Commentary

Geography of camps in the Stalin epoch: Experiences and lessons

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Claudio Minca (2015) raises a relevant question on the proliferation of different "camps" around us, which is closely related with fundamental human rights in the era of new information and biological technologies. Minca draws the attention of geographers and other scholars to the high risk of new technologies' misuse: their unprecedented progress can easily enable careful sorting of populations, assigning them specific social roles, controlling and limiting their activity and mobility and as a result, transforming them into mere biological beings. Particularly important are camps' impact on everyday life and territorial structures.

 Humanity has already accumulated sad experiences of this political practice. In these comments, I want to briefly re-consider the lessons that we have to learn from the history of the repressive regime established by Bolsheviks from their first days in power and then (greatly) amplified by Stalin. Waves of mass repressions succeeded each other till the very death of the dictator and deeply affected Soviet society, its social structure, human capital and psychology. Their consequences remain quite noticeable today, more than 60 years after their end.

In the same ways that Minca signals, this terror was typically justified by the need to craft a perfect social and biological national body — but in this case, that was the need to create a “new Soviet man”, free of “bourgeois” instincts and prejudices. Notoriously, Stalin justified this with an argument that the resistance of “hostile class elements” increased with time.

The general idea was, to use Minca's terms, to ascribe "the right place for the right people" and at the same time to mobilize human and economic resources for reducing the lag separating the Soviet Union from developed countries and to build a competitive military—industrial complex. This task requested the commissioning of a great number of new mineral deposits and new sites for increasing the production of steel, non-ferrous metals and other materials. It also supposed the creation of a new military and other infrastructure, especially along Soviet boundaries. Finally, the objective was to minimize the costs of the "great construction works of communism". Large-scale projects perfectly matched the nature of a centrally planned economic system and also served ideological needs because they supposedly proved "economic advantages of socialism" (Kolosov, Nefedova, & Treivish, 1995:101). These construction works were impossible without free labor force deprived of any civil and human rights and transformed into a biopolitical substance — the end product of the total politicization of life, in terms of Minca's (2007, 2015) readings of Agamben's work.

Altogether 4.5–4.8 million people were condemned for political reasons, and about 1.1 million of them were shot. Between 1920 and 1952 at least 6.5 million people were deported from their homes; Fourteen 'ethnic' and cultural groups (codified thus in Stalin's nationality policy) were totally displaced. Every fifth person in these relocated ethnicities died as a result of deportation. About 4 million were deprived of electoral and other rights. Families of "direct" victims were considered as "socially dangerous" or "socially harmful elements" and suffered from repression, too. Estimations of the total number of victims depend, in particular, on the classification of repressions and vary between 11 and 12 and 40 million. Between 1923 and 1953 every third active adult became a victim of the regime (Popov, 1992). The Gulag thereby provided necessary territorial mobility of labor according to the changing geography of "great construction works" and the state's economic needs. “Human material” for that was abundantly supplied by collectivization of agriculture, cleansings of “socially dangerous elements” and of the population nearer state boundaries, the “Great Terror” of 1937–1938, political trials and deportations, annexation and the Sovietization of new territories in 1939–1940 (Kolosov & Polian, 2011).

Though the use of slave labor has its roots predominantly in domestic reasons, it is easy to find a direct relation between camp spatialities and wider geopolitical issues. The functioning of the self-sufficient economy was to meet the geopolitical objectives of the Soviet state. Confrontation between the USSR as a “besieged fortress” and the rest of the world, and the territorial expansion...