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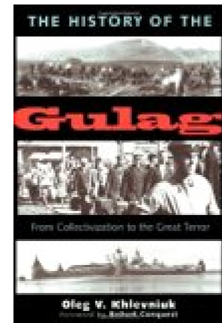

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An Inside View at the Machinery of Terror

After a comparatively restrained repression during the 1920s, the Soviet regime began a series of campaigns against potential or imagined opponents. From that decade, the structure of the Stalinist penal system was created. Its key feature was the large-scale exploitation of convicts in labor camps, where many convicts died. The bureau of the Glavnoye Upravleniye Ispravitelno-trudovykh Lagerey, (Chief Directorate of Corrective Labor Camps)–called at times the GULAG, part of the OGPU, and later the NKVD–managed the Soviet penal system, and its various acronyms became synonymous with mass repression.

The growth of the penal system was part of Stalin's successive campaigns to break the Soviet population to his will. The penal system's history has been known in broad outlines, but lacked precise data until the archives of the Communist Party and the central GULAG administration became available. Oleg Khlevniuk, from the State Archives of the Russian Federation (GARF), uses these now public internal documents to trace the GULAG expansion from 1929 to 1941 in *The History of the GULAG: From Collectivization to the Great Terror*. He describes the circumstances that led the Stalinist regime to prefer camps over other forms of forced labor, including evidence that shows Stalin's responsibility for the terror and repression. He uses regulations and reports to show that while the penal system intended to isolate and exploit (not exterminate), its brutality and disregard for human life cost the lives of many. From his deep knowledge of the archives, he adds precision to the discussion about the overall scale of Stalinist repression during these years, and the likely number of dead. His book adds to the ongoing debate among genocide scholars: Was Stalin's GULAG a genocidal act or not?

Initially, the regime preferred labor settlements as the main form of penal labor. From 1930 to 1933, "Kulaks" (land-owning peasants) and their families were exiled to create settlements in the forests of northern Russia, Siberia, or the steppes of Central Asia. After executing at least 20,000 Kulaks, another 2.14 million were dumped in the wilderness with inadequate food, tools, and shelter (another 4 million "Third Category" Kulaks were resettled on wasteland in their home region). The exiles labored for the government, with nature and climate cutting much of the cost of guarding the settlements. However, so many died that the regime stopped deportations in 1933 and issued several resolutions. After five years, Kulaks might have their civil rights restored, though they would never leave their exile settlements. They could send invalids and children to relatives. Punishments, fines, arrest, penal teams, and penal quarters were implemented, but wardens were ordered not to use food or physical abuse as punishment. Life, though harsh, gradually improved. Of those who had arrived as children, the government established regulations that set many of them free after they became adults, letting them leave the settlements. But mass exile was still used. In 1935 and 1937 two waves of "counterrevolutionary national contingents" (p. 146), were exiled–borderland ethnic groups, such as 171,000 Koreans, were dumped in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Many did not survive the first winter. The same happened to 400,000 Poles deported from areas an-

nexed after the Hitler-Stalin Pact.

In 1929, OGPU managed only labor camps. In 1931 it also became the administrator of labor settlements, and in 1934, as the new NKVD-USSR, of labor colonies and prisons. While labor colonies remained an important but secondary part of the GULAG penal system, labor camps became the primary manner of convict labor. Already in June 1929, before the Dekulakization and Collectivization campaigns, the Politburo had added 50,000 convicts to the small labor camps to develop mining and agriculture in remote regions. The camps grew from 179,000 convicts in 1930 to 510,307 in 1934. Yet the need to get the work done also made OGPU leaders try to preserve the long-term exploitability of convicts. For example, a November 1930 regulation stressed that the daily ration remain at 2,500 calories. Convicts could earn bonus days towards early release and sick convicts could not be worked to death, but sent to "recovery teams," though not those "whose health cannot be restored" (p. 43); they would just die. Though the camps continued to grow–725,483 in 1935 to 839,406 in 1936, then falling to 820,881 in 1937–the proportion of deaths fell, as new convicts arrived in reasonable health, camp rations became more plentiful, and the disabled were released. Anxious to know the true conditions in the camps, the NKVD leadership even put sealed complaint boxes in camps, mailed periodically to Moscow, and prosecuted a few commanders for wasting convicts.

In September 1936, Stalin appointed Nicolai Yezhov head of the NKVD. Several smaller groups were purged, such as naturalized foreigners, and then, in July 1937, the Politburo issued Order Nr. 00447 "To repress former kulaks, criminals, and other anti-soviet elements" (p.145), which began the mass-repression period called the Great Terror. Though "seemingly chaotic," Khlevniuk notes, the Great Terror was "a centrally directed action against various groups perceived as real or potential enemies" (p. 140). Stalin decided at all times the scale and scope of the repression, yet in such a manner that he could abruptly end it and blame the bloodshed on overzealous local NKVD agents. Khlevniuk cites new bloodcurdling internal NKVD reports that confirm survivor testimony found in works by Roy Medvedev and Robert Conquest.[1] After Stalin decided to end the mass purge, he scapegoated Yezhov and his crew, notably for using torture, technically against the law. But when Yezhov's successor, Lavrenti Beria, asked Stalin for guidance, he confirmed to Beria that torture was allowed and ordered an end to prosecutions of NKVD agents. To the scared masses it seemed that Stalin had not known of the bloodshed, and once he did had boldly reestablished socialist legality. For the number of victims, Khlevniuk follows the 1953 NKVD Pavlov report, published in greater detail by Arch Getty and Oleg Naumov.[2] But he cautions that the numbers noted in the NKVD report are a "minimal starting point" (p. 305), as obviously many people died without formal NKVD reports filed in Moscow.

