The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian Ministry: Only Non-Political Gulag Records Destroyed

July 13, 2018



Ministry of Internal Affairs (Russia) **Wikicommons**

Russia's Interior Ministry reportedly said records of Soviet-era gulag labor camp survivors are subject to destruction, but only if the survivor was not convicted of political treason.

The Gulag Museum in Moscow alleged last month that Russian officials permanently destroyed cards with the personal information and the release dates of former inmates. In response to concerns that authorities were attempting to erase the history of Soviet repression, the Interior Ministry noted that physical copies of the records were digitized for permanent storage.

The Interior Ministry now admits it does delete some records of gulag survivors, but only those who were not convicted of committing political crimes against the Soviet Union, Russia's Kommersant business daily reported Wednesday.

In a letter sent to gulag historian Sergei Prudovsky, who originally discovered the practice of

destroying records when the files for a peasant farmer went missing, the Interior Ministry specified that only the record cards of gulag survivors who were convicted of "political" crimes under the 58th article of the USSR's criminal code are still retained.

Related article: A Gulag Historian Returns to Prison

But experts say that convictions of gulag prisoners under other articles could also have been politically motivated, and therefore their records must be kept.

"We understood that cases of deportation, dekulakization, articles on socially harmful and dangerous elements, could have been politically motivated," Memorial gulag researcher Nikita Okhotin told Kommersant.

Conservative estimates say nearly 700,000 people were executed in Stalin's Great Terror of 1937-38. The Memorial rights group keeps a database with records of some 3 million victims of Soviet repression.

Gulag researchers are calling for an amendment to the 1991 law on the rehabilitation of the victims of Stalinist repression, a key legal effort in reckoning with the victims of Soviet human rights abuses, that would interpret the category of political crimes more broadly.

Regardless, said Okhotin, who helped draft the 1991 rehabilitation law, records should not be destroyed. "We couldn't even imagine that the remaining documents could disappear," he said.

Reuters contributed reporting to this article.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/07/13/russian-ministry-only-non-political-gulag-records-destroyed-a62231