

From Vorkutlag to Vorkuta. Remembering Gulag heritage through time.



History Thesis AR2A011
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1. Introduction

1.0 Contested heritage: definitions

The way we remember our past is related to the physical remains of history. Meanwhile societal choices and values are being constantly re-evaluated and re-adapted to modern thinking, the tangible monuments can be preserved, or erased, as a means for asserting, defending, or denying critical claims to power, land and legitimacy. Hence, all monumental heritage representing norms and values from the past fall under the risk of becoming “contested”.

The concept of “contested heritage” has been present for more than three decades, driving international interest. Scholars of archaeological and architectural research, among the other disciplines, aim to better understand the notion of the term. In the book *Contested Cultural Heritage*, Helaine Silverman defines contestation of history and heritage as a result of troublesome manipulation of markers and manifestations of cultural heritage through appropriation, use, misuse, exclusion or erasion.¹ The issue of social identity is at the core of contestation as society is not fixed and timeless, but it undergoes a process of production.² John Tunbridge and George Ashworth use the term ‘dissonant heritage’ to discuss the issues of discordance and a lack of consistency in understanding cultural heritage. The concept implies a state of tension between attitudes and behaviour of the involved parties.³ Another way of addressing ‘contested heritage’ is outlined by Sharon Macdonald as ‘undesirable heritage’ and ‘difficult heritage’, which is a historically significant past that remains visible in sites, buildings, artworks and other artefacts. Yet, it remains difficult to reconcile with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity.⁴

1.1 Gulag: complexities of the context

Between the 1920s and the 1950s, Gulag camps (Gosudarstvennoe Upravlenie Lagerei, State Administration of Camps) were used as an instrument of power by the Soviet system for labour. The system implied incarceration and internal exile of people that posed a counter-revolutionary threat and ideological danger to the Soviet regime (Appendix A).⁵ Hence, the affected social group was a diverse mix ranging from political dissidents, rich peasants, ethnic minorities, artists, religious groups and many more. In this way, the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) could supply millions of prisoners as a free labour force for metals extraction industries, building infrastructure and cities. In Gulags, prisoners were exposed to harsh living and working conditions, along with the extremely cold weather and starvation.

For many years, forced labour sites were subjected to an oblivion and selective erosion of history due to the political complexity of these historical landmarks. Gulag’s contested heritage was narrated through the ‘frame’ of the Stalinist regime. However, starting from the early 1990s people actively addressed the ambiguity of the Gulag heritage. The reasons for these changes dates back to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the major ideological change in the post-Soviet countries. Moreover, an extensive amount of literature, archives and memoirs began to be published beyond the post-Soviet land (e.g. the United States of America and Western European countries). As a result, a number of memory preservation methods have emerged, such as establishment of memorials (e.g. Memorial to the victims of Gulag, Moscow 1998), archives (e.g. Memorial St Petersburg’s Archive, International Me-

morial Association, 1987), memoirs (e.g. The Sakharov Center's *Vospominaniia o Gulage*, 1990), museums (e.g. Gulag History Museum, Moscow, 2004), and among the most recent - virtual museums (e.g. *Virtual'nyi muzei Gulaga*, Gulag Online, 2009).

In the following chapters, the term contested heritage is used to describe difficult, traumatic heritage, associated with the events that are difficult to be publicly reconciled with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity of a place as a social norm. This research aims to investigate the reasons why Gulag sites have become contested and the influence of such heritage on social and cultural identities in the present times. I chose an exemplary location representing the problems of Gulag's contested heritage to be the Arctic city of Vorkuta (Komi Republic, Russia). The city was built by political prisoners of Vorkutlag in 1943, which brought complexity to urban development considering the traumatic past.

1.2 Methodology

The research is executed in three steps following the timeline of the events: 1) The emergence of Vorkuta city and Vorkutlag (1932-1962), 2) Dezonification and the end of forced labour in Vorkuta in the 1970s, and 3) Contemporary Vorkuta.

Existing studies set the ground for understanding the context in which the Gulag system originated. Namely, exploration of the rise of Vorkuta camp is carried out with Elizabeth Austin's thesis titled "The Gulag System in Northern Siberia: The Creation and Evolution of Vorkuta, Norilsk, and Kolyma", published in 2017. The document provides an overview of the Gulag operating timeline, focusing on demographics, locations, prisoners' life, construction processes and the eventual Gulag closure. I applied this work to outline an image of Vorkutlag (Vorkuta's Gulag) in the early times of its development (1930-1950). In order to focus on the particular urban and architectural developments that took place in the time of Vorkutlag and remained unchanged to this day, I referred to the work of Alan Barenberg, Associate Professor in the Department of History at Texas Tech University specializing in history of the Soviet Union. Alan Barenberg's essay *The Gulag in Vorkuta: Beyond Space and Time*, published in 2015, narrates the story behind Vorkuta's buildings and urban spaces of the city. His essay argues that the Gulag phenomenon is not fixed neither in space nor in time. Following recent trends in historiography, it describes the close connection of the Gulag system to Soviet society as a whole using the case of Vorkuta.⁶ The research is expanded by the study of Alan Barenberg's book *Gulag Town, Company Town: Forced Labour and Its Legacy in Vorkuta*. It examines history of the city based on archival research and oral history, offering interpretations of the relationship between the Gulag and Soviet society.



Figure 1: Memorial to the victims of Gulag by Evgenii Iosifovich Chubarov in Moscow (Efimov 2017)

Moreover, Alan Barenberg's interviews given to the University of Pittsburgh,⁷ and the Wilson Center are used as a source of an external commentary of the historian regarding his book's content and the process he underwent to complete his writing (including his field trip to Vorkuta and interviews).⁸

After the closure of Vorkutlag camp in 1962, the city, although initially emerged as a consequence of Stalinist repressions, continued to "live". After Vorkutlag prisoners were freed, the majority proceeded to stay in Vorkuta. The city that was built by the "criminals" was then inhabited by the ex-prisoners of Gulag institutions. Every part of the city's infrastructure, buildings and monuments reminded the Vorkuta population of its recent and difficult history and created a palpable tension within the society. To investigate the recent impact of the Gulag system on Vorkuta and understand the perspective of a Soviet-times architect, I interviewed Vitali Troshin. Troshin was the chief architect and city planner in the Russian arctic city of Vorkuta starting in 1970. Hence, in this position his goal was to research the past and develop the city for the future. In the interview Troshin discussed topics of memorialization, censorship, social acceptance and the process of public 'healing'. Also, to gain insight into the reasons why ex-prisoners chose to stay in Vorkuta, I analysed a series of prisoners' diary entries through the platforms of ProQuest digital library,⁹ Schoolhistory by a British history,¹⁰ and RadioLiberty.¹¹

The present-time Vorkuta preserved the zeitgeist of the Stalinist era, with an evident effect of time, which is visible in the decay on its structures. Nature and time started to take over the city and the abandoned structures. Nonetheless, contested architecture and monuments remind Vorkuta's modern generation of the Stalinist cruelty and repression. To understand the contemporary identity of Vorkuta city and its people, I focused on the

recent photo and video materials. To select the most relevant findings that could present the state of modern-day Vorkuta, I limited my search to the publications of video, photo and diary entries published within the past 3 years. For this research, two diary entries (*Diary in the footsteps of Komi Memorials* by Igor Sazhin, and *Vorkuta. The return.* by an unknown author), three amateur films (*The dying city of Vorkuta* by Ilya Varlamov, *The most forgotten city* by Anton Lyadov and *Vorkuta: the dying city in the permafrost* by Sergey Volkov) and one series of photographs (*Return to Vorkuta* by Roman Demyanenko) were used as a medium. The selected material depicts modern Vorkuta's crumbling state. When speaking literally, current architecture is barely holding in place, which makes it unsafe to be occupied. Moreover, the 'crumpling' societal and economical conditions make living in Vorkuta a greater challenge for the population. In turn, now the people became 'trapped' in the city due to financial burdens associated with the poor living conditions in the city.

By following the progression of events in a chronological order, the complex phenomenon of Gulag and its imprint on modern-day Russian society is being subjected to a closer examination. The study is aimed at opening the discussion on the current urban, social and political state of Vorkuta city, while referring to the complex heritage of Stalinist repressions.

1.3 Objectives and findings

This paper examines the phenomenon of post-Gulag towns in Russia. The focus is put on the process of evolving from the traumatic repression-related past towards the new contemporary identities. Thus, the aim of this thesis is to investigate the chronology of Russian Gulag towns in dealing with traumatic heritage, starting from the time of Gulag-camps initiation and ending with the present day situation. Although for this research I selected a single case study of Vorkuta, the results mostly apply to the general context of over 30,000 Gulag camps that took place in Russia.

The main research question that I addressed is:

In what way does the difficult heritage related to Gulag institution's land and societal division affect the development of a contemporary identity for the post-Gulag city?

The following sub-questions were used to structure my study:

- How and why was the city of Vorkuta initiated?
- What were the societal hierarchies in early Vorkuta and how did these hierarchies get preserved or turned down in the periods of the city's development?
- How did the architecture built in early Vorkuta reflect societal and political structures?

- What were the political changes that contributed to the development of the city of Vorkuta?
- At what point in time did the Gulag-related past become a contested heritage of Vorkuta?

Several perspectives were discovered in addressing the questions above. On one hand, there was the Gulag institution, a synonym for the regime, repression and Stalinist ideology; on the other - Soviet people, whose lives have been affected by the institution, either to become a guard or a prisoner. However, apart from that there were the city-planners and architects subjected to both sides - the regime and the people. Today, Vorkuta's image refers back to its Gulag-related past. Whether through a carefully constructed memorial, or a crumbling Stalinist building, these visual cues make residents of the city recall the difficult past. Thus, the fusion of melancholy, bitterness and at the same time gratefulness emerge from the experience of the cold and ghostly Vorkuta. The same description can be used towards the modern Vorkuta's population too. Many current citizens of Vorkuta are the descendants of the former Gulag prisoners. Unhappy with the state of the city and the buildings that they are occupying, Vorkuta citizens are unable to move elsewhere due to the financial hardships.

¹ Helaine Silverman, "Contested Cultural Heritage: A Selective Historiography," in *Contested Cultural Heritage*, 1st ed. (Springer, 2014), pp. 1-49.

² Edward M. Bruner and Stuart Plattner, in *Text, Play, and Story: the Construction and Reconstruction of Self and Society* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1988), pp. 2-3.

³ J.E Tunbridge and Gregory John Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons., 1996), p. 6-7.

⁴ Sharon Macdonald, "Undesirable Heritage: Fascist Material Culture and Historical Consciousness in Nuremberg," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 12, no. 1 (2006): pp. 9-28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527250500384464>.

⁵ Olga Ulturgasheva, "GULAG LEGACY: Spaces of Continuity in Contemporary Everyday Practices," *Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Research* (Laboratorium Journal, January 22, 2015), <https://www.soclabo.org/index.php/laboratorium/article/view/467>.

