the Western world was treated almost solely to damning accounts of a murderous system of slave labor, especially in the

⁹ Caute, 4.

¹⁰ For this standard narrative see, for instance, A. I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, 3 vols, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper and Row, 1974-1978); G. M. Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism: The Gulag in the Soviet Totalitarian System*, trans. Carol Flath (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2000); Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev, eds., *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2003); Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror*, trans. Vadim A. Staklo (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2004); and Lynn Viola, *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin’s Special Settlements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). For an opposing view, which holds that re-education remained paramount throughout the Stalinist period, see Steven A. Barnes, “Soviet Society Confined: The Gulag in the Karaganda Region of Kazakhstan, 1930s-1950s” (PhD diss., University of Stanford, 2003).

¹¹ On the institutionalization of anti-foreigner sentiment, especially in regard to the Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS), see Michael David-Scott, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to Soviet Russia, 1921-1941* (forthcoming), chapter 8.

late 1940s and early 1950s.¹² Yet if the Soviet Union in the early stages of the Cold War, then almost wholly closed to outsiders, exhibited relatively little concern for how it was perceived abroad, the Khrushchev era witnessed far greater openness to foreigners coupled with an almost paranoid insecurity regarding image control.¹³ Foreigners were again invited in mass numbers to the Soviet Union, Soviet delegations travelled abroad to demonstrate Soviet superiority in science, sport, and culture, and Khrushchev proclaimed a new era of “peaceful coexistence,” under which such exchanges could thrive.¹⁴ Already by 1960 Frederick Barghoorn and others were writing extensively of the “Soviet cultural offensive” that marked a new chapter in the Cold War.¹⁵ And, as part of this move toward increased (though still very limited) transparency and socioeconomic rather than military competition, the Soviet Union once again lifted the veil of secrecy surrounding the Gulag and proclaimed the superiority of Soviet corrections.

Beginning in 1954 a steady stream of foreign visitors were given guided tours of Gulag facilities, especially the infamous Butyrka Prison in Moscow and the Kriukovo Corrective-Labor Colony, located in Moscow Province. Presented as typical penal institutions, Butyrka and Kriukovo were tasked with convincing foreign delegates, many of them familiar with if not experts in penal affairs, of the superiority of Soviet correctional facilities. Man could be transformed, they proclaimed, through a combination of meaningful labor; education and vocational training; political and cultural stimulation; genuine concern for society’s outcasts as exhibited by good living conditions and fair treatment by guards; a heavy dose self-government

¹² See, among many others, V. V. Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent Prisoners of the Soviets*, trans. Nicholas M. Oushakoff (Boston: Hale, Cushman & Flint, 1935); I. L. Solonevich, *Escape from Russian Chains: A Record of Unspeakable Suffering*, trans. Warren Harrow (London: Williams and Norgate, 1938); Ante Ciliga, *The Russian Enigma* (London: Routledge, 1940); David J. Dallin and Boris I. Nicolaevsky, *Forced Labor in Soviet Russia* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1947); Vladimir Petrov, *Soviet Gold: My Life as a Slave Laborer in the Siberian Mines*, trans. Mirra Ginsburg (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1949); V. A. Kravchenko, *I Chose Justice* (New York: Scribner, 1950); Albert Herling, *The Soviet Slave Empire* (New York: W. Funk, 1951); and Charles A. Orr, ed. *Stalin’s Slave Camps: An Indictment of Modern Slavery* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952). For more see Libushe Zorin, *Soviet Prisons and Concentration Camps: An Annotated Bibliography, 1917-1980* (Newtonville, MA: Oriental Research Partners, 1980). A few letters to the editors of British newspapers composed by Andrei Stakhanov and law professor A. Trainin did little to stem this tide. Barnes, 366-69.

¹³ As Robert English notes, there was a marked reduction in anti-Western propaganda under Khrushchev as “the psychology of encirclement began to break down.” Robert D. English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals, and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 60.

¹⁴ On this see Robert F. Byrnes, *Soviet-American Academic Exchanges, 1958-1975* (Bloomington; Indiana University Press, 1976); Yale Richmond, *U.S.-Soviet Cultural Exchanges, 1958-1960: Who Wins?* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1987); and Shawn Salmon, “Marketing Socialism: Inturist in the Late 1950s and Early 1960s,” in *Turizm: The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism*, ed. Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006): 186-204.

¹⁵ Frederick C. Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive: The Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960).

by the inmates themselves; the maintenance of close ties with family and outside society; and a variety of incentive programs including workday credits and parole. Some foreigners, ideologically predisposed to accept this offering at face value, showered endless praise on the humane and progressive institutions they visited. Yet most, such as Judge Leibowitz, while wondering whether they were being shown “Potemkin villages,” came to the same conclusion: the Soviet penal system, still condemned in most quarters as no better than slavery, was actually superior to anything the West had to offer.

Visiting the Gulag, Pre-1953

Starting already in the 1920s, as part of their general appeal to the international community, Soviet officials and academics asserted the superiority of the U.S.S.R.’s penal system with its emphasis on rehabilitation through labor and the power of the collective.¹⁶ Criminals should not be locked away, humiliated, and oppressed as was the practice in the West, they argued, but should be reformed into honest and productive citizens. Leaving aside the accuracy of their characterization of Western prisons and the actual extent to which their aim was achieved in the 1920s and early 1930s, the young Soviet regime sought to prove its propaganda by inviting foreigners to visit penal institutions such as Moscow’s Lefortovo and Sokolniki prisons. This program was fairly successful; the majority of guests, at least in their self-censored press reports, were ecstatic with the models of cleanliness, humanity, and progress to which they were treated.¹⁷ In addition to tourists, certain foreign specialists were allowed access to additional institutions not on the standard tourist itinerary; most prominent among these, the German penologist Lenka Von Koerber visited the U.S.S.R. in 1932 with the explicit purpose of studying the Soviet criminal justice system and reported having free access to virtually any prison or labor colony in Moscow and even in the provinces, and the ability to conduct private conversations with any (criminal, not political) prisoner she liked. In conclusion, while the system had a few faults, Von Koerber found “many more good features” that she encouraged other countries to adopt.¹⁸

¹⁶ David-Scott, “Showcasing,” chapter 3.

¹⁷ Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba, 1928-1978* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 142-56. Although, as David-Scott notes, “those with the greatest stake in singing the praises of Soviet socialism were not representative of travelers as a whole.” David-Scott, “Showcasing,” 36.

¹⁸ Lenka Von Koerber, *Soviet Russia Fights Crime* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1935), xiv.

For those unable to visit the Gulag, the Soviet regime provided a virtual show prison in the form of *Belomor*, written in 1934 by an editorial board headed by Maxim Gorky and translated in modified form into English in 1935.¹⁹ *Belomor* offered to Western audiences through the eyes of one of the world's best-known writers, an alternative penal system that promised to at once transform inmates and their surroundings into beacons of industrial modernity: "success was to be measured in human terms as well as in terms of engineering."²⁰ Conditions there, it was frankly acknowledged, were primitive and harsh, but the redeeming quality of hard labor coordinated with educational and cultural programs and the power of the socialist dream produced new men and women. Nikolai Pogodin's play *The Aristocrats* provided a similar glimpse into the reforging of man at the White Sea Canal, but it remained largely unknown in the West.²¹

From the late 1930s until the early 1950s, however, foreign visits to the Soviet Union were few and the penal system under Laverntii Beriia became a matter of state security. Paradoxically, therefore, the most famous visit to the Gulag took place during World War II when U.S. Vice President Henry A. Wallace travelled to the gold-mining region of Kolyma at the start of a goodwill trip to Siberia. Kolyma, which had been extremely sparsely populated until the early 1930s, by the 1940s, thanks primarily to convict labor, was the Soviet Union's chief gold-mining region. This visit to the Gulag differed, however, from those of the 1920s and early 1930s. The NKVD, rather than demonstrate the superiority of Russian incarceration, staged an elaborate farce for Wallace, keeping all evidence of prisoners out of sight while presenting the region's population as volunteers. And Wallace and his entourage, despite warnings that Kolyma was little more than an enormous prison, swallowed the bait. They characterized the miners they were allowed to meet as "big, husky young men," they marveled at

¹⁹ Maxim Gorky, L. Auerbach, and S. G. Firin, *Belomor: An Account of the Construction of the New Canal Between the White Sea and the Baltic Sea* (New York: Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, 1935). Although translated into English to reach a broad international audience, this was primarily an internal propaganda piece. Eighty thousand copies of the original Russian version, complete with embossed cloth cover and a fold-out diagram of the canal, were published in 1934. M. Gor'kii, L. Averbakh, and S. Firin, eds., *Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Kanal imini Stalina: istoriia stroitel'stva* (Moscow: Istoriiia Fabrik i Zavodov, 1934). On the translation into English see Cynthia A. Ruder, *Making History for Stalin: The Story of the Belomor Canal* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998), 192-202.

²⁰ Gorky, Auerbach, and Firin, 308.

²¹ It could be found in *Four Soviet Plays* (New York: International Publishers, 1937) and it was published separately in England: Nikolai Pogodin, *The Aristocrats: A Comedy in Four Acts* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1937). Also notable from this era was the film *Road to Life*, which depicted the re-education of homeless youth and was screened in dozens of countries. David-Scott, "Showcasing," chapter 4.

the amount of lend-lease equipment and supplies that supported the gold mining operations, they fraternized with top NKVD officials, who played the role of magnanimous hosts, and they enjoyed musical performances by prisoners masquerading as wartime evacuees.²² Once home, Wallace and his travelling companion Owen Lattimore sang paeans to the “volunteers” of Siberia over the radio, in film, in *National Geographic*, and in the book *Soviet Asia Mission*.²³ The show had been a success.²⁴ Thus, whereas in the 1920s and early 1930s the Soviet regime promoted its penal system as a model of humane correctionalism, by the late 1930s every effort was made to shroud the Gulag in secrecy, to hide it from view.

Reform of the Gulag, 1953-1960

Shortly after Stalin's death in 1953, his heirs proclaimed a return to socialist legality aimed at removing the excesses and “legal nihilism” of the preceding two decades.²⁵ While never resolving the fundamental tension between the rule of law and the extralegal nature of the Communist Party, this campaign resulted in a host of new legal codes, a well-educated corps of judges and lawyers, and renewed academic study into the nature of crime and punishment.²⁶ As part of this campaign, Stalin's heirs undertook a fundamental transformation of the Gulag, the highlights of which, especially the 1953 amnesty and the release of most political prisoners from

²² Henry A. Wallace and Andrew J. Steiger, *Soviet Asia Mission* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1946), 35.

²³ One this see Tim Tzouliadis, *The Forsaken: An American Tragedy in Stalin's Russia* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 225-26.

