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GULAG forgotten victims: early release on medical grounds 1930-1953

It is widely accepted in recent scholarship that canonical 1, 760, 000 prisoners died in the GULAG in between 1930-1955. Yet the question of the published official data's reliability and completeness has never been seriously researched or revised in Western and Russian historiography since the opening of classified GULAG archives in the early 1990s (Zemskov (1991), Zemskov, Getty, Rittersporn (1993)). The main goal of my paper is to revise this historiographical perception through a general overview of an important, but almost unexplored, practice – the early release of inmate invalids on medical grounds – with relation to the more general GULAG disability phenomenon and the question of GULAG mortality data reliability. Methodologically, I plan to merge these major issues into one interconnected pattern.

I will demonstrate that the early release of the most emaciated prisoners allowed GULAG officials and doctors at all administrative levels to artificially reduce death rates in an attempt to avoid prosecution by the supervising authorities. As my preliminary research shows, those released were often terminally ill and died, literally, in their thousands on the doorsteps of the camps. Those dying convicts were never included in official GULAG medical reports due to GULAG bosses' strict orders, although the prisoners' health was jeopardized within the GULAG system. Thus, the actual average death indexes of GULAG penitentiaries in some years and especially in certain deadly camps may therefore prove to be higher than has been agreed upon in the literature so far.