Political Power and Cultural History in the Northeastern Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s

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Abstract: This article investigates cultural trends and promotion of cultural establishments in the northeastern USSR in the 1950s and 1960s. I examine the relationships of the government and intellectual network in the context of new sociocultural policy in the unusual conditions of the outgoing Dalstroy epoch. The Magadan Region underwent a kind of “perestroika” in this period, but it was a “perestroika” within the outlined ideological boundaries and under conditions of strict party control. The cultural policy and authorities’ activity on background changes in public-political life was directed on “de-Dalstroy” process by formation new regional identity and creation of numerous new avenues of regional self-expression in the form of institutions, creative unions, and organizations.

Keywords: academics, cultural-educational institutions, Dalstroy, Kolyma, Magadan Region, northeastern USSR, Soviet cultural policy, theater, writers

During the Soviet period, the governmental policy in cultural sphere and cultural development processes in the northeastern USSR were commonly considered as resulting from Socialism achievements. The most important facets of cultural development in the northern areas under governmental consideration were the leading role of the Communist Party in the cultural sphere, cultural popularization policy including the promotion of ethnic art trends and professional training of native personnel, liquidation of illiteracy, and a rise in educational and cultural levels of people. According to published sources of that time, the cultural policy in the northeast encountered “highly complicated area-specific challenges” including small and scattered indigenous populations, the peculiar distribution and character of...
productive forces\textsuperscript{1} there, and the frontier status of the Dalstroy\textsuperscript{2} and the Magadan Region territories.\textsuperscript{3}

The post-Soviet historians expressed their greater attention to the Dalstroy period in the regional history. However, researchers of the history of Dalstroy and the post-Dalstroy era are generally focused on the economic component (development of mining branch and other industries),\textsuperscript{4} while the research of the governmental or social sphere does not raise the questions of intellectuals’ network and cultural development. Overall, the cultural policy and cultural development in territories of the northeastern USSR are still poorly known and many subjects of research interest remain for modern historians.

Nevertheless, scholars have been examining some facets of regional cultural policy, such as literary and book-publishing activities in the Magadan Region; in 2003, the regional conference “The Book Culture of the Magadan Region: Its History, Challenges and Perspectives” was held in Magadan, and its proceedings were then published.\textsuperscript{5} In 2004, the Magadan State Archives published a collection of documents elucidating the book-publishing history of the Magadan Region.\textsuperscript{6}

A. G. Kozlov, in his papers about the history of the Magadan Musical Theater of Drama from 1930 to the 1950s, has investigated that period since its very beginning, when the first artistic troops formed; he has also provided the details and nuances of staging the Lyubov Yarovaya performance in 1938 and Traviata opera in 1945, and made biographical sketches of more than two hundred professional actors, amateurs, and culture artists, among them victims of Stalin’s repressive policy.\textsuperscript{7}

Some recent publications present information on such cultural establishments as the Union of Artists and the Regional Museum of Local History and Nature.\textsuperscript{8} The Memoirs of V. Ya. Levinovsky, the Art Director of the Magadan Musical Theater of Drama from 1965 to 1974, are as well worthy of noting here.\textsuperscript{9} Kozlov’s book of memoirs contains descriptions of the Magadan Theater’s activities, historical sketches, portraits of artists, and some valuable information about cultural trends in the Magadan Region from the 1950s to the 1970s.

The Magadan Theater was well known in all Soviet Union, because some of the best actors were imprisoned on the Kolyma and were forced to perform for the Dalstoy elite. The February 1945 staging of Verdi’s Traviata by the prisoner of the camp Leonid Varpakhovsky, the former assistant of Vsevolod Meyerhold, became well known in the musical life of Magadan. As Inna Klause writes, Varpakhovsky continued to cultivate Meyerhold’s methods in the camp theater, and the famous prisoner-musicians Eddie Rozner and Vadim Kozin played and sang
the their repertoire that was withdrawn after their arrest from the Soviet musical life. As a result of the efforts of these prisoners, who were also actors, directors, musicians, and artists, a special subculture has developed in the camps of the northeastern USSR. This space of Magadan culture is based on the camps not only because it was built in Stalinist times but also because prisoners formed the culture itself.

In 1953, the Magadan Region was established as the territorial administrative unit aimed to replace the Dalstroy (1931–1957), the headquarters of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) in the northeastern areas. This important event signified the revision of the governmental management policy and obviously expressed itself in such processes as using free-hired labor forces and an intense development of sociocultural sphere in this territory. However, the Soviet and Communist leaders and personnel, who came to Magadan in December 1953, were faced with the Dalstroy’s challenges and oppositions to new governmental structures as the Regional Communist Party Committee (Obkom) and the Regional Executive Committee (Oblispolkom). The representatives of the Dalstroy elite, who had been working in the Political Police (NKVD) and Dalstroy since the 1930s, succeeded in being appointed the Secretaries of the new local Communist Party Committees.

