

## **Making a Career in the GULAG Archipelago: The BBK –BBLag personnel.**

The paper, focusing on several groups of the BBLag employees, explores the social background of those who worked there as the camp guards, the mid-rank administrators, the ISCH-NKVD staff, and technical specialists. It tries to answer important questions such as who were such people, what motivated them for work for the forced labour enterprise, and reveal some general patterns of social mobility within the GULAG during the 1930s.

The most significant difficulty in researching this subject is high turnover, frequent relocations, removals and the purges among the GULAG staff. Additionally, it is very difficult to trace the fate of an individual in the GULAG, for the people were moving from one camp to another. Finally, the prisoners migrated to the category of the hired staff and vice versa.

Among other sources, the paper uses the application files for the job of a camp guard, or for the position of an officer in the ISCH (Information-Investigatory Department, later the Third Department) dated the first half of 1930s. The applications for positions of the chiefs of the election commissions from the Medvezhegorsk district for the election to the Supreme Soviet of 1937 and for the Secretaries of these Commissions constitute a major source for the research into the background of mid-rank administrative staff of the BBK. The problem with this kind of sources is to what extent one may trust the information provided in them. The applicants could easily provide false information about their origins, background, and work record. However, the majority of applications contain multiple spelling and stylistic mistakes. This fact partly confirms the theory of modest social background of these BBLag employees, but does not erase the possibility of falsifications.

The White-Sea Baltic Combine was a typical GULAG empire. It possessed its own train, plain, “people’s court,”- Special Collegium of the Leningrad Region Court at the BBK of the NKVD, and its own prosecutor. The verdicts of this court were announced to the prisoners through the orders of the Combine chief.

At the eve of the Great Patriotic War the overall number of those toiling at the Combine amounted to 81446, with the share of prisoners ranging around 70811 (and

only 4180 of them were female). The BBK also hosted 10635 contracted workers, and 4097 armed guards. And all the population of this empire was engaged in making money for the Soviet state.

The armed guards platoons at the BBK was a mixture of prisoners and contract workers. The proportion of the hired guards and the prisoners in the platoons varied, although it is possible to argue that the number of prisoners at all times was very high. For example, in May 1931 the fourth platoon of the second marksmen's unit of the second detachment included 2 commanders, 19 hired guards, and 57 prisoner guards, altogether amounting to 81 person.

The majority of the prisoners employed as guards were sentenced for duty or domestic crimes. For example, among the 50 prisoner applications dated 1932, (47 accepted, 3 rejected) all of them had been sentenced by the People's Court according to the articles of the Soviet penal code dealing with general crime, the most frequent being 136 (premeditated murder), 164, (buyup of stolen goods), 169 (fraud), and 142 (grave bodily harm). Many of these applicants, from the poorest peasant or working class background, prior to their arrest were registered as members of the VKPb or VLKSM. The majority had served in the army. The prisoners were recruited only after the Chekist-Operative Section, (the ISCH) had checked their files for "compromising materials." Most of them indicated their "social standing" as either "peasant," or "worker." Apart from few Ukrainians, one Buryat, and one Tatar all of them were Russians,. The most frequently mentioned 'professions prior to arrest' included 'grain grower,' ("khleborob,") "worker," "loader," peasant," "cooper," "shoemaker," "seller," "brigadier," "militiaman." The possibility of verification of this information by the commanders was problematic, so concealment of the origins or social standing could be disclosed mainly through the denunciations of the colleagues.<sup>1</sup>

This group of prisoners served as a major source of the camp guards during 1930s.<sup>2</sup> As a memo from April 7, 1934 testifies, there was an increasingly severe shortage of the z/k guards in all the armed guards detachments of the BBK.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, from multiple letters sent to the VOKHR sections of the BBLag it is obvious that

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<sup>1</sup> NARK, f. 865, op. 1, d. 12/57, p. 148.

<sup>2</sup> NARK, f. 865, op. 1, d. 9/47, p. 57-61.

<sup>3</sup> NARK, f. 865, op. 1, d. 12/57, p. 267.

this job was a popular one and was sought by a great share of the prisoners. Moreover, it was more popular than the post of the KVCh instructor and even than some administrative positions.<sup>4</sup> Having a positive record of work in the camp administration, the prisoner had better chances to get a similar job after being transferred to another camp.<sup>5</sup> The shortage of the prisoner guards testifies to the fact that for some reasons many applicants did not suit the positions.

