

CHILDREN OF THE GULAG

by

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A THESIS

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Early Bolsheviks seeking to redefine the family launched “cultural campaigns” to throw off the vestiges of the tsarist regime and create new societal roles. Laws were enacted to protect children and provide them with rights. “Thank you Comrade Stalin, for our Happy Childhood” was a popular slogan. Posters portraying Stalin as the benevolent father and protector of children hung in every schoolroom. Yet contrary to official propaganda millions of children were left abandoned, orphaned or separated from their families. Many of these unfortunate children found themselves victims of the Gulag.

This thesis illustrates how war, famine, collectivization, political purges and capital punishment left countless children at the mercy of the state. Thousands of

children were arrested or born in the camps to pregnant women or women who became pregnant through rape or camp relationships. Many perished and those who survived carried forever the scars of their “happy” childhoods.

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June 6, 1935 – December 22, 2007



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## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

*Thank you Comrade Stalin*  
*For our happy life!*  
*For our happy childhood*  
For our wonderful days<sup>1</sup>

Prior to the collapse of the USSR, Western scholars had limited access to official government archives. The right to access the archives was strictly regulated and subject to the whims of Soviet officials. With the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, scholarly exploration into the extent of Soviet repression expanded at an astounding rate. The opening of official archives to Westerners during the 1990s has enabled historians to document and analyze information previously unavailable to Western scholars. These newly available documents have begun to shed light on the complex and troubled history of the Soviet era and illustrate the considerable gap between official Soviet ideology-based propaganda and the extent of atrocities suffered by a significant percentage of the population.

Bolshevik Party leaders spread slogans promising “peace, bread, and land” and “All Power to the Soviets” to ensure their ambitious plan to rise to

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<sup>1</sup> A popular slogan during the Stalin era.

power. Communist ideology promised a socially harmonious society based on long-term social reform that would eliminate exploitation of the working class and eventually eliminate social classes altogether. All Soviet citizens would realize the full extent of human freedom through cooperative efforts and Soviet children would realize the happy childhood so eloquently described by Tolstoy in his oft-quoted work, *Childhood*. But the nascent government inherited a countryside ravaged by years of war, civil unrest, disease, and famine. The euphoric vigor was quickly replaced by confusion and tension as Soviet leaders struggled to tackle insurmountable crises with limited resources and little experience.

By the time Joseph Stalin achieved full party leadership the country was irrevocably on the road to becoming a totalitarian state ruled by an iron fist. The Stalinist government let loose a reign of terror upon the countryside through collectivization; *dekulakization*;<sup>2</sup> deportation and exile; and political purges. Millions of Soviet citizens were victimized by Stalin's policies of political repression and many eventually ended up in Gulag labor camps.

The youngest members of the population were not immune to this wave of terror. Countless children were arrested or born in prison and labor camps to

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<sup>2</sup> *Kulak* (literally "fist") usually refers to the more efficient and prosperous peasant farmer. The *kulaks* were considered class enemies because of their "capitalistic" practices; they exploited hired labor and generally realized a profit. The terminology also applied to opponents of the collective farm and other state policies. Stalin set out to liquidate the *kulaks* as a class in an effort to enforce his program of collectivization. *Kulaks* were to be shot, imprisoned, or sent to labor camps and their property was to be confiscated and turned over to the state. *Dekulakization* was the process of liquidation of the *kulaks* as a class.

women who were pregnant when they were arrested or who became pregnant through rape or camp relationships. Some children were actually arrested along with their mothers and many more children were sent directly to children's homes when their parents died as a result of starvation or war, or who were executed or sent to the Gulag during Stalin's great purges. Oftentimes juveniles convicted of crimes were subject to the same sentencing standards as adults and were sent to prisons or camps to perform "corrective" labor.

Innocent children were caught up in the waves of atrocities inflicted upon the Soviet people under Stalin's leadership. Poverty, illegitimacy, starvation, and poor health care had long been a problem among the underprivileged classes in pre-Soviet Russia, but the policies of *dekulakization*, collectivization, and the great purges victimized children who historically had known some sense of security and happiness. Children were not overlooked in Stalin's campaigns designed to rid the country of "socially harmful elements." Orphanages and children's homes quickly became overcrowded and the appalling condition of the homes ensured that many children languished or perished.

This thesis sets out to tell the story of these children. I shall illustrate how millions of children were victimized, either directly or indirectly, by Soviet policies of repression. They were abandoned, neglected, and marginalized. Many were sent to corrective camps, orphanages, special settlements and even prisons. Much of this thesis incorporates the voices of the children survivors as depicted

in translations taken from *Deti Gulaga*;<sup>3</sup> 1918-1956, a collection of documents that includes letters, diaries, and memoirs of children of the repressed during this period. All translations from this source are the authors unless otherwise indicated.

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<sup>3</sup> "Children of the Gulag."

## CHAPTER II

### SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

*I often think: how many people took part in making destitute such children, as I! I do not speak about those who came to arrest the parents. But in fact someone had taken me, had brought me somewhere; someone had decided, in what city and in what children's home to send me; some secretary – most likely a woman, a mother – wrote out this direction and scrawled her illegible signature. Doing it every day, they should think of this, somehow explain to themselves this mass orphanage, find the justification of their participation in this business. However, each person finds the justification easily and simply.*

*Testimony of M. I. Nikolaev<sup>4</sup>*

During the early years of Bolshevik power a utopian fervor swept through the newly created Soviet Union. Convinced that the problems of the country were rooted in the bourgeois trappings of capitalism under the tsarist regime, the nascent Soviet government set out to prove that the socialist revolution would reshape society and the failings that were the tragic heritage of capitalism would disappear once the emerging socialist society was fully formed.

One of the earliest challenges facing the fledgling government was the problem of the overwhelming number of homeless children wandering around the countryside in search of food and shelter. By 1917 there were already

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<sup>4</sup> Vilenskii, *Deti Gulaga*, 216.



approximately two million *besprizorniki*<sup>5</sup> left to their own devices largely as a result of the ravages of World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution.<sup>6</sup> Orphaned, abandoned, or separated from their families, these dirty, lice-infested and disease-ridden waifs roamed the streets in large groups begging or stealing in their quest to stay alive.

The problem of *besprizornost'* was not a new phenomenon to Soviet Russia. In pre-Revolutionary Russia, child abandonment was rampant and child mortality rates were among the highest in Europe. The vast majority of children entering foundling homes in Moscow and St. Petersburg between 1764 and 1914 perished.<sup>7</sup> During the second half of the nineteenth century as many as 17,000 children per year were being received by the central foundling home in Moscow alone with a mortality rate that reached as high as 96 percent in the early 1890s.<sup>8</sup> The foundling homes, originally established under Catherine II in the late eighteenth century, did little to alleviate the problems of abandonment and may actually have exacerbated the problem by creating incentives for delivery of infants to the homes. The Bolsheviks were convinced that the socialist ideology of the new government would quickly eliminate the dilemma of *besprizornost'*

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<sup>5</sup> *Besprizornik* was an orphaned or otherwise homeless or abandoned child. Pl. *besprizorniki* or *besprizornye*. *Besprizornost'* is the general phenomenon of homelessness among children.

<sup>6</sup> Stolee, "Homeless Children in the USSR," 66.

<sup>7</sup> Ransel, *Mothers of Misery*, 303-308.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

and the leaders set out to develop programs that would raise a new generation of Soviet citizens free from the problems experienced under Romanov rule.

Leon Trotsky postulated that “[a] revolution does not deserve its name if it does not take the greatest care possible of the children—the future race for whose benefit the revolution has been made.”<sup>9</sup> The leadership, motivated by visions of a harmonious future society of social progressiveness, set out to create policies based on communist ideology to ensure the future of all children. Party leadership didn’t recognize illegitimacy and therefore rejected the need for foundling homes as a repository for illegitimate children; therefore the foundling homes were abolished.<sup>10</sup> The institutions and their assets were incorporated into the Department of Maternal and Infant Welfare in an effort to address the concerns of maternity and infant support for Soviet mothers in need and for orphaned children who had lost both parents.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Party leadership believed the family was harmful to the upbringing of children.<sup>12</sup> They argued that, by having the state rear the children, women would be free to work, thus emancipating them from the drudgery of domestic responsibilities. The state

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<sup>9</sup> Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed*, 138.

<sup>10</sup> Ransel, 301.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*, 29-30.

would then be able to take full responsibility for raising children and educating them to become true communists.<sup>13</sup>

Anatolii Lunacharski, the first Soviet People's Commissar for Education, declared that "[c]hildren in orphanages are state children. Their father is the state and their mother is the whole of worker-peasant society."<sup>14</sup> To that end, in 1918 the family law code of the RSFSR was issued which outlawed adoption and declared that all needy children were considered to be under the guardianship of the state.<sup>15</sup> Anton Makarenko, a major figure in the development of Soviet education, urged parents to begin proper upbringing early in childhood and encouraged couples to have large families in order to create the true collective spirit.<sup>16</sup> The goal of the public institution was to "create the necessary conditions for the normal development of children, to replace the individual family," and to "raise citizens."<sup>17</sup> But the state was ill equipped to feed, shelter, clothe, and educate the multitudes of *besprizoniki* whose numbers grew at an alarming rate in the aftermath of the great famine of 1921-22.

The Soviet Union had not yet recovered from the devastation of years of unrest when famine engulfed the countryside. The Russian famine of 1921-22 followed closely on the heels of the tumultuous years of the First World War and

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<sup>13</sup> Geiger, *The Family in Soviet Russia*, 72.

<sup>14</sup> Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened*, 87.

<sup>15</sup> Stolee, 67.

<sup>16</sup> Iaacs, *Makarenko, His Life and Work*, 157-159.

<sup>17</sup> Kirschenbaum, 51.

the ensuing Russian Civil Wars of 1918-20. Estimates of the number of unattended waifs range from seven<sup>18</sup> to over nine million<sup>19</sup> *besprizoniki* in the period from 1920-22. The famine affected at least twenty million people and sparked a mass exodus of refugees from the famine-stricken regions to other parts of the country. Authorities struggled in vain to care for the multitudes of displaced and hungry children who were caught up in the upheaval. Lack of adequate resources, poor facilities, and untrained personnel added to the chaos encountered by the magnitude of the worsening crisis.

Government officials and educators scrambled to open receivers<sup>20</sup> and *detdoma*<sup>21</sup> to accommodate the growing masses. Narkompros took over the responsibility of all activities designed for the relief of the *besprizoniki* with the goal of rehabilitating these children in addition to feeding and housing them. With difficulty, Narkompros began setting up colonies and homes for the children but with limited success. Inexperience coupled with the magnitude of the task at hand doomed many facilities to failure. While some managed to feed, shelter, and educate their wards, the vast majority of the institutions created to assist homeless children suffered the same deprivation prevalent throughout the

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<sup>18</sup> Ball, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Stolee, 65.

<sup>20</sup> Receivers were temporary facilities originally designed as halfway houses for retrieving children directly from the streets. Children for whom relatives couldn't be found would eventually be sent to a *detdom*.

<sup>21</sup> *Detdom* (contraction of *detskii dom*; pl., *detdoma*) Children's boarding-home intended for the long-term care and education of homeless children.

country. Faced with food shortages, inadequate supplies, and poor facilities the institutions were overrun by hungry, sick, feral children and the overwhelmed staff had limited means by which to care for them.

The following tables provide an example of the rapid rate at which *detdoma* emerged in response to the growing population of homeless children, especially in the famine stricken areas:

**TABLE 1 Increase in Number of Children in *Detdoma* in 1921**

Regions	January 1, 1921		December 31, 1921	
	<i>Detdoma</i>	Children	<i>Detdoma</i>	Children
Volga Germans	12	428	33	3,300
Simbirsk province	65	3,530	117	11,719
Stavropol' province	40	2,279	125	12,490
Tambov province	113	7,834	134	13,372
Tatar Republic	110	5,670	232	17,971
Ufa province	103	4,976	239	23,985
Cheliabinsk province	90	6,103	222	22,200
Tsaritsyn province	51	2,374	159	14,721
Samara province	294	18,000	407	44,660
Astrakhan' province	67	2,964	92	5,509
Viatka province	89	3,347	109	10,934
Perm' province	165	7,703	203	12,214
Saratov province	145	--	180	18,000
Chuvash region	12	489	40	4,500

Source: Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened*, 114.

**TABLE 2 Change in the Number of *Detdoma* in the Russian Republic**

1921-1922	6,063
October 1, 1923	3,971
June 1, 1924	3,377
January 1, 1925	2,836
December 1, 1926	2,224
December 15, 1927	1,922

Source: Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened*, 155.

**TABLE 3 Number of Children Housed in *Detdoma* in the Russian Rep.**

1917	25,666
1918	75,000
1919	125,000
1920	400,000
1921	540,000
1922	540,000
1923 (Oct.1)	252,317
1924 (June 1)	239,776
1925 (January 1)	228,127
1926 (December 1)	177,000
1927 (December 15)	158,554
1927/28	136,989
1928/29	129,344

Source: Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened*, 156.

\*With an additional 114,000 at the beginning of 1923 and 72,000 by the summer of 1925 in Ukraine. One source suggests that during the famine years about one million children were in *detdoma* throughout the Soviet Union.

Homeless children (see Figure 1) continued to plague the countryside even after the famine. While the total number of homeless children declined, a new influx of street children began to emerge. No longer were the majority of children roaming the streets war orphans or victims of the earlier social crises and famine. Post-revolutionary social conditions created by industrialization, economic policies, and the disintegration of family life saw a new wave of children making their way to the streets. In addition, many children who had



FIGURE 1

*Besprizorniki* (Source: Memorial)

remained homeless in the preceding years had become hardened by street life and had turned to crime. The government could no longer blame the phenomenon of *besprizornost'* on the legacy of the former government or external catastrophes such as wars or famine, but had to look within Soviet society and its failure to achieve its ideals of a socialist way of life.<sup>22</sup>

Attitudes toward the plight of these children shifted as juvenile delinquency and hooliganism plagued society. Soviet leadership began to implement a more authoritative approach to the problem of *besprizornost'*. Beginning in 1924, abandoned children and juvenile delinquents were taken from the streets and placed in colonies, into workhouses for juveniles, and into

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<sup>22</sup> Stolee, 68.

the Labor Communes of the OGPU.<sup>23</sup> In late 1935 the police apprehended about 160,000 homeless and neglected children, of whom 62,000 were sent to the NKVD child reception centers and 10,000 were arrested. In 1936 the number of unattended juveniles apprehended was 156,000.

