



DOLINKA MUSEUM FOR COMMEMORATION OF VICTIMS OF POLITICAL REPRESSION

Karanga, Kazakhstan

49.6773546, 72.6799091



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Executive Summary

The Karaganda Corrective Labour Camp (Karlaga) was a Soviet forced labour camp located in the Karaganda region, in the central part of Kazakhstan, and operated between 1931 and 1959. The camp covered a vast area, at its largest, roughly the size of France. After its closure, the camp was left for the most part unfenced and unattended. The locals had reused many former camp buildings. After Kazakhstan gained independence, the government had little interest in commemorating former camps and also addressing the contentious Soviet legacy. In the late 2000s, an effort towards commemoration was made by the government with the creation of the two museums, Alzhir Museum and Karlaga Museum in Dolinka. However, since then, the visitation levels have remained low, both for local and international tourists, arguably reflecting a lack of ownership and legitimacy given by other stakeholders, most importantly, local communities.

Introduction

Since the late 2000s, there have been two museum-memorials dedicated to commemorating the Gulags of Kazakhstan, mainly the Karaganda Corrective Labour Camp, also known as Karlag, and its victims. Located in the region of Karaganda, in central Kazakhstan, Karlag functioned for almost three decades, from 1931 to 1959, and at its peak, it housed about sixty thousand prisoners from many different nationalities and ethnicities.

The current museum-memorials, the Alzhir Memorial and the Karlag Museum in Dolinka, are the main official commemorations for the victims of the Soviet forced labour camps and rule in the country. However, their popularity among locals and international tourists is low, and they both receive very few visitors each year. This case analyses the dynamics of the memorialisation of what has been considered the Soviet Terror in Kazakhstan.

Background

Repression in the Soviet Union and the Gulag system

On June 27, 1929, the Politburo, the policy-making committee of the Communist Party, decided to create a network of self-supporting camps to replace the existing system of prisons.¹ A resolution titled 'On the use of the labour of criminal prisoners' was adopted, which prescribed the formation of the system of corrective labour camps all across the Soviet Union, which came to be known as GULag (*Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei*, or eng. Main Camp Administration).²

Two main motivating factors led to the emergence of the Gulag: the economic and political.³ The economic factor explains Gulag as a slave labour system, which was created to meet the needs of Stalin's industrialisation policies that included the colonisation of remote regions of the USSR and the excavation and mining of mineral deposits.⁴ The creation of the camps coincided with the adoption in 1929 of a policy of forced collectivisation in the countryside.⁵

Collectivisation, the process of claiming private lands and consolidating them into large publicly-owned farms, was accompanied by mass arrests and deportation of a class of wealthy peasants (the so-called 'kulaks') and the village intelligentsia.⁶ They were arrested under Article 58.10 of the Penal Code, termed 'anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda.' This is related to the political factor underpinning the emergence of the Gulag, that being that the camps were used

¹ Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *The history of the Gulag: from collectivization to the great terror* (London: Yale University Press, 2004), 9.

² Президентская Библиотека, "НАЧАЛО ФОРМИРОВАНИЯ СЕТИ ИСПРАВИТЕЛЬНО-ТРУДОВЫХ ЛАГЕРЕЙ ОГПУ СССР," accessed July 10, 2021.

³ Steven Anthony Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 32.

⁴ Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 54.

⁵ Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *The history of the Gulag: from collectivization to the great terror* (London: Yale University Press, 2004), 9-10.

⁶ Ibid.

to isolate those deemed dangerous to Soviet society.⁷ This is supported by the fact that the labour in the camps was not efficient and, for the most part, not profitable.⁸ Furthermore, in 1932 and 1933, the harvest was very poor, and forced collectivisation caused a severe famine.⁹ Kazakhstan and Ukraine were among the regions most severely affected. The solution to this new crisis came by establishing a system of severe repression, which only led to the further growth of the system of camps.¹⁰ The temporary stabilisation of the system following the 1932-3 famine was short-lived as it was curbed by the Great Terror in 1937-38.¹¹

The Great Terror, also known as the Great Purge, was a series of punitive actions directed against various groups that the Soviet leaders perceived as real or potential enemies.¹² The Terror increased the number of prisoners in the Gulag and worsened the situation in the camps.¹³ The Gulag was characterised in those years by an escalation of violence, starvation and increased mortality rates.¹⁴ During the Second World War, the Gulag expanded even further by absorbing the prisoners of war and citizens of the territories occupied by the Soviets, Finland, Baltic States, Poland, Belarus and others.¹⁵