During the Great Terror, the labor camp population jumped from 996,367 in 1938 to 1,317,195 in 1939 while life in the penal system worsened. Though seven new camp complexes were built, they could not handle the huge influx of new, often sick, convicts, despite orders that only able-bodied convicts be sent to labor camps. Internal reports speak of emaciated prisoners in infirmaries "lying naked on long bunks" (p.174). Of the 54,000 convicts at Ukhta-Pechora Camp, above the Arctic Circle, 8,000 were so sick they could not work at all and 11,132 were only to do light work according to the rules–yet they did heavy labor. Death rates in several camps were so high that Khlevniuk calls them "provisional death camps" (p. 178) since the state knew, yet did not care, that people were dying in such numbers. Disappointing the regime's hopes, many of the new convicts were too weak to fulfill the work expectations.

The NKVD was now one of the largest economic enterprises in the country and Stalin kept assigning it new projects, straining its resources. Beria successfully lobbied Stalin for new convicts. In June 1939 the Politburo ended early releases, allowed the transfer of more short-term prisoners from prisons and labor colonies to the camps, and gave the NKVD the right to execute convict "absentees, those refusing to work, and wreckers" (p. 203). The GULAG issued circulars warning against convict self-mutilation to gain early release and exhorted guards to punish them. To prevent escapes, Beria expanded the network of spies and fabricated a few cases of anti-Soviet underground to intimidate convicts. In 1940 the regime criminalized many workers in the general population by punishing unauthorized leaves with time in a prison or labor colony, as well as absences and tardiness. In less than a year over 3 million people were convicted thus, with 500,000 transferred to labor camps. The number of convicts grew from 1,344,408 in 1940, to 1,500,524 in 1941, falling to 1,415,596 in 1942.

By January 1, 1941, there were 4 million people registered in the four branches of the GULAG penal system: 1.5 million in NKVD corrective labor camps; 429,000 in labor colonies; 488,000 in prisons; and 1.5 million in special settlements, excluding the Polish citizens exiled in

1940 and those nominally freed but still bonded to the exile village. Another 2 million did corrective labor, a step away from the GULAG, to which they would be sent at the next infraction.

What had been the "price of terror"? And why? Some historians, such as Robert Thurston, argue that Stalin did not know about the terror,[3] that it was a reflection of bureaucratic infighting, or that the enslavement of people was a necessary, if cruel, method to quickly industrialize the country. Khlevniuk, on the other hand, stresses that new Politburo Special Files indicate that repression and terror were always initiated and supervised from Moscow, and Stalin's role was "active and decisive" (p. 331). Not once did NKVD leaders decide an important issue without Stalin's approval. Each wave of repression had political goals, the economic use of the repressed being a secondary though welcome side effect, especially as Soviet leaders were convinced that centrally managed slave labor was more effective than free labor. Yet, Khlevniuk shows, save for a few specific projects, convict labor was less economical. Also, many GULAG projects were ill-conceived, adding little lasting value to the infrastructure. The GULAG system did not help the Soviet Union industrialize faster than less repressive forms of labor would have.

Concerning camp life, the new archival documents Khlevniuk reprints show a lesser known side of Beria, who, according to these records, truly tried to make the camps more efficient, notably by checking that the official food and clothing ration was distributed and keeping overly brutal camp commanders on their toes with impromptu audits and occasional prosecutions for wrecking the slave herd. His efforts lowered the official death from 6.7 percent overall in 1938, with 10.4 percent average in forest camps, to 2.9 percent and 3.5 percent respectively, in 1939. Yet he could not be successful. He did not set the overall plan in which the GULAG was expected to be self-sufficient, the fees paid by other agencies for its work covering its expenses–a plan that always assumed convict labor to be cheaper than it really was. The NKVD leaders' orders to keep convicts in good condition also put camp commanders in a difficult spot. Convicts who did not fulfill their norm were under threat of harsh punishment–but so were camp commanders. To fulfill their allotment, camp commanders pushed convicts to the brink. In turn the NKVD center could not be too strict without crashing the system. To ease the pressure, camp staff simply fed *tufta* (garbage) into the statistics, bribing controllers to report work complete when it was not or by listing dead inmates as escapees in their reports. And just when Beria seemed to have stabilized camp mortality, Stalin crashed his reforms with a new wave of repression and assignments that sent death rates soaring. In 1940, the GULAG grew by nearly 200,000 inmates; the workday was raised from 10 to 11 hours, with 3 days off per month.

