

# Repression against Polish Citizens during the Construction of the Akmolinsk–Kartaly Railway Line in 1939–1943

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## Abstract

The paper examines the Soviet Union's repressive policies against Polish citizens during the construction of the railway connection between Akmolinsk and Kartaly. Archival documents and memoirs of the deportees from prewar Poland present a terrifying image of the tragic fate experienced by those who worked building the key railway line established in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic during the Second World War.

In the 1930s and 1940s, coal was the basic source of energy necessary for fueling Stalinist industrialization. The entire industry and logistics were dependent on coal deliveries. The priority for the development of transport in the USSR was building routes that would secure quick access to coal deposits and connecting them with large metallurgical combines. Between the 1930s and 1950s, a major number of the so-called great construction projects in the USSR functioned within the NKVD Gulag system, where the objectives were realized by means of labor carried out by prisoners, so-called *spetsposelentsy* [special settlers], displaced persons and ordinary citizens of the Soviet Union. The latter usually worked as the managing staff.

In March 1939, during the 19th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the decision was made to launch the construction of the Akmolinsk–Kartaly railway line<sup>1</sup> – one of the prioritized projects of the third five-year plan in 1938–1942 (the objective in this period was to lay down 3,000 kilometers of railway tracks in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic). According to the project, the main railway line was to serve as the shortest connection between the Karaganda Coal Basin and the Magnitogorsk Metallurgical Combine, shortening the distance between the coal deposits in Karaganda<sup>2</sup> to Magnitogorsk by 470 kilometers (*Tretiy piatiletniy plan razvitiya narodnogo khoziaystva...*, 1939, p. 94).

The preliminary work began in 1935, when surveyors determined the optimal route for the railway line and conducted the necessary technical inspections. Three directions were proposed: southern (through Semiozernoye), central (through Esil) and northern (through Kustanay) (Pavlov, 1997, p. 122). Since the main purpose of the railway line was the transit and transport of goods, the central direction was selected. Another favorable factor was level terrain and few rivers. In June 1939, the construction of the railway line began in two locations at once (in Akmolinsk and Kartaly). The entire route led through the following: Akmolinsk, Shortandy, Novocherkasskiy, Kalininskiy, Atbasar, Molotov, Esil, Arykbalyk, Ruzaevka and Zerenda oblasts (*Dokladnye informatsyi, spravki, obzory, zh-d linii Akmolinsk–Kartaly*, n.d., p. 16). The plan was to build (or adapt) two main stations with depots in Atbasar and Kushmurun and three auxiliary stations with railway turntables in Esil, Tobol and Zhaltyr (*Stroitelstvo zh-d linii Akmolinsk–Kartaly*, n.d., p. 105). The whole construction was divided into seven sections assigned to separate brigades responsible for executing the work (*Dokladnye zapiski, informatsyi politotdela na stroitelstve zh-dorozh. linii Akmolinsk–Kartaly*, n.d., p. 57).

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1 After 1940 the route was often referred to as Stalinsko-Magnitogorska (*Dokladnye informatsyi, spravki, obzory, zh-d linii Akmolinsk–Kartaly*, n.d., p. 1).

2 More on the construction of Karaganda and coal mines: Kim, 2017.

The plan was to build 116 bridges – seven large, 10 medium and 99 small (Dokladnye informatsyi, spravki, obzory, zh-d linii Akmolinsk–Kartaly, n.d., p. 24). Shykhman [Shukhman?] was the head of the construction of the Akmolinsk–Kartaly railway, while the political department was headed by Pavlov (Dokladnye zapiski, informatsyi politotdela na stroitelstve zh-dorozh. linii Akmolinsk–Kartaly, n.d., p. 18). The total cost of the construction plan was 5,298,700 rubles (Dokladnye informatsyi, spravki, obzory, zh-d linii Akmolinsk–Kartaly, n.d., p. 24 verso).

