

“Gulag,” a Russian acronym for Main Administration Camp, is used to refer to the brutal prison camps and forced labor that existed in nearly every region of the Soviet Union; also implied in the concept were the baseless arrests, the interrogations with predetermined outcomes, the transportation in unheated cattle cars, and the premature deaths. The Gulag had antecedents going back to the 17th century in Czarist Russia, was instituted almost immediately by Lenin following the Russian Revolution of 1917, and took on much larger dimensions under Stalin in 1929 when he decided to use forced labor to speed up Soviet industrialization as well as to excavate the natural resources in Siberia. Conservative estimates would place the total number of forced laborers in the history of the U.S.S.R. at about 30 million and the total number of resulting deaths at about 3 million.

Elinor Lipper, a Dutch socialist, was held for eleven years, from 1937 to 1948, in Soviet prison camps. Eight of these eleven years were spent in “Kolyma,” a term that came to represent the greatest misery the Gulag had to offer. Rich in gold and other minerals, the Kolyma region is located in the far northeastern corner of Siberia and is perhaps the least inhabitable part of Russia. After her eventual release, Elinor Lipper published a book about her grueling experience in Stalin’s Russia and especially in the prison camps of Kolyma.

The excerpts below include the following: A portion from the book’s foreword, where Lipper provides some preliminary insights into the Gulag; a portion on what motivated her to go to the Soviet Union in the first place; and, finally, two portions related to Vice President Henry A. Wallace’s visit to Kolyma in the spring of 1944, which occurred while Lipper was imprisoned there. (Wallace was vice president to Franklin Roosevelt during Roosevelt’s third term as president.) In a very effective manner, Lipper utilizes Wallace’s naïveté about Soviet communism to point out the actual situation in Kolyma.

In fairness to Wallace, the United States was allied to the Soviet Union at the time, as World War II was still in progress, and Wallace intended his goodwill visit as part of an effort toward positive post-war relations between the two countries. The first half of the 20th century had already witnessed two world wars, and Wallace wanted to do everything possible to avoid a third. Several years later, in a September 7, 1952 article in *This Week* magazine titled “Where I Was Wrong,” Wallace acknowledged that Elinor Lipper’s book had shown how he had been deceived by his Soviet hosts, and since then he had come to realize that, “Russian Communism...is something utterly evil.”

Elinor Lipper on Soviet Prison Camps

(*Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, by Elinor Lipper, translated by Richard and Clara Winston, Henry Regnery Co., 1951, pages v-vii, 11-15, 111-113, 266-269.)

Foreword

...For only would-be suicides and heroes can raise their voice against the decisions of their government in Russia. There are few such people in Russia, as there are few everywhere in the world. And it is not only that speaking out is courting death; objectors will be liquidated in absolute secrecy and can be certain that scarcely anyone will ever hear about their resistance.

...Who are the so-called counterrevolutionaries who make up the majority of the prisoners in Soviet camps? Are they guilty, or are they innocent? There can only be one answer. From the standpoint of objective, non-Soviet justice, and from the standpoint of the strictest kind of class justice as well, these people are innocent. Of all the millions of persons in Soviet prisons and camps, very few have consciously taken action against the government in speech or in writing, by demonstrating or attempting to escape from the Soviet Union. Their number is so small that they are insignificant in the great mass of prisoners. Only after spending many years in camp is one likely, with luck, to meet up with a “genuine” counterrevolutionary.

...One consequence of all these arrests has been complete intimidation of the people. No one knows what group will be struck tomorrow, whether it will be “undisciplined” workers, or peasants whose harvest proved too small, or national minorities, or “insubordinate” Russians, or government officials, or army officers, or members of the intelligentsia who today are proud of being “proletarian intellectuals” and who tomorrow may be denounced as corrupt cosmopolitans. There is no security for anyone in the Soviet Union, just as the word “security” does not exist in the Russian language—the only word covering that concept means “lack of danger.”

And so a generation of children is growing up there whose first word is “Talin” (Stalin), and who speedily learn that there are questions which must never be asked, and answers which can never be given. Throughout life all the members of a great nation are forced to mask their faces. Millions of human beings struggle to prove their guiltlessness anew every day, without ever being able to prove it completely. For when the day of arrest comes, nothing counts, neither work nor merit, neither heroism nor submissiveness, neither wisdom nor silence. There are so many who die in the camps, and the gaps must be filled...

How I Came to the Soviet Union

...In 1931, when I began studying medicine in Berlin, student life was full of political tensions. The Chinese wall behind which I had lived so peacefully in my native Holland was beginning to crumble. For the first time I met students who were working their way through the university. They spoke enthusiastically about a country where gifted young people could go to school without paying for their tuition. That country was the Soviet Union. (In 1942 fees for higher education were reintroduced there.) We had endless discussions about free love and women’s right to have abortions. There was one country in the world that gave this right to women—Soviet Russia. (In 1935 abortion was forbidden by law in the Soviet Union and was declared a crime punishable by eight years in a labor camp...)

