The work leading to this report was supported in whole or in part from funds provided by the National Council for Soviet and East European Research.
Executive Summary

My large-scale study, which is still underway, has two related purposes. One is to write the history of the release of approximately 10 million Soviet political prisoners (zeks) from Stalin's Gulag archipelago of prison camps and forced exile in 1953-58, and of their return and reintegration into Soviet society. The other is to analyze the direct and indirect impact of these millions of returnees on Soviet social, cultural, and political life during the crucial decade of change, or de-Stalinization, between Stalin's death in 1953 and Khrushchev's overthrow in 1964. More generally, my study explores the frequently ignored social and historical dimensions (represented in this case by the returnee phenomenon) of high Soviet politics, including policy-making by the top leadership.

Conditions in Stalin's Gulag were often murderous (at least 12 million inmates died in 1936-53), so returnees in the 1950s were survivors in the fullest sense. Their liberation occurred in stages between 1953 and 1956, each tied to major developments inside the post-Stalin leadership. The arrest of Beria and other NKVD/MVD bosses, for example, produced a small trickle of 10 to 12,000 returnees in 1953-55. Many were relatives or associates of high officials, including Molotov's wife and Khrushchev's daughter-in-law. Khrushchev's attack on Stalin at the 20th Party Congress then led to the policy of mass liberation of Gulag inmates in 1956-57.

Millions of Gulag returnees immediately created a variety of practical problems for the Soviet system. Having nowhere to return, a large number of freed prisoners elected to remain as free citizens in the North Siberian and Central Asian regions of their imprisonment or exile. That development changed the demographic, economic, cultural, and political character of Magadan, Vorkuta, Karaganda, Tashkent, and other centers. More generally, as individuals, virtually all returnees had welfare needs that strained the state's administrative and financial resources in the 1950s -- family reunification, health care, living quarters, formal rehabilitation, jobs, pensions, etc.

The Soviet government did help most Gulag survivors with many of these basic needs in tacit return for their political passivity and silence about the past. Those returnee needs then influenced several important welfare and legal reforms of the 1950s and early 1960s. On the other hand, there was little the state could do for the many families already torn asunder by the Gulag (the plethora of divorces, remarriages, lost children, etc.), or for the many returnees who had psychological problems similar to those among survivors of the Nazi death camps. These family and personal problems created many traumas in Soviet society.

Collectively, millions of returnees also created an even
larger problem that could not be managed easily by the Soviet government, legally or administratively. Millions of other citizens had been agents or beneficiaries of Stalin's 20-year mass terror. As a result, as Anna Akhmatova remarked in 1956: "Now they are trembling for their names, positions, apartments, dachas. The whole calculation was that no one would return." Akhmatova formulated the starkest political conflict: "Two Russias are eyeball to eyeball -- those who were imprisoned and those who put them there."

Widespread social antagonisms between victims and victimizers generated an array of political, cultural, and historical expressions in 1953-61 that were both prelude to and a source of Khrushchev's radical anti-Stalinist policies of 1961-64. Some returnees, for example, initiated formal charges against "informers and hangmen," and legal suits to regain confiscated property. At the same time, Gulag language and terror-related themes began to creep irrepressibly into popular discourse, folk songs, and even into the official censored press. Still more, Gulag survivors in society were irrefutable evidence of past official crimes, and thus they inflamed the unfolding political controversy over the Stalinist past between reformers and conservatives inside the Soviet policy establishment. All these social tremors and pressures gathering below -- the "muffled rumble of subterranean strata," as Solzhenitsyn called them -- contributed significantly to the public outburst of official anti-Stalinism between the 22nd Party Congress in October 1961 and Khrushchev's downfall three years later.

While few survivors of the Soviet terror returned to high-level political positions (unlike in post-Mao China, for example), many did play important political roles after 1953. Early returnees with access to high official circles became lobbyists for further releases in 1953-54 and catalysts in the mass liberation policy that followed. Khrushchev recruited several former prisoners in 1954-55 to serve on official investigative commissions as counterweights to his opponents in the Party and police bureaucracies. Later, rehabilitated zeks sat on the approximately 100 troikas that actually liberated camps in 1956-57, and still later on many commissions that carried out posthumous rehabilitations.

Khrushchev's special relationship with Gulag returnees -- his opponents derisively called them "Khrushchev's zeks" -- tells us something important about that remarkable and contradictory leader: at critical moments, he trusted Stalin's victims more than he trusted entrenched Stalinist officials. Khrushchev's sponsorship of former zeks at the top of the system also helps to explain the mass return of others to establishment professions throughout Soviet life by the early 1960s.
But at the same time, "Khrushchev's zeks" engendered fear, loathing, and political opposition among a great many people in those same establishment and official circles. The conflict between former victims and victimizers (and merely beneficiaries of the terror) grew larger and became a fundamental issue in the politics of de-Stalinization. Behind the scenes, it raised stark Nuremberg-like questions: Who, in addition to Stalin and his leading cohorts, had participated in the terror? What had been their degree of personal responsibility? What should be their punishment now, if any?

Such questions were actually raised by the Soviet government itself (though sometimes indirectly) on three occasions — when Beria and perhaps a score more of top policemen were arrested and executed; at the 20th Party Congress in 1956; and publically at the 22nd Party Congress in 1961. Each occasion sent a wave of panic through the community of victimizers and accomplices, just as each encouraged victims to expect more justice and retribution. Nuremberg-like issues were then pursued repeatedly in lower official forums in 1962-64. Some victims now brought formal charges against very high officials; the press launched a (guarded and sometimes indirect) discussion of the terror, criminal involvement, and personal responsibility; and terror-related themes, including those questions, became almost commonplace in Soviet fiction.

By 1963, these conflicts, exposés, and questions endangered the entire ruling elite and more than one generation of officials who had made careers under Stalin. Opposition to Khrushchev personally and to de-Stalinization generally grew steadily throughout Soviet officialdom. When the Central Committee deposed Khrushchev in October 1964, these issues were not formally mentioned. But their importance in his downfall soon was made clear by the reversal of policies that, as officials complained, had portrayed the Soviet political elite as a generation of "'fathers' who were arrested and 'fathers' who did the arresting." Since the returnee phenomenon had been a central part of those policies, a Moscow official told former zeks: "The fashion for rehabilitated people is now dead."

The returnee story does not end, however, with Khrushchev's fall. A remarkable number of Gulag victims and their relatives have played leading roles in the Soviet dissident movements that emerged in the late 1960s and continue today, and as writers of uncensored samizdat literature about the terror years. In addition, while time has depleted the ranks of surviving returnees, millions of ordinary Gulag victims and their children still remain a sizable segment of the Soviet populace and, if the past is any indication, a potential constituency for another official
wave of anti-Stalinist revelations and political reform.

My study of the returnee phenomenon in Soviet politics yields several general conclusions as well. High Soviet officialdom, including the top political leadership, is not immune or indifferent to social pressures and problems below, as the "totalitarianism" and other approaches suggest. In time, the government will react to such social tremors with better or worse policies, depending on political circumstances inside or outside the system.

Indeed, the government's treatment of its Gulag population before and after 1953 shows that the Soviet political system can adapt, carry out major reforms, and change. No problem as dramatic as the liberation and social reintegration of 10 million political prisoners now troubles the government, but it does have other large social problems. My study suggests that none of these current problems seriously threatens the stability of the Soviet system any more than did the liberation of Stalin's Gulag thirty years ago.

But my study also shows that the political heat of the Stalinist past still generates social and political antagonisms in the Soviet Union. Anti-Stalinist and neo-Stalinist constituencies (including surviving victims and victimizers) are still present in both society and officialdom as components of the larger ongoing conflict between reform and conservatism. Understanding these and other deep-rooted cleavages, which reach into the ruling elite, does not lead to predictions. It does mean, however, that another episode of official anti-Stalinist reform should not be ruled out.

