

Book Review

GULAG: A HISTORY¹

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*The detention facility at Guantanamo Bay has become the gulag of our times, entrenching the practice of arbitrary and indefinite detention in violation of international law.*³

In June 2005, Amnesty International's scathing comparison of a U.S. military detention center to the Gulag drew the ire of several political commentators⁴ and revived an ominous word from the lexicon of the Soviet Union. "Gulag"⁵ refers to the vast network of Soviet prison labor camps that began under Vladimir Lenin⁶ and continued until the Soviet Union dissolved in the 1990s.⁷ In light of the ongoing Global War on Terrorism (GWOT),⁸ U.S. military detention centers for enemy combatants could expand. Because increasing numbers of commanders may seek advice on detention operations, judge advocates should study detention center issues and develop the ability to contend with any associated international criticism.⁹

Contending with Amnesty International's criticism must begin with an account of the Gulag, such as Anne Applebaum's award-winning¹⁰ *Gulag: A History*. In *Gulag*, Applebaum provides general readers¹¹ a survey of the "social, cultural, and political framework" of the Gulag camps¹² and illuminates the Gulag's memorable human drama. Applebaum extensively researched her account,¹³ and her impressive array of sources includes government archives, interviews, personal memoirs and earlier, more definitive works on the Gulag.¹⁴ In key sections of the work, however, Applebaum avoids using the

¹ ANNE APPLEBAUM, *GULAG: A HISTORY* (2003).

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³ IRENE KHAN, *Foreword to ANNUAL REPORT OF AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL* (2005), available at <http://web/amnesty.org/report2005/message-eng>.

⁴ See, e.g., Neil Cavuto, *Does Gitmo Matter?*, FOXNEWS.COM, June 14, 2005, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,159571,00.html> (fearing that "[w]e're more inclined to look after the needs of those who hate us [i.e., prisoners in Guantanamo Bay] than to consider for a moment [victims of September 11th terrorist incidents]"); James S. Robbins, *Got Gulag? North Korea Does*, NAT'L REV. ONLINE, June 9, 2005, <http://www.nationalreview.com/robbins/robbins200506090745.asp> (blasting the reference "both for its fallaciousness, and the implicit trivializing of the Soviet Gulag system in which tens of millions were imprisoned and uncountable numbers died"); Cathy Young, *A Long Way from the Gulag*, BOSTON GLOBE, June 6, 2005, at A13 (calling the Amnesty International comment a "broadside" that goes "so far in the other direction").

⁵ "GULAG" was initially an acronym for glavnoe upravlenie lagerei, which means "Main Camp Administration." APPLEBAUM, *supra* note 1, at 50 (emphasis added). It referred to the department of the Soviet secret police responsible for managing the prison labor camps, *id.*, and later to the system of Soviet concentration camps generally. *Id.* at xxv.

⁶ *Id.* at 8-9.

⁷ *Id.* at 562.

⁸ During the summer of 2005, Department of Defense officials sometimes referred to the GWOT as the Global Struggle Against Violent Extremism. See, e.g., Tom Regan, *The 'Rebranding' of the War on Terror*, CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR, July 28, 2005, <http://www.csmoniotr.com/2005/0728/daily/Update.html>.

⁹ See Lieutenant Colonel Paul Kantwill, *Foreword*, ARMY LAW., July 2005, at 1 (stating that international and operational law "has become a core competency of all military attorneys").

¹⁰ *Gulag* won both the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for Non-Fiction and Britain's Duff-Cooper Prize. AnneApplebaum.com, Bio, <http://www.anneapplebaum.com/bio.html> (last visited Mar. 20, 2006) [hereinafter Applebaum Bio].

¹¹ Applebaum defines a "general reader" as a reader who lacks "any specialized knowledge of Soviet history." APPLEBAUM, *supra* note 1, at xxvi.

¹² *Id.* at xviii, xxiii.

¹³ Her bibliography includes twenty-nine interviews, *id.* at 653-54, during which Applebaum's Russian language skills clearly paid huge dividends. As one reviewer noted, she "dearly spent hundreds of hours listening to former prisoners, former guards, and local researchers" throughout the former Soviet Union. Lawrence Uzell, *Remembering the Gulag: Gulag: A History*, FIRST THINGS: A MONTHLY J. ON RELIGION & PUB. LIFE (Nov. 1, 2003) (book review). The depth of these accounts gives *Gulag* an unforgettable personal flavor. The book also gains considerable authenticity from Applebaum's access to previously sealed archival materials concerning the Gulag. APPLEBAUM, *supra* note 1, at 565 ("[T]his book itself is testimony to the abundance of newly available [archival] information.").

