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THE SOVIET FORCED LABOR SYSTEM: AN UPDATE

The Gulag: Still a Soviet Reality

The Soviet Union continues to maintain a large forced labor system that extends to nearly every region of the country (figure 1). Forced labor in the USSR is far more than a penal system to support enforcement of criminal codes: it is an integral part of the Soviet economy as well as a key mechanism for intimidating Soviet citizens into compliance with the Kremlin's political norms.

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Despite Gorbachev's widely touted Glasnost, analysis of information  indicates that the number of forced laborers has grown to over 4.5 million from the 4 million estimated in the late 1970s and now accounts for 3 percent of the total Soviet labor force.

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o **CONFINED** forced laborers number about 2.3 million:

--About 2 million are confined in some 1200 heavily secured forced labor camps (see figure 2); 250,000 more are in urban prisons or colony settlements.

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--The yearly growth rate of camp population has averaged 1.9 percent since 1977--nearly twice that of the Soviet labor force.

--New camps are being built in regions undergoing economic expansion: the Volga, West Siberia, East Siberia, and the Soviet Far East (figure 3).

o UNCONFINED forced laborers are estimated at 2.2 million:

--Parolees--those released from forced labor camps to finish their sentences at construction projects--probably number over half a million.

--Probationers--those sentenced directly to labor projects called by the Soviets "compulsory labor without confinement"--are estimated at 1.6 million (figure 4).

o The ways in which Moscow uses forced laborers to support the **ECONOMY** have varied little over the years:

--Construction and manufacturing are still the most prevalent economic activities for forced laborers.

--The number of forced laborers engaged in logging has declined slightly, but the Soviets are using them to exploit new timber areas in East Siberia.

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o **INCREASES** in the growth rate of the system since 1977 may reflect continuing economic, social, and political problems and policies:

--Soviet labor shortages, especially in unskilled labor or in unattractive or difficult jobs, have intensified and require increased supplements of forced labor.

--Large-scale construction projects--industries, pipelines, and railroads--and continuing economic expansion to outlying regions have exacerbated the labor shortages.

--Heightened campaigns against alcoholism, crime, and corruption have produced more forced laborers and required an expansion of the camp network.

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### Historic Comparisons

Forced labor has been an important part of the Soviet political and economic scene for more than 50 years. Its continued existence, despite international pressures and condemnation for human rights abuses, indicates that Moscow believes the benefits of the system outweigh the negatives.

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While the number of forced laborers has varied somewhat during different eras, the integration of this labor force into the national economy has remained a constant policy.

o **STALIN'S** regime molded the forced labor system into a significant economic asset:

- His collectivization policy sent millions of peasants, especially Ukrainians, into exile or to forced labor camps.
- Soviet 5-Year Plans made ample use of forced labor in large construction projects, and the system grew to about 2 million by the early 1930s.
- Large numbers of forced laborers were used in the expanding timber industry in the north and in gold mining operations in the remote Kolyma River area of northeastern Siberia. Cruel treatment, inadequate food, frigid cold, and damp working conditions at Kolyma resulted in an extremely high mortality rate--estimated at over 3 million during the 15- to 20-year period of operation.
- During World War II, Stalin deported many displaced persons--Poles, Balts, and others--to the Soviet forced labor system; German POWs and

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non-Russian minorities accused of collaboration swelled the ranks to some 15 million by 1947.

- o The **KHRUSHCHEV** era gave rise to some outward changes but, in reality, it was a revitalization period for the forced labor system:

- In the immediate aftermath of Stalin's death, reforms were initiated and the number of forced laborers was reduced drastically.

- In 1964 and in 1970, however, the Soviets instituted new programs for unconfined forced labor (parolees/probationers) that sent many to construction sites of new industries, often chemical plants.

- Toward the end of the 1960s, criminal penalties also were toughened as the crime rate increased.

- o The **LAST TEN YEARS** has seen a gradual increase in numbers of forced laborers and their continued use in the economy:

- By 1977, confined and unconfined forced laborers in the Soviet Union totalled about 4 million.

- Since Brezhnev, campaigns against crime and

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corruption have intensified; both Andropov and Chernenko pressed this activity.

