

# KOLYMA

## THE LAND OF GOLD AND DEATH

by Stanislaw J. Kowalski

Stalin's prisoners, or "lagerniks" as they were commonly called, referred to the frozen land of Kolyma as a planet, although it physically remained part of Mother Earth. This vast piece of Arctic and sub-Arctic territory, with its undefined political and geographical borders, was located in the furthest North-East corner of Siberia.



Kolyma differed from the remaining Asian land mass in so many ways that it could be considered, metaphorically at least, as an entity unto itself. The remoteness and isolation, the severity of the climate, and the harsh living conditions made this frozen hell stand apart from the rest of Siberia.



The people of the Soviet Union feared Kolyma more than any other region of the Gulag Empire. "*Kolyma znaczi smert*" was the common phrase whispered at the time, and translates, without loss, to "*Kolyma means death.*"



# CHAPTER 1



There was one special characteristic of this land, which made Kolyma exceptional among the many northern regions of Siberia. This particular feature was its rich deposits of gold, or gold placers, as geologists call them. After the discovery of gold and its mining potential, the land became subject to extensive exploitation in which the hands of political prisoners became the basic tools in the state-run operation. Millions of so called "enemies of the people" perished in the gold mines of the cold North when used as slave labor. There was a dual purpose to this system; the exploitation of human resources and the simultaneous

destruction of people opposed to the system. Nature and Stalin made Kolyma the land of gold and death.



Long before this once-ignored corner of Siberia gained its questionable prominence as the "White Crematorium" and "The Land of White Death";



Russian explorers, hunters and adventurers had already recorded its existence. In the 16th and 17th century, this land of peaceful northern people like Chukchis, Ewenis, Tungusis, and Yakutis fell without a fight into Tsarist hands, during the period of Russian expansion into the political vacuum of Siberia. From a historical perspective it was a spectacular



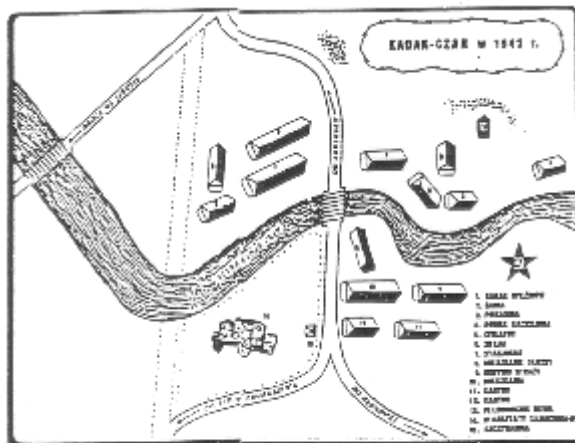
expansion. In the course of only three decades the Russian military, followed by settlers, advanced 3000 miles and by 1639 had reached the western shores of the Pacific Ocean.

As early as 1648 an adventurous Cossack, Semen Dehznev, made the first trip North by boat, following the River Kolyma, to reach the Arctic Ocean and the Bering Strait (at the time not known as such). His expedition, though well documented in writing and deposited in the Irkutsk archives, got lost in human oblivion and lay dormant for almost 150 years. The land was not abandoned altogether - it was exploited for fur trade but rather on limited scale. The first traders set up their posts in the region of today's Nizhnyi Kolymsk, though this was abandoned later for several years.



There were two basic elements that kept Russian pioneers away from this Siberian land's end - severe climate and geographical isolation. These elements

combined together created a solid barrier that postponed Kolyma's re-discovery until the beginning of the present century.



Plan of the Kodak-Chan labor camp. From the memoirs of A. Krakowiecki.

The severity of the climate can only be explained in terms of the elements of Nature that affected the region and its geographical set-up, in relation to these elements. The whole process begins in the warm Pacific current which on its way North passes the coast of Alaska, warming it up as it goes by. After picking up cold waters in the Bering Strait the current runs south, cooling the coast of Kamchatka, Kolyma and Sakhalin. Kolyma's mainland is therefore isolated from the warming influence of the Pacific Ocean and the connecting seas, like the Sea of Japan and the Okhotsk Sea.

The other basic factor is the combined effect of the severe arctic air current and the mountain ranges along the east coast of Kolyma. The cold winter winds, having no outlet to the sea, circle around, creating natural refrigeration. This results in Kolyma having one of the lowest recorded temperatures in the world. In some places it was read as low as 98 degrees Fahrenheit below zero.



The northern people, named earlier, who lived there for generations, recognized the short summers and long cold winters as the natural turn of seasonal events. But the Russians, who first explored the land, though they



were used to the cold Siberian climate, found Kolyma's climatic conditions to harsh for their liking. Stalin's prisoners had no choice; they had to bear with it as long as their strength endured. These unfortunate people vented their frustration with climate in the following short phrase which epitomized the coldness of the land and which became

known all over Siberia. The little sarcasm therein carried a touch of bitter humor, although nothing in Kolyma added to a jovial mood. And the phrase is as follows:

Kolyma - a wonderful planet,  
Twelve months of winter and the rest  
One long summer.

The inaccessibility of the land to Russian explorers and pioneers could be attributed to the two fore-mentioned factors of geography and climate. Each in its own way - or both combined - closed the two available routes by land and sea totally or partially throughout the major part of the year. The land route, from the south, blocked by massive snowfalls in winter, was also a problem in the short summer. After the snow melted, the passages in the mountains and the taiga turned into marshlands were difficult to cross. As a result of this, even at the peak of gold mining, the Soviets did not undertake any plans to connect by land route the mainland of Siberia with Kolyma.



A road was eventually built after World War II and is presently known as Kolyma Road, connecting Vladivostok and Magadan, the capital of Kolyma. Apparently it remains in operation all year round.

The alternative connection was the sea route from the eastern port of Vladivostok to the small primitive ports of Magadan (Nagayevo), Kamchatka and the Arctic Sea port of Ambartchik. Centered on these, the only feasible means of communication with the North, the Russians created a whole fleet of vessels operating as cargo ships and carriers of gold on the return trip.

## CHAPTER 2

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Russian prospectors looking for gold came rather late into this North-East Siberian region, although the presence of this precious metal in its streams and valleys was common knowledge among the local nomadic tribes. However, as a result of their religious beliefs, these tribes were not willing to share this knowledge with the early Russian hunters and traders. The basic reason behind this had its roots in the teachings of their priests (shamans), to the effect that gold is "the root of all evil." This aphorism tied up to an ancient legend among them that gold was mistakenly left behind, when at the beginning of times the heavenly stars were sent down by the Great Spirit to collect all gold from Earth, which caused plenty of wickedness among the people. Within this legend there was a prediction of human disaster on enormous scale if and when gold was removed from the frozen ground of Kolyma. The prophecy was later translated into the human calamity of Stalin's purges that delivered millions of people into the cold and inhospitable land to die a cruel and horrible death.