While I was at Berlin University I worked during vacations in the municipal hospital. For the first time I saw human misery close up. With other students I helped distribute milk among the children of the unemployed. To this day I can see an unemployed epileptic’s six children staring at us with dumb suspicion, the oldest about ten years old, all with colorless faces, overlarge heads and rachitic legs. Once your eyes were open to social injustice it was

impossible for you to shut them again, especially during the years 1931 and 1932 in Berlin. Men out of work loitered on every street, and political discussions went on at every street corner.

What first led me to socialism was a purely emotional reaction to this misery. It was only later that I fortified my belief by reading theoretical writings on socialism. The menace of the Nazi monster with its hateful ideology was coming dangerously near, while the Social Democratic government of Germany retreated step by step before it. It seemed impossible for a thinking person not to take a stand. I entered the "Red Student Group."

I thought I was casting my lot for a social order that would use modern technology for the benefit of the masses, rather than for a privileged upper crust, by nationalizing the land and the means of production:

A social order which by intelligent application of technology would make possible a six-hour working day and a five-day working week (achievements of the Russian Revolution which have long since been abolished), with the leisure time thus saved being used for the development of the individual personality.

A social order which would not resort to war to further its ends, because its people felt linked with the masses all over the world; which recognized force as an evil and would use it only in the period of transition and only against those who used force against it.

A social order which freed its artists, architects, and scientists from concern for their daily bread, so that they could devote their full energies to their artistic and scientific tasks.

A social order where there was no incentive or cause for crime because all men were guaranteed a minimum livelihood that would enable them to live like dignified human beings. A few criminals would still exist, the heritage of former social conditions, but they would be re-educated rather than punished. We assumed that born criminals were relatively rare and that there would be very few such pathological cases.

That was and is my conception of socialism. For the sake of this ideal I left Germany in 1933. The same ideal impelled me to go to the Soviet Union in 1937. There I worked for two months in a publishing house that specialized in foreign literature. (Until 1934 I had tried to continue my medical studies in Italy, but I was unable to get the necessary academic documents out of Germany.)

After my first two months I was arrested.

The political path that had led me to the Soviet Union was perfectly clear, perfectly straightforward. Nothing I had done, said, or planned could have justified my arrest. My only fault was my boundless naïveté in imagining that the Soviet Union was the realization of my ideals.

Even today, after my return from the Soviet Union, the idea of socialism seems to me the most reasonable solution to the social problem and its achievement the only guarantee that wars can be averted in the future. But today I know that the Soviet Union has no interest in the realization of this idea. The Soviet Union has betrayed socialism to the world; it has drowned the idea in blood. A believer in socialism cannot believe in the Soviet Union, for it is impossible to defend the slaughter of millions of innocent human beings and to claim at the same time that one is striving to benefit suffering humanity.

But at that time I did not yet know this. At that time I sat in my cell completely dazed, and waited. And I endured what thousands of women in this same prison endured. I was shifted from one collective cell to another. I picked up Russian and heard my fellow prisoners' stories. Each new story that I heard made me see more and more, until at last I realized what I vainly tried not to realize: that all these people were as innocent as I was. Then my own suffering began to merge into the vast suffering of them all...

Henry A. Wallace on Kolyma

Henry A. Wallace's book, *Soviet Asia Mission*, is typical of the superficial and unprincipled reports made by foreign visitors who, after a brief stay, think they are equipped to tell the truth about the Soviet Union. He speaks with admiration of the mushroom growth of Magadan [a port town in northeastern Siberia that serves as the gateway to the Kolyma region] whose first houses were built "twelve years ago." "Today," Wallace says, "Magadan has forty thousand inhabitants." He does not mention, or does not know, that this city was built solely by prisoners working under inhuman conditions. He also admires the 350-mile Kolyma Road that runs from the port northward over the mountains, and he calls it "an all-weather highway." He does not say—or does not know—that this highway was built entirely by prisoners and that tens of thousands gave their lives in building it. His statement that "in the Kolyma area the Russians have about 1,000 men engaged on road construction" is false, and ridiculous in view of the tremendous natural obstacles to road building. In fact thousands of prisoners are kept busy merely keeping the existing highway open to traffic amid the continual snowstorms.

Wallace says: Commander "Nikishov gamboled about, enjoying the wonderful air immensely." It is too bad that Wallace never saw him "gamboling about" on one of his drunken rages around the prison camps, raining filthy, savage language upon the heads of the exhausted, starving prisoners, having them locked up in solitary confinement for no offense whatsoever, and sending them into the gold mines to work fourteen and sixteen hours a day, at no matter what human cost.

According to Wallace the gold miners of Kolyma are "big, husky young men who came out to the Far East from European Russia." He also reports that "about 300,000 people" now live in the Kolyma district. The figure is amazingly close to the true one. But Wallace fails to say—or does not know—that most of these 300,000 persons are prisoners.

"Such is the return of the exiles to Siberia—they are pioneers of the machine age, builders of cities." Can Wallace possibly be aware of the grotesque irony of his words? For like their

fathers and grandfathers, the children and grandchildren are also exiles, prisoners. But the conditions under which they live are far more inhuman now than they ever were in Tsarist times. In those days the prisoners' families could accompany them into exile; today prisoners are buried alive, cut off from everyone. No one who has a relative in a Kolyma camp is permitted to enter the district.

