

Coerced Labour, Forced Displacement, and the Soviet Gulag 1880s-1930s

Zhanna Popova

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Social History of Punishment and Labour Coercion

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In a correctly organized society, not a single healthy and able-bodied member should count on the privilege of being exonerated from the labour that is obligatory for everyone.

—Nikolai Luchinskii, “Arestantskie raboty vo Frantsii i v Rossii”,
Tiuremnyi vestnik, 1 (1906), pp. 39–56, 40.

It makes me laugh when [people] talk about bourgeois sabotage, when they point the finger at a terrified bourgeois and call him a saboteur.

We have national, popular, proletarian sabotage.

—Aleksii Gastev, quoted in *Trudy I Vserossiiskogo s'ezda Sovetov narodnogo khoziaistva, 25 maia–4 iunia 1918 g.*
(Moscow, 1918), p. 382.





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Table of Contents

Introduction	9
Chronological overview	16
1 A Threatening Geography: Shifting Usages of Forced Displacement and Convict Labour, 1879–1905	19
Early history of exile and katorga	21
Legislative framework	28
Usages of exile	31
The failed abolition	37
Modernizing the penal system	43
Modalities of convict labour	49
Extramural labour	56
Conclusion	61
2 Under Pressure: Revolution, Repression, and War in the Russian Empire, 1905–1917	63
Coercive regimes and the deployment of punishment	66
Subaltern crime and the politics of criminalization	68
Dissent, state of exception, and exile	71
The advance of extramural prison labour	75
Redefining hard labour in the imperial borderlands	80
Convict labour for the war effort	87
Conclusion	89
3 Blueprints for the Gulag? The Advance of Mass Internment, 1914–1923	93
POW camps during World War I	95
Camps transform and linger, 1918–1921	105
Camps and the new penal system, 1922–1923	115
Conclusion	120
4 Revolutionary Utopias and Dystopias: Violence and the Making of the Soviet Man, 1923–1929	123
New Soviet labour	129
Terror and the Chekist culture	135
Measures of social defence	143
Conclusion	157



5	“Special Settlements” and the Making of the Gulag, 1929–1934	163
	Installation of the special settlements	167
	Ruptures and continuities in the deportations to Western Siberia	176
	Labour coercion across the rural-urban divide	182
	Conclusion	187
	Epilogue: Paroxysms of Violence, 1937–1953	193
	Reinventing katorga	202
	Bibliography	211
	Index	235

Introduction*

The glory days of the Western Siberian town of Tobolsk are long gone.¹ Once the centre of the Russian imperial presence in Western Siberia, a booming administrative and commercial town, by the beginning of the twentieth century Tobolsk had lost much of its significance to the city of Tyumen some 250 kilometres to its southwest. Standing on the mighty Irtysh River, Tobolsk fell victim to the modernization of infrastructure. As railroads replaced rivers as the main arteries of commerce, the Trans-Siberian Railroad became the chief route that connected Siberia and the Far East with the European part of the empire. Tobolsk could not profit from this breakthrough in connectivity: the Trans-Siberian went through Tyumen and other towns much to the south, while Tobolsk was connected to it only in the 1970s. Reaching the town by car is still tricky, with snowfall in winter and floods in spring regularly obstructing the roads.

In 2016, when I visited Tobolsk for my archival research, the town had a stagnating population of around 100,000 inhabitants and sought to attract tourists by showcasing its imperial past. Tobolsk boasts the easternmost white kremlin, a tell-tale sign of the early modern Russian military presence. The newly renovated kremlin, located on the high shore of Irtysh, dominates the town and forms the core of its museum complex. Just a stone's throw away was another museum, and one of the goals of my journey to Tobolsk: the Museum of Siberian Katorga and Exile. The Tobolsk prison castle, built in 1855 as a hard labour facility and a node of convict transportation, was used as a prison continuously until 1989. Part of this prison complex now hosts

* Research for this book was funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) as part of the research programme “Four Centuries of Labour Camps. War, Rehabilitation, Ethnicity”. Travel funds for archival research were generously provided by the University of Amsterdam. The Hoover Institution Library and Archives (Stanford University) funded my participation in the 2015 Workshop on Authoritarian Regimes, thanks to which I was able to consult microfilmed copies of the collections of the Gulag Administration held at the State Archive of the Russian Federation (*Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, herein abbreviated as GARF).

