



## **Forced Labor in Soviet Industry: The End of the 1930s to the Mid-1950s**

An Overview

*Andrei Sokolov*

SOVIET INDUSTRIAL LABOR policies combined coercion with material and moral, or intangible, incentives.<sup>1</sup> Although the mix changed over time, one form of labor motivation never completely dominated. The industrialization drive of the first Five-Year Plan (1928–32) did generate enthusiasm among workers, but expectations remained unfulfilled, and the removal of “class enemies,” threatening Stalin’s promised “happy” and “merry” life, yielded no improvements. The Stakhanovite campaign to encourage individual feats of labor heroism in 1935 and 1936 failed to raise labor productivity. It was not until after the Great Terror of 1937 and 1938 that the balance shifted toward force and coercion in the workplace. Yet even during the most coercive periods, material and moral incentives were used and even intensified.

Concern about labor discipline is common in countries undergoing rapid industrialization, but the problem was more complicated in the Soviet Union. First, the mass flight of the rural population to the cities because of forced collectivization created

1. Concerning labor stimulation in the 1930s, see A. K. Sokolov, “Sovetskaia Politika v Oblasti Motivatsii i Stimulirovania Truda (1917–1930s),” *Ekonomicheskaia Istorica*, 2000, No. 4.

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an industrial labor force with no factory experience and with its own ideas of discipline. The priority of heavy industry required heavy manual labor by both skilled and unskilled labor, but the emphasis on heavy industry meant that there were few consumer goods to motivate labor. The high turnover rate of industrial workers (*tekuchest'*) remained a persistent sore point. As long as workers were free to change jobs in "free" local labor markets, planners could not direct and hold workers to complete planned tasks. Administrative recruitment could not direct sufficient labor according to staffing plans, and actual labor distributions diverged from planned tasks. Workers tied to factories for a period after completing their education failed to observe their obligations and sought out other employment.

#### MORE "STICKS" THAN "CARROTS"

The causes of the economic slowdown of the late 1930s, called "the economic fever," following the successful second Five-Year Plan (1933–37), remain obscure. The growth of military industry "to strengthen the military preparedness of the world's first state of workers and peasants" was one factor. Automatic deductions were taken from workers' pay for the "motorization of the red army," and the budget shifted from investment to defense. Regardless of the slowdown's actual causes, the Soviet leadership decided the slowdown was caused mainly by "worker relationships" and was determined to apply force and coercion to improve discipline in the workplace. Among Soviet leaders the opinion was widely held that "the 'ruling class' [workers] had become impudent" and that it was "time to tighten the screws." The decision to apply force in the workplace was accompanied by the vast growth of penal labor as the Gulag filled with the victims of the Great Purges. The construction of large projects and the opening of new regions with prison

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labor reinforced the notion that economic problems could be decided by force.

Laws passed in the late 1930s and early 1940s provided the legal basis for draconian measures against industrial workers. On December 20, 1938, the Council of People's Commissars (the highest state body) approved the decree "On the obligatory introduction of work books in all enterprises and institutions," a law designed to attack labor turnover and to reduce the free movement of labor among enterprises. Labor contracts were increased to five-year terms; all job changes, salary and reward histories, punishments, rebukes, and reasons for firings were registered in the labor book, which the cadres department used to evaluate workers' performance. In January of 1939, the Council of People's Commissars decreed that tardiness of 20 minutes or more constituted an unauthorized absence from work. On June 26, 1940, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet approved the decree "On the transition to an eight hour work day, a seven day work week, and the prohibition of voluntary departures of workers from enterprises and institutions." The June 1940 law tied the worker to the enterprise and introduced criminal punishments for laziness, poor discipline, and tardiness. In August of 1940, criminal punishments were introduced for minor workplace infractions, such as drunkenness, hooliganism, and petty theft. The October 1940 reforms of vocational education raised the term of obligatory work after graduation to four years and prohibited voluntary departures. In some schools, criminal punishments were given for discipline violations and for unauthorized leaves.

