

# Heritage Lectures

No. 800

Delivered June 24, 2003



Published by The Heritage Foundation

October 16, 2003

## Gulag: Understanding the Magnitude of What Happened

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I am very delighted to be here—for a number of reasons, but mostly because Heritage was one of the organizations that continued to say what was wrong with Communism and continued to criticize it even before everybody else saw the light and agreed that that was the right thing to do. So thank you very much for having me here.

I'd like to begin by pointing out that I am standing before you today in 2003, the year that marks the 50th anniversary of Stalin's death. In commemoration of that event, I'd like to read a very short excerpt from the memoirs of his daughter, Svetlana, who sat by his deathbed until the very end. For the last twelve hours, she wrote:

The lack of oxygen became acute . . . the death agony was terrible. He literally choked to death as we watched. At what seemed to be the very last moment, he opened his eyes and cast a glance over everyone in the room. It was a terrible glance, insane, or perhaps angry, and full of the fear of death.

Within days of Stalin's demise, his henchman Beria, and then Khrushchev, began dismantling one of the dictator's proudest achievements, namely his concentration camps. They did so for many reasons—some had wives and relatives in the camps; some feared retribution from others who did. Most of all, though, they did so because the camps were an economic disaster and had distorted the society they were supposed to help build.

- From Aktyubinsk to Yakutsk, there was not a single major population center that did not have its own local camp or camps, and not a single industry that did not employ prisoners.
- To put it bluntly, former communists have no interest in discussing the past. It tarnishes them, undermines them, hurts their image as "reformers."
- Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, a part of the Western Left struggled to explain, and sometimes to excuse, the camps and the terror that created them precisely because they wanted to try some aspects of the Soviet experiment at home.
- In the end, the foreign policy consequences are not the most important. If we forget the Gulag, sooner or later we will forget our own history too.
- The more we know of the specific circumstances which led to each episode of mass murder, the better we will understand the darker side of our own human nature.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/research/russiaandeurasia/hl800.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/research/russiaandeurasia/hl800.cfm)

Produced by the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Ave., NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
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Yet although they knew this, none of Stalin's Soviet successors—not Nikita Khrushchev and not his reformist successor, Mikhail Gorbachev—was far-seeing enough, or politically powerful enough, to finish the job. As a result, both the economic and the moral legacy of the camps continue to distort Russian and East European society today. One might say that Stalin is dead, but his last, terrible gaze still casts its shadow.

Although the legacy of the Gulag will be the ultimate subject of my talk today, I do want to begin with a brief account of what we have learned about the camps since the time of Stalin's death, and in particular what we know now that we did not know 10 years ago. For I do not want to claim that, in writing a narrative history of the Gulag,<sup>1</sup> I have discovered a new topic that has never been touched upon before: Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, the history of the camp system that he published in the West in the 1970s, largely got it right. Although he had no access to archives, and based all of his writing on letters and memoirs of other prisoners, he did, it now appears, get the general outline of the history right, proving that prisoners' gossip was not so wrong as many historians tried to claim.

### Mining the Archives

In the years I spent researching this book, however, I concluded that archives can make a difference. I was able to work in archives in Moscow and Karelia, and had access to many documents already copied out of archives in St. Petersburg, Perm, Vorkuta, Kolyma, and Novosibirsk. At one point, I was handed a part of the archive of a small camp called Kedrovoy Shor, in the far north, and politely asked if I wanted to buy it—which I did, of course.

What was available to me was often quite ordinary—the day-to-day archive of the Gulag administration, for example, with inspectors' reports, financial accounts, letters from the camp directors to their supervisors in Moscow. Yet when reading these documents, the full extent of the system, and its importance to the Soviet economy, comes into focus.

