

4

The End of the Gulag

Aleksei Tikhonov

STALIN DIED ON March 5, 1953. The principal portfolios were distributed immediately—Lavrenty Beria nominated Georgy Malenkov for chairman of the Council of Ministers, and Malenkov proposed Beria as his first deputy while naming him as minister of the newly consolidated Ministry of Internal Affairs and State Security (MVD). In the course of the following week, Beria issued directives that closed all of the highly publicized political cases under way, such as the “Kremlin doctors’ plot” and the “Mengrelian affair.” On March 26 he sent the Presidium of the Central Committee a proposed decree “On amnesty.”¹ This decree called for the release of about one million inmates from Gulag camps, colonies, and prisons and cut in half the terms of those left in camps. The next day (!) the amnesty decree was published in the central press, and over the next three months some 1.5 million prisoners, or about 60 percent of the entire Gulag population, were released. This virtual dismantling of the Gulag camp system was carried out in such a short time, considering the vast geographic

1. L. Beria, 1953. Documents, Moscow 1999. Published as a joint project of the Democracy International Foundation and the Hoover Institution.

scope of the Gulag empire, that it became the basis of a conspiracy theory advanced by Khrushchev as the justification for Beria's execution. According to Khrushchev, Beria deliberately released a large number of criminals to strengthen the MVD to make himself the new dictator. Beria was so compromised by these accusations that the rather absurd myth of the "conspiratorial" motives for the amnesty became part of history courses taught in Russian schools. Beria's control of the secret police would have given him a more direct method of dealing with his rivals.

The scale of the 1953 amnesty made it not so much a political measure as a social and economic one. Like a military demobilization, the amnesty required a strategy and a plan. The three weeks that elapsed between Stalin's death and the amnesty announcement were clearly insufficient to prepare a plan for the large-scale amnesty of 1.5 million prisoners. Presumably, such a plan was waiting in the wings pending Stalin's death. Indeed, the Gulag archives reveal earlier planning within the Gulag system for radical restructuring.² As far back as 1930, the eventual architect of the Gulag system, G. Yagoda, proposed exile with accompanying family members as a superior alternative to camps. The MVD administration had been trying since the late 1940s to "cleanse" the camps of most of their inmates. Two actual MVD plans (from 1949 and 1951) called for the conversion of Gulag prisoners into an exile labor force. Both plans were associated with S. S. Mamulov—deputy minister of internal affairs from 1946 to 1953—an official from Beria's inner circle who was repressed in 1953 along with Beria. Moral issues were not a motive for the proposed changes; the MVD's main concern was to strengthen the camp regime for the remaining inmates while meeting its production goals. Notably, the two MVD plans did not call for an amnesty, which would have had to originate with the Politburo. Rather they proposed to send camp inmates into exile

2. These files are located in the Hoover Institution Archives, Fond 9414.

The End of the Gulag 69

in remote regions, on the mandatory condition that they work at the MVD industrial and construction projects.

The first plan was proposed in an internal MVD document from 1949. The deputy minister of internal affairs, V. V. Chernyshev (who headed the Gulag from 1939 to 1941), sent Mamulov a proposal to transfer all inmates in the camps of the Pechora Territory of northern Russia after five years' confinement to the status of special resettlers, assigned to the Pechora Coal Basin for their ten- to twenty-year sentences.³ Chernyshev enclosed a Draft Resolution for the Council of Ministers, signed by the Gulag's chief, G. P. Dobrynin, which demonstrates its serious intent.⁴ Besides release from the camps, the plan required the MVD "to provide opportunities for exiled settlers to set up personal households and to render assistance in the construction of individual houses."⁵ Settlers had the right to summon their families to their places of exile. Unfortunately, no traces of the debate over this plan survive in the archives, although events show that it was not implemented. In fact, the Chernyshev proposal was typical of the Soviet approach to major reforms. The reform was to be tried out first on a limited experimental basis before its coverage was expanded. In this instance, the new system applied to only one camp region, but in 1949, even this modest reform proposal went too far.

Again in June of 1951, Mamulov sent to MVD minister S. N. Kruglov a bold initiative for reorganizing the Gulag. Mamulov's letter did not survive, but the Gulag archives contain abundant material on the subsequent debate inside the MVD, which makes Mamulov's own proposals clear. The Mamulov proposal is summarized in a memo prepared by a Colonel Ljamin, the head of the MVD's organization department, on June 18, 1951, as Agenda

3. 9414-1d-146, l. 3.

4. 9414-1d-146, ll. 7-8.

5. 9414-1d-146, l. 8.

70 Aleksei Tikhonov

Point 14: “About the replacement of the term of confinement by exile to remote regions of persons convicted of certain crimes.” This agenda item was rejected in a June 19 meeting of the administration of the MVD, for the reasons spelled out in a memo to Kruglov, written by the director of the Gulag administration, I. Dolgikh, on July 6.⁶

As in the 1949 proposal, the 1951 Mamulov proposal called for the replacement of camp sentences with exile to remote areas for persons convicted of specified crimes. Though the 1949 proposal had been limited to one camp region, the 1951 Mamulov proposal called for the transfer of almost 70 percent of all inmates in camps and colonies to the status of exiles, which meant a reorganization of the entire Gulag system. Only the most hardened criminals would remain in camps. The advantages of the reorganization were that the state would be relieved of its obligations to pay 8 billion rubles a year from the state budget for the support of prisoners; the use of convict labor would improve; and the regime for guarding the especially dangerous offenders remaining in camps would be improved, reducing the incidence of escapes. The provisions of Soviet labor law would apply to exiles, although wages would be lower. In other words, the new “exiles” would have a juridical status halfway between Gulag inmates and free workers.