By the end of the 1950s, on the background of the post-Stalin reforms (destalinization), the Communist Soviet leaders took under their control the most important regional developmental trends. It looked as if the epoch of the Dalstroy wouldn’t intend to leave the scene of the history, all aspects of regional life were still affected by both the Dalstroy legacy and sociocultural and managerial contradictions of that transitional period. The cultural sphere was also influenced by these processes, the regional consequences of which manifested themselves later. I share Alexei Yurchak’s position that Soviet people were able to engage in the production of new forms and meanings of reality that were tangible, multiple, and grounded in the real world. I think it is especially shown when the person appears in specific conditions of the Soviet northeast in 1953–1957, when nobody knew here who the winner in the war of old and new cadres would be. Simply separating them into Stalinists and anti-Stalinists, or “conservative” and “liberal,” would be incorrect. In a sense all of them emerged from under Stalin’s “overcoat,” and their outlooks are difficult phenomena to define unambiguously.

In modern historiography, mass culture, questions of education, consumption, intellectuals and their relations with the power, public and private life in the USSR in the 1950s and 1980s, and questions of
cultural history have all been investigated. The major feature investigated by my earlier research is connected with the fact that the period of “thaw” in the northeast was compared to “perestroika” of the 1980s; such analogies and estimates were given by participants of events of the 1950s whom I interviewed. Most modern Western researchers emphasize the role of the postwar period in cultural reformation of the Soviet society but focus on the European metropoles. In the northeastern USSR—along with the camp contents and culturology of the power in Dalstroy—we can see a cardinal “perestroika” explosion in Khruschev’s era in the Magadan Region.

There are several research publications that elucidate in detail the control and management problems of that period; for instance, my monograph discusses the processes of political reformation in the northeastern USSR in 1953–1964 and opposition between the Dalstroy elite and new managers. From the viewpoints of new cultural policy conducted by the Magadan Obkom and the Oblishpolkom, I also regard the changes in political, social life, and activities of cultural establishments and organizations as important.

One of the fundamental studies devoted to the northeast in the period after 1953 is Mirjam Sprau’s monograph, published in 2018 in Germany. Sprau analyzes the process of creating a civil administration, social infrastructure and scientific institutions, mechanization of production, urbanization, and other processes in the post-Stalin space of the northeast. The researcher notes that by the end of the 1950s as a result of the process of “de-Stalinization” and even “Sovietization,” Kolyma became the same Soviet region as all the others.

In one of her earlier studies based on Magadan periodical press sources in 1953–1959, Sprau points to significance of educational policy of the Magadan government as a tool of revision of ideological and cultural trends; she also analyzed the role of mass media used to eliminate the Dalstroy relapses, gave a reasoned description of a step-by-step creation of the “myth about the origination of the Magadan Region,” and discussed the policy of regional authorities who intended to develop a new regional conscience in people.

I investigate cultural trends and promotion of cultural establishments in the northeastern USSR in the 1950s and 1960s. This research is based on both published and unpublished archives of the Dalstroy, the Magadan Obkom, and the Magadan Oblishpolkom, and on those of cultural establishments in the territory of the Magadan Region in 1954–1970 as well. The basic points of these studies include the Dalstroy legacy as the factor of new cultural policy, along with the introduction
of new ideological grounds, and the development of activities of area-leading cultural establishments. These include the Magadan Musical Theater of Drama, the Pushkin Regional Library, the Regional Museum of Local History and Nature, the Regional Book Publishers as well as different artistic groups, Red Yarangas, local cinemas, and television.

**Dalstroy as an Inhibitor of Cultural Development during the Transitional Period 1954–1957**

It was in the city of Magadan, the administrative capital of the Dalstroy, where the governmental power bodies as the Magadan Obkom and the Magadan Oblispolkom, with their leading staff delegated from other areas, were first established in the northeast. The territories of Kolyma and Chukotka had their distinctive characters that distinguished them from the rest of the USSR. These territorial peculiarities expressed themselves as the area-specific geographic environments and climatic conditions, economic and social situations, and the existing beliefs and ideas of this region produced by the Dalstroy activity and convict labor system. The Dalstroy-governed industrial activities had been for many years based on the convict labor of prisoners and the production of gold, tin, and coal, which were the basic priorities of regional industry; such trends resulted in economic imbalances and negative political effects, and this situation required serious efforts to be eliminated.

Establishment of the new regional administration on the territory of Dalstroy activity was an integral component of post-Stalin reforms, and moreover, it was intended to drastically change the situation in this area, as hopes for better life and wishes for reforms were much stronger here than in the rest of the country. Reformation processes in the cultural policy, which began in 1954 and produced their immediate effects for the everyday life of residents, were stipulated by plans and programs declared by the new authorities. Their first priorities included elimination of the Dalstroy’s policy negative consequences or, using the formal language of those years, elimination of the “perversion of Socialist law.” New governmental structures were to replace the Dalstroy and provide for the steady development of the gold mining industry in the region. These structures were also meant to initiate activities to improve living standards, as the social sphere had been out of the scope of the interests of the Dalstroy authorities.

At the ideological level, the goal of the Soviet government was to establish a typical Soviet administrative unit. As it was declared by
N. S. Khruschev in 1953: “We must remove this black-spot image off Magadan and Kolyma, we must to the full extent restore the Communist Party’s policy, and return to normal life and citizenship rights.”\(^{23}\)

The central government understood “the normal life” as the restoration of the absolute governmental leadership of the Communist Party, but such restoration couldn’t have been a painless process in the northeastern areas of the USSR.

