



Coercion versus Motivation

**Forced Labor
in Norilsk**

*Leonid Borodkin
and Simon Ertz*

CHAPTER 7 COVERS the history of Noril-lag, the correctional labor camp founded to provide penal labor for the vast mineral wealth of Norilsk. That chapter focuses on the construction of a large-scale industrial complex, a task imposed on the NKVD's Gulag administration in 1935. Although labor issues are addressed parenthetically, Chapter 7 deals mainly with the relationship between Norilsk and its NKVD and Politburo superiors. The current chapter turns to the subject of forced labor—how Noril-lag organized and motivated prison workers to complete the planned tasks for which Norilsk's bosses were held accountable.

Norillag was one of the largest Gulag facilities, employing close to one hundred thousand workers at its peak. It was one of the Gulag's highest-priority camps, producing metals vital to the Soviet industry and military. Norilsk's priority status was shown by its direct subordination to the director of the Gulag from its founding in 1935 until 1941. The Norilsk Integrated Plant played a central role in the country's nickel industry in the 1940s. When transferred from the MVD to civilian industry in 1954, Norilsk was producing one-quarter of Soviet nickel.

Chapters 1 and 3 emphasized the perceived advantages of forced

76 Leonid Borodkin and Simon Ertz

labor that could be seized upon by a dictator like Stalin: Unlike free workers who demanded substantial material incentives to work in remote regions, prisoners could be dispatched by administrative decree. Their labor could be closely monitored by guards; their hours of work could be set by administrative order, and poor work punished. The use of punishment rather than material rewards saved vital resources, and “surpluses” could be extracted from prison workers. Chapter 2 shows that Soviet labor policy mixed “carrots and sticks” even in the periods of greatest coercion in the work place. This chapter finds that even in the Gulag, where force could be most conveniently applied, camp administrators combined material incentives with overt coercion.

In a penal labor environment, camp administrators could induce inmates to fulfill their “plans” by four general methods: rules, punishments, moral incentives, and material incentives. Rules set forth the planned tasks of prisoners, such as the number of work hours or piece-rate norms. By stiffening rules and regulations to make inmates work harder and longer, more “surplus” could be extracted. Punishments, such as reduced rations or solitary confinement, maintained discipline; moral incentives, such as medals or other honors, encouraged the fulfillment of tasks without a loss of scarce resources; and material incentives, such as higher pay, differentially rewarded those with the best work records.

NORILSK'S PRIORITY

Figure 5.1 shows Norillag's labor force compared with total Gulag labor.¹ The number of Norilsk prisoners grew rapidly and steadily

1. More precisely, we have statistical data from the Gulag's Records and Assignments Department, which produced regular reports on prisoners at all camps, including Norilsk, and reports from Norilsk itself on contingents of prisoners and free employees. Norilsk reports cover 1936–38 and 1941–49. GARF 9414 (Gulag); 8361 (GULGMP).

Coercion versus Motivation 77

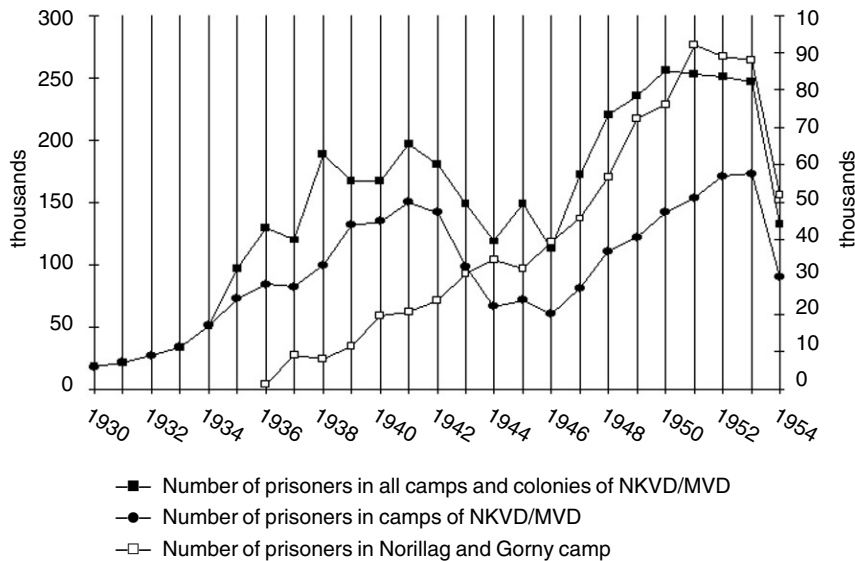


Figure 5.1 A Comparison of the Number of Prisoners in Norillag and Gorny Camps with the Number of Prisoners at All Camps and Colonies of the NKVD-MVD (January 1 of Each Year)

Sources: For Norilsk—GARF 9414.1.174: 7; 1155: 20, 54ob., 55; 1160: 4; 2784: 18; 1.358: 1, 17, 29, 55; 364: 2, 19, 37, 54; 370: 24, 60; 371: 2, 29, 54, 70; 379: 15, 92ob.; 390: 2, 47, 85, 129; 424: 8, 58, 114, 165; 442: 1, 45, 88, 130; 455: 8; 466: 10, 57ob., 103ob., 146ob.; 472: 2ob., 17ob., 18ob., 42ob., 64ob.; 479: 3ob., 27ob., 51ob., 75ob.; 485: 3ob., 21ob., 25ob., 40ob., 58ob., 78; 495: 2ob., 21ob., 39ob., 57ob.; 500: 2ob., 31ob., 46ob., 58ob.; 502: 1, 4, 7, 10; 506: 15ob., 47ob., 48ob., 73ob., 74ob., 110ob.; 508: 4; 511: 8ob., 67ob., 124ob., 150ob.; 513: 3ob., 39ob., 70ob. For other camps and colonies: GARF 9414. 1. 1155: 1a, 2. For 1949–1954 data, see: Zemskov, V. N. “GULAG (istoriko-sotsiologicheskyy aspekt),” in *Sotsiologicheskkiye Issledovaniya*, No. 6, 1991, p. 11; No. 7, 1991, p. 12. Camp data for 1954 are as of April 1.

until the end of 1950. There were only two years of decline, 1937 and 1944. Norillag peaked at the beginning of 1951, when it housed ninety-two thousand prisoners in twenty-four camp divisions, twenty-three separate and regular camp centers, and six other units, including its mining camp.² National prisoner totals, on the other

