

*Коновалова Полина Михайловна
студентка 4 курса бакалавриата
факультет международных отношений
Московский государственный институт международных отношений
(университет) Министерства иностранных дел Российской Федерации
Россия, г. Москва
e-mail: konovalova.p@my.mgimo.ru*

*Научный руководитель: Голунов Сергей Валерьевич,
доктор политических наук
Московский государственный институт международных отношений
(университет) Министерства иностранных дел Российской Федерации
Россия, г. Москва*

ФУНКЦИИ ГУЛАГА КАК ПРОБЛЕМА ДЛЯ ЗАПАДНОЙ ИСТОРИОГРАФИИ

***Аннотация:** В этой статье рассматривается относительная важность и эффективность функций ГУЛАГа. В первой главе данной статьи рассматривается история развития мест содержания под стражей с XVII века до сталинской эпохи. Во второй главе рассматривается проблема изоляции врагов народа в ГУЛАГе. Последняя глава посвящена основной цели ГУЛАГа — эксплуатации заключенных в экономических целях.*

***Ключевые слова:** ГУЛАГ, Советский Союз, экономика, западная историография, Сталин.*

*Konovalova Polina Mikhailovna
4th year bachelor student
Faculty of International Relations
Moscow State Institute of International Relations (University) of the Ministry of
Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation
Russia, Moscow*

*Scientific adviser: Golunov Sergey Valerievich,
doctor of political sciences
Moscow State Institute of International Relations (University) of the Ministry of
Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation
Russia, Moscow*

FUNCTIONS OF GULAG AS AN ISSUE FOR THE WESTERN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Abstract: *This paper looks at the relative importance and efficiency of GULAG functions. The first chapter of this paper examines the history of the evolution of detention facilities from the 17th century till Stalinist era. The second chapter addresses the issue of isolation of enemies of the people which was one of the essential aims of the GULAG. The final chapter focuses on GULAG's primary and explicit goal, which was the exploitation of prisoners for economic purposes.*

Key words: GULAG, Soviet Union, economics, Western historiography, Stalin.

Introduction

The question we could ask ourselves while recalling the Stalin era is why we do not give due consideration to GULAG, and why there are not so many memorials devoted to victims of repressions. The answer to these questions might lie in the subsequent history of Russia. The post-Soviet period brought economic and political collapses, and other major transformations that blotted the significance of GULAG.

Today it is essential to bring the information about Stalin era to the masses. There is a great need to educate the population on this issue so that we can understand how and why GULAG came into being, and what were the consequences of it.

In this paper I am going to look at the relative importance and efficiency of GULAG functions.

In this study I use researches published in academic journals, books and articles that interpret and review the topic of this work, and abstracts summarizing primary and secondary sources.

The first chapter of this paper examines the history of the evolution of detention facilities from the 17th century till Stalinist era. The second chapter addresses the issue of isolation of enemies of the people which was one of the essential aims of the GULAG. The final chapter focuses on GULAG's primary and explicit goal, which was the exploitation of prisoners for economic purposes.

Chapter 1

Overview of the GULAG system

Part I

From Czarist Russia to Stalin

The notion of coercive labor first appeared in imperial Russia. In times of Peter the Great criminals were sentenced to involuntary labor which grew more and more popular as a means of punishment.

In 1649 Alexis of Russia promulgated a legal code (“Sobornoye Ulozheniye”) according to which those who acted against the law had to be sent to Siberian labor camps. Typically, those places were nothing like ordinary prisons. Detainees had to live in poorly organized places of confinement, lacking food and compelled to perform exhausting physical activities. Mining and timber work were the most widespread kinds of labor. After the changes in penal law in 1847, prisons were no longer a place of confinement for criminals only. Now, all those who showed signs of going against the current political regime were under the risk of getting arrested.

In October 1917 the Bolsheviks came to power. Many of convicts of Czarist Russia were released. Soon, the Bolsheviks started the new wave of arrests. After two revolutions the state needed stability and Bolsheviks tried to achieve it by incarcerating those who expressed opposition to the new regime. The new wave of detentions was a part of the Bolsheviks’ plan to transform society, to dispose of “enemies of the people”. According to Bolsheviks, the most hazardous members of society were capitalists. They showed themselves as enemies the people who desired to go against the government. Lenin held that these people had to be detained and re-educated [1].

After Lenin’s death in 1924 the system of detention fell into the hands of Stalin. Soon enough the process of collectivization and industrialization commenced. In 1929 the government approved a resolution “On the Utilization of the Labor of Criminal Prisoners”. According to the document, a vast, extensive system of camps had to be established in order to break new ground full of natural resources [8]. From now on, the camps carried out both political and economic functions. Apart from isolating enemies of the people, the coercive labor in camps could be used to fulfill the projects of planned economy.