Using the 1953 NKVD reports by MVD Colonel Pavlov, still "our main source" (p. 287), Khlevniuk discusses the scale and scope of Stalinist repression during the decade. This report was published in English in 1992 and remains our main archival source given that the FSB archives are closed again and regional studies are still lacking detail. For some historians, the NKVD report shows that the regime, except for the Great Terror, was not that lethal, especially if one adopted its restricted definition of "political crimes" while obfuscating its responsibility for the terror-famine. On the other side, Alexander Yakovlev, who as a Politburo member saw other secret reports and knew something about the quality of Soviet statistics, stated about the Pavlov numbers for the Great Terror (but by extension about Pavlov's numbers in general), that "These figures, of course, are false."[4] Considering that the central planning was based on laboriously collected yet unreliable statistics, with the 1930s an era of egregious statistical make-believe (e.g., the saga of the population Census of 1937 and 1939), one should indeed be distrustful.

Based on his knowledge of the archives, Khlevniuk provides clarification to the debate. Concerning the scale of the repression, he notes that the NKVD data does not include arrests and sentences by police and regular courts, though from 1930 to 1940, non-NKVD courts passed 19.9 million convictions. Most were sentenced to corrective labor at their regular workplace or received suspended sentences, but 5,580,000 people received prison terms. The number of prison sentences is taken from a 2001 study by Kokurin and Morukov. Khlevniuk cautions the reader that the two authors "did not explain their method of calculation" (p.391, n16, 23). One wished for clarification–was their number reliable or not? Some historians essentially limit the victims of political repression to those sentenced by NKVD organs, but Khlevniuk, from his knowledge of the NKVD memoranda, concludes that most people sentenced by the non-NKVD courts were also "victims of the regime's brutality and its terrorist nature rather than ordinary criminals" (p. 306). And so, from 1930 to 1940, a total of 21 million people were sentenced (some repeaters) by NKVD and non-NKVD courts, plus 2.8 million Kulaks and exiled borderland ethnics, and over 4 million third-category Kulaks

resettled within their home region, a staggering proportion of repressed for a population of about 100 million adults.

Concerning the number of inmates in labor camps, Khlevniuk stresses that the Pavlov report was reliable, especially after 1934, when statistics were kept by the Department of Accounting and Distribution (URO) in a kind of double ledger system. Including repeaters and excluding those who died, Khlevniuk estimates that at least 3.75 million people "went through" the camps from 1934 to 1940. Under normal conditions (no purges), camp mortality was lower than commonly believed, for there were no children and old people and permanent invalids were periodically released. Less trustworthy is the NKVD reported total for the dead, from 1930 to 1941 575,000 dead inmates in camps, colonies, and prisons. This total is too low, Khlevniuk stresses, for many inmates who died were listed in other categories or not counted at all, such as the dead in Kolyma (1930-1933), those who died outside medical facilities (he estimates at 30,000 for both), and those who vanished during intercamp transports, (176,740 from 1934 to 1941). The official category to other penitentiaries also included camp executions, while camp commanders tried to minimize camp mortality by reporting deaths as escapees. From 1934 to 1941, the difference between "escaped" and "captured escapees" is a staggering 122,176. Also not included are 1932-1933 deaths in prison, when about 800,000 prisoners were fed, at times, only 400 calories a day. Out of 2.1 million inmates, the NKVD reported nearly 600,000 deaths for 1930-1934, and listed another 600,000 as "escaped" for 1931-1932. Now a few might indeed have successfully escaped their isolated outposts, and a few invalids were released after July 1931 to relatives. But most of these "escapees" were probably dead. The mortality among the 650,000 borderland ethnics deported between 1935 and 1937 is unknown and the fate of the 400,000 Polish exiles is only partly clear.

Khlevniuk notes that the number of dead in the GULAG "should be augmented," (p. 321) but does not venture an overall estimate. But looking at the statistical shadows in his discussion would give as probable numbers: 1 million who died in detention, 1.3 million who died as exiles, and 735,000 executions. He puts the victims of the terror-famine at a conservative 6-7 million. If one adds the likely dead among the "third-category" Kulaks and freed invalids dying after their release because of their time in the GULAG, this would support R.W. Davies' estimate that the new NKVD data shows 10-11 million deaths caused by the Soviet state in the 1930s.[5]

On the technical side, the translation from Russian is excellent. While reading, one does not have the feeling that it is a translation, which is important, as a bad translation can stump the reader. And there is much to stump the reader anyway, for the text is dense. It needs to be read carefully, pencil and pocket calculator at hand. This work adds much to our knowledge about the internal workings of the Stalinist penal regime. It is especially useful for the printing, in full, of 104 source documents, invaluable for those without access to Russian archives. Oleg Khlevniuk's *The History of the GULAG: From Collectivization to the Great Terror* should serve as an excellent resource for college instructors and others interested in the Stalinist regime.

Notes

[1]. Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[2]. Arch J. Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

[3]. Robert Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934-1941* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

[4]. Alexander N. Yakovlev, *A Century of Violence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 233.

[5]. R.W. Davies, "Forced Labour under Stalin: The Archives Revelations," *New Left Review* 214 (1995): pp. 62-80.

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