

## The Russian GULAG

Understanding the Dangers of Marxism Combined With Totalitarianism

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### Abstract

This study examines the Soviet Gulag, the main prison camp administration implemented in the Soviet Union. The GULAG represents an institution that is not well known, and this paper will explain why it existed and why it remains in the shadows of history. Terror, propaganda, and belief in progress represent the three ideas that directed the Soviet totalitarian system. This thesis will accordingly explore the ideology behind totalitarian government and Marxist practice in order to understand why the Gulag was allowed to exist. Finally, it investigates the reasons why the Gulag has not taken a priority position in human knowledge and how the rise of the intellectual Left in the West and its sympathies towards Marxism contributed to this. Alexandr Solzhenitsyn is heavily used throughout this paper for his insights on the Gulag.

## The Russian GULAG

## A Case of the Dangers of Marxism Combined With Totalitarianism

“Who enters here do not lose hope.  
Who leaves do not rejoice.  
Who has not been will be here yet.  
Who has been here will not forget.”<sup>1</sup> –Alexander Dolgun

These words were etched on the wall of Alexander Dolgun’s cell in the Lefortovo Prison, which the Soviet secret police used for torture and interrogation. Dolgun, an American who worked at the American Embassy in Soviet Russia, was arrested in 1948 and convicted on false charges of espionage towards the Soviet government. He represents just one voice to have passed through the notorious GULAG, but the last line of this poem represents the story of all who passed through the camp system. GULAG translates into English as Main Camp Administration, which is derived from the Russian words Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagererei. The term GULAG, however, signifies far more than its prosaic name would suggest. A vast archipelago of labor camps that stretched across the 12 time zones of Soviet Russia for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the GULAG would come to represent something different to each group that tried to understand it. For the Soviet Union’s communist leaders, it signified an important cog in the Soviet economy as well as a means to destroy political opponents. To outsiders, it signified an institution as mysterious as the Siberian wilderness where many of these camps existed. To the countless millions of political prisoners, “spies,” and “traitors” who passed through the camp system, the GULAG meant hardships, imprisonment, pain and, to many, death. The Soviet combination of Marxism and totalitarianism brought the Soviet GULAG into existence. Terror, propaganda, ethical

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1. Alexander Dolgun, *An American in the Gulag* (New York: Random House, 1975), 26.

relativism, and the Marxist interpretation of progress combined to launch and justify the GULAG.

The Soviet government implemented terror to spread fear and discord amongst its citizens. Machiavelli once stated, “Fear is maintained by a dread of punishment which never fails.”<sup>2</sup> In the Soviet Union, this fear manifested itself in the anticipation of arrest. Everyone was under suspicion and lived in constant fear that an insignificant utterance or action would be heard or observed and classified as “suspicious behavior.” Interestingly enough, prisoners that filled the Soviet camp system arrived via legal means. They were usually interrogated, tried, and then convicted. This does not mean that the system was logical, as it most certainly was not. Interrogation would often involve torture, and prisoners who did confess often admitted to false claims in order to alleviate their agony. Ultimately, arrests were often based merely on suspicions made by the secret police. Applebaum reveals that “the regime appears to have chosen its victims in part because they had for some reason come to the attention of the secret police – a neighbor had heard them tell an unfortunate joke, a boss had seen them engaging in ‘suspicious behavior’ – and in larger part because they belonged to whichever population category was at that moment under suspicion.”<sup>3</sup>

The notion of actual individual guilt ceased to be important. The Cheka, the Soviet secret police responsible for suppression of political opposition to Bolshevik party, began arresting people based on rumors and generalizations. Soviet law and order devolved into a system that based arrests on dubious evidence. Whole groups, which were classified as

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2. Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *The Permanent Purge: Politics in Soviet Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), 98.

3. Applebaum, *Gulag*, 122.

“enemies of the state,” were sentenced for their collective guilt. Entire occupational groups who the Cheka assumed were not serving the best interests of the state experienced arrest and sentencing simply because of their occupation. Solzhenitsyn reveals that the Soviet government identified particular people who held such occupations such as schoolteacher, church council member, local government official, priest, monk, or nun, as “insects.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Solzhenitsyn indicates that the Cheka accomplished this massive feat by taking over the whole judicial procedure:

It would have been impossible to carry out this hygienic purging, especially under wartime conditions, if they had had to follow outdated legal processes and normal judicial procedures. And so an entirely new system was adopted: extrajudicial reprisal...assumed by the Cheka, the Sentinel of the Revolution, which was the only punitive organ in human history that combined in one set of hands investigation, arrest, interrogation, prosecution, trial, and execution of the *verdict*.<sup>5</sup>

M.Y Latsis, a Latvian who was one of the most notorious members of the Soviet secret police stated, “We are not carrying out war against individuals. We are exterminating the bourgeoisie as a class. We are not looking for evidence or witnesses to reveal deeds or words against Soviet power. The first question we ask is – to what class does he belong, what are his origins, upbringing, education, or profession? These questions define the fate of the accused. This is the essence of the Red Terror.”<sup>6</sup>

Soviet terror also involved psychological warfare that encouraged the dehumanization of the individual. The GULAG represented a prime example of what happens when people are actively stripped of their individuality. Inna Shikheeva-Gaister was arrested because she

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4. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 1, 28.

