

Child Mortality and Disease in Karlag, 1941: A Comparison of Prisoners' and Free Workers' Children

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Abstract: The article analyses archived statistical data illustrating mortality rates for the children of female prisoners, as well as the children of free labourers in Karlag in 1941. For a comparative view of the problem of child mortality in the Gulag in 1941, the article uses data from two other camps in the Gulag system, Vyatlag and Bureilag. The general trends and differences in the mortality rates of the children of mothers who were prisoners, and

mothers who were free labourers, were analysed. It appears that the number of children in Karlag agricultural camp in 1941 was significantly higher than in forest and railway industry camps, and the overall mortality rate of children of imprisoned mothers was lower on average. Almost two-thirds of the children who died in Karlag in 1941 were children of female prisoners. In addition, the morbidity of children of incarcerated mothers was much higher than that of the children of free labourers. The peak of the morbidity and mortality in Karlag was April 1941.

Keywords: Gulag, Karlag medical and sanitation services, children of the Gulag, children of Karlag, children in the correctional labour camps, children's homes, conditions of detention, infant mortality in correctional labour camps, Karlag.

Introduction

The historical works on childhood in Stalin's Gulags embrace several historical and sociological aspects of the children's contingent in the Gulag. This includes several categories: children exiled with their parents; prisoners who were arrested as adolescents; children rendered to orphanages after their parent's arrests, and often then delivered to the Gulag; and children born in the Gulag. (Craveri, Losonczy 2012) Research on the Gulag's juvenile population is often based on studies of quite late memories of the people who spent part of their childhood in Gulag camps and experienced exile or confinement during childhood or adolescence. (Craveri, Losonczy 2017) In recent years publications about camp childhood have appeared. One of the first is the collection of documents published in 2002 and edited by Vilenski et al. Studies followed on Kazakhstan's camps by Kazakhstani historians through a research project that lasted from 2022 to 2024 (Allaniiazov, Saktaganova, 2023; Saktaganova 2024; Saktaganova et al. 2024).

Studying children's captivity in the Gulag camps is associated with multiple difficulties, the first of them is the absence, or fragmentary character, of the memories. Children born in Gulag camps were at an age which is challenging to evoke, as they were either sent very young to orphanages or taken with their relatives. Despite the resolution of the Central Executive Committee (VCIK) and the Revolutionary State Council (SNK), of the 1st August 1933, "On the Affirmation of the Correctional Labour Code of the URSS", authorising women to let their children remain with them until the age of four (Losev et al. 1959: 291),

the camp authorities preferred to send children away to orphanages to remove additional expense. Children were a burden for the Gulag's economy as they did not generate income. (Alexopoulos 2017: 54) There were some cases when the children were held in a special holding area, similar to a nursery, at the camp child institution until the mother was free, but these cases were rare. The historians who studied the problem of child captives in the Gulag had to, due to the rare character or the absence of memories, to count on the normative, statistical, and similar documents of the different Gulag structures. One of these structures, which organised the everyday life and the medical care of new-born babies, was the Gulag Sanitation Department.

The activity of the Gulag Sanitation Department corresponded, and often contributed, to the general strategy of the Gulag's policy, striving to wring out, according to Solzhenitsyn's expression, the maximum of the prisoner's physical capacities. (Alexopoulos 2015: 506) The camp's doctors, who were often prisoners themselves, would rarely provide dispensation from labour for ill prisoners. If doctors were suspected of being too generous towards the prisoners, they could find themselves sent to perform general work in the camp. Human life was observed from the point of view of its utility. The presence of a child could distract the mother, as was thought by the Gulag authorities, from her direct duties. According to the Gulag's Sanitation department circulars, the mother was authorised to remain with her child only during the period of breastfeeding, afterwards the child was sent to the departments of the Ministry of Education, i.e. the orphanages. Female prisoners were excused from general labour only in the last months of their pregnancy. After giving birth to the child, they were sent to the general works. In camp, the children were held in one of the structures of the Sanitation department, or children's homes (*doma mladentsa*), where, according to the sanitation reports, their lives were formally managed and supervised.

The goal of this article is to analyse and compare, according to archive material, the monthly statistical data of 1941 on the mortality and disease level of the prisoner's children with those of the Gulag free labour workers. For the realisation of this goal, we use data from several units of the Gulag Sanitation Department, including the Karaganda labour camp. Nineteen-forty-one was remarkable for the high level of child mortality. We also utilised the fragmentary memories of people who were born in the Karaganda labour camp (Karlag).

Methodology, methods, and the materials of the study

Kazakhstan is the largest country in Central Asia. In the period we discuss in the article, Kazakhstan was part of the Soviet Union. GULAG was not the camp system but the name of an institution that governed the camp system. Specifically, on November 6th 1929 the Central Executive Committee¹ and the Council of People's Commissars² passed a law that imprisonment of up to three years should be served in "general prisons", whereas confinement from three to ten years should take place in prison camps in remote regions of the country (Prokopchuk 2004), opening the way for the establishment of a network of prison camps. For the management of the camp system the Main Administration of Labour Camps, Labour Settlements and Places of Detention, or GULAG, was created (*glavnoe upravlenie ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagerei, trudovykh poselenii i mest zakliucheniia*) and subordinated to the NKVD (*Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennykh Del'*) or People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs. GULAG in its heyday controlled 36 of the so-called "corrective labour camps" (*ispravitel'no-trudovyi lager*), in fact each of these camps was a conglomerate of several prison camps. The reason GULAG camps were established in Kazakhstan was the industrialisation of the Soviet Union. Kazakhstan is rich in mineral resources such as iron, copper, coal and so forth, and to extract these resources and build settlements the leaders of the Soviet Union decided to use prison labour.