At one point the GULAG authorities advanced a policy of relying upon ‘socially close elements’ in filling up the vacant positions of the armed guards. It was a failure. Many professional delinquents were reluctant to abandon their criminal lifestyle after the appointment. They openly engaged in drunkenness and speculation, and provoked the commanders to remove them from their positions.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the released prisoners who had previously worked as camp guards, wished to stay in the camp on a contract basis. Many of the application letters of the newly liberated prisoners wishing to obtain armed guards positions were submitted prior to their liberation to secure a position in advance.<sup>7</sup> An application letter of a prisoner z/k guard Semen Nikitovich Goncharov, addressed to the chief of the VOKHR BBK, dated August 1, 1932 stated:

Having served as a camp guard for almost two years, I became deeply attached to my job and think it would be useful for me to raise my poor literacy through self-training. I also hope to be of use for the VOKHR and promise to serve as well as I did being a prisoner.<sup>8</sup>

Further evidence shows, that not only the prisoners employed as the guards or as administrators, but also those engaged in general works upon their release were not willing or prepared to leave the camp immediately.<sup>9</sup> Life outside the camp was hardly easier for them than in the camp. Having lost their families in the course of the revolution

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<sup>4</sup> Prisoners who occupied these posts wished to leave them for the one of the camp guard. NARK, f. 865, op.1, d. 11/53, pp. 217-218, 259.

<sup>5</sup> NARK, f. 865, op.1, d. 9/47, p. 292.

<sup>6</sup> NARK, f. 865, op. 1, d. 12/57, p. 281.

<sup>7</sup> NARK, f. 865, op.1, d. 9/47, pp. 170-183.

<sup>8</sup> NARK, f. 865, op.1, d. 9/47, p. 430.

<sup>9</sup> As an ex-prisoner wrote in her memoirs, “in the camp we had a daily ration, a shelter, and connections that guaranteed our survival. V. Nikitina, *Dom oknami na zakat*,

or the world war, and compelled to earn their daily bread from early childhood, they did not consider their camp term as the worst evil. Moreover, they found life there convenient and secure. They could not only make a career as a guard or an inspector there, but also learn a profession through enrollment in the camp educational programs.<sup>10</sup>

Sometimes relatives at liberty wrote to the prisoners asking if it was possible to accommodate them there as well.<sup>11</sup>

The autobiographies, attached to the prisoners' applications for armed guards position, display life stories that started with extremely harsh material conditions in childhood and describe death of one or both parents and siblings, extended families left without a breadwinner, famine, work experience from the age of 10-12, or leaving primary or secondary school.<sup>12</sup> Some of the applicants (as well as the hired guards themselves) had a number of mental disorders, the most widespread being neurasthenia and schizophrenia.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, the position of a guard was also desired by the demobilized army soldiers, OGPU soldiers, primarily of peasant background.<sup>14</sup> Data on 78 hired members of the first platoon of the first VOKHR detachment from April 1933 reveals that their place of residence prior to the arrival to the BBLag was either the village or (just several

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<sup>10</sup> In 1932 short-term preparatory courses in Medgora for preparation the staff for the Canal exploitation were organized jointly by the GULAG and Narkomvod. Periodically the GULAG offered a number of the liberating prisoners for these courses. On May 25, 1935 a bureau was organized with branches in all the sections of the camp "on the employment and assistance of the ex-prisoners." It was supposed to arrange the employment for liberated prisoners, prepare work contracts for them and provide them with financial support. Additionally, from 1932 the Central College was functioning under the aegis of the Cultural Educative Section of the BBK which prepared skilled workers of many qualifications. In the course of 1934 and the first half of 1935 alone 7500 specialists of different technical qualifications were prepared there, the majority of them coming from the ranks of the prisoners. NARK, f. 865, op. 2, d. 1/2, p. 12. *GULAG v Karelii*, p. 108. At the same time, a system of professional education was established for juvenile prisoners. Soon it proved to be dysfunctional and was dismantled. NARK, f. 865, op. 2, d. 1/2, p. 164. To enroll in the courses at the Central College which ranged from forestry to medicine and cultural service, the prisoners had to conform to certain requirements. Apart from a "non-political" crime, they had to have completed 7 grades of school education. However, ordinary delinquents were not always eager to study there. Some of the prisoners escaped after arrival, while others were disqualified as "illiterate."

<sup>11</sup> At the beginning of 1930s the mother of an actor, performing in the *Belomorkanal* troupe (vaudevilles composed and staged by professional actors) of peasant "dekulakized" background sent him a letter, asking if it was possible to arrange to sent to the camp his younger brother. M. Terentjeva, "Moi otez Igor Terentjev," in *Teatr GULAGa*, p. 56. This vision was shared mainly by people of lower social standing, peasants and workers.

<sup>12</sup> NARK, f. 865, op. 1, d. 9/47, pp. 231, 260, etc.

<sup>13</sup> NARK, f. 865, op.1, d. 9/47, p. 43; d. 9/45, p. 46.

<sup>14</sup> NARK, f. 865, op. 1, d. 9/48, p.122.

cases) a small provincial town. In this report under “social standing” there were three choices: “a peasant-kolkhoznik,” “an individual peasant”( in the minority), or “a worker.” Five indicated themselves as “farm laborers” (“batraki,”) other five as “state employees.”

Nevertheless, the rotation among the hired armed guards was so high that only few guards overstayed their initial contract term. The same was the case in other platoons.<sup>15</sup> Only five guards arrived in the BBLag in 1931, while the rest started their term in 1932 or in 1933.

