The Put’ of Perekovka: Transforming Lives at Stalin’s White-Sea Baltic Canal

The process of perekova, or re-forging, promoted at the construction of Stalin’s White-Sea Baltic Canal (Belomorkso-Baltiiskii kanal im. Stalina) had a grand plan: the transformation of lives. This teleology was rooted in the OGPU’s¹ desire to mold criminal prisoners into dedicated believers of Soviet ideology, rendering the Belomorkanal one of the most infamous forced-labor projects. Perekovka was ubiquitous at the camp site. Criminal prisoners wrote of their transformations in autobiographical sketches, the camp newspaper was named in its honor, political prisoners discussed the phenomenon in their critical works, poetry and plays were dedicated to its grandiose potential. By invoking the smelting of metals, the term perekovka adeptly highlighted the industrial atmosphere of Stalin’s first Five-Year Plan and asserted that—along with factories, plants, and waterways—people could be built according to a master design. While it is possible to question the legitimacy of the process as whole and the veracity of the declarations to its allegiance, the construct nevertheless plays an essential role in cultural narratives emerging from the project and must be examined as such.

Criminal autobiographies housed in the RGALI and GARF archives in Moscow narrativize the process of perekovka and document the path, or put’, of their transformations. The notion of pathway is essential in these tales, yet motion can occur in opposing directions:

¹ The predecessor of the KGB, the acronym OGPU stands for Ob’edinennoe gosudarstvennoe politcheskoe upravlenie, or Unified State Political directorate. The OGPU was the administrative body in charge of the Belomorkanal’s construction.
prisoners’ fall into the criminal world often serves as counterpoint to their ascent into socialist society. Despite very different destinations, the two routes share important qualities: the substitution of an artificial family for its biological counterpart and the role of collective identity in forming individual consciousness. The transformative journey of perekova echoes elements of the socialist realist master plot, as the role of the vospitatel’ (educator-reformer) in the former mirrors that of the mentor in the latter. This commonality also exists in the criminals’ stories about their past lives—having a “mentor” to inaugurate one into a life of crime is just as important as the educator in the socialist counterpart.

The Mechanics of Perekovka

The KVO (kul'turno-vospitatel'nyi otdel) at the White-Sea Baltic Canal was in charge of the re-forging of prisoners as well as all other aspects of the re-educational process: it helped to abolish illiteracy among the convicts, organized professional-technical courses for the re-training of the incarcerated, maintained the “red corners” in the barracks and established social and recreational groups for the prisoners.² The department was divided into sub-divisions, or chasti, each of which was headed by a different vospitatel’. The vospitateli were key figures on the Canal and frequently mentioned in prisoner autobiographies and stories. They were directly in charge of remaking criminals’ consciences, serving as true “engineers of the human soul,”³ echoing Stalin’s famous statement on the role of writers in the Soviet Union. The authorities, in turn, encouraged vospitateli to pen their own biographies, which were intended to serve as inspiration for recalcitrant prisoners. Part of the reason behind the apparent success of this method was due to the fact that the call to work and evidence of transformation came directly

² I. L. Averbakh, Ot prestupleniia k trudu (Moscow: OGiZ, 1936), 58, 60, 73, 75.
from former criminals rather than members of the administration. Nevertheless, such successes must be qualified, as a thief-turned-reformer often could take advantage of his “privileged” position to indulge more readily in drunkenness and card-playing; as the political prisoner Dmitrii Vitkovskii recalls, “Usually the educators (vospitateli) withdraw into an attic in some or another barrack, play cards, eventually manage to get drunk and enjoy various thieves’ amusements.”

The volume From Crime to Labor (Ot prestupleniia k trudu, 1936), a sort of bible of Soviet penal philosophy, offers insight into the process of perekovka as a specifically pedagogical phenomenon: the prisoners go through the “school of the Belomor construction” and have an important influence on the workers at the Moscow-Volga Canal, a subsequent Gulag project run by the OGPU. Chapters focus on remaking prisoners’ attitudes, the organization of cultural-educational work, the importance of collectivity as work principle, and udarnichestvo (shock-worker labor) as a method of work stimulation—all of which are key components of the Belomorkanal program. Most importantly, as the volume argues, perekovka concerns the transformation of human consciousness, and prison is not simply a tool for punishment or for economic gain. Soviet incarceration, therefore, is presented as a means rather than a goal, necessitating time for a journey towards enlightenment. This idea did not make a sudden appearance in the 1930s; the Bolsheviks believed that crime was merely a byproduct of an unfair

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4 Anna Iankovskaiia, a criminal on the White-Baltic Sea Canal, attributes her transformation specifically to the fact that a fellow prisoner, and not the Criminal Police, coerced her into starting to work. See the English translation of her story in the collection, In the Shadow of the Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War, Eds. Sheila Fitzpatrick and Yuri Slezkine (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), 282-85.


6 “...лагерники, прошедшие школу Беломорстроя.” I. L. Averbakh, Ot prestupleniia k trudu, 27.

7 Ibid, 4.

8 Ibid, 15.
capitalist system\textsuperscript{9} and that the reformation of all prisoners was possible, instituting a maximum five-year sentence for all criminal offenses.\textsuperscript{10} The term “corrective” (\textit{ispravitel'nyi}) labor is introduced in 1920, but the name change becomes mainly an issue of semantics; by 1929, many prisoners are not considered to be re-educable (excluding inmates at the White Sea-Baltic Canal) and the term is officially replaced by forced (\textit{prinuditel'nyi}) labor in 1933.\textsuperscript{11} Other scholars, however, argue that “years of Gulag propaganda” stressed that “prisoners were temporarily isolated from society but could be reeducated and reintegrated into that society”\textsuperscript{12} and the potential for reeducation of prisoners persisted past the construction of the Belomorkanal.

