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The role of the Gulag during the Great Patriotic War: to the story of one stereotype¹

Dmitrii V. Surzhik

PhD in History,

Institute of General History of the Russian Academy of Sciences,

119334, 32a Leninskii av., Moscow, Russian Federation;

e-mail: dimsu@inbox.ru

Abstract

The article discusses the role of the Main Directorate of prison labor camps of NKVD in the national economy during the Great Patriotic War. As a result of the crisis, emergency measures and efforts of the entire Soviet society and competent actions of the leadership of the country managed to make a giant leap. Already in March 1942, the eastern regions of the USSR gave as much production as all the enterprises of the country produced before the war. Large opportunities for the growth of production were opened to the domestic industry in connection with the introduction of the current production method at factories and plants, as well as through the use of advanced techniques and progressive technology of production organization. If in the beginning of 1942 Germany had superiority in arms, then by the end of the year the balance had taken another turn in favor of the USSR. Based on a comparison of materials of various branches of the Soviet economy the author concludes about artificiality widespread stereotype, according to which the prisoners of the Gulag made Russian history. On the whole, all Soviet citizens, working at the front and in the rear, worked for the Victory, worked not for fear but for conscience.

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Keywords

The Gulag (the Main Directorate of prison labor camps), economy, USSR, Great Patriotic War.

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Introduction

Among the myths about the Great Patriotic War, there is a whole layer associated with the role of prisoners in the Victory. The state television channels broadcast films glorifying the exploits of "penal battalions", children-"bastards", in which the main characters, convicted for one reason or another, are those who honestly performed their duty to protect their homeland treating them so severely. The same theme is continued by the whole whirlwind of literature, raised by the famous work of A.I. Solzhenitsyn "The Gulag Archipelago", as well as by the books of R. Conquest and S. Cohen. Let us try to understand this complex question.

The role of prisoners of the Gulag in the Great Patriotic War

According to V.N. Zemskov, doctor of history, one of the leading Russian scientists concerned with the problem of mass repressions in the USSR, who has recently passed away, "by the beginning of the war, the number of prisoners in the camps and colonies of the Gulag was 2,3 million. As of June 1, 1944, their number decreased to 1,2 million. For the three years of the war (until June 1, 1944) from the Gulag camps and colonies 2,9 million convicts were discharged and 1,8 million convicts again arrived" [Zemskov, 1991, 3].

These people were kept in 56 labor camps, where by the middle of 1944 the refusals to work were practically eliminated (0,25% of the number of able-bodied prisoners). The prisoners were transferred to various sectors of the Soviet economy: construction of railways – 448 thousand people, mining and metallurgical industry – 171 thousand people, industrial construction – 310 thousand people, airport and highway construction – 268 people, forest industry camps – 320 thousand people. At the same time, the camp authorities have taken extensive measures to improve the life and physical condition of prisoners. Therefore, since the beginning of the war and until August 17, 1944 Gulag offices sold more than 1,700,000 tons of food products, including more than 1 million tons of bread products, about 600 thousand tons of grain, 66 thousand tons of meat, 130 thousand tons of fish, 31 thousand tons of fat. The planted area increased in 5,5 times (up to 90 hectares), the extensive work to combat mass epidemics [Pronko, Zemskov, 1996, 140-141] and fought for the reduction of mortality were carried out. Total deaths in the Gulag: in 1941 – 100997 people, in 1942 – 248877, 1943 – 166967, 1944 – 60948, 1945 43 848 people [The Gulag during..., 1991, 23]. Thus, it is clear that the allegations made by some authors that the camp leadership sought more effective ways to kill prisoners are far from historical realities.

What did prisoners of the Gulag produce? During 1941-1944, they built and put into commission 612 operational airfields and 230 airfields with runways, a complex of aviation plants in the Kuibyshev area, 3 blast furnaces with a total capacity of 980 thousand tons of iron per year, 16 open-hearth and electric furnaces with a capacity of 445 thousand tons of steel, rolling mills with a total capacity of 445 thousand tons of rolled steel, 4 coke batteries with a capacity of 1 740 thou-