¹ Throughout the book, I have used the simplified Library of Congress transliteration system for Russian, except for geographical and personal names that have a conventional spelling in English (hence Tobolsk and not Tobol'sk, Trotsky and not Trotskii).

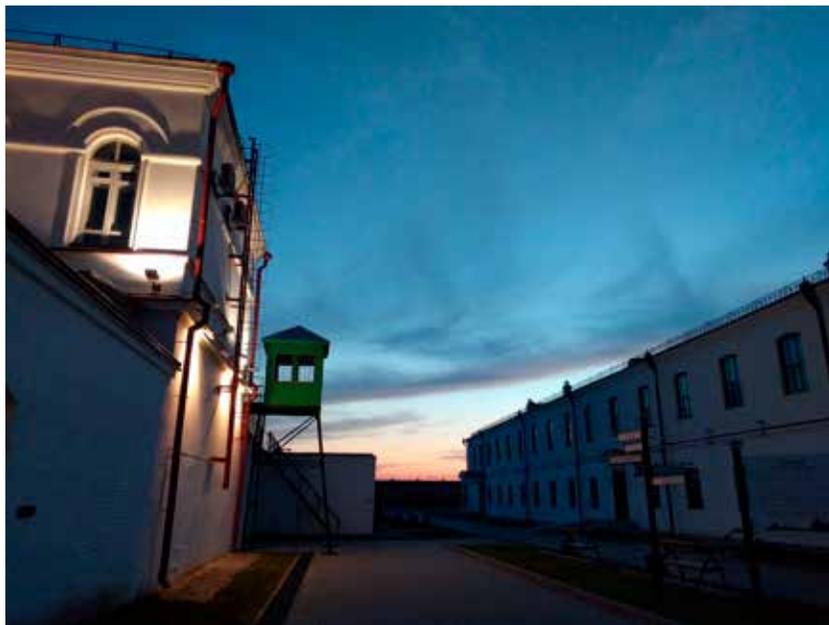


Figure 1 Inner courtyard of the Tobolsk Museum of Siberian Katorga and Exile. Photo of the author

the museum, while the former solitary confinement block was refurbished as a hostel. Despite my better judgement, I stayed in this hostel for several weeks, partly out of research interest and partly because of convenience, as the state archive where I spent most of my days was right around the corner. Most of the time I was the only guest there.

On several occasions, I left the hostel and was surprised to find out that it was raining outside, because the tiny window at the top of the cell barely let any light or sound in. This nineteenth-century prison building inhibited any contact with the outside world in the ways its architects could not have predicted: the walls were so thick that they blocked cell phone signals, making it impossible to have calls inside. Although the place had been renovated, was kept clean, and was well-lit, it was invariably terrifying. I kept on imagining how destructive solitary confinement there must have been during the long Siberian winters.

The prison complex as a whole evoked further malaise. One could see direct material continuities between the tsarist and Soviet carceral practices, and witness how the Soviet authorities built, in very practical terms, upon the imperial heritage of repression. Soviet-era additions included window covers for regular cells, replicating the effect of total isolation that the thick walls created in the imperial prison. Watchtowers were perched over tiny,

caged courtyards, measuring no more than 3 metres by 3 metres, where inmates were supposed to do their daily walks.

Continuities between the imperial penal system and the gigantic network of repressive institutions known as the Gulag, that are hard to pinpoint on the level of the entire systems, become visible, even palpable, when we are faced with concrete penal sites. Penal system and extrajudicial practices of repression have become the symbol of arbitrariness and tyranny of the state. Penal sites were, and continue to be, places where villains could turn into victims, punishment and its consequences were disproportionate to the offence, and political activism was often persecuted harsher than violent crimes.

