

**Forced Labor and The Landscape Modification: A Phenomenological Study
of Karlag Prisoners' Experiences at Aktailak**

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In keeping silent about evil, in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the surface, we are implanting it, and it will rise up a thousand-fold in the future. When we neither punish nor reproach evildoers, we are not simply protecting their trivial old age, we are thereby ripping the foundations of justice from beneath new generations.

—Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

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I would also like to acknowledge and honor the victims of the Karlag labor camp and the regime's cruelty, whose experiences and labor are central to this study. The capstone aims to not let the public forget about this chapter of our history and recognize the humanity and resilience in those who were unjustly suffering at Karlag.

Introduction

This capstone project aims to explore the experience and activities of Karlag prisoners at the Aktailak site during the late operation of the camp by focusing on their interactions with the landscape and construction of the camp's infrastructure under the conditions of forced correctional labor. The study will be conducted through the lenses of the post-processual archaeological theories of landscape phenomenology and narrative storytelling proposed by Christopher Tilley (1994) and Janet Spector (2009), respectively. The research will provide a humanizing reconstruction and interpretation of the experiences and activities of the prisoners who extensively modified the landscape and interacted with the environment around them. The main focuses of the project will be on the bodily and sensory aspects of the convicts inside the camp spaces, the construction of the irrigation system and buildings, and the environmental and living conditions that accompanied convicts at Aktailak. The research and the site overview will be supported by the primary sources and archival collection of memoirs, diaries, official documents, and historical records about Karlag and its subdivisions.

The project studies Aktailak, one of the camp points and administrative centers for the Bidayik subdivision of the Karlag. During 1930-1959, on the territory of the Karaganda Region in Kazakhstan, Karlag was a massive agricultural forced labor prison system that played an essential role in the development of the arid and coal-rich lands of the region (Barnes, 2011). The formation of a subsequent city could be attributed mainly to the camps' operations; prisoners, resettlements, agriculture, farming, and mining works influenced the growth of the city amidst the harsh and barren steppes (Barnes, 2011). By looking at the Gulag phenomenon in general, it is possible to see how different historical, ideological, political, economic, and social factors were interconnected with each other and manifested themselves in how these camps were

structured and functioned. The territorial vastness of the Gulag, combined with the fact that it comprised multiple institutions within it and paralleled many aspects of life in the Soviet Union outside of the camps, made scholars of various disciplines like history, economics, political science, and sociology thoroughly observe it. Additionally, fictional and biographical literary works have been reflecting on the topic of the Gulag from a moral perspective. However, archeology has not yet covered the Gulag or its subdivisions on the territory of Kazakhstan. Therefore, this capstone project's purpose is to demonstrate how the abilities of archaeology to study the material culture, architecture, and other traces of human activity in the varied conditions of preservation and across time can reveal valuable insights about the Gulag system beyond the numerical estimations and socio-political implications of the camps.

The Gulag period in the history of the Soviet Union can be characterized as a period of losses, cruelty, censorship, repression, and destruction. Its operation was not profitable from an economic perspective, and it did not achieve its ultimate goal of engineering and remodeling a convict into a proper Soviet citizen (Barnes, 2011). Thus, after the 1930s, the government did not openly discuss the camps; instead, it controlled and limited the public's knowledge of life behind the barbed wire (Barnes, 2011). Many official documents about the camp system were intentionally erased or became unattainable (Bogumił, 2018). In addition, the physical remains of Gulag camps were not well preserved across their vast territory since their camps were located at the very margins of the country (Bogumił, 2018). Therefore, they do not receive much attention, and it is challenging to recover some information from them. Such secrecy and concealment resulted in the generation of many myths, misunderstandings, and errors around the topic of the Gulag (Bogumił, 2018). A similar scenario can be observed in the contexts of other forced labor camps in Germany, Australia, and the USA. For example, The Lager Wick camp on the territory

of Jersey, the British Channel Islands, was constructed by Nazi Germany to punish convicts with forced labor, and later, its material and architectural remnants were deliberately destroyed and erased from the memories of people (Carr, 2016). However, the conduct of the archaeological excavation and oral histories allowed researchers to recover what was intended to be wiped out and silenced (Carr, 2016). The analogous goals and procedures were applied to the Aktailak site to explore how archaeology can recover the unpreserved evidence and refine these sensitive and uncomfortable topics in history.

Literature Review

Research Context: Karlag Labor Camp

The Main Administration of Camps or *Glavnoe upravlenie lagerei* (Gulag) was the major labor camp system that existed during the Soviet Union era, roughly from the 1930s to the 1950s (Barenberg, 2022). Its geography was spread mostly across the territory of the Soviet Union, particularly covering its edges and isolated locations, because of economic, demographic, and ideological reasons. By settling the country's remote areas, the government could ensure more control and continue pushing the idea that their actions provide progress and fertility to the wild and untamed lands (Barnes, 200). Kazakhstan, Siberia, Belarus, Ukraine, and the western parts of Russia had several forced labor camps that differed in their populations, environmental conditions, purposes, and conducted labor (Barenberg, 2022). The Gulag period left a tragic mark on the history of the Soviet Union and its people. As Barenberg (2022) mentions in his historical overview of the Gulag, it is inconceivable to establish all the fallen victims of that period. The Soviet Union did not keep a structured and complete account of how many people were interned and how many died (Barenberg, 2022). Considering the large territory and the secrecy under which the camps were operating, some archival sources were lost or had restricted

access, while many moments were not documented (Barenberg, 2022). The accusation and departure to the forced labor camp for many could be considered the death sentence due to the inhuman conditions and high mortality rates (Barnes, 2011). People were dying in imprisonment during work, exile, persecution, extermination, and due to the brutal conditions in the camps and illnesses after the release; from 18 to 20 million people were accused and imprisoned from 1930 to 1941, and among this number, the deaths vary from 1.5 million to 2 million (Barenberg, 2022; Barnes, 2011). Mass arrests, shootings, sentences, violence, and tyranny were common for the Soviet citizens amid the Gulag period; people and their families were directly and indirectly affected by the actions of the state and the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs or Narodny Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del (NKVD) that controlled the camps' functioning.

The political, historical, and ideological origins of the Gulag are rooted in the utopian ideas of the Bolsheviks and their October Revolution (Barenberg, 2022; Barnes, 2011). First, the Soviet penal system was imprisoning the class and political threats of the state at Solovki prison camp located on the Solovetsky Islands in the White Sea, where later the White Sea Canal, a major project constructed by the prisoners' labor, would be constructed; its creation was followed by a large number of victims. The Solovki camp became an archetype for the future Gulag camps; closer to the 1930s, the nature and the purpose of the penal system started to change towards the usage of labor as a form of punishment and for economic development (Barenberg, 2022). Under the rule of Joseph Stalin, the general secretary of the USSR's Communist Party, Gulag's operation intensified and expanded massively (Barenberg, 2022). Historical and political events like collectivization (1928-1940), the Great Purge (1936-1938), the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), and industrialization were crucial to how the Gulag and penalty systems have been changing and developing throughout the years. Stalin's goals and

policies were aimed at the achievement of the industrial and economic domination of the country through labor (Josephson et al., 2013). Collectivization and its goal to centralize, modernize, and mechanize the agricultural production in the countryside is correlated with the targeted deportation, sentencing, and incarceration of the *kulaks*, prosperous peasants who had a significant amount of land and resources later confiscated by the state during the *dekulakization* campaign (Barenberg, 2022). This event, like those stated above, has overall contributed to the creation of settlements for forced labor and economic development. These actions and plans of the authorities were deeply intertwined with their ideologies and utopian intentions of transforming and taming nature, cleansing the state, eliminating its enemies, and competing with other countries (Josephson et al., 2013). However, as the history and the result of the Gulag system's functioning show, it was done with violence, terror, repression, famine, and unfair labor.

The Soviet government aimed to reshape its prisoners into the expected proper citizens by using labor as the correctional practice and punishment in combination with total isolation from the rest of the society and imprisonment in harsh conditions (Barnes, 2011). The Gulag system was operating on the margins in both geographical and social senses because camps were scattered throughout the country's edges which did not provide any contact for prisoners with the outside world (Barnes, 2011). The Gulag's population was large and diverse in many aspects; people from different social, ethnic, and economic backgrounds were confined together with different cases for the accusations. The camps consisted of those who committed actual crimes and prisoners who were wrongfully accused and were labeled as the enemies of the state for the political reasons (Barnes, 2011).

The focus of this research is Karlag or Karaganda Corrective Labor Camp, which was one of the largest forced labor camps within the whole system, and it was strategically constructed in Kazakhstan's steppes to exile convicts there and develop the mining and agricultural sectors of the country (Barnes, 2011). The goals for Karlag created by the government were majorly shaped by Stalin's broader plans for collectivization, the First Five-Year Plan, and achieving superiority over nature for economic and technological benefits (Musagalieva, 2024). Therefore, it is informative to examine Karlag and its specific subdivisions to understand how the government was executing these plans and how people were affected by them. The site studied by this research project is Aktailak, which is nowadays the name of the village in the Zhanaarka District in Central Kazakhstan. However, before 1959, it was one of Karlag's subdivisions with approximately 2300 convicts. Since academic works on the Karlag camps are not enough to provide information on Aktailak, this literature review evaluates the sources from different non-archaeological disciplines on Karlag and Gulag in general. This approach informs mostly on the historical details of the camp and demonstrates the dominant trends in the study of the Gulag camps in the academy.

