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SLAVE LABOR AND THE SOVIET PIPELINE

INTRODUCTION

August 8, 1942: The U.S. State Department learns that Germany plans to "resolve, once and for all, the Jewish question in Europe." U.S. diplomats react skeptically.¹ The message is nevertheless forwarded to London, where David Allen of the British Foreign Office takes a cautious view of the matter, demanding more evidence. He writes: "We have no confirmation of this report from other sources, although we have of course received numerous reports of large scale massacres of Jews, particularly in Poland."

And while officials in the West were demanding irrefutable evidence, in the East the gas ovens had already been operating for more than four months. Jews, moreover, were being used extensively as slave laborers all over Germany.² The Allies failed not only in imaginatively piecing together the available evidence, they lacked sympathy.³

¹ The State Department reaction is in United States National Archives, 862-4016, Race Problems, Germany, 2234.

² Martin Gilbert, Auschwitz and the Allies: A Devastating Account of How the Allies Responded to the News of Hitler's Mass Murder (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982), p. 27.

³ Op. cit., p. 341: "The failures, shared by all the Allies, were those of imagination, of response, of Intelligence, of piecing together and evaluating what was known, of coordination, of initiative, and even at times of sympathy." Another finely documented account of the Allies' response to information about the Jewish holocaust is Walter Laquer's The Terrible Secret: An Investigation into the Suppression of Information About Hitler's "Final Solution" (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980).

Four decades later, evidence once again mounts of inhumanities in the East which once again are being greeted skeptically or dismissed in the West. This time the culprit is the Soviet Union. It is believed to be using forced labor--perhaps slave labor--on the Siberian gas pipeline, an estimated \$45 billion project financed to a great extent with Western low-interest rate credits--indeed, as low as 7.5 percent.⁴ Economic and strategic considerations aside, humanitarian considerations alone demand that the West cease collaborations on this project and insist on a thorough, scrupulous investigation of all the evidence of gross human rights violations in this enterprise.

WORKING IN SIBERIA

In his 1976 book The Russians, New York Times correspondent Hedrick Smith cites a friend from Leningrad:

People know that the real dirty work [in Siberia] is done by convict labor. They know that most of the young Komsomol [young Communists] brigades are pressured into going out there, and that older workers go for the "long ruble" (the high pay bonuses).⁵

Yet even high wages have failed to attract workers to Siberia for long; Smith reports that "living conditions are so severe that in the Sixties nearly a million more people moved out of Siberia than moved in, despite graduated pay bonuses designed to hold people there."⁶

That much of Siberian work is less than voluntary is confirmed by The Washington Post's Robert G. Kaiser, in his 1976 book Russia: The People and the Power:

The Siberians are pioneers, though not always by choice. Thousands of them (and the parents of thousands more) arrived in Siberia in prison cars, sentenced there by czarist or communist courts, or swept to the east in some great purge or forced relocation. Exile to Siberia is still common today.⁷

The situation has not improved. According to Soviet census reports, there are fewer workers in 1982 to do heavy jobs and

⁴ The estimate of \$45 billion is by Roger W. Robinson of Chase Manhattan Bank's Eastern European division. Cited by Senator Jake Garn (R-Utah) in Congressional Record, Volume 128, No. 65, May 25, 1982.

⁵ Hedrick Smith, The Russians (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Company, 1976), p. 334.

⁶ Op. cit., p. 333.

⁷ Robert G. Kaiser, Russia: The People and the Power (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), p. 4.

there will be still fewer during the next decade. Official Soviet statements report around 2 million unfilled job vacancies in November 1980, and Soviet Party Chief Leonid Brezhnev has said that up to 400,000 additional workers will be needed in the next few years to develop new oil and gas fields in western Siberia. The Soviet economy, moreover, is in even worse shape now than it was a decade ago--massive grain imports and military adventures having further aggravated it. The Soviet government thus is unable to provide the proper food and clothing required for work in bitter cold weather.

