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### FORCED LABOR IN SOVIET RUSSIA<sup>1</sup>

by **BERTRAM D. WOLFE**

The Middle Ages left Russia with a heritage of torture, knout and exile. The eighteenth century abolished torture, in the nineteenth the knout was done away with, and the first day of the twentieth will be the last day of the penal system based on exile.

WITH these words the Russian delegate to the International Congress of Prison Officials held in Brussels in 1900 gave expression to a dream which had been animating all the best public servants of Tsarist Russia during the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Russia, they knew, had been the last stronghold of slavery (aside from the United States and certain colonial lands) in the modern world. Forced penal labor for the profit of the state they rightly judged to be the reflection in prison of serfdom or slavery in the outside world. But in 1861 Alexander II had emancipated the serfs, even endowing

them with some land, and in 1863 Lincoln had freed the Negro slaves. Thus Russia was putting an end to the fixity or bondage (*krepost'*) which had been decreed by the enlightened autocrats, Peter and Catherine and their successors. That bondage had been primarily a military device to fix every man to his post, where the tax-gatherer and the recruiting sergeant could find him. Then had come the internal passport, the universal obligation of service to the state, the conscription of capital and labor for military industrialization. Peter the Great, Russia's foremost industrializer before the Bolsheviks, had begun by ordering "the gathering of a few thousand thieves from all over the provinces and cities" to aid in the building of his capital. Then he and his successors had added debtors, vagabonds and political malcontents. Thus the institution of penal forced labor on public works had arisen as the state's industrial counterpart of agricultural serfdom: to build ports, fortresses and roads, to work salt mines and metal mines, to clear forests, to populate the frozen north and the otherwise almost unin-

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<sup>1</sup>By David J. Dallin and Boris I. Nicolaevsky. \$3.75.  
*Yale.*

habitable wastes on the marches of the empire.

But two centuries had elapsed since then and Russia had defeated Charles XII, Frederick the Great and Napoleon. Secure against attack and expanded to her "natural frontiers," could she not now turn her resources inward for the welfare of her people, and begin the "loosening of the bonds?" Russia's conscience and the world's had been aroused by the anti-slavery societies and new humanitarian penal concepts. The last strongholds of serfdom and slavery were being broken up. Torture and conviction by confession and corporal punishment were abolished. It remained only to put an end to the anachronistic vestiges of penal servitude and forced labor in exile. Such was the basis of the optimism of the Russian delegate to the 1900 Congress of Prison Officials.

But after the revolution of 1905, there was a slight relapse. According to Andrei Vyshinski, whose services as prosecutor and purger were to make him perhaps the world's leading expert on forced labor, *katorga* (heavy penal labor) began to increase once more. By January 1, 1906, the number sentenced to *katorga* had climbed back to nearly 6000; by January 1, 1914 to almost 30,000. How enormous, how monstrous those figures seemed then: how modest, how idyllically exiguous they seem now!

The 1917 Revolution came, bearing with it a heritage of humane traditions and dreams of equality and free-

dom. "Educational institutions are to be substituted for prisons," begins a 1918 decree of the People's Commissariat of Justice. The words, *guilt*, *punishment*, *vengeance*, were deleted from the official vocabulary. The terms, *prison* and *exile* were "forever abolished." Society was to be held responsible for the criminal's criminality — poverty for his theft; illness, or chaotic social arrangements and lack of proper education and opportunity, for his acts of violence. He was to be treated as a victim in need of help, a sick man to be healed, a misfit to be redeemed and fitted into society by being taught a trade. Labor, under wholesome therapeutic conditions and with trade union rates of pay, was to be used to support him and to redeem him.

To safeguard the rights and "human dignity" of those unfortunates who had to be placed for a while in "places of social detention and rehabilitation," various rights were guaranteed to them: the right to smoke, to read, to write and receive letters, to interview relatives without the humiliation of bars between visitor and detainee, to be addressed civilly by his warders, to be fully compensated for useful labor. Chains, handcuffs, solitary confinement, torture, punishment by hunger, were abolished. Whatever the grim realities of a land in revolutionary travail, no one could deny the nobility of this new code:

Bourgeois penal policy aims at moral and physical maiming and physical destruction, achieved by means of organized

torture and violation of the human dignity of prisoners. . . . The exploitation of prison labor [production for the profit of the state rather than the use of the prisoner], the system of squeezing "golden sweat" out of them, the organization of production in places of confinement which, while profitable from a commercial point of view, is fundamentally lacking in corrective significance, is entirely inadmissible in Soviet places of confinement.

