Resistance and the Everyday: Reconsidering the Vorkuta Prisoner Strike of 1953
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In late July and early August 1953, one of the most remarkable events in the history of the Gulag took place. Over 15,000 prisoners, nearly half of the population of Rechlag [речной лагерь, "river camp"], went on strike to demand improvements in their living conditions and a visit from a representative of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. One of a handful of "special camps" established in 1948-49 to hold the Soviet Union's most dangerous prisoners,[1] Rechlag was located near Vorkutlag ["Vorkuta camp"] and the city of Vorkuta, which had been built on European Russia's largest coal deposit, above the Arctic Circle. The strike, which lasted approximately ten days, was one of three known mass prisoner uprisings that took place in the year and a half following Stalin's death in March 1953. Well-organized and largely peaceful, they were occasions for prisoners and Gulag administrators to articulate competing visions for the future of the Soviet system of forced labor after Stalin. They took place in the wake of a number of extraordinary events, including not just the death of the вождь, but also a massive prisoner amnesty, which resulted in the release of over 1 million prisoners from the Gulag but left the "special camps" largely untouched, and also the arrest of Lavrentii Beriia, the man who had been in charge of the Soviet apparatus of repression since 1938 and one of the triumvirate jockeying for the position of Stalin's successor.[2]

As extraordinary events, the three prisoner uprisings in 1953-54 have been the subject of a small but growing historiography, based first on published memoirs,[3] and in recent years

[1] On the establishment of the special camps see Iurii Nikolaevich Afanas'ev and V. P. Kozlov, eds., *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga : konets 1920-kh-pervaia polovina 1950-kh godov*, 7 vols. (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2004), 2: 370-71; Steven Anthony Barnes, "Soviet society confined: The Gulag in the Karaganda region of Kazakhstan, 1930s--1950s" (PhD, Stanford University, 2003), 221-50; G. M. Ivanova, *Gulag v sisteme totalitarnogo gosudarstva*(Moscow: Moskovskii obshchestvennyi nauchnyi fond, 1997), 63-66.

[2] A good overview of the events of the "cold summer" of 1953 can be found in Miriam Dobson, *Khrushchev's cold summer : Gulag returnees, crime, and the fate of reform after Stalin*(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), chap. 1 passim.

[3] An overview of the strikes based on published memoirs can be found in Andrea Graziosi, "The Great Strikes of 1953 in Soviet Labor Camps in the Accounts of Their Participants: A Review," *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Sovietique* 33, no. 4 (1992).

buttressed by the availability of substantial archival documentation on the uprisings.[4] Historian Marta Craveri has argued convincingly that the strikes fit into a postwar "crisis of the Gulag" made apparent by declining economic indicators and increasing levels of prisoner resistance.[5] Vladimir Kozlov, on the other hand, places the uprisings into a longer narrative of popular resistance that began in the postwar Gulag but extended into the Brezhnev era. According to his work, disorder was brought into the Gulag by new waves of prisoners during and after World War II, spread throughout the Gulag during what he calls the епоха бунтов, and then into Soviet society at large during the upheavals of the post-Stalin era.[6] Steven Barnes, in his recent article on the Kengir uprising, has analyzed the "propaganda war" between prisoners and authorities and the leadership of the strike in order to examine the possibilities and limits of resistance in the Gulag.[7] He uses the uprising to examine the transformation of the Gulag and its population after WWII, in particular how various groups of prisoners adapted to the limits of Soviet discourse, which operated in the camps just as they did in Soviet society at large.

This paper offers a new approach to the mass uprisings in the Gulag. Rather than focus on the extraordinary nature of the events that took place in Vorkuta in the summer of 1953, I will instead use the uprising as an opportunity to examine everyday relationships, practices, and identities in the postwar Gulag.[8] Very few events in the history of Vorkuta have received such attention in both the archival record and from memoirists. As such, studying the uprising

[4] Much of the archival material is now widely available in print, particularly since the publication of the Istoriia Stalinskogo Gulaga series, which contains an entire volume on prisoner unrest. Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6.
[5] Marta Craveri, "Krizis Gulaga: Kengirskoe Vosstanie 1954 goda v dokumentakh MVD," *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 36, no. 3 (1995); Marta Craveri, *Resistenza nel gulag : un capitolo inedito della destalinizzazione in Unione Sovietica*(Soveria Mannelli (Catanzaro): Rubbettino, 2003). On the broader economic crisis, see Marta Craveri and Oleg Khlevniuk, "Krizis ekonomiki MVD (konets 1940-kh-1950-e-gody)," *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 36, no. 1-2 (1995).
[6] Kozlov relies on a number of medical metaphors including ген антигосударственности, and инфекция мятежа. V. A. Kozlov, *Massovye besporiadki v SSSR pri Khrushcheve i Brezhneve (1953 -- nachalo 1980-kh gg.)*(Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2010), chap. 1 passim.
[7] Steven A. Barnes, ""In a Manner Befitting Soviet Citizens": An Uprising in the Post-Stalin Gulag," *Slavic Review* 64, no. 4 (2005).
[8] Although my conclusions are somewhat different from those reached by Barnes, our approach to the mass uprisings is similar in that we use extraordinary events to examine the nature of the postwar Gulag in general. As he has rightly pointed out, "What is remarkable in Gulag history is not the wave of major uprisings that struck in 1953 and 1954 after Stalin's death but the relative paucity of such incidents earlier in its history." Ibid.: 826. In other words, the root causes of the strikes were typical of the postwar Gulag.

presents an opportunity for historians to look at life in a camp and its community in depth. In doing so, I am not arguing that the events that took place were not extraordinary, nor am I suggesting that there is no utility for historians in seeing them as such. Rather, I will demonstrate that looking at extraordinary events in terms of their ordinariness can tell us a great deal about the Gulag and its place in Soviet society.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first will reconstruct a basic narrative of events. The second will examine the behavior of local, regional, and central authorities during the course of the uprising in order to draw conclusions about power structures and relationships within the Gulag hierarchy. The third section will examine the organization and leadership of the prisoners throughout the strike. It will explore what the strike reveals about the nature of underground prisoner organizations that operated in the postwar Gulag. It will also revisit one of the central questions that prisoner uprisings raise: to what degree were the prisoners loyal Soviet citizens? The final section will demonstrate that the strike was not a simple conflict between two sides, as it has been typically described. As I will demonstrate, the uprising reveals much about the complex nature of social identities and hierarchies within Gulag camps and their surrounding communities.

The 1953 Rechlag Strike: an Overview

The strike began on 19 July 1953, when approximately 350 prisoners in camp section 2 refused to leave the zone and go to work at mine no. 7. The prisoners, who were part of a larger group of "troublemakers" transferred from Peschanlag near Karaganda, had been held in quarantine in separate barracks since their arrival in Rechlag on 25 June 1953.[9] The prisoners demanded a visit from the camp administration and Procurator. When the authorities arrived, the

[9] The official documentation on the arrival of the 1,015 prisoners can be found in GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 2613, l. 12-15. Peschanlag was a coal mining special camp in the Karaganda region. A. B. Roginskii, M. B. Smirnov, and N. G. Okhotin, *Sistema ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagerei v SSSR, 1923-1960 : spravochnik*(Moscow: "Zven'ia", 1998), 352-54. See also Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 437, 676 n. 215. Kozlov describes an attack on guards in Peschanlag in January 1952, as well as a wave of murders of informants from January through March of that year. He also notes that prisoners transferred from Peschanlag ("sandy camp") to Gorlag ("mountain camp") in October 1952 provided the spark for that strike. V. A. Kozlov, *Neizvestnyi SSSR : protivostoioanie naroda i vlasti, 1953-1985*(Moscow: Olma Press, 2005), 67, 81.

prisoners informed them that they had requests and complaints that could only be resolved by the Central Committee of the Communist Party; until a representative of the Central Committee arrived, they would not work, nor would they allow themselves to the transferred to another camp section.[10]

The situation continued unchanged for the next two days. Although the 350 *Peschanlagovtsy* remained on strike, the rest of the prisoners in camp section 2 continued to work as usual.[11] But, as Rechlag prisoner Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Ugrimov wrote, "... the whole camp boiled like a cauldron," and after seeing that the camp administration was not decisively reacting to the strike of the new arrivals, the strike spread to the rest of the camp section on the morning of 22 July.[12] That morning, messengers ran through the barracks urging prisoners not to report for work.[13] Approximately 1,500 prisoners from two shifts refused to report for duty and repeated the earlier demand for a visit from the Central Committee. By the following day, 23 July, nearly three thousand prisoners, the majority of the prisoner population of camp section 2, were on strike.[14]

On 24 July, five days after the initial group of 350 prisoners went on strike, a number of concessions were offered to the prisoners. These included a nine-hour working day, the removal of numbers from clothing, permission to send one letter per month, permission to send money home to families and to spend up to three hundred rubles per month in the camp, and permission to meet with relatives. The concessions were communicated not only to the prisoners in camp section 2, but throughout Rechlag.[15] However, this did not have the desired effect of defusing

[10] GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, l. 62. See also Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6:466.
[11] In a meeting with Rechlag director Derevianko and deputy Komi MVD Minister Noginov on 21 July the striking prisoners repeated their demand for a visit from a representative of the Central Committee. GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, l. 63. See also Ibid.
[12] A. A. Ugrimov and T. A. Ugrimova, *Iz Moskvy v Moskvu cherez Parizh i Vorkutu*(Moscow: Izd-vo "RA", 2004), 287-88.
[13] According to Ugrimov one of these messengers was Armand Maloumian, although Maloumian does not mention this in his memoirs. Ibid., 291.
[14] GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, l. 64. See also Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 467.
[15] Information about when and in which camp sections these concessions were communicated is contradictory. However, Joseph Scholmer confirms that soon after the strike began in camp section 2, and long before it had spread to his own camp section, the concessions were "taken round all the special camps by special messenger on the second day of the strike." Joseph Scholmer, *Vorkuta*(New York: Holt, 1955), 241.

the strike. On the contrary, prisoners in camp sections 3 and 16 joined the strike, bringing the number of striking prisoners to 8,700; mine nos. 7, 12, 14, 16 and the construction of the TETs-2 power station were now at a standstill.[16] Camp section 40 was the next to join the strike, on 25 July.[17] On 26 July the first violent confrontation of the strike took place: a group of prisoners in camp section 3 attacked the isolation cells (*shtrafnoi izoliator*) inside the zone, freeing seventy-seven prisoners who had been arrested on suspicions of planning the strike. Camp guards fired on the prisoners, killing two and wounding two others.[18] On 28 July, prisoners from camp section 13, having discovered that the neighboring camp section was on strike, refused to work.[19] On 29 July the strike spread to camp section 4.[20] According to an official estimate, 15,604 prisoners in six of seventeen camp sections in Rechlag were now on strike, 10 days after the strike began.[21] This figure represented 40 percent of the Rechlag population, or about 1/5 of the total prison population of Vorkutlag and Rechlag.[22] This represented the largest work stoppage in the history of the Vorkutlag camp complex, and one of the biggest in the history of the Gulag.

