

HEIN ♦ Kolyma: A Land Laced with Death

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)



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“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.”

Jacques Rossi, Gulag prisoner for 19 years.



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To serve out his life sentence, Hein Dyck was sent to Kolyma, in Russia's far east. Kolyma had the reputation of being the coldest place on the planet. People spoke of 12 months of winter there. Temperatures regularly dipped below -50 F. It was the remotest location in the entire Soviet Gulag, and the hardest place to survive.

Gold had been discovered in the Kolyma River Valley in 1928-29, and Stalin wanted to exploit it to fund economic growth during the First Five-Year Plan. In 1931, the State founded Dalstroy, a company to oversee mining and production in the region, using prisoner labor. In February, 1932, the Head of Dalstroy, Eduard Berzin, arrived in Kolyma to begin building Gulag camps. By 1934, there were 30,000 prisoners working in those camps, mining for gold and tin, and building roads and railroads through the mountains and tundra.

To get to Kolyma, Hein and other prisoners had to endure a crowded cattle car journey thousands of miles across Russia, during which they were only given small amounts of salted herring, black bread, and water. Many died en route. When prisoners reached Vladivostok or other port cities on Russia's eastern coast, they were loaded onto "death ships" for a voyage to the port city of Magadan. Prisoners arrived in Magadan half-starved and often ill. One adult male survivor

arrived in Kolyma weighing just 83 pounds after his transport there. Then, prisoners had to march to their camps, some of which were 150 miles away.

In the first years of the Kolyma Gulag, 1932-35, Berzin allowed prisoners three "rest days" per month, and when temperatures dropped below -65 F, they were not sent outside to work. But Stalin chastised Berzin for his "lenient" treatment of prisoners in 1937, and by the time Hein got to Kolyma, prisoners no longer received days off. They had to work in the arctic tundra or open pit mines in all temperatures. Many died of overwork, starvation, and exposure, but gold output climbed.

Hein arrived in Kolyma in the fall of 1936 or spring of 1937, and was sent to one of the many prisoner camps. By then, the Kolyma Gulag was growing exponentially thanks to the Great Purge. In 1937, there were 70,000 prisoners, and by 1940, there were 140,000 dispersed among 80 camps, all administrated from Magadan, the largest city in the region. There would eventually be 130 camps in Kolyma.

Hein and the other prisoners lived in facilities surrounded by a barbed wire fence, with guard towers along the fence to prevent escape. Guards were notorious for cruelty. They were taught that their prisoners were spies, fascists, and enemies of the state, traitors who would betray their country if given a chance. Thus, they brutalized those under them, making life unbearable.

Hein was sent 6,600 miles (10,000 km) away from his home in Ukraine to the Kolyma region of Siberia.

Many prisoners were taken across Russia on the Trans-Siberian railroad to port cities like Vladivostok, then shipped to Magadan, entry port for the region, when the route was ice-free. Kolyma, a huge region six times the size of France, eventually had over 130 prison camps.



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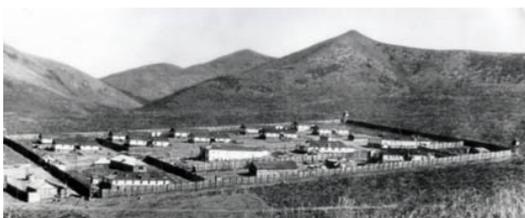
The elaborate network of prison camps throughout Kolyma was part of the Soviet Gulag. Many political prisoners served 10 and 20-year sentences in one of the Kolyma camps.



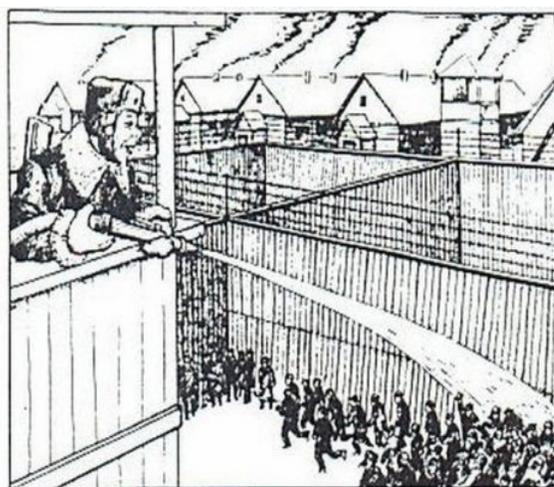
Entrance to a prisoner camp at Magadan, the entry point to Kolyma. From here, many prisoners were made to walk to remote camps in the mountains as far as 150 miles away.



