

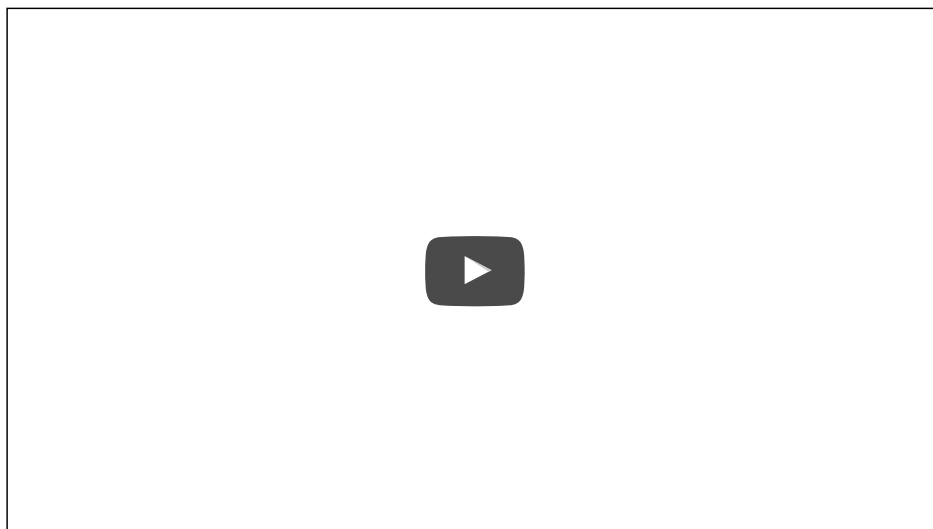
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Gulag: What We Know Now and Why it Matters

LSE IDEAS

A summary by Harriet Shone, BSc Government & History

Anne Applebaum, the current Philippe Roman Chair in History and International Affairs at LSE IDEAS, discussed the Stalinist Gulag system and why it continues to matter almost 60 years after the death of Stalin.



This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's famous portrayal of life in the gulag, "*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*". Fifty years after the harsh realities of life as a political prisoner in the USSR began to be widely discussed, Professor Applebaum discussed why the story of the gulag's victims is no longer a matter of public debate in Russia.

The impact of the gulag on the USSR was widely felt throughout the Soviet period. First created under Lenin in 1918 as a temporary measure to contain counter-revolution, the gulag system expanded under Stalin until there were 476 camp systems across the Soviet Union with an estimated 18 million prisoners passing through the camps by 1953.

Professor Applebaum explained that the purpose of these camps went beyond the simple punishment and humiliation of 'enemies of the state', although they were certainly effective in this. Rather, Stalin's decision to expand the camp system was largely couched in economic terms. What better way to extract natural resources, to build, to mine and to achieve the goals of the 5 Year Plan, than to extend the network of free labour? Stalin put potential threats to the state to work rather than waste their potential by killing them.

In the long term, this system of forced labour had a stagnating effect on the Soviet economy. Mechanisation of industry was delayed because it was cheaper and easier to throw more lives at a problem than to find innovative ways to do things. Productivity was known to be low in the gulag because starvation and exhaustion do not motivate men to produce. In Moscow, prisoners built apartment blocks while in the north of Russia they built whole communities for miners to live in despite arctic conditions and the totally unliveable nature of the land. The Soviet planned economy's total lack of logic was never clearer than in the use of starving, and indeed dying, people to do work that might have been achieved by machines.

Again, it was for economic reasons that Stalin's descendants, right from the moment of his death, took steps to dismantle the extensive web of prison camps. They were an economic experiment and they had failed. But no leader of the USSR was forward-thinking or politically powerful enough to end the gulag entirely. Until 1989, the prison camp system cast a long shadow – as Professor Applebaum put it, "Stalin is dead but his last terrible gaze still casts its shadow".

Why then, if the horrors of prison life were so well-known in a country where prisoners were utilised in every industry and in every town, is the gulag not memorialised? Where Germany has honoured the victims of Nazi terror in writings, days of national mourning and in dozens of built statues and memorials, Russia has few memorials for the millions of innocent people who died in the gulag. There is not a straightforward answer to this – the economic and political failures of the post-Soviet

period, the collection of other horrors suffered in the same period which clouds the significance of the gulag and the ascendance of a President that describes himself as 'chekist' all play a part.

A recent poll taken in Russia saw 48% of respondents viewing Stalin as a positive force for the USSR. This forgetfulness of a national tragedy is the result of a deliberate lack of public discourse and education.

Professor Applebaum believes that we should continue to discuss the gulag not so we can make sure it doesn't happen again but because it will happen again and by looking to the past we can try to understand why. History offers us a chance to understand that dark part of humanity that is able to debase its neighbours in the name of ideology or practicality alike.

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