Although later conveniently interpreted as necessary preparations for war, these harsh labor measures were passed more than one year before the surprise Nazi invasion of June 22, 1941. Soviet propaganda depicted the increased force in the workplace as an initiative from the workers themselves. On the eve of the passage of the 1940 labor decrees, the plenum of trade unions gave official

support for battles against laziness, drunkards, and thieves. Meetings organized in factories and enterprises supposedly enthusiastically supported the new labor laws. Western authors and some contemporary Russian historians, in contrast, regard the move to force and coercion as a natural consequence of the logic of a totalitarian state but ignore the fact that economic methods of labor motivation remained in use. In reality, the Soviet leadership was engaged in the difficult balancing act of attempting to raise labor productivity by combining different methods of labor motivation, swinging between force and economic motivation.

At the same time as force and coercion were increasing, economic incentives were being raised. In the three years leading up to war, worker pay rose substantially. In 1937 a minimum wage of 110 to 115 rubles a month was established. In 1940 alone, the wage fund rose more than 50 percent; the wages of manual ferrous metallurgical workers rose 11 percent; and the wages of engineering-technical workers, 28 percent. The average monthly pay of workers was 331 rubles a month, with engineering-technical workers earning 696 rubles.<sup>2</sup> As a further indicator of the importance of economic incentives, pay scales were further differentiated to reward skilled workers in priority industries. Skilled technical workers were paid twice as much as unskilled workers. Since workers spent 55 percent of their income on food,<sup>3</sup> the Council of People's Commissars on October 7, 1940, allowed workers to farm small garden plots, and in a short time, one million workers were farming private plots, which held one-third of the nation's cows and pigs.<sup>4</sup> In 1937, a commission for the safety of workers was created that introduced factory inspectors; large factories opened their own clinics. By 1938,

2. A. V. Mitrofanova, *Rabochii Klass SSSR Nakanune i v Gody Velikoy Otechestvenno Voyny, 1938–1945 gg* (Moscow: Nauka, 1984), 128.

3. *Ibid.*, 129.

4. *Ibid.*, 132.

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1,838 sanatoriums and 1,270 “houses of rest” were in use. On the eve of the war, enterprises supported twelve thousand camps for young pioneers.<sup>5</sup> Only party personnel, highly trained specialists, leading scientific workers, and “leading workers” were assigned individual apartments. Most workers lived in crowded communal apartments and dormitories. In 1940, the average worker in a large Moscow automotive plant was assigned 4.5 square meters of living space.<sup>6</sup> The opportunity for a leading worker to receive an apartment was therefore a formidable incentive. On December 27, 1939, the “Hero of Socialist Labor” award was established, which provided opportunities to enter the party or receive promotions. Such rewards could be individual or collective. For example, the factory “Hammer and Sickle” received the Lenin Medal for its service to the building of socialism in 1939.

Measures passed on the eve of World War II used both “carrots” (wage differentials, the promise of better housing, medals that opened up new career paths) and “sticks” (criminal punishments for minor labor infractions). These measures do not appear to be part of the logical plan of a calculating totalitarian state but its ad hoc responses to problems that were often caused by the state’s own actions. New laws were carried out in the form of “campaigns,” creating permanent and extraordinary agencies, commissions, and committees, which acquired their own logic and carried measures to absurd extremes. This “campaignism” can be seen in the directives passed to strengthen discipline and order (see Table 2.1).<sup>7</sup>

The sentencing of workers for unauthorized absences and idleness reached its peak well before the German attack. In 1940 alone, of the 3.3 million cases before the People’s Courts, 2.1 million were

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 133.

7. Compiled from the database published in V. N. Zemskov, “Ukaz ot 26 Iunia 1940 g . . . (Esche Odnia Kruglaia Data),” *Raduga*, 1990, No. 6, p. 46.

