

Inside Stalin's 'Marble Gulag': Soviets Allow Rare Visit to Siberian ...

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Inside Stalin's 'Marble Gulag'

Soviets Allow Rare Visit to Siberian Camp for Uranium Miners

First of two articles

By Michael Dobbs
Washington Post Foreign Service

MARBLE GULAG, U.S.S.R.— Stark granite mountains rising to a height of 8,000 feet surround this Stalinist-era labor camp, forming a natural prison more awesome than anything man could possibly invent. In winter, the temperature drops to 60 degrees below zero.

Visiting this desolate Siberian camp, it is difficult to conceive of anybody trying to escape. The only natural exit—down the mountain valley to the nearest village, about

35 miles away—is blocked by guardhouses and machine-gun posts.

And yet, according to Soviet secret police documents, 83 prisoners did try to escape during the years 1949 to 1951 when the camp was in operation. Most tried to scramble up the almost vertical rock face—a daunting route even for well-equipped mountaineers. No one got away.

Part of a vast network of Stalinist labor camps stretching across Siberia, never before accessible to Western journalists, the Marble Gulag provides a point of departure

for a journey through Soviet history. The camp symbolizes a totalitarian economic and political system that continues to mold in significant ways the everyday lives of ordinary Soviet citizens, more than 35 years after Stalin's death.

A land of appalling hardships and huge natural resources, Siberia encapsulates the challenge facing President Mikhail Gorbachev as he attempts to steer the Soviet Union into the 21st century. This pair of articles, based on a week-long trip across an area as large as the United States, will compare modern-day

See GULAG, A24, Col. 1



BY MICHAEL DOBBS—THE WASHINGTON POST

The Stalinist-era "Marble Gulag" is surrounded by 8,000-foot-high mountains.

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West Gets First Look At Stalin-Era Camp For Uranium Miners

GULAG, From A1

Siberia with the Siberia of Joseph Stalin.

Until a few months ago, the existence of the Marble Gulag was a closely guarded secret. It was here, in the taiga, or forest region, of eastern Siberia, that uranium was mined to produce the first Soviet atomic bombs. The Soviet Union's rise to superpower status rested on the merciless exploitation of tens of thousands of slave laborers.

Today, the Marble Gulag is being turned into a museum commemorating the victims of Stalinism, the Soviet equivalent of Auschwitz or Buchenwald. The decision to allow Westerners to visit the camp (the word "gulag" derives from the Russian acronym for Stalin's prison system) represents a further step in Gorbachev's drive to shed light on the "blank spots" of Soviet history, especially the quarter century of Stalin's rule from the late 1920s to 1953.

The liberal Soviet journal *Novy Mir* has begun serializing excerpts from "Gulag Archipelago," Alexander Solzhenitsyn's landmark exposure of the Stalinist camps, more than 15 years after its publication in the West. A competition is now underway in Moscow to erect an anti-Stalinist monument in the Soviet capital.

"Richard III and Ivan the Terrible were innocents compared to Stalin. This kind of murderer never existed before the 20th century," said Evgenii Tokar, a young Soviet director making a documentary film about Marble Gulag. "In my opinion, Stalin was even worse than Hitler. Hitler did not destroy his own people."

Soviet and Western historians estimate that up to 50 million people were "repressed" by Stalin. The greatest bloodletting took place before World War II with the destruction of the kulaks, or rich peasants, and the "Great Terror" of 1937. But several million people were sent to camps after the war, including many Soviet soldiers captured by the Nazis.

'Death Valley'

Even today, the Marble Gulag is difficult to reach. From the nearest village, Chara, you drive three hours by four-wheel-drive vehicle along forest trails that meander into a rocky river bed. Then there is a two-hour hike up to the camp itself.

As you climb above the tree line, at 6,000 feet, the luxuriant taiga becomes suddenly barren. The play of light on the mountain sometimes gives the granite rocks a marble hue, explaining the name of the camp. The mountains form a gigantic soundbox, mixing the moans of the wind with the gurgling of running water.

A line of unused electricity pylons leads past a row of single-story wooden guardhouses to the labor camp. About 200 yards long and 200 yards wide, it is surrounded by two parallel barbed-wire fences and four corner posts. Most of the buildings in the camp have been largely destroyed by the elements, but the outlines remain: a long barracks where about 500 prisoners huddled around a stove, the punishment cell where it was easy to freeze to death, the kitchen.

