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DAVID J. NORDLANDER

MAGADAN AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE DAL'STROI BOSSES IN THE 1930s

Far more than a place of incarceration, the prison assumed a transcendent significance throughout the Stalin era. The Gulag in particular became a summation of the period, for events behind the barbed wire in many respects encapsulated the key realities of Stalinism. Among a plethora of topics, the legacy of specific camp regions across Siberia and other northern realms provides one of the most compelling lines of inquiry to elucidate the *modus operandi* of the Soviet 1930s. This essay will focus upon the history of Dal'stroi, the prison fiefdom in the Soviet Far East that in time became the largest entity within the nation-wide network of labor camps. An acronym signifying the euphemistic title of Far Northern Construction Trust, Dal'stroi proved itself a brutal institution over the years that fully reflected the impact of the Stalin Terror. In reference to the infamous archipelago of prison camps, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn remarked that Dal'stroi and its capital of Magadan formed “the greatest and most famous island, the pole of ferocity of that amazing country of *Gulag*.”¹

Such a regional investigation can be useful on a number of levels, for the focus of scholarship in Soviet history until recently remained on Moscow and the top party leadership under Stalin. Local government has for the most part been overlooked, even though it can reveal much about the nature of power and rule in the USSR. My emphasis here will be an explication of the chief Dal'stroi bosses, including an analysis of their backgrounds, motivations, and career paths as well as generational shifts they represented within the NKVD. In many respects, such an investigation involves the politics of personnel and the mutable nature of Soviet officialdom. Rather than representing a static *nomenklatura* that became ossified in place, the party and state bureaucracies in the early Stalin era evolved under seismic shifts that witnessed enormous political turmoil. Events in Magadan paralleled

1. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956; An experiment in literary investigation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974) I: ix.

national developments, and can serve to highlight the nature of such changes in Stalinist provincial administration.²

Lacking any regional antecedents, both Dal'stroi and its capital of Magadan came to life only in the early Stalin era and indeed stood as a quintessential reflection of Stalinism. Upon order of the *Politbiuro*, the Council of Labor and Defense (*Sovet truda i oborony*—STO) created the state trust Dal'stroi on 13 November 1931. As the chairman of STO, V. M. Molotov drafted a resolution defining the parameters and financing of this new organization. Dal'stroi would concentrate on highway and industrial construction in the valley of the upper Kolyma River, with a particular emphasis on mineral excavation in the region; it would control every enterprise and settlement within its venue, stretching down to Magadan and the Sea of Okhotsk; the Soviet government would initially capitalize Dal'stroi at twenty million rubles, a sum to be augmented annually by request of the trust leadership; STO would name a director, who was then to appoint deputies and assistants in several branches of economic and political operations; and finally, Dal'stroi would be freed from all local taxes and levies, and would stand above other regional institutions in terms of seniority.³

There should be no surprise that Stalin tapped a veteran chekist as the first director of prison operations in Magadan. One day following the creation of Dal'stroi, Molotov named Eduard Petrovich Berzin as its chief. Berzin, a Latvian Communist from a peasant family near Riga, enjoyed a high profile in the Soviet Union going back to the Bolshevik Revolution. A veteran of World War I, he had been a member and then leader of a Latvian regiment that in 1918 became the First Latvian Rifle Division, one of the units that guarded Lenin and other party leaders in the days after October. Berzin later helped liquidate the Left-SR uprising in Moscow and purportedly uncovered an international conspiracy known as the “Lockhart Affair.” He joined the Cheka in 1922, after which he rose through the ranks of the OGPU to become the head of a major labor camp in the northern Ural Mountains, Vishlag, from 1926 to 1931. As director of this site, Berzin had proven himself an able and competent administrator who could be trusted with the most vital missions. Considering the importance of the burgeoning gold industry in the north-eastern region, there is little wonder that Stalin selected a man of wide experience to run Dal'stroi.⁴

By 1932, the outlines of Dal'stroi's character became clear as Gulag activities began to transform Magadan. Having arrived in February of that year, Berzin

2. For an excellent guidebook on secret police personnel during this time period, see N. V. Petrov and K. V. Skorkin, *Kto rukovodil NKVD: Spravochnik* (Moscow: “Zven'ia,” 1999).

3. For more particulars on the birth of Dal'stroi, see GAMO (Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Magadanskoi Oblasti—State Archive of the Magadan Region), f. r-23ss, op. 1, d. 1, l. 1.

4. See “Luchshii chekist—tverdyi bol'shevik,” *Kolymskaia pravda* (7 November 1934): 2. For a modern assessment that more objectively reveals the conundrums facing Berzin's career in Magadan, see A. G. Kozlov, “Pervyi direktor,” *Politicheskaia agitatsiia*, 17 (September 1988): 28-31. For Berzin's official appointment as director of Dal'stroi, see GAMO, f. r-23ss, op. 1, d. 1, l. 2.

established a two-story wooden headquarters on the river Magadanka at the edge of town. Since Dal'stoi was nominally under the command of the Council of Labor and Defense, the OGPU created a separate regional organization in April 1932 known as *Sevvostlag*, or North-eastern Camp Administration, as an official arm of the Gulag providing the labor requirements of Dal'stoi. In terms of institutional oversight, a parallel *Sevvostlag* boss oversaw the growing number of labor camps in the area on behalf of the trust director. No duality of power ever arose in Magadan, however, for the Dal'stoi boss remained the local arbiter of events. Such an arrangement came about in part for propaganda purposes, for it allowed the Soviet state to refer to the vital functions of the "state trust" while concealing the actual nature of regional camp operations.⁵

Aside from its motivation, however, state rhetoric found ready adherents within this distant camp fiefdom. Many Gulag bosses, and even some inmates, placed at least some currency in the promises of official ideology. The idealistic framework of rehabilitation programs became the intellectual foundation for all endeavors in the region and gave meaning to several players caught in this bizarre yet tragic drama. Without question, the Gulag in Magadan comprised a repressive organization in the early Stalin era responsible for the suffering and deaths of many prisoners. One key difference from later years, however, was that Soviet goals at this time did not aim to destroy prisoners as political or ideological enemies of the state. While later generations of camp bosses regarded the "reforging" campaign as a useful pretense, the language of correctional labor resonated widely for the first wave of Dal'stoi administrators. For them, labor competition between brigades of Gulag captives became a motivational tool wrapped in the revolutionary ideals of Bolshevism.