The Communist and Soviet personnel, who came to Magadan in the beginning of 1954, had to be faced in their policy with a strong resistance of the Dalstroy traditions. The representatives of the Dalstroy elite, who had been working in the NKVD and in the Dalstroy since the 1930s, managed to occupy posts of Secretaries of Regional Communist Party Committees. The governmental functions of the Magadan Oblispolkom were hampered by the Dalstroy opposition, as for some valid causes, the Dalstroy Headquarters remained the leading force in solving the most important problems and implementing political and governmental orders and decisions at regional level in those years. Problems with financing different projects entailed procedural conflicts between the Dalstroy Headquarters, the Magadan Obkom, and the Magadan Oblispolkom and were enhanced by personal enmity of their leaders. Regional requirements for highly qualified personnel were to some extent satisfied at account of so-called practitioners—non-educated but skilled workers who had acquired their professional experience in the northeast. Many of them had earlier been Dalstroy prisoners; later, on release, they stayed in the area and continued to work at Dalstroy enterprises.

An intense migration of population was accompanied by processes of societal separation, and the most important were the social contradictions between the Dalstroy staff and incoming personnel; many newcomers were quite unprepared to live and work in the environment of the Kolyma, and such unpreparedness was most obvious in the mining enterprises where most of the population worked. Mining industry leaders recognized that “a peculiar attention should be paid to former prisoners, who have been long working in the industry; they meet new specialists with hatred and pursue them.”\(^{24}\)

The ideological policy of the Soviet authorities and Communist leaders was aimed at overcoming these conflicts. It was important that both the regional and local governments understood quite well the necessity of creating a new regional conscience in people and developing their regional self-identification. These processes of new regional self-understanding were to counterbalance the Dalstroy-based images
of Kolyma and were centered on the new “Magadan image.” However, inconsistencies remained; side by side with the task of eliminating camp reminiscences in people’s minds, the promotion of new regional self-identity had to be underlain by the Kolyma residents, both the free-hired people and the former prisoners, the latter among those who remained adherent to the Dalstroy experience and spirit. To receive the support of the population, the governments had to consider their particular views.

A new ideological cliché, which Sprau determined to be the “myth about the Magadan Region origins,” became a cornerstone of the new cultural policy in the region. This myth was implied by the historical reminiscence of the Dalstroy’s past, including the history of creation and subsequent elimination of Kolyma in 1939. This can also include the long experience of “uncharacteristic relationships” between the Dalstroy and the Khabarovsk political government, to which the local Communist authorities were formally subordinate, and the difficult organizational period for the establishing the new administrative unit in 1953.

The “myth about the origins” found its representations both in the regional press and in formal reports of the leaders of the Magadan Region; it was intensely popularized in 1954–1957, and since 1958, when P. Ya. Afanas’ev was appointed the First Secretary of the Magadan Obkom, it has become the political doctrine as the basis for propagandizing the Communist Party’s achievements. This myth phenomenon had, as its principal constituents, first, the designation of December 1953—the time of establishment of the Magadan Region as the starting point of commencement of a new historical epoch; second, a demonstratively expressed opposition of new regional governments to the Dalstroy; and third, the policy of concealment of some historical facts of the Dalstroy period in the northeast. These tendencies were described in a special note “The Distortions in the Kolyma Press Publications in the Past” by writer N. V. Kozlov, who submitted it to I. N. Kashtanov, the Magadan Obkom Secretary. In his note, he pointed to the time gap in the history of the Kolyma and to drastic inconsistencies of authorities in their policy of elucidation of tragic facets of the regional history.

In this respect, it is worthy of analyzing the changes within the Soviet Kolyma newspaper, which was the main regional press organ of the Dalstroy; later it was, by the decision of the Magadan Obkom, renamed the Magadanskaya Pravda and became the main mass media organ propagandizing the new cultural and ideological policy.

In the mid-1950s, the Magadanskaya Pravda and Kolyma newspapers were the basic sources of information for the local population. The
regional governments used press publications to gain advantages in their struggle against the Dalstroy. As soon as the Communist governments took their control over the regional press, the periodicals changed their content, the editorial boards had new membership, the character of publications became more critical, and there were changes in publicity style and graphic design of press organs. The basic trends of publications were a growing criticism of the Dalstroy system and the mass media concept of elucidating the existing interests and requests of local population. As it is pointed out by scholars, the same processes were not still so instantaneous with the *Kolyma* journal published under the auspices of the Dalstroy, and the new governments took their control over the journal after the Dalstroy was structurally reorganized into the Magadan Economy Council (Sovnarkhoz) in 1957.27

The life histories of thousands of prisoners in the northeast, the processes of departure of the Dalstroy leading personnel in 1953–1957, an intense migration of regional population, and a mass arrival of newcomers in those years had served as a basis for formation in people’s mind an image of the Kolyma as a “planet” or “island”; moreover, since the late 1950s to the early 1960s, the spiritual phenomenon of the Kolyma had found its manifestation in meetings of the Magadaneers at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow each year on 31 August. The origins of this meeting tradition were laid down by the graduates of the famous First School of Magadan in the late 1940s; each year the former schoolmates came to meet each other at the building of the Dalstroy’s Headquarters in Moscow. Later, not only people from Magadan but also those from any other area of the Magadan Region were called the “Magadaneers” at such meetings.

