Being Human in Hell: Practices of Existence in the Soviet Gulag and the Chinese Laogai

Calvin Duffy *

Abstract

In *The House of the Dead*, Dostoevsky writes that the labour camp was "a world apart", with "its own unique life." His novel is set in Tsarist Russia, but his words are equally applicable to the Soviet Gulag and Chinese *laogai*. In these camps, the experience of being human was unique, grotesque, and transformative. To stay alive, never mind to stay human, was often impossible. Drawing on survivor memoirs from the camps, this paper examines the forces that shaped and remade the human experience in these places and analyses the responses to and results of these forces. By considering the Soviet and Chinese cases together, certain insights about being human in extreme circumstances are revealed, while highlighting the different adaptations that were made in varying conditions. The paper follows a three-part structure: the impact on human life of the economic logic that underlay the camps; the role of thought reform in reconditioning personalities, and the adaptations that people made in order to survive. The primary material is contextualised with reference both to the historiography surrounding the Gulag and *laogai*, and some of the theoretical writing on totalitarianism in the camps.

Keywords: Gulag, Laogai, labour camps, Solzhenitsyn.

Introduction

> And then they took them out, put them in formation, and drove them the fifteen miles to Abakan on foot. About a dozen of them died along the way. And no one is ever going to write a great novel about it, not even one chapter: if you live in a graveyard, you can't weep for everyone.[1]

With these words, Alexander Solzhenitsyn describes a routine incident in the transportation of prisoners to their assigned labour camp, an incident that, in metonymic fashion, represents the destructive conditions of the Gulag. The Soviet Union did not have a monopoly on this paradigm of maltreatment: in China's *laogai*, too, inmates were reduced to what Eugenia Ginzberg would call a "species of strange, unreal beings."[2] The labour camps of these two Communist nations, especially during the Stalinist and Maoist periods, were characterised by their sense of epochal struggle; both against the environment, as the inmates were used to carve out settlements in areas of wilderness, and against the prisoners themselves, as they were "reformed" by various means. This was no accident: Liu Shaoqi expressed the underlying ideology when he remarked that "[t]hrough struggle, both inside and outside the Party, we seek to change society and gradually rid it of its evils and backwardness." [3] The Russian and Chinese Communists intended to remake the world, both at societal and individual levels, with the Soviets seeking to produce citizens that were "historical agents who likewise understood the laws of history and acted on their behalf." [4] If Todorov was correct when he remarked that "the camps represent the extreme of the totalitarian regime," it is no surprise that in the camps of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, the ideology

[1] Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation, I-II*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (London: Collins Harvill Press, 1974), 584.

[2] Eugenia Ginzberg, *Into the Whirlwind*, trans. Paul Stevenson and Manya Harari (London: Persephone Books, 2014), 301.

[3] Liu Shaoqi, *How to Be a Good Communist* (Yan'an, 1939).

[4] Robert Service, *Comrades - Communism: A World History* (London: Pan Books, 2007), 66; Peter Fritzsche and Jochen Hellbeck, "The New Man in Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany," in *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared*, ed. Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 314.

of remoulding had its most terrible enactment.[5] Through a logic of economic exploitation and various strategies of thought reform, these prison systems enforced that ideology on the inmates and they, in turn, either adapted to survive or succumbed to the conditions.

