

INTRODUCTION

GULAG: A HISTORY

And fate made everybody equal
Outside the limits of the law
Son of a kulak or Red commander
Son of a priest or commissar . . .
Here classes were all equalized,
All men were brothers, camp mates all,
Branded as traitors every one . . .
-alexander tvardovsky,
"By Right of Memory"

This is a history of the Gulag: a history of the vast network of labor camps that were once scattered across the length and breadth of the Soviet Union, from the islands of the White Sea to the shores of the Black Sea, from the Arctic Circle to the plains of central Asia, from Murmansk to Vorkuta to Kazakhstan, from central Moscow to the Leningrad suburbs. Literally, the word GULAG is an acronym, meaning Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei, or Main Camp Administration. Over time, the word "Gulag" has also come to signify not only the administration of the concentration camps but also the system of Soviet slave labor itself, in all its forms and varieties: labor camps, punishment camps, criminal and political camps, women's camps, children's camps, transit camps. Even more broadly, "Gulag" has come to mean the Soviet repressive system itself, the set of procedures that prisoners once called the "meat-grinder": the arrests, the interrogations, the transport in unheated cattle cars, the forced labor, the destruction of families, the years spent in exile, the early and unnecessary deaths.

The Gulag had antecedents in Czarist Russia, in the forced-labor brigades that operated in Siberia from the seventeenth century to the beginning of the twentieth. It then took on its modern and more familiar form almost immediately after the Russian Revolution, becoming an integral part of the Soviet system. Mass terror against real and alleged opponents was a part of the Revolution from the very beginning—and by the summer of 1918, Lenin, the Revolution's leader, had already demanded that "unreliable elements" be locked up in concentration camps outside major towns. A string of aristocrats, merchants, and other people defined as potential "enemies" were duly imprisoned. By 1921, there were already eighty-four camps in forty-three

provinces, mostly designed to “rehabilitate” these first enemies of the people.

From 1929, the camps took on a new significance. In that year, Stalin decided to use forced labor both to speed up the Soviet Union’s industrialization, and to excavate the natural resources in the Soviet Union’s barely habitable far north. In that year, the Soviet secret police also began to take control of the Soviet penal system, slowly wresting all of the country’s camps and prisons away from the judicial establishment. Helped along by the mass arrests of 1937 and 1938, the camps entered a period of rapid expansion. By the end of the 1930s, they could be found in every one of the Soviet Union’s twelve time zones.

Contrary to popular assumption, the Gulag did not cease growing in the 1930s, but rather continued to expand throughout the Second World War and the 1940s, reaching its apex in the early 1950s. By that time the camps had come to play a central role in the Soviet economy. They produced a third of the country’s gold, much of its coal and timber, and a great deal of almost everything else. In the course of the Soviet Union’s existence, at least 476 distinct camp complexes came into being, comprising thousands of individual camps, each of which contained anywhere from a few hundred to many thousands of people. The prisoners worked in almost every industry imaginable—logging, mining, construction, factory work, farming, the designing of airplanes and artillery—and lived, in effect, in a country within a country, almost a separate civilization. The Gulag had its own laws, its own customs, its own morality, even its own slang. It spawned its own literature, its own villains, its own heroes, and it left its mark upon all who passed through it, whether as prisoners or guards. Years after being released, the Gulag’s inhabitants were often able to recognize former inmates on the street simply from “the look in their eyes.”

Such encounters were frequent, for the camps had a large turnover. Although arrests were constant, so too were releases. Prisoners were freed because they finished their sentences, because they were let into the Red Army, because they were invalids or women with small children, because they had been promoted from captive to guard. As a result, the total number of prisoners in the camps generally hovered around two million, but the total number of Soviet citizens who had some experience of the camps, as political or criminal prisoners, is far higher. From 1929, when the Gulag began its major expansion, until 1953, when Stalin died, the best estimates indicate that some eighteen million people passed through this massive system. About another six million were sent into exile, deported to the Kazakh deserts or the Siberian forests. Legally obliged to remain in their exile villages, they too were forced laborers, even though they did not live behind barbed wire.

As a system of mass forced labor involving millions of people, the camps disappeared when Stalin died. Although he had believed all of his life that the Gulag was critical to Soviet economic growth, his political heirs knew well that the camps were, in fact, a source of backwardness and distorted investment. Within days of his death, Stalin’s successors began to

dismantle them. Three major rebellions, along with a host of smaller but no less dangerous incidents, helped to accelerate the process.

Nevertheless, the camps did not disappear altogether. Instead, they evolved. Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, a few of them were redesigned and put to use as prisons for a new generation of democratic activists, anti-Soviet nationalists—and criminals. Thanks to the Soviet dissident network and the international human rights movement, news of these post-Stalinist camps appeared regularly in the West. Gradually, they came to play a role in Cold War diplomacy. Even in the 1980s, the American President, Ronald Reagan, and his Soviet counterpart, Mikhail Gorbachev, were still discussing the Soviet camps. Only in 1987 did – himself the grandson of Gulag prisoners—begin to dissolve the Soviet Union’s political camps altogether.

Yet although they lasted as long as the Soviet Union itself, and although many millions of people passed through them, the true history of the Soviet Union’s concentration camps was, until recently, not at all well known. By some measures, it is still not known. Even the bare facts recited above, although by now familiar to most Western scholars of Soviet history, have not filtered into Western popular consciousness. “Human knowledge,” once wrote Pierre Rigoulot, the French historian of communism, “doesn’t accumulate like the bricks of a wall, which grows regularly, according to the work of the mason. Its development, but also its stagnation or retreat, depends on the social, cultural and political framework.”

One might say that, until now, the social, cultural, and political framework for knowledge of the Gulag has not been in place.

I first became aware of this problem several years ago, when walking across the Charles Bridge, a major tourist attraction in what was then newly democratic Prague. There were buskers and hustlers along the bridge, and, every fifteen feet or so someone was selling precisely what one would expect to find for sale in such a postcard-perfect spot. Paintings of appropriately pretty streets were on display, along with bargain jewelry and “Prague” key chains. Among the bric-a-brac, one could buy Soviet military paraphernalia: caps, badges, belt buckles, and little pins, the tin Lenin and Brezhnev images that Soviet schoolchildren once pinned to their uniforms.