The method used in this article is based on the principle of historicism (according to this concept, historical events develop according their own dynamic and inherent rules) and the systematic character of the described phenomena. The chronological approach allowed us to analyse the conditions of the children during the period of economic and structural crisis in the Gulag system at the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s. The analytical method enabled us to clarify the influence of the structural features of the Gulag system using the function of its particular divisions, such as the Gulag Sanitation Department (*vedomost sanotdela*). Statistical and mathematical analysis was used to synthesise the statistical data from Sanitation Department reports.

In the analysis of GULAG statistical data, our attention focused on data from the Karaganda correctional labour camp (Karlag). Karlag was extremely complex and the biggest agricultural state farm (*sovkhoz*) in the Soviet Union.

In its heyday, Karlag consisted of several camps that held 100,000 prisoners. The purpose of Karlag was to produce food for a growing prisoner population and the free labour of Kazakhstan, whose task was to develop mining and industrial enterprises in the region. Karlag was located near to Karaganda city in central Kazakhstan. To better understand the specifics of child mortality in the camps at the beginning of the 1940s, analysis of two other camps in the Gulag economic system are presented: Vyatlag (a forestry camp situated in the Kaiski district of Kirov oblast in central Russia), and Bureilag, a railway industry camp situated on the Far Eastern Railway (now the Jewish Autonomous Region, a region on the Russian Pacific coast).

The prime source for this article are documents from the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARE, *Государственного архива Российской Федерации (ГАРФ)*), particularly the records of the Sanitation Department (фонда санитарного отдела) (Fond: R-9414, Inventaire 1, Dossier 2767) which contain the monthly Department summary lists of different indicators such as child disease and mortality rates. They contain the following:

- indicators on extra hospital help and home attendance and overall primary numbers of attendances of children who fell ill at home, in the kindergarten, and in the nurseries (*detskie iasli*);
- indicators on extra hospital help, containing data about the number of child inpatients at the beginning of the month and those who came for the first time, including time spent in the hospital;
- indicators on mortality, containing the overall number of dead children, including the children of imprisoned mothers;
- additional data about vaccinations against the following diseases: small-pox, dysentery, typhoid/paratyphoid and diphtheria;
- additional data on the number of children, including the overall number of children of the free work force at the end of the reporting month who were aged one month to three years, from three to eight years, and in kindergartens and nurseries;
- additional data on the number of children of women in prison, including those who are placed in children's homes (*doma mladentsa*).

For a comparative analysis of the camp prisoner health and mortality in general including child mortality in Karlag for several months in 1941 we used monthly summary lists from the Gulag NKVD Sanitation Department (ITL) NKVD (Fond: R-9414, Inventory 1sup., dossier 611). There is no data for every month of 1941, but even the statistical materials used allow us to draw certain conclusions about the percentage of child mortality in Karlag.

There were also the circulars and directives of the Gulag Sanitation Department from the archive of the GULAG Sanitation Department (Fond: R-9414, Inventory 1, dossier 2753). Separate documents have been taken from the Fund of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) (Fond: 9401, Inventory 1, dossier 570), including the original secret orders NKVD URSS for 1940. The memories of people born in Karlag have also been used in this article. For instance, the interview with Tatjana Ivanovna Nikolskaia. Her interview was conducted in November 2005 by archive staff at the Memorial historical and educative society within the Children of the ALZhIR program. In addition memory fragments from one imprisoned mother and her child born in Karlag, cited in the book *Gulag-Kinder: Die Vergessenen Opfer* by Meinhard Stark, were used.

The discussion and the results of the research

The presence of women is significant in the Stalinist Gulag; the peak was during the period of the Great Purge. According to NKVD order №0486 on “The Operation on the Repression of the Wives and Children of Traitors of the Motherland” from 15 August 1937, the wives of ‘traitors to the motherland’ and their children who were younger than 15 years old, were sent to corrective labour camps. The order made exceptions for pregnant women or women nursing babies, although this exception was practically never applied. According to A. B. Roginsky, the total number of repressed wives of ‘traitors’ was 18,000. The outline for this operation was already designed in July 1937. The resolution of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (*Politbiuro*, the de facto most powerful institution in the Soviet Union) issued an order:

1. Accept the proposition of the State Commissariat of Internal Affairs (Narkomvnudel) on the incarceration for five to eight years for all the

wives of convicted traitors against the motherland, members of the right Trotskyite spy-diversionary organisation, according to the designated list. 2. Instruct the Narkomvnudel (NKVD, the Soviet security service from 1934 to 1941 with very broad interests from economic crime to border guarding) to organise special camps in the Naryn and Tugaisk regions of Kazakhstan. (Grinev et al. 2003: 10–11)

Children appeared in the camps at the beginning of the 1930s, but only at the end of 1937 did the Sanitation Department introduced strict reporting on the disease and mortality levels of the infant population, along with reporting on the functioning of the nurseries. The instruction of the Gulag Sanitation Department from 25 December 1937 announced:

Paragraph 3: The recording of everyday attendance at nursery of the children of free labourers, and those of prisoners, is made on the monthly time sheet on form D3. At the end of the month, attendance at the nurseries must be summarised, as well as their nonattendance by the children for different reasons, as well as the medical attendance of the nursery children at home. Paragraph 4: The analysis of every month's attendance and the functioning of the nurseries must be formed in a monthly report by those responsible for the nurseries on form D4 and sent to the Sanitation Department. Paragraph 5: The Sanitation Department summarises these materials about the functioning of each nursery on form D4 in summary table D5. Paragraph 8: In the case of child mortality, the death report always has to be registered on form D7. The death report had to be made in four copies: the first had to be sent to the Camp registration section (URO or *Uchotno-raspredelitelnyj otdel*, the Accounting Distribution department), the second to a Civil Registration Office (ZAGS), the third sent to the Sanitation Department, the fourth stays in the documents of the establishment that makes the report. All the death reports are added up in summary D8. (GARF, F.R.-9414.-Op.1-D.2752.-L.19, GARF, F.91414)

The end of the 1930s was crucial for the Gulag camp system's economic set-up. As a result of the Great Purge (see Kennan 1960), camps were overcrowded with prisoners: from the 1st of January 1937 to the 1st of January 1939, the total number of prisoners grew from 1.2 to 1.7 million people. This was critical for the camp's infrastructure as the overloading of camps led to increased execu-

tions. The categories of prisoner subjected to capital punishment were men of productive age, and highly qualified workers and specialists who were actually needed in the Gulag economic structure. Political purposes prevailed over economic: instead of using 'enemies' as a cheap workforce, they were eliminated. The repressions of the Terror corresponded with the relative stabilisation of the camp's economy, which lasted until the beginning of the Second World War. (Khlevniuk et al. 2004: 29–30)

The problem of creating special infrastructure for the children of incarcerated mothers at the beginning of the 1940s became the subject of correspondence from the Gulag authorities. In his report to the Peoples Commissar of the Internal Affairs (Narkom or NKVD) Lavrenti Beria on 19 April 1941 Gulag chief Viktor Nasedkin writes:

There are, in the camps, colonies and prisons of NKVD URSS, 12,000 children under four years old with their mothers, and 8,500 pregnant women, 3,000 of whom are in the last months of pregnancy. Only 8,000 of these children are placed in the specially organised children's institutions in the NKVD correctional labour camps, the others remain in the prison cells and barracks with their incarcerated parents. Because of the necessity to widen the net of the children's institutions in the correctional labour camps and colonies, I ask your ordinance for the allocation of 1.5 million roubles for the organisation of the children's institution for 5,000 persons in the camps and the colonies, and 13.5 million for its maintenance in 1941, 15 million roubles the total. (Vilenski et al. 2002: 366–367)

The expenses had to be made up from the unplanned incomes from those sentenced to the correctional labour camps.

In 1941, the chef of the Sanitation department, David Loidin, issued an instruction containing the structure of the camp children's institutions, including five types of children's institution: nurseries, children's homes, kindergartens, children's consultations, and milk kitchens. According to this instruction, the nurseries and the kindergartens where children from one month to three years old were kept, and from three to seven years old "whose mothers worked in the industries and the institutions". Children's homes were a "closed type" (*zakrytogo tipa*) of institution for round-the-clock monitoring of children from 0 to four years old. Only the children of imprisoned mothers were kept in the children's home. (Alanijazov, Saktaganova 2023: 129–130)

The general data from the Gulag Sanitation Department and its structural subdivisions for 1941 gives us information on the following camp administration units: the Hydraulic Engineering Construction unit (Glavgidrostroj), fuel supply, mining and metallurgy, special and industrial construction, Bezymjanlag (a Gulag camp started on 25 September 1940 in Kuibyshev oblast in eastern Russia at the Volga river specialising in the building of aircraft, automobiles, aerodromes, and roads), the agricultural camps, the forest camps, and railway construction (GUZDS). (Saktanova 2024: 1-24), GARF F. 9414, In.1, D.2767) The mortality of children of prisoner mothers, in comparison to the total number of children dead in Karlag in 1941, is given in Table 1.

Months of 1941	Total number of imprisoned mothers' children from 0 to 3 years old in Karlag in 1941	Total number of prisoners who died in Karlag in 1941	Total number of children who died in Karlag in 1941 (%) in comparison with general mortality	Children of imprisoned mothers (% in comparison with total number of dead children)	% of mortality in relation to the total number of imprisoned mothers	Children of free labour mothers (% in comparison with the total number of dead children)
January	901	98	14 (14.3%)	10 (71%)	1.1%	4 (28.5%)
February	911	114	10 (8.8%)	9 (90%)	0.98%	1 (10%)
April	951	92	33 (35.8%)	29 (88%)	3%	4 (12%)
June	1018		13	8 (61.5%)	0.8%	5 (38.5%)
July	1056		25	19 (76%)	1.8%	6 (24%)
August	1101		23	13 (56.5%)	1.18%	10 (43.5%)
September	1084	139	40 (28.7%)	24 (60%)	2.2%	16 (40%)
October	1081		23	17 (74%)	1.6%	6 (26%)
November	1080		26	19 (73%)	1.7%	7 (27%)
December	1077		30	22 (73.3%)	2%	8 (26.6%)

Table 1. Indicators of the mortality in the children of imprisoned (imp.) and free labour mothers (free lab.) in Karlag in 1941 (GARF F. 9414, In.1, D.2767; GARF F. 9414, In.1, D.611).

