



The Gulag in Karelia

1929 to 1941

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THE KARELIA REGION was known for its wide-scale use of penal labor. In the 1920s, several escapees from the Solovetskii Islands published vivid accounts of the Soviet penal system.¹ In the early 1930s the Soviet authorities openly publicized their use of penal labor in the construction of the White Sea–Baltic Canal. Thereafter a veil of secrecy descended on the Gulag in Karelia, which would remain undisturbed until the opening of local and regional Soviet archives in the early 1990s.

In Karelia this process was spearheaded by the Institute of Language, Literature, and History, a branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and in particular by Vasilii Makurov, who edited a fascinating collection of archival documents on the Gulag in Karelia in the 1930s.² Using recently declassified documents from local and central party and government archives, we can create a new per-

1. See S. A. Malsagoff, *An Island Hell: A Soviet Prison in the Far North* (London: A. M. Philpott, 1926); J. D. Bessonov, *My Twenty-six Prisons and My Escape from Solovetsk* (London: J. Cape, 1928); I. M. Zaitsev, *Solovki* (Shanghai: Slovo, 1931).

2. V. G. Makurov (ed.), *Gulag v Karelii, 1930–41* (Petrozavodsk: Karel'skii nauchnyi tsentr, 1992).

spective of the Gulag, provided by the very officials who were responsible for its daily operation. The archival documents used in this chapter were written by a wide range of party, state, and NKVD officials. Most were intended only for a select group and contain much candid information about the Gulag in Karelia, showing its unique and defining position in the evolution of the entire Soviet penal system.³

THE TRANSPARENT KARELIAN GULAG (PRE-1933)

From the earliest days of the Soviet regime, some form of prison or concentration camp existed in Karelia. During the Civil War, Soviet authorities established concentration camps on the Solovetskii Islands to hold the prisoners considered most hostile to the Bolshevik regime. The OGPU maintained control over these camps throughout the 1920s, and as the number of prisoners grew, the camps spread from the islands onto the littoral areas of the White Sea.

The OGPU remained aloof from the vibrant political and theoretical penal debates of the 1920s, allowing it to develop its own particular penal system within the SLON (Solovetskii Camp of Special Significance), which promoted self-sufficiency and avoided draining resources from security tasks. The apparent low cost of the SLON was increasingly attractive to Soviet authorities, who were faced with an overcrowded and costly penal system. By May 1929, expanding the camps was necessary after a Council of People's Commissars' decree transferred all prisoners serving sentences of more than three years to OGPU jurisdiction.⁴

3. C. S. Joyce, "The Gulag 1930-1960: Karelia and the Soviet System of Forced Labor" (Ph.D. diss., University of Birmingham, 2001).

4. Sovnarkom decree July 11, 1929, "Ob ispol'zovanii truda ugodovno-zaklyuchennykh" in M. I. Khlusov (ed.), *Ekonomika Gulaga i ee Rol' v Razviti*

This transfer of responsibility to the OGPU coincided with a substantial rise in the penal population as a direct result of collectivization. The SLON camps expanded rapidly, peaking in January 1931 with a population of 71,800 prisoners.⁵ Most were employed in the timber industry, which was short of labor despite a Western campaign against the dumping of cheap timber produced by penal labor.⁶ The most visible penal timber operations were suspended while foreign dignitaries toured the region. Molotov attempted to parry this anti-Soviet campaign by insisting that penal labor be used only on internal infrastructure projects, such as the construction of the White Sea–Baltic (Belomor) Canal.⁷

THE BELOMOR CANAL

The idea of a canal linking the Baltic and White Seas had first been proposed during the eighteenth century, but no practical steps were taken until the Soviet period. To prove the superiority of the Soviet system not only over the previous regime but also over the apparently bankrupt Western capitalist nations, the Soviet authorities decided to construct the Belomor Canal to link the Great Northern

Strany—1930-e gody, Sbornik Dokumentov (Moscow: RAN, 1998), document No. 4. See also documents 1–3.

5. M. B. Smirnov (ed.), *Sistema Ispravitel'no-Trudovoykh Lagerei v SSSR - Spravochnik* (Moscow: Zven'ya, 1998), p. 395.

6. For debates on Soviet forced labor at the time, see *Times* (London) May 18–20, 1931; *Daily Mail* (London) February 2, 1931; L. I. Parker, ed., *Forced Labor in Russia: Facts and Documents* (London: British Russian Gazette and Trade Outlook, 1931).

7. In February 1931 both the author George Bernard Shaw and Lady Astor visited the northwestern Russian Republic to verify Molotov's claims that forced labor was not used in the timber industry. During these visits all OGPU timber operations were moved to remote locations and then returned to their original areas of operation once the dignitaries had left. D. J. Dallin and B. I. Nicolaevsky, *Forced Labor in Soviet Russia* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1948), 226.

Route by a network of internal waterways.⁸ Not only would this grand construction improve the nation's infrastructure and open up the natural resources of the Karelian region to industrial exploitation, but the use of prisoners would demonstrate the progressive nature of the Soviet corrective-labor penal policy.⁹ The initial hyperbole of this portrayal ensured that the project maintained a high profile throughout the construction period, even though access to prisoners and worksites was strictly controlled. Soviet authorities further complicated the project by announcing that the construction would receive minimal funding, would use only local materials, and would be finished in a short period, as is explained in Chapter 8.

