

The Legacy of Bolshevism

Sir, According to your editorial discussion of the Russian revolution 60 years ago and the Russian regime today (NS 11 November), one of the differences between them is that 'the Gulag system was built on the dead bones of the Bolshevik old guard'. On the contrary, the Gulag system was built *by* the Bolshevik old guard.

A few weeks after the Bolsheviks seized power, Lenin advocated among methods of suppressing opposition 'forced labour for all who disobey the present law' (December 1917) and 'punishment by forced labour of the hardest kind' for 'harmful vermin' (January 1918); a few months later, the Bolshevik government legalised forced labour sentences (July 1918) and forced labour camps (September 1918); at the end of the Civil War, Trotsky argued in his campaign for the militarisation of labour that 'deserters from labour' should be drafted into forced labour battalions or sentenced to forced labour camps (March 1920); one of the demands of the Kronstadt rebels was an investigation of the camps (March 1921); after the final victory of the Bolshevik regime, the first extermination camps were established in the far North during 1921. As the camp system grew, the Chief Administration of Places of Imprisonment (Gumzak), which already existed in 1917, went through several changes of name until it became the Chief Administration of Corrective Labour Camps (Gulag); in 1923 an official handbook listed 65 camps under its control.

However many 'revisionist historians' may have 'shown that Stalinism was a negation of October, not simply a continuation of it', there is no doubt that the Gulag system – like most features of Stalinism – existed before Stalin's accession and indeed before Lenin's death. And there was no reason for not knowing this at the time. As early as 1920 Bertrand Russell referred to the camps in his book *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*. From 1921 the international anarchist movement exposed the nature of the camps on the basis of reports from inside them; from 1925 first-hand accounts of the camps by escaped prisoners began to appear in the West, and the books by Malsagov and Bezsonov were widely read. By the end of the 1920s, the camp population was over 100,000. Two things changed after 1929 – the size of the Gulag archipelago increased, and the victims included Communists. Those who created the camps died in them – and serve them right!

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