**Table 2.1 Number Convicted by Court Institutions and Military Tribunals for Lateness, Absenteeism, and Unauthorized Leaving a Workplace, 1940–52**

| <i>Years</i> | <i>Convicted by courts for absenteeism and lateness of more than 20 min. (according to the law of 26 July 1940)</i> | <i>Convicted by courts for unauthorized leaving a workplace (according to the law of 26 July 1940)</i> | <i>Convicted by military tribunals and courts for unauthorized leaving a workplace (according to martial law of December 1941)</i> |
|--------------|---|--|--|
| 1940         | 1,769,790   | 311,648  | —  |
| 1941         | 1,458,115   | 310,967  | —  |
| 1942         | 1,274,644   | 297,125  | 121,090  |
| 1943         | 961,545   | 160,060  | 382,537  |
| 1944         | 893,242   | 167,562  | 321,008  |
| 1945         | 941,733   | 117,334  | 92,733   |
| 1946         | 861,340   | 143,600  | 74,746   |
| 1947         | 684,441   | 215,679  | 31,400   |
| 1948         | 564,590   | 249,940  | —  |
| 1949         | 517,459   | 267,869  | —  |
| 1950         | 513,891   | 208,962  | —  |
| 1951         | 315,275   | 133,823  | —  |
| 1952         | 147,885   | 179,695  | —  |
| Total        | 10,904,020  | 2,774,234  | 1,117,421  |

Source: V. N. Zemskov, Ukaz. soch., p. 47.

accused of idleness and unauthorized departures; almost 1.8 million workers were sentenced to six months of corrective labor without reduction in normal work hours and were reduced to one-quarter pay, and 322,000 were imprisoned for from two to four months. In 1941, 3.2 million workers were subject to sanctions, and 633,000 served prison sentences. Both serious and petty offenders were susceptible to the arbitrary decisions of their superiors, who were authorized to punish virtually any action, such as the search for a better paying job or an apartment. Such harsh measures reduced labor turnover as intended. Immediately before the passage of the June 1940 law, labor turnover in ferrous metallurgy was 6.6 percent

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a month (4.2 percent were fired for idleness), but by the end of 1940, turnover fell to 1.9 percent a month.<sup>8</sup>

The Soviet system had its ways of moderating extreme laws. The implementation of draconian decrees depended on relationships in the work collective and on personal contacts. Enterprises found ways to sabotage laws that worked against their interests. Managers concealed absences and other violations if they felt it was in their interest.

## THE WAR YEARS

The extraordinary measures and decrees put into effect in the period 1938–40 were suited to wartime. Combatant countries turned to more coercive labor measures (tying labor to factories, requiring longer hours, and so on) and appealed to patriotism. In the Soviet Union, coercive measures were particularly severe, and appeals to duty and patriotism were particularly vocal. Soviet authors emphasized patriotism as the rationale for immense sacrifices under the slogan “everything for the front, everything for victory” and saw the wartime emergency as fully justifying coercive methods. There is no dispute about the many acts of labor heroism during the war years, for example, the huge over-fulfillment of norms achieved “without sleep or rest” under the most difficult circumstances.<sup>9</sup> These wartime achievements may in fact have revealed the hidden reserves of the Soviet economy. Regardless of such individual acts of heroism, the war years saw a lowering of labor productivity on

8. Ibid.

9. It is necessary to mention among Western works that of John J. Barber and M. Harrison, *The Soviet Home Front, 1941–1945: A Social and Economic History of the USSR in World War II* (London: Longman, 1991). This book, based on Soviet sources, is free of ideological bias and covers many problems of work motivation during the war years.

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a large scale as mobilized, qualified male workers were replaced by female and youth workers, and factories were evacuated to the east.

Stalin was not content to rely on patriotism but counted more on coercion and force, although the combination depended on the situation in the country and on the front. On November 30, 1941, the Committee for the Distribution of Labor was formed within the Council of People's Commissars to mobilize and redistribute labor resources. The February 1942 law of mobilization of men from age sixteen to fifty-five years and women from age sixteen to forty-five years brought some 12 million women and youth workers into factories and enterprises. The share of women in ferrous metals, a traditional male occupation, rose to 39 percent in 1945.<sup>10</sup> Some 2.1 million persons were subject to mobilization calls in schools of labor reserves. In 1941, about 826,000 were called; in 1943, about 771,000; in 1944, about 50,000; and in 1945, about 25,000.<sup>11</sup>

