Chapter Nine

Who Is the Prisoner Here?

Background

The Holocaust provided the classic image of the concentration camp guard: A cruel and sadistic SS officer impeccably dressed in black jackboots, indifferently sorting incoming Jewish prisoners for the gas chamber or work brigades. The Nazi concentration camps were basically extermination camps in which prisoners were either executed immediately or worked to death. The men and women who guarded these camps belonged to the fanatical SS-Totenkopfverbaende or were recruited (such as female guards) into associated organizations by racist appeals. In 1945, the Nazi concentration camps held around 700,000 inmates guarded by 55,000 guards.

At the time of Stalin's death in March of 1953, his concentration camps held 2.5 million prisoners. While the Nazis operated hundreds of camps, primarily in Eastern Europe, Stalin's Gulag administration operated 3,274 labor camps and colonies, 52 prisons, 120 children's work colonies, and 748 orphanages and hospitals spread throughout the vast territory of the Soviet Union. To run this empire, the Gulag administration employed 446,000 persons, of whom more than half (234,000) were in the militarized guard division.[1]

This chapter tells the story of the quarter-million guards who manned the sentry outposts, who escorted inmates to work, and who

hunted them down when they escaped. Few, if any, were there for ideological reasons. Their officers were sent to the Gulag as punishment duty, and the guards were a rag-tag collection of poorly educated and poorly paid unfortunates, unlikely to have any affiliation with the party or with communist youth. The Gulag guard corps was at the bottom of the ladder of the interior ministry hierarchy. At the top were the Chekist operational workers who caught, imprisoned, and executed enemies of the Soviet state. Those who guarded them were at the bottom.

The job of these guards and their officers was not to exterminate prisoners; summary executions at the time of sentencing did that job more efficiently and saved transportation costs. Instead, their task was to maintain order and discipline in the camps, to prevent escapes, and to deliver and return prisoners to work in the industrial and mining enterprises associated with the camp.

Why Not the Best and the Brightest?

Nazi concentration camp guards tended to believe in Nazi racist ideology, worked in camps an easy train ride to Berlin, and, if not driven by ideology, had vast opportunities for corruption (through the theft of inmate belongings). Soviet Gulag guards lived thousands of miles from home in some of the world's harshest climates. Although some camps and colonies were located in central regions, the most important were dispersed in forlorn corners of the vast Soviet Union. They were built close to the vast mineral and forestry resources of the Far North, Siberia, and Kazakhstan.

Although prisons in other societies are not exactly located on prime real estate, they can scarcely compare in remoteness and hardship with the prisons of the Soviet Gulag. As a massive industrial and mining empire, the Gulag spun off a huge demand for guards in a society that was perennially short of labor. The USSR, in 1953, had a prison population fifteen times larger than the United States, a country of comparable size. The Gulag administration faced a constant struggle of recruiting and retaining guards.

In any penitentiary system, the task of guards is basically the same: All societies isolate violent and dangerous offenders as a threat to the

physical safety and property of their citizens. In the Soviet case, most inmates were condemned to the Gulag not as threats to public safety but because of actual or suspected opposition to the Soviet state.

That guards perform their jobs well was extremely important to the leadership. If the guarding system broke down, civil society could be swamped with "socially dangerous" persons who could infect the rest of society with their anti-Soviet views. Yet, there was little reason to expect that Gulag guards would be the "best and the brightest." Guards had to work in remote regions where free labor would not come on its own. Guarding is a cruel, brutal, and unrewarding business in its own right, let alone in an arctic climate. Unless the Gulag administration was to pay exceptional wages and benefits, there would also be no reason for qualified persons to volunteer for guard positions.

The official statistics for the militarized guard division of the Gulag for 1945 show that only twelve percent belonged to the party, ninety percent had an elementary education or less, and almost eighty percent had been on the job less than a year.[2] If one adjusts these figures to exclude officers (who accounted for about ten percent of the total), the characteristics of ordinary guards look even worse.

Their officers were not much better. NKVD/MVD officers with uncompromised backgrounds and good training opted for careers in the central administration or in the glamorous operational administrations. The guard division was a dumping ground for compromised officers sent to Gulag camps under the motto: "You can take those whom we do not need."[3] "Officer" positions in the Gulag even had to be fulfilled by "free labor," suggesting even a shortage of officers. In 1948, 26,254 of the 63,033 officer positions were filled by "free labor."[4] Given that most camps were off limits to civilians, many of these "free" officers were either prisoners themselves or former prisoners.

That the Gulag was not a particularly desirable place of employment is reflected in the fact that of the 337,484 authorized positions in the camp sector, 21 percent were unfilled (in 1948). In the early 1930s, shortages were so severe that prisoners occupied managerial positions in camp administration. During the construction of the White Sea–Baltic Canal, most lower-level administrative and technical positions were held by prisoners. Although the Gulag administration sought to minimize the use of prisoners as guards for obvious

reasons, the number of prisoner-guards was substantial. As of January 1939, of the 94,921 armed guards in camps and colonies, 25,023 were prisoners.[5] The practice of using prisoner-guards continued throughout the history of the Gulag.