⁶ Alan Barenberg, "The Gulag in Vorkuta: Beyond Space and Time," *Laboratorium* 7, no. 1 (May 18, 2015): pp. 92-108.

⁷ Guillory, Sean, and Alan Barenberg. *Gulag Town, Company Town*. Other. SRB Podcast, November 24, 2015. <https://srbpodcast.org/2015/11/24/gulag-town-company-town-2/>.

⁸ Barnes, Steven, and Alan Barenberg. *Book Talk: "Gulag Town, Company Town Forced Labor and Its Legacy in Vorkuta"*. Other. Wilson Center Press, March 25, 2015. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/book-talk-gulag-town-company-town-forced-labor-and-its-legacy-vorkuta>.

⁹ <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/problems-communism-gulag-authorities-victims/docview/1326735595/se-2>

¹⁰ <https://schoolshistory.org.uk/topics/european-history/russia-soviet-union/vorkuta-gulag-letters-and-diaries-of-an-inmate>

¹¹ <https://www.rferl.org/a/stalin-gulag-vorkuta/24918538.html>

2. Vorkutlag: land of the Gulag and coal mines



Figure 2: Vorkuta in 1950 (Borovski 2009)

2.1 Emergence of Vorkuta

The territory of Siberia takes up more than a half of Russia's territory, but the extreme weather conditions rendered the land low in population density. Despite the inhospitable climate, the territory contained a vast amount of natural resources (e.g., gold, nickel and coal). In the summer of 1930, a team of Moscow geologists, led by Georgii Aleksandrovich Chernov, discovered coal on the banks of the Vorkuta River.¹² Once the deposit of coal was found in the land of modern-day Vorkuta, it became “the perfect” land for a penal labour site due to its remote location, cold climate and the impossibility to escape. The following year, 1931, the first group of prisoners and guards was sent to the Vorkuta River to start the formation of a permanent settlement.

The area that marked the first coal mine was entitled Rudnik, and became the administrative centre of a camp division in 1932. In the beginning years, prisoners of Vorkuta were subjected to extremely poor conditions. Northern Siberian remoteness implied the unavailability of sufficient shelters, food supply, healthcare, proper clothing and connection with the rest of the country. Hence, the first years at the Gulag were the deadliest. Around three million prisoners were brought to Vorkuta between 1931 and 1933, yet almost one million of these prisoners died.¹³ The winter in the Arctic was especially severe, cutting off communications with the nearby cities and thus inability to receive supplies. During this period, political prisoners were “worn down” mentally and physically as they could no longer focus on work. Then, when the quality of work was not met, camp officials frequently refer to the punishment of reducing a prisoner's ration. This was vividly described by one of Vorkuta's prisoners: “Faced with starvation, they didn't work harder, they simply lost any sense of individuality and human dignity and devoted all their energies to begging for a piece of bread. They were called dokhodiagi – walking corpses”.¹⁴

Despite these and other serious issues, Vorkutlag's construction has quickly expanded across the tundra. By the 1940s, a sequence of severe small mines, a power plant, and coal production factories appeared on the map of Vorkuta (Figure 2). A ring of Gulag mining locations and railroad lines extended further. The Vorkuta's outline started to resemble a human skull by the 1950s (Figure 3). This resemblance was not intentional, but instead accidental since the pattern of the development followed subsequent coal deposits discoveries.

The demographic composition of the newly formed Vorkuta, on the other hand, was less curious and mostly consisted of the political prisoners and the people sent for exile, along with the guards as supervisors. 'Free people' were incentivized to move to the Arctic city too. Biggest Russian cities, like Moscow, Leningrad and Odessa established multiple Dalstroi agencies (Far North Construction Trust organisation managing road construction and mining industry) to recruit voluntary personnel to be sent to Vorkuta. Among the incentives that were used to attract more civilians, the salary was set to be 60% higher than the average pay established by the government; mid-year increase of salary by 10% until it is doubled; and an exemption from military service, which was a lifesaving condition during the Second World War.¹⁵

The period of The Second World war had greatly affected the Gulag's composition. In the early 1940s, 60% of Vorkutlag inmates were political prisoners. (Appendix B) This group consisted of anyone who had "done, written, said, or been accused of doing, writing, or saying, anything that could be constructed as negative to the state or could be labelled as counterrevolutionary".¹⁶

As counter-revolutionary criminals were the dominant part of Vorkutlag between the 1940s and 1950s, the camp contained notable public figures of the political and artistic worlds. Some of these prisoners included a former Professor of History at the University of Leningrad, former First Secretary of the Communist Party of Estonia, deputy ministers of East Germany, writers, artists, and many former university students. Many well-known writers, such as Varlam Shalamov and Alexander Solzhenitsyn were assigned to the neighbouring gulag camp, Kolyma. (Appendix C)

2.2 Spatial configuration of Vorkuta through 'zonification'

Vorkuta's configuration exemplifies how the Gulag institution directed the use of space. The city started from a complete 'tabula rasa', and gradually evolved into settlements and mining locations. Throughout the period between 1932 and 1950 the growth of settlements was similar to all industrial Soviet towns, except that in the early 1940s the city was defined by the process of 'zonification' (Figure 7).

Within the ring of Vorkuta city, the space was divided between free citizens and prisoners (or exiles). The latter category was designated a specific 'zone' to live in.¹⁷ However, throughout the 1930s, Vorkuta experienced a shortage of wood and barbed

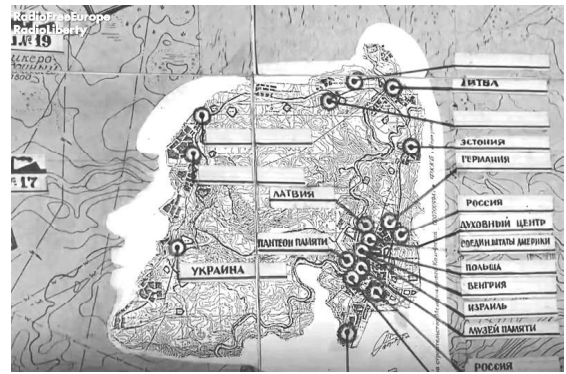


Figure 3: Vorkuta map, 1950. Excerpt from RadioFreeEurope interview with Vitalii Troshin (RFE/RL's Russian Service 2017)

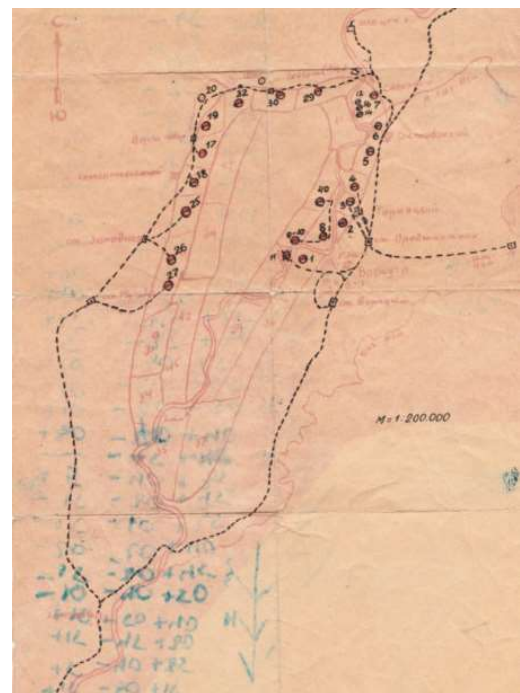


Figure 4: Hand-drawn map of Vorkuta and the surrounding area. (Moorhouse n.d.)

wire, which led to multiple camp 'zones' being unenclosed despite the Gulag regulations. During the first decade of Vorkuta camp's existence, the prisoners co-occupied spaces with the free citizens.

The change in defining borders of the camps followed the outbreak of the Second World War and the rising tension due to suspicion of many prisoners and the exile population. According to Wilson Bell, individuals that were mobilised as a result of the Second World War - ethnic Germans, or repatriates from German occupied territory - were located in a separate 'zone' away from both prisoners and civilians. These in-between regions were "often porous, with people, information, and practices frequently crossing the borders between 'inside' and 'outside'." ¹⁸

The Vorkutlag uprising in early 1942 was the catalyst for a stricter delineation of the camp and the city. In the escalating situation regarding the advancement of the German army into Soviet Territory along with the collapse of the civilian economy, Vorkutlag prisoners have initiated a large-scale armed uprising. On January 24, 1942, a group of 125 men at the far-North Vorkutlag captured the local telegraph office and disarmed the camp's guards. It took over a month to suppress the violence, resulting in thirty-three deaths of the NKVD forces and forty-eight killed, six suicides and eight captured camp prisoners.¹⁹ The fear of Gulag prisoners by the Soviet authorities had led to explicit instructions for all camps to increase security and vigilance. The massacre has impacted not only on the restriction of Gulag territories, but also the exclusiveness of public spaces of Vorkuta's free citizens. In November 1943, Vorkuta was officially entitled as a city, where Mikhail Maltsev - Vorkuta camp director - initiated the city's first public venue. Victory Park and Victory Boulevard were built by the forces of camp prisoners and completed in 1945. As a 'final touch', the park was surrounded by a wooden fence. Although this measure was not performed for security purposes, it was a symbol of delineation as the space belonged to non-prisoners.²⁰



Figure 5: Hard labour on the fields of Vorkutlag, N.D. (Johnstone 2015)



Figure 6: Inside of a barrack in Vorkutlag (Stickings 2019)



Figure 7: Labour camp number 125 in Vorkuta, 1946. (Steil 2005)

2.3 Constructing cities and infrastructure: the case of Children Hospital

From the start of the Vorkutlag operation in the 1930s, the camp sites, residences for guards and free citizens were built and serviced by Gulag prisoners and exiles.²¹ The coal mines were within a 40 kilometre radius from the city centre. Although coal was the core of Vorkuta's economy, the area was operating iron foundries, brickworks, cement and lime plants. As the camp site quickly expanded and achieved the status of a city in 1943, Vorkuta had already acquired a university, geological theatre, swimming pools, nurseries, theatres, schools, residential districts, as well as sufficient infrastructure for transportation, piping, and electricity - all for the free population. As John Noble writes about Vorkuta in his memoir *I Was A Slave In Russia*, the city appeared modern, with street lamps, cobblestoned roads, and planked wooden sidewalks; a symbolic element of the city could be found in the centre of the town - a bronze statue of Joseph Stalin.²²

Despite the quick expansion of the city, Vorkuta had no initial master plan and thus it was done quickly and inefficiently through the hard labour of Gulag prisoners. Through closer administration of the notable architecture of the Gulag period in Vorkuta - the Children Hospital - spatial and temporal boundaries of the camp and the city are explored.

