

Prisoners of Torment: Inmate Life in Soviet Forced Labor Camps

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A poster pervasively displayed in the U.S.S.R. declared "The Soviet Government does not punish; it reforms."¹ The meaning of reform in the Soviet Republics was vastly different from the equivalent concept in other nations. Beginning with Vladimir I. Lenin, the Bolsheviks advocated labor as a way to effectively rehabilitate or reform criminals. After working for the good of the state, dissidents should have learned the value of communism and the benefits of living in communist society.

Unfortunately, this ideal went unfulfilled. Joseph Stalin firmly established a military regime in which he was venerated and citizens lived in terror. He presided over his empire through the secret police who were the representatives of the legal system in this era. Between 1934 and 1946, the secret police were officially called the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs or the NKVD. The camps to which the NKVD's prisoners were sentenced are commonly referred to as Gulags, which is an inaccurate term since GULag is the acronym of the Russian equivalent for Main Administration of Camps.² Statistics concerning the GULag system were falsified by Stalin's regime so it will never be known for sure how many people were convicts in these establishments, although it may be close to 8.8 million.³ These vile institutions located in

remote areas of the country (refer to the map in the Appendix) were places where already shell-shocked inmates were further brutalized in the name of justice.

Justice in the Soviet Union was synonymous with internal security. In the communist system there was no place for the ideas or opinions of other political groups. Totalitarianism was employed by Stalin and his regime to ensure that the citizens would be loyal to the government. Purges were also undertaken inside the system to eliminate the great leader's enemies within the governmental structure.⁴ The purged officials, along with the multitudes of



Michael Jakobson. *Origins of the Gulag: The Soviet Prison Camp 1917-1937* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 1993), 130.

convicted citizens, were sent to forced labor camps.

The convicts sent to these prison camps were the instruments of the economic production of the complexes. Each of the labor camps was assigned to produce a certain quantity of a raw material, based on its location, for the Soviet government. The most famous complex, Kolyma, was established for mining gold in the taiga region (in the Arctic). Naum Jasny best sums up the cycles of arrests that fed these institutions: "In short, the stream of those in need of 'correction' does not dry up."⁵ It is those who were corrected that experienced the dark side of the government. The prisons and forced labor camps of the Soviet Union were

purposefully designed and facilitated by the administration in such a way that inmates were traumatized.

The degradation of the accused began with interrogation. Before being questioned, the person under arrest was believed to be guilty. A prisoner undergoing an uneventful interrogation would be deprived of sleep for the duration, lied to about the facts of their case, and threatened with harm to their loved ones upon failure to confess. Other methods of persuasion common in the accounts of this experience were being made to stand for days at a time, sitting in one position on a chair for prolonged periods, beatings, and starvation. All of these things were ordered by thoughtful interrogators, who committed further atrocities when prisoners still failed to confess. One such method was to lock the prisoner in an airtight cell and bake him until blood came out of his pores, after which he was removed on a stretcher to sign his confession.⁶ There is also documentation of the use of electric shock torture to cause the accused to admit to his sins.⁷ Additional horrific means of torture were reported as well. The inescapable question of whether or not those in positions of power condoned these actions can be answered with a resounding YES! "As for torture, Stalin personally gave orders for it to be used, just as the deadly routine in the camps was organized on his direct orders."⁸

Life in the camps themselves was miserable for the convicts, but it is obvious that interrogators set out to traumatize the inmates before they reached their destinations. The prison experience neatly complimented the month-long interrogation ordeal. Cells varied in size, but were invariably overcrowded. This was true of every cell, just as it was common for prisoners to receive one bathroom visit and two bread rations daily. Since the small windows in cells were barred, very little light was available. As a result, the guards responded by leaving a light bulb burning twenty-four hours a day. Their reasoning was partly due to a desire to torture the prisoners, and partly so they could look through a peep-hole and see the inmates at any time. Natural light and fresh air were provided by a daily walk outdoors that lasted between fifteen and forty-five minutes.⁹ Though the prisons described above were miserable and

terrifying residences, some of them were a worse torment than others. In the Lefortovo prison, Avraham Shifrin occupied a cell in which green mold covered the walls and five inches of mud and water stood on the floor.¹⁰ Prison conditions such as these were devastating to the convicts, who were kept there awaiting the end of their interrogations, sentences, transportation to a camp, or death.

Prisoners transported to forced labor camps were severely traumatized by the system, and the physical conditions of the camps themselves were deplorable. Victor Kravchenko best describes the barracks, or living quarters for the inmates.

