

# IGA-677 / RusNatSecPol / Lecture 7

## Forced Labor and the Gulag

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## Today's objectives

1. *Identify:* problems of Soviet economic planning, and motivations to create/intensify coercive labor institutions
2. *Discuss:* why positive inducements for workers were insufficient to meet needs of industrialization
3. *Consider:* role of prison labor in Soviet economic development

Labor in the Soviet Economy  
Prison Labor in the Soviet Economy



Figure 1: Where would you most (and least) like to live and work?



Figure 2: Arzamas-16



Figure 4: Makhachkala



Figure 6: Norilsk



Figure 3:  
Komsomolsk-on-Amur



Figure 5: Moscow



Figure 7: Severodvinsk

# Labor in the Soviet Economy

## Problems for Soviet Economic Planning

1. Free movement of labor
  - mass movement to urban areas,  
de-population of countryside
  - workers unwilling to move to  
areas where labor demand is high
2. Labor turnover
  - workers leave assigned jobs
  - limited economic incentives  
available to recruit/retain workers

Many of these problems were self-inflicted,  
but others predated the 1917 revolutions.

### Solution:

coercion + (some) positive inducements



Figure 8: Doesn't add up

## Positive incentives

## Wages

1. Piece-rate pay (sdel'naya oplata)
  - introduced in 1928 (5 Year Plan)
  - wage payments based on amount of work completed by individuals
  - fixed rate for 100% of quota
  - bonus pay for exceeding quota
  - bonus pay for overtime work
2. Minimum wage
  - introduced in 1937
  - applied across industries, sectors
3. Wage differentiation
  - different piece-rates across positions, industries, sectors
  - to conceal inequalities, average wages usually not published



Figure 9: Earn your pay

## Benefits

1. Housing
  - state-subsidized apartments for “leading workers”
2. Private gardens
  - small plots for household consumption
  - livestock permitted
3. Civilian decorations
  - recognize great achievements in economy and culture (e.g. Order of Lenin, Hero of Socialist Labor)
4. Workplace health and safety
  - factory inspectors
  - factory clinics
  - sanatoriums



Figure 10: Upgrade

*Discussion:*

why weren't these incentives strong enough?

## Shortcomings

1. Incentives to “cook the books”
  - managers inflate production numbers, manipulate quotas
  - workers cut corners to meet quota
  - lots of uncompleted production
2. Bureaucratic overhead
  - costly to calculate, administer payments for task-specific work
3. Recruitment/retention problem
  - factories must keep quotas low to attract workers
4. Inequalities
  - inconsistent incentives across and within industries

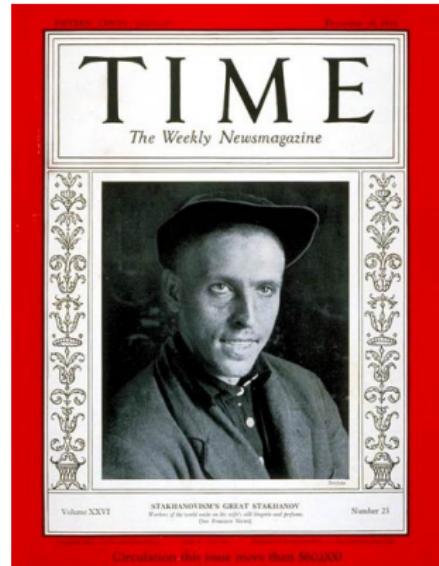


Figure 11: Real Stakhanovite

## Negative incentives

### **Permanent record**

## 1. Employment book (trudovaya knizhka)

- (re-)introduced in 1939
  - like an internal passport for jobs
  - deterrent against labor turnover
  - keeps record of:
    - jobs held
    - salaries
    - rewards
    - punishments
    - performance evaluations
    - reasons for dismissal
  - still exists today in some post-communist countries



Figure 12: Wherever you go

Figure 13: We're watching

## Criminalization of shirking

1. Tying workers to enterprises
  - June 1940 law
  - criminal punishments for absenteeism, tardiness, indiscipline, laziness
2. "Broken windows" policy in workplace
  - August 1940 law
  - minor infractions criminalized (e.g. drinking on job, theft)
  - workers could now be punished for job search, apartment hunting
3. Vocational training reform
  - October 1940 law
  - prohibited voluntary departures from post-graduation work assignments
4. Wartime measures in defense industry
  - tribunals for departures, idleness



Figure 14: Fair warning

## Corrective labor for slackers

1. 6 month sentences for absenteeism
  - 10.9 million sentenced 1940-1952
2. 2-4 months for unauthorized leaves
  - 2.8 million sentenced 1940-1952
3. 5-6 year sentences under martial law
  - 1.1 million sentenced 1941-1947

Did this deterrent work?