As historians point out, many schools, hospitals, libraries, and other sociocultural facilities had been constructed under the control of the Dalstroy from the 1930s to the early 1950s; however, these buildings intended for cultural events were made of wood as temporary structures, and only free-hired personnel of the Dalstroy could visit them. In labor camps, there were special units responsible for culture, education, and propaganda activities.28

The functions of control and management of governmental establishments of culture and education were transferred from the Dalstroy to the Department of Culture of the Magadan Oblispolkom in 1954; the system of cultural establishments included the Regional Museum of Local History and Nature and the Regional Library, the district museum, the Children’s Library, nine local libraries and Culture Houses, 26 village clubs, 18 village libraries, 27 reading houses,
21 Red Yarangas, and the Children’s School of Music.\textsuperscript{29} In addition, the areawide system of trade-union cultural-educational establishments included 113 clubs, 104 libraries, and 132 Red Rooms.\textsuperscript{30}

The available cultural-educational establishments didn’t answer the expected requirements of the new regional unit. Most district and village clubs, libraries, and reading houses were unsuitable, dark constructions lacking entrance halls and places for complementary education and subsidiary rooms. In many cases, reading halls were not available at libraries. Many structures were old and unsafe buildings. Some village clubs were box-shaped constructions made of veneer boards, or they could also be in tents; in other cases, they occupied the administrative rooms of local authorities and Local Departments of People’s Education. Thus, they could start their cultural and educational activities only after the formal working day was over.

Moreover, it was almost typical that clubs and libraries lacked necessary equipment; Culture Houses usually had at their disposal just one or two tables and several benches, libraries had one table and several bookshelves, and as a rule there were no chairs at all nor musical instruments and table games. Planned requests were satisfied only for 15 to 20 percent of all establishments.\textsuperscript{31} In reality, all cultural and educational institutions needed to have new equipment: local Culture Houses needed to have radio players (radiola), tape recorders, and musical instruments; Red Yarangas needed radio receivers, small electric power plants, projecting machines, and warm tents.

Upon establishment of the Magadan Region, the cultural policy conducted by the regional government had as its perspective targets the growth several cultural-educational structures, and the building of new Culture Houses, clubs, libraries, and cinemas. There was also an intention for the further development of the network of Red Yarangas aimed at the education of reindeer breeders and herders. Cultural establishments, which earlier had been fixed assets of the Dalstroy, were then accepted on the balance of the Oblispolkom, and the Communist governmental structures strengthened their control functions by virtue of the procedural consideration of cultural development facets in the Bureau and Secretariat sessions of the Obkom. The Magadan Oblispolkom Department of Culture performed its current control via the city authorities and local departments throughout the region. The most important questions were discussed in sessions of the Department of Culture councils; implementation of regionwide events and programs promoted activities of local authorities. To perform their on-site supervision, the regional officials from the Department of Culture
regularly visited remote areas and districts. The Magadan Oblispolkom Department of Culture was responsible for cultural activities and educational policy including control and supervision of activities of art institutions, polygraphic designing techniques, and scheduled events, as well as the provision of equipment for culture and art centers.

During the first years of political and social reforms, the regional government was basically engaged in solving the problems of education and training of personnel for cultural centers and establishments. As it was acknowledged by the Oblispolkom staff, the Regional Department of Culture was unable to provide any actual support to local departments in districts in 1954, due to lack of the regional methodology office and regional lecture bureau. The Regional Executive Committees in districts had as their control and supervision targets the district departments of culture and educational centers; the district Culture Houses and libraries were to become the local leaders in ideological propagandizing.

The Soviet-Communist ideology was popularized and developed on basis of the Communist Party’s system of ideological education and of different means of mass propaganda. There were tens of establishments, which were intended for different population strata and included political schools, schools of propaedeutic Marxism-Leninism studies, schools of Communist Labor, people’s universities, schools of advanced methods of labor, economical schools and workshops, and the Komsomol circles and clubs. Specialists working in spheres of science and education, culture, and art, and those from the Znanie (Knowledge and Intelligence) Society were invited to be the lecturers.

In the beginning of 1954, the number of personnel working at cultural establishments in the territory of the Magadan Region was 243 people, and by 1957 it reached as high as 405. In 1958–1959, 291 specialists were retrained, and 136 people were commissioned to work at local cultural centers in different districts. By 1959, all cultural establishments were completely staffed, and as many as 113 specialists were sent to work in Chukotka, and in 1969, 115 additional people arrived. But the rate of staff fluctuation remained high; many people changed their jobs or even left the territory due to the difficult living and working conditions there. In one of the reports of the Regional Department of Culture in 1960, the following was said: “Now we expect the arrival of 53 young specialists, but there is no guarantee that they would stay and work here.”

From 1954 to 1957, whereas the regional population was growing, the number of clubs lowered from 170 to 158, and movie-projection
units from 330 to 297. However, during those four years, the number of libraries increased from 130 to 140, the Red Yarangas from 20 to 33, plus four musical schools, the Center of People's Art, and the Methodology Office were opened. But side by side with these achievements, the number of the trade-union cultural centers decreased as the Dalstroy enterprises and establishments were closed throughout the regional territory. As a result, between 1954 and 1957 the number of trade-union clubs went from 108 to 80 and movie-projector units from 276 to 166.36

Cultural Wave: The Formation of New Principles and Institutions in the Late 1950s and 1960s

Only by the end of the 1950s could the Soviet and Communist leaders have taken under their control the most important components of the regional development and finalized the problem of political guidance in the northeast. However, the effects from contradictions between regional authorities during the 1953–1957 transitional period turned out to be significant for all aspects of the regional life and manifested themselves in many cultural phenomena, which produced their impacts on further regional prospects.