Following the precedent set during a prisoner strike that took place in Noril'sk during the previous month, a commission was sent from Moscow to meet with the prisoners and get them to

[16] GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, l. 65. See also Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 467. According to other documents, there were 8,829 prisoners in these three camp sections on 26 July 1953. GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, l. 3.

[17] This followed a small sitdown strike at the pit head of mine no. 29 and the announcement of concessions. GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, l. 65. See also Ibid. Edward Buca, *Vorkuta*(London: Constable, 1976), 230-32.

[18] Aleksandr Kokurin and N. V. Petrov, eds., *GULAG (Glavnoe upravlenie lagerei), 1917-1960* (Moscow: "Demokratiia", 2000), 580. This incident was described by Galinski to the U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities on 4 April 1960. Galinski claimed that two prisoners were killed and six wounded. *Soviet "justice" : "Showplace" prisons vs. real slave labor camps : consultation with Mr. Adam Joseph Galinski*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. G.P.O., 1960), 15.

[19] GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, l. 66. See also Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6:467.

[20] A report produced by the operational department of Rechlag described that the strike in camp section 4 began at mine no. 6, when some of the prisoners in the first shift of the day refused to work. Nearly all of the second shift refused to work as well, and from then on a general strike began. GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, l. 69. See also Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 473. According to Joseph Scholmer, who participated in the strike, the decision was taken the night before by a previously elected strike committee consisting mainly of Ukrainians and Lithuanians. Knowledge of the strike had reached camp section 4 at least a week before this via rail cars, but the "proper psychological atmosphere for a strike" had not yet developed. Scholmer, 236-37, 244, 246.

[21] GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, l. 4.

[22] The total number prisoners in Rechlag on 26 July 1953, according to a report produced on 29 July, was 38,589. Ibid., 3.

return to work.[23] On 29-30 July this commission met with prisoners from the six striking camp sections, inside the zone. The commission was led by Army General Ivan Ivanovich Maslennikov, a longtime deputy minister of the USSR MVD.[24] In each section, Maslennikov and the commission members entered the zone and asked to hear the prisoners' complaints.[25] They read a prepared speech to the prisoners, announcing that the commission had been sent from Moscow "to examine the situation that has arisen 'on the ground' and to decide the questions that have been broached by the prisoners of Rechlag." The commission then proposed that the prisoners immediately return to work and "end the sabotage" so that their demands could be responded to in good time. The speech reiterated the concessions already given to the

[23] On 5 June 1953 a commission of MVD officials arrived in Gorlag to negotiate with the prisoners. This commission was similar in terms of personnel, powers, and conduct from the commission sent to Vorkuta. Six of the eight members sent from Moscow served on both commissions. Colonel M. Kuznetsov, who led the Gorlag commission, was third-in-command of the Rechlag commission. However, the Gorlag commission appears to have been granted greater autonomy in settling the strike than the subsequent Rechlag commission. In addition, the Gorlag commission presented itself as representatives of Beria, which not the case with the Rechlag commission since Beria had already been arrested before the strike broke out. On the Gorlag commission see Kozlov, *Neizvestnyi SSSR*, 72-74. On the Gorlag strike see Marta Craveri, "The Strikes in Norilsk and Vorkuta Camps, and their Role in the Breakdown of the Stalinist Forced Labour System," in *Free and unfree labour : the debate continues*, ed. Tom Brass and Marcel van der Linden(New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 354-78; Craveri, *Resistenza nel gulag : un capitolo inedito della destalinizzazione in Unione Sovietica*; Graziosi: 419-46.

[24] Ivan Ivanovich Maslennikov (1900-54), born in Saratov oblast', became a deputy Narkom NKVD USSR in charge of troops in the aftermath of Beria's ascendancy as Narkom and the subsequent purging of Ezhov. He was appointed on 28 February 1939. He left for the front at the outbreak of war, although he was not officially relieved of his position until 3 July 1943. During the war he served in several areas on the Soviet Union's eastern and western fronts, serving as commander of the Northern Caucasus Front and deputy commander of Soviet forces in the Far East. On 8 September 1945 the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet accorded him the honor of "Hero of the Soviet Union." By 19 July 1948 Maslennikov had been reappointed to his position as deputy minister of the MVD. Although his portfolio was periodically reshuffled, he remained deputy minister until he shot himself on 16 March 1954. Although he was presumably a member of Beria's inner circle, he was not arrested when the latter was, perhaps because of his army connections. Aleksandr Kokurin, N. V. Petrov, and R. G. Pikhoia, eds., *Lubianka : VChK-OGPU-NKVD-NKGB-MGB-MVD-KGB : 1917-1960 : spravochnik* (Moscow: "Demokratiia", 1997), 22-23, 30, 41, 36, 57, 85, 150. Other commission members were: B. P. Trofimov (deputy chief of the MVD fifth section), M. V. Kuznetsov (chief of the prison section of the MVD, who had been head of the commission in Gorlag), I. Ia. Il'in (head of the operative department of the prison section of the MVD), F. Ia. Teplov (deputy chief of the first department of the prison section of the MVD), V. V. Mikhailov (head of the convoy security division of the MVD), G. I. Gromov (deputy head of the operative department of the prison section of the MVD), Major A. S. Bogdanov, Lt-Col. N. S. Noginov (deputy minister of the MVD of Komi ASSR), Major-Gen. A. A. Derevianko (director of Rechlag), Col. Mironov (head of the 15th division of the militarized guard of the MVD), and Senior Justice Counselor M. D. Samokhin. The latter was the only representative of the Procuracy on the commission. Kokurin and Petrov, eds., *GULAG, 1917-1960*, 579, 587. However, prisoner memoirs, both of participants and those who relate secondhand accounts, almost universally report that Rudenko, Procurator of the USSR, was present and played an important role in events. Edward Buca claims to have been kicked by Rudenko while the commission met with prisoners. Buca, 265.

[25] On camp section 3, see *Soviet "justice"*, 15-16.

prisoners, and added three more that awaited approval in Moscow: that bars be removed from the windows of barracks, that barracks be left unlocked overnight, and that the workday credit system (*zachet*)[26] be extended to Rechlag prisoners. The speech proposed that the prisoners return to work the next day, otherwise the commission would not be able to resolve the issues that concerned them.[27] Leaders of the strike in the camp sections then addressed the commission, presenting the prisoners' complaints and demands. By all reports, the meetings ended peacefully, but without the sense that any agreement had been reached between the two sides.

Beginning the morning of 31 July, 12 days after the strike first began, decisive action was finally taken by the administration to end the strike. Camp section 2, which was where the strike had begun, was the first to be confronted. At 10 AM, loudspeakers that had been set up on the watchtowers delivered an ultimatum that the prisoners return to work.[28] In order to increase the pressure on the prisoners, machine guns previously mounted on the watchtowers were moved into plain view. At this decisive moment, the prisoner strike committee sent messengers from barracks to barracks ordering the prisoners to give up in order to prevent bloodshed.[29] The prisoners of camp section 2 then left the zone. Outside the gates, they were divided into groups of one hundred and taken under guard into the tundra for "filtration."[30] News of the broken strike in camp section 2 traveled quickly, and prisoners in sections 3, 4, and 13 returned to work over the next two days of their own volition.[31] In camp section 16 the prisoners also returned to

[26] On the workday credit system see Simon Ertz, "Trading Effort for Freedom: Workday Credits in the Stalinist Camp System," *Comparative Economic Studies* 47, no. 2 (2005).
[27] GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, ll. 151-52. See also Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6:476-77.
[28] Kokurin and Petrov, eds., *GULAG, 1917-1960*, 582.
[29] Ugrimov and Ugrimova, 295-96. Ugrimov heard noises from outside the zone that he took for tanks, although no tanks were used in the operation to put down the revolt.
[30] Kokurin and Petrov, eds., *GULAG, 1917-1960*, 582.
[31] GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, l. 135. See also Kokurin and Petrov, eds., *GULAG, 1917-1960*, 582., Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 526. In camp section 4 the Moscow commission informed the prisoners that camp section 2 had gone back to work, and this was visually confirmed when full coal cars passed by the section on the railroad. On 1 August the prisoners reported for work. As Joseph Scholmer wrote, "The strike ended as suddenly and mysteriously as it had begun." Scholmer, 266-67.

work, but not before the strike leaders were turned in by the rest of the prisoners.[32] In all but one camp section the prisoners (or their leadership at least) decided that it was better to return to work than risk of violent confrontation with the authorities. Although it had taken them nearly two weeks to confront the prisoners, the strategy adopted by the Gulag authorities seems to have been remarkably effective.

