The Gulag at War: Stalin’s Forced Labour System in the Light of the Archives. by Edwin Bacon
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deserve high praise for the standards of comprehensiveness and detail that they attain in describing the holdings of a major archive.

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Edwin Bacon’s compact volume does not purport to be a history of the gulag; nor can it be taken for a history of the gulag at war, despite its title. Rather, it represents a kind of surgical strike on formerly secret archives, carried out under the noxious influence of the scholarly squabble on the gulag’s size.

Bacon has read the numerous articles in the Russian periodical press as well as published and unpublished document compilations based in part on the recently declassified records of the central gulag administration (GARF, fond 9414). He has also consulted this latter collection himself and notes that the gulag materials are “vast,” yet adds without explanation that “only a small portion has contributed to the present work.” True enough: of the approximately 110 endnotes in his book containing a named archival file, 75 refer to only 2 dela and another 9 to the explanatory preface accompanying the archival finding aid. Some 10 different named archival dela are cited altogether, mostly top secret reports assembled by the gulag central administration for their superiors at the NKVD/MVD and the party leadership, as well as some lecture materials prepared for the gulag chief. These are choice documents and the author uses them judiciously; but, given the extent of this archive alone, the narrowness of his source base is, well, disheartening.

On the matter of the questions Bacon brings to the documents, he has organized the first book in English on the gulag to use archives primarily around the problem of the total quantity of convicts. In a chapter entitled “Gulag Studies” (sic) he presents dispassionately the dismal numbers debate among Rosefielde, Wheatcroft, Conquest, Getty and others, arguing logically that it is a matter to be settled by the archives. Under the heading “New Revelations” Bacon then recounts the prisoner totals reported in the Russian-language press since 1989, showing that, although they each rely on archives, they are not in agreement, in some cases have been revised and generally suffer from serious misunderstandings of gulag terminology as well as what he charitably characterizes as “a lack of depth in analysis.” In short, he will provide reliable totals, at least for the war years.

Bacon follows his discussion of “historiography” and the framing of his inquiry with a 2-chapter account of the formation and administrative structure of the gulag, a story to which materials from the formerly secret archives are said to add little and with which Solzhenitsyn’s account, written entirely without archives, is held to “coincide well” (47). No effort is made to illustrate the general picture with even a superficial sketch of the formation and operation of a single camp-system as a case study or to demonstrate the striking differences among camp-systems located in different regions and national republics, despite the riches on the panoply of gulag’s far-flung empire contained in the group of sources Bacon consulted. Still, he manages to illuminate how the data can be easily misconstrued, given the diversity in the forms of punishment—camps, colonies, labor settlements, prisons, forced labor without confinement, etc.—whose relative proportions changed over time.

The section on formation and structure out of the way, Bacon proceeds to his central chapter, entitled “How Many Prisoners?” which climaxes with an alarmingly precise one-page table covering 1942–45, valuable information that might have been presented with less buildup. Anyway, if not the exact figures, at least the orders of
magnitude of the data taken from the gulag administration are more or less credible (notwithstanding the confusion and *sploshnaia tukhta* on convict totals in regional gulag archives overlooked here), yet only a true idealist could presume that Bacon has exorcised the numbers demon. More to the point, having carefully put forth the data, he observes that “the archives do not answer all our questions.” Few readers would disagree or be able to resist the banal admonition that often the greatest limitations arise from the questions posed. Look through at-long-last-accessible archives for statistics on convict totals and that’s what you’ll find.

Nowhere in the book is there an attempt to assess the historical significance of the subject, since Bacon apparently assumes that its meaning is self-evident—i.e., that the gulag embodied an evil political system now justly overthrown. This apparent all-purpose assumption allows Bacon to omit, among other matters, any discussion of the difference between political and non-political convicts. Of course, it is not necessary to apologize for the gulag or the Soviet penal code to note that a very sizable contingent of convicts were not 58ers (politicals) but thieves, drunkards, rapists and murderers—that is, people who in all countries are at least temporarily isolated in some fashion from the rest of society.

While enumerating the millions of political prisoners and deportees, it is surely worth mentioning whether the USSR had a relatively high or low common crime rate, and whether sentences for non-political crimes were longer or shorter than elsewhere. Were the methods of gulag unique or have other countries experimented with reforming character through labor and with the economic exploitation of convicts? Were the USSR’s ex-convicts integrated back into society? Upon release did they adopt to some extent the official norms or did they mostly transfer the values and experience of the gulag to the outside? Anyway, how different were the cultures, economies and societies of gulag sites from non-gulag ones? For officials, were gulag careers different from careers in, say, the trade union or party bureaucracy? What kinds of officials went into the gulag and did they go willingly? Did some try and perhaps manage to transfer to non-gulag positions? Above all, what was the role of the gulag both in supporting and in undermining Soviet socialism? Many more questions not addressed in Bacon’s study could be adduced.

To be sure, there are moments in Bacon’s book when the gulag during 1941–1945 does come alive, so to speak. In three of the eight chapters (sandwiched around the numbers discussion), Bacon chronicles the dramatic upheaval following the nazi invasion and capture of substantial territories that formerly held labor camps; the desperate wartime food situation that gulag officials complained thwarted their ability to reorganize for the war effort; the uprising in the Vorkuta camp complex in January 1942 that required the use of air power to put down and that represented only the most extreme example of a growing security problem; the precipitous wartime drop in the gulag population that occurred in part because of starvation as well as the “release” of nearly a million convicts to army battalions; and the gulag’s renewed expansion beginning in 1944, including the takeover and use by the NKVD of Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen (right down to the same striped uniforms) to incarcerate German and Soviet citizens. Here one begins to get a sense of the social history of the gulag and the feeling of a missed opportunity becomes that much more acute.

In conclusion, Bacon convincingly shows that the contribution of gulag convicts to the defeat of the nazi’s was substantial, especially in the production of munitions but also at the front. Yet he also points out, without commentary, that “the defensive and offensive Soviet operations around Stalingrad between 17 July 1942 and 2 February 1943 put out of action, either temporarily or permanently, more men than the Gulag contributed to the Red Army during the war.” How much longer will the massive gulag, with all its horrors and paradoxes, continue to be treated as entirely apart from the rest of Soviet society and at the same time as the defining institution and experience of the USSR?

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