

Defending the Rights of Gulag Prisoners:

The Story of the Political Red Cross between 1918 and 1938

“Each individual has the opportunity to defend his rights. Each individual can protect himself against violations of the law”¹

“The law is a taiga and the procurator is a bear”²

“The state donated money for the very people, whom it had put in jail – isn’t that intriguing?”³

The Soviet Union was not supposed to be a country of arbitrariness and lack of rights. To the contrary, revolutionary law and socialist legality had to rule over everybody and legal defense had to be provided to every arrested individual. A number of Soviet central agencies aimed at curbing illegal practices in the administration of justice. The All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK), the Legal Department of the Commissariat of Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspection (Rabkrin), the Soviet of People’s Commissars (SNK), the Commissariat of Justice (NKIu), the Office of the Procurator (Prokuratura), and the Commissariat of Inner Affairs (NKVD) were all in part responsible for guaranteeing the respect of laws and directives regulating imprisonment.⁴ Soviet citizens arrested for political crimes sent to these organs their petitions for release through the prison superintendents. In many respects, the Political Red Cross (*Politicheskii Krasnyi Krest*) was just another supervisory institution. And yet, it was unique and special, because it was the only Soviet agency that, besides exerting control over the Gulag, made help to political prisoners its *raison d’être*, its primary and explicit goal.

While the state was imprisoning its - real or imagined - political opponents by the hundreds and thousands, it also permitted the existence of an organization whose job was

to help them. As a non-governmental society legally operating in the Soviet Union from 1918 to 1938, the Political Red Cross (hereafter PRC or the Cross, as its members called it) fulfilled a necessary function, because there was no other state bureau that could adequately engage the human needs of political prisoners and their families. As the institutional site for help to prisoners and control over legality in the Gulag, the PRC had an impact on the police and investigation organs.⁵ The very existence and the activities of an organization able to secure some leniency for political prisoners raise important questions about the hegemony of the Stalinist state, the meaning of resistance, and the expectations of state authorities, prisoners, and social activists. In my view, the PRC is emblematic of the paradoxical coexistence in the Soviet Union of the 1920s and 1930s of hatred for people classed as “enemies” and notions of human dignity and rights expressed through assistance to the suffering prisoners and their families. This article analyzes how the PRC members (the *krasnokrestovtsy*) articulated the idea of prisoners’ protection against the abuses of state officials and what this meant in terms of their relationship with the state.⁶

While Gulag memoir literature has popularized the image of the Soviet prison as a place of arbitrariness and abuse of authority, where the state could heavy-handedly interfere in the lives of its subjects, this article reveals - without whitewashing the real tragic conditions of Soviet prisons and camps - how the PRC used legislation, notions of morality, and personal connections to claim prisoners’ rights to legal help, a just treatment during imprisonment, and material assistance for them and their families. Through negotiations with the state organs, the PRC attempted to alleviate the fate of individuals condemned for political crimes. Sometimes it achieved its goal on legal grounds, other

times on moral grounds, and, when all the rest failed, through personal networks of patronage.⁷ Thus, prisoners' rights depended on law as well as on conceptions of morality, on the authorities' whim and on the *krasnokrestovtsy's* good relations with them.

The fundamental basis for any study of the relationship between Soviet law and terror is constituted by John Hazard's works. In this paper I largely build upon Hazard's recognition that Soviet law instituted procedural guarantees and provided for citizens' rights as well as upon his claim that draftsmen and legal practitioners were battling over the rights of the accused. However, Hazard's work is biased by a stark juxtaposition between the thrust to legality of the benign Leninist formative years and a harsh Stalinist regime, characterized solely by terror and arbitrary power. In the conclusion of his *Settling Disputes in Soviet Society*, Hazard portrays the years from 1924 to 1953 as a nightmarish parenthesis in the development of Soviet legality. This view overlooks the impact of the Constitution of 1936 and the discussion of legal reforms which surrounded it. Other scholars have explained the Stalin Constitution in terms of appearance, propaganda, and mobilization strategy.⁸ Eugene Huskey has proposed a perceptive interpretation of "the paradoxical growth of both law and terror in the era of the Great Purges." According to Huskey, law was not used as a façade or a momentarily political tactic, but rather as a permanent "mechanism of repression and social control." This argument has moved legal historiography away from the impasse of interpreting the relationship between terror and law as one of reality versus appearance. Yet, Huskey's understanding of the legal system as a "mechanism of repression and social control" and his view of the Bar as breeding a spirit of opposition emphasize only the punitive side of

a state intent on instilling fear and despair. More recent works on the legal system in Stalinist Russia keep conveying the image of a state convicting and punishing its citizens. In *Soviet Criminal Justice under Stalin*, for instance, Peter Solomon insists on Soviet authoritarianism and portrays an extended net of repression loosened only by the disposition of some dissident judges.⁹ These approaches heighten the conflict between the state and some elite social groups and explain their relationship in terms of repression and resistance.

Contemporary Russian historiography, too, has tended to focus on the state's repressive policies, coming to the conclusion that the Politbiuro's actions bypassed all legal norms and conformed only to the favorite Bolshevik principle of revolutionary expediency. Depicting the activities of the Soviet repressive apparatus as extraordinarily cruel and arbitrary, many Russian political scholars continue to espouse the paradigms of the totalitarian regime and the leader's personality.¹⁰ In a recent work on the ideological battles of the first third of the twentieth century, K.N. Morozov has looked beyond the activities of the state machine in suppressing the socialist opposition and recognized that institutions such as the PRC and the Investigation Section of the Supreme Tribunal in fact attempted to soften the fierce prison regime. Nevertheless, he has framed the relationship between the state and the political prisoners exclusively in terms of "prison fight" – a battle that was fought through petitions and hunger strikes.¹¹ For him and other Russian authors writing on the PRC, political defense could be nothing else than the manifestation of oppositional attitudes towards the Soviet repressive regime.¹²

By combining political and legal history with a more broadly social perspective, some historians have denied the notion that Soviet people could opt only between

submission to tyranny and the hard and lonely path of dissent. Golfo Alexopoulos has found wide areas where even the imprisoned and exiled *lishentsy* could engage the system that marginalized them by reacting to discriminatory legislation, demanding some sort of protection against hunger and cold, and carving out rather autonomous spaces.¹³

While deploying the notion of resistance, Lynne Viola has avoided traditional simplifications by conceptualizing it as “part of a wide continuum” and by engaging the wide range of social and cultural complexities that usually inform it. In her opinion, it is largely the source lens of Stalinism that makes historians view actions as resistance.¹⁴

In line with this historiography, I think that a narrow story of resistance – either as political opposition or dissent – is not helpful in making sense of the PRC and its activists. Building on Primo Levi’s notion of the grey zone,¹⁵ I would rather suggest “liminality” as a more useful conceptual and analytical tool for understanding why and how the PRC emerged in 1918 and - more or less effectively - kept providing help to political prisoners until 1938. As a hermeneutical concept, liminality is the state of being both insider and outsider. As a method of analysis, liminality helps scholars of Soviet history avoid the classic opposition between believers and dissidents and rather shows the continuum between loyalty and resistance.¹⁶

Seen through the conceptual qualifier of liminality, the defense of political prisoners’ rights emerges as a reality of Soviet life between 1918 and 1938 which did not spell resistance. The PRC operated in symbiosis with state imprisonment practices as a hybrid structure shadowing the official police. Applying liminality, I interpret the *krasnokrestovtsy* as not as dissidents, but as social activists who operated as liaisons between the state and its needy Gulag population, advocating for the prisoners’ rights and

reminding the state of its duties towards them. Unlike their immediate predecessors (the revolutionaries of the 1880s who helped fellow party members agonizing in the tsarist prisons¹⁷) and their future heirs (the dissidents of the 1960s who also spurred practices of assistance to political prisoners¹⁸), the *krasnokrestovtsy* did not relate help to dissent, but rather combined civil engagement and loyalty. From the ethos and culture of the pre-1917 Russian intelligentsia, the PRC activists inherited the moral obligation to serve, but they “sovietized” it, that is combined it with loyalty to the state. This was an easy move to make, since the Soviet state itself constantly demanded social engagement (*obshchestvennaia rabota*) from its citizens. The *krasnokrestovtsy* accomplished the state mandate to be socially useful, but on their own terms: they linked themselves closely to the letter of the law and learned how to use legal provisions to protect the interests of – allegedly - harmful and dangerous elements. Like the dissidents of the Brezhnev era, the *krasnokrestovtsy* based their claims in laws and ideas of human rights. But, unlike the later *inakomyshchik*, the PRC activists spoke against illegality without openly criticizing Stalin’s policies, taking their ideas into the public sphere, prompting social change, or otherwise waging wars with the state.¹⁹ Their narratives and practices of help sometimes aimed at disrupting the all-pervasive state power, but at other times sustained it. This peculiar combination of civil engagement and loyalty to the existing government was the *sine qua non* condition for the PRC to accomplish its goals.

From its inception, the PRC took upon itself the role of a-political, non-party legal defender (*pravozashchitnik*) or rights’ advocate (*pravozastupnik*),²⁰ and defined political defense as the provision of a professional service to any individual accused of political crimes. The PRC did not mean its advocacy as political activity or as the ideologically

grounded defense of prisoners' rights. It rather attempted to establish humanitarian and legal criteria for determining prisoners' entitlements. In the Cross's view, humanity and necessity impelled the prisoners' right to material relief, while a legal (not political) line needed to be followed in assigning juridical help. However, the disputes that dominated the relations between the PRC and the police organs reveal that the issues of who should oversee the prisoners' welfare and perform supervisory functions in the Gulag - as well as how and why - were much more than simple a-political questions. In the way of the protection of prisoners' right was nothing less than state security.

