



GULAG

The Zek people

FOREWORD

BY DR. ART MARIANNE NEERLAND SOLEIM

The Nazi camp system is a central part of the research, dissemination and education at the Falstad Centre. The Soviet and Nazi camps were closely related. The two systems were established nearly at the same time and on the same continent. There were prisoners who experienced and described the camps in both systems. When you read the stories of those who survived the Gulag or the Holocaust, one is struck by the differences between the experiences of the victims rather than the differences between the two camp systems. Each story has its own unique qualities and each camp resulted in different types of horror for different types of people. In Germany, one could die of cruelty, in Russia of hopelessness. In Auschwitz you could die in the gas chamber, in Kolyma you could freeze to death in the snow.

Nearly 30 million people passed through the vast Soviet prison camp system of Gulag in the period from 1917 to 1986. Several millions succumbed to the cold, food shortages and atrocities. Over the years the word “Gulag” has been the same as the system of slave labour in the Soviet Union, in all its forms and various camps: labour camps, punishment camps, criminal and political camps, women’s camps, children camps and transitional camps.

Among the people who became victims of the Gulag system there were also some of the Soviet prisoners of war who had been in German captivity during the Second World War. Stalin considered all prisoners of war as traitors. All who surrendered to the enemy should be considered as malicious deserters. The biggest problem for the Soviet authorities was to distinguish between those who had betrayed their country and those who really were innocent regarding to the situation they found themselves in. It was not until 1995, the victims of the Gulag system restored their civil rights. One of these victims was Vladislav Spirov who in 1944 was sent to a German prison camp in Kirkenes when he was ten years old. First in 1996 he got his rights back and could travel freely.

When the Falstad Centre during the summer 2009 is showing the exhibition “GULAG – ZEK-people” we put the spotlight on a subject which for many people is an unknown topic. We hope this exhibition will contribute to increase the knowledge about the fate that met some of the Soviet prisoners of war who were repatriated from Norway during the spring of 1945.

The text in this catalogue is a shortened version of the historian Vladimir Dukelskij and his script “A guide for the traveller to Gulag country” written for the exhibition “Goulag – le peuple des Zeks” at the Musée d’Ethnographie de Genève in 2004-2005. The catalogue is edited by Ingeborg Hjorth and Marianne Neerland Soleim and translated by Annika Odland. All images are borrowed from the organization Memorial.



A GUIDE FOR THE TRAVELLER TO GULAG COUNTRY

BY VLADIMIR DUKELSKY, HISTORIAN, MOSCOW

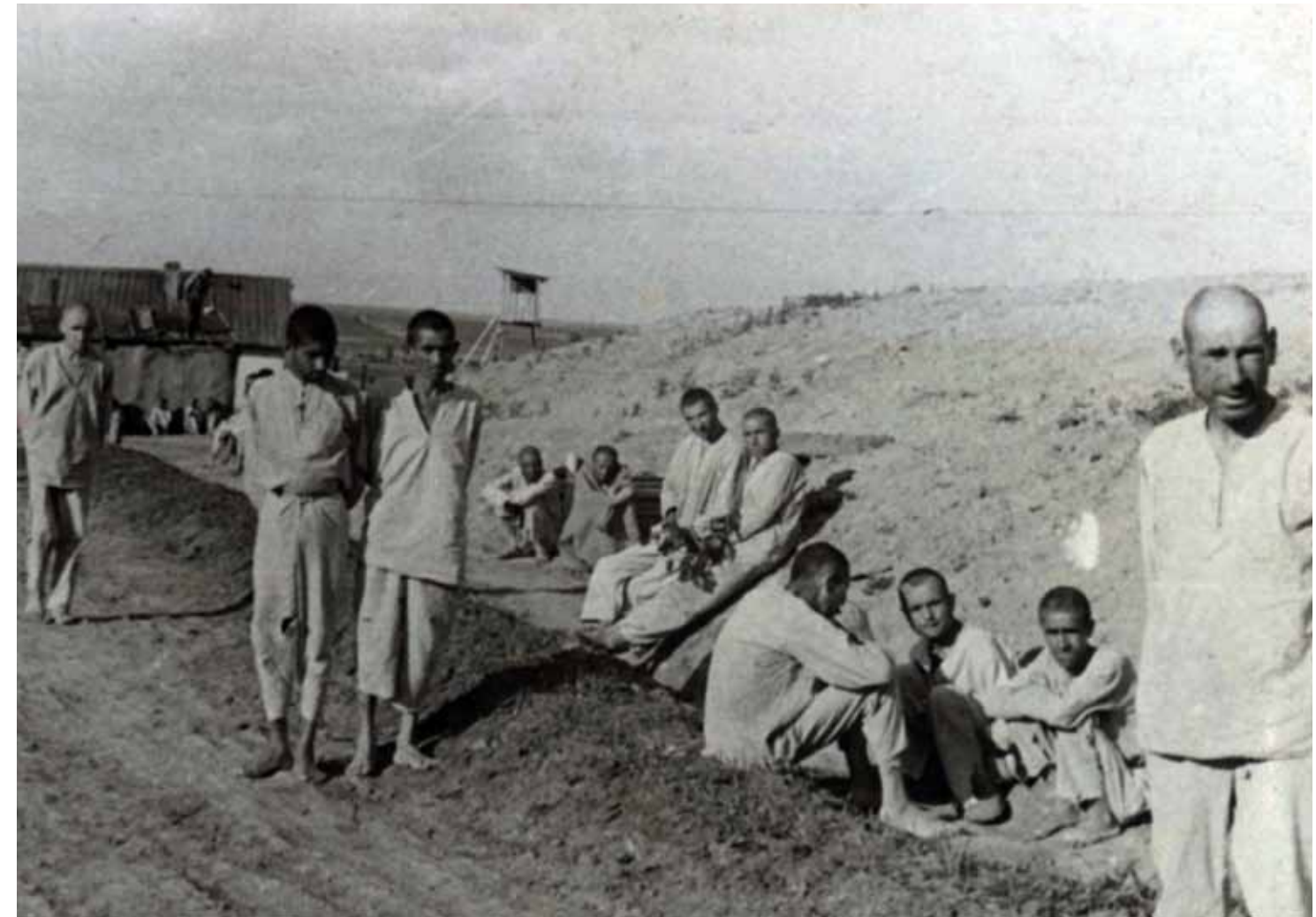
In October 1917, following the Great October Revolution, a radical party – the Communist Party, or Bolsheviks – took power in Russia. The Communist party formed a government, the Council of People's Commissars. Having eliminated all its opponents, it became the country's sole political party for the next 74 years. Less than two months after the Revolution, the new authorities created an organ of repression, the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission, which was to play a major role in the country's history. This organ's logo was VChK. Its agents, who inspired terror in the entire population, were known as Cheka men. They bore the name with pride.

