Controlling Spaces, Creating Identities: Penitentiary Agricultural Colonies for Young Detainees, from Nineteenth-Century France to Early Soviet Ukraine

Anna Christine Grant
Occidental College

Children share with criminals the burden of heightened surveillance and reduced agency. From the Enlightenment to the present day, young lawbreakers, combining these two categories in one, have attracted special attention, anxiety, and attempts at control. Studying juvenile detention can thus reveal how people use built and natural environments to elicit desired behaviors. Prior to the early nineteenth century, European nations generally made no special provision for judging or punishing child criminals differently than adults, although magistrates might apply a more lenient variant of the prescribed penalty. It was in the context of the rapid urbanization associated with industrialization which took place during this period that the juvenile criminal was first defined as a distinct type.[1] Although villages continued to have their share of child thieves and vagabonds, in city streets the concentration of young pickpockets, panhandlers, and prostitutes made them newly visible and, to wealthier citizens, a recognizable

1 See for example Margaret May, "Innocence and Experience: The Evolution of the Concept of Juvenile Delinquency in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Victorian Studies* 17 (1973): 7–29; Heather Shore, "Inventing and Re-Inventing the Juvenile Delinquent in British History," *Memoria y Civilización* 14 (2011): 105–132.

Bulletin of the German Historical Institute 75 (Spring 2025): 39-66

hazard of urban life. Yet it was in rural spaces that the first institutions designed specifically for young lawbreakers were created. The pioneer was the Mettray penitentiary agricultural colony, founded in 1839 near the city of Tours in central France. Its founders reshaped a rural space to address an urban problem.

Eight decades later, the nascent Soviet regime faced a massive wave of homeless and criminal children who had been orphaned, lost, or abandoned due to seven years of wars and revolutions and consequent displacement and famine. Children congregated in cities, where they could survive by petty theft, begging, or scavenging, and which they could reach easily by stowing away on or under a train carriage. State agencies and volunteer associations scrambled to help, although they were often overwhelmed by the scale of the problem and the paucity of funds and material.[2] One resource available to administrators was the handful of penitentiary agricultural colonies founded by late–Russian Empire philanthropists and patterned after Mettray. Because Mettray had become known internationally as the best model for reforming delinquent youth, its distinctive layout and practices were adopted in a range of contexts, including, from the 1870s, in Russia.[3] Many Russian reformers in the late nineteenth century looked on western practices as a roadmap to a modern and prosperous state. The colonies' capacity fell far short of the need, and thus do not represent the full extent of the response to the unhoused children crisis, but they were a direct, material link with the previous philanthropic system.

Unlike the earlier philanthropists, however, Soviet educators did not subscribe to a nostalgic view of rural virtues; rather, their Marxist ideology elevated the urban proletariat as the revolutionary class. When they sent troubled youth to the countryside, it was out of pure necessity.[4] The best-known of these new Soviet institutions was the Gorky Labor Colony, founded in 1920 near Poltava, Ukraine, by a former schoolteacher and future novelist named Anton Makarenko. He

2 Alan M. Ball, *And Now My Soul Is Hardened: Abandoned Children in Soviet Russia, 1918–1930* (Berkeley, CA, 1994), 108–26.

3 Marie-Sylvie Dupont-Bouchat and Éric Pierre, eds., *Enfance et justice au XIXe siècle: essais d'histoire comparée de la protection de l'enfance, 1820–1914: France, Belgique, Pays-Bas, Canada* (Paris, 2001); Felix Driver, "Discipline Without Frontiers? Representations of the Mettray Reformatory Colony in Britain, 1840–1880," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 3 (1990): 272–293; Jeroen J. H. Dekker, "Punir, sauver et éduquer: La colonie agricole 'Nederlandsch Mettray' et la rééducation résidentielle aux Pays-Bas, en France, en Allemagne et en Angleterre entre 1814 et 1914," *Mouvement Social*, no. 153 (1990): 63–90; Christine Grant, "Grazing the Limits of Provincial Philanthropy," *Peripheral Histories?*, peer-reviewed blog, April 16, 2021, https://www.peripheralhistories.co.uk/post/grazing-the-limits-of-provincial-philanthropy.

4 Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936* (Cambridge, UK, 1993), 63.

claimed that his methods, based on nurturing a functioning children's collective, could produce proletarians from the very soil that would otherwise sprout peasants and exploiters.

Because the renowned Gorky Colony was first established on the site of the late-tsarist Poltava Agricultural Colony and Industrial Asylum, it inherited a material configuration originally devised at Mettray, transmitted via transnational networks, and adapted with limited success to a Russian Imperial provincial context. Makarenko's diligent work, both practical and discursive, to use this space in ways that explicitly contradicted the values embedded in it under the previous regime sprang from an awareness of what Patrick Joyce and Tony Bennett have termed "material powers." They have called on historians to take account not only of "the distinctive kinds of effectivity that material objects and processes exert as a consequence of the positions they occupy within specifically configured networks of relations that always include human and non-human actors" but also of "the difference they make in their own right as a consequence of their specific material properties considered relationally."[5]

Applying this lens of material powers to the Mettray and Gorky Colonies reveals several processes at play. A material configuration — in this case, a penitentiary agricultural colony — is explicitly designed both as a representation of a certain conception of how social relations should be ordered, and as a tool to implement that order. Over time, it is further shaped by the everyday practice of this system of order. The founders of Mettray, believing in the power of environments to determine identity and actions, intentionally designed the material configuration of the colony to elicit a set of actions and affects that they viewed as both a means to inculcate, and an expression of, an honest character. This material configuration consisted of buildings, objects such as uniforms, furniture, and tools, the movement of children's bodies along designated routes and performing designated actions, and the natural environment in which the colony was situated. At the

5 Patrick Joyce and Tony Bennett, "Material Powers: Introduction," in *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn* (Oxford, UK, 2010), 5. Other authors who have theorized the relationship between societal norms and the built environment include Leora Auslander, "Beyond Words," *American Historical Review* 110 (2005): 1015–1045 and Nancy Rose Hunt, "History as Form, with Simmel in Tow," *History and Theory* 57 (2018): 126–144.

moment of its founding, the colony embodied its founders' ability to exercise power over the space and its inmates. This power relation became, in a sense, petrified, set into the stone and other materials of the colony's physical existence and destined to persist after the original founders had disappeared — or so the founders of Mettray hoped, and Makarenko feared.

When Mettray-style colonies appeared in tsarist Russia, they imitated the original design, but because the philanthropists' power to command space was limited by the relative poverty of the country and by the autocratic state's heavy hand on civil society, the material configuration of the colonies did not exactly reproduce the original model. The power relations thus embedded into the physical sites were those of the tsarist-era philanthropists, influenced by Western models and Russian conditions. At first, Makarenko, like other early Soviet educators, had few resources available to reconfigure these spaces, but his actions and writings make it clear that in directing his colonists to use the spaces in ways that reflected and supported the new, Soviet regime, he recognized and resisted the power of material things to entrench a social order despite its political defeat.

Considering the two model institutions, the Mettray and Gorky Colonies, in a single transnational and comparative frame facilitates evaluation of different approaches to youth criminality and reveals the extent to which ideology and culture shape solutions to similar problems in different contexts. This paper considers one aspect of the comparison: how, in each case, rural spaces were made to solve a problem and serve a population understood as predominantly urban. In each case children were rhetorically constructed as urban, even when their origins were in fact rural. In nineteenth-century France, colony directors created spaces that were tightly regulated and designed to elicit desired behaviors. In Anton Makarenko's narrative, it is the children's collective that is portrayed as transforming and controlling various degraded rural spaces in the name of the proletariat.