The sight struck me as odd. Most of the people buying the Soviet paraphernalia were Americans and West Europeans. All would be sickened by the thought of wearing a swastika. None objected, however, to wearing the hammer and sickle on a T-shirt or a hat. It was a minor observation, but sometimes, it is through just such minor observations that a cultural mood is best observed. For here, the lesson could not have been clearer: while the symbol of one mass murder fills us with horror, the symbol of another mass murder makes us laugh.

If there is a dearth of feeling about Stalinism among Prague tourists, it is partly explained by the dearth of images in Western popular culture. The Cold War produced James Bond and thrillers, and cartoon Russians of the sort who appear in Rambo films, but nothing as ambitious as *Schindler's List* or *Sophie's Choice*. Steven Spielberg, probably Hollywood's leading director (like it or not) has chosen to make films about Japanese concentration camps (*Empire of the Sun*) and Nazi concentration camps, but not about Stalinist concentration camps. The latter haven't caught Hollywood's imagination in the same way.

Highbrow culture hasn't been much more open to the subject. The reputation of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger has been deeply damaged by his brief, overt support of Nazism, an enthusiasm which developed before Hitler had committed his major atrocities. On the other hand, the reputation of the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre has not suffered in the least from his aggressive support of Stalinism throughout the postwar years, when plentiful evidence of Stalin's atrocities was available to anyone interested. "As we were not members of the Party," he once wrote, "it was not our duty to write about Soviet labor camps; we were free to remain aloof from the quarrels over the nature of the system, provided no events of sociological significance occurred." On another occasion, he told Albert Camus that "Like you, I find these camps intolerable, but I find equally intolerable the use made of them every day in the bourgeois press."

Some things have changed since the Soviet collapse. In 2002, for example, the British novelist Martin Amis felt moved enough by the subject of Stalin and Stalinism to dedicate an entire book to the subject. His efforts prompted other writers to wonder why so few members of the political and literary Left had broached the subject. On the other hand, some things have not changed. It is possible—still—for an American academic to publish a book suggesting that the purges of the 1930s were useful because they promoted upward mobility and therefore laid the groundwork for perestroika. It is possible—still—for a British literary editor to reject an article because it is "too anti-Soviet." Far more common, however, is a reaction of boredom or indifference to Stalinist terror. An otherwise straightforward review of a book I wrote about the western republics of the former Soviet Union in the 1990s 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."

These are all small things: the purchase of a trinket, a philosopher's reputation, the presence or absence of Hollywood films. But put them all together and they make a story. Intellectually, Americans and West Europeans know what happened in the Soviet Union. Alexander Solzhenitsyn's acclaimed novel about life in the camps, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, was published in the West in several languages in 1962– . His oral history of the camps, *The Gulag Archipelago*, caused much comment when it appeared, again in several languages, in 1973. Indeed, *The Gulag Archipelago* led to a minor intellectual revolution in some countries,

most notably France, converting whole swathes of the French Left to an anti-Soviet position. Many more revelations about the Gulag were made during the 1980s, the glasnost years, and they too received due publicity abroad.

Nevertheless, to many people, 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 those who are not old-fashioned left-wingers: 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 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. The absence of hard information, backed up by archival research, was clearly part of it too. The paucity of academic work on this subject was long due to a paucity of sources. 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 less understanding.

But ideology twisted the ways in which we understood Soviet and East European history as well. A small part of the Western Left struggled to explain and sometimes to excuse the camps, and the terror which created them, from the 1930s on. In 1936, when millions of Soviet peasants were already working in camps or living in exile, 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." At the time of the Moscow show trials, while Stalin arbitrarily condemned thousands of innocent Party members to camps, the playwright Bertolt Brecht told the philosopher Sidney Hook that "the more innocent they are, the more they deserve to die."

But even as late as the 1980s, there were still academics who continued to describe the advantages of East German health care or Polish peace initiatives, still activists who felt embarrassed by the fuss and bother raised over the dissidents in Eastern Europe's prison camps. Perhaps this was because the founding philosophers of the Western Left—Marx and Engels—were the same as those of the Soviet Union. Some of the language was shared as well: the masses, the struggle, the proletariat, the exploiters and exploited, the ownership of the means of production. To condemn the Soviet Union too thoroughly would be to condemn a part of what some of the Western Left once held dear as well.

But it is not only the far Left, and not only Western communists, who were tempted to make excuses for Stalin's crimes that they would never have made for Hitler's. Communist ideals—

social justice, equality for all—are simply far more attractive to most in the West than the Nazi advocacy of racism and the triumph of the strong over the weak. Even if communist ideology meant something very different in practice, it was harder for the intellectual descendants of the American and French Revolutions to condemn a system which sounded, at least, similar to their own. Perhaps this helps explain why eyewitness reports of the Gulag were, from the very beginning, often dismissed and belittled by the very same people who would never have thought to question the validity of Holocaust testimony written by Primo Levi or Elie Wiesel. From the Russian Revolution on, official information about the Soviet camps was readily available too, to anyone who wanted it: the most famous Soviet account of one of the early camps, the White Sea Canal, was even published in English. Ignorance alone cannot explain why Western intellectuals chose to avoid the subject.

The Western Right, on the other hand, did struggle to condemn Soviet crimes, but sometimes using methods that harmed their own cause. Surely the man who did the greatest damage to the cause of anti-communism was the American Senator Joe McCarthy. Recent documents showing that some of his accusations were correct do not change the impact of his overzealous pursuit of communists in American public life: ultimately, his public “trials” of communist sympathizers would tarnish the cause of anti-communism with the brush of chauvinism and intolerance. In the end, his actions served the cause of neutral historical inquiry no better than those of his opponents.

