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Tukhta: labour and resistance in the audit regime of the Soviet Gulag

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ABSTRACT

Working from the memoir literature of Soviet Gulag survivors, the article explores the curious practice of *tukhta* as contrived by the toiling *zeks* of the archipelago. In a labour regime tasked with accumulating surplus, destroying political dissent, and transforming the subjectivity of the imprisoned, *tukhta* proved to be a tactical means for resisting the logic of Gulag as an audit regime. The subtle labour control of numbers effected by Gulag demanded equally sophisticated practices of resistance on the part of the *zeks* subjected to its technique, and *tukhta* was one of those practices. When treated as a kind of *phronesis*, the informal and ethical quality to the practice of *tukhta* can be appreciated in a way that more formal social scientific epistemology and historical method would miss. Perhaps the most salient counter-conduct to be found in the experiences of Gulag's orchestration of labour control, *tukhta* has the potential to reveal a great deal about audit regimes generically beyond the historical bounds of Soviet Russia. Historical inspiration for engaging audit regimes can therefore be derived from the ethico-political practice of *tukhta*, where otherwise there might just be pessimism, demoralization, and resigned acceptance to the awesome power of those regimes.

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Introduction

Of all the practices innovated by the inhabitants of Gulag, non were as foremost as that of *tukhta* [тухта]. In fact, *tukhta* was practiced in the Soviet labour camp system to such an extent that not only was it impossible for a work brigade to surpass its production norm without its help (Herling, 2005 [1951], pp. 40–41), but the great edifice itself was said to stand upon it (Solzhenitsyn, 2007, p. 167). An incorrigible scourge of the bosses, *tukhta* proved an invaluable skill in the socio-political toolbox of the *zek*,¹ and virtuosity in its use and application was an essential ingredient for sound leadership and collective survival in the labour camps of the USSR.

But what exactly is it? Coined in the argot of the camps, *tukhta* (sometimes *tufta* [туфта]) was a practice calibrated to a particular condition into which the *zeks* of Gulag were put by that great technology of labour control.² It has been described simply as ‘cheating on required work norms’ (Applebaum, 2003, p. 14), or more sweepingly as ‘a whole system of ingenious cheating’ (Herling, 2005 [1951], pp. 40–41). It was ‘falsifications and exaggerations’ (Khlevnyuk, 2004, p. 338; see also Borodkin & Ertz, 2005, p. 423 fn3), and it was ‘the system of faking results of all types’ (Conquest, 1978, p. 165). But *tukhta* was so much more than mere dishonesty, cheating, and a gaming of the system. It was a labour resistance strategy that arose in response to the audit techniques of Gulag,

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and it emerged within the ‘meta-disciplinary’ rationality that permeated the camps as a technology of labour control (Welsh, 2017, 2018, 2021b). Though broad and ranging in form, *tukhta* was actually quite a particular kind of activity, and its effectiveness lay precisely in the particular way in which it reflected and reversed the mode of labour control characteristic to the camps of Gulag. To this mode of control we shall return directly, but it is important to note from the outset that *tukhta* emerged in correspondence to it. To understand one is then to understand the other.

Camp: a meta-disciplinary technology of labour control

The organisational technology of the camp was not really a ‘disciplinary technology of labour’ (Foucault, 2003, p. 242). The mode of control vectored onto the *zeks* was much less concerned with ‘their bodies, their gestures, and all their daily actions’ than one might assume (Foucault, 1980, pp. 151–152). In contrast to the conventional image of the enclosed compound, the spatial technology of the camp did not revolve around the straightforward principle of confinement.

We were surprised to find that the camp was not surrounded by barbed wire or a wall. Prisoners, we were told, were allowed to move freely up to within half a mile of the camp; after that the guards shot without warning. (Buber-Neumann, (2008 [1949]), p. 65)

We were allowed to foray into the taiga unaccompanied by guards – escape was unthinkable – and because the forest provided excellent cover, we could perform our clandestine activity and enjoy the free time we had gained without being caught. Anyone’s approach was announced by the snapping of twigs and crunching of dry needles, shrubs, and leaves. (Bardach, 1998, p. 256)

What we have here is a relative absence of physical coercion, confinement, and discipline, although these things were certainly present in degrees. The somatic intervention, panoptic surveillance, and enclosed spatial *quadrillage* of pure disciplinary rationality cannot encompass the techniques of control brought to bear upon the *zek* by the technology of camp (Welsh, 2021b). Escape was rarely an effective strategy in this technology – ‘given the locations of the camps, there was simply no place to go’ (Ivanova, 2000, p. 44). Something more than disciplinary power was at work here.

The camp system did begin early in the revolutionary and civil war period as a network of disciplinary prisons, but quickly expanded under the need for an ‘intensified exploitation of prisoners’, otherwise expressed by Soviet nomenklatura as the ‘utilization of internal reserves’ (Khlevnyuk, 2004, p. 118; see also Bacon, 1996, Dallin and Nicolaevsky, 1947; Ivanova, 2000, Gregory, 2003; Alexopoulos, 2015). The expansion of the destructive labour camps was ‘intended primarily not to punish the criminal, but rather to exploit him economically and transform him psychologically’ (Herling, 2005 [1951], pp. 40–41; see also Razgon, 1997, p. 154; Toker, 2019, p. 154). To achieve the combined purposes of increased collective output, individual subjectivity transformation, and the political destruction of dissent, more effective means of labour subsumption were innovated. Driven by the accumulation imperative, the disciplinary technology of the prison was ineffective, so a ‘governmental rationality’ had to be integrated into the technology of camp (see Foucault, 2007, 2010). Between ‘discipline’ and ‘government’, a ‘meta-disciplinary’ way of accessing the subjectivity of the *zek* had therefore to be contrived (Welsh, 2018), and this meant placing the *zek* into a population through which control over the body could be maximised by pastoral control over the will. The mode of power that operated in the camps therefore went far beyond the physical coercions that one might expect in the somatic and spatial dispositions of incarceration, and can better be described as functioning through a *moral economy of the will* that was emplaced by the camp technology (Welsh, 2021b). This point is decisive, if we are to get to *tukhta* as a labour counter-conduct and willful pivot for ethical practice.

Tukhta in Gulag can only be understood within the context of the *brigade system*, and in relation to the brigade’s principal technique – the ‘differentiated ration pot’ (Solzhenitsyn, 2007, p. 155; see also Ginzburg, 1967, pp. 403–409). Sometimes called the ‘cauldron system’ (Herling, 2005 [1951], pp. 40–41; Gilboa, 1968, 56, pp. 42–43; Panin, 1976, p. 48), this was the linchpin of the moral economy of

the will that pervaded the camp technology. The differentiated ration pot was a system of distributing food to the *zeks* with the intention of incentivizing percentages of output above 100% of a determined norm. As one of the Gulag bosses were to put it, the ‘quantity a prisoner was fed each day depended on his work that day: in other words, he was fed an amount that corresponded to whether or not he had worked up to the norm that was set for him by the Gulag authorities’ (Mochulsky, 2011, p. xxxvi). Presented in less technical and neutral terms, Solzhenitsyn had another perception of the cauldron system.

What a merciless knowledge of human nature! Neither those pieces of bread nor those cereal patties were comparable with the expenditure of strength that went into earning them. But as one of his eternal, disastrous traits the human being is incapable of grasping the ratio of an object to its price. (Solzhenitsyn, 2007, pp. 155-156)

The ‘big ration’ was rarely worth the extra energy (Bardach, 1998, p. 222; Razgon, 1997, p. 155; Solzhenitsyn, 2007, p. 218). From the earliest years, the Soviet Union was no stranger to Taylorist principles of scientific management, but there is more at work here than the hypocrisy of a capitalist organization of production in the World’s First and Only Socialist State. The cauldron system went further than the somatic interventions of Taylor’s time-and-motion study or the rational choice schematic built around his compulsive Little Dutchman. It was a dynamic structure orchestrated to produce a particular worker subjectivity in the organized production system as a whole.

Though it was the ultimate object of the labour control system, production norms and differentiated rations were not predicated upon the individual worker. A ‘malveilling’ population of mutual observation had to be produced (see Foucault, 1980, p. 158), through which the subjectivity of the individual *zek* was to be more effectively accessed, moulded, re-forged, and produced for the purposes of ever-increasing production (Foucault, 1991). To this end the *brigade* was conceived.

Prisoners were now divided into ‘brigades’, and the rations were calculated in accordance with a whole ‘brigade’s’ production. Thus inmates were induced to police one another, demand output from even the weakest, and help drive each other to death. (Toker, 2000, p. 21)

In this technology, barbed wire, guards, and the isolation of cells took second fiddle to techniques of control that penetrated the ‘willing’ choice structure of the *zeks* (see Ahmed, 2014; Welsh, 2021b). With the possibility of escape precluded by the remote setting, it was the norm system that came to assume such importance for ensuring compliance. This is labour control ‘at a distance’ (Gill, 2014, p. 22). It bypasses the body in pursuit of the will, and it emplaces a new kind of regime. When realised through an epistemic grid of numbers and the bureaucratic organisation of output, the productive orchestration of Gulag begins to take on the form of an *audit regime* (Applebaum, 2003, p. 201). It was in the context of this regime that *tukhta* emerged as an idiosyncratic counter-conduct especially suited to the logic of audit. This means that by approaching *tukhta* as a practice in labour engendered by the technology of audit, we can perhaps obtain generic insight into how audit control of labour might be understood, engaged, and countered in social and historical contexts closer to our own.

