

II. BALTIC PRISONERS IN THE GULAG REVOLTS OF 1953

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[Part I. Baltic Prisoners of the Gulag Revolts of 1953](#)*

The Norilsk Revolt

The Norilsk revolt was stimulated by the arrival of prisoners from Karaganda. They were well organized and some were even planning a larger revolt. The Ukrainian prisoner and strike leader Yevheny Hrytsiak relates that in August 1952 some prison rebels were considering a political strike throughout the entire Gulag area. Hrytsiak responded by saying it was better to organize an uprising in the local zone and “hopefully, in time, this action would spread a chain reaction throughout the entire Gulag.” ¹

Since the creation of Gorlag, Norilsk was hard to control. There had been previous attempts at opposition which were suppressed.² By the early 1950s, the MVD leadership reported continuing difficulty. The authorities responded with increased security measures that were of little effect. The prisoners became more resentful of these tougher measures and their exclusion from the post-Stalin amnesty. A calculated reaction of the prisoners was to liquidate the suspected spies in their midst. This killing of informers was a common tactic used in other camps as the new prisoners organized and defended themselves.

Also there was a new dynamic in the Gulag. Solzhenitsyn says that the newly organized groups in the special camps were bound by the all-important national ties: “National groups – Ukrainians, United Moslems, Estonians and Lithuanians, which informers could not penetrate – were born and flourished.³ No one elected the leadership, but its composition so justly satisfied the claims of seniority, wisdom and suffering that no one disputed its authority over its nation. A consultative and coordinating body evidently came into being as well – a “Council of Nationalities” as it were, organized as a prelude to the revolt.

The Norilsk revolt began within weeks of the amnesty. In May there were several instances of shootings by guards of the new Karaganda arrivals in Camp 5. These led to protests and a strike that subsided, but the prisoners staged another protest one week later.⁴ A separate uprising happened in Dudinka at nearly the same time. Pahvalahti, a Finnish prisoner in this transit camp, asserts that the Dudinka uprising, a work stoppage that lasted six days and in which five dockworkers were killed, was the first event in the sequence of unrest.⁵ The port strike, although a short one, was still a serious financial loss to the Soviet regime

The camp authorities tried to quell the Norilsk unrest, but it continued throughout the entire summer. The political prisoners proved their organizational ability, discipline and solidarity. They created strike committees and formulated reasonable demands. The Ukrainians were the most numerous, but all national groups had representation on the committees, and there were Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians in the leadership of the strikes in the various camps. Sympathy strikes occurred in many camps, and the strikes spread throughout the area until August. Trains in the area carried strike slogans, news from other camps spread rapidly, and stories circulated of a revolt in Karaganda suppressed by troops.⁶ The strike

leaders in Gorlag demanded a meeting with top officials from Moscow. Black flags appeared over the camp barracks as a sign of mourning for the murdered prisoners and as a symbol of the revolt (which upset the administration greatly).⁷

Negotiations with the Moscow Commission

The authorities tried various techniques to end the revolt. They used force, guile and insincere negotiations. They also showed confusion and indecision. Plus, the revolts in Norilsk, Vorkuta and elsewhere were occurring in the midst of political chaos in Moscow following Stalin's death. The power struggle that removed Beria and his top lieutenants occurred in July at the height of the Norilsk revolt and as the Vorkuta uprising was unfolding. Beria's fall weakened the standing of the MVD in the Gulag camps and strengthened the strikers.

The special commission from Moscow arrived on June 6. Loudspeakers announced its arrival. The commission, led by Beria's deputy Colonel Kuznyetsov, the chief of the prison administration of the Soviet MVD, asserted to the prisoners that "Lavrenti Pavlovich Beria himself has sent us to discuss your demands."⁸ A secret prisoners' committee submitted a list of demands, which included the review of all sentences, improved conditions, the removal of bars on the windows, removal of prisoners numbers and permission to correspond with relatives, etc. Kuznyetsov was accompanied by other commission members. They included Lieutenant-general Seryodkin, the commander of the prison convoy guard forces of the MVD, and a Comrade Kiselyov, representative of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR. The Commission began by saying the revolt was useless. If necessary it could be suppressed by force; in any event it wasn't possible to make many changes in the camps.⁹ On hearing this, the strike leaders almost walked out of the conference. Then one of the commission members stood up, smiled and said that since Stalin's death the whole question of prison camps was under review, especially regarding political prisoners.¹⁰

