

ZEK

ABOUT THE EXHIBIT

Relevance of the material. No sociological, historical, demographic or cultural history of Russia can be attempted without taking into account the profound influence the slave-labor camps and prisons have had on her development. Russia was called "the prison house of nations" during the Imperial period; it became even more so during the Soviet period, a development Solzhenitsyn called the GULAG Archipelago. Much of the Soviet north, Siberia, the Far East and Central Asia was "settled" and exploited using slave labor and mass deportations. Zeks were compelled to build a large number of major construction projects with far-reaching consequences: the Belomor and Moscow-Volga Canals, the Baikal-Amur (BAM) Railroad, the double-tracking of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, the cities of Noril'sk and Magadan, and on and on. Historians estimate that 11% of any generation in the Soviet population was sent to forced labor in the camps, exile, or to execution. One out of every four or five Russian citizens alive today have themselves either "sat" in prisons or camps, are now incarcerated, or have a relative who "sat". Russian prisons today are one of the world's great incubators for multiple-drug-resistant tuberculosis and AIDS, threatening not only the rest of Russian society but the world as well.

Availability of material: Soviet-era court mail is readily available in terms of municipal and people's courts, much less so for the other kinds and higher judicial levels. Regular police (i.e., not the secret police) correspondence can be found, albeit with some effort. As for mail relating to the GULAG itself, correspondence from some of the bigger camp complexes is not hard to find, but from many prisons, smaller camps and those complexes where the death rates were high or their existence was short, it is very difficult. Some institutions were designed to work people to death, or simply to execute them, so-called "shooting prisons" and at many of them the inmates were not allowed to correspond more than once or twice a year, if at all. For these, only rare and scattered mail exists, most of it official correspondence.

Difficulty of collecting and exhibiting: Those factors that militate against the collector in this field are:

1. **The often poor quality of the paper, envelopes, cards and writing implements available to the prisoners.**
2. **Prison and camp conditions that were not kind to paper;**
3. **Arbitrary censorship. Many prisoners' messages were confiscated or simply never delivered, thus drastically reducing the availability of material today.**
4. **Fear. Many letters and cards that did reach home from the prisons and camps were destroyed by the recipients because their family members or friends had been arrested on political charges and the recipients didn't wish to join them.**
5. **Secrecy. To mask the scale of its prison empire, Soviet authorities turned the addresses of its incarceration facilities and camps into "post office box numbers" and codes. Only an ability to read Russian and establish which numbers and letters denote a place of confinement and which do not (whether by consulting the Smirnov work listed below or deriving the writer's status from the text of the letter or card) allow a collector to identify such items.**
6. **Classified material. While much more information has become available since 1991, some of it is still classified and inaccessible. One such area, if indeed any records were ever kept at all, is that of censor marks. There are no published lists of those, so no one has any idea how many there**

were or what they all looked like. In that respect, this field is still in its infancy, and evolving.

7. **Location. Most Soviet-era mail available in the West today is international, sent here from there. Soviet and Russian Federation prison-and-camp mail is almost exclusively domestic. This makes collecting such material in the West more difficult.**

Features of camp and prison mail. Unlike many other postal history fields, it is usually the addresses and return addresses on such correspondence that are crucial; postmarks play a lesser role, and weights and rates not at all. Censor marks on camp mail are the exception, not the rule.

Categories. There are four categories of mail in this field:

1. **Correspondence to and from camp and prison inmates;**
2. **Personal correspondence to and from camp personnel (guards, administrators, etc.);**
3. **Official mail between camps, prisons and courts.**
4. **Correspondence to and from prisoners of war in Soviet camps.**

A fifth, non-mail category is added to these: official documents, including ID cards and booklets.

"Completeness." There is no such thing as a complete exhibit or collection of the GULAG, its predecessors and its successors. In the 42 years of just the GULAG's existence, there were hundreds of labor camp complexes and tens of thousands of sub-camps, sections, sub-sections, base camps, remote points, columns and labor-gang sites. Then there were the prisons - hundreds more of them, and they came in quite a number of "flavors" and often-changing designations. The GULAG's masters themselves - the Ministry of Justice, the secret police and the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) - underwent numerous re-organizations (Cheka, GPU, OGPU, GUGB, NKVD, NKGB, MGB, MVD, MOOP, KGB). So too did the GULAG, and during WWII zeks were loaned out to a bewildering assortment of other commissariats, main directorates and directorates involved in everything from road building and airfield construction to lumbering to all manner of defense industries. The regular police and court systems also changed frequently, especially in the early days of the USSR.

The camp and prison systems that came after the GULAG underwent revision as well, often due to the tug of war between the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the KGB and the Ministry of Justice over which of them should have jurisdiction over the prisoners. To demonstrate all of this with envelopes, postcards, documents and forms in a thorough manner would require hundreds of frames.