At its core, *tukhta* was then not a gratuitous activity, but a necessary one that arose for survival in the exigent circumstances of the forced labour regime (Bell, 2018, p. 95; Khlevnyuk, 2004, p. 338). In order to ‘escape the harsh conditions of the Gulag environment, inmates developed various strategies to protect themselves’ (Gallen, 2004, p. 8), and *tukhta* was one of the most effective and essential. This is the core of the practice: personal survival.

However, *tukhta* cannot be comprehended at the level of personal survival. To speak of ‘exaggerated production output’ gets us closer to a more precise understanding of *tukhta* (Toker, 2000, p. 109), for this brings us within the orbit of organised and aggregate (social) production, without which the concept is meaningless. *Zeks* were engaging in *tukhta*, when they were ‘chiseling, padding, falsifying, or inflating the data used in work reports to obtain a better percentage and hence a better ration’ (Bardach, 1998, p. 391). *Tukhta* arose at the intersection

between production and reproduction, work and subsistence, labour and survival, but it is not simply within production processes in general that *tukhta* takes its characteristic form. There must be *collective production*, and there must be *audit*. Though it might well have many tactical forms, *tukhta* is a strategic and collective response to audit techniques, and within its own terms it is an effective response.

Moving a little further, Applebaum's 'swindling the boss' introduces an essential dimension to the practice (2003, p. 350). *Tukhta* is an act of resistance to authority. It is not an act of domination, avarice, or personal aggrandisement, but 'a hidden form of work refusal' against which the authorities were in 'constant battle' (Borodkin & Ertz, 2005, p. 423 fn3). For the *zek* subjected to the machinery of Gulag, it was one of the 'various forms of inmate resistance, which impeded its productivity' (Gallen, 2004, p. 8), and one of the 'various ways of deceiving those in charge of them' (Panin, 1976, p. 50). At its heart, '[t]he object of *tufta* was to give Gulag officials the impression that one was doing the required amount of work, when one was actually doing far less. In this spirit, *tufta* could be committed on an individual level, or on a collective level such as a work brigade or even an entire camp' (Gallen, 2004, p. 8), yet its logic was always a collective one.

Tukhta: outline of a practice

Tukhta can be advantageously approached as a species of *phronesis* (φρόνησις). Obviously of Ancient Greek provenance, *phronesis* simply means prudence or practical wisdom. More a practice (*mētis*) than a principle (*episteme*), *tukhta* resembles more closely the qualities of phronetic wisdom than it does any systematic or formalised kind of knowledge. *Phronesis* 'goes beyond both analytical, scientific knowledge (*episteme*) and technical knowledge or know-how (*techne*) and involves judgements and decisions made in the manner of a virtuoso social and political actor' (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 2). We shall return to the significance of *phronesis* for understanding *tukhta* in the context of audit regimes at the end of the article, so let us limit ourselves here to simply setting out the importance of contextualised example for understanding *tukhta* as an instance of *phronesis*.

If we 'take Aristotle's insight that case knowledge is crucial to the practice of *phronesis*' (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 65), and if we wish to identify *phronesis* in the practice of *tukhta*, then perhaps the best introduction to *tukhta* as *phronesis* can be made by exploring some examples of it. This thought is strengthened by the significance of 'context sensitivity' in understanding *phronesis* (Andorno, 2012, p. 458; Musschenga, 2005), especially when we recognize the importance of historical and spatial context for understanding moral action of the kind entailed in *phronesis* (Andorno, 2012, p. 460; Williams, 1985, pp. 72, 78–92). Given its essentially practical quality, *tukhta* meant different things to different people, and had by necessity to be calibrated to immediate conditions. There is however an isomorph to the practice, something that denominates the varieties of practical form, and that common element begins to emerge from particular instances of its use.

So, just as Detienne and Vernant (1991) were obliged to 'collate different viewpoints and perspectives' from across the canon of Greek civilisation, in order to arrive at an adequate understanding of *mētis*, we shall have to do the same for our grasp of *tukhta*. What better way to get an initial handle on the isomorph to the practice than via ethnographic accounts delivered by its practitioners, innovators, connoisseurs, and virtuosos? In this way, we can arrive at a practical understanding of *tukhta* by treating the Gulag as a 'critical' case-study (Flyvbjerg, 2001, pp. 66–87), which can be accessed through the historical medium of memoir.

Below, we shall forage through an ethnographic undergrowth of *tukhta* anecdotes drawn from Gulag memoir literature. These anecdotes will present as a range of individual experiences, but in these experiences we are aiming to identify what is 'typifying' of *tukhta* in these narrations (Toker, 2019, p. 12), those 'serially iterative' accounts of a practice that was 'made possible by the system', generated from 'recognizable actions', and that provide testimony. Though the multifaceted quality of *tukhta* will be brought out by this testimony, providing a rich triangulation of the concrete practice, what we want to grope towards is the isomorph or denominator to the practice.

The recollections of Victor Herman are perhaps a good place to start. Victor Herman was an American, who was arrested in the wake of the Great Purge (July, 1938). He laboured for eighteen years in Soviet captivity, most of which was spent in the Siberian taiga. It was whilst logging at Hard Labor Camp Number 231/1 that Herman discovered an elemental form of *tukhta*, although he never actually uses the word outright (Herman, 1983, pp. 261–263).

How could I go for ten days out here in this cold – with no food – and with no food, where would the stamina come from to do the work?

The wind was coming up. It was colder now – but the mist was blowing off. I couldn't see all of the others, but those I could see were just sitting down, a guard and a dog standing nearby.

I stopped and I sat down again. I kept trying to think, trying to figure something out. If I were lucky ...

I was sitting on something! There was something there just under the snow.

I got up and kicked away the snow with my basket boots.

It was a log! A big log – thick!

I stood on it and walked to one end – and then I turned around and walked to the other end.

I stepped off to the other side – and stepped onto another log! ...

There was one jammed up right next to another – and then another one after that! I kept going. There was a whole line of logs – and I walked it off and it went for quite a distance, and when I saw that they were pretty much perpendicular to the tracks, I realized what they were – that they must have served as some kind of ramp for the logs that were rolled down from the forest. After all, this was marshland – they must have laid a bed of logs all along here so that the cut timber could be rolled down from the treeline. The plane from the verge of the woods down to here was an incline, and the jacks who had been working here must have laid this ramp to ease and speed their work.

I would need logs that were long and not too heavy. I uncovered three of them – and notched the end of each. I dragged one and then the other and then the other to the wagon, my heart booming, a kind of manic exultation overtaking me.

Was I not the Lindbergh of Russia? Was I not the American kid who'd knocked Russia on its ****? Was there a **** thing these **** could ask of me that I could not the **** do?

The **** ...

I laid those long logs up against the bed of the wagon, fitting the notches just so. I made a gangway of them – and then I went back to where the cache of logs was and I started.

I worked all that day. I worked until it was dark and I couldn't work anymore.

The guard never said a word to me that whole first day. He saw where I was getting the wood from, but he never said a thing. I kept waiting for him to stop me, but he didn't – and when night came I dug into the snow and slept the sleep of the dead.

I cut up about thirty long logs that first day, cut them into equal lengths and dragged them up there and stacked them inside.

I slept.

I started in again at the crack of dawn.

The second day I began crisscrossing with spaces between. The guard wasn't paying any attention, and then I saw that it was a different guard, and that they'd relieved the first guard during the night, and this guard wasn't paying any attention, and unless he got in there with me he couldn't tell, and so I crisscrossed, and with crisscrossing, I had almost half of the wagon filled by nightfall of the second day.

I wasn't even hungry. Nor was I tired. There was only one thing in me – and it filled me up – the conviction that I would do it, I would do it, **** *I am going to do it*, and it was like an elixir that gave me food enough and strength enough to do the same **** monumental task nine times over!

Again I slept. I dug into the snow near my cache of logs – and I slept – and the third day I began stacking logs on end, so that the interior of the stack would be hollow, but you wouldn't see it because all along the outside and the top I'd finish with a solid shell, and brace the whole thing up then, and by the end of the third day I'd filled all of the wagon except the doorway, and as I was walking back to dig in for the night again, I saw where there was a third guard with me now, and that he'd probably been with me all that day, but I hadn't even noticed. And what had *he* noticed?

Nothing.

It was hard to sleep that night – because it was then that the hunger came. It felt as if my stomach were consuming itself.

All that night I lay awake, trying to fight back the hunger that was eating me up.