NB information from March and May is absent in the summary data.

From the data that we have on general mortality in Karlag (statistical data from 4 months), we can deduce that the highest percentage of infant mortality was in April of 1941: of 92 of the dead (in general) 35.8 percent were children, which is 33 children. Unfortunately, we cannot provide in this table, for comparative analysis, data about the number of free labourer's children because the statistical data from the Gulag Sanitation Department contained the prisoners' children from 0 to three years old, and the free workers' children from 0 to eight years old.

More detail is shown in Figure 1.

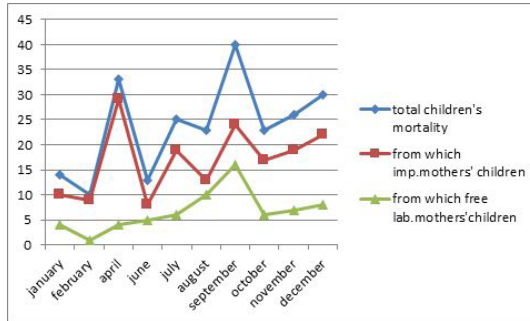


Figure 1. The mortality level of female prisoner's and free employee worker's children in comparison with general infant mortality in Karlag during 1941
NB information from March and May is absent in the summary data.

According to these data, we can conclude that almost two-thirds of the dead children in Karlag in 1941 were the children of incarcerated mothers. The highest peak of mortality for female prisoners' children in Karlag falls in April: 29 children die in this month, which corresponds to 88% of the general number of dead children. In April 1941 there were 2,153 children in Karlag, of those 1,202 (55.8%) were the children of free workers and 951 (44.1%) the children of female prisoners. The number of prisoners' dead children constituted 3% of the total number of female prisoners' children. In other months, this percentage was lower. The maximum infant mortality was in September, when 40 children died (24 children, or 60%, were the children of incarcerated mothers), which constituted 2.2% of the total number of female prisoners' children who died in this month. The percentage of female prisoners' dead children varied throughout 1941 from 60% to 90% of the overall number of dead children. In relation to the total number of female prisoners' children, the percentage of dead children varied from 0.98% to 3%.

The archival documents provide certain information that allows us to make a comparative analysis of infant mortality in Karlag. Let us compare the year 1941 with the end of the 1930s and the end of the 1950s. So, on the 16th of December 1938 a high mortality rate among female prisoners' children was documented. From the total number of children in the camp, 514, during only two months (September and October) in 1938, 98 children died (19%). This number was 1.5 times higher in 1938 than in 1941, when in the same two months 63 children died. The children died from pneumonia, which accounted for 50% of the total mortality rate. The mortality was explained in the reports

as follows: mortality from pneumonia was due to the extremely unsatisfactory state of medical services, untimely hospitalisation, and the unsatisfactory prophylactic work in the kindergarten, which led to a high number of respiratory illnesses and resulting lung complications. (GAKO. F.1171, In. 1, D.13: 61)

In 1939, 114 children died in the camp. From 1941 to 1944, 924 children died, including 202 in 1941 (the figures vary in different Gulag and Karlag Sanitation Department archive files), 314 died in 1942, 226 in 1943, and 182 in 1944 (Dilmanov 2002: 169). The mortality rate among female prisoners' children in Karlag in January 1944 was 3% of the total number of children in Karlag camps, in February 1%, and in March 1.5% (GARF F. 9414, In.1, D.2796: 186). In 1949, 570 children of prisoners were kept in five children's homes. As a result of their unsatisfactory condition, 184 children died in 1948 alone, or over 32% of the total number of children (Dilmanov 2002: 169). In 1951, in Karlag the infant mortality rate in children's homes was on average 1.2% (GARF F. 9414, In.1, D.451: 47–47rev.). In 1952 in Karlag, the mortality rate of children in children's homes was on average 1.4% (GARF F. 9414, In.1, D.2896: 46). Thus, it was not until the mid-1950s that the infant mortality rate in Karlag decreased sharply compared to the 1940s, and the number of dead children was no longer so appalling, although its children continued to die.

For a comparative view of the problem of child mortality in the Gulag in 1941, we present data for Vyatlag (a camp that was part of the Gulag forest industry system) and Bureilag (a camp that was part of the Gulag railway industry system). Vyatlag existed in the Gulag system from 1938 to 1960 and was located in the Kajski district of the Kirov oblast in central Russia. The main areas of the camp's activities were logging, pulp production, woodworking, construction of timber railway sleepers, etc. (Ohotin, Roginskij et al. 1998: 200–201).