The history of Karlag

The Karaganda region in the central part of Kazakhstan is rich in natural resources, especially coal. This was known from the tsarist era, but the basin started to be exploited only in the early 1930s.¹⁶ However, as early as 1925, the Soviet authorities had identified the Karaganda region as a potential place for a labour camp.¹⁷ In the early 1930s, the first labour camp, named the Kazakhstan Corrective Labour Camp, called Kazitlag or Kazlag, was established there.¹⁸ Kazilag was run by the OGPU (in Russian: *Объединённое государственное политическое управление* – The Joint State Political Directorate) a secret police unit. However, the camp as well as the OGPU were disbanded within a year, and only the agricultural part of the camp, called 'Gigant', remained. It then became a part of a new independent camp, the Karaganda Corrective Labour Camp (Karlag), overseen by the NKVD (in Russian: *Naródnyy komissariát vnútrennikh del*), the successor of OGPU.¹⁹

Karlag was primarily, though not exclusively, an agricultural camp established to transform the

⁷ Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 333.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *The history of the Gulag: from collectivization to the great terror* (London: Yale University Press, 2004), 55.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 2.

¹² Ibid., 140.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 241.

¹⁶ Steven Anthony Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 52.

¹⁷ Galina Ivanova, *Labour Camp Socialism: the gulag in the soviet totalitarian system* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 70-71.

¹⁸ Steven Anthony Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 53.

¹⁹ Ibid.

semidesert steppe into a productive agricultural base.²⁰ It was one of the largest, both geographically and in terms of prisoner population, and longest-lasting camps in the Gulag system.²¹ The camp had a size of 300,000 square miles (roughly the size of France).²² Its administrative centre was located in the village of Dolinka, fifty kilometres away from the city of Karaganda, where the former administration building still stands.²³

At its peak, around 1949, the camp housed about sixty thousand people and prisoners representing many different nationalities and ethnicities, including German, Korean, Ukrainian, Japanese, Hungarian, Chechen, and many others.²⁴ The majority of the prisoners were those sentenced under Article 58.10 of the Penal code, among them Soviet leading artists, scientists and professionals in various fields.²⁵ Over the course of its existence, it is said that over one million prisoners passed through the facility.²⁶

The conditions in the camp were harsh, with overcrowded and poorly heated barracks. The prisoners suffered from lice and bedbugs and received rations too small to sustain them.²⁷ Every prisoner was forced to undertake exhausting physical labour, often in harsh weather. Some of them were tortured and killed.

After the death of Stalin in 1953, the number of prisoners in Karlag and in the Gulag system in general began to fall. The make-up of the detainees changed as well, the proportion of criminal prisoners rose, and the number of political prisoners declined.²⁸ The camp closed down eventually in 1959, and all the detainees were either released or transferred to other places to finish their sentences.

History of the Contestation

Karlag after its closure

The former camp spreads across a vast area, which in itself presents challenges for a commemoration of the site. Much of the site remained unmarked and only a small portion came to be maintained and was fenced. Many buildings that had formed the infrastructure of the camp

²⁰ Steven Anthony Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 54.

²¹ Ibid., 53.

²² Peter Ford, "Dark Tourism in Kazakhstan's Gulag Heartland," *Diplomat*, May 25, 2017.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Karlyga Myssayeva and Michael Brown, "Labor Propaganda and the Gulag Press: The Case of Putevka," *Journalism History* 46, no. 3 (2020), 212.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Assam Tokayeva, "В будущем музее Карлага окна заложили кирпичом". Радио Азаттык. October 14, 2006. <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/1180719.html>.

²⁷ Karlyga Myssayeva and Michael Brown, "Labor Propaganda and the Gulag Press: The Case of Putevka," *Journalism History* 46, no. 3 (2020), 212.