Each camp looked different, but barbed wires and guard towers, twice-daily roll call, and slave labor never let the prisoners forget they were not free men and women.



Prisoners slept behind barbed wires in the camps, but left each day to walk to a work site.



Cruelty and sadism were commonplace. This drawing by former guard Danzig Baldaev, shows how new arrivals were doused with water from a fire hose as they waited outside the gates in subzero weather. After several hours, covered in ice, they were finally let in.

HEIN ♦ Guard Brutality in the Kolyma Gulag

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THE HUNT

This cannibalistic sport was especially popular with the guard details and sentries at Camp No. 031, but it flourished everywhere throughout the Gulag given the right conditions: small groups of convicts out in the woods; automatic weapons; close range someone easy to shoot.

There was a system of incentives for guards who prevented escapes. Shoot a runner - get a new stripe on your uniform, home leave, a bonus, a medal. Hatred for the prisoners [supposedly] were S.S., they were traitors and spies. Guards were perverted both by the absolute power they were given and by the weapons they so longed to use. Convicts were generally shot down either by very young soldiers or by hardened sadists and murders.

One of the convoy detail would pick a victim and begin to stalk him. The guard would wheedle, persuade, try to lure the victim over the line. Unless a smart and savvy crew boss had warned the victim ahead of time, the deception worked. The soldier would say, "Hey! You! Go get me that little log to sit on!"

"But sir, it's off limits!"

"Not a problem. You have my permission. Go!"

The prisoner steps over the line. One quick burst of fire, and he's dead. Typical. Banal.

Sometimes the guards and sentries would actually order their victims to step over the line, or just shove or chase them out, the better to shoot them. A guard was authorized to order a convict to cross the cordon. He was also authorized to mow that same man down.

- Anatoly Zhigulin, Kolyma prisoner
In *Gulag Voices*



An inmate strung up and carried back to camp.



A prisoner being given the "cold treatment" as punishment for some camp offense.



Guards setting dogs on a prisoner.



One prisoner attacks another at a worksite.



One prisoner kills another with an axe, in full view of the guards. There was constant competition for survival, expressed in fighting over clothing, bunk space, jobs, rations, and favor with the guards.



A gang of thieves saw a prisoner in two. The “thieves” were hardened criminals who aided the guards in suppressing the political prisoners in exchange for better jobs and rations.

A Brutal Place

Hein’s memory slowly returned, but it only reminded him of what he had lost: his job, his reputation, his family, and his freedom. Nobody knew where he was, so there was no hope for help. He would have to survive on his own. He had his youth and strength to his advantage, but his German ethnicity was to his detriment. The Germans were an especially disfavored people group in the Soviet Union.

Political prisoners like Hein were called “58s” in camp because they had been arrested under Article 58 of the penal code. They were thrown together with criminals (called “thieves,” although many had committed violent crimes). The 58s were beneath the thieves in camp hierarchy. Guards relied on the criminal element to help control the politicals, which they did through terror and violence. They were awarded better jobs and extra rations for suppressing the 58s.

During their few non-working hours, prisoners were crammed into over-crowded barracks where they competed for bunk space, privy time, and other necessities. It was a life and death struggle just for bread and warm clothing. Inmates slept on slat boards without pillows or bedding in wet work clothes that would be stolen otherwise. Violence often broke out among the prisoners. Hein bore a scar on his forehead where a man attacked him and tried to kill him. People developed a certain hardness of spirit, one that could cope with daily injustice, grueling work, tormenting hunger, and ubiquitous death. They made moral compromises to stay alive.

It was difficult to find companionship, even among other 58s. Prisoners were constantly watched, and couldn't speak freely even to each other. The NKVD had secret informers in the barracks and brigades, prisoners who would turn in others for advancement or privilege. The reward, better food or a job out of the cold, could save the informer’s life, albeit at the expense of somebody else’s.

Art by former prison guard Danzig Baldaev,
Drawings from the Gulag, 2010.

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Prisoners assembled for roll call at the end of the day listened for the names of those who would be executed.



Another Danzig Baldaev drawing in which he shows mass executions in the camps.



Relics from the tortures in the Butugychag Camp in Kolyma.



Eduard Berzin was the founder of the Kolyma camps. He drove from camp to camp in Lenin's former Rolls Royce. Berzin became a victim of the Purges himself. He was arrested in 1937 and executed in 1938.

