



# SENT TO SIBERIA

Despite the collapse of Communism, the notoriously brutal gulags of the former Soviet Union are still in use – and now there are Saturday-night discos to go along with the hard labour. By Orlando Figes. Photographs by Carl De Keyzer

IT IS ALMOST 50 YEARS SINCE STALIN DIED, YET HIS GHOST STILL stalks the lands of the former Soviet Union. His presence can be felt in the prisons that are housed in the former labour camps of the 'Gulag' – an acronym for *Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei* ('Main Camp Administration') that has come to stand for the terror of the repressive Soviet regime.

In 1953, at the time of Stalin's death, there were six million people in the 'gulag archipelago'. This was Alexander Solzhenitsyn's term for the thousands of camps, from Karaganda on the Central Asian steppe to the minefields of Kolyma and Magadan in the Arctic north-east corner of Siberia. During Stalin's reign 20 million people passed through the gulags (perhaps another 15 million were exiled to special settlements).

The gulags were more than prison camps: they were a major sector of the Soviet economy, producing more than a third of the country's gold, and perhaps even more of its coal and timber, between 1928 and 1953. The gulag population was a cross-section of Soviet society: peasants, workers, clerks, intellectuals – all denounced as 'enemies of the



Russia has a prison population of one million, many of them housed in former gulag camps in Siberia. Male prisoners (opposite, top) are set work on a new building at one such camp. Women prisoners at Camp 22 have a 'relaxation hour' (above) when they listen to soothing music. At Camp 27, a model camp, lunch (right) is a bowl of sardines and a piece of rye bread. The hospital ward (left) at Camp 37 affords some solitude



The women-only Camp 22 holds a Saturday-night disco (below); and (right) an inmate of the camp treats a cold by wearing a fur coat in the heat of summer



Hard men: a ward 'boss' (above) in the sauna at Camp 17 shows off tattoos done illegally with home-made needles; and (below) an inmate of Camp 12, Novobirusinsk, takes an ice shower in temperatures of -40°F



Teenage boys in the youth camp, Kansk, celebrate Christmas (far left) and (left) attend school lessons

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people' – were mixed in with common criminals. The gulag had its own laws and customs, its own morality, its own literature, its own slang; children were born there. No one who passed through was left unscarred. Decades after their release, former inhabitants could recognise each other by no more than a certain look of hardness in the eyes.

After Stalin's death the gulag population was gradually reduced, but the camps themselves remained. Some became workers' barracks for factories and mines. Others served as prisons for common criminals (though they were also used for dissidents and anti-Soviet nationalists in the 1970s). Today Russia has about a million prisoners, many of them housed in the former gulag camps. It is an enormous prison population – even for a country with tremendous social problems and a huge crime wave following the collapse of the police state in 1991 – and to some extent it has been created by an over-harsh and arbitrary judicial system. Conditions in the camps have changed since Soviet days. But, as Carl De Keyzer's extraordinary photographs suggest, elements of the old system remain.

The image of the 'zek' or gulag prisoner breaking rocks with a pick-axe came to symbolise the Stalinist regime, which wasted millions of human lives by constructing dams and canals in this way. Only the strongest could survive a ten-year sentence of breaking rocks for up to 16 hours

