

Stalin's Slave Ships

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Kolyma, the Gulag Fleet, and the Role of the West

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and in the meantime extend their apologies for any omissions.

To James and Elizabeth

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Preface: A Horrible Secret

One evening in 1999, I settled with my wife in our Sydney, Australia, home and flipped channels on Australian cable TV. We began to half-watch a program about a Russian explorer by the name of Otto Schmidt and his attempt in 1933 to traverse the Arctic Ocean along the northern border of the Soviet Union in the merchant ship *Chelyuskin*.¹

The program relayed how the ship became stuck fast in the Arctic ice just as it approached the end of its trek, almost within sight of the open waters of the Bering Strait. The world watched helplessly as the Arctic ice pack embraced *Chelyuskin* and dragged it back away from open water, almost as a predator might retrieve its escaping prey. The world listened through vivid radio accounts from the scene as the ship was crushed by the massive ice packs. As the ship slipped beneath the ice, over a hundred passengers and crew were forced into tents on the frozen ocean's surface.

The television program described how Soviet aviators were dispatched from Moscow to rescue the stranded survivors and (in ironic testimony to the state of development of the Soviet Union at that time) how they reached the scene—by traveling by boat and train *westward* from Moscow over Europe, across the Atlantic, through the United States, across Canada and Alaska—finally reaching the *Chelyuskin* survivors after almost circumnavigating the world. This was easier than trying to travel eastward from Moscow across their own country.

While watching the program, we began to wonder why the Soviets would undertake this heroic rescue effort when the United States, with personnel and aircraft in nearby Alaska, had offered its assistance, in the spirit of Arctic cooperation. After all, in other emergencies in earlier years, Arctic rescues were the scene of impressive international cooperation between the Soviet Union and other countries.² The television program provided an answer. Evidently Stalin was afraid that any personnel from the United States sent

to the scene might witness a horrible secret: there was *another* ship stranded in the ice. According to the television program, this second ship—named *Dzhurma*—held imprisoned in its holds some twelve thousand Gulag prisoners who were slowly starving and freezing to death in the icy wastes of the Siberian Arctic. It was said that the guards aboard *Dzhurma* survived that winter by using prisoners as the primary source of food, and that most of the surviving guards went insane from the experience. What is clear is that when *Dzhurma* was freed from the ice the following spring and made its way to port, no prisoners remained on board.

I was astounded to hear this. Surely, if twelve thousand people perished, it must rank as the greatest maritime disaster of all time. Why was so little known about it? What happened to the people on board? Did they all starve, go mad, and die? Were there other incidents similar to this one involving Gulag prisoner transports? Where did these ships come? How were they used? How many people were taken to their fate on these ships?

This book arose from my efforts to answer those questions and satisfy my personal curiosity about *Dzhurma*. Initially, my aspirations were far more modest, in particular since my only previous exposure to Russian history involved frequent viewing of the film *Dr. Zhivago*. First, having learned long ago that healthy skepticism should be applied in these cases, I set myself the objective of confirming *Dzhurma*'s existence as a real ship; that took several weeks. With that task accomplished, I decided to somehow find a photograph; that took several months. Finally, after two years of effort, I was able to obtain copies of the original plans for *Dzhurma*—and my emotional journey was nearly completed.

But while on that journey I learned more about the ships employed on the Gulag run and the misery inflicted upon their passengers. I also learned that while Gulag transport was an internal Soviet operation, there had been strong connections with the United States and Europe, as unwitting but vital accomplices. I concluded that although the history of the Kolyma camps has been at least partially documented, the full history of the transports that brought the victims to these camps remained untold. Moreover, the little bit that had been reported over the years has turned out, unfortunately, to be to a large extent wrong. What follows is the most complete story prepared to date on Stalin's slave ships—the transports fleet of the Kolyma Gulag.

