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The Gulag: What We Now Know and Why It Matters

Anne Applebaum

When speaking or writing about the Soviet Union's concentration camps, I always like to begin with a disclaimer. For I do not want to claim that, in writing a narrative history of the Gulag, I have discovered a new topic that has never been touched upon before. Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, the history of the camp system that he published in the West in the 1970s, largely got it right. Although he had no access to archives and based all of his writing on letters and memoirs of other prisoners, he did, it now appears, understand the history of the system very well.

Nevertheless, in the years spent researching my book *Gulag: A History* I concluded that archives can make a difference to our understanding. Documents, for example, enabled me to be far more precise than was possible in the past. Thanks to the newly opened Soviet archives, we now know there were at least 476 camp systems, each

This is an excerpt from remarks made by Anne Applebaum at a November 7 City Seminar in New York City. Ms. Applebaum has written for numerous magazines, including The Economist, the Spectator, and Slate. She is currently a columnist and member of the editorial board at the Washington Post. She is the author of Gulag: A History.



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one made up of hundreds, and some even thousands, of individual camps, sometimes spread out over thousands of square miles of otherwise empty tundra.

We also know that the vast majority of prisoners were peasants and workers, not the intellectuals who later wrote memoirs and books. We know that, with a few exceptions, the camps were not constructed explicitly to kill people: Stalin preferred to use firing squads to

18 million people passed through the system. In addition, a further 6 or 7 million people were deported to exile villages. The total number of people with some experience of imprisonment and slave labor in Stalin's Soviet Union could have run as high as 25 million, or about 15 percent of the population.

We also know now where the camps were — namely, everywhere. Although we are all familiar with the image of the

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conduct his mass executions. Nevertheless, the camps were often lethal: Nearly a quarter of the Gulag's prisoners died during the war years. The Gulag's population was also very fluid. Prisoners left because they died, because they escaped, because they had short sentences, because they were being released into the Red Army, or because they had been promoted — as often happened — from prisoner to guard. Those releases were invariably followed by new waves of arrests.

A NATION OF SLAVES

As a result, between 1929, when prison camps first became a mass phenomenon, and 1953, the year of Stalin's death, some

prisoner in a snowstorm, digging coal with a pickax, there were camps in central Moscow where prisoners built apartment blocks or designed airplanes, camps in Krasnoyarsk where prisoners ran nuclear power plants, fishing camps on the Pacific coast. From Aktyubinsk to Yakutsk, there was not a single major population center that did not have its own local camp or camps, and there was not a single industry that did not employ prisoners. Over the years, prisoners built roads, railroads, power plants, and chemical factories. They manufactured weapons, furniture, machine tools, and even children's toys.

In the Soviet Union of the 1940s, the decade the camps reached their zenith, it would have been very difficult in many

places to go about your daily business and not run into prisoners. It is no longer possible to argue, as some Western historians have done, that the camps were a marginal phenomenon or that they were known only to a small proportion of the population. On the contrary, they were central to the entire Soviet system.

We also understand better the chronology of the camps. We have long known that Lenin built the first ones in 1918, at the time of the Revolution, but archives have now helped explain why Stalin chose to expand them in 1929. In that year he launched the Five-Year Plan, an extraordinarily costly attempt, in both human lives and natural resources, to force a 20 percent annual increase in the Soviet Union's industrial output and to collectivize agriculture. The plan led to millions of arrests as peasants were forced off their land; they were imprisoned if they refused to leave. It also led to an enormous labor shortage. Suddenly, the Soviet Union found itself in need of coal, gas, and minerals, most of which were found only in the far north of the country. The decision was made: prisoners should be used to extract the minerals.

To the secret policemen who were charged with carrying out the construction of the camps, it all made sense. Here is how Alexi Laginov, former deputy commander of the Norilsk camps, north of the Arctic Circle, justified the use of prisoner labor in a 1992 interview:

If we had sent civilians, we would first have had to build houses for them to live in. And how could ordinary people live here? With prisoners, it is easy. All you need is a

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barrack, a stove with a chimney, and somehow they survive.

