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Gulag: A History

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GULAG

A HISTORY

ANNE APPLEBAUM

Performed by
Laural Merlington



Synopsis

Pulitzer Prize, General Nonfiction, 2004
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 recreates 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 20th century.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 27 hours 45 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Brilliance Audio

Audible.com Release Date: March 15, 2012

Language: English

ASIN: B007KI5TCY

Best Sellers Rank: #85 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Ideologies & Doctrines > Communism & Socialism #100 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Europe #157 in Books > History > Asia > Russia

Customer Reviews

I find books about the gulag and prison life very interesting. This is a very extensive, thorough, and complete book about the Gulag. Very interesting! I'm amazed at how much research the author devoted to this book.

I knew nothing about USSR/SOVIET UNION/RUSSIAN history until I read a book about the German Invasion, "LENINGRAD-THE EPIC SIEGE 1941-1944", by Anna Reid. A tremendous book, which was the beginning of my obsession with life under Josef Stalin, a most brutal Dictator, right up next to Mao and Hitler, in the 20th Century. I needed to know more, and I can tell you that this is, by far, one of the greatest books I've Ever read, regardless of the genre. I'm no fancy critic, but if you really

want to know what tortures and torments Josef Stalin and his "henchmen", for lack of a better word, perpetrated on his own people, and the people of other, surrounding countries, you must read this book. I was particularly interested in reading about the GULAG, a word that literally struck terror into me while I was growing up. Which shows just how much a word such as GULAG, or Siberia, could scare a girl who was 10yrs old in 1975. Author Anne Applebaum has written a very detailed, yet human book about the Concentration Camps, Forced Labor Camps, Prison Camps, and all the regular prisons, too. All I can really say is how profoundly this book has affected my life. There are so many stories, right out of survivors mouths, that I would have to re-read a page, here and there, just to make sure I had read it correctly. Also, many archives became available for people to research, and Ms. Applebaum does a magnificent job of taking these records of the atrocities, inflicted on at least 20 million people, and writing about them in such a way you are literally hooked from page one. It is worth every single moment of your time to read it. Incomprehensible and shocking sound like compliments when trying to describe this amazing literary feat. Ms. Applebaum received a Pulitzer Prize for this masterpiece, and deservedly so. Every school should be using this as a classroom text. It simply must be read! Absolutely 5 stars; I give it infinite stars! Thank you, connie markarian

Equality. Brotherhood. Soviet slave labor. For profit? Downfall. These are the words that describe the progression from liberal idealism to the imprisonment and deportation of over 28 million Soviet citizens and foreigners to what were called the Gulags, labor camps spread out across much of the now defunct Soviet Union that held those deemed "criminals" and "politicals." Not until 1962 when Aleksandr's Solzhenitsyn's One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich was published did the rest of the world recognize that the Soviet vision of a worker's paradise was nothing more than barbed wire and bondage. Such overwhelming numbers should make anyone pause for a moment and question why people were willing to tolerate such abuse. While there may not be an easy answer to this question, author Anne Applebaum poses an even more daring question: Why has the world paid so little attention to a system of oppression that destroyed the lives of millions of people? In her introduction, for example, Applebaum makes a compelling argument when she describes American and West European tourists purchasing t-shirts and memorabilia from the Stalinist Soviet era. Would those same tourists in their right mind be caught wearing a Nazi armband or a t-shirt with Hitler's image on it? We know that Hitler and the Nazis stood for racial superiority and Social Darwinism, but are the Communist crimes against humanity less tragic because their stated goal of a classless society was somehow nobler? This question Applebaum poses is worth the price and

time a reader will spend examining the history, the life, and the downfall of the Gulag in the former Soviet Union. In Part One: The Origins of the Gulag, 1917-1939 Applebaum briefly contrasts prison camps under the Czars to that of the Bolsheviks, where Lenin deemed those who were "class enemies" were to be sent to the camps initially to live in separate quarters from the criminals. There is the Great Turning Point of 1929 when Maxim Gorky, an author initially critical of Bolshevik power, visited and then wrote a glowing review of Solovetsky prison, even though the event was clearly staged. This was also the year that Joseph Stalin took a personal interest in the Gulag so that he could generate profits for the country's industrialization plan. His inane love affair with constructing the White Sea Canal using Gulag laborers would lead to the deaths of over 25,000 prisoners, a pyrrhic victory considering that it was built so poorly that no ships have sailed on it since its completion. When I read that Stalin was using slavery as a means of generating wealth, the world should have recognized that Communism was not that different from Fascism. What starts out as a macro analysis of a bygone prison system quickly becomes personal in Part Two: Life and Work in the Camps. There are many interesting chapters in this section, but two that stand out are the chapters on arrests and the prisoners. The decision to arrest people can at best be described as "nonsensical" and at its worst deliberate. Those who were deemed kulaks or "prosperous" peasants, those who somehow had contact with foreigners or were labeled foreigners, and those pegged as "socially dangerous elements" found themselves quickly arrested and either deported, shot, or sentenced to a prison camp, whose severity depended on their actions against the state. Of particular interest is the culture of the Gulag in terms of those deemed criminals or politicals. Those who were considered politically subversive were reviled more than criminals who had committed heinous crimes such as rape and murder. Finally, there is the apex and rapid downfall of the Gulag, where Applebaum provides more statistics on life inside during World War II. In 1941, for example, over 352,000 prisoners died, and by the end of the war more than two million would perish. Near the end and right after the war, she also lists the thousands of foreign nationals and Soviet minorities who were deported or were arrested. Of particular interest are the thousands of ethnic Muslims such as Chechens and Tartars who were forced from their lands and were not allowed to return. Applebaum does not explicitly state this, but one can surmise that much of the terrorism we encounter today can be traced back to the decisions of Joseph Stalin. Surprisingly, in 1953, right after Stalin's death, there were close to 2.5 million prisoners in a Gulag, the highest at any point. While the Gulag officially ended after Stalin's death, there were still political dissidents in prison camps well into the 1980s under Gorbachev. What is particularly incredible about Applebaum's book is her ability to capture the sentiments of former Soviet citizens during and after the era of the

Gulag. In her travels in the former Soviet Union, Applebaum describes people's mostly distained reactions when they discovered her interest in the Gulag. Vladimir Putin, a former KGB agent and current president of Russia, reflects this unwillingness to own up to the past other than to mention that he sees no reason to dwell upon it. Right after World War II, West Germans underwent "de-Nazification" so that they could regain their humanity. Based on Applebaum's book, shouldn't the world expect the same from Russians? Last time I checked, actions speak louder than even the right words.

This book was a huge undertaking by the author. Obviously the result of many years of study. Appelbaum is objective and thorough in her depiction of life in the soviet camp system. If you only read one English language book on the gulag, make it this one. 5 stars.

Everybody should read this book

I had already read various books about the Russian prison system, BUT this book just blows me totally away. The Things that went on in the camps was enough to make me sick! Not to mention what the people themselves endured Just getting to the camps!!!! The very system of the Gulag was just hellish!!!

Your knowledge of 20th century Russia isn't complete unless you understand the place that the Gulag had in the Soviet Union. This depressing story is made accessible by virtue of Ms. Applebaum's clear prose, and her organization by topic of the material. This is a great book for those of us who found Solzhenitsyn's long novels impossible to read, and a great companion for those intrepid souls who were able to make it through Solzhenitsyn.

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