

GULAG VS. LAOGAI

***THE FUNCTION OF FORCED LABOUR CAMPS IN THE
SOVIET UNION AND CHINA***

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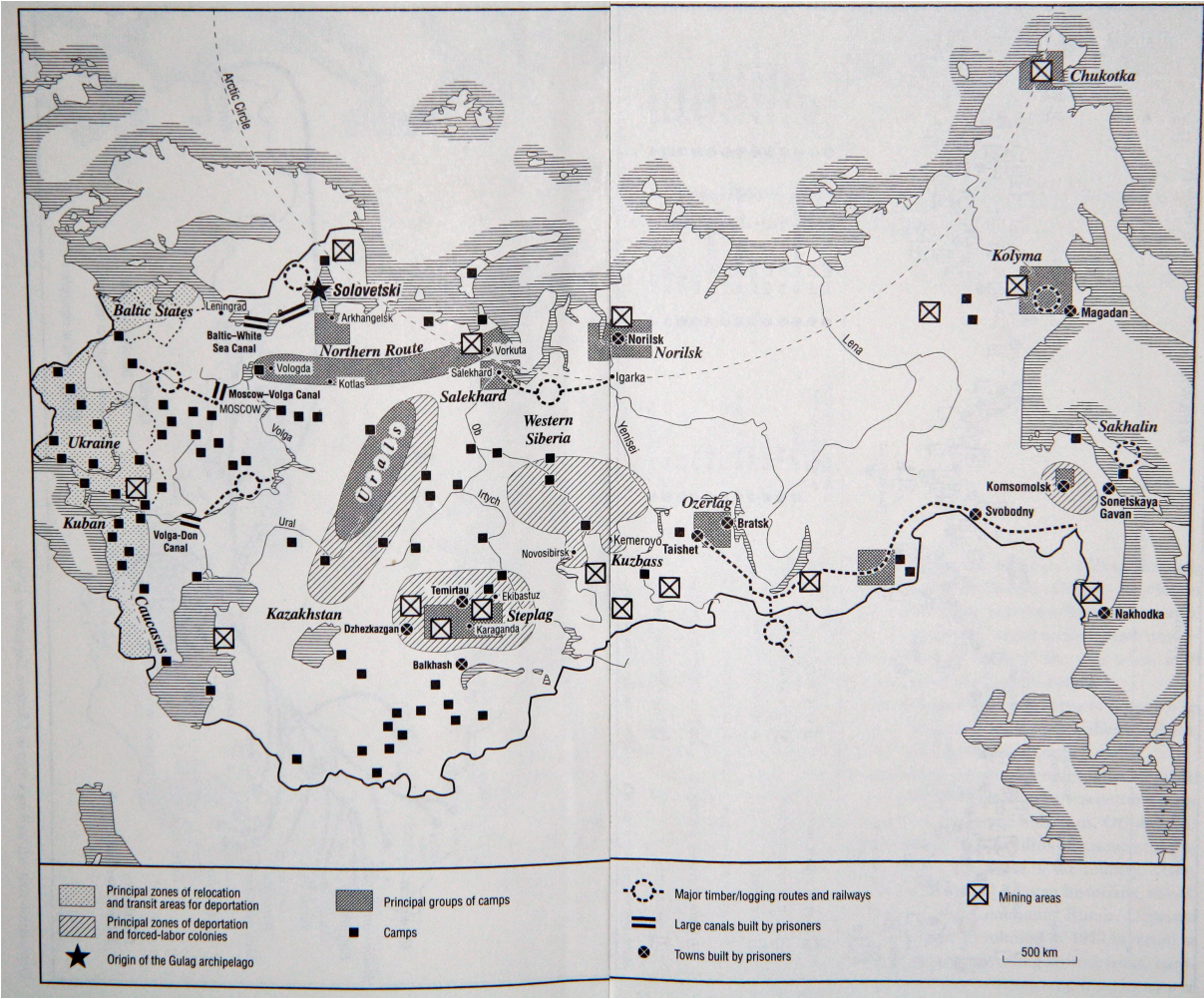
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

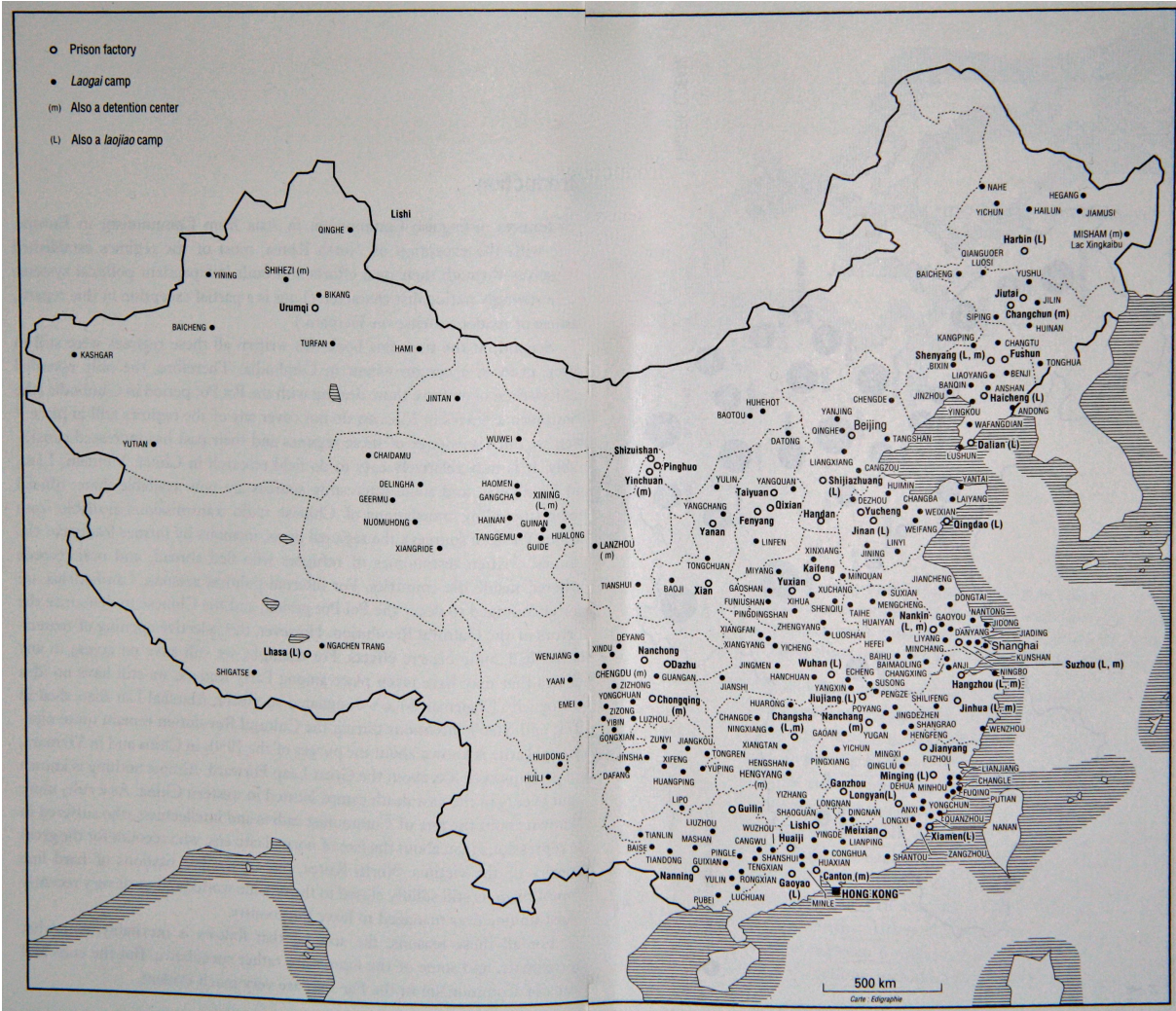
BAM	Baikal-Amur Mainline
BBK	White Sea-Baltic Combine
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
Cheka	All-Russian Extraordinary Commission to Combat the Counterrevolution, Speculation and Sabotage
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
Dalstroï	Far-Eastern Construction Administration
GARF	State Archive of the Russian Federation
GMD	Guomindang (National People's Party)
GPU	State Political Administration
Gulag	Main Camp Administration
Jiuye	Forced job placement
KGB	Committee on State Security
KVC	Cultural and Education Department
Laogai	Reform through labour
Laojiao	Re-education through labour
LRF	Laogai Research Foundation
MGB	Ministry of State Security
MVD	Ministry of Internal Affairs
NKVD	People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs
OGPU	Unified State Political Administration
PLA	People's Liberation Army
Politburo	The Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party
POW	Prisoner of war
PRC	People's Republic of China
RGASPI	Russian State Archive of Social and Political History
SLON	Northern Camps of Special Significance
SR	Social Revolutionaries
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WWII	World War II

MAPS



The gulag archipelago¹

¹ Source: S. Courtois, N. Werth, J.-L. Panné, A. Paczkowski, K. Bartošek, & J.-L. Margolin (eds.), *The black book of communism: crimes, terror, repression* (Cambridge etc. 1999), pp. 36-7.



Main units of the laogai penal network²

² Source: S. Courtois, N. Werth, J.-L. Panné, A. Paczkowski, K. Bartošek, & J.-L. Margolin (eds.), *The black book of communism: crimes, terror, repression* (Cambridge etc. 1999), pp. 460-1

INTRODUCTION

Laogai and freedom and democracy are incompatible. If you have laogai, you have no freedom or democracy. If you have freedom and democracy, you cannot have laogai.

– Harry Wu³

According to the Oxford dictionary, *laogai* (劳改) is ‘a system of labour camps (in China), many of whose inmates are political dissidents.’ The term *laogai* is an abbreviation of *laodong gaizao* (劳动改造), which can be translated as “reform through labour”⁴ and represents a system of forced labour camps that stretches over China’s vast territory. The *laogai* system consists of various forms of incarceration, but three distinct types of camps can be singled out: *laogai* (reform through labour), *laojiao* (劳教) (re-education through labour), and *jiuye* (就业) (forced job placement). Together, they function as the prison system of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In this study, the term *laogai* will refer to the prison system as a whole, unless otherwise indicated.

The origins of the *laogai* can be found in the early 1930s, when the CCP had just begun its armed revolution. Whenever the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) conquered a territory, it established a power base and took over the various prisons and camps that already existed. These camps were much smaller than the *laogai* system that would later develop, but the basic organization, management techniques, and harsh conditions were not much different. Three years after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the First Plenary Labour Reform Work Congress was held. However, official labour reform legal stipulations were not announced to the public until 26 August 1954. This Statute on *Laogai* was much influenced by the experience and theorizing of Soviet penologists.⁵ Indeed, whereas judicial officials in Republican China had been interested in continental European and Anglo-Saxon law, the Chinese

³ Interview with Harry Wu, *laogai* survivor and executive director of the *Laogai* Research Foundation, 28 October 2010.

⁴ In the People’s Republic of China, the term *gaizao* has long been interpreted as “remolding,” because it implies a more complete transformation than mere “reform.” See: P.F. Williams, & Y. Wu, *The great wall of confinement: the Chinese prison camp through contemporary fiction and reportage* (Berkeley etc. 2004), p. 40.

⁵ J.D. Seymour, & R. Anderson, *New ghosts, old ghosts: prisons and labor reform camps in China* (Armonk etc. 1998), pp. 12-8; H. Wu, *Laogai: the Chinese gulag* (Boulder 1992), pp. 54-61.

Communists thoroughly studied the works of early socialist thinkers on law and punishment. The laogai was, therefore, partially modelled after the Soviet *gulag*.⁶

The word gulag is an acronym for *glavnoe upravlenie lagerei*, or Main Camp Administration. However, the term has come to represent more than just the administration of the concentration camps in the Soviet Union. Nowadays, the gulag has come to symbolize the entire Soviet repressive system. The word encompasses everything from the arrests and the interrogations to the transport in cattle cars and the forced labour in the camps.⁷ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, which was published in 1973, was instrumental in exposing the gulag system. It revealed to the world the pain and suffering inside the Soviet gulag.⁸ Solzhenitsyn, himself a former gulag-inmate, died on 3 August 2008. He lived long enough to witness the end of the gulag and the collapse of the Soviet system that had put him there.⁹

1973 was also the year in which Jean Pasqualini published a memoir of his experiences in the laogai. He wrote his biography *Prisonnier de Mao: sept ans dans un camp de travail en Chine* (*Prisoner of Mao* is the title of the English translation) together with Rudolph Chelminski, who described Pasqualini as the "Chinese Solzhenitsyn."¹⁰ The title of Jean-Luc Domenach's account of the Chinese forced labour camps – *Chine: l'archipel oublié* ("China: the forgotten archipelago") – also alludes to Solzhenitsyn. In fact, in the laogai literature, frequent references are made to the Soviet gulag. Harry Wu's first book was entitled *Laogai: the Chinese gulag* and Steven W. Mosher even stated that 'at the risk of oversimplification, it may be said that the Chinese laogai is the Soviet gulag with thought reform and a profit motive added.'¹¹ However, a systematic comparison between the *function* of the gulag and the laogai in the Soviet and Chinese Communist systems is still missing. The purpose of this study is therefore to carry out such a comparison on a political, economical, and psychological level. The research question is: *how does the laogai differ from the gulag in the political, economical, and psychological functions it fulfils within the Communist system?*

⁶ K. Mühlhahn, *Criminal justice in China: a history* (Cambridge etc. 2009), p. 148.

⁷ A. Applebaum, *Gulag: a history of the Soviet camps* (London etc. 2003), p. 3.

⁸ S. Courtois, 'Introduction: the crimes of communism', in: Courtois, S., Werth, N., Panné, J.-L., Paczkowski, A., Bartošek, K., & Margolin, J.-L. (eds.), *The black book of communism: crimes, terror, repression* (Cambridge etc. 1999) p. 27.

⁹ Laogai Research Foundation (LRF), *Laogai Handbook 2007-2008* (Washington 2008), p. 4.

¹⁰ Bao Ruo-wang (Jean Pasqualini) & R. Chelminski, *Prisoner of Mao* (New York etc. 1976), p. 7.

¹¹ S.W. Mosher, 'Chinese prison labor', *Society*, 29 (1991), p. 49.

This study thus puts more emphasis on the laogai than on the gulag. This has been done for several reasons. First of all, unlike the gulag, which is now a historical institution, the laogai is still in operation today. It is, in fact, currently the largest prison network in the world. However, and this brings me to the second reason, not many people outside of China know about its existence. Although the true history of the Soviet gulag might still not be as well known as that of the Nazi concentration camps, facts about the Chinese laogai have not at all filtered into Western popular consciousness. Jeffrey C. Kinkley has aptly described the attitude of many in the West as “Chinese labour camps still exist today; surely they are not concentration camps, are they?”¹² This naiveté can partly be explained by the dearth of literature on, and images of, the laogai. The aim of this study is therefore to contribute to our understanding of the laogai by comparing the political, economical, and psychological functions of the Chinese forced labour camps to those of the Soviet gulag.

It should be mentioned, though, that carrying out a solid and systematic comparative study, especially when related to totalitarian systems, is not without pitfalls. The absolute denial of access to archives and camp sites, the total control of media, and the propaganda promoting the regime’s “successes” in both Communist countries have made it very difficult to obtain objective information about the gulag and the laogai. Besides, since I have no research knowledge of either Russian or Chinese, I have had to rely mostly on English literature.

Nevertheless, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of the archives, it has been easier for historians to engage in fact finding related to the gulag. Even before the fall of the USSR, during the glasnost years, a flood of memoirs about the gulag already began to be published in newspapers and magazines. Anne Applebaum has written an excellent, comprehensive, and detailed history of the gulag based on these memoirs as well as on archival research, and this study has made extensive use of her *Gulag: a history*. It was also during the late 1980s that the Memorial Society in Moscow arose. The threefold mission of the International Memorial Society, which was officially founded on 19 April 1992, is (1) ‘to promote mature civil society and democracy based on the rule of law and thus to prevent a return to totalitarianism,’ (2) ‘to assist formation of public consciousness based on the values of democracy and law, to get rid of

¹² J.C. Kinkley, ‘Labor-camp fiction as conversion literature: Zhang Xianliang and Ōoka Shōhei’, in: Williams, P.F., & Wu, Y. (eds.), *Remolding and resistance among writers of the Chinese prison camp: disciplined and published* (New York 2006), pp. 70-1.

totalitarian patters, and to establish firmly human rights in practical politics and in public life,' and (3) 'to promote the reveal of the truth about the historical past and perpetuate the memory of the victims of political repression exercised by totalitarian regimes.'¹³ Since its inception, Memorial has compiled of a list of names and locations of all the camps, published several pioneering books on the history of the gulag, and collected a huge archive of oral and written survivor's stories.¹⁴

Even though in China all statistics related to the laogai are regarded as state secrets, there are some provinces where essential information on the laogai is overtly available. Moreover, although outsiders are not allowed to directly observe the circumstances in the laogai, it is perfectly possible to visit areas in China that abound in prisons and prison enterprises and each province is supposed to maintain a model prison to display to foreigners.¹⁵ In the past, several scholars have studied the laogai by examining internal documents, interviewing former prisoners, and visiting remote regions of China where a great number of camps exist. Among them are Jean-Luc Domenach, James D. Seymour, Richard Anderson, and, above all, Harry Wu. Wu has had the personal experience of spending 19 years in the laogai, without being formally charged or afforded a trial. A few years after his release, he emigrated to the United States. Throughout the 1990s, Wu has made several undercover trips back to China in order to obtain more information on the laogai. He is, therefore, a source of considerable data.¹⁶ In 1992, Wu established the Laogai Research Foundation, which, like Memorial, has compiled lists of camps, put together oral and written testimonies and published books on the laogai. Early in this study I interviewed Harry Wu, which has helped me in getting my research on the right track. Other than the works of the above-mentioned authors, this study has relied on several NGO reports, documents, and articles, as well as various secondary sources for information on the laogai.

Additionally, it has made use of some of the most famous memoirs of gulag and laogai survivors. Even if they cannot be relied upon for names, dates, and numbers, I have found them very useful in clarifying and illustrating parts of my research. However, it

¹³ Memorial, "The charter of the international volunteer public organization "Memorial' Historical, Educational, Human Rights and Charitable Society" (version 18 december 1998), <http://www.memo.ru/eng/about/charter.htm> (viewed on 18 december 2011).

¹⁴ Applebaum, *Gulag*, p. 10.

¹⁵ Seymour & Anderson, *New ghosts, old ghosts*, pp. xiv, 1, 17.

¹⁶ M. Pearson Frugé, "The laogai and violations of international human rights law: a mandate for the laogai charter", *Santa Clara Law Review*, 38 (1998), pp. 485-6.

should be mentioned that the focus of this study is not on the personal experiences of former inmates, but on the function of the forced labour camps in the Soviet and Chinese Communist systems.

Because this study does not presume any specialized knowledge of the history of the Soviet Union and China, the first two chapters provide a historical overview of the gulag and the laogai. These chapters place the forced labour camps in the context of the development of Soviet and Chinese Communism. In doing so, a distinction has been made between the periods before Stalin and Mao, the times when the two dictators were in power, and the years after their deaths. The third chapter investigates the political function of the gulag and the laogai. Using Archie Brown's six defining features of a Communist system as a framework, it explains how the political systems in the Soviet Union and China were related to the forced labour camps. It then demonstrates that this link can be described in Micheal Mann's terms "classicide" and "fratricide". This chapter ends with some reflections on the capitalist developments within China in relation to CCP power and the laogai system. The fourth chapter deals with the economical function of the gulag and the laogai by investigating the role of the forced labour camps in fulfilling the economic goals of socialism and their contribution in times of war. It concludes with an analysis of the efficiency of both camp economies. The last chapter examines the psychological function of the gulag and the laogai. It explains the idea of the transformative power of labour, investigates the origins and practice of the "thought reform" program in China, and ends with a discussion on the efficacy of thought reform and the cultivation of political loyalty. The conclusion provides an answer to the research question, followed by some suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 1: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE GULAG

From the seventeenth to the beginning of the twentieth century, there had been penal colonies and detention centres in Russia, but they bore little resemblance to the concentration camps that were set up by the Bolshevik regime from July 1918 onwards. In October 1917 the Bolsheviks had carried out a *coup d'état* against the Provisional Government, but they were themselves completely unprepared to lead the country and their popular support was weak. Almost immediately after the Bolsheviks took power, civil war broke out. Against this setting of improvisation and violence one can find the origins of the first Soviet labour camps.¹⁷ This chapter will provide an overview of the development of the gulag. In doing so, a distinction has been made between the origins of the gulag, how the camps took on a new significance under Stalin, and how they evolved after Stalin's death in 1953. This chapter will also touch upon the development of Soviet Communism and the history of the secret police.

1.1 ORIGINS OF THE GULAG, 1918-1929

In Marxist theory, crime is not rooted in the immoral and selfish desires of individual criminals, but rather in "the exploitation of the masses."¹⁸ According to the Bolsheviks, crime would disappear in the more harmonious, post-revolutionary state. Lenin initially felt ambivalent about the incarceration of traditional criminals like thieves and murderers, whom he saw as potential allies. However, confronted with outburst of civil war, the new leadership felt obliged to take strong measures against both traditional lawbreakers as well as a new kind of criminal: the "class enemy". Class enemies were opponents of the new regime, who – publicly or secretly – worked to destroy it. They varied from priests to former tsarist administrators and bourgeois entrepreneurs. Yet the new authorities were most interested in socialist rivals, particularly the Mensheviks, Anarchists and the Left and Right Social Revolutionaries (SR). Members of these non-Bolshevik, socialist parties were captured in order to prevent them from "sabotaging" the revolutionary struggle.¹⁹

¹⁷ Applebaum, *Gulag: a history of the Soviet camps*, p. 28; R. Overy, *The dictators: Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia* (New York etc. 2004), pp. 595-6.

¹⁸ Phrase used by Lenin and cited in Applebaum, *Gulag*, p. 29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-35. E. Bacon, *The gulag at war: Stalin's forced labour system in light of the archives* (Basingstoke etc. 1994), pp. 42-3.