During the Civil War (1918-1921) the Cheka's powers grew and its chief, Felix Dzerzhinsky, became one of the foremost leaders of the State. At the same time, the power of the elected organs – the Soviets of Workers' and Peasants' Deputies – weakened considerably, gradually becoming purely formal. The dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party took the place of the "dictatorship of the proletariat". All regional powers were concentrated in the hands of Party committees. The whole of Russia was ruled in the same way, with Joseph Stalin, the Communist Party's general secretary, at its head. Fully aware of the potential power of the Cheka, Stalin made every effort to transform it into a docile instrument. The few economic liberties authorized in the Soviet Union during the 1920s were definitively abolished in 1930 with the inauguration of the "offensive of socialism on all fronts". This slogan stood for the adoption of a policy of forced industrialization and rural collectivization. The class of so-called prosperous peasants - kulaks - was eliminated. 1.8 million persons were deported by the authorities to remote areas in Northern Russia and Siberia.

On 25 April 1930 the Central Directorate of Labour and Re-education Camps, later to become the Gulag, was established within the OGPU. The following year saw the start of the implementation of the Gulag's first ambitious project, the construction of a waterway between the Baltic and White Seas. It was on this site that the word zek (z/k: abbreviation for "canal detainee") was first coined. 1936 brought the solemn declaration that socialism has been built in all essentials. The most pitiless wave of persecutions, the Great Terror, began a few months later. During the years 1937 and 1938, 680 000 persons were shot and 800 000 sent to the Gulag. In 1939 and 1940, after the Soviet Union's annexation of the Baltic countries and Western Ukraine, the Gulag population was swelled by fresh contingents from these "bourgeois" lands. The years of war between the USSR and Germany (1941-1945) saw the deportation of entire peoples - Volga Germans, Crimean Tartars, Chechens, Ingushs and other Caucasian nationalities.

After the victory over the Nazis, the Soviet people expected a relaxation of the USSR's totalitarian regime, but what happened was the exact opposite. A new flow of prisoners, made up of former Soviet prisoners of war, inhabitants of territories occupied by the Germans during the war, or ordinary citizens incriminated under the draconian new laws, began reaching the Gulag. Finally, the Cold War saw the beginnings of a new struggle directed against cosmopolitans (principally Jews) and "servile admirers of the West".

The terror ended only with the death of its great initiator and inspirer, Joseph Stalin. In 1953 certain large works under construction by prisoners were halted by decision



A group of prisoners rests, Privol'ski, 1944.

of the authorities. Following a mass amnesty, more than a million convicted criminals were freed within the space of a few weeks. More than a quarter of a century later, the Gorbachev era signaled the release of the last political prisoners and the beginnings of an open debate on problems relating to the Gulag, a debate that became the driving force behind glasnost and perestroika.

