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The archipelago sunk in memory

Anne Applebaum's book on the history of the Gulag invites one to reflect on the meaning of emptiness: in history and in one's head.

Not long ago, a girl who had recently graduated from a provincial secondary school asked me, "What is it, this Gulag?" She claimed that there was no mention of it at school and denied that she'd been a bad pupil. Then, after a moment's reflection, she added: "But my grandfather was *there*." This seems to suggest that Anne Applebaum's book *Gulag: A History of the Soviet Camps* seems to have come out too late. (Try to imagine a world where any testimonies or books about the Nazi regime became available for the first time, say, thirty years after the end of the Second World War, around 1973, the year Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* appeared.) But perhaps it is not that Applebaum's book has been tardy – it did not have any real chance of being published earlier since Soviet archives became partly accessible only after the collapse of the USSR and, like any other work with Gulag as its subject matter, which required research in Russia, it was possible only after 1991. It may simply be that as an object of interest Gulag has sunk into oblivion. I am a case in point – at least as far as this particular book is concerned and, I must admit, to two other seminal works on Soviet terror – Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* and Robert Conquest's *The Great Terror*. Both of these I read around 1980 or perhaps a little earlier, and it involved a certain amount of secrecy. This quiet "crime" evoked sweet feelings of conspiratorial resistance, albeit only in terms of reading forbidden literature. The horrors that it described had no effect on my life; for thinking and conversation purposes, it was as if they hadn't existed at all, even though both the perpetrators and victims were still around. In 1990 when it was suddenly possible to subscribe to Solzhenitsyn's collected works, published as a supplement to the magazine *Novy Mir*, it seemed like something so exciting it was hard to believe. Yet by the time the last volumes were due to come out I failed to receive them because the Soviet Union had already collapsed and, with it, the interest in Solzhenitsyn and the great Soviet terror.

As far as the Russians themselves are concerned, Applebaum notes that events as recent as the mid-20th century seem like ancient history to them. And so her book seems to have been written for people who have landed from the moon and have never heard of Gulag. They are probably not so few in number, but there will be even more of those for whom knowledge of Gulag is only an ideological chart with which to find their way in a world that is just as schematic. The impression of this weird and completely alien world of the Gulag is exacerbated by the rather too literal translation of the original into Latvian despite the fact that our language has managed to assimilate many of

the words, concepts and realities that originated in the Gulag. To a Latvian it seems strange to read about NKVD troops marching "across the tundra dressed in thick fur coats and firm boots," or about mud when referring to the uninhabited taiga, or, completely comical: "We each received a pair of long underpants as well as a black tunic (!)..." I can quite believe that it was put that way in English but one would think that just a little more imagination and Soviet experience would serve to prevent one from making tunics part of the inmate garb in Soviet concentration camps. In deference to American ignorance, many words are explained, which, to the reader with Soviet background might seem self explanatory – *chefir, tundra, taiga, balanda, barak, etap, feldsher, kolkhoz, kulak, makhorka, parasha, psikhushka, samizdat, stakhanovite, valinki, zek, zona* ... Many words are simply left in the original Russian, providing only explanations of their meaning – apparently on the basis of an assumption that there are no equivalents in the Western world. One example is *banya* (bathhouse in Russian), which the author probably considers a uniquely Russian concept. Those with knowledge of the Russian language will be surprised by the explanation of the camp term *dokhodyagi* (the dying, literally – "goners"), where the verb *dokhodit'* has been translated as "to reach": the dying are therefore sarcastically referred to as those who have "reached socialism". All that said, however, I think that Applebaum has managed to avoid the naiveté and incomprehension that are not unusual for a Western historian when speaking of the Soviet system. Her earnest explanations will be useful for those who are fortunate enough not to know anything about the Gulag.

Writing the previous paragraph, I was aware of my somewhat suspect position as "someone who knows" – it may have stemmed from my conviction that I somehow already knew most everything Applebaum has written about. I knew the language, I knew the Soviet everyday life and, apparently, the chief sources Applebaum had relied on were also mine – Solzhenitsyn, Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* and Evgeniya Ginzburg's *Into the Whirlwind*¹. (Applebaum has made use of a far greater number of sources and has performed a substantial work of research; the bibliography, the list of works, documents and interviews she has conducted is valuable in its own right.) However the issue at stake here is not so much knowledge of the Gulag as the illusion that I am better able to understand the Soviet phenomenon itself – from the inside, so to speak. My word, that's not true. If there's anything at all to understand about the Gulag, then I don't understand it and neither does Applebaum.