Contrary to their announcements and instructions, the members of the 3rd Congress of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan commissioned the first section of the main line in 1940 (drawing from the experience gained during the construction of the Turkestan–Siberia Railway, they announced the construction would last seven months) (Pavlov, 1997, p. 123), so the builders did not finish the work on time. It is worth noting that the entire railway line was divided into sections (construction stages), where the construction was overseen by corresponding oblasts in which the work was being carried out. For instance, the Kustanay oblast (mainly the Taran district) oversaw the second stage of the construction. In order to speed up the work and fill up the staff shortages, about 20,000 young people arrived from the Ukrainian SSR. In comparison, in 1939 the Kustanay Oblast Executive Committee sent 100 communists, 500 Komsomol members and 1,000 kolkhoz workers along with 200 horses and 700 cattle to work on railway construction (Magistral Akmolinsk–Kartaly sdat' v ekspluatatsiyu, 1940). Using this workforce, only 87% of the plan was executed in 1939, while the cost of construction increased by approximately 30%. Only 110 out of the planned 806 kilometers of tracks were completed. The pace of the work decreased due to unfavorable weather conditions (hot summer and very harsh winter, sand storms and sukhoveys), but mostly due to the lack of mechanization and shortages of qualified shift managers and specialists in various fields. The workers had at their disposal about 400 horse-drawn rakes, 200 hand rakes and one (sic!) excavator. Most of the work was done by hand. Such conditions were confirmed in the accounts of Polish citizens who worked at the railway construction: “We worked there using horses and our hands, with shovels or crowbars” (Reports, 1939–1946, p. 1959).

The new railway construction stage began in 1940. The events of the first months of the Second World War were unfolding favorably for the Soviet Union. The political, economic and military cooperation between the Third Reich and the USSR facilitated the progress of Stalinist industrialization. To grow heavy, light and wood industry, the Soviets used slave laborers deported from Soviet-occupied territories of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. In the course of four waves of deportation, over 320,000 people were sent from Poland deep into the USSR. In 1940, three deportation operations were

carried out on 10 February, 13 April and 29 June.<sup>3</sup> The fourth and last deportation of Polish citizens was conducted in May and June 1941.

The Polish citizens subjected to the three first deportations were sent to the Kazakh SSR. The first deportation, carried out in the early morning of 10 February 1940, went down in history as one of the most brutal due to harsh weather conditions and the shock experienced by the Polish citizens. The deportees were military and civilian settlers and foresters. In the course of the operation, about 140,000 people were expelled from their homes. It is worth noting that about 4% of all deportees were sent to Kazakhstan, i.e. 1,206 families numbering 5,379 people in total. Upon arrival in Kazakhstan, the Polish citizens were accommodated in the following locations: Akmolinsk oblast (Stalinsky, Stepniak and Shortandy raions) – 506 people; Kustanay oblast (Zhetikara raion) – 884 people; Pavlodar oblast (Bayanaul raion) – 1,108 people; Semipalatinsk oblast (Zharly raion) – 1,085 people; East Kazakhstan oblast (Samara raion) – 325 people (Głowacki, 1996, p. 293).

The second deportation began on 13 April 1940. The deportees were relatives of members of the families of persecuted Polish officers, policemen, gendarmes, prison guards, state officials, land- and factory owners, and participants of counterrevolutionary insurgent organizations (Guriarov, 1997a), as well as prostitutes. Unlike during the first wave of deportations, the majority of those deported in April were sent to Kazakhstan. Documents show that over 61,000 Polish citizens arrived in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (Ciesielski, 1993, p. 77). The deportees were accommodated in the Akmolinsk, Aktiubinsk, Kustanay, Pavlodar, South Kazakhstan and Semipalatinsk oblasts. Here are the relevant statistics:<sup>4</sup> Akmolinsk oblast – 6,308 people; Aktiubinsk oblast – 6,816 people; Kustanay oblast – 8,103 people; Pavlodar oblast – 11,440 people; South Kazakhstan oblast – 20,046 people; Semipalatinsk oblast – 7,638 people. The total number of deportees – 60,351 (Ciesielski, 1993, p. 77). It should be emphasized that there was a fundamental difference between the foresters and settlers deported in February and those deported in April – the former were sent to previously prepared workplaces, while the latter had to look

3 The deportation of the “special settlers – escapees” took place on 29 June 1940. The majority of the deportees were Jews (85%), who were sent to special settlements located in the northern part of the USSR, and tasked with clearing forests and working with non-ferrous metals. The total number of “special settlers – escapees” was about 77,000 people. Since most of them were not Polish nationals and their destination was not Kazakhstan, this group of deportees is not examined in the main text of the article.

4 Statistical data cited in the present article differs slightly from that cited in other publications, because the NKVD documents concerning the same period of time provide slightly different numbers. It should also be emphasized that it is hard to establish how long the deportees lived in a given location, as they were sometimes allowed to move to another oblast or raion.

for work on their own. The general situation of the newly-arrived victims of repression was far worse than that of their predecessors who arrived in the Kazakh SSR in February 1940 (this was manifested through much harsher living conditions and scarcer food supplies, among others).

