Chapter Thirteen

"Arbeit Macht Frei"[1] Soviet Style

Background

Throughout most of Stalin's reign, the functions of state security were combined in one massive organization called the NKVD. After the war, there was a separation of security functions between the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and what would eventually become the Committee for State Security, the KGB. After Stalin's death, this separation continued. The MVD was headed by S. N. Kruglov, a veteran state-security official, who replaced Lavrenty Beria upon his arrest in the summer of 1953. Ivan Serov headed the KGB, which was charged with domestic and foreign intelligence and operations.

Stalin's successors were left with the problem of what to do with the Gulag camps and their two and a half million inmates. Within weeks of Stalin's death, more than a million inmates were amnestied, primarily those who had committed minor offenses. But more than a million political inmates, nationalists, and hardened criminals were left in camps. Many of them erupted into violent revolts in the wake of the first amnesty.

The amnesty of political prisoners had to await Nikita Khrushchev's February 1956 secret speech, which revealed the horrors of the Stalin regime. Khrushchev's speech signaled that it was now time to decide what to do with the Gulag camps and their inhabitants. He turned to his two state-security agencies for proposals. The MVD pro-

posed to replace the Gulag camps with conventional prisons and to eliminate the use of forced labor as a major input into the economy. The KGB argued in favor of keeping as much of Stalin's Gulag as possible and argued with particular fervor for the continuation of forced convict labor.

This is the story of the battle between the "moderate" Ministry of Internal Affairs, headed by Kruglov, and the "hardliner" KGB headed by Ivan Serov. Of the two, Kruglov had more experience. He headed the Gulag from 1946 to 1953. The moderate–"hardliner" battle is captured in a document from Ivan Serov to the Central Committee (addressed to Leonid Brezhnev).[2] According to Serov, forced labor was actually good for prisoners—a Soviet form of "Arbeit macht frei."

The KGB's Argument

In a memo of May 10, 1956, KGB head Serov strongly resisted his rival MVD's proposal to liquidate the corrective-labor camps and to transfer the inmates of the Gulag to prisons on two grounds:

> First, inmates in prisons cannot be used for socially necessary labor because there are no enterprises in prisons. Accordingly, there can be no use of the factor most important to re-educating the prisoner—his labor.
>
> Second, the liquidation of the corrective labor camps requires an expansion of prisons for holding non-working prisoners at additional expense of state resources.

According to Serov's calculations, there were already 152,000 inmates in prisons built to house 104,000. If the Gulag camps were emptied, the prisons would have to accommodate an additional 113,000 counter-revolutionaries, 135,000 thieves, bandits and murderers, and 305,000 criminals convicted of large thefts, for a total of over 554,000. This would yield a figure six times greater than the existing capacity of prisons.

Serov also objected to the MVD's proposal to prohibit the use of prison labor in construction, forestry, mining, and other hard physical labor.

> The use of prisoners for socially necessary labor including heavy labor, if correctly organized with adequate supplies and in the context of educational work, will aid the re-education of workers in the spirit of an honest life of labor in Soviet society. Moreover, practice shows that, if well organized, such work can raise the worker's qualifications.

The KGB also opposed the MVD's proposal to create special prisons for unredeemable criminals:

> The concentration of so-called unredeemable criminals in one place can create the view among them of hopelessness for the future. It is not ruled out that in such prisons there will be organized demonstrations, rebellions and other excesses instead of work.

The KGB also opposed the MVD's proposal to relax the conditions of incarceration for prisoners showing positive signs of rehabilitation, such as giving them the right to live outside the prison or with their families.

> The introduction of such a regime will weaken the entire regime of holding prisoners and the re-educational meaning of prison confinement will be lost. If prisoners have served a major portion of their time and are showing a positive attitude toward work, then it is necessary to consider their early release.

Kruglov and his MVD, as experienced Gulag operators, understood the power of the so-called work credit system. Work credits were granted to prisoners who over-fulfilled their plans. For each work credit received the sentence would be shortened according to an existing formula. Although work credits were periodically banned in the Gulag, they kept being revived because of their effectiveness in stimulating work effort.

Serov and his KGB opposed the continuation of work credits. Instead, they proposed to leave early releases to the courts and to prison managers. An automatic system of early releases could unleash undesirable elements on civil society.

> The current practice of awarding work credits for the over-fulfillment of plans leads to the result that inmates possessing good work habits and physical strength have the opportunity to obtain early release, without showing signs of rehabilitation. Such early-released persons cause concern among citizens and in addition they tend to commit new crimes. It would be better, in exceptional circumstances, when an inmate with exceptional labor service and behavior earns the right to early release after having served the major part of his sentence, to let courts decide based upon a proposal of the camp director.

Who Won?

The issue of the future of the Russian penal system was joined after Stalin's death, with two visions presented. One called for a conventional prison system focused on rehabilitation; the other (KGB) position proposed the continuation of a forced labor system in camps with strict terms of confinement. In the long run, both positions partially won the day. Russia today has a penal system that is a mix of Stalinist and Western practices.

Prisons remained under the jurisdiction of the MVD (now the MVD of the Russian Federation) until 1996, when they were transferred to local authorities. The Gulag system of camp administration was officially abolished in 1965, although prisoners continued to be assigned to work with hazardous chemicals and in timber cutting. Modern Russian penal legislation resembles that of Western countries, with prohibition of torture and inhumane practices. Russian prisons and camps remain overcrowded, with some 20 percent of the prison population incarcerated in detention centers due to lack of space. More than half of Russian prisoners are held today in overcrowded labor camps, where they work primarily in logging operations.[3]

The most striking legacy of this debate is the exceptionally high percentage of the Russian population institutionalized in prisons and camps. In 1970, there were slightly more than a million convicts. There were also innovations in the late Soviet period such as "punitive psychiatry," which made political activities such as dissidence a mental illness, requiring confinement in mental hospitals. From that day on, political prisoners ended up in hospitals not in prisons. By the mid-1980s, the prison population doubled to more than 2 million.

During the disorder of Gorbachev's *perestroika,* the decline in convictions outweighed the increase in crime and reduced the number of prisoners back to 1.3 million by 1991. The Russian institutionalized population at the turn of the twenty-first century remained high by international standards (along with the United States) at one million, or 632 per hundred thousand, versus the world average of 86 prisoners per hundred thousand.[4]