Rationing, which was reinstated at the start of the war, became more differentiated as the war progressed. A large number of norms for bread, meat, clothing, and shoes were established, with soldiers at the front receiving the highest norms. The norms of home-front workers depended on their priority. The lengthening of the workday and workweek meant that workers spent most of their time in the factory, where they were fed, provided with goods, and even slept. The 1945 volume of centralized consumer goods was thirteen times the prewar level.<sup>12</sup> The production of necessities fell and what was left over was reserved mainly for use at the front. Clothing, footwear, matches, kerosene, soap, and so forth, disappeared from state stores, and free market prices rose through the roof. Widespread corruption within the rationing system required the Defense Council to approve a decree on January 23, 1943, against the misuse of

10. *Rabochi Klass Nakanune i v Gody Veliko Otechestvennoy Voyny*, p. 353.

11. *Ibid.*, 354.

12. *Ibid.*, 407.



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supplies in the official supply system, and special controllers were put in place whose activities were regulated by trade unions.

Most made do with what they had before the war. Rationing provided only minimal subsistence, but in besieged Leningrad supplies were considerably lower, and workers in Leningrad and elsewhere had to cover their minimal needs on the “free market.” Accordingly, money wages maintained their value. In 1944, the average wage was 573 rubles a month, and in ferrous metals it rose as high as 697 rubles. In 1940 the premium share of compensation for engineering technical workers rose from 5 percent to 8 percent for workers and from 11 percent to 28 percent for engineering technical workers.<sup>13</sup>

On December 26, 1941, enterprises producing for the military were placed on a militarized regime. Unauthorized departures were judged not by People’s Courts but by military judges. Absences from work and malicious idleness were considered as “deserting from the labor front” and could mean sentences in the Gulag of from five to eight years. Negligence leading to major accidents could be punished by execution. Punishment statistics (see Table 2.1) reveal that 121,090 workers were punished under the December 1941 law in 1942, 383,000 in 1943, and 93,000 in 1944. After the application of a military regime in transport in the spring of 1943, 50,000 transport workers were punished in the period 1943–44.<sup>14</sup> As the war moved toward its conclusion in late 1944, the number punished under these laws fell, and a decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of 30 December 1944 declared an amnesty for those who had left military factories if they voluntarily returned to their work. According to correspondence from Molotov to Stalin, some two hundred thousand “labor deserters” had been sentenced in absentia

13. *Ibid.*, 405–406.

14. V. N. Zemskov, *Ukaz. soch.*, p. 45.

and were on the loose.<sup>15</sup> Many of these deserters were young graduates of vocational schools, who justified their absence by the need to care for elderly parents or the family plot. To prove their case, they submitted letters from relatives, neighbors, and hospital officials. Many of these deserters were indeed working, only not at the place of employment designated by the state. Therefore, these punishment statistics do not reflect labor discipline in production but the priorities of state policy in allocating labor.

The principal legal basis for punishing violators of labor discipline remained the law of June 26, 1940, which besides imposing work sanctions and possible imprisonment reduced pay and food rations by 25 percent. In 1942, some 1.3 million workers were subject to these sanctions, and 297,000 were imprisoned from two to four months (see Table 2.1). In 1943 and 1944, some one million workers were punished each year, including some 160,000 who were imprisoned. In May of 1945, Germany was defeated, but sanctions continued to be imposed. Even after Germany's defeat, 942,000 workers were punished, including 117,000 who were imprisoned. Military laws also remained in force, and about 93,000 people were convicted according to the law of December 26, 1941 (see Table 2.1).

#### THE IMMEDIATE POSTWAR YEARS: REALITY VERSUS EXPECTATION

The aftermath of World War II was more difficult for the Soviet Union than for other countries. Its formerly occupied territories had been destroyed and turned into wastelands. The consequences of war were seen in the run-down capital stock as well as the deteriorating buildings. Reconstructing the economy and placing it on a civilian footing demanded substantial investments in the absence of

15. Ibid., 46.

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economic reserves. More than 20 million people had been lost in the war, not counting the millions of war invalids and physically handicapped. The government had to establish orphanages and create pensions for the tens of millions of invalids and widows. The prewar social order had been torn apart by the loss of life, the millions of children without parents, and the deterioration in living standards. Social ties collapsed, and criminality and banditry were rampant. The population continued its wartime mentality, although the enemy had been vanquished, and the rhetoric of the cold war created the image of a new enemy, American imperialism. The armed forces continued to occupy a special position of authority. Society remained to a great extent mobilized, and the idea of a new peacetime society only slowly entered the consciousness of people. Many problems continued to be resolved by coercion and force, requiring an “iron hand” to restore order.

