Current Books

Reviews of new and noteworthy nonfiction

Darkness Remembered

GULAG:
A History.
By Anne Applebaum. Doubleday. 677 pp. $35

STALIN'S LOYAL EXECUTIONER:
People's Commissar Nikolai Ezhov, 1895–1940.
By Marc Jansen and Nikita Petrov. Hoover Institution Press. 274 pp. $25

THE DIARY OF GEORGI DIMITROV, 1933–1949.
Edited by Ivo Banac. Yale Univ. Press. 495 pp. $39.95

Reviewed by Andrew Meier

Moscow in the decade that followed the Soviet collapse could be an unsettling place, a city of brutish and often lethal politics, where the newly rich and the old poor competed, with predictable results and considerable indelicacy, for the spoils of the ancient regime. Amid the turmoil, I learned to seek solace in a small, dimly lit apartment, its shelves filled with manuscripts. I would take the metro to the city's northern edge and visit Semyon Vilensky, not only for relief, but in search of an answer to the unspoken question that haunted the capital and the country surrounding it: the question of remembrance.

Vilensky is not a historian, a political scientist, or even a scholar, but he is as good an expert on matters of historical memory as any Russian I know. For more than four decades, he collected the works—memoirs, short stories, poems, plays, novels, and diaries—of the *zeks*, the prisoners who suffered in the Soviet labor camps. *Zek* was camp slang, a word that grew out of the Gulag architects' bureaucratic shorthand: *z/k* stood for *zaklyuchennyi*, prisoner. Vilensky himself, as *zek* I-1620, spent more than six years in Kolyma, site of the dreaded goldfields at the Soviet Union's frozen northeastern edge.

It is a miracle that the manuscripts, more than a thousand in all, survived. Vilensky, now in his seventies, is a stocky man with a white, curly mane and anarchic, bushy eyebrows that dance when he talks. With a grin, he likes to share his secret: "The *babushki*." The grandmothers. For a quarter of a century, from Nikita Khrushchev to Mikhail Gorbachev, he traveled the country for six months each year, stashing manuscripts with the *babushki* in villages far from Moscow. Slowly, quietly, he saved the literary heritage of the camps.

In the late 1980s, once glasnost began to free Moscow's printing presses, Vilensky started to reel the manuscripts in. In 1989, he founded a group known as Vozvrashchenie (The Return), and began to publish them. With a full-time staff of one, he published more than 50 volumes by the time the new

century opened. But he was not ready to rest. Boris Yeltsin had gone, Vladimir Putin had come, and the euphoria accompanying the Soviet fall had long since faded. Yet there had been no reckoning, no attempt at historical understanding. "We barely had enough time to ask the right questions," Vilensky said, "let alone try to answer them."

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, many anticipated that the sins of the Soviet state would be revealed in all their detail. But the return of history did not live up to expectations. The archives opened only briefly—long enough for a few sensations to emerge, but not for the "white spots," as Russians call the gaping holes in their historical knowledge, to be filled in.

In recent years, however, several volumes have enhanced our understanding of the Soviets' greatest legacy, the vast and ornate system of political repression known simply as the Gulag (*Gulag* is an abbreviation of *Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei*, Main Camp Administration). Even after the publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* in the 1970s, many in the West held a number of false ideas about the camps: that they were Stalin's creation; that they reached their capacity during 1937–38, the years known as the Great Terror; that they were the Soviet version of Hitler's concentration camps; that they were dismantled entirely after Stalin's death. Amazingly, Anne Applebaum's *Gulag* is the first complete history of the Soviet camps to appear in English.

Any attempt at a history of the Soviet penal system will inevitably be measured against *The Gulag Archipelago*. Solzhenitsyn, however, has been rightly criticized for his wooden prose—*dokumental'naya proza*, "documentary prose," Russian writers say, noses upturned. Thankfully, Applebaum, a journalist who has long contributed to British publications and recently joined *The Washington Post*'s editorial page, makes no effort to varnish her history with rhetorical flourishes. Instead, she offers a comprehensive examination of the penal system that littered the Soviet Union with camps and *spetsposelki* (the "special settlements" to which undesirables were exiled). In a lucid and well-crafted narrative, she lays out the evolution of the system, from its tsarist origins (many of the Bolsheviks had known it firsthand), to the first camps (her chapter on the Solovki camp, a former monastery on an island in the Solovetsky archipelago in the White Sea, is one of her best), to the rise of the camps under Lenin (by 1921, she reports, there were 84 camps in 43 provinces), to the Great Terror, to the post-World War II growth of the Gulag when Stalin's paranoia and megalomania filled the camps with more than two million prisoners, all the way through the Khrushchev thaw to the rise of Gorbachev—the grandson of *zeks*—and the end of systematic political repression in the Soviet Union.