Over the last ten years or more, I have become less and less interested in Soviet concentration camps and have paid almost no attention whatsoever to the arguments that took place in Russia in the early 1990s over the nature and credibility of gulag testimonies. And so reading Applebaum's book I suddenly realized something I really should have "known" or at least imagined: almost all the authors of the serious memoirs and books on the Gulag – Evgeniya Ginzburg, Lev Razgon, Varlam Shalamov, Alexander Solzhenitsyn – had been informers (of one or another kind, usually for a short time) or even agents of the security services as was Boris Dyakov. (Remarkably, his codename was Woodpecker, which is closely associated with the action of knocking. The same Russian verb *stuchat'*, to knock, in slang also means to inform on!) It is even possible that *all* the prisoners who spent a long time in the camps and survived were "trusted persons" of the administration, or *pridurki*. From this perspective, Applebaum's dedication sounds strange – "to those who described what happened" – when compared to Viktor Frankl's conclusion in his renowned book on the German concentration camps *Man's Search for Meaning*: "we who returned know, and can say with all conviction: "The best

did not return!"

My reference to Frankl is perhaps a bit premature because up till now, I consciously tried to avoid comparisons of the two regimes, Nazi and Communist. Sandra Kalniete (former EU Commissioner who as a child was deported to Siberia) did not avoid it when speaking at the 2004 Leipzig Book Fair. After saying these words, "both totalitarian regimes – Nazi and Communist – are equally criminal," the vice-president of the German Jewish Central Council Solomon Korn, together with some colleagues, stood up and left the room; this raised a great commotion in the German press over the next days. One of the main criticisms Korn levelled at Kalniete was based on the politically "correct" opinion that the crimes of Nazism and Communism and their ideologies must not be compared, although Korn's reaction was probably a reflection of the fears of rising anti-Semitism in the New Europe. (He saw Kalniete's claims about Soviet crimes from a victim's point of view as the wish to avoid responsibility for Latvians' own crimes against the Jews.)

Applebaum and the reviewers of her book have no hesitation in placing both criminal regimes alongside each other. Indeed, the cover of the American edition calls the Gulag "Russia's forgotten Holocaust". Soviet concentration camps are compared to Auschwitz and extracts from what reviewers have said give the impression that they were truly shocked by what they had read, as they – perhaps a different "they" – had been by Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. Already in the introduction, Applebaum tries to find a reason for this "ignorance" pointing out the significant changes undergone by the Soviet Union during the whole period of its existence, the lack of visual information about Soviet concentration camps, the influence of the left in the West, the attraction of communist ideology, Soviet propaganda and one of the most important reasons – the role of Stalin's Soviet Union in the defeat of fascism. The latter gave almost *carte blanche* to the Soviet Union to carry on with the internal terror and placed the Western allies in an uncomfortable position: "No one wants to think that we defeated one mass murderer with the help of another." Simple proof of this claim, if such were needed, is the following fact about Soviet camps mentioned in Applebaum's book: "As the Red Army marched across Germany in 1945, the Soviet Military Administration immediately began to construct them, eventually setting up eleven of these "special" concentration camps *spetslagerya* – in all. Two of them, Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald, were located on the site of former Nazi concentration camps."

Applebaum compares the concentration camp systems of both totalitarian regimes. Historically, the Bolsheviks were considerably ahead of the Nazis – the first camps in Soviet Russia began to be built in 1919 and by 1920 there were already 84 camps for the enemies of the regime. At its peak the Gulag consisted of 476 camp complexes each comprising from a few to hundreds of separate camps. The author points out the main feature the camps of the two regimes had in common – the need for an "enemy" or "Untermensch". Put simply, a principle was necessary whereby people could be incarcerated. In Germany Gypsies, homosexuals and Jews became this persecuted group, whereas in the Soviet Union the designation "enemy of the people" in fact meant that any group could fall victim to the whims of the authorities. Applebaum also points out the principal differences between the two concentration camp systems and not just in terms of the killing methods involved. The Nazis used gas chambers but their Soviet colleagues made do with "simple" shooting (although there is evidence of Soviet security services using car exhaust fumes to kill).² People in the Soviet Union, in camps or

outside, perished not so much because they were exterminated according to a plan (as was the case in Nazi Germany where there were camps specifically for extermination or corpse production), but rather because of the confusion and pointlessness of the system. Moreover, the basic task of Soviet concentration camps, if we discount ideological "work therapy", was economic in nature – the mass exploitation of cheap (slave) labour. Hopes of surviving in Soviet concentration camps were certainly greater than under the Nazis but they nevertheless rapidly diminished taking into account Soviet "economic" management practice and the sentences of five, ten and twenty–five years.