Vorkuta Children Hospital

The order to build the Children's Hospital came from Vorkuta's prison camp's director, Aleksei Kukhtikov in 1948 during the height of the Soviet Gulag and High-Stalinism movement (Figure 8). Designed by an architect in exile, Vsevolod Lunev, who had been sent to Vorkuta after he was freed from German captivity. The Hospital building is a physical representation of the utopian ideas of the Gulag supporters. They truly believed that through the punishment of thousands of criminals the institution would bring good and prosperity to Soviet society. Except, according to such thinking, prisoners were merely a labour force: foreigners and traitors to Soviet culture.

The impressive hospital's exterior and the positive intent of the architecture cover a troubling past associated with the labour of hundreds of prisoners through the long winter months. In his essay *The Gulag in Vorkuta Beyond space and time*, Alan Barenberg observes: "here were prisoners working and suffering under compulsion to build an institution that would provide services from which they would never themselves benefit: a hospital for the children of non-prisoners".²³ Hence the separa-

ration between the Gulag prisoners from the Soviet society is visible in the spatial terms just like the "little zone" of the camps and the "big zone" of the Soviet union.²⁴ As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn describes the relation of the labour camps to society through a metaphor of "archipelago", Soviet places of punishment were away from Soviet life.

For many months, hundreds of prisoners were brought to the construction site, crossing multiple borders of camp and non-camp space. The route was revealed to Vorkuta's free citizens, who continued their mundane activities in the heart of the city. In turn, Gulag prisoners were able to observe normal life too. In this context, although the construction area for the hospital was initially part of the camp zone as the prisoners occupied this land, as soon as the building process was over the area belonged to the city and to the 'free' population. Thus, the construction zone performed as a 'temporal' space mediating between the camp and the city.

After its completion, the existence of the Children's Hospital influenced thousands of children's lives - here they were able to receive proper health care. Following its opening in 1950, the building remained in operation for decades. Moreover, as more prisoners started to get released from Vorkuta after its dezonification and the subsequent ban of the punishment system, a substantial number of children receiving medical care were coming from the generation of former prisoners and exiles which was not the case before since it was only the children of camp officials and labourers from outside the city that benefited from the hospital. The example of Vorkuta Children Hospital symbolises how the grounds have developed from a camp territory, towards the property for non-prisoners, and ending as the institution for all, after the end of zonification.



Figure 8: Completed Children's Hospital building in Vorkuta, 1950 (Vorkuta pokazhet Sever, N.D.)

¹² Paul Kellogg, "Truth behind Bars': Reflections on the Fate of the Russian Revolution: 2 Striking against the Gulag, 1947–53," Athabasca University Press (AU Press, 2021), <https://read.aupress.ca/read/3bdb9b17-ef38-48c6-ba29-22bbecf21759/section/7e5111d9-a2a8-47c8-b828-e3fb6f4c1ea4>.

¹³ David Satter, "Chapter 13. Vorkuta," in *It Was a Long Time Ago, and It Never Happened Anyway: Russia and the Communist Past* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 256-260.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Austin (University of Virginia Slavic Department, 2017), p. 39.

¹⁵ Austin, E. (2017), p. 11-12.

¹⁶ Austin, E. (2017), p. 15.

¹⁷ Jacques Rossi, in *The Gulag Handbook: An Encyclopedia Dictionary of Soviet Penitentiary Institutions and Terms Related to the Forced Labor Camps* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), pp. 137-140.

¹⁸ Barenberg, A. (2009), pp. 94-95.

¹⁹ Steven A. Barnes, "All for the Front, All for Victory! the Mobilization of Forced Labor in the Soviet Union during World War Two," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 58 (2000): p. 249, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0147547900003690>.

²⁰ Barenberg, A. (2015), p. 98.

²¹ Austin, E. (2017), p. 41.

²² John H. Noble, "Chapter 12," in *I Was a Slave in Russia: An American Tells His Story* (Broadview, ILL.: Cicero Bible Press, 1971), p. 88.

²³ Barenberg, A. (2015), p. 94.

²⁴ Rossi, J. (1989), p. 137.

3. 'Dezonification' and the end of forced labour in Vorkuta

Stalin's death in 1953 brought the uncertainty of the future for the Gulag system. Following the series of prisoner uprisings in May later that year across Vorkuta, Norilsk and Kolyma labour camps, the strikes and rebellions alluded to the change in the system, including Gulag's inevitable end in 1962. However, before the closure, the policy of Gulag institutions had shifted to become more lenient. 'Dezonification', as opposed to 'zonification', meant reconfiguring the space in Vorkuta to tackle the land of delineation (borderline between the camp and the city). Throughout this process a pattern can be drawn in the city expansion. This expansion was not carried out by building new structures, but by redesigning camp spaces to become a part of the city. An early example of a 'dezoned' camp occurred in 1945, when Mikhail Maltsev announced that the Camp Section-1 would become a part of Vorkuta city. The labour camp zone once hosting thousands of construction and mine workers was turned into a residential district. To redefine the land in spatial terms, barbed wire fencing was dismantled and civilians were moved into the renovated barracks. In this example, the simplicity of the territorial reconfiguration relied upon a shift of the fence, which justifies the ambiguity and the non-static borders of the zoning system in Vorkuta.

After 1953, the economic ineffectiveness of the Gulag system caught the attention of the Soviet government officials. Productivity of forced labour was found to be minimal, leading to the overall unprofitability of many Gulag institutions. Thus, a new strategy was developed targeting both: an improvement of the local economy and reconfiguration of land. Within the first three months after Stalin's death, around 1.5 million prisoners were released. However, their status had not changed officially as they were still obliged to work and were not allowed to leave the city. The new 'dezoned' status offered them new benefits too. By 1950, Vorkuta's prisoners were paid full wages and were often provided with civilian housing. By these means, Gulag prisoners were encouraged to invite their families to Vorkuta and remain living in the city after their sentence was officially over. In this manner the city began to transform from Gulag town into a 'Company town'.²⁵ The society began to address the problem of heritage associated with Gulag institutions through the formation of human rights associations. In this way, the period between the 1980s and the 1990s was rich with social activism led by the Owing to Memory organisation.

3.1 'Dezonification' of land

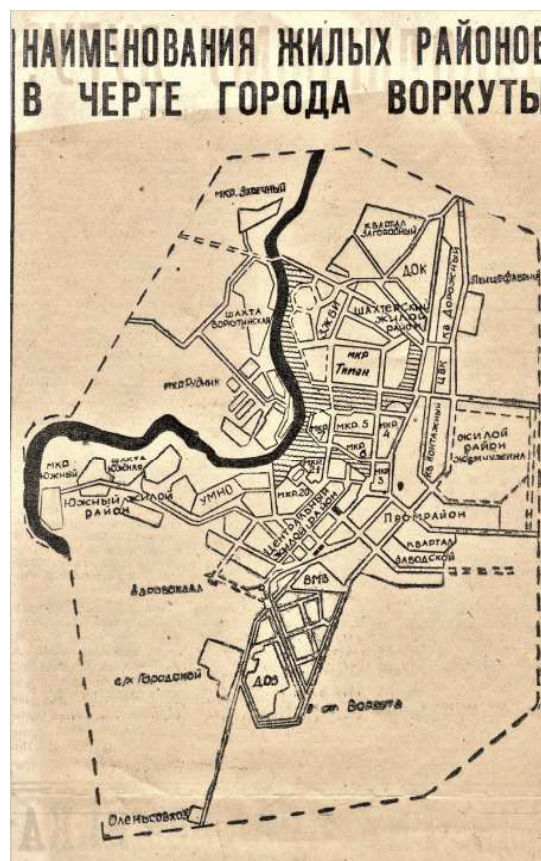
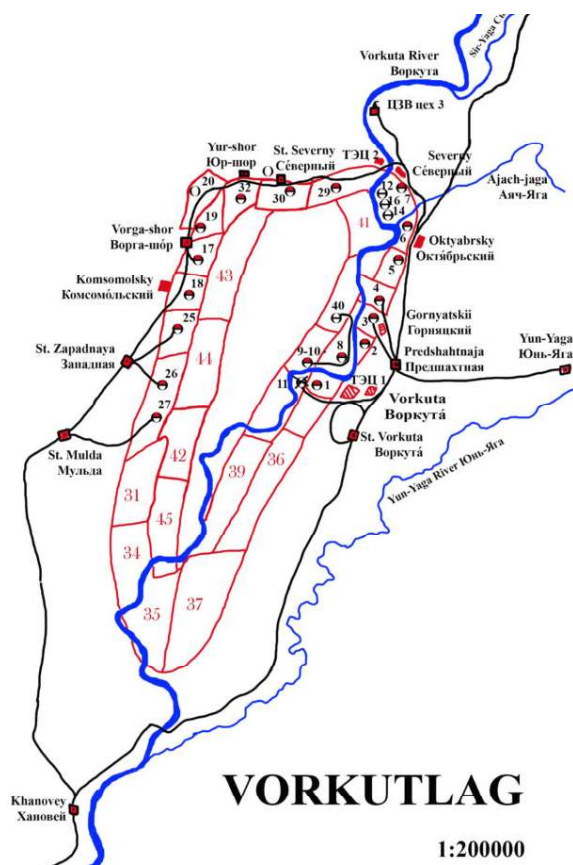
As a consequence of the dezonification act, many structures that originated in the camp became part of the city. Whether a camp barrack or a monumental building, the spaces were transformed to be used by all. The barracks were turned into worker dormitories after minimal renovations, and the public venues built by prisoners became a part of the Gulag's legacy. Hospitals, theatres and residential blocks remained to stay for months, years and even decades. American journalist and historian David Satter wrote about his visit to Vorkuta (2008) in his book *It Was a Long Time Ago, And It Never Happened Anyway*:

Official histories did not mention that Vorkuta had been built by prisoners. Yet reminders of the camp were everywhere. There were burial grounds in and around the rebuilt settlements and children regularly found skulls and bones.²⁶

Building over the past, and “covering” historical background related to the Gulag legacy was noticeable in the later renaming of Vorkuta’s institutions. Although the spaces were essentially used for the same purposes, the renaming act aimed “to transform the system of minds and associations with spaces”.²⁷ For instance, the Headquarters of the camp administrations became the Headquarters of the Coal Mining Trust in 1953. The spaces that were not suitable for adaptation, such as watch towers, and other signs that reminded the population of Gulag were erased from the city by the 1990s.