²⁸ Steven Anthony Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 655.

were simply reused by the local community. The main administration building in Dolinka served as a sanatorium, school and subsequently as a hospital.²⁹ The Karabas Gulag railway terminal, where prisoners arrived and were selected for forced labour, is still used as a rail terminal with access to an operating Kazakh prison, which in turn also utilises former Gulag incarceration buildings.³⁰ A former building in Osakarovka that was used as an orphanage for children of those imprisoned in Karlag is still being used as an orphanage to this day.³¹ Some of the abandoned barracks are used as waste dumps.³²

Near Spassk, thirty-five kilometres away from Karaganda, there is a mass burial place for war prisoners and internees who were held at a camp unit there. After Kazakhstan gained independence, the mass graves were commemorated with monuments placed by different governments and public organisations.³³ The first monument was placed by the government of Japan in 1994, and monuments from Poland, Hungary, Lithuania, Ukraine, Armenia, Romania, and others followed.³⁴ A monument for victims of all nationalities was placed there by the municipal government in 2004 when the Spassky Memorial Complex was opened.³⁵ Spassk is one of the few burial places to be commemorated and maintained. There are numerous other mass burial sites that remain either undiscovered or, if discovered, without commemoration.³⁶

The site was left largely without commemoration initially after its closure. Before the collapse of Communism, there could be no question of such commemoration. After Kazakhstan gained independence in 1990, addressing the Soviet and the gulag history was also initially omitted. With independence, Nursultan Nazarbayev became the first president of Kazakhstan in 1991 (until 2019). In 1995, he established a new political agenda to promote Kazakhstan as a modernising and transnational polity.³⁷ The agenda focused on the country's post-independence achievements and its future, and left little space and resources to deal with the Soviet past and to commemorate the Karlag victims.³⁸ Another possible explanation for Kazakhstan's reluctance to address the Soviet legacy is Nazarbayev's desire to maintain good relations with Russia, Kazakhstan's main trading partner.³⁹

²⁹ Peter Ford, "Dark Tourism in Kazakhstan's Gulag Heartland," *Diplomat*, May 25, 2017.

³⁰ John Lennon and Guillaume Tiberghien, "Ambiguity and dilution in Kazakhstan's Gulag heritage," *Tourism Recreation Research* (2021), 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Maria Golovnina, "Forgotten Stalin victims despair in Kazakh steppe," *Reuters*, December 21, 2009.

³³ Freejournal.org, "Спасский мемориал," May 16, 2020.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Oktmo.ru, "Спасский мемориал," February 8, 2021.

³⁶ Guillaume Tiberghien and John J. Lennon, "Gulag Heritage Conservation, Visualisation and Interpretation for Tourism Development: A Multi-Stakeholder Perspective," *Tourism Planning & Development* (2020), 21.

³⁷ James Richter, "Famine, Memory, and Politics in the Post-Soviet Space: Contrasting Echoes of Collectivization in Ukraine and Kazakhstan," *Nationalities Papers* 48, no. 3 (2020), 483.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 483-484.

Alzhir Museum and Karlag Museum in Dolinka

The Soviet and Karlag legacy has only been addressed to a limited extent in the years following independence. President Nazarbayev established May 31 as the Day of Remembrance of Political Repression in Kazakhstan in 1997. Another important development was the establishment of two museums commemorating different aspects of Karlag.

The first one, the Alzhir museum-memorial complex, opened on May 31, 2007, on the initiative of President Nazarbayev.⁴⁰ It is located thirty kilometres from the capital, Astana (now called Nur-Sultan) and commemorates the place of the former Alzhir camp (full name: Akmolinsk Camp for Wives of Traitors to the Motherland).⁴¹ The camp was a subdivision of Karlag that housed wives and children of the Karlag inmates.⁴²



Figure 1: "Alzhir Memorial Museum" image by Ninaras via Wikimedia Commons CC BY 4.0

The second museum in Dolinka was opened in 2001 and was, at least initially, a modest project. It took several years for the museum to acquire its own separate room in one of the camp's former hospital wings, which was still deemed to be inadequate by the museum's director.⁴³

The director's aspirations were realised when the museum acquired the former administration building of Karlag, which was fully transformed into a museum, called the Karlag Museum or 'the Memory Museum of Victims of Political Repressions' in 2009.⁴⁴ The first floor of the museum is dedicated to the deportations of the Soviet era and the second floor to Kazakh independence and the post-Soviet state.⁴⁵ The museum was, however, briefly closed and underwent renovations until it was ceremoniously reopened in May 2011.⁴⁶ As part of their activities, since 2013, a 'Night in Karlag' has been organised,⁴⁷ during which scenes from the life in the camp are reenacted and visitors are offered 'Gulag-type' meals.⁴⁸

⁴⁰ Guillaume Tiberghien and John J. Lennon, "Gulag Heritage Conservation, Visualisation and Interpretation for Tourism Development: A Multi-Stakeholder Perspective," *Tourism Planning & Development* (2020), 11-14.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² John Lennon and Guillaume Tiberghien, "Ambiguity and dilution in Kazakhstan's Gulag heritage," *Tourism Recreation Research* (2020), 5.