Kuznyetsov suggested that the striking prisoners choose a group to represent them and present all of their grievances. He vowed: "We guarantee that none of your parliamentarians will be punished."¹¹ In response, each of the larger national groups picked its representative. The Ukrainians picked Hrytsiak, the Russians Vladimir Nedorostkov, the Belorussians Hryhory Klymovich. The Lithuanians and Latvians each selected a delegate, but their names were not known by Hrytsiak and are unidentified at this writing.¹²

The meeting took place in the open. The commission was seated behind a table covered with a red cloth. The table was placed close to the watchtower for security purposes. The five delegates approached the official table. Kiselyov called out to Hrytsiak, pointing his finger and asking "Name, name"? Hrytsiak did not answer, but gestured at the prisoner identification number on his clothing. Kuznyetsov understood and said to the Central Committee representative: "What do you need his name for? Don't you see his number, U-777. That is his name." Kuznyetsov then said to Hrytsiak: "That's okay, we will dispose of those numbers, they are not necessary for you nor for us."¹³ The discussions continued.

Kuznyetsov then asked specifically "Did you come on your own, or were you sent by the people?" Hrytsiak pointed to the mass of prisoners standing 30 to 40 meters behind him and said, "Ask them." Hrytsiak began his presentation by listing the grievances of the Norilsk prisoners, starting with "blatant incidents of illegality" which had taken place in 1946.

As the prisoners and the authorities had their standoff, the prisoners were wary of trickery. When the Commission arrived, the inmates gathered around. Ciszek reported, however, that "groups of ten were stationed all around the camp to prevent another sneak attack," as had been tried earlier.¹⁴ The negotiations were interrupted by other events.

The power struggle in the Kremlin affected the Gulag. The day Beria's arrest was announced, July 10, Kuznyetsov and his negotiating team disappeared from Norilsk.

Prisoner Reactions During the Revolt

During the Norilsk revolt, Father Ciszek reported that many more of the prisoners came to him for religious help. "During this period, I heard a great many confessions. The prisoners, not knowing when the shooting might begin, were like men before battle, afraid of death and putting their affairs of the soul in order. I was saying Mass every morning now for large crowds, and distributing many communions." He added: "The tension grew and uncertainty mounted. Some men actually broke down under the strain. The infirmary and the hospital were filled, so men lay on the grass outside. The air was warm, the weather was beautiful, it was a spring such as we had seldom seen in Norilsk. Yet the atmosphere was increasingly charged. There were constant alarms every night now. The gates were always open and the troops tried to infiltrate the camp to seal it off. They had broken passages in the barbed wire on the east and west sides of the camp to sneak through and cordon off the sections of the camp."¹⁵ Under the continual tension and lack of sleep the prisoners grew exhausted.

On June 30, some prisoners in Camp 5 were killed by the guards. Among the known casualties were a Latvian, Roberts Kepris; Estonian Endel Kaldmets; and a Lithuanian, Juris Kasparaitis.¹⁶ In the revolt, a heroic role was played by various Baltic prisoners, such as the Lithuanian Misterevičius in the Camp 5.¹⁷ Also, two Baltic women were noted by many for their courage and leadership. They were the Latvian, Alida Dauge, and an Estonian, Asti Tofri, known by most prisoners

only as “ Esta.” They were among a group of eight brave women revolt leaders most of whom were Ukrainians.¹⁸ The medic of Camp 4, the Lithuanian Juozas Kozlauskas, was also noted by Hrytsiak for his bravery because he “completely ignored the deadly danger. He constantly ran among the wounded prisoners administering first aid.” For this action, the guards broke his ribs.¹⁹ Later Kozlauskas was accosted by the camp captain and called a “fascist pig” who wanted to overthrow the Soviet government. Kozlauskas responded: “We are fighting for the liquidation of all prisons and camps and you for their conservation. Now think for yourself: who are the fascists – we or you?” The camp captain answered: “Do you know what it would mean to dissolve all prisons and camps? It would mean the end of Soviet rule!”²⁰

The Attack on the Prisoners (August)

In spite of the pledges, the regime decided to use military force to suppress the unrest.²¹ “At the beginning of August, all six special political camps of the Norilsk Gulag were surrounded by MVD troops. The soldiers opened fire, and the uprisings were bloodily suppressed.