The presence of this gold, for which the masters of the Soviet Union were ready to sacrifice any number of their fellow-human beings, and from which the northern people shied away, can be explained in a more prosaic, but scientific way by geologists. Their studies point to the presence of gold in some of the Earth's regions as result of land upheavals, volcanic eruptions, the formation of the earth's crust and gold placers, applying to them such geological ages as Triassic and Jurassic, measured in millions of years. One present-day geologist who specializes in the study of gold deposits is Prof. Wladyslaw J. Ciesielewicz, of Colorado School of Mines. He has explained the formation of Kolyma's gold deposits in these scientific terms in his paper "Russia's Bloody Gold":



***"The Mesozoids of Kolyma and North East Yakutia constitute the last rich auriferous matalogenic province (in Russia) found along the edges of the Siberian shield. They form the so-called Yana-Kolyma folded belt, a series of mountain ranges extending from Southwest to Northwest across the entire Northeast Siberia. The rocks are mostly sandstone, shale and volcanic of the Triassic and Jurassic age. Structurally, Mesozoids represent the following stage of the geosynclinal cycles. In the Upper Jurassic the Mesozoids were cut by porphyric gold bearing dikes which intruded along major faults (Ustiev 1972). Areas away from these deep-seated faults are barren. Zones of impregnation also developed in the shales. Subsequent lifts and erosion of these Mesozoid structures gave rise to the present-day structures. Before of the aforementioned regular structural control, the gold placers in Kolyma and Northeast Yakutia occur in a characteristic banded pattern. The placers are very young; some formed in Pleistocene. Russians claim that in the virgin state they contain the highest concentration of gold of any known placer province in the world."***

Prof. Ciesielewicz was not the only Pole who dedicated himself to the study of this region. Long before him, and many decades before gold was discovered in Kolyma, some Polish patriots exiled to Siberia by the Tsar ventured to the region of Kolyma, being either forced by circumstances or by the will of their Russian masters. The most notable of these patriots was Jan Czerski. He was a young geographer-geologist and a fighter for Polish freedom in the unsuccessful 1863 uprising against the Tsar. Once he was captured, he was exiled to the far end of the Russian Empire and given the task of exploring the Northeast regions of the cold Siberian lands. He remained there for the rest of his life, contributing to the Russian science many notes and papers about the geography of Kolyma and Indigirka. These

were preserved in the archives of the Academy of Science in St.Petersburg. Czerski died early in life at the age of 47 and was buried in one of the regions that he explored. In recognition of his contribution to science he was named the first (Russian) geologist of Northeast Siberian territories, and a mountain range was given his name. His grave originally had a wooden cross upon it, but this was later replaced with a solid stone obelisk.

The other known Polish exile to that region was Wacław Sieroszewski, who spent several years exploring the land of Yakutia, and living with the native people of the territory. His legacy to these people was his book about their culture and traditions, known as the first written record about the nation of Yakutis. This book is held to this day as a treasured document about the earlier Yakuti way of life and their culture.

Another book, written by the Polish journalist and Stalin's prisoner in Kolyma, Anatoli Krakowiecki, gave an account of a Polish exile of the Tsar's era, called Krzyżanowski. The man after escaping to the Arctic region married a Yakuti woman and raised a family with her. He remained around the region of present-day Arkhangel until 1934 when the first labor camps started to appear in his area. Like most of the northern people of that time he moved North and perhaps, like many of them, crossed the frozen Bering Strait and started a new life for himself and his family in a place safe from Stalin's persecutions.

Another Polish pioneer in this land, almost unknown in Poland, was Joseph Slonimski. He spent several years in Kolyma as a geologist, having been recruited by the Soviets in Paris. At his late age, and after return to Poland, he wrote a novelette about his experiences in that cold land, entitled "Purga."



In this book he gives account of the early methods used to prospect for gold, the primitive technique employed to mine it and the ways of life of the northern people like Yakutis and Ewenis. He gave us valuable insight into the culture of the tribes, who raised herds of reindeer for food, clothing and shelter to live and survive in this frozen land.

The actual discovery of gold did not take place until 1910, when an escaped convict, Boriska, a man of Tartar origin, ventured accidentally into an Arctic valley rich in gold deposits. The news of this discovery was slow to spread through Russia, there being no

news media in the modern sense. Soon after, in 1914, Tsarist Russia entered into war with Austria and Germany, which turned the discovery into an issue of only a secondary importance. Even the post-Revolutionary discovery of diamonds by a Tsarist officer, hiding from the Soviet secret police in the remote Siberian region, passed without notice. During the Russian Civil War of 1918-1921, the country was embroiled in internal strife and in no mood for sensational news about exciting discoveries.

Eventually, by 1925, the reports of Kolyma's gold reached Moscow and caught the attention of men of science and the top men in the Communist regime. This followed on from a new economic trend called the New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1922. According to NEP, the Russian currency was to be returned to a partial gold standard by which at least 25% of rubles were to be backed by gold. There was another contributory factor that made the setting up of gold reserves into a matter of great urgency. The country was on the verge of economic disaster and was urgently in need of new resources. The newly introduced social and economic reforms had brought the state to the edge of bankruptcy. This created an urgent need for outside help. To a country starved of foreign currency the gold deposits in Kolyma were a godsend. However, exploitation of this precious metal on a large scale was not immediately possible. The infrastructure had first to be put in place. The means to this were limited, or totally unavailable.

The first step undertaken by the Soviet Government to reach the gold was to encourage private enterprise in this far away corner of Siberia. This went counter to Soviet ideology and was very much discouraged in other parts of the Soviet Union. These gold prospectors, (using primitive methods of gold panning), obviously showed success in their undertaking - so much so that the Soviet government moved into the gold mining business, on its own, soon after.

The Special Committee for Siberian Affairs in Moscow, already at work in 1928, dispatched an expedition to the far east territories under the leadership of Karl Yanovich Luks, a Latvian communist and a former member of Lenin's guard unit. Accompanied by 35 compatriots, he landed in the region of present-day Magadan with the special task of building the "Kulturebase" or, in other words, supplies base for entire Kolyma on the shore of the Okhotsk Sea. Their first goal was to build the port on the site of a fishing haven called Nagayevo. The construction of the project, which started in 1929, proved to be a total disaster. On three occasions powerful storms washed the constructed buildings into the sea. Soon after, and for some unknown reason (in 1932) Luks himself committed suicide. The task of starting the building of infrastructure had therefore to be taken over by his successor.

In the same year a group of young geologists from Lena-Adan gold fields organized the first state expedition to explore Kolyma's mineral resources. This expedition, under the leadership of Yuri Aleksandrovich Bilibin, a geologist from the Moscow Academy of Mining, confirmed the existence of gold in that region but their findings as to the content of the gold in gold placers were inconclusive. A second expedition, organized by Abraham Issakovich Gernstein, also failed to locate the expected riches of the land. The next three expeditions, led by Valentin A. Tsarogrodski, (According to the report of Prof. W. Cisielewicz), finally discovered rich gold placers throughout the explored regions of Kolyma and Indigirka.

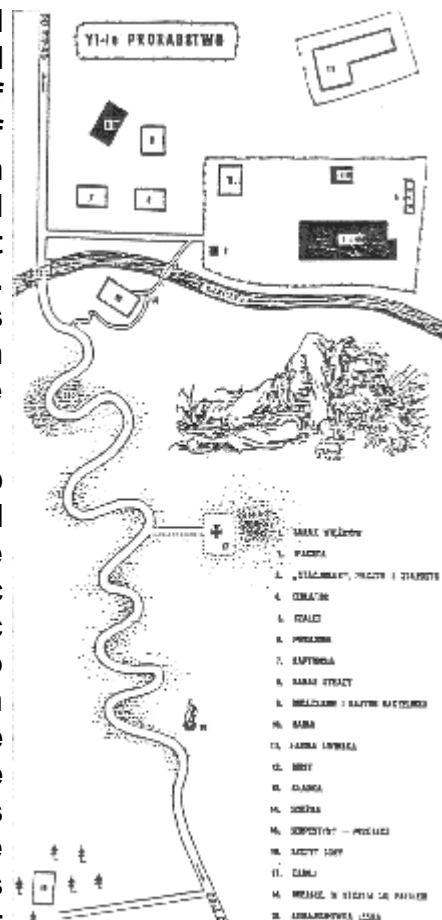


The deposits proved to be several times richer than those in other gold mining areas in the Soviet Union are. According to the estimate of the geologists, the payload was as much as 10 to 15 grams per cubic meter of soil which apparently is a very high ratio. One of the geologists of that era, Joseph Slonimski, in his book "Purga" described in detail the exploration of the discovered fields by panning for payloads. The method included digging one-meter deep holes in several places and washing the soil in water from melted snow until the gold content in the area was established. After having researched the soil and after having established the payload, proper mining for gold could begin, also by primitive methods i.e. by digging, washing and panning.