²⁴ Wallace would famously apologize years later after becoming friends with Vladimir Petrov, a former prisoner from Kolyma who had escaped the Soviet Union during the war, while Lattimore chose rather to attack the damning testimony of Elinor Lipper, who had personally witnessed as a prisoner how the American delegation had been duped. Tzouliadis, 279-82.

²⁵ As Dobson rightly points out, the campaign for a new level of socialist legality was actually initiated in 1948, but this was then altered and reinvigorated by Stalin's heirs in 1953. Miriam Dobson, “‘Show the Bandits No Mercy!’: Amnesty, Criminality and Public Response in 1953,” in *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinisation: A Social and Cultural History of Reform in the Khrushchev Era*, ed. Polly A. Jones (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 21-2. For more on the socialist legality campaign and its results see, among others, Leon Lipton, “Socialist Legality: The Road Uphill,” in *Russia under Khrushchev*, ed. Abraham Brumberg (New York: Praeger, 1962), 434-469; John N. Hazard and Isaac Shapiro, *The Soviet Legal System: Post-Stalin Documentation and Historical Commentary* (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Oceana Publications, 1962); and Dobson, *Khrushchev's Cold Summer: Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform after Stalin* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

²⁶ As Charles Schwartz noted in describing the behavior of the Soviet bureaucracy, party concerns took precedence when needed over legal ones, the plan was the law just as much as legal codes were the law, and corruption for the sake of the state was widely tolerated. Schwartz, Charles A. “Corruption and Political Development in the U.S.S.R.” *Comparative Politics* 11, (July 1979): 430-31. Or to put it more bluntly, as George Feifer did in his otherwise sympathetic report on Moscow court proceedings in the mid-1960s, “To look for the rule of law in a one-party, one-press, one-explanation, one-art-form state. . . would have taken more naïveté than I could muster. In Russia the Party rules.” Feifer, *Justice in Moscow* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), 15.

1954 to 1956, are already well-known.²⁷ Through these measures Stalin's heirs greatly reduced the size of the Gulag and the percentage of political prisoners: the number of Gulag inmates in five years fell from 2.47 million on 1 January 1953 to 721,899 on 1 January 1958 and the percentage of political prisoners was slashed from 21.8 percent to just 1.9 percent.²⁸ But looking beyond this quantitative shift in penal demographics, they also sought a qualitative transformation of the penal system. Characterizing the camps and colonies of Stalin's Gulag as serving only one goal, the maximization of production, Stalin's heirs and Khrushchev in particular promoted a campaign to put the correctional back into correctional-labor institutions.²⁹ As Kliment Voroshilov told MVD chief Sergei Kruglov at a Politburo meeting on 8 February 1954, "the most important thing is to pay attention not to [economic] construction but to the correction [*ispravlenie*] of people."³⁰ Or, as Minister of Internal Affairs Nikolai Dudorov quipped at a Gulag conference in 1958, "What could be more humane or important than the work that we perform in the matter of remaking man?"³¹

This overarching goal of reclaiming the convict as a useful member of society, rather than simply punishing and extracting labor from him, drove the introduction of a number of concrete reforms and programs in the penal system from 1953 to 1960. The most potent symbol of this de-Stalinization in the Gulag was the improvement of conditions in the special camps for political prisoners followed by their transformation into regular corrective-labor camps in 1954.³² Hundreds of memoirists recall the day the bars and locks were removed from the barracks, and, more symbolically, the numbers came off their uniforms. But this was just the

²⁷ On early post-Stalin penal reforms see, among others, Nanci Adler, *The Gulag Survivor: Beyond the Soviet System* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002); Dobson, "'Show the Bandits No Mercy!'", 21-40; Marc Elie, "Les politiques à l'égard des libérés du Goulag: amnistiés et réhabilités dans la région de Novosibirsk." *Cahiers du monde russe* 47, no. 1-2 (January-June 2006): 327-348; Andrei Artizov, ed., *Reabilitatsiia—kak eto bylo: dokumenty Prezidiuma TSK KPSS i drugie materialy*, 3 vols. (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi Fond "Demokratiia," 2000-2004); and a host of memoirs that extend into the post-Stalin period.

²⁸ GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 1398, ll. 1, 10; GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 1427, l. 11. In a related move Stalin's heirs released nearly all exiles and special settlers. See V. N. Zemskov, "Massovoe osvobozhdenie spetsposelentsev i ssylnykh (1954-1960gg.)," *Sotsiologicheskie Issledovaniia*, 1991, no. 1, 5-26.

²⁹ Their characterization of the Stalinist system was, of course, partial. Focused on the 1937-1953 time period, they ignored the distinct apex of correctionalism in Soviet penal affairs in the early 1930s; thus, many of the policies and programs they began to reinstate hearkened back not to the time of Lenin, but rather that of Stalin. And even in the late Stalinist period correctionalism never wholly disappeared from Gulag rhetoric or policy. See, for example, Steven A. Barnes, "All for the Front, All for Victory! The Mobilization of Forced Labor in the Soviet Union during World War Two," *International Labor and Working Class History* 58 (Fall 2000): 239-60.

³⁰ This conclusion was seconded by Khrushchev and Malenkov. A. A. Fursenko, *Prezidium Tsk KPSS, 1954-1964*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Rosspen, 2003), 21.

³¹ GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 311, l. 9.

³² These camps had been established in 1948 to house primarily political prisoners in harsh, restrictive conditions.

beginning. Visiting and correspondence rights for all prisoners were introduced or extended, cultural groups were restored, sports programs were introduced, chess tournaments flourished, prisoners were allowed to wear their own clothes and grow their hair long.³³ Well-stocked stores for prisoner use, commercial dining halls that provided better food than the regular mess halls, and kitchen facilities where prisoners could cook their own meals appeared, as did self-tended vegetable gardens.³⁴ Movies for prisoners became commonplace and some corrective-labor institutions acquired televisions for inmate use. The MVD ordered that prisoners should no longer be searched when leaving for and returning from work, arguing that this only wasted the prisoners' valuable time for relaxation and cultural activities.³⁵ Self-governing organizations that offered prisoners the chance to help regulate much of camp life—cultural activities, sanitation, sports, education and vocational training, and even discipline—were instituted. Workday credits and parole offered the hope of early release.³⁶ The Gulag introduced minimum-security colonies and camp points for well-behaved prisoners where guarding was minimal and many prisoners were given permission to live outside the zone without any guarding whatsoever. Guards and administrators were admonished to be polite and respectful in their conversations with prisoners, characterized now as (wayward) citizens rather than enemies of the people.³⁷ Thanks in large part to vastly increased oversight by prosecutors and the newly-formed oversight commissions, physical abuse of prisoners, a problem in virtually every penal system, became

³³ Unlimited correspondence with relatives was announced 10 June 1954. GARF, f. R-9401, op. 1a, d. 542, l. 358. A 16 April 1954 order called for every camp point to have a variety of instruments (accordions, harmonicas, violins, guitars, mandolins), volleyballs, soccer balls, ice skates, and one chess set, two domino sets, and two checker sets for every twenty-five prisoners. GARF, f. R-9401, op. 1a, d. 531, l. 151. For many long hair was a particularly important concession—"it was for them a symbol of freedom and return to normal life." Małgorzata Giżejewska, *Kołyma 1944-1956: we wspomnieniach Polskich więźniów* (Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2000), 108. See also M. S. Gol'dman, "...Ne etomu menia desiat' let v komsomole uchili..." *Karta*, 1997, no. 17-18:52.

³⁴ An MVD order from 22 April 1954 called not just for vegetable gardens to be planted but for camp points to organize mushroom and berry-picking parties, using prisoners incapable of regular labor. GARF, f. R-9401, op. 1a, d. 531, l. 168. Starting 19 May 1954 the MVD allowed most prisoners to buy tea, even though it was often used to brew the narcotic *chifir*. GARF, f. R-9401, op. 1a, d. 542, l. 326. The commercial dining hall system began as a trial in mid-1954 and was thereafter expanded. GARF, f. R-9401, op. 1a, d. 543, l. 30.

³⁵ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 1a, d. 542, l. 249.

³⁶ Workday credits had been re-introduced for some prisoners in the early 1950s (after being abolished in the late-1930s) and were restored for all prisoners on 10 August 1954. Accordingly, prisoners who fulfilled or overfulfilled their daily production target could get an additional one or two days off their sentence. GARF, f. R-9401, op. 1a, d. 532, ll. 147-49, 487. Parole, also abolished in the late-1930s, was restored on 14 July 1954. GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 1398, l. 43.

³⁷ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 1a, d. 542, l. 195. A high-ranking official in the RSFSR Procuracy in early 1956 reminded his subordinates that Gulag administrators and wardens should be "a model of restraint, tactfulness, and courtesy when addressing prisoners. Every act, action, and word should develop in the prisoner respect to the warden staff as his educators." GARF, f. A-461, op. 13, d. 33, l. 23.

much less prevalent. The large labor-camps were gradually liquidated and replaced by smaller colonies with the intent to house all prisoners in their home provinces rather than shipping them off to Siberia, the Far North, or Central Asia.³⁸ Finally, prisoner labor was reduced to eight hours per day and the nature of work shifted from primarily hard, physical labor to light, specialized work.

These reforms did not touch all corners of the Gulag equally; similar to Soviet society at large, living and working conditions for some (notably in the logging camps) remained miserable, complaints about food and medical care continued, and violence by wardens and guards persisted, even though it became much more sporadic. Overall, however, there can be no question that life for the average prisoner by the late 1950s was much better than it had been in the late 1940s. And this was precisely the intent of the reforms; living conditions similar to those of non-prisoners were considered a requisite part of the Gulag's new aim: preparing inmates for return to "an honest working life." This point was reinforced by the first national press treatment of the Gulag in the post-Stalin era, in which an *Izvestiia* reporter in 1956 toured Butyrka Prison and related to the country the new face of Soviet punishment: healthy prisoners wearing civilian clothes, impeccable cleanliness, hearty meals, a well-stocked store, plenty of leisure time for reading or playing games, and the promise of early release through workday credits. Such were the means of re-education which would help lead to a time "when there will be no need for prisons in our country," the author concluded.³⁹

The Soviet penal reforms of the 1950s also had an international component that is vital for understanding the necessity of once again showing the Gulag to foreigners. Although the majority of prisoners of war from World War II had already been repatriated by 1953, more than 18,000, most of whom had been charged with crimes, remained behind; in addition, the Soviet Gulag housed thousands of other foreign nationals convicted of a wide variety of legal infractions. These two categories combined meant that 32,465 foreigners were held in various

³⁸ An MVD report from 1959 confirmed that "the existence of a camp-type place of confinement can only be allowed when the country faces emergency situations. . . . Our experience with the camps persuasively affirms such a conclusion." GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 319, l. 117. See also P. M. Losev, *Material'no-bytovoe i meditsinskoe obespechenie zakliuchennykh* (Moscow: Vysshiaia shkola MVD SSSR, 1957).