The notion of "class enemy" and the use of coercive measures against this category of citizens altered and complicated the ideal of help. The Soviet legal system entailed punishment focused on the social defense of the Soviet citizenry from dangerous elements. In other words, state enemies, who had violated the social consciousness, deserved repressive measures to restrain them from interfering with citizens who lived according to the Soviet way. The *krasnokrestovtsy* presented themselves as advocates for the Union's imprisoned population against the social and political defense priorities of the state. Although the state indeed needed to take into account the ever growing population of prisoners and their families, how could the socially harmful and politically disloyal be helped? There was a dynamic tension between the PRC's concern for the personal suffering of unfortunate individuals and the police organs' desire to maintain social and political order. The *krasnokrestovtsy*'s humanitarian ethos contrasted with the extraordinary defensiveness of the Soviet government. The profoundly political character of prisoners' care and control became explicit every time the PRC activists competed

with the representatives of the police in defining politics of entitlement within the Gulag.²¹

Foundation, goals, and philosophical platform of the PRC

On January 30, 1918, the People's Commissar of Justice Isaak Shteinberg wrote a note to the "comrades" in the Commissariat for Judicial Cases asking them to "pay attention to Vinaver's proposal to establish a Political Red Cross in Moscow." He added that a similar institution already existed in Petrograd where "it works wonderfully."²² Shteinberg's letter offered ground to establish official relations between a relief organization on behalf of political prisoners and the judicial authorities. Following this letter, first the Commissar of Justice of the city of Moscow and the Moscow province and then the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission (hereafter Cheka) as well as other organs in charge of the prison system gave the members of the Committee of the Moscow Red Cross permission to visit places of imprisonment and meet with the prisoners' elders to enquire about their needs. As a member of the Moscow group said, "at a time when it is so difficult to feed the prisoners and the judicial apparatus is only taking shape, [this activity] is very essential both for the prisoners and the state."²³ "The practical usefulness of our efforts" argued the *krasnokrestovets* Nikolai Murav'ev in the first annual report to the general assembly of PRC members, "reconciled the state's representatives with our activities."²⁴

Like all the other Soviet societies, the Moscow Committee of the PRC had a statute. The PRC activists elaborated first a draft statutory document, which carried the signatures of the old revolutionaries Vera Nikolaevna Figner, Vera Ivanovna Zasluch, and German Aleksandrovich Lopatin. But the officially approved "Statute of the Russian

Society of the Red Cross for Help to Political Prisoners (Political Red Cross),” which was printed in Moscow in 1919, was signed by Mikhail L’vovich Vinaver as Chairman of the Moscow Committee.²⁵ The documents differed only in two points: the printed statute limited the activities of the PRC to the Moscow territory and, to prevent any doubt on the PRC’s loyalty, did not mention “moral support” to political prisoners as one of the Society’s stated goals. In all other respects the two texts were identical. They explained that the Society was established “with the goal to provide help to individuals deprived of freedom for political reasons without distinction of party membership and professed convictions.” They both emphasized that all actions undertaken by the PRC were within the limits of legality and that the PRC, unlike its tsarist homonymous predecessor, was not an underground society.

Thus, the distinguishing trait of Soviet social help to individuals accused of political crimes was the fact that it was provided by a state-recognized organ on a regular basis – as opposed to pre-revolutionary help, which was administered by an illegal organization. In order to turn the social defense of political prisoners into a state system, the *krasnokretovtsy* loudly proclaimed the principle of non-participation in politics not only in the Society’s statute, but also in a note that appeared in a few Moscow newspapers in May 1918.²⁶ At a time when the civil war was at its climax all over the territory of the new vast Soviet state, this principle was the only guarantee to preserve the newly organized institution and hope to achieve any results in its relief activities.

In the thoughts of the *intelligenty* and political activists who founded the PRC,²⁷ relief work for political prisoners had to be not only a-political, but also essentially non-party. This meant that help was provided to *anyone* deprived of freedom for reasons of

political and/or religious nature. This included all kinds of persons. Indeed, political sentencing was a blurred concept in the Soviet Union. The political section of the Criminal Code of 1922 was very elastic, because it included a long list of political offenses dubbed as “counterrevolutionary” and defined in the broadest terms. The Cheka issued general allegations and sometimes did not formulate any accusation at all. The majority of “politicals” were individuals who neither belonged to a party nor could be accused of specific political crimes. Most of the times, they were ordinary peasants who did not match the image of hard-boiled political opponents to the Soviet regime. Charges escalated from ordinary to political throughout the 1920s and 1930s: in the high-pitched atmosphere of the collectivization, acts that used to be treated as banal hooliganism, cases of negligence on the work, and ordinary offenses such as arson, assault, and murder, were re-qualified as political crimes and “political offenders” were sentenced to terms of 8-10 years or even to death.²⁸

Since the authorities could politicize almost any crime, the PRC’s advocates could take on almost any case without going beyond the limits of their jurisdiction. The Cross adapted its working definition of political prisoner to the practices of the police organs, but also to the pressure of petitioning citizens, who relied on the imprecise content of political crimes to draft extraordinarily diverse requests, complaints, and petitions. The PRC accepted as clients both “ideological political prisoners” (i.e., socialists and anarchists of all backgrounds) and ordinary persons, maintaining a distinction only between individuals accused of political crimes (*politicheskie zakliuchennyye*) and citizens arrested for penal crimes (*ugolovnyye arestovannyye*).²⁹ In addition, the PRC decided not to

limit itself to helping inmates, but to extend assistance to individuals recently released from prison and to the prisoners' relatives.

Improving the life of the Soviet people was a recurrent motif of official discourse, which mandated public assistance to all citizens in dire need who were ineligible for social insurance, unable to work, and without responsible relatives. In line with this discourse, the PRC organized the defense of those prisoners who were not economically self-sufficient and did not benefit from the care of close relatives. According to its statute, to accomplish this goal, the Society arranged frequent visits to the places of imprisonment - "with the permission of the authorities." It regularly offered meals and provided various foodstuffs, clothes, and medicines.³⁰ It interceded for the improvement of the conditions of imprisonment, for amnesties, and for reductions in the sentences. "Through all possible legal means," it facilitated visitations and written communication between the prisoners and their relatives and friends. It provided the prisoners with books, journals, and newspapers. It organized lectures, performances, concerts, and literary evenings to collect donations. According to the Society's statute, the PRC could publish books, brochures, journals, and newspapers "with humanitarian content." This point opened up space for the propaganda of humanitarian ideas and the elaboration of theoretical issues related to the condition of political prisoners. In practice, to the best of my knowledge, the PRC never published anything.³¹

Activists' visits to the places of imprisonment were a key component of the PRC's work and as such were the object of much negotiation with the state agencies. Already in August 1918, the Punitive Section of the People's Commissariat of Justice had issued a circular letter regulating prison visitation by the representatives of the PRC.³² The

organization's right of prison visitation (the door-opening *propusk*) was later confirmed by a resolution of the Presidium of the Cheka issued in February 1919. A telegram written by the head of the Cheka Council on May 16, 1921, informed all provincial chekists that the representatives of the PRC should be given permission to meet with the prisoners' elders. The PRC had a copy of this telegram and its delegates showed it to the guards in order to obtain access to prisons and camps.³³ In practice, the *krasnokrestovtsy* had to overcome a series of hindrances coming from the lower agents of state power. These, as Murav'ev put it, "considered the activity of our Society as 'counter-revolutionary' and were unable to comprehend the high idea of service to the human person which we adopted as our leading principle...They set up cavils and wrecked the nerves of our collaborators..."³⁴ In December 1921, the chekist Rozenblium cancelled the universal permission to access all camps which had been granted to most PRC's activists. Instead, he promised to give the *krasnokrestovtsy* L.E. Elliner and I.S. Kal'meer permission to visit any camp at any time if they had called him by telephone. Thus, after three-four years since the inception of their activities, the source of the activists' right to enter places of imprisonment moved from a piece of paper to a telephone call. The passage from bureaucracy to personal connections made the ground on which the PRC was standing shakier. The relevance of patronage networks became even more pronounced in the fall of 1922 when *propuski* were granted only personally to Peshkova and Vinaver.³⁵

1922 was indeed a crucial year in the life of the PRC. On June 12, a resolution of the Presidium of the VTsIK had established that all Soviet societies and associations (excluding the trade unions) needed to be registered with the Commissariat of Interior and that new societies could not be opened without proper registration and approval of

their statutes. All organizations which did not register within two weeks from the publication date of this resolution would be closed down. This legislation encouraged the development of mass civil association working in closer contact with state and party organs - and finding themselves under their immediate control.³⁶ The PRC sent a series of letters to the Moscow Soviet asking to officially register the Society. To make its case, the PRC reminded state authorities that it had emerged with the collaboration of the then Commissar of Justice Isaak Shteinberg. Although founded by individuals who took part in the pre-revolutionary red cross movement, it had always existed as "a-political organization" recognized by the Presidium of the VTsIK, the Cheka and the GPU, as well as personally by the Chairman of the Moscow Soviet L.B. Kamenev. These letters also articulated the forms of help offered by the PRC and showed that they were in accordance with the Soviet taxonomy of assistance: help to prisoners could be material (through the provision of foodstuffs, clothes, soap, etc.), medical (through the distribution of medicines), cultural-enlightening (through the supply of books to the prisons' libraries), and juridical (through the submission of official petitions to the GPU and the drafting of papers on behalf of the prisoners).³⁷ The PRC was assuming the new Soviet code and subculture of help not in a posture of resistance, but as a culturally transmitted way of being and performing a social duty.³⁸

Despite all explanations and argumentations, the PRC was closed down on August 25, 1922, and forced to interrupt its work for a few months. While the Society ceased existing as such, on November 11, 1922, the *krasnokrestovka* Ekaterina Pavlovna Peshkova was given a special written permission to help political prisoners and their families, both materially and legally. Not only could she receive petitions from prisoners,

but also organize collections of money and accept private donations on behalf of any individual imprisoned for political crimes. Among her “rights” as activist was also the permission to entertain official relations with the state organs. Peshkova’s status as activist was completely formalized: she had stationary paper and a seal with the engraving “E.P. Peshkova. Help to Political Prisoners” (Pompolit).