Discussing continuities and ruptures between the imperial and the Soviet systems has been a highly politicized matter since the emergence of the Soviet state and continues to be so. Both the Soviet authorities and their critics continuously underlined the rupture between the imperial and the Soviet practices of repression, albeit for different reasons. In the immediate aftermath of the 1917 revolution, Soviet authorities highlighted the differences of the new Marxist penal system that, as they claimed, was built on profoundly different foundations than the bourgeois prison and exile complex of the Russian empire, offering criminals a true promise of return to the proletarian society as its useful productive members. Critics, meanwhile, also focused on the Soviet system's distinctions, underlining its extreme brutality as well as the widespread torture, starvation, and rape in the camps.²

In the public consciousness, "Gulag" designates the whole Soviet repressive system, above all camps and prisons. The word has become the denomination for any exceptionally brutal carceral institution and is commonly used beyond the Soviet context in the scholarly context and in public discussions. In the narrow sense, however, the abbreviation "GULAG", which stands for *Glavnoe upravlenie lagerei*, or Main Camp Administration, denotes a Soviet agency that officially existed between 1930 and 1960 and was responsible for running the vast system of various carceral institutions. The exact name of the agency changed several times: between 1934 and 1938, it was officially called Main Administration of Camps, Labour Settlements and Places of Confinement, while between 1939 and 1956 its name changed to Main

2 Among the early examples are the memoirs of two former White officers: Iu. Bezsonov, *Mes vingt-six prisons et mon évasion de Solovki* (Paris: Payot, 1928) and S.A. Malsagoff, *An Island Hell: A Soviet Prison in the Far North* (London: A.M. Philpot, 1926). For an extended list of memoirs of inmates of the early Soviet camps, see: Jonathan D. Smele, *The Russian Revolution and Civil War, 1917–1921: An Annotated Bibliography* (London, New York: Continuum, 2003).

Administration of Corrective-Labour Camps and Colonies. Regardless, the abbreviation continued to be used in the official documents and in everyday life alike. For convenience and simplicity, throughout the book I will refer to this agency as Main Camp Administration, while the term Gulag will be used for the Soviet system of carceral institutions as a whole, a system that also included a vast network of settlements for peasants deported during the collectivization and other places of confinement.

The Soviet heritage of repression casts a long shadow over contemporary Russian society and continues to be a controversial, troubling, and largely taboo subject. Crucial efforts to bring the discussion of this heritage into the public space first started during the late Soviet times. During the perestroika and the immediate post-Soviet period, the Gulag briefly came into the focus of public discourse: the significant opening of classified party and state archives, the publication of Gulag fiction and memoirs, intensive academic investigations, and discussions in the press made it seem that Russian society was starting to work through this traumatic past. However, these discussions did not lead to the establishment of an institutional framework that could bring justice to the victims of the Stalinist repression, and eventually the conversation was marginalized and testimonies of survivors silenced, and the Gulag legacy remained contested. In the 2000s and early 2010s, non-governmental organizations and regional associations of Gulag survivors continued to function, and academic research produced robust narratives on various facets of the Stalinist repression, but the discussion became increasingly dominated by state actors. The new state-sponsored GULAG History Museum opened in Moscow in 2015 and pursued a rich programme of public outreach, seeking to ignite and guide a public conversation about the Soviet camps. Its permanent exhibition accurately, if selectively, presented historical facts about the camp system, but remained full of omissions that downplayed the role of Stalin in its creation and barely mentioned political repression beyond the GULAG.³ In the last decade, pressure against the NGOs and activists working on the history of the Gulag has been mounting. Individual activists in the regions faced direct persecution.⁴ In April 2022, Memorial, the major public association that

3 Andrei Zavadski and Vera Dubina, "Eclipsing Stalin: The GULAG History Museum in Moscow as a Manifestation of Russia's Official Memory of Soviet Repression", *Problems of Post-Communism* 70, no. 5 (2023): 531–543.