This phenomenon can be easily explained by the fact that living and working conditions of the guards were truly pathetic. However, the aspirations of these people were also very limited. The description of the discussion between an inspector and the armed guards that took place during the inspection of one of the BBK armed guard platoons discloses that although the guards suffered from extreme poverty and deprivation, they were not totally discontented. The questions posed by the guards to the inspector were devoted to the petty complaints of daily life, such as how to compensate for a stolen pillow case, how to get new clothes, how to get better kitchen facilities ; other complaints ranged from delayed salary to poor meals.<sup>16</sup> In some of the BBK subsections the guards and firemen, although still formally employed, had given up their duties and made their living as the shoemakers, artisans, and cooks.<sup>17</sup>

Watching movies was the favorite pastime of all the BBLag guards, one of the few features of the “Bolshevik culture” that was accepted, beloved and served as a very good distraction from the gloomy reality.<sup>18</sup> The local communists attempted to use this affection to their own means through alluring the workers into the clubs on the pretext of watching a movie and then turning it into a Communist propaganda meeting first/or instead, placing guards outside of the club so that no one would leave it.<sup>19</sup> Sport games,

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<sup>15</sup> NARK, f. 865, op. 1, d. 11/53, pp. 471, 472.

<sup>16</sup> NARK, f. 865, op. 1, d. 12/57, pp. 475- 477.

<sup>17</sup> NARK, *Stalinskaia Trassa*, issue 16, February 2, 36, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Criminal cases, started at BBK in the 1930-s, reveal that pastime, and aspirations of the BBK contract workers and ex-prisoners that hardly extended above drinking. It is interesting that these workers, living in the same barracks for many years, and addressed each other by nicknames “Vaska”, “Kuzka” could not even remember the surnames of their friends/neighbors during the interrogations or appeared to never know them.

<sup>19</sup> A number of the criminal cases instigated on the article 58 disclose the frictions/conflicts between the workers and the local administration and the party activists on this issue. Archiv MVD.

especially football, was another favourite pastime of the camp hired staff and the camp guards.<sup>20</sup>

The uncontrollability of what was going on in the armed guard detachments was displaying itself already on the level of platoon –battalion,<sup>21</sup> and was very well reflected in the appraisals of the guards, composed by their platoon commanders. For example, the part called “features of personality,” and describing relations with other guards and the commanders is formalistic. All appraisals fall into three distinctive types.<sup>22</sup>

Denunciations among the guards were not infrequent. They were sent to the regimen commander. The subjects ranged from exposing damaging details of a colleague’s biography, such as his being a priest in the past,<sup>23</sup> or an accusation of “speculation,” which was rampant among the guards and ranged from selling a piece of clothing to prisoners to having a lively trade with them.<sup>24</sup> Other denunciations disclosed “mixing” with the z/k women.<sup>25</sup>

For some Soviet people the position of an armed guard was a starting point in the “GULAG career”. As it will be demonstrated later, many of the guards were soon promoted to the positions of the mid and high rank administrative staff. Building a career inside the GULAG system was not the only way to get out of poverty and deprivation. Some of the guards somposed petitions saying they would like to “enhance their political and military skills in the ‘normal’ OGPU-NKVD school. Soon they received a transfer to these institutions.”<sup>26</sup>

In the 1930s all employees of the Investigatory-Chekist Section of the camp prior to their arrival in the GULAG had had a working experience in the CHEKa, (later

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<sup>20</sup> Criminal cases

<sup>21</sup> The reports on the state of affairs in the BBK VOKHR platoons dated April, 1934 demonstrate that for the most part these reports were treated so superficially that the absurdities were widespread. Gratitude was repetitively expressed for the “sleeping while on duty” in 1, 2,3,4, 5, 7, 9 and Solovki separate platoons and Murmansk platoon. Fake reports included absurdities such as mentioning that all the guards in platoon were “on vacation.” Illiterate and obscure language of the reports on the accidents made impossible to understand what had happened. NARK, f. 865, op.1, d. 11/25, pp. 247, 305. Its interesting however that normally the “gratitude” to the guards in the “journal of disciplinary sanctions and encouragements” was expressed for such things as “leaving the bed tidy.” (f. 865, op. 1, d. 9/48, p. 76.)

<sup>22</sup> NARK, f. 865, op. 1, d. 10/49. Overall there were 60 appraisals reviewed.

<sup>23</sup> NARK, f. 865, op. 1, d. 12/57, p. 148.

<sup>24</sup> NARK, f. 865, op.1, d. 11/53, p. 204.

<sup>25</sup> NARK, f. 865, op. 1, d. 10/50.

<sup>26</sup> NARK, f. 865, op. 1, d. 11/53, p. 487.

OGPU) in the court, or in the regional Investigatory Department (*Ugolovnii Rozisk*).<sup>27</sup> Similarly to the one of a guard, the position of an ISCH officer was frequently occupied by promoted workers, (“vidvizhentsi”) who had committed a duty crime. Some of them prior to their arrest had occupied ‘position of responsibility.’<sup>28</sup> Many of the officers had long sentences and were sentenced for various crimes starting with murder,<sup>29</sup> and ending with the “abuse of power during the collectivization.”<sup>30</sup>

The majority of the BBLag Chekists were recruited by the ChK-OGPU-NKVD in the middle or at the end of 1920s, after having worked in a factory, or on a construction site. Thus, the route from an unemployed worker, registered at the local employment office to a responsible position in Moscow, Leningrad or in the provinces and later in the GULAG was usual for Soviet Chekist and made a pattern of social mobility within the Soviet society.