The “new” institution could hire its own employees and consultants. Officially, the Pompolit was made up of Peshkova and her aid Vinaver, while an additional group of 10-15 individuals figured on the register of employees as “technical personnel.” In practice, membership was drawn from previous *krasnokrestovtsy*.³⁹ Furthermore, the Pompolit inherited the property of the old organization and kept operating in its facilities (on Kuznetskii Most n. 16, at walking distance from the offices of the police organs on Lubyanka Square). And yet, there were some substantial differences between the PRC and the Pompolit. The latter did not preserve the official denomination of “society” (*obshchestvo*) or “civil organization” (*obshchestvennaia organizatsiia*) with a printed statute and, to the best of my knowledge, no document determined its precise status in the system of state institutions of the Russian Republic or the Soviet Union. Since its “rights” were granted by administrative organs without being confirmed by legal ones, they looked more like special permissions than legal rights. Most importantly, the Pompolit as relief organization could not visit prisoners in the Gulag. Peshkova and Vinaver - who were not elected by their peers, but nominated in their positions by the GPU - remained the only two persons holding *propuski*.⁴⁰

What was the PRC able to achieve in the midst of these restrictions? Until 1938 the PRC effectively performed the important function of information bureau able to

locate prisoners and communicate crucial information to their relatives. It also kept sending money and goods to prisons and camps all over the Soviet Union and successfully called off many death sentences by claiming that “death penalty should be abolished...for reasons of high humanity and for a principled negation of it.”⁴¹ In general, the potential for providing some forms of material help was greater than the odds of changing one’s sentence. By the early 1930s, the *krasnokrestovtsy*’s power to bargain was already decreasing, but their pushing and pulling could still lead to the vindication of prisoners’ rights. For instance, Vinaver, Peshkova, and Murav’ev devoted much energy to the defense of Pavel Nikolaevich Maliantovich, a member of the Moscow City College of Defenders who was accused of belonging to the central Bureau of the Menshevik party and condemned to 10 years of camp. “Talking” with the authorities and applying all possible legal norms, they obtained a change of sentence from Gulag imprisonment to exile minus 12. This was considered a good outcome because Maliantovich’s case was a difficult one and, as Vinaver admitted in his private correspondence with Kuskova, “the external proofs were against him.”⁴² Few years down the road, the *krasnokrestovtsy*’s intercessions will lose much of their effectiveness. Indeed, in 1938 Maliantovich’s sons, Vladimir and Georgii - who were also members of the Moscow College of Defenders – would be shot within one year from their arrest and despite the PRC’s hassling around them.

Finances

Contrary to Murav’eva’s words quoted in the epigraph to this paper, the PRC never enjoyed formal financial support from the state. Its stable material base consisted in mandatory membership fees, voluntary donations from various institutions and private

individuals, funds collected through lectures, concerts, and other performances, and the income from the Society's properties and capital management. Peshkova and Vinaver, who until 1937 freely moved through the Soviet border on Polish visas, brought back to Moscow donations from foreign friends. But, most importantly, the PRC received numerous parcels and a significant amount of cash from Russian political émigrés. In June 1926, one of the original founders of the PRC and by then political émigré Ekaterina Kuskova informed a Russian émigré organization based in Prague, that “it is extremely easy to send money to Ek. Pav. [You can send] a check through the bank – better not from an institution, but from a private person. She always sends back a receipt.”⁴³ Cash and checks went into a bank account opened in the name of Peshkova, but the inspectors of finance recognized that the money belonged to the PRC and did not tax Peshkova for it.⁴⁴ The flow of money into the PRC and its taxability status reveal once more the liminality of this institution and its members.

With the onset of the NEP, the PRC lost the possibility to receive foodstuffs and goods of basic consumption from state institutions. Without broad public support from non-governmental organizations and private individuals, argued the *krasnokresovtsy*, the Cross would have soon been unable to fulfill its humanitarian duties. Indeed, the PRC contacted several potential non-state sponsors with the plea to contribute by paying a membership fee (the minimum yearly fee was 20 rubles), making a donation, entrusting capitals to a *krasnokrestovets*, or establishing special commemorative funds. Introduction letters to donors invoked the category of *sochuvstvie* as compassion for the prisoners and sympathy for the ideas and work of the PRC. Political prisoners, who did not receive any assistance from outside sources, found themselves in the most arduous conditions. The

general penury of food that characterized many places of imprisonment was one of the most acutely felt problems, because it led to diets low in calories or - in the most frequent scenarios - to an insufficient intake of fats and absolute under-nutrition. This in turn caused extreme bodily emaciation and the spreading of serious diseases, such as typhus and scurvy, among the already sickly Gulag population. Describing political prisoners' "scandalous poverty" to prospective donors from Soviet civil society was a risky move because, while it induced compassion for the prisoners, it might also have aroused public indignation towards the state. To achieve empathy but at the same time avoid a sense of indignation, the *krasnokrestovtsy* wrote a few carefully crafted letters that positively emphasized the humanitarian and civil meaning of help to political prisoners.⁴⁵ Standing on the uncertain boundary between state and non-state institutions, the PRC offered a space for individuals to be involved in Soviet social activism, but not in a full-fledged public life.

Although after November 1922 the legal permission to continue the activities of the Moscow PRC was granted to Peshkova personally, she still tried to position the Cross in the Soviet institutional network of help and thus to maintain its sources of funding.⁴⁶ The PRC's financial situation, however, became increasingly more difficult. In the summer of 1926 Vinaver wrote to Kuskova that "although we are always broke and the support that we receive is small, we somehow manage to survive."⁴⁷ But, by the end of that year, he already defined the PRC's material situation as "nasty."⁴⁸ The Petersburg office of the PRC closed business in 1928 because it did not have money to pay for the rent.⁴⁹ In January 1935, Vinaver grimly predicted that "the Cross will materially survive for the next one-and-half year. I don't know what will happen after that."⁵⁰

The financial down slope of the PRC definitely contributed to its final closing in 1938. However, that lack of money was not the key reason for it. In the end, financial problems made many Soviet institutions ineffective, but they did not determine their closure. The profound motivations for the PRC's end lie elsewhere. I would argue that the liminality of this organization, which initially allowed it to operate in constructive collaboration with allied agencies, later brought the PRC to its deathbed. To understand this liminality and its changing meaning for the very existence of the PRC, I will reconstruct the dialogues entertained by the *krasnokrestovtsy* both with state authorities and with prisoners. Within this framework, one of my primary goals is to study the complex mutual influences between the state and the PRC understood as components of a unified system. The PRC will emerge as the official intermediary or middleman selected by both sides to conduct negotiations between them.

Dialogues: negotiating with the state

The PRC did not work in a vacuum. In providing help to the arrested, this relief organization largely cooperated with the state. Soviet organs not only let the Cross's representatives visit prisons and camps, but they also took into some account the requests and petitions submitted by the society and its legal defenders. Initially, the PRC attempted to make the cooperation with the state as broad as possible by maximally expanding the scope of its juridical help. Murav'ev, in particular, insisted that the provision of legal help be one of the immediate tasks of the PRC. Considering the growing need for court defense among the population, Murav'ev asked the Cassation Tribunal of the VTsIK to admit to its meetings defenders from the ranks of the PRC.⁵¹ In a letter to the People's Commissariat of Justice, the PRC argued that "the Extraordinary

Commission would be significantly more efficient, if the representatives of the Red Cross could take part in the defense in court. This would give the representatives of the Red Cross the opportunity to show their collaboration in the process itself and would release the representatives of the state from the necessity to study the petitions of the Red Cross.” The author of this letter also remarked that the College of Defenders was overloaded with work and did not have enough personnel. Finally, the PRC argued that "the non-party nature of our work completely guarantees the political loyalty of the Political Red Cross’s members." The impartial work of the PRC’s jurists, continued the letter, “could significantly help the uncovering of judicial truth.”⁵² As Murav’ev further explained in another letter to the Chairman of the Moscow Soviet, the PRC was neither the representative of the interest of single individuals nor a side in a case. Rather, it was interested in the just resolution of any case and had the mission to eliminate all possible injustices and mistakes.⁵³

The initial attempt to gain a larger and more solid space of judicial action failed and, in practice, the *krasnokretovtsy* could only “talk” with the authorities. The process of interceding on behalf of prisoners (the so-called *khodataistvo*) entailed a great deal of negotiation - both in written and oral form - with high administrative institutions. Several revolutionary tribunals as well as the agencies of the political police replied to the PRC’s enquiries concerning the arrested, reviewed its intercession letters, and kept it informed about their resolutions.⁵⁴ When the provincial Cheka sections delayed replying to the PRC or distributing the parcels that it sent for the politicals, the All-Russian Cheka ordered them to speed up their administrative procedures.⁵⁵ The People's Commissariat of Education and Rabkrin also held regular correspondence with the PRC.

A number of factors might have forced even the most intransigent Bolshevik leaders to do some maneuvering in the relationship with the *krasnokrestovtsy*: the shared experience of underground political activity before the revolution, the similar ideological base (since many individuals in the governing regime had a non-Bolshevik past), the revolutionary merits of some *krasnokrestovtsy* and their popularity among the democratic strata of the population, and - last but not least - the high international authority of Peshkova's husband Maxim Gor'kii. Common origins and year-long person contacts seem to have mattered a lot. Each *krasnokrestovets* had different personal connections. For instance, Vera Figner negotiated with the Central Committee of the Party, while lawyers like Murav'ev were in charge of submitting intercessions with the VTsIK.⁵⁶ The protocols of the meetings of the Moscow Committee of the PRC reveal that the chairman of the Moscow Soviet L.B. Kamenev was a big patron of the Cross, ready to intercede with the Cheka on its behalf. For instance, in December 1919, the PRC forwarded to Kamenev a telegram that it received from a group of politicals imprisoned in Nizhnii Novgorod and asked him to "give orders to satisfy this petition."⁵⁷ Vinaver and Murav'ev had frequent "talks" with Kamenev.⁵⁸ Supposedly following one of them, the chairman of the Moscow Soviet visited some prisons to check on their sanitary conditions, gave orders to the Moscow Cheka to keep the arrested in preventive imprisonment no longer than 48 hours, and promised to bring the issue of groundless arrests to the attention of the Moscow Soviet.⁵⁹ Another time, Murav'ev visited Kamenev and asked him to renew permission to visit the Butyr'skaia prison to all members of the Cross. Kamenev agreed to talk with Dzerzhinskii about this.⁶⁰ Although both Murav'ev and Vinaver had access to Dzerzhinskii, Peshkova was known as the one who could negotiate with "iron Felix" in a

more personal way.⁶¹ Unshlikht was reported to have “a not so bad attitude” towards the PRC and, indeed, he was the one who signed the permission for the PRC to continue its work in November 1922.⁶² Vinaver regularly met with Unshlikht and brought to his attention all issues of “unacceptable” chekists’ actions. If we believe Vinaver’s words, Unshlikht was unaware of the censurable facts occurring in the Gulag and promised to pay more attention and take measures to improve the prisoners’ fate.⁶³ Negotiations took regularly place with Messing, Prokof’ev, Gai, Menzhinskii, and Deribas. After Dzerzhinskii’s death in 1926, Iagoda usually had the last word: he could endorse or reject all the negotiations between the *krasnokrestovtsy* and the lower ranks in the police organs.⁶⁴