5. Ibid.

6. M.Y. Latsis, quoted in Paul Johnson, *Modern Times*, 71.

was classified as the daughter of an enemy of people. She experienced the feelings that many prisoners experience in their first few hours of imprisonment. She was first held in Lubyanka, a prison that was notorious for its harsh conditions:

Here in Lubyanka, you are already not a person. And around you there are no people. They lead you down the corridor, photograph you, undress you, search you mechanically. Everything is done completely impersonally. You look for a human glance – I don't speak of a human voice, just a human glance – but you don't find it...They don't see you as human being! You have become an object....<sup>7</sup>

Shikheeva-Gaister's account echoes the common experience not only those who were subjected to the camps, but also Soviet society as a whole. Government command policies do not consider the individual's needs, but rather they consider society needs. Man does not maintain his individuality when he is valued in the context of society.

In this regard, totalitarian rule seeks to invade its citizen's lives to a point where they cannot question the rule of the government. According to Abbott Gleason, this has been a defining characteristic of totalitarianism that has not changed over time. He defines this idea:

The idea of a radically intrusive state run by people who do not merely control their citizens from the outside, preventing them from challenging the elite or doing things that it does not like, but also attempt to reach into the most intimate regions of their lives. These totalitarian elites ceaselessly tried to make their subjects into beings who would be constitutionally incapable of challenging the rule of the state and those who control it.<sup>8</sup>

Totalitarianism requires the state to not only control politics and the economy, but also control the mind of its people. Personal convictions are meaningless as the totalitarian government seeks to transform individual thought into ideology of the state. Hannah Arendt

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7. Applebaum, *Gulag*, 131.

8. Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 10.

observes: “Thanks to its peculiar ideology and the role assigned to it. . . totalitarianism has discovered a means of dominating and terrorizing human beings from within.”<sup>9</sup>

Marxism-Leninism fundamentally redefines man as a social and economic being, valued only in the context of how he fits into the larger society. It necessarily dehumanizes the individual and calls for complete sacrifice of oneself. Communists have been self-identified as “dead men on furlough” when they are integrated into the system: “When a person has become a member of the underground, that person has ceased to exist as an individual for all intents and purposes and has simply become a cog in the party machinery.”<sup>10</sup> The specific and empirical consequences of their policies on a particular people group or individual is set aside because they believe their actions are supposedly benefitting the entire society. As a result, man is no longer personal, but social. Simon Leys outlined this process of Marxist-Leninist belief: “[T]he Communists always believe that mankind mattered more than man. In the eyes of the party leaders individual lives were merely a raw material in abundant supply – cheap, disposable and easily replaceable. Therefore . . . they came to consider that the exercise of terror was synonymous with the exercise of power.”<sup>11</sup>

Totalitarian government necessitates the creation of an opponent that stands in the way of the progress of the nation. For the Nazis it was the Jews and initially for the Soviets it was the kulaks, the wealthy peasants. The identity of this opponent changes systematically as

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9. Hannah Arendt, as quoted in Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 95.

10. Glenn Martin, *Prevailing Worldviews of Western Society since 1500* (Marion, IN: Triangle Publishing, 1984), 177.

11. Simon Leys, quoted in Paul Hollander, *From the Gulag to the Killing Fields*, xl.



the vision of the ruling party changes. This is necessary because an enemy always needs to exist in order for the government to justify its terror. Sympathizing with this opposing entity becomes the basis for justice in that those who express sympathies with the enemy, real or imagined, can be found guilty. This concept is central to totalitarianism, “namely, that their regime is not a government in any traditional sense, but a *movement*, whose advance constantly meets with new obstacles that have to be eliminated.”<sup>12</sup>

The idea of rebuilding and reconstructing society is also at the heart of totalitarian belief. Without the promise of a better way of life, totalitarian dictators could not complete a successful rise to power. This belief can be defined as, “a reasonably coherent body of ideas concerning practical means of how totally to change and reconstruct a society by force, or violence, based upon an all-inclusive or total criticism of what is wrong with the existing or antecedent society.”<sup>13</sup> The essence of the *Communist Manifesto* is the idea of the oppressed proletariat class rising up against those who control the means of production in order to create a utopian classless society. Class warfare exists at the center of a revolution trying to create an egalitarian society. This means that certain groups of people are demonized and the cycle of oppression shifts as the supposed oppressed now become the oppressors and the supposed oppressors become the oppressed. Terror certainly plays a large role in achieving this but propaganda represents the main engine behind the implementation of totalitarian rule in any society. Lenin further radicalized the original Marxist ideology as he held to the belief that violence and bloodshed could speed up the process of creating this classless utopia.