Yet not all of our attitudes to the Soviet past are linked to political ideology either. Many, in fact, are rather a fading by-product of our memories of the Second World War. We have, at present, a firm conviction that the Second World War was a wholly just war, and 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. No one wants to be told that there was another, darker side to Allied victory, or that the camps of Stalin, our ally, expanded just as the camps of Hitler, our enemy, were liberated. To admit that by sending thousands of Russians to their deaths by forcibly repatriating them after the war, or by consigning millions of people to Soviet rule at Yalta, the Western Allies might have helped others commit crimes against humanity would undermine the moral clarity of our memories of that era. No one wants to think that we defeated one mass murderer with the help of another. No one wants to remember how well that mass murderer got on with Western statesmen. “I have a real liking for Stalin,” the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, told a friend, “he has never broken his word.” There are many, many photographs of Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt all together, all smiling.

Finally, Soviet propaganda was not without its effect. Soviet attempts to cast doubt upon Solzhenitsyn’s writing, for example, to paint him as a madman or an anti-Semite or a drunk, had some impact. Soviet pressure on Western academics and journalists helped skew their work too. When I studied Russian history as an undergraduate in the United States in the

1980s, acquaintances told me not to bother continuing with the subject in graduate school, since there were too many difficulties involved: in those days, those who wrote “favorably” about the Soviet Union won more access to archives, more access to official information, longer visas in the country. Those who did not risked expulsion and professional difficulties as a consequence. It goes without saying, of course, that no outsiders were allowed access to any material about Stalin’s camps or about the post-Stalinist prison system. The subject simply did not exist, and those who pried too deep lost their right to stay in the country.

Put 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. The Second World War 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.

In other words, the “social, cultural and political framework” has now changed—and so too has our access to information about the camps. At the end of the 1980s, a flood of documents about the Gulag began to appear in Mikhail Gorbachev’s Soviet Union. Stories of life in Soviet concentration camps were published in newspapers for the first time. New revelations sold out magazines. Old arguments about numbers—how many dead, how many incarcerated—revived. Russian historians and historical societies, led by the pioneering Memorial Society in Moscow, began publishing monographs, histories of individual camps and people, casualty estimates, lists of the names of the dead. Their efforts were echoed and amplified by historians in the former Soviet republics and the countries of what was once the Warsaw Pact, and, later, by Western historians too.

Despite many setbacks, this Russian exploration of the Soviet past continues today. True, the first decade of the twenty-first century is very different from the final decades of the twentieth century, and the search for history is no longer either a major part of Russian public discourse, nor quite so sensational as it once seemed. Most of the work being carried out by Russian and other scholars is real historical drudgery, involving the sifting of thousands of individual documents, hours spent in cold and drafty archives, days spent looking for facts and numbers. But it is beginning to bear fruit. Slowly, patiently, Memorial has not only put together the first guide to the names and locations of all of the camps on record, but has also published a groundbreaking series of history books, and compiled an enormous archive of oral and written tales as well. Together with others—the Sakharov Institute and the publishing house Vozvrashchenie (the name means “return”)—they have put some of these memoirs into general circulation. Russian academic journals and institutional presses have also begun to print

monographs based on new documents, as well as collections of documents themselves. Again, similar work is being carried out elsewhere, most notably by the Karta Society in Poland; by historical museums in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania, and Hungary; by a handful of American and West European scholars who have the time and energy to work in the Soviet archives.

While researching this book, I had access to their work, as well as to two other kinds of sources that would not have been available ten years ago. The first is the flood of new memoirs which began to be published in the 1980s in Russia, America, Israel, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere. In writing this book, I have made extensive use of them, a practice which is not entirely orthodox. In the past, some scholars of the Soviet Union have been reluctant to rely upon Gulag memoir material, arguing that Soviet memoir writers had political reasons for twisting their stories, that most did their writing many years after their release, and that many borrowed stories from one another when their own memories failed them. Nevertheless, after reading several hundred camp memoirs, and interviewing some two dozen survivors, I felt that it was possible to filter out those which seemed implausible or plagiarized or politicized. I also felt that while memoirs could not be relied upon for names, dates, and numbers, they were nonetheless an invaluable source of other kinds of information. Without them, it would not be possible to describe certain crucial aspects of life in the camps: prisoners' relationships with one another, with their guards, with the camp regime. I have consciously made heavy use of only one writer—Varlam Shalamov—who wrote fictionalized versions of his life in the camps, and this is because his stories are known to be based upon real events.

As far as was possible, I have also backed up the memoirs with an extensive use of archives—a source which, paradoxically, not everyone likes to use either. As will become clear in the course of this book, the power of propaganda in the Soviet Union was such that it frequently altered perceptions of reality. For that reason, historians in the past were right not to rely upon officially published Soviet documents, which were often deliberately designed to obscure the truth. But secret documents—the documents now preserved in archives—had a different function. In order to run its camps, the administration of the Gulag needed to keep certain kinds of records. Moscow needed to know what was happening in the provinces, the provinces had to receive instructions from the central administration, statistics had to be kept. This does not mean that these archives are entirely reliable—bureaucrats had their own reasons to distort even the most mundane facts—but if used judiciously, they can explain some things about camp life which memoirs cannot. Above all, they help to explain why the camps were built—or at least what it was that the Stalinist regime believed they were going to achieve.

It is also true that the archives are far more varied than many anticipated, and that they tell the story of the camps from many different perspectives. I had access, for example, to the archive of the Gulag administration, with inspectors' reports, financial accounts, letters from the camp directors to their supervisors in Moscow, accounts of escape attempts, and lists of

musical productions put on by camp theaters, all kept at the Russian State Archive in Moscow. I also consulted records of Party meetings, and documents that were collected in a part of Stalin's *osobaya papka* collection, his "special archive." With the help of other Russian historians, I was able to use some documents from Soviet military archives, and the archives of the convoy guards, which contain things such as lists of what arrested prisoners were and were not allowed to take with them. Outside of Moscow, I also had access to some local archives—in Petrozavodsk, Arkhangelsk, Syktyvkar, Vorkuta, and the Solovetsky islands—where day-to-day events of camp life were recorded, as well as to the archives of Dmitlag, the camp that built the Moscow–Volga Canal, which are kept in Moscow. All contain records of daily life in the camps, order forms, prisoners' records. At one point, I was handed a chunk of the archive of Kedrovyi Shor, a small division of Inta, a mining camp north of the Arctic Circle, and politely asked if I wanted to buy it.