Even the dread *Cheka* (the secret political police that has since been transformed into the OGPU, the NKVD and the MVD) was originally conceived only as a temporary emergency device, and was therefore named Extraordinary [*i.e.*, Emergency] Commission to Combat Active Counter-revolution. It, too, would disappear, as soon as the counter-revolutionary armies were defeated or driven off Soviet soil.

## II

All through the twenties and early thirties, a series of political choices were made which, bit by bit, with tragic fatality, were to lead to the miscarriage of that noble dream. There was a gradual change from labor for the prisoner's use and redemption to labor for the state's profit and the prisoner's destruction: to the development of a system of "squeezing golden sweat out of them" on a scale hitherto undreamed of in the entire history of mankind, under any social system whatsoever.

Here are a few of those fatal political choices, and the reader can add to them others of a like nature:

The decision to retain the "Extraordinary Commission to Combat Counter-revolution" after the Counter-revolution had been beaten.

The decision to outlaw all political parties, including democratic and socialist parties, except the Communist Party.

The decision to outlaw all dissent within the Communist Party.

The decision to reduce the Soviets from parliaments of labor, to which all working class parties might send candidates, to a mouthpiece and transmission belt of the Communist Party.

The decision to determine the plowing, seeding, planting, harvesting, and disposal of the crop of the peasants, not by the inducements of industrial goods but by police methods, which required the swelling of the police apparatus into a monstrous ubiquity for coercing the overwhelming majority of the population. Inevitably, such an omnipresent police spilled over into the Soviets, the trade unions, the Communist Party, into the very Central Committee of the Party.

The decision to treat the state as coextensive and identical with the whole of society, denying all autonomy to non-state organizations, and to the individual conscience, intellect, judgment and will.

The decision to police all expressions of thought, opinion, emotion, personal life, art, science, beliefs, dreams.

The decision to "collectivize" the

peasants at a single stroke, not by persuasion and the offering of superior inducements but by police methods, and to "liquidate" as "kulaks" all who were reluctant to surrender their bit of land or cattle and all nomads who were reluctant to settle down.

The decision to industrialize the land at a tempo which would take no account of consumers' goods or strain or sacrifice, procuring the necessary "capital" by increasing the speed-up and exploitation of labor and by keeping wages at a low minimum even after the reserve army of unemployed had disappeared. The alternative to attracting workers by suitable inducements was to fix them in their jobs by force, and to decree lateness, absence from work, or voluntary change of employment a crime against the state. Thus even "free" labor became, in effect, a form of state forced labor.

The decision to treat all proposers of a different tempo or method or approach as sub-human beasts, "mad dogs," "wrecker-diversionist-spy-scum-riff-raff-fascist beasts in human form."

What wonder that this monstrous abuse of prisoners in words was accompanied by a monstrous abuse in deeds! All these decisions, and others like them, reduced man once more (to use the words Marx used in his indictment of capitalism) to "subordination to the products of his own labor, the machines." With the tying of even "free" laborers to their jobs, there came the inevitable increasing enslavement of those who had lost their

shadowy freedom. Thus, bit by bit, one of humanity's noblest dreams was converted into one of its most fearful nightmares, until the Soviet state became the greatest and most ruthless employer of slave labor that the world has ever known.

"A prison is a prison," Soviet officials now wrote:

Why such finickiness? Measures of social protection is a ridiculous term. We must overcome this sugary liberalism, this compassionate attitude toward the offender. . . . The Five-Year Plan requires tasks involving a great demand for unskilled labor. . . . It is here that the places of confinement can come to the assistance of those economic enterprises which experience a shortage of labor. . . . Incorporate the work performed by those deprived of liberty into the planned economy of the country, and into the Five-Year Plan. . . . Bring about the realization of a series of economic projects with great savings in expenditures . . . by means of the widespread use of labor of sentenced individuals. . . . The following are objects of mass labor best fitted for the realization of the purposes of corrective labor: large-scale industrial construction (factories, dams, dikes, blast-furnaces, railroads, etc.) . . . irrigation works; highway construction. . . .

### III

Only one problem remained to be solved. Historically, slave labor was one of the most inefficient forms of labor and scarcely yielded more than enough to sustain the slave. But, as Stalin has more than once observed, "nothing is impossible to Bolshevik determination." The solution lay along two lines. First there was the fact that unlike private chattel

slaves who cost their owners money, state slaves can be recruited without cost, and it does not matter how soon they are worked to death. The second line of solution was that which had been worked out in regard to "free" labor: the norm, the wage insufficient to sustain life for those who cannot or will not reach the norm, and the incentive system of extra rations or extra compensation for those model or speed-up workers who exceed the norm. In the prison camps and places of exile, the compelling argument of the club, the dog and the gun was supplemented by a system of regulated starvation and feeding according to norms, fixed neither by the feeble health nor the feeble zeal of the prisoner, but by the will and plans of the state.

