



## WORLD NEWS

# Stalin's forgotten prisoners

## Gulag victims left stranded in Arctic

by Mark Franchetti  
Vorkuta

THROUGHOUT his tortuous 10 years of hard labour in Stalin's gulag, Pavel Negretov dreamt of the new life that would begin on the day he finished his sentence for anti-communist activities. Still a young man, he imagined himself starting afresh in Moscow, far from the horrors he had endured.

That new life never came. More than half a century later, Negretov remains stranded in Vorkuta, in the Arctic Circle, where he was sent to work in barbaric conditions in the coal-mines of Russia's far north. Now 75, he has yet to be granted the residence permit he needs to move with his wife to the Russian capital.

Negretov is not alone. Hundreds of former opponents of Stalin's dictatorship, including 250 in Vorkuta, have been left to their hard lives in remote regions to which they were exiled in the 1930s and 1940s. Most have struggled ever since to return to their home towns and villages. Thousands have died of old age without being allowed to resettle.

"There are queues of former political prisoners waiting to leave Vorkuta," said Yevgenia Khaidarova, of the local branch of Memorial, a human rights organisation that helps victims of Soviet repression.

"The scene is the same all over Russia. These people are caught in limbo, living in a terrible vicious circle — they can't resettle without a *propiska* [residence permit], which they could get only if they had a flat in the city they wanted to go back to."

Those dispatched to the gulag had their flats confiscated by the authorities. With their homes, they lost their right to live in the places where they had grown up with their families.

If they were affluent, they could buy a privatised flat. Deprived long ago of any opportunity to establish themselves, however, they are poor. If they moved without an official permit, they would have no legal right to work or to receive vital benefits, including healthcare.

Like the overwhelming majority of Russians, they depend on the state to provide them with homes. So they wait in the frozen Arctic, hoping forlornly that one day the state will find them a flat somewhere — anywhere — other than Vorkuta.

Isolated from the outside world by inhospitable tundra, 100 miles north of the Arctic Circle and more than 1,000 miles from Moscow, Vorkuta is a place where winter lasts for

10 months and the temperature falls regularly to -40C. It is completely dark for weeks on end.

Like the other labour camps scattered across the northern wastes and christened the gulag archipelago by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a camp survivor himself, Vorkuta was uninhabited until geologists found huge coal reserves beneath its frozen earth.

Slave labour was the only way to develop the mineral wealth. The first prisoners were sent to Vorkuta in 1931 on a journey that took six months and claimed thousands of lives. They were crammed first into cattle trains, then onto barges along several rivers and completed the last 50 miles on foot.

Between 1934 and 1954 2m were sent away to toil in Vorkuta's 80 mines — petty criminals, political opponents of Stalin and the hapless, innocent victims of senseless purges, "guilty" of anything from simply being related to a foreigner to having turned up late for work.

"My first year and a half was the hardest," recalled Negretov, who arrived in Vorkuta at the height of winter after being arrested in Ukraine in 1946 for collaborating with an anti-communist group. "I thought I had landed in hell."

