

# Gulag labor camps in stalin era history essay



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## Introduction to the Gulag Camps

Gulag Labor Camps were developed in the Soviet Union to imprison the weak people in the country and force them into labor. The main purpose of starting this system was forced labor and brutal behavior with these people, who were called the Kulaks. These were the peasants who were grabbed up by the Soviet Union and were exiled into terrible conditions in the extreme weather and conditions of the Soviet Union. After enduring the resentment in the camps, these people were forced into labor. Gulag was known as one of the major traits of oppression from the government of Soviet Union. This paper will discuss the activities in the Gulag camp under Joseph Stalin era from 1932 to 1942.

## **Stalin's Gulag**

"GULAG" is a term referring as an acronym of a USSR bureaucratic organization which was also known as the Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps. These camps operated during the era of Stalin as the Soviet system of forced labor camps. Shortly after the revolution of 1917, the concentration camps were created in the USSR, but it was not until the era of Stalin that the system grew to tremendous proportions in order to collectivize the agriculture and turn Soviet Union into a modern industrial power (George Maon University, 2010).

## **History of Gulag Camps**

The forced labor camps of the Soviet System were first established under the Cheka in 1917. However, the population of these camps was not very high in the initial years compared to 1930s when the population reached significant

numbers. The system of forced labor in the Russian Gulag became a signal of oppression and tyranny. Thousands and millions lost their lives in these camps and even more were imprisoned. Generations of Russian women, children and men were affected by the foreboding and silent barbwire walls of Gulag. Men were beaten in the streets, arrested from their homes, taken from their beds at night and were never told the reason. This massive system of Gulag influenced the lives of the people from 1917 till 1988 when the Soviet Union collapsed.

There were Gulag camps in the entire Soviet Union but the largest of the camps existed in the most extreme climatic and geographical regions of the country from the Siberian east and the Central Asian south to the Arctic North. There were a variety of economic activities that the prisoners were engaged in but their work was usually unskilled, inefficient with regard to economics and no automation was involved at all. The combination of extreme climates, endemic violence, unsanitary conditions, meager food rations and hard labor lead to extremely high death rates in the camps. However, the Gulags were reduced in number and strength after the death of Stalin in 1953, but political prisoners and forced labor camps continued to exist in the Soviet Union up to the era of Gorbachev (George Maon University, 2010).

## **Developments under Joseph Stalin**

By 1934, these camps, or Main Directorate for Corrective Labor Camps, had several million inmates under Cheka's successor. Many common prisoners including murderers and thieves along with religious and political dissenters were forced into these camps. The camps which were located in the remote

regions of Far North and Siberia were called the Gulags . These Gulags made huge contribution to the economy of Soviet Union in the regime of Joseph Stalin. White Sea Baltic Canal, the Baikal-Amur Railroad line, many hydroelectric stations, the Moscow-Volga Canal, industrial enterprises and strategic roads in remote regions were constructed by the prisoners of Gulag. Much of the manpower required for country's lumbering and for the mining of gold, coal and copper was also fulfilled by the prisoners of Gulag.

The number of projects assigned to the NKVD was continuously increased by Joseph Stalin which led to an increase in reliance of the labor of Gulag. The Gulag workers also served other economic projects and enterprises independent of NKVD which contracted the prisoners for work. The Commissariat of Internal Affairs was abandoned when Stalin won. This placed the locations of confinements of the Internal Affairs to the hands of Commissariat of Justice. However, in 1934, the Internal Affairs regained control and took over all the camps and prisons, including those which were in control of Justice and secret police previously.

## **The Economy of Gulag**

The majority of the settlers in Gulag camps were semiliterate peasant during the first half of 1930. These peasants were used primarily for heavy and crude labor developing a new territory. The totalitarian regime was established more firmly and the population of settlers became more nationally diverse and socially different. The use of this forced labor got more varied and the decision of using this labor got in the hands of the government (Ivanova, Flath and Raleigh, 2000).

Under the era of Stalin, the legal status of the settlers in USSR was such that they could be transferred from one place to another at any moment on the decision of the government. This transfer of labor was based on the need of production in the economy. Decision makers did not care about the property of the labor and their rights. The improvement of equipment and the technologies of production were hindered by the forced labor in these camps which were widespread in Stalin's period. The forced labor in the economy was primarily concentrated in the Gulag camps which were virtually unpaid and very mobile. The Soviet Union did not built any industries and factories during the first five years of the plan as hundreds of concentration camps and colonies were built during this period. The lack of advancement in technology and productivity meant that the labor was ineffective and unproductive. However, it was highly attractive for the government as it was very cheap and no incentives were required to make the labor work (Ivanova, Flath and Raleigh, 2000).

