

Chapter Title: Introduction: Born Again: A New Model of Soviet Selfhood

Book Title: Belomor

Book Subtitle: Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag

Book Author(s): Julie Draskoczy

Published by: Academic Studies Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1zxsjv1.6>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.



Academic Studies Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Belomor*

JSTOR

INTRODUCTION

Born Again: A New Model of Soviet Selfhood

Ah, to be born again is as terrible as to die.¹⁰
—Fedor Gladkov, *Cement* (1925)

In his autobiography the Belomor prisoner Andrei Kupriianov wrote, “No, I am not an alien element. I am united with the working class in soul, body, and blood. My father, mother, and I were all killed for the cause of the working class.”¹¹ While his parents’ deaths were literal, Kupriianov’s own death was metaphorical—his former, criminal self had been killed to allow for the creation of a devoted Soviet citizen. Kupriianov immediately introduces physicality and violence into the understanding of his identity, directly placing creation alongside destruction in what is a mirror of the central thesis of this book.

Kupriianov was born in 1902 to a poor peasant family. After the death of his mother and father in 1918, he took the name Pavlov in an initial, symbolic transformation of identity. His parents were killed during the Russian Civil War, and he served in the Red Army for almost four years before returning home in 1921. After murdering a White Army bandit in a forest, he became more acquainted with the criminal world. He eventually planned to rob a wealthy businessman with a partner in crime, but it all went wrong: the intended robbery victim was killed in the tussle, and both criminals were sentenced to long prison terms. Kupriianov began reading avidly in the Kresty prison in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) and soon started writing short stories. The first time he saw his name in print—one of his stories was published in a newspaper—he rejoiced like a child. He was ultimately sent to Belomor, where he became “re-forged” into a laboring socialist citizen. Prison facilitated his artistic development; it was where he learned to love to read and where he began to write. The author declares his “old self” and family dead, and embraces his “new family”: the USSR. He receives a distinct reward for his dedication: early release. Kupriianov receives the news that he is being freed while he is in the middle of writing his autobiography, and the timing hardly seems coincidental. He was a model worker and writer, and the canal adminis-

tration needed his story to use as an exemplar for other prisoners. Art, in turn, facilitated not only an individual's re-forging—the ideological backbone of Stalin's White-Sea-Baltic Canal, or Belomor—but also the re-forging of other prisoners who read about Kupriianov's path. Art here is not for entertainment purposes but has a specific and tangible function. It serves as evidence or proof of an individual prisoner's commitment to the socialist method of rehabilitation while also explaining the Soviet method of *perekovka* to other prisoners and, ultimately, the world.



Figure 1. An entrance to the prison camp at Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal. Stalin's portrait hangs at the top of the gate, above slogans concerning political re-education. Photograph reproduced with permission of Iurii Dmitriev.



Figure 2. A group of prisoners at the construction of the Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal. Photograph reproduced with permission of Iurii Dmitriev.

Convict laborers built Stalin's White-Sea Baltic Canal (*Belomorsko-Baltiiskii kanal im. Stalina*), or Belomor for short, in a mere twenty months from 1931-33. They were working with crude tools in unbelievably difficult working conditions. The connection between art and violence rendered the camp a site of both destruction and production. Thousands of prisoners lost their lives, while at the same time costumed plays were being staged; nature was permanently altered, while literary competitions were being organized. Yet rather than being a paradox, such anomalies exemplify Stalinist culture. In the industrializing push of Stalin's first Five-Year Plan (1928-32), the destruction of the old world facilitated the creation of the new, and art and culture were to be the handmaidens of a grand, material transformation. The prison, as a site of both intense creativity and physical violence, is an excellent example of this uncanny artistic-corporeal combination.

During the Soviet period, the Gulag became the principal site of formalized retribution. The Gulag, an acronym that referred to the central camp administration¹² but came to mean the Soviet prison system as a whole, was a complex institution. Far from being relegated to the Siberian tundra, it was urban and rural, with individual camps both large and small. The Gulag population included men, women, and children; the innocent and the guilty; political and criminal prisoners. Its function was both economic and social, it was a tool of both oppression and re-education. Scholarly debate continues regarding which of these purposes was more significant.¹³

Belomor: Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag explores prison narratives from the construction of Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal within the larger contexts of penal and Stalinist culture. From this analysis emerges a revised vision of the Soviet self, one that underscores the link between artistic expression and the physical body in the forging of socialist identity through performance. Belomor was touted as both a technological achievement of Stalin's first Five-Year Plan and a metaphorical "factory of life" (*fabrika zhizni*) for recalcitrant prisoners. Alongside the locks and dams, socialist subjects were made out of common criminals through the process of *perekovka*, or re-forging. According to this penal philosophy, the dual forces of physical labor and artistic expression had the power to, quite literally, re-create human beings. Yet the belief in the malleability of people did not begin with Belomor—it was an essential component of the Marxist understanding

of human nature. The prison camp, as a zone both internal and external to the Soviet experience, simultaneously intrinsic and extrinsic, served as an ideal laboratory for the exploration of character transformation according to socialist ideals.

The Gulag: Aesthetically Productive, Physically Destructive

Prison in general—as a “total institution,” in the parlance of Erving Goffman—is characterized by its separation from the outside world, a separation that is often visibly apparent in the physical setting of the establishment.¹⁴ Total institutions render indistinguishable the boundaries between sleep, work, and play—activities that on the “outside” are normally conducted in different arenas with different people. This collapsing of barriers fosters an intense desire for the demarcation of space,¹⁵ and the creation of numerous identities is a direct response to the forced homogenization that occurs behind bars. Members of total institutions undergo a “stripping” process upon entry, often losing their clothes, their hair, and even their names. As both a reaction to this theft and a survival mechanism, prisoners create stories.¹⁶ Narratives of selfhood occur in numerous registers and various contexts within the Gulag, necessarily making it a site of active creativity, both of people and of texts.

