

The End of Forced Labour?

THE SILENT REFORM: *Alfred Burmeister*

ON SEPTEMBER 18TH last, the Soviet government announced, for the first time in decades, an amnesty for a large category of political prisoners. (The amnesty granted after Stalin's death covered "political crimes" only in cases where the sentence did not exceed five years of forced labour, and therefore only applied to an exceedingly small number of "politicals.") Under the new decree, all those who were sentenced for "collaboration with the Germans" to up to ten years of forced labour were to be released at once and their civic rights were to be restored; "collaborators" sentenced to more than ten years had their sentences reduced by half.

This new amnesty formed part and parcel of a penal reform which has been in progress for more than a year, and merely gives publicity to some of the changes which hitherto had, for whatever reason, gone on quietly.

Reports of this penal reform only began to reach the West last summer in the form of statements from returning prisoners of war. But a comparative study of these reports from camps in widely separated regions in the Soviet Far North, Far East, and Central Asia has established beyond doubt that the operative date for the reforms was everywhere the same—April 24th, 1954. The five unpublished decrees put into force on that date, together with the present amnesty for "collaborators," amount to a fundamental change in the penal system based on forced-labour camps and points to its gradual replacement by a comparatively "free" form of forced resettlement.

The unpublished decrees of April 1954 concern (1) a system for reducing forced-labour sentences in proportion to work performed; (2) the creation of legal tribunals in the camp area with power to revise sentences on application; (3) "conditional release" of all prisoners who have served two-thirds of

There has been a great deal of discussion—most of it highly speculative—about the changes in the Soviet régime since Stalin's death. We believe these two articles, based on extensive interviews with recently released German and Japanese prisoners-of-war, provide us with authoritative information on the changes that have taken place in the system of forced labour. Alfred Burmeister, who lives in Munich, is himself a former inmate of a Siberian prison camp, having been released in the late forties. Herbert Passin is an American anthropologist, formerly on the faculty of Ohio State University, who has lived for most of the past eight years in Tokyo, where he has been engaged in a study of the agrarian problem and land reform in Japan. He speaks Japanese fluently, and was therefore able to interview personally many Japanese prisoners who have lately been set free. His co-author, Fritz van Briessen, has spent fifteen years in the Far East as a Foreign Correspondent.

their sentence; (4) an amnesty for invalids; and (5) an amnesty for juveniles.

OF ALL these measures, the present amnesty for collaborators deals perhaps with the most widely-felt popular grievance, and had indeed been foreshadowed for some time in official propaganda through the press and even on the stage. The mass arrests of innocent people who had remained in the German-occupied parts of the U.S.S.R., which took place during the last year of the war and immediately afterwards, perturbed the population to such a degree that its faith in the régime was shaken for years. Nor had the Soviet people forgiven the secret police for the mass arrests and forced-labour sentences inflicted on Soviet soldiers returning from German prisoner of war camps. If Stalin's and Beria's successors wished to win the confidence of the population, they had to clean up that legacy; the subject of unjust sentences for alleged collaboration was openly discussed last year in several articles in the party periodical *Partinaya Zhizn* ("Party Life"), and forms the main theme of Korneychuk's play *The Wings*, which has been showing for months in more than one hundred theatres of the U.S.S.R. In practice, this measure makes comparatively little difference: the bulk of those now amnestied must have received their ten-year sentences for collaboration before 1948 (there were hardly any political sentences of less than twenty or twenty-five years afterwards), and would therefore have been nearly due for release anyhow.

Far more radical is the impact of the unpublished decrees of April 24th, 1954. The first of them reintroduces the so-called "*zachety*" ("settings-off") which had been normal practice in Soviet labour camps up to 1938. Under this system, any day on which the prisoner fulfils his "working norm" up to 100 per cent or more, counts for two or even three days of his sentence. Before the Yezhov period—the height of the great purges—it had become normal under this system that a penalty of eight years could be served in four; conversely, between 1938 and

1954, an eight-year sentence might mean many more years because, in place of the former reductions, arbitrary extensions of the sentences were introduced, e.g. "for the duration of the war" or even "until special order." Now the "*zachety*" are restored, and the directive appears in most cases to be to "set off" three days of the sentence for one day of norm-fulfilment.

For the mass of the camp inmates, this counting of three days for one is of immense importance; a general reduction of remaining sentences by two-thirds means that the majority of the present political prisoners will leave the camps within a few years. Even those who were sentenced to twenty or twenty-five years in 1949–50, during Stalin's last major wave of arrests, and who thus have still fourteen or nineteen years of their sentence before them, would find the remaining penalty reduced to four and a half or six years respectively by that measure alone. But that is not all. For under the new machinery introduced by the second of the April decrees, applications for revisions of the sentences are in most cases successful to the extent of a reduction by several years; while the third decree permits the "conditional release" of all prisoners who have served two-thirds of their sentence.