I will do it! I can do it! Lindbergh of Russia indeed! There is nothing on this **** Russian soil or in that Russian sky that a kid from Detroit cannot **** - *do!*

Toward first light I fell asleep, and then the guard was kicking me. It was not long after dawn, and I got up and tried to warm my self – and the hunger had somehow left me. For how long? I started – and as soon as I tried to hoist a new log and prop it up to begin sawing, I felt it, a hunger so wild it was like wire bands snapping all over my belly and chest. I scooped up snow and swallowed mouthfuls of it.

Inside myself I was screaming **** over and over – and I went to work.

I stacked the doorway solid. I was finished before noon. I came down the gangway and took another look at it. Yes, it looked okay. And who was going to take the thing apart to check me?

The guard was sleeping.

I waked him and pointed.

'What do you want?' he said.

'Look,' I said, and kept pointing. I was crouched over him and I could barely hold myself like that, my back bent in that position.

'Look,' I said.

He stood up. His dog came to him and began nosing at his legs.

'Good,' he said. 'We go back. Get your tools, and we go back.'

'Good,' I said, and I did something incredible.

I slapped him on the back. As if he were a partner in my labors and an accomplice in my deception, I slapped the **** on the back, and I said, 'Good.'

What is most striking in this story is the way that it traces the practical, spontaneous, and adaptive birth of *tukhta* as a child of necessity born in the nursery of trial and error. Just as Herman finds himself confronted with a problem, perhaps *the* most pressing problem a human can have, to which there seems no solution, a combination of chance, hope, curiosity, exploration, daring, quick thinking, and a desire to survive, come to inspire the first faltering steps toward *tukhta*. We also get a sense of the defiance that must animate the practice, at least if it is to be developed into its more mature and elaborated forms, as we shall find most fully articulated below in the Vlasov case.

Interestingly, the pervasive cynicism of the audit regime sneaks into the account, with the various convoy guards seemingly indifferent to Herman's execution of the task assigned. Though this attitude was not universal amongst those living the 'dog's life' of the *VOKhR* (see Ivanova, 2000, p. 159; Solzhenitsyn, 2007, pp. 534–563),³ apathy amongst the lower-echelon executors of the Soviet Power was widespread and common. This attitude also shows how governing 'at a distance' typical to the audit regime does not require the close supervision of disciplinary panopticism.

This last point segues into a little anecdote given in the literary memoir of Varlam Shalamov (1995, pp. 29–30), the legendary *Kolyma Tales*, where a parallel story is told of foraging around the freezing forest for cedar needles beyond the camp compound (on the belief that they were an important source of vitamins). Subjected to the cauldron system like everything else, even this relatively light work brought forth a very basic species of *tukhta*. In this case, a large stone buried in the sack of needles would make the difference between dinner or no. Once tied off and submitted at the camp gate, and knowing full well that '[t]hey don't untie them there', the culprits could rely on their deception being discovered too late to identify which sack had belonged to whom in the foraging. By this time, the *kasha* (soup) would be in their bellies.

Jansuz Bardach was a Pole who found his way into the Gulag in 1941 via the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, conscription into the Red Army to fight the Germans, an accident with his tank, and a proclivity for ill-advised sarcastic comments. Sent to the Kolyma under the enormous viceregal administration of the Dalstroi trust, he avoided the gold mines and found his salvation in wangled work as a medical assistant after a period in the logging operation. His account of *tukhta* mostly pertains to his experiences in this latter activity, where he found himself paired in tree-felling with one Nikolai.

My partner, Nikolai, was a master *tuftach*. He'd been an administrator in a tool manufacturing company before his arrest and had spent most of his career making up numbers and filing false reports. He'd been arrested not

for this, however, but for counterrevolutionary activity and sabotage: the factory had failed to fulfill the plan assigned for it, and as a result the administrators were sentenced to ten or fifteen years in the camps. His real crime, manipulating reports and raking in millions of rubles for non-plant activities, never came up in court. He taught me how to make the norm in only four or five hours a day. (Bardach, 1998, p. 256)

Evidently, it seems that Nikolai had encountered something akin to *tukhta* before his absorption into the now mature Gulag system. Had *tukhta* already metastasized into Soviet society at large? Though most acute and archetypal in the camps, it seems that *tukhta* was a familiar phenomenon across the Soviet Union by the 1940s (see Nutter, 1962; Rosefelde, 1980). This is a point not without its significance, and we shall return to it later. However, it is important to indicate at this stage how Nikolai's previous *tukhta*-like activities before camp differ from *tukhta* proper. Although we know no more about these activities than is mentioned here by Bardach, one would be forgiven for finding a direct parallel from what looks like corporate corruption, greed, and personal aggrandisement to the activity of *tukhta* recounted below. However, fine distinctions are involved in defining practices like *tukhta*, but they are decisive. Exactly how the *tukhta* of Bardach and Nikolai differs from the latter's dubious practices pre-Gulag will become apparent as we proceed. Back to the narrative.

Our job was to cut down trees, clean off the branches, cut the logs into segments of equal length, and stack them for hauling. But instead of performing this exhausting work, Nikolai's mission was to find stacks left over from last year, of which there were plenty, and claim them. 'All we need to do,' Nikolai confidently explained, 'is cut off the ends of the logs so they look freshly cut and bring the brigadier to measure them.' The butt end of each log was notched with a distinctive mark to identify the worker who had stacked it, and one of the logs had the date carved on it. But since the taiga was so immense, many of the stacks were never found by the workers doing the hauling, and thus they remained year after year, until Nikolai or some other *tuftach* discovered them. This eliminated the most exhausting work, allowing Nikolai and me to concentrate on what he called 'cleaning the stacks' – cutting an inch off each end of the log so it looked freshly prepared. We put our signatures on the fresh ends, buried the scraps we'd sawed off, and covered the hole with moss and branches. (Bardach, 1998, p. 256)

Resembling the previous story of Victor Herman, the form of *tukhta* recounted here by Janusz Bardach differs somewhat from the more developed cases we shall encounter further down, in that it is undertaken at perhaps the most basic level of productive organisation. This common but elementary example was called 'freshening up the sandwiches' (Ginzburg, 1967, p. 410; see also Sgovio, 1979, pp. 167–175), and was widespread across the logging sites of Gulag. In this first line of *tukhta*, there is little to indicate the elaborated and systemic practice of the kind we shall see in the Vlasov or Mochulsky cases. Based upon this vignette of *tukhta*, Bardach nevertheless goes on to describe the practice in more generic terms.

If a brigadier cared about his men and wanted to ensure they received their full rations, he falsified the reports. This maneuvering – presenting false reports with inflated data – was known as *tufta*, and the person doing this was known as a *tuftach*. *Tufta* occurred every day, as not everyone could fulfill the norm, and it looked bad if the brigadier didn't make his quota. No one challenged the false reports because bribery and camaraderie were the *modus operandi* all the way up the line. Each higher-up expected the person below him to pay for the oversight, the form of payment depending on what was available. Discrepancies between the amounts in the reports and the amounts actually shipped could be blamed on insufficient air transport and difficulties in transportation due to bad weather. From the mining camps and processing centers, across the desks of the regional administrators, and all the way to the headquarters of Dalstroy, *tufta* spread through the bureaucracy like a virus. Moscow demanded numbers and that's what they got – real or imaginary. (Bardach, 1998, pp. 236-237)

Crucial here is the word 'camaraderie'. Not a very common word or sentiment expressed in Gulag memoir literature, it is nevertheless essential to the more articulate forms of *tukhta*. Also, we get the first explicit mention of the centrality of numeration and audit for the technology within which *tukhta* arises. The audit regime of Gulag is a regime of numbers, and it is ultimately in that language that *tukhta* must be translated from its elemental forms. We shall see the importance of this further down. In the meantime, back to the elemental forms.

A rich seam of insight can be found in this short personal narrative of Olga Adamova-Sliozberg's (2011, p. 92), in which she recounts an incident out logging in the forests of the

Kolyma that bears a great resemblance to the foregoing stories, but with a greater bounty of additional insights. This anecdote encapsulates a number of themes typical to low-level *tukhta* out in the taiga.

I worked at logging with Galia Prozorovskaia as a teammate. At the beginning she was stronger and more skillful than I, but gradually she began to lose strength. She worked more and more slowly, and we began finishing our general norm (eight cubic meters a day for two people) later and later. Everyone was going home, but our stack wasn't yet collected, and we didn't have the strength to move faster.

I was always the first to give up.

'Let's stop, Galia. We'll finish tomorrow, I can't do anymore.'

Galia looked at me with the eyes of an exhausted horse and said:

'And the norm? Can you get along on four hundred grams?'

(If you fulfilled the norm, you got six hundred grams of bread a day. This two-hundred-gram difference determined whether we lived or died because one could not live and work at fifty degrees below zero on four hundred grams of bread a day.)

"Oh yes, of course . . . The norms! Well, let's try and make one more effort". We stacked up the firewood, with me cheating scrupulously, sticking snow and branches inside the pile. Galia pleaded with me:

'Please don't. What if they find out? How shameful! We, former party members, are burying snow in the wood pile'.