Such sentiments reflected the philosophical outlook of the original camp bosses in Magadan. By definition of their punitive roles as agents of the secret police, both Berzin and his assistants played a substantial part in the evolution of the Stalin Terror. But as representatives of state security in the period following the Bolshevik Revolution, they cannot be easily categorized. Many such officials perpetrated callous and inhumane acts at various points of their careers. Along with acknowledging the repression with which they became involved, however, it should be understood that Berzin's circle reflected the more temperate values seen in the generation of Old Bolsheviks who had served the party from the days of October. The initial Dal'stoi administrators were all quite different from subsequent and far more sadistic Stalinist henchmen who came to the territory in the late 1930s. Although they had worked within the secret police for years, the experience of Dal'stoi's first managerial generation came largely from the pre-Stalinist era, when more moderate figures could be found in high positions of the Cheka or OGPU. Until the Kirov assassination late in 1934, and for a short time

5. Such a balancing act of propaganda and misleading explanation continued throughout the history of Dal'stoi, reflecting both standard practice in the Stalin era as well as the pretense of continuity with an earlier emphasis on the heroic "opening" of northern territories to Soviet power. See A. G. Kozlov, "Svetloe nachalo Magadana," *Reklamnaia gazeta* (7 March 1989): 8.

thereafter, it was not unusual to find agents like Eduard Berzin within the ranks of the secret police.

Berzin's manner as the Gulag chief in Magadan reflected his extensive education and cosmopolitanism. Having attended art school in Berlin before World War I, he had imbibed the revolutionary idealism of his formative years before 1920 and was an intellectual peer of leading thinkers in the party. For Berzin, the reshaping of those arrested and fallen from official grace constituted an important element in the Soviet experiment. While an acknowledged economic tool for the Soviet state, the Gulag for him remained a venue of remedial hope to prisoners through the concepts of "reforging" (*perekovka*) and "reeducation through labor" (*perevospitanie trudom*). Even though less-educated, many of his subordinates in Magadan were sympathetic as well to earlier Soviet attitudes far more benign than those of later Stalinists. As assistants to Berzin at his first Gulag administrative stop at Vishera in the Northern Urals, a number of Dal'stroi aides retained a long-term friendship with him built upon the shared utopian values of an earlier epoch.⁶

Although Berzin embodied the profile of a "Little Stalin" from the period, he never exemplified the image of a tyrannical or vainglorious party boss. While subsequent Dal'stroi administrators more closely matched the despotic persona reminiscent of the *Derzhimorda* character of Gogolian fame, Berzin and his associates functioned in a more subdued manner. They could be ruthless and uncompromising, but otherwise comported themselves simply and without distinctions separating them from their subordinates. An example of this can be seen in the work of Rodion Ivanovich Vas'kov, the titular head of *Sevvostlag* for its first two years of operation from 1932-1934 and one of Berzin's closest assistants. Vas'kov had a notorious but overblown reputation among the prisoners, in later years embellished by the reminiscences of Varlam Shalamov, as an arbitrary official who epitomized the suffering in the north-eastern camps. While this depiction would have been appropriate for later police administrators in the region, its application to Vas'kov obscured the differences between his generation and the one that followed. The infamous main stone prison in Magadan, which had functioned from the earliest times of Dal'stroi's existence and had entrapped famous inmates such as Evgeniia Ginzburg and others, became known in camp slang until the 1950s as "Vas'kov's House" even though neither its namesake nor Berzin approached the sadism and depravity of their successors who imparted the unfortunate legend to this structure in subsequent years.⁷

Like Berzin and many of his aides, Vas'kov had been born a peasant and raised in the rural poverty of late Imperial Russia. He served as a soldier in World War I, labored in the Ukraine under German occupation, and joined with Red forces following the October Revolution. Throughout the Civil War and after, Vas'kov

6. A. G. Kozlov, "Vernulsia k sem'e," *Reklammaia gazeta* (4 April 1989): 8.

7. See Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma tales*, trans. John Glad (New York: Penguin, 1994): 152. For a description of the subsequent and depressing realities to be found in "Vas'kov's House," which still stands in central Magadan, see Evgeniia Ginzburg, *Within the whirlwind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1981): 290-304.

worked in both the Cheka and OGPU, spending his entire Soviet career with the secret police as low-level agent, researcher, department head, and finally labor camp administrator. As with most of his original comrades in Magadan, Vas'kov found himself implementing increasingly harsh policies with the same vision that had guided him from the earliest days of Soviet rule. The ensuing conflicts would ensnare and then pass by many officials such as him and Berzin, but should not hide the fact that these men had followed ideals spawned in their youth, forged in the heat of revolution, and then engulfed by the onset of a harsher reality during the Stalin era.⁸

The brutal transformation in Soviet politics that undermined Berzin and his assistants came by the end of 1937, when the Great Purges hit Magadan with full force as had happened earlier throughout the country. From 1936 to 1938, the USSR endured a scale of state-sponsored violence unprecedented in either tsarist or Soviet times. Opening in standard chronologies with Ezhov's ascension to power as NKVD commissar in September 1936, the Terror lasted for two years amidst a sequence of show trials, widespread arrests, and a notable expansion of the Gulag. Catapulted by Stalin to a dominant position within state and society, the secret police oversaw all these developments and became the most significant institution in the Soviet Union. More powerful at this time than even the party, the NKVD offered Stalin an essential tool in shaping his authoritarian command. In particular, it helped him entrench a Stalinist elite while simultaneously destroying the generation of Old Bolsheviks who could never abide his apotheosis. As such, the *Ezhovshchina* became a defining episode in the final establishment of Stalin's rule.