The focus of the city expansion was based on establishing new residential areas. However, the pattern of urban growth appears to be in a close relation with the original zoning plan of Vorkuta. Residential blocks were placed close to the coal mines, factories and the railroad (Figures 9-10). According to the general plan of the city of Vorkuta, as declared by the Vorkuta City Executive Committee, seven residential areas of the city were established as follows²⁸

1. Central residential area
The territory bounded by: the city gate - railroad to the Yuzhnaya coal mine - Vorkuta river - Shakhterskaya (Russian: Miners) embankment - Pischevnikov Boulevard
2. Shakhterski (Russian: miners’) residential area
Micro-districts: Timan, Ural, Sinega, Zagorodny, Sangorodok
3. Railway residential area
Gorodskoy state farm, steel plant base, Vorkuta airport, Vykxa Steel Works, Pechorshakhtstroy plant
4. Southern residential area
Micro-district Yuzhny, Teplichny state farm, Yuzhnaya coal mine, urban treatment facilities
5. Zarechny residential area
Micro-districts: Rudnik and Zarechny
6. Zhemchuzhina (Rus: pearl) residential district
Railroad to the Yin-Yaga coal mine
7. Industrial district
Vorkuta Mechanical plant, industrial enterprises



Figures 9-10: Left: Vorkutlag map (Moorhouse N.D.), right: Vorkuta city districts in 1976 (Romanov 1982)

3.2 'Dezonification' of people



Figure 11: "Day of departure from Vorkuta, 1956" (Moorhouse, n.d.)

Transition from a former Gulag town towards dezonified Vorkuta was visible in the demographic composition and social structures too. In the period between 1953 and 1958, approximately 105,000 prisoners were released from the camp complexes. Although some ex-prisoners chose to live outside of Vorkuta, by the end of the 1950s a third of Vorkuta's population consisted of former prisoners and exiles. Overall, nearly all former prisoners attempted to return to their incarceration cities after their inability to fit in other places, including their hometowns. Prisoners had little to return to by the time they were officially free from their sentences. Some feared they would be treated as criminals in their hometowns, while for others their careers had been destroyed. Many of the former-prisoners' friends and family members were prosecuted too and were either dead or exiled. In this way, staying in Vorkuta offered a little hope for the ex-prisoners to create new life and new families.²⁹

In Vorkuta, social networks among ex-prisoners left no room for discrimination. A Gulag town was transformed into, what Alan Bareberg called, a 'Company town'.³⁰ In an interview for The Telegraph Galina Dall confessed that "you always feel there is a shoulder on which you can lay your head".³¹ Galina Dall endured nine years, eleven months and nine days in Vorkuta's Gulags. With an abundance of former Gulag prisoners remaining in Vorkuta, social networks became the most powerful force in the city. The comradeship and alliance of dezed individuals assisted them with finding a temporary stay or even permanent housing, and a sympathetic consideration for a job application.³² Just like the Gulag institutions changed their status as a means of dealing with Gulag heritage, the human dimension had adjusted itself too. Former prisoners adapted themselves into paid professional workers, Gulag guards became civilians, and Camp Administration officers turned to be employees of civil ministries in the new social context.³³ However, despite thousands of prisoners re-starting their lives, many have encountered problems in their lives as non-prisoners - the psychological impact of imprisonment was enormous. (Appendix D)

3.3 The city as a result of dezonification: interview with Vitali Troshin

In December 2021, I interviewed Troshin Vitali Alekseevich, Russian architect, artist, and public figure. (Appendix E) Vitali spent many years of his life in Vorkuta, in the times after Dezonification act. He was the chief architect and city planner in the Russian Arctic city starting from the 1970s. In the interview, he shared his experience of the city and the people soon after thousands of politically repressed individuals were freed from the forced labour. Based on the interview, the development of Gulag-free Vorkuta city can be discussed in four stages. First stage marks the beginning of the Owing to the Memory movement initiated by the famous engineer and ex-gulag-prisoner Dmitri Ilich Mamulaishvili. Stage two marks the emergence of the Vorkuta Memorial organisation, and its success due to the large publicity. In this period, the Memorial team in Vorkuta was led by Vitali himself. In the later stage, the focus of Memorial organisation shifted from preserving the memories of Gulag towards defending human rights of politically repressed individuals. And lastly, stage four marks the end of Vorkuta Memorial, as all activists of the group left the city.

1 - Owing to the memory (Russian: 'U Pamyati v Dolgu')

The story of Vitalii Toshin's encounter with Gulag heritage in Vorkuta started in the 1980s. During his work as the head architect in Vorkuta Civil engineering institute, he had seen documentation of the classical Stalinist architecture of Vorkuta and discovered a list of Gulag prisoners associated with the notable architecture in Vorkuta.

In 1988, he met Roman Yunitser (Mitin), young artist and journalist, and Dmitri Ilich Mamulashvili, ex-prisoner of Vorkutlag and a social activist. Together, Roman Yunitser and Dmitri Mamulashvili wrote an article for the Zapolyarye newspaper titled *Owing to the memory* (Russian: *U pamyati v dolgu*). The piece was a "manifesto" to pay tribute to the victims of Stalinist terror. There, the authors summarised the problems encountered in the life of a released Gulag prisoner based on Mamulashvili's own experience (Figure 12). Although previously public attention was mainly put on the fallen Soviet soldiers during World War II, Roman Yunitser's publications on Gulag heritage marked the shift in Soviet society. In the following months after this publication, the Vorkuta city Committee of the Communist Party decided to organise (on a voluntary basis) a council on Vorkuta's Gulag heritage. Dmitri Ilich Mamulashvili was selected by the citizens as the leader of the organisation called Owing to the Memory.



Figure 12: The head of the Owing to Memory committee, ex-prisoner of Vorkutlag, Dmitrii Ilich Mamulaishvili with his son in the former field of Vorkuta's Gulag in 1988 (Matycin 2021)

2 - Vorkuta Memorial organisation

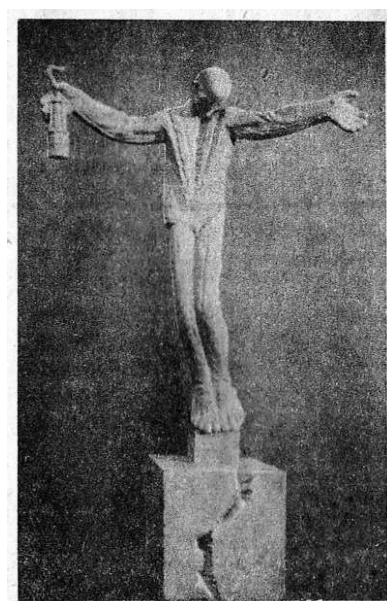
According to Vitalii Troshin, the movement initiated by Mamulashvili paved the way to the formation of Vorkuta Memorial organisation in the years after his (Dmitrii Mamulashvili's) death. As the country was undergoing major changes when the Communist Party left the leading role at the end of the 1980s, Gulag memory preservation methods were not limited to the formation of committees (as Owing to Memory), but also the development of larger gestures symbolising Gulag heritage. As the wave of publications about Joseph Stalin's repressions swept through the press across the different countries, the question arose of perpetuating the memory of the victims of Gulag.

In 1989, the sculptor Ernst Neizvestyi was commissioned by the Magadan Regional Department of Culture to create a memorial to the victims of repression. The sculptor originally envisioned the project as a triptych titled *Triangle of Suffering* with the installation of monuments in the three unofficial capitals of Soviet Gulag - Magadan, Vorkuta, and Sverdlovsk. These three geographical points would be spiritually connected into "a triangle of suffering", in the tradition of ancient temples. The sculptor has also added that this idea came to his mind back in the 1950s, when "there was no possibility to realise it".³⁴ Unfortunately, the only successful sculpture that was possible to execute was built in Magadan. In the case of Vorkuta, the high costs of the project were unable to be covered since the city was in a deep economic crisis.

Despite the financial issues, Vorkuta's activists believed that the city needed a memorable sign. In 1988, Troshin proposed a memorial dedicated to the victims of political repressions. It was a stone placed upon a pedestal with an inscription that read: "A monument to the victims of the arbitrariness of the period between 1930 and 1950 will be erected at this place." (Figure 13) It was planned that later a memorial would be developed here. Despite the outstanding sculptors working on the layout of the new monument, including Ernst Neizvestnyi, Veniamin Smirnov and Igor Pylaev, the plan didn't come true due to the same financial issues.



Figure 13: Memorial to the victims of Gulag placed on Shakhterskaya promenade, Vorkuta in 1988 (Centralised Archives System of Vorkuta 2018)



Безвинным узникам Заполярья
Таким видится памятник жертвам сталинских репрессий воркутинскому скульптору Игорю Пылаеву.
Заполярье. 1989 9 декабря. С. 2. Фото Р. Митина.

Figure 14: To the innocent victims of Zapolyarye. Memorial proposal by Igor Pylaev (Mitin 1989)

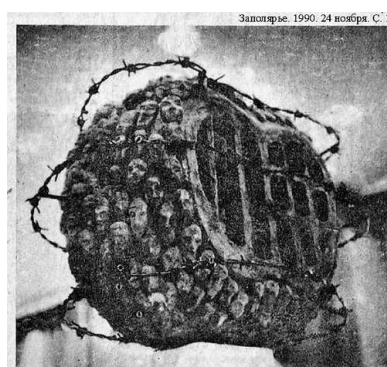


Figure 15: Memorial to the victims of Stalinist repressions, proposal by Veniamin Smirnov (Nikolayeva 1990)



Figure 16-18: Mask of Sorrow by Ernst Neizvestnyi in Magadan, Russia. (Klavdienko 2012)

The staircase leads inside this structure, and the exit is located at the backside to the cross. A camera must be located in the body of the mask. We need to think about the design of the camera. Either we will simulate the actual view of the camera, or the image of the camera. I would like a person, going up this stairway and entering inside the cell, to light up a candle in memory of those who were imprisoned, and to feel like a prisoner himself. And we were all prisoners... I wanted it to be a conciliar moment, that is when a group of people who are walking towards this monument are taken up to the stairs. But only one person should go into the cell, there should be a narrow door so that only one enters, and a narrow door so that only one leaves. The idea of catholicity, that is, all together, and liturgy - I am alone, so that everyone feels alone and thinks about the people who were imprisoned. And then go down to the cross - as the path to purification ... (Neizvestnyi 1990)

3 - The social mission of the Vorkuta Memorial organisation

In the following decade, Vitalii Troshin persisted with his attempts to develop a Gulag memorial in Vorkuta. In the early 1990s, Vorkuta mayor supported Vitalii's idea of hosting an international competition on Gulag-themed memorial designs. In total, twelve countries were approved to participate and submit their works. However, the challenge emerged when Vorkuta's First Secretary could not decide on the first, second and third places. Then, Troshin proposed an urban scheme, where the twelve monuments were located in different districts of Vorkuta, marking notable former Gulag sites. "Russia's Crown of thorns", as Vitalii called it, was referring to the symbol of punishment in Christianity: a painful burden, suffering and guilt. The proposal was approved by the Secretary. Several memorials were carried out on the grounds of Vorkuta. This opened up the international discussion of sculptors and artists on the topic of Gulag heritage while being located on the land of Vorkuta (Figures 19-21). Importantly, these were not merely a tribute to Vorkutlag or to Vorkuta itself, but to the people that went through the regime's terror.