Given the emphasis on the production of identity at Belomor in particular, selfhood becomes a central concept when one grapples with the camp’s narratives. Research on this area, in turn, is indebted to the work of numerous scholars of Soviet subjectivity, most notably: Jochen Hellbeck’s concept of creative selfhood, Irina Paperno’s work on diaries and dreams, Thomas Lahusen’s extended analysis of *perekovka* and re-writing of the self, and Igal Halfin’s exploration of communist autobiographies as conversion narratives. Although it was released after I completed this book, Stephen Barnes’ landmark *Death and Redemption* echoes my argument here, demonstrating that the Gulag camps went to great lengths to “reform” prisoners in a highly elaborate system of indoctrination in which *perekovka* remained a central philosophy. This cycle, as Barnes also notes, often occurred in repeating patterns of creation and destruction.¹⁷

In the prison’s “production” of various selves, an individual prisoner may have multiple monikers: a prisoner number, a given name,

and numerous nicknames. My notion of creative selfhood has much in common with Hellbeck's work on subjectivity and his assertion that the Stalinist period *produced* rather than destroyed individuals.¹⁸ Yet my purpose here is not to use prisoner narratives to demonstrate that the prisoners truly believed in the regime or that they certainly did not. Some believed, others did not believe—the question is a spurious one. We do not have access to the prisoners' psyches to ascertain their "real" beliefs, beliefs that were uncertain, fluctuating, and difficult to express in the first place. Faith in and uncertainty about the Soviet project, I would argue, co-existed on an individual level.

Instead, this work analyzes prisoner narratives as a type of discourse, accentuating the complexity of life and death within the camp and, by extension, within the larger Soviet context. Each chapter takes up a central metaphor related to the canal's construction—the factory of life; the art of crime; the symphony of labor; the performance of identity; and the mapping of utopia—and demonstrates how these framing concepts relate to broader cultural trends within the Soviet Union. I often focus on the criminal realm, a subset of prisoners who not only represented the majority of the population throughout the camps' history, but whose way of life—language, mores, and music—had a significant impact on culture beyond the barbed wire. Since only criminal prisoners were eligible to take part in the process of re-forging at Belomor, the regime encouraged them to participate in literacy programs and writing competitions, which allowed for the production of a large body of criminal-written texts preserved in the Russian State Archive for Literature and Art (RGALI) and the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF). By analyzing these never-before-published materials, *Belomor* not only sheds light on this criminal population but also offers a new understanding of the group's relationship to political prisoners. Criminal-written autobiographies, poetry, and short stories lie at the heart of this trove of artistic texts, and they are interpreted alongside the political prisoners' conceptions of the criminal realm.

In the extension of Belomor tropes to the larger Soviet experience, two key characteristics become evident: the import of the physical body and the ubiquity of creative activity. The physical culture, or *fizkul'tura* movement, attested to the centrality of the physical body in the Soviet Union. In 1929 the holiday "Physical Culture Day" was created, with grand parades through Red Square highlighting the strapping physiques

of young Soviet men and women. The emphasis on training the physical body that began in late 1920s and early 1930s continued into the 1940s and beyond, with fitness promoted as a vital feature of a good Soviet citizen.



Figure 3. A 1945 photo exhibit in Moscow that emphasized the importance of promoting physical fitness among youth. Russian Pictorial Collection, Box 29, Hoover Institution Archives.

Yet despite the athletic connotations, these parades were artistic productions rather than sporting events. The facts that they were carefully scripted and choreographed and that theater personnel were in charge of orchestrating them, demonstrate the inextricability of art and physicality.¹⁹ Art, as a fiction-producing mechanism, was precisely what was needed to disguise broken bodies as healthy ones.²⁰ Art and physicality, as this monograph will demonstrate, reimagine themselves as creativity and destruction. The physicality that I am describing here is not limited to the boundaries of the human body; it is a capacious category that includes the tangibility of landscape, the materiality of text, and the corporeality of labor. Nature, text, and body are all violently destroyed and dramatically reimaged. Art is part and parcel of the physical—it serves as the vehicle by which the physical components of reality can be drastically refashioned.

Given that art and physicality are fundamental components of the Gulag experience, Belomor serves as an especially productive case study for understanding the mechanics of Stalinist culture. In response to the regime's demand for a multiplicity of cultural narratives within the face of destruction, Belomor produced selves as both re-forged beings (physical) and paper texts of autobiography (art). As Igal Halfin notes, "autobiography does not only express the self; it creates it."²¹ Given that autobiography stems from the confessional mode, it is particularly conducive to re-forging narratives. For both, the destruction of the former, sinning self must occur before the new, textual self can be created.²² In the highly industrialized atmosphere of Stalin's first Five-Year Plan (1928-32), the self becomes a ware. It is both metaphorical and material; it can be produced like a good on a factory line and altered according to the State's requirements. Although intended to follow strict ideological demands, these selves were anything but stable. Some might give voice to a newly forged self to disguise actual feelings of disloyalty, others might wholeheartedly believe in the Soviet project, and still others might be struggling with how to express themselves properly in what Stephen Kotkin would call "speaking Bolshevik." This multiplicity of self-narratives within the Gulag is mirrored in outside society by the requirement that all Communist Party members have an autobiography in their file, a text that could be re-written numerous times over the course of one's life, thus implying that the past could be edited and crafted.²³ Despite prison seeming to be "the least intellectual of places," there "concern about words and verbalized perspectives [...] plays a central and feverish role."²⁴ The highly charged atmosphere of incarceration demands that discourse matter. The production of self-narratives is accompanied by the destruction of the physical body, creating a contradiction endemic to total institutions. The paradox is self-sustaining—the physical duress endured in prison is both a response to the environmental conditions and an impetus for escape by intellectual, spiritual means. In the Soviet Union, the body, especially in its relationship to labor, had a unique function that the prison setting only accentuated.²⁵