4 In December 2021, Karelian activist and historian Iurii Dmitriev was sentenced to fifteen years in a penal colony. For a detailed account of the trials, see: <https://dmitrievaffair.com>, last accessed 4 July 2022.



collected, preserved, and researched testimonies and documents on the Soviet camp system, was forcibly dissolved, as state actors effectively monopolized the ways in which the Gulag can be discussed, researched, and remembered in Russia.

Historicizing and contextualizing the Gulag is rendered challenging by the long-running politization of this past, but it is necessary to inscribe the Soviet repressive system within the global history of repression beyond perpetuating the narrative of its exceptionalism. Although it was indeed exceptional in many ways, it was also firmly embedded within the global context of mass confinement, forced displacement, and coerced labour.⁵ Mass confinement is discussed throughout the book, but the main focus is the latter two elements of the penal-repressive system. As I argue, confinement could be an often unachievable goal for state officials faced with financial shortages, but both displacement and forced labour were the mainstay of their punitive repertoire due to these measures' flexibility and a host of other reasons into which I delve in detail throughout the book. The emphasis of this research is primarily on tracing how forced displacement and coerced labour, used both as punishment and extrajudicially, were tightly interconnected. Both instruments long predated not only the emergence of the camp network, but also the creation of a modern prison system in imperial Russia. Tracing their developments gives an opportunity to look into the establishment of the camps beyond the Bolsheviks' arrival in power. As much as possible, this book looks at the repressive system beyond the legal acts, as it seeks to highlight the regional tensions, bureaucratic and legal inconsistencies, and contingent arrangements dictated by war, revolution, financial penury, or regional particularities: sometimes, ad hoc or temporary solutions would markedly change the places of confinement.

I approach the nexus between coerced labour and forced displacement in punitive policies in Russia and the USSR from two complementary angles: conceptual and legal production in the capitals and regional developments and practices. For state officials, both coerced labour and forced displacement bore a variety of meanings beyond the straightforward punitive goals. The meanings of forced labour were generally made explicit and theorized, while the purposes of forced displacement remained unarticulated beyond the agenda of colonization. Exploration of the evolution of these meanings helps to paint a wider backdrop against which the development of repressive

5 The term "forced displacement" is used here to designate together tsarist exile, Soviet mass deportations, and the transportation of individual inmates.

practices took place, and helps to explain why certain options were adopted, while other practices were discarded.

In the domain of punishment, the gap between proclaimed official policies and the realities of the punished was harrowingly wide in imperial and Soviet times alike. Adopting a regional perspective makes it possible to grasp at least some of these discrepancies, and to describe and analyse penal practices in the variety of their historical and local forms. I have tried, as much as possible, to address both the local dimension and the developments of the whole system simultaneously, but while in some chapters a combination of the two optics prevails, in others, one of the perspectives dominates. The in-depth cases are generally based on the Western Siberian archival materials, but accounts from other regions were also included as illustrations. This regional approach also highlights how Russian and Soviet penal and repressive policies were inextricably connected to colonial expansion into Siberia. Western Siberia was at the core of crucial events and processes that defined the shape of the repressive system: the development of transport, mass peasant migration of the last decades before 1917, the mass captivity of prisoners of war during World War I, and the tumult and violence of the revolution and the civil war. Some of the key sites of Stalinist industrialization that relied on forced labour were also located there. These transformations continuously changed the face of Western Siberian sites of repression.

Although the focus here is on continuities and ruptures between the imperial and the Soviet periods, I also sought to include, where possible, discussions of relevant global developments of repressive policies. Recent contributions in the global history of convict labour and penal transportation, on which I build these reflections, have shown that the uses of displacement and labour as punishment around the world and through the centuries had strong similarities.⁶ To put it simply, penal practices globally were rarely driven only by the internal logic of punishment, but were shaped by a host of economic, political, and cultural factors. As made stark by Ann Laura Stoler, across very different historical contexts, “changes in sites of incarceration and the specific types of hard labour performed were rarely determined by the priority of punishment alone, nor by what was imagined to be commensurable with the severity of what was considered