In 1937, for example, the majority of the employees of the Third Department of the BBK NKVD, who participated in implementing order № 00447 in the BBK came from the poorest peasant or working class background. They were recruited into the GULAG system after their service in the Red Army. Some of them were promoted by the local party organization.<sup>31</sup> Almost all of them had only primary education or none at all. An exception was an assistant to the chief of the Third Department BBK NKVD, Alexander Shondysh, who in 1927 graduated from the Herzen Pedagogical University in St-Petersburg.

Among ten officials of the Third Department of the BBK NKVD, who had taken the most active part in the repressive operations, only two were sentenced to death.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> NARK, f. 865, op.1, d. 9/47, pp. 1-430.; In the questionnaires of the former Cheka-ISCH employees the graph “work experience” was left blank, despite the fact that the “main profession” was indicated as a working specialty. They obviously did not work a day on their main profession. NARK, f. 865, op. 1, d. 9/47, p. 257.

<sup>28</sup> NARK, f. 865, op.1, d. 11/53, p. 259. NARK, f. 865, op.1, d. 9/47, p. 244.

<sup>29</sup> One such a prisoner, sentenced for murdering his wife, was working as a KVCh instructor at a time of his application for a guard position. NARK, f. 865, op.1, d. 9/47, p. 27. In general among KVCh chiefs and instructors in this camp murderers were not infrequent. NARK, f. 865, op.1, d. 11/53, p.409-410; NARK, f. 865, op.1, d. 9/47, p. 260.

<sup>30</sup> As a rule these individuals had worked in the lowest and middle ranks of the Soviet state security organs, the CHK-OGPU-NKVD. NARK, f. 865, op.1, d. 9/47, p. 54-57; p. 254.

<sup>31</sup> A note from the TsA FSB RF (Central Archive of the FSB of the Republic of Karelia), (*Informatsionnaia spravka po sledstvennim delam*), issued on December 21, .2005.

<sup>32</sup> During the process that lasted on May 24-30, 1939 the military tribunal of the NKVD troops of the Leningrad region sentenced the assistant to the chief of the BBK Third Department Alexander Shondysh

Pavel Dolinsky, the chief of the Third Section of the Third BBK Department from the first of December 1938 until April 16, 1939 and the one who reported on the prisoners' cases during the *troika*'s meetings, was arrested on April 13, 1939. Following the trial that lasted from May 24 to May 30 the same year the Military Tribunal sentenced him to a year of imprisonment reduced subsequently to "corrective labour" for the same period of time with the 10% loss in the salary.<sup>33</sup> An officer from the fifth section of the BBK Third Department, - Fyodor Volkov, arrested on July 21, 1938, was sentenced by the Military Tribunal in January 1939 to six years of imprisonment in a camp without loss of civil rights. On September 23, 1939, according to the decision of the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR, the length of his sentence was reduced to one year of corrective labour. After the sentence was reviewed he was released immediately on the basis of having already served time. from May 30, 1939."<sup>34</sup> An assistant to the chief of the first section of the Third Department Michail Pletz, who in the course of the executions had issued "criminal orders on torture and beatings of the convicts," during the process was sentenced to four years of imprisonment in a camp. Soon thereafter, the Supreme Collegium reduced his sentence to two years."<sup>35</sup>

In some cases the subsequent review of a sentence resulted in its being increased. The commander of the armed guard division of the Third Department Nikolai Mironov, arrested on July 8, 1938, was placed on a probationary period of four years. By the decision of the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR, issued on September 23, 1939, the sentence of the Military Tribunal was reversed as "inadequately mild." On December 25, 1939 he was sentenced again, this time to a sentence of two years and six months in prison, without the loss of electoral rights.<sup>36</sup>

Formal punishment in the form of salary deductions was applied to executioners of the lowest ranks.<sup>37</sup> Apart from the welfare privileges (pensions and numerous benefits), the NKVD (later MVD) provided them with the confidentiality, anonymity and security. Their involvement in the executions was denied and their real place of service

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and the chief of the fifth section of the BBK Third Department Ivan Bondarenko to capital punishment on the basis of article 193-17 "b" of the criminal code. On October 20 the sentence was carried out.

<sup>33</sup> Informatsionnaia spravka.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

was concealed, often replaced by another occupation altogether such as a contract worker in forestry. In the course of the regional party committee meetings starting from January 1939, officials who had taken an active part in the implementation of the Terror were promoted in the NKVD hierarchy.