Robert Kaiser describes the climate in one relatively populated region of Siberia which he saw along the Trans-Siberian railroad:

More than half the region is north of the 60th parallel--farther north than Juneau, Alaska. There are barely three months of a year without snow and ice, and the brief summer is hot and mosquito-infested. Yet most of the vast natural riches of Siberia lie beneath the permafrost and summer swamps of those far-northern reaches.⁸

Hedrick Smith explains what this cold means to the laborers:

Man, it turns out, is more durable than machines. In December and January, when work at diamond mines or on construction sites slows to a crawl, workmen can take no more than half an hour outside without heading for the warm-up shed. But they have to give up entirely at 58 below because machinery breaks down and steel rods snap like twigs in the extreme cold.⁹

What this means is that work involving manual labor could go on. If past experience in the Soviet construction camps is an indication, it does go on.

SLAVE LABOR IN THE USSR

The use of slave labor from the very beginning of the Soviet Union has been documented by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in the Gulag Archipelago, published in the 1970s. His very long list of slave labor projects includes the Trans-Siberian railroad tracks, the construction of the pipeline from Sakhalin to the mainland and timber cutting for export and import, which he estimates to have "constituted half the Archipelago." Solzhenitsyn describes life on some of the more brutal projects:

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Op. cit., p. 329.

Who other than the Archipelago natives [forced laborers] would have grubbed out stumps in winter? Or hauled on their backs the boxes of mined ore in the open gold fields of the Kolyma? Or have dragged cut timber a half-mile from the Koin River....through deep snow on Finnish timber-sledge runners, harnessed up in pairs in a horse collar (the collar bows upholstered with tatters of rotten clothing to make them softer and the horse collar worn over one shoulder)?¹⁰

These practices did not end with Stalin. Peter Reddaway, senior lecturer in Political Science at the London School of Economics, speaking on behalf of the International Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in the U.S.S.R., on February 26, 1973 condemned the West for being indifferent to the fate of the estimated million prisoners in the thousand or so forced-labor camps of the Soviet Union.¹¹ Today, this number has grown to at least 3 million prisoners, by conservative estimates.

A few years ago, prisoners started building the Baykal-Amur railroad in conditions similar to those facing the workers who must lay the Siberian pipeline. Russian human rights activist Mikhail Makarenko, a former Gulag inmate, testified before the U.S. Senate on June 18, 1982, that "people are working in a temperature 50 degrees below zero without any safety on higher elevations, on walls and so on."¹²

It is alarming to look at the map of the labor camps (Map II) by the Soviet dissident Avraham Shifrin, also a former Gulag inmate. Obviously, camp inmates could be forced to help build the pipeline. Will they? Some experts are convinced of it, notably Yuri Belov, director of the International Society for Human Rights, located in Frankfurt, West Germany. He wrote a letter published by the New York Times on September 1, 1982: "During the past two years, a great number of new hard-labor camps have been set up along the route of the pipeline."

Dr. Kronid Lubarsky, editor of U.S.S.R. News Briefs, a physicist and former political prisoner currently living in Munich, questions whether there is sufficient solid evidence for Belov's statement. Yet Lubarsky, in a September 7, 1982, tele-

¹⁰ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago, Parts III-IV (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pp. 591-594.

¹¹ "The Forced Labour Camps on the USSR Today: An Unrecognized Example of Modern Inhumanity," published by the International Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in the USSR, February 26, 1973.

¹² Transcript of Proceedings, Oversight Hearing on the Proposed Trans-Siberian Natural Gas Pipeline before the Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, Subcommittee on International Finance and Monetary Policy, June 18, 1982, p. 51.

phone conversation with The Heritage Foundation, noted that "in the area of the pipeline there are indeed a lot of camps. They were not constructed specifically for the pipeline, however; the Soviets ordinarily use on such construction projects not ordinary prisoners but people conditionally released from camps." Lubar-sky does not dispute the use of the term "slave laborers"; on the contrary, in the interview he stated that he is "absolutely sure that slave labor is used in building the Siberian pipeline. It is used in all heavy construction work in all branches of Soviet economy."

