

# The “Great Terror” in the GULAG: A Case Study of the White-Sea Baltic Combine and Camp of the NKVD

Oxana Klimkova

Central European University  
hphklo01@phd.ceu.hu

## PERSA Working Paper No. 47

THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WARWICK**  
Department of Economics



*Political  
Economy  
Research in  
Soviet  
Archives*

Version: 9 August 2006

Available from [www.warwick.ac.uk/go/persa](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/persa).

The “Great Terror” in the GULAG: A Case Study of the White-Sea Baltic Combine and  
the Camp of the NKVD

Oxana Klimkova

**Abstract**

The paper is devoted to the exploration of the Soviet repressive operations of 1937-1939, the so-called “Great Terror” in the GULAG system on an example of the regional camp complex. In particular, it focuses on the reconstruction of the mechanism of repressive operations, identification and quantitative analysis of the chief target groups among the camp hired staff and the prisoners, and the NKVD personnel that carried out the repressions. The paper notes how in the White-Sea Baltic Combine and Camp of the NKVD, as in many other localities, the “Terror,” at first ideologically motivated, became indiscriminate, and on the basis of the analysis of the criminal cases of the persecuted prisoners shows what social categories for particular reasons became vulnerable to the extermination.

# The “Great Terror” in the GULAG: A Case Study of the White-Sea Baltic Combine and the Camp of the NKVD

Oxana Klimkova

Although the topic of the Stalinist repressions of 1937–1939 has become very popular in the academic works on the Soviet history, little has been written in relation to repressive operations inside the GULAG.<sup>1</sup> This paper undertakes an attempt to discuss important questions related to the social history of the so called “Great Terror” in the regional camp (the White-Sea Baltic combine and camp of the NKVD (later referred to as the BBK NKVD)<sup>2</sup> and provides an analysis of the sources available for further exploration. In particular, it focuses on the following issues: the reconstruction of the repressive operations, identification of the chief target groups among the BBK hired staff and the prisoners, and the NKVD personnel that carried out the repressions.

The “Great Terror” is commonly known as a range of repressive operations targeting certain social groups in the Soviet Union in years 1937-1938, also referred to as “*Ezhovschina*” or “*Stalinskie Repressii*.” (“Stalin’s purges.”) Some historians agree in fixing the commencement of the repressions at the end of the summer or the beginning of the autumn of 1936, when the show trials of Trotskyists and Zinovievites were staged, and Nikolai Ezhov was appointed People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs (NKVD SSSR) replacing Heinrich Yagoda.<sup>3</sup> The ideological justification of

---

<sup>1</sup> The questions that are usually raised in recent works relate to the connection between the escalation in political repressions and persecutions that took place in the Soviet Union in 1937-1939 and the situation inside the camp system, the number of the persecuted inside the GULAG, and the influence of the repressive course on the camp life and conditions. S. Kuzmin, “Lagerniki” in *Molodaia Gvardia*, № 3,4,5, 1993. E. Bacon, *The Gulag at War: Stalin’s Forced Labour System in the Light of the Archives* (New York : New York University Press, 1994.) A. Getty, G. Rittersporn, “Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre-War Years,” in *American Historical Review*, October 1993; V. Zemskov, “Gulag: istoriko-sotsiologicheskii aspekt,” *Sotsiologicheskie issledovania*, 1991, № 6, p. 10-27, № 7, p. 3-16. Available at <http://www.hrono.ru/statii/2001/zemskov.htm>, Internet; accessed on 10. O. Khlevniyk, *The History of the GULAG: From Collectivization to the Great Terror*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> After the completion of the White-Sea canal in 1934, the BBLag (White-Sea Baltic camp) was assigned to be created at that time White-Sea Baltic combine (BBK), that was endowed with the task of the exploitation of the canal and the natural resources surrounding it with the use of the forced labour. During the years of its existence (1934-1941) it focused on the industrial exploitation and construction, having constructed many important industrial enterprises of the region. The camp itself, meaning a place of detention of the prisoners, will be later referred to as “the BBLag.”

<sup>3</sup> O. Khlevniyk, “The Objectives of the Great Terror. 1937-1938,” in *Soviet History 1917-1953: Essays in Honour of R. W. Davies*, J. Cooper, ed. (New York: St’ Martin’s Press, 1995), p. 158.

the repressive course on the 1937 February-March plenum of the CC VKP(b) was followed by several major orders unleashing the Terror.

