



Teacher material

Gulag

Background information

Labour-Camps in the Soviet Union

1. Terms

The scale of political repression and imprisonment created the need for a new type of detention centre. The primary form of detention during the Stalinist era was **labour-prison camps**. The original term for these labour-prison camps was the **concentration camps** (*концентрационный лагерь*). After the war, for political reasons, the term **special purpose camp** (*лагерь особого назначения*) was used. The system of camps was formed in 1918–1920. In 1918, Lev Trotsky demanded the pacification and disarming of the Czech Legion and their placement in a concentration camp. Lenin used the concept of the **concentration camp** in August 1918, when he demanded that “kulaks, priests, White Guards, and other dubious elements” be interned there. A concentration camp was organised in a former abbey on Solovets Island (*Соловецкий лагерь особого назначения*) in 1920 at Dzerzhinski’s initiative. Prisoners in concentration camps were not used as forced labour until 1926 – at first the main objective was to isolate persons.

In 1929 concentration camps were renamed **correctional labour camps – ITL** (*Исправительно-трудовой лагерь*) and the OGPU¹ set about using them to fulfil the assignment given to it by the state to colonise sparsely populated and economically weakly developed regions of the Soviet Union. All internees sentenced to more than three years of incarceration or who were convicted by the OGPU were sent to these labour-prison camps. From 1930 the notorious **Main Administration of Camps – GULAG** (*Главное управление лагерей*) was organised under the authority of the OGPU; it was transferred to the newly formed NKVD² in 1934. The milder **correctional labour colonies – ИТК** (*Исправительно-трудовая колония*) were also transferred to the NKVD from the Ministry of Justice. From 1932 to 1937 Matvei Berman was the head of the Gulag. Since the 1930s the term “Gulag” has become a symbol of state repression and the exploitation of slave labour. At its peak an army of 2.5 million convicts was used as a cheap source of manpower for construction projects such as building canals, extracting natural resources, colonising regions in the Far North, and so on. The Russian dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn named the network of camps as the **Gulag Archipelago** (cluster of islands). In 1940, people deported from the newly annexed Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and elsewhere began arriving in the Gulag.

2. Camps after the Second World War

The Second World War years were the most difficult for internees in the labour-prison camps. On 22 June 1941, the day of the German invasion of the USSR, an order was issued prohibiting the release from camp (even if the full prison camp term had been served) of convicts who had been convicted of “betraying the homeland, espionage, terrorism, undermining state production or transportation,

¹ OGPU: *Joint State Political Directorate under the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR* (Russian: *Объединённое государственное политическое управление при СНК СССР*).

² NKVD: *The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs* (*Народный комиссариат внутренних дел, Narodnyu Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del*), abbreviated NKVD (НКВД).



Trotskyism, right-wing tendencies and banditry” – which was almost all the persons convicted of “counterrevolutionary crimes”. Those convicts had to remain in the camps until the end of the war. Internees convicted of less serious crimes (975 000 persons during the war) were released and sent to serve in the Red Army. An estimated 2 million people died during the war years in the Gulag.

During the war, NKVD feared that prisoners, especially those from the Baltic countries, might use the advance of the German forces to organise uprisings in the camps. In 1942 the NKVD considered a group of Estonians led by General Jaan Soots, Nikolai Reek and others in Usollag (Perm oblast, Solikamsk) to be the most dangerous “rebellious organisation” that they had uncovered; 149 persons of this group were convicted. The end of the war brought release for some categories of convicts (excluding persons convicted of “counterrevolutionary crimes”), yet this contingent was nevertheless rather negligible.

3. Camps after the Second World War

The war brought some changes. For instance, the **forced labour** (*каторжные работы*) form of punishment was introduced in 1943 for active collaboration with German occupying authorities and participation in punishment operations, and a corresponding section was created in some labour-prison camps with a stricter regimen, harder work, the requirement of wearing the prisoner’s personal number on his clothes, and so on. There were 56 correctional labour camps under the Gulag by the summer of 1944.

The camp system began expanding rapidly after the war, reaching its high point in the early 1950’s. A total of over 60 000 convicts belonged to the forced labour category in 1947. In 1948, the authorities began re-arresting former prisoners again who had already served their sentences and been released. Most of these people were nevertheless not sent back to the camps. Instead, they were sent to sparsely settled distant regions, such as Kolyma, Krasnojarsk krai, Kazakhstan, and elsewhere. The post-war years brought a marked increase in the total number of “political” internees, or persons convicted of “counterrevolutionary crimes”. As of the summer of 1946, they accounted for about 35% of the total number of convicts, considerably more in some camps. “Political” were held in labour-prison camps alongside criminals – murderers, thieves and others. **Special camps** (*особый лагерь*) and special prisons were organised in 1948 for interning “particularly dangerous state criminals” who had been convicted of espionage, terrorism, and participating in anti-Soviet movements. Supporters of independence arrested in the Baltic countries were also included in this category. A particularly strict regimen was established in these camps and prisoners were forced to do physically hard labour. A total of 12 camps were formed.

4. The economy of the camps

The forced labour of the camps was a very important part of the economy. The Volga-Don Canal, the Volga-Baltic Sea Canal, and the Great Turkmenistan Canal were all built with camp manpower. So were the Stalingrad and Kuibyshev electric power plants. Work began on building a railroad from Salekhard through the Arctic tundra to Igarka – the so-called ‘Dead Road’. The building of a tunnel and railroad to Sakhalin Island began in 1950. Altogether, the MVD³ controlled a total of 9% of capital investments of the entire Soviet Union just prior to Stalin’s death and the five-year plan for 1951–1955 called for this amount to be doubled.

³ MVD: *The USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), responsible for the criminal militia and correctional facilities.*



The system of forced labour was not easy to control. Many prisoners refused to work: the mass refusal of prisoners to work reached a critical point in the early 1950s. An inspection conducted in 1953 concluded that the costs of maintaining the camps exceeded by far the profits earned by the work of convicts. The Gulag was subsidised with 2.3 billion roubles of state money.

5. The transformation of the Gulag after Stalin

Rapid changes took place after Stalin's death. Beria (Stalin's chief of secret police) became Minister of Internal Affairs and stopped work on over 20 special projects of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, including the canals and the "Dead Road", the dam on the lower course of the Don River, the port at Donetsk, the Sakhalin tunnel, and other structures. Many labour-prison camps were transferred to the administrative field of the ministries for which they were in the process of building objects. Beria informed the CPSU CC Presidium in his memorandum that there were 2 526 402 people in camps, of which only 221 435 were dangerous criminals (meaning prisoners in special camps). The Gulag system was transferred to the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice in April of 1953.

This arrangement existed only until January of 1954, after Beria was removed from power and executed. Under Khrushchev's leadership the Gulag was returned to the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In addition to organisational changes, over a million convicts were immediately released by amnesty (which did not extend to "particularly dangerous state criminals") after Stalin's death. The release of prisoners continued during the ensuing years. A new review of the cases of "political" internees began in 1954, after which their numbers in camps began decreasing. The reorganisation of labour-prison camps as correctional labour colonies began in October of 1956.