Abstract

By extending the history of political prisoners to all Gulag detainees, historians have overlooked one of the most striking features of Stalin's prison camp system—namely, the revolving door, the circular movement of millions of Soviet citizens to the Gulag and back. Stalin's labor camps and colonies formed a dynamic, variable, and unstable system in which prisoners came and went in vast numbers. Ordinary peasants and workers, sentenced for minor infractions, passed through this notorious penal system in very large numbers. The Gulag and non-Gulag worlds were profoundly connected as millions not only entered the system, but returned to Soviet life. Stalin's 1945 amnesty is hardly mentioned in the scholarly literature, although it freed over half a million people and represented Stalin's largest single release of Gulag prisoners. As such, it offers the most striking example of the Gulag's revolving door.