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## PUBLIC HISTORY

# REMEMBERING REPRESSION: THE GULAG AS AN NPS EXHIBIT

*Martin Blatt | Nov 1, 2008*

*Editor's Note: The following essay is part of a series on the National Parks that was conceptualized and coordinated by Art Gomez, historian in the National Park Service, who was a member of the AHA's Professional Division. See also "[America's National Parks System: Sunset or New Dawn?](#)" and "[Public Education and the National Park Service: Interpreting the Civil War.](#)"*

The  
National  
Park  
Service



(NPS), in a  
unique



*Gulag Memorial, Moscow, dedicated to the memory of the victims of Stalinist repression. This art installation by Evgenii Iosifovich Chubarov, in the sculpture garden near the New Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, was completed in 1998. Photo courtesy Steven Barnes.*

partnership with Amnesty International USA; the Gulag Museum in Perm, Russia; and the International Memorial Society, developed the first traveling exhibition in the United States on the Soviet Gulag. The exhibit, *GULAG: Soviet Forced Labor Camps and the Struggle for Freedom*, opened on Ellis Island in New York in spring 2006, and subsequently traveled to Boston; Independence, California; Atlanta; and Poughkeepsie, New York. Each host NPS site chose to participate because the struggle for freedom, a central theme of the exhibit, was also a key element in its own story. Louis Hutchins, senior curator, Northeast Museum Services Center of the NPS, and I were the principal organizers for the National Park Service.

The exhibit traces the history of the Soviet Union's forced labor camp system and its impact on Russia and the world today. The vast network of labor camps was an integral part of Stalin's plans for rapid industrialization and at its height the Gulag imprisoned or internally exiled over five million citizens. This resulted in both the repression of political opposition and the availability of labor for Stalin's economic program. Highlighted in the exhibit is the history of one camp in Russia's Ural Mountains, Perm-36, which has been transformed into a historic site and museum by Russians committed to preserving the memory of the Gulag.

The exhibit included four distinct sections. The

first part detailed the growth of the Gulag under Stalin, described the prisoners and their supposed “crimes,” and depicted a typical day in the life of a Gulag prisoner; the second highlighted the human rights movement in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s and detailed how Perm-36 was converted into a high-security camp for political prisoners; the third examined the legacy of the Gulag in Russia today and focused on the efforts of the Gulag Museum at Perm-36 to educate young Russians on the history of the Gulag and the totalitarian state. Finally, the fourth part showed the links between the efforts of Russia’s Gulag Museum and historic sites around the world that endeavor to explore and give meaning to the difficult histories in their own countries.

We could not have produced GULAG and related programs or managed the exhibit’s traveling schedule without key contributions from scholars and universities. Two scholars in particular, Steven Barnes of George Mason University and Joshua Rubenstein of the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University played indispensable roles.

The original development team for the exhibit consisted of Louis Hutchins and myself from the National Park Service, and Victor Shmyrov and Oleg Trushnikov from the Gulag Museum. When Hutchins and I began working on this project, we could see that it was crucially important to have a scholar of Soviet history as a core member of the exhibit production team as neither of us was an expert in Soviet or Russian history. There were issues related to historical accuracy and interpretation and also assistance that we would need taking the draft exhibit text from our Russian colleagues and not only

translating it but also making it comprehensible for an American audience. In the last several decades, the American public has become increasingly familiar with the history of the Holocaust through the excellent work of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and other museums and the outreach efforts of Facing History and Ourselves. However, knowledge of the Soviet Union's Gulag lags far behind. In seeking to identify a scholar, it was clear to us that we did not want someone caught up in the old ideological battles of the Cold War.

We were extraordinarily fortunate to find Steven Barnes, an exceptionally talented Russian scholar who does not approach the subject of the Gulag burdened by the blinders of Cold War mentality. We first encountered Barnes when he was just completing his PhD at Stanford University and was about to begin a post-doctoral fellowship at Harvard University's Davis Center. He had spent several years combing the newly opened former Soviet archives for his dissertation, soon to be published as *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*.

Our colleagues at the Gulag Museum sought to include far too much by way of subject matter and more words in the exhibit than an American audience might tolerate. We went through a dozen draft scripts of the exhibit and Barnes served as a reviewer of several versions. Our goal was a daunting one. We sought to radically reduce the amount of exhibit script while relating a complex story not known to most Americans. We needed to simplify and condense but still to communicate this painful history clearly and in a historically accurate manner. Barnes helped to reorganize the exhibit on multiple occasions and worked tirelessly to get

the proper language in English to capture the letter and spirit of the Russian expressions and text.