In the flattering portrayal of the Soviet system in \textit{From Crime to Labor}, the penal methods of the USSR are compared with those of capitalist countries. While Fascist Germany presents crime as something inborn and thus impossible to change, the Soviet Union, as the book claims, believes in the possibility of reforming even the most difficult portions of the population.\textsuperscript{13} The Soviet penal system is also contrasted to its Tsarist precedent, with images of whips and bodily punishment meant to drive home for the reader the high degree of cruelty in pre-revolutionary Russia.\textsuperscript{14} Following these ideals, the key to reformation was hard physical labor, and it was most effective when it could be done on large construction projects with a concentrated group of prisoners, such as with the White Sea-Baltic Canal or Moscow-Volga

\textsuperscript{9} This concept finds a precedent in French utopian socialist thought, in particular the work of Charles Fourier. Fourier is referenced numerous times in Fedor Dostoevskii’s 1872 novel \textit{The Possessed} and is credited with the foundation of the idealistic community in Utopia, OH.
\textsuperscript{10} Jakobson, 5.
\textsuperscript{11} Jakobson, 86, and Zhak Rossi, \textit{Spravochnik po GULagu} (London: Overseas Publications, 1987), 309. Jakobson has a slightly different date for the adoption of the term “corrective” than appears in Rossi’s handbook (1921 instead of 1920).
\textsuperscript{13} I. L. Averbakh, 14.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 8.
Canal.\textsuperscript{15} The stress on a very strict work ethic has a chilling resonance with the infamous slogan, “Arbeit macht frei” (“work makes you free”) and is echoed in the Soviet labor slogan published on the top of the front page of every camp newspaper: “Labor in the USSR is a matter of honesty, glory, valor, and heroism.”\textsuperscript{16} There are, of course, limitations in comparing Hitler’s concentration camps with Stalin’s Gulag.\textsuperscript{17}

Although attempting to underscore the inherent humaneness of the socialist method as opposed to penal techniques employed in “bourgeois” (capitalist) countries, the volume \textit{From Crime to Labor} does not refrain from acknowledging the strict discipline and physical duress in the Gulag:

Labor in the camps is hard work, the discipline is most strict and demanding. The shock-worker labor, the conscious relationship to responsibility, and the genuine striving towards re-forging find absolute encouragement; the breaking of camp discipline, the refusal to work or a lackadaisical approach to work, and even more importantly, the attempts to undermine the realization of corrective-labor politics and the sortie by the class enemy meet a decisive opposition in various forms— from measures of coercion by the camp elite to strict disciplinary measures.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 21.
\textsuperscript{16} «Труд в СССР, дело чести, дело славы, дело доблести и геройства.»
\textsuperscript{17} The debate concerning the feasibility of a comparison between Nazi concentration camps and the Soviet Gulag continues to the present day. If one emphasizes the role of the Gulag as a machine of political repression—not its only characteristic, since the camps also have an economic function whereas Nazi concentration camps had virtually no profitable component—the comparison has some weight. See Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev, eds., \textit{The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag}, 191. For a discussion of Soviet labor camps and Nazi concentration camps in the same context, see Terrence Des Pres, \textit{The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps} (NY: Oxford UP, 1976). For a recent monograph comparing the Soviet and Nazi experiences, see Sheila Fitzpatrick and Michael Geyer, eds., \textit{Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared} (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009).
\textsuperscript{18} «Труд в лагере – труд тяжелый, дисциплина строжайшая и требовательная. Если ударная работа, сознательное отношение к обязанностям, искреннее стремление к перековке находят всенародное поощрение, то нарушение лагерной дисциплины, отказ от работы, недобросовестное к ней отношение, а тем более попытки подорвать осуществление исправительно-трудовой политики и вылазки классового врага встречают решительное противодействие в разнообразных формах – от мер воздействия лагерной общественности до жестких дисциплинарных мер.» I. L. Averbakh, 29.
Following up on this sense of warning, the volume notes that the remaking of prisoners’ consciousness cannot be considered a philanthropic or sentimental endeavor; instead, the path to reformation is a “strict and harsh route” (once again, the notion of put’) where the “iron discipline” of the camp holds sway.\textsuperscript{19} As the above passage suggests, the class enemy plays a particular role, demonstrating how a type of Soviet ideological school is “in session” at the White Sea-Baltic Canal and other Gulag construction projects. In addition to building a Canal and re-building themselves, the prisoners were also being indoctrinated in “Soviet speak” while in a secluded, collective laboratory where propaganda could easily be disseminated and carefully controlled. The Marxist conception of class struggle assumed primary importance at the camp site, and the prison’s cultural-educational division had to address such political questions closely.\textsuperscript{20}

Several components comprised the cultural-educational work intended to assist in the goal of reformation of inmate consciousness through physical labor. The elements of sorevnovanie (competition) and udarnichistro (shock-worker mentality) were essential in the implementation of perekovka.\textsuperscript{21} The notion of socialist competition became a key motivating force for the prisoners. Since prisoners worked together in brigades and phalanxes, the measure of success was a collective matter. Gulag officials commented upon this phenomenon, encouraging group, rather than individual, measurements of work so as to facilitate a “collective psychology” that was in line with Soviet ideology.\textsuperscript{22} This emphasis on group responsibility also had a secondary, pragmatic function: it made it virtually impossible for prisoners to refuse to work. If a prisoner shirks their work duty and holds up the brigade, he will, in theory, eventually

\textsuperscript{19} «Путь переделки – суровой и жесткий путь. Подчинение железной дисциплине лагерей…» Ibid, 36.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 35.
\textsuperscript{22} Jakobson, 96.
become ashamed regarding his behavior as others work diligently alongside him. Eventually, this guilt will coerce even the laziest of prisoners into adopting a work ethic.\textsuperscript{23} Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn discusses the system in his landmark Gulag novella, \textit{One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich (Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha, 1959)}:

> To outsmart you they thought up the work squad—but not a work squad like in freedom, where Ivan Ivanych receives his separate pay and Petr Petrovich receives his separate pay. In the camps the brigade was arranged such that it was not the administration that hurried along prisoners, but rather the prisoners hurried along each other. It was like this: either you all got a bit extra or you all croaked. You’re not working, you bastard—because of you I will be hungry? Put your guts into it, slob.\textsuperscript{24}

The work-for-food system institutionalized cruelty in the Gulag, making survival nearly impossible for the malnourished or feeble, who found themselves in an inescapable, deadly circle.

Records of work-fulfillment percentages were documented publicly on chalkboards, either on the \textit{chernaia doska} (black board of disgrace) or the \textit{krasnaia doska} (red board of achievement) and graphic diagrams around the Canal served as a constant reminder of the inherent shame in sub-par labor output. Prisoners formed work brigades (or \textit{brigady}, smaller groups with 25-30 members) and phalanxes (or \textit{falangi}, larger groups consisting of 250-300 prisoners), and these teams competed actively, trying to outdo one another's norm-fulfillment.