I. Mettray: Shaping physical spaces to guide behavior

Beginning in 1810, France's Penal Code provided for children under sixteen to be acquitted of crimes they had committed if a judge believed they had acted "without discernment," and to be sent back to their families, or, if no suitable family existed, to a "house of correction."[6] However, since there were in fact no houses of correction, judges in the next three decades faced the dissatisfying choice of returning children to dysfunctional families or sending them to local prisons. Some of these institutions began to construct separate wings for juveniles to protect them from adult detainees, but with no special adaptations to the needs of children. In 1839, one of these judges, Frédéric-Auguste Demetz, together with his friend, former military officer *vicomte* Louis-Hermann de Brétignières de Courteilles, founded the Colony of Mettray to address this lacuna. Run by a private charitable society, the *Société Paternelle*, and funded by a combination of public funds and private donations supplemented by the labor of the young detainees themselves, the colony accepted male youth acquitted under the penal code who had nonetheless been sent to prisons because they had no family deemed capable of raising them. Demetz intended Mettray to accept boys whose conduct in prison had been good and who deserved a gentler regime, although as the colony grew this principle was abandoned. Beginning with just eight "colonists" in early 1840, Mettray housed around 800 at its peak in 1874.[7] This figure represented just under 15% of the 5,383 young male detainees living in privately-run colonies in that year; a further 2,268 were held in state-run prisons or colonies. Girls were administered separately, and there were just over two thousand young female detainees, almost all in private institutions, in 1874.[8] Once at Mettray, boys received a primary-school education, and worked to grow various crops, tend livestock, or learn crafts and trades that would prepare them to settle in rural areas on their release.[9]

6 *The Penal Code of France, Translated into English with a Preliminary Dissertation and Notes* (London, 1819), Article 66.

7 Anna Christine Grant, "Model Colonies: A Transnational Study of Penitentiary Agricultural Colonies for Young Detainees in France, Russia, and the Soviet Union, 1839–1937" (PhD diss., Carnegie Mellon University, 2019), 38-42.

8 Henri Gaillac, *Les Maisons de correction: 1830-1945* (Paris, 1991), 181–84. By 1874, Mettray's example had inspired other private individuals or societies to found a network of similar colonies across France.

9 For a history of the Mettray colony see for example Luc Forlivesi, Georges-François Pottier, and Sophie Chassat, eds., *Éduquer et punir: la colonie agricole et pénitentiaire de Mettray, 1839–1937* (Rennes, 2005); Stephen A. Toth, *Mettray: A History of France's Most Venerated Carceral Institution* (Ithaca, NY, 2019); Grant, "Model Colonies."

Mettray was a rural space, but it was designed to serve the needs of an urban population. As one supporter of Mettray wrote in 1847, Mettray and its imitators "diminish the population that encumbers cities, and weaken that excessive competition that, in one blow, crushes workers twice by lowering salaries and at the same time raising the price of essential goods."[10] Urban workers under economic stress could turn to crime or to political unrest; by reducing these stresses, urban elites made their own lives more secure.

Because they relied in part on private donations, Mettray's founders and patrons produced a discourse about juvenile crime designed to engage public support. In this discourse, juvenile crime is defined as primarily the result of urban life. In cities, they argued, when overworked or morally corrupt parents failed to keep their children disciplined, it was too easy for them to escape the authority of priests or employers, shirk productive work, and be enticed by cabarets and immoral entertainment. At their society's inaugural general meeting, Mettray's founders decried city life as "the abyss of corruption," an "impure atmosphere" for young people's moral and physical health. To "preserve them for the future from dangerous frequentations," boys at Mettray were encouraged to "love and taste the charms" of agrarian life, which was "more in keeping with our natural needs" than the manmade attractions of the metropolis.[11] The rural setting itself, construed as closer to nature (a milieu uncorrupted by human intervention, compatible with good health and evoking an imagined, more innocent time in human history), was understood to possess the inherent power to transform.[12] Indeed, Mettray's founders fully shared the faith of fellow-reformer Charles Lucas in "amending the child by the land, and the land by the child."[13]

This discourse did not include young female detainees, who were generally expected to perform domestic labor.

10 Augustin Cochin, *Notice sur Mettray* (Paris, 1847), 2, http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k63889q.

11 Archives départementales d'Indre-et-Loire (hereafter AD37) 1Y 103, Assemblée générale des fondateurs de la Colonie de Mettray, 7 June 1840, speech by Société Paternelle president Adrien de Gasparin, 6-7.

12 For a discussion of the positive values attached to nature in the modern West, see for example Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York, 1973); William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York, 1995), 69–90. Mettray's founders said little about any spiritual or psychological benefit working-class children could gain from being close to nature; in this period, such discourses applied primarily to the affluent, educated classes. For a discussion of concepts of nature applied to the urban poor, see Anna Christine Grant and Jeremia Njeru, "Sunlight and Free Markets: An Urban Political Ecological Perspective on Social Housing in Victorian London (1850–1914)," *Urban History* 50 (2023): 424–444.

13 For a concise account of the life and work of Charles Lucas, see Dupont-Bouchat and Pierre, *Enfance et justice*, 38–43.

Because this kept them confined indoors, it did not greatly signify whether the outside world presented them a rural or an urban face. Until the 1880s, when republican-dominated governments stopped cooperating with religious groups to provide correctional services, these girls were entrusted to charitable orders of nuns, often housed in towns. Here, they learned domestic skills such as needlework, which brought in little money. An 1873 penitentiary commission warned that women in cloistered orders, being cut off from the outside world, were ill-prepared to help young detainees reintegrate into it.[14] Although the commission encouraged the charitable orders to found agricultural colonies, only a few were ever created.[15]

Colony founders believed that a rural setting would help young male offenders develop hard work, honesty, and thrift, but they expressed a certain disapproval of the men and women who already inhabited these spaces, viewing them as backward, slow, dirty, and disinclined to respect their superiors. Having trained in modern farming methods which were informed by an agricultural research station on the site, former colonists were expected to settle in rural districts, acting as agents of modernization by helping "to uproot those old routines to which our peasants cling so tightly only because they defy the examples and advice given to them by men who are placed above them."[16] Only when subjected to order and hierarchy would a rural setting bring forth honest laborers from lawbreaking children. This desire for order was reflected in the highly symmetrical layout of the colony, with its chapel, workshops, and houses regularly spaced around a central square (Figure 1). Such symmetry did not prevent a Russian visitor to Mettray, Nikolai Shcherban', from experiencing the colony in 1864 as the true image of what rural life could be:

> There was no trace of artificiality in it. Everything around was perfectly natural, as if it had not been put there but had taken shape all by itself; one did not think of a house of correction, but it seemed as if we were standing in the square of a small hamlet,

14 Gabriel-Paul-Othenin d'Haussonville, *Les établissements pénitentiaires en France et aux colonies* (Paris, 1875), 473.

15 The Nazareth colony near Angers was the best known of these, but it gave its founder "many crosses" to bear: Augustin Nicq and Henri Pasquier, *La Vénérable Marie de Ste Euphrasie Pelletier, Fondatrice de La Congrégation Du Bon-Pasteur d'Angers* (Arras and Paris, 1901), 251, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k9752173r.