--Crackdowns on dissidents--refusniks, human rights activists, religious nonconformists, minority nationalists--also have added slightly to the forced labor population. We estimate that 3,000 to 5,000 Soviet citizens have been convicted of "political crimes" including several dozen Catholic activists from Lithuania, Latvia, and W. Ukraine.

--The Gorbachev regime has given early release to over 125 human rights activists--including nine Catholic activists--since January 1987. However, under Gorbachev, the anti-alcohol and anti-corruption campaigns have resulted in the incarceration of possibly 150,000 new prisoners.

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### Economic Role

Forced laborers continue to make up an important, though small (3 percent), segment of the Soviet labor force. Their current role in the Soviet economy mirrors the way forced labor has been used in certain industries and regions for more than 50 years (figure 5).

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o **CONSTRUCTION** activity has been an effective means for the Soviets to use forced laborers:

--Some forced labor camps are set up at construction sites of urban apartments, hotels, and government buildings.

--**Confined** forced laborers still work in construction of industries.

--Most **unconfined** forced laborers are sent to remote construction sites of major projects, including industries, pipelines, railroads, and housing.

o **MANUFACTURING** uses the largest number of confined forced laborers:

--About 1.2 million forced laborers in 732 camps now engage in some sort of manufacturing; this activity showed the largest increase since 1977 (figure 6).

--Products include: agricultural machinery; auto batteries, gears, mufflers, and tires; electric motors; radio/TV components and cabinets; pipes and pipe fittings; bags; boxes; clothing; gloves; shoes; and many wooden goods such as doors, furniture, chess sets, and barrels.



o **LOGGING and WOOD PROCESSING** still occupies many forced laborers in remote regions as it did in the 1930s:

--Many camps are located at the edge of dense taiga forests in the northern part of European USSR and the Urals area; some are abandoned as areas are logged out and forced laborers move to new camps.

--New camps are springing up in virgin forests of East Siberia as the timber industry begins to expand eastward.

o **MINING** or mineral processing remains a common activity for forced laborers engaged in strenuous and sometimes dangerous work:

--Forced labor camps are located at or near mining areas for: gold, uranium, coal, limestone, stone, clay (for bricks), sand, and gravel.

--At some mines prisoners are used in auxiliary work on the surface, such as cutting timber in support of mining operations.

--A new forced labor camp at the site of a crushed rock plant in northern West Siberia was probably needed because of increased demand for the product

and because the Arctic climate, isolation, and hard work would be unattractive to free labor.

o AGRICULTURAL work for forced laborers is minimal.

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### Conditions at Camps

Former prisoners reaffirm that the Soviets maintain abominable living and working conditions for forced laborers in camps and violate basic human rights through policies that debilitate and degrade prisoners.

o WORKING CONDITIONS at camps lead directly to injury or indirectly to health problems:

--In many manufacturing industries prisoners endure hazardous and unventilated surroundings; they operate defective machinery and wear no protective gear.

--Working hours often exceed the 8-hour day, 6-day week schedule established by Soviet law; camp officials may extend workdays to meet production goals or prisoners may work longer to fulfill unrealistic production quotas required to get full food rations.

--Climate and terrain also may add to the miseries,

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especially in the cold and swampy northern regions; prisoners work in almost all weather conditions, often without adequate clothing, boots, and gloves.

o **LIVING CONDITIONS** at the camps also are hazardous to forced laborers' health:

- Inadequate food stands out as one of the most inhumane and widespread features of the system; the insufficient amounts and extremely poor quality, often rotten, are confirmed by most former inmates.
- Punishment for camp infractions includes beatings, isolation, and reduced diet.
- Medical care is of marginal quality and often arbitrarily applied; several dissidents--who as a group receive the harshest treatment in camps and prisons--have died within the last few years.
- An estimated 400 Christian and Jewish prisoners of conscience are often prevented from practicing their religion.

Outlook

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The size of the Soviet forced labor population in the Soviet economy will probably continue to increase at about the same rate as in recent years because:

- The difficulty in attracting free labor to unskilled jobs in construction and in resource development projects in remote regions will maintain the pressure to use forced laborers.
- The use of unconfined forced laborers is an economic approach to punishment that supplements free labor in selected industries and regions.
- The campaigns against crime and corruption, as well as slack labor and other economic crimes will probably continue under Gorbachev and will provide a continuing pool of forced laborers.

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