Attached to one of the buildings, a flimsy one-log thick, is a sign erected by members of the local Komsomol, the Communist youth league. "Comrades!" it announces. "Here will be created a historic monument. We ask you to leave everything as it is."

There is not much to pilfer. Some scraps of clothing and leather sandals worn by the zeks, Russian slang for inhabitants of the gulag, and crude kitchen utensils. Rolls of rusty barbed wire. The carcass of an American Studebaker truck donated to the Soviet Union in World War II under lend-lease. A piece of cardboard containing instructions to the guard.

Local residents were well aware of the existence of the camp but, until very recently, were reluctant to talk about it. Fantastic legends circulate in Chara about a "Death Valley" in the mountains that no living creature or plant can possibly survive.

"You're crazy to go up there. Your hair will fall out. The entire valley is radioactive," said one Chara resident, on being asked directions. Soviet geologists who scour the mountains for minerals, and regularly visit the camp, insist there is no danger.

The secrets of the Marble Gulag began to unravel at the beginning of this year when Komsomolskaya Pravda carried a photo of the camp on its front page. It had been taken more than 10 years earlier by the paper's correspondent in the region, Vladimir Sungorkin, who came across the camp by chance.

"I never thought that I would be able to publish such a picture," Sungorkin said. "This was the first photo of a Stalinist labor camp ever to

appear in the Soviet press. Until very recently, it would have been dangerous to have told anybody that I even had such a picture. The whole subject was taboo."

Even today, under *glasnost*, or Gorbachev's policy of greater openness, Komsomolskaya Pravda felt itself unable to fully describe the historical background to the establishment of the Marble Gulag. That history goes back to the Potsdam conference in July 1945 when Stalin learned about the development of the American atomic bomb from President Truman.

After returning to Moscow, Stalin decided to give top priority to the development of a Soviet bomb. Teams of geologists were sent to scour the country for deposits of uranium, the radioactive chemical element whose nuclear fission sets off a chain reaction that results in the explosive force of an atomic bomb. One of the sites they discovered was the Udokan mountains near Chara, deep in the Siberian taiga and accessible only by plane.

To extract uranium from this desolate spot, a huge human investment was required. About 600 zeks stationed year-round at the Marble Gulag were responsible for mining the ore. But this was just the tip of the slave-labor pyramid servicing the camp.

Sungorkin estimates that at least 1,000 prisoners worked on constructing a road from the Marble Gulag to a base camp and airport about 25 miles away at a place called Sinelga. Tens of thousands more zeks worked on a road that stretched 500 miles across the mountainous taiga to the town of Mogocha on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Another 100,000 prisoners were assigned to build a northern branch of the Trans-Siberian, known as BAM, that is only now being completed.

'Kill Me, Kill Me'

Mikhail Shinkin was a 22-year-old sergeant in the Soviet army when he was sent to the Marble Gulag. Without his knowledge, his soldiers had sold a sheep to some starving civilians. A military tribunal sentenced him to 10 years in a labor camp for the crime of abetting the theft of state property.

The journey to the gulag was like a trip through hell. In September 1948, just as winter was setting in, a party of 500 prisoners set off by foot from Mogocha. For the first 60 miles, to the village of Tupik (which means "Dead End" in Russian,) there was a rudimentary forest road. Beyond Tupik, they had to cut their way through 200 miles of Siberian wilderness, building their own road.

"We lived like animals, sleeping out at night. Dozens and dozens of prisoners simply froze to death along the road. At night, we would light a fire, then clear away the embers and sleep on the warm ground," recalled Shinkin, a retired metalworker who now lives in the Moscow region.

As punishment for petty offenses, the prisoners were forced to spend the night lashed to wooden stakes away from the fire. Shinkin still bears scars on his wrist from being placed in handcuffs that restricted the circulation of the blood. He says he only survived because he was young and strong.

Throughout the five-month ordeal, the prisoners had practically nothing to eat. Sometimes they would be given a handful of uncooked grain. The guards would often throw meat to their dogs rather than give it to the prisoners.

"I remember one night we were sitting around the fire. The dogs were howling all around us. The person next to me was showing us pictures of his family when he collapsed into the fire, dead from hunger, cold and exhaustion," Shinkin said.