16 AD37 1Y 105, Assemblée générale des fondateurs de la Colonie de Mettray, 23 January 1842, 17.

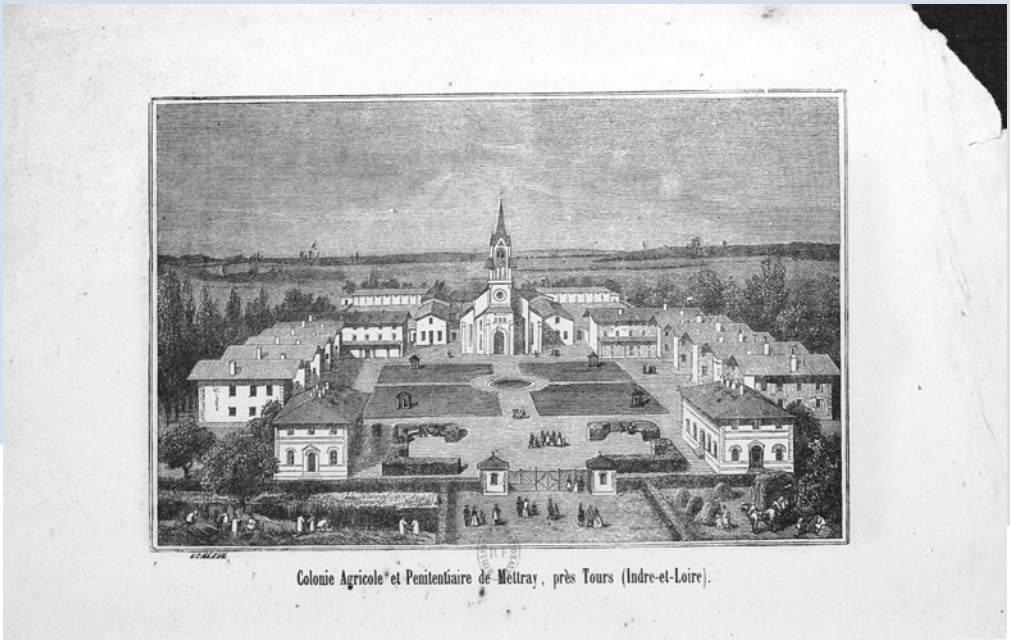

Figure 1. This engraving of the Colony of Mettray was first produced and distributed to potential supporters in 1846, at a time when only a few of the buildings portrayed had been built. Symmetrically laid out and presided over by the central chapel, the colony's buildings embody order and submission to religion. The buildings' position around a central square recalls France's urban *grandes places* on a modest scale. Source: Frédéric Auguste Demetz, *Notice sur la colonie agricole de Mettray* (Tours, France, 1865), Bibliothèque nationale de France, http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k378430r.

> whose inhabitants had gone off to work in the fields, leaving only the artisans and youngsters at home. Only the ship in the middle of the yard recalled that all this had been *built,* and built with a particular goal.[17]

A well-ordered agricultural colony promised all the benefits of country life without the poverty, dirt, or disorder endemic to actual rural conditions.

Mettray's leaders, therefore, shaped the physical environment in which colonists lived, and imposed routines to script their movements through it. Amenities in the colony were kept deliberately simple and Spartan, to prevent boys from becoming accustomed to a standard of living that they would not be able to attain in future through honest labor. To foster quasi-familial feelings between boys and their supervisors, they lived not in a large dormitory, but in "small houses, each consisting of two rooms, and affording under one roof

17 Nikolai Vasil'evich Shcherban', "Metre - ispravitel'naia koloniia dlia maloletnykh prestupnikov. Iz dorozhnykh zametok. Stat'ia pervaia," *Otechestvennyia Zapiski*, no. 168, September 1866, 389. The so-called "ship" was a set of masts and rigging set up in Mettray's central square, where boys, particularly those interested in a naval career, could practice useful skills. The equipment was a gift from the Ministry for the Navy.

working, eating, and sleeping accommodation for a 'family' of forty boys and their superintending officers, two in number," known as "fathers" of the families.[18] A "father" at Mettray spent almost every non-working moment with his charges: "he takes his meals at the same table, he sleeps in the same dormitory as his pupils; he never leaves them or loses sight of them."[19] Like a real father, he shared the home lives of his children.[20] Each supervisor had a separate sleeping room in the family cottage from which he could observe his charges through a small grille without being seen. This technique draws from the Panopticon, a nineteenth-century prison design comprising a central watchtower from which a guard could observe inmates housed in cells arranged around it. Because the inmates could not see into the watchtower to know whether they were being observed, the design encouraged them to regulate their own behavior at all times, and eventually to internalize the moral values on which the prison's rules were based.[21] The boys slept in hammocks, and to prevent them talking during the night, their orientation alternated, one with his head near the wall, the next near the center of the room. Bugle calls punctuated their days, indicating when to get up, wash, eat, go to work or attend lessons, and so on.

These technologies were intensified in the colony's punishment quarter. Boys whose misbehavior was deemed rebellious or harmful to morale — including some unlucky early colonists who guilelessly admitted they preferred the sheltered industrial workshops of their former prison to field labor in the wind and rain at Mettray — were sent to small solitary confinement cells where their only human contact was during visits from the director or chaplain.[22] For an infraction such as encouraging others to disobey their supervisors, solitary incarceration could drag on for months.[23] Slogans painted on the cell walls, such as "God sees you," encouraged detainees to reflect on their actions and repent.[24] The cells were attached to the chapel building, and incarcerated boys

18 Matthew Davenport Hill, *Our Exemplars, Poor and Rich* (London, 1861), 263.

19 AD37 114J 579, copy of article from *La France*, 8 August 1839.

20 Michel Foucault described the "fathers" as "technicians of behaviour: engineers of conduct, orthopedists of individuality," *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, 1995), 294. Foucault did not believe that skilled affective labor rendered the carceral framework less burdensome, but that by using affective labor to manipulate children's emotions so that they willingly participated in their own rehabilitation, Mettray's "fathers" merely disguised the power they exerted.

21 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 195-230.

22 AD37 114J 187, Assemblée générale des fondateurs de la Colonie de Mettray, 1841, 31.

23 AD37 114J 584, unsigned, undated manuscript of an account of a visit to Mettray [1850s].

24 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish, 294*.

could observe religious services without seeing or being seen by the other colonists.

In addition to being guided by the physical environment, colonists were taught to give their actions and those of their supervisors an approved interpretation. These supervisors, or "fathers," were encouraged to view their charges with genuine affection with a view to that affection being returned and serving as motivation for boys to please them through good behavior. But they also used a system of reward and punishment, instrumentalizing peer pressure, collective responsibility, and the sense of honor.[25] Few sources capture the voices of the detainees themselves, but letters from some freed colonists, as well as accounts of their words and actions in the narratives of the colony's directors and visitors, follow a familiar pattern: repentance for their former misdeeds, gratitude for the instruction received, and exhortation to those who remained in the colony to submit to discipline and attain a successful future. For example, in a New Year's greeting at the end of 1882, former colonist Audfray scripted out this call-and-response between his letter and its audience: "I think you will put my advice into practice, and to prove it I ask you, when your benefactors read you this letter on the platform on Sunday, all of you to lift your right hand and say I swear before God and before my benefactors . . ."[26] On Sunday evenings, during the early years of the colony, Demetz and Brétignières would read these letters, as well as other uplifting stories of heroic young Frenchmen or repentant miscreants, to an assembly of the whole colony, providing a model narrative that colonists could and did use to claim the identity of honest, reformed, and trustworthy citizens: "All colonists placed far from Mettray feel the need to correspond with us, and with their comrades to whom they often address the best of advice."[27] Colony directors designed the natural and built environment to guide the boys' behavior, but they did not rely upon it alone to reform them. Rather they scripted and choreographed the boys' movement through, and understanding

25 Foucault, 294.

26 See for example AD37 114J 585 (*Livre d'or*), extract of letter from former colonist Audfray, 30 December 1882, and other letters collected and transcribed into this ledger; AD37 114J 584, unsigned, undated [but c. 1850s] manuscript of an account of a visit to Mettray, which describes the tearful repentance of a boy in the punishment cell.