GEOGRAPHY
TRACES OF A VANISHED CIVILIZATION

Until the 1930s, large areas of Siberia were practically uninhabited because the presence of permafrost in the soil rendered agriculture impossible. In 1923, one of the founders of the camps system declared: *“We must think about expanding the organization of forced labour ... and colonizing the uninhabited areas under a discipline of iron. We have plenty of room ... and no shortage of places suitable for that purpose.”*

The Kolyma in the North-East of Siberia, whose capital was Magadan, is a typical example. A veritable empire of camps, peopled almost exclusively by prisoners, covered a territory extending from Yakutia to the Sea of Okhotsk. The temperature here drops to minus 70 degrees Centigrade - and the truly awesome winds. Gradually, the network of corrective labor camps spread over the whole country like a cancerous growth. Compounds surrounded by barbed



wire sprang up in the taiga and the steppes, on islands, on the banks of rivers and lakes. Lake Baykal, the Amur river, Western Siberia and the Urals, Karelia, Northern Russia, the Volga region – all appear on the long list of the Gulag’s geographical addresses. When East Prussia was annexed by the Soviet Union after the Second World War, camps sprang up there too. The Gulag also made its entry into Central Europe, many Nazi camps in the Soviet occupation zone being returned to their original use.

Most camps in the European part of Russia have today vanished without trace. But the structures put up by the zeks - dams, canals, roads, railway lines, shipyards, airstrips – are still there. The Gulag civilization founded cities today inhabited by ordinary people; it launched large concerns in the mining and metallurgical industries. The ruins of the camps have long since merged into the northern landscape.



“LABOUR- AND RE-EDUCATION CAMPS” IN THE SOVIET UNION 1923–1961.

The points show the largest administrative units in the Gulag camp system. Not all were in operation simultaneously. For each improvement camp there was many departments, all in all more than 3,000 in the Gulag.

Page 6:
Left: Ruins of a camp taken over by the taiga, Krasnojars, 1990.
Right: Solovki Monastery, 1990s. Used by Gulag from the 1920s.

ORIGINS

FROM CONCENTRATION CAMPS TO CORRECTIVE LABOUR CAMPS

The first concentration camps appeared in Russia literally a few months after the triumph of the October Revolution of 1917. The Red Terror decree (1918) officially proclaimed the right to protect the country against its enemies “by isolating them in concentration camps”. Camps were established in all the provincial capitals. Persons declared to be “enemies of the people” or “doubtful elements” were crowded into them simply as an administrative measure, i.e. without trial. The practice of taking hostages from among the bourgeoisie, the gentry, the officer corps and political parties spread rapidly. Fifteen years later millions of citizens, including family members of the country’s leaders, were in their turn to become hostages of the regime, thus guaranteeing the submission of the rest of the people.

A milestone in the construction of the Gulag system was the decision to “re-educate” the prisoners and the establishment of forced labour camps. When the “Directorate of Forced Labour Camps” was set up within the Cheka on 3 April 1919, a difference between concentration camps and so-called corrective labour camps still existed. It was soon to vanish.

The full flowering of the camps system began in 1930 with the declaration of the “offensive of socialism on all fronts”. The machinery of persecu-

tion was taking on speed: the rhythm of the construction of socialism (industrialization and collectivization) called for the application of extraordinary “industrial-scale” measures in order to swell the Gulag’s population. Every region received a set quota of persons to be arrested and those to be executed. During the Great Terror of 1937-1938 this process took on a planned character. In the period of July 1937- April 1938 the number of Gulag prisoners rose by 800 000. Under such circumstances there could be no question of any judicial process. People were sentenced by a decision of a troika composed of the chief of the regional Internal Affairs administration, the secretary of the Party committee and the chairman of the regional Soviet.

At the beginning of the 1940s the number of death sentences declined noticeably, but parallel to this the flow of prisoners sent to the Gulag swelled and stabilised. In 1940 the 53 gigantic groups of camps, with their millions of annexes and subsections, their 425 colonies, 50 children’s colonies and 90 “infant homes”, contained 2.35 million persons.

Construction of the White Sea Canal, 1932.



FILLING THE CAMPS INTO THE "OTHER WORLD"

From the 1920s until the mid-1950s a large stratum of Russia's population lived in constant expectation of arrest. Whole classes and sectors of society, all those who had formerly owned anything, however small, as well as all former government officials were systematically liquidated or re-educated in camps. Their family members were sentenced by default.

Sometimes the danger came from one's family name, which might be the same as a politician's who had fallen into disfavor. Worse still was one's ethnic origin or "nationality", as it was called, which had to appear in one's passport. A sword



of Damocles was suspended over all individuals "of foreign origin", Korean or Chinese, German or French, Polish or Spanish. All were regarded as "spies", but an even more terrible fate was to belong to one of the so-called «national minorities» deported in their entirety.

