



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Book Review **by Richard M. Ebeling**

Gulag: A History

by Anne Applebaum (New York: Doubleday, 2003); 677 pages; \$35.

Siberia. The word has had a chilling connotation for people around the world for 200 years. Long before Lenin and the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, the tsarist regime had used the vast area that stretches from the Ural Mountains to the Pacific and Arctic Oceans as a place of exile and forced labor for dissidents, political prisoners, and ordinary criminals.

Indeed, the Russian imperial government had sent off many of the leading figures of the future Soviet government into exile in the years before the First World War, including Lenin and Stalin.

But as cruel as the tsarist system may have seemed to those who suffered under it, it was mild and benevolent in comparison with the future Soviet regime.

When Lenin and Stalin were ordered into exile by the Russian authorities at the beginning of the 20th century, they traveled to their places of exile on their own recognizance, with government railway passes to their destinations in Siberia.

They lived in isolated villages, but they could hunt and fish, read and write, and maintain correspondence with their friends and comrades. Political prisoners sent into exile were considered to be above the common criminal, people of ideological conscience who were to be treated differently.

Having lived and continued to work for their Marxist cause in Siberian exile under the tsars, the Bolshevik leaders knew the strengths and weaknesses of the prison and exile systems of the Russian Empire.

When they came to power in November 1917, they soon introduced their own system of prisons and forced labor camps in the huge reaches of the empire they inherited during and after the Russian Civil War of 1918–1921, which had left them fully triumphant.

Lenin and Stalin understood that any system of imprisonment and exile like the one they had lived through under the tsars would enable their opponents to maintain and extend their opposition to Soviet power.

Thus, the new prison system that became the Gulag was designed to prevent and indeed destroy any ability for enemies of the Communist regime to continue their resistance.

Furthermore, and most especially under Stalin, the Gulag was turned into a vast slave system to provide the human material for “building socialism” with cheap and seemingly limitless supplies of labor.

In other words, during the 25 years of Stalin’s leadership of the Soviet state, the Gulag was made into an essential element in the system of socialist central planning for the construction of entire new industrial cities in empty and inhospitable regions of northern Russia, Siberia, and Central Asia and supplied manpower to extract raw materials and precious metals from regions of the country that were virtually unfit for human habitation.

From Lenin’s time to the end of the Soviet system under Gorbachev, literally millions of victims of the regime entered and passed through the Gulag system, with many of them never living through the experience.

But among those who did survive the ordeal, hundreds wrote about the nightmare of it all. And from the 1920s to the 1990s many of these accounts were published in the West.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s three-volume *Gulag Archipelago* and Eugeniya Ginsburg’s *Journey into the Whirlwind* and *Within the Whirlwind* are among the better-known accounts that have been available to the Western reader.

And David Dallen and Boris Nicolaevsky’s *Forced Labor in Soviet Russia* and Nikolai Tolstoi’s, *Stalin’s Secret War* have been among the carefully documented secondary summaries of the nature of the system.

The workings of the Gulag

But Anne Applebaum’s *Gulag: A History* is the first volume that attempts to give a detailed and fairly comprehensive narrative of the origin, purpose, workings, and reality of the system based both on the memoirs of those who lived through and survived the camps and on the now-available archive documents in Russia.

The first part of the volume is devoted to explaining how the first prison camps were established in 1918 on islands in the White Sea in northern European Russia. The prisoners were mostly non-Bolshevik socialists. Soon the apparent tsarist style of imprisonment was replaced with the cruel severity that became the hallmark of the system in future years.

Even so, the Bolsheviks at first tried to make it a showcase of humane treatment, but the camps on the islands were shortly after closed to prevent visitors from seeing the reality of how they were run.

The first great exercise with slave labor was also given publicity: the building of the White Sea Canal. But this was never done again, especially after the canal fell into disuse because of the poor and primitive manner in which it was constructed.

