

General information

Life in Labour and Prison Camps (Kolyma, Ural)

Relation to the course / learning topic

Contemporary History I – Estonia and the World in the First Half of the 20th Century, topic IV: WWII (Estonia in WWII – occupations, options open to Estonians)

Contemporary History III – essential features of developments in the 20th century: Estonia and the World III, topic: Crimes against humanity

Key words

labour camp and prison camp, concentration camp, GULAG

Study results

The pupil

- is familiar with the ways in which crimes were committed against humanity and their consequences;
- comprehends the nature of crimes against humanity and how necessary it is to condemn and prevent them;
- analyses memories as sources of history.

At the beginning of the lesson, the pupils formulate 3 questions on the concept of prison camps. Thereafter they read the lesson texts and underline the answers. Thereafter the pupils are divided up into groups of four. Each member of the group receives a different source text, on the basis of which they put together the profile of a prisoner. In the next phase, pupils introduce their source and profile to each other and discuss what those recollections had in common, what were the differences, what has affected the recollections, etc. The pupils assess the recollections as historical sources, the teacher leads a discussion.

Recommendations for the teacher

* If pupils become interested in finding out what became of those people subsequently or in reading about their experiences in full, the sources are available at the address: <http://www.comunistcrimes.org/et/digiarhiiv> . Sources A and B are very lengthy and detailed yet it is definitely a good idea to recommend them. In the case of source B, the author himself states that everything may not have been exactly the way he has described it since a long time has passed since the events described and he has used his fantasy in certain instances.

* The aim of using recollections is to show that the experience of every person, which at first glance appears to be similar, was individual and is important for just that reason.



Lesson plan

Life in Labour and Prison Camps (Kolyma, Ural)

Evocation (3 + 10 minutes)

The teacher writes "labour and prison camps" on the blackboard and asks pupils to write down 3 questions on that concept in their notebooks. The aim of the assignment is to activate pupils and to get them to think about what exactly that concept could mean, thus simplified questions like: What? When? Why? Where? Who? How many? etc. are the best questions. Thereafter the teacher distributes Worksheet no. 1 to the pupils and the pupils read it, bearing in mind the questions they have posed and underlining the answers. The aim of reading is not necessarily to find answers to all the questions but rather to provide a quick overview of the prison camp system to make it easier for pupils to get their bearings in subsequent assignments.

Comprehension of meaning (15 + 10 minutes)

Stage I. Individual work with a source

The teacher divides pupils up into groups of four and gives the groups worksheets 2–5. Pupils divide up the sources among themselves, read the source that they are given and answer the questions in the worksheets. Where necessary, the teacher should assist pupils with certain concepts that may be unfamiliar to them, such as parask (receptacle provided to prisoners in prisons for bodily excrement).

Stage II. Pupils introduce their topic to others, completion of the worksheet

The members of the group introduce the recollections they have read to one another, relying on their answers to the questions. Together they complete Worksheet 6, Assignment 1. Particular attention should be paid to the portion of the work devoted to finding similarities and differences. This is followed by the teacher's oral check for similarities and differences. It is important to note that regardless of the many similarities (cold, hunger), every person's experience and suffering was individual.

Reflection (7 minutes)

At the end of the lesson, the second half of Worksheet 6 is completed in the same groups. The worksheet does not necessarily have to be completely filled in for the oral check to be conducted. The positive and negative sides of memories as historical sources should emerge from the questioning of all the groups. The last question provides the teacher with feedback on whether to include more memories in lessons or to stick with the textbook and informative texts.



Worksheet I

Life in Labour and Prison Camps (Kolyma, Ural)

Assignment

Read the text and underline the parts that answer your questions.

Labour-prison Camps

The form of political repression that was most widely used in the Soviet Union – incarceration – created the need for a new type of detention centre. **Labour-prison camps** became the main form of incarceration during the Stalinist era.

The initial form of prison-labour camps was the **concentration camps** formed in 1918–1920, which for political reasons were referred to as **special purpose camps** after the war. It has been claimed that prisoner manpower was not used in concentration camps until 1926 since their aim was to isolate people. In 1929, concentration camps were re-named **corrective labour camps** and they started being used to colonise underpopulated, economically underdeveloped regions of the Soviet Union. All internees sentenced to imprisonment for over 3 years or who had been convicted by the OGPU (*Объединённое государственное политическое управление*, in English: Combined State Political Administration) were sent to these labour-prison camps. In 1930, the infamous **Main Administration of Camps – GULAG** (*Главное управление лагерей*) was organised in subordination to the OGPU. In 1934, it was placed in subordination to the Soviet Union's NKVD. At its high point, an army of prisoners 2.5 million strong was in the camps, used as manpower that was practically free of charge on new construction, the building of canals, the acquisition of raw materials, the occupation of areas in the Far North, etc.