Prior to the NKVD assault on the party and society-at-large, Ezhov instituted a purge within the Lubyanka aimed at establishing his own authority. Although his predecessor, Iagoda, had already been removed and arrested before Ezhov's assumption of power, the purge of "Iagoda men" from across the USSR formed a top priority for the new commissar in the well-established tradition of "cleansing" the security apparatus upon a change of its leadership. From late 1936 through all of 1937, the current NKVD boss pursued a methodical elimination of agents from the Iagoda regime, replacing them with "Ezhov men." Unlike many other regions, Magadan for a time weathered this purge from above. Although representative of an earlier generation of chekists, and thus no longer in favor among the ascendant Stalinist hierarchy, Berzin remained in charge of Dal'stroi for more than a year after these alterations in the Soviet power structure. Other than some changes in local camp operations which reflected national trends, the Gulag in Magadan had yet to feel the full effects of the *Ezhovshchina*.⁹

All this changed abruptly in December 1937, when a host of new NKVD agents arrived in Magadan on Ezhov's orders. Although assigned as "deputies" to Berzin,

8. "Stoikii borets na fronte perekovki," *Vernyi put'* (7 November 1934): 3.

9. Some authors contend that this situation in Magadan, clearly not on par with the violent upheaval already taking place elsewhere in the Soviet Union, reflected Berzin's more moderate political sentiments and proclivities. See A. G. Kozlov, "Iz istorii Kolymytskikh lagerei (1932-1937 gg.)," in S. G. Bekarevich, ed., *Kraevedcheskie zapiski* (1991): 87.

the new security personnel left no doubt as to their actual status. The Kremlin simultaneously summoned Berzin back to Moscow, an unscheduled trip packaged in part as a vacation but laden with forebodings. Berzin likely knew the import of his travel plans as well as the recent flurry of administrative appointments, but nevertheless worked for several days to show the new staff various aspects of camp activities. As a sign of their secret mandate from Stalin and Ezhov, however, the new “assistants” evinced little regard for the Dal’stroi boss and all but ignored him in their quest to overtake the state trust. Although Berzin technically remained in office, he was in effect the victim of a *coup d’état* choreographed from the Kremlin. In the space of a few hours, Berzin had become a “former person” in the city he ran unrivaled for almost six years.¹⁰

Ominous coincidences accompanied these power shifts in Magadan, for events began with the third anniversary of the Kirov assassination. On the night of 1 December 1937, a steamer pulled into Nagaev Bay on one of the last runs of the navigation calendar with a fresh complement of prisoners and the Dal’stroi administrators recently appointed by Ezhov. According to protocol in Magadan, Berzin greeted his new team at the docks with the usual fanfare of pageantry and brass bands. As the senior official of the group sent from Moscow, Karp Aleksandrovich Pavlov shook hands with Berzin as his first deputy and introduced the remaining crew. Although he probably knew details of Berzin’s imminent fate, Pavlov said nothing on the subject during the brief municipal tour and familiarization at regional Gulag headquarters. The only hint was Pavlov’s rank, for he was a “senior major of state security” (*starshii maior gosbezopasnosti*) and thus higher on the career ladder than the presiding Dal’stroi boss. But the most perilous sign lay at anchor just off the coast, for the *S. S. Nikolai Ezhov* that had brought the new chekists to Magadan would soon carry Berzin on the first leg of his journey back to meet the infamous namesake of the ship at central NKVD offices in Moscow.¹¹

After a short time familiarizing the new staff members, Berzin sailed for Vladivostok to begin a purported “vacation” that included a stop in the Kremlin. He traveled in the same relative comfort to which he had grown accustomed, and no aspect of the journey would have struck him as unusual. Following a rough winter passage on the Sea of Okhotsk, Berzin took the Trans-Siberian Railroad westward to Moscow as he had done numerous times in the past. Nothing extraordinary

10. For Berzin’s last *prikazy* as the head of Dal’stroi, in which he appointed Pavlov as a “temporary” director during his own absence, see GAMO, f. r-23, op. 1, d. 26, l. 137. These events in Magadan represented a typical Stalinist phenomenon in which security personnel assigned as “deputies” soon assumed control of operations, thus offering a smooth transfer of power. Appointed as a deputy to Ezhov in July 1938, Beria himself assumed command of the NKVD after his predecessor’s ouster in December of that year. For more on Beria’s appointment and Ezhov’s downfall, see Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A reassessment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990): 431-432, and *Inside Stalin’s secret police: NKVD politics, 1936-1939* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1985): 76-99.

11. A. G. Kozlov, “Iz istorii kolymskikh lagerei (konets 1937-1938 gg.),” in S. G. Bekarevich, ed., *Kraevedcheskie zapiski* (1993): 121. See also id., “Tiazhelye gody,” *Magadanskaia pravda* (18 June 1989): 4.

happened until the train arrived in the ancient Russian town of Aleksandrov, just seventy kilometers north-east of the Soviet capital. On Ezhov's personal order, Berzin was arrested there on the station platform the night of 19 December, and subsequently taken by one of the "black raven" cars of the secret police to the infamous Lubyanka prison for interrogation.¹² For fear of causing commotion on downtown streets in Moscow, particularly when prominent figures were to be apprehended, the NKVD often struck in outlying regions under the cover of darkness. Berzin thus spent his last moments of freedom in Aleksandrov, a location not devoid of historical irony. Steeped in the painful legacy of Ivan the Terrible and the *oprichniki*, this tiny municipality had been a temporary headquarters for the tsar during his intemperate flights from the Kremlin in the 1560s and thereafter.¹³

