

AMNESTY 1945:

The Revolving Door of Stalin's Gulag

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Executive Summary

By extending the history of political prisoners to all Gulag detainees, historians have overlooked one of the most striking features of Stalin's prison camp system—namely, the revolving door, the circular movement of millions of Soviet citizens to the Gulag and back. Stalin's labor camps and colonies formed a dynamic, variable, and unstable system in which prisoners came and went in vast numbers. Ordinary peasants and workers, sentenced for minor infractions, passed through this notorious penal system in very large numbers. The Gulag and non-Gulag worlds were profoundly connected as millions not only entered the system, but returned to Soviet life. Stalin's 1945 amnesty is hardly mentioned in the scholarly literature, although it freed over half a million people and represented Stalin's largest single release of Gulag prisoners. As such, it offers the most striking example of the Gulag's revolving door.

All sources of light can to some degree be compared with the Sun. And the Sun cannot be compared with anything. So it is that all the expectations in the world can be compared with the expectation of amnesty, but the expectation of amnesty cannot be compared with anything else.¹

– Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

Introduction

It was the spring of 1945 that inspired Solzhenitsyn to describe the immense expectation of amnesty among Gulag prisoners. Inmates as well as interrogators in Stalin’s labor camps and colonies seemed certain that a large-scale amnesty would follow the Soviet defeat over Nazi Germany. “It just couldn’t be that so many people were to remain in prison after the greatest victory in the world!”²

Rumors of an impending release circulated widely and feverishly, according to Solzhenitsyn. One prisoner even insisted that Stalin told an American correspondent how “after the war there would be an amnesty the like of which the world had never seen.”³ The writer who introduced the world to the Soviet Gulag characterized prisoners’ hopes for amnesty at the end of WWII as completely naïve; indeed, eight years were added to Solzhenitsyn’s own sentence on the very day that the amnesty was issued in July 1945.⁴ However, if that day proved no different (or worse) for political offenders, this was not the case for many others. In fact, at the conclusion of Russia’s most catastrophic war, over a million people had their Gulag sentences either significantly reduced or completely erased.

¹ Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation, I-II* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1973), p. 273.

² *Ibid.*, p. 270-71.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

Solzhenitsyn described the 1945 amnesty as “Stalin’s cruel joke with the politicals,” but the law was a serious matter for many others.⁵ The impact of Stalin’s amnesty was enormous, but Solzhenitsyn’s dismal view of the law illustrates the degree to which political and non-political detainees received different treatment within the Gulag system. If release from the Gulag remained a distant dream for political detainees and others classified as socially dangerous elements, this was not the case for ordinary criminal offenders who constituted the majority of Gulag prisoners. Indeed, roughly 20-40 percent of inmates in Stalin’s labor camps and colonies were released each year from 1934 to 1953.⁶ New data indicates that nearly six million prisoners were officially released under Stalin.⁷ Moreover, in almost all the years of its existence, the Soviet Gulag detained a majority of criminal and not political offenders, although the proportion of “politicals” increased in the postwar years.⁸ For example, in 1951, one of the peak years for the penal system in terms of the number of detainees, the Gulag held over 57,000 *more* prisoners for violating the June 4, 1947 law on theft of socialist property than for all counter-revolutionary offenses.⁹ Illiterate, semiliterate, and persons with only an elementary school education

⁵ Alexander I. Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation, V-VII (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1976), p. 437.

⁶ J. Arch Getty, Gabor T. Rittersporn, and Viktor N. Zemskov, “Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre-War Years: A First Approach on the Basis of Archival Evidence,” The American Historical Review 98 (October 1993), p. 1041.

⁷ Edwin Bacon, The Gulag at War: Stalin’s Forced Labour System in the Light of the Archives (New York: New York University Press, 1994), p. 167; V.N. Zemskov, “Gulag (istoriko-sotsiologicheskii aspect)” Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia no. 6 (1991), p. 14; Getty, et al., pp. 1049-50; David J. Nordlander, “Origins of a Gulag Capital: Magadan and Stalinist Control in the Early 1930s,” Slavic Review 57 (Winter 1998), 809-810. The figures provided for 1945 do not reflect the full extent of the amnesty. For this reason, the overall numbers provided here concerning prisoner releases are probably low.

⁸ As many authors note, these categories are not precise. Nonetheless, according to John Keep, “Scattered information suggests that roughly one-quarter to one-third were “politicals”, but the ratio varied over the years, increasing spectacularly after 1944 and then falling again.” See his “Recent Writing on Stalin’s Gulag: An Overview.” Crime, History & Societies (no. 2, vol. 1, 1997), p. 100. See also Getty, et al., p. 1030-39.

⁹ V.N. Zemskov, “Gulag (istoriko-sotsiologicheskii aspect)” Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia no. 7 (1991), p. 10.

constituted the vast majority of Gulag prisoners—as many as 80% before the war.¹⁰ This majority of camp inmates apparently lacked any eloquent memoirists and thus has remained largely obscure. Yet their experience of the Gulag is especially significant because it returned with them to Soviet society.

Over the years, knowledge of Stalin’s immense labor camp system has derived largely from the testimonies and experiences of those condemned as enemies of the state, people like Solzhenitsyn, Varlam Shalomov, Eugenia Ginzburg, and Anna Larina. They and others like them spent decades in remote camps, saved only by the death of Stalin and the rehabilitation of many political prisoners in the 1950s. Their vivid memoirs convey three striking characteristics of the Soviet penal camp system: the interminable sentences attached to Gulag prisoners, the absence of any hope of release, and the complete isolation from the outside world. However, by extending the history of political prisoners to all Gulag detainees, historians have overlooked one of the most striking features of Stalin’s prison camp system—namely, the revolving door, the circular movement of millions of Soviet citizens to the Gulag and back.¹¹ Stalin’s labor camps and colonies formed a dynamic, variable, and unstable system in which prisoners came and went in vast numbers. The Gulag and non-Gulag worlds were profoundly connected as millions not only entered the system, but left and returned to Soviet life. Stalin’s amnesty is hardly mentioned in the scholarly literature, although it freed over half a million people and represented Stalin’s largest single release of Gulag prisoners.¹² As such, it offers the most striking example of the Gulag’s revolving door.

¹⁰ Zemskov, “Gulag,” no. 6, p. 18.

¹¹ I am not the first to use the term “revolving door” to describe the Soviet Gulag system. See David Nordlander, “Capital of the Gulag: Magadan in the Early Stalin Era, 1929-1941” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1997), p. 179; Nanci Adler, “Life in the ‘Big Zone’: The Fate of Returnees in the Aftermath of Stalinist Repression.” *Europe-Asia Studies* (vol. 1, no. 1, 1999), p. 7; Steven A. Barnes, unpublished paper presented at AAASS annual convention in Toronto, Canada, November 2003, p. 2; Steven Barnes argues that “the assumption that releases from the Gulag were ‘very rare’ was one of the major mistakes of the first generation of Gulag historians.” See his “Soviet Society Confined: The Gulag in the Karaganda Region of Kazakhstan, 1930s-1950s,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 2003), p. 33.

¹² A few scholars briefly mention Stalin’s amnesty. See Peter H. Solomon, Jr., *Soviet Criminal Justice Under Stalin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 421; Elena Zubkova, *Poslevoennoe sovetskoe obshchestvo: politika i povsednevnost’, 1945-1953* (Moscow, 2000), 41. 93; Zemskov “Gulag,” no. 7, p. 6-7; Getty, et al., p. 1039fn; Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2003), p. 292.

Stalin's Amnesty

The Bolshevik party leadership regularly issued large amnesties to commemorate major events, such as the formation of the Soviet Union in 1923, the 10-year anniversary of the October revolution in 1927, the completion of the White Sea Canal in 1933, and the 20th anniversary of the Red Army in 1938. For this reason, Gulag prisoners had reason to expect that an amnesty might follow the victory over Nazi Germany. A month after the war's conclusion was celebrated in the Soviet Union, on July 7, 1945, the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet issued a decree: "On Amnesty in connection with the victory over Hitler's Germany."¹³

A large release of inmates might not have come as a great surprise, but the magnitude of the release and the speed with which it was carried out were unprecedented. Shortly after the Nazi invasion in 1941, over half a million prisoners were granted early release in the summer and fall of that year, and enlisted into the ranks of the Red Army.¹⁴ Yet this enormous flow of people from the Gulag to the military in a few short months did not match the scale of the exodus that took place in a similarly short period of time just four years later. In the summer and fall of 1945, a staggering 40% turnover of the entire prison labor population took place.