Put together, these sources make it possible to write about the camps in a new way. In this book, I no longer needed to compare the "claims" of a handful of dissidents to the "claims" of the Soviet government. I did not have to search for a median line somewhere in between the accounts of Soviet refugees and the accounts of Soviet officials. Instead, to describe what happened, I was able to use the language of many different kinds of people, of guards, of policemen, of different kinds of prisoners serving different kinds of sentences at different times. The emotions and the politics which have long surrounded the historiography of the Soviet concentration camps do not lie at the heart of this book. That space is reserved, instead, for the experience of the victims.

This is a history of the Gulag. By that, I mean that this is a history of the Soviet concentration camps: their origins in the Bolshevik Revolution, their development into a major part of the Soviet economy, their dismantling after Stalin's death. This is also a book about the legacy of the Gulag: without question, the regimes and rituals found in the Soviet political and criminal prison camps of the 1970s and 1980s evolved directly out of those created in an earlier era, and for that reason I felt that they belonged in the same volume.

At the same time, this is a book about life in the Gulag, and for that reason it tells the story of the camps in two ways. The first and third sections of this book are chronological. They describe the evolution of the camps and their administration in a narrative fashion. The central section discusses life in the camps, and it does so thematically. While most of the examples and citations in this central section refer to the 1940s, the decade when the camps reached their apex, I have also referred backward and forward—ahistorically—to other eras. Certain aspects of life in the camps evolved over time, and I felt it was important to explain how this happened.

Having said what this book is, I would also like to say what it is not: it is not a history of the USSR, a history of the purges, or a history of repression in general. It is not a history of Stalin's reign, or of his Politburo, or of his secret police, whose complex administrative history I have deliberately tried to simplify as much as possible. Although I do make use of the writings of Soviet dissidents, often produced under great stress and with great courage, this book does not contain a complete history of the Soviet human rights movement. Nor, for that matter, does it do full justice to the stories of particular nations and categories of prisoner—among them Poles, Balts, Ukrainians, Chechens, German and Japanese POWs—who suffered under the Soviet regime, both inside and outside the Soviet camps. It does not explore in full the mass murders of 1937– , which mostly took place outside the camps, or the massacre of thousands of Polish officers at Katyn and elsewhere. Because this is a book intended for the general reader, and because it does not presume any specialized knowledge of Soviet history, all of these events and phenomenon will be mentioned. Nevertheless, it would have been impossible to do all of them justice in a single volume.

Perhaps most important, this book does not do justice to the story of the “special exiles,” the millions of people who were often rounded up at the same time and for the same reasons as Gulag prisoners, but who were then sent not to camps but to live in remote exile villages where many thousands died of starvation, cold, and overwork. Some were exiled for political reasons, including the kulaks, or rich peasants, in the 1930s. Some were exiled for their ethnicity, including Poles, Balts, Ukrainians, Volga Germans, and Chechens, among others, in the 1940s. They met a variety of fates in Kazakhstan, central Asia, and Siberia—too wide a variety to be encompassed in an account of the camp system. I have chosen to mention them, perhaps idiosyncratically, where their experiences seemed to me especially close or relevant to the experiences of Gulag prisoners. But although their story is closely connected to the story of the Gulag, to tell it fully would require another book of this length. I hope someone will write one soon.

Although this is a book about the Soviet concentration camps, it is nevertheless impossible to treat them as an isolated phenomenon. The Gulag grew and developed at a particular time and place, in tandem with other events—and within three contexts in particular. Properly speaking, the Gulag belongs to the history of the Soviet Union; to the international as well as the Russian history of prisons and exile; and to the particular intellectual climate of continental Europe in the mid-twentieth century, which also produced the Nazi concentration camps in Germany.

By “belongs to the history of the Soviet Union,” I mean something very specific: the Gulag did not emerge, fully formed, from the sea, but rather reflected the general standards of the society around it. If the camps were filthy, if the guards were brutal, if the work teams were slovenly, that was partly because filthiness and brutality and slovenliness were plentiful enough in other spheres of Soviet life. If life in the camps was horrible, unbearable, inhuman, if death rates were high—that too was hardly surprising. In certain periods, life in the Soviet Union was

also horrible, unbearable, and inhuman, and death rates were as high outside the camps as they were within them.

Certainly it is no coincidence that the first Soviet camps were set up in the immediate aftermath of the bloody, violent, and chaotic Russian Revolution either. During the Revolution, the terror imposed afterward, and the subsequent civil war, it seemed to many in Russia as if civilization itself had been permanently fractured. "Death sentences were meted out arbitrarily," the historian Richard Pipes has written, "people were shot for no reason and equally capriciously released." From 1917 on, a whole society's set of values was turned on its head: a lifetime's accumulated wealth and experience was a liability, robbery was glamorized as "nationalization," murder became an accepted part of the struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat. In this atmosphere, Lenin's initial imprisonment of thousands of people, simply on the grounds of their former wealth or their aristocratic titles, hardly seemed strange or out of line.

By the same token, high mortality rates in the camps in certain years are also, in part, a reflection of events taking place throughout the country. Death rates went up inside the camps in the early 1930s, when famine gripped the entire country. They went up again during the Second World War: the German invasion of the Soviet Union led not only to millions of combat deaths, but also to epidemics of dysentery and of typhus, as well as, again, to famine, which affected people outside the camps as well as within them. In the winter of 1941- , when a quarter of the Gulag's population died of starvation, as many as a million citizens of the city of Leningrad may have starved to death too, trapped behind a German blockade. The blockade's chronicler Lidiya Ginzburg wrote of the hunger of the time as a "permanent state . . . it was constantly present and always made its presence felt . . . the most desperate and tormenting thing of all during the process of eating was when the food drew to an end with awful rapidity without bringing satiety." Her words are eerily reminiscent of those used by former prisoners, as the reader will discover.