The last deportation of Polish citizens to Kazakhstan took place in May and June 1941. It should be noted that deportations in 1941 were carried out not only in occupied Poland, but also in Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina and the Baltic States. The German invasion of the USSR on 22 June 1941 put an end to the last wave of deportations. Some contingents failed to arrive in their destination points on time and the deportees were abandoned mid-journey. The number of Polish citizens deported in May–June 1941 from so-called western Belarus was 22,353, from so-called western Ukraine – 12,371, and from Lithuania – 12,682. Some of the contingents were sent to the Kazakh SSR, including three which made their way to the South Kazakhstan oblast (Ciesielski, 1996, p. 45). As a result of wartime deportations, approximately 100,000 Polish citizens found themselves in Kazakhstan.

After the diplomatic relations between Poland and the Soviet Union were reinstated, most of the Polish citizens were released from the Gulag system. According to incomplete data, more than 43,000 of those who were able to leave set out on a journey to find shelter and join the Polish Army organized by General Władysław Anders (Polish Armed Forces in the East). Polish citizens, not only prisoners, but also those fleeing eastwards from the front, made their way to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan from all over the USSR – the Arkhangelsk oblast, Komi ASSR, the Vologda oblast. This introduced major changes to the demographic situation in the Kazakh SSR. According to data provided by the Polish embassy in the USSR, about 125,000 Polish citizens were in the USSR in the years 1941–1942. In the following year, this number grew. In June 1942, the Polish embassy in the USSR – based on the data obtained from the delegates of the Polish embassy in Kazakhstan – stated that 142,800 Polish citizens living in the country were given access to social welfare. Some of them left during the evacuation of Anders' Army – the total number of people who exited the USSR at that time was 120,000 (119,855). In November 1942, the embassy estimated the total number of Polish citizens who remained in the Kazakh SSR at 89,111 (Ciesielski, 1993, pp. 80–81).

As a result of the outbreak of the German-Soviet War, the construction of the railway line slowed down drastically. There were staff shortages, as most of the construction workers had been sent to the front. They were replaced by deportees to Kazakhstan who had been released as part of the so-called amnesty. For instance, at the beginning of 1942,<sup>5</sup> about

5 It should be emphasized that Polish deportees were building this railway lines in as early as 1940, and especially in spring 1941 (Ciesielski, 1996, p. 131).

4,000 Polish deportees worked at the railway construction<sup>6</sup> (the majority of them were recruited in the Pavlodar, Kustanay and Petropavlovsk oblasts) (Informacja NKWD Kazsrs o ogólnej liczbie polskich obywateli rozmieszczonych w Kazachskiej SRS, cited in: Panto, 2019, p. 190), who had been deported from the eastern voivodeships of the Second Polish Republic, occupied by the USSR since 17 September 1939.<sup>7</sup> The Polish citizens worked mainly at the stations in Atbasar and Esil, which were already quite large cities at the time. They were aware of the significance of their task, which they were carrying out quickly and with great efforts:

We are building the Akmolinsk–Kartaly main railway line. The task is urgent, because the route is to accommodate transports to the Urals and to the front, to avoid the roundabout route through Petropavlovsk. The redevelopment of the bridge over the river is in progress. We are laying down the second track. Rails and ties. Mum has been tasked with laying down the tracks... (Krzysztoń, 1996, pp. 53–54).<sup>8</sup>

Here is how Eugenia Mamak, deported with her family to the Kazakh SSR on 13 April 1940, described working for the railways:

In 1941 there was a demand for Polish workers who would build the railway and the NKVD sent us there, to the Akmolinsk–Kartaly line, Kustanay oblast, Semiozernoje raion, Kushmurun station. That's where heavy – very heavy labor began (Reports, 1939–1946, p. 2239).

Additionally, in 1942 members of the so-called Trud Army<sup>9</sup> were mobilized to build the railway. Among them were the Germans who had been deported to Kazakhstan in 1941 and the Poles who had been deported in 1936.

