

On the Road to Democracy: The Gulag Museum at Perm-36

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In December 1999, Marie Rust, director of the National Park Service's (NPS's) Northeast Region, became a founding member of the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience. At the coalition's first formal meeting, Rust met Victor Shmyrov, director of the Gulag Museum at Perm-36 in Russia, another founding member/institution of the coalition, and the two agreed to begin a collaboration.

Shmyrov's museum preserves and interprets a gulag camp built under Joseph Stalin in 1946 in the village of Kutschino, Russia, near the city of Perm. Known as Perm-36, the camp is a typical labor camp—this one being focused on timber production. If you've read *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, this is very much like the camp described by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

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. The camp closed in 1987. Many believe this to be the last preserved unit in an intricate chain of prisons, labor camps, and remote areas of exile stretching across thousands of miles in Russia. Although there were over 12,000 camps like this one in Russia, Perm-36 is the last surviving intact example from the system.

Scholars estimate that 20 million people died in the labor camps as a result of Stalin's repressions. Many millions more were imprisoned or deported to remote areas. The gulag system affected everyone in the country. This was a way of controlling the entire population; the country was industrialized on the backs of its forced labor. Let me be clear here: this is not a system of jails—those existed for criminals. This was a system of repression and fear for everyone else. Being late to work three times merited a five-year sentence. An unexcused absence from work or failure to make daily work quotas usually meant ten years in the gulag.

In the 1990s, the camp complex was rediscovered by a group of historians who decided that preserving this difficult story from Russia's past was critical to the country's future. The Gulag Museum at Perm-36 was created to "promote democratic values and civil consciousness in contemporary Russian society through preservation of the last Soviet political camp as a vivid reminder of repression, and an important historical and cultural monument." Civic engagement was part of this museum's mission from its inception.

Since 1996, the museum has undertaken the task of preserving and reconstructing the camp as a historic site and providing a range of interpretive and dialogue experiences for schoolchildren and visitors to the site. The museum has sent several delegations to the United States to learn from NPS. These groups observed interpretive and educational programs, looked at self-financing examples, and visited significant American sites that deal with difficult issues and recent history. They also asked NPS to send a team of preservation and museum professionals to Perm-36 to provide technical assistance, and I was honored to lead that group.

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. A rich program of sharing the complex history of the

place and discussion is presented to the site's 30,000 annual visitors.¹ 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 rehabilitation, 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—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.

However, the museum has struggled with many of the same issues that American sites such as Manzanar National Historic Site have. Should the fencing and guard towers be reconstructed where missing (Figure 1)? Is it enough to evoke the sense of imprisonment—or do you need the eight rows of security perimeters to truly understand how people were made to feel here? Through active engagement with former prisoners and guards, the museum staff has decided that restoring key features, such as the guard tower from the maximum security unit, is appropriate.

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 are encouraged to discuss, debate, and engage the subject matter intellectually as a necessary foil to the emotional reactions the place elicits. A civic hall—a place typical of community gatherings in Russian villages—has been created inside one of the structures to provide a safe forum for this conversation.

Hard work is already paying off. The Perm Regional Government has publicly acknowledged its belief that the presence 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 has steadily increased. The museum is now working with the regional government to amend school curricula 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 to be hosted by American historic sites, including Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site, Manzanar, Boston National Historical Park, and Ellis Island. The exhibit will incorporate civic engagement principles in its organization—stating questions and encouraging the audience to enter the dialogue. Introductory panels at each host site will link contemporary issues of human rights, immigration, and repression to the historic themes of the gulag and the host site. Formal interpretive opportunities and educational programs will accompany the exhibit to ensure that all visitors have an opportunity to engage the material. Through this international partnership, NPS sites will benefit from the Gulag Museum's extensive experience with civic engagement, and will build mechanisms to continue this work in their everyday programming.

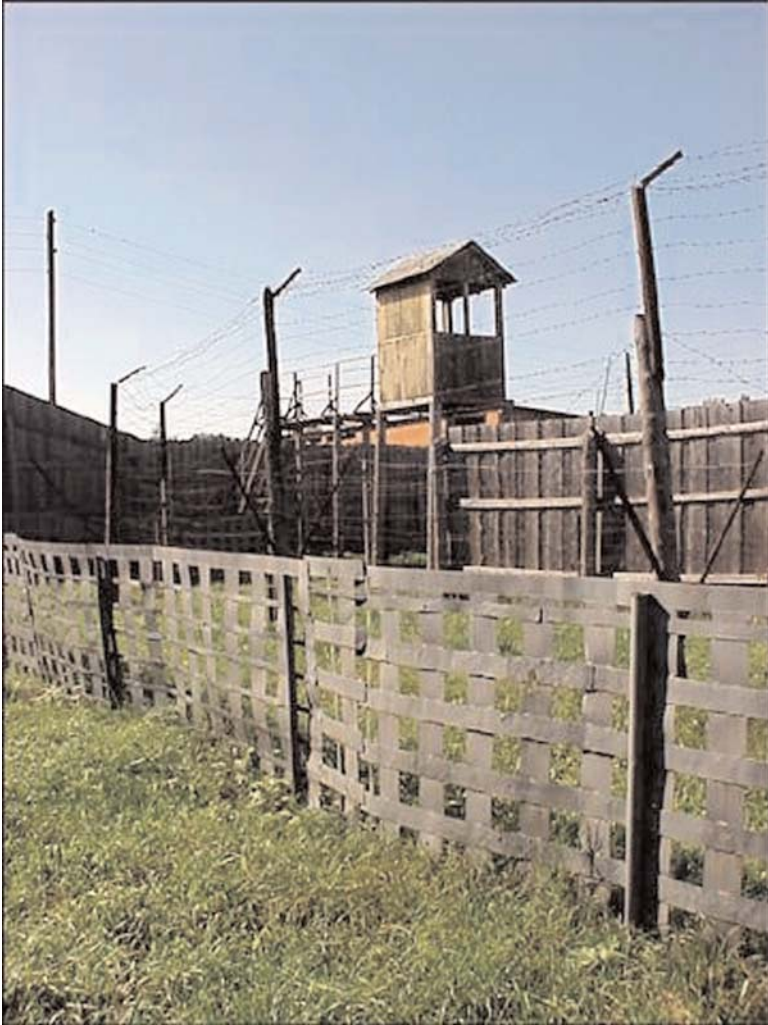


Figure 1. A reconstructed guard tower in the maximum security complex. National Park Service photo.

Endnote

1. This visitation figure was quoted by Shmyrov several times while visiting the United States in November 2002.

Visitation projections at the museum suggest that this number may quadruple in the next five years.