The most notorious one, an operative order № 00447 of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs "On the operation to repress former kulaks, criminals and other anti-Soviet elements" initiated mass repressions of "anti-Soviet elements" in years 1937-1938 starting between 5-15 August (depending on the region) and concluding in four months. It named the "elements to be repressed," which included all those who in some form or other opposed the Soviet regime or had been a victim of state terror: the kulaks who had completed their terms of exile or who had escaped; former members of non-Bolshevik parties (Socialist Revolutionaries, Georgian Mensheviks, Mussavatists, etc); former White Guardsmen; surviving tsarist officials, "Terrorists" and "spies" from previous years; political prisoners in the camps, hardened criminals and recidivists. In total, the order authorized the arrest of 268, 950 people, of whom 72, 950 (including 10000 camp prisoners) were to be shot.<sup>4</sup> These operations, which made up what later would be called the Great Terror, were conducted with varying intensity until November 1938. Complementing them, the regular activities of the Soviet punitive organs became more active in this period.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of August 1937 Nicolai Ezhov signed an operative order № 00409 (a supplement to the 00447 order) addressed to the Karelian NKVD chief Karl Tennison, the current BBK chief and the staff of the Third (Operative) Department of the BBK NKVD. The Karelian NKVD was assigned a quota of 3700 individuals to be repressed, 2800 of them to be shot, 900 to be confined in the camps. (The real numbers were significantly higher: 7221 were shot and 1207 confined in the camps). The initial number of prisoners to be repressed within the BBLag amounted to 800 people.<sup>5</sup> The first meeting of *troika* NKVD KASSR<sup>6</sup> that examined the cases of the BBLag prisoners took place on the 17<sup>th</sup> of August 1937. The chief of the Third Department BBK NKVD Pavel Dolinsky reported on 110 convicts. All of them were

---

<sup>4</sup> A. Getty, O. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 473-80. Two other important orders, signed by N. Ezhov, from 14<sup>th</sup> of September and 9<sup>th</sup> of October 1937, simplified the procedure of reviewing criminal cases on "counter-revolutionary" crimes and extended the term of the imprisonment for the crimes of espionage, terror, treason and sabotage from ten to twenty five years.

<sup>5</sup> I.I. Chukhin, *Karelia—37: ideologiya I praktika terrora* (Petrozavodsk : State University, 1999), p. 123.

<sup>6</sup> As a rule, *troika* consisted of the people's commissar of the NKVD administration, the secretary of the local party organization, and the procurator of the republic, province, or territory. *Troikas* enjoyed the extraordinary right to pass verdicts unilaterally and carry them out, including death sentences.

sentenced by *troika* to be executed. The *troika* protocols issued on the basis of the materials supplied by the Third Department of the BBK NKVD contained significantly more death sentences than those based on the information from other sections of the Karelian NKVD, such as regional Investigation Department (*Ugolovnii Rozisk*).

The wave of repressive operations in the country subsided in the autumn 1938. The joint *Sovnarkom*-Party Central Committee resolution from 17<sup>th</sup> November 1938 forbade “mass operations of arrest and exile.” On November, 24<sup>th</sup>, N. Ezhov was released from the post of the People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs; he was soon to be shot.

Overall during the years 1937-1938 12453 individuals were shot on the territory of the republic of Karelia. Here too as in many other regions of the USSR, the deadline of the operations there was extended. While the official end of the *troikas*’ functions was scheduled on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April 1938, in Karelia four additional *troika* meetings took place to review the cases of the BBLag prisoners. On the last (46<sup>th</sup>) meeting of *troika* that took place on November, 10<sup>th</sup>, the chief of the first section of the Third Department of *Soroklag* (a subsection of the BBK) and the chief of the fifth section of the Third Department BBK NKVD presented a report on 456 convicts.<sup>7</sup>

The identification of the victims and reconstruction of the mechanism of the major repressive operations has been complicated by the ambiguous relationship between the regional authorities, state security service, and the regional Memorial organization, which itself was torn by internal conflicts.<sup>8</sup> According to the currently widespread version (supported by the St–Petersburg Memorial society), on the most well known execution site *Sandarmokh*, a remote forested area twelve kilometers east of Medvezhegorsk (location of the headquarters of the BBK and BBLag) between October 27 and November 4, 1937, a total of 1, 111 prisoners of the so-called “*Solovetsky etap*”<sup>9</sup> were executed. This version lacks reliable evidence, for it has been

---

<sup>7</sup> I.I. Chukhin, *Karelia-37*, p. 124.

<sup>8</sup> This fact influenced the work on the regional Book of Memory, which on its final stages was conducted not by professional historians but by amateur enthusiasts, resulting in a not always adequate spelling of the Finnish names. Interview with the chief of the Karelian Memorial, V. T. Paaso, Petrozavodsk, 28.06.2006.