6 Two edited volumes published in recent years can serve as entry points into this rich and sophisticated literature: Clare Anderson (ed.), *A Global History of Convicts and Penal Colonies* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018); Christian G. De Vito and Alex Lichtenstein (eds), *Global Convict Labour* (Leiden, Boston, MA: Brill, 2015).

a crime”.⁷ These observations appear particularly pertinent for the Russian and Soviet cases. Considering how widespread the use of extrajudicial measures of repression was in tsarist Russia and especially in the Soviet Union, it is crucial to include in the analysis not only the displacement and forced labour of convicts, in other words, of those who received a court sentence, but also of those who never were convicted, but had to endure repression nevertheless. Such an inclusive, wide-angle approach is also crucial to understand why these repressive arrangements have had such a long-running impact on society in Russia.

The starting point for this investigation is the last third of the nineteenth century. Chapter 1 focuses on the long-running practice of exile and central officials’ attempts to create alternatives to it by launching a prison reform. The centrality of exile and its persistence must be understood within the wider setting of Russian colonial expansion to Siberia, political struggles, and the absence of full-scale judicial and police reform. Incarceration thus emerged as a potent alternative to exile, contributing to the fragmentation and complexity of the imperial penal system. Chapter 2 follows the transformations of the penal system as it was put under pressure, first by growing social unrest and the tsarist authorities’ responses to it, and then by the burdens of World War I. Already during the tsarist period, wartime needs spurred a greater reliance on the concentrated, centrally organized, and increasingly exploitative use of convict labour on large-scale infrastructural projects. Chapter 3 offers an analysis of two wildly different, albeit almost coeval, systems of camps: prisoner-of-war camps during World War I and the early revolutionary camps as they took shape in Western Siberia. This short but impactful period heralded the spread of mass internment, another crucial element of the future repressive architecture. Early Soviet penal experiments and their consequences are at the heart of Chapter 4. During the 1920s, the camps for political dissenters established by the secret police provided just one among many forms of confinement and use of forced labour. Examining the abandoned alternatives helps to understand the state of the penal system on the eve of Stalin’s offensive in the first Five-Year Plan. Chapter 5 focuses on the establishment of the large-scale repressive system of settlements for deported peasants in the 1930s Soviet Union, which lay at the foundation of the Gulag along with the forced labour camps. Tracing the developments of the special settlements system makes clear the extreme interconnectedness between the free and

7 Ann Laura Stoler, “Epilogue – In Carceral Motion: Disposals of Life and Labour”, in Anderson (ed.), *A Global History*, pp. 371–80, 372.

unfree spheres of labour and the extensive reliance on forced labour both in rural and urban contexts.

Chronological overview

As the narrative of this book spans over seven decades of Russian history, a brief chronological sketch might be helpful for the non-specialist reader. The history of forced labour and forced displacement as the dual pillars of the Russian punitive policies begins before the creation of the first Gulag camps, indeed long before the camps were established in Russia at all. With this book, I seek to integrate this history within the larger narrative not simply as a prelude to the behemoth system of the Soviet camps, but as a rich and contradictory story in its own right.

The point of departure of this analysis is the penal system of the Russian empire of the last third of the nineteenth century, in which the traditional penal practices of exile and hard labour as punishments for the most dangerous crimes coexisted with prisons and other carceral institutions. Consistent attempts to reform and “modernize” the penal system started during the reign of the tsar Alexander II (ruled 1855–1881) and continued under his successors. Known as “the Liberator” for abolishing serfdom (1861), Alexander II encouraged a wide range of reforms that transformed crucial aspects of social life. The prison reform was in gestation for decades before it was initiated in 1879; although initial plans for it were ambitious, the immediate impact was very moderate. Due to political change and lack of budget and qualified prison staff, this reform faltered and did not lead to immediate expansive changes in the practices of punishment. Nevertheless, it was taking place in a society that was rapidly changing: judicial reform, financial reform, the *zemstvo* reform of local government, reforms of middle and higher education, in addition to the abolition of serfdom, contributed to changes in the socio-political landscape of the empire. However, the fundamental aspect of imperial governance, the absolute power of the tsar, remained untouched. Discontent grew, and revolutionaries resorted to spectacular acts of violence against high-ranking administrators, and even the tsar himself, hoping to radicalize the masses with such propaganda by the deed.