The Soviet leadership, in fact, did not want attention for the Gulag. Its purpose was not propaganda but rather mass labor under increasingly despicable conditions. Applebaum recounts the arrest processes and the initial imprisonments.

To obtain confessions prisoners were kept awake day and night, made to stand during the long hours of interrogation, beaten, tortured, and dehumanized. Prison cells were often overcrowded with no room to sit or sleep.

When it was time to send them off to the camps, they were crowded into cattle cars with no sanitary facilities, poor ventilation, and meager food supplies. The journey to the destination camps in these conditions could last for weeks or even months.

Those who lived through the trip — and many died along the way — often found themselves deposited in empty wastelands of tundra, swamps, dense forests, deserts, or the frigid expanse of the Arctic Circle region.

They would have to forage or hunt for food and, with few or no tools, build living quarters. Then they were set to work clearing timber areas, mining for metals, minerals, or precious gems, or constructing new industrial cities out of the barren terrain.

Among the most horrific destinations were the gold fields of Kolyma in eastern Siberia. Prisoners would be shipped by rail to the Pacific and then crammed into practically derelict vessels for the sea journey farther north. The death toll from the sea journey and the harsh conditions of the mines was especially high.

Life in the Gulag

In the camps there was a system of rank, privilege, and power. The camp administrators often took advantage of their positions and isolated locations to rule their domains as if they were kings and princes whom the prisoners were to grovel before and mindlessly obey.

The guards were also likely to brutalize and exploit the prisoners for their own purposes and benefit. Among the prisoners there was an ordering of power, privilege, and control. Informers were everywhere.

Death in the camps took many forms: prisoners were worked to death, starved to death, beaten to death, shot for disobedience or rebellion. One inmate later wrote,

Death in the camps possessed another terror: its anonymity. We had no idea where the dead were buried, or whether, after a prisoner's death, any kind of death certificate was ever written.... The certainty that no one would ever learn of their death, that no one would ever know where they had been buried, was one of the prisoner's greatest psychological torments.

Rape and prostitution, both heterosexual and homosexual, were part of camp life. The children born and raised in the camps were treated no better than the adults. Applebaum explains:

Infant epidemics were legion. Infant deaths were extremely high — so high that they were, as the inspectors' reports record, often deliberately covered up. But even those children who survived infancy had little chance at a normal life inside the camp nurseries.

When they were older, they were usually transferred to state orphanages that “were vastly overcrowded, dirty, understaffed, and often lethal.” About 30 boys would live in a 12-square-meter room. One report stated that 38 boys shared seven beds and also said that 140 children shared one cup. Starvation was not uncommon in places.

There were rebellions and revolts. They were all crushed during Stalin's time. But following Stalin's death in March 1953, there occurred larger and more successful revolts. Informers would be murdered. The prisoners went on strike, most notably in the region around Vorkuta and Norilsk. But these, too, were finally put down, with hundreds of leaders and activists in the rebellions rounded up and shot.

However, the system never returned to the full madness of Stalin's time. And in the years following Stalin's death, large numbers of Gulag inmates were released. For the first time, their stories of life in the camps became known to virtually everyone else in the society, as the returnees told their tales to relatives and friends around the dinner table in hushed voices. But many did not want to hear out of fear or indifference.

Applebaum takes the story of the Gulag through the period of the dissident movement of the 1960s and 1970s to the end of the system in the 1980s. As part of her summary, she attempts to estimate how many people actually went through the Gulag system. She comes up with a total of 28.7 million people, out of which millions died as a result of the system of forced labor. This, of course, does not include the millions of others who were murdered by the regime during the years of Soviet power as part of the purges or as “enemies of the people.”

In the short space of this review, it is impossible to do justice to the detail and care with which Applebaum recounts the subjects mentioned as well as many others. It is a moving and serious account of one of the most evil aspects of Soviet communism in the 20th century.

Richard Ebeling is president of [The Foundation for Economic Education](#).

This article was originally published in the September 2003 edition of *Freedom Daily*.