Most articles and books study the Gulag from a historical perspective; they also connect the camps to the ideological and political characteristics of the Soviet Union, with a focus on quantitative estimates of how many prisoners and losses were throughout the camps' operation. For example, the works by Ivanova et al. (2015) and Musagalieva (2024) look at the large-scale implications of the Gulag and Karlag with the discussion of the collectivization and socio-economic situation of the country. Musagalieva (2024) showcases how Karlag's existence negatively affected the movements of the people across the country because the traditional pastoral economy of the local populations was replaced by the creation of collective farms and

the adoption of a human workforce for mining production and farming. The author analyzed official documents from the archives and historical literature to highlight the negative aspects of the Karlag and collectivization for not only its prisoners and countryside population but also the traditional pastoral socio-economic state of the region (Musagalieva, 2024). Her work provides the historical background on the emergence of the Karlag and what the authorities planned to create with the prisoners' labor force (Musagalieva, 2024). The book chapter by Ivanova et al. (2015) contains a similar socio-economic focus on the organization of the Gulag but also adds many details about the conditions in which prisoners had to work. The descriptions of the health, hygiene, overlooked safety regulations, nutrition, and clothing are valuable when talking about the daily lives of the prisoners and the humanization of their experiences; therefore, this work goes beyond the dominant academic studies about Gulag (Ivanova et al., 2015). Another valuable feature of this chapter is the extensive discussion of forced labor and its consequences for the country's economy, the workers, and the environment (Ivanova et al., 2015). The approach of the Ivanova et al. (2015) work is similar to the approach in a holistic and major publication by Barnes (2011) that explores the Gulag as a society with its particular structure and functions. The author focuses on daily life at the camp to demonstrate his point about the Gulag being an institution that aimed to construct and shape from prisoners what Soviet citizens should represent according to the authorities (Barnes, 2011). Overall, this work provides valuable background information about Karlag, mainly how it was established, what role Kazakhstan's environment played in its construction, how labor was organized there, and what the routine lives of prisoners were (Barnes, 2011). The comprehensive and detailed approach of Barnes (2011) that looks at the intertwinement and interaction of different components of the camp and the analysis of sources like memoirs and historical documents makes this work stand out from other

publications on Karlag. Still, this publication is written majorly from the historical perspective which once again shows the lack of archaeological approaches in the studies of the Karlag.

Another thoroughly conducted research of the materials related to Karlag from the historical and cultural angle is the article by Myssaeva and Brown (2020) that examined the propaganda of labor through the newspaper *Putevka*. *Putevka* served as the ideological and political tool for work propaganda for those inside the camp; it was read at the same time by prisoners and staff (Myssaeva & Brown, 2020). The various elements, such as labor, Soviet ideologies and slogans, education, and the shaping of the Soviet citizen, interplayed in the content of that newspaper (Myssaeva & Brown, 2020). The extracts from *Putevka* demonstrate how the government manipulated and controlled the prisoners' knowledge and perception of labor at Karlag. The main element of the newspaper was the celebration of labor, praise of those who were deemed good workers and shame of the bad ones and plans that will help to increase productivity. The role of *Putevka* was important for distancing people from the actual situation with labor and the human cost in which it resulted (Myssaeva & Brown, 2020). *Putevka* wanted to present labor to prisoners as the opportunity to redeem themselves and become clean and new Soviet citizens (Myssaeva & Brown, 2020). Therefore, there are many mentions of the performance increase and case stories about former convicts who rehabilitated their image (Myssaeva & Brown, 2020). This newspaper demonstrates in what other ways besides the constant monitoring, punishment, physical, and spatial elements the government aimed to control the population of the camps. The everyday stories and slogans about the benefits of labor were aimed at concealing the truth about actual circumstances in the camps and manipulating the prisoners and other Soviet citizens to know about the camp's operation. The paper also provides relevant information with descriptions of the internal life at the Karlag and what convicts were

doing besides the labor; it also shows how else and through what sources Karlag can be analyzed in academia (Myssaeva & Brown, 2020).

Archaeology of Labor Camps

As stated above, there are significant gaps in the archaeological approaches to the study of the Karlag and Gulag in general. However, scholars have looked at forced labor camps across other chronological and geographic contexts. Most of the selected papers employed traditional archaeological methods and historical sources to study the camp sites. Besides Gulag, there were prisoners of war (POW) camps in the USA, labor and concentration camps in Nazi Germany, and penal colonies and internment labor camps in Australia that forced their convicts to work as a punishment, control, and economic exploitation. Despite the differences in details on the origins, operation, and conditions, there are many similarities in how scholars approach the topics of prisons, incarceration, and forced labor in archaeology. One common pattern found during the review of these sources is the discussion of how many prison and camp sites are found in a poor state of preservation with a limited amount of material culture and structures; some articles even discuss how these sites are so ephemeral because they were deliberately destroyed or remodified to conceal what was, in reality, happening at them (Gonzalez-Ruibal, 2022; Mitchell, 2018). As González-Ruibal (2021) argues, sites of the forced labor camps could be considered subaltern and existing on the margins, therefore, they are neglected and leave few archaeological traces. Those who were considered marginalized and outcasted by the rest of society had to create their own social spaces from the places they inhabited; their material culture would also be preserved less because of the constant reuse and repurposing of the lower quality materials (González-Ruibal, 2021). This applies to Aktailak prisoners and their place in Soviet society; they did not have their own space or personal belongings, they were dehumanized and

reduced to the collective image of the laborers. Information about the lives of the convicts could be gathered mostly from their tangible work at the camp rather than their own voices. Therefore, González-Ruibal (2021) proposes to study these overlooked groups and their experiences from the post-processual perspective and its theories on post-colonialism and critical theories. The second common theme between all of these readings is the correlation between modernity and forced labor. Industrialization and economic development during military and peaceful times were driving forces behind the usage of free, cheap, and forced labor of the convicts. Thus, archaeological works on these different sites could be used to better understand what the universal aspects of forced labor camps were and how Karlag differed from them.

For example, the studies of Nazi Germany camps can be characterized by the limiting number of material culture, poor preservation of the structures, and employment of historical and oral data to provide more evidence (Starzmann, 2015; Starzmann, 2018; Colls et al., 2020). This destructive historical period left little material record and required archaeologists to research through palimpsest sites and very segmented data (Starzmann, 2018). As the example with the Tempelhof site shows, such evidence of past violence and oppression also tends to be forgotten or changed into something with a new, more peaceful meaning, making the work for archaeologists harder (Starzmann, 2018). However, it is important to remember that archaeology aims not only to provide an exact empirical reconstruction of the past but also to stimulate discourse on these historical, political, and social issues, make the public remember, become educated, and improve the society (Starzmann, 2018). Besides the main challenges of conducting archaeology of the labor camps, the research at Tempelhof by Starzmann (2015, 2018) revealed that people there were exploited to work in military airplane production.

Starzmann (2015) reconstructs the living conditions of the workers and places the forced labor practices at the site within the broader political and economic situation of that period in Germany. Considering the limited number of artifacts and preserved structures, Starzmann (2015) produced comprehensive research that brings attention to the major event in history. Similar to the research at Tempelhof, the works by Carr (2017) and Colls et al. (2020) study the Nazi camps of Lager Wick and Sylt, respectively. The case with the Lager Wick explores the relationship between archaeology and oral histories; the researchers acknowledge the help they got from interviewing the veterans to find the remnants of the demolished camp and plan their subsequent excavations (Carr, 2017). The combination of methods used for exploring Lager Wick is similar to the methods used at Aktailak, which again demonstrates how traditional archaeological strategies and historical data can complement each other and provide more details. Colls et al. (2020) explore in the same manner the landscapes of forced labor camps on the example of the Sylt site. The authors managed to understand the camp's dimensions, interactions between architecture, landscapes, and the prisoners, and the changes in the camp operation over time (Colls et al., 2020).

The forced labor and its correctional intent were also studied in the contexts of the US South after the Civil War and colonization of Australia through the convict framework and labor landscapes (Westmont, 2023; Gibbs et al., 2023). As Westmont (2023) demonstrates, convict leasing was a significant force in reconstructing and rebuilding the Southern territories of the US after the Civil War. They built the railroads, worked in the fields, and at the mining productions as part of their prison sentencing (Westmont, 2023). The author offers a complex overview of how different aspects like power dynamics, race, and agency would have influenced the experiences of the convicted workers (Westmont, 2023). Moreover, the work explores the

interactions between people and landscapes; it highlights how the environment and land influenced the working conditions and type of work the prisoners had, similar to the Karlag case (Westmont, 2023). Overall, Westmont (2023) considers various aspects of convict leasing, from its socio-political implications to its material and architectural manifestation. The author, in a very detailed and reflective manner, demonstrates how workers were dehumanized and treated similarly to the chattel slaves to increase their workforce and economic output (Westmont, 2023). The case of Australian forced labor of the convicts parallels the main aspects of Westmont's research (2023). It also adds an interesting perspective on how laborers transformed the landscape when they had to extract resources like wood and stone (Gibbs et al., 2023). The authors created a comprehensive framework where they characterized the different types of sites related to forced labor and their relation to Australia's environment on different scales, from local to global (Gibbs et al., 2023). What is unique about the Australian case is the excellent collection of written and archival sources that provide many details on this historical period (Gibbs et al., 2023). Therefore, an archaeological perspective is necessary to not only reconstruct what was happening at the sites but also focus specifically on the relationship between labor and the environment (Gibbs et al., 2023).

Finally, Starzmann's (2018) article describes clearly and comprehensively why archaeology is so valuable for studies on sites like Aktailak and Karlag camps in general. Archaeology can become a testimony when applied to historical periods that are marked by censorship, purposeful demolition, and obscurity (Starzmann, 2018). It can reveal what is hidden or left unsaid behind historical sources and what else can be extracted from the archaeological record, like material culture, structures, and landscape modifications. However, it also can go beyond the traditional methods and help the public sympathize with those who suffered at the

camp by employing the concepts of public archaeology and theory of the landscape phenomenology.

Theoretical Framework

Post-processual or interpretative archaeology is a school of thought that emphasizes aspects like subjectivity, agency, multivocality, and symbolism in studying past societies (Shanks, 2008). It aims to bridge the gaps between the empirical, interpretative, and historical approaches to get a detailed picture of bygone days (Shanks, 2008). Additionally, post-processual archaeologists go beyond the creation of interpretations based on the findings and believe that archaeology can contribute to the present socio-political issues in the world by empowering and uncovering the voices of minorities and oppressed groups (Shanks, 2008). To better understand what it would have been like to serve a sentence at the Aktailak subdivision camp, theoretical frameworks of phenomenology and landscape archaeology within the post-processual movement have the potential to provide relevant and comprehensive perspectives.