27 AD37 1Y 108, Assemblée générale des fondateurs de la Colonie de Mettray, 22 June 1845, directors' report read by Demetz, 17.

of, the colony, trusting that this would help them to internalize its values.

A visitor's account preserved in Mettray's archives reveals Demetz's skill at using punitive spaces and choreographing different actors' movements through them to provoke repentance and ensure cooperation on the part of his colonists. After accompanying the visitor on a tour of the colony, Demetz showed him a letter from a sixteen-year-old Breton who had been confined to the punishment cell after encouraging others to disobey their supervisors. The straitened conditions had induced the boy to ask for forgiveness: "Dear sir, I am still in the cell. If you knew how sad my existence is, locked up like this for 7 [sic] long months between four walls, working continually, receiving neither compliments nor rewards, oh! Director, sir, you would not leave me to languish like this." The letter touched the heart of the visitor, who accompanied Demetz to the boy's cell where he witnessed the boy's tears and interceded for him.[28] By making it clear to the detainee that his release was due not to his having served his time, but to the gracious and undeserved intervention of a patron, Demetz could put an end to what was an extremely severe punishment for insubordination without losing face, while underlining the boy's dependent position. The visitor's journey down into the cell and his reemergence with the promise of clemency for the boy served to reenact the religious theme of Christ's death, resurrection, and promise of salvation; and the boy played his designated role as the repentant sinner.

Mettray's success, then, rested on its ability to rewrite incarcerated boys' life stories through redirecting their behavior. But its founders knew that the colony's survival also depended on their ability to persuade supporters to finance its work, and they used Mettray's built environment toward this end, too. Visitors were welcomed and given guided tours that combined experiencing the material reality of the colony with an approved narrative of the history and working of the institution.[29] The abovementioned engraving (Fig. 1) not

28 AD37 114J 584, unsigned, c. 1850s account of a visit to Mettray.

29 Many visitors to Mettray published accounts of their visits; see, for example, Paul Huot, *Trois jours à Mettray: rapports lus au Congrès scientifique de Tours et à la Société des sciences morales de Seine-et-Oise* (Paris, 1848); the abovementioned account by Shcherban', "Metre"; and William Henry Leigh, *The Reformatory at Mettray; a Letter from a Visitor to That Institution, Addressed to a Member of the Committee of the Warwickshire Reformatory, November 1855* (London, 1856).

only conveyed an image of the real Mettray to far-flung supporters; it was the only Mettray that these supporters would ever encounter, possessing a "mediated materiality," and it was designed to influence their discursive and financial relationship with the colony.[30] Signed by V. Chevin, the engraving appeared in the minutes of the May 1846 General Assembly of the Founders of Mettray.[31] Each year, the *Société Paternelle* held an annual meeting in Paris at which the directors gave an account of the colony's work, financial statements were presented, and, usually, a government minister or other prestigious figure was invited to speak. The speeches were printed and distributed to all those of Mettray's supporters who had, by donating 100 francs or more, been designated "founders" of the colony. Many of these founders never visited Mettray and knew it primarily through these reports. The engraving presents aspects of the real colony, with a faithful depiction of the chapel tower, the central square, and the architecture of the cottages. However, it portrays more cottages and other buildings than actually existed, encouraging supporters to envision a perfected future colony whose expansion depended on their ongoing donations. In the foreground of the image, colonists cut and stack hay (although, in reality, no fields existed in this location), but the figures at the center are groups of visitors. The image thus invites viewers to imagine themselves at the heart of the scene, creating a sense of belonging that could motivate them to make financial contributions.

Demetz and his associates, then, seem to have understood that, as Leora Auslander has argued, material objects such as this printed image "are active agents in history" possessing "communicative, performative, emotive, and expressive capacities."[32] The colony's ability to communicate ideas to and evoke emotion among its supporters was limited by the technology available and the material qualities of the medium. The complimentary brochure was printed in black and white on ordinary paper, conveying simplicity and frugality. Unlike

30 Joyce and Bennett, "Material Powers: Introduction," 13 discusses the "mediated materiality" of literary representations, which I here apply to a visual image.

31 AD37 1Y 109, Assemblée générale des fondateurs de la Colonie de Mettray, 10 May 1846.

32 Auslander, "Beyond Words," 1017.

a photograph, the medium of engraving allowed the image to be recognizable as representing the real colony, yet aspirational, showing it in an as-yet unrealized state, and placing affluent supporters at the center of the image, laying out the whole institution around them for their perusal and their approval.

Mettray operated for almost a century, but after the death of Demetz in 1873 it began a long decline, closing in 1937 with its reputation in tatters after revelations of abuse and mistreatment.[33] In its heyday, however, its model had become the acknowledged standard, inspiring imitations across Europe and the Americas, each offering its row of "family" cottages and encouraging bracing agricultural work.[34] In the 1860s, as the Russian Tsar introduced a series of modernizing reforms, including the first independent judiciary, reform-minded Russians took an interest in Mettray and its various imitators, founding the country's first penitentiary agricultural colony near Saint Petersburg in 1870 and a handful of others across the western part of the Empire in the following decades. Like their French predecessors, Russian reformers ascribed moral purity to rural spaces. When novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky visited the Saint Petersburg colony, he thought its church should have icons that would "remind the boy, sinking and befouled in the whirlpool of the capital, of the distant village where once he was clean."[35]

II. The Gorky Colony: Raising proletarians

For the socialists who took power in the former Russian Empire after 1917, there was nothing pure or romantic about poorly paid agricultural labor, and they viewed the pre-revolutionary penitentiary agricultural colonies as sites of brutal exploitation and physical abuse. Maxim Gorky, the revered Soviet writer who had himself been homeless as a child, recalled boys he knew who had had been beaten and the skin ripped from their head, or been killed with a blow from an

33 Toth, *Mettray*.

34 See for example the two-part article by Robert M. Mennel, "'The Family System of Common Farmers': The Origins of Ohio's Reform Farm," *Ohio History* 89 (1980): 125–56 and 279–322; "Redhill and Mettray," *The Spectator* (London), 26 May 1849; Dupont-Bouchat and Pierre, *Enfance et justice*; Edouard Ducpétiaux, *Colonies agricoles, écoles rurales et écoles de réforme pour les indigents, les mendiants et les vagabonds, et spécialement pour les enfants des deux sexes, en Suisse, en Allemagne, en France, en Angleterre, dans les Pays-Bas et en Belgique.* (Brussels, 1851).

35 A. F. Koni, "F. M. Dostoevskii," in *F. M. Dostoevskii v vospominaniiakh sovremennikov*, ed. K. I. Tiun'kin and M. Tiun'kina, vol. 2 (Moscow, 1990), 243; for a history of the Saint Petersburg colony, see Grant, "Model Colonies," 228–97.

employee's fist.[36] In 1918, the new Soviet government declared that no child under seventeen could be convicted of a crime: institutions for troublesome youth were to be educational and therapeutic, not punitive.[37] However, authorities did not have the resources to adequately fund such institutions, and much depended on the resourcefulness of individual educators. In 1920, the district (*guberniia*) education authority assigned schoolteacher Anton Makarenko to the former Poltava agricultural colony, soon renamed in honor of Maxim Gorky. After a difficult start, the colony thrived, and Makarenko led it until 1927, when the NKVD — the Soviet security police — invited him to run a new children's commune in Kharkiv funded by their agents' donations. After leaving the Dzerzhinsky Commune in 1935, he devoted himself to a literary career until his death in 1939.