While not all apprehended juveniles were indicted, the number of sentences is rather significant: in 1935 courts sentenced 6,725 juveniles between twelve and sixteen, and in 1936, they sentenced 15,031.<sup>24</sup> According to the NKVD's own statistics, children's "reception centers" collected 842,144 homeless children in the years 1943-1945. Most were sent back to their families, to children's homes or to trade schools. But according to the records 52,830 were assigned to "labor-educational colonies," in other words, concentration camps.<sup>25</sup>

Not all the children who found their way into the children's homes, prisons, and camps were orphans or juvenile delinquents. Some were arrested along with their mothers during the campaign to arrest the wives and children of "enemies of the people" in spite of the 1937 operational rule which forbade the arrest of pregnant and nursing women. In 1940 an order was issued to allow mothers of infants a reprieve. New mothers were to be allowed to care for their children until the child was a year and a half old at which time the mother would then be subject to arrest and the child put in an orphanage or given to relatives.

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<sup>23</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Vol. Two, 447.

<sup>24</sup> Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag*, 127.

<sup>25</sup> Applebaum, *Gulag*, 329.



However, in practice both pregnant and nursing women were regularly arrested.<sup>26</sup>

Frequently children were born in the camps to mothers who became pregnant either through camp relationships or rape. The number of children born in the camps was significant enough that it was necessary for officials to establish special nurseries and mothers' camps in order to address their specific needs. From 1947 on the number of juveniles in camps and colonies increased dramatically largely because of the high rate of pregnancy in the camps.<sup>27</sup>

Infants born in the camps were usually separated from their mothers soon after birth and placed in the nurseries. Their mothers were permitted only limited visitation for breastfeeding. Many children were eventually sent to children's homes never again to see their mothers.

The children who lived in the camps and colonies weren't the only ones to suffer from Soviet policies of repression. Many were left behind when their parents were arrested or killed. The fortunate ones stayed with relatives but many were not so lucky. Often they were destined to fend for themselves on the street. Sometimes children would be taken in by strangers but for many their lives were only slightly better than when they were living on the streets. One such child was Savelyeva Leonidovna. After her parents were arrested in 1937

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 317.

<sup>27</sup> Pohl, *The Stalinist Penal System*, 33.

and sent to a camp in Sakhalin, Savelyeva was transferred to a children's home and in 1940, at five years of age, was kidnapped and adopted by a family who wanted to use her as a house servant. Savelyava's name was changed and she never saw her real family again.<sup>28</sup>

Often children of political prisoners were told to forget about parents who were labeled as enemies of the people. The children were told that if their parents ever came to get them, they should tell their parents that they don't want to live with them.<sup>29</sup> Children of political arrestees were often treated with contempt. NKVD officers responsible for children's homes were ordered to maintain special vigilance and to single out the children of counterrevolutionaries to ensure that they did not receive privileged treatment of any kind. Thanks to this rule, Pyotr Yakir lasted only three days in one of these orphanages following his parents' arrest. During that time, he managed to get a reputation as a ringleader of the traitors' children and was immediately arrested, at age fourteen. He was then transferred to a prison and eventually sent to the camps.<sup>30</sup>

Al'dona Volynskaia, who lived in a Soviet orphanage for four years, was orphaned when her parents were arrested in 1938.

I lived first in Moscow then with our nanny in Istra where I went to school. After my father was expelled from the Party, I was transferred to P.S. 275 in Moscow and a completely different life began. For example, the

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<sup>28</sup> Vilenskij, 248.

<sup>29</sup> Applebaum, 327.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 326.

teachers, after learning that my mother had been expelled from the Party, once called me to the staff room and began to question me as to what year my mother joined the Party and I answered, "My mother is not a Party member."

One day mama was summoned by the NKVD and didn't come back. Three days later some men and women came to the apartment and asked me whether I had a grandmother saying that I was going to live with her. It was obvious that they were lying since they didn't ask where she lived. A search began. I was allowed to take a satchel of books with me and two additional books. I chose a volume of Pushkin and Chekhov. They didn't let me take the photo album. They placed some children's things into a bag. A neighbor lady winked at me, slipped a piece of *crepe de chine* into the bag, and asked if she could give me some candy. It was then that I understood that, without permission, nobody had the right to give me anything anymore.

I was taken to Danilovskii Children's Reception Center where there were eight children in all, including Elia and Nelia Iuvian, Lida Karnitskaia, and Vera Berdelisova. I was taken to the basement where I was fingerprinted and photographed in front and in profile, holding a board with letters and numbers on it. The girls had been there more than a month and they told me that almost everyone in the overcrowded Center had recently been taken away to children's homes.

Al'dona Volynskaia<sup>31</sup>

It's impossible to overstate the extent to which the lives of so many innocent children were disrupted. Whether they were orphaned, sent to camps, suffered health issues, starved to death or killed outright the list of atrocities defies comprehension. Sometimes the cause of their suffering was a direct result of official policy and other times an indirect result. Nevertheless the state was

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<sup>31</sup> Vilenskii, 322-323.

responsible for inflicting incredible harm upon countless innocent children, condemning them to suffer on the streets or in the camps, colonies, and special settlements thereby creating a mass orphanage.

## CHAPTER III

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GULAG

The term “Gulag” entered general circulation in the West with the introduction of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s narrative, *The Gulag Archipelago*. Although Gulag is the name given for the agency responsible for managing the labor camps, it has become synonymous with the Soviet system of repression. Statistics and descriptions of the Gulag didn’t begin to emerge in the West until the Khrushchev era after the worst of the atrocities had already occurred.

The Gulag was first established in the USSR during the early Bolshevik years under Vladimir Lenin as a system of forced-labor prison camps. The system reached its zenith after 1928 under Joseph Stalin and continued to thrive until long after his death in 1953, although on a lesser scale. The Soviet secret police<sup>32</sup> began taking control of the prison system in 1927 and by April 1929 direct control of the new unified system by the secret police was complete. The Special Department for Camps became the Main Administration of Corrective-Labor Camps or *Glavnoe*

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<sup>32</sup> Originally the Cheka, the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage [*chrezvychainaia komissii*]; subsequently the GPU, State Political Directorate [*Gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie*]; the OGPU, Joint State Political Directorate [*Ob’edinennoe gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie*]; the NKVD, People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs [*Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennykh del*]; the MVD, Ministry of Internal Affairs, [*Ministerstvo vnutrennykh del*]; and finally the KGB, Committee for State Security [*Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti*].

*Upravlenie Ispravitel'no-Trudovykh Lagerei i kolonii* (The Chief Directorate of Corrective Labor Camps and Colonies) better known by the acronym—GULag.

The word “Gulag” has become synonymous with Soviet oppression and slave labor administered in labor camps; concentration camps; punishment camps for political and criminal prisoners; women’s camps; children’s camps; transit camps; and special settlements. The Soviet dictatorship, hungry for wealth and progress, stepped up the expansion of the Gulag to provide at a low cost, at least theoretically, the labor force necessary for the exploration and industrial colonization of remote, resource-rich regions.

Prison labor was used throughout the Soviet Union but the majority of the Gulag labor camps were concentrated in remote regions with harsh climates— areas which were difficult to colonize solely through volunteer efforts.<sup>33</sup> The use of penal labor allowed the government to develop those regions without the expense of free labor. Prison labor was used to mine the Kolyma gold region—a significant source of funding for the state treasury. Major construction and infrastructural projects, including the White Sea-Baltic Canal and the Baikal-Amur Mainline, were developed through the use of prison labor and the logging industry flourished on the backs of the *zeks*<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> Gregory, *The Economics of Forced Labor*, 4.

<sup>34</sup> A colloquial term for a Soviet Gulag inmate. Abbreviation of *zakliuchennii*.

Although women were officially exempt from heavy labor in reality they provided a significant percentage of forced laborers in the logging industry and many of the major construction projects, especially during the World War II period when a large contingent of male prisoners were sent to the front.<sup>35</sup> Pregnant women were usually released from heavy labor but were not exempt from work and only experienced a brief respite long enough to give birth. Mother and child were frequently separated shortly after birth and the mother was soon returned to the labor force.

The inhabitants of the Gulag system included members from all walks of society but certain groups of individuals were targeted at different times throughout the history of the camps, especially during the Stalin years. No demographic group was completely safe—men, women, and children were all vulnerable as the waves of repression overtook Soviet society.

The strain on the penal system through collectivization, purges, industrialization, and the aftereffects of war permitted the Gulag system to expand unchecked. Conditions in the camps were extremely harsh. Prisoners received meager food rations, inadequate medical attention, and insufficient clothing, which made it difficult to endure the severe weather and long working hours. As a result, the death rate in the camps from exhaustion, starvation, injury, abuse, exposure, and disease was exceedingly high. After Stalin died in

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<sup>35</sup> Ilic, *Women in the Stalin Era*, 135-6.

1953, the Gulag population was reduced significantly and conditions for inmates somewhat improved. However, forced labor camps continued to exist in the Soviet Union, although on a much smaller scale, into the Gorbachev period.



## CHAPTER IV

### STALIN'S POLICIES OF REPRESSION

By the time the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917 Russia had already begun moving in the direction of modernization. No longer were the nation's social privileges restricted to the nobility. Education was slowly becoming a reality for the populace and professional freedoms were beginning to blossom. Utopian ideals were being explored and Russian writers and artists were joining the ranks of their Western counterparts in the enjoyment of the cultural movement. But this newfound sense of liberation was quickly squelched with Stalin's rise to power. In order to secure his position of power and eliminate any possible future threat, Stalin set out to rid the Politburo of any potential competitors. His policies of oppression had broad impacts and were designed to provide him with absolute power. The assassination of Sergei Kirov in 1934 provided the excuse Stalin needed to ignite the Great Purge of 1936-38 thereby completely and thoroughly securing his power.

Purges existed throughout Stalin's reign of terror but three major waves took place. Intensified formation and development of Stalinist state structures, including the Gulag, accelerated between 1929 and 1930 with the first major

wave brought on by the process of collectivization, increased industrialization, and *dekulakization*. Corrective labor camps and special “*kulak*” settlements began expanding at an alarming rate only to be followed by the systemic crises of 1932-33 resulting in mass starvation.<sup>36</sup> The second and greatest wave of terror was known as the *Yezhovshchina*,<sup>37</sup> or the Great Terror, from 1937-38 and the third major wave occurred in 1944 when the system swelled with prisoners of war.

Many of the victims of the Great Terror were ordinary men, women, and children accused of political offenses. Those who were imprisoned, shot, or exiled weren't the only victims of the purges. Hundreds of thousands of people were affected indirectly through loss of jobs, or expulsion from universities, the Communist Party or the Komsomol. Their crimes were in having a connection (spouse, parent, child, or close acquaintance) to the “enemies of the people,” relatives who lived abroad, or “questionable social backgrounds.”<sup>38</sup> The wives and children of political detainees often found themselves suddenly thrust into abject poverty. Unable to find jobs to support themselves, many resorted to the criminal world for survival. Not only did they have to face starvation, ostracism, and the loss of civil rights, they were also subjected to the grave psychological stress of being under the very real constant threat of arrest.

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<sup>36</sup> Khlevniuk, 1.

<sup>37</sup> So named after Nikolai Yezhov, the head of the NKVD at the time of the Great Terror. Yezhov was eventually relieved of his posts, accused of conspiring against Stalin, and on February 4, 1940 was executed.

<sup>38</sup> Khlevniuk, 168-169.

Officially about two-thirds of those sentenced to death or prison during the Great Terror of 1937-38 were convicted for political crimes, but that doesn't mean that the remainder were ordinary criminals. During the peak waves it was often difficult to distinguish ordinary criminals from those detained for political reasons. For example, an order by the People's Commissar of Internal Affairs dated May 21, 1938 on the work of police *troikas*<sup>39</sup> mentioned convictions of "collective farmers who, though with a history of prior arrests and convictions . . . were not engaged in criminal activity and were not connected to criminal groups."<sup>40</sup> According to an August 15, 1937 order, the wives of so-called traitors were to be arrested and sent to the camps for five to eight years and children over fifteen who were "socially dangerous and capable of anti-Soviet actions" had to be sent to camps, corrective labor colonies, or special orphanages. The order furthermore commanded the transfer of orphaned children of the enemies of the people to an orphanage or the care of relatives.<sup>41</sup>

The crimes committed by these ordinary people were classified as crimes against the state. Under Article 58,<sup>42</sup> any small infraction, whether real or

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<sup>39</sup> Literally "threesome" or "triumvirate". The NKVD *troika* was a commission of three people charged with the responsibility of imposing extrajudicial punishment as a supplement to the legal system.

<sup>40</sup> Khlevniuk, 168.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>42</sup> Article 58 was a section of the Russian SFSR Penal Code put into force February 25, 1927, to arrest those suspected of counterrevolutionary activities. Individuals charged under Article 58 were labeled "enemies of the people" and were subject not only to legal sanctions, but social and political ostracization.

imagined, could alter one's life forever. Charges of wrecking,<sup>43</sup> criminal intent, limiting, and inefficiency could net a ten-year sentence during the good years and twenty-five at the height of the terror. In 1940, waves of wives were arrested for failure to renounce their husbands. Because wrecking was blamed for the economic failures and shortages in the state, accusations suggesting terror, agitation or counterrevolutionary actions could mean death. Fear and hysteria generated by mass operations against the "enemies of the people" led to high levels of aggressiveness and intolerance among Soviet citizens. Terror made people fear initiative. It compelled them to play it safe or endorse complete inaction since the lack of initiative was punished much more mildly than the inevitable mistakes committed by active and involved individuals.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> "Wrecking" was a crime specified in the criminal code to address charges of counter-revolutionary sabotage or deliberate acts of undermining Soviet ideals.

<sup>44</sup> Khlevniuk, 343.

## Dekulakization and Collectivization

*Not war, not blockade, not occupation, and not even drought . . . our richest south! It was many, many years before I would understand the reason (for this great famine). It was one new and, for me, very difficult word: collectivization.*

*Irina G. Gentosh<sup>45</sup>*

The first major wave of purges began when collectivization was introduced by Stalin in the winter of 1929-30 as a means of boosting agricultural production. Ostensibly touted as a voluntary program, in reality the strategy for collectivization involved the forced expropriation of grain and farm holdings by the state, often through violent means. Lands held by peasants were seized and peasants were forced onto collective farms (*kolkhozes*) and state farms (*sovkhozes*).<sup>46</sup>

Rather than improving agricultural production, the immediate effect of collectivization was a reduction in grain output and the drastic diminishment of livestock. The disastrous result was the major famine of 1932 and 1933, also known as *Holodomor* in Ukraine (see Figure 2). Several million peasants perished, especially in the country's major



FIGURE 2  
Victim of Holodomor, the Great Ukrainian Famine (Source: Memorial)

<sup>45</sup> Vilenskii, 252-253.