The theory of phenomenology, adapted from philosophy, got its new implementation in the pioneering work of Christopher Tilley, who demonstrated how the study of experiences and senses can be used to observe landscapes in archaeology (1994). First, he redefined the concept of landscapes by critiquing the previously established definitions of landscapes as static and geographical phenomena and suggesting viewing landscapes as a dynamic medium through which different agents interact with each other and create new meanings (Tilley, 1994). By departing from landscape's static and topographic definitions, Tilley (1994) explained how landscapes can be read as stories about past human actions to extract more information and narratives about the prior societies. This definition of archaeological landscapes is relevant for the Aktailak site, where most of the observations about prisoners' activities can be made from the

landscapes rather than a limited number of historical or archival records. After conceptualizing the landscape, Tilley (1994) introduces phenomenology as the appropriate approach for studying landscapes since it concerns how actors experience the world around them, what they feel, how they react, and what their senses tell them. Phenomenology offers a subjective and reflexive way to look at landscapes because scholars can interpret them based on their own perceptions and interactions with the place (Tilley, 1994).

Landscapes in archaeology were also reviewed by Tim Ingold's work (1993) on finding the bridge between archaeological and anthropological approaches. By introducing the concept of *dwelling perspective* in the study of landscapes, he argued for the benefits of combining the empirical perspectives on the landscapes with the interpretative ones (Ingold, 1993). By *dwelling*, Ingold (1993) implies the constant participation and interactions between the landscape and different actors. This reconceptualization of landscapes parallels Tilley's (1994) definition because both works emphasize how the landscape is a culturally constructed and dynamic concept that can be treated as a story and an instrument to extract information about the past. The landscape at Aktailak can offer many insights into the prisoners' lives if treated as more than an exterior and static geographical scenery. Together with the environment, it played an essential role in how prisoners engaged in forced labor and constructed the space around them. The framework for adding the element of the environment will be provided by Andrew Hoaen's work (2019), which continues the trend of linking the gap between objective and subjective approaches in studies of past people. According to the author, the environment in archaeology was mainly viewed from a functional and ecological angle rather than a cultural one (Hoaen, 2019). To avoid these dichotomies between nature and culture, physical and abstract, Hoaen (2019) suggests incorporating phenomenological and sensory archaeology into studying past

environments. Together, these methods can aid in getting a more holistic picture of how people have utilized their environment. Although Hoaen (2019) primarily focuses on prehistoric societies and more ancient environments that would have looked different in the past, his conceptualization of environment and phenomenology is still relevant to the Aktailak site and its focus on agriculture that forced prisoners constantly interact with their surroundings.

Finally, it is now essential to discuss how this research will present the findings based on Janet Spector's (2009) feminist and empathetic look at conducting archaeology and how it is connected to the post-processual theoretical movement. Spector (2009) presents a distinctive archaeological study of the Dakota tribe that challenges the dominant Eurocentric and androcentric projections on past societies in archaeology. The author argues that archaeology has the potential to be more than the rigid and strictly scientific discipline that produces exact reconstructions of the past (Spector, 2009). Spector's main idea states that adding multiple perspectives, narrative storytelling, empathy, and sensitivity to the scholars' writings on the studied communities can avoid generalizations and make archaeology more engaging and accessible in society (2009). The narrative storytelling framework employed by Spector allowed her to write a detailed and vibrant interpretation of the daily life of the Dakota people, including the activities done by groups like women and children, which are often overlooked in archaeological studies. By employing the narrative framework based on Spector's (2009) book, the interpretation of the Aktailak prisoners' experience will contain more details and humanization that will help the public sympathize with the hardships they endured and relate to them. This allows for research to include more voices of the prisoners, focus on their suffering, and look at the Karlag camps from the perspective of those who experienced the cruelty of the Soviet penal system first-hand.

Methodology

The first step of this research's design is recording data about the Aktailak site through traditional archaeological methods like systematic pedestrian surveys, excavations, mapping, sketching, and photography. Members of the CAG research project conducted these activities during the three-week fieldwork in May 2024. The work by Tringham and Danis (2019) mentions the significance of walking during surveys from a phenomenological perspective and how it allows researchers to feel the world they are in, both physically and abstractly. By moving through the landscapes, researchers can feel the terrain of the site, note the weather conditions, observe various site features, and orient themselves in that space, which will result in asking more nuanced and reflective questions about the experience of the people that have been there many years ago (Tringham & Danis, 2019). The article by Hamilton et al. (2006) also notes the reflexivity of walking during surveys and its help in generating more thoughtful questions and interpretations of the site. Most importantly, this work demonstrates, by using the example of the Neolithic site, Tavoliere, how traditional archaeological methods can be adopted and implemented for the phenomenological studies of landscapes (Hamilton et al., 2006). To view landscapes from the phenomenological perspective, no groundbreaking innovative approach is required; it is possible to use the same methods but with some modifications to the questions. For example, similarly to Hamilton et al. (2016) and Tringham and Danis (2019), questions will be mainly about the environmental conditions, visibility at the site, possible routes taken by the people in the past, and other sensory engagements with the landscape.

During the next step, it is necessary to organize everything, write the interpretations, and support them with historical and archival materials. Barnes (2000) shares in his article how to meaningfully and subtly approach the analysis of the archival and primary records about the

Gulag to go beyond numerical data about the camps and the political or economic implications of the Soviet Union's regime. The author's critique of the previous work by historians on Gulag and proposal of shifting research questions from the quantitative estimates to the observations of the prisoners' and guards' routine at the camps with more details and social aspects resonates with the literature phenomenology of landscapes (Barnes, 2000). The focus on the reconstruction of daily life instead of one major event, multivocality, avoidance of generalizations, and looking at the landscapes or camp as social phenomena unite the works by Barnes (2000), Hamilton et al. (2016), and Tringham and Danis (2019). As Barnes (2000) recommended, the memoirs of the former inmates will also be used to provide supporting data on the experience at the camp because memoirs offer an inside perspective into life at camp, as long as scholars ask appropriate questions and interpret the sources. One significant aspect of Barnes's (2000) methods is the idea of positioning the Gulag within the context of other forced labor camps or concentration camps to get comparisons, highlight the distinctive features of Gulag camps, and how it fits within the phenomenon of corrective institutions.

After processing memoirs and historical records about Karlag, the final step is to connect all interpretations, create an overview of the site, and present it in this capstone project. In this work, the research question will be explored through narrative storytelling with details and descriptions that will humanize the past and make a dynamic and vivid reconstruction shaped by the theoretical framework of Spector (2009). Tringham and Danis (2019), when discussing the writing and narrative techniques in sensory archaeology, also reference Spector's book (2009) as an example of creating fictional stories that are based on empirical archaeological evidence to preserve the human aspects of archaeology and show how archaeology can be accessible and welcoming to everyone. By following the narrative storytelling approach of Spector (2009), the

Aktailak site can gain a novel and experiential portrayal where humans will not disappear behind numbers and overgeneralizations; their experiences and activities will be integrated within the landscape, and the descriptions will invoke feelings and empathy in the reader.

Overall, although Gulag is frequently explored in works from different disciplines, there is a significant gap in the archaeological literature and the literature about its specific subdivisions. By addressing these gaps and expanding on the topic of Karlag, it will be possible to see what factors and traits united all camps within the Gulag system and highlight those that made them different. Additionally, more research on such grim and destructive periods in the history of the Soviet Union could stimulate the discourse and draw attention to broader issues like collective memory, trauma, authoritarian regimes, labor exploitation, and penal systems. The post-processual archaeological theory of landscape phenomenology, with its perspective on the landscape as a social and dynamic phenomenon and methodology that considers senses, perceptions, and experiences of the agent, will help get a more detailed and sympathetic reconstruction of the site (Tilley, 1994). In addition, Spector's (2009) narrative storytelling approach will enhance the understanding of the prisoners' experiences through empathy and respect for their histories.

Methodology

The design of this research can be divided into two main stages: the collection of data during fieldwork and the interpretational part that comes after. The first stage was conducted during the fieldwork at the Aktailak site from May 12 to May 31, 2024, as a part of Central Asia's Gulag: Mapping and Managing Penal Heritage in Kazakhstan (CAG) project at Nazarbayev University. During this period, the team was engaged in traditional archaeological methods like pedestrian surveys, excavations, mapping of the site, sketching, and photography.

By doing systematic pedestrian surveys, the team recorded the artifacts found on the surface, structures, and features associated with the Karlag period and observed the environment around them. The survey form included information about the GPS coordinates, descriptions of the weather conditions and topography, material of the structure, and sketches. The observation of the landscape at Aktailak and the record of the location of the buildings, features, and other traces of the landscape modification were crucial for understanding the camp's size and layout.

The surveys provided valuable information about the features that were not previously documented and expected to be found at the site. The preserved parts of the irrigation system in various conditions could potentially offer information on how farming and agriculture were organized in the region. This capstone project will focus on this irrigation canal as a manifestation of the intensive labor and contribution of the prisoners to the camp's maintenance. Additionally, excavations, test pits, and cleanings were done inside the structures, which helped estimate the dimensions of the buildings and materials used. They also revealed some artifacts like metallic pieces from the windows and doors, and broken dishes. During the pedestrian survey, artifacts like glass and ceramic insulators from power transmission lines were encountered and estimated to be from the Karlag and later periods.

The second stage of the methodology focuses on the processing of collected observations, artifacts, photographs, and archival data. All of this information is stored in the project's database on Google Drive, and it will be gathered together to help contextualize the archaeological findings. The interpretations and reconstruction of the activities and organization of the site will be grounded in the theoretical frameworks of landscape phenomenology and narrative storytelling (Tilley, 1994; Spector, 2009). The landscape phenomenology approach will help to analyze how prisoners interacted with the environment at Aktailak and how it affected

their engagement in forced labor and daily activities. Instead of focusing on the numerical estimations and political implications of the camp operation, this perspective will offer more insights into the humanizing aspects and the efforts put in by prisoners into the management of the camp and the region. In addition, the narrative storytelling framework will be used to provide a direction and a manner in which the interpretations will be written up. Spector's work (2009) revises the dominant trends in the archaeological representations of studied cultures and advises scholars to write about the past in a humanizing, dynamic, and accessible way to stimulate the discourse and reflection about the sensitive periods of history. These approaches will be appropriate for the reconstruction of the Aktilak, considering what data was recorded during the first stage of the project.