It is true, of course, that the Leningraders died at home, while the Gulag ripped open lives, destroyed families, tore children away from their parents, and condemned millions to live in remote wastelands, thousands of miles from their families. Still, prisoners' horrific experiences can be legitimately compared to the terrible memories of "free" Soviet citizens such as Elena Kozhina, who was evacuated from Leningrad in February 1942. During the journey, she watched her brother, sister, and grandmother die of starvation. As the Germans approached, she and her mother walked across the steppe, encountering "scenes of unbridled rout and chaos . . . The world was flying into thousands of pieces. Everything was permeated with smoke and a horrible burning smell; the steppe was tight and suffocating, as if squeezed inside a hot, sooty fist." Although she never experienced the camps, Kozhina knew terrible cold, hunger, and fear before her tenth birthday, and was haunted by the memories for the rest of her life. Nothing, she wrote, "could erase my memories of Vadik's body being carried out under

a blanket; of Tanya choking in her agony; of me and Mama, the last ones, trudging through smoke and thunder in the burning steppe.”

The population of the Gulag and the population of the rest of the USSR shared many things besides suffering. Both in the camps and outside them, it was possible to find the same slovenly working practices, the same criminally stupid bureaucracy, the same corruption, and the same sullen disregard for human life. While writing this book, I described to a Polish friend the system of *tufta*—cheating on required work norms—that Soviet prisoners had developed, described later in this book. He howled with laughter: “You think prisoners invented that? The whole Soviet bloc practiced *tufta*.” In Stalin’s Soviet Union, the difference between life inside and life outside the barbed wire was not fundamental, but rather a question of degree. Perhaps for that reason, the Gulag has often been described as the quintessential expression of the Soviet system. Even in prison-camp slang, the world outside the barbed wire was not referred to as “freedom,” but as the *bolshaya zona*, the “big prison zone,” larger and less deadly than the “small zone” of the camp, but no more human—and certainly no more humane.

Yet if the Gulag cannot be held totally apart from the experience of life in the rest of the Soviet Union, neither can the story of the Soviet camps be fully separated from the long, multinational, cross-cultural history of prisons, exile, incarceration, and concentration camps. The exile of prisoners to a distant place, where they can “pay their debt to society,” make themselves useful, and not contaminate others with their ideas or their criminal acts, is a practice as old as civilization itself. The rulers of ancient Rome and Greece sent their dissidents off to distant colonies. Socrates chose death over the torment of exile from Athens. The poet Ovid was exiled to a fetid port on the Black Sea. Georgian Britain sent its pickpockets and thieves to Australia. Nineteenth-century France sent convicted criminals to Guyana. Portugal sent its undesirables to Mozambique.

The new leadership of the Soviet Union did not, in 1917, have to look quite as far away as Greenland for a precedent. Since the seventeenth century, Russia had its own exile system: the first mention of exile in Russian law was in 1649. At the time, exile was considered to be a new, more humane form of criminal punishment—far preferable to the death penalty, or to branding and mutilation—and it was applied to a huge range of minor and major offenses, from snuff-taking and fortune-telling to murder. A wide range of Russian intellectuals and writers, Pushkin among them, suffered some form of exile, while the very possibility of exile tormented others: at the height of his literary fame in 1890, Anton Chekhov surprised everyone he knew and set off to visit and describe the penal colonies on the island of Sakhalin, off Russia’s Pacific coast. Before he left, he wrote to his puzzled publisher, explaining his motives:

We have allowed millions of people to rot in prisons, to rot for no purpose, without any consideration, and in a barbarous manner; we have driven people tens of thousands of versts through the cold in shackles, infected them with syphilis, perverted them, multiplied the

number of criminals . . . but none of this has anything to do with us, it's just not interesting . . .

In retrospect, it is easy to find, in the history of the Czarist prison system, many echoes of practices later applied in the Soviet Gulag. Like the Gulag, for example, Siberian exile was never intended exclusively for criminals. A law of 1736 declared that if a village decided someone in its midst was a bad influence on others, the village elders could divide up the unfortunate's property and order him to move elsewhere. If he failed to find another abode, the state could then send him into exile. Indeed, this law was cited by Khrushchev in 1948, as part of his (successful) argument for exiling collective farmers who were deemed insufficiently enthusiastic and hard-working.

The practice of exiling people who simply didn't fit in continued throughout the nineteenth century. In his book, *Siberia and the Exile System*, George Kennan—uncle of the American statesman—described the system of “administrative process” that he observed in Russia in 1891:

The obnoxious person may not be guilty of any crime . . . but if, in the opinion of the local authorities, his presence in a particular place is “prejudicial to public order” or “incompatible with public tranquility,” he may be arrested without warrant, may be held from two weeks to two years in prison, and may then be removed by force to any other place within the limits of the empire and there be put under police surveillance for a period of from one to ten years.

Administrative exile—which required no trial and no sentencing procedure—was an ideal punishment not only for troublemakers as such, but also for political opponents of the regime. In the early days, many of these were Polish noblemen who objected to the Russian occupation of their territory and property. Later, exiles included religious objectors, as well as members of “revolutionary” groups and secret societies, including the Bolsheviks. Although they were not administrative exiles—they were tried and sentenced—the most notorious of Siberia's nineteenth-century “forced settlers” were also political prisoners: these were the Decembrists, a group of high-ranking aristocrats who staged a feeble rebellion against Czar Nicholas I in 1825. With a vengeance that shocked all of Europe at the time, the Czar sentenced five of the Decembrists to death. He deprived the others of their rank, and sent them, in chains, to Siberia, where a few were joined by their exceptionally brave wives. Only a few lived long enough to be pardoned by Nicholas's successor, Alexander II, thirty years later, and to return home to St. Petersburg, by then tired old men. Fyodor Dostoevsky, sentenced in 1849 to a four-year term of penal servitude, was another well-known political prisoner. After returning from his Siberian exile, he wrote *The House of the Dead*, still the most widely read account of life in the Czarist prison system.

Like the Gulag, the Czarist exile system was not created solely as a form of punishment. Russia's rulers also wanted their exiles, both criminal and political, to solve an economic

problem that had rankled for many centuries: the underpopulation of the far east and the far north of the Russian landmass, and the Russian Empire's consequent failure to exploit Russia's natural resources. With that in mind, the Russian state began, as early as the eighteenth century, to sentence some of its prisoners to forced labor—a form of punishment which became known as *katorga*, from the Greek word *kateirgon*, "to force." *Katorga* had a long Russian prehistory. In the early eighteenth century, Peter the Great had used convicts and serfs to build roads, fortresses, factories, ships, and the city of St. Petersburg itself. In 1722, he passed a more specific directive ordering criminals, with their wives and children, into exile near the silver mines of Daurya, in eastern Siberia.