Labor Camp Near Rostov-on-Don, *by Leonid Lamm*

Applebaum judiciously marshals her material to recreate the Gulag in all its minutiae, both macabre and mundane. She is careful to depict both sides of camp life, the prisoners' and the guards'. She aptly represents the linguistic divide, telling in its details, between the slang of the *zeks* and the anesthetized bureaucratic code of the Gulag administrators. She is unafraid to confront the paradoxes that abounded—*zeks* who became guards, guards who fraternized with *zeks*, female prisoners who married guards.

Above all, Applebaum takes care to denote the line between Hitler's camps and Stalin's: The Soviet camps were not designed as extermination centers. Countless men and women died, of course, but Stalin and the architects of the Gulag had seen early on the virtues of prison labor. The *zeks* would be fed in accordance with their *trudosposobnost'* (work capacity), and they in turn would feed the Soviet military-industrial complex.

If there is a fault to *Gulag*, it's the book's reliance on documents over the voices of survivors. Despite its masterly sweep, the book seems oddly drained of the Gulag's sweat and blood. Applebaum apparently elected not to

do extensive interviews of *zeks* (only some two dozen are listed in the notes), though she did make excellent and wide-ranging use of memoirs by survivors.

Applebaum and others (myself included) stand in the debt of a small corps of Russian historians, archivists, and Gulag veterans who have dedicated themselves to excavating the Soviet past. Vilensky's Vozvrashchenie is not alone. The Andrei Sakharov Foundation houses an extensive library and research center in Moscow, and the Memorial Society, founded in the Gorbachev era to unearth and preserve the memory of the victims of Soviet repression, has grown, against all odds, to national scale, with branches across the country. The Memorial Society and the Demokratiya Foundation, run by Aleksandr Yakovlev, Gorbachev's former ideologist, have produced volumes of archival documents that are a boon to scholars and deserve to be translated into English. (Applebaum has made good use of these Russian texts.) The historians Aleksandr Kokurin, Oleg Khlevniuk, and Nikita Petrov—men who were educated in Soviet schools but came of age professionally after the Soviet fall—continue to set a heady pace, contributing either to the Memorial Society series or to pioneering journals such as *Istoricheskii arkhiv* (Historical Archive). Khlevniuk, author of several acclaimed volumes on the mechanics of Stalinism, has recently completed a history of the economics of the Gulag that awaits publication in Moscow. His *History of the Gulag, 1930–1941* will be published next spring as part of Yale University Press's Annals of Communism series.

Petrov, a cochair of the Memorial Society, and the Dutch historian Marc Jansen have written a new study of Nikolai Ezhov, the man Stalin trusted to orchestrate the Great Terror. *Stalin's Loyal Executioner* has received scant notice outside academic circles. But this slim volume, written, alas, in uneven English, is a revelation: Using previously unpublished documents from the holy of holies, the so-called Presi-

dential Archive, Jansen and Petrov attempt a biography of the alcoholic near-dwarf of self-professed uncertain sexual orientation who, at Stalin's behest, with less than a primary school education, ran the daunting operation that sent more than half a million to their deaths in 1937 and 1938.

Jansen and Petrov lay bare the Soviet lies about Ezhov: first, those the Bolsheviks spread to depict him as a fervent proletarian, and later, when he had become an enemy of the state, the ones the Stalinists used to bury their former comrade as a "dwarf-pederast." Detailing his role in the show trial of 1936, Jansen and Petrov reveal how Ezhov climbed the Soviet echelons. They retrace the purge of the Old Bolsheviks, killed by the thousands in the terror, and quote Nikolai Krylenko, the commissar of justice, who at the height of the terror told a friend, "Nowadays Leninists like me are not wanted; the fashionable ones are the Ezhovs . . . parvenus with a lost conscience." Krylenko was soon arrested, and within a year, shot.

Ezhov got his turn not long thereafter. In 1939 he was charged with spying "on behalf of Poland, Germany, England, and Japan; directing a conspiracy within the NKVD [the Soviet internal security agency]; preparing a coup d'état; organizing a number of murders; having sexual intercourse with men." Under torture, Stalin's loyal executioner signed every confession put before him.

Both *Gulag* and *Stalin's Loyal Executioner* avoid the feverish debate that consumed scholars in the wake of the Soviet collapse: the search for a precise tally of the victims of Bolshevik repression. Still, the revisionists, some of whom claim that only thousands were arrested in the Great Terror, will not be pleased. Gulag documents indicate that from 1929 until 1953, the year of Stalin's death, 18 million passed through the camps. Another six million were packed off to exile settlements in the Siberian taiga or the Central Asian steppes. Jansen and Petrov restrict themselves to the arrest and execution lists of 1937–39. "In the course of some 15 months," they write, "approximately 1.5 million people were arrested; almost half of them were executed." Suffice it to say, as Applebaum does, that "statistics can never fully describe what happened."