On the labor front, the Soviet Union emerged from the war with a wide gap between reality and expectations. Workers and their families felt that they deserved to live not only better than in the wartime years but also better than before the war. Such a feeling was particularly widespread among the 8 million soldiers and officers who were being demobilized to return to “peaceful and productive labor.” Many were intent on careers other than hard labor in factories and collective farms, under the motto: “The people should decide which direction is better to take.” For returning soldiers, the impression they had received of the higher living standards in Germany was overwhelming. Those who wanted to attend universities or to live in Moscow had to grapple with the internal passport system. Those who received official permission to live in Moscow were assigned to dormitories; others found places “in corridors” occupied by thieves, bandits, and the poor. In such an explosive situation, it was a blessing that few weapons remained in private hands.

The politics of labor in the postwar years was influenced by the

public's dissatisfaction with living standards and working conditions, as shown by letters to political authorities and by questions asked during meetings and lectures.<sup>16</sup> A female worker in a Moscow plant wrote: "We worked hard throughout the war; we awaited the victory and counted on better conditions. The opposite occurred. They lowered our salaries and we receive pennies. It is time to think about the workers." Many letters sounded the leitmotiv: "Less chatter about the needs of workers, more about our real concerns." Collective farms were described as "souring organizations," from which all above-plan production was taken. And again: "Everybody is running away from the villages." Lecturers at factories in Moscow were asked: "How can you explain that German prisoners of war are receiving twice as much bread as those of us in need?" "Why is it that unemployed people in the West live better than we do who are working?" "What good is socialism when life is getting worse?" A letter to authorities reads: "My husband is an engineer. He gets 900 rubles per month and he cannot support a family of three. What does this say about workers with even larger families?" A letter, signed by Ivan the "son of a rat" (Ivan Krysovych) to emphasize his extreme poverty, complained that his application for boots had been turned down three times, and he promised to hang himself if turned down again. A female worker in Moscow was arrested for distributing a song titled the "Urban Toast" (a play on the famous "Village Toast"), which replaced "Be healthy, live a rich life" with "Be healthy, live a rich life / As much as is allowed by our salary / But if our salary does not allow you to live / Well no one is forcing you to

16. New documents from archives regarding this topic were included in the monograph of E. Yu. Zubkov, *Poslevoennoe Sovetskoe Obschestvo. 1945–1953 gg. Politika i Povsednevnost'* (Moscow, 1999). Many documents were published about postwar life, such as "Moskva Poslevoennaia. 1945–1947 gg. Arkhivnie Dokumenty i Materialy" (Moscow: Mosgorarkhiv 2000). Although the situation in Moscow had characteristics particular to metropolitan areas, the situation was common for the whole country.

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survive.” The attention of security organizations was attracted by one worker who, although earning eighteen hundred rubles a month, refused to buy obligatory state bonds, declaring: “When I am able to live well, then I’ll sign up.” Another worker wrote: “We are not lazy. We are working with all our might but they don’t give us enough to live let alone to survive. It is not insulting when they reward scientists who are of value to society, but it is terrible when they give jazz singers the right to eat to their fill.”<sup>17</sup> Although rationing remained in effect, workers complained that they had to buy all their goods in the market: “Commercial stores are full, but rationed goods are the worst products.” “We can’t even buy potatoes; what use are coupons?” Supply officials were accused of gluttony at the expense of workers’ empty stomachs. Instances of large-scale corruption among supply officials were reported in large factories such as the Moscow Electrical Lamp Factory.<sup>18</sup> Two hundred vocational students in the Tagan region refused to eat in the school cafeteria, complaining that they could not eat one more bite of cabbage. “This is not a strike but a request to be fed.”<sup>19</sup> An inspection revealed that the menu indeed consisted only of cabbage dishes.

