

GROWTH OF THE GULAG

How the Man of Steel Broke the People, 1928-1933

The Soviet Gulag was a monster that devoured its children long before it swallowed Hein Dyck in 1936, Peter Dyck in 1941, and Gerhard Dyck in 1945. By the time the First Five-Year Plan began in 1928, the regime had all the elements in place to persecute its opponents: the secret police (OGPU), a system of concentration camps, effective methods of interrogation and torture, and informers in the population. A continual stream of arrests made fear a powerful weapon.

Siberia had coal, oil, timber, and gold. Stalin had come to see that the Gulag could be a viable source of labor, useful to perform massive work projects, settle and exploit the natural resources of Siberia, and benefit the country economically.

Legal changes had expanded the secret police's power in the mid-1920s. Article 58 (Feb. 25, 1927), which gave the secret police the right to arrest anyone suspected of counter-revolutionary activities, was the justification for many political arrests. People arrested under Article 58 were called "The 58's" in camp, and were singled out for special tortures. The Food-for-Work System, implemented in 1928, fed prisoners according to their work output. In July, 1929, all USSR camps and prisons were turned over to the secret police, who could run and expand them as needed.

Under the Five-Year Plan, the Gulag grew exponentially. In 1929, there were approximately 179,000 prisoners. By the Plan's end, in 1934, there were 510,000. By 1936, that number had doubled. The numbers



In 1930-31 alone, 1.8 million peasants were exiled to Siberia, entire families split up or placed in exile settlements. By 1934, that number was 10 million.

steadily grew until Stalin died in 1953.

As the need for human labor increased, Stalin orchestrated continual waves of repression to "recruit" labor for massive building projects. In 1929, the OGPU arrested geologists and mining engineers whose expertise they needed, used them to seek out coal, gold, and nickel in the Arctic. During collectivization (1930-1933), two million "kulaks" were exiled

to Siberia, sent to the Gulag as prisoners or as "special settlers," workers forbidden to leave exile villages. They were scattered in camps throughout the USSR, building railroads, roads, or chemical plants, making brick, cutting trees, and packaging fish. In 1934, Genrikh Yagoda ordered 15,000-20,000 more prisoners for the Moscow-Volga Canal project, and more arrests ensued.

Prisoners were sent wherever they were needed. If there wasn't a camp already when they arrived, they had to build their own. Some of the areas were so remote that barbed wire wasn't used until 1937 (there was no worry of the prisoners trying to escape).

Gradually, whole new regions of Siberia were opened up. The Vorkuta Gulag was established in 1932 to extract coal, and grew to 132 camps. The Kolyma Gulag in the far northeast was founded in 1932, and by 1934, there were 30,000 prisoners. Camps were founded in the Ural Mountains, in Irkutsk, in Moscow, and in Kolyma.

Work norms skyrocketed under the First Five-Year Plan. Central Planning Agencies in Moscow calculated quotas for each camp based on the number of prisoners, and food rations for them based on their work produc-



Prisoners building the White Sea-Baltic Canal, one of the first major projects in the Soviet Union made entirely through slave labor (1931-32). About 25,000 workers died due to harsh working conditions.

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Prisoners transporting lead-zinc ore, Vaygach Island, 1931-32 (left) and crushing rocks for the Baltic Canal in 1932 (right). Political prisoners were thrown into the Gulag, where they had to do forced labor for long sentences of 10 or 20 years, or life.

tion. All prisoners worked long hours. Work went on around the clock in three shifts, even in blizzards.

Meeting the work norms became the key to survival. Merciless overseers drove prisoners to work harder and faster. If prisoners didn't meet their quotas, they were put on reduced rations and slowly starved to death. Even starving "goners," too weak to walk, were pulled to work sites on sleds, to labor until their deaths. In December, 1928, at Krasnaya Gorka, 150 prisoners were left overnight in the woods as punishment for failing to fulfill their quotas; they all froze to death.

In order to survive, people had to cheat. Prisoner Anatoly Zhigulain recalled the impossible quota for wheelbarrows of gravel extracted from the frozen tundra. "People were growing weaker by the day," he wrote. "People were dying." As a life-saving measure, the boss had his workers mix their gravel with lighter materials - snow, pine needles, and branches. That way, they could fulfill the quota and receive their food. They hoped to be far

gone before their deception was found out. "But meanwhile, people will have been saved, people will have been fed. Other convicts will do penance for our sins."

The largest project during the First Five-Year Plan was the White Sea Canal, dug between the White and Baltic Seas between 1931-32. About 126,000 Gulag workers, mostly political prisoners began work in 1931. Very little technology was available, so prisoners built five dams, 18 locks, and the 141 mile-canal by hand.

About 25,000 workers perished due to working conditions, but frequent arrests replenished the workforce. The canal opened on August 2, 1933, four months ahead of schedule. This project, the first major Soviet endeavor built entirely by slave labor, was a much-heralded success.

This is how Siberia was settled and the Soviet Union industrialized: through the arrest of millions of innocent people, who were exploited and, in many cases, worked to death.



Meeting the work norms dictated whether a prisoner would live or die. Rations were reduced if a prisoner could not complete his daily norm.