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Most countrieshave prison systems where those convicted of crime serve out their sentences.

Thesecountries believe that criminals should be punished for their actions by beingseparated from the society, by being deprived of their freedoms. However, theGulag served primarily as a way to gain control over the entire population, rather than punish criminal acts. (Applebaum, 1).

A history of the vast networkof labour camps that were once scattered across the length and breadth of theSoviet Union, from the islands of the White Sea to the shores of the Black Sea, from the Arctic Circle to the plains of central Asia, from Murmansk to Vorkutato Kazakstan, from central Moscow to the Leningrad suburbs. (Applebaum, 1). From1929, when the Gulag began its expansion, until 1953, when Stalin died, thebest estimates indicate that some eighteen million people passed through thismassive system. The killings of millions of innocent people in the Gulag systemis seen as one most shocking and vicious episodes of the twentieth century. Gulag is thesystem of Soviet labour camps from 1920s to mid-1950s housed the politicalcriminals and prisoners in Soviet Union. There were 474 camps on the territoryof Soviet Union. The word Gulag is an acronym for Glavnoye UpravleniyeLagerey, or Main Camp Administration.

(Applebaum, 1). Over the time the word not only signifiedthe administration of the labour camos but also the system, the idea of Sovietslave labour itself. Prisoners in camps worked in terrifying conditions withouttheir will. Outdoors and in mines, in arid regions and the Arctic Circle, without adequate clothing, tools, shelter, food, or even clean water. The Gulag had itsroots from the Czarist Russia, in the force-labour brigades that operated inSiberia from the seventeenth century to the beginning of the twentieth. (Applebaum, 1). It then took on its modern and more familiar form almost immediately afterthe Russian Revolution, becoming an integral part of the Soviet system. Massterror against opponents was a part of Revolution from the very beginning.

Solzhenitsynargued, and with real evidence, that Lenin, not Stalin, was responsible forcreating the Gulag, and that the first Soviet concentration camps for politicalprisoners were built in the 1920s, not the 1930s. He also showed that far morepeople were killed during the era of mass collectivization, and the Gulagpopulation actually reached its zenith a decade later at the end of the 1940sand in the early 1950s. Most importantly, Solzhenitsyn aimed to show that, contrary to what many believed, the Gulag was not an incidental phenomenon, something which the Soviet Union could eventually eliminate or outgrow. Rather, the prison system had been an essential part of the Soviet economic andpolitical system from the very beginning. From 1929, thecamps took on a new significance. In that year, Stalin decided to use forcedlabour both to speed up the Soviet Union’s industrialization, and to excavatethe natural resources in the Soviet Union’s barely habitable far north. In thatyear, the Soviet secret police also began to take control of the Soviet penalsystem, slowly wresting all of the country’s camps and prisons away from thejudicial establishment. Helped along by the mass arrests of 1937 and 1938, thecamps entered a period of rapid expansion.

By the end of he 1930s, they couldbe found in every one of the Soviet Union’s twelve time zones. Contrary topopular assumption, the Gulag did not cease growing in the 1930s, but rathercontinued to expand throughout the Second World War and the 1940s, reaching itsapex in the early 1950s. By that time the camps had come to play a central rolein the Soviet economy. They produced a third of the country’s gold, much of itscoal and timber, and a great deal of almost everything else.

The prisonersworked in almost every industry imaginable—logging, mining, construction, factory work, farming, the designing of airplanes and artillery—and lived, ineffect, in a country within a country, almost a separate civilization.  The Gulag had its own laws, its own customs, its own morality, even its own slang. It spawned its own literature, its ownvillains, its own heroes, and it left its mark upon all who passed through it, whether as prisoners or guards. The Sovieteconomic planners actually counted on prison labour as part of the overalleconomy. Although the primary stated reason for imprisonment was to pay forsome alleged crime, the ministers of the NKVD agreed that they should takeadvantage of the free physical labour to contribute to economy.

The Gulagparticipated in every sector of Soviet economy. Prisoners produced any type ofproducts such as missiles, car parts, furniture, leather goods, lamps, candles, textiles, locks, buttons, glass cups and even toys. Even the one-third off allthe Soviet Union gold, coal and timber were mined by the Gulag’s. Even though insome respects, the Gulag’s helped boost the financial status of USSR ; thelabour camps did not make a substantial contribution to economy.

