What Role Did Guards Play in Gulags?

Cathy Jedruczek

Just as the history of Germany would not be accurate if one did not talk about the Holocaust, the Soviet Union's history is not complete if one does not focus on Stalin's forced labor camps. However, for years, people in the Soviet Union as well as the outsiders were not aware of how extensive the labor camp system was and how harsh conditions were. Historians could not study Gulags because they had no direct access to the camps or written documents and the accounts of survivors provided only a sketch of what was really happening. The "iron curtain," erected after the Second World War and separating the Soviet Union from the West during the Cold War, further delayed a thorough study of the Gulags.

The Gulags would not have existed if they were not Stalin's idea. He needed obedient people to put his plan into practice, and so it was his subordinates, the administration, the commanders and the guards who arrested, interrogated and exploited the people of the Soviet Union. My grandmother, Marianna Mogielnicka, and her family were victims of Stalin's terror. They were sent to Kazakhstan and worked in various camps for five years. In addition to enduring cold, hunger, and disease, my relatives' lives were dependent on the commanders and guards. The prisoners' daily routine cannot be fully grasped if one does not discuss the commanders and guards of the camps. The bosses of the Gulag, and the jailers who directly supervised the prisoners' work, had total control over human lives. The administration of the Gulag made sure that the guards were cruel and vicious toward the prisoners. Bosses who were too lenient were replaced, and jailers who were kind to prisoners were often dismissed. Prisoners' lives were in the hands of guards who ignored human suffering and treated people as machinery or tools, rather than living creatures. In order to get the picture of how the system functioned, one must understand the role the guards played in Gulags? To understand their function in the labor camps, I will discuss the structure of the Gulag, what characterized all guards, and how they treated prisoners.

According to Donald Hingley, the political police, known as NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) "continued to control throughout the Stalin era, a huge slave empire containing networks of camps set up in the most extensive areas of USSR" (148). As Hingley explains, the first political police known as Oprichnina was set up in 1565 by "Ivan the Terrible, the first grand Duke of Moscow to be crowned as Tsar" (1). Hingley writes that NKVD was the

twentieth century equivalent of Oprichnina because both organizations terrorized the entire population rather than investigating and punishing individuals. Both Stalin and Ivan the Terrible feared their own people and used secret police to mass murder all potential opponents (2). Hingley states that NKVD assisted Stalin in transforming already existing camps, giving them a new shape and purpose. As a result of mass arrests, the number of prisoners totaled millions rather than ten of thousands. Prisoners consisted not only of mere thieves and criminals, but also of intellectuals, doctors and political activists. Camp laborers became a part of the Soviet Union's economic development, and engaged in projects such as the canal joining the White Sea and the Baltic (148).

David J. Dallin writes that those corrective labor camps were developed and established between 1928-1934, during what Stalin called "the Great Turning Point." In order to rapidly develop the Russian economy without foreign investment, Stalin planned to reduce people's general standard of living to the lowest level. This meant "a colossal increase in repressions," mass executions and deportations (191-92). According to Dallin, in order to centralize Russia's economy Stalin introduced three so-called Five-Year Plans. The first one became a law in 1928 and it made prison labor the essential part of the general industrialization. One of the laws stated that prisoners who received more than a three-year sentence had to serve their terms in labor camps. The Five-Year Plan allowed Stalin, as the official circular of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR states, "to bring about the realization of a series of economic projects with great savings and expenditures [...] by means of widespread use of labor of individuals sentenced to measures of social protection" (206-08).

According to Dallin, the secret police then established a new department, the Gulag (Chief Administration of Camps) to overlook the camps, which were "infecting, like a growing cancer, new towns, provinces, and regions" (208, 211). Boris Levytsky states that without such people as Henry Yagoda, the first chief of the Gulag, the secret police would never have succeeded. Yagoda "found means of making the forced laborers work in the worst conditions." Stalin and his closest associates were proud that their system of "combining forced labor and economic development functioned with so little friction" (75-76). Dallin writes that the Russian dictator "had gained faith in the abilities of Yagoda and in the effectiveness of forced labor in 1929-1930," when the secret police "had demonstrated its efficiency in the lumber economy of the north" (212).