The years of the Second World War were the hardest for prisoners in the labour-prison camps. On 22 June 1941 already, an order was issued forbidding the release from camp (even if the prison term had been served) of all who had been convicted of betraying the Soviet homeland, espionage, terrorism, sabotage, Trotskyism, right-wing inclinations and banditry. Those prisoners had to remain in the camps until the end of the war. An estimated 2 million people died during the war years in the Gulag system's camps and colonies (to a great extent due to malnourishment). By the summer of 1944, there were 56 corrective labour camps under the jurisdiction of the Gulag. The camp system started expanding rapidly after the war, reaching its ceiling in the early 1950's. The total number of political prisoners imprisoned for **counterrevolutionary crimes** increased noticeably. Political prisoners were held in labour-prison camps side by side with criminal offenders – murderers, thieves and others.

It came to light in 1953 that the costs of maintaining the camps far exceeded the profit gained from prisoner labour. After Stalin's death, work was halted on over 20 special projects and over a million prisoners were released through an amnesty. The release of



prisoners continued in subsequent years as well. In 1954, a new review of the cases of political prisoners began, after which their number in the camps started dropping. The reorganisation of labour-prison camps into corrective labour colonies began in October of 1956.

Saueauk, M., Kaasik, P. Töö-vangilaagrid. Kommunistlike režiimide kuritegudest (Labour-Prison Camps. On the Crimes of Communist Regimes). Teaching material: informative texts, study assignments. Compiled by Maripuu, M. Oja, M. (Estonian Institute of Historical Memory) 2009, pp. 47–49. (in abridged form)



Worksheet II

Life in Labour and Prison Camps (Kolyma, Ural)

Assignment

Read the source and based on this material, write down your answers to the questions:

- Whose memories are these? Do the person's age, occupation, background and other such attributes emerge from the text?
- Describe the experience of the source's author in prison camp in 4–5 sentences.
- Is the experience described here similar to or different from the experiences of other imprisoned persons in your opinion? Give reasons for your opinion, provide examples from the text.

Source A. Recollections from the Archangel Death Camps

*"The trial began in the morning. We were summoned by name into a room where the military tribunal had taken their places. The tribunal consisted of two men and an interpreter. The judges asked me in Russian: "Patšemu bazal i gde bõl." The interpreter, however, asked me: "Why did it go?" That certainly was not how it sounded in Estonian. I told the judge how it all happened, that I was plied with drinks by a group, it happened in a freight car, and they wanted to take me with them. The judges gestured for the interpreter to tell them what I said. The interpreter's reply in Russian was: "On tolko hatel bazat". I was asked further about that incident. I told them that I managed to jump off the train and caught a train back to where I was assigned (*this person had been mobilised into a labour battalion). The judges ordered the translation of my words. The interpreter's reply was again the same: "On tolko hatel bazat". The judges leafed through their handbooks to find the appropriate section for the charges against me. I was convicted according to 193.7, meaning 10 years in a corrective labour colony. If I hadn't returned to my place of work on my own, the section I would have been charged with would have ended with g, meaning: to be shot.*

*Once again, we've journeyed west for several days along the taiga roads of Archangel. We stop in a settlement. There's a workshop here where prisoners make tablespoons out of wood. They sit around a large table and they have all been given the necessary knives for fashioning spoons. Our convoy guard (*asks) us who knows how to make spoons. I reply that I do. I had never made a single wooden spoon before in my life, but I hoped that if I can manage to make them, I'd be left to work there. I'm given a little wooden block and the necessary sharp knives. I peek at the others working there but I don't like the spoons they make, they're good for nothing. I take my little block of aspen wood, examine it and start carving. I finish my spoon pretty quickly. I showed it to the workshop manager – he*



took it, examined it from all sides, then held the spoon up high and said to the others, look, you maklakid, this is what a proper spoon looks like, not the kind that you lot make. Then he said to me: "Budiš brigadirom." (You'll be brigade leader) The manager went over to our convoy guard and said something to him, holding the spoon I made in front of his eyes, but the convoy guard replied: "Nje kokom slutsis." (Under no circumstances)

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There's a very big prison camp here. Wooden barracks slapped together using round wooden laths can be seen everywhere. The sides of the walls are smeared both outside and inside with a mixture of sand and clay to keep the wind from blowing through. We're given an empty barrack. There was a wood-fired stove made of an iron barrel. The fire had to burn in that stove day and night. There are double-decker bunks here and also a blanket for each bunk. It's stained and very soiled but it's still a blanket. There's no pillow. I had an empty glass jar along with me. I wrapped my empty canvas sack around it and that was my pillow.

