



Project Gallery

Archaeology of forced labour in 1950s Prague: the case of Stalin's monument

Daniel Pilar¹ , Jan Hasil²  & Marek Dvořák² 

¹ Department of Prehistory, Institute of Archaeology, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, Czechia

² Department of Historical Archaeology, Institute of Archaeology, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, Czechia

Author for correspondence: Daniel Pilar ✉ pilar@arup.cas.cz

Excavations on Letná Hill uncovered a forgotten 1950s labour camp linked to Prague's Stalin Monument. Preserved architecture and artefacts reveal the daily life of workers, driven less by physical violence than by ideological pressure and social consequences, shedding new light on forced labour and material culture in communist Czechoslovakia.

Keywords: Eastern Europe, Communism, dark modernities, settlement waste

Stalin above Prague

In December 1949, the foundation stones of the world's largest Stalin monument were laid in the centre of Prague, on the Hill of Letná, as a demonstration of the loyalty of Czechoslovak communists, who seized power in 1948. A 15m-high statue of granite was erected, depicting Stalin at the head of a procession of the Czechoslovak and Soviet people (Šindelář 2010; cf. Ptichnikova & Antyufeev 2018). Its process of construction demonstrates how significant the project was for the Stalinist regime. High-quality materials were used, some even imported from Western countries, and the construction required innovative engineering solutions. When unveiled on 1 May 1955, Stalin's monument visually dominated the cityscape (Figure 1) but, just nine months later, Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1953–1964), condemned Stalin's cult of personality. The most splendid statue of Stalin thus missed the era for which it had been created. The monument stood above Prague for just seven years; in November 1962, during de-Stalinisation, it was blown up. Only its massive pedestal remains as a unique archaeological monument in Prague's cityscape.

Forgotten labour camp

While Stalin's monument is notorious, the existence of a labour camp for its construction had been forgotten. It was only during rescue excavations ahead of construction work in 2021 that evidence of its existence was rediscovered. The camp consisted of

Received: 21 November 2025; Revised: 27 February 2026; Accepted: 16 March 2026

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Figure 1. The Stalin monument in 1960 (photograph courtesy of Fortepan/UWM Libraries/Harrison Forman. Reproduced with permission).

buildings representative of ‘emergency architecture’ (van Pelt 2024; Figures 2 & 3), which were inconsistently preserved. During its dismantling, the western part of the camp was levelled using heavy machinery; here, buildings were identifiable only from underground infrastructure. The eastern part, however, was covered by thick layers of backfill that form the mound around the monument. This protected the remains and preserved the camp’s surfaces, small construction details and lost artefacts. The key results of the rescue excavation have already been published (Hasil *et al.* 2022).

In 2025, a Czech project ‘The Land gone wild’ (co-funded by the European Union) was launched, aiming to look at the twentieth century in an innovative way. It focuses on common people and their resilient strategies in critical processes, using archaeological evidence to examine topics such as the impact of global conflicts on individuals, communities and landscape, forced migrations, collectivisation or forced labour. A detailed evaluation of the artefacts from the labour camp started within this project, resulting in the compilation of 954 porcelain and table/container glass artefacts, the most common categories of archaeological finds and 1287 other fragments (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17628709>). Although subsequent analysis ruled out part of this corpus as unrelated to the encampment, most of the finds help to understand the essential aspects of life in the camp, such as the barracks-like lifestyle, waste management and the closed nature of the Czechoslovak economy with regard to imports from abroad, contrasting with findings from Second World War labour camps (Hasil *et al.* 2024).