This notion of 'scrupulous cheating' is well phrased, for it contains so much of the essence of *tukhta*. Aside from the normative cheating entailed, it conveys the carefully calibrated quality to the cheating. Neither indiscriminate, nor constant, it is particular, instrumental, and responsive. It is also necessary for survival, rather than gratuitous. It demonstrates the courage, boldness, and personal risk that *tukhta* required. It is worth noting the collaborative and comradely spirit of the practice, as well as the admixture of self-interest and selflessness in the act. However, what is most significant, and probably the easiest to miss, is how the norm system preys upon the sincerity and scrupulousness of the *zek*. Note the unease and partial willingness to engage in the practice of *tukhta*, though it is for their own survival. Even in such life-threatening conditions, they are reluctant to bend the rules, partially out of fear for the potential punishment, but also because of their pride, dedication, and intuitive probity (see Applebaum, 2003, pp. 352–353). As with many 'politicals' condemned to Gulag, Eugenia Ginzburg noted how she intuitively worked 'conscientiously, even hyperconscientiously' (Ginzburg, 1981, p. 63), at least initially.

Sliozberg later learned how such probity is not merely self-defeating, but potentially fatal in the audit technology of enforced scarcity and the brigade system. At the nadir of her physical strength in the Kolyma, she was incapable one day of cutting down the one more tree necessary to make her daily norm of four cubic meters. Attempting to leave the site anyway, a foreman discovered the shortfall – a 'healthy thirty-year-old fellow, stuffed with food, warmly dressed, and tranquil'. Whilst sitting down on a stump to smoke, he insisted that Sliozberg complete her norm, reminding her without a shred of irony how "[n]orms are norms. One must work honestly" (Adamova-Sliozberg, 2011, p. 129). The lesson of Gulag is that to work honestly in that environment, is most likely to perish.

On another occasion, and at this point in the narrative a veteran of the archipelago, Sliozberg more nonchalantly alludes *en passant* to a milder form of *tukhta* that nevertheless stands as yet another example of the practice. She describes living on a riparian site in 1940, where she was tasked with collecting driftwood and tying it into rafts. On this site, she considered the brigade leader, a dispossessed Kulak called Sasha, to be 'a good man from Siberia' (Adamova-Sliozberg, 2011, p. 123).

On the riverbank stood big unclaimed piles of driftwood, and we could always act as if we collected them. So we worked peacefully, Sasha didn't oppress us, and the results were always good enough to qualify us for the first category of nourishment.

In this instance, there seems to be little calculation and conspiracy, but something more accepted and almost ignored. Here, *tukhta* needs little more than a blind eye given by a ‘good man’.

Quarrying in the Northern Urals in the late 1940s, Leonid Finkelstein and fellow *zeks* arrived at a fairly unique form of *tukhta* innovated to suit the particular setting of their labour. While the guard convoy sat up on the cliffs above, it became apparent that there was a blind spot in their work site from which a number of their group would not be visible from atop the escarpment. Immediately, the opportunity for *tukhta* was grasped.

We knew precisely which parts of the bottom of the canyon are visible from up there, and that was our swindle... in the visible part of the bottom, we were cutting very hard at the stone wall. We were working and it was a great deal of noise – the guards could both see and hear us work. Then, Ivan would walk along the row... and say, One to the left and we would each make one step to the left. It was never noticed by the guards.

So we would step, one to the left, one to the left, until the last one would step into the invisible zone – we knew where it was, there was a chalk strip on the ground. Once we were in the invisible zone, we would relax, sit on the ground, take an ax and hit the ground next to us, in a relaxed way, just to produce the noise. Then someone else would join, someone else, and so on. Then Ivan would say – ‘You: to the right!’ – and the man would go and join the cycle again. None of us ever worked even half the shift’. (quoted in Applebaum, 2003, p. 357)

This would be an example of *kantovka*, or ‘shirking work without appearing to do so’ (Panin, 1976, p. 50), and it is a constitutive element of *tukhta*. This form of *tukhta* was derived in response to the panoptic power of surveillance and its disciplinary modality, but would not have been effective in the ‘malveilling’ dynamic of the brigade, because it would not sidestep the audited norm sheet and mutual policing inscribed into the audited population of the brigade. It was nevertheless an example of the broad practices that make up the overall strategy of *tukhta*.

In the case of Alexander Dolgun, we find ourselves dealing with a fast learner and one of the most enterprising of *tuftachs*. As an American, Dolgun worked at the US Embassy in Moscow, before being knabbed off the street by the NKVD in late 1948 and put through an intense education in the Lubjanka, Butyrki, and Lefortovo prisons, as well as the dreaded Sukhanovka. Finally graduating to Gulag some years later, he arrived at the Dhezkazgan complex in the Kazak steppe and came across another American who had followed the same path from the US Embassy some years before. This Victor S– had some words of wisdom to impart to the neophyte Dolgun.

For some reason or other, my dossier was marked *extremely dangerous* when I first came down to Karaganda. That was in forty-two, you know. There were no camps for politicals then. ‘Extremely dangerous!’ I don’t know why. But they never dared let me out of camp to go to work. *Pridurki* [trusty] from the first day. Always on camp, always a better chance to steal food. No copper mines. Different now. They know I’m not dangerous. So I get some hard assignments. But I know my *tufta* now. I get along.

Tufta?

Tufta means filling your work quota without really doing any work. Look, I can give you some hints, but mostly you’ll have to figure it out for yourself, depending on the job you’re on. If we work together some time, you’ll never have to work at all, believe me. But you have to know how to do it, and if you don’t learn you’ll be dead before you’re out of school!

Then he said, ‘Who’s your brigadier?’

Vtyurin.

Well, I don’t know him. But you had better make friends with your brigadier. That’s the beginning of successful *tufta*. (Dolgun, 1976, p. 205)

This story is of interest because it really brings out the practical pedagogy behind *tukhta*. It is spoken of as a vocation, to which the novice is to be apprenticed by a master, a skill that can only be learned through observing, absorbing, and doing. Of course, it also reaffirms the importance of the brigadier, the character of that brigadier, and the individual *zek’s* ability to establish the right relationship with that brigadier.

In one of the more celebrated memoirs of Gulag, Eugenia Ginzburg confirms the importance of these last words of wisdom uttered by Victor S-. Ginzburg was sentenced under Article 58 for counterrevolutionary activity, and served most of her 18 years in the Kolyma around Magadan. She was assigned to work at one point in the camp's hen house, where she became acquainted with the formidable Marya Grigoryevna Andronova – the infamous released-but-not-released former *zek* who was in charge of the chickens and whom the rest of the camp had dubbed 'the Fury'. Ginzburg however came to a different understanding of this personality, who turned out to be a disciplined, conscientious, and competent brigadier.

The chickens were not in good condition, due to the perennial dietary problems visited upon all living things condemned to endure the remote Kolyma climate, and vitamin deficiency was top of the list. One evening, when left to watch over the house during the night, a couple of the chickens dropped down dead. Fortunately, Marya Grigoryevna happened to pop back to check on Ginzburg at that moment and found her in a blue funk over the deaths. Instead of chastising her, as expected, she let Ginzburg into some home truths of life in the hen house, namely that as long as they acted quickly, chopped off the chickens' heads, and drained them of blood before *rigour mortis* set in, the hens could be converted into oven-ready birds rather than dreaded wastage. After swiftly grabbing a clever, and hastening the luckless fowl to the top of the queue for the morrow's dinner, she explained the situation to the greenhorn Ginzburg.

Look at it from another angle – the only thing our management understands is figures. What matters most to them is a dash in the wastage column. What, wastage? No, we don't have any because we're an exemplary collective, transforming nature on Kolyma. If we didn't put a dash, but a real, honest figure, there'd be hell to pay and people would be in terrible trouble. All the prisoner-poultry hands would be assigned to hard manual labor, and former prisoners, like me, for our sins would be charged with wrecking [Article 58-7] and sent back to the lock-up. It would be a black day for the chickens too. Because if they kicked us out – we who try to do a proper job – and installed some slap-dash free workers in our place, then it wouldn't be a matter of two or three chickens dying each night, but of the whole lot of them dying off like flies. So that's how it is . . . Now you know, in case anything happens. I'm to blame . . . I did drop a hint, but you didn't catch on . . . (Ginzburg, 1981, pp. 62-63)

Ordered yet again by the audit power of numbers – 'we dared not lower the egg productivity index' (Ginzburg, 1981, p. 65) – we also find *tukhta* here accompanied by collective solidarity amongst the *zeks*, a responsible and adroit brigadier, as well as a conscientiousness in work that is both the yoke around their necks and the basis for their successful *tukhta*. We can now see how significant the combination of the features becomes for *tukhta*, as we move further up the scale to yet higher levels of organised leadership in the Mochulsky case.