While the multiple counting of working days and the machinery of revision are of benefit chiefly for prisoners sentenced to twenty or twenty-five years, the "Two-Thirds-Decree" is particularly popular among those with ten or fifteen years' sentences—for it means in practice that they are released at once, having generally received their sentences before 1949. Finally, all juveniles who were less than eighteen years old at the time of their sentence are released from the camp without application to a tribunal of revision, though the camp managements apparently have power to transfer these released juveniles collectively to forced settlements for carrying out assigned labour under supervision. The aged and invalid prisoners come before special tribunals in the camp areas and are generally "conditionally released"; this means that they may be sent back to the

camps by administrative order if they prove to be a bad political influence in their new surroundings.

THE total impact of these measures makes it evident that the Soviets have decided on a large-scale reduction in the economic scope of the forced-labour system, if not on its total abolition.

The first public hints that such a reform was in progress were given by the deputy minister of justice, Gorshenin, in *Pravda* of November 12th last year, and by the legal theorist Salikhov in the periodical *Gosudarstvo i Pravo* ("State and Law"), No. 6, 1954. Both mentioned the existence of "special decrees concerning the earlier release from camp of special categories of prisoners," but specified neither the categories to be released nor the date of the decrees. The point of these articles was not to explain these measures as such, but to emphasise that the releases should generally be decided by tribunals and that they should be conditional.

In fact, all the releases of political prisoners are "conditional" on the released prisoners further good conduct, and except for the aged and the invalids they are accompanied by the assignment to an area of resettlement and to a type of work. The released "politicals" do not receive a passport—which every Soviet citizen needs to circulate freely—but merely a *Komandirovka*, a travel order to one of the outlying areas for a similar type of heavy work to what they did in the camp—unless they are simply asked to stay on in the old area outside the barbed wire. They are rarely allowed to choose even whether they prefer to work in the gold mines of Kolyma, the coal pits of Vorkuta, or the copper mines of Kazakhstan: assignment takes place according to the needs of the plan, and their only chance to influence the decision is by bribery. Bribes go not only to the camp chief, but to the camp doctor for a "favourable" diagnosis, to the MVD official in charge, on whose report the release may depend—and at the other end to the new "employer," the manager of a factory, state farm, or mine who is to hire the released prisoner.

The driving force behind the reform, then, is not just the humanitarianism of the new rulers, but the need to change the conditions of forced labour in response to the demands of a growing economy. I have the impression that the most effective pressure for penal reform was exercised by the employers of forced labour. The first great blow against the camp labour system was struck when it was decided—in the autumn of 1953—to remove the state enterprises in the camp areas from the administrative control of the MVD, and to hand them over to the economic ministries responsible for their respective branches of production. The managers of these enterprises had never been happy about the use of forced labour: they found it a nuisance to have to employ unwilling and correspondingly unproductive workers, and to be debited with full wage rates for their inferior work in their internal accounting with the camp administration. The fact that, moreover, the entire cost of the guards was charged to their accounts did nothing to reconcile them to the system. As soon as they were made independent of the MVD and had to justify their accounts by economic standards to their new quarters, they naturally rebelled. They said they would prefer to employ the healthy, well-fed guards and make them earn their living with honest work, instead of letting the work be done by the miserable, unfit, and unwilling forced labourers while paying the guards for doing nothing. The prisoners in turn said that they could work much better, even in the harsh climate of their remote areas, if only they were allowed to live there as free men and not behind barbed wire—and they underlined this demand by strikes, and in the last year even by open revolt.

Under this double pressure, reform started with the correction of the excesses of the last years of Stalin's régime. The bars before the windows fell; guards were no longer placed outside the huts at night; the eight-hour day, long demanded by the prisoners and supported by intelligent managers on grounds of efficiency, was at last made legal for all Soviet prisoners in the spring of 1954.

And then the great transformation from forced-labour camps into forced settlements started. At Vorkuta, sixty per cent of the prisoners were released in the course of the past year. Emergency housing within the area was prepared for them at top speed. The virgin soil areas of Kazakhstan, where forced labour could not be used and free labour was difficult to recruit, received masses of released prisoners as settlers. But industry, coal pits, and gold mines profited as well, for the forced settlers of today work with far more élan than the prisoners of yesterday. They want to let their families come to join them, or to found a family where they are. They want to have at last a flat of their own, a life of their own, and they need money for it; and they begin to like their work now that it is becoming the basis of a "real" life.

WHAT did the Soviets realise only now what Marx stated a century ago—that slave labour is less productive, and therefore less profitable, than free labour? Stalin's natural bent toward terror was not the only reason. The truth is that compulsion was necessary to open up and settle in a few years remote areas like Kolyma, Vorkuta, and Karaganda. Not even the highest wages, the most alluring incentives would have made the new towns rise out of that inhospitable ground at the same pace as could be done by millions of slaves. Only prisoners could have been driven to the shores of the Arctic on foot, in order to build the railway across the tundra and to dig the coal pits; only on the bones of countless prisoners could the famous Kolyma road to the gold deposits be built in barely one decade; only after generations of prisoners had lived and died in miserable huts and tents did the foundations exist for building stone houses with central heating for "free" Soviet citizens.