This paper will examine that dynamic, concentrating on the ways in which the humanity of the individual was attacked in the labour camp, and considering the manner in which some prisoners were, despite the odds, able to continue being human. For the purposes of this consideration, "being human" refers both to ensuring one's physical and mental survival, and to manifesting certain qualities that would be considered "human", such as compassion, creativity, or ambition. The shared feature of these activities is personal agency, the exercise of control over one's fate. By this measure, it is the defence of this personal agency, above all, that characterised being human within these oppressive prison regimes. It must be noted that taking the Gulag and *laogai* together in this way leads to some considerable generalisations: the nuanced differences between the *katorga* prisons of the 1950s and the mass camps of the late 1930s in Russia, or between the *laogai* and *laojiao* in China, cannot be properly considered here. The benefit, however, of this generalising is that it emphasises certain universalities about the human experience that can be derived from this history. The study will primarily draw on survivors' accounts, though it must be acknowledged from the outset that such material poses the problems of unreliable memory, selection, and other implicit biases, such as that those who survived and wrote of their experiences were highly atypical of the camp population. As Williams and Wu have argued, however, "inter-subjective agreement among sources does lead to a degree of objectivity," even if these sources cannot be entirely trusted.[6] The recurrence across memoirs of similar experiences in Kolyma, Beiyuan, Karaganda, Manchuria, and elsewhere, allows for a certain degree of confidence in their veracity. Furthermore, the personal nature of this material lends it to the study of survival and adaptation, as the authors struggle to comprehend what it meant to be human in hell.

Part I:Economic Logic

[5]Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, trans. Arthur Denner and Abigail Pollack (London: Phoenix, 2000), 28.

[6]Philip F. Williams and Yenna Wu, *The Great Wall of Confinement: The Chinese Prison Camp through Contemporary Fiction and Reportage* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 15.

The significance of the economic motive to the Gulag has been a matter of some debate in the historiography of Soviet Russia. The Chinese *laogai* has come under less discussion, though this may be a consequence of it receiving less scholarly attention overall. The leading historian of the Gulag, Anne Applebaum, argues that the camps established from the 1920s onwards had an entirely economic focus, oriented around profitability and the rational use of labour. [7] Others have agreed, such as Golfo Alexopoulos, who rejects Solzhenitsyn's idea that the camps were institutions of mass murder, and considers the primary goal of the Gulag to be "physically exploit[ing] to the maximum degree possible", with nonproductive prisoners discarded by the mechanisms of the system.[8] Robert Conquest, however, views the camps in terms of the mass arrests that generated them, and so places economic motivations in second place, emphasising the extent to which the Gulag was "politically efficient." [9] This would have been supported by one of the earliest chroniclers of the Gulag, Malsagoff. Writing in 1926 of the Solovki camp, the seedbed of the archipelago, he declared that camp punishments were intended to send "the largest possible number of prisoners, more or less swiftly, to 'the other side.'" [10] More recently, Barnes has reframed the discussion, arguing that for the Stalinist leadership, labour "was not only the means but also the measure of rehabilitation". [11] His contribution is crucial for its synthesis of economics and ideology, and we shall return to it later. Regardless of historiographical preferences, it has been demonstrated that the economic role of the Gulag and *laogai* became closely entwined with their respective states' economies. By 1954 in China, 85% of prisoners were engaged in productive labour, while the previous year a policy of "many stay, few leave" had been introduced, as this compelled workforce was used to open up large, underdeveloped areas of the country.[12] In Russia,

[7] Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History of the Soviet Camps* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 63-220.

[8] Golfo Alexopoulos, "Destructive-Labor Camps: Rethinking Solzhenitsyn's Play on Words," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 16, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 499–526.

[9] Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (London: Pimlico, 2008), 333.

[10] S. A. Malsagoff, *An Island Hell: A Soviet Prison in the Far North*, trans. F. H. Lyon (London: A. M. Philpot Ltd., 1926), 169.

[11] Stephen A. Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 38.

[12] Michael R. Dutton, *Policing and Punishment in China: From Patriarchy to "the*