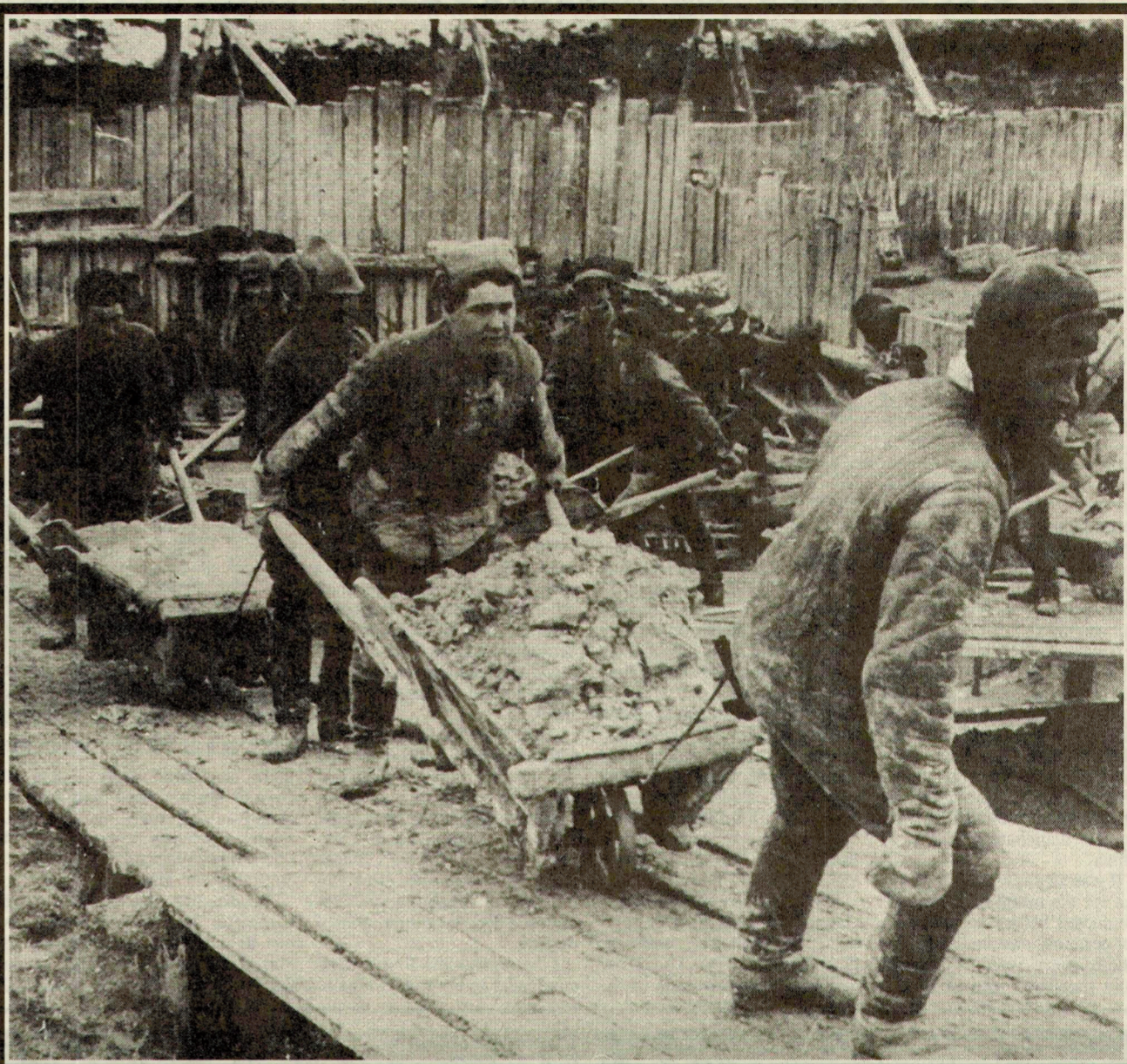
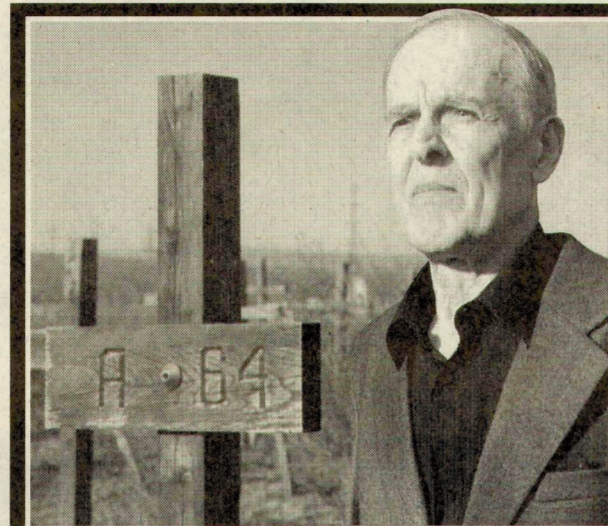
"There were three shifts of eight hours. We were escorted at gunpoint in the snow from our barracks to the mines. It was always pitch-dark, with freezing temperatures, but the wind was the most terrible thing. I used to wonder why my



parents had brought me into this world. I was skin and bones, and covered in ulcers."