⁴³ Assam Tokayeva. "В будущем музее Карлага окна заложили кирпичом". Радио Азаттык. October 14, 2006. <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/1180719.html>.

⁴⁴ John Lennon and Guillaume Tiberghien, "Ambiguity and dilution in Kazakhstan's Gulag heritage," *Tourism Recreation Research* (2020), 5.

⁴⁵ Guillaume Tiberghien and John J. Lennon, "Managing authenticity and performance in Gulag Tourism, Kazakhstan," *Tourism Geographies* (2019), 8.

⁴⁶ "Музей памяти жертв политических репрессий в Долинке обновлен". Радио Азаттык. 31 March, 2011. <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/24210998.html>.

⁴⁷ Guillaume Tiberghien and John J. Lennon, "Gulag Heritage Conservation, Visualisation and Interpretation for Tourism Development: A Multi-Stakeholder Perspective," *Tourism Planning & Development* (2020), 14.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

The two national museums mark a significant development in the commemoration and management of the Gulag past. However, the treatment of the Gulag past by the government remains ambiguous and incomplete.⁴⁹ As mentioned above, the rest of the former camp infrastructure is not maintained. For instance, the buildings just next to the Karlag museum in Dolinka are in a state of decay.⁵⁰ Moreover, the visitation level in both museums remains low⁵¹ as visitations are mostly undertaken by local schools, and they attract very few international tourists or even locals.⁵² This is contrary to what the global trend of dark tourism would suggest.⁵³

The location of the two museums might partially contribute to low visitations, as access to both museums by public transport is not straightforward and can be expensive.⁵⁴ However, low popularity might also be due to the lack of ownership over the two museums and the diverse stances held by Kazakhs about the Soviet Union, which the current narrative does not address.

At present, the local communities do not have any say in developing the two Gulag museums, and they do not always embrace the history presented in them.⁵⁵ This omission is further exacerbated by the complexity of the Soviet legacy in Kazakhstan. The manager of Nomadic Travel, a company providing trips to the two museums, reported:

Some of the locals and the authorities said; Why are you not patriots? Why are you telling such stories about our country? We have Baravoie, Balkhash, (natural heritage attractions) we have the picturesque nature. Why do you show this negative material?⁵⁶

There is a clear division on the memories of the Soviet past as some Kazakhs would not mention the Karlag at all, others criticise the government for speaking too little about the historic legacy of the Gulag, and some look back to the Soviet period with nostalgia.⁵⁷

For example, it was suggested in 2006 that local interest in the museum may have been raised if the authorities had agreed to declassify the archive of Karlag. The government may, however, have had good reasons to avoid the discussions of the Karlag altogether. For their part, the authorities feared that declassifying the archives might lead to mass litigation, given

⁴⁹ John Lennon and Guillaume Tiberghien, "Ambiguity and dilution in Kazakhstan's Gulag heritage," *Tourism Recreation Research* (2020), 3.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 6.

⁵² Ibid., 9.

⁵³ Dark tourism is tourism involving travel to sites associated with death and tragedy which has been a worldwide trend, attracting millions of tourists for instance to the former Nazi camp Auschwitz, located in Poland. To know more see: Askar S. Mukashev and Dana M. Ussenova, "Opportunities of "Dark Tourism" development in the Republic of Kazakhstan," *Education and Science without borders* 7, no. 4, 39.

⁵⁴ John Lennon and Guillaume Tiberghien, "Ambiguity and dilution in Kazakhstan's Gulag heritage," *Tourism Recreation Research* (2020), 2.

⁵⁵ Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *The history of the Gulag: from collectivization to the great terror* (London: Yale University Press, 2004), 27.

⁵⁶ John Lennon and Guillaume Tiberghien, "Ambiguity and dilution in Kazakhstan's Gulag heritage," *Tourism Recreation Research* (2020), 9.