Lubarsky's view is supported by Professor Makhmet Kulmagambetov, a Soviet political prisoner who emigrated to the West in December 1979. In a statement sent from Munich on August 27, 1982, to Senator William Armstrong (R-Colorado), he writes:

In March 1972 I was transferred to the birthplace of Soviet gasoline, Vuktyl, where there were also conditionally released prisoners used for labor.... Thereafter, from 1975 to 1977 I worked in the city of Ukhta. In Ust'-Ukhta, near KS-10, there was a 'construction town' where only conditionally-released prisoners lived. When I talked to them, many of them told me that their working and living conditions were so hard that it would have been better to return to camp. Some of them were taken back to labor camps forcibly for not having fulfilled their assigned work quotas...in the cities of Ukhta and Surgut there was continuous traffic of large trucks carrying prisoners to work on the construction of gas pipelines.

Kulmagambetov explains that "conditionally released" prisoners remain, in fact, prisoners serving their terms. He says that they should be called "unescorted" prisoners. He saw many of them working on gas pipeline construction.

To be sure, no eyewitness who personally has worked on the Siberian pipeline has appeared to be cross-examined by Congress. As David Satter, former correspondent in Moscow for the Financial Times, wrote in the Wall Street Journal on June 29, 1982:

There is unlikely ever to be conclusive evidence that the Soviet Union is using forced labor on the West Siberian pipeline, but all circumstantial evidence suggests that the inmates of Soviet labor camps will play their part in supplying Siberian gas to the West.

For years, it must be recalled, circumstantial evidence pointed to the existence of Nazi extermination camps. This evidence was widely ignored.

"GUEST WORKERS" IN THE SOVIET UNION

Soviet prisoners are not the only forced laborers likely to be working on the pipeline. So are foreigners, especially from Vietnam.

In a "Foreign Report" marked "confidential," the British journal The Economist revealed on September 17, 1981, that Brezhnev and Le Duan, the Secretary General of Vietnam's ruling Communist Party, had met about a week earlier and discussed their growing economic difficulties. Among the likely topics was "a new means by which the Vietnamese government is planning to offset its massive debt to the Soviet bloc: the provision of large numbers of Vietnamese 'guest workers'." The two nations, in fact, in July had signed an agreement "on the movement of citizens of Vietnam and the Soviet Union between the two countries." That agreement is intended to offset the \$3 billion Vietnamese debt, of which \$1.4 billion is in convertible currencies and \$1.6 billion in nonconvertible currencies like rubles. Interest costs to Vietnam were \$25 million in 1976, soaring to about \$240 million in 1981.

According to a member of the U.S. State Department's Policy Planning staff, the Soviets were embarrassed by the publicity that the agreement received. Moscow immediately denied the allegations that Vietnamese slave labor would be used in Siberia on the pipeline project. Yet the denials reveal more by what they leave out than by what they say. Boris Scherbin, the Soviet Minister for Oil and Gas Construction, for example, stated in August 1982, that prisoners could not work on the pipeline because the project needs highly skilled and experienced specialists.¹³ He said not a word about the great masses of unskilled labor required to clear the ground for the pipeline. It is widely understood that the Vietnamese, for example, can ill afford to deplete their own small pool of skilled laborers and technicians by sending them to the Soviet Union. This leads to only one conclusion: the workers which Hanoi must send to the USSR are destined for unskilled work, the hard labor needed before the Western built and financed pipe-laying machinery can be used.

The evidence that Vietnamese are going to the USSR comes from many quarters:

*** Netherlands. On November 4, 1981, the London Daily Telegraph reports that the Vietnamese community in Amsterdam is becoming alarmed by reports of month-long house-to-house raids in South Vietnam, rounding up people to go to work in the Soviet Union.

*** California. On August 27, 1981, a woman from Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) writes to a friend in San Diego:

¹³ Daily Report, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, 25 August 1982, Vol. III, No. 165, p. CC6.