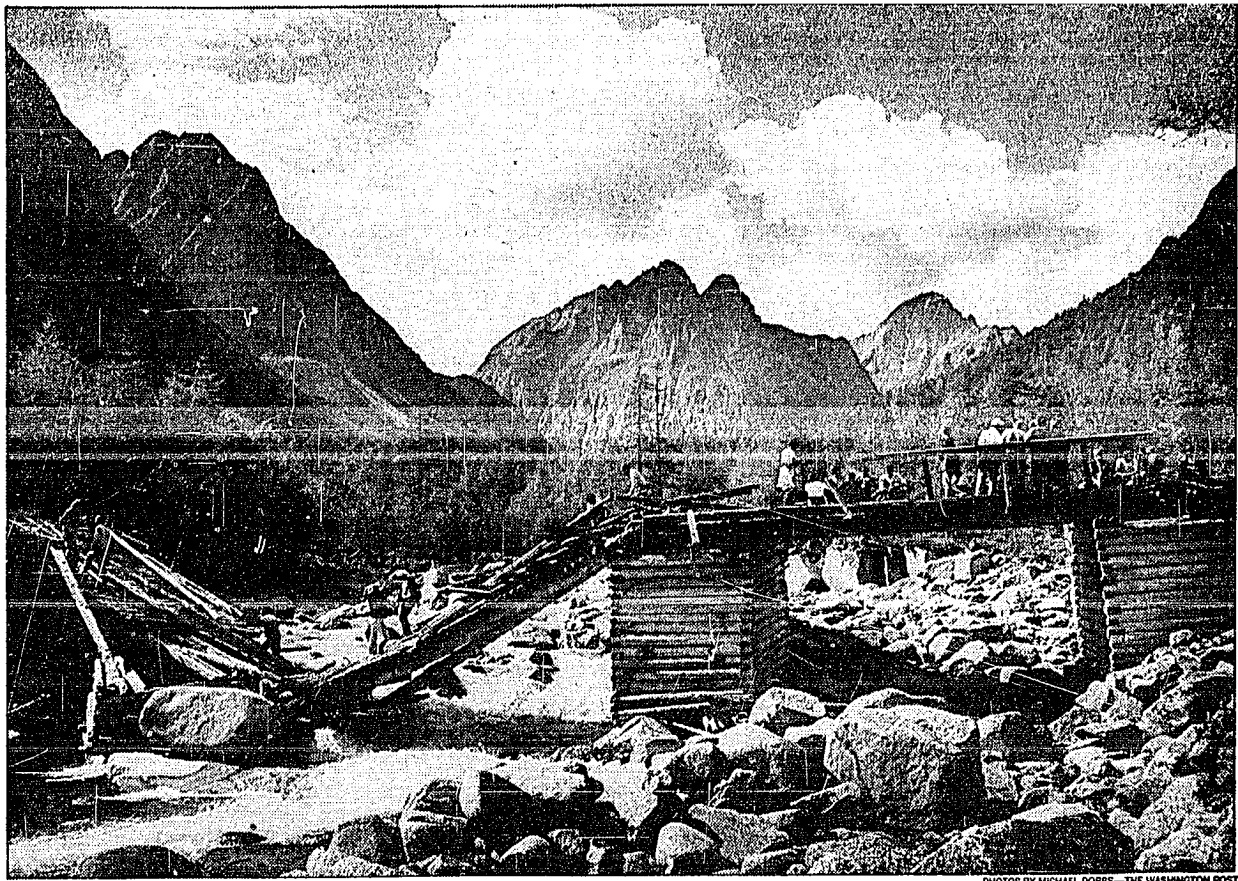
After the horrors of the journey, it was almost a relief to get to the Marble Gulag. The flimsy huts provided at least some protection against the harsh Siberian winter. And since the extraction of uranium had been declared a top-priority project, the zeks were relatively well fed.

Shinkin said he never thought of escaping from the camp, knowing that it would be impossible. But he remembers an escape attempt by three of his friends. Two of the zeks were shot as they tried to scramble across the rocks. The third was caught and viciously beaten by the guards.

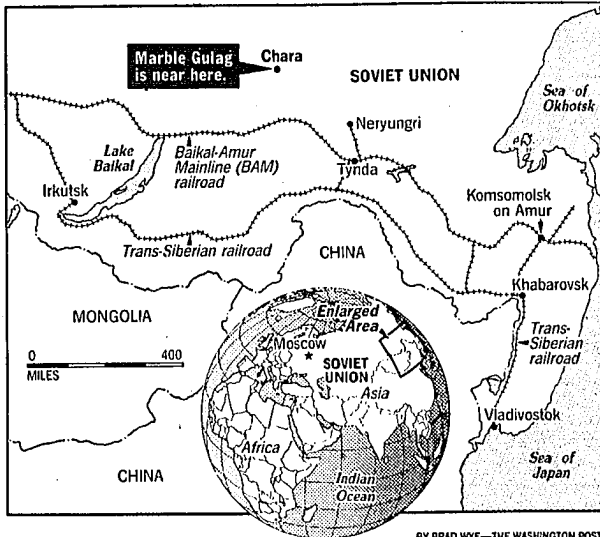
"They left him out all night underneath the watchtower. I can still remember him crying, 'Kill me, kill me,' all night," said Shinkin.