- yes (e.g. turnover in metallurgy drops from 7 to 2 percent/month in 1940)
- but turnover bounced back after war
- 1947 turnover statistics, by industry:
  - 64% per year in construction
  - 54% per year in mining
  - 40% per year in oil industry
  - 36% per year in metallurgy
  - 34% per year in light industry



Figure 15: Lock them up!

# Prison Labor in the Soviet Economy

## Main Administration of Camps (GULAG)

Established 1930; first camps opened 1919.

Parent agencies:

1. 1919-1922:

All-Russian Extraordinary Commission  
(VChK)

2. 1922-1923:

People's Commissariat of Internal  
Affairs (NKVD)

3. 1923-1934:

Joint State Political Directorate  
(OGPU) within Council of People's  
Commissars (SNK)

4. 1934-1946:

NKVD (re-constituted)

5. 1946-1960:

Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD)



Figure 16: Hard labor

## Types of Gulag facilities

### 1. Correctional labor camps

- Ispavitel'no-trudovye lagerya (ITL)
- for prisoners serving 3+ years
  - prison-like, w/ guards, surveillance



### 2. Labor colonies

- for prisoners serving < 3 years
- in remote regions, fewer guards

### 3. Labor settlements (trudposeleniya)

- locations of exile for class enemies
- in remote regions, fewer guards

### 4. Scientific research labs (sharashki)

- for scientists and engineers with special skills

### 5. Psychiatric hospitals

### 6. Territorial prison administration system

Figure 17: Rest well



Figure 18: Work well

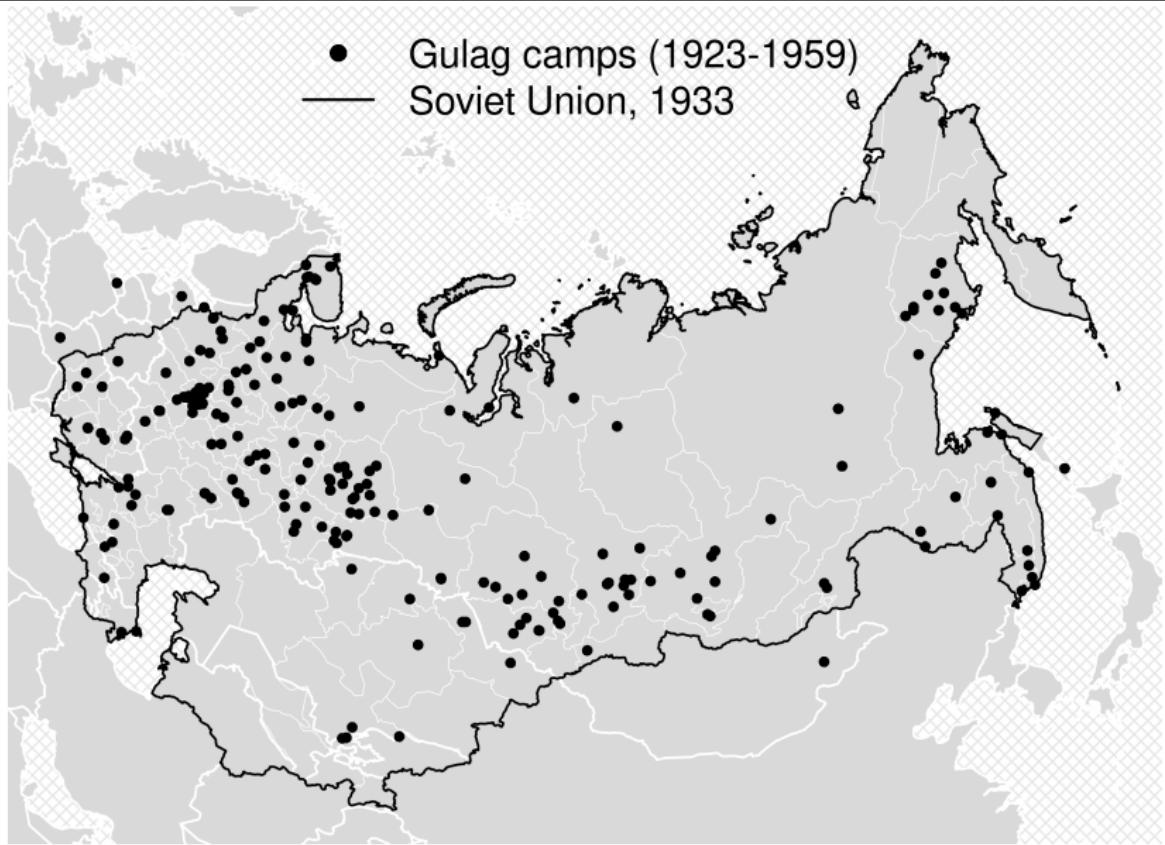


Figure 19: Geographic distribution of correctional labor camps (ITL)