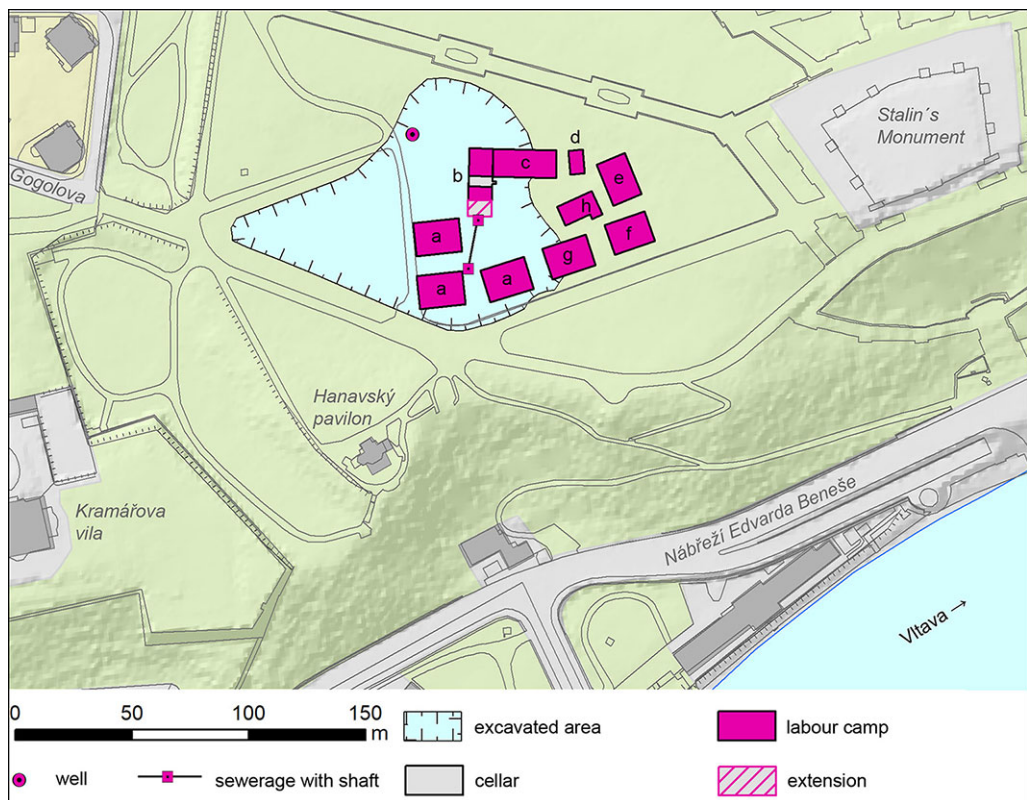


Figure 2. Plan of the labour camp at the construction site: a) barrack; b) kitchen; c) dining hall; d) power station; e) administrative building; f) lock-smith's workshop and forge; g) cloakroom; h) washroom (figure by authors).

Reading the artefacts

Objects found in the camp area and inside the houses can be identified as the lost personal belongings of internees—buttons, combs or hygiene-related items. A few artefacts suggest the presence of women among the inhabitants (Figure 4). Fragments of spirit bottles also indicate that alcohol was accessible. These are important clues to the characteristics of the communities that inhabited the camp, the details of which have not been preserved in any written records.

A large assemblage came from a waste deposit near the kitchen building (Figure 5), where porcelain plates, beer glasses and the remains of at least 87 ducks (osteological analysis identified them as *Anas platyrhynchos* f. *domestica*) were found under a former window. In many cases, kitchen waste had been stuffed into beer glasses and thrown out of the window. The entire deposit was concealed under a layer of tar paper. This curious deposit not only tells a vivid tale of life in the camp, it illustrates the complete and almost absurd detachment of artefacts and people from their normal behavioural boundaries.