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It's winter, 1941. It's -54° degrees outside. We're still in the same settlement. My hands are bloody in many places, full of cracks and fissures and they hurt but there's nothing with which to treat or lubricate them. It's all from holding a shovel in my hands every day without gloves. All of us who live here are covered with lice, in addition to lice, mites have also multiplied. Mites nest in our armpits, between our legs and in the hairs of our eyebrows as well.

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/.../ Seven days have passed now and my health has recovered again. I don't feel the kind of hunger anymore like I did before I got sick. I go to work again with the others, still digging graves so that some of the deceased would have a place for being buried. I've probably been working for a couple of weeks when I'm summoned away from work. I go to the guard building and he tells me that now, today already, I'm to be taken to Column no. 13. It's located in the town of Velski, where the Central Mechanical Factory is. "Life will be good there." /.../ I was later told how I ended up there. The factory's management apparently received a letter from one of my former camps reporting that a specialist works there and asking if they needed him. Factory management reportedly sent a vehicle then to fetch me."

Soomets, Hugo: Meenutusi Arhangelski taiga surmalaagritest 1941. juulist kuni sõja lõpuni (Recollections of the Archangel taiga death camps from July of 1941 until the end of the war, pp. 19–24, 35–36, 39). Written in 1989.



Worksheet III

Life in Labour and Prison Camps (Kolyma, Ural)

Assignment

Read the source and based on this material, write down your answers to the questions:

- Whose memories are these? Do the person's age, occupation, background and other such attributes emerge from the text?
- Describe the experience of the source's author in prison camp in 4–5 sentences.
- Is the experience described here similar to or different from the experiences of other imprisoned persons in your opinion? Give reasons for your opinion, provide examples from the text.

Source B. In the Kolyma Gold Mine

"Heino, son of Juhan, born in 1924, Section 58.1a, 25 years plus 5! Take your things and go into the corridor!"

He looked around the cell suspiciously. Finally, he noticed smoke rising from near the wall, a couple of steps from the parask. "How much did you get – 15 or 20?" was said in a half-whisper.

"25."

"Well, well – they really let you have it! Forced labour?"

"No, camp."

"I've got 20 and forced labour. Everyone here is in for a long time. What's your sentence for?"

"I was in the German Army, then in the woods – with weapons, a radio transmitter, you know..."

"Well, then you've earned at least 25. There's lots of folks here who haven't done anything and still got 15-20 years."

/.../

When he heard that the newcomers had only just arrived in Magadan and were supposed to be sent on to the gold mine today or tomorrow, he turned sombre. "Try to avoid it if you can. I was strong as a bear four years ago when I was sent to Terekhtyak. But look at what's left of me. Whoever ends up in the Indirgika rajon is a lost soul. Only one out of a thousand comes back from there."

"What's so terrible there?"

"Backbreaking work and in the summer, millions of mosquitoes – freezing cold in winter and still backbreaking work. Crappy food and shabby clothes on top of all that. It's as if there is no Soviet regime there – only the law of the taiga. The warden of every camp is the lawmaker and also the one who carries it out."



In his thoughts, Heino thanked his compatriot, who had painted a general picture for them of what lay in store for them. Once again, one had to start getting used to the idea that the end is near.

/.../ A 12-hour workday without any days of rest, on top of that, odds and ends for yourself every evening slowly started having its effect. The men had become noticeably thinner and their step had become even more torpid and shambling. The rosy hue disappeared from the cheeks of even the young Ukrainians, replaced by a yellowish-grey hue. Heino felt that his strength was totally spent. Even though he thought he had felt that a dozen times already, he had still found some reserves concealed within himself that prevented him from giving in once and for all. If only those legs wouldn't be heavy as lead! Regardless of the disgusting, bitter-insipid stlannik, scurvy prevailed ever more. All his teeth had become loose and for many of the men, they started falling out one after another. His legs were covered with blue feckles up to his crotch and for some men, they even covered their entire lower body and stomach.

