

FINAL PERFORMANCE REPORT

Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives

<http://gulaghistor.org>

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Final Report
Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives
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Since receiving the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant in October 2005, the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University (CHNM) embarked on a long journey to build the web site, *Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives* <http://gulaghistory.org>, which offers the general public and students of World History an innovative, multi-faceted consideration of the human struggle for survival in the Soviet Gulag labor camps. Drawing from the latest secondary scholarship and primary source research, *Many Days, Many Lives* presents compelling original historical content through a bi-lingual exhibit, short documentaries, a rich archive of primary sources, and lesson plans to teach with the site.

This work has been accomplished despite some significant organizational hurdles over the course of the grant.

First was the loss of significant members of the Gulag project team. Stephanie Hurter, who had guided the project from proposal through critical planning stages, had to resign her position because of poor health in September 2006. Gwen White, another doctoral student at George Mason, assumed the role as Gulag project manager and guided the research activities and website production through the fall of 2007. At that time, however, Gwen was forced to leave the project because of her husband's illness and subsequent death from cancer. This left us in the difficult position of replacing another key staff member just as it was time to pull together the diverse strands of research, web development, audio/video production, data entry, translation, editing, and launch preparation. The role was assumed by Sheila Brennan, Senior Digital History Associate at CHNM who is ABD in history at Mason. She was assisted by the rest of the project staff: Project Director and Lead Historian Dr. Steven Barnes; Associate Producer, Dr. Elena Razlogova; Researcher and Translator, Nastya Mikeeva; and Multi-Media Editor, Misha Vinokur.

Second was the tragic loss of CHNM's founding director and the *Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives* executive producer, Roy Rosenzweig. Roy's long struggle and death from cancer in October 2007 left the project and CHNM with a heavy burden. Those who knew Roy know that his energy, vision, and work ethic were incomparable and irreplaceable. CHNM Managing Director, Tom Scheinfeldt has taken over as executive producer for the project and is doing his best to assume Roy's former role.

With all of these challenges, the Gulag team pushed forward on the grant's deliverables. A summary of what we accomplished follows below.

Project Content and Components

Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives website

The project site, <<http://gulaghistory.org>> contains three main content sections that offer site visitors different opportunities to mine the resources available in: Archive, Exhibits, and Resources. Each section has sub-sections that lead to additional content. On the homepage, we feature one exhibit and one item that rotate regularly. Visitors can also learn about the multi-national project team and origins of the site from the **About** page.

- The **Archive** section provides a completely searchable collection of nearly 300 primary sources from around the world, including documents, photographs, oral histories, paintings, video clips complete with standardized Dublin Core metadata and rights clearances. Anyone may browse the entire archive, item-by-item, or by keyword tag. The project staff established a controlled vocabulary list by which to tag every item in the archive in an effort to make the sources more accessible. Within the archive are 30 complete prisoner biographies, each one segmented and tied directly to the text of the exhibit narrative and available in English and Russian that users can read separately from the narrative exhibits.

We worked closely with our Russian partners, the Gulag Museum at Perm 36, Perm, Russia and the International Memorial Society, Moscow, Russia to secure many of the items available in this digital collection.

- **Exhibits** offer three different narratives to explore the rich materials in the archive. The first exhibit is "Days and Lives," a well-written, bilingual (Russian and English) exhibit narrative containing more than 36 panels of rich yet highly readable original text broken into 10 themed sections that showcase more than 50 high quality images, 10 originally-produced documentaries, and 10 high quality video clips featuring interviews with former Gulag prisoners. Each section treats a theme dealing with Gulag experiences, including arrest, labor, suffering, propaganda, conflict, solidarity, guards, survival, and fates. Another section is devoted to the prisoners themselves, showcasing

their full biographies that also link to documents or images from the archive that relate to that person's life.

As we proposed, upon entering the web exhibition, each visitor is assigned a prisoner randomly and an excerpt from that prisoner's personal story appears at the top of each section while browsing "Days and Lives." This function allows the visitor to follow along with historical narrative in each section that applies to the broader Gulag experience, while also tracing the life of their prisoner.

Because this is an original piece of scholarship its planning and development took nearly two years. During the summer of 2006, the Gulag team expanded to include two more full time research assistants at the Center and we also contracted to hire a researcher in Moscow to do research for us at the Memorial Museum and other archives in Moscow. As well, we began sifting through official and personal documents from the Gulag and gathering a collection to include in the archive section of our website. During the spring and summer of 2007, we synthesized all of the materials gathered into the text for the narrative section of the website. In the process of collecting images and writing the narrative text, we also selected images and created text for short documentary movies that introduce each of the themed section. During the Fall 2007 and Winter 2008, Misha Vinokur worked with Dr. Steve Barnes to edit and produce those ten movies. Dr. Razgolova offered additional assistance by translating the English "Days and Lives" into its Russian counterpart. The bilingual exhibit, "Days and Lives," launched in June 2008.

The second exhibit, *Gulag: Soviet Forced Labor Camps and the Struggle for Freedom*, was developed in conjunction and collaboration with a traveling exhibit from the National Park Service with an attractive design developed by Stephanie Hurter and Jeremy Boggs at CHNM. This exhibition provides a portal for relatives of Gulag prisoners and others to respond to the exhibit in the "Reflections" sections. It launched in April, 2006 at the same time as the opening of the physical exhibit at Ellis Island, which allowed us to begin publicity for the overall project before our own exhibits were public.

Third, we offer a narrated tour of the Perm 36 camp. In the final months of the project, we completed this short exhibit featuring a video tour of the Perm 36 Gulag camp in Russia. In December 2006, Dr. Razlogova traveled with a Russian camera crew to the

Perm 36 site, more than 700 miles from Moscow. There we recorded several hours of original video footage and interviews with the Perm 36 museum director, Viktor Shmyrov. We produced a high quality video tour of the camp, complete with transcripts in English and Russian.