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- 6 Not all of the deported Polish citizens fell under the Gulag NKVD system. Those deported on 10 February and in June 1940 were subordinate to special command offices of the Gulag NKVD, those deported on 13 April 1940 received the status of administrativno vyslannye, and those in May and June 1941 – the status of sslynoposelentsi [special settlers – escapees]. The last two categories were also supervised by special command offices, but had to earn their living, which led them to “voluntarily” seek employment at the Akmolinsk–Kartaly railway construction sites, among other places (Ciesielski, 2010, p. 254; Berdinskikh, Berdinskikh & Veremeev, 2017; Ob obshchem kollichestve polskich grazhdan razmeshchennykh v Kazakhskoi SSR, n.d., p. 6).
- 7 More on deportations of Polish citizens to Kazakhstan: Głowacki, 1996; 2009; Ciesielski, 1993; 1996; Ciesielski, Hryciuk & Srebrakowski, 1993; Zaroń, 1990; Gurianov, 1994; 1997; Zemskov, 2005; Gurianov, 1997b; Polian, 2001; Bugay, 1995.
- 8 Memoirs of Krzysztoń were first published in 1978.
- 9 Temporary work details (Trudarmia) from the years 1942–1956 – a system operating in the USSR during the Second World War, in which people were obligated and forced to work, mobilized and organized in a military manner. They were part of the NKVD system.

Various paths led the Polish citizens to the railway construction sites. Some – like Stanisława Kamieniecka, who was deported to Kazakhstan on 13 April 1940 – decided to take the job before enlisting into Anders’ Army:

In May 1941, they announced they were looking for laborers for the railway. On 17 May, I left with my family for the Akmolinsk oblast to work building the railway embankment. [...] In the second half of August we were sent to finish the construction of the railway near the city of Kartaly, Tobol station (Reports, 1939–1946, p. 1959).

Others, like Stanisław Szczepaniak, were forcibly deported to work at the railway construction:

In July 1941, I was deported without my family in order to work building the Akmolinsk-Kartaly railway line. Several thousand people made their way there, but not entire families – only the youths. We lived there in barracks where water would leak inside through the roof or in bug-infested wagons (Reports, 1939–1946, p. 2363).

The Polish citizens released as part of the amnesty were traveling in great numbers from the North towards the South. They took up all kinds of jobs to survive. The construction of the Akmolinsk-Kartaly railway line constantly required new workforce. Unfortunately, the jobs they were offered were not always carried out in decent and humane conditions. Having regained their freedom, the Polish citizens often had to once again engage in forced labor. Marianna Owczarek, a policeman’s wife, who was deported with her daughters to Kazakhstan on 13 April 1940, recalls this period in the following manner: “After the amnesty, we were taken to perform forced labor building the Akmolinsk-Kartaly railway line. The work was very heavy, I labored together with my daughters aged 15 and 16” (Reports, 1939–1946, p. 1590).

In 1943, only 730 Polish deportees worked the same construction job. The number of laborers decreased after the Soviet-Polish diplomatic relations were reinstated in August 1941. It was also caused by the “amnesty” granted to the Polish citizens who subsequently left the camps and special settlements in order to join General Władysław Anders’ army. Shortly after enlisting into the army, some of them (116,543 people, including 78,631 soldiers) (Wawer, 2010, p. 241; Materski, 2005, p. 661) left the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup>

10 On 30 July 1941, a treaty was signed between Poland and the USSR, known as the Sikorski-Mayski Agreement. The document provided a legal basis for building

A group of deportees learned about the “amnesty” and about the ongoing mobilization into Anders’ Army thanks to the railway construction job:

It was a very arduous summer. The first train carrying Poles to Anders’ Army travelled via that railway line. As they were passing by, they told us about the amnesty and about the formation of the Polish Army. But a few days later we were sent back to the kolkhoz and every day we were made to harvest the grain. There was no one else to clean up, as Russian men had been called up into the army: the Soviet Union was fighting Germany (Relacja Czesławy Pączek z d. Nowickiej, n.d.).

Those builders of the main railway line who had joined the army were replaced in 1942 and 1943 by *spetsposelentsy* from the Baltic States and Moldova (about 2,800 people), and later by the Chechen and Ingush deportees in 1944 (1,500 people) (Alimgazinov, 2019, p. 585).

It is worth noting that after leaving their settlements, some people “voluntarily” took up work building the railway. Their decision was dictated by an extremely difficult economic situation, as there were no other jobs which paid enough to support a family. Here is how Halina Wyrzykowska recalled this period:

I took up a position at the construction of the Akmolinsk-Kartaly railway as an unqualified laborer [...]. We were assigned to difficult earthworks. The only tools at our disposal were shovels and “carriers.” We were paid 5 rubles per day, which was barely enough for bread and soup. We warmed our meals on top of two bricks in front of the barrack. We lived in collective barracks, 20 people in each, regardless of gender. There was no hygiene to speak of in these conditions and no chance of surviving the winter (wspomnienia Haliny Wyrzykowskiej, cited in: Hersztowska, n.d.).

