

Uprising that shook the Gulag (on the history of the steplag prisoners' uprising)

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Abstract. The article examines the history of the Steplag prisoners' uprising in 1954. The author focused on the specific features of this camp, the composition of the prisoners, the key points of the Soviet policy regarding the camp system and the fate of the prisoners after Stalin's death, and the reasons that led to the open resistance of the prisoners. Article is based on the archival documents, taken from the archives of Zhezkazgan Regional Department of Internal Affairs, and also the Archives of the Zhezkazgan branch of Karaganda region. The archival materials evidence that the uprising was well organized. And although it was suppressed, the official leadership was forced to reconsider the cases of many political prisoners, as a result of this, 8 thousand Steplag prisoners were acquitted and gained their freedom. That confirms that although this uprising cost dearly, it had impressive positive results as well. [Sadykov T.S. **Uprising that shook the Gulag (on the history of the steplag prisoners' uprising)**. *Life Sci J* 2014;11(12s):1003-1007] (ISSN:1097-8135). <http://www.lifesciencesite.com>. 217

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Introduction

As a result of the ideological and political tightening, the number of the repressive bodies increased and the camp system was established on the vast territory of the former Soviet Union. Each camp has its own history.

Millions of people sentenced to imprisonment in camps, illegally accused as "public enemies", "traitors to the Motherland" were subjected to the policy of suppressing dissent, non-resistance and absolute submission, more than that, their free labour was used to carry out economic objectives. In other words, economic potential was, to a significant extent, created by back-breaking forced labor of the prisoners, cost-effective workforce. Therefore there was a good reason for organizing most of the camps in the places with insufficient labour forces and abundant natural resources. The history of the camps organized in the territory of Kazakhstan, KarLag, then Steplag and other camps, clearly demonstrates this.

The repressive policies of the Soviet government in the 20-50s of the XX century and the system of camps created at that time have been studied extensively by both domestic and foreign historians.

The foreign historiography of GULAG distinguishes three periods: pre-war, "Cold War" and modern period.

In the West the first evidences of the Soviet Gulag prisoners started to be published in the prewar period already. The most famous was the book by I.L. Solonevich "Russia in a concentration camp," in which the Soviet camp system was represented as an institution similar in structure to the Soviet state [1]. Jacques Rossi, the French author of the famous "Gulag Handbook", spent nearly a quarter of a

century in the Siberian camp barracks. Certainly, these early publications were very emotional and far from carefully planned studies. The World War II period weakened Western interest in the problems of the Gulag to a certain extent.

During the "Cold War" the number of publications in foreign historiography was steadily increasing. The witnesses and participants of the events, who somehow managed to leave the USSR, as well as the evidence of the foreigners who visited the Soviet Union during the war still remained the main source of information. In 1945, in Rome Polish officers Silvestre Mora and Peter Zvernyak published the book in French, titled "Soviet justice" based on personal experience, observations and a large number of evidences given by the witnesses [2]. One strength of that book was that it included the map of separate camps, with their production focus.

The first research paper on the subject was the book by D. Dallin and B. Nikolayevsky "Forced labor in Soviet Russia" [3], published in the U.S. in 1947. Some researchers have used the 1941 State economic development plan of the USSR as a new source of data collection for studying the forced labor. This document was stolen by the Fascists and then sent to the U.S., where it was published as a statistical collection.

During the "Cold War" the problem of Soviet concentration camps was popular among the researchers abroad not only due to some scientific potential, but mostly because of political considerations. In the 1950s there appeared some publications which described the resistance in Gulag [4].

The first research work on the Soviet camp system published in the West is the book "The USSR concentration camps" (Munich, 1955; Russian)

written by the founder of Munich Institute for the Study of the USSR History and Culture, B.A. Yakovlev (N.A. Troitzky).

In the mid-twentieth century the foreign authors moved from disparate publications to comprehensive research of the Gulag history. The focus was the history of forced labor camps, forced labor system and deportation of various social and ethnic groups of the Soviet people [5]. One can mention the works by P. Barton, M. Heller, R. Conquest, E. Bacon, D. Getty, and M. Jacobson. However, due to the scarce sources and the fact that there was no access to the Soviet archives, very subjective judgments have been formed.

The English explorer R. Conquest [6] and historian-emigrant A.Nekrich [7] raised the problem of deportation of some USSR nations in the 40s and their involvement into the forced labour system in their works [8]. One more representative of the west immigrant Gulag historiography is the book by A.I. Solzhenitsyn "Gulag Archipelago", published in Paris in 1973.

After the so-called "archival revolution", when the documents from the closed funds of the Russian archives had become available, the western historians and economists continued to study both the repressive and productive aspects of the Gulag system in the Stalinist period, already drawing on archival sources. The works of such authors as R. Stettner[9], K.Gestwa [10], M. Sprau, S.Ertz, P. Gregory [11], M.Harrison [12], E. Bacon [13], M. Jacobson [14], N. Werth [15], A.Applebaum, B. Jensen [16], G. Persson [17], W. Hedeler [18] and the others described various aspects of the Gulag issues.