¹⁴ See, e.g., *id.* at 88-89 (quoting VARLAM SHAMALOV, KOLYMA TALES 369 (John Glad trans., Penguin Books 3d ed. 1994) (1980)) (Kalamov's description of camp life in the "Berzin era"); *id.* at 362-63 (quoting 2 ALEKSANDR I. SOLZHENITSYN, THE GULAG ARCHIPELAGO, 1918-1956: AN EXPERIMENT IN LITERARY INVESTIGATION 252-54 (Thomas P. Whitney trans., 1973)) (Solzhenitsyn's discussion of "trusties," prisoners who collaborated with camp authorities); Steven Merritt Miner, *The Other Killing Machine*, N.Y. TIMES, May 11, 2003, sec. 7, at 11 (book review) ("[A] great deal of what Applebaum writes about . . . has been told before.").

Gulag's history to critically analyze American detention policies in the GWOT. While Applebaum's rich historical narrative makes *Gulag* interesting reading, her failure to explore a broader range of contemporary lessons, such as the U.S. government's detainee policies in the GWOT, prevents it from being indispensable.

Gulag contains three substantive sections: two sections explain the history of the camps, and one section describes daily life in the camps.¹⁵ Applebaum conveys a wealth of information in her two historical sections. She painstakingly describes the origins of Soviet concentration camps during Lenin's "Red Terror" in 1918,¹⁶ their re-designation as the Gulag after 1928,¹⁷ and their expansion from the Solovetsky Archipelago across the entire landscape of the Soviet Union.¹⁸ She recounts the Gulag's growth under Stalin, who envisioned the camps as a source of cheap labor for Soviet economic development,¹⁹ including massive public works projects.²⁰ Finally, Applebaum explains the Gulag's steady decline under Stalin's successors.²¹

Because Applebaum does not presume that her readers have any specialized knowledge of Soviet history, she methodically develops the Gulag narrative. The copious detail in the historical sections might be overwhelming. For more patient readers, however, these sections will situate the rise and fall of the Gulag labor camps within the larger context of Soviet history and show that the Gulag was an inescapable reality of Soviet life.²² The most memorable part of *Gulag* for general readers may be its middle section that describes the daily lives of camp prisoners, guards, and administrators. This collection of anecdotes is probably Applebaum's greatest contribution to Gulag literature.²³ Each personal story provides a compelling glimpse into the prisoners' suffering, from arrest to transport to confinement in the dreadful camps.

These vignettes also expose the inept management that consistently undermined the Gulag's productivity and exacerbated the misery of the *zeks* (Gulag prisoners). Applebaum explains that "in principle," the camps' operational guidelines should have maximized worker productivity.²⁴ In practice, these guidelines were rarely applied due to the administrator's frequent incompetence and occasional cruelty.²⁵ Although Stalin apparently tied so much of his nation's economic fortunes to the Gulag, the actual conditions in the camps likely hampered camp productivity and Soviet economic growth. He apparently never understood—possibly due to either misinformation from subordinates or his own willful ignorance and denial—that the capacity to work tends to decline when people are cold, starving, poorly housed, and neglected. The stories that Applebaum has compiled illustrate the folly of Stalin's vision and the dreariness of Gulag life better than any matter-of-fact account ever could.

¹⁵ APPLEBAUM, *supra* note 1, at xxvi (explaining the structure of the book).

¹⁶ *Id.* at 9.

¹⁷ The Communist Party Politburo decided in 1928 that all Soviet prisoners would be sent to prison labor camps run by the secret police. *Id.* at 50. That year, the secret police changed the name of the department for camp management to "Main Camp Administration," or GULAG. *Id.*; see *supra* note 5 (explaining the Russian meaning of "GULAG").

¹⁸ APPLEBAUM, *supra* note 1, at 20 ("In the survivors' folklore, Solovetsky was . . . remembered as the first camp of the Gulag."), 36–37 (describing the Gulag's spread). Stalin also moved "special exiles," who were often "rounded up at the same time and for the same reasons as Gulag prisoners," to "remote exile villages" in uninhabited, resource-laden regions of the Soviet Union. *Id.* at xxvi.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 49. Stalin's World War II strategy included a vital role for the camps, with some camps serving as resource extraction centers, see *id.* at 90, and others producing ammunition and war materiel. *Id.* at 450 (noting that thirty-five camps made ammunition, twenty camps made army uniforms, and thousands of inmates built railways, roads, and other infrastructure). Even more importantly, the Gulag provided almost one million badly needed conscripts for the Red Army. *Id.* at 446.