The discussion summarized in the July 6 memo to the minister of the MVD shows that it was not possible to adopt such a sweeping proposal in 1951. The Gulag chief, Dolgikh, objected that implementation of this plan “would require a radical reorganization of the work of enterprises and construction projects at which manpower from the camps is used, causing serious damage to the country’s economy.” Moreover, a change in the status of almost 75 percent of prisoners (1,790,000) would mean revising the entire penal code, which had focused after the war on the prosecution of

6. 9414-1-504, ll. 2–5.

The End of the Gulag 71

crimes against state and personal property. Under Mamulov's proposal, prisoners converted to exile status would be largely those who had stolen state or private property; prisoners remaining in camps would be largely those convicted of violent crimes. Moreover, Dolgikh objected that many repeat offenders would be set free and that the new system would require extensive capital expenditures. Because of such objections, Mamulov's proposal was rejected, although the Gulag did acknowledge the need "to develop a practice of paroling inmates and transferring them to exile status." In fact, the MVD administration welcomed the principle of selective conversion of Gulag prisoners to exiles if they had earned the right through hard work and good behavior. Particularly objectionable was Mamulov's proposal to convert to exile status all prisoners sentenced under specific criminal codes regardless of their work or behavior. Rewarding of prisoners by converting them to exiles should be used as an incentive.

The handling of the Mamulov proposal was typical of the Soviet bureaucracy. The proposal was made by a deputy; the proposal was then discussed by the collegium of the ministry (the MVD), and a decision was reached and sent to the minister. Even though the proposed change was substantial, the proposal did not constitute a political initiative. Rather, it involved an internal discussion of the classification of sentenced persons under the jurisdiction of the MVD, either as Gulag inmates or as exiles, although, as the discussion shows, there was concern that such a move would change the existing criminal codex. The discussion shows the MVD trying to find better methods for holding "dangerous" prisoners while meeting its production goals. The Mamulov proposal was not a theoretical exercise. It provided a list of 1.8 million Gulag inmates for conversion to exile status according to the criminal code under which they had been sentenced.

Mamulov's list remained within the MVD for another two years. The death of Stalin in March of 1953 provided the oppor-

Table 4.1 Comparison of Mamulov's 1951 "Exile" Proposal with Beria's 1953 Amnesty

<i>Laws and Decrees</i>	<i>1951 Mamulov</i>	<i>1953 Amnesty</i>
Theft of socialist property (August 7, 1932, law)	4%	4%
Theft of personal property (Article 47)	24%	24%
Theft of public property (Article 47)	35%	33%
Profiteering	4%	5%
Property crimes	4%	3%
Hooliganism	5%	7%
Violation of the law on the internal passport system	2%	2%
Crimes by soldiers	2%	3%
Official and economic crimes	7%	8%
Decrees other than those listed above	2%	2%
Other crimes	8%	7%
Totals (millions)	1.8	1.5

tunity for the new leadership, at first under Malenkov and Beria, to make the political decision to dismantle the Gulag system. The amnesty decree initially freed more than 1.5 million prisoners, while the Mamulov proposal called for the exile of 1.8 million prisoners to remote regions for work on MVD projects. Table 4.1 shows that the 1953 amnesty actually followed Mamulov's plan. The percentages of those granted amnesty in 1953 (according to the crime that they had committed) were nearly identical to those proposed in 1951 for transfer to exile status.

The stereotype of the Soviet system is that government agencies were mainly interested in protecting their turf and in building their own empires. According to this stereotype, the MVD and the Gulag administration should have wanted as large a Gulag system as possible. In reality, a consistent theme throughout the Gulag archives is that the Gulag system cost more than it produced and that it was creating a class of professional criminals. Internal Gulag studies

The End of the Gulag 73

showed extraordinarily high rates of recidivism with those initially sentenced for minor crimes, especially young people, returning as repeat offenders charged with more serious crimes. Although there were some apparent successes in the use of prison labor for large construction projects in the early 1930s, the Gulag became a drain on the economy and the state budget as it filled with victims of the Great Terror and then with returning Soviet POWs. The 1953 amnesty derived primarily from the bureaucratic interests of the MVD itself. An external event—Stalin’s death—merely provided an excuse for the radical reform, which had been desired by the MVD and Gulag administration itself for many years. The amnesty on the occasion of Stalin’s death protected the MVD leadership against charges of attempting to change Soviet criminal law.

The irony of this “beginning of the end” of the Gulag system is that the real author of the amnesty, Mamulov, later served fifteen years in prison himself and was not covered by the amnesty. Beria, the feared MVD minister, suffered an even worse fate: he was the last major political figure in Soviet history to be executed.