According to the amnesty law, several categories of prisoners were to be released from their sentences entirely.¹⁵ First, those punished with a term of deprivation of freedom for three years or less were subject to release. Also released were persons sentenced for wartime offenses, namely, according to

¹³ P.S. Romashin, Amnistiia i pomilovanie v SSSR (Moscow, 1959), 71-72.

¹⁴ Special decrees of the State Defense Committee (gosudarstvennyi komitet oborony) or GOKO on July 12, 1941 and November 24, 1941 released prisoners and directed them into army service and into factory labor. GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 2; "Gulag v gody voyny: doklad nachal'nika GULAGa NKVD SSSR V.G. Nasedkina, Avgust 1944 g." Istoricheskii arkhiv (no. 3, 1994), p. 64. In addition to the 420,000 prisoners who were released early in 1941, an additional 157,000 were freed before the completion of their sentence and directed into the Red Army in 1942-43. Many others were sent to military service after completing their sentences. The total flow of prisoners from the Gulag into the Red Army in the war years is estimated at nearly a million. Zemskov, "Gulag," p. 24. See also Barnes, "Soviet Society Confined," pp. 142-43; Amir Weiner, Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 148-49.

¹⁵ Romashin, p. 71-72.

the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet decree of December 26, 1941 for deserting their jobs at military and other factories.¹⁶ These two categories constituted the majority of prisoners freed under the amnesty, although two other groups of prisoners were targeted for release as well. Military personnel (voennosluzhashchie) would be freed from their criminal sentence if the fulfillment of their term had been postponed until the end of combat.¹⁷ Also identified for release were people sentenced for military crimes, such as the failure to report for mobilization or the draft, failure to follow orders or commands, and desertion.¹⁸ Simply, Stalin's amnesty largely freed petty offenders and people sentenced for wartime offenses such as shirking and desertion.

In addition to granting many prisoners immediate release, the amnesty law also accelerated the release of prisoners who had been serving longer sentences.¹⁹ The law stipulated that those sentenced to deprivation of freedom for a term of over three years could have the remainder of their unserved sentence cut in half. For example, a man sentenced to seven years deprivation of freedom in 1941 had two years, eight months, and ten days remaining on his term when the amnesty law was published. Therefore, the head of his camp's Department for the Registration and Assignment of Prisoners (otdel ucheta i

¹⁶ On the December 26, 1941 law, see John Barber and Mark Harrison, The Soviet Home Front, 1941-1945 (London: Longman Inc., 1993), pp. 164-65. This law represents one of several "wartime decrees" which convicted nearly four million to detention between 1940 and 1952, the largest group of people sentenced in the war years. See Getty, et al., p. 1033-34; Solomon, pp. 299-334.

¹⁷ This provision targeted soldiers only, and not all persons whose sentences had been postponed until the end of hostilities. For example, the law would not apply to sentenced criminals who worked on the nation's railroads and were ordered to stay in their job in transportation while their sentence was postponed until the end of the conflict—even if such people had committed less significant crimes than the soldier. At the same time, officials were warned not to apply this category to all soldiers, as many had been sentenced for counterrevolution under article 58-10 of the Criminal Code or for theft of socialist property according to the law of August 7, 1932. GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 149.

¹⁸ The military crimes identified included the following articles of the RSFSR Criminal Code: 193-2, 193-5, 193-6, 193-7, 193-9, 193-10, 193-10a, 193-14, 193-15 and 193-16. See Romashin, p. 71-72.

¹⁹ Romashin, p. 71-72.

raspredeleniia zaliuchennyh) or OURZ recalculated the prisoner's date of release after precisely cutting the remaining sentence by exactly one-half-- to one year, four months, and five days.²⁰ The amnesty freed some prisoners immediately, but it also accelerated the release of many others.

In a number of Gulag memoirs, criminal offenders are depicted as favored detainees who experienced far better conditions in the camps than did the political prisoners. For example, Shalamov describes how "repeating offenders were always considered 'friends of the people' right up to Lavrenty Beria's famous amnesty of 1953."²¹ In fact, Stalin's amnesty explicitly excluded recidivists. The amnesty was not extended to recidivists convicted (two or more times) for embezzlement, theft, robbery, hooliganism, and such "analogous crimes" as banditism and stealing which were punished under Stalin's draconian law of August 7, 1932 regarding the theft of socialist property.²²

Moreover, persons who committed crimes that the government considered the most severe could not have the remaining portion of their sentence reduced by one-half. These included persons convicted for counterrevolutionary crimes, theft of socialist property under the law of August 7, 1932, banditism, producing counterfeit currency (fal'shivomonetnichestvo), murder, and robbery. Simply, the amnesty extended to all prisoners except for those the party considered to be the most dangerous.

In the Soviet Union, amnesty did not result solely in the blanket release of prisoners. Release from detention was just one of the benefits extended under an amnesty law. The 1945 law freed many criminals from labor camps and colonies, but it also reduced certain sentences by one-half. In addition, the amnesty allowed some ex-prisoners to have their criminal record cleared, while others whose cases

²⁰ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 15.

²¹ Varlam Shalamov, Kolyma Tales (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 304.

²² Romashin, p. 71-72; GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 5, 80-82. However, repeat offenders who were sentenced for less serious crimes did receive the benefits of the amnesty. For example, amnesty was extended to persons who had been sentenced repeatedly for desertion, or for violating the December 26, 1941 law against abandoning work at a military factory.

were pending investigation or trial could have the charges dropped completely. Stalin's amnesty affected both new cases and old, prisoners and ex-prisoners, and provided benefits to nearly all categories of criminal offenders.

The Revolving Door

The party leadership demanded that the amnesty be executed quickly, so Gulag officials released prisoners with a great sense of urgency. Over 91,000 people who were either convicted of crimes or under investigation had been released from NKVD-UNKVD prisons across the Soviet Union in just the three-week period from July 10 to August 20, 1945.²³ Every five days, camps were supposed to provide a running tally on the numbers of prisoners they had released, and issue a final report on the breakdown of prisoners whose status changed under the amnesty.²⁴ The head of the Gulag, V.G. Nasedkin, wanted the bulk (*osnovnoe chislo*) of convicts who qualified for amnesty to be released no later than September 10th.

In late August 1945, the chief of the Gulag administration issued warnings to various camps and colonies that were not freeing prisoners in a timely manner, and chastised them for “dragging out the implementation of the [amnesty] law,” for their “weak execution of this work,” and for “excessive delay in work on the release of persons who fall under the amnesty law.” Nasedkin urged them to “speed up the tempo” and promptly free amnestied prisoners. He warned of serious consequences if officials did not immediately inform the central Gulag administration regarding the number of prisoners that had been freed and the reasons for delays in the implementation of the amnesty law.²⁵

²³ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 48-49.

²⁴ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 11.

²⁵ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 92, 94, 96, 103.

Yet the amnesty was no easy assignment for Gulag officials. The immediate review of hundreds of thousands of prisoner files greatly burdened the staff of camps and colonies. OURZ employees were “extremely overburdened” (chrezmerno peregruzheny) trying to implement the amnesty.²⁶ Gulag employees had to process and verify the components of each prisoner’s case file, investigate whether prisoners had previous convictions that would exclude them from the amnesty, keep accounting records of money paid for personal documents, arrange for the police to issue passports to ex-prisoners, process and distribute money and food, and railway tickets to released prisoners for the journey to their new place of residence, and keep accurate account of how many prisoners were being released.²⁷ The central OURZ department of the Gulag issued a memo to its local departments warning officials to be especially careful when reviewing prisoners’ personal case files, including documents supporting their release or reduced sentence under the amnesty provisions.²⁸

OURZ officials were told to pay close attention to such things as judicial sentences and determinations, the length of punishment, when sentences began to be served, and any previous convictions. They had to issue individual determinations on each case, and have these signed by the prisoners. At the same time, many prisoners challenged the judgments of the Gulag administration that denied their rights under the amnesty. In September 1945, Nasedkin urged the heads of corrective labor camps to promptly review prisoner complaints and to verify the case files of prisoners whose petitions for amnesty had been rejected.²⁹

When reporting to their superiors on the progress of the amnesty, Gulag officials touted their many successes. In a report to Beria on the implementation of the amnesty, Nasedkin stated: “218,540 people have been freed from corrective labor camps and colonies as of August 25th, that is 33.4% of the

²⁶ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 214.