These conditions proved impossible to fulfill, and fundamental changes to the canal's specifications were necessary. In February 1931, a secret decree reduced the depth of the northern section of the canal, which had been entrusted to the OGPU, from eighteen feet to twelve feet,¹⁰ transforming the canal from an important transport route to a backwater, suitable only for shallow barges and passenger vessels.¹¹ Construction on the northern section of the canal was slow, and the pace only quickened after G. Yagoda (dep-

8. The Great Northern Route was an attempt to establish a permanent sea route, together with the appropriate infrastructure, along the entire length of the Soviet northern coastline. Such a navigable route was intended to help the development of Siberian settlements and provide an alternative route to the Far East that would pass solely through Soviet waters.

9. For an example of the portrayal of Soviet superiority, see *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* (Moscow: August 5, 1933), p. 1.

10. STO (Council of Labor and Defense) secret decree No. 4—June 3, 1930, had stated a depth of twenty feet to allow for the passage of vessels with an eighteen-foot draft. The northern section of the canal, which had been assigned to the OGPU, stretched from Povenets on Lake Onega to Belomorsk (Soroka) on the White Sea. Y. Kilin, *Kareliya v politike Sovetskogo gosudarstva, 1920–1941* (Petrozavodsk: State University Press, 1999), p. 127.

11. Report by the Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council (Revvoensovet). GARF 9414.1.1806: 44. Once the canal was officially opened, it was discovered that on some sections of the River Svir the depth was only six feet, making it inaccessible to *any* vessel in the Baltic Fleet!

uty head of the OGPU) and the Council of People's Commissars ordered the Gulag to make the project a priority at the expense of all other tasks. As a result there was a huge increase in the number of prisoners, and strict military discipline was imposed.¹²

The project was completed quickly despite the harsh weather and the unmechanized methods of work. Great publicity accompanied the canal's opening on June 30, 1933, claiming "an important victory for the USSR on the frontline of industrialization and the strengthening of the defense capability of the nation."¹³ In reality the shallow depth of the canal prevented the passage of any vessel from the Baltic fleet, and large cargo shipments had to be reloaded onto smaller craft. As soon as the project was finished, proposals were made for the construction of a second route to allow larger vessels, but to no avail. Even as late as 1939, the first secretary of the Karelian oblast' committee stated that "specialists believe it would be cheaper, quicker and more valuable to build a second canal, parallel to the first at a distance of about 1km to the east, along the entire route."¹⁴ Because of these shortcomings the publicity surrounding the canal faded rapidly, and the whole region was increasingly shrouded in secrecy as the canal and its environs were assigned to the OGPU for further development.

The only agency to benefit from the Belomor project was the Gulag, which had successfully demonstrated the potential of using

12. Between 1931 and 1932, the number of prisoners serving the construction project increased from 64,000 to 99,000, peaking in December 1932 with 108,000. *Sistema Ispravitel'no-Trudovykh Lagerei v SSSR—Spravochnik*, p. 162. Prisoners in Karelia were held in one of two camp systems, the BBLag (White Sea-Baltic Camp) or SLAG (Solovetskii Camp). The SLON camp had been reorganized into three camps in 1929—Visherlag, Svir'lag, and the USiKMITL (the Administration of Solovetskie and Karelo-Murmansk Corrective-Labor Camps). With the start of canal construction, most prisoners from USiKMITL were transferred to a new camp system, the BBLag, and those remaining were entrusted to SLAG (Solovetskii Camp). *Ibid.*, 395.

13. *Gulag v Karelii, 1930–41*, doc. No. 56—July 27, 1933.

14. *Kareliya v politike Sovetskogo gosudarstva, 1920–1941*, p. 127.

168 Christopher Joyce

penal labor on large-scale construction projects. However, the completion of the canal was only the beginning of the Gulag's involvement in the development of Karelia. Throughout the 1930s this region was a testing ground for the use of penal labor on different projects, and the experience gained in Karelia was soon disseminated throughout the entire Gulag.¹⁵

THE WHITE SEA-BALTIC COMBINE (BBK)

To make good use of the Gulag's water-engineering skills, the OGPU was given the task of building the Moscow-Volga Canal. Many skilled prisoners were transferred from Karelia to this new project, but a significant number remained in the BBLag (White Sea-Baltic Camp), which was now assigned to the newly created White Sea-Baltic Combine (BBK). The BBK served as a regional developer with exclusive rights to the exploitation of the canal and any natural resources surrounding it,¹⁶ and "no establishment nor individual, without special permission from SNK USSR, [had] the right to interfere in the administrative-economic and operational activities of the combine." The BBK received central funding and was granted tax-free status until January 1, 1936, by which time it was expected to have established a working infrastructure and profitable enterprises.¹⁷ After 1936 there was a noticeable change in the economic activities of the BBK as the combine attempted to achieve

15. On completion of the canal, the Russian republic adopted a new corrective-labor code (August 1, 1933) which incorporated many lessons learned from the Belomor project and stressed the primacy of physical labor as the basis of the Soviet penal system. For a copy of this statute, see A. I. Kokurin and N. V. Petrov, eds., *Gulag 1917-1960* (Moscow: Demokratiya, 2000), Document No. 19; also see Joyce, "The Gulag 1930-1960."

16. *Gulag v Karelii, 1930-1941*, doc. No. 66 (August 17, 1933). The importance of the BBLag was strengthened because the head of the BBLag also served as the deputy head of the Gulag.

17. *Ibid.*

financial self-sufficiency by divesting itself of unprofitable activities and of the camps associated with them. In 1937 the BBLAG was relieved of the added expense of maintaining the Solovetskii Islands as a strict regime camp, and jurisdiction passed to the Main Administration of State Security, which continued to hold the BBLag's high-profile prisoners.