In the 17-year history of Steplag that ruined thousands of lives, there is still an open page, regarding unrest among the camp prisoners that grew into an armed uprising.

Steplag surpassed other camps at severity of labour, excessively strict internal regulations, inhuman living conditions of prisoners. However, hellish toil, hunger, poverty, illnesses and even death could not break the free spirit of the prisoners suffering in camps without any guilt. As in the other camps of the Soviet Union, prisoners expressed their discontent in various forms. Thus, refusal to work, creating secret organizations, and distributing leaflets finally led to a major uprising. Rebellion in Steplag was significant and long-lasting.

The news of the Stalin's death in 1953 was followed by repercussions throughout the whole camp system. The prisoners' hearts rebounded with hope, and their desire to live was again awake. Despite the efforts of the camp authorities to conceal it, the echo reached the distant steppe camp. And here hope returned to the prisoners' hearts.

The government announced an amnesty on March 27, 1953. The amnesty released the people convicted for up to 5 years. As the majority of prisoners of conscience were convicted for 10 to 25 years, they were not included in the amnesty. According to the next article of the law, the imprisonment term for the prisoners who were convicted for more than 5 years was cut in half. However, this was not relevant to the political prisoners. Thus, this law released and reduced the imprisonment term for thieves and other criminals of this kind. The evidence of that can be the letter of Capiton Ivanovich Kuznetsov, one of the uprising organizers: "Among us (*political prisoners – author's note*) there are no criminal offenders, murderers, corruptionists and the amnesty is not for us. Those who are included in the amnesty are, in fact, people dangerous to the society, the state: thieves, ordinary criminals, corruptionists, the most degraded. The amnesty law released an echelon of harmful to the community elements in the spring, but a month later 6 echelons of prisoners came, among them there are also those who have been convicted previously" [19]. In fact, the Steplag archival data state that in 1954 600 prisoners (among them there were those who were amnestied and reconvicted) were convicted twice or even more, 230 of those prisoners were convicted for crimes within the camp [20].

The expectations were not justified, but the discontent among the prisoners did not subside, the effect was quite the opposite, the tension reached the peak of its intensity. Figuratively speaking, once calm camp system now resembled a raging sea.

To defuse the exacerbated situation the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet government took joint decisions. For example, under the Regulation as of March 12, 1954 "On the improvement of labour camps work" and the Resolution of the Central Committee of the CPSU, enforcement bodies were to review the cases of the people convicted under Article 58.

In April of the same year (1954), by the decree of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet the prisoners under the age of 18 were released. In Steplag, the Decree of 1954 became the reason for reviewing 1,297 cases, 1,041 prisoners under the age of 18 were released, 1,007 prisoners, who have lost their health, were also released. Among those convicted under Art. 58 only 62 political prisoners were acquitted [21].

Nevertheless, the results of all these measures were a drop in the ocean. Final decision on the complete release of the people was not taken. Dissatisfaction with the camp system was not going to decline. Only in Steplag, in 1954 there were 349

cases of discontent; within a year 7,481 prisoners did not fulfill the labor standard [22].

In accordance with the orders of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs, the camp administration tightened internal regulations.

Here is an example of the above-mentioned letter of K.Kuznetsov: "Recently, 14 people returning from work under convoy were seriously injured. On another occasion, the guard turned the muzzle of his machine gun at the prisoners sitting near the barracks and five people were shot dead on the spot" [23]. One can see from these examples how much value was set upon human life in the camp.

On April 14-15, 1954 all the prisoners of two camp units who had been beaten half to death by the guards, because of alleged violations of the order, refused to go to work. The discontent of the prisoners expressed this way gradually turned into an armed clash with security guards.

On May 16, 1954 over 60 prisoners from 3 camp units located in Kengir village disobeyed the guards and encroached upon the territory of the other camp. The prisoners who had disrupted the regulations were captured and imprisoned with the assistance of military guards additionally called in. However, it was very difficult to suppress the rebellion. Even groups of the guards allocated between the camp units according to the order of the camp authorities did not stop the prisoners.

On May 18 uprising turned into armed resistance, they started to build barricades and fortresses in the camp units. Special headquarters for controlling the uprising were formed, the head of it was the former Red Army officer K.I. Kuznetsov and there were 8 more people. The leaders were responsible for keeping order and organizing protective measures. For communicating with the people outside the camp, the rebels used balloons, spread leaflets; they also made weapons and even explosives. On May 18 during a rally devoted to the funeral procession of 18 prisoners, who became the first victims of the collision, K. Kuznetsov called everybody to uniting and unified resistance. Despite the fact that the decree on his release came from Moscow at the beginning of the uprising, he did not leave his friends and stayed with them until the end.

The researchers who studied the uprising documents admit that it was of organized nature. At the general meeting in the camp, the rebels wrote a letter to the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Chief Administration of camps, in which they put forward a claim about establishing special commission to investigate the lawlessness that took place in the camp. The rebels decided that they would not go to work, or obey the camp administration before the arrival of the Commission.