/.../

One day, Heino suffered what could have happened long since already. The men had somehow reluctantly descended into the semi-dark mine in the morning. Heino felt exceptionally overworked today because three drillers had worked at night instead of two and since there were more drill holes, more of the mine stratum had been detonated, and the heap of mined coal was considerably bigger than usual. The first couple of cartloads successfully reached the bunker. Then, however, whether it was simply carelessness, a case of forgetting himself for a moment, or only chance, in any case Heino had just barely passed through a low-ceilinged shaft and managed to stand up straight to his full height when his right leg got caught behind something. The next moment, the cart was overturned, its contents strewn beside the path and the boy himself on the ground in the shaft. Unluckily, Tall Kostya happened to be heading towards the bunker at that very moment some ten metres behind Heino. Now was the time to show those Jerrys who is boss around here and how they have to answer for their actions! He walked up to Heino as he lay on the ground and kicked him with all his might in the ribs. And he carried on kicking the boy on the ground, who had curled up like a cat. Just when he had finally managed to stand halfway up to retreat from his attacker further into the darkness, he was kicked so hard on his left shin that it made him groan unintentionally. He carefully felt the area where he had been kicked to make sure that the bone wasn't broken. The pain was so great that at first he didn't even try to stand up, remaining indifferently to wait for fresh blows."

Hanko, Jüri: Üks Kolõma lugu I (A Kolyma Story I) [1943-...] (pp. 2–4, 194–195, 238, 265–267). Written in 1964–1988/9 (?).



Worksheet IV

Life in Labour and Prison Camps (Kolyma, Ural)

Assignment

Read the source and based on this material, write down your answers to the questions:

- Whose memories are these? Do the person's age, occupation, background and other such attributes emerge from the text?
- Describe the experience of the source's author in prison camp in 4–5 sentences.
- Is the experience described here similar to or different from the experiences of other imprisoned persons in your opinion? Give reasons for your opinion, provide examples from the text.

Source C. Suspicious Elements

"Then I was ordered back into the car and I wasn't allowed to take anything along. I was told I would be back in an hour. So, I was taken away in the light summer clothes that I just happened to be wearing. I was taken to the rooms of the Ministry of Security on Pagari Street. We entered a large room containing lots of little closets. I was very perplexed when I was ordered to enter one of the closets. There was a stool in the closet. You could stand in front of it or sit on the stool, that was all there was room for. There were three ventilation holes in the door. /-/ The door to my closet was opened at night and I was told to come along. I was taken to an investigator, where it turned out that I was being accused of belonging to a counterrevolutionary organisation of secondary school pupils. They said my mission had been to pass on ammunition. That accusation was so absurd that at first it made me laugh, but later made me cry.

/.../

Towards the end of August, we arrived in the Urals in the town of Solikamsk in Molotov oblast. That's where the railroad ended. We were informed that we are not arrested but that as suspicious elements, we were only being isolated for the duration of the war. /-/ At the end of September, we were sent on to another camp. I don't remember how many tens of kilometres long the way was. The weather was cold already. Our route passed through marshy areas. I was barefoot since my summer shoes were unsuitable for that journey. We were tired, cold and hungry when somewhere down below, lights came into view out of the darkness. The guards made fun of us: "You can see your home." The camp was located on low-lying land much like a mud pit. Walkways had been built of boards in front of the barracks, otherwise everyone would have sunk into the mire. Our logging work began in that camp.

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When the temperature dropped to -45–50° in December, my hands and feet became



*frostbitten. The camp warden decided: "If you can't go to the woods, you can still hold the end of a saw back in the zone (*in the camp)." Thus, I was assigned with my frostbitten hands and feet to the wood sawing brigade to cut wood for the zone, even though all my fingernails had come off and my fingers and toes were covered with cold sores.*

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People started dying en masse. Hunger and the cold did them in. People were swollen from starvation and the weak were no longer able to get up and died. Whoever was still sent out into the woods froze in the woods because they didn't have the strength anymore to keep themselves warm by working.

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The ground was frozen rock hard. Bonfires were built over a large area to thaw the ground so that a large pit could be dug into which the corpses were thrown. If somebody's hand or leg got in the way, it was chopped off with an axe and tossed into the pit.

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The winter of 1941–1942 was the hardest also because we hadn't gotten used to either the climate or the conditions. Dr. Kask said: "Whoever survives the first year has hope to continue to survive." During that first year, 70% of the people we left our Estonian homeland with perished.

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In May we were informed that the Extraordinary Commission in Moscow has sentenced us in absentia. Some were sentenced to 5 years in prison camp, others 8, and still others 10. I was sentenced to 5 years according to Section 58.1. We were sent back to camps in the Nyrup rajon, now already into the same camp along with criminal prisoners and repeat offenders, who made our life even more inhumane than it already was. We were cursed fascists in their eyes. I even had to sleep in the same bunk beside a woman who had committed two murders. She had committed the second murder in prison camp for some trifling matter. That murderess boasted with that feat and said that she could kill whomever she liked without increasing her sentence. Only faith and hope gave me strength."