This whole operation was stretched out over many years because it was of primary importance that it be stealthy and unnoticed. It was essential to clean out, conscientiously, socialists of every other stripe from Moscow, Petrograd, the ports, the industrial centres, and, later on, the outlying provinces as well. This was a grandiose silent game of solitaire, whose rules were totally incomprehensible to its contemporaries, and whose outlines we can appreciate only now. Someone's far-seeing mind, someone's neat hands, planned it all, without letting one wasted minute go by. They picked up a card which had spent three years in one pile and softly placed it on another pile. And the person who had been imprisoned in a central prison was thereby shifted into exile – and a good way off. Someone who had served out a “minus” sentence [by which it was forbidden to enter a certain number of cities] was sent into exile, too, but out of sight of the rest of the “minus” category, or else from exile to exile, and then back again into the central prison – but this time a different one. Patience, overwhelming patience, was the trait of the person playing out the solitaire. And without any noise, without any outcry, the members of all the other parties slipped gradually out of sight, lost all connection with the places and people where they and their revolutionary activities were known, and thus – imperceptibly and mercilessly – was prepared the annihilation of those who had once raged against tyranny at student meetings and had clanked their Tsarist shackles in pride.²⁰

In the beginning of the civil war, both “traditional” and “political” criminals were imprisoned under the rule of the established judicial ministries (first the Commissariat of Justice, later the Commissariat of the Interior), and placed in the old tsarist prison system. This system, however, proved to be a complete mess. Crowds had attacked the jails, unauthorized commissars had fired the guards, and prisoners had been given extensive amnesties or had just walked away. The Bolsheviks believed that class enemies needed harsher punishment than traditional criminals. Therefore, they could not accept to let them to enter this old prison system alongside ordinary thieves and juvenile delinquents. Instead, the Cheka (the Bolshevik secret police) came up with a more creative solution. From July 1918 onwards, they started to lock up class enemies in concentration camps outside major towns. With reference to these early camps, the term “concentration camp” simply means supervised camps surrounded by barbed wire where opponents of the new regime could be “concentrated.”²¹ Class enemies were basically brought together in any large building that could accommodate them, including barracks, factories and even manor houses of the expropriated aristocracy.²²

The Cheka had been created on 20 December 1917 and is an abbreviation of *Vserossiiskaya Chrezvychainaya Komissiya po bor'be s kontr-revoljutsiei, spekuljatsiei i sabotazhem* (All-Russian Extraordinary Commission to Combat the Counterrevolution, Speculation and Sabotage). Its first leader was Felix Dzerzhinsky, who described the task

²⁰ A. Solzhenitsyn, *The gulag archipelago, 1918-1956* (London 1974), pp. 35-6.

²¹ Applebaum, *Gulag*, pp. 28-31; Bacon, *The gulag at war*, p. 43.

²² Overy, *The dictators*, pp. 596.

of the Commission as ‘to suppress and liquidate any act or attempted act of counterrevolutionary activity or sabotage, whatever its origin, anywhere on Russian soil [and] to bring all saboteurs and counterrevolutionaries before a revolutionary court.’²³ The Cheka, also described as the “Iron Fist of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat,” formed the military and security section of the Communist Party. As an “extraordinary commission” it had no background of legitimacy, no responsibility to abide by the rule of law, and it did not have to check with the police or the Commissariat of Justice.²⁴ In fact, there was no criminal code or any system of criminal law in the Soviet Union before 1922. And when a new Criminal Code came in effect on 1 June of that year, only one article dealt with the Cheka’s actions: the infamous article 58. This article could be interpreted so broadly that almost anyone could be punished by it.²⁵ In March 1918, when the Bolshevik government moved from Petrograd to the new capital Moscow, the main office of the Cheka was set up close to the Kremlin, in Bolshaya Lubyanka Street. It would remain there until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. During this period it would change its name to GPU, OGPU, NKVD, MGB, MVD and eventually KGB.²⁶

In 1922, after the Bolsheviks had won the civil war, the Soviet Union had clearly developed two separate prison systems. Traditional criminals fell under the jurisdiction of the Commissariat of Justice, whereas the Cheka (by this time renamed the GPU, and soon afterwards the OGPU) dealt with the political criminals. Gradually, as the definition of “enemy” expanded, the OGPU became more powerful and its camp structure increased. In 1923, Dzerzhinsky established a “special concentration camp” at a disused monastery on the island of Solovetsky, in Arkhangel’sk province. Similar institutions were founded at the surrounding islands of Bolshaya Muksalma, Anzer and Zayatsky. Together, they became known as SLON, abbreviated from *Severnnye Lagerya Osobogo Naznacheniya* (Northern Camps of Special Significance).²⁷ According to NKVD school lectures, the whole Soviet system of ‘forced labour as a method of re-education’²⁸ began in these arctic camps. At first, “political” prisoners (which, in this case, meant members

²³ Quoted from the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), 130/2/134/26-27 and cited in N. Werth, ‘A state against its people: violence, repression, and terror in the Soviet Union’, in: Courtois, S., Werth, N., Panné, J.-L., Paczkowski, A., Bartošek, K., & Margolin, J.-L. (eds.), *The black book of communism: crimes, terror, repression* (Cambridge etc. 1999), p. 58.

²⁴ Applebaum, *Gulag*, pp. 31-2; Werth, ‘A state against its people’, pp. 53-58.

²⁵ Solzhenitsyn, *The gulag archipelago*, pp. 32, 60, 354.

²⁶ A.H. Brown, J. Fennell, M. Kaser, & H.T. Willetts, *The Cambridge encyclopedia of Russia and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge etc. 1982), pp. 312-3; Werth, ‘A state against its people’, p. 64.

²⁷ Applebaum, *Gulag*, pp. 35, 40-1.

²⁸ Quoted from GARF, 9414/1/77 and cited in Applebaum, *Gulag*, p. 42.

of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, Mensheviks, and Anarchists) were taken to a smaller monastery and granted certain “privileges” like newspapers, books and the freedom from work. However, their special status would not last long and labour soon became mandatory for everyone. Up until the mid-1920s, prisoners worked primarily for the internal needs of the camp system. From 1926 onwards, contribution to the wider national economy became the main focus.²⁹

1.2 STALIN’S GULAG, 1929-1953

Throughout the 1920s, Joseph Stalin had strengthened his position within the Communist Party by defeating or getting rid of first the Bolsheviks’ enemies and later on his own enemies. In 1929, he set up policies that would eventually secure his power and simultaneously transform Soviet society and economy. In fact, Stalin himself described this year as the “Great Turning Point.” Central to his ideas was a new program of frantically fast industrialization. One of the implemented policies was a new “Five-Year Plan,” an economic program that demanded industrial productivity to rise by 20 percent each year. Besides, Stalin increased the speed of forced collectivization. Through this process, millions of peasants were required to leave their property and take part in collective farms.³⁰

As was often the case in the USSR, new policies led to the creation of new categories of criminals and consequently to new waves of arrests. Meanwhile, the Criminal Code had been improved in 1926, and article 58 had expanded from two simple paragraphs to eighteen subsections. Unsurprisingly, the targets of the Five-Year Plan could not be met, but the authorities needed a scapegoat. In this case, the arrested “wreckers” and “saboteurs” were mostly technical specialists and engineers.³¹ The process of forced collectivization, in fact, encountered so much resistance that it created one of the three biggest waves of arrests in Soviet history (together with the Great Terror and the Second World War). Resisters of collectivization were called *kulaks*, a word that originally stood for ‘a miserly, dishonest rural trader who grew rich not by making his own labour but through someone else’s.’³² However, the meaning of the term rapidly expanded and finally became so vague that almost anyone could qualify. In the period

²⁹ Bacon, *The gulag at war*, p. 45; L. Toker, *Return from the archipelago: narratives of gulag survivors* (Bloomington etc. 2000), p. 15.

³⁰ Applebaum, *Gulag*, p. 62-4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³² Solzhenitsyn, *The gulag archipelago*, p. 55.

from 1929 to 1933, more than two million “kulaks” were deported – men, women, children and old people. Approximately 100,000 of them ended up in the OGPU camps, the rest was sent to isolated exile villages where living conditions were not much better. Many of them died of starvation, cold and overwork.³³

The 1930s saw an enormous expansion of OGPU camps, especially into the arctic regions. By this time, *zeks*, a term used for gulag prisoners, were building roads, railways and industrial compounds. Besides, they were working on huge timber projects and in coal, lead and gold mines.³⁴ There was, however, one specific construction project that stood out: the White Sea Canal (Baltiisko-Belomorski Kanal, or BBK), an ambitious project that would connect the White Sea and the Baltic. The purpose of the canal was for ships with timber and minerals to reach the Baltic ports without making the long journey around the Scandinavian countries. As chief promoter of the project, Stalin was closely involved. His influence ensured that construction started quickly and that the entire canal was finished within twenty months. The White Sea Canal prison camps were a direct offshoot of SLON: they were organized on the SLON model, many inmates from SLON were transferred to the canal, and some of the guards and leading OGPU officials moved from SLON to the construction site as well. In total, around 170,000 prisoners worked on the White Sea Canal. However, once the canal was finished, it proved to be too shallow for most ships to pass and the majority of goods continued to travel by train.³⁵

Meanwhile, a new network of camps was set up in north-eastern Siberia, controlled by the *Dalstroï* (Far-Eastern Construction Administration).³⁶ This particular area of the Soviet Union was rich with gold, which the Soviet government desperately needed in order to purchase equipment for industrialization from the West.³⁷ It is also the coldest region in the Northern Hemisphere, with temperatures dropping to -70°Celsius. To determine the cold, prisoners of these camps developed their own methods:

If there was frosty fog, that meant the temperature outside was forty degrees below zero; if you exhaled easily but in a rasping fashion, it was fifty degree below zero; if there was a

³³ Applebaum, *Gulag*, pp. 12-3, 64; Werth, ‘A state against its people’, pp. 146-7.

³⁴ Toker, *Return from the archipelago*, p. 17.

³⁵ Applebaum, *Gulag*, pp. 76-8, 84-5.

³⁶ Overy, *The dictators*, p. 598.

³⁷ Werth, ‘A state against its people’, p. 205.

rasping and it was difficult to breathe, it was sixty degrees below; after sixty degrees below zero, spit froze in midair.³⁸

The camps in this remote corner of the USSR were the deadliest of all mass-imprisonment areas: these were the notorious Kolyma camps. (There were, in fact, a few camps on the Arctic islands of Novaya Zemlya from which no one returned, but they were much smaller in scale.) The Kolyma camps could not be reached overland. In order to get there, prisoners first travelled by train across the entire length of the Soviet Union to huge transit camps in Vladivostok and Vanino. From there, prison ships brought them to the capital and port Magadan.³⁹ From Magadan, a single road (built by the prisoners) connected the various camps. Gradually, the area controlled by the Dalstroi increased and expanded into the neighbouring regions of Indigirka and Chukhotsk. Ultimately it would encompass a territory four times the size of France. The gold extracted by the Kolyma prisoners rose from 276 kilos in 1932 to 48 metric tons in 1939. This was around one-third of the countries' total gold production. Estimates based on ship records show that at least three million prisoners died in Kolyma between 1938 and 1953.⁴⁰

1937 and 1938 were the years of the Great Terror, which was also known in the Soviet Union as the *Ezhovshchina* (the reign of Ezhov). The OGPU had been reorganized and renamed the NKVD in July 1934, and Nikolai Ezhov was its head from September 1936 till November 1938. Under his leadership, the results of the NKVD repression were evident at every level of Soviet society. The Great Terror is generally known for the arrests of many high-ranking officials within the Communist Party, the government, the military and even the NKVD itself. Besides, there were the three spectacular public "show trials" in August 1936, January 1937 and March 1938, at which leading Bolsheviks "confessed" that they were secretly planning to overthrow the Soviet government and eliminate its leaders.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the repression of the Great Terror also struck many ordinary Soviet citizens. Besides, all members of the non-Bolshevik, socialist parties who had not yet been arrested were captured and taken off to the gulag. 'The Big Solitaire game was finally wound up.'⁴² Underlying the arrests was the

³⁸ V.T. Shalamov, 'Carpenters', in: *Kolyma tales* (New York etc. 1980), p. 46.

³⁹ R. Conquest, *Kolyma: the arctic death camps* (London etc. 1978), pp. 13-14, 19-20.

⁴⁰ Conquest, *Kolyma*, 39-40, p. 227; Werth, 'A state against its people', p. 205.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 184-5, 204.

⁴² Solzhenitsyn, *The gulag archipelago*, p. 72.

assignment of quotas from 1937 onwards. All the regional NKVD leaders received a specific quota of arrests to be carried, without any motive given.⁴³ In total, approximately 1.6 million people were arrested, of which almost 700,000 were executed. Documents reveal that Stalin was directly involved with these mass arrests. After he had appointed Ezhov as the head of the NKVD in 1936, he carefully controlled and guided every move Ezhov made. In fact, Stalin used the NKVD to eliminate its own enemies and create a new class of loyal leaders. In November 1938, the Great Terror also ended on Stalin's orders, and, to this end, Ezhov was replaced by Lavrenti P. Beria.⁴⁴

Beria took over a rather chaotic camp economy. The arrests of many camp leaders, the death and disability rates among prisoners, and the arrival of numerous new prisoners had so destabilized production, that the NKVD was no longer able to realize its economic plans. In order to reorganize the gulag economy, Beria introduced several drastic measures. First, he established a Special Technical Bureau, which was to make use of the special technical knowledge and talents of prisoners. Besides, he demanded an increase in food rations and clothes for prisoners, he proposed to extend the working day to eleven hours, he called for a halt to the early release on parole, and he suggested strengthening the repressive measures against malingerers and wreckers (to include execution).⁴⁵ The idea was to 'exploit, as much as possible, all the physical capacities of all the prisoners.'⁴⁶

By far the biggest wave of arrests took place during the Second World War, although it is actually more accurate to divide the overall WWII-wave into three separate ones. What these waves had in common was that they brought large numbers of foreigners to the camps. First of all was the wave of prisoners from the newly occupied territories. Immediately after the Soviet invasion of eastern Poland, in September 1939, the NKVD began arresting people. More than 100,000 Poles were sent to the gulag, while another 320,000 were exiled to remote villages in Siberia, Kazakhstan, Central Asia and Northern Russia (some of which had been established by the kulaks). Those most at risk were members of the former Polish administration, traders and merchants, landowners and wealthy peasants, industrialists, shopkeepers and civil servants.⁴⁷ Additionally,

⁴³ Ibid., p. 71.

⁴⁴ Werth, 'A state against its people', p. 190.

⁴⁵ O.V. Chlevniuk, *The history of the gulag: from collectivization to the Great Terror* (New Haven etc. 2004), pp. 196, 205-6; Werth, 'A state against its people', pp. 205-6.

⁴⁶ Quote by L.P. Beria and cited in Werth, 'A state against its people', p. 206.

⁴⁷ Applebaum, *Gulag*, pp. 382-3; Werth, 'A state against its people', p. 209.

almost 100,000 people from the Baltic States were transported to the gulag, whereas another 160,000 Balts and almost 40,000 Moldavians were sent into exile. Because of the huge numbers of arrests, very few people were actually put on trial. After the Poles and Balts, Stalin began to target the Soviet minority groups. The entire German population living on the Volga and Finns who inhabited the Soviet republic of Karelia were being expelled. The same fate awaited the Caucasian nations – the Chechens, Ingush, Kalmyks, Karachai and Balkars – and the Crimean Tartars. By the end of the war, 1.2 million Soviet Germans had been deported, together with 390,000 Chechens, 90,000 Ingush, 90,000 Kalmyks, 70,000 Karachai, 40,000 Balkars, 180,000 Crimean Tartars and 9,000 Finns. What was different about the WWII-wave was that people were arrested solely on the basis of their blood.⁴⁸ But the all-embracing wave of arrests didn't end here. By far the largest number of foreigners entered the camps as prisoners of war. That is, if they actually made it to the camps. On Stalin's orders, more than 20,000 captured Polish officers were shot in April 1940. The Germans discovered 4,000 bodies of those executed in Katyń forest, in the spring of 1943. Altogether, between 1941 and 1945, the Soviet Union took almost 2.4 million German POWs, 1.1 million other European soldiers and about 600,000 Japanese war prisoners. The NKVD set up special POW-camps from March 1944 onwards. Although these camps technically did not belong to the gulag (they were controlled by the Administration of War Prisoners, and later the Main Administration of War Prisoners and Internees), the difference between the two was never clear.⁴⁹

With the Second World War won, millions of Soviet citizens expected life to become easier. However, not even a year had passed before the Cold War began. This was Stalin's reason to tighten, once again, his grip on his people. In March 1946, the NKVD split into two different organizations: the gulag remained under the control of the MVD, whereas the MGB dealt with counterintelligence, foreign intelligence and border guards. Instead of relaxing the repression after the war, the Soviet government got on with a new cycle of arrests. Consequently, the gulag continued to expand. The entire camp system would not reach its peak before the early 1950s. When Stalin died on 5 March

⁴⁸ Applebaum, *Gulag*, pp. 383, 386-8; Solzhenitsyn, *The gulag archipelago*, pp. 78-9, 84.

⁴⁹ Applebaum, *Gulag*, pp. 389-92.

1953, more than three million prisoners were held in the gulag. A comparable amount of people was living in exile.⁵⁰

1.3 THE GULAG AFTER STALIN, 1953-1992

After Stalin's death, a new era – the years of the “Thaw” – began. His main successors established a collective leadership through which they sought to assure the stability of the system and distribute responsibilities. However, behind the cover of collective leadership, a struggle for power unfolded, particularly among G.M. Malenkov (Chairman of the Council of Ministers), L.P. Beria (head of the NKVD) and N.S. Khrushchev (a Party secretary who became First Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU in September 1953).⁵¹ Together with other central Party chiefs, these potential supreme leaders began to conduct an extensive debate about Stalinist justice. The majority of them agreed on the need to diminish the power of the secret police. To that end, Beria was arrested on 26 June 1953 and executed in the same year. In July 1954, the collective leadership issued a decree on the gulag, which brought back the eight-hour workday, simplified the camp system, and made it easier for prisoners to earn early release through hard work. Besides, prisoners were allowed to write letters, receive packages and buy clothes. At the same time, Khrushchev set up national as well as local committees to review prisoners' sentences and releases slowly began. However, the real turning point in the official recognition of Stalinist crimes came in February 1956, when Khrushchev gave his “secret speech” at the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party. For the first time, a prominent Communist leader openly attacked the cult of Stalin's personality and acknowledged the many crimes and injustices he had committed. In doing so, Khrushchev tried to save the Communist regime by attributing the crimes of Communism to Stalin only (despite his own personal involvement in carrying out Stalin's terror). Besides, because he went further than his colleagues in pushing the process of “de-Stalinization,” Khrushchev strengthened his position within the leadership. For the same reason, he authorized, in 1962, the publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.⁵² ‘Khrushchev saw that such

⁵⁰ Applebaum, *Gulag*, pp. 414-6; Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, ‘Gulag: Soviet forced labor camps and the struggle for freedom’, <http://gulaghistory.org/nps/onlineexhibit/> (viewed on 12 August 2011).

⁵¹ Brown et al., *The Cambridge encyclopedia*, p. 119; Werth, ‘A state against its people’, p. 250.

⁵² Applebaum, *Gulag*, pp. 454-5; Brown et al., *The Cambridge encyclopedia*, pp. 120-1; Courtois, ‘Introduction: the crimes of communism’, pp. 23-5.

publications could conduct his propaganda for him: literary writers could discredit his enemies by tarring them with the crimes of the past.⁵³ This period of official criticism came to a sudden end when Khrushchev was stripped of his powers on 24 October 1964. The title of First Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU then went to Leonid Brezhnev.

Stalin's death truly meant the end of the gulag as a system of mass forced labour where millions of people were incarcerated. Although there were still periods of severe repression, the camp system would never be restored to its previous size. However, the gulag did not disappear altogether. It evolved. This is well illustrated by the nature and number of political prisoners. During Stalin's era, almost everyone could be arrested, at any moment, and without any cause. Brezhnev's KGB, on the other hand, arrested people for things they had actually done: either they had committed a real crime, or they were caught for their literary, religious, or political opposition to the Soviet Union. In other words, people knew why they had been taken into custody, and political prisoners identified themselves as such. In the camps, political prisoners were separated from ordinary criminals and they wore a different uniform. In the mid-1970s, Amnesty International estimated that of the one million prisoners in the USSR, no more than 10,000 had political sentences. Most of the political prisoners were locked up in one of the two "political" camp complexes at Mordovia and Perm.⁵⁴ The security arrangements at Perm-36, the most notorious camp for political prisoners, were exceptionally strict. The entire complex was surrounded with multilayered barbed-wire fences enclosed by timber board and equipped with alarm and signalling systems. In the 1970s, all the wood-burning stoves were replaced by a central heating system, since the stoves and stacks of firewood had provided opportunities for prisoners to hide forbidden items and exchange messages. Accordingly, each isolation cell was equipped with a lavatory. Again, the aim of better sanitary facilities was to increase the isolation of prisoners.⁵⁵ The majority of prisoners at Perm-36 were intellectuals, writers, artists and journalists, who had been active in a small but thriving underground society. Throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, members of the underground collected and circulated information on the history of Stalinism, the conditions in the forced labour camps, and the state of

⁵³ Applebaum, *Gulag*, p. 466.

⁵⁴ Applebaum, *Gulag*, pp. 5, 471-2.

⁵⁵ The Memorial Museum for the History of Political Repressions, 'Former camp Perm-36: history of the camp' (version 2010), <http://www.gulagmuseum.ru/eng/camp/history/> (viewed on 12 August 2011).

human rights in the Soviet Union. The name for their underground literature was *samizdat*, which literally means “self-publishing house.” Samizdat was also sent to the West, in hopes of making the situation in the Soviet Union known to a wider international public.⁵⁶

In March 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was appointed General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU. Gorbachev was convinced that the Soviet Union needed to speak openly about its troubles, and, to that end, he introduced “glasnost”, or “openness”. Glasnost was initially meant to be an economic policy, but, within an astonishingly short period of time, it set in motion a discussion about the Soviet past. The Soviet press began to publish formerly banned books, as well as new memoirs and articles about Stalinist camps, prisons and mass murders. Partly in response to these press revelations, a process of rehabilitation began. At the end of 1986, Gorbachev granted a general pardon to all Soviet political prisoners. However, the KGB was reluctant to let the political prisoners go. In fact, when Perm-36 was closed in 1988, not all its political prisoners were released. Some of them were transferred to the nearby prison camp of Perm-35, where they would stay until February 1992. By this time, the Soviet Union had ceased to exist, and all the political camps were finally closed for good.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Applebaum, *Gulag*, pp. 477-8; Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, ‘Gulag: Soviet forced labor camps and the struggle for freedom’.