Thus, the feelings and attitudes of some leaders of the Dalstroy, especially among famous geologists, implied the support of the “Kolyma gold resources fadeaway” theory;37 this support can be regarded as a protest of the Dalstroy elite against the sociopolitical reforms in the northeast. Cited here is a passage from the speech of I. E. Drabkin, the Director of the Northeastern Geological Headquarters of the Ministry of Geology, at the Seventh Regional Conference of the Communist Party in November 1963:

It is worthy of noting that the Magadan Region was established in the hardest time, when not only the increment indices of gold reserves but gold production itself fell to a record low, so it was the most depressive period. It was a real challenge for the Regional Communist Party Committee to cope with the fadeaway theory of the Golden Kolyma, which became spread among miners and geologists like an infectious disease. It took us five years to overcome this “resistance,” I should say—this skepticism about the mineral potential of our region; the decisive solution was made by the Bureau of the Communist Party Central Committee in 1958, and it became the last nail in this theory’s coffin. Since then, as you can see it now, our region has been intensely prospering.38
It was paradoxical that this very “theory” itself has become a cultural phenomenon, and the new authorities seeking governmental power in those years considered the rejection of this theory as one of their most decisive achievements. Resistance to this theory is represented in some well-known literature works, among the most popular the novel The Territory by Oleg Kuvaev, published as far back as 1974.

The Territory is not just a description of the opposition between the old and the new regional authorities; it is a documentary novel representing peculiarities of the Dalstroy mentality and traditions based on the economics of gold production and the psychology of a “pegged-out site,” when, by the personal decision of an authorized manager, the equipment and transportation facilities and people were brought to a new area—a “blank spot” on map—in order to begin industrial activities there. The authorized status and mentality of the Dalstroy managers at the highest regional and any local level engendered in all of them a careless attitude to both the natural environment and the everyday needs of people. However, under new sociopolitical circumstances on-site, the Dalstroy leaders had to somehow reconcile with the Regional Communist Party Committees and Executive Committees, as well as meet the needs and requirements of free-hired personnel and young people who came to work in this northeasternmost territory.

The policy of cultural development received a new impetus due to the resolutions adopted at the Third Regional Conference of Communists in 1958, according to which the cultural policy had been recognized as a regional development priority. Many different centers of cultural-educational development of people received musical instruments of folk music, accordions, radio receivers, filmoscopes, table games, gramophones and gramophone records, record players, radiolas, paints, portraits, placards, and photo expositions.

Overall, in the early 1960s, there were 886 cultural-educational establishments of different status in the region. Since the late 1950s through the early 1960s, the cultural policy targets were stipulated by the two-year regional plans. In compliance with the plan of cultural development approved for 1961–1962, the spheres of activities were determined for any club, library, Yaranga, and so on, so that any inhabited locality could have this cultural-educational opportunity. Strengthening relationships between cultural establishments and kolkhozes, working teams, and people working in remote areas was of special interest to the regional government; according to the program of cultural development, new centers of culture including those financed from kolkhoz budgets were to come into operation.
In 1964, the Regional Trade-Union Palace of Culture was opened, and hundreds of different rooms included the Amateur Theater, the Choir, the Cinema Amateurs Club, the Children’s Sector, the Chess Club, a shooting gallery, a library, the Sector of Science and Technology Propaganda, the Zoo Room, the Music Salon, and the Ballet Studio. The number of visitors could reach more than one thousand people, as there was a large hall of six hundred seats and with equipped scene, and a smaller hall of three hundred seats, as well as showrooms and dancing halls. In addition to this one, new Culture Houses were opened in many district areas in the region.

The managerial and administrative problems in the mid-1950s were largely due to the opposition policy of the Dalstroy, which had still preserved its large powers and didn’t aim at supporting establishments transferred under the Oblispolkom’s control. In those years, setting up a higher educational establishment in Magadan became the priority project to promote reforming processes in the region. Magadan Region residents had the opportunity to study by correspondence at institutes in Khabarovsk and Vladivostok, but in compliance with the program of the regional development, an urgent necessity arose for the education and training of different specialists on-site in Magadan. Immediately upon the establishment of the Magadan Region, the higher education project was discussed at the Magadan Obkom and then, in 1955, was considered at the Obkom’s Bureau session; the regional authorities addressed the Council of Ministers of the Russian Federation with this project proposal, but in June 1955 their request was denied. In accordance with the decision of the Council of Ministers, the establishment of the Pedagogical Institute in Magadan was inexpedient as the annual needs for secondary school teachers in the region were 70 to 75 people and these requirements could be met at account of graduators from pedagogical institutes in Khabarovsk and Komsomolsk-na-Amure.