Camp section 10, however, continued its strike. On 1 August the Moscow commission began to execute its plan to end the strike in camp section 10.[33] They began as they had the previous morning in camp section 2, announcing an ultimatum to the prisoners and opening the gates of the camp to allow the prisoners to leave. Unlike in camp section 2, the strike committee did not decide to end the strike immediately. The ultimatum was soon repeated over the speaker system. From this point forward, the exact course of events is difficult to reconstruct. Some prisoners attempted to leave the zone and end the strike, but were stopped by a large mass of approximately 350-400 prisoners who were determined to resist and formed a barrier.[34] Fifty unarmed guards were sent into the zone to aid those who wanted to leave, but they were repelled by the mass of prisoners. Next, the main gates were opened and a fire truck was sent into the zone to use water to break up the strike. However, the fire brigade was repelled as well.[35] At this point the decision was taken to fire on the prisoners, an action which finally broke the strike.[36] According to official totals, 42 prisoners were killed and 135 wounded; at least eleven

[32] This is according to the report prepared by the Moscow commission. Kokurin and Petrov, eds., *GULAG, 1917-1960*, 582. I have not found any first-hand accounts of the strike in camp section 16 in prisoner memoirs.
[33] GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, ll. 157-60. See also Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 493-95. As is clear from this document, force was supposed to be used only after the front gates had been opened, and three holes had been cut in the barbed wire to allow prisoners to leave. Only after these two measures had failed, after 2:00 P.M., were armed soldiers to enter the camp zone, and then only after warning the prisoners of this via loudspeaker. As this suggests, the shooting of prisoners on 1 August was probably unplanned and indicates just how poorly the Moscow commission and camp administration controlled the situation in camp section 10.
[34] The account reported by the Moscow commission stated that those who attempted to leave the zone were beaten by other prisoners. Kokurin and Petrov, eds., *GULAG, 1917-1960*, 583. Iakimenko described the situation as a heated argument between those who wanted to end the strike and those who wanted to continue, but does not state that violence took place. Arkhiv NIPTs "Memorial" f. table to steer 2, op. 3, d. 66, l. 137. Buca does not describe any significant disagreement.
[35] Buca described this, as does the commission account. Buca, 271; Kokurin and Petrov, eds., *GULAG, 1917-1960*, 583.
[36] Buca stated that the first shot was fired by Rudenko, which seems unlikely (if he was even there at all!). Buca, 271. The Moscow commission report stated that the motivation for opening fire was the fear that the prisoners

more died subsequently from their wounds.[37] With the bloody repression of the prisoners in camp section 10, the remarkable Rechlag strike concluded.

The arrest and isolation of the suspected ringleaders took place in short order. In camp sections 2 and 10, where the strike had been broken, "filtration" of prisoners immediately followed the prisoners' exit from the zone. According to Ugrimov, the prisoners in camp section 2 had been told they would be taken to the mine, but instead were divided into groups of one hundred and taken into the tundra in the direction of the camp cemetery. Despite fears of mass shootings, the prisoners were instead kept in groups in the tundra in front of armed soldiers, where they waited in the sun. Then, one by one, each group of one hundred prisoners was brought back to the zone. Near the camp gates they were met by a group of officers, warders, and prisoners who had been recruited to name the ringleaders. Each prisoner approached the group and recited his name and number, after which his role in the strike was discussed.[38] The majority of prisoners were simply returned to the zone. Prisoners suspected of involvement were transferred to newly-organized sections of Rechlag. Those identified as organizers were immediately arrested and put on trial, and "active participants" and "instigators" were transferred to prisons elsewhere.[39] In camp sections 3, 4, 13 and 16, where the prisoners had chosen to go

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would attempt to flee the zone and overwhelm the guards massed outside. Whether or not this was the actual motivation, it is clear that the situation had become chaotic and had escalated beyond the control of the authorities. Kokurin and Petrov, eds., *GULAG, 1917-1960*, 583.

[37] Of the 135 wounded, 83 sustained minor injuries. Kokurin and Petrov, eds., *GULAG, 1917-1960*, 584. A list compiled on 6 August of the prisoners killed on 1 August and those who subsequently died from their wounds listed 53 prisoners. GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, ll. 179-84. See also Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 519-24. Of those killed, the majority were Ukrainians (56.6 percent), Lithuanians (18.9 percent), and Estonians (7.5 percent), all percentages that were higher than the respective weight of each nationality in the general population of Rechlag. A list compiled on the same date of prisoners who sustained injuries on 1 August, which presumably did not include prisoners who had died from their wounds, contain 123 names. GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, ll. 185-87. Derevianko named a figure of 138 wounded in an earlier report. GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, l. 135. See also Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6:526. Memoir accounts set the number of dead and wounded somewhat higher. Buca, an eyewitness participant, wrote that "hundreds lay dead" after the shooting. Buca, 272. Secondhand accounts tend to give higher casualty figures. Scholmer, 260; E. A. Eminov, *Smert', ne samoe strashnoe*(Moscow: PeNates-PeNaty, 1999), 365; M. Baital'skii, *Notebooks for the grandchildren : recollections of a Trotskyist who survived the Stalin terror*(Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1995), 385.

[38] Ugrimov and Ugrimova, 296-98.

[39] Armand Maloumian was in the latter group and was immediately brought by train to a prison in a former monastery at "Bogoutchar." Armand Maloumian, *Les Fils du Goulag*(Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1976), 159-72.

back to work, the process of filtration took place "gradually" over time.[40] Of the approximately 15,600 prisoners in the camp sections that had gone on strike, just over 90 percent were returned to the zone. Of the remaining 10 percent (1,192) who were singled out, 883 were transferred to new camp sections, 280 were transferred to prisons outside Vorkuta for a term of one year, and 29 were arrested to be put on trial.[41]

These twenty-nine accused ringleaders were held and tried in Vorkuta. Most had their cases heard in September, and they were convicted under articles 58-14 and 58-11 of the Russian criminal code and given sentences of 10-25 years.[42] At least two of these convicted prisoners were transferred to special regime prisons, Iurii Levando to Vladimir and Anatolii Kniazev to Butyrka in Moscow.[43] However, the convictions against the accused ringleaders from these camp sections were overturned from 1954-56.[44] The exception was camp section 10, where the massacre had taken place on August 1. In this case, the prisoners waited much longer to go to trial. After the violence of 1 August, Edward Buca was taken to the punishment prison at Rudnik, before being transferred to a prison in camp section 1. Over a period of months, Buca and other accused ringleaders of the strike in camp section 10 were questioned, as were many

[40] Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6:542.
[41] Ibid., 6:544. According to correspondence from Tepliashin, the deputy director of Rechlag, dated 29 October 1953, 269 prisoners were transferred to a prison regime, 980 were transferred to punishment camp sections and 22 prisoners had been convicted or were under investigation. GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 2613, l. 137.
[42] Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds.,6: 547. These were: Stasis Iozo Ignatavichus, Viktor Dem'ianovich Kolesnikov, Pavel Leont'evich Kovalev, and Iurii Alekseevich Prasolov. For more on Kovalev, see Ibid., 6: 562-3. For more on Prasolov, see Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 560-62, 564-66. Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 557. These were Anatolii Musaevich Kniazev, Feliks Feliksovich Kendzerskii, Iurii Fedorovich Levando, Genrikas Iashkunas, and Ion Urvig. [consolidate]
[43] Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 560, 680 n. 273.
[44] On 17 August 1956 a plenum of the USSR supreme court overturned the sentences against the four prisoners from camp section 3. Ibid., 6: 679 n. 266. The sentence against Kolesnikov had already been overturned by the Komi Procuracy on 24 July 1954 on the grounds that he had been in camp section 3 for only twenty-seven days, had done nothing anti-Soviet, and had agreed to head the strike committee only in order to keep order in the camp. It is worth noting that he had been convicted of the crime for which he had been sent to Rechlag on 12 March 1953, and was a former party member and employee of the MGB. Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 546-50. The investigative department of the Komi ASSR KGB refused to overturn the cases against the five prisoners from camp section 2 in January 1955. However, these convictions were subsequently overturned for lack of evidence against the accused on 24 August 1955. Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 557-60, 680 n. 274. Whether or not the cases against the ringleaders and camp section 10 were ever overturned is unknown.

prisoner witnesses.[45] As part of the interrogations, prisoners were brought in to confront each other face-to-face.[46] After a trial lasting from 25-31 December 1953, Buca was sentenced to a further ten years' imprisonment.[47] In all, only fourteen prisoners were convicted of new crimes for their role in the rebellion.[48]

"The Authorities"

The operation of decision-making within the Gulag remains poorly understood. While the partial opening of the Soviet archives has allowed researchers to unearth a wealth of correspondence, regulations, and orders produced by Stalin and his inner circle, as well as from the next level of important ministerial/Gulag-level officials, much less progress has been made in trying to understand how lines of power extended outward from the center to the periphery. The role that individual camp directors played in determining conditions in their respective camps, and the sort of bureaucratic give-and-take that must have taken place between center and periphery is often difficult to discern. In general, historians have adopted one of two models for understanding center/periphery relations in the Gulag administration. The first is to see camp directors essentially as a "transmission belt" for the policies of top Soviet officials like Ezhov, Beria, and Stalin.[49] Although many of the central aspects of the so-called "totalitarian" model have been debunked by revisionists and post-revisionists, the "transmission belt" conception of the relationship between center and periphery within the Gulag remains remarkably persistent, if only implicitly.[50] The alternative is to view the authority of individual camp directors as

[45] According to Tepliashin, the investigation had already been wrapped up by the end of October. GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 2613, l. 137.
[46] Buca, 280-87.
[47] His long and rather fantastical account of the trial can be found in Ibid., 288-313. According to him, Ripetsky also received ten years, Kamashev three years, Vinogradov two years, and Malushenko one year. Nine other defendants had their cases dismissed. Buca and the five others who were sentenced were transferred to camp section 62 in Rudnik. He remained there until October 1955, when he was transferred to Ozerlag in Siberia. Buca, 317-26.
[48] Here I am assuming that Buca was accurate in naming five prisoners convicted at his trial, including himself. It seems that none of the leaders of the strike in camp sections 4, 13, and 16 were put on trial.
[49] This follows Fainsod's famous characterization of the relationship between local Soviets and the Party. Merle Fainsod, *How Russia is ruled*, Rev. ed.(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 383.
[50] Although Steve Barnes considers the existence of multiple factions within the prisoner population, he refers to "the Gulag authorities" and "the authorities" throughout. Such an approach seems to implicitly overlook the presence of conflict and friction between officials on the central, provincial, and local level. Barnes, "In a Manner Befitting," 834-37.

relatively unrestrained. In his classic study of Gulag, Solzhenitsyn suggested that the top command in the camps, the *lagershchiki*, were much like serf owners in Imperial Russia, who saw the camps under their control as patrimonial estates.[51] In that same vein, others have described camp directors as "little Stalins." Some historians, like David Nordlander, seem to have adopted both positions.[52] Yet neither position does an adequate job of explaining the decision-making process at various levels of the Gulag hierarchy.