Throughout the 1990s, the attention of Vorkuta Memorial members was put on the survivors of Gulag and life after their release. This was meant to include both prisoners and guards. During the interview, Vitalii Troshin admitted that prior to this time he could only see the Gulag personnel as "anti-humans".³⁵ His perception changed after he engaged in conversations with

the former Gulag guards. "In some ways, we used to live worse than the prisoners themselves!", - stated one of the former Gulag guards to Vitalii. While prisoners would sleep on their bunk beds inside of the barracks, a guard had to share a bed with another guard. While one was patrolling the camp – the other guard was asleep. Also dormitories and residences were provided only for the administration workers and officers, while the guards lived in accommodation similar to the barracks.

Nevertheless, even in the harsh climatic and economic conditions Gulag prisoners and guards managed to survive. Many of the inmates were able to follow their passion even inside of the camp, becoming architects, artists, actors and writers. Throughout the period of Vorkuta Memorial's active social mission, archives of the Gulag heritage included the works produced by the political prisoners and exiles. For instance, Vsevolod Lunyev developed his first architectural works while being de-zoned in Vorkuta. He designed the famous Vorkuta Music and Drama Theatre (1945), entrance to the fountain on Victory Boulevard (1945) and the Palace of Culture of Miners and Builders (1950) (Figures 22-23). The awareness of the Vorkuta Memorial organisation towards the Gulag-led creations was not limited to the achievements of prisoners, but also to the administration workers. In particular, Vitalii Troshin stressed the importance of Mikhail Maltsev, the head of Vorkuta-Pechora Directorate of Correctional Vorkuta Labour Camps. Under Maltsev's lead, the city began its urban transformation as new houses, a stadium, a maternity hospital and Vorkuta Drama theatre were built.



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21

Figure 19: Monument to citizens of Poland and other countries in Vorkuta, 1997

Figure 20: Lithuania's monument to the victims of war and political repression in Vorkuta, 1995

Figure 21: Chapel in memory of Lithuanian Gulag prisoners in Vorkuta, 1994

(Russian Association of Victims of Illegal Political repression n.d.)

By highlighting the different influences of Vorkuta development coming from Gulag inmates, guards and officials, Vitalii Troshin highlights the complexity and the ambiguity of the system. When speaking of the Vorkuta population in the times of Gulag (1930s), he refers to the blurred land separation between the city and the camp. For instance, often people that were living outside of the camp zone were the people that had just been released from the camp. Moreover, whether inside the camp or out in the city, people understood and accepted their roles as a matter of being part of the country's history. Here, Vitalii Troshin assures that he is in no way trying to justify the cruelty of the system. He remembers the words of Ernst Neizvestnii when the sculptor visited Vorkuta and spoke of the Soviet mindset: "[t]he problem of our people and the country is that the government took a role of 'fate': it cannot be condemned, but it must be accepted". This thinking haunted the repressed individuals and prevented them from returning to their hometowns after being released from Vorkutlag. Therefore, part of the Gulag survivors rehabilitation program carried out by Vorkuta Memorial was aimed at proving that these individuals are equal to the rest of the society. They were awarded as Honorary citizens of Vorkuta and frequently engaged in public events to integrate them. The trauma, however, was still "fresh" among the Gulag survivors. When speaking about the fragile condition of Vorkuta's society, Troshin compares that to an open wound:

Imagine if I have an injury and I keep ripping off the skin before it heals completely...over and over again. The healing process should be gradual to avoid pain and blood.³⁶

4 - The end of Vorkuta Memorial

As Vitalii revisited his memory of the closure of the Vorkuta Memorial group, I could sense the bitterness and sadness in his words:

We had a purpose to help people that went through the Gulag system. We needed to protect and rehabilitate them. Now many of the repressed individuals require help... but the organisation does not exist anymore.

In February 2022 International Memorial was officially liquidated, after it was stated as an illegal organisation by the Supreme Court of Russia. Vitalii Troshin did not provide any details regarding this lawsuit. Nevertheless, there are many vocal discussions taking place on the Internet. In particular, there was a large amount of publicity involved in the Russian and world-wide press. During the listening of the International Memorial case, the court did not accept to the arguments of the



Figure 22: Vorkuta State Drama theatre, 1943 (Kolpakov 2017)



Figure 23: Vorkuta's first stadium "Dinamo", 1946 (Kolpakov 2017)

organisation's defence, which aimed to prove that the activities of Memorial organisation were beneficial for the nation; and that the Memorial activities are dedicated to uncovering the difficult heritage related to the violations of freedom and the arbitrariness of the regime. Instead, the organisation was accused of violating the law related to the spread of information to the public. The formal reason for the lawsuit was the absence of a "Foreign agent" label on several Memorial materials shared on social media. Despite the organisation immediately correcting the label of the requested materials, the prosecutor continued to call the organisation "a threat to society" for pointing out the crimes of the Soviet regime.³⁷ In 1989, the Memorial Organisation became a symbol of Russia's opening up to the world and to itself through the exploration of its darkest chapters in history. Hence the closure of the Memorial marks how under the rule of Vladimir Putin, the country is returning to the rejection of its own history. The verdict about Memorial's liquidation was followed by the protest of Moscow citizens (Figures 24-25). People showcased their banners in front of the Supreme Court building in Moscow.³⁸



Figure 24-25: Protesters in front of the Supreme Court Moscow regarding the end of International Memorial. Poster 1 translation from Russian: "Hands-off from Memorial, freedom to politically-repressed people". Poster 2 translation from Russian: "You can't kill memory of the nation! We are surviving in poverty, lawlessness and with barely any hope" (Mokrushin 2022)

When addressing the development of Vorkuta after the city was dezonified, the fast-changing notions of Vorkuta's identity became apparent. Immediately after the end of the Gulag system, Vorkuta was transformed from a Gulag town into a "Company" town. Communist Party's ambitions to create a city in the Arctic circle were realised as the urban spaces of Vorkuta were enriched by the classical Stalinist monuments and architecture, inhabited by the free population of former prisoners, guards and their families. However, soon after the transformation of Vorkuta, the population started to acknowledge the traumatic heritage related to the Stalinist regime. Repressed individuals were in the process of dealing with their own trauma, which made Gulag-related conversations a sensitive topic. Nevertheless, the support, and the "rehabilitation" acts were welcome. This paved the way to the formation of early organisations that began to address the difficulty of Vorkuta's heritage. The organisation has expanded and reached its peak when the Memorial team was formed. The members helped preserve Gulag heritage and defended human rights of the Gulag survivors. The memorization practices then included the development of sculptures, publication of articles and opening discussions. This time marked the peak of Vorkuta's development both as an urban and a social entity. Throughout 1990ies, political and economic changes led to a drop of investments in Vorkuta. This resulted in a sudden decline of Vorkuta's demographics as people began to relocate, and Vorkuta's Memorial had officially stopped its activity in the city.

²⁵ Alan Barenberg, "Gulag Town, Company Town," 2014, <https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300179446.001.0001>.

²⁶ David Satter, in *It Was a Long Time Ago, and It Never Happened Anyway: Russia and the Communist Past* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 266.

²⁷ Alan Barenberg and Steven Barnes, "Book Talk: 'Gulag Town, Company Town Forced Labor and Its Legacy in Vorkuta,'" Book Talk: "Gulag Town, Company Town Forced Labor and Its Legacy in Vorkuta", accessed March 11, 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/book-talk-gulag-town-company-town-forced-labor-and-its-legacy-vorkuta>.

²⁸ "ЖИЛЫЕ РАЙОНЫ ВОРКУТЫ," Централизованная библиотечная система города Воркуты (Zapolyarie magazine, March 10, 1982), <http://www.vorkuta-cbs.ru/vorkutinskie-syuzhety/zhilye-rajony-vorkuty>.

²⁹ Erik van Ree, "Problems of Communism: Gulag Authorities and Gulag Victims," *International Review of Social History* 58, no. 1 (July 2012): pp. 107-119, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020859012000776>.

³⁰ Barenberg, A. (2014).

³¹ "Stalin's Forgotten Victims Stuck in the Gulag," *The Telegraph* (Telegraph Media Group, March 2, 2003), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/3308207/Stalins-forgotten-victims-stuck-in-the-gulag.html>.

³² Barenberg, A. (2015), p. 100.

³³ Barenberg, A., Barnes, S. (2015).

³⁴ Sergei Sviridov, "LiveJournal." LiveJournal, November 14, 2012, <https://chelchel-ru.livejournal.com/830485.html>.

³⁵ Bulatova, Diana, and Vitalii Troshin. Vorkuta's Difficult heritage as seen by Vitalii Troshin. Personal, December 29, 2021.

³⁶ Bulatova, D., Troshin, V. (2021).

³⁷ "Дайджест: Почему Закрывают 'Мемориал', Договорятся Ли Россия и США Об Украине и Где Еще Ждут Войны в 2022 Году?," *BBC News Русская служба* (BBC, December 29, 2021), <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-59790660>.

³⁸ Sergei Mokrushin, "Nobody Is Safe Anymore: the Closure of Memorial," *Nobody Is Safe Anymore: the Closure of Memorial*, January 2, 2022, <https://ru.krymr.com/a/memorial-moskva-zakrytiye-krym-prava-cheloveka/31635606.html>.

4. Traces of the difficult past in the modern day Vorkuta

Modern-day Vorkuta's character is defined by its cold climate, Stalinist architecture and large plots of abandoned land. According to unofficial counts, currently there are no more than fifty thousand people left in Vorkuta.³⁹ This makes Vorkuta one of Russia's fastest 'dying' cities. To investigate the current state of the post-Gulag city, the method that I chose is based on the study of video materials published by the travellers within the past three years. Although I believe that a field trip to Vorkuta would provide a valuable insight for this thesis, in the light of the current political tension related to Russia declaring war to Ukraine, the field work at Vorkuta was impossible. Nevertheless, the large availability of video and photographic material on social media assessed me in constructing an image of the current state of Vorkuta. Therefore, the video materials used in this chapter are the publications of Russian travel bloggers Sergey Volkov (published in February 2022) and Anton Lyadov (published in April 2021), as well as Russian Journalist Ilya Varlamov (published in October 2020). The analysis also includes the works of the professional photographer Roman Demianenko, released in April 2020. Moreover, the photographs and diary of an amateur blogger Igor Sazhin express the emotions and feelings while staying in Vorkuta in March 2021. Also, I included notes from diaries of a former Vorkuta resident who returned to Vorkuta in 2019.

4.1 Study of photography and diary entries on the current state of Vorkuta

While searching for recent publications related to Vorkuta's state in the 21 century, I noticed a pattern in the types of literature available on the Internet. The titles highlighted "the return" to Vorkuta. The articles, posted either in a personal blog or in the press, are based on the perception of the Arctic city from the perspective of a former Vorkuta-citizen's visit to his hometown. Thus, the sources are based on a personal and descriptive text. Despite the subjectivity of the personal notes, the authors discuss in a comparative framework their (subjective) memories of Vorkuta in their childhood versus the image of the city as seen today. The narratives are supported with photographic materials too - a great asset in understanding Vorkuta's present day context.