Today the United States, Europe, and Russia all condemn the horrors of the Gulag, including the widespread death in the Kolyma camps, the most infamous of them all. Yet this condemnation is somewhat ironic, since in the 1930s companies and governments in the United States and Europe built most of Stalin's slave ships and sold them to the Soviet Union, in some cases negotiating the deals personally with the commander of the Kolyma Gulag and in others selling ships to agents working for the Soviet Union. The United States and Canada welcomed these same ships into their West Coast

ports at the midpoints of their Gulag careers, during World War II. These two countries even helped maintain and improve the Gulag fleet by providing extensive repair and overhaul services for these ships from 1942 to 1945. Finally, several of the ships used in Gulag service were provided free to the Soviet Union by the United States in the 1940s. One of these may have carried American military personnel to the Kolyma Gulag.

Some fifty years after Stalin's death, we are now only untangling the full history of that era. What is interesting is the extent to which the history of ships can yield insight into these topics and reveal truths not previously appreciated. This should not be surprising, because ships are big, expensive, and slow, and their activities are therefore often noticed and recorded. In short, ships leave wakes.

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Acknowledgments

I did not intend to write a book—I just wanted to get some answers to basic questions. That my curiosity has yielded this manuscript is evidence of the tremendous support I have received from, quite literally, all over the world.

I am indebted to many hard-working staff members at research institutes and museums across the globe, including Shirley Sawtell of the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge, Cees van Romburgh of the Nederlands Scheepvaartmuseum Amsterdam, Kees van Putten of the Maritiem Museum Rotterdam, Elizabeth Verity of the National Maritime Museum (Greenwich), Carl-Gunnar Olsson of the Sjöhistoriska Museet, Peter Hasling of the Søfartens Bibliotek, Lisbeth Ehlers of the Søfartsmuseet på Kronborg, Dr. Lorraine C. McConaghy and Phyllis Kelly of the Seattle Museum of History and Industry, Aigars Miklaāvs of the Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation, Susan Wheeler of the University of Baltimore Langsdale Library, Francis Mansbridge of the North Vancouver Museum and Archives, David Cantrill of the Kirkland Heritage Society, Molly Biddle of the Wisconsin Maritime Museum, Matthew L. Daley of the University of Detroit Mercy Libraries, Elizabeth Rees of the Tyne and Wear Archives Service, Raymond Teichman of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, the staff at the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, William Kooiman of the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, Dr. Richard Osborne of the World Ship Society, and the Slavic Reference Service of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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a floating workshop, was kind enough to share his personal observations and to organize research efforts in Vladivostok on my behalf. Akiko Jackson took time away from a busy workplace, demanding husband, and even more demanding twins to assist me in tracking down Japanese writings on *Indigirka*. Ryoichi Nishiguchi of the town of Sarafutsu in far northern Hokkaido lent critical assistance in securing copyright permission to use photographs of *Indigirka*. Molly Pyle provided encouragement along the way and while in Vladivostok helped me make contact with Russian historians and research material relevant to this project.

Maritime history is well served by a global band of enthusiasts, and many of these assisted me in my efforts. The gang at the Internet-based Maritime History Exchange answered a number of incredibly obscure questions, and thanks are owed to Ron Mapplebeck, George Robinson, Roger Jordan, Mike Ridgard, Andreas von Mach, Syd Heal, and Gilbert Provest. It is simply not possible to stump this group. Special thanks to Roel Zwama for obtaining copies of the *Brielle's* plans from the Maritiem Museum Rotterdam (saving me a long trip from Australia) and for sharing his impressive collection of photos of Dutch merchant ships. Thanks also to Karl Osterman for digging into Swedish archives, and to David Asprey for his invaluable research skills and hospitality in London.

At a time when corporations are accused of putting profits ahead of all else, it is good to know that a researcher can still look to companies for assistance in projects of this kind. In that connection, I wish to thank Steve Turner for rummaging through the corporate attic of Telcon Ltd., Charlotte Beasdale for providing access to the Swire Group archives, and Rollie Webb for personally sourcing old photos from the Todd Pacific Shipyards Corporation. (It was not until later that I learned that Rollie was at the time president of Todd shipyard.)