Finally, since this research will be conducted from the post-processual archaeological lens, it is crucial to justify the written interpretations with historical evidence. The project's database offers multiple types of archival and primary materials like memoirs, biographies, historical maps, and official documents. Most of the historical data come from the State Archive of the Karaganda Region for Scientific and Technical Documentation and Karaganda State University; these data include the official reports made by the administration of the camp. For site reconstruction, it will be useful to sort the information on agriculture, farming, and irrigation; these records provide numerical estimations that are necessary for providing a quantitative context about how much labor was put in by prisoners. Historical maps will be included to visually demonstrate the territory of the camp and its irrigation canal. Moreover, more personal, subjective, and emotional elements will be provided by the published memoirs and biographies of the prisoners and their relatives. Most of the descriptions of labor, conditions, and the camp's environment will be extracted from the collection of the memoirs published by

Dulatbekov and Zhumadilova (2010). These works come in 3 parts and cover various aspects of the imprisonment at Karlag, recollected by the former prisoners. When organizing interpretations into one coherent site overview, these memoirs will provide the context about more specific and humanizing experiences of the prisoners. For example, how they were personally affected by the participation in a particular labor activity in both physical and emotional senses. By grounding the collected observations in the historical context, this research will become more nuanced, avoid generalizations, and contextualize prisoners' experiences at Akatilak within the broader events in the country.

Research Limitations

In the process of research, the main challenge that occurred was the establishment of the camp's timeline since the exact dates and activities could not be reconstructed from the gathered data, available tools, and limited timeframe. Another complication could follow from the very nature and common critique of post-processual archaeology; its lack of objectivity and scientific rigor in combination with the prioritization of the meanings and abstractions instead of the physical evidence is often brought up by various scholars. Nonetheless, the project will explore and base its interpretation on the physical evidence and consider the historical data to make the research more grounded and empirical. Moreover, the post-processual movement does not aim to discover the rigorous and absolute truths about the past people; instead, it recognizes the more socially and culturally significant side of archaeology, which can impact the world not only in a scientific way but in a public way, too. Such a perspective is more appropriate for the topic of the Gulag and provides novel approaches for studying, discussing, and remembering it.

Ethical Considerations:

Lastly, it is necessary to mention the ethical considerations of the project and how potential harm will be avoided. For the project about the prisoners' engagement with forced labor, it is important to recognize and remember what hardships and damage the victims of the Gulag went through. Their experiences will be presented with respect, empathy, and transparency; the research will also refrain from the dramatization and dehumanizing exploitation of the prisoners' histories. All the interpretations and observations will be guaranteed to be supported by historical and memorial data to avoid generalizations and inaccuracies. In addition, the project provides an acknowledgment of the victims of the repressions and the regime's unjust actions.

Findings and Discussion

This capstone project aims to analyze the forced labor at Aktailak and how it was reflected in the landscape modifications, interactions with the environment, and structures built by prisoners. The analysis will be done through the lenses of post-processual archaeological theories and the contextualization within the academic, official, and biographical sources about Karlag subdivisions. The findings will discuss the landscape modifications, the organization of space, which includes the administrative building, *kartzer*, mudbrick production zone, irrigation canal, and barracks, and the absence and silence in the archaeological record of the camp. The following discussion section will focus on what these findings communicate about the bodily experiences of the prisoners, concepts of power, control, and isolation, and finally on the comparative broader implications of Aktailak in relation to other labor camps throughout the modern history of mankind.

Landscape Modifications

Irrigation canal:

The steppes of Central Kazakhstan can be a harsh environment to inhabit, especially with its extreme range in temperature throughout the seasons, irregular rainfalls, scarce water resources, and hard soils. The forests and reservoirs do not dominate its landscapes, so from the very first glance at Aktailak, you can sense the dread and hostility from its natural features. The early May mornings were often rainy, windy, and gloomy; the environment did not offer any shelter or salvation from the weather's unpredictability. The wet and cold ground made it hard to move and sent chills up your whole body from the feet. Now, imagine yourself waking up after four hours of sleep on the bunks made from the rough wooden planks filled with bed bugs and without a proper meal, being escorted to work in these steppes (Barnes, 2011). You can't object, you can't resist, and you can't escape; the steppes of the Karaganda region look endless, and its horizons extend vastly. It would not be possible to last for long only on your feet without any cover and provisions; therefore, the escapes were not popular among prisoners. The workdays seemed endless; they had lasted a minimum of twelve hours without counting the commute to the work site and back to the barracks. The unwelcoming steppe was the main working site for the prisoners, where they had to engage in various agricultural activities for the sake of the governmental plans. The winds, mosquitoes, cold, and storms usually accompanied their labor; in any weather, the work was not allowed to stop. These aspects add more weight to each construction on the territory of Aktailak, especially to the irrigation canal that extends from the Sarysu River, which was previously called "Danube", to the west, and ends at the Zhannarka District. This major feature provides a glimpse into the labor organization and the engineering skills of the Karlag prisoners in the region, where the water management system is crucial for the maintenance of the agriculture and camp operation. It also shows how labor was affecting and altering the landscape and what information archaeologists can extract from it. As stated before,

Karlag was built on the steppes of the Karaganda region with the rough continental climate of Central Asia (Barnes, 2011). The Soviet authorities tasked various scientists and engineers who were imprisoned to study the region, its topography, and environment to provide solutions on how to transform this desert with its specific characteristics into a solid base for the production of food and resources that could go towards the development of Karaganda and its mining industry. This would not be the first time or last time that Central Asian lands were analyzed to construct hydrotechnical systems on their territory for economic purposes. As Brite (2018) shows, the Soviet Union was interested in controlling Central Asia's waters for agricultural development and taming nature right from the 1920s. Stalin believed that science and technology alone would be able to tame the regions' natural conditions (Josephson et al., 2013). By acquiring control over Central Asia's water sources, the state would be able to irrigate the land and get control over its population and the resources (Brite, 2018). However, as the case of the Main Turkmen Canal from the Karakum River, which was one of the longest water systems in Central Asia, showed, the ill-conceived plans and actions of the state prevented the utopian ideas about nature domination and the transformation of the desert into a fertile center from happening. Its construction required a large amount of human and material capital; many marginalized communities of that period, like Jews, local Turkmen people, and Gulag prisoners, were affected negatively by the powerful system that forced them to either labor for the country or adapt to the changes (Brite, 2018). The canal was not sustainable, and it was directly linked to the environmental catastrophe of the Aral Sea (Brite, 2018). This was not, however, the last attempt of the Soviet Union to gain control over the water sources. The tragic engineering of the White Sea Canal in the 1930s, where nearly 20 thousand Gulag prisoners died, is another example (Brite, 2018). The canal was supposed to connect the White Sea with the Baltic Sea through

Lake Onega and allow the state to make economic transportations, navigate military naval vessels, and most importantly, demonstrate to the masses how great the Soviet penal system was (Barnes, 2011). The ideology was always intertwined with everything done by prisoners. The propagandistic works like “The I.V. Stalin White Sea - Baltic Sea Canal” by Maxim Gorky (1934) celebrated and praised the government’s authority that contributed to the extensive labor of the Gulag prisoners, which resulted in this massive construction. This book did not discuss how many people died during the work, how many people were affected, or the disastrous consequences it has brought. The canal was built on the tears, blood, and sweat of the convicts who were just seen as economic tools; their pain was not publicized, but instead distorted, falsified, and used for propaganda (Barnes, 2011).

Returning to the Aktailak case, there are many parallels in the ideology and goals behind the construction of its irrigation canal, but on a smaller and more local scale. Traditionally, irrigation systems allow the support of agriculture and farming by artificially supplying water from the main source to the fields, preventing floods, and improving the soil conditions (Brite, 2018). The Aktailak canal was dug out and expanded in different directions to provide the camp and later established village with the opportunities to grow crops and maintain livestock. Its length is estimated to be around 5.5 kilometers; the depth of the canal shows some standardization despite the changes over the many years due to sedimentation, flooding, and human activities. At the starting point, the canal’s width is 3.5 meters and its depth is 1.6 meters. Towards the end, the dimensions decrease to 2.68 meters and 0.30 meters, respectively. This change could be explained by the necessity of allowing water to flow to the irrigation fields; the ground slopes lower and becomes less angled. Vegetation and tree line along the canal prevent the free movement, and they were possibly strategically planted there to obscure the vision of the

prisoners to prevent escapes. There are also several paths paved by years of walking and natural processes. After many years, the canal and its features remained mostly unchanged; the activities of the prisoners are still inscribed into the landscape of Aktailak. The entire walk from the start to the end of the canal would take approximately one and a half hours. It would also be accompanied by winds, freezing temperatures in the early mornings, and hot sun during the day. Moreover, small feeder channels are going to the north and south, which allow water to flow in other directions. This also helps to prevent flooding and the redistribution of excess water during the rainfalls. The shape of the canal is parabolic, which was common for the canals constructed during the Soviet Union period (Laycock, 2007). It is efficient and easy to build, especially considering the lack of time, materials, and equipment of the Karlag prisoners. Laycock (2007), in his book about the construction of irrigation canals, mentions that the parabolic shape prevents cattle from stepping on and destroying it because of its smooth slopes. The canal at Aktailak does not have any lining along it, but it has partially preserved twelve concrete gates and some lined slopes. The construction and engineering of the canal's structures show some standardization in the measurements; the average height of the gates is usually around 0.37 meters, while their average length is 1.53 meters. The materials used for their construction were usually concrete, stone, and plaster for smoothing the foundation. The inner notches where the metal sluice gate was placed were laid with wood and stones, but the gates themselves were missing. Out of twelve concrete gates, one had a carved Roman number, 11, and 1953. The placement of the gates is also not straightforward; most of them were found along the canal, but some of them were parallel to each other or facing other directions. The primary canal is also associated with the dam, which is located 30 meters away from it, and with at least three tributary canals that provide water for it. This shows how complex the hydraulic system was at

Aktailak despite the simple instruments and the tight deadlines. At “The Museum of Memory of Victims of Political Repression” in Dolinka, where the administrative center of the Karlag was, you can see what tools the prisoners had at their disposal. Pickaxes, shovels, wheelbarrows, and crowbars demanded human power, effort, and skills to be used, particularly because the daily norm for digging was from 8 to 10 cubic meters (Dulatbekov & Zhumadilova, 2010). The soil conditions, foul weather, and degrading commands of the guards would only make the whole situation worse. Your body no longer belonged to you; it was mechanized and abused only for economic and ideological purposes. Prisoners continued building the canal only with one hope in mind: the water and the crops it would bring would be beneficial for their nutrition and living conditions. However, their own rations were poor and limited; the amount of food depended on their work performance (Barnes, 2011). Applebaum (2004), in her major historical publication about the Gulag, demonstrates memoirs where prisoners recall getting hot water, minimal amounts of grains, bread, potatoes, animal lungs, and meatless soup for sustenance. It was not enough and fair for the endless hours and amounts of work the prisoners did. Irrigation canal was supposed to help them and villagers to grow new crops: potatoes, onions, cabbage, and tomatoes, which prisoners themselves often times did not have a chance to eat.