The conditionswere really terrible for prisoners to effectively work. The prisoners weresick, weak, hungry and unable to work without sufficient food, clothes andsupplies. Instead of being a triumph, the camps turned out to be economicfailures. But how doesthis painful journey starts for a citizen? Only with four words: “ You areunder arrest.” And you’ll find nothing better to respond than: “ Me? Whatfor?” That’s all. “ That’s what arrest is: it’s a blinding flash and a blowwhich shifts the present instantly into the past and the impossible intoomnipotent actuality.” (Solzhenitsyn, 4).

Arrests are classified according tovarious criteria: nighttime and daytime; at home, at work, during a journey; first-time arrests and repeats; individual and group arrests. Arrests are distinguishedby the degree of surprise requires, the amount of resistance expected (eventhough in terms of millions of cases no resistance was expected and in factthere was none). Arrests are also differentiated by the thoroughness of therequired search; by instructions either to make out or not to make out aninventory of confiscated property or seal a room or apartment; to arrest thewife after the husband and send the children to an orphanage; or to send therest of the family into exile, or to send the old folks to a labour camp too. For example, in 1926 Irma Mendel, a Hungarian, obtained through the Comintern to front-rowtickets to the Bolshoi Theatre.

Interrogator Klegel was courting her at thetime and she invited him to go with her. They sat through the show veryaffectionately, and when it was over he took her—straight to the Lubyanka. The criminalssentenced to prison camps can be divided into two categories. People whocommitted crimes such as murder, rape and robbery, acts which could be prosecutedin most countries.

Second one is people who committed “ crimes” so minor thatthey would not be punishable in other countries. These “ crimes”  included unexcused absence from work, orpetty theft. This type of “ criminal” made up vast majority pf prisoners in theGulag system, and were punished by sentences of eight-ten years of forcedlabour. Their trials usually took five minutes, if there was one at all. People whowere arrested remained in overcrowded filthy prison cells until they weresentenced by a court or a special committee. Then they would be sent to one ofseveral types of forced labor camps, or sent into exile. There were three typesof prison camps: First one was camps with barbed wire and guards inwatchtowers. Prisoners were allowed to move within the camp zone but notallowed to leave the zone.

If they were caught beyond, they were shotimmediately. Second was stricter camps with bolted windows. It allowedrestricted movements for prisoners.

Lastly, there were unguarded camps in remoteregions of the USSR. Even though prisoners had complete movement of freedom, labour was controlled. Another typeof punishment was internal exile, where the person would be sent to a remoteregion of USSR and could not leave. Any attempt to leave the region waspunished.

Even though they did not live behind barbed wire, they were forcedlaborers. Nearly six million were sent into exile, deported to the Kazakhdeserts or the Siberian forests. Instead of individual criminals, usuallygroups of people were sentenced to internal exile. Koreans, Chechens andGermans were included in these groups. During the mass exile, thousands ofChechens died. This is one of the reasons that Chechnya wants to gain itsindependence from Russia today. Not onlyprison camps but also type of labour varied on the location of the camp. Generally, camps in Central Asia dependent on agriculture where prisoners grewand picked cotton.

Whereas prisoners in the northern camps did logging. Campsin the Northeast did mining, gold and tin were the products they extracted. The Naziconcentration camps and the Gulag differ in a very important way. Even though morepeople passed through the Gulag, for a much longer period of time, than throughNazi concentration camps; yet, the Gulag is still not nearly as well known. Nazicamps was used to exterminate whole groups of people, Jewish population inEurope. The Gulag was used as a weapon of ongoing political control over onecountry. The Gulag system did not target any specific group of people: in factall ethnic groups nationalities, and religions were imprisoned.

Moreover, therewere no plans for releasing any of the prisoners of Nazi concentration camps. Whereas in the Gulag system if a prisoner managed to somehow survive his or hersentence, he or she would be released at the end of it. Between 1934 and 1953, for example, between 150, 000 and 500, 000 people were released each year. Someprisoners were even eligible to earn early release, if they worked very hardand exceed their quotas. Some were released because they were let into the RedArmy, or because they were invalids or women with small children, or becausethey had been promoted from captive to guard. As a result, the total number ofprisoners in the camps generally hovered around two million, but the totalnumber of Soviet citizens who had some experience of the camps, as political orcriminal prisoners, was far higher. However, oncereleased, ex-prisoners often faced many difficulties.