Thanks to archives, we now know that there were at least 476 camp systems, each one made up

of hundreds, even thousands of individual camps or *lagpunkts*, sometimes spread out over thousands of square miles of otherwise empty tundra. We know that the vast majority of prisoners in them were peasants and workers, not the intellectuals who later wrote memoirs and books. We know that, with a few exceptions, the camps were not constructed in order to kill people—Stalin preferred to use firing squads to conduct mass executions.

Nevertheless they were, at times, very lethal: Nearly one-quarter of the Gulag's prisoners died during the war years. They were also very fluid: Prisoners left because they died, because they escaped, because they had short sentences, because they were being released into the Red Army, or because they had been promoted from prisoner to guard. There were also frequent amnesties for the old, the ill, pregnant women, and anyone else no longer useful to the forced labor system. These releases were invariably followed by new waves of arrests.

As a result, between 1929, when they first became a mass phenomenon, and 1953, the year of Stalin's death, some 18 million people passed through them. In addition, a further 6 or 7 million people were deported, not to camps but to exile villages. In total, that means the number of people with some experience of imprisonment in Stalin's Soviet Union could have run as high as 25 million, about 15 percent of the population.

We also know they were everywhere. Although we are all familiar with the image of the prisoner in the snowstorm digging coal with a pickaxe, there were also camps in central Moscow, where prisoners built apartment blocks or designed airplanes; camps in Krasnoyarsk, where prisoners ran nuclear power plants; fishing camps on the Pacific coast. The Gulag photo albums in the Russian State Archive are chock-full of pictures of prisoners with their camels.

From Aktyubinsk to Yakutsk, there was not a single major population center that did not have its own local camp or camps, and not a single industry that did not employ prisoners. Over the years, prisoners built roads and railroads, power plants and chemical factories; manufactured weapons, furni-

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1. *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

ture, even children's toys. In the Soviet Union of the 1940s, the decade the camps reached their zenith, it would have been difficult in many places to go about your daily business and not run into prisoners.

### The Five Year Plan

We also understand better the chronology of the camps. We've long known that Lenin built the first ones in 1918, at the time of the Bolshevik revolution, as an ad hoc, emergency measure to contain "enemies of the people," prevent counter-revolution, and re-educate the bourgeoisie.

Archives have also helped explain why Stalin chose to expand them in 1929. In that year, Stalin launched the Five Year Plan, an extraordinarily costly attempt, in human lives and natural resources, to force a 20 percent annual increase in the Soviet Union's industrial output and to collectivize agriculture. The plan led to millions of arrests as peasants were forced off their land and imprisoned if they refused to leave. It also led to an enormous labor shortage. Suddenly, the Soviet Union found itself in need of coal, gas, and minerals, most of which could be found only in the far north of the country.

The decision was taken: The prisoners should be used to extract the minerals. To the secret policeman charged with carrying out the construction of the camps, it all made sense. Here is how Alexei Loginov, former deputy commander of the Norilsk camps, north of the Arctic Circle, justified the use of prisoner labor in a 1992 interview:

If we had sent civilians, we would first have had to build houses for them to live in. And how could civilians live there? With prisoners it is easy—all you need is a barrack, a stove with a chimney, and they survive.

None of which is to say that the camps were not also intended to terrorize and subjugate the population. Certainly prison and camp regimes, which were dictated in minute detail by Moscow, were openly designed to humiliate prisoners. The prisoners' belts, buttons, garters, and items made of elastic were taken away from them; they were described as "enemies" and forbidden to use the word "comrade." Such measures contributed to the

dehumanization of prisoners in the eyes of camp guards and bureaucrats, who therefore found it that much easier not to treat them as fellow citizens, or even as human beings.

In fact, this was an extremely powerful ideological combination—the disregarding of the humanity of prisoners, combined with the overwhelming need to fulfill the Plan. Nowhere is this clearer than in the camp inspection reports, submitted periodically by local prosecutors and now kept neatly on file in the Moscow archives.