Even though the construction of the irrigation canal did not end up in the deaths of more than a thousand convicts, like it was during the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal, and in comparison, it looks much smaller and more modest, it still reflects the grand ideas of Stalin. The transformation and taming of the wild lands would have been possible only with the sufferings of the prisoners who did not have any choice or agency.

Mudbrick production zone

On the territory of the camp, you may encounter round depressions in the ground with the earthen centers inside them. These pits go in groups, and there are around 6 areas with these features. From the aerial view, they are useful during the discovery of the camp zones because they were used for the production of the mudbrick, the main material for constructing the camp buildings. At Aktailak, the position of the mudbrick production zones is deliberate and calculated; all areas are located near the water sources, like irrigation canals or catchments. The soil around these pits is usually wet and muddy, which makes it difficult to move close to them. The number of the mudbrick production pits in groups also varies; some of them are densely placed, while others are separated from each other by a distance of less than one meter. The dimensions of the features demonstrate some standardization; the average diameter of the features is 8.5 meters, and the average depth is 0.52 meters. The differences in dimensions could be explained by the demands of the camp infrastructure, since the barracks and workshops were made and developed over time, depending on how many new prisoners were arriving. Mudbrick production was a distinctive feature of the Karlag camps because of the unique environmental constraints that the region provided. Unlike Siberia, the Central Kazakhstan steppes do not have dense forests, so the barracks and other buildings were not made from timber. The camp administration and prisoners had to adapt to the steppe environment and construct everything from mud, clay, sand, and various organic materials like plants and dung. When looking at the Aktailak landscape from an aerial view, it is easy to see the definite and prominent outlines of the mudbrick pits, which allow archaeologists to identify other Karlag camp locations. Karlag prisoners had to work in groups, *brigades*, and be responsible for each step of the production process. Generally, the making of mudbrick can be divided into five steps: the selection of soil and materials, mixing, molding, drying, and storage (Fodde, 2009). All steps required human

strength and endurance. The long workdays varied weather conditions, and constant skin contact with the harmful chemicals of the materials complicated the whole process and once again demonstrated how the Soviet government prioritized the economic output rather than the health and lives of human beings. The round shape of the mudbrick production zones could be explained by the repetitive process of treading and mixing materials with human feet. People walked in circular motions until their feet were sore and aching; their limbs were merely instruments for the profit and did not belong to them. After mixing the substance for the mudbricks, prisoners had to mold them into bricks using wooden forms and let them dry. The weight of the mudbrick was around 16 kilograms, and convicts had to stock and move them to the place of construction. The most degrading and tragic aspect of the whole process is that everything was aimed at the creation of the barracks where prisoners themselves would live in Karlag. This paradox of building your own cell is another distinct feature of the Karlag camps. When you are sent to the edges without any infrastructure, another facet of your punishment becomes the establishment of conditions for spending your time in confinement.

Barracks

The barren lands of Central Kazakhstan were what the first prisoners of Karlag saw before them when they were sent there. The construction of barracks, the overcrowded and cold mudbrick housing buildings for the convicts, presents another case of inhuman treatment of the prisoners by the Soviet penal system. They came to this land and had to build everything with their hands. The nights during the construction process were spent on the cold ground without any shelter from the winds. Everything had to be done in tight deadlines and manually with the help of simple tools. Mudbrick barracks are the prominent feature of the Karlag camps; at Aktailak, the survey exposed approximately 11 mudbrick barracks in a rectangular and L-shape.

Their length was 45 meters on average, while their average width was 13 meters. All of the barracks show standardization in their dimensions, which makes it easy to identify them. It was hard to analyze them more carefully since they have either collapsed walls and been buried under the ground or the mudbrick has decomposed over time, which looks like rectangular mounds on the surface. Each barrack housed around 160 prisoners who slept on the wooden bunk beds, did not have proper heating, and had no personal space. The movement from one barrack to another was restricted: some even had metal bars on their windows (Barnes, 2011). The living conditions there could be described as humiliating, cold, cramped, unsanitary, and hostile. People of different backgrounds were forced to live together without regard to their language barriers or cultural, social, and economic differences. The archival documents report severe problems with hygiene and cleanliness; prisoners had to tolerate cockroaches, bedbugs, mosquitoes, lice, flies, and fleas. These conditions caused a lot of deaths and diseases but did not force the officials to improve the situation.

Barracks are major structures for Karlag and the knowledge about the living conditions for prisoners. From the memoirs and official documents, it is known that the barracks were assigned by gender, but there could be other factors like the type of crime, behavior of the prisoners, type of labor, ethnic background, and health status. However, due to the poor preservation, it is hard to get a deeper look into how prisoners spent their time outside of working hours. The excavations did not reveal any personal belongings, signs of resistance, or more insights into the interior layout of the barracks. Over the years, the cheap and completed on tight deadlines labor showed its results, and the fact that mudbrick could not withstand the inclement weather of the region.

Administrative building and *Kartzer*

When looking at the landscapes of Aktailak, the most noticeable and well-preserved architectural structures are the *kartzer*, a detention facility, and an administrative building. Both buildings are situated further south of the main camp, away from the barracks, workshops, and irrigation canal. These two structures were the first constructions of the Karlag at Aktailak, and they were foundational for the camp operation. The journey of prisoners started from the administrative building, where they were left off after the transportation. Fear, hopelessness, isolation, exhaustion, and disorientation would follow them throughout their whole road to Aktailak. At the administrative block, officers and guards would check the newly arrived convicts, register them, and assign numbers. After this careful inspection, the lives of the thousand Soviet citizens would change forever. The administrative building itself does not look imposing, big, or frightening. It is made from fired bricks and concrete with several rooms inside. The power imbalance between the prisoners and officials is reflected even in the choice of construction materials for the buildings where these two groups would spend the majority of their time in the camp. Fired brick is stronger and more appropriate for providing heat; the guards would sit comfortably in the warm rooms. On the other hand, the barracks for prisoners were solely built from mudbrick, the cheapest material made from what the environment of the region has provided. This led to the situation where barracks were always cold and had a lot of moisture, making the existence there extremely uncomfortable. Fired bricks hold heat better than mudbricks, and they are more durable against rain, water, moisture, and winds. Therefore, the administrative building, even in its wretched condition, remains still, while barracks are crumbling into the ground.

The layout of the rooms does not give anything particular about their purposes. However, it was most likely that the guards and camp administration did some paperwork here, rested, and generally spent their time while prisoners labored in the fields and in the workshops. However, not everything that clear about this building. There are several interpretations about the exact purpose of it. Some believe that it was a small hospital or medical post, while others think that it was solely a processing room from which prisoners were later distributed across the camp. This ambiguity is the consequence of the poor preservation of the building. The roof and some walls are completely collapsed, while the details of the doors and windows are missing.

The second building of the Karlag period that still stands silently and immediately attracts attention at Aktilak is *kartzer*, the detention facility or isolator where convicts with misbehaviors and deviations would be punished by being sent into the solitary cell. Even at first glance, the building evokes the atmosphere of dread and isolation. Around these two concrete structures, there is only an endless horizon: no escape and no hope. *Kartzer* is mentioned many times in the memoirs of the prisoners, always in the context of punishment and unfairness. This rectangular-shaped building, made with stone walls and a concrete roof and floor, reminds people of the inhuman actions of the Soviet authorities towards the captives at Karlag. The paranoia, control, and surveillance at the camps led the administration to create this prison within the prison where convicts were sent for any violations. Stealing, disobedience to authority, criticism of the Soviet Union's power, breaking camp rules, work-related issues, and behavioral problems all could contribute to the decision of sending prisoners to the isolator cells (Barnes, 2011). Prisoners in the *kartzer* were under constant surveillance, which is supported by the spy window found in some of the rooms. The layout of the building once again demonstrates how isolating and suffocating the whole experience at the *kartzer* was. After entering the metallic

door, which is now missing, you would see a corridor with 3 rooms on each side; most of them were used as solitary cells, but the one room differs in size and purpose. It has a higher door frame, larger window notches, and more space. The other rooms are smaller and either do not have any windows or have spy windows used for monitoring prisoners.

Kartzer at Aktailak is in relatively good condition compared to other structures; it misses details like doors and windows, has collapsed walls and roof, but still allows us to understand what the typical isolator looked like during the Karlag period. It was a prison within the prison; convicts would have passed through these confining walls multiple times during their sentencing. First, before being distributed to the camp, they would have been inspected and investigated for any potential diseases. Prisoners were stripped away from their clothes, staying naked on the cold concrete floors, awaiting the minute when their lives would be forever changed. After this check, there was always a possibility of returning to that place during their stay at Karlag. All of the rooms in the isolator look relatively the same and remind other *kartzers* at other camps across Karlag. Bare stone walls, hard floors, and minimum space for movement reflect the main purposes of this building. Spending endless hours in isolation could have been deadly because of the cold and lack of food. Administration neglected all of the maintenance of the normal conditions in the isolator to humiliate and punish wrongdoers more. Overall, *kartzer* at Aktailak looks like a standardized punishment or isolator cell from other camps. However, in the hallways, you may notice parts of the heating system made from fired bricks. Considering that Applebaum (2004) described in her book the absence of any heating and comfort for the prisoners, this finding raises questions about the temperature inside the building, suggesting that without the oven, prisoners would have simply died from the cold or mold. In addition, other isolators were wet and moldy inside; prisoners were also cut off from any communication,

restricted from moving freely, and received bread from the unprocessed wheat that was almost impossible to eat (Applebaum, 2004). *Kartzer* was one of the most intimidating places in the whole camp, and its remote location from the barracks and working zone only intensified the feelings of alienation and paranoia from being kept under close watch. One more confusing matter about the *kartzer's* presence in Karlag is the fact that building it, maintaining it, and sending prisoners there would be costly for the administration. Building it would require more resources, and keeping prisoners there would result in the loss of some working force.