Months of 1941	Total number of imprisoned mothers' children from 0 to 3 years old in Vyatlag in 1941	Total number of children who died in Vyatlag in 1941	Children of imprisoned mothers (% of total number of dead children)	% mortality in relation to the total number of children of imprisoned mothers	Children of the free labour mothers (% of total number of dead children)
January	60	9	9 (100%)	15%	0
February	67	4	0	-	4 (100%)
March	67	5	5 (100%)	7.4%	0
April	50	2	2 (100%)	4%	0
May	81	4	0	-	4 (100%)
June	82	0	0	-	0
July	95	1	0	-	1 (100%)
August	100	3	1 (33.3%)	1%	2 (66.7%)
September	98	3	3 (100%)	3.06%	0
October	118	6	4 (66.7%)	3.4%	2 (33.3%)
November	119	9	8 (88.9%)	6.7%	1 (11.1%)
December	110	8	6 (75%)	5.5%	2 (25%)

Table 2. Mortality rates of female prisoners' children in Vyatlag in 1941 (GARF F. 9414, In.1, D.2767: 1–24)

As Victor Berdinskikh writes in his monograph on Vyatlag: in June 1941 the listed “camp population” numbered 19,650 people, of whom 17,890 were men and 1,760 women. There were 1,662 free employee workers. “The camp was initially created for joint sex confinement, and male and female ‘subzones,’ such as barracks were quite ‘interpenetrable’ allowing prisoners to come in and, to put it in their language, ‘exchange opinions’ on quite understandable ‘issues,’ the male part of the camp’s administration had in this respect ‘the widest opportunities’” (Berdinskikh 2001: 80).

According to data from the Gulag Sanitation Department (Table 2), in Vyatlag there were from 50 to 119 children of prisoners in different months during 1941, with the percentage mortality of these children being 33% to 100% of the total number of dead children depending on the month, which was 1% to 15% of the total number of female prisoners' children. In the summer months, and in February, not a single child of an imprisoned mothers died.

Mortality peaked in January 1941, when nine children died, all of them children of imprisoned mothers, which was up to 15% of the total number of female prisoners' children. The mortality rate of children of free employee workers in different months in 1941 ranged from 0.3% to 3% of the total number of children of free workers. In January 1941 this number was 146 (0%) children of free employ-

ee workers, February 133 (3%), March 183 (0%), April 191 (0%), May 255 (1.5%), June 251 (0%), July 159 (0.6%), August 517 (0.4%), September 568 (0%), October 568 (0.3%), November 372 (0.2%), December 383 (1.8%). (In January, March, April, June, and September, no children of free-employee mothers died.)

The mortality rate of the children of free employees was lower than that of the children of imprisoned mothers, but still quite high: and in some months nevertheless reached 100% of all children who died. (see Table 2) The expected staffing level in Vyatlag on the eve of World War Two was 2,652, but there were only 1,689 free labour workers. Vacant working places were filled by prisoners. (Berdinskikh 2001: 60) Viktor Berdinskikh explains: all those who were employed there sought to leave as soon as possible. We can observe the increase in infant mortality among children of prisoners in Vyatlag in the autumn and winter seasons, and on this basis we can conclude that in the northern, swampy, and humid climate, sunny days had a health-improving effect.

The other camp we will cite here for comparison with Karlag is Bureilag, a camp in the Gulag's railroad industry system. Bureilag existed from 1938 to 1942, with its centre at Izvestkovaya station on the Far Eastern Railway (now the Jewish Autonomous Region, a region on the Russian Pacific coast). Initially, it was a BAM (railway Baikal Amur Magistral) construction site on the Tynda-Zeya main line (southern Siberia close to the Chinese border). At the beginning of 1941 the camp was restructured as an automobile repair works, and with the beginning of the Second World War it functioned as an ammunition manufacturing enterprise (Ohotin, Roginskij et al. 1998: 177–178). The camp contingent stabilised until February 1939 and fluctuation was not so high. The stabilisation of camp life affected the mortality, which in April 1939 (in comparison with January 1939) was 3.5 times lower. (Golovin 2000)

Months of 1941	Total number of imprisoned mothers' children from 0 to 3 years old in Bureilag in 1941	Total number of children who died in Bureilag in 1941	Children of imprisoned mothers (% of the total number of dead children)	% mortality in relation to the total of children of imprisoned mothers	Children of free labour mothers (% of total number of dead children)
January	180	5	4 (80%)	2.2%	1 (20%)
February	178	7	1 (14.%)	0.5%	6 (85.7%)
March	181	6	2 (33%)	1%	4 (66.6%)
April	343	7	5 (71%)	0.4%	2 (28.6%)
May	348	10	4 (40%)	1.1%	6 (60%)
June	332	3	0	-	3 (100%)
July	343	18	4 (22%)	1.1%	14 (77.7)
August	354	25	10 (40%)	2.8%	15 (60%)
September	342	28	7 (25%)	2%	21 (75%)
October	252	6	4 (66.7%)	1.6%	2 (33.3%)
December	224	10	10 (100%)	4.5%	0

Table 3: Mortality rates of children of prisoners and free labourers in Bureilag in 1941 (GARF F. 9414, In.1, D.2767: 1–24)

NB the information on December is absent from the Bureilag summary data

According to the data in Table 3, the highest imprisoned mothers' infant mortality rate in Bureilag during 1941 was in December when 4.5% of the total number of female prisoners' children died. In December 1941, there were 2,299 children in Bureilag, of whom 224 were children of incarcerated mothers (of which 100% were in children's homes). In other months, the mortality rate ranged from 0.4% to 2.2% of the total number of children of incarcerated mothers. In June 1941, no children of female prisoners died in Bureilag.