After several failed assassination attempts, in March 1881 Alexander II was killed in a bombing. As his son Alexander III (ruled 1881–1894) assumed the throne, he thwarted the political reforms. In an attempt to subdue the revolutionaries, Alexander III introduced a state of emergency in August 1881. Although it was intended as a temporary measure, in some



regions it remained in force for decades, endorsing the local authorities in their attempts to repress the revolutionary movement and allowing them to persecute those suspected of being a threat to public order extrajudicially. These attempts to undermine the revolutionary movement were far from successful, and the heir of Alexander III, tsar Nicholas II (ruled 1894–1917), was faced with an intensifying social and political unrest. Strikes by industrial workers, dissent from the educated layers of society, and discontent among the peasants plagued the reign of the last Romanov. Aspiring to be a strong autocratic ruler, Nicholas consistently refused to reform the empire's political order until he was forced to do so during the 1905 revolution. This revolution, which exposed the empire's deep social problems, was marked by mass support for its radical causes. In the aftermath of the revolution, the tsarist government exiled, imprisoned, and sentenced to hard labour thousands of revolutionaries. Conditions in the penal system, which had improved over the decades of long prison reform, rapidly deteriorated, leading to rising mortality in both prisons and transit jails.

The last Romanovs were also preoccupied with consolidating Russia's colonial expansion to the east. A forceful drive towards centralization and russification defined the imperial policies towards Siberia during the reigns of Alexander III and Nicholas II. Central administrators saw the Trans-Siberian Railroad as the definitive solution to Siberian problems with infrastructure and the ultimate means to solidify imperial presence. Construction started in 1891, and once the first stretches became operable in 1901, this new opportunity spurred peasant migration to Siberia, with as many as 10 million migrants resettling within a span of ten years. The gradual integration of Siberia into the Russian empire had an effect on penal policies, as it transformed the way imperial administrators viewed Siberia within the empire: the growth of connectivity and population density facilitated flights of exiles and undermined the harsh character of the punishment.

The 1917 February revolution brought to an end the reign of Nicholas II. In March, he was forced to abdicate in favour of his brother Mikhail, who refused the throne. With the future of Russian governance insecure, a provisional government was created. The politics of the Provisional Government, which ruled Russia between February and October 1917, was characterized by liberal aspirations that were undermined by the lack of control over enforcement of the new legal acts. The Provisional Government abolished the exile and *katorga*.⁸ In a country torn apart by war and revolution, some

8 *Katorga* was the second harshest punishment after the death penalty. It implied full loss of rights (civil death), lifelong exile, and hard labour terms of up to 25 years.

regions remained cut off from the central government for years, and the penal system practically disintegrated.

As the Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917, they sought to underline that the creation of the first proletarian state brought about a fundamental departure from the tsarist policies in all aspects of political and social life. The immediate post-revolutionary period was marked by the coexistence of the coercive policies of war communism and the start of intensive experimentation with noncustodial types of punishment. At the same time, in their fight against political dissent, the Soviet security police (the Cheka) used concentration camps among other tools of terror. Following the death of Vladimir Lenin in early 1924, intense internal struggles for power changed the face of the Bolshevik party. Joseph Stalin emerged victorious, having decimated any opposition within the party towards the end of the 1920s. He abandoned the New Economic Policy, which was introduced in 1921 as a measure to alleviate the economic challenges prompted by war and revolution. Instead, the Soviet economy was organized through ambitious Five-Year Plans. Implementation of the first of these plans (1928–1932) profoundly transformed not only the economy of the Soviet Union, but also its repressive system, launching the building of sprawling network of camps and other punitive institutions.