THE SEARCH FOR AN ECONOMIC IDENTITY (1933–37)

The generous financial support granted to the BBK during the second Five-Year Plan allowed the BBK to experiment with different economic activities in an effort to discover which were more suited to the use of forced labor. The experience gained in Karelia had direct relevance to Gulag activities across the Soviet Union.

A successful agricultural base was deemed essential if the combine was to establish a permanent workforce. The Karelian authorities were particularly excited about the establishment of agricultural experimental centers to investigate the prospects for farming in northern climates. The combine was less excited by small-scale local agricultural operations, and although one of its main tasks was supposedly colonization using special settlements, it preferred to focus on large-scale industrial exploitation and construction. As a result agriculture remained unimportant throughout the 1930s and only supplemented imported supplies.¹⁸

Remote OGPU camps were required to develop a local infrastructure and to erect buildings to meet their needs. The OGPU camps in the Karelian region had enough experience to establish new camps and the auxiliary enterprises needed to keep them operational. Much of this construction was small-scale, but with the

18. *Ibid.*, docs. No. 77, 115. Despite the abundant expanse of water in and around the Karelo-Murmansk region, the combine's attempts at establishing a fishing industry were swiftly curtailed after disastrous results in 1936 when the plan was only fulfilled by 5.6 percent. GARF 9414.1.844: l. 4, 20.

completion of the canal the forced laborers of the Gulag had proved that they were capable of finishing important capital construction projects. The variety of capital projects assigned to the BBK encompassed the complete range of construction tasks entrusted to the Gulag during the prewar years.

The construction of a hydroelectric power station (Tulomstroi) on the river Tuloma, near Murmansk, dominated the combine's activities for the period of the second Five-Year Plan. On completion in 1937, Tulomstroi became the most northerly power station in the world. Its generating capacity could meet the power requirements for Murmansk and for the Kola Peninsula and the Kirov railway line. Tulomstroi became a semiautonomous agency within the combine and received priority for all supplies and labor. Although the BBK directed considerable time and resources toward the Tulomstroi project, the combine received no benefit from its completion. Unlike the Belomor Canal, the Tuloma power station was transferred to a civilian agency once it became operational, and all the resources assigned to the project were sent to other pressing NKVD projects instead of to the combine as expected.¹⁹

During the Yagoda and Yezhov periods, most Gulag construction focused on the development of a working infrastructure to support the primary planned economic task for that region. Large-scale construction only occurred when the completed enterprise would form the backbone of plans for the future assimilation of the area, as was true for the Norilsk nickel combine or the timber-paper-chemical combine, which was located in the Karelian town of Segezha and assigned to a quasi-independent agency (Segezhstroi) in the BBK.²⁰ However, the BBK had learned from the Tulomstroi experience not to concentrate its resources on specific tasks at the

19. GARF 9414.1.954: 4.

20. NKVD order No. 348—November 10, 1935, GARF 9401.1.

expense of all other activities, particularly without guarantees that a completed project would stay in their jurisdiction.

Segezhstroi experienced difficulties from its inception, plagued by problems with supplies and labor and by the discovery, at the end of 1935, that the local administration had not only been using different plan headings from those used by the central Gulag authorities, but was actually working from a completely different plan!²¹ After the first stage of Segezhstroi was finished in March 1939, construction on the rest of the project faltered as resources were diverted to other pressing tasks.²²

The BBK increasingly insulated itself from financial and organizational problems in Segezhstroi by emphasizing its administrative independence. In October 1939 the BBLag camp district serving Segezhstroi became a camp in its own right (Segezhlag) and was assigned to the now truly autonomous construction project.²³

Although manufacturing received little publicity, it was a benefit to the combine as a whole. These industries (sewing, leather-processing, fur-farming, woodworking) met much of the internal demand within the local Gulag and also employed many weak prisoners whose presence on other tasks would have hindered work. Manufacturing was profitable and by 1939 provided as much as 31 percent of the combine's total income, even though more than 80 percent of resources were devoted to activities requiring heavy phys-

21. GARF 9414.1.764: 3–3ob.

22. This lack of support from the central Gulag authorities for the further development of Segezhstroi was surprising since cellulose production was particularly important to the explosives industry. Elsewhere, the Gulag was developing other cellulose plants (e.g., Arkhangel'sk oblast') and had created the Cellulose-Paper Department to assist in the construction and operation of such enterprises. Perhaps the close proximity of Segezha to the Finnish border made any further expansion unwise. NKVD order No. 00366, GARF 9401.1.

23. NKVD order No. 001273—October 21, 1939, Central State Archive of Crimean Republic (Tsentralnyi Gosudarstvennyi Archiv Respublici Krym, hereafter—TsGARK), f. 865, op. 35, sv. 1, d. 2a, l. 314.

ical labor.²⁴ Despite their economic success, these industries were regarded as auxiliary activities, and the BBK devoted more attention to high-profile, large-scale projects, which were considered more suitable to penal labor.

Unlike other infrastructure projects, the Belomor Canal remained in Gulag jurisdiction since it would become a major new water route and was supposed to facilitate the industrial assimilation of central Karelia. The depth of the canal required that most cargo be reloaded onto smaller barges built by the combine itself. Cargo turnover did increase, but toward the late 1930s it became apparent that most shipments originated, or were destined for, locations in central Karelia and that the canal was mainly used as a private transport route for the combine.²⁵ Eventually, all parties, including the BBK, accepted that the combine's control of the canal was of benefit to no one, and the canal was transferred to the Peoples' Commissariat for Water Transport in April 1939.²⁶ This experience may have convinced both the Gulag and the government that penal labor was more suited to primary industries, and as a result the Gulag was never again entrusted with the administration of a major transport route.