<sup>46</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 3.

grain-growing regions of Ukraine, the North Caucasus, the Central Volga area, and Russia's Central agricultural region.<sup>47</sup>

*Kulaks*, the relatively wealthy peasants who owned larger lands and used hired labor, were generally the more prosperous and usually more literate and industrious of the peasant farmers. Scapegoated by the Communist Party, these so-called rich farmers were viewed as rural capitalists and blamed for all the economic problems facing the country. Stalin stated that, "[t]o advance on the *kulak* means to get down to business and strike the *kulak*, yes strike him, so he will never be able to get back on his feet again"<sup>48</sup> and in January of 1930, OGPU boss Genrikh Iagoda stated:

The *kulak* must be destroyed as a class . . . [The *kulak*] understands that he will perish with collectivization and therefore he renders more and more brutal and fierce resistance, as we see already, [ranging] from insurrectionary plots and counterrevolutionary *kulak* organizations to arson and terror. [The *kulak*] will and is already burning grain, murdering activists and government officials. If we do not strike quickly and decisively . . . we will face a whole series of uprisings . . . By March, we must deal with the *kulak*, breaking his back forever."<sup>49</sup>

Irina G. Gentosh provided a vivid description of the famine that ravaged the land in the winter of 1932-33 as a result of Stalin's policies of collectivization and *dekulakization*. Irina was one of the fortunate children whose mother was able

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 71-72.

<sup>48</sup> Viola, *Unknown Gulag*, 13.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 14.

to provide enough sustenance for her, but she was not unaffected by the famine.

The tragedy that she as a very young child witnessed stayed with her throughout her life.

It's the winter of 1932-1933 in Rostov-on-the-Don. I'm seven years old. More and more often I hear the word "famine." Other new words also appear: workers' cooperative, ration-cards, vouchers, *torgsin*.<sup>50</sup> That's where my mother brings our family wealth: her ring and a pair of silver spoons. The *torgsin* store is like a fairytale. I stand at the window and look at the kielbasa, sausage, black caviar, candy, chocolate, and *pirogii*. I don't ask for anything, as I know very well she can't buy it. The most she'd been able to buy for me was a little rice and a piece of meat. No I—a sickly, only child—don't go hungry. I won't eat *mamaliga*.<sup>51</sup> It's so pretty to look at, like boiled cream, but it tastes disgusting. I also hate barley and am surprised how greedily Len'ka eats it. Len'ka is the little boy who lives in the apartment above us and sometimes comes over to play. He's quiet, good-natured and doesn't talk back. He always looks like he's shy and afraid of everybody. Later on I find out that Len'ka's grandfather has died and the grown-ups are saying there's nothing to bury him in. There's no coffin. I'm frightened and confused. Does that mean the dead body's going to stay in the house? I want to ask Len'ka, but he hasn't come for a long time. Then I find out they made a coffin for the grandfather out of broken boxes and buried him. But Len'ka still doesn't come. It's only a long time later I'm told that he also died. They were very quiet people, Len'ka's family, and they starved in silence. It was the weakest that died—the old and the young.

At the beginning of the 1930's my mother enrolled in courses at the Russian Red Cross in Rostov to become a nurse. She finished with flying colors and went to work at the Gynecological Department of the Proletarian Hospital. That winter her department, like many others, was closed and turned into a Children's Department. The patients there were the *besprizornye*, homeless children, who were starving. These words I already know very well and I'd seen the *besprizornye* more than once. One time was at the market where one of them, dirty and tattered, tore a bag

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<sup>50</sup> Soviet contraction for "*torgovlia s inostrantsami*" meaning trade with foreigners. It was a store where anyone with hard currency and valuables could purchase otherwise unobtainable goods such as food and clothing.

<sup>51</sup> A gruel similar to polenta made out of cornmeal.

out of my mother's hands and another time was on the road back from Grandma's in the evening near a huge vat where asphalt was heated during the day. The vat was still warm and they were sleeping next to it huddled in a warm, dirty, horrible pile. Tucked in my bed at home I keep thinking intensely and can't understand why they're sleeping outside in the winter. Where were their mothers? All of my questions received the same answer – famine. But what famine was and why it was happening I never could understand.

At home my mother often talks about the children in her department. I even come to know a few by name. Tonight she has to work, but there's no one to leave me with. I'm happy to go with her. We quickly go down the hallway to the duty station. She puts on a white coat and then says I can go out and meet some of the children. Of course I'm shy and I hesitate. So she brings a few children into the duty station.

In front of me are strange creatures in long printed nightshirts reaching to the floor. Of course I know very well that they're children but how can Mama call them nice? How can she even tell them apart? I see only shaved heads covered with scabs, unbelievably skinny pale faces with sores on the lips and arms that are thin like sticks. I can't tell which are boys and which are girls. Their hands are also covered with scabs, and when they pull up their floor-length shirts I can see their huge stomachs as they scratch them and the skinny stick-legs they stand on.

I think Mama realized the extent of my shock and immediately took the children away. Now at home I hear endless stories about these children. Often they're not directed at me at all but what can you hide from a child in a two-room apartment? When I don't want to take my cod-liver oil she talks about how the children grab the spoon out of her hands and how they lick it clean. At night in bed I hear her telling someone in the other room how she'd barely been in time that day to take a little boy down from a noose in the bathroom. The older ones had tried to hang him because he wouldn't give them his bread ration. I already know all about mange, ringworm, and bloody discharge from the rectum.

The older children kill sparrows in the hospital courtyard, bake them in cinders, and eat them innards, bones, and all. I often hear about death. My mother remembered one little boy, very young, for the rest of her life. His death was long and difficult. On his last night she sat near him constantly. He was delirious and thrashing about and in his delirium kept calling for his mother and asking for potatoes. It had gotten light out



already when he suddenly became calm and subdued, opened his eyes wide, looked at her senselessly, smiled and said, "Mama came. She brought potatoes." And died.

Irina G. Gentosh<sup>52</sup>

Many of the children Irina described likely didn't survive to tell their stories but they were not forgotten. The tragedy is not only with those who suffered the slow and painful death of starvation, but is also with those innocent children like Irina who, at such a young age, had to witness so much suffering.

### **Exile and Special Settlements**

In 1930 and 1931 Stalin sent close to two million peasants into internal exile. Entire families were deported to the most remote regions in the Northern Territory, the Urals, Siberia, and Kazakhstan. These deportees built as many as two thousand settlements (*spetsposeleniia*) in 1930 and 1931 in the remotest regions of the country.

Exile combined with forced labor was introduced in January 1930 as a means of diverting the increasing numbers of peasant counterrevolutionaries from overcrowded facilities to areas where they could be controlled without having to be housed and fed. These persons were called "special settlers"

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<sup>52</sup> Vilenskii, 252-253.

(*spetspereselentsy*) and were often dispatched into the wilderness regions with their entire families. The term masked the reality of their status as prisoners and forced laborers exploited by the state to extract much needed raw resources from the more desolate regions of the country. The vast majority of these special settlers were *kulaks*.

The following testimonial by K. A. Strusevich paints a vivid portrait of her life in the special settlements. Her experience provides an example of those children whose lives had previously been simple but relatively happy and stable. She was one of the many children directly victimized through Stalin's policies.

It is many years since I saw the portrait of Stalin holding the smiling girl Gelya (Markizova)<sup>53</sup> in his arms (see Figure 3). It hung in almost every kindergarten and symbolized our happy childhood. Well I want to tell about our "happy" childhood; youth who too early had grown old.



FIGURE 3

*Gelya Markizova (Source: Kun, 327)*

There were five of us in my family: father, mother, and three sisters. We were a typical peasant family. The happiest days for the children were during the holidays when we gathered together and neighbors and friends would come. In 1930, collectivization began and sorrow and fear fell upon our home as well. One day militants from the local Soviet arrived and confiscated all our property and led the cattle away. We were detained for three days at the railway station. Other families like us from neighboring villages were also brought there and then we were all corralled into boxcars.

<sup>53</sup> Gelya Markizova's was the daughter of Ardan Markizov, the second secretary of the Buryat Mongol ASSR. A year after the photo was taken Gelya's father was charged with spying for Japan and subsequently executed. Gelya's mother was killed as the wife of an enemy of the people.

We traveled for several days. We were unloaded at Shalakusha station directly onto the snow at thirty degrees below zero in the silent taiga wilderness. Some of the children were placed into horse-drawn carriages and the adults went on foot. Along the way my sister and I became ill with the measles and mama frequently checked up on us, weeping with sorrow and worry . . . We were unloaded with some other families at N'uk-Ples on the Black River in Verkholyed Soviet where stood two huts with small windows and stone ovens, like a rural banya,<sup>54</sup> that produced black smoke when heated. Everyone had to go outside to kindle the fire where we all sat around the fire singing or crying.

Double plank beds were laid with hay in the log huts. The families huddled together to get warm and fall asleep. Soon all the men were taken to fell trees for building the barracks. By autumn we were moved from N'uk-Ples to a settlement in Chernyj. There were ten barracks with several families living in each of them. A separate small house was constructed for the commandant. Our family was originally placed in the 7<sup>th</sup> barrack and then moved to the 12<sup>th</sup> barrack when it was built. We all lived half-starved, sucking on bread as if it were candy. People were freezing to death but we had not time to bury them. Everyone worked hard cutting wood, rooting out the stumps, and plowing the land which was mostly of clay and stone. Those who could work and knew how built bricks and installed furnaces in the barracks.

There were elementary schools in the settlements but upon orders of the commandant it was terminated and the parents were unable to school their children. I was unable to save my sisters. The youngest died at the age of 16 from myocardiodystrophy and the other has been an invalid since 1945 from all her years of suffering. I have taken care of her all of my life.

Thanks to the Arkhangelsk regional organization, "*Sovest*,"<sup>55</sup> I finally learned 53 years later the bitter truth about my father. In January 1937 my mom died and in September my father was shot. He was later

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<sup>54</sup> A Russian steam bathhouse.

<sup>55</sup> "Conscience"

rehabilitated, but it does not ease the pain. I am glad that I survived the times for which my father said in the 1930s, “a time will come when they will write about us.” He understood that something terrible was happening in our country.

K. A. Strusevich  
Arkhangelsk<sup>56</sup>

Something terrible was indeed happening in the country. Stalin’s policies of repression would continue to expand unchecked until no member of society was safe from the potential threat of political victimization.

The special settlements laid the foundation of Stalin’s Gulag supporting the largest contingent of prisoners in the Soviet Union through the mid-1930s and rivaling the population of forced labor camps thereafter. The special settlements were vital to Soviet industrialization and modernization by providing the human resources needed to work in the harsh conditions of remote territories.<sup>57</sup> Unlike the Gulag labor camps, people living in these involuntary settlements were permitted to live in family units and did enjoy a small degree of freedom to travel, although only within specified areas and with special permission of the commandant. Friends and relatives of the special settlers could visit only with official permission and were subject to strict control.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Vilenskii, 102-103.

<sup>57</sup> Viola, 4.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

Although the *kulaks* were the first of the settlers to be rounded up by the authorities, they weren't the only ones. Anyone considered a "socially dangerous element" could be subject to special settlement. Suspect ethnic groups, individuals with roots from wartime "enemy nations," and populations from the occupied Baltic states and other bordering nations were also targeted.<sup>59</sup>

Life was harsh for those living in the special settlements. Daina Shmuldere-Gerkis lived with her family in one of these special settlements and her description of life in the settlement illustrates how much suffering was endured by these "free" settlers.

When it was possible to sell or exchange something we were very happy. We had no dishes except for our big teapot in which we would collect milk for my little brother whenever we left home. We exchanged an enameled pannikin with a removable handle and a half-liter mug for a woolen blanket. We received two buckets of potatoes in exchange for a bed-sheet and a gold wedding ring. We cooked *shchi*<sup>60</sup> from salted potato greens and river water. In the mornings mama ordered us to sleep long so that we did not ask to eat. When we woke up, she grated three potatoes, suffused them with boiled water and watched that we drank this slowly. We bought dried potato peels from which we made flapjacks fried on the sizzling hot surface of the stove.

From fish scales, if it was possible to exchange something for them, we made aspic. If there was salt or even garlic it seemed a royal dish. If we could get fish bones, we dried and pounded them to season our soup. More often instead of salt we used fish brine. We ate bitter fish interiors left over after removing the cod-liver oil. At first as a new contingent we received bread – adults received 500 grams and dependents 300

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>60</sup> Russian cabbage soup.

grams—but gradually the norm was cut down to 150 and 100 grams. Now I do not remember when we ceased to be given bread altogether but I remember that when the pestles had started to grow the bread was gone.

We collected pestles on the newly thawed field. We were worried that there wouldn't be any but when we found them there was no strength to bend down. Because of famine mama swelled up and sometimes lost consciousness. In the spring of 1942, I was so weak that climbing uphill with water I looked back and it seemed that my legs had turned to stone. There was no energy to move them. Although to earn just one small potato you could get a job with someone to look for lice in their hair.

One night mama woke us and told us to say goodbye to our little brother. He was in such bad shape that mama had no hope that he would survive until morning. But he did survive. In the first winter mama bought at the market in Terviz a pair of black ankle boots and a black coat probably because she didn't expect our little brother to live until spring.

There was hardly any firewood. The woods were not very close and there was nothing to bring it in with. We had neither saws nor an axe. We always had to borrow tools for the task. And then there wasn't any strength left to prepare the firewood.

We tried to pull birch trees out by the roots from under the frozen snow and dragged them home in the snow. Mama chopped this firewood and when the landlady finished warming it up, threw it in the oven and cooked our *balandu*<sup>61</sup> . . . By then many of our immigrants had already been buried at Malomuromski cemetery. It was literally only a few days after our arrival when 14 year old Elga Lemberga died. Andris Gegeris and Irena Lazdinia died. All of them were born in 1940. Of all the kids, the only one left alive was our little brother, Aivis. At Krivoshapkin, mama and our brother Volodja died. In Karklyni ten-year-old Oyars died of starvation.