2. Data for October 1, 1951. GARF 9414.1.461: 53.

78 Leonid Borodkin and Simon Ertz

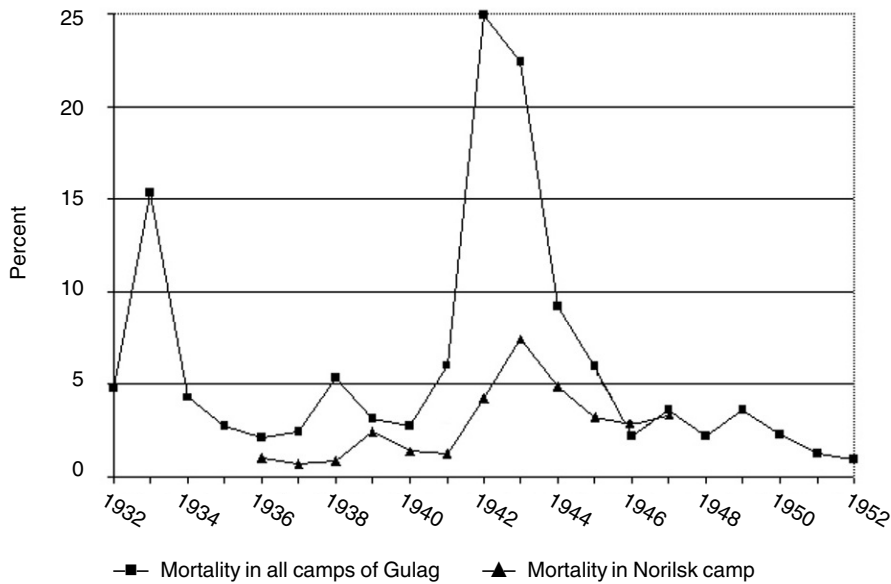


Figure 5.2 Comparison of Prisoner Mortality Rates at All NKVD Camps with Those at Norilsk (Morbidity as a Percentage of Average Annual Population)

Sources: GARF 9414.1.2740: 34, 43, 49, 62, 85; 2784: 7-10, 26; 2788: 3, 6, 9, 11, 15, 17, 19, 24, 27, 30, 33, 34; 2796: 97, 102ob.-103, 114ob., 128, 141, 247; 2804: 2ob.-3, 39; 2817: 2, 11, 21, 30, 39, 48; 2821: 31ob., 118ob.; 2822: 61ob.-62, 126ob.-127; 2883: 114, 116.

hand, rose with the mass repressions in the late 1930s, the toughening of penitentiary policy in mid-1947, and the appearance of new classes of prisoners with World War II. In the absence of new repressions, the camp population declined because of mortality, the dispatch of prisoners to the front during World War II, and amnesties, such as those of 1945 and 1953. Norillag, in contrast, grew steadily and independently of the growth of the camp system as a whole, reflecting the high priority of its economic tasks and its importance as a supplier of priority metals to the economy and military.

Mortality in Norillag should have been naturally high because

Coercion versus Motivation 79

of its location in the Arctic Circle, but Figure 5.2 shows that its mortality rate was considerably lower than Gulag averages,³ even during the war when meager food supplies and poor medical care raised general Gulag mortality. In 1942 and 1943 the average mortality rate at all camps was 25 percent—one-fourth of the entire camp population died in a year!—while the corresponding Norilsk figure averaged 5.5 percent. Norilsk's low mortality rate indicates that prisoners were in relatively good physical condition. The managers of Gulag camps had a stake in keeping prisoners healthy so that their plans could be met. In fact, prisoners' work was regulated according to the state of their health, as a lecture for internal use by the director of the Gulag, V. G. Nasedkin, relates: "Physically healthy prisoners are assigned to Work Capacity Category 1, which allows them to be used for heavy physical work. Prisoners with minor physical deficiencies (non-organic functional disorders) are placed in Work Capacity Category 2 and are used in medium-heavy work. Prisoners with pronounced physical deficiencies and diseases are assigned Work Capacity Category 3 and are used in light physical work and individual physical work. Prisoners with severe physical deficiencies that preclude their use for labor are assigned to Category 4—the disabled category. Hence all of the labor processes that pertain to the production structure of each camp are divided, according to how arduous the work is, into heavy, medium and light. . . ."⁴ Norilsk had the extra advantage that medical examinations and the selection of prisoners for Norilsk were done at the sites from which prisoners were dispatched. Prisoners deemed unable to work in the Arctic were not sent to Norilsk, as several

3. The source of these data is the statistics of prisoner morbidity and mortality, which the Gulag's health department gathered to monitor the prisoners' physical condition, devise measures to improve it, and to lower the mortality rate.

4. GARF 9414.1.77: 26-27. The document is dated 1945 or 1946, but in any case no later than February 21, 1947.

80 Leonid Borodkin and Simon Ertz

former prisoners have testified.⁵ The percentage of prisoners capable only of light physical work (or less) dispatched to Norilsk was small, particularly since such prisoners accounted for one-third of the Gulag population in 1942.⁶ The selection of relatively healthy prisoners, however, was not the only reason for Norilsk's low mortality rate. Personal testimonies of former Norillag prisoners confirm that, although living conditions at Norillag were harsh and food sources meager, these conditions were still somewhat better than at other labor camps.

Camps in the Gulag used a standard system, introduced in 1935, for prisoner record keeping.⁷ Prisoners were divided into Group A prisoners, who worked in production or construction; Group B prisoners, who occupied administrative-managerial and support jobs; Group C and D prisoners, who were not working because of illness, transit, quarantine, solitary confinement, or work refusal. Camp administrators aimed to limit Group C and D workers and raise the proportion of actively working prisoners. In Norilsk, Group A workers constituted more than 80 percent of all prisoners as compared with the Gulag average of 70 to 75 percent in the 1940s, while the share of nonworking prisoners did not exceed 10 percent.

Another indicator of Norilsk's priority status was its widespread use of free workers. In 1941, a total of 3,734 free workers and 16,532 prisoners worked at the Norilsk plant, or a ratio of approximately 1:5; by 1949 this ratio had decreased to 1:2.1 (20,930 free

5. See, for example S. S. Torvin, "Vospominaniya" in the Archives of the Moscow Memorial Scholarly Information and Educational Center (hereafter Moscow Memorial Archives), 2.2.92: l. 90; N. Semakin (reminiscences; untitled). *Ibid.*, 2.3.58; I. Assanov, "Zhizn' i Sudba Mitrofana Petrovicha Rubeko," in *Norilsky Memorial*, No. 4, October 1998, p. 11.

6. GARF 9414.1.370: 90.

7. Directive No. 664871 of the director of the Gulag, March 11, 1935. See A. I. Kokurin, N. V. Petrov, and Yu. Morukov. "GULAG: Struktura i Kadry" in *Svobodnaya Mysl'*, 1999, No. 9, pp. 116–117.