Finally, it is important to understand that official Soviet change, as the varying fate of Gulag victims shows, can be for the better or the worse -- forward toward at least modest liberalization, or backward toward Stalinism. Soviet officials who prefer to respond to internal social problems in liberalizing ways stand a political chance against their opponents only when Soviet relations with the outside world are not crisis-ridden. International crises have repeatedly thwarted reform coalitions and policies inside Soviet officialdom since the 1950s (Hungary, the U-2 episode, the American escalation in Vietnam, Czechoslovakia, etc.).

Therefore, the United States can make one -- and probably only one -- important contribution to the prospects of liberalization inside the USSR: It can pursue policies that steadily reduce tensions in American-Soviet relations and in the world. Whatever those specific policies may be, they add up to detente, not cold war.
Introduction

What follows is a report on a large-scale work still in progress. Most of my research is finished, and I have written the equivalent of a chapter in the book that will result from it. But primary research for the study turned out to be far more extensive and time-consuming than I had thought possible or necessary. As my work progressed, my subject expanded naturally into new areas and grew larger; at the same time, I discovered a variety of unexpected and valuable research materials. Therefore, this report is necessarily general and elliptical.

My study has two related purposes—one narrative, the other analytical. The central narrative theme is the release of millions of Soviet political prisoners (popularly called zeks) from Stalin's Gulag archipelago of prison camps and forced exile in 1953-58, and their return to Soviet society. My purpose here is to tell the largely untold story of survivors' lives after the Gulag. It is, of course, an often dramatic story composed of many different personal fates and rich biographical detail—a subject in human as well as narrowly Soviet studies.

My analytic purpose is broader. It is to explore the direct and indirect impact of these millions of returnees on Soviet social, cultural, and political life during the crucial decade of change, or de-Stalinization, between 1953 and 1964. In this respect, my study seeks to address major issues in our understanding of Soviet politics and society. Collectively, the returnees represented an important
historical and social dimension of political de-Stalinization, dimensions that are too often ignored in our analysis of contemporary Soviet politics.

Most Western studies tend to treat Soviet politics and policy-making both ahistorically, or apart from their essential history, and in narrow terms of a high leadership apart from society and usually immune to social pressures from below. This approach, a legacy in part of the long-standing totalitarianism school of Soviet studies, assumes a clear and rigid boundary between the party-state and society. It does not see that diverse trends and conflicts in society, themselves the product of historical experience, also exist, albeit in more subterranean and muted forms, within Soviet political officialdom. Or to borrow the imagery used by a recent emigre, that officialdom and society are really the "upstairs" and "downstairs" of a single social-political house, with a stairway of interacting pressures, influences, and responses between them.¹

The direct and indirect role of Gulag returnees in the 1950s and 1960s illustrates this more variegated and complex reality. Millions of survivors personified the unextinguished political heat of the traumatic Stalinist past, and especially the twenty-year terror. Their fates, which became highly visible after their release, and frequently their outspoken voices, played a central role in the intensely histori-cized politics of 1953–64, when reconsideration of the past became an essential aspect of political reform. At the same time, the personal needs and social reintegration of millions of ex-zeks, multiplied by their families, created a large social constituency for political de-Stalinization, and a test of the Soviet system's capacity to adapt to new circumstances and to change.
In these and other ways, Gulag survivors were a persistent and important factor in Soviet politics from 1953 to the fall of Nikita Khrushchev in 1964, and beyond. It is possible to document their role, for example, in the decision to liberate the Gulag population, changes in various social and cultural policies, Khrushchev's anti-Stalin campaigns, conflicts in the high leadership, and the emergence of open dissent after 1964.

Research Materials

Primary sources for such a study are necessarily numerous and diverse. Once the student of Soviet politics recognizes all the social and historical dimensions of that subject, he or she must seek political information in all kinds of materials and places, however unlikely. Soviet censorship limits formal information about politics to a relatively few sanitized sources, but as a result, it also inadvertently generates an outpouring of informal information elsewhere—in official and unofficial sources, published and unpublished materials, central and provincial publications, non-fiction and fiction.

Materials for my study, in addition to many useful secondary works by Western scholars, fall into four general categories:

1. Materials that appeared in official (censored) Soviet publications. The impression that Soviet censorship permitted very few commentaries on the "camp theme," as it became known—only a few speeches by leaders, or in literature only Solzhenitsyn's One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich—is wrong. Writings touching in various ways on Stalin's terror, the Gulag system, and returnees appeared in many different official publications and forms between the mid-1950s and 1967—
general histories of various subjects, monographs on specialized topics, encyclopedias, stenographic reports of meetings, newspapers, thick monthly journals, memoirs, prose fiction, poetry, and plays. Nor were such materials confined to the central press. Provincial publications in areas where many zeks settled after their release, such as the journal Baikal in Siberia and Prostor in Kazakhstan, sometimes featured camp themes and returnee writers more freely than did their central counterparts. Indeed, the existence of so much Gulag-related literature in official publications, some of it apparently inspired by or directed to a returnee constituency, is itself an important finding of my study. More generally, it indicates the need for more study of provincial publications than is now customary in Soviet studies. Soviet political life is not confined to Moscow or even the large cities.

2. Unofficial (uncensored) Soviet materials that appear either in typescript (samizdat) or in books and journals published abroad (tamizdat). The body of uncensored Soviet materials is now so large on so many different topics that it should be considered, along with official publications, as a basic source for Soviet studies. (Unfortunately, many Western scholars seem to be unaware of informative samizdat/tamizdat material on their own research subjects.) It is especially rich and valuable on my subject. Camp themes and returnee writers have been a major part of samizdat/tamizdat non-fiction and fiction since that literature grew into a large phenomenon in the late 1960s. These materials present a great variety of unvarnished detail about individual survivors, the returnee experience more generally, and even about related aspects of high Soviet politics. Moreover, this uncensored material continues to appear even today in books such as Anton
Antonov-Ovseyenko's *The Time of Stalin* and in ongoing periodicals such as *Pamiat'* and *SSSR: Vnutrennie protivorechiia*. Thus, official and unofficial Soviet materials supplement each other in important ways, and both are essential. This, too, is a research lesson for the field.

3. These written sources are supplemented by information that I have received from Soviet citizens, mainly individual Gulag victims and their relatives, through personal interviews, correspondence, and responses to a questionnaire I composed in Russian. Most of these people live in the Soviet Union. (I intend to use analogous information from recent emigres collected by the Soviet Interview Project and the Wiener Oral History Library.) The value of this personal information is threefold. It provides anecdotal detail about individual returnees and related institutional procedures such as legal rehabilitation and welfare services. It suggests at least partial answers to questions addressed rarely or not at all in written sources. And it helps me to judge which experiences were common among returnees and which were individual ones.
4. Finally, in addition to Soviet sources, there are dozens of published memoirs of foreign survivors of the Gulag. Though these authors were repatriated citizens of other countries, and thus not returnees to Soviet society, their first-hand accounts shed considerable light on common camp experiences, release procedures, and the lives of many Soviet citizens whom they encountered.

The Returnee Phenomenon: An Overview

Returnees from the Gulag were survivors in the fullest sense—in important ways, even in the sense that we speak of survivors of the Nazi death camps. Unlike the Nazi camps, the Gulag's first purpose was forced labor; but conditions in the jails, transit prisons, convoys, and forced labor camps were usually murderous. Weak prisoners soon perished from direct physical abuse, overwork, under-nourishment, or fierce climatic conditions. Not even the strong normally survived for many years.

Beginning with mass deportations of peasants in 1929-33, the Gulag population was repeatedly expanded and replenished by millions of arrests, particularly during the terror of 1936-39, the wartime deportations, and the post-war repressions. It is estimated that at least 12 million people died in the Gulag between the mid-1930s and the early 1950s, 3 million in the infamous Arctic camps of Kolyma alone. In other words, prisoners who lived to be liberated in the 1950s were the minority and probably included less than ten percent of those arrested on political charges in the 1930s. Most returnees were inmates who somehow had managed to survive "only" ten years or less in the Gulag.

