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It took beyond extraordinary efforts, by people working with primitive tools, for forced-labor prisoners to construct the White Sea-Baltic Sea Canal. In Russian, that canal is known as "Belomorkanal." This image depicts a 1932 photograph of prisoners working on the canal. Online via Wikimedia Commons.

David, in Anne Holm's story, is the son of an innocent political prisoner sentenced to hard labor in a concentration camp (likely Belene, in Bulgaria.) At the age of one, the child and his mother are consigned to the same place.

It isn't long before David's father is executed, but his mother is released. David, essentially raised by another camp inmate named Johannes, remains in the camp until he is twelve.

The situation was all too familiar when the GULAG, and forced-labor camps, were at their height. *In Siberia*, a book by Colin Thubron, tells us about the vast inflow of prisoners to another Siberian camp - the infamous *Kolyma* - from which workers were ordered to build the impossible:

Kolyma was fed every year by sea with tens of thousands of prisoners, mostly innocent. Where they landed, they built a port, then the city of Magadan, then the road inland to the mines where they perished. People still call it the 'Road of Bones.' ... Kolyma itself was called 'the Planet,' detached from all reality beyond its own -- death. (In Siberia, page 266.)

Researching his book, Thubron visited *Vorkuta*, another camp. As he was leaving that former place of suffering, he stumbled over a stone. On it, someone had scratched this message:

I was exiled in 1949, and my father died here in 1942. Remember us. (In Siberia, page 41.)

Today one can remember the nameless millions by the work they left behind. The White Sea Canal, which connects the White and Baltic seas (by way of *Onego Lake*), is the most famous example.

Over a 21-month period between 1931-1933, approximately 170,000 prisoners and "special exiles" dug a 141-mile (227 km) canal (including five dams and nineteen locks) over a landscape of mostly granite using the simplest, most *primitive* tools. Twenty-three miles (37 km) of the Canal (called Belomorokanal in Russian) were completely man-made.

Nearly all *workers* on this massive project were prisoners. Vast numbers of those prisoners died during construction.

For half the year, *the canal* was frozen. During the other half, water levels were too low if the summer was too dry. Engineers were given an impossible production schedule to *construct it*, but they had neither mechanized equipment nor concrete to use.

In the *town* of *Medvezhegorsk*, a key *place* during the canal's construction, one can still find some of the actual tools used to build the canal. (The pictures, depicted here, are by *Alfred Bekman*, now deceased.) The tools are maintained by the local history museum and are described by Anne Applebaum at page 64 (paperback edition) of her book *Gulag: A History*:

The pickaxes on display there are actually slices of barely sharpened metal, tied to wooden staves with leather or string. The saws consist of flat metal sheets, with teeth crudely cut into them. Instead of dynamite, prisoners broke up large rocks using "hammers" - hunks of metal screwed on to wooden handles - to pound iron bars into the stone.

Living conditions for the workers were no less primitive. In a letter written to his wife, A.F. Losev said that his sleeping quarters made him wish to be back in prison:

*...if during the night you roll from one side to another, at least another four or five people have to roll over too. (Applebaum, quoting from the *Karelian Archives*, at page 65 of *Gulag: A History*.)*

A family of nine lived on "...one third of a bucket of greenish soup, in whose dark water swam two or three green tomatoes or a cucumber, a few pieces of frozen potato, shaken together with 100-200 grams of barley or chick-peas" plus 1000 grams (about 2.2 pounds) of bread. (Applebaum, page 65.)

When the canal (never commercially or economically viable because it was only twelve feet deep and used wooden gates and walls) was timely finished, 12,484 prisoners were freed for their death-defying production efforts. The rest who survived went on to the next project.

A monument to those who died is located at Petrozavodsk, a town in the far northern part of Russia in the general area where the canal was built.

Escape from any of the camps was rarely an option. Stalin himself, who had been exiled four times by the Tsarist regime, escaped three times. His scorn for the "toothlessness" of the Tsarist penal system was legendary.

But even *his* system was not foolproof - especially if an escape were engineered by someone in charge of the camp.