I remember one frosty evening I went to Koshelev where I borrowed a saw. On the horizon the sun turned bright red. The snow creaked under my legs. Suddenly I understood, that mama was dead and

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<sup>61</sup> Prison or camp soup; very thin and watery usually without meat or protein.

we shall remain alone. Until that evening I hadn't supposed such a thing was possible. I cried. Tears froze on my cheeks.<sup>62</sup>

Reflecting back on the day her mother died, Daina described the sense of abandonment and hopelessness she and her siblings experienced when they were suddenly thrust alone into the world:

In the evening mama had told us that she felt better. All of us together were glad for her. But in the morning of the next day I woke up and mama's agony had begun. Outside it was still dark. Vilma lit the stove and left. The hut glowed from the burning stove. Mama lay on the trestle bed, breathed hard and looked me in the face. To this day I remember this sight – as if she understood everything but there was no point in saying anything. I shouted from sorrow, from confusion, from powerlessness. My little brother laid near mama. I put him on the furnace next to our sister.

Our little brother was two years old but he did not walk and did not talk. But that he was alive was a great miracle. On that day my little sister was ten and a half years old and I was thirteen and a half.

I dressed my dead mother and laid canopies out on the floor. There on benches was a wide board on which mama laid Dagmar twenty days ago. Now on the board our mama lay; cold and indifferent to us. We had to wait to dig a grave for the ground was frozen as a stone.

The tomb was dug by the blacksmith, Snegiryov, from the collective farm. He was a good, light-hearted person, the father of five children. He dug the grave well – deep and with a niche. In this tomb he laid straw. My sister and I brought our mama to the cemetery on a sled. Snegiryov laid mama in the niche and covered the niche with a board so that the frozen lumps (of dirt) did not fall on mama.

When we were taken away to the children's home in the spring, we went to say goodbye to mama. The earth under the trees had not completely thawed, and instead of a grave there was a depression. Our

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<sup>62</sup> Vilenski, 355-356.

mama remained there, in that distant strange village, but all my life I feel her near to us. Forty-six winters have passed since then but I still often cry for her. I do not cry about our orphaned fate. I cry about the fate of a mother who should pay with her life for the life of the children.

Daina Shmuldere-Gerkis  
Banished from Latvia in 1941 to Vasjugansky raion<sup>63</sup>

Daina's family was among many Latvians who were banished during the ethnic cleansing campaign. Other minority groups included the Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Finns, Kalmyks, Jews, Lithuanians, Estonians, and Chechens. Greeks were also considered a socially dangerous ethnic minority group and even though Zh. P. Fatiadi's mother was a Soviet citizen, her family was exiled to Novorossisk.

My mother, a Soviet citizen of Greek nationality, was taken in 1941 under escort from Simferopol to perform forced labor in the coalmines of Kukhbassa. My father was lost earlier, in 1940, in the Soviet-Finnish war.

We were carried by "veal" car under an escort. And in Kuzbas we had to live in a vegetable storehouse on plank beds, then in a crude cold dugout. Famine drove me, barefooted, to the miner's barracks where I, with outstretched hand and tears in my eyes, would ask for a slice of bread for myself and my mother who was unable to rise from a wooden trestle bed. There were no papers from the hospital so my mother did not receive my father's pension from his service on the front.

In 1943 mama died. After her death life became even more bitter. I remained an orphan. Tears, famine, and cold — my destiny. After mama's death I remained three and a half long years in the same dugout, slept on the same trestle bed . . . And so it was until the commandant was replaced. A new order allowed the children's home to hand me over to the militia.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.



Then I was received by the children's home of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

In the children's home nobody bothered us, but we lived poorly and didn't eat enough. Our footwear – rubber *chuni*,<sup>64</sup> rough working boots, stockings – one pair for a year, you had to carry them, you had to keep an eye on them. Not just once did I witness the death of students.

Zh. P. Fatiadi  
Novorossisk<sup>65</sup>

Fatiadi's father fought and died for the country but the reward for his valor and sacrifice was that his wife and children should suffer as enemies of the people. Daina and Fatiadi both became orphans when their mothers died in the harsh environment of the special settlements. They became two more innocents added to the sea of orphans in the mass orphanage lamented above by Nikolaev.

Deportation and exile to remote regions were commonly practiced forms of repression. While her family wasn't sent to one of the special settlements, Margit Feller and her family faced much of the same hardships as the special settlers. Starvation, deprivation, lack of sanitation, and inadequate shelter claimed the lives of many deportees and exiles.

We lived without bread or a calendar. But I remember that papa was no longer with us and that there was a fierce winter. There were three of us – mama, my little brother Otmar, and me – we huddled in a small hut and in order to warm it I had to go every day with an axe into the taiga surrounding the settlement. I would cut down a dry pole, pull it out

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<sup>64</sup> Crude footwear often made of old tires.

<sup>65</sup> Vilenskii, 356-357.

of a deep snow on the well-beaten path and carry it home on my shoulder where my family impatiently waited for me. I brought enough to stoke the oven in the evening and in the morning. I didn't have the energy to go for firewood twice [in one day]. The Russian furnace was our very best friend. It warmed us—in it we cooked our meager meals and on top we all three slept.

One time in the evening coming back from a wood I left a snowy field behind the village and saw that the door of a crude log hut was wide open. It was not really a log hut, but a barrack—an infirmary made of aspen logs where sick animals were brought to get healthy. When we were first brought to this settlement the infirmary stood empty. It was damp and smelled carbolic inside. But eventually the most destitute exiles who had no other place to go lived in it. And here now the doors of this barrack are broken. There had been a strong frost and from within escaped a cold mist. There in the infirmary lived more than ten people, all of whom had no place to go . . . Having released my burden at the threshold, I entered into the dark structure and before my eyes appeared a strange and terrible picture. Covered by rags and tatters on plank beds laid gaunt people and in the middle of the barrack a big black bull wandered around and sniffed at them. None of those who lay there had the strength to rise to close the door allowing the last heat to escape and in crept a bitter cold. I was too weak but still I banished the bull, shut the broken door, and fed the furnace to boil water and to warm these people rendered weak from famine and cold. I carried boiled water to them in a tankard and they extended to me their thin arms and one just laid with his son beside the unfortunate woman for whom there was already nothing that could be done. She was dead.

Margit Feller  
Banished to Vasjugansky from Bukovina in 1941<sup>66</sup>

Margit Feller's eyewitness account presents a vivid example of the horrific living conditions experienced by thousands of exiles. Not only did Margit suffer the cold and hunger while being pushed to the limits of her physical endurance

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<sup>66</sup> Vilenskii, 358.

in order to simply stay alive, she also suffered the emotional trauma of witnessing senseless death and experiencing an overpowering sense of hopelessness.

### The Great Terror

*Everything really started on December 1, 1934. On that day Sergei Kirov was killed by a certain Nikolaev. The murderer was connected with Zinoviev, Kamenev, and others who had organized an Anti-Soviet Center in Moscow and Leningrad. They were tried openly and harshly. They were accused, it must be said, of fairly serious charges. Specifically, they were accused of wanting to restore capitalism in the USSR and of arson, murder, diversion, espionage, etc. The people "demanded" the death of the guilty. Undoubtedly, they demanded it under pressure from someone, but whom?! I can picture the condition of the defendants. After all, they were the oldest members of the Party, they'd been exiled and jailed repeatedly, they'd suffered. For what!! To meet death so soon, to perish at the hands of those for whom they'd struggled? The "fair, just and stern" court determined that the ZINOV'IEV group turned to crime on account of "fierce" hatred of the USSR. But how on earth could they bear "fierce" hatred towards the people for whose happiness they had struggled . . . There are so many they could have benefited!*

V. Moroz<sup>67</sup>

The assassination of Sergei Kirov by Leonid Nikolaev on December 1, 1934, was just the excuse Stalin needed to launch his greatest purge. Stalin claimed Kirov's murder was part of a larger conspiracy led by Leon Trotsky and his supporters in an attempt to usurp Soviet authority. Top Party officials Lev Kamenev, Grigori Zinoviev, and fourteen others were arrested and executed in

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 292.

1936. Numerous show trials took place in which the defendants were accused of conspiring with Western powers to assassinate Stalin and other Soviet leaders. In March 1936, the Politburo signed a resolution on “measures for protecting the USSR from infiltration of spies, terrorist and diversion elements” thus launching the beginning of the Great Terror which would claim the lives of numerous men, women, and children. According to statistical results provided by “Memorial”<sup>68</sup> for the period from October 1936 through November 1938:

In the cases investigated by the State Security Department of the NKVD:

- At least 1,710,000 people were arrested
- At least 1,440,000 people were sentenced
- At least 724,000 people were executed. Among those executed:
  - At least 436,000 people were sentenced to death by NKVD *troikas* as part of the dekulakization campaign
  - At least 247,000 people were sentenced to death by NKVD *dvoikas* and the local special *troikas* as part of the ethnic cleansing campaign
  - At least 41,000 people were sentenced to death by Military Courts

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<sup>68</sup> “Memorial” (Russian: Мемориал) is an international historical and civil rights society that operates in a number of post-USSR states with the following missions stated in its charter:

- *“To promote mature civil society and democracy based on the rule of law and thus to prevent a return to totalitarianism;*
- *To assist formation of public consciousness based on the values of democracy and law, to get rid of totalitarian patterns, and to establish firmly human rights in practical politics and in public life;*
- *To promote the revelation of the truth about the historical past and perpetuate the memory of the victims of political repression exercised by totalitarian regimes.”*

The society was officially founded by a conference held on April 19, 1992, although it was organized in the 1980s during the Glasnost period in the former Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the society became international, with organizations in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Latvia, and Georgia. Its full official name is the International Volunteer Public Organization MEMORIAL Historical, Educational, Human Rights and Charitable Society. In 2004 Memorial was among the four recipients of the Right Livelihood Award, sometimes called the alternative Nobel Prize, for its work in documenting violations of human rights in Russia and other former states in the USSR. Quoting the RLA jury: “. . . for showing, under very difficult conditions, and with great personal courage, that history must be recorded and understood, and human rights respected everywhere, if sustainable solutions to the legacy of the past are to be achieved.”

Among other cases in the period:

- At least 400,000 people were sentenced to labor camps by police *troikas* as socially harmful elements
- At least 200,000 people were exiled or deported by administrative procedures
- At least two million people were sentenced by courts for common crimes; among them 800,000 were sentenced to Gulag camps<sup>69</sup>

By October 1936 the campaign to purge the elites was well under way.

The cleansing of the Party ranks was only the beginning of this greatest period of repression. The Red Army was decimated and the result was disastrous to the war effort in the years to come. But the repression didn't stop with the Party members and military officers. Anyone who was considered a potential aggressor, individuals accused of being saboteurs in agriculture and industry, dangerous ethnic minorities, foreign nationals, poets, artists, and intelligentsia were all potential victims. Both of Luibov Stoliarova's parents became victims of the Great Terror. Her father was likely targeted in the campaign to rid industry from potential saboteurs and wreckers.

Our family had consisted of seven people: my father, mother, and five children. My father, Iosif Mikhailovich Bachuk, worked at the Kharkov locomotive factory as master of the shop. In November 1937, at four o'clock in the morning father had been taken away by a "Black Raven."<sup>70</sup> Many years later I learned that he worked on construction in Belomorsk-Baltic canal where he died. My mother, Matrina Platonova

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<sup>69</sup> "Memorial," [http://www.memo.ru/history/y1937/hronika1936\\_1939/xronika.html](http://www.memo.ru/history/y1937/hronika1936_1939/xronika.html).

<sup>70</sup> A "Black Raven" or "Black Maria" was a vehicle, usually a van, which transported prisoners.

Bachuka, a forty-something year old housewife, an illiterate woman, was arrested six months later. Then we somehow learned that our mother was sent for five years to Kazakhstan.

Luibov Iosifovna Stoliarova<sup>71</sup>

Stoliarova's mother's only crime was that her husband had been arrested and sent to the camps. On July 5, 1937, the Politburo signed a resolution On Family Members of the Traitors ordering that all wives of the enemies of the people be sent to labor camps for at least five to eight years and their children should be sent to special orphanages.<sup>72</sup> The rationale behind this campaign was that the wives of these enemies would be loyal to their husbands and therefore should be considered socially dangerous elements while their children, as hinted at by Mikhael Bezzubikov below, were somehow tainted by their genetic connection to their parents.

My mother was arrested on August 1, 1937, and there I was with three younger brothers – Vova, Tolya and Alexander. I was twenty years old. I was constantly being called to Lubyanka, the Kyznetskii Bridge, but more often to Myasnitskii 11. It was pure hell. In a 30x40 meter room I was summoned at 9:00 in the morning as one of 300 people whose relatives had been subjected to repression. I signed that I would not leave, that I had obligations, and that I would inform inhabitants, students, workers, etc., that my parents were enemies of the people and that otherwise I was

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<sup>71</sup> Vilenskii, 242.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 229-230.

a fair, hardworking person, but all the newspapers, radios, and posters on all corners called for the destruction of the enemies of people and their children - in fact, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

Mikhael Iakovlivich Bezzubikov<sup>73</sup>

Children of those repressed became the most vulnerable victims of the Great Terror. The slogan espoused by Stalin that "the son is not responsible for his father," publicly proclaimed about two years before the Great Terror but never truly implemented in practice, was replaced by another principle: isolation of and discrimination against all close relatives of the arrested, including the very young.<sup>74</sup>

Mikhael I. Nikolaev recalled what it was like for him to be sent to a children's home after his parents were arrested:

While I was in my first children's home (I was five years old) I had either fought with someone or offended some girl. A nurse approached me and with such rage said to me: "You little reptile! You are exactly like your parents – enemies of the people! You should be shot just like them."

I was small and certainly didn't understand everything, but somewhere in my memory the seed was planted and has since emerged. Of course in Russia, "kill" is just a word. We throw it around all the time and it's just a word. For the least little thing you'll hear, "I would've killed him!" or "Killing's too good for him!" So maybe it was the unusual word "shot" that stuck in my child's mind and that's why I remembered it. In 1941, before releasing me from the children's home, the manager Maria Nikolaevna Ugolnikova talked to me. She told to me then that I should not

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>74</sup> Khlevniuk, 169.

be ashamed of my parents—that they are not with me. “You had parents and they did abandon you, Misha. They were good people.”

And it is necessary to say that almost all my life was ashamed that I lived in a children’s home, that I was homeless, like some kind of foundling. And even Maria Nikolaevna’s words could not help. I am still ashamed and hide the fact that I was from a children’s home.

