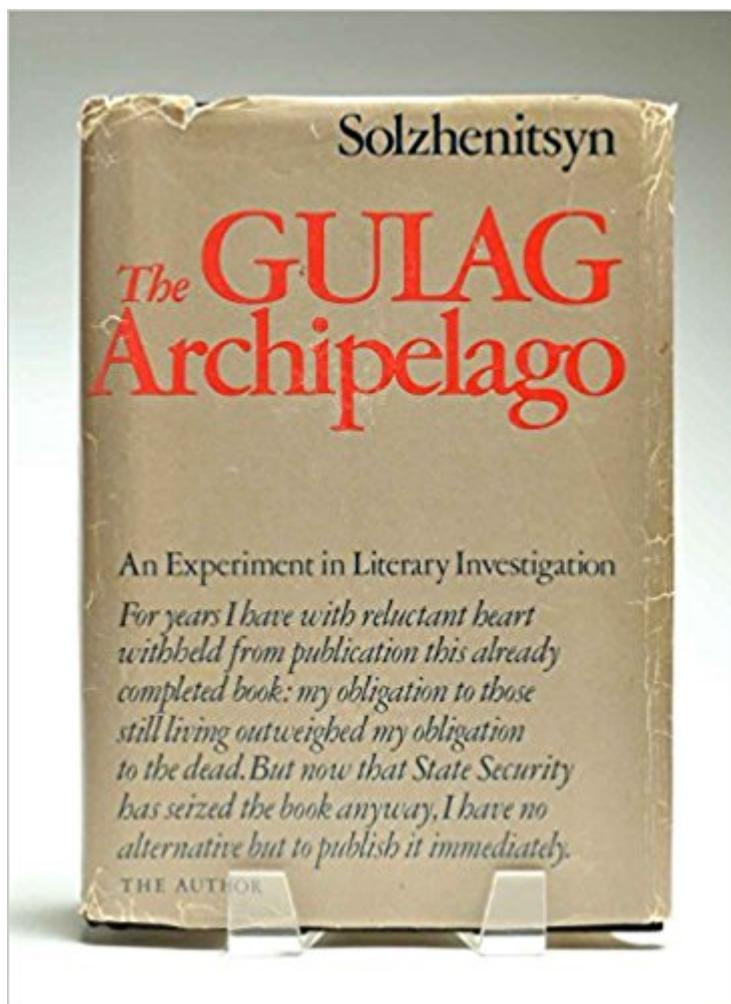


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The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956 I-II



Synopsis

Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn emotional masterpiece about Russian's Gulag Archipelago became a major bestseller in the west in 1972, giving him worldwide fame. An excellent, moving read.

Book Information

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Product Dimensions: 9.3 x 6.4 x 2.2 inches

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Average Customer Review: 3.4 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (89 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

Gulag Archipelago is the award winning expose that shocked the world with its revelations about the true nature of life in the, "worker's paradise," a.k.a, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) The author, a once dedicated Communist himself, shows how millions of Soviet citizens were arrested, tortured into "confessing" various "crimes against the state" and imprisoned for long periods to satisfy Josef Stalin's paranoia concerning the threat posed by his "enemies" both real and imagined. His personal experience forms the basis for this saga, perhaps, the saddest of all time. Solzhenitsyn takes the reader through the arrest and brutal interrogation process that broke the strongest of men. He then carries them with him in grossly overcrowded "Stolypin" prison rail cars and prison ships called "Black Maria's" into transit camps where prisoners were deprived of almost all the basic necessities of life. God help the attractive, female prisoner sentenced to ride in either! At the transit camps prisoners are fed only "gruel" which often had to be eaten by hand as no eating utensils were provided. The strongest men ate well. The weak starved. A trip to the latrine was the highlight of ones day! Almost unbelievable is the fact, the worst was yet to come. Life in the camps was unbearably hard. Prisoners performed back-breaking labor including digging canals and logging forests by hand in sub-zero temperatures wearing only summer weight clothing. Their "crimes:" One man got a tenner (i.e. a ten year prison sentence) for being the first to stop applauding after a Stalin speech. Others included being a Priest/Nun who refused to renounce

his/her faith. A third was being female and telling a State Security Officer, "No!"

I read this book, both volumes and part of the third, years ago in the wake of this work becoming a political slogan and football bandied about so much during the Reagan years, as it turns out by people who obviously had not read it. While initially approaching that task with some skepticism, I quickly concluded that it was very well written and informed, being worth the time spent in reading it. "Gulag" is an acronym in Russian for an agency that was known as the Central Administration of Corrective Labor Camps which the author, a former Red Army officer, entered in 1945 as a "zek" or prisoner. The book(s) is a very absorbing chronicle of the history of this system told through the personal stories of specific individuals that became known to the author. While Solzhenitsyn is very explicit, obviously, in making his bitterly and well earned anti-communist outlook known, this work is not a hysterical rant or screed, but a serious memoir and work of historical literature, one that is neither boring nor tendentious. Moreover, while the author's affinity for Russia's Orthodox traditions shines through, a certain social-revolutionary sensibility that has also been a hallmark of that culture during the last century and half of upheaval also emerges. As Herzen observed about Bakunin, who endured his own struggles with Russian Tsarist tyranny in the previous century, it seems that the Gulag's author was not born under any ordinary star, but a comet. The forced labor camp system set up by Stalin was designed to purge his political opponents, set up a system of cheap forced labor to subserve his economic development and industrialization programs and as a vehicle for the implementation of his own peculiar take on ostensible Marxist-Leninist social cleansing and transformation.

This review is based on the original 1970's English-language Harper & Row edition. There is so much here about Russian history, Soviet thinking and policies, and the situation inside the Gulags. Because there are so many topics and issues raised in this combined volume, I will elaborate on only a few of them. Solzhenitsyn rarely mentions Gulag Poles in this set of volumes. In one year, 2,100 Zolotisty Polish inmates had been reduced to 168 survivors (p. 131). The Soviet concentration camps have sometimes been favorably compared to the Nazi German ones by western liberals. We hear, for instance, that at least the children were well treated. Tell that to the Gulag children, some imprisoned for political crimes at the dangerous age of six! (p. 463). Besides physical suffering, Gulag children underwent severe de-moralization, in effect becoming amoral beasts (e. g., p. 452). Finally: "They didn't hesitate to liquidate the 'kulak' families right down to tiny children, and they even wrote about it proudly in the newspapers." (pp. 370-371). Communist apologists have claimed

that Gulag deaths were caused largely by passive negligence, Soviet-system inefficiencies, wartime disruptions and privations, etc. This is nonsense. To illustrate: "...police dogs are fed better than prisoners..." (p. 534). Well, at least there were no gas chambers in the Gulags. But so what? They weren't needed. Referring to the primitive state of Gulag life, labor, and death, Solzhenitsyn quipped: "That's what our gas execution van consisted of. We didn't have any gas for the gas chamber." (p. 91).

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