During the first Five-Year Plan, Gulag timber operations were uncoordinated and were engaged either in contract work for local timber organizations or preparatory work for the development of future NKVD regions. Toward the end of the second Five-Year Plan, timber activities increased as it became apparent that they were suited to the growing pool of unskilled manual labor. The BBK and BBLag were at the forefront of the expanding Gulag timber activities and dominated this penal activity for the rest of the 1930s. Much

24. Joyce, "The Gulag 1930–1960," 102–103.

25. *Ibid.*, 117–118.

26. SNK USSR decree No. 321—March 23, 1939, NKVD order No. 079—April 5, 1939, GARF 9414.1.

The Gulag in Karelia 173

of the expansion in the combine's timber industry was at the expense of Karelian timber organizations, which lacked the BBK's endless supply of labor and political support. By 1937 the combine was producing 35 percent of cut timber and 12 percent of sawn timber in Karelia, a substantial achievement for such a new organization.²⁷

LOCAL CONFLICT

The growth of the Gulag in Karelia led to increasing friction with the local authorities. During the 1920s, OGPU activities were welcomed by the local government since prisoners were employed in sparsely populated regions lacking a permanent workforce. Relations between the Gulag and the Karelian authorities began to deteriorate, however, during the construction of the Belomor Canal. The Karelian government appreciated the effect the canal would have on the region, but despite their continual offers of assistance and pleas for information, they were largely ignored by the OGPU.²⁸ Communication between the Gulag and local authorities was almost nonexistent, and the arrogant behavior of the OGPU-NKVD toward the Karelian government continued throughout the 1930s. When the BBK was granted control over vast areas of central Karelia, the Karelian government lost control overnight of the resources and industries in this region and faced a constant struggle against the further expansion of Gulag activities. Questions of colonization, defense, transport, infrastructure, local hydrology, and so on, were increasingly decided by the secretive OGPU-NKVD, whose line of command went straight to Moscow, bypassing local authorities.

27. V. G. Makurov, "Belomorsko-Baltiiskii kombinat v Karelii, 1933–1941," *Novoe v izuchenie istorii Karelii* (Petrozavodsk: 1994), p. 158.

28. Even those Karelian officials co-opted onto official supervisory bodies were generally sidelined. The chairman of the special committee overseeing the Belomor project did not realize for eight months that the chairman of the Karelian SNK (E. Gyulling) was also a member of the committee. GARF 9414.1.1805: 84.

The coordination between the BBK and local government was minimal, plunging development plans into confusion. At the start of the second Five-Year Plan, the Karelian republic was subject to four different plan variants, produced by the Karelian planning agency, the Gosplan USSR, the Leningrad oblast, and the BBK—but the plans were not integrated. Each of these bodies had received funding dependent on the plans. The government of Karelia, supposedly an autonomous republic, had no control or even knowledge of the investment decisions made about its own territory. The BBK area, in particular, had been taken away from the jurisdiction of the Karelian government; the republic had lost control of the heart of its territorial integrity.²⁹

ECONOMIC SPECIALIZATION (1937–41)

The BBK-BBLag remained the most powerful combine-camp system in Karelia throughout the 1930s, but during the third Five-Year Plan its supremacy was challenged by events both inside and outside the republic. With the creation of Tulomstroi and Segezhstroi, the combine had encouraged the establishment of independent camp systems to finish large new construction tasks. This tendency grew in 1939 and 1940 when several urgent projects in the region were assigned to the Gulag, which created new camps for each of these tasks, bypassing involvement by the BBK.³⁰ These developments were welcomed by the BBK-BBLag under the leadership of M. M.

29. *Kareliya v politike Sovetskogo gosudarstva, 1920–1941*, p. 136. On some occasions the Karelian authorities did manage to outmaneuver the Gulag, the most notable example being the construction of two railway lines (Dorstroi 1 and 2), where the BBK continually sought plan details from the Karelian Peoples' Commissariat for the Timber Industry, details which were not forthcoming. For more on this subject, see Joyce, "The Gulag 1930–1960," 100–101.

30. Other camps created include Segzhlag, Kandalakshlag, Matkozhlag, Keks-gol'mlag, Monchegorlag.

The Gulag in Karelia 175

Timofeev, who wanted to focus on logging and timber processing.³¹ The move to economic specialization in the BBK-BBLag was soon mirrored across the Gulag with the establishment of NKVD economic administrations dedicated to specific kinds of production. The BBLag became the most important camp in the Gulag for Timber Processing (ULLP).

The arrival of Timofeev marked a distinct change in the operation of the BBK and BBLag and presaged the future transformation of the Gulag under the direction of L. Beria. By 1937 the combine was just beginning to discover which economic activities were most profitable when the NKVD embarked on its frenzied purge, depriving the Gulag of leadership and direction. Even the Gulag was not immune from the Great Terror, and in 1938 several high-ranking BBK personnel were arrested for having links with “enemies of the people,” an accusation hard to parry when working in an organization that dealt with “counterrevolutionaries”!³² The prisoners were also subject to renewed investigations and arrests, and between 1937 and 1939, hundreds of inmates from the BBLag and the Solovetskii Islands were executed en masse.³³ The disruption and distrust created by this maelstrom only began to be rectified in the BBK and BBLag with the arrival of Timofeev, who was determined to transform the combine into a profitable timber agency.³⁴ The Gulag

31. M. M. Timofeev was head of both the BBK and BBLag from August 28, 1937, to March 1, 1941. *Sistema ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagerei v SSSR—Spravochnik*, p. 163.