Almost four centuries later, this town and its traditions came back to haunt Berzin near the close of 1937. The *Ezhovshchina* had finally hit Magadan and claimed one of its first victims from the top of the Gulag elite. Although the dramatic events of Berzin's arrest occurred in late December, the die had been cast for Berzin in the Kremlin long before his actual removal from power.¹⁴ In concert with the national hysteria that had overtaken the rest of the country, the NKVD accused Berzin of being a major figure in a Japanese spy ring from the Soviet Far East:

"Berzin, Eduard Petrovich, party card no. 0629023, served at the head of a counter-revolutionary spy-diversionist Trotskyist organization in Kolyma. For counter-revolutionary sabotage-wrecking activities, he has been arrested by the organs of the NKVD. Be it resolved that Berzin, Eduard Petrovich be expelled from the Communist Party as an enemy of the people."¹⁵

Convicted of high treason on 1 August 1938, Berzin was shot in the Lubyanka immediately thereafter.¹⁶

Aside from heralding the dramatic changes in store for the regional Gulag, the elimination of Berzin and his staff allowed Stalin to revamp Dal'stoi management with the pursuit of more radical policies in mind. As a representative of an earlier generation of officialdom that maintained sympathies for more utopian goals, Berzin presented an impediment to Soviet "progress" by the time of the Great

12. Berzin's status as an important regional official merited the direct participation of Ezhov, who signed the arrest warrant to apprehend the Dal'stoi boss in the outskirts of Moscow. See A. G. Kozlov, "Pervyi direktor," *art. cit.*: 29.

13. For more on the role of Aleksandrov during the reign of Ivan the Terrible, particularly in regard to the official formation of the *oprichnina*, see Ruslan G. Skrynnikov, *Ivan the Terrible*, ed. and trans. Hugh F. Graham (Gulf Breeze, Fl.: Academic International Press, 1981): 83-87.

14. See A. G. Kozlov, "Iz istorii Kolymskikh lagerei (1932-1937 gg.)," *art. cit.*: 87.

15. AOSVZ (Arkhivnoe Otdelenie Severovostokzoloto—Archival Department for the Association of North-eastern Gold—formerly Dal'stoi institutional archive), d. 3418, l. 25.

16. See A. G. Kozlov, *Magadan: Konspekt proshlogo* (Magadan: Magadanskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1989): 33. For more on Berzin's downfall, see Roy Medvedev, *Let history judge: The origins and consequences of Stalinism*, ed. and trans. George Shriver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989): 427.

Purges. The appointment of a new administrative team offered Stalin a chance to install policy changes in Magadan from his seat in the Kremlin. At the very time Stalin cabled Berzin with “Bolshevik greetings” in October 1937 for a job well done at the helm of the local camps, the Soviet leader surreptitiously authorized the imminent removal of the decorated NKVD veteran. Having decided to overhaul the trust structure in Magadan long before Berzin’s actual ouster, Stalin simultaneously instructed Ezhov to hire new Dal’stoi officials as imminent replacements.¹⁷

Steeled by the brutal circumstances of the era, the new camp elite proved far more ruthless than Berzin. Armed with the more repressive training then current in the secret police, which by 1937 accentuated novel methods of torture and prisoner abuse, most of the NKVD agents just named by Ezhov to the Dal’stoi hierarchy had taken part in the onset of the Terror in other regions of the USSR. Given clear instructions from Moscow, these camp bosses came to Magadan with a distinct mandate to align regional affairs with those across the nation. As head of the state trust, Stalin assigned a seasoned official with a long service record in the Cheka-OGPU-NKVD security agencies, K. A. Pavlov. Starting as an investigator for the Cheka in Kazan after joining the Bolshevik party in 1918, he had risen to a number of leadership posts within the OGPU and NKVD in Krasnoiarsk, the Crimea, and the Azov-Black Sea regions. As a “jewel” of the Gulag, however, Dal’stoi came as a promotion for this veteran chekist.¹⁸

As the foremost aide who signed off on many Gulag orders, A. A. Khodyrev became Pavlov’s chief deputy. The secret police named S. N. Garanin, a notorious character from Belorussia, as the new boss of *Sevvostlag*. Iu. M. Gaupshtein became head of the Dal’stoi Political Section, a position that served as a regional liaison between atrophied party structures and the secret police in Magadan. L. P. Metelev and V. M. Speranskii soon filled two posts that had risen in importance due to the events of the Great Purges: chief procurator and head of the regional NKVD office, respectively. When the Stalin Terror reached full swing, local procurators became especially important since they had to “review” all cases for execution and imprisonment within their jurisdiction even though final disposition often depended upon the authorization of Moscow. Alongside these personnel shifts, Dal’stoi’s official title and affiliation changed as well. In April 1938 it became known as the “Main Administration for the Construction of the Far North” (*Glavnoe upravlenie stroitel’stva Dal’nego Severa NKVD SSSR*) as the result of a transfer to the secret police from its prior status as a state trust under the purview of the Council of Labor and Defense. Even though such alteration on paper only reaffirmed the effective control which the NKVD had wielded over Dal’stoi for years, it marked a symbolic confirmation of the metamorphosis in the local Gulag from Berzin’s time.¹⁹

17. For some of these contracts, see AOSVZ, d. 13484, l. 1.

18. A. G. Kozlov, “Iz istorii kolymyiskikh lagerei (konets 1937-1938 gg.),” *art. cit.*: 121-22.

19. GARF (Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii—State Archive of the Russian Federation), f. 9401s, op. 1a, d. 22, ll. 62-63.