The monetary reform of December 14, 1947, returned the economy to a more normal postwar footing. The old currency was exchanged for a new currency at the rate of ten to one, and only limited sums could be converted, thereby liquidating savings, such as those of a worker who had saved one thousand rubles to buy a coat.<sup>20</sup> Prices of rationed goods were raised close to those in commercial stores; fewer and fewer products were rationed, and the stimulus to work returned. According to one worker: “Under

17. *Ibid.*, 111, 195, 277, 390.

18. *Ibid.*, 390.

19. *Ibid.*, 111.

20. *Ibid.*, 277.

rationing, you bored yourself eating a few pieces of white bread; now you can eat until you are full.”<sup>21</sup>

The public’s clamor for a better life extended to demands for a better life in the workplace. Although the war had ended in the spring of 1945, the harsh labor laws of the late 1930s and war years remained on the books. Appeals for their repeal were common. Among the most “poisonous” questions posed at worker meetings were: “When will we be allowed to change freely from one enterprise to another?” “When are mobilized workers from other regions free to leave?” “Will the law about criminal punishments for tardiness be repealed?” “Is a new labor law in the works?” “Will the authorities penalize those workers who wish to work out of the home?” There were demands to “get rid of the laws and decrees that either directly or indirectly enslave our labor.” Former soldiers who had been in Germany wrote: “There there is real freedom. But our workers did not fight for freedom for themselves but for oppression.” One worker expressed himself as follows: “I want to work. I want to go to another factory as a sign of protest against Soviet serfdom. Give the worker free labor.”<sup>22</sup>

Notwithstanding the public mood, Stalin’s labor policy remained contradictory. The Council of People’s Commissars decree of June 21, 1945, eliminated the lengthened workday and multiple shifts but also reduced the bonuses for plan overfulfillment that had allowed technical workers to earn two to three times their base salary. As the economy shifted to peacetime, production fell in factories not suited to civilian products, and workers complained of falling wages, lack of work, and irregular payments.”<sup>23</sup> Mobilization as a source of labor began to erode. In May of 1946, about 203,000 mobilized, repatriated, and evacuated workers worked in

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 111–112.

23. Ibid., 380.

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ferrous metallurgy, constituting 25 percent of its labor force; 10 percent of those were mobilized from vocational schools, and 6 percent were Gulag inmates. By the end of 1947, the share of mobilized workers in ferrous metallurgy fell to 14 percent, while the share of “nonmobilized” labor rose from 59 to 72 percent.<sup>24</sup> In 1946, some 1.5 million workers were supplied to enterprises and construction sites by organized recruitment, which was especially prominent among demobilized soldiers. But by May of 1947, organized recruitment was transferred to the ministry of labor reserves, and only four hundred thousand workers were recruited by this means. In March of 1955, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet eliminated mobilization and organized recruitment as a way of organizing the labor force, but the organized placement of graduates continued. In the period 1946–50, 3.4 million young people acquired specialized training in specialized schools and were placed in enterprises for obligatory terms. Disappointed by their work, they found ways to extricate themselves from their obligations. The premature turnover of graduates was severe enough to warrant the Decree of August 2, 1948, which put in place measures to battle the turnover of graduates of vocational schools.

The strict labor laws of the war years were retained in the first years of the postwar period. Moscow and Leningrad factories were removed from wartime regulations in March of 1947, and the regulations were then dropped from factories in other territories in July of 1948, but the draconian law of June 1940 remained in effect (see Table 2.1). Turnover remained the scourge of Soviet employers, despite the fact that the antiturnover decrees remained intact. Turnover peaked in 1947, when it reached 64 percent of workers per year in construction, 54 percent in coal mining, 40 percent in the oil industry, 36 percent in metallurgy, and 34 percent in light industry. Difficult work and living conditions promoted labor turnover,

24. *Promyshlennost' i Rabochiy Klass SSSR*, p. 220.

which accelerated during the famine of 1946–47. The postwar displacements and continued high turnover rates even called forth a temporary harshening of criminal punishments. In 1949, almost a quarter million workers were subject to criminal punishment for unauthorized absences, laziness, and idleness; however, the number of fines fell during the same period by half.<sup>25</sup>