In March 2021, online journal and media platform "7x7: Horizontal Russia" published an article titled *Diary in the footsteps of Komi Memorials*.⁴⁰ In his blog, Igor Sazhin wrote about his trip to Vorkuta (2021) as a part of his journey around the Komi Republic in Russia. The goal of Igor's trip was to revisit the monuments initiated by the former Vorkuta Memorial organisation. His trip began from the Memorial to the Victims of Gulag. The hardships of getting to the memorial commenced as the author headed outside of the center of Vorkuta towards the old district of Rudnik, which used to be the first Vorkuta coal mining zone (Figure 26). Despite the historical significance of this place, there was no safe path to reach the area. A single bridge connected Vorkuta center with Rudnik. That bridge was not used any longer as it was unsafe to walk on. As the author crossed the bridge despite his concerns, the district's image only displayed the same dystopian image of heritage that is abandoned and empty, in his own words: "[a]n empty building with columns looking at the world with empty eye sockets. Horror. Desolation. Terrible frost."⁴¹

Throughout the course of Igor Sazhin's journey, the observations mainly related to the extremely cold weather (-35 degrees Celsius), emptiness of the city, and the endless tundra. His descriptions partially correlated with the expressions stated in the diary entries of another author, which chose to remain anonymous. On the LiveJournal website, the unknown author describes Vorkuta:

White silence all around you, polar nights, a place of power.⁴²

Unlike the former Vorkuta's description, this author saw empowerment and beauty in the apparent emptiness of Vorkuta. The narrative gave an impression that the place is highly valuable for the author. He revisited the locations around his former residence (Central square), and wrote about the neighbourhood being ghostly. Due to the difficulties related to Vorkuta's budget, the city council was unable to take down or refurbish the abandoned buildings (Figure 27). Instead, the officials hoped that the unused spaces would provide a shelter to homeless individuals, or become party places for the youth. In contrast, crimes, fire,⁴³ and murder took place in the abandoned structures.⁴⁴

Apart from the abandoned residences, the diary mentioned unused schools, restaurants and stores. In the cases of schools, some had to shut down due to the decline of Vorkuta's population.⁴⁵ As the former Vorkuta citizen approached Moskovskaya street, he described it as once being the most beautiful boulevard. The buildings were rich in Gulag-related history and architectural elements, yet now the majority of these structures are abandoned. For instance, the former restaurant Yunost was acquired by Russian investors, yet no signs of refurbishment were noticeable. On the other side of the street there was the Kirov cinema building: abandoned and unmaintained (Figure 28). This square was formerly marked with a cast iron monument of Joseph Stalin, and operated as the center of Vorkuta. However, as the ideological change appeared in the city in the early 1980s, the center of the city had also departed towards the new direction.

Today, Vorkuta's image actively evokes implicit, and at times straightforward references to the Gulag-related past. Whether a carefully constructed memorial, or a crumbling Stalinist building, the symbols make the visitors and the residents of Vorkuta recall the suffering that the prisoners had to undergo to build this city. Hence, the fusion of melancholy, bitterness along with gratefulness emerge from the experience of the cold and ghostly Vorkuta.

As a last step for the photographic material analysis, I referred to the works of Russian photographer Roman Demyanenko.



Figure 26: The center of the Rudnik: administration building of Vorkuta's first coal mine (Sazhin 2021)



Figure 27: Abandoned residential building in front of the author's house in Vorkuta (Unknown 2019)



Figure 28: The former center of Vorkuta. Image of the facade of Kirov cinema (Unknown 2019)

His great-grandfather went through Vorkutlag as a traitor of the Soviet Union for being captured during the Second World War. The photographer left Vorkuta when he turned eighteen years old, but he revisited his hometown in January 2018. During his visit, he was able to reconnect with his childhood memories through a visual narrative made with the help of photography. The photographer witnessed Vorkuta's shocking decay as "locals live and work amid the ruins" and "abandoned buildings keep tumbling down" (Figure 29).⁴⁶

When Roman speaks of the young population of Vorkuta today, he says it is natural that the children of Gulag prisoners, many of whom were freedom activists, inherited the rebellious streak from their ancestors. For instance, it manifested through punk music concerts held in the House of Culture in Vorkuta. "I met one guy at one of the punk gigs in Vorkuta. He was wearing a Discharge T-shirt and torn jeans (Figure 30). He was just 15 years old. I decided to include a photo of his tattooed hand holding a cigarette in the project, to capture this side of Vorkuta too.", - explained Roman in his interview to Calvert Journal in April 2020.⁴⁷

4.2 Study of the video materials on the current state of Vorkuta

For this study I used three video materials, namely *The dying city of Vorkuta* by Ilya Varlamov, *The most forgotten city* by Anton Lyadov and *Vorkuta: the dying city in the permafrost* by Sergey Volkov. These works described the state of Vorkuta, supporting the narratives of the earlier diaries and photographs. The selected travel videographers tend to compare Vorkuta to Chernobyl, or the video games S.T.A.L.K.E.R. and Metro 2033 for its ghostly appearance.

Abandoned architecture is unfortunately still in use by the citizens of Vorkuta today. Although many residents wish to get rid of their apartments, nobody is willing to buy a damaged property in Vorkuta. In case of the residents leaving their buildings, they would need to pay for high utility costs (as a result of poor thermal insulation, missing windows, and water leakage). In this way, many people that compose the modern population of Vorkuta are trapped and tied to the dying city. According to the studied video material, because of the movement of the permafrost soil, the buildings start to crack and fall just like a house of cards.⁴⁸ Despite the evidence of cracks on the facades, it can take decades for a building to be evacuated.⁴⁹ Although the majority of the Vorkuta population wishes to relocate towards the West of Russia, many cannot afford leaving their

apartments in Vorkuta due to the low wages and high service costs for housing.^{50 51} (Appendix F)

Despite the rich history of the place, the few people that are currently living in Vorkuta seem to be forgotten by the rest of the country. Here people have to survive, rather than live. Surviving in Vorkuta does not refer solely to the permafrost land climate, but to the emergency state of the buildings, the crumbling economy of the place and the unsuited streets for public life.⁵² It appears that with the end of the Soviet regime, the place and the people lost their purpose in the country's economy: the city did not provide the free labour force (by Gulag prisoners) and the new technological advancements do not require much coal mining. In this manner the mining city of Vorkuta became a ghost city today.



Figure 29: Abandoned school building in Vorkuta (Demyanenko 2020)



Figure 30: Danila, 15 years old. Each year, many young people leave Vorkuta and move to more southern cities in Russia because they see no chances for professional advancement and social prospects (Demyanenko 2020)

³⁹ “Europe’s Easternmost City Photos of Life in Vorkuta, One of Russia’s Fastest Dying Cities,” Meduza, accessed April 6, 2022, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/01/27/europe-s-easternmost-city#:~:text=According%20to%20unofficial%20counts%2C%20there,of%20Russia's%20fastest%20dying%20cities.&text=A%20cemetery%20for%20Gulag%20prisoners,Uprising%20on%20August%201%2C%201953.&text=Inside%20one%20of%20Vorkuta's%20abandoned%20apartments>.

⁴⁰ Igor Sazhin, “Najnovije Vijesti Na News Video Portalu,” Dnevnik.hr, March 10, 2021, <https://dnevnik.hr/>.

⁴¹ Sazhin, I. (2021).

⁴² Anonymous, “Воркута. Возвращение Домой. День Первый.,” LiveJournal, March 31, 2019, <https://backpackers-roo.livejournal.com/4060.html>.

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⁴⁵ Виктория Столярова, “«Они Практически Пустые»: Почему в России Умирают Моногорода,” ТВК, November 11, 2019, <https://tvk6.ru/publications/sunday-news/46592/>.

⁴⁶ Masha Borodacheva and Roman Demyanenko, “Young Russia,” Young Russia, April 24, 2020, <https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/11764/vorkuta-documentary-photography-russian-arctic-gulag-Roman-Demianenko-russia-z>.

⁴⁷ Borodacheva, M., Demyanenko, R. (2020).

⁴⁸ Самый Брошенный Город / Воркута / Как Живут в Мертвеющих Посёлках / Лядов с Места Событий, The Люди, 2021, 13:50 to 15:17, <https://youtu.be/JbIj5OX9fA>.

⁴⁹ The Люди, 3:00 to 3:30, 2021.

⁵⁰ Воркута. Умирающий Город в Вечной Мерзлоте. Жизнь На Краю Земли За Полярным Кругом, Русские Тайны, 2022, 18:56 to 20:58, <https://youtu.be/5LilPhKGzCg>.

⁵¹ The Люди, 35:13 to 35:30, 2021.

⁵² Умирающая Воркута. Как Живёт Город, Где Квартиру Можно Купить За Один Рубль, Varlamov, 2020, 17:25 to 38:13, <https://youtu.be/54elyebf0lg>.

5. Discussion

The case of Vorkuta is one of the many post-Soviet towns that relate to the practice of Gulag institutions. The heritage that describes a Stalinist ideology, repression and violence can be considered to be difficult by, and towards, the citizens of Vorkuta. When researching the history of Vorkuta, the root of the 'contestation' became apparent to me. The city originated from the strive of the Soviet Communist party to develop the territory beyond the Arctic circle using the power of repressed individuals, guards and incentivized citizens. Therefore, the current city, and its parks, residences and public venues are "standing on the graves" of the victims of the Stalinist terror. Putting the ethical considerations aside, the urbanisation of Vorkuta's land was perceived as a success by the government. Moreover, throughout the period of the Second World War, many notable artists, architects and writers were sent to Vorkuta's camp, which contributed to the famous artworks produced within the camp (i.e. theatrical plays, movies, photographs and classical Stalinist Architecture). From that perspective, the creations made during the Gulag times reflect the views and notions of the repressed victims through the ideological frame. In this way these creations evoke implicit, or at times straightforward references to the times of Stalinist regime. Whether a carefully constructed memorial, or a crumbling residential block, the symbols make the residents of Vorkuta recall the suffering that the prisoners had to undergo to build this city. Hence, the fusion of melancholy, bitterness and at the same time gratefulness emerge from the experience of the cold and ghostly Vorkuta.

However, it appears that the social trauma experienced through the repression had influenced the acceptance of the boulevards, restaurants and other public locations built with the hands of Gulag prisoners. Traumatic memories of the Stalinist terror led the citizens and the city councils to erase or reform the visual clues related to the regime. Today, the generations coming after the ex-prisoners faced confusion of whether the memorials reflect the memory towards the regime itself, or towards the victims of the terror. Moreover, ownership-related issues raise concerns over maintenance of the Gulag-related historic grounds. In the modern times, when the land in Vorkuta is distributed among different business owners and investors, little contribution was done to pay tribute to the architecture built with the hard labor of repressed individuals. This has led to the decaying views on the historic boulevards in Vorkuta today.

