

THE END OF STALIN'S GULAG

Growing Resistance in the 1940s & 1950s



Mass amnesties were granted after Stalin's death in 1953, but Germans were not released. The picture on the left shows a group of German prisoners on Christmas Eve in Special Camp Ozerlag in the mid-1950s. After many other prisoners had been released, 85,000 German prisoners still languished in the Gulag.

Stalin died on March 6, 1953. Three weeks later, Chief of the MVD (secret police) Lavrentiy Beria recommending releasing one million of the 2.6 million Gulag inmates with sentences under five years, including pregnant women, mothers, children, the elderly and the ill. Beria's Amnesty released only criminals, however, and political prisoners were left incarcerated indefinitely. Beria, who had ordered thousands of people arrested and personally signed over 50,000 death warrants, was arrested in June, 1953, and executed six months later for "anti-state activities." Thus began De-Stalinization, or discrediting Stalin and beginning to abandon his style of repression.

Prisoners had begun to show resistance in the later Stalin years. One effective means of resistance was called the "slowdown," where workers did not meet their quotas and denied the government the output it wanted.

In May, 1953, inmates in Norilsk were the first to go on strike in the "special purpose camps." Inmates armed themselves with knives and clubs they had made themselves and formed self-defense units. Approximately 16,400 inmates went on strike from late May to early August. The government used force to suppress the strike, but it was the first organized resistance within the camps.

The Kengir Uprising was another protest event. It occurred in Kengir Camp in central Kazakhstan during May and June, 1954. The "Dubovka transport" brought activists and fighters from Western Ukraine to be incarcerated in the camps, but it also brought rebellion. "These sturdy young fellows, fresh from the guerrilla trails, looked around themselves, were horrified by the apathy and slavery they saw, and reached for their knives," wrote

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. They murdered the thieves and criminals who had carried out their sadistic torments on prisoners with impunity. The Kengir prisoners managed to seize the entire camp and to hold it for several weeks. Within the camp, the prisoners even formed a provisional government that conducted marriages and religious ceremonies. After 40 days of freedom, the Soviet authorities used tanks and guns to put down the rebellion, killing 500-700 prisoners on June 26, 1954.

For decades, camp administrators had relied on the actual criminals in the camps (called "thieves" in the camps, although they were guilty of all kinds of crimes) to help suppress and terrorize the political prisoners. After WWII, battle-hardened political prisoners began to show resistance in the camps. They were called "red hats."

In 1954-55, in the Vorkuta region, a camp administrator imported sixty "thieves" to break up a group of red hats. The thieves stole the money and possessions of an older prisoner. The red hats demanded that they return the stolen things, but the thieves refused. The red hats surrounded the barracks at 2 am. and beat up the thieves.

After the war, several million German POWs served in the Gulag. Many had been released in 1949, but 85,000 "war convicts" still languished in their Gulag camps. In September, 1955, West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer visited Moscow and advocated for the release of the remaining German POWs. It was not until 1956 that the last of these, including Hein, Peter, and Gerhard Dyck, were released.



The mother of a German prisoner thanks German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer for negotiating the release of 15,000 Germans from the Soviet Gulag in September, 1955. Some were not granted their freedom until 1956.