Makarenko's best-known novel, the *Pedagogical Poem* (published in English as *The Road to Life*), appeared in 1935 and is a fictionalized account of his work with the Gorky Colony.[38] The book was immediately successful among Soviet readers and remains in print today.[39] As a primary source, it is uniquely valuable, revealing details of daily life and painting rich portraits of individuals that do not appear elsewhere. However, it is not a straightforward, documentary account. Like any autobiography, Makarenko's book was written not only to record events, but to justify the author's actions, and in the treacherous political climate of the 1930s, a writer's fate could hinge on their skill in doing so.

Makarenko was acutely aware of the political climate in which he wrote. By 1935, although repressions had not yet engulfed the country as they would by 1937, political dissent had effectively been stifled. Makarenko was careful to cast events of the 1920s in a light that harmonized retrospectively with Stalin's policies of the 1930s, such as the collectivization of agriculture and the repudiation of paedology (the academic study of childhood from medical, social, and psychological standpoints).[40] When the Soviet leader, having solidified his polit-

36 Maksim Gorky, "Po Soiuzu sovetov," in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 11 (Moscow, 1962), 253.

37 Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution*, 78; Ball, *And Now My Soul*, 127–50.

38 Citations in this article will be to the three-volume English-language edition published in Moscow in 1955: Anton Makarenko, *The Road to Life: An Epic of Education*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Moscow, 1955). The most recent scholarly edition published in Russian is Anton Makarenko, *Pedagogicheskaia Poema* (Moscow, 2003).

39 Letters received by Makarenko's publishing house from his early readers praise the novel's vivid evocation of characters and its hopeful message; many who had borrowed a copy wanted to know where they could buy the book for themselves: Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (hereafter RGALI) f. 332, op. 1, ed. khr. 70.

40 For the history of paedology (child science) in Russia and the early USSR, see Andy Byford, *Science of the Child in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia* (Oxford, UK, 2020).

ical control over the state apparatus by 1936, took a sharp, socially conservative turn, he made paedology anathema, returning responsibility for child-raising to the family, promoting teacher-centered, disciplinary modes of education, and making children twelve and up subject to adult courts, prisons, and gulags.[41] Archival sources, including correspondence, official reports, and the earliest drafts of the novel from 1925 on, suggest that Makarenko was already in the 1920s aligned with the side that prevailed under Stalin in the 1930s, embracing military forms of labor organization that his critics derided as "regimental pedagogics."[42] Still, his motivation to ensure that the values and perspectives conveyed in the novel were unimpeachably Stalinist must inevitably have influenced what events he chose to recount, as well as the interpretations he gave them.

Makarenko also had strong motivation to keep his narrative as true to real events as possible. Gorky wrote to him in 1933, "Your enormously significant and strikingly successful pedagogical experiment has world significance," and in 1934 that his book would "vindicate and strengthen [his] method of raising children." Makarenko, in reply, described his pedagogy as essentially dialectic, not founded on "any absolutely correct pedagogical measures or systems" or "dogmatic theses" but adapted to the specific moment and situation.[43] It followed that a narrative, rather than a formal treatise, could best communicate the essence of Makarenko's approach. He had struggled to convince his opponents in the education authorities that his methods were working: "A properly organized children's collective evidently represented such an impossible miracle that they simply did not believe in it, even when they observed it in living action."[44] By bringing the colony to life in prose, he hoped to convince a wider and friendlier audience. Makarenko believed it was the colony's results, rather than any theoretical argument, that best defined and vindicated his pedagogical approach. To achieve its goal of conveying Makarenko's pedagogical principles, the novel had to be true to actual events.

41 For the experiences of young detainees in the later Gulag, see for example Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation* (1985; New York, 2002), part 3, chapter 17; Jacques Rossi, *Fragments of Lives* (Prague, 2018), 74–75.

42 RGALI, f. 332; see for example op. 1, ed. khr. 55, Extract from protocol no. [. . .] of the meeting of the presidium of TsB KDR, 13 July 1928.

43 Correspondence between Makarenko and Gorky, cited in Svetlana Sergeevna Nevskaia, "'Pedagogicheskaia Poema' i proza zhizni Antona Makarenko," in *Pedagogicheskaia Poema* (Moscow, 2003), 11–12.

44 Makarenko, *Pedagogicheskaia Poema,* 649 (this passage did not appear in the first published versions of the novel or in its translations, but deleted passages were included in this scholarly edition).

There are indications that the book does, on the whole, hew close to actual events. Writing in the first person, Makarenko uses his own name but gives pseudonyms to all the other dramatis personae. Makarenko's own photographs illustrate the text, with individuals identified by their fictional names, bolstering the claim that the novel captured real events. He is candid about some of his failures, including an infanticide and a suicide, as well as several boys who quit the colony unreformed. Archival sources also confirm key dates and details.

Later testimonies from former colonists underline the accuracy of the narrative: "His book deals with real people who actually lived in the Gorky Colony. The author merely changed some of the names," wrote Semion Kalabanin, a former colonist who featured heavily in the novel under a pseudonym; everything in the book was "the actual truth," according to Ivan Tokarev, another of Makarenko's pupils.[45] Such testimonies, however, given after Makarenko's death when he had become an icon of Soviet education, could not feasibly deviate from the approved narrative.[46] Perhaps a better argument for the relative veracity of the *Poem* is the contrast with its sequel, *Flags on the Battlements,* a fictionalized account of Makarenko's Dzerzhinsky Commune, published after the 1936 death of his mentor and protector Gorky, during the Terror in 1938.[47] It follows a hackneyed socialist-realist plotline of enemies plotting sabotage and being unmasked by good-hearted Soviet youth. In this book, the main characters (especially the villains of the piece) are much less nuanced and more stereotypical. It is significant that in this work Makarenko no longer uses his own name for the character of the commune's director, distancing the author from the text in recognition, perhaps, that it was no longer possible to write an account that was true to life.

Whether or not any specific event in the *Poem* happened as narrated, or indeed at all, is impossible to determine. However, the accuracy of any given scene is less important than

45 *Makarenko, His Life and Work: Articles, Talks and Reminiscences* (Moscow, 1963), 77; Ivan Dem'ianovich Tokarev, "Vospominaniia o Kommune im. F. E. Dzerzhinskogo, *Igor' Petrovich Ivanov i kommunarskaia metodika,* http://kommunarstvo.ru/biblioteka/bibtokvos.html, accessed May 6, 2023. See also A. M. Tubin's testimony, in *Makarenko, His Life and Work*, 43; as well as former communard Leonid Konisevich's account of his time at the Dzerzhinsky Commune, *Nas vospital Makarenko: zapiski kommunara* (Cheliabinsk, 1993), http://makarenko-museum.narod.ru/lib/Konisevich_L_Nas_vosp_Mak.htm.

46 Götz Hillig and Marianne Krüger-Potratz, "'Vtoroe rozhdenie' A. S. Makarenko: opyt rekonstruktsii protsessa kanonizatsii ego kak pedagoga (1939–1941 gg.)," *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique* 29 (1988): 209–42.

47 Anton Makarenko, *Learning to Live: Flags on the Battlements* (Moscow, 1953)

the meanings it conveys. After all, the fictionalized Gorky Colony survived in Soviet culture long after the original—and its author—had passed away. As a primary source, it tells us what Makarenko wanted the world to know about his colony and his pedagogy.