The mortality rate of female prisoners' children ranged from 22% to 100% of the total number of deaths. At the same time, the mortality rate of children of free employees also ranged from 20% to 100% of the total number of deaths. It should be noted that the total number of children of free employees, registered in Gulag camps, was on average higher than the number of children of incarcerated mothers. In January of 1941 the number of children of free labour in Bureilag was 723 children, by December the number was 2,075, the highest number was in August 1941 at 2,712 children. Thus, in January and February, there were four times more children of free labour workers than of incarcerated mothers, between March and September seven times more, and in October and December nine times more. The number of children of free employees increased sharply, while the mortality rate remained approximately the same

as that of children of incarcerated mothers. The number of female prisoners' children increased approximately twofold over the year.

By comparing statistical data from the three camps (the percentage of incarcerated mothers' dead children of the total number of children), we can conclude that the overall mortality rate among female prisoners' children in Karlag was somewhat lower than in those of the Gulag's camps that focused on other economic activities such as railways and forestry. At the same time, the total number of children of female prisoners in Karlag was an order of magnitude higher than in the Gulag camps dedicated to other economic systems. One reason for the lower child mortality rate in Karlag could be that Karlag was an agricultural camp conglomerate engaged in producing vegetables and meat, so inmates had better access to food than in industrial camps (Ventsel and Zhanguttin 2016).

For a comparison of children's mortality in Karlag we present data on child mortality in corrective working camps and other penitentiary facilities from the Soviet Ministry of the Internal Affairs (MVD SSSR) from 1947 (Table 4). In this year mortality among children was one of the highest within the GULAG camp system.

Month	The number of children in institutions	Died	%
January	14,631	496	3.3
February	14,706	469	3.1
March	17,289	544	3.3
April	17,453	532	3.0
May	18,075	501	2.9
June	19,243	526	2.7
July	20,244	726	3.6
August	19,992	904	4.5
September	11,345	354	3.8
October	9,557	359	3.7
November	9,506	400	4.0
December	10,217	412	4.7

Table 4. Child mortality in work camps and other penitentiary facilities from the Soviet Ministry of the Internal Affairs (MVD SSSR) from 1947 (Khlevniuk 2004: 563–564)

Comparison of childrens' mortality of with 1947 in corrective work camps and other similar institutions of the Ministry of the Internal Affairs shows lower mortality in Karlag camps. In 1941 higher mortality came in April (3%),

September (2.2%) and December (2%), in other months it was below 2%. In 1947 overall child mortality in GULAG camps was at its lowest in June (2.7%), although in August, November and December was between 4.0% and 4.7.

Nevertheless, as we as we learn from the surviving memoirs of Tatyana Nikolskaya, who was born in Karlag in 1941, the chances of survival for the children of female prisoners was very low. Tatyana Nikolskaya recalls:

I was born in April 1941. Or rather, not so! Not I was born, but there were two of us. Twins, born on April 9, 1941 – Vladislav and Tatiana. Vladislav, unfortunately, due to illness, Vladislav did not live to this day. And, moreover, it was a completely incomprehensible disease. Absolutely incomprehensible. So, my mother told me that it was very difficult for him ..., very difficult to survive. So there was incontinence of the head ... [the doctor] did injections and I've got huge scars on my two legs where they to put an IV drip in. Well, it wasn't an IV drip, it was some kind of solvent. After the solvent was injected, they cut it all up, and the scars formed. They said: "You see, your vitality is inherent in you." Probably, the doctors tried to save my brother, but due to the conditions in the camp, their efforts were not enough. (*Deti ALZHIRA* 2005)

From the recollections of incarcerated mothers, we can conclude that the attitude toward children in the children's homes was quite formal. The mother of Albert Main, born in Karlag in May 1940, kept notes while in the camp, despite this being strictly forbidden. On February 11, 1941, she recorded her impressions of the children's home where her son was kept:

In the nursing room [the cold air from outside] was blowing in from the windows and the door. Alik was like a mouse. He never once stretched out his arms. The poor children were freezing. At times he was almost blue. Yes, January was the hardest month. Because of the cold and hunger, it was almost impossible to calm the child. With 200 grams of bread and one warm meal a day. After every feeding, there was a pain in my breasts.

Albert Mein himself recalled, "I distinctly remember standing in a crib somewhere and being cold. I can't say where exactly. Sometimes, someone would forcefully give me something, apparently some medicine or food. I tried to resist somehow. What I remember is me standing up in the crib every time, and for some reason alone all the time. (Stark 2013: 18–19)

According to statistical data from the Gulag Sanitation Department, from 20% to 50% of female prisoners' children in the children's homes of Karlag in 1941 fell ill (GARF F. 9414, In.1, D.2767). These data can be seen more clearly in Table 5.