Understandably, survival was itself a subject that later troubled and divided many returnees, much as it obsessed survivors of the Nazi
Who had survived, who had not, and why? Some people endured because of strong bodies and unrelenting will, or through the circumstantial good fortune of less arduous work or early exile instead of prolonged camp terms. But many survived by becoming informers or entering into other kinds of collaboration with the camp authorities. These circumstances raised painful moral and political questions in the 1950s and 1960s; they form the subject, in the context of the history of the Gulag system, of my first chapter.

Millions of zeks did survive to return to Soviet society in the 1950s, but exactly how many is not yet known. Even reputable estimates of the Gulag camp population around the time of Stalin's death in 1953 vary greatly, from less than 5 million to more than 12 million. For several reasons, I am inclined to accept informed Western and Soviet estimates of about 8 million. Since the camp population fell to about 1 million in 1958, we can assume that approximately 7 million inmates, most of them arrested on political charges, were freed. Foreign prisoners—Poles, Germans, Japanese, and others—must be subtracted from the returnee figure because they were repatriated. But to the total number of returnees must be added the millions of people, including deported Soviet nationalities, in forced "eternal" exile, which was an integral part of the Gulag system. Therefore, it seems safe to conclude that a minimum of 10 million Soviet citizens, and possibly many more, were freed from various kinds of imprisonment and banishment by the government's release policies of 1953-57. Returnees, in other words, were a mass phenomenon.

The liberation and return of the Gulag population was a multi-year process that began with Stalin's death on March 5, 1953. That biological event led to important social and political developments throughout the
far-flung Gulag system and in the top Soviet leadership. It resulted in the arrest and trial of Lavrenty Beria and other NKVD/MGB bosses, it raised the hope of liberation among victims and their families, it contributed to a wave of rebellions inside the camps, and it produced the first trickle of returnees to society. Above all, these initial events forced political decisions and conflicts in the leadership.

For three years, the number of releases remained small and the result of a slow case-by-case procedure. Apart from amnestied criminals, only about a thousand political prisoners were freed by the end of 1953, most of them relatives or friends of high officials. They included, for example, Khrushchev's daughter-in-law, Molotov's wife, and the once-celebrated actress Zoya Fyodorova. By late 1955, excluding repatriated foreigners, freed political prisoners still numbered probably no more than 10 to 12 thousand, a tiny fraction of the Gulag population. At the case-by-case pace of 1953-55, it would have taken 2500 years to liberate all of the inmates and exiles.

Khrushchev's anti-Stalin speech to a closed session of the Twentieth Party Congress on February 25, 1956 was the turning point. By indicting Stalin for "mass repressions," Khrushchev tacitly exonerated millions of people arrested on spurious charges of "counter-revolutionary activity" since the 1930s (all the so-called Article "58ers." ) Almost immediately, blanket amnesties were issued for several categories of political prisoners. And within weeks, mass exoneration procedures were being conducted by special commissions, dispatched from or ordered by Moscow, inside hundreds of camps themselves. (Inmates called them "unloading parties.") A simple denial of the original charge usually was enough to gain millions of prisoners their freedom. Most were given temporary
documents, a few rubles, a train ticket, and permission to return to the place of their arrest. By the summer of 1956, homeward-bound zeks, often still skeletal and in prison garb, had become a familiar sight on railways and roads across the Soviet Union.

Not all released prisoners actually went home. Thousands of people with personal ties to sensitive political cases or to martyred Bolshevik leaders were banned from Moscow and other capital cities for several years; and some deported nationalities were not, and still are not, allowed to return to their homelands within the USSR. But millions of other survivors simply had nowhere to return. Years of imprisonment had destroyed everything associated with "home"—family, career, possessions, and their mental and physical health. (A startling number of prisoners seem to have died very soon after their release.) Some exiles had already started new families with other exiles or "free" spouses, which tied them to their remote locales; and some zeks and exiles, deprived of alternatives, had developed a strong psychological attachment to their areas of long-time imprisonment.

Millions of survivors therefore chose to remain, now as free citizens and paid employees, in the vast regions of the dismantled Gulag empire, especially in Northern Siberia and Central Asia. Indeed, so many did so that their liberated presence dramatically changed the demographic, social, and political character of several former administrative centers of the Gulag, including Magadan, Vorkuta, Karaganda, and Tashkent. Even after most of the barbed-wire camps had been bulldozed and the areas transformed, visitors still found terrible traces of what had been there, including remnants of mass graves and skulls with bullet holes in the middle. But the living traces were more important.
Even today, substantial segments of the populace of those regions and cities are former zeeks and their descendents. This "zekization" of certain important areas was also part of the great return of the 1950s, and a subject for special study.

But millions of freed prisoners and exiles did go home. By 1956-57, they were visible everywhere—in villages, cities, apartment houses, offices, professional societies, and even at Communist Party meetings—reentering, or trying to reenter, society. They were people once as diverse as the Soviet Union itself, formerly of all classes, backgrounds and nationalities. Over the years, Stalin's terror had victimized virtually every group, high and low in society, and perhaps one of every two families. Inside the Gulag, wrote Tvardovsky:

...Fate made everybody equal
Outside the limits of the law,
Son of a kulak or Red commander,
Son of a priest or commissar.

Here classes all were equalized,
All men were brothers, camp mates all,
Branded as traitors every one.

Now, they went their separate ways.

Social Aspects of the Great Return

Generalizing adequately about so many lives after the Gulag, much less actually tracing them, is impossible. We encounter here the inherent limits of social history and sociological analysis; we must generalize about great masses of people on the basis of the relatively few whom historical and other circumstances make known to us. In the case of Gulag survivors, the problem is made even more difficult by official Soviet prohibitions on survey-type research and on the publication of candid memoir accounts; by the fact that the great majority
of returnees simply slipped back into the anonymity of Soviet society; by the abiding fear and reticence of many survivors, who sought to conceal and forget their past; and by the existence of an untold number of utterly broken zeks who were incapable of rejoining society. They became the flotsam of the great return—half-crazed (or so it seemed to bypassers) wanderers, beggars, loners, and outcasts.\(^{12}\)

Nonetheless, the sources listed above yield considerable evidence about the subsequent lives of many returnees, and even glimpses of some who otherwise vanished. My files include (or soon will include) adequate biographical information about almost a hundred returnees and/or their families, and partial information about perhaps another hundred. Even though most of these people were members of the political, cultural, and scientific intelligentsia, their post-Gulag lives, and their public attitudes toward their Gulag past, were different in many ways, as even a few examples suggest.

Some returnees rose high in the Soviet establishment by outwardly forgiving or forgetting the Gulag. They included the biologist Academician Aleksandr Baev, the rocket scientist Sergei Korolev, and the Party writer Galina Serebryakova.\(^{13}\) On the other hand, General Aleksandr Todorsky and Aleksei Snegov acquired significant political roles in official circles because they were returnees. Some Gulag survivors pursued religious careers, notably Dmitri Dudko and Anatoly Levitin-Krasnov. Among the poets who returned to official publications—such as Andrei Aldan-Semenov, Aleksandr Rekemchuk, Nikolai Zabolotsky, Tatyana Gnedich, Boris Ruchyev, Yaroslav Smelyakov, and Anatoly Zhigulin—some made their Gulag experience a literary theme, while others consciously abjured it. Still other writers became uncensored
survivor-witnesses to the Gulag as a Soviet holocaust, including Evgenia
Ginzburg, Varlam Shalamov, and, of course, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.
Later, many returnees became founders of the dissident movements of
the late 1960s, while others lived quiet, conformist lives.

Collectively, however, the millions of returnees were a new and
important social element in Soviet life in the 1950s. This was so not
simply because of their numbers, but because their common experiences,
needs, and demands generated widespread problems, conflicts, and
cultural expressions in society. These social tremors pressured the
political-administrative system into some kind of governmental response.