too, the Gulag "developed side by side with the whole country", as the new Soviet state needed a vast pool of cheap manpower, which could be obtained, as Solzhenitsyn writes, "only by swallowing up one's own sons".[13] Whether or not their administrators had productivity as their primary motive, these Communist labour camps were nonetheless defined and characterised by economic forces. This manifested in the human experience of prisoners who found themselves commodified, rationalised, and reduced to so many units of mute labour. Many prisoners' accounts attest to this although, curiously, one of the most emphatic descriptions of the economic logic of the Gulag comes from a non-Russian inmate. Valentin Gonzalez, better known as the Spanish Communist El Campesino, spent time at a Vorkuta camp, working in the coal-mines. There, he encountered a brutal attitude among officials, as his complaints about the extremely dangerous conditions received the response: "We want coal. The Soviet Union needs coal. At any price."[14] The extent to which each Gulag administrator was consumed with his own production goals was also noted by Herling, who wrote that when the order came in to supply prisoners for a convoy to Kolyma, the most deadly of all the camps, the camp chief took it as an opportunity to pass off his weakest prisoners, making it easier to fulfil his own targets.[15] In terms of daily practice, then, economic concerns had a pervasive impact on prisoners' lives, and this was especially the case with regard to rations. In both the Soviet Union and China, a sophisticated system of rationing served to incentivise maximum productivity, and to punish the failure to fulfil norms with a guaranteed route into starvation and death. Alexander Dolgun described the efficiency of the process. When prisoners met the norm, they would receive a basic ration, but if they fell *below* the norm, their rations would be cut, at a graduated percentage depending on their shortfall. Of course, this reduction in food meant a reduction in energy, making it far less likely that they would fulfil the norm, or even a high percentage of it, the next day, therefore ensuring another cut in rations. Yet, as both Dolgun and Gonzalez made clear, constant fulfilment of the norm while on

People" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 273-75.

[13]Solzhenitsyn, *I-II*, 71-143.

[14]Valentin Gonzalez, *Listen Comrades: Life and Death in the Soviet Union*, trans. Ilsa Barea (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1952), 168.

[15]Gustav Herling, *A World Apart*, trans. Andrzej Ciolkosz (London: Penguin, 2005), 83.

heavy labour was almost impossible, so that the majority of prisoners would eventually find themselves sliding downwards.[16] The situation in China was similar, with the difference that a prisoner's political orthodoxy also influenced their ration level. Wu described a system of A-, B-, and C-rations, allocated according to attitude, adherence to regulations, and labour potential. Given that most political prisoners had been sentenced for their ideological nonconformity, it was very rare for them to receive the A-rations. [17] In either case, however, the effect was the same: to place the prisoner's life at the centre of tension between production figures and caloric intake.

Under such conditions, the other economic factor that shaped prisoners' lives was, inevitably, their work assignment. This, too, was systematised. In some cases, such as Ginzberg's camp near Vladivostok, the camp population was divided according to their convictions. Those who had committed misdemeanours, such as embezzling, received the lightest work, while the "worst" offenders, such as those convicted of Counter-Revolutionary Trotskyite Activities, were assigned to the hardest labour. There was a medical examination of new inmates but, Ginzberg tells us, "the diagnosis conformed to the patient's sentence."[18] Dolgun describes a slightly different process, where his actual physical condition was considered, so that his lack of any buttocks saved him from certain death in the copper mines of Dzhezkazgan. [19] Regardless of the method of classification, the point was that prisoners were defined by the camp regime according to their use-value, and this value alone could make the difference between life and death. One of the sharpest accounts of this perverse mechanism comes from Zhang Xianling, who writes of how the comfortable jobs went to those with a particular "preservation value".[20] Prisoners who possessed a special expertise that the camp could not do without - such as the ability to drive a heavy truck, or to write well - could make this known, and so gain privileges. Yet even in this protected position, the prisoner's existence was bound up with the machinations of the camp, because above

[16]Alexander Dolgun, *Alexander Dolgun's Story: An American in the Gulag* (London: Collins/Harvill, 1975), 210; Gonzalez, *Listen Comrades*, 153.

[17]Harry Wu, *Bitter Winds: A Memoir of My Years in China's Gulag* (New York: John Wiley Sons, 1994), 90.

[18]Ginzberg, *Into the Whirlwind*, 253-4.

[19]Dolgun, *An American in the Gulag*, 165.

[20]Zhang Xianling, *Grass Soup*, trans. Martha Avery (London: Minerva, 1995), 26.

all preservation value depended on whether "a man's continued existence would advertise the greatness and the rightness of the policy of labour reform."[21] This example is characterised, in part, by the greater concern with ideological purity so typical of the *laogai*, yet more than that, it expresses a cost/benefit perspective on human life that tyrannised every aspect of inmates' existence.