\textsuperscript{23} I. L. Averbakh, 52.
percentages, with the standard norm unearthing as 2.5 cubic meters of rock per day.\textsuperscript{25} The creation of work collectives were encouraged strongly by the authorities; however, prisoners sentenced under article 58 (counter-revolutionary crimes) were in theory not allowed to participate in these groups, demonstrating the predilection for criminal prisoners and most likely augmenting the animosity between the two groups.\textsuperscript{26} The importance of collective work and its supposed positive effects as demonstrated at the White Sea-Baltic Canal set an example for future projects, influencing the work system developed at the Moscow-Volga Canal.\textsuperscript{27} Workers, therefore, had multiple incentives for over-fulfilling their norms: increased food rations, monetary bonuses, and shortened prison terms (the most powerful of all motivations).\textsuperscript{28}

\textit{Perekovka} was not a peaceful process. It was a violent, aggressive experiment in human transformation where a past life was annihilated to accommodate a new one; the re-forging story of the prisoner Rottenberg in the collectively-written Belomor volume \textit{History of the Construction} (\textit{Istoriia stroitel'stva}) is defined in medical terms, “Now we will try a new surgery with the knife, that is, to cut the tissue of the surface.”\textsuperscript{29} In Maksim Gor'kii’s introduction to this all-important monograph regarding the Canal’s construction, he claims that he fights “not to kill as the bourgeoisie does, but rather to resurrect laboring humankind into a new life, and I will kill only when there is no longer the possibility to blot out man’s former habits of feeding on the flesh and blood of people.”\textsuperscript{30} Not only is violence an inherent component of the re-forging process, but prisoners may be met with violence if they do not subject themselves to the demands

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\textsuperscript{25} A. I. Kokurin and Iu. N. Morkurov, eds., \textit{Stalinskie stroiki GULAGA 1930-1953} (Moscow: Materik, 2005), 34.
\textsuperscript{27} I. L. Averbakh, 72.
\textsuperscript{28} «Теперь попробуем ножом хирурга, так сказать, разрезать ткань поверхности.» L. Averbakh, S. Firin, and M. Gor’kii, eds., \textit{Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Kanal imeni Stalina: Istoriia stroitel'stva} (OGIZ, 1934), 523.
\textsuperscript{29} «Я борюсь не для того, чтобы убить, как это делает буржуазия, а для того, чтоб воскресить трудовое человечество к новой жизни, я убиваю только тогда, когда уже нет возможности вытравить из человека его древнюю привычку питаться плотью и кровью людей.» Ibid, 12.
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of *perekovka*. A human being, in turn, is physical matter that can be melded and shaped or otherwise tossed away, “It is immeasurably more difficult to refine human raw material than wood, stone, or metal.”\(^{31}\) It is acknowledged, however, that the process is not an easy one, nor is it simple to describe: “There is not a supply of words sufficient for the various and complicated processes of re-forging and its feeling, senses, and habits.”\(^{32}\)

The word *perekovka*, in its very morphological structure, emphasizes the notion of remaking or redoing. At Stalin’s White Sea-Baltic Canal, everything would be made anew: geography, industry, nature, economy, country, culture, and, of course, people. People were built parallel the construction of the Canal, and both projects were equally important.\(^{33}\) At the Canal, the administration could make people into honest Soviet citizens just as easily as they could make them into cement mixers, claims the *History of the Construction*.\(^{34}\) The frequent use of the prefix “pere-” reflects this near obsession with reconstruction. Since this prefix often refers to the repetition of some action with a better completion as the outcome, the idea of *perekovka* is echoed literally thousands of times while being applied to all different words and situations in the *History of the Construction*: *perestroit’* (to rebuild), *pererozhdenie* (re-birth), *perezhit’* (to survive), *perereshat’* (to change one’s mind), “rabota ikh pereuchit” (work will re-teach, train them), *perevypolnenie* (overfulfillment), *peredumat’* (to change one’s mind), *perechuvstvovat’* (to experience), *pereshchegoliat’* (to outflaunt); the list could go on and on.\(^{35}\) The emphasis on remaking—with the prefix *pere*- as its vehicle—is so strong that there is an overall sense of forward motion in the book as a whole. Everything is in the process of being re-done and re-made, and it is not simply to make the same object or perform the same action over

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\(^{31}\) «Человеческое сырье обрабатывается неизмеримо труднее, чем дерево, камень, металл.» Ibid, 609.

\(^{32}\) Ibid, 14.

\(^{33}\) Ibid, 180.

\(^{34}\) Ibid, 177.

\(^{35}\) Ibid, 185, 187, 197, 231, 132, 263, 197, 197, 390, 390.
again; rather, it is to do it better. Not surprisingly, some of the most ideologically-charged chapters of the *History of the Construction* contain the most *pere-* prefixed words: “Chekists,” “Canal Army Soldiers,” and “Crush the Class Enemy” are a few examples. In this new society, the old life—social customs, historical facts, class divisions, criminal life, language, politics—must be destroyed violently in order to accommodate the new. Birth and death are the defining moments of any experience; they are the bookends of life, rich in ritualistic meaning. In addition, the presence of death and re-birth within the context of *perekovka* ritualizes the phenomenon, since the majority of rituals cluster around these two foundational life events. In turn, *perekovka* in some ways resembled an initiation rite; in initiation ceremonies, as the anthropologist Mircea Eliade notes, the old must be destroyed in order to be created anew, with the initiation process allowing one to grasp a positive aspect within death itself.36

*Perekovka*, with its goal of the “production” of new people, injects an industrial emphasis into the process of re-forging prisoners—an entirely appropriate tone, given the concentration on manufacturing during Stalin’s first Five-Year Plan. One prisoner likens the Canal to a “life factory” (*fabrika zhizni*), where people are remade like so many products on a conveyor belt—albeit in a highly unusual way: “Yes, strange, unusual transformations are made here. Miraculous transformations, nothing about which you could even find in fairy tales.”37 Despite the technical association inherent in *perekovka* as an industrial, metallic procedure, texts often portray the process as organic in order to strengthen its claim to veracity; its supposedly spontaneous occurrence makes it seem like a natural phenomenon.38 The attempt to make

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37 “Да, странные, необычайные превращения творятся здесь. Чудесные превращения, о которых даже в сказках ничего не найдешь.” RGALI, f. 1885, op. 33, d. 3, l. 285.
initiation rites seem organic is quite common in general, even though the new birth is anything but natural, instead representing a societal, cultural construction. In the irrevocably changed environment where nature is plundered for its bounty and people are transformed for their psyches, the Soviet Union proclaims itself the victor in the “war against nature,” and in the process a new version of nature is created, which has its own laws, rules, and processes.