²⁷ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 6, 10, 109-110.

²⁸ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 33.

²⁹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 109.

overall figure of 654,000 people who qualify for release under the amnesty. The [process of] releasing [prisoners], issuing passports, supplying food and other items, money and transportation tickets, and taking [ex-prisoners] to their place of residence is proceeding normally.”³⁰ By October 5, 1945, just three months after publication of the amnesty law, Dobrynin reported to Beria that implementation of the law was “in large part completed” and that 611,804 prisoners had “actually” been freed (fakticheski osvobozhdeno).³¹

The picture presented to the NKVD chief by Nasedkin in late August and Dobrynin in October appeared rather unproblematic, but Gulag administrators actually confronted a very different reality. In fact, problems in the implementation of the amnesty were common. “Since releases will be taking place on a mass scale,” a senior official wrote, “one cannot exclude the possibility that people will be freed who do not appropriately fall under the amnesty law.”³² Indeed, some officials granted amnesty to recidivists, or to persons sentenced for murder.³³ Gulag authorities described anxious searches to hunt down a number of prisoners who had been released in error.³⁴

Nonetheless, the amnesty ultimately resulted in reduced sentences and release from detention for nearly a million Gulag prisoners. The vast majority of prisoners who were impacted by the amnesty law were subject to immediate release. At the time the law was issued, there were 1,565,442 people being held in NKVD camps and colonies,³⁵ and one senior Gulag official wrote that “...now with the implementation of the [amnesty] decree, changes [in the number of inmates] over the next two months will be significant...”³⁶

³⁰ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 55.

³¹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 111.

³² GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 23.

³³ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 238-239.

³⁴ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 215.

³⁵ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 230.

³⁶ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 33.

Indeed, in the summer and fall of 1945, Corrective Labor Camps (ITL), which held prisoners sentenced for more than three years, released 206,554 inmates. The Administration of Corrective Labor Camps and Colonies and the Department of Corrective Labor Colonies (UITLK-OITK), which detained those with terms of one to three years, released 414,199 inmates. In total, Soviet labor camps and colonies freed as many as 620,753 prisoners. Over a third of the prisoners released had been convicted under the December 26, 1941 law for shirking, and fifteen percent were convicted of military crimes.³⁷ Nearly forty percent of the Gulag population was subject to immediate release following the publication of the amnesty law.

A look at who benefited from release under the amnesty reveals that roughly half had been convicted for wartime offenses. Of the 620,753 prisoners who were freed, nearly 38% were sentenced according to USSR Supreme Soviet laws that were largely published in the war years, particularly the law of December 26, 1941.³⁸ The second largest group of prisoners released—185,562 or nearly 30%-- had committed property crimes such as theft and robbery.³⁹ Persons who committed military crimes constituted over 15% of the total number of prisoners released; the vast majority of these or 74% were serving time for desertion.⁴⁰ Only a small minority of released prisoners, or over 7%, had committed white-collar crimes such as abuse of power and embezzlement. Of the remaining ten percent of prisoners freed under the amnesty, many had been sentenced for such serious offenses as hooliganism, speculation, forgery, murder, banditry, and counterrevolutionary actions (including anti-Soviet agitation, aiding the enemy, and sabotage).⁴¹ Such criminals qualified for release because the amnesty mainly targeted prisoners according to the length of their sentence rather than the crime for which they were convicted.

³⁷ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 205-6.

³⁸ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 206.

³⁹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 206.

⁴⁰ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 206.

⁴¹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 208-109.

However, the amnesty did not only provide for the release of prisoners. An additional 212,890 inmates—92,054 from camps and 120,836 from colonies-- had the remaining time left on their sentences cut in half.⁴² The amnesty law also dictated that prisoners who were sentenced to deprivation of freedom for more than three years would have the remainder of their unserved sentence cut in half. Many of the 212,890 prisoners who had their remaining sentences reduced included persons sentenced for property and white-collar crimes.⁴³ By cutting sentences in half, the amnesty law allowed many detainees at camps and colonies to be released in the upcoming months and years. As a result, Gulag officials anticipated an additional exodus in the last quarter of 1945 and in 1946 of about 147,968 people or 15.5% of the population at camps and colonies according to figures from October 1, 1945.⁴⁴ When one adds together both immediate and accelerated releases, the full impact of the amnesty becomes strikingly apparent.

Two Worlds Tied Together

The prison doors did not just open, leaving inmates to freely enter the world outside. Rather, Gulag involvement in the lives of prisoners continued after these inmates were awarded amnesty. Prison officials were required to prepare ex-prisoners for their entry into Soviet society by providing them with such things as passports, transportation, material goods and food, and medical care. Moreover, many amnestied prisoners stayed on as “free laborers” within the camp system. Far from being isolated from one another, the Gulag and non-Gulag worlds (prisoners and ex-prisoners, inmates and civilians) had many points of contact.

⁴² GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 117.

⁴³ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 209.

⁴⁴ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 233.

The Long Arm of the Gulag

The Soviet labor camp system claimed to remake prisoners by subjecting them to the transformative effects of labor. Given the party's ideological commitment to this process of "reforging" (perekovka), it is not surprising that camp authorities were responsible for managing their prisoners' transition back to Soviet life.⁴⁵ Camp officials did not immediately sever ties with prisoners once they determined that inmates qualified for release under the amnesty. Gulag authorities were responsible for managing the prisoner's transition to society. The long arm of the Gulag extended beyond the camps.

In order to function in the larger society, inmates released under the amnesty had to be issued passports. Working from a list provided by the administration of the particular place of detention (and assisted by workers from the camps and colonies themselves), the police processed and distributed passports to ex-convicts largely at the location of a prisoner's release.⁴⁶ On July 14, 1945, the head of the USSR NKVD main administration of police, A.G. Galkin, the assistant head of the prison administration, K.S. Zil'berman, and the Gulag's chief, Nasedkin, issued guidelines to the country's directors of police, corrective-labor camps, prisons, and corrective-labor colonies.⁴⁷ They indicated in the directive that the heads of prisons, camps, and colonies had to provide the local police (in the area where the camps were located) with an elaborate roster on their prisoners who qualified for release. In addition to the prisoner's name, these lists had to include the person's date and place of birth, nationality, and two photos; camp administrators also had to specify the article of the Criminal Code under which the prisoner was sentenced, previous convictions, as well as the job training (spetsial'nost') that the inmate received while in the prison, camp, or colony. The police were supposed to then issue a 5-year passport to the amnestied prisoner; ex-prisoners over the age of fifty-five received a passport without a year limit. The preparation of passports alone placed an enormous burden on Gulag officials.

⁴⁵ On reforging, See Barnes, "Soviet Society Confined," pp. 9-16, 70-83; Stephen Kotkin, Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 231.

⁴⁶ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 39; See also GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 219.

⁴⁷ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 8.

Moreover, Gulag authorities determined the destination of each ex-prisoner, a task made complicated by the Stalinist leadership's repressive policy against national minority groups. Once they were granted a document confirming their release under the amnesty, certain people (Germans, Finns, Romanians, Bulgarians, Crimean Tatars, Italians, Kalmyks, Chechens, Ingush, Turks, Kurds, and others) could only be settled in places designated for their particular ethnic group.⁴⁸

However, members of these ethnic minorities who were physically able to work were not released to settlements, but rather directed to workers colonies under the existing corrective labor camps.⁴⁹ For example, Germans, Finns, Romanians, Italians, Bulgarians, and members of other nationalities freed under the amnesty law were supposed to be directed to the nearest workers colony if they were physically fit for work. Those unable to work, the infirm, invalids, pregnant women, and women with small children were sent to their family's place of deportation or settlement (rasselenie).⁵⁰ For these Gulag prisoners, "release" simply meant transfer within the NKVD system of detention from camps to settlements.

In addition to ethnic identity, a prisoner's new residence was determined by the inmate's criminal history, family situation, and physical condition. Prisoners were classified under several categories, each subject to different policies. For example, settlement restrictions also applied to criminal offenders. If amnestied prisoners were subject to passport restrictions because of their criminal record, then they were given exile according to articles 38 and 39 of the Regulations on Passports (Polozheniia o pasportakh).⁵¹ Those prisoners who had the fewest restrictions in terms of their place of residence following release included women, youths, and invalids.