That cost/benefit approach was incessant, and for so many who did not escape the death sentence of general work, it was ruthless. Countless prisoners found themselves transformed into disposable economic units, like the men in the Kolyma mines who died on the march home: "I was going to say like flies - but at Kolyma the flies died like people."[22] Even those who developed practices of survival found themselves, in many ways, ceasing to be human, existing only as avatars of work, entirely deprived of personal agency. One of Shalamov's characters describes this transformation, as his consciousness "that was perhaps no longer human…was now directed toward one goal only, that of removing the stones as quickly as possible."[23] In this way, the economic logic of these labour camps did not merely motivate their organisation and management. They also dominated and altered the inmates' human experience, turning them into people who did not know what it meant to be alive: that is, they no longer knew how to protect their survival, or manifest their individual qualities in the world.

Part II: Thought Reform

For all their concern with production, however, both the Soviets and the Chinese laid claim to a project of reforging the individual into an exemplary member of a socialist nation. Their prison camps were, at least in theory, intended to remake their subjects into good citizens who could partake in the journey toward communism. This took various forms: cultural activities, ideological discussion, mutual surveillance. The forms of thought control differed considerably between the Gulag and *laogai*, but they both exerted a powerful influence on the prisoners' experience, intertwining with the pressure of the economic logic to ensure that each person had little opportunity for relief.

The significance of thought reform to the Soviet plans for the Gu-

[21] Xianling, *Grass Soup*, 28.

[22] Ginzberg, *Into the Whirlwind*, 294.

[23] Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, trans. John H Arnold (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 27.

lag has been a matter of debate. Certainly, in the 1930s there was some emphasis on the transformative power of work, most famously demonstrated in the construction of the White Sea Canal (Belomor). A crucial element of this rhetoric was the role of the Cultural-Educational Department (known as the KVCh), which undertook the organisation of cultural events and the provision of reading material. Both Applebaum and Solzhenitsyn, however, dismiss the idea that this section had any impact on re-education, with the former claiming that its sole purpose was to ensure higher production figures, and the latter scornfully writing that while "*everything is possible* in Gulag", no-one was ever "re-educated by government means through the KVCh".[24] This, however, does not properly explain why a great deal of time and effort was expended upon the KVCh. Barnes's contribution offers a more coherent answer. As mentioned above, he argues that the Gulag was "an integral part of the Soviet project" to remake society, through the transformative power of labour. What other scholars overlook, he insists, is that brutality was a vital component of this ideology, so that labour was means and method of rehabilitation, "and failure in the reeducation process was meant to be fatal."[25]

The quintessential statement of this ideology of enforced reformation can be found in the volume written about the construction of the White Sea Canal. This text, produced by Maxim Gorky and a team of other authors, records how the project was "a splendidly successful attempt at the transformation of thousands of former enemies of Soviet society". It offers many stories about prisoners who were changed by their experience at Belomor, becoming exemplary shock-workers. Notably, however, most of these reforged prisoners had been sentenced for criminal offences, such as murder or theft, whereas those sentenced for political offences, such as Anti-Soviet Agitation or Counter-Revolutionary Activity, were largely ostracised from cultural-educational work and discussions about reform.[26] This exclusion of political prisoners from re-education is also described by Herling. Positions in the KVCh were usually awarded to criminal prisoners, as they did not pose a danger of sedition, and if a 58-er wished to borrow a political text from the camp library, he or she had to have a long talk with the KVCh director before-

[24]Applebaum, *Gulag*, 220; Solzhenitsyn, *III-IV*, 468.
[25]Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, 13-38.
[26]Maxim Gorky, L. Auerbach, and S. G. Firin, eds., *The White Sea Canal* (London: Bodley Head, 1935).