Coercion versus Motivation 81

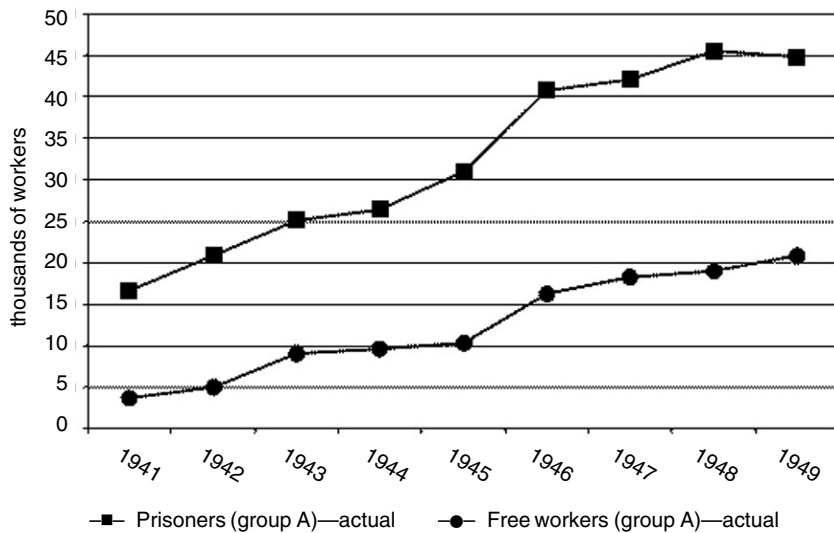


Figure 5.3 The Integrated Plant's Labor Resources—Number of Free Workers and Group A Prisoners (Production Workers) (Average Annual Totals)

Sources: GARF 8361.1.10: 11; 11: 11, 27, 32; 40: 26; 56: 44-45; 71: 30; 95: 109; 101: 124-125; 125: 158; 143: 54; 155: 145; 174: 102.

workers and 44,897 prisoners), as shown in Figure 5.3. In 1936 free workers numbered 223 compared with 4,552 prisoners in all sectors (including workers in all groups), and in 1937, free workers numbered 384 compared with 8,658 prisoners.⁸ The increase in free workers during subsequent years in Norilsk resulted mostly from the release of prisoners—a process that followed different paths. During the 1940s prisoners were commonly assigned to the plant even after they had nominally completed their sentences. Many released prisoners, especially political ones, were sent to a “special settlement” as exiles with internal passports that often barred them even from leaving the city limits of Norilsk. There were instances, for example, where a prisoner, shortly before his term ended, was

8. GARF 9414.1.854: 78, 81; 969: 59–62.

informed, virtually without explanation, of a “second term.”⁹ Such measures are explained by Norilsk’s persistent need for labor, especially during the war, when nickel production had to be increased as rapidly as possible. The plant’s free workers were covered by a certificate that exempted them from being drafted into the Red Army,¹⁰ and prisoners’ requests for transfer to the front were generally denied.¹¹ The Norilsk administration saw to it that even prisoners who, under the Supreme Soviet resolution, were to be released early for the front, continued to work as prisoners.¹² A State Defense Committee decision issued on January 19, 1945, shortly before the end of the war, released workers from custody and then attached them to the Norilsk plant as free workers.¹³ In the first half of 1946, more than twelve thousand former prisoners were assigned to Norilsk under a special resolution of the State Defense Committee. Beginning in the second half of 1946, they were gradually converted to the status of ordinary free workers.¹⁴ It remains unclear, however, whether they received full rights, including the right to leave Norilsk.

The economic and juridical position of the two classes of free workers—former prisoners and those who had come to Norilsk without previously serving in the camp—was substantially different. Unlike newcomers, former Norilsk prisoners were deprived of benefits and privileges for work in the Far North. In the second half

9. N. V. Numerov, *Zolotaia Zvezda GULAGa* (Moscow: Izd-vo zhurn, 1999), pp. 402–403.

10. Ye. Kersnovskaya, *Skol’ko Stoit Chelovek* (Moscow: Fond Kersnovskoi, 2001), vol. 4, p. 220.

11. P. O. Sagoyan, *Vospominania* (untitled), in Moscow Memorial Archives, 2.1.104: 23; I. Assanov, *Zhizn’ i Sud’ba Mitrofana Petrovicha Rubeko*, “Noril’skiy Memorial,” edition 4, October, 1998, place of publication not given, p. 12.

12. GARF 9414.1.1188: 11ob. See also Zemskov, Ukaz. soch., *Sotsiologicheskie Issledovaniia*, No. 7, 1991, p. 24.

13. GARF 9414.1.1188, pp. 11, 13, 24, 37-39.

14. GARF 9414.1.447:1ob., 2, 14ob., 15, 22ob., 23, 38ob., 39; 457: 2ob., 3.

Coercion versus Motivation 83

of the 1940s, free workers who entered into Norilsk labor contracts for three years received a 100 percent “northern increment” and an extra 10 percent for each month. After two and a half years, they were given a six-month paid vacation, free transportation, and a month for traveling back and forth. Those who signed on for another three years got the same terms and a voucher to a sanatorium for the entire length of the vacation.”¹⁵ In 1945 a “special contingent” of more than ten thousand former Soviet prisoners of war and Vlasovites was settled in Norilsk on the same basis as exiles—they received northern benefits, but they were not allowed to leave Norilsk. After screening by the camp’s Special Department, many of these “special contingents” were sentenced to terms of confinement, mostly under Art. 58-1b (treason by a serviceman).¹⁶

Most “free” workers in Norilsk had a camp background, were restricted in their movements, and did not receive special wage supplements. “Released hard workers” deprived of such benefits formed a stratum of “second-class people” in the late 1940s.¹⁷ Norilsk management used these restrictions to lower labor costs even after prisoners were released. A 1950 report by the director of Norillag, V. S. Zverev, revealed that only 20 percent of free workers were actually “free”: “The 25,000 free workers at the plant’s production facilities include 15,000 ex-convicts, 3,997 special settlers and 1,000 exiles. . . .”¹⁸

15. E. Setko-Setkevich, “Bozhe, Spasi Dushu Moiu,” *Vospominania Sibiriakov* (Warsaw, 1990), p. 9, cited from “Noril’skiy Memorial,” edition 3, October 1996, place of publication not given (translation of B. S. Birger).

16. S. S. Torvin, “Vospominania,” *Arkhiv Moskovskogo Nauchno-Informatsionnogo I Prosvetitel’skogo Tsentra “Memorial,”* l. 131. The author dates the appearance of the “special contingent” to August 1946, in which he is apparently mistaken, since the archives say that these people were first taken to Norilsk in August 1945. See GARF 9414.1.430:26ob., 27, 30, 33ob., 34; 447: 1ob., 2, 14ob., 15, 22ob., 23, 38ob., 39.

17. S. S. Torvin, “Vospominania” (f.2. op.2. d.92. l.129).

18. GARF 9414.1.151: 33.

Although penal and free labor worked together in production and construction, free labor was used primarily in production. The most labor-intensive and grueling jobs, mainly in construction, were for prisoners; other jobs could be performed by both free workers and prisoners. Prisoners represented an all-purpose labor resource for the Norilsk plant.

Although accounts from other camps suggest that prisoners were not used according to their specialty, former Norilsk inmates report that prisoners were used in their profession at the proper levels. The rational use of specialists was often attributed to A. Zavenyagin, the second director of the integrated plant (which was later named for him) from April 1938 through March 1941. But the use of prisoners according to specialization was actually general Gulag policy, as shown by a 1940 order by Interior Minister L. Beria: “. . . I order . . . that full use be made of all specialists among prisoners [only 623 out of 1,200 specialists at the Norilsk plant are being used in their specialty], primarily in production, and the most qualified of them as technical supervisors.”¹⁹ Hence the use of qualified specialist-prisoners in responsible positions in Norilsk was not an isolated initiative by Zavenyagin but a general policy of the Gulag and the NKVD. Prisoners working in their specialty could not be sure their assignment would be permanent. When the war broke out, the Norilsk camp management removed prisoners from management positions, either for security reasons or to make positions for party functionaries avoiding call-ups to the front.²⁰ Starting in 1943, when the Red Army’s prospects on the front improved markedly, prisoners (even political ones) again were given the chance to work in their specialties. Nevertheless, in Norillag, from 90 to 95

19. NKVD Order No. 0424 of September 27, 1940, “On Measures to Improve the Work of the Norilsk Integrated Plant.”

20. Kersnovskaya, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

Coercion versus Motivation 85

percent of all prisoners were employed as ordinary workers. Opportunities to have skilled jobs, specifically as engineers or technicians, were granted only to a small group of prisoners. Such positions were not only physically less taxing, but they offered better rations and benefits.²¹ Engineering and technical jobs were reserved mainly for “free” labor. In construction, 3 to 5 percent of prisoners, compared with 30 percent of free workers, had engineering and technical positions. In 1944 there were far more free workers than prisoners in specialized construction positions.

REGULATING WORK EFFORT

Work “effort” is determined by quantity, measured by hours worked per unit of time, and by quality, measured by the worker’s effectiveness. The quantity of work is easier to regulate than its quality. Unsurprisingly, Norilsk inmates worked long hours with few days off. According to a lecture designated for internal use, Gulag inmates in the 1940s were granted four days off a month.²² General instructions for Gulag camps from the spring of 1947 granted eight special days off (January 22, May 1 and 2, May 9, September 3, November 7–8 and December 5). According to Noril-lag statistics, after 1945 the annual number of workdays declined to about 300 to 310 and then stabilized at this level. Norillag’s figures are consistent with general Gulag regulations which granted four days off a month and eight additional days off a year, yielding 309 workdays. Prisoners under a hard-labor regime in the mid-1940s had only three days off a month,²³ a figure which was raised to four days in July 1950.

21. F. I. Vintens, “Vospominania,” without title, Moskovskiy Arkhiv “Memorial” (f.2. op.2 d.11. l.33).

22. GARF 9414.1.77: 28.

23. Ibid., 56.

Figure 5.4 Average Number of Days Worked by Group A Prisoners per Year in Norilsk

| | 1941 | 1942 | 1943 | 1944* | 1945 | 1946 | 1947 | 1948* | 1949 |
|--------|------|------|------|-------|------|------|------|-------|------|
| Plan | 293 | 317 | 313 | 300 | 329 | 317 | 312 | 302 | 308 |
| Actual | 335 | 349 | 329 | 328 | 320 | 309 | 296 | 307 | 308 |

Note: *1944 and 1948 were leap years.

Source: GARF 8361.1.11: 31; 40; 41; 56; 39; 71; 55; 95; 99; 101; 155; 125; 152; 155; 139; 174; 97.

We do not have the Gulag regulations for the entire period, but we do have Norillag records on the labor use of prisoners. Norillag administrators calculated how the camp's total "man-days" (the average number of all prisoners multiplied by the number of days in the given year) were spent at work and away from work, including time off. From these figures, Figure 5.4 shows the average number of days worked a year by Group A (industrial and construction) workers, a number that confirms the heavy workload of prisoners. The high point of hours worked was reached in 1942 when prisoners averaged only one and a half days off each month. As the 1942 annual report on capital investments by the Norilsk Integrated Plant stated: "A cutback in days off was a resource that made up for the manpower shortage, both in the mass vocations and in the skilled professions, and explains why the number of man-days worked was 126.5 percent of the plan while the number of workers in 1942 was 105 percent of the plan."²⁴ Former prisoners confirmed the extremely large number of days worked a year, although strangely enough, they provided scanty information, probably assuming that such information was common knowledge. Z. A. Ravdel, a Norillag prisoner beginning in 1939, wrote that there were no days off or holidays at all at the beginning of the war, and only after the victory

24. GARF 8361.1.41: 21ob.

Coercion versus Motivation 87

at Stalingrad were two days off a month granted.²⁵ N. F. Odolinskaya, who was sent to Norillag under a hard-labor regime in 1945, wrote that she did not have days off even after the war.²⁶ After transfer to the women's hard-labor zone of the Mining Camp in the spring of 1949,²⁷ she wrote that "hard-labor prisoners were not allowed to celebrate Soviet holidays."²⁸ The first days off for hard-labor prisoners came in the early 1950s.²⁹ N. V. Numerov, who worked in the Mining Camp office in the spring of 1953, wrote that there were no days off for prisoners who worked there as specialists.³⁰ Another prisoner, M. P. Rubeko, who arrived in Norilsk in 1939, said that before the war "every Sunday was considered a day off. True, if there was urgent work, it could be canceled."³¹

Norillag had a special system for canceling work in extreme weather. During the early years of camp construction, extreme weather was handled informally, by shortening the workday or by providing breaks for warming up.³² In 1939, General Director Zavevnyagin issued an order ". . . that restricted work outside at temperatures below -40° [C] or when winds exceeded 22 m per second."³³ According to former prisoners, if the sum of temperature and wind speed reached $-40^{\circ}\text{C}/-42^{\circ}\text{C}$, then the weather was "certified" as unfit for work, and prisoners were brought back to the camp or

25. Z. I. Ravdel, "Vospominania," without title, Moskovskiy Arkhiv "Memorial" (f.2. op.1 d.100. l.157, 162–163).

26. N. F. Odolinskaya, "Sovietskiye Katorzhniki" (reminiscences), in Moscow Memorial Archives, 2.2.66: 31.

27. Odolinskaya, *op. cit.*: 80, 87.

28. *Ibid.*, 91.

29. *Ibid.*, 133–134.

30. Numerov, *op. cit.*, p. 402.

31. Assanov, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

32. GARF 9414.1.854: 20.

33. V. N. Lebedinsky, "V Serdtse Rudnogo Pritaimyrya" in *Voprosy Istorii*, No. 1, 1978, pp. 204–209, here p. 208.

were not taken to work at all.³⁴ These rules did not apply to those who worked inside buildings or in mines. During snowstorms they walked to work along ropes that had been stretched between poles.³⁵ For hard-labor prisoners at the Mining Camp “. . . certified weather was revoked. They were taken to work in any weather. . . .”³⁶ Norilsk’s own statistics reveal that harsh weather rules were often disregarded. “Idle time due to atmospheric conditions” averaged only 1.55 days in 1946, 2 days in 1947, and 6 days in 1949 for the entire worker population.³⁷ Since certified weather applied only to outside work, the number of days of idle time would have been higher for outside workers than these figures show. According to meteorological data, the “severe weather formula” applied to at least 33 days between October and May, far more than the days actually granted.

In the mid-1940s, the Gulag administration set “the length of the workday at nine hours for prisoners engaged in unhealthy production and underground work, and at ten hours for all other work, including one hour for a lunch break.”³⁸ In 1947, the Gulag set a nine-hour workday (also including a one-hour lunch break). Prisoners in strict-regime camps had a ten-hour workday by an order of the MVD of December 1948.³⁹ Hard-labor prisoners worked one hour longer than other prisoners did.⁴⁰ Former Norilsk prisoners report that they actually worked a ten-hour day, not including lunch breaks, prisoner assembly, or the time needed for getting back and forth to work. Former prisoner Z. I. Ravdel describes round-the-

34. Cheburekin, P. V. *Vospominania in Moscow Memorial Archives*, 2.1.125: 15–16. Vintens, *op. cit.*, l. 32; Odolinskaya, *op. cit.*, l. 33.