Today the foundations are there. An industry has risen out of the steppes. The climate has not become more pleasant, nor the landscape more attractive; but living conditions are no longer very much worse than elsewhere in the Soviet Union. Today, then,

it is possible to ask free workers and technicians to live in the Komi Autonomous Republic, or in Karaganda or Kolyma—and, on the other hand, the industry which has been built up requires free workers and not slaves for its efficient running. Conveyor belt and handcuffs, complicated machinery and unfree operators do not go well together; that a high level of the means of production requires a corresponding type of worker is another old Marxian truth which the Soviets have had occasion to remember.

In addition, there are the political advantages of these reforms for the successors of Stalin and Beria. Whether the prisoners' strikes made them first realise the limits of their power, or whether they were anyhow aware of the need to make concessions to popular discontent, the fact is that the terror has been toned down. Some of the recent returning prisoners of war report that they met no "politicals" in the transit prisons on their journey, nor did new political cases enter their camps during the last two years. Even if one assumes that the new political prisoners may be in special prisons, their number could not be as large as in former times. On the other hand, there are many new ordinary criminals in the camps; there is also no lack of new "economic offenders" who, after serving their sentence, are not allowed to go home but are assigned to the forced settlements, just like the "politicals."

Of course, there are limits to this political "thaw." There have been quiet individual rehabilitations of victims of the great 1937 purge, but no sign of an open revision of the monstrous trials of that time. There is an amnesty for Soviet citizens abroad, but only for those who collaborated with the Nazis—not for other political opponents of the Soviet system. Substantial as the reforms are, they do not touch the basis of the party dictatorship with its intolerance of any form of political dissidence. It remains to be seen how far the loosening of the terror machine will unwittingly contribute to the revival of a new opposition—and whether in that case the régime will react by a new tightening of the screws or by further concessions.

THE STRIKE AT NORILSK: *Herbert Passin & Fritz van Briessen*

BY THIS time, a great deal has come to be known about the strikes and uprisings that took place in forced-labour camps in Soviet Russia, following Stalin's death. The best known of the forced-labour camp uprisings is that of Vorkuta, the great mining complex within the Arctic Circle, which has been reported on by the Germans, Dr. Joseph Scholmer and Brigitte Gerland, and by the American, John Noble. Disturbances have also been reported, although in lesser detail, for other camps, such as Karaganda, by released European and American inmates. But the repatriation of Japanese prisoners from Russia, which has been going on in a slow, steady trickle, has both confirmed and supplemented these reports. Hundreds of Japanese had been inmates of camps where disorders took place, and their eyewitness accounts have revealed uprisings and strikes in other places that have not hitherto been reported in the West—Norilsk, Magadan, Tayshet, Kirgil (Karaganda), and Muika (Sakhalin). There is some evidence that this process has still not run its full course. As late as January of 1955, for example, a three-day strike took place in the Tayshet forced-labour camps.

Some of these actions have been part of a continuing chain reaction. A number of the Ukrainian leaders of the uprising in Norilsk, for example, seem to have been involved in an earlier disturbance in Karaganda, even before Stalin's death. And when a group of fifteen of the leaders of the Norilsk uprising—again Ukrainians—were transferred to Tayshet in May 1954, they there became the centre of a new resistance movement which culminated in a strike over the clothing ration.

The strike that took place in the Far North mining complex of Norilsk began on May 7th, 1953—two months after Stalin's death—and lasted until August 11th, 1953, or about one hundred days in all. This means that it started more than a month before the June 17th uprising in East Berlin and more than

two months before the uprising in Vorkuta, and continued after the Vorkuta strike was over. The strike spread from camp to camp within the complex and was temporarily halted by armed suppression on the night of May 23rd, 1953. But it was brought to its final conclusion only after a massacre on the night of August 11th, 1953, when it is estimated that hundreds of prisoners were killed or wounded. Several Japanese prisoners were direct participants in, and eyewitnesses of, these events.

NORILSK is located in the Arctic Circle at 69° 20' north latitude and 88° 6' east longitude, near the mouth of the Yenisei River at the north-western corner of the Siberian plateau. It is the centre of an industrial and administrative complex (or Kombinat), which spreads eastward to the Wariyok River (about 20 km.), westward to Dudinka, an Arctic port on the Yenisei (about 200 km.), and northward to the shore of Wariyok Lake (about 100 km.). The area is rich in mineral resources, and its non-ferrous metal production and chemical works are combined into an intricate industrial system which is—except for food—practically self-supporting.

Norilsk, like Vorkuta, was developed primarily by forced labour. The area had been known even during Czarist times, but it was not systematically explored until an expedition went there in 1923. The real development began, however, in the 1930's. The construction of the railroad between Wariyok and Norilsk was started in 1935. Another narrow-gauge railroad was built between the mouth of the Yenisei and Dudinka. With the end of World War II, Norilsk's development made an enormous spurt. In 1946, it was still administratively a "village," a mining community of 50,000 people. Seven years later, when it was elevated administratively to the status of a "city," it had an area more than ten times its earlier size and a population of over 300,000.

The major towns of the region are Norilsk,