

# The soviet twilight world of horrors

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The Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970, was the author whose works first made the world really aware of the actual existence of, and the ultimate horrors of, the Soviet Union's Gulag. When Solzhenitsyn had, in Estonia, prepared the manuscript of the *The Gulag Archipelago* for print, and sent it secretly to the West, he was arrested by the Soviet authorities and expelled from the "workers' paradise". This, of course, only helped to make him a celebrity and human rights' hero in the West, and added to the credibility and renown of his book.

By now, many other "camp memoirs" have been published, both in Russia and elsewhere. In 2002, for instance, Aleksandr Yakovlev's international foundation, Demokratiya, published a bulky collection of Russian language documents *Gulag (Glavnoye Upravleniye Lagerey) 1918 – 1960*, compiled by Aleksandr Kokurin and Nikita Petrov.

In April 2003, Anne Applebaum's *Gulag: A History* (Penguin Press) appeared simultaneously in the United States and the United Kingdom. Upon first examining the book, we stumble, on the back inside flap of the dust cover, upon a photograph and brief bio of the author. And it comes as somewhat of a surprise, that this lady who has had the wherewithal to confront and expose the ghost of the Soviet Gulag, is charming and youthful in appearance, and has no personal experience of those dreaded forced labour camps. Anne Applebaum, born in 1964, graduated from Yale University and studied later in London and Oxford. She began her career as a journalist in 1988, as Polish correspondent for *The Economist*. In 1992, Applebaum moved to London, to become the foreign news editor and deputy editor-in-chief of *The Spectator*. She has also contributed to such well-known publications as *Foreign Affairs*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Guardian*, etc. After fifteen years in Europe, Applebaum moved back to America, where she is now a member of the editorial board of, and a columnist for, *The Washington Post*.

Her first book, *Between East and West: Across the Borderlands of Europe*, published in 1995, was awarded the Adolph Bentinck Prize. The book is primarily devoted to the various peoples inhabiting the borderlands of the former Soviet Union -- Lithuanians, Poles, Germans, Jews, Byelorussians, Russians, Ukrainians, and others -- and their intriguing history, religion, culture, and national movements. It seems, that in the course of writing this book, she reached the understanding, that although these peoples have endured much throughout their history, their sufferings during the Soviet period of the 20th century overshadow all the past trials and tribulations. It must be added, that Applebaum was, no doubt, prompted to dissect the Gulag by her own background – her maternal grandfather was born in Kobrin, which is in present-day Belarus.

Her chief inspiration for writing the book came from the realisation, that while the crimes committed by the Nazi regime have been investigated very thoroughly, and con-

demned by the international community, the inhuman nature of the no less criminal Soviet Communist regime is, both in the East and the West, treated with connivance. And the issue, of openly condemning the horrid Soviet crimes against humanity, is far too often handled in an evasive manner. Applebaum notes, that a characteristic example of how the inhuman nature of Communism is not given serious thought, is the light-hearted eagerness with which Western tourists, when visiting the former Eastern Bloc, buy the symbolic trappings of the now defunct Soviet empire. At the same time, it would be impossible even to imagine that these same people would indulge in similar trade with the symbols of Nazi Germany.

On the back of the dust cover of *Gulag: A History*, there are acknowledgements from a number of internationally renowned political figures like former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger; President Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski; Harvard University history professor and prominent sovietologist Richard Pipes; well-known Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukowsky; the author of *Stalingrad*, Anthony Beevor; and others. These names certainly serve as proof of the quality of the work of Anne Applebaum.

Applebaum presents the long and complicated history of the Communist concentration camp system, which the Russian abbreviation Gulag stands for, in three parts. Part one deals with the establishment of the first prison camps by the Bolsheviks, and the expansion of the camp network until 1939. During this industrialisation period, these forced labour camps became an essential part of the foundation of the Soviet economy.

In the next part, the author examines the true nature of the Gulag Archipelago, an isolated nightmarish world surrounded by barbed wire fences. There, millions of prisoners -- men, women, and children; young and old; sick and healthy; criminals and political prisoners -- lived in squalid barracks, toiled to fulfil work quotas far beyond their limited capabilities, attempted to keep themselves alive on meagre and often contaminated rations, loved and hated, struggled and surrendered, escaped and adjusted, died and survived. This was a state within a state, created by a brutal totalitarian regime, with its own laws and traditions, and even its own special vocabulary, incomprehensible to outsiders.

This examination of the Gulag continues with the evolution of the camps after the outbreak of WW II. Even the end of the worldwide conflagration did not bring any relief for that twilight world of suffering. As a matter of fact, the population of the Gulag actually increased considerably, remaining more or less stable until Stalin's death. During the subsequent "thaw", a vast number of the prisoners were released, but the Gulag, as a system of suppression, continued its existence, and even during the rule of Gorbachev, dissidents were still held there.

Applebaum is of the opinion, that although there were differences in details, the Nazi and the Communist concentration camps were in fact twins, and that Soviet Communist ideology actually provided a means for systematically practising crimes against humanity. Anne Applebaum expresses her special concern about the fact, that in present-day Russia, there is no general condemnation of Communism as an inhumane and criminal ideology. And, that the people who were once implementing it, continue a tranquil existence in a society that seems to make no public distinction between good and evil.

Investigations into the atrocities which were carried out only a few decades ago, are conducted only by a few NGO's like the Memorial society and some enthusiastic historians – the state has distanced itself completely from such activities. The President himself says he is proud of having been a KGB officer and cheka agent; former communists are still in power, not only in Russia but also in several former satellite states of the Soviet Union. The imperialist policy of a big power is held in great respect in Russia and there are very few people who are ready to take the skeletons out of their own cupboards. The great majority are ready to let everybody live on with their skeletons so as to escape unpleasant disclosures about their own recent past.

To write her book, Applebaum has made use of an impressive amount of studies into, and memoirs related to, the subject. Most of these have been in English or Russian, but she has also found French and Polish language materials, as well as works of fiction and even so-called “camp poetry”. In addition to the published sources and archive materials (for instance, the extensive materials of the Russian *Memorial* society), Applebaum has also relied upon oral history. This consists of interviews she made in the period 1997-2001, both in Russia and elsewhere, with people who had had, in one way or another, dealings with the Gulag.

Most probably, Applebaum has never been to Estonia, and therefore, the number of Estonian sources she has made use of is small, but at least they are not conspicuous by their absence. There are, for instance, the memoirs of Otto Tief, the head of the last legitimate Government of the Republic of Estonia to be formed just before Soviet troops re-occupied Estonia in 1944, and the collection of reminiscences compiled by amateur historian Hilda Sabbo.

*Gulag: A History* is characterized by a fluent and emotional style, and by frequent quotations from those who had themselves experienced the horrors of the Gulag. At the same time, the author makes a point of being objective and true to the facts. Perhaps, the book does not contain much in the way of facts and information that would be strikingly new to those who are already quite familiar with the history of Eastern Europe and the Gulag. But *Gulag: A History* serves a broader purpose perfectly well -- it prevents a horrid chapter of our recent past from sinking into oblivion. The book stirs our conscience just when it is about to doze off, and sounds the alarm when the principles of democracy tend to be forgotten. Anne Applebaum's book is soon to be published in German, French, Italian, Dutch, Polish, and Hungarian. Hopefully, there will, soon, also be an Estonian translation of *Gulag: A History*, thus making a worthy complement to *The Black Book of Communism*, which came out in Estonian in the year 2000.