The result of these delays and opposition policy was that the Pedagogical Institute in Magadan was opened only in 1961. It was in the same year that the Northeast Interdisciplinary Science Research Institute of the Academy of Sciences Siberian Branch was set up. The delay with the positive solution of this highly important problem was due to both a hard transitive period of strengthening and stabilizing the statutory authorities in the Northeast during 1954–1957 and current contractions with the Dalstroy, which was still holding its managerial sway in the region.

Another example comes from June 1954, when the Magadan Musical Theater of Drama was managerially transferred from the Dalstroy
control to the Department of Culture of the Magadan Oblispolkom. Upon the transference procedure, the Dalstroy increased public utilities payments for the theater; to solve the problem, the Magadan Oblispolkom applied directly to P. F. Lomako, the USSR Minister of nonferrous metallurgy. The final solutions were personally supported by I. L. Mitrakov, the Dalstroy’s Director at that moment, and the results were that in 1955 the theater was structurally reorganized, its staff was reduced, and the new practice of the theater’s touring outside the region’s territory came into being.

Through the 1950s and 1960s, the theater was actively touring throughout the Magadan Region and in neighboring areas; however, its financial activity remained unprofitable. The existing situation was largely saved owing to the theater’s collaboration with Vadim Kozin, the famous singer, a member of the theater’s staff, whose concerts were highly popular among the audience and comprised about 35 to 40 percent of the theater’s total revenues in the second half of the 1950s. Kozin, in cooperation with the theater’s touring team usually of three or four people, gave his concerts in different parts of the region, and beginning in 1956, they also made tours to different cities across the rest of the USSR. In autumn 1958, a group of administrative leaders of the USSR Ministry of Culture were listeners of Kozin’s program concert. The authorities had to constantly raise touring expenses for Kozin, and the Director of the Magadan Theater insisted on paying each concert presentation of the singer as 4.5 times the usual pay rate, which was 867 rubles for concert. In 1958, salaries of Vadim Kozin were 187,000 rubles including northern bonuses, and the net income of the theater from his concert activity during that period was 402,000 rubles.

In 1958, the first theater’s school (Studio) was established at the Magadan Musical Theater of Drama, and 20 young people became its first students. From 1965 to 1974, V. Ya. Levinovsky was the theater’s Art Director; he organized a united company of actors and was a producer of high-popular performances such as The Violet of Montmartre, The Bat, The Viennese Naughty, The Princess of the Circus, The Bayadere, and others. Here is how Miron Etlis described his impressions of the theater and cultural life of the city of Magadan in a letter to Igor Golomstock in 1961:

I managed to visit the local theater, but I saw only a drama troupe (Aphrodite’s Island and Four under One Roof). I think that many central cities do not have such theaters: good premises, a large stage, and as for the troupe, I’m not a theatergoer, but I liked it. Operetta, they say, is better! In the same building there is also a fairly decent
Regional Library with a reading room, which has an interlibrary loan (term—a month). I was there the day before yesterday, the 12th issue of *Foreign Literature* is not yet available—I wanted to take it with me to finish reading Faulkner’s *Mansion*.42

The city TV Center was established in Magadan in 1957, which was widely supported by the city enthusiasts; the TV antenna’s effective area was not only the city but also neighboring settlements. The TV tower was designed by the Dalstroyproekt engineers and assembled at the Marchekan machinery plant. The prime TV broadcast from the TV Studio took place on 31 December 1959, and the first outdoor reportage was in 1967. It was in same year that the first satellite telecommunication center Orbita was set up, and since then the reception of the first program of the central TV has been possible.43 By 1967, people in the territory of the Magadan Region had 77,000 radio sets and 16,800 TV sets.44 The modern-equipped Magadan Radio Center came into operation in 1965. In opinion of the regional leaders in 1967, the TV tower crowning the Lenin Avenue in Magadan has become the symbol of the cultural prospects of the region.45

By 1962, there were 472 film-projecting units in the region’s territory.46 Both Soviet and foreign movies were shown on screen. During the third quarter of 1962, 165,000 visitors of the city’s main Gornyak cinema watched 108 Soviet movies, and 110,500 people watched 28 Western movies. The average number of showings of Soviet and foreign films was four and nine, respectively. Some movies were especially popular with the audience including *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, *The Seventh Journey of Sindbad*, *Twelve Girls and One Man*, and *The Magnificent Seven*.47 Foreign films were very popular among the audience and made up a considerable part of the cinema repertoire.

The former Dalstroy’s *The Soviet Kolyma* newspaper was renamed the *Magadanskaya Pravda* in January 1954. Through the mid-1950s, the *Magadanskaya Pravda* and the *Kolyma* were the main sources of information for the region’s residents. In opinion of Mirjam Sprau, who has analyzed the content of the Magadan press periodicals from 1954 to 1959, the Soviet-Communist regional authorities used press publications, first, as the means of propaganda against the Dalstroy’s policy and, second, as the means of promotion of the “regional self-identification” feelings in people. The author points to that, upon the transference of the control functions of press means from the Dalstroy to the Communist authorities, there followed changes in thematic facets, the authors’ membership was renewed, the level of criticism increased, and there were changes in publication style and in polygraphic design.48
In August 1954, the Magadan Regional Publishing House was established on basis of the “Soviet Kolyma” Dalstroy’s Publishers and became the center of attraction and unity of literary figures and writers in this area. During the first four years since 1954, the membership of the literary circle at the Magadan Publishers grew from 13 to 43 authors. The members of the literary circle were the most creative and talented writers in the region, and in the early 1960s, the total number of interested participants reached 150 people.