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12. Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 425.

13. Zbigniew K. Brzezinski and Carl J. Friedrich, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 88-89.

Lenin believed that Marxism could only work on an international scale thus attaining global socialist revolutions represented the ultimate goal. Stalin, however, believed that socialism could work in one nation and that the Soviet Union needed to rapidly industrialize and strengthen before the transition towards a classless society could occur. Stalin's methods of industrialization included collectivization of peasant lands, 5-year industrial plans, and party purges. These policies required force to implement and the GULAG represented the perfect system to take care of those in resistance and also those rumored to be in resistance to the state.

One of the fundamental principles behind implementation of terror was euphemizing the rhetoric. This is essentially propaganda, which is necessarily steeped in deception. Often, the words that were used did not adequately fit the description of what was actually occurring. Progress represented the highest aim and the means to achieve that goal simply did not matter. C.S. Lewis notes the first step in the process as a change in language: "The first symptom is in language. When to 'kill' becomes to 'liquidate' the process has begun. The pseudo-scientific word disinfects the thing of blood and tears, or pity and shame, and mercy itself can be regarded as a sort of untidiness."<sup>14</sup> For example, the government rhetoric justifying the prisons camps stated that the GULAG was designed to re-educate and reinstitute those who passed through. In the late 1960s, the camps were called "corrective labor colonies."<sup>15</sup>

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14. C.S. Lewis, quoted in Lloyd Billingsley, *The Generation That Knew Not Josef*, 30.

15. Leona Toker, *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 117.

In the 1970s, while Solzhenitsyn was still writing *The Gulag Archipelago*, he met with government officials in order to suggest ways of improving the camps and the lives of the prisoners. This meeting revealed the true motives behind the camp system, motives that Solzhenitsyn had tried to discern for a long time. They would not raise the living standards of prisoners for fear that the prisoners would be living better than the free people. They could not reprimand wardens for indecent behavior because they were having trouble holding the wardens at their job with minimal benefits and low pay. They could not pay the prisoners for their labor because it was their fault for cutting themselves off from society. Solzhenitsyn responded to their excuses by asking them “But don’t we want to reclaim them for normal life?!”<sup>16</sup> The response he received was telling, “Reclaim them??? The sword-bearer is astonished. ‘That’s not what the camps are about. A camp is a place of retribution.’ Retribution! The word fills the whole room...The Archipelago was, the Archipelago remains, the Archipelago will stand forever!”<sup>17</sup>

While terror represents the mechanism of totalitarianism, propaganda is also required to obscure the terror from the outside world. Solzhenitsyn demonstrates this point by allegorizing the Gulag as a sewage disposal system, partly to emphasize the vile nature of the system and partly to stress that Stalin took great efforts to conceal the system in the underbelly of Soviet society to deceive the outside world. Many recognize 1937 and 1938 as the years when this sewer system flowed the strongest or (in other words) the years when the most memoirs were written. Solzhenitsyn attributes this to the fact that 1937 and 1938 represented the years in which educated people, who had a history with the Party, were

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16. Ibid., 505.

17. Ibid.

rounded up. The Communist Party possessed an exceptional distaste for the elite during this era as is evidenced by the sheer number of educated prisoners thrown into the Gulag.

Krysinska offers that “The penal system had an anti-elite orientation and, although in terms of sheer number, the less educated outnumbered the intelligentsia in the camps, those who studied in institutions of higher or secondary education were proportionately twice as numerous in the Gulag system as they were in the general population.”<sup>18</sup> This particular group was armed with the pen and their memoirs emphasize those particular years.