The chiefs of the managerial sections and departments, commandants of the special labour settlements, political instructors, chiefs of the camp guards subdivisions, and Political Sections, chiefs of the BBK subsections, KVCh chiefs employed on the contract basis for the most part were either released prisoners or promoted BBK-BBLag workers of the poorest peasant/working class background who had started their career within the BBK system.<sup>38</sup> Their balance slightly changed with time with significant decrease at the end of 1930s. But even in February 1939, after the repressive operations within the camps' system, out of 5395 contracted employees of the BBLag 1893 were ex-prisoners. From this number 424 employees had been sentenced for 'counter-revolutionary' crimes. In the administration of the camp from 557 hired employees 259 were ex-prisoners. From this number 126 were registered as "counter-revolutionaries." In the Section of Finances and Planning, in the Central Accounting Department the leading administrative staff (the chiefs of the departments) had previously been sentenced for 'counter-revolutionary' crimes.<sup>39</sup>

The number of administrators recruited by the Combine 'from outside' was very limited. The BBLag employees of low ranks made a major source for contracted mid-rank contracted Combine administrators. The majority of them arrived in the GULAG as guards through recruitment. During their term they were promoted first to the post of a commander of the armed guard platoon or a political instructor. Later they were promoted to the position of a chief of a camp subsection or a commandant of a labour settlement.<sup>40</sup>

The educational level of mid-rank Combine administrative staff was rather poor. The majority of the commandants of the special settlements, applying to the positions of

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<sup>38</sup> The applications for the positions of the chiefs of the election commissions to the Supreme Soviet from the Medvezhegorsk district in 1936 were taken as a basis for this kind of research. Overall 39 application was reviewed. NARK, f. 865, op. 1, d. 67.

<sup>39</sup> *GULAG v Karelii*, p. 163.

<sup>40</sup> The only exception was the case when a person went to work for the BBK following a recruited spouse. NARK, f. 865, op.1, d. 67, p. 36.

NARK, f. 865, op. 1, d. 67, pp. 5, 29, 30, 39.

the chiefs of the electory commissions indicated their educational level as “the lowest.”<sup>41</sup> Their application letters and autobiographies display a huge variety of orthographic and stylistic mistakes. This was true also of those individuals, whose former job demanded dealing with the documents.<sup>42</sup>

Not a single individual descended from the family of the state employees (sluzashchie). Similar to the cases of the camp guards, the majority described harsh material conditions in their childhood. The only exception was the case of a BBK employee who went to work there following a recruited spouse.<sup>43</sup> A former Ukrainian peasant even described in detail the cattle owned by his family.<sup>44</sup>

The same can be said about the secretaries of the election committees.<sup>45</sup> Out of 30 applicants not a single one had higher education, and only few had completed the secondary school. Nevertheless, some of these applicants were employed as school instructors at the special settlements.

Role of membership in the Communist party in an administrative career in the camp deserves special attention. It is possible to suppose that certain positions, especially those demanding professional skills, did not preconceive the membership in the Communist party: there were no specialists to fill them. But in general, as it was outside of the camp, party membership made moving up on the administrative hierarchy much easier. It is interesting, that even in 1939 among the BBK Communists there were no representatives of the medical staff, engineering and technical staff, and, and what more surprisingly, very few chiefs of the camp subsections. But almost all employees of the Third Department, political instructors of the VOKHR units, and commanders of VOKHR units, instructors of the Political Sections were the members of the Communist party.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, the highest level for promoted workers, (vidvizhentsi) was represented by the positions of the highest BBK administrative staff. The chief of the BBK from 1937 to 1941 Mikhail Timofeev, a protégée of Nikolai Ezhov, who propagated and actively

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<sup>41</sup> Some of the autobiographies actively use Bolshevik rhetoric, some of them present a unique mixture of old Slavonic words, Russian language, Bolshevik rhetoric and Ukrainian.

<sup>42</sup> NARK, f. 865, op.1, d. 9/47, p. 322.

<sup>43</sup> NARK, f. 865, op.1, d. 67, p. 36.

<sup>44</sup> NARK, f. 865, op.1, d. 67, p. 67.

<sup>45</sup> NARK, f. 865, op.1, d. 13/68.

<sup>46</sup> Garf, f. 9414, op. 3a, d. 1, p. 10.

supported the policy of the purges,<sup>47</sup> was of urban working class background. He passed a typical route from the errand boy in the Fershtadt store in Peterburg to the member of the CheKa. During the revolution of 1917 and the Civil War he served in the various kinds of extraordinary commissions: chrezvichaikakh, and troikah. Later, during 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s he worked “in the most crucial areas of the Chekist work in the Special Departments in the Ukraine, disclosing and fighting the enemy groups” and got an award for his “ruthless fight with the enemies of the people.” He left his post of a BBK chief in 1941 for the position of the chief of the GULLP.<sup>48</sup> He survived the purges and retired in 1956 from this post, with a wide range of state awards and medals.<sup>49</sup>