Ojamets (maiden name Randkivi), Marta: [Meenutusi Uurali vangilaagrist. VI 1941–1946 (Recollections from the Ural Prison Camp. VI 1941–1946), pp. 1-7] Written in 1988/9(?).



Worksheet V

Life in Labour and Prison Camps (Kolyma, Ural)

Assignment

Read the source and based on this material, write down your answers to the questions:

- Whose memories are these? Do the person's age, occupation, background and other such attributes emerge from the text?
- Describe the experience of the source's author in prison camp in 4–5 sentences.
- Is the experience described here similar to or different from the experiences of other imprisoned persons in your opinion? Give reasons for your opinion, provide examples from the text.

Source D. To Russia Twice.

...when I was arrested, deported a second time...

Me: "Hold on, Aunt Meery, what do you mean, wasn't the first deportation in '41, I don't understand?"

Meery: "No, no, the deportation was carried out before the war, but the war had already started when I was arrested. That was on 6 July..."

Me: "Why then were you arrested?"

*Meery: "I was the wife of a bandit, you see! Hermann was subject to mobilisation but he didn't go. When they came for him, he jumped out of the window and ran into the woods. Then they arrested me. At first, I was taken to Rakvere and from there to Russia. I was in prison for a month and I was interrogated every night. I thought, good heavens, what will become of me here now? I was already pregnant but it didn't show yet. One of those leering jerks (*guards) said to the interrogator that you sure are lucky, such a nice young maiden for tonight (I was already 27 years old by then...) but luckily they didn't do anything to me. On the other hand, I later heard in camp that others had been beaten and all sorts of dreadful things had been done."*

Me: "Was the investigator a Russian? What did he ask?"

Meery: "He was an Estonian from Petseri. /laughing/ What questions could he have to ask, usual stuff like what do I know about bandits and where is Hermann. Later on there in Russia it was totally stupid. What else could I say? I said, go ahead and kill me, but I know nothing."

Me: "And that went on for a month?"

Meery: "Yes, it seems that later on they themselves got tired of it. Once towards the end I asked what am I charged with and how many years will I get? That official answered that you're not guilty of anything but the cursed Germans didn't let us finish the investigation in Rakvere. Now you're a hostage and for three years. /-/ Much later when I was already in



camp and I was very ill after giving birth, someone came to my bunk with some papers and said, sign this to show that you're aware of the verdict. What was in those papers I don't know."

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Meery: "I gave birth there. I don't know where they threw that baby, probably to the dogs. And then I got so sick and weak after that that I didn't know how to walk anymore."

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Me: "What work did you have to do?"

Meery: "First I had to work in a peat bog guarded by guards. But my legs got frostbite in the first week already. I was in a summer dress the way I was in July when I was apprehended. I suddenly felt a sharp twinge run through me and then my legs started hurting horrendously. I told the guard and then I was taken to a medical assistant. By then I already had awful big blisters on my legs. The medical assistant cut them open but then I came down with a fever. I don't know how long, I lay in my bunk all winter long. /-/ It was -15 degrees in the barracks all the time, outside it was -40. /-/ But I survived because I was later sent to work tending pigs. That work wasn't supervised by guards. The piglets were given clean milk and gruel. I had no reason to wait any longer, I ate my fill there with the pigs..."

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Me: "And then you got to go home?"

Meery: "Yes. I had been at home for a week when a militia representative and the rural municipality Party organiser and all sorts of others entered my house. And then they reassured me and said, you've suffered without being guilty of anything and now you have nothing more to fear..."

Me: "But you were taken away again in '49?"

Meery: "Yes, then they deported me with the others. So altogether I was there for 13 years."

Meery Krutob: [interview on the years 1941–1946 and 1949–1957]. Interview held in 1988.



Worksheet VI

Life in Labour and Prison Camps (Kolyma, Ural)**Assignment 1**

Write the profiles of the four people you have read about in the boxes on the sides. Thereafter fill in the middle boxes: point out the similarities and differences in the memories you have read.

Name: Background information: Reason for imprisonment: Form of memory:		Name: Background information: Reason for imprisonment: Form of memory:
SIMILARITIES	DIFFERENCES	
Name: Background information: Reason for imprisonment:		Name: Background information: Reason for imprisonment:



Form of memory:		Form of memory:
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What could the causes be for the differences in their experiences?

Assignment 2

Write down your answers to the following questions and fill in the table.

- 1) What other historical sources can you name in addition to memories?
- 2) Point out the positive and negative aspects of memories as historical sources. Find at least four arguments for both sides!

Memory as a historical source

+	-
Positive aspects are that	Negative aspects are that

- 3) In the opinion of your group, should more memories be used in lessons? Why?