The working conditions were extremely difficult not only because of the harsh climate, but also (perhaps most importantly) because they had no way of fulfilling their basic needs. The deportees lived in locations with no bathing facilities, with widespread infectious diseases, and no access to sanitation and medical care. In some periods, about 30% of laborers were suffering from malaria at the same time (Nurseitov, 2013). According

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new relations and facilitated the establishment of a Polish army in the territory of the Soviet Union.



to the construction manager of the section which employed Polish deportees, laborers had to work in winter without warm clothing and boots due to supply shortages, which led to a surge of diseases and deaths. Here is how children of the deportees recall this period:

So my mother worked expanding the tracks, she would actually lay them down and later expand them. They were building the Akmolinsk–Kartaly railway. My mother recalled that [...] labor was maybe even harder at that location, as they had to work for 10 hours, [...] they received practically no food, everything was in short supply, so their bodies were weak, while the work was hard, meant for men. This was no easy task, there were brigades, quotas, etc. (Relacja Bogdana Doniszkwowica, cited in: Panto, 2019, p. 218).

The Kustanay Branch of the Polish Embassy in Kuybyshev, which operated in 1941–1942, also raised the subject of these harsh conditions. It is worth noting that the delegate appointed to this post, Captain Mieczysław Romański, himself worked on the building of this railway for a certain time (in September 1941), so he was well aware of the difficult situation that his fellow countrymen had to face. In his reports, which were sent to the Polish Embassy, he wrote:

The living conditions among Polish citizens are in a great majority of cases extremely difficult. These people, destroyed by harsh working conditions they had to endure so far, by the lack of boots and clothing, and by unwholesome food (no fats, milk or sugar), remain in a state of exhaustion and succumb to various illnesses (mostly tuberculosis). Especially harsh conditions are experienced by Polish citizens who are working at the above-mentioned Akmolinsk–Kartaly railway line. In some sections of the construction, the laborers live in barracks unfit for winter – in one case they are so overcrowded that the workers do not have enough space to lie down, they have no canteens and receive only bread (400–600 grams per day), depending on whether they are working or not. The remuneration for the work at railway construction sites is very low and calculated unfairly. The brigadiers treat the laborers in a hostile, often nasty way.

The working conditions in the kolkhozes are not much better. The living conditions are appalling. The workers live mostly in Kirgiz dugouts, together with the dugout's owner and his family, often with their animals. There is no fuel. Obtaining it is extremely difficult, because they are surrounded by steppes.

The Polish citizens suffer from bad health. Food and soap shortages, lack of proper medical assistance, complete lack of medications, filth, bug-infestation and all kinds of skin diseases – these factors lead to high mortality, especially among children and the elderly. Winter is the period of recurring measles epidemics, which usually lead to pneumonia and account for the majority of deaths (Kustanajska obł. Sprawozdanie kpt. [Mieczysława] Romańskiego..., 1942, pp. 9–10).

The main tasks carried out without the use of machines involved loading coal, stone, wooden planks, sand, gravel, cement and other construction materials by hand; the workers also did some cleaning (e.g. cleaned frozen wagons and cleared snow off the tracks) (Ciesielski, 1996, p. 132). The exiles worked a minimum of 8 hours, the working day often lasted 12–14 hours. Monthly salaries (about 280 rubles) were enough only to buy food, which was in short supply anyway<sup>11</sup> (more on that later) (*Zapisy terroru...*, 2022, p. 132). Thanks to the account of Maria Oskierka, who was deported to Kazakhstan on 13 April 1940, we know the course on an average day of the workers:

The daily schedule was as follows: at 7 a.m. we went to work, we labored until dinner at noon, at 1 p.m. we went to work for the afternoon shift and we finished at 7 p.m. We very often had to work at night. Quotas exceeded our strength, so no one could fulfill them. The payment for our work was minimal. We had to get food on our own, because the local shops offered only bread (which was often in short supply as well). We obtained other products in nearby kolkhozes in exchange for our personal belongings. We didn't receive any clothing. After work, Poles living in nearby barracks would gather in one of the buildings and raise their spirits by reading books out loud and reminiscing about the old days. The НКВД's approach to Poles was hostile. The communist propaganda aimed to instill the communist spirit in our youths and children. We had very little information about Poland. Medical assistance was very limited. Only severely ill people were

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<sup>11</sup> Maria Wojewoda recalls: "Remuneration was appalling, you had to sell your last shirt to buy a bowl of soup" (Reports, 1939–1946, p. 1612). Eugeniusz Czekaj: "Later we were forcibly sent to build railway tracks and facilities on the Akmolinsk-Kartaly line. Thousands of women were building the railway for 800 grams of bread and a small monetary payment" (*Zapisy terroru...*, 2022, p. 78).

taken to hospital. Mortality rate generally wasn't too high (Reports, 1939–1946, p. 1262).