Makarenko's Gorky Colony transformed, in turn, three rural spaces previously under the control of "non-toiling" (that is, neither proletarian nor peasant) classes: first, the former agricultural colony for juvenile detainees; later, a former noble estate; and finally, a former monastery which had, since the revolution, housed a dysfunctional children's colony. In each case, Makarenko portrays not individual leaders, but the collective itself, as an entity naturally endowed with the power and authority to purify and reshape these rural spaces. This purification is physical, as colonists remove what is broken and filthy: building latrines, using stones from old monastery walls to build pigsties, and renovating a noble country home to house dormitories. It is also cultural, as they overcome mindsets associated with the bourgeoisie and "former people."[48] Monks, guards, and aristocrats had fled, but religious believers, *kulaks*, and experts in progressive pedagogy remained to be defeated and their ideas exposed as inferior and ineffective.[49] The spaces all these "former people" had inhabited and which had conformed to their interests and values had to be reshaped and reused in explicitly proletarian ways lest they serve to preserve pernicious aspects of the old regime.

Makarenko rejected the values embodied in the tsarist-era colonies by using the existing built environments in ways that undermined their original purposes. He began his work at Tribi, on the site of the Poltava Agricultural Colony and Industrial Asylum, founded in 1891 and built on an orderly, Mettray-style "pavilion" plan.[50] He described it mockingly as a "perfect square" of "uncompromisingly symmetrical brick buildings."[51] Although Makarenko's colonists necessarily occupied buildings designed for the previous surveillance-

48 The term "former people" (*byvshie liudi*) was used by Soviet authorities to designate those who had not been "toilers" (that is, peasants or proletarians) before the October Revolution.

49 *Kulak* was a term that denoted wealthy peasants who exploited their poorer neighbors, although not all those targeted by Soviet anti-*kulak* policies were in fact any better off than their neighbors, as discussed below.

50 *Otchet pravleniia Poltavskago Obshchestva Ispravitel'nykh Priiutov za pervyi god sushchestvovaniia Obshchestva (c 7-go iiunia 1891 goda no 7-e iiunia 1892 goda)* (Poltava, 1892).

51 Makarenko, *Road to Life*, 1:28; see also Shcherban', "Metre," cited above.

based regime, in which the educators were instructed "never to take their eyes off their charges, either during work or recreation, and at night to sleep next to them in an adjoining room," Makarenko refused to let the built environment determine his own system and gave all his teaching staff their own, separate apartments.[52] One former educator's room was later used by a local wheelwright who joined the colony to escape his unhappy marriage. Rather than a site of power over the colonists, the room became a refuge for a harmless but somewhat pathetic character, as the old man "would sit huddled up in his little room" waiting for the colonists to drive his angry "virago" of a wife away.[53] Makarenko's narrative thus inverts the power relations embedded in the original design.

Makarenko uses descriptions of the colony's agricultural land to condemn the impotence or unwillingness of the previous regime to provide genuine help to juvenile detainees: "The very soil on which our colony stood was unsuited to agricultural purposes. It was little better than sand, which a breath of wind sent shelving into dunes."[54] This was the land the tsarist regime had deigned to make available for the children most harmed by poverty and exploitation. Indeed, the records of the former colony show that after waiting fruitlessly for a promised grant of land from the state, the Poltava philanthropists had to accept a private donation. Poltava is located in the richly fertile black earth region, an area covering much of Ukraine and Western Russia and providing abundant grain, but the only plot available for the purpose was a site that had been logged and then rented out to peasants to graze their livestock, whose hooves had destroyed whatever topsoil remained.[55] The land was so worthless, Makarenko later argued in a letter to the local authorities, that the colony should not have to pay rent for it.[56] Although the Gorky colony survived there for three years, thanks to deliveries of food from various state agencies, it was not until it moved to a former noble estate that it began to prosper. Makarenko's narrative upholds the Marxist view that the working classes should

52 Makarenko, *Road to Life*, 1:29.

53 Makarenko, *Road to Life*, 1:112.

54 Makarenko, *Road to Life*, 1:89.

55 *Otchet pravleniia Poltavskago Obshchestva zemledel'cheskikh kolonii i remeslennykh priiutov za 1895 i 1896 gody* (Poltava, 1897), 5.

56 RGALI, f. 332, op. 1, ed. khr. 52, Makarenko to Regional Executive Committee (Okrvikonkom), 20 September 1921.

not be content with the scraps allotted to them by bourgeois philanthropy but should seize the means of production to create a better world.

The next site seized by the Gorky Colony was an estate formerly owned by the Trepke family, who had fled in 1917, leaving the estate in disrepair. Here, in the "wild beauty of the loop of the Kolomak [River]," were handsome houses for the colonists, together with rich farmland, an orchard, and buildings for livestock, awaiting only the colony's labor to repair and refurbish them.[57] A trained agronomist joined the colony and assured its productivity. As at Mettray, the colony employed modern agricultural expertise to maximize yields, demonstrating the superiority of science over peasant traditions. Like the nineteenth-century French reformers, the Gorky Colony used the children's labor to improve and modernize agricultural land: it "amended the land," to use the French reformers' phrase, by the labor of the child. However, unlike them, Makarenko did not believe the land could, in turn, morally "amend the child." In fact, he worried that agricultural work could turn promising proletarians into *kulaks*. Building a strong and cohesive collective required labor that was challenging, meaningful, and politically aligned with the Soviet regime. The *Pedagogical Poem* thus paints the colony at Trepke as a producer of proletarians through the collective: the rural space was made to serve an urban purpose.

Whereas the founders of Mettray had viewed young criminals as an urban phenomenon, the "waifs" of the Gorky Colony initially had, Makarenko wrote, no class identity at all. "We had hardly any children of workers, the proletariat was for them something remote and unknown, while most of them harbored profound scorn for agricultural labour, or rather not so much for the labour, as for the labourer's scheme of life and mentality."[58] Most were of peasant backgrounds, but almost all had spent time living rough in cities. Some Soviet educators believed that this experience of alienation freed homeless youth from bourgeois values, making them the proletariat of

57 Makarenko, *Road to Life*, 1:387.

58 Makarenko, *Road to Life*, 1:117.

children, but Makarenko dismissed this idea, arguing that it was labor and collective belonging, not dysfunctional street life, that produced class consciousness.[59]

Even before the Gorky Colonists displayed any sign of proletarian consciousness, however, the Soviet regime deployed them to embody its sovereignty over rural spaces and people. Makarenko recorded scenes of colonists exposing their neighbors' corrupt dealings, participating enthusiastically in raiding their illicit liquor stills and catching them illegally harvesting trees.[60] Even though they had not yet given up their own illegal activities, stealing property and crops from the neighbors with little fear of being caught, their presence served to impose proletarian, Soviet power on the countryside. To do so, as the young detainees decamped from the original colony site to Trepke, they reorganized the terrain itself: "The boys persistently, and with the utmost sangfroid, carried out revisions of the various communicating paths between the farmsteads, determinedly straightening them in their pursuit of a definite ideal."[61] Colonists ignored fences' function as "tokens of the inviolability of private property" and set up stiles to pass over them. Makarenko's ironic tone here sweeps away peasant concerns that their private property could be their best means of survival. The local farmers' crops suffered, but the work of moving people and supplies between the old and new colony sites was greatly reduced.[62]

Recounting these activities in his 1935 text, Makarenko took care to show that his colonists had been pioneers in the fight against *kulaks*. The *kulak* was a looming figure in Stalinist agricultural policy. Originally meaning "fist," the term was given to peasants who had become wealthier than others, especially after late-tsarist reforms had removed the equalizing influence of traditional peasant communes. Anyone who hired (and exploited) laborers was a *kulak*, but the term metastasized to include anyone who owned several horses or was conspicuously wealthier than their neighbors—or whose reluctance to support Soviet power made them politically suspect. Stalin's

59 Eric Aunoble, "S'éduquer à part pour mieux s'intégrer? Les communes pédagogiques en Ukraine soviétique (1920–1924)," *Revue d'histoire de l'enfance « irrégulière »*, no. 7 (2005): 217.