Fyodor Vasilyevich Mochulsky occupies an unusual position amongst our Gulag memoirists. He was a self-described 'gulag boss'. Although his position of leadership was not dissimilar to Vlasov (as we shall see), in that he was appointed by the People's Commissariat of Railroad Transport to positions of command in the production complex of Gulag, he was nevertheless a party member, an engineer, a paid worker, and a free person. Crucially, therefore, he was no *zek*, but that did not relieve him of the pressures of production quotas or accountability to the apparatuses of the audit regime of Gulag. Fresh out of the academy, Mochulsky was appointed as a unit foreman in the Third Region of the great Pechorlag railway construction project that was tasked with extending the Soviet rail network through the frozen northern wastes to the newly sited coal mining complex of Vorkuta. With war imminent, the young Mochulsky took up his position with patriotic seriousness and party conscientiousness.

The Camp Administration officials continually screamed over the Selektor [radio set] at the unit bosses, demanding an accounting of how many prisoners had worked, and how many had fulfilled their norms for the twenty-four-hour period. All they cared about was how much each prisoner needed to be fed, which was tied to how much work he had done that day. And to show how serious their demands were, they constantly cursed at us and threatened to slam us into prison, unless 'by tomorrow all the prisoners went to work and fulfilled 100 percent of the plan'. As I mentioned earlier, those who did not fulfil their work norms received 300 grams (about 10 ounces) of bread, and soup.

It was clear that winter had already arrived in full force, and the building of living quarters for the prisoners had not been included in the work plan. I immediately turned to the political instructor and asked him what was going on. Weren't we simply condemning all of these prisoners to an early death with such terrible conditions? To my questions, the political instructor only raised his hands, saying that it was not up to him, and that he himself could not understand what was happening. There was nobody to turn to, but we had to do something quickly to fix. But what to do?. (Mochulsky, 2011, p. 33)

Faced with an audit regime that clearly governed 'at a distance', Mochulsky's dilemma called for the obvious solution. His foray into *tukhta* relied upon the tacit collusion of both the *zeks* under his management and the camp police (VOKhR). These groups participated, because the *tukhta* had arisen from the need to divert production time into building proper accommodation facilities for *zeks* and VOKhR alike in the hyperborean temperatures (they had been living in hastily erected tents) – 'The VOKhR armed guards themselves had been suffering, like the prisoners, with no housing and little food, so they too were ready to support us' (Mochulsky, 2011, p. 36). Without both the self-interested participation of these groups and their collusive spirit of common interest, the *tukhta* stood little chance of success, and the punishment consequent to failure could have been severe for Mochulsky. As a Gulag boss, he had been forced to live riskily in Gulag's moral economy of the will, drawing upon every ounce of skill, ingenuity, courage, and experience.

The daily norm for the *zeks* at Mochulsky's camp in Pechorlag was 300 g of bread for failure to achieve norm, 600 g for 100% of norm, 800 g for over-fulfilment, and a bonus meat dish for achieving 150% over-fulfilment. Finding themselves confronted by these insurmountable norms, Mochulsky told the *zeks* under his command that 'we (the unit bosses) would be feeding the leadership "tufta", or made up numbers, that would show all the prisoners fulfilling the daily plan by 100 percent' (2011, p. 35).

Every month the department held a meeting with the foreman (including Volodia and me) where we drew up a projected plan of work for the next month. In our plans, Volodia and I added in the kind of jobs that would be impossible to check: the clearing of ditches, the taking away of the top layer of earth in the sand pits (Go on, check it out! Just how high was this layer?) and others. On the days when the weather was too nasty for working outside, we simply added these unverifiable jobs to the brigades' 'fulfilment', which brought their output up to 100 percent. This was how we made sure that every member of the brigade would receive the normal food ration the next day. (Mochulsky, 2011, pp. 80-81)

When the *tukhta* was discovered, Mochulsky addressed a local party meeting convened by the local leadership to discuss punishment (Mochulsky, 2011, pp. 42–44). Although he was officially censured, Mochulsky was let off his *tukhta* after a frank admission found strong approval amongst fellow middle managers, free camp employees, and regular party members in attendance at the meeting. He even claims to have been unofficially congratulated by superiors after a promotion for saving lives through the *tukhta* and thus behaving 'as a true communist' (2011, p. 52).

I explained to the crowd everything we did, from the earliest actions right up to the building of warm barracks. I honestly said that, yes, at the beginning of the month we consciously misled the authorities with 'tufta', since we could see no other way out of this complex situation. I emphasized that by the end of the month, the monthly construction plan for railroad track building had been fulfilled and that the prisoners' lives had been saved. Now they were in the position to survive any kind of freezing winter. In the hall, I heard someone exclaim: 'great job!' (Mochulsky, 2011, p. 44)!

Mochulsky's *tukhta* was impressive, but does not quite reach the pure ideal. Thus, we come to Vlasov. There is probably no better illustration of the elaborated practice of *tukhta* than in the case of Vasily Grigoryevich Vlasov. As recounted by Solzhenitsyn in *The Gulag Archipelago* (2007, pp. 163–164), Vlasov had been head of the District Consumer Cooperatives in the Kady region, but had fallen foul of local party intrigue. On trumped up charges, he had been tried by an OSO – a troika of NKVD judges – and sentenced to the Gulag. Not only does this anecdote sketch out quite succinctly how *tukhta* works from a leadership position, but also how it is a demanding ethical practice that requires character and a certain virtuosity. Vlasov's *tukhta* orchestrates almost all of the constitutive aspects of the practice, and it is worth absorbing at length.

Vasily Grigoryevich Vlasov, whose acquaintance we have already made in connection with the Kady trial, was that kind of person. Throughout his whole long sentence (he served nineteen years without any interruption) he retained that same stubborn self-assurance which characterized his conduct during the trial and with which he had mocked Kalinin and the commutation of his death sentence. Through all these years, when he was dried up from starvation and breaking his back on general work, he perceived himself not as a scapegoat but as a genuine political prisoner and even as a 'revolutionary,' as he used to describe himself in heart-to-heart conversations. And when, thanks to his naturally sharp administrative grasp, which in his case substituted for his incomplete schooling in economics, he held jobs as a trusty in production posts, Vlasov sought not only to postpone his own death but also the chance to patch up the whole cart so it was easier for the rest of the fellows to pull it along.

In the forties, on one of the Ust-Vym logging camp sites (and UstVymlog was distinct from the general pattern in that it had only *one* unified set of bosses: the camp itself ran its logging, did its own auditing, and was responsible for plan fulfilment to the Ministry of the Timber Industry), Vlasov simultaneously combined the duties of norm setter and planner. He was the head of the whole thing there, and in winter, in order to provide support for the sloggers out logging, he credited their brigades with fictitious cubic yards of wood cut. One of the winters was particularly severe; and working just as hard as they could the zeks fulfilled the work norms by only 60 percent but received rations for having fulfilled 125 percent of norm; and with the help of these beefed-up rations they managed to last out the winter without halting work even one day.

However, shipments of the 'felled' (on paper) timber were far behind schedule, and the camp chief heard some evil rumors. In March he sent a commission of foremen into the woods – and they turned up a shortage of 10,500 cubic yards of timber! The enraged chief summoned Vlasov, who heard him out and then said to him: "Give 'em, chief, *five days* in the brig. They're all sluts. They were too lazy to get out into the woods because the snow there is still deep. Set up a new commission with me as the chairman." And thereupon, with his own sensible troika, Vlasov, without leaving his office, drew up an official document and 'found' all the missing timber.

The chief was quieted down for the time being; but in May there was more trouble: they were still shipping out too little timber, and the higher-ups kept asking questions. So the chief called in Vlasov again. Vlasov was a short fellow, but he always retained his vigorous rooster-like bearing, and this time he didn't even pretend: the timber just didn't exist. 'So how could you have drawn up a false document, blankety, blank, blank, blank!' Vlasov replied: 'Do you think it would have been better for you to go to jail yourself? After all, ten and a half thousand cubic yards is a full *ten-ruble bill* for a free employee, and even for a Chekist it's a fiver.' The chief cursed him out, but by this time it was too late to punish Vlasov; the whole thing depended on him. 'Well, what's to be done now?' Vlasov answered: 'Just wait till the roads have completely dissolved in mud.' And the time came when the winter roads had all dissolved completely, and the summer logging trails were still impassable too. And at this point Vlasov brought the chief a detailed and watertight report for his signature, to be sent on to the administration higher-up. In it he proved that because of the highly successful timber-felling operations of the past winter it had been quite impossible to move 10,500 cubic yards out of the forests on the sledge trails. Neither could this timber be hauled out through the swampy forests. Next he gave estimates for the cost of a corduroy road to get the timber out, and he proved that the haulage would cost more than the timber was worth. So that in a year's time, because the logs were going to be lying there in the swamp for a whole summer and autumn, they would be unsuitable for lumber and acceptable to any possible customer only for firewood. And the administration agreed with these literate conclusions, which they were not ashamed to show any other commission – and therefore the whole 10,500 cubic yards of timber were written off.