²⁰ *Id.* at 62. The first such project was the 141-mile White Sea Canal between the Baltic Sea and the White Sea. *Id.* Over the course of twenty months, thousands of prisoners from Gulag camps dug the canal with flimsy, handmade tools in extreme climatic conditions. *Id.* at 64–65. Its human costs were enormous: approximately 25,000 canal workers died from exhaustion, starvation, or exposure. *Id.* at 65. The finished canal was only twelve feet deep, making it useless for most commercial vessels. *Id.* at 64.

²¹ *Id.* at 477–78. Widespread amnesty and prisoner releases began under Lavrenty Beria. *Id.* at 479 (explaining that Beria extended amnesty to: (1) prisoners with sentences of five years or less; (2) pregnant women; (3) women with minor children; and (4) prisoners under age eighteen). They continued under Nikita Khrushchev. *Id.* at 509 (noting that 617,000 prisoners were released in the ten months after Khrushchev's speech criticizing Stalin in 1956).

²² See David Remnick, *Seasons in Hell: How the Gulag Grew*, NEW YORKER, Apr. 7, 2003, available at http://www.newyorker.com/critics/books/?030414crbo_books (book review) ("[The Gulag] was everywhere. There were camps not only in the frozen wastes of the Siberian north and the Far East but in every corner of the [Soviet] Empire, including the biggest cities.").

²³ Other critics agree with this assessment. See *id.* ("[T]he book's emotional power is in [Applebaum's] portrait of the victims and what they endured.").

²⁴ APPLEBAUM, *supra* note 1, at 185.

²⁵ For example, camp guards and administrators were rarely top-notch members of the secret police, *id.* at 259–60, and they were sometimes apparent sadists. See *id.* at 272–75. Prisoners often arrived in the camps weakened from their long transport trips and unable to work. *Id.* at 175. They were housed in crowded barracks where professional criminals ruled over a strict and violent caste system, with the knowledge and approval of camp administrators. *Id.* at 282–83. Although the official Gulag workday never exceeded eleven hours, *id.*, with a mandatory eight hours of sleep each night, *id.* at 193, actual workdays often topped sixteen hours. *Id.* at 192.

Unfortunately, Applebaum's historical account is more elaborate documentation than thoughtful analysis of the Gulag system. Applebaum's organization of *Gulag* compounds this deficiency. Applebaum devotes Part Two of *Gulag* to personal vignettes about camp life, but details of camp life also seep into the book's ostensibly historical sections, Parts One and Three. The result is a narrative that sometimes feels repetitive. Details of horrible working conditions and meager food portions are shocking initially, but they grow increasingly less poignant with each subsequent rehashing.

In addition, Applebaum never settles on defining the ultimate goal of the camps, but she fleetingly hints at several possibilities: increasing Soviet economic output, consolidating Stalin's political power, and satisfying Stalin's twisted sense of paranoia.²⁶ Perhaps it is too much to expect a historical overview to draw analytical conclusions. Nonetheless, such conclusions would have given context to the historical details that Applebaum has documented so meticulously.

Most troubling, however, is Applebaum's surreptitious transformation from neutral historian to political commentator in *Gulag*'s introduction and epilogue, both of which occupy extremely noticeable locations in the book. Applebaum's background explains how she could so effortlessly assume this role. She served as the Warsaw correspondent for the *Economist* magazine (1986–88) and as the foreign editor and deputy editor of the *Spectator* magazine (1988–92) before becoming an opinion-editorial columnist and editorial board member of the *Washington Post*.²⁷ Applebaum's political writing seems mildly conservative.²⁸ In *Gulag*, though, her rhetoric leans far enough to the right that conservative reviewers have written fawningly about the book, sometimes launching outrageous attacks against less enthusiastic critics.²⁹

Applebaum injects political commentary primarily through her explanation of the Gulag's historical significance: (1) a better understanding of "old Communist threats to Western civilization" is made "all the more necessary" by "the emergence of new terrorist threats to Western civilization;"³⁰ (2) understanding the Gulag lets American readers "understand our own history" and remember "what mobilized us" and "what inspired us" during the Cold War;³¹ and (3) understanding "how different societies have transformed their neighbors and fellow citizens from people into objects" can lead to an understanding of "the darker side of our own human nature."³² In short, Applebaum uses the history of the Gulag to reveal the general depravity of humans and the specific malevolence of the Soviet Union and Communism. Beyond these trite observations, Applebaum's commentary offers little contemporary insight.

