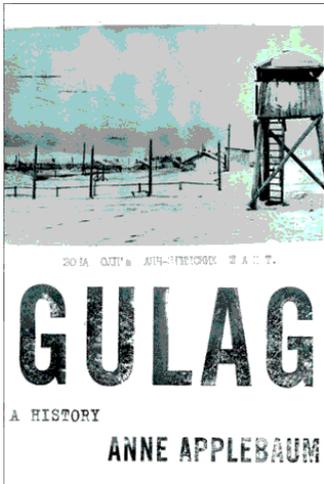

Gulag: A History by Anne Applebaum (2003), 717 pages.



Anne Applebaum was born in Washington D.C. in 1946. Following studies at Yale and Oxford, she became East European correspondent for important British and American periodicals. Presently she is a columnist and editorial page writer of The Washington Post. Her husband Radek Sikorski's book *Full Circle: A Homecoming to Free Poland* was reviewed on our pages in September 1997.

Our Library contains many books, written in Polish or English, devoted to Gulags, and judging by our circulation records, they evoke continued interest. No surprise here, as many members (or their older relatives) may have been directly affected by them and wish to compare their recollections with what some writers relate. We can be grateful to the author for her superb job as she narrates the history of one of the most barbaric institutions known to man. Its original name had an almost neutral meaning: Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei (main camp administration), but in fact 18 million people crossed the camps' gates, almost five million never to return.

Part One deals with the origin of Gulags in 1917 when Lenin ordered that any individual declared a "class enemy" could not be trusted and should be treated worse than an ordinary criminal. This distinction had a profound effect on the Soviet penal system, starting with the invention of concentration camps by Trotsky, made possible by the empty spaces vacated by prisoners of war who went home after the Brest Litovsk peace settlement. One hundred camps, two million beds! The new prison regime had some resemblance to the Tsarist terror years, but in reality there was significant difference. The "politicals" of the previous century were offered, quite frequently, humane conditions. Polish history offers examples of "exiles" who lived fairly "normal" lives, except for the "katorga" groups. The concept of the latter was revived in full force by the Soviets in the late 20s under the command of Stalin. The dire economic situation brought about the ruthless resettlement of "kulaks," diligent farmers with a few more cows or pigs than others. Of course, the so-called landowners disappeared forever. Two million Ukrainians were expelled from their property and 100,000 were immediately sent to Gulags. Soon thereafter, the grandiose plan for the White Sea Canal was created, with Stalin demanding it had to be built in 20 months by Gulag inmates. No modern techniques were used, just picks and shovels, and handmade wheelbarrows. Norms were established, and those who exceeded them were given cherished rewards. One person earned 10 kilos of extra bread in one day; the happy worker ate all of it at once, by himself. This infamous period was "successfully" completed by a radical purge of the party ranks which included execution of such luminaries as Marshall Tukhachevsky, Kamenev, Zinoviev, and Yezhov. Part one ends with 1939.

The second part of the book does not use a chronological order. Rather, it discusses the Gulag by subject matter. Separate chapters treat various aspects such as arrests, transport ordeals, camp selections, daily life, punishments, rewards, women and children, survival strategies, possible escapes. It is a grim narrative, documented extensively. Applebaum searched through Russian archives and read endless volumes or files, carefully selecting appropriate fragments for each sub-chapter. She quotes over two thousand excerpts, and thus the authenticity of the testimonials is beyond doubt. Her reporter's instinct dictates that each sub-chapter should be self-contained, having a logical structure and judicious observations. She refrains from inserting personal feelings, even when relating horrors.

Lastly, part three covers Gulags from 1940 through 1986, again in chronological form. It begins with the high point of the camps' existence when their population usually exceeded two million. These were not the "old" residents who expired by the thousands but the new replacements arriving by cattle cars. There occurred the annexation of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus (formerly a part of Poland), the deportation of thousands of Poles and Baltic nationals, the surprise attack by Hitler's armies, a hurried evacuation of some camps, and the dramatic turn of events following the battle of Stalingrad. The tragic end of the Russian POWs liberated from German captivity and mercilessly killed in their own motherland. However, the edifice of the monumental crime apparatus called Gulag was slowly but inevitably crumbling, although its denizens did not give up readily. After all, it extended over the entire Soviet Union with its numerous republics, dominated countries such as East Germany, the Baltics, Poland, and the Balkans. The gradual change began with the death of Stalin in 1953, was shortly revived during the Brezhnev regime, and finally this hell came to an end in 1989.

In the Epilogue, the author herself is puzzled by the story that she just told. To her, Russia's lack of interest in its past (except for Moscow's and St. Petersburg's formidable palaces) is astonishing. "The arrogant contempt for its fellow citizens by the 'new elite' can convert Russia into a sort of northern Zaire," she remarks. We, too, are inclined to ask questions. Where are the custodians of the memories of crimes that lasted 70 years? How can we wonder about the lack of interest in the West when the East does not remember its victims? What motivated the Russian multitudes to blindly follow the man who created this infernal ordeal? For so many, compensation is

impossible: some victims barely reached the Urals, others survived just a few weeks of the Siberian cold. As we turn the last page of this memorable book, we can only hope that the 21st century will bring better times. There is no doubt in this reviewer's mind that this formidable book merits its prize.

George E. Suboczewski