Confronting Amnesia

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Confronting Amnesia: Frozen Memories of the Russian Gulag (2009)

INTRODUCTION

The Russian Gulag, developed by Josef Stalin at the height of the Soviet Union,
was one of the gravest human rights violations of the Twentieth Century. This sprawling
system of penal colonies and forced labor camps consisted of an estimated 500 distinct
complexes that spanned twelve time zones. At the time of Stalin's death in 1953, about
18 million people had passed through this penal system, roughly 15% of the Soviet
population. Yet, despite the closing of the last camps by Gorbachev in 1987, the rehabili-
tation of all victims of political repression in 1992, and denunciations of Stalin's despo-
tism, the legacy of the Gulag is virtually invisible in Russia's collective consciousness.

In fact, attempts to educate the public—and a new

generation—about the Gulag and human rights
in general have been met with open enmity from the government. In light of the fact that, in the words
of Marshall Goldman, the Senior Scholar at Harvard's Davis Center, "almost every family had some
relative or some acquaintance who had been imprisoned or sent to the Gulag or executed," Russia's
indifference to the atrocities of a system that endured for more than half a century is staggering.

Confronting Amnesia: Frozen Memories of the Russian Gulag addresses these difficult themes.
"Somehow," said Co-Producer John Michalczyk in a 2009 interview with
the Boston Herald, "the enormity of the evil perpetrated in the Gulag has generally
eluded the collective consciousness of Americans and Western societies." An important
contribution to a vital dialogue on human rights, this film explores the history of the
Gulag and its legacy in Russia today in an attempt to combat this Western "blindness."
While the first camps were founded by Lenin and Trotsky in 1918, the Gulag flour-
ished under Stalin who, believing it could play an important function in the Soviet econ-
omy, launched the first industrialization of the camp system in 1929. His initial intent
was to use prisoners to develop resources such as timber, to open up mining districts,
and to build roads and railroads, among other projects. After he consolidated power,
however, particularly from the mid-1930s on, Stalin began to send political prisoners,
any person that displayed a shred of dissent, to the Gulag, where they were executed
immediately or worked to death.

Using interviews with scholars, historians, human rights activists, and survivors
and their families, Confronting Amnesia presents a grim view of life in the Soviet Union
during Stalin's Reign of Terror. These accounts explore the tactics used by the "Ministry
of Fear" to control the population through intimidation, from the knock on the door in
the middle of the night, to the façade of legality of trials that frequently lasted no more
than thirty seconds. The film goes on to detail the unspeakable horrors of the two-week
long journey to the camps, during which prisoners were locked inside cattle cars, and
the abominable conditions of the camps themselves, such as Kolyma, located in a region
where temperatures reