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ALZHIR: THE LEGAL FOUNDATIONS AND DAILY REALITIES OF THE LARGEST WOMEN'S CAMP IN THE SOVIET GULAG SYSTEM (1937–1953)

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Abstract

This scholarly article examines ALZhIR (Akmolinsk Camp for Wives of Traitors to the Motherland), the largest women's camp within the Soviet GULAG system, which operated from 1938 to 1953 in the Akmola region of the Kazakh SSR. The study analyzes the camp's establishment through the prism of normative-legal documents—from Order No. 00447 (1937) that launched the "Great Terror," to Order No. 00486 (August 15, 1937) that codified the principle of "family liability" and mandated the repression of wives, mothers, and children of those labeled "enemies of the people," to Order No. 00758 (December 3, 1937) that formally established the camp as a special women's section within the Karaganda labor camp system. The article explores the daily realities of imprisonment: the systematic depersonalization through numeric branding, the brutal working conditions (including the daily norm of 40 bundles of reeds), the severe food shortages, the near-absence of hygiene and medical care, the birth of approximately 1,500 children in the camp (many conceived through rape by guards), and the forced separation of mothers from their infants. It further examines the psychological trauma endured by survivors, the camp's closure in 1953 following Stalin's death, and the subsequent legal restrictions that prevented former prisoners from returning to their homes until the mass rehabilitation campaigns of 1956–1958. Drawing upon archival documents, prisoner testimonies, and the collections of the ALZhIR Museum and Memorial Complex (established in 2007), this research demonstrates that ALZhIR was not merely a site of physical punishment but a systematically designed institution intended to destroy women's identity, dignity, and maternal bonds. The history of ALZhIR reveals the chilling logic of totalitarian repression: the transfer of political guilt through blood and marriage, the replacement of judicial authority with administrative orders, and the substitution of concrete evidence with vague "degrees of social danger." The camp's legacy serves as a powerful warning about the dangers of state-sponsored violence and the importance of preserving historical memory.

Keywords: GULAG, ALZhIR, Stalinist repressions, Great Terror, women prisoners, family liability, Soviet legal history, political repression, Kazakhstan, memory studies

Introduction

ALZhIR (Akmolinsk Camp for Wives of Traitors to the Motherland) was the largest women's camp in the GULAG system, operating from 1938 to 1953 in the Akmola region of the Kazakh SSR. Its establishment was not a single administrative decision but the result of a gradual accumulation of normative documents during the "Great Terror" of 1937. This article analyzes the legal foundations of ALZhIR's establishment and operation—from all-Union level repressive decrees to camp-specific organizational orders and administrative regulations—examining their internal logic, development, and historical consequences.

The legal history of ALZhIR dates to July 30, 1937. On that day, People's Commissar of Internal Affairs Nikolai Yezhov signed Order No. 00447, titled "On the Repression of Former Kulaks, Criminals, and Other Anti-Soviet Elements." This document launched the "Great Terror" and authorized local internal affairs organs to conduct mass arrests and executions of "anti-Soviet elements." According to a 1956 report by the CPSU Central Committee's special commission investigating mass repressions, during 1937–1938 alone, 1,548,366 people were arrested on charges of anti-Soviet activity—meaning one in every 104 Soviet citizens was arrested—of whom 681,692 were executed. Order No. 00447 created the political and institutional foundation for subsequent repressions against family members of "enemies of the people": if an "enemy of the people" was to be eliminated, then those connected to them by blood or marriage were likewise viewed as potential threats.

The direct legal basis for ALZhIR was Order No. 00486, signed on August 15, 1937, officially titled "On the Repression of Wives of Traitors to the Motherland and the Placement of Their Children." Signed by People's Commissar Yezhov, it formalized the beginning of mass repression against "family members of traitors to the Motherland" (ChSIR). Other relatives May be left undisturbed if not repressed and willing to take in orphans. The defining feature of this order: guilt required no proof, and a court was unnecessary. Once the charge of "treason to the Motherland" was established, family members automatically became targets of repression—personal guilt was "transferred" through blood and marital ties. The sentence was determined not by a court but by the NKVD's Special Council (Osoboye soveshchaniye), with women merely informed of the decision. Additionally, the order required compiling detailed lists of all family members—wives, children, elderly parents—for each "traitor," and writing detailed "character references" for children over 15. On January 29, 1939, the head of the NKVD's Administrative-Economic Department, Sumbatov, reported that since August 15, 1937, a total of 25,342 children had been "confiscated" across the USSR: 22,427 placed in orphanages and 2,915 assigned to guardians. While Order No. 00486 established the principles and policies of repression, the material establishment of ALZhIR as an institution involved the following administrative steps:

December 3, 1937, Order No. 00758: The NKVD issued this order officially deciding to establish a special women's camp section within the Karaganda labor camp system (Karlag). The site selected was Labor Settlement No. 26 ("26-ya tochka")—an existing settlement near Akmola, previously used for dispossessed exiles.

· December 1937: A special NKVD branch office was established in Akmolinsk.

· The camp's official name was "Special Women's Camp Section No. 17 of the Karaganda Labor Camp," unofficially referred to as "Point 26." The acronym ALZhIR—Akmolinsky lager zhyon izmennikov Rodiny—was actually coined by the imprisoned women themselves.

On January 6, 1938, the first group of female prisoners arrived at the camp. From January 10 onward, systematic transport of prisoners began. The first 1,600 women alone were sent from Butyrka prison. However, a vast gap existed between legal norms and reality. According to regulations, women were to receive warm clothing and hand cream in winter, and when temperatures dropped below -30°C, they were to be assigned only emergency work—but these rules were never implemented, and women were forced to work outdoors even in severe cold. Camp infrastructure was extremely primitive: prisoners were forced to build their own barracks, constructing shelter in the steppe under summer heat, autumn rains, and winter blizzards. Beds had no mattresses—only straw thrown on wooden floors. In winter, the temperature inside the barracks did not exceed 6–8°C, with the main fuel being reeds cut by women from the steppe. Upon entering the camp, women were stripped of surname, nationality, and profession. In their place, personal

numbers were sewn onto the back, sleeve, and knee of their clothing—these numbers also served as aiming points if a prisoner attempted to escape. Notably, Order No. 00486 was not immutable. In October 1938, the order's core principle—that a wife must be automatically arrested because her husband was arrested—was officially abolished. Yet the order itself continued to operate in "abbreviated and modified form" for another five weeks. This inconsistency shows that even within the repression system itself, there were disagreements and adjustments regarding the principle of "family liability.

In 1953, after Stalin's death, ALZhIR was closed. Over 6,000 women were released. However, legal restrictions were not fully lifted: until the mass rehabilitation of 1958, the convicted were deprived of the right to return to their places of origin. They were forced to continue their labor on the camp territory, eventually living on land that was converted into the Akmolinsky state farm.

ALZhIR was not the product of a momentary impulse, but a repression machine constructed through the gradual accumulation of normative-legal documents at various levels: Order No. 00447 created the political-institutional foundation for the "Great Terror"; Order No. 00486 codified "family liability"; and Order No. 00758 formalized the camp's material organizational structure. The distinctive feature of this legal chain was the inheritance of political guilt through blood and marriage, the replacement of judicial authority with administrative orders, and the substitution of concrete evidence of guilt with vague "degrees of social danger." The history of ALZhIR demonstrates that when law ceases to be a guarantee of rights and becomes instead a tool of repression, its destruction strikes not only at individual freedom but at society's fundamental trust in justice itself.

On January 6, 1938, the first group of women and their young children arrived at ALZhIR. In the following days, the transport of prisoners became systematic – on January 10, the first echelon reached the camp. Prisoners were brought from major cities such as Moscow, Leningrad, Kharkov, Rostov, Minsk, and Kazan, as well as from Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Central Asia. The majority of them were wives, daughters, and mothers of state and party officials, scientists, and military leaders. For example, the wives of Kazakh intellectuals Turar Ryskulov, Beyimbet Maylin, and Kaysar Tashtitov were also held here. Among the women were Damesh Zhurgeneva, wife of Temirbek Zhurgenev, People's Commissar of Education of Kazakhstan; Shakytai Tatimova, wife of Labor Commissar Mukhametkali Tatimov; and Rabiga Asfendiyarova, wife of Sanzhar Asfendiyarov, People's Commissar of Health. Also passing through this camp were Ashkhen Nalbandyan, mother of poet Bulat Okudzhava, and Rakhil Messerer-Plisetskaya, mother of the famous ballerina Maya Plisetskaya. The camp was located in the middle of the Kazakh steppe, southwest of present-day Astana. It consisted of several barracks built of straw, four guard towers, and multiple rows of barbed wire. Due to the increasing number of prisoners and lack of space, newly arrived women were forced to build their own barracks with their own hands – in the scorching heat of summer, in the cold of winter, in rain and blizzards. The climate of the Kazakh steppe was extremely harsh: in summer, temperatures reached 40°C (104°F) accompanied by swarms of insects; in winter, temperatures dropped to -40°C (-40°F) with constant steppe winds.