# CHAPTER 3

The Moscow directors of the newly organized government agency, The Central Gold Monopoly, realized that effective exploitation of Kolyma's gold fields could not reach the peak of productivity without advanced American technology. A group of their geologists and technocrats made a trip to California to acquaint themselves with American mining systems. They inspected some of the American mines and managed to recruit a few American engineers. That was, however, the limit of the assistance they got from the Americans.

Unable to secure foreign technology or develop their own, they resorted to slave labor, provided in abundance by the all powerful Soviet police organization. By then, socio-economic conditions in the country had taken a drastic turn for the worse. In 1929, Stalin began to collectivize the Soviet farming industry. From then on, peasants and small landowners were not allowed to own the land or to profit from the sale of the crops. Those who resisted this policy were dealt with ruthlessly. Some were executed, but hundreds of thousands of others were driven to the peripheries of the Soviet Empire to form an enormous, expendable slave labor force.



Plan of the Labor Camp. In the center lay the dying "dokhodiaga," the goners.

Stalin particularly targeted those who were traditionally the richer peasants, the so-called "kulaks." This class of the people were unwilling to join the farm collectives and were subjected to reprisals from state security personnel. Though there was some open rebellion, most of the affected population resorted mainly to passive resistance. People simply refused to work in the collectives. Stalin's response was to let them be starved out of existence. The kulaks had destroyed farm equipment, burned fields, and slaughtered livestock, but the government officials locked up the remaining food stores and induced a famine.

As a result, a sufficient amount of food was not produced to feed the country's population. These shortages of farm products resulted in the greatest man-made famine in the history of mankind. The region most affected was the Ukraine. According to recent Ukrainian reports (from Kiev), at least half a million people died of starvation. Other sources estimate the number as high as three million. Police reprisals continued with mass arrests and mass deportation of whole populations to remote corners of Siberia. Ukrainian historians claim that these persecutions were directed entirely against ethnically Ukrainian people. Though it may have seemed this way from the Ukraine, the known facts indicate numerous other ethnic groups were included in these pogroms.

For centuries this part of Europe (Ukraine) had a large Polish population - many of them remained in place after the Revolution. The total or partial disappearance of Poles from the areas of Kamieniec Podolski, Winnica, Zhytomierz and Kiev, and the most recent discovery of ethnic Polish groups in Kazakstan, Uzbekistan and other regions of Siberia, clearly indicates that Poles were persecuted as much as any other ethnic groups in Ukraine. Also, since the Ukrainian section represented the economically poorer class, and was from the beginning of communism supportive of this social and political change, they were unlikely to be the only persecuted group. Furthermore, they must have enjoyed some of Stalin's confidence since, according to the report of Eugenia Ginzburg in her book "In the Whirlwind," the guards for the prison camps in Kolyma were recruited from Ukraine and Tashkent.

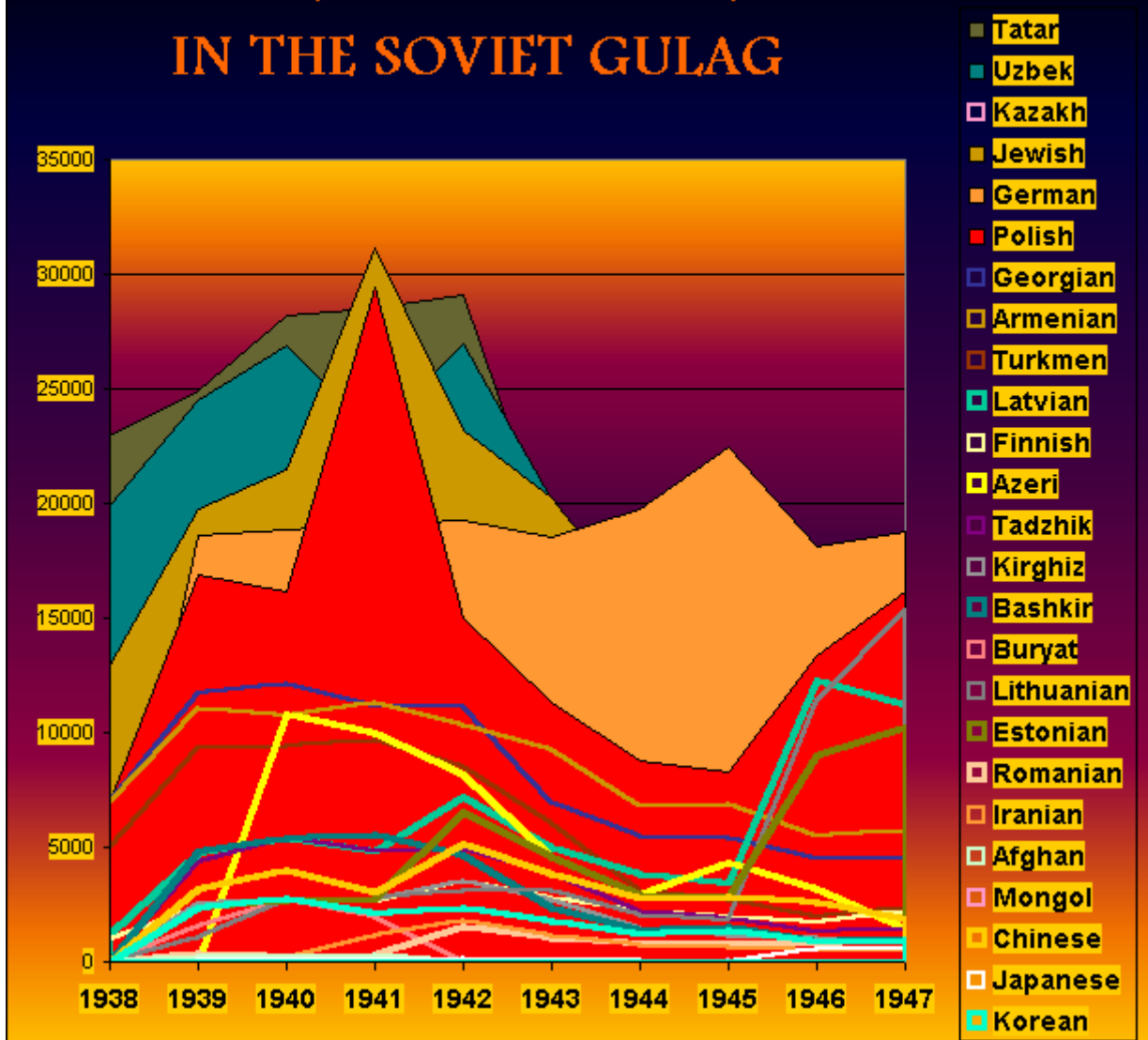
In addition to "kulaks" and Poles from Ukraine, the insane Soviet system of persecution reached out for other sources to provide slave labor for the Gulag or Labor Camp Administration in the entire Soviet Union, including Uzbeks, Tatars, ethnic Germans, Georgians, Armenians, Turkmen, Mongols, Latvians, Estonians, Lithuanians, Chinese, Koreans, Afghans, Finns, and



countless unnamed others. By the mid 30s, Stalin Purges and Show Trials were in full swing. His aim was to wipe out any challenge to his leadership and to impose total control over the people. That his repression created a mass of slave workers, was an added bonus. No one in the Soviet Union was immune from this, regardless of ethnicity or nationality. In fact, foreigners were viewed as a threat. The war years brought huge numbers of unfortunate foreign nationals under Soviet control. The number of foreign nationals sent to the Gulag varied from year to year, depending on where these purges were being conducted. The chart below summarized the annual Gulag (NTL) population, of foreign nationals only,