The process is so complete and totalizing that the “new” person might not recognize the “old,” symbolizing the utter finality of the transformation, “The engineer Magnitov thought about the old engineer Magnitov—for him this man was already a stranger.” The raw, physical acts of death and birth, in turn, were both inherent components of re-forging. Perekovka also reveals the essential role that autobiography plays in the cultural narratives about the Canal; in order to articulate one’s new life and devotion, it was necessary to recall where you came from and who you used to be. Just as the map could assess change in landscape and geography, the material text of the autobiography could document the change in a human being, a change that is itself understood spatially, in terms of a specified put'. The phenomenon echoed the construction of the Canal itself; like “working the rough stone,” building the person is a process that happens over time, “in the creation of great new projects the new great man is created.”

Given the supposedly limitless potential of perekovka, the Canal project was intended to be more than a pedagogical experience and much more than merely a collection of locks, dams, and dikes—instead, it represented life itself, a metaphorical and utopian homeland in which all

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39 Eliade, xiv.
40 L. Averbakh, S. Firin, and M. Gor’kii, eds., 542.
41 This turn of phrase emerges from the Freemason movement that spread rapidly in eighteenth-century Russia and asserts that people could smooth the roughness of their passions just as a stone setter hews rock. For more on this subject, see Thomas Smith, Working the Rough Stone: Freemasonry and Society in Eighteenth-Century Russia (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois UP, 1999).
42 «В творчестве новых великих дел создается новый великий человек.» L. Averbakh, S. Firin, and M. Gor’kii, eds., 342. Note also that the Russian word tvorchestvo used here also refers to creativity as well as creation, beautifully capturing the artistic-industrial hybridity inherent in the canal’s construction.
notions of subjectivity were entirely dissolved. As the prisoner Vasilii Fedorovich Atiasov explained in his autobiography, “I myself have a wife and four children and I once thought about them [but now] I’m happy to give everything to my beloved BMS, it is our pride, our beauty. And here in this rock, in this water, I found my happiness, my pathway to life.” In a quasi-religious move, Atiasov was able to surrender all previous allegiances in glorious adoration of the canal, an appreciation that he was able to come to by way of a distinct path, or *putevka*.

*Path to Perekovka as Socialist Realist Master Plot*

The New Man (*novyi chelovek*) is one of the key ideological concepts under Stalin, and the creation of this omnipotent Soviet being shares many qualities with the re-forged prisoner at the camp site: both abjure their past in order to adopt a brighter future, both come to this realization through “correct” ideological training and education, and both are used as a metaphor for the overall greatness and reformability of the Soviet Union itself as a country. The creation of the New Man exemplifies the key tenets of socialist realism’s master plot, where an unreformed, uninitiated main character comes to profess a new, moralistic way of life given the help of a tutor or trainer, fulfilling the mythical narrative of the mentor-disciple dyad. This is much like the process of *perekovka* at the White Sea-Baltic Canal. A newly arrived, often untrained, prisoner might refuse to work or participate, setting up the task. The *vospitatel’* acts as the mentor, guiding the prisoner along the path of reformation. While there may be setbacks

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43 BMS is an acronym for the Canal construction, *Belomorstroi*.
44 “Я сам имею жену, 4 детей, и я про них некогда думать [...] Да, я же все отдам за любимый БМС, это наша гордость, наша краса. Я здесь в этой скале, в этом плавуне нашел свое счастье, путевку в жизнь.” GARF, f. 7952, op. 7, d. 30, l. 9.
45 Atiasov’s statement echoes the previously-discussed phenomenon of *besprizornye*, where allegiance to the state was substituted for familial love. For a further treatment of this topic, see Alan M. Ball, *Now My Soul Is Hardened: Abandoned Children in Soviet Russia 1918-1930* (Berkeley: U California P, 1994). Interestingly, the phrase Atiasov uses to describe his transformative trajectory, “putevka v zhizn’,” is identical to the name of Nikolai Ekk’s 1931 film in which young delinquents are brought to a special camp in order to be reformed (*Putevka v zhizn’, Road to Life*). See also the earlier discussion of romantic love for the Canal project.
47 Clark uses this terminology in her breakdown of the socialist realist master plot, 257.
along the way, eventually a symbolic initiation occurs. This kind of narrative forms the key structure of most Belomorkanal autobiographies, texts that were written mainly in the summer of 1933, a full year before the formal declaration of socialist realism as official literary method at the August 1934 First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers.

The stress on the life story in prisoner works about the Canal also has a direct parallel with the biographical pattern evident in socialist realism after 1932.\(^48\) The prevalence of the biographical mode stems in part from the importance of the “positive hero” as one of the most recognizable features of socialist realism. The positive hero, emblematic of Bolshevik ideals, is often so generic and featureless so as to appear not as an individual but more as hagiography.\(^49\) Such is also the case with the re-forged prisoner: newly devoted and dramatically transformed, he is no longer discernible from the other convicts around him. Following the religious motif, the re-forging narratives are ritualized and repetitive, becoming a type of conversion narrative. Prisoners perform selfhood in an attempt to assure their survival, and through this performance Soviet propaganda is internalized while most evidence of individuality is dissolved. Paradoxically, however, in order to erase this subjectivity, prisoners must first narrate the specific details of their past lives in their autobiographies.\(^50\)

The short story “Karas',” by the prisoner A. K. Ivanov, is a productive example of a conversion narrative; although it is not written as an autobiographical submission, it follows the same pattern of a re-forging narrative and addresses important aspects of subjectivity. The title itself, which means a “wide-hipped woman” in criminal slang,\(^51\) is a klichka (nickname) for the main character and represents his position within the criminal world (i.e., feminized and

\(^48\) Clark, The Soviet Novel, 45.
\(^49\) Ibid, 47.
\(^50\) This process could also be likened to the performance of last rites, a final confession of one’s soul. In both instances, a previous way of life—or life itself—is abolished to make possible a higher, more ideological existence.
\(^51\) Vladimir Shlyakhov and Eve Adler, eds., Russian Slang and Colloquial Expressions (NY: Barron’s, 1999), 104.
subservient). Interestingly, the prisoner who submitted the story first wrote it in the third person, saying “he” (on) did this or that, but subsequently changed the third-person to first-person, scribbling out the previous pronouns in what was perhaps an attempt to render the story more realistic and personal, as if it were a true life story. Similarly, while the story is signed by A. K. Ivanov, the name “Karas’” is scribbled more hastily next to his own real name, perhaps another last-minute effort to make the story appear as autobiography.