"When this letter reaches you, my husband will no longer be home. Just a few days ago, the State has demanded that he and a number of his friends leave the country for labor in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, to pay back the debts those brother nations have helped us (sic) during the time we fought the U.S. and their puppets." She adds: "there is little chance that I will ever be able to meet my beloved husband again."

- *** Paris. January 18, 1982, a Vietnamese man reports to his cousins living in France that their son Dung "has sent words to [them] that he had heard that the government will send the people in reeducation camps to Siberia."
- *** Texas. On April 1, 1982, a family from Dalat in Vietnam writes to their American friends that "the government is conducting a census survey of youth and dividing them in categories.... Belonging to category B are youth whose families were connected with the old regime, and they would be sent as laborers to Russia." The couple is worried for their son Trinh, who belongs to that category.
- *** Tokyo. On April 19, 1982, the Japanese newspaper Yomiuri cites Japanese government and foreign diplomatic sources in Japan that Hanoi has already sent about 10,000 workers to the Soviet Union as a means of covering a deficit in its foreign currency reserves.
- *** Maryland. On May 1, 1982, Mrs. Le Hoang An, head of the Association for Vietnamese Human Rights, in Paris, wrote to the Vietnamese Information Bureau in the U.S. that information received in April from Vietnam, Thailand and China indicates that "approximately 16,000 Vietnamese were forced to go to [Warsaw Bloc] countries.... During the first quarter of 1982, 2,496 workers were sent to Russia in two Russian freighters, the OBDORST and the DOUDINKA; the aircraft carrier MINSK and the destroyer DENSKOUCHT transported 3,200 workers and docked at the OKHOTSK Naval Base on March 26, 1982."

On June 18, 1982, Professor Doan Van Toai, a former official of the Communist National Liberation Front in South Vietnam who served in the Ministry of Finance after the fall of Saigon, author of The Vietnamese Gulag and currently lecturer at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, listed nine Vietnamese who had already been sent to the Soviet Union in 1980. He stated that the letters he and others have received from Vietnam "have said that the Vietnamese workers who were exported to the Soviet

Union have not been allowed to write or contact their family outside the Soviet Union."¹⁴ In September 1982, however, a letter did manage to get through. It was from a North Vietnamese to a relative in the West and came to the attention of Le Thi Anh, director of the Vietnamese Information Bureau in Washington, D.C. The letter writer states that he is doing "an exhausting job in a snowy and cold climate," has a salary that barely allows him to buy food, and that he finds his work very hard and his Russian supervisors very harsh and arrogant. Whether or not he went to this cold region voluntarily is beside the point; it is clear that at present he is doing forced labor and is unable to return home.

Evidence is also coming from Cuba. A Miami-based newspaper, Ideal, in an article entitled "Secret Information from Castro at the Popular Assembly," published in February 1980, reports Castro as saying that:

...if the Soviets do not have the manpower to exploit their timber, if they let us have some of that wood, even if it is located in Siberia -- and in Siberia it is better because it is not so warm -- we will send our work brigade in Siberia to yield all the wood products that we need. If we have some tens of thousands of workers and fighters in our international brigades abroad now, if we have now 1200 teachers in Nicaragua, if at one point we had 36,000 men in Angola, if at one time we sent 12,000 men in Ethiopia, if we have construction workers in Angola, the Republic of Guinea, Libya, Iraq, if we had them in Vietnam too, why don't we have ten thousand men to produce wood in Siberia?

And make it possible to lay the Siberian pipeline?