No one had a right to feel safe. Faithful service to the revolutionary cause, lack of any relations with "enemies of the people", proletarian origins, service in the State security apparatus itself were no guarantee against being arrested and sentenced to forced labour. Persons sentenced under political articles never accounted for more than a third of the Gulag's population. Everyone was at risk of being found guilty. Coming to work late or leaving a quarter of an hour early, your output failing to reach the required quality standard, your machine breaking down, a stoppage due to some totally extraneous cause, all these counted as "criminal intent". A cattle plague, a poor harvest, a few cucumbers pilfered by children, any of these could serve as grounds for conviction. The grounds for conviction were no more than a legal formality. The simple truth was that the camps system demanded an ever-increasing flow of human material. The fact of arrest signaled the prisoner's "civic death", as well as the first step on his or her way to the "other world".

The defendant entered into a court
(the Sjakti case), Moscow 1928.

THE CAMP A COUNTERFEIT HABITAT

The camps were not designed to meet the needs of the human beings condemned to inhabit them but, rather, to serve the purposes of the repressive machine to which they belonged. The locations chosen were the most inhospitable and least suited for human habitation that could be found.

The camp was supposed to constitute a space for the organization of the prisoners' life and work. But in reality it was a means of destroying what made the prisoner human – his individuality, morality, respect for himself and his fellows in misfortune, his health.

The imitated the principles governing the organization of habitats in the normal world. It had its town hall (the camp office), its public catering system (the kitchens), its "club", its "infirmary", its workshops, even its own prison (the punishment cells). Embodying the ideal of collective living, it was a parody of order.

As they gradually grew in size, many camps came to form solid built-up areas. A number of cities – Vorkuta, Inta, Norilsk – came into being in this way. Areas of free settlement existed cheek by jowl with camp compounds. Prisoners had their workplaces outside the camp and, conversely, free workers were hired for jobs inside the compound. The two worlds

interpenetrated each other and gradually came to form a single whole, the more so as recently released prisoners who had reason to expect being re-arrested preferred to settle nearby.



Interior, stay barracks
(unknown camp).

SOCIAL HIERARCHY

GODS, CHIEFS, THIEVES AND OTHERS

The masters of the prisoners' destinies – were far away, in Moscow, in the Kremlin or on Lubyanka Square. In the eyes of the camp inmates they were rather like gods. The highest god was Joseph Stalin, the General Secretary of the Communist Party. Myths and legends circulated describing how his miraculous intervention had rescued someone from the hell of the camps.

Recruitment of cadres to serve in the camps was a perennial difficulty. Few were willing to go to the ends of the earth. For this reason, most of the camp personnel were men who had seriously blotted their copybook, alcoholics or thieves. The largest section of camp personnel consisted of the armed guards (VOKHR), probably accounting for between 5 and 10% of the total population of the Gulag. These “watchdogs” were despised and hated by the prisoners who paid them back by making them crawl in the mud, stand for hours in the open in the extreme cold, etc.

The armed guards watched over the camp perimeter. But inside the compound, with the administration's tacit consent, all power lay in the hands of professional criminals who had full control not only of the other prisoners' property but of their very lives. Criminals held posts in the camp's food distribution systems, were responsible for stores and canteens, and were appointed as team leaders, the work team or “brigade” being the camp's principal industrial and social unit.

At the bottom of the social ladder were the “down-and-outs”, morally and physically broken men. Despised by all, feeding on garbage and eating dirt, they had almost lost the appearance of human beings. Their whole behavior showed that they already had one foot in the grave.

THE RULES

A STEP TO YOUR LEFT, A STEP TO YOUR RIGHT AND I FIRE!

Whoever they might be in reality, the Cheka men who ruled the roost in the Gulag wore uniforms, had ranks and regarded themselves as members of the military. Camp life was regulated accordingly: companies, columns and marching in rank and file.

After the pre-trial prison cell and the transfer, the first feeling of the newly arrived camp inmate was, paradoxically, a sensation of freedom. He found himself in a wide space under an open sky and could glimpse a natural landscape beyond the barbed wire. This feeling could not be allowed to last; the camp regime saw to that. Anyone failing to observe the rules was subject to severe disciplinary measures. To impress upon the prisoner that he was under constant and vigilant control, a roll-call was taken twice a day, before departure for work and after return. Having to stand in the icy cold was torture to the prisoner, still barely awake or exhausted after a long day's work. The guards would make their intentions clear with the time-honoured formula: “A step to the left, a step to the right and I fire!” The prisoners marched in serried ranks, and at the slightest attempt to turn aside or drop back, the threat would be unhesitatingly carried out.

Camp life was regulated by orders and signals. A prisoner who broke a rule or failed to obey an order laid himself open to various forms of punishment. He might be beaten, drenched with water and made to stand outside in the icy cold, locked up or sent to the punishment cells.



Josef Stalin and the NKVD chief Jezjov inspect the construction of the White Sea Canal, 1934.

DAILY LIFE

WHEN HUNGER KILLS EVERY OTHER FEELING

The death of privacy began during transfer when the zek received his first initiation into Gulag-style community life. Later, he was lodged in a communal hut, went to work in a gang, ate his meals in a communal canteen and defecated in a communal latrine.

According to the standards, a Gulag prisoner in the 1940s received two shirts, a pair of underpants, a short overcoat, trousers, a quilted jacket and a pair of warm insoles. Footwear caused the worst problems because of a permanent shortage. The prisoners had to be content with ragged half-boots, galoshes or hand-made wooden-soled shoes. The prisoner's crowning glory was his cap, beret or the famous lined shapka with ear-flaps. Women covered their heads or shoulders with scarves.

Daily life in the camp revolutionized the prisoner's system of values. Everyone's first concern was the struggle for food. Hunger, from which prisoners suffered constantly, was due not only to the shortage of food; it was programmed in line with the slogan *"He who does not work shall not eat"*. Hunger ruled camp life more firmly than the authorities. The primeval urge crushed the zek's willpower and killed all other feelings. It made prisoners commit ugly acts of servility and turned them into informers. The late 1920s saw the introduction of a

system of "credits" according to which a zek's food ration depended on the degree to which he fulfilled his output quota. This was a trap whereby the zek was forced to enter into a form of "socialist emulation" with death. The more he worked in order to get an extra ration, the more rapidly he wore out his strength.

Exhausted by hunger and impossibly hard work, many prisoners contract-

ed diseases such as pellagra, scurvy and night blindness. Camp medicine was indifferent to the individual human being. Whatever the complaint brought to them, the male nurses, medical assistants and doctors, not daring to exceed the quota of patients allowed under the plan, would confine themselves to taking a half-dead man's pulse before pronouncing him to be "in good health" and sending him back to work.



Distribution of hot water.



Construction of White Sea channel, 1932, photographed by Aleksandr Rodsjenko.

SURVIVAL STAYING HUMAN

The zek lived under permanent surveillance and underwent humiliating body searches almost every day. Yet private spaces did exist, created out of scraps, manufactured from whatever happened to be at hand, often protected more jealously than life itself.

When you had lost everything, down to your name replaced by a number on a wadded jacket, staying human was no easy matter. Not everyone had the strength to win the last-ditch battle by reconstructing a world of his own. Religious believers found strength in God, but atheistic communists, used to subordinating the personal dimension to the struggle for the freedom of others, had a harder time of it. Their revolutionary ideals smashed, they began to doubt their own selves.

At the fragile threshold beyond which one's personality begins to disintegrate, memories alone, particularly of the most intimate kind, could be of use. Writing and receiving letters from home was a lifeline. The zek who slipped a clumsy little drawing into a letter to his wife was a changed man: the simple act gave new meaning to his life. Bans and restrictions on correspondence were regarded as the worst punishment. No news from home was indeed almost the same as a death warrant.

The simplest way to relax in the Gulag was by smoking, but this pleasure was mostly inaccessible. Tobacco was a highly valued commodity; it was used to reward shock workers and informers, it was hoarded like a luxury. Hand-

made tobacco pouches, cigarette boxes and holders, lighters and matchboxes were made lovingly and with special care. They formed part of the prisoner's identity - a reflection of his personality that had miraculously managed to survive. Like smoking, many simple activities such as playing chess or cards acquired a new significance in the Gulag. Chess demonstrated that despite the subhuman conditions one's intellectual faculties were still intact.

The prisoner had nowhere to sit, nowhere to rest his head. So he learned to sit on his haunches for hours on end. Seated on their bunks, zeks wrote letters home, kept diaries, sewed, knitted, did embroidery, drew and prayed. Once in bed, a man could at last be alone with himself, for his place was marked with a metal label bearing his name and forename.

This gave rise to what could be called a "pocket-sized" culture. Small objects could more easily be hidden from view, disguised, kept as one's own property. Women prisoners, deprived of the strict necessities of life, learned to make sewing needles out of fish bones or broken-off bits of comb, which they concealed in their shoe-soles. The art objects created in the camps were tiny, designed for prolonged contemplation in the light of a 25-Watt lamp by men and women reduced to near-blindness by vitamin deficiency.



Portrait of a zek
(unknown artist), the 1940s.

WOMEN AND CHILDREN AND YET, CHILDREN WERE BORN

In no other area of Gulag life was the decline of values more evident than in the sphere of human relations. The institution of the family was destroyed, relations between the sexes were reduced to the purely animal, and the care of children was entrusted to prison-keepers acting on behalf of the State.

The Gulag was principally a world of men; 80 to 94% of its population was male. In the early days, the founders of the camps system were skeptical about using women's labour. But before long "gender equality" was established in this respect, gangs of women began to take part in the heaviest work, and soon the division of labour between the sexes vanished altogether.

Women were seen breaking stones, pushing loaded wheelbarrows along narrow planks at a run, quarrying ores.

If camp life was hard for men, it was even harder for women. At every step the Gulag humiliated them and deprived them of their traditional role in society. The punishments imposed on women were absolutely incommensurate with the crimes of which they were accused. For coming to work late because a child was ill you got 5 years in the camps; for stealing a bag of flour, 12 years.

It was no rare thing for a child to be born in a camp. Some had been conceived earlier; in other cases the

father was an officer or a guard who had threatened or bribed the mother into sleeping with him. Newborn babies were issued with a few yards of cloth and taken to a special part of the compound. Infants were placed in the care of female common-law prisoners.

Until the mid-1930s, infants were kept in the camp in which their mother was confined until the age of 4. Later the age was reduced to 12 months. Children separated from their mothers were sent to special boarding schools or orphanages, where their mother's address was kept secret. Parents had practically no hope of finding their child again at some time in the future. The institutions in which these children were confined were, of course, different from the camps, but their organization and way of life were characteristic of the same repressive system.



Left: The Infant's house in the Jagri Camp, Arkhangelsk, the 1940s.
Opposite page: Female labor brigade, railroad Baikal-Amur, 1933.



THE WORK

LATTER-DAY SLAVE-MASTERS

The Bolsheviks believed in the ennobling and educational virtues of work. If work made man, it could also remake him, make him fit to accept socialist values, to join the ranks of “builders of a new society”.

The system was oscillating between its penitentiary and economic functions. The prisoner was a means of production and, as such, had to be given a minimum of care if he was to meet the Gulag’s output quotas. Here, however, the idea of inexhaustible manpower resources, coupled with the illusion of their cheapness, came into play. And this is why, although hundreds of thousands of new prisoners were sent to the Gulag each year, the working population remained practically static; the losses in human lives were too high. In the overwhelming majority of cases work bore no relation to the abilities and skills of the prisoner. Only a small minority of individuals with technical or medical skills could hope to be given jobs connected with their field of knowledge. Priests were employed in making fishing nets, teachers, writers and engineers in digging foundations and clearing forests. The point was to make everyone feel worthless and useless.

Forced labour, then, was not related to a result. But there were still such things as output quotas: so much stone to be split, so much ore to be mined, so many trees to be felled. Under such conditions a worker gradually learned to be a virtuoso at deceiving his tormentors. And so the glorious phenomenon of *tufta* – scam – came into being in the Gulag, the art of producing a simulacrum of a result, of passing off an unfinished job for a job well done. Like the purely formal approach to output quotas, the phenomenon of *tufta* – which gradually invaded every nook and cranny of the Soviet economy – was initially a product of the Gulag.