⁵⁷ Applebaum, *Gulag*, pp. 495-501; The Memorial Museum for the History of Political Repressions, ‘Former camp Perm-36: history of the camp’.

CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE LAOGAI

There have been prisons in China for thousands of years and some form of penal labour has existed more or less continuously since 200 BC. However, up until the twentieth century, the prison was only one of a wide variety of punishments available to the authorities. Others included torture, humiliation, corporal punishment and life-long internal exile.⁵⁸ China's traditional system of punishment slowly fell apart during the late Qing period (c. 1897-1911). Inspired by foreign powers and eager to eliminate extraterritorial privileges, the Chinese authorities set out to compose new legal codes and to reform the prison system. The imperial reformers reduced available punishments to execution, imprisonment and fines and stressed the reformatory potential of the prison. After the collapse of the Qing Empire in 1911, the prison reform program was continued by the Yuan Shikai government (1912-16), the so-called "warlords" (1916-27) and the Guomindang (GMD) (1927-49). As a result, the late Qing period and subsequent Republican Era (1911-1949) were characterised by a significant continuity in penal philosophy and administration.⁵⁹

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was founded in July 1921 in Shanghai. Between 1923 and 1927, the CCP formed a united front with the Guomindang. Historians call the period from the foundation of the CCP until the break with the GMD the First Revolutionary Civil War.⁶⁰ From August to December 1927, the Chinese Communist Party staged a series of insurrections in Nanchang, Hunan, Hupei and Canton. The idea behind these uprisings was that the decisive battle had to be waged in the cities. However, when every attempt to take over a major city failed, the CCP decided to build up its strength among China's peasants.⁶¹ This chapter will provide an overview of the development of the Chinese Communist Party and the system of forced labour camps it set up from 1927 onwards. In doing so, a distinction has been made between the

⁵⁸ Seymour & Anderson, *New ghosts, old ghosts*, p. 12; Williams & Wu, *The great wall of confinement*, pp. 30, 34.

⁵⁹ F. Dikötter, *Crime, punishment and the prison in modern China* (New York 2002), pp. 1, 61; Seymour & Anderson, *New ghosts, old ghosts*, p. 14; Williams & Wu, *The great wall of confinement*, pp. 29-30.

⁶⁰ The Second Revolutionary Civil War (1927-1937) covered the Jiangxi period and the Long March; the period between 1937 and 1945 is called the War of Resistance Against Japan; the renewal of the war against the Guomindang from 1945 to 1949 is the Third Revolutionary Civil War. See: J. Guillermaz, *A history of the Chinese Communist Party 1921-1949* (London 1972).

⁶¹ J. Ch'en, 'The Communist movement 1927-1937', in: Fairbank, J.K., & Feuerwerker, A., (eds.), *The Cambridge history of China: Republican China, 1912-1949* (Cambridge 2008), pp. 183-8.

revolutionary years before the Communist victory in 1949, the so-called Mao Era, and the period from Mao's death in 1976 until the present.

2.1 ORIGINS OF THE LAOGAI, 1927-1949

The CCP set up its first Red Bases in 1928 in the Jinggangshan Mountains, between Hunan and Jiangxi. On 7 November 1931, the fourteenth anniversary of the October Revolution, Mao Zedong established a Chinese Soviet Republic in the eastern part of Jiangxi province.⁶² Almost immediately after the foundation of the Jiangxi Soviet, Mao and other Communist leaders started to eliminate the legal codes developed in the late Qing and the Republican Era. As an alternative, the Jiangxi Soviet Central Executive Committee issued decrees and policy statements, which culminated, in December 1933, in the Central People's Commissariat of Justice's "Draft Statute of the Chinese Soviet Republic Governing Punishment of Counterrevolutionaries." A counterrevolutionary can be compared to the Soviet "class enemy": he or she constituted a real or imagined threat to the Communist regime. Most counterrevolutionaries were landowners, rich peasants or "capitalists."⁶³ For example, Article 30 of the 1933 Draft Statute stated that 'any counterrevolutionary criminal behaviour not included in this statute may be punished according to an article in this statute dealing with similar crimes.'⁶⁴ Moreover, the law was subordinate to the revolution, as can be concluded from a statement by Commissar of Justice Liang Botai: 'Whatever is to the advantage of the revolution, that is the law. Whenever it is to the advantage of the revolution the legal procedure can at any time be adapted. One ought not to hinder the interests of the revolution because of legal procedure.'⁶⁵ Most counterrevolutionaries were executed or sent to "labour reformatories." The latter had the dual mission of "educating" and "reforming" prisoners as well as forcing them to engage in economic production. As such, the labour reformatory was the predecessor of the modern laogai.⁶⁶

The Long March, which lasted from October 1934 to October 1935, brought the Chinese Communist Party from Jiangxi to North China, where they established a power

⁶² J.-L. Margolin, 'China: a long march into night', in: Courtois, S., Werth, N., Panné, J.-L., Paczkowski, A., Bartošek, K., & Margolin, J.-L. (eds.), *The black book of communism: crimes, terror, repression* (Cambridge etc. 1999), p. 471; Williams & Wu, *The great wall of confinement*, p. 35.

⁶³ William & Wu, *The great wall of confinement*, pp. 35-6, 40.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 39.

⁶⁵ Quoted from the journal *Hongse Zhonghua* [Red China] and cited in T. Lötveit, *Chinese Communism 1931-1934: experience in civil government* (London etc. 1978), p. 140.

⁶⁶ Wu, *Laogai*, p. 55; Williams & Wu, *The great wall of confinement*, pp. 39-40.

base at Yan'an. During the Yan'an period (1935-45), Mao Zedong finally became the main leader of the CCP, primarily because of his talent to express political principles in persuasive papers and speeches.⁶⁷ Compared to the Jiangxi Soviet, there were fewer executions in Yan'an, and the CCP now began to organize legislative and public security institutions.⁶⁸ From the Yan'an base, the CCP spread across vast areas of North and Central China and Party membership increased from 40,000 in 1937 to 800,000 in 1940 and more than 1.2 million in 1945. In order to provide new members with ideological education and to uphold the unity and discipline of the Communist movement in general, Mao carried out a rectification campaign (called *Cheng Feng*, which literally means "reform of work style/spirit") from 1941 to 1944.⁶⁹ Thought reform was at the heart of the rectification campaign. Party cadres from all levels had to take part in study groups and were asked to write "thought examinations." The rectification campaign was also a purge. The CCP wanted to get rid of those who did not seem determined to fight against the Guomindang and those who questioned Mao's authority.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, thought reform had become a fundamental component of penal treatment. Accordingly, all criminals had to spend time in an institution of confinement, where they would have the chance to reform themselves by means of labour and political study.⁷¹ In November 1942, the CCP for the first time spoke of "a blending of harsh and lenient political measures," which would eventually lead to the well-known government policy of "leniency with those who cooperate, harshness with those who resist."⁷² By the end of the Yan'an period, the CCP began to use prisoners in labour brigades in the countryside. These brigades were made up of eleven or twelve inmates, who were supervised by local militia.⁷³

After Japan's surrender in 1945, the number of prisoners drastically increased. As a result, the newly created labour brigades steadily grew into larger labour camps. From 1947 onwards, labour camps that contained up to 2,000 inmates became a widespread phenomenon.⁷⁴ However, traditional prisons still existed in the urban areas. When the

⁶⁷ Mühlhahn, *Criminal justice in China*, p. 165.

⁶⁸ William & Wu, *The great wall of confinement*, p. 46; Wu, *Laogai*, p. 57.

⁶⁹ Guillermaz, *A history of the Chinese Communist Party*, pp. 361, 363-4. See also: J.P. Harrison, *The long march to power: a history of the Chinese Communist Party, 1921-72* (London 1973), pp. 323-47.

⁷⁰ Guillermaz, *A history of the Chinese Communist Party*, p. 367; Mühlhahn, *Criminal justice in China*, p. 165.

⁷¹ Mühlhahn, *Criminal justice in China*, p. 167.

⁷² Wu, *Laogai*, p. 57.

⁷³ Mühlhahn, *Criminal justice in China*, p. 168.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Communists took over a city and its prisons, they released the prisoners incarcerated because of their involvement in revolutionary activities, they examined the wardens and they set up a new prison administration.⁷⁵ Harbin Prison provides a good example of the transition of prison authority and its consequences. When the Communists took over Harbin Prison in 1946, it was one of the first prisons under CCP control. The new prison administration took great pains to exert its influence on prison society. In order to prevent the emergence of tyrants, prisoners were organized into “self-administrative committees,” which were responsible for maintaining prison discipline, managing everyday prison life, upholding prison hygiene and arranging study sessions. Additionally, the Harbin Prison administrators introduced a program of cultural and ideological education.⁷⁶ Harbin Prison was particularly celebrated for its economic success. Within a year after its takeover, Harbin Prison was self-sufficient, and two years later it submitted almost three quarters of its income to the people’s government.⁷⁷ ‘While Harbin Prison was not a labour camp, it developed many features of the later labour camp system. The organization of inmate society in the prison; the emphasis on self-administration, thought reform, and political study; and the insistence on an economic contribution that prisoners owed to both the party and the state – all of these factors would eventually become hallmarks of the laogai.’⁷⁸

2.2 THE LAOGAI DURING THE MAO ERA, 1949-1976

On 1 October 1949, Mao Zedong climbed the Gate of Heavenly Peace (Tiananmen) in Beijing and declared the victory of the Communist revolution.⁷⁹ Immediately after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Mao dismantled all previous legal codes from the late Qing and the Republican Era and removed every remaining GMD employee from office. After the old order was destroyed, the CCP leadership set out to establish a new judicial system. This was to be based on the laws and judicial organs of both the Soviet Union as well as the former CCP revolutionary bases (primarily those in Jiangxi and Yan’an).⁸⁰ Between 1950 and 1953, the new authorities carried out several

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 168-9.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 169-70.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 170. Wu, *Laogai*, p. 59.

⁷⁸ Mühlhahn, *Criminal justice in China*, p. 171.

⁷⁹ R. Service, *Comrades: a history of world communism* (London 2007), p. 283.

⁸⁰ Mühlhahn, *Criminal justice in China*, p. 177; Williams & Wu, *The great wall of confinement*, pp. 44-5.

campaigns⁸¹ in order to isolate the “enemies of the people.” This category included the “five black elements”: landlords, rich peasants, reactionary capitalist counterrevolutionaries, criminal offenders and rightists.⁸² The campaigns led to the arrests of so many people, that the authorities had to come up with a new system to accommodate them. The placement of those arrested was for the first time thoroughly discussed during the Third National Conference on Public Security in May 1951. The resolution that was adopted after this conference established the organizational structure for the development of the laogai. Mao himself personally revised the document and added the following amendment:

The large number of people who are serving their sentences is an enormous source of labour. In order to reform them, in order to solve the problem of the prisons, in order that these sentenced counterrevolutionaries will not just sit there and be fed for nothing, we should begin to organize our laogai work. In the areas where this work already exists, it should be expanded.⁸³

Besides labour and production, the Resolution of the Third National Public Security Conference emphasized the political, ideological, cultural and hygienic education of prisoners. Finally, the conference appointed the Ministry of Public Security to be in charge of the administration of the prison sector. Luo Ruiqing, the founding Minister of Public Security, compared himself to Felix Dzerzhinsky, whose portrait hung on Luo’s office wall.⁸⁴ However, unlike the Soviet Union, the CCP did not want a central agency in control of the labour camp system. Instead, the laogai came under the direct administrative domain of provincial Public Security Bureaus.⁸⁵ The legal basis for the laogai was established in the Statute on Laogai, publicly announced on 26 August 1954 and promulgated 7 September of that year.⁸⁶

Throughout the 1950s, laogai camps emerged all over China, but the biggest and most populous camps were located in northern Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, Tibet, Xinjiang

⁸¹ These were the Land Reform Campaign (1950-52), the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries (1950-51), the Three Anti’s Campaign [anticorruption, antiwaste, antibureaucracy] (1952), the Five Anti’s Campaign [antibribery, anti-tax evasion, antifraud, anti-theft of state property, anti-leakage of state economic secrets] (1952), and the Thought Reform Campaign (1951-52). See: Mühlhahn, *Criminal Justice in China*, p. 181.

⁸² K. Mühlhahn, “Remembering a bitter past”: the trauma of China’s labour camps, 1949-1978’, *History and Memory*, 16 (2004), p. 116.

⁸³ Quoted from Sun Xiaoli, *Zhongguo laodong gaizao zhidu de lilun yu shijian* [The theory and practice of the Chinese laogai system] and cited in LRF, *Laogai Handbook*, pp. 7-8.

⁸⁴ Williams & Wu, *The great wall of confinement*, p. 49.

⁸⁵ Mühlhahn, *Criminal justice in China*, pp. 222-5.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

and particularly Qinghai.⁸⁷ The latter was a real penal province with several camps that could house tens of thousands of prisoners. One of them, Tanggemu Farm, extended more than seventy kilometres from east to west.⁸⁸ In Qinghai province, laogai prisoners mainly worked on the clearance of wasteland, agricultural production and the building of roads and railways. Besides, there were a few factories in the provincial capital Xining.⁸⁹ Overall, Qinghai can best be described as ‘the Chinese equivalent of the Russian Kolyma, with a climate that was scorching in the summer and freezing in the winter.’⁹⁰

Throughout the Mao Era, various forms of incarceration existed. There were detention centres, prisons, juvenile offender camps, the laogai (reform through labour), the laojiao (re-education through labour) and jiuye (forced job placement).⁹¹ The approximately 2,500 detention centres that were located in various cities were the first stop on the way to the labour camps. Here prisoners waited until the charges against them were drawn up. Sentences under two years were also served in these centres. Study sessions in the detention centres tended to be more intense than those in the laogai. The latter put greater emphasis on labour and production.⁹² The prisons held the most serious offenders, including those with a life sentence or a death sentence with a two-year reprieve. Besides, prisons housed the more sensitive cases, like high-ranking CCP members, foreigners, priests, and spies. Compared to the laogai, there was a greater degree of strictness and a higher level of security in the prisons.⁹³ The minimum age for prisoners has varied over the years, but juvenile offenders were forced to labour like other inmates and were organized along the same military lines.⁹⁴ The inmates of the camps were split into three groups: laogai, laojiao and jiuye. During the Mao Era, the biggest group of prisoners belonged to the laogai. These inmates had lost their civil rights, did not get paid for their labour and were seldom allowed to receive visitors.⁹⁵

All prisoners in the detention centres, prisons and laogai had been through some kind of trial or tribunal and had received specific sentences. Laojiao inmates, on the other

⁸⁷ Margolin, ‘China: a long march into night’, p. 499.

⁸⁸ H. Wu, & G. Vecsey, *Troublemaker* (2002), p. 118.

⁸⁹ J.-L. Domenach, *Chine: l’archipel oublié* (Paris 1992), p. 541.

⁹⁰ Margolin, ‘China: a long march into night’, p. 499.

⁹¹ Wu, *Laogai*, pp. 6-14. See also: Domenach, *Chine*, pp. 139-226.

⁹² Margolin, ‘China: a long march into night’, pp. 498, 507, 510; Wu, *Laogai*, p.6. See also: Bao Ruo-wang (Jean Pasqualini) & Chelminski, *Prisoner of Mao*, pp. 27-83 and H. Wu, & C. Wakeman, *Bitter winds: a memoir of my years in China’s gulag* (New York etc. 1994), pp. 48-70.

⁹³ Margolin, ‘China: a long march into night’, p. 499; Wu, *Laogai*, pp. 8-9.

⁹⁴ LRF, *Laogai Handbook*, p. 22.

⁹⁵ Margolin, ‘China: a long march into night’, p. 499.

hand, were assigned to periods of study and manual labour without formal sentencing.⁹⁶ The Decision of the State Council of the People's Republic of China on the Question of Re-education Through Labour, promulgated on 3 August 1957, gave local police and administrative units the power to send "less serious offenders" straight to re-education through labour camps. The Decision did not prescribe a limit for the duration of incarceration, and, even though a 1961 regulation set the maximum period for lao jiao to three years, much depended upon the prisoner's attitude. If a prisoners "failed to admit guilt," "resisted reform" or "violated camp rules and discipline," three-year renewals could be continued indefinitely.⁹⁷ In theory, lao jiao prisoners kept their civil and political rights and even received a small income. However, in practice it was impossible to vote in the camps and most of their salary was held back to compensate for food and accommodation. In general, the day-to-day routine and organization of the lao jiao was very similar to that of the laogai.⁹⁸ According to the 1957 Decision, a lao jiao sentence could be imposed on the following four categories of people:

1. Those who do not engage in proper employment, those who behave like hooligans, and those who, although they steal, swindle, or engage in other such acts, are not pursued for criminal responsibility, who violate security administration and whom repeated education fails to change;
2. Those counterrevolutionaries and anti-socialist reactionaries who, because of their crimes are minor, are not pursued for criminal responsibility, who receive the sanction of expulsion from an organ, organization, enterprise, school or other such unit and who are without a way of earning a livelihood;
3. Those persons who have the capacity to labour but who for a long period refuse to labour or who destroy discipline and interfere with public order, an who [thus] receive the sanction of expulsion from an organ, organization, enterprise, school, or other such unit and who have no way of earning a livelihood;
4. Those who do not obey work assignments or arrangements for getting them employment or for transferring them to other employment, or those who do not accept the admonition to engage in labour and production, who ceaselessly and unreasonably make trouble and interfere with public affairs and whom repeated education fails to change.⁹⁹

During the Let a Hundred Flowers Boom and a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend Movement of May and June 1957, people were encouraged to criticize the Party.

⁹⁶ M.K. Whyte, 'Corrective labor camps in China', *Asian Survey* 13 (March 1973), p. 255

⁹⁷ Amnesty International, *China: punishment without crime: administrative detention* (version 31 August 1991), <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA17/027/1991/en> (retrieved on 4 September 2011), p. 32.

⁹⁸ M.K. Whyte, 'Corrective labor camps in China', *Asian Survey* 13 (March 1973), pp. 257-8.

⁹⁹ Quoted from Article 1 of the Decision of the State Council of the People's Republic of China on the Question of Re-education Through Labour and cited in Amnesty International, *China: punishment without crime*, p. 31.

Communist intellectuals who still remembered the rectification campaign in Yan'an stayed quiet, but hundreds of thousands of other people spoke freely about their grievances.¹⁰⁰ The Decision on the Question of Re-education Through Labour was adopted in the heat of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, which immediately followed the Hundred Flowers Movement. The Anti-Rightist Campaign sent between 300,000 and 400,000 "rightists" to the forced labour camps, many as laoiao inmates.¹⁰¹ Harry Wu had also publicly expressed his opinions on political affairs during the Hundred Flowers Movement, but was not imprisoned until 1960.¹⁰²

Probably the most controversial paragraph in the 1954 Statute on Laogai was Article 62. This article provided the basis for the so-called forced job placement system, or *jiuye*.¹⁰³ It stated that those prisoners who wished to remain in the camp area, whose services were needed, who had no residential registration and no job to return to, or who could be settled in sparsely populated areas, should continue to be employed by their local laogai unit.¹⁰⁴ Consequently, the majority of prisoners who had completed their sentences were kept in the camps as "free convicts" for the rest of their lives. The forced job placement formally existed alongside the laogai, but it can more accurately be described as an extension of the latter.¹⁰⁵ Until the 1960s, 95 percent of laogai and laoiao prisoners became "job placement personnel" after their sentences had been served. Those who did return from the camps were important figures such as Pu Yi (former emperor of Manchuria), CCP members and their children, minor criminals and old and infirm prisoners who had family in rural villages.¹⁰⁶ Job placement personnel did not have the same rights and freedoms as ordinary citizens, but continued to live in semi-prison conditions. They were deprived of the right to choose their job and place of residence, and their salary was no more than 60-70 percent that of a general worker.¹⁰⁷ Even though job placement personnel were allowed to marry and leave their work perhaps twice a year, they could never return to their home and pick up their civilian

¹⁰⁰ Margolin, 'China: a long march into night', p. 485.

¹⁰¹ Amnesty International, *China: punishment without crime*, p. 29.

¹⁰² United States, *Chinese prison system, "laogai": hearing before the Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights of the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, One Hundred Fourth Congress, first session, April 3, 1995* (Washington 1995), p. 13.

¹⁰³ Mühlhahn, *Criminal justice in China*, p. 228.

¹⁰⁴ Seymour & Anderson, *New ghosts, old ghosts*, p. 191.

¹⁰⁵ Mühlhahn, *Criminal justice in China*, p. 228.

¹⁰⁶ Wu, *Laogai*, p. 111.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

lives. For this reason, Harry Wu had mixed feelings when some of his laoiao friends were transferred to the forced job placement system:

I envied their chance for greater freedom, but I also knew their future prospects darkened with this transfer. Labour-reform prisoners like me, at least in theory, served a fixed sentence. We could maintain some vague hope that Party leaders would someday re-evaluate the policy toward rightists and announce a termination date for our prison terms. Even ten years away, we hoped that we might leave the prison system and resume our interrupted lives. The transfer to forced job placement status removed that possibility. Once resettled, the ex-prisoners would receive permanent assignment to a work unit, probably in some remote area, and would live out their lives in a netherworld of internal exile. After the announcement I thought about how Ao and the others would receive a regular monthly salary, buy their daily meals in a cafeteria, and spend their days off getting their shoes repaired or eating noodles in a small restaurant. But I also knew they could never hope to return to a regular life in society. They would have no working papers, no grain coupons, no housing, no way to exist apart from the network of farms and enterprises run by the Public Security Bureau. Their forced job placement label was a life sentence.¹⁰⁸

According to a saying in the in the camps, ‘there is an end to laogai and laoiao, but jiuye is forever.’¹⁰⁹

In the course of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-76), numerous Revolutionary Committees and Red Guards arose all over Chinese society who took over the country’s judicial and police apparatus. During 1966 and 1967, they carried out frequent attacks on the Ministry of Public Security in Beijing.¹¹⁰ The Revolutionary Committees and Red Guards quickly grew accustomed to taking people into custody, performing interrogations, and administering punishments – from fines to beatings and executions. In addition, they reintroduced punishments known from before the revolution such as public display and humiliation. At the time, the actions of the Revolutionary Committees and Red Guards were referred to as The Entire People’s Proletariat Dictatorship.¹¹¹ The Cultural Revolution was a disaster for the Ministry of Public Security and its facilities. Especially in the cities, Red Guards stormed the detention centres, prisons and camps. In some cases, prisoners were released and guards were put under arrest.¹¹² Within a short period of time, the number of laogai camps was reduced to half their former level and the total amount of land under

¹⁰⁸ Wu & Wakeman, *Bitter winds*, p. 187.