hand to discuss their reasons for doing so.[27] The re-educative activities of the KVCh and the Gulag at large were characterised by such contradictions and ambiguities, reflecting the tenuous conditions of the prisoners' existence. The KVCh's activities were entirely irrelevant to the struggle for survival, yet Herling, Dolgun, and even Solzhenitsyn acknowledge that its offerings could provide a place or moment of refuge. Concerts and film screenings were always well-attended, even during times of severe hunger, and Dolgun, as a performer in the culture brigade, remarks on the tumultuous reception that his "pretty ragged" shows invariably received.[28]

The ambiguous impact of Soviet thought reform can also be seen in the freedom of discourse in the Gulag. The things which one could or could not say varied considerably between camps. The fictional Ivan Denisovich, in a katorga camp filled entirely with political prisoners, expressed relief that in such a place "you could shout anything you liked from a top bunk and the stoolies wouldn't report it because the security officer couldn't care less."[29] Ginzberg had a different experience at her camp near Vladivostok, where criminal and political prisoners were mixed together, and one woman's declamations against the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact ended in her being shot "'for anti-soviet propaganda in the huts'".[30] Denisovich's experience is based on the camps of the 1950s, when political prisoners were separated from the main camp population, changing the dynamics that had hitherto governed their conduct, whilst Ginzberg's anecdote took place shortly after the height of the Great Terror. Hence, even if the Soviets truly saw labour as the key to reforging, their application of that ideology was inconsistent and flexible according to immediate conditions, so that the prisoners often experienced thought reform merely as fleeting background rhetoric.

By contrast, the Chinese application of thought reform had a far more significant influence on human life in the *laogai*. In these camps, the principle of mutual surveillance, and the associated practices of study and struggle sessions, were effective at achieving, as Lifton de-

[27]Herling, *A World Apart*, 152-5.
[28]Herling, *A World Apart*, 156-69; Dolgun, *An American in the Gulag*, 275-90; Solzhenitsyn, *III-IV*, 483-4.
[29]Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (London: Vintage, 2003), 131.
[30]Ginzberg, *Into the Whirlwind*, 279.

scribes in another context, the "penetration by the psychological forces of the environment into the inner emotions of the individual person".[31] Jean Pasqualini's *Prisoner of Mao* records the workings of this with great clarity. Thought reform began with the interrogation, before an arrestee even made it to camp, as they were press-ganged by authorities and fellow inmates to confess their crimes "without giving the government any trouble [...] Your salvation lies in the attitude you adopt during the interrogation."[32] Once in camp, prisoners' lives were structured around both work and political education, as every night they engaged in study and discussion of orthodox political texts, led by older, "reformed" prisoners. Should a member of the brigade repeatedly reveal an unorthodox attitude, he or she would be subjected to a struggle: "a peculiarly Chinese invention . . . an intellectual gang-beating of one man by man, sometimes even thousands, in which the victim has no defense, even the truth."[33] The hapless dissident would be surrounded by the group, who would scream accusations, insults, and condemnations, sometimes resorting to extremely painful physical humiliations. Mutual surveillance underpinned these practices, in that each prisoner became accustomed to monitoring those around him for ideological deviations, and reporting infractions to the group as soon as they occurred.[34] A reading of survivor accounts from the *laogai* makes it clear the extent to which these social arrangements controlled prisoners' lives, vastly limiting or even eradicating their opportunities for psychological liberty.

As if such pervasive control were not enough, however, *laogai* warders and administrators also tactically applied public violence in the re-educative project. Lai Ying describes an execution of a stone-breaker, accused of being "a diehard counterrevolutionary". The entire camp was gathered to witness his shooting, and the body was left to lie in the open for all to see. Such a brutal incident taught Ying that "open defiance of the system was not possible", no doubt exactly the result that the administrators desired.[35] The frequency of executions in the *laogai* was lower

[31] R. J. Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of "Brainwashing" in China* (London: Gollancz, 1961), 66.

[32] Jean Pasqualini and Rudolph Chelminski, *Prisoner of Mao* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1975), 32-5.