The unmaintained architecture extends beyond the public buildings towards the residences and whole districts. This poses unsafe living conditions to those remaining to live in Vorkuta. Perhaps, a parallel can be drawn between the prisoners of Vorkutlag and the current population of Vorkuta, where both live in extreme cold climates, crumbling residences and minimal wages. In both cases, life in Vorkuta is rather involuntary, as the majority of the modern citizens cannot afford living elsewhere.

It was clear to me that the city and its citizens acknowledge the dark side of the history of Vorkuta, however at certain moments the acknowledgement of trauma was more vocal and active than in other times. The traumatic past related to contestation of Gulag memories in Vorkuta was elaborated through the social activism of Owing to the Memory and the International Memorial movements. The peak of activism in the early 1990s marked the willingness of the city and the people to commemorate the victims. However, the recent closure of the largest organisation focusing on the memory of Gulag victims highlights the rejection (and non-acceptedness) of this heritage. Hence, the history of Vorkuta and the memory of Vorkutlag remains unclear.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Offences of Gulag Population (By Percent as of January 1 of each year)

**Table 7. Offenses of GULAG Population
(by Percent as of January 1 of each year)***

	1934	1936	1940
<i>Sentenced for:</i>			
“Counterrevolutionary offenses”	26.5	12.6	33.1
Dangerous crimes against the administrative order, including Banditry	15.2	17.7	3.6
Other crimes against the administrative order, including Speculation	3.9	3.2	2.4
and “Hooliganism”	1.3	1.1	2.4
Misconduct in office, Economic crimes	—	—	7.3
Crimes against persons	7.5	10.6	7.3
Crimes against property	4.7	5.5	5.2
Theft of public property	15.9	22.3	12.1
“Socially harmful and dangerous elements”	18.3	14.2	1.9
Violation of the law on internal passports	8.0	11.5	18.9
Military offenses	—	2.3	1.3
Other delicts	0.6	0.8	0.7
	2.0	2.6	3.3

NOTE: *The percentages do not add up to 100 because of rounding.

SOURCE: GARF (TsGAOR), fond 9414, opis' 1, delo 1155, listy 3–6.

J. Arch Getty, Gabor T. Rittersporn, and Viktor N. Zemskov, “Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre-War Years: A First Approach on the Basis of Archival Evidence,” *The Soviet Union*, 2018, pp. 153-185, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351145206-7>.

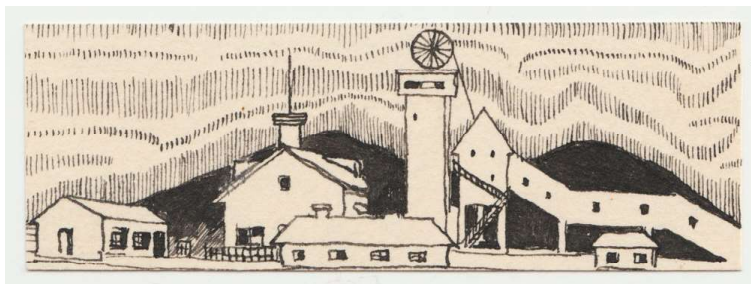
Appendix B

Vladimir Petrov, a former Kolyma (Vorkuta’s neighbouring camp) prisoner describes the truth of life under totalitarianism in the Soviet Union:

It is a well-known fact that the population of the USSR is divided into three categories, which are today [late 1960’s] almost equal in numbers: prisoners, ex-prisoners, and future prisoners. It is difficult to find in the Soviet Union a company of three adult men, at least one of whom has not at some time been subject to repressions, either through investigation or trial, or imprisonment in a camp.

Vladimir Petrov, in *Escape from the Future; The Incredible Adventures of a Young Russian* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 160.

Appendix C



Vorkuta Mineshaft Number 7. Original drawing by a Gulag inmate

An excerpt from one of Vorkutlag's inmates sentenced for being an acquaintance of his distant uncle, who became a part of anti-Soviet resistance after WW2. The author was a former art student, and received a sentence of 25 years in prison. He was loaded in the train carriage and sent to Vorkuta. Series of diary entries

Dan Moorhouse, "Vorkuta Gulag: Letters and Diaries of an Inmate," Schoolshistory.org.uk, October 7, 2019, <https://schoolshistory.org.uk/topics/european-history/russia-soviet-union/vorkuta-gulag-letters-and-diaries-of-an-inmate/>.

Appendix D

One of the former Vorkuta's inmates was released on July 27, 1956. The date marked the former prisoner becoming a "fully fledged citizen again" as he wrote in his diary. Following the release, he got a train ticket to return to his life prior to his imprisonment. He proceeded to follow his education as a student in the Academy of Art, Novosokolniki. Yet, despite the attempts to enjoy his life as a free citizen, the author was hospitalised in a psychiatric institution (1957). Later, he suffered from depression and anxiety for the rest of his life. When reading through the diary entries, the ex-inmate did not focus on describing the camplife. Instead the entries were full of books and poems extracts, discussions about art and cinema. However, the unwritten stayed with him for the rest of his life.

Appendix E: Interview with architect, artist, and public figure Vitali Troshin. Translated from Russian. (December 29, 2021)

- How would you define the term "difficult heritage"?

- It is hard to say... I was used to living in extreme conditions. My goal was not to withstand these (conditions), whether natural or social, but to adapt myself. I did this not just to live, but also to remain true to myself and change something in life. My father had been to six fascist camps. Then he was sent to an American camp, and later ended up in Baku. I didn't know this up until the time when I started initiating Memorial organisation. On one hand my father was repressed, and on the other I never joined the party, yet still I ended up being at the administrative position... I was the head architect, and I had never experienced difficulties. I lived in different times and my parents have protected me from the social and economic issues that they experienced even in the 1910s. I used to live in a closed city called Rudnick in Ukraine. Even in the times when everyone was suffering from starvation, our city had caviar. It was a special town for the abundance of uranium ore. Therefore, I cannot say that based on my practice the time was ever difficult for me.

- How did you join the Memorial organisation?

- This was closely linked with my professional activity. Between 1982 and 1985, I was the head architect

in the institute (in Vorkuta). There, I was developing a civil institute. I've seen documentation of beautiful buildings. It was the classic Stalinist architecture, which I personally admire. My curiosity led me to searching for the authors of the projects, and in the documentations, I found "z-k" ('zeka', Russian: inmates). From that moment on I began the search for those people and their stories. It was a discovery for me. I was lucky to personally meet and have a conversation with Vorkutlag ex-inmates. The quotes that I included in my letter to you were not extracts from literature, but exactly what I heard from those people. I did not understand what happened there (in Vorkutlag), because I didn't dive into that system. By 1987 I met two interesting individuals – painter and journalist of Zapolyarye magazine (Roman Yunitser-Mitin), and an ex-inmate who soon became an honorary citizen of Vorkuta (Dmitri Ilich Mamulaishvili). Together, they produced a beautiful article titled "U pamyati v dolgu" (Russian: Owing to the memory). In that article published in the communist party times (1987), Yunitser concisely summarised the problems he encountered in life, which were related to his experience in gulag (Vorkutlag). I really enjoyed the piece, and I reached out to the authors. After that, we decided to create a movement, called "U pamyati v dolgu" (Russian: Owing to the memory). It wasn't a political movement, but rather related to culture. We wanted to perpetuate and make a collection regarding the Gulag heritage. This was our foreshadowing to the formation of the International Memorial Organisation in 1989. Even before the International Memorial existed, we were already part of the Memorial team but under a different name.

I was not involved in the (communist) party, but this wasn't because I was an anti-Soviet person... I was afraid I do not live up to the high moral standards that a party member must live. Fortunately, I was supported by the first secretary (of Vorkuta) as he didn't insist on me, an administration member, to become part of the party.

I got to know the hardships of gulag survivors when I got involved in Memorial activities. In the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s there was the first major public acknowledgement, coinciding with the party leaving the leading role. A wave of information also included lies, as well as the extreme truth... it was hard to sort it all out. Personally, I saw every person working in the gulag system as an anti-human. It was a terrible person that was a part of that system. This was my impression up until I met some of the camp's guards. How did they get into the system? What was their life like under the regime? What did they feel? Could they simply resign? As I questioned them, my opinion has largely changed.

In the end of the 1990s young people became vocal about the problems related to the Stalinist terror. The excessive freedom of the time caused a negative effect on the ethical side of the discussion. I was witnessing the transformation of the ex-gulag inmates. Most repressed individuals got into the camps without a specific reason: for a joke, an acquaintance, for being captured during the war... These were difficult life paths, but they were all patriots as most of them returned to Russia with a full understanding of the punishment they would be facing. They were unconditionally a part of that system. So, when the young generation from the Memorial organisation began to shame and ask the ex-prisoners: "How were you not rebelling to the system?". You should see the eyes of the gulag survivors: they couldn't believe that they were once again seen inferior to other people due to the failure to resist the regime.

I recommend you watch a two-episode movie called "Lagernaya pil" (Russian: Camp dust). The main character there, Igor Dobroshtan, was an inmate in gulag that was famous for his heroic attempts to run away from the camp. He did this not even once, but five times! Then, the questions appear: how could he attempt to run five times and nevertheless stay alive? After the series of investigations, it turned out that outside of the gulag he was a spy. Then, the administration assigned him to enter the gulag and watch after the inmates undercover. He was able to join the prisoner groups that were planning an escape, and of course notify the administration about the plans. Moving forward to the times after gulag, his mission became known to the public. Then a true metamorphose took place: Igor began to portray his actions as a heroic feat. According to his arguments, he was purposefully revealing the "bad communists" that wanted to run away from the regime. Here lies the complexity of the difficult heritage. In this movie, there was a quote given by one of the camp's officials to the inmates: "I will grind you all into a camp dust".

Then there was the continuation: “God created humans from clay, and the socialists from the camp dust”. Soviet citizens judge themselves the hardest and live a very difficult life. Russia cannot be understood with the mind.

Ernst Neizvestnyi is a famous Russian sculptor, an immigrant that lived in the West for a long time. Once, he arrived at Vorkuta and spoke of our country: “The problem of our people and the country is that the government took a role of fate: it cannot be condemned, but it must be accepted”. Soviet people can receive a request to come to the police station without any explanation for the possible reasons. Then, on the way to the station he, or she, would think over all the possible wrongdoings done in the past, like crossing the road, cursing and so on. By the time he reaches the station, he already decided that he would receive a year in prison and a fine. This slavish thinking is laid down by the system... Even now, it continues to be in the minds of the population.

- How did you manage to recollect the memory of Vorkutlag, despite the many gaps in Gulag history?