³⁹ Val. Goltsev, "In the Butyrka Prison," *Izvestiia*, 13 September 1956, 3. This article was subsequently summarized on the front page of Baltimore's *Sun*, with the tongue-in-cheek preface that "life in a Soviet prison isn't what it used to be. It is a healthful, educational and even cultural experience. . . ." Howard Norton, "Prisons Win Russ Praise," *Sun* (Baltimore), 14 September 1956, 1.

places of confinement in the Soviet Union immediately prior to Stalin's death.⁴⁰ Through amnesties, case reviews, and negotiations with foreign governments, Stalin's heirs quickly began the process of releasing and repatriating the vast majority of this foreign contingent. Already by 1 January 1954 the Soviet Union held only 9,749 prisoners of war along with 7,448 other foreign nationals; by 1 January 1956 those numbers had been slashed respectively to 2,884 and 701.⁴¹ Additional releases were made in 1956 as the last prisoners of war were allowed to leave.⁴² Although MVD reports assured the Politburo that most foreigners were grateful for their release and harbored no ill will toward the Soviet Union, once home, many of them related to the world the abhorrent living conditions and rampant abuses of the Gulag.⁴³ Thus, even while Khrushchev was enacting substantive penal reform at home, the Soviet Gulag to which the West was being exposed was that of the 1940s and early 1950s.

Although the actual reforms implemented by Stalin's heirs in the penal sphere appear to have been motivated by internal rather than external pressures, penal officials were aware of how their system was perceived in the West and how Soviet penal demographics compared with Western prison systems. In addition to reports by recently released prisoners in the foreign press and longer exposes such as Joseph Scholmer's *Vorkuta* and Dallin and Nicolaevsky's *Forced Labor in Soviet Russia*, both of which were translated by the MVD into Russian for internal consumption, the Gulag during the 1950s periodically composed reports on the number of prisoners in other countries and their respective incarceration rates.⁴⁴ In one such document from the late-1950s, figures are given for the United States, England, Japan, France, and West Germany and although the Soviet numbers are conspicuously absent, the Soviet incarceration rate at that time (around 400 per 100,000) far surpassed those to which it was compared, which

⁴⁰ Official documents list 18,703 POWs remaining as of 1 March 1952, including 14,945 Germans, 1,057 Japanese, 834 Austrians, 588 Romanians, and 497 Hungarians. In addition to those held in the Soviet Union, another 11,814 foreigners convicted by Soviet military tribunals were being held in East Germany, Hungary, and Austria. M. M. Zagorul'ko, ed., *Voennoplennye v SSSR, 1939-1956: dokumenty i materialy* (Moscow: Logos, 2000), 789-90, 901.

⁴¹ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 478, l. 269. There were also 1,760 prisoners without citizenship in early 1956, mostly in for counterrevolutionary crimes. The majority of these were of Russian or Ukrainian origin, but there were a number of foreigners as well, including four Americans and one Brit. GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 480, ll. 74-75.

⁴² GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 479, l. 307.

⁴³ See, for instance, Joseph Scholmer, *Vorkuta*, trans. Robert Kee (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1954); "Freed Yanks Tell Red Prison Camp Horrors," *Los Angeles Times*, 1 January 1954, 1; "Soviet Slave Market," *New York Times*, 17 April 1954, 12; Harrison E. Salisbury, "Russia Re-Viewed: The Prison Camps of Siberia," *New York Times*, 27 September 1954, 23; John H. Noble, "Jailed American Caged in Rail Car," *New York Times*, 4 April 1955, 6; and "U.S. Woman Bares Ordeal in Soviet," *New York Times*, 23 March 1958, 20.

⁴⁴ These are available at GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, dd. 1799-1800.

ranged from 63 per 100,000 population in England to 292 per 100,000 in West Germany.⁴⁵ Another report from late 1959, which reflected a steep cut in the Soviet prisoner population due to the 1959 case reviews, compared inmate figures and incarceration rates of the U.S., England, France, West Germany, Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia, and Georgia.⁴⁶ While the rates of the smaller Soviet republics (which sent a portion of their inmates to Russia) were roughly equal to those of the “capitalist states,” Russia’s, at 610 per 100,000 was more than double that of West Germany and nearly six times higher than that of the United States.⁴⁷ Thus, even as the Soviet Union slashed its inmate population—under Stalin the incarceration rate (not including special settlers) reached almost 1,400 per 100,000 population by the early 1950s—the MVD was acutely aware that the U.S.S.R. remained by far the most carceral country in the world.

Given the magnitude of such figures, it is not surprising that many senior justice officials in the Soviet Union in the 1950s were embarrassed by the state of their criminal justice system. In 1955, the MVD, Ministry of Justice, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs declined an invitation to participate in the First United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, held in Geneva in September 1955, and decided that other international legal conferences must also be avoided until a new criminal code had been passed and the penal system had been sufficiently reformed. When invited in 1956 to participate in a working group in preparation for the Second UN Congress to held in 1960, Minister of Justice Gorshenin made a similar reply to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in presenting the invitation to General Prosecutor Roman Rudenko, noted that the Soviet Union was being harshly criticized abroad for their struggle to “restore socialist legality” and “remove shortcomings in our judicial work.” Again, the recommendation was made to decline the invitation.⁴⁸ Still coping with Stalin’s legacy, Soviet justice officials felt unprepared, embarrassed even, to face international gatherings of criminologists and penologists. This attitude would persist until 1960, when the decision was made to attend the Second UN Conference on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, held in London in

⁴⁵ GARF, f. R-9414, op. 3, d. 131, l. 213. These comparisons are not wholly accurate as the figures for the West come from 1953-54, likely the most recent data available in 1958 when the document was issued.

⁴⁶ For more on the case reviews see Elie, “Les anciens détenus du Goulag: libérations massives, réinsertion et réhabilitation dans l’URSS poststalinienne, 1953-1964” (Ph.D. Diss., Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2007), 191-205.

⁴⁷ GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 1427, l. 104.

⁴⁸ Notably, Poland and Romania were also invited to the working group, but after consulting the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, decided to decline the invitation as well. GARF, f. R-8131, op. 32, d. 4578, l. 29.

August 1960.⁴⁹ Only seven years after Stalin's death had enough progress been made to allow Soviet officials to go abroad and defend their revamped correctional system against the slanderous reports dominating the Western media. Although still concerned with the number of prisoners in the Soviet Union, a figure they kept top secret, by 1960 they no longer felt inhibited by the policies and practices of the 1937-1952 era.

Preparing for Visits

Although Soviet justice officials remained sequestered within the U.S.S.R. during the 1950s, Stalin's heirs quickly approved another method for countering the increasing number of Western reports on the abuses of the Soviet penal system, spread largely by the very prisoners they were releasing. Just as many of the penal reforms of the 1950s hearkened back to the 1920s and early 1930s for inspiration, so too did the solution to negative press: Khrushchev decided to once again open the Soviet penal experiment to the world. The period of absolute secrecy concerning Soviet prisons had to end; slander would be met not with silence, but with tangible proof of reform. From 1954 to 1959, dozens of foreign delegations toured the Soviet Gulag. Their visits gave the Soviet Union a chance to demonstrate to the world the professed humanity and enlightened practices of its penal sector. Naturally, the experience of the visits had to be tightly controlled. This was achieved by careful selection of visitors, restrictions on which sites could be visited, and meticulous planning of the tours themselves.

One of the easiest ways to control the experience of visiting the Gulag and the resultant message was for the KGB to vet potential visitors and only admit people perceived as friendly to the Soviet Union.⁵⁰ A large number of visitors came from the Soviet bloc, and many Western visitors were affiliated with left-wing political movements. There was also impetus to invite respected opinion leaders, especially those with intimate knowledge of corrections, as their expertise would lend credence to their testimonials. Even with these restrictions, however, a fairly wide variety of foreigners visited Gulag sites (as detailed in TABLE 1). Conservative American governors, French socialists, English lawyers, West German journalists, East German prison officials, Italian and Indian parliamentarians, and South American criminologists were all admitted. In 1957, several delegates to the World Festival of Youth and Students were given

⁴⁹ For an account of these proceedings see *Second United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders* (New York: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1960).

⁵⁰ RGANI, f. 5, op. 30, d. 277, ll. 6-7.

prison tours.⁵¹ Indeed, the head of the MVD's prison department, P. S. Bulanov, on 12 June 1957 complained to Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs M. N. Kholodkov about the number of visitors and their lack of experience in corrections. Many of them were not jurists or otherwise associated with penal affairs, he lamented; most recently, members of the League of Ceylon-Soviet Friendship had been given a tour even though they were bankers, engineers, and doctors.⁵² But despite Bulanov's complaint the visits continued.

More restrictive than the process of vetting potential visitors was the list of sites available for visitation. In order to control as best as possible the impressions of their guests, the MVD coordinated tours of basically four institutions: the Kriukovo Corrective-Labor Colony and Butyrka Prison, which will comprise the focus of the present paper (along with a solitary foreign visit to the Tula Corrective-Labor Colony), the Iksha Juvenile Labor Colony, and, from 1954-56, the Japanese prisoner of war camps.⁵³ Contact by foreigners with other prisons or prisoners was to be avoided. The Provincial Party Commission of Crimea in 1956, for instance, complained that de-convoyed prisoners were wandering around in Simferopol, a city that had a number of tourists and foreigners. The MVD responded by changing the local corrective-labor colony from a minimum-security to a medium-security institution to limit the number of de-convoyed prisoners.⁵⁴ Similarly, in 1959 the U.S. military attaché requested permission for two American diplomats to visit the northern mining city of Vorkuta. MVD boss Dudorov responded to the Central Committee that there were prisoners and guards everywhere in the region, even in the middle of Vorkuta itself. For this reason both he and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs requested that Vorkuta be kept off-limits to foreigners.⁵⁵ Thus, while Khrushchev sought to demonstrate the superiority of the Soviet penal system, the vast majority of the Gulag was to remain, as under Stalin, out of sight.

That does not mean, however, that Butyrka and Kriukovo were "Potemkin villages." As approved stops for foreign tours they were to some extent demonstration or model institutions, although MVD documents never refer to either as *pokazatel'nyi*, variously translated as

⁵¹ GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 198, ll. 78-83.

⁵² GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 198, l. 66.