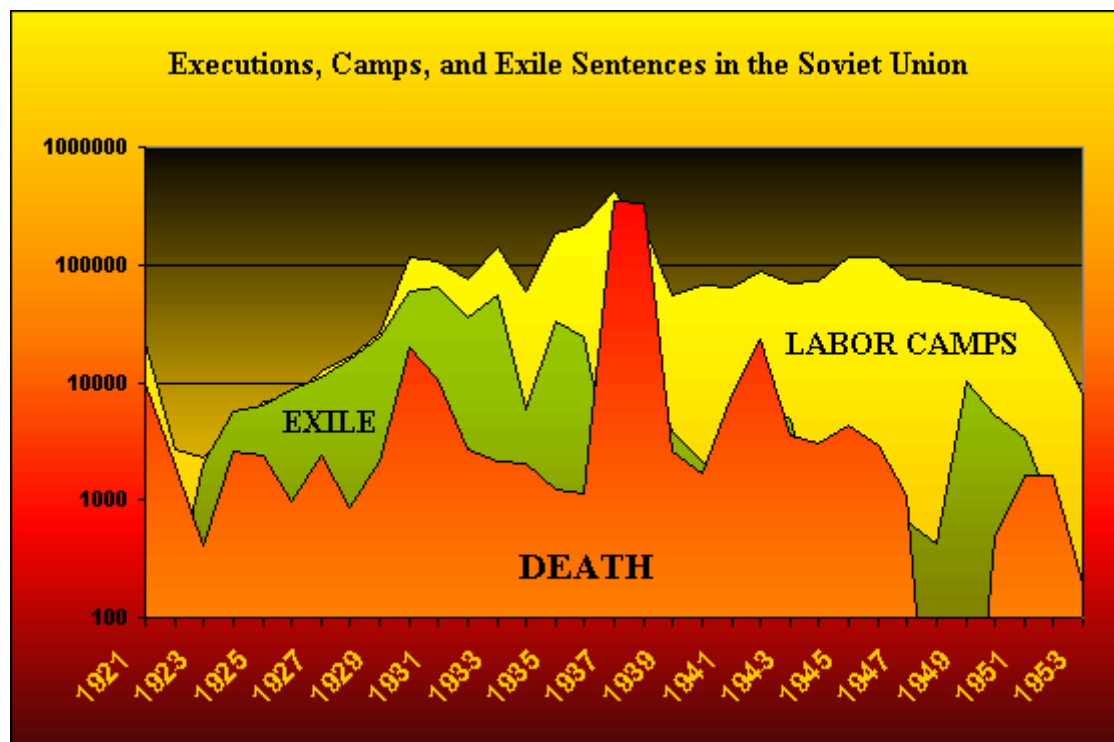
based on data recently released from the old Soviet archives (Pohl 1997).

## FOREIGN NATIONALS IN THE SOVIET GULAG



Many of the old Bolsheviks who had deviated their loyalty to the Party and to the communist ideology were arrested, tortured, charged with most ludicrous crimes, were found guilty in show trials and executed. The Red Army lost over 70% of its higher-ranking officers by imprisonment and execution. But more than this; ordinary, everyday people were also arrested and sent into exile too - it did not matter if they were innocent or guilty. The gold fields of Kolyma were not deprived of their share of this labor bonanza. The activity of execution and sentencing both Russians and foreigners to the labor camps reached a frenzy before and during the wars years, as shown in this chart based on data from Pohl (1997).





By then, the riches of this distant sub-Arctic land were ready to be developed and exploited. The initial infrastructure was named "Kulturbase," and was basically limited to the port of Nagayevo and the supply center in Magadan. With the arrival of the first director of Kolyma, Edward Petrovich Berzin, (in 1932) it was renamed "Dalstroy" and quickly expanded its operations. Under his direction, the whole region of Kolyma became a fast growing frontier land of the Soviet Union whose entire economy was based on cheap slave labor. In a short time the main thoroughfare to the North from an initial 13 kilometers developed to a 1034 kilometer-long highway leading from Magadan to the Arctic port of Ambartchik. Thousands of labor camps were built along this road and thousands of mines, predominantly gold mines, began operations.

The key to the fast development of Kolyma was its capitol city Magadan. This small sub-Arctic fishing village, inhabited by the northern tribe of Ewenis, (who gave it the name meaning "sea dunes") rapidly developed into a busy penal colony. Hundreds of thousands of prisoners were delivered each year to Kolyma's



slave labor camps. They populated the town of Magadan and its hinterland, and were meant to work there to their deaths and not return. Consequently, Magadan, from having only 165 houses and buildings in 1935, (not counting prison camps), grew within half a century into a metropolis of 160,000 people. It became, in the process, a thriving mining, industrial, fishing and cultural center, and remains so today.

Recent official Soviet Russian publications, such as the book "Magadan" portray the city as a beautiful, modern place - vital, progressive and, most of

all, free. In this entire book there is no mention whatsoever of the slave labor which gave this place a birth from the death and suffering of countless souls. This present modern capitol of the North seems to have no memory, no shame, and no desire to know the crimes of its past.

Not one sentence or paragraph is dedicated to all the Soviet nationalities and many prisoners from such countries as Poland, Germany, Rumania, Lithuania, Latvia, Mongolia, China, Korea, Afghanistan, Armenia, or the Japanese POWs of World War II who lived, worked and died there. With the dismantling of the slave labor camps in the late 50s and 60s the memory of these murdered slaves and war victims also perished from the history books of Kolyma's libraries and schools, and from the records of government offices. Although some records have come to light from old Soviet archives, the denials in Kolyma continue to this day.

The slave workers, the product of Stalin's repression, started to arrive in Kolyma in the early 30s to begin massive exploitation of the mineral resources. The cargo fleet, created for that purpose, carried its human load on a one-way trip to the frozen land of the North. Only a very few ever returned to their homelands, and most of them came back as invalids, the victims of severe frostbite. The majority of them remained forever in mass graves, dug into the permafrost, or had their bodies buried under rocks or carried away by spring flood to the Arctic Sea. Their souls, as prison folklore had it, found eternal rest on the white peaks of the mountains, called "sopkas."