Nonetheless, the menace in the form of *kartzer* served as the motivation for the convicts to labor harder. If you did not work enthusiastically or refused to work, then you could have ended up in the worst place at the camp.

Spatial Organization of Domination

To understand what ideas the landscape at Aktailak has reflected in relation to the Soviet penal system, it is significant to look at its spatial organization and how structures and work sites were associated with each other. In general, the layout of the Aktailak was purposefully constructed to separate the authorities and the prisoners. The concentration of administrative power was to the south of the camp, where the administrative building and *kartzer* were located, while to the north, there was a working area and living quarters where prisoners spent most of their time. The camp was mainly divided into these two main zones, but prisoners could not move freely between them. However, Barnes (2011) mentions that in some divisions, people were not always under strict surveillance; those who earned trust with their work performance and good behavior did not have guards to look over them and could walk freely as if they were not surrounded by barbed wire and fences. Still, the camp was a penal institution, and it was not

possible to escape the constant watch and control of the guards, which was reminded by how structures and zones were positioned in relation to each other.

The distance between the administrative building and the isolator and the rest of the camp demonstrates the hierarchy between the officials and prisoners. The barracks, workshops, irrigation canal, and agricultural fields are clustered together to ensure that everyone who was working was under supervision and monitoring. The dense tree line along the canal and barbed wire would also contribute to the control of the prisoners' movement and experience at the camp. Barbed wire acted as the hard boundary that separated convicts from the rest of the territory and society. It reminded them of their position and helped to prevent any escapes. The trees planted by the prisoners themselves obscured the visibility and outlined the working areas of the camp that belonged to them. Even on the vast steppe, the landscape and every environmental feature at Aktailak were bounding and confining people.

The remoteness of the *kartzar* also reinforces the idea and the main purpose behind this building. Being away both physically and socially for an indefinite time with no communication or contact with the rest of the camp would be a mental and bodily torture for the wrongdoers. The architecture and location of the *kartzar* were transformed into the active tool of repression and alienation with its distant location and cramped atmosphere. Its placement on the periphery of the camp reminded and threatened prisoners of what could await them if they did not obey the camp rules. In general, everything constructed and modified at Aktailak was not accidental; landscape and spatial organization reflected the Soviet state's attempt to dominate and oppress the prisoners' bodies and minds.

Absence and Silence in the Record

The Akhtailak case demonstrates how sites of suffering and dark heritage do not usually withstand for a long time. The Karlag period ended approximately in 1959, but most of the structures and evidence of the camp have disappeared. It is still a part of the contemporary past, like World War II and the Nazi period, but sites from all of these historical chapters are in poor condition. In addition to the environmental and natural processes that affect the condition of the structures and features of the camps, other factors like deliberate forgetting, propaganda, and erasure of the uncomfortable parts of history contribute to the fragmented archaeological record of the Karlag. Structures were intentionally demolished, while other written or oral sources were silenced due to the sensitivity of the topic and reluctance to reveal inconvenient facts. The Soviet government was especially focused on concealing the truth and translating only the ideologically appropriate information. For the authorities, the Gulag camps and the forced labor were not only the means for punishing its citizens but also the manipulative tools for controlling the masses and commending the Soviet Union's power. Therefore, the flow of information between the camps and the rest of society, and the knowledge about the camps' operation, was strictly limited. After the disbandment of the Gulag camps in the 1950s, the government tried to destroy much of the textual evidence of how poorly treated and untended the prisoners were. The Nazis were also getting rid of and burning written sources of their crimes at the Mauthausen concentration camp, which complicated the work of future historians (Mitchell, 2017). Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's book (1973) was the first shocking introduction for the public to what was happening behind the barbed wire. It was almost impossible to publish works about the camps, openly discuss them, and research the archives to get any information; everything was done in secrecy. Even the physical traces of the camps were destroyed or neglected, letting the passage of time crumble the foundations of the structures to the ground. The Karlag sites were not protected or maintained for

future generations to witness; on the contrary, some structures were ordered to be destroyed or repurposed for bathhouses, barns, hospitals, shops, and housing buildings to cover up their initial functions. Starzmann (2017) describes a similar situation in the context of the Nazi period, which was also destructive, tragic, and oppressive, making people rather erase it from their memories than discuss it openly. At the Tempelhof airfield site, where prisoners of the concentration camps were ordered to work, the evidence of the usage of forced labor and inhuman treatment was concealed and obscured to control the narrative and to hide the crimes of the Nazis and the National Socialist regime (Starzmann, 2017). This part of the history is highly fragmented, ambiguous, and complex to follow because of the ephemeral archaeological traces and silenced sources. Nonetheless, Starzmann (2017) suggests that archaeology can serve as the testimony that reveals what was hidden and unclear; it can look at these palimpsests of the past sufferings and focus on what and why was intentionally destroyed or misrepresented. It can also help the public to understand how some sites and events connected to them later were reconceived and reenvisioned with the new political meanings that were not always true (Starzmann, 2017). In recent days, the authorities have pushed the narrative of Tempelhof airfield being a symbol of freedom and resilience instead of acknowledging its brutal and oppressive past (Starzmann, 2017).

The Karlag history is another example of a highly discontinuous and broken period with not much material and textual evidence. In this case, archaeology as testimony can focus not only on what is still standing but also on what was lost and why. At Aktailak, various Karlag structures were reused throughout the years to the point where their original function was forgotten or became obscure. *Kartzer* became a site for children to play and for local people to bury their dogs, the bathhouse was used as a butter factory, and the administrative building was

taken apart for materials needed by the villagers to build their houses. After the Kalrag, life continued at Aktailak, but the landscapes acquired new meanings. Thus, without a closer look into its features, it would be hard to decipher the existence of the forced labor camp back then on this land. The absence of any personal belongings and artifacts of everyday life only emphasizes the fact that being a Karlag prisoner reduced individuals to one collective identity with no agency and personal history. Everything was ripped away and destroyed. This also translates to the structures found on the landscape; barracks, work sites, and penal facilities demonstrate how the administration enforced everyone to a monolithic and homogenous existence. Even in death, convicts could not return to their previous selves; the mass burials and unmarked graves are sorrowful indications of this. Prisoners were silenced in all ways to the point where even for archaeologists it is challenging to recognize individual selves in them. Still, interpreting the past does not produce a single narrative; instead, it raises questions about what has been preserved, what has been lost, and how these findings inform and complement our understanding of the Karlag camps.

Discussion

Phenomenology of Space and Body

“It follows that for the phenomenologist his or her body is the primary research tool. He or she experiences and observes the landscape through the body.”

(Tilley, 2010, p. 271)

The phenomenological analysis of the landscapes in archaeology relies on the bodily experiences and sensory perceptions of the past people and researchers (Tilley, 2010). The

phenomenological research does not have either predetermined hypotheses that should be evaluated or questions that should be answered. The main idea of the phenomenological research is to enter the landscape and let the perceptions and experiences there provide information about the site. Such analysis will not be generalist or broad; by experiencing the site through their own bodies and by allowing the landscapes to affect them in their own way, the researchers gain more specific insights (Tilley, 2010). Through a phenomenological lens, Aktailak's landscape unravels as more than a neutral background for human activity; it becomes an active scene through which relations between people and the environment are continually produced through bodily movement, perception, and engagement. For the Karlag prisoners, the endless steppe, the irrigation canal, the barracks, and the *kartzler* were not abstract spaces; they became lived environments in which punishment, endurance, power, control, and isolation became materialized and engraved in the landscape. At Aktailak, prisoners were involved in all of their senses during the interaction with their surroundings. In front of them and around, they could only see the boundless steppes. Their bare feet were touching the wet and cold dirt, and their hands were placing the heavy bricks for construction. Noises of the winds and guards' shouts were accompanying their work, while smells of sweat and unwashed bodies filled their barracks. The taste of the plain food with sometimes unprocessed grains and undercooked meat could not be forgotten even after the release. Prisoners were altering the landscape of the Aktailak, but it was also affecting their bodies and souls through the forced labor and the need to adapt to their conditions.

By being physically present at the site, it was possible to phenomenologically reconstruct the working and living conditions of the convicts. Noticeable aspects of it were the site's natural topography and environment, weather, and the act of walking from one zone or structure to

another. Central Kazakhstan has a continental climate with an average temperature and wind speed in the winter being -14 °C and 20 km/h, respectively, while in summer, the average temperature and wind speed are +21 °C and 16 km/h. The winds are unforgiving and frequent in the plain steppes of the Karaganda region, while the precipitation is low and infrequent throughout the year. These climate conditions present several difficulties for the Karlag prisoners to engage in agriculture and construction work. They had to build their own water system to provide water for the fields and farming activities, create mudbrick for the infrastructure to make up for the lack of wood in the region, and endure through the weather's unpredictability. The natural topography of the site is steppes, which do not provide any cover from the winds and make escapes almost impossible. Where would they go after crossing the camp's boundaries? The steppes seemed infinite and only intensified the feeling of isolation from the rest of the world in the prisoners. This also made the guards' work easier since they could observe the inmates laboring in the open fields. Nothing could be obscured from their vision. The prisoners were trapped in that space, affecting it and materializing their pain and exhaustion in it for other generations to witness. The walk around the camp during the archaeological survey and excavation works on the barracks offered an opportunity to experience to some extent what the prisoners felt in the Aktailak space. Being at the site demonstrated that the landscape and prisoners had dialogic and reciprocal relationships where change occurred in both directions. Now, the discussion proceeds with phenomenological insights of the main features and structures at the site and how they help to understand the Aktailak carceral landscape.

Irrigation Canal

In any weather, they labored on,

Becoming weary as they dug the canal.

