Russia: Last WW2 German Prisoner Finally Released from Gulag

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Yenisey| The Russian prison authorities surprised the international community this morning, by announcing that they would finally set free on Friday, the last German prisoner of war from the Second World War. 84-year old Reinhard Kunze, was only 14 years old when he was captured by Soviet troops during the Battle of Berlin, in January 1945, and was detained for the last 69 years in various Soviet and Russian forced labor camps. The Foreign Minister of Russia, Sergueï Lavrov, announced this morning that in an "act of good will", the Moscow government was ready to "put aside their national pride" and show their "generosity and good will" by letting him go home.

Recruited in the Hitler's youth (*Hitlerjugend*) 12th SS Panzer Division in 1943 when he was 12 years old, Mr. Kunze was accused by Soviet authorities of executing Yakov Dzhugashvili, the son of Joseph Stalin, at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in April 1943. The son of the dictator had been captured during the Battle of Stalingrad, and was killed after his father refused to exchange him for the German Field Marshall Friedrich Von Paulus, who had been captured by Soviet troops. The Russian leader had however decreed that no matter when the other German POWs were to be released, the murderer of his son was to remain in forced labor camps until his death, to pay for his act of "exceptional cowardice".

Until now, the successive Russian governments had maintained the sentence and realized Stalin's wish, even if it had no real legal legitimacy under modern democratic standards. The actual government however, seems to have changed its mind in order to appease the tension with Germany, that has developed over the conflict in Ukraine. Many experts doubt however that this surprising announce could really have the desired effect, as it also constitutes an admittance that Russian authorities had detained illegally a German Citizen for 70 years, who moreover was only 14 years old at the time of his imprisonment.

This surprising news brings back painful memories to many Germans, has Mr Kunze is only that last of a never-ending list of horrible stories linked to the end of the Second World War. Approximately three million German prisoners of war were captured by the Soviet Union during World War II, most of them during the great advances of the Red Army in the last year of the war. The POWs were employed as forced labor in the Soviet wartime economy and postwar reconstruction. By 1950 almost all had been released. Officially, the last surviving German Prisoners of war returned home from the USSR in 1956, but it is now clear that it was not exactly true. According to Soviet records, 381,067 German Wehrmacht POW died in NKVD camps over that time period, out of which 356,700 were German nationals and 24,367 from other nations. Many scholars and historians dispute those numbers however, suggesting that the body count could be close to 1 million.

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