Hingley writes that NKVD had its organization active in the army and on the outside. Outside it maintained Special Forces such as Frontier Troops, Railway Troops, and Convoy Troops responsible for escorting prisoners to concentration camps, and Gulag Troops which ensured that the prisoners did not escape (171). According to Levytsky, the Gulag, with its headquarters in Moscow "consisted of

two sections: the Camp and Railway Administration and the Administration of lines of Communication." However the system of labor camps was fully autonomous and, in the words of Levytsky, "the competence of local authorities was abolished." The Camps had their own armed force and police (139). The NKVD was a complex organization where a special department carefully watched all parts of the Communist Party (Radzinsky 348). According to Edvard Radzinsky, there were special secret sections within NKVD watching over NKVD personnel. On top of that, "there was a super secret special section to keep an eye on the secret special sections. This section too kept files, innumerable dossiers" (348).

The administration of the labor camps was just as complex. According to Dallin, there were two main departments, VOKhRA, and the internal NKVD. VOKhRA, the armed guard of the camp consisted of NKVD employees. They were assisted by convicted NKVD officials, who "in an attempt to reintegrate themselves and regain freedom," tried to "exceed their superiors in severity." The local NKVD followed the principles established by central NKVD in Moscow. Those local officials were in charge of putting prisoners into solitary confinement, gathering information on suspicious persons, sabotage, plans of escape, and even on members of the NKVD itself (245- 46). According to Elinor Lipper, survivor of Stalin's camps, NKVD "employed an army of prisoner stool pigeons" to watch the prisoners (219). Lipper mentions a woman regarded as the most powerful prisoner in the work camp, who was responsible for the distribution of work. She had the ability to make proposals to transfer workers to lighter jobs or other more remote camps. She made those decisions based on her personal liking; thus prisoners had to "shower presents and flattery upon her" (204-5). Lipper also describes a female guard who was the distributor of bread in the camp and who was hated by everyone. The former inmate explains that all prisoners craved the end of the loaf of the bread rather than the middle section, but only the guard's special friends received the end part. Lipper writes, "an end mysteriously fills you more than the middle section of the bread, although it too weighs only seven ounces" (205). Dallin states that directors of camps or camp employees were often ex- prisoners who, after serving their sentences, remained in the camps. After years spent in prisons they felt lonely and knew that family and friends would not welcome them home (18). In the words of Ann Applebaum, often NKVD officers became prisoners, and then became guards, making second careers in the Gulag administration (258). The administration of the gulag functioned as a hierarchy with large bosses, whom Solzhenitsyn called "camp keepers," on the top; under them were the militarized guards, or "prison keepers" (535).

According to Applebaum, the bosses who were loyal to the Communist Party enjoyed the life of luxury and were rewarded with "higher salaries, better bonuses, and longer vacations" (267). Radzinsky mentions that the NKVD always received special treatment and they were placed higher than

the regular party members. They received the best apartments, were sent to sanatoriums, and hospitals (347). They saw themselves as better than ordinary jailers who, according to Solzhenitsyn, "had much less - and were allowed to steal less too" (555). Solzhenitsyn compares bosses to plantation owners, who rode on horseback to inspect workers digging out potatoes in the muddy fields (554). Applebaum emphasizes that all bosses had their own servants and they even began to compete among each other over who produced "the best prisoner theatrical groups, the best prisoner orchestras, the best prisoner artists" (268).

Solzhenitsyn devotes a whole chapter in the second volume of The Gulag Archipelago to guards. Interestingly, he doesn't call the administrators and jailers guards, but "dogs." He compares guards' service to that of guard dogs. Solzhenitsyn writes, "There are whole officers' committees which monitor the work of an individual dog, fostering a good viciousness in the dog." He further explains that police dogs were better fed than prisoners, and that the maintenance of guards cost the government a lot (534).