The inmates slept in pairs to keep warm, using one jacket as a mattress on the floor and the other as a blanket. "We kept our boots under our heads to stop other prisoners from stealing them, and pulled our trousers down over our feet to prevent frostbite," Negretov said. "Every morning an angry

Pictures: Manon Loizeau



Life in limbo: Negretov, top left, among the nameless graves in Vorkuta, and Kalashnikova, 78, who spent a decade in the camps. Workers were escorted at gunpoint to the mines

corporal would wake us up, shouting. That was the worst time — waking up to another day, exhausted."

Every day in Vorkuta, prisoners starved, froze to death, were executed by guards or were killed digging in the mines. Memorial, which was headed by Andrei Sakharov, the dissident nuclear physicist, until his death in 1989, has obtained access to archives in an attempt to calculate the toll. The initial estimate is half a million dead.

Today, the graves are marked by numbered, nameless wooden crosses in seven cemeteries that surround a city of 180,000 people built on bones.

"I have been here 52 years, and I have dreamt all my life of living in a city like Moscow or St Petersburg," said Negretov.

"Our state has no conscience. It has forgotten about us and the Russian people as a whole. We have no democracy, only greed for more power. And who is Boris Yeltsin? A former Communist party boss. Power has not changed hands." Since the advent of glasnost, the Russian government has

rehabilitated most former *zeks* — as gulag inmates were known — formally recognising them as innocent victims of repression and providing them with minimal compensation and the right to a proper pension.

But it has done little to help them resettle. Negretov fought until 1995 to be rehabilitated. He was awarded £700 compensation for the 10 years he sacrificed in the mines. All he really wants, however, is to move to any large Russian city. He was finally offered resettlement last month, but to the arid smokestacks of Dzerzhinsk, the dangerously polluted centre of Russia's chemical industry.

Memorial has written several times to Yeltsin and the Russian parliament, urging them to help the last gulag survivors go home. But the Kremlin has other, more pressing matters to attend to.

Along with Vorkuta's ageing former prisoners, hundreds of unemployed young miners have joined the clamour to leave in search of a brighter future. They constitute a more menacing force for change.

Since taking up the cause of the former inmates with the aid of the Solzhenitsyn Foundation, which is run by the writer's wife, Natalia, Memorial has managed to help several gulag victims resettle far from Vorkuta, but seldom to the cities of their choice. Some who were moved to rural backwaters without heating or hot water were so disappointed that they returned to Vorkuta.

Gulag survivors have received little support from ordinary Russians in their quest to return home. When Stalin's death in 1953 led to the release of millions of prisoners, even their families often refused to

take them in, for fear of persecution by the KGB.

"The first thing I did when I was let out was to get on a train back to Moscow," said Lyubov Kalashnikova, who spent a decade in Vorkuta's camps. "I still had a brother and sister living there."

"They hadn't seen me for 10 years but nobody dared welcome me home. They were too scared. Everyone was terrified of being associated with me."

She was eventually forced to go back to Vorkuta.

Decorated for bravery as a volunteer in the Soviet army during the second world war, Kalashnikova, now 78, was ac-

cused of treason in 1941 because she had survived a German ambush. Her superiors said she should have turned the gun on herself rather than risk capture.

When she became a "free" woman, she made an annual, 46-hour journey by train to Moscow for 15 years in a vain attempt to plead for a residence permit. "I have tried to return to Moscow all my life," she said.

Kalashnikova, who can barely walk and lives with her disabled daughter in a tiny flat in Vorkuta, has never been given any hope of success. Instead, every year, she receives

the letter Yeltsin sends to all veterans, congratulating them on the anniversary of the end of the war.

"I don't want to die here," said Kalashnikova, whose baby son died from diphtheria in the camps at the age of two. "I hate this town. It is a symbol of death. I buried my life here, my destiny, my happiness."

"My only wish is to return to Moscow, to die in my homeland. I have not lived here. I have simply existed. That has been the most painful thing — just seeing my life pass away, crossed off, erased without trace. Russia has forgotten about us."

*I want to  
come by*