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# GULAG:

## SOVIET PRISON CAMPS AND THEIR LEGACY



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A Project of the National Park Service and the  
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*This curriculum unit is dedicated to all those imprisoned in the GULAG system.*



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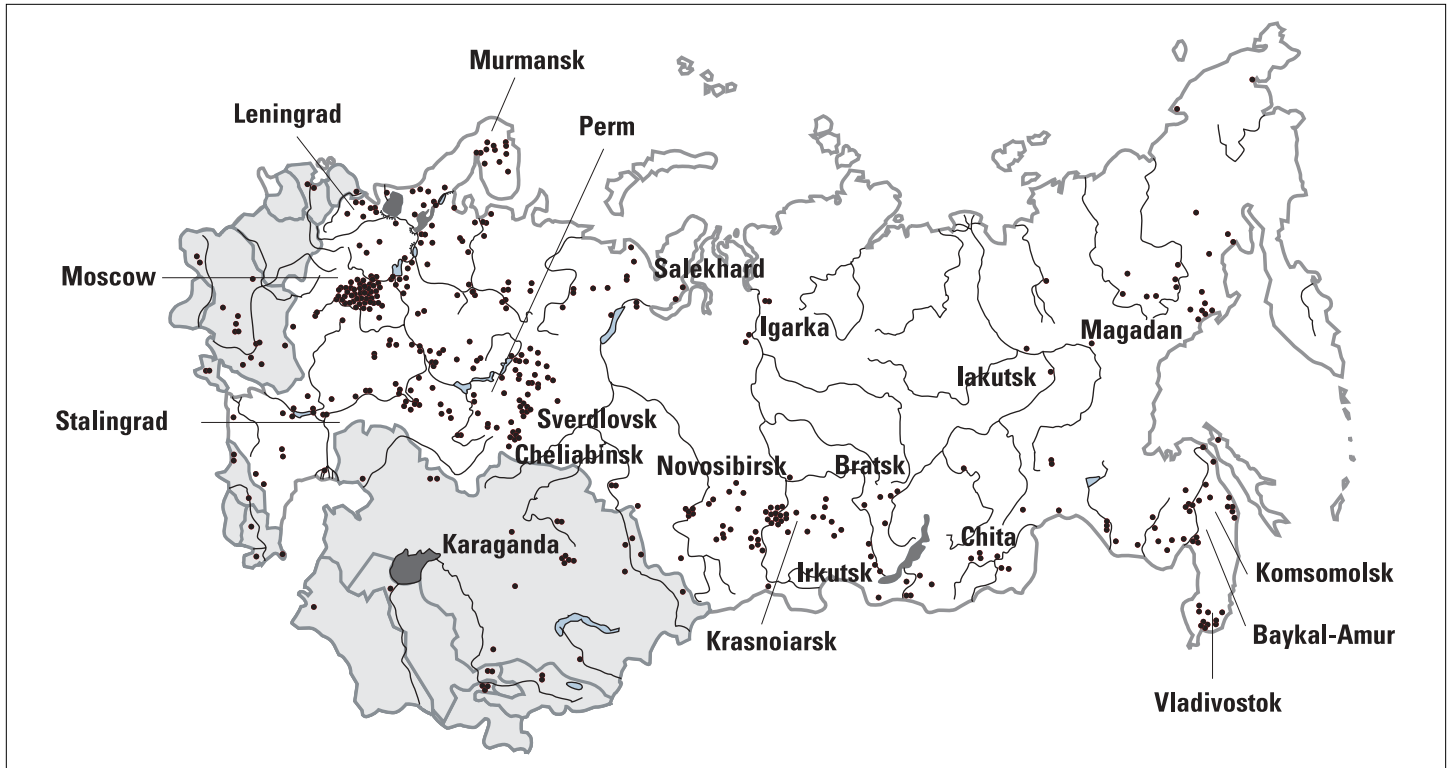
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## GULAG: SOVIET PRISON CAMPS AND THEIR LEGACY



GULAG locations across Soviet Union

Most countries have prison systems where those convicted of crimes serve out their sentences. Citizens of these countries believe that people who commit crimes should be punished by being separated from the rest of society and deprived of some of their freedoms.

However, the GULAG—the prison camp system that arose in the Soviet Union after 1929—served primarily as a way to gain control over the entire population, rather than punish criminal acts. The incarceration of millions of innocent people in the GULAG system is correctly seen as one of the worst and most shocking episodes of the twentieth century.

### DEFINITION OF GULAG:

State Camp Administration

### NUMBERS DEBATE

A 1990 report by the Moscow News stated that between 1931 and 1953, 3,778,234 people were arrested for counter-revolutionary and state crimes, of which 786,098 were shot.\* Recent scholarship suggests that between 1929 and 1953, 18 million people passed through camps and 6 million more were exiled.

\*Source: *Moskovskie Novosti (Moscow News)*, March 4, 1990.

## TIMELINE

**17th-20th centuries:** forced labor brigades in Siberia

**August 1918:** Vladimir Lenin orders “Kulaks” (wealthier peasants), priests, and other “unreliables” to be “locked up in a concentration camp outside of town”

**Sept. 1918:** Red Terror initiated by Lenin: Arrest and incarceration of “Landowners, industrialists, merchants, priests and anti-Soviet officers” all to be detained in concentration camps

**December 1919:** 21 registered concentration camps

**December 1920:** 107 registered concentration camps

**1923:** Solovetsky monastery in northwestern Russia turned over to OGPU (precursor of NKVD and KGB) for use as a prison camp

**November 1925:** Decision to make systematic use of prison labor out of economic necessity, and for large scale construction projects

**1929:** Decision to create mass camp system as an element in transforming Soviet Union into industrialized country

**1930-1933:** Two million Kulaks exiled to Siberia, Kazakhstan and other remote regions

**1930:** 179,000 people in prison camps

**1931:** 212,000 people in prison camps

**1932-1933:** White Sea Canal camp set up to construct canal connecting inland waterways with White Sea

**1934:** Camps expand into Far Eastern Siberia and Kazakhstan

**1934:** 510,307 people in prison camps

**1937-1938:** Great Terror: one in every twenty people in Soviet Union arrested

**1938:** 1,888,571 people in prison camps (in addition, a great many more people were executed)

Beria replaces Yezhov

**1939:** Camps in almost every region, in every time zone in Soviet Union

1,672,992 people in prison camps

**July 1941-1944:** Mass Amnesties: 975,000 prisoners released into Red Army over three years

**1945:** 1,460,677 people in prison camps

**1950:** Prison population reaches its highest levels: 2,525,146 people in prison camps

**March 5, 1953:** Death of Stalin

2,468,524 people in prison camps

**March 27, 1953:** Amnesty for prisoners with less than five year sentences, pregnant women, women with children, all children under eighteen

One million people released

**December 1953:** Beria executed

**1954:** Many restrictions lifted on prisoners remaining in GULAG system: could receive mail and buy clothing

**1956:** Khrushchev’s Secret Speech acknowledges “excesses” of Stalin and his associates

**1950s:** Arrests of dissidents continues; some are in camps, some in psychiatric hospitals

**1986:** Gorbachev issues general pardon for all political prisoners and prisons shut down for good

**1995:** GULAG Museum opens at site of Perm-36 Prison Camp

Millions of innocent people were incarcerated in the GULAG, serving sentences of five to twenty years of hard labor. Prisoners in camps worked outdoors and in mines, in arid regions and the Arctic Circle, without adequate clothing, tools, shelter, food, or even clean water. We will never know how many prisoners suffered from starvation, illness, violence, and cold; an immense number of people died. More people passed through the GULAG, for a much longer period of time, than through Nazi concentration camps; yet, the GULAG is still not nearly as well known.

The Nazi concentration camps and the GULAG differ in a very important way. Nazi camps were used to exterminate whole groups of people, most notably the Jewish population of Europe. The GULAG was used as a weapon of ongoing political control over one country. The GULAG system did not target any particular group of people: in fact all ethnic groups, nationalities and religions were imprisoned. Moreover, if a prisoner managed to somehow survive his or her sentence, he or she would be released at the end of it. There were no plans for releasing any of the prisoners of Nazi concentration camps.

In order to answer the difficult question of how this could happen, we must examine the leadership of the Soviet Union, with Joseph Stalin at its top.

### JOSEPH STALIN AND HIS RISE TO POWER

Joseph Stalin, born Iosef Dzhugashvili, in the country of Georgia, did not start out as a central player in the events leading up to the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Vladimir Lenin appointed him as the editor of Pravda, the newspaper of the Communist Party, and then as Commissar of Nationalities in November 1917. In 1922, having become an important person in Lenin's inner circle, he was appointed to the position of General Secretary of the Communist Party. Yet Lenin expressed apprehension that Stalin would abuse his power if he remained in this position. In his "Testament" written in 1922, Lenin wrote "Stalin, having become General



Courtesy of the Library of Congress



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

**Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin (right), 1922. Stalin publicized this photograph to prove that Lenin trusted and supported him.**

Secretary, has unlimited authority concentrated in his hands and I am not sure whether he will always be capable of using that authority with sufficient caution."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, by the time of Lenin's death two years later, Stalin had transformed his position into the most powerful post in the country.

By 1928, Stalin had complete control of the Communist Party and had appointed only those people who were personally loyal to him to run the most important government departments. From this position of power, Stalin and his economic planners began the transformation of the primarily agricultural Soviet Union into an industrialized state, with the first Five Year Plan. The expectations of what could be produced were completely unrealistic, and those factory managers and workers who could not produce the minimum quotas were accused of sabotage and "wrecking."

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**CAMPAIGNS AGAINST “ENEMIES OF THE PEOPLE”**


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**1930-1933: Campaigns against the “Kulaks.”**

Beginning in 1930, peasants were arrested or sent into exile, or immediately shot on the suspicion of being “enemies of the people.” Peasants were required to turn all grain over to the state; anyone in possession of grain could be accused of “hoarding.” Others might be labeled “Kulaks;” the word means “fist,” but could be used to accuse any peasant of non-Soviet methods simply because his personal crops or livestock were thriving. Peasants could be judged simply because they owned an extra cow; a jealous neighbor could accuse them of being anti-Soviet. Between 1930 and 1933, over two million peasants were exiled to Siberia and 100,000 more were sentenced to the GULAG.<sup>2</sup>

**1934: Kirov Affair.** There was a steady stream of arrests for “anti-Soviet” activities up through 1934 (see timeline). But the assassination of Sergei Kirov—the head of the Leningrad branch of the Communist Party and a close associate of Stalin—set off a wave of mass arrests and execution, this time claiming thousands of lives. The evening of the assassination, Stalin himself issued a call for the execution of anyone conducting anti-Soviet terror. During the next few months, about 40,000 residents of Leningrad were arrested and sent to prison camps or shot. The wave of arrests was known at the time as “the Kirov flood.”

**1937-1938: The Great Terror.** The Great Terror stands out as one of the most brutal periods of repression under Stalin. It began in July 1937 and ended in November 1938, and was directed at various groups perceived by the Soviet leadership as real or potential “enemies of the people.” The arrests began with Communist Party members accused of counter-revolutionary activities, and then spread to family members of party members and then to the general public. During the Great Terror, 1,575,259 people were arrested and more than half of them were shot. *If about 700,000 people were shot during the Terror, this means about 1,500 people were executed every day.*<sup>3</sup>



“Annihilate the KULAKS as a Class!” c. 1929



Courtesy of the David King Collection



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

After Yezhov was executed in 1940, his image disappeared from official photographs, as seen above.

**Lavrenty Beria,**  
head of the NKVD 1938-1953.

To demonstrate to the Soviet population that “wrecking” was a serious crime, fifty-five people were arrested for “sabotage” at the Shakhty coal mine in southern Russia in 1928. Only four people were declared innocent, and the fifty-one others were executed or imprisoned for sabotage. This was the first of many “show trials” which reinforced state control over individuals’ lives.

## WHO WAS SENT TO THE CAMPS AND WHO WAS RELEASED

### Criminals

The criminals sentenced to prison camps can be divided into two categories:

- People who committed crimes such as murder, rape, and robbery, acts which would be prosecuted in most countries. These career criminals continued their criminal activities in the camps, such as robbing supply trucks before clothing or food could be distributed.
- People who committed “crimes” so minor that they would not be punishable in other countries. These “crimes” included unexcused absences from work, or petty theft, such as taking bread from a restaurant kitchen to feed one’s children. This type of “criminal” made up the vast majority of prisoners in the GULAG system, and were punished by sentences of eight–ten years of forced labor. Their “trials” usually took five minutes, if there was one at all.

### NKVD LEADERS

**The Secret Police or NKVD, officially called the State Commissariat for Internal Affairs and best known in later years as the KGB, carried out the arrests and imprisonments. The leaders of the NKVD under Stalin were:**

**Grigorii Yagoda (1891-1938)**  
Commissar of NKVD 1934-1936. Arrested in March 1937 and shot March 1938 at the height of the Great Terror.

shot in 1940. By the time of Yezhov’s arrest, one of every twenty people in the country had been arrested. Every other family had someone in prison.<sup>4</sup>

**Nikolai Yezhov (1895-1940)**  
known as the “Bloody Dwarf.” Appointed Commissar of NKVD in August 1936. He presided over the Great Terror. He was removed from his post in 1938 and sentenced to death for his alleged “mistakes” during the purges, which, according to Stalin, included lack of witnesses or corroborating evidence. He was arrested in 1939 and

**Lavrenty Beria (1899-1953)**  
Beria became the head of the NKVD in 1938. He initiated reforms in the GULAG system in order to make camps more economically productive. He also created Sharashka camps, special scientific research facilities staffed by imprisoned scientists. He was arrested in late June 1953 and shot in December 1953.



### Political Prisoners

This was a group which included opponents of the Soviet regime, but most of these people were arrested and sentenced based only on the suspicions of being “anti-Soviet.” Political prisoners constituted no more than 25% of the total prison camp population at any one time. Political prisoners were charged under Article 58 and were known in the GULAG system as “58ers.”

### ARTICLE 58

Article 58 was approved as part of the Soviet criminal code in 1928, and was the main code used to charge and sentence “political” prisoners, those supposedly engaged in counter-revolutionary or anti-Soviet activities. However, the language was so vague and was interpreted so widely that it could be applied in almost any case.

There are many examples, especially during the “Great Terror” of 1937 and 1938, of people being charged under Article 58 who were clearly not engaged in anti-Soviet activity:

- Man sentenced for three years for smiling “in sympathy” while drunken soldiers in a restaurant in Odessa told anti-Soviet anecdotes
- The cook who applied for a job at the Japanese embassy, but was arrested on charges of espionage before she even started the job
- Thousands of innocent people who happened to be family members of suspected “traitors.” These people received minimum sentences of five–eight years of hard labor

Most people arrested under Article 58 were forced to confess to some bogus counter-revolutionary activity, such as a plan to poison wells or speak out against grain collection.



Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

“I won the Nobel Prize for literature. What did you do?”

Criminal code stated that **counter-revolutionary activities** are committed when “the person who committed them, although not directly pursuing a counter-revolutionary aim, knowingly entertained the possibility of this arising or should have foreseen the socially dangerous character of the consequences of his actions”  
(Supreme Court Ruling 1928)

## MASS AMNESTIES AND EARLY RELEASE

One important difference between the GULAG system and the Nazi concentration camps was that a person sentenced to five years of hard labor in a Soviet labor camp could expect, assuming he or she survived, to be released at the end of the sentence. Between 1934 and 1953, for example, between 150,000 and 500,000 people were released each year. Some prisoners were even eligible to earn early release, if they worked very hard and exceeded their quotas.

### Amnesties

There were mass amnesties in 1941 and 1953 (see timeline). The 1941 amnesty allowed released prisoners to enlist in the Red Army and fight during WWII. A general amnesty was issued in 1953, shortly after Stalin's death, in recognition that the vast majority of inmates were imprisoned unjustly.

In 1945, 1948 and 1949, pregnant women and women with small children were released from the prison system. In 1949, of 503,000 women in prison camps, 9,300 were pregnant and 23,750 had small children in the camps.

However, once released, ex-prisoners often faced many difficulties. Some were sent into exile, or banned from returning to their homes in the cities. It was very difficult to find work. Family members often had died, or were afraid to be associated with a former GULAG inmate. If former prisoners were allowed back to their homes, they faced months of difficult travel with little or no money and no means of surviving the trip. Some opted to stay, or were stranded, in the towns close to where they had been imprisoned.

## PEOPLE LEFT BEHIND: SOCIAL EFFECTS OF MASS ARRESTS

### Wives of Prisoners

When married men were sentenced to a labor camp the wives and children they left behind were victimized as well. Friends and neighbors might turn against them, for fear of associating with “wives of enemies of the people.”

One prisoner stated, “I often thought of my wife. She was worse off than me. I was after all in the company of other outcasts whereas she was among free people among whom there might be many who would shun her...”<sup>5</sup>

Frequently wives lost their jobs, their apartments, and had to sell their possessions and live on occasional work or the kindness of relatives. Most women did not know which prison camps their husbands were sent to, and since mail between prisoners and outsiders was strictly limited, communication was nearly impossible. If they knew where their husbands were, some women moved to the town so it was possible to visit. If a prisoner worked hard and earned the privilege of a visit with a wife or mother, he would be watched over by guards.