[33] Pasqualini and Chelminski, *Prisoner of Mao*, 58.

[34] Xianling, *Grass Soup*, 97.

[35] Lai Ying, *The Thirty-Sixth Way: A Personal Account of Imprisonment and Escape from Red China*, trans. Edward Behr and Sydney Liu (London: Constable,

than that in the Gulag, but their public enactment made them effective components of the thought reform campaign.[36] Public physical punishment could also occur in a less planned way, as with Harry Wu's struggle session. He was dragged into the infamous jet-plane position, with his arms raised high up behind his back, a humiliation that was relatively common. On this occasion, however, the crowd ran out of control and his wrist was broken by someone wielding a club.[37] Officially, such violence was forbidden, yet this physical threat always underlay the ideological control, ensuring that the *laogai* program of thought reform had a pervasive influence on prisoners' lives.

As much as the Soviet and Chinese systems differed in their ideological emphases, however, their patterns of thought reform were similar on two points. On an organisational level, in both the Gulag and *laogai*, the small group was, as Solzhenitsyn recorded, "the basic form of re-education."[38] Norms were assessed by work unit, rather than by individual, so that one person's failure to fulfil norms would impact all of his comrades' rations; and, as we have seen, when ideological control was attempted, it was principally enforced through the dynamics of the self-monitoring group. In this sense, the prisoner's mental life was partially or fully subsumed by the life of the group, eroding any sense of individuality. The other similarity was in regard to the output of this process of reform. In the end, those prisoners who did not die of starvation or mistreatment were not transformed into outstanding socialist citizens, but were merely exhausted and hollowed-out, such as the former Group Leader, Wang. He "graduated" from his reeducation, yet remained in the labour camp as he had nowhere else to go, and Xianling describes how "he looked as though he wanted to fall over and let the earth cradle him for a long sleep", yet even while napping, he would hear the Troop Leader calling his name, and come to attention.[39] For so many, thought reform meant little more than the destruction of the meaning of life: in particular, the loss of any sense of agency or individual power.

Part III: Individual Adaptation

1970), 86.

[36]Williams and Wu, *The Great Wall of Confinement*, 46.

[37]Wu, *Bitter Winds*, 225-6.

[38]Solzhenitsyn, *III-IV*, 116.

[39]Xianling, *Grass Soup*, 131.

When reviewing the totalitarian conditions under which prisoners existed, it seems implausible that any of them could nonetheless eke out a certain humanity yet still, some did. Little historical writing has addressed this aspect of life in the labour camps, perhaps because of its specifically personal nature, which does not easily find a place in histories other than biographies. The most important observation on the matter comes from Todorov, and is worth quoting at length. Upon entering the camp, he writes,

> previously held moral values collapse beneath the weight of the new and brutal circumstances. The prisoner discovers a world without pity and finds that he can actually live in such a world. If the prisoner survives this first stage, however, he may reach a second, in which he once again discovers a set of moral values, although perhaps not the same ones as he held before.[40]

The previous two sections of this paper, on economic logic and thought reform, depicted the workings of that world without pity, which dictated the human experience in the labour camp. This section considers how the prisoner learned to live in such a world.

Camp literature is full of the curious and ruthless ways in which prisoners adapted to survive. One of the most common was gaining admission to the hospital, either by genuine or self-inflicted injury. Dolgun, severely ill and debilitated after months of torture and interrogation, regained his strength when a doctor befriended him and kept him in hospital for several weeks.[41] The perversity of the labour camp scenario is illustrated by how many would self-mutilate themselves just to get a few weeks of rest away from general work. For those on the job, the most important skill to develop was *tufta*, the Russian word for faking norm fulfilment. A stone-breaker would know how to stack his stones into a dome that *looked* like three cubic metres, and a forest worker would know to re-lay logs cut long ago, perhaps sawing off the ends to make them look new.[42] To learn these and other pragmatic tactics of survival was essential, as Wu discovered in his early weeks of imprisonment. A younger man, Xing Jingping, convicted for a criminal

[40]Todorov, *Facing the Extreme*, 41.