Virtually every returnee wanted, for example, at least three things:
to reunite or recreate a family; to receive health care and living space;
and, depending on his or her physical condition and age, to resume a
career or obtain an adequate pension. The Soviet government's general
response was to offer an unwritten but often-spoken social contract.
Essentially, officials said to Gulag survivors: Having freed you, we
now will meet your welfare and work needs within limits, and we will
let you live in peace. In return, you must not make political demands
or clamor about the past.

In reality, government agencies could do little for families
already torn asunder by the Gulag, except perhaps help returnees to
locate relatives. (And even that seems to have been done mainly by
friends and other relatives.) In some cases, both parents had been
arrested, and children had disappeared (sometimes under new names) into
state orphanages or foster homes. Even in cases where one spouse had
remained free (usually the wife), there had been countless renuncia-
tions, divorces, remarriages, estrangements caused by lack of communication,
and children who didn't know their father's real fate or name. There were, of course, also cases of long faithfulness and perseverance. But the prisoners' return caused traumas in a great many Soviet families. The outcomes were as diverse as one might imagine, from joyous to tragic. As for male returnees who found no family waiting, many quickly started new ones, frequently with younger women, a life-affirming act that brought still more citizens into the returnee saga.

Nor could the government do much directly for the many Gulag survivors who had psychological problems similar to those associated with survivors of the Nazi camps. (There is some evidence that a few Soviet psychologists became specialists in these matters.) Even leaving aside the people who had been irreparably broken by their camp experiences, many returnees were psychologically numbed or otherwise impaired. Some lived in constant anxiety, tormented by nightmares and everyday reminders of the Gulag. Some returnees who started new families refused to discuss the past with them. Often, children of Gulag survivors developed characteristic attitudes similar to those observed among children of Nazi camp survivors.

The Soviet government did try to meet other needs of returnees. Most released prisoners eventually received health care, living quarters, jobs, or pensions, however modest. Here, the main constraint was not official indifference, but the general scarcity of those provisions in the Soviet Union in the 1950s. Which is to say that the needs of so many returnees and their families taxed government resources and required costly revisions in various welfare laws. Thus, for example, the reform of 1956 that increased pensions for all citizens also expanded the definition of time on the job (stazh) in ways that tacitly included years of imprisonment and forced labor.
Nevertheless, the actual process of obtaining these necessities, particularly permanent residence permits, employment, and full pensions, wasn't automatic or easy for many returnees. Formally, victims of the terror had been "legally" indicted and convicted. To regain full citizenship, they needed official confirmation of their exoneration more fulsome and definitive than the elliptical and temporary documents they had received upon their release. (Amnesty, for example, was not technically exoneration.17)

Returnee appeals—along with posthumous ones by surviving relatives who had similar needs—therefore flooded the offices of lawyers, administrative agencies, and procurators, where, it was said, "Khrushchev's men" had replaced Stalin's and Beria's. Legal appeals revolved mostly around the complicated exoneration procedure known as "rehabilitation," but they also included suits to regain confiscated apartments and other possessions. As a result, many social conflicts of the great return coalesced and were expressed in the Soviet judicial system, where they played a role in the legal reforms of the 1950s and 1960s.18

But not all of the demands and conflicts associated with returnees could be easily managed by the Soviet government, legally or administratively. Some were too acute, simply because millions of other citizens had been implicated in Stalin's 20-year terror. There were different degrees of personal responsibility for the systematic victimization of millions of people. But criminal complicity had spread like a cancer throughout the political system and society, from Politburo members who directed the terror alongside Stalin, Party and state officials who had participated in the repressions, and hundreds of thousands of NKVD personnel who arrested, tortured, executed, and guarded prisoners,
to the plethora of petty informers and slanderers who fed on the crimson madness. Millions of other ordinary citizens were implicated by having profited, often inadvertently, from the misfortune of so many victims. They inherited the positions, jobs, apartments, possessions, and sometimes even the wives and children of the vanished. Generations built lives and careers upon a holocaust. The terror killed millions, but it also, said one returnee, "corrupted the living."  

Many Soviet citizens, of course, had behaved as honorably as possible during the terror years; and many people now welcomed the liberation of the Gulag population "as important to the health of the nation." But among millions of other citizens, the prisoners' return provoked only fear and hostility. Anna Akhmatova, whose own son was released in 1956, remarked: "Now they are trembling for their names, positions, apartments, dachas. The whole calculation was that no one would return."

The unexpected appearance of so many survivors therefore opened deep and bitter divisions throughout Soviet society. Akhmatova formulated the starkest conflict: "Two Russias are eyeball to eyeball--those who were imprisoned and those who put them there." But even people who had not participated directly in acts of repression or denunciation—all those circumstantial and unwitting beneficiaries of the terror—now had reason to feel uneasy about their lives and positions. Some became repentant Stalinists, so to speak, like Khrushchev himself; but a great many more felt only hostility toward the returnees. Alongside the community of surviving victims, there formed a community of increasingly self-defensive victimizers—social constituencies for and against political de-Stalinization from above.
Widespread conflicts were inevitable. Whether out of resignation or fear, most returnees evidently accepted the government's welfare provisions in return for passivity. Many, however, wanted more, including fuller restitutions for their suffering, official punishment of the guilty, political revelations, and personal vengeance. And indeed, returnees initiated such actions—formal charges against "slanderers and hangmen," legal suits to regain stolen property, oral and samizdat campaigns against "informers," and even physical attacks on their tormentors. Nor could these conflicts be confined to obscure levels of society or of the political system. They reached into professional scientific and cultural establishments, the NKVD, and even high circles of the Communist Party.

Social communities and antagonisms of this magnitude and intensity cannot exist for long without producing cultural expressions, even in conditions of political authoritarianism and censorship. The irrefrangible percolation of the "camp theme" (as it became known), including the returnee phenomenon, from the subterrane of society into popular and then establishment culture is a fascinating development of the 1950s and 1960s. Broadly speaking, the process developed on four interrelated levels of culture: everyday language, folk songs, poetry and prose in manuscript, and eventually official publications.

When the zeks returned to society, they brought with them a politicized version of the coarse criminal jargon commonplace in the Gulag but banned from discourse and Soviet publications under Stalin. Gulag language had begun to seep into the "big zone" (society) from the "little zone" (the camps) before the 1950s, but now it spread widely with returnees themselves. By the 1960s, camp jargon was a familiar
part of spoken Russian at all levels of society and was even appearing in published fiction. (Eventually, it formed the contents of entire dictionaries.\textsuperscript{24}) Closely related, vernacular tales of the terror, camps, and survivors began to inspire tape-recorded folk songs by popular bards of the 1950s and 1960s, notably Bulat Okudzhava, Yuli Kim, and Aleksandr Galich. They, too, spread “faster than a virus flu.”\textsuperscript{25}

Meanwhile, writers, including Gulag survivors, began to develop camp themes and even returnee characters in prose fiction and poetry. Such manuscripts must have already existed in considerable numbers by late 1956, since a small but dramatic wave of camp-related literature appeared in official publications in 1957–60, before the literary “flood” let loose by Khrushchev’s public anti-Stalinism at the Party congress in October 1961.\textsuperscript{26} That is, the “camp theme,” a kind of underground or counter-culture, had already forced itself, however tentatively, into official Soviet culture well before the appearance of Solzhenitsyn’s //Ivan Denisovich// in 1962. In the early 1960s, it grew into a full-fledged genre that posed an array of searing questions about the past and the present.

These social and cultural pressures building below after 1953 should not be interpreted apart from the highly authoritarian and still repressive nature of the Soviet political system. To have a major impact on the course of events, they required political initiatives at the top of the system. Nonetheless, social and cultural aspects of the prisoners’ return created a political context “downstairs” that pressed for a more radical response “upstairs”—more radical than Khrushchev’s speech to a closed session of the Party congress. When that response finally came in the early 1960s, this “muffled rumble of subterranean strata” was
both a causal factor and a contentious subject in the high-level political struggles that followed.  