“Maybe you don’t understand now,” she continued, “but when you grow up, you’ll realize that they were good people and they didn’t suffer because they had done anything wrong.”

Then she told me that my father was no longer alive but that I may still meet my mother someday. After many years I have come to understand that my parents were arrested approximately between ‘32—‘33, even before the murder of Kirov, since I wound up in the children’s home in the summer of ‘33. And then they shot my father and what became of my mother I cannot guess. Now I am only surprised how it is that Maria Nikolaevna was not afraid to tell me that they were good people.

No, I have never found my mother and never learned anything about her, though I have tried. But for some reason, when I hear Bulat Okudzhava’s “Don’t Hang your Head in Sorrow” and “Komsomol Goddess” I always think the words are about her and I can’t hold back the tears.<sup>75</sup>

Testimony of M. I. Nikolaev

That Maria Nikolaevna had the courage to speak up for Nikolaev’s parents illustrates that not all citizens working for the Soviet system agreed with the unjust Soviet policies. They, too, were simply trying to survive. And it was truly an act of courage for Maria Nikolaevna to try to help the boy since the punishment for those who befriend the enemies of the people was potentially

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<sup>75</sup> Vilenskii, 216.



severe. Maria Nikolaevna risked being arrested herself by showing such compassion.

These young victims of Stalinism were also highly vulnerable to physical abuses. Too young and weak to defend themselves they were easy targets for unscrupulous adults and older children who preyed on their vulnerability. M. I. Bezzubikov described what happened to him and his siblings after their parents were arrested:

My younger brothers were first brought by a “Black Raven” to Danilovski monastery which was converted to a children’s receiving center and then were distributed to different children’s homes under the department of People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs. From there Alexander was sentenced to five years to Kareliya . . . While he was there criminals raped him. He escaped and joined me in Moscow. When he turned sixteen he left for the front and at seventeen became the commander of a platoon where he died bravely.

My second brother, Anatoly, was nine years old. In the children’s home he was tormented and called the enemy of people. He cried, escaped, was caught, beaten, and put in a punishment cell (cellar) and not allowed to eat. Eventually this brother who was called, “the enemy of people” escaped to Angelsk . . . where he worked on a state farm. In 1943 he left for the front. Because of fear that he would be exposed as an enemy of people he changed his name, year of birth, and claimed he lost his documents. So in all this fright and confusion he cannot untangle himself anymore.

I passed through Danilovski monastery to get my younger brother, six-year-old Volodia. All his life he wandered from attics to hostels and now stands in line for a place to stay. Yes, who will give to him! My oldest brother, Ivan, lived in Moscow and after our father and mother were arrested he was unable to get a job for three years and he already had two children. At first even I wasn’t sent to the front: it was supposedly Stalin’s order – to not yield the terrible Soviet weapon of children of the enemies of people.

So seven out of eight children of the “enemies of people,” whose parents were exterminated by the authorities, protected the native land; four were lost to war and three were mutilated. And such families as ours were many.

Testimony of Mikhael Iakovlivich Bezzubikov<sup>76</sup>

Stalin’s policies illustrated a complete disregard for the lives of these children who were treated as criminals, left to starve, tormented, beaten, and sometimes even sent to the front to become cannon fodder. “*And such families as ours were many.*” Statements such as this one are a recurring theme in the collection of memoirs submitted to *Memorial* and in *Deti Gulaga*.

Even unborn children were vulnerable to the atrocities plaguing the countryside. Numerous pregnant women were arrested contrary to official instructions against the practice. Zayara Vesvolaya’s memoirs recite the story of a pregnant woman with whom she shared a cell for one month. When Natasha was fourteen years old her parents were arrested, leaving her and her younger brother in the care of their elderly grandfather. They lived in extreme poverty, so when the war broke out, Natasha volunteered for the army and fought in the Battle of Moscow. She later completed her master’s thesis at Moscow University and had only been married a short time and was heavy with child when they came for her. Refusing to sign the records of her cross-examination, her

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<sup>76</sup> Vilenskii, 255.

interrogator forced her to remain standing for extended periods of time. Upon losing consciousness, she would fall only to have him bring her back with a whiff of ammonia and prop her back up against the wall to start the process all over again. Finally the interrogation ended and she was sentenced to five years' exile. The prison doctor warned that her pregnancy was in jeopardy but instead of keeping her in the hospital until she gave birth they forced her to leave immediately. After a month of hard traveling she finally arrived at the camp and gave birth to a stillborn baby the same day.<sup>77</sup>

## World War II

Stalin's last great purge occurred during World War II when the camps swelled with prisoners of war and soldiers who had been prisoners of war in foreign camps. Many Soviet soldiers who surrendered to the enemy were viewed with suspicion and upon return from prison camps in foreign countries found themselves subject to arrest and sentencing as spies. Some were executed while others were sent to perform hard labor in the camps. Adult men were not the only ones to fight for the motherland. Women made up entire battalions and young boys would fight alongside the men at the front. In a terrible twist of irony many of these men, women, and children who fought for their motherland and

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<sup>77</sup> Zayara Vesvolaya, "7:35." In Vilensky, *Till My Tale is Told*, 306-307.

suffered in foreign POW camps (see Figure 4) returned home only to find that they were treated as stepchildren, or worse.

V. M. Lisovskii was only 15 years old when he was taken prisoner by the Germans. He was forced to perform hard labor and, when he attempted to escape, was subjected to physical punishment. Yet when he finally escaped the Germans he faced the same fate at the hands of his fellow countrymen.



FIGURE 4  
*Young Russian Prisoners of War*  
(Source: Memorial)

During the Second World War I lived in the Klinty Briansk region and in March 1945, I was taken away by Germans with a big group of men of different ages to a camp in Gomel. I was 15 years old. In the end of April, I was taken to a camp in Bryansk, a settlement of Uritska, where I was forced to work on excavation and construction. Then an aggregate construction brigade of about 100-150 people with a convoy and guards were driven to work repairing bridges, paving boards through bogs, repairing roads, excavating dugouts, digging entrenchments, and felling and sawing up trees. On horses we hauled logs and transported sand and dirt.

When the horse pass was, by chance, left unattended by the guards, I ran away with the purpose of sitting out before the arrival of our armies, but I came across some Germans who delivered me to camp. For several days I was held in a shed under guard without food, beaten soundly, with water poured over me to revive me. It was September 1943, the nights were cold and I had fallen asleep. Soon I began to get boils all over my body but I was not released from work. Working and moving ahead west through Bryansk, Vitebsk, and Smolensk oblasts, we passed Belarus. In September 1944 in Bialystok, the Sokol<sup>78</sup> ran into our incoming armies. We were interrogated about counterespionage at the front and the infiltration camp of Bialystok and the infiltration of the city of Volkovysk. There at a military registration and enlistment office I received a certificate of

<sup>78</sup> Czech word for "falcon". The Sokol was a Slavic Youth Movement and Gymnastics organization that played an important part in the Czech nationalism movement.

conscription and with permission returned home to Klinty Bryansk region.

Having been registered at the military registration and enlistment office in the city, I was directed to the KGB for inquiry. There they put me in KPZ<sup>79</sup> and for two weeks underwent nightly interrogations. Then the investigation stopped since they found no illegal actions on my part. Upon release the inspector said, "Go live, but live quietly." And at home mama added, "Thank God that they kindly let you out. Live quietly as water below the grass, my son."

I have long reflected why such a malicious destiny mixed with valor was mine? After my successful escape the motherland did not meet me as a mother, but as a stepmother. From age 15 to 17 years I accepted such tortures in fascist camps. I worked to complete exhaustion under the supervision of guards, was screamed at, beaten, my clothes were torn, wind chilled me to the bone, all the time half-starving, with only one thought—where to get food. I took a grave risk on the second escape. I returned with scurvy. The bottom front roots of my teeth had become bare. Boils tormented me all winter long for 20 years.

And after surviving this half nightmare in my ears and in my head I constantly heard, "Live, but live quietly." I certainly understood the advice of the inspector. He knew that my father, a priest, was arrested in 1937 and had sent the notice that he was condemned for ten years without the right of correspondence.<sup>80</sup> That means I am then the son of the enemy of the people. Yes, naturally in fact, after my father was arrested I was excluded from the Pioneers. And mama, when she could, worked for 72 rubles a month to support herself and me?! When she submitted the application to give me permission to go to the Pioneer camp, the inspector replied with his head bent, "It's not possible." Yes, in fact, for a son of the enemy of the people how it is possible?

In 1962, I inquired at the Bryansk Office of the Public Prosecutor about the fate of my father and they answered that he died in camp in 1942 of cardiovascular failure and have sent the information that he was rehabilitated due to a lack of proof of guilt. I learned the truth about the fate of my father after 57 years. They answered on November 28, 1994, but

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<sup>79</sup> "Kamera predvaritel'nogo zakliucheniia" a cell of preliminary confinement.

<sup>80</sup> When a prisoner was sentenced to execution his or her family was told that s/he was sentenced to a specific term, usually ten years, without right of correspondence.

it seemed to me that they answered as in 1937. I affix the answer from the prosecutor's office. Some kind of confused abracadabra!

By examination of the criminal case it is established that your father, M. S. Lisovskii, was involved in the criminal liability of being a priest in Nizhnii Starodubskii of Bryansk in 1936-1937. That among believers he distributed anti-Soviet propaganda, read counterrevolutionary sermons, claimed that the laws of the Soviet authority were directed at the deterioration of the life of workers, and stated insurgent moods. For these actions on November 27, 1937, at UNKVD in the Orlovskii oblast a *troika* condemned him to execution.

In connection with that matter has not been collected sufficient evidence of guilt subject to repression and under the protest of the public prosecutor of the oblast on August 9, 1962, the presidium of the Bryansk regional court, the decision of the *troika* concerning M. S. Lisovskii has been dismissed and the matter not carried out due to a lack of evidence. The basis for change of the formulation of the dismissal of this matter in absence of the constitution of a crime is not available. Irrespective of it your father is considered rehabilitated. On the question of shedding light on the addition of rehabilitation that he was a priest, it is necessary to address the Bryansk regional court that rehabilitated him. Information on the burial place of your father is not available.

V. M. Lisovskii  
Moscow<sup>81</sup>

Out of multiple layers of paranoia grew policies of extreme repressive measures contributing to the chaos of a society that viewed the repatriated soldier as an enemy of the people, even when that soldier was a 15-year-old boy.

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<sup>81</sup> Vilenskii, 415-416.

## CHAPTER V

## PREGNANCY AND CHILDBIRTH IN THE CAMPS

*The anguish of small children is more powerful and more tragic than the anguish of adults. Knowledge comes to a child before he can fend for himself. For as long as his needs and wishes are anticipated by loving eyes and hands, he doesn't realize his own helplessness. But if those hands betray him, surrendering him to callous and cruel strangers, his horror has no limits. A child cannot grow used to things or forget them; he can only put up with them, and when that happens, anguish settles in his heart and condemns him to sickness and death . . . That is the whole story of how, in giving birth to my only child, I committed the worst crime there is.*

*Hava Volovich*<sup>82</sup>

While countless children accompanied their mothers into the camps or were arrested and sent to the camps by the authorities, a significant number of children were also born in the camps. As the female population increased so did the number of children and the frequency of childbirth. The number of women prisoners (see Figure 5) steadily increased during the campaign in the late 1930's to arrest wives of the enemies of the people and continued to soar through the end of WWII. The ratio of women to men reached its highest point of 24 percent in 1945 when male prisoners were sent to the front. As a natural consequence the

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<sup>82</sup> Hava Volovich, "My Past." In Vilensky, 263-264.

increased percentage of women in the camps corresponded with a sharp increase in childbirth.<sup>83</sup> While there was a slight decrease in the number of women in the camps after the July 7, 1945 amnesty, there followed a resurgence of arrests that continued again to increase until Stalin's death in 1953.

The majority of female political prisoners were arrested not because they themselves were accused of specific criminal acts, but because they were somehow associated with men (fathers, husbands, brothers, sons) who had been convicted of political crimes. The Special



FIGURE 5

*Women Prisoners in Barracks (Source: Applebaum)*

Camps for Wives of Traitors to the Motherland were first introduced in the period from 1937 to 1938 and had become a mass phenomenon by 1940.

Most male prisoners had limited contact with females and the women were supposed to be kept separate from the men in the camp system. But for better or worse this was not always the case. Birth control wasn't available in the Gulag and many women ended up becoming pregnant either through rape or camp relationships. Rape and sexual assault of women prisoners was a harsh reality. Women who resisted were often punished and their only chance of survival was to accept these unwanted exploitations. Women quickly learned the

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<sup>83</sup> Pohl, 30-31.



rules of survival and learned to find a protector among the male guards or criminals. Some women took advantage of their sexuality in order to obtain extra rations and buy protection from unwanted advances. But for many it was a horrible price to pay for survival.

In the harsh environment of the camps pregnancy was often more of a burden than a blessing. For those women who couldn't bear the thought of bringing a child into the camp environment the only option was abortion. Sometimes women were permitted to have abortions but others received a second sentence for attempting an illegal abortion. Still others were forced to have abortions while some performed self-abortions, often with tragic results. One woman had the camp doctor attempt to terminate her pregnancy without instruments. The pain was unbearable and the experience left her barren.<sup>84</sup> Not all women who became pregnant had the option of an abortion. Some women chose to keep their child and others became intentionally pregnant in order to lessen the burden of life in the camps.

Officially women were not to be subjected to hard labor but in reality many women were expected to perform the same duties with the same quotas as the men. Hard labor for women, such as tree felling and mining, was frequently meted out as a means of punishment. Because it was officially prohibited for women to engage in hard labor, men in adjoining camps would receive credit for

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<sup>84</sup> Abblebaum, 319.

the work done by women in the logging and mining industries.<sup>85</sup> If a woman didn't meet her quota by quitting time she may have been left behind in the forest to finish the job. This practice was essentially a death sentence, thus for many women who intentionally sought pregnancy it was literally a matter of life or death.

While it might be expected that having the women housed in separate camps would protect them, in practice the separation of women from men caused the general work conditions for women to worsen dramatically.<sup>86</sup> Without the benefit of being able to obtain lighter duties at a commingled camp, women were expected to join in the general work population. Although instructions were issued from the central Gulag administration on every aspect of camp life, including the type of work to which women would be assigned, the instructions were not always followed at local levels and conditions in the camps varied greatly.<sup>87</sup> Pregnancy was often seen as the only escape a woman had from the harsh conditions facing her in the general work camps.