¹⁰⁹ United States, *Chinese prison system*, p. 15.

¹¹⁰ Mühlhahn, *Criminal justice in China*, p. 235.

¹¹¹ Wu, *Laogai*, p. 60.

¹¹² Mühlhahn, *Criminal justice in China*, pp. 235-6.

cultivation by laogai prisoners dropped by 60 percent.¹¹³ It was not until 1971 that the Ministry of Public Security was rehabilitated and given back its control over the prison sector. Subsequently, throughout the early 1970s, the severely weakened laogai system was able to take up its business again.¹¹⁴

2.3 THE LAOGAI AFTER MAO, 1976-PRESENT

After Mao's death on 9 September 1976, there was a short period of power competition. Mao himself had appointed Hua Guofeng as his successor. However, faced with a gathering economic crisis and popular discontent, Hua could not handle the situation by himself and brought Deng Xiaoping back to public life. Deng, who knew almost every influential Party agency from the inside, quickly surpassed Hua and became the CCP's supreme leader in December 1978.¹¹⁵ He reorganized the entire prison sector. Under Deng's leadership, hundreds of thousands of political prisoners were rehabilitated and released. Among them was Harry Wu, who by then had spent nineteen years in twelve different camps. Overall, the proportion of political prisoners in the laogai dropped from 90 percent in the 1950s to 10 percent in the 1980s.¹¹⁶ Deng shifted the emphasis of the penal system from re-education toward economic considerations. He stressed the productive potential of the laogai as a source of government revenue and ruled that laogai camps should function according to market principles.¹¹⁷ In 1979, the People's Republic of China produced its first Criminal Law. There had never been a penal code under Mao, because he had feared that it would restrict his manoeuvres.¹¹⁸ The 1979 Criminal Law reduced the repeated use of the principle of analogy: from now on, case-by-case approval from the Supreme People's Court was necessary. Besides, it drastically curtailed the customary practice of extending the sentence of a prisoner who appealed a guilty verdict.¹¹⁹ However, the new law still listed three different categories of political crimes: counterrevolution, endangering public security, and disrupting the order of

¹¹³ Wu, *Laogai*, p. 60.

¹¹⁴ Mühlhahn, *Criminal justice in China*, p. 236.

¹¹⁵ Service, *Comrades*, pp. 437-440.

¹¹⁶ Wu, *Laogai*, p. 19.

¹¹⁷ M. Pareles, 'Hard times, hard labor: prison labor reform in China from 1978 to present', *Greater China* (winter 2006), <http://www.stanford.edu/group/sjeaa/journal61/china3.pdf> (retrieved on 12 July 2010), p. 34

¹¹⁸ Margolin, 'China: a long march into night', p. 540.

¹¹⁹ Williams & Wu, *The great wall of confinement*, pp. 39, 75.

social administration.¹²⁰ In 2006, there was still a 99 percent conviction rate for the charge of endangering state security.¹²¹ One year after the Criminal Law was promulgated, the State Council ordered that *jiuye* should be ended in its existing form. As a result, by 1988, job placement personnel constituted only 5 percent of the total amount of prisoners.¹²² Meanwhile, in 1983, all penal institutions were transferred from the Ministry of Public Security to the Ministry of Justice, which has had jurisdiction ever since.¹²³

Throughout the 1990s, the Chinese government published several more legal reforms, including a 1992 White Paper entitled “Criminal Reform in China”¹²⁴ and the Prison Law of 1994. The latter replaced the term *laogai* with *jianyu* (监狱), or “prison.” However, this alteration in language did not change the actual function and character of the forced labour camps and in common parlance the term *laogai* is still used as much as before. According to Harry Wu, ‘they only changed the surface, but not the reality.’¹²⁵ Wu established the Laogai Research Foundation in 1992, with the mission ‘to gather information on and raise public awareness of the laogai.’¹²⁶ He is determined to bring to the attention of the United States government that goods produced in laogai camps are being sold in the United States, regardless of laws prohibiting such actions.¹²⁷ In fact, throughout the 1990s, Wu himself returned to China multiple times to further investigate the country’s extensive prison system.

When the world entered the twenty-first century, China was the only major power with a flourishing concentration camp system.¹²⁸ With regard to this system, three important developments during the last decade deserve special attention. First was the imprisonment of several hundreds of thousands of Falun Gong practitioners in re-education through labour camps since 1999. Indeed, according to former *laojiao*

¹²⁰ LRF, *Laogai Handbook*, p. 8.

¹²¹ Congressional-Executive Commission on China, *Annual Report* (version September 2006), <http://www.cecc.gov/pages/annualRpt/annualRpt06/CECCannRpt2006.pdf> (retrieved on 15 December 2011), p. 47.

¹²² Seymour & Anderson, *New ghosts, old ghosts*, p. 197.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹²⁴ See: Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, ‘Criminal Reform in China’ (version August 1992), <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/criminal/index.htm> (viewed on 6 September 2011).

¹²⁵ Interview with Harry Wu, laogai survivor and executive director of the Laogai Research Foundation, 28 October 2010.

¹²⁶ Laogai Research Foundation, ‘About us’, <http://www.laogai.org/aboutus> (viewed on 5 September 2011).

¹²⁷ J. Pasqualini, ‘Glimpses inside China’s gulag’, *The China Quarterly*, 134 (1993), p. 357.

¹²⁸ Williams & Wu, *The great wall of confinement*, p. 2.

inmates, Falun Gong practitioners have made up a considerable number of the total laojiao population during the last decade.¹²⁹ Second was the promulgation of the Anti-Drug Law of the People's Republic of China in June 2008. Whereas during the Mao Era the majority of laojiao inmates were political dissidents, in the twenty-first century they are mostly drug offenders and those involved in the sex trade.¹³⁰ According to the Chinese government, the 2008 Anti-Drug Law ended the incarceration of drug users in laojiao camps. Instead, they would be sent to "drug detention centres." However, in reality, 'the Anti-Drug Law is continuing and extending the abuses of re-education through labour, simply under another name.'¹³¹ The local police runs the drug detention centres, and forces drug users to engage in unpaid labour. There is no treatment for quitting drugs.¹³² The third major event concerns the Olympic games in Beijing in August 2008. In the run-up to the Olympics, the Chinese government detained numerous human rights defenders, religious practitioners, ethnic minorities, lawyers and journalists in laojiao camps.¹³³ One of them was 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo. He had worked with other dissidents and intellectuals to draft Charter '08, an open letter calling for broad legal and political reform, increased protection of human rights, and real democracy in China.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ United States Department of State, *Annual report on international religious freedom* (version 2009), <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/140693.pdf> (retrieved on 8 September 2011), p. 21.

¹³⁰ Pareles, 'Hard times, hard labor', p. 34

¹³¹ Human Rights Watch, *"Where darkness knows no limits": incarceration, ill-treatment and forced labor as drug rehabilitation in China* (version January 2010), http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/china0110webwcover_0.pdf (retrieved on 6 September 2011), p. 2.

¹³² *Ibid.*, pp. 1-3.

¹³³ Amnesty International, *Amnesty International report 2009: the state of the world's human rights* (version 2009), <http://report2009.amnesty.org/sites/report2009.amnesty.org/files/documents/air09-en.pdf> (retrieved on 6 September 2011), p. 107.

¹³⁴ N. Kempton, & N. Richardson, *Laogai: the machinery of repression in China* (New York 2009), p. 91.

CHAPTER 3: THE POLITICAL FUNCTION OF THE GULAG AND THE LAOGAI

For both the Soviet and the Chinese Communists, the term Communism had two different meanings. First of all, it referred to an international movement determined to put an end to capitalism. Second, Communism was the name of the final stage in Marx's development theory. As such, it stood for an independent, stateless, co-operative society that would exist in the future.¹³⁵ According to Archie Brown, there are six defining characteristics of a Communist system. He subsequently groups them into three pairs, linked to (1) the political system, (2) the economic system, and (3) ideology. The political features are the "the monopoly of power of the Communist Party" and "democratic centralism"; the economic ones are "non-capitalist ownership of the means of production" and the existence of a "command economy, as distinct from a market economy"; and the characteristics relating to ideology are "a declared aim of building Communism" and the "existence of, and sense of belonging to, an international Communist movement."¹³⁶ Brown's first two characteristics are essential in order to examine the political function of the gulag and the laogai. This chapter will therefore begin with an explanation of how the political systems in the Soviet Union and China were related to the forced labour camps. Next, it will demonstrate that this relationship can be described in Micheal Mann's terms "classicide" and "fratricide." The last section of this chapter will throw some light on the capitalist developments within the PRC in relation to CCP power and the laogai system.

3.1 RULE BY THE VANGUARD PARTY OF THE PROLETARIAT

Both the Bolsheviks and the Chinese Communist Party adhered to a Marxist tradition of development theory. Marx believed that it was inevitable that a country must move through feudalism and capitalism in order to reach socialism, with each phase set up by a revolutionary outburst.¹³⁷ According to Marx, capitalism would lay the economic foundations needed for socialism, but it would do so by exploiting the labour of the people. Therefore, the people had to overthrow the capitalist system and take all political and economic power under socialism.¹³⁸ Because Russia was not yet into the

¹³⁵ A.H. Brown, *The rise and fall of communism* (New York 2009), p. 101.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-114.

¹³⁷ G. Brinkley, 'Leninism: what it was and what is was not', *Review of Politics*, 60 (1998), p. 151.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

normal capitalist stage at the beginning of the twentieth century, Lenin introduced the “vanguard” party concept. The vanguard consisted of a group of leading revolutionaries who were to guide the people through a triumphant revolution.¹³⁹ This concept was adopted by the Bolsheviks as well as by the CCP. Both described themselves as “the dictatorship of the proletariat” and depended upon a monopoly of power to survive. Consequently, all groups with opposing political views were banned. Mikhail Tomsky, leader of the Soviet trade unions, made the following statement in November 1927: ‘We allow other parties to exist. However, the fundamental principle that distinguishes us from the West is as follows: one party rules, and all the others are in jail!’¹⁴⁰ When the CCP came to power in 1949, it completely destroyed the remaining power and influence of their main political opponent: the Guomindang. Brown’s first characteristic, the monopoly of power of the Communist party, was thus present in both the Soviet Union and China.

The second feature, democratic centralism, in theory meant that there was room for discussion of issues until a decision had been made. The decisions of higher party organs were binding though, and had to be implemented all over the party and society in an organized and efficient way. According to Mao, democratic centralism was ‘the method of discussion, criticism, persuasion and education, and not (...) the method of coercion or repression.’¹⁴¹ In reality, however, democratic centralism created an inflexible, hierarchical and strictly disciplined party. When this highly centralized character is combined with the monopoly of power of the Communist Party, it can be concluded that a great amount of power was concentrated in the highest party organs.¹⁴² Most powerful were the Politburo and the General Secretary. The relationship between these two has varied greatly over time. Whereas autocratic rule was the norm in the Soviet Union and China, under Stalin and Mao both countries turned into personal dictatorships.¹⁴³ Both Stalin and Mao were put on a pedestal equal to Marx and Lenin. In China, “Mao Zedong Thought” was officially recognized as the definitive adaptation of Marxism to the Chinese situation.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 152.

¹⁴⁰ Quoted from *Trud* [Labour] and cited in Courtois, ‘Introduction: the crimes of communism’, p. 7.

¹⁴¹ Mao Zedong, ‘On the correct handling of contradictions among the people’, in: *Selected works of Mao Tse-Tung* (Beijing 1961-1965), vol. 5, p. 389.

¹⁴² Brown, *The rise and fall of communism*, p. 107.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 107-8.

In accordance with Marxist-Leninist thought, the CPSU and the CCP cultivated an “organic” concept of “the people,” defined in terms of class. Mao gave the following description of “the people”:

At the present stage, the period of building socialism, the classes, strata and social groups which favour, support and work for the cause of socialist construction all come within the category of the people, while the social forces and groups which resist the socialist revolution and are hostile to or sabotage socialist construction are all enemies of the people.¹⁴⁵

In other words, ‘the people was the proletariat, and classes opposed to the proletariat were enemies of the people.’¹⁴⁶ It was the task of the state to “cleanse” the proletariat of its enemies, so they could no longer get in the way of social and economic development.¹⁴⁷ In doing so, the state focussed less on targeted individuals than on groups of people. The final goal was to exterminate groups that had been designated as enemies. ‘The future Communist society was to be built upon a proletarian people purified of the dregs of the bourgeoisie.’¹⁴⁸ Martin Latsis, one of the first Cheka leaders gave the following order on 1 November 1918:

We don’t make war against any people in particular. We are exterminating the bourgeoisie as a class. In your investigations don’t look for documents and pieces of evidence about what the defendant has done, whether in deed or in speaking or acting against Soviet authority. The first question you should ask him is what class he comes from, what are his roots, his education, his training, and his occupation.¹⁴⁹

The system of forced labour camps in both countries functioned as a way to get rid of the enemies of the people. For this reason, Solzhenitsyn has described the gulag as the state’s “sewage disposal system.”¹⁵⁰ In Richard Overy’s comparison of the camp systems in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, the purpose of the camps is first and foremost related to the isolation of enemies of the state. In Overy’s point of view, ‘the camps functioned as the logical outcome of ideologies rooted in the dichotomy between belonging and exclusion.’¹⁵¹ He goes on by saying that the camps were ‘the direct

¹⁴⁵ Mao Zedong, ‘On the correct handling of contradictions among the people’, p. 385.

¹⁴⁶ M. Mann, *The dark side of democracy: explaining ethnic cleansing* (Cambridge etc. 2005), p. 320.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

¹⁴⁸ Courtois, ‘Introduction: the crimes of communism’, p. 16.

¹⁴⁹ Quoted from *The Red Terror in Russia* and cited in Courtois, ‘Introduction: the crimes of communism’, p. 8.

¹⁵⁰ Solzhenitsyn, *The gulag archipelago*, pp. 24-92.

¹⁵¹ Overy, *The dictators*, p. 634.

consequence of the ideological driving-force of the two dictatorships, which rested (...) on the allocation of blame and the redemptive destruction of the enemy.’¹⁵² His conclusion can also be applied to the laogai system in China. From the start, the laogai has had the dual function of punishing criminals as well as to protect and strengthen the dictatorship of the CCP.¹⁵³ In fact, Mao himself stated that ‘our success in eliminating counterrevolutionaries is undoubtedly an important reason for the consolidation of our state.’¹⁵⁴ Today, the Chinese Communist Party still uses the laogai as a way to enforce its form of rule. The Chinese system of forced labour camps ‘will not be abandoned until that possibly distant day when the regime decides to coexist with political voices it does not control.’¹⁵⁵

The forced labour camps ‘symbolized at once the state’s vulnerability to opposition and its power to crush its enemies; the political opponent’s infinite viciousness and his ultimate powerlessness; the torture victim’s irrefutable guilt and the state’s unchallengeable rightness.’¹⁵⁶ There was no room for the idea that someone had unlawfully been taken into custody or that anyone on trial could be found not guilty. ‘People were not arrested because they were guilty; they were guilty because they had been arrested.’¹⁵⁷ Questioning the reason for one’s arrest was practically the same as opposing the Communist Party. By doing so, a prisoner showed that he truly was a counterrevolutionary.¹⁵⁸ There was no other way but to be submissive and accept one’s crimes. This explains the classic first question to every new prisoner: ‘Tell us why you are here.’¹⁵⁹

3.2 CLASSICIDE: ELIMINATING EXTERNAL ENEMIES

The political function of the gulag and the laogai was thus to isolate the enemies of the people. A further distinction can now be made between two different types of enemies. The first category deals with “external enemies”: those who belonged to the classes

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Wu, *Laogai*, p. 19.

¹⁵⁴ Mao Zedong, ‘On the correct handling of contradictions among the people’, p. 397.

¹⁵⁵ Nathan, ‘Introduction’, p. 23. See also: Amnesty International, *Political imprisonment in the People’s Republic of China* (version 1978),

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA17/015/1978/en/9bd51e41-0535-4c75-af00-4f5b53acca46/asa170151978en.pdf> (retrieved on 28 November 2011).

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁵⁷ Margolin, ‘China: a long march into night’, p. 507.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.; Solzhenitsyn, *The gulag archipelago*, pp. 12-3.

¹⁵⁹ Margolin, ‘China: a long march into night’, p. 507.

opposed to the proletariat (including the nobility, the middle class, the intelligentsia, the clergy, but also professional groups like military officers and the police). Micheal Mann has aptly called the elimination of this group “classicide.”¹⁶⁰ The second category encompasses opponents within the Communist Parties. These were “internal enemies.” They were removed in mass purges, which are labelled “fratricide” by Mann.¹⁶¹

In the Soviet Union, one of the earliest cases of classicide was the policy of “de-Cossackization,” beginning in 1920. The Cossacks had centuries ago succeeded in escaping serfdom by moving to the empty lands in southern Russia. During the Civil War, many of them fought against the Bolsheviks in an attempt to maintain control over their territory.¹⁶² The Bolsheviks, however, were determined to eliminate, by legal and physical means, any active or passive resistance to their authority. Besides, the Cossacks had been military allies of the tsarist regime and therefore belonged to an opposing class. Accordingly, all Cossack men were shot, and all women, children and elderly family members were deported to the camps.¹⁶³ Classicide occurred on a much grander scale during the “de-kulakization” of 1929-33 (see Chapter 1). Indeed, in December 1929, Stalin explicitly stated that its goal was ‘to exterminate the kulaks as a class.’¹⁶⁴

In China, classicide manifested itself mainly in the wide variety of political campaigns that were carried out by the CCP in order to suppress its enemies. Between 1949 and 1957, these included the Agrarian Revolution Movement, the Suppress Bandits and Oppose Hegemonists Movement, the Suppress Counter-Revolutionaries Movement, the Three Anti’s, Five Anti’s Movement, the Collectivization of Agriculture Movement, the Public and Private Joint Ownership Movement, and the Anti-Hu Feng Counter-Revolutionary Clique Movement.¹⁶⁵ Throughout the Mao Era, the main function of the laogai was to hold and punish those who were arrested during these and subsequent campaigns. However, repression of political opponents did not stop under Deng Xiaoping’s leadership. On the contrary, Deng initiated the Movement to Suppress the Beijing Democracy Wall (1979), the Movement Against Spiritual Pollution (1982), the Swiftly and Severely Attack Criminals Movement (1983), the Movement to Oppose

¹⁶⁰ Mann, *The dark side of democracy*, p. 320.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Brown, *The rise and fall of communism*, p. 53.

¹⁶³ Courtois, ‘Introduction: the crimes of communism’, pp. 8-9.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁶⁵ Wu, *Laogai*, pp. 63, 82.

“Capitalist Revision” (1986-87), and, above all, the suppression of the Tiananmen Democracy Movement (1989).¹⁶⁶

In general, it was not the intention of the Communist regimes to simply kill all their conceivable opponents. Prisoners were to make an economic contribution to the state – and reform themselves in the process (see Chapter 4 & 5). The reason that so many of them died can be found in mistaken revolutionary projects.¹⁶⁷ In both countries, programmes of rapid industrialization and forced collectivization led to malnutrition, overwork and death. The process of forced collectivization in the Soviet Union soon led to the famine of 1932-33, in which more than 6 million people died.¹⁶⁸ Likewise, the Great Leap Forward and the People’s Communes – China’s combined programme of industrialization and collectivization – were followed by three years of famine, in which between 20 and 30 million people starved to death.¹⁶⁹ The situation in the forced labour camps was greatly affected by these programmes of industrialization and the famines that ensued. Prisoners were given lower food rationing priority compared to the rest of society.¹⁷⁰ In August 1961, Harry Wu was transferred to section 585 at Qinghe Farm, a compound where all those who had reached an advance stage of starvation were sent. The food rations at section 585 were reduced to the absolute minimum, and prisoners would usually die within a short period of time.¹⁷¹

What was remarkable about both Communist regimes was that ‘when their transformational policies failed, they blamed the failure on the victims, whom they accused of sabotaging the transformation.’¹⁷²

3.3 FRATRICIDE: ELIMINATING INTERNAL ENEMIES

Stalin and Mao did not tolerate any doubt about the wisdom of their plans. This was true for Party members as much as it was for the general population. Communist leaders who expressed their concern about rushed industrialization would not remain in office very long.¹⁷³ In fact, there were no standards for handling conflict within the Communist

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

¹⁶⁷ Mann, *The dark side of democracy*, p. 319.

¹⁶⁸ Werth, ‘A state against its people’, pp. 159-60.

¹⁶⁹ Mann, *The dark side of democracy*, p. 336. See also: Margolin, ‘China: a long march into night’, pp. 487-96.

¹⁷⁰ Mann, *The dark side of democracy*, p. 337.

¹⁷¹ Wu, *Bitter winds*, pp. 112-21.

¹⁷² Mann, *The dark side of democracy*, p. 319-20.

¹⁷³ Applebaum, *Gulag*, p. 63.

Parties. Both the CPSU and the CCP had trouble dealing with disagreement between radicals and pragmatists. In both countries, factionalism has led to the arrests of hundreds of thousands of Party members, who were subsequently sentenced to terms in the gulag and the laogai.

The most famous case of fratricide in the Soviet Union was the Great Terror of 1937-38. During this period, many senior administrators within the Communist Party, the government and the military were arrested. Indeed, as Solzhenitsyn put it, 'the wave of 1937 swept up and carried off to the Archipelago people of position, people with a Party past, yes, educated people.'¹⁷⁴ There had already been mass expulsions from the CPSU earlier in the 1930s, but the Great Terror was bloodier, and is remembered for its high number of executions. It began with the public show trials of Kamenev and Zinoviev in August 1936. Other trials of leading Bolsheviks – among them Krestinsky, Rykov, Pyatokov, Radek, and Bukharin – followed in January 1937 and March 1938.¹⁷⁵ Under torture, these opponents of Stalin provided confessions about secretly planning to topple the government and killing its leaders. All of them were duly shot, along with many of their family members.¹⁷⁶ The majority of Soviet citizens were frightened by this new wave of repression. However, there was a small group of people that actually approved the new arrests. To them, the confessions explained why, despite great plans for industrialization, the Soviet Union was still so backward: all along, there had been "enemies of the people" within the higher ranks of the CPSU who had disrupted the social transformation of the country.¹⁷⁷ The Communist authorities thus held the "enemies of the people" responsible for the disastrous outcomes of their own plans. According to the same line of reasoning, many gulag camp commanders and top administrators were arrested during the Great Terror.