⁵³ The only other visit to the Tula Colony of which the author is aware occurred in May 1961 and is detailed in D. Nikolaev, "Glazami inostrantsev," *K novoi zhizni*, no. 7 (1961), 10. For visits to Iksha see GARF, f. R-9412, op. 2, d. 1. On visits to the Japanese POW camps see GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 464, ll. 8, 512-516; and GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 466, ll. 150-54, 189-92.

⁵⁴ TsDAGO, f. 1, op. 24, d. 4300, l. 261-64.

⁵⁵ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 506, ll. 16-17.

“demonstration” or “show,” or *obratsovyi*, meaning “model.” Both of them, but Butyrka especially, functioned as typical places of confinement. Built in the late-nineteenth century on the site of a previous prison-fortress and thoroughly remodeled after World War II, Butyrka Prison was the largest of Moscow’s prisons. In 1954 it contained 380 cells, 76 investigatory rooms, 22 punishment cells, and a hospital with 140 beds. With a limit of 3,000 prisoners (at 2.5 square meters per prisoner of living space), it held 2,136 inmates on 3 April 1954 and 3,036 on 4 May 1956; staffing in 1954 stood at 785 with an additional 5 positions unfilled.⁵⁶ As with most Soviet prisons, Butyrka was not primarily a prison in the Western sense, but rather a jail or remand prison, where suspects were held and investigated in pretrial detention. It did, however, hold small numbers of convicted inmates awaiting execution along with dozens of convicted prisoners who serviced the prison.

After sentencing, the vast majority of offenders were sent to a corrective-labor camp or corrective-labor colony and it was at one such colony, Kriukovo, that foreigners could become acquainted with the details of their long-term incarceration. The Kriukovo Corrective-Labor Colony, officially referred to as Camp Subdivision No. 2 of Moscow Province up to 1957 and Corrective-Labor Colony No. 2 of Moscow Province thereafter, was located some forty kilometers north of Moscow in what would soon become Zelenograd. Originally founded in 1922 as a house of correction (*ispravdom*), Kriukovo in the 1930s was an open colony (without walls or fences and with only minimal guarding) occasionally shown to foreigners.⁵⁷ Between 1954 and 1959 its inmate population, by then enclosed by perimeter fencing, fluctuated between 880 and 1,070, most of whom had been convicted of minor crimes and serving sentences ranging from one to ten years.⁵⁸ It featured a living zone with three two-story dormitories and a number of outbuildings (kitchen, club, store, administrative building, and so forth), and an attached production zone comprised of six buildings where prisoners produced various items such as aluminum dishes and automobile oil filters.⁵⁹ Like Butyrka, it was a functioning penal institution that, while designated for foreign visits, did not exist solely for show.

Even with the visitors and sites preselected, the MVD went to considerable trouble to prepare for each visit. Prior to each tour a meticulous plan would be drafted, approved, and then

⁵⁶ GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 185, l. 116; GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 198, l. 15.

⁵⁷ Von Koerber, 185-93.

⁵⁸ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 451, ll. 86, 194, 286; GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 465, ll. 90, 239, 281; GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 255, l. 52; RGANI, f. 5, op. 30, d. 312, l. 35.

⁵⁹ GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 255, l. 52.

sent to the warden of Butyrka or Kriukovo. A checklist of preparatory activities was fairly standard in such reports. A 1956 plan for Butyrka, for instance, required the prison warden, Aleksei Vasilevich Kalinin, to conduct a thorough cleaning of the facilities, provide new clothing and bedding to the prisoners where needed, and isolate the worst inmates in other prisons in the city. In addition, on the day of the visit, the number of prisoners and staff moving around the prison was to be reduced to a minimum to give an impression of well-kept order.⁶⁰ Likewise, more than a month prior to the 9 July 1959 visit to Kriukovo by American governors and reporters, officials were ordered to bring the roads to the colony and the surrounding area into order, to finishing repairing a broken water pipe, and to perform minor remodeling to the club, dining hall, school, and one of the prisoner barracks. They were instructed to organize a volunteer workday (*subbotnik*) among the prisoners to clean up the colony, change out all the visual propaganda, replenish the library with books (especially foreign-language literature), and acquire food and other products with which to stock the colony store. The worst prisoners were to be taken out of the colony for the day and sent to work on construction sites, and the seven female staffers were to be given the day off. Although such plans may sound as if deception was the goal, this is true only to a certain extent. It must be remembered that virtually all institutions conducted similar routines in preparation for inspections, be they internal or external.

In addition to general housecleaning items, tour plans often provided a step-by-step description of how the tour should proceed. In fact, Dudorov on 3 May 1956 approved a standardized 11-point plan for showing Kriukovo to foreign delegations, which began as follows:⁶¹

- 1. Deputy Commander of the GULAG MVD USSR comrade Shchekin (in civilian garb) will accompany by vehicle the delegation from their hotel in Moscow to the camp subdivision.*
- 2. The warden of the camp subdivision Major Gromov will meet the delegation at the gate of the camp subdivision and lead them into his office. In the office the warden of the camp subdivision comrade Gromov will begin a discussion with the delegation with the question – “what would the delegation like to become acquainted with while visiting the camp subdivision” and will give preliminary information on the fundamental tenets of the corrective-labor policies of the Soviet Union. He will point out that labor lies at the basis of the re-education of convicts. Every prisoner must work. . . [and so on for another several sentences]*

⁶⁰ GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 198, l. 17.

⁶¹ GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 255, ll. 52-55.

The discussion with the delegation should have an active character, it should not only answer questions that interest members of the delegation, but willingly tell them about the humane attitude of the Soviet state toward convicts. It should also, in turn, question the delegates about how the re-education of criminals is organized in their country.

The remaining points, like the second one, detail for each stop on the tour what information the delegation should be told, from the prisoners' unlimited and uncensored correspondence rights to the recent production achievements of the best workers in the colony. Tours were thus heavily scripted and conversations were designed to invite comparisons with Western prisons.

Plans for Butyrka included less explicit detail on how the tours were to be conducted but often featured extensive lists of anticipated questions along with appropriate, if not always truthful, answers. A plan from 1955 on how Butyrka should prepare for a visit by H. W. Seymour Howard, the mayor of London, is typical in this regard. If he inquired as to the number of prisoners, prison officials were to respond that although there was space for 1,700 inmates, the prison only held 1,232 at that time (the actual figures were 3,000 and around 2,000). If asked what types of crimes they were in for, the correct response was a variety of offenses, including hooliganism, theft, and (perhaps surprisingly) murder. Even more astonishing, the original document allowed the admission that "there is also a small number of prisoners brought in for political crimes (spies)," but this line was crossed out before the document was approved. Similarly, if queried as to the presence of death row inmates, the prison staff was to admit that there were several murderers awaiting execution; again, however, this admission is crossed out and the word "no" is written in the margin. Regarding prisoners beyond Butyrka Prison, Howard was to be given an artificially lowered figure for Moscow Province, but the chaperones were not to divulge any sense of the number of prisoners in the Soviet Union at large. Outside of matters related to inmate statistics, political prisoners and capital punishment, most of the suggested answers were true. On living conditions, Howard was to be honestly told that prisoners enjoyed three to four square meters of living space. In addition, the document instructed officials to give the "actual" caloric data for rations and add that prisoners could purchase additional provisions at the prison store. Finally, if asked about prison labor, officials were to truthfully answer that investigatory prisoners did not work, but some prisoners who had already been sentenced were

retained to help service the prison; their labor was compensated, Howard was to be informed, and they were eligible for parole and workday credits.⁶²

Similar to the 1955 document, a May 1956 plan for the visit of French socialists to Butyrka included a similar list of possible questions and the appropriate answers. On the numbers of prisoners, guests were to be informed that the prison held 2,000, even though the actual figure by that point was 3,036. Interestingly, in its report to the Central Committee on this visit, the prison department related that the delegation was provided with a figure of 1,200 rather than 2,000. Thus, either the appropriate response was modified downward after the report was issued, or else the prison department lied to the Central Committee. Either scenario seems plausible. The visitors were to be told if they asked about social classes and ages of prisoners that they came from all classes—workers, peasants, the service class, and, surprisingly enough, recidivist thieves—and that they were mostly from 30 to 45 in age. This last figure is interesting because it is obviously false: as elsewhere, most inmates in the Soviet Union fell into the 18-30 age bracket.⁶³ Admitting as much, however, was problematic because the Soviet Union was intent on promoting the inherent socialist morality of its youth.⁶⁴ But again, not all was deceit; in fact, if queried about counterrevolutionary crimes, prison officials were to frankly admit that there used to be some in Butyrka, but they had all been sent to the camps.⁶⁵ Thus, even as the number of prisoners was artificially lowered, the presence of political prisoners in the Gulag was confirmed.

Tour guides for Kriukovo were also prepared to deflect questions concerning the scope of the Soviet Gulag and other sensitive matters. West German journalists visiting Kriukovo in 1955 were falsely told that Kriukovo was the only such colony in Moscow province; others used to exist, the official explanation went, but “in connection with the decline in crime in the country they have been shuttered.”⁶⁶ When the jouranalists later told their chaperones that they knew about Lubianka and the Vorkuta camp complex, which they heard held 100,000 prisoners, one of

⁶² GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 198, ll. 7, 13-14.

⁶³ On 1 January 1959, for instance, 62.6 percent of all prisoners were under the age of 30. A. I. Kokurin and N. V. Petrov, eds., *GULAG: glavnoe upravlenie lagerei, 1917-1960* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi Fond “Demokratiia,” 2000), 218.

⁶⁴ Allen Kassof, *The Soviet Youth Program: Regimentation and Rebellion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 24-31. See also Juliane Furst, *Stalin’s Last Generation: Soviet Post-War Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁶⁵ GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 198, ll. 15-19.

⁶⁶ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 465, l. 91.

the tour guides, a Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) official, “recommended that they limit their questions to the work of the Kriukovo Colony.”⁶⁷ Danish editors at Kriukovo likewise asked about the supposed 5-9 million prisoners in the Soviet Union and the special camps for political prisoners but were informed that such numbers were completely false and that there were no such special camps.⁶⁸ And during the visit to the Tula corrective-labor colony, the French socialist Rosenfeld irked MVD officials in 1956 by repeatedly asking in Russian where the political prisoners were and where prisoners were executed.⁶⁹

Yet not all delegations were to be lied to regarding numbers of prisoners and so forth. As can be seen in the list of delegations visiting Gulag institutions in the mid- to late-1950s, many came from within the east bloc and some were policemen or penal officials who came explicitly for training. As such they were treated differently from guests from the West or from developing countries. In instructions concerning a visit by Ministry of Social Defense officials from China, the prison staff at Butyrka was told to provide actual figures for prisoners and guards.⁷⁰ Nor were such delegations necessarily limited to Butyrka and Kriukovo. A 1959 delegation of Bulgarian MVD officers, in addition to the standard sites, were given access to two Moscow Province jails, the Mozhaisk Corrective-Labor Colony for women, and all the Leningrad corrective-labor colonies.⁷¹ To such foreigners practical concerns of governance took precedence over demonstrating the superiority of socialism, which was a given.