The change was made only gradually and, to do the Soviet leaders justice, at first only with reluctance. The outside world, even as it was so long unwilling to believe that the Nazis could set up genocidal crematoria in the "enlightened twentieth century" and in the land of "German culture," has been reluctant to believe that slave labor could become an essential part of the economic structure of a land which "has abolished all exploitation of man by man." Still less would admirers of a "planned economy in a planless world" believe that planned recruiting of prisoners and planned forcing of their labor was an essential part of the Plan. Or an essential political foundation stone in "Soviet economic democracy."

The Soviet Union is the only great nation in the world which does not publish penal statistics. It ceased publication of these figures in 1931, the year that the Anti-Slavery Society in England made an inquiry into the conditions of the Soviet camps. The results of this investigation, which was undertaken in a careful and objective manner by Allan Pim and Edward Bateson, were published as the *Report on the Russian Timber Camps*. Unfortunately a number of timber and manganese companies and certain boards of trade attempted to take advantage of the report by advocating embargoes on Soviet imports. As a result, the numerous friends of the Soviet Union, as well as the millions who refused to open their minds to the possibility that such horrors existed, were enabled to stamp the report as the contrived invention of vested economic interests.

In 1935 Vladimir Tchernavin's moving personal record of his servitude and escape, *I Speak for the Silent*, was published. By this time American intellectuals had been so shocked by our depression that all too many of them longed to believe that somewhere in an imperfect world there was rational planning, real security and a social organization capable of producing abundance. Tchernavin's cry fell on deaf ears.

During the war, the more sensitive were occasionally shocked for moments by casual side remarks in the most ardently pro-Soviet books: remarks like Quentin Reynolds' in

*Only the Stars Are Neutral*, in which he described a ragged, hopeless battalion of 800 convict women he had witnessed marching to forced labor; like Walter Kerr's in *Russia's Red Army*, concerning the apathetic reception of lend-lease goods in Murmansk by the slave laborers functioning as longshoremen; like Wendell Willkie's declaration in the pre-publication serialization of *One World*: "Between the airfield and the town of Yakutsk we looked for the usual concentration camp, but there was none or at least we never came across it." (Significantly, this tell-tale sentence was omitted when *One World* was published in book form, for there was the will to believe that all concentration camps, torture systems, police state and totalitarian features were in the opposing camp and not in the camp of our own "United Nations.")

It remained for the citizens of another united nation, Poland, to make the fearful journey "to the dark side of the moon" and, unexpectedly, by a turn of fate, to return with reports on the fate of the submerged and the damned. When the Stalin-Hitler pact partitioned Poland in 1939, from Russia's portion over a million men, women and children, including all possible bearers of the idea of a free Poland, were driven in sealed freight cars or on foot, into distant places of exile and concentration camps in Siberia's wastes and frozen north.

There they found that they were not being punished as Poles but as people who did not fit into the reasons

and plans of the Soviet state, for they found there Russians and members of all the nationalities in the great family of Soviet nations. Their wet clothes turned to rags as they worked in the snow and ice; bodies and spirits were broken; ulcers, scurvy, pneumonia, tuberculosis, hunger, exhaustion, despair, took their frightful toll as they worked to exhaustion and early death under brutalized guards, fierce trained dogs, the lash and the gun. Why waste them? the State reasoned, even as it had already learned to reason concerning its own peasants resisting collectivization, nomads resisting a planned sedentary existence, officials convicted of inefficiency, or corruption, or heresy, or mere friendship with other convicted officials. Why waste them, when it saves powder and lead and yields a profit to the state to keep their skin and bones together until they are worked to exhaustion? Why use the wasteful death penalty when in a few years they will be worked to death anyhow?

But then a miracle happened. The partners who, in 1939, had formed their partnership over the prostrate body of Poland, fell out with each other in June 1941. Now Stalin, needing Polish military manpower, and above all needing the support of Britain, which had gone to war precisely over the invasion and partition of Poland, agreed to let General Sikorski and a British parliamentary commission recruit an army among the ragged, vermin-ridden, ulcerated

and pallid ghosts who still eked out their existence in the land of the damned. How frightful the toll had been was proved by the pitiful remnant, numbering a few hundred thousand, that could be nursed back to health, out of the more than a million which the International Labor Office statistical report had recorded as having gone into deportation.