32. *Gulag v Karelii, 1930–1941*, doc. No. 122.

33. Between October 27 and November 4, 1937, a total of 1,111 prisoners were executed at Sandormokh, a remote, forested area six kilometers west of Povenets (site of the first lock-gate into the Belomor Canal from Lake Onega) and twelve kilometers east of Medvezh'egorsk (location of the headquarters of the BBK and BBLag). I. I. Chukhin, *Kareliya—37: ideologiya i praktika terrora* (Petrozavodsk: State University, 1999), pp. 124–125.

34. It is ironic that Timofeev, who was instrumental in creating a profitable combine, used economic arguments in his campaign to discredit both Pliner (head of Gulag 1937–1938) and Yagoda (NKVD 1934–1936), claiming that they

system had paid little attention to establishing a stable local workforce. Under Timofeev's leadership, attempts were made to stabilize the camp workforce by preventing the mass seasonal movement of prisoners. Kinds of production were organized to allow exploitation throughout the year, and each work site was allotted a basic number of workers.³⁵ Having limited the number of workers who could be freely transferred, Timofeev introduced training courses to improve productivity, since there was no fear of losing these trained workers to another camp system. He also imposed greater central control over camp districts (*lagotdeleniya*) and camp compounds (*lagpunkty*) to limit friction between outposts in the BBLag.³⁶ Although his actions improved productivity, Timofeev was unable to completely alter the emphasis on fulfilling only short-term goals, since most local officials were well aware of the potentially lethal recriminations that could arise from failure.

exploited the Gulag as an economic agency rather than treated it as a penal institution. *Gulag v Karelii, 1930–1941*, doc. No. 130.

35. For example, the timber section of the BBK administration was upgraded into a Department of the Timber Industry, which was granted a fixed number of *zeks* who could not be transferred to nontimber work without the permission of the department. TsGARK, f. 865, op. 35, sv. 2, d. 5, l. 12 (March 23, 1939).

36. In an attempt to improve the flow of information within the BBK, the combine established its own communication network independent of any Karelian infrastructure. Once completed, this network was able to reach every camp location, narrow-gauge railway, ice-dirt road in the BBK's area of operations. (TsGARK, f. 865, op. 36, sv. 3, d. 30, l. 91). Timofeev was not completely successful in eradicating bad practices from the BBLag. In BBK directive No. 06200, December 28, 1940, he complained that despite six orders issued by the combine leadership in the past eighteen months, some heads of camp districts were still transferring prisoners within the system without letting the central BBLag authorities know. Such actions ensured that the central accounts were inaccurate and that the leadership would lose track of the actual number and location of prisoners in its system. (TsGARK, f. 865, op. 35, sv. 3, d. 13—1940).

THE WINTER WAR

By the late 1930s the international situation had deteriorated, and the Soviet government was increasingly concerned about Karelia's extensive border with Finland. In 1939 the Soviet General Staff reported that Finland had sixty airbases and landing strips while in the area stretching from Lake Ladoga to the Barents Sea, the Red Army did not have a single aerodrome.³⁷ The only organization in the region with substantial labor and material resources at its disposal was the BBK-BBLag, which were soon entrusted with the construction of numerous defense works.³⁸ After it became apparent that the Soviet authorities had underestimated the tenacity of Finnish forces, BBLag prisoners were dispatched to construct defense works throughout Karelia and Murmansk, and timber production and manufacturing were reconfigured to meet the demands of these new construction projects.³⁹ The BBLag was instructed to relocate all prisoners sentenced as "counterrevolutionaries" (about thirty thousand people) away from the Belomor Canal, the Kirov railway line, and other strategic points, even though such locations were generally at the heart of the BBK economic operations.⁴⁰ Even camps deep in the forest had to curtail lumbering to meet the strict blackout

37. *Kareliya v politike Sovetskogo gosudarstva, 1920–1941*, p. 121.

38. Even as late as November 1939 (i.e., the month the Winter War began) there were still no anti-aircraft defenses or artillery posts along the Belomor Canal. Archive of Social and Political Movements and Formations of the Republic of Karelia (AOPDFRK), f. 3, op. 65, d. 10, l. 16, 47.

39. The BBLag sent four thousand prisoners to project No. 100, the construction of the Petrozavodsk-Suoyarvi road, and sixteen thousand prisoners to project No. 105, the construction of a railway line around Kandalaksha. TsGARK, f. 865, op. 36, sv. 3, d. 24, l. 2-4.

40. This order was given on November 26, 1939, and stated that all transfers should be completed in the next three days, that is, before hostilities began. The order provides further evidence that the Soviet declaration of war against Finland was premeditated. TsGARK, f. 865, op. 36, sv. 3, d. 30, l. 91–92.

