



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Norillag prisoners strike for better conditions (Norilsk uprising), 1953

26 May

1953

to: 4 August

1953

Country: Soviet Union

Location City/State/Province: *Norilsk*

Location Description: *Norilsk Corrective Labor Camp (Norillag)*

Goals:

The prisoners' demands included a review of all prison sentences; an end to summary executions; the shortening of the working day from twelve to eight hours; the right to correspond with their families; the transfer of disabled prisoners; and the removal of the locks on the barracks, the bars on the windows, and the identification numbers on prison uniforms.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 102. Prisoners' strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 102. Prisoners' strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 102. Prisoners' strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 102. Prisoners' strike
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
- 178. Guerrilla theatre

Methods in 5th segment:

- 102. Prisoners' strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 102. Prisoners' strike

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors

Notes on Methods:

The guerrilla theatre consisted of women inmates beginning to dig graves for themselves to demonstrate their contempt for camp authorities.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Soviet prisoners

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Yevhen Hrytskyak, Danylo Shumuk, Alida Dauge, Asti Tofri

Partners:

not known

External allies:

not known

Involvement of social elites:

not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Norillag prisoners

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 11 days, 16 hours

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Soviet Union's Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD); Colonel Mikhail Kuznyetsov, the chief of the prison administration of the MVD; Norillag authorities

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

not known

Campaigner violence:

not known

Repressive Violence:

Prison guards shot at and killed inmates on several occasions. On 7 July 1953, authorities attacked women inmates with jets of hot water, bricks, and truncheons. On 4 August 1953, military troops arrived at Norillag and killed as many as 150 inmates.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0 points out of 1 point

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

While not all of the campaigners' goals are known, a source reports that most of their demands were met.

The Norillag was a gulag labor camp, located in Norilsk, Krasnoyarsk Krai, Russia, a town in the Taimyr Peninsula on the coast of the Arctic Ocean, close to the mouth of the Enisei River. Inmates of the Norillag worked 12-hour days, in temperatures as low as negative 50 degrees Celsius during the winter. They worked in mines, brickyards, cement plants, and in the base camps, as well as on road and railroad construction. Sources estimate that the Norilsk camps held between 25,000 and 35,000 inmates at the time of the Norilsk uprising in 1953, the majority of whom were political prisoners.

The death of Joseph Stalin on 5 March 1953 raised hopes of amnesty among the prisoners, but their hopes were soon dashed when authorities announced that the amnesty would only apply to criminal prisoners, and not to political prisoners.

Amidst an atmosphere of frustrated expectations, the Norilsk uprising began in Camp No. 5 on 26 May 1953, one day after a perimeter guard shot at five political prisoners and killed two. The prisoners in Camp No. 5 spread news of the violence to other compounds via a pre-established semaphore communications system using flags.

When the news reached Camp No. 4, a prisoner named Yevgeny Griciak responded by beginning a strike in his camp. When he failed to convince the inmates to put down their tools with his words, Griciak “noticed then that the rhythm of the work was set by the sound of the air hammers. As long as the hammers kept going, the inmates would work, so I shut the compressors off. The hammers stopped and everyone quit working.”

When one of the authorities ordered the 5,000 prisoners to return to their work, the inmates refused. The result was a three-day siege at the construction site. On the inmates' third day without food or water, they painted a large sign with the words, “We Are Being Killed and Starved,” and hung the sign on a building to make it visible to the townspeople of Norilsk. Shortly afterward, the authorities brought in food and water, and the inmates voted to go back to the barracks. Nevertheless, despite their return to the barracks, the inmates continued with their strike the next day.

By 5 June 1953, the Norillag prisoners had initiated strikes in six of the camps, with a total of 16,379 prisoners on strike. One source reports that inmates joined together as a human wall to block camp administrators from the prisoners' quarters. Another

source reports that inmates raised black flags over their barracks as a symbol of their revolt, while local trains carried strike slogans.

As the camp authorities deliberated, the prisoners organized themselves. They set up committees to regulate the duties of strikers and elected leaders: one leader for each barrack. Representatives on the committees included Ukrainians, Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians, although Ukrainians were the most well-represented. Among the leaders of the uprising were Yevhen Hyrtsyak, Danylo Shumuk, Alida Dauge, and Asti Tofri. Dauge and Tofri were two of the eight women leaders in the revolt.