While the regime intended artistic productions to inspire labor at Belomor, many Russian artists—including well-known authors such as Vladimir Mayakovsky and Maxim Gorky—understood art itself as a type of labor. This collapsing of creativity into labor is precisely what distinguishes the Russian experience: even beyond the Soviet period,

writers acknowledge the transformative potential of both prison and labor. Nikolai Chernyshevskii penned his influential *What Is to Be Done?* (1863) while confined in Peter and Paul fortress in St. Petersburg; Fedor Dostoevsky wrote of the re-birth (*pererozhdenie*) of his convictions after time spent in prison.²⁶ Mayakovsky decided to become a poet only after spending time in prison, where he devoured books. Numerous Russian authors upheld labor as a physical activity that is both transformative and redemptive. Even while warning about the dangers of routinized labor, Dostoevsky singled out work as the single most important activity in prison, as it was the only way to survive such an oppressive environment. Mayakovsky, not unlike Gorky, equated his writing with labor and underlined its transformative potential: “My verse / by labor / will break the mountain chain of years, / and will present itself / ponderous, / crude, / tangible, / as an aqueduct / by slaves of Rome / constructed, / enters into our days.”

Although it shared many qualities with total institutions, the Gulag also differed in many respects from the average prison. The fusion of socialist ideology with corrective labor was perhaps the most significant distinction, as Soviet prisons were intended not simply for punishment but for reformation, not simply for retribution but for conversion. This was particularly true in the example of the White Sea-Baltic Canal, where the penal philosophy of *perekovka* (re-forging) held sway. This concept asserted that criminals could be crafted into socialist citizens through the moralizing power of hard labor and socialist education. Another characteristic feature of the Gulag was the strategic function of creativity, particularly at Belomor—it was not just labor that would set the prisoners free, but also the artistic articulation of their new selves. This adeptly encapsulated the creative/physical duality endemic not only to Belomor but also to Stalinist culture. While social mobility in most total institutions is severely restricted between inmates and staff,²⁸ barriers among ranks were often porous in Soviet prisons. Sergei Alymov, a Belomor prisoner, participated in the publication of the official history of the construction effort with an editorial collective composed entirely of non-prisoners. Naftalii Frenkel', the purported originator of the inhumane work-for-food system,²⁹ was himself a prisoner at Solovki, one of the first camps in Gulag history, before he rose in the ranks of the regime's administration and eventually achieved the title “Hero of Socialist Labor.” The reverse path was also possible: many of the most

prominent figures in the canal's administration were later purged from the Communist Party altogether.³⁰

The inherent industrial connotation of re-forging played a significant role in the creation of selfhood at the White Sea-Baltic Canal, and the close connection between industry and culture was ubiquitous in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s. "Forge" serves as both a noun and a verb: it is both the fire in which metal is melted and the process of melting itself. The term *perekovka*, therefore, succinctly captures the *perpetuum mobile* of transformation at Belomor: the prisoners themselves produce the furnace in which they are to be smelted. The fiery heat of industrialization renders self-molding permanent, physical, and transformative. This identity conversion, like a metallurgical process, would be violent, and the Soviet labor camp was an ideal site for building the New Man.

The recasting of industrial processes as cultural constructs began long before the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal; it was a favorite rhetorical device of the Bolsheviks. In a 1924 speech by Leon Trotsky, workers' clubs are cited as a "smithy" where proletarian culture is "forged."³¹ In the violent and heady years following the Russian Revolution, a massive restructuring of culture and society occurred, one that was very often portrayed in metallurgical terms.³² The concept of smelting is apparent in other utopian visions as well. In Book Three of Plato's *Republic*, the "myth of the metals," a fiction assuring citizens that they all have a bit of metal from the earth in their souls—gold, silver, or iron/bronze, depending on their level in society's hierarchy—is discussed in detail. This "noble lie" is intended to foster patriotism, as one who believes they literally come from the land will most likely be loyal to it. The prisoners at Belomor were encouraged to take pride in the canal project in a similar, fabricated fashion; since they are part and parcel of the industrialization plan—both metaphorically and literally—they must swear allegiance to the Soviet project.³³ Many prisoner narratives, in turn, imagine the project as a homeland, as more dear to them than their families, or even as a romantic lover.³⁴

The violence inherent in the molding of prisoners' consciousnesses—as well as the ferocity that characterized the Gulag more generally—cannot be underestimated. This was a characteristic feature of Soviet ideology. The recent scholarly debate surrounding Soviet subjectivity too often miscalculates the role of violence. By applying Michel Foucault to

the creation of selfhood, scholars like Igal Halfin, Jochen Hellbeck, and Oleg Kharkhordin understand Stalinist Russia as a largely successful project in the forging of modern subjectivity.³⁵ Even though these scholars' groundbreaking research is essential to my project, I believe something vital is lost in the appropriation of subjectivity and the widespread application of Foucault.³⁶ This view does not truly capture the collective violence endemic to the Soviet creation of selfhood, violence overwhelmingly apparent in the Belomor context. In addition, the use of Foucault does not allow the multiplicity of self-narratives to emerge in all of their complexity. As Jerrold Seigel notes of Foucauldian models of selfhood, "both bodies and selves are imprisoned inside the discourses or structures where their formation took place."³⁷ I instead posit Nietzsche—and by extension Maxim Gorky—as alternatives in the discussion of Stalinist selfhood. For Nietzsche, as for Gorky, selfhood becomes a task or achievement, with the distant, at times seemingly unrealizable, goal of the *Übermensch* as something that must be actively fashioned, often by way of a violent process. The self is not a stable concept, which makes it impossible to determine if a person "believed" in an ideology or not; it is, rather, the sum of an individual's drives and will that forces them to act, and the only conception of self can be one's construction of it.³⁸ While some might claim that my substitution of Nietzsche for Foucault is spurious given the former's significant influence on the latter, I would like to underscore here that I choose to emphasize Nietzsche through *his relationship* to Gorky. Gorky is the philosopher truly at the heart of this project, and it is by examining Gorky's affinity for Nietzsche that I hope to argue my claim that these two thinkers offer a much more appropriate blueprint for Soviet selfhood than does Foucault. Gorky was deeply influenced by Nietzsche's writing. Many noted the philosopher's wild popularity in the country, as the writer Vasilii Rozanov explained:

Did we ever devote so much strength and enthusiasm, so much reading and so many sleepless nights to a Russian [...] as we have to Nietzsche in recent years? Nietzsche's "Zarathustra" has been quoted here like our most favorite Russian verses, like a cherished ... fairytale; Pushkin never knew a period of popularity comparable to our "Nietzschean period" at its height.³⁹

In an alternative Nietzschean/Gorkyan model of selfhood, a framework emerges that allows for the inclusion of physical violence and a multiplicity of aestheticized selves. Rather than assuming a “successful,” or total, construction of self, Nietzsche fosters an understanding of selfhood as perennial striving, as task or achievement that would closely follow the rhetoric of *perekovka*. The violence of the prison camp and the forging of individuals demonstrate the necessity of overtly introducing the body into the discussion of Soviet selfhood. Nietzsche imagines the body as a kind of political structure that is both complex and contradictory.⁴⁰ His Zarathustra claims, “The awakened and knowing say: body am I entirely, and nothing else; and soul is only a word for something about the body. The body is a great reason, a plurality with one sense, a war and a peace, a herd and a shepherd.”⁴¹ At Belomor the self was profoundly physical: not just created by autobiographies and other written texts, it was inscribed in flesh. The prisoners’ aching muscles and sore limbs after a twelve-hour workday reminded them that they were being transformed not only mentally but physically, and their refusal to submit would be met with even more severe bodily consequences.

The well-known Gulag author Varlam Shalamov writes how the Gulag experience literally imprints itself on the prisoner: “On every face Kolyma wrote its words, left its mark, carved excess wrinkles, fixed eternally frostbite’s stain, that indelible stamp, ineffaceable brand!”⁴² Such evidence is *written (napisala)* on the face like a literary text; the physical and creative are combined in a paradoxically destructive way.⁴³ The body of the prisoner, in turn, can be understood as the sole reliable document of the camp experience.⁴⁴ The act of glimpsing a mirror in the Gulag captures the changing body as a textual testament to the horrific experience of the camps. Since mirrors were virtually nonexistent in the Gulag, many prisoners remember their first glimpse of their reflections as a painfully intense moment of *non-recognition*, a non-recognition that occurred because the faces’ owners had changed so drastically that they no longer recognized their own features. Upon seeing a mirror for the first time in three years, the Gulag prisoner Ol’ga Adamova-Sliozberg searches for her face everywhere but is unable to find it. Finally she realizes that the worn and tired face of her mother is actually *her* reflection; the camps have aged her so greatly that she is unrecognizable to herself.⁴⁵ The camp memoirist and poet Irina Ratushinskaia also recalls her reflection as a painful (and male) one.⁴⁶ This inability to identify

oneself actually reproduces the self—the healthy, pre-Gulag self along with the new, unfamiliar visage. This ability to see oneself outside of oneself is an odd and peculiar privilege, one that creates an additional text of corporeality almost akin to W. E. B. DuBois’ concept of “double-consciousness.”⁴⁷ As a corporeal existence is being destroyed, a new and unrecognizable textual body is being created.

According to Nietzsche, violence is inherent in the formation of society, a process he describes in terms uncannily similar to those of the Soviet project of re-forging:

The welding of a hitherto unchecked and shapeless populace into a firm form was not only instituted by an act of violence but also carried to its conclusion by nothing but acts of violence—that the oldest “state” thus appeared as a fearful tyranny, as an oppressive and remorseless machine, and went on working until this raw material of people and semi-animals was at last not only thoroughly kneaded and pliant but also *formed*.⁴⁸

Coupled with physical force (thousands of prisoners died in building a waterway that came to be known as the “road of bones”) was ideological force. As prisoners toiled at Belomor, the regime transmogrified their minds as well as their bodies. Imbedded in the ideals of the Russian Revolution was a sense of aggressive transformation, and the Bolsheviks sought to re-mold forcefully those not willing to submit to their worldview. According to Lenin, Marxism had “assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the more than two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture.”⁴⁹ The Communist Party, in turn, served as the vanguard of the proletariat. Their task was to actively lead the workers and peasants to consciousness, to help them make the pilgrimage from darkness to light. Not only Belomor but the entire Soviet project is modeled off of the assumption that *perekovka*—the potential for human self-transformation—is possible. Marxism-Leninism particularly embraced this possibility, since peasants and workers had to become enlightened, class-conscious citizens in the absence of the full development of capitalism.

A New Soviet Religion:

God-Building as Precursor to Perekovka

God-building (*bogostroitel'stvo*), a type of socialist religion that locates the divine within humankind rather than in the heavens, adeptly addresses the close link between religiosity and socialist idealism. Popular in the early years of the twentieth century but later deemed heretical in the Soviet Union,⁵⁰ god-building relates directly to Nietzschean philosophy, demonstrating that the thinker is relevant to Belomor as both a historical and a theoretical touchstone. Nietzsche recognized the societal function that Christianity fulfilled,⁵¹ and in *The Gay Science* he acknowledges humanity's need to fill the void that the death of God has created.⁵² So did the Bolsheviks, and the revolutionaries thought that god-building could serve as a substitute for deeply entrenched Orthodox tradition. The notion of god-building claimed that through communism men would become like God—imagining Bolshevism as a *literal*, not just *functional*, substitute for religion.⁵³ This positing of humankind above God echoed the Nietzschean *Übermensch* and created a quasi-religion, a phenomenon made evident by the ubiquitous spiritual terminology in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. The idea of god-building gained credence among key thinkers in the early days after the revolution, including Anatolii Lunacharskii, Aleksei Bogdanov, and Maxim Gorky. Although the alleged “father of Socialist Realism” was forced to abandon his interest in the concept due to its “bourgeois” connotations, evidence of a Nietzschean influence is ubiquitous in Gorky's work and reconfigures itself as re-forging. Traces of god-building are apparent even in Gorky's most politically correct works; in Gorky's novel *Mother* (*Mat'*, 1907), heralded as a classic of socialist realism, the mother's evolving relationship to spirituality demonstrates clearly how revolutionary fervor can fill the vacuum created by the death of God.⁵⁴ Gorky's essential role in the cultural project of Belomor requires further elaboration on his proclivity for god-building, and his novel *Mother* is a useful starting point.

