

Dialogue Between Continents: Civic Engagement and the Gulag Museum at Perm-36, Russia

In December 1999, at the initiative of National Park Service (NPS) Northeast Regional Director Marie Rust, the agency 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 institution of the coalition. 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 facility 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 January 1988. Although it is estimated that 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. 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. During a trip in April 2001, the Gulag Museum's staff asked Rust to send a team of preservation and museum professionals from NPS to visit Perm-36 and provide technical assistance in

four specific areas that required on-site consultation:

1. Surveying all historic structures and developing prioritized guidelines for the stabilization, preservation, treatment, repair, and reconstruction of the built elements of the camp.
2. Reviewing of the museum's organization and staffing with recommendations leading towards meeting international standards for professional museum operations.
3. Creating a museum storage space for the preservation of artifacts and archival materials at the site

and providing recommendations for future preventative conservation treatment.

4. Writing general guidelines for promoting the historic site internationally to visitors through tourism, publications and sales items, and web-based technology.

A team of five NPS professionals, including experts in preservation and museum management, was selected to provide this assistance by traveling to the site and working with key museum staff (Figure 1).

exhibits, and a gallery where he was installing a new temporary exhibit. The exhibit featured family photographs from the Stalinist period, all of which had faces of individual family members removed or blotted out, an apparently common practice among families whose relatives had been identified as political enemies of the state and sent to camps or executed. This eerie and powerful exhibit indicated the history and subject matter the team was to experience in Russia. Once the team arrived in the Ural



Figure 1. The NPS team and staff of the Gulag Museum at Perm-36. Photo by Oleg Trushnikov.

Summary of Itinerary

The team members arrived in Moscow on September 4, 2001. In Moscow, the team was met by Yuri V. Reshetnikov, the primary exhibit designer for the Gulag Museum at Perm-36. The team toured the museum at the Andrei Sakharov Archives, where Reshetnikov had designed the

region, in the city of Perm, the team saw the outside of the prison used to incarcerate and then distribute prisoners to the forced labor camps throughout the region. The prison still holds criminals today. The team also visited the memorial to victims of Soviet repression recently built on the outskirts of town before proceeding to

Perm-36, which lies in a remote area of the Urals about four hours' drive from Perm.

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 civil 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 of providing necessary labor 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 Stalin, when the numbers of labor camp prisoners soared to almost three million people in the early 1950s.³ During the entire period of Soviet forced labor camps, from 1917 until 1988, it has been estimated that about 20 million people were imprisoned.⁴ But to fully appre-

ciate 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 1988. The second property, less than a mile down the road from the main facility, served as a camp industrial building (ca.1952-ca.1956), soldiers' barracks (ca.1956-ca.1972), and a "maximum security" unit (1979-1988).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 (1972-1988). 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 1988 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.

Period 1, 1946-1956: Stalinist labor camp. During the first period, the labor camp served as a typical logging camp established under the Stalinist regime. Built to exploit the heavily forested areas of the Ural region, this camp and many others relied on the manual labor of thousands of imprisoned citizens to provide timber downstream to the many cities and towns devastated during World War II. The timber camps were built from logs as temporary facilities: as soon as the prisoners cleared the forests (about five to ten years), the authorities moved the prisoners into a new section of the forest where they would build a new camp.

This camp also served as a base camp for four satellite camps located deep in the forests. It served as the headquarters for the operation, providing the distribution point for all the prisoners and for food and other supplies. The base camp housed about one thousand prisoners, and each of the four satellite camps housed between six and eight hundred prisoners. The base camp consisted of four barracks with about 200 to 250 prisoners each. It also contained a hospital unit, storage facility, wash house, outhouse, and punishment cell. Less than a mile down the road from the camp, at a site near the Tchusovoy River, a storage area for the logged timber was created. The prisoners at the various camps within the complex hauled the logs to this site during the year, and floated them down river during the spring floods.

Between 1946 and 1951, this labor camp complex was a typical low-secu-

rity camp which housed prisoners sentenced to short terms (up to five years). If the prisoner was finishing up a longer sentence, he might be transferred to such a camp to complete his term. These low-security prisoners were not considered dangerous.

By 1951, the prisoners had fully exploited the forests surrounding the camp and its satellite camps. The satellite camps moved farther from the base camp to better exploit remaining forests, and the base camp was supplied with vehicles for transporting timber. This development was considered technologically advanced in a camp economy system that relied overwhelmingly on manual labor.⁷

Also, at this time (as part of the national reform laws passed in 1948), the Soviet authorities implemented a plan throughout the Soviet labor camp system to administratively separate living zones for prisoners and working-industrial facilities where the work took place. These reforms tried to address the severe problems of overexploitation of the prisoners and improve worker output.⁸

At Perm-36, 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, a new facility was constructed to house workshops where the prisoners loaded manufacturing planks into packing boxes.

Because there was less demand for labor at this type of operation than previously required for forestry work-

ers, the total camp population dropped by a half, and two barracks were no longer used. Between 1952 and 1956, one barracks was converted into a canteen and another into a camp headquarters.

Period 2, 1956-1971: Labor camp for Soviet officials. Between 1956 and 1958, the camp was converted to house Soviet officials, including KGB, judicial branch authorities, and military officials accused of abuses of power. These prisoners had to be isolated from the rest of the prisoner population because their lives would have been threatened by other prisoners. Of course, there was great irony in this—that those who had been the oppressors of the innocent became the oppressed themselves. These officials were soon replaced by those Soviet officials accused of criminal activity, such as committing theft or accepting bribes.

