

# GULAG FACT SHEET

**G**ulag is an acronym for *Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagarei* (State Administration of Penal Labor Camps), the bureaucratic entity responsible for running the country's penal camps. From 1929 until 1954 these camps were under the control of the secret police, known as the OGPU (1922-1934), the NKVD (1934-1946) and the MVD (1946-1954). While the camp system had precursors in both the Tsarist and early Soviet period, the Gulag was created as a vast complex of repression by the Soviet dictator, **Iosif Stalin** (r. 1929-1953). Beginning from its inception as one political prison, the former Solovetsky monastery, the Gulag grew to encompass dozens of major camp complexes with thousands of individual camps and millions of inmates.

- The **camp population** grew from 179,000 in 1929 to 2,468,524 in 1953 (reaching its height in 1950 with 2,525,146 inmates).
- Perhaps 18 million persons in total were incarcerated in the Gulag in this period.
- While numbers are sketchy, of the much larger number of gulag inmates plus exiled "special settlers" and labor colonists (often youth detention facilities) that totaled 26 million in these years, perhaps 1.5 million perished. It is important to remember, however, that in most years more people were amnestied from the Gulag than died in it. Excepting the brutal war years, the most common experience of the Gulag was surviving it.

The inmates or "**zeks**" of the Gulag consisted of common criminals, political prisoners and simple citizens caught up in the government's various "waves" of repression.

- Despite large numbers of political incarcerations by the secret police in this period (for instance, over 1.5 million were sent to the Gulag in the 1930s for "counter revolution"), the vast majority of inmates were incarcerated under non-political criteria (such as the draconian laws concerning "labor desertion" and "theft of socialist property").
- Some of the "crimes" that landed one in the Gulag included unexcused absences from work, petty theft, conveying an anti-government joke or being a prisoner of war.
- Gulag prisoners when released were often restricted to residency "in the zone" (the camp complex) and were forced to continue working as "free laborers" on much the same work they did as prisoners.

The Gulag evolved into an **economic empire** as much as a network of forced-labor prisons (at its height, one in every fifty Soviet workers was a *zek*).

- *Zeks* were used as nearly dehumanized slave labor and toiled on such large scale projects as canal and railroad construction, gold mining, logging, the Soviet atomic project and myriad other tasks.
- The great camp complexes of Karaganda, Kolyma, Norilsk acted as mechanisms of forced colonization to open the Soviet Union's frozen north and empty steppes.
- The forced labor of elite scientists in the so-called *sharashkas* or prison laboratories produced technological innovations, especially weaponry (Sergei Korolev, the father of the Soviet space program. was probably the most famous of the *sharashka* scientists).
- While the Gulag was never profitable, it dominated whole sectors of the Soviet Union's economy, especially mining and logging.

The Gulag's *zeks* never accepted their enslavement and conducted active and passive **resistance**.

- In the Gulag's early years many inmates escaped (in 1933 45,755 escaped, of which only 28,370 were recaptured).
- Later years saw large-scale revolts, such as the Kingir, Norilsk and Ust-usa which had to be suppressed with tanks and military aircraft.
- The *zeks* most effective means of resistance, however, was work slow-downs and *tukhta*, or falsification of output.

The inefficiency of the Gulag and the resistance of its inmates convinced Stalin's successors to scale it back dramatically following the dictator's death.

- Already in March of 1953 more than a million *zeks* were released and in 1956 more than 500,000 former inmates "rehabilitated," or pardoned of all political crimes.
- While forced labor and political persecution continued until the end of the Soviet Union, the camps never again approached the ubiquity and size they possessed under Stalin.
- Following Khrushchev's "Thaw" period (1956-1964), forced labor was again used to punish political dissent, usually under the laws against "anti-Soviet propaganda" (from 1968-1986 2,468 were sentenced to hard labor under this law).
- All political prisoners were pardoned and released by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1986 (288 in total).