178 Christopher Joyce

regulations, although several camps flouted this ruling, and some were even accused of using higher-wattage bulbs than normal!⁴¹

Even with the cessation of hostilities with Finland during the short interlude between the Winter War and the Great Patriotic War, most prisoners sent to complete defense works were not returned but were transferred to new projects that arose from the assimilation of Finnish territories ceded to the Soviet Union by the Treaty of Moscow. The rapid advances of German and Finnish forces in 1941 forced the mass evacuation of both camp and combine, although some prisoners did remain behind to finish urgent tasks.⁴²

SECURITY, ORDER, AND HEALTH

The remoteness of the Solovetskii Islands was suited to the isolation of prisoners considered hostile to the Bolshevik regime. The expansion of Gulag activities onto the Karelian mainland throughout the 1930s and the growing integration of forced labor with the mainstream economy meant that previous levels of security were no longer possible. Attempts were made to prevent “anti-Soviet” elements from mixing with the local population and holding positions of responsibility in the camp administration, but “counterrevolutionaries” were usually the best-qualified prisoners to hold administrative posts as the Gulag economy diversified. The use of such prisoners in the administration was tacitly accepted and occasionally even encouraged. In June 1939 the deputy head of the BBLag, N. S. Levinson, called on all sections of the camp to employ prisoners with accounting experience in their accounting departments, even if the prisoners included “counterrevolutionaries.”⁴³ This

41. TsGARK, f. 865, op. 35, sv. 3, d. 14, l. 59.

42. For more details on the use of prisoners in Karelia during the Great Patriotic War see Joyce, “The Gulag 1930–1960.”

43. TsGARK, f. 865, op. 35, sv. 1, d. 1, l. 120.

The Gulag in Karelia 179

order was in response to threats by the state bank (Gosbank) to impose sanctions if the BBLag did not produce correct and full financial accounts. The following year, after the theft of 120,000 rubles led to an investigation of the BBLag administration, Levinson was apparently surprised to discover that many “counterrevolutionaries” occupied administrative posts.⁴⁴ After such revelations, these prisoners were removed from their posts but were usually reinstated as soon as the furor had died down.

Once Beria took control of the NKVD, genuine attempts were made to reduce the number of prisoners, especially “counterrevolutionaries,” employed by the Gulag administration. The growth of a permanent Gulag cadre under Beria facilitated the removal of prisoners from the administration, although many of the “free worker” replacements were actually former prisoners, some of them former “counterrevolutionaries.”⁴⁵

The use of prisoners in the day-to-day running of the Gulag was especially prevalent for camp guards. The post of camp guard was unappealing because of the poor working and living conditions and the dangers posed by criminal elements among the camp population.⁴⁶ As a result, the camp authorities were compelled to use prisoners to staff positions that remained vacant. Between June 1936 and July 1938, about half the guards in the BBLag were prisoners, but this proportion fell gradually after the arrival of Timofeev, and by April 1941 only 2 percent of guards were prisoners.⁴⁷ This significant change in the guards was mirrored across the Soviet Union

44. TsGARK, f. 865, op. 35, sv. 3, d. 13, l. 93ob.

45. On January 1, 1940, 29 percent of the BBLag administrative staff were former prisoners, including 8 percent former “counterrevolutionaries.” TsGARK, f. 865, op. 32, sv. 1, d. 5, l. 78–78ob.

46. For examples of the poor conditions endured by free worker guards, which often led to poor morale, drunkenness, and even suicide, see *Gulag v Karelii, 1930–1941*, doc. No. 136; TsGARK, f. 865, op. 35, sv. 1, d. 1a, l. 32–35.

47. *Gulag v Karelii, 1930–1941*, doc. No. 103; TsGARK, f. 865, op. 32, sv. 1, d. 10, l. 71–71ob, TsGARK, f. 865, op. 32, sv. 3, d. 27, l. 2–16.

180 Christopher Joyce

as Beria sought to improve the working conditions of NKVD employees.

During the 1920s the penal population of the SLON contained several cohesive prisoner groups based on former political allegiances or religious convictions. On certain dates, such as workers' holidays or religious feasts, these groups staged protests against Soviet power and against their conditions of imprisonment. By the 1930s such cohesive groups no longer existed, yet the BBLag and other camps continued to prevent prisoners from going to work on these days, and extremely detailed security arrangements were in effect for the period of the holiday.⁴⁸ No real threat to security in the BBLag ever materialized from the prisoners, but this did not prevent overzealous security agencies from "exposing" pernicious plots. In 1933 the OGPU "discovered" a "counterrevolutionary, insurrectional organization of prisoners" that was planning to tear the Karelian republic from the Soviet Union and give both it and the Belomor Canal to Finland!⁴⁹

Apart from spontaneous, isolated incidents, many of which were the result of alcohol, the most serious form of disorder was escape attempts, which always had a potential for the unwelcome involvement of other agencies, particularly if the escapee committed further crimes. Although security around many of the camp compounds was surprisingly lax, both the administration and the prisoners understood that it was extremely difficult to escape in a sparsely populated region littered with NKVD personnel. Although the proportion of inmates escaping from the BBLag was higher than the Gulag average, the high recapture rate meant few prisoners

48. For examples, see TsGARK, f. 865, op. 35, sv. 1, d. 1, l. 300; TsGARK, f. 865, op. 35, sv. 3, d. 9, l. 296–311.

49. I. I. Chukhin, *Kanalarmeitsy* (Petrozavodsk: 1990), pp. 193–200. In fact this accusation merely provided additional material for a campaign against ethnic Finns living in Karelia.

The Gulag in Karelia 181

remained at large.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the BBLag was criticized for its poor security, which failed to improve significantly despite claims to the contrary made by Timofeev.⁵¹ At the local level BBLag officials sacrificed security issues to ensure uninterrupted production. The diversion of limited resources to improve security was opposed by the central camp authorities if it threatened economic plan goals.