His working with Hutchins and myself led to his “conversion” to public history. Whereas previously he had had a rather exclusive focus on the academic presentation of history, now Barnes has a much fuller understanding of the value of public history products and the amount of work involved. With colleagues at George Mason University’s Center for History and New Media, Barnes (who is now a member of the history faculty at George Mason University) developed an online version of the traveling exhibit, and is building, with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, *Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives*, a larger virtual museum exhibit, at <http://gulaghistory.org>. In addition, the occasion of the exhibit traveling to Boston directly led Barnes to organize the first international conference on the history of the Gulag at the Davis Center, held in the fall of 2006. The conference covered a wide range of topics, including understanding mass terror’s legacy; the Gulag’s legacy after the Soviet Union; kinship and ethnicity in the Gulag; defining the Gulag; the Gulag’s cultural legacy; remembering the Gulag in Russia today; economics and political control in the terror apparatus; and the Gulag in art, literature, memory, and cinema.

Another scholar who was critical to the success of the traveling exhibit was Joshua Rubenstein of Harvard University’s Davis Center, and for many years the Northeast Regional Director of Amnesty International USA. Rubenstein, who has lectured and written widely on the Soviet human rights movement, served a major role in organizing public events associated with the

traveling exhibit and also reviewed the exhibit text. He facilitated the active engagement of Amnesty International across the country as the exhibit traveled to NPS sites. Rubenstein, co-editor most recently of *The Unknown Black Book: The Holocaust in the German-Occupied Soviet Territories* and *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee*, is also the author of *Tangled Loyalties: The Life and Times of Ilya Ehrenburg and Soviet Dissidents: Their Struggle for Human Rights*.

Harvard University's National Resource Center for Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies (NRC), in concert with the NPS, has developed a teacher curriculum unit that explores the themes of the traveling exhibition. It is a three-day course intended for use among middle and high school students. The unit, entitled "GULAG: Soviet Prison Camps and Their Legacy," includes chapters devoted to the creation and scope of the Gulag system, daily life in the camps, as well as the Gulag's historical legacy. The curriculum includes first person accounts and artwork as well as class exercises and homework. Anyone interested in receiving a curriculum unit may contact the NRC at [nrc@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:nrc@fas.harvard.edu), or download a PDF of the unit at [gulaghhistory.org](http://gulaghhistory.org).

One of the coauthors of the curriculum, David Hosford, is a teacher at Lincoln-Sudbury (Massachusetts) High School. In 2005, in part inspired by the traveling exhibit, he launched the Stalin Project with support from the National Endowment for Humanities. The aim of the web site ([www.stalinproject.com](http://www.stalinproject.com)) is to provide teachers and students with free access to a wide array of unique learning materials about the

Stalin era. Hosford writes in his introduction to the site that over the last 15 years great strides have been made to understand the lessons of Hitler and the Holocaust but “very little has been done to study Stalin and the crucial lessons that his rule holds for us.” At this site teachers and students will learn, Hosford declares, about a “pivotal leader of the twentieth century as well as analyze what steps an individual might take to preserve one’s freedom in the face of oppression.”

The National Park Service partnered with universities in two locations where the NPS host site did not have an appropriate venue to display the exhibit. In Boston, Boston University’s 808 Gallery housed the exhibit. As a direct result of this connection, the Boston University Art Gallery recruited Svetlana Boym of Harvard University to curate a companion exhibit to the traveling exhibit, *Territories of Terror: Mythologies and Memories of the Gulag in Contemporary Russian-American Art*. Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site partnered with Marist and Vassar Colleges; the exhibit was on display at Marist and Vassar was involved in public programming. Universities have also played an active role in programming connected to the exhibit. Scholars at Emory University in Atlanta assisted the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site in conceptualizing how the traveling exhibit would be presented with thematic linkages to the story of the civil rights struggle in America. In New York, the Harriman Institute at Columbia University joined with the Jewish Heritage Museum to present a program tied to the Gulag while the exhibit was on display on Ellis Island.

In New York, the exhibit received significant

critical acclaim. The *New York Times* called the exhibit “powerful” (June 7, 2006) and declared that “small things tell large truths...in spareness and simplicity.” The *Wall Street Journal* wrote (June 27, 2006) that the small artifacts with which the story is told “are strikingly effective” and overall the exhibit has an “affecting, mesmerizing quality” which dramatically engages visitors. Gulag Museum Director Victor Shmyrov has reported to us that the coverage of the exhibit, in particular, the reviews in the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, has provided a significant boost for the museum, both at home and abroad.

The National Park Service does not produce very many traveling exhibits, which is unfortunate. However, there are nearly 400 NPS units across the United States and many are involved in producing temporary or permanent exhibits, web sites, and/or curricula. NPS sites address a very wide range of history and I hope these are seen as opportunities by AHA members to become involved.

—Martin Blatt is chief of cultural resources/historian at Boston National Historical Park. He was recently elected vice president of the National Council on Public History.