Casualties

Ciszek said that 78 were killed and more than 150 wounded in the assault on Camp 3.²² Hrytsiak reported 100 dead and 400 wounded.²³ The captured rebels were loaded into trucks and taken past the cement factory into the tundra. Ciszek remarked: “No doubt they were taken to another camp in the hills, although there were rumors, as always, that the men had simply been shot.”²⁴ There were killings of prisoners in Camps 1 and 4 also.²⁵

Punishment and Reprisals

The most active leaders of the camp uprisings were sent to prisons and punishment camps. Pajaujis recounted that “the attempts of the prisoners to retaliate with a new strike were met by the administration with a so-called combing: armed guards using their rifles led groups of 50 to 60 men to the taiga, separated those who were known as active strikers and isolated them. After the territory was entirely cleared of the prisoners, those ‘combed through’ were returned to the camp.” Pajaujis reported that “during such ‘combing’ there were many killed, not only among the prisoners, but also among the guards. The riots in the Norilsk camps continued for several months.”²⁶

Aftermath

Camp 3 and Camp 5 were cleaned up and repaired, and the prisoners were gradually brought back to work, but now the camp was smaller. It held only 1,000 rather than the original 5,000. Ciszek reported that “the barracks were patched up and whitewashed, there was hardly a sign of the battle.” There was little talk of what happened: “The men had been warned that any talk of the revolt, or any attempt to stir up any new trouble, meant immediate transfer to a penal camp and perhaps a stiffer sentence.”²⁷

According to Ciszek, there were a lot of changes made. They granted most of the conditions of the Revolutionary Committee. The numbers were removed from the prisoners’ clothes, they received wages, about 100 rubles a month, a store was opened where they could spend their wages on sugar, bread, candy and tobacco. Also, a prisoner could have his sentence reduced. For any day a worker exceeded his assigned quota, his sentence was reduced by three days. Food was improved and the inmates could send letters once a month.²⁸

After the revolt, it was easier for the workers to openly practice their religion. There were other priests in Norilsk, such as Father Victor who was in Camp 4. Father Ciszek was the only priest left in Camp 5. It was easier for him to work as a priest, to say Mass, hear confessions, distribute Communion; he even began giving retreats again and did a lot of spiritual counseling.²⁹

The Vorkuta Strike

While the Norilsk revolt was going on, a similar event erupted in Vorkuta. There it began, almost simultaneously, as a strike in several of the camps. The Vorkuta strike began in Camp No. 7 in the third week of July, shortly after a new group of prisoners had arrived from Karaganda and Taishet.³⁰ They were political prisoners, mostly Western Ukrainians and Lithuanians. They had staged protests in Karaganda and were transferred to Vorkuta with the promise of improved conditions as part of the settlement of the dispute. As in Norilsk, the leaders of the strike were Ukrainians and Lithuanians, but Poles, Latvians and others also played leading roles. “In each camp as the strike was announced strike committees composed of representatives of all nationalities assumed responsibility for internal order.”³¹ Balts were members of these committees. Buca remarked that “those anonymous masses of ragged and filthy prisoners suddenly became a threat, a menace.”³²

Despite the efforts of the camp leadership to isolate the camp and suppress information, news about the strike spread to the other minepits. The authorities also used rumors to suppress the strike and prevent its spread, but this tactic failed. The camp leaders tried to negotiate an end to the strike; they tried to talk the strikers into abandoning their opposition. The strike committees of each camp prepared their demands. In Camp No. 29, the strike committee had addressed a letter to the Communist Party Central Committee with demands that included removal of bars on the windows, an end to prisoners' numbers instead of names, and per-mission to contact relatives.

The striking prisoners raised flags of rebellion. Noble described this: "Not long after the shooting in Camp No. 3, we made our own flag, a plain red banner (the hammer and sickle is the Communist Party flag) bordered in black cloth in memory of our two murdered comrades... as far as the eye could see across the tundra, the new red-and-black banner of slaves-made-free replaced the Soviet flag over much of Vorkuta."³³

In the immediate attempt to quell the unrest, the authorities killed strikers in at least two camps. At Camp No. 3, troops shot two people and wounded fifteen (most or all of whom later died) while at the Ayachaginsk camp, where Latvian Janis Zile was held, eight were shot and thirty wounded.³⁴ Zile reports that the prisoners responded to the bloodshed by warning: "If you use weapons against us again, we will blow up the coal mines."³⁵

The strike directly or indirectly involved the entire camp complex. Those who did not actively take part showed their solidarity. According to Zile, "In August 1953, 250,000 prisoners simultaneously began a political strike, asking for freedom. Work stopped in the mine shafts, brick ovens, lime ovens, cement plants – everywhere where prison labor was being used."³⁶ Everybody gave testimony of solidarity with the workers. The prisoners used slowdown tactics. Instead of the normal 1,000 tons, they just managed to mine some 30 tons a day. In this mine none were killed, but many were arrested. In all of the other camps, there were either direct strikes or slowdown strikes. Women prisoners wanted to participate but were told by the strike leaders not to. Still, German women employed in the Vorkuta brickyard camp declared a hunger strike. Latvian women wanted to join them, but were cautioned by the Germans not to do so because the reprisals against Latvians would be harsher than against them. The strike caused a great loss to the Soviet economy. After ten days of the stoppage, the state was denied about a half million tons of coal.