In its time, Peter's use of forced labor was considered a great economic and political success. Indeed, the story of the hundreds of thousands of serfs who spent their lives building St. Petersburg had an enormous impact on future generations. Many had died during the construction—and yet the city became a symbol of progress and Europeanization. The methods were cruel—and yet the nation had profited. Peter's example probably helps explain the ready adoption of *katorga* by his Czarist successors. Without a doubt, Stalin was a great admirer of Peter's building methods too.

Still, in the nineteenth century, *katorga* remained a relatively rare form of punishment. In 1906, only about 6,000 *katorga* convicts were serving sentences; in 1916, on the eve of the Revolution, there were only 28,600. Of far greater economic importance was another category of prisoner: the forced settlers, who were sentenced to live in exile, but not in prison, in underpopulated regions of the country, chosen for their economic potential. Between 1824 and 1889 alone, some 720,000 forced settlers were sent to Siberia. Many were accompanied by their families. They, not the convicts laboring in chains, gradually populated Russia's empty, mineral-rich wastelands.

Their sentences were not necessarily easy ones, and some of the settlers thought their fate worse than that of the *katorga* prisoners. Assigned to remote districts, with poor land and few neighbors, many starved to death over the long winters, or drank themselves to death from boredom. There were very few women—their numbers never exceeded 15 percent—fewer books, no entertainment.

On his journey across Siberia to Sakhalin, Anton Chekhov met, and described, some of these exiled settlers: "The majority of them are financially poor, have little strength, little practical training, and possess nothing except their ability to write, which is frequently of absolutely no use to anybody. Some of them commence by selling, piece by piece, their shirts of Holland linen, their sheets, their scarves and handkerchiefs, and finish up after two or three years dying in fearful penury . . ."

But not all of the exiles were miserable and degenerate. Siberia was far away from European Russia, and in the East officialdom was more forgiving, aristocracy much thinner on the

ground. The wealthier exiles and ex-prisoners sometimes built up large estates. The more educated became doctors and lawyers, or ran schools. Princess Maria Volkonskaya, wife of the Decembrist Sergei Volkonsky, sponsored the building of a theater and concert hall in Irkutsk: although she had, like her husband, technically been deprived of her rank, invitations to her soirées and private dinners were eagerly sought after, and discussed as far away as Moscow and St. Petersburg.

By the early twentieth century, the system had shed some of its previous harshness. The fashion for prison reform which spread through Europe in the nineteenth century finally caught up with Russia too. Regimes grew lighter, and policing grew laxer. Indeed, in contrast to what came later, the route to Siberia now seems, if not exactly pleasurable, then hardly an onerous punishment for the small group of men who would lead the Russian Revolution. When in prison, the Bolsheviks received a certain amount of favorable treatment as "political" rather than criminal prisoners, and were allowed to have books, paper, and writing implements. Ordzhonikidze, one of the Bolshevik leaders, later recalled reading Adam Smith, Ricardo, Plekhanov, William James, Frederick W. Taylor, Dostoevsky, and Ibsen, among others, while resident in St. Petersburg's Schlüsselberg Fortress. By later standards, the Bolsheviks were also well-fed, well-dressed, even beautifully coiffed. A photograph taken of Trotsky imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress in 1906 shows him wearing spectacles, a suit, a tie, and a shirt with an impressively white collar. The peephole in the door behind him offers the only clue to his whereabouts. Another taken of him in exile in eastern Siberia, in 1900, shows him in a fur hat and heavy coat, surrounded by other men and women, also in boots and furs. All of these items would be rare luxuries in the Gulag, half a century later.

If life in Czarist exile did become intolerably unpleasant, there was always escape. Stalin himself was arrested and exiled four times. Three times he escaped, once from Irkutsk province and twice from Vologda province, a region which later became pockmarked with camps. As a result, his scorn for the Czarist regime's "toothlessness" knew no bounds. His Russian biographer Dmitri Volkogonov characterized his opinion like this: "You didn't have to work, you could read to your heart's content and you could even escape, which required only the will to do so."

Thus did their Siberian experience provide the –Bolsheviks with an earlier model to build upon and a lesson in the need for exceptionally strong punitive regimes.

If the Gulag is an integral part of both Soviet and Russian history, it is inseparable from European history too: the Soviet Union was not the only twentieth-century European country to develop a totalitarian social order, or to build a system of concentration camps. While it is not the intention of this book to compare and contrast the Soviet and the Nazi camps, the subject cannot be comfortably ignored either. The two systems were built at roughly the same

time, on the same continent. Hitler knew of the Soviet camps, and Stalin knew of the Holocaust. There were prisoners who experienced and described the camps of both systems. At a very deep level, the two systems are related.

They are related, first of all, because both Nazism and Soviet communism emerged out of the barbaric experiences of the First World War and the Russian civil war, which followed on its heels. The industrialized methods of warfare put into wide use during both of these conflicts generated an enormous intellectual and artistic response at the time. Less noticed—except, of course, by the millions of victims—was the widespread use of industrialized methods of incarceration. Both sides constructed internment camps and prisoner-of-war camps across Europe from 1914 on. In 1918 there were 2.2 million prisoners of war on Russian territory. New technology—the mass production of guns, of tanks, even of barbed wire—made these and later camps possible. Indeed, some of the first Soviet camps were actually built on top of First World War prisoner-of-war camps.

The Soviet and Nazi camps are also related because they belong, together, to the wider history of concentration camps, which began at the end of the nineteenth century. By concentration camps, I mean camps constructed to incarcerate people not for what they had done, but for who they were. Unlike criminal prison camps, or prisoner-of-war camps, concentration camps were built for a particular type of noncriminal civilian prisoner, the member of an “enemy” group, or at any rate of a category of people who, for reasons of their race or their presumed politics, were judged to be dangerous or extraneous to society.