Of course, *Gulag* is not an ideological rant and, through most of its six hundred seventy-seven pages, is instead a fairly evenhanded historical survey. Yet when Applebaum uses political commentary as bookends for her substantive sections, she takes a measured risk. Readers who disagree with her philosophy might find that it tarnishes the rest of *Gulag*. They might reasonably question whether Applebaum has lapsed into tired Cold War propaganda: "a constant focus on victims of communism [that] helps convince the public of enemy evil . . ." ³³ For example, Applebaum devotes a separate chapter to maltreatment of political dissidents after the Gulag had formally dissolved.³⁴ In light of Applebaum's Cold War views, this chapter looks more like a recursive illustration of the vileness of the Soviet regime than a description of an integral part of the Gulag's history.

²⁶ See, e.g., *id.* at 45–49 (describing Stalin's use of the camps to extract resources as part of his Five Year Plans), 94–95 (describing role of the camps in confining political prisoners during the Great Terror of 1937–38), 105 (noting the mass execution of "enemies of the state" within the camps).

²⁷ Applebaum Bio, *supra* note 10.

²⁸ See, e.g., Anne Applebaum, *Blaming the Messenger*, WASH. POST, May 18, 2005, at A17 (mildly criticizing the Bush Administration for its tactic of blaming *Newsweek* for an allegedly erroneous story of *Koran* desecration at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, that sparked protests in Pakistan and Afghanistan); Anne Applebaum, *Defending Bolton*, WASH. POST, Mar. 9, 2005, at A21 (asserting that there is a role in global affairs for the United Nations "as long as that role is limited"); Anne Applebaum, *Planning for Next Time*, WASH. POST, Sept. 7, 2005, at A25 (observing in a detached, clinical, and emotionless manner that future emergency plans should focus on people who lack the means to evacuate areas of pending disaster and who may act "irrationally").

²⁹ See, e.g., Juliana Pilon, *Capturing the Apocalypse*, AM. ENTERPRISE, Sept. 1, 2003, at 52 (calling *Gulag* "nothing short of a masterpiece"); see also David Frum, *A Must Read*, NAT'L REV., May 5, 2003, at *1 (calling *Gulag* a "titanic achievement: learned and moving and profound" and railing against a "peevisly ungenerous" review of *Gulag* by David Remnick, editor of the *New Yorker*). Remnick's "ungenerous" review called Applebaum's book "ambitious," "well-documented," assembled with "extraordinary care," and having "emotional power." Remnick, *supra* note 22.

³⁰ APPLEBAUM, *supra* note 1, at xxiii.

³¹ *Id.* at 576.

³² *Id.*

³³ EDWARD S. HERMAN & NOAM CHOMSKY, *MANUFACTURING CONSENT: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE MASS MEDIA* lxiii (2002).

³⁴ See APPLEBAUM, *supra* note 1, at 528–51 (political dissident chapter), 547–51 (describing psychotherapy-based torture of political prisoners after 1960).

Readers might also question Applebaum's perfunctory attempt to silence dissenting voices on the Cold War. Many of these critics plausibly argue that rather than being a necessary crusade, as Applebaum claims, the Cold War could have been a convenient means to justify increased American military spending³⁵ and corporate-friendly foreign and economic policies.³⁶ Applebaum's curt dismissal of such alternative views as mere "confusion"³⁷ does not serve her readers well. Instead, it demonstrates the extent to which Applebaum embraces the traditional Western version of the Cold War and refuses to adequately even consider competing interpretations.³⁸ This approach might be acceptable in an op-ed column, but it could weaken her status as a historian in *Gulag*.