<sup>9</sup> By the *Solovetsky etap* the group of the BBLag prisoners is understood, that included prominent political, national and religious leaders (Russian scholar and philosopher Pavel A. Florensky, the famous Ukrainian stage director Alexei Kurbas, an orchestra conductor from the *Kazan* Opera Theatre, and later the chief conductor of the Central Theatre of the BBK NKVD A. Grindberg; religious leaders,

impossible to identify who was executed on this site. It is highly probable that the real execution site was situated on the dead-end siding of the eleventh track section of the local railway line, where the prisoners were transported from the *Solovetsky prison*.<sup>10</sup> The executions that took place on *Sandarmokh* might well have been conducted by the Finnish troops. The discrepancy between the significance of the *Sandarmokh* as a site of memory and mourning, and feasibility of actual evidence to support the theory is staggering.<sup>11</sup> Several other executions sites remain unknown or completely forgotten.

One of the most important questions related to the Terror is one of defining the numbers and reconstructing the social profiles of the victims sentenced by extra-judicial *troiki* in years 1937–1938. The data about the size and composition of the camp population is much more reliable than the number of those repressed within the camp system.

Within the BBK NKVD, in the year 1937 several administrative sections were proclaimed “enemies nests,” their staff arrested and persecuted, following the earlier removal and repression of the management of the White-Sea Canal.<sup>12</sup> Starting from January 1937 *Stalinskaia Trassa* (the official newspaper of the BBK) was flooded with the articles exposing the “enemies of the people” in the Medical, Cultural-Educative and other sections of the BBLag, in the White–Sea Canal management, in the special settlers’ cooperative associations (*artels*), in the Tourists’ corner of Medvezhegorsk hotel, on the local construction sites, in the department stores. The term “enemy of the people” was used in the press and in public to describe non-political offences.<sup>13</sup>

An analysis of the social profiles of the repressed members of the staff is complicated by the fact that the information provided on them in the regional Book of

---

such as Orthodox bishop Aleksii Voronezksy, Damian Kurskii, Nikolai Tamborsky, Petr Samarskii, the chief of the Baptist church of the USSR V. Kolesnikov and a range of the Catholic priests, including P. Veigel, that had been sent by Vatikan with the official mission to investigate the facts of the persecution of believers in the USSR) ; For more complete information see *Memorialnoe kladbische Sandarmokh. 1937: 27 oktyabrya–4 noyabra*. p. 1; I.I. Chukhin, *Karelia—37: ideologiya I praktika terrora* (Petrozavodsk : State University, 1999), pp. 124-125.

<sup>10</sup> Interviews with the local journalists and researchers N. M. Ermolovich, A. M. Grigorovich, K. V. Gnetnev. Petrozavodsk, May 2006.

<sup>11</sup> It is interesting that there is very little information about the actual evidence displayed on this mourning site. It has become an arena for political battles of the regional political parties that take place during the commemoration ceremonies. This fact serves as a vivid manifestation of manipulation of collective memory in post-Soviet Russia.

<sup>12</sup> NARK, f. 865, op. 36, d. 2/14, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Stalinskaia trassa*, № 90, 1.08.1937, p. 2.

Memory is incomplete and selective. During the Terror among approximately seventy seven repressed employees of the BBK NKVD the representatives of technical intelligentsia were abundantly represented. Only one individual was a Communist party member. At least several members of the staff were of noble origin. The majority (seventy one individual) were charged with the “counter-revolutionary” offences, the rest were persecuted “according to the order 00447.”<sup>14</sup> Sixty eight employees were shot, the rest received ten-year imprisonment in the camps. At least sixteen employees had held important administrative positions in the BBK. Special settlers<sup>15</sup> constituted another target group. More than seven hundred of them were arrested and repressed, the majority being sentenced for “counter-revolutionary activity”<sup>16</sup>

The personal information on those executed en masse in the course of the repressive operations inside the BBK NKVD, as well as in the republic of Karelia in general, contained in the regional Book of Memory<sup>17</sup> provides a sufficient ground for a statistical analysis of the various groups of prisoners that fell prey to the Terror. Overall, around 2-4 % of the BBLag prisoners were persecuted in the course of the Terror.<sup>18</sup>

The exact number of the BBLag prisoners, subjected to the repression, amounts to 2588. 2580 prisoners were shot.<sup>19</sup> A statistical breakdown of the bases for persecution reveals the following pattern: 851 prisoners or about 32 % were sentenced under article 58<sup>h</sup> of the Soviet penal code for “political” or “counter-revolutionary crimes”; 1352 or 52 % under article 82 on attempted escape, 365 or 14 % under the

---

<sup>14</sup> *Pominalnie spiki*, pp. 844-849.

<sup>15</sup> Inhabitants of the “special settlements” that had been deported from the original place of residence to the areas of resettlement in northern and eastern regions of the USSR, including Karelia as “unreliable” elements.

<sup>16</sup> *Pominalnie spiski* mentions seven hundred fourteen names of the victims from the ranks of the special settlers.