60 Makarenko, *Road to Life*, chapters 5 and 9 of volume 1.

61 Makarenko, *Road to Life*, 1:381.

62 Makarenko, *Road to Life*, 1:384.

collectivization of agriculture from 1930 on relied heavily on the image of the *kulak* as a threat to other peasants and to Soviet power. Many peasants categorized as *kulaks* were prevented from joining collective farms and deported to special settlements in Siberia or arrested and either shot or sentenced to the Gulag.[63] In the novel, Makarenko portrays the boys as having an instinctive disdain for the local peasants, whom he labels *kulaks* and describes as shifty, acquisitive, and dangerous. He thus paints the children as predisposed to proletarian consciousness, requiring only political education and the experience of the collective to become true Soviet citizens.

Taught to see themselves as a collective and to make that collective the colony's supreme authority, engaging in farm labor and political education, the colonists came to adopt what Makarenko saw as a proletarian identity even as they worked in agriculture:

> The members of the colony had begun proudly to consider themselves proletarians, and thoroughly understood the difference between their own position and that of the village youth. Intensive, and often onerous, work on the land did nothing to disturb their profound conviction that quite different activities lay ahead of them.
>
> The oldest of them were already able to describe in some detail what they expected from their future, and what they aspired to. And it was the youthful forces of the town and not of the village, which played the leading role in the crystallization of these dreams.[64]

However, once they had developed this consciousness, Makarenko wrote, they could no longer be content with the "idyll" of rural life. Even though agriculture was their "principal work," the colonists "regarded farming merely as a means of livelihood and the improvement of our life, and the workshop as a means of gaining skill."[65]

In the *Poem,* Makarenko recounts how former colonists, returning from their studies in the city, expressed such sentiments.

63 Cathy A. Frierson, *Peasant Icons: Representations of Rural People in Late Nineteenth-Century Russia* (New York, 1993), 116–60; Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (New York, 1996).

64 Makarenko, *Road to Life*, 2:400.

65 Makarenko, *Road to Life*, 1:375.

"Oh, how I love work in the fields! What a pity that there's no sense in it, damn it! Wouldn't it be nice if you could work in the fields, and reap, and have textiles growing up, and boots, fields of machines, tractors, accordions, spectacles, watches, cigarettes waving in the wind . . . My, my! . . . Why didn't the rotters consult me when they made the world!" Another says, "Our fellows, the waifs, as we're called, are proletarians, it's industrial work they need. Of course, it's jolly and all that to work in the fields, but what do we get out of the fields? If we go into the village, it means we join the petty bourgeoisie, that seems a shame."[66] Readers in the 1930s would recognize this emphasis on the necessity and utility of industrial work as consistent with the Stalinist policy of industrialization, which relied on the forced collectivization of agriculture by facilitating extraction from the peasantry in order to accumulate the resources necessary to establish factories.[67] Agricultural labor is here presented as routine, "jolly," and ultimately meaningless, denying its value, even though such things as textiles, boots, and cigarettes could not, of course, be produced without the raw materials agriculture supplied. But Makarenko's inclusion of this conversation makes a more specific point about the nature of his colony. The idea of the earth producing tractors and cigarettes is a fantasy, but Makarenko hints here that his methods had made agricultural land fulfil one function of an urban space: producing proletarian people.

Although by 1924 the colony at Trepke was thriving, Makarenko portrayed the environment as dangerous to the future development of Soviet citizens. Although he contended that the collective won over the local youth by its wealth, its cultural level, and the thriving, joyful colonists themselves, he also expressed the fear that individuals who grew to love agriculture would be lost to the Soviet cause: "Just look round, and you'll see there are more kulaks every day. How can the colony go on living here?"[68] Even the voluntary collective farms that appear in the book are viewed as disorganized or contending for resources in a petty-spirited manner. This negative judgement may have been made at the time of the events

66 Makarenko, *Road to Life*, 2:257-8.

67 Wendy Z. Goldman, "Blood on the Red Banner: Primitive Accumulation in the World's First Socialist State," *International Review of Social History* 67 (2022): 211–229.

68 Makarenko, *Road to Life*, 2:257-8. The word rendered as "kulak" in this translation is the more informal *kurkul'* in the original Russian. This scene is set during the period of the New Economic Policy, during which some Soviet leaders encouraged peasants to enrich themselves; it predates the period of dekulakization under Stalin.

recounted, in the early to mid-1920s, reflecting Makarenko's no-nonsense persona. Alternatively, it may be an instance of Makarenko in 1935 retroactively writing Stalinist priorities into his story: collectivization in the 1930s was a means to bring agriculture under state control, not merely to change from an individual to a collective ownership model.[69]

Agriculture alone, then, was not enough to satisfy nascent proletarians; they needed to be active and useful builders of socialism. To Makarenko, this would eventually mean participating in Stalin's great project of industrial development in a factory-based children's commune. First, though, in 1926, the Gorky Colony took on the challenge of socializing a large group of abandoned and uncooperative children at the "7th of November" colony, organized by the Children's Aid society on the former site of a celebrated seventeenth-century monastery at Kuriazh, near Kharkiv (Fig. 2). Although the labor would be agricultural, the cultivation of the Kuriazh children would constitute the real "work for the State, work the Soviet government needs."[70] The 120 Gorky colonists joined those already living at Kuriazh. Many of the original residents left rather than submit to labor and discipline, but in April 1927, the relocated Gorky Colony counted 353 colonists – three more than the official capacity.[71]

In Makarenko's narrative, discredited religious beliefs on the one hand, and ineffective pedagogical work on the other, combine in the very ground of Kuriazh to make it an unhealthy and malodorous place in need of purification. "The first thing which struck me was the stench prevailing in the colony. It was a complex blend of privies, cabbage soup, dung, and . . . incense."[72] By including fragrant incense in a list of foul odors, the author categorizes religion, despite its pleasant facade, as harmful and distasteful, to be discarded by Soviet society.

Although the monks had dispersed, Makarenko was faced with both material and human traces of their work. The monastery's "broken-down dirty church" continued to operate in the midst of the colony.[73] Makarenko lobbied to have it shut

69 For more on the fate of early Soviet communes and collectives, see Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York, 1989), 207-212, 241.

70 Makarenko, *Road to Life*, 2:324.

71 RGALI f. 332 op. 1 ed. khr. 55, Report to the Presidium of the All-Ukraine Executive Committee from the Kharkiv regional executive committee, n.d. [1927].

72 Makarenko, *Road to Life*, 2:308.

73 Makarenko, *Road to Life*, 3:295.

Figure 2. In this 1927 photograph of Gorky Colonists at the site of the former Kuriazh Monastery, uniformed youth in a military-style marching band contrast with the old religious architecture in the background, embodying the new Soviet order and new meanings superimposed upon the space. Source: Anton Makarenko, *The Road to Life*, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1955), plate opposite page 358.

down and the building used as a meeting space, but his efforts succeeded only after he himself left the colony in 1928.[74] Other elements of the monastery, however, were successfully repurposed. Pilgrims had previously visited the monastery's spring, renowned as miracle-working; the Gorky Colony used it prosaically for washing. The "old walls, saturated with the stench of sweat, incense and bugs, oozing with the filth of waifdom" were pulled down and the bricks reused to build a pigsty.[75] The walls, representing the closed-mindedness of religious belief, as well as forming a physical barrier, keeping foul odors in and clean air out, were judged fit only for swine.

The first attempt to try to reclaim the former monastery for Soviet purposes had failed abjectly and the Gorky Colony found it necessary to purify the place of the "bestial, biological ruin" of demoralized children living in filthy, lousy conditions. Yet altering the material environment was impossible until the children's attitudes could be changed. In Makarenko's narrative, this "conversion" happened suddenly, within the space of three hours, with the arrival of the

74 Alla Stankevich, "Istoriia obiteli," *Kuriazhskii monastyr'*, July 25, 2020, https://kuryazh.kh.ua/sample-page/, accessed November 5, 2024.