Although the GULAG grew out of Czarist’s katorga, there were some striking differences between two systems:

1. In Czarist Russia those who committed particularly serious crimes such as murder, rape, felony assault etc. were sent to katorga. At that time political prisoners were not sentenced to perform forced labor. As for Stalinist era, criminals and political prisoners were made to perform coercive labor. Furthermore, there were numerous cases of innocent people, women and children being sent to camps.

2. In pre-revolutionary Russia only dangerous criminal offenders were sent to perform genuinely hard labor in mines. The greatest construction of those times - the Amur railway – took 50 years to be built with the use of coercive labor. During this period only five thousand of convicts sentenced for serious crimes were working on the construction. Regarding GULAG, by 1973 there were 42 camps with more than 2 million prisoners, more than one third of them being convicted on political charges [9].

3. In katorga those who were sentenced for an ordinary offence in time were seen as “making steps towards correcting themselves” and that allowed them to receive back their confiscated money. They also were permitted to marry and build their own houses on allocated forest territory. In case convicts were behaving themselves, 10 months of imprisonments was counted as a year.

4. A daily nutritional norm in pre-revolutionary camps was 819 grams of rye bread, 106 grams of meat, 21.6 grams of lard, several kinds of cereal and oil. Cabbage, potatoes and onion could be bought on personal earnings. A daily nutritional norm in GULAG was 750 grams of rye bread, 21 grams of meat and 13 grams of buckwheat [9].

Part III

GULAG’s structure

The term “GULAG” (Main Administration of Camps) dates back to the revolution of 1917. Originally it was the “All-Russian Extraordinary Commission” (Cheka) headed by Felix Dzerzhinsky. In 1922 the name was changed to “All-Union State Political Administration and Unified State Political Directorate” (OGPU). In 1934 the organization united into “The People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs” (NKVD) presided over by G.G. Yagoda (1934-1936), then by N.I. Yezhov (1936-

1938) and L.P. Beria (1938-1945). In 1946 yet again the new name was adopted – The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) [2].

Before the NKVD's appearance in 1934, the affairs were managed by republican justice ministries and republican NKVDs, and by the interior ministry [2]. The earliest and one of the most eminent places of detention was the Solovetsky Camp of Special Destination (SLON) which appeared in 1920 as Felix Dzerzhinsky's intention to confine opposition of the regime. Standardized implementation of coercive labor commenced in 1926 [2].

The system of GULAG operated as follows. The NKVD ministers provided guidance to the administration of camps, which was in charge of executing all the instructions. Governmental structures replenished GULAG with new detainees. Most of the convicts were detained in ITLs (Corrective Labor Camps) or in labor colonies (general places of confinement). There were also some other places of detention: research centers, high-security areas of detention, mental institutions. Overall, camps were similar to classic prisons: detainees were being watched by guards and did not have opportunity to escape from places of confinement [5].

In 1934 various projects that were undertaken by civil administrations were transferred to the GULAG. As a consequence, a heavy workload fell on the camp system and devastated its capacities: “The Gulag has 30 main building projects; none will be completed in 1940. All will continue for several years, with an overall labor budget of 14.7 million. rubles. The Gulag is systematically charged with additional building projects, which result in a remarkable backlog. The large number of construction projects requires a fundamental reorganization, and the magnitude of these tasks complicates management in an extreme fashion, leading to a diversification of tasks and to bottlenecks in resource allocation” [2].

Chapter 2

Political functions

After Stalin came to power arrests gained momentum. More and more people were captured for political reasons. The legal authorization to conduct large-scale repressions appeared in 1937 with the decision of the Politburo of the CC of the VKP(b)

No. P51/94 (also known as the resolution about the anti-Soviet elements). According to the document NKVD (and its regional representatives) was to repress certain segments of the population. However, it was just the beginning of mass arrests.

Soon enough another resolution was signed. NKVD Order № 00447 about repression of former kulaks, criminals, and other anti-Soviet elements was more elaborative about who had to be captured. This time it was stated more precisely that it was crucial to defend the population from subversive activities of revolutionaries. A new wave of repressive campaigns, lately known as the Great Purge, broke out. Stalin wished to eliminate all those who menaced the ideology he constructed. From 1937 till 1938 harsh destruction of enemies of the people took place. It all started with “kulaks operation” and then was continued with several “national operations” [5].