Now the harrowing record was made available in countless documents, personal narratives and piteous tales. They told not only of themselves but of the other shadows that would never return to the land of the living. Through the account distilled from innumerable narratives and set down with painful restraint in such books as *The Dark Side of the Moon* (written anonymously) and *La Justice Soviétique* (by Sylvester Mora and Peter Zwierniak) we get some conception of the number of concentration camps, their geographical distribution and activities, the conditions obtaining in them. It would take a new Dante to do real justice to this modern inferno, yet this collective account, derived from thousands of letters, diaries, conversations, documents and reports is the distillation of the anguish and agony of an entire people.

An intolerably painful book for us to read, *The Dark Side of the Moon* must be read, every word of it, by any who would attempt to influence the history of our time. For, as the brief and sober preface of T. S. Eliot points out:

This is not merely the story of what happened to Poland and to innumerable Poles between 1939 and 1945. . . . It is also a book about the USSR, about the Europe in which we now live, about the world in which we now live.

#### IV

*Forced Labor in Soviet Russia*, by Dallin and Nicolaevsky is a more illuminating, less emotionally shattering, study of the same subject in all its ramifications. It is the first systematic and scholarly examination of all the documents available, all the eyewitness accounts, all the meaningful fragments of Soviet comment, of the history and social significance of that "peculiar institution" which has become a cornerstone of Soviet polity and economic life. Here the reader will find the carefully reasoned and documented answers to his shocked and incredulous: *Why?* He will find the historical background from which I have drawn in part for the opening section of this review article. He will find a map locating all known concentration camps; a careful breakdown of the various industries in which they are engaged; an economic analysis of why human flesh is substituted for machinery in certain types of construction and production; a careful collation, erring only on the side of understatement, of the statistical evidence on the numbers of millions involved; a digest of all eyewitness reports and accounts of participants from Tchernavin to the Poles and the latest returning Russian war-prisoners and displaced persons; a



study of the fabulous rise of Magadan, capital of a Slave Empire; pen portraits of the principal architects of the system — in short, an analysis of all available material, fitted into a systematic exposition.

With admirable patience and skill the authors have slowly put together, over a period of more than a decade, the tiny bits of evidence from Soviet sources, put them together like fragments of an ancient mosaic of which many parts may still be missing but of which all the outlines are already clear. They have preferred to let Soviet records and Soviet spokesmen speak for themselves, citing date and page and verifiable source. The book contains 32 photostats of actual documents of GULAG (the Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps, Prisons, Labor and Special Settlements of the NKVD), and the photostat of a page of instructions for the seizure and deportation of all Lithuanian leaders, trade union, socialist, democratic, economic, political and cultural, the originals of which are on file with the International Red Cross at Geneva, and microfilm copies of which are in the New York Public Library.

Dallin and Nicolaevsky have thus produced the first definitive study of slave labor as a cornerstone of Soviet economy, and the first general theoretical analysis of its social, political and economic meaning. It is the Soviet government's own fault if they have had to guess at the total figures involved. Their figures, advanced with

excessive caution, reveal a slave class running well above the ten-million mark, more numerous than the total number of workers under Tsarism who were to be emancipated in 1917, more numerous, too, than the total number of male "free" workers in industry today!

As Dallin earlier made clear in his *The Real Soviet Russia*, this class of slaves is today the most numerous productive class in Soviet society, situated at the bottom of the social pyramid, unreached even by the shadowy paper constitution and bill of rights, devoid of all rights whatsoever, planfully exploited to the point of exhaustion and annihilation. Yet — a significant and essential part of this peculiar planned economy — it is in need of being continuously replaced by the creation and "recruiting" of new groups and classes of heretics, dissenters, criminals, "class-alien" or "national-alien" or "enemy-alien" bodies of men.

As has been the case wherever a numerous class of slaves, private or state, exists alongside of poor freemen, the latter inevitably begin to feel the pressure of the slave system in lowered remuneration and lessened freedom. It was the existence of this growing class of slaves throughout the thirties that made it possible for the Russian state to reintroduce the internal passport, fixity in factory and farm, the conscription of youth for labor, the conversion of trade unions from protective agencies to speed-up agencies, and the gradual blurring of the un-



certain boundaries between the various degrees of unfreedom.