And so it was that the trees were felled, and *eaten up*, and written off – and stood once again erect and proud in their green coniferous garb. And, in fact, the state paid very reasonably for these dead cubic yards: a few hundred extra loaves of black, gluey, watery bread. The thousands of trees and the hundreds of lives which were saved were of no account on the profit-and-loss sheet. Because this kind of wealth was never counted in the Archipelago.

The meaning of this last remark is clarified in another place by Gustav Herling (2005 [1951], pp. 40–41), for whom to be dead is to drop off the accounts and disappear, to be 'a nameless unit of energy', who 'with one stroke of the pencil is to be eliminated from the plan of production'. On the other hand, a prisoner injured at work is 'a damaged machine' to be sent off for repair. To be accounted is to count, it is to be 'made live' and then 'let die' (see Foucault, 2003, p. 241). What is vital here to grasp is how the *zek* must live *through* audit, cannot evade audit, cannot hide from audit, cannot refuse audit. The *zek* must cope, handle, adjust, redeploy within the severe limits of the modality.

The Vlasov case integrates many of the features of *tukhta* already encountered: Politically articulate defiance, collective and individual survival, oblique counter-conduct over direct resistance, comradeship, courage, risk, ingenuity, all channelled through an adept and literate handling of numbers. In fact, the Vlasov case is perhaps the best exemplar of the defiance and political motivation in *tukhta's* most articulate expression. It requires a certain ethical practice.

Beyond corruption, graft, and games

So why is *tukhta* not really just good old fashioned corruption? How is the practice distinct from simple cheating and thievery? How can the widespread practice of *tukhta* be justified, if it is so profoundly enervating and obfuscating to the productive economy? These are vital questions that have to be answered, before we can adequately understand *tukhta* as a technique and counter-conduct to the technology of control.

For many who write about it, *tukhta* is simply cheating, lying, dishonesty, and stealing. Suffice to say that this is a superficial reading. The first thing to acknowledge is the self-interest at the heart of *tukhta*. However, the role of self-interest in *tukhta* is a difficult and complex one. Although it was more or less alloyed with collective solidarity in the *tukhta* of each and every *zek*, the proportion of self-interest varied between personalities and circumstances. On arrival in camp, and after some bad experiences in transit, Gustav Herling realised 'I would have to start looking after my own interests' (Herling, 2005 [1951], pp. 40–41). Self-interest in a technology of control tasked with destroying your subjectivity and your very existence through labour is a survival imperative. This makes of self-interest not quite the egoistic or anti-social motivation it might otherwise seem, but rather a vital centre of gravity in an environment of enforced scarcity. However, this could never be the end of the matter. Self-interest is a necessary condition of *tukhta* (see Applebaum, 2003, pp. 354–355), but not a sufficient condition, because pure self-interest is an ineffective strategy in the brigade and cannot long endure there undiluted.

Likewise, the question of honesty takes on a different complexion, when self-interest is brought into relation with the brigade technology of control. After bluffing his way out of general labour and into a safer job in the medical section of the Kolyma camps, for which he was unqualified, Janusz Bardach gives his account of a conversation with another *zek* regarding his dishonesty in dealing with officialdom.

I don't think lying and cheating are always wrong. I was taught to be honest. But my parents also taught me to be smart when dealing with the Soviet officials, and sometimes that means you can't be honest . . . 'Do you ever feel guilty?' His question struck like a dagger. 'Sometimes, yes,' I said. 'I cheated to get in. I cheated to save my life. But I never intended to hurt anyone. You're right, my work does affect the lives of the patients, but if you were me, what would you do?' (Bardach, 1998, p. 276)

Of course, the pressure brought to bear upon the *zek* within the framework of the audit regime begins with the basic denial of the means of subsistence and daily physical reproduction. This kind of imposed necessity impels the most unlikely or unfamiliar of behaviours, just as it establishes the inner contradictions characteristic of the transformation of subjectivity in camp. Honesty, probity, self-interest, camaraderie, all become key terms through which the *zek* must then navigate, and that in a way quite alien to them in their previous lives. In this regard, the *zek* has a steep and ethically uncomfortable learning curve.

Whilst imprisoned briefly in 1945 at NKVD Special Camp No. 1 near Mühlberg in eastern Germany, the American John Noble found himself in possession of a carefully secreted 1,000 Mark note, which 'began to represent a storehouse waiting to be tapped. My father and I had never even tried to bribe our way past a head waiter, but now we began to concentrate on converting money into bread' (Noble, 1960, p. 51).

The German communist Margarete Buber-Neumann worked for a relatively short period of time at the end of the 1930s in agricultural labour at a Camp in the steppe near Karaganda. When she arrived

in camp, she learned quickly that dishonesty and thievery were integral to camp life. Along with a friend from back in the Butyrki prison, she was tasked after arrival with washing and delousing a load of clothes belonging to other *zeks*. For the job, she was simply handed a bar of soap and directed to the wash hut, where they began the work in the diligent manner to which they were accustomed in their previous lives.

The foreman came up and watched us. He had a really terrible face and we learnt afterwards that he had been a professional thief. However, his manner towards us was amiable. 'You really don't want to do it that way', he said after a while. 'You want to do it the camp way'. 'What way's that?', we asked. 'why, you just pocket the soap. That's valuable. You can get all sorts of things for it. Then you pitch the things into the cauldron and boil them. Just leave them in for a while, and that's it'. We thanked him for his good advice. Who were we to introduce innovations (Buber-Neumann, 2008 [1949], pp. 59-60)?

Though it might bear a resemblance, this is not actually *tukhta*. This was simply theft. Theft as part of a larger and intelligent strategy of survival to be sure, but theft nevertheless. It shows clear differences to *tukhta*, differences that are immediately apparent in a passing reference to the proper practice made a little later in Buber-Neumann's memoir.

The days that followed were sad and weary. I seemed to lose my strength, and more and more I failed to perform my daily quota. But for the fact that I now had a Political as my gang-leader [*brigadier*], I should seldom have got more than a pound of bread a day, but he made entries in his log to help fellow Politicals. (Buber-Neumann, 2008 [1949], p. 86)

Here we have the quota system, the camaraderie, the more acute physical need, and even a hint at politically motivated resistance to the camp system, rather than mere survival or the opportunistic eye for advantage. At Mine 16 of the Vorkuta camp complex, John Noble tells a tale that lines up quite neatly with this distinction posed in the two anecdotes of Buber-Neumann.

With little modern equipment and no conception of safety, we had cave-ins almost every week in which one or more slaves were killed or injured. The ceilings of the mine tunnel often collapsed because the wooden posts that shored up the ceiling were spaced too far apart. The department managers saved the wood that was provided for shoring and sold it to the Komi nomads, pocketing the cash. Another scheme was to show a saving of so many feet of wood on their monthly reports and receive a government bonus. (Noble, 1960, p. 125)

The first 'scheme' bears little resemblance to the instances of *tukhta* with which we have become acquainted, but the second scheme does have some of its key features. Although the second scheme is by no means a pure example of *tukhta*, for we do not know how this 'government bonus' was distributed, the contrast with the first scheme is a chasm.

Alex Dolgun touches upon the subject of thievery in another 'good example of how *tufta* can work beautifully if your nerves are good' (Dolgun, 1976, p. 259). After being moved onto making locks in the camp tool shop by his brigadier Zyumin, Dolgun was working to a norm of four locks a day, but was able to manage only two. As this particular instance of under-fulfilment of norm was common in the workshop, Zyumin accepted his performance. Time-consuming more than physically exhausting, the work went well until he began to run out of sheet-metal for the locks. At this point he was exhorted by Zyumin to 'Use your ingenuity ... Only don't tell me about it. All I want to know about is finished locks that work'. Reading between the lines, Dolgun stole it from the camp stove works.

Once the stove makers had completed a stove, it was written down in their norm sheets, and they were through with it. Stoves were picked up for delivery by civilian drivers once a week or so. There was no difficulty juggling inventories at this stage because everyone stole stoves, including the MVD. So I just stole a whole stove, knowing that the man who made it would not be penalized, and probably no one else would either. The hardest part of my career as a locksmith was stealing stoves, and the hardest part of that was the physical work of carrying them. I hammered out the rivets, flattened the bent sheets, cut them for the lock box, and kept on making two locks a day. One stove would last me about two weeks. (Dolgun, 1976, p. 259)

What is crucial here is the line 'knowing that the man who made it would not be penalized, and probably no one else would either'. Here we have comradely concern for the well-being of fellow

zeks, the acceptance of risk that it might harm someone, on top of the risk to oneself in thievery, the imperative to meet brigade norms, the enforced scarcity of the cauldron, the centrality of number to the technology of labour control, and the ingenuity needed for survival. The more of these features that are present, the closer one moves to *tukhta* proper.

In the context of camp, not to mention Soviet or Russian society at large, *tukhta* must be contrasted with the superficially similar practice of *blat* [блат]. Closer to the *quid pro quo* of classical corruption, *blat* is 'influence, protection, the network of gaining favours' (Conquest, 1978, p. 165). It is the 'pull, protection, connections, illegal way of obtaining certain privileges' (Khlevnyuk, 2004, p. 338). Although it was used as far as possible by everybody who could do so, it was normally open only to the *blatniye*, or *urkas* (Conquest, 1978, p. 165), that is to say the professional criminals or 'thieves' that riddled the archipelago alongside the politicals.