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a book on this subject. Perhaps it was a small gesture on his part, but it is one that will likely cement my long-held aspirations to be a writer of history.

I have also benefited from the transmission of personal history, in this case from father to son. Walter Kowalski put me in touch with his father, Stanislaw Kowalski, who provided me with firsthand experience of a voyage aboard *Dzhurma*. Likewise, Robert E. McCabe, Jr., put me in touch with his father, a member of the U.S. mission to Moscow during World War II, who had direct contact with escaping American internees. Chuck McPartlin was kind enough to share photographs taken by his father, Marine lieutenant colonel Charles E. McPartlin, Jr., during a historical visit to Vladivostok in 1937. (His father was an amazing man: he went ashore on the beaches both at Guadalcanal and Da Nang.) Vladimir Chumak, Kathleen Luft, and Chisato Morohashi provided translation services, and Barrie Collits assisted greatly with editing and preparation of early drafts of the manuscript. Anne Doremus provided honest, if at times painful, reviews of these early drafts and contributed significantly to the final product. Along the way, she provided highly valued encouragement and counsel.

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Finally, my wife, Maura, deserves great credit for humoring me when I came up with this insane idea, for serving as a sounding board for my ideas and hypotheses, and for breaking out her rusty Russian language skills to help me sift through mounds of material, including on one occasion when she was just recovering from anesthesia in the hospital. (Come to think of it, perhaps I should double-check that translation.) I find it much easier to develop my thoughts through conversation with others, and Maura was typically the other party for this discourse. For that—and everything else she brings to my life—I am eternally grateful.

Despite the extensive assistance, the author remains fully responsible for any errors.

Chapter 1

Here Stones Cry

Ships are the best means of carrying items that have a low value per unit of weight.

—Abraham Resnick and Armand Hammer, *Siberia and the Soviet Far East: Unmasking the Myths*

The small steamship *Indigirka* passed through the Okhotsk Sea on the cold night of December 12, 1939, tossed by high winds and heavy seas. It had been a difficult day for the passengers and crew.¹

It had been a difficult day for most of the world. That day the Nazis, still celebrating their victories in the opening months of World War II, announced compulsory forced labor for all Jewish men aged fourteen to sixty. It was a sign of things to come. Farther north, Finnish forces launched a desperate counterattack against Soviet invaders at Suomussalmi. In the South Atlantic, British cruisers closed in on the German pocket battleship *Admiral Graf Spee*, the crews readying themselves for a dawn confrontation, the first major sea battle of the war. In the United States, which was still at peace, newspapers eulogized Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., who had died earlier that day with the last words, “I’ve never felt better.” In Atlanta, final preparations were under way for the premiere of *Gone with the Wind*.

“Gone with the wind” had a different meaning for the occupants of *Indigirka*, driven through the heavy seas by a strong northwesterly gale. Capt. Nikolai Lavrentevich Lapshin guided *Indigirka* through this gale toward his destination, the Pacific port of Vladivostok. Almost 1,200 people were aboard. It was a mixed group that included 144 fisherman and 105 members of their families, all on their way home from a long tour of duty in the Far East fishing fleet. But the largest group of passengers, 835 in total, was special. These were some of the finest and most imaginative engineers

in the Soviet Union, on their way to help prepare Soviet industry for its anticipated war with Germany. They represented critical resources for defense, rocketry, and aircraft establishments, and their talents were being placed at the disposal of these industries by order of the Soviet premier, Joseph Stalin himself.

Earlier that week several thousand people had crowded a dock at Nagaev Bay, the harbor serving the Siberian town of Magadan, expecting to board a ship for a journey south to Vladivostok. Originally some 2,500 special passengers were to have been transported, but *Indigirka* was a smaller ship than normal for this route. A much larger ship had been scheduled to make the journey but had been detained in Vladivostok by regional administrative personnel during a routine inspection. Officials in Magadan feared that the special passengers might be stranded and were terrified of the consequences to themselves—Stalin's order was explicit, and he was not known for an understanding and forgiving nature. With a Siberian winter on its way, Nagaev Bay would soon be blocked by ice; it was therefore critical to make this journey immediately. Scanning the available ships and seeing no other choice, the chief of the harbor, a man named Smirnov, commandeered *Indigirka*, which had arrived with cargo on November 23. He ordered its officers to pack into the ship as many passengers as possible for the voyage to Vladivostok.