If *I Speak for the Silent* and *The Dark Side of the Moon* correspond to the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the new anti-slavery movement that is bound to develop in our time, then Dallin and Nicolaevsky have produced the study of the Bradleys, the Wilberforces and the Hinton Helpers.

And they have provided a touchstone to test every new book and reporter and lecturer on Russia: if he has nothing to say on this essential foundation-stone in the Soviet structure then his book is either ignorant or dishonest. One can no more talk about the Russian working class henceforward without discussing the millions of its slave producers than one could talk about production in the Old South without mentioning chattel slavery, or about labor in the New South without mentioning Jim Crow. And anyone who has nothing to say

about this dehumanization of millions of human beings can henceforth be regarded neither as a liberal, a democrat, a humanitarian nor a socialist.

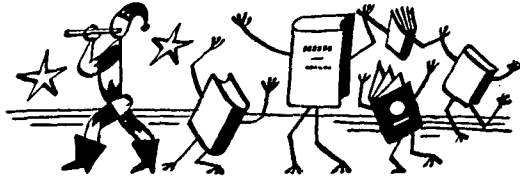
Thus this book is a must for everyone who would understand Russia and the history of our time. It teaches us what the régime of "economic democracy" is like. It provides the missing key to many enigmas such as the unwillingness of the Russian rulers to permit observers to travel freely through their land; their refusal even to accept America's gift of international control of atomic energy. (How, indeed, could they accept a control that is tied up with freedom of movement and freedom of inspection in a land that is dotted with hundreds of concentration camps containing millions of toilers?) Thus, Dallin and Nicolaevsky have written what will surely become one of the key books of our time.



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## THE CHECK LIST

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### HISTORY

I REMEMBER DISTINCTLY, *A Family Album of the American People in the Years of Peace: 1918 to Pearl Harbor*, assembled by Agnes Rogers, with running comment by Frederick Lewis Allen. \$5.00. *Harper*. Mr. and Mrs. Allen have once again produced an excellent picture-comment book. They cover every aspect of American life — economic, political, theatrical, literary, journalistic, military, educational, humorous. The Wilson-Harding-Coolidge-Hoover-Roosevelt eras pass before one's eyes quickly, pleasantly, sometimes painfully. Perhaps the most truly American picture in the entire book appears on page 18; it shows a dapper Mr. Harry S. Truman standing between two show cases in a Kansas City haberdashery store, which he ran from 1919 to 1923 (and not with conspicuous success) in partnership with Ed Jacobson. Mr. Allen's comments are what they should be: clear and objective.

OUR LUSTY FOREFATHERS, by Fairfax Downey. \$4.50. *Scribner*. The subtitle of this book reads: "Being diverse chronicles of the fervors, frolics, fights, festivities, and failings of our American ancestors." The general thesis of the book is that "our forefathers drank deep, ate hearty and lived lustily." Mr. Downey has little difficulty in proving his thesis from the records — and with the aid of some fictionizing that seems not very necessary. He is not above literary smacking of the lips and he dredges up his "discoveries" with boyish relish. The need for such a book at this late date is problematical. The "debunkers" of the twenties went over this ground pretty thoroughly — and many of them are now wondering whether, in their quest for "juicy

stuff" about our ancestors, they did not lose sight of more worthy and more enduring material. There are several illustrations by John C. Wonsler; they are in keeping with the text.

FOREIGN MUD, by Maurice Collis. \$5.00. *Knopf*. Like Mr. Collis' previous book, *The Land of the Great Image*, this volume on the Anglo-Chinese Opium War is interesting chiefly for the fascinating material it brings to light on pre-imperialist oriental civilization. Although Mr. Collis is certainly no apologist for British imperialism, he thinks that the British were rather less wicked than most of us had supposed. They were subjected to innumerable provocations from a Chinese bureaucracy that represented neither the Emperor nor the people. The British, he says, would have preferred free trade with China to a war; and they would have preferred to export their own industrial products rather than opium.

DREYFUS TO PÉTAIN, by William Herzog. \$3.50. *Creative Age*. This volume is concerned mainly with the Dreyfus affair, of which it provides a vivid and readable account. The passages on more recent French history, however, are full of Party-line reporting. Mr. Herzog fails to mention, for example, in his treatment of the collaborationist Jacques Doriot, that this man had formerly been one of the top leaders of the French Communist Party. Nor is there any mention of the defeatist part played by the Communists during the early stages of the war. Mr. Herzog sees the coming world struggle primarily in terms of a battle between Communism and Catholicism.

IT TAKES ALL KINDS, by Lloyd Lewis. \$3.75. *Harcourt, Brace*. This is a collection of Mr.