35. Ravdel, *op. cit.*, l. 114.

36. Odolinskaya, *op. cit.*, l. 91.

37. GARF 8361.1.56: 39; 71: 55; 95: 99; 101: 155; 125: 152; 155: 139; 174: 97.

38. GARF 9414.1.77: 28.

39. [MVD Order No. 001516 of December 31, 1948—not yet declassified.]

40. GARF 9414.1.77: 55. See also GARF 9414.1.729: 8.

clock tunneling work, which proceeded “. . . in two shifts of eleven hours each,” both in 1940 and during the war.⁴¹ Yevgeniya Kurbatova reported that in 1944 women engaged in ore sorting on a round-the-clock, two-shift schedule, worked twelve hours without breaks. Another female prisoner, E. Kersonovskaia, was supposed to work an eight-hour day doing heavy lifting. But she reported for 1944: “They don’t look at the clock; they look at cars to be loaded.”⁴² In the 1940s another former female prisoner, who worked under a strict security regime building the Norilsk airport, reported an “official” twelve-hour day, not including going to and from work.⁴³

PUNISHMENTS AND INCENTIVES

It would appear that camps offered an ideal environment for mechanisms to stimulate work effort. The work of prisoners could be monitored and poor work punished. Indeed, Gulag labor was regulated by harsh measures. The “Temporary instructions concerning the regime for holding prisoners in corrective-labor camps and colonies” issued by the NKVD on August 2, 1939, placed prisoners refusing work on a “penalty regime,” and hardcore “work refusers” were subject to criminal punishments. Depending upon the violation of work discipline, workers could be deprived of correspondence for six months, deprived of the use of their own money for three months, transferred to general work (for specialists and office personnel), placed in isolation for twenty days, or placed on reduced rations and in poorer living conditions. The administration of every

41. Ravdel, *op. cit.*: 118, 157.

42. Kersnovskaia, *op. cit.*, l. 17, 26.

43. Odolinskaia, *op. cit.*, l. 29–30.

90 Leonid Borodkin and Simon Ertz

camp fought a constant battle against *tufta*, a hidden form of work refusal, or the imitation of work.⁴⁴

In camps, as in the economy as a whole, labor-motivation systems were directed at the fulfillment of work norms. It is important to note that Gulag work norms were the same as civilian norms; norms were dictated according to the branch of the economy. Norilsk used the same work norms as its corresponding civilian branches despite its location in the Arctic Circle (see Chapter 7). Some decrees lowered norms for “physically weak” workers.⁴⁵ As might be expected, prisoner living standards depended on the fulfillment of norms. Norm underfulfillment typically meant reduced rations,⁴⁶ but the method of lowering rations had to be used cautiously. Reduced rations could so weaken workers that they could not fulfill their norms, and even severer long-term consequences, such as dysentery and tuberculosis, were often observed in Norilsk.⁴⁷ On the flip side, prisoners who overfulfilled their norms received better rations and other advantages. Such penalties and rewards were often applied to the work brigade; thus the work of one prisoner affected the rations and living conditions of other brigade members. Within the brigade, there were mechanisms for maintaining work discipline and for helping other (weaker) brigade members, such as material incentives and punishments and

44. It is not surprising that there are few sources about this phenomenon. For Norilsk see, for example, GARF 9414.1.854: 12; see also N. Suprunenko, “Ne Iskazhaia Istoriu,” Norilskiy Memorial. First edition. April 1990, pp. 4–7. (This text was written in 1977 for the newspaper *Krasnoiarskiy Komsomolets*, p. 7, but was not published.)

45. GARF 8361.1.69: 22.

46. Since the problem of food and provisions in camps should be analyzed separately, Order No. 00943 NKVD of August 14, 1939, is only mentioned here. By this decree, detailed programs of the food and clothing norms for prisoners of camps and colonies were established, including schemes for the increase and decrease of norms.

47. Kersnovskaia, *op. cit.*, l. 237.

Coercion versus Motivation 91

awards.⁴⁸ Brigade leaders were chosen “from the most disciplined and conscientious workers” and were responsible for fulfillment of norms.⁴⁹ The brigade leaders who achieved good work results received better rations, honorary posting on the “red board,” better clothing, and the right to buy goods in the company store.⁵⁰ Prisoners could also receive commendations that were placed in the prisoner’s record, monetary rewards, rewards in kind, the right to receive packages without restrictions, the right to send money to relatives not exceeding one hundred rubles a month, and the opportunity to transfer to more qualified work. Prisoners working according to “Stakhanovite” measures received added privileges, such as a place in better living quarters, boots or coats, special rations, a separate dining room or the right to be served first, first access to books or newspapers in the prison library, the best seating in the camp theater, or a place in a training course to raise qualifications.⁵¹ In 1943, about 18 percent of prisoners and 32 percent of “free” workers were Stakhanovites.⁵²

Incentives, which directly linked inmate living conditions to labor productivity, were powerful motivators for prisoners living at the margin of subsistence. They raised the productivity of successful workers and required only small managerial expenditures on bonuses. On the other hand, the loss of manpower caused by deprivation and severe working and living conditions raised serious questions about the economic effectiveness of this incentive system.

48. For a description of this process, see Ravdel’, *op. cit.*, l. 154. Odolinskaia, *op. cit.*, l. 104.

49. See also Ravdel’, *op. cit.*, l. 110.

50. Ravdel’, *op. cit.*, l. 120.

51. Order No. 00889 NKVD of August 2, 1939.

52. GARF 8361.1.57: 22–23, 38b.

WORK CREDITS FOR REDUCED TERMS

The Gulag administration used a “work credit” system, whereby sentences were reduced (by two days or more for every day the norm was overfulfilled). Work credits were widely used during the 1930s in correctional-labor camps, colonies, and even in prisons, but an order by the NKVD commissar Beria in the summer of 1939 abolished the credit system and wiped out the workday credits accumulated by prisoners.⁵³ Beria’s justification was that the best prisoners were being released after serving one-half or one-third of their sentences. Beria’s order did not quite rule out sentence reductions as rewards for prisoners who attained high productivity results for an extended period, but such exceptional cases were decided by the Special Conference of the NKVD, based on special requests by the camp director and the director of the political department. Beria’s order laid out other kinds of rewards, such as better supplies and food, monetary bonuses, meetings with relatives, general improvements in living conditions, and so forth. In general, however, the order represented a tightening of the regime and working conditions in the camps, and it provided for much harsher treatment of inmates who refused to work.

Former inmates confirm that there was no system of workday credits during the 1940s in Norilsk, but “. . . by special decision a sentence could be reduced for excellent work, based on a request by the plant to the government.”⁵⁴ However, some former inmates report that political prisoners could not receive work credits, though

53. In Kokurin/Petrov, it was connected with the speech of Stalin during the meeting of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet on August 25, 1938. Kokurin/Petrov, *Ukaz. soch.*, “Svobodnaia Mysl,” No. 3, 2000, pp. 105–123. Here p. 108.