It must have disappointed officials that despite best efforts there was room for only a third of those who required transport. Many had to be left behind, which in effect meant waiting until new ships could arrive the following spring. One of those left behind was a brilliant engineer by the name Sergei P. Korolev. The Soviet Union would have to wait a bit longer for his contribution, which proved considerable—Korolev was ultimately to become the father of the Soviet rocket and space programs, though his identity was to be a state secret until years after his death in 1966.

The passengers and crew were loaded, along with a small security detachment, and *Indigirka* departed Magadan on December 8 for the ten-day journey to Vladivostok. All proceeded normally until early in the morning of December 13. The previous day *Indigirka* had been approaching the La Perouse Strait, a difficult passage that separates the Japanese island of Hokkaido from the island of Sakhalin, at that time divided between the Soviet Union and Japan. Once past the Aniva Lighthouse, which marks the eastern entry to the passage, the ship followed a heading westward to the beacon on the Stone of Danger, a rock outcropping. Having recently arrived from the Baltic Sea, the captain was not familiar with the area, and he steered by compass alone on this bleak night filled with wind and snow. Fatefully, Lapshin allowed the senior navigator to leave the bridge, assigning navigational duties to the most junior officer, who had only recently completed his training.

The wind was blowing hard from the northwest; conditions were atrocious. As a passenger aboard the ship later recalled, “At times the ship lay almost on her side, and the men rolled over on the bunks. Now and then the straps by which they tied themselves to the posts broke and someone would tumble down to the dirty floor. The air in the tightly shut holds became stifling. Human voices could not be heard over the battering of the waves that shook the whole body of the ancient little ship.”²

Though crowded with people, *Indigirka* had been designed as a bulk cargo ship, and therefore its load on this voyage was lighter than normal. This meant it rode high in the water and presented considerable surface area to the wind, which slowly pushed the ship off course. Rather than heading west, as indicated by the compass, *Indigirka* was actually drifting to the south, toward Hokkaido. The inexperienced junior navigator did not correct for this offset.

After a while, strange lights appeared to starboard. The captain and his first officer, V.L. Peskovsky, assuming they were in the middle of the strait following the desired track to the west, dismissed the lights as of no concern, merely a ship on an opposite course. In fact, the lights were from Japanese settlements on the northern tip of Hokkaido. Then, at 2:15 in the morning, strange “white stains” appeared on the water directly ahead, and these the captain and first officer could not dismiss.³ Such “stains” were all too familiar to seafarers—they signified shallow seas and underwater hazards. At this point the officers realized their error and knew they had drifted far off course toward the south.

The captain ordered the helm hard to the right in an attempt to head back north to the safety of the La Perouse Strait. It was too late. At 2:20 *Indigirka* shuddered as it ran hard aground on Todo Reef, about a mile off the coast of Hokkaido, near the small fishing and farming village of Sarufutsu. The hull was punctured, and water began to flood the ship. Then waves pushed the damaged ship off the rocks and into slightly deeper water. Hammered by the waves and encumbered with tons of water, the ship took on a dangerous list to starboard and gradually settled to the bottom of the shallow sea, its decks still above water. The radio officer immediately issued an “SOS,” which was picked up by both Japanese and Soviet units.