The thick odor of stale sweat and squashed bedbugs made me slightly nauseous. Very little daylight filtered in through the dirty barred windows. Several small electric bulbs hung from the ceiling, but they were not burning now. The barracks were so cold our breath was visible¹¹

One cause of the stench was the lack of bathing opportunities for prisoners. This was less of a concern for them though, than the reality that their barracks either had a wood stove or were unheated. Inmates slept packed together like sardines on the top bunk to avoid freezing, since even barracks with stoves were unbearably cold. There were no blankets, so convicts slept in their clothes. In many camps the clothes were state-issued. These included underwear, a long-sleeved waistcoat, summer blouse, and wadded trousers for the wintertime. There were no sturdy leather shoes and the flimsy cloth footwear available to prisoners deteriorated quickly. The state issue outfit became rags in short order as well.¹²

Inmates were denied their basic needs further in the distribution of sustenance. Sources agree that a three hundred gram diet, as opposed to the normal seven hundred grams is starvation rations. Prisoners who failed to meet the incredibly demanding work quota were punished with this quantity of food. Those sent to punishment cells also received this amount. Naturally, the meager rations created a desperation for food within the ranks of prisoners. Starvation drove the convict to obtain additional food at any cost. One way to obtain rations was to cause a non-fatal injury by self-

mutilation. Dimitri Panin's punishment cell mate employed such a method. "What he now did, however spectacular it may seem to a newcomer, was nothing out of the ordinary to the hardened prison guards who usually treated it as a joke. Lom took a rusty nail and drove it through his scrotum into the edge of the bunk, thus impaling himself there."¹³ Injuries entitled the prisoner to additional rations, so an infection or illness preventing work would not develop. Methods such as Lom's worked for this purpose. Such self-mutilations, horrific as they may be, ensured the survival of starving inmates. If this avenue was not an option, the convicts would steal food from one another.

Harsh working conditions also prompted desperate and violent measures. It is impossible to understand why a prisoner would cut off his own finger or hand to avoid working unless the conditions of the situation were known.¹⁴ Whether the job was motivating other prisoners,¹⁵ or slaving away mining gold, there were quotas.

Meeting the quota (determined by the overseer in a particular camp), or failing to meet it, was literally a life or death situation. As previously mentioned, failure meant the receipt of starvation rations. Inability to achieve the acceptable level of production warranted abuse from fellow convicts and the guards in charge of the team. Other prisoners randomly assaulted inmates who failed in this capacity.¹⁶

Assault and abuse from guards was particularly bad. Inmates could be brutalized by guards for almost any reason, and beatings for collapsing during the work day seemed like a good idea to them. For example, a person who fell under the weight of a log in a logging camp would be beaten.¹⁷ In other camps the convicts were beaten while they

worked.¹⁸ Guards found that the expression of opinions from prisoners was also a good excuse for brutalizing him.¹⁹ Other humiliations by guards were enacted during inspections by doctors and daily searches. The prisoners were certainly naked, especially in the dead of winter. Punishments, unlike the humiliation of searches, were distributed for behavior and work performance. These could range from the previously discussed punishment cells and beatings to things like forcing the convict to stand naked on a tree stump while he was eaten alive by the mosquitoes.²⁰ In one instance, a prisoner insulted a guard. The outcome of his offhand comment was that the guard had him tied naked to a tree infested with poisonous gnats. As the story goes, the bloated corpse was removed from the tree several hours after the prisoner's screams ceased.²¹ The guards would also shoot inmates for events that could be construed as escape attempts. Those in charge of the prisoners were given bonuses for catching or eliminating escapees in some camps. In order to earn their bonuses or leave, some of the guards would provoke incidents. Avraham "Shifrin" witnessed a guard calling a prisoner to come to him—and when the prisoner crossed the flag line he shot him down.²² This was not unusual. Obviously, the death and traumatization of the prisoner was not of concern to these people. In most cases, corpses were not buried during the winter, but in the spring by other convicts.²³

Inmates did not have a high regard for each other's existences. The social situation in the camps' centers were based on two main groups—the common criminals and everyone else. In most cases the criminal faction was comprised of the murderers, rapists, thieves, and other offenders worked with the camp



Michael Jakobson. Origins of the Gulag: The Soviet Prison Camp 1917-1934. (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 1993), 129.

administrators. Criminals ran the show in the barracks and whatever they wanted they got. Political prisoners were considered by this faction to be enemies. As a result, “. . . starving and terrorised [sic] politicals found their inadequate rations, their meagre[sic] clothing, and their lives constantly at the mercy of capricious and consciousnessless thugs to whom murder meant little, theft less.”²⁴ Barbara Armonas, a former political prisoner, reflected on how she had once been beaten up by a criminal. A friend wisely advised her not to make her life impossible by getting the convict in trouble.²⁵ Unfortunately, these brutalizations and thefts were commonplace in forced labor institutions. Even through the tiny window this account provides, it is difficult to conceive of how these human beings could carry out the extreme violence exemplified by Victor Kravchenko’s impressions of the prisoners.