Bohdan Doliński, deported to Kazakhstan on 13 April 1940, not only confirms this state of affairs, but also adds several interesting facts:

A workday lasted twelve hours, with the exception of two days per week when we worked night shifts. We lived in barracks, forty people per each, one bed right next to another. When it rained, water filled the barrack up to our ankles. There were no days for rest. Initially, we were paid about 10 rubles per day (depending on the quota). However, we could only buy 800 grams of bread which cost 1.5 rubles per kilogram. In October the ration was decreased to 400 grams. Other products: pork fat – 120 rubles per kilogram, oil – 70 rubles per kilogram, flour – 20 kilograms for 150 rubles. The daily quota for women: dig up 8 cubic meters and shovel into the wagon, then unload onto the track; for men – 12 cubic meters. In October, remuneration was cut in half (Reports, 1939–1946, p. 2417).

In general, according to the accounts of the laborers, railway construction was much harder than other work they had previously done in multiple Soviet kolkhozes. Working and living conditions were appalling and supplies were scarce.

These accounts present a totally different image than the one recorded in Soviet archival documents. The next section of the paper will discuss everyday lives of the deportees and the functioning of the main railway line based on the analysis of archival sources.

One of the major problems encountered by the builders (mentioned in the majority of accounts) was the lack of food. In a letter to Raisov (head of the district executive committee), dated 23 September 1940, we read about drastic shortages in food supplies. The planned deliveries were to contain: 1,000 tons of potatoes, 230 tons of cabbage, 55 tons of onions and garlic, 10 tons of cucumbers, 45 tons of tomatoes and 50 tons of roots. The oblast authorities ordered that food be provided by the following raions: Akmolinsk, Atbasar, Novocherkasskiy, Kalininskiy, Shchuchinsk, Shortandy and Esil. Despite all efforts, the raions failed to provide the required amounts. For instance, out of the planned 5,500 kilograms of onions, the Novocherkasskiy raion delivered only 1,100 kilograms; out of 3,000 kg beets that they had promised – only 500 kg. The situation was similar in other raions. In some cases, out of the 2,500 kilograms of potatoes they had promised, the Atsabar, Kalininskiy, Novocherkasskiy and Esil raions did not deliver a single kilogram (the Esil raion executive committee admitted they would not fulfill the task of delivering potatoes;

other raions kept “feeding” the workers only promises). The author of the letter, head of the construction by the name of Shykhman [Shukhman?], inquired as to what should be done if the quotas were not delivered. He asked the oblast authorities to compel the raions to deliver the planned supplies, and determine new, more realistic quotas, and with regards to the lack of vegetables (tomatoes and cucumbers), he asked to have them replaced with marinated mushrooms (Dokladnye zapiski, informatsyi politotdela na stroitelstve zh-dorozh. linii Akmolinsk–Kartaly, n.d., pp. 17–18). The task was assigned in writing, which supposedly meant that it was immediately taken care of. The reality, however, was very different, as we learn from the accounts of the Poles who worked building the railway:

In some periods, [...] for several months we lived on only 300 grams of bread [...] and one portion of soup from the canteen (tinted water with cabbage leaves). That’s all we ate for a couple of months... (Śliwowska, Gizejewska & Ankudowicz, 1992, p. 121).

On top of the notorious food shortages, there were also other problems, such as escapes from the workplace. After the central authorities introduced an eight-hour workday and a seven-day workweek for railway builders on 26 June 1940, the workers immediately reacted with anger. This mode of operation resulted from major delays in the execution of the plan. In order to ease the tension and resolve the situation, the railway construction’s political department held a meeting on 14 September 1940. According to the report presented by comrades Kuptsov and Ampilov, in August 1940 in just one section of the construction 78 people failed to show up to work. The number of disciplinary proceedings registered from 26 June to 10 September 1940 was 447 (Dokladnye zapiski, informatsyi politotdela na stroitelstve zh-dorozh. linii Akmolinsk–Kartaly, n.d., p. 29) (it is worth noting that brigade overseers often “covered” for their subordinates, e.g. Sigachev, head of the fourth section of the construction, protected eight absent workers from his superiors) (pp. 20, 25). According to the highest party authorities, the key problem was that the workers and deportees had not been properly informed that the seven-day workweek was only a temporary solution. The authorities recommended that this information, so important from the perspective of the railway construction, be disseminated in the press and workplace (e.g. during talks and lectures) (pp. 20–23). The Polish deportees refused to work on Sundays, often due to their religious beliefs. Some Poles resisted and did not go to work on certain days (*Zapisy terroru...*, 2022, p. 192). Eugenia Mamak describes this period as follows:

We worked for 12–14 hours with no days off. So we paid little attention to their threats and eventually started taking days off without permission. That’s when mass arrests began. We had to stop acting as we pleased and were forced to keep quiet and work (Reports, 1939–1946, p. 2239).