## **The Major Projects of Gulag under Stalin**

### White Sea-Baltic Canal

The first major project that the Gulag camp economy worked for was the canal that was built under White Sea. The White Sea- Baltic Canal was built by the prisoners of Gulag between 1931 and 1933. Over 100, 000 prisoners dug a canal which was 141 miles in length with the help of a few tools in just 20 months. The tools used by the prisoners were simple pickaxes, makeshifts and shovels (George Maon University, 2010). The camp construction project began without a technical plan without the completion

of geological and topographical analysis. The work began without any machinery, dwellings, trucks, roads, sufficient food during the autumn.

The authorities decided to increase the amount of food for the prisoners in the hope of increasing productivity. However, the working conditions remained very difficult as diseases and starvation led to high level of deaths. Many historians have marked that many prisoners died within two or three months after working on the canal construction. This type of production became a tradition that remained the same for decades (Ivanova, Flath and Raleigh, 2000).

Official reports show that the first construction project of the camp was relatively economical as the canal just cost 95.3 million rubles to construct. This was very low as compared to the 400 million rubles that was anticipated by the decision makers. The minimal expenditure on the labor and tools led to this savings. Another reason for the reduced costs was that a very low cost was associated with the maintenance of the camp staff. There were 14,000 prisoners whereas the staff only consisted of only 37 personnel. Unlike many other Gulag projects, there was no need to maintain several thousand professional guards, political staff, convoy troops and the camp administrative officials. Each task that was carried out from the initial designing of the canal to guarding of the prisoners was carried out by the prisoners themselves which contributed to savings in the project (Ivanova, Flath and Raleigh, 2000).

Kolyma Mine

The name that struck fear into the minds of the Gulag prisoners was Kolyma. The place was reputed to be the coldest place inhabited on the planet where there is winter 12 months of the year. The prisoners spoke of Kolyma as the place where there was winter whole year and the rest was summer. The place was so remote that it could not be reached by the land route. The prisoners spent days in train travelling across the Soviet Union and then again spent many months waiting for the waterways to be free of ice. Then the ships were boarded by the prisoners to travel past Japan and up the Kolyma River to reach their destination of Kolyma gold-mining destination. Survival at Gulag was more difficult and required more hardships than any other place of Gulag.

#### Moscow-Volga Canal

The most valued part of the camp projects was hydro-technical installations in the USSR. Joseph Stalin loved building canals as a true Eastern despot. This project was done without any economic justification and with no concern for the consequences or losses. The primary purpose of Stalin was to demonstrate the might of the Soviet Union for which dubious profits and instantaneous triumphs were enough (Ivanova, Flath and Raleigh, 2000).

In 1932, new corrective labor camps and new administration for the canal were established in the town of Dmitrov. The name of the largest and the new labor camp in Gulag was Dmitlag which had over 150, 000 prisoners and the numbers reached 200, 000 in two subsequent years. The arrests for the construction of this canal started in 1932 under the rule of Stalin because of the shortage of man power. Most of these prisoners were arrested under

article 35 of the Criminal Code according to Federov. This article declared these prisoners as a danger to the society. Destroying socialist property or profiteering was some of the economic crimes that were mostly cited for the arrests (Martens, 2006).

The head of Dmitlag at a party meeting declared that the prisoners are not to be imagined as poor as according to him they had everything. The records have revealed that on fulfilling their work quotas, the prisoners got 600 grams of bread, those who lacked got 400 grams and those being punished got 300 grams of bread. The head of Dmitlag also exercised the power he had over the prisoners and their fates and he enjoyed doing that. In 1933, the administration decided to expand the camp in order to meet the rising need of these workers and this forced the government to find more guilty people. The actual expenditure in the construction of Moscow-Volga canals was higher than that was expected. The expected expenditure on the labor was calculated to be 4 rubles 3 kopecks per day whereas the actual was 4 rubles 36 kopecks per day. This demonstrated a rise in expenditure of 33 kopecks per day on each worker (Martens, 2006).

In Gulag, it was not a question of the subsistence level of the prisoners or even the survival of the workers. The prisoners of Dmitlag were driven to pick over garbage dumps and consume leaves and poison berries which resulted in thousands of deaths. The Soviet invited foreign delegates just to show how hard the USSR was trying to convert criminals into responsible and productive citizens. Dmitlag showed limitless possibilities of reeducating the people according to the Gulag administration (Martens, 2006).