El'da Fridman related how the life of her mother was saved from execution due to pregnancy.

My parents, Abram Naumovich Fridman and Raisa Davydovna Smertenko, were arrested the first time in 1928 while students of the Saratov University and banished to Khadzhent. There I was born.

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<sup>85</sup> Ilic, 135-36.

<sup>86</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Vol. One, 247.

<sup>87</sup> Ilic, 132-138.

After the second arrest they were separated. Dad was banished to Krasnoyarsk and mama and I were banished to Bashkiria. My parents met again at Vorkuta after the next arrest in 1936. They participated together in surviving many days of a hunger strike of the political prisoners, which ended in a bloody massacre. Four women, including my mom, were rescued from execution due to pregnancy. They were sent to Kochmis (Komi ASSR). By order at Vorkuta Labor Camp children who have reached 3 years had to be transferred to a special children's home. Although having been born in 1938 and not yet three years old, in the summer of 1939 they too were sent from Kochmis to Arkhangelsk's special children's home. With these children accompanied the prisoner Adda D'vovna Voitolovskaia, three mothers and a guard. Some children were met on the quay by waiting relatives – they had been given permission to take them away. And here on the quay eleven children were transferred by order to the children's home. On repeated inquiries about what became of these children the answer has always been, "All were lost during an epidemic." In this official document even the names and surnames of the children have not been specified – just simply "eleven." What epidemic and did it really happen? Where were these children buried?

My brother Andrei, whose birth rescued my mom from execution, was lost in a children's home for children of prisoners in Arkhangelsk.

El'da Abramovna Fridman<sup>88</sup>

Whether El'da's mother became pregnant intentionally to avoid execution is unknown, but the life of her infant child was the ultimate price she paid to be saved from the executioner's hand.

While there were many women who sought pregnancy as the means for a temporary reprieve, there were those women who chose to become pregnant for emotional reasons. Just because a woman was in prison didn't mean she forgot

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<sup>88</sup> Vilenskii, 320.

how to love and in many cases the loss of love was the greatest punishment a woman could bear. Hava Volovich was one of those women searching for love and comfort to lessen the horror of her surroundings. Her daughter, Eleanora, was born in a remote camp barracks, not in the medical block. There were three mothers there and they were given a tiny room filled with bedbugs. During the daytime they had to go to work and leave their infants with old women who had been relieved from work to care for the little ones, but these women would often eat the children's rations of food and the mothers were helpless to do anything about it.<sup>89</sup>

When Eleanora had barely started walking, Volovich was transferred to the Mother's Camp and set to felling trees. She was only permitted to see her child for a restricted amount of time. In return for being allowed to see her daughter outside of normal visiting hours, every day Volovich would take to the nursery a little bundle of firewood to bribe the nurses, but sometimes the guards at the gates took her firewood and thus she would lose the opportunity for that precious extra time with Eleanora.<sup>90</sup> Volovich described the conditions of the children's home.

The nurses would get the children up in the mornings forcing them out of their cold beds with shoves and kicks. (For the sake of "cleanliness," blankets weren't tucked in around the children but were simply thrown on top of their cots.) Pushing the children with their fists

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<sup>89</sup> Volovich, 260-261.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

and swearing at them roughly, they took off their night clothes and washed them in ice-cold water. The babies didn't even dare cry. They made little sniffing noises like old men and let out low hoots.

This awful hooting noise would come from the cots for days at a time. Children already old enough to be sitting up or crawling would lie on their backs, their knees pressed to their stomachs, making these strange noises, like the muffled cooing of pigeons.

One nurse would be responsible for each group of seventeen children. She had to sweep the ward, wash and dress the children, feed them, keep the stove going, and do all sorts of special "voluntary" shifts in the camp; but her main responsibility was keeping the ward clean. In order to cut down on her workload and allow herself a bit of free time, she would "rationalize" her jobs: that is, she would come up with ways in which she could reduce the amount of time she had to spend on the children.

The nurse brought a steaming bowl of porridge from the kitchen, and portioned it out into separate dishes. She grabbed the nearest baby, forced its arms back, tied them in place with a towel, and began cramming spoonful after spoonful of hot porridge down its throat, and then move on to the next child. Only the babies of the nurses got adequate care and would live to see freedom.

Hava Volovich<sup>91</sup>

In this "house of dead babies," as many as 300 infants died annually in the years before the war started and the rate increased drastically thereafter.<sup>92</sup> Little Eleanora died when she was only one year and four months old. Volovich was not allowed to leave the camp compound to bury her child and never knew where her grave was.

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

New mothers were subject to a strict set of rules and regulations concerning the feeding and visiting of their newborn children. The infant child was taken away from its mother only days after the birth and sent to a nursery within the camp zone. Once separated, a nursing mother could enter the nursery only at strictly specified feeding times. Official regulations issued in 1938 stated that until the child was three months old, seven visits per day were allowed. For those children who were between the ages of three and five months visits were reduced to six times a day, and from five months to ten months there were only five visits per day. At the age of ten months, babies were weaned off breast milk with the exception of sick children who were permitted to be breastfed for a longer period.<sup>93</sup>

In order to obtain access to the feeding room, nursing mothers had to show a pass to the guards, both on entry into and exit from the building. Women were prohibited from entering any other part of the building. They were permitted to stay in the feeding room for a maximum of 30 minutes, during which time silence had to be maintained. A mother who was not breastfeeding her child was permitted to see her baby only twice a month during specified hours. Any mother who violated the established order could have all rights to visit her child revoked.<sup>94</sup> If the camp commander determined, however, that the

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<sup>93</sup> Ilic, 141-144

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

prisoner could not be released from work, all visitation entitlements could be revoked, regardless of the age or health of the child.<sup>95</sup>

Evgenia Ginzburg wrote that in Elgen<sup>96</sup> Camp women were permitted to feed their children in the nursery several times a day, as per the official order. However, in order to maximize the general labor force and reduce the amount of labor needed to support the nursery, the doctor would routinely announce that lactation had ceased prematurely and the mother would be forced to return to normal labor, very often in a different area of the camp thereby limiting her access to the child.<sup>97</sup>

Children were supposedly able to leave the nursery if their parents reached the end of their sentences. However, if children reached the age of four years before their mother was released they were usually sent to NKVD children's homes within the camp zone. In the period from 1936 to 1937 the authorities deemed that children in the camps were detrimental to the discipline and productivity of their imprisoned mothers. Therefore children were sometimes sent to a children's home as young as twelve months of age and the mothers were no longer permitted to see their children.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Elgen was a special women's camp. Ironically, the word "elgen" means "dead" in the Yakut language.

<sup>97</sup> Ilic., 143.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 141-144.

Nelia Simonova was born in a camp and was separated from her mother at a very young age. She never knew her father and never knew a happy childhood. Her story is typical of children born in the camps.

My mom, being still quite young and working in the printing houses in Tashkent, had not joined the Komsomol on time (during collectivization they were “*dekulakized*,” and all large families were sent to live to Tashkent). There was an incident at her business, which ended with her arrest. Then she was deported and sent to Belomorkanal, in Norilsk, and finally in Kazlag, in the Karaganda area, in the village Dolinskoe. There I was born in 1939. Naturally I did not live with her but near the zone, in a home for children of political prisoners. Never in my life did I speak the word “papa” as I did not have one. My memory of her has not faded these many years. In our children’s home there lived children from nursing age till school age. Conditions of life were hard and they fed us poorly. It was necessary to climb on a kitchen pail to fill up on berries in the woods. Very many children suffered and died . . . We were beaten, forced to stand idly for a long time in a corner for the slightest prank . . . Once during quiet time I could not fall asleep at all. Aunt Dina, the governess, came down on my head and if I have not turned I probably would not be alive. I lived there until 1946, although mama was not yet released (she remained in the camps for 12 years).

Nelia Nikolaevna Simonova<sup>99</sup>

As was so frequently the case with NKVD practices, the forced relocation of children in the camps usually took place in the middle of the night. The process was planned and executed like a military operation so that the mothers were taken by surprise. Since no address was ever provided to the mother upon separation, mother and child were rarely ever reunited.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Vilenskii, 245.

<sup>100</sup> Ilic., 141-144.



N. A. Ioffe was one of the camp mothers who had to endure the pain and suffering unique to the mothers of infants born in the camps. She had to deal with the physical suffering common to all camp internees but also had to endure the agony of watching her child and the children of the other mothers suffer and, as in the case of Allochka, the daughter of a fellow prisoner, the death and final indignation of the abuse of her tiny body after her death.

November 6, 1937. According to Kolyma camp rules all prisoners should be in a zone. Twenty women live in one tent where a huge lock hangs on the doors. Near to this tent is a second one. It is a workshop where women work repairing old pea jackets and padded jackets. This tent is also always locked. Two lines of barbed wire enclose both tents.

In the morning the escort opens the lock, releases the people on duty and directs them to the common zone for bread and boiled water. Two people on duty under escort bring 20 rations of bread and 20 teaspoons of sugar, which is then divided among the women. After breakfast some of the women go into another tent where they are again locked up and another group, accompanied by an escort, go up a hill to cut firewood.

At lunchtime the women are escorted into a large area to the dining room. This time there are no men. We work again after lunch and in the evening we are escorted to supper. Once a week those requiring medical aid are taken under escort to a first-aid post. The medic that was there at the mine . . . has no idea where the heart is, but all the same on any given day almost half of the tent went to the first-aid post; in fact on every departure from the zone, on every occasion, someone has met someone; someone has gotten to know someone. Even casually heard snippets of conversation are discussed and commented on a thousand times. Besides me there is one other woman from Moscow with a child – Shura Nikolaeva. Shura studied at the Academy of Communication, and at the Komsomol the assembly voted to expel her from the Komsomol because her brother had been arrested as an “enemy of the people.” She too had five years under KRTD<sup>101</sup>. Shura had a six month old daughter – Allochka.

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<sup>101</sup> *Kontrrevoliutsionnaia Trotskistskaia Deyatel'nost'* counterrevolutionary Trotskyite activities.

She [Shura] was taken when she was pregnant. At home remained two boys – twins. She worked as an orderly.

During the postnatal period in the sweltering tent I developed severe mastitis. I lay several days with a temperature above 40 [Celsius] and then Lera was sent with me to Ust'-Taizhna, to the hospital where he was born. After ten days of quarantine, the children, Lera and Alla, were taken to the children's combine. And in two weeks both were ill with pneumonia. Allochka, the bright, healthy girl, suffered greatly. And about mine there is nothing to say!

Oh, this children's combine! Now it's a "factory of angels." Children die continuously, from anemia or simply from want. And in fact the conditions could be quite good; the facility is good and the food, too, is quite good. All balked at leaving. Under [Article] 58 to work with children was not allowed for "enemies of people." Criminals, non-political prisoners, "socially close"<sup>102</sup> worked. With rare exception the "socially close" and their children were not subject to this and other treatment.

Those who work at the children's combine had cushy jobs in warmth, without an escort, and with good food. Here's how they worked: for long hours they stand under the stairs with the "*muzhiks*"<sup>103</sup> or leave the children alone altogether. The children were unfed and not looked after. They both suffered and died. Of all from Lerina only three remain alive: Lera; Tamara, the daughter of the German Communist Ioganni Bel'ki; and Tolik, son of the Moscow workingwoman, Shura Ivanova.

And this is one of the camp miracles – why these three have escaped. In fact, we mothers could do nothing for our children. We simply wanted very much that they lived. And they survived. After pneumonia, Lerochka returned to the children's combine. But Shura's Allochka died. It was terrible to look at Shura – in a few days she turned gray and had grown old for her years. But that wasn't all that she would have to endure . . . She had to take Allochka to the mortuary. I was allowed to leave to help and I went to the cemetery to order a coffin and a gravestone. Our women made a floral arrangement for her of many beautiful colors. Two women went with me to the mortuary. They dressed Allochka and decorated her with flowers. She did not suffer long and lay

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<sup>102</sup> A suspect or criminal in a non-political case – a member of the "toiling masses."

<sup>103</sup> Usually a Russian peasant man. In this case is used colloquially to mean "guys" or "dudes."

as if alive—only much better and so pretty. She could have been three but she was only a year and three months.

When I returned to the mortuary (at that time it was a very small house near the hospital) I saw that Shura was sitting on a stone near the mortuary. She had such an expression. I thought, “What else could happen, in fact Allochka has already died?” When I approached closer she turned to me and in a very even voice said, “Nadia, my girl was raped.” For a minute I thought that she had gone mad. But as though she overheard my thoughts she said, “I have not gone mad. I speak the truth. Go look. I cannot go.”

I went to the head physician. He probably had gotten so used to it that nothing would surprise him. He went with me to the mortuary. He examined Allochka and fetched other doctors. For two hours we sat with Shura on a stone near the mortuary. Perhaps they had simply forgotten us. And then one of the doctors approached us and said that there was a medical examination and it was confirmed that the body had really been raped. It was done at the mortuary. He admitted that it frequently happened with the corpses of women. Then he left. Allochka was buried.

N. A. Ioffe<sup>104</sup>

Ioffe’s desperate story painfully illustrates the hopelessness and despair that so many mothers endured when they brought innocent new lives into the harsh and unimaginably cruel environment of Gulag camp life.

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<sup>104</sup> Vilenskii, 269-271.

CHAPTER VI  
ORPHANAGES AND CHILDREN'S HOMES

*In the Memorial Society there is a map of all the Gulag camps, but nowhere is there a map of the network of children's homes that dotted our entire country. They spawned a mutilated generation.*

*Al'dona Volynskaia*<sup>105</sup>

Conditions in the orphanages and children's home were appalling and presented an unhealthy and even dangerous environment for their inhabitants. Conditions in these institutions, especially for children of political prisoners was analogous to that of the Gulag camp environment. In a memo to M. F. Shkirjatov, N. Semashko, Chairman of the Children's Commission, VTsIK discusses the failure of several children's homes to address the problem of inadequate sanitation, poor living conditions and neglect. He referred to a decision made by the Party and the government on May 31, 1935 to liquidate the problem of children's homelessness and neglect but complained that, in spite of this measure, conditions in the children's homes remain "absolutely intolerable."

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<sup>105</sup> Vilenskii, 325.