Komsomolskaya Pravda's revelations about the Marble Gulag triggered a flood of letters, including some from former zeks. At least half the letters were in support of Stalin. Many accused the paper of defaming the late dictator and grossly exaggerating the hardships of the camps.

"You are blackening Stalin's



Until a few months ago, the existence of the "Marble Gulag" in eastern Siberia, above, was a closely guarded secret. Right, the road to the gulag was built by former convicts who had to walk 300 miles from nearest settlement.



BY BRAD WYE—THE WASHINGTON POST

times and Stalin himself. There should have been more such camps so that all the kulaks could have been annihilated," wrote an inhabitant of Irkutsk named Ivanova.

Some readers attacked Komsomolskaya Pravda for printing "absurd rumors." A regional prosecutor, V.P. Balyaba, said secret police archives showed that the inmates of the Marble Gulag were either common criminals or Nazi collaborators. No shootings ever took place at the camp, he claimed.

It is difficult to calculate how many of the inmates of the Marble Gulag were serving terms for political offenses. Political prisoners and hardened criminals were mixed together. Many of the zeks were like Shinkin—serving long sentences for offenses that would not be considered crimes in a civilized country.

"The only people who can say such things in defense of Stalin are those who never experienced the gulags themselves. If you lived through this, you are bound to have a completely different attitude," said Shinkin, who was a front-line soldier in World War II and remembers going into battle shouting "For Stalin, for the Motherland."

The Power of Repression

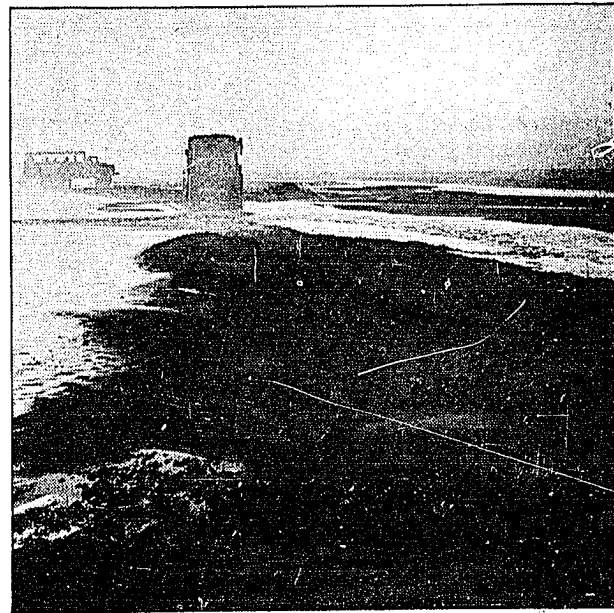
A Westerner visiting the Marble Gulag is struck by a paradox. The camp provides dramatic evidence of the penury and backwardness of Stalin's Soviet Union. The people who produced the atomic bomb and transformed their country into a superpower lived in conditions of appalling misery and political repression.

It is contradiction that goes to the heart of the difference between the United States and the Soviet Union. The United States became a superpower by releasing the individual energies of its people. In pursuing a dream of a better life, Americans also contributed to the overall strength of the nation.

The Soviet Union has traditionally taken the opposite path. By keeping the living standards of the population as low as possible, Stalin was able to concentrate resources on priority projects such as development of the atomic bomb. The Soviet Union achieved superpower status through merciless repression and the creation of a vast network of slave labor.

The Stalinist system worked for a time—despite the huge cost in human lives. Repression was an effective instrument during the early stages of industrialization, when economic progress could be achieved by mobilizing vast resources. But during the information revolution, which is driven by the free flow of ideas, repression is counterproductive.

Gorbachev is the first Soviet



brutality and extensive economic development.

Czars and Communist Party general secretaries alike have sought to tap Siberia's great natural wealth through the system of political exile

and grandiose projects such as the Trans-Siberian Railway. But Gorbachev is trying to use different methods—and Siberia is finding it difficult to adapt.

NEXT: Gorbachev's Siberia