Both activists and state officials trod a fine line between formally defined and personally negotiated interactions. The *krasnokrestovtsy* frequently received visits from police officers, who came to Kuznetskii Most to discuss the affairs of the Cross. One day, towards the end of 1928, as Vinaver was attempting to intercede for some prisoners, the Cheka agent told him:

Let them file a petition. To this I replied that if this was an attempt to put us on our knees, of course, neither I nor Ek. Pavl. (who was standing by my side) would agree; but it is another matter if You mean it seriously without forcing us on our knees (*bez kolenok*). I did not get any clear answer.⁶⁵

As this episode reveals, the PRC was not willing to bend completely to the whim of the organs of police and investigation. To the contrary, it strove to preserve as much autonomy as possible. There was a sort of open dialogue between the *krasnokrestovtsy* and the state authorities: it was a constant bargaining, a pushing and pulling, in which each

side felt free to criticize the other in a more or less direct way. Thus, the relationship between the PRC and the state was neither one of opposition and resistance nor one of simple submission and blind loyalty.

In the management of prisoners, as in many other areas of public administration, Soviet agencies shared responsibilities and their functions often overlapped. Although the PRC aspired to a constructive collaboration with the police organs, the division of labor in caring for and controlling the prisoners could be fuzzy and intra-institutional frictions were at the order of the day at Kuznetskii most. Faced with a constant penury of qualified personnel, some state representatives even addressed single PRC activists with the offer to join state commissions for the management of prisons. However, the *krasnokrestovtsy* systematically turned down these propositions, preferring to play the role of prisoners' intermediary rather than merging with the state's organs and thus sharing with them the burden of responsibility for the ineffectiveness of their actions.⁶⁶

In their correspondence with Gulag superintendents, the *krasnokrestovtsy* made it always clear that they were acting as the advocates of prisoners whose relatives had asked for their intercession. In formulating complaints and demands, the PRC indicated concrete facts and specific cases; their motivations for help included pragmatic considerations such as the beginning of the cold fall season and the lack of heating in the cells, the penury of beds and sheets to sleep in, the spreading of epidemic diseases and the lack of medicines, as well as the ever present difficulties in the provision of foodstuffs. Sometimes the *krasnokrestovtsy* evoked less material reasons, but they always abstained from larger ideological discussions of why political prisoners should be helped. In conveying their clients' requests to the Cheka, the *krasnokrestovtsy* re-couched them in

the neutral language of Soviet bureaucracy, simply saying “the verdict is considered unjust.”⁶⁷ While in drafting longer letters the *krasnokrestovtsy* largely reiterated the prisoners’ reasoning and arguments, they always avoided politically charged tones. The *krasnokrestovtsy* preferred to assess socio-political phenomena through categories which were not related to politics, but to the realm of morality. These categories intersperse the correspondence with the state authorities and reveal a strong - although mostly implicit - moral and ethical component in the activists’ *weltanschauung*.

Poor health conditions were often evoked as a good motivation for helping prisoners. In a letter to the Presidium of the Cheka, the *krasnokrestovets* Iosif S. Kal’meer asked the temporary release of a group of prisoners who were to be transferred from prisons in Moscow and Vladimir to a camp in Tashkent. He motivated his request simply by saying: “among them are individuals emaciated by disease and long terms of imprisonment.”⁶⁸ In another letter the PRC interceded for a certain Isidor I. Ramishvilli, who was detained in the Iaroslavl’ political isolator. Isidor was 65 and sick with arteriosclerosis. In addition, he recently had contracted angina and his nerves were “greatly shaken.” Given his serious health condition, the PRC asked to move him to a sanatorium in Moscow. It also argued that this man had no intention to engage in political work and was so sick that he could not have done that even if he wanted to.⁶⁹ Old age, sickly conditions, and need of medical help were good reasons to move the prisoners to better places of detention, such as camps closer to a railway station or in good climatic regions.

Women prisoners, in particular, were frequently presented as sick and weak individuals whose fragile nervous system could be completely destroyed by

imprisonment and whose lives were threatened by the remoteness and cold of “the far North.” For instance, the PRC asked to release Tat’iana M. Uvarova explaining that this woman had already spent half of her term, but above all emphasizing that the prisoner suffered from an acute form of tuberculosis and “detention in prison is dangerous for her life.”⁷⁰

The motif of sickness easily combined with that of loneliness – a yoke that afflicted female and male prisoners alike. In a letter addressed to the Procurator of Samara, the prisoner Iulia N. Sadykova was portrayed as a “sick woman” suffering from heart disease: “life in Samara, where she does not know anybody, has serious negative effects on her.”⁷¹ Another time, the PRC asked to suspend the transfer of Konstantin A. Kontsevyi-Morshanskii from its current Moscow prison because he was “a sick man who needs the support of his family.”⁷²

On the grounds of family relations, the PRC often asked to send male prisoners to camps where they could be closer to their old mothers or wives with multiple young children. In a letter to the Commission on exiles of the Moscow section of the Commissariat of Inner Affairs (MKVD), the PRC asked to suspend the exile of a certain Genrigsen (also spelled Genriksen) to Norway as his country of origin, because his wife was pregnant and they had eight small children.⁷³ Loneliness and orphanhood, which are the reverse of family relations, are evoked not in a sentimental and melodramatic way, but with the matter-of-fact tone that characterized stern but just Soviet activists. Forwarding the petition of a daughter for the revision of her mother's case, Peshkova wrote: “on my end, I ask you to fulfill this petition since the 13-year-old Liubov’ Radtsig

remained alone after the arrest of her father and mother, and she does not have anybody who could take care of her."⁷⁴

Political prisoners were the yardstick of socio-political danger in the Soviet Union. As a counter-narrative to the official conceptualization of the politicals, the PRC often used prisoners' ignorance and darkness as exculpating devices and grounded humanitarian aid in their actual harmlessness as dark and ignorant persons. For instance, in a letter to the Presidium of the VTsIK, the PRC advocated for a certain Shal'gin who had been condemned to capital punishment for murder. The PRC was positive that "the serious crime committed by Shal'gin is the result of his low level of consciousness."⁷⁵ In a letter to the Office of the Procurator of Iaroslavl', the PRC emphasized that the prisoner Tamara I. Kochergina was only 19 and, because of her "extreme youth," her release would not represent a danger for the state regime and the social order.⁷⁶

When they deemed it fit, the *krasnokrestovtsy* played the cards of "correct" social origins, poor economic conditions, and potential usefulness for the "construction of socialism." In a letter to the Office of the Procurator of Viatka, the PRC asked to release the student of the Medical School V.A. Popova from exile. It argued that a long exile "would prevent her from finishing her medical education which would give her the possibility to find a socially useful job." In addition, the PRC referred to a directive of VTsIK on the improvement of the conditions of women prisoners to honor the "Day of the Woman Worker" (*den' robotnitsy*).⁷⁷ When the Railway Tribunal of the North Railway system condemned to death three of its employees because they hoarded and re-sold big amounts of salt and flour, the PRC argued that their crime was politically insignificant, since it was triggered by their difficult material situation. All the

condemned came from the peasantry; for their entire lives they had earned their bread through labor; and each of them supported a big family. Taking into consideration the social position of the condemned and their past as workers, the PRC demanded to suspend the death sentence and substitute it with a milder form of punishment. Finally, the PRC argued that, with the upcoming anniversary of the October revolution, “the satisfaction of this demand would fit with the indulgence that the population of the Russian Republic got used to associate with the celebration of the October revolution.”⁷⁸

The PRC paid attention to the changes in the political climate. For instance, in 1922 the PRC interceded for a group of citizens condemned to death with the accusation of “counter-revolutionary agitation” because, in a public meeting, they had opposed the requisition of church property. The actions committed by these men, argued the PRC, had not been performed to gain personal profit or with other selfish concerns in mind. Their speeches in local meetings against the requisitioning of church properties “were the open interventions of free citizens,...criticism towards the current Soviet state is admitted by the current law and, when pronounced in the presence of state's representatives, cannot be equated to secret anti-Soviet agitation. The restless social mood determined by the historical moment through which Russia was living (i.e. the crumbling of the old system) created among the members of the meeting a certain nervous atmosphere, but it is not possible to put the guilt for this exclusively on the condemned. This extraordinary time that is now experienced by Russia must serve as an alleviating circumstance.” To give mercy to these men, argued the PRC, “is not only an act of charity, but also a means to placate passions...To let the condemned live cannot represent any danger for the Soviet

state; to the contrary, it would reinforce the awareness of the masses about the strength and solidity of the Soviet state.”⁷⁹

Apart from passing on petitions from individual prisoners, the PRC sometimes took the initiative to argue for the collective rights of the Gulag population. In these cases, too, we don't see much abstraction and theoretical discussion, but rather references to concrete situations and contingent material conditions. Family members' right to visitation, for instance, was largely sustained by reference to prior similar permissions and to documents that demonstrated the petitioner's relation to the prisoner.⁸⁰ In a letter dated October 4, 1927, Peshkova requested some visitation permits for the Solovki camp. Her note was characterized by a rare urgency of tone, motivated by the fact that navigation to the Solovki Islands would soon be closed. In a preceding correspondence the Moscow section of the OGPU had suggested the PRC to send this request to the Leningrad section. Peshkova was not satisfied by this answer and wrote back to the Moscow OGPU with a list of camps for which she demanded immediate visitation permits. She wrote: “In light of the fact that we did not receive any reply from Leningrad, that soon the navigation will be impossible, that all prisoners have the right of visitation, and that the visitation permits for the Solovki Islands have always be given by Moscow (and not by Leningrad), we are demanding that you proceed with their delivery.”⁸¹ Peshkova did not request visitation permits as arbitrary privileges, but as full-fledged rights.