The life and career of a former Solovki inmate Naftalii Frenkel has become a subject of interest for many scholars. Many of them used the references of other prisoners and anecdotal evidence as a source.<sup>50</sup> Sentenced for the ten year camp imprisonment by the Collegium of the OGPU on the basis of the articles 57, 98 and 188 of the Soviet penal code (illegal crossing of the Soviet border, contrabanda and fraud),<sup>51</sup> after completion of the canal construction he was appointed as the Chief of the BAM (Baikal- Amur Route) administration of the GULAG OGPU. On October 29 he was granted a rank of the General-Lieutenant of the Engineering-Technical Service, and on April 28, 1947 he proceeded to an honorary retirement, accompanied by numerous state awards.<sup>52</sup>

Chief of the 8<sup>th</sup> BBLag subdivision Semeyon L. Moiseev, a descendant from a working class family, passed a route from a ‘fallen Chekist’, sentenced to several years of imprisonment for a ‘duty crime,’ to a high rank BBK boss. As many other GULAG Chekists, in the course of the 1930s he was removed from his position and rearrested for several times.<sup>53</sup> The fate of this protégé of N. Frenkel, who managed to save his life and

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<sup>47</sup> As the BBK press commented, “from the first days of his work in the BBK eradicated and crushed the enemy groups, that had been hiding in the BBK apparatuses *Stalinskaia trassa*, no. 57, June 17, 1938, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> The Administration of the Forestry camps of the NKVD (later the MVD) of the USSR.

<sup>49</sup> N. V. Petrov, K. V. Skorkin, *Kto rukovodil NKVD 1934-1941*, spravochnik (Moscow: Memorial, 1999). Internet, <http://www.memo.ru/history/nkvd/kto/biogr/index.htm>, accessed on August 27, 2006.

<sup>50</sup> K. Gnetnev, *Kanal*, p. 22, A. Applebaum, *The Gulag: A History*.

<sup>51</sup> Arkhiv MVD, f. 72, op. 01, d. 3107, p. 5. The case also sheds light on his education: instead of the degrees in economics and law he supposedly held, it indicates professional training of “an agronomist.” Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> O. Khlevniyk, *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror*, p. 348.

<sup>53</sup> NARK, personal fond of B. Moiseev; Gnetnev, *Kanal*, p. 124.

retain a “GULAG career” demonstrates that for the GULAG Chekists the connections within the GULAG system were of primary importance.

At the level of high rank administrative staff an administrator usually fulfilled several duties. For example, Moiseev combined the titles of a caretaker of the 8<sup>th</sup> subsection and the Chief of the ISCh of Management of the Solovetskih and Karelo-Murmanskikh ITL.<sup>54</sup> Such practice was typical for other forced labour enterprises. Fulfillment of the duties of an administrator, investigator, and the procurer by one person had several rationale behind it. First, it was supposed to contribute to the fulfillment of economic plans by raising the level of responsibility of an administrator and increasing his power. It also reflected severe lack of hired personnel. This practice, started during the BBCanal construction, was used during the entire existence of the Combine.

Z. A. Almazov-Almazyan (Almazov) occupied the post of the BBLag chief from October 7, 1936 to June 13, 1937 combining it with the positions of the chief of the BBK and an assistant to the chief of the GULAG.<sup>55</sup> This GULAG boss with the working class background also advanced from the lowest positions. After his swift promotion within the GULAG hierarchy, he was arrested and executed in 1937.

But the most important outcome of the personnel shortage was the fact that starting with the White-Sea Canal Construction, prisoners were employed not only as the camp guards, but also in all the administrative sections, technical bureaus, as engineers, statisticians, accountants.<sup>56</sup> Many of the industrial enterprises of the GULAG at that time, including the White-Sea canal, de facto run by the imprisoned specialists, officially “chief engineers,” de jure were headed by the hired party members. After the end of the canal construction almost all administrators, engineers and qualified technical specialists were transferred to the Moscow-Volga canal construction.<sup>57</sup> A smaller part went to the central GULAG apparatus in Moscow, few remained at the BBK.

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<sup>54</sup> Gnetnev, *Kanal*, p. 131.

<sup>55</sup> Spravochnik po GULAGu, p. 9.

<sup>56</sup> KGANI, f. 214, op. 1, d. 27, p. 73. GARF, f. 9414, op. 1, d. 3, p. 71; d. 12, p. 39.

<sup>57</sup> TSAODM, f. 3352, op. 3, d.3, p. 3. (Where, after the end of this canal construction, all these Chekists with their chief (head of Dmitlag) S. Firin altogether 119 individuals were arrested and shortly executed.

In the first half of 1930s the staff of the Department of the Registration and the Allocation of the Prisoners (URO) of the BBK consisted of 420 employees. Almost all of them were prisoners, formerly prominent economists, statisticians and the engineers.<sup>58</sup>

In the necessity to run the enterprise based on the camp labour and fulfill the economic plans the GULAG bosses were destined to constant compromises between the “Bolshevick principles” and the reality. After the end of the Canal construction almost all the specialists and “rabsila” left the Canal. In 1934 The Head of the Canal Management Latsis proposed to attract the labour settlers to work for the Canal. The proposal was met with indignation: the Canal was a classified enterprise so it needed to be properly protected from the “enemies.” Latsis was removed from the Canal administration immediately. But soon the kulaks were invited to run the Canal infrastructure.<sup>59</sup>

The major positions in the Canal management during the 1930s were occupied by the best engineers in the country, “collected” by the OGPU in the course of the fabricated process on the “wrecking on water transport” and liberated in the 1930s. For example, in the course of the second half of the 1930s the position of the Chief Engineer of the Canal was subsequently occupied by three ex-prisoners, sentenced for ‘political’ crimes on the basis of article 58 of Soviet penal code. One of them, Alexey Vasilov, released in January 1936, in 1938 became the Chief engineer of the Canal. In 1939 he was promoted to the position of an assistant to the chief of the Canal construction.