The Soviet officials who were imprisoned could not (or would not) perform much labor, and the timber processing operation was closed down. The building built for this use near the river was converted into living quarters for the soldiers who guarded the camp. The rest of the camp remained essentially unchanged. Those prisoners who could work labored in the workshops in the industrial zone.

Period 3, 1972-1988: Labor camp for dissidents and human rights activists. Beginning in the 1960s, each labor camp throughout the Soviet Union was identified by region (letter code) and number. Until 1972, this camp was called “UT-

389/6,” meaning it was located in the Perm region and it was timber camp number 6. Beginning in 1972, when Soviet officials converted the camp into a secret camp for dissidents and human rights activists, the camp location was camouflaged by the two-letter code “BC.” One major concern of the Soviet officials was the ability of dissidents to leak information to the general population and to the foreign press. The camp’s code name was one of many efforts to stop all such leaks. There were a total of thirty-four “normal” labor camps in the Perm region, plus those two set aside for especially dangerous criminals of the state, BC-389/35 and BC-389/36. This number provides the origin of the camp’s name today, “Perm-36.”

The creation of special camps for dissidents and human rights activists, such as Perm-35 and Perm-36, marked a new chapter in Soviet attempts to quiet opposition to the state. The student uprisings in much of Europe in the late 1960s and the challenges from Soviet Bloc countries, particularly Czechoslovakia, fostered an awakening among Soviet intellectuals, many of whom circulated their opposition through the Samizdat (underground press) to fellow Soviet citizens and abroad. Their collective resistance created a serious problem for the Soviets, both in terms of maintaining internal stability and promoting a positive image abroad.

Perm-36 was identified as the best place for these dissidents because it had been very well secured while used as a camp for high Soviet officials. The high Soviet officials were transferred to a new facility at Nizhniy Taghil in

1971, and in the year that followed, the camp was again reconfigured to house the dissident population. The headquarters was reconstructed in masonry, a new outhouse was built, the paths were paved, and a new barracks for guards was built outside the camp fence. In the industrial zone, the workshop and maintenance shed (Building 11) were reconfigured to house new machinery for the production of parts for domestic laundry irons. When production began sometime in 1972, the prisoners produced parts for a manufacturing plant located about 50 kilometers from the camp. Some of the prisoners worked in general camp maintenance, such as in the forge shop and in the boiler house. On July 13, 1972, the first 300 prisoners were transferred from Mordoviya.

Although the make-up of the prisoner population at Perm-36 changed from year to year, about 50% had been convicted of anti-Soviet propaganda, about 25% had been convicted of treason, and about 25% had been convicted of Nazi collaboration during World War II.

In the early 1970s, the problem of repeat offenders among dissidents and human rights activists was relatively minor. As the decade wore on, however, it became an increasing problem for the Soviet authorities. In their search for a new place to provide almost complete isolation for the recidivists, the authorities identified the former guard barracks near the Perm-36 camp as an ideal location. The building was reconstructed and the immediate surrounding area was reinforced with a series of barbed wire and high wooden fences topped with watchtowers in

1979. An administration building and checkpoint was constructed, as was a barracks for the guards. On March 1, 1980, the first 23 or 24 prisoners arrived. Here the prisoners experienced almost total isolation for ten-year terms. They lived under the harshest of conditions in cramped twenty-four-hour-locked cells with one or three other prisoners, worked in small workshops in the same build-

ing, and exercised in small pens, closed boxes lined with metal and covered with barbed wire, not much larger than their cells. During the course of their term they saw only the other prisoners in their cell and the guards who ushered them from place to place within the building (Figure 2).

Perm-36 ceased operation as a labor camp, the last to close in the Soviet Union, in January 1988.



Figure 2. The guard tower at the maximum security unit. Photo by William Brookover, National Park Service.

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.⁹ 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 such questions as "What happened here in this place?" they are even more interested in asking "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's 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. As stated above, 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 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 presence of the museum and its educational programs the area has 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 the 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 that all visitors have an opportunity to engage the material.

Conclusion

It is difficult to articulate in words the power conveyed by visiting the museum at Perm-36. Imagine if a group of dedicated Americans had established a historic site museum at a slave auction site or plantation at the end of the Reconstruction period in the 1870s. Imagine the power that experience would have had for visitors who had recently been enslaved or owned slaves. Imagine the kinds of dialogue it could have created. Imagine the potential impact of such a historic site in the country as it moved to

enact restrictive codes for African Americans and Jim Crow laws. This analogy points to the kind of power the Gulag Museum at Perm-36 conveys to Russian and international visitors today.

For the group of NPS professionals, the visit had tremendous impact, even though few of us knew much about the Gulag system and the millions of people it affected before going on the trip. To hear first-hand from those who lived in and survived the system provides an unprecedented opportunity for learning and greater international understanding. The visit was made all that more poignant, when the events of September 11, 2001, put an exclamation point on our experience. The team had struggled to understand how an entire population could be controlled by fear. After learning of the tragedies in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania perhaps we had a better understanding of just how that can happen. Thanks to the efforts of the Gulag Museum at Perm-36, Russia will not forget and it will not happen again.

Endnotes

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, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2000); and Natan Sharansky, *Fear No Evil* (New York: Random House, 1988).
2. Jakobson, *Origins of the Gulag*, p. 10; Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism*, p. 12.
3. Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism*, p. xv.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 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 paper 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.*, p. 111.

7. Ibid., pp. 116-117.
8. Ibid., p. 109.
9. This visitation figure was quoted by Shmyrov several times while visiting the U.S. in November 2002. Although about 8,000 people actually visit the camp, 30,000 people are reached annually through programs, traveling exhibits, and museum activities. Visitation projections at the museum suggest that this number may quadruple in the next five years.

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