Historical Aspects of the Great Return

The historical past plays an important, and usually divisive, role in the contemporary politics of most countries. This is particularly true in the Soviet Union because of that political system's relatively short but exceedingly traumatic history. In the 1950s and 1960s, the events of the Stalinist past were still autobiographical for most adults, or "living history," as Russians like to say. Here, I can do no more than summarize briefly the multi-level role played by Gulag returnees in the intensely historicized politics of the Khrushchev years.

Most generally, the return of millions of Gulag survivors helped set off and inflame the bitter controversy over the Stalinist past, which became an essential part of the political struggles between Soviet reformers and conservatives—and between anti-Stalinists and neo-Stalinists—in 1953-64. Looking back, Soviet citizens saw, and were deeply divided by, two conflicting features of the Stalinist era—national achievements and monstrous crimes. For many people, it was hard to acknowledge the crimes because that truth involved "the truth about ourselves and our illusions." Or as a young historian and son of a victim discovered, "Many people will defend [the past], defending themselves."  

Gulag returnees, however, were irrefutable evidence of those crimes. Collectively, even when mute, they were a constant reminder of what had happened and of those who had not returned. And not all of them were mute. When an official Party historian tried to discredit the revisionist historical views of the returnee Snegov by asking ominously if he was in
On another level, returnees helped to enrich historical thought in the Soviet Union after many years of sterility caused by repression and censorship. They brought back to society an array of historical traditions that had long been officially criminalized and silenced under Stalin, but had been kept alive in private discussions in camp barracks. By the 1960s, this revitalization process was evident in intellectual life, from culture to science, and in political life. Returnees like Snegov, Todorsky, Boris Dyakov, Suren Gazaryan, and Pyotr Yakir represented pre-Stalinist (and anti-Stalinist) Leninism. Mikhail Yakubovich and Irina Kakhovskaya, an old Menshevik and SR respectively, were determined to exonerate the memory of their movements and comrades. Solzhenitsyn, Father Dudko, and Levitin-Krasnov were representatives of even older religious and Slavophile traditions. Mikhail Baitalsky, a one-time Trotskyist, had returned philosophically to his Jewish origins. The revival and open conflict of these and other rival traditions in Soviet political life was due in part to Gulag returnees, who carried and helped resuscitate them.

But what made returnees an active historical factor in Soviet politics was the determination of many of them to publicize what had really happened during the terror, inside the Gulag, and to them personally. Such people refused to defer to official censorship about the past because, like survivors of the Jewish Holocaust, they had developed a passionate desire to bear personal witness, and to proclaim, "This Must Not Happen Again."
Thirty years later, it is clear that this truth-telling passion has created a large and powerful Gulag literature with many similarities to Holocaust literature—memoirs, history, and fiction written by Gulag victims and their relatives. Many of its authors have become well-known outside the Soviet Union, including Solzhenitsyn, Yakir, Lev Kopelev, Shalamov, Roy Medvedev, Ginzburg, Nadezhda Mandelstam, and Antonov-Ovseyenko. But their writings are only the visible tip of a voluminous literature of historical revelation that began to form in the 1950s and continues to grow even today.

Gulag survivors contributed to this process of historical revelation in various formal and informal ways. Some returnees (Yakir, Antonov-Ovseyenko, Todorsky) became professional or quasi-professional historians upon their return. Some (Olga Shatunovskaya, Snegov) sat on official commissions appointed to investigate the crimes of the 1930s or to rehabilitate victims post-humously. Other returnees (Aleksei Kosterin, Ginzburg, Yevgeny Gnedin, Baitalsky, Yakubovich, Yelena Vladimirova, Kopelev) began to write or tape-record their memoirs in the 1950s or 1960s, first in the hope of publication in the Soviet Union, then for circulation in samizdat. A great many more returnees furnished documents and oral testimony that later made possible three large uncensored histories of the Stalin era—Medvedev's *Let History Judge*, Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, and Antonov-Ovseyenko's *The Time of Stalin*. (Earlier, material of this kind often appeared, with or without attribution, in official books about victims of the terror.  

All these impassioned reminders, reminiscences, and reinvestigations of the past were loose inside the Soviet Union long before the advent of mass samizdat in the late 1960s. In a system where history is highly
politicized and censored, ongoing politics unavoidably becomes histori-
cized. That alone was enough to make the phenomenon of Gulag returnees
an important and potentially explosive part of Soviet politics after
Stalin.

Gulag Returnees and the Politics of De-Stalinization

The Soviet Union isn't the only communist country where victims of
the previous leadership's terror returned to play a political role. But
unlike in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and most dramatically China in
the 1970s, significant numbers of survivors were not restored to positions
of political authority in the Soviet Union. Barely a handful of Gulag
returnees (perhaps a dozen), for example, resumed high or even middle-
level posts in the Soviet Communist Party.

The main reason was, of course, that very few ranking Soviet officials
arrested in Stalin's terror actually survived to be freed in the 1950s.
Moreover, unlike the post-Mao ruling elite, the post-Stalin elite had
either been directly involved in the terror or had risen politically as
a direct result of its ravages. Leaders with blood on their hands or on
their feet, they were, with few exceptions, opposed to restoring any
surviving victims to positions of high political authority.

Therefore, the main political role of Gulag returnees was contextual
rather than direct or high-level participation. As I have suggested
above, mass social, cultural, and historical aspects of the prisoners'
return created a political atmosphere and pressures that influenced
changes in the political system and in policies, from welfare and legal
provisions to Khrushchev's anti-Stalin campaigns. My thesis is that
these influences from below were politically important in 1953-64;
and the ways in which they operated is the main focus of my political analysis.

Nonetheless, on important occasions and in various capacities, returnees did become direct participants in policy-making and conflicts at high political levels, and even inside the top Soviet leadership. I can do no more here than adumbrate a few of these instances, which began almost immediately after Stalin's death in 1953. (Indeed, it is reported that a released zek embalmed the despot's body for its resting place in the Lenin Mausoleum. 33)

Gulag survivors played a direct role in the first acts of de-Stalinization. Composed of relatives, friends, and associates of the ruling elite, the initial trickle of returnees in 1953-54 had access to the highest official circles. Their first-hand accounts of their experiences probably did more than anything else to destroy, at this level, the joint Stalinist myths about the Gulag—that all or most of the inmates were guilty, and that treatment in the camps was humane. These early returnees became, in effect, high-level lobbyists for further releases. Their influence seems to have been especially great on Khrushchev and Anastas Mikoyan, the two preeminent de-Stalinizers in the leadership by 1956. 34

The first response of the post-Stalin leadership was to place all blame for past crimes on "Beria's clique" in the NKVD/MVD. Here, too, several returnees, including the former NKVD officials Snegov and Gazaryan, played significant roles as witnesses in the series of semi-closed trials of Beria and his top henchmen in 1953-55. While the publicized indictments that led to death sentences were more constrained, the actual trial proceedings featured a number of Nuremberg-like charges, as well as
accounts by victims and their families of summary executions, torture, and false confessions. 35

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of survivors who had not been released began to take mass action on their own behalf inside the Gulag. Beria's fall, and other circumstances, set off a wave of rebellions in several large camps in 1953-55. Though they were eventually suppressed, these zek uprisings compelled the government in Moscow to confront and begin direct negotiations with inmates. 36 More important, the rebellions forced the whole Gulag question onto the agenda of the top leadership. Thus, Gulag survivors played critical roles, at the top and at the bottom of the Soviet system, in the events that led finally to the mass liberation of 1956-57.

