

Work in the Gulag's

GULAG was the acronym for the Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps.

Gulag prisoners could work up to 14 hours per day. Typical Gulag labor was exhausting physical work. Toiling sometimes in the most extreme climates, prisoners might spend their days felling trees with handsaws and axes or digging at frozen ground with primitive pickaxes. Others mined coal or copper by hand, often suffering painful and fatal lung diseases from inhalation of ore dust. Prisoners were barely fed enough to sustain such difficult labor.

“After eleven and a half hours of labor (not including time needed to assign a task, receive tools and give them back), Professor Kozyrev commented: ‘How far Man is still from perfection. Just to think how many people and what minds are needed to do a job of one horse.’”

“In this case the four incompetent workers were: Epifanov, who was until the Great Purge of 1937 a professor of Marxism-Leninism in the Academy of Mining in Moscow; Colonel Ivanov, a chief of a major Red Army division; Professor Kozyrev, director of research at the Pulkovo Space Observatory in Leningrad; and myself, a secret agent of the Comintern.”

In the eyes of the authorities, the prisoners had almost no value. Those who died of hunger, cold, and hard labor were replaced by new prisoners because the system could always find more people to replenish the labor camps.

Built between 1931 and 1933, the White Sea-Baltic Sea Canal was the first massive construction project of the Gulag. Over 100,000 prisoners dug a 141-mile canal with few tools other than simple pickaxes, shovels, and makeshift wheelbarrows in just 20 months. Initially viewed as a great success and celebrated in a volume published both in the Soviet Union and the United States, the canal turned out to be too narrow and too shallow to carry most sea vessels. Many prisoners died during construction.

Kolyma was a name that struck fear into the Gulag prisoner. Reputedly the coldest inhabited place on the planet, prisoners spoke of Kolyma as a place where 12 months were winter and all the rest summer. Kolyma was so remote that it could not be reached by an overland route. Prisoners traveled by train across the length of the Soviet Union only to spend up to several months on the Pacific coast waiting for the few months each year when the waterways were free of ice. Then, they boarded ships for their trip past Japan and up the Kolyma River to their gold-mining destination. Surviving Kolyma was more difficult than any other Gulag locale.

Women in the Gulag

Women suffered greatly in the Gulag. Male camp employees, guards, and even other male prisoners sometimes raped and abused women. Some female prisoners took on “camp husbands” for protection and companionship. Some were pregnant on arrival or became pregnant while in the Gulag. Occasionally, Gulag authorities released pregnant women and women with young children in special amnesties.

More frequently, mothers had little respite from forced labor to give birth, and Gulag officials took babies from their mothers and placed them in special orphanages. Often these mothers were never able to find their children after leaving the camps.

“The arrival at the corrective labor camp turned out to be the culmination of the humiliation. First we were made to strip naked and were shoved into some roofless enclosures made out of planks. Above our heads the stars twinkled; below our bare feet lay frozen excrement. An enclosure measured 3 square feet. Each held three to four naked, shivering, and frightened men and women. Then these ‘kennel cages’ were opened one after the other and the naked people were led across a courtyard‘the camp version of a foyer‘into a special building where our documents were ‘formulated’ and our things were ‘searched.’

The goal of the search was to leave us with rags, and to take the good things ‘sweaters, mittens, socks, scarves, vests, and good shoes’for themselves. Ten thieves shamelessly fleeced these destitute and barely alive people.

‘Corrective’ is something that should make you better, and ‘labor’ ennobles you. But ‘camp’? A camp wasn’t a jail. So then what on earth was going on? ”

“The night search, the most degrading procedure, was frequently repeated. “Get up! Get undressed! Hands up! Out into the hall! Line up against the wall.” Naked we were especially frightened. “Among the blind, the one-eyed is king,” and next to them I was still a hero—for the time being. Our hair was undone. What were they looking for? What more could they take away from us? There was something, however: they pulled out all the ties that had been holding up the nuns' skirts and our underwear.”