The launch of the Belomor project was accompanied by much publicity about the progressive nature of the Soviet penal system and its use of the labor process to reform prisoners. The process of reeducating offenders, known as *perekovka* (reforging), was entrusted to the Cultural Education Department (Kul'turno-vospitatel'nyi otdel—KVO), which was supposed to instill an enthusiastic work ethic, supported by cultural and educational activities. This work was highly politicized and needed a significant number of Party workers. The KVO was considered an extremely unattractive post, however, and the department experienced severe staff shortages even during the high-profile canal construction. Consequently, some local officials were forced to use prisoners to fill many posts. In the fourth camp district of the SLAG (Solovetskii Camp) only 97 of 129 KVO posts were filled in 1931. Of these workers, 25 were prisoners sentenced for “counterrevolutionary” crimes and ought not to have been involved in the political reeducation of other inmates.⁵²

On completion of the canal, many party workers employed in the BBLag moved on to the Moscow-Volga Canal, leaving behind a staff of questionable quality. The Gulag's penal system was increasingly shrouded in secrecy as Soviet propaganda focused on Nazi Germany and its concentration camps. At the local level, most in the KVO paid lip service to political indoctrination, and the

50. See tables in Joyce, “The Gulag 1930–1960,” 130.

51. NKVD order No. 001408—November 6, 1940 (GARF, f. 9401, op. 1).

52. *Gulag v Karelii, 1930–1941*, doc. No. 8.

department was mainly involved in schemes to boost productivity or to provide cultural activities. Unlike many other camp systems, the BBLag provided its prisoners with a wide range of cultural activities, many of which it had inherited from the rich cultural and academic life of the Solovetskii camps during the 1920s. The close proximity of Karelia to Leningrad ensured that its penal population included intellectuals and performing artists, who gave high-quality productions for prisoners and local civilians. The BBLag even had a theater, located in Medvezh'egorsk, which employed 338 people, most of them prisoners.⁵³ However, in 1939, in an attempt to improve security and reduce the profile of prisoners, all prisoners were removed from performing roles, although they were still allowed to play in the orchestra and work as set designers and builders and costume-makers.⁵⁴ Some attempts were made to improve the education of prisoners by campaigns to eradicate illiteracy, but the constant transfer of prisoners between camps severely disrupted such work.

The basis of the *perekovka* principle was the proviso that prisoners should be provided with a set standard of living conditions that met their basic needs, allowing them to concentrate on their own redevelopment. If conditions fell below this standard, it was considered harmful to the prisoners' reeducation. Yet even during the Belomor period, the head of the Gulag, L. I. Kogan, was forced to remind the BBLag leadership that "the men [prisoners] and their comforts are every bit as important as the obligatory fulfillment of the production programme." Surprisingly, this order and other allusions to poor living conditions are frequently mentioned in M. Gorky's book on the Belomor Canal, and it is not clear whether this

53. For further details on theater in the BBK, see M. M. Korollova (ed.), *Teatr Gulaga* (Moscow: Memorial, 1995).

54. TsGARK, f. 865, op. 35, sv. 2, d. 4, l. 37. The BBLag theater was destroyed by Finnish forces during the Great Patriotic War.

The Gulag in Karelia 183

situation was ever rectified. In 1933 the deputy head of the OGPU, Yagoda, issued a similar order, although the emphasis was then placed on providing living conditions that would maintain a prisoner's labor productivity rather than providing opportunities for reeducation.⁵⁵

Living conditions across the Gulag deteriorated and reached a low point during the purges. Once Beria became the people's commissar for internal affairs, attempts were made to improve conditions for prisoners. However, the orders issued by the central Gulag authorities on improvements to living conditions were unrealistic and were rarely accompanied by added funding. In 1939 Timofeev complained to Beria that if he obeyed rules on appropriate winter clothing, as many as fifteen thousand inmates would be confined to barracks. Beria's response was to call for the establishment of workshops where prisoners could repair their clothing, but as no extra funding was provided, few camps heeded this call.⁵⁶ Timofeev made many pleas for increases in capital investment for infrastructure. Of 150 camp compounds, only 30 had separate dining rooms, and elsewhere prisoners were forced to eat in their overcrowded barracks.⁵⁷

Gulag medical personnel had to ensure that the greatest number of prisoners were fit for production. Competence was evaluated using death and sickness rates, the number of nonworking and invalid prisoners, and so on. Each camp system could have a certain proportion of its prisoner population excused from work for illness. However, the combination of poor living conditions and heavy

55. *Gulag v Karelii, 1930–1941*, doc. No. 72.

56. NKVD order No. 74—March 3, 1939. TsGARK, f. 865, op. 35, sv. 1, d. 2a, l. 16–18ob.

57. *Gulag v Karelii, 1930–1941*, doc. No. 130. On October 30, 1940, in the seventh transit colony of the BBLag, a tier of bunks was so overloaded that it collapsed and crushed one prisoner to death. NKVD order No. 00297—March 18, 1941—TsGARK, f. 865, op. 35, sv. 3, d. 14.

physical labor ensured that the number of sick prisoners always exceeded the accepted quota. In 1936, the BBK made proposals to establish special groups of weakened prisoners that would receive better rations and accommodations and be gradually reintroduced to work under the supervision of medical personnel.⁵⁸ The number of invalids and weak prisoners among the BBLag population grew throughout the 1930s. Timofeev tried to place them in jobs that needed little physical labor, such as the manufacturing sector or the maintenance of camp compounds, but all prisoners, regardless of their health, wanted these less physically demanding jobs. In 1938 it was revealed that of the 7,350 prisoners engaged in camp maintenance in the BBLag, only 1,260 were genuine invalids. The rest, many of whom had secured their positions through bribery and influence, were judged capable of physical labor.⁵⁹