Once the Gulag question was placed inescapably on the policy agenda, it caused bitter conflict inside the post-Stalin leadership. That conflict was exacerbated both by the varying roles of individual leaders in the terror and by the legacy of Stalin's long personal dictatorship. The new leadership apparently was uncertain about the full dimensions of the Gulag empire and the human toll of the 20-year terror. And some Politburo members, including Khrushchev, did not fully trust the high command of the NKVD/MVD/Gulag, even after the arrest of Beria. As late as 1955, several Politburo members still insisted that there had not been "mass repressions," only "some mistakes" now largely corrected. Khrushchev, however, was moving quickly toward the more radical indictment of the past that he presented at the Twentieth Party Congress, and he suspected a massive coverup by entrenched police and Gulag officials.

Sometime before 1956, Khrushchev took a radical step. From among his personal acquaintances and contacts, he began to recruit Gulag returnees
themselves as official investigators, under Party auspices, of the whole Gulag question. Yevshei Shirvindt, for example, once a high penal official and just back from 18 years as a zek, was sent to Gulag headquarters in Moscow to research the camp population. Shatunovskaya was made a member (and perhaps later, the head) of an official commission empowered to investigate the crimes of the 1930s, including the Kirov assassination and the Moscow purge trials. Todorsky was promoted to lieutenant general and given access to archives in order to calculate the military casualties of Stalin's terror. Snegov was made a KGB colonel, deputy head of the Gulag, and a member of the MVD presidium. Reporting directly to Khrushchev, he was a key organizer of the liberation of the camps in 1956-57.37

Historians must lament that none of the official investigations based on secret archives and testimony, and often conducted by returnees themselves, were ever published, even though they were completed. (Some of their findings later leaked into unofficial histories of the Stalin era.) Ultimately, the reports fell victim to powerful opponents of this kind of de-Stalinization, and to Khrushchev's own reluctance to pursue these issues too far. Nonetheless, such high-level undertakings involving former zeks so soon after Stalin's death were important politically.

They revealed something important, for example, about the remarkable and contradictory Khrushchev. Despite his own involvement in the crimes of the past, and his recurrent political turnabouts in 1953-64, at critical moments he evidently trusted Stalinist victims more than he trusted entrenched Stalinist officials. Not surprisingly, the latter referred derisively to "Khrushchev's zeks," and they were pleased to report after his fall: "The fashion for rehabilitated people is now dead."39 It is also true that Khrushchev manipulated former zeks for his own political
purposes, as when he put the returnee Lazurkina on the podium of a Party congress to abet his plan to remove Stalin's body from the Mausoleum. (She reported that Lenin had spoken to her in a dream, urging that action. 40) But Khrushchev's direct and indirect ties to Gulag returnees, which continued until his death, fostered in him a sense of historical justice. How else to explain his astonishing, though futile, proposal to build a memorial to victims of the terror? 41

More generally, Khrushchev's early use of returnees as political counterweights to officials with vested interests in concealing past crimes set a precedent that continued into the 1960s. The practice was institutionalized in the approximately one hundred commissions sent from Moscow in 1956 to liberate Gulag inmates and exiles. Each troika included representatives of the Procuracy and Central Committee, and one already freed, "rehabilitated" Party member. 42 And although the full reports were not made public, Khrushchev did use revelations provided by returnees, either as individuals or commission members, in his major anti-Stalin speeches at the Twentieth and Twenty-second Party congresses. Still later, many Gulag survivors eagerly played roles on individual commissions set up regularly, until the mid-1960s, to exonerate the reputations of prominent people who died in the terror, an action essential for the well-being of surviving relatives.

Finally, Khrushchev's personal sponsorship of returnees had a dual ramifying effect in official circles throughout Soviet life. On the one hand, it set an authoritative example that helped a great many more Gulag survivors return or rise to desirable positions in academic, cultural, scientific, and other establishments. Directors of institutes, for example, understood that this was Khrushchev's own policy, and thus they
felt compelled to comply. By the early 1960s, there were former zeks in virtually every Soviet establishment, from research institutes and universities, to editorial boards.

On the other hand, the appearance of so many of "Khrushchev's zeks" engendered fear, loathing, and intense political opposition among a great many people in those same circles. To accomplices and beneficiaries of the terror, returnees in their professions were daily reminders of their own pasts and a constant threat of retribution. When Lazar Kaganovich, then still a Politburo member, objected that Khrushchev was "proposing that ex-convicts pass judgment on us," he spoke for thousands, perhaps millions, of such people throughout the Soviet system. It was on this establishment level that the two Russias were most truly and directly "eye-ball to eye-ball."

And yet, it is difficult to generalize about this potentially explosive conflict in Soviet life. Because of the nature of the terror and of the Stalin cult, almost every successful adult, who had not been arrested, had been a Stalinist in some important respect between 1936 and 1953. People therefore reacted in various and often complex ways to the returnees and to the unfolding controversy over the Stalinist past.

Most of the direct accomplices of the terror were, of course, implacably hostile. They remained ardent Stalinists, people who "hate this era of emptied prison camps." But many former Stalinists—or perhaps, people who merely had risen to official eminence under Stalin—became what I call repentant Stalinists. They wanted or were willing, within limits, to right the wrongs of the past. They, too, appeared throughout the Soviet establishment, from Khrushchev and Mikoyan in the Politburo, to celebrated figures like Ilya Ehrenburg, Aleksandr Tvardovsky, and Konstantin Simonov
in literary life. Or to paraphrase the son of one victim, there were bad people in bad times who became good people in good times; and there were those who remained bad people in good times.

Not even returnees themselves were politically united. Many rejoined the Communist Party, or even joined for the first time. Others blamed the Party for all their misfortunes and hated all that it still represented. While many returnees supported or sympathized with Khrushchev's anti-Stalin campaigns, some, such as Serebryakova, lent their prestige to his political opponents. Most former zeks idolized the Solzhenitsyn who published *Ivan Denisovich* in 1962, but Dyakov allowed his memoirs to be used to discredit Solzhenitsyn's portrayal of camp life. Later, one high-ranking returnee banished his daughter from his home when she became a dissident.

One generalization, however, is possible. Political controversy caused by the returnee phenomenon and the Stalinist past generated stark questions that forced people throughout Soviet society to take sides, and that constantly threatened to erupt politically at the top. Let us call them Nuremberg-like questions, not just for the sake of brevity, but because so many Soviet citizens saw inescapable parallels between these issues and those enunciated at the Nuremberg trials under the rubric of "crimes against humanity." (After all, the USSR had been a prosecuting government at Nuremberg and signatory to its judgments; and Khrushchev's own Procurator-General, Roman Rudenko, had been the chief Soviet prosecutor.) Simply stated, those questions asked: Who, in addition to Stalin and his leading cohorts, had participated in the terror? What had been their degree of personal responsibility? What should be their punishment today, if any?
The entire weight of the Soviet system often seemed to conspire against even the asking of such questions, but they were asked and discussed. Behind the scenes, they were the source of intense private controversy, and great personal alarm, almost from the moment of Stalin's death; and after 1965, they became the subject of widespread discussion in samizdat. But Nuremberg-like issues were also raised and debated, however guardedly and briefly, in official forums and in the censored Soviet press, partly because they were a source of conflict inside the high leadership, and partly because they were irrepressible questions in the context of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization policies.

Nuremberg-like questions were raised by the Soviet government itself on three important occasions, though sometimes only tacitly. The first was in 1953, when "Beria's clique," and implicitly the NKVD, were charged with "criminal activities." The second was the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, when Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin caused widespread panic among officials implicated in the terror; a few committed suicide, including Stalin's literary commissar Aleksandr Fadeyev, while many more suffered "mental breakdowns from their fears of being made to answer for their crimes."