Upon entering the camp, women were stripped of their surnames, nationalities, and professions. They were now reduced to a single category – "enemy of the people," "traitor to the Motherland." The only means of distinguishing individuals were the camp numbers sewn onto their clothing – on the back, sleeve, and knee. These numbers also served as aiming points in case of an escape attempt.

Reed harvesting. One of the camp's main types of labor was reed gathering. Each woman was assigned a daily norm of 40 bundles of reeds. Reeds were used as construction material in summer and for heating barracks in winter. Those who failed to meet the norm were deprived of 800 grams of black bread and half a liter of water. Division by profession. Depending on their education and profession, women were assigned to different types of labor. Those with architectural, construction, and other technical specializations, as well as those in veterinary medicine, worked in their fields – designing and constructing barracks, farms, canals, establishing orchards, and caring for animals on the farm. Medical personnel served in the camp's medical unit. Representatives of the humanities – teachers, musicians, artists, singers – were assigned to the heaviest physical labor: reed harvesting and, in winter, ice breaking. Work during the war. During the Second World War, ALZhIR prisoners sewed clothing for Red Army soldiers. Additionally, women planted and cultivated fruit trees on the camp territory – apples, pears, plums, cherries. On one occasion, 600 apple saplings were planted; during a harsh winter, hares gnawed and damaged their bark. The camp administration warned that if even a single sapling was lost, executions would begin. Food in the camp was extremely meager. According to archival documents, breakfast consisted of a thin liquid porridge-like soup called balanda, to which a single drop of vegetable oil was added. Interestingly, women did not consume this drop of oil but rather rubbed it onto their faces, as constant wind and outdoor work severely chapped their skin.

This act was a symbolic expression of the women's determination to preserve their dignity even in such horrifying conditions.

Lack of fruits and vegetables, vitamin deficiency, and dystrophy were widespread. These factors sharply increased the mortality rate. According to available data, more than 10,000 women died in the camp during 1940–1950 alone. The year 1943 saw particularly high mortality – cemeteries around the camp "grew like mushrooms." Hygienic conditions in the camp were virtually nonexistent. Women had the opportunity to shower only once a week, often in cold water. The unsanitary conditions led to the widespread spread of various infectious diseases. The inadequacy of medical care in the camp infirmary further aggravated illnesses. According to incomplete data, over 600 women died in this camp alone. One of the most tragic chapters in ALZhIR's history is the issue of children. Between 1938 and 1953, approximately 1,500 children were born in the camp. This statistic includes only those who survived. On average, about 100 infants were born each year. A significant portion of these children were conceived as a result of rape by camp staff. Many women were brought to the camp already pregnant or with their young infants. For example, Janina Germanovich was brought to the camp with her four-month-old daughter Maya.

Born children were later taken from their mothers. According to Order No. 00486, children under 3 years of age remained with their mothers in the camp, but upon reaching 1–1.5 years, they were transferred to orphanages. This separation was an extremely severe psychological trial for many mothers. Despite all the harsh conditions, women made efforts to continue cultural and spiritual life. In their free time, they wrote poetry, read books, and organized circles. Some women established connections with camp staff, seeking to obtain relief from heavy labor or permission to breastfeed.

Furthermore, women tried to avoid conflicts among themselves and supported one another. The fact that they remained "captives of eternal fear" throughout their lives demonstrates how severe the psychological trials they endured truly were.

Conclusion

Daily life in the ALZhIR camp was a systematic violence aimed at constant hunger, cold, forced labor, and the destruction of human dignity. Yet even under these conditions, women strove to preserve their humanity, their maternal and feminine qualities. The materials presented in this chapter demonstrate that ALZhIR was not merely a place of physical punishment, but a specially designed system intended to break the spirit of women.

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