Appeals from workers, from their superiors, and from judicial workers finally led to the decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of July 14, 1951, “About the replacement of judicial responsibility of workers and employees for idleness, except in the case of multiple and extended absences with disciplinary and social actions,” which reduced the number punished under the June 26, 1940, law to 180,000 (as compared to hundreds of thousands earlier).<sup>26</sup> In April of 1956 the law was dropped entirely. With the passage of the April 1956 law, the post-Stalin leadership turned decisively from “sticks” to “carrots” in the workforce as the harsh work laws of the period 1938 to 1940 faded into memory.

The rampant criminality of the early postwar years turned the attention of authorities from work discipline to theft of personal and state property. A campaign against the burgeoning postwar criminality and theft was initiated by two laws of June 4, 1947, that strengthened the protection of personal and social property. Convictions carried terms of five to six years for the theft of personal property, ten to fifteen years for banditry, seven to ten years for theft of state property, and ten to twelve years for group thefts. Punishments for nonreporting of crimes were set at two to three years. In the course of the campaign against theft, hundreds of thousands of people were sentenced, and for crimes committed earlier, sentences were raised. Chapters 1 and 4 reveal that almost

25. V. N. Zemskov, *Ukaz. soch.*, p. 45.

26. *Ibid.*



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a million inmates of the Gulag were sentenced under anticrime laws in the early 1950s.

## THE GULAG

This chapter has focused mainly on the “civilian” labor force of the Soviet Union, which constituted around 95 million people in 1950. It has said little about inmates of the Soviet Gulag, working in camps and colonies under harsh climatic conditions in remote areas, typically for no pay. Although other chapters deal extensively with the Gulag, we focus here on only a few points. Gulag labor, like “civilian labor,” underwent changes in the war years. At the war’s beginning, a number of large Gulag projects were wrapped up, and other projects were cut back. Many inmates were freed and dispatched to the front; others were sent into penal battalions. Many inmates also went voluntarily to the front, spurred by patriotic enthusiasm. Accordingly, the number of inmates in the Gulag system fell considerably. This reduction in numbers was supposed to be compensated for by a doubling of norms for those remaining. The workday was extended. Sickness and mortality rose because of increased work and worsening provisions. New forms of forced labor, such as labor worker columns and military construction units similar to those used during the civil war, were introduced.

Gulag administrators of penal labor, like their civilian counterparts, realized over time that coercion alone did not produce high labor productivity. To raise the effectiveness of Gulag labor required material incentive schemes and investments of scarce capital resources. The Gulag was at first expected to be a “magic wand” that would build major projects in short order, such as the White Sea–Baltic Canal in 1931 (see Chapters 8 and 9). However, it was discovered that the Gulag required equipment, skilled labor, experienced specialists, and better worker qualifications, all of which raised the cost of maintaining the Gulag. Labor productivity in the

Gulag's production administrations was only 50 to 60 percent of comparable civilian administrations. Economic methods for raising the motivation of prisoners began to be introduced. In November of 1948, the Council of Ministers decreed that Gulag workers were to receive wages, but only 30 percent of what workers in corresponding civilian branches received.<sup>27</sup> Gulag wages were composed mainly of bonuses and piece-rate payments. In the economic branches of the Gulag, tariffs and norms for the payment of labor were gradually raised throughout the postwar period, and an eight-hour day was eventually established. By 1953, paid contingents in camps constituted 62 percent.<sup>28</sup> Those not paid included invalids, those refusing to work, and a few other classes of prisoners. The average monthly pay of prisoners was 324 rubles a month, of which they received 129 rubles after charges for their maintenance.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps even more important, a system of accounts (*zachet*) was restored for more than half of Gulag inmates by which prison sentences were reduced according to the number of days of overfulfillment of norms. Measures to raise labor productivity were generally not successful, although the term reductions for good work were considered effective. In the period 1951–52, not one production administration of the Gulag fulfilled its plan for raising labor productivity.<sup>30</sup> And the 1953 plan was characterized as unsatisfactory.<sup>31</sup>

The 2.5 million prisoners of war in Soviet camps in 1946 did not provide a great boost to production. Foreigners could not survive the Soviet Gulag. They were often sick, had high rates of mor-

27. The newest publication of Gulag documents, including the third volume, shows that this decree provoked a series of normative acts that set the rate of prisoners' wages in individual camps and in the different industries of the Gulag economy.