<sup>17</sup> I. I. Chukhin, Yu. A. Dmirtiev, *Pominalnie spiski Karelii, 1937-1938* (Petrozavodsk, 2002); *Memorialnoe kladbische Sandarmokh. 1937: 27 oktyabrya–4 noyabrya*. (St-Petersburg: Memorial, 1997). Literature that deals with the repressions in the republic of Karelia in general is much more abundant. To mention just a few works: A. Tsigankov, *Ikh nazivali KR: Repressii v Karelii 20-kh-30-kh godov* (Petrozavodsk: Karelia, 1992), *One United Family: the Nationalities Policy of CPSU from the 1920's to the 1950's and Its Implementation in North-Western Russia* (Petrozavodsk, 1998); *Osobie papki: rassekrechennii dokumenti partiinikh organov Karelii 1930-1956* (Petrozavodsk, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> During the second half of the 1930-s the population of the BBLag amounted to 75-85000 prisoners. Constant fluctuations in the number of the prisoners were connected with the arrival and departure of *etapi*, internal and external transfers of the workforce. On the first of July 1938 the number of prisoners amounted to 77278. V. G. Makurov, “Belomoro-Baltiiskii Kombinat v Karelii. 1933-1941,” *Novoe v izuchenii Karelii* (Petrozavodsk: RAN, 1994), pp. 139-140.

<sup>19</sup> *Pominalnie spiski Karelii*, pp. 904-1075. The data provided in this work is based on the *troika* protocols dated 1937-1938.

operative order 00447. The remaining 2 % under the articles 59-3,<sup>20</sup> 54-5<sup>21</sup> and 67. The reasons for persecutions of remaining 5 prisoners are not mentioned.<sup>22</sup> The data about those physically exterminated during the Terror need to be updated and verified. Besides those officially executed, others died under torture or from extremely harsh conditions. Some of those deaths were backdated as executions, but many might have been registered as caused by illnesses.

*Troikas'* protocols dated 1937-1939, included a vast number of individuals, sentenced to death for other than “counter-revolutionary” crimes. So far, only prominent prisoners of the *Solovetsky etap*, sentenced on the basis of the article 58, became a subject of public and scholarly attention. The basic questions for the social historians to answer are: who were the rest of the victims, how they were selected and what was the basis for their sentences. The criminal cases of the prisoners referred to the *troika* court can provide an answer to this question.

The charge of counter-revolutionary crimes, based on the article 58 of the Soviet penal code, served as a pretext for more than 30% of all the executions of the prisoners. In the BBLag as in other forced labour camps,<sup>23</sup> where such cases were started,<sup>24</sup> they were often based on the confessions extracted under torture of participation in a large “counter-revolutionary” organization. The transcripts consisted of confessions of espionage, membership in underground organizations, denunciations of other prisoners, etc. For example, in the third camp subsection of the Onega section of the BBK an alleged “counter-revolutionary Fascist organization” was exposed involving sixteen prisoners. A nobleman, the famous drama artist Nikita Appolonsky was persecuted as its leader. All his camp acquaintances, among whom were the Count S. Medem, the Count N. Lipke, a general's son, A. Bers, a renowned Russian

---

<sup>20</sup> “Acts of banditry, organization of the armed gangs and participation in them; organizing of the attacks on the Soviet institutions of citizens, destruction of the railway lines or other means of transport and communication.” D. Karnitsky, G. Roginzky, *Ugolovni kodeks RSFSR. Posobie dlya slushatelei pravovikh VUZov, shkol I yuridicheskikh kursov* (Moscow: OGIZ, 1935).

<sup>21</sup> This article referred to the cases of the repetitive crimes committed by the individuals while already on probationary period. D. Karnitsky, B. Roginzsky, *Ugolovni kodeks RSFSR*.

<sup>22</sup> *Pominalnie spiski Karelii*, pp. 904-1075.

<sup>23</sup> GARF, f. 8131, op. 37, d. 99.

<sup>24</sup> However, sometimes during the Terror the procedure of compiling lists of the repressed prisoners was simplified to an extent that all legal procedures of investigation were abandoned. According to the rules of the “simplified procedure” the prisoners, charged with “counter-revolutionary” crimes, were often dragged to the execution site from the barracks after the chief of the Third Department composed a memo on every victim that included personal data, criminal record, and the “criminal activity” of a prisoner inside the camp. I.I. Chukhin, *Karelia-37*, p. 123. The same refers to the prisoners of the *Solovetsky etap*. These prisoners' sentences were based on the data from the memo composed by the chief of the *Solovki* prison and his assistant.



chemist and professor of the Leningrad Institute of Technology, Leonid Fokin were shot as his accomplices.<sup>25</sup>