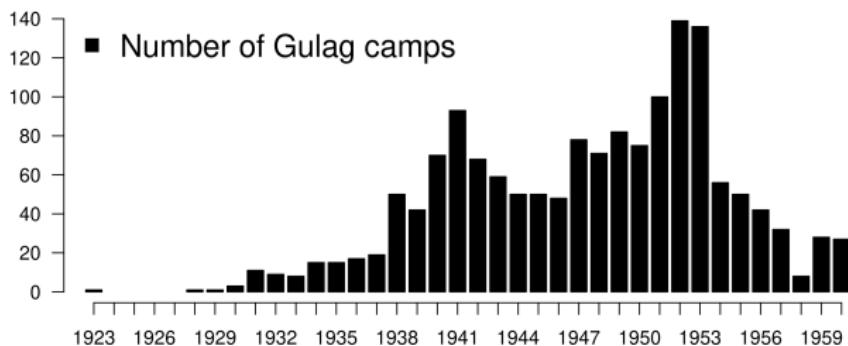


Figure 20: Correctional labor camps (ITL) over time

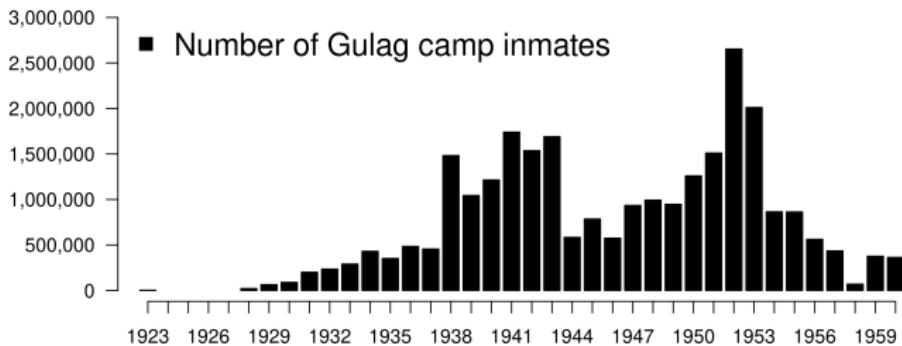


Figure 21: Correctional labor camp (ITL) inmates over time

## Gulag as a labor force provider

## Why use prison labor?

1. Cheaper than free labor
  - market wages for free labor ≫ subsistence wages for unfree labor
  - remote areas with harsh climate too costly to settle with free labor
  - shortcut to industrial colonization
2. More mobile than free labor
  - workers could be rapidly shifted to regions with high labor demand
3. Address labor shortages in economy
  - deploy workers to industries with high turnover rates

### *Discussion*

What similarities/differences to you see with the motivations for serfdom?



Figure 22: The expendables

## Where prison labor was utilized the most

1. Capital construction projects  
(e.g. canals, railroads)
  - represented 2/3 of Gulag economic activity
2. Natural resource extraction  
(e.g. diamond, metal mining)
3. Forestry  
(e.g. logging)
4. Internal Gulag production  
(e.g. clothes, shoes, construction)
5. Agriculture  
(limited, mainly in special settlements)

## Types of employment

1. Internal  
(main industrial administrations, glavki)
2. External  
(on contract to civilian enterprises)



Figure 23: Gold mine



Figure 24: Belomorkanal

## Taking stock of Gulag's contribution

## How reliant was Soviet economy on prison labor?

1. Small share of total labor force
  - 2 out of 100 workers were inmates
2. But huge variation by industry
  - 1 out of 5 construction workers
  - almost 100% in some extractive industries (diamond, platinum)
3. Created “addiction” to cheap labor
  - demand for prison labor > supply
  - ministries lobby for more prisoners, NKVD struggle to keep up
  - difficult to replace prisoners with civilian workers



Figure 25: #ZekLife

## Inefficiencies of prison labor

1. Low productivity
  - no positive incentives
  - high mortality, deadly conditions
  - low mechanization
2. Incentivizes shirking
  - *tufta*: “we pretend to work, you pretend to pay us”
3. Disincentivizes capital investment
  - why invest in better technology when labor is so cheap?
4. Opportunity costs
  - highly skilled technical workers used for manual labor
5. Many projects were ill-conceived
  - few feasibility studies
  - lots of unfinished construction
6. High cost of unfree labor
  - cost of resettling, feeding often > economic value of project



Figure 26: The cost

## Discussion

1. Did economic motives for repression out-weigh political ones?
2. Why so little research on Gulag in USSR?  
Didn't they want to know how well the system worked?
3. Compare and contrast:
  - a) use of Gulag labor vs. PMC Wagner recruitment of convicts
  - b) Gulag labor in USSR vs. prison labor in U.S.

# NEXT MEETING

*Backgrounder: Repression (Th, Sep. 28)*

- state repression in comparative perspective
- things to consider:
  - where is the line between repression and law enforcement?
  - why is there a trade-off between reducing government violence and preserving civil liberties?