Living in the Gulag

During their non-working hours, prisoners typically lived in a camp zone surrounded by a fence or barbed wire, overlooked by armed guards in watch towers. The zone contained a number of overcrowded, stinking, poorly-heated barracks. Life in a camp zone was brutal and violent. Prisoners competed for access to all of life's necessities, and violence among the prisoners was commonplace. If they survived hunger, disease, the harsh elements, heavy labor, and their fellow prisoners, they might succumb to arbitrary violence at the hands of camp guards. All the while, prisoners were watched by informers—fellow prisoners always looking for some misstep to report to Gulag authorities.

Jacques Rossi, the artist who made the following drawings in the 1960s based on his memories, spent 19 years in the Gulag after he was arrested in the Stalin purges of 1936-37. He later published several writings, including his most important, *The Gulag Handbook*, in 1987 (published in English in 1989).

“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.”

“A lesson to learn: How to distribute your body on the planks trying to avoid excessive suffering? A position on your back means all your bones are in direct painful contact with wood... To sleep on your belly is equally uncomfortable. Until you sleep on your right side with your left knee pushed against your chest, you counterbalance the weight of your left hip and relieve the right side of your rib cage. You leave your right arm along the body, and put your right... cheekbone against the back of your left hand.”

"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...

Goners were extremely emaciated prisoners on the verge of death from starvation. Their presence constantly reminded prisoners of their potential fate if they failed to fulfill work quotas and thus were deprived of their full food rations.

What were their Crimes?

The Gulag held many types of prisoners. It served as the Soviet Union's main penal system: robbers, rapists, murderers, and thieves spent their sentences not in prisons but in the Gulag.

In addition, the Gulag held political prisoners, a group including not only real opponents of the Soviet regime but also many innocents caught up in the paranoid clutches of the Soviet secret police. Most prisoners were the victims of arbitrary and severe legal campaigns under which petty theft, lateness, or unexcused absences from work were punished by many years in these concentration camps.

Have you ever been late to work?

In the Stalin era, a person who arrived late to work three times could be sent to the Gulag for three years.

Have you ever told a joke about a government official?

In the Stalin era, many were sent to the Gulag for up to 25 years for telling an innocent joke about a Communist Party official.

If your family was starving, would you take a few potatoes left in a field after harvest?

In the Stalin era, a person could be sent to the Gulag for up to ten years for such petty theft.

Trying to feed her four hungry children during the massive 1932-1933 famine, the peasant mother allegedly stole three pounds of rye from her former field—confiscated by the state as part of collectivization. Soviet authorities sentenced her to ten years in the Gulag. When her sentence expired in 1943, it was arbitrarily extended until the end of the war in 1945. After her release, she was required to live in exile near her Gulag camp north of the Arctic Circle, and she was not able to return home until 1956, after the death of Stalin. Maria Tchebotareva never found her children after her release.

Seeking the appearance of democracy, the Soviet Union held elections, but only one Communist Party candidate appeared on the ballot for each office. Fear of punishment ensured that nearly all Soviet citizens “voted” by taking their ballot and ceremoniously placing it into a ballot box.

In 1949, Ivan Burylov, a beekeeper, protested this absurd ritual by writing the word "Comedy" on his "secret" ballot. Soviet authorities linked the ballot to Burylov and sentenced him to eight years in camps for this "crime."

The secret voting ballot of Ivan Burylov showing where he had written the word comedy. Courtesy of The State Perm Region Archive of Political Repression.

The "secret" voting ballot of Ivan Burylov showing where he had written the word "Comedy."

Arrest of a so-called rich peasant in 1930. This peasant, Mikhailov, had attempted escape from a state-owned farm where he had been sent into exile. Courtesy of the Central Russian State Film and Video Archive.

Arrest of a so-called "rich peasant" in 1930. This peasant, Mikhailov, had attempted escape from a state-owned farm where he had been sent into exile.

Trial of so-called "rich peasants" in 1929. Stalin's drive to seize all private land in the 1920s and 1930s met significant resistance. Some victims were shot, some were arrested and sent into the Gulag camps, and many were exiled to remote parts of the country.