When I first began to read them, I was shocked both by their frankness and by the peculiar kind of outrage they express. Describing conditions in Volgoglag, a railroad construction camp in Tatarstan, in July 1942, one inspector complained, for example, that "the whole population of the camp, including free workers, lives off flour. The only meal for prisoners is so-called 'bread' made from flour and water, without meats or fats." As a result, the inspector went on indignantly, there were high rates of illness, particularly scurvy, and, not surprisingly, the camp was failing to meet its production norms.

The outrage ceased to seem surprising after I had read several dozen similar reports, each of which used more or less the same sort of language and ended with more or less the same ritual conclusion: Conditions needed to be improved so that prisoners would work harder, and so that production norms would be met. Yet very little was actually done.

The reports reminded me of the inspectors of Gogol's era: The forms were observed, the reports were filed, and effects on actual human beings were ignored. Camp commanders were routinely reprimanded for failing to improve living conditions, living conditions continued to fail to improve, and the discussion ended there.

The level of detail also, however, clears up any remaining doubt about who was in control of the camp, the central government or the regional bosses. Back in Moscow, they knew what the camps were like, and they knew in great detail.

### Distortion of the Economy

Without question, the expansion of the camps distorted the Soviet economy. With so much cheap

labor available, the Soviet economy took far longer than it should have to become mechanized. Problems were solved by calling for more workers. With so many poorly trained people working under coercion, construction was not of the highest quality either. By one account, labor productivity among free workers in the forestry industry was nearly three times that of the prisoners working in the forestry camps.

But the camps also distorted the way people in the lands of the former Soviet Union think about economics, a point I would like to illustrate by describing a trip I took a couple of years ago to the city of Vorkuta, on the Arctic Circle.

Vorkuta's history begins in 1931, when a group of colonists first arrived in the region by boat, up the northern waterways. Although even the tsars had known about the region's enormous coal reserves, no one had managed to work out precisely how to get the coal out of the ground, given the sheer horror of life in a place where temperatures regularly drop to  $-30$  degrees or  $-40$  degrees in the winter, where the sun does not shine for six months of the year, and where—as I can testify—in the summertime flies and mosquitoes travel in great dark clouds.

But Stalin found a way by making use of another sort of vast reserve. Vorkuta's 23 original settlers were, of course, prisoners, and the leaders of that founding expedition were, of course, secret policemen. Over the subsequent two and a half decades, a million more prisoners passed through Vorkuta, one of the two or three most notorious hubs of the Gulag.

With the help of prisoners, the Soviet authorities built a city with shops and schools and later swimming pools. Yet the cost of heating shoddy Soviet apartment blocks for 11 months of the year was astronomical, far more than the value of the coal itself. The city's infrastructure, built on constantly shifting permafrost, required huge efforts to maintain. Miners could, instead, have been flown in and out on two-week shifts, as they are in Canada or Alaska. Nevertheless, Vorkuta, now a city of 200,000 people, kept going throughout the 1970s and 1980s and still exists today.

The truth, of course, is that Vorkuta was and still is completely unnecessary. Why build kindergartens

and university lecture halls in the tundra? Why build puppet theatres? Vorkuta has three. Yet in Vorkuta, you cannot ask such questions, even now.

You cannot ask them, for example, of Zhenya, a retired geologist with whom I spent the better part of a day. Together, we walked around the city, around the prisoners' cemeteries, around the ruined geological institute—a once-solid structure, complete with a columned, Stalinist portico and a red star on the pediment. Although her Polish parents had been arrested and deported here in the 1940s, although she knows and willingly recounts the city's history, Zhenya nevertheless spent a good part of the day railing against the “thief-democrats” and “greedy bureaucrats” who had, rather sensibly, decided to shut the institute down. If your whole life has been associated with a place, it is hard to admit that the place need never have existed.

### **Confused Memory of the Past**

But if Zhenya, herself the daughter of victims, was unable to understand why her city now needs to be dismantled, then who can? And this question brings me to the next part of my talk, in which I would like to ask why the Gulag, about which historians now know so much, and whose economic impact we now understand so much better, is so seldom debated and discussed by Russians.

