

The GULAG

The Soviet system of forced labor camps was first established in 1919 under the Cheka, but it was not until the early 1930s that the camp population reached significant numbers. By 1934 the GULAG, or Main Directorate for Corrective Labor Camps, then under the Cheka's successor organization the NKVD, had several million inmates. Prisoners included murderers, thieves, and other common criminals--along with political and religious dissenters. The GULAG, whose camps were located mainly in remote regions of Siberia and the Far North, made significant contributions to the Soviet economy in the period of Joseph Stalin. GULAG prisoners constructed the White Sea-Baltic Canal, the Moscow-Volga Canal, the Baikal-Amur main railroad line, numerous hydroelectric stations, and strategic roads and industrial enterprises in remote regions. GULAG manpower was also used for much of the country's lumbering and for the mining of coal, copper, and gold.

Stalin constantly increased the number of projects assigned to the NKVD, which led to an increasing reliance on its labor. The GULAG also served as a source of workers for economic projects independent of the NKVD, which contracted its prisoners out to various economic enterprises.

Conditions in the camps were extremely harsh. Prisoners received inadequate food rations and insufficient clothing, which made it difficult to endure the severe weather and the long working hours; sometimes the inmates were physically abused by camp guards. As a result, the death rate from exhaustion and disease in the camps was high. After Stalin died in 1953, the GULAG population was reduced significantly, and conditions for inmates somewhat improved. Forced labor camps continued to exist, although on a small scale, into the Gorbachev period, and the government even opened some camps to scrutiny by journalists and human rights activists. With the advance of democratization, political prisoners and prisoners of conscience all but disappeared from the camps.



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