The Gulag had other ways to force "free" persons into guard positions. Many inmates became guards after their sentences were completed because internal passport controls would not permit them to live elsewhere. After World War II, Red Army soldiers, POWs, displaced persons, and others who would have been in Germany or in other foreign countries were automatically processed in "filtration" camps. Many who escaped imprisonment were made into concentration camp guards. Others had their papers taken away and had no choice but to remain as guards. At the beginning of 1946, the number of such guards numbered 31,000.[6]

The sorry conditions of the armed guards of the Gulag were summarized in a letter to the NKVD minister Beriia in August of 1945:

> At the current time, most of the armed guards are older persons and war invalids. Many have asked to be demobilized based on the state decree about demobilizing older persons. The Gulag administration gives a standard answer to such requests that the personnel staff is not subject to this decree. Such an answer is correct for the present but the basic question is the future insofar as most guards are older than forty, disqualified from military service because of health, war invalids, or women. Our efforts to recruit demobilized solders is not yielding results. There are other substantive deficiencies. For example in the armed guards, we have in the commanding staff in officer ranks free workers recruited from collective farms and cities in the ordinary fashion.[7]

Although former Red Army soldiers understood weaponry, those recruited from the collective farms did not. Guards did not know how to clean their rifles, and one female guard went on duty with a rag stuffed in her rifle.[8]

Work Conditions and Discipline

Guards were poorly paid, equipped, and trained. An August 1945 report to Beriia contains the following description of Gulag guards:

> The armed guards of many camps do not wear uniforms. They wear ripped shoes and tattered clothing. In the summer, they wear winter hats, wadded trousers, and quilted jackets. Their appearance is worse than that of the prisoners although the disciplinary rules of the Red Army apply to them.[9]

The proposal to Beriia: Make the armed Gulag guards a part of the NKVD Special Forces. The proposal was rejected because of the high cost and problems of mobilizing armed guards for the Gulag.[10]

Gulag guards worked long hours under generally miserable conditions in harsh climates. A March 1950 report stated that:

> The work day of armed guards is excessively hard and, as a general rule, is 10 to 12 hours, and during the summer months longer. Their days off are irregular; their vacations are withheld and are granted primarily in the winter.[11]

A January 20, 1950, report to the head of the Gulag administration showed that the living conditions of guards had not improved: "In many divisions, the staff is miserly quartered, some in wagons, and some in heated huts."[12]

Gulag guards had to stand guard under freezing conditions. According to Gulag folklore, prisoners would taunt guards manning watchtowers in freezing weather from their barracks: "Who are prisoners here? You or us?"

In one instance, a guard was electrocuted when he tried to attach a primitive stove to an electrical line. When his death was investigated, it was determined that forty-three guards had jerry-rigged primitive heating devices to electrical wires at their posts "without the permission of the commander."[13]

Armed guards worked for little pay under difficult conditions, and, in many cases, they were forced into the job. It is therefore no wonder that morale and discipline were low. The Gulag administration prepared regular reports on disciplinary actions against its employees in the camp sector. On December 1, 1948, there were 276,661 employees working in the camps, the vast majority of which were guards. Of these 61,729 (22 percent) were fired or "left" in 1948. Of these, 13,003 left because of illness or age, but almost 20,000 were fired for vio-

lation of discipline, occupational crimes, etc. The report also shows that thirteen percent (36,521) of all camp employees as of 1948 had been indicted, arrested, demoted, or had reprimands placed in their records.[14]

Given the manpower shortages, those infractions that led to firing must have been very serious. Of those fired in 1948, 4,370 were fired by the central administration of the MVD.

Fraternization

Within the camp, "observers" or "operationals" had direct contact with inmates. They assigned them their tasks, monitored their whereabouts within the camp grounds, and spied. According to camp records, there were almost 140,000 "informers" among the inmates, of whom one half were to report planned escapes.[15] Contact between guards and prisoners was to be strictly limited. Armed guards manned the watchtowers and patrolled the area around the camp, they escorted prisoners to work and back, and they transported prisoners from one camp to another. Other than that, they were to have no contact. Such anti-fraternization rules were to prevent guards from exchanging information with inmates, from being "infected" by their political views, or from developing friendly relationships that might lead to assistance in escape attempts. Gulag guards were subject to a drumbeat of political education, instructing them that they were guarding vicious and dangerous enemies of the people.

