

0. BULGARIAN LABOR CAMPS - Story Preface

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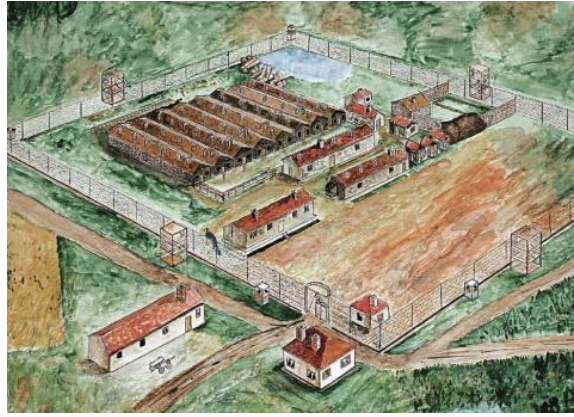
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During 2009, a commemorative exhibition entitled “Without a Trace? The Labor Camp in Belene 1949-1959 and Afterward...” was on display, in Bulgaria, at Sofia’s National Art Gallery. Among other items were reconstructions of the Belene camp by survivor and cartographer [Krum Horozov](#). This image depicts a painting, by Horozov, of the second block of the Belene Camp. Click on the image for a better view.

Before the close of World War II, when the Red Army failed to leave Eastern European countries, Stalin’s sphere of influence was expanding. Eventually that group of Soviet-occupied nations became known as the “Warsaw Pact.”

At Yalta, Stalin apparently never meant for his troops to leave. He just forgot to mention it to Churchill and FDR.

It didn’t take long for Churchill to predict what would happen if Stalin controlled Eastern Europe. It was, he said (at thirty-eight minutes into his “Sinews of Peace” speech), as though an “[Iron Curtain](#)” had descended. Soon after one war ended, another - the “Cold War” - [had begun](#).

Soviet propaganda posters claimed “[We Are Invincible](#).” (From left to right the pictured flags are from occupied Romania, East Germany, Bulgaria, Soviet Union, Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia.)

No posters, and no propaganda mentioned another crucial fact: While Nazi concentration camps were being closed, more and more Soviet forced-labor camps were being opened.

The first [Soviet labor camp](#) (which Solzhenitsyn called the “mother of the GULAG”) was a former monastery - [Solovetski Monastery](#). Perhaps there was symbolism in that choice with [barbed wires](#) replacing open doors.

One of the camps in [Bulgaria](#), on an island in the Danube River, was called [Belene](#). It is from here - Belene - that David, the hero of [I Am David](#) (formerly entitled *North to Freedom*) begins his journey.

How, and when, did forced labor camps come to other communist countries, like Bulgaria?

A book which tells the stories of Bulgarian camp survivors, answers that - and many other - questions. (See [The Bulgarian Gulag. Eye-witnesses](#), a collection of documentary stories about concentration camps in Bulgaria; edited by Ekaterina Boncheva, Edvin Sugarev, Svilen Pytov, Jean Solomon; published in Sofia during 1991; translated, from Bulgarian, by Dr. Neli Hadjiyska and Dr. Valentin Hadjiyski.)

From that work we learn, among other things:

The camps were born just four months after the great people’s victory. More precisely, in January 1945...The decree was issued on a motion by Interior Minister Anton Yugov. According to it, the TVOs [Bulgarian Communist designation for “prison”] are designed for incorrigible vagrants and recidivists. No one should be detained there for more than six months without a second sentence.

Of course, officials had wide latitude when they decided who could be corralled into these camps. And as for the six-month stay:

There were people who never understood why were they in the camp. The six months mentioned in the decree remained a mirage. Probably out of courtesy, the camp administration wrote its lists like that: Ivanov - 6+6+6+6...”

What was the point of slave-labor camps, beyond forced work? What turned the eyes of camp inmates lifeless? Something even more sinister than stealing time from captive people:

Yet in the endless chronicle of Bulgarian camps there is something that comes on top of what we are used to. It is the absolute dehumanization, the complete break from all moral norms and humanity, all that defines us as rational and emotional beings. In the camp (a repressive body created by the government with the “consent” of the public) they kill not only with or without pretext - they kill for sport as well.

