



Civic Engagement and the Gulag Museum at Perm-36, Russia

Through communication with former prisoners and guards and an international dialogue with other "sites of conscience," The Gulag Museum at Perm-36, Russia, is building all its programs on a foundation of civic engagement.

In December 1999, National Park Service (NPS) Northeast Regional Director Marie Rust became a founding member of the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience. At the Coalition's first formal meeting, Ms. Rust met Dr. Victor Shmyrov, Director of the Gulag Museum at Perm-36 in Russia, another founding institution of the Coalition. Dr. Shmyrov's museum preserves and interprets a gulag camp built under Joseph Stalin in 1946 near the city of Perm in the village of Kutschino, Russia. Known as Perm-36, the camp served initially as a regular timber production labor camp. Later, the camp became a particularly isolated and severe facility for high government officials. In 1972, Perm-36 became the primary facility in the country for persons charged with political crimes. Many of the Soviet Union's most prominent dissidents, including Vladimir Bukovsky, Sergei Kovalev and Anatoly Marchenko, served their sentences there. It was only during the Soviet government's period of "openness" of Glasnost, under President Mikael Gorbachev, that the camp was finally closed in 1987. Although there were over 12,000 forced labor camps in the former Soviet Union, Perm-36 is the last surviving example from the system.

Since 1996, the museum has undertaken the task of preserving and reconstructing the camp as a historic site. The museum has sent several delegations to the U. S. to learn from the National Park Service. In turn, a team of five NPS professionals, including experts in preservation and museum management, traveled to Russia in September 2001 to work with key staff at the Gulag Museum and learn about their civic engagement efforts.

Site History

The Gulag Museum at Perm-36 preserves, documents, and interprets the last surviving forced labor camp of the Soviet era (1917-1992).¹ Its stated mission is to establish a historic site that serves as a memorial museum of the history of political repression and totalitarianism in the former Soviet Union. The Museum also seeks to promote democratic values and civic consciousness.

Taken as a whole, the labor camp at Perm-36 powerfully illustrates the entire period of the forced labor camp system in the Soviet era. Although the Czarist regime preceding the Revolution did convict political opponents for crimes against the state and incarcerated them in prisons throughout the remotest parts of the country, the forced labor system implemented by the Bolsheviks was a new phenomenon in Russian history.² The Soviets used the system both as a means of imprisoning those who threatened the State and as a means of providing necessary labor

¹ Sources: Victor Shmyrov, the Museum's Director and a professionally trained historian of 20th century Russian history, provided most of the detailed information about the camp's history during interviews with him and his staff on September 8 and 9, 2001. For contextual information several published sources were consulted, including Alexander Solzhenitsyn, One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich (New York, Bantam Books, 1963); Michael Jakobson, Origins of the Gulag: The Soviet Prison Camp System, 1917-1934 (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1993); Galina Mikhailovna Ivanova, Labor Camp Socialism: The Gulag in the Soviet Totalitarian System (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000); and Natan Sharansky, Fear No Evil (New York, Random House, 1988).

² Michael Jakobson, Origins of the Gulag, 10; Galina Mikhailovna Ivanova, Labor Camp Socialism, 12.

to support the rapid programs of industrialization and economic expansion instituted in the years following the Revolution. This system of forced labor and political repression reached a peak under the rule of Josef Stalin, when the numbers of labor camp prisoners soared to almost three million people in the early 1950's.³ During the entire period of Soviet forced labor camps, from 1917 until 1987, it has been estimated that about 20 million people were imprisoned.⁴ But to fully appreciate the overall impact of such a repressive system, it should also be noted that over a million people worked as camp personnel between the 1920s and 1950s. In other words, the entire society was deeply affected by this social institution, both as oppressor and oppressed.

The labor camp museum in Kutchino is divided into two properties. The main facility served as a forced labor camp and detention center from 1946 to 1987. The second property, about ¼ of a mile down the road from the main facility, served as a camp industrial building (c.1952 - c.1956), soldiers' barracks (c.1956 – c.1972), and a "Maximum Security" unit (1977-1987).⁵ This maximum security facility housed those considered especially dangerous by the State: dissidents and human rights activists who continued their public agitation after release from their first prison terms.

The history of Perm-36 can be broken down into three major periods of significance: the Stalinist labor camp (1946-1956), the labor camp for high Soviet officials (1956-1971), and the labor camp for dissidents and human rights activists (1972-1987). Each period illustrates a significant aspect of the history of totalitarianism and political repression in the Soviet Union. The first period documents the typical forced labor camp found throughout the country when the number of prisoners soared after World War II, and the country embarked on a massive reconstruction project. The use of forced labor was an integral part of the post-war economy. As one historian has put it, "...in the conditions of the universal postwar devastation and impoverishment, the Gulag participated in the construction of the Soviet military-industrial complex and helped it grow and gain social prestige."⁶ All areas of the economy relied to one extent or another on forced labor; the forestry work carried out at this labor camp was quite typical of the period. The second period documents the incarceration of high Soviet officials, including members of the KGB, the judicial branch of government, and the military. These officials, treated as privileged prisoners, nevertheless had to be separated from the rest of the prisoner population because of fears for their security. The final period documents the incarceration of dissidents and human rights activists who posed the most serious threat to the internal stability and security of the Soviet Union. Many of these prisoners had national and international reputations for their work in human rights, national liberation movements, and other dissident activities throughout the Soviet republics. During the last period, the existence and location of the camp was a highly guarded secret. The construction of the maximum-security unit in 1979 illustrates further the increasing pressures the Soviet authorities felt to obliterate internal dissent by severely punishing those activists who repeatedly defied the state. Finally, it was this camp that was the last of the forced labor camp system to be closed down in 1987 under President Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of Glasnost. Today it stands as the best-preserved reminder of Soviet oppression. When once there were over 12,000 camps in the country, Perm-36 is believed to be the only intact camp left.

