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P.O. Box 65
Hancock, Michigan 49930-0065 USA
1-906-487-9722 • fax 1-906-487-9405
www.georgewright.org

What Does the Soviet Gulag Have to Do with the National Park Service?

Louis Hutchins, National Park Service, Northeast Museum Services Center, Charlestown, Massachusetts 02129; louis_hutchins@nps.gov

For the past four years, I have been working with a dynamic and highly significant museum deep in the heart of Russia: the Gulag Museum at Perm-36. You might ask, as I do in the title of my talk today, “What does the Soviet Gulag have to do with the National Park Service?” It’s a question I get asked often, and so I want to start with a brief discussion of civic engagement. To expand a little on what Cynthia Macleod said in her introduction to this session, at its core, civic engagement means creating an ongoing dialogue with visitors about the stories we tell. We use historic sites to tell powerful stories about the American past, but we also can and should connect those histories to contemporary issues in American society.

The civic engagement initiative developed out of several impulses, some internal and some external to the NPS. Today I want to touch on one of those external forces: the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience. In 1999, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City, an affiliated site of the NPS, issued an international call to historic site directors committed to not only preserving the past but also actively engaging visitors in issues facing society today. Several site directors responded with enthusiasm, including our own Marie Rust, then the Northeast regional director. The group’s charter declares:

We hold in common the belief that it is the obligation of historic sites to assist the public in drawing connections between the history of our site and its contemporary implications. We view stimulating dialogue on pressing social issues and promoting humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function.

The founding members included: Lower East Side Tenement Museum, New York City; Terezin Memorial, Czech Republic; District Six Museum, South Africa; Slave House Museum, Senegal; Work House Museum, England; Open Memory, Argentina; The Liberation War Museum; the National Park Service, Northeast Region; and the Gulag Museum, Russia.

In 2003, the Gulag Museum’s director, Victor Shmyrov, proposed a joint project to collaboratively develop, design, and bring to the U.S. an exhibit on the history of the Soviet forced labor camps and the role of the Gulag Museum to educate Russians about their totalitarian past.

Several National Park Service sites address social injustice in American history and the relevance of this history to contemporary life. Some of these sites welcomed the opportunity to host such an exhibit, and they have been actively engaged in developing this project. These sites include Manzanar National Historic Site, the former Japanese internment camp in central California; *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historic Site in Topeka, Kansas; Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site in Atlanta; Eleanor Roosevelt National His-

toric Site in Hyde Park, New York; the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, New York City; and Boston National Historical Park.

What was the Gulag? “Gulag” was the acronym for the Soviet bureaucratic institution, *Glavnoe Upravlenie ispravitel'no-trudovykh Lagerie* (Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps). This branch of the secret police oversaw the Soviet forced labor camp and internal exile system. Between the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, some 25 million people were held in the Gulag system. At its height under Stalin in the early 1950s, the system held over 5 million prisoners.

The former Gulag camp, Perm-36, was originally set up as a rather typical camp in the 1940s in the heavily forested region in the Ural Mountains, not far from the western edge of Siberia. It housed 1,000 prisoners in four barracks (Figure 1). Under brutal conditions (Figure 2), prisoners cut timber and in the spring floated it downstream to help the cities rebuild after the devastation of World War II.

After Stalin’s death in 1953, the new Soviet leaders drastically reduced the size of the Gulag, and most labor camps were abandoned. Perm-36 survived because of its remote location. First it housed convicted Soviet authorities. Then, in the early 1970s, it was transformed into one of the most notorious facilities for human rights political prisoners. By the late 1960s, the Soviet Union faced a serious internal threat: dissidents and human rights activists who publicized their activities when possible and created serious image problems internationally. The human rights movement had been growing in the 1960s and it was spurred by opposition to Soviet actions, in particular the suppression of the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia in 1968. Increasingly the government had to deal with punishing and isolating these political prisoners. In 1972, during a period of renewed political repression in the USSR, Perm-36 was converted into a political prison, and for the next 15 years, the camp, along with two others nearby, held many of the Soviet Union’s most prominent dissidents.

After the Soviet Union’s collapse, some Russian historians, human rights activists, former Gulag prisoners, and others created civic organizations to help foster remembrance. One of the most prominent, the Memorial Society, erected small monu-



Figure 1. Artist’s rendition of the camp in 1946. There were four barracks of 250 prisoners each, a headquarters building, out-houses, a hospital, and a punishment block. Courtesy of the Gulag Museum at Perm-36.



Figure 2. Restored prison cell at the Especially Severe camp barracks. During the prisoner’s term, he only saw his cell-mate and his guard, who took him to his work cell and to his exercise yard. Most prisoners spent at least five years in this camp. Several died there as well. Courtesy of the Gulag Museum at Perm-36.