What took place in the Gulag, argued the PRC, contradicted the picture of prison life given in the press. In the spring of 1921, the *krasnokrestovtsy* proved very critical of an article published in *Pravda* by Nikolai L. Meshcheriakov, a member of the

newspaper's editorial board who described "prison life in Soviet Russia" based on a two-and-a-half-hour visit to the Butyrkaia prison. Meshcheriakov wrote that the common cells had open doors and the prisoners could go for long walks in the halls and in the prison yard; he talked about "free socialization" between men and women, who had permission to visit each other. According to him, the superintendents always knocked before entering the isolation cells, addressed the prisoners politely, and provided them with newspapers, books, and paper to write letters; the prisoners even attended performances and lectures especially organized for them.⁸² From the *krasnokrestovtsy's* multiple visits to the prisons and through the endless stream of petitions from prisoners and their relatives, the PRC knew a different story – one of unexpected forced transfers, overcrowded and unheated cells, anti-sanitary conditions, spreading of serious epidemics, semi-starvation, thefts and arbitrary requisitions of personal belongings, isolation, inaction and ignorance concerning the reasons for the arrest, rudeness, humiliation, insults, punishments and beatings, etc. In short, the regime of imprisonment was comparable to physical and moral torture, "a slow and painful agony," as a *krasnokrestovets* put it. "As a result of all the serious moral and physical suffering, the prisoners' abjection and hopelessness reached extreme limits and produced more than one case of serious psychic diseases." Individuals from the administrations "invited" female prisoners into their quarters allegedly for cleaning them. "Afraid of punishment and being deprived of any defense of their rights, these women don't dare oppose the caprice of the prison's bosses."⁸³

The *krasnokrestovtsy* denounced the "monstrous forms of arrest," that occurred when "a mass of random people [were] arrested who [did] not have any relation to

politics," and were kept in prison without being interrogated.⁸⁴ Despite the VTsIK had instructed the Cheka agents to complete investigations of political cases within one month from the arrest, the rules regulating the investigation process were not observed. Although official directives mandated politeness towards the prisoners, the guards had “not yet learned the new rules of interaction with the prisoners” and could not stop viewing the politicals as criminals.⁸⁵ Claiming a legal benefit for all political detainees, the PRC appealed on the basis of state rules.

Transmission of information is another measure of the PRC’s liminality. Because no effective system of either private or administrative correspondence operated in the Gulag, the *krasnokrestovtsy* tried to establish formal arrangements to deliver information to the prisoners’ relatives as well as enhance communication between them and their close ones in jail. At the same time, the PRC sent frequent notes to the All-Russian and the Moscow Cheka “informing” them on the “excesses” of the Gulag and demanding to investigate and eliminate the moral conditions that triggered hunger strikes, anxiety, and all sorts of extreme situations.⁸⁶ While the Gulag created an environment that was ripe for the thriving of panic-spreading “prison myths,” the PRC believed that “a-normal” events and “excesses” could be limited through accurate information. Since rumor was a prime concern of Soviet authorities,⁸⁷ the PRC could easily recommend itself up as aid to the Cheka - the deliverer of true information to the higher organs of Soviet power, the builder of official information networks, and a means against the rumor mill. Indeed, the information on the real conditions of the Gulag was not directed at the public sphere - whose indignation the PRC did not aspire to arouse - but remained for internal consumption.

The arbitrariness and cruelty of the local prison administration were one of the PRC's main concerns, since, as a *krasnokrestovets* put it, "the administration decides the fate of the prisoners without being controlled by anybody." It was above all the remoteness of the camps from the control of the central government that turned them into "nests of absolutely unacceptable disorders."⁸⁸ The misdeeds of local officials are well-known to historians of Soviet history. Peter Solomon, for instance, has described the relationship between central instruction and local implementation in Soviet criminal justice arguing that "officials in the localities sometimes took a casual approach to laws and directives from the center."⁸⁹ Local cliques took personal advantage of the distance from the center also in the administration of relief to political prisoners. The PRC reacted by denouncing the negligence and wrongdoings of local officials; it criticized the dissonance between the legal policies promoted by the Soviet of People's Commissars and the Commissariat of Justice on one hand, and the chekists' actions on the other. The Cross argued that this contradiction hindered close contact and constructive collaboration among the state organs.

Thus, the *krasnokrestovtsy* did not challenge the central authority, but rather denounced the incompetence, sluggishness, and arbitrariness of the camp administration and strove to take measures *through the center* to fix these phenomena. As the PRC wrote in one of its numerous letters to the All-Russian CheKa and the VTsIK, "we take the liberty to express the hope that the Presidium will listen to our voice. Only the awareness of the necessity to perform our duty dictates this appeal."⁹⁰ In the PRC's narrative, the violations of prisoners' basic human rights happened at the hands of the local administration and needed to be prevented through the intervention of the organs of

central government. Lynne Viola has interpreted one's claim of loyalty to the center against erring officials as an aspect of resistance.⁹¹ Instead of seeing the PRC's alliance with the Presidiums of the CheKa and the VTsIK against the local chekists as disguised resistance, I suggest to view this collaboration as a measure of the liminality of an untidy and contradictory organization.

Dialogues: negotiating with the prisoners⁹²

Prisoners sent various requests to the police organs, but they often “copied and pasted” the PRC as well, asking for its intercession and advocacy. Most of them knew that the final decision on their case would have come from the Cheka, but they also believed that the PRC - and Peshkova personally - could have effectively interceded for them or at least helped in speeding up procedures. Indeed, prisoners very frequently received replies not directly from the Cheka, but through the PRC, which thus confirmed its function as middleman and patron. For instance, in March 1927 Emilia I. Ivant wrote both to the OGPU and to Peshkova saying: “on April 14 ends the term of my exile. Please send me the documents as soon as possible.” A few days later she received the following reply from the PRC: “according to the directive of the Special Council of the GPU dated March 28, 1927, you are permitted to live in freedom.”⁹³ Almost all communications to the prisoners were very concise (never longer than 4-5 lines); they had a purely informative character and were phrased in dry, bureaucratic, and legalistic terms.

The *krasnokrestovtsy* wanted their clients to explain why they were requesting the visit of an activist and what specific juridical help they were seeking;⁹⁴ they recommended prisoners to give “the most precise” information on the date and place of the arrest as well as the motivation specified in the sentence (“it is necessary that you

indicated [all this] absolutely literally, with the same phrases used in the sentence”).⁹⁵

The prisoners were supposed to send “short, motivated petitions in the name of the OGPU;” the Cross would have delivered them and kept the prisoners informed.⁹⁶ The PRC even devised a specific formula to pass over information to the prisoners: “In reply to your enquiry n. ...dated..., according to the information received from the OGPU, we communicate that...” With these words the PRC made its intermediary function explicit to the prisoners, as though it wanted to avoid any confusion on its position *vis-à-vis* the state and the investigation organs. There was no sentimentalism in the notes to the prisoners; the approval and the rejection of their requests for release were communicated in the same neutral and impassionate tone, because political prisoners should have not perceived the PRC as an ally against the state or as a site of resistance.

Some prisoners were quite diligent. They understood how the PRC wanted to position itself and consequently crafted petitions that were motivated, brief, precise, and unemotional. Some petitioners simply wrote that they needed warm clothes, underwear, sheets and a pillow, shoes, foodstuff, and tobacco.⁹⁷ One man held in the Taganskaia prison asked the PRC to buy glasses for him.⁹⁸ The student of the Leningrad Polytechnic Institute Nikolai Baukevich asked to lend him 10-15 rubles which he would have returned as soon as possible.⁹⁹ Other petitioners dutifully presented the details of their arrest in the cold and polite language of law and then formulated questions that touched upon all possible aspects of political imprisonment, from the nitty-gritty rules of prison life to the most complicated legal advice. For instance, Grigorii I. Ivanov-Chernets wrote to Peshkova asking to inform him whether the amnesty for the tenth anniversary of the revolution applied to his arrested brother and what he needed to do in case it did: “Should

I send a petition or better an intercession somewhere, or would it all be useless?”¹⁰⁰ At times, prisoners asked the PRC’s jurists to undertake their defense and achieve the modification of the sentences issued by the revolutionary tribunals. For instance, proposing to hire Nikolai Murav’ev as his advocate, a prisoner wrote: “since I have been living in prison for the last 17 months, I am not updated on the current order of things: who can advocate for me as defender? where does one need to submit requests? etc.”¹⁰¹

Other prisoners, however, were less disciplined. Appealing for assistance and complaining about wrongful imprisonment and sentencing, this kind of petitioners used disparate arguments and emotions to illustrate and accentuate the injustice of their situation. They were very vocal in describing their painful, sad, and desperate situations and often made their stories truly pathetic. These individuals explicitly relied on the kindness and compassion of the *krasnokrestovtsy*, who – as these prisoners believed – were sensitive patrons both worried for the petitioners’ tragic fate and able to reverse it thanks to their unique relationship with the Cheka. Women, in particular, tended to look at Peshkova as their spokesperson and demanded from her understanding and consolation alongside with help.¹⁰² As Golfo Alexopoulos has shown in her book *Stalin’s Outcasts*, the more helpless the petitioners presented themselves, the more they intensified the obligation of the addressees to respond sympathetically. Their laments placed a burden of conscience: the just activists needed to help them otherwise they would have been responsible for unpleasant consequences, such as starvation and death. In short, some political prisoners fashioned the *krasnokrestovtsy* as new Soviet patrons, who could not behave like the notorious heartless bureaucrats of the old tsarist power structure.¹⁰³

Judging from the *krasnokrestovtsy*'s replies to lamenting petitioners, I would argue that the formers' self-fashioning did not match with how the latter approached them. Long and dramatic petitions had the same impact as short and unemotional ones. In 1931, when Lidiia V. Osipova poured all her soul in a series of heartfelt long letters to Peshkova, the head of the PRC dryly replied: "The petitions to the GPU must be brief and motivated. I will return to you the petitions that you wrote because you need to make them shorter." Only when Osipova finally wrote a proper petition, Peshkova submitted it and informed Osipova that now she should wait a couple of months for an answer.¹⁰⁴ In the same year, a woman named Ekaterina Piotrovskaiia decided to write her desperate request of help in verses, but the lyrical genre did not impress the state functionary Ekaterina Peshkova: "In reference to Your letter, I communicate that it is impossible to give You any information since You do not tell when and where You were arrested and did not even write your patronymic. We ask You to write Your correspondence with us in colloquial language – not in verses."¹⁰⁵ The activists dutifully replied to all petitions, attempting to provide the prisoners and their relatives with the requested information, but never demonstrating any special empathy or compassion.