Also, at this time (as part of the national reform laws passed in 1948), the Soviet authorities implemented a plan to separate living zones and working or industrial zones throughout the Soviet

³ Galina Mikhailovna Ivanova, Labor Camp Socialism, xv.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁵ Various terms have been used by the Gulag Museum staff to describe this unit of the camp including Extraordinarily Severe Camp, Extremely Severe Camp, Especially Severe Camp and Maximum Security Camp. All of these terms except the last sound awkward in the English language. This report uses the term "Maximum Security," even though the facility as it existed at Perm-36 provided much harsher conditions than at any maximum security prisons in the United States.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

labor camp system. These reforms tried to address the severe problems of overexploitation of the prisoners and improve worker output.⁷

At this camp, the newly constructed industrial zone contained buildings to service the vehicles, provide workshop space for the base camp prisoners, provide central heating to the camp, and house an office for accounting and industrial management. In addition, on the area previously used for storing timber near the river (about ¼ of a mile from the base camp) a new facility was constructed to house workshops where the prisoners labored manufacturing planks into packing boxes.

Because there was less demand for labor at this type of operation than previously required for forestry workers, the total camp population dropped by a half, and two barracks were no longer used. Between 1952 and 1956, one barrack was converted into a canteen and one barrack was converted into a camp Headquarters (HQ).

For more detailed history of the site and the NPS trip, see www.georgewright.org/194hutchins.pdf. For more information on the Gulag Museum and the International Coalition, see www.sitesofconscience.org.

Civic Engagement at the Gulag Museum

Over the past several years, the Gulag Museum has developed a number of impressive educational programs for visitors to the site and for schools throughout the Perm region.

First and foremost, the Gulag Museum is a historic site. It uses a real place to teach about the history of totalitarianism and political repression in the former Soviet Union. Drawing on the three major periods of significance, a rich program of sharing the complex history of the place and discussion is presented to the site's 30,000 annual visitors.⁸ The Museum staff sees the site as a vehicle to teach visitors about the darker side of the Soviet past: to understand how a population is affected living under a totalitarian system of government. Although they are concerned with questions, such as "What happened here in this place?" they are even more interested in such questions as "How does a totalitarian state affect the individual citizen?" In addressing these questions to Russians today, they ask how the system of repression that existed not even a generation ago STILL affects Russian citizens and all of Russia today.

The site itself possesses great power. Even unfurnished and in its present state of incomplete reconstruction, it conveys a remarkable sense of the power of the state and the vulnerability of the individual. The labor camp's remote location, its spartan structures, the rows of wooden and barbed wire barriers (fully reconstructed in the "Maximum Security" unit) all convey a powerful story even without the narrative intervention of tour guides, exhibits, or furnished interiors. The Museum is lucky to have a remarkable understanding of the site's history and significance already.

The Museum Director, Victor Shmyrov, has clearly articulated one key point in developing the desired visitor experience: knowledge and education must be primary to the experience, emotion must remain secondary. Visiting the Gulag Museum is a truly powerful experience. Visitors, particularly Russians, often respond emotionally to this experience because it brings up highly charged feelings about the nation's recent past. There is certainly a place for emotion and reflection in the desired visitor experience, but it cannot be at the sake of educating the public about the system of political repression that permeated Russia under the Gulag system. Visitors to

⁷ Ibid., 109

⁸ This visitation was quoted by Director Victor Shmyrov several times while visiting the US in November 2002. Visitation projections at the Museum suggest that this number may quadruple in the next five years.

the site are encouraged to discuss, debate and engage the subject matter intellectually as a necessary foil to the emotional reactions the place elicits.

Hard work is already paying off. The Perm Regional Government has publicly acknowledged its belief that the presences of the Museum and its educational programs in the area have positively influenced the democratic process in the Region. More and more teachers want to bring their classes to the site, and the demand for traveling exhibits on the Gulag system have steadily increased. The Museum is now working with the Regional Government to amend school curriculum to include the repressive history of Soviet Russia and the introduction of liberal democratic values in the nation.

The Museum is now collaborating with a number of NPS sites to create an exhibit for American sites to host. The exhibit will incorporate civic engagement principles in its organization – stating questions and encouraging the audience to enter the conversation. Formal dialogue opportunities and educational programs will accompany the exhibit to ensure all visitors have an opportunity to engage the material. The first American venue for the exhibit will be Ellis Island.