Despite officials' efforts to totally destroy the spirit of camp prisoners, human beings often find a way to overcome adversity. Relying on inner strength, people can frequently surmount staggering odds against them. David was one of those people.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/BULGARIAN-LABOR-CAMPS-I-Am-David>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/BULGARIAN-LABOR-CAMPS-I-Am-David>

Media Stream

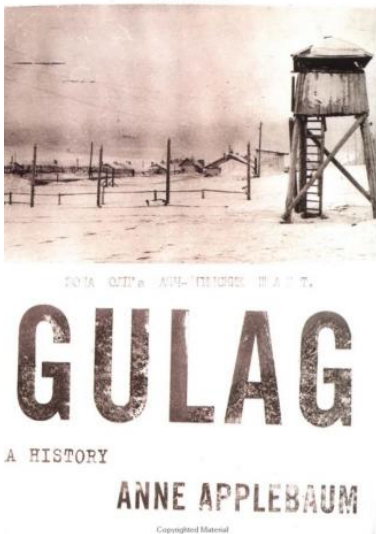


Poster - We Are Invincible

Image online, courtesy Military Photos.net

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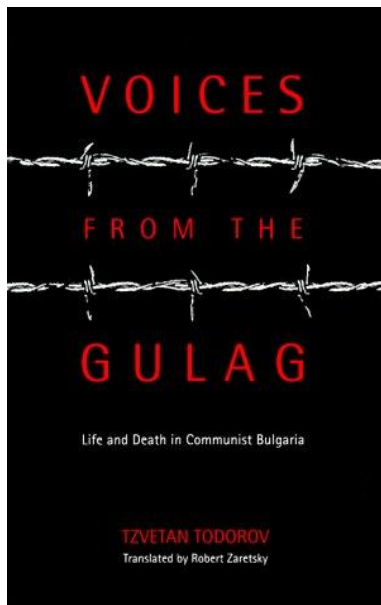


GULAG - by Anne Applebaum

Bookcover image, online courtesy publisher and Google Books.

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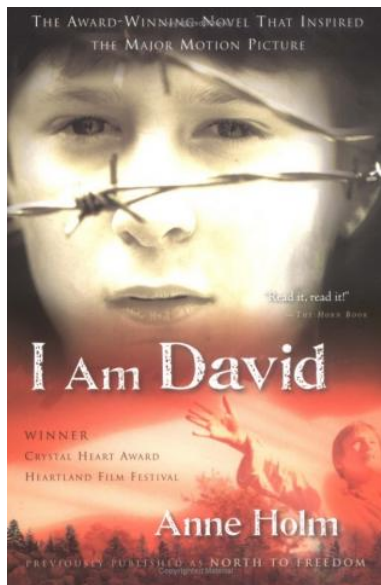


Voices From the GULAG - by Tzvetan Todorov

Bookcover image online, courtesy Google Books.

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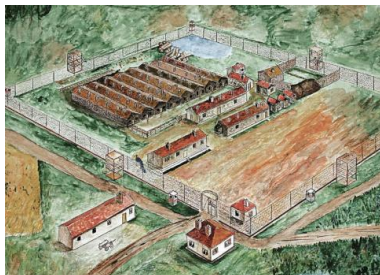


I Am David - by Anne Holm

Bookcover image online, courtesy Amazon.

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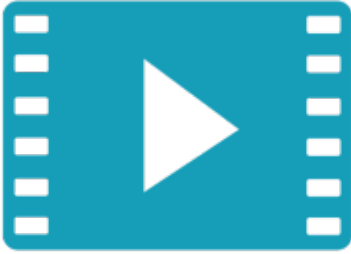
Belene - Bulgarian Forced Labor Camp

Video clip online, courtesy YouTube.

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Cold War - A Divided Berlin

Universal Newsreel, 22 July 1948.

Courtesy, National Archives.

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