The executions under the article on attempted escapes totaled more than 50% of all executions of the BBLag prisoners. Although the regular penalty for the crimes of attempted escapes and camp banditry, was detention in the ZHIZO (Camp punishment cell),<sup>26</sup> capital punishment for these crimes was imposed selectively prior to the year 1937. The sentences, passed by the Special Board of the Leningrad region functioning at the BBK NKVD, were usually announced in all camp subdivisions.<sup>27</sup> According to order № 00409, issued by N. Ezhov, attempted escapes were subject to criminal investigation and then transferred to the *troika* court. Only in January 1938 more than 211 BBLag prisoners were executed for attempted escapes.<sup>28</sup>

As with cases on “counter-revolutionary” crimes, the BBK Chekists resorted to forging the accusatory materials. On the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of December 1937 a raid was undertaken in the course of which about one hundred prisoners returning from work were arrested and, in accordance with the orders from the chief of the 5<sup>th</sup> Section of the BBK Third Department I. Bondarenko, charged with attempted escape. On the basis of this incident twenty five criminal cases were sent to the *troika* and fifteen prisoners were shot.<sup>29</sup>

The majority of the executed BBLAg escapees had been detained in the camp for common criminal offences. They belonged to a group designated as *SVE* (“Socially harmful element”) or *SOE* (socially dangerous element).<sup>30</sup> This category included a broad range of hardened criminals as well as “declassed” peasants. In several dozen cases under review, that eventuated in the death sentence issued by *troika*, the victims possessed a spotless proletarian or peasant pedigree.<sup>31</sup> The majority

---

<sup>25</sup> I. I. Chukhin, *Karelia-37*, pp. 125-126.

<sup>26</sup> According to the Soviet penal code, the regular punishment for the attempted escape from the place of confinement consisted in the deprivation of freedom up to three years. D. Karnitsky, G. Roginzky, *Ugolovnii kodeks RSFSR*, p. 129.

<sup>27</sup> NARK, f. 865, op. 2 d. 1/3, p. 14, f. 865, op. 2, d. 1/2, p. 11; f. 865, op. 2 d. 1/2, p. 64, 116, 182.

<sup>28</sup> NARK, f. 865, op.2, d. 7/33, pp. 4-122.

<sup>29</sup> I. Chukhin, *Karelia-37*, p. 127.

<sup>30</sup> The escapees that had been confined in the camp on the basis of the 58<sup>th</sup> article, during the terror were usually accused of the “counter-revolutionary crimes.”

<sup>31</sup> A significant number of former peasants reveal a process of the pauperization and criminalization of the peasant Russia under the Communist regime. Among them younger age groups were abundantly represented, born in 1918–1921.

of them were illiterate or barely literate. Some of the convicts were also Red Army veterans or had participated in the guerilla war against the White Bands.<sup>32</sup>

In the interrogation protocols dated summer–autumn 1937 some prisoners, hoping for a mild punishment, either insisted that they had not entertained any preordained plan to escape, or else they pleaded extenuating circumstances: such as needing to assist sick or disabled family members at liberty, or having been tortured in the camp, etc., and promised to compensate for their error through “honest labour for the benefit of the Soviet motherland.”<sup>33</sup> Others, obviously suspecting, that the punishment might be severe, denied that they had attempted to escape or pretended to be ignorant of the internal camp rules.<sup>34</sup>

During the Terror some escapes by prisoners did not result in the instigation of the criminal cases. Instead they were sentenced to six months of penal labour. The same pertains to other crimes.<sup>35</sup> This is probably explained by the fact that the number of the cases assigned to the *troika*'s court was influenced by the pressure of fulfilling the quotas. After the quota was met, the rest of the transgressors were punished in a usual way.

The crimes of camp banditry, discipline abuses, such as refusal to work, and embezzlements, investigated by the BBK Third Department, constituted another jurisdiction for the *troika*'s court.<sup>36</sup> The sentences were issued under operative order № 00447. These repressive operations, targeted informal groups of criminals that had previously exercised power in the camp subsections, accounted to 14% of all camp executions.<sup>37</sup>

Individuals, accused of embezzlements within the BBK NKVD included the hired staff and the prisoners occupied in the camp administrative and financial apparatuses. Many of them were registered as “state employees” (*sluzaschie*) prior to their arrest and detention in the camp. Some cases were instigated under violation of the law of 7.08. 1932 “on the protection of the state property.” These cases were based on the reports composed by the inspectors' commissions of the BBK administrative apparatuses and economic enterprises. Despite the fact that “shadow” economy was thriving in the camp subsections, such reports in a large part were based

---

<sup>32</sup> Arkhiv MVD RK, f. 73, op. 01, d. 290, 297.

<sup>33</sup> Arkhiv MVD RK, f. 73, op. 01, d. 293, 303, 304, 305, 901.