According to Solzhenitsyn, prison keepers and ordinary guards all shared the same basic characteristics. They were arrogant, stupid, despotic, money-hungry, and most of all, cruel (539-46). As Applebaum writes, due to severe living conditions in a majority of the camps, the administration in Moscow constantly experienced shortages of personnel. Some Russians, however, volunteered to work as guards because it meant social advance; others were sent to the camps not knowing what was the nature of their task (260-61). Vladimir Petrov states that those who volunteered for this type of service "were men not well adapted to normal working life because they were not too bright, lacked professional skills or preferred an easy life" (251). Lipper writes that free citizens who took a job at the camp had to participate in the exploitation of the dead-tired prisoners (212). The Gulag officials described guards as "not second-class but fourth-class people, the very dregs" (Applebaum 260- 61). Drinking was their only source of entertainment and, as Applebaum describes, some guards organized drinking sessions where they "drank themselves into unconsciousness" or they were too intoxicated to guard their posts (258). Lev Razgon, in "The Routine of Execution," describes his conversation with a former warden, Grigory Ivanovich, whom he met in the hospital. The warden recalls that every morning they were given "a shot glass of Vodka" and then began executing political prisoners (136). Lipper mentions that everybody drank in Kolyma (the camp she was assigned to) to drown something inside, not because of the bitter cold (213).

Guards lacked higher education; the majority completed only third or fifth grade. According to reports gathered by Applebaum, many guards didn't even know the members of the Communist Party, nor did they know how to use their weapons. Applebaum gives example of guards who did not know how to clean and take care of their weapons, and mentions a female guard who stood

"on duty with her rifle barrel stuffed with a rag" (261). According to Solzhenitsyn, guards thought that they didn't have to read or learn and that they knew everything "inside out" (504). In reality, as Applebaum writes, they only "had the dimmest idea of why they are doing their job" (260). Ivanovich admitted to Razgon that he didn't give a thought about the executions. After he has done his job he would have "as much to drink" as he wanted and then go to sleep or go for a walk (137). Dallin emphasizes that local NKVD officials operated under terror and fear of repercussions and a possible arrest if they did not meet the standards (32). Petrov notes that guards were taught to regard prisoners as "enemies of the people" who they could treat "like scum of the earth with complete impunity" (252). Lipper writes that managers of the camp were interested in fulfilling the plan by more than a hundred percent and the only work they had done was "dreaming up new methods of extorting a little more work from the prisoners" (216). Petrov, who worked in the gold mines, states that those who failed to fulfill the quota were sentenced to death and then immediately executed (291).

According to Solzhenitsyn, having no limit to their power, guards eventually "developed anger with a twist, in other words," sadism (547). Applebaum writes about cruelty toward prisoners, which was "genuinely sadistic" in its nature. She gives an example of a guard who derived pleasure from "forcing prisoners to stand slowly freezing, in the snow" (272). According to Dallin, "Putting fear into the souls of prisoners was developed into a system." Guards used dogs to help them watch over prisoners in the taiga. Such dogs were specially trained to dislike people who wore ragged clothes; thus it was impossible for a fugitive to escape such a vicious beast (124). Solzhenitsyn mentions a guard who refused to release prisoners from barracks despite a forest fire approaching the camp with a high speed. The guard, who didn't have time to speak to higher authorities, decided to let the prisoners burn (559).

Guards not only enjoyed watching people suffer; they were also rewarded for shooting a prisoner who attempted to escape. In fact, according to Applebaum, they often provoked such escapes for which they "could even be granted a vacation at home"(273). In the words of Solzhenitsyn, "Year by year they coarsened in the service, and you couldn't observe in them the least cloudlet of pity toward the soaked, freezing, hungry, tired, and dying prisoners" (554). No wonder the warden from Razgon's memoirs admitted that his conscience didn't bother him and that he felt like the women and men he executed never existed (137).