Other prominent BBK engineers included Alfred Bekman, Mikhail Grigorovich, and Natalia Kobilyna ‘the famous female work superintendent’ of the Canal construction. Representatives of Russian pre-revolutionary nobility, educated in the best higher institutions of the country, they , as many other imprisoned engineers, after their release remained in the GULAG. Kobylina went to the Canal Moscow-Volga, both naval engineers after their liberation in mid-1930s remained at the BBK-BBLag and worked there until their retirement.

The reasons for their remaining in the GULAG included the difficulty of returning to Moscow or St Petersburg where they had worked prior to their arrest with a stigma of being imprisoned, and finding jobs there while in the GULAG they had earned the

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<sup>58</sup> Gnetnev, *Kanal*, p. 33.

<sup>59</sup> Gnetnev, *Kanal*, p. 194.

reputation of the high professionalism and were respected and stimulated by the means of rewards and bonuses.<sup>60</sup>

The fact that the positions of high standing were occupied by the prisoners imposed certain constraints on the GULAG bosses. At the beginning of the 1930s the difference between the hired staff and the certain categories of the prisoners (in particular, the engineers and the technical staff) was thoroughly concealed from everybody. It was expressed neither in clothes nor in lifestyle, so that even important camp officials did not know who among the ranks of the chiefs of the construction, managers, engineers, armed guards was a prisoner and who was not.

The imprisoned engineers called the few Chekists they worked with the “GULAG tribe.” This nickname was accepted the latter as a compliment, and as an expression of respect of their strength and devotion to their cause, while in reality it was a derogative.<sup>61</sup> The imprisoned specialists were provided with better living conditions and higher salaries than those of the ordinary z/k. Their average monthly salaries in the BBK were one hundred rubles, while the z/k’s engaged in hard manual labour ranged from seven to ten rubles.<sup>62</sup> Thus a special caste was created, with higher living standards and its own social life. The regime for them was very mild, especially during the beginning of the 1930s until the year 1937. Some of them, while on business trips to Moscow and Leningrad, were unguarded and lived at home.<sup>63</sup>

Medical and cultural institutions of the Combine were also run and staffed with the (ex) prisoners. Some of them belonged to medical elite of the country, and even in the conditions of imprisonment and exile conducted important research work. Surgeon Pribitkov, who worked in Medgora clinic. In the course of his work during the years 1933-1939 he carried out 2200 various operations the only exception being brain cancer. Working simultaneously in two BBK hospitals and a clinic, in six day week he made 4-5 operations, not counting the cases of injury. At the same time in 1939 he completed a solid work devoted to petty surgery.<sup>64</sup> Abram Shapiro, a country-renown venerologist

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 221.

<sup>61</sup> Gnetnev, p. 124.

<sup>62</sup> S. Kuzmin, “Lagerniki”// *Molodaia Gvardia*, 1993, no. 3, p. 161.

<sup>63</sup> GARF, f. 9414, op.1, d. 7, p. 15.

<sup>64</sup> Built and opened in 1935, together with the central hospital, it was part a “sanitary town,” *Sangorodok*, where the new branches of medicine, based on the contemporary achievements of the medical research and

and the author of 25 scientific works on venereology, educated in Germany, during the second half of the 1930-s worked in the BBK clinic and after his liberation served as a head of its party committee.

Many of the released artists, conductors, composers from St.Petersburg and Moscow, afraid of losing NKVD protection, remained in the theatres as free individuals on a contract basis. For example, Leonid Teplitsky (the creator of the first jazz-band in Leningrad) liberated in 1933, he went to Leningrad. Being unable to get a registration there, he returned to Karelia and from 1<sup>st</sup> of June 1935 was employed as the chief conductor of Karelian Republican Symphony Orchestra of the House of the National Culture (later Karelian State Philharmonic). An ex-prisoner Raisa Zherebtsova (Evers), at the end of her two year contract with the BBK Central Theatre in 1938 remained there as a contracted conductor and stage director.<sup>65</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The border between imprisonment and freedom, between ‘the camp’ and ‘the mainland,’ between being a camp prisoner and a camp employee was more blurred and elusive than it seemed to be. The practices of the prisoners employed as the camp guards, as technical specialists indistinguishable from other administrative personnel, and ex-prisoners remaining to serve the camp challenge much received wisdom about the camps.