The Rechlag prisoner strike of July-August 1953 provides an excellent opportunity to see how officials in Moscow and local camp administrators approached particular problems, and how center and periphery worked with each other when the chips were down. The scenario that the central Gulag administration and officials in Vorkuta faced was hardly routine. Nor was the context, with Stalin buried only a few months earlier and Beria freshly-arrested. Nevertheless, correspondence between center and periphery suggests that lines of authority were not as clear as one might expect, and in times of crisis the Gulag system might appear to be downright dysfunctional.

How did local and central authorities approach the strike? How did they interact with each other when trying to deal with the crisis and bring it to an end? Although the Rechlag administration had never dealt with a large-scale prisoner strike, when the crisis began in July 1953 the situation appeared to be one already familiar to Derevianko. Having served since the beginning of 1952, he was already familiar with the rising level of small-scale resistance on the

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[51] Aleksandr Isaevich Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956*, 3 vols.(New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 2:542.. He also compares them to American plantation owners. Solzhenitsyn, 2:540. For Solzhenitsyn, the major distinction between camp directors and serf owners was that "their power was not for a lifetime and not hereditary." Therefore, camp officials engaged in constant corruption and thievery for purely personal gain. Solzhenitsyn, 2:542-545.

[52] Although he posits that Nikolai Berzin, the first director of Dal'stroi, occupied "the status of regional dictator, the infamous type of "Little Stalin" well known from accounts of the period," he also claims that "gulag[sic] bosses had no independence on substantive issues."David J. Nordlander, "Origins of a Gulag Capital: Magadan and Stalinist Control in the Early 1930s," *Slavic Review* 57, no. 4 (1998): 806-7. On the whole, Nordlander's approach is nuanced, and he points out that local camp administrations enjoyed "limited operational autonomy." As he writes, "...Dal'stroi had the right to lobby and control other agencies, both in Moscow and the Far East, in order to receive essential goods and services. The northeastern trust often took unilateral action to fulfill production targets...." Nordlander: 807. Further, he notes that, "... the major hindrance to close supervision by Moscow was the general inefficiency and incompetence of the Soviet bureaucracy rather than any overt recalcitrance or independence on the part of regional officials. Remote location also caused difficulties...." Nordlander: 811.

part of special camp prisoners, usually organized by members of nationalist underground organizations. There was a well-established network of prisoner informants who kept the administration apprised of nationalist activities. When open resistance manifested itself, usually in the form of small-scale work refusals, violence against non-prisoners or prisoner suspected of collaborating with the administration, or even the distribution of leaflets, Derevianko and his staff responded according to a formula that had previously been effective. That is, suspected ringleaders were seized by the authorities and removed from the scene; they were either transferred to other camp sections or imprisoned in the camp section's isolation cells. This is, in fact, exactly how Derevianko dealt with a wave of unrest in camp sections 1, 5, and 6 of Rechlag in June-July 1953 that preceded the strike. According to a report by Derevianko that he composed in late July, a number of incidents were connected to the arrival of approximately one thousand Ukrainian nationalists who had been transferred from Kamyshlag, a special camp in Kemerovo region, to Rechlag in February 1953.[53] As late as July 21 (two days after the strike began in other parts of Rechlag) prisoner leaflets were found in these camp sections. In this case, the tactics of isolation apparently worked, as overt resistance ceased and the Rechlag strike never spread to these camp sections.[54] Thus, the Rechlag administration defused a potentially difficult situation without getting the central Gulag administration involved.

Yet, at exactly the same time that Derevianko was successfully dealing with the *Kamyshlagovtsy*, he failed to contain another threat to the order in camp. On 19 July, 350 prisoners, recently transferred from Peschanlag and just released from "quarantine," refused to leave their barracks to report for work in mine no. 7. As I described above, this was the first overt action that would lead to the Rechlag strike. Derevianko met with the prisoners that day to

[53] Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 4:675, n. 210. Kamyshlag was a special camp in Kemerovo region engaged primarily in mine construction that existed from 1951-54. Roginskii, Smirnov, and Okhotin, 187-88. Derevianko later claimed that the situation in Rechlag was "normal" until the arrival of the *Kamyshlagovtsy*. GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1, d. 772, l. 117. On the activities of underground Ukrainian nationalist organizations in Kamyshlag in 1952, see Kozlov, *Neizvestnyi SSSR*, 66.

[54] Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 466. Derevianko admitted in a report on 29 July 1953 that activities in these camp sections had occupied the attention of the operative apparatus of the camp, implying that this was why Rechlag had been unable to head off strikes in the other camp sections. Ibid. These measures were apparently effective, as the Rechlag strike never spread to these camp sections.

hear their demands, and it seems that he quickly decided to approach the situation differently from usual practice. First, he immediately involved the Komi ASSR MVD (the regional authorities) in the matter, and Deputy Minister Noginov was on the scene by 21 July, presumably flying from Syktyvkar to survey the situation.[55] Next, he reported on the situation to his superior, USSR MVD Minister Kruglov, asking for instructions. That same day, Komi Obkom Secretary Osipov, who happened to be in Vorkuta at the time, sent a telegram to Sovmin Chair Georgii Malenkov informing him of the situation. According to Derevianko, Obkom Secretary Osipov proposed to Malenkov that Rechlag prisoners be included in the system of workday credits, have their numbers removed from their clothing, and be allowed to send one letter per month, rather than the two per year then allowed.[56] It is important to note that Derevianko and Osipov immediately struck a conciliatory stance with the prisoners, hoping that concessions could end the strike, rather than immediately calling for violent suppression. Also, the concessions suggested by Osipov were fairly similar to those that Kruglov eventually authorized, although extending workday credits to special camp prisoners was more than the MVD would be willing to allow at this time.

Why did Derevianko handle this situation differently from how he was approaching a simultaneous problem in a different part of the camp? Why did he immediately get Syktyvkar and Moscow involved? Why were the ringleaders not immediately arrested and isolated? It is possible that Derevianko lacked sufficient information to act. Since the group of prisoners was being held in relative isolation, and had come directly from another camp fairly recently, Rechlag might not have the opportunity to establish an adequate network of informants to know what was going on and who might be leading the unrest. Rechlag reports on what was going on in camp section 2 suggest that informants were only able to report on the ringleaders once they began discussions with prisoners outside their quarantine, and this only from 20 July onward.[57]

[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid., 6: 467.
[57] Ibid., 6: 437-441.

Thus, he might have decided that the situation required the involvement of Moscow because he didn't have a handle on what was going on. But Derevianko's decision to report to Moscow likely was also related to the tactics adopted by the prisoners. Mass work refusals were a relatively unusual tactic, unlike violence against camp officials or suspected prisoner informants. If entire barracks of prisoners refused to leave, it would be much more difficult to establish who the ringleaders were and isolate them. It is also possible that Derevianko chose to get Moscow involved because he thought the situation was less serious than what was going on in the camp sections closer to the city. In a report of 29 July, he admitted that activities in camp sections 1, 5, and 6 had occupied more of his attention at the time, because they seem to be more dangerous, both because the subversive activity had been going for some time, and because of the proximity of those camp sections to the city. [58] It may seem paradoxical, but Derevianko may have chosen to involve Moscow precisely because he thought that he had more time to spare in dealing with this particular case of unrest.

Moscow did not respond swiftly to the crisis unfolding in faraway Vorkuta. Derevianko did not receive an immediate reply to the telegram that he sent to Kruglov. On July 22, when the strike first began to spread beyond the initial group of 350 prisoners, Derevianko sent a second telegram to Kruglov. In fact, it was not until 24 July, five days after the initial group of 350 prisoners went on strike, that Kruglov finally replied with a list of concessions that Derevianko could offer the striking prisoners.[59] The parallel track of communications, Komi Obkom Secretary's telegram to Malenkov, seems to have been even less successful in evoking a swift response. The Central Committee Presidium did discuss the situation in Vorkuta and other special camps during July 1953.[60] But high-level discussions appear to have been limited to considering the broader issue of conditions in the camps rather than a specific response to the

[58] Ibid., 6: 466.
[59] GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, l. 64. See also Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 467.
[60] Kozlov, *Neizvestnyi SSSR*, 92-93. This was one of five times that the camp system regime was discussed during a fourteen-month period from July 1953-September 1954.

events in Rechlag.[61] In the meantime, the strike had spread from 350 prisoners to 3,000 prisoners on July 25. And when the concessions approved by Kruglov were announced in camp section 2 and throughout Rechlag, they did not have the desired effect -- instead of convincing prisoners to go back to work, they encouraged the strike to spread. The fact that Derevianko waited for guidance from Moscow, and that that guidance was slow to be sent, clearly played an important role in the course of events. The sluggish response to the strike suggests that center/periphery relations had become quite dysfunctional by the summer of 1953. Local camp administrators like Derevianko lacked the authority to deal with local crises, yet their superiors in Moscow were unwilling or unable to give prompt direction to defuse such crises.

A decisive resolution to the strike did not come until the MVD sent representatives to Vorkuta to speak directly with the prisoners. Thus, it was not until ten days up the strike began the decisive action to end it was taken. The so-called Moscow commission, most of the members of which had experience dealing with a similar strike in Noril'sk the previous month, outlined explicitly to the prisoners what concessions had been offered and further concessions that might follow; but they also delivered also a stern message that there was little more to be achieved by striking. That most of the prisoners soon agreed to call off the strike suggests that the presentation of a united front of central, regional, and local authorities, backed up with the presumed authority of having been sent from Moscow, was finally enough to convince most prisoners that the strike had achieved the maximum possible.

