Julie Draskoczy


For a long time, accounts of life in the Gulag have focused on the memoirs of political prisoners, or in a rare instance Deborah Kaple’s _Gulag Boss_, yet we have hardly heard from criminal prisoners in their own words and through their own actions. Julie Draskoczy’s book _Belomor: Criminality and Creativity in Stalin’s Gulag_ effectively amplifies and expands our knowledge of the criminal element in the Gulag. Indeed, having served on Draskoczy’s dissertation committee, this reviewer is pleased to see how that dissertation has been shaped into a well-written and absorbing narrative.

Draskoczy takes as her subject criminal prisoners at the construction site of the Belomor Canal and examines their activities and purported re-forgings through the lens of creativity as a multi-valent concept: Creativity through artistic production, through performance both off and on stage, through criminal activity, and through labor building the Stalin White Sea-Baltic Canal. To accomplish this task, Draskoczy has relied on extensive archival sources, the most recent scholarship on the Gulag, criminality, and selfhood as subject, coupled with access to contemporary scholars and artists who continue to study the Belomor Canal.

This monograph contains 5 chapters, an Introduction, and Epilogue. Fascinating photographs and illustrations grace the text, while the Notes and Bibliography offer much useful information. In the Introduction, _Born Again: A New Model of Soviet Selfhood_, Draskoczy provides a brief history of the Belomor Canal’s construction, as well as the framework into which she will situate her study. The notion of re-forging (_perekovka_) as assiduously practiced at Belomor, as well as the Nietzschean idea that “violence is inherent in the formation of society” (28) guide the discussion, as does Gorky’s belief in the connection between literature and labor. Technological progress and labor combine to enable social miscreants to literally and figuratively remake themselves into new Soviet men and women who will leave Belomor not only with a trade, but as literate, engaged citizens enthusiastically ready to build the USSR. The efficacy of such a program, however, ultimately is questionable as Draskoczy notes, but as she rightly states, “...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.”(40) This insight structures the subsequent discussion and underscores the author’s main contention that criminality and creativity went hand-in-hand at Belomor.
Chapter 1, *The Factory of Life*, details the program of re-forging/perekovka through its implementation, reception, and results. Draskoczy defines *perekovka* as a violent process that requires the destruction of one’s “old” self to create one’s “new” self. This analysis focuses on criminal prisoners precisely because they were believed to be those inmates most suitable for re-forging. Their criminal pasts could be erased and reconfigured through their labor on the Canal; itself considered a creative act that destroyed the landscape in order to rebuild it. Especially notable in this chapter is Draskoczy’s reliance on here-tofore unread biographies written by re-forged criminal inmates. While the veracity of these accounts can be challenged, as the author notes, the fact of their existence and the attitudes they reveal are nonetheless worthy of attention. By using the metaphor of *put’* the pathway, to re-forging, Draskoczy demonstrates the presumed linear quality of this process, although she stresses that “While the relationship between *put’* and *perekovka* demonstrates the ironic parallels between a fall into a life of crime and a lift into a socialist reality, certain incompatibilities remain.” (74) The study then examines these incompatibilities through the creative process at Belomor.

Subsequent chapters scrutinize the explicit ways in which criminality and creativity overlapped and symbiotically fed each other at Belomor. Chapter II, *The Art of Crime*, carefully analyzes inmate participation in various artistic projects organized at Belomor, most prominently through the camp newspaper *Perekova* and its inmate editor, the writer Sergei Alymov. By using rich archival resources, Draskoczy is able to trace the creative process from inception to production, be it in the form of agitational brigades, tattoos, stories/poems/articles, or songs. This approach fruitfully illustrates how the creativity inherent in criminal activity was presumably rechanneled into non-criminal artistic production. The variety of artistic expression exposed the latent talent that criminal prisoners could deploy both in service to the Belomor project through their labor and as the means through which they could re-fashion themselves into new Soviet citizens. As Draskoczy notes, “The art of crime, therefore, not only includes the aesthetic aspects of the criminal profession but also how prisoners more generally contributed to the Belomor project as artists.” (109)

Chapter III, *The Symphony of Labor*, cogently argues that music and musical metaphors were part and parcel of the Belomor experience. Not only were inmates forced to stage live performances along the Canal route to set the tempo for work on the Canal, musical metaphors likewise infiltrated narratives about life in the camp/construction site, and music played an integral role in the staging of Nikolai Pogodin’s popular play *The Aristocrats*. More significant, however, is the author’s examination of montage and collage, two artistically