Alan Barenberg’s Lecture “The Entangled Legacies of the Gulag”

On Tuesday July 2nd Dr. Alan Barenberg gave a lecture entitled “The Entangled Legacies of the Gulag: Vorkuta from Gulag Town to Company Town” as part of the Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center’s on-going Noontime Scholars Lecture Series. Dr. Barenberg, assistant professor of history at Texas Tech University and visiting scholar at the Summer Research Laboratory, spoke about the fate of the Soviet Gulag system in the period after the death of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in 1953. The content of Dr. Barenberg’s lecture was taken from his forthcoming book *Gulag Town, Company Town: Forced Labor and Its Legacy in Vorkuta* (Yale University Press, 2014).

Dr. Barenberg’s lecture shed light on a period in Gulag history often over-shadowed by the more dramatic purges that took place in the 1930s and the Second World War. Although American audiences may be familiar with Gulag narratives thanks to world-renowned works such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* and Yevgenia Ginzberg’s *Journey into the Whirlwind*, Dr. Barenberg’s work focuses on the intertwined fates of Gulags, the towns that existed in their shadows, and the fate of these places in the post-Stalin period.

Vorkuta, located in the Russian far north above the Arctic Circle, was one such city that sprung up because of the Gulag located there. Before the establishment of the Vorkuta Gulag, the region was sparsely populated, home only to a few nomadic reindeer herders. When it was discovered that one of the world’s largest coal deposits lay under the surface of this region, it became useful to import prisoners to serve as coal miners. The original groups of prisoners served as “involuntary colonists” in the previously uninhabited region. At its peak, the camp housed 80,000 prisoners.

The miner-prisoners, camp staff, and the coal industry quickly began requiring more support than the prisoners themselves could provide. The city of Vorkuta beyond the barbed wire fences also began to grow. Non-prison inhabitants of Vorkuta included all members of society needed to run a booming city—teachers, doctors, workers, bureaucrats, technicians, cooks, launderers, etc. Many of the city’s inhabitants were family members of those imprisoned in the camp.

The influx of internal Soviet migrants, the growth of both the camp and the town, and the lack of raw materials for building led to a situation where borders within and around the Gulag were crossed many times each day. In fact, through his research Dr. Barenberg found that those borders were not even static from one day to the next. Depending on the needs of the camp, Gulag officials could re-draw the boundaries of the Gulag to include more or less camp housing. This was quite advantageous for many reasons. For example, if a camp director was having trouble providing food for his prisoners, simply moving the barbed wire to exclude a set of prisoners and their respective barracks allowed him to relieve himself of the necessity to provide rations to the people housed in those structures.

Dr. Barenberg described a whole classification of inmates known as “de-zoned” prisoners. While they were technically still imprisoned in the Gulag, they were allowed to live outside of the boundaries of the camp and enjoyed greater freedoms. Interestingly, Dr. Barenberg also discovered that many former prisoners of the Vorkuta Gulag chose to make the city of Vorkuta their permanent residence after being released. This helped Vorkuta sustain and, at times, even increase its population. In the post-Soviet period, Vorkuta began to see its population...
decrease, though it remains a city of approximately 70,000 residents today.

Dr. Barenberg’s work challenges the established narrative of the Gulag system as an archipelago, distinctly separate from all other aspects of Soviet life. Instead, he re-imagines the Gulag as integral to both the ideology of the Soviet system and as the physical center around which many Soviet citizens, prisoners and non-prisoners alike, arranged their lives. More broadly, Dr. Barenberg asks his readers and audiences to revisit their concepts of freedom and imprisonment, since such bilateral distinctions may inhibit one’s understanding of the Soviet system.

Nellie Manis finished her MA at REEEC with a graduate minor in European Union Studies in May 2013. She received a BA in History and a BA in International Studies from Penn State University in 2008. In August she will begin a Fulbright Student grant at the Linguistics University of Nizhni Novgorod in Russia. In addition to coursework in translation and interpretation, she will research the differences between translation pedagogy in the United States and Russia.