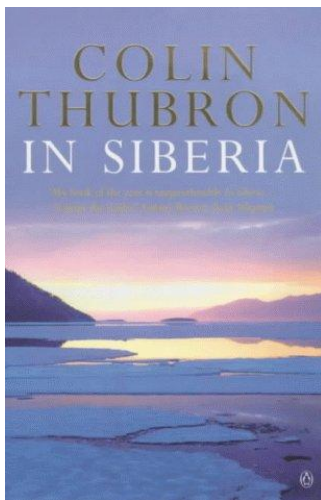
See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/WHAT-THEY-ACCOMPLISHED-I-Am-David>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/WHAT-THEY-ACCOMPLISHED-I-Am-David>

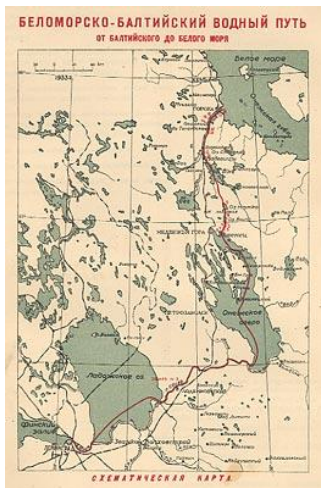
Media Stream



In Siberia - by Colin Thubron

Image online, courtesy amazon.com website.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/In-Siberia-by-Colin-Thubron>



Map Depicting the Baltic Sea

This map is taken from M. Gorky, L. Averbach, S. Firin (eds.), *Belomorsko-Baltiiskij Kanal imeni Stalina. Istorija stroitel'stva. 1931-1934 gg.* (s.l., 1934), after p. 8. Online, courtesy the iisg.nl website.

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Map Depicting the White Sea

Image created by NormanEinstein. Online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons. License: CC BY-SA 3.0.

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Map Depicting Onego Lake

Image online, courtesy the nordictravel.ru website.

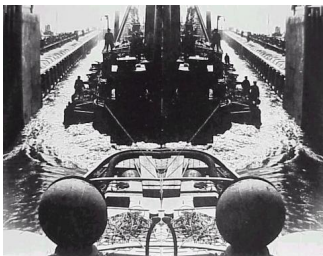
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Building With Primitive Tools

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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The Belomorokanal

Image online, courtesy the shrdocs.com website.

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Constructing the Canal

Image online, courtesy the socialistworker.co.uk website.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Constructing-the-Canal>



View of the Town of Medvezh'egorsk

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/View-of-the-Town-of-Medvezh'egorsk>



Scene Near Medvezh'egorsk

Image online, courtesy Alfred Bekman at the heninen.net website.

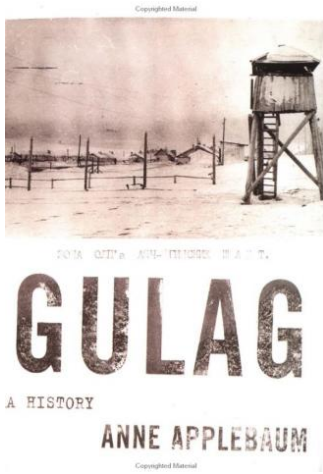
View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Scene-Near-Medvezh'egorsk>



View of the Canal Near Medvezh'egorsk

Image online, courtesy Alfred Bekman at the heninen.net website.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/View-of-the-Canal-Near-Medvezh'egorsk>



GULAG: A History - by Anne Applebaum

Image online, courtesy amazon.com website.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/GULAG-A-History-by-Anne-Applebaum>



Map Depicting Petrozavodsk

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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Map of Russia

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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Monument to Those Who Died Building the White Sea Canal

Image online via Wikimedia Commons.

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Petrozavodsk

Image online, courtesy the heninen.net website.

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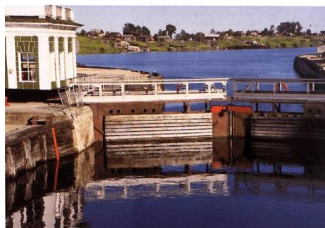


Prisoners Working on the White Sea Canal

Image online, courtesy the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute website.

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Prisoners-Working-on-the-White-Sea-Canal>



Wooden Gates of the Canal

Image online, courtesy the karelia.ru website.

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WHAT THEY ACCOMPLISHED

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Forced Labor Camps, USSR - Kolyma, Part of the GULAG

Video clip, *Siberian Impressions*, Part IV (*Kolyma - At Life's Rock Bottom*).

Documentary by Stanislaw Kalisz, Marek Antonowicz, Dariusz Jakubiak and Adam Draber. Online, courtesy SDMeda.EU.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Forced-Labor-Camps-USSR-Kolyma-Part-of-the-GULAG>



Forced Labor Camps - Vorkuta, Part of the GULAG

Video, courtesy CNN's *Eye on Russia*.

Quoted passages, as noted above. Books available, online at Google Books, for more detailed review.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Forced-Labor-Camps-Vorkuta-Part-of-the-GULAG>