- Baribinskii Home: The home is terribly overcrowded. Of the 640 children in the home 212 have to sleep doubled up because of a lack of bedding. There are 130 sick and disabled children living in the home. Children have to eat in shifts because of the lack of dinnerware and flatware. The straw mattresses and pillows are lice infested. The baths are completely insufficient to handle the number of children and have become breeding grounds for disease. They do double-time as a laundry facility. Clean linens are mixed with dirty. Many windows are missing.
- Children's Home No. 3: In order to accommodate the number of children at this facility they have expanded the living quarters into an old stable. The density is to such a degree that there is no room to pass between the beds. The sanitary condition is absolutely intolerant. Children go for 28 days without a bath and without a change of clean clothing. There are insufficient linens and clothing to go around and there is a lack of potable water. Kids drink water wherever they find it. The premises are poorly heated and children go night and day with their coats on. Seriously ill children live among the others. The food is of poor quality and the dining area is filthy. Norms for food are not kept – the attendants spend the money allocated for food on themselves. Children eat in shifts and have to drink tea from the dishes from which they eat their meals.
- Children's Home #2, Berbilki: Children are doubled up in beds. One third of the children are ill with contagious diseases. The home is not prepared for winter. The doors don't properly close and the furnaces are inadequate.<sup>106</sup>

Semashko described the appalling conditions in these homes from the official perspective while Al'dona Volynskaia described the conditions from a very personal perspective:

Our group of 38 children was sent to Novoukrainka, in Kirovograd Province. Hungry and tired from walking several miles on foot, we arrived at a squat, dark building which turned out to be the dining hall. The tables had been set with food and every bowl had more than a dozen

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 205.

flies floating in it. At that time none of us could eat that soup. Later on we would eat it, even if another child had spit into it. We constantly went hungry there.

One time a commission came and everyone was served full dishes of vegetables. They asked us, "Is it good? Do you like it?" "Yes we do!" The commission left and the cafeteria lady screamed, "We haven't eaten for three shifts!" and threw the leftover "food" into the garbage.

We were covered with sores from malnutrition and the kind nurse Maria Ivanovna told us, "Greens won't help you; you need to eat meat." One day they gave us each a piece of fried meat that smelled so strongly of kerosene that even the dogs who were constantly following us wouldn't eat it. Obviously a sick cow who had been treated with kerosene had died.

The street where the children's home was located also had a flourmill, a creamery, and silos of sugar beets. Hungry children would flock to any passing cart carrying grain, corn, beets or seeds. They'd manage to fill their pockets with things to eat while being beaten with a whip.

It was cold in the bedrooms and we usually lay two on a mattress in our clothes and boots covering ourselves with a second mattress and a blanket. Once a month we were taken to the bath. I remember with disgust how we had to wipe ourselves off with wet sheets. There were no handkerchiefs, no gloves and you wiped your nose on your coat sleeves so that they looked like tanned leather.

The Lenin Children's Home No. 1 was located in the town of Novoukrainka, in Kirovograd Province. It held 400 children. Of those 400, 38 were children whose parents were repressed and the rest were children whose parents died of starvation in the 1933 famine. Near the dining hall there was a large pear tree that never bloomed. Beneath it there was a hole into which the bodies of children who starved to death were thrown.

Al'dona Volynskaia<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 322.

Unfortunately even when officials like Semashko attempted to improve or regulate the standards in the homes the system wasn't capable of enforcing adequate care for these children and couldn't protect them from the corruption and abuse they endured at the hands of those in whose care they were entrusted.

Starvation was a constant concern. A telegram from a children's home near Smolensk to the Moscow children's commission stated that the food supply



FIGURE 6  
*Camp Children* (Source: *Memorial*)

had been cut off and 100 children were starving.<sup>108</sup> Children in the camps, prisons, and children's homes (see Figure 6) were often subject to rapes and beatings.<sup>109</sup> Infant epidemics were so high that the inspectors' reports showed they were deliberately

covered up.<sup>110</sup> Persistent diarrhea outbreaks, the result of gross malnutrition, contributed to the high infant mortality.<sup>111</sup> Other diseases plaguing the camps included scurvy, bronchitis, tuberculosis, typhus, and dysentery and several children were born with syphilis.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Vilenskii, 144.

<sup>109</sup> Applebaum, 325.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibis*, 323.

<sup>111</sup> Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, 7.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

Ginzburg reflected on what it was like to work in the children's wards.

[T]he most appalling thing of all was the arrival every three hours, with every change of shift, of the nursing mothers to "feed" their infants. Among them there were some of us – political prisoners – who had taken the risk of bringing an Elgen child into the world. They peered in through the door with an anxious question on their miserable faces, and it was hard to tell what they feared more: that the infant born in Elgen would survive or that it would die.

Evgenia Ginzburg<sup>113</sup>

Not only were the children starved for sustenance, they were also starved for education. The lack of food, heat, and basic living supplies was enough to hamper any attempt at providing an education for the children and a shortage in educational supplies and trained instructors guaranteed the children would be starved intellectually. In the Baribinskii home Semashko states that there are "[n]o visual aids in the classroom, the few desks in the rooms are in poor shape and many children sit on the floor. The classrooms are poorly heated and the children sit in class with their coats on. There are only 12 poorly trained instructors for a total of 640 pupils. The staff steals from the school." Semashko went on to note that in Children's Home No. 3, "[t]he school year is drastically shortened due to a lack of teachers and equipment. The quality of study is poor."<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>114</sup> Vilenskii, 205-207.



The following letter was sent from a 12-year-old schoolgirl to Joseph Stalin pleading for his help. It epitomizes the belief of many people that if their lives were somehow miserable it was only because Stalin wasn't aware of their predicament. Like so many others, Nina believed that she was the exception and that other Soviet children truly did have a happy childhood. Yet the type of childhood she endured was all too common.

January 18, 1937

Hello, dear Comrade Stalin! Our leader, teacher and favorite friend to all happy Soviets. Dear Comrade Stalin! I send to you warm and intimate greetings and wish you the best successes in your life and to be healthy forever. I wish to describe to you my gloomy life.

Dear Comrade Stalin! I heard your speeches on the radio. You said that in the Soviet Union the life of children is very good, they study at schools, and the doors in the schools are wide open. It certainly is true, dear Comrade Stalin. Dear Joseph Vissarovich, my brother Alexander and I are unable to go to school because, comrade Stalin, we do not have enough food. Our cow and horse had been taken by [the local collective] in 1935. This is the second year we live without a cow and horse. Now we no longer have any cattle yet the rural Soviet has incorrectly imposed a tax upon us.

Dear Joseph Vissarovich! We have not entered the collective farm because my father is an invalid. He battled in two wars and lost his health [in the wars] and so to work in a collective farm is not possible . . . We now have no land as we handed it over to the collective farm in 1936. Comrade Stalin I go to school in the 4<sup>th</sup> class and my brother also goes to school in the 2<sup>nd</sup> class. The others do not study because are still too young.

Dear Comrade Stalin, for us to go to school is simply impossible as there is no food and we are very anemic. Dear Comrade Stalin! I wish to describe to you about my successes as I study: my marks for the first quarter were in seven subjects "perfect" and in three subjects "good." But what I want to achieve in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter for all subjects is "excellent." But if there was food, Comrade Stalin, I would study even better.

Dear and favorite leader, Comrade Stalin! I believe and hope that you will render us some help. And don't leave unredeemed my request.

Thank you Comrade Stalin  
For our happy life!  
For our happy childhood  
For our wonderful days.

And so, Comrade Stalin, our favorite leader, I have described to you my life. I hope for you, the favorite leader of the happy country, that you will heed my request. Write, please, dear comrade Stalin. I shall look forward to your answer.

Nina Vasilevna Shvetsova  
12 years old<sup>115</sup>

Nina dreamed of attending school but for so many children the only education they received was in the form of abuse and neglect as described by Savel'eva Natal'ia Leonidovna.

The method of education in the children's homes was with fists. Before my eyes the director beat the boys who were older than I. He beat their heads against the wall and beat their faces with his fists because during a search they found grain crumbs in their pockets and suspected that they were preparing to run away. And the teachers told us us, "nobody needs you." When we were taken for a walk the babysitters and teachers pointed their fingers and shouted, "Enemies, enemies you see!" And we probably were no different than them. Their linen and clothes were from the confiscated property of our parents.

Savel'eva Natal'ia Leonidovna<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Vilenskii, 225-226.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 248.

Still others were forced to work and therefore didn't have a chance to attend school. Al'dona Volynskaia was one such child.

At the Pioneer Camp we found out that the city was surrounded, except for the road to Odessa. Elia Iuian, Masha Polivanova, and I, barefoot and in our shorts and print dresses, took a satchel of seeds and went towards Odessa but the military division would not let us through, not even to spend the night in the village. Towards morning we returned and everyone cried and embraced us. Then the principal, Larisa Shadurskaia, arrived and took the 40 oldest children (out of 400) and said that wars come and go and that the older ones should perish in order to save the younger ones who will continue to live after the war. We divided ourselves according to work. Natalka Liashko milked 14 cows and I would help her. We reaped, tied sheaves, harvested sunflowers, etc. The boys rubbed the seeds from the sunflower heads onto tarpaulins, laid in a store of firewood and kneaded and dried dung for fuel. The collective farm director asked us to help gather the harvest. He gave us honey and a breed sow which later gave us 14 piglets.

When the German advance divisions left we, the older children, repaired the mud houses and everyone returned to the city. All of the work was completed by children. Elia Iuian, Natalka Liashko, Aina Saulit, and I worked "under the Germans" as washerwomen and were assigned part-time work. Without firewood or soap we washed linen on wooden boards and boiled, ironed, and removed "Soviet" lice. Many of us worked at the hair salon or the tailor's, as janitors, waitresses, cooks, and swineherds and the boys looked after horses. We gradually started to forget about hunger as there was no one to rob.

Al'dona Volynskaia<sup>117</sup>

The horrific conditions experienced by these innocent children severely affected their perception of the world. Tamara Tsulukidze, who was arrested in

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 324.

1937 and sentenced to 10 years in the camps, worked with children in the camp theater. Tamara's husband, the director Alexandr Akhmateli, was arrested along with her and shot soon thereafter. For several years Tamara worked at forestry sites and stone quarries before arriving at a camp theater in Kniazhpogost in the Komi Republic where she ran the puppet theater. Her position with the theater allowed her to perform at settlements for free workers and in the camps for children born in the Gulag. She observed that:

The children were extremely thin, gloomy and fearful, with their little heads shaved bare. They stared in silence. In a narrow corridor in the accommodation block, which served as a "playroom," about 50 children were sat on the floor in front of the puppet theater curtain. The show began. When Petrushka the cat appeared they didn't react at all. Total silence. But when Druzhok the dog appeared above the curtain and barked, they were terrified. The front rows began to howl and the rest followed them. I came out in front of the curtain to show them it was only a puppet, but it was no use – they just went on crying. Children brought up in the "zone" had never seen a cat, a cockerel or a cow, and they associated a dog with the guards' dogs. Once, after a performance of Andersen's story *The Nightingale*, a four-year-old boy came up to me, pulled on my skirt, and said, "Auntie, I love you."

Tamara Tsulukidze<sup>118</sup>

Many children born and raised in the camp environment were unable to develop properly and many more perished. Although in some camps the children were adequately fed, food was often a scarcity and malnutrition was a constant reality for most of the children in the camps. But not only were the

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<sup>118</sup> Kizny, *Gulag*, 275.

children starved for food and deprived of an education, they were also denied basic affection.

These children were treated like prisoners and their caretakers were discouraged from holding them or giving them affection. As a result, four-year-old children were unable to speak. Infants would spend the entire day just lying in their cots. The only time they could be picked up was to have their wet diapers changed when there were dry diapers available. Without proper nurturing and suffering from what appears to be somatosensory deprivation<sup>119</sup> these children didn't stand a chance of developing into caring, confident human beings but instead learned to behave like the "beasts" Solzhenitsyn described in *The Gulag Archipelago*.<sup>120</sup>

The children whom Solzhenitsyn observed in the adult camps weren't the innocent infants and toddlers who inevitably perished but often were seasoned criminals who had found a way to survive the system through their own system of terror. The popular slogan, "Thank you Comrade Stalin for our happy childhood" certainly didn't apply to these children but in many ways they were truly the fruit of Stalin's seeds, for they instilled their own reign of terror in the Gulag. These children most likely resembled Jack's savage followers in William

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<sup>119</sup> According to Dr. James W. Prescott, early somatosensory deprivation is an ontogenetic process in the abnormal development of the brain and behavior. Dr. Prescott claims that in societies where parents lavish physical affection on infants there is less crime and violence among adults whereas in societies where newborns are deprived of bodily pleasure during infancy there is a significantly higher rate of crime and violence.

<sup>120</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Vol. Two, 447-467.

Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, who, without social structure and moral experience became steeped in primal instinct and anarchy.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn described these children.

Juveniles grew into camp life so swiftly – not in weeks even, but in days – as if they were not in the least surprised by it, as if that life were not completely new to them, but a natural continuation of their free life of yesterday . . . These were the children of workers, not the privileged ones. In the Archipelago the kids saw the world as it is seen by quadrupeds: only might makes right. Only the beast of prey has the right to live. That is how adults saw the Archipelago, but were capable of counterposing to it all their experience, thoughts, ideals, and everything that they had read to that very day. Children accepted the Archipelago with the divine impressionability of childhood. And in a few days children became beasts there. And the worst kind of beasts with no ethical concepts whatever.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 452.

## CHAPTER VII

## JUVENILE CRIMINALS

*Com. Vulf, with whom I discussed this over the telephone, informed me that this was not an isolated case,<sup>122</sup> and that there were up to 3,000 registered juvenile hooligans, among them about 800 obvious gangsters capable of anything. On the average, he arrests up to 100 hooligans and homeless children every day, and he has nowhere to send them (nobody wants to take them) . . . I think that the Central Committee should instruct the NKVD to organize a settlement of not only homeless but also neglected children and thus protect the capital from the growing problem of juvenile hooliganism. As to this particular case, I do not understand why we cannot just shoot these scoundrels. Do we have to wait until they grow up to be even greater thugs?*

*K. Voroshilov  
Chairman of the Military Council of the Soviet Union<sup>123</sup>*

The policies that spawned this mutilated generation contributed to the development of a widespread criminal subclass of society made up of troubled youth. These abandoned and homeless children often found their new families in the gangs that roamed the streets. The above letter from Voroshilov to Stalin, Molotov, and Kalinin illustrates the lack of understanding and concern displayed by the authorities with regard to the plight of these children.