CONCLUSION

Is the Soviet Union using forced labor in the construction of the Siberian pipeline? The evidence is difficult to ignore. The official TASS reply broadcast on Moscow radio as reported in the August 14, 1982, issue of London's Economist, is that there are no political prisoners working on the Siberian pipeline "since the Soviet Union has no political prisoners." This carefully worded statement actually falls far short of being a denial. It merely says that the Soviet Union has no "political prisoners," ergo there can be no "political prisoners" working on the pipeline. Yet the fact that the Soviet Union has political prisoners is almost universally believed in the West by experts of almost every political persuasion. With the premise of the TASS statement meaningless, the conclusion is also empty of meaning. Why did not TASS state categorically that there is no prison labor or forced labor working on the pipeline? Many of those pipeline

¹⁴ Transcript, op. cit., p. 28.

laborers--probably most of the unskilled--could hardly be there of their free will given the harsh conditions and the extremely low pay.

On August 25, 1982, Tass reported that the Urengoy-Petrovsk trunkline of the Siberian pipeline had been laid earlier than planned and that work is continuing rapidly on the Urengoy-Pomary-Uzhgorod "export-oriented" pipeline. Says TASS, broadcasting a report from the Communist Party newspaper Pravda, "the railwaymen and river transport workers have already sent 2,700 km of pipes to the pipeline builders. Due to the shock work of the builders, more than 500 km of pipes were welded into a single line by mid-August and 250 km of pipes were laid."¹⁵ What does Pravda mean by "shock work?"

According to Soviet analyst Stanislav Levchenko, who used to work for Soviet information organizations before he defected to the U.S. in 1979, the Soviet press in the past few weeks has been publishing editorials and interviews with law-enforcement officials. The purpose, explains Levchenko, surely is to crack down on alcoholics and other "criminals" who are not model Soviet citizens. He points out that in the past such people have been sent to be "rehabilitated" in labor camps. Will this expected crack-down be a means of filling the Siberian prison camps? And will these new inmates soon find themselves building the Siberian gas pipeline? Certainly these questions merit answers. Since Western money and equipment are building the pipeline, these questions deserve investigation by Western governments, human rights organizations, academics, and journalists.

But what are Western governments doing about the allegations? It is remarkable that even in the United Kingdom, under the Tory leadership of Margaret Thatcher, only a sole voice in Parliament is demanding investigation of slave labor on the Siberian pipeline, that of David Atkinson. True, West German and French governments have pledged to look into allegations that slave labor is being used to build the Siberian pipeline. But whether this will result in a "whitewash" (as columnist William Safire charged on August 26, 1982, in the New York Times) is certainly an open question, given the commercial interests involved. Careful monitoring of the investigations would be highly desirable. Already once in this century, West European officials remained blinded or indifferent to reports of atrocities from the East. Will history be repeated?

In the U.S., there is a rising chorus of outrage at the possibility of slave labor being used in Siberia. Senator Armstrong has launched his own investigation, vowing to collect

¹⁵ Daily Report, op. cit., p. CC5.

"every shred of credible evidence" on this issue. He has introduced an amendment to H.J. Res. 520 calling on the State Department to investigate these charges. Congress, in turn, should convene hearings and start searching for witnesses. To remain silent or passive on this matter is to become an accomplice to the inhumanities.