One of the things that always strikes contemporary visitors to Russia is the lack of monuments to the victims of Stalin's execution squads and concentration camps. There are a few scattered memorials, but no national monument or place of mourning. Worse, 15 years after glasnost, 10 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there have been no trials, no truth and reconciliation commissions, no government inquiries into what happened in the past, and no public debate.

This was not always the case. During the 1980s, when glasnost was just beginning in Russia, Gulag survivors' memoirs sold millions of copies, and a new revelation about the past could sell out a newspaper. But more recently, history books containing similar “revelations” are badly reviewed or ignored. The president of Russia is a former KGB agent who describes himself as a “Chekist,” the word for Stalin's political police.



The reasons for this are not hard to fathom. Life is genuinely difficult in Russia today, and most Russians, who spend all of their time trying to cope, do not want to discuss the past. The Stalinist era was a long time ago, and a great deal has happened since it ended. Post-Soviet Russia is not the same as post-Nazi Germany, where the memories of the worst atrocities were still in people's minds.

The memory of the camps is also confused in Russia by the presence of so many other atrocities: war, famine, and collectivization. Why should camp survivors get special treatment? It is further confused by the link made, in some people's minds, between the discussion of the past that took place in the 1980s and the total collapse of the economy in the 1990s. What was the point of talking about all of that, many people said to me: It didn't get us anywhere.

But there is also a question of pride. Like Zhenya, many experienced the collapse of the Soviet Union as a personal blow. Perhaps the old system was bad, they now feel, but at least we were powerful. And now that we are not powerful, we do not want to hear that it was bad.

Far and away, though, the most important explanation for the lack of debate is not the fears and anxieties of the ordinary Russian, but the power and prestige of those now ruling the country. In December 2001, on the 10th anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, 13 of the 15 former Soviet republics were run by former communists, as were many of the satellite states.

To put it bluntly, former communists have no interest in discussing the past. It tarnishes them, undermines them, hurts their image as "reformers." Sometimes they end discussion subtly; sometimes they do so bluntly. Just a few weeks ago, Hungary's new post-communist government cut the funding and fired the board of directors of Budapest's new museum dedicated to the history of communism and fascism, which the previous government had erected at great cost.

And this matters: The failure to acknowledge or repent affects politics and society across the region. Would the Russians truly be able to conduct a war in Chechnya if they remembered what Stalin did to the Chechens? During the Second World War, Stalin accused the Chechens of collaboration with the

Germans, but instead of punishing collaborators—if there were any—he punished the whole nation. Every Chechen man, woman, and child was put on a truck or a cattle car and sent to the deserts of Central Asia. Thousands wound up in camps. Half of them died. To invade Chechnya again, at the end of the 20th century, was the moral equivalent of Germany re-invading Poland, yet very few Russians saw it that way.

Yet the failure to fully absorb the lessons of the past has consequences for ordinary Russians too. It can be argued, for example, that the Russian failure to delve properly into the past also explains the Russian insensitivity to the slow growth of censorship, and to the continued, heavy presence of the secret police.

It may also explain the stunning absence of judicial and police reform. In 1998, I visited a criminal prison in Arkhangelsk and emerged reeling from what I'd seen. The women's cells, with their hot, heavy air and powerful smells, made me feel as if I were walking back into the past. Next door, in the juvenile cell, I met a sobbing, 15-year-old girl who had been accused of stealing the ruble equivalent of \$10. She had been in jail, without a hearing, for a week.

Afterwards, I spoke to the prison boss. It all came down to money, he told me. The prison warders were rude because they were badly paid. The ventilation was bad because the building was old and needed repairs. Electricity was expensive, so the corridors were dark. Trials were delayed because there were not enough judges.