<sup>34</sup> Arkhiv MVD RK, f. 73, op. 01, d. 301, 307, 309.

<sup>35</sup> NARK, f. 865, op. 2, d. 7/33, p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Arkhiv MVD RK, f. 73, op. 01, d. 1253, 1255.

<sup>37</sup> Arkhiv MVD RK, f. 73, op. 01, d. 1035, 1030, 1031, 1036, etc.

on surmises and guess-work. For example, financial losses included an arbitrarily calculated sum of “uncollected profits,” that had allegedly occurred as a result of failure to fulfill the economic plan, or from “inappropriate use of the cattle.”<sup>38</sup> The logic of these investigation processes is obscure. The number of the accused in the course of the investigation were later released due to the “insignificance of the criminal offence” although their involvement had been clearly established.<sup>39</sup>

During the Terror prisoners who had recently been released from the camp also became a target of repressive operations. If they failed to obtain their passports and find a job after having spent several days at liberty, they could be rearrested for minor offences or a “parasitic lifestyle.”<sup>40</sup> Occasionally, the prisoner was arrested on the day following his release from the camp, and within five days after the investigation was finished, sentenced to capital punishment by a *troika* court for “leading a parasite lifestyle of a declassed element .”<sup>41</sup>

The verdicts issued by *troikas* on these cases reveal the basis for interpreting the notion of social “deviancy.” The typical verdict of *troika* meetings in autumn 1937, referring to a recently released prisoner, was formulated in the following way: “to be shot as a declassed element with the parasite lifestyle, regularly committing the acts of drunkenness, theft, swindle, and hooliganism.”<sup>42</sup> Or, alternatively, the sentence provided a more specific justification for execution, such as “maintaining personal connections with the declassed element, he is guilty of robbing a worker from Onega plant in September. To be shot.”<sup>43</sup>

Study of the cases initiated on the basis of the common criminal offences reveals no evidence of violence or torture to extract confession. As usual confession did not serve as the main proof of guilt, for the accused could have denied involvement in the criminal activities until the moment of execution.<sup>44</sup>

The protocols of the interrogations in the cases of the criminal offences, composed by the interrogators, were certainly adapted to produce a desirable

---

<sup>38</sup> Arkhiv MVD RK, f. 73, op. 01, d. 902, vol. 1, p. 247

<sup>39</sup> Arkhiv MVD RK, f. 73, op. 01, d. 902, vol. 2, p. 229.

<sup>40</sup> The local RO (*Ugrozisk*) Criminal Investigation Departments of the regional NKVD branches while investigating such cases and supplying the materials for *troika*, worked in close cooperation with the BBK operative sections. In the local book of memory these people are registered as *BOZ* (“individuals without a definite occupation”) and *BOMZ* (“individuals without permanent place of residence.”) *Pominalnie spiski Karelii*, pp. 824-843.

<sup>41</sup> Arkhiv MVD RK, f. 73, op. 01, d. 916, p. 11.

<sup>42</sup> Arkhiv MVD RK, f. 73, op. 01, d. 191, p. 28, d. 910.

<sup>43</sup> Arkhiv MVD RK, f. 73, op. 01, d. 907, p. 30.

<sup>44</sup> Arkhiv MVD RK, f. 73, op. 01, d. 902, vol. 1.

impression. However, they aimed not at presenting the evidence of the existence of the “anti-state” intentions or actions of those interrogated, or the gravity of the charges, but at demonstrating the transgressor’s “immunity to re-education.” For example, the protocols of interrogation might state that an ex-prisoner confessed “would not work, but would go on stealing, for theft is also a form of labour that he performs.”<sup>45</sup> The interrogation protocol of a prisoner charged with theft stated “I can not refrain from stealing due to instincts that I have cultivated, and that make me steal again and again.”<sup>46</sup>

Such “predilections” were also reflected in the prisoners’ ‘kharakteristika’ issued by the camp administration and the interrogation protocols of the witnesses, who, often “playing the game” of an interrogator, consciously contributed to the creation of an image of a “deviant element.”<sup>47</sup>

There was an abundance of political rhetoric in cases of criminal offences. If there had been a fight in the workers’ settlement, one participant being a Stakhanovite, and another one an ex-prisoner, the course of the investigation was predetermined. The roles of the victim and attacker were ideologically predictable, resulting in the charges of “beating a Stakhanovite F. out of the motives of the class struggle, embittered by a failure to organize a workers’ strike.”<sup>48</sup>

In the course of the rehabilitation process of the 1990–s political rhetoric acquires another dimension. If a victim had been repressed on the basis of a “non-political” crime, rehabilitation was normally denied. However, if a political charge (as a rule, formulated according to article 58) accompanied the main one, then the individual was often rehabilitated on political grounds, even if he had been a hardened criminal.<sup>49</sup>

As far as the NKVD staff is concerned, only basic biographical data on the leading officials, including members of the *troika* of the Karelian NKVD has been published.<sup>50</sup>

As is indicated in their personal files, the majority of the employees of the Third Department of the BBK NKVD, who participated in the implementation of the order № 00447 in the BBK came from the poorest peasant or working class

---

<sup>45</sup> Arkhiv MVD RK, f. 73, op. 01, d. 1035, p. 18; d. 917, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Arkhiv MVD RK, f. 73, op. 01, d. 916, p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> Arkhiv MVD RK, f. 73, op. 01, d. 902, p. 24.