Receiving Guests

With preparations in place and answers to potential questions learned, the tours could commence. Foreign delegations were usually accompanied by high-ranking Gulag officials dressed in civilian garb; indeed, all officers except the warden were to wear civilian attire on tour days, likely to give the impression that they were not aloof from the prisoners but actively

⁶⁷ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 465, l. 94.

⁶⁸ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 466, ll. 125-26.

⁶⁹ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 480, l. 136.

⁷⁰ GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 198, l. 12. According to a guide who frequently accompanied foreigners on their excursions to Butyrka, all inquired about political prisoners “even though they all know from speeches by the head of the Soviet government N. S. Khrushchev that there are not any political prisoners in the Soviet Union.” N. Gladkikh, “Amerikanskii iurist govorit: ‘To, chto Ia uvidel, menia porazilo,’” *K novoi zhizni*, no. 1 (1960): 72.

⁷¹ GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 198, ll. 171-72.

engaged in their rehabilitation.⁷² In addition to MVD officers, there were sometimes other chaperones, including officials from the Ministry of Justice, the Procuracy, the Supreme Soviet, and VOKS.⁷³ As noted above, at the beginning of the tour it was typical to have a lengthy discussion, often lasting an hour or so, on the U.S.S.R.'s corrective-labor principles, paying special attention to the issue of rehabilitation.⁷⁴ They would also discuss the contingent of prisoners and other specificities of the detention facility they were touring.

After this discussion the visitors would be led on a tour of the institution, which for Kriukovo (and the Tula corrective-labor colony for the French socialists) included a dormitory, the 500-seat club, the library, the dining rooms and kitchen, the store, the hospital, a visitation room, the locker room, the bathhouse, and the workshops.⁷⁵ At Butyrka the tour typically featured several cells with prisoners, the reception room, the investigatory rooms, the kitchen, bathhouse, hospital, library, store, and the exercise yards.⁷⁶ Some tours were even allowed, upon request, to see the punishment cells, and beginning in 1956 the MVD began to show off the new prison workshop, where prisoners could receive a small wage and begin their process of rehabilitation, and a room devoted to cultural and educational pursuits.⁷⁷ By 1959 the visits to Kriukovo for some guests also included unstructured time when the visitors could meander around the colony, talk with prisoners or guards, and look into any building they pleased without the constant presence of a chaperone.⁷⁸ The actual tour of the facilities usually lasted two or three hours, although it could be shortened or lengthened depending on the guests' other obligations.⁷⁹ One group of South American jurists spent nearly eight hours at Kriukovo!⁸⁰ Perhaps surprisingly, photography was usually allowed at both Butyrka and Kriukovo.⁸¹

⁷² GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 198, l. 169. In 1960, however, a visitor noted uniforms on all penal officials. John P. Conrad, "What Lenin Foresaw," *Observer*, 2 July 1961, 19.

⁷³ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 465, ll. 89, 91.

⁷⁴ See, for instance, GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 451, l. 86; GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 255, l. 35.

⁷⁵ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 451, l. 86.

⁷⁶ GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 198, l. 14.

⁷⁷ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 480, l. 135; GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 481, l. 330; GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 198, l. 16.

⁷⁸ Leibowitz, 160.

⁷⁹ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 451, ll. 198, 290; GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 255, l. 37.

⁸⁰ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 481, l. 65.

⁸¹ West German journalists visiting Kriukovo were told not to photograph, but one got away with just a warning after snapping a picture of the colony. Most, it appears, were not given such restrictions, however. GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 465, l. 93; GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 466, l. 129; GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 198, ll. 14, 17. See also the few photographs accompanying Leibowitz's article and photographs of the Tula Corrective-Labor Colony taken by Mareau Pivert, available at <http://histoire-sociale.univ-paris1.fr/Voyages/Toulacadre.htm>.

The details of the tour, both physically and conversationally, largely followed the scripts penned by the MVD. Delegates often took special interest in the library, asking questions about the number of books (there were 4,500 at Kriukovo in 1954 and 12,000 at Butyrka in 1955), and expressing approval of the readers' conferences organized among the prisoners.⁸² It was virtually mandatory to be shocked by the amount of foreign literature available for prisoner consumption, which was, of course, tailored to the nationality of the guests.⁸³ A Chinese delegation inspecting Kriukovo in 1955 could even find the classics of Chinese literature.⁸⁴ By 1956 visitors were noticing television sets in the library, although one wonders whether this was viewed as progressive or not.⁸⁵ The medical section was usually pronounced exemplary.⁸⁶ In the kitchen guests could review the menu for the week and were always asked—and few refused—to sample the food being prepared for the inmates. Without exception they proclaimed it to be tasty and healthy.⁸⁷ They were also assured that prisoners received ample rations and that prisoners often left uneaten bread on the table.⁸⁸ The quantity of products in the stores surprised guests; a Japanese jurist even bought a pouch of tobacco (*makhorka*) from the Butyrka store.⁸⁹ While inspecting the visitation rooms, guests often expressed astonishment at the availability of multi-day conjugal visits, a unique feature of the Soviet penal system at the time that penal reformers in the West had long advocated.⁹⁰ Visitors thought highly of self-governing organizations such as the activists councils and often requested (likely with some prompting) to meet with the activist council head.⁹¹ Many were shown musical concerts put on by prisoners, others watched chess matches or sporting events.⁹² Finally, as labor was viewed as “the primary education of convicted criminals,” the prison or colony workshop was the centerpiece of the

⁸² GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 451, l. 87, 194; GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 465, l. 88; GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 466, l. 127.

⁸³ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 451, l. 288; GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 481, ll. 64, 331.

⁸⁴ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 465, l. 240.

⁸⁵ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 478, l. 215.

⁸⁶ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 481, l. 331.

⁸⁷ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 451, l. 196; GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 465, ll. 87, 93, 279; GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 466, l. 127; GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 203, ll. 130-43.

⁸⁸ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 465, l. 95.

⁸⁹ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 451, l. 287; GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 465, l. 96; GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 466, l. 128; GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 480, l. 310.

⁹⁰ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 451, l. 196; GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 203, ll. 130-43.

⁹¹ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 451, ll. 197-98; GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 465, l. 282; GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 466, l. 125, 127.

⁹² GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 465, l. 93; GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 466, l. 129; GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 478, l. 215.

tour.⁹³ Its importance is stressed in the plan to prepare Kriukovo for an afternoon visit in 1959. Prisoners remaining in the colony that day (after the troublemakers had been convoyed to an off-site construction project) were to start work only at 12:00 and were to be finished with lunch by 2:00 in the afternoon (meaning that the work day would continue until 9:00 at night). The Gulag apparently wanted the prisoners to be not just working during the afternoon visit, but having the appearance that the work was relatively easy and interesting. A late start and late lunch would ensure they were neither tired nor hungry when the delegation arrived.⁹⁴

During the tours visitors were allowed, even encouraged, to talk with any of the prisoners, even, at least from 1956 onward, death-row inmates in Butyrka.⁹⁵ They often asked inmates about their crimes, sentence length, family situation, perspective for release, and the quality of life in the colony or prison. Although there is no documentation to this effect, it is certain that Gulag officials warned prisoners how to behave and interact with the foreign guests. And for the most part they dutifully played the part. An English delegation in 1954 spoke with prisoner Sidorov, who told them about his vocational training and the money he was able to earn and send home to his family, and prisoner Kalashnikov, who was excited to be freed the following month through a combination of workday credits and parole after serving just over three years of his ten-year sentence.⁹⁶ In a moment that must have especially pleased Gulag officials, a Kriukovo inmate in 1954 queried a group of English parliamentarians what they were doing to bring to pass the reunification of Germany.⁹⁷ Prisoners at Butyrka “politely gave correct answers” to questions posed by Chinese delegates in 1955.⁹⁸ When a delegation from Ceylon in 1957 spoke with four murderers in Butyrka whose death sentences had been commuted to life imprisonment, the prisoners dutifully praised the Supreme Soviet for showing such mercy to them. Similarly, inmates in the prison service told the delegates that they had nothing bad to say about the prison officials.⁹⁹

⁹³ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 451, l. 195.

⁹⁴ GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 198, l. 167.

⁹⁵ GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 198, l. 16.

⁹⁶ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 451, l. 196. In the redacted report sent to Khrushchev these details were summarized in the formulation that the prisoners all gave good answers to questions posed by the foreigners “in the spirit of Soviet patriotism.” GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 203, l. 137.

⁹⁷ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 451, l. 288.

⁹⁸ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 465, l. 88.

⁹⁹ GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 198, ll. 78-80.

Prisoners being prisoners (and Soviet planning being Soviet planning), however, there were unexpected responses. Danish newspaper editors in 1955 actually found one prisoner Popov at Kriukovo who had been sentenced by article 58-10 of the Russian criminal code to ten years imprisonment for anti-Soviet propaganda. Popov confessed his guilt to the foreigners, but said his sentence was too harsh and he had therefore requested a case review to get it reduced.¹⁰⁰ In 1956 an inmate at Butyrka complained to the group of French socialists about the length of his sentence.¹⁰¹ Perhaps more shockingly for the MVD, a Kriukovo prisoner in 1956 approached a visiting Chilean jurist and handed him a note, asking that it be passed on personally to Voroshilov. At the end of the visit, however, the note, a plea to let the inmate's mother live in the Moscow Province village of Shcherbinka, was simply handed over to the MVD hosts with the request that it go to its intended destination.¹⁰² Thus, while not all interactions with prisoners went according to plan, none were too damaging to the controlled message sought by the MVD.

At the end of the tour, visitors were usually invited to a meal and conversation in the warden's office. The post-tour meal at Kriukovo in 1959 was a luscious spread that included caviar, sturgeon and vodka, along with coffee and cake.¹⁰³ It was also customary at the conclusion of the meal for the warden and sometimes a delegation of prisoners to present visitors with gifts, usually products made in the colony or prison workshop.¹⁰⁴ Leibowitz, for instance, received flowers from the prisoners and "a prison-made tea kettle and a chafing dish" from the warden.¹⁰⁵ The MVD clearly knew how to make a good final impression. And, true to script, at this point the delegates usually expressed gratitude to their hosts, an exercise often accompanied by high praise for the visited institution and explicit comparisons with their home institutions. A British politician was recorded to have expressed pleasant surprise at "the absence of bars in the colony, and the free, unguarded movement of the prisoners."¹⁰⁶ Others were delighted with "the system of re-educating prisoners, the humane relations with the prisoners, and the free, unforced speech manner of address of the former to the administration."¹⁰⁷ A Swedish parliamentarian with close knowledge of his domestic penal system reportedly praised the system of vocational

¹⁰⁰ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 466, l. 128.