None of which is to say that the camps were not also intended to terrorize and subjugate the population. Certainly, prison and camp regimes, which were dictated in minute detail by Moscow, were openly designed to humiliate prisoners. The prisoners' belts, buttons, garters, and items of elastic were taken away from them. The guards described them as "enemies" and forbade them to use the word "comrade," even with each other. Such measures contributed to the dehumanization of prisoners in the eyes of camp guards and bureaucrats, who therefore found it that much easier not to treat them as fellow citizens or even as human beings. In fact, this proved to be an extremely powerful ideological combination — the disregard of the humanity and individuality of prisoners and the overwhelming need to fulfill the centrally determined plan.

STALIN'S "BORING" MURDERS

One of the reasons I wrote my book was because I started to wonder why I encountered this subject only while living in Eastern Europe. I have a degree in Russian history from Yale University, and yet I knew very few of these details. I was also inspired, I have to admit, by an extremely irritating *New York Times* review of my first book, *Between East and West: Across the Borderlands of Europe*, which was about the western borderlands of the former Soviet Union. Although largely positive, the review contained the following line: "Here occurred the terror famine of the 1930s, in which Stalin killed more Ukrainians than Hitler murdered Jews. Yet, how many in the West remember it? After all, the killing was so boring and ostensibly undramatic."

Were Stalin's murders boring? Many people think so. The crimes of Stalin do not inspire the same visceral reaction in the Western public as do the crimes of Hitler. Ken Livingstone, a former member of Parliament and now the mayor of London, once spent an entire evening trying to explain the difference to me. "Yes," he said, "the Nazis were evil. But the Soviet Union was *deformed*." That view echoes the feeling of many people, even people who are not old-fashioned members of the British Labour Party. The Soviet Union went wrong somehow, but it was not fundamentally wrong in the same way as Hitler's Germany.

THE BLIND EYE OF IDEOLOGY

Until recently, it was possible to explain this absence of popular feeling about the tragedy of

European communism as the logical result of a particular set of circumstances. The passage of time is part of it: Communist regimes really did grow less reprehensible as the years went by. Nobody was very frightened of General Jaruzelski, or even of Brezhnev, although both were responsible for a great deal of destruction. Besides, archives were closed. Access to the sites of the camps was forbidden. No television cameras ever filmed the Soviet camps or their victims, as they had done in Germany at the end of World War II. No images, in turn, meant that the subject, in our image-driven culture, didn't really exist either.

Ideology twisted the ways in which we understood Soviet and East European history as well. In the 1920s Westerners knew a great deal about the bloodiness of Lenin's revolution and the camps that he was just then beginning to set up. Western socialists, many of whose brethren were among the first victims of the Bolsheviks, protested loudly, strongly, and frequently against the crimes then being committed by the Bolshevik regime.

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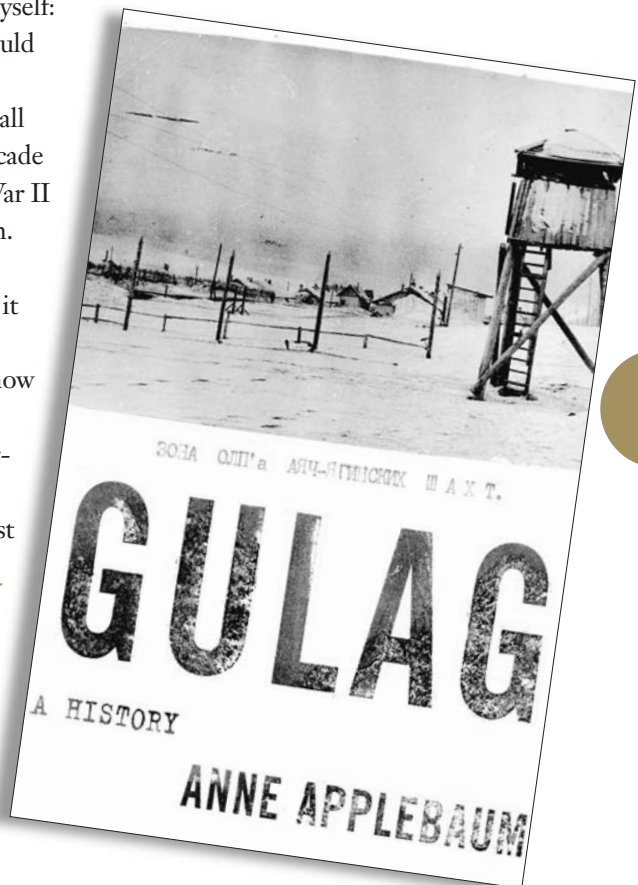
"IT REMINDS ME OF MONTANA"