However, the millions that were rounded up in other eras often represented the peasant populace of Russia who did not typically record their stories. Solzhenitsyn describes 1929 and 1930 as years when fifteen million peasants were moved into the vast Siberian wilderness, out of thought and existence, yet the outside world knew very little about this massive displacement. One must take great care in classifying one set of years as more heinous than another because in reality the traffic of prisoners into the camps represented a constant flow: “Although I have no statistics at hand, I am not afraid of erring when I say that the *wave* of 1937 and 1938 was neither the only one nor even the main one, but only one, perhaps, of the three biggest waves which strained the murky, stinking pipes of our prisons sewers to bursting.”<sup>19</sup> The important concept being that the world outside of the Soviet Union was oblivious to this sewer system that was always vibrant and pulsing with wave after wave of new victims.

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18. Karolina Krysinska and David Lester, “Suicide in the Soviet Gulag Camps” *Archives of Suicide Research* 12, no. 2 (April 2008): 172.

19. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 1, 24.

Soviet propaganda blurred the true nature of Soviet communism and even influenced a new political movement in the West that sympathized with Stalin. Tolerance towards Stalin would dramatically change American culture and influence the rise of Fabian Socialism in the United States. The Fabian Socialists believed that the best way to implement socialism into society was to do so gradually. Both Marxism and socialism believe in an egalitarian society. Socialism is the belief in government ownership of business and the near abolition of private property in order to create an egalitarian society. Marxism is a strain of socialism that believes that the rise of the working class against property owners will ultimately lead to the ideal of egalitarianism. Fabian socialists believed this equal society did not need to be rushed. By utilizing existing institutions of education and the ballot box, they slowly took over the Democrat Party during the 1930s.<sup>20</sup> As a result, more Americans began to sympathize with socialist ideologies, including Marxism, causing a new intellectual left to arise. According to Lionel Trilling, the radical movement of the Thirties represented a seminal moment, “It may be said to have created the American intellectual class as we now know it in its great size and influence. It fixed the character of this class as being, through all mutations of opinion, predominantly Left.”<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, this New Left would assume political control of the United States until the end of the 1970s. Thus, the atrocities of the GULAG went largely unmentioned in the Western world and many Americans began sympathizing with the Marxist belief system. Johnson argues that this new atmosphere influenced the Left to defend the Soviet Union: “Hence many of them were not only prepared to defend its apparent virtues but to justify the

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20. Martin, *Prevailing Worldviews*, 191

21. Lionel Trilling, quoted in Paul Johnson, *Modern Times*, 308.

manifest ruthlessness of the Stalin regime.”<sup>22</sup> Yet, by 1936 millions of Soviet peasants had already been subjected to life in the camps. Famine spread throughout the Soviet Union as a result of Stalin’s economic policies of forced collectivization and his terror against the wealthy Russian peasants. However, Sidney and Beatrice Webb’s survey of the Soviet Union during this time described the condition of people in different light, in that the “downtrodden Russian peasant is gradually acquiring a sense of political freedom.”<sup>23</sup>

Political ideology does not fully explain the favorable attitude towards the Soviet Union. Most Americans remember World War II as a just and noble war. The United States is often identified as the liberator, the nation who freed Western Europe from Nazi rule and Hitler’s oppression. Clearly, the memory of the brave and heroic men who served the Western Allies in opposition to Hitler’s cruel tyranny should never be diminished. However, this war should not be romanticized to the point that one forgets the atrocities that still occurred post-WWII, possibly as a direct result of U.S. foreign policy. Americans seem to want to forget the darker side of the Allied victory. “To admit that by sending thousands of Russians to their deaths by forcibly repatriating them after the war, or by consigning millions of people to Soviet rule at Yalta, the Western Allies might have helped others commit crimes against humanity would undermine the moral clarity of our memories of that era.”<sup>24</sup>

In reality, Stalin implemented the same practices that Hitler did. He may not have published a memoir like *Mein Kampf* that blamed a specific ethnic group for the Soviet Union’s problems, but he did order massive book burnings, widespread propaganda, and of

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22. Ibid., 306.

23. Applebaum, *Gulag*, xx.

24. Ibid., xxii.

course a main camp administration. Marx was anti-Semitic and classified the Jewish people as ego-driven people who worshipped money as their god. “Marx ended his revolting pamphlet against the Jews, in his *Die Fruhschriften*, with the remark that the true emancipation of the Jews consisted in ‘the emancipation of *society from Jewry*’ (his emphasis).”<sup>25</sup> Yet, Stalin was also a violent anti-Semite who even began enslaving Jews before his death. By the time World War II started, Stalin had killed more Jews than Hitler did.<sup>26</sup> While he did not officially try to implement a “Final Solution” to exterminate the Jews like Hitler did, the number of deaths during the Holocaust pales in comparison with the number who died in the grip of the GULAG. Solzhenitsyn estimated that those who died as a direct result of Stalin’s directives reached nearly 60 million.<sup>27</sup>

It would seem that a significant statistic such as 60 million dead would be common knowledge to most, especially since it occurred in the last century. However, French historian Pierre Rigoulot reveals how such a number is forgotten: “Human knowledge doesn’t accumulate like the bricks of a wall, which grows regularly, according to the work of the mason. Its development, but also its stagnation or retreat, depends on the social, cultural and political framework.”<sup>28</sup> One of man’s greatest faults is his tendency to forget. In regard to the Gulag, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn said, “We forget everything. What we remember is not

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25. Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddin, *Leftism Revisited: From de Sade and Marx to Hitler and Pol Pot* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1991), 121.