The mother in *Mother* is a symbolic, metaphorical mother to all. A universal mother figure can be used as a political tool; in the novel one of the protagonists insists, “We are all children of one mother—the great, invincible idea of the brotherhood of the workers of all the countries over all the earth.”⁵⁵ This passage in *Mother* is later echoed in Gorky's 1934 speech to the All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers: “speaking figuratively and despite our age differences, we here are all children of one

and the same mother—all-Union Soviet literature.”⁵⁶ Casting ideological pronouncements in familial terms allows Gorky to naturalize them, adding both continuity and inclusivity. Similarly, Belomor prisoners were encouraged to think of themselves as members in the “workers’ family,” and they often described the educators in charge of their reformation as substitute parents. Given that many of the criminal prisoners were homeless or orphaned, the idea of belonging to a family—even if it was a metaphorical, oppressive one—likely had some appeal.

The idea of mothering and procreation morphed into Gorky’s fascination with prisoner transformation and *perekovka*. The labor camp would be the mother of a new working class. Both god-building and the maternal impulse dovetailed with the author’s largest philosophical and intellectual preoccupation: human fashioning. Whether it was the literal, biological creation of the human by the maternal womb or the transformation afforded by a personal journey or individual greatness, Gorky remained intrigued by the individual’s ability for creation, journey, and self-discovery. Maintaining that humans were inherently malleable and eternally improvable, he believed in the potential for endless refinement through diligent effort.

Gorky’s special relationship to the Belomor project allows for an understanding of his career as a symbolic representation of the ideals promoted at the camp.⁵⁷ Gorky was a staunch enthusiast of prisoner labor and even predicted the possibility of a waterway similar to Belomor in his early works; in the April 1917 issue of his journal *New Life* (*Novaia zhizn*) he writes, “Imagine, for example, that in the interest of the development of industry, we build the Riga-Kherson canal to connect the Baltic Sea with the Black Sea [...] and so instead of sending a million people to their deaths, we send a part of them to work on what is necessary for the country and its people.”⁵⁸ Gorky’s condoning of Gulag camps such as Solovki and Belomor seems paradoxical to many scholars in light of his humanitarian endeavors, and some speculate either that Gorky was ignorant of the full extent of Stalin’s butchery or that he was aware, but was in a position that necessitated acquiescence to safeguard his well-being.⁵⁹ When viewed in the context of his philosophical outlook on literature and labor, however, his support of prison camps seems not like an aberration but rather a natural extension of his belief in violent re-birth, a belief related to Marxist-Leninist ideology and the concept of god-building. Gorky sees people and language alike in the framework

of craftsmanship. Perhaps his mistake was not so much his general support of Gulag projects, but his belief that human flesh can be formed like words on a page or cement in a factory. Gorky, after all, cared more about the craft than people themselves; in his 1928 essay “On How I Learned to Write” (*O tom, kak ia uchilsia pisat'*), he claimed that “the history of human labor and creation is far more interesting and meaningful than the history of mankind.”⁶⁰ Gorky was key to the canal project because his philosophical interests exemplify the very core of Belomor: the violent transformation of people through creative acts.

Technology’s magic demonstrated humans’ usurpation of God in a tangible way, with the ever-widening capacity to harness and transform the natural environment showcasing the potential of man-made machines. Soviet pilots were imagined as literal incarnations of the New Man,⁶¹ and the massive expansion of the Soviet aviation industry in the mid 1920s provided some of the most concrete evidence of human superiority over the divine. Short voyages known as “air baptisms” (*vozdu-shnye kreshcheniia*) supposedly eradicated peasants’ belief in God while highlighting the majesty of Red aviation. In such “agit-flights,” pilots would take Orthodox believers into the skies and show them that they held no celestial beings.⁶² Those who participated in the flights would narrate their experiences to neighboring villagers, describing “what lies beyond the darkened clouds.” This phrase served as the title of a 1925 essay by Viktor Shklovskii in which a village elder embarks upon a conversional agit-flight that he later recounts to his fellow peasants. Six years later, Shklovskii participated in the writers’ collective that co-authored the now infamous monograph *History of the Construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal*,⁶³ in which a different, often deadly, type of technological program offered the promise of conversion. In both instances, darkness will be overcome by the enlightening potential of socialist rationalism: aviation will liberate the peasants from their ignorant beliefs, just as labor will supposedly bring the Belomor prisoners to the light of Soviet ideology. Such endeavors occurred before the backdrop of a larger civilizing project, since both the rural reaches of peasant villages and the wild expanses of untouched Karelia necessitated modernization.

Yet could such projects ever be completed? Did the New Man really exist, and could his creation ever be achieved? The messianic vision of Soviet socialism necessitated that paradise lie always just out of reach. Similarly, Nietzsche posits the development into the *Übermensch* as

a perennially elusive goal; like the Faustian concept of striving, the individual is forever trying to perfect oneself without necessarily ever achieving perfection. This constant yearning renders the present as the future, as the purpose of today is necessarily the reward of tomorrow. In the Soviet Union, the regime assured people that the difficulties they endured were required in order to reach the *svetloe budushchee* (radiant future), a utopia found at the end of an interminable road.⁶⁴ In the absence of an end result or final destination, the voyage itself becomes the site of cultural exploration.