In 1944 Vice President Henry Wallace actually went to Kolyma, one of the most notorious camps, during a trip across the Soviet Union. Imagining he was visiting some kind of industrial complex, he told his hosts that "Soviet Asia," as he called it, reminded him of the Wild West, and particularly of Montana, which is where he was from. He said, "The vast expanses of your country, her virgin forests, wide rivers and large lakes, all kinds of climate, her inexhaustible wealth, remind me of my homeland." He was not alone in refusing to see the truth about Stalin's system at that time; Roosevelt and Churchill had their photographs taken with Stalin too.

Together, all of these explanations once made a kind of sense. When I first began to think seriously about this subject, as communism was collapsing in 1989, I even saw the logic of them myself: it seemed natural, obvious, that I should know very little about Stalin's Soviet Union, whose secret history made it all the more intriguing. More than a decade later, I feel very differently. World War II now belongs to a previous generation. The Cold War is over too, and the alliances and international fault lines it produced have shifted for good. The Western left and the Western right now compete over different issues. At the same time, the emergence of new terrorist threats to Western civilization makes the study of the old communist

threats to Western civilization all the more relevant. It is time, it seems to me, to stop looking at the history of the Soviet Union through the narrow lens of American politics and start seeing it for what it really was.

Certainly it will help us to understand our own history. For if we forget the Gulag, sooner or later we will forget our own history too. Why did we fight the Cold War, after all? Was it because crazed right-wing politicians, in cahoots with the military-industrial complex and the CIA, invented the whole thing and forced two generations of Americans to go along with it? Or was there something more important happening? Confusion is already rife. In 2002 an article in the conservative British *Spectator* magazine opined that the Cold War was "one of the most unnecessary conflicts of all time."



Gore Vidal has also described the battles of the Cold War as "forty years of mindless wars which created a debt of \$5 trillion." Already, we are forgetting what it was that mobilized us, what inspired us, what held the civilization of "the West" together for so long.

There are deeper reasons to understand this half-forgotten piece of history too. For if we do not study the history of

repeated. Only our ability to debase and dehumanize our fellow men has been—and will be—repeated again and again.

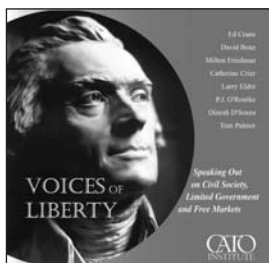
The more we understand how different societies have transformed their neighbors and fellow citizens into objects, the more we know of the specific circumstances that led to each episode of mass murder, the better we will understand the darker side of our own human

“Already, we are forgetting what it was that mobilized us, what inspired us, what held the civilization of ‘the West’ together for so long.”

6 the Gulag, some of what we know about mankind itself will be distorted. Every one of the 20th century's mass tragedies was unique: the Gulag, the Holocaust, the Armenian massacre, the Nanking massacre, the Cultural Revolution, the Cambodian revolution, the Bosnian wars. Every one of those events had different historical and philosophical origins and arose in circumstances that will never be

nature. I wrote my book about the Gulag not "so that it will not happen again," as the cliché has it, but because it *will* happen again. We need to know why—and each story, each memoir, each document is a piece of the puzzle. Without them, we will wake up one day and realize that we do not know who we are.

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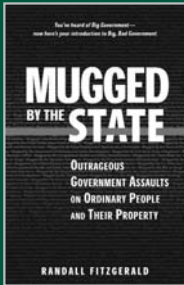
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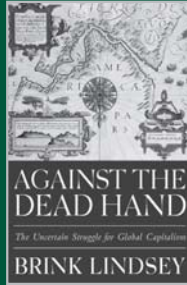
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