I was not convinced. Money is a problem, but it is not the whole story. If Russia's prisons look like a scene from a Gulag memoir, and if Russia's courts and criminal investigations are a sham, that is partly because the Soviet legacy does not haunt Russia's criminal police, secret police, judges, jailers, or even businessmen. But then, very few people in contemporary Russia feel the past to be a burden or an obligation at all. Like a great, unopened Pandora's box, the past lies in wait for the next generation.

### Lessons for the West

But do we, in the West, remember the Soviet past any better? One of the reasons I wrote this book

was because I really encountered this subject only while living in Eastern Europe, and I started to wonder why.

Since there are a lot of writers in the room today, I think I can also confess that I was further inspired by an irritating *New York Times* review of my first book, in 1994, which was about the Western borderlands of the former Soviet Union. Although largely positive, of course, it contained the following line:

Here occurred the terror famine of the 1930s, in which Stalin killed more Ukrainians than Hitler murdered Jews. Yet how many in the West remember it? After all, the killing was so—so boring, and ostensibly undramatic.

Were Stalin's murders boring? Many people think so. Put differently, the crimes of Stalin do not inspire the same visceral reaction as do the crimes of Hitler.

Ken Livingstone, a former British member of Parliament, now Mayor of London, once struggled to explain the difference to me. Yes, the Nazis were "evil," he said. But the Soviet Union was "deformed." That view echoes the feeling that many people have, even people who are not old-fashioned members of the British Labor Party: The Soviet Union simply went wrong somehow, but it was not fundamentally wrong in the way that Hitler's Germany was wrong.

Until recently, it was possible to explain this absence of popular feeling about the tragedy of European communism in the West as the logical result of a particular set of circumstances. The passage of time is part of it: Communist regimes really did grow less reprehensible as the years went by. Nobody was very frightened of General Jaruzelski, or even of Brezhnev, although both were responsible for a great deal of destruction. Besides, archives were closed. Access to camp sites was forbidden. No television cameras ever filmed the Soviet camps or their victims, as they had done in Germany at the end of the Second World War. No images, in turn, meant that the subject, in our image-driven culture, didn't really exist either.

But ideology twisted the ways in which we understood Soviet and East European history as well. In fact, in the 1920s, a great deal was known in the West about the bloodiness of Lenin's revolution.

Western socialists, many of whose brethren had been jailed by the Bolsheviks, protested loudly and strongly against the crimes being committed then.

In the 1930s, however, as Americans became more interested in learning how socialism could be applied here, the tone changed. Writers and journalists went off to the USSR, trying to learn lessons they could use at home. *The New York Times* employed a correspondent, Walter Duranty, who lauded the five-year plan and argued, against all the evidence, that it was a massive success—and won a Pulitzer Prize for doing so.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, a part of the Western Left struggled to explain, and sometimes to excuse, the camps and the terror that created them precisely because they wanted to try some aspects of the Soviet experiment at home. In 1936, after millions of Soviet peasants had died of famine, the British socialists Sidney and Beatrice Webb published a vast survey of the Soviet Union, which explained, among other things, how the "downtrodden Russian peasant is gradually acquiring a sense of political freedom."

These sentiments reached their peak during the Second World War, when Stalin was our ally and we had other reasons to ignore the truth about his repressive regime. In 1944, the American Vice President, Henry Wallace, actually went to Kolyma, one of the most notorious camps, during a trip across the USSR. Imagining he was visiting some kind of industrial complex, he told his hosts that "Soviet Asia," as he called it, reminded him of the Wild West:

The vast expanses of your country, her virgin forests, wide rivers and large lakes, all kinds of climate—from tropical to polar—her inexhaustible wealth, remind me of my homeland.

According to a report that the boss of Kolyma later wrote for Beria, then the head of the security services, Wallace did ask to see prisoners, but was kept away. He was not alone in refusing to see the truth about Stalin's system: Roosevelt and Churchill had very cordial relations with Stalin too.