Prisoners at Belomor used skills they had developed in the criminal world to manage and manipulate the prison system, and although they were encouraged to drown their past lives in the depths of the canal, they nevertheless used their life experiences as springboards for the articulation of their “new” lives. The regime encouraged prisoners to re-interpret their pasts in order to move beyond them, to craft a new, creative version of the self that was highly dependent on the power structures surrounding them. While Nietzsche would not have condoned this restraint of individuality, he certainly would have acknowledged the power of the State to undertake such a project—this is precisely why he found political regimes to be so dangerous and restrictive.⁶⁵ Yet the creative, aesthetic aspect of selfhood is apparent both at Belomor and within Nietzsche’s work; the philosopher created an artwork of himself. He produced a literary narrative of his life as his ultimate statement of self,⁶⁶ just as the Belomor prisoners—and many others in the Soviet Union—had to cobble together coherent, fictional narratives about their own histories.⁶⁷

While total institutions can be generally configured as creative locales, the Soviet context adds another dimension to such production. Unlike in the average prison, creative acts were not only supposed to serve as a coping mechanism or means of escape for the prisoner; instead, they were to facilitate his or her re-forging. Such a move places a convict in a double bind, as he or she is denied even the possibility of artistic freedom of expression, a realm that is theoretically characterized by individual inspiration. The forceful aestheticization that occurred at Belomor, in turn, is one of its most unusual and characteristic features. Perhaps the most well known image from the project is Aleksandr Rodchenko’s photograph of a full orchestra playing before convict laborers in one of the newly completed locks. The viewer is not only struck by the seeming

absurdity of such an incongruent combination (high culture + prison) but must also recognize the photograph as a beautifully composed art object unto itself. Despite the penal context, art abounded at Belomor. Some of the country's most recognized photographers documented the project, some of its most famous authors wrote about it, and some of its most important cultural icons served time at it. Criminal prisoners were expected, in turn, to craft laudatory allegiances to labor and socialism. This bizarre artistic richness renders the Gulag different from other prisons and speaks to its normative, totalizing atmosphere.

Art certainly appears in other unexpected punitive contexts—most significantly in the Nazi concentration camps of the Holocaust. Terezin stands out as a camp known for its production of both art and propaganda; art in the form of extensive children's drawings, propaganda in the form of sanitized documentary films that demonstrate the supposed humane conditions at the camp. While the connection between Nazism and Stalinism will be explored further later in the book, it suffices to note here that at Terezin the prisoners' art and the State's propaganda were more or less independent of each other; one did not facilitate the existence of the other. Yet in the Soviet example, the categories are collapsed. Prisoner art could be used as State propaganda, and State propaganda at times mimicked prisoner art. Such distinctions are less clear, and the end result, in some respects, is more nefarious.

Thomas Lahusen writes, "People, their deeds and works, are remembered by History only if they succeed as story."⁶⁸ Although focusing on criminal-written texts, the present volume attempts to preserve the Belomor story from multiple perspectives: the stories prisoners told themselves and each other as well as the story the regime foisted upon the incarcerated and the outside world. Grasping both the individual stories and the larger narrative of the project is the key to understanding Belomor. Yet while we acknowledge this fictional fecundity, it is necessary to remember that the Gulag was also a destructive entity. This seemingly paradoxical arrangement—life-creation in the face of death, religiosity in the wake of atheism—was endemic to the Stalinist worldview. Rather than remaining a contradiction, the dialectic of opposing forces sustained the socialist vision: in order to be born again, it was necessary first to die.

*The Construction of Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal:
A Brief History*

The White Sea-Baltic Canal was built in a mere twenty months, a brief episode in the decades-long history of the Gulag. Yet this Soviet prison project is, perhaps more than any other, immortalized in the popular imagination of scholars and citizens. Pictures of Belomor wheelbarrows accompany nearly every overview article on Gulag history, and the project is cited in innumerable sources as the foundation of Soviet forced labor.



Figure 4. Prisoners work with wheelbarrows during the construction of Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal. Photograph reproduced with permission of Iurii Dmitriev.

Just one small section of the collectively written “history” of Belomor, “The Story of a Man’s Re-forging,” has been the subject of numerous analyses. In her recent monograph, Miriam Dobson repeatedly cites the Belomor model of prisoner narratives as a touchstone for her exploration of Khrushchev-era penal texts.⁶⁹ The project is perhaps the only Gulag experience to be preserved in material culture (the brand of Belomorkanal *papirosy*, or cigarettes, has now expanded to include a cheap vodka) and musical production (Belomorkanal is a *shanson* group that uses the cigarette label on their album covers). Kitschy items referencing the project are hawked at nostalgic tourist shops in the center of Moscow—you can purchase a “Belomorkanal” notebook for 200 rubles

or a “Belomorkanal” ashtray for 380—and the camp serves as the inspiration for visual art and poetry in contemporary Russia. In the face of its rapid completion and ultimate failure as a technological achievement (the canal is barely used today), how can we explain the ubiquity of its cultural references and its continued importance in historical debates? It is the purpose of this book to explore this question, demonstrating how Belomor—with its uncanny blend of the physical and the aesthetic in the ultimate goal of performative self-transformation—exemplifies Stalinist cultural values. Belomor’s aesthetic imagination distills key cultural tropes around which the structure of this book is organized.