It was as if the system needed an explanation for why it worked so badly – as if it needed people to blame. Or perhaps 'the system' is a misleading expression: perhaps it was Stalin himself who needed to explain why his beautifully planned slave-labour projects progressed so slowly and with such mixed results.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ Solzhenitsyn, *The gulag archipelago*, p. 25.

¹⁷⁵ Applebaum, *Gulag*, pp. 104-5; Werth, 'A state against its people', p. 184.

¹⁷⁶ Applebaum, *Gulag*, p. 104.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

Unlike Stalin, Mao *did* lose much of his earlier legitimacy through the Great Leap Forward and the famine that had followed it. Therefore, in 1962, he was forced to hand over power to Liu Shaoqi.¹⁷⁹ In Mao's point of view, Liu subsequently betrayed the "dictatorship of the proletariat" by allowing the emergence of a new bureaucratic class within the CCP. In other words, Mao believed that the "vanguard party of the proletariat" had ceased to exist.¹⁸⁰ In 1966, he decided to intervene with a programme called the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. This would soon turn into the country's largest case of fratricide. At the start of the Cultural Revolution, Mao formulated four central objectives:

1. To replace his designated successors with leaders more faithful to his current thinking;
2. To rectify the Chinese Communist Party;
3. To provide China's youth with a revolutionary experience;
4. To achieve some specific polity changes that would make the educational, health care, and cultural systems less elitist.¹⁸¹

In order to fulfil his goals, Mao mobilized a younger generation of Party members – those who were in high schools and universities. The youths were organized into groups called the Red Guards, which had the tasks of "cleansing" the nation, eliminating the pragmatists and renewing the revolutionary spirit. Robert Jay Lifton has described the actions of the Red Guards as a "quest for revolutionary immortality," by which he means 'a shared sense of participating in permanent revolutionary fermentation, and of transcending individual death by "living on" indefinitely within the continuing revolution.'¹⁸² The Party youth had always heard their parents' stories about revolution and wartime. The Cultural Revolution was their chance for heroism. At the same time, they kept the revolution on track. When the violence committed by the Red Guards escalated and threatened to disintegrate society, the People's Liberation Army was ordered to put an end to it. As a result, numerous Red Guards were killed by army firepower. Ultimately, through the Cultural Revolution, the CCP did not only lose many of its original leaders in the earlier purges, but also an entire generation of future

¹⁷⁹ Margolin, 'China: a long march into night', p. 516.

¹⁸⁰ J.C. Hsiung, *Ideology and practice: the evolution of Chinese communism* (New York etc. 1970), pp. 274-5.

¹⁸¹ Mühlhahn, *Criminal justice in China*, p. 234.

¹⁸² R.J. Lifton, *Revolutionary immortality: Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (New York 1968), p. 7.

leaders. Taken as a whole, the Cultural Revolution resulted in the deaths of between 400,000 and 1 million people, the majority of which had been Party members.¹⁸³

3.4 CHINA'S CAPITALIST COMMUNISM

The Cultural Revolution had so destabilized the CCP that it was in no condition to undertake any radicalization or mobilization. Besides, as mentioned in Chapter 2, the Cultural Revolution severely damaged the laogai system. The forced labour camps gradually recuperated, but the Communist regime itself had to moderate.¹⁸⁴ After Mao's death in 1976, it became clear that the majority of the Chinese population wished for long-lasting political stability and economic growth. Likewise, many Communist leaders did not favour any kind of radical action or resuming factionalism.¹⁸⁵ When Deng came to power, he announced four fundamental principles: 'keeping the socialist road, maintaining the dictatorship of the proletariat, upholding the Party's leadership and adhering to Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought.'¹⁸⁶ Communist rule thus remained, but Deng was determined to bring back an entire capitalist sector. He dismantled the rural communes and allowed the establishment of private industrial enterprises. Globalization was embraced, foreign investment was invited and special economic zones were set up in the cities along the Pacific coast.¹⁸⁷ The introduction of capitalist measures had liberating effects. There were improvements in healthcare and education for the rural population and businessmen who set up their own shops and companies could earn a lot of money.¹⁸⁸ The CCP no longer regulated every aspect of public life and the command economy gradually ceased to exist. In 2006, 'private enterprises in China accounted for almost half of the country's GDP and more than two-thirds of its industrial output.'¹⁸⁹ In 2010, China became the country with the most exports and it surpassed Japan as the world's second-biggest economy.¹⁹⁰ At the end of the same year, Forbes Magazine appointed Hu Jintao, China's present leader, as the

¹⁸³ Mann, *The dark side of democracy*, p. 337.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Service, *Comrades*, p. 437.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 440.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 441.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 444.

¹⁸⁹ Brown, *The rise and fall of communism*, p. 605.

¹⁹⁰ J. Pomfret, 'Book review: 'Deng Xiaoping and the transformation of China,' by Ezra F. Vogel', *The Washington Post* (26 August 2011), http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/book-review-deng-xiaoping-and-the-transformation-of-china-by-ezra-f-vogel/2011/08/26/gIQAfTD6FK_story.html (viewed on 24 September 2011).

world's most powerful person. It was the first time that someone from China was heading the list.¹⁹¹

However, up until now, political reforms have failed to materialize. Deng only accepted democratic reforms insofar as they did not get in the way of his other plans.¹⁹² When, in the spring of 1989, thousands of students gathered in Tiananmen Square to demand an end to official corruption and to call for democratic and civil rights, Deng refused to compromise and declared martial law.¹⁹³ Li Peng, Prime Minister at the time, later said that to let the protesting students, whom the CCP had no power over, to 'negotiate with the Party and government as equals' would have been the same as to 'negate the leadership of the CCP and negate the entire socialist system.'¹⁹⁴ In the night between 3 and 4 June, the People's Liberation Army moved to central Beijing in order to "clear" the area of protesters. More than 1,000 people were killed and around 10,000 were injured. In Beijing alone, 10,000 people were taken into custody; another 30,000 were arrested in the rest of the country.¹⁹⁵ The protest leaders were sentenced to long terms in the laogai.¹⁹⁶ Neither Deng, nor his successors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, have since then shown any sign of moving towards democracy in a Western sense.

So even though China has substantially moved away from Communist economic criteria, it has managed to hang on to the two important political aspects. To this day, the Chinese Communist Party fully retains the monopoly of power and the rigidly hierarchical organization associated with democratic centralism.¹⁹⁷ Communism in China seems unassailable, but the regime itself apparently thinks otherwise and maintains that 'class struggle is still very intense in China.'¹⁹⁸ The CCP still uses the laogai as a means to repress its opponents. At the end of 2010, Human Rights Watch estimated that the number of political and religious prisoners ranged in the thousands.¹⁹⁹ According to official statistics from the Ministry of Justice, several

¹⁹¹ Forbes, 'The world's most powerful people' (version 3 November 2010), <http://www.forbes.com/wealth/powerful-people> (viewed on 24 September 2011).

¹⁹² Service, *Comrades*, p. 442.

¹⁹³ Amnesty International, 'The massacre of June 1989 and its aftermath' (version 17 September 1990), <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA17/009/1990/en/09883e40-f94b-11dd-b4a7-534af7b95ddd/asa170091990en.pdf> (retrieved on 14 September 2011).

¹⁹⁴ Nathan, 'Introduction', p. 20.

¹⁹⁵ Margolin, 'China: a long march into night', p. 542.

¹⁹⁶ Service, *Comrades*, p. 443.

¹⁹⁷ Brown, *The rise and fall of communism*, p. 604-5.

¹⁹⁸ Wu, *Laogai*, p. 2.

¹⁹⁹ Human Rights Watch, 'China: Release 2010 Nobel Peace Laureate: Liu Xiaobo and wife should be allowed to attend Nobel ceremony' (version 7 December 2010),

hundreds of people are sentenced under “state security crimes” each year.²⁰⁰ On 25 December 2009, a Beijing court sentenced Liu Xiaobo to an 11-year prison term on charges of “incitement of subversion of state power.” These charges stemmed from drafting and circulating Charter '08 (see chapter 2).²⁰¹ Liu’s imprisonment underlines, once again, the political function of the laogai. Still, Liu himself continues to believe in a better future:

I believe that my work has been just, and that someday China will be a free and democratic country. Our people then will bathe in the sunshine of freedom from fear. I am paying a price to move us in that direction, but without the slightest regret. I have long been aware that when an independent intellectual stands up to an autocratic state, step one toward freedom is often a step into prison. Now I am taking that step; and true freedom is that much nearer.²⁰²

<http://www.hrw.org/news/2010/12/07/china-release-2010-nobel-peace-laureate> (viewed on 30 September 2011).

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Human Rights Watch, ‘China: Liu Xiaobo’s Nobel spotlights rights deficit: release peace laureate and other jailed rights defenders’ (version 8 October 2010), <http://www.hrw.org/news/2010/10/08/china-liu-xiaobo-s-nobel-spotlights-rights-deficit> (viewed on 30 September 2011).

²⁰² Quote by Liu Xiaobo and cited in Human Rights Watch, ‘China’s rights defenders: brief profiles of some of the Chinese human rights defenders who are in jail, under house arrest or otherwise harassed by the authorities’ (version 2010), <http://www.hrw.org/chinas-rights-defenders> (viewed on 30 September 2011).

CHAPTER 4: THE ECONOMICAL FUNCTION OF THE GULAG AND THE LAOGAI

After the expansion of the gulag system at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, Western countries became increasingly concerned about how their own businesses were threatened by the export of the Soviet camps. Especially in Britain and the United States, threatened companies and trade unions called for a boycott of cheaper Soviet materials supposedly made by forced labourers.²⁰³ As a result of the lobbying of the American Federation of Labour, and on the basis of the Tariff Act of 1930 which stated that 'all goods (...) mined, produced or manufactured (...) by convict labour or/and forced labour (...) shall not be entitled to entry at any of the ports of the United States', the U.S. Treasury Department prohibited the import of Soviet pulpwood and matches.²⁰⁴ Likewise, under Section 1761 of Title 18 of the U.S. Code, it is a criminal offense to 'knowingly transport (...) from any foreign country into the United States any goods, wares, or merchandise manufactured, produced, or mined, wholly or in part by convicts or prisoners (...) or in any penal or reformatory institution.'²⁰⁵ Today, the Laogai Research Foundation (LRF) continues to call attention to this section of the U.S. Code. It is central to their examination and tracking of laogai products, because it provides the basis that the importation of those products to the United States is illegal. In 1991, when Harry Wu returned to China to secretly film and take photographs for *CBS 60 Minutes*, he got hold of information confirming that laogai products were in fact being exported to international markets. In 2008, the LRF found 314 separate entries for laogai camps in two Dun and Bradstreet databases, which enable companies to gather information on potential collaborators abroad.²⁰⁶ Additionally, the LRF published a report in February 2010, in which they list more than 100 laogai enterprises that are advertising in English and/or other European languages on the Internet, suggesting that laogai factories are indeed trying to export their products to the rest of the world.

²⁰³ Applebaum, *Gulag*, pp. 74-5.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75

²⁰⁵ Office of the Law Revision Counsel, '18 USC Sec. 1761' (version 1 July 2011), <http://uscode.house.gov/> (viewed on 26 October 2011).

²⁰⁶ Laogai Research Foundation (LRF), *Laogai forced labor camps listed in Dun & Bradstreet databases* (version 19 June 2008), http://s3.amazonaws.com/laogai_archive/resources/1263/788.Laogai-DB-Report.pdf (retrieved on 8 October 2010).

Otherwise, it would be unnecessary and unprofitable to translate company information and product descriptions.²⁰⁷

The Soviet Union and China have taken (the threat of) a boycott very seriously and both regimes have responded by taking measures to prevent it from disrupting the flow of hard currency into their countries.²⁰⁸ These measures alone attest to the economic significance of the forced labour camps, but there is more to the camp economies than export to the world market. This chapter will therefore further investigate the role of the gulag and the laogai in fulfilling the economic goals of socialism and their contribution in times of war. It will end with an analysis of the efficiency of both camp economies.

4.1 FULFILLING THE ECONOMIC GOALS OF SOCIALISM

One of the basic problems of Soviet as well as Chinese Communists was how they would apply their revolutionary vision of a future industrial society to a country that at the time was predominantly agrarian. Both regimes believed that Marxism had given them scientific knowledge of the future, and it required huge industrial growth.²⁰⁹ In their point of view, the camp economy was a means of accelerating industrialization. As such, the gulag and the laogai did not only have a punitive function, but they also made a contribution to the realization of the economic goals of socialism.

In the Soviet Union, prison labour was already widely used before the Communist takeover and throughout the 1920s. However, at the end of the 1920s, the authorities established a fundamentally new system of the gulag economy.²¹⁰ On 26 March 1928, the first decree concerning “a greater use of penal labour” appeared. Its goal was ‘to bring about the realization of a series of economic projects with great savings in expenditures (...) by means of widespread use of labour of individuals sentenced to measures of social protection.’²¹¹ On 27 June 1929, the Politburo approved a resolution “On the Use of the Labour of Convicted Criminals”. This resolution provided for the establishment of a network of new camps in the country’s remote areas with the

²⁰⁷ Laogai Research Foundation (LRF), *Not for sale: advertising forced labor products for illegal export* (version February 2010), http://laogai.org/sites/default/files/pdf/lrf_enterprise_ads_report.pdf (retrieved on 2 September 2010), pp. 2-3.

²⁰⁸ Applebaum, *Gulag*, p. 75; LRF, *Not for sale*, p. 1.

²⁰⁹ Mann, *The dark side of democracy*, pp. 318, 322.

²¹⁰ O.V. Khlevnyuk, ‘The economy of the OGPU, NKVD, and MVD of the USSR, 1930-1953: the scale, structure, and trends of development’, in: Gregory, P.R., & Lazarev, V.V. (eds.), *The economics of forced labor: the Soviet Gulag* (Stanford, CA 2003), p. 44.

²¹¹ Quoted from official circular of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR and cited in D.J. Dallin, & B.I. Nicolaevsky, *Forced labor in Soviet Russia* (London 1948), p. 206.

purpose of colonizing those areas and exploiting 'natural resources by using prisoner labour.'²¹² At a conference of higher prison officials in October of that same year the following announcement was made:

The Five-Year Plan (...) requires tasks involving a great demand for unskilled labour. Local conditions sometimes present serious obstacles to the recruitment of labour. It is here that the places of confinement, having at their disposal excess labour in great quantities and engaged in production near the places of confinement, can come to the assistance of those economic enterprises which experience a labour shortage.²¹³

However, the Stalinist approach of the late 1920s and after was not one of considerate and thorough planning. The CPSU, and Stalin in particular, was driven by an aim for spectacular achievements and grand projects that would make the Soviet Union "the envy of the world."²¹⁴ The gulag was thus to carry out large projects of the planned economy. According to the 1929 resolution, the newly created camps would accommodate 50,000 inmates in total. Nevertheless, the massive wave of arrests that accompanied the policy of de-kulakization and forced collectivization at the end of the 1920s and beginning of the 1930s subsequently changed these plans. On 1 January 1930, the total number of prisoners in the new camps was nearly 180,000.²¹⁵ "The number of camps, too, increased and it soon became evident that they could well play a much more important role in the grand "socialist offensive" than had been anticipated."²¹⁶ The big question for the OGPU was how to make economic use of all these inmates and special settlers.

In this respect, the development of the OGPU economy was greatly influenced by the gulag's first major project: the White Sea Canal (see Chapter 1). For the first time, the "advantages" of the use of prison labour were revealed: large contingents of manpower were quickly brought together in the required location and the authorities could exploit the prisoners under any conditions, despite casualties. Besides, at the White Sea Canal, the OGPU was able to improve its methods for organizing large projects and its

²¹² Quoted from the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI), 17/3/746/2,11 and cited in Khlevnyuk, 'The economy of the OGPU, NKVD, and MVD of the USSR, 1930-1953', p. 45.

²¹³ Dallin & Nicolaevsky, *Forced labor in Soviet Russia*, p. 208.

²¹⁴ R. Conquest, 'Foreword', in: Gregory, P.R., & Lazarev, V.V. (eds.), *The economics of forced labor: the Soviet Gulag* (Stanford, CA 2003), p. viii.

²¹⁵ O.V. Khlevnyuk, 'The economy of the gulag', in: Gregory, P.R. (ed.), *Behind the Façade of Stalin's Command Economy: Evidence from the Soviet State and Party Archives* (Stanford, CA 2001), p. 114.

²¹⁶ Dallin & Nicolaevsky, *Forced labor in Soviet Russia*, p. 207.

personnel gained experience.²¹⁷ After the completion of the canal in 1932, the OGPU began to set up other major economic divisions. These included the establishment of the Kolyma camps for the development of mining and gold prospecting (see Chapter 1), the construction of a new centre of iron and steel industry at Magnitogorsk, the construction of a canal between the Volga and the Moskva River, the construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM) in the Far-East, and the formation of the Ukhta-Pechora Trust where coal and oil production were organized.²¹⁸

Another major assignment of the NKVD was the exploitation and development of the Norilsk region, which contained more than a third of the world's nickel reserves, 40 percent of its platinum reserves, and substantial amounts of cobalt and copper.²¹⁹ On 23 June 1935, the Council of People's Commissars issued a decree, "About Norilsk Nickel Industrial Complex Construction", which gave the NKVD the responsibility to construct the Norilsk Nickel Integrated Plant and 'to organize a special camp for this purpose.'²²⁰ The Council of People's Commissars considered the NKVD to be the right administration for this undertaking, because Norilsk is situated beyond the Arctic Circle and, by then, the NKVD had a growing reputation for managing large projects in remote regions and under difficult circumstances. The 1935 decree gave the NKVD three years for the building of the Norilsk complex and it called for a production capacity of '10,000 tons of nickel annually', starting in 1938.²²¹ At the time, nickel was deemed the basic product to be generated in Norilsk, primarily because it was sought after by the military. Platinum, cobalt and copper would become more important afterwards.²²² In the beginning of the 1950s – when the gulag had reached its apex – there were around 70,000 prisoners in the concentration camps of Norilsk.²²³ Today, the Norilsk Nickel Combinat is still operating. Together with the Moscow metro and the Moscow University, it is one of the lasting monuments of the gulag's contribution to the development of the socialist state.²²⁴

²¹⁷ Khlevnyuk, 'The economy of the gulag', p. 115.

²¹⁸ Dallin & Nicolaevsky, *Forced labor in Soviet Russia*, p. 214; Khlevnyuk, 'The economy of the gulag', p. 115.

²¹⁹ S. Ertz, 'Building Norilsk', in: Gregory, P.R., & Lazarev, V.V. (eds.), *The economics of forced labor: the Soviet Gulag* (Stanford, CA 2003), pp. 127-130.

²²⁰ Quoted from GARF, 5446/1/481/195 and cited in Ertz, 'Building Norilsk', p. 130.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ertz, 'Building Norilsk', p. 129.

²²³ Werth, 'A state against its people', p. 205.

²²⁴ V.V. Lazarev, 'Conclusions', in: Gregory, P.R., & Lazarev, V.V. (eds.), *The economics of forced labor: the Soviet Gulag* (Stanford, CA 2003), p. 196.

In China, the Resolution of the Third National Public Security Conference (see Chapter 2) had already emphasized the enormous labour potential of the laogai. Soon afterwards, Luo Ruiqing, the founding Minister of Public Security, made the following statement: ‘Looking at it from an economic perspective, these counter-revolutionary criminals, if not executed right off, are a source of labour, and if we organize them and force them into the service of the nation (...) they will have a definite effect on national development.’²²⁵ Later, in 1954, Luo explained that ‘labour reform production (...) directly aids in the development of the nation’s industries, and also saves the nation a great deal in expenses. It is a dependable source of wealth.’²²⁶ In accordance with Article 30 of the Labour Reform Regulations (which were approved by the State Council of the People’s Republic of China on 26 August 1954 and promulgated on 7 September of that year), ‘the production of labour reform should serve in the development of the national economy, and should be included in overall national production planning.’²²⁷ Finally, Article 46 of China’s Criminal Law states that all prisoners who are able to work, regardless of whether they have been sentenced to fixed-term imprisonment or life imprisonment, will undergo labour reform.²²⁸

As in the Soviet Union, the laogai has played an important role in the CCP’s “socialist construction”. Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, laogai prisoners carried out large-scale, labour-intensive projects.²²⁹ Among these were the building of a hydroelectric dam on the Hui River, a wasteland reclamation project in the Heilongjiang River Valley, an irrigation project in Subei, the building of public roads and the cultivation of new lands in Xinjiang and Qinghai, various mining operations in Shanxi, and the construction of railway lines in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Gansu, Shaanxi, Szechuan and Yunnan.²³⁰ In addition, there have been unconfirmed but persistent reports of laogai farms in Yunnan and Guizhou that grow opium poppies and refine opium, and of laogai camps in Xinjiang Uyger Autonomous Region, Qinghai and Jiangxi that excavate radioactive ore and gold.²³¹ In 1987, a Communist legal scholar provided the following summary of the laogai’s achievements:

²²⁵ Quoted from *Renmin ribao* [People’s Daily] and cited in Wu, *Laogai*, p. 34.

²²⁶ Spoken in the Communist General Assembly and cited in Wu, *Laogai*, p. 34.

²²⁷ Quoted from *Laogai gaizao tiaoli* [Labour Reform Regulations] and cited in Wu, *Laogai*, p. 41.

²²⁸ China.org.cn, ‘Criminal Law of the People’s Republic of China’ (version 14 March 1997), <http://www.china.org.cn/english/government/207319.htm> (viewed on 31 October 2011).

²²⁹ Mosher, ‘Chinese prison labor’, p. 49.

²³⁰ Wu, *Laogai*, pp. 43-4.

²³¹ Mosher, ‘Chinese prison labor’, p. 57; Wu, *Laogai*, p. 35.