In 1940 Timofeev—who had lost many of his labor-capable prisoners to urgent projects elsewhere in the region—asked the central authorities to recalculate plan figures to take into account the excessive number of invalids in the BBLag workforce.⁶⁰ He also appealed for permission to increase the proportion of prisoners allowed to occupy hospital beds. For the first half of 1940, the authorities granted the BBLag 2,041 hospital beds, enough for 3.34 percent of the camp's population, but the weakened health of this workforce and the disruption of food and medical supplies caused by the Winter War had increased the daily number of prisoners needing beds to 2,220.⁶¹

Even such conclusive data rarely convinced the central authorities to change plan goals, and the only time medical personnel could directly affect production was when an infectious disease threatened

58. *Gulag v Karelii, 1930–1941*, doc. No. 100.

59. *Gulag v Karelii, 1930–1941*, doc. No. 133.

60. TsGARK, f. 865, op. 36, sv. 3, d. 24, l. 8. It is not clear whether Timofeev was successful since he was soon promoted to another job.

61. TsGARK, f. 865, op. 36, sv. 3, d. 24, l. 53–54.

Table 9.1 Mortality Rates in the Gulag

<i>Year/Mortality Rate (%)</i>	<i>OGPU/NKVD Camps</i>	<i>BBLag</i>
1931	2.9	2.2
1932	4.8	2.1
1933	15.0	10.5
1934	4.3	2.4
1935	3.6	1.7
1936	2.5	1.7
1937	2.8	3.3
1938	7.8	4.8
1939	3.8	3.0
1940	3.3	2.9

Source: Joyce, "The Gulag 1930–1960: Karelia and the Soviet System of Forced Labor," p. 150.

to reach epidemic levels. In March 1939 the fifth camp district (Nizhne-Vyg) of the BBLag stopped work, and the entire compound was quarantined until medical staff decreed that the epidemic had passed.⁶² However, local medical staff, many of whom were prisoners, were under pressure from local camp bosses to prevent any interruption of production, and so serious medical conditions, such as venereal diseases, were ignored unless the level of infection increased rapidly.⁶³

The provision of food and medical supplies to the Gulag was subject to the unpredictability of the Soviet planned economy. Prisoners were at the bottom of the national supply chain, and thus any shortages felt throughout society were acutely felt in the Gulag. During the famine in 1933, the mortality rate in the OGPU camps, including even the high-profile BBLag, reached alarming proportions (see Table 9.1).

Throughout the 1930s (except 1937) the mortality rate in the

62. TsGARK, f. 865, op. 35, sv. 1, d. 4, l. 35.

63. TsGARK, f. 865, op. 35, sv. 1, d. 1, l. 37.

186 Christopher Joyce

BBLag was lower than the national Gulag average because of the BBLag's importance, its own infrastructure, and the supply routes in existence before the rapid expansion of the penal system. The BBLag mortality rate only exceeded the national average during 1937, and it is possible that this figure includes the significant number of prisoners from the Solovetskii Islands who were executed.

SPECIAL SETTLERS

The effect of special settlers on Karelia was limited because of the presence of the powerful BBLag and the opposition from the Karelian government to yet more "anti-Soviet" elements in the republic. During canal construction, the chairman of the Karelian government, E. Gyulling, managed to redirect thousands of settlers destined for Karelia to Murmansk, where they helped establish a large urban and industrial center at Kirovsk and Apatity.⁶⁴ Thousands of settlers were assigned to the BBLag from 1933 onward as the camp and combine were entrusted with the task of creating a permanent population base in the region to provide construction workers for various enterprises. It soon became apparent, however, that local camp administrators were neglecting the settlers and focusing their attention on the camp compounds and on plan fulfillment. Settlers were seen as a drain on local resources since it took several years before they became self-sufficient and began contributing to the combine.⁶⁵ Despite orders from the head of BBLag, D. V. Uspenskii, the situation failed to improve; but as the settlers had their civil rights restored, they increasingly became the responsibility of the Karelian authorities, much to the relief of the local Gulag leadership.

64. In 1935 there were thirty-five thousand special settlers in the Murmansk region. Between 1931 and 1935, approximately 55–72 percent of the population in this region were settlers. See Joyce, "The Gulag 1930–1960," 161.

65. *Gulag v Karelii, 1930–1941*, doc. No. 92.

CONCLUSION

Before the opening of the Soviet archives, information on the activities of the Gulag in Karelia was largely confined to anecdotal evidence from memoirs and from Gorky's book on the Belomor Canal. None of these sources could give anything more than a glimpse of life in the Karelian Gulag. The official view of life in the Gulag provided by archival evidence has not contradicted the memoir material but has demonstrated the complexity of the Gulag and the constant, conflicting pressures under which it operated. An investigation of the Karelian Gulag has highlighted the experimental nature of forced labor in this region and shown that the practices developed by the BBLag and BBK were soon adopted across the Soviet Union. Up until the mid-1950s, many leading figures in the Gulag spent some part of their careers in Karelia.⁶⁶ During the Great Patriotic War, the Gulag was almost completely erased from Karelia, and only a few camps, controlled by the local NKVD, remained in operation. In the postwar world Karelia no longer had a part in determining the future direction of the Soviet Gulag, but it did continue to foreshadow national developments in the application of penal policy.

66. Joyce, "The Gulag 1930–1960," Appendix No. 21.