

Gulag NEH Report

Interim Report, Gulag: Many Lives, Many Days, October 1, 2005 to September 30, 2006

We have made excellent progress on this web-based exhibit project in our first year, and we are moving along toward producing a high-quality website that is rooted in the best and latest scholarship and that engagingly presents the story of the Soviet Gulag to a broad international audience.

In the fall of 2005 we began by carefully evaluating the budget, our staff, and our needs. Project Manager Stephanie Hurter had meetings with key individuals at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to ask them questions about what method they use to turn physical exhibits into online exhibits. Hurter and other team members also met with staff members from the National Museum of American History to discuss the same thing. Hurter and Project Historian, Steve Barnes, also worked on making contact with important individuals who held important—previously unpublished—materials related to the Gulag, as well as overseeing graduate research assistants who began to gather and review memoirs and biographies of Gulag prisoners. Hurter and Barnes also delivered a lecture at the Wilson Institute's Kennan Center on the Gulag and their website project. International Liaison Elena Razlogova traveled to Russia in the early part of the New Year and researched materials at a film archive in Moscow and also made contact with our partners at Memorial in Moscow.

By late Spring 2006, we had collected materials for thirty-two biographies and had a list of other prisoners to pursue. (We now expect to have at least forty prisoner biographies within the site—double what we had promised in our original proposal.) We had also collected images and photographs to accompany each of the themes of the website and had begun to begin thinking about presentation of these graphics. Barnes traveled to Russia in March and gathered further photographs and materials from our partners in Perm, Russia.

In the summer of 2006, the Gulag team expanded to include two more full time research assistants at the Center—bringing us to a total of three for the summer—GMU Doctoral Student Gwen White, visiting scholar Nastya Mikheeva, and summer intern Alexis Hurter. All of them did an extraordinary job of researching, organizing, and synthesizing research material. We also contracted to hire a researcher in Moscow (Mirjana Visentin) to do research for us at the Memorial Museum and other archives in Moscow. Throughout the summer we wrote approximately forty biographies of Gulag prisoners—prisoners who reflect the diversity of experiences and demographic differences that made up the prisoner population. We also collected over 1,600 images of objects, artwork, and photographs relating to the Gulag. 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. We have also begun drafting the text for the narrative section of the website.

In the process of collecting images and writing the narrative text, we have also compiled image collections and created text for mini-movies that will introduce each of the themes in the narrative section.

Another major task has been developing the digital infrastructure for the website and project. We had initially programmed one database to use, but then decided it was not flexible enough. We have instead built a new database structure that draws on other work underway at the Center for History and New Media, and we have begun entering images and text into it. We continue to work on the design and more concentrated conversations about its final look are planned for the upcoming months as the text is completed and the final images selected. In the original proposal, we said we would do the site in Flash but we have now decided that “AJAX” (Asynchronous JavaScript and XML) and Cascading Style Sheets will allow us to achieve our design goals and provide interactivity while also insuring a higher level of accessibility.

For the fall, we have two research assistants working to finalize image selection, the narrative, and to work on translation work of the site from English into Russian. As well, Razlogova has hired a film crew in Perm, Russia to join her in late October to film the reconstructed Gulag camp in Perm and also to interview its current director. We have also hired a script editor to help us polish the text for a public audience.

Although the grant to CHNM was \$30,000 below what we originally requested, we are trying to accomplish all of the goals set out in the more expensive proposal. Still, we will probably have to make some small changes. One area involves the online chats we had originally proposed. We are now thinking that we can accomplish the same goals at lower cost with a blog written by Barnes and perhaps another historian and with the opportunity for the public to comment. Another minor change in our work plan involves the QTVR of the Perm camp that we had originally proposed. We have now decided that film clips with voice-over narration from the director of the Perm Museum would be more interesting and engaging to site visitors. We anticipate being able to provide the full range of materials promised in the original proposal with the possible exception of the oral interviews that we were to receive from the National Park Service. There, we still need to assess the quality of the material available.

One of the key accomplishment of the past year has been the completion of one of the three “featured exhibits” on the site—*Gulag: Soviet Forced Labor and the Struggle for Freedom*. The other two will be the views of the Perm Camp and the main exhibit, *Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives*. This first exhibit 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. Its launch in April, 2006 (at the same time as the opening of the physical exhibit at Ellis Island) has allowed us to begin publicity for the overall project. Since then we have already had more than 600,000 hits and 12,000 unique visitors to the website.

We have exceeded our goals for the first year of the project, but have encountered one major problem as we move into year two—project Stephanie Hurter, who has done an

extraordinary job on the project, has had to resign her position because of poor health. As a result, we are having to reconsider our schedule for the coming year. We are hoping to adhere to our original plans, but we may need to consider requesting a no-cost extension.

Roy Rosenzweig, Principal Investigator

Steve Barnes, Project Historian