[41]Dolgun, *An American in the Gulag*, 185.

[42]Dolgun, *An American in the Gulag*, 173; Ginzberg, *Into the Whirlwind*, 308-310.

offence, repeatedly told Wu of the need to take care of oneself, because "in this place the strongest one is the better one." Only after continual worsening of his situation did Wu heed this advice, however, accepting the need to remould himself according to the system's exigencies. He eventually realised that the only way to overcome the torments of *laogai* life was to act in a rough, reckless manner: "The fierce one fears the relentless one, and the relentless one fears the foolhardy one."[43] To put it in Todorov's words, Wu discovered a new set of moral values, deciding that in his new surroundings, he "could not afford compassion or decency". Hence, the adapting prisoner had to learn how to be dominant in an environment where everything conspired to dominate them, so finding a way to exercise their will just enough to continue living.

Yet the prisoner also had to learn to yield in the right ways, especially when under serious ideological pressure. Chinese inmates in particular learned to say the right words, adapting their innermost thoughts to the demands of their surroundings, even while retaining an inner core of independence. For Lai Ying, this was easy, even from her early days of imprisonment when she was used to browbeat arrestees into confession, and she found "how easy it was to slip into the jargon of the interrogating judge". Later, at the end of her *laogai* career, she had no qualms about writing an extensive confession denouncing everything about her former life, even the Church: "To achieve freedom, it was necessary to write this way. I felt sure God would understand."[44] Pasqualini found this process more difficult, but in time he, too, achieved "a high ideological level", and his memoir gives the sense that he truly believed in that ideology, but only to the extent that it enabled his survival.[45] The challenge of maintaining this pretence lay less in the political speeches that a prisoner made at study sessions, but more in controlling the subtle, involuntary behavioural cues that revealed the actual direction of his or her thoughts. The inmate had to know, for instance, the correct way in which to inform the Group Leader of a brigade member's death, as Xianling describes. "Group Leader, So-and-so has died" was acceptable, but "Oh! Group Leader, another person has died!" was dangerous, because of the implication that there was some sort of systemic problem.[46] Hence, the prisoner set about shaping themselves

[43]Wu, *Bitter Winds*, 68-81.
[44]Ying, *The Thirty-Sixth Way*, 49-128.
[45]Pasqualini and Chelminski, *Prisoner of Mao*, 219.
[46]Xianling, *Grass Soup*, 82.

to the system, so as to obtain the maximal amount of breathing-room and safety from scrutiny. Such pockets of flexibility represented a re-acquisition of personal agency, and afforded inmates opportunities to manifest their human qualities with greater freedom.

Of course, even in camp there was disagreement, and it is possible to discern three different philosophies of survival from the memoirs. One could be termed the submissive approach, whereby the prisoner totally adhered to the rules and conditions imposed upon them, letting go of any desire to control their own fate. This was the attitude described by one of Shalamov's characters, who came to have "no pride, vanity, or ambition…[because it] was more important to learn to button your pants in the frost." In an act of religious-like acceptance, they "simply let matters take their course…[and] breathed freely in the fist of another man's will."[47] Given that most prisoners were not intellectuals or revolutionaries, but merely ordinary people attempting to make a life amidst a totalitarian system, it is reasonable to suppose that this was the most common manner in which the populations of the Gulag and *laogai* lived. The second philosophy was one of fighting to survive, but within certain self-imposed moral constraints. As a doctor told Dolgun, "You survive at *almost* any cost…If you survive by stepping on others and lose your compassion, then you're not worth saving."[48] To a 21st century reader, safe from totalitarian oppression, such a perspective appears to be admirably noble, demonstrating a rare spark of human virtue amidst hellish conditions. Coming from a prisoner in one of the most privileged positions in camp, however, such words sound hollow. For many who fought for survival, there was no option but to adopt what Wu called a "dog-bite-dog mentality".[49] Constantly near the point of starvation, he could not have reservations about stealing a turnip found by another prisoner, and beating up the other man when confronted. Furthermore, if a prisoner reached the conclusion that they were innocent of any crimes, the inexorable conclusion was that they had to survive at any price. Those who did not make this decision, Solzhenitsyn tells us, lost their lives, and those who did, lost their consciences.[50] Solzhenitsyn's famous novel, *One Day In the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, is an incredibly acute depiction of these prac-