The unfolding of events and the final outcome suggest a number of things about both the role that individual camp directors played in the Gulag and center/periphery relations. First of all, in most cases camp directors preferred to deal with crises themselves. This is, after all, how Derevianko had approached the problem of prisoners spreading seditious leaflets only days

[61] Voroshilov, Kruglov of the MVD and Gorshenin of MinIust were charged with reviewing the regime in special camps and the system of automatic exile that had been put in place in 1948.The three drafted a resolution that was sent to the on 19 August that included a softening of the regime for special camp and *katorga* prisoners. However, the final decision on this matter was put off until early the following year. The text of the draft resolution can be found in Andrei Artizov and others, eds., *Reabilitatsiia: Kak eto bylo*, 3 vols. (Moscow: "Demokratiia", 2000-2004), 2:65-66. See also Artizov and others, eds., 2:386, n. 11. and Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6:676, n. 219.

before the strike broke out. It is little wonder that they preferred to work this way, since the reaction of central authorities was anything but swift. Once the problem had been referred to regional and central authorities to resolve, local officials spent days waiting for authorization to act. It was precisely during this period of waiting that the strike spread from a small group in a single camp section to include nearly half the prisoners in Rechlag. In the end, however, the center responded effectively to the crisis. Once the so-called Moscow Commission arrived, the majority of prisoners called off the strike rather quickly. What does this suggest about the validity of the "transmission belt" or the "little Stalin/*lagershchik*" models? Clearly, neither fit this scenario. Instead, camp directors worked much like bureaucrats in any other part of the Soviet system. They attempted to solve problems themselves in most cases. But when the situation crossed a certain threshold, they deferred to their superiors for direction.

The Prisoners

The 1953 Rechlag uprising provides an opportunity not only to look at power relationships within the Gulag hierarchy, but also to examine the prisoners who participated in it. As an extraordinary event, it has attracted much attention from prisoner memoirists, both direct participants and those who heard about the events via rumor.[62] In trying to understand the uprising and its causes, the USSR MVD and the Rechlag administration assembled as much information as they could find about the prisoners who participated in the strike. There were special efforts taken to understand who the leaders of the uprising were and what motivated them. Finally, the archival documentation includes copies of leaflets and speeches allegedly produced by prisoner participants. While there are certainly limits to what one can deduce from this corpus of evidence (especially since much of it came from prisoner informants), the existence of a large body of material dealing with a discrete set of events represents an unusual opportunity. In particular, the archival and memoir material allows us to study prisoners and their worldviews in a breadth and depth that is not usually possible.

[62] Solzhenitsyn, 3:281-4.

The course of events during the Rechlag strike in many ways confirms what memoirists and historians have long been saying about the nature of the prisoner population after World War II, that prisoners became better organized and more difficult for camp administrations to control. Many prisoners began to organize themselves into underground groups organized primarily along national lines. Joseph Scholmer, a German prisoner in Rechlag who was never a member of an organization of this type, was nevertheless well aware of their existence. As he wrote,

> The existence of the numerous underground organizations in the special camps of Vorkuta and the work they do is perhaps the most astonishing phenomenon of all.... Each group is built up on a national basis. There is a perfectly good practical reason for this. Only people of the same nationality are really in a position to judge whether a man is personally and politically suitable to be taken on for underground work. On the whole it can be said that such groups are made up of the elite of each nation's representation in the camps. The groups are organized around a nucleus which is purposely kept a small as possible to minimize the NKVD's [sic] chances of making contact with it.[63]

Why did these organizations form in Rechlag and in camps across the Gulag? A major contributing factor was the influx of prisoners from the western borderlands of the Soviet Union, in particular West Ukraine and the Baltic states, beginning in 1943 and continuing throughout the postwar period. There were now sizable minorities of prisoners, and in some camp sections outright majorities, of prisoners who shared a common, non-Russian, language and culture. Some of these prisoners had actively fought against the establishment of Soviet power as members of partisan organizations like the OUN/UPA/"forest brothers," giving them shared experiences of resisting Soviet power.[64] Many of the new prisoners had experienced Soviet power for the first time during World War II, since the territories in which they lived had not been part of the Union during the interwar period. Other factors also increased the likelihood that these groups would organize themselves. First, they were concentrated in only a few camp complexes, in places like Vorkuta, Noril'sk, Karaganda and Kolyma. Within these camp complexes, they were far more likely than Russian prisoners to have been sent to *katorga*

[63] Scholmer, 189.
[64] [W. Borderlands resistance ref?]

sections, and after 1948, to special camp sections.[65] Thus, they were concentrated *within* camp complexes as well. They tended to be serving longer sentences and were much less likely than the average to be released.[66] On the other hand, mortality was on the wane both inside and outside the special camps, as the food supply generally improved following World War II and the postwar famine.[67] Thus, there were sizeable, concentrated group of prisoners who had experience actively resisting Soviet power, for whom death from malnutrition was no longer an onminpresent risk. Such conditions made the formation of underground nationalist organizations possible.

What did these organizations do? First and foremost, they transmitted information between prisoners, barracks, sections, and camp complexes. For prisoners who had access to these networks, they were able to call upon what they assumed was a much more reliable source of information than the usual *parasha*. Access to accurate information was essential for survival in the camp. The organizations also operated as mutual aid societies, sharing resources and favors in order to improve the survival chances of all. The networks also existed in order to stop the infiltration of informants and collaborators within the camp population. Intimidation and violence were often applied to those suspected of collaborating with the authorities, and archival records are rife with examples of prisoners who were beaten or killed because of suspected collaboration. By the early 1950s, there was a clear sense that these organizations were successful in many of their endeavors, particularly in disrupting informant networks. Administrators in Vorkuta consistently complained of the difficulty they had maintaining

[65] In 1950, only 16 percent of the prisoners in Rechlag were Russian, as opposed to 48 percent in Vorkutlag. Forty percent of the prisoners in Rechlag were Ukrainian, 5 percent were Latvian, 12 percent were Lithuanian, and 5 percent were Estonian; in Vorkutlag the figures were 22 percent, 1 percent, 3 percent, and 2 percent respectively. [See Dissertation Appendix A, Table A.11.]

[66] In 1949, for instance, 4,345 prisoners (or 7.30 percent of the population) were released from Vorkutlag, as opposed to only 250 (or 1.57 percent) from Rechlag. As the overall number of prisoners released from the complex increased over time, the difference in the release rate only grew. By 1953, 11,622 prisoners (or 33.23 percent of the population) were released from Vorkutlag, as opposed to a mere 1,016 (or 2.80 percent) from Rechlag. [Appendix]

[67] The mortality rate for prisoners in Rechlag during this period reached its zenith in 1949 (11.31 deaths per thousand) and its nadir in 1951 (5.87 deaths per thousand); in Vorkutlag, the mortality rate was 11.64 deaths per thousand in 1949 and 9.50 deaths per thousand in 1951. Mortality in both camps tended to be roughly equal to that of the Gulag average, which ranged between a high of 12.10 deaths per thousand in 1949 and a low of 6.70 deaths per thousand in 1953.

networks of prisoner informants and quelling violence between prisoners. Despite concerted attempts to infiltrate the organizations and diminish their influence through various means, in 1951 Vorkutlag/Rechlag director Kukhtikov was forced to admit that incidents of camp violence were not decreasing, but in fact increasing.[68] The camp administration appeared to be at a complete loss to contain these underground nationalist organizations operating in the camp.

The events of July 1953 confirm not only the existence of underground prison organizations, but also how effective they became. Although the strike took a few days to spread from the *Peschanlagovtsy* (July 19) to the rest of camp section 2, once the spread began it took place quite quickly. In less than a week to strike spread from a group of 350 prisoners in one camp section to over15,000 prisoners in six camp sections. As participant Joseph Scholmer pointed out, such a swift spread of the strike was greatly facilitated by the existence of underground organizations. As he wrote, "This strike would not of course have been possible if the underground resistance groups had not already been in existence... they provided the personnel and the necessary technical basis for any sort of offense of action... the strike had at its disposal a piece of machinery that had been built up with the greatest care and could be relied upon to function smoothly."[69] While some of the responsibility for spreading the strike lies with the indecisiveness of the camp administration, and the decision to offer concessions to prisoners in a number of sections, it seems clear that knowledge of the strike in camp section 2 was spread not by the authorities but by the prisoners themselves. Information was communicated between barracks via "runners" who volunteered for the task. But information was also passed between camp sections. It is not entirely clear how this was done, but it likely was related to the fact that most prisoners worked outside the camp zone, so would have had the opportunity to spread information via prisoners or non-prisoners outside of camp territory. This meant that once the strike had actually begun and the prisoners refused to leave the zone, it would be more difficult

[68] GARF, f. R-9414, op. 1 ch. 2, d. 151, ll. 238-43.
[69] Scholmer, 234-5.

to exchange information with other sections, since many fewer prisoners were leaving the barbed wire.