### Children of Prisoners

If both parents were sent to the prison camps, children were either adopted by family members and raised in other cities or sent to orphanages for children, where, like the wives of prisoners, they were treated badly by the other children. The teachers were afraid to show them too much affection for fear of having sympathies for “enemies.” During the Great Terror, in less than one year, 15,347 children were sent to orphanages when their parents were arrested.

Children sometimes went to the prison camp with their parents, where they lived in special barracks for juveniles. Children born in the prison camps stayed with their mothers until the age of two, and then were transferred to orphanages.

## DIFFERENT TYPES OF CAMPS

People who were arrested remained in overcrowded filthy prison cells until they were sentenced by a court or a special committee. Then they would be sent to one of several types of forced labor camps, or sent into exile.

### There were three main types of prison camps:

- > Camps surrounded by barbed wire with guards in watchtowers, where prisoners lived in crowded barracks. Prisoners could move within the camp zone, but could not leave the zone. If they were caught beyond the “prison zone,” they were automatically shot.
- > Stricter camps with barred windows, locked barracks and restricted movement within the camp zone.
- > Unguarded camps in remote regions of the USSR, where labor was controlled but prisoners had complete freedom of movement.

Another punishment option was internal exile, where the person would be sent from home to a remote region of the Soviet Union and could not leave. Attempts to leave that region were treated like prison escapes and punished. The people sentenced to internal exile were usually groups of people, rather than individual criminals, who were considered unreliable or suspicious in some way. These groups included ethnic Koreans, Germans and Chechens. Thousands of Chechens died during their mass exile, which is one of the reasons that the region of Chechnya would like to gain its independence from Russia today.

The type of labor varied as well. The kind of labor demanded from the prisoners depended entirely on the location of the camp. Camps in the Central Asia region were generally agricultural, where prisoners grew and picked cotton, while prisoners in the northern camps did logging. As we will see in the discussion to follow, some camps were specially set up in a particular region to undertake a specific project.

Photograph Courtesy of Tomasz Kizny



**The Children’s Barracks at Molotov, 1946**

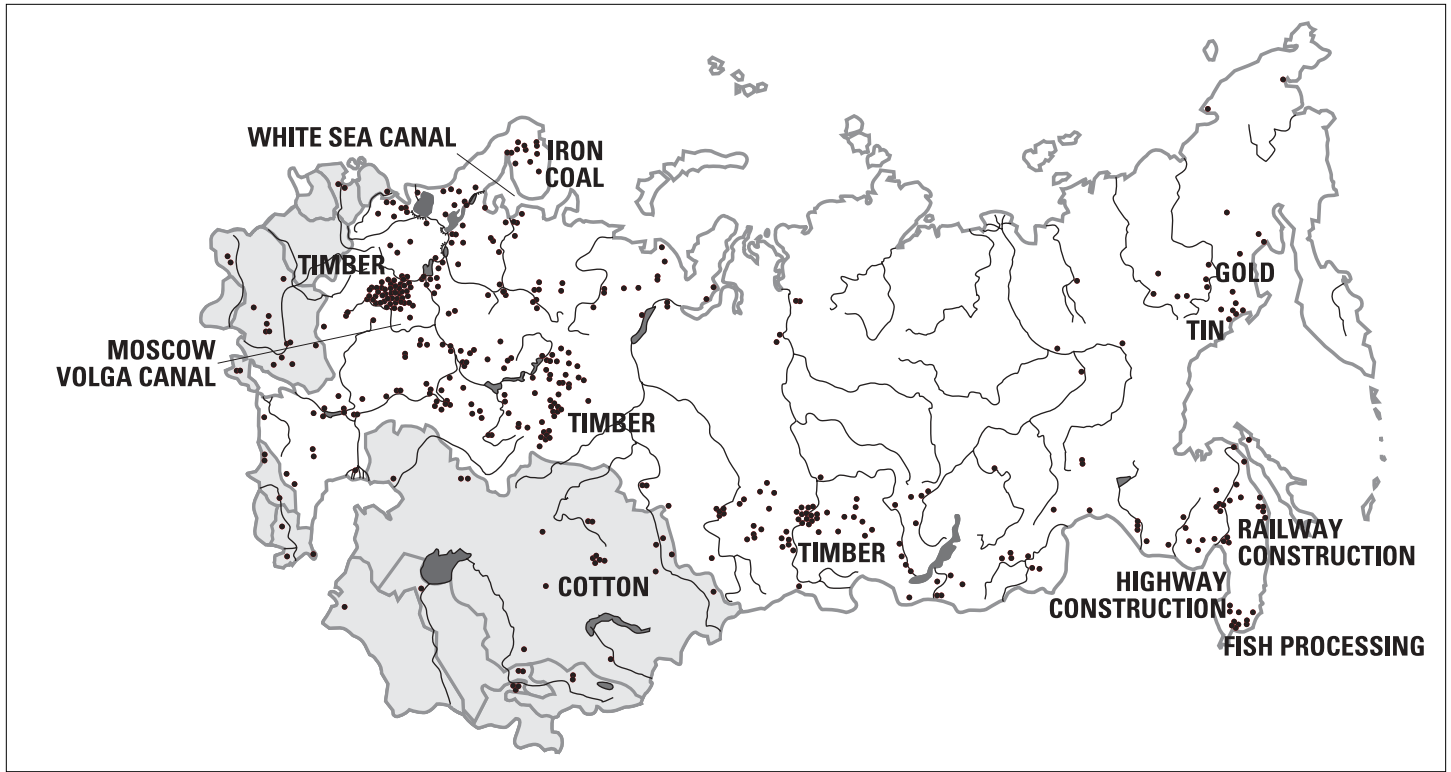
### “Here Today Gone Tomorrow”

The fear of arrest had a palpable effect on public life. Ilya Ehrenburg, a famous journalist, described how in the offices of the newspaper “Izvestia” they stopped putting names on the office doors, since people were rapidly disappearing. They adopted a “Here Today Gone Tomorrow” attitude. In the government offices, it was the same: “empty seats, haggard faces and an extreme unwillingness to talk.”<sup>6</sup>

Private citizens in general knew that an arrest could occur at any time with no warning. Solzhenitsyn listed the actual situations in which people were arrested, as follows:

- > by police at a hospital operating table during surgery
- > by grocery staff inviting a customer to see a new food shipment
- > by a religious pilgrim, who asked for shelter in Christ’s name
- > by the meterman reading the electrical meter
- > by a bicyclist who runs into a pedestrian on the street
- > by the conductor on a train
- > by a taxi driver
- > by the teller at a bank
- > by the manager of a movie theater
- > by strangers rushing up on the street claiming to be old friends

One effect was that “people leaving for work said farewell to their families every day, because they could not be certain they would return at night...” Another was extreme suspicion of strangers and suspicion of a greeting or even a smile on the street. People were living at a high level of tension: “Everyone living in the apartment is thrown into a state of terror by the first knock at the door.”<sup>7</sup>



Correlation of camps and natural resources

### ECONOMIC ACTIVITY OF THE CAMPS

The Soviet economic planners actually counted on prison labor as part of the overall economy. Although the primary stated reason for imprisonment was to pay for some alleged crime, the ministers of the NKVD agreed that they should take advantage of the free physical labor to contribute to the economy.

The GULAG participated in every sector of the Soviet economy, including mining, highway and rail construction, arms and chemical factories, electricity plants, fish canning, airport construction, apartment construction and sewage systems. Among the items prisoners produced were missiles, car parts, leather goods, furniture, textiles, glass cups, lamps, candles, locks, buttons and even toys. The GULAG played a central role in the Soviet economy, mining one-third of all the Soviet Union's gold, and much of its coal and timber. The GULAG population accounted for one out of every 50 workers in the Soviet Union.

### DEBATE: Economics vs. Punitive Rationale for Mass Arrests and Camp Systems

At different times, there were different priorities: In the early Stalin era, until 1935, economics were as important as punitive measures and political control. Prisoners were sent to areas where large projects were underway such as the Belomor Canal in the north, or Dalstroi in far eastern Siberia where prisoners mined gold.

In the early Stalinist period, prisoners were actually treated better than they were later, as the focus was deriving the maximum value of labor rather than elimination of "enemies."

## Major Construction Projects

Stalin and his planners were obsessed with the construction of enormous projects that would make other industrialized countries envious of the USSR. Such projects included:

- > Canal linking the Moscow River to the Volga River
- > Railway between Lake Baikal and the Amur River
- > Construction of hydroelectric dams



Photograph Courtesy of Tomasz Kizny

Prisoners at work on the White Sea Canal

### CASE STUDY: WHITE SEA CANAL PROJECT, "TOO NARROW AND TOO SHALLOW"

Studying the White Sea Canal (Belomor) project can help us understand the paradox in using prison labor for major construction projects. Stalin believed that the use of prison labor would benefit the Soviet economy since the workers would be working for free, but the prisoners were not given any appropriate tools or machines, and ultimately constructed a primitive canal system that barely functioned.

The importance of this project lies in the fact that it gave a new direction to the entire GULAG system, since the location of camps from then on would be determined by the project or labor which was needed. The White Sea Canal project was the first given over to the NKVD. In fact, the NKVD managed the largest construction system in the USSR.

#### Building the White Sea Canal

For at least 200 years, Russian leaders had imagined a canal to connect two inland waterways to the White Sea, but they all realized it was an unrealistic project and did not attempt to make the canal. Stalin decided to take on this difficult project to make a political point: that the Soviet Union, under his leadership, could accomplish even the most difficult feats.

Thus the White Sea Canal project turned into a test case and a propaganda bonanza for the "reforging" of criminals

into upstanding Soviet citizens.

Rather than using steel and cement to construct the 141 miles of waterways and 19 locks, prisoners had to make these structures out of sand, rock and wood. They had no implements beyond primitive hand tools, and Stalin wanted it built as soon as possible. 170,000 prisoners worked on the project using handmade saws, wooden spades and wheelbarrows. These prisoners were supposed to receive more food and new clothing every year since their work was deemed so important, but this didn't happen. Their living conditions were substandard.

When prisoners arrived at new work sites, they found nothing, and had to build their barracks and organize the food supply, usually in subzero temperatures. At least 25,000 people died during the construction of the White Sea Canal, although this number does not include those who died after they were released for illness or accident.

Stalin ordered that the canal should be built in twenty months, and indeed it was, but the extreme haste ultimately was expensive: the canal was used only rarely by barges, and was too narrow and too shallow to be used by passenger ships or submarines. Although a practical failure, the completion of the canal within this timeframe was a political triumph for Stalin and his economic planners.

## CAMPS AS ECONOMIC FAILURES

In some respects, the Soviet economy did gain from prison labor. For example, the gold mined in Siberia exceeded expectations and helped boost the financial status of the Soviet Union.

However, although the prison camps were publicized as making important contributions to the Soviet economy, it is not surprising given the desperately poor conditions, that prison labor did not make a substantial contribution to the economy. Without sufficient food, supplies and clothing, prisoners were weak and sick, and unable to work.

Lavrenty Beria believed that with some reforms the camps could be more productive. He increased food rations, suggested that camp administrators get sickly prisoners back to work, and that prisoners be sent to camps specifically undertaking important construction projects. He also wanted administrators to abandon the system of parole and early release, since the prisoners who worked hardest were being released, leaving behind the less productive laborers. He also urged “harsh coercive measures” to be used against “absentees and those refusing to work, and wreckers.”<sup>8</sup> Like others, he resorted to more repression in order to force more work, and harsher regimes like an 11-hour work day, with no more than three days off per month.

Upon Stalin’s death in 1953, Beria began closing camps and releasing prisoners, citing the economic inefficiency of the camps, as if that were the only rationale for closing them down. The debate continues today about whether the GULAG was intended to be primarily a punitive or an economic institution.

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**DAY ONE** STUDY GUIDE AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

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## TERMS FOR IDENTIFICATION

Stalin	The Great Terror	Lavrenty Beria	Article 58
Lenin	Grigorii Yagoda	Kulak(s)	Alexander Solzhenitsyn
The Kirov Affair	Nikolai Yezhov	NVKD (KGB)	The White Sea Canal (Belomor)

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- a** What did Stalin aim to achieve by creating the GULAG? Which was the more important goal of the GULAG—maintaining political stability or improving the economy and infrastructure of the USSR?
- b** In what ways and to what extent did the GULAG fulfill Stalin's goals?
- c** Was the GULAG largely Stalin's idea, or did it have deeper roots in Russian history? In what ways and to what extent was the GULAG a consequence of the ideology of communism?
- d** How did those arrested and sent to the GULAG deal with their predicament? What kind of people do you think were most likely to survive (or not survive) imprisonment in the GULAG? What factors beyond prisoners' control may have contributed to their ability to survive?
- e** How did people respond to the arrest and imprisonment of friends and family members? How do you think you would have responded?

## DAY 1 EXERCISE

**WHO WAS IMPRISONED AND WHY?****Goal**

Students should consider why each of these individuals might have been arrested and sentenced to serve time in the GULAG.

**Directions**

Break students into groups of 5. Each group should be comprised of one of each character: Mikhail, Olga, Ivan, Natasha, and Sergei.

Students should read biographical sketches and come up with reasons why each person would have been under suspicion and then arrested. Then the students will report on why "their" person was arrested and sentenced to the GULAG.

**Refer to *Biographical Sketches* at end of DAY 3.**

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**DAY ONE** STUDY GUIDE AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION
 

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## ALTERNATIVE EXERCISE

**Goal**

To help students understand the “method to the madness” of Stalin’s GULAG and acquire some knowledge about the key events in the history of the GULAG.

**Directions**

Break the class into two groups (or four or six depending on class size). One group, or block of groups, represents the citizenry of the USSR, and the other group, or block of groups, represents the NKVD.

The “citizens” are given identity cards which give the person’s name, occupation, age, and place of residence (similar to the composite individuals in the first exercise). The NKVD has copies of the identity cards and announces that it intends to arrest half of the “citizens” after ten minutes has elapsed.

During the next ten minutes, each group separately should develop a strategy, the NKVD—whom to arrest and why; the “citizens”—how to avoid arrest.

The NKVD wants to lend an aura of legitimacy to itself and its task, and thus it wants to avoid completely random and arbitrary arrests while nonetheless instilling fear in the populace. The “citizens”, as they ponder during the first few minutes how to avoid arrest, should soon realize that they cannot trust one another since some of them will ultimately have to be arrested. They will have to come up with verbal defenses of their own, if possible.

After ten minutes the NKVD can make its first arrest. The arrest should be accompanied by a brief announcement explaining the charges. Ideally, the NKVD would realize that fear would be more effectively instilled if the “citizens” were not arrested all at once but rather over the course of several minutes.

Once the arrests are complete, the teacher can refer to some of the biographical sketches or begin a discussion using the discussion questions for Day 1.

<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Heller and Aleksandr Nekrich, *Utopia in Power: The History of the Soviet Union from 1917 to the Present*, New York, 1986, p. 160.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Applebaum, *GULAG: A History*, New York, 2004, p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Oleg Khlevniuk, *The History of the GULAG from Collectivization to the Great Terror*, New Haven, 2004, pp. 165-166.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*, New York, 1990, p. 290.

<sup>5</sup> Conquest, p. 264.

<sup>6</sup> Conquest, p. 259.

<sup>7</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The GULAG Archipelago*, New York, pp. 6 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Khlevniuk, p. 203.

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**DAILY LIFE IN THE GULAG**


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“Be Vigilant!” Communist slogans urged people to be wary of others.

Over the course of sixty years, the GULAG system altered the lives of millions of people who were either swept away into the Soviet penal system, or were left behind without their arrested loved ones to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives. Families lived in fear of the dreaded knock on the door in the middle of the night, a well-known harbinger of a tragic journey that would end in slave labor in some of the most inhospitable regions in the world.

**DENUNCIATION**

One of the main goals of the Soviet leadership was to destroy personal ties among private citizens and create an atmosphere of distrust and fear. Ordinary citizens were bombarded by propaganda which provided a constant reminder that they were surrounded by enemies and that vigilance was needed by all. People were encouraged to denounce enemies whenever they felt there was a threat.

Demian Bedny’s poem (see box on Page 16), in which he expresses dismay towards enemies, is typical of much of the literature of the time. Movies were another medium that was used quite often and effectively.

In a musical film called “The Goalkeeper,” the goalkeeper is encouraged to do his job:

*Hey you goalie, prepare for battle!  
You’re a watchman by the gate!  
Just imagine that behind you  
The borderline must be kept safe<sup>1</sup>*

Perhaps the best known attempt to instill fear and distrust is the promotion of the child hero, Pavlik Morozov. Pavlik was a Young Pioneer (the official early Party training organization) who lived in a small village near the Ural Mountains. He was an excellent student and even taught his mother how to read and write. His father was one of the leaders of the village, but, according to the official story, he had fallen in with the enemies of the country. Pavlik denounced his father to the authorities and went so far as to testify against him in court. The young pioneer was martyred when he and his brother were killed by their father’s supporters. Morozov’s selflessness and heroism were held up to all children as an example of how children should put the country even before their own families.

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**WE DEALT THE ENEMY A CRUEL COUNTERBLOW**


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Monstrous! I can hardly put in words  
 That thing my head can find no place for  
 For which no name would do, such an awful evil  
 That it's hard to find a word to fit its horror.  
 How despicable is the hissing voice of spies!  
 How disgraceful the sight of enemies among us!  
 Shame to the mothers that gave birth  
 To these vicious dogs of unprecedented foulness!  
 These vicious dogs, whose fury is before us...