Months of 1941	Total number of the imprisoned mothers' children from 0 to 3 years old in Karlag in 1941	Sick children in children's homes (% of total number of children)
January	901	259 (28.7%)
February	911	223 (24.5%)
April	951	456 (48%)
June	1018	269 (26.4%)
July	1056	323 (30.6%)
August	1101	376 (34.1%)
September	1084	317 (29.2%)
October	1081	338 (31.2%)
November	1080	400 (37%)
December	1077	427 (39.6%)

Table 5. Number of children who fell ill in children's homes in Karlag in 1941 (GARF F. 9414, In.1, D.2767: 1–24)

According to the data in Table 6, the highest number of sick (as well as dead, see Table 1) children in Karlag in 1941 was in April, constituting 48% of the total number of children in the children's homes (they were all the children of imprisoned mothers). In the other months, the percentage of sick children ranged from 24.5% to 39.6%. The poor condition of the children in Karlag in April 1941, in our opinion, is for the following reasons (the reporting materials and summaries do not indicate the causes of mortality in any particular month):

- Insufficient nutrition. Apart from cereals the nutritional norms in the Karlag children's homes in 1941 included – in rather modest quantities
- some bread and animal and milk fats, but should also have included fruits and vegetables (Alanijazov, Saktaganova 2023: 135). Even assuming that prisoners' children were fed according to the rules, it is unlikely that they received fresh fruit and vegetables as these were unavailable in early spring. Thus, the children's bodies were weakened by a lack of vitamins.
- Sharp temperature changes (up to 20 degrees Celsius) in Central Kazakhstan, which has a cold climate, and at the same time insufficient heating

of premises. Children were extremely cold and falling ill in the children's homes.

– It is possible to assume that in Karlag in April 1941 there was an epidemic of some sort (which were quite common in the Gulag camps), which due to the insufficient supply of medicines in the camps doctors could not cope with.

A common table was used to summarise Gulag Sanitation Department data for 1941, the data on children of free labour in the Gulag camps, and data on the children of incarcerated women, which allows us to make a comparative analysis of the situation of the different children in the camps. Regarding medical care, the Gulag free labour often used the same structures of the Sanitation Department which also monitored the health of prisoners. There were no separate hospitals in the structure of the Karlag for VOHR (*voyenizirovannaya okhrana*, or paramilitary guard units) officers and free employees. The medical care of all people, both prisoners and free labour, was provided by the Sanitation Department.

As reported by Viktor Nikolaevitch Zemskov, the Gulag VOHR paramilitary guards numbered about 107,000 in the early 1940s. He notes that in addition to assisting prisoners, the sanitary service of camps and the corrective labour colony (*ispravitel'nyje kolonii*)³ also provided medical care for VOHR soldiers and their families. (Cholak 1989)

By the early 1940s, former prisoners, who had been forbidden to leave their camps, were increasingly becoming free employees at these camps. For example, for women arrested under NKVD order No. 00486, the end of their term was to come in 1942–1943 and 1945–1946. Nevertheless, a special directive of June 22, 1941, prohibited their release from the camps because they were deemed “counter-revolutionaries, bandits, recidivists and other dangerous criminals”. The following year, a directive was issued allowing the release of CHSIRs (члены семьи изменников родины, or family members of traitors to the motherland) on the condition that they remain in the camps as free labour (Grinev et al. 2003: 28–29). Former prisoners who were unable to return to their previous lives after leaving the camp also became free employees because very often work was denied to ‘enemies of the people’ elsewhere.

Some structures of the sanitary service, such as those related to the supervision of children, employed free labour. The Instruction on the Sanitary

Service of Prisons of the NKVD USSR from 1940 states that, regarding the maintenance of prison nurseries, "all work in the nursery is managed by the head of the sanitary service of the prison. Nursery services are to be performed by free labour medical workers according to certain staffing requirements (GARF F. 9401, In.1sch, D. 570:198).

According to Boris Aleksandrovitch Nakhapetov, a historian of the Gulag Sanitation Department, medical care for free workers and their families was a difficult task. In most remote and forest camps there were no hospitals at all.

There are many shortcomings in the provision of medical care for the free workers and their families, as well as to the personnel of the guards, which are summarized as follows: the network of hospital facilities is insufficient. This is especially acute in the deep forest camp units. Even within the administration of some forest camps, such as Usolskiy and Kizelovskiy (in the Molotov oblast, currently Perm oblast in northern Russia), there are no hospitals, and the staff, their families, and personnel of the guards often go through a lot of trouble before receiving the necessary medical care. Kindergartens and nurseries were also in insufficient quantity. (Nakhapetov 2009: 82)

The statistical data of the Gulag Sanitation Department shows that the largest number of children of free labour in Karlag in 1941 was in November, with 1,354 children. The peak of mortality for this group was September 1941 with 1.3% of the total number of free labour children dying (16 out of 1,249). In 1941, from 8% to 29% of free labour children received medical care in kindergartens and nurseries in Karlag, and by the end of the year their number had risen to 30%.

Child Mortality and Disease in Karlag, 1941

Months of 1941	Children of free labour from 0 to 8 years old	Total number of free labour children in nurseries and kindergartens (% of total number of free labour children)	Fell ill in nurseries and kindergartens (% of total number of free labour children)
January	1,114	90 (8%)	3 (0.26%)
February	1,187	92 (7.7%)	46 (3.8%)
April	1,202	115 (9.5%)	28 (2.3%)
June	1,293	133 (10.2%)	7 (0.5%)
July	1,231	136 (11%)	26 (2%)
August	1,217	187 (15.3%)	28 (2.3%)
September	1,249	230 (18.4%)	35 (2.8%)
October	1,268	336 (26.5%)	81 (6.3%)
November	1,354	408 (30%)	128 (9.4%)
December	1,330	389 (29.2%)	164 (12.3%)

Table 6. Provision of kindergarten and nursery places for the children of Karlag free labour, and the mortality rate among those children in 1941.