*They barely made it back to the zone,
And sometimes, died along the way.*

(Dulatbekov & Zhumadilova, 2010, p. 86)

The camp's operation in the Karaganda region's climate could not have been possible without the complex water system that would provide water for the agricultural and farming activities. The irrigation canal and its concrete gates represent that adaptation to the environment and symbolize the resilience of the prisoners who were bound to the repetitive movements of digging, carrying the soil and materials, levelling the ground, and building the canal's walls. Prisoners were holding simple tools, their food rations were poor, and they did not receive proper instructions before starting the work. The wind was penetrating their thin clothes and sending chills over their bodies. The irrigation canal extends for 5.5 kilometers, and each day during its construction was the same as the previous one. Waking up early, getting the porridge for breakfast, lining up under the guards' orders, and walking through the steppe to the work site to continue digging the canal. The trees planted by the convicts themselves covered their visibility and helped to prevent the harsh wind gusts. After receiving the instructions and instruments, the work would start under the vigilant gaze of the camp's administration. The environment would seem peaceful and quiet; only the rustling of leaves and grass would fill the prisoners' ears. However, when they got to work, this stillness was disrupted by the sharp sounds of the metal tools clanking, scraping, voices, guards' commands, heavy breathing, coughs, and grunts of the prisoners. The beautiful and calm scene of the tree line and the flowing river would become an active working zone where the Soviet Union's ideology about nature domination and the re-educational aspects of the forced labor would materialize in the landscape. All prisoners could smell was the sweat and bodily discharges, and the wet soil. The setting would be uncomfortable

and isolating to demonstrate to the prisoners why they were brought there in the first place. Digging the canal and constructing its heavy concrete gates for 12 hours each day was an exhausting and monotonous act that reshaped both the land and the prisoners' perception of themselves. The forced labor transformed them into tools and a free extra pair of hands for the economic benefits. Each gate along the canal carries the memory of the prisoners working all day to give Aktailak a chance to grow crops, make the fields fertile, and maintain the farming activities. The walk from the canal's start to the end would take approximately hour and a half which suggests that its construction would be a very long and tiring experience for the prisoners. Their backs were always hunched and bent over from continuous digging. Their hands had blisters from the tools and absence of the gloves. Overall, the irrigation canal embodies both the productivity and the punishment; its creation allowed Aktailak village to grow crops and develop the farming but for the prisoners it symbolizes and inscribes into the landscape their suffering and pain. Through the irrigation canal, Aktailak's landscape translates across the time the activities conducted at the site and bodily experiences of the inmates. The walk along it allows archaeologists to get the idea of what it was like to be in that space, how body was reacting to the environment, and note what sensory aspects the construction of the canal was evoking.

Barracks and Mudbrick Production Zone

At that time, the whole country resembled a camp zone. And behind the wire fence, we had practically a real town. We provided for ourselves - there were bakers, cooks, doctors. The barrack was heated with reeds, which the women prisoners themselves cut while standing chest-deep in water. The stove in which bread was baked was also heated with reeds; the same was used to heat the bathhouse.

(Dulatbekov & Zhumadilova, 2010, p. 265)

As other structures and features of the Aktailak's landscape, barracks did not have only one straightforward function of housing the prisoners and providing them a place to sleep and rest. From the phenomenological perspective, barracks of the Karlag prisoners become a space of collective isolation, endurance, and a shared suffering. There are no preserved intact barracks at Aktailak, therefore it is challenging to interpret how they would have affected the bodies of the inmates. The information about them could be extracted from the comparative analysis of the barracks at other Karlag camps and from the memoirs. The memoirs contain vivid descriptions of what prisoners felt while being housed in the barracks; they saw these mudbrick walls every day and every evening they returned to their wooden bunk beds. There were no proper ventilation and insulation, the rooms were heated with what people were able to find in the steppes. Primarily, prisoners collected reeds to heat the stoves and make mats from them for their beds.

Mats were made from the reeds that were growing on the lake near the camp. They became our mattresses and served as insulation for the greenhouses. The same reeds were also used as fuel for the barrack stoves. When an urgent task was announced, everyone who was able, by order of the barrack supervisor - an important figure in our camp life - went to the lake to collect reeds.

(Dulatbekov & Zhumadilova, 2010, p. 388)

The barracks did not provide inmates with any sense of comfort or homeliness. The air was thick and heavy there; the smell of unwashed and sweaty bodies, smoke, and damp wood filled the rooms and did not allow prisoners to take a deep breath. There was a minimum amount of furniture besides the hard wooden bunk beds on which prisoners were sleeping after the long

workdays. The overcrowded barracks did not provide any personal space and solitude. Everything was shared and forced prisoners to become one collective self of the nation's enemy that should be disciplined. At night, under the dim light of the candles or kerosene lamps prisoners could see tired, weary, and hungry faces of each other. The barracks were paradoxical spaces in the social sense; people were surviving there together, shared food and clothes, showed empathy and solidarity, and spent the majority of the time close to each other but there could not be full trust between them because of the strict surveillance and fear of the informants and punishment. Prisoners had to negotiate their human side within these contradictions. The fact that barracks were also equipped with the radios that translated propagandistic messages from the Radio Moscow by KVCh intensified the feeling of always being watched and controlled (Barnes, 2011). The metal bars on the windows and the locked doors made prisoners feel claustrophobic and cramped. Every movement and conversation were monitored which prevented prisoners from demonstrating their personality and individuality. At Aktailak, the barracks became the space for temporality of confinement where every day mirrored each other. The strict schedule consisting of waking up, setting to work, and then going back to the barracks did not change and forced prisoners to adapt their bodies and minds to this rhythm.

The other feature that could be explored phenomenologically at the site is mudbrick production zone. The repetitive and monotonous acts of mixing soil, water, and clay with feet and constant contact with the wet earth eventually became a routine for the prisoners. The creation of mudbrick was not aimed merely for the economic profitability, it was also significant for the camo operation; without mudbrick there would not be any infrastructure and buildings at the camp. Mudbrick was used to build barracks, workshops, factories, and other structures where

prisoners were engaged in the forced labor. Its production heavily depended on the seasons and environment of the steppes. During the winter and fall the ground would be frozen and difficult to work with, therefore spring and summer would be more appropriate for this activity. The production required water, grass, animal dung, and soil that was supposed to be mixed, formed into bricks, and later dried out. With these activities, the space of the mudbrick production zone embodied the rhythmic taskscapes; prisoners did the same repetitive movements day after day. Each action inscribed itself into the landscape, leaving the traces for the future generations to witness the signs of the forced labor at the site. It is possible to reconstruct the working conditions of the convicts by looking at the numerous circles in the ground where mudbricks were created. The burning sun, intrusive insects, the humidity in the air, and cold soil would not be easy to tolerate. However, prisoners did not have any other choice because whether they would sleep in the barracks or under the open sky depended on their input in labor. The mudbrick production significantly affected the bodies and the health of the inmates. In addition to the constant contact with the soil and sensory involvement in its creation, female prisoners experienced uterine prolapse due to the carrying of the bricks that sometimes weighted around 20 kilograms (Dulatbekov & Zhumadilova, 2010). Now, after the fall of the Soviet Union and the cessation of the Karlag's operation, the mudbrick production zones across the site are aid archaeologists to spot the location of the camp. They became the archive of the past endures and sensory activities. These round features on the ground serve as the material testimony of how landscape, environment, forced labor, prisoners' bodies, and ideology merged together to produce the architecture of the Aktilak.

Kartzer

I remember one time, it was very cold. The frost was terrible. We couldn't feed the

calves; there were more than a hundred of them for each of us. The next day, the warden came running and shouting: "I'll throw you in the kartzel!" But what could he get from us? We were powerless. He yelled and threatened, then left. Took pity on us.

(Dulatbekov & Zhumadilova, 2010, p. 381)

This recollection from a memory of the former prisoner Zeynep Tnalina demonstrates how even the guards sometimes understood that being confined in the cold and claustrophobic stone box is too harsh for a minor misdemeanor (Dulatbekov & Zhumadilova, 2010, p. 381). The bad behavior that could be the reason for being sent to the *kartzel* ranged from simple conversations between prisoners during work to the clear signs of resilience and protest (Barnes, 2011). The experience of spending endless hours in the four stone walls with nothing but the noise of your own heartbeat, destructive thoughts, and the freezing limbs was aimed at punishing and threatening the prisoners who were at fault. When standing at the lonely, small cell in the *kartzel*, it is hard to imagine how a grown adult would fit comfortably into this place to spend hours, days, weeks, and months in isolation and fear. Here, at the *kartzel* the power and control over prisoners was not abstract or merely mentioned in the memoirs. Instead, the submissiveness and compliance of the prisoners to the regime were felt and expressed by the stone walls, concrete hard floor, absence of any comfortable provisions, and sensory deprivation from the total isolation. The camp's administration had a full authority over how you would spend your time; either in a claustrophobic, solitary cell or outside in the steppes working until all of your limbs would be sore. In its very essence, *kartzel* at Aktailak is the prison within the prison. To punish the wrongdoers, the confinement at the isolator forced them to forget their human side; they lost their selves and agency. The hard texture of the concrete, the smell of mold on the walls, the sound of the guards' footsteps, and the heavy air filled with tragedy were the distinct

aspects of the punishment block at Aktailak. Just walking from one room to another in this nearly ruined structure causes apathy and a feeling of hopelessness. Every movement inside these walls is constrained, every breath is amplified by confinement. After sitting and lying for a significant amount of time at the *kartzet*, the prisoners' limbs were sore, their muscles stiffened, and body was merging into this carceral space. In the isolator cell, the inmates experienced the total temporal distortion, sensory deprivation, and moral and social exclusion due to their inappropriate behavior. It was an architectural and spatial extension of the Soviet regime's ideology that aimed to discipline the minds and bodies, erase any individuality, and create an illusion of re-education of the prisoners. Combined with the vast steppes where the *kartzet* was located, the structure presented a paradox where among the seemingly boundless landscape with so much space the only functioning structures are designed to incarcerate, restrict, and isolate you.