⁴⁸ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 11.

⁴⁹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 222. On the wartime settlement of ethnic Germans and others, see Weiner, p. 150; Steven A. Barnes, "All for the Front, All for Victory! The Mobilization of Forced Labor in the Soviet Union during World War Two," *International Labor and Working-Class History* No. 58 (Fall 2000), pp. 242-43.

⁵⁰ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 97; GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 222.

⁵¹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 8.

In particular, minors, pregnant women, women with small children, the elderly, and invalids could be transferred to their former place of residence or to relatives even if the locations were identified as secret or classified (rezhimnye mestnosti).⁵² Those ex-inmates who were not subject to any restrictions regarding their place of residence were supposed to be transported to their family's location.⁵³ If prisoners had no family or if they wanted to return to their former employers, then they were taken to the location of their original arrest.⁵⁴ According to the Gulag leadership, the issue of where to settle amnestied prisoners "had to be approached with care" in order to provide maximum assurance that the former inmates would "return to an honest life."⁵⁵

One of the most difficult tasks associated with the massive release of prisoners concerned their transportation. The NKVD of the republics, krai, and oblasts were responsible for managing the movement of amnestied prisoners to their new locations. The NKVD was supposed to cover the prisoners' cost of transportation and provide medical and other assistance at transit points.⁵⁶ The Gulag also had to provide freed prisoners with a transportation ticket (proezdnyi billet) for travel to the station located nearest to the prisoner's new place of settlement.⁵⁷

According to Gulag authorities, the overwhelming majority of people freed from colonies were residents of the local region (oblast'), so freed prisoners simply went home on commuter trains. For example, in the Novosibirsk and Moscow oblasts, 86.3% and 70% of persons freed under the amnesty were identified as local residents.⁵⁸ However, those released from camps had to make a much longer journey to their next place of residence, and camp officials monitored them through the transition. These

⁵² GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 39; See also GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 222.

⁵³ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 74, 84.

⁵⁴ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 84.

⁵⁵ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 84.

⁵⁶ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 39.

⁵⁷ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 84; GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 39.

⁵⁸ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 220.

amnestied prisoners were transported in special trains (spetsial'nyimi eshelonami), staffed with various workers from medical personnel to cooks.⁵⁹ A staggering one hundred and fifteen transit checkpoints were set up by the NKVD at ports and railway stations in order to move over half a million amnestied prisoners to their new destinations.⁶⁰

In the Soviet Union after a devastating war, this massive movement of people in a short period of time did not occur smoothly. Amnestied prisoners were not released in a timely manner whether because railway lines were under repair, or because officials needed prison labor to help with the harvest or to finish work on certain industrial and construction projects.⁶¹ In addition, the movement of prisoners greatly strained the Soviet Union's transportation system. The People's Commissariat for Communications (NKPS) was supposed to secure the movement of amnestied prisoners by providing additional railcars or special trailers (pritsepnyye vagony); amnestied prisoners were not supposed to travel in regular passenger cars.⁶²

However, the commissariat did not provide enough additional railway cars to move the large population of amnestied prisoners. Huge concentrations of amnestied prisoners crowded major transit stations across the country. At the Irkutsk station, amnestied prisoners had fights with passengers and station administrators.⁶³ At the Sverdlovsk station, three hundred ex-convicts overwhelmed railway authorities who did not know how to relieve the terrible glut of passengers.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 220.

⁶⁰ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 111.

⁶¹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 224-225.

⁶² GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 213.

⁶³ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 221.

⁶⁴ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 120.

Finally, officials at NKVD labor camps and colonies were supposed to provide freed prisoners material support during the transition to their new locations. Released inmates were supposed to be supplied with food provisions (prodovol'stvie) for the journey to their next residence.⁶⁵ Nasedkin, issued guidelines regarding material support for prisoners upon release. The camp or colony was supposed to supply freed prisoners with specified amounts of such items as bread, tea, sugar, meat and fish, and salt for 10-15 days as well as proper clothing as they traveled to their new place of residence. The camps and colonies were also expected to issue every prisoner a "food certificate" (prodattestat) specifying the products that the prisoner had a right to obtain and for how many days.⁶⁶

Although Gulag officials were required to help ex-prisoners make the transition from the camps by providing transportation and material support, such assistance was often lacking. In places as diverse as Omsk, Sverdlovsk, Vologda, Gorky, and Iaroslavl, many amnestied prisoners were released without money or a transportation ticket to support their journey home.⁶⁷

In October, Nasedkin criticized a series of "gross violations" at a corrective labor colony in the Arkhangelsk oblast.⁶⁸ He described how amnestied prisoners had been given dirty and torn clothing, and how the head of the corrective labor colony retained fifty three prisoners who had already served out their sentence and deserved to be released. Ex-prisoners were not given enough food to support them on the long journey from Arkhangelsk oblast to such far away places as Khabarovsk and Tambov. Food that was supposed to be distributed was not. Instead of bread, amnestied prisoners were given spoiled crackers (sukhari) and dried bread crumbs (sukharnye kroshki).⁶⁹

⁶⁵ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 39.

⁶⁶ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 20-21.

⁶⁷ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 221.

⁶⁸ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 113.

⁶⁹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 113; See also GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 218.

Newly released inmates were supposed to be allotted a certain food ration to support them during the journey to their next destination after release from the labor colony, but current inmates were stealing these food rations. Nasedkin complained that the head of the Arkhangel'sk corrective-labor colony and his assistant were simply not taking charge of the amnesty process, but had instead left the responsibility of transporting and supplying amnestied prisoners to low-level employees, such as accountants and storage men, who were prisoners or ex-prisoners.⁷⁰ Nasedkin stated that those in camps and colonies who failed to implement the directive of the NKVD USSR and Gulag NKVD, namely the head and his assistant, should be brought to justice (*privlech' k strogoi otvetstvennosti*).⁷¹

Lacking everything from food to a railway ticket, ex-prisoners often resorted to theft.⁷² Soviet crime in the postwar period was often attributed to former Gulag elements, especially those released under the amnesty. Elena Zubkova describes how people viewed anyone who spent time in detention as a criminal or potential thief and brigand, and that "in the mass consciousness, post-war crime was viewed as the consequence of the 1945 amnesty."⁷³

This popular view was apparently shared by Soviet officials. A.G. Galkin, head of the Main Administration for the Worker-Peasant Police (GURKM) issued a report to L.P. Beria, the NKVD chief, in which he associated the release of amnestied prisoners with a rise in crime.⁷⁴ He attributed the crime wave to the fact that prisoners had not received the necessary food and transportation documents for their journey, and they were not being transported to their new residence in an organized manner. In addition, amnestied prisoners had not received proper assistance in securing work at their new location.

⁷⁰ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 113.

⁷¹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 113.

⁷² GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 101.

⁷³ Zubkova, p. 93. Apparently, areas that became home to ex-prisoners did witness a rise in crime. According to David Nordlander, "Magadan and other Gulag towns invariably experienced higher rates of robbery and assault per capita than most cities in the USSR up until the 1950s" as criminal offenders were released into communities across the country. Nordlander, p. 247.

⁷⁴ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 140.

All this was perceived by Nasedkin as unwarranted criticism of the Gulag, so he criticized the police organs in turn.⁷⁵ According to the Gulag chief, the police knew that the “amnesty would free over 600,000 people including a significant number of prisoners sentenced for theft, robbery, and hooliganism,” people who “could again return to the path of crime” and yet the police “did not take elementary and necessary measures with their agents and operations in order to prevent the possibility of a rise in criminality.”⁷⁶

The Gulag was not isolated from the world outside its borders. When over half a million prisoners left the prison camp system in the summer and fall of 1945, they entered Soviet villages and cities like millions of others who were freed from labor camps in previous years. Camp officials were responsible for managing the prisoners’ transition from Gulag to civilian life by providing them with passports, food, and transportation, but that transition was far from easy. Many ex-prisoners left the Gulag and brought the camps’ diseases and deprivations with them.⁷⁷ Others, however, remained at their Gulag location despite their formal release.