This story has many of the characteristic features of the re-forging narrative. Most important is the role played by the vospitatel’ (educator), who is likened to a father figure, “I listened attentively to the educator’s speech. It seemed to me as if the educator was speaking to me like my father who was killed in the war.” While the physical speech of the reformer-educator frequently represents the first stage in the transformation, the second could come at night, during sleep or dreams, when the ideas spoken earlier have the opportunity to coalesce and take hold. Some prisoners also imagine the dreams of their loved ones at home; in his diary, one prisoner pictures his wife Olia dreaming about her drunken, wild husband with a knife in his hands, and he tries to assure her that this really is just a dream—he is no longer a murderous maniac but is reading books and sitting in a Lenin Corner. Dreams here are a schematic re-interpretation of the, a way of acknowledging memories before transcending them.

52 «Внимательно слушом я речь воспитателя. Мне казалось, что воспитатель говорит мне мой отец тоже погиб на войне.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 65.
53 The importance of dialogue in the conversion of prisoners, it should be noted, also highlights the important role of oral phenomena (like songs and music) at the Belomorkanal.
54 Another example of the transformative power of dreams occurs in the short story “Bura,” where the main character, during his “sleepless” (bezsonnye) nights, remembers all of his past crimes and criminal life in general, thinking about how all his friends had forgotten him. Books, newspapers, and education facilitate his transformation, making it appropriate that he would define his conversion in enlightenment terms, that he went “from the darkness to the light,” (iz mraka k svetu). RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 119-23.
55 «Оля наверное проснулась и опять перед ее глазами встает пьяный с ножом в руках и звериными глазами Прокофий Федорович. Нет Оля — это твое воображение. Я сижу в Ленинском уголке и читаю книги.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 38, l. 30.
56 In addition to the function of facilitating perekovka and life examination, dreams also act as an escape from the prisoner’s everyday reality, a realm in which one is truly free.
could not fall asleep the night after his conversation with the vospitatel', and he reviews his life history, in particular his difficult familial situation; “My thoughts sped away far into the past, remembering my father who did not return from the war. They killed him. I was seven years old. Finding out about the death of my father, my mother cried loudly. She also died in 1917.”

Like so many other prisoners at the Belomorkanal, Karas' is an orphan and finds a substitute family in his re-educator and in the ethos of the state. In order to accomplish this conversion, the past life must be confronted and remembered before being forgotten; Karas' wakes up the next day after his prophetic dream and decides to begin working. In the symbolic finale of the story, the character loses his old nickname of “Karas’” and now everyone calls him by his full name, Aleksei Ivanovich (very similar to the prisoner’s real name of A. K. Ivanov), in an effort to recognize his new-found appreciation for a dignified, laboring lifestyle.

The prisoner Mikahil Koldobenko ends his autobiographical submission with a statement in all capitals, claiming this is “how the steel was tempered” before signing his name. Such a pronouncement immediately brings to mind the identically-titled socialist-realist classic by Nikolai Ostrovskii *How the Steel Was Tempered (Kak zakalialas' stal'),* 1932-1934, which—significantly—was published as a model socialist-realist work after Koldobenko wrote his autobiography, confirming how texts produced at the White Sea-Baltic Canal at times seem to anticipate what will become popular outside the camp confines. In another parallel with a socialist-realist classic, the prisoner Fillipp Iakovlevich Kabanenko (who interestingly refers to himself as “comrade” rather than “canal-army soldier,” the officially accepted term at the

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57 «Крепко запала мне в голову речь воспитателя. Далеко в прошлое [уносилась] мысль моя. Вспомя я отца своего, который не вернулся с войны. Убили его. Мне было 7 лет. Узнав о смерти отца, громко плакала мать. В 1917 г. умерла и она.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 65.
58 Ibid, l. 66.
59 «Так закалилась сталь,» Ibid.
camp\textsuperscript{60}) recalls how he injured both his legs at the work site and had to be carried by his brigade, and despite not healing well, insists on continuing to work with his bandaged legs.\textsuperscript{61} This autobiographical detail echoes Boris Polevoi’s socialist-realist novel \textit{Story about a Real Man} (\textit{Povest’ o nastoiashchem cheloveke}, 1946), which concerns the plight of a Soviet pilot who, despite losing both his legs, still flew in service to his country.

The presence of socialist realist elements of the master plot in these criminal narratives demonstrates two central thematic undercurrents: the state as substitute family and the process of \textit{perekovka} as a quasi-religious phenomenon. Interestingly, many of the nuances of these characteristics also hold true for the \textit{put'} of \textit{perekovka} in the reverse direction: the fall into the criminal world, where the figure of a thieving mentor appears more vivid and durable.

\textit{The Inverse Trajectory of Perekovka}

The prisoner autobiography by Gigorii Ivanovich Koshelev, entitled “My Path” (\textit{Moi put‘}) demonstrates colorfully how the road to crime can mirror the road to socialist labor. As is very common, familial problems serve as the generator of a life of crime for Koshelev: his father went to war in 1914 and his mother subsequently died of hunger, leaving him to search the streets, dirty and cold, for nourishment.\textsuperscript{62} He soon meets and befriends Vas'ka-Svistun (“Vaska the Whistler,” or, in slang, “Vaska the Liar”), a vodka-drinking criminal, and asks him how he is able to procure so much food and drink. Enamored by Vas'ka’s criminal lifestyle and the luxuries it affords, he “decides to start upon this path” himself.\textsuperscript{63} It is significant here that the author uses the same—and very loaded—term in Russian for the pathway that brings him down

\textsuperscript{60} The issue of how to address prisoners is discussed at length in the \textit{History of the Construction} (see the chapter entitled “Kanaloarmeytsy”). While it was decided that “prisoner” was too ignominious a term for the incarcerated at the Belomokanal, is was also unthinkable to call them comrades—and so a compromise was struck: \textit{kanaloarmeyts} (canal-army-soldier).

\textsuperscript{61} GARF, f. 7952, d. 7, op. 30, l. 133.

\textsuperscript{62} The ubiquity of family problems in criminal autobiographies perhaps affords a certain appeal to the notion that the state could serve as a substitute for biological relatives.