The Purges in Kolyma

The Purges continued everywhere in the Soviet Union, including in the remote Kolyma camps. Head of Dalstroy, Eduard Berzin, was arrested late in 1937 and shot. The next commander showed no leniency. The NKVD established execution quotas that needed to be fulfilled to purge the regime's "dangerous enemies," and nearly 6,000 people were executed in Kolyma in 1937-38. In the Zolotisty Goldfields, guards summoned a work brigade from the mine and shot them all in full daylight. At another camp, 30-50 men were killed each day, their corpses dragged off on tractor sledges. The charges were read aloud and were typical for the era: counterrevolutionary activities, failure to fulfill the quota, and espionage.

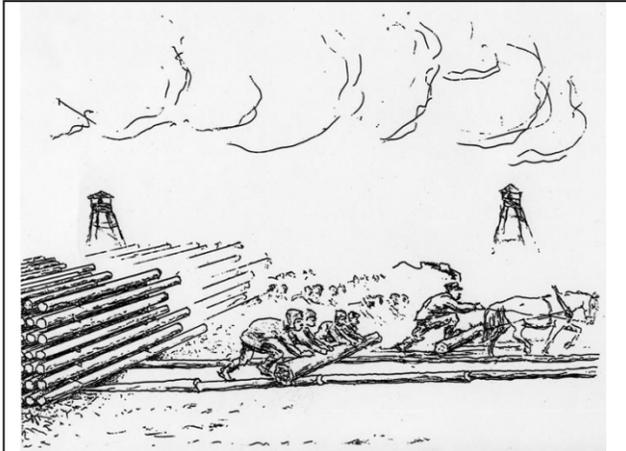
Varlam Shalamov, survivor of the camps and author of *Kolyma Tales*, wrote, "For many months there day and night, at the morning and the evening checks, innumerable execution orders were read out. In a temperature of fifty below zero the musicians from among the non-political offenders played a flourish before and after each order was read. The smoking gasoline torches ripped apart the darkness... The thin sheet on which the order was written was covered with hoarfrost, and some chief or other who was reading the order would brush the snowflakes from it with his sleeve to decipher and shout out the name of the next man on the list of those shot."

Two more commandants of Kolyma were purged as well. It appeared that no one was safe until Stalin's madness subsided, around 1940.

The Daily Grind

At 5:00 in the morning, and sometimes earlier, the prisoners were awakened for their daily roll call. They stood outside in rows, sometimes for more than an hour, for the daily counting. Then they got a small daily ration, and prepared for another grueling workday.

Prisoners were organized into work brigades. Hein was assigned to the gold mines. Armed guards with attack dogs accompanied the brigade on their daily march to their work sites. Gulag prisoners worked approximately 10 hours per day in the winter and 14 hours per day in the summer, seven days a week. During winter, prisoners had to work in icy, sub-zero winds all day. In such extreme cold, it was imperative that the prisoners keep moving to avoid freezing to death.



“Inferior to a Horse,” drawing by Jacques Rossi, who spent 19 years in the Gulag after being arrested during the Purges. He wrote, “After 11 and a half hours of labor (not including time needed to assign a task, receive tools and give them back), Prof. 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.’” ...The four 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; Prof. Kozyrev, director of research at the Pulkovo Space Observatory in Leningrad; and myself, a secret agent of the Comintern.”



A modern depiction of Gulag slave labor.

The projects these slaves of the state labored on were grand in scope, contributing to the industrial strength of the country and the Five-Year Plans. They built roads to the Kolyma gold mines through impossible terrain; or created mines deep in the hillsides with picks and shovels. In the absence of machinery or horsepower, human strength had to accomplish the most arduous tasks. Prisoners dug ditches and mines into permafrost by hand, with picks that were dull, shovels that were weak, and bodies that were emaciated.

NKVD guards oversaw fulfilling the current Five-Year Plan as well as guarding prisoners, so they slave-drove those under them. Ivan Karpunich-Braven, a former Red-Army Officer who had become a prisoner, described how others were treated: “Those who lagged behind were beaten with clubs and torn by dogs. Working in 50 degrees below zero Fahrenheit, they were forbidden to build fires and warm themselves. Men were hitched to a sledge and beaten by a stave... Those who did not fulfill the norm... were punished by the chief of the camp, Zeldin, in this way: In winter he ordered them to strip naked in the mine shaft, poured cold water over them, and in this state they had to run to the compound; in summer they were forced to strip naked, their hands were tied behind them to a common pole, and they were left out, tie there, under a cloud of mosquitos. Then, finally, they were simply beaten with a rifle butt and tossed into an isolator.”