**Demian Bedny (1937)**, from *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia*

There were other incentives set up by the state for people to be wary of and denounce each other. A very real reward was that one could potentially receive a share of whatever was confiscated by the state. For example, if a person lost his apartment, the denouncer could receive part, if not all, of the property as a reward. Another incentive to denounce others was that one could be arrested simply because one was associated with a guilty party, even if the association was fleeting, accidental, or involuntary. If the accused did not report on the “guilty” party, he could be arrested on the basis of Article 58-12 (see previous chapter). Finally, there were some people who simply enjoyed denouncing their enemies. Nadezhda Mendelstam calls these people the “lovers of evil” and explains that they:

...had a taste for their dual role. Some of them were quite famous: Elsberg for example...It was typical of Elsberg that, after getting his friend S. sent to a concentration camp, he continued to visit S.'s wife and gave her advice. She knew about his role, but was frightened of betraying her disgust...<sup>2</sup>

### ARREST

In theory, the procedure for arresting individuals was supposed to follow a legal process to prevent excesses by the local police. In many cases, restrictions on arrest were observed to a point; but during the late 1930s, the process deteriorated considerably due to pressure from above, and the significant increase in the number of arrests. John Scott, an American worker who lived in Magnitogorsk, describes the arrest process:

All arrests were made at night. Surprise was always sought for; people were arrested when they least expected it, and left for weeks when they expected every night to be taken. The arrests were made by agents having no idea of the accusations against the person being arrested. They arrived, usually a sergeant in uniform and two plain-clothesmen, in an automobile, knocked at the door, politely presented an order signed by the prosecuting attorney or by the head of the city NKVD, authorizing them to search the apartment and arrest a certain person. The door was then locked, no one could come or go during the search. A civilian witness was taken at random from an adjacent apartment. He or she watched the search going on, then was requested to sign a paper stating that the authorities had not abused their power; that is beaten anyone up or stolen anything. Everything confiscated was listed and a receipt given. The search finished, the polite and completely uncommunicative agents departed with the arrested person. Probably no one in the house except the witness was aware until the next morning that anything had taken place.<sup>3</sup>

At other times, individuals were called into the local NKVD headquarters for questioning. These visits were presented by the authorities as simple meetings and the people in question were assured that they would not be kept for long. Since most of the people arrested were completely innocent of any crime, they fully believed that they would return quite soon, once the “mistake” was cleared up. Olga Adamova-Sliozberg was a communist who lived in Moscow. She recounts her reaction when she discovered her husband had been arrested:

I opened the door and was taken aback by the smell of boots and tobacco.

Marusya [the nanny] was sitting there telling the children a story in the midst of utter chaos. Heaps of books and manuscripts were scattered about the floor. Cupboards had been flung open, clothes hastily stuffed back; underwear protruded from half-open drawers. I had no idea what had happened, but my heart froze in a dreadful premonition of misfortune. Shielding the children, Marusya got up and said in a strange, quiet voice, “it’s all right, keep calm!”

“Where’s my husband? What’s happened?”

“Don’t you understand? They’ve taken him.”

No, it was impossible; it couldn’t happen to me, to him! Of course there had been rumors (just rumors, it was only the beginning of 1936) that something was going on, that there had been arrests... but surely all this applied to other people, it couldn’t happen to us...

...I believed in the justice system of our courts. My husband would come back, and this alien smell and topsy-turvy apartment would be no more than a dreadful memory.<sup>4</sup>

After the arrest, the newly accused—dazed, angered, scared, and/or resigned—were usually taken to prison for questioning in a car called a black raven or black Maria. These vehicles were often disguised so that the public would not guess how often these arrests occurred; some were painted like delivery trucks, with “Bread” or “Meat” painted on the sides. Many of those who were arrested never saw their families again.

The pretexts for arrest varied greatly. While there were common criminals who were convicted of typical crimes like murder or theft, the Purges included political prisoners who might be charged with sabotage at their work, destruction of state property, or spying for one



Courtesy of the Hoover Archives

**A propaganda poster of the secret police striking down the counter-revolutionary enemy**

(or more) of the many perceived enemies of the state. GULAG historian Anne Applebaum notes some of the crimes for which people were arrested:

The father of Alexander Lebed, the Russian general and politician, was twice ten minutes late to work for his factory job, for which he received a five-year camp sentence. At the largely criminal Polyansky camp near Krasnoyarsk-26, home of one of the Soviet Union’s nuclear reactors, archives record one “criminal” prisoner with a six-year sentence for stealing a single rubber boot in a bazaar, another with ten years for stealing ten loaves of bread, and another—a truck driver raising two children alone—with seven years for stealing three bottles of wine he was delivering. Yet another got five years for “speculation,” meaning he had bought cigarettes in one place and sold them in another. Antoni Ekart tells the story of a woman who was arrested because she took a pencil from the office where she worked. It was for her son, who had been unable to do his schoolwork for lack of something to write with.<sup>5</sup>

In her memoir, Eugenia Ginzberg remembers a woman who was arrested because she told two political jokes.<sup>6</sup> Gustaw Herling worked in the camps with a man who had received ten years for winning an unfortunate drunken bet that he could shoot Stalin's eye in a portrait on the wall.<sup>7</sup> People were even arrested for beating a soccer team supported by somebody high up in the government.

## PRISON

The first days in prison were an almost unbearable shock. Political prisoners often received the worst treatment. In most cases, the conditions in the prisons were horrendous. The cells were so crowded that there was almost no space to sleep. A 1933 memorandum from the OGPU [precursor of the KGB] describes the overcrowding:

- > As a rule, police cells are overcrowded by 200-400 percent and sometimes up to 600-800 percent. Thus, in the Moscow police detention cells, built for 350 people, 2,341 were being kept as of 31 January.
- > ... As of 1 January, in the Urals province, cells built for 470 people housed 1,715 inmates [...]
- > As of 1 January, in the Ivanovo Industrial province, cells built for 19 people had 70 people, etc.<sup>8</sup>

Instead of bathrooms, many cells had a bucket in the corner—and even this was better than prisons where one needed permission to be taken to the toilet. Lice and disease ran rampant, and the stench was so strong that the guards sometimes issued perfume to cover up the smell. Food was sparse and practically inedible. Although no communication was allowed between cells in the prisons, an ingenious tapping language was prevalent amongst the prisoners. Each letter had a certain combination of taps and prisoners became quite adept at exchanging information in this manner despite the authorities' attempts to prevent it.

For those considered to be ideologically dangerous—a designation reserved mostly for political “terrorists”—there were solitary confinement cells. These were typically no larger than a couple of steps in each

direction and could get extremely frigid in the winter time. By most accounts, people could spend only a short time in these cells before losing both their health and their sanity.

Nearly every city and town had some form of prison facility, but some were infamous throughout the country. Lubyanka, one of the most dreaded prisons, was located on the underground floors of the headquarters of the secret police in Moscow. In addition to the simple workers who were cycled through this prison, most of the highly-ranked political prisoners were held here before being executed or sent to a labor camp. Other famous prisons such as Butyrka or Lefortovo were used in tsarist times and were reopened by the communists when they took power.

## INTERROGATION/CONFESSION

The main purpose of the prisons was to hold prisoners for interrogation. The end goal of interrogation was to get the prisoners to sign a confession that they had committed a certain crime. Usually these accusations were completely false and the prisoners refused to sign the incriminating document. It is a curious fact that the Soviet authorities were obsessed with the need to obtain this written confession. In most cases, the fate of the prisoner had already been determined, but long hours of intimidation and torture were used to force the prisoner to sign the false document.

One of the primary tools used by the secret police interrogators was torture. Preeminent Russian historian Oleg Khlevniuk writes that “Soviet punitive agents were at that time members of one of the most criminalized and brutal security services in history.”<sup>9</sup>

In a secret letter written to Stalin by one of the heads of the secret police, some of the official interrogation methods were outlined:

In relation to arrested persons who stubbornly oppose the demands of the investigator, and conduct themselves in a provocative manner, and seek in all ways to drag out the investigation or to deflect it from the right path, a strict regime under guard is to be introduced.

This includes the following measures:

- a) transfer to a prison with a more strict regime, where hours of sleep are restricted and the maintenance of the arrested person in regard to food and other domestic needs is worsened;
- b) solitary confinement;
- c) forbidding walks, food parcels and the right to read books;
- d) placing in a punishment cell for a period up to 20 days.<sup>10</sup>

These interrogators were trained in the art of inflicting pain and carried it out with cold blooded efficiency. Prisoners were beaten, burned, frozen, raped, and cut. There were special standing cells (sometimes called the intestine) which were shaped like chimneys and designed specifically so that a person could not sit down. Every time he collapsed, his knees would buckle and he would become painfully wedged in the cell, effectively forcing him to stand up again. In a report, the NKVD noted one instance where an interrogator “knocked K’s teeth out and kicked her. As a result, he damaged [her] spine, and K could only ‘stand’ on her hands and knees.” This report describes another case where the prisoner’s “head was squeezed between the steel bars of a sink and he was beaten with sticks on his back and legs for two days and two nights. After the beating, he was put in a stance and beaten on the head with a paper-weight, a bottle [...], a chair leg [...] until unconscious and then thrown in a lock-up.”<sup>11</sup>

Hygiene, or the lack thereof, was also used as a psychological weapon to weaken the prisoners’ resolve. Often prisoners were “softened up” for a week or two in a common cell where the filth would demoralize them to the point where they would submit. In at least one instance, a lice cell was used where the cell was kept at a high temperature and the lice flourished by feeding off of the helpless prisoners.

Another dreaded form of torture was the conveyor. In his book, Vladimir Tchernavin meets a fellow prisoner who recounts the horrors of the conveyor:

Picture a group of about forty prisoners, men and women, all worn out, hungry, eaten by lice, suffering from swollen legs from long standing—people who have not slept for many nights. Single file we were led into a big room with three or four desks, and at each desk was an examining officer. Then comes another room and more examining officers, a corridor, stairs and more rooms with more examining officers. At the command “at a run” we had to run from one desk to another. And as we approached each desk the examining officer would start shouting at us in the vilest language imaginable ... This sort of torture lasts from ten to twelve hours. Examining officers go away and rest; they get tired sitting and shouting obscenities and so are relieved by others, but the prisoners have to keep on running.<sup>12</sup>

One of the most effective methods of eliciting a confession was to use personal information about the prisoner. It was difficult for prisoners to hold out when the interrogators threatened to arrest his/her spouse or children. According to official documents, it was also common practice to make

... use of compromising data which the MGB [the new name of the NKVD] has at its disposal, which the latter is concealing.

Sometimes, in order to outwit the arrested person and give him the impression that the agencies of the MGB know everything about him, the investigator draws the arrested person’s attention to particular intimate details from his personal life, vices which he conceals from his associates and others...<sup>13</sup>

There were even reports of mock executions in order to get the “stubborn” prisoner to confess. In this process, called “the ditch,” prisoners were taken to a site where others had been sentenced to be executed. The NKVD officials put them “alongside those sentenced to death, and started shooting those sentenced to death in his presence and threatening to shoot him if he did not confess.”<sup>14</sup>

In the end, most people signed the confession given to them, although the charges were usually completely false. Some signed because the endless days of torture and confinement were simply too much. They also felt



Courtesy of Regina Gorzkowski-Rossi

**“A lesson to learn: How to distribute your body on the planks trying to avoid excessive suffering? A position on your back means all your bones are in direct painful contact with wood... To sleep on your belly is equally uncomfortable. Until you sleep on your right side with your left knee pushed against your chest, you counterbalance the weight of your left hip and relieve the right side of your rib cage. You leave your right arm along the body, and put your right... cheekbone against the back of your left hand.”** *Drawing and memoir excerpt by Jacques Rossi*

that the outcome was inevitable and signing would simply speed the process along. Others signed because they felt they were saving their loved ones. In a few cases, the signature was simply forged.

## TRIAL

The final act before sending prisoners to the GULAG was the trial itself. Not all prisoners were given a trial, especially after 1937 as the numbers of arrested grew. However, a large number of prisoners had their case heard in front of a troika (three judges) who listened to the evidence and passed down the sentence. Although the outcome was preordained, this was an important moment because the prisoners would finally learn their fate. Some were taken and immediately shot. The major-

ity received a certain number of years of hard labor in an unspecified labor camp.

There was another type of trial that was utilized for high profile figures called the show trial. As with other trials, the outcome of these trials was never in doubt. However, the proceedings drew regional or national attention. Many of the top communists such as Kamenev, Rykov, and Bukharin admitted to heinous crimes of sabotage and spying in front of the whole country. These were scripted events where the prosecutor and accused had roles that they were supposed to fulfill. The show trials were very effective tools in convincing the Soviet people that corruption in their country was pervasive. Citizens were led to conclude that if the leaders of the revolution had resorted to these crimes,

it was only reasonable to think that anyone might be capable of doing the same.

There are many reasons why the Soviet government insisted on carrying out this charade of justice. Perhaps most importantly, it gave the overall system an air of legitimacy. It gave the people a sense that the purges were an unfortunate but necessary part of the battle against sabotage.

### DEPORTATION

After the sentence was passed down, prisoners usually had to remain in prison until the fateful day that they were summoned to leave. At this point, they were transported, often in the same type of trucks that had brought them to the prison months before, to the train that would take them to a labor camp. The trains were located not in the center of the city, but rather on the outskirts to keep from drawing attention to the large number of prisoners being transported.

Zayara Vesnyolaya recounts the beginning of her journey to Siberia:

They put us on in alphabetical order. I was third. The two best places, by the windows on the upper bed boards, were already taken, of course. I use "upper" to refer to their location, for there were no actual lower bed boards; people whose surnames came further down the alphabet had to find a space on the floor [...]

We waited for hours in the suffocating heat with the door securely closed, and it was only late in the evening that we finally moved off. We soon made a very unpleasant discovery: there was no slop bucket in the car, only a narrow opening in the wall opposite the door, into which had been fitted a tilting wooden trough made of three rough planks. Since we were crazed with thirst and were given a mug of water only when there was a long halt, there was no way to flush it out. It was a real circus act to try to hit the trough while the train was bumping and swaying from side to side, and few managed it. One can well imagine what the floor around the trough was like within a couple of hours of setting off.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, it was quite typical that food and water were portioned out in very small quantities. This was due in part to the attitude of the guards that food and water took a lot of time to distribute, and would only lead to more demands for the bathroom. The general lack of sanitary conditions led to widespread dysentery and disease that often proved to be fatal.

Another element that the prisoners had to deal with was extremes in temperature. The train cars were cattle cars, or converted passenger cars called Stolypin cars. Prisoners suffered from viciously cold temperatures in the winter and unbearably hot temperatures in the summer. Some prisoners, weakened by lack of food and sickness, died of exposure.

The trains carried the prisoners to certain cities or regional centers. From there, the prisoners were often forced to walk the remaining distance to their camp. Others were put on a boat and shipped to their final destination. The boat rides to the far eastern territory were legendary in their cruelty. The political and regular criminals were grouped together. The prisoners were placed below deck together with common criminals in holding tanks with no toilets. Food was thrown into the holding tank and the prisoners were left to fend for themselves in trying to grab some of the sewage soaked food. Stories of rape, murder, and abuse were quite common from this trip.

Most prisoners arrived at a pre-existing camp where the living facilities had already been built. Others arrived in an empty space and their first job was to build the labor camp in which they would be detained for many years to come. For those who survived the trip, there were other horrors awaiting them. The work, the food, the criminals, and the climate all combined to make survival a constant struggle.



### DAILY ROUTINE IN CAMP

The daily routine naturally differed in some respects depending on the camp. However, according to government documents and personal memoirs, there are a number of notable similarities. The prisoners were generally awakened quite early and given only a little time to ready themselves for the day ahead. Although official regulations stipulated that there were to be days off relatively regularly, this was rarely the case. Even more rarely was a day off awarded due to cold, despite the fact that one was not supposed to work when the temperature was less than minus 41° centigrade. Breakfast was a quick affair and then the prisoners were immediately escorted to work.

On the march, they were told that they would be shot if they took even a step out of line. Work went on until lunchtime, when the prisoners were allowed to rest and either eat the bread they had been given that morning or a meager portion of soup. Work then resumed until dark when the prisoners would march home, utterly starving and near collapse from exhaustion. Before they were allowed to go to eat, they were subject to roll call. This meant that the prisoners would have to stand out in the cold for another hour or more while the camp authorities confirmed that everything was in order. It was only after this that the prisoners were allowed to eat and go to sleep. The work day generally lasted from 10-12 hours, although there were many accounts of people working far more.

### FOOD

Much of one's existence in a labor camp was dictated by hunger. Food, and the lack thereof, dominated the thoughts and actions of the prisoners. This was a deliberate tactic used to both control the prisoners and encourage them to work hard. At mealtimes, prisoners were generally separated into three lines for three cauldrons. The prisoners were fed based on the amount of work they had completed that day. Those who fulfilled over 125% of their quota were fed from the third cauldron; the second cauldron was for those



Courtesy of Regina Garzkowski-Rossi

Prisoners waiting for their daily ration of food.