In 1958, the regional printing industry included 16 enterprises of the regional status. In 1955–1958, printing enterprises received more than one hundred different equipment units. When the new equipment was installed and came into use, the quantity of polygraphic design and colors of issued newspapers became much better. Two books printed at the Regional Printing House: The Time of Melting Snows and The Chinese Fairy Tales were the winners at the All-Union Contest in 1961. The Chinese Fairy Tales awarded the Winner’s Diploma at the All-Union Contest was submitted to the Book Exposition in London. Since 1955, by the initiative of writer N. V. Kozlov, the literary almanac At the Far North was issued in Magadan three times a year, and since 1959, it became a subscribed quarterly. The Magadan branch of the Writers’ Union of the RSFSR was established on 1 March 1960.

Thus, the original works of fiction, editions propagandizing the mass politics goals and elucidating the Northeast history, and those dealing with industry-development tasks were the main publication trends of the publishers. The basic goal was the transference from reediting to publishing works of the Magadan authors. In addition to this, the Magadan Publishers were the USSR leaders in publishing books in languages of native peoples of the Russian Far East.49

However, the edition of new literary writings was remained under the strict supervision of authorities. Thus, the continuation of the well-known novel The Man Is Born Twice by V. S. Vyatkin was not allowed in 1964 due to its labor-camp-related theme. It is worthy of note here that the very first historical study of the Dalstroy period was performed by N. A. Zhikharev, the Obkom’s Secretary, who had access to high-confidential archive documents. The author investigated the history of geological studies in this area, along with the establishment and activities of the Dalstroy’s structures, and the history of the Communist Party organizations in the northeast, but he didn’t deal with the camp system and its prisoners.50

The strict censorship imposed on literary works didn’t allow the camp theme to be present, but the writers—being Kolyma residents—
could not avoid it entirely. They still hinted at the theme of labor camps in their works published during the 1950s and 1960s. A good example is the beginning of the short story “The Dog’s Green Lead” by Viktoria Goldovskaya (published in 1969), where the first three sentences include phrases that refer the reader back to the time of the camps: “Fifteen years . . . Many things could have been changing during that time. He came out into the May sun-lit square already intending not to become surprised at anything.”

In this regard, Ivan Garayuschenko’s novel Registered in Kolyma, published by the Magadan Publishers in 1964, is of particular interest to history researchers. This is the story of a former convict who tries to find his place in life. It was one of the very first books in the USSR about the Dalstroy camps. The publication perspectives of the book were discussed in 1963–1964, and the result was that the State Committee of the Council of Ministers didn’t recommend this book for publication, but in autumn of 1964 the Magadan Publishers, without submitting the novel for a second review, issued this book in a first print run of 15,000 copies. The consequences for the Magadan Obkom were a serious scandal, which was enhanced by the fact that the entire first edition of the book had been sold by the spring of 1965; nevertheless, all the participants of the book publishing process were just severely reprimanded at the Obkom’s Bureau session. The author of the novel, I. D. Garayuschenko, was the Director of the Obkom’s Press Media Sector, and this publication event was just an exception to the rule. As we can judge from the archive documents, publication of this book became possible owing to the silent assent of the regional party leaders.

Conclusion

The activities of different establishments of culture in the territory of the Magadan Region were under the control and supervision of the Magadan Oblispolkom and Obkom. The candidatures to be appointed the directors of the establishments of culture, the chairmen of different unions of artists and amateur circles, and editors of newspapers had to be approved at the Obkom’s Bureau sessions. Scheduled press publications, theater repertoires, social arrangements, and events were also discussed by the Bureau members and had to be approved at the Obkom’s Bureau sessions. From the end of the 1950s through the 1960s, the guideline in the regional cultural policy was the growth in number and popularization of works representing industrial development of
the region and everyday life of miners, drivers, kolkhoz workers, reindeer herders, and hunters.

Despite many new clubs, libraries, and cinemas, the regional establishments of culture were still placed in old structures of the Dalstroy epoch, and construction of new buildings for them remained an unsettled question. A growth in the number of the establishments of culture was associated with managerial problems of moving to other places, hiring personnel, preparing workrooms, and lodging specialists. Besides lack of high-qualified specialists in cultural sphere, there was a high rate of staff fluctuation in the 1960s. The same concerned the Red Yaranga system as, despite the certain success of this project aimed at the education of reindeer herders and hunters, great distances and hard-working conditions in the northern areas were the main obstacles for specialists from central regions of the country and prevented them from coming here.

As the results of conducted studies show, the cornerstones of the new cultural policy in the 1950s became the criticism of the Dalstroy’s regime and popularization of the “myth” about establishment of the Magadan Region in December 1953 as the reference point of the new epoch demonstratively opposed by the new regional authorities to the Dalstroy system. The cultural phenomenon of the “theory of gold fade-away” developed by the Dalstroy’s elite reflected their protests against sociopolitical changes and the failure of their usual mode of life.