Narrating the history of the desire to build a White Sea waterway will demonstrate how Belomor not only reaches forward in time by influencing Soviet history that is to come, but also maintains close connections to Tsarist-era desires, perhaps speaking to a broader imperialist-socialist continuum. The drive to build such a waterway has a long history. In the second half of the sixteenth century, mercantile ties were established between Western Europe and Russia, and in 1584 the Karelian city of Arkhangel’sk was founded as a trading port. English explorers were the first to propose a canal in order to open Moscow to northern trading routes.⁷⁰ The Russia Company, the major English shipping company that traded with Russia, understood the need for an uninterrupted waterway in northern Russia to shorten their trade route and make it less dangerous.⁷¹ It was not until Peter the Great, however, that the idea gained more credence; in July of 1693, Peter made an arduous voyage by land and sea to Arkhangel’sk and realized the necessity of establishing an independent Russian fleet given the vast number of foreigners in northern Russia. He traveled on what became known as the *Osudareva doroga*, or the Tsar’s Road, dragging his newly built fleet of ships overland from the White Sea to the Baltic Sea, for there was as yet no waterway.⁷² The Tsar’s Road would eventually become the pathway of the White Sea-Baltic Canal. Mikhail Prishvin’s 1957 novel *The Tsar’s Road (Osudareva doroga)*, while focusing on the era of Peter the Great, also implies the egregious power, suffering, and loss of human life at the White Sea-Baltic Canal as a parallel example. Even before the actual construction of the canal, physical hardship and injustice had marred the natural landscape. Thousands of people traveled the Tsar’s Road in August 1702 during the Great Northern War in the horrible conditions of penal servitude; as one laborer recalls, “There were three doctors on the entire expedi-

tion. The first—Vodka. The second—the Lash. The third—Death, that good aunt.⁷³ These extreme conditions were not so different from what would become life at BelBaltLag, the prison camp for the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal.

The first quarter of the nineteenth century began with a genuine battle for the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal, and in February 1827 the fisherman and supplier Fedor Antonov delivered a letter to the Karelian minister asking for a canal to be built. Local residents saw promise in the potential construction project, hoping that a waterway connecting the Karelian region with central Russia would end their economic and social isolation. Various parties submitted no fewer than fifteen proposals for such a project, but the government cited lack of funds and inappropriate timing as reasons for rejecting them. In 1868-69 private companies put together their own funding in light of the regime's inaction, but they were not able to raise enough money for the completion of a waterway. Finally, on 8 March 1886, the government reacted positively to the idea of the waterway, and began expeditions to explore the economic impact and feasibility of developing a canal, eventually publishing the results of the survey.⁷⁴ Despite the growing discussion of a White Sea-Baltic Canal in 1900-01,⁷⁵ due to the outbreak of World War I and the building of the Murmansk railroad in 1915 (which underscored the strategic and technical advantages of such a venture), the canal was never begun in Tsarist Russia.⁷⁶

The project gained popularity after the 1917 revolution, as it represented an avenue for Soviet Russia to highlight its technological progress as a newly industrialized country. On 5 May 1930, the Politburo approved a resolution that would finally allow work to begin on the construction; in the initial plan, the canal was divided into two sections: southern and northern. The southern section was to be built to a depth of eighteen feet and completed in two years, with work beginning in 1931; the northern section, between Lake Onega and the White Sea, was to be handled by the OGPU, with costs minimized in light of the proposed exploitation of prison labor.⁷⁷ Stalin himself, in a message to Viacheslav Molotov, suggested the use of prisoner labor in order to cut costs after the 5 May presentation of the project.⁷⁸ After several further decrees, with additional revisions to the plan and the organization of operating and administrative committees for Belomorstroi (the Belomor Construction), authorities approved the work plan in its final

form on 18 February 1931. The new plan relied exclusively on prisoner labor, reduced the depth of the canal to 10-12 feet in order to minimize costs,⁷⁹ set the completion date as no later than the end of 1932, and estimated a total cost of 60-70 million rubles for the project.⁸⁰ In November 1931 work officially began on the canal, and Genrikh Iagoda, head of the OGPU, took control of the project, signing the formal decree in which the other heads of the project are enumerated: Lazar' Kogan (director of the Belomor construction project), Iakov Rapoport (assistant director of the Belomor project), and Naftalii Frenkel' (director of labor) were among the most visible supervisors on the canal. While estimates of the number of prisoners passing through the canal project have ranged from 100,000 to 500,000, new research demonstrates that about 65,000 hands worked on it daily, with a total number of 143,000 prisoners working over the construction period. If we accept the Russian historian V. N. Zemskov's estimated mortality rate of 10% of the workers annually, approximately 25,025 prisoners died during the 21 months of constructing the canal. Yet this number would account only for immediate deaths and would not include the great number of prisoners who likely perished later as a consequence of the debilitating work of canal-digging.⁸¹

On 28 May 1933 the ship *The Chekist* sailed through the waterway, marking the first navigation of the canal, even as work on the project was still being finished.⁸² On 2 August 1933, Viacheslav Molotov signed a decree announcing the official opening of the canal, and on 4 August 1933 the Soviet Union awarded various prizes and honors to the best officials, engineers, and workers on the canal.⁸³ The goal was achieved: what Tsarist Russia had aspired to for hundreds of years, the Soviet Union realized in just twenty months.

A historical survey of the interest in building a White Sea-Baltic waterway makes it possible to draw parallels between Tsarist and Soviet-era ambitions. The documented suggestions for the project in the 1800s include the notion of "civilizing" the wild reaches of Karelia, and argue that the connection of northern Russia to its central portion would allow money and people to flood into the region, introducing "culture" into the remote area.⁸⁴ This remained one of the key ideological motivators during the construction of the canal in the 1930s; in an August 1933 memo signed by Viacheslav Molotov, he notes the importance of the "colonization of the area" (*kolonizatsiia kraia*) and the increase of

the population that would occur with the influx of workers.⁸⁵ Both the rehabilitation of prisoners and the stimulation of economic activity in the far North “would serve to transmit Soviet civilisation to the frontier.”⁸⁶ The importation of a massive workforce to a sparsely inhabited area allowed for freed prisoners to remain in the region and build the population base. The Soviet goal was unequivocal—the waterway was intended to have a colonizing function by transmogrifying both landscape and people.