The Kremlin sent a high-level delegation which flew into the Vorkuta airfield. Heading the official group was General Ivan Maslenikov, the deputy chief of the MVD, and General Roman Rudenko, the Procurator General. They arrived with about forty Chekist officers and two battalions of elite troops. Maslenikov is often identified as a Soviet war hero, but his background was primarily that of secret police official. He had begun his career as an official in the OGPU in the 1930s and later in the Soviet interior ministry as head of the border guards before serving in the military with secret police duties. During World War II, he had prominent responsibilities as deputy commander on many fronts, including the Baltic. He filled the notorious task of directing NKVD troops to kill retreating Red Army soldiers as a lesson to others. Rudenko was the chief Soviet prosecutor at the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal, then became the Ukrainian prosecutor and also represented the USSR in various international legal settings. The two officials were joined by Derevianko, the head of Rechlag Kuzma, also a veteran NKVD officer, who had gained fame as a Red Army general in the Far East upon the fall of Japan and then became head of the Far Eastern Gulag, including Kolyma.

Railroad workers who noticed the strikers' slogans of "Freedom or Death!" took a sympathetic attitude. Locomotive operators, driving past the camp, would sound their whistles. Train passengers waved hands expressing their sympathy to the bold men in the camps.

The Commission leaders were accompanied by the forty Chekist figures and hundreds of guards as they made their trip around the camps. They met with the striking prisoners who sat on the camp ground. Initially the official approach to the strikers was scolding. Derevianko had originally berated the strikers for "sabotage" and "disgraceful behavior."³⁷ But now his approach became more polite and the Commission also took a tone of showing unprecedented respect for the prisoners, along with feigned sympathy. They urged the prisoners to return to work and acknowledged the validity of some of their demands. They promised some reforms: "You can take off your number patches" and "Window bars will be removed." They insisted that the workers return to work "because the country needs coal." At the meeting at Camp No. 7 a prisoner in the crowd shouted: "And what we need is freedom, you dirty.....!"³⁸

By manipulation and deceit, Derevianko was able to get some of the striking camps to return to work. He told each camp that the others had returned to work.

The Massacre at Camp No. 29

Camp No. 29 joined the strike a few days after Camp 7 began its strike. Juozas Krakauskas, a Lithuanian in Camp No. 29, said that on July 26, when the camp joined the strike, it had already established a prisoners' strike committee. The committee had Baltic members. Lithuanians on the strike committee were Vytautas Sivilis, Eduardas Lugalys, Juozas Grušys, and Albinas Bliujis. As the strike unfolded, the prisoners waited. Krakauskas recalls that "after July 26 the weather in Vorkuta turned out to be really beautiful. Whoever wanted to could get a better tan than in Palanga. I took advantage of that opportunity."⁴⁰

Camp No. 29 did not work the entire last week of July. Silde says that Camp No. 29, along with Camps 3 and 7, showed an “utter fearlessness and an uncompromising attitude.”⁴¹ The daily loss of coal production and the growing gridlock at the Vorkuta complex put pressure on the authorities. The prisoners firmly turned down the invitation to resume work, instead sticking to their demand for reforms.

Valentins Ozolins, a participant who survived the revolt, recalled: “We wrote on the roofs of the camp buildings ‘Freedom or Death’ for the airplanes to see. On the gates we wrote: ‘Ninety nations: Uzbeks, Americans, English, Swedes, Poles, Hungarians, Rumanians, etc... We are united.’” It was written in Russian, Latvian, Estonian, Lithuanian – in all languages. “We asked for one and the same thing: Freedom or Death.”⁴²

The Latvian priest Janis Mendriks was in Camp No. 29. Ozolins has described the events. He asserted that the prisoners were willing to stay and work at Vorkuta for two years:

“We wanted to be free people. We were willing to stay and work without pay. We asked for the chance to inform our families where we were. We asked that the bars be taken off the windows and that we could walk freely... we demanded that our numbers be taken off.”⁴³

The slogan in Camp No. 29, as in the other camps, was “Freedom or Death.” Ozolins said: “In spite of the fact that we were from different nations, we operated properly. We were strong and we were united. No one stood aside.” Ozolins continued: “We asked for freedom, we received death.”⁴⁴ Military defenses were prepared and troops encircled the camp. “Hundreds of Red Army soldiers dug themselves in the tundra soil. Rain filled the holes with muddy water and the soldiers cursed the dirty detail they had been assigned.”⁴⁵

The Kremlin delegation came to visit Mine No. 29. They met with the prisoners on the camp grounds and were greeted with applause and respect. They were seated at a table covered by a “blood-red cloth.” Maslenikov stood up and exclaimed, “Citizens!,” and then began wiping sweat from his face and unbuttoned the collar of his uniform. He continued: “Citizens... I can announce to you that the Government is preparing radical changes in the camp system. I am not authorized to discuss all of the details... but go back to work... You will be taken care of.”⁴⁶ In response, a prisoner in the group answered: “You have sucked our blood long enough. We shall not return to work before you have reviewed the indictments against us.” It seemed that everything that had to be said was said. A call to break up the meeting came from the crowd, and the Moscow committee had to watch the prisoners disperse. Silde wrote: “The Kremlin representatives had spoken in the name of the Soviet Government, but three thousand men simply turned their backs on them. Can a dictatorship tolerate it?”⁴⁷ With no success the officials left.

Krakauskas remembered: “After the commission left, preparations were made to fortify positions outside of the camp. Sacks of sand were put around various defense positions. New guards climbed into the towers. We sensed that there was something going on, but we didn’t know how it would turn out.”⁴⁸

Krakauskas wrote: “The next morning there was new activity around Camp No. 29. It was a sunny day... we heard car engines and songs in the distance. The troops were approaching. Soldiers who stood by their trench-mortars and submachine guns were joined by fire-brigade men and ambulances.”⁴⁹ Some military supervisors took little groups of men to different locations, but most of the force stood at the main gate. General Maslenikov approached Camp No. 29, crossing the Vorkuta River at the TEC-2 bridge. Fifteen truckloads of soldiers drove up to the camp. “There were whole companies of troops with dogs, light tanks, fire-fighting machines and much more.”⁵⁰

The Moscow Committee men appeared again at the gate. General Procurator Roman Rudenko was in charge of the Soviet Government’s negotiations with the camp inmates. The group was accompanied by a thousand heavily armed soldiers. The prisoners gathered at the gate, crowded the square and the road. Many Latvians and Lithuanians were among them. Krakauskas said: “I was walking with aviation lieutenant A. Kostkus-Kostkevičius, captain Kazanas and other prisoners. We were lining up on the road without being asked to do so.”⁵¹

The strikers met the official group on the parade ground near the gate. As the main camp gates were flung wide open, Derevianko addressed the strikers, shouting in a grim voice: “Interned citizens! For the last time I invite you to call off the strike. Those ready to work should come out. They will not be punished!” He pleaded: “Prisoners, many of you are decent people, you worked hard and thus tried to pay for your crimes. There are rebels among you, don’t listen to them. The gate is open, go to work immediately.”⁵² There was deadly silence. The general repeated the order threatening to shoot. A few left the camp. Seven men came out: one Lithuanian and others of various nationalities. No one else obeyed the order. The officials closed the gate and took away the ones who stepped outside. Thousands stayed. They replied shouting: “Why aren’t you shooting at us? Give us freedom or give us death.” Deadly silence fell again. They repeated: “Freedom or death!”⁵³

The prisoners, standing in a row, had joined hands and advanced a few steps. Mendriks was in the front with his fellow prisoners. They looked like a living wall. Silde said, "They stood erect, while usually their heads were bent at work. In this moment they felt an elation which was reflected in their shining eyes; they did not hide their bodies in dugouts or behind buildings as did those who were armed with sub-machine guns and trench-mortars."⁵⁴

As the prisoners stood in front, General Rudenko fired a pistol into the air. It was an order, the pre-arranged sign for a bloodbath. Silde commented:

The order for the mass murder in Vorkuta was given by Public Prosecutor General of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics Rudenko. At the Nueremberg War Crimes Tribunal, Rudenko had represented the Soviet Union in the prosecution of the Nazis. He spoke in the name of high principles of justice, indicting those who caused the deaths of millions of innocent people. He spoke to them in court as one of the defenders of right and law. Now he stood in front of the forced laborers, a pistol in hand.⁵⁵