The mortality rate of children of free labour in kindergartens and nurseries increased during 1941 from 0.26% to 12.6% of the total free labour children. Nevertheless, a certain decline in the mortality of this group was observed during the summer months of 1941.

In some Karlag departments there were significant problems with housing for VOHR guards. In the distribution of funds for housing, free workers were considered last. This distribution policy continued from the 1930s through to the 1950s. A letter from a VOHR rifleman (*strelok*) of the VOHR, written in 1939 to the local prosecutor demonstrates this:

I live with my family practically in the open air. ... It was raining, and I didn't know where to put the child. There are leaks everywhere. I had to ask a neighbour to let me to sleep over. Since the baby was born he has always been sick from the cold. Neither the child nor my wife have been given a bread card. I cannot live on 600 grams of bread and 200 roubles. I wrote reports, but they don't help, on the contrary, my situation is getting worse and worse. I sleep in my clothes, and the child's nappy cannot be changed. I ask to exclude me from the guard, I cannot work. (Dilmanov 2002: 184)

But even with such problems of child morbidity among VOHR personnel, we can see from the statistics of the Gulag Sanitation Department that in orphan-

ages and nurseries, children of free employees contracted fewer diseases than the children of prisoners in children's homes.

The greatest peak of mortality occurred in December 1941 and was about 12% of children. The increased mortality in the autumn and winter months suggests that the infrastructure of kindergartens and nurseries was inadequate: it is likely that the premises were not sufficiently heated during these months.

Conclusion

Thus, it can be concluded that despite some financial investments made by the Gulag authorities to help with infrastructure for the maintenance of children of imprisoned mothers, the mortality rate of these children remained high. Life in the Soviet camp meant total control over the lives and activities of inmates. Although in reality inmates were sometimes able to have certain agency and could express their personality through art, or cultivating and preparing food (Ventsel and Zhanguutin 2016; Ventsel et al. 2014), regarding the relationship between mothers and children, control was strict and efficient. This had serious consequences on the life expectancy of children.

Almost two-thirds of all children who died in Karlag in 1941 were the children of imprisoned mothers. The highest percentage of deaths in this group of children in Karlag in 1941 was in April, when 29 children died, i.e. 88% of the total child mortality rate in Karlag of this year. Moreover, from the presented data on total mortality in Karlag it can be concluded that the highest percentage of child mortality occurred in April: of the 92 deaths in Karlag, children accounted for 35.8%.

In April 1941, there were 2,153 children in Karlag, of whom 1,202 (55.8%) were children of free labour and 951 (44.1%) children of imprisoned mothers. The proportion of incarcerated mothers' children who died was 3%. We speculate that the increased infant mortality in this month may have been due to inadequate nutrition, lack of vitamins, inadequate heating of children's homes, and a possible increase in infectious diseases, characteristic of the spring. In the other months of 1941, the percentage of deaths was lower. A definite peak occurred in September, when 40 children died, of whom 24 (60%) were children of imprisoned mothers, representing 2% of the total children of imprisoned mothers.

Overall, the percentage of children of incarcerated mothers who died, in relation to general infant mortality in Karlag, ranged from 60 to 90% during 1941. It can be argued that care of prisoners' children in the children's homes was inadequate. The fact that the organisation of life in children's homes, where children were, except for feeding time, continuously without their mothers, was a major contribution to child mortality. In 1941, 26% to 48% of the children of imprisoned mothers fell ill in the children's homes.

However, in Karlag, compared to some other Gulag camp systems, the mortality rate of children of incarcerated mothers was lower. According to the data we have presented for the other two camps in the Gulag system, we can see that in Vyatlag the mortality rate of children of imprisoned mothers varied from 33% to 100% of the total number of children who died. The number of children in Vyatlag was smaller than in Karlag (a maximum of 119 children in November). Approximately the same percentage of mortality was recorded among free labour children of in Vyatlag, with a larger number of children (a maximum of 568 children in November and October 1941). The mortality rate of children of imprisoned mothers in Bureilag ranged from 20% to 100% during 1941, where the total number of children of female prisoners was approximately 10 times lower than the number of children of free employees.

In general, we can conclude that the number of children of free employees in camps in the Gulag system in 1941 was much higher than of imprisoned women. At the same time, the mortality rate of free labour children was much lower than that of prisoners' children. However, Sanitation Department reports on attendance at children's nurseries and kindergartens by children of free labour are not sufficiently valid due to the fact that there was an insufficient number of kindergartens and nurseries for Gulag workers during the period in question. Only 8% to 30% of free labour children were able to go to kindergarten or nursery. The mortality of children of free labour, unlike the children of prisoners, was higher in the autumn and winter months.

Notes

¹ The Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Union (*Tsentral'nyj ispolnitel'ni komitet SSSR*) was the highest governing body in the Soviet Union in the interim of the sessions of the Congress of Soviets, and existed from 1922 until 1938, when it was replaced by the Supreme Soviet of first convocation.

² The Council of People's Commissars (*Soviet narodnykh kommissarov* or Sovnarkom, also as generic SNK), was a government institution formed shortly after the October Revolution in 1917. Created in the Russian Republic the council laid foundations in restructuring the country to form the Soviet Union. It evolved to become the highest government authority of executive power under the Soviet system in states which came under the control of the Bolsheviks.

³ Such colonies combined penal detention with compulsory work (penal labour).

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