26. *Ibid.*, 120

27. Billingsley, *The Generation That Knew Not Josef*, 37.

28. Pierre Rigoulot, quoted in Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), xviii.

what actually happened, not history, merely that hackneyed dotted line they have chosen to drive into our memories by incessant hammering.”<sup>29</sup>

Knowledge of the Soviet GULAG has increased significantly since the collapse of the Soviet Union as more sources have become available and widespread. However, there is much about the Soviet camps that is still clouded in mystery. Whether on purpose or out of ignorance, it is an issue that is not approached with same scrutiny that the Holocaust is. Auschwitz-Birkenau, Dachau, and Buchenwald are commonly recognized names while Kolyma, Lubyanka, and Solovetsky are unfamiliar locales. The argument of which system was more repugnant represents an argument that will not reach a satisfactory conclusion. After all, it is an argument of whether mass murder achieved through quick, systematic, mechanized methods is worse than mass murder through harsh living conditions and forced labor. Paul Hollander relates that, “It is not easy to decide which was worse: years of starvation, ill health, and hard labor in the camps or prisons culminating in death, or a quick end in the gas chambers or by a bullet in the neck.”<sup>30</sup>

The lack of understanding of the GULAG cannot simply be explained away as ignorance. After all, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, published by the Soviet magazine *Novy Mir* in 1962, outlined the daily life of a prisoner in a Soviet labor camp. Russians who identified with Ivan Denisovich’s sufferings quickly bought 95,000 initial copies of the magazine. Shortly thereafter, *One Day in the Life of Ivan*

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29. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 1 (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), 299.

30. Paul Hollander, *From the Gulag to the Killing Fields: Personal Accounts of Violence and Political Repression in Communist States* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), xxxviii.



*Denisovich* exploded onto the international scene, representing one of the first novels to expose the camp system during the Stalin era. Ivan makes a profound statement in *One Day*, reflecting Solzhenitsyn's struggle to communicate extreme suffering to those who had never experienced the atrocities of the prison camps. He says, "How can you expect a man who's warm to understand a man who's cold?"<sup>31</sup>

Solzhenitsyn's three-volume work of the Gulag Archipelago even more articulately explains the camp system inside and out. In the first volume, Solzhenitsyn clearly identifies the limitations of Western intellectuals who analyze the literature written about the GULAG. His statements do not condemn the lack of knowledge shown by Westerners but rather illustrate their lack of true understanding. He uses the metaphor of a latrine bucket to make his point, claiming that the latrine bucket often symbolizes for the West the most revolting and reprehensible aspects of prison life: its humiliation and filth. He counters this misconception by saying the actual horror is only truly known to the prisoner who has used a latrine bucket. The real horror is not the presence of the bucket, rather the moments when there was no bucket. At first glance this may seem like a petty distinction. However, Solzhenitsyn reveals a greater truth about the lack of understanding of Western literature on such issues:

Our Russian pens write only in large letters. We have lived through so very much, and almost none of it has been described and called by its right name. But, for Western authors, peering through a microscope at the living cell of everyday life, shaking a test tube in the beam of a strong light, this is after all a whole epic, another ten volumes of *Remembrance of Things Past*: to describe the perturbation of a human soul placed in a cell filled to twenty times its capacity and with no latrine bucket....

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31. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 34.

Of course, much of the texture of this life is bound to be quite unknown to Western writers.<sup>32</sup>

These books appeared in 1973 and shed a new light of what really was happening in the Soviet Union and helped undermine the previous decades of Soviet propaganda.

Although the desired result of mass propaganda is complete acceptance of a given ideology, the survival of Stalin or Hitler's totalitarian regimes did not depend on the people's total commitment towards Nazi or Communist ideology. The people did not need to radicalize their own beliefs but simply allow their own to become blurred. Relativism only requires the abandonment of absolute truth claims in order to succeed as a system. Reality becomes hazy as the freethinking and individual capacity for critical thought is replaced with the morals of the supreme state. Therefore, the Soviet Gulag was allowed to thrive as a necessary system in the Soviet Union because the morality of such a system was never questioned in this new society of ambiguity. Arendt suggests, "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction. . .and the distinction between true and false. . .no longer exist."<sup>33</sup>

It must be understood that while Nazism and Soviet Communism provided the template for the totalitarian model of government and implemented similar practices in their respective regimes, they still represented two separate ideologies. The premise of national salvation constituted a central platform of the Nazi party and allowed for them to assume power in Germany in the 1930s with relatively little resistance offered. The corporate belief

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32. Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 1, 541.

33. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1958), 474

that Germany needed redemption from its humiliation following World War I, protection from Asiatic barbarism in the East, and expansion to create Lebensraum (living space) for the German master race all encouraged support for the Nazi party, which was bent on redeeming German civilization.<sup>34</sup> Nazism is a racially driven ideology which defined the Jewish people as scapegoats for everything negative that had happened to Germany and perceived them as the obstacle that impeded the German nation's progress. While Soviet Communism also relied on the demonization of specific people groups, it was not built on racially constructed ideologies. It represented a system that sought to abolish distinctions, specifically economic distinctions, between individuals and ultimately nations-states. Nationalism finds itself in direct opposition to Karl Marx's vision as he articulated it in the *Communist Manifesto*: "In proportion as the exploitation of one individual by another is put an end to, the exploitation of one nation by another will also be put an end to. In proportion as the antagonism between classes within the nation vanishes, the hostility of one nation to another will come to an end."<sup>35</sup>

Stalin was driven by the idea of an economic system pushed forward by government force. As a totalitarian figure, his subordinates sought to win his approval with new theories on how to achieve this progress. A socialist society achieved through force must either go forward or backward because it cannot inherently stabilize itself. Human self-interest and the desire to accumulate always prevail, causing capitalism to creep back into the social framework. Socialism can only succeed through massive industrialization that ultimately has

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34. Ian Kershaw, "Hitler and the Uniqueness of Nazism" *Journal of Contemporary History* 39 no. 2 (April 2004): 248.

35. Marx, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2007), 29.

to be paid for by those who own the wealth. The wealthy will not willingly give up their property, which in turn requires a socialist government to seize it by force. This logic led to Stalin to believe that he could forcefully collectivize the land of millions of peasants and seize their property. It is clear that this economic approach adopted by Stalin certainly followed a pattern of lawlessness. One of his economists, S.G. Shumilin, stated, “Our task is not to study economics but to change it. We are bound by no laws.”<sup>36</sup> In the Soviet’s case, the peasants owned the wealth in the grain crops and Stalin wrested it from them through policies of violence, bloodshed, and imprisonment. His actions revealed the true nature behind socialism: “That is the bitter logic of socialist power which Stalin grasped in the 1920s: there was no stable point of rest between a return to capitalism and the use of unlimited force.”<sup>37</sup>

Finally, the GULAG was born as a direct result of a belief in the inevitability progress. What is the purpose of enslaving millions of people in a main camp system? While there are many answers to this question, the primary answer is prisons were designed as a way to boost the Soviet economy. However, reality did not match theory, as was the case with most of the Soviet’s ambitions. At the heart of Marxist ideology is the idea of freeing the workers from capitalist exploitation and oppression. The dictatorship of the workers is supposed to bring greater equality, which would and lead to full mobilization of labor, the driving force behind the Marxist system. Ironically, however, the exact opposite occurs:

What labor finds, however, is that in reality the all-powerful party through its government, which acts on behalf of the proletariat and presumably embodies its “dictatorship,” deprives the organizations of labor, the unions, of their former

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36. Johnson, *Modern Times*, 267.

37. *Ibid.*, 268.

independent status and transforms them into adjuncts of the governmental bureaucracy.<sup>38</sup>

The GULAG system, while designed to serve as the driving force behind increased industrialization, consequently opposed a key element of Marxist belief. Marx claimed that the capitalist system thrived under an “iron law of wages,” meaning that the unemployed kept wages at a minimum because they were always eager to compete for available jobs, which naturally drives the cost of labor down. The prison labor camps magnified this concept to a new extreme because prison labor represented the driving force behind many projects in the Soviet Union that could have otherwise been used to mobilize the labor force. Ultimately, “The labor camps provided workers for projects which were run so uneconomically that even the minimum wages of the Soviet Union did not provide an economic basis for their operation.”<sup>39</sup>

The White Sea Canal represented the one of the larger Soviet projects of the 1930s and perhaps the most significant during the existence of the labor camps. The White Sea Canal connected the White Sea to north to St. Petersburg and “required 141 miles to be dug, five dams, and nineteen locks.”<sup>40</sup> Its purpose was to allow open passage to the Baltic Sea from the White Sea. Before, the Baltic could only be accessed via a long journey through the Arctic Ocean and down the long coast of Norway. However, the Canal’s ultimate significance did not lie with the economic prosperity it generated. In 1966, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn spent eight hours by the canal and saw only two ships carrying firewood pass

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38. Brzezinski and Friedrich, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, 245.