With the outbreak of World War II in 1939, and the invasion of the Eastern Polish provinces by the Soviets, new sources of slave labor were found to feed the economic needs of Stalin's empire. Some two million Poles were forcibly removed from their homes by the Soviet police and resettled in the vast territories of Siberia and Kazakstan. They had to work in collective of the



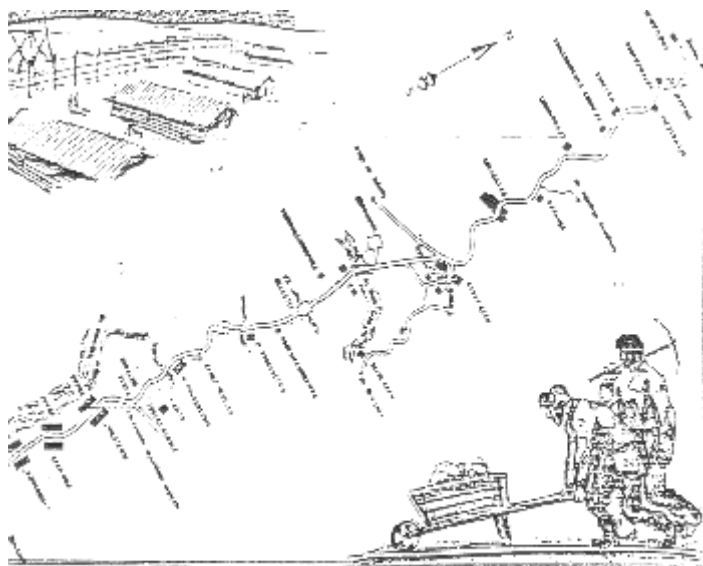
wide steppes or lumberjacks in the taiga or as slave labor in the camps of the cold and remote northern regions. Some Poles were executed by the Soviets like the 15,000 Polish officers who died in the forests of Katyn and Miednoye. The strange geographical names of the sub-Arctic and Arctic regions of Siberia became part of the Polish historical dictionary. Most of them became synonyms of the Polish wartime martyrdom in the Soviet Union.

Soon three other countries, forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union, contributed manpower to the slave system of the Gulag. The patriots of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia followed the tragic trail of Poles to sacrifice their effort and lives for the benefit of their persecutors and exploiters.

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# CHAPTER 4

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Section of the road to the North  
with maps of camps on both sides.

Slave labor would have been of little consequence to the Soviet economy without the infrastructure that enabled the movement of prisoners from the point of the labor source to the point of its utilization and eventual destruction. The Trans-Siberian Railway became the main thoroughfare that brought prisoners to intermediate points along the line from which they branched off to various places in the North. Its easternmost point,

Vladivostok, was the intermediate stop for the prisoners scheduled for Kolyma. However, here the land route to the far Northeast corner of Siberia ended. The only available means to reach shores of Kolyma was by the way of the northern sea such as the Japan Sea and Okhotsk Sea. For this purpose a special fleet was organized with its base in Vladivostok.

Each of the ships of the fleet, like the Dhzurma, Sovlatvia, Dalstroy, Decabrist and many others, carried within its hold many thousands of the persecuted people, destined for extinction. All of these vessels, though of cargo design, were fitted with elaborate internal arrangements to enable the carrying of the maximum load of prisoners. And this arrangement was of a kind that no other slave ship in the history of mankind was equipped with, not even the slave ship that carried African slaves to America.



A typical slave ship was Dhzurma. Its internal structure illustrates best how the human cargo was transported northwards within its holds. A wooden structure had been erected around the walls of its cargo holds, and comprised of four tiered bunks, with the floor serving as the fifth. Each of the bunks was divided into sections to accommodate five men in lying position. To take their places the prisoners had to slide in legs first with their heads facing the passages to avoid suffocation. If there was not enough places to accommodate prisoners, men had to

use passage-way as they're put up for a sea voyage lasting six to eleven days.

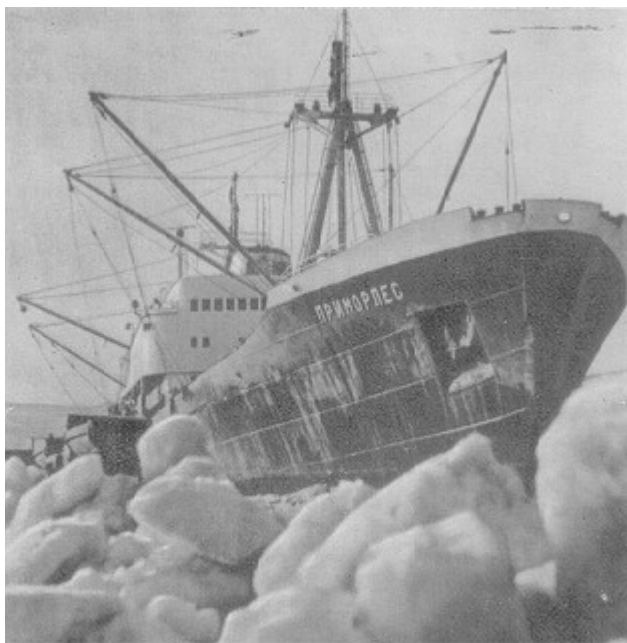
The sanitary arrangements consisted of two 50-gallon barrels, called "parashas," which were emptied periodically into the sea. It was quite common for these barrels to spill over, causing the inside of the holds to

smell with the odor of human waste. An outside latrine was also available, but only few prisoners at a time were allowed to use it. Therefore the queues were always long and moved slowly. This outside arrangement was fenced with barbed wire to prevent prisoners from jumping into the sea, especially when the ship was in Japanese territorial waters.



In this crowded ship, like in the entire prison system in the Soviet Union, food was always a commodity in short supply. At the time, the whole country went hungry and slaves were at the bottom of the list when it came to allocation of food. In the ship the rations were even far below the general prison standards. The daily meal of the prisoner during the journey consisted of reduced ration of bread, a portion of sauerkraut and a bucket of fresh water for each group of fifty men. This provision of food followed the maxim practiced within the system that "men who don't work don't need food".

Ventilation of the interior of the holds was another problem for the prisoners. Fresh air was delivered through the overhead opening of the hold. However,



even when fully opened the amount of air let in was barely sufficient to keep the prisoners away from suffocation. Then, the openings and the main door were always closed when the vessel passed the Japanese waters. For this, and other, reasons every journey took its toll in human life. Often there were additional fatalities caused by unforeseen and unexpected maritime perils.

The Dhzurma had its fair share of such tragedies. The memory of them has been

preserved for posterity in books such as Robert Conquest's "Kolyma." These incidents provide a good testimony to the little value that the Soviet masters placed on human life. Here are few of the stories presented in his book.

While on one of her late fall journeys to the port of Ambartchik in the Arctic Ocean, the Dhzurma got stuck in ice, due to the early arrival of cold weather. Unable to break the ice, she remained in the frozen sea throughout the entire winter with the human cargo of twelve thousand men inside. The Soviets had no means to rescue them and they would not accept offer of the outside help, which came from an American weather station in the Arctic. In this they must have been guided by fear of exposing their slave system to the world. The



entire load of men died of cold and starvation while still in her holds. Eventually the Dhzurma was freed from the ice in the spring and so was able to continue in the business for which she was designed.

On another occasion, while on the open seas, some of the common criminals, called in prison language "urkas and zhuliks," started a fire in one of the holds. The ship's command took the easiest way out. The crew shut the door and openings, and the whole shipment of human load suffocated. The fire was indeed extinguished and the ship saved for the next shipment of its human cargo.

Another disaster, mentioned in the Robert Conquest's book, related to the ship Sovlatvia which, while carrying Lithuanian prisoners and a load of dynamite, exploded at the destination. This was apparently caused by the sabotage by the prisoners. Again a small story that leaked out through the tightly sealed wall of Soviet secrecy.

A Polish source reports another sea disaster that involved the notorious Dhzurma. In the spring of 1941 the ship, while carrying a load of 8000 men (including a contingent of 3000 Poles), experienced another catastrophe that took place during a raging sea storm. In the Polish hold the center bunks collapsed burying hundreds of men under the debris of lumber and human weight. There were several death and injuries - the actual number never came to light.

The rest of the fleet on the northern route may have had similar experiences, but not all prison tales got out from the land of "white death." The secrecy of the police apparatus would not let any of it to get out from cold and frozen Kolyma.