<sup>48</sup> Arkhiv MVD RK, f. 73, op. 01, d. 1150, p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> Arkhiv MVD RK, f. 73, op. 01, d. 912.

<sup>50</sup> *Pominalnie spiski*, pp. 19-26.

background. They were recruited into the GULAG system after serving in the Red Army. Some of them were promoted by the local party organization.<sup>51</sup> Almost all of them had only primary education or none at all. An exception was an assistant to the chief of the Third Department BBK NKVD Alexander Shondysh, who in 1927 graduated from the Herzen Pedagogical University in St-Petersburg.

As it has been shown in the existing studies on the GULAG, the climax of the repressive operation was followed by a wholesale purge within the NKVD apparatus, that reached its peak at the end of the year 1938 and the beginning of 1939.<sup>52</sup>

A number of the employees of the Third Department of the BBK NKVD, who played the major role in implementing the Terror, were arrested in March–August of the year 1938. The investigation case № 11602, (non- political and not subject to rehabilitation), apart from the BBK NKVD officials, included the NKVD officers from the Leningrad region, sent to the BBK for staffing the operative team for execution of the sentences. The majority of the defendants were accused of “abuse of power, falsification of criminal cases, torture of the prisoners and appropriation of the arrestees’ private possessions.”<sup>53</sup>

According to a note from the FSB archive that contains data on ten officials of the Third Department of the BBK NKVD, who had taken an active part in the repressive operations, only two of them were sentenced to death.<sup>54</sup>

Pavel Dolinsky, the chief of the Third Section of the Third BBK Department from the first of December 1938 until 16<sup>th</sup> of April 1939 and the one who reported on the prisoners’ cases during the *troika’s* meetings, was arrested on the 13<sup>th</sup> of April 1939. Following the trial that lasted from the 24<sup>th</sup> to the 30<sup>th</sup> of May the same year the Military Tribunal sentenced him to a year of imprisonment reduced subsequently to “corrective labour” for the same period of time with the 10% loss in the salary.<sup>55</sup> An officer from the fifth section of the BBK Third Department, - Fyodor Volkov, arrested on the 21<sup>st</sup> of July, 1938, was sentenced by the Military Tribunal in January 1939 to

---

<sup>51</sup> A note from the TsA FSB RF (Central Archive of the FSB of the Republic of Karelia), (*Informatsionnaia spravka po sledstvennim delam*), issued on 21.12.2005.

<sup>52</sup> N. Petrov, V. Kokurin, *Kto rukovodil NKVD 1934-1941. Spravochnik* (Moscow: Memorial, 1999), p. 499.

<sup>53</sup> I. Chukhin, *Karelia-37*, p. 126.

<sup>54</sup> During the process that lasted from 24<sup>th</sup> to the 30<sup>th</sup> of May 1939 the military tribunal of the NKVD troops of the Leningrad region sentenced the assistant to the chief of the BBK Third Department Alexander Shondysh and the chief of the fifth section of the BBK Third Department Ivan Bondarenko to capital punishment on the basis of article 193-17 “b” of the criminal code. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of October the sentence was carried out.

<sup>55</sup> Informatsionnaia spravka.

six years of imprisonment in a camp without loss of civil rights. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 1939, according to the decision of the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR, the length of his sentence was reduced to one year of corrective labour. After the sentence was reviewed he was released immediately on the basis of having already served time. from the 30<sup>th</sup> of May 1939.”<sup>56</sup> An assistant to the chief of the first section of the Third Department Michail Pletz, who in the course of the executions had issued “ criminal orders on torture and beatings of the convicts,” during the process was sentenced to four years of imprisonment in a camp. Soon thereafter, the Supreme Collegium reduced his sentence to two years.”<sup>57</sup>

In some cases the subsequent review of a sentence resulted in its being increased. The commander of the armed guard division of the Third Department Nikolay Mironov, arrested on the 8<sup>th</sup> of July 1938, was placed on a probationary period of four years. By the decision of the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR, issued on 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 1939, the sentence of the Military Tribunal was reversed as “inadequately mild.” On the 25<sup>th</sup> of December 1939 he was sentenced again, this time to a sentence of two years and six months in prison, without the loss in electoral rights.<sup>58</sup>