Aside from these administrative and institutional changes, Dal'stroi became transformed as well by the intensification of the *Ezhovshchina* throughout the Soviet Union. Higher arrest rates across the USSR soon resulted in a notable expansion of the labor camps by the end of the 1930s, with Dal'stroi being one of the foremost recipients. In short, the state trust could avail itself of a much larger inmate pool thanks to the bursting prisons in Moscow and other Soviet cities that fed the Gulag pipeline. By comparison to the 62,703 prisoners within the Dal'stroi system at the conclusion of 1936, there were 80,258 by the end of 1937 and 93,978 at the close of 1938. Statistics from 1939 unveil the "latent bulge" caused by the Great Purges, since the Gulag in Magadan by that year had nearly doubled its inmate population to 163,475. As a result of the Stalin Terror, industrial operations throughout the north-eastern territory finally had an adequate supply of manpower even if it suffered from a depleted store of expertise lost with the annihilation of many specialists.²⁰

Fortified by this veritable army of prison laborers, the new camp bosses approached their tasks with a perverse vigor. One administrative change in particular became noteworthy. As a means of streamlining decision-making in criminal cases across the Soviet Union in the late 1930s, Stalin had resuscitated a peculiar bureaucratic form known as the *troika* that had begun as emergency tribunals at the time of the Civil War. Formed under his instruction in 1937, these extralegal panels held unrivaled local power during the Great Purges. The *troiki* became a regional stand-in for the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court and the "Special Council" (*Osoboe soveshchanie*) of the NKVD that oversaw sentencing procedures in Moscow. In Magadan, the local *troika* regulated all arrests and interrogations in the north-eastern territory from the lengthening of Gulag terms to impositioning of the death penalty. In 1937-1938, this unofficial yet infamous panel in Magadan comprised Pavlov, Metelev, and Speranskii. While most *troiki* nation-wide contained the regional party first secretary along with the local NKVD chief and municipal procurator, the head of Dal'stroi served in place of a party secretary non-existent in Magadan.²¹

In comparison with the Berzin administration, the new Dal'stroi management proved far more ruthless and uncompromising. Younger than Berzin, most of Pavlov's staff were members of a different generation within the secret police that had been forged by the "Revolution from Above." Few of the officials who first came to Magadan in December 1937 held top positions in the pre-Stalinist era, and thus formed a cadre socialized by the harshening policies of the 1930s. They belonged to the "new class" of managers described by Sheila Fitzpatrick, men who had risen from the working class and peasantry to assume major positions during the Stalin era.²² While Berzin had been tainted by his association with Old

20. GAMO, f. r-23ss, op. 1, d. 6, l. 55.

21. For more on the *troiki*, see R. Medvedev, *op. cit.*: 622, and R. Conquest, *The Great Terror*, *op. cit.*: 286.

22. See S. Fitzpatrick, "Stalin and the making of a new elite, 1928-1939," *Slavic Review*, 38, 3 (September 1979): 399-402.

Bolsheviks as well as by a career that had formed long before Stalin came to power, the current elite at the helm of Dal'stroi represented a more reliable base of support from the perspective of the Kremlin. As some scholars have noted, these new Gulag bosses in Magadan proved more cynical, less reflective, and more pliable than the Berzin administration due to their notions of bureaucratic discipline ingrained by their political upbringing.²³

Just as Stalin insisted on creating his own hand-picked *Politbiuro* by the mid-1930s, he also favored regional officials from the “new elite” who had an acceptable social provenance in the lower classes and likely greater fealty toward him.²⁴ The new Dal'stroi administrators fit such prescriptions. Unlike Berzin and many of his assistants, they were poorly educated and decidedly uncosmopolitan. Even the lofty ideals of the October Revolution, little of which could be seen from the perspective of the Gulag, went beyond their limited comprehension about the goals of Soviet power. Never the type to ask probing questions on policy, they took their marching orders from the bureaucratic chain of command. Although some of them had proven administrative competence, many were chosen for personal characteristics at a premium during the Great Purges: brutality and intemperance. Garanin in particular offered these qualities, for he had emerged from an aimless youth as a man of great vindictiveness. In all respects, the new *Sevvostlag* boss fit the mold of the classic NKVD henchman from the late 1930s.²⁵

As *Sevvostlag* boss, Garanin had official jurisdiction over the actual functioning of the labor camps. In that role, he acted with a vengeance unseen in Magadan prior to Berzin's arrest. Under broad guidelines established by his Dal'stroi overlords, Garanin routinely signed execution orders for prisoners who had been accused within the camps of lesser charges such as embezzlement of “socialist property,” refusal to work, “counter-revolutionary sabotage in production,” escape attempts, or “camp banditry.” On 23 December 1937, for instance, he authorized the shooting of twenty-one inmates for the aforementioned infractions.²⁶ At times, Garanin appeared unconstrained by the bureaucratic niceties of condemnation procedures. According to camp tales, he occasionally drew his revolver and shot prisoners on the spur of the moment for minor offenses.²⁷

23. A. I. Shirokov and M. M. Etlis, *Sovetskii period istorii Severo-Vostoka Rossii* (Magadan: Mezhdunarodnyi pedagogicheskii institut, 1993): 7-8.

24. This emphasis ended by 1939, when overt Soviet discrimination in favor of workers and peasants lessened across the USSR. See S. Fitzpatrick, *Education and social mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921-1934* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979): 234-254.

25. The legends of Garanin, which percolated into the camp memoirs of Ginzburg and others, accurately reflected the personality of the *Sevvostlag* boss while overplaying his role. See A. G. Kozlov, “Iz istorii kolymyiskikh lagerei (konets 1937-1938 gg.),” *art. cit.*: 136-138.

26. OSF ITs UVD (Otdelenie Spetsial'nykh Fondov, Informatsionnyi Tsentr Upravleniia Vnutrennykh Del—Department of Special Funds, Information Center for the Administration of Internal Affairs), f. 12-u, op. 1, d. 4, l. 127.