¹⁰¹ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 480, l. 135.

¹⁰² GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 481, l. 65.

¹⁰³ Leibowitz, 160.

¹⁰⁴ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 466, l. 94; GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 481, l. 65.

¹⁰⁵ Leibowitz, 160.

¹⁰⁶ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 451, l. 198.

¹⁰⁷ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 451, l. 289.

training and the requirement that all prisoners work, noting that no equivalent could be found in Swedish institutions.¹⁰⁸ Italian women expressed great delight with Kriukovo, noting that Italy could boast of nothing similar and promising to tell about the “incredible reforging of people” that was achieved there through labor.¹⁰⁹ The French socialist Marceau Pivert reportedly declared that “the Soviet Union in matters of corrective-labor policy is at the avant-garde of other countries.”¹¹⁰ A Brazilian criminologist in 1955 praised the Kriukovo colony, reporting that there was nothing like it in Brazil, where all inmates sat confined and idle in prisons.¹¹¹ Japanese jurists reported that their jails did not preserve the dignity of man like Butyrka did while their Greek counterparts claimed that as Greek prisons were aimed “at destruction,” they could not even compare to the rehabilitation-focused Soviet institutions.¹¹² A Lebanese politician, after condemning his own prison system, remarked of the prisoners in Butyrka that “he saw joyful expressions on their faces and faith in the future in their eyes.”¹¹³ Similarly, a Belgian jurist also noted that in all her experience with prisons she had “never seen on the faces of prisoners the expression of such joy of life as we saw in the Butyrka prison.”¹¹⁴ A French lawyer touring Butyrka in 1957 went so far as to say “he would not be against committing a small crime in order to land in this prison.” In return, he was graciously told that for a small crime he would not end up in prison at all.¹¹⁵ In a more tempered response, French jurists said that conditions in Butyrka were comparable to prisons in Paris, except that French inmates did not have televisions, movies, or comparable medical care.¹¹⁶ Only Seymour Howard, mayor of London whose responsibilities included prison inspections, completed a (rushed) tour without remarking how much he was impressed with Butyrka.¹¹⁷

The Fruits of their Labor

¹⁰⁸ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 465, l. 95.

¹⁰⁹ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 451, l. 87.

¹¹⁰ GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 255, l. 37.

¹¹¹ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 465, l. 283.

¹¹² GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 480, l. 311. A Danish editor gave a similar commendation, lamenting the repressive state of prisons in Denmark. GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 466, l. 129.

¹¹³ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 481, l. 271.

¹¹⁴ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 481, l. 331.

¹¹⁵ GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 198, ll. 74-75.

¹¹⁶ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 481, l. 165.

¹¹⁷ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 465, l. 279.

While laudatory comments made by foreign visitors during visits to Butyrka and Kriukovo certainly pleased the MVD and other Soviet officials, the real justification for the tours came in the form of favorable accounts in the Western press. Delegates who visited various areas of the Soviet criminal justice system were constantly admonished to “be objective” in how they reported their findings back home.¹¹⁸ By “objective,” of course, Soviet officials meant for their guests to publish what they had actually seen and heard during their strictly regulated visits, not what they may have heard or deduced about the rest of the penal system. Far from all published the details of their visit to Butyrka or Kriukovo. The editor of *Saturday Review*, Norman Cousins, for instance, wrote several favorable articles about his visit to U.S.S.R., but never mentioned his trip to Kriukovo.¹¹⁹ Likewise, a group of American governors were silent on their visit to Kriukovo after returning home.¹²⁰ And West German photojournalist Rainer M. Wallisfurth apologized for not expounding on the Soviet penal system, considering her visit to Kriukovo insufficient material for delving into such a contentious subject.¹²¹

More damaging than silence, at least one prominent guest, Henri Dusart from the French socialist delegation, penned a less than favorable report in *Le Populaire* of their visit to the Tula corrective-labor colony. Although Dusart noted many of the standard tour talking points—the library, sports, films, workday credits, wages, sufficient food supplement by the store, and conjugal visits—he did so unenthusiastically. Moreover, he sarcastically referred to the colony as a country house (*maison de campagne*), bemoaned their host’s refusal to take them to Vorkuta or another large labor camp, and noted that the film the prisoners were watching on the day of the visit depicted two men engaged in a brutal fight in a swamp. “Re-education through homeopathy, of some sort,” Dusart pointedly remarked. Finally, a full one-third of Dusart’s article mockingly detailed the criminal record of a few inmates with whom the French socialists conversed, highlighting the idiocy and harshness of Soviet laws.¹²² The attacks were vicious

¹¹⁸ Leibowitz, 147, 152; GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 465, l. 94.

¹¹⁹ See, for instance, Norman Cousins, “Interview with a Soviet Official,” *Saturday Review*, 1 August 1959, 10-11, 32-34.

¹²⁰ The general sentiment of their report, however, is reflected by Colorado Governor Stephen L. R. McNichols’s characterization of the Soviet legal system as “an adjunct of the political system, [which] is used as a means to establish, to maintain and to perpetuate the communist government in Russia.” *Proceedings of the Governors’ Conference, 1959* (Chicago: The Governors’ Conference, 1959), 24.

¹²¹ Rainer Maria Wallisfurth, *Sowjetunion: kurz belichtet* (Munich: Isar Verlag, 1955), ii.

¹²² Henri Dusart, “Visite à un ‘camp de correction par le travail,’” *Le Populaire*, 4 June 1956, 2. The official report submitted to the Central Committee on the French socialist visit to Tula, however, noted that the prisoners “behaved honorably and with restraint and did not make any complaints about the incorrectness of their sentences, . . .”

enough to warrant a retort in *Pravda*, which accused the socialist delegation of spreading malicious lies and charged that instead of viewing the achievements of socialist, they had only wanted to visit a prison and corrective-labor colony, along with some old sections of Moscow.¹²³

The majority of visitors who did publish their impressions of the Soviet Gulag, however, gave the “objective” report that Soviet officials sought. Likely the first publication to emerge from the visits of foreigners to the post-Stalin Gulag was D. N. Pritt’s “Prisons in the USSR,” printed in the *Anglo-Soviet Journal*, an unabashedly pro-Soviet publication. Recipient of the International Stalin Peace Prize in 1954 and former Labour MP who had been expelled for his defense of the Soviet invasion of Finland, Pritt had previously visited and extolled the superiority of the U.S.S.R.’s prisons in the 1930s, and his 1954 visit only confirmed his earlier impressions.¹²⁴ The prisoners at Kriukovo, he wrote, enjoyed a spacious and well-equipped “wide open” institution, watched by only five unarmed (at least during the day) guards. They enjoyed good working conditions—some even worked without guard outside the colony—and received a full 80 percent of the wages of free workers. During their ample leisure time they pursued their education or vocational training; they had television, movies, and 4,000 books, as well as various cultural circles. They earned workday credits which provided for early release, they often received sentence reductions and many were paroled before their term expired. Prisoners were on cordial terms with the colony administrators, who took a keen interest in the wellbeing of their wards. “And the Home Office official,” Pritt continued, preferring the familiar term Home Office to the more proper Ministry of Internal Affairs, “who came with us talked to [the inmates] in a most friendly fashion, asking after their particular problems and anxieties, and encouraging them in many ways.” Visits, including conjugal visits, were frequent, prisoners enjoyed a well-stocked store, they sent money home to their families, and they had the right to complain to various authorities. In sum, Pritt concluded, the Soviet penal system is imbued with “a wholesome mixture of plain humanity and plain common sense. . . . Nothing is done to degrade or dehumanize the prisoners; nor is there any sentimental coddling.” This was for Pritt a model penal institution for global emulation, not “what the slanderers of the Soviet

GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 255, l. 36. For more on the socialist delegation’s visit to the Soviet Union see Jean-Paul Brunet, “Socialisme et bolchevisme: L’image de la révolution d’octobre et de l’Union Soviétique chez les socialistes français en 1956,” *Revue française de science politique* 39, no. 5 (1989): 700-715.

¹²³ “For Mutual Understanding and Cooperation in International Workers’ Movement,” *Pravda*, 28 July 1956, 3-4.

¹²⁴ D. N. Pritt, “The Russian Legal System,” in *Twelve Studies in Soviet Russia*, ed. Margaret I. Cole (London:Victor Gollancz, 1933), 160-64.

Union call a concentration camp, where—they tell us—a man may not call his soul his own, nor indeed his body”¹²⁵ The MVD, understandably thrilled by this article, swiftly translated it in full into Russian and sent it to the Central Committee.¹²⁶

A similar report of the Soviet penal system was presented to the American public several years later by Vincent Hallinan, a left-wing lawyer and onetime Progressive Party presidential candidate who visited Butyrka Prison in 1959, having previously sat in U.S. federal prison for tax evasion and for a contempt citation stemming from his defense of labor leader Harry Bridges.¹²⁷ After reciting the many progressive aspects of Soviet penal policy, Hallinan described his visit to the prison: televisions, a movie theater, ubiquitous radios, a library staffed by six(!) librarians, dormitory life rather than solitary confinement, lockers for personal belongings, an impressive hospital with free medical care, a store for purchases, and food of the same standard as “the Ukraine Hotel, the swankiest in the Soviet Union.”¹²⁸ The lone critique Hallinan leveled was the small size of the exercise yards, a point that his hosts acknowledged with the (false, it turns out) promise that Butyrka would soon be replaced with a more modern facility. Similar to Pritt, Hallinan ended his account of the prison with the comment that the Soviet approach to crime and punishment is “humane and scientific.”¹²⁹

But if Pritt’s and Hallinan’s publications, tainted by known personal bias and limited by the narrow distribution of their writings, were minor victories for the MVD, two major victories in the “Soviet cultural offensive” came in June 1959. The first was a front-page *New York Times* article by W. Averell Harriman on his visit to Kriukovo. The well-known former ambassador to the Soviet Union, a prominent Democrat but certainly not a Soviet sympathizer, reported his belief in Khrushchev’s statement that slave labor camps were a thing of the past (in part, as Khrushchev himself admitted, due to the low productivity of their labor on giant works projects) and that only prisons and “corrective colonies” remained. He then described his impressions of Kriukovo: impeccably clean dormitories; “healthy and tanned” prisoners playing table tennis,

¹²⁵ Pritt’s account of the juvenile colony at Iksha, which had a swimming pool and gymnasium and boasted few escapes, “although escape is particularly easy,” was equally glowing. D. N. Pritt, “Prisons in the USSR,” *Anglo-Soviet Journal* 15, no. 4 (Winter 1954): 2-7.