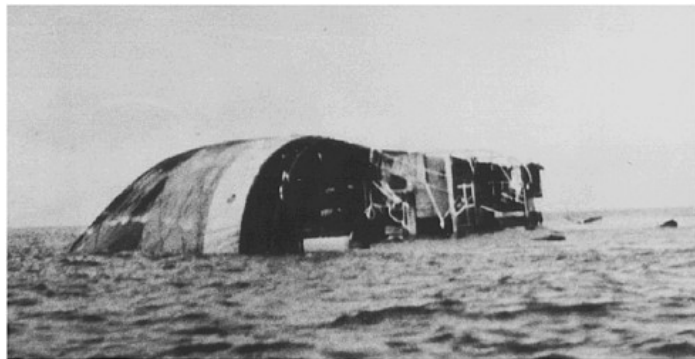
On board there was chaos. In a scene that has been played out innumerable times during the seafaring era, all scrambled to seek safety on deck and to prepare to abandon ship. As soon as it was apparent the ship was doomed, passengers below decks began to open the hatches leading from the forwardmost hold in hopes of reaching the relative safety of the ship’s weather decks. A member of *Indigirka*’s security detachment standing nearby witnessed this struggle and, responding either according to his training or instinct, immediately sprang into action.

He grabbed his rifle, aimed, and fired five shots.

The passengers abandoned their attempt at escape and returned to the hold from which they had come. In hindsight, they would have had greater success if they had rushed into the gunfire and overwhelmed the guard, for within minutes the ship rolled onto its starboard side and the steel hatch covers, by this time under water, could not be opened. The passengers were trapped below decks, a mass of human beings collapsing upon each other, those at the bottom drowning in dark frigid water, those in the middle suffocating in the jumbled pile of bodies, and those at the top clawing at the steel plates trying to get out.

Though the action by this member of the security detachment may seem unusual it was fully in keeping with his duties. For *Indigirka* was a slave ship, serving in the Gulag fleet, and the 835 special passengers, the engineering “brains,” were in fact prisoners being transferred from the Kolyma Gulag in eastern Siberia to special forced-labor assignments in the defense industry. Another fifty passengers, also prisoners, were en route to Vladivostok for other purposes, including hearings related to their sentences. Everyone else on board was either in the thirty-nine-member crew and security detachment or one of the 249 fishermen and their families.

Those able to escape from below decks began to abandon ship or were swept into the sea. Only two lifeboats were aboard—not the four required by Soviet maritime regulations—and members of the crew and security detachment commandeered one of them and set off for safety. The attempt to lower the other lifeboat failed; it was crushed against the ship’s hull, killing four members of the crew.



The wreck of the *Indigirka* upon Toda Reef in 1939. Almost 750 prisoners died in this wreck, which occurred a short distance from shore. Source: Sarufutsu Village Japan-Soviet Union Friendship Memorial Museum.

Eventually five survivors reached shore and stumbled into the humble house of fisherman Dzin Genitiro. The poor fisherman initially believed that his country was being invaded by Soviet forces. This was not unreasonable. The massive but little known Soviet-Japanese battle of Khalkin-Gol (referred to as Nomonhan by the Japanese) had taken place only four months before, and the 18,500 Soviet and up to sixty-one thousand Japanese casualties inflicted there bore tragic testimony to the risk of full-scale war between the Soviet Union and Japan.⁴ Genitiro ran to put on his uniform—he happened, coincidently and appropriately, to be a sailor in the maritime rescue service. Revived with vodka, the Soviet invaders were finally able to explain the reasons for their unexpected arrival. The situation thus clarified and tensions thus reduced, the alarm went out.

A rescue operation was quickly and efficiently organized, using the Japanese ferry *Karafuto Maru* and later the schooner *Sosui Maru* and whaling ship *Sanei Maru*. The rescue was impressive; many hundreds who had managed to escape from the holds were rescued from the sea or the wreckage of the ship. By the next morning 395 people had been saved—twenty-seven crew members (including all of the senior officers) and 368 passengers, including fifty-seven women and children. Few of the rescued passengers were prisoners; most were fishermen or members of their families. Over the next few days another eight members of the crew and a few more passengers turned up alive.

The Soviets, seeking to keep the mission of the ship secret, were slow to reveal the true nature of the loss to Japanese authorities. It was not until three days later that the Japanese learned that there will still hundreds of people aboard the ship, trapped in the holds. The Japanese authorities pressed the Soviet captain for an exact accounting of his passengers and were amazed when he was able to supply only vague estimates.⁵ A second rescue attempt was made, this time using acetylene torches to cut holes through steel plates to reach the prisoners still trapped below decks.