28. *Gulag. 1918–1960* (Moscow, 2000), p. 667.

29. *Ibid.*, 669.

30. *Sistema Ispravitel'no-Trudovykh Lagerey v SSSR, 1923–1960* (Moscow, 1998), p. 49.

31. *Gulag*, p. 670.

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tality, and showed little interest in work. International pressure also required that they be maintained at a higher standard of living than Soviet inmates were. Prisoners of war constituted a headache for the camp administration; and Soviet authorities attempted to rid themselves as quickly as possible of foreign prisoners of war. By 1949 there were only ten thousand such prisoners remaining, primarily those convicted of war crimes.

The Gulag experienced its apogee in the early postwar period. The number of Gulag inmates rose to 2.5 million in 1950.<sup>32</sup> In the aftermath of war, camps filled with deserters, military criminals, collaborators with occupation forces, participants in national movements, and other real or imagined anti-Soviet elements. Half the inmate population was composed of those sentenced under the June 1940 law. The Gulag administration saw wisdom in separating political from criminal prisoners and created special camps for political prisoners. Camps were differentiated by security regimes. According to the decree about “working zones,” the strictest regime with the highest security was reserved for the most dangerous criminals, but the equipment for strict security was deficient. Other prisoners worked without guards. Prisoners working without guards rose to 11 percent of all inmates in 1947 and continued to grow after that.

On the initiative of the minister of interior, L. P. Beria, the liquidation of the Gulag occurred quickly after Stalin’s death in March of 1953. As someone who had been involved in the system for a long time, Beria was more aware of the real situation of forced labor, its ineffectiveness, its low labor productivity, and the unprofitability of colonies. Large gulag projects were first to be closed; the production administrations were abandoned; and a group of camps was closed down. On March 27, 1953, amnesty was declared

32. V. N. Zemskov, “Gulag (Istoriko-Sotsiologicheskii Aspekt),” *SOTsIS*, 1991, No. 6, p. 13. Some experts add about three hundred thousand convicts plus those in transit.

for those with sentences of up to five years. Beria called for an examination of all criminal legislation, replaced the “special meeting” of the MVD, and began an examination of “political cases.” Beria’s arrest and execution inhibited these initiatives, but after a while the liquidation of the Gulag system was resumed, accelerated by Gulag uprisings in 1953 and 1954.<sup>33</sup> In 1954 the examination of political cases began, and in 1955 those who collaborated with occupying forces were granted amnesty. Declarations of amnesty for political prisoners accelerated after the Twentieth Party Congress, in which Khrushchev delivered his secret speech against Stalin’s crimes, and the history of the camps came to an end in October of 1959. A joint decree of the Central Committee and Council of Ministers closed down the Gulag for not fulfilling its primary function, “the rehabilitation of prisoners by means of labor.” At this time, 948,000 people were incarcerated, of which only 1.2 percent had been sentenced for anti-Soviet crimes.<sup>34</sup> Most special camps were liquidated, and labor colonies were turned over to local offices of the MVD.

Thus by the mid-1950s, coercion in the Soviet workplace—ranging from harsh penalties for relatively minor infractions to the extreme coercion of the Gulag—had been largely abandoned. The rejection of force was not related to particular personalities but to the inherent ineffectiveness of force in the workplace. Even Beria, one of the most ardent advocates of coercion, had concluded that it did not work. Any other administrator working in these circumstances would have favored a liberalization of the regime, since the punishment system had worn itself out, and a new means of motivating labor had to be found in the 1960s.

33. There is a substantial body of literature on camp revolts. For official reports, see reference note 32. It should be noted that the rebels advocated labor rights equal to those of “free” workers.

34. V. N. Zemskov, *Ukaz. soch.*, p. 15.