

Stalin's Slave Ships: Kolyma, the Gulag Fleet, and the Role of the West

By Martin J. Bollinger


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Between 1932 and 1953, a fleet of ordinary cargo ships was pressed into extraordinary service. The fleet's task was to relocate approximately one-million forced laborers to the Soviet Gulag in Kolyma, located along the Arctic Circle in far northeastern Siberia. The Kolyma Gulag, the most infamous in the Soviet Union, was accessible only by sea, and the fleet became the lifeblood of the entire operation. As one of the largest seaborne movements of people in history, this transport took a devastating toll on human lives. Bollinger presents the often-horrific stories of the Gulag fleet and its passengers and reveals the unwitting role of the United States government in the operation.

U.S. shipyards built most of the Gulag fleet, and the U.S. government sold many of the ships used in the transport directly to an agent of the Soviet Union. The United States also overhauled and repaired many ships in the Gulag fleet free of charge at the midpoint of their Gulag careers. In some cases, free ships provided to the Soviet Union under the Lend Lease military assistance program were diverted into Gulag transport duties. How much did Washington know about the deadly duty of these ships? How many prisoners made the voyage? How many never made it out alive? Bollinger details this tragic tale using firsthand testimony from those involved in the operation and materials from both American and Russian archives.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Management consultant and student of maritime history Bollinger has written a valuable book on the maritime transportation system that Stalin used to send tens of thousands of Soviet citizens to the Kolyma prison camps. In clear and concise prose, he describes not only how Stalin supplied the Gulag camps of northeastern Siberia with forced labor, but also how the European and US governments acquiesced in this slave trade and actually built or refurbished many of the ships in Stalin's fleet....Highly recommended. Upper-division undergraduates and above." - **Choice**

"Bollinger's admirable study shines a clear light into one of the darker corners of the Soviet forced labour system, and it will be of interest both to those studying the Gulag and to maritime historians in general." - **International Journal of Maritime History**

"Bollinger skillfully details this tragic tale using firsthand testimony from those involved in the operation and materials from both American and Russian archives." - **Lt. Colonel Robert A. Lynn, Florida Guard**

Review

"Bollinger tells a fascinating tale about one of the more sordid chapters in the history of Stalin's forced labor empire. The book should also be read for its lessons about the West's inadvertent complicity in this sorry saga." (David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye[^]L Brock University[^]L author, [^]Toward the Rising Sun: Russian Ideologies of Empire and the Path to War with Japan[^]R)

"An ingenious use of neglected sources to shed new light on the workings of Stalin's labor camp system." (David Stone[^]L author of [^]Hammer and Rifle: The Militarization of the Soviet Union, 1926-1933[^]R)

About the Author

MARTIN J. BOLLINGER is a full-time management consultant with a leading strategy and technology consulting firm, specializing in business and operations strategy for the aerospace, defense, and transportation industries. In his spare time, he researches and writes about maritime history. He has lived and worked in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, and currently resides in Great Falls, Virginia.

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