Yet even in such a dehumanizing place as the Gulag, some good-hearted people could be found. That was the case during World War II, when all guards were sent to the front, and old men were assigned to guard the prisoners. NKVD officers were sent to the front where their fanaticism boosted the morale of other

soldiers (Levytsky 159). According to Solzhenitsyn, who remembers those better years, the new guards "understood the shame of their service." It was something they didn't mention to their families at home (557). Applebaum gives examples of bosses and guards who "saved hundreds from death" by creating better living conditions, and others who "paid special attention to the mothers in the camp" (272). Immediately after war those guards were sent home and were replaced by ex-Red army soldiers. However those soldiers who were captured by the enemy were regarded as political prisoners because they had contact with the West (Levytsky 185).

Guards who were in the system had a choice between treating others as human beings or treating them like animals. Petrov writes that very few prisoners were able to preserve themselves; the majority turned into animals "in the lowest sense of the word" (300). Petrov describes in his book the prisoners he saw upon his arrival in Kolyma. He recalls men who had "starved, worn-out faces, quiet voices, were completely absorbed in themselves and uncommunicative. Their range of interest was limited to work and food, and more food, and food again" (254). Lipper mentions a prisoner who wrote a petition where he wanted a commander of the camp to transfer him to the status of a horse. The prisoner explained that the horse gets more food, and it is treated with much more respect and care than workers. The prisoner was sentenced to solitary confinement for making those remarks (225-26). Solzhenitsyn emphasizes that many guards were subjected to "intense ideological irradiation" and that "unlimited power in the hands of unlimited people always leads to cruelty" (560). There were some, however, who understood the true nature of the system. At the end, as Applebaum argues, "nobody forced guards to rescue the young and murder the old. Nobody forced camp commanders to kill off the sick" (279). They all had a free will.

During the Stalin era, as Petrov put it, the population of the USSR was divided into three categories: "prisoners, ex- prisoners, and future prisoners" (223). People lived under a constant fear of being arrested and imprisoned. Ironically, many believed in the Soviet system, were members of the Communist Party, and supported Stalin. One did not have to be a thief or a killer to be arrested. Having a suspicious family member or a friend, or simply being in a wrong place at a wrong time made one "an enemy of the state." It is frightening to think about the living conditions in camps situated in the Artic Circle and the suffering prisoners endured for years. It is even more appalling to think of the guards who supervised the prisoners and saw them deteriorate into mere shadows. Is it possible that a majority of them were simply numb to human suffering and pain? And after the labor camps stopped functioning, why were they not put on trial like some of the Nazis? There are people still sympathetic to Stalin and there are guards who are proud of their service to mother Russia. Applebaum describes her conversation with a former inspector of camps, Olga Vasileevna, who argued that the job of the camp commander was extremely dangerous since one had to deal with criminals and

murderers. She mentions that bosses did not always eat well, especially during the war and that "it wasn't only prisoners who had lice, the bosses had them too" (262-63). Nevertheless, forced labor camps will always be part of Russia's history. People, to this day, credit Stalin for transforming Russia into a superpower. They easily forget the millions of people who perished in mines, forests and fields while building Stalin's projects or extracting gold. There are no official monuments erected commemorating the lost souls; instead, Russia has cities built on the bones of the dead prisoners. There are people who never returned from Gulags. They stayed because they were too poor to afford a trip back or they had no family to return to. Ironically, former guards and NKVD officials, who still live, enjoy their comfortable apartments and retirement pensions all provided by the government. Applebaum described Vasileevna's apartment as "unusually spacious, the gift of a grateful Party" (262). Razgon states that guards retired and "most of them receive large individual pensions. They sit in the squares and watch the children play. They go to concerts and are moved by the music" (138). They seem to be proud of their service and apparently they have no sense of guilt. After all they helped to build what is still considered a "superpower".

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