*Drawing by Jacques Rossi*

### DAILY RATIONS VORONTSY LABOR CAMP

**Cauldron I:** 300 grams of bread, for breakfast, a liter of thin soup; supper: a spoonful of groats, a liter of soup

**Cauldron II:** 500 grams of bread, breakfast, a liter of soup; supper—2 spoonfuls of groats and a piece of spoiled fish

**Cauldron III:** 700 grams of bread, breakfast—1/2 liter of soup; supper 2/2 liter of soup, 2 spoonfuls of groats and a piece of spoiled fish

*Inside Soviet Slave Labor Camps, Case #1822, p.0000344.*



Courtesy of Tomasz Kizny

**A view of a camp in Vorkutlag**

who fulfilled 100%-125% of their quota; and finally the first cauldron was for those who did not meet their quota. It was nearly impossible to fulfill, not to mention over-fulfill a quota, so most were fed from the meager rations of cauldron I. Gustav Herling recalls watching the prisoners line up for the first cauldron: “dazed with exhaustion and swooning on their thin legs, they pushed their way through the hatch, whined plaintively, begging for an extra dribble, and peered greedily into the cans of the second- and third-cauldron prisoners.”<sup>16</sup>

Many prisoners felt that those who honestly worked enough to earn the third cauldron were doomed to a sure death from exhaustion. Even though they received nearly twice the amount of food than those who received the first cauldron, they would overwork themselves and become victim of “the big ration.” In his memoirs Lev Razgon recalls a conversation he had with a doctor who said, “the discrepancy between the energy expended in work and that provided by the ‘big ration’ was so great that the healthiest forest worker was doomed to death by starvation within several months.”<sup>17</sup>

### LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

In 1940, a chemical engineer from Poland was arrested and sent to the labor camps. When he was finally

released, he left the USSR and in an interview, he related in great detail what the living arrangements were like in his camp:

[The camp] was in the form of a rectangle about 220 x 90 meters, surrounded by a wooden fence, 2.5 meters high. There was a barrier inside the camp 3 meters from the fence. The prisoners were allowed to go only as far as that barrier. In case a prisoner was found in the space between the barrier and the fence... , the sentry was allowed to fire without warning. The sentries were placed on the watchtowers at the corners of the camp and also in the middle of the longer sides of the fence. There were two exits in the camp. At these exits were small barracks with soldiers... who checked the prisoners leaving the camp and returning to it. One quarter of the camp area was occupied by the industrial zone... in which were barracks housing workshops and offices. In the remaining part of the camp were supposed to be only the prisoners’ quarters and the utility buildings—the bathhouse, the disinfestation building, the laundry, the kitchen, the shoemaker and tailor workshops, the clothing warehouse, the food storage, the club and the bakery...

The barracks were in the form of a rectangle, mostly 7 x 20 meters in size and were one-story high. Inside, special two-tier beds were put in along both the long walls, (they were) quite comfortable. When the influx of convicts was particularly great these beds usually were removed because of the shortage of barracks... and long wooden sleeping shelves... were constructed. Then there was a terrible jam. After the arrival of several Polish transports, the housing conditions became awful because of the overcrowding. It was always humid in the barracks—people were drying their clothes which had become soaked while they had been working—the floor was covered with mud which never dried up. The whole barrack was dimly lit by one little bulb. In the middle of the barrack were tables and benches where people, exhausted by labor, sat and half-slumbered. Some of them fell on their bunks right after work, without undressing until the next morning. During this period of time, the bathhouse and the disinfestations unit were not available because of a defect in the steam boiler by which they were serviced. Thus during 7 weeks we were denied the possibility of washing ourselves and changing our underwear. The people became terribly infested with lice...

Every convict received a straw mattress sack, and filled it with shavings from the carpenter’s workshop; he also received 1 blanket, however, a very poor one. It was generally very warm in the barrack... on the other hand if the stove got out of order, the cold was terrible, sometimes one’s hair would freeze to the shelves. It was possible to take a bath as often as one wanted, every week for instance. However, it was pretty tiring for people working hard in the woods to wait in line for a bath.<sup>18</sup>

## TYPES OF PRISONERS: POLITICAL AND CRIMINAL

In the camps, there were essentially three types of prisoners: the professional criminals (“urka”), the petty criminals and the political prisoner. In the camp social order, conventional rules of status and respect were turned upside down. Hardened criminals, convicted of murder, rape, and assault, were put in charge of prisoners charged under political codes and those convicted of the “crimes” mentioned previously. The guards were not concerned by the resulting abuses of justice and order. In fact, this was favorable for the guards because they knew that the criminals could easily keep everyone else in line through intimidation and violence. The political prisoners were convicted of crimes such as wrecking and sabotage, although in most cases they were guilty of nothing. It was these people who were considered to be the most dangerous under Stalin, and they were treated with the utmost vigilance and cruelty.

The criminals wielded a great deal of power in the camps. Gustav Herling described the system:

The urka is an institution in the labour camp, the most important person after the commander of the guard; he judges the working capacity and the political orthodoxy of the prisoners of his brigade, and is often entrusted with the most responsible functions...<sup>19</sup>

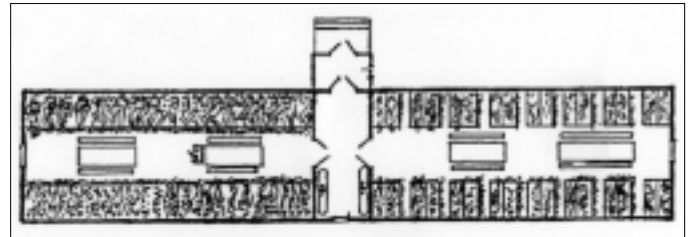
The criminals were in charge of nearly all aspects of camp life, although they themselves did very little of the actual work. Often they would sit around, dressed in very elaborate outfits that they had stolen from the politicals, and force others to carry out the commands of the camp guards.

The political prisoners lived in constant fear of the criminals who seemingly had no moral or ethical boundaries. These urkas thought nothing of stealing from the others in the camps. One Polish judge, who was taken prisoner, remembered the urkas with disgust:

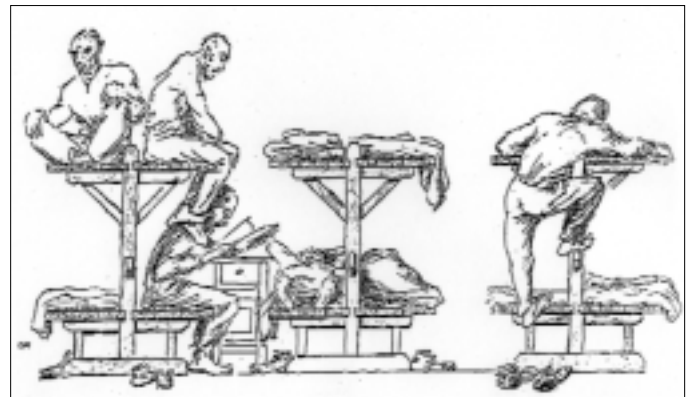
...I had come into contact with murderers, bandits, thieves, prisoners and the whole underworld, but I had not imagined that a man could fall to such monstrous bestiality... The obscene curses exchanged between the camp inmates who were walking with us and the groups of men, and particularly women, who were working at the tracks, evoked disgust and dread. We soon became

accustomed to theft, particularly that of shoes and clothing from (our) bundles, ...which [was] frankly tolerated by the [camp authorities]. ...[They were] concerned solely with preventing the condemned persons from escaping. I was not worried about my belongings; I already had been robbed thoroughly, at the place where we had spent the first night.<sup>20</sup>

The language used by the criminals was shockingly crude and became almost a separate language with its own “zhargon,” or slang. The urkas were often violent and abused the other prisoners physically and sexually. They would force other prisoners to fulfill whatever demands or urges they had, at the threat of death. In one case, Gustav Herling saw two urkas playing cards and realized that they had bet the life of a political prisoner in the camp.<sup>21</sup>



Camp Sleeping Quarters, Drawing by Jacques Rossi



**“The GULAG was conceived in order to transform human matter into a docile, exhausted, ill-smelling mass of individuals living only for themselves and thinking of nothing else but how to appease the constant torture of hunger, living in the instant, concerned with nothing apart from evading kicks, cold and ill treatment.”** *Drawing and memoir excerpt by Jacques Rossi*



Courtesy of The Hoover Archives

An attempt by the government to show that slave labor really did not exist. The caption reads, "In response to the capitalist slander about forced labor in the timber industry, we will increase our socialist work."

In another case, an urka found two prisoners fighting and imposed his own form of justice: "...he made two rapid movements toward the quarrelers with his pick; as quick as lightning he had knocked out one eye apiece."<sup>22</sup>

## WORK

Perhaps the most important element in a person's survival in labor camps was where he or she worked. This was determined in part by what type of sentence the prisoner had been given, and in part by the camp administration. There was an endless variety of jobs in the labor camps. Certain jobs would almost surely lead to death, while others allowed prisoners to scrape by with access to the most basic of amenities. The hardest were usually outdoor jobs that exposed the prisoners to the brutal elements. Cutting trees was one of the main outdoor jobs. This work was known as "green execution" and most prisoners only lasted a short time before dying of exhaustion. Mining and manual construction were some of the

other tasks that almost inevitably killed off most of the workers within a few months.

Within the camp, there were individuals called trusties who were given better jobs and had the power to dominate the lives of others. These were the people who worked in the cafeteria, the bathhouse, or the barber shop. They could control who got rest, who got food, and who would do the lethal jobs that meant almost certain death. Often the trusties would get their jobs through bribes or other connections with the prison guards.

The production at each camp was controlled by something called the norm. The norm was a quota of how much work a prisoner was expected to do each day. It was vital to the prisoners' existence because the amount of food they received was based on what percentage of the norm they had fulfilled. The norms were usually set at impossibly high levels. In most cases even a healthy person, not to mention a starving, sick,

ill-clad prisoner, would have been hard put to fulfill even three-quarters of the norm. One former prisoner reported that:

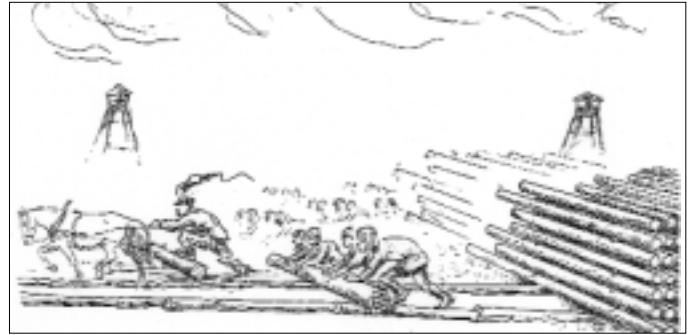
The norms for digging ground along with removing the top frozen layer of moss and the roots of plants, removing and rooting out the stumps, and preparing the ground for the future road—were 10 square meters for one person. For shoveling snow, there was a different norm, for cutting the woods another, and so on. Generally, by honestly working, one could honestly fulfill 50% of the norm.<sup>23</sup>

This forced the prisoners to “cheat” in order to show that they had fulfilled the norm. This cheating, or *tufta* as it was called, often meant the difference between life and death. The prisoners were ingenious in the tricks that they used to make it look as if they had fulfilled the norm. Eugenia Ginzberg recalls being near death because she could not meet even 20% of the norm for cutting trees. She received starvation rations and was often put into a punishment cell for sabotage. Finally, one of her fellow prisoners showed her how to find logs that had already been cut and pretend that she had cut them herself. As she explained:

This trick, which we christened ‘freshening up the sandwiches,’ saved our lives for the time being... we laid a foundation of our pile with trees we had really cut down ourselves, leaving a couple or so we had felled but not yet sawn up to give the impression that we were hard at it. Then we went to fetch some of the old logs, ‘freshening up’ their ends and stacking them in our pile.<sup>24</sup>

Others would bribe their supervisor with food, belongings, or even sexual favors.

Sickness and injuries were commonplace at the camps. As one prisoner recalled, “Hunger, excessive work, and the living conditions caused a quick loss of strength, frequent accidents, illness, and death.”<sup>25</sup> By nearly all accounts, the hospitals were a sanctuary from the impersonal and vicious life in camp. The doctors and nurses often showed compassion for the patients and the conditions in the hospitals themselves were far better than those in the barracks and work place. When in the hospital, the prisoners were exempted from work



Courtesy of Regina Garzkowski-Rossi

**“After eleven and a half hours of labor (not including time needed to assign a task, receive tools and give them back), Professor Kozyrev commented: ‘How far Man is still from perfection. Just to think how many people and what minds are needed to do a job of one horse.’**

**In this case the four incompetent workers were: Epifanov, who was until the Great Purge of 1937 a professor of Marxism-Leninism in the Academy of Mining in Moscow; Colonel Ivanov, a chief of a major Red Army division; Professor Kozyrev, director of research at the Pulkovo Space Observatory in Leningrad; and myself, a secret agent of the Comintern.”** *Drawing and memoir excerpt by Jacques Rossi*



Courtesy of Yuri Bradsky

**Trying to fulfill the norm**

and it was not unusual that prisoners survived only because they were allowed to recover, if only briefly, from the punishing daily life of the camps. However, it was not easy to get admitted to these hospitals. Doctors were allowed to admit only a certain number of people per day, regardless of the actual need. This problem was compounded by the fact that many of the spaces were taken by criminals who were admitted through bribes or threats.



Courtesy of the David King Collection

The prisoners were given only the most basic tools.

The work in the camps was so horrific that prisoners would go to astounding lengths in order to avoid it. One prisoner recalls a man who, “cut his hand open with an axe in order to get into the hospital to relax for at least a couple of days.”<sup>26</sup> Gustav Herling witnessed a man place his arm in the wood stove, a routine that was apparently carried out daily, in order to avoid working.<sup>27</sup> The sanitary department of the GULAG produced a remarkable document where it chronicled some of the other forms of self-mutilation:

- ▶ hacking off fingers and extremities
- ▶ freezing the extremities
- ▶ artificial irritation and reopening of wounds, rashes, scratches, and other actions preventing prompt healing
- ▶ chemical burns of the skin and underlying tissues
- ▶ injuries, traumas, etc.

This document also noted cases of drinking kerosene or soap to cause stomach ailments, injecting turpentine or petroleum to create boils, and injecting soap or kerosene into the urinary tract to simulate venereal diseases.<sup>27</sup>



Courtesy of the David King Collection

Building Lock # 1 on the White Sea Canal



Courtesy of Regina Gorzkowski-Rossi

Prisoners would go to extremes to avoid back-breaking labor.

## FINAL REMARKS

It is estimated that one out of every six Soviet citizens was persecuted in the Stalin era.<sup>29</sup> Countless more were caught up in the web of fear and suspicion that permeated society at this time. Despite this fact, or perhaps because of it, Stalin was able to stay in power for over 25 years and died a natural death. His legacy is complex. Today there are still many who feel that the iron hand of the Georgian-born leader was necessary in such a backwards and underdeveloped country. Although the USSR did improve in some areas, it is impossible to ignore the enormous price paid by the Soviet people who were treated as if they were an expendable commodity in the name of communism.

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**DAY TWO** STUDY GUIDE AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

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## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- a** After people were arrested they were often asked to sign a confession based on lies. Some people signed these immediately as they felt that holding out would not change their fate and would only prolong their torture. However, there were others who refused to confess even when faced with months of torture. Which strategy would you have used and why?
- b** If the outcome of the incarceration process was inevitable under Stalin, why did the Soviet authorities insist on spending time and money to go through the whole process of arrest, interrogation, and trial?
- c** In the camps, most prisoners were faced with the decision of whether or not they should become a “Trusty”—someone who worked in a job which provided certain privileges such as extra food. Often a privilege like this meant the difference between death or survival. There were never enough “trusty” jobs for all the prisoners, so competition for the jobs was intense. In your opinion, was it immoral to work in one of these jobs? Was it immoral to accept this level of treatment with its privileges when other prisoners were perishing from overwork and lack of food and warmth?
- d** Do morals change in different situations? Can our sense of what is “fair” be swayed by the need to survive? In order to stay alive, many people were forced to do things in the camps that would have been considered immoral in “regular” society. Do values change depending on the circumstances, or are they always the same, regardless of one’s surroundings?
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**DAY TWO** STUDY GUIDE AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION
 

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## DAY 2 EXERCISES

**DENUNCIATION****Directions**

Read the section on denunciation. Hand out small slips of paper to everyone in the class. Announce that there are certain people within the class who have reportedly been keeping food from the others. Any student who successfully reports another student for hoarding food will get a reward (this can be a small piece of candy, or some other privilege that will be attractive to the students). If you do not allow food in the class, you could denounce people for using a certain color of pen or pencil, talking while the teacher is talking, or anything else you can think of. Collect the denunciations as they are written and start to read them to the class.

Punishments for students who are found to be hoarding food can be to sit on the floor, under the desk, writing sentences on the board...be creative. The exercise usually picks up momentum as three things happen:

- 1 the students see that they are rewarded
- 2 the students see that their peers are punished
- 3 the students see that the charges don't really have to be true in order for punishments and rewards to be handed down.

After the exercise, have the students journal about their experience.

- > Did they denounce others? Why or why not?
- > What incentives were there to denounce others?
- > Why did other people in the class write denunciations to get their classmates in trouble?
- > What happened to the dynamics in the classroom?
- > How could this process affect a society if everyone was encouraged to denounce one another?