The rescuers gained access to the holds, but upon entering the rescuers were horrified at the sight before them. There was a mass of corpses in the dark cold space, half submerged in the frigid water. Many of the prisoners on top of the pile had taken their own lives, slicing their throats in order to end their agony. Incredibly, rescuers were able to pull only twenty-eight living prisoners from the mound of over six hundred bodies, and one of those died after reaching land. In all, 741 prisoners had perished, in addition to the four members of the ship's crew killed while attempting to flee the ship.

One wonders whether the rescuers were able to gain access to the ship's bridge. If they did, they might have noticed a small plaque declaring that the slave ship *Indigirka* had been constructed in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, in 1920 and had originally been named after the nearby college town of Ripon. Perhaps they would also have found papers indicating that the ship, now lying at the southern shore of the Okhotsk Sea, had been built in the heartland



Japanese rescue personnel working aboard *Indigirka* to free hundreds of entombed prisoners. *Source:* Sarufutsu Village Japan–Soviet Union Friendship Memorial Museum.

of America for the U.S. government and had been sold by an American operator just one year earlier to the Soviet Union’s infamous security force, the NKVD—Narodnii Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del (Народный Комиссариат Внутренних Дел), or People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs. The NKVD is perhaps better known by its subsequent acronym, KGB.

Today the coast of Sarufutsu is unmarred by *Indigirka*’s wreckage, removed in a salvage operation by the Mitsubishi Trading Company in June 1941.⁶ Only a small monument appears at the site, inviting observers to look across the sea to where the ship was lost. As a poem inscribed on the monument declares, “Here Stones Cry.”⁷ Not many people visit the *Indigirka* memorial at Sarufutsu. It is a quiet, empty place.

This silence may be fitting, for the Sea of Okhotsk itself is a quiet and empty place, unfamiliar to most people. This large body of water fills a basin bordered by Kamchatka, eastern Siberia, and Sakhalin Island, some of the most barren and inhospitable lands on the earth. The sea resides at the very northern edge of Asia, north of Japan, well outside the major trade routes of the Pacific Ocean. There are no major cities along its border—the largest has perhaps 150,000 inhabitants. Today, the surface of the Sea of Okhotsk carries only the occasional freighter transporting fish, minerals, timber, or other raw materials from Siberian ports to Japanese or other markets.

But it was not always so undisturbed and lifeless. From 1932 to 1953, these waters were churned by fleets of steamships carrying massive amounts of cargo from south to north—human cargo. About one million people were transported across this sea to the infamous Kolyma Gulag camps in eastern Siberia; fewer made the return journey. It was one of the largest seaborne movements of people in history. To put it in perspective, almost the same number of people crossed the Sea of Okhotsk into exile in Kolyma during these years as emigrated to the United States on all ships across all oceans during the same period.⁸ The wreck of *Indigirka* at Sarufutsu provided only a glimpse into what was in fact a massive undertaking hidden from the West for over a decade.

Unlike the immigrants to the United States during these years, the passengers to Kolyma were not voluntary migrants in search of a better future. Instead, for the most part they were political prisoners arrested in Stalin's purges and forcibly relocated as convict laborers to the camps in northeastern Siberia. Some were Polish or Japanese prisoners of war, captured in World War II. A few of the captives may have been U.S. military personnel, rescued from German POW camps or captured during intelligence-gathering flights but never returned to the United States, imprisoned instead in the Gulag.

Today, with one exception, the steamships of the Sea of Okhotsk have long vanished—their hulls and propellers no longer disturb the water's surface. But their wakes remain, and the ripples from these wakes extend far. They reach deep into the corridors of power in the former Soviet Union and across the breadth of Russia and its surrounding nations. They extend across oceans to the shipyards in Europe and the United States. They reach back in time to touch the Roosevelt administration during World War II. And at the center of it all is gold.