Anne Applebaum. *Gulag: A History*. New York: Anchor Books, 2004.

Book Review

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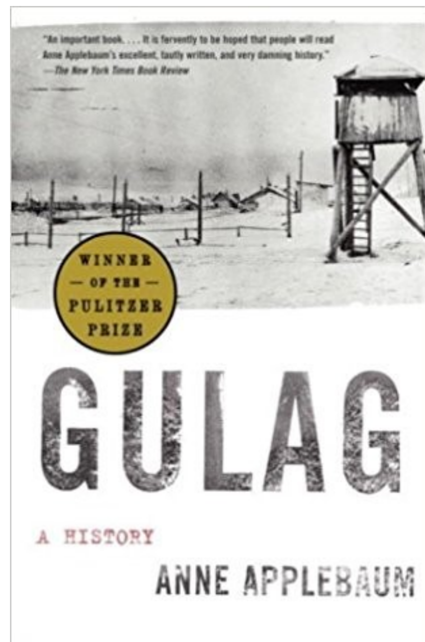

When confronting evil in the world, it is important to look at it with an unblinking eye and to bear witness of what has happened. Anne Applebaum does an important service to the world by bearing witness in *Gulag: A History*. Drawing on extensive Soviet archival information, interviews with prisoners, emigres, guards, and administrators, and memoirs, Applebaum provides a comprehensive look at the breadth and depth of the Stalinist system of work and punishment camps. The Soviet government officially called the camps *Glavnoe Upravlenie ispravitel'no-trudovykh LAGerei* (Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps). These camps came to be collectively known by their Russian acronym: GULAG. It is a sobering tale of what happens when state imperatives, paranoid leadership, draconian laws, uncaring bureaucracy, and incompetence all come together.

The Soviet Union faced daunting challenges from the beginning. One of the first was to develop the resources in the vast lands east of the Urals. Siberia's harsh climate, vast distances, and lack of infrastructure made it difficult to convince anyone to settle there. At the same time, the demands of jump-starting industrialization across the Soviet Union required not only settlers and workers, but highly educated specialists such as engineers, geologists, aircraft designers, and even nuclear physicists as well.

Along with the need to jump-start the Soviet economy was the need to enforce security and control. The Soviet Union, like its Russian core, was a vast state with an ethnically and religiously diverse population. The conclusion of organized counter-Soviet resistance left many areas restive, further increasing the centripetal forces. Such a state, in the Russian view, demands a *vozhd*—a strongman leader, or master. Joseph Stalin held that appellation, while neither his predecessor Lenin, nor those who followed were referred to by that term. As an interesting aside, now that Vladimir Putin has won his fourth election as Russian president, the head of RT television now refers to him at *vozhd*, along with ordinary Russians recently interviewed by the BBC.

Stalin needed manpower; enemies of the state needed to be controlled or eliminated, and the result became the Gulag. Eventually, the Soviet security apparatus arrested millions on one pretext or another and sent them to first build a network of labor camps and then live, work, and perhaps die in them. Another part of Stalin's design was forced resettlement—both to fill empty lands and to ensure that no region was able to become the focal point for revolution. Accordingly, Stalin ordered the relocation of Ukrainian Kulaks, Chechens, Poles, Balts, Tatars, Soviet Germans, and members of many other minorities, who often came to labor in the camps as well. Applebaum skillfully weaves together these disparate elements to show how they combined to form this monstrous system.

To Stalin and his security *apparat*, potential enemies were the same as actual enemies, and were treated as such. Orders went out under Stalin's hand, setting out quotas for numbers of "enemies" of each group to be arrested and sent to the camps. Some were arrested for as little as telling a joke about Stalin—or laughing at one. Some were arrested after being labeled state enemies by their neighbors, who themselves were desperate to do anything to stay out of the camps. Some were arrested because they had technical or medical skills needed for one project or another. Some were arrested simply for being members of the wrong group. Some were arrested for no reason at all. Some were arrested because they actually were criminals or those working against the state; per Applebaum, the last category was the smallest.

While reading Applebaum's accounts, one is struck by the slipshod management of the camps. This reviewer is reminded of a saying he frequently heard from those in Russia about the Soviet period: "We pretended to work, and they pretended to pay us." The Soviets created detailed regulations and standards for the camps, and the camp administrators and inspectors faithfully submitted detailed reports of conditions in the camps, which extensively documented failures to comply with regulations and standards. Applebaum notes that these reports were

almost always ignored, and skillfully uses them to illustrate conditions and common practices across the Gulag.

This history illuminates the extensive and multi-faceted nature of the Gulag. Camps existed for a huge range of purposes—from building roads and canals, to mining and forestry, to both heavy and light manufacturing, to building nuclear power plants, and even to designing aircraft and rockets.

Applebaum spends most of the book chronicling the fate of the *zeks*—a pronunciation of z/k, which was the abbreviation for the Russian *zakljućónnyj*—prisoners. In the camps, many *zeks* were in fact less than prisoners. Instead, they were not even considered citizens, and sometimes not even people. This is in line with the well-known principle in wartime propaganda of painting enemies as somehow less than human, except here, the principle was applied to Soviet citizens who often did nothing wrong, and as mentioned above, were arrested simply due to their ethnicity, their location, or even because they possessed needed expertise. This is a difficult part of the book to read, not because of any lack of skill on Applebaum's part, but because the descriptions are both horrific and seemingly endless.

Another difficult part is Applebaum's accounting of how the *zeks* reacted to their status. Some resisted in ways large and small, some fell in with criminal gangs, some prostituted themselves, some became collaborators, and a few became guards or administrators themselves. Most tragic, are those innocents who convinced themselves that they had indeed committed the crimes for which they were falsely arrested.

Applebaum makes the point that even compared to the Nazi concentration camps, the Soviet treatment of the *zeks* was an entirely different level of depravity. It is impossible to briefly summarize the horrific things done to them—suffice it to say that if it can be imagined, it happened, along with much worse. We are shown how the *zeks*—men, women, and even children lived, and mostly died—either purposefully worked to death, as happened in the infamous Kolyma mines, by their own hand, by accident, or by inches from starvation and disease. Hannah Arendt famously coined the phrase, "the banality of evil." Applebaum shows us the indifference of evil.

Anne Applebaum's account was justly awarded the Pulitzer Prize, but one curious omission is the impact of World War II on life in the camps. There are bits and minor mentions, but it is hard to square the seeming lack of effect in this book with the privations and struggle that the rest of the Soviet Union went through. In the end, this is a minor quibble, which does nothing to subtract from the value of the book.

Afterword

Every once in a while, we are confronted with the existence of things we do not wish were true. Similarly, we are sometimes tempted to believe in a sort of "moral equivalency" between the two sides in the Cold War—a belief that is quickly proved false by exposure to what happened within the Soviet Union. For me, it was my first visit to Vilnius, Lithuania right after the fall of the Soviet Union. There, I toured the former KGB prison while former inmates described matter-of-factly the horrific treatment they had received in rooms that still had bloodstains on the walls and floors. Anne Applebaum does us a similar service on a much larger scale in her book, *Gulag: A History*.