

Russia: Convict Labour and Transportation, 1696 – 1960

Carrie Crockett

“Tyrants of the world! Tremble! And ye, take heart and pay attention, Rise up, trampled slaves!” When in 1820 Tsar Alexander read these lines from the great poet Pushkin’s “Ode to Liberty,” he sentenced the writer to 6 years of internal exile. The tsar had been advised that the poem’s fervent, revolutionary tone had attracted the attention of an anti-tsarist group of aristocrats, the Decembrists, and been their inspiration during the anti-government Revolt of 1925.

Although 6 years of banishment might seem a harsh punishment for the composition of revolutionary verse, Pushkin’s sentence was a light one given the era during which he lived. A few of the poet’s diplomat friends had interceded on his behalf, assuring the tsar that Pushkin had since changed his political views. The Decembrists themselves, however, were convicted as political dissidents, and received harsher punishments: 5 were executed by hanging and 90 were stripped of their aristocratic titles and estates before being transported to “life in exile” at the far eastern end of the Russian Empire. In Siberia and the Russian Far East, they were separated and assigned to live in tiny, isolated settlements that had limited access to food and usually no medical services. The Decembrists, along with the other criminal and political exiles in Siberia, became part of Russia’s hard labor system known as *katorga*. Along with thousands of other “unfortunates,” they spent the rest of their lives constructing roads, mining salt and silver and performing other labor, and settling the peripheries of the empire.

For 5 centuries – beginning in 1593 and ending in 1988 – Russian heads of state used forced exile (*ssylka*) and hard labor (*katorga*) as the preferred methods for punishing criminals. The example of Pushkin and the Decembrists is but one of thousands of cases of individuals who fulfilled hard labor and exile sentences for political or religious differences or criminal infractions. Later, during the Soviet decades, both Lenin and Stalin followed in the footsteps of their tsarist predecessors by exiling millions of citizens to remote labor camps throughout the empire in the name of building the socialist state.

Tsarist Justice: A rule of law?

In an effort to emulate European nations that ruled according to set laws, in 1649 Tsar Alexei appointed a group of nobles to draw up Russia’s first national penal code, the *Sobornoye Ulozhenie*, or Code of Law. The *Ulozhenie* was formulated to uphold the authority of the Tsar while subduing those who challenged his authority or disrupted societal order. While outlawing capital punishment, the Code specified mutilation (such as flaying and flogging, the ripping out of the nostrils, and branding) coupled with hard labor and exile as the appropriate punishment for criminals and dissidents. It detailed hundreds of actions for which citizens could be sentenced: robbery, murder, running away from work, assault, begging, leaving the army or refusing to serve in the army, making counterfeit money, and “driving horses into a pregnant women and causing her to miscarry.” Other punishable crimes that merited sentences of exile included impersonating a priest, disrupting a religious service, conducting a meeting at which politics were discussed, and reading revolutionary letters or other forbidden texts aloud.

In addition to serving as the head of state, the Russian tsar was also the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, for Russians were taught that he had been “appointed by God.” Disobedience to the tsar was one and the same with disobedience to God Himself. Thus, citizens who opposed the tsar for philosophical reasons, like the Decembrists, or who adhered to religions other than official Russian Orthodoxy could also receive sentences of hard labor in “eternal exile.

***Katorga*: Hard labor and exile in Siberia**

As did other European nations of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Russia used convict labor extensively for the purpose of state building. Peter the Great capitalized on the hard labor of convicts in 1696, when he exiled a group of prisoners to Voronezh for the purpose of constructing the fleet of ships that enable him to conquer the Tatar city of Azov later that year. Penal laborers were used to build forts along the country’s northern borders to aid in defense against the Swedes, construct ports and naval facilities along the Black Sea, mine silver and lead in the Transbaikalia region, and lay *versts* of road and railway throughout European Russia and across the expanse of Siberia. After receiving their sentences, prisoners typically walked under guard across the continent to their assigned place of exile and hard labor. The journey typically took between 1 and 2 years and high percentages of prisoners perished along the route. After 1879, prisoners were transported from Odessa to ports in the Far East such as Vladivostok and Sakhalin via the Russian Volunteer Fleet, cruisers that were dedicated solely to the distribution of convicts throughout the farthest reaches of the empire. Although transporting a convict via sea voyage was more expensive proposition than forcing him to march across the continent, a higher percentage of convicts survived and ultimately reached their penal settlements.