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The Kolyma Highway is called “The Road of Bones” because many died during its construction, their skeletons buried in the road’s foundations.

The railroad also cost many human lives.



A Kolyma gold mine.

“

We have to squeeze everything out of a prisoner in the first three months. After that we don't need him anymore.

*Camp Commander Naftaly Frenkel, 1937
Quoted by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*

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Inmates had to work in Kolyma’s gold and tin mines or outside at worksites in sub-zero temperatures. Guards would not allow them fires to make fires to warm themselves.

Hein worked in a Kolyma goldmine.

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The Food-For-Work System

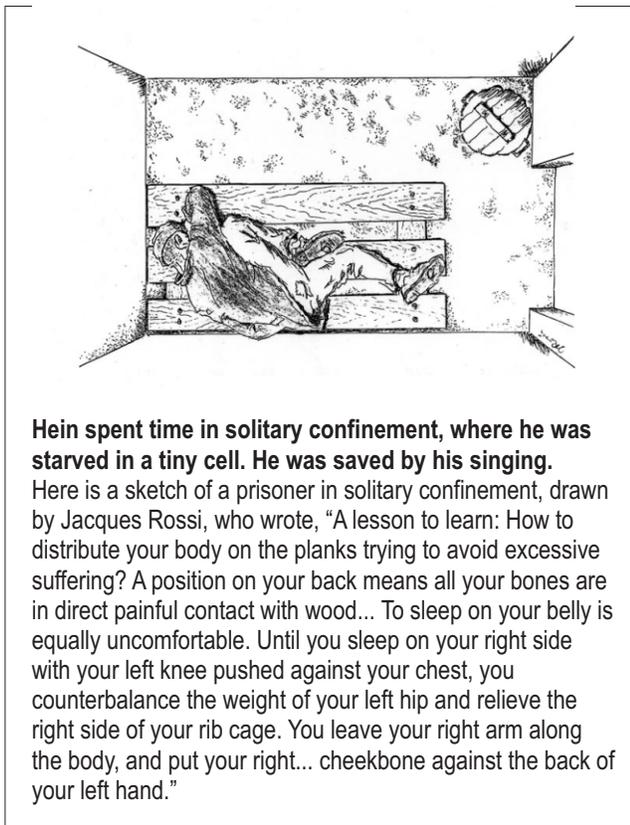
Prisoners were fed 700 calories a day, one chunk of bread and some form of cabbage soup. Scurvy was rampant from a lack of Vitamin C and many prisoners experienced its symptoms: muscle pain, bruising, sore gums, and tooth loss.

The Gulag used a food-for-work system. Those who completed their daily quota of work received a full ration. Those who failed to meet their daily quota had their rations cut, and if they failed to meet their daily work quota day after day, they became known as “goners.” They slowly starved to death in full view of others, their weak and fading forms a reminder to the others in camp of how close death was. Although too weak to walk, they were still expected to work, dragged to work sites by other prisoners on sledges. Prisoners were so hungry that they ate anything. They ate a week-old horse corpse covered in flies and maggots. They ate a barrel of lubricating grease brought to



A “goner” was someone in camp too weak to work, who was no longer given his daily ration. His presence reminded other prisoners of their precarious fate.

Drawing by Evfrosiniia Kersnovskaia, former Gulag prisoner.



Hein spent time in solitary confinement, where he was starved in a tiny cell. He was saved by his singing.

Here is a sketch of a prisoner in solitary confinement, drawn by Jacques Rossi, who wrote, “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.”

grease wheelbarrows. They ate moss, like the Arctic reindeer.

At one point during his imprisonment, Hein was put into solitary confinement. He was given no food for days, and it appeared that the authorities intended to starve him to death. Hein, who had a beautiful bass voice and knew many German hymns and folk songs, sang to keep his spirits up. Someone in authority heard him singing from his cell and decided that he sang too beautifully to die, so Hein was released back into the general population of the labor camp.