54. Vintens, *op. cit.*, l. 40–41. The author himself occupied an important position in the chemical laboratory, and for his achievements in modernizing technology, his term of conviction was reduced twice: the first term for a half year, and the second, for one year.

Coercion versus Motivation 93

inmates convicted under general articles continued to be awarded credits.⁵⁵ We do not know whether the 1939 credit-system ban was partly rescinded later in favor of the “common convicts” or, if rescinded, whether this action was on the initiative of the local camp management. By the end of the 1940s, however, both official documents and inmate memoirs unanimously attest to a turnaround in the policy on workday credits. A joint order of the MVD and the Prosecutor General’s Office in July 1948 put into effect instructions on the crediting of workdays to inmates in the Far North construction (Dalstroï) camps.⁵⁶ Notably, the July 1948 order gave the right to workday credits to all working inmates, including those sentenced to hard labor, regardless of the length of their sentences, the article under which they were convicted, or how long they had been in the camp. Similar instructions were introduced in late 1948 at projects of the MVD’s Main Industrial Construction Administration by Resolution No. 4630-1808ss of the USSR Council of Ministers of December 17, 1948. Both sets of instructions were later gradually applied to many other camps, and they were put into effect in Norillag in May 1950.⁵⁷ Within a short period, work credits covered more than half the inmates of Gulag camps and colonies.⁵⁸ Three weeks after workday credits were introduced in Norilsk, the Norillag management requested changes, arguing that the specified norms could be overfulfilled only through superhuman efforts in Arctic conditions.⁵⁹ V. S. Zverev, the general director of Norilsk,

55. Ravdel’, *op. cit.*, l. 154, 224. Vintens, *op. cit.*, l. 40.

56. Order of MVD/Office of Public Prosecutor USSR No. 00683/150ss of July 21, 1948, implemented by a resolution of the Council of Ministers USSR No. 1723-688ss of May 22, 1948. See GARF 9414.1. 151: 281.

57. Resolution of Council of Ministers USSR No. 1547-590ss of April 13, 1950 and Order of MVD No. 00287 of May 4, 1950. See GARF 9414.1.151: 281.

58. Zemskov, *op. cit.*, *Sotsiologicheskie Issledovaniia*, No. 7, 1991, pp. 3–16. Here p. 12.

59. By using the workday credit scale established for Dalstroï, the workers in these shops could receive a maximum of .75 of a credit-day for one day worked.

argued for a points system that favored crucial mining and metallurgical industries: “It would be absolutely wrong to leave them [mining and metallurgy] in the same category as others, such as construction, power engineers, and mechanics.”⁶⁰ The management proposed the liberalized credits for metallurgical and enrichment plants shown in Figure 5.5.⁶¹

These special scales were approved by the Gulag administration, and the Gulag and the Prosecutor General’s Office jointly drew up a draft directive to give these proposals legal force in August 1950,⁶² though the document itself wasn’t adopted until the following year, in the fall of 1951.⁶³ The delay was not significant, since Zverev had already put his proposed workday-credits scale into practice at Norillag.⁶⁴ Zverev’s action indicates the freedom the director of a large camp had in making decisions about organizing the inmates’ labor. In these decisions, the management of Norillag was obviously spurred by its own stake in creating more effective methods of motivating prison workers. Former inmates confirm that the workday-credits system came into wide use in the early 1950s.⁶⁵

The same applied to mining operations, where more than 90 percent of workers were in multifunction brigades; the best among them were unable, to all intents and purposes, to fulfill the norms to more than 125 to 130 percent, and accordingly, they would not have been able to get more than one day of credit. The engineering personnel in the plant’s metallurgical shops would not have been able to get more than .5 of a credit-day, since the lack of individual norms meant that the awarding of credits by this scale would have depended on the fulfillment of the nickel production plan set for the entire plant. At that point, however, nickel production had never gone more than 4 percent over the plan in the plant’s entire history.

60. GARF 9414.1.151: 285–286, 289.

61. GARF 9414.1.151: 286–287, 290.

62. GARF 9414.1.151: 297–298.

63. GARF 9414.1.151: 299–300.

64. GARF 9414.1.151: 290.

65. Rubinshteyn, *op. cit.*, l. 188–189; Numerov, *op. cit.*, l. 402.

Figure 5.5 Liberalized Credits for Metallurgical and Enrichment Plants

| <i>For fulfillment of monthly norms</i> | <i>Prisoners working in mining enterprises</i> |
|--|--|
| From 100% to 105% | 1.5 days |
| From 106% to 110% | 1.75 |
| From 111% to 115% | 2 |
| From 116% to 120% | 2.5 |
| 121% or more | 3 |
| <i>For fulfillment of the plan</i> | <i>Engineers</i> |
| At 100% | Up to 2 days |
| For fulfillment of the plan and all technical-economic targets (unit cost, productivity, input coefficients, accident rate, etc.) | Up to 3 days |
| <i>For fulfillment of monthly norms</i> | <i>Ordinary prisoners</i> |
| From 100% to 105% | 1.5 days |
| From 106% to 115% | 1.75 |
| From 116% to 125% | 2 |
| From 126% to 135% | 2.5 |
| 136% or more | 3 |

MONEY WAGES AND BONUSES

Gulag camps also paid inmates differentiated monetary payments for work performed. Throughout the 1940s, administrative reports referred to these payments as “monetary rewards” and “monetary bonus remuneration.” The term “wages” was used occasionally but was not introduced officially until 1950. Before 1950, payments were made in the form of supplemental bonuses. The 1939 “Provisional Instructions on Procedures for Inmates in Correctional Labor Camps” required that bonuses be credited to the inmate’s personal account up to a monthly upper limit. Inmates could also be given personal cash, totaling no more than one hundred rubles

96 Leonid Borodkin and Simon Ertz

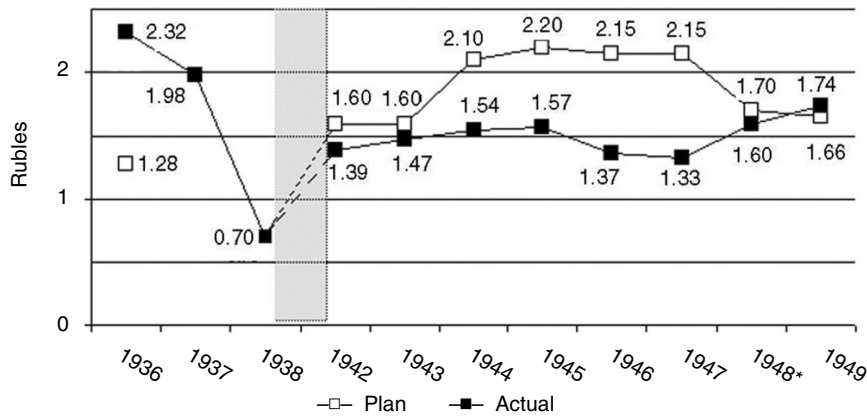


Figure 5.6 Monetary Incentive Fund of Norilsk Complex and Its Usage (Average Monetary Payments per Prisoner Worker per Day, in Rubles)