The quality of a Russian hard laborer’s health and life depended heavily on the type of settlement to which he or she was sent and the kind of labor that was assigned. Some of the most dreaded exilic locations, such as Kara, Nerchinsk, and Sakhalin, emphasized mine work. Prisoners who worked in the mines usually spent their days in dank tunnels full of coal dust that choked the lungs, and their nights in prisons that were old, overcrowded, and filthy. The travel logs of numerous European travelers describe the filthiness and disease that flourished in such penal environments. Alternatively, sometimes political exiles were entrusted to small villages or Indigenous groups all of whom, the tsar’s gendarme warned them, would be executed if the prisoner escaped. Numerous nineteenth-century photographs of Siberian hard labor exiles show them living in near isolation on the vast steppe in rudimentary dwellings such as huts, dugouts, caves, and in tents along rivers.

Historians estimate that between 1807 and 1917, over 1,000,000 people were sentenced to exile in Siberia, where they “served the tsar” as forced exile-colonists, either with or without hard labor. These individuals brought with them some of the early colonizers of Siberia: over 250,000 children.

The Soviet Era: Hard labor in the Gulag

During the 1920s, Lenin built upon the remnants of the tsarist prison system in order to contain the political enemies to his emerging state. Stalin then continued the work of prison building after he took power in 1929, creating a massive infrastructure of prisons, work camps, and corrective settlements that is today loosely referred to as the Gulag, (an acronym for the Main Administration

of Corrective Labor Camps). The Gulag's original purpose was to subdue those who opposed the government by means of incarceration and forced labor, and to incentivize the general population to comply with the laws set by the Soviet government.

Crimes Against the State

As was the case in tsarist times, (as illustrated by the example of Alexander Pushkin), citizens could be sentenced to exile or hard labor for seemingly minor infractions; many ordinary aspects of living had been classified as a crime against the state by 1930. Being late to work 3 times could garner a penal sentence of 3 years; telling a politically incorrect joke could bring 25. Hundreds of Russian writers and artists were sentenced to exile and/or hard labor for writing and creating according to their own inclinations instead of according to the government's "new rules for artistic expression." Many women received hard labor sentences during the government-induced famine of 1931-33 for stealing paltry amounts of food that they hoped would keep their children from starvation. One woman, Maria Tchebotareva, who stole 3 pounds of rye bread to feed her 4 small children, received a sentence of 10 years hard labor in the Gulag. After completing her time, Maria was forced to stay in the Arctic region of her incarceration until 1956, when she finally returned home. She was never able to locate any of her children. (*Please see the digital exhibit, The Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives, referenced below*).

As was the case with tsarist penal settlements, the Soviet hard labor camps were oriented toward using convict labor to complete public works projects, such as building roads, mining gold and silver, and felling trees. Unlike the camps of the Nazi regime, their objective was not systemized killing. Prisoners worked on massive construction projects, such as the construction of the White Sea Canal and the building of the Moscow Metro and Moscow State University. Many penal settlements were situated in remote regions, however, such as the Arctic north, Central Asia, and the Far East, where the difficulties of hard labor were exacerbated by climatic extremes. Also, rarely did the skill sets of Soviet prisoners match the work projects assigned them, which produced low morale among the penal laborers and encouraged abusive tendencies in the guards. In general, Gulag prisoners were inefficient, underskilled workers whose labor was further hampered by near-starvation, lack of medical care, and the rampant violence that pervaded the Gulag.

Forced Exile

Certain Soviet eras were also hallmarked by waves of mass deportation. Forced resettlement were coordinated by Gulag planners for the purpose of advancing Soviet state building while exerting ideological control over the populace. The *dekulakization* campaign of 1929-32 (also known as the *collectivization of agriculture*), was such an era. Under the auspices of strengthening socialist sentiment among the peasantry while uncovering "enemies to the workers," Stalin mandated that millions of successful farmers, or *kulaks*, be arrested and either executed or forcibly deported to labor camps.

In his book, *The Whisperers*, Russian historian Orlando Figes cites the experience of 8-year-old Antonina Golovina, whose *kulak* father was arrested and sentenced to 3 years of hard labor during the collectivization of her Russian village. Antonina and her mother were given just 1 hour to pack a few belongings before their home was destroyed and they were deported to a "special settlement" in Siberia to complete 3 years of forced labor. At Antonina's camp, 1,000 kulaks were made to live

within 5 wooden barracks situated along a riverbank. Conditions were harsh. When 2 of the barracks were destroyed, the prisoners dug holes in the frozen ground in which they tried to survive until spring. The camp was also cut off from food deliveries during the winter months. So many prisoners perished from cold, starvation, and disease, that the living were not physically capable of burying all the dead. As the kulaks and their families died, the survivors stacked their frozen corpses in piles along the riverbank. When the spring came, the bodies were placed in the river.