**COMMUNICATION****Goal**

One of the most difficult aspects of prison and solitary confinement was the inability to communicate with others. One of the ways that the prisoners got around this was to knock to each other through the wall. Below is an example of the system that they used (of course they used the Cyrillic alphabet). The numbers represent the number of knocks, used for each letter. For example 1..3 would be the letter C

	1	2	3	4	5
1	A	B	C	D	E
2	F	G	H	I	J
3	K	L	M	N	O
4	P	Q	R	S	T
5	U	V	W	X	Y
6	Z				

**Directions**

This code can be used for a number of activities.

The teacher starts out by tapping a simple sentence and the class would have to guess what the message was. Students break into pairs and try to communicate using the tap language.

Students come up with their own secret code. The code is only successful if the guards (the rest of the class) can't figure out what is being said.

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**DAY TWO** STUDY GUIDE AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

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**FOOD****Goal**

Based on the information in the “Food” section, the teacher or a select group of students should bring in approximations of the amount of food included in cauldrons 1-3.

- > What is your immediate reaction to the amount of food? (Remember that this food was supposed to nourish someone who worked a 12 hour day.)
- > There were three different rations (cauldrons) based on one’s output. What do you think this would do to the relationships within the camp when some receive more food than others?

Often times it is very hard to understand how much (or how little) prisoners were given to eat in the camps. One exercise is to have the students try to exist on the prisoners’ ration for one day. After this, the students should journal about their own experiences and how they think this would affect the prisoners of the GULAG. If this is too involved, the teacher could bring in a ration and show the students how much bread, soup, and water were given in a day.

**WORK**

Note to the teacher: This exercise should show how the prisoners tried to survive by using “tufta” or a strategy of cheating the system in order to survive.

**Directions**

Divide the class into teams of 4-5. Each team must try to complete a task that is nearly impossible to complete in the time given. This task can be almost anything, but there should be a number of obstacles that they must deal with as they try to complete it. At the end of the allotted time, the team captain should report how much they were able to do. Each team should be rewarded (with candy, privileged seating, etc) or punished based on their performance. You, as the boss, can choose to acknowledge or ignore the many infractions that will most likely occur as people try to make up for lack of time or other resources. If time allows, you should do a second round of the same activity.

In a journal or class discussion, the students should consider the following:

- > What happened to the groups that didn’t fulfill the quota?
  - > What incentives were there to be honest in completing the project?
  - > What strategies were used to “cheat” the system in order to get a full reward?
  - > What did people do when they were caught in the act of trying to cheat the system?
  - > For those people who bent the rules, should this be considered cheating or simply a strategy to survive in a hostile environment?
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**DAY TWO** STUDY GUIDE AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

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**CAMPS**

Using the description given in the “Living Arrangements” section of the text, create a poster of what you think the camps might have looked like.

**IDENTITY**

The teacher can use the five biographies to teach about the topics covered in DAY 2. All of the biographies are fictitious, but they are based directly on the experiences of real people.

Have the students read DAY 2 for homework.

Each student should receive a biography.

Before each topic (denunciation, arrest, etc) is discussed in class, the students should read the corresponding section of their own biography.

The students can then discuss in small groups (including at least one of each of the biographies), or in the class as a whole, the experiences of their person.

This discussion should bring out most of the main points that are covered in the text itself.

*NOTE: If you have less time, or you would like to work with a real biography, have the students read the interview with Dr Jerzy Glikzman before discussing the information covered in Day 2.*

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## DAY TWO FOOTNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Stites, Richard & James von Geldern, ed. *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia: Tales, Poems, Songs, Movies, Plays, and Folklore*, 1917-1953. Indiana University Press: Indianapolis, Indiana, 1995, p. 236.

<sup>2</sup> Mendelstam, Nadezhda, *Hope Against Hope: A Memoir*, Atheneum: New York, 1970, pp. 36-37.

<sup>3</sup> Scott, John, *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel*, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana Press, 1989, p. 190.

<sup>4</sup> Olga Adamova-Sliozberg from *Till my Tale is Told: Women's Memoirs of the Gulag*, ed. Simeon Vilensky, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999, pp. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Applebaum, Anne, *GULAG: A History*, New York: Doubleday, 2003, pp. 293-194.

<sup>6</sup> Ginzberg, Eugenia Semyonovna, *Journey in the Whirlwind*, New York: Harcourt Inc, 1995, p. 106

<sup>7</sup> Herling, Gustaw, *A World Apart*, New York: Penguin Books, 1986, pp. 50-51.

<sup>8</sup> Khlevniuk, Oleg, *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004, p. 58.

<sup>9</sup> Khlevniuk, p. 152.

<sup>10</sup> 'Dobit'sa polnogo Razoblacheniiia' from Boobbyer, Philip, *The Stalin Era*, New York: Rutledge, 2000, p. 67.

<sup>11</sup> Khlevniuk, pp. 151-152.

<sup>12</sup> Tchernavin, Vladimir, *I Speak for the Silent*, Boston and New York, 1935, p. 656

<sup>13</sup> Boobbyer, p. 67.

<sup>14</sup> Khlevniuk, p. 159.

<sup>15</sup> Zara Vesnyolaya, from *Till my Tale is Told: Women's Memoirs of the Gulag*, pp. 325-326.

<sup>16</sup> Herling p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> Razgon p. 155.

<sup>18</sup> *Inside Soviet Slave Labor Camps, 1939-1942: An analysis of written statements by 9,200 former prisoners*, United States Dept. of State. Office of International Information: 1952, Hoover Archives, Case #283, p.0000291-294.

<sup>19</sup> Herling p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> *Inside Soviet Slave Labor Camps, 1939-1942: An analysis of written statements by 9,200 former prisoners*, United States Dept. of State. Office of International Information: 1952, Hoover Archives, Case #2391, p.0000366-367.

<sup>21</sup> Herling, p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> From Anatolii Zhigulin, Chernye Kamni as quoted by Applebaum, p. 285.

<sup>23</sup> *Inside Soviet Slave Labor Camps, 1939-1942: An analysis of written statements by 9,200 former prisoners*, United States Dept. of State. Office of International Information: 1952, Hoover Archives, Case #13541, p.0000440.

<sup>24</sup> Ginzberg, p. 410.

<sup>25</sup> *Inside Soviet Slave Labor Camps, 1939-1942: An analysis of written statements by 9,200 former prisoners*, United States Dept. of State. Office of International Information: 1952, Hoover Archives, Case #1822, p.0000346.

<sup>26</sup> *Inside Soviet Slave Labor Camps, 1939-1942: An analysis of written statements by 9,200 former prisoners*, United States Dept. of State. Office of International Information: 1952, Hoover Archives, Case #1822, p.0000346.

<sup>27</sup> Herling, p. 81.

<sup>28</sup> Khlevniuk, pp. 220-221.

<sup>29</sup> Khlevniuk, p. 305.

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## DE-STALINIZATION AND THE LEGACY OF THE GULAG

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According to Lavrenty Beria, on the day of Joseph Stalin's death—March 5, 1953—there were 2,526,402 people in prison camps across the Soviet Union, a small fraction of whom Beria himself considered “dangerous state criminals.” Just three weeks after Stalin's death, Beria declared a mass amnesty for prisoners with less than five-year sentences, pregnant women, women with children, and all children under eighteen. One million people were released.<sup>1</sup> Lavrenty Beria himself, who had signed the death warrants of over 50,000 people, and had hundreds of thousands more deported or arrested, was arrested in June 1953 and executed in December 1953 for “anti-state activities.” The execution of Beria was an important step in the beginning of what would become known as “De-Stalinization”—the process of discrediting and abandoning the policies and strategies of Joseph Stalin.

### THE DE-STALINIZATION CAMPAIGN

Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin's successor as First Secretary of the Communist Party, was in a difficult situation. If he refused to denounce Stalin, his own legitimacy would be undermined, but the Party would lose its legitimacy if it attacked its own leader. Many of Stalin's supporters were still active members of the Communist Party, and Khrushchev did not want to alienate them. Khrushchev himself had been a member of Stalin's inner circle, but claimed that he and other Party members did not try to stop Stalin because they did not know the full extent of what was happening. Khrushchev also described the paralyzing fear that kept Stalin's closest associates from intervening; if they contradicted Stalin, they certainly would have been executed or sent to the camps themselves.



Nikita Khrushchev giving a speech

Courtesy of the Society for Cooperation in Russian and Soviet Studies

### The “Cult of Personality”

Khrushchev's attempt to both acknowledge the atrocities and distance himself and other party leaders from Stalin and his crimes was a speech entitled, “On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences” that he gave to other high ranking Party members in February 1956. It became known as the “Secret Speech” because it was not intended to be made public. However, there were reports about the speech and soon the entire country learned of Khrushchev's attacks on Stalin's “excesses” and his abuse of power. While Khrushchev blamed Stalin, he also held Party members accountable for treating Stalin like a god.

**“ON THE CULT OF PERSONALITY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES” BY NIKITA KRUSHCHEV**

“ After Stalin’s death, the Central Committee began to implement a policy of explaining concisely and consistently that it is impermissible and foreign to the spirit of Marxism-Leninism to elevate one person, to transform him into a superman possessing super-natural characteristics akin to those of a god. Such a man supposedly knows everything, sees everything, thinks for everyone, can do anything, is infallible in his behavior. Such a belief about a man, and specifically about Stalin, was cultivated among us for many years.

Stalin acted not through persuasion, explanation and patient cooperation with people, but by imposing his concepts and demanding absolute submission to his opinion. Whoever opposed these concepts or tried to prove his [own] viewpoint and the correctness of his [own] position was doomed to removal from the leadership collective and to subsequent moral and physical annihilation. This was especially true during the period following the 17th Party Congress, when many prominent Party leaders and rank-and-file Party workers, honest and dedicated to the cause of Communism, fell victim to Stalin’s despotism.

He discarded the Leninist method of convincing and educating, he abandoned the method of ideological struggle for that of administrative violence, mass repressions and terror. He acted on an increasingly large scale and more stubbornly through punitive organs, at the same time often violating all existing norms of morality and of Soviet laws.”<sup>2</sup>

**Feb. 25 1956**

It took another five years, until October 1961, for the Communist Party to denounce the purges and make the important decision to move Stalin’s body out of Lenin’s tomb—a place of high honor—and into a grave behind the mausoleum.



Joseph Stalin’s body was put in Lenin’s Mausoleum on Red Square in Moscow. It was removed in 1961 during “De-Stalinization.”

Courtesy of the Society for Cooperation in Russian and Soviet Studies

**UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES**

As news of the “Secret Speech” reached other Communist countries such as Poland and Hungary, public demonstrations against government policies began taking place. The mass demonstrations in Hungary led to the Hungarian uprising against the Communist State in October 1956. This uprising was brutally suppressed by the Soviet military.

## “LANCING THE BOIL”

Between 1960 and 1963, publishers were allowed to print stories and memoirs about experiences in the GULAG system. One of the most famous of these publications is Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, a short story that details one prisoner’s day in a labor camp. Although a work of fiction, the story is based on Solzhenitsyn’s own experiences and the experiences of others in the camps. In 1963, immediately after publication of *One Day in the Life*, Khrushchev retreated from his commitment to publishing accounts of Stalin’s camps. He warned that camps and the purges were “dangerous subjects” that might harm the Communist Party. Khrushchev later described the publication of Solzhenitsyn’s novel as “lancing a boil” by showing the “conditions under which people lived” in order to “provoke anger against the one who caused it all.”<sup>3</sup>

### The End of “Rehabilitation”

Khrushchev’s successor, Leonid Brezhnev, not only ended the process of “De-Stalinization” but actually began to restore Stalin’s reputation as a great military leader and as the architect of Soviet industrialization. In 1965, only nine years after Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech,” the Party instructed writers and other intellectuals that they should not produce any more negative treatments of the 1930s and the labor camps.

Under Khrushchev, there had been cases of “Rehabilitation,” or officially excusing accused persons, both alive and deceased, who had served their sentences. But Brezhnev suspended this process. This meant that those who had been given a sentence for a crime, even though they might have been innocent, were still considered criminals in the eyes of Soviet society.

## SOVIET CONSTITUTION OF 1936

### Sample Laws from the Soviet Constitution

#### Article 123

Equality of rights of citizens of the USSR, irrespective of their nationality or race, in all spheres of economic, state, cultural, social and political life, is an infeasible law. Any direct or indirect restriction of the rights of, or, conversely, any establishment of direct or indirect privileges for, citizens on account of their race or nationality, as well as any advocacy of racial or national exclusiveness or hatred and contempt, is punishable by law.

#### Article 125

In conformity with the interests of the working people, and in order to strengthen the socialist system, the citizens of the USSR are guaranteed by law: freedom of speech; freedom of the press; freedom of assembly, including the holding of mass meetings; freedom of street processions and demonstrations.

#### Article 127

Citizens of the USSR are guaranteed inviolability of the person. No person may be placed under arrest except by decision of a court or with the sanction of a procurator.

There was no public discussion of the GULAG in the 1970s and until the middle 1980s. In fact, Solzhenitsyn was not permitted to publish his *GULAG Archipelago* trilogy in the Soviet Union. However, this lack of public acknowledgment did not mean that people stopped thinking about the camps and Stalin. In the 1960s and 1970s, authors would type up their manuscripts and circulate copies to friends and other writers. This was called “samizdat” or self-publishing. Some manuscripts, including *GULAG Archipelago*, were smuggled out of the Soviet Union and were published in the West.



Courtesy of the Society for Cooperation in Russian and Soviet Studies

Two Muscovites look for relatives during the Gorbachev era.

### THE GULAG AND THE BIRTH OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The official crackdown on public discussion about the camps and human rights issues in general led to the formation of underground groups of dissenters who not only circulated *samizdat* materials about the camps, but also criticized the current Soviet regime. The general public certainly realized that ordinary Soviet citizens had no legal protection in their own society if they could be arrested and imprisoned for no reason.

The Soviet Constitution of 1936 actually did guarantee what we consider basic human rights to Soviet citizens, but it was not enforced. Beginning in the late 1960s, human rights activists, especially Alexander Esenin-Volpin, called for the simple idea that the Constitution should be respected and followed, rather than ignored.

Esenin-Volpin, who was a mathematician and logician, had been arrested and imprisoned in a psychiatric hospital. Upon his release in 1960 he went to a central square in Moscow and gave a speech outlining his “strategy of legality,” the basis of which was to hold the Soviet Government accountable for upholding and enforcing its own laws.

Usually the term “Glasnost” is associated with Gorbachev’s reforms in the 1980’s, but Esenin-Volpin used this term in 1965 when he organized the “Glasnost Meeting,” a demonstration in the center of Moscow. The demonstrators carried signs saying “Respect the Soviet Constitution” and protested the arrest of two dissident writers. The demonstrators were promptly arrested. In 1968 Esenin-Volpin circulated his famous “Memo for Those who Expect to Be Interrogated.”

In 1970, Volpin joined the Human Rights Committee of the USSR and worked with Andrei Sakharov and other activists. Throughout the 1970s there were occasional instances of public demand for discussion about the camps. Solzhenitsyn's expulsion from the Soviet Union after winning the Nobel Prize for Literature sparked calls for public discussion about the purges, but that did not begin again until 1987, when Mikhail Gorbachev, who would be the last leader of the Soviet Union, began the discussion.

### GORBACHEV AND THE CAMPS

In November 1987, Gorbachev made a speech on national television in which he openly stated that there were "violations of the law, arbitrariness and repressions" in the 1930s, and that all were "the result of the abuse of power."<sup>4</sup> Gorbachev's openness about his country's and his party's past led to the "opening of the floodgates" and the height of public discussion of the GULAG. Finally, the Soviet public could read GULAG novels and memoirs that before had only circulated as *samizdat*.

The "rehabilitation" process was resumed and accelerated. In this new atmosphere of discussion and debate about the camps, the "Memorial" Society was founded. Memorial, as it was called, grew out of informal meetings of academics and young professionals interested in social justice and political reform during the Gorbachev era.

#### The goals of the Memorial Society were:

- > to give survivors of the prison camps a forum to express their grief and anger
- > to build a monument to the victims of Stalinism and a center devoted to the history of repression, but when members of Memorial tried to get signatures on a petition in 1987 to build a monument, KGB agents intervened, detained activists, and confiscated their materials

**Memorial Society WEB SITE:** <http://www.memorial.ru>

#### "REPENTANCE" Directed by Tengiz Abuladze, 1984

<p>This film was released in 1987 and took part in the country-wide process of coming to terms with Stalinism. In the film, the Stalin-like mayor of a small town in Georgia (Stalin's birthplace) dies. The day after his funeral, his body is exhumed and dumped on his son's front lawn.</p>	<p>The son reburies his father, but the corpse is placed there over and over. It turns out that a woman who accuses the dead Mayor of Stalin-like purges of the town does not want the man to rest and has been moving the corpse herself.</p>
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In Minsk, the government harassed activists by threatening to fire them from their jobs and to withhold bonuses and promotions. The Minsk government also discouraged students from participating in Memorial's activities by threatening to lower their grades and withhold diplomas.

In 1988, a group of young writers applied to Minsk city authorities to conduct a public gathering to commemorate those killed by Stalin. The writers were denied permission. The organizers held the gathering anyway. The city authorities shut down all public transportation to the cemetery where the meeting was to take place and the police seized and detained a number of well-known cultural figures walking towards the meeting site. They brutally broke up the demonstration—which included children—with tear gas and clubs.