Soon, the important Commission including the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs of the USSR, Major General S.Egorov, the Head of Chief administration of the camps Lieutenant General I.Dolgikh, Senior officer of the USSR Prosecutor's Office N.Vavilov, arrived [24]. Recognizing that the use of military force would give no result, the Commission issued orders for releasing minors, and the prisoners with low state of health convicted for a short period. Yet the commission did not review the cases of the prisoners illegally convicted by Article 58.

Strained relations between the rebels and the official authorities were maintained for 40 days.

During the Kengir uprising, Zheskazgan was visited by the USSR Minister of State Security Serov, the USSR Minister of Internal Affairs Kruglov, the USSR Prosecutor General Rudenko, a member of the Presidium of the CPSU Central Committee Furtseva. "I can not give any guarantees - Furtseva said during a meeting with the prisoners - but I have no doubt there will be changes in your lives in the future." "Changes", mentioned, were not slow to arrive. Realizing that the rebels would not agree to any persuasion, the decision was taken to crush the rebellion by force. This decision was discussed at the highest level. The then I Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan Ponomarenko asked for permission to use military forces against the rebels, Political bureau of the CPSU Central Committee gave its consent [25].

On the 40th day of the uprising, May 26 2 battalions of military guards of 1,600 people, 1 Division of Internal Security, a group of 98 with specially trained dogs, three fire trucks raided into the prisoners' territory. The barricades of 5 T-34 armoured fighting vehicles paved the way for the troops, destroying rebels' constructions.

During the suppression of the armed conflict the unit officers and commanders often used service guns.

According to the testimony of survivors, several hundreds of people were killed during suppressing the armed resistance. However the official documents state that the victims of an armed clash were 46 prisoners, 5 people were killed by the prisoners themselves, 61 people received wounds of varying severity. Among the military 40 people were injured. Material costs during the uprising accounted for 36,908 roubles, losses from refusal to work accounted for 4,708,621 roubles [25].

5,200 participants in the uprising were to be punished, 400 people who took an active part in the uprising were imprisoned, 1,000 people who supported the rebellion (500 women and 500 men) were transferred to Magadanlag and Ozerlag.

Cases of the rebellion leaders were examined at the circuit sessions of the Supreme Court of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic from July 21 to August 8, 1955. The uprising leaders: E.I. Suchenkov, G.I. Keller, V.P. Ryabov, Yu.A. Knompus, V.P. Skirchuk, V.V. Ivashchenko were charged and sentenced to death under Article 58-3 of the RSFSR (The Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic) Criminal Code. The sentence was enforced on September 8, 1956.

The sentence against the uprising leader K.I. Kuznetsov on August 5, 1955 was replaced by 25 years in prison by the decision of the Supreme Court of the Kazakh SSR.

Nevertheless, the rebellion had its consequences, which did not disappear without leaving a trace. The official administration had to review the cases of many political prisoners, as a result, only in Steplag 8 thousand prisoners were acquitted and gained their freedom.

Despite all the efforts to keep the uprising in Kengir secret, the news about it reached the West. Thus, during the transfer from Zhezkazgan to Mordovia (Dubrov camp) some Ukrainian women secretly passed a letter written by rebels abroad. This letter was published in 1956 in London. In the United States and Germany, the former Steplag prisoner, Hungarian Ferenc Varkony who witnessed all these tragic events wrote and published a book.

In 1956, in New York there was a rally in support of the prisoners who took part in the Kengir uprising. The rally participants approached the U.S. President D.Eisenhower with a special letter [26].

In the west the Kengir uprising was publicly discussed, whereas in the Soviet Union mentioning this event was still under a ban. Even in the late 50s during the weakening of the Stalinist regime and in the following years the uprising of prisoners was not mentioned in public. Only in the 90s of the XX century, after gaining independence, in Kazakhstan people had an opportunity to study and talk about what had happened at that time.

The Kenger uprising that shook the entire camp system was the beginning of the collapse of Steplag. Since 1955 camp administration was decreased by 2,309 people, i.e. 53.7%, the number of the heads was down by 227 people, i.e. 50% [25]. In 1957 Steplag, which had warped thousands of lives, was completely closed.

The memories of the past years will never be erased and they will occupy a rightful place in the history of humankind. The goal of the researcher is to reproduce and convey them to the future generations. Steplag remained in the memory of the representatives of many nations which suffered

through the most difficult conditions in the course of the history.

According to June 1954 data the Steplag had 2,660 Russians, 9,596 Ukrainians, 2,690 Lithuanians, 1,074 Latvians, 290 Kazakhs and representatives of the other nations that were part of the Soviet Union.

In 1945 – 1947 in the prison camps there were Germans, Japanese, Chinese, Koreans and other nationals of the states which participated in the Great Patriotic War. One of the Steplag prisoners was the captain of the U.S. Army – African-American, who went in an armoured fighting vehicle to the area occupied by the Red Army in Germany after the war.

In Zheskazgan there are still remains of some constructions, reminiscent of the martyr camp. Some young people are aware of that, the others are not [27]. While the witnesses of these camps, over a thousand Karlag and Steplag prisoners are still alive, they will always remind us of this period of history.

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