Rudenko said he came to negotiate, but actually he ordered the shooting of the camp inmates. There were three volleys with machine-gun fire in between; many were killed immediately while hundreds were wounded. The rest ran while guards with clubs and iron bars rushed after the zeks, beating them and driving them out of camp."⁵⁶ The shooting came from all sides, but the regular troops refused to shoot. Pentjuss says that Mendriks was in the midst of the prisoners in the front row, wearing a cross. In the massacre, he was shot and fell to the ground. Pentjuss recalled that the eyewitnesses reported that his cross was shining brightly in the sun as he lay dying.⁵⁷

The soldiers who were used to suppress the revolt were not Russians or Ukrainians, they were Mongol units specially flown into Vorkuta because Moscow could not rely on its own military stationed in the North.

In the other camps nearby, the inmates heard the shots resound from Camp No. 29. The massacre occurred around 4:00 PM in the afternoon. Ozolins:

The dead and wounded everywhere... the wounded were moaning on the road by the gate. The parade ground was spattered with blood. Here and there lay my comrades dying. Many died after that as they lay wounded outside without any help. The weather was hot... no medications... no one came to help. The hospital was overcrowded. No specialists there. Those lightly wounded found their way back to the barracks.⁵⁸

Krakauskas:

The scene is engraved in my memory for good. I saw the front rows of prisoners dispersing – they fell on the sand, some of them still alive but wounded. Now we knew why they had brought the ambulances. A shot man falls in a strange way. I managed to take a look at Captain Kazanas. I saw how he raised his hand toward his forehead, but the hand fell down along with the body. I never saw him again. Having finished the independence battles, the captain remained in the eternally frozen land.⁵⁹

Krakauskas concluded:

The attack was finished. We, whoever were still capable, did not wait for one another. All of us returned to the camp. It was quieter over there. I got up from a hole in the road and looked around for familiar faces. I heard Kostkus-Kostkevičius shouting that I should wash my bleeding face. My face was washed by Alex using water from the fireman's barrel.⁶⁰

The special unit of Mongols gathered the bodies, loaded them onto the trucks, covered them with tarpaulins, and buried them during the night. Scholmer writes that a doctor was later summoned from among camp prisoners to help those who were still alive. He reported that many wounded died later.

In the evening, MVD guards forced all prisoners onto the tundra – even the walking wounded and the more seriously wounded. Some wounded prisoners died on the tundra from loss of blood and were carried back dead. All prisoners were screened as informers identified the revolt leaders. They were then forced back inside the camp and divided.

Casualties

The exact number of casualties is uncertain, but the most credible accounts – those of the survivors – indicate that hundreds were killed and hundreds wounded. Several written accounts based on early evidence give the figure of 66 as the number killed, but this is not based on documentary evidence. The figure given in the official MVD report, which was never made public, was 42 dead and 135 wounded.⁶¹ Most of the survivors of Camp No. 29 say that at least several hundred were killed. Buca reports that at least 400 were killed. The survivors also state that hundreds were wounded.

There were at least seventeen Baltic prisoners killed in the massacre at Camp No. 29. Two were Latvians: Janis Mendriks and Ilmars Petersons. Four were Estonians: Karl Kukkk, Yuri Oksakas, Yuri Klasen, and Petr Linnuk. Ten were Lithuanians: Afanasius Kazanas, Augustas Barnatavičius, Antanas Kilbauskas, Mykolas Cechavičius, Kazys Kairys, Vaclovas Milkauskas, Vitolis Martinavičius, Juozas Pūkys, Eduardas Velička, and Alfonas Laičiūnas. The remaining prisoners were not allowed to count the dead. The prisoners were threatened and told that every-thing would be explained later. It never was. But there were other casualties as well. Many of the wounded strikers did not survive. Arrests and the first reprisals took place from August 1st to 3rd. A number of strikers were later shot for participation in the revolt. We do not know the exact figure.⁶²

The Aftermath of the Strike

Zile commented: "The strike proved that prisoners are capable of uniting, but since Stalin's death those in power have not in the slightest become more humane."⁶³ The official MVD report misrepresented the events, understated the deaths and injuries, and characterized the action of the striking prisoners as "counter-revolutionary sabotage." It also completely ignored the fact that unarmed strikers were fired on and the role of Rudenko and Maslenikov in the massacre.⁶⁴