¹²⁶ GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, d. 464, ll. 100-102.

¹²⁷ For his memories of and thoughts on the U.S. penal system see Vincent Hallinan, *A Lion in Court* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1963).

¹²⁸ Although he then confessed that he could barely tolerate even the Ukraine Hotel’s cuisine.

¹²⁹ Vivian Hallinan and Vincent Hallinan. *A Clash of Cultures: Some Contrasts in American and Soviet Morals and Manners* (San Francisco, CA: American Russian Institute, 1960), 43-52.

volleyball and basketball or performing a variety of traditional folk songs and jazz numbers; a library boasting worn translations of Mark Twain, Jack London and other Western authors; a diet of 3,600 calories; frequent conjugal visits; excellent discipline; decent wages; and a well-stocked store that sold, among other items, “gaily colored cotton shirts.” To conclude his report of the colony Harriman related a particularly touching moment when the prisoner in charge of the communal garden presented him with a bouquet of lilacs and the admonition, “‘Take these with greeting to your fellow countrymen and tell them we want their friendship and peace.’ The inmate then added, his eyes twinkling slyly, ‘That’s what everyone wants, isn’t it?’”¹³⁰ The MVD could hardly have dreamed of a better presentation of their prisons and prisoners. Harriman’s article was soon followed by his expanded travel account *Peace with Russia?*, which confirmed his initial reporting of Kriukovo.¹³¹

The second flattering report of the Soviet penal system in 1959 was Leibowitz’s article in the June 8 edition of the widely-read American magazine *Life*. As with Harriman, the forum of publication combined with Leibowitz’s respected standing and moderate political views combined to produce a much more effective propaganda piece than anything Pritt or Hallinan could provide. Although early in his legal career he helped the International Labor Defense, which was associated with the U.S. Communist Party, defend the so-called Scottsboro Boys, Leibowitz, a well-respected justice in New York’s King County Court in the 1950s, was hardly a communist sympathizer. Indeed, the first section of his *Life* article lambasted the “bleak and disheartening” Soviet court and pre-trial detention systems, notably for their lack of “concern for the right of the individual,” and his general views on politics and justice led Hallinan to call him a “reactionary” (not to mention an archetypal “Ugly American”).¹³² Yet despite this, Hallinan admonished that “the portion of Judge Leibowitz’s article dealing with Soviet prisons should be read by every American who has the least feeling that, in some way, he should be his brother’s keeper.”¹³³

Leibowitz strove to impress upon his readers that he did not accept Soviet statements at face value. He pressed the Soviet Union’s prosecutor general, Roman Rudenko, on a few contradictions in Soviet law and readily disproved a false impression of crime in Moscow given

¹³⁰ W. Averell Harriman, “Soviet Penal Reform Noted by Harriman,” *New York Times*, 3 June 1959, 1.

¹³¹ W. Averell Harriman, *Peace with Russia?* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 107-10.

¹³² Leibowitz, 153, 156; Hallinan and Hallinan, 24-27.

¹³³ Hallinan and Hallinan, 43.

by chief of police M. V. Barsukov.¹³⁴ Moreover, he reportedly grilled his host, deputy head of the Gulag V. M. Bochkov, on the way to Kriukovo about the Soviet Union's infamous slave labor camps—finally obtaining a concession that there had been a few such camps but they no longer existed—and openly wondered if he was about to visit a “tourist attraction.” Yet he apparently accepted his host's “serious” reply that Kriukovo was simply an “average Russian prison of its type.”¹³⁵ Although the buildings were drab, Leibowitz noted, the inmates, dressed in civilian attire, “did not have the beaten, shamed look of the American convict.” Rather, they were playing soccer, “laughing and enjoying themselves,” studying engineering, eating plentiful amounts of “excellent borscht” and other food, and working in the factory. There was only one inmate in the hospital—“a most eloquent tribute” to the humanity of the institution, Leibowitz thought—and one “cheerful” inmate serving a two-day sentence in the large isolation cell. Prisoners received wages for their labor (while keeping the institution self-sufficient financially), made purchases at the store, sent money home, enjoyed conjugal visits, and prepared to leave the colony by learning a trade. And the primary complaint of prisoners was that the equipment sometimes broke down in the workshop, preventing them from working. In the final analysis, Leibowitz concluded that although the physical plant was “shabby . . . by American standards,” the atmosphere of hope and progress that pervaded Kriukovo confirmed the monumental changes that had recently occurred in the Soviet penal system. The smug look on Bochkov's face in the photograph showing Leibowitz receiving flowers from Kriukovo's inmates tells everything that needs to be known: another foreigner was about to tell the world about his lovely visit to the land of laughing inmates, otherwise known as Soviet Gulag.¹³⁶

Leibowitz's article was perceived by the Soviets as a major victory in the cultural cold war. Soon after its publication in the West, large sections were reproduced not only in *Izvestiia*, as noted above, but in *K novoi zhizni*, the MVD's internal journal for correctional officers.¹³⁷ Indeed, the extent to which Leibowitz's *Life* article was valued by justice officials in the Soviet Union is evidenced by a 2 November 1960 letter from Aleksandr Fedorovich Gorkin, chairman of the Supreme Court, to P. N. Pospelov of the Central Committee apparatus, attacking the

¹³⁴ Leibowitz, 152-54.

¹³⁵ Leibowitz, 156.

¹³⁶ Leibowitz, 162.

¹³⁷ Gladkikh, “Amerikanskii iurist govorit,” 73.

article “Man Behind Bars,” which appeared in *Sovetskaia Rossiia* on 27 August 1960.¹³⁸ This article and the readers’ comments that were subsequently printed on 17 September 1960, he charged, misrepresented the state of the country’s penal system by profiling depraved, uncorrected, and unrepentant criminals living a life of comfort until their eventual early release on parole. What is remarkable is that Gorkin used statements from Leibowitz’s article to substantiate his charge that “Man Behind Bars” and its follow-up were both “incorrect and politically harmful.” Gorkin warned that “it is not coincidental that these articles have been republished in the bourgeois press with the slanderous aim of demonstrating that the Soviet Union is now supposedly turning away from humane principles of correcting and re-educating prisoners in places of confinement.”¹³⁹ In Gorkin’s view, the positive propaganda achieved through Harriman and Leibowitz was being undermined by the regime’s own press.

Indeed, as Gorkin feared, some in the United States were attempting to discount the reports of Harriman and Leibowitz and not only by reprinting “Man Behind Bars.” David J. Dallin, co-author of the damning account of the Soviet Gulag that made its way into the MVD archive, wrote in the *New York Times* in late 1959 that “the Kryukovo Colony. . . is obviously maintained and manned as a show piece for guided tours.” And while Dallin acknowledged that conditions in the U.S.S.R.’s prisons had likely improved under Khrushchev, the “hasty conclusions” of Harriman and Leibowitz should not be believed as “neither of them took the pains of going to the well-known vast camps of Vorkuta and Kolyma.”¹⁴⁰ In addition to Dallin, certain members in the U.S. government, notably the House of Representatives’ Committee on Un-American Activities, by 1960 became concerned with “a strange phenomenon on the American scene, namely, a parade of outstanding American personalities to the Soviet Union to learn all about some phase of life under communism on a 2-week journey, and then to report the ‘facts’ to the American people.” Most disconcerting among these reports were those proposing that “a new era of benevolence has dawned” in the Soviet penal system.¹⁴¹ To counter, in their view, such obvious lies, the Committee on Un-American Activities heard and published statements from Adam Galinski, a Polish survivor of the Vorkuta camps who reported to have

¹³⁸ For more on this article and the movement it epitomized see Jeffrey S. Hardy, “‘The Camp is Not a Resort’: The Campaign against Privileges in the Soviet Gulag, 1957-1961,” *Kritika* (forthcoming).

¹³⁹ RGANI, f. 5, d. 34, l. 70, l. 21. Indeed, this article was reported (though without any “slanderous” commentary) in the United States. See Seymour Topping, “Prisons in Soviet Called Too Soft,” *New York Times*, 28 August 1960, 17; and “Soviet Prison System Called Too Soft,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 10 October 1960, 12.

¹⁴⁰ David J. Dallin, “Soviet Labor Camps,” *New York Times*, 16 June 1959, 34.

¹⁴¹ *Soviet “Justice”: “Showplace” Prisons vs Real Slave Labor Camps* (Washington, DC: U.S. G.P.O., 1960), 5.

heard through the prisoner grapevine that “there existed certain camps which were simply sham and which were made for tourists to see. The inmates of those camps are not prisoners, but MVD soldiers who are disguised as prisoners and coached in the types of answers which they are to give to foreign visitors.”¹⁴² If such was the case, Galinski testified, then they were obviously a farce, for the real Gulag was bent on the destruction of its inmates. Thus, even as visits to Butyrka and Kriukovo helped the Soviets present to the world the image of a reformed and enlightened penal system, potent narratives of death and privation from survivors of the Stalinist Gulag continued to thwart their efforts.

Conclusion

Visits by foreigners to penal institutions in the era of Khrushchev constituted a small yet important part of the Cold War. Even though their broader mission of convincing the world of Soviet superiority failed, the tours largely succeeded in impressing their guests. In many cases one can write this off to ideological predisposition. But in other instances, notably the visits by Leibowitz and Harriman, this appears to not be the case. Certainly the tours were successful in part because they were carefully managed, but the institutions visited were not Potemkin villages. They were not a façade or a farce, even if they were to some extent staged, with a deliberately incomplete picture being presented. Indeed, foreign visitors believed that what they were being shown was real precisely because these were not show prisons, despite their designation as suitable for foreigners. The prisoners and guards were real. The somewhat shabby dormitories were real. The death-row inmates were real. The admission that other colonies with harsher regimes existed was real.¹⁴³ Except for a few matters such as inmate statistics and political prisoners, what visitors were told was mostly true. And the abandoned remnants of larger camps seen by Harriman in Karaganda and Wallisfurth in Transcaucasia constituted additional tangible proof of a reformed penal policy.¹⁴⁴ In short, there was a palpable genuineness about Butyrka and Kriukovo, the two primary penal institutions visited by

¹⁴² *Soviet “Justice,”* 48. This rumor has since been repeated in, for instance, Brian Freemantle, *KGB* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), 158.

¹⁴³ Harriman, *Peace*, 109; Travel notes of Marceau Pivert, available at <http://histoire-sociale.univ-paris1.fr/Voyages/Toulacadre.htm>, accessed 23 March 2010.