\textsuperscript{63}“Что решил вступить на этот путь,” RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 38, l. 105.
to a life of crime as well as the pathway that brings him to a life of honest labor: put'. It is possible, in turn, to see Vas'ka-Svistun as a sort of inverse vospitatel'; a teacher or reformer who educates him about a life of stealing rather than a life of labor and also changes his world and habits, albeit in the opposite way.

Koshelev travels from city to city, picking up additional nicknames and additional jail time along the way. While he at first follows Vas'ka-Svistun like a devoted protégé, he eventually loses track of him. In 1929, he is sent to Solovki, where he still refuses to give up his old ways and still dreams of his former friend and father figure, “the whole time traveling in the train I was playing cards and thinking about the past, drunken, merry days, about Vas'ka Svistun, dreaming about somehow running away and meeting with Vas'ka once again to start thieving.”

Then, the unexpected happens—one day Koshelev meets his pal Vas'ka on the camp site but barely recognizes him; Vas'ka is now the head of a shock-worker brigade, literate and cultured. Although Vas'ka continually tries to convince his friend to change to a working lifestyle, Koshelev does not want to hear about it, and he eventually begins avoiding his former partner-in-crime. Vas'ka may have served as his vospitatel' for the criminal world, but he does not play this role in Koshelev’s reverse trajectory—it is not a reformer that eventually convinces Koshelev to adopt a life of labor, but rather the peer pressure of his fellow prisoners:

And so there was a despicable attitude against me. In the kitchen they opened the windows and hung loafers, they started to write my name on the black board of shame and in the wall newspapers, spreading it throughout the entire camp, through the radio and paper that I am a loafer, an idler, wherever I went everyone began laughing and making fun of me. I was alone in the company and every day

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64 «Я ехал в поезде всю дорогу играл в карты вспоминал о прошлых пьяных веселых днях о Васке Свистуне мечтал как бы сбежать и вновь встретиться с Ваской и начать воровать.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 38, l. 107.
the educator (vospitatel') Zarybaev led discussions, talking about the free, Soviet country and how it was impossible not to work living in the USSR.65

This recollection is particularly revealing, because it suggests how massive the Panopticon of propaganda was at the White Sea-Baltic Canal. In anticipation of what was to occur (or was already occurring) in the country as a whole, the camp site was a completely wired, virtual media frenzy where information was controlled and disseminated in particularly incriminating ways against those who did not fall in line. Although the vospitatel' was omnipresent, more often than not shame and perennial teasing seemed to be the method—one that was truly successful—in convincing recalcitrant prisoners to begin working.

While Koshelev does eventually begin working and reading newspapers, becoming literate, he claims merely that he “got used to the educator” (ia privyk k vospitateliiu) and not that he was truly swayed by him. When he sees Vas'ka again, the former criminal is being freed early as one of the best shock-workers; Vas'ka later writes his friend that he is now working on the Moscow-Kurskii railroad line as a conductor. Vas'ka, therefore, exchanged his metaphorical put' for a literal one, leaving behind the pathway to crime to follow the more entrenched, straight path of the railroad tracks.66 Koshelev ends his autobiography by thanking his comrades for putting him on the proper put', one that no longer follows crime but instead a life of work. This emphasis on the pathway traveled not only likens the autobiography to a religious pilgrimage or vision of a utopian landscape, in which a prescribed route must be followed in order to arrive in an idealized world.

65 «Но как подло все было настроение против меня. На кухне открыли окно лодырь вывесели меня на черную доску стали писать в стенгазету передавали на весь лагерь через радио газету что я лодырь и филон куда я не пойду все надо мной стали смеяться все против меня. Я одинок в роте ежедневно воспитатель Зарыбаев проводил беседы рассказывал о свободной советской стране и почему нельзя не работать живя в СССР.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 38, l. 108.
66 In Russian, a railroad engineer is not a worker on a train; rather, he is a puteets, one whose profession stems from the idea of put'.
Like Koshelev, the prisoner Orest Valer'ianovich Vziaemskii falls under the influence of a criminal-world educator, Semen, and Vziaemskii highlights the allure inherent in a life of crime in his description of Semen:

I have to say the people who are used to a more refined life of the mind are worse off in terms of their personal qualities than people who are closer to life, who address danger as a trade. Maybe to charge them is not possible, because for them, as Semen said, life seems vapid if they are not exposed to danger. I advised him to become a pilot, or that he should understand the construction’s fervor. He finished a ton of courses, he was a tractor driver, he was in Pioneer camp, but he always returned to the dangerous life. He remains one of the brightest of all my memories.67

Semen, unlike Vas'ka, cannot be re-forged even though he might try to re-educate himself. Almost like a drug user, he is addicted to the life of crime, and Vziaemskii is entranced by his colorful life more so than he could be by any vospitatel' preaching about socialist labor.

The autobiography of the aforementioned prisoner Mikhail Koldobenko is another re-forging tale that concentrates more on the pathway to the criminal world than the road to socialism, its narrative offering an interesting glimpse into the psychology of crime. Born in 1901, Koldobenko has memories of growing up with his drunk father whose life advice (in addition to quitting school) consisted of: “You struggle really hard—like fish beating against the

67«Нужно сказать, что люди, которые привыкли к более утонченной умственной жизни, в отношении личных качеств ниже, чем люди, которые ближе к жизни, которые обращаются с опасностью как с ремеслом. Может быть их и обвинять в этом нельзя, а им, как говорил Семен, жизнь кажется пресной, если они не подвергаются опасности. Я ему советовал быть летчиком, или он должен был бы понять пафос стройки. Он кончил массу курсов, был и трактористом, был и в пионерском лагере, но возвращался всегда к опасной жизни. Он является одним из наиболее ярких моих воспоминаний.» GARF, f. 7952, op. 7, d. 30, l. 58.
ice—but still you have nothing to eat. But they suck your blood like spiders.” Koldobenko begins working at the age of sixteen in a factory, and when World War I breaks out he begins to feel like a real man; he gets married, he is not afraid of death, and he loves to work. With the sudden death of his wife in childbirth, however, his life falls apart: “right away life snapped […] and so stretched on the boring, gray days.” He sees death everywhere and is solely responsible for his young daughter; eventually he takes to drink. When he marries again, his second wife turns out to be a “meshchanka” (a member of the petty bourgeoisie, or someone of narrow tastes and interests) who does not like to work, loves to go out, and has a fondness for sweets. When she suggests to him that they could wound the child with a needle in the top of the head, causing her to die without anyone noticing, he decides to leave her, finds a third wife, and gives up drinking for a year. Yet in the end, it is his alcoholism that leads to imprisonment—after a verbal, then physical, fight with a friend at the Logashev restaurant, he is sent to the White Sea-Baltic Canal.