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<sup>122</sup> Voroshilov was referring to a case of two sixteen year olds who committed a double murder, inflicted three injuries, and were sentenced to ten years in prison for their crimes.

<sup>123</sup> Khlevniuk, 126.

As previously mentioned, the problem of homeless children grew in the 1920s largely as a result of the famine and gave rise to a bevy of street gangs. As street gangs multiplied, so did problems of juvenile delinquency and crime. Once relegated to the street even the most well-intentioned and moral children were lured into a world of crime in order to survive. Dirty, poorly dressed, emaciated waifs were an image proper society preferred not to see and the ever-growing masses of homeless children created a great disdain within the general public. The chair of the Juvenile Affairs Committee in Baku proclaimed that, "When all is said and done, you will not make a human being out of a *besprizornyi*," and a police official stated that, "the sooner all our *besprizorniki* die, the better."<sup>124</sup> Such was the attitude of many frustrated officials trying to get a handle on the growing problems of juvenile crime.

In an attempt to rid society of these unruly street rats the authorities initiated an aggressive campaign against delinquency and, contrary to official regulation, juvenile delinquents under twelve were frequently sent to labor colonies. Often these young colonists lacked work or educational activities to occupy them and their living conditions were horrific. Idleness led to corruption and it was not uncommon for these children to be engaged in gambling, drinking, and thievery. Colony authorities imposed harsh punishments, beat the children, and appointed privileged nonworking "leaders" and "managers" to

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<sup>124</sup> Fujimura, *Russia's Abandoned Children*, 56.



keep the rest of the children in check instead of utilizing the forms of self-government that were officially in place. The appalling living conditions and the absence of armed guards in the children's colonies resulted in frequent escapes.<sup>125</sup>

Although there were attempts to educate children at some of the institutions, reality defied the proclaimed principles. Even internal NKVD inspections routinely exposed multiple violations of the regimen and crimes by both the juvenile colonists and the administration. Many NKVD authorities rejected the concept of reeducating these ruffians and employed typical Stalinist policies of repression to control them. A network of guarded special-regimen colonies was developed. The first of these colonies was created in July 1935 in Arkhangelsk and in November 1935, Iagoda signed a directive to heighten juveniles' responsibility for crimes committed in the colonies. Incurable colonists under sixteen years of age were to be sent to the new guarded colony in Arkhangelsk and those over sixteen sent directly to adult Gulag camps. To accommodate the growing number of young offenders, three more guarded colonies were established in May 1936 with increasingly more colonies being established in the years to follow.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Khlevniuk, 128-129.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

The spread of crime among children and youth was in part a natural result of the drastic transformation of the traditional lifestyle of millions of people, the decimation of the family unit, mass repression, a sharp deterioration in living conditions, and crippling privation. Article 12 of the Criminal Code of 1926 lowered the age of responsibility from seventeen to twelve and allowed for children as young as twelve to be sentenced for theft, assault, mutilation, and murder. In an attempt to address the growing problem of juvenile crime, Stalin ordered that juveniles twelve years of age and older accused of theft, violence,



FIGURE 7  
Viktor Khrodchinsky, Fifteen-Year-Old  
Poet (Source: Memorial)

inflicting injuries, committing murder, or attempting to commit murder should be prosecuted to the full extent of the Code and were to be judged in court and subjected to the same penalties as adults,<sup>127</sup> including the death sentence, although there is no clear evidence that children were ever executed.

However, there are documented cases of juveniles who were arrested while under the age of seventeen and later executed when they reached the age majority. Vicktor Khrodchinsky (see Figure 7) was arrested at age 15 and sent to Solovetsky Camp from 1929-1931 and 1932-36. He was executed in 1937.

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<sup>127</sup> Solomon, *Soviet Criminal Justice Under Stalin*, 197-203.

With the advent of World War II the problem of juvenile crime increased dramatically as more and more children became orphaned and abandoned. The answer to this renewed problem was to not only apply the full measure of punishment to intentional crimes but also in cases where crimes were committed as a result of carelessness. Thus, if a twelve-year-old child accidentally spoiled a bag of grain intended for the government, he could be subjected to the full extent of the law.

Younger prisoners were not supposed to be sent to adult prisons, but with the sharp increase in juvenile convictions and overcrowding in youth facilities, the practice persisted. In order to survive, these young offenders instinctively sought the protection of professional criminals who, for the price of protection, turned them into slaves and prostitutes. Hardened by their horrifying experiences many of these children became some of the most violent and cruel prisoners in the system. They didn't hesitate to kill for a piece of bread or simply for the fun of it. There was nothing human left in these children and it was impossible to imagine that they might someday return to society as healthy, well-adjusted human beings.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Applebaum, 332.

Not all juvenile prisoners were feral street kids who had resorted to crime as a means of survival. Some young prisoners were political prisoners or, in the case of Aili Jurgenson, freedom fighters. Aili Jurgenson was arrested at age 14 (see Figure 8) for her part in the Estonian resistance movement.



FIGURE 8  
*Fourteen-Year-Old Aili Jurgenson (Source: Memorial)*

She and another schoolgirl blew up a monument which they felt symbolized Soviet occupation and repression. Aili was convicted as an under-aged terrorist and sentenced for eight years in a Gulag labor camp in the Komi-Zyryan, ASSR.

For Article 58 infractions there was no minimum age. Nina Peregud was an eighth grader whose father was arrested. Investigators were searching their home when Nina suddenly remembered that she had thrown a crumbled up rhyme into the stove that had not yet been lit. When she tried to retrieve the note and destroy it she was arrested, interrogated and sentenced to five years imprisonment and three years deprivation of rights even though she wasn't yet old enough to have rights.<sup>129</sup>

Zoya Leshcheva was arrested at age 10 for refusing to remove from her neck a cross that her mother had given her before she was sent to prison. By age

<sup>129</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, Vol. Two*, 465-466.

14, Zoya was convicted of terrorism for her part in the vandalism of a statue of Stalin that stood in the camp where she lived. Zoya claimed full responsibility for the act thereby saving the approximately 150 other children involved from receiving punishment. She was then sentenced to the maximum penalty but since the 1950 law didn't allow for the execution of a fourteen-year-old she was given a tenner.<sup>130</sup> Eventually she received two additional terms. Her parents and brother had long since been freed but she remained in the Gulag.<sup>131</sup>

The following table provides a sampling of the crimes for which juveniles were sentenced. It's important to note that the highest category of sentencing was for being "socially harmful and dangerous elements" which pertains to Article 7 of the penal code and is described as persons "having committed socially dangerous acts or representing danger through their relation[s] with the criminal milieu or through their past activities, measures of social defense of a judicial-corrective, medical or medico-pedagogical character." It's also difficult to imagine how 97 juveniles could be convicted of misconduct in office when they were hardly old enough to receive a position in office.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> A ten-year sentence.

<sup>131</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, Vol. Two*, 467.

<sup>132</sup> Getty, *Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre-War Years*, 1032.

**TABLE 4 Data on 10,366 Juvenile Camp Inmates as of April 1, 1939**

Sentenced for:	No.	Percent of All Sentences	Adults: Percent of All Sentences January 1, 1939
"Counterrevolutionary offenses"	160	1.6	34.5
Dangerous crimes against the administrative order, including Banditry	929	9.0	14.8
Misconduct in office	97	0.9	1.4
Crimes against persons	434	4.2	4.8
Crimes against property	2,507	24.4	12.1
Theft of public property	22	0.2	2.1
Being "socially harmful and dangerous elements"	5,383	56.9	21.7
Violating the law on internal passports	115	1.1	2.1
Other crimes	204		

Source: Getty, *Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre-War Years*, 1027

As of July 1, 1945 there were on record 34,105 prisoners under the age of 17 listed in the official records. Following the amnesty of 1945, official records indicate that on October 1, 1945 there were 22,382 juveniles released leaving 11,723 to remain in prison.<sup>133</sup>

<sup>133</sup> Alexopoulos, *Amnesty 1945*, 285.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

Millions of children fell victim to Stalin's policies of repression. They were orphaned when their parents were caught up in the waves of oppression; they were abandoned by the state and left to fend for themselves on the streets; they were left to starve in the wake of man-made famines that spawned under collectivization; they were neglected and abused in the camps and orphanages; and some were even killed outright. The state chose to use expedience rather than compassion when attempting to solve the problems of homelessness, abandonment, and orphanage. In keeping with their campaign mentality, authorities rounded up the waifs and herded them into children's homes, orphanages, and colonies. When these children became unwieldy as they struggled to survive, the authorities labeled them "hooligans" and shipped them off to colonies or the Gulag. The state's policies, whether directly or indirectly, were nonetheless responsible for creating the "mutilated generation" so aptly described by Al'dona Volynskaia.

Children who were released from the camps and settlements were not released from their suffering. The fortunate ones were able to stay with family

members but the majority were abandoned or sent to state orphanages which were seriously overcrowded, dirty, understaffed, and often lethal. Children of political prisoners who were placed in these homes would frequently find themselves accused of counterrevolutionary activities and wrecking.<sup>134</sup> Many children ran away from the orphanages and ended up living on the streets in the criminal world. Sooner or later they would be arrested and returned either back to the orphanages or to the prisons and camps. Those who did manage to stay out of the camps after being released had difficulty re-assimilating into society.

For those Gulag survivors who had families, returning to them was complicated and often problematic. Unable to shed the camp culture to which they had become accustomed, returnees struggled to find a place in society. The family was the main point of re-entry into society for the survivors but the familial setting had become a distant memory for most and for the children who grew up in the camps it was a completely unknown entity. Reintegration into normal society was a difficult if not impossible task for individuals who had become so thoroughly segregated from society. Family members who had waited for their loved ones to return often didn't understand how to cope with the changed person who returned to their doorsteps. Couples who had remained married during incarceration often found their marriages crumbled shortly after

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<sup>134</sup> Vilenskii, 227.



re-assimilation. Couples where both spouses had shared the experience of the camps had a better chance of surviving since they had both “been there.”<sup>135</sup>

For Soviet Gulag survivors, the repression continued throughout the victim’s lifetime. Freed from the physical surroundings of their prisons they remained captives psychologically, economically, and socially. The effects of their experience with Soviet repression continued to haunt them throughout their lives and they would never escape their sense of being “second-class” citizens. They were faced with the problem of finding housing and employment in a society that rejected them and they lived in constant fear of being re-arrested. Fear of re-arrest was often with good reason. Zoia Dmitrievna Marchenko had been arrested three times: in 1931, 1937 and 1949. She was arrested first for the possession of ant-Soviet literature in the form of notes she had taken while visiting her brother in prison. Her second arrest came for refusing to sign a false deposition against her husband who had been arrested the year before and she was later accused of counterrevolutionary Trotskyite activity.<sup>136</sup>

Suspicious of everything, survivors were perpetually afraid of committing even minor infractions for fear of reprisal. They had lost their youth and in the case of many women, the ability to bear children. Rehabilitation statistics provide

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<sup>135</sup> Bertaux, *Living Through the Soviet System*, 224.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 223-224.

a sense of the extent and duration of Soviet repression: approximately four million applications for rehabilitation were filed between 1992 and 1997.<sup>137</sup>

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the problem of homelessness was not a new phenomenon to the Russian people when the Soviet Union was formed. But Stalinism represented a significant rupture within society that was driven by terror. Following the death of Stalin in 1953, the terror abated and the Khrushchev thaw gave the Russian people a glimmer of hope, but it would take many generations to heal the damage created by Stalin's reign of terror.

A shadow continues to loom over the homeless children in Russia today. The state orphanage system is overcrowded and the children in these homes continue to suffer, although to a lesser degree than under the Soviet regime. According to compilations published by UNICEF in 1997, approximately 611,034 Russian children are "without parental care." Of these, 337,527 reside in baby houses, children's homes, and homes for children with disabilities and of these, at least 30,000 are committed to locked psychoneurological *internaty*<sup>138</sup> for "uneducable" children, run by the Ministry of Labor and Social Development.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>138</sup> A special children's home for children who are considered to have no prospects. The children in these homes have mild to severe developmental disabilities or are children with physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy and other forms of deformities.

<sup>139</sup> UNICEF, "Children at Risk," 70.

Long-term institutionalization of children carries significant risk factors to their emotional, behavioral, social, biological, and physical development. Close living quarters increases the risk of infectious disease and institutionalized children are at a greater risk of neglect and abuse. They often acquire socioaffective development difficulties from a lack of physical nurturing.<sup>140</sup> In the long term, institutionalization increases the child's likelihood that it will grow up psychiatrically impaired.

Children in today's orphanages in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union continue to be marginalized and in many of the institutions they are subject to physical, emotional, sexual, and confinement abuse.<sup>141</sup> It will take a concerted effort to undo the damage inflicted upon so many generations of children. Significant improvement in development of the children in these homes is only possible if the children's environment changes and attitudes toward *besprizorniki* are transformed.

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<sup>140</sup> McGuinness, "Competence of Children Adopted from the Former Soviet Union," 457.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 458.

## APPENDIX

## GLOSSARY

**Article 58:** The section of the Soviet penal code put into force February 25, 1927 to arrest those suspected of counterrevolutionary activities.

**besprizornik:** A homeless child.

**Cheka:** (VChK, or Vserossiiskaia Chrezvychainaia komissiiia): All-Russian Extraordinary Commission (the secret or political police from 1917 to 1922; superceded by the OGPU).

**chernyj voron:** Literally, black raven also known as a Black Maria. A vehicle used for transporting prisoners.

**dekulakization:** The expression used for the process of liquidation of the kulaks as a class.

**Gulag** (Glavnoe upravlenie ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagerei): The Main Administration of Corrective-Labor Camps.

**kulak:** Literally a fist; a prosperous, sometimes educated peasant who used hired labor.

**Narkompros:** People's Commissariat for Enlightening, a Soviet agency dedicated to the administration of public education and cultural matters.

**NEP:** New Economic Policy

**NKVD** (Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennykh del): People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (the secret police from 1934; later the MVD).

**OGPU** (Ob''edinennoe gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie): Unified State Political Administration (the secret or political police from 1922 to 1934; superseded by the NKVD).

**spetspereselentsy:** Special settlers.

**spetsposelenie:** Special settlement or village.

**troika:** A triumvirate of officials introduced to supplement the legal system for the execution of extrajudicial punishment.

**Yezhovshchina:** So named after Nikolai Yezhov who headed the NKVD during the period of the Great Purges when the campaigns reached their peak; literally Yezhov era.

**zek:** Russian slang term for an inmate in the Gulag camps.

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