It was not simply the ability of these organizations to exchange information that was striking. In most sections, those organizing the strike managed to maintain a high level of secrecy throughout the strike. Often this was done by giving the strike leadership a dual structure, with official strike committees representing the prisoners in negotiations while a secret leadership attempted to control events from behind the scenes. This system, which Vladimir Kozlov has aptly described as having "dual centers" (*dvoetsentrie*), was clearly in place in many of the striking sections.[70] In camp section 3, for instance, the strike committee was led by V. D. Kolesnikov, a former MGB officer(!) who had been convicted on 12 March 1953 and had only spent twenty-seven days in the camp section before the strike broke out. Known as a former Air Force Colonel among the prisoners, his reputation had led him to be nominated and elected to leadership of the strike committee against his objections. Kolesnikov was surely a figurehead for the striking prisoners and did not actually lead the strike.[71] On the other hand, there were sections where the strike leaders decided to operate openly, as was the case in camp section 10, where Edward Buca, one of the important "underground" leaders of the strike, was persuaded to become the leader of the strike committee as well.[72] The dual structure that was maintained in most sections meant that many strike participants, even those with a knack for observation, did not know who was actually in charge. Aleksandr Ugrimov, for instance, admitted in his memoirs that early in the uprising he had only a rough idea of who was leading the strike. As he wrote, "I never once saw our leaders. It was said that the center [of the leadership] included

[70] Kozlov, *Neizvestnyi SSSR*, 83.
[71] Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 546-50; Kozlov, *Neizvestnyi SSSR*, 85. He later claimed in testimony that he used his new position of authority to maintain order in the zone and steer the strike in a peaceful direction. As a result of this testimony, Kolesnikov's conviction for his role in the strike was overturned less than a year later.
[72] Buca, 249-50. Having "outed" himself as a leader of the strike, it is no surprise that Buca was clearly identified by camp director Derevianko as the leader of the "sabotage" in camp section 10. GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, l. 136. See also Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 526.

representatives from various nationalities, and that the head was some Colonel-Pole from that transport [from *Peschanlag*]."[73]

The existence of "dual centers" in the camp sections was the result not simply of the desire to maintain secrecy, but also reflected divisions within the leadership of the strikes and the prison population in general. While the underground "conspiratorial centers" tried to use the committees as a moderate cover for radical aims, the committees in turn attempted to steer the strikes in a more peaceful direction. In some cases, according to Kozlov, the committees were able to control the course of events.[74] And just as the strike leadership was usually divided between moderate strike committees and radical "conspiratorial centers," the mass of prisoners in the individual camp sections were not entirely united in their support of the strike. I will explore the question of prisoner opinion further in the following section, but will simply point out that the prisoner population was not unanimously supportive of the strike. At the outset of the strike in camp section 2, for instance, any prisoner who did not want to participate was invited by the camp administration to leave the zone. According to prisoner Ugrimov,

> More than a few prisoners answered that call, production bosses, people holding on to, above all, their "warm places" [*teplye mesta*], stool pigeons and simply self-seekers and cowards. Perhaps, there were also those who were firmly confident that all of this was a provocation by the camp administration, that would necessarily end in cruel repression; and there were also those who were not connected to the comradely work of collective brigades.[75]

Thus, Ugrimov listed a whole range of people who had much to lose by participating in the strike, including those with privilege, those who occupied positions of authority, prisoner informants, and those who were simply convinced that the strike was a bad idea. The camp population remained divided into identity groups, usually in terms of nationality, and was distributed along a hierarchy of privilege, and so even from the beginning there were prisoners

[73] Ugrimov and Ugrimova, 291. Ugrimov is probably referring to Kendzerskii (see below). Kozlov, *Neizvestnyi SSSR*, 85; Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 451, 535.
[74] Kozlov, *Neizvestnyi SSSR*, 83.
[75] Ugrimov and Ugrimova, 290.

who refused to participate in the strike.[76] In addition, not all of those who participated in the strike were entirely loyal to the cause. The fact that the Rechlag administration continued to receive information from their network of prisoner informants during the strike suggests that "stool pigeons" remained among the strikers.[77] Even among those who supported the strike, there was clearly no consensus about what the uprising should attempt to achieve.

What were the prisoners' demands? How did they present these claims to local, regional, and central authorities during the strike? For the first ten days, strike leaders consistently demanded a visit from the Presidium of the Central committee to come from Moscow to hear prisoners' complaints.[78] In written correspondence and face-to-face interactions with local officials (such as Derevianko and the camp procurator Rusakovich) and regional officials (like Osipov and Noginov), prisoners' representatives repeatedly expressed a lack of confidence. In each section where the strike broke out, representatives stuck to this formula of waiting for higher authorities to arrive from Moscow. This was even after being told on July 25 and over the next few days that MVD Minister Kruglov had approved a number of concessions be made to the prisoners. By making the consistent demand to negotiate only with those from Moscow, strike leaders were able to maintain a surprisingly high level of unity among the prisoners.

Once the commission arrived from Moscow and met with prisoners on July 29-30, prisoner representatives moved from their general demands to the specifics of what they wanted the strike to achieve. Although no one from the Soviet Union's top leadership body was among the members of the commission, the fact that some fairly high level MVD officials made the trip from Moscow impressed on some of the prisoners that their strike had at least achieved its goal of getting some attention in Moscow. Various leaders of the strike in the camp sections addressed the commission, presenting the prisoners' complaints and demands. Transcripts of the

[76] Joseph Scholmer claimed that in camp section 4 (mine no. 6) only seventy prisoners did not participate in the strike. As he wrote, "These were made up either of those with communist convictions or of those whose personal interest identified them with the system -- the overseers, one or two of the brigade leaders, and a few people on the technical staff of the pit. The strikers made no attempt to stop them going to work." Scholmer, 252.
[77] The MVD file on the uprising is filled with reports based mostly on prisoner testimony that was obtained during the strike. See, e.g., GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 0160, ll. 75-99. See also Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 477-88.
[78] See, e.g., Levando's written demand of 22 July. Ibid., 6: 436-7.

speeches preserved in the Gulag archive suggest that, while the demands presented by the prisoners varied in their scope and radical nature, they shared much in common in terms of rhetoric. For example, the speech delivered by Anatolii Musaevich Kniazev, one of the strike committee leaders in camp section 2, was presented as an appeal to the Central Committee of the Communist Party against corrupt and cruel local officials.[79] In particular, Kniazev drew a link between the local camp administration and Beria. As he stated,

> It has become known to us from print and radio that the agent of world imperialism, adventurer, careerist-executioner Beria, over a long period of time, deceiving the party, without the knowledge of the party and without its agreement, brought arbitrariness upon the people, sowed national enmity, and isolated part of the people in prisons, camps, [and] colonies.

From there, Kniazev listed a series of humiliations visited upon the prisoners by the camp administration, presenting cases individually. These included cruel treatment of disabled and sick prisoners, theft by corrupt officials, poor medical care, beatings and dog attacks, and prisoners being forced to work without proper footwear or clothing. Connecting these individual incidents together, Kniazev accused Rechlag director Derevianko of not only ignoring the facts of prisoner abuse, but actually encouraging the practice. As his address reached a crescendo, Kniazev called Derevianko both an "associate of Beria," and a "bloodsucker."[80] Kniazev's strategy was to use specific incidents of abuse of power to build a case against the Rechlag director. Attempting to tie the camp administration to the recently fallen Beria was a rhetorical strategy employed by virtually all of the prisoners' representatives.

But some of the prisoners' demands went much farther than cleaning up local abuses of power. A written statement from "the prisoners of the 10th camp section" to the Central Committee (not the commission), begin with the familiar formula of denouncing Beria and those

[79] According to Ugrimov, Kniazev's speech followed another one by Levando, the strike leader, and was "much less successful" than the one that preceded it. Ugrimov and Ugrimova, 293-94.
[80] GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, ll. 240-48. Quotations from 240, 246. See also Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6:469-73. Kniazev's allegations were subsequently investigated by the Komi ASSR Procuracy. However, with the exception of three incidents, they were determined to be unfounded. Of the three incidents that were supported by evidence, in two cases the guilty parties had already been punished, and in the third had been fired or transferred to other camps. Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 553-56, 680 n. 270.

who worked for him in the camp system. However, from there the statement went far beyond simply tying the local camp administration to the fallen leader. Instead, it argued that the entire prison system represented the flawed and corrupt creation of the evil Beria. As a result, their demands were far-reaching: the release of all "political prisoners" from the camps, giving foreigners the opportunity to return home, and the guarantee that none of the strikers would be punished.[81] That the demands of the prisoners in camp section 10 would be so categorical is not surprising, given subsequent events; despite the fact that they joined the strike last, this was the only section where the prisoners did not return to work when threatened with violent repression. This was also the only section where the underground leadership of the strike decided to become the open leaders of the strike, and the only where the strike had violently ended by the authorities.

No matter how radical the demands of the prisoners were, they were all presented to the Moscow commission as consistent with the rights of Soviet citizens and workers. They were not anti-Soviet at all; rather, they respectfully acknowledged the supremacy of the Communist Party and state. Prisoners presented themselves as lawful Soviet citizens and exemplary workers who had contributed to the construction of Soviet socialism through their "honest labor." Kniazev's speech above even went so far as to quote Stalin's statement (with attribution) that the Communist Party "originates from the people, maintaining a solid connection with the people, and represents the vital concerns of the people."[82] Through their speeches, many of the strike leaders attempted to draw a direct connection between themselves and the Communist Party in opposition to both Beria and the corrupt local officials. This is perhaps one of the most surprising aspects of the uprising, as well as the ones which preceded it in Noril'sk and followed it in Kengir: by and large, the representatives of the prisoners "spoke Bolshevik" in their interactions with local and central authorities and the general population of Vorkuta.[83]

[81] GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, ll. 251-53. See also Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 495-96.
[82] GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, l. 247. See also Ibid., 6:472.
[83] Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic mountain : Stalinism as a civilization*(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), chap. 5 passim.

What is to be made of the fact that representatives of the prisoners, many of whom had ardently fought the establishment of Soviet control in the Ukraine and the Baltics during and after World War II, were representing themselves as loyal Soviet citizens? Steven Barnes, in his recent article about the Kengir uprising, states this is evidence that

> The Gulag had in at least in this small way accomplished its goal. It had transformed them. It had broken them just enough that they began to mouth the words... the overwhelming power of the Soviet system to control the political discourse was never more apparent than when these overtly anti-Soviet nationalists not only showed a facility for speaking Bolshevik but also accepted the desirability of speaking publicly in that language.[84]

Indeed, it is difficult to deny that the appropriation of Soviet discourses of supplication by the prisoners' representatives shows the pervasiveness of Soviet rhetoric within the Gulag. However, one should not overlook the profoundly subversive nature of the way in which such language was being used by the prisoners in Rechlag. In their most extreme demands, which included the immediate release of all political prisoners from the Gulag, they challenged the existence of one of the most important institutions in the Soviet Union, the system of forced labor. Rather than show the extent to which ardent nationalists were "broken" by the Gulag, I would argue that the subversive use of Bolshevik language by strike leaders shows that the dominant political discourse could be turned against local officials to demand radical change. As Steven Kotkin so provocatively suggested in *Magnetic Mountain*, "the identification game" contained within it the possibility of directly challenging the Soviet order.[85] In the new atmosphere of uncertainty following the death of Stalin, Rechlag prisoners sought to use official Soviet rhetoric to drive a wedge between local and central authorities. Rather than suggest the degree to which the prisoners had been "broken" by the Gulag, I would argue that it shows how well they had learn to play the rhetorical games required of Soviet citizens.