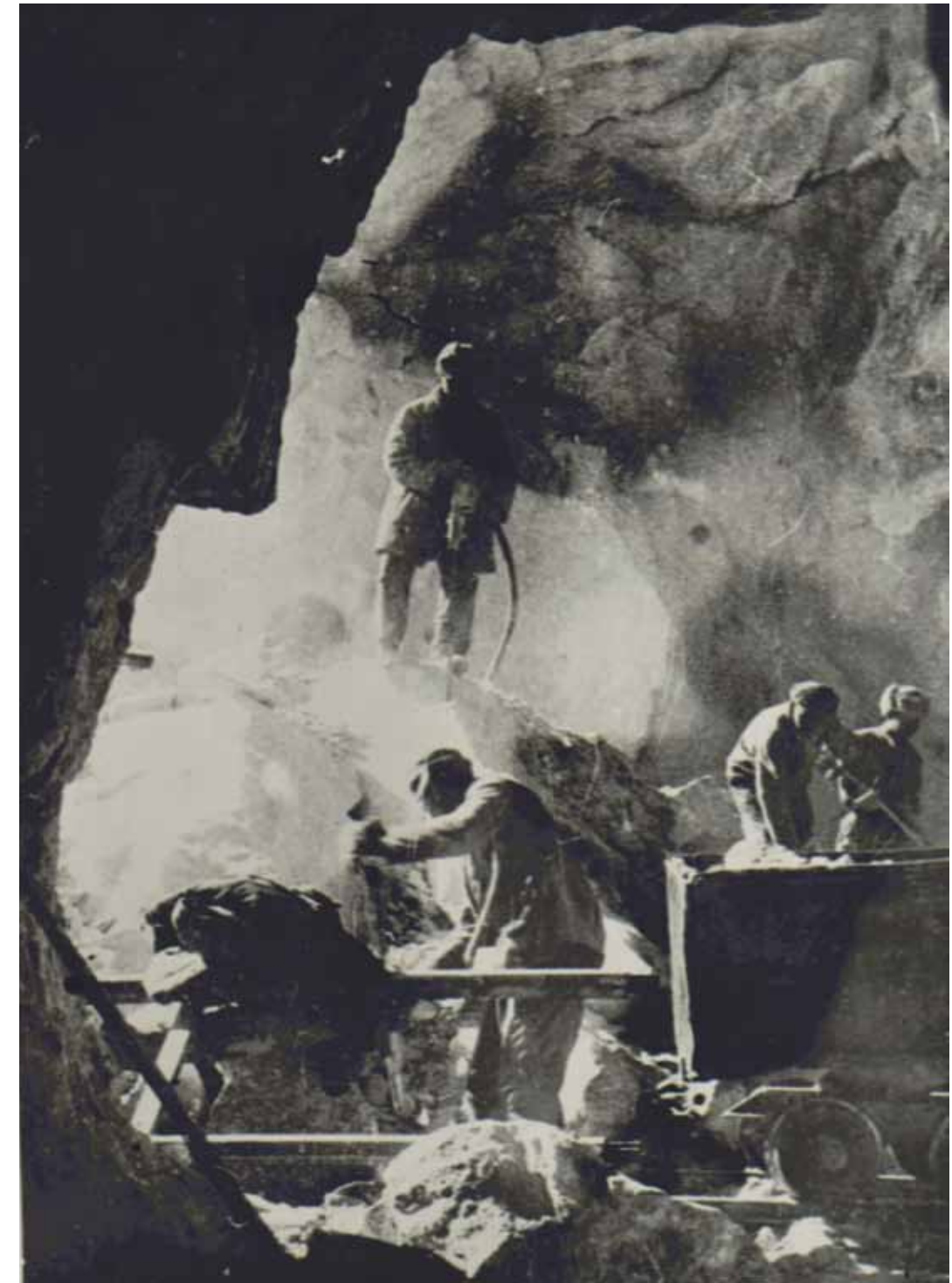
TECHNOLOGY

THE AGE OF THE WHEELBARROW

A new zek would often try to use know-how acquired in his former life to inject some rationality into the slave labour to which he was condemned. Some useful technical inventions actually saw the light of day: thus, the country’s first dump truck was developed on the site of the Moscow River–Volga canal. Mostly, however, the camps’ technology was as monstrous as the purposes and places which it served.

On the site of the canal linking the White Sea with the Baltic (Belomorkanal), the prisoners had a hard time removing the innumerable erratic boulders scattered over the foundation trenches. These stones were carried on stretchers and dumped on vehicles ironically nicknamed “Fords”, an original Belomorkanal invention consisting of tree trunks lashed together to form a robust platform and mounted on four wooden wheels. Each “Ford” was drawn by two horses.

Specialized periodicals devoted to “Inventions and Rationalization Measures” were to be published. Inventors would receive larger food rations and benefit from other advantages, including reduction of sentence and even restitution of civil rights. Never before had the mind of man been rated at so high a price – the price of life and freedom.



Mining in the Kolyma,
1943.

PROPAGANDA

“CULTURE AND EDUCATION SECTION”

The Gulag's founders made sure that camp inmates, deprived as they were of everything else, received their full ration of official propaganda. In the interests of the prisoners' education, every camp had to have its “culture and education section”. Here you could read *Pravda*, attend lectures on the successes of socialism, listen to the radio. From time to time the culture section would organize a concert or stage a show, with the prisoners as musicians and actors. The audience consisted of the camp's officers, seated in the front rows, the guards and a few shock workers rewarded for fulfilling the daily output quota to at least 150%.

The propaganda team would sometimes include former artists, but generally it was composed of common-law prisoners. People from the underworld turned out to be more expressive, more naturally histrionic than the “counterrevolutionaries”. Certain propaganda sketches went under the name of “live newspapers”. A written press also existed in the camps, especially in the 1930s. Work in the culture and education section was a great stroke of luck: it enabled one to survive without having to do heavy physical labour. Some camp commanders turned out to be real patrons of the arts. One of the most famous was Semyon Firin, the chief of both the Belomorkanal and the Moscow River-Volga canal sites. Under his sponsorship, talented prisoners created a review called “Storming the Canal”, published books and set up a painters' studio. In 1937, the entire group – 219 in all – was arrested and shot at the same time as its sponsor.

After the Great Terror of 1937-1938 the work of culture and education sections dwindled rapidly. From an instrument of “re-education”, the camp was reduced solely to a means of exploiting the labour of “enemies of socialism”.

Performance by the
propaganda brigade,
White Sea Canal, 1932.



DEATH, ESCAPE, RELEASE

WAS THERE A WAY OUT?

