

Prisoners faced
numerous severe
conditions in the
gulag



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Gulag conditions varied significantly across the time period and place, and these conditions continued to change. However, to one degree or another, the majority of prisoners faced numerous severe conditions.

Housing:

Prisoners lived in barracks, which were large, rectangular buildings filled with rows of double bunks. The living conditions for prisoners were brutal as the barracks were not properly built. They were poorly lit, heated, and insulated, which made it hard when temperatures dropped drastically to below freezing. It also was overcrowded and wreaked due to the ill and dying. First, fear of many diseases such as typhus forced camp commanders to order baths and delousing, although these were infrequent and ineffective which meant many of the prisoners had poor hygiene. Second, overnight, prisoners' waste was often deposited in overflowing buckets which produced many odors.

Food:

Gulag prisoners faced insufficient food rations every day. Food supplies were inadequate, and consisted of mainly soup and bread. According to how much work a prisoner did would depend on how much food a prison would receive for each meal. If they were able to complete their quota they would receive a full ration, although this barely provided enough food for the prisoners to sustain difficult labor or even for survival, whereas, if a prisoner did not fulfill his daily work quota, he received even less food. However, if a prisoner consistently failed to fulfill their work quotas, they would slowly starve to death. This incentive scheme, that included both coercive and motivational elements and was applied universally in all camps, was introduced by Naftaly

Frenkel. While it was effective in compelling many prisoners to make serious work efforts, it also had the adverse effect, which increased the exhaustion and sometimes caused the death of many inmates who were unable to fulfill high production quota.

Varlam Shalamov was a Russian author who was imprisoned in the Gulag for more than twenty years. He wrote the celebrated *Kolyma Tales*, a series of short stories based on his life in the Gulag. In one section he said, “ Each time they brought in the soup... it made us all want to cry. We were ready to cry for fear that the soup would be thin. And when a miracle occurred and the soup was thick we couldn’t believe it and ate it as slowly as possible. But even with thick soup in a warm stomach there remained a sucking pain; we’d been hungry for too long. All human emotions—love, friendship, envy, concern for one’s fellow man, compassion, longing for fame, honesty—had left us with the flesh that had melted from our bodies...” (V. T. Shalamov, “ Dry Rations,” from *Kolyma Tales*.) This passage expresses the feelings that must have run through many prisoners in the Gulag. This statement is important because as soon as this is read, it articulates to the reader just one out of many treacherous conditions these prisoners went through each day.

Working Conditions:

Typical Gulag labour was exhausting physical work for every prisoner. This was because camp commanders were under pressure to produce, which meant they saw their prisoners as a factor of production, and drove them to fulfill quotas. In general, the central administrative bodies showed an evident interest in maintaining the labor force of prisoners in a condition which

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allowed the fulfillment of construction and production plans that were handed down from above.

Officially established work hours were in most periods longer and days off were fewer than for civilian workers. Often, official work time regulations were extended by local camp administrators. Gulag prisoners would work up to fourteen hours per day, toiling sometimes in the most extreme climates. Within these camps there were many different types of jobs, and prisoners frequently changed their jobs. Many prisoners in the Gulags worked in mining or forestry, although there were many other kinds of work as well, which included constructing apartment buildings, railways and roads. Although, in most periods, the degree of machinery was significantly lower than in the civilian industry and the supply was short, if existent. Also, tools to perform these tasks were quite limited or weren't accessible which meant prisoners faced a greater burden by having to do such tasks by hand. This made it difficult for prisoners to perform the task and do it properly. Although, some examples of the tools they used were using handsaws and axes to fell trees or using primitive pickaxes to dig at frozen ground.

Besides a wide array of punishments for prisoners refusing to work, who didn't fulfill their quota or even those who were too enfeebled to meet production quota, they instituted a number of positive incentives intended to boost productivity. These included monetary bonuses, since the early 1930s, and wage payments, from 1950 onwards. Plus, there were cuts of sentences on an individual basis, general early release schemes for norm fulfillment and over fulfillment, until 1939. Also, in selected camps from 1946 onwards, preferential treatment and privileges for the most productive workers.

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Another benefit was, some prisoners, in the 1930s and ethnic groups in the 1940s, organized to secure some of the preferred jobs as trustees. This meant these jobs were earned as a privilege and those who received these benefits were becoming more trustworthy and reliable. These jobs consisted of inside jobs such as cooking, sewing or repairing machinery.

Immediately after the German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941 the conditions in camps worsened drastically, quotas were increased, rations cut, and medical supplies came close to none, all of which led to a sharp increase in mortality. The situation slowly improved in the final period and after the end of the war. Gulag prisoners all over knew about Kolyma and dreaded a move to what they called ' the Planet', for its remoteness, or ' gateway to hell', for its conditions. Winter jobs clearing trees for new roads often left only a few survivors and thousands of frozen bodies - thus, the Kolyma Hwy linking Magadan with Yakutsk is called the ' road of bones'.