Commandants of various sections of the construction encouraged people to work by giving additional bread rations to those who worked (Ciesielski, 1996, p. 132), so not only elaborate propaganda and repression, but also “awards” served to motivate the workers to fulfill the necessary quotas determined by the management. Regular deliveries of bread to the Akmolinsk–Kartaly construction sites, however, also proved to be problematic. In a letter dated 2 October 1940, we read that a negligence concerning the delivery of flour and the lengthy (over a month-long) renovation of bakery no. 1 in Akmolinsk caused a deficit of bread, which in turn resulted in breaks lasting several days in the delivery of bread (Dokladnye zapiski, informatsyi politotdela na stroitelstve zh-dorozh. linii Akmolinsk–Kartaly, n.d., pp. 48–49).

Railway construction sites were dangerous. Many accidents and mistakes took place in such locations. One example is the situation which happened during the construction of the Akmolinsk–Kartaly line. On 25 August 1940, at the 654th kilometer near the Koluton station, a “Yanvarets” (crane no. 450) got derailed. The accident was caused by the violation of the transport regulations, as the arm of the crane had not been properly immobilized, which caused vibrations and eventually led to the collapse of the entire structure (Dokladnye zapiski, informatsyi politotdela na stroitelstve zh-dorozh. linii Akmolinsk–Kartaly, n.d., p. 50). The committee investigating the accident charged workers Barabash and Nezhintsev with violating the transport regulations and occupational health and safety regulations. According to the calculations of the committee, the accident cost 1,836 rubles and 32 kopecks.

Another accident occurred on 20 September 1940, when two trains – no. 1301 and no. 1302 – crashed at the Adyr railway station. The event was caused by negligence on the part of stationmaster Zubkov, who violated the rules of storing railway keys, as well as occupational health and safety regulations. Train driver Bunakov, train conductor Bairova and points operator Kusenko were found guilty as well. They all received sentences and were held criminally responsible (Dokladnye zapiski, informatsyi politotdela na stroitelstve zh-dorozh. linii Akmolinsk–Kartaly, n.d., pp. 50–51). Derailment of trains, collisions with building materials, and dilapidated and obstructed tracks were notorious. Every work accident was followed by an investigation and those found guilty received sentences. Between August and October 1940, around 200 major accidents took place (48 in September, 54 in October) (pp. 50–63). It is worth noting that many of them were fatal – in September 1940 alone, four accidents

resulted in deaths. Many people who worked building the railway line were run over by trains (p. 61). A large number of accidents and the types of such occurrences reflect the incompetence of those employed at the construction sites. It must be highlighted that the presented data refers only to free individuals, i.e. citizens of the Soviet Union. The Polish citizens – both deportees and later those released as a result of the amnesty – were not included in the archival documentation. Accidents featuring the special settlers were most likely registered in separate records.

Using deportees as a workforce was not the only method of maintaining a fast pace of construction. Another one involved “socialist work competitions” and establishing work leaders. In May 1940 – according to official data – the average work efficiency was 124.9%, in June – 126.7%, in July – 131.2%, and in August – 138% (Dokladnye zapiski, informatsyi politotdela na stroitelstve zh-dorozh. linii Akmolinsk-Kartaly, n.d., p. 70). Higher efficiency was accompanied by a larger number of work leaders (Stakhanovites). In May 1940, there were 3,650, and in October – as many as 5,600. Presently, it is hard to determine how reliable these numbers are, but the astonishing speed of work and great numbers of laborers could realistically lead to such results. Anna Jaxa-Małachowska recalled: “Everyone over the age of 14 works at depots and building the railway line [...]. An inhumanely hard labor” (Śliwowska, Giżejewska & Ankudowicz, 1992, p. 120).