While we have already seen examples of the psychological and adrenaline pull towards a life of crime, Koldobenko’s road to prison is related directly to alcohol. At the camp site, he claims to be captured by the idea of physical work, which is the best way for him to address his drunkenness, “Prison is a good school for drunkards. It turns them towards a new life […] I regret only one thing: that I landed late in prison, thank you Soviet power for returning me to life. Thank you to the camps of the OGPU for its humanitarian approach to criminals.” In this surprisingly-worded oath of allegiance, Koldobenko reinforces the notion of perekovka as a

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68 «Бьешься как рыба об лед, а жрать нечего. А они как пауки кровь сосут.» RGALI, f. 1885, d. 3, op. 38, l. 70.
69 «И вот вам сразу порвалась жизнь [...] Потянулись скучные серье дни.» Ibid, l. 72.
70 «Лагеря это хорошая школа для пьяниц. Она их возвращает к новой жизни [...] Жалею одно: поздно попал в лагерь, спасибо Советской Власти что она меня возвратила к жизни. Спасибо лагерям ОГПУ за ее гуманный к преступникам подход.» RGALI, f. 1885, d. 3, op. 38, l. 73.
successful way to refashion prisoners and also frames his transformation in pedagogical terms, calling the prison a “school.” In these inverse trajectories of *perekovka*, the role of guide or mentor and the notion of pathway remain essential elements, once again underscoring a pseudo-religious tone to the tales. Narratives in which a criminal mentor plays an essential role seem to downplay the role of the official *vospitatel’*, with peer pressure from other prisoners emerging as a more convincing call to labor.

_Violating the Norm: Subversive Criminal Narratives_

Although most of these criminal autobiographies follow the formula of an initial stage of laziness; a second stage of contemplation (whether through the *vospitatel’*, reflection on earlier life, prophetic dreams, or intimidation by fellow prisoners); and a final stage of abandoning the past and becoming a productive worker, there are also narratives that violate this pattern to varying degrees. There are prisoner autobiographies in which there is no admission of guilt and no particular praise of the Soviet system, although such examples are rare, since these narratives all passed through the administration’s hands. One such example is the autobiography of Mikhail Aleksandrovich Polokhin, a criminal who practiced the seasonal work of stealing motorcycles and bicycles for three years before switching to thieving on railroad cars. Polokhin seems to take pride in his criminal life; he describes his various non-legal professions with flair, explaining precisely the details of his criminal maneuverings. He has the criminal nickname “Tashkent,” and he moves to various cities before finally being caught stealing a large sum of money and sent to Povenets, where part of the Belomorkanal construction is located. Included in his narrative is no allegiance to the Soviet state, no description of re-forging, but rather only his success in securing false documents. With these documents, he goes into the city of Povenets every day instead of working at the camp site and attempts to continue his former
vocation, this time stealing from suitcases. He is well-dressed and well-fed for being in a prison camp, asserting he lacks nothing at the camp site. He claims the authorities are often entirely unapprised of the activities at the work site, in an unorthodox description of the administrative organization:

The monitor and company apparently did not know who and how many people they had, and where to find these people. They are either sleeping or working. In short, an extremely advantageous situation was created for loafers and pretenders. The loafers went wherever they pleased, especially those who were the smartest. But it wasn’t even necessary to be particularly smart. And so I hung around for more than a month, but in the end I got sick of the idle life.71

It is utter boredom—and not a shock-worker mentality or allegiance to the Soviet state—that ultimately pushes Polokhin to form a work collective called “The Pathway to Socialism” (Put' k sotsializmu), a name that seems incongruous with Polokhin’s laziness and distaste for work. Despite Polokhin’s indifferent attitude, the all-important component of pathway remains, demonstrating how essential this element was in cultural narratives regarding the Canal. In both utopian texts and travel narratives (including those of religious pilgrimage) the trope of the road is a vital element; in order to describe a fantastical, alternate reality or a literal one, you must explain how to arrive there. Even biographies that seem to violate the norm, therefore, still contain important ideological motifs central to the Canal’s construction.

Rather than mere disinterest or boredom, other prisoners criticize the regime for its lack of fairness. Iosima Korneevich Zhitkov claims that he received fewer privileges than his friend,
who had worked less than he did. He goes on to assert that the recent atmosphere on the Canal was negative because the Party was not strong enough. Cryptically, he says, “But that is all I can write,” giving the reader a sense that there is more criticism he would like to air (the unexplained ellipses in his text also allude to this possibility), but he is simply not free to.\footnote{72 «Последнее время было плохо потому что партии не хватало. Ну и все что я мог написать.» GARF, f. 7952, op. 7, d. 30, l.112.} Yet despite these criticisms, the prisoner does not demonstrate any clear anti-Soviet tendencies, instead writing of his desire for better Party organization.

Although not as long or descriptive as Polokhin’s text, other prisoner autobiographies do refute the supposed transformational potential of \textit{perekovka}. The prisoner Fedor Alekseevich Tupikov declares in his text that he is not guilty and had never committed any crime. Although he claims he learned many things in prison, including how to read, he swears no allegiance to the Belomorkanal project. There is no mention of \textit{udarnichestvo}, although he does write that he would like to become part of the workers’ family.\footnote{73 RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 38, l. 304.} While not necessarily declaring their innocence, other prisoners use their autobiographies to point out shortcomings on the Canal: “dampness in the barracks, the wind blowing through cracks, even no place to dry your foot wrappings on occasion,” and only since they were young and their “blood is boiling” could they withstand such conditions.\footnote{74 «Сырость в бараке, нередко дул ветер через щели, даже бывало портянок негде было высушить […] кровь кипит.» GARF, f. 7952, op. 7, d. 30, l. 19.} The initial paucity of the cultural environment also becomes apparent, even if the situation is improved as the Canal is constructed:

All of this work went on in very difficult conditions, there was no cultural life and not even any promises of it. The club corner was just beginning to be built […] So I started to go to the [reading] corner, where they had some books, magazines, newspapers. I was especially interested in questions concerning the international
situation, because in our division and camp there were gossips, and an out-and-out counter-revolution spread around rumors that Japan had taken the Baikal and now there is supposedly some secret council or congress that is discussing something. I looked upon all this with suspicion, and I wanted to report it, but I didn’t see such power to whom to report; despite the fact that I’m in the camps of the OGPU, at our work point the KVCh worked weakly. The whole time I met educators from the newspaper only twice, arguing at meetings, but they did not lead a conversation among the company. And they whispered in different ways. All of this annoyed me, and I often broke in with protests, and they answered me, so, you need more, you’re probably a communist. I did not hide the latter, I told them everything that was said about Baikal and Japan was a lie. After a while such incidents did not occur.