In the past forty years, the People's Republic of China's 'Labour Reform' production has already become a major force in such projects as water conservancy, road building, wasteland development, mining, construction, and other heavy labour intensive fields, in developing the handicraft industries and in increasingly mechanizing and automating all types of heavy and light industry. A few of its products have received national silver medals for quality and have entered the international market.²³²

When Deng Xiaoping decided, in the early 1980s, that the laogai should be subject to market principles and thus be self-financing, the prison administration was separated from the prisons' economic enterprises. This course of action has variously been described as "one prison, two systems," and "separation between prison and enterprise."²³³ As a result, the laogai came under a system of dual control: the Ministry of Justice controls the prisoners as prisoners, whereas the Bureau of Production controls the prisoners as workers.²³⁴ In general, prisons provide inmates to their own or other state-owned enterprises (or even foreign-owned companies) on a contractual basis. Prisoners are usually employed in the production of primary products or on labour-intensive infrastructural projects.²³⁵ Each laogai enterprise has its own production plan, financing system, wage scale, purchasing department, etc. Indeed, since the early 1980s, laogai enterprises increasingly began to resemble other state-owned enterprises. The only difference is that workers in laogai enterprises are prisoners and that enterprise managers are judicial personnel. For this reason, the CCP refers to laogai enterprises as "special state-run enterprises."²³⁶

Reflecting their dual function as places of confinement and production, official regulations state that each laogai in the PRC should have two names. Within the public security and legislative bureaus, each prison or camp is known by such names as "Beijing No. 1 Prison," "Hebei Province No. 6 Laogai Camp," "Xing-Ke-Pu Labour Re-Education Battalion," or "Shanxi Province No. 4 Job Placement Battalion."²³⁷ At the same time, all these special state-run enterprises have a second name, determined by the type

²³² Quoted from *Laodong gaizao zuifan de lilun yu shijian* [Labour reform criminals – theory and practice] and cited in Wu, *Laogai*, p. 49.

²³³ J.D. Seymour, & R. Anderson, 'Profit and loss in China's contemporary prison system', in: Williams, P.F., & Wu, Y. (eds.), *Remolding and resistance among writers of the Chinese prison camp: disciplined and published* (New York 2006), p. 159.

²³⁴ Mosher, 'Chinese prison labor', p. 56; Wu, *Laogai*, p. 42.

²³⁵ Mosher, 'Chinese prison labor', pp. 54, 57; Seymour & Anderson, 'Profit and loss in China's contemporary prison system', p. 159.

²³⁶ Mosher, 'Chinese prison labor', p. 56; Wu, *Laogai*, pp. 41-2, 44.

²³⁷ Mosher, 'Chinese prison labor', p. 56; Wu, *Laogai*, p. 41.

of production. For example, “Qinghe Farm,” “Xingdu Brick Factory,” “Yingde Tea Company,” or “Yanqin Construction and Engineering Company.”²³⁸ Normally, the first name is used internally and the second one publicly. Only a few prisons and camps display their prison or camp names on their signs. The majority, however, show only their industrial names. Therefore, from the outside, most prisons and camps appear to be regular factories, farms, or mining operations.²³⁹

4.2 CONTRIBUTING TO THE WARTIME ECONOMY

Concerning the economic function of the forced labour camps, one major difference between the gulag and the laogai stands out: World War II. The Chinese civil war was obviously very much affected by the Second World War, but the laogai did not perform as important a role during WWII as the gulag in the Soviet Union. Indeed, while many of the NKVD projects during the pre-war period were already of use for the military, the forced labourers of the gulag also made a significant contribution to the wartime economy of the USSR.²⁴⁰

According to the Soviet government, the gulag served two important functions during the war. First, it separated potential or actual enemies from the rest of society (see also Chapter 3). Second, it provided a large labour force capable of contributing to the war effort.²⁴¹ The onset of war had brought a labour-shortage to the country, which in turn significantly slowed down economic activities. There was a growing need for soldiers on the frontline, but at the same time an adequate workforce was required for the production of military goods, food and clothing, and to manage the transport and distribution system.²⁴² As a result, the government handed over various plans on the construction of military enterprises and facilities to the NKVD. The largest assignment during this period was the construction of a railroad in the Far East and the northern part of the European USSR, but prisoners also worked on hydraulic-engineering projects, nonferrous metal production and the establishment of new oil installations. One of the most outstanding tasks was probably the construction and renovation of 251 airfields for the People’s Commissariat of Defense. This project alone required 400,000

²³⁸ Mosher, ‘Chinese prison labor’, p. 56.

²³⁹ Wu, *Laogai*, p. 41.

²⁴⁰ Bacon, *The gulag at war*, p. 123; Khlevnyuk, ‘The economy of the OGPU, NKVD, and MVD of the USSR, 1930-1953’, p. 50.

²⁴¹ Bacon, *The gulag at war*, p. 124.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 124-5.

prisoners.²⁴³ Overall, during the Second World War, gulag prisoners produced nearly 9 million tons of coal, more than 30 million mortar shells (13 percent of all USSR production), around 25 million large-calibre shells, and more than 9 million anti-personnel mines. Besides, large prison farms produced food for the prisoners, the guards and the wider population. In 1941 alone, this amounted to 140,000 tonnes of grain, 203,000 tonnes of potatoes and vegetables and 225,000 tonnes of hay.²⁴⁴ Between 1942 and 1945, camp labour made up around one-tenth of the non-agricultural workforce.²⁴⁵ Nevertheless, a fundamental paradox existed at the heart of the gulag's contribution to the Soviet war effort, since 'the same forced labourers who were deemed to be the dregs of society' now proved to be 'an invaluable economic resource.'²⁴⁶

That being said, 'from a purely economic point of view the resource of labourers in the camps was wasted through a failure to maintain their physical well-being.'²⁴⁷ When it came to the provision of food, clothes and medicines, prisoners continued to suffer a low priority. Besides, the government kept pushing the gulag authorities to "do more with less" and to make more efficient use of the existing forced labour contingent.²⁴⁸ As a result, the overwhelming majority of prisoners were ill, emaciated and exhausted, and the mortality rate in the camps during the war rose to exceptional heights. According to ministry statistics, between 1 July 1941 and 11 February 1945, 1,005,000 prisoners died in the gulag.²⁴⁹ However, according to Ivanova's calculations, at least two million people died in the camps during the war years. This number does not include the so-called mobilized contingents or special settlers, whose mortality rate was also extremely high.²⁵⁰ Consequently, regardless of the influx of new prisoners, the total number of gulag prisoners declined significantly during WWII. Moreover, confronted by the German advances of 1941-42, many camps were evacuated and about 420,000 prisoners were given an early release. This led to a further reduction of the total amount of inmates. Finally, the gulag lost part of its workforce in 1942 and 1943, when 157,000

²⁴³ Khlevnyuk, 'The economy of the OGPU, NKVD, and MVD of the USSR, 1930-1953', pp. 49-50.

²⁴⁴ Bacon, *The gulag at war*, p. 139-144; Overy, *The dictators*, p. 609.

²⁴⁵ Bacon, *The gulag at war*, p. 125.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

²⁴⁹ Khlevnyuk, 'The economy of the OGPU, NKVD, and MVD of the USSR, 1930-1953', p. 51.

²⁵⁰ G.M. Ivanova, *Labor camp socialism: the gulag in the Soviet totalitarian system* (Armonk etc. 2000), p. 94.

prisoners who had been convicted of minor offenses were turned over to the military.²⁵¹ Yet even though the war severely weakened the camp system and its prisoners, the CPSU continued to expect a high level of labour productivity. As a result, the camp authorities extended the working days as long as was possible and tried to maximally increase the number of prisoners.²⁵²

Unfortunately, there is no information available on how the laogai may have contributed economically to the Korean War or Vietnam War.

4.3 CAMP ECONOMIC EFFICIENCY

So far, this chapter has described the contribution of the gulag and the laogai to the national economies of the Soviet Union and China in terms of factories built, canals dug, railway lines laid and other tasks successfully completed by forced labourers over the years. More is required when it comes to *measuring* the economic contribution of the gulag and the laogai and evaluating the efficiency of the camp economies. In order to determine the contribution of the gulag and the laogai to the Communist states, it is necessary to compare the productive effort of the forced labour camps to the non-prisoner sector of the economy.²⁵³ Due to the scarcity of economy-wide data in both countries (China regards all statistics related to the laogai as state secrets)²⁵⁴, it is very difficult to make such comparisons. Besides, the official statistical data that exist are beset by three major problems. First, they may have been misreported on purpose. Second, their economic significance is uncertain because of the way in which they are constructed. Third, economic variables and enterprise categories have frequently been redefined, which has led to inconsistencies in time series data.²⁵⁵ Nonetheless, some analysis of the efficiency of the camp economies is possible.

In economic terms, the mass deportations of the kulaks to remote regions of the Soviet Union can clearly be described as a catastrophe. According to official estimations, between 1930 and 1932, the Soviet government spent 250 million rubles on transporting the kulaks and establishing exile villages. On average, 1,000 rubles were spent on each new farm that was set up. However, the value of each confiscated

²⁵¹ Khlevnyuk, 'The economy of the OGPU, NKVD, and MVD of the USSR, 1930-1953', pp 50-1.

²⁵² Ivanova, *Labor camp socialism*, p. 94.

²⁵³ Bacon, *The gulag at war*, p. 143.

²⁵⁴ LRF, *Not for sale*, p. 7.

²⁵⁵ C.A. Holz, & Y.-M. Lin, 'Pitfalls of China's industrial statistics: inconsistencies and specification problems', *The China Review*, 1 (2001), p. 30.

property was only around 560 rubles. Besides, the newly created farms stayed unprofitable for many years and their debts to the state often grew to a point where they periodically had to be written off. Moreover, the destruction of the most viable farms that were left behind constituted one of the major causes of the famine of 1932-33.²⁵⁶

As a result of the heightened secrecy and a lack of control in the gulag economy, it was easy to distort statistics and write fake reports. Memoirs of ex-prisoners are full of stories about how readily and skilfully people in the camps sought to “pull a tufta.”²⁵⁷ This word itself translates as “swindling the boss”, but can more accurately be described as “pretending to work”, and it permeated virtually every aspect of work in the gulag.²⁵⁸ However, prisoners were not the only ones interested in padded statistics. Tufta was also organized by camp administrators. Many of the high economic statistics of the gulag economy were in fact tufta, because they were accomplished not through normal arrangement of production but through intensified exploitation of resources.²⁵⁹ Instead of establishing sustainable, long-lasting projects, the NKVD chose to exploit the most resource-rich areas for short periods of time. This was exactly what happened at Kolyma: because of the exploitation of the richest deposits, the average gold content between 1935 and 1938 was 19.3 to 27 grams per cubic meter of sand. Naturally, this could not continue for long. In the years 1946 and 1947, it had already shrunk to 7 grams and, subsequently, the total amount of gold mined sharply decreased.²⁶⁰

Meanwhile, the Great Terror of 1937 and 1938 also disturbed the relatively successful development of the gulag economy. Within a period of two years, the population of the gulag rose from 1.2 million to almost 1.7 million.²⁶¹ The camp authorities were unable to put the hundreds of thousands of new prisoners to work. Besides, between August 1937 and November 1938, nearly 700,000 people were executed, the majority of which were able-bodied men, specialists and workers. The NKVD constantly needed these people at their projects, but the declared goal of the Great Terror was the physical extermination of “enemies of the state” and not their use as “cheap” labour.²⁶² In the course of the Great Terror, Nikolai Ezhov “had placed a much

²⁵⁶ Khlevnyuk, ‘The economy of the gulag’, pp. 125-6.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 126.

²⁵⁸ Applebaum, *Gulag*, p. 321.

²⁵⁹ Khlevnyuk, ‘The economy of the gulag’, p. 126.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 127.

²⁶¹ Khlevnyuk, ‘The economy of the OGPU, NKVD, and MVD of the USSR, 1930-1953’, p. 48.

²⁶² Ibid., pp. 48-9.

bigger priority on hunting down class enemies than he had on healthy economic management.”²⁶³ Indeed, political motives took priority over economic ones. The gulag economy further deteriorated as a result of the arrests of many camp directors and a sharp increase in the mortality rate and physical exhaustion of prisoners.²⁶⁴ Therefore, despite the huge influx of new camp inmates during the years of the Great Terror, the gulag economy was experiencing a severe crisis.

As the Great Terror abated, the forced labour economy stabilized and then increased until early 1941. Economic growth was mainly due to the reforms carried out by the new NKVD leader Beria (see Chapter 1). One of the most drastic measures implemented by Beria was the elimination of the system of workday credits. Previously, prisoners had been able to reduce their sentence by earning credits for additional time worked in production. Through the elimination of this system, the worker contingents stabilized, but at the same time it abolished one of the last quasi-economic motivation in the NKVD economy.²⁶⁵ The removal of workday credits (which had been an effective way of motivating gulag inmates) therefore went hand in hand with harsher repressions.²⁶⁶ This, in turn, led to other complicated tradeoffs, since prisoners who received smaller portions of food as a punishment for failing to meet their quotas lost their strength and subsequently their ability to work. Overall, there was a constant struggle within the dictatorship and within the gulag administration between the idea that prisoners could be forced to labour and the realization that people must be offered incentives in order to work well.²⁶⁷

The methods employed by camp administrators to motivate prisoners and maximize prison production were more or less the same in the Soviet Union and China. They can be grouped into four categories: rules, punishments, moral incentives, and material incentives.²⁶⁸ Rules disclosed the amount and type of work of the prisoners, such as the number of work hours, the setting of daily quotas or the link between production and food rations. By strengthening the rules and regulations, camp administrators could

²⁶³ Werth, ‘A state against its people’, p. 206.

²⁶⁴ Khlevnyuk, ‘The economy of the OGPU, NKVD, and MVD of the USSR, 1930-1953’, p. 48.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49

²⁶⁶ Khlevnyuk, ‘The economy of the OGPU, NKVD, and MVD of the USSR, 1930-1953’, p. 49.

²⁶⁷ P.R. Gregory, ‘An introduction to the economics of the gulag’, in: Gregory, P.R., & Lazarev, V.V. (eds.), *The economics of forced labor: the Soviet Gulag* (Stanford, CA 2003), pp. 5-6.

²⁶⁸ L. Borodkin, & S. Ertz, ‘Coercion versus motivation: forced labor in Norilsk’, in: Gregory, P.R., & Lazarev, V.V. (eds.), *The economics of forced labor: the Soviet Gulag* (Stanford, CA 2003), p. 76.

force prisoners to work harder and longer, and thereby increase productivity.²⁶⁹ Punishments included the reduction of food rations, solitary confinement, revoking prisoners' letter-writing privileges, revoking family members' right to visit, and, in China, calling a meeting of the prisoner's work group to criticize his or her poor attitude.²⁷⁰ In China, if a prisoner did, and still does, not meet his or her daily quota, he or she is guilty of "not following directions," a "lazy work attitude," or "unwillingness to engage in labour." Such "worker avoiders" may have their food rations decreased on grounds of "no work, no food" or "light work load, light rations."²⁷¹ Moral incentives, such as medals, written commendations, special visiting privileges for family members, or bestowing the title of "active reformer," were an inexpensive way to motivate prisoners. Material rewards, such as a higher pay, reduced sentences, or increased food rations, were normally only used to reward the very best workers.²⁷²

In both the Soviet Union and China, the labour value of a prisoner varied greatly from farm to factory and depending on the geographical location of the camp. In *New ghosts, old ghosts*, James D. Seymour and Richard Anderson have analysed the laogai economy in the Northwestern provinces of Gansu, Xinjiang and Qinghai. The latter two have always received many prisoners from Eastern China. With their large imported prisoner populations, the output of the laogai camps in Qinghai and Xinjiang has been considerable, but not extraordinary. In fact, Seymour and Anderson show that, in the case of Qinghai, laogai enterprises were usually much less productive than similar civilian enterprises. The grain output per capita at Ge'ermu Prison Farm, for example, was only 312 kilograms per capita in 1964. However, after the prison farm was converted into a local cooperative enterprise, productivity increased to 2,983 kilograms per capita in 1993.²⁷³ Indeed, in the course of time, Qinghai province has decided to increase per capita production by scaling down the laogai.²⁷⁴ Concerning China's national economy, the per-worker prison production in 1994 was 4,060 *renminbi*, or yuan, whereas in civilian industry the figure was 14,800 yuan.²⁷⁵ Of the three provinces described in *New ghosts, old ghosts*, Gansu is the most similar to the rest of China. In

²⁶⁹ Borodkin & Ertz, 'Coercion versus motivation: forced labor in Norilsk', p. 76; Wu, *Laogai*, pp. 36-7.

²⁷⁰ Borodkin & Ertz, 'Coercion versus motivation: forced labor in Norilsk', p. 76; Wu, *Laogai*, p. 37.

²⁷¹ Wu, *Laogai*, pp. 36-7.

²⁷² Borodkin & Ertz, 'Coercion versus motivation: forced labor in Norilsk', p. 76; Wu, *Laogai*, pp. 37-8.

²⁷³ Seymour & Anderson, *New ghosts, old ghosts*, pp. 145-6.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

²⁷⁵ Seymour & Anderson, 'Profit and loss in China's contemporary prison system', p. 166.

1995, the agricultural and industrial output value of the laogai system was merely 0,079 percent of Gansu's economy.²⁷⁶ Since the mid-1990s, with the civilian economy booming and the laogai economy getting weaker, this percentage has further declined. Between 1995 and 1999, Gansu's economy grew at a rate of 9,6 percent, whereas laogai production grew only at 4,8 percent.²⁷⁷ Although it is impossible to draw conclusions about China as a whole from the Northwestern area, Seymour and Anderson argue that the laogai has been an insignificant factor in the Chinese national economy.²⁷⁸

Elsewhere, Seymour and Anderson actually state that, since 1949, the laogai has, on the whole, cost much more money to operate than has been generated by laogai enterprises. Their conclusion (which is based on classified CCP statistics, Chinese and Western literature, and interviews with former inmates) is surprising, because the official position of the Chinese government has long been that prisons were funded by profits from their own enterprises and critics of the laogai (including Harry Wu and his Laogai Research Foundation) have claimed that laogai enterprises produce vast profits for the Communist regime.²⁷⁹ Still, Seymour and Anderson point out that claims of laogai profitability tend to speak of "profit" when actually describing cash flow. Indeed, the salaries of guards and wardens, as well as the funds that had been required to build the camps, are often not included in the equation.²⁸⁰

The official CCP position regarding the economy of the laogai changed in the early 1990s. A first indication of this change was a high-level meeting on 30 November 1993, which was attended by Premier Li Peng, Vice-premier Zhu Rongji, and various important administrators concerned with China's national economy. During that meeting, a resolution on the laogai system's economic problems was adopted. The meeting itself, and the resolution in particular, implied that the laogai was uneconomical and that the 1980s "self-financing" policy had been a failure.²⁸¹ The resolution stated that wages for prison personnel and costs of prisoner's maintenance were from then on to be funded by the central government; wages for prison personnel were to be increased; there were to be new funds for laogai farms and all laogai camps in poor areas; and the central

²⁷⁶ Seymour & Anderson, *New ghosts, old ghosts*, p. 36.

²⁷⁷ Seymour & Anderson, *New ghosts, old ghosts*, p. 209; Seymour & Anderson, 'Profit and loss in China's contemporary prison system', pp. 161-2.

²⁷⁸ Seymour & Anderson, *New ghosts, old ghosts*, p. 209.

²⁷⁹ Seymour & Anderson, 'Profit and loss in China's contemporary prison system', pp. 166, 170.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 163-4.

government was to raise the yearly subsidies for laogai building and renovation.²⁸² Thenceforth, the resolution became an outline for a new approach to the laogai economy. In 1994, the central government's obligation to be responsible for the funding of the basic necessities of the laogai administration was incorporated in the new Prison Law. According to Article 8, 'the state shall ensure the expenditures of a prison for the reform of prisoners.'²⁸³

So the question arises why the gulag and the laogai were unable to generate profit. According to Chinese economists, it has to do with an arcane index called *jingji xiaoyi*, which literally means "economic efficiency", but is officially understood as "prosperity index."²⁸⁴ The problem, however, can be addressed in more common sense terms. One of the reasons why the forced labour camps in the Soviet Union and China were unprofitable was because they were often poorly managed. Indeed, in both countries, it was unlikely to find the best business managers working in the camps.²⁸⁵ Furthermore, despite the above-mentioned methods used by camp guards and administrators to motivate prisoners, the inmates themselves had little incentives to carry out their assigned tasks well. A Chinese penological journal has put the qualitative problems of forced labour in the following words: 'Convicts working in a labour reform factory are not masters of the enterprise; they are society's criminals, and there is a negative, antagonistic and disruptive side to them.'²⁸⁶ In 1926, the journal *Soviet Justice* had already noticed that 'obligatory labour has but one highly advertised feature: its cheapness. But the productivity of a man working under compulsion is far lower than that of a freely hired man.'²⁸⁷ Other reasons for the unprofitability of the camps include lesser suitability of prisoners to their particular jobs and the fact that camps did not always possess adequate machinery.²⁸⁸ However, the most important miscalculation in both countries may have been the idea that prison labour was somehow "free", coming

²⁸² Ibid., p. 164.

²⁸³ Quoted from Article 8 of China's Prison Law and cited in W. Zongxian, 'Western prisons and Chinese prisons: focusing on differences', *European Journal of Crime, Criminal Law and Criminal Justice*, 11 (2003), p. 103.

²⁸⁴ Seymour & Anderson, 'Profit and loss in China's contemporary prison system', p. 166.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Quoted from *Wo chang fazhan waixiangxing jingji de zuofa* [How our factory has developed a foreign-oriented economy] and cited in Seymour & Anderson, 'Profit and loss in China's contemporary prison system', p. 158.

²⁸⁷ Quoted from *Sovetskaya yustitsiya* [Soviet Justice] and cited in Dallin & Nicolaevsky, *Forced labor in Soviet Russia*, p. 166.

²⁸⁸ N. Jasny, 'Labor and output in Soviet concentration camps', *The journal of political economy* (1951), p. 410.

at no cost to society.²⁸⁹ In reality, even though the entire forced labour system was much better organized in China (possibly because, through *jiuye*, it was able to force work from prisoners for a much longer period of time), in both countries productivity of labour was much lower in the gulag and the laogai in comparison to the non-prisoner sector of the economy.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁹ Lazarev, 'Conclusions', p. 191.

