

COALITION OF FAMILIES OF KOREAN & COLD WAR POW/MIAS



Special Edition “We will find our own missing loved one by searching for them all, together.” Fall 2021

The Gulag Study⁽¹⁾

Addressing the Question of Whether American POWs
Were Taken to the USSR and Not Returned

What is Credible Evidence?

When we family members ask government officials about the so-called *Transfer Issue*, the oft-repeated over-view is that there is no 'credible' evidence that POWs were taken to the Soviet Union.

This verbiage likely comes down from high-on. It is difficult to understand how government policy makers could stand behind that position, given the massive amount of information to the contrary that exists. Making

that representation even more far-fetched is the fact that each of the five editions of *The Gulag Study*, published over the course of more than a decade, were authored by a talented and dedicated directorate within the Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency.

Each edition has analyzed numerous sightings and Intel Reports about American POWs having been taken to the Soviet Union during the Korean War. The first and

fifth editions—both of which are the subject of this article—state as a factual conclusion that American POWs were imprisoned in the Soviet Union. There might not be

widespread specific information as to which of our men were taken, but we know some of them were. Anyone who says otherwise is uninformed. Or avoiding the truth.

The '93 Gulag Study (the 1st Edition), the Support Directorate of the U.S./Russia Joint Commission on POW/MIAs concluded in its Executive Summary that American POWs⁽²⁾ were transferred to the Soviet Union and never repatriated as part of a highly secret Soviet MGB⁽³⁾ program to exploit and counter U.S. aircraft technologies. The program also used the POWs for general intelligence purposes, and possibly as lucrative hostages.

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"At Camp 19, in 1959, guards told the witness that the bloodied bodies were American officers. The witness was also told that eighteen other Americans were gradually killed off between May and July that year. Once a week one of them was taken out, forced to dig his own grave before he was stripped and then shot."

From the 2005 (Fifth Edition) Gulag Study

(1) The Gulag Study is a series of reports by the Research and Analysis Division of DPMO's US/Russia Joint Commission Support Directorate. DPMO is the predecessor of today's DPAA, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency.

(2) See the sidebar to this article for more information about the mission of the US/Russia Joint Commission on POW/MIAs and its U.S. Support Directorate, which authored all five editions of The Gulag Study.

(3) The MGB was the Soviet Ministry of State Security. It was one of the predecessor agencies of the KGB.

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Twelve years later, the Executive Summary of the Gulag Study's 5th Edition stated that American servicemen were imprisoned in the former Soviet Union, but that no definitive, verifiable information had been acquired that would allow the Directorate to determine the scope of such transfers or the fate of those who were taken. The Summary goes on to state that most reports lack the specificity to correlate them to individuals listed as missing and that, without greater access to Russian Secret Service and Military Intelligence officers and historical records, resolving questions raised by reports of American Servicemen in the Soviet Union will remain an elusive task.

In short, we have credible evidence. What we lack are details and cooperation from the Russians sufficient to answer the questions, "Which Americans were taken?" and "What became of them?"

Why did the Soviets want Americans?

Though, for the most part, the Studies don't address which specific men were taken, they do address other aspects of the issue. For example, why the Soviets wanted American servicemen. The Korean War was the first modern air war. It introduced new technologies that were electronics intensive. The technology depended on various advance support systems like air-intercept radar and airborne reconnaissance. The Soviets lagged behind the U.S. in its development of these new technologies and sought to close the gap by 'theft of design,' as the 1st Study put it. The Russian side of the U.S. Russia Joint Commission provided documents that show the Soviet 64th Fighter Aviation Corps had an unofficial mission during the Korean War: the management of overt and covert human intelligence which they targeted against the U.S. air forces.

The Soviets were particularly interested in the U.S. F-86 aircraft. The USAF ultimately determined that 666 of its air crew were missing and unaccounted for. The 1st Gulag Study states that, from an analysis of circumstances of their loss, several hundred of these airmen had survived their crashes and were candidates for transfer to the Soviet Union. To quote: "There is almost blatant evidence that this was, indeed, the case for a number of technically proficient, well-educated and highly skilled pilots of the F-86 Sabre Jet."

There was a policy to turn over pilots to the Soviets

According to the 1st Edition of the Gulag Study, the former head of a division-level POW collections team in the Chinese People's Volunteer Army testified about the existence of a policy to surrender American Pilots. Ac-

ording to the witness, his superior told him that "the Russians wanted the pilots." The witness admitted that he, personally, had turned over three pilots just north of the front lines between November of 1951 and March of 1952.

Another witness, a Russian General named Lobov, admitted in an interview that a special Soviet Air Force Unit was deployed with a mission to capture U.S. F-86 pilots alive by forcing them down. Reportedly, the Soviet pilots in this unit had to sign a secrecy statement.

The 1st Study also mentions the Soviet Sharashkas, which were separate prison camps in which individuals with technical, scientific, and other specialized skills were interned. Much of the Soviet focus at the time was on advancement of military capabilities, which made these camps likely destinations for many U.S. POWs.

But the Sharashkas were just one small part of a vast Soviet system of prisons, the GULAG, into which millions of people—including American POWs—were cast away for purposes of building or rebuilding the Soviet Union. Whether it be infrastructure or technical

capabilities, or political exploitation, the Soviets had no qualms about stealing people from their lives and depositing them into labor camps of one sort or another. It was no secret then and it is no secret now.