The Polish Operation is a perfect example of a national targeted repression. NKVD Order No. 00485 (*On the liquidation of the Polish diversionist and espionage groups and POW units*) authorized elimination of “Polish spies”. The following segments of the population had to be captured:

1. "Active" members of the Polish minority in Soviet Union (practically all Poles).
2. All immigrants from the Second Polish Republic.
3. Political refugees from Poland (mostly members of the Communist Party of Poland).
4. Former and present members of the Polish Socialist Party and other non-communist Polish political parties.
5. All prisoners of war from the Polish-Soviet war remaining in the Soviet Union.
6. Members of the Polish Military Organisation listed in the special list (most of them were not members of that organisation) [12].

The detainees were also divided into two groups: those who were subject to execution (the first category) and those who were sent to camps or prisons (the second category). It was prohibited to release those who were captured on the basis of suspicion of espionage.

Overall, the Polish operation turned out to be the biggest ethnically motivated repression in the time of the Great Purge. Altogether, in the period of mass repressions more than a dozen of national targeted operation took place, among them being Romanian, Latvians, Finnish, Afghans, Chinese etc [3].

Acting in accordance with resolution about the anti-Soviet elements, in one of the orders in 1937 NKVD was commanded to repress family members of previously detained “enemies of the people”. Pursuant to the resolution women who were married to convicts, or who contributed to counter-revolutionary actions or had known about their husbands’ intentions and did not reveal the truth to authorities were subjects to arrests. Typically, these women were detained in corrective labor camps for 5-8 years [4]. Socially deviant children of convicts were also sent to corrective labor camps, colonies or orphanages [4].

Only later did the truth become known and it was revealed that most of the cases were fabricated, that detained were forced to testify under force. According to statistics, 1 372 382 were arrested and 681 692 were executed throughout the Great Purge [13]. It should be recalled that the vast majority of victims of operations of 1937-1938 were in fact innocent. As a matter of fact, there really were those who stood counter to the regime, however, many were arrested for alleged counter-revolutionary actions. It often happened that terminology in the documents was not clear enough and it was almost impossible to define whether or not a person was showing signs of rising against the regime [2]. In many cases people were arrested without any evidence of them committing a crime. It was a regular practice for NKVD to capture citizens in their homes, places of work and even in street. After Stalin’s death many of them were rehabilitated [7].

Frequently people fell victims of the system just as a result of inaccuracy of documents. Often it was hardly possible to determine whether a person was a counter-revolutionist or not. At that time, it was better not to dissent from government policy and to express that dissent openly. Every day huge numbers of people were arrested. Stalin’s aim was to maintain an atmosphere of stability in the country, and all those who did not agree with the regime were giving rise to suspicion. In a situation like that

it was easier to take preventive action, to detain and to expel rather than to let things take their own course.

Chapter 3

Economic functions

At the beginning of the formation of GULAG system there was little benefit from prison labor to the overall economy. In 1918 the Soviet authorities signed a resolution “On Prison Worker Teams” according to which camps’ prisoners were compelled to perform labor with the objective of helping to execute government economic projects. The document was soon followed by another resolution “On Deprivation of Liberty as a Measure of Punishment and Procedures for Its Implementation” that authorized constructing workplaces for prisoners. Although more than 300 places for light industrial and manual work were built, still only 40% of all detainees were involved into hard work throughout 1920s [10].

The changes began with the 1929’s resolution “On the Use of Prison Labor” that obliged convicts who were sentenced for three or more years to be relocated to OGPU’s camps [6]. Promptly it was announced that unskilled labor was required to assist economic enterprises associated with collectivization and Five-Year Plans.

The scope of application of GULAG’s economic functions was broad: mining, highway and rail construction, arms and chemical factories, electricity plants, fish canning, airport construction, apartment construction and sewage systems; among the items prisoners produced were missiles, car parts, leather goods, furniture, textiles, glass cups, lamps, candles, locks, buttons and even toys. Becoming an integral part of national economics, the system of coercive labor had a prominent place in development of regions with low accessibility. The most significant camps were located in remote areas with vast natural resourced. Generally, harsh climatic conditions made it difficult to access those regions, so groups of prisoners were settled in places they had to work in, and then the work began. From now on the location of camps was determined by the project and the kind of labor that was needed. Some of the illustrative examples of prison labor are field development of a gold mine at the Kolyma river in the far east of

the country, the construction of the Baikal Amur railway and road, coal mining in Vorkuta, nickel mining in Norilsk etc.

