

The System of Forced Labor in Russia

By DAVID SATTER

Wall Street Journal (1889-Current file); Jun 24, 1982; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Wall Street Journal (1889 - 1988)
pg. 28

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There is unlikely ever to be conclusive evidence that the Soviet Union is using forced labor on the West Siberian gas pipeline, but all circumstantial evidence suggests that the inmates of Soviet labor camps will play their part in supplying Siberian gas to the West.

The exact route of the pipeline is unknown but if it originates in the Urengoye gas fields and leaves Soviet territory at Uzhgorod, its first stage should traverse the Komi autonomous republic in Western Siberia, which contains one of the densest concentrations of labor camps in the Soviet Union. The Soviet authorities are known to have used forced labor for pipeline construction at least twice—for an internal gas pipeline that originated at Ukhta, near the start of the West Siberian gas line, and on the "Friendship" line, which supplies gas to Eastern Europe.

Forced labor is by no means exceptional in the Soviet Union. It is an integral part of the economic system, and it is extremely doubtful whether the current Soviet economy could function without it.

The Soviet economy needs forced labor because it is extremely wasteful of manpower. Subordinated in its entirety to the regime's political goals, the economy does not allow managers the independent authority to make even the simplest cost savings.

The state planning agency tells factory directors what to produce, when to produce it, from whom to obtain materials and how many workers to employ. Unable to be efficient, enterprises overstate their resource requirements, particularly their need for manpower. The artificial shortages that are created are made good through forced labor.

Workers Have No Rights

The Soviet authorities publish no figures on the use of what amounts to slave laborers but enough is known to make it possible to estimate with reasonable certainty that of a total work force of approximately 115 million persons, as many as five million are either inmates of labor camps, performing assigned work while in internal exile or serving out minor sentences by working in labor-intensive branches of industry.

The inmates of labor camps, who comprise the largest and most economically significant group of forced laborers, are believed to number no fewer than three million, and they work in virtually all areas of the economy where manpower is in short supply.

Branches of industry heavily dependent on labor from the prison camps include logging, housing construction, road building and the mining of diamonds, uranium and gold.

In addition to labor-camp inmates, the Soviet reservoir of forced laborers includes at least a half million persons who have

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been sentenced to internal exile and one million to two million, including chronic alcoholics, prostitutes and first offenders, who are serving in "chemicals," that is, working off their brief sentences by performing heavy work in labor-short industries.

The presence of such a vast reserve of forced laborers having no rights sets the tenor of the whole economy and sharply limits the concessions the Soviet authorities are obliged to make to motivate the non-prison work force. Problems in finding workers do not necessitate fundamental reforms because they can always be solved by increasing the number of people in confinement.

A generation ago, the inhabitants of the Gulag would have been political prisoners, but today there are only a few hundred persons in Soviet camps who have been formally convicted of political crimes.

The majority of labor-camp inmates are arrested and sentenced for terms of three to seven years on charges of either theft, hooliganism or violations of the passport laws.

In a society of endless shortages, where a value structure based on religion was forcibly destroyed, stealing flourishes. Theft is common at every level of Soviet society, including the very highest, and

elaborate systems of falsification and theft exist in most industries.

This makes it relatively simple to find candidates for the labor camps. Large-scale arrests for stealing and black-market operations take place not because, in most cases, crimes were unexpectedly uncovered but because at one moment the authorities decided to change their attitude to the corruption that had existed all along.

Thousands of arrests for hooliganism are also a direct result of Soviet social conditions. Vodka sales are a major source of revenue for the state. In provincial cities and workers' districts, where there are few

distractions, vodka is one of the few consumer goods that is always available. Mass drunkenness is common, and when fights break out, they can lead not only to the arrest and sentencing of the persons involved but also to labor-camp sentences for everyone who happened to be in the vicinity.

The passport laws, which are intended to help control the movements of every citizen, also help to maintain the labor-camp population. There are some people in Soviet society who live illegally in areas, usually large cities, where they are not registered. These are usually people who, for whatever personal reason, cannot adapt to the Soviet system of total control. Such persons, sometimes called "Bichi," from the abbreviation in Russian for "Formerly Intellectual Person," are rounded up regularly in identity checks that take place in cities all over the country.

The population of forced laborers is thus constituted not just of hardened criminals but, in the majority, of people who are vulnerable to arrest because they have made typical adjustments to the nature of Soviet life. This vast pool of rightless manpower is then used to solve many of the Soviet economy's endemic problems.

Labor-camp inmates can be assigned to any work in any place and moved from project to project at will. Their work

norms are high but every prisoner knows that his conditions of confinement, bad to begin with, can be made immeasurably worse if he fails to comply.

Prisoners Are Cheaper

The use of forced labor is inexpensive. The average salary for a prisoner is 60 to 80 rubles a month compared with a minimum salary of 150 rubles for a free worker and a possible salary of up to 500 rubles for a person who agrees to work in remote parts of Siberia.

Of the prisoner's salary, half is deducted by the state, a quarter pays for his food (the worst scraps in the Soviet distribution system) and for his share of the expense of running the labor-camp system. That leaves 15 to 20 rubles a month at his disposal.

Western businessmen who argue that it is possible to enter into profitable business relations with the Soviet Union without being a participant in the repressive Soviet system probably underestimate the extent to which repression is the way the system operates.

In a Western society, in which people are expected to find work, the punishment for failure to do so is unemployment. In Soviet society, where people are assigned work, the punishment for failure to accept it is a labor camp.

With their labor vitally necessary in the camps, the persons arrested every year for minor crimes stand little chance of being acquitted once an arrest has been made. Investigation in most cases is rudimentary, and the accused is often sentenced to a labor-camp term regardless of what it finds.

It is these convicted persons, many of them barely aware of the what they've been accused of, who, in their hundreds of thousands, are swept every year into the labor-camp system, to work anonymously and probably unwillingly on vast development projects, including, quite possibly, the West Siberian gas pipeline. Through their presence, the pipeline becomes a far more apt symbol of the true nature of East-West cooperation than its Western backers could imagine.

Mr. Satter, formerly a correspondent in Moscow for the Financial Times, is writing a book about the Soviet Union.