The Co-existence of Prisoners and Ex-Prisoners

Many amnestied prisoners remained employed within the Gulag system-- whether by choice or not. Some inmates stayed in their original camp jobs, for example, as miners, truckers, and railway workers except that their status changed to that of a free laborer (po volnomu naimu).⁷⁸ The reasons for their retention varied. For example, some prisoners could not be released from camps because of harsh weather conditions. In the remote regions of the Soviet Union, prisoners were not easily transported out

⁷⁵ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 140.

⁷⁶ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 140.

⁷⁷ Amnestied prisoners were supposed to receive a thorough medical examination (meditsinskoe osvidetel’stovanie) to prevent the release of persons with such common infectious diseases as dysentery. GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 219. However, released inmates did carry many diseases with them.

⁷⁸ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 62, 130.

of their labor camps. If released prisoners “could not depart for their place of residence for a long time due to the absence of navigation, difficulties acquiring a train ticket, etc.” then they could be retained as a temporary free laborer at the camp.⁷⁹

This was the case in Noril’sk, where over four thousand amnestied prisoners were held as wage laborers until 1946 because camp officials failed to release them before the cessation of navigation.⁸⁰ At the Noril’lag, fewer than fifty percent of released prisoners had been transported to their new place of residence following the amnesty.⁸¹ But for most of those who remained in the Gulag after their official release, the reason was not the weather.

Commenting on the early release of prisoners at a 1938 meeting of the Presidium, Stalin demanded, “Can’t we arrange things so that people stay on in the camps? If not, we release them, they go back home and pick up again with their old ways. The atmosphere in the camp is different, there it’s harder to go wrong. Anyway, we have the voluntary-compulsory [state] loans. So let’s have voluntary-compulsory staying-on.”⁸²

Apparently, this became future policy. Following the 1945 amnesty, Gulag authorities tried to convince ex-prisoners to remain at their jobs, to encourage the voluntary retention (*dobvol’noe zakreplenie*) of amnestied prisoners as wage laborers.⁸³ A Gulag directive of July 17, 1945 urged the heads of labor camps and colonies to recruit amnestied prisoners to remain at their jobs in state enterprises. Camp officials were allowed to grant a lump sum payment (equal to a month’s salary), plus “high quality” shoes, linens, and clothing to amnestied prisoners who remained at their camp jobs as wage

⁷⁹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 11.

⁸⁰ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 225. Given that camps were located in remote and inaccessible regions, such problems were typical. David Nordlander describes how Dalstroi’s transit camp in Vladivoskok often held prisoners up to six months as they waited for the Sea of Okhotsk to thaw and permit transfer to Magadan. See Nordlander, p. 8.

⁸¹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 142.

⁸² Dmitri Volkogonov, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1988), p. 188.

⁸³ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 226.

laborers for at least a year.⁸⁴ Construction sites and factories were supposed to supply recently amnestied prisoners with a monthly wage appropriate to the ex-prisoner's new status as a free laborer, along with other material support such as clothing and shoes.⁸⁵

Nasedkin issued guidelines on July 28, 1945 to the heads of all the labor camps and colonies in which he described the need to inform amnestied prisoners about the incentives designed for them and their families. Prospective workers, he suggested, should be recruited through a series of perks that include: payment for family members to join the ex-prisoner at his new work location, adequate housing, shoes and clothing at a discount, and a one-time stipend to both the worker and his family members.⁸⁶

Despite the advertisement, conditions were not always appealing for amnestied prisoners who agreed to remain. Ex-prisoners often did not receive the material support and incentives that they were promised, such as food, clothing, and housing, so many quit their camp jobs and made their way home.⁸⁷ Moreover, official promises of support prompted amnestied prisoners to expect material assistance. They knew what they were entitled to receive in the form of support, and demanded their due.⁸⁸ Nasedkin took measures to address the claims of ex-prisoners on the grounds that the Gulag had to actively recruit laborers. The Gulag chief believed that steps needed to be taken to provide "a serious incentive for persons freed under the amnesty to remain in their jobs at the camps."⁸⁹

Although the Gulag leadership urged camps and colonies to retain amnestied workers through voluntary incentives, it became clear that many camps simply refused to let go of convict labor. In October 1945, G.P. Dobrynin, deputy head of the Gulag, complained to the deputy NKVD chief, V.V. Chernyshov, about two camps in the coal mining region of Vorkuta: "Reports coming in from the camps

⁸⁴ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 227.

⁸⁵ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 130.

⁸⁶ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 40.

⁸⁷ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 228.

⁸⁸ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 99.

⁸⁹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 100.

regarding the implementation of the amnesty law indicate that too great a number of amnestied prisoners have remained in camps as free laborers. In Vorkutlag, 1924 people from a total of 6714 freed and in Intlag, 1986 from [a total of] 4046 people [who had been released].”⁹⁰

Vorkutlag operated from 1938 to 1960 and had as many as 39,711 prisoners in 1945.⁹¹ In the case of Intlag, a camp that existed from 1941 to 1948 and confined 9268 prisoners in 1945, the amnesty freed roughly fifty percent of all prisoners by the fall of 1945.⁹² However, nearly half of these liberated prisoners (osvobozhdennye) remained at the camp and at their job after being amnestied. Throughout the Gulag system, the number of prisoners retained was quite large. Following implementation of the amnesty, a total of 26,888 “released” prisoners had been recruited to remain at their jobs as wage laborers. Of these, 4,725 stayed at NKVD camps and colonies and 22,163 people remained as workers at construction sites and enterprises of other commissariats, especially light metal, textiles, and mining.⁹³

According to Soviet law, amnestied prisoners or prisoners who had already served out their term could be required to stay at their camp jobs.⁹⁴ This practice was especially common during the war when close to 60,000 prisoners who had already completed their sentences were denied release and forced to remain in their camp jobs as wage laborers.⁹⁵ However, amnestied prisoners could only be held involuntarily according to special decrees of the State Defense Committee (gosudarstvennyi komitet oboronyi or GOKO) or the NKVD USSR that were issued *after* the publication of the amnesty law.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 142.

⁹¹ Spravochnik sistema ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagerei v SSSR, 1923-1960 (Moscow, 1998), p. 192-193.

⁹² Spravochnik, p. 229-230.

⁹³ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 227.

⁹⁴ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 83, 109-110.

⁹⁵ Zemskov, “Gulag,” no. 6, p. 23. For other examples, see Barnes, “Soviet Society Confined,” p. 64-65, 90.

⁹⁶ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 228.

For example, according to a GOKO decree of August 1, 1945, the 17,066 amnestied prisoners who worked in the gold and tin industries of Dal'stoi in Kolyma could be detained to work as wage laborers “until the end of the panning season” (do kontsa promyvochnogo sezona).⁹⁷ Similarly, according to GOKO decree of August 30, 1945, the 2,416 able-bodied amnestied prisoners working on the construction of the Komsomol'sk-Sovgavan' railroad could be detained as wage laborers until July 1, 1948.⁹⁸ Also by a GOKO decree issued since the publication of the amnesty law, 20,000 amnestied prisoners were retained in timber industries until October 1945.⁹⁹ The GOKO regularly issued instructions regarding the mandatory retention of ex-prisoners in important industries. However, such decrees were no longer valid if they were published before the amnesty law.¹⁰⁰

Guidelines issued by the NKVD and the Procuracy on August 2, 1945 state that amnestied prisoners could only be retained at their jobs in camps or with other commissariats if the arrangement was the result of a “voluntary agreement.”¹⁰¹ However, many amnestied prisoners did not remain in their camp jobs willingly. The USSR Procuracy and the Gulag NKVD received many complaints from prisoners who were supposed to be freed under the amnesty but were not. Ex-convicts described how they were not being transported to their new place of residence but instead were tethered to their camp jobs against their will and under the status of free laborer.¹⁰²

Moreover, many prisoners whose release was delayed filed complaints. In September 1945, Nasedkin urged camp heads to communicate with these amnestied prisoners so that they understood why and for how long they would continue to be detained at the camps following the formal release from their

⁹⁷ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 57; GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 228.

⁹⁸ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 228.

⁹⁹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 229.

¹⁰⁰ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 228.

¹⁰¹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 228.