However, two years later, after pressure from notable Soviet citizens such as Andrei Sakharov, Memorial had an official charter and was recognized by the Soviet government. In addition to the activities of Memorial, there were many other examples of public discussion about the GULAG. There were even posters made to commemorate victims of Stalinist repressions.



### PRO-STALINISM AND “WILLED AMNESIA”

Newspapers published letters written by individuals who had been imprisoned in the GULAG. However, not all letters to newspapers were anti-Stalinist. A letter appeared in the newspaper *Soviet Russia* on March 13, 1988. Nina Andreeva, its writer, expressed her allegiance to Stalin (below.)

Nina Andreeva's letter prompted a nationwide movement of pro-Stalinists. They created “UNITY,” a movement that by 1991 had spread across the Soviet Union. UNITY freely proclaimed admiration

of Stalin, and downplayed the significance of purges. While UNITY was an extreme case of pro-Stalinism, the majority of the population in the late Soviet period seemed to develop a case of “willed amnesia.” Even under conditions that allowed free discussion, most people seemed to settle for forgetting the past. When a list of Stalin's victims began appearing in a Moscow newspaper, readers complained that they had heard enough about Stalinism. Perhaps economic upheavals of the time were a more immediate concern.

#### “I CANNOT WAIVE PRINCIPLES” BY NINA ANDREEVA

“Take, for example, the question of Joseph Stalin's place in our country's history. The whole obsession of critical attacks is linked with his name, and in my opinion this obsession centers not so much on the historical individual himself as on the entire highly complex epoch of transition, an epoch linked with unprecedented feats by a whole generation of Soviet people who are today gradually withdrawing from active participation in political and social work. The industrialization, collectivization, and cultural revolution which brought our country to the ranks of the great world powers are being forcibly squeezed into the ‘personality cult’ formula. All of this is being questioned. Matters have gone so far that persistent demands for ‘repentance’ are being made of ‘Stalinists’ (and this category can be taken to include anyone you like).

I support the Party's call to uphold the honor and dignity of the trailblazers of socialism. I think that these are the party-class positions from which we must assess the historical role of all leaders of the Party and the country, including Stalin. In this case, matters cannot be reduced to their ‘court’ aspect or to abstract moralizing by persons far removed both from those stormy times and from the people who had to live and work in those times, and to work in such a fashion as to still be an inspiring example for us today.

I think that, no matter how controversial and complex a figure in Soviet history Stalin may be, his genuine role in the building and defense of socialism will sooner or later be given an objective and unambiguous assessment.”<sup>5</sup>

***Sovetskaia Rossiia, March 13, 1988***



Courtesy of Alexander Faldin

“MEMORY” by Alexander Faldin, 1987. During Perestroika, artists and writers were free to paint and publish works about the camps and repressions under Stalin.

### THE GULAG AND STALIN IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

In October 1992, less than one year after the Soviet Union was dismantled, the Russian government passed a law which rehabilitated all of the victims of political repression, from the entire Soviet period: 1917 to the present. The government also mandated compensation for survivors of the camps, including the return of property, and financial compensation based on the number of months spent in prison camp. Survivors were given the special status of “Victim of Political Repressions,” which allowed them improved access to housing and medical care.

Although the government took these symbolic steps to make amends for Stalin’s repressions, there was no prosecution of those who committed these human rights abuses.

There are still many Russian citizens who are nostalgic for Communism and especially for Stalin. There is very little discussion about Stalin’s crimes and the GULAG in contemporary Russia. “In 1990 that was all we could talk about; now we don’t need to talk about it anymore.”<sup>6</sup>

### PUBLIC INDIFFERENCE TO THE GULAG: CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

Many experts on human rights in Russia agree that in order to come to terms with the horrors of the GULAG there should be a public process, similar to South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission or the Nuremberg trials at the end of World War II. The lack of a public reckoning, these experts agree, has resulted in cynicism and indifference to civic participation. They believe that without a commitment to public discussion of Stalinism and commemorations of its victims, human rights progress in Russia is compromised and limited.

Why has there been no public process about the GULAG? One possibility is that people are reluctant to acknowledge that this past hysteria to identify enemies of the state may have included their own family members. The older generations, those who lived through Stalin’s time, might feel guilt about their own role as informants. Another explanation is that the current leadership is not interested in making the GULAG a topic for public debate, since many of the current political leaders were members of the Communist Party or the KGB in the Soviet era. Alexander Yakovlev, chairman of the Rehabilitation Committee in Russia, observed that “Society is indifferent to the past because so many people participated in them [its excesses].”<sup>7</sup>

Despite the efforts of the Memorial Society, there has been no permanent monument erected to remember the victims. Alexander Yakovlev commented, “A monument will be built when we—the older generation—are all dead.”<sup>8</sup>

According to scholars, widespread indifference to the GULAG has many concrete consequences:

- Former members of the KGB are not prosecuted. Some enjoy privileges such as high pensions and dachas. To this day, Russians can see that crime has its rewards and good is not necessarily triumphant.
- Indifference and ignorance about the past explains Russians’ tolerance of censorship and heavy secret police presence.
- Conditions in modern-day Russian prisons resemble prison camps; prisoners are physically beaten and humiliated, the prisons themselves are filthy and unheated, and the director of the prison system does not allow public oversight or human rights workers to monitor prison conditions.
- Monuments are being proposed not only to Stalin, but Kuznetsov, a member of the “troika” or “three”—one of three notorious officials who signed the death warrants of 40,000 people.
- A monument was erected to Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Soviet Secret police, which would become the KGB. This replaces a monument that was taken down in Moscow, with great fanfare, in 1991.

In 2003, on the 50th anniversary of Stalin’s death, the All-Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion carried out a survey. One question was: “**What role did Stalin play in the history of our country?**”

The responses were as follows:

<b>Positive</b>	<b>53%</b>
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<b>Surely Negative</b>	<b>33%</b>
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<b>Had difficulty answering the question</b>	<b>14%</b>
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Back in 1980, only 8% of people surveyed thought Stalin had a positive role in history.

*Source: BBC World News Service*

Without international pressure or a commitment from the Russian leadership, it is not likely that a widespread public discussion of the GULAG and its long-term implications will take place. The current Russian President Vladimir Putin, a former KGB agent, has not acknowledged the importance of such a discussion.

However, there are organizations that educate the public about the GULAG and human rights in general. One is the Perm 36 Memorial Museum for the History of Political Repression, run by Memorial. It is on the site of a prison camp that had the reputation of being one of the worst camps in the entire system. The prison camp has been reconstructed so that visitors can experience and observe what the camps were really like.

The Perm 36 Museum educates student groups about open civil society and strengthening individual political and social rights.

The Andrei Sakharov Museum is “devoted to the preservation of the memory of Andrei Sakharov and all those who suffered and were sacrificed under the totalitarian regime. Its purpose is to educate those unfamiliar with past abuses, and to promote the continued development of intellectual freedom, respect for individuals, and civil and social responsibility in Russia.” The Museum's extensive “Totalitarian Past” exhibit includes photographs and maps of forced labor camps, Stalinist decrees, and propaganda literature and posters.

**Andrei Sakharov Museum WEB SITE:**

<http://asf.wdn.com>



The museum at PERM features a reconstructed camp and educational exhibits.

**DEBATE:  
GULAG REALITY CAMP**

Mayor Shpektor of Vorkuta, 1200 miles north east of Moscow near the Arctic Circle, has proposed reopening the camps for the “history-conscious tourist” who wants some personal experience of the suffering of the millions of people who were imprisoned there. Shpektor says that by experiencing the reality of the GULAG, people will better understand that this should never be repeated. The Memorial Society considers this idea “sacrilege” and an insult to the GULAG’s survivors. What do you think?

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**DAY THREE** STUDY GUIDE AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION
 

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## TERMS FOR IDENTIFICATION

Nikita Khrushchev Khrushchev's "Secret Speech"	Leonid Brezhnev <i>One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich</i>	"Samizdat" Alexander Esenin-Volpin	Mikhail Gorbachev "Glasnost"	Memorial Nina Andreeva
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## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- a** Why was Lavrenty Beria, head of the KGB under Stalin, arrested and shot shortly after Stalin's death? What would you have done if you have been a high-level official in the Soviet Communist Party when Stalin died?
- b** Why did Stalin's eventual successor, Nikita Khrushchev, criticize Stalin's "Cult of Personality" in 1956 in a speech intended originally only for high-level Communist Party officials?
- c** What were the consequences of Khrushchev's "Secret Speech"? Should Khrushchev be regarded as a hero or a fool for his policy of "DeStalinization"?
- d** Why did DeStalinization fail?
- e** Should Alexander Esenin-Volpin be regarded as a hero or a fool for his efforts to force the government of the USSR to uphold the rights of Soviet citizens as outlined in the country's constitution?
- f** Why did public knowledge of the history of Stalin's GULAG system increase during the 1980s? Should Mikhail Gorbachev be regarded as a hero or a fool for his policy of "Glasnost"?
- g** Why does Stalin remain such a popular figure in Russia today? What can be done to educate Russians (and others) about the true history of Stalin's GULAG? Should there be a "GULAG Reality Camp" as proposed by some?

## DAY 3 EXERCISE

**DESIGN A MONUMENT TO THE VICTIMS OF THE GULAG**

This can be done as a class, or broken down into smaller groups. Monument designs should include both visual and narrative components.

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<sup>1</sup> Applebaum, pp. 478-479.

<sup>2</sup> Jon Bone, ed. *Special Report To The 20th Congress Of The Communist Party Of The Soviet Union (Closed session, February 24-25, 1956)*  
By Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, First Secretary, Communist Party of the Soviet Union  
<http://www.uwm.edu/Course/448-343/index12.html>
<sup>3</sup> *Khrushchev Remembers: The Glasnost Tapes*, Ed. and trans. Jerrold L. Schecter with Vyacheslav V. Luchkov, Boston, 1990

<sup>4</sup> David Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb*, New York, 1994, p.50.

<sup>5</sup> Nina Andreeva, "I cannot waive my principles," *Sovietskaya Rossiya*, March 13, 1988

<sup>6</sup> Applebaum, p. 570

<sup>7</sup> A. Yakovlev, in conversation with A. Applebaum, cited in Applebaum, p. 570

<sup>8</sup> A. Yakovlev, in conversation with A. Applebaum, cited in Applebaum, p. 571.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

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### NATASHA PETROVSKAYA

#### Background

Natasha was thirty-four years old in 1935 and lived in Moscow. Her devoted husband was a high-ranking official in the Propaganda Ministry where Natasha worked as a film projectionist. Natasha was a very pleasant woman of average intelligence who was an early supporter of the Bolsheviks; she handed out pro-Bolshevik leaflets to residents of Moscow during the Russian Civil War. Yet she owed her job more to her connection with her husband than to her skill or dedication as a projectionist. One day, during a showing of a new propaganda film, the film jammed in the projector. To Natasha's misfortune, Stalin's face was displayed prominently on the screen as the film, stuck in the projector, burned. The resulting image of Stalin's face twisting and bubbling in a horrible way was too much for the authorities to accept as just an accident.

#### Arrest

The NKVD (KGB) arrested Natasha late one winter night after she and her husband had gone to bed in their Moscow apartment. Although she knew a couple of colleagues who had disappeared, she was convinced that her arrest was a mistake. Her husband was not so sure, but Natasha brushed him off and went with the NKVD officials after they had briefly searched the apartment. The officials assured her that she would be back soon and she decided that she would not bother her children who were sleeping. She never saw them again.

#### Prison

Natasha was horrified when she ended up in a prison cell with others who she considered to be real "enemies of the people." She complained to the guard that there had been a mistake, but the guard was accustomed to hearing this and paid no attention. The prison cell contained three times as many prisoners as it was designed for. In fact, it had been used in Tsarist times as a cell for political prisoners, but in those days the cells had never been so full. Natasha waited for two weeks;

then, she was switched to an isolation cell with no other people. The cell was freezing, but worse than the cold was the complete isolation. After a few days, she realized that the person in the next cell was trying to speak with her by knocking on the wall. Talking was prohibited, but depending on the guard, prisoners might be able to get away with it.

#### Interrogation

Natasha was relieved when she was finally able to speak to someone about the mistake that had been made. The interrogator was very polite and offered her food and said everything could be cleared up if she signed a document. Natasha was astounded when she read that she was supposed to admit to being part of a Trotskyist terrorist group that was plotting to overthrow the government. The document listed fifteen other people that she was supposed to implicate in the plot as well. She refused to sign. The interrogator started to swear at her and promised that she would soon sign. At irregular intervals, Natasha was called in and interrogated, but she refused to sign the document. Several times she was struck by the interrogator—once so hard that she lost two teeth. Natasha finally did sign when the interrogator said that he had spoken with her children and that it seemed they too might be guilty. Natasha was in a panic and promised to sign any document as long as the children were not touched. The children were not touched, but they were shunned in school for having a mother who was an enemy of the people.

Natasha's husband was distraught about his wife's imprisonment, but never spoke up for fear of being arrested himself. He knew that Stalin periodically tested the loyalty of his subordinates by arresting their family members and gauging their reaction. Stalin was paranoid and viewed the slightest unusual act by a subordinate as a potential sign of disloyalty.

#### Trial

Natasha was sentenced to fifteen years in the GULAG. Her case was heard by three judges who seemed quite

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uninterested in her difficulty. Natasha tried to explain that someone had made a mistake and that she was not like the other prisoners, but the judges did not listen.

### Deportation

Natasha was placed in a cattle car packed with women. She still believed that a mistake had been made in her case, but she was starting to wonder how so many of the prisoners could all claim they were innocent. The cattle car was disgustingly filthy and freezing cold. Despite the temperature, Natasha fought to stand near the wall where a little fresh air was coming in through a knot hole. The smell was unbearable as was the lack of food and water. The guards were especially reluctant to give water because this meant more prisoners would demand to use the bathroom.

### Prison Camp

Natasha finally arrived at Vorkutlag Camp. This camp was primarily dedicated to mining coal. She was assigned to the women's barracks, which were poorly ventilated, and she had to share a bed with another woman who worked the night shift. Her barrack was separated from the men's barracks, but she had to be very careful to avoid gangs of criminals who roamed quite freely at night.

### Work

The first job Natasha was given at the mines was to dig coal. The tools she was given were very primitive—a wooden shovel and a pick—but she was expected to mine a great deal of coal every day. Working at her hardest, Natasha could only fulfill 35% of her quota for rations, which meant that very quickly she would starve. For a little while, her section leader helped her by faking the amount of coal that Natasha actually gathered. This was dangerous for the section head, but she understood how difficult it was for Natasha to survive. However, Natasha ultimately fell out of favor with the section head because she still felt somewhat superior to the other prisoners, most of whom were, in her opinion, actually guilty.

### In the Camps

Finding food was a constant struggle for Natasha, as it was for all the prisoners. For a while, the protection provided to her by her section leader allowed her to eke out a subsistence living. But when she fell out of favor, she started to starve. She tried desperately to get switched out of mining into some other job, but she really had no skills and the political nature of her sentence prevented her from getting many of the best jobs. Some of the women were willing to submit to sex with the male criminals in exchange for an extra scrap of food. This disgusted Natasha at first, but she soon came to realize that this was a simple act of survival. She, however, decided on a different path. She found a man who was tolerable to her, and decided that her only chance was to get pregnant. Her plan worked. The reduced workload and better food given to pregnant women probably saved her life.

In many ways, when Natasha first arrived at camp, she stood out. Her clothes were nicer and she interacted only rarely with the others. Unfortunately for her, she was easy game for the criminals in the camp. They immediately took whatever remained of her nice clothes and she was left with a poorly-fitting prison uniform. The criminals disliked her from the start, and they instituted a campaign of harassment against her. They stole her shoes, spilled her food, and forced her to do many of the hard jobs. Finally Natasha learned that one of the most effective survival strategies was to be invisible—to refrain from doing or saying anything that would make her stand out.

Although many people were freed from the prison camps to help with the war efforts, Natasha was not. Vorkuta became a very important coal mining center and Natasha was unable to go free. Her baby son lived at an orphanage near the camp and she got to see him only rarely. She finally was released from camp in 1946 with her baby. She learned that her husband had been shot in 1937. One of her children was nowhere to be found. The other died fighting in WWII.

## MIKHAIL BELOV

### Background

Mikhail was a thirty-four year old lathe operator in a tractor factory in Leningrad, and he and his wife had three children. A hard working, apolitical, and affable fellow, Mikhail was adored and admired by his fellow workers whom he enthralled with his imaginative and original jokes and stories during lunch breaks.

### Arrest

Mikhail's popularity among the workers at the factory was deeply resented by the head of Mikhail's work unit, who feared that Mikhail might soon challenge him for leadership of the unit. The head of the unit therefore placed certain articles from the factory in Mikhail's work bag and told the head of factory security that Mikhail was stealing things from the factory. For good measure, the head of the unit also told the factory's propaganda liaison officer that Mikhail had made several jokes about Stalin, which, in fact, was true. One morning in October 1936, as his fellow workers watched dumb-founded, he was taken from the shop floor by men who identified themselves as members of the state security bureau, and was never seen at work again.