Two days before the opening ceremony of the canal, in May 1937, the head of Dmitlag, Firin and 218 other administrators were arrested by Stalin and were later shot. The reason for the arrest and killing was the involvement of Firin in some affair and the arrest was known as the "Firin Affair". For the involvement of Firin in some inappropriate activity, the entire police staff was arrested and killed. This shows that Stalin mastered fear as his weapon in politics. The administrators and Firin were accused of getting involved in some counter revolutionary organization. Later, the top secret police officials were also arrested and killed. At the end, even after the completion of the canal, instead of setting free the prisoners of Dmitlag, Stalin decided to execute many of the prisoners who survived the tortures (Martens, 2006).

### **The Party Propaganda and Prisoners' Enthusiasm**

The Party propaganda used all kinds of advertisements and other means in order to instill a spirit of construction in the prisoners during the first five-year plan. The newspapers distributed in the camps contained slogans such as "Labor in the USSR is a matter of honor, a matter of valor and glory" (Ivanova, Flath, & Raleigh, p. 78). These workers who were pulled away from their family, their homes and their normal lives were filled with slogans such as "Camp Workers! Let us complete the ground preparation at a level of 150 percent!" and "Better provisions for the Shock Workers!" (Ivanova, Flath, & Raleigh, p. 78).

#### Loudspeaker Systems

At a later stage, public address systems were installed in the Gulag camps adding to the motivating slogans. A powerful and amplified loudspeaker was

mounted on a tall pole continually blared since the morning to the day end. This was mounted so high in order to protect it from being damaged by the workers. These slogans from the loudspeakers filled the minds of the prisoners with ideological cliches which were designed to divert their thought towards the work (Ivanova, Flath, & Raleigh, 2000).

### Brainwashing of the Prisoners

Corrective labor brainwashing was combined with brainwashing through propaganda. All kinds of special shifts, initiatives and salutes were thought up for the prisoners. A shock-work system and worker competitions were instituted in the camps which reached 95 percent of the workers according to the reports of the administration. This was encouraged after the completion of the Stakhanovite movement which was named after a coal miner Stakhanov who set a new coal mining record. Therefore a nationwide campaign was launched to raise and rationalize the industrial output. An array of material incentives was also introduced by the government in order to increase the production of the prisoners (Ivanova, Flath, & Raleigh, 2000).

### Inspiring the Masses

The camp press played a significant role in inspiring the masses of prisoners. The press initiated publishing a newspaper in 1932 at the construction site of Moscow-Volga canal. The primary task of the newspaper was to inspire the involuntary prisoners to process them into voluntary and productive workers. This was done in order to complete the construction plan of the canal as rapidly as possible. The chief of the camp construction once said in his address to the prisoners that whoever thinks that train engines and

hundreds of excavators are necessary for the completion of the canal, he simply does not want to work on the canal. He also commanded the workers to orient themselves to the wheelbarrow, shovel, the hand drill and the crusher (Ivanova, Flath, & Raleigh, 2000).

## **The Growth of Gulag Camps**

With every passing year, the camp economy gained strength and grew. Not only canals, roads and dams were built using the forced labor from prison, but cities were also being built by them. The well known cities built by the prisoners include Bratsk, Norilsk, Salekhard, Vorkuta, Nokhodka and many others which remained ghost towns and never appeared on the maps. The Gulag camp not only expanded geographically in the 1930s but its organizational and administrative structures also grew and adapted to cope with the punitive policies which became more and more severe. After 1935 to 1940, parole was abolished and the system of crediting the workdays was disallowed. Solitary confinement punishment cells were started to be installed in all the camps of Gulag. The function of these cells was to incarcerate the prisoners and was dictated by the Temporary Instruction of 1939. These cells were for the prisoners of corrective labor camps and colonies of the NKVD (Ivanova, Flath, & Raleigh, 2000).

These punishment cells were turned into an ideal weapon against the insubordinates and uncooperative workers. The prisoners were not provided any beddings in the cells, were given hot food only after three days and not taken out for work. The maximum number of days in the punishment cells allowed was 20 days which was beyond the endurance of many prisoners. This also resulted in many deaths in the confinement. Many Party workers

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were against this punishment as this did not provide any good to the government. Each prisoner being punished in the solitary cell meant that there was one worker less on the work field. This was the main reason for such humanitarianism (Ivanova, Flath, & Raleigh, 2000).

