

Virtual Tour of the Gulag

The Only Accessible Gulag Museum, The Gulag.cz Association, Czech Republic

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Abstract. The study presents a virtual tour of the Gulag camp (www.gulag.cz), which consists of the 3D visualization of the labour camp and the panoramic tours of all types of barracks. It is a unique opportunity to familiarize with the conditions, to see how Gulag camps really looked like, especially as there is no museum built from former Gulag camps in Russia today. The description of everyday life in the camp is illustrated by witnesses' testimonies. The tour is accompanied by a general overview of the Gulag system and the stories of Czechoslovak, Hungarian, and Polish citizens arrested in the Gulag. The virtual tour is the result of three Czech expeditions to the furthest flung parts of Siberia (in 2009, 2011, and 2013), aiming to map what has remained of the abandoned Gulag camps in those areas.

Keywords: Gulag, Stalin, Soviet labour camps, virtual tour, Dead Road, Transpolar mainline Salekhard – Igarka, barracks, prisoners, Soviet Union, 3D artefacts

The virtual tour of the Gulag is a unique way of learning about what **Soviet corrective labour camps** looked like. Though there were tens of thousands of Gulag camps in the USSR, none has been turned into a museum analogous to former Nazi camps (Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Theresienstadt). Given that it is not possible to visit a camp of this kind in Russia, we decided to at least capture the appearance of real, abandoned Gulag camps, transfer them from Russia to the Internet and create a virtual tour accessible to people all around the world.

The tour can be found at www.gulag.cz and is accessible in four languages: Czech, English, Polish, and Hungarian. It is a complete 3D visualization of a labour camp with a panoramic tour of all types of barracks and a 3D tour of found artefacts. The tour is supplemented by information about the fates of Czechoslovaks, Poles, and Hungarians in the Gulag.

How the Tour Came About

The virtual tour is the result of three expeditions (2009, 2011, 2013) that mapped in the most remote parts of Northern Siberia the remains of corrective labour camps along with what is known as the Dead Road – a freight railway built by Gulag prisoners in 1947–1953. Almost 1,500 km in length, it was intended to link the towns of Salekhard and Igarka. An estimated 100,000 prisoners in dozens of camps worked on it. Due to the fact that the Northern Siberia region is so distant and desolate, many of these camps have been preserved to this day – the entire construction project was abandoned soon after the death of Stalin in March 1953.

In all, we mapped 17 abandoned camps in various states of decay. In difficult climatic conditions, far from civilization, we carried out thorough geodetic measurements of camp buildings and took spherical panoramic photographs of them. In total, we took 18,000 pictures, which we have used to create the panoramic tour.

Everyday Life in the Gulag

Our aim is to introduce virtual Gulag tour visitors to everyday life in the camp. There, the constructed model of the camp corresponds in shape to the most common layout of the buildings (although every camp differed in number of barracks and other details) and it features all the types of barracks typical of the majority of camps: three types of prisoners, barracks, administration, kitchen with mess-hall, solitary cell, latrines, sick-bay, disinfection section, drying house, workshops and stores, first-aid station, guard house, guard tower, and dog kennels.

The tour also includes 3D visualization of items and written materials found in the camps that illustrate everyday life. We also documented prison clothing, mess-hall bowls, spoons, medicine bottles, tobacco products, work reports, and prisoners' personal letters.

Use of Memoirs and Witnesses

Alongside knowledge gleaned from our long-term field research, we have drawn on the study of specialist literature, archive materials and, above all, the memoirs of survivors in describing the purpose of individual buildings and camp life. Descriptions of each type of barrack are supplemented by collections of onetime prisoners. The authentic memoirs of prisoners are exceedingly important in creating a picture of everyday life and conditions in the camp, giving the tour a

necessary emotional aspect. In most cases, these are memoirs of camp life along the Dead Road. Alongside published memoirs, we recorded interviews with two actual survivors for the purposes of the tour.

The Gulag.cz Association

The Gulag.cz civic association is a voluntary independent group that explores the phenomenon of the Gulag prison system as well as the Soviet totalitarian regime in general from various perspectives and disciplines. We co-operate with Czech historians, researchers, literary scholars, filmmakers, and photographers.

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