75 Makarenko, *Road to Life*, 3:60, 3:217.

120 Gorky Colonists from Trepke.[76] Makarenko and a small "advance detachment" had come to Kuriazh several weeks previously and carried out planning and preliminary work, but none of the children had been willing to join them. In the book, it is not Makarenko himself, but the collective as a living, thriving entity, that transforms degraded and criminal children. Immediately after the group's arrival, Makarenko relates, the Kuriazh children happily submitted to washing and haircuts, and their lice-ridden bedding and clothing were treated in a disinfecting chamber.[77]

In Makarenko's view, the socialist collective made up for the children's dysfunctional or absent families, but unlike the founders of Mettray he never used familial terms as official nomenclature. A 1932 article in the NKVD newspaper *Dinamo,* however, praised the "paternal abilities" of a "communard father" — one of the older boys in Makarenko's second project, the Dzerzhinsky commune — who had taken an "incorrigible" younger boy under his wing, describing them as "A 'son' of nine, and a 'father' of eighteen."[78] Later, former colonists described Makarenko himself as a substitute father to them. One, A. M. Tubin, declared, "My own father deserted my mother when I was four years old. I don't remember him, and have come to hate him. My real father was Anton Makarenko.[79] Delivered after the conservative turn of the late 1930s, this statement reflects an official recentering of the nuclear family and of paternal authority in Stalinist social policy after the more radical experiments of the 1920s. However, the living quarters of the Gorky Colony and, later, the Dzerzhinsky Commune, were never intended to replace or imitate family homes as had been the case at Mettray.

Even as the Gorky Colony's reputation grew and it became a model institution, attracting foreign and Soviet visitors, pedagogical experts who distrusted Makarenko's charismatic influence and his military methods accused him of creating an unhealthy "cult of personality" and worked to have him removed as director.[80] Makarenko experienced this defeat as

76 Makarenko, 3:229.

77 Makarenko, *Road to Life*, 3:231.

78 M. Bukshpan, "Vypolniaem zavet Feliksa Edmundovicha," *Dinamo*, 1932, RGALI f. 332 op. 2 ed.khr. 58.

79 A. M. Tubin speaking at Makarenko's funeral in 1939, quoted in *Makarenko, His Life and Work*, 43.

80 RGALI, f. 332, op. 1, ed. khr. 55, Extract from protocol no. [. . .] of the meeting of the presidium of TsB KDR, 13 July 1928.

a profound "loss" and searched for a new position. In part through the intervention of Maksim Gorky, who had adopted him as a protégé, in 1927 he was appointed director of the NKVD's Dzerzhinsky Commune in Kharkiv.[81] Like the Gorky Colony, it housed lawbreaking and homeless children, offering schooling together with vocational training, but instead of agricultural work, here the children were trained in the commune's factory, where they produced electric drills and cameras, requiring skill and precision. The commune was converted into an ordinary factory just prior to the outbreak of war in 1941.[82]

Conclusion

Both the Mettray and Gorky Colonies took rural spaces and reshaped them to provide solutions to urban problems, housing children categorized as urban and replacing local traditions with modern scientific knowledge and organization. Demetz and Brétignières pursued these goals while espousing a romanticized and nostalgic view of rural virtues, intending their wards to become lifelong rural residents, shunning the dubious freedoms of the city. Makarenko, believing the urban proletariat to be the revolutionary class, and knowing it formed the base of political support for the Soviet regime, painted rural life as idyllic but dangerous, threatening to promote stagnation and produce *kulaks*.

Mettray's custom-designed architecture contained numerous elements designed to funnel colonists into desired behaviors and attitudes, and sometimes to prevent any possibility of rebellious actions. The Gorky Colony moved into sites created for other purposes, claiming them in the name of the proletariat. Rather than redesigning the spaces to control them, Makarenko allowed the colonists to reshape spaces for their needs, including spaces that belonged to others. At the end of the *Pedagogical Poem,* he describes a procession of colonists marching into the city on a day of celebration, walking on the

81 Correspondence between Makarenko and his future wife, and between Makarenko and Gorky, cited in Nevskaia, "'Pedagogicheskaia Poema' i proza zhizni Antona Makarenko," 5-10. Makarenko resigned definitively from the Gorky Colony in 1928, and with Maksim Gorky's support focused on finishing his novel.

82 Oscar Fricke, "The Dzerzhinsky Commune: Birth of the Soviet 35mm Camera Industry," *History of Photography* 3 (1979): 135–155; see also Makarenko, *Flags on the Battlements*.

tramlines and forcing the vehicles to match their pace, having a "joke" with the townsfolk, their "own folk": "we go about the town like its masters, not 'asylum boys,' but colonists, Gorkyites."[83] Having established order in the benighted countryside, Makarenko claims for the children an urban identity.

Makarenko's narrative of the collective shaping both its members and the spaces they occupied does not, of course, imply that each individual child had agency or freedom any more than the colonists of Mettray did in their rigid regime. In fact, by ceding authority to the collective, Makarenko legitimized methods, sometimes including ostracization and violence, that he and his teachers were forbidden to use.[84] Yet both Makarenko and Demetz understood that children and adolescents, especially when subjected to a demanding regime, often needed opportunities to exert agency. Indeed, one striking similarity between these two very different institutions is the way each sometimes strategically gave up control over their wards. At Mettray, much was made of the lack of walls surrounding the colony. When Brétignières asked a boy why he did not try to escape, he replied, "because there are no walls."[85] When Makarenko wanted to stop a spate of thefts from supply cupboards, he instructed employees to remove the padlocks.[86] Walls and locks only tempted children to test their skills, and removing the challenge took the fun out of the game.

Both the Mettray and Gorky Colonies were, for a time, model institutions turning out a certain number of young adults who looked on their leaders as substitute fathers and adopted the values they had been taught. Both, after the initial charismatic leaders had died or left, and, for those who were singled out for punishment, even during their tenure, were sites of surveillance, coercion, and sometimes abuse. In each case, it was when they understood children's need for agency that the colonies were most successful.

Mettray operated by the principle of "amending the child by the land, and the land by the child," using child labor to bring

83 Makarenko, *Road to Life*, 3:396.

84 The exception was an incident at the very outset of the Gorky Colony where he hit a boy in the face for his attitude, and unexpectedly won over the whole group, although he claimed this was a singular incident. Makarenko, *Road to Life*, 1:43-46.

85 AD37 1Y 106, Assemblée générale des fondateurs de la Colonie de Mettray, 12 March 1843, 17.

86 Tokarev, "Vospominaniia."

idle land into a productive state as its directors trusted in the rural environment and the carefully planned living spaces to teach boys to act in approved ways. Because Soviet ideology emphasized the leadership role of the urban proletariat, Makarenko was suspicious of the land's effect on the child, and instead used the child to amend the land and its people by introducing modern, efficient agricultural practices and keeping the colony's rural neighbors in line. Both colonies thus shaped their rural environments to serve the needs of an urban population.

Anna Christine Grant works on transnational histories of Modern France and Russia/the USSR, focusing on incarcerated youth. She is a Visiting Assistant Professor of European History at Occidental College, Los Angeles. She has published articles on urban housing reform and on youth detention in the *Journal of Urban History* and the *Journal of the Western Society for French History*. Her current book project focuses on penitentiary agricultural colonies, from their inception in nineteenth-century France to their adoption in Tsarist Russia and their persistence into the early Soviet Union.