## **The Social Status of Gulag Prisoners**

The social status of the prisoners of Gulag also changes gradually. They were more commonly called or referred as the foresters. Until the fall of 1937, the official documents and even the propagandas avoided using the word prisoners. They were instead referred to as shock workers or Stakhanovites. The term Stakhanovites was very widely used in the official correspondence during the mid 1930s. Outstanding workers who were very productive were housed in special barracks (Ivanova, Flath, & Raleigh, 2000).

However, at railway stations the scenes were not as encouraging for the prisoners as it seems. In 1936, the prisoner transport trains were still common which had Stakhanovite banners and slogans attached. The portraits of Stalin and other leaders also accompanied these banners on trains. Armed guards could be viewed inside these trains protecting the workers and the workers themselves were found gazing outside the train windows dreaming of the free world outside. The things changed for the workers in 1937 when a camp administrator of Gulag issued detailed orders that it was a big mistake to call these prisoners with respected names and calling them heroes. This was the times when Gulag lost the vocabulary which gave respect to the prisoners. These workers started to be called with names such as camp workers, camp society or camp population. The administrative and bureaucratic references to these prisoners were made

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with work pool, contingent and special contingent (Ivanova, Flath, & Raleigh, 2000).

At the end of 1930, the most common word that was found to be referring to the prisoners was “ z” or “ k” which was the abbreviation for the word of prisoner in Russian. On the use of special titles, the camp officials were instructed not to use word such as heroes or leaders of productions to refer to the prisoners. This was in September 1940 when the political section of Gulag directed the officials to not to refer the workers in heroic and good words and statements. The officials were not allowed to use these words in oral or documented forms of communication to refer to the prisoners. The officials were only allowed to use the statements such as “ z or k performing at shock-work level” and the most respectable form being “ z or k using Stakhanovite labor methods” (Ivanova, Flath, & Raleigh, p. 81).

### **Shrouding of Gulag in Secrecy**

The activities of the Gulag were shrouded completely in secrecy by the end of 1930s. The network of post office boxes, units, farms, special facilities and forestry enterprises were covered in the country without a word about the prisoners of the camps. A list of total 371 circulars was present with the officials as state secrets with 300 being added to them a year later. The totalitarian view was being hidden behind the barbed wires of the Gulag as well as the country. The newspapers being distributed in the Gulag camps included a label or a stamp which directed the prisoners not to remove the newspaper from the camp territory. To ensure that no information of the camp, the nature of the camp work projects and the address of the editorial

board is filtered through the camp press, hundreds of censors worked vigilantly (Ivanova, Flath, & Raleigh, 2000).

In 1938 and 1939, the question of secrecy became particularly relevant during the struggle with the effects of secrecy in the Gulag system. The head of Gulag, during a Gulag Party meeting addressed the documents of Gulag as very secret and secret to varying degree. All the secret correspondences were delivered by special couriers in order to ensure such high levels of required secrecy. Substantial expenditures were made by the Soviet government in order to make sure that there is no loop hole in the secrecy. 25 million secret packages were delivered in the year 1940 alone by the NKVD field communications division. Out of these packages, 537 tons of cargo of secret correspondence and 675, 000 of the secret packages were delivered by the central apparatus of the communications division for which it received certain awards from the government as well. In addition to this, the government officials having access to the top-secret documents also received a special bonus in addition to their salary (Ivanova, Flath, & Raleigh, 2000).

The top-secret documents of the Gulag contained information such as operations, accounts and distribution, the secret-service agents' tasks, health issues and sanitation and the information about the fuel industry. The document also contained the information of running the secondary railway lines and those being built by the Gulag labor mainly in the Far East (Ivanova, Flath, & Raleigh, 2000).

## **Intensification in the Economic Activity**

In 1938, a significant intensification in the economic activity took place of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs. The economy of the camp clearly expressed military-industrial entity which became very large and systematic. The length of sentences of the prisoners and the number of prisoners rose sharply in this period (Ivanova, Flath, & Raleigh, 2000).

There were thirteen camps in 1936 with a total volume of 1.2 billion rubles. However, by the spring of the same year, there were 33 camps and the total capital inflow for the construction activities doubled. The NKVD established thirteen new camp complexes in 1937 and 1938 alone which were to work in the forestry industry. The total population of new prisoners increased to 600,000 in number. The Gulag had become an enormous complex according to one of its officials that involved a number of different industries including but not limited to construction, mining, agriculture and manufacturing (Ivanova, Flath, & Raleigh, 2000).