¹⁰² GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 142.

sentence. He also directed Gulag administrators to supply these workers with food and goods and “to take measures to create normal living conditions for them.”¹⁰³

Stalin’s amnesty reveals a complex and dynamic picture of the Gulag system in which camp officials manage the prisoners’ transition to Soviet society, prisoners and ex-prisoners labor next to one another, and material incentives are touted in an environment of deprivation and coercion. Gulag prisoners, ex-prisoners, and civilians can share the same space both within the camps and beyond. Far from being isolated from the rest of Stalinist society, the prison labor population appears in constant contact with a non-Gulag world, as prisoners come and go and as a prisoner’s status changes. At the same time, Stalin’s amnesty also exposes the fundamental instability of a penal system in which large numbers of prisoners regularly change their location and/or their status.

A Shock to the Gulag System

“The massive release [of prisoners] following the amnesty,” wrote the deputy head of the Gulag OURZ in his final report regarding the law, “has resulted in significant changes in the quantity and quality of the prison population currently being held in corrective-labor camps and colonies.”¹⁰⁴ The changes introduced by Stalin’s amnesty negatively impacted an already inefficient labor camp system. The release of nearly half the prison labor force in a few short months affected Stalin’s camp establishment in a profound way, and the instability it generated is even more striking when one considers that large releases of prisoners from the Gulag occurred regularly. At the same time, the amnesty also introduced certain changes to the Gulag labor force that endured throughout the postwar Stalin years.

¹⁰³ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 109.

¹⁰⁴ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 230.

Further Weakening a Crippled Institution

Stalin's amnesty did not benefit the Gulag system. The law was not designed to release weak prisoners, maintain skilled and able-bodied prisoners, and provide work incentives to inmates left behind. To be sure, camp officials tried to use the amnesty law to encourage greater worker productivity and "labor competition" among inmates.¹⁰⁵ The law was announced at meetings of prisoners, published in special newspapers and bulletins, and discussed in barracks.¹⁰⁶

The amnesty law became a tool to motivate prison laborers and to increase productivity. At one camp, Pechorlag, officials distributed 10,000 copies of the amnesty law to prisoners, conducted lectures and newspaper readings, and established worker competitions in order to increase labor productivity.¹⁰⁷ However, the net impact of the amnesty on the overall Gulag system was negative, just as the NKVD leadership had warned it would be.

Prior to the publication of the amnesty law, Beria provided "data necessary for deciding the issue" of the amnesty, including estimations on the total impact of the law.¹⁰⁸ In a letter to V.M. Molotov in July, the NKVD chief expressed urgent concerns regarding the quantity and productivity of the Soviet Union's convict labor force following such a large amnesty. He estimated that the amnesty would result in the release of roughly 540,000 prisoners (far less than the number actually released), and noted the harmful effect of such a massive exodus of inmates on the overall strength of the NKVD convict labor force. Beria argued that "as a result of the amnesty, many of the most important enterprises and construction sites of the NKVD would be left without workers."

¹⁰⁵ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 226.

¹⁰⁶ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 226.

¹⁰⁷ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 226. According to Gulag officials, these measures apparently worked in raising the productivity of prisoners. The camp exceeded its production quotas in the months July-October despite the fact that it lost a significant number of prisoners during the same period as a result of the amnesty.

¹⁰⁸ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 15.

In an attempt to protect his institution, Beria insisted that “a series of measures must be taken so that labor strength is ensured in the production of gold, tin, wolfram, oil, and at other important sites.”¹⁰⁹ To this end, he demanded that: 1) the NKVD be freed from having to supply other commissariats with convict labor; 2) prisoners of war who are arriving from captivity should be directed only to NKVD labor camps from now on; 3) the volume of NKVD duties in the areas of construction and production should be reviewed and reduced, and only work that can be performed by the existing level of camp labor strength should be required of the commissariat; 4) the material position of the remaining convict population should be improved, especially in the area of food, as this will raise labor productivity.¹¹⁰

Party officials knew in advance that the amnesty would negatively impact the Gulag labor force because they received estimates regarding the effect of the amnesty on various sectors of the national economy.¹¹¹ In the end, almost all areas of major economic activity under the authority of the Gulag administration were severely affected by sharp declines in their prison labor force.

Anywhere from one-fifth to two-thirds of Gulag prisoners left various important economic sectors of the NKVD, such as the Main Administration for Road Construction (GUShOSDOR), the Department of Industrial Construction (Glavpromstroï), and the Main Administration of Camps for Mining and Metallurgy (GULGMP).¹¹² Moreover, the workers who left were not necessarily the least productive. In fact, the group described by officials as “the most physically capable of work in terms of their age” (that is, 17 to 30 year-olds) represented the largest single age-group released from camps and colonies following the amnesty.

¹⁰⁹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 17.

¹¹⁰ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 17.

¹¹¹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 18.

¹¹² GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 231.

Age of the Prison Population	July 1, 1945	October 1, 1945	Number Released	Percentage Released
Under 17 years-old	34,105	11,723	22,383	65.4%
17 to 30 years-old	720,959	418,953	302,006	41.9%
31 to 50 years-old	595,822	441,717	154,105	25.1%
51 to 60 years-old	109,194	84,189	25,005	22.9%
Over 60 years-old	18,158	14,182	3,976	21.9%

Source: GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 231 (November 1945).

In addition to the loss of young labor, the Gulag also lost many workers with skills. Following the amnesty, the quantity of specialists and qualified workers among the prison population dropped sharply. Specifically, the number of prisoners trained as engineers fell by a third, from 6374 to 4256 people in NKVD labor camps and colonies.¹¹³ The number of prisoners who had other special qualifications or skills (spetsial'nosti) also dropped by slightly over a third, from 7425 to 4729 prisoners after the amnesty.¹¹⁴ The number of doctors declined by nearly 29%.¹¹⁵ The pool of skilled prisoners who could work as builders, metal-workers, and miners, shrunk by around half following the amnesty.¹¹⁶ Overall, the population of qualified or skilled workers at NKVD labor camps and colonies dropped by 43%.¹¹⁷

Not only did the Gulag lose skilled and able-bodied workers under the amnesty, but less productive workers were not released in large numbers. One might assume that the 1945 amnesty would target women, invalids, minors, and the elderly because these groups were typically given priority for release.¹¹⁸ Central authorities decreed that there should be a kind of queue for amnesty releases (ocherednost' v osvobozhdenii), and that these groups should be placed at the head of the line. A joint

¹¹³ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 235.

¹¹⁴ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 235.

¹¹⁵ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 236.

¹¹⁶ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 236.

¹¹⁷ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 236.

¹¹⁸ See Solomon, pp. 421-22, 441-42; Barnes, "All for the Front," p. 242.

directive of July 12, 1945 from the USSR Procuracy as well as the All Union Commissariats for Internal Affairs, State Security, and Justice stated that certain groups of people should be released first (v pervuiu ochered’), namely, “minors, pregnant women and women with small children, the elderly, invalids, local residents, and also persons sentenced for shirking (samovol’nyi ukhod s predpriiatii).”¹¹⁹

In the case of women, although many were released at this time, the overall ratio of men to women in the camps did not change significantly. As compared with before the amnesty, during the period July-September, the number of men dropped by 25.8% and women by 54.2%.¹²⁰ Before the amnesty, the Gulag population consisted of 70.1% men and 29.9% women.¹²¹ Following the amnesty’s release of female prisoners, the composition of the Gulag population shifted by about ten percent to 79.2% men and 20.8% women.¹²² However, although women, youths, invalids, and others received priority in release, the amnesty did not free these groups of prisoners in very large numbers.

Prison releases are often described as the Soviet leadership’s attempt to save money by transferring less productive workers out of the Gulag.¹²³ However, the evidence suggests that invalids were not released from the Gulag in large numbers under Stalin’s amnesty. The USSR Commissariat of Health (Narkomzdrav) and republic Commissariats of Social Security (Narkomsobesy) did not readily accept invalid ex-prisoners. The USSR Sovnarkom issued a decree (postanovlenie) on July 20, 1945

¹¹⁹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1229, l. 6; See also GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 39; GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 218.

¹²⁰ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 231.

¹²¹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 231.

¹²² GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 231.