Landscape of Power, Control, and Isolation

Casella (2010) states that the modern carceral landscapes demonstrate the interplay between three elements of social power: domination, resistance, and negotiation. Although these sites of punishment were intended to control and subordinate prisoners, they were never experienced passively; the prisoners' own actions, experiences, and perceptions continually reshaped them (Casella, 2010). Carceral landscapes are first created intentionally to isolate, punish, and govern people; they embody the ideological, political, and disciplinary ideas of the authorities (Casella, 2010). However, those who inhabit these landscapes constantly modify them and negotiate the space around them, which is evident even at Aktailak. You can feel the presence of the prisoners and their sufferings through the structures and features at the site. The memoirs and archival documents show how Karlag prisoners tried to adapt and contest the

carceral space around them through the black market and creation of art and poetry about their experiences at the camp. The acquisition of food, clothing, cigarettes, and alcohol by the prisoners at Karlag through the black market demonstrates their needs and agency (Barnes, 2011). They were not always passive victims of the circumstances; they were capable of finding pleasure and a way out during the hard times. Compared to the negotiation, the resistance at Aktilak is not that evident and well-documented. There are no material traces of the weapons, carved words, and modified structures that could suggest how prisoners tried to rebel and oppose the authorities and the regime. These situations were probably more subtle and were immediately prevented by the administration. Barnes (2011) describes how the camp administration frequently transferred different groups of prisoners from one camp to another and intensified the surveillance to stop people from uniting and having a chance to organize an uprising. On the other hand, the clearest manifestation of one of these elements of social power is seen through the landscape and its built structures at Aktilak. Everything constructed at the site communicated the major idea about the domination of the Soviet penal system over the convicts. The concept of domination at Aktilak can be elaborated on and divided into the ideas of power, control, and isolation that add more nuance to the site's carceral landscape.

At Aktilak, structures and features like administrative building, *kartzer*, barracks, and irrigation canal could not be separately associated with the aspects of power, control, and isolation. These elements are entangled with each other, and these archaeological findings communicate all three of them concurrently from the phenomenological analyses. First, to understand how the Aktilak landscape translates these ideas, it is important to define them. According to Dépret and Fiske (1993), power is the capacity or agency through which an actor

influences or shapes the outcomes of actions, interactions, and meanings within a social context. It is about the role that a person has in how the events will unfold. The authors also relate the concept of control to power since they both depend on each other (Dépret & Fiske, 1993). An increase in power often corresponds with greater control over situations, and vice versa (Dépret & Fiske, 1993). Therefore, it is impossible to discuss one thing without another. At Aktailak, power was felt, seen, and materialized through the administrative building, where guards and the authorities managed the camp's operation, registered new prisoners, and did the bureaucratic work. Its distinct red color reflected the significance of the structure and the role it had in the camp's life. The usage of the fired bricks in its construction shows how the camp's administration had a higher position in the hierarchy compared to the prisoners and required more comfortable conditions even in the working space. While prisoners had to labor for twelve hours in the mudbrick workshops or under the open skies to dig the canal, plant crops, and knead the materials for mudbrick with their bare feet, the guards were pleasantly working in their heated and well-lit quarters. The difference between the structures' materials and conditions of the prisoners versus guards demonstrates the power imbalance; convicts were occupying the lowest niche in Soviet society. The camp's administration had authority and could influence how prisoners spent their sentencing. As part of the Soviet ideology, the main function of the Gulag was to force prisoners to work to redeem themselves and become model citizens. They were powerless against the regime and had no other choice but to comply with the rules and tasks. The main feature of the Gulag camps was the forced labor, which acted as a powerful tool to control and oppress the convicts. The evidence of the irrigation canal, agricultural fields, and mudbrick production is a demonstration of how the Soviet Union's power was materially inscribed into the landscape. Everything from the commute to work and living inside the camp perimeter was

disciplined and controlled because of the guards' commands and the system of surveillance. These activities at the camp were the continuation and the reconstruction of the plans and ideologies from the Soviet Union's government about the economic profitability, domination of nature, collectivization, and the elimination of the enemies of the state. The *kartzet* is another example of how the Akhtailak's landscape was imposing power and forcing prisoners to act obediently. Its isolated placement right by the administrative building, claustrophobic interior, and hostile architecture instilled fear and spread paranoia in the prisoners who tried to avoid ending up there at all costs. Power at Akhtailak was not merely abstract or verbal; it was not reflected only through the propagandistic slogans, newspapers, and documents but was a part of the landscape that could be felt, touched, and experienced. The second element, control over the prisoners, was asserted through forced labor, repetitive tasks, restricted movement, and constant surveillance. The Soviet government used forced labor as a tool for controlling the bodies and minds of the convicts; the amount of the received food, any treatment, and general attitude towards you depended on your performance at work. The irrigation canal and structures along it became a symbol of Stalin's utopian ideas about nature transformation and domination over the wild lands. The authorities wanted to control everything from people to the environment. Therefore, the carceral landscape at Akhtailak was more than scenery or a background in front of which the camp events were unfolding; it was an active mechanism for control with its barbed wire, fences, watchtowers, and intentional spatial organization. Prisoners were also under surveillance and supervision of the guards and other recruited fellow inmates who reported any deviant behaviors (Barnes, 2011). This helped to prevent escapes, the emergence of gangs, murders, and bribery. Prisoners knew that they were always watched, which internalized the control, fear, obedience, and rules and discipline of the camp within them. The third element,

isolation, is especially reflected in the overall location of the camp and its isolator block, the *kartzer*. Gilmartin et al. (2013) identify isolation as the result of the reduced sensory input and absence of any social interaction. As societal animals, humans are supposed to be in a group where they can communicate with other individuals. Therefore, isolation is associated with negative consequences like loneliness, anxiety, depression, and anger. The authors also define three factors connected to the main concept, like sensory deprivation, social isolation, and confinement, which shows how being isolated is a more complex physical and mental state than just being alone (Gilmartin et al., 2013). The last concept, the confinement, is especially relevant to the camp at Akhtailak since prisoners were involuntarily placed in a position where they could not interact with the outside world and sometimes were put in the solitary cells as a form of punishment. Being away from the rest of society in the steppes would exclude them from the rest of the country and be devoid of any individual expression; their interactions and sensory experiences were limited to receiving punishment and orders from the guard. Enduring penalty at the *kartzer* would only progress the feelings of isolation in the convicts, create a total sensory erasure, and make them forget about their human side. They were surrounded only by the stone walls and total silence. As Barnes (2010) observes, the sentence to Karlag signaled total estrangement from the outside world and could be compared to death in a social sense. The significant distance between *kartzer* and the rest of the camp also communicates the idea that this facility was a tool for separating prisoners with inappropriate behavior. When you do not have anything personal or any agency, your identity is being erased and faded until you become just another number in the Soviet Union's penal system, while your body becomes a tool in the economic plans of the totalitarian regime. You lose all your hope and thoughts about your previous life. Your routine of waking up early to work until the end of the day becomes the only

constant in your life, and this repetitiveness isolates you from other life experiences that are normal to humans.

Overall, the Aktailak carceral landscape was an ideological instrument for dominating, controlling, and isolating prisoners. It shaped their bodies, behaviors, and perceptions according to the Soviet Union's ideology at that time, which was rooted in the Marxist-Leninist theories. The ideology stated that human nature, like the environment, could be reshaped through labor, discipline, and collective effort (Barnes, 2011). This conviction considered forced labor at the camps not only as an economic mechanism but also as a moral and transformative power tool. Therefore, the Aktailak landscape materialized and reflected these ideas. Surveillance, spatial order, separation from society, and repetitive tasks became means for moral correction and re-education of the prisoners that would enforce collective identity over individuality and the benefit of the forced labor.

Comparative and Broader Implications

The Aktailak's carceral landscape provides archaeologists with an opportunity to understand what the distinctive features of the Karlag were compared to other sites of suffering, punishment, and confinement across other historical examples. The environment of Central Kazakhstan and the Karaganda region majorly shaped how prisoners constructed the infrastructure at the camp and in what type of labor they were involved. Karlag was mainly an agricultural camp where most of the resources were focused on the development of the region into a flourishing agrarian center that could sustain and maintain the mining industry of Karaganda city. Therefore, most of the landscape modifications were connected to the creation of the irrigation canal and plowing the fields to grow crops. Barracks and other structures were made from mudbrick, an accessible and cheap material that could be obtained from the natural

resources of the steppe. However, the most important differences between Karlag and other forced labor camps or sites of confinement are rooted in the ideologies and purposes of their operation. Karlag, like other Gulag camps, used punishment to re-educate the convicts, give them a chance to redeem themselves, and reintegrate themselves back into society. In Karlag, forced labor was corrective and tied closely to the socialist regime (Barnes, 2011). The propagandistic slogans about the benefits of the work, the *Putevka* newspaper, and the governmentally approved book by Maxim Gorky (1934) on the White Sea Canal constantly praised the labor in the camps and raised false hopes in the prisoners that they would be returned to their normal lives if they were honest and compliant workers. In addition, the Gulag camps had the Cultural-Educational Department called *KVCh* that was responsible for the re-education of the prisoners and socialist labor propaganda (Barnes, 2011). This department created special cultural activities, distributed posters, and tuned the radios across the camps that spread information on the greatness of the labor (Barnes, 2011). This forced labor aspect makes Gulag camps stand out from other carceral sites because it was entangled with almost every other feature of the Soviet penal system. It was also connected to the economic output of the country and the development of the military industry during the war. Therefore, the scale of the camps was massive as they were found on almost all of the peripheries of the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this capstone project explored the landscape and its main structures and features at Aktailak through the post-processual archaeological theories, specifically phenomenology of the landscapes that was introduced by Tilley (1994). The project's phenomenological approach demonstrated that the landscape at Aktailak is not just a static background or scenery; it is a palimpsest of human suffering, endless pain from the forced labor,

and rare glimpses of hope and resilience. Every corner at the site, decaying structures, trees, fading traces of barracks, and deserted irrigation gate serve as the remainder of what was happening there before the establishment of the modern village. Space at Aktailak communicates crucial ideas about power, control, and isolation that were present not only in the physical aspects, like landscape modification and carceral architecture, but also in the verbal and textual aspects, like constant threats from the guards, propagandistic radio messages, and *Putevka* newspaper. These three elements, like power, control, and isolation, that are evident in the organization of the camp did not appear from nowhere; they reflect the major situation in the country and the ideologies pushed by the authorities of the Soviet Union. The regime that prioritized the collective over the individual, the economic development over the lives of its citizens, and the reshaping of the whole person's identity into the one that would be more appropriate for the state was reflected in how carceral space was felt and lived in at Aktailak. Therefore, to not forget this chapter of history, archaeology and its post-processual approaches offer a way to still talk about these events in a more humanizing way that highlights the lived experiences of the prisoners rather than focusing on the political or economic dimensions of the Karlag camps as the previous works did. This way, archaeology can become a form of testimony that uncovers sites where the controversial and violent events have happened. Research at Aktailak shows how dominant narratives created by the authorities could be challenged to bring awareness and remembrance, and advocate for a more inclusive and holistic approach to study the Soviet penal past.

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