### Prison

Mikhail was thrown into Kresti Prison, which had long been a prison under the tsars. His cell was built for forty people, but held 200 prisoners. This led to absolute chaos in the cell. There were constant fights over space, food, and use of toilet and washing facilities. Due to his popularity, Mikhail became the cell elder and acted as a mediator in all disputes. This was a welcome distraction from all of the discomforts that he endured. There were lice everywhere and it was impossible to avoid them. There was also a stench from the bucket in the corner, as well as from those who were too sick to make it to the bucket.

### Interrogation

Mikhail did not pay much attention to politics, but for the most part he supported the State. He had no idea why he was in prison, but he had seen many of his friends disappear so he was not shocked when the NKVD (secret police) came for him. The officials wanted Mikhail to sign a document saying that he had led a ring of saboteurs in the factory whose goal was to break the lathes and delay production. He was also accused of being a part of an international ring of spies who were trying to infiltrate the system. He refused to sign the document. This infuriated the interrogator. Mikhail was thrown into the "intestine," which was a chimney-shaped metal cell that was just big enough to hold a standing person; every time Mikhail collapsed, his legs would become painfully jammed and he would have to stand up again. He was also verbally abused, but he never gave in. Finally, his signature was forged, and he was sent to trial.

### Trial

Mikhail was found guilty of both industrial sabotage and slandering the State. A "troika," or panel of three judges, heard his case. It took them ten minutes to decide his sentence: ten years in prison. He was convicted of counter-revolutionary terrorist activity, which meant that he would have to work at the most difficult jobs in the camps.

### Deportation

Mikhail was put on a train without knowing his destination. He noticed that all the prisoners were put on trains outside the city; he assumed that this was to keep the transport of prisoners as secret as possible from "free" people. His train was a Stolypinka, which was a passenger car that had been outfitted with cages for the prisoners. Mikhail was still somewhat weak from his time in solitary confinement, and this was only exacerbated by the fact that there was very little water given to the prisoners—only one or two cups a day. Mikhail passed the time teaching math to a thirteen year old boy. The



boy had been accused of sabotage; based on the laws of the time, he was tried as an adult. Mikhail lost track of this boy when they arrived at camp, but he soon learned that the boy died cutting trees in the forest.

### **Prison Camp**

Mikhail finally arrived at a timber camp near Arkhangelsk. The winters there were brutally cold. The barracks where Mikhail lived were less crowded than the prison cell in Leningrad. He had his own bed and when the stove worked, the barrack was relatively warm. When the stove did not work, sleep was almost impossible. There were 300-400 prisoners in his camp. There were a number of similar camps nearby, all dedicated to cutting trees.

### **Work**

Mikhail was immediately sent into the woods to cut trees. Despite his time in prison and on the train, he was still a strong worker. However, he was only able to fulfill 80% of his quota, which meant that he got less food than others. This left Mikhail with a choice; he could either try to fulfill the quota by “cheating” the system, or he could try to get placed in a new job. It was at this point that Mikhail’s ability to make friends paid off. He had befriended one of the workers in the workshop, and since Mikhail was skilled with machinery, he was able to get the authorities to overlook the fact that he was charged as an enemy of the people.

### **In the Camps**

After a short time working in the woods, Mikhail was on the verge of starvation. He was fed from the First Cauldron which was a meager ration for the amount of work he did every day. Food ruled the minds of the prisoners and Mikhail was no exception. He tried eating snow to satisfy his empty stomach, but that did little to help him. Despite his raging hunger, he never allowed himself to give in to the temptation to beg or steal. He knew that if he started stealing he would very quickly lose his self-respect, which, in many ways, was the only thing he still had.

One day, Mikhail witnessed two criminals playing cards in the barracks. He knew that these criminals played for vicious stakes. In this case, they were playing for the life of one of the newly arrived political prisoners. The criminal lost the card game and sent one of his lackeys to bring the unsuspecting prisoner over. The new prisoner was lucky—he lost only his clothes. Mikhail had seen cases where people had been murdered, or criminals had chopped off each other’s fingers as penalty for losing. He knew they had very little regard for the lives of others, and could do almost anything since the guards put them in charge.

Mikhail’s wife, Vera, remained faithful to him throughout his stay at the camp. This was not easy considering she risked being arrested for being connected with an enemy of the people. She was harassed at work and many of her friends stopped talking to her, especially when she refused to say anything bad about Mikhail. Mikhail’s children were singled out in class as examples of enemies of the people. Mikhail was able to see Vera twice while he was in the camps. She made the incredibly strenuous journey to the camps where they met in the meeting house, which was set up for well behaved prisoners to see their families. The anticipation of this meeting turned out to be better than the meeting itself; after not seeing each other for so long, and after suffering such devastating events, it was difficult for them to share all that had happened to them and to express their feelings.

Mikhail was released in 1943 during one of the amnesties that allowed men to enlist in the army. He fought for the Red Army and died in combat in 1944.

## IVAN KHARKOV

### Background

Ivan was twenty-four years old at the end of WWII. Before the war Ivan taught math to high school students in his hometown of Yaroslavl, where he lived with his parents and younger siblings. Ivan was captured by the German army in the summer of 1942 while fighting around Stalingrad. Unlike more than half of his comrades captured by the Germans, Ivan survived the brutal conditions in the German prisoner of war camp and was liberated in the spring of 1945 by American troops. Just before the end of the war in Europe, the American and British governments reluctantly made an agreement with Nazi Germany to turn over all Soviet POWs in their custody to Soviet authorities, whether or not such individuals wished to return to the Soviet Union. Ivan was arrested by the NKVD as soon as he was handed over to Soviet authorities.

### Arrest

Ivan's euphoria of at having survived the Nazi POW camps quickly turned to horror when he was arrested by the NKVD. He could not believe that after three years of hell in the German camps, the country he had fought for was betraying him. Later, he would discover that Stalin was stunned by the huge number of Soviet troops captured by Germans, especially during the first year of the war. In the summer of 1942 Stalin issued Order 227 (and later Order 270) which required every Soviet soldier to fight to the death or else face summary execution or imprisonment. Before the end of the war the Soviet government executed more than 100,000 Soviet soldiers and imprisoned a few hundred-thousand more on charges of treason. Stalin also viewed as traitors the more than two million Soviet citizens, including Soviet soldiers and ordinary civilians, who survived being imprisoned and used by the Nazis as slave laborers.

### Prison

In prison, Ivan was isolated from the other prisoners so that he would not realize how many of his fellow soldiers had been arrested. Luckily for Ivan, he was accustomed to thinking up strategies for occupying his mind, even with no outside stimulation. He worked through math problems in his head and estimated how many steps it would take for him to walk to different imaginary places.

### Interrogation

Ivan thought he had seen it all when it came to methods of torture. He found out that the NKVD were every bit as skilled as the Nazis at inflicting pain, and somehow the fact that the torturers were his own countrymen made it all the more difficult to bear. He was deprived of sleep, beaten, and in one instance the interrogator pulled out a gun and threatened to shoot him. Ivan was not a simple political prisoner. He had been hardened by his war years, and the standard means of coercing a confession were not effective. If anything, they had the opposite effect and just made him more resistant to persuasion.

### Trial

Ivan was just twenty-four years old in 1945 when he was sentenced to spend twenty years in a labor camp. The judges reprimanded him for not serving his country more faithfully and then decided his fate in a matter of minutes.

### Deportation

Ivan was placed in a cattle car that was so crowded that people came close to suffocating if they couldn't get a space near the door. This nightmare was compounded by the fact that the guards gave each person only two cups of water a day and salted fish was one of the main items that they ate. It was at this point that Ivan's body physically gave out. He was struck with dysentery, which can kill a person because he can't retain liquids. Ivan was also unable to wait for the trips to the bathroom

which happened only twice a day. By day eight, Ivan had lost consciousness and if the trip had not ended the next day, he surely would have died.

### **Prison Camp**

Ivan arrived at Ivdel camp near Sverdlovsk and was taken straight to the hospital. Most of the doctors there were prisoners themselves, although there were often one or two doctors that lived in town. Ivan was struck by the fact that this was one of the few times over the last five years that anyone had shown compassion toward him. Although the camps weren't well equipped, the doctors did what they could to help the prisoners. When he was released, Ivan felt much better. He moved into his barrack with one hundred other prisoners. He slept on a bunk bed and had his own space that he did not have to share with anyone else.

### **Work**

Ivdel was a timber camp and Ivan was put on a team to go out and cut wood every day. The amount of wood that they were supposed to cut was completely unreasonable, but Ivan's section boss was willing to make false reports to make it look like his work brigade was fulfilling the norm. This was quite common in the camp, but also quite risky. Ivan's team stacked the logs so that the piles were hollow in the middle. As it turned out, Ivan's team leader had also fought in the war, and had requested that Ivan join the team when he found out that Ivan was a soldier. It was for this reason that the team leader was willing to take such a risk.

### **In the Camps**

Ivan was able to eat enough food to keep up his strength. Since he officially fulfilled his work norm, he was able to eat from the Second Cauldron, which meant that he got more than many of the other inmates in the camp. His meals usually consisted of 500 grams of bread, breakfast—a liter of soup; supper—two spoonfuls of groats and a piece of spoiled fish.

Within the camps, there were hardened criminals who, unlike Ivan, had actually committed a crime. Because these criminals had no scruples, they were perfect candidates to keep order in the camps. In return, the guards allowed them to skip out on most work, just as long as the work was done by someone else. These criminals were used to getting their own way and did not tolerate opposition. However, this had started to change after the war when more war-hardened prisoners arrived and were unimpressed with the criminals' threats and violence. Ivan experienced this firsthand when he arrived in camp. He had just gotten out of the hospital, and found that one of the criminals demanded a bribe in exchange for a bed in the barracks. When Ivan had nothing to offer, the criminal closed in to fight with Ivan. It was at this point that Ivan's work team stepped in and gave the criminal a beating that almost killed him. The criminals started to avoid the war veterans and looked for easier prey among the political prisoners.

Eight years after he had arrived in camp, Ivan and three of his military friends planned an escape from camp. Escapes were rare due to the isolation of the camps, and the lack of options of places to go even if they did escape the camp itself. Ivan was sure that there would be sympathetic veterans in a town nearby that would help them figure out a way to get passports or work-papers. This escape never took place because in 1953, Stalin died and hundreds of thousands of prisoners were freed. It was not until 1987 that Ivan was rehabilitated and found innocent of the crimes for which he had been sent to the labor camp.

Ivan entered the war in 1942 at the age of twenty-one. He was thirty-two when he finally was free again. He returned to Yaroslavl and resumed teaching math.

## SERGEI ROKOVSKY

### Background

In 1952, Sergei was a respected sixty-six year old physician in Odessa who had treated many local high-ranking Communist Party officials. Sergei was an atheist who had never embraced Judaism as practiced by his parents and grandparents. Still, he took pride in his Jewish heritage, and was a life-long supporter of the Communist Party because of its strong opposition to anti-Semitism. He reveled in the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany, a genocidal regime which had killed millions of Europe's Jews during World War II. Sergei was planning on retiring from his medical practice in a few months when suddenly he was arrested.

### Arrest

Sergei was treating a patient when two NKVD officials walked in and arrested him. This was not completely unexpected for Sergei and he calmly collected his belongings, excused himself, and left quietly with the NKVD officials. There had been ominous signs for a couple of months before the arrest. The news was full of reports about the "Doctors' Plot" in Moscow. Stalin had accused several doctors whose patients included high-ranking officials in the Kremlin, of trying to kill off the leaders of the USSR. Many of these doctors were Jewish, and Sergei felt that there was a worsening of conditions in the country for Jews. During the war, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC) was encouraged by Stalin to speak out against the Nazis. Sergei had gone to some meetings of the JAC and now it was clear that many of those people were also being targeted.

### Prison

The prison that Sergei found himself in was staggering in its filth and lack of hygiene. There were 150 prisoners where there should only have been forty. There was only a bucket in the corner for a toilet, which Sergei had trouble getting used to, especially because there was no privacy from the others in the cell. He kept to himself for the most part and dreaded the inevitable interrogations that began a week after he entered the prison.

### Interrogation

It mattered little to Sergei's interrogators that he was sixty-six. They brought him in for sessions that would last ten to twelve hours where he was not allowed to sleep and was continuously asked the same questions. The interrogator would ask him to state his name, his home town, and then the questioning would get increasingly intense. Sometimes there were attempts to trip Sergei up by presenting information in different ways, but Sergei was quick to identify the mind games that were being played. He was accused of being part of a plot to poison one of the head Communist officials in Odessa. He was called a "cosmopolitan," which was how Jews were referred to in the press, and there was a list of eight of his colleagues who, together with Sergei, had theoretically plotted this assassination attempt.

Sergei finally confessed because he could not stand the physical torture any longer. After three months of torture he signed a paper where he admitted to trying to kill the official and implicated the other eight doctors as well.

### Trial

Sergei's trial was a highly publicized affair because it was unbelievable that such a respected citizen like Sergei could contemplate such a crime. Sergei was forced to admit to his crimes in a public court. When he faltered, he was removed and beaten in the shins until he was ready to comply again. Sergei was given twenty years and labeled a Trotskyist cosmopolitan terrorist.

### Deportation

After the trial, Sergei was a broken man. He had lost his will to live during the interrogation and only dimly noticed when he was placed in a cattle car and shipped north. There was very little food on this trip and even less water. Sergei was too weak to get to the spaces in the train car where he could get fresh air. He was saved only because one of his former patients recognized him and looked out for him.

**Prison Camp**

Sergei ended up in a section of a prison camp where research was being conducted on a highly secret project. There were a number of these camps where the top researchers in the country were held and forced to work on highly-sensitive projects. Sergei was lucky, relatively speaking, to end up in this section of the camp, because the conditions were better than those at the hard labor camps. It was not a mistake that he ended up there. The head of the camp was on the lookout for highly qualified physicians to care for his prisoners. Ironically, this was done not for their well-being but for their productivity. This was especially important because he had to report to Beria on a weekly basis.

**Work**

Sergei was immediately set up at the camp hospital as the head physician. Although the supplies were limited, Sergei was able to create a smoothly running hospital. The prisoners who were not in the research section of the camp were in devastating condition near death. Sergei tried to provide a haven for them and give them a chance to get some rest. For many, this made the difference between life and death.

**In the Camps**

The food in the camp was barely edible, but Sergei was in no position to complain because he was able to eat from the Third Cauldron, which meant that he was given a full ration of food. His heart went out to those who worked outside all day, only to return to half the amount of food that he was given. He usually had bread and something that passed for oatmeal in the morning. In the evening he had bread and a soup that was filled with rotten vegetables or fish. Sergei was able to supplement his meals with food that he received as the head of the hospital. He was conflicted about this food because some felt that he was accepting bribes. He tried very hard not to play favorites, but he knew that the prospect of receiving food influenced him to give more attention to some patients than to others.

One of the hardest parts of Sergei's job was to decide who was admitted to the hospital each day. There were only a limited number of beds, and once they were filled, he could not accept any more patients regardless of their condition. This moral dilemma was compounded by the fact that criminals would often force their way into the hospital even though they had no medical reason to be there. Sergei nearly lost his life when a criminal in the camp threatened him with a knife because there were no beds in the hospital. The criminal was stopped by one of the hospital workers, but Sergei knew his life was always in danger.

One thing that Sergei could never get used to was the number of cases where people deliberately injured themselves in order to avoid doing hard labor. He had seen cases of people cutting off their fingers, wounding themselves with an axe, drinking cleaning solution, breaking limbs, and even injecting soap into their urinary tract to make it look like they had a venereal disease.

Sergei was released in 1958. His health had gotten worse over the six years he spent in prison, and he died a year later.

**OLGA ANDREYEVA****Background**

Olga was the hard working wife of a relatively prosperous peasant who lived, together with their five children, in a small village north of Kiev in Ukraine. They successfully farmed about 100 acres, selling their surplus produce in town. Then, in 1930, the state forced them into a “Kolkhoz,” a collective farm, and confiscated their land. A year later her husband was arrested and sentenced to ten years in the GULAG for “anti-Soviet activity” when it was discovered that he was hoarding grain in their barn. A deeply religious and ethical woman, Olga was deeply upset by her husband’s arrest, but she had to set aside her own grief to take care of the children. As the food supply dwindled and famine spread, she did all she could to keep herself and her children from starving.

**Arrest**

Olga was forty years old in 1932 when she was arrested and sentenced to ten years in the GULAG. She and a group of her neighbors were arrested together. The charge against them was that they had continued to “hoard” food for their own families. In fact, many of the people in Olga’s village had starved to death, including two of her five children. Olga was caught in the wheat field trying to find grain which had been overlooked during the harvest. Olga’s three remaining children were taken to an orphanage run by the state. Two survived while the other perished from hunger.

**Interrogation**

Olga was not interrogated.

**Trial**

There was no trial for Olga. She was simply given a ten-year sentence for being a counter-revolutionary terrorist—one of the most serious convictions.

**Deportation**

Olga was placed on a barge and sent north. Olga was not allowed to bring any belongings aside from the clothes that she wore. There was no food on the barge and people starved during the trip. Instead of being buried, those who died were thrown into the river.

When they arrived at a small village, the prisoners were forced to walk another two days to the labor camp. This would have been difficult for a healthy person. For starving prisoners, this was almost impossible. The guards threatened them and hit them when they fell, but even this did not prevent people from collapsing, some never to get up again.