Taking into account the limited amount of information about the Soviet system of terror, statistical arguments are often evoked in order to assess the volume of the crimes committed and to evaluate the "degree of evil" as embodied by one or another perpetrator. *The Black Book of Communism* gives the number of victims of communist regimes at 100 million (this also includes the communist regimes in Asia) but the number of those murdered by the Nazis has been calculated at approximately 25 million. Knowing full well that a book on the history of the Gulag cannot omit such calculations, Applebaum rightly points out that they are only approximate and she stops at 28.7 million people who had been involved in forced labour in the USSR of which 2,749,163 had died. Speaking of the victims of the red terror in the Soviet Union in general, it is almost impossible to give a precise figure but the number of deaths has been put at between 10 and 20 million. In a way, these figures lessen the significance of the death of each murdered individual but they do, however, allow us to speak of extermination, i.e., genocide of whole groups of people, including nations.

The statistics of large numbers leave no room for imagination. Applebaum has made use of a wide range of sources to write a popular history book, which endeavours to provide a comprehensive examination of the development of the Gulag. The work contains hardly any judgement. Moreover, the few examples of irony I noticed are an indication that she really does observe Soviet absurdity from a distance. For example, writing about the arrest and execution of a Latvian Eduards Berzins, the director of *Dalstroi* (Far Northern Construction Administration), on the absurd charges of "counter–revolutionary sabotage–wrecking activities and organising a spy–diversionist Trotskyist organisation in Kolyma, which was allegedly shipping gold to the Japanese government and plotting a Japanese takeover of the far east," as well as espionage on behalf of England and Germany, Applebaum comments wryly: "Clearly the *Dalstroi* boss had been a very busy man." I don't think this is funny.

Anne Applebaum, like most of us, has never been imprisoned and so her chosen genre of "observer from the sidelines" is understandable. Her book cannot expect to have the emotional effect of, say, Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* or even Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, which is much more literary than this history of the Gulag. The strength of Applebaum's book lies precisely in its "scientific" approach and neutrality. However, her sources are often not neutral, either in fact or style. For example, when speaking of the children born in the camps:

I saw the nurses getting the children up in the mornings. They would force them out of their cold beds with shoves and kicks [...] pushing the children with their fists and swearing at them roughly, they took off their nightclothes and washed them in ice–cold water. The babies didn't even dare cry. They made

little sniffing noises like old men and let out low hoots. This awful hooting noise would come from the cots for days at a time. Children already old enough to be sitting up or crawling would lie on their backs, their knees pressed to their stomachs, making these strange noises, like the muffled cooing of pigeons.

Or when describing the Asian strangers who had been dragged into the Soviet meat grinder:

Even in the waiting-room they clasped their stomachs in pain, and the moment they entered behind the partition burst into a sorrowful whining, in which moans were mixed indistinguishably with their curious broken Russian. There was no remedy for their disease [...] they were dying simply of homesickness, of longing for their native country, of hunger, cold and the monotonous whiteness of snow. Their slanting eyes, unused to the northern landscape, were always watering and their eyelashes were stuck together by a thin yellow crust. On the rare days on which we were free from work, the Uzbeks, Turcomen and Kirghiz gathered in a corner of the barrack, dressed in their holiday clothes, long coloured silk robes and embroidered skullcaps. It was impossible to guess of what they talked with such great animation and excitement, gesticulating, shouting each other down and nodding their heads sadly, but I was certain that it was not of the camp.

In any case, figures alone do not set off the mechanism to compare evils. One paragraph was enough for me:

All of which sounds very civilised – except that another order gave camps permission to remove the dead prisoners' gold teeth. These removals were meant to take place under the aegis of a commission, containing representatives of the camp medical services, the camp administration, and the camp financial department. The gold was then supposed to be taken to the nearest state bank.

This is not a reference to the Nazi death camps, as it might at first seem.