sand tons of coke, coal mines and sections with a total capacity of 6 790 thousand tons of coal, 46 electric turbines with a total capacity of 596 thousand kilowatts, 3573 km of new railways, 4700 km of highways, 1058 km of oil pipelines, 6 hydrolysis and sulphate and alcohol plants with a total capacity of 3 million decaliters of alcohol, 10 compressor stations for the oil industry, 2 chemical plants for the production of soda and bromine, a plant of nitro-glycerin powders and a number of other enterprises. Gold in terms of chemical pure – 315 tons, tin in concentrates – 14 398 tons, tungsten concentrate – 6795 tons, molybdenum concentrate – 1561 tons, electrolytic nickel – 6511 tons, chrome ore – 986 thousand tons, coal – 8924 thousand tons, oil – 407 thousand tons, wood and timber – 90 million cubic meters were extracted. The supply of the following product of the Gulag to the Red Army were significant: 22 million sets of uniforms for the Red Army, 6,4 million special seals for mines, 1,7 million gas masks, 70, 7 million of ammunition, and the Gulag enterprises came in second place in the country by the production of 82-mm and 120-mm high-explosive mines. A lot of money has been transferred in the Defence fund [ibid., 22]. The certificate of V.G. Nasedkin, the chief of Gulag of the NKVD of the USSR, addressed to L.P. Beria, commissar of internal affairs of the USSR, since November 1942 the monthly output was over one million 82 mm mortar, and ammunition total production for 1942 was 15.500.000 units, or 20 times more than in 1941. The total output of ammunition was 21.700.000 units for 1943, or 140% by 1942, including 82 mm and 120 mm mines – 12.500.000 units. The volume of commercial products produced by industrial enterprises of the Gulag for the three years of the war, in selling prices was expressed in 3.651.000.000 rubles, agricultural products – 1.188.000.000 rubles, income for the allocated labor force to other Commissariats – 2.570.000.000 rubles, and 970,000,000 rubles was recovered from convicts to correctional labor, and in total with other revenues – 10.668.000.000 rubles. Annual transfers to the state income increased and reached 1.029.000.000 rubles in 1943 against 446.000.000 rubles in 1940, i.e. increased by 2,2 times. In total, during the years of war the 2.650.000.000 rubles war transferred to the budget, including 300.000.000 rubles over the plan [see Pron'ko, Zemskov, 1996, 143, 146, 149].

These figures are very impressive! But how did the Soviet rear work during the war without taking into account the contribution of the Gulag? To answer this question, it is necessary to start with the losses of the Soviet economy as a result of the war. Since the beginning of the war, a third of industrial enterprises were in the occupied territory, smelting 42% of steel, and these enterprises, for the most part, produced high-quality sheet steel required for tanks. In 1942, as a result of the Germans' temporary occupation of the western and southern regions of the country, Russia lost 43% of coal production, 32% of iron ore production, 42% of steel production, 40% of aluminum production [Great Patriotic War..., vol. 7, 2013, 106]. We will keep silent here about loss of fertile chernozem of Ukraine and Kuban. However, You will agree, the losses are very, very heavy without this!

To overcome them it was necessary to take measures of severe austerity and strict control, the heroism of each employee in the workplace. As a result of emergency, extraordinary measures and

efforts of the entire Soviet society and competent measures of the country's leadership it was possible to make a giant leap. Already in March 1942, the Eastern regions of the USSR gave as much production as all enterprises of the country before the war. In the first half of 1942, 1200 large evacuated enterprises were put into operation [Zagorul'ko, 2010, 658]. The transfer of industry to the military track was successfully completed. Already in 1943, the output of industrial products increased in comparison with 1942 in a number of positions and main types. Thus, in the fourth quarter, compared with the third one, the country produced 966 units of aircraft, 288 units of tanks, 10,4 thousand units of machine guns, 52.6 thousand units of submachine guns, 2909 thousand units shells (without aircraft) and mines [Kumanev, 2007, 237]. This was greatly facilitated by the increase in the level of planning, the transition in many enterprises to monthly and even weekly schedules, specific measures to improve production management and strengthen the economy, more rational use of equipment and labor force, increasing the capacity of the heavy industry through new industrial and transport construction. The implementation of the production on the line, as well the use of advanced techniques and advanced technology of production management provide great opportunities for growth of production at plants and factories (see table 1).

Soviet miners achieved a turning point in the work of the basins, producing coal with increase of 17,6 million tons more in 1943 from 1942. Kuzbass, the main coal base of the country, gave almost three quarters of the all-union production of coking coals. Restored Podmoskovnyy basin exceeded not only the level of coal production in 1942 (almost 69 percent), but also pre-war level. In total, 4,3 million tons of coal were produced at the restored mines of Donbass [Soviet economy, 1959, 167, 169].