This passage illuminates several different aspects of life at the Canal, including hardship, gossip, and the attempt to self-aggrandize, most likely in the interest of protecting oneself politically.

First of all, this passage’s author, Abram Gavrilovich Bessonov, seems unabashed in his

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75 This is an acronym for the Kul'turno-vospitatel'naja chast', or cultural-educational division, which is an organizational sub-division of the KVO, or Kul'turno-vospitatel'nyi otdel, or cultural-educational department.
76 «Вся эта работа происходит в очень трудных условиях, нет культурной жизни и нет даже никаких посул. Уголок для клуба только что начинал строиться и сентябрь кое-как функционировал. Тут я стал ходить в уголок, где была кое-какая литература, журналы, газеты. Меня особенно интересовали вопросы международного положения, т. к. у нас в роте и в лагерях были шептуны, махровая контрреволюция разносила слухи, что Япония забрала Байкал и сейчас якобы идет какой-то тайный совет, съезд, который что-то обсуждает. На все это я смотрел с подозрением, так хотелось кому-то заявить, но такой силы не вижу, несмотря на то, что находясь в лагерях ОГПУ, КВЧ на нашем пункте работает слабо. За все время я встретил два раза воспитателей то ругающих газетой [sic] на собраниях, но бесед среди рот не велось. А шипели на разные лады. Все это нервировало меня, я часто выступал протестами, а мне отвечали: а тебе что – больше надо, наверно коммунист. Последнего я не скрывал, заявлял, что все, что говорится про Байкал и Японию, забрала его – это ложь. Через некоторые [sic] время в роте таких явлений не стало.» GARF, f. 7952, op. 7, d. 30, l. 25.
77 This last name, literally meaning “sleepless” in Russian, could very well be a pseudonym. This seems all the more likely given his potentially controversial narrative about life at the Canal. His choice of surnames, if it is indeed assumed, relates back to the earlier discussion of sleep and dreams on the Canal, the lack of which caused constant difficulties and the presence of which assured an escape from the harsh reality of camp life.
criticism of cultural life at the Canal; although it did exist, it is not as productive or as thorough as other prisoners may make it out to seem. In addition, Bessonov acknowledges the existence of gossip and whisperers at the Canal\textsuperscript{78} as well as the ideological and moral pressure to squeal on those who do not fall into line, even when no one is looking or paying attention. In many ways, his narrative is quite contradictory; at once trying to swear allegiance to Soviet power even as he is not being treated properly, simultaneously interested in international news and gossip and trying to refute it. The end to his story, nevertheless, is a “happy” one—he himself becomes a vospitatel’ and helps to publish wall newspapers. Although Tupikov and Bessonov both offer criticism of the Soviet regime, they ultimately still would like to become members of its utopian reality.

Conclusion: Navigating the Incongruities of Soviet Reality

While one of the aims of this article has been to outline the (ironic) parallels between a fall into a life of crime and a lift into a socialist reality, certain incompatibilities remain. The role of the criminal mentor is often more pronounced and durable than its vospitatel’ counterpart, who is not necessarily always responsible for a criminal’s re-forging. Often the peer pressure of other prisoners working in the brigade or the allure of specific incentives (like a shortened prison term) is more successful than the typical educator’s speech. There are also inconsistencies on schematic, symbolic planes. In what is a ritualistic, repetitive act, elements of the personal and individual become magnified; in what is an atheist country quasi-religious conversion narratives are promoted; in what is a forced-labor Gulag camp, lax policies and disobedience abound and often remain unnoticed.

\textsuperscript{78} The prisoner Iurii Margolin, who served time at the White Sea-Baltic Canal after its completion, also notes the impossibility of keeping secrets in prison: «В лагере нет ни одиночества, ни возможности охранить надолго секреты.» Margolin, 139.
In the face of these divergent characteristics, one unifying thread remains: the put’, or path, of transformation. The names alone of various work brigades at the Canal make this evident: “The Path to Correction” (Put’k ispravleniiu), “The Path to Studies” (Put’k uchebe), “The Pathway to Socialism” (Put’k sotsializmu), and so on. Perekovka, as well as its inverse voyage towards the criminal world, was not a spontaneous occurrence. It was something that happened over time and, more importantly, was linked with a sense of physical motion towards a defined goal, rendering the phenomenon as a type of pilgrimage. While there may be a defined set of features accompanying a pilgrimage, each pilgrim participates in the voyage in an individualized way, similar to the criminals performing perekovka at the Belomorkanal.

The study of Soviet culture has witnessed a recent preoccupation with topography, as demonstrated by numerous scholars: “Understanding Sovietness […] means understanding the space of Sovietness”; “The very history of Russia is the otherness of its geography”; “[The Soviet Union] was a country in which […] the notion of space […] was imbued with remarkable ideological prominence.” The success of the New Man, therefore, was in some ways dependent on his ability to navigate the Soviet landscape, whether metaphorically or literally. While the White-Baltic Sea Canal intended to set prisoners on a different path towards life, the impetus behind the project’s very construction stemmed from the more pragmatic desire to connect seas, to create a pathway of water. The put’ is both figurative and factual. Despite

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79 Pilgrimage Studies as a discipline has witnessed a recent shift from concentrating on the fixed characteristics of pilgrimages as a whole to the particular features of an individual pilgrim’s experience. See, for example: Marysia Galbraith “On the Way to Częstochowa: Rhetoric and Experience on a Polish Pilgrimage,” Anthropological Quarterly 73 (April 2000): 61-73.


82 Eric Naiman, Introduction, The Landscape of Stalinism, xi.
divergent descriptions in prisoner narratives as well as the debatable “success” of *perekovka*, one element remains consistent—the primacy of the pathway.