27. Some of this has been recounted in R. Medvedev, *op. cit.*: 512.

Given some license by the Magadan *troika*, Garanin seemed to dictate a summary justice in this remote prison realm. Known to roam Gulag zones with a swaggering authority that terrorized inmates, he played to the hilt his role as the visible arbiter of Soviet law throughout the subarctic frontier. Unlike his supervisors in either Magadan or the Lubyanka, Garanin was an important NKVD official whom the prisoners might glimpse with some regularity. As the most apparent and hated symbol of state retribution in the territory for most of the Terror, he became the regional namesake of the Great Purges. In Magadan, the *Ezhovshchina* has therefore been referred to for years as the *Garaninshchina*. The term, however, became somewhat of a misnomer. In spite of such a moniker, which evolved from the limited viewpoint of camp inmates, Garanin controlled neither the formulation of key Gulag policy nor the evolution of local events. Fully subservient to the Soviet chain of command, he existed at the mercy of the Magadan *troika* and ultimately Ezhov and Stalin.²⁸

By the spring of 1939, the extreme political violence of the Great Purges came to a halt in Magadan as it had months earlier throughout most of the Soviet Union. As a precursor to this denouement, Stalin had issued a signal at the November 1938 party plenum in Moscow that the “excesses from below” (*peregiby snizu*), purportedly at fault for the Great Purges and a reiteration of excuses long used by the Kremlin, must be stamped out across the USSR. More important, Stalin’s contemporaneous removal of Ezhov from power intimated that the Terror had drawn to a close. Extricating the country from the grip of this mayhem, however, proved to be a complicated task. Dal’stoi endured still more effects of the *Garaninshchina* following the plenary session in Moscow. Although Garanin himself had been removed in October 1938, after which local police measures faded in severity, Pavlov and Khodyrev remained in power through the first half of 1939. NKVD activities subsided across the region by May of that year, when the Kremlin transferred the Dal’stoi chief back to Moscow for reassignment at the Lubyanka while arresting or otherwise removing most of his assistants. Just as Evgeniia Ginzburg and Sergei Korolev arrived as prisoners in Nagaev Bay in the summer of 1939, Magadan underwent a major transition.

In the wake of yet another overhaul in the administration of Dal’stoi, the territory again experienced a change in priorities. The pendulum began to swing back toward the goals of the period before 1937, as Gulag administrators regained their previous focus upon gold production. Spurred once more by the financial necessities of the Soviet government, the state trust reclaimed its economic *raison d’être*. While this signified a return to Berzin’s industrial emphasis, it did not imply the reintroduction of the more “benevolent” attitudes of that era. The Stalin Terror left an indelible mark upon Magadan that transcended the events of 1937-1938. Having survived the *Ezhovshchina*, Magadan had to traverse a path between the competing legacies of Berzin’s economic record and the searing impact of the Great Purges.

28. In spite of lending his name to the era in Magadan, Garanin indeed remained secondary to the *troika*. See A. G. Kozlov, “Iz istorii kolymkskikh lagerei (konets 1937-1938 gg.),” *art. cit.*: 130.

The end of the Stalin Terror in Magadan signalled a number of dramatic changes in the region. Reassigned to secret police work in Moscow, Pavlov left his deputy Khodyrev at the helm of Dal'stroi until a new management team could be formed on Kremlin instructions. Several lesser camp officials from the *Garaninshchina* took the blame for the "excesses from below." Speranskii was arrested and shot "for falsification of investigatory materials," while Garanin received a long term in the Gulag.²⁹ Imprisoned by order of a Special Council (*Osoboe soveshchanie*) of the NKVD in Moscow, the former *Sevvostlag* chief was sentenced to eight years "for participation in a counter-revolutionary organization."³⁰ The circle of political irrationality had closed, for Garanin became an inmate on the same charge from Article 58 as had many of those whom he once persecuted. After several years in the Gulag, he died from exhaustion in the Pechora region. The secret police incarcerated other notorious figures from the era as well.³¹ Most important, Stalin brought the curtain down on the *Garaninshchina* just as he had raised it: by naming a new administrative team for Dal'stroi.³²

As in December 1937, Stalin sought management for the state trust in a cohort of officials trained largely since the late 1920s. Unlike Berzin, they were not tainted by pre-Stalinist experiences and ideals. One such figure, Ivan Fedorovich Nikishov, became the new Dal'stroi boss at the end of 1939. While serving in various areas of the Soviet Union, Nikishov had risen slowly within the ranks of the secret police. He studied in 1928-1929 at the Higher Border Patrol School, an NKVD institution in Moscow, from where he graduated to work in Kaluga and other locations throughout the early 1930s. In 1934, Nikishov became a supervisor of the NKVD Administration for Internal Troops in central regions near Voronezh, whereafter he went to the Caucasus as chief of the NKVD Administration for Border and Internal Troops in Azerbaijan by 1937. Nikishov transferred after one year to Leningrad where, as the overseer of a similar detachment, he rose in visibility due to the importance of the city. In November 1938, Ezhov promoted him to be presiding head of the NKVD in Khabarovsk, a position that he held for ten months. Summoning him thereupon to Moscow, Stalin met with Nikishov in the Kremlin before appointing him to the top post at Dal'stroi in October 1939.³³

29. See T. S. Smolina, "Kolyma-god 1939," *Magadanskii komsomolets* (10 September 1988): 4.

30. A. G. Kozlov, "Garanin: Legendy i dokumenty," *Magadanskaia pravda* (14 October 1993): 3.

31. For examples, see T. S. Smolina, "Kolyma-god 1938," *Magadanskii komsomolets* (3 September 1988): 4.

32. *Ibid.* While occurring several months after Ezhov's ouster, these events in Magadan dovetailed with the earlier NKVD "housecleaning" in Moscow that resulted in Beria's appointment before the end of 1938. For more on this, see Amy Knight, *Beria: Stalin's first lieutenant* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993): 90-93, and R. Conquest, *The Great Terror*, *op. cit.*: 431-435.

33. For more on Nikishov's career, see S. P. Efimov, "Nachal'nik Dal'stroia I. F. Nikishov," *Kolyma*, 11 (1991): 34. For reference to the Kremlin meeting between Stalin and Nikishov, see A. G. Kozlov, *Magadan*, *op. cit.*: 92.