39. Ibid. 253.

40. Applebaum, *Gulag*, 62.

through. He observed that the canal was so shallow “that not even submarines can pass through it under their own power; they have to be loaded on barges, and only then can they be hauled through.”<sup>41</sup>

The failure of the White Sea Canal was only discovered long after its creation. During its construction, the canal was used as an instrument of propaganda and provided another example of how the Soviet government hid the reality of slave labor from the public. When it was completed it “was widely publicized as one of the miraculous achievements of Stalin and the socialist system.”<sup>42</sup> The project served its purpose of promoting Stalin but upon closer examination, the project revealed that slave labor projects would fail in the long run. The most important statistic concerning this project was the number of people who died creating it. Between 200,000 and 300,000 prisoners worked on this project during the 20 months it took to build. Mortality rates reached 25 percent and between 50,000 to 200,000 people died while constructing the canal.<sup>43</sup>

The White Sea Canal was constructed purely on the backs of prison laborers. Such luxuries as modern day digging equipment were not available to the men as some of them were lucky to even have a metal spade with which to hack at the frozen earth. Everything about the construction of the canal was primitive. 170,000 prisoners utilized the most basic wooden spades, pickaxes, wheelbarrows, and handsaws. Usually the handsaws were just sheets of metal with teeth crudely cut into them while the pickaxes were slightly pointed pieces of metal tied on to the end of a stick. One prisoner stated that, “Everything was done

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41. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 2, 102.

42. Toker, *Return from the Archipelago*, 16.

43. *Ibid.*

by hand, sometimes with the help of horses. We dug earth by hand, and carried it out in wheelbarrows, we dug through the hills by hand as well, and carried away the stones.”<sup>44</sup>

Many of the projects and materials that were produced in the labor camps were crude and primitive and hardly worth the effort and cost to make. While prison labor did heavily contribute to much of the Soviet Union’s infrastructure of railroads, canals, and roads, many of the camps were simply not economically practical. Brzezinski reveals, “The labor camps provided workers for projects which were run so uneconomically that even the minimum wages of the Soviet Union did not provide an economic basis for their operation.”<sup>45</sup> The problem with prison labor lies in the motivation driving the workers. Most workers concern consisted simply in getting through the day without experiencing a major injury or receiving a beating from the guards. Also, since food rations were so meager, prisoners would try to expend as little energy as possible in order to maintain some sort of vigor. Eventually prisoners would figure out how their authorities operated and learn which guards were stricter and which were more lackadaisical. Solzhenitsyn illustrates this principle: “Work was like a stick. It had two ends. When you worked for the knowing you gave them quality; when you worked for a fool you simply gave him eyewash.”<sup>46</sup>

As a result, many prisoners adopted a policy of “tufta” which means, “swindling the boss.” While there were certainly examples of prisoners in more lenient camps who actually enjoyed their work and tried to create quality products through their labor, tufta represented a common practice throughout the Gulag. This practice of shirking work did not mean that the

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44. Applebaum, *Gulag*, 64.

45. Brzezinski and Friedrich, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, 253.

46. Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, 26.

prisoners were all lazy sluggards who tried to manipulate the system. In most cases, the work they were supposed to complete was simply impossible for one man to perform. One of the coalmines in Kolyma required that each prisoner mine 5.5 tons of coal per day, an unreachable quota. Faced with impossible norms, many devised creative ways to avoid work, “Yet their primary motive was not usually mere sloth, or even the desire to ‘show scorn’ for the Soviet system: their primary motive was survival.”<sup>47</sup> Since food rations were directly proportional to the worker’s output, many prisoners simply adopted creative ways of deceiving their overseers into thinking they had met their quotas. Thus, they would receive full rations for minimal labor.

Hunger was ever present in the GULAG. Every day represented a struggle to find enough to eat. The rations that were given to the prisoners were barely enough to sustain a person living a sedentary lifestyle let alone a person subject to the hard labor of logging or mining during the harsh Siberian winters. “Starvation was routine. We weren’t given enough food to sustain us through-out one day of hard work, let alone weeks and months. Starving prisoners hunted for mice and rats with sticks and stones.”<sup>48</sup> Prisoners would chew on the roots of certain weeds, eat mushrooms they found in the forest, and swallow worms and insects simply to find some relief for their biting hunger. The prisoners were deprived of food but in all reality, the rest of Russia probably did not fare much better. The terrorization of the peasants and the lack of incentive to produce for a government that would just take it all anyway led to massive food shortages, leading millions to die of starvation in the Soviet Union. Leon Trotsky summarized the situation in the 1937: “In a country where the sole

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47. Applebaum, *Gulag*, 354-355.