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[84] Barnes, "In a Manner Befitting," 849-50.

[85] As Kotkin writes, "If indirect, or less than fully intentional, contestations were built into the operation of the identification game, however, more direct challenges to the new terms of life and labor were dangerous. Yet even these were not impossible -- as long as they were couched within the new language itself, and preferably with references to the teachings of Lenin or Stalin." Kotkin, 220.

In the end, it is difficult to determine the degree to which prisoner demands and speeches should be considered demonstrations of loyalty to the system or as attempts to instrumentally use Bolshevik language as a tactic. When considering the group of several thousand prisoners on strike, who came from a range of backgrounds before being incarcerated, it is likely that the speeches and statements were interpreted in many different ways. It is entirely possible that some prisoners saw the rhetoric as an expression of loyalty, while others saw this as purely instrumental (after all, performances can be interpreted in many different ways). But the actual form that the 1953 Rechlag uprising took, the strike, may itself be the most revealing indicator of the degree to which "speaking Bolshevik" meant "thinking Bolshevik." Why did the prisoners decide to go on strike as an act of resistance? One could argue that this form of resistance shows that the prisoners had internalized Soviet values concerning the central importance of labor as constituitive of the self. But then one must contend with the fact that by 1953 the strike had long since ceased to be a common or acceptable tactic for workers to use against management in the Soviet Union. Nor was there a long tradition of prisoner strikes within the Gulag itself. It is entirely possible that the idea of striking came from beyond the Soviet system. After all, there was a sizable group of prisoners who had lived most of their lives in the "capitalist world," where strikes were far more common. Or the decision to strike may have been the result of pragmatic calculation -- recognizing the limitations on the kinds of acts of mass resistance that might be possible to realize within a prison camp, the *Peschanlagovtsy* may have arrived at the strike as the most reasonable option. And since the intention of the strikers was to grab the attention of Moscow, the strike was a logical choice to do so, since it was impossible to ignore the impact of a strike on output figures regularly sent to the capital.[86] If the striking prisoners were truly "speaking Bolshevik," it only may be in the sense that they tailored their words and

[86] Announcements by prisoners throughout the strike demonstrate that the leaders recognized that withholding their labor could be a powerful means to get the attention of the camp administration, and ultimately of their superiors in Moscow. Iu. F. Levando, one of the strike leaders in camp section 2, threatened in a statement given to Derevianko on 22 July that, "a delay in informing the Presidium of the TsK Kompartii [about the strike] could result in [объекты работы] being shut down for some time, which will result in economic losses for our motherland. Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 437.

actions in such a way as to meet with a receptive audience. This demonstrates the ingenuity and pragmatism of the strike's organizers.

Us vs. Them?

On the surface, the uprising demonstrated the cleavages that divided Vorkuta. If there was ever a moment when the camp administration and guards were definitively divided from the prisoners, and non-prisoners were divided from prisoners, this would be it. The defiant refusal of the prisoners to work and their demands for concessions from the administration stood in stark opposition to the threats and counter-demands of both the local administration and the so-called Moscow commission. Both prisoner memoirs and official accounts tend to emphasize a picture of the strike as a standoff between two unified sides. However, a closer examination of events, and of the evidence gathered about locals' views of the strike, suggests a much more complex and nuanced picture of the fault lines created by the strike. As I will demonstrate, the strike actually revealed a great deal about everyday interactions and relationships between prisoner and non-prisoner populations. It demonstrates not only the existence of numerous (and not necessarily predictable) cleavages among populations, but also a surprising diversity of interrelationships.

While it is true that prisoners and camp administration alike adopted a posture of opposition to each other, there was in fact a high degree of cooperation between the striking prisoners, the camp administration, and mine officials throughout the strike. This is most clearly illustrated by the fact that essential prisoner mine personnel continued to work throughout the strike, despite the fact that many of them maintained open solidarity with the strikers. To have shut down the coal mines of Vorkuta for a period of only a few days might have resulted in a disaster that could have endangered the lives of many and disrupted coal production for months. Without the operation of water pumps, many parts of the mines would have been flooded and would have had to be abandoned. More importantly, ventilation systems had to continue to work in order to prevent a dangerous collection of carbon dioxide or methane gas below ground. Although water pumps and ventilation were increasingly automated, these crucial safety systems

were often run by prisoners. In order to prevent disaster, it was imperative for some prisoners in each striking camp section to report to work as usual.

In camp section 2, representatives for the prisoners and the camp administration immediately agreed to cooperate in order to maintain safety in the mines and prevent a potential disaster. Aleksandr Ugrimov, who ran an electrical substation in mine no. 7 throughout much of the strike, later recalled in his memoirs that,

> …the leadership of the strike adopted a wise decision. It was said that it was necessary to keep the mine and the equipment in normal order, and because of this the people who are responsible for this should leave [the zone] and -- by their wishes -- remain there or return. Of course, such decisions could only have been made by agreement with the camp administration. It was no less surprising that the camp administration immediately agreed with the representatives of the strikers on a whole range of other questions that regulated the life of the camp over the course of this unusual period. The brigade of Katerpal [to which Ugrimov belonged], which included those on duty in water pumping and the substations, had to go to the mine, and were promised to be able to return [to the zone] upon request. This promise was fulfilled. We were brought out and brought back under convoy."[87]

Thus, both sides agreed that prisoners working in essential safety systems should be allowed to work every day in the mine and return to the camp after their shifts for the duration. According to Eduard Buca, a leader of the strike committee in camp section 10, the prisoners themselves approached the camp administration in order to ensure safety in the mines and that the prisoner-staffed bakery continued to operate throughout the strike. Although the officer of the guard whom the prisoners approached was "astonished" at their proposal, an agreement was quickly worked out that allowed two brigades of prisoners to leave the zone throughout the strike.[88] A certain degree of cooperation between the striking prisoners and the camp administration was present throughout the strike in virtually all sections, as both sides agreed that maintaining safety in the mines was paramount.[89] Both sides' willingness to cooperate demonstrates that for many

[87] Ugrimov and Ugrimova, 290.
[88] Buca, 243-44.
[89] According to testimony in the case against four members of the prisoner committee in camp section 3, after the election of this committee "prisoners were sent to work to maintain the mine in normal condition." Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 549. Cooperation is noted in other memoirs as well. Baital'skii wrote that, "Throughout the strike, the ZKs made sure that the mine was protected from flooding and gas leaks." Baital'skii, 385. Oleg Borovskii notes this as well. VMKM, f. OF, d. 3094/1-2, l. 276. However, it appears that the camp administration was not able to

on both sides the strike was not an all-or-nothing proposition, and they were thinking not just of trying to win the upper hand, but also about keeping the mines in working condition over the longer-term. It also suggests that both sides were used to a certain degree of give-and-take in their everyday interactions.

The prisoner strike involved other groups besides prisoners and the camp administration. The events of July-August 1953 affected the lives of all who lived in the Vorkuta area, including the large non-prisoner population. This non-prisoner population, which numbered some 68,000 people at the beginning of 1953, was a rather motley crew. A sizable majority had at one time been held inside the zone of Vorkutlag or Rechlag as prisoners, former Soviet POWs, and "mobilized" Soviet ethnic Germans. As such, the loyalties of Vorkuta's citizens were highly suspect, and there was a great deal of anxiety throughout the strike as to which side they supported. How did this non-prisoner population act during the strike? What did they think of what the prisoners were doing? Information from a number of sources suggest that there were a wide range of actions and opinions in response to the strike.

The strike clearly had a disruptive effect on the lives of most of the non-prisoners in Vorkuta. Those who worked in the coal mines and other economic enterprises where prisoners also worked were affected. Many had unexpected free time on their hands, as most mines operated with a small skeleton crew to maintain safety but do little else. Since most miners were paid depending upon the output of their brigade/mine, they felt the effects of the strike in their pocketbooks as well. Some non-prisoners, rather predictably, took advantage of the extra time off to drink. Some were urging the prisoners with whom they worked to go on strike, pointing out that other mines were already shut down. Some "special settlers" had attempted to leave work themselves in order to show solidarity with the strikers, although this had been prevented by city authorities.[90] Perhaps the most important and most widespread role that non-prisoners

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persuade or coerce the prisoners at mine no. 6 in the ventilation brigade to work throughout the strike. Scholmer, 249-50.

[90] GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, ll. 33, 9. See also Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6: 450, 435.

played in the events was to pass along information to prisoners about the situation in other mines and parts of the camp. Indeed, this is an important part of the explanation for why the strike spread so quickly through so many camp sections.[91] There was nothing new about such exchanges of information between prisoners and non-prisoners at the workplace, but the heightened tensions of the strike raised the stakes for such commonplace interactions.

How did the non-prisoner population view the strike? This is a difficult question to answer, as most of the evidence that one can use to try to answer this question comes from police reports about the mood of the population. How to use these reports, or *svodki*, has been a source of significant controversy among historians of Stalinism.[92] In the case of the strike, a careful reading of the reports is unquestionably useful. First, reports demonstrate that local, regional, and central authorities were concerned about the mood of the non-prisoner population during the strike. Not that this was an unusual Soviet practice -- the compilation of reports on the mood of the population is one of the better documented phenomena of Soviet history. But it does suggest that there was serious concern that the local population sympathized with the strike. Considering the very high percentage of former prisoners, exiles, and various other people with potential axes to grind against the Soviet state and local camp administration, it is hardly surprising. Second, the reports suggest that there was a wide range of opinions on the strike among non-prisoners. The diversity of opinions demonstrates that the conflict was far more complicated than a simple division between "us" and "them."