⁵⁷ Martha Brill Olcott, "Kazakhstan's Soviet Legacy", Carnegie endowment for international peace, November 30, 2011.

the fact that both former camp workers and inmates remained in the area following the camp's closure. This worry means that some parties have been cautious in their approach towards reconciliation and historical openness.⁵⁸

Decision-Making Processes

The decision-making process regarding the commemoration of the Karlag site was made by the central government. For the first years after independence, it was the political establishment's decision not to maintain the former site, and then in the late 2000s, it was also their decision to create the two museums. Both actions might have been, to some extent at least, a decision of political expediency rather than an organised policy of addressing the Gulag past.

Other stakeholders, most importantly, local communities, have not been engaged in the process of deciding how to commemorate the site. Arguably, this led to the current low visitation levels and generally low interest in the museums. This, in turn, contributes to a lack of support and legitimacy for the museums and the interpretation of history they present.⁵⁹ The lack of inclusion of a wider group of stakeholders is particularly acute in light of the varied perspectives Kazakhs hold on the Soviet era. While the museums are public bodies, the bulk of their advertisement and promotion is performed by private tourism companies.

The seeming lack of local engagement, however, has not necessarily been for want of trying. Upon release, inmates were forbidden from disclosing abuses suffered during their time in the camp for a period of twenty-five years.⁶⁰ This may well have prevented knowledge of the camp from entering cultural memory and from being transmitted across generations. The author, Ekaterina Kuznetsova, who began exposing the history of Karlag from the mid-1880s over several successful publications, was met with a negative reaction from ex-guards and workers.⁶¹ Kuznetsova's work has also been translated into foreign languages for Karlag's international diaspora, who in 2011 were still contacting the author regularly.⁶² In 2018, a Kazakh theatre play, "Ahiko from Aktas", was staged in Japan, which narrativised the life of a Japanese inmate in Karlag, one of 'thousands of people of different nationalities, victims of political repression, who were deported to Kazakhstan in the dark years of Stalin,' its

⁵⁸ Assam Tokayeva. "В будущем музее Карлага окна заложили кирпичом". Радио Азаттык. October 14, 2006. <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/1180719.html>.

⁵⁹ Guillaume Tiberghien and John J. Lennon, "Gulag Heritage Conservation, Visualisation and Interpretation for Tourism Development: A Multi-Stakeholder Perspective," *Tourism Planning & Development* (2020), 3.

⁶⁰ Elena Weber. "Автор книг о казахском ГУЛАГе сомневается, нужно ли их писать ещё". Радио Азаттык. 21 November 2011. https://rus.azattyq.org/a/gulag_kazakhstan_karlag_ekaterina_kuznetsova/24395081.html.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

description writes.⁶³ The play seems to have been well received by its Japanese audience.⁶⁴ Whether or not this has increased tourism to Karlag, and specifically to the museum, is not obvious, however. At present, private and public efforts to increase tourism are not coordinated.⁶⁵

Dynamics to consider in decision-making include the importance of the choice of what to maintain if the area to commemorate is vast and who should make this decision; the need to include the local community in the decision about creation and exhibitions in the museums; and the interaction between government, local authorities and private tourism providers.

Summary and Conclusions

Addressing the Soviet era and the legacy of the Gulag has been limited and selective so far in Kazakhstan. The Gulag camp, for the most part, is unmarked and therefore, the understanding of its historical role remains unclear. The process leading to this partial remembrance has been dominated by the central government, overlooking other stakeholders, most importantly, local community members, with some having serious personal interests in the memory of Karlag. Granted, the authorities have, in the past, been reluctant to directly address the camp's legacy because of the possibility of mass litigation within the local community, which consists of both ex-inmates and ex-guards. Addressing the legacy of the Gulag needs to involve local communities and take into account the tourism factor (including Karlag's international diaspora), rather than being, like the two currently existing museums, a product of political expediency.

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⁶³ M. Omarova. "Ahiko from Aktas". Mukhtar Auezov Kazakh National Theatre of Drama. 2018.

⁶⁴ Embassy of Kazakhstan in Japan. "Auezov Kazakh State Drama Theater presented "Ahiko from Aktas" in Japan". Youtube. January 29, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ieby-k97usw>.

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Figures

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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gulag_ALZHIR_in_Astana,_Kazakhstan,_Monument_to_the_victims_02.jpg. (Figure 1)

About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

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