Torture:

Life in a Gulag was a brutal and violent zone, every man was for themselves. If they did survive hunger, disease, the harsh elements, heavy labor, and their fellow prisoners, they might succumb to arbitrary violence at the hands of camp guards. Prisons were designed to prevent or monitor all inmate conversations. Guards in secret observed prisoners through peepholes, and even hired so-called " stool pigeons" from amongst the prison population to work as police " agents" by informing on their peers. These informers were fellow prisoners who always looked for some misstep to report to Gulag authorities. This often caused violence among prisoners as no one could be trusted. Wardens aimed at placing at least one informant in every crowded

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cell. Despite the present surveillance, convicts were sometimes still able to communicate in secret with one another, by tapping in code through the walls of their cells, or secretly passing on rumors or precious supplies during their daily walks to their “ washroom” and exercise-courtyard. There were also punishment cell which provided even worse conditions as there were no blankets and a sub-starvation penalty food ration. Nevertheless, life in Soviet jails was typically so difficult that virtually all inmates preferred confinement in Gulag labor camps, no matter how difficult the conditions were.

Trickery was also done by the guards, for example, guards would let workers leave their tools at the job sit hidden. This was so they wouldn't have to carry tools to the living quarters and then back the very next day after a fourteen hour shift. Even though these were allowed, it was not out of humane intentions; it simply gave the guards an excuse to shoot the worker who was sent the next morning for the tools which were, of course, set beyond the logging territory as attempting to commit an escape. When investigating the shooting of these “ escaping” prisoners, the position of the dead body was usually the only factor considered. That the body would lay with its feet to the camp and its head away from it was considered sufficient evidence of an escape attempt. As a result, it was common practice for the guards to simply adjust the position of the body after killing a “ runner” to ensure that the killing would be declared justified. There is some evidence that money rewards were given to any guards who shot an escaping prisoner, but the official rules (as seen below) state guards were fined for escaping prisoners.

Quality of Life:

Prisoners competed for access to all of life's necessities. Jacques Rossi, spent nineteen years in a Gulag after he was arrested in the Stalin purges of 1936-37. Based on his memories he became an artist and a writer. He once said, "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." (Memoir excerpt by Jacques Rossi)

Survival:

Surviving the Gulag required prisoners to compete daily with fellow inmates for food, living space, and medical care. Some prisoners retreated into religious or intellectual contemplation to maintain some semblance of sanity.

Andrei Vyshinsky, was a procurator of the Soviet Union, who wrote a memorandum to NKVD chief Nikolai Yezhov in 1938 which stated, "Among the prisoners there are some so ragged and lice ridden that they pose a sanitary danger to the rest. These prisoners have deteriorated to the point of losing any resemblance to human beings. Lacking food . . . they collect orts [refuse] and, according to some prisoners, eat rats and dogs" This statement, reveals the true pain and suffering many inmates went through, and what they would do in order to make it one more day.

The Gulag drove its inmates to desperation. A great many were forced to do things they would never have contemplated in regular surroundings. Some would literally blow a hand off hoping to become injured and thereby avoid

hard labor. Others gave up and tried to take their own lives. Many only mentally survived by a retreat into religious or intellectual contemplation, but nothing ultimately could save the prisoners called “goners” who reduced to digging through trash heaps or eating the rations of a dying friend in their desperation to survive.

Since, the camps were not designed to exterminate prisoners, many of the prisoners found ways to survive. Their methods varied from, cheating to meet quotas, which was a practice called tufta, which the authorities sometimes chose to overlook. Others took advantage of the medical systems established in the camps, going on sick leave to miss the most terrible working days. Some painters, musicians, and craftsmen were able to employ their skills for the camps’ benefit. Others collaborated with authorities, and denounced their fellow prisoners. Some women offered sexual favors to the camp authorities in order to survive. Finally, some prisoners cooperated through friendships or national groups for support; by means of certain strategies, often of a religious nature, they kept their morale high enough to survive.

Medical Care:

Health care was insufficient or inadequate in the Gulags. The nature of the medical treatment of prisoners in the Gulag has emerged from accounts published by survivors. Over a period of seventy years some doctors entrusted with the medical care of prisoners failed to discharge their ethical duties, contributing to the prisoners’ neglect and suffering. The medical profession must carefully examine what occurred and properly assign responsibility for ethical as well as unethical medical acts. Understanding the <https://assignbuster.com/prisoners-faced-numerous-severe-conditions-in-the-gulag/>

history of these ominous events will alert doctors worldwide to the importance of medical autonomy in the support of imprisoned patients.

Since, it was a common practice to house both ill and healthy inmates together; prisoners risked contracting a number of life threatening diseases, such as tuberculosis, HIV, and hepatitis. Also those who mined coal or copper by hand often suffered painful and fatal lung diseases from inhalation of ore dust. There is little opportunity for a prisoner to receive qualified medical assistance or even the documents necessary for them to register as disabled and be granted a pension.