¹²³ Regarding the 1953 amnesty, A.I. Kokurin and N.V. Petrov state that “The main reason for this amnesty was, of course, not the humanity of the government, but the desire to free places of detention of invalids, women, and children who were practically incapable of work, and to replace them with valuable labor strength.” See *Gulag*, p. 11. On Stalin’s 1946 release of prisoners “who were completely incapable of further useful work and whose upkeep was costing the state a fortune,” see Volkogonov, pp. 235-36.

requiring these commissariats to accept sick and invalid amnestied prisoners from labor camps and colonies and to accommodate these ex-prisoners in local medical facilities (lechebnye uchrezhdeniia) and in homes for invalids.¹²⁴

The reaction on the part of the Commissariats was to resist the influx of new patients on their already inadequate and overcrowded facilities. On August 11, 1945, the USSR Commissar of Health, Miterev, sent a memo to the vice-chairman of the USSR Sovnarkom, Voznesenskii, on responsibility for sick prisoners who are freed under the amnesty.¹²⁵ Miterev seemed intent on emphasizing that the NKVD would continue to bear responsibility for many of these prisoners. He emphasized that the transportation of sick prisoners to hospitals or to places of residence following their recovery will be funded by the NKVD, and that sick ex-prisoners who do not have a permanent residence should be set-up in a job following their recovery by organs of the NKVD.¹²⁶

However, relatively few invalid prisoners were actually transferred to the jurisdiction of the health and social security commissariats. On September 26, 1945, the head of the Gulag OURZ, Aleshinskii, issued a memo to Nasedkin in which he noted that “a very insignificant number [of sick or invalid ex-prisoners] has been transferred or will be moved to hospitals and invalid homes...”¹²⁷

Following publication of the amnesty law, the Gulag NKVD issued a directive which asked all camps, colonies, and regional NKVD offices to report on the number of freed invalid prisoners who should be transferred to the commissariats of health and social security. By September, as many as sixty-five reported no sick or invalid prisoners for transfer.¹²⁸ Another twelve regions stated that they had 1290 sick or invalid amnestied prisoners for transfer, of which 1080 would be handed over to the organs of the

¹²⁴ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 223.

¹²⁵ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 79.

¹²⁶ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 79.

¹²⁷ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 86.

¹²⁸ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 86; See also GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 153.

Commissariat of Health and 210 to the Commissariat of Social Security.¹²⁹ In his final report in November on the implementation of the amnesty, Liamin reported (quite remarkably) that the number of sick and invalid amnestied prisoners was “insignificant,” and that these had all been accommodated at local institutions of the commissariat of health and the commissariats of social security.¹³⁰

What accounts for the small numbers of invalids who were transferred out of the Gulag under the amnesty? It appears that invalid ex-prisoners had nowhere to go. There was no use in transferring prisoners to healthcare institutions that would not accept them. According to Aleshinskii, administrators planned to transfer their sick and invalid amnestied prisoners to already existing regional institutions of the commissariats of health and social security, but the latter hardly had the resources to care for many new patients.¹³¹ The Sovnarkom of the republic of Tadzhikistan reported that sick and invalid amnestied prisoners who were being transferred to homes for invalids and other medical institutions “most often ask for material assistance which the republic cannot provide because of a lack of funds for this purpose.”¹³² Similarly, the head of the Molotov oblast administration of corrective-labor camps and colonies (UITLK UNKVD) claimed that while he had 560 sick prisoners that warranted transfer to hospitals, the oblast health department could not provide in-patient care (koechnoe lechenie) for these ex-prisoners.¹³³

Following the amnesty, the prison labor population continued to be characterized as physically weak. To be sure, food deprivation and the general hardship of the war years had a devastating effect on the labor camp population; rates of death and illness soared in these years.¹³⁴ According to one estimate,

¹²⁹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 86; See also GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 153.

¹³⁰ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 223.

¹³¹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 87.

¹³² GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 94.

¹³³ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1228, l. 87; See also GSRF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 223.

¹³⁴ “Gulag v gody voiny”, p. 67-71; Zemskov, “Gulag,” no. 6, p. 21; Galina Mikhailovna Ivanova, Labor Camp Socialism: The Gulag in the Soviet Totalitarian System (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), pp. 93-94.

“More than half of all GULAG deaths in the entire 1934-1953 period occurred in 1941-43, mostly from malnutrition.”¹³⁵

However, even prior to the war, the physical condition of prison laborers was strikingly frail. A Gulag document from 1940 described how expenses related to the maintenance of sick and incapacitated workers “place a heavy burden on the Gulag budget.”¹³⁶ This situation apparently continued, as Stalin’s amnesty did nothing to improve the overall Gulag labor stock. Liamin noted in his final report in November that “the physical condition of the prisoners who remained in NKVD camps and colonies did not change especially. As before, physically capable prisoners (*fizicheski polnotsennye zakliuchennye*) comprised a smaller number [of prisoners] as compared with the weak (*oslablennye*) and invalid.”¹³⁷ The following illustrates Liamin’s point:

Category of Work Ability	1940	1942	July 1, 1945	October 1, 1945
1 – heavy labor	35.6%	19.2%	15.5%	16.1%
2 – moderate labor	25.2%	17.0%	32.6%	31.4%
3 – light labor	15.6%	38.3%	41.1%	41.2%
4 – invalid, weak	23.6%	25.5%	9.4%	10%
No category; located in convalescent centers	--	--	1.4%	1.3%

Source: GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 232 (November 1945); “Gulag v gody voyny,” p. 67. The four categories of work ability are described in *Gulag (Glavnoe upravlenie lagerei) 1917-1930*, pp. 278, 318.

Stalin’s amnesty was not crafted in such a way as to mitigate the harmful effects of the labor losses on the Gulag economic machine. A profile of prison laborers before and after the amnesty reveals that the physical weakness of inmates remained a problem while the skill level of detainees declined. Beria’s letter to Molotov prior to the publication of the amnesty law suggests that the NKVD chief was responding to the policy rather than shaping it, and trying desperately to mitigate the harmful effects of the amnesty on his institution. What motivated Stalin to initiate the amnesty remains a mystery.

¹³⁵ Getty, et al., p. 1041.

¹³⁶ Zemskov, “Gulag”, no. 6, p. 14.

¹³⁷ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 232.

However, it seems clear that he did not design or implement the law with the goal of improving the economic productivity of the Gulag system.

The Amnesty's Enduring Changes

Stalin's amnesty introduced fundamental changes to the Gulag that characterized the Soviet prison labor system in the postwar years. Major shifts occurred with respect to the type of prisoners detained and the length of sentences. These proved to be lasting changes that persisted until the death of Stalin in 1953, when the next large amnesty reconfigured the composition of the Gulag yet again.

Following the massive release of prisoners with shorter sentences, the proportion of Gulag detainees with longer sentences increased. In July 1945, nearly half of all Gulag prisoners were serving sentences of under five years, but this segment of the prison labor population dropped to one third after the amnesty. Sentences of five to ten years remained the most common, but the number of prisoners serving terms in this category increased by nearly 9% following the amnesty-- the largest single increase for any category of detainee. The number of people who were condemned to sentences of over ten years increased by 3.3%.¹³⁸ After the implementation of Stalin's amnesty, prisoners serving shorter sentences declined as a proportion of the overall Gulag population while those serving longer sentences increased. The change is illustrated by the following:

Length of Sentence	# of Prisoners (July 1)	% Gulag Population	# of Prisoners (October 1)	% of Gulag Population	% change
Up to 6 mos.	23,408	1.6%	4,266	.5%	- 1.1%
6 mos. to 1 yr.	75,222	5.3%	21,800	2.3%	- 3%
1 to 3 yrs.	233,789	16.4%	94,818	10%	- 6.4%
3 to 5 yrs.	314,419	22.1%	186,995	19.7%	- 2.4%
5 to 10 yrs.	742,185	52.1%	576,537	60.9%	+ 8.8%
Over 10 yrs.	31,558	2.2	52,185	5.5	+ 3.3%

Source: GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 233 (November 1945).

¹³⁸ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 233.

The 1945 amnesty appears to mark the beginning of a shift in which many more Gulag prisoners would serve longer sentences. Prior to this date, the prison labor population remained remarkably constant with respect to the length of sentences. For example, following the Great Terror in 1939, over half or 55% of the Gulag population of 1,289,491 served sentences of five years or less, nearly 45% had five to ten year sentences, and less than one percent was serving sentences of over ten years.¹³⁹ Similarly, in March 1940, labor camps and colonies held 1,668,200 people of which nearly two-thirds or 60.7% were serving sentences of five years or less, 38.4% five to ten years, and less than one percent were serving sentences of over ten years.¹⁴⁰ Before the war, more than half of the Gulag population turned over every five years.