Wallace also has a touching story to tell about Gridassova, the head of the women's camp. He speaks of her efficiency, maternal solicitude, and little unostentatious attentions. All these traits he found united in the wife of Ivan Nikishov "whom we first met in Magadan at an extraordinary exhibit of paintings in embroidery, copies of famous Russian landscapes. The landscapes were made by a group of local women who gathered regularly during the severe winter to study needlework, an art in which Russian peasants have long excelled..." Nikishov presented Wallace with two "wall pictures." "Who did them?" Wallace asked. Nikishov replied that he couldn't possibly know all the sewing women in a city of 40,000. Later Wallace learned from the exhibit director "who that sewing woman was. She was 'one of the art teachers', Ivan's wife."

In fact, Gridassova was no art teacher and never took up a needle. "The group of local women" consisted of female prisoners, most of them former nuns, who were employed to do needlework for such highly placed ladies as Nikishov's wife. The whole insipid tale fits very well into the general picture that Wallace paints of Nikishov and his wife, those exploiters of slaves who cared as little for the thousands of prisoners whose lives were in their hands as they did for the excellent fish with which they plied Wallace...

Wallace in Magadan

None of the numerous high commissions ever aroused so much excitement as Wallace's visit to Kolyma during the war [World War II]. Some time before the visit took place, a persistent rumor warmed the souls of the freezing prisoners; in return for help in the war the Soviet Union was going to cede Kolyma to the United States. Even the soberest and most reasonable prisoners conceded the possibility, and long discussions were held as to whether in that case the prisoners would also be turned over to America. It was a typical prisoners' fairy tale, as absurd as it was tenacious. And it received a tremendous stimulus when news came of the impending visit of the American Vice President.

Wallace traveled through the Asiatic portions of the Soviet Union in order to observe the capacity of Soviet industry. I do not know what he saw in the rest of Soviet Asia, but in Kolyma the NKVD [secret police—later known as KGB] carried off its job with flying colors. Wallace saw nothing at all of this frozen hell with its hundreds of thousands of the damned.

The access roads to Magadan were lined with wooden watchtowers. In honor of Wallace these towers were razed in a single night.

At the edge of the city there were several prison camps, among them the large women's camp with its several thousand inmates. These prisoners worked in various places throughout the city. Every prisoner who was there at the time owes Mr. Wallace a debt of

gratitude. For it was owing to his visit that for the first and last time the prisoners had three successive holidays. On the day of his arrival, the day of his visit, and the day of his departure, not a single prisoner was allowed to leave the camp.

This was not enough. Although the route for Mr. Wallace and his suite was carefully prepared in advance, there was still the possibility that by mischance the visitor would catch sight of the prisoners in the camp yard—which would not have been an edifying spectacle. Therefore, on orders from above, movies were shown to the prisoners from morning till night for three days. No prisoners went walking in the yard.

To some extent the prisoners of Magadan did repay him, but probably Mr. Wallace did not know it. How could it occur to him that the actors whose performance he enjoyed one evening in the Gorky Theater of Magadan were mostly prisoners? He never met any of these actors, because immediately after the curtain fell they were loaded aboard a truck and returned to the camp. After all, it would have been embarrassing if one of the actors had happened to know English and had mentioned to Mr. Wallace that he was one of hundreds of thousands of innocent prisoners serving a ten-year sentence in Kolyma.

And how could Mr. Wallace know that the city of Magadan, which had risen so swiftly out of the wilderness, had been built exclusively by prison labor; that women prisoners had carried the beams and bricks to the building sites?

He probably did not realize that he had sowed confusion among the prettily dressed swineherd girls at the model farm on the twenty-third kilometer from Magadan by asking them a harmless question about the pigs. For these girls were not swineherds at all; they were a group of good-looking office girls that had been ordered to play a part especially for Mr. Wallace's visit. They took the place of prisoners who actually did take care of the swine. However, the interpreter saved the situation and the visit went off smoothly.

Mr. Wallace was also gratified to note the rich assortment of Russian merchandise in the shop windows of Magadan. He made a point of going into a store to examine the Russian products and to buy some trivial item. The citizenry of Magadan were even more amazed than Mr. Wallace at the Russian goods that appeared overnight in the shop windows, because for the past two years all the—strictly rationed—goods that could be bought had been of American origin. But the NKVD had gone to the trouble of digging stuff up from the remotest stores and precious private hoards in order to impress Mr. Wallace. A citizen of Magadan with presence of mind slipped into the store at the same time as the important visitor and bought a food delicacy that had long since vanished from the channels of trade. Another wanted to follow his example, but by that time Mr. Wallace had left, and this citizen was laconically informed that the articles were “not for sale.”

Then Mr. Wallace went home and published his enthusiastic report on Soviet Asia. The watchtowers were put up again, the prisoners sent out to work again, and in the empty shop windows were to be seen nothing but a few dusty and mournful boxes of matches.