According to this definition, the first modern concentration camps were set up not in Germany or Russia, but in colonial Cuba, in 1895. In that year, in an effort to put an end to a series of local insurgencies, imperial Spain began to prepare a policy of *reconcentración*, intended to remove the Cuban peasants from their land and “reconcentrate” them in camps, thereby depriving the insurgents of food, shelter, and support. By 1900, the Spanish term *reconcentración* had already been translated into English, and was used to describe a similar British project, initiated for similar reasons, during the Boer War in South Africa: Boer civilians were “concentrated” into camps, in order to deprive Boer combatants of shelter and support.

From there, the idea spread further. It certainly seems, for example, as if the term *kontslager* first appeared in Russian as a translation from the English “concentration camp,” probably thanks to Trotsky’s familiarity with the history of the Boer War. In 1904, German colonists in *Deutsche Sud-West Afrika* also adopted the British model—with one variation. Instead of merely locking up the region’s native inhabitants, a tribe called the Herero, they made them carry out forced labor on behalf of the German colony.

There are a number of strange and eerie links between these first German-African labor camps and those built in Nazi Germany three decades later. It was thanks to these southern African labor colonies, for example, that the word *Konzentrationslager* first appeared in the German

language, in 1905. The first imperial commissioner of Deutsche Sud-West Afrika was one Dr. Heinrich Goering, the father of Hermann, who set up the first Nazi camps in 1933. It was also in these African camps that the first German medical experiments were conducted on humans: two of Joseph Mengele's teachers, Theodor Mollison and Eugen Fischer, carried out research on the Herero, the latter in an attempt to prove his theories about the superiority of the white race. But they were not unusual in their beliefs. In 1912, a best-selling German book, *German Thought in the World*, claimed that nothing can convince reasonable people that the preservation of a tribe of South African kaffirs is more important for the future of humanity than the expansion of the great European nations and the white race in general . . . it is only when the indigenous people have learned to produce something of value in the service of the superior race . . . that they can be said to have a moral right to exist.

While this theory was rarely put so clearly, similar sentiments often lay just beneath the surface of colonial practice. Certainly some forms of colonialism both reinforced the myth of white racial superiority and legitimized the use of violence by one race against another. It can be argued, therefore, that the corrupting experiences of some European colonists helped pave the way for the European totalitarianism of the twentieth-century. And not only European: Indonesia is an example of a post-colonial state whose rulers initially imprisoned their critics in concentration camps, just as their colonial masters had.

The Russian Empire, which had quite successfully vanquished its own native peoples in its march eastward, was no exception. During one of the dinner parties that takes place in Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*, Anna's husband—who has some official responsibilities for "Native Tribes"—holds forth on the need for superior cultures to absorb inferior ones. At some level, the Bolsheviks, like all educated Russians, would have been aware of the Russian Empire's destruction of the Kirgiz, Buryats, Tungus, Chukchi, and others. The fact that it didn't particularly concern them—they, who were otherwise so interested in the fate of the downtrodden—itself indicates something about their unspoken assumptions.

But then, full consciousness of the history of southern Africa or of eastern Siberia was hardly required for the development of European concentration camps: the notion that some types of people are superior to other types of people was common enough in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. And this, finally, is what links the camps of the Soviet Union and those of Nazi Germany in the most profound sense of all: both regimes legitimated themselves, in part, by establishing categories of "enemies" or "sub-humans" whom they persecuted and destroyed on a mass scale.

In Nazi Germany, the first targets were the crippled and the retarded. Later, the Nazis concentrated on Gypsies, homosexuals, and, above all, on the Jews. In the USSR the victims were, at first, the "former people"—alleged supporters of the old regime—and later the "enemies of the people," an ill-defined term which would come to include not only alleged political

opponents of the regime, but also particular national groups and ethnicities, if they seemed (for equally ill-defined reasons) to threaten the Soviet state or Stalin's power. At different times Stalin conducted mass arrests of Poles, Balts, Chechens, Tartars, and—on the eve of his death—Jews.

Although these categories were never entirely arbitrary, they were never entirely stable either. Half a century ago, Hannah Arendt wrote that both the Nazi and the Bolshevik regimes created "objective opponents" or "objective enemies," whose "identity changes according to the prevailing circumstances—so that, as soon as one category is liquidated, war may be declared on another." By the same token, she added, "the task of the totalitarian police is not to discover crimes, but to be on hand when the government decides to arrest a certain category of the population." Again: people were arrested not for what they had done, but for who they were.

In both societies, the creation of concentration camps was actually the final stage in a long process of dehumanization of these objective —a process which began, at first, with rhetoric. In his autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, Hitler wrote of how he had suddenly realized that the Jews were responsible for Germany's problems, that "any shady undertaking, any form of foulness" in public life was connected to the Jews: "on putting the probing knife to that kind of abscess one immediately discovered, like a maggot in a putrescent body, a little Jew who was often blinded by the suddenness of the light...."

Lenin and Stalin also began by blaming "enemies" for the Soviet Union's myriad economic failures: they were "wreckers" and "saboteurs" and agents of foreign powers. From the late 1930s, as the wave of arrests began to expand, Stalin took this rhetoric to greater extremes, denouncing the "enemies of the people" as vermin, as pollution, as "poisonous weeds." He also spoke of his opponents as "filth" which had to be "subjected to ongoing purification"—just as Nazi propaganda would associate Jews with images of vermin, of parasites, of infectious disease.

Once demonized, the legal isolation of the enemy began in earnest. Before the Jews were actually rounded up and deported to camps, they were deprived of their status as German citizens. They were forbidden to work as civil servants, as lawyers, as judges; forbidden to marry Aryans; forbidden to attend Aryan schools; forbidden to display the German flag; forced to wear gold stars of David; and subjected to beatings and humiliation on the street. Before their actual arrest in Stalin's Soviet Union, "enemies" were also routinely humiliated in public meetings, fired from their jobs, expelled from the Communist Party, divorced by their disgusted spouses, and denounced by their angry children.

Within the camps, the process of dehumanization deepened and grew more extreme, helping both to intimidate the victims and to reinforce the victimizers' belief in the legitimacy of what they were doing. In her book-length interview with Franz Stangl, the commander of Treblinka,

the writer Gitta Sereny asked Stangl why camp inmates, before being killed, were also beaten, humiliated, and deprived of their clothing. Stangl answered, "To condition those who actually had to carry out the policies. To make it possible for them to do what they did." In *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp*, the German sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky has also shown how the dehumanization of prisoners in the Nazi camps was methodically built into every aspect of camp life, from the torn, identical clothing, to the deprivation of privacy, to the heavy regulation, to the constant expectation of death.