They would first question the men in North Korea on operational and tactical matters. Some of these men were then selected for transfer to the Soviet Union.

One source that is cited in the 1st Study is Retired Soviet Army Colonel Gavril Ivanovich Korotkov, who served as part of an analytical group that reported on developments in intelligence, both tactical and technical, that were learned from the war in Korea as it unfolded. According to Korotkov during a 1992 interview, Soviet military specialists were given approval to interrogate U.S. POWs. Some of the POWs were selected out for further interrogation, in the Soviet Union, based on criteria such as experience and seniority. Korotkov testified that the American POWs were transported mostly by rail, and that there were hundreds of them.

The Soviets were after not only the tactical and technical intelligence, but political Intel as well. According to Korotkov, the Soviet Ministry of State Security—the MGB—controlled the Americans, and interrogation reports were sent to various sectors of the Soviet intelligence apparatus. Which means information should exist in records of various Russian government agencies today.

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"The range of eyewitness testimony as to the presence of U.S. Korean War POWs in the GULAG is so broad and convincing that we cannot dismiss it."

From the 1993 (1st Edition) Gulag Study

The 1st Study cites other sources, some of which are American, all of which describe Soviet interaction with American POWs, as prisoners, most often within the Soviet Union. One report of note came from Captain Mel Giles of the Far East Command Group during the Korean War. In 1990, Giles reported that, during the war, in 1952, one of his agents had found out that 63 U.S. POWs were going to be shipped by truck and by rail to Chita in the Soviet Union. Giles maintained that the report was considered so credible that air strikes on the railway that would be carrying the POWs were cancelled by the U.S. command.

"The Soviets transferred several hundred U.S. Korean War POWs to the USSR and did not repatriate them."

From the 1st Gulag Study

In the 1st Study, the Support Directorate discusses the strengths and weaknesses of information known about several case studies. Thereafter, the Study's Summary concludes that the transfer of American POWs was, for the most part, "politically motivated, with the intent of holding them as political hostages, subjects for intelligence exploitation, and skilled labor within the camp system."

They changed American prisoners' names.

Following the case studies, the Directorate lays out all sorts of reports that came from within the Soviet Union. An interesting fact revealed by one witness helps explain the difficulty in tying reports to specific POWs. This witness claimed that foreigners were given Russian names. The source for this information reported that records of the name changes might still exist, most likely in Moscow. The question becomes, do the Russians have them and, if so, what will it take to get them to produce the information?

In addition to its reporting on the taking of American POWs, the 2005 Gulag Study delves into discussion of the various agencies involved in the Soviet Security and Intelligence System. It also highlights a number of the different camps within the Soviet GULAG. This information amounts to a valuable resource for research into the overall issue of the taking of Americans.

Both the 1st and the 5th Gulag Studies are replete with reports, sightings, and analysis of information, all of which lead to the inescapable conclusion that American POWs were taken from North Korea to the Soviet Union and never returned. The Studies tell us which Soviet agencies and offices were involved in this clandestine operation, where interrogations took place and what prison camps housed these prisoners. Myriad records exist...somewhere.

So, why, some seventy years later, is the truth still under wraps?

Where are the records? Likely, the Soviets feared retribution and the Russians today worry about political, economic, and other sorts of fallout. We get it. But that doesn't make continued lack of cooperation acceptable. And what about the U.S. government? Intel documents from Congress, the CIA, the military and even the white House, dating back to the war and going forward, demonstrate that our government knew men had been taken.

For seven decades, through numerous administrations, this tragedy has been housed in a dark corner of history. Russia has not produced records that would speak directly to the program. Permission to reveal the truth would have to come from the highest ranks of the Russian government. Until that authority becomes a reality, the U.S. side of the Joint Commission can ask, discuss, and negotiate but how many records will they get that do more than dance around the issue?

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency handles remains recovery and identification, archival research, family outreach, and many other aspects of this labyrinth of unanswered questions. It makes a tremendous and much appreciated contribution to the accounting mission. But, the Transfer Issue—what do we hear about it? That there's no credible evidence men were taken.

For the most part, that's only if we ask. And, unless we push for more, that's all we get. To those of us who work the issue, it appears that a directive has come down from high up in the chain of command. DoD? State? The White House?(4) We don't know. It would be helpful if an appropriate government official would speak to this.

Regardless of the rhetoric, I believe the 'no credible evidence' claim is untrue. At best, it is misleading. My collection of documents alone shows otherwise, and I don't have a security clearance. So, why do officials keep repeating that mantra? We might not know which men were taken but we do have credible evidence that American POWs were transferred to the Soviet Union.

What's being done at the highest levels of our government to get the missing information? One would think our Presidents would have pounded their fists for answers. Why haven't we seen diplomatic, economic, or other sanctions? Alternatively, why not a promise of no retribution for the Russians? Make it a humanitarian issue. Distinguish between the Soviet Union and Russia. That was then. It's seventy years later. Unrelated politics have gotten in the way for too long.

Avoidance is the easy path to take. The abandoned men deserve so much more.

"Ultimately, it is persistence that will shape the outcome of this often frustrating, occasionally promising, and always daunting enterprise." Norm Kass, Former Executive Secretary for the U.S. side of the USRJC

(4) This list of U.S. government entities with knowledge that men were taken is not all-inclusive.