The living space created by the Gulag held its inhabitants in a firm grip and refused to let them go. Prisoners released after serving their full term were systematically rearrested, and the second sentence was always heavier than the first.

Escape was practically impossible for the simple reason that there was nowhere to go. The most insuperable obstacle was not the barbed wire, the guard's automatic rifle

or even the hundreds of miles of snow-covered taiga or tundra. Worst of all were the people. The sparse local population saw any escaped prisoner as a criminal for whose return to the authorities they got a reward in the form of money, food or alcohol. If an escaped prisoner nevertheless succeeded in reaching a village or a railway station, the system of total control which made it impossible to travel without papers would cause the escape plan to collapse at the very last stage.

Death seemed to be the only way out. Tens and hundreds of thousands of prisoners died in the camps each year, but still the system was not satisfied. In the Gulag, death lost much of its importance, stopped being an event worth noting, was reduced to just another stage in the production cycle. Death was no longer feared or respected. *"Your turn to die today, mine tomorrow"* was a common camp saying.

The right to die was not observed any more than the right to live. All traditional death rites disappeared, leaving only the barest minimum: a wheelbarrow filled with cadavers and a place in the cemetery. The death of a Gulag prisoner who was executed or succumbed to disease was not notified to his next of kin. Information concerning the death of prisoners was treated as a State secret.

A gradual reform of the camps system began after the death of Stalin, March 1954. But the Soviet Union's new leaders took their time, provoking a wave of strikes and uprisings in the camps. The risings in Vorkuta, Norilsk, Kazakhstan and Kolyma did speed up the reorganization of the system. The year 1954 saw the beginning of mass releases, followed by the rehabilitation of political prisoners.



Guards with dogs, Tagli, the 1940s



A zek, the 1930s.

THE LEGACY OF THE GULAG

BY MAG.ART. MARC MAURE, PRODUCER

Memories of Stalin's Gulag have largely disappeared in Russia's landscape and history. From the large Gulag Archipelago that were scattered across the vast Soviet territory, and counted several thousand camps of various sizes, little is preserved. In today's Russia, one will search in vain for a national museum, or large public organizations, responsible for documenting and disseminating the history of the Gulag. The Solovetskii stone on Lubianka Square in Moscow, with the inscription *In memory of millions of victims of a totalitarian state*, put there by Memorial in 1991, is the only monument of Gulag found in Moscow.

During recent years the Stalin period were used to rehabilitate and to restore Russia's greatness. In 2005 said 50% of Russians that Stalin had been a good leader, and 12% that he had had a very bad influence on the nation. He was in December 2008 voted by viewers in the state channel *Rossia* as the third greatest Russian in the country's history.

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A prisoner's grave,
Kolyma, the 1990s.

MEMORIAL

Human Correction Convenience organization *Memorial*, established in 1988, has played the lead role nationally when it comes to explore and maintain the memory of the Gulag. Memorial is a community of dozens of organizations in different regions of Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Latvia, and Georgia. Its main task was the awakening and preservation of the societal memory of the severe political persecution in the recent past of the Soviet Union. Memorial has established large collections and archives through extensive documentation work, and are engaged in active communication both in Russia and abroad.

Memorial is responsible for a human rights center, working with human rights violations in today's Russia and the former Soviet Union. They are among the few who dare to raise a critical voice against Russian abuses in Chechnya.

Memorial's department in St Petersburg, 4 December 2008: Russian police confiscated a comprehensive digital archive of unique photographs, film footage, interviews and more from Gulag history. This happened right ahead of an international conference in Moscow about Stalin, organized by the Memorial and the Yeltsin Foundation. Participants said they felt that they no longer talked about the past, but about the present.

<http://www.memo.ru/eng/>

THE EXHIBITION

The Gulag exhibition is based on the exhibition *Goulag – le peuple des zeks* from Musée d'Éthnographie de Genève, 2004. It consists of a unique and comprehensive pictorial material that Memorial with great help and generosity has made available.

The Norwegian version of the exhibition is produced by the Nansen Foundation Child Watch, in cooperation with Memorial. It is funded with support from the organization Fritt Ord, Arts Council Norway /Norwegian Culture Fund, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Falstad Centre and Helgeland Museum.

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Documentation: Nikita Okhotin

COLOPHON CATALOGUE:

Catalogue: Ingeborg Hjorth, Åshild Karevold, Marc Maure, Marianne Neerland Soleim
Layout: Åshild Karevold
Print: Wennberg trykkeri AS
Cover photo: A zek, the Baikal-Amur railway, 1933.
Illustration p. 2-3: Campsite, Vorkuta, 1945
ISBN: 978-82-92383-27-8

First edition, Norwegian version printed in The Falstad Centre's publications series 2009. English version 2012 financed by Helgeland Museum.





f a l s t a d

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Memorial and Human rights Centre

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