Epilogue

Keeping the balance while walking on a tight rope was exhausting. Although nobody in the political elite significantly interfered with the Cross's work, the constant negotiations with both the Cheka and the prisoners were wearing out the *krasnokrestovtsy*. In an "Autobiographical note" written in 1930, Murav'ev emphasized the stressful nature of relief work for political prisoners: "the heavy burden of this organization...is indeed a heavy cross, which I put on myself voluntarily and which cost

me the loss of much health and energy...”¹⁰⁶ Around the same time Vinaver confessed: “we are very tired both on the physical and the nervous level... We can still do a lot. But our nerves are constantly under great pressure.”¹⁰⁷ Peshkova and Vinaver liked to emphasize that they could not quit their job, no matter how exhausting it was, “because the authorities don’t let anybody else do it apart from me and Ek. Pavl...”¹⁰⁸ For many years, the PRC was the only state institution performing a difficult, but necessary function.

By the mid-1930s, as the *vydvizhentsy* of Stalin’s cultural revolution were flooding all Soviet institutions, this situation was bound to change. Younger people began to appear among the PRC’s activists and a new cohort of officers entered the Cheka as well. Ironic as it might seem, this situation bothered both the social activist Ekaterina Peshkova and the investigator Aleksandra Andreeva. According to the testimony of Lidiia Dan, who met Peshkova in the summer of 1935 in London, the *krasnokrestovka* “complain[ed] that in the current GPU there are new people, who don’t understand anything and to whom the old names are meaningless.” Peshkova’s complaint almost literally echoed Andreeva’s words as she told Peshkova: “the names of Gots and Liber don’t say anything to the new guys.”¹⁰⁹ The “new guys” had a different understanding of what a political prisoner was and should be; they did not share the same cultural code and historical references that had so far made communication (if not collaboration) possible between Peshkova and Andreeva.

In explaining the closing down of the PRC on July 15, 1938,¹¹⁰ we need to take into purview the organization’s financial situation as well as the political conflicts of the time and the changes in the balance of power and personnel in the Bolshevik Party.

However, I would argue that among the most important causes for the PRC's fall was the emergence of new people and new organs charged with controlling the legality of the Gulag. The *krasnokrestovtsy* were losing their energy and, despite their great experience in this field, their unique approach to help to political prisoners could no longer be sustained. The new organs were better integrated in the political and administrative texture of the state; they did not occupy the liminal position that had been initially advantageous and later nefarious to the PRC. The *krasnokrestovtsy* had straddled the traditional resisters-supporters boundary; they had stood on the edge of social and political consciousness, on the border of official morality and culture for twenty long years. After 1936 there was no more space to stand on the threshold: the country had a constitution, a well-established judicial apparatus, and a new cohort of Stalinist graduates who could easily replace the old and old-fashioned social activists of the PRC.

The Soviet Union was ready for the Cross's functions to be passed over to new institutions, which were better woven in the fabric of soviet and party systems. Replying to petitions written in 1938, Peshkova explained that the PRC had ceased to work and could no longer investigate the prisoners' fate. Its role was now exclusively played by the Gulag Administration and the Office of the Procurator of the SSSR, to which Peshkova suggested to turn.¹¹¹ Few month down the road, in its December 1938 Plenum, the USSR Supreme Court officially began to review and reverse convictions issued in political cases.¹¹² However, something seems to have been lost in this passing over of tasks: the nature of the functions once belonging to the PRC changed as the center of gravity shifted from help to a poorly performed supervision of legality.

* * *

This study of PRC's activities and its interactions with the prisoners and the Cheka has revealed the highly ambiguous borderland which was inhabited by this organization. In its exchanges with the prisoners and their relatives the PRC had to be careful not to portray the Cheka poorly and thus shed negative light on the state. The *krasnokrestovtsy* adopted an impassive tone, because they did not want prisoners to misunderstand the care that their organization showed towards political "enemies." On the other hand, in its communications with the state organs, the PRC showed a relatively greater freedom in expressing indignation against administrative violence. Here the *krasnokrestovtsy* could stir up a moderate amount of pity and emotions. Desperation as a category giving prisoners the right to be helped was evoked alongside with references to laws and prisoners' rights. I have shown that the *krasnokrestovtsy* were enraged by episodes of prison arbitrariness and did not hide their feelings in the correspondence with the VTsIK and the All-Russian CheKa. The PRC considered it natural and logical that the prisoners showed opposition to the arbitrary actions of the police administration, but its activists could express these thoughts only to the state organs.

The PRC did not position itself in oppositional terms with the state, but rather in collaborative ways. The *krasnokrestovtsy* loved their country and were ready to cooperate *with* the state to reinforce it. They repeatedly showed themselves working not to oust the regime under which they lived but to perfect it. They were able to complicate the state's policy of repression without challenging the new order and, above all, without undermining its legitimacy and authority in the eyes of the public, because their interventions never acquired an undesirable – from the government's perspective – broad public resonance. On its part, the new government initially supported people who strove

to be useful to the state independently from their party membership. Although Bolshevik ideology did not accept any compromise with charitable movements, Soviet leaders collaborated with an organization which provided social help voluntarily and on the basis of donations. Thus, this paper has shown that Soviet state authorities adopted a flexible approach toward the organization of social assistance to political prisoners. In the end, the prison population was so big that the state could not easily expel it from the body politic. It was there all the time, as a sore/an abscess, which the state could neither ignore nor completely excise.

The PRC's office at Kuznetskii Most was a liminal space where the continuum between loyalty and resistance could be literally seen every day. To its *priemnaia* (reception room) came hundreds of prisoners' relatives, but state officers too often visited the *krasnokrestovtsy* in their offices. The individuals volunteering their time and energy at Kuznetskii Most had tried to conform their conduct to the state's wishes and expectations regarding their role in the Gulag system. They molded themselves from old regime opponents into Soviet social activists. But this does not mean that they shifted their primary loyalty away from the prisoners and toward the state or that they lost their core values. Their goal remained service to the prisoners as the weakest members of the Soviet social system. The PRC was not hostile to Soviet power writ large but to excessive encroachments on the rights and dignity of the prisoners. Their disagreements with the state related to the severity of the punishment, but the *krasnokrestovtsy* neither challenged the basis of the Soviet state nor sought to mitigate the prisoner's guilt. They insisted on employing an "apolitical" approach. Like other Soviet legal agencies that aimed at curbing illegal practices in the administration of justice, the PRC functioned as a restrain

on the GPU, an agency which checked rampant violations to legality on the part of local officials and plenipotentiaries. This paper argued that it was the *krasnokrestivtsy*'s liminality that allowed them to call for political prisoners' release while still claim loyalty to the institutions of the soviets.

Help to prisoners was a duty that the PRC performed as a state institution for the benefit of citizens who had no financial means and were separated from their families. The *krasnokrestivtsy* felt that the prisoners were entitled to such conditions of imprisonment that would have allowed them to preserve their physical and spiritual health. In this process, they invoked both juridical arguments and moral ideas. Their politics of entitlement was based first of all on social vulnerability, only occasionally on class position, and almost never on political expediency. In its correspondence with the state authorities, the PRC represented the political prisoners as the wretched victims of abjection, left alone to the whim of fate. Indeed, *zabitosť* (wretchedness, abjection), poverty, and detachment from one's family were key concepts that grounded a citizen's "right to be helped" in the case of political prisoners as for most other marginalized Soviet people. Thus, the *krasnokrestivtsy* interceded for their clients on the basis of formal rules defined by the state, but they also petitioned by appealing to the informal rules of a socialist moral economy.¹¹³ Only a vague line separated legal arguments from moral appeals and the power of personal connections.

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1 S. Z-tsev, "III sessiia VTsIK," *Ezhenedel'nik sovetskoi iustitsii*, no. 18, 20 May 1922, 8.

2 Prison saying popular among the chekists. Quoted in K.N. Morozov, *Sudebnyi protsess sotsialistov-revoliutsionerov i tiuremnoe protivostoianie (1922-1926): etika i taktika protivoborstva* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2005), 512-513.

3 These words were pronounced by the social activist E.I. Murav'eva in a private conversation with her grand-daughter T.A. Ugrimova. Quoted in T.A. Ugrimova "Stoi v zavete svoem..." *Nikolai Konstantinovich*

Murav'ev. Advokat i obshchestvennyi deiatel'. Vospominaniia, dokumenty, materialy (Moscow, OOO "AMA-Press", 2004), 307.

4 See John N. Hazard and Morris L. Weisberg, *Cases and Readings on Soviet Law* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950); John N. Hazard, *Settling disputes in Soviet society; the formative years of legal institutions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960); Eugene Huskey, *Russian Lawyers and the Soviet State. The Origins and Development of the Soviet Bar, 1917-1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Peter H. Solomon, *Soviet criminal justice under Stalin* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

5 The secret police was variously titled through the 1920s and 1930s as Cheka, OGPU, or NKVD. For the sake of simplicity, in this paper I will always use the acronym Cheka.