The new tendencies in the state policy were expressed in greater attention of the authorities to sociocultural sphere. One of the urgent tasks of the new cultural policy was the development of the system of management in the cultural sphere. The new sociocultural tendencies were associated with accelerated public housing, opening of new centers, and establishments of culture, education, and public health service; these processes were aimed at the stabilization and retention of personnel in the region and providing good living standards for young specialists arriving from central parts of the country. In people’s minds, such accelerated improvements in their everyday life were combined with euphoria from new sociopolitical changes and the accessibility of new authorities, which made a drastic contrast to the recent Dalstroy past.

The new political government was seeking the people’s support, as it tried to cope with social contradictions and stabilize the regional population; in consideration of these goals and on the background of intense migratory processes, the governmental cultural policy was aimed at formation of the new regional self-identity in minds of residents in
this territory. Here, the historical background of the 1950s and 1960s was characterized by the particularities of the natural environments and geographic remoteness of the area, as well as to a greater extent by the Dalstroy’s managerial and attitudinal legacy, the personal experience of many thousands of people released from the labor camps, and area-specific population structure and high rates of migration.

The specific character of the cultural policy in the territory of the Magadan Region in those years was due, until the end of the 1950s, to the phenomenon of the Dalstroy: despite the growing number of centers and establishments of culture there, the formation of the state management structures in the cultural sphere was impeded by both area-specific factors and managerial problems and contradictions. During the first few years after the establishment of the Magadan Region, such events as the appointment of new leaders of the Magadan Obkom and the Third Regional Communist Conference held in 1958 gave a powerful new impetus to the development of the sociocultural sphere in this territory.

It should be noted that the complex scientific institute in Magadan was to some extent established to create a competitor to Dalstroy’s former Geological Administration. And in the first years of activity, the reports I have explored noted the duplication of research topics, even the struggle of organizations to retain personnel. The scientific institute was already an organization created with the support of the regional committee and the party’s first secretary. Thus, active development of academic science was opposed to the old Dalstroy school. The data shows that the development of literature and intellectual life from the 1950s to the 1970s were associated with attempts to explain labor camp past, search for information about specific people among the prisoners, and bring to the forefront the conflict of “man versus system,” whereas for the party line’s censorship, the “man versus nature” conflict was preferable.

The Communist and Soviet personnel had to be faced in their policy with a strong resistance of the Dalstroy traditions and managerial contradictions with its management staff. As seen the period of “thaw” in the northeast was compared to “perestroika” of the 1980s—such analogies and estimates were given by the First Secretary of the Magadan Regional Komsomol Committee of that time (1957–1960), Alexander Bogdanov, whom I managed to interview in 2006. The peculiarity of the interviews is that information is recorded many years after the events occurred, and the participants overestimate certain phenomena and facts. We can assume the Magadan Region underwent
a kind of “perestroika” in this period, but we must be clear that it was a “perestroika” within the outlined ideological boundaries and under conditions of strict party control.

The results indicate that overall, the cultural policy and authorities’ activity on background changes in public-political life was directed toward the “de-Dalstroy”-ing process through the formation of a new regional identity and the creation of numerous new avenues of regional self-expression in the form of institutions, creative unions, and organizations.

From the late 1950s through the first half of the 1960s, new centers and establishments of culture came into operation, and many clubs, cinemas, libraries, and Red Yarangas received new equipment, and various creative unions of composers, writers, and artists were set up; all these positive processes and events, together with the establishment of the Pedagogical Institute and Science Institute in Magadan in the early 1960s, favored cultural development in the region.

Despite low living standards and hard labor conditions, and the complicated social environments and contradictions, the improvements in the cultural sphere by the mid-1960s were remarkable, and they were largely striking for the area residents who started their working activities at the USSR’s northeast as early as in the 1930s and 1940s.

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Notes

1. “Productive forces” is a key idea in Marxism and Soviet economy denoting the union of human labor and the means of labor.

2. Dalstroy was established in 1931 as the state road and industrial construction trust in the Upper Kolyma area. In 1938, Dalstroy was handed over to the Soviet NKVD and transformed into the NKVD’s Far North Construction Trust. The organization consisted of the main administration and production units, including the Northeastern Labor Camp. Over the period of its activity between 1932 and 1956, Dalstroy produced 1,187 tons of chemically pure gold; Dalstroy’s gold production costs reached 19 billion rubles in 1932–1956, while the value of gold exceeded $1.3 billion. Dalstroy was transformed into the People’s Economy Council of the Magadan economic administrative area in 1957.


22. Red yaranga is a special form of cultural and educational institution for national territories, created in places densely populated by indigenous peoples.


24. GAMO R-23-1-1924: 305.


29. GAMO R-161-1-2: 360


31. GAMO R-161-1-2: 37.

32. GAMO R-161-1-2: 40.

33. GAMO P-21-5-608: 34.

34. GAMO P-21-5-606: 29.

35. GAMO R-161-1-176: 8.

36. GAMO P-21-5-608: 22.
37. The theory common among Dalstroy geologists in 1950s that the North-east (Kolyma) had already exhausted their stocks of gold.

38. GAMO P-21-5-296: 166.

39. GAMO P-21-5-661: 8.


41. GAMO R-161-1-62: 288.


44. GAMO P-21-5-584: 126.


46. GAMO P-21-5-591: 15–16.

47. Ibid.


54. GAMO P-21-5-377: 8–9.

55. Later in 1986–1989, Alexander Bogdanov was the first secretary of the Magadan Obkom.