When World War II broke out in 1941, news trickled into the work camps with newly-arriving prisoners. The guards silenced the radios when the war was going badly on the Soviet front, but they threatened prisoners with distant events: “If Stalingrad falls, we will shoot all of you.” As far removed as the inmates were from the front, they felt wartime deprivations keenly. The prisoners were given more work, less food, and harsher punishments than they had received before. In 1941, starvation broke out in the Gulag camps, and as many as one-quarter of inmates died that year alone. The bodies were simply dumped, or the

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Death was ever-present in Kolyma. Here, prisoners dispose of starved corpses through a hole in the ice while a guard with a dog looks on.

“goners” in the camp were assigned to bury them. The starvation victims did not weigh very much. Most were buried, either in unmarked graves, or their bodies thrown into work sites and covered to avoid the trouble of digging a grave.

Somehow, Hein managed to survive it all. In his years in Kolyma, he survived all five administrative heads of Dalstoy. He saw the camp population double and triple with various groups: Purge victims in the late 1930s, then Germans and other targeted ethnic groups in the early 1940s, and as the war went on, POWs from the war in the mid to late 1940s, which included Germans, Japanese, and new political prisoners. In 1948, Stalin declared that Soviet-born Germans were permanently exiled and forbidden from returning to their former homes.

Through all these events, the prisoners were cut off from the rest of the world. They slaved away in the furthest corner of the Soviet empire, their strength draining as they mined the hills of Kolyma or built roads in its permafrost. No one, except the guards, the other prisoners, and God, bore witness to their suffering. Those who sur-

vived kept their head down and did their work. Endless death, torment, cold, hunger, and slavery was their lot in life. They slogged day after day in the Gulag to advance Soviet goals as long as their luck or their strength endured.

Hein had served 17 years when Stalin died in 1953. There were mass amnesties, but only for the real criminals. Political prisoners were not eligible for release. Still, conditions improved in the camps. Then some political prisoners began to be set free, but not the hated Germans, who were still considered the worst enemies of socialism. In 1955, the Chancellor of Germany had visited Moscow on behalf of Germans in Russia. The following year, 1956, Hein and other Germans were at last released from their life sentences. They still could not return to their homelands, however, and Hein had to remain in exile in the North.

Three to five million people died in the Kolyma camps between 1931 and 1953, perhaps one-fifth of the 20 million people who died in the entire Gulag.

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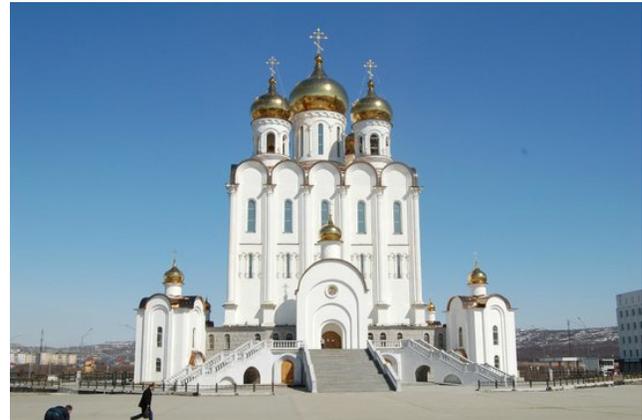
The city of Magadan has a population of about 100,000. Its industries are fishing, mining, making pasta and sausage, and distilling.



Temperatures still drop to -50 and -60 below 0, F.

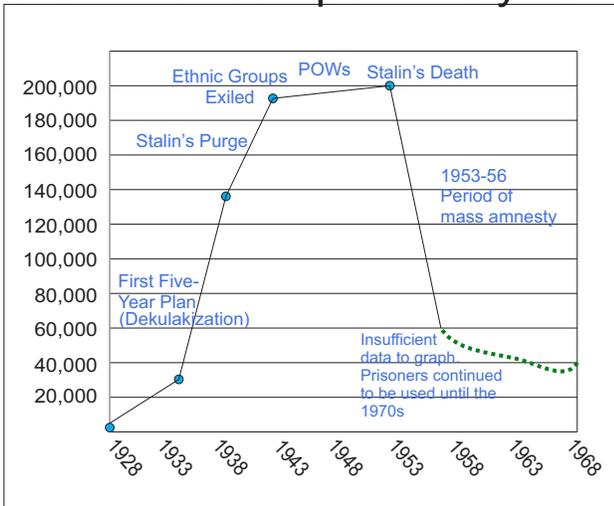


Many former prisoners, too poor to move anywhere else and forbidden from returning home, remained in the region.



A Russian Orthodox Church was built in Madagan.

Growth of Camps in Kolyma



The region is still one of incredible beauty and deadly cold.