

## Abstract

This paper focuses on the institutions, which were in charge of administering the massive exploitation of forced labour in the USSR during Stalinism. In a setting where frequent restructuring and overlapping competences were the order of the day it makes an attempt to identify and describe core organisational patterns and decisive junctures, thus smoothing the way for future research.

Moreover, on the basis of these explorations, it seeks to gain first insights into the roles of different players in this apparatus. Particularly, it seeks to clarify the real role of one of the most notorious institutions within the Stalinist bureaucracy – the GULAG (meaning the so-called main administration with the Soviet People's Commissariat (Ministry) of the Interior).

It finds that the GULAG throughout the 1930s was a universal management agency in control of the entire system of forced labour camps and colonies, as well as of the often complex economic tasks their inmates fulfilled. As the prison camp economy witnessed a period of extreme expansion, however, a dismantling of the GULAG took place in the beginning of the 1940s. While the GULAG was stripped of its most important economic competences, which were outsourced to separate main administrations within the ministry, it was left with non-economic responsibilities, such as guaranteeing isolation of prisoners and discipline among them, but also ensuring their physical well-being and sanitary conditions in all camps and colonies. With regard to these tasks, the GULAG since the end of the war developed and promoted strategies to significantly improve the state of the camps and colonies, which, however, partly came into conflict with purely economic strategies the newly created main administrations pursued. Moreover, the GULAG's position to enforce its specific strategy was weakened by the fact that on the level of the very prison camps there was no special counterpart who would execute it. Instead, there is evidence that local camp managers, who had to fulfil both non-economic and economic tasks, tended to attach greater significance to the fulfilment of the latter.