Steven A. Barnes


Much has been written about the Soviet forced labor detention system, the Gulag, a word made widely known in the 1970s by Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s three volumes of _The Gulag Archipelago._ This awareness did not always go hand in hand with corresponding understanding, however. First of all as a result of the inaccessibility of the main sources, kept secret by the Soviet authorities, our view of the Gulag has long been inadequate. _Auschwitz Without Furnaces,_ is one telling title (as translated from the Russian) out of the Gulag literature. Stalin’s concentration camps were seen as almost as deadly as Nazi gas chambers. Prisoners were most unlikely to survive, for the central aim was to kill them off, wrote Robert Conquest in his classic _The Great Terror_ (1968), concluding that at least 12 million of them died.

During the past two decades, after greater accessibility following the end of communist rule in Russia, this view has gradually been readjusted. In his book _Death and Redemption,_ Steven Barnes, associate professor of history at George Mason University, on the basis of essential sources now completes the process, without going to the other extreme of playing down the Gulag’s impact. Although “one of the most brutal institutions of the lethal twentieth century” (p. 6), it was no “truly genocidal institution” (p. 2), he writes. Throughout the Stalin years, some 18 million people passed through the prisons and camps of the Gulag, and another 6 or 7 million were subject to internal exile. At least 1.6 million died in the appalling conditions of the camps, while probably more than 1 million died during the process of exile. Those surviving were often crushed by the experience. On the other hand, substantial percentages of the Gulag population were also released, in other words, the system had “a revolving door” (p. 10). Along with death, there was also “redemption.” (The connection between the Gulag and the “shaping of Soviet society” suggested in the subtitle, is not brought out very well, however.)

Indeed, Barnes does not just deal with the Gulag in the narrow sense of the word, the corrective labor camps and colonies, as well as the prisons; he includes the special settlements of the deported kulaks and repressed nationalities. (The prisoner-of-war and filtration camps during and immediately after World War Two are left out, though, and are mentioned only in passing.) The Karaganda region of Kazakhstan is singled out as a case study.
If one can speak of culpable homicide rather than premeditated murder, what then in Barnes’ view were the main Gulag aims? Apart from isolating and punishing inmates, the intention was to reeducate them (although often accompanied by a good deal of cynicism). There were political lessons and extensive propaganda, and this not merely to make them work harder. Besides, the camps had an economic significance, but this was a secondary task only, and Barnes disputes the opinion of some other authors that mass arrests might have sometimes been dictated by economic needs. The Gulag was never economically profitable. On the other hand, one could object that for some extremely harsh Gulag projects free labor was hardly available.

Detainees included criminals as well as a high percentage of political prisoners, or “counterrevolutionaries” in Soviet terms, usually treated worse since they were supposed to be largely incorrigible. Moreover, millions of “criminals” had been condemned for relatively small offences, like violation of the harsh labor laws of 1940. Barnes’ data on the special settlements of internal exile reveals there were also millions of people in the Gulag for the simple fact of belonging to the “wrong” social group or nation.

The camps were more diverse than is often assumed. Some of them were close to cities, others were hardly reachable in distant regions. In 1943 the katorga, or hard labor from tsarist times, was officially reinstated, although in a much more severe manner. It was also applied in the “special camps” for especially dangerous state criminals (mainly political prisoners) of 1948 and after, like Steplag near Dzhezkazgan in Kazakhstan, in Barnes’ words, the “lowest circle of the corrective labor hell” (p. 168).

In the early 1950s, revolt in the Gulag increased. Many new prisoners had fought during the war or been hardened in partisan warfare, with a high percentage of non-Russian nationalists among them. A major uprising took place in Kengir division of Steplag in May–June 1954, more than a year after Stalin’s death. The dictator’s death was itself a factor contributing to the rebelliousness. Within weeks, his successors had issued an amnesty, releasing nearly 50 percent of the Gulag population but excluding the political and tougher criminal prisoners.

During the following five years, the Gulag in its Stalinist form, containing millions of prisoners with a high percentage of political ones among them, was dismantled. The name Gulag officially disappeared in 1960; however, some of the characteristics of the system are still there. As recently as September 2011, Russian Justice Minister Alexander Konовалov argued that the present state of Russian prisons and penal colonies, with their inhumane conditions, retains many of the features of Stalin’s Gulag. Although this observation is as