The first major demand of the prisoners was to have the opportunity to negotiate with representatives from Moscow instead of with local authorities. The scholar William D. Pederson writes that “[t]his demand, which was repeated during the Vorkuta and Kingir uprisings, seems to have grown out of the display of power that Communist prisoners of war exerted on the truce negotiations in the Korean War” (see “Vorkuta prisoners strike for improved conditions, Russia, 1953”).

In Camp No. 3, prisoners led by a man named Nikolaitchuk distributed hundreds of leaflets to the townspeople of Norilsk, located a mile and a half away, to publicize the situation in the camp. The inmates printed the leaflets with ink from the administrative office and letter blocks that they cut out of rocks and pieces of cement using their work tools. The inmates then delivered the leaflets to city dwellers by crafting kites from paper lying around, tying the leaflets to the kites with a cord, and setting the cords on fire as they released the kites into the air. As the kites flew over Norilsk, the cords burnt to an end, causing the leaflets to fall from the sky into the city. Griciak said that that word of the revolt finally reached the authorities in Moscow partly because of this action.

On 6 June 1953, a special commission arrived from Moscow to meet with the prisoners and discuss their demands. Colonel Mikhail Kuznyetsov (also spelled Kuznetsov, Kusnetov), the chief of the prison administration of the Soviet Union’s interior ministry (MVD) led the commission, whose task was to end the prisoners’ strike at any cost. Other members of the commission included Lieutenant-General Seryodkin, the commander of prison convoy guard forces of the MVD, and Comrade Kiselyov, a representative of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR.

A secret prisoners’ committee submitted a list of demands to the commission. The prisoners’ demands included a review of all prison sentences; an end to summary executions; the shortening of workdays from twelve to eight hours; the right to correspond with their families; the transfer of disabled prisoners; the removal of locks on the barracks and bars on the windows; and the removal of identification numbers from prison uniforms. Hyrtsyak was among the inmates who presented the demands to the commission.

Kuznyetsov told the prisoners that a few of their demands would be met immediately, while the others would be reviewed in Moscow. In the meantime, the prisoners were to go back to work, which they did.

Ten days after the negotiations ended, the prisoners re-initiated their strike. Reports vary as to whether the strikes were triggered by the mass arrest of the first strike’s leaders under Kuznyetsov’s orders, or by the fact that camp authorities had begun to lock the doors of the prisoners’ barracks.

The inmates in Camp No. 6, the women’s compound, also participated in the strike. On 7 July 1953, when the women inmates had not worked for a month and been on hunger strike for a week, camp authorities installed machine guns on the watchtowers. 3,000 women prisoners, in turn, emerged from their barracks and started to dig graves for themselves to demonstrate their contempt for the authorities. At that point, the authorities began to attack them with jets of hot water, bricks, and truncheons. The women fled into the tundra, where they met more troops.

The Norilsk uprising ended on 4 August 1953. While one source reports that MVD troops encircled all six camps of Norillag at the beginning of August, opened fire, and thereby terminated the revolt through bloody suppression, other sources suggest that the strikes in most of the camps had already ended by the time that the troops arrived. One source, for example, writes that the strikes in Camps No. 4 and 5 ended on 4 July, when guards with machine guns and automatic rifles killed 27 prisoners. These sources say that the military repression on 4 August was directed toward Camp No. 3, where the strikers had held out the

longest. While the official body count of the confrontation was four, unofficial body counts were as high as 150.

After the suppression of the uprising, authorities sent the most active leaders of the protests to prisons and punishment camps. Meanwhile, the administration put down additional attempts to strike through “combing,” a practice in which armed guards forced groups of 50 to 60 prisoners to the taiga, separated out the inmates whom they knew to be active strikers, and isolated them.

Few spoke of what had transpired for fear of punishment. “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,” wrote Walter Ciszek, who served as a priest in Camp No. 5.

In spite of the uprising’s violent end, the authorities granted many of the prisoners’ demands, such as the shortening of their workday from twelve to eight hours; the right to correspond with their family and receive packages; the removal of bars from their windows; and the removal of numbers from their uniforms. Because of these gains, along with the fact that a government commission had arrived from Moscow as requested, the prisoners considered their protest to have ended in victory.

The Norilsk uprising was one of the first major revolts of the inmate movement that emerged within the Soviet labor camp system between 1952 and 1954. Together with the 1953 revolt in Vorkuta, it marked what L. Latkovskis describes as “the beginning of the end of the Gulag.”

Research Notes

Influences:

The display of power that Communist prisoners of war exercised on the truce negotiations in the Korean War appear to have inspired the Norillag prisoners' demand to negotiate with representatives from Moscow instead of with local authorities.

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Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

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