Perhaps Georgi Dimitrov, the Bulgarian head of the Comintern, offers the best summation. Bits of his diary, kept from 1933 until his death in 1949, have appeared before, but now the entire text has been published in English. In its pages, Dimitrov offers a wealth of insight into the workings of the Comintern and Stalin's Politburo. An entry on November 7, 1937—Revolution Day—provides what may be the clearest prophecy of the madness to come. Dimitrov recounts the parade in Red Square, the feast that followed at Marshal Kliment Voroshilov's, and a toast by Stalin that is remarkable in its honesty and chilling in its blood lust.

"I would like to say a few words, perhaps not festive ones," Stalin said. "The Russian tsars did a great deal that was bad. They robbed and enslaved the people. They waged wars and seized territories in the interests of landowners. But they did one thing that was good—they amassed an enormous state. . . . We have united the state in such a way that if any part were isolated from the common socialist state, it would not only inflict harm on the latter but would be unable to exist independently and would inevitably fall under foreign subjugation. Therefore, whoever attempts to destroy that unity of the socialist state . . . is an enemy, a sworn enemy of the state and of the peoples of the USSR. And we will destroy each and every such enemy, even if he is an Old Bolshevik; we will destroy all his kin, his family. We will mercilessly destroy anyone who, by his deeds or his thoughts—yes, his thoughts—threatens the unity of this socialist state. To the complete destruction of all enemies, themselves and their kin!"

The toast, Dimitrov notes, was seconded by "approving exclamations: To the great Stalin!"

In Vladimir Putin's Moscow—and despite the grip of the oil and gas barons, it is very much his city these days—the remnants of the Soviet intelligentsia like to talk about

expiating guilt. The forlorn and graying dissidents say that the villains of Soviet power should face a Nuremberg. They know, of course, that there never will be one. Russians have not embraced any attempt at a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the German term for the process of coming to terms with the past. It is said to be cathartic, offering a kind of deliverance. Russian has no such word.

In Germany, the past has been opened wide—in part by the Allies, but far more significantly by social demand and law. In German society, after World War II and again after the fall of the Berlin Wall, excavating the past and telling its secrets became national obsessions. As early as 1946, the philosopher Karl Jaspers began the process of delineating guilt. For all the failings of de-Nazification, Buchenwald and Dachau were not allowed to disappear; they became museums. Among West Germans, with the rise of the generation of 1968, the urge for self-examination only gained strength. Then 1989 brought the craving to the East. The Stasi headquarters were not only stormed but opened. The state established the right and the means for citizens to gain access to their secret-police files. Most significant, the line between perpetrator and victim was not allowed to fade away. To be exposed as a Stasi officer, agent, or informer is to wear the stigma of the offender. Germans, whether confronted by the Allies or by their own sons and daughters, faced the issue of moral complicity and continue to bear its weight.

Nothing could be further from the case in Russia. In 1991, in the last days of the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin did push through the "Law on the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression." The legislation was a critical step, but a far cry from the "truth and reconciliation" endeavors attempted elsewhere. By now, a presidential commission, established by Yeltsin and chaired by Yakovlev, has officially "rehabilitated" more than four million victims of Stalinism, but, for more than a decade, they have had to carry on an unseemly struggle for compensation. And as the new century opened, a former secret policeman rose to rule the Kremlin.

Russian historians warn, however, against comparing the German experience with the Russian. Germany, after all, started to examine its past only after an economic miracle, one of history's greatest. Russia, more than a decade after the end of the Soviet Union, still awaits its recovery. In a nation economically, socially, and ideologically adrift, reopening old wounds is not a priority.

This past March, on the 50th anniversary of Stalin's death, a Moscow pollster asked Russians their opinion of the former leader. Of the respondents, 53 percent said Stalin played "a positive role in the life of the country"; 33 percent disagreed; 14 percent were uncertain whether he had been good or bad.

Still, all is not lost. Historians continue to unearth documents and sift through the layers of Soviet realia and surrealia to assemble accounts of the dark past. The surviving *zeks*, even in the new age when so many Russians have mistaken liberty for license, refuse to let their memories fade.

Vilensky continues his publishing marathon. He struggles, as ever, for funds, but he recently produced his "life's achievement": a children's anthology of 20th-century Russian writers, the celebrated and the unknown, including Vladimir Nabokov and Solzhenitsyn (who allowed Vilensky to reprint *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*), all of whom suffered the rise of Soviet power. Much to Vilensky's surprise, the project has been a success. The Ministry of Education, while stopping short of publishing it, gave the primer its blessing. Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov, not one inclined to air the Soviet past, has consented to its use in the schools, as have the administrators in the Magadan Region, once the headquarters of the Kolyma camps.

The first printing was small—20,000 for the entire country—but Vilensky was overjoyed. "At least it's out there," he said, when I visited him earlier this year. "Otherwise our children are facing a white wall. Just ask a 13-year-old in Smolensk what he knows of the Gulag."

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