The third and most important occasion was the Twenty-second Party Congress in 1961, when for the first time Khrushchev and his allies publicly charged surviving Stalinist leaders (Molotov, Kaganovich, Malenkov, and Voroshilov) with "direct personal responsibility" for "illegal mass repressions," called for "a thorough and comprehensive study of all such cases rising out of the abuse of power," and hinted that such people would be tried for past crimes. Another wave of panic spread through the community of victimizers.
Little retribution actually resulted from these official half-steps. Perhaps a score of high Stalinist police bosses were tried and executed in the mid-1950s, while a few thousand lesser NKVD officials and other odious figures were merely demoted or prematurely retired. (Their victims called them "hangmen on pension.") But even these half-steps at the top were enough to unleash a broader discussion of Nuremberg-like issues in lower official circles and in the Soviet press, especially between 1961 and Khrushchev's overthrow in 1964.

Khrushchev's accusations at the Party congress in October 1961, for example, encouraged other people to bring formal charges, before various agencies and Party bodies, against still influential Stalinists. There were several such cases, but two were especially significant and later well-documented. One involved a campaign by established Moscow writers, including some returnees, to expose the prominent literary critic Yakov Elsberg as an active "informer" who had caused the arrest and death of many writers. In the other case, the returnee Pavel Shabalkin accused four top Party philosophers, including Mark Mitin and Pavel Yudin, of having been instrumental in his arrest and 20-year imprisonment. The individuals accused in these cases—all of them escaped real punishment—were less important than the fact that a plethora of equally guilty and vulnerable Soviet officials stood behind them.

It was also in 1962-63 that discussions of Nuremberg-like issues began to appear frequently in the Soviet press, though again cautiously and often by indirection. In particular, three forms of the discussion revealed hidden conflicts in official circles. One involved the publication of several camp or terror-related stories and memoirs, most notably Solzhenitsyn's *Ivan Denisovich*. Dozens of conflicting reviews of these
exposés appeared in Soviet newspapers and journals, ranging from enthusiastically approving to openly hostile. Collectively, these reviews constituted (and can be read as) a debate over the terror, criminal involvement, and personal responsibility. Not surprisingly, opinion varied radically, often depending on whom the reviewer represented.

A related discussion was set off at high levels by Ehrenburg, when he revealed in his controversial memoirs that under Stalin he had "to live with clenched teeth" because he had known his arrested colleagues were innocent. Many Soviet officials reacted furiously, and publicly, to Ehrenburg’s confession, or "theory of silence," because if the individual writer Ehrenburg had known the truth, so must have the whole officialdom above him. These officials not only denied any personal responsibility in the victimization of millions of innocent people, they denied having known anything about it. Ehrenburg’s assertion, which amounted to a charge of vast complicity by silence, aroused such a political commotion that it eventually entangled Khrushchev himself.

The third Nuremberg-like discussion in official circles was both more direct and indirect. The early 1960s brought forth a spate of official Soviet writing about Germany under Nazism and the actual Nuremberg trials. Some of this commentary was innocent enough, but much of it was plainly an indirect discussion of the Soviet Union under Stalin. Soviet writers and readers had no trouble tacitly translating into terms of their own experience analyses of the Hitler cult, Gestapo, Nazi concentration camps, informers, mass German silence and complicity, and unfulfilled justice. Two films, for example, were special occasions for such analogies: the American film Judgment at Nuremberg, which was shown in Moscow in 1963; and the Soviet film Ordinary Fascism, which was released in 1965.
Finally, there was an even more popular outlet for these issues. Beginning in 1962, and continuing for more than a year after Khrushchev's overthrow, portrayals of the Stalinist terror, its consequences, and its aftermath became almost commonplace in officially published Soviet fiction. Many novels and stories featured at least partial accounts of the fate of innocent victims and their families, the brutality of NKVD officials, the perfidy of informers, the betrayal of friends and associates, the corruption of Party members, the tribulations of Gulag returnees, and the related conflicts of the post-Stalin period.\(^56\) Though literary treatments were often formula-ridden and characters stereotypical, what emerged was a fairly unvarnished collective picture of the 20-year holocaust caused by Stalin's rule. And running through this "fiction," explicitly or implicitly, were the same questions of widespread criminal involvement, generational responsibility, and justice.

Gulag returnees were involved at each level of these discussions--as protagonists, writers, and "fictional" characters. But their opponents--the large community of victimizers and other neo-Stalinists--were far stronger. By 1963, such exposés and searing political questions endangered the entire ruling elite and more than one generation of Soviet officials who had made careers under Stalin. Opposition to Khrushchev personally and to de-Stalinization generally grew steadily throughout Soviet officialdom.

When the Central Committee deposed Khrushchev on October 12, 1964, the formal indictment of his leadership did not mention those issues.\(^57\) (The indictment was presented by Mikhail Suslov, the Politburo member who probably had the most to fear from further revelations.) But within months, their importance in Khrushchev's downfall was made clear, as officials were authorized to repudiate and reverse policies that had portrayed the
political biography of the ruling elite as "a chain of crimes and mistakes," and that elite as a generation of "'fathers' who were arrested and 'fathers' who did the arresting." Little wonder that a Moscow official could inform returnees: "The fashion for rehabilitated people is now dead."

Epilogue

The focus of my narrative and analysis is on the period 1953-64, but the story of Gulag survivors did not end with the fall of Khrushchev. In an epilogue, I will relate how a number of representative returnees responded to the different policies of the post-Khrushchev leadership and, above all, to the official rehabilitation of the Stalin era, which continues today. Time has depleted the ranks of surviving returnees, but a great many still remain throughout Soviet society. Along with their adult children, who must embody in some way their parents' experiences, they remain a sizable segment (surely still numbering in the millions) of the Soviet citizenry.

This raises the question of the enduring legacy of Gulag returnees, two aspects of which require special mention. A remarkable number of Gulag survivors, children of returnees, and relatives of victims who did not survive have played active roles in the Soviet dissident movements that formed in the late 1960s. To name only a few who have become known in the West: Solzhenitsyn, Kopelev, Roy and Zhores Medvedev, Elena Bonner (Sakharov's wife), Yuri Gastev, Larisa Bogoraz, Kosterin, Gnedin, Father Dudko, Levitin-Krasnov, Vasily Aksyonov, Yakir, Lidia Chukovskaya, and Arseny Roginsky. Nor does this include writers of uncensored Soviet holocaust literature such as Shalamov, Mandelstam, Ginzburg, and Antonov-Ovseyenko.
In this respect, Gulag victims and their relatives remain an important factor in Soviet political life. Dissident activists and writers among them keep alive the idea of truth-telling about the crimes of the Stalinist past. They insist that for such historical crimes there is no statute of limitations. To tell the full truth about what happened, as one returnee wrote as recently as 1980, is "a duty to those who died..., to those who survived that dark night, to those who will come after us." So long as the Soviet government denies the truth, that moral axiom, which circulates today among the conformist intelligentsia as well as in dissident circles, probably guarantees the continuation of uncensored historical writing and political dissent inside the Soviet Union.

At the same time, larger numbers of Gulag victims and their relatives remain a potential constituency for another combined wave of anti-Stalinist revelations and reform from above. The possibility of official reform is outside my discussion here. Suffice it to say that the reformist cause, despite its defeat since Khrushchev, lives on in Soviet officialdom, mainly because Stalin's institutional legacy—particularly, the hypercentralized economic system—is still the source of so many serious problems. In different political circumstances, another leader or faction may well reach for the fallen banner of fundamental economic reform. Such a program will require not only renewed criticism of the Stalinist past, but a reformist ideology to overcome powerful conservative resistance to change. And anti-Stalinism remains the only viable ideology of communist reform from above, as it was under Khrushchev and as it has been in other communist parties, from Belgrade and Prague to Peking. In such circumstances, Gulag victims will still have a role to play.
Policy Implications

This study yields no specific recommendations for American policy toward the Soviet Union, but it can contribute (I think) to a better understanding of the Soviet system that should inform our policy-making. That understanding can be stated briefly, if somewhat didactically, as follows:

1. The Soviet high leadership and officialdom are not immune or indifferent to social pressures and problems below, but instead sensitive to them. In time, the government will react to such societal tremors with better or worse policies, depending on political circumstances inside and outside the system.