48. Paul Hollander, *From the Gulag to the Killing Fields*, 9.



employer is the state, opposition means death by slow starvation. The old principle: who does not work shall not eat, has been replaced by a new one: who does not obey shall not eat.”<sup>49</sup>

Hunger did not simply represent a by-product of the Gulag; it constituted the driving force behind it. The notion of re-education through labor caused production output to determine whether a prisoner was reformed or not. Stalin understood that Marx objected to slavery because slaves, who received minimum sustenance, no matter what their output was, possessed no incentive to work. Therefore, Stalin implemented a policy whereby the prisoner was not given minimum subsistence but rather his rations were directly linked to his output.<sup>50</sup> As stated before, the government’s stated purpose behind this policy was to reform prisoners so they came to value labor and could later be reinstated into society. Yet, the camps did not come close to doing this and actually achieved the exact opposite. Prison memoirs show that the prisoners who did survive were corrupted by the system. The camps brought out their savage nature and exposed even further the brutal reality of human nature. Varlam Shalamov spent 17 years in arguably the worst camps of Kolyma, the mining camp of the frigid north. He revealed what camp did to the prisoners: “camp – is wholly and consistently a negative school of life. There is nothing either necessary or useful that anyone derives from it. The prisoner learns flattery, falsehood, and petty and large-scale meanness. . . When he returns home, he sees not only that he has not grown during his time in camp, but that his interests have become meager and crude.”<sup>51</sup>

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49. Leon Trotsky, as quoted in Lloyd Billingsley, *The Generation That Knew Not Josef*, 23.

50. Toker, *Return from the Archipelago*, 16.

Ultimately, the story of the Gulag represents what happens when an institution holds absolute power over millions of people. It shows that human nature, when unrestrained, can execute unimaginable destruction. Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant stated, “It will be noted that the propensity to evil is here established (as regards action) in the human being, even the best; and so it also must be if it is to be proved that the propensity to evil among human beings is universal, or, which amounts here to the same thing, that is woven into human nature.”<sup>52</sup> Absolute power corrupts absolutely. In the case of the Soviet Union, this corruption led to millions of deaths. Exact numbers cannot be known for certain as official Soviet documents concerning the camps are often unreliable and many who died were simply cast into a shallow grave in the Russian wilderness. However, Solzhenitsyn estimated that between 1917 and 1959 more than 66 million people died in the camps. Throughout the life of the Soviet Union from 1917 to its collapse in 1991, between 100 and 150 million people were put to death under communist rule.<sup>53</sup> It is difficult to even fathom numbers so large; as Stalin allegedly said, “The death of one man is a tragedy; the death of millions is a statistic.” The ability to kill millions of people is made possible when one man or party is absolutized. This isolates human nature and allows it to reach its full potential to practice evil. Despite man’s claim to be a civilized and enlightened being, the history of the Gulag shows the brutal and ruthless nature of man and what it can turn into. Johnson declares, “It is not commonplace that men are excessively ruthless and cruel, not as a rule out of avowed malice

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51. Varlam Shalamov, as quoted in Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 2, 619.

52. Immanuel Kant, as quoted in Tim Tzouliadis, *The Forsaken: An American Tragedy in Stalin’s Russia* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 359.

53. Martin, *Prevailing Worldviews*, 182.

but from outraged righteousness. How much more is this true of legally constituted states, invested with all the seeming moral authority of parliaments and congresses and courts of justice.”<sup>54</sup>

History must understand the story of the GULAG so it becomes a story that is just as well known as the German concentration camps. It must be remembered because it exposes what happens when Marxism is adopted by a totalitarian system driven by ideology. Terror, propaganda, and belief in progress became the catalysts driving the Soviet system. Because man is inherently inclined to evil, such ideologies resulted in the Gulag and led to social engineering as a common practice throughout the twentieth century. The history of the Gulag is a lesson to humanity on the destructive potential of totalitarianism combined with the powers of deception. Even further, it should be adopted as a personal challenge to mankind to prevent such evils from occurring in the future. Pieces of history are often forgotten and the GULAG represents one of these lost moments. The important message of the Gulag must endure as part of the social framework and become an important part of human knowledge.

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54. Johnson, *Modern Times*, 14.

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