Figure 3. The last remaining original barracks in 2001. The museum has been working to restore the original structures to interpret the entire history of the camp. Courtesy of the Gulag Museum at Perm-36.

1985. Thanks to dedicated reconstruction efforts, the museum was able to open in 1996, and today the former camp is the only surviving complex from the Soviet Gulag system (Figure 4).

Through the offering of tours, exhibits, and workshops, the museum is able to fulfill its mission statement: “To promote democratic values and civic consciousness in contemporary Russia through preservation of the last Soviet political camps as a living reminder of repression and as an important historical and cultural monument.”

The stories the museum tells remain highly controversial today. In a 1993 Russian public opinion poll, about 8% who responded believed that Stalin’s role had been positive. In 2003, on the 50th anniversary of his death, the positive response had swelled to over 50%. Many forces in Russia today do not like what the Gulag Museum is doing.

The exhibit that the National Park Service and the Gulag Museum are jointly bringing to the United States will present the story of the Gulag in three sections. The first section will explore the Gulag as it developed and grew into a powerful tool of repression under Stalin. The second section will address the rise of the human rights movement within the Soviet Union and focus on the history of Perm-36. The final section will look at the legacy of the Gulag in Russia today (Figure 5).

I want to leave you with one image today, a pair of ordinary objects that will be featured in the exhibit: the toothbrushes of former dissidents Ivan Kovalev and Tatiana Osipova.

In the late 1970s, Ivan was editor of the outlawed *Chronicle of Current Events* which documented human rights abuses within the country. Tatiana, his wife, was active in the

ments throughout the country to commemorate victims of totalitarianism. In 1991, Memorial Society activists, who wanted to preserve a forced labor camp to serve as a memorial to the Gulag victims, organized to save Perm-36. By the early 1990s, Perm-36 lay in ruins (Figure 3). KGB officials had destroyed much of the facility after Ukrainian Television crews filmed and broadcast the facility where internationally renowned poet Vasily Stus had died from neglect in

Figure 4. Visitors at Perm-36 Museum. Courtesy of the Gulag Museum at Perm-36.



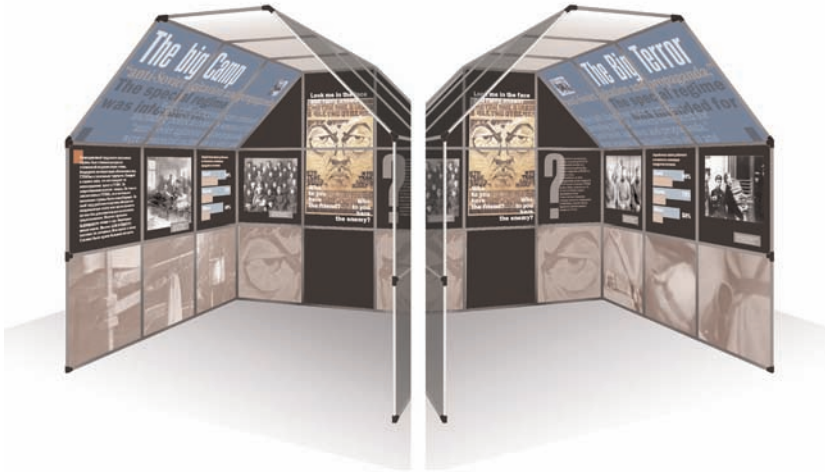


Figure 5. Traveling exhibition module prototype design. The exhibit will feature full-scale prison cell sections, prisoner artwork, artifacts, maps, photographs, Soviet propaganda posters, and official Soviet newsreels on the Gulag. Oleg Trushnikov, exhibit designer. Courtesy of the Gulag Museum at Perm-36.

Helsinki Group, a human rights organization. After she was arrested in 1980, he sent her a toothbrush. Etched in the plastic is a love message. The authorities never saw it. When he was arrested in 1981, she sent him, through her mother, a toothbrush which also contained a love message. Sadly, Ivan never thought to look for a message since it came through Tatiana's mother, but when they were reunited in the late 1980s, he still had the toothbrush. These are treasured objects. And they tell a powerful story of struggle and endurance.

All societies and countries have painful pasts—histories that are difficult to face, stories some would rather ignore or deny. This traveling exhibit presents an opportunity for the NPS to share with American visitors a model of how historic sites can play an important role in the dialogue about a nation's past and its future. No doubt there will be some visitors surprised when visiting Ellis Island or Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site to discover an exhibit on such a seemingly foreign topic. I hope and believe it will spur them also to think about the history of the site they are visiting and its implications for our society today.