## CHAPTER 5

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All effort of the system was geared towards more efficient production of gold. Lack of modern methods and equipment drove the masters to resolve the mines' inefficiency by increasing the number of the slave workers. They counted that such primitive means would ensure the maximum production at the minimum cost to the state. The basic idea was that this enterprise had to take care of itself, and produce lucrative returns to the state.

The organization called "Dalstroy" (mentioned earlier), was by then in full operation. Its first director, Edward P. Berzin, was fully aware that well-fed and well-provided-for laborer secures best production. Guided by this idea he created reasonable living conditions for the prisoners. Basic food like bread and fish was in sufficient supply; accommodation, although primitive, provided fair protection against cold and other adverse weather conditions; and many prisoners were issued such warm clothing as sheepskin coats, fur hats and felt boots. This period, in the prisoners' terms, was later called the "golden era of Kolyma." It ended with Berzin's disappearance in one of the labor camps built for the prisoners under his supervision.

His successor, Pavlov, a typical "aparatchik" (functionary) of Stalin's repressive regime, faithfully followed the policies of the secret police (NKVD) for the destruction of undesirable political elements in the country. He was the originator of the terror within Stalin's terror, which lasted in Kolyma from 1937 to 1942 and in its lesser edition to 1952.



Berzin, on right with three other doomed officials in Magadan 1936.

At the time of his directorship another Gulag organization came into being. Its purpose was to administer and control the penal system of the northeastern region, as a semi-independent institution within the general administration. In other words this was a subsidiary political structure to the original "Dalstroy." Its name was USWITL, which in translation meant "Administration of North East Corrective Labor Force."

The directors of USWITL were changed frequently. Each new director tried to exceed his predecessor in the production of gold and did this by introduction harsher measures against the prisoners. The first and the most sadistic director were an official by the name Garagin. The era of his harsh reign came to be known in Kolyma's penal tradition as "Garaninshchina" meaning "the time of sadistic terror of Garanin."

His successors were hardly an improvement on the system introduced by him. None of them ever tried to bring in innovations that would improve the living conditions of the prisoners. Such names as Wishniowiecki, Gakajev and Drabkin established themselves in the history of Kolyma as brutal administrators, always demanding and never compromising. The reign of the last one was contemporary to the presence of Polish prisoners in his labor camps from 1940 to 1942.

This period of Kolyma's history was exposed to the world by the Poles who left the shores of the gold land, thanks to an unusual political arrangement that took place between the Soviet Union and the Polish Government in London. In 1941, after the invasion of the Soviet Union by Nazi Germany, Poland and Soviets found themselves on the same side of the fighting factions - and so rather unwillingly became allies. A Treaty was signed in London that secured the release of all Poles from prisons and labor camps. Its terms, which called for the immediate release of Polish prisoners, were not always carried out by promptly the Soviet penal administrators. However, eventually, a large proportion of those remaining alive joined the Polish Army and left the Soviet Union for the Middle East.

At the time, the British and Americans took no depositions from those who left Soviet Union camps. The Polish reports were ignored by the West and often dismissed as false propaganda against the Soviet Union, spread intentionally by the anticommunist Poles. About ten years later the British Intelligence Service questioned some Poles in England about their experiences in the Soviet Union - for reasons known only to itself.

Returning to the organization USWITL, for the sake of efficiency, it was divided into smaller administrative units according to regions. In Kolyma there was four such regions called "uczastok," each being the seat of the regional director. These in turn were divided into smaller units like "prorabstwo". Each of them supervised several mines and labor camps of various nature and purpose.

The basic unit in the system was the single labor camp. Its productivity determined the success or failure of the entire mining enterprise in Kolyma. It also proved or disproved the efficiency of the controlling apparatus. Such a camp - its construction, its functioning and the role of its prisoners - as the labor unit on which the system existence depended, deserves a more detailed description.



Basically a camp, built in an isolated place in the taiga where gold placers were discovered, was neither a costly nor a complicated proposition. From its very inception it was self-sustaining organization, relying in every respect on the labor provided by the prisoner. He provided the labor for its construction; the basic material, the lumber, was also the product of his lumbering effort. The process of setting the camp was simple and was carried out with utmost speed once the slave labor was there.



It started with a certain number of prisoners being dropped off in the frozen wilderness of the taiga at the beginning of the short lasting summer season. The first task of the men was to erect barbed wire fences, to build log barracks as accommodation for the prisoners and utility services, as well as the outside barrack for the guard and their commander. Another group of prisoners was immediately engaged in building primitive gold-mining equipment, opening the ground and beginning the mining of the gold containing layer of soil. This meant that the production of gold started almost immediately after the arrival of men. The needs of the prisoners were usually the last concern of the camp's overseers. The operation had to start quickly because, as the sign above the gate stated "The country needs metal". And in the word "metal" was intentionally disguised the meaning of gold. The short story of the gold mine "Pioneer", or "Pryisk Pioneer" as called in Russian, located 400-500 kilometers north of Magadan in the valley surrounded by snow clad mountains runs like this:

In the summer of 1941, the first group of Polish prisoners arrived at that camp. There they found that of the original men who started the camp two years earlier, only a few remained alive. These were mainly the camp functionaries who for providing essential service to the camp were given better food rations, better clothing and better accommodations. At the time two barracks for the working men still had provisional roofs of tree bark, the kitchen barrack was half finished and the medical room was set in a shack by the gate. The barbed wire fences and the watchtower were solidly in place, and the barrack for the guards on the high grounds was furnished with all conveniences allowed by the circumstances.



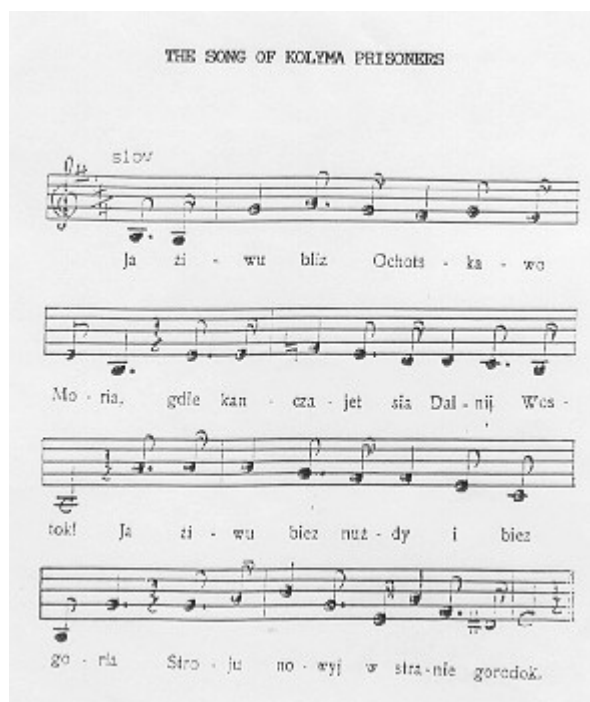
## CHAPTER 6

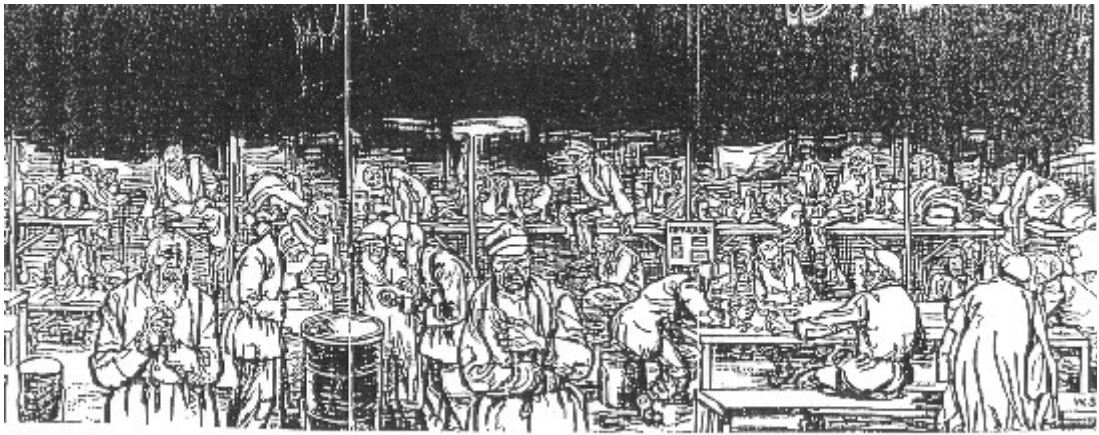
Far back in time, somebody of poetic talent had expressed the tragedy of the prisoners through lyrics composed to a soft, sad and melancholic tune. Inmates throughout the entire region of Kolyma sang these lyrics with many variations. Anatol Krakowiecki, the Polish author mentioned earlier, memorized the first verse, together with the musical notes and recorded them in his book. The verse in translation sounds as follows:

"I live on the coast of the Okhotsk Sea,  
where the Far East ends;  
I live in hardship and misery  
building a new settlement here."

"Hardship and misery", cold, sickness and hunger were never absent from Kolyma's slave laborers. And the settlement spoken about was nothing else but the camp itself with all its gold mining arrangements. Other verses of the song describe the misery in which the prisoners lived, and the last of them related to the cold, snowy peaks of the mountains where the souls of the dead were to find their eternal rest.

The rewards for labor and miserable existence were given in the form of food rations, varying according to the productivity of the individual man. In the summer, when production was at full swing, the highest ration amounted to 600 grams of bread, a bowl of thin soup three times a day and a quarter of salted herring. For the less productive men the bread was scaled down to 400 and 200 grams a day. In the winter all rations were reduced to the lowest and the soup servings to two a day. Basic winter work was to keep main thoroughfares free of snow and to remove the upper crust of soil down to gold bearing level.





Inside the labor camp barracks. As described by Dr. Julius Margolis, Polish-born Jewish Scholar and a former inmate of Soviet prisons and labor camps.

The general supervision of the camp was in the hands of the guard detachment and its commander. The prisoners-functionaries, picked from the common criminals handled the internal affairs. Political prisoners were excluded from the privileged functions. The subordination of the prisoners to the criminal elements had some valid justification in the eyes of the penal authorities. The criminals were the extended hands of the prison terror. These chosen men were assigned such positions as internal camp supervisor, cook, men issuing bread and barrack orderlies - they were most feared by the prisoners for the club which they carried and used to punish the lesser of their own class.

It was the responsibility of these camp functionaries to get men out of their barracks in the morning, and to use any means to secure the highest rate of productivity from the prisoners. The use of clubs, and beating with spades and pickhandles, was a common sight. Among other drastic measures applied to prisoners was cutting ration short or finding additional work for them after the regular 12 hour work. On some occasions such punishment ended in death, for which the functionaries were never held responsible.

All labor camps were part of the same penal system, but they varied as to their purpose. Gold-mining and mining in general was the basic reason for their existence; road building and road maintenance in the marshy taiga were secondary in importance; and the so called OLP camps or Special Labor Camps were set for some specific task and generally remained under the supervision of men outside the system.

The mining camps were feared for such hardships as cold, hunger, hard work and high mortality rate. The OLPs could be anything from a place of reasonable existence to



that of the utmost degree of intolerance, such as hard labor camps. One of the last type of the camps was became an experience of some 500 Poles in Magadan, as a punishment for refusing to go to work. Of these Poles 75%

**perished within two and half months. Roadwork in general involved hard work as well but the treatment of the prisoners was more tolerant.**

**Krakowiecki in which he described a group of men sent from the mine to the easier job at roadwork gave a good picture of the gold mine laborers. This is how he describes the group of these men:**



**"...From there, from the gold mine, came a procession of human phantoms. These people were driven hard to work, like animals, through the entire (summer) season. The animals would have revolted or died. The man endures more than they do. The men exploited through the season changed into skeletons. One cannot understand how these people are still alive? Only skin and bones, without exaggeration. These past people, physically completely destroyed, are not needed in the gold mine anymore, because their productivity is nil; therefore the half dead men are directed to the task of maintaining the roads."**

# CHAPTER 7

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The research of British historian Robert Conquest, author of the book "Kolyma," produced some gruesome information on the subject of mortality rate. According to him the death rate among the prisoners reached 30% in the first year and almost total in the second. The factors which contributed to



such a high loss of life among the prisoners, in the first place, were the climatic conditions in winter which resulted in death and amputations due to frostbite; this was followed by the sub-marginal rations of food which destroyed men physically and mentally; and finally sickness of epidemic proportion like scurvy and dysentery which also took their toll. The above sicknesses did not

qualify for hospitalization and treatment.

The exact figures from Kolyma have not yet been released or identified, but Pohl (1997) has published figures from the Soviet archives on the "official" death count from all of the labor camps. The annual number of deaths in these camps, particularly around the wars years, may have been grossly understated, but is nevertheless appalling.



In total, between 1937 and 1953, as estimated by Robert Conquest, Kolyma consumed almost 3 million lives, mainly natives of the Soviet Union. Numerically the Polish losses were a mere fraction of the total, but less than

5% of them survived. Of the 12,000 Poles sent to that region between 1940 and 1941 only 583 men returned alive. The following reports of those who survived give us some insight into the conditions experienced by prisoners within the penal system of Kolyma at that time. These are various excerpts from books and stories written on the subject:

"...it was uncommon for a work force of 2000 to 3000 to be able to send only 100 to the gold face...

...that of 3000 katorga prisoners sent to Maxim Gorky mine in 1944 only 500 were healthy enough to be transferred to Laso the following season...

...No Polish prisoners at all returned of 3000 sent to Chukhots camps...

...In Maldyak out of total 20 Poles in my group 16 died...

...at Komsomolets, there were only 46 survivors out of 436 men...

...at 10th OLP in Magadan out of total 500 Poles only 130 survived...



Prisoner's graves marked with scrap boards  
-- crosses and stars were not permitted.

This dual-purpose system was designed to eliminate all politically undesirable elements and to provide precious gold for the Soviet Treasury. It also made Kolyma into the burial grounds for many high-ranking communists whom for one reason or another fell out of favor. Many of them experienced, before their deaths, the hardships of laboring in gold mines before cold, hunger, sickness and misery consumed their lives.

The hero of the widely publicized Kirov trial, Iwan Zaporozec, became a prisoner in Kolyma before he was finally executed in 1937. The first director of the "frozen land," Rheingold Berzin, met his end in one of the arctic camps which he once built and supervised. This was his punishment for some false accusation that he conspired with Japan to hand over Kolyma to this eastern neighbor of the Soviets. Next, the man who instituted his own kind of terror in the camps under his rule, Garagin, disappeared somewhere in the North in one of the gold mines. His successor Wishniowiecki, met with the same fate - ironically brought to the trial for the death of prisoners whom he took on expedition to find new gold fields. The fate of other administrators such as Gakajev, Drabkin and Nikishov may never be known.

In this enormous state enterprise, involving millions of people, in unheard-of hardship, misery and death, there was another side which should be taken into account. This balancing item was the precious gold itself and its output. Again, relying on Robert Conquest's calculations, its production started with a few tons in the first year and reached 400 to 500 tons the year at the peak of human sacrifice.