Antonina's story typifies the degree of hardship that confronted those who were sentenced to forced labor and exile during the Soviet years. Families were commonly broken up, fathers often vanished or were executed, and mothers were given little time to gather a few belongings in satchels before being forced from their homes. Remaining family members were then packed into crowded, hot trains for weeks or months and fed subsistence rations until being delivered to labor settlements or resettlement sites in Siberia and Central Asia. Even though only one of Antonina's family members – her father – had been classified as a criminal, an "enemy of the workers," her entire family had been removed from mainstream society to be reeducated through labor. The *dekulakization* campaign continued into the 1950s. During the 1931-32 wave alone, however, 1,800,000 kulaks and their families were forcibly exiled to labor colonies. 500,000 of these died during transit; their bodies were usually simply left alongside the train tracks.

Forced Colonization

Individuals could be removed from their homes and deported to remote regions for non-criminal reasons as well, however. During the 1930s and 1940s, Stalin designated certain groups as "enemies of the workers" on the basis of their ethnicities alone. Overall, more than 7,000,000 Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Volga Germans, Finns, Crimean Tatars and Greeks and members of Indigenous groups were forcibly resettled in order to colonize the periphery. Unlike Gulag labor or exile, however, forced resettlement was usually for life, as returning to one's native home was a punishable offense. The re-settlers were usually assigned to inhabit remote, under-developed regions where, lacking the tools, supplies, and equipment necessary for survival, they perished in large numbers. Some historians have estimated that nearly half of those forcibly resettled for ethnic reasons died of starvation and disease.

How Many?

For a variety of reasons, historians have had a difficult time reaching agreeing on the total number of people who were forcibly repressed between 1918 and 1988 (the year that the last camp for political exiles was disbanded). First, Soviet record keepers were notoriously inaccurate for political reasons. Also, archival data regarding the penal system is non-existent for certain periods of time: figures for 1918-34 are not known to exist. Further, the penal statistics that do exist do not necessarily provide true readings of prisoner experience. For example, standard Gulag operating procedure mandated that seriously ill or profoundly malnourished prisoners be released from prison just prior to their actual deaths, resulting in artificially low prisoner numbers. Also, Soviet citizens could be convicted multiple times and many served more than one sentence, resulting in possibly inflated figures. It was not uncommon for a prisoner to complete his or her term in a labor camp and return home only to be sentenced for a new offense and returned them to the prison system.

These complications notwithstanding, conservative estimates place the number of those repressed by the Soviet penal system (forcibly exiled, incarcerated, sent to the Gulag) between 1928 and 1953 at 25,000,000 (1928 is the year that Stalin seized power, and 1953 is the year of his death). This estimate does not include victims of the planned famine in Ukraine nor the 10,000,000 fatalities that the USSR sustained during World War II. It represents an informed estimate of how many private citizens passed through the Soviet criminal justice system: those who were executed by firing squads, sent to the Gulag or special settlement, forced into slave labor, or involuntarily relocated in the interest of state building.

Further reading

Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A history* (New York: Random House, 2003).

Jonathan Daly, *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 2009).

Ian Frazier, "On the Prison highway: The Gulag's silent remains," *The New Yorker* (30 August, 2010).

Hiroaki Kuromiya, *The Voices of the Dead: Stalin's Great Terror in the 1930s* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008).

Lynne Viola, *The Unknown Gulag: The lost world of Stalin's special settlements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Online Exhibits

Gulag History: "Many Days, Many Lives." <http://gulaghistory.org/exhibits/days-and-lives>

Memoirs

Eugenia Ginzberg, *Journey into the Whirlwind* (1967).

Nedezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1970).

Veronia Shapovatov, *Remembering the Darkness: Women in Soviet prisons* (Boston: Rowman and Littlefield, Inc. 2001).

Simeon S. Vilensky, *Till My Tale is Told: Women's Memoirs of the Gulag*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001).

Stephanie Williams, *Olga's Story*. (New York: Doubleday, 2006).