Nikishov's assignment to Magadan came as no surprise, for he had already served a similar role as secret police chief in Khabarovsk. More critical, his rise to these key positions dovetailed with Beria's assumption of power, an association which saved him from the purge of Ezhov and his closest assistants after November 1938. As a result of fortuitous timing, Nikishov entered into the ranks of "Beria's men" just as they began to consolidate power across the USSR. Following the removal of Ezhov and his aides, Beria formed a "family circle" of Georgian associates in the top hierarchy of the secret police. Among others, Beria appointed Mikhail Gvishiani to be chief of the secret police in the Soviet Far East with immediate supervision over all regional labor camps. Perhaps on account of his previous work in the Caucasus in 1937, Nikishov may have established tight bonds with a number of these officials now serving in senior positions. Such connections likely ensured him the lengthy nine-year career he would enjoy at the helm of Dal'stoi.³⁴

Under Beria's oversight, Nikishov assembled a new staff upon his arrival in Magadan on 12 December 1939.³⁵ G. A. Korsakov became deputy director of the state trust, the position formerly held by Khodyrev. In place of Speranskii, Nikishov assigned G. F. Okunev as the operational head of the NKVD office in Magadan. Another important official of the restructured crew, I. K. Sidorov, assumed leadership of the Dal'stoi political department. A host of other personnel filled in the secondary positions within the local Gulag hierarchy.³⁶ While transcripts of Nikishov's October meeting with Stalin in the Kremlin are not available, this administrative overhaul in Magadan assuredly came from instructions by the Soviet leader. Chastened by the fate of his two predecessors at Dal'stoi, one of whom had been arrested and shot while the other was summarily removed upon the orders of Moscow, Nikishov would not likely have made any move without a blessing from above.³⁷

Stalin even instituted a number of changes in Magadan that predated Nikishov's arrival, after which they became marching orders for the new Dal'stoi chief. On 25 June 1939, Beria reorganized the NKVD apparatus in Magadan to match his "reforms" at the national level which had been focused upon strengthening bureaucratic lines of authority.³⁸ Before that, on 11 June, his assistant Vsevolod Merkulov had enumerated new regulations concerning the registration of prisoner

34. On Beria's rise to power and his installment of the Georgian "family circle" at NKVD headquarters, see again A. Knight, *op. cit.*: 90-93. See also R. Conquest, *The Great Terror*, *op. cit.*: 627.

35. Following the Kremlin meetings with Stalin and the lengthy trip across Siberia, Nikishov arrived to begin work in Magadan on this date. See *Sovetskaia Kolyma* (14 December 1939): 4.

36. T. S. Smolina, "Kolyma—god 1939," *art. cit.*: 4-5.

37. Using previous events as a guide, Nikishov's meeting with Stalin in the Kremlin in October 1939 presumably dealt with fine details of policy governing the activities of the new Gulag administration in Magadan. For further information, see again A. G. Kozlov, *Magadan*, *op. cit.*: 92.

38. GARF, f. 9401s, op. 1a, d. 34, l. 59.

deaths that would augment record-keeping and refine central knowledge and control over the inmate population.³⁹ On 13 July, another Beria subordinate, Sergei Kruglov, communicated to Nikishov revamped standards for *Sevvostlag* prisons.⁴⁰ While reflecting Beria's attempt to reconstitute the apparatus of the secret police so as to bolster his own position, such changes also embodied the refinement of central control over far-flung camp enterprises.

Taking cues from Moscow, the new Dal'stroi chief proved savvy enough even to replicate the imagery and style of his Lubyanka superiors. Consistent with Beria's official persona as a reformer out to mitigate the effects of the Great Purges, Nikishov cultivated the impression of a regional boss striving to curtail the lawlessness of the preceding epoch. As Beria had done in the center, Nikishov presented himself in Magadan as a sober administrator who would provide sensible leadership in the wake of such irrational violence. The so-called "Beria thaw" proved to be a mirage in the long run, however, for the main purpose of Beria and subordinates like Nikishov was to establish efficiency and order in place of earlier policies that had caused obvious administrative dysfunction throughout the Soviet bureaucracy at the time of the *Ezhovshchina*. Aiming less to repudiate the Stalin Terror than to correct its imbalance, the new NKVD bosses streamlined police measures so as not to harm other state activities such as industrial production. Moreover, the overt repression of the Great Purges had already played its role from the viewpoint of political control and did not have to be repeated under Beria.⁴¹

The "reformist" course charted by Beria and his subalterns like Nikishov revealed that public image mattered in the USSR, even in the subarctic desolation of Magadan. Untarnished by participation in the *Garaninshchina*, Nikishov and his staff offered a clean break for a camp management eager to dispel the memory of 1937-1938. In order to distance themselves from the atrocities of their predecessors, the new Gulag elite in Magadan began to deplore in public the "provocative attacks" and "slander" hurled against party members by Ezhov's minions in 1937-1938. In agreement with Stalin's official line on correcting the "exaggerations from below," Dal'stroi officials also inveighed against the "unlawful" accusations and policies that had spun out of control throughout the territory. The Nikishov administration furthermore elicited a *mea culpa* from many former Dal'stroi employees during the Great Purges, such as N. A. Abramovich, which helped to separate the present era from the one that had preceded it:

"Fate cast for me, a man, to play a shameful and accursed role in that difficult time. This now brings only bitter regrets over our wasted strength, health, and

39. *Ibid.*, ll. 35-36.

40. *Ibid.*, l. 153.

41. See A. Knight, *op. cit.*: 92-93. Solzhenitsyn has argued that the concomitant release of prisoners during the "Beria thaw," the rare "reverse wave" in his description, came only as a political move to enhance the reputation of Beria while heaping all the blame upon Ezhov for the atrocities of the Great Purges. See A. Solzhenitsyn, *op. cit.*: 76.

energy. For no purpose, we chekists faithfully met our assigned tasks with the sincere belief that what we were doing was right."⁴²

Coupled with the regretful paeans of similar NKVD agents who had been active in Magadan throughout the Stalin Terror, these "confessions" became standard fare in the Gulag well into the early 1940s. As part of a political show scripted from the Kremlin, this and other statements aimed to mollify a population traumatized by recent events.