²⁹⁰ R.J. Rummel, *China's bloody century: genocide and mass murder since 1900* (New Brunswick etc. 1991), p. 231.

CHAPTER 5: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF THE GULAG AND THE LAOGAI

Unlike the Nazi concentration camps (that were genuine killing-factories), the gulag and the laogai were never designed or intended to be centres of extermination. Instead, the forced labour camps in the Soviet Union and China were to have a political effect on their prisoners. According to the 1930 Law on the Corrective Labour Camps, the gulag was, first and foremost, an institution for rehabilitation, engaged in ‘a struggle for Communist morals’ against ordinary criminals and counterrevolutionaries.²⁹¹ Likewise, the most important task of the laogai was the transformation of offenders into productive, socially responsible citizens.²⁹² The slogan ‘Reform first, production second’ was, and still is, displayed in many laogai camps.²⁹³ How did the Soviet and Chinese Communists attempt to rehabilitate and reform their prisoners? In order to explain the Communist belief in the possibility of changing a prisoner’s political outlook, this chapter will begin with an analysis of the views of Engels, Marx, and Mao on labour. Next, it will investigate the origins and practice of the unique “thought reform” program in China. It will end with a discussion on the efficacy of thought reform and the cultivation of political loyalty.

5.1 TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF LABOUR

In both the Soviet Union and China, punishment rested on one central aspect: the transformative power of labour. In 1876, Friedrich Engels had written a small essay entitled *Anteil der Arbeit an der Menschwerdung des Affen* (or ‘The share of labour in development from ape to man’), in which he points out how, through labour, the hands of early men were formed, how the human brain developed through the coordination of the hands’ action when using tools, and how language evolved in the process of teamwork, giving yet another boost to the brain. According to Engels, labour was at the heart of the process of civilization and it played a vital role in every accomplishment in human history. Labour brought about a constant improvement or sophistication in man that eventually led man into modern civilization.²⁹⁴ For Marxists, labour thus attained a

²⁹¹ N. Adler, ‘Enduring repression: narratives of loyalty to the Party before, during and after the gulag’, *Europe-Asia studies*, 62 (2010), p. 213; Overy, *The dictators*, pp. 597, 608.

²⁹² LRF, *Laogai Handbook*, pp. 9-10; Seymour & Anderson, ‘Profit and loss in China’s contemporary prison system’, p. 158.

²⁹³ LRF, *Laogai Handbook*, p. 1.

²⁹⁴ Mühlhahn, *Criminal justice in China*, pp. 149-50.

special meaning, as distinct from the concept of work in capitalist societies. In Marxism, the significance of labour does not lie in the creation of wealth or the acquirement of discipline and industrial skills, but rather in its own transformative power.²⁹⁵ In 1937, Mao Zedong summarized these ideas in the following words:

Marxists hold that in human society activity in production develops step by step from a lower to a higher level and that consequently man's knowledge, whether of nature or of society, also develops step by step from a lower to a higher level, that is, from the shallower to the deeper, from the one-sided to the many-sided. For a very long period in history, men were necessarily confined to a one-sided understanding of the history of society because, for one thing, the bias of the exploiting classes always distorted history and, for another, the small scale of production limited man's outlook. It was not until the modern proletariat emerged along with immense forces of production (large-scale industry) that man was able to acquire a comprehensive, historical understanding of the development of society and turn this knowledge into a science, the science of Marxism.²⁹⁶

In this line of reasoning, labour should also be the very first method to reform and re-educate criminals. Indeed, in both Communist countries, criminals and political dissidents were typically defined as those reluctant to or incapable of carrying out the work required of them. The idea behind labour reform was that all crimes, whether political or not, are capitalistic and anti-socialist in nature. Only by engaging in physical labour can this ideology of the exploiting classes be eradicated, while simultaneously creating a feeling of solidarity with the Communist proletariat.²⁹⁷ Besides, 'if labour had transformed ape into man, it certainly could be expected to transform an idle person or exploiter into a productive member of society.'²⁹⁸ Incarceration in the gulag or the laogai was thus not regarded as a form of legal punishment, but as an opportunity for a criminal to reform himself in anticipation of his reinstatement into society. Indeed, the camp system was referred to as a "re-education system," and the camp guards were called "educators" who changed wrongdoers into "new people."²⁹⁹ In the Statute on Laogai, Article 25 speaks of 'the goal of transforming criminals into new persons', Article 26 articulates the need to 'persuade them to renounce the thought of crime and create a new conception of morality', and Article 73 states that 'if the behaviour of a prisoner indicated genuine repentance after the imposition of a penalty, it is possible, depending

²⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 151.

²⁹⁶ Mao Zedong, 'On practice: on the relation between knowledge and practice, between knowing and doing', in: *Selected works of Mao Tse-Tung* (Beijing 1961-1965), vol. 1, p. 296.

²⁹⁷ Wu, *Laogai*, p. 32.

²⁹⁸ Mühlhahn, *Criminal justice in China*, p. 150.

²⁹⁹ Courtois, 'Introduction: the crimes of communism', p. 19; Mühlhahn, *Criminal justice in China*, p. 147.

on the degree of repentance, to lighten or completely cancel the penalty imposed on him'.³⁰⁰ Chinese leaders frequently evoked Engels and Marx's ideas about work to justify the legal punishment of reform through labour. On many occasions, they cited the following quotation from Marx: 'Physical labour is the best disinfectant from preventing social viruses.'³⁰¹

The Soviet Union was the first country in the world to establish a unique type of criminal justice that combined Engels and Marx's ideas about justice, crime and punishment as well as their characteristic interpretation of labour. The idea of labour as a means of reforming criminals was for the first time thoroughly discussed during the Sixth Soviet Congress in October 1918. From then onwards, forced labour became the primary method for reforming prisoners in the Soviet Union.³⁰² At the beginning of the 1930s, the idea of correction and re-education through labour was still very much prevalent among the upper strata of the CPSU. Even intellectuals seemed to believe in it for some time. When Maxim Gorki was invited to go on an "excursion" to the Solovetsky Islands in 1928, he wrote a book eulogizing the camps upon his return.³⁰³

In modern Chinese, the term used for labour is *laodong* (劳动). It consists of two characters: lao (劳) which means "to exert oneself" or "to wear oneself out," and dong (动) which means "to move." Together, they take on the meaning of hard physical labour leading to physical movement or tangible changes. The meaning of the term *laodong* thus implies that labour is not only regarded 'as a valuable activity in itself but also that this very activity is the basis for social movement or progress'.³⁰⁴ From very early on, the CCP has seen labour as a cultivating activity for changing the psyche of those who were employed by it. For Mao, practice and knowledge were strongly related and he believed that truth could only be discovered, verified and developed through practice.³⁰⁵ Mao went a step beyond Engels and Marx's ideas in that he asserted that labour was not merely able to change the objective world, but also the labourer's subjective worldview:

³⁰⁰ A.P. Blaustein, *Fundamental legal documents of Communist China* (South Hackensack 1962), pp. 247, 264.

³⁰¹ Mühlhahn, *Criminal justice in China*, p. 150.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 153-4.

³⁰³ Courtois, 'Introduction: the crimes of communism', p. 20; S. Swianiewicz, *Forced labour and economic development: an enquiry into the experience of Soviet industrialization* (London 1965), p. 18.

³⁰⁴ Mühlhahn, *Criminal justice in China*, p. 151.

³⁰⁵ Mao Zedong, 'On practice', p. 308

In the present epoch of the development of society, the responsibility of correctly knowing and changing the world has been placed by history upon the shoulders of the proletariat and its party. (...) The struggle of the proletariat and the revolutionary people to change the world comprises the fulfilment of the following tasks: to change the objective world and, at the same time, their own subjective world – to change their cognitive ability and change the relations between the subjective and the objective world. (...) The objective world which is to be changed also includes all the opponents of change, who, in order to be changed, must go through a stage of compulsion before they can enter the state of voluntary, conscious change. The epoch of world communism will be reached when all mankind voluntarily and consciously changes itself and the world.³⁰⁶

In other words, labour transformed the labourer by developing his or her subjective knowledge and awareness.³⁰⁷

5.2 THE ORIGINS THOUGHT REFORM

The uniqueness of the laogai as an institution of confinement is best illustrated by the pervasive exercise of the official Chinese Communist program of *sixiang gaizao* (思想改造), or “thought reform.”³⁰⁸ In the West, the program is better known as “brainwashing.” This word first appeared in 1951, when Edward Hunter, an American journalist, used it as a literal translation of the Chinese colloquialism *xi nao* (洗脑) (“wash brain”), which he quoted from Chinese informants who talked about the practice after the Communist victory in 1949. Afterwards, “brainwashing” was soon applied to Soviet approaches too.³⁰⁹ The Soviet regime has indeed used detailed propaganda techniques and various psychological pressures in trying to change the mindset of its citizens, but never with such precise organization, such impressive psychological force and depth, or on such a broad national scale as in China.³¹⁰ The Chinese applied thought reform throughout all levels of society (from universities to special indoctrination centres to business and government offices), but the program reached its greatest intensity in the laogai system.³¹¹ According to Robert J. Lifton, the practice of thought reform in China was

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Mühlhahn, *Criminal justice in China*, p. 152.

³⁰⁸ E.J. Epstein, & S.H.Y. Wong, ‘The concept of ‘dangerousness’ in the People’s Republic of China and its impact on the treatment of prisoners’, *British Journal of Criminology*, 36 (1996), p. 487; LRF, *Laogai Handbook*, p. 12; R.J. Lifton, *Thought reform and the psychology of totalism: a study of ‘brainwashing’ in China* (New York: 1976), pp. 4-5.

³⁰⁹ Lifton, *Thought reform and the psychology of totalism*, p. 3.

³¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 389-90.

³¹¹ R.J. Lifton, “‘Thought reform’ of Western civilians in Chinese Communist prisons”, *Psychiatry*, 19 (1956), p. 173.

shaped by “two great historical forces”: Chinese culture and Soviet Communism.³¹² A third, more abstract, influence, which goes beyond the Russian and Chinese, is the specific mystique of the totalitarian secular religion that demands inquisitions and conversions of apostates:

Only a group which felt that it had *the* answer for the salvation of mankind could so self-righteously implement such a destructive process. “Thought reform” is the monolithic ideology overstepping itself, the ultimate expression of the Communist mystique. It is the acting-out of the mystical imperative, the assumption that its doctrine, its behavioural principles, its messianic message, are of such ultimate moral value that every conceivable means is not only justified but *absolutely indicated* when employed in their service.³¹³

In the Soviet Union, the central aim of every interrogation was the extraction of a confession. No interrogation could be concluded without a confession from the accused. At the height of the Great Terror, the NKVD had developed an interrogation procedure called the “Ezhov method,” according to which the arrested man had to provide the motives for his arrest himself – and he had to make it plausible in every detail. Besides admitting their own political crimes, prisoners were expected to inform on at least one person who had “recruited” them to engage in counterrevolutionary activities, and all the people they had themselves “recruited.” The principal methods used to obtain a confession were persuasion, intimidation, and threats. During the prolonged persuasion stage, the interrogator tried to persuade prisoners to admit guilt of their own free will, usually by promising them reduction of sentences. If the accused would not give in, indirect methods were often applied. For example, the resonating of inhuman female shouts and cries for help from the room next to the interrogation. Interrogators also frequently used threats of reprisals against family members, a practice that was particularly widespread during the Ezhov period. One of the foremost techniques used to extract confessions, however, was the systematic prevention of sleep. Interrogations would sometimes last uninterruptedly for days and nights. While the need for sleep eventually put every other sensation out of place, overpowered all opposition, and ousted all power of concentration, the interrogator kept asking the prisoner questions about who had “recruited” him and whom he had “recruited.”³¹⁴ Once the prisoner was

³¹² Lifton, *Thought reform and the psychology of totalism*, p. 389.

³¹³ Lifton, “Thought reform” of Western civilians in Chinese Communist prisons’, p. 194.

³¹⁴ Beck & Godin, *Russian purge and the extraction of confession*, pp. 45-53. These trials are novelized with great precision in A. Koestler, *Darkness at noon* (Harmondsworth 1965).

convinced that there was nothing left to do but to write a confession, the interrogation came to an end and the prisoner was sent off to the gulag.

Many of the techniques used to extract confessions from prisoners in the laogai closely resembled those used by the Soviets during the Great Terror. However, whereas in the Soviet Union confessions have generally been associated with the Moscow show trials (when the NKVD needed clear proof of individual guilt in order to satisfy their own ideological sense of justice), confessions in China were generally understood as the basis for individual reform. In addition, the Chinese combined the extortion of confessions with extensive group re-education programs.³¹⁵ Altogether, the Chinese took over from Soviet Communism much of the content and many of the forms of the thought reform process. This included the supposedly scientific Marxist-Leninist doctrine with its problem-solving features, the organizational methods of “democratic centralism,” the emphasis upon criticism, self-criticism, and confession as aspects of “ideological struggle,” the demand for unconditional submission in word and deed, and the system of informing upon others in the service of the Communist Party.³¹⁶ Other methods carried over from the Soviet practice were the long and tedious interrogations, and the major emphasis upon sin and guilt.³¹⁷

The Chinese thought reform program thus integrated principles of Soviet theory and practice with elements from their own cultural heritage. Some aspects of thought reform are actually in a straight line with the Confucian tradition. One of these is the notion that one must follow the “correct” ideological way as a guide to human behaviour, and that one must always work for one’s “self-cultivation.”³¹⁸ In his famous pamphlet *How to be a good Communist*, Liu Shaoqi wrote that ‘we should not look upon ourselves as immutable, perfect and sacrosanct, as persons who need not and cannot be changed,’ but ‘in order to preserve our purity as vanguard fighters of the proletariat and to enhance our revolutionary quality and working ability, it is essential for every Communist to

³¹⁵ Beck & Godin, *Russian purge and the extraction of confession*, p. 56; Lifton, “Thought reform” of Western civilians in Chinese Communist prisons’, p. 193.

³¹⁶ Lifton, *Thought reform and the psychology of totalitarianism*, p. 389; Lifton, “Thought reform” of Western civilians in Chinese Communist prisons’, pp. 192-3.

³¹⁷ Lifton, *Thought reform and the psychology of totalitarianism*, p. 389; Lifton, “Thought reform” of Western civilians in Chinese Communist prisons’, p. 193.

³¹⁸ R.J. Lifton, ‘Thought reform of Chinese intellectuals: a psychiatric evaluation’, *Journal of social issues*, 13 (1957), p. 17.

work hard to temper and cultivate himself in every respect.’³¹⁹ In the same text, Liu actually refers to a quote by Confucius in which the feudal philosopher described his own process of self-cultivation: ‘At fifteen, my mind was bent on learning. At thirty, I could think for myself. At forty, I was no longer perplexed. At fifty, I knew the decree of Heaven. At sixty, my ear was tuned to the truth. At seventy, I can follow my heart’s desire, without transgressing what is right.’³²⁰

Certainly, Confucianism shares with Communism the notion that one can and should remake oneself, but the Communists naturally emphasized that self-cultivation was not achieved through passive meditation (as in the Confucian tradition), but rather by way of active partaking in the Communist society.³²¹ Also, from a Confucian point of view, the ruler had the dual function of administrator and teacher. Yet, unlike the Communists, Confucius believed that authentic teaching could not be forced upon anyone.³²² Besides, the *Cheng Feng* or rectification campaign in Yan’an in the early 1940s (see Chapter 2) seems to have been a decisive step in the development of the Chinese Communist thought reform program. During this campaign, the CCP for the first time turned to measures of personal confessions and re-education as a means of solving problems. These forms of introspection would later evolve into the basic techniques of the thought reform program carried out on a national scale.³²³ Finally, a special kind of psychological mindedness that has long been nurtured in Chinese history has played a role in the development of reform techniques. According to the Chinese tradition, from early childhood onwards, people should learn to be aware of the psychological currents in their surroundings and they should become skilled at exerting influence upon the people around them.³²⁴ In their thought reform program, the Chinese Communists thus called forth a time-honoured cultural tradition and skill in the performance and manipulation of personal relationships. However, these aspects of the Chinese cultural heritage could be incorporated into the thought reform program only because they were invariable

³¹⁹ Liu Shaoqi, *How to be a good Communist: lectures delivered at the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in Yanan, July 1939* (Beijing 1964), pp. 2-3, 9.

³²⁰ Quoted from the *Confucian Analects* and cited in Liu Shaoqi, *How to be a good Communist*, p. 6.

³²¹ Lifton, *Thought reform and the psychology of totalism*, pp. 390-1.

³²² R. Madsen, ‘Resisting the regime of remolding’, in: Williams, P.F., & Wu, Y. (eds.), *Remolding and resistance among writers of the Chinese prison camp: disciplined and published* (New York 2006), p. 107.

³²³ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 396-7.

with Marxist-Leninist principles. It was this double fit that allowed the CCP to practise thought reform so vigorously.³²⁵

5.3 THE PRACTICE OF THOUGHT REFORM

According to a statement by Ivan Denisovich in Solzhenitsyn's famous novel about the Soviet prison camps, prisoners could say exactly what was on their minds once they had arrived in the gulag: "There was one good thing about a punishment camp – you were free to let off steam. (...) Here you could shout your head off if you wanted – the squealers wouldn't tell on you, and the security people couldn't care less."³²⁶ The only thing the guards cared about was keeping the prisoners under control.³²⁷ Notwithstanding, each camp in the Soviet Union had a Cultural and Education Department (KVC), which handed out newspapers, lent books, and, in a few cases, organized films and concerts. The existence of such a department suggests that the aim of the gulag was not merely to punish political prisoners in order to set an example to others, but that actual efforts were made to change their political attitudes. However, contrary to similar organizations in the laogai, the influence of the KVC on life inside the gulag was negligible.³²⁸ The thought reform program in China varied from prison to camp and it changed with time, but it is possible to provide a general outline of the program as it must have been during the Mao Era, when it was in its most advanced form. It is paradoxical, however, that during the Mao Era so much time and energy was spent on reforming prisoners into good Communist citizens, because during this period 95 percent of the prisoners ended up as job placement personnel and never returned to society. An excerpt from a *People's Daily* editorial gives a rough idea of the basic penal philosophy of the CCP:

All crimes have definite sociological roots. The evil ideology and evil habits left behind by the old society (...) still remain in the minds of some people to a marked degree. Thus if we are to wipe all crimes from their root, in addition to inflicting on the criminal the punishment due, we must also carry out various effective measures to transform the various evil ideological conceptions in the minds of the people so that they may be educated and reformed into new people.³²⁹

³²⁵ Lifton, *Thought reform and the psychology of totalism*, p. 392; Lifton, "Thought reform of Chinese intellectuals", p. 17.

³²⁶ A. Solzhenitsyn, *One day in the life of Ivan Denisovich* (Frogmore 1978), p. 153.

³²⁷ Madsen, 'Resisting the regime of remolding', p. 105.

³²⁸ Swianiewicz, *Forced labour and economic development*, p. 18.

³²⁹ Quoted from *Renmin ribao* [People's Daily] and cited in LRF, *Laogai Handbook*, p. 11.

Generally speaking, thought reform consisted of two essential aspects: confession and re-education.³³⁰ The principal methods used to carry out the thought reform program included individual interrogations, study groups, and the mobilization of inmates to supervise and exert pressure on each other.

Almost immediately after new convicts had arrived in one of the detention centres, they were asked to write an account of their life from childhood on. By means of these autobiographical statements, prisoners were to assess their entire past life. Making a judgment about this past life was considered to be the basis for a reformed future.³³¹ This stage of thought reform was characterised by repetition and the immense patience of the interrogators. At all times, they were willing to make their demand over and over again. 'If not today, then tomorrow', they would say, until a prisoner could no longer keep up his resistance.³³² In fact, it was frequently stated that 'the Party had plenty of time.'³³³ After their past life had been exposed, inmates then had to renounce it. This was to be done by making a complete list of their crimes. The crime list was a formal document that included a clear depiction of each crime, the time and date it was committed, who had given the order, who the victims were, and the name, age, and background of possible witnesses. This list was added to the personal file of the prisoner. The next steps in the thought reform program were acknowledging one's guilt, recognizing and criticizing one's crimes, and submitting to authority.³³⁴ An internal document of the Public Security Bureau described the process as follows:

If a criminal does not acknowledge his crimes and submit to the law, then accomplishing thought reform is out of the question. (...) Acknowledging one's crimes is a prerequisite to submitting to the law, and submitting to the law is the beginning of reform. Acknowledging their crimes and submitting to the law are the first lessons criminals must learn upon entering prison, and this consciousness must be present throughout the process of reform.³³⁵

Jean Pasqualini, laogai survivor and co-founder of the Laogai Research Foundation, recalls:

³³⁰ Lifton, *Thought reform and the psychology of totalism*, p. 5.

³³¹ J.A. Fyfield, *Re-educating Chinese anti-Communists* (London 1982), p. 78.

³³² Fyfield, *Re-educating Chinese anti-Communists*, p. 79; E.H. Schein, "The Chinese indoctrination program for prisoners of war: a study of attempted "brainwashing", *Psychiatry*, 19 (1956), pp. 162-3.

³³³ Margolin, 'China: a long march into night', p. 507.

³³⁴ Fyfield, *Re-educating Chinese anti-Communists*, p. 79; Wu, *Laogai*, pp. 29-30.

³³⁵ Quoted from *Laodong gaizao gongzuo* [Labour reform work] and cited in Wu, *Laogai*, p. 28.

He asked me if I knew what I had been arrested for. I wasn't sure how to answer – I hadn't learned the drill yet.

'I'm not sure,' I said.

He regarded me with immense calm, and in an avuncular voice said, 'You are a counterrevolutionary. All of us are. Otherwise we wouldn't be here. Do you know where you are?'

Curious to see how much he could tell me, I pretended complete ignorance. (...)