The industrial output gross volume that was produced by the Gulag increased quite rapidly. Production by these camps totaled 1.5 billion rubles in 1938, 2.5 billion rubles in 1939, 3.7 billion in 1940 and 4.7 billion rubles were planned in 1941. The share of mass consumption goods, as called, was very small relative to the total industrial output of the Gulag which amounted to 1.1 billion rubles for the year 1941 (Ivanova, Flath, & Raleigh, 2000).

## **The Crimes of the Prisoners**

There were many types of prisoners that were held in the Gulag. The main penal system of the Soviet Union was served by the Gulag. Rapists, thieves,

robbers and murderers did not spend their sentences at the prison but in the Gulag. Political prisoners were also held at the Gulag under the regime of Stalin. These were the people who included many innocent caught up in the paranoid clutches of the USSR and were not only limited to real opponents of the Soviet regime. Most of these prisoners were not real criminals and were arrested for petty thefts, lateness or unexcused absences from work and they were punished for many years in these concentration camps (George Maon University, 2010).

In the era of Stalin, a person who arrived at work late three times could be sent to the Gulag camps for up to three years. Many people were sent to the Gulag concentration camps because of merely telling innocent jokes about a Communist Party official. A person who gets involved in petty thieves such as picking up a few potatoes from a harvest field that were left behind, could get up to ten years serving in the forced labor of the Gulag (George Maon University, 2010).

## **Work in the Gulag**

The prisoners of Gulag had no rights what so ever. They could be forced to work up to 14 hours a day and the work of a typical Gulag worker was exhausting physical labor. Prisoners could spend their days digging at the frozen grounds with primitive tools, cutting trees with handsaws and axes working in the most extreme climates. Other workers mined copper or gold by hand and often died from fatal lung diseases from inhalation of the ore dust. Moreover, the prisoners were not even fed enough to sustain such a difficult physical labor. The prisoners had almost no values in the eyes of the authorities. New prisoners replaced those who died of hunger, cold and hard



labor because the system could find new labor always to replenish their supply of labor (George Maon University, 2010).

## **The Reform of 1939**

In 1939, Beria, the new NKVD head attempted to regulate the temporary settlement of the prisoners with permanent status. These reforms were focused on removing these camps completely from Gulag and the jurisdiction of the NKVD. In these reforms the prisoners were given the status of special settlers but still they would have to remain at their place of confinement. However, their children upon reaching the age of 16 and those married to free citizens would have the right to move and settle anywhere in the Soviet Union except for some strategically important places. Settlers who were working in the industrial units were agreed to get passports restricting their residence to a given locale. Those special settlers living in the agricultural areas would be governed by the general Soviet laws and the collective farms statutes. However, after 2 years of negotiations and talks, the reform project was labeled as not pressing enough in March 1941 (Viola, 2007).

## **Decline of Gulag Population**

By the year 1941, there were almost 930, 000 settlers in about 1, 750 settlements in Gulag and half of them working in the industry. Movements within the special settlements continued in Gulag in the years after 1941. Dozens of special settlements with diminishing population in Siberia were merged in the early 1941. In the meantime, some of the settlers started working outside the settlements. There were almost 20, 000 to 37, 000 workers who were registered with NKVD and lived in the special settlements

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but worked in the nearby towns and cities. With the start of the war, the population in Gulag started to decline sharply due to a huge rise in the rate of deaths in these camps in 1942. A quarter of population of Gulag died in the winters of 1941 because of starvation. In the period of 1941 and 1943, around 500, 000 prisoners died in the prison camps (Viola, 2007).

With the start of the World War II, the Gulag Administration halted all the rehabilitations of special settlers except the youngsters. The State Defense Committee issued directive orders in April 1942 to authorize the mobilization of special settlers in the army. Before this, the prisoners were not allowed to serve in the war or engage in any military services. Now that the enemy was at the gates of Moscow and the country was at war, the recruitment of these settlers was allowed in the army. This was because the army was in desperate need of manpower in 1942. Almost 34, 000 special settlers were drafted for the war effort in May 1942. This number has increased to 600, 000 by November in the same year (Viola, 2007).

The World War II was the watershed for many of the special settlers. The possibility of official redemption was held out by the war. An NKVD directive ordered the removal of the families of the special settlers, who were serving in the army, from the police registries and gave the settlers the right to leave. The regime was prepared to liberate the special settlers after more than a decade of sufferings for their participation in the war effort. Even after years of inhumane treatment, suspicion and hostility, the government changed its perspective toward those prisoners who served in the army (Viola, 2007).