¹⁴⁴ Harriman, *Peace*, 110. The camp seen by Harriman was in the process of being demolished to make way for a new housing tract.

foreigners. Yes, they were among the best of Soviet penal institutions, and yes, they were carefully prepared for each visit, but that does not mean they were fake.

The tours were also successful because of the international post-war conjuncture in penal affairs. The 1950s globally was a time when the idea of rehabilitation in the penal sphere triumphed over custodialism, retribution, and labor extraction.¹⁴⁵ In most places, however, the United States in particular, this newly dominant philosophy translated slowly into institutional practice. Prisoners remained in oppressive and brutalizing prisons, given limited access to educational, cultural, or vocational programs, were often not provided with labor (which is universally acknowledged among penologists as necessary for rehabilitation), and enjoyed very limited rights and no forms of self-government.¹⁴⁶ In many ways, therefore, what prisoners in the Soviet Union came to enjoy in the 1950s, and what was placed on display at Kriukovo, was the dream of penal reformers globally. Prisoners were kept in so-called open institutions with communal living quarters instead of cells and minimal or even no guarding. They enjoyed self-governing organizations, libraries, cultural groups, educational and vocational courses, and conjugal visits. They were released early through parole and workday credits. They had significant correspondence rights and clear channels for complaints. They worked, earned wages, made purchases at the prison store, wore their own clothing. Certainly, scarce resources, entrenched habits and other factors meant that not all prisoners enjoyed these benefits to their fullest extent. Yet the point remains that Butyrka and especially Kriukovo were not only representative of the policy changes made under Khrushchev, they were, in fact, representative of at least some of the Soviet Union's better penal institutions. The Soviet Union was making a good-faith effort to transform the hellish Stalinist Gulag into a model penal system. And foreigners, familiar with their own repressive systems, were naturally impressed when confronted with what the Soviet Union was achieving.

¹⁴⁵ See, for instance, Francis A. Allen, *The Decline of the Rehabilitative Ideal: Penal Policy and Social Purpose* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1981); Herman Franke, *The Emancipation of Prisoners: A Socio-Historical Analysis of the Dutch Prison Experience* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995); D. L. Howard, *The English Prisons: Their Past and their Future* (London: Methuen & Co., 1960); and *First United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders* (New York: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1956).

¹⁴⁶ Some American penologists went so far as to label their own system 'totalitarian,' an unveiled reference to the repression of the Soviet Union. See, for instance, Gresham Sykes, *The Society of Captives: A Study of Maximum Security Prison* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), xxxii.

In the end, however, the favorable reports presented by Averell, Leibowitz, and others did little to sway public opinion and appear to be swiftly forgotten. Damning accounts of the Stalinist system, notably *Within the Whirlwind* by Evgeniia Ginzburg and *Gulag Archipelago* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, kept the worst abuses of the past in the forefront of the Western imagination. Moreover, these were joined in the 1960s and 1970s with a few memoirs of camp life under Khrushchev, especially Anatoly Marchenko's *My Testimony*, published in the West in 1969, which argued that "today's Soviet camps for political prisoners are just as horrific as in Stalin's time." (Although this statement is manifestly false, as a close comparison between *My Testimony* and about any memoir from the Stalinist period reveals.) Ultimately, the so-called Soviet cultural offensive in the penal sphere failed to effectively counter the dominant Cold War narrative of the Gulag as both a system of slavery and a synecdoche for a larger system of slavery, the Soviet Union itself.

Epilogue

The Soviet Union continued to use Kriukovo as a show prison beyond the 1950s. During the 1960s many foreigners still believed that Kriukovo was a representative institution, even if it was acknowledged that "the best feet were probably being put forward."¹⁴⁷ By the 1970s, however, it had become widely recognized in the West as a show prison that, while interesting as a tourist destination, did not present an accurate depiction of Soviet imprisonment.¹⁴⁸ This shift was no doubt due in large part to Solzhenitsyn, who labeled Kriukovo a "Potemkin structure," although he personally declined a visit when offered, and pronounced condemnatory judgment on foreign guests of the Gulag: "And oh, you well-fed, devil-may-care, nearsighted, irresponsible foreigners with your notebooks and your ball-point pens," he charged, "how much you have harmed us in your vain passion to shine with understanding in areas where you did not grasp a

¹⁴⁷ John P. Conrad, *Crime and its Correction: An International Survey of Attitudes and Practices* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), 153. In his initial reporting Conrad, an official in the California Department of Corrections, was even less circumspect with his praise for the Kriukovo Colony, which provided the convict "good food, good work, good pay, good quarters, regular conjugal visits, and an opportunity to educate himself." John P. Conrad, "What Lenin Foresaw," 19. See also Peter Archer, *Communism and the Law* (London: The Bodley Head, 1963), 87; and a moderately favorable report given by delegation from the U.K.'s Institute for the Study and Treatment of Delinquency. E. Perry and M. Stone, "Impressions of the I.S.T.D. Study Tour to the U.S.S.R.," *British Journal of Criminology* 4, no. 2 (September 1963): 170-76.

¹⁴⁸ "Counting Russia's Camps," *Economist* 263, no. 6970 (2 April 1977): 64; Avraham Shifrin, *The First Guidebook to Prisons and Concentration Camps of the Soviet Union* (Uhlidingen, Switzerland: Stephanus Edition, 1980), 37.

lousy thing.”¹⁴⁹ Curiously, however, carefully managed Gulag tourism continued and even outlasted the Soviet Union itself. In 2009, participants of the International Festival of Detective Films and TV Programs on Law-Enforcement Themes, held in Moscow and boasting 268 films from 60 countries, were treated to a number of excursions. Perhaps not surprisingly, the list included visits to both Butyrka and Kriukovo.¹⁵⁰ That same year, Mickey Rourke was given a tour of Butyrka as preparation for playing a Russian mobster in the Hollywood blockbuster *Iron Man 2*. He talked with prisoners, tested out the beds (more comfortable than his sofa), tried the food (and even asked for a loaf of the delicious black bread to take with him), visited the exercise room, and, commenting on the availability of conjugal visits, quipped, “that’s very humane.”¹⁵¹

TABLE 1: PARTIAL LIST OF FOREIGN VISITORS TO THE
SOVIET PENAL SYSTEM, 1954-1959

	Butyrka	Kriukovo
Italian Women, including lawyers		24 Jul 1954
English Jurists, led by John N. Pritt		20 Sep 1954
English Parliamentarians		21 Oct 1954
West German Journalists		11 May 1955
Chinese Jurists, led by Minister of Justice Shi Liang	3 Jun 1955	4 Jul 1955
Dossio Orudi, a Brazilian Criminologist		16 Jul 1955
H. W. Seymour Howard, Mayor of London, and First Esquire William T. Boston	25 Jul 1955	
Danish Editors		15 Sep 1955

¹⁴⁹ Solzhenitsyn was also offered to see Dubravlag, which is notable because, as the primary detention facility for political prisoners, this was anything but a show prison. Solzhenitsyn, 2:147; Solzhenitsyn, 3:503.

¹⁵⁰ *DetectiveFEST 2010 Booklet* (Moscow: Detective, 2010), 12. Available online at http://www.detectivefest.ru/addition/files/detectivefest_12_booklet_eng.pdf, accessed on 12 March 2010.

¹⁵¹ Nikita Kartsev, “Mikki urka,” *Moskovskii komsomolets*, 14 March 2009, available online at <http://www.mk.ru/social/highlife/article/2009/03/13/238621-mikki-urka.html>; and “Mikki Rurk ‘otsidel’ v legendarnoi Butyrke,” *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*, 13 March 2009, available online at <http://www.kp.ru/daily/24259/456497/>.

Chinese Ministry of Social Defense Officials	1956	
Hungarian Ministry of Justice Officials		11 Jan 1956
Delegation of French Socialist Party	12 May 1956	
Foreign Participants of the 6th Congress of the MAIuD	15 Jun 1956	
Brazilian, Argentine, and Chilean Jurists		16 Jul 1956
French Jurists	2 Aug 1956	
Greek Lawyers	16 Aug 1956	
North Korean MVD Officers	22 Aug 1956	22 Aug 1956
N. Majdalani of the Lebanese Progressive Socialist Party	7 Sep 1956	
Korean Prosecutors	13 Sep 1956	
Delegation from UN Women's Group (10 in all, from Bulgaria, England, Iran, Syria, Ceylon, and Belgium)	21 Sep 1956	
Vietnamese and Mongolian MVD Officials	1956	
Finnish Jurists	20 Feb 1957	
League of Ceylon-Soviet Friendship Members	7 Jun 1957	
French Lawyers	16 Jul 1957	
Iranian law professor, journalist, and literature professor	19 Jun 1957	
Society for Anglo-Soviet Friendship Members	21 Jun 1957	
Deputy Chairman of the Ceylon Parliament and Head of the Ceylon Delegation to the World Youth Festival	5 Aug 1957	
Chilean Delegates to the World Youth Festival	9 Aug 1957	
Delegation of the Free-Soviet Society	12 Nov 1957	
Italian Member of Parliament	Late 1957	
English Cooperative Workers	Late 1957	
Delegation of English Women	Late 1957	
Ida Rokhauge-Anderson, Deputy Director of the Danish Prison Administration	Late 1957	
Delegation of the International Association of Democratic Jurists	Late 1957	
West German Jurist and Communist Party Member Karl	26 Nov 1957	

Pfannenshvarts		
Indian Parliamentarian	8 Jan 1958	
Delegation of the Austrian Communist Party	23 Jan 1958	
Hungarian Prosecutors	18 Apr 1958	
Delegation of English Social Organizations	2 Jun 1958	
Samuel S. Leibowitz	31 July 1958	
Minister of Justice of the Indian State of Kerala	13 Aug 1958	
Burmese Municipal Council Members	8 Sep 1958	
English Delegation led by Charles Irving, Mayor of Cheltenham	9 Sep 1958	
Prison Administrators from the GDR	15 Nov 1958	
Romanian Police Officers	28 Nov 1958	
Vincent Hallinan	11 May 1959	
W. Averell Harriman		18 May 1959
Colombian Delegation led by a Parliamentarian	13 Jun 1959	
American Publicist Norman Cousins	24 Jun 1959	
American Judge Abraham N. Geller	29 Jun 1959	
American Governors and Reporters		9 July 1959
Social-Democratic Youth from Sweden	16 Jul 1959	
English Parliamentarian Anthony Greenwood	1 Aug 1959	
Ben Golden and Borton Goldberger, activists of the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship	19 Aug 1959	
Bulgarian MVD Officials	Sep 1959	Sep 1959

Sources: GARF, f. R-9401, op. 2, dd. 451, 464, 465, 466, 478, 480, 481, 490, 499, 505, 506; GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 198; GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 319; RGANI, f. 5, op. 30, dd. 277, 312.