'This is the Detention Centre of the Peking Bureau of Public Security. It is at number 13 Tsao Lan Tse Hutung, West City. Only counterrevolutionaries and political offenders come here. Some of us are here because of things we did before the Liberation. These individuals are called Persons with a Counterrevolutionary Past. Those who have been arrested for things they did since the Liberation are called active counterrevolutionaries. Some of us are both... But whatever category we fit into, all of us have committed crimes because we had very bad thoughts.'³³⁶

The man with the avuncular voice went on by explaining that:

'We must reform these thoughts and become new men again. Twenty-four hours after your arrest you will be interrogated. Step lively when they come for you. When you go outside, walk briskly, with your head bowed down. Keep your eyes on the ground and don't try to look forward or to the side; the guard will give you directions and tell you when to turn. At the interrogation you have to confess your crimes without giving the government any trouble. Be frank and sincere. Your salvation lies in the attitude you adopt during the interrogation.'³³⁷

The man that gave the above-quoted speech was named Loo and he was the leader of Pasqualini's study group. Typically, the prisoners in a detention centre were divided up into small teams called *dui* (隊). There were between 10 and 15 prisoners in each *dui*, among whom two older prisoners were selected as group leaders. One of them chaired a weekly meeting regarding living conditions, health, and the distribution of small items like toiletries and cigarettes. The other leader chaired the daily study sessions. Under his direction, the other members were mobilized to extract confessions from new inmates by applying group pressure. Anyone who insisted on denying guilt was punished by being forced to undergo struggle sessions or by being placed in solitary confinement. It was the task of the leader to keep notes of each meeting and to report to the appropriate Public Security cadre.³³⁸ There was absolutely no freedom in the study groups. Talking, standing, walking, laughing and even crying were all prohibited:

When the warden told me my beloved sister had died, he simply said, 'The People's Government acted humanely. It is all over now. You should not cry because that is against the

³³⁶ Bao Ruo-wang (Jean Pasqualini) & Chelminski, *Prisoner of Mao*, pp. 31-2.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³³⁸ Fyfield, *Re-educating Chinese anti-Communists*, p. 77; Wu, *Laogai*, p. 29.

rules. And it would have a bad effect on the feelings of the others about thought reform.' They did not let us laugh. They even did not let us cry.³³⁹

The purpose of these study sessions was not merely to aid in the extraction of confessions though; it was also a means to pass on the facts and ideology on which the prisoners were to base their new attitudes. As such, the daily study session combined confession with re-education. The session would usually start with one of the inmates reading from a newspaper, a journal article, or the writings of Mao Zedong. Next, these materials subsequently gave rise to discussion and essay writing. The customary method for discussion in the laogai system was that known as "criticism and self-criticism." This meant that everyone had to examine their own "reactionary" tendencies, and then search for the cause of these in their past life. Each inmate had to recall past "bourgeois" and "imperialistic" influences, as well as present "individualistic" traits. Meanwhile, the group leader encouraged the prisoners to criticize each other. If someone did not participate enthusiastically enough or showed any tendency to withstand full emotional involvement in the thought reform program, he or she was to be ruthlessly criticized.³⁴⁰ Contrary to the Soviet interrogations (where violent methods were frequently employed), the Chinese constantly stressed that every problem had to be solved through discussion and persuasion, never by force. Consequently, physical violence was uncommon.³⁴¹ Those who continued to deny guilt were not allowed to leave the detention centre and go labour in one of the camps.³⁴²

After the confessions and criticisms of a prisoner were accepted by the Public Security cadre, the prisoner had to keep on showing repentance in behaviour. This could be done by exposing any and all politically incorrect behaviour or comments by other prisoners. This practice was described as "aiding in the reformation of others."³⁴³ The systematic use of informers from prisoner ranks enabled the prison administration to get hold of detailed information about nearly all activities going on inside the camp. Besides, this arrangement added to the creation of a feeling of general distrust, thereby

³³⁹ Statement of Catherine Ho, a Catholic nun, in United States, *Chinese prison system*, p. 7.

³⁴⁰ Fyfield, *Re-educating Chinese anti-Communists*, pp. 80-1; Lifton, "'Thought reform' of Western civilians in Chinese Communist prisons", pp. 184, 186.

³⁴¹ Lifton, "'Thought reform' of Western civilians in Chinese Communist prisons", p. 184; Margolin, 'China: a long march into night', p. 507.

³⁴² Wu, *Laogai*, pp. 28-9.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-1.

undermining all friendships, emotional bonds, and group activities.³⁴⁴ The officers in charge were well aware of the fact that using force is not the most consistent or intelligent method in transforming the ideology and behaviour of a large group of people. Instead, they made use of the enhanced opportunities for peer-group pressure and let the prisoners control each other.³⁴⁵ Another type of collective control resulted from the joint responsibility for the performance by an individual member of the dui.³⁴⁶

In addition to the long-term approaches described so far, the laogai administration occasionally used certain short-term “shock” techniques for the extraction of confessions.³⁴⁷ These included public confessions of guilt, or, as Pasqualini remembers, staged executions:

In the middle of them all was the barber, tied up in chains and fetters. A rope around his neck and cinched at the waist kept his head bowed. His hands were tied behind his back. The guards shoved him directly in front of us. He stood there silently, like a trussed penitent, as the steam wisped up around his feet. Yen had prepared a speech.

‘I have something awful to speak about. I’m not happy to do it and it’s nothing to be proud of. But it’s my duty and it should be a lesson for you. This rotten egg here was jailed on a morals charge – homosexual relations with a boy. He received only seven years for this offense. Later, when working in the paper mill, his behaviour was constantly bad and he stole repeatedly. His sentence was doubled. Now we have established that while here he seduced a young prisoner nineteen years old – a mentally retarded prisoner. If this happened in society, he would be severely punished. But by doing what he did here, he not only sinned morally, but he also dirtied the reputation of the prison and the great policy of Reform Through Labour. Therefore, in consideration of his repeated offenses, the representative of the Supreme People’s Court will now read you his sentence.’³⁴⁸

A government official strode forward and announced the decision of the People’s Court: death with immediate execution of sentence.

Everything happened so suddenly then that I did not even have the time to be shocked or frightened. Before the man in the blue uniform had even finished pronouncing the last word the barber was dead. The guard standing behind him pulled out a huge pistol and blew his head open. A shower of blood and brains flew out and splattered those of us in the front rows. I looked away from the hideous twitching figure on the ground and vomited. Yen came up to speak again.

‘Let this serve as a warning to you. I have been authorized to tell you that no more leniency will be shown in this camp. From now on, all moral offenses will be punished in the same way. Now go back to your cells and discuss this.’³⁴⁹

³⁴⁴ Schein, ‘The Chinese indoctrination program for prisoners of war’, pp. 153-4.

³⁴⁵ Fyfield, *Re-educating Chinese anti-Communists*, p. 78; Wu, *Laogai*, pp. 30-1.

³⁴⁶ Epstein & Wong, ‘The concept of ‘dangerousness’ in the People’s Republic of China’, p. 488.

³⁴⁷ Fyfield, *Re-educating Chinese anti-Communists*, pp. 79-80.

³⁴⁸ Bao Ruo-wang (Jean Pasqualini) & Chelminski, *Prisoner of Mao*, p. 189.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 189-90.

After Deng Xiaoping came to power at the end of the 1970s, he made several statements confirming the continuing validity of the thought reform program. At present, the extreme political study sessions of the Mao Era no longer exist, but thought reform is still prevalent in the laogai.³⁵⁰

5.4 THE IMPACT OF THOUGHT REFORM AND THE CULTIVATION OF POLITICAL LOYALTY

It thus appears that a considerable amount of time was set aside in the daily laogai programs for thought reform. Whether or not it was truly possible to remodel the lifestyle and thinking of POWs, criminals, thieves, drug addicts, prostitutes and counterrevolutionaries into enthusiastic members of the new Communist society, there can be no doubts about the efforts in this direction.³⁵¹ But how successful was thought reform? What has been its impact on laogai prisoners? Although there were a wide variety of approaches to the question of prisoner conversion, three specific types of responses can be identified. At the one end of the spectrum were the Chinese *zealous converts* who experienced thought reform as a genuine feeling of being reborn, along with their society. They were usually younger people, between the ages of fifteen and twenty-two. At the other extreme were the *resisters* who adopted an entirely rejectionist stance against the program.³⁵² One of them was Wei Jingsheng, who not only refused to change his beliefs, but he also refused to pretend that he was changing them:

To tell you the truth, I nearly believed it when they lied [before his trial in 1979] that 'nothing will happen to you if you admit your mistakes.' But I never thought that any of the 'mistakes' they wanted me to admit to were mistakes at all, so I decided to stick to my opinions and not sacrifice my principles to forge a deal with them. It later became apparent to me that everything they had said was a lie from start to finish. (...) I just congratulate myself for not getting duped by them. I will never again consider abandoning my principles to strike a bargain.³⁵³

The most common response lay between these two extremes, and the majority of laogai prisoners may be called *adapters*. Certainly, for many prisoners it was impossible to

³⁵⁰ LRF, *Laogai Handbook*, pp. 1, 12.

³⁵¹ Fyfield, *Re-educating Chinese anti-Communists*, p. 83.

³⁵² Lifton, *Thought reform and the psychology of totalism*, pp. 399-400; P.F. Williams, 'The repercussions of thought remolding and forced labor on Chinese writers: introduction', in: Williams, P.F., & Wu, Y. (eds.), *Remolding and resistance among writers of the Chinese prison camp: disciplined and published* (New York 2006), p. 5.

³⁵³ Quoted from *The courage to stand alone* and cited in Madsen, 'Resisting the regime of remolding', p. 104.

retain former criteria of truth and falsehood, but the extent of blurring of reality varied greatly.³⁵⁴ As an adapter, Pasqualini was subjected to his share of confusion and identity crisis:

It does not take a prisoner long to lose his self-confidence. Over the years Mao's police have perfected their interrogation methods to such a fine point that I would defy any man, Chinese or not, to hold out against them. Their aim is not so much to make you invent nonexistent crimes, but to make you accept your ordinary life, as you led it, as rotten and sinful and worthy of punishment, since it did not concord with their own, the police's, conception of how a life should be led. The basis of their success is despair, the prisoner's perception that he is utterly and hopelessly and forever at the mercy of his jailers. He has no defence, since his arrest is absolute and unquestionable proof of his guilt. (During my years in prison I knew of a man who was in fact arrested by mistake – right name but wrong man. After a few months he had confessed all the crimes of the other. When the mistake was discovered, the prison authorities had a terrible time persuading him to go back home. He felt too guilty for that.)³⁵⁵

The influence of the gulag and the laogai was not limited to its prisoners. The existence of the gulag and the laogai alone, including the threat of the forced labour camps, pervaded daily life in both Communist countries because almost anyone could end up in them. 'Given this pervasive threat, there was a constant motivation toward conformist behaviour, which in turn could lead to an unwitting adaptive strategy of conformist thinking and feeling.'³⁵⁶ Janis and Kling have demonstrated that role-playing can indeed change a persons' opinion, especially when that person has to improvise a lot.³⁵⁷ Imagine how much more effective imposed role-playing could be under Stalin's and Mao's rule, when one's life and liberty were directly at stake if the role was not played convincingly enough. Although compliance did not in any way guarantee safety, real or suspected dissent could put the lives of the perpetrator and his or her family in more danger. Naturally, all of these effects were inflated in arrestees under interrogation. In fact, the key factor in understanding loyalty toward a system of governance that imposed its ideology by executing, imprisoning, and exploiting real and suspected dissidents as well as their relatives, can be found in the extent of the control which the

³⁵⁴ Lifton, *Thought reform and the psychology of totalism*, p. 401; Lifton, "'Thought reform" of Western civilians in Chinese Communist prisons', pp. 183-4

³⁵⁵ Bao Ruo-wang (Jean Pasqualini) & Chelminski, *Prisoner of Mao*, pp. 39-40.

³⁵⁶ Adler, 'Enduring repression: narratives of loyalty to the Party before, during and after the gulag', p. 229.

³⁵⁷ I.L. Janis, & B.T. King, 'The influence of role playing on opinion change', *Journal of abnormal and social psychology*, 49 (1954), p. 218.

state exercised over each citizen's life situation.³⁵⁸ 'If an individual's behaviour can be controlled sufficiently and the information available to him manipulated to the degree that is possible in a totalitarian state [and in] a prison, (...) a remarkable amount of persuasion can be effected.'³⁵⁹

³⁵⁸ Adler, 'Enduring repression: narratives of loyalty to the Party before, during and after the gulag', pp. 211, 229; R.A. Bauer, 'Brainwashing: psychology or demonology?', *Journal of social issues*, 13 (1957), pp. 44-6.

³⁵⁹ Bauer, 'Brainwashing: psychology or demonology?', p. 44.

CONCLUSION

This study has set out to establish clear historical facts and to provide, as complete as possible, a comparison between the political, economical, and psychological functions of the Soviet gulag and the Chinese laogai. Although penal labour had been common in the Soviet Union and China before the twentieth century and was thus not invented by the Communists, earlier penal colonies and detention centres bore little resemblance to the systems of forced labour camps that were set up by the CPSU and the CCP.

The Soviet Communists seized power more quickly than the Chinese, but the Bolshevik *coup d'état* was almost immediately followed by a bloody civil war. As a result, they were relatively slow to embark on the revolutionary transformation of the Russian social order. The CCP, on the other hand, gradually seized power during a 22-year long civil war entwined with an international war against Japan. Once in power, the CCP began more quickly with the reconstruction of Chinese society. Overall, the Chinese Communists had the advantage of adapting their actions to the perceived successes and failures of the Soviet Union. Indeed, the development of a criminal justice system in China was organized along and inspired by the Soviet model. The 1954 Statute on Loagai was, in fact, created with the help of Soviet penologists. This is not to say that the CCP strictly followed the Soviet model; the Chinese criminal justice system was also influenced by traditional Chinese culture as well as the concrete local history of the revolutionary bases in Jiangxi and Yan'an.

In both countries, however, the law fulfilled only a temporary function and was subordinate to the revolution. The ad hoc and arbitrary nature of the Soviet and Chinese legal systems was reflected by an explicit ambiguity in wording, various escape clauses and frequent recourse to the principle of analogy. Some articles could be interpreted so broadly that almost anyone could be punished by them. In the Soviet Union, the Cheka (later renamed GPU, OGPU, NKVD, MGB, MVD, and KGB) was in charge of the administration of the gulag. As an extraordinary commission, it had no background of legitimacy, no responsibility to abide by the rule of law, and it did not have to check with the police or the Commissariat of Justice. Unlike the Soviet Union, the CCP did not want a central agency in control of the system of forced labour camps. Therefore, the laogai came under the direct administrative domain of provincial Public Security Bureaus. Besides the Public Security Bureaus, local police and administrative units had the power

to send “less serious offenders” straight to laojiao camps without formal sentencing. What distinguished the laogai system from the gulag was the existence of *jiuye*, or forced job placement. This may best be compared to the punishment of internal exile in the Soviet Union, because people sentenced to *jiuye* or internal exile could never return to their homes and pick up their civilian lives. In other words, they were serving a lifetime contract. However, whereas internal exile existed alongside the gulag, *jiuye* was an extension of the laogai system. Many prisoners would become as job placement personnel *after* their sentences had been completed.

The forced labour camps thrived under the leadership of Stalin and Mao. After the deaths of the dictators, many political prisoners were rehabilitated and released and both camp systems took on a new significance. The Chinese Communists thus built up the laogai roughly at the same time when the Soviet Union began the partial liquidation of the gulag. Overall, there are clearly many similarities and differences between the *histories* of the gulag and the laogai. However, the focus of this study was on the *function* of the forced labour camps. The aim was to contribute to our understanding of the laogai by comparing the political, economical, and psychological functions of the Chinese forced labour camps to those of the Soviet gulag. The main conclusions of this comparative analysis are summarized below.

The political function of the gulag and the laogai was to isolate the enemies of the people, and, in doing so, to protect and strengthen the Communist regimes. It is not surprising that the political function of the forced labour camps was the same in the Soviet Union and China, since both countries adhered to the same political ideology. In accordance with Marxist-Leninist thought, they defined “the people” and its “enemies” in terms of class: the people was the proletariat and all classes opposed to the proletariat were seen as enemies of the people. Both the CPSU and the CCP considered it the task of the state to “cleanse” the proletariat of its enemies by arresting and imprisoning them. By making a further distinction between “external” and “internal” enemies, I have shown that both regimes committed classicide as well as fratricide.

I have described the economical function of the forced labour camps in terms of the contribution they made to the realization of the economic goals of socialism as well as their input in times of war. Both the Soviet Union and China used prison labour in the development and construction of public works and infrastructure. The economical goal of the gulag and the laogai was therefore the same. The reason for this similarity can,

again, be found in Marxist ideology. Both regimes were faced with the problem of how they would apply their revolutionary vision of a future industrial society to a country that at the time was predominantly agrarian, and, in line with Marxism, believed that the camps were a way to accelerate industrialization.

When it comes to the contribution of the forced labour camps in times of war, World War II forms a major difference between the gulag and the laogai. Even though the Chinese civil war was very much affected by the Second World War, the laogai did not perform as important a role during WWII as the gulag in the Soviet Union. Indeed, while many of the NKVD projects during the pre-war period were already of use for the military, the forced labourers of the gulag also made a significant contribution to the wartime economy of the USSR. Between 1942 and 1945, prison labour even made up around one-tenth of the non-agricultural workforce. However, the economic value of the zeks was wasted through a failure to maintain their physical well-being. Indeed, the majority of prisoners were ill, emaciated, and exhausted, and the mortality rate in the camps during the war rose to exceptional heights. I have not been able to find any information regarding the economic contribution of the laogai during the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

Other than describing the contribution of the gulag and the laogai to the national economies of the Soviet Union and China in terms of factories built, canals dug, and railway lines laid, I have tried to analyse the *efficiency* of both camp economies. In doing so, I came to the conclusion that even though the entire forced labour system was much better organized in China (possibly because, through *jiuye*, it was able to force work from prisoners for a much longer period of time), in both countries productivity of labour was much lower in the gulag and the laogai in comparison to the non-prisoner sector of the economy. Reasons why the forced labour camps were often unprofitable included poor management, unmotivated prisoners, lesser suitability of prisoners to their assigned tasks, and the fact that camps did not always possess adequate machinery. Nevertheless, the most important miscalculation in both the Soviet Union and China may have been the idea that prison labour was somehow “free”, coming at no cost to society. In fact, there was a constant struggle between the idea that prisoners could be forced to labour and the realization that people must be offered incentives to work well.

The main difference between the gulag and the laogai finds its existence in the psychological function of the forced labour camps. Both the Soviet and the Chinese Communists believed in Engels and Marx's ideas about the transformative power of labour and that, through physical labour, the ideology of the exploiting classes could be eradicated, while simultaneously creating a feeling of solidarity with the proletariat. Certainly, incarceration in the gulag or the laogai was not regarded as a form of legal punishment, but as an opportunity for a criminal to reform himself in anticipation of his reinstatement into society. However, Mao went a step beyond Engels and Marx in that he asserted that labour was not merely able to change the objective world, but also the labourer's subjective worldview.

The uniqueness of the laogai as an institution of confinement is best illustrated by the pervasive exercise or the official Chinese "thought reform" program. The practice of thought reform was shaped by Soviet Communism as well as traditional Chinese culture. Altogether, the Chinese took over from Soviet Communism the emphasis upon criticism, self-criticism, and confession as aspects of "ideological struggle," the demand for unconditional submission in word and deed, and the system of informing upon others in the service of the Communist Party. Other methods carried over from the Soviet practice were the long and tedious interrogations, and the major emphasis upon sin and guilt. The elements incorporated from the Chinese cultural heritage included aspects of Confucianism, the *Cheng Feng* or rectification campaign in Yan'an in the early 1940s, and a special kind of psychological mindedness that has long been nurtured in Chinese history.

Generally speaking, thought reform consisted of two essential aspects: confession and re-education. The principal methods used to carry out the thought reform program included individual interrogations, study groups, and the mobilization of inmates to supervise and exert pressure on each other. In addition to these long-term approaches, the laogai administration occasionally used certain short-term "shock" techniques like public confessions or staged executions. It is true that each camp in the Soviet Union had a Cultural and Education Department, but, when compared to similar organizations in the laogai, its influence on life inside the gulag was negligible. Nonetheless, even though a considerable amount of time was set aside in the daily laogai programs for thought reform, it has not always been successful. There were by and large three types of responses: zealous converts, adapters, and resisters.

The psychological function of the gulag and the laogai was, however, not limited to its prisoners. The existence of the camps alone, including the threat they posed, pervaded everyday life in both Communist countries because almost anyone could end up in them. I have shown that, in the end, both the gulag and the laogai functioned as a means of cultivating political loyalty.

The goal of this study was to answer the question: *how does the laogai differ from the gulag in the political, economical, and psychological functions it fulfils within the Communist system?* On the whole, it is remarkable that many of the similarities between the functions of the gulag and the laogai stem from the fact that both the Soviet Union and China adhered to the same political ideology as well as the fact that the Chinese adapted their practices to the perceived successes and failures of the Soviet Union. The main difference between the gulag and the laogai (thought reform), in turn, was to a large extent shaped by traditional Chinese culture.

It must be emphasized, again, that the findings of this study, particularly when related to the laogai, are entirely dependent on a small body of English literature. During this research, it has been especially difficult to find objective information on the economical function of the laogai. I have, therefore, tried to describe and explain the different, and sometimes conflicting, standpoints of those involved. It would be interesting to carry out a more in-depth investigation of the economic contribution of the laogai to the Chinese national economy, above all during times of war, if the Chinese state archives will ever become accessible. Besides, even though the Laogai Research Foundation claims that thought reform is still prevalent in the laogai today, not much is known about the development of this unique feature of the Chinese prison system after the Mao Era. It would be interesting to examine how thought reform in the laogai has evolved since Deng Xiaoping, who shifted the emphasis of the forced labour camps from re-education toward economic considerations.

EPILOGUE

Even if there is only one Liu Xiaobo imprisoned, that means that the Chinese are still running the laogai system.

- Harry Wu³⁶⁰

Today, the CCP still uses the laogai as a means to suppress political dissidents. Even though China has substantially moved away from Brown's economic criteria of a Communist system and despite many elements of progress in China that ought to be recognized (like the rising living standards, the expansion of the social safety net, the broad range of individual choice in personal life and others³⁶¹), the monopoly of power of the Chinese Communist Party continues to be the basic principle of rule. That power remains to a certain extent dependent on the systematic incarceration and oppression of those designated as enemies.

³⁶⁰ Interview with Harry Wu, laogai survivor and executive director of the Laogai Research Foundation, 28 October 2010.

³⁶¹ A.J. Nathan, 'Introduction', in: Kempton, N., & Richardson, N., *Laogai: the machinery of repression in China* (New York 2009), p. 23.

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