These were not men but the obscene shadows of men, repulsive-looking caricatures of human beings in rags and tatters. They were all bearded, with wasted bodies, dragging their feet through the mud in the last stages of deadly fatigue.²⁶

Some of the inmates that lived in the prison camps ultimately survived their tortures long enough to be released. After years of starvation and abuse, these men and women experienced culture shock upon being released into mainstream Russian society. For the newly released prisoner, small things that most people took for granted became difficult to accept. It

seemed strange to them that they did not have lice and could wear knit underwear. Another consequence of camp life was insatiable gluttony. Consistent starvation caused newly released prisoners to react to food the same in freedom as they had as slaves of the state. In other words, they ate whatever they could get their hands on.²⁷ Adjusting to the world outside camp was difficult, but living in it was a test of endurance and strength. It was extremely difficult for a released prisoner to get a job. This was the result of the intense fear of employers, who could have been arrested for consorting with an enemy of the state. To complicate things, and further torture prisoners, many of those released were not allowed to return home, or were released into exile.²⁸

Survivors of this experience were the prisoners traumatized and demoralized by the Soviet government’s forced labor experience. The world will never know how many of these people with their memories still reside in Russia amongst their tormentors. There has been no equivalent of the Nuremberg Trials to punish perpetrators for these atrocities. What the world has been left by their victims, are a handful of testimonies; memoirs such as those written by Dimitri Panin and Barbara Armonas, as well as testimonies such as Avraham Shifrin’s, illustrate for us the torment of life in prison camps. The people sentenced to these camps, the dead as well as the survivors, are the unacknowledged symbols of the system of brutality run by the Soviet regime.

End Notes

¹ Michael Jakobson, *Origins of the Gulag: The Soviet Prison Camp System 1917-1934* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 1993), 113.

² *Ibid.*, xiii.

³ Steven Rosefielde, "Incriminating Evidence: Excess Deaths and Forced Labour Under Stalin: A Final Reply to Critics," *Soviet Studies* 39.2 (1987): 303.

⁴ Merle Fainsod, *How Russia is Ruled* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 354-356.

⁵ Naum Jasny, "Labor and Output in Soviet Concentration Camps," *The Journal of Political Economy* LIX.5 (Oct. 1951): 419.

⁶ Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago vol. I*, trans. by Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1973), 98.

⁷ Anton Antonov-Ovseyenko, *The Time of Stalin: Portrait of Tyranny* (Cincinnati: Harper and Row, 1983), 158.

⁸ *Ibid.*

- ⁹ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 480.
- ¹⁰ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws, *U.S.S.R. Labor Camps*, 93rd Congress, 1st session, 1 February 1985, 7-8.
- ¹¹ Victor Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom: The Personal and Political Life of a Soviet Official* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), 338.
- ¹² David J. Dallin and Boris I. Nicolaevsky, *Forced Labor in Soviet Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), 11.
- ¹³ Dimitri Panin, *The Notebooks of Sologdin*, trans. John Moore (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976), 156.
- ¹⁴ Congress, *U.S.S.R. Labor Camps*, 22.
- ¹⁵ Robert Conquest, *Kolyma: The Arctic Death Camps* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 54.
- ¹⁶ Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, trans. by John Glad (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980), 58.
- ¹⁷ Albert Konrad Herling, *The Soviet Slave Empire* (New York: Wilfred Funk, Inc. 1951), 29-30.
- ¹⁸ Conquest, *Kolyma*, 127.
- ¹⁹ Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, 148-149.
- ²⁰ Panin, *The Notebooks of Sologdin*, 50.
- ²¹ Congress, *U.S.S.R. Forced Labor Camps*, 20.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Conquest, *Kolyma*, 54-55.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 79.
- ²⁵ Barbara Armonas, *Leave Your Tears in Moscow*, as told to A.L. Nasvytis (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1961), 128.
- ²⁶ Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom*, 161.
- ²⁷ Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, 197-198, 208, 220.
- ²⁸ Dallin and Nicolaevsky, *Forced Labor in Soviet Russia*, 21-22, 98.

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