Following the 1945 amnesty and into the post-war years, prisoner sentences grew longer. In particular, the segment of the Gulag population that was serving sentences of five to ten years grew to represent the majority of Gulag prisoners, while those with shorter sentences of five years or less sharply declined in number. In 1951, just over a quarter of the Gulag population was serving shorter sentences of five years or less, while over half were condemned to terms of five to ten years.¹⁴¹ Just prior to Stalin's death in January 1953 when labor camps and colonies held a peak of 2,472,247 prisoners, only 20% were serving sentences of under five years, and roughly half served from five to ten years. Moreover, in stark contrast to the pre-war years, large numbers of people were now condemned to very lengthy sentences, particularly in the years leading up to Stalin's death. In 1953, as many as 17% served from ten to fifteen-year sentences (up from roughly 9% in 1951), and nearly 14% had sentences of fifteen years or more (also up from roughly 9% in 1951).¹⁴² The revolving door of Stalin's Gulag was revolving far less frequently.

¹³⁹ Gulag, p. 416, 418. In 1939, 30% of the Gulag population was serving 10-year sentences.

¹⁴⁰ Gulag, p. 726.

¹⁴¹ Zemskov, "Gulag," no. 7, p. 12.

¹⁴² Gulag, p. 435, 438. Zemskov, "Gulag," no. 7, p. 12.

Moreover, prison releases following the amnesty resulted in significant changes to the prison population in terms of the nature of the crimes committed. The main difference involved persons sentenced for criminal offenses (ugolovnye prestupleniia). As a percentage of prisoners in camps and colonies, these criminal offenders constituted 70% before the amnesty and 52.3% afterwards.¹⁴³ Correspondingly, political prisoners made up a large segment of the Gulag population that was left behind after the enormous exodus of criminal offenders.

This came as no surprise. Prior to publication of the amnesty decree, Nasedkin expected that slightly more than half of all inmates, or 817,000, would remain in NKVD labor camps and colonies after the amnesty and that half of these, or 414,000, would be people sentenced for counter-revolutionary crimes. The remainder would be persons confined for such offenses as theft, speculation, and banditry.¹⁴⁴

Overall, the percentage of prisoners held in camps and colonies who were sentenced for counter-revolutionary crimes jumped from 30% (or 440,220 people) before the amnesty to 47.7% (or 455,282 people) by October 1, 1945.¹⁴⁵ At corrective-labor colonies, in particular, the percentage of prisoners sentenced for counter-revolutionary crimes doubled to 30.2% (or 114,597 people).¹⁴⁶

To be sure, the war made this transformation possible. Among prisoners in NKVD camps and colonies who were sentenced for counter-revolutionary crimes, the largest segment was either sentenced for anti-Soviet agitation, or as traitors to the motherland (izmenniki Rodine) and aiding the enemy (posobniki vragu).¹⁴⁷ And these counter-revolutionary crimes largely carried lengthy sentences. Of all the prisoners sentenced for counterrevolutionary crimes in the Stalin years of 1939-1953, nearly half served 6-10 year sentences while over 20% were condemned to twenty-five years.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 232.

¹⁴⁴ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 11.

¹⁴⁵ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 232.

¹⁴⁶ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 232.

¹⁴⁷ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 232.

¹⁴⁸ Gulag, p. 434.

Of all the changes introduced by the amnesty, the most obvious—namely, the net reduction in the number of detainees—was the least significant in terms of its lasting impact on the Gulag. The massive exodus of forced laborers in the summer and fall of 1945 resulted only briefly in a sharp decline in the prison labor population. Indeed, there were many new arrests to fill vacancies in the camp barracks. In November 1945, Liamin, deputy head of the Gulag OURZ, noted that “the loss of freed prisoners will be offset (*budet vospolniat’sia*) by the influx of new prisoners into camps and colonies.”¹⁴⁹ As amnestied prisoners left, new prisoners arrived.

Moreover, the overwhelming number of new prisoners fit the profile of the old. They were sentenced under Stalin’s draconian labor laws. Liamin noted that 194,074 new prisoners had entered the system from publication of the amnesty law to October 1st, and that 78% of these new prisoners were sentenced for shirking (*za proguly*) their jobs at enterprises and institutions.¹⁵⁰ Data through the month of October indicated that as many as 289,524 new prisoners had entered the Gulag system. Laimin estimated that by the middle of 1946, given the current rate of new detentions which he identified as nearly 75,000 per month, NKVD labor camps and colonies would continue to hold roughly the same number of people as before the amnesty law, that is, 1.5 to 1.6 million.¹⁵¹ Stalin’s amnesty did not lead to a reduction in the overall prison population, except in the very short term. The revolving door managed to maintain the total number of prisoners fairly constant for a time, but beginning in the late 1940s, the Gulag population grew dramatically.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 233.

¹⁵⁰ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 238.

¹⁵¹ GARF f. 9414, op. 1, d. 1246, l. 234.

¹⁵² Applebaum, p. 579; “Barnes, “Soviet Society Confined,” p. 212-13; Zemskov, “Gulag” no. 6, p. 11; Getty, et al., p. 1040.

Conclusion

For millions of Soviet citizens, a Gulag sentence represented a one-way journey to oblivion. Yet millions more went there and came back. This revolving door of Stalin's Gulag presents historians with a number of challenges. First, it complicates the task of determining exactly how many Soviet citizens experienced Stalin's Gulag. Any single annual figure on the number of prisoners provides only a snapshot and fails to capture the presence of a revolving door. As Anne Applebaum wrote in her recent book on the Gulag: "Although arrests were constant, so too were releases... As a result, the total number of prisoners in the camps generally hovered around two million, but the total number of Soviet citizens who had some experience of the camps, as political or criminal prisoners, is far higher," perhaps in the area of 18 million.¹⁵³

John Keep also notes: "The Gulag was a universe continually on the move... The official statistics do not neatly list the influx into the system (as individuals were sentenced) and the efflux through deaths, releases, and so on."¹⁵⁴ Given the degree of movement within the system, one can appreciate the difficulty of determining just how many prisoners were detained in the Stalin years. The numbers are important for understanding the degree to which Soviet citizens experienced Stalin's penal labor system and the impact that the Gulag system had on the larger society.

The existence of the revolving door presents other challenges as well. In particular, it requires historians to place the 1953 amnesty into a broader context. Shortly after the death of Stalin, the NKVD chief, Lavrenty Beria, initiated his famous amnesty of March 27, 1953 in which a million prisoners were released.¹⁵⁵

In sheer numbers, this amnesty was the largest in Soviet history. However, as a percentage of the overall Gulag population, Beria's amnesty released the same proportion of Gulag prisoners as had been

¹⁵³ Applebaum, p. xvii.

¹⁵⁴ John Keep, "Recent Writing on Stalin's Gulag," p. 98; Zemskov, "Gulag," no. 7, p. 12.

¹⁵⁵ On Beria's amnesty, see Ivanova, p. 124; Adler, "Life in the 'Big Zone'," p. 8; Applebaum, pp. 478-83; Barnes, "All for the Front," p. 253.

released under Stalin's postwar amnesty. In both cases, as much as forty percent of the Gulag labor force was released in a single stroke. The amnesty that was initiated by the NKVD chief on the death of Stalin is typically viewed as unprecedented, yet the proportional effect of the 1953 prison unloading is strikingly comparable to Stalin's 1945 amnesty. Moreover, like the 1945 amnesty, Beria's amnesty did not apply to political prisoners. The two dramatic releases of prisoners appear more alike than not.

When historians think about prisoner releases in the Soviet period, the first instance that comes to mind is the massive release of Gulag prisoners that took place in the 1950s following the death of Stalin. Yet amnesty was not a post-Stalin phenomenon. Rather, continuous prisoner releases were a fundamental feature of the Gulag system he created. Ordinary peasants and workers, sentenced for minor infractions under Stalin's draconian labor laws or theft decrees, passed through this notorious penal system in very large numbers.

With millions of people both entering and exiting the Gulag, the Soviet labor camp system appears not isolated and removed from the broader society, but rather thoroughly tied to it. Millions of criminal detainees left the labor camp system following their release and settled in communities across Russia as ex-prisoners. The existence of the revolving door compels an examination into the ways in which Stalin's camps impacted the larger Soviet society, the degree to which ordinary citizens experienced penal labor, and the connectedness between the Gulag and non-Gulag worlds. These constitute largely unexplored issues that await future study.