[47]Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, 57-63.
[48]Dolgun, *An American in the Gulag*, 179.
[49]Wu, *Bitter Winds*, 159.
[50]Solzhenitsyn, *III-IV*, 602-3.

tices of survival, with every moment incorporated into the project, even the manner of walking to work: "In the morning the *zeks'* only hope of salvation is ambling to work slowly. Move briskly and you'll never finish your time."[51] Yet, conversely, this is also a hopeful novel, as Ivan's tactics are consistently successful and he falls asleep feeling "pleased with life" because a "lot of good things had happened that day", just one of "the three thousand six hundred and fifty-three days of his sentence".[52] Hence, both those who gave themselves over to the labour camps' strictures, and those who mastered the means of manoeuvring around its control, could find a strange sort of peace.

That peace, however, came only with the destruction of each individual's prior identity. Herling describes this process, arguing that camp life only became bearable once "all criteria, all standards of comparison which apply at liberty, have been completely obliterated from the prisoner's mind." This is precisely what Todorov suggests: the erasure of the old life, with the possibility of a new one emerging. The economic and ideological control over the Gulag and *laogai* was too severe to be subverted or overthrown, at least until the broader system began to disintegrate, as occurred following Stalin's death in 1956. To be human in hell was to remake oneself, yet rarely was this reforging of a type that would produce inspiring new socialist citizens.

Conclusion

In the Appendix to his Critique of the Gotha Programme, Marx remarked that "productive labor" was the "sole means of betterment" for criminals.[53] The Communists who ran the Gulag and *laogai* would have cited this as scriptural basis for their projects yet, as Solzhenitsyn wrote in his sacerdotal style, "what if there is nothing for a person *to be corrected of?* [sic]"[54] These labour camps shaped and changed their subjects, but not for the better. Through the application of their economic logic, the prison population was transformed from a mass of humanity into a mass of labour units. Those who did not find ways to surpass the inhuman mechanism of the rationing system, and the ruthless demands of general work, usually found themselves discarded like so many consumed resources. The pressure was not merely physical, as

[51] Solzhenitsyn, *One Day*, 105.
[52] Solzhenitsyn, *One Day*, 149.
[53] Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 1875.
[54] Solzhenitsyn, *III-IV*, 630.

ideological demands weighed on the prisoners' consciousness, especially in China, where thought control was refined almost to a science. In the face of such threats to one's individuality, the inmate could only make marginal and tactical adaptations, eking out humanity in those moments when the guards were not bringing down the boot. Yet, as we have seen, even this presented a trade-off, because it was almost impossible to survive under such conditions while retaining one's old codes of morality and behaviour. For a few, hope could at least be found in the possibility of recording these experiences and telling the world. This motivated Harry Wu, who endured physical punishment and struggle sessions, having resolved to pass on the story: "I learned not to care if they hurt my body, but I had to keep my mind intact so that I could remember."[55] Solzhenitsyn, too, "never lost hope that our story *would* be told: since sooner or later the truth is told about all that has happened in history."[56] Such hope, however, was the preserve of a handful of intellectuals and writers, who had a means by which to communicate the truth. For most, the truth of life in the Gulag or *laogai* was that "in the eyes of the state and its representatives a physically strong person was better—yes, better—more moral, more valuable than a weak person who couldn't shovel twenty cubic meters of dirt out of a trench in a day."[57] To survive in such a place was almost impossible; to be human was little short of a miracle.

[55]Wu, *Bitter Winds*, 286.

[56]Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation, V-VII*, trans. H. T. Willetts (London: Fontana, 1978), 471.

[57]Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, 58.

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