Commenting on the "Kalniete scandal" that arose from comparing two criminal regimes, Polish historian Pavel Mahceovich asked, how in the end are we to measure the degree of criminality – "by ideological criteria, by the precise numbers of victims or by the method of extermination?" Applebaum's book proves that there are no arguments that would permit the claim that Nazism was incomparably "more evil" than communism. Moreover, I doubt if anyone could accuse the author of being an anti-Semite trying to relativise the evil done to the Jewish people. Additionally, in examining the formation of the Soviet concentration camps, Applebaum also draws our attention to Russia's imperialist policy with regard to the subjugation of small nations, which is based on the coloniser's ideology of superiority. This view of "native tribes" brings it closer to the theory of white supremacy adopted by the Nazis but it was precisely the ideology of racism that later led to the conclusion that the evil of Nazism was unique.

Despite being a bestseller in the West, *The Gulag Archipelago* did not manage to create a new attitude towards the Soviet system but became a kind of dissident's handbook, and after the collapse of the USSR its circle of readers shrank to almost zero. Recalling the book's sad fate, I won't attempt to predict the future of Applebaum's book but I think it might well become a convenient source of reference for specialists. I doubt if the research into communist terror should be directly associated with the growing threat of terror in the West as the author would justify the relevance of her work. It is too late to return to the possibility that "If the Russian people and the Russian elite remembered – viscerally, emotionally remembered – what Stalin did to the Chechens", deporting all the Chechens to the steppes of Kazakhstan, "they could not have invaded Chechnya in the 1990s, not once and not twice". When considering the hushing-up of the Gulag in post-Soviet Russia, Applebaum compares it to the evaluation process of Nazism in Western Germany where 85,000 Nazis were sent for trial. (Of these, writes Applebaum, only less than 7,000 were actually convicted. "The trials were notoriously corrupt, and easily swayed by personal jealousies and disputes. The Nuremberg Trial itself was an example of "victor's justice" marred by dubious legality and oddities, not least of which was the presence of Soviet judges who knew perfectly well that their own side was responsible for mass murder too.") Her conclusion, albeit with reference to the chairman of the Russian rehabilitation commission, that the main reason why the gulag has been forgotten in Russia is the current rulers who still have associations with the Soviet regime, seems a little weak.

But there has to be some kind of reason. Although the author speaks of the ideological and economic absurdity of Soviet concentration camps, like any normal person, she nevertheless tries to find a cause, any cause for this inconceivable mass terror. Quite often for her, this cause turns out simply to be Stalin. And thus she is not able to accept that the deaths of millions of people during the time of the red regime could be completely absurd. The Gulag, unlike Nazism, has not been a lesson to anyone – not to the survivors, not to the organisers, not to the West, not to the East. However, forgetting the Gulag does not make it go away and Applebaum is not a psychotherapist who can help to cure the trauma of communism. Western politicians will still have to treat Russia's communist past as a hot potato. At the same time, keeping silent about its ties to this past, today's Russia will not for a long time be able to free itself from its great power chauvinism; Russians will always be destined to find themselves in a situation of civil irresponsibility and the history of the 20th century will never, never be able to untangle itself from the webs of ideology. Too late to be thinking about the Gulag? Great, let's not think then! And let's abandon any hope of understanding why our heads are so messed up.

In a word, we'll all just will live alongside the invisible archipelago of the Soviet labour and death camps forever.

¹ The book's Russian title, *Krutoi Marshrut*, seems to suggest a head-spinning road; "krutoi" in Russian criminal slang also means an authoritative thief as well as describing something as being superior.

² When speaking of Soviet mass murders, which tend to be toned down in comparison with the subsequent elimination of the Jews, Applebaum writes: "Similar atrocities took place all across the border regions. In the wake of the Soviet withdrawal, the NKVD left about 21,000 prisoners behind and freed another 7,000. In a final burst of violence, however, departing NKVD troops and Red Army soldiers murdered nearly 10,000 prisoners in dozens of Polish and Baltic towns and villages – Vilnius, Drohobycz, Pinsk. They shot them in their cells, in the courtyards of their gaols, in nearby forests. As they retreated, NKVD troops also burned down buildings and shot civilians, sometimes murdering the owners of the houses in which their own troops had been quartered." I'm ashamed to say it but the only popular

"historical" source about Soviet atrocities is *Baigais Gads* (The Year of Terror), published in Riga in 1941 for Nazi propaganda purposes. This fact may, perhaps, be partly explained by my lack of interest but not only – another factor is a wish to not *in any way* defend the Nazi crimes.

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