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Russian Prisoners to Build Siberian Railway Line

By AFP

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Planned railroad track spans over 4,000 kilometers running from Lake Baikal in eastern Siberia to the Sea of Japan in the Far East. **Flickr / Sergei F**

Russia's prison service on Thursday said that convicts would be sent to construct a new section of the Baikal-Amur Mainline track (BAM) in Siberia, a railway partially built by Gulag prisoners.

Amid labor shortages Russian government officials have discussed plans to use prison labor for major construction projects but they insist there are no plans to revive the Stalin-era Gulag practice.

The BAM track spans over 4,000 kilometers running from Lake Baikal in eastern Siberia to the Sea of Japan in the Far East.

Conceived in the 1930s, it was one of the largest and most costly projects of the Soviet Union

that claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Gulag prisoners sent to the labour camps under dictator Joseph Stalin.

"An agreement was signed on the intent to use convict labour and create a site that functions as a correctional facility," state news agency RIA Novosti quoted a spokesman for Russia's Federal Prison Service (FSIN) as saying.

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Alexander Tchernoyarov, who heads one of the main companies involved in the project, pointed to a "serious shortage of manpower," with many migrant workers unable to enter Russia due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The Russian military said in April that it would contribute to the modernisation of the BAM track but more manpower was needed to fill the 15,000 vacant positions.

Around 40,000 prisoners died when building the railway in the 1930s, but many researchers consider this figure to be an underestimate.

"It will not be a Gulag," FSIN head Alexander Kalashnikov told rights officials in May, speaking of plans to use prison labor.

He added that the labourers would enjoy "decent conditions" and receive a salary.

The new section of the BAM railway will be 340 kilometers long and work is set to begin in the spring.

In March, the prison service said it was considering whether to mobilise convicts to clean up pollution in the Arctic.

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