One of the first projects that had befallen the coercive labor of GULAG prisoners was the White Sea Canal that connected the White sea and lake Onega. Stalin decided to attempt building a canal that could connect inland waterways in order to affirm the position that under his administration the Soviet Union could carry out even the most ambitious_projects. The construction turned up to be too shallow for maritime or commercial transportation traffic. This was one of the early economic fiascos that was followed by many more [5]. Some of the projects were simply abandoned. Several railway tracks were not finished, others were never moved. Some of the envisioned hydroelectric installations were canceled.

Most of Stalin's ideas and projects were not accurately thought out. Ambitious plans and daunting tasks dominated in the Communist leadership. The Five-Year plans were enacted and implemented without being planned carefully. Prison labor never fulfilled the high expectations of the Soviet government. Initially there were several issues in the GULAG system that later turned out to be impediments to economic growth. The use of material and human resources often was not cost-efficient. Some detainees were dying on their way to camps, some were sentenced to death and died before reaching the destination [1]. Furthermore, prisoners were dying as a result of poor housing and lack of food. As for material resources, the vast amounts of camps were not provided with mechanical equipment, and even if they were, it was frequently the case that there was little capacity to put the machinery into practice. There were often no competent people to run the material sources [11].

Conclusion

GULAG was an integral part of the Soviet camp system that was developing for a number of years. In addition to a traditional, historically rooted places of detention, a new system of punitive institutions began to form after October revolution. The new structure took a form of labor camps that later developed into a large network used for implementation of punitive policies of the Soviet Russia.

GULAG was responsible for integration, redistribution and allocation of prisoners in all labor camps. GULAG was also accountable for assembling the labor force, ensuring the custody regime, food supply and clothing allowance. These functions made GULAG a vital part of institutional arrangement of bodies, which were responsible for the enforcement of punishments that were later directed at use of labor of detainees.

Since the beginning of 1930s Soviet camp systems with their inexhaustible resources, mobile and almost free workforce became a significant contribution to the economy. The number of prisoners was constantly growing, allowing camps to solve considerable economic issues. By the beginning of the second World War, GULAG was encompassing a substantial number of productive sectors, the largest of them being mining, forestry, fuel industry and capital construction.

In general, camp economy was unprofitable. The productivity level in GULAG was almost half as high as the productivity of those sectors where free labor was implemented. Furthermore, the quality of production was persistently low. Even though coercive labor was free, it had a high cost for the government. Estimates for maintenance of camps was never paid off with the revenue that was gained from the exploitation of prisoners.

Overall, repressions and coercive labor became a defining characteristic of Stalinist era. While the GULAG system was efficient to achieve some of its purposes, it also failed in many respects. The system that was responsible for execution of criminal penalties eventually evolved into a massive industrial complex that played a significant role in economic and political lives of the Soviet Union. The GULAG was a multidimensional socio-economic facility.

Bibliography:

1. Applebaum A. Gulag: A history. Doubleday Books, 2003.
2. Gregory P. R., Lazarev V. The economics of forced labor: The Soviet Gulag. Hoover Institution Press, 2013. T. 518.

3. Khlevniuk O.V. The history of the Gulag: from collectivization to the great terror. Yale University Press, 2004.
4. Klements E. T. Worse Than Guards: Ordinary Criminals and Political Prisoners in the GULAG (1918-1950). 2019.
5. Kort M. The Soviet colossus: history and aftermath. Routledge, 2014.
6. Nordlander D. J. Origins of a gulag capital: Magadan and Stalinist control in the early 1930s //Slavic Review. 1998. T. 57. №. 4. C. 791-812.
7. Perrie M. et al. (ed.). The Cambridge History of Russia: Volume 3, The Twentieth Century. Cambridge University Press, 2006. T. 3.
8. Rosefielde S. The First “Great Leap Forward” Reconsidered: Lessons of Solzhenitsyn’s Gulag Archipelago //Slavic Review. 1980. T. 39. №. 4. C. 559-587.
9. Rossi J. [BOOK REVIEW] The Gulag handbook, an encyclopedic dictionary of Soviet penitentiary institutions and terms related to the forced labor camps //Orbis. 1990. T. 34. C. 295-295.
10. Scherer J.L., Jakobson M. The Collectivisation of agriculture and the soviet prison camp system //Europe-Asia Studies. 1993. T. 45. №. 3. C. 533-546.
11. Shalamov V. Kolyma tales. Penguin UK, 1994. T. 913.
12. Werth N. The NKVD Mass Secret Operation n 00447 (August 1937 – November).
13. Wheatcroft S. The scale and nature of German and Soviet repression and mass killings, 1930–45 //Europe-Asia Studies. 1996. T. 48. №. 8. C. 1319-1353.