Moreover, Applebaum's retrospection seems to be an end in itself rather than a means to improve future U.S. policies. Applebaum expressly denies the "cliché" that she wrote *Gulag* to prevent a similar tragedy from happening again.³⁹ Furthermore, she does not encourage American readers to use the history of the Gulag to analyze the practices of their own government.⁴⁰ Studying the Gulag could raise broader issues for readers, such as the complexity of defining crimes and administering justice; the potential for abuse and corruption within prison systems anywhere; the inconsistency between official American commitment to human rights and official American indifference to the Gulag during World War II;⁴¹ a comparison of the GWOT label of "enemy combatants"⁴² with the Gulag label of "enemies of the state;"⁴³ and the consequences of maintaining secret American detention centers for "enemy combatants."⁴⁴ By subtly closing the door to such inquiry, Applebaum seems to have chosen comfortable acceptability over contemporary relevance. Her choice is disappointing.⁴⁵

In conclusion, *Gulag* would have had more intellectual power without Applebaum's disputable Cold War rhetoric. By focusing on one interpretation of the recent past and on philosophical vagaries about human nature, Applebaum misses the opportunity to produce a truly meaningful work. Instead, she is content to dutifully resurrect old ghosts of the Soviet menace as indirect justification for the current Administration's war on "new threats to Western civilization."⁴⁶ *Gulag* does allow readers to learn historical facts and glimpse the human tragedy of prisoner camp life, but it does not inspire them to use this knowledge for important modern applications. Readers of *Gulag*, especially those serving as judge advocates, must undertake this analysis on their own.

³⁵ See GORE VIDAL, *The Last Empire*, in *THE LAST EMPIRE: ESSAYS 1992–2000*, at 317 (2001) ("Suddenly, we were faced with the highest income taxes in American history to pay for more and more weapons . . . all because *the Russians were coming.*"); Bruce Clark, *Red Scare: Fifty Years After His Death, Stalin's Crimes Are Still Morally Shocking*, WASH. MONTHLY, Apr. 1, 2003, at 46 (book review) ("With full knowledge of the Soviet Union's crimes against its own subjects, it is still possible to argue that at certain times, America and its allies stoked the fires of superpower competition and put humanity's survival at risk.")

³⁶ See NOAM CHOMSKY, *HEGEMONY OR SURVIVAL: AMERICA'S QUEST FOR GLOBAL DOMINANCE* 149 (2003) ("The new global order [after WWII] was to be subordinated to the needs of the U.S. economy and subject to U.S. political control as much as possible.")

³⁷ APPLEBAUM, *supra* note 1, at 576 (claiming that "[c]onfusion is already rife" concerning the Cold War's purpose).

³⁸ The degree to which this ideology might have crept into *Gulag* is also problematic. See Lynne Viola, *The Gray Zone*, NATION, Oct. 13, 2003 (reviewing ANNE APPLEBAUM, *GULAG: A HISTORY* (2003)) ("It seems . . . at worst hubristic to exploit the gulag in an effort to rewrite the cold war and create a usable past for the supposed victory of the West . . .").

³⁹ See APPLEBAUM, *supra* note 1, at 577.

⁴⁰ See *id.* at 575–77.

⁴¹ See Clark, *supra* note 35 (explaining that since 11 September 2001, our government has been increasingly willing to overlook brutality from allies in the GWOT).

⁴² See *Hamdi v. Rumsfeld*, 542 U.S. 507, 510, 518 (2004) (explaining that the Authorization for the Use of Military Force in 2001 allowed the President to use "all necessary and appropriate force" in response to the terrorist incidents of September 11, 2001, and thereby authorized detention of enemy combatants as a "fundamental and accepted . . . incident to war").

⁴³ See APPLEBAUM, *supra* note 1, at 5–6, 102 (explaining that the term was a malleable classification that swept in vast numbers of seemingly innocent Soviet citizens).

⁴⁴ AMNESTY INTERNAT'L, *ANNUAL REPORT OF AMNESTY INTERNAT'L: UNITED STATES OF AMERICA* (2005), available at <http://web.amnesty.org/report2005/usa-summary-eng> (accusing the United States military of managing the secret detentions of persons with "high intelligence value" at undisclosed locations around the world).

⁴⁵ With respect to the "enemy combatant" issue, Applebaum might have already sent the manuscript for *Gulag* to print before widespread allegations of Guantanamo Bay (GITMO) prisoner abuse surfaced. But in an op-ed piece responding to Amnesty International's "gulag of our times" comment in June 2005, Applebaum primarily distinguished GITMO from the Gulag as a matter of scope and degree. Anne Applebaum, *Amnesty's Amnesia*, WASH. POST, June 8, 2005, at A21, (noting, in response to Amnesty International's criticism, that because U.S. military detention centers are not "intrinsic to our political system," they are "not 'similar in character' to the gulag at all"). Notably, Applebaum's response failed to specifically address Amnesty's narrow concerns of incommunicado detentions without due process, which was certainly a staple of the Gulag system. *Id.*

⁴⁶ APPLEBAUM, *supra* note 1, at xxiii.