All of that contributed to our firm conviction that the Second World War was a wholly just war, and even today few want that conviction shaken. We

remember D-Day, the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps, the children welcoming American GIs with cheers on the streets. We do not remember that the camps of Stalin, our ally, expanded just as the camps of Hitler, our enemy, were liberated. No one wants to think that we defeated one mass murderer with the help of another.

During the Cold War, it is true, our awareness of Soviet atrocities went up—but in the 1960s, they receded again. Even in the 1980s, there were still American academics that went on describing the advantages of East German health care or Polish peace initiatives.

In the academic world, Soviet historians who wrote about the camps generally divided up into two groups: those who wrote about the camps as criminal and those who downplayed them, if not because they were actually pro-Soviet, then because they were opposed to America's role in the Cold War, or perhaps to Ronald Reagan. Right up to the very end, our views of the Soviet Union and its repressive system always had more to do with American politics and American ideological struggles than they did with the Soviet Union itself.

Together, all of these explanations once made a kind of sense. When I first began to think seriously about this subject, as communism was collapsing in 1989, I even saw the logic of them myself: It seemed natural, obvious, that I should know very little about Stalin's Soviet Union, whose secret history made it all the more intriguing.

More than a decade later, I feel very differently. World War II now belongs to a previous generation. The Cold War is over too, and the alliances and international fault lines it produced have shifted for good. The Western Left and the Western Right now compete over different issues. At the same time, the emergence of new terrorist threats to Western civilization make the study of the old communist threats to Western civilization all the more relevant. It is time, it seems to me, to stop looking at the history of the Soviet Union through the narrow lens of American politics and start seeing it for what it really was.

I should say, of course, that our failure in the West to understand the magnitude of what happened in Central Europe does not have the same

profound implications for our way of life as it does in Russia. But there will be consequences.

For one, our understanding of what is happening now in the former Soviet Union is distorted by our misunderstanding of its history. Again, if we really felt—if we really, viscerally felt—that what Stalin did to the Chechens amounted to genocide, it is not only Vladimir Putin who would be unable to do the same things to them now, but we who would be unable to sit back with any equanimity and watch them.

In the end, the foreign policy consequences are not the most important. For if we forget the Gulag, sooner or later we will forget our own history too. Why did we fight the Cold War, after all? Was it because crazed right-wing politicians, in cahoots with the military-industrial complex and the CIA, invented the whole thing and forced two generations of Americans to go along with it? Or was there something more important happening?

Confusion is already rife. In 2002, an article in the conservative British *Spectator* magazine opined that the Cold War was “one of the most unnecessary conflicts of all time.” Gore Vidal has also described the battles of the Cold War as “forty years of mindless wars which created a debt of \$5 trillion.” Already, we are forgetting what it was that mobilized us, what inspired us, what held the civilization of “the West” together for so long.

And this is not only about the politics of the West. For if we do not study the history of the Gulag, some of what we know about mankind itself will be distorted. Every one of the 20th century's mass tragedies was unique: the Gulag, the Holocaust, the Armenian massacre, the Nanking massacre, the Cultural Revolution, the Cambodian revolution, the Bosnian wars, the Rwandan massacres. Every one of these events had different historical and philosophical origins, and arose in circumstances that will never be repeated. Only our ability to debase and destroy and dehumanize our fellow men has been—and will be—repeated again and again.

Yet the more we understand how different societies have transformed their neighbors and fellow citizens into objects, the more we know of the specific circumstances which led to each episode of mass murder, the better we will understand the darker

side of our own human nature. I wrote my book about the Gulag not “so that it will not happen again,” as the cliché has it, but because it probably will happen again. We need to know why—and each story, each memoir, each document is a piece of

the puzzle. Without them, we will wake up one day and realize that we do not know who we are.

—Anne Applebaum is a columnist and member of the editorial board of *The Washington Post*.