One can imagine why these anti-fraternization rules would be ignored. Many guards were themselves only a step removed from being inmates themselves. A large number were former inmates who had served out their term and had no where else to go. Others had passed through filtration camps at the end of the war and had narrowly escaped imprisonment themselves. Still others had their papers confiscated and were tied to the camp. If the guards obeyed fraternization rules, they had to keep company only with other guards, and they would probably be deprived of female companionship, which they could "find" among female inmates.

Indeed, fraternization was rampant: A representative 1946 MVD report criticized the "unsatisfactory political-educational work of camp staff and cases of contacts with prisoners, group drunkenness,

and hooliganism."[16] Another typical report (dated October 1941) entitled "Co-habitation of armed guards with female prisoners, drunkenness and other violations of military discipline" complained:

> Discipline among the guard staff is lax. There are cases of guards going on watch drunk, of co-habitation with women inmates. . . . The commander of the division, Shevchuk, knows about this but takes no action. In the fourth platoon, the guards Rezepov, Grishchuk and Girnev co-habit with female prisoners. A guard of this platoon, Novikov, co-habited with female prisoners Tomlina, Arkhipova, Kbardinova and Vasilieiva. When this became known in the platoon, he committed suicide. [We wonder whether the term "co-habitation" was code for rape?]. . . . Another guard of this platoon, Churkin, on October 4, 1941, guarding nine prisoners at the ZhanaArka station, left the prisoners by themselves, went to drink with a female friend and remained there until the prisoners found him themselves.[17]

The murder of two inmates by an NKVD guard in the Agrinskii Labor Camp began with fraternization that ended in a deadly argument. The incident was reported directly to the head of the Gulag administration and to the NKVD deputy minister in the following 1942 report:[18]

> In the electro station of construction site 203, the guard, Ananevy, and the prisoner, Khvatovy, argued over cigarettes. During the ensuing scuffle, Khvatovy struck Ananevy, after which the guard took a hammer and killed him with a blow to the head. Another inmate and a free worker responded to the noise. Fearing that he would be caught at the scene of the crime, Ananevy killed the second inmate with a hammer blow and seriously wounded the free worker, leaving him unconscious. As these murders were taking place, the other prisoners returned from work.

The report ends with the terse statement: "The guard was arrested and the investigation is under way." Given the high level of this report, we imagine that the guard's punishment was quite severe. The guard's major offenses were, first, the near killing of a free worker, and second, engaging in fraternization. In 1942, the killing of an inmate alone would probably not have attracted much attention.

Some fraternization reached comedic proportions: A January 2, 1951, report described a guard in the Krasnoiarsk region, "fulfilling the temporary duties of the head of a convoy, who took two prisoners with him beyond the zone of production and organized a drunken spree with them. The drunken guard gave his automatic rifle to a prisoner, who opened fire and wounded the guard in the leg." The report concludes that "such cases are not rare."[19]

The widespread practice of fraternization did not mean the absence of widespread cruelty and violence by guards against inmates. Some examples: An overseer aided by male prisoners forcibly shaved and beat female prisoners.[20] Transport guards withheld supplies from prisoners in transit, many of whom arrived at their destinations in a state of starvation. Drunken guards stole prisoner belongings, raped women prisoners, and beat prisoners for no reason. Prisoners were forced to stand freezing in the snow and were set upon by guard dogs.[21]

Prisoners as Resources

In 1953, there were 2.6 million prisoners in the Gulag's camps and colonies. They engaged in the production of minerals, and in agriculture, forestry, and construction. Although the Gulag accounted for only two percent of the labor force, it accounted for, in some cases, such as nickel and gold, up to one hundred percent of production. In construction, which was carried out in remote regions and hostile climates, Gulag prisoners accounted for up to twenty percent.

Clearly, a "rational" Gulag administration would want to preserve its most valuable resource; namely, the inmates themselves. Indeed, in 1946, the economic activities of the Gulag were transferred in large part to independent economic administrations that reported directly to the MVD. The Gulag administration was left in charge of the inmates and was no longer responsible for production goals. It also learned that it could lease out its inmates for money to the industrial ministries. At this point, the records show a change in attitudes toward prisoners. The Gulag administration started to remind camp plant managers about nutrition norms and other rules relating to worker health and safety.

In any prison setting, the welfare of inmates is as much deter-

mined by guards, wardens, and medical personnel as it is by central decrees. The business of guarding prisoners, worldwide, is far from glamorous. It is likely to attract sadists who welcome the prospect of abusing other people. Poor guard pay and hostile climatic conditions would scarcely create a favorable environment for inmates. It is therefore to be expected that Gulag guards did not perform their duties well; that they disobeyed fraternization orders; and that many of them were cruel.

In the later years of the Gulag, the weakness of the guarding system led to a breakdown. The only way camp managers could maintain order was to turn discipline over to organized gangs of prisoners who basically ran the camp. The inability of the Gulag management to maintain control of the camps, as eventually manifested in massive camp uprisings that required armed troops, was one reason for the liquidation of the camp system starting in 1953.[22]