Source: GARF 9414.1.854: 57, 80; 968: 24–26; 969: 10; 1118: 24; 8361.1.40: 42ob.; 56: 40; 71: 56; 95: 101; 101: 156; 125: 152ob.; 155: 140; 174: 98.

a month, subject to the approval of the division chief. Bonuses and personal cash were issued “piecemeal at different times, in such a manner that the total amount in an inmate’s possession [did] not exceed 50 rubles.”⁶⁶ The 1947 procedures for Gulag inmates spelled out similar terms for monetary rewards for overfulfilling production norms. According to Gulag director V. G. Nasedkin, writing in 1947, inmates could receive cash amounts of not more than 150 rubles at one time. Any sums over this amount were credited to the inmate’s account and were paid out as previously issued cash was spent.⁶⁷

Figure 5.6 shows monetary payments per man-day worked for the period 1936 to 1949 to all inmates working at the Norilsk Integrated Plant. Probably most inmates did not receive bonuses; therefore the average figures are lower than the actual bonuses. Bonuses paid out hovered around two rubles a day, suggesting that

66. Order No. 00889 NKVD of August 2, 1939.

67. GARF 9414.1.77: 28.

Coercion versus Motivation 97

the average worker would have to overfulfill norms for fifty days to accumulate the one hundred ruble maximum. The average amount of pay was somewhat higher in 1936 than in subsequent years because of normal overfulfillment and an increase in bonuses for skilled workers. For certain projects, “there was an artificial increase in bonus remuneration for the purpose of accelerating projects of an extremely urgent nature.”⁶⁸ There were also instances in which “the amounts of work completed were artificially inflated.”⁶⁹ The larger bonuses for skilled workers graphically show that the first directors of Norilsk⁷⁰ were actively and deliberately using monetary rewards as incentives at the start of operations. In 1937, the overexpenditure of the monetary-reward fund was viewed as a problem because even a small overfulfillment of output norms by individual groups of workers could cause large increases in bonuses, which would raise the bonus-remuneration fund for fulfillment of the capital-projects plan.⁷¹ Norilsk management drew up new rates “to lower the growth of bonus remuneration for overfulfillment of norms” and introduced “bonus bread.” Four hundred grams of bread were moved from the basic allotment to bonus bread issued in place of money bonuses.⁷² These and later measures drove down expenditures on money rewards.⁷³ The Norilsk plant’s 1937 report raises some doubt about how reliably money was managed inside the camp: “Accounts of inmate depositors were managed in 1937 by the divisions themselves, which caused numerous abuses, both

68. GARF 9414.1.854: 12.

69. Ibid.

70. The first chief of Norilsk construction and of Norillag, V. Z. Matveev, was arrested and replaced by A. P. Zaveriagin in April 1938.

71. GARF 9414.1.968: 24–25. Note: Apparently, this practice of monetary motivation calculation was not in use in reality because the costs for prisoners’ support were lower than planned for nearly every year during this period. Figure 5.6 shows that the situation was the same for premium pay.

72. GARF 9414.1.968: 25.

73. GARF 9414.1.969: 10.

on the part of workers and on the part of accounting employees.”⁷⁴ Monetary rewards paid out in the 1940s, especially in the second half of the decade, were lower than planned amounts, even though the Norilsk plant was fulfilling and overfulfilling its norms. In 1948 the planned amount was changed to a more realistic, lower figure. From the plant management’s perspective, bonuses were part of the expenditures on man-days of work in production. Managers under pressure to lower production costs reduced bonuses as a convenient means of lowering costs. Norilsk plant data show that savings on “monetary rewards” in the 1940s kept total expenditures per man-day of work below planned levels right up until 1948. This effect was especially noticeable from 1944 to 1947, when savings on other kinds of costs were disappearing. Since cost economies improved the general financial capabilities of the enterprise and were cited in the plant’s reports as distinctive achievements, management considered that reducing monetary rewards to cut costs was no less important than the incentive effect of these small bonuses.

The memoirs of former Norilsk inmates do not devote much space to monetary rewards. While such rewards were mentioned for Norillag’s early period,⁷⁵ references become openly skeptical for the 1940s: “Officially convicts received wages for their work according to the logs, but the wages never reached them and went into the pockets of the camp management. Only in 1945 did the management start to pay out a few crumbs.”⁷⁶ Rewards for efficiency-improvement proposals submitted by inmates also were trivial. The former inmate A. A. Gayevsky writes: “In May 1942 I was rewarded for a proposal that yielded an economic benefit totaling 185,100 rubles.” Here is the quote from Directive No. 74 of the NKVD on the Norilsk plant: “For the initiative he has shown,

74. GARF 9414.1.968: 9.

75. See Ravdel’, *op. cit.*, l. 115.

76. Assanov, *op. cit.*, l. 11–12.

Coercion versus Motivation 99

engineer Gayevsky is to be awarded a bonus of 100 rubles, with a notation made in his personal file, and he is to receive engineers' meals starting 1 June."⁷⁷ Judging from Gayevsky's account, the engineer's meal was more significant than the one hundred rubles.

As the 1940s ended, two resolutions ("Pursuant to USSR Council of Ministers Resolutions No. 4293-1703ss of 20 November 1948 and No. 1065-376ss of 13 March 1950") introduced wages for Gulag inmates.⁷⁸ Wages were officially introduced to Gulag camps (excluding special camps) by the MVD decree of April 1, 1950.⁷⁸ Prisoner wages were based on rates in corresponding civilian sectors, but with appropriate reductions. Inmates received only a small part of their wages in cash after the deduction of food, clothing costs, and income taxes.⁸⁰ After these deductions, inmate cash wages were not to be less than 10 percent of their total earnings. Progressive piecework and other bonuses for free workers at MVD enterprises were also applied to prisoners. Inmate administrative and managerial personnel received 50 to 70 percent of the pay of free workers in equivalent jobs.

By directly linking Gulag wages to the civilian economy, inmate wages followed the principles of wage differentiation in the economy at large. These principles included the use of piece rates and bonuses to motivate the fulfillment of production norms; higher pay in such high-priority branches as coal, gold mining, and metallurgy; higher wages for qualified and skilled workers; and higher wages for workers in production as against secondary and auxiliary pro-

77. See memoirs of A. A. Geyevsky on website of Krasnoiarsk Society "Memorial" (<http://memorial.krsk.ru/memuar/mgaew.htm>).

78. Zemskov, "GULAG (Istoriko-Sotsiologicheskii Aspekt)," *Sotsiologicheskie Issledovania*, 1991, No. 7, pp. 11–12.

79. See also 9401.4.2693: 177. In reality the mention of "... work experience of camps and colonies where prisoners received wages..." in this decree indicates that in some camps wages may have been paid earlier."

80. This means that bonuses given to separate groups of workers were not considered.

100 Leonid Borodkin and Simon Ertz

duction. Prisoners who were temporarily excused from work because of illness or other reasons were not credited with wages, but their food and clothing costs were not withheld. Certified disabled prisoners used in piecework were paid according to prisoners' piecework rates for the work that they actually completed.