- **Resources** gives all online visitors the opportunity to extend their experiences beyond the web site to learn more about the Gulag. First, users will find teaching resources developed by project partners, Harvard University's National Resource Center for Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies (NRC). This curriculum module further explores the themes of *Many Days, Many Lives*. It is a three-day course intended for use among U.S. 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, and is easily downloadable as a PDF file.

Second, a bibliography offers the opportunity for further reading and research on Gulag topics. And lastly, we launched a podcast series and blog to accompany, contextualize, and help publicize the launch of the website, funded in part by a grant from the Kennan Institute. This series features interviews by lead scholar Dr. Barnes with recognized authorities in the field of Soviet studies and Russian history. The first of these interviews, a conversation with Lynn Viola, is available now from the *Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives* website and through iTunes.

Publicity and Outreach

To publicize *Many Days, Many Lives*, we planned a vigorous program of pre- and post-launch publicity and focus grouping, including appearances and presentations at the American Historical Association annual meeting in January 2008, the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies annual meeting in November 2007, the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations annual meeting in June 2007, and among students at Duke University, the University of North Carolina, Harvard University, and Miami University of Ohio. (see Appendix for full list)

Once we launched the website in June 2008, we launched a significant publicity drive,

electronically and in print, to drive traffic to the site. These efforts included: placing prominent advertisements in the History News Network, *Newsnet* (the Slavic Studies newsletter), *History Teacher*, *Social Studies Professional*, and the American Historical Association's *Perspectives*; mailing out a general press release organized by George Mason media relations; announcing the site launch on H-Russia, H-World, H-Public, and other relevant listservs; soliciting contacts in the history blogosphere that brought about announcements on widely read CHNM blogs such as dancohen.org, foundhistory.org, edwired.org, and clioweb.org; discussing the site on CHNM's popular podcast Digital Campus; and launching Dr. Barnes' ongoing "Episodes in Gulag History" podcast. Lead historian Barnes and Associate Producer, Razlogova will also continue their extensive efforts to publicize the site among scholarly and educational audiences through additional conference presentations, public lectures, and guest teaching appearances.

We have received positive feedback, from scholars and museum professionals in the United States and in Eastern Europe who see *Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives* as an excellent example of serious history scholarship. In July, the American Historical Association's blog featured *Gulag* in a review which helped to increase our visibility and site visitation. During 2008, gulaghistory.org has received a steady stream of visitors totaling nearly 60,000, with over 320,000 page views.

Project Sustainability

One major task was developing the digital infrastructure for the website and project. We initially programmed one database to use, but then decided it was not flexible enough. In considering the long term stability and sustainability of the project, we transferred the website to the new Omeka web publishing platform under the direction of CHNM creative lead Jeremy Boggs and Omeka head developer Kris Kelly. Omeka is a free, standards-based, open-source web platform for publishing collections and exhibitions online. Designed specifically by CHNM for cultural institutions, enthusiasts, and educators and funded with a national leadership grant from IMLS, Omeka facilitates community-building around collections and exhibits and features a standardized Dublin Core metadata structure and standards-based design that is fully accessible and interoperable with other widely used collections management packages. This means that metadata for the *Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives* is standardized according to widely accepted library and archival standards and the front end website complies with WC3 and web accessibility standards, including section 508. It also means that the website is fully compatible with Zotero, CHNM's research management tool, currently in use by nearly

1,000,000 scholars and students worldwide. In the original proposal, we said we would do the site in Flash but we decided that once we switched to the Omeka platform that using “AJAX” (Asynchronous JavaScript and XML) and Cascading Style Sheets would allow us to achieve our design goals and provide interactivity while also insuring a higher level of accessibility.

Additionally, *Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives* is featured on the Omeka "showcase" as an example for others who are interested in building scholarly online exhibitions. As a free, open source project under active development by a diverse and dispersed community of programmers and designers and being used by hundreds of other institutions around the world, we believe the Omeka infrastructure provides a clear, low-cost technology upgrade path and the best chance for maintaining the project as a viable resource for years to come.

Conclusion

Regardless of ongoing challenges the project faced through the term of the grant, we believe we have produced a compelling yet serious, engaging yet scholarly, website that will significantly advance the general public's understanding of the Gulag prison camp system specifically and Soviet and Cold War history in general. *Many Days, Many Lives* achieves our main objective, which was to begin filling a void of English language resources on Gulag, Russian, and Soviet history on the web, while also offering a Russian language exhibition. We believe that this site will be a starting point for scholars, educators, and interested general visitors seeking more information about those topics. Furthermore, by expanding the number of sources and biographies, and by employing the latest web publishing and collections management technology, we have broadened the project's reach, enhanced its sustainability, and exceeded our original goals.

Appendix: Lectures and Appearances

- November 2008, American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, Philadelphia, PA
- April 2008, Duke University – Guest lecture in Slavic studies class, and lecture at a high school teacher training institute on teaching the Gulag.
- April 2008, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill – Public lecture
- February 2008, Havighurst Center for Russian and Post-Soviet Studies, Miami University, Oxford, OH
- January 2008, American Historical Association, Washington, DC
- November 2007, American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, New Orleans, LA
- November 2007, Southern Historical Association, Richmond, VA
- June 2007, Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University, Lecture at teacher training institute designed to create pedagogical materials for teaching Stalinism in high schools.
- June 2007, “Soviet Society and the Cold War: The Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives,” 2007 Annual Meeting of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, Reston, VA.
- April 2007, American University, Two lectures to students in Russian and public history courses.