6 To the best of my knowledge, Western scholarship has not yet told the story of the PRC. Russian language literature on the PRC includes a series of articles and collections of archival documents. Without any analytical pretensions, these works simply describe the relationship between the PRC and the Bolshevik state through a narrative line that goes from ephemeral collaboration to increasing confrontation. See L.A. Dolzhanskaia, ed., "*Nash spor s Vami reshit zhizn'.*" *Pis'ma M.L. Vinavera i E.P. Peshkovoii k E.D. Kuskovoii, 1923-1936* (Moscow: Vostochnaia Kniga, 2009); L. A. Dolzhanskaia and I.I. Osipova, eds., "*Dorogaia Ekaterina Pavlovna...*" *Pis'ma zhenshchin i detei. Pis'ma v ikh zashchitu. 1920-1936* (St. Petersburg: Zhurnal "Zvezda," 2005); L.A. Dolzhanskaia and I.I. Osipova, eds., *Obrecheny po rozhdeniiu... Po dokumentam fondov Politicheskogo Krasnogo Kresta 1918-1922. Pomoshch' Politzakliuchennym 1922-1937* (St. Petersburg: Izd-vo zhurnala "Zvezda", 2004); T.A. Ugrimova, "*Stoi v zavete svoem...*" *Nikolai Konstantinovich Murav'ev. Advokat i obshchestvennyi deiatel'. Vospominaniia, dokumenty, materialy* (Moscow, OOO "AMA-Press", 2004); I.I. Osipova and A.B. Roginskii, eds., "Novye materialy o presledovanii za veru v Sovetskom Soiuze. Oprosnye listy i kartochki arestovannykh, pis'ma zakliuchennykh i ikh rodstvennikov (po materialam arkhiv Politicheskogo Krasnogo Kresta)," *Tserkovno-istoricheskii vestnik*, vol. 2-3, 1999, 5-198; Ia.V. Leont'ev, "Politicheskii Krasnyi Krest v Moskve: Opyt istochnikovedcheskogo analiza," in *Arkheograficheskii Ezhegodnik za 1997 god* (Moscow: Nauka, 1997), 159-165; A. Iu. Gorcheva, "Spiski Peshkovoii," *Zvezda*, vol. 3, 1996, 169-180; S.I. Golotik, "Pervye pravozashchitniki v Sovetskoii Rossii," *Volia*, vol. 4-5, 1995, 7-24. Political red crosses existed in the centers of the Russian diaspora in Europe. See M.K. Galmarini and Ia.V. Leont'ev, "Deiatel'nost' berlinskikh komitetov pomoshchi russkim politzakliuchennym," *Russkii Berlin, 1920-1945. Materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii, 16-18 dekabria 2002 g.* (Moscow: Russkii Put', 2006), 107-134. Informal networks of social solidarity existed among the wives, sisters, and mothers of the arrested. Steven Kotkin mentions them in his book *Magnetic Mountain. Stalinism as a civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 348.

7 On personal networks and political patronage see Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Blat in Stalin's Time," in *Bribery and Blat in Russia: Negotiating Reciprocity from the Middle Ages to the 1990s*, ed. Stephen Lovell, Alena Ledeneva, and Andrei Rogachevskii (New York: St. Martin's, in association with the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London, 2000), 166-182 and *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Alena V. Ledeneva, *Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking, and Informal Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Barbara Walker, "(Still) Searching for a Soviet Society: Personalized Political and Economic Ties in Recent Soviet Historiography. A Review Article," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 43: 3, 2001, 631-642. See also the articles by Kiril Tomoff, Vera Tolz, and Barbara Walker in the special issue of *Contemporary European History* 11: 1 (2002).

8 For instance, Arch Getty, "State and Society under Stalin: Constitutions and Elections in the 1930s," *Slavic Review*, 50: 1, Spring 1991, 18-35.

9 See footnote 4 for full references to the works by Hazard, Huskey, and Solomon.

10 See for instance D.B. Pavlov, *Bol'shevitskaia diktatura protiv sotsialistov i anarkhistov 1917-seredina 1950-kh godov* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1999).

11 K.N. Morozov, *Sudebnyi protsess sotsialistov-revoliutsionerov*.

12 See footnote 6.

13 Golfo Alexopoulos, *Stalin's Outcasts: Aliens, Citizens, and the Soviet State, 1926-1936* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 2.

14 Lynne Viola, "Introduction," in *Contending with Stalinism. Soviet Power and Popular Resistance in the 1930*, ed. by Lynne Viola (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 1. In the same collection see

especially her essay “Popular Resistance in the Stalinist 1930s. Soliloquy of a Devil’s Advocate,” 17-43. See also Peter Fritzsche, “On the Subjects of Resistance,” *Kritika*, Winter 2000, 1: 1, 147-152.

15 Primo Levi, *The drowned and the saved* (New York: Summit Book, 1988).

¹⁶ Alexei Yurchak suggests a similar argument when he describes the boundary between believing and rejecting in “the last Soviet generation.” *Everything was forever, until it was no more: the last Soviet generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

17 Relief activities specifically on behalf of “politicals” started in Russia in the 1870s within the so-called Chaikovskii circle. Since then, Russian revolutionaries - both in the underground and abroad - never stopped helping their imprisoned comrades-in-arms. Important rings in the chain linking the Soviet PRC with the pre-revolutionary homonymous organization were the Petrograd and Moscow bureaus of the Aid Society for Released Politicals, which operated for a brief time in the spring-summer of 1917. See the entry “Krasnyi Krest’ politicheskii,” in *Otechestvennaia Istorii. Istorii Rossii s drevneishikh vremen do 1917 goda. Entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Nauchnoe izdatel’stvo “Bol’shaia Rossiiskaia Entiklopediia,” 2000), vol. 33, 102-103. See also the articles by V.N. Figner, “Obshchestvo pomoshchi osvobodzhennym politicheskim” and G. Filat’ev, “Pervaia pomoshch’ amnistirovannym v Moskve,” in *Deviati Val. K desiatiletiu osvobodzheniia iz tsarskoi katorgi i ssylki*, eds. V. Vilenskii, F. Koni, B. Breslav, V. Pleskov, E. Nikitina (Moscow, 1927).

18 The literature on dissent is very broad. Among the most illuminating recent work see Marco Clementi, *Storia del dissenso Sovietico (1953-1991)* (Roma: Odradek, 2007); Anke Stephan, *Von der Küche auf den Roten Platz* (Zürich: Pano, 2005); and Barbara Walker, “Pollution and Purification in the Moscow Human Rights Networks of the 1960s and 1970s,” *Slavic Review*, 68:2, Summer 2009, 376-395.

19 The first dissident to make a legally founded argument for social change was Aleksandr Esenin-Vol’pin. See his *Filosofii. Logika, Poezii. Zashchita prav cheloveka: izbrannoe* (Moscow: Rosiiskii gosudarstvennyi gumanitarnyi universitet, 1999). However, the generation of the 1960s preferred to associate itself with the culture and ethics of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia than with those of the 1920s-1930s.

20 While Russia had a long tradition of *pravozashchitniki*, the term *pravozastupnik* emerged towards the end of 1917 to signify unlicensed, informal defenders who appeared as representatives of a party with the special consent of the court. The PRC often helped prisoners find either a *pravozastupnik* or a *pravozashchitnik* (i.e. an individual with a juridical degree) willing to defend them as citizens accused of political crimes. GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 228 and l. 349. See also Ugrimova, “*Stoi v zavete svoem*,” 292.

21 The work of Michel Foucault theoretically frames the question of care, control, and punishment. On social help as care and control vis-à-vis the unique social and ideological traits of the Soviet context see E. Iarskaia-Smirnova, P. Romanov, N. Lebina, “Sovetskaia sotsial’naia politika i povsednevnost’, 1940-1980e,” in *Sovetskaia sotsial’naia politika: stseny i deistvuushchie litsa, 1940-1985*, ed. by E.R. Iarskaia-Smirnova and P.V. Romanov (Moscow: OOO “Variant”, 2008), 7-32.

22 GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, l. 1. The Petrograd PRC was organized already in 1917. Its appeal for donations appeared in some Petrograd newspapers on 10 (23) December 1917. See Z.N. Gippius, “Peterburgskii Dnevnik (Vypiski iz dnevnika Z.),” in *Pamiat’. Istoricheskii sbornik*, vol. 4 (Paris: YMCA Press, 1981), 353-373. After the opening of the Moscow offices, the Petrograd PRC soon turned into a minor branch. See L.A. Dol’zhanskaia, ed., “*Nash spor s Vami reshil zhizn’*,” 104.

23 GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 2, l. 1-2. The quote is from a letter dated 13 June 1918 and addressed to a local relief organization for political prisoners in Astrakhan’.

24 N.K. Murav’ev, “Rech’ na godichnom sobranii Politicheskogo Kasnogo Kresta, 14 marta 1919 g.” preserved in Murav’ev’s family archive, quoted in Ugrimova, “*Stoi v zavete svoem...*,” 127.

25 The draft document signed by the old revolutionaries is preserved in GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, l. 6-18. The booklet printed by the Tip. Tsentr. T-va ‘Kooperativnoe Izda-vo’ is in GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, l. 19-28.

26 See for instance *Nashe slovo*, 26 May 1918, 3.

27 The founding members of the PRC were a group of around 50 individuals. Among those who remained most active in the organization throughout the years were E.P. Peshkova, M.L. Vinaver, N.K. Murav’ev, E.P. Rostkovskii, I.S. Kal’meer, V.N. Maliantovich, and A.I. Peres. V.G. Korolenko was chosen as the Society’s honorary chairman, while V.N. Figner, V.I. Zasluchich, and P.A. Kropotkin were nominated honorary members. See N.K. Murav’ev, “Rech’ k Vere Nikolaevne Figner, Vere Ivanovne Zasluchich i Petru

Alekeevichu Kropotkinu po povodu izbraniia ikh pochetnymi chlenami Politicheskogo Krasnogo Kresta” preserved in Murav’ev’s family archive, quoted in Ugrimova, “*Stoi v zavete svoem...*”, 134-135. According to the lists published by Golotik, in 1918 the organization’s membership counted 200 activists (see his article “Pervye pravozashchitniki v Sovtskoi Rossii”). Lia Dol’zhanskaia has calculated that between 1918 and 1922 around 1,000 persons paid membership fees to the PRC (“*Nash spor s Vami reshit zhizn*”, 35). 28 P. Solomon, *Soviet criminal justice under Stalin*. See also Robert Sharlet, “Stalinism and Soviet Legal Culture” in *Stalinism. Essays in Historical Interpretation*, ed. by Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1977), 155-179.

29 For instance, the PRC helped the peasants of the Tambov region who had been arrested at the end of the civil war when the bands of Antonov were liquidated. These included up to 400 men and women, elderly and children of various ages from 2-3 months to 16 years (see GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, l. 79). Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the number of “non-political” clients increased exponentially.