As a borderline 'goner' (*dokhodyaga*), Olga Sliozberg had to get out of logging one day lest she drop dead of exhaustion. Left with 'nothing to give our medical assistant, Valka, the thief', and having 'already given her the last pair of stockings from my package a month ago for a migraine' (Adamova-Sliozberg, 2011, p. 128), Sliozberg was out of options on that day. This is not *tukhta*, but *blat*. In contrast to the comradely orchestrations of *tukhta*, the exchange relation of *blat* lies closer to the motions of naked self-interest. The zero sum outcome to *blat* bears little resemblance to the collective solidarity of *tukhta* within the numbers regime. The manoeuvring of the thief Valka into the privileged position of work assigner [*naryadchik*] was not accidental, for the practice of *blat* is predicated upon the exploitation of personal advantage over one's peers, the striving for dominance over others for one's own benefit, the tactical occupation of rent-seeking positions from which to extract maximum personal benefit under the guise of mutual exchange.

Still in NKVD Special Camp No. 1, the American John Noble seems to have intuited this distinction. 'Sickened' by a 'procession of the dead' being carried out by other, barely living, prisoners, Noble considered how '[f]or every one of our black-market cigarets [sic], I realized, we had taken food that might have gone to someone else – perhaps to one of the dead men I had just seen. I spoke to my father about it, and we agreed to cancel our black-market arrangements. The privilege we had bought had not been bought with cigarets, really. It had been bought with greed and thoughtlessness' (Noble, 1960, p. 53). This self-assessment is a bit harsh, for greed can hardly be an appropriate label for desiring an adequate bread ration. It raises the question of whether we are witnessing the not uncommon rhetorical practice in Gulag survivor memoirs of overzealous self-abasement. However, the juxtaposition of this discriminating disdain for *blat* and his later more positive attitude toward *tukhta* in the Vorkuta camp complex is telling. Ironically, Noble came onto the receiving end of *blat* in camp. Without the means for *blat*, and without 'friendly' connections, Noble came to grasp the harsh truth of the practice.

One night, before the evening roll call, when we were locked in for the night, I went to the *Stolovaya* and approached one of the well-fed cooks. 'Yeda, yeda,' ('Food, food'), I begged in rehearsed Russian. I pointed longingly at the discarded fish heads and a small pile of *kasha*, scrapings off the prisoner-officials' plates. The cook looked me over to see if I were a friend, a friend of a friend, or a quick man with substantial *blat* (bribe money). When he decided he didn't know me from Adam, he kicked me out of the kitchen with a menacing wave of his food chopper'. (Noble, 1960, pp. 111-112)

Probably the most serious problem with *tukhta* concerns its enduring and widespread effect upon Soviet society at large, for it seems that *tukhta* did indeed become ubiquitous across the whole of Soviet society and economy. The practice was certainly 'widespread' across Gulag (Bell, 2018, p. 94; Gallen, 2004, p. 8), and it was 'commonplace' amongst the *zeks* (Khlevnyuk, 2004, p. 338). Doubtless, when he or she engaged in *tukhta*, the *zek* 'wasn't doing anything out of the ordinary' (Bardach, 1998, p. 236). However, *tukhta* also became a 'basic word among Soviet workers' (Panin, 1976, p. 50). In fact, the practice of *tukhta* 'permeated virtually every aspect of work – work assignments, work organization, work accounting – and affected virtually every member of the camp community, from the Gulag

bosses in Moscow, to the lowliest camp guards, to the most downtrodden prisoners' (Applebaum, 2003, p. 350).

Anne Applebaum is not the only one to have identified its metastasis beyond the islets of Gulag, with implications for production and planning across the entire Soviet Union (Rosefielde, 1980). In his reckoning, John Noble concluded that '[l]ying about production figures (in every phase of Soviet economy) goes all the way up the Soviet scale, and nobody takes them seriously' (Noble, 1960, p. 134). Evgeniia Borisovna Pol'skaia thought of *tukhta* as 'the scourge of all creative work, eating into the pores of the entire country' (quoted in Bell, 2018, p. 94). Speaking of life after Gulag in Soviet society, Alex Dolgun was emphatic that 'the whole of life in the system is *tufta*' (Dolgun, 1976, p. 427).

I was easily able to integrate myself practically, though not emotionally and spiritually, into the daily life of a Moscow bureaucrat. I discovered that *tufta* is really as much a part of civilian life in the Soviet Union as it is in the camp. Without cheating the system nobody could survive, so everyone is engaged in *tufta* all the time. In Russia many people lead a kind of double life in order to be able to live with the extremely controlling and regulated manner in which the government tries to manage its society'. (Dolgun, 1976, p. 426)

If we accept the spread of *tukhta* throughout the country, we can say that the effect of its spread upon Soviet society seems to have been deleterious. If '[m]any key achievements of the camp economy were *tufta* – in essence, if not formally – because they were caused by the depredation of resources and not well-planned, well-managed work' (Khlevnyuk, 2004, p. 339), then there is little reason to doubt a similar effect upon the economy in general. *Tukhta* seems to have borne responsibility for the failure to reach strategic output targets in the Soviet economy as a whole throughout the 1930s and 1940s (Medvedev, 1971, p. 105; Nutter, 1962).

In the wider context of Soviet society, was this economic evil actually *tukhta*, or some other species of the genus? Could it be that *tukhta* is confined necessarily to the archipelago of Gulag, and that it is something related, but other, to that which departed through the gateway of camp to infest the social host? The line of transmission from what Jacques Rossi termed the 'small zone' (*malenkaia zona*) of camp to the 'big zone' (*bolshaiia zona*) of the Soviet Union as a whole (1989, p. 137), seems to be clear for Applebaum.

From theft, it was hardly a great moral leap to telling fibs about production statistics. If *tufta* began at the brigade level, and was compounded at the *lagpunkt* level [camp], by the time the accountants at the larger camps were calculating total production statistics, the numbers were already very far from reality – and would, as we shall see, give very misleading ideas about the camps' real productivity, which was in all probability extremely low. (Applebaum, 2003, p. 360)

The conclusion can only be that it is not *tukhta* that is the problem, but audit regimes emplaced in conditions of zero sum reproduction and enforced scarcity. The practice of *tukhta* might well be 'economically absurd' (Bell, 2018, p. 94), but that is because the audit regime to which it arose in response was absurd.

The Gulag instilled in Soviet society the thought that people could work without receiving any reward for their labor and trained the Soviet people, particularly scientists and specialists, to reconcile themselves to beggars' wages and not to demand acceptable working conditions. The Gulag's suspension of the development of productive forces was to have a long-term effect on the Soviet economy, and the master-slave production relations of the camps corrupted large segments of Soviet society. Hundreds of thousands of people who served as guards, managers, political workers, and so forth, in the Gulag system considered it completely normal to live off the daily exploitation of their fellow citizens and treat them like beasts of burden. Their children were raised in an atmosphere in which it was natural to be ruthless toward their fellow men; they grew up to scorn honest labor and to accept calmly as their due the good things in life obtained through lies, violence, and denunciations. Furthermore, the nether regions of the camp economy incubated a special variety of Soviet manager and exploiter, who valued and nurtured everything except for the human being. This unique type of manager was to go on to play a significant role in the economic policymaking of the Party and the government. (Ivanova, 2000, p. 125)

Ecce the audit regime! When *tukhta* is described as 'forgery, deception, work done only for show, figures purposely inflated, and many other kinds of cheating on results' (Kaple, 2011, p. 210), we are

forgiven for dismissing the practice as mere corruption and criminality. However, the key word here is actually *results*, for it is in that word that we can sense the exogenous imperative behind the practice. This is no cheating for greed or gain, but cheating to achieve results imposed from without by a system of inhuman assessment and enforced scarcity. 'Results' imply a process, the output of which is discrete, quantifiable, and measurable: they are the results of audit.

Conclusion: *tukhta* as *phronesis*

So how can we sum up our understanding of *tukhta* as a kind of practice within the audit apparatus of labour control? The Ancient Greek notion of *phronesis* perhaps comes closest to encapsulating its protean, informal, ethical, and idiosyncratic characteristics. A key assumption of *phronesis* as an ethical practice is that 'one's capacity to distinguish between good and bad judgments cannot be reduced to pure science' (Andorno, 2012, p. 459). Recounting from the Gulag memoir of Elinor Lipper (1950), a German woman swept into the camp system, Robert Conquest reminds us of the practical core to phronetic activity.