The formal punishment in the form of salary deductions was applied to executioners of the lowest ranks.<sup>59</sup> Apart from the welfare privileges (pensions and numerous benefits), the NKVD (later MVD) provided them with the confidentiality, anonymity and security. Their involvement in the repressive operations was denied and their real place of service was concealed, often replaced by another occupation altogether such as a contract worker in forestry. In the course of the regional party committee meetings starting from January 1939, officials who had taken an active part in the implementation of the Terror were promoted in the NKVD hierarchy. Thus, it is possible to argue that the purges of the NKVD, based on investigations of “deviations” during the Terror, such as committing brutal murders and forging accusatory materials, on the level of the provincial NKVD offices were implemented under strict central control and taken simply in order to guaranteeing the success of the new political line, without undermining the punitive system as a whole.

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

According to the traditional view, the state terror as a method of resolving period-specific problems, in 1937-1938 was used to replace the old political elite with a new generation of Stalinist careerists and also to purge the country of a potential fifth column in case of war- in other words to eliminate those suspected of disloyalty and treason.<sup>60</sup> But contrary to this view, many regional books of memory that have been published in the recent years, reveal that the majority of victims of the Great Terror were ordinary people accused of political crimes. In Karelia the share of people of Finnish origins was remarkably high.

Current study has shown that inside the forced labour camp different groups of prisoners fell the victims to the Terror. Apart from the “political” prisoners, persecuted for counter-revolutionary crimes, (the majority of them being the representatives of intelligentsia and nobility, the so-called *bivshie*) and a category of convicts who are difficult to classify: the kulaks who had escaped from exile, those convicted under the 7<sup>th</sup> August 1932 law on the theft of public property, etc., the victims included a large proportion of ordinary and hardened criminals.<sup>61</sup> The repressive operations, targeted at non-political transgressors, were very selective and in a large degree motivated by the desire to fulfill the quotas for troika meetings. They extended to the criminal gangs that had been “terrorizing” the camp population, informal administrative networks of the “shadowy economy,” and single internal regime violators: the prisoners who for some reasons transgressed the internal camp rules. With the beginning of the Terror the policy of benevolence towards and reliance on the “socially close” categories of the camp population, that had been one of the major principles of internal camp order, and the Bolshevik policy towards criminality, the Soviet utopia of *perekovka* (re-education) were abandoned. From the point of view of their initial target groups, outlined in the orders from the centre, the repressions, that took place in the BBLag during the years 1937–1938 could be conceived of as the most utter manifestation of the implementation of that part of the Socialist utopia, that proscribed the “cleansing” of the society from all deviant models of behaviour by the means of violence. But in the BBK NKVD, as in many other localities, the Terror became ideologically irresponsible and indiscriminant.

---

<sup>60</sup> O. Khlevniyk, *The History of the GULAG*, p. 330.

<sup>61</sup> It should be noted that the distinction between the “political” and “criminal” categories is very problematic. The NKVD authorities rarely resorted to the term “criminal” (“*ugolovnik*”) as opposite to “political.” To describe the ordinary criminality the terms “declassed element,” abbreviations *SOE* and *SVE* were used. The term “political” (“*politicheskii*”) itself is a later invention, never used by the NKVD officials in the 1930-s.

A lot of “white spots” in the repressive operations remain unexplored. The data on the victims and the repressive mechanism needs further work and verification. Besides, the Terror exerted significant influence not only on the functioning of the White-Sea Baltic Combine and the Camp NKVD, but also on social life of the prisoners and the hired staff. This influence remains to be investigated. However, despite the stricter regulations of the camp regime that were implemented in 1937, the total separation of the camp prisoners from the BBK settlements was never achieved. The close ties as well as hidden routes and patterns of coexistence between these groups pervaded even in those macabre years. Despite the wave of arrests and depositions, frequent announcements of “unmasking” “enemies” and “wreckers,” the centre of the BBK, located in the city of Medvezhegorsk, enjoyed rich social and cultural life. In spite of the crisis in the Central Theatre of the BBK NKVD, related to the simultaneous dismissal of all its z/k members of the artistic troupe, the regular theatrical and operatic productions of high quality and cultural diversity took place, not speaking about Estrada concerts, concerts of the amateur circles, parades and masquerades. In the first half of 1937 the population of Medvezhegorsk participated in a variety of social and cultural events, including Alexander Pushkin’s days in Karelia, (*Pushkinskie dni*), that included concerts and literary evenings, the social events devoted to mourning of Sergey Kirov, then, finally, the election campaign, that was supposed to engage the population for almost half a year. How the Terror was perceived by the local population and the prisoners themselves is an uneasy challenge for future studies.