In the Soviet system, the dehumanization process also began at the moment of arrest, as we shall see, when prisoners were stripped of their clothes and identity, denied contact with outsiders, tortured, interrogated, and put through farcical trials, if they were tried at all. In a peculiarly Soviet twist on the process, prisoners were deliberately "excommunicated" from Soviet life, forbidden to refer to one another as "comrade," and, from 1937 on, prohibited from earning the coveted title of "shock-worker," no matter how well they behaved or how hard they worked. Portraits of Stalin, which hung in homes and offices throughout the USSR, almost never appeared inside camps and prisons, according to many prisoner accounts.

None of which is to say that the Soviet and Nazi camps were identical. As any reader with any general knowledge of the Holocaust will discover in the course of this book, life within the Soviet camp system differed in many ways, both subtle and obvious, from life within the Nazi camp system. There were differences in the organization of daily life and of work, different sorts of guards and punishments, different kinds of propaganda. The Gulag lasted far longer, and went through cycles of relative cruelty and relative humanity. The history of the Nazi camps is shorter, and contains less variation: they simply became crueler and crueler, until the retreating Germans liquidated them or the invading Allies liberated them. The Gulag also contained a wide variety of camps, from the lethal gold mines of the Kolyma region to the "luxurious" secret institutes outside Moscow, where prisoner scientists designed weapons for the Red Army. Although there were different kinds of camps in the Nazi system, the range was far narrower.

Above all, however, two differences between the systems strike me as fundamental. First, the definition of "enemy" in the Soviet Union was always far more slippery than the definition of "Jew" in Nazi Germany. With an extremely small number of unusual exceptions, no Jew in Nazi Germany could change his status, no Jew inside a camp could reasonably expect to escape death, and all Jews carried this knowledge with them at all times. While millions of Soviet prisoners feared they might die—and millions did—there was no single category of prisoner whose death was absolutely guaranteed. At times, certain prisoners could improve their lot by working in relatively comfortable jobs, as engineers or geologists. Within each camp there was a prisoner hierarchy, which some were able to climb at the expense of others, or with the help of others. At other times—when the Gulag found itself overburdened with women, children, and old people, or when soldiers were needed to fight at the front—prisoners were released in mass

amnesties. It sometimes happened that whole categories of "enemies" suddenly benefited from a change in status. Stalin arrested hundreds of thousands of Poles, for example, at the start of the Second World War in 1939—and then abruptly released them from the Gulag in 1941 when Poland and the USSR became temporary allies. The opposite was also true: in the Soviet Union, perpetrators could become victims themselves. Gulag guards, administrators, even senior officers of the secret police, could also be arrested and find themselves sentenced to camps. Not every "poisonous weed" remained poisonous, in other words—and there was no single group of Soviet prisoners who lived with the constant expectation of death.

Second—as, again, will become evident in the course of this book—the primary purpose of the Gulag, according to both the private language and the public propaganda of those who founded it, was economic. This did not mean that it was humane. Within the system, prisoners were treated as cattle, or rather as lumps of iron ore. Guards shuttled them around at will, loading and unloading them into cattle cars, weighing and measuring them, feeding them if it seemed they might be useful, starving them if they were not. They were, to use Marxist language, exploited, reified, and commodified. Unless they were productive, their lives were worthless to their masters.

Nevertheless, their experience was quite different from that of the Jewish and other prisoners whom the Nazis sent to a special group of camps called not Konzentrationslager but Vernichtungslager—camps that were not really "labor camps" at all, but rather death factories. There were four of them: Belzec, Chelmno, Sobibor, and Treblinka. Majdanek and Auschwitz contained both labor camps and death camps. Upon entering these camps, prisoners were "selected." A tiny number were sent to do a few weeks of forced labor. The rest were sent directly into gas chambers where they were murdered and then immediately cremated.

As far as I have been able to ascertain, this particular form of murder, practiced at the height of the Holocaust, had no Soviet equivalent. True, the Soviet Union found other ways to mass-murder hundreds of thousands of its citizens. Usually, they were driven to a forest at night, lined up, shot in the skull, and buried in mass graves before they ever got near a concentration camp—a form of murder no less "industrialized" and anonymous than that used by the Nazis. For that matter, there are stories of Soviet secret police using exhaust fumes—a primitive form of gas—to kill prisoners, just as the Nazis did in their early years. Within the Gulag, Soviet prisoners also died, usually not thanks to the captors' efficiency but due to gross inefficiency and neglect. In certain Soviet camps, at certain times, death was virtually guaranteed for those selected to cut trees in the winter forest or to work in the worst of the Kolyma gold mines. Prisoners were also locked in punishment cells until they died of cold and starvation, left untreated in unheated hospitals, or simply shot at will for "attempted escape." Nevertheless, the Soviet camp system as a whole was not deliberately organized to mass-produce corpses—even if, at times, it did.

These are fine distinctions, but they matter. Although the Gulag and Auschwitz do belong to the same intellectual and historical tradition, they are nevertheless separate and distinct, both from one another and from camp systems set up by other regimes. The idea of the concentration camp may be general enough to be used in many different cultures and situations, but even a superficial study of the concentration camp's cross-cultural history reveals that the specific details—how life in the camps was organized, how the camps developed over time, how rigid or disorganized they became, how cruel or liberal they remained—depended on the particular country, on the culture, and on the regime. To those who were trapped behind barbed wire, these details were critical to their life, health, and survival.

In fact, reading the accounts of those who survived both, one is struck more by the differences between the victims' experiences than by the differences between the two camp systems. Each tale has its own unique qualities, each camp held different sorts of horrors for people of different characters. In Germany you could die of cruelty, in Russia you could die of despair. In Auschwitz you could die in a gas chamber, in Kolyma you could freeze to death in the snow. You could die in a German forest or a Siberian wasteland, you could die in a mining accident or you could die in a cattle train. But in the end, the story of your life was your own.