The introduction of wages for Norillag inmates created financial problems because the MVD order required that cash wages be paid from the authorized appropriation without an allocation of supplemental funds. The Gulag's metallurgy administration, under which Norilsk fell, reported "inevitable difficulties in the camps' work during this transitional period" and significant deviations "between the authorized estimates of the revenues and expenditures of correctional-labor camps and actual results."⁸¹ Camps such as Norilsk attempted to close the financial gap by cutting "food and clothing allowances as compared with estimates," but these cutbacks "did not offset the increase in wages paid out, since wages at a number of camps were paid out in increased amounts due to the overfulfillment of production norms."⁸² A 1952 inspection report on Norillag, however, points out some positive results: "The changeover of inmates to wages was a major incentive for most inmates to raise productivity."⁸³ The deputy director of Norillag expressed a similar view in a letter dated June 5, 1952, saying that certain groups of inmates, especially in the skilled vocations, were working much more efficiently because of the introduction of wages.⁸⁴

Figure 5.7A shows the distribution of money wages in 1952 for the entire contingent of Norillag's working inmates. The average wage per worker (credited as cash) was about 225 rubles. Because of higher wages in the metallurgical industry, Norillag wages were

81. GARF 9401.4.2693: 177.

82. GARF 9401.4.2693: 178.

83. GARF 9414.1.642: 80.

84. GARF 8361.1.305: 10.

Coercion versus Motivation 101

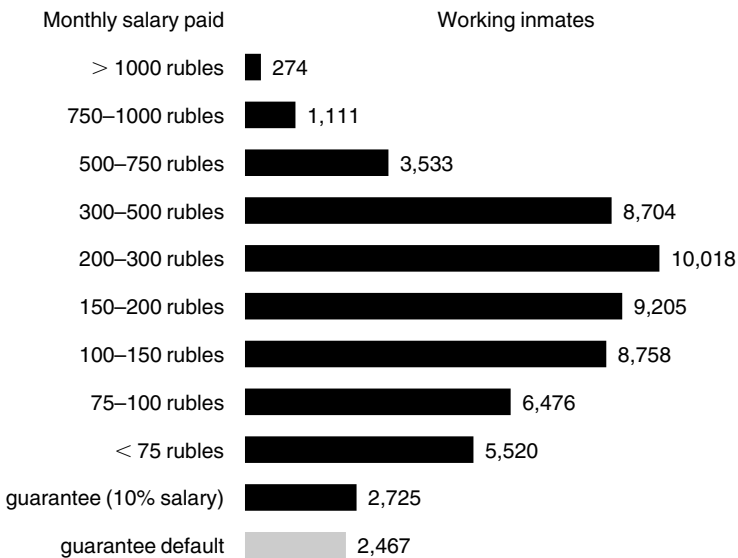


Figure 5.7A Average Number of Working Inmates by Monthly Average Salary Paid in 1952

Source: GARF 9414.1.174: 34ob.

higher than at other camps. At the same time, the average wage of a qualified worker in the civilian economy stood at 1,465 rubles a month in mining, 1,343 rubles in ferrous metallurgy, and 651 rubles in garments and shoes.⁸⁵ Thus Norilsk inmates received about one-third the pay of the lowest-paid civilian workers and about 15 percent of the pay of workers in comparable jobs, although inmates did receive “free” housing and food. Figure 5.7A shows considerable dispersion of money wages: while almost five thousand inmates

85. This takes into account prisoners who were deprived of wages. The data, however, do not allow calculating precisely the average wage, and thus it is necessary to proceed from possible error in this estimation in the range of 5 to 10 percent. For 1953 civilian wages, see V. P. Popov, *Ekonomicheskaiia Politika Sovetskogo Gosudarstva. 1946–1953* (Moscow: Tambov, 2000), p. 65.

102 Leonid Borodkin and Simon Ertz



Figure 5.7B Monthly Salary Distribution of Industrial Workers in USSR, 1934

Source: A. Bergson, *The Structure of Soviet Wages. A Study in Socialist Economics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946), 228.

received more than five hundred rubles a month, more than eight thousand received less than 75 rubles.⁸⁶ Figure 5.7B, which shows the 1934 distribution of industrial workers' wages in the USSR, yields a similar level of differentiation in the “noncamp” economy.⁸⁷ Such substantial differentiation in inmate wages shows that the Gulag, like the civilian economy, held out the prospect of higher monetary earnings to motivate labor. Those who worked well received relatively large material rewards; those who did not, received little.

Accounts of former prisoners describe the effect of wages in Norilsk. Cheburekin, a former Norillag inmate, wrote that wages were introduced for inmates “at northern rates, but 30 percent lower than for free workers. They withheld only for ‘room and

86. We conclude that prisoners who received a guaranteed 10 percent from payroll salary accounting are also in this category. Prisoners who were totally deprived of wages are not included in this sum.

87. Unfortunately, we do not have reliable data about the distribution of salaries of industrial employees in the USSR at the beginning of the 1950s.

board,' and the rest went into my bank account. I could take up to 250 rubles a month for my expenses. . . . I received 1,200 rubles a month, and after all the deductions something was left over, and accumulated in the account. Some professional drivers . . . earned up to 5,000 a month!"⁸⁸ A. A. Gayevsky, an engineer, remembered the following: "When I was released from the camp in 1947, I got back 2,561 rubles and 63 kopeks of the money that I had earned, and I was issued a cotton blanket, a lumpy mattress, a sheet and a pillowcase."⁸⁹ After Gayevsky received his certificate of release, which stated that he was to go to his "chosen" place of residence—the settlement of Norilsk in Krasnoyarsk Krai (which wasn't yet a city in 1947)—he remained at the plant in the same job, though in the new capacity of free worker. But since his sentence had stripped him of his rights for five years, he did not receive the benefits for workers in the Far North.⁹⁰

CONCLUSIONS

Norilsk was one of the highest-priority Gulag operations, shown by the steady growth of prison labor in Norilsk despite fluctuations in the total camp population. Despite Norilsk's harsh natural conditions, Norilsk prisoners were less likely to die than prisoners were elsewhere, and there were more free workers in Norilsk than in other camps. Norilsk appeared to follow general Gulag regulations closely for hours and days worked, but labor effort was dictated more by production requirements than by rules (for example, harsh weather rules were often ignored). Norilsk's best workers could earn work credits to reduce their prison terms, though sentence reductions for good work were granted only as an exception before

88. Cheburekin, *op. cit.*, l. 21.

89. See: A. A. Gaevskiy, *op. cit.*

90. *Ibid.*

104 Leonid Borodkin and Simon Ertz

1950. The fact that Norilsk put its own work-credit system into effect before receiving central approval suggests that Gulag managers had considerable authority. Norilsk, like other camps, relied more on material incentives as time passed, but the need to cover monetary bonuses from general cash funds limited bonuses to token amounts before 1950. In 1950 Norilsk inmates were placed on a wage system, patterned after the civilian wage system, but Norilsk inmates appeared to earn less than half of comparable wages in the civilian sector. The Norilsk archives show that “free” workers were far from free. Most were former inmates, denied the right to leave Norilsk. After completing their sentences, they received higher pay, more privileges, and occupied a middle ground between convict and truly free labor.