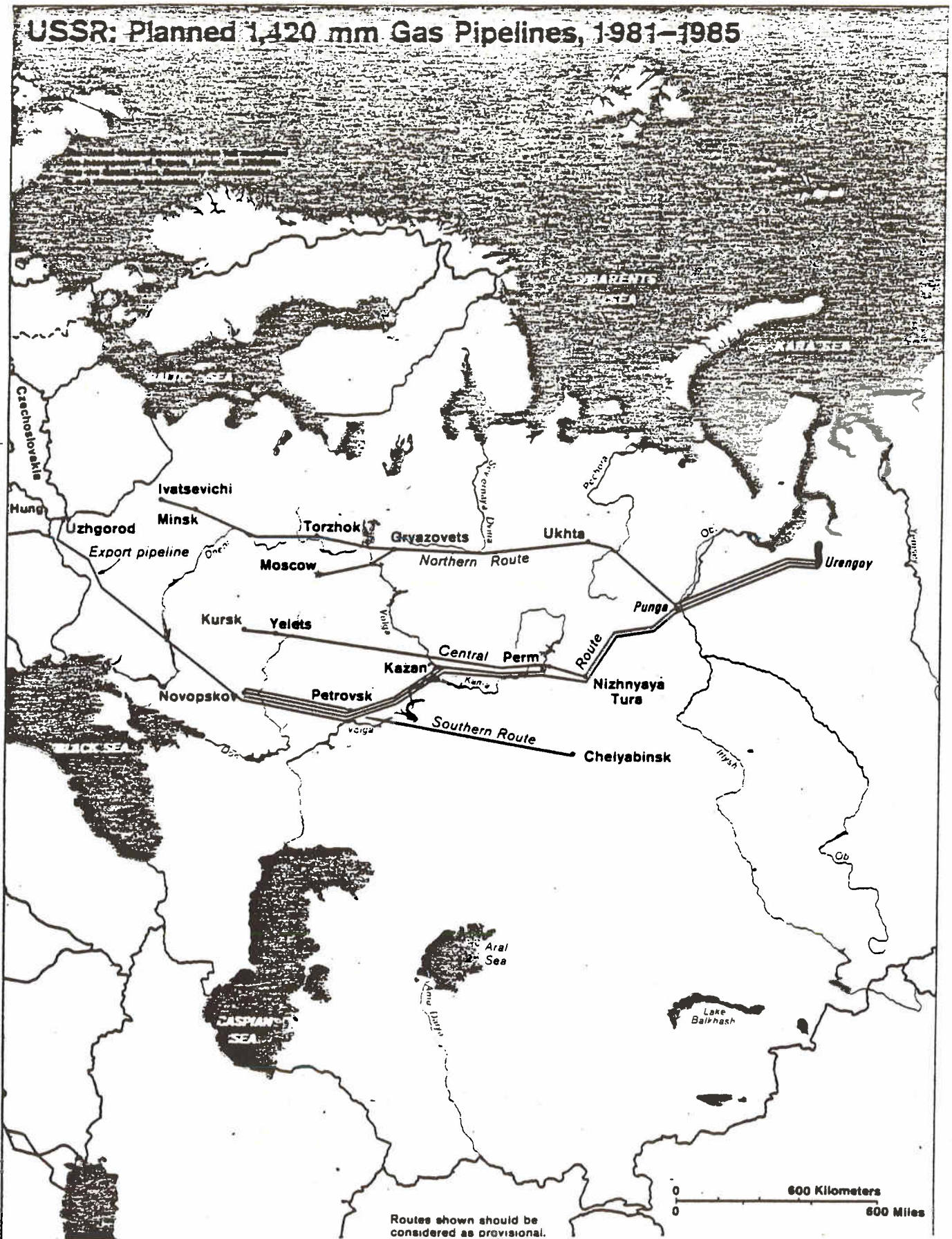
Nor can the United Nations ignore the charges of Soviet use of slave labor. In a recent speech assessing the world body, U.N. Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar complained that the organization was becoming ineffective. If he is sincere about making the U.N. more relevant as a defender of human rights and dignity, he will mobilize U.N. resources to investigate the charges of slave labor being used to build the pipeline.

The task of investigating the use of slave labor in the USSR, however, will be considerably more difficult now after the Soviet authorities forced, on September 8, 1982, the end of the so-called Helsinki group.

Unless Moscow is fully cleared of these charges no Western state, company, or organization should participate in any way in constructing the Siberian natural gas pipeline. In this matter, the burden of proof is on Moscow. Though much of it is circumstantial, the evidence is compelling enough--as it should have been regarding Nazi extermination camps in 1942 and 1943--for the West to conclude, until it is proved otherwise, that slave labor is building the pipeline.

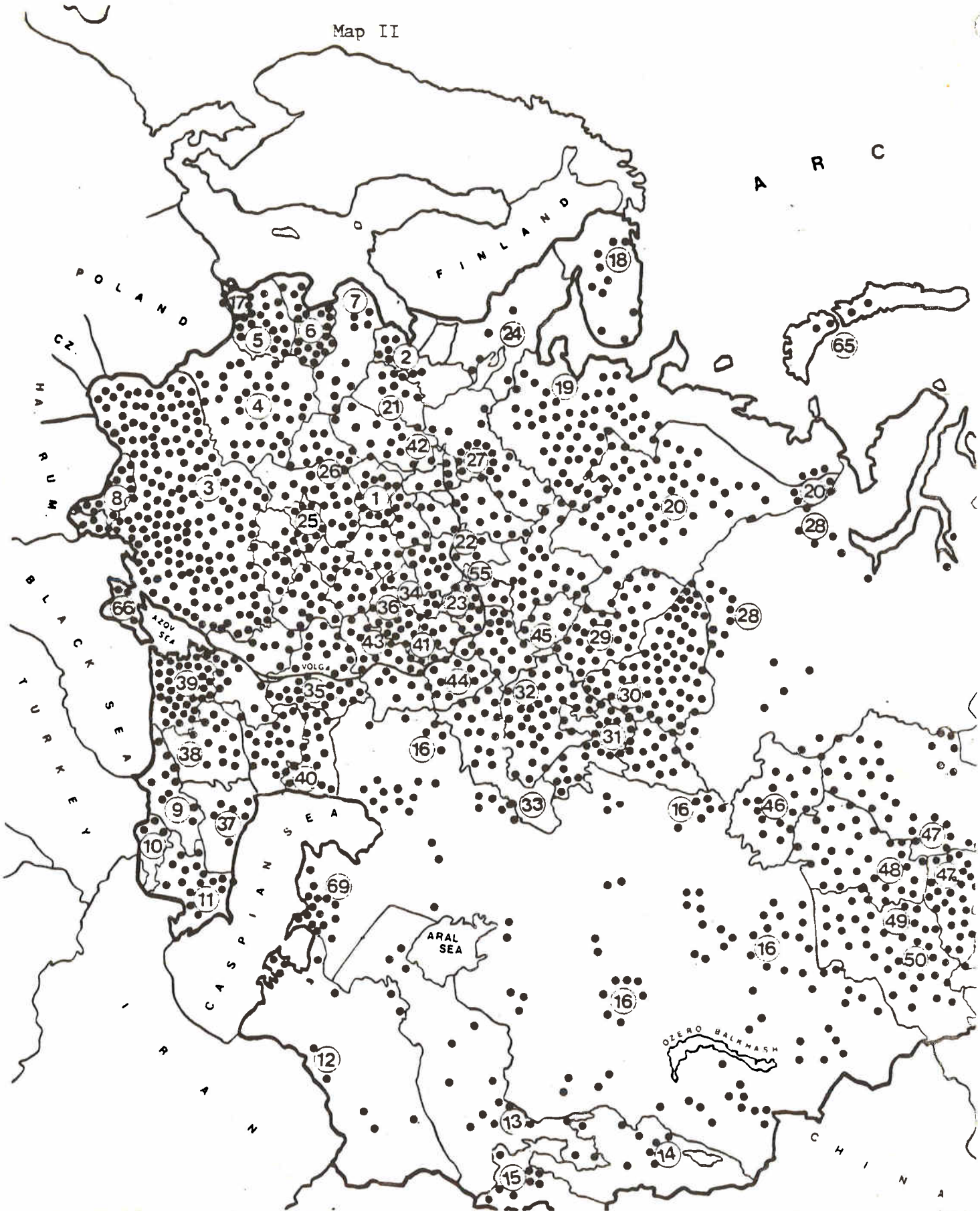
Juliana Geran Pilon, Ph.D.
Policy Analyst

USSR: Planned 1,420 mm Gas Pipelines, 1981-1985



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce

Map II



Source: Avraham Shifrin, The First Guidebook to Prisons and Concentration Camps of the Soviet Union (New York: Bantam Books, 1982)