2. The government's treatment of the Gulag population, and then the returnees, in the 1950s and 1960s shows that the Soviet political system can adapt and change. No problem as dramatic as the liberation and return of 10 million Gulag survivors currently troubles the government, but it does have other large social problems that are well-documented in the Soviet press and in Western scholarship. These problems do not seriously threaten the stability of the Soviet system any more than did the liberation of Stalin's Gulag. The government will cope with them.

3. Thirty years after Stalin's death, and twenty years after Khrushchev's fall, the heat of the Stalinist past still generates social and political antagonisms in the Soviet Union. Anti-Stalinist and neo-Stalinist constituencies (including Gulag victims) are still present in both society and officialdom as components of a larger conflict between reform and conservatism. Consider, for example, the sharply conflicting reactions this year to Yuri Andropov's police campaign to fight "corruption" and instill
"discipline." Understanding these deep-rooted cleavages, which reach into the high elite, does not lead to predictions. It does mean, however, that another episode of official anti-Stalinist reform should not be ruled out.

4. As its varying treatment of Gulag victims showed, the Soviet government can respond to internal problems in ways that are progressive or reactionary. Change can be for the better or the worse—forward toward at least modest liberalization, or backward toward Stalinism. Soviet officials who prefer to respond to social problems in liberalizing ways stand a political chance only when Soviet relations with the outside world are not crisis-ridden. International crises have repeatedly thwarted reform policies inside Soviet officialdom since the 1950s (Hungary, the U-2 episode, the American escalation in Vietnam, Czechoslovakia, etc.). Therefore, the United States can make one—and probably only one—important contribution to the prospects of liberalization inside the USSR: It can pursue policies that steadily reduce tensions in American-Soviet relations and in the world. Whatever those specific policies may be, they add up to detente, not cold war.
NOTES


6. It is even harder to estimate the exile population than the camp population. One knowledgable Soviet source insists that exiles were at least as numerous as camp inmates in 1953, an impression confirmed by some former exiles. Unlike the camps, there is no study of the exile system. For an elliptical account, see Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Vol. 3, Part VI.
7. Figures in this paragraph are from Roy Medvedev, *Khrushchev: A Biography* (New York, 1983), pp. 64, 83. Medvedev's sources included former zeks who served on the commissions discussed below, as well as members of Khrushchev's entourage.

8. I have several first-hand accounts of these events. See also Medvedev, *Khrushchev*, pp. 96-7.

9. Poetic expressions of such attachments appeared, for example, in the journals *Baikal* and *Prostor*.


12. See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 100-1. I have heard many such stories.

13. Most people released from the Gulag while Stalin was still alive were rearrested, but a few remained free, including Korolev and the poet Nikolai Zabolotsky. I will treat these early returnees in the first chapter as adumbrations of what came later.
14. Many returnees tell of similar conversations with Soviet officials. The social contract was a tacit theme of many Soviet novels and stories praising Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization policies. See below, note 56.

15. The impact of the terror, and later the returnees, on family life was a major theme of Soviet fiction in the 1950s and 1960s. See below, notes 26 and 56.

16. See, for example, Zakon o gosudarstvennykh pensiiakh (Moscow, 1964); and E. Efimov, "Pravovye voprosy vosstanovleniia trudovogo stazha reabilitirovannym grazhdanam," Sotsialisticheskaja zakonnost', No. 9, 1964, pp. 42-5.

17. See the documents and commentary in P.S. Romashkin, Amnistia i pomilovanie v SSSR (Moscow, 1959). Soviet officials and employers usually pointed out this distinction to returnees.

18. Legal issues raised by the returnee phenomenon, from the mid-1950s well into the 1960s, can be followed in the journals Sovetskaia iustitsiia; Sotsialisticheskaja zakonnost'; and Sovetskoe gosudarstvo i pravo. See, for example, V.M. Savitskii, "Po povodu ugolovno-protsessual'nykh garantii prava nevinovnogo na reabilitatsiiu," ibid., No. 9, 1965; Efimov (cited above, note 16); and the guarded overview in the dissertation by M.F. Poliakova, "Imushchestvennye problemy reabilitatsii po sovetskому pravu" (Moscow, Institute of State and Law, 1977).

19. Aleksei Snegov in Vsesoiuznoe soveshchaniie o merakh


22. Ibid., p. 188.


24. See Bronia Ben-Iakov, Slovar' argo GULaga (Frankfurt, 1982); Vladimir Kozlovskii, Sobranie russikh vorovskikh slovarei, 4 vols. (New York, 1983); and others. These were published abroad, but the enterprise itself began cautiously inside the USSR. See K. Kostsinskii (Kirill Uspensky), "Sushchestvuet li problema zhargona?," Voprosy literatury, No. 5, 1968, pp. 181-91.


29. See ibid., p. 29; and Iu. Trifonov, Otblesk kostra (Moscow, 1966), p. 86.
30. From the transcript of a closed meeting of Party historians in 1965. The transcript was made privately and circulated in samizdat.


32. I have in mind, for example, the scores of biographical books and pamphlets rehabilitating high-ranking officials who died in the terror.


34. See, inter alia, Medvedev and Medvedev, Khrushchev; Medvedev, Khrushchev; Antonov-Ovseyenko, The Time of Stalin; and Roy Medvedev's forthcoming All Stalin's Men. I have several first-hand accounts that confirm and amplify these accounts.

35. See, for example, Gazarian, "O Berii i sude nad berievtsami v Gruzii."


37. Antonov-Ovseyenko, The Time of Stalin, pp. 210, 319; Medvedev, Khrushchev, p. 69. I have several first-hand testimonies that confirm and amplify these accounts. Todorsky's figures, compiled anonymously, became well-known and now are accepted as standard by Western scholars. Clearly, the post-Stalin high
military command wanted to make known the extent of Stalin's
slaughter of military officers. That military elite played
an interesting role in de-Stalinization.

38. See, for example, Antonov-Ovseyenko, The Time of Stalin,
esp. Part II, chapter 4.

39. Medvedev, Khrushchev, p. 98. Many people I interviewed
spoke of "Khrushchev's zeks."

40. XXII s"ezd kommunisticheskoi partii sovetskogo soiuza,
(Moscow, 1962), p. 121.


42. Medvedev, Khrushchev, p. 97. This account is confirmed
and elaborated upon in various memoirs and oral testimonies.

43. As several former zeks, who returned to institutes and
to similar institutions, have told me.

44. Quoted in Medvedev, Khrushchev, p. 84.

45. The phrase is from Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem "The

46. D'jakov, Povest' o perezhitom. Chapters of his memoirs
appeared in journals in 1963 and 1964.

47. A samizdat bulletin devoted exclusively to the subject
began to appear in 1969. It was entitled "Crime and Punishment."

48. Khrushchev seems to have levelled Nuremberg-like charges against his Politburo opponents, later traduced as the "anti-Party group," sometime in 1956-57 or earlier. See XXII s"ezd, II, pp. 586, 589.


50. XXII s"ezd, II, pp. 402, 584. One young Soviet citizen had the unusual privilege of a stay in a Central Committee sanatorium in October 1961. He was stunned by the fury and fear the congress caused among its elite patients.

51. N.N., "Donoschiki i predateli sredi sovetskikh pisatelei i uchenykh."


53. It is particularly useful to read together the reviews of Ivan Denisovich (1962), Yuri Bondaryev's Silence (Tishina), which appeared in Novyi mir in March-May 1962, and Dyakov's memoirs (Povest' o perezhitom), which began appearing in 1963.

54. See the exchange between between Ehrenburg and Vladimir Yermilov in Izvestiia, January 30 and February 6, 1963.

55. See, for example, E. Genri, "Chuma na ekrane," Junost', No. 6, 1966; And F. Burlatskii, "Eto ne dolzhno povtorit'sia," Pravda, February 14, 1966.

57. For the indictment, see Medvedev, Khrushchev, chapter 21.


60. I have made this general argument at length elsewhere. See above, note 28.