Derevianko had assured us that our requests would be fulfilled. We were reminded of the slogan above the camp gates that 'the road to freedom and prosperity is honest work for the native land' and he promised that no one would be punished for taking part in the strike. But this promise was not kept. For three days after the strike, arrests occurred throughout the striking camps. They arrested the most active participants and placed them in a hurriedly created punishment camp, No. 66. From there, they were sent to the Irkutsk prison. They shot some of them en route, while others were given a year of punishment in the Vladimir prison. An intensive interrogation and reassignment of prisoners took place in the camps. Participants were sentenced in the autumn of 1956, but interrogations continued until the 1980s.⁶⁵

Commemoration

Each year, the survivors of the Vorkuta uprising commemorated the event. On August 1 at Mine No. 29, they erected a small memorial to the fallen. Solzhenitsyn writes: "Near the slag heap at Pit 29, somebody in Khrushchev's day raised a cross – with a tall stem, like a telegraph pole – on the communal grave. Then it was knocked down. And someone put it up again."⁶⁶ Silde described how the Vorkuta inmates, whatever their nationality, observed August 1 as their day of mourning: "Every year since 1953, Vorkuta people pin a black ribbon to their miner's dress as a sign of undying solidarity and loyalty to their fallen comrades."⁶⁷

Some improvement in camp conditions did occur in the Karaganda, Norilsk and Vorkuta camps. The bars were removed from the windows, the numbers were taken off their prison clothing and there were other nominal changes, although the basic system remained. Also it was somewhat easier to practice religion.

The suppression of the Norilsk and Vorkuta revolts in 1953 did not bring order to the camps. There was continued dissatisfaction, sporadic unrest occurred in both camps and cases of sabotage increased in the mines. Sabotage was difficult to control because the authorities and the guards were fearful of going underground. These revolts in 1953 were the beginning of the end of the Gulag. They also were the first of more uprisings throughout the camp system. Among the most serious were a revolt at Kengir in 1954 and another major revolt in Vorkuta in 1955.

In 1954, Kengir (Dzezhkazgan) was the scene of a major battle between the prisoners and the regime. Located in the Karaganda area, the Kengir camp was a part of Steplag. Applebaum says that like their counterparts in Rechlag and Gorlag, the commanders of Steplag were, in the wake of Stalin's death, unable to cope with their prisoners.⁶⁸ According to Craveri, the administration had totally lost control. Underground organizations in the camp played a major role in directing the unrest.

The commanders were especially concerned about the Ukrainians and Balts in the camp. Moscow responded by directing that the Ukrainian and Baltic prisoners be isolated from the rest of the prison population. For unknown reasons, however, this was not done. There were around 20,000 inmates in the camp.⁶⁹ Half the prisoners were Ukrainians, while one-fourth were Baltic nationals and Poles. The insurrection continued with unrest, disorder, periodic strikes and protests. It ended with a huge massacre of prisoners.⁷⁰

In the post-Stalin period there were major changes in the Gulag. In 1953, the MVD handed control of the Gulag over to the economic ministry. But the Gulag system did not change. Hrytsiak notes that only more revolts in succeeding years, especially the massive struggle in Kengir in 1954 and again in Vorkuta in 1955 as well as unrest elsewhere finally brought major changes for the imprisoned workers.⁷¹ There were additional amnesties, including the amnesty of 1955 and 1956, in which many of the political prisoners were released. Amnestied and released prisoners still encountered formidable obstacles. They had a lack of rights and found it difficult to obtain residency permits or find work. Returned prisoners

encountered discrimination and suspicion in Soviet society. Many remained under KGB suspicion and surveillance. This is particularly true of the clergy, but many soldiers and cultural activists also fell under this shadow.

Although the original GULAG institution was disbanded, the Soviet Gulag system did not end. The regime did its best to hide the Gulag name, but some of the Gulag special regime camps continued to exist into the 1960s. The incarceration of political prisoners continued unabated and the use of forced labor lasted into the 1980s.

Epilogue

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union there have been efforts to not only document the history of the camps and the revolts, but to also memorialize these events. On the fiftieth anniversary of the Vorkuta and Norilsk uprisings, there was a commemoration at the sites, and there were also various writings of remembrance. But there was very little international attention given to these events. There are also virtually no public memorials to the victims of the slave labor system. The city of Vorkuta has a modest museum, but there is very little in the way of official Russian efforts to honor the victims or to publicize the past. There have been research trips to the former camp sites by individuals and small, mostly private, non-Russian groups. One example is the expedition to Karlag in Karaganda in the early 1990s by Lithuanians. The best efforts at commemorating the events so far have been by Baltic, German, Polish and Italian organizations. Only a few documentary films have been made. In Russia, the local Russian authorities in the areas of the former camps, the former Communist government officials, and the central Russian government would rather forget about this part of Russia's past and leave the camps hidden by decay and the passage of time. But the bones are still there and they keep reappearing.