Some were sent intoexile, or banned from returning to their homes in the cities. It was very hardto find a work. Family members often had died, or were afraid to be associatedwith a former Gulag inmate. If former prisoners were allowed back to theirhomes, they faced month of difficult travel with little or no money and nomeans of surviving the trip.

Some opted to stay, or were stranded, in the townsclose to where they had been imprisoned.” For thoseleft behind after the arrest there is the long tail end of a wrecked anddevastated life.” (Solzhenitsyn, 5). When married men were sentenced to alabour camp the wives and children they left behind were victimized as well. Friends and neighbors might turn against them, for fear of associating with “ wivesof enemies of people.” Frequently, women lost their jobs, their apartments, andhad to sell their possessions and live on occasional work or the kindness ofrelatives.

Most women did not know which prison camps their husbands were sentto, and since mail between prisoners and outsiders were 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 workedhard and earned the privilege of a visit with a wife or mother, he would bewatched over by guards. If both parentswere sent to the prison camps, children were either adopted by family membersand raised in other cities or sent to orphanages for children, where, like thewives of prisoners, they were treated badly by the other children. The teacherswere 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 toorphanages when their parents were arrested. Children sometimes went to theprison camp with their parents, where they lived in special barracks forjuveniles. Children born in the prison camps stayed with their mothers untilthe age of two, and then were transferred to orphanages. Perhaps themost important factor in a person’s survival in labour camps was where thatperson worked. This was determined by two factors: what type of sentence theprisoner had been given and by camp administration. Endless variety of jobswere present in labour camps.

Certain jobs would lead to definite death. Outdoorjobs which exposed the prisoners to harsh elements were the hardest ones. Woodcutting or among prisoners referred as “ green execution” was the main but themost short lasted outdoor job.

Prisoners would usually die of exhaustion in ashort period. Mining and manual construction also usually ended up with death. However, therewere ones who were given better jobs and had the power to dominate the others. These individuals were called trusties. Trusties would usually worked in thecafeteria, the bathhouse, or the barber shop.

They controlled who got food, whogot rest, and who would do the lethal work that meant certain death. They wouldget their jobs through bribes or other connections with the guards. Norm was thecontrol system of the production at each camp, a quota of work expected from aprisoner each day. Norms were usually set at very high. The amount of food aprisoner received was based on the norms they fulfilled. Food played a criticalrole on survival of prisoners.

Food was the only thought in prisoners minds. The drive to get food both controlled the prisoners and encouraged them to workhard. The prisoners were fed with the amount of work they had accomplished. Ifa prisoner fulfilled over 125% of their quota, they were fed from the thirdcauldron which consisted the most ingredients and had the most amount of food. The second cauldron was for those who fulfilled over 100%-125% of their quota. Finally, third cauldron was for the ones failed to fulfill their quotas whichlacked ingredients and had the less amount of food.

It was nearly impossible tofulfill the quota, let alone over-fulfill it. Many prisoners felt that if aprisoner worked enough for third cauldron, it was doomed to death due toexhaustion. Sickness andinjuries were common at the labour camps because of the horrible conditions.

Hospitals were the safety place for prisoners to escape from the brutal life incamp.  During their stays in hospitals, the prisoners were excused from work however, it was not easy to admitted tohospitals. Doctors were allowed to admit limited amount of people, even thoughthe actual need was higher. The problem of the system was that criminals wouldtake the limited space in hospitals by bribe and threats. The conditionswere so horrible that some prisoners would go to great lengths in order toavoid working.

The prisoners would intentionally hurt themselves. One prisonerrecalls a man who, “ cut his hand open with an axe in order to get into thehospital to relax for at least a couple of days.” They would cut or freezetheir extremities, burn their skins with chemicals, drink kerosene or soap tocause stomach ailments and many more horrible actions just to rest for fewdays. Itis estimated that one out of every six Soviet citizens was persecuted in theStalin era. Countless more were caught up in the web of fear and suspicion thatpermeated 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 handof the Georgian-born leader was necessary in such a backwards andunderdeveloped country. Although the USSR did improve in some areas, it isimpossible to ignore the enormous price paid by the Soviet people who weretreated as if they were an expendable commodity in the name of communism.