There is tufta in all kinds of work. A man who understands the art of tufta can always turn out satisfactory work, although in reality his work should not pass. In the evening, for example, two wood choppers show their pile to the free brigadiers. He checks it and notes down: twelve cubic yards. That is a respectable performance. Nevertheless, the two wood choppers are not noticeably tired. In actuality they have felled just enough wood to camouflage artfully a pile of brush. That is tufta. (Conquest, 1978, p. 165)

In this now-familiar example of *tukhta*, the crucial word is 'art'. *Tukhta* can be thought of as one of the *arts de faire*, that is to say the 'practices of everyday life' (De Certeau, 1984). It is no science, but a practice that draws upon the virtuosity of the practitioner, and which demands 'ingenious' technique on the part of the *zek* (Hosford et al., 2006, p. 26). As Leonid Finkelstein put it, the expert *tuftach* was a 'real artist' (quoted in Applebaum, 2003, p. 358), and Alex Dolgun refers to his friend Gorelov as a 'a clever *tufta* artist' (Dolgun, 1976, p. 215). This is how *tukhta* should be understood as a form of practical knowledge.

The resemblance between *tukhta* and the Greek idea of *mētis* is instructive. As a knowledge that comes from practical experience (Scott, 1998, pp. 309–341), *mētis* is an instrumental 'way of knowing' that implies a combination of 'flair, wisdom, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, various skills, and experience acquired over the years' (Detienne & Vernant, 1991, p. 3). *Mētis* is an intelligence that 'is directly involved in the difficulties of practical life with all its risks, confronted with a world of hostile forces ... , which operates in the world of becoming, in circumstances of conflict' and which 'takes the form of an ability to deal with whatever comes up, drawing on intellectual qualities: forethought, perspicacity, quickness and acuteness of understanding, trickery, and even deceit' (1991, p. 44). The kind of situations where *mētis* is most applicable are those 'requiring a quick and practical adaptation that becomes almost second nature to the practitioner' (Scott, 1998, p. 316), so much so that *mētis* is 'often so implicit and automatic that its bearer is at a loss to explain it' (1998, p. 329).

Set apart from the scientific formalism and context independence of *episteme*, *mētic* know-how depends more on 'informal understandings and improvisations than upon formal work rules' (Scott, 1998, p. 310), and 'knowing when and how to apply the rules of thumb in a concrete situation is the essence of *mētis*' (1998, p. 316). The setting for *mētis* is those 'situations which are transient, shifting, disconcerting and ambiguous, situations which do not lend themselves to precise measurement, exact calculation, or rigorous knowledge' (Detienne & Vernant, 1991, pp. 3–4). As a consequence, *mētis* cannot be learned formally, but must be arrived at through doing. As we saw from the story of Victor S–, and, as with all forms of *mētis*, *tukhta* is 'exceptionally difficult to teach apart from engaging in the activity itself' (Scott, 1998, p. 313).

Metis, with the premium it places on practical knowledge, experience, and stochastic reasoning, is of course not merely the now-superseded precursor of scientific knowledge. It is the mode of reasoning most appropriate to

complex material and social tasks where the uncertainties are so daunting that we must trust our (experienced) intuition and feel our way. (Scott, 1998, p. 327)

Apart from these general resemblances to *tukhta*, there are a number of features in *mētis* that are very particular to *tukhta*. Measured and calibrated to its objective, the practical skill of *mētis* is ‘as economical and accurate as it needs to be, no more and no less, for addressing the problem at hand’ (Scott, 1998, p. 313). Far from a gratuitous activity, as we saw in a number of cases above, *tukhta* is likewise limited to its object and carefully crafted to particular requirements. Just as successful *tukhta* relies upon the innovative orchestration of experiential and behavioural elements, as showcased most fully in the Vlasov case, the practical innovations of *mētis* entail the ‘recombination of existing elements’ in social practice (1998, p. 324). ”

There is no application of learned rules or obtained templates of action, nor are there means of measuring its quality. As James Scott emphasises, the litmus test for *mētis* is ‘practical success’ (1998, p. 323). It is the ‘ability and experience necessary to influence the outcome – to improve the odds – in a particular instance’ (1998, p. 318). This means that *techne* accompanies the activity of *mētis*, with *mētis* being the means and *techne* being the ends of that activity. *Techne* pertains to activities ‘that have a singular end or goal, an end that is specifiable apart from the activity itself, and one susceptible to quantitative measurement’ (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 99). As a tactical synthesis of *techne* and *mētis* (Karakilic, 2020, p. 7), *tukhta* can then be thought of as a ‘practical rationality governed by a conscious goal’ (Foucault, 2002, p. 364), and that goal is survival both individual and collective in the number regime of audit.

Mētis is the means through which the powerful are sidestepped and outmanoeuvred by the weak, and how power can be reversed, because *mētis* is ‘the notion of an uncontainable, recalcitrant cunning’ (Zeilinger, 2017, p. 9). Referring to ‘the appropriation of dominant power and its inscription in the resistant force of practical skills and wisdom’, *mētis* is ‘never a solution, but rather a beginning and, subsequently, an ongoing becoming’ (2017, p. 9). In short, it is ‘an ongoing becoming-recalcitrant’ (2017, p. 10), just as one finds in the practice of *tukhta*.

All this is merely to flesh out the practical activity of *tukhta*, and to signpost it in a more familiar anthropology of epistemology. However, there is something insufficient about *mētis* for understanding *tukhta*, and that is the difference between *mētis* and *phronesis*. The deficit is ethical judgement. Where *mētis* is limited to the instrumental, *phronesis* entails both the instrumental and the ethical, and *tukhta* cannot be grasped without both its particularly instrumental and globally ethical aspects. As *phronesis* requires ‘an interaction between the general and the concrete; it requires consideration, judgment, and choice’, but most crucially ‘experience’ and ‘value judgment’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001, pp. 57–58). Similarly, *tukhta* is not about mere survival, but an *ethos* of comradely cooperation toward collective survival animated by a defiant struggle against the controlling power, which means ‘ethics in relation to social and political praxis, that is, the relationship you have to society when you act’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 55).

James Scott has drawn our attention to how ‘[t]he destruction of metis and its replacement by standardized formulas legible only from the center is virtually inscribed in the activities of both the state and large-scale bureaucratic capitalism’ (1998, p. 335). In *mētis/phronesis* we can find ‘a means of comparing the forms of knowledge embedded in local experience with the more general, abstract knowledge deployed by the state and its technical agents’ (1998, p. 311), such as in the case of audit regimes.

What exceeds the subsumption mechanisms of capital might always enable workers to penetrate the structures of the dominating regime and transform it from the inside by drawing on the same ‘weapon’ which is directed upon them ... In this regard, what is also needed, perhaps, is a political reflection on the ways in which technological apparatuses that promote the interest of capital can be counter-used to foster workers’ autonomy in the antagonistic relationship between labour and capital. (Karakilic, 2020, p. 8)

Tukhta as *mētis/phronesis* means practical wisdom in the tactical and strategic reversal of power relations. As a practice, it is one of the potential ‘points of reversibility’ in the audit

regime, around which ‘alternative forms of active ethical subjectivity can develop’ (Munro, 2014, p. 1135). Perhaps it has the capacity to furnish ‘the crucial link between power and subjectivity in the identification of “reversible relationships” that provide points of resistance to prevailing regimes of governmentality’ (Munro, 2014, p. 1142). If *Phronesis* means learning by doing, then communication of what we learn will be necessary for experiences and know-how to be transmitted. Hopefully, the notion of *tukhta*, as well as the stories we can tell about it, will be helpful in this communication.

Tukhta was but one element in a whole counter-apparatus of techniques for material-immaterial, collective-individual survival in the audit regime perfected by the Soviet Gulag (Welsh, 2022), but few were as effective in resisting the latter’s powerful grip upon the human soul. For this reason alone, further study of the practice would be of great value for both historical and contemporary reasons. However, there is another aspect to *tukhta* worthy of further reflection, especially for those who see in the practice a one-way roadmap to social degeneration, implosion, and slow suffocation, such as we witnessed in the Soviet Union over the long haul. Although it is not immediately apparent, *tukhta* offers the potential for transcendence beyond the mode of control particular to the audit regime. The practice both recognizes and works through the immanent contradictions produced by the instrumental rationality of the audit regime, and it is thus informed by a species of *immanent critique* (see Welsh, 2021a, pp. 481–482). Beyond mere survival, it is perhaps this quality to *tukhta* that can point us toward a politics more socially optimistic than the slow decay and evanescence of a social system offered by the Soviet exemplum. In this way, the harrowing accounts of living and dying in the Soviet Gulag become more than mere objects of morbid historical interest. They can inspire labour struggles in other historical contexts denominated by the regime of audit, and hint at a prospect more emancipatory over and above the necessary step of sheer survival.

Notes

1. *Zek* (зэк) is an abbreviation of *zaključónnyj* (заключённый), an incarcerated inhabitant of the Gulag system of labour camps.
2. Whether *tukhta*, *tufta*, or *toufta*, the term seems to have originated in the *fenya* (феня) of the *blatnoye* [блатной], the jargon of the notorious Russian ‘thieves’.
3. The *VOKhR* (ВОХР) was the Militarized Guard Service of the MVD (Военизированная охрана), the umbrella organisation for the various security personnel of Gulag.

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