30 Between 1918 and 1922, when the Cross’s activities were limited to the city of Moscow and the surrounding area, the PRC serviced around 30 places of imprisonment. In 1921 it provided 18,504 persons with food rations. According to Murav’ev’s calculation this corresponded to one meal a day for 30% of the prison population in the city of Moscow (GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, l. 79 and 34). After 1922 the PRC started to serve prisons and camps all over the Russian territory. In particular, it helped prisoners in Iaroslavl’, Arkhangel’sk, Pertominsk, and Kholmogorsk. According to Vinaver, every assisted prisoner stayed under the PRC’s care for an average period of 6-9 years (GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 72-73, quoted in Dolzhanskaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshit zhizn*”, 107).

31 GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, l. 19-28.

32 Circular letter no. 44, dated 31 August 1918, was published in the journal *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia i pravo* n. 5-6, 1918, 75-76.

33 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 46.

34 N.K. Murav’ev, “Rech’ na godichnom sobranii Politicheskogo Kasnogo Kresta 14 marta 1919 g.,” 127.

35 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 57.

36 Concerning Soviet legislation on non-governmental organizations see A.P. Kupaigorodskaia and N.B. Lebina, “Dobrovol’nye obshchestva Petrograda-Leningrada v 1917-1937 gg. (tendentsii razvitiia),” in *Dobrovol’nye obshchestva v Petrograde-Leningrade v 1917-1937 gg. Sbornik statei* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1989), 5-16. We also need to remember that 1922 was the year of the trial against the Central Committee of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party, with which many *krasnokrestovtsy* had been associated before the revolution.

37 GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, l. 70.

38 On political subculture see B.I. Kolonitskii, *Simvoly vlasti i bor’by za vlast’: k izucheniiu politicheskoi kul’tury rossiiskoi revoliutsii 1917 goda* (Saint Petersburg: D. Bulanin, 2001).

39 See Dolzhanskaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshit zhizn*”, 10 and Dolzhanskaia and Osipova, “*Dorogaia Ekaterina Pavlovna...*”, 47.

40 See Vinaver’s letter to E. Kuskova dated 3 January 1923, preserved in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 18-19, quoted in Dolzhanskaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshit zhizn*”, 32. On the difference between the two incarnations of the PRC see also Dolzhanskaia and Osipova, “*Dorogaia Ekaterina Pavlovna...*”, 34-35.

41 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 128.

42 Vinaver’s letter to Kuskova dated 31 May 1931, preserved in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 106-108, quoted in Dolzhanskaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshit zhizn*”, 143.

43 Kukova’s letter to A.A. Vinogradov, preserved in GARF, f. 5880, o. 1, d. 10, l. 145, quoted in Dolzhanskaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshit zhizn*”, 81.

44 L.O. Dan’s letter to Kuskova dated 20 Nov. 1930, preserved in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 156, l. 12, quoted in Dolzhanskaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshit zhizn*”, 135-136.

45 The letter to the Society “Koooperatsiia” is preserved in GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, ll. 3-4. For examples of other letters see GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 44; l. 100; and l. 113.

46 See for instance GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 44 and 45.

47 Vinaver’s letter to Kuskova dated 17 July 1926, preserved in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 35-36, quoted in Dolzhanskaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshit zhizn*”, 77. See also Peshkova’s letter to Kuskova dated 10 November 1929, preserved in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 390, ll. 68-76, quoted in Dolzhanskaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshit zhizn*”, 206.

- 48 Vinaver's letter to Kuskova dated 27 December 1926, preserved in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, l. 41, quoted in Dolzhanskaia, "*Nash spor s Vami reshii zhizn*", 79.
- 49 Vinaver's letter to Kuskova dated 21 January 1929, preserved in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 69-70, quoted in Dolzhanskaia, "*Nash spor s Vami reshii zhizn*", 103.
- 50 Vinaver's letter to Kuskova dated 7 January 1935, preserved in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 128-130, quoted in Dolzhanskaia, "*Nash spor s Vami reshii zhizn*", 162.
- 51 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 125
- 52 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 1, l. 57-58.
- 53 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 60.
- 54 In the archive of the PRC I found correspondence with the Moscow Revolutionary Tribunal, the Railway Tribunal, the Supreme Revolutionary Tribunal of the VTsIK and many, many others.
- 55 See for instance GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 45.
- 56 See GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 27, l. 43.
- 57 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 22.
- 58 We should remember here that Murav'ev had defended Kamenev when the latter was arrested in 1915 at an illegal conference of the Bolshevik party. Ugrimova, "*Stoi v zavete voem...*", 247.
- 59 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 3, l. 1.
- 60 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 3, l. 3.
- 61 See for instance Peshkova's letter to Dzerzhinskii dated 30 May 1924, preserved in RTsKhIDNI, f. 76, o. 3, d. 87, l. 2, quoted in Dolzhanskaia, "*Nash spor s Vami reshii zhizn*", 184. I plan to discuss Peshkova's relationship with Dzerzhinskii in chapter 5 of my dissertation.
- 62 *Ibid.*
- 63 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 9, l. 5.
- 64 A letter that Murav'ev wrote to N.N. Polianskii illuminates the chains of patronage that each *krasnokrestovets* could use. GARF, f. 1652, o. 1, d. 419, l. 7. Strong evidence showing these connections is scattered throughout the PRC's archive.
- 65 Vinaver's letter to Kuskova dated 21 January 1929, preserved in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 69-70, quoted in Dolzhanskaia, "*Nash spor s Vami reshii zhizn*", 103.
- 66 See N.K. Murav'ev, "*Rech' na godichnom sobranii Politichskogo Kasnogo Kresta 14 marta 1919 g.*," 128.
- 67 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 203, l. 102.
- 68 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 49.
- 69 GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 105.
- 70 GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 239.
- 71 GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 304.
- 72 GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 337.
- 73 GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 74.
- 74 GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 192.
- 75 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 103.
- 76 GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 250
- 77 GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 238. For the text of the directive see "*K mezhdunarodnomu dnu rabotnitsy. Postanovlenie Prezidiuma Vserossiiskogo Tsentral'nogo Ispol'nitel'nogo Komiteta*," *Izvestiia*, no. 50, 6 March 1923, 2.
- 78 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 36.
- 79 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 69-76.
- 80 It must be said that the OGPU approved almost all petitions for visitation submitted by the PRC.
- 81 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 203, l. 62.
- 82 N. Meshcheriakov, "*Tiur'ma v Sovetskoi Rossii*," *Pravda*, no. 77, 10 April 1921, 2. For the PRC's reaction to this article see esp. GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 37-38.
- 83 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 56 and ll. 79-80.
- 84 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 37-38.
- 85 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 56 and ll. 79-80.
- 86 See GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 7, l. 4 and l. 6; GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 24. GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 52; GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 7, ll. 14-15; GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 227, l. 2-3

87 On rumors see Rebecca Manley, *To the Tashkent Station. Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union at War* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009), 68-69 and 84. See also Lynne Viola, “The Peasant Nightmare: Visions of Apocalypse in the Soviet Countryside,” *Journal of Modern History*, 62: 4 (1990), 747-770.

88 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 56.

89 P. Solomon, *Soviet Criminal Justice under Stalin*, 59.

90 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 37-38.

91 L. Viola, “Introduction,” 11.

92 In this section I do not examine the complaints and petitions written by political prisoners and their relatives, but rather analyze what happened to these documents after they were mailed out. I study how these letters were processed: both how the PRC filtered and sifted through them and how the higher state institutions dealt with them. The analysis of prisoners’ petitions is the subject matter of chapter 6 of my dissertation.

93 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 157, ll. 1-3.

94 GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 374.

95 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 61.

96 See for instance GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 715, l. 7; GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 565, l. 8; l. 61; or l. 65.

97 GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 37, l. 5 and ll. 10-11.

98 GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 37, l. 17.

99 GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 37, l. 19

100 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 157, l. 8.

101 GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 6, l. 2-3: See also GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 5, ll. 9-10.

102 This is all over the board in the prisoners’ petitions. For some examples see GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 565, l. 58; ll. 66-67; and ll. 71-72.

103 Apart from Alexopoulos’s *Stalin’s Outcasts*, see Emily Pyle, “Peasant Strategies for Obtaining State Aid: A Study of Petitions during World War I,” *Russian History/Histoire Russe*, 24:1-2 (Spring-Summer 1997), 41-64; and Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Supplicants and Citizens: Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s,” *Slavic Review*, 55:1 (Spring 1996), 78-105.

104 GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 565, l. 74 and 78. For Osipova’s petitions see GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 565, l. 66-67 and ll. 71-72.

105 GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 603, ll. 331-333.

106 N.K. Murav’ev, “Avtobiograficheskaia zametka,” preserved in Murav’ev’s family archive and quoted in Ugrimova, “Stoi v zavete svoem...”, 108-109.

107 Vinaver’s letter to Kuskova dated 31 May 1929 preserved in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 72-73 quoted in Dolzhankaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshil zhizn*”, 107.

108 *Ibid.*

109 L. Dan’s letter to Kuskova dated 17 December 1935 preserved in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 156, ll. 7-8, quoted in Dolzhankaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshil zhizn*”, 211.

110 Literature on the closure of the PRC in 1938 is extremely scanty. The only persons who knew how and why it took place – Peshkova and Vinaver – left behind them neither memoirs nor personal diaries. The archive of the PRC is not very helpful either. Dismayed at the absolute lack of sources, Moscow researchers tell each other a metropolitan legend: before the closure of the PRC, Peshkova spent three days carrying out of Kuznetskii Most several boxes of documents and, having taken them to her apartment, she scrupulously burned all evidence.

111 GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1642, l. 1-3 and l. 8.

112 On the strengthening of socialist legality against police arbitrariness and how ineffective it was see also Gabor T. Rittersporn, “Extra-Judicial Repression and the Courts: Their relationship in the 1930s” and Oleg V. Khlevniuk, “Penal Policy and ‘Legal Reforms’,” in *Reforming Justice in Russia, 1864-1996*, ed. by Peter H. Solomon (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1997). See also I.P. Rashkovets, “Protiv proizvola,” in *Oni ne molchali*, ed. by A.V. Afanas’ev (Moscow: Politizdat, 1991), 226-242.

¹¹³ Early XX c. socialists, such as E. Bellami, defined moral economy as a system in which the well-being of a person is determined not so much by his/her capital, but rather by his/her labor and moral image, since the access to credits is open only to those with a good reputation.