Table 1. Production of main types of combat equipment of different types of small arms, weapons and ammunition in the USSR in the first half of 1943²

Armament, military equipment and ammunition (in total)	In percent as compared to the first half of 1942	
Rifles and carbines (thnd)	1884, 5	96, 6
Pistols machine guns (thnd)	959, 1	179, 1
Machine guns (thnd)	236, 0	176,0
Mortars (thnd)	56,3	45, 8
Guns (thnd)	61,9	115, 5
Tanks and SPA (thnd)	111, 89	100, 1
Aircraft (thnd)	16 545	1169, 8
Shells and mines (thnd pcs.)	17 636,4	173,0
Air bombs (thnd pcs.)	2487,7	76, 5

If at the beginning of 1942 Germany had superiority in arms, by the end of the year the balance took another turn in favor of the USSR. So, the Soviet Union manufactured for 1942: tanks – by 18 257, aircraft – by 10 736, field and anti-aircraft guns – by 34 793 more than in Germany. In general, in the second half of 1942, the Soviet industry produced 1,3 times more than in the first half of the year [Soviet economy, 1959, 34, 36].

² Data are given on: [History..., vol. 6, 1976, 353].

These figures look even more impressive if you think whose hands made them. In the national economy of 1942, 18,4 million people were employed, in 1943 – 19,4 million. In industry of 1943, 7,5 million people were employed, more than 2,1 – in transport, in state farms and subsidiary agricultural enterprises – about 1,5 million, in construction – 921 thousand people [The national economy, 1959, 8-9, 34, 414]. Women accounted for 57 per cent of workers and employees in the national economy of the USSR instead of 53 per cent on 1 October 1942. Women and young people played a crucial role in almost all sectors of the Soviet economy. In 1943, in a result of the liberation of a large territory, the working-age population began to increase.

The assessment of the level and pace of development of the military economy, given in the monograph of American historian Martin Kaidin "Tigers" are burning! The defeat of a tank elite Hitler" is of interest. He writes, "When the flow of soldiers to the front subsided, the Russians with great speed increased their military power. They seemed to be recruiting soldiers from all over the world. They suffered from bleeding wounds, but continued to fight. ... German factories struggled to produce weapons for the Eastern front. And the Russians lost a huge part of their country, including entire cities, and we should also take into account the number of lost cities, and millions of civilians who came under the power of the Germans, and destroyed and captured factories. However – and it was amazing and *terrifying* – *production of Russian weapons increased (emphasis added)*. Both men and women worked day and night in Russian factories to win not by the number of people, but by the excellent quality of weapons. However, the Nazis, who are accustomed to meet with poor technique on the ground and in the air, cannot realize that the new technology of the Russians was of the same quality as theirs. If not better. It was really so. And the longer the war lasted, the greater the flow of Russian weapons coming to the front became, and the more clearly the ghost of the defeat of the reich could be seen" [Kaidin, 2011, 21-22].

Conclusion

As we can see, the contribution of Gulag prisoners to the Victory was great and it consisted primarily in the creation of fixed assets, mining of minerals, production of garments and, as noted earlier, certain types of ammunition. In general, all Soviet citizens at the front and in the rear worked to win, worked not for fear, but for conscience. Without heroism in the rear there would be no victories of the Soviet weapon at the front. This unity and Patriotic enthusiasm, self-sacrifice were the foundation of our common Victory.

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Роль ГУЛАГа в годы Великой Отечественной войны: к истории одного стереотипа³

Суржик Дмитрий Викторович

Кандидат исторических наук,

Институт всеобщей истории РАН,

119334, Российская Федерация, Москва, просп. Ленинский, 32а;

e-mail: dimsu@inbox.ru

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Аннотация

В статье рассматривается роль труда заключенных Главного управления лагерей НКВД СССР в народном хозяйстве в годы Великой Отечественной войны. На основе сопоставления материалов различных отраслей советской экономики автор делает вывод о надуманности широко распространенного стереотипа, согласно которому заключенные ГУЛАГа внесли решающий вклад в экономику Победы.

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Ключевые слова

ГУЛАГ, экономика, СССР, Великая Отечественная война.

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