Some non-prisoners expressed clear sympathies for the striking prisoners. This was the general conclusion of a report sent from the Komi Deputy MVD Minister Col. Noginov to the Vorkuta Gorkom on 27 July 1953. Noginov observed that, "the majority of residents who are former prisoners from the *spetskontingent* look upon the actions of the prisoners sympathetically." Indeed, one would expect to find some level of support or sympathy among a

[91] GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, l. 67. See also Ibid., 6: 468.
[92] See, e.g., Sarah Rosemary Davies, *Popular opinion in Stalin's Russia : terror, propaganda and dissent, 1934-1941*(Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). [Davies/Hellbeck/Halfin debate…]

population whose majority consisted of former prisoners and exiles. But sympathy did not necessarily translate into expressions of active support. There were indeed some non-prisoners who were unreservedly in favor of the strike, and hoping that the prisoners could achieve significant concessions. As a former prisoner from Western Ukraine stated,

> There have not been any real successes, just minor softening [of the regime] in questions of everyday life. But a yoke remains a yoke. It is true that in all of this there seems to be a victory, in that we are seeing the strength of our unity in practice and how the authorities are forced to yield in the face of it. There is no question that conclusions will be drawn from this and this is only the beginning....

For this former prisoner, the strike was seen as a key moment that would demonstrate to the prisoners all that they could achieve through collective action. On the basis of information gathered from informants, some in the local MVD feared that that the population of one neighborhood (Rudnik) was so embittered towards camp soldiers and officers, who frequently provoked them and started fights, that they hoped to use opportunities presented by the strike to "inflict reprisals."[93] While this is undoubtedly an exaggeration of the willingness of non-prisoners to bring the strike out of the zone and into the city of Vorkuta, it is not surprising that such a fear existed, considering the frequency of brawls between camp guards and various parts of the non-prisoner population.[94] The MVD had good reason to be anxious about the way that many former prisoners would react to the strike.

On the other hand, there were also non-prisoners who were skeptical about what the strike could achieve, and whether or not it was a good idea in the first place. Some expressed the opinion that the strike was probably a result of deliberate provocation by the authorities, in particular Beriia. Some wondered openly about whether it was possible for a positive outcome to emerge. Acknowledging the fact that the administration had made significant concessions to the prisoners, one Vorkuta resident bemoaned the fact that the latter "continued to stir up trouble [*skoty buzit'*]." As he or she continued, "... this could end up badly for them [the prisoners] if

[93] GURK NARK 2, f. 2216, op. 1, d. 57, l. 93-94.
[94] [Dissertation chapt. 4]

they don't properly assess the situation."[95] In other words, this city resident felt that the prisoners ought to accept the concessions they had won, because they would face brutal repression if they continued to strike. At the same time that they expressed sympathy for the plight of the prisoners, many non-prisoners nevertheless thought that the strike was a bad idea.

For many non-prisoners, the strike was a clear source of anxiety. Indeed, one MVD report sent to Moscow concluded that "a certain portion of the city population continues to worry... chiefly, this includes former prisoners...."[96] As one might expect, some former prisoners felt that the strike potentially threatened to disrupt their status. One engineer reportedly reacted with relief that the prisoners had gone back to work. As he stated, "if the strike had lasted longer they might have thought about us [former prisoners], that we sympathized." An amnestied prisoner working in the planning department stated that, "It had only just gotten easier, and now the *katorzhane* aren't working, they are just making things difficult for themselves, and now they [the authorities] might pounce on others (he has in mind the amnestied) [editorial comment in original]."[97]

Finally, there were non-prisoners who expressed clear opposition to the strike. As one German special settler reportedly stated, "... let's say that they were even unjustly convicted, but to carry out a strike -- that is unworthy of Soviet people, it is necessary to simply hang the strike organizers." Another former prisoner stated, "... a strike is a crime. I think we should do with them what we used to do with Trotskyites in my time: take them all to *kirpichnyi* [the brick factory, site of 1938 shootings] and shoot them." Many opposed to the strike criticized the local administration's reaction as being too moderate. One "special settler" engineer apparently stated that "a large amount of guilt for it [the strike] belongs to the local administration, which was unable to decisively and quickly localize the expression of discontent and seize the

[95] GURK NARK 2, f. 2216, op. 1, d. 57, ll. 93-94.
[96] This report was produced by Major Strelkov, the head of the fourth section of the Komi ASSR MVD, and forwarded to Moscow. GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, ll. 145-6. See also Afanas'ev and Kozlov, eds., 6:488-9.
[97] GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, ll. 143-44. See also Ibid., 6: 513-14.

ringleaders."[98] Some apparently feared that the prisoners might break out of the zone and attack the non-prisoner population. One ex-prisoner stated that, "it has become scarier to live in the city. The *katorzhane* could suddenly break out of the zone by force and fall upon the peaceful population."[99] As such comments demonstrate, the reactions of non-prisoners to strike ran the gamut from open support to open opposition.

The prisoners on strike were also concerned about the views of non-prisoners. While some prisoners subsequently claimed that there was widespread, if quiet support of their actions, attempts made to win over the non-prisoner population suggest that prisoners were also anxious about the mood surrounding population.[100] Although they do not appear to have waged an elaborate "propaganda war" as Solzhenitsyn wrote of the 1954 Kengir uprising in *The Gulag Archipelago*, there were clearly some attempts to win the hearts and minds of those on the "outside."[101] For instance, the MVD file on the strike contains a written "appeal" from the "striking prisoners to the soldiers and civilian population of Vorkuta." This "appeal" invites the soldiers guarding the camp to join their prisoners in their strike "for freedom, for democracy, that there has never been in Russia." Although it allows that 10-15 percent of the prisoners are truly guilty, the rest were "brothers, fathers, and relatives, the same peasants and workers as you are." The "appeal" presents the vast majority of prisoners as Soviet patriots who fought to defend the Soviet Union during World War II. It invites the soldiers to join the strike, spread information about it, maintain contact with prisoners, and distribute the "appeal" themselves.[102] As the course of events would subsequently show, there would be no defections of soldiers and non-prisoners to the side of the prisoners -- but how the strike was viewed outside the zone was clearly a source of anxiety for both the prisoners and the camp administration.

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[98] This report was produced by Major Strelkov, the head of the fourth section of the Komi ASSR MVD, and forwarded to Moscow. GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, ll. 145-6. See also Ibid., 6:488-9.
[99] GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, ll. 143-44. See also Ibid., 6: 513-14.
[100] Joseph Scholmer stated in his memoirs that many ex-prisoners sympathized with the strike, though they were afraid to openly support it. Scholmer, 251-52.
[101] Solzhenitsyn, 3: 316-17. This "propaganda war" has been explored more recently in great detail by Steven Barnes. Barnes, "In a Manner Befitting," 833-43.
[102] GARF, f. R-9413, op. 1, d. 160, l. 268.

As an act of mass resistance where over 15,000 prisoners refused to work while demanding improvements in their living conditions, the Vorkuta prisoner uprising of 1953 would seem to be as clear a case as one could find of a clear-cut, two-sided conflict. Yet, as I have demonstrated, a close reading of memoir and archival sources suggest that this is an oversimplification of actions and perspectives from various groups of prisoners and non-prisoners. Right up until the end of the strike, when ultimatums were delivered to the various camp sections, there was an underlying level of cooperation between local Gulag administrators and prisoners. Likewise, prisoners and non-prisoners were not separated into two mutually exclusive groups who universally supported or condemned the strike. Surveillance materials gathered to measure the "mood"of populations inside and outside the camp, while highly problematic, clearly demonstrate the diversity of viewpoints and perspectives on the legitimacy of the strike and its chances for success. This, in turn, reflects the complex social hierarchies and diversity that existed within both populations not just during the strike, but during less extraordinary times. If anything united the population of Vorkuta in the summer of 1953, it was a pervading feeling of anxiety about the outcome of the unprecedented acts of mass prisoner resistance that was taking place.

Conclusions

The participants in the events that took place in Vorkuta in the summer of 1953 had clear agendas when they constructed their accounts of what took place. Participants like Scholmer, Buca, and Ugrimov largely focused on demonstrating the heroism of the prisoners, heroism which was undeniable. Local, regional, and central Gulag authorities had their own interests in mind when they composed reports on what took place at the end of July and the beginning of August. Officials at each level attempted to demonstrate that they had dealt with the strike efficiently, effectively, and with an appropriate level of force, particularly during those instances where violence had taken place and prisoner casualties had resulted. While the archival sources generally suggest that the three levels of authorities operated in concert, as I have demonstrated this was not always the case. Although they shared an overall interest in seeing the conflict

resolved, there were particular circumstances when actions did not serve all parties' interests equally well. All, however, were united in their attempts to paint the strike as a dangerous and subversive action by extremist prisoners. This, after all, was the ultimate justification for threatening and ultimately carrying out violent actions against the prisoners. Prisoners and Gulag officials were equally interested in representing the conflict as a simple struggle between the two sides, even if they disagreed on which side held the moral high ground.

This paper has demonstrated that one must look past these agendas in order to get a better understanding of the strike and what it reveals about the nature of the Gulag and its relationship to Soviet society. The Vorkuta prisoner strike of 1953 is quite useful for understanding the nature of the postwar Gulag. It demonstrates a great deal about the way that local, regional, and central actors in the Gulag administration responded to problems and interacted with each other. It suggests that neither the "conveyor belt" nor the "little Stalin" models can explain the interaction between center and locality. The strike is also useful for examining prisoner society. It demonstrates the ubiquity and effectiveness of nationalist prisoner underground organizations, which were central during all phases of the strike. Although there was clearly a wide range of opinions and world views among prisoners, written and spoken discourse during the strike suggests that prisoner leaders had become adept at "speaking Bolshevik." Yet their speech acts did not simply demonstrate the active or passive acceptance of Soviet political discourse. In some cases prisoners' demands and complaints were intended not just to undermine the legitimacy of local administrators, but also to challenge the very nature of the Gulag as an institution. Thus, Soviet language was being deployed in a subversive fashion. Finally, and most importantly, looking past the agendas of the sources makes it possible to see Gulag communities of the early 1950s for what they truly were: not a world strictly divided between the inside and the outside, prisoners and non-prisoners, or "us" and "them," but rather diverse communities with complex social hierarchies that defy reduction into simple categories.