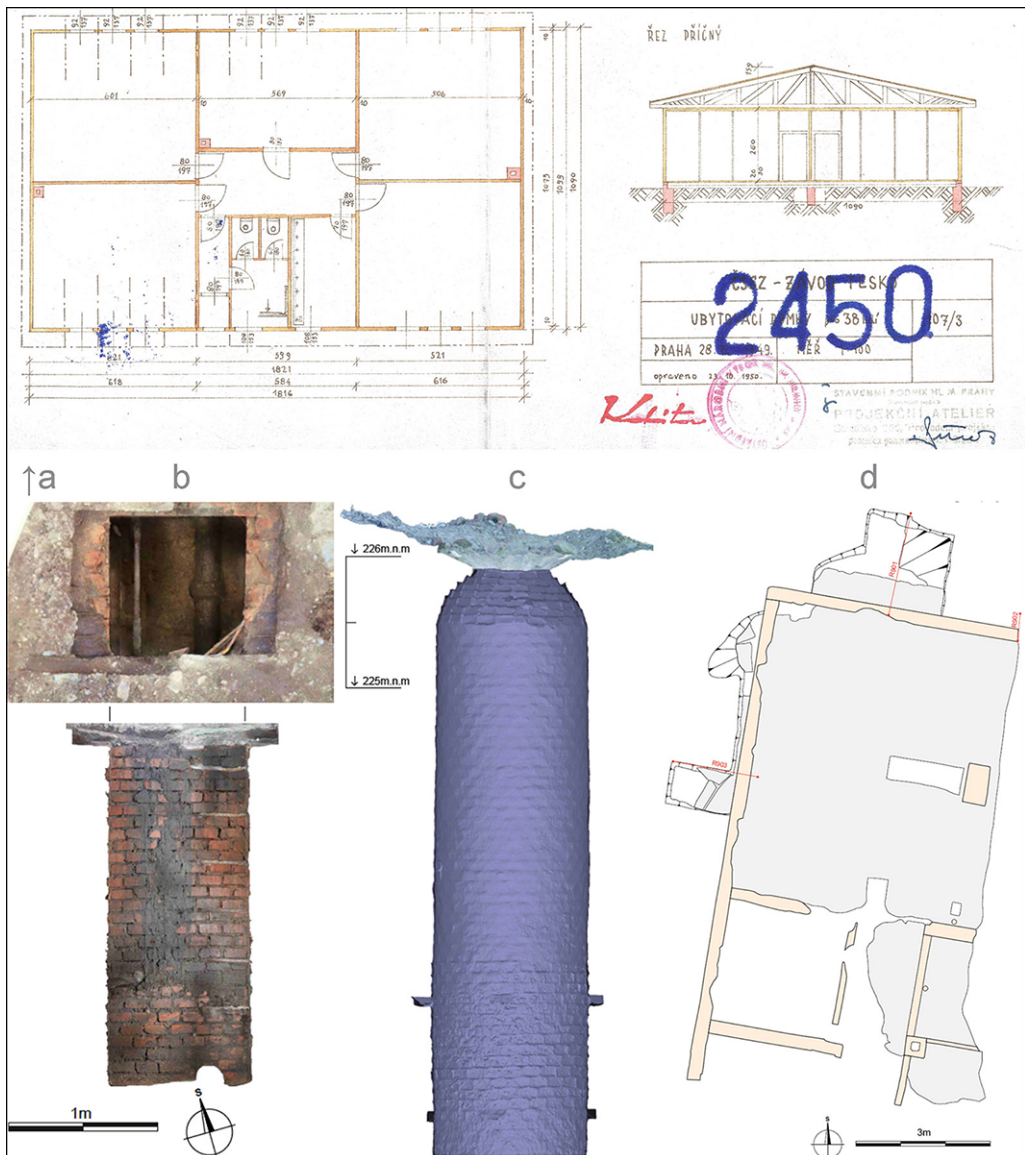


Figure 3. Evidence of camp buildings: a) archival plan of barrack; b) sewerage shaft (orthoplan); c) brick well (axonometry); d) excavation plan of kitchen (figure by authors).

Most artefacts used in the camp would have been removed from the site as part of normal modern waste management. The recovered objects therefore represent only a selection of what was once present—enough to tell us fragments of personal stories and isolated events, but insufficient to gain a complete understanding of the resident communities and their lives. Key questions about the possible rotation of internees or changes in their daily routines thus remain unanswered, demonstrating how misleading a



Figure 4. Identified personal belongings of internees (above) and fully reconstructed plates from the kitchen (below) (photographs by I. Hrušková).

purely archaeological interpretation of similar sites without external evidence can be. In the case of Letná, external evidence is represented by the few personal memories of individuals, members of the intelligentsia, who had to work manually on the construction of Stalin's monument to achieve social rehabilitation.