Measuring the total estimated tonnage against the loss of life the account would place no more than one kilo of gold for each human life lost in the process of production. In present terms of gold value it would amount from \$16,000 to \$17,000 per lost life. In practice this was the unit which in its final assessment governed the cost of the precious metal.

The outbreak of war with Nazi Germany in 1941, and initial heavy losses on the front, forced the Soviet leaders to revise their policy towards the slave labor force. Seeing that the sources of labor were limited in their potential, they brought in some drastic changes for the benefit of the imprisoned men. Now that manpower became scarce due to the war, it became more appreciated. The harsh treatment of 1937-1942 was abandoned as a policy, which allowed for a gradual improvement of living conditions in the labor camps. With this, the mortality rate substantially decreased. For several years thereafter the Soviet Union still remained a slave empire, but this time one which was more tolerant of its prisoners. With this the idiom "dokhodiaga" or "gonner" came to an end in the penal lingo.

When, with victory over Germany in 1945, losses on the front came to an end a new slave labor situation had developed. This situation opened new sources of labor from the newly subdued people. The newcomers to the system were German and Japanese POWs, Ukrainian nationalists, Rumanians and, ironically, members of the Polish Underground Army, who had helped the Soviet war effort. All these men filled in the empty spaces of their deceased predecessors. However, they found the living conditions more tolerable than those who had been in Kolyma before them did. Many of them served their ten years sentence, and with further changes of political climate inside the Soviet Union, were allowed to return to their home countries.



## CHAPTER 8

With the dissolution of "Dalstroy" in 1957, the Soviets adopted a new labor policy altogether with regard Kolyma. While the prison population was still a part of the labor force, it mainly consisted of common criminals. The political side of it ceased to exist. To fill in the labor needs new manpower was recruited from all Soviet nationalities on a voluntary basis. Young men and women were lured to the frontier land of Kolyma with the promise of high earnings and better living. The introduction of modern technology made the cold country livable and one of the most prosperous regions in present-day Russia. Many of the new pioneers settled there, started families and made their homes in the place where slave labor was once the only productive force.



With the change of the lifestyle, the past of this northeastern Siberian territory is gradually disappearing in oblivion. The history of the land during communist area never really made the news in the world. To many Russians, Poles, Lithuanians and Latvians the word "Kolyma" may be synonymous with the horrors of Auchwitz, Buchenwald, Dachau, Tremblinka and others, yet it remains almost unknown in the West. Today, almost half a century after World War II, seldom does someone recognize the name and connect it with the



gruesome past of this frozen land. Its infamy stays hidden from the outside world, because the system of Soviet secrecy would not let knowledge of it beyond the borders of the country. Its victims who lie buried in the permafrost cannot talk, and the countries of the West would rather accept Stalin's lies than the truth that occasionally slips out via few surviving men.

One dose of Stalin's "truth" was presented to the American Vice-President, Henry Wallace, when in 1944 he visited Kolyma. After the visit he left the country with the absolute conviction that "no such camps existed," in total agreement with the British philosopher, Bertrand Russell. Whatever was shown to the man who held one of the highest offices in the USA he accepted it as the truth and presented it in his book "Soviet Asia Mission."



From this book the American reader learned that the gold miners of Kolyma are "big husky young men who came out to the Far East from European Russia," and who were "pioneers of machine age, builders of cities." He was greatly impressed with Kolyma's director Nikishov and his wife Gridassova, with Magadan's cultural life and with the shops full of Russian goods.

The truth was that during his three-day stay the chiefs of Kolyma did their best to conceal the factual reality. The wooden watchtowers were pulled down, the prisoners were not allowed to leave their barracks and not even the least aspect of prison life was exposed to the American visitor. He was taken to the only farm in the region, 23 kilometers from Magadan, where well dressed and well fed girls, (police women disguised as swineherds), gave a false impression of the agricultural endeavor in that part of the country. He

was also flown to the North, to the mine Berelakh, where he found the state mining to be an impressive enterprise.



VP Henry Wallace and NKVD friends in Kolyma, 1944.

The miners, according to him, were healthy and well-clad men, and more productive than their counterparts in Alaska's Fairbanks. Being served with delicious fresh fish from Kolyma River he

offered his compliments to the "presiding chef of the mining camp." The deception was total and successful. The outside world got the firsthand knowledge about Kolyma from the man who deserved his trust. Who would disbelieve or dispute information from the Vice-President of the United States of America, a force for truth and justice?

## CHAPTER 9

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The secrecy of Kolyma is still being continued. This land, though infamously steeped in human suffering and death, is still cloaked in mystery to the world. Western encyclopedias, documentary film, and journalism have barely flickered the light of a match within miles of this grim place. Traditional Russian secrecy, dating back to the Tsars, became a parallel of western policy towards the Soviet past, heedless of the countless unmarked graves and the bloodstains still to be found on the permafrost. The recent Russian illustrated publication "Magadan," mentioned no slave labor in the development of this Kolyma's capitol and shies away from any information that would discredit the place's genocidal past.



Stalin and Commissar Voroshilov in 1936.

Encyclopedia Britannica merely mentions the name Kolyma as an arctic river with additional insignificant comments about gold mining activities in its Upper basin (p.878.v.5). From its further pages we learn that Magadan's



economic development is wholly restricted to mining in several locations. Another note (p.479 v.6) gives only the following information about slave-built sub-arctic city: "good harbor led to its founding in 1933; later a road was built from Magadan crossing the mountains of the Kolyma gold fields. There is a teacher institute in the town." To some men of the West the only "reliable" source on Soviet and Russian matters are Soviets and Russians themselves.

This strange, unjustified and unexplained attitude of the West is best presented by Prof. Wladyslaw J.

Ciesielewicz, who concluded his paper "Russian Bloody Gold" with the following comments on the matter of secrecy of the Kolyma's infamous past:

"George Orwell predicted in his "1984" fiction that the victims of the Big Socialist Brother would be eradicated even from the memory of the people to become true non-beings. Today, in 1985

(the same goes for 1994) of the real world, this fate actually befallen to 4-6 million Kolyma victims of Russian Socialism. Due to the censorship in Russia and her colonies (former East European satellites) and in democratic West these people virtually disappeared from the dustbin of history. They are mentioned only in a few books and in some obscure, often unpublished memoirs, written in languages other than English that no one ever reads. But there is no television documentary series, motion pictures, major historical studies or discussions in textbooks on this subject, and no human rights conferences, United Nations resolutions, Congressional hearings, monuments or memorials anywhere to remind us of the Great Kolyma Holocaust."

Kolyma, still one of the main centers of mineral resources in the world, has changed its face since Stalin's era. Maybe the slave labor still exists there, but likely on a smaller scale and limited to common criminals. Yet behind it, there is a long period of human suffering and sacrifice of life, which should not be forgotten. It is the place of human genocide, like Auschwitz, and as such deserves to be documented in the history of the world on equal basis with Nazi centers of human destruction.

# EPILOGUE

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**TO: Whom it may concern**

***I am one of the millions of slave laborers who were part of Kolyma's tragic past, and who, like so many nameless others, were slated to become historical dust and pass into oblivion in the Great Soviet Plan. I am one of those who experienced Stalin's cruel terror, through painful incarceration in Kolyma's gold mine and the hard labor camp at Magadan, in the severe arctic climate of Siberia. As one of the fortunate survivors of this insane era of Stalinism, Communism, and dehumanizing slave labor, I feel obligated to write about those who suffered and perished, and to preserve the truth of these events for future generations. Those few of us who survived must ensure that posterity holds these crimes as a warning against ambitious and cruel rulers who have neither understanding nor compassion for their fellow human beings.***

**Stanislaw J. Kowalski**

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