Such repentful tones for a time dominated public discussions in Magadan. Serving as a muted catharsis for the Soviet system, the confessional mood revealed Nikishov's intentions to clear the ground for policy changes. While not atoning for the "errors" of their predecessors, the new Dal'stoi administrators interpreted such public apology as a breakwater for their own rule. After a brief period of disclaimers, Nikishov would turn his full attention toward economic goals mandated by the Soviet government. The reorientation of the regional Gulag as an important "shop" for the country demanded at least a partial repudiation of the Great Purges. Alongside this came a curtailment of the incendiary rhetoric from the *Ezhovshchina*, which appeared striking in comparison with the more sober party rhetoric now trumpeting the attainment of record mining quotas as the overarching objective in the upcoming period.⁴³

In conjunction with this industrial re-emphasis, Nikishov also had to stifle the ideological attack against Berzin. Since the first Dal'stoi boss had presided over the most successful economic achievements of the state trust, it became imperative for Nikishov to claim Berzin's mantle as an efficient manager. The rampant vilification of him thus came to an end along with the Terror. Regardless of the political crimes charged against Berzin, insights into his managerial acumen provided a key for recapturing the record pace of the early-to-mid 1930s. Leaning upon the proven usefulness of Berzin's material incentives as well as his campaigns of "socialist competition" and Stakhanovism within the camps, themes being reaccentuated by Moscow in these more pragmatic times, Nikishov hoped to find the right mix of initiatives to revive prison enterprises. By invoking the programmatic successes and productive ethos of the Berzin era, Nikishov sought to reproduce the proportionally higher output figures attained before 1937.⁴⁴

On account of Berzin's unrehabilitated status as a "nonperson," however, Nikishov's accent upon Dal'stoi's initial achievements mandated a tightrope act of interpretation.⁴⁵ The new camp boss and his staff therefore invoked Magadan's

42. Quoted in T. S. Smolina, "Kolyma—god 1939," *art. cit.*: 4-5.

43. This emphasis upon production became a constant refrain in local newspapers. For example, see *Sovetskaia Kolyma* (5 December 1940): 3.

44. On the flip side, Nikishov never embraced Berzin's "idealism" as Dal'stoi remained a more cynical institution after 1937. See A. S. Navasardov, "Iz istorii stroitel'stva Kolymskoi trassy (1928-1940 gg.)," in S. G. Bekarevich, ed., *Kraevedcheskie zapiski* (1991): 25.

45. Berzin remained a "nonperson" in the USSR for eighteen years, from his death in 1938 until his posthumous rehabilitation following Khrushchev's "secret speech" in 1956. See K. B. Nikolaev, "Pervyi direktor tresta 'Dal'stoi'," *Magadanskaia pravda* (2 August 1988).

earliest history with utmost caution, an official prudence which had other roots as well. As specious as the charges against Berzin had been during the *Garaninshchina*, the basic storyline of Japanese espionage in the region could not be dropped altogether from public reference. In particular, Soviet border clashes with the Japanese in 1938 and 1939 resuscitated tensions. The specter of further international conflict at this time, dramatically evident in Germany's recent invasion of Poland as well as Japan's activities in both China and Korea, only bolstered paranoid views that the USSR was under siege from external enemies. As a purported spy ringleader, Berzin had to remain a suspect figure if only to maintain the plausibility of Stalinist scenarios. Eventual hostilities with the Axis powers entrenched this viewpoint, making Nikishov's task of historical revisionism an even more selective one. As the war effort deepened, however, the need to resuscitate the productive capacity of state enterprises meant that figures like Berzin could not entirely be forgotten.⁴⁶

Over the course of the 1930s, the transformation of camp life in the territory found reflection in the personages who ran the state trust. Appointed by order of Stalin, the Dal'stroi bosses reflected shifting Soviet priorities. A pre-Stalinist official with vivid memories of 1917, Berzin proved a relative idealist as a camp official who took seriously at least some of the utopian protestations of Marxism-Leninism. Although the Gulag remained a hostile environment for prisoners during his tenure, Berzin ran a far more moderate regime than his successors. The onset of the Great Purges in Magadan, as across the USSR, proved a turning point. Transformed by the repressive ethos of the *Garaninshchina*, Dal'stroi shed the pretense of any benign role after Berzin's ouster. Aligning himself with national trends, Pavlov repudiated most of his predecessor's temperate initiatives while stiffening camp practices to the great detriment of inmates. Nikishov followed suit, even though his professed role was to resuscitate industrial growth in the Magadan camps while modifying the impact of the Terror.

Socialized by the harsh experiences of the Stalin era, which by then had already included the collectivization campaign and repeated acts of political terror, Dal'stroi officials after Berzin behaved with a wanton attitude toward higher party ideals. In contrast to the first local Gulag boss, who had come of political age at the dawn of Soviet power, most administrators in Magadan by the late 1930s and early 1940s formed a younger cohort with little practical memory even of NEP. Whether in policy or practice, they were neither utopian nor liberal. While some were outright sadists, such as Garanin, most were simply pragmatists who had few illusions about their positions or Stalin's expectations. Sent directly from Moscow, they arrived in Magadan armed with the economic and political mandates given

46. Tangible reasons prevented Nikishov from ignoring Berzin's legacy entirely. Aside from the industrial achievements attained by the first Dal'stroi chief in the Magadan region, most of the infrastructure of camps, roads, power stations, and state farms throughout the territory had been built by Berzin. See *ibid.*, as well as A. G. Kozlov, "Pervyi direktor," *art. cit.*: 31.

them in the Kremlin. Aside from focusing upon the industrial mission of the state trust, they maintained an unyielding camp regimen not to be dismantled until the mid-1950s.

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