1. Yevheny Hrytsiak, *The Norilsk Uprising* (München: Ukrainisches Institut für Bildungspolitik, 1984),
2. Ibid., 15, 16.
3. Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag Archipelago*, Vol. III, 240.
4. Walter Ciszek, *With God in Russia* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 177–201.
5. Unto, Pahvalahti, *Beria's Gardens* (New York, Dutton: 1960), 252. 252.
6. Ciszek, 181–182.
7. Hrytsiak, *The Norilsk Uprising*, 22.
8. Ibid.
9. Ciszek, 195–196.
10. Ibid., 195.
11. Hrytsiak, *Norilsk Uprising*, op. cit.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ciszek, *With God in Russia*, 196.
15. Ibid., 196.
16. V. A. Kozlov, ed., *Vostaniya, bunti i Zabastovki zaklyuchennikh*, 362–366.
17. Ibid., 366.
18. Kozlov, 400; Hrytsiak, 45.
19. Hrytsiak, *Norilsk Uprising*, 46.
20. Ibid., 47.
21. Pederson, "Norilsk Uprising of 1953," 53.
22. Ciszek, *With God in Russia*, 205.
23. Hrytsiak, op. cit.
24. Ciszek, 204.
25. Silde, *Profits of Slavery*, 225.
26. Joseph Pajaujis–Javis, *Soviet Genocide in Lithuania* (New York: Manyland Books, 1980), 143.
27. Ciszek, 204.
28. Ibid., 205.
29. Ibid.
30. A Polish prisoner and revolt participant, Pavel Swetlikowski, asserted that the strikers' demands to the Central Committee were already formulated on July 10. *Gulag Workuta: Raport Oficera Armii Krajowej* (Warsaw: Biblioteka Zeslanca), 221.
31. Zile, Janis, "Vorkutas 1953 gada vasara," *Via Dolorosa – Stalinisma upuru liecibas*, Vol. 2 (Riga, 1993), 259.
32. Eduard Buca, *Vorkuta* (London: Constable, 1976), 231.
33. Noble, *I Was a Slave*, 153. Silde also tells of such flags being raised in all the surrounding camps and on the Vorkuta power station. After the shooting at Mine No. 3, it was left at half-mast in honor of the first fallen comrades. *Profits of Slavery*, 231.
34. Zile, *Vorkutas vasara*, 259.
35. Ibid., 259.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag*, 282.
39. Ibid., 165.
40. Memoirs of J. Krakauskas in *Vorkutos politinių kalinių atsiminimai*. (Lietuvos Gyventojų Genocido ir Rezistencijos Centras: Vilnius, 1998), 101.
41. Silde, *Profits of Slavery*.
42. Valentins Ozolins, Interview, July 1987, Garezers, Three Rivers, Michigan, USA.
43. Ozolins, Ibid.
44. Ozolins, Interview.
45. Silde, *Profits of Slavery*, 236.
46. Silde, 239.
47. Ibid.
48. Krakauskas, *Vorkutos politinių kalinių atsiminimai*, 101.
49. Ibid.
50. Zile, "Vorkutas 1953 gada vasara," 261.

51. Krakauskas, 101.
52. Ibid., 101.
53. Ibid., 102.
54. Silde, 240.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., 239.
57. Viktors Pentjuss, Interview, Riga, August 1993.
58. Ozolins, op. cit.
59. Krakauskas, 102.
60. Ibid.
61. Kozlov, ed., *Vostaniya, bunti i zabastovki*, 519–526.
62. Ibid.
63. Zile, "Vorkutas vasara," 263.
64. Kozlov, op. cit., 519–526.
65. Ibid.
66. Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag Archipelago*, Vol. III, op. cit.
67. Silde, *Profits of Slavery*, 231–232.
68. Applebaum, *Gulag*, 495.
69. Ibid.
70. Solzhenitsyn, "Forty Days of Kengir," *Gulag Archipelago*, Vol. III, op. cit.
- Hrytsiak, *The Norilsk Uprising*, 51.

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