Outline of the Exhibit

To the extent possible, the exhibit is arranged by period and chronologically within each period.

Introduction page.

1. "Inheritance" - The tsarist and Provisional Government legacy, 1699-1917.

- a. **The slave-labor concept.**

- b. **Tsarist hard-labor prisons.**
- c. **Tsarist corrective-labor sections.**
- d. **Tsarist exile.**
- e. **Chaos in the penal system during the Provisional Government period.**
- f. **POW camps.**

2. "Infancy" - The first stirrings of the Soviet penal system and the political police, 1917-1922.

- a. **Change of masters.**
- b. **POWs, internees and continued police surveillance of their mail.**
- c. **Early prisons in fortresses, naval barracks, Tsarist-era prisons.**
- d. **The Cheka and its prisons - Butyrka and the Lubyanka.**
- e. **Monastery prisons.**
- f. **Ministry of Justice prisons - district jails.**
- g. **The concept of rehabilitation and the corrective-labor facilities.**

3. "Adolescence" - The USLON, other OGPU camps and the birth of the GULAG, 1923-1929.

- a. **The Solovetsky Islands.**
- b. **Corrective-labor facilities in the 1920s.**
- c. **GPU internal prisons.**
- d. **Prison population increase.**
- e. **Political isolators.**

4. "GULAG structure, communications and codes" - An explanation of the various levels in the forced-labor hierarchy and the terminology to be used in the remainder of the exhibit.

- a. **OGPU Plenipotentiaries.**
- b. **Camp complexes.**
- c. **Transit points.**
- d. **Camps.**
- e. **Base camps and columns.**
- f. **Separate base camps.**
- g. **Remote sub-base camps.**
- h. **The courier post.**
- i. **Coded addresses.**

5. "Life and Death in the Camps and Prisons."

- a. **Links with home.**
- b. **Censorship of camp mail.**
- c. **Tasks in the camps - cushy jobs.**
- d. **Trade skills.**
- e. **Free workers.**
- f. **"Socially dangerous elements."**
- g. **"Deprived persons."**
- h. **Amnesties.**
- i. **Special settlers.**
- j. **Transports within the GULAG.**

- k. **The GULAG and the Great Purge.**
- l. **Shared background between the GULAG and the Nazi extermination camps.**

6. "Maturity" - The GULAG empire & other main directorates employing slave labor, 1930-1940: a tour of camps and prisons around the USSR.

- 1. **Non-GULAG compulsory work.**
- 2. **Unrecorded camps.**
- 3. **Camp complexes, corrective-labor colonies and labor communes**
- 4. **NKVD prisons.**

7. "Middle Age" - WWII and the rise of the "Camp-and-Industrial Complex," 1941-1953.

- **Middle age/the GULAG goes to war.**
 - 1. **Stalin's Camps.**
 - 2. **The sharashki.**
 - 3. **Wartime restructuring.**
 - 4. **Prisoner loan to other main directorates, subordinate directorates and other commissariats.**
 - 5. **Zek shortages.**
 - 6. **Wartime starvation in the camps.**
 - 7. **Camp life begins to improve.**
 - 8. **Kolyma and northern logging camps.**
 - 9. **Prison labor in defense industries.**
 - 10. **Vetting and filtration camps.**
 - 11. **NKVD Main POW Directorate.**
 - 12. **Beginning of the "camp-and-industrial complex."**
- **Middle age/restoration (late 1946-1948).**
 - 1. **The GULAG's Central and Eastern European waves.**
 - 2. **POWs as zeks.**
 - 3. **The Ministry of Internal Affairs takes over the GULAG.**
- **Middle age/period of greatest expansion (1949 - March 1953).**
 - 1. **"Touring" some of the camp complexes.**
 - 2. **MVD oblast- directorate prisons.**
 - 3. **Republic-level prisons.**
 - 4. **Oblast'-level transit prisons.**

8. "The Final Years" - (March 1953 - January 1960).

- **The Great Retreat (1953-1956) - dismantlement of the GULAG after Stalin's death - prisons and camps.**
 - a. **Japanese POWs.**
 - b. **Prisons.**
 - c. **Zek strikes.**
 - d. **GULAG's territorial directorates.**

- e. **Some camps survive - DUBRAVLAG & the Western Railroad Corrective-Labor Colony.**
- **Final years/collapse (October 1956 - January 1960).**
- a. **Dismemberment and decentralization of the GULAG.**
- b. **The rise of psychiatric prisons.**

9. "Aftermath" (1960-1991).

- a. **The last of the Soviet period: 1960-1991.**
- b. **Russian Federation prisons, 1992-2000. Prisons in the Russian Federation and the former Soviet republics. The rise of the "tuberculosis and AIDS factories."**

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