**Prison Camp**

When Olga arrived, she was put into a women’s barrack in a zone that was separated from the men. Her barrack had a stove that kept the room warm, sometimes too warm. This change made the sub-zero temperatures outdoors even more of a shock to the system. She had very little personal space, but she did have her own bed, attached to the wall.

**Work**

Because Olga was accused of being a terrorist, she was automatically given the hardest work at the camp. She was sent to cut logs in the forest. Although she was used to hard labor in her village, she had never cut trees before and had a great deal of difficulty. She was supposed to cut a certain amount of wood each day, but she was only able to produce half of her daily quota.

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### **In the Camps**

The amount of food that Olga received was based on how much work she had finished each day. Since she was unable to fulfill her quota or norm, she ate out of the First Cauldron. This meant that she barely received enough food to survive. The only thing that saved Olga, at least temporarily, was that she was excellent at sewing. She was able to mend the clothes of the privileged prisoners and get a little extra bread.

Most of Olga's existence was controlled by Nadya. Nadya was in the camps because she had killed a fellow worker on the collective farm where she worked. Since she was convicted of a violent crime against an individual, her treatment was actually much less severe than the treatment received by "politicals," or those accused of crimes against the State. Her main job was to control the prisoners. If she did that, then the guards had very little to worry about. Olga was continually shocked at how crude Nadya's language was. Nadya sensed this and made it a point to try to harass Olga as much as possible. Although this terrified Olga, she knew she was lucky because Nadya protected her from the other criminals, especially the males.

In the long run, Olga was unsuccessful in figuring out a way to meet her norm for tree-cutting, and did not manage to carve out a softer job in the camp hierarchy. Slowly but surely she lost weight and energy. She started having trouble seeing in the dark. Finally, she collapsed one day on the way back to the barracks after work. She never got up again. She had been in the camp for three months.

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## APPENDIX: TESTIMONY OF DR. JERZY GLIKSMAN

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### Excerpts from the statement of Dr. Jerzy Glikzman to the United Nations

“Inside the car it was pitch-black. I remained where I had fallen, while around me pressed some fifty strange people of different characters, ages, and nationalities. I was just one of the few thousand prisoners locked into this long train going full speed towards the mysterious I.T.Ls [labor camps].

In my youth I used to hear a great deal about Russian revolutionaries sent by the tsarist regime to Siberia. At home, in Warsaw, we had living memories of the terror of the tsars. My brother Victor told me many a story about his exile in Narym in the interior of Siberia in 1913. But these stories had invariably appeared to me distant, unreal, something out of the past which had disappeared with the tsars.

And now I myself was thrown into a Russian prison transport and sent to forced labor; only the jailers had changed...

Ours was a small-type cattle car adapted for its new purpose—that of transporting people for periods of several weeks at a time—by the addition of three features: two tiers of wooden berths, a small iron stove and a round hole the size of a plate cut in the center of the floor to serve as a toilet. (According to other affidavits, even the convenience of berths and ‘round holes’ were absent. A.K.H.)

We traveled in this manner for a full three weeks. We left the transport prison on October 25, 1940, and we reached our destination on November 15. These weeks were even harder on us than the long months we had previously spent in prison.

We suffered from overcrowding and filth, from the continual stench of the toilet hole; from the brutal inspections and nightly hammerings from outside; from fear, sickness, and the uninterrupted close association with criminals.

However, this was not all. Hunger and thirst also made our life miserable. Our daily rations consisted of a pound of dark, clay-like bread and a small piece of dried raw fish...

Once we were left for two days without a drop of water. We experienced extreme suffering. My tongue was transformed into a piece of leather, my mouth was filled with a glue-like clay, my head burned, the blood beat in my temples.

When the train stopped for a short while we heard the prisoners in other cars hammering on their walls and shouting ‘water, water!’

In Orsha<sup>1</sup>, our train halted several miles from the city and from the railway station. The door of our car suddenly flew open and somebody barked a crisp order, ‘Get off, Hurry! Hurry!’

Carrying the sick with us, we quickly jumped off the high cars. Once off the train, however, we were immediately ordered to kneel beside the car in deep snow. The soldiers threatened to shoot anybody who dared stand up. We were forbidden to talk.

Dazed and senseless, we were unable to understand what was going on. After the darkness of the car we were blinded by the sunshine and whiteness of the snow blanketing everything around us.

After I managed to collect my wits a bit I beheld a sight which I will not forget as long as I live.

We were located in an immense area traversed by at least a dozen railroad tracks. Unending trains similar to our own stood on each line, and beside each car I could see a dark, cramped-together crowd of several dozen prisoners surrounded by soldiers with rifles at the ready.

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It was an infernal view: thousands of living shapes, some of whom had already lost all resemblance to human beings, their faces blue with cold, thin, matted with hair. All were shaking in the freezing temperature, trying to wrap themselves as best they could in the remains of their clothing. The bright sunlight made the hideousness of their rags even more apparent. One could see torn jackets, parts of quilted coats, old blankets, even women's wraps. All the prisoners knelt in the wet snow, beating their arms trying to keep warm.

Among these wretched crowds, the tall and elegant figures of numerous NKVD officers moved about in long well-fitting coats, in caps with blue and red piping and high boots of a shiny black. These were officers of the highest rank, in many of whose faces could be discerned discipline, energy, and intelligence. Their well-fed appearance of self-assured, powerful, and proud dignitaries was in sharp contrast to the grey humiliated mass around them—the human dirt whose fate was entrusted to the their hands.

Surrounded by a great number of lesser-ranking endless elegant NKVD fry, they were all very busy. They moved among the mass of prisoners with large piles of sealed brown envelopes containing their charges' files. They glanced into the cars, accepted reports from their subordinates, issued orders, counted the prisoner groups, called some names from the brown envelopes, and so on. It was a general inspection which kept us in the cold until the darkness of evening.

It was small wonder that it took them such a long time. Many thousands of prisoners were assembled near Orsha that day. I could see groups in front of their cars wherever I looked. Some of them were so far away that I was unable to distinguish the individual figures—only large, blurred, dark shadows on the snow were visible in the ever-increasing darkness...

Our train continued to roll to the northeast. We passed Vyazma. Strovsky told us we were not far from Moscow.

'There are concentration camps here, too,' he told us, 'even model lagers<sup>2</sup> where conditions are really good.'

For me this was no news. In 1935, while on a tour of the Soviet Union, I visited such a camp. But I said nothing. Ginsburg, however, showed enthusiasm.

'Model camps near Moscow!' he exclaimed. 'If we would only be sent there!'

We all heartily agreed with Ginsburg, but Strovsky was firmly skeptical. 'No, my dear fellows,' he said, 'those camps are not for us.'...

The 'Polish' zone consisted of about a dozen wooden barracks, each similar to the one in which we had spent our first night in the camp. About four hundred prisoners were crowded into every structure. Our newly arrived group received buildings recently vacated by prisoners who had been transported to their permanent camps of detention.

The barracks were indescribably filthy and full of thousands of gigantic bed bugs. We fought the scourge energetically with our shoes and with burning kindling sticks. The berths became reddish from the slaughter, but we did not feel any relief after the battles. The swarms of insects continued viciously biting us, denying us sleep, covering our bodies with characteristic marks.

As in the prisons, we had to sleep on one side, turning over simultaneously on command. This did not, however, apply to the lowest shelves. The cold was so intense there that nobody cared to remain on them, for we had neither straw bedding nor blankets. The lower shelves thus stood empty while the upper ones were overcrowded...

At Kotlas we daily received less than a pound of black clay-like bread and a very thin, watery kasha<sup>3</sup> (two portions of not more than a glass each) compared to which the hated thick penchak of the Oshmiana<sup>4</sup> prison was a regal meal...

From the moment we left Kotlas we could observe the same sight everywhere through the window of our car: lager after lager spread over the taiga forests.

For ten days we traveled and for ten days we saw one gigantic net of barbed-wire fences, one vast chain of turrets; camps, camps, and camps everywhere. Sometimes we could see groups of heavily guarded prisoners marching to their work or returning to their living quarters; sometimes we also noticed labor gangs finishing some phase of their work on sections of the line. With dull eyes they glanced at the passing train. Their own hands had built the line over which new masses of slaves were now being transported farther into the cold wastelands...

With the exception of myself, all prisoners in our car were Soviet people. I had never before had occasion to associate with such a large group of Soviet intellectuals...

It was late at night when we arrived in Tchibyu<sup>5</sup> in the Komi Autonomous Soviet Republic. The train halted several miles from the railway station. After dismounting, we were led afoot through the dense forest. The snow lay deep on the ground and the cold air pained us as we breathed.

The UKHITIZHM Camp was divided into more than a score of Sections—designated O.L.P.s (O.L.P.s are the Russian initials for ‘Separate Camp Point’)—and concentrated around the town of Tchibyu. Our section was ten miles from the town and was distinguished as NO. 2.

After a thorough inspection and the usual obisk<sup>6</sup> we were taken to the bathhouse. We were overjoyed, for we were greatly in need of washing after the ten-day trip and the two months spent in the filthy and lousy Kotlas camp...

We hoped that we would be issued other government clothes—the universal wadded camp uniform—as provided for by camp regulations. Unfortunately nothing came of these hopes. The kaptyor (chief of the clothing warehouse), himself a criminal camp inmate, told us that his supply was exhausted. Only those very few among us who actually had nothing to wear, and covered themselves with rags, managed to beg some wretched garments from the clothing attendant: a torn fufayka<sup>7</sup> with dirty patches of cotton protruding on every side, or a pair of well-worn, stained quilted pants.

‘You are lucky,’ the kaptyor told them. ‘I have some clothes available... A few prisoners just died and that’s why I have some clothes available...’

With primitive machinery and working methods, mostly in severe climates, making use of undernourished, inexperienced slave labor, the quotas assigned for the camps are wholly unattainable. Work becomes the most wretched punishment, a veritable curse. So hard are living conditions there that all human effort is expended in the struggle for survival, in the fight to pull through and, at least, keep alive. The work forced upon the inmates is far above their endurance, and instead of morally raising the individual, it makes of every prisoner a dazed, unhappy working beast.

As the camp’s commanders and officers are responsible for the fulfillment of their assignments, they goad their slaves, swindle, fix their reports and their books, bribe their superiors and accept bribes from their underlings.

The influence of the lagers on criminality in the country is disastrous. I do not here refer to political prisoners, millions of whom are kept in the camps, but to the real criminals, the ordinary convicts, for even insofar as they are concerned the labor camp is not a corrective institution but, on the contrary, a place where demoralizing influences reach their climax...

I was assigned to a section of wood-cutters. I had a hard time at my work, especially when I first started at it...

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According to camp rules, prisoners were not to be taken to the woods when the cold reached  $-35^{\circ}$  F. This reasonable regulation was, unfortunately, not heeded, and we were frequently herded to work even in cold up to  $-50^{\circ}$  F.

Camp regulations also explicitly stated that in the cold regions of the north inmates were to receive, in addition to wadded clothes and warm underwear, a pair of valenki (also called pimiy), or high boots of a felt made from the pelt of sheep and horses; chunye, or socks made by sewing together two pieces of heavy fabric; and a pair of warm gloves. Actually, however, most of us had little with which to protect our hands and feet from the intense cold. Our leather shoes were entirely inadequate for the severe climate, and, in addition, they were by now in a sorry state...

In spite of the fact that the work was beyond the limits of our endurance, we all strained to the utmost to perform it as best we could. This was partly to avoid the jeering advice and mocking remarks of the section leaders and supervisors; but mainly in order to obtain more food. For the size of our daily rations directly depended upon the amount of work every one of us accomplished on any particular day. It was the general policy to keep all in a state of semi-starvation and to give individual prisoners a chance to better their rations as a reward for better work. Hunger was thus made to serve to increase the level of production.

Even the smallest task in camp had its pre-determined and carefully computed 'norm.' Special tables stated the amount of all possible kind of work that a camp inmate was required to do in a day. These quotas foresaw the amount of boards a prisoner was to plane, the number of square meters of ground he was to clear, how many nails he was to drive, or what tonnage he had to load or unload. The norms were very high. Even an exceptionally strong laborer would have had great difficulty in filling them, and we, the perpetually hungry and weak slave workers, found the task utterly impossible.

The worst off were those who filled less than 10% their daily norm. Those were considered otkaschiki, that is, people refusing to work at all. Such an individual was put in a penal chamber (the 'isolator') where he received only some water and 300 grams of bread a day. As a further punishment he was also brought to court and sentenced anew.

Not much luckier were prisoners who executed only between 10% and 30% of their assigned work. They too received only 300 grams of bread a day, but in addition were allowed some unshortened watery soup from the 'penal pot.' I was extremely careful not to fall into this category, for those who once suffered this misfortune—and there was a great number of prisoners who did—were lost forever. After a few days of such semi-starvation, these people became weaker and weaker and their working capacity thus kept decreasing.

These unhappy individuals were consequently never again capable of the greater amount of work, which would enable them to raise their status to that of a higher category and cause them to obtain an additional piece of bread; a vicious circle indeed! We could see these people shrinking before our eyes...

My nosebleed during work in the woods was not an accident, but a symptom of my deteriorating health. My heart became weak. The boils that appeared on my swollen legs, my teeth that became loose and began falling out, my pale lips and gums, were all unmistakable signs of scurvy. I knew that whoever fell seriously ill in conditions such as existed here was almost invariably doomed never to rise again.

And just at that time I had an experience that depressed me even more.

According to camp rules prisoners who did not have any valenki, or whose felt boots were torn, were not to be sent to work on the outside during the cold winter weather. My valenki, which I had brought along from outside the prisons, became tattered after several weeks of working in the woods.

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When I stated this fact during the morning roll call, I was told to see a special officer, who stood near the gate and inspected the working gangs as they marched out. He was very busy, but I finally managed to attract his attention and show him my protruding toes and heels. He scarcely glanced at my feet before shouting that my boots were still in very good shape and that I was simply a shirker seeking an excuse to avoid work. This was a very serious accusation in camp, and I did not attempt to refute it with a single word. I simply ran to the gate to proceed to my work. But meanwhile my section had already left and the guards refused to let me out. Against my will I became an *otkaschik*, one maliciously refusing to work. As punishment I was locked up for thirty-six hours in the ‘isolator.’

The ‘isolator’ was an ordinary small wooden barrack, but its windows were barred and it was unheated. There was not even a stove in the room. The cold in the barracks was almost as intense as outside, and I ran about the small room trying to keep warm. Later, at night, another camp inmate similarly punished was brought in. He was a professional thief—one of the *urki*. We understood each other almost without words. We lay down close to one another on the wooden shelf and tried to warm ourselves with our bodies. We suffered from hunger. All we received was a small piece of bread and cold drinking water.”

*This is the end of the account given by Dr. Jerzy Glikzman to the UN Commission of Inquiry into Forced Labor in 1950. Courtesy of the Hoover Archives.*

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<sup>1</sup> town in Belarus

<sup>2</sup> *lager*: labor camp

<sup>3</sup> *kasha*: porridge

<sup>4</sup> Food served in the Polish prison where Glikzman was held

<sup>5</sup> *Tchibyu* or *Chibyu*: an industrial town in the Urals that changed its name to Ukhta in 1943.

<sup>6</sup> *obisk*: search

<sup>7</sup> *fufayka*: warm quilted coat

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## APPENDIX: GULAG RESOURCES AVAILABLE FROM THE NRC LENDING LIBRARY

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### National Resource Center for Russian, East European, and Central Asian Studies

c/o Davis Center, Harvard University  
1730 Cambridge St., CGIS S-301  
Cambridge MA 02138  
617-495-8095  
nrc@fas.harvard.edu

<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~nrc/lendinglibrary/lendinglibrary.html>

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### VIDEOS

Our #	Title
12	<i>Red Flag: Communism in Russia</i> (Series "People's Century")
22	<i>Stalin: Man and Image</i>
36	<i>Stalin's Ghost</i> . NBC News, 1989
38-F	<i>Past Seems But a Dream / My iz Igarki</i> (reunion of GULAG survivors)
38-I	<i>Marshal Blucher</i> (case history of an honored military figure, purged by Stalin)
39-B	<i>Inside Gorbachev's USSR: Comfortable Lies, Bitter Truths</i> (for segment interviewing a Stalinist prison executioner)
41	<i>Stalin</i> , PBS, Parts I-III
42	<i>Hitler and Stalin: Roots of Evil</i>
83	<i>Survivors: Series, Red Empire</i>
113	<i>Kolyma</i>
128	<i>Cold Summer of 1953</i> (DVD)
150	<i>Joseph Stalin: Red Terror</i>
180	<i>Burnt by the Sun</i> (drama about the atmosphere of life under Stalin)

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[Note! The fictional narrator is a Gulag guard dog, but this is not a children's book; the violence level is graphic and extreme. A haunting allegory of man's inhumanity to man and beast alike.]

## WEB RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

[www.gulaghistory.org](http://www.gulaghistory.org)

A web site devoted to the touring GULAG exhibition and the forced labor camps in general.

[www.perm36.ru](http://www.perm36.ru)

The website of the Perm 36 Memorial Museum in Russia. English version available.

[www.stalinproject.org](http://www.stalinproject.org) and [www.stalinproject.com](http://www.stalinproject.com)

An interactive web site for high school students devoted to Stalinism, including the GULAG, to be launched Winter 2006-2007.

<http://www.osa.ceu.hu/gulag>

An on line exhibition devoted to forced labor camps.



