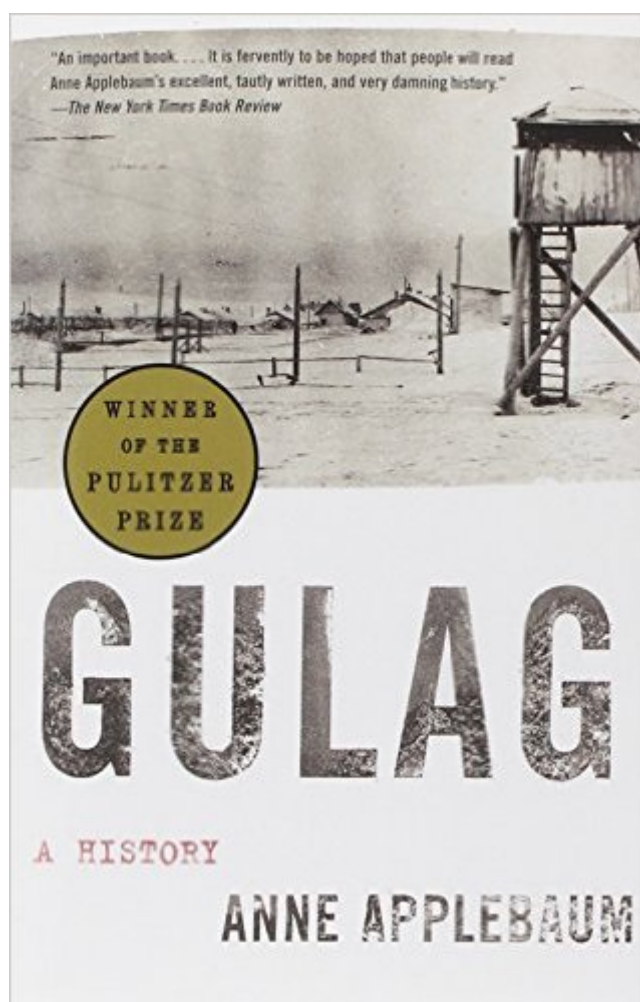


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Gulag: A History



Synopsis

The Gulag--a vast array of Soviet concentration camps that held millions of political and criminal prisoners--was a system of repression and punishment that terrorized the entire society, embodying the worst tendencies of Soviet communism. In this magisterial and acclaimed history, Anne Applebaum offers the first fully documented portrait of the Gulag, from its origins in the Russian Revolution, through its expansion under Stalin, to its collapse in the era of glasnost. Applebaum intimately re-creates what life was like in the camps and links them to the larger history of the Soviet Union. Immediately recognized as a landmark and long-overdue work of scholarship, Gulag is an essential book for anyone who wishes to understand the history of the twentieth century.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

With the publication of "The Gulag Archipelago" in the early 1970s, Alexander Solzhenitsyn shocked and dismayed the Western world by masterfully detailing the existence of a horrific shadow culture within the Soviet Union, a culture comprised of a mass society of slave laborers scratching out their bare-knuckled survival in unbelievable difficulty and squalor, and having been recruited into the Gulag for a variety of economic, social, and political reasons. Given the inherent limitations of this superb albeit shocking work, the West had to wait for the fall of the Soviet bloc for a more definitive and more complete treatise on the nature of the Gulag. This new book by scholar-turned-journalist Anne Applebaum represents such a work. The work is both massive and comprehensive, dealing not only with the ways in which the Gulag came into existence and then thrived under the active sponsorship of Lenin and Stalin, but also with a plethora of aspects of life within the Gulag, ranging

from its laws, customs, folklore, and morality on the one hand to its slang, sexual mores, and cuisine on the other. She looks at the prisoners themselves and how they interacted with each other to the relationships between the prisoners and the many sorts of guards and jailers that kept them imprisoned. For what forced the Gulag into becoming a more or less permanent fixture within the Soviet system was its value economically in producing goods and services that were marketable both within the larger Soviet economy as well as in international trade. As it does in China today, forced labor within the Gulag for the Soviets represented a key element in expanding markets for Soviet-made goods ranging from lamps to those prototypically Russian fur hats.

In 1973, when Alexander Solzhenitsyn launched the first volume of his monumental GULAG ARCHIPELAGO, an oral history of Soviet concentration camps, he expressed concern that a proper history of the camps might never be written, that those who do not wish to recall would destroy all the documents "down to the very last one." As it happened, however, the documents were not destroyed; they remained locked away in files and archives. Nor did Solzhenitsyn foresee the coming of Mikhail Gorbachev and the advent of glasnost, his policy of openness, much less the unfettered availability of Gulag information and the flood of memoirs by camp survivors. It was an American Sovietologist-turned-journalist, Anne Applebaum, now a Washington Post columnist, who embraced the unexpected opportunity to undertake this vast and daunting project from which whole universities of ordinary researchers might have slunk away in dismay. Lenin himself, the founding father of Russian communism, established the first 84 camps of the Soviet Gulag almost immediately after the Russian Revolution, basing their design on tsarist precedents. Lenin's successor, Josef Stalin, presided over the Gulag's development into the far-reaching "archipelago" of which Solzhenitsyn wrote. Transport to the camps was no less nightmarish in many cases than the camps themselves. Prisoners en route to distant camps are said to have frozen to death even before they were loaded into the cattle cars, where they would sometimes remain crowded together for more than a month. Memoirs tell of trains being stopped to take off corpses, which were thrown into ditches. The struggle for survival was part of daily life in the camps, the struggle for bits of food, edible but often revolting, and for enough water to sustain life.

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