

A DIFFERENT TYPE OF PRISONER

Post-War Gulag Inmates of the 1940s

A different type of prisoner appeared in the Gulag at the end of World War II. The camp population swelled with soldiers from many



armies, including Japanese and German Prisoners of War (POWs), the Red Army, Polish Army officers, and others. These battle-hardened POWs were not easy prey for the criminals who had dominated camp life since the 1920s, unlike earlier political prisoners. They came to be called “red hats.”

There are many accounts from the post-war Gulag of red hats beginning to fight back against criminal violence, thievery, and informers. Zeks united along religious lines or ethnic groups (Russian Germans, Christians, Orthodox, Jews, Ukrainians, Latvians, and the like), and their common experiences build solidarity between them. One effect of this new solidarity was rooting out informers that had been planted into brigades and barracks. Gerhard’s account of the men in his brigade ridding themselves of their informer is typical; during the late 1940s, prisoners were able to unite enough to kill many of the informers.

The government noted that if the red hats could stand up to the thieves, then they could stand up to the guards and camp administration as well. In 1948, the Gulag created 12 *osoblagi*, or “special purpose camps” and sent 275,000 of the “most dangerous” political prisoners there. These camps were for so-called spies, terrorists, Trotskyites, right-wingers, Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries, anarchists, white emigrants, nationalists, and others who might oppose the government. Gerhard would be among them.