It is worth noting that the situation at the railway construction sites was not as dramatic as in other construction sites overseen by the НКВД (e.g. Dalstroy, Karlag). The reason behind it was not only that Moscow was determined to get the results and commission the railway line as quickly as possible, but also that the construction work was being carried out jointly by deportees (and those released following the so-called amnesty) and free individuals (citizens of the USSR). Here is how Maria Rossowska remembers this work:

10 April 1941. On 4 April, a truck drove up and took me and Hela Kuspysiowa [Mrs. Kuspys] to work building the iron road. The Akmolinsk-Kartaly railway line. Koybagar station. I was in despair after being taken away from Hanka and my aunt. The conditions here seem better, especially in Koybagar, where we can buy everything for a low price, the canteen is well supplied, there is even fruit compote and herring salad. We work clearing a shovel-deep layer of clay off the track. The payment for cleaning one rail is 7.56 rubles per day. We do not receive messages from our families and that isn't going to change. There are rumors that they are going to send us to a camp in Ishim. We were told as we were leaving that we would return to Veselyi Podol for the winter. We

are feeling great here. We live in tents (Reports, 1939–1946, p. 1567).

Evidently, individual perception and subjective impressions of witnesses can be vastly different. The previous accounts clearly discuss harder conditions than those which the witnesses experienced during work at special settlements and kolkhozes. The account cited above is different: it highlights better working and living conditions at the railway construction. In this case, we can simply assume that the memories of each witness from the period of the construction of the Akmolinsk–Kartaly main railway line were determined by their previous experiences (from the period beginning with deportation until the “amnesty”).

On 28 January 1940, two sections of the tracks were joined (it is worth noting that the line was put to temporary use with many faulty elements) (Pavlov, 1997, p. 123). The witnesses to this event recall that the day was very frosty and there was a snow storm (Nurseitov, 2013). Frozen bread, prepared as a meal for the participants of the ceremony, had to be cut with a saw. On construction sites, the motto of the year 1940 was the “20th anniversary of the Kazakh SSR.” The general plan that year was fulfilled in only 70% (Stroitelstvo zh-d linii Akmolinsk–Kartaly, n.d., p. 40).

In 1941, the issues concerning the railway construction were not boding well. The plans and projects that were supposed to arrive from Lenintrassproekt in April 1941 were delivered on 2 July with numerous elements still incomplete (Dokladnye informatsyi, spravki, obzory, zh-d linii Akmolinsk–Kartaly, n.d., p. 10). Designs concerning the construction of technical facilities, railway stations and depots were delayed as well. The main problem, however, was supplying the construction workers with water. None of the scheduled deadlines were met (Atbasar station – by 15 July; Esil – by 15 March; Tobol – by 15 May, etc.). An investigation into the matter led to the discovery that one of the reasons for the delays was that Lenintrassproekt had underestimated the amount of necessary building materials. Another problem was failure to deliver technical drawings on time (Dokladnye informatsyi, spravki, obzory, zh-d linii Akmolinsk–Kartaly, n.d., p. 11). It is also important that additional construction damages were caused by spring floods.

In September 1943, the Kushmurun depot and the Akmolinsk–Kartaly railway line began operating (of course with a number of incomplete elements). In one of the workers’ memoirs we find the following information:

Mamlyutka, 14 March 1943. Dear Madame! I was unable to send the package mentioned in the letter from January, because the Akmolinsk–Kartaly railway connection does not accept luggage, as the line had not been commissioned, and the postal service does not accept packages over 8 kilograms

(Dokladnye informatsyi, spravki, obzory, zh-d linii Akmolinsk–Kartaly, n.d., p. 176).

Officially, the construction of the railway line finished in 1943, but the line was not fully operational until 1945. However, it must be noted that in 1942 it served to transport 1.4 million tons of coal and various kinds of food and ammunition necessary for the Red Army soldiers fighting in the war.

The construction of the Akmolinsk–Kartaly main railway line was the key project of Stalinist industrialization during the Second World War. Moscow was determined to build it, using not only forced labor performed by Polish deportees (and those of other nationalities), but also volunteers, communists and members of the Komsomol from all over the Soviet Union. The construction undoubtedly influenced the Soviet economy, especially in the northern region of the Kazakh SSR. It is worth noting, however, that it changed more than just the map of the Soviet Union – it also left a tragic mark on the lives of those who worked on its construction. Exhausting labor and the demand for workforce influenced the shape of Poland's intelligentsia and elites, as their members were deported to Kazakhstan on a massive scale. These people experienced the entire spectrum of the Soviet terror. On top of the obvious physical struggle, the intelligentsia suffered additional punishment in the form of being deprived of a chance to lead intellectual lives in their own language, which for some proved to be simply unbearable.

(transl. by Julia Niedzielko)

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