The harsh physical conditions and subsequent high fatality rate also link the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal with the Tsarist-era project of a boat conduit. Both the Tsar’s Road and the pathway of the White Sea-Baltic Canal come to be known colloquially as the *doroga na kostiakh*, or the “road of bones,” underscoring the interconnectedness of these two historical experiences and the brutality imbedded in the landscape. As with any colonizing project, violence cannot be subtracted from the equation. Interestingly, the *doroga na kostiakh* is mentioned in the Belomor volume *History of the Construction*, but only in order to contrast the supposedly humane, Soviet approach to the project with the deadly road-building done by prisoners during the Tsarist era, “The road of bones! says Deli. Karelians say that war captives, working on the building of the road, were dropping by the hundreds. Every meter there is a grave. But we have ten thousand without a single death, only stomach aches.”⁸⁷ Despite the fact that the Tsarist and Soviet-era ambitions to build a waterway share clear commonalities in terms of motivation and implementation, they are contrasted in the *History of the Construction* in order to distinguish Soviet ideology from its Tsarist precedent. In reality, the two approaches appear more alike than dissimilar. While in Tsarist Russian inefficiency stemmed from continuous stalling and lack of funds for the project, in the Soviet Union the fast-paced construction and use of penal labor as solutions created an even greater inefficiency—a canal that was too shallow to be used, but for which thousands of prisoners had sacrificed their lives.

In contrast to the imperial interest in building a canal, the Soviet Union used Belomor for its own propaganda purposes, claiming that what had been impossible to complete in the Tsarist era was achievable only with the organization and determination of the socialist labor force. Although in a literal sense this was indeed true, it is necessary to once again take into account that the Soviet Union exploited the free

manual labor of prisoners, thereby drastically cutting costs. They also built the canal to such a shallow depth—another cost-saving measure—that it is barely navigable.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, the canal was completed—on budget and on time—and hydro-technical engineers continue to marvel at its construction even today.⁸⁹ The engineering feat of the canal's construction exemplifies the notion of Gulag as laboratory, where new techniques, such as the all-wooden locks developed by the engineer V. N. Maslov, could be attempted.⁹⁰ The lack of equipment led to innovation, and the prisoners accomplished numerous other technological feats, including the development of wooden trucks (ironically called “Fords”), the construction of primitive derrick furnaces, and the on-site production of iron.⁹¹ The successful completion of the canal project, in turn, encouraged the continuation of other construction projects awarded to the OGPU, spreading the influence of the Belomor model.⁹²

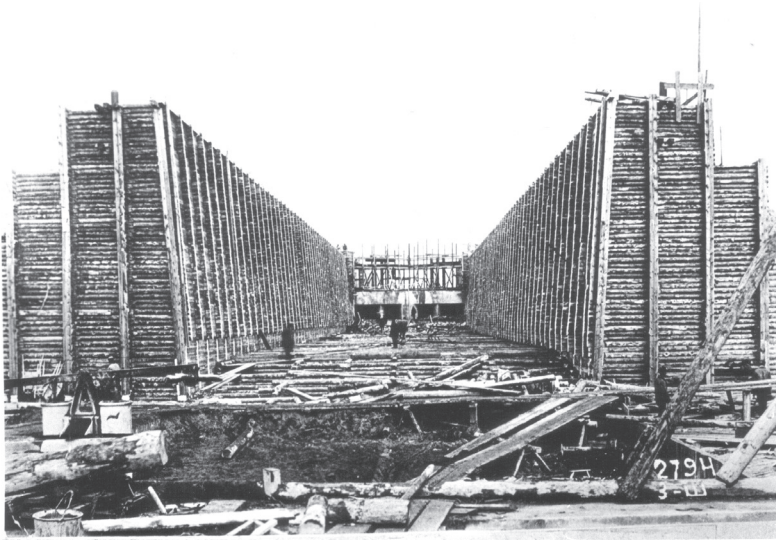


Figure 5. An example of the wooden construction at Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal. Photograph reproduced with permission of Iurii Dmitriev.

Despite the Soviet Union's purported break from the imperialist ambitions of pre-Revolutionary Russia, colonial rhetoric was ubiquitous. Some even argue that the Soviet project was actually an extension of Tsarist, imperial, aims.⁹³ Significantly, parallels were often drawn—whether visually or textually—between Belomor and imperialist Egypt, with images of pyramids alongside the banks of the canal.⁹⁴ Just as religious proselytizing often accompanied imperial colonization, the Soviet experiment—and *perekovka* in particular—offered citizens the chance to be born again as socialist subjects. The Tsarist-Soviet connections illuminate important elements of the Belomor story: that its ambitions reached far beyond the waterway's banks, and that the project's religious, colonial, and imperial subtexts were always just below the surface. These broad narratives served as the backdrop for the will to mold a New Man in the New World, a project that addressed both body and mind.

It is challenging to assess the “success” of re-forging as a penal strategy. While many prisoners were indeed released early for their stunning labor output and allegiance to the Soviet state, it is very difficult to follow their paths after they left prison. While some may have effectively used skills they acquired in prison to create new selves, others surely ended up in the camps again. After his release from Belomor, Igor' Terent'ev (discussed at length in Chapter Two) willingly submitted himself back into the “meat-grinder,” only to suffer extreme consequences. While tracing individual criminal prisoners and their relative successes is difficult, it is much easier to follow the popularity of re-forging as an ideological device. Not only does it have an antecedent in the concept of god-building and the self-improvement doctrines of the 1860s, but the idea continued to resonate in the Gulag and beyond, even if the official project was eventually abandoned. In contemporary Russia, we now have not the New Man but the New Russian, yet another metamorphosis in the understanding of selfhood. Yet no other version of self-fashioning more productively summarizes Stalinism than re-forging, a violent and aesthetic process in which one had to die in order to be born again.