- When I was involved in International Memorial activities, I didn't think of the political system, but instead I focused on the affected people. They (Gulag's ex-inmates and guards) were sure that I, head architect and the painter, was able to create monuments, improve cemeteries and so on. Here, my administrative position aided me a lot. While in the administration, I was looking for a social program to improve living conditions. When the coal miners received food products instead of salaries, and the mayor's office had no money, we continued building the city. This was possible to do because we managed to fit the project into the plans of the city.

Before the start of the Memorial organisation in early 1988, I proposed installing a memorial dedicated to the victims of political repressions. The initiative was supported by the Communist party (Communist Party of the Soviet Union). On the opening day, there were the first secretary of the Vorkuta's party committee, the head of the city's administration, and security guards. Seven of the guards set off fireworks at the end of the event. The reason why the first secretary approved of having this event is because he was raised in Vorkuta and even worked together with the gulag prisoners in one of the Vorkuta's mines. He was knowledgeable of the situation within the city. Therefore, in the end the memorial was placed there. It was in January, and it was below 30 degrees Celsius: polar night, old people holding candles, tears... There was a conditional memorial in front of us: a stone placed upon a pedestal. Eventually I was able to assure the mayor that the city needs a bigger memorial. The installation that I developed in 1988 was rather a memorable symbol. Then, we decided upon holding an international competition. Out of twenty-four countries that applied to participate, we selected twelve. There were talented sculptors and artists from the Baltics, Germany, Sweden, America... When all the works were placed along one line inside of the building of the Communist Party, First Secretary told me: “Vitali, I cannot choose since I am not a specialist here... whichever works you select for the first, second and third places – those will be later on awarded in the ceremony”. Unfortunately, I couldn't choose either because the works differed a lot yet portrayed specific thoughts on the theme of repression. That evening I came home late, and on the TV, there was a movie scene. There, a crown of thorns was put on Christ. Suddenly an idea came to my mind – Vorkuta is a ring. At that time, there were thirteen districts in Vorkuta located along the city ring. I realised that we could use this to create “Russia's crown of thorns”. I shared my thoughts with the First Secretary the next morning, to which he replied: “Vitali, I will be sent to jail for that”. Then I had to explain that the “crown of thorns” was a symbol of the punishment for humankind. I ended up making a scheme for the project, highlighting the locations where a monument could be located. There, a piece of land was allocated to the selected works. Based on the locations and the plot size, masters were allowed to carry out the memorials at their own expense. Based on this initiative, we also opened an academy for international students. This academy hosted fifteen students each month, who participated in various workshops regarding the development of memorials.

The most terrible state was related to the warped destinies and souls of people. After their release, most

of these people came to their homeland, but in turn - the homeland did not accept them back. New families were formed... we have this saying "no person is incarcerated for nothing" ... all these thoughts pressured ex-inmates to return to Vorkuta and live among the same former prisoners.

When speaking with one of the former gulag guards, he told me to investigate the life of the gulag personnel in Vorkuta: "We used to live worse than the prisoners themselves!". While prisoners would sleep on their bunk beds inside of the barracks, each assigned to their own bed; us, guards, had to share one bed for two people. Meanwhile one was patrolling – the other one was allowed to sleep. Then we would change. Dormitories and residences were only for the administration and officers, while the guards lived in the accommodation like the barracks. The prisoners had their own beds, they were fed twice or three times a day, even though the meal wasn't great... Gulag employees would only receive 'talons' (Russian: coupons), but sometimes they were unable to find where to credit these coupons. In Vorkutlag it wasn't common for a prisoner to attack or kill a guard. They all knew that the conditions were harsh for all. The guards, too, were sent to work in Vorkuta as a punishment. It is a very complicated system.

Mikhail Maltsev was a creative person and engineer. He was directed to Vorkuta to develop the coal mining sphere. When he arrived at Vorkuta, he could not distinguish the camp from the city as well as the difference between the prisoners and free people. In the first months in Vorkuta, he called to Lavrenti Pavlovich Beriya and requested to improve the social situation at Vorkuta. The system of punishment regime did not result in a better production of coal mine. This can be also found in the magazine "Iskusstvo Kino" (Russian: The art of cinema), written by Leonid Agranovich. He tried to write a plot for "Shakhter Zapolyaria" (Russian: The coal miners beyond the polar circle). There, Maltsev was the main character. The focus was put on the approach that he took while being at power of Vorkutlag. He received a full support from Beriya. Maltsev assigned ex-inmates to be the heads of coal mines. Besides that, he declares to build a maternity hospital in Vorkuta. In the same year, he created a position of the city's head architect and requested for the plan of urban development in 1943. Maltsev builds a theatre and allows Aleksandr Kapler to live outside of the camp as a city photographer. In gulag slang, these people were called "pridurki" (Russian: idiots) – all the engineers, architects, artists... They remained living and engaging in their professions even as gulag prisoners.

Everyone turned against me, including the International Memorial members, when I nominated Maltsev as an honorary citizen of the city of Vorkuta. I believe that not a single (communist) party member had transformed the city as Maltsev had done. The first stadium built with an underground field heating was built in 1947 under the direction of Maltsev in Vorkuta.

Recently there was a release of a movie about gulag focusing on Mikhail Maltsev – "Glavniy rezhisser Vorkutlagovskogo teatra" (Russian: Chief director of the Vorkutlag theatre). Also, there is "Kolyuchii yanvar" (Russian: Prickly January) about the uprisings of gulag inmates.

- What was the peculiarity of the social composition when you first arrived at Vorkuta?

- When people speak of life inside of the camp and outside, these people are most probably not knowledgeable of Vorkuta. There, the population outside of the camp primarily consisted of people that have just been released from the camp. When building districts and extracting coal, they knew that this was done for their future self. When I left Vorkuta, there were still forty-two ex-inmates remaining living in the city. They were happy when they were awarded and considered as being socially equal. Initially, there was a high mortality rate in Vorkuta because the product's delivery was extremely difficult. Mainly attributes of labour were brought into the city, but not the food products. For some reason people believed that there, in the Arctic, people can catch a fish or a deer, and eat mushrooms and berries... In the winter of 1932 out of 1500 individuals that arrived at Vorkuta, only 53 of them were still living. And that number includes both guards and inmates. The difference between the gulag inmates and guards wasn't large. Precisely due to the environment: the climatic and socio economical. For both (guards and inmates) there were is-

sues, for both there were barracks. The barbed wire only emerged during the wartime when gulag camps were hosting the war captives and deserters.

I was developing a space for the Gulag Museum forty kilometres away from the Vorkuta centre. There, I tried to make a replica of a gulag camp (approximately 400 people), where I placed five rows of barbed wire and some barracks. Up until now the wire remained standing there, but the barracks had been removed. Also, the people that sponsored the project were taken into prisons, as they were “the members of an organised crime group”.

For a long time, I have not been a supporter of the unequivocal opinion that Vorkuta is Hell. For most it was hell-like, but for someone it was life. In there, a person without a previous practice, was able to become a city architect after his time in Gulag. Almost two thirds of all stone buildings in Vorkuta were designed by Vsevolod Lunyev, a Vorkutlag inmate. His first ever works were developed while being inside the camp. Similarly, many became painters, actors, and architects there... I am not trying to justify gulag. The regime was horrific, everyone knows that. But we shouldn't go on about it... Imagine if I have an injury and I keep on ripping off the skin before it heals over and over again. The healing process should be gradual to avoid the pain and blood.

- Did you succeed in developing the project “Russia's crown of thorns”?

- The project included sixteen compositions: churches, monuments, cemeteries... I think about six of them were successfully placed on the designated land, but unfortunately the socio-economic issues related to the end of the Soviet Union had led to the pause. I am sure that up until now people in Vorkuta are suffering from all the attempts that the communist parties have tried to put in the city's development, but as there was no more party the plans were not met. Development had paused, and the population of Vorkuta shrunk. Even if Vorkuta will become tiny, or even disappear from the map, I believe that the memory and meaningfulness of Vorkutlag land will remain for centuries. About 250.000 people are buried in that ground. Can you imagine that all these 250.000 people were once living there, coming from twenty-four different countries? This land preserves the memory, and currently their remains... they cannot go into oblivion for sure.

Currently, international issues prevent project continuation. Since the land was designated for several countries, currently their political condition may not be interested anymore in getting involved. Unfortunately, many sculptors are already dead by now too. But I believe that the project is still quite realistic. According to the initial intentions, we are not making series of memorials to Vorkuta or Vorkutlag, but to the people that went through the Soviet terror and gave up their lives building cities, railways and digging coal mines. We cannot leave that without a symbol. I am sure that we can create an international center that would preserve these memories.

I used to have a friend, a painter that was an ex-prisoner in Vorkuta. He was charged with a murder of his wife, an accident: a book thrown at her had hit the head. He wasn't given a life sentence, and moreover he was released earlier than his original verdict. Until he turned 72 years old he worked in my department as the main artist and later on a sculptor. He made ice sculptures. He did not experience any violence while being inside of the prison and he remained creating art works. He used to live in my office space, because while he had been in the prison police took his residence. Although he was promised to be provided with a new apartment, he had to wait for a while. When I saw Zhora (the painter) out on the streets he was wearing a bowtie. He wanted everyone to see that he's a free man, he is an artist. Some, of course, get into the zones where violence was practised. I saw those people too, felt sorry for them and helped them out. In the practice of the Memorial Association, those people were just 10% out of all repressed people in Vorkuta. The rest have understood and accepted this (the existence of the gulag) as a matter of history of the country and believed that they got into history from this side: some through the war, some through captivity, some through the camp.

We left the International Memorial organisation when the war in Afghanistan started. Memorial team was initially made to support the memory, the rights and history of repressed gulag survivors. Later, new people came under the wing of the Memorial: the human rights activists who could not succeed in creating their own organisation. Having violated the foundations of the twenty-years-old “Memorial” organisation, they began to write about Chechnya, Afghanistan, and Syria... It was not our focus of expertise. This split of interests has caused the end of the International Memorial. Initially, we had a purpose – to help people that have been through Gulag. We needed to protect and rehabilitate them. I was able to rehabilitate thousands of people together with Memorial. Now, many of the repressed individuals require help... But the organisation does not exist anymore.

Appendix F

The abandoned look of Vorkuta’s architecture and urban spaces is further emphasised with the rapidly falling population in the city. Taking for instance Sovetski district, which originated in 1953, the peak of the area’s inhabitants was in 1970. According to the descriptions of the former Sovetski district resident, it was a pleasant neighbourhood with an active public life. However, the decline in population started with the end of the Soviet Union, as the coal mines started to shut down leaving inhabitants of the coal mining district jobless. By 2020, there were 2540 residents remaining, yet today there is only one.

Воркута. Умирующий Город в Вечной Мерзлоте. Жизнь На Краю Земли За Полярным Кругом, Русские Тайны, 2022, 29:55 to 30:22, <https://youtu.be/5LilPhKGzCg>.