The GULAG dragged people into its universe and it was difficult for them to leave it even after their formal release. Its enterprises penetrated the regions where they were established making forced labour an integrate part of local life.

Even the pioneer camps in the region were also managed by the GULAG. Their organization and management was provided by the “morally stable” “z/k labourforce” with few hired workers.<sup>66</sup> The GULAG appointments and careers were the manifestation of the gap between the Bolshevick intentions and the reality: certain “enemies” were so indispensable that not only survived the purges and lived happily thereafter, occupying

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medical technology. The clinic contained the cabinets of the doctors of all basic specialties, X-ray cabinet, physiotherapeutic section with hydropathical baths, with all major kinds of physiotherapy. The clinic was supposed to serve BBK hired staff and the local population.

<sup>65</sup> *Solovki* official website, <http://solovki.info/?action=archive&id=237>

<sup>66</sup> NARK, f. 865, op. 2, d. 1/2 p. 2-3.

positions of high standing. This was especially true in relation to the technical specialists and medical personnel.

If the jobs demanding professional skills in the Combine were occupied by the (ex-) prisoners, among whom there were many so-called “*bivshikh*,” specialists with higher education and diverse social background,<sup>67</sup> the positions of the armed guards and administrators of various ranks for the most part were filled by the hired individuals of modest social background, or ex-prisoners sentenced for other than “political” crimes. Harsh living and working conditions resulted in high turnover and large proportion of the prisoners among the guards. Even in 1939 in many camp subsections the hired armed guards were residing in crummy communal apartments together with their families, (since construction of the living quarters was almost absent at the Combine) sometimes without electricity and the radio.<sup>68</sup>

While some guards indulged in drunkenness, co-habitation with the z/k, desperation and despondent “moods” resulting in frequent suicides of the komsostav of certain parts of VOKHR,<sup>69</sup> others made use of the possibilities life offered to them and advanced in the camp hierarchy. Research into the social background of the middle and higher rank hired BBK staff reveals that many of the chiefs of the managerial sections and departments, Third Department officers, commandants of the special labour settlements, political instructors, chiefs of the camp guards subdivisions, chiefs of the BBK subsections, KVCh chiefs employed on the contract basis for the most part were promoted workers of the poorest peasant/working class background.

Many of them arrived in the GULAG as guards through recruitment. During their term they were promoted first to the post of a commander of the armed guard platoon or a political instructor. Later they were promoted to the position of a chief of a camp subsection or a commandant of a labour settlement.

Promoted workers, (*vidvizenzi*) made up an important source also for the highest BBK administrative staff. All these facts provide an alternative to the commonly accepted vision of the camps, provided by the ex-prisoners, coming from the educated

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<sup>67</sup> The only source that presents the information on the social background of the Combine management, is *Pominalnie spiski Karelii*.

<sup>68</sup> NARK, *Stalinskaia Trassa*, issue 89, 24.06.1939, p. 3.

<sup>69</sup> NARK, f. 865, op.1, d. 10/51, p.40-43, 92, etc.

and well-off families, for whom the camp experience was a degradation from their relatively high social and economic status prior to imprisonment. Still, many of the poor and uneducated also died or were mistreated.

Moving up to higher ranks gave certain advantages for the “GULAG careerists.” They could join the local party nomenclature as a closed cast with internal rotation of personnel, closed distributors (of commodities), as well as behavioral codes and rituals.

By the second half of 1930-s the system of special networks of commodities (*raspredi*) for the certain groups of hired staff, with the special reservation system<sup>70</sup> was already developed in all sections and regional subdivisions of the BBK. For example, a letter to the editorial office of *Stalinskaia Trassa* in May 1938 complained:

“all sought-after products, such as butter, pork, salted fish have suddenly disappeared from the stores of *Segezstroy*. It turned out that the employees of the department of the general supply have organized a genuine hidden distribution network. The “table of orders” of the store number one contains a list of the “privileged” part of the staff, that enjoy a home delivery of a wide variety of high quality products.”<sup>71</sup>

The same situation existed in other BBK subdivisions, and small lagpunkts, where the goods were sold “under the shelves,” according to the lists composed by the chief of the subdivision.<sup>72</sup> This was not only the case with the main stores, but also with petty trade units, dolly shops in the remotest and smallest settlements.

The households of the BBK administrative staff were provided with housemaids from the ranks of the special settlers. By the end of the 1930s this practice had become fully accepted, and the only concern the Combine management expressed in relation to this matter was the concern over able-bodied settlers. Orders were issued demanding their replacement with the settlers with a poorer state of health so that to prevent “the distraction of labour force from fulfillment of the state tasks.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> NARK, *Stalinskaia Trassa*, issue 13, 26.01.36, p. 12.(-)

<sup>71</sup> NARK, *Stalinskaia Trassa*, issue 32, 5.05.1938, p. 4.

<sup>72</sup> NARK, *Stalinskaia Trassa*, issue 64, 4.07.1938, p. 4; issue 9, 18. 01.1939, p. 3.

<sup>73</sup> NARK, f. 865, op. 1, d. 3/15, p. 181.