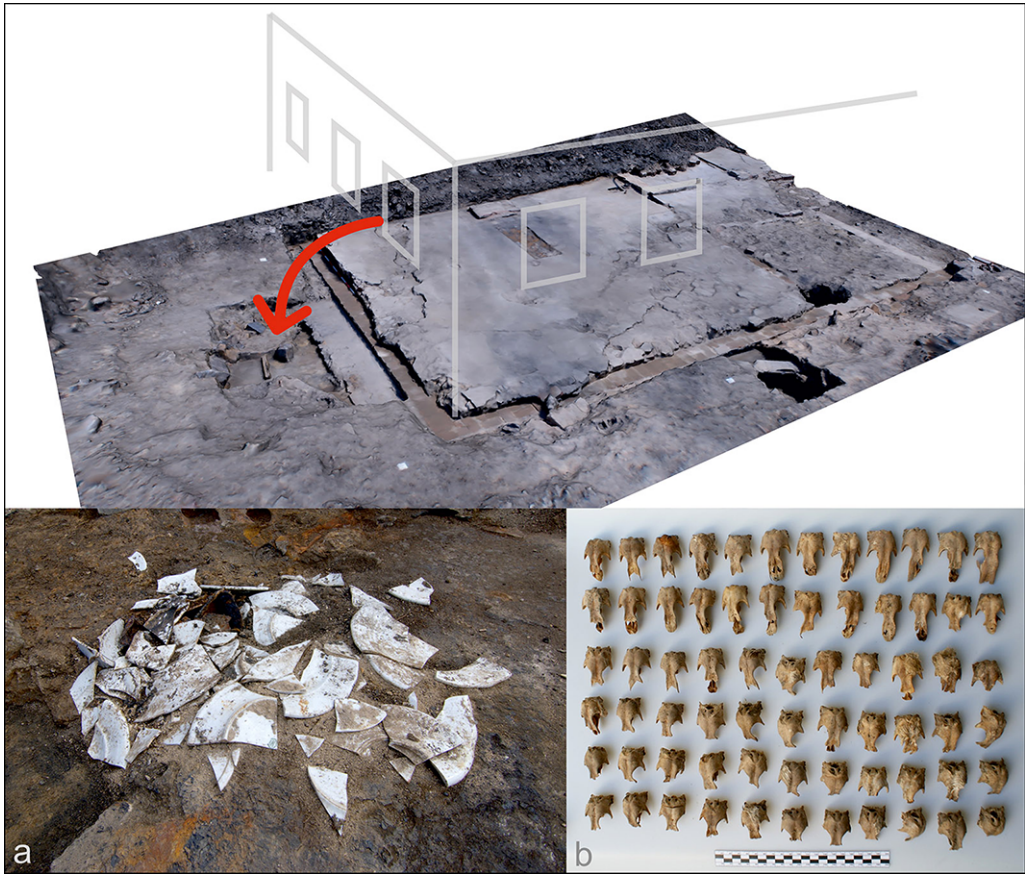


Figure 5. Finds from a waste dump under the window of the kitchen: a) discarded table porcelain; b) duck skulls (figure by authors; photographs by D. Pilař & I. Hrušková).

A true labour camp? A new view on the communist era

The Letná camp diverges from a Gulag, the most widely known example of a communist internment camp. The archaeological evidence does not present the image of a brutal place behind barbed wire where opponents of the regime were physically separated from society and their exploitation through forced labour was a secondary aspect of their detention. Testimonies of former forced workers indicate it was a place for the correction of people inconvenient for the regime. Work on the Stalin monument was therefore not only a form of economic exploitation, but also ideological subjugation, where insignificant individuals built an eternal monument to the symbol of the regime. In this respect, the site is characteristic of the entire period: workers were not made to work by brute force, but by the clear and understood consequences that acts of disobedience would have for them and their families. It is thus another important aspect of the archaeology of communism (Konczewski 2020; Vařeka 2024), which demonstrates common social engineering and economic exploitation under Stalinism.

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This *quid pro quo* meaning of forced labour may not be understandable to contemporary Western society, as shown by a recent interpretation of forced labour in the 1940s from a Marxist perspective as a concomitant phenomenon of capitalism and its crisis (Dézsi & Wurst 2024). However, the camp at Stalin's monument demonstrates identical socioeconomic relations within a society that, since 1945 and especially since 1948, had systematically deconstructed the essential institutions of capitalism, ever under the guidance of Marxist-Leninist ideology.

Conclusion

The rediscovered labour camp of Letná reveals an inseparable part of the Stalin Monument in Prague. Excavation has uncovered eloquent aspects of the reality of forced labour and everyday life of unfree labourers in the 1950s. The site was not a scene of violent oppression but reveals various forms of coercion and exploitation that characterised the communist era and the high degree of entanglement of Eastern Bloc society with the phenomenon of unfree labour.

Funding statement

This work was funded under the Programme Johannes Amos Comenius (OP JAK in Czech) (project no. CZ.02.01.01/00/23_025/0008705), managed by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic and co-funded by the European Union.

Online supplementary material (OSM)

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17628709>.

Author contributions: CRediT categories

Daniel Pilař: Conceptualization-Equal, Formal analysis-Equal, Investigation-Equal, Methodology-Equal, Resources-Equal, Visualization-Equal, Writing - original draft-Equal, Writing - review & editing-Equal. **Jan Hasil:** Conceptualization-Equal, Investigation-Equal, Methodology-Equal, Project administration-Equal, Visualization-Equal, Writing - original draft-Equal, Writing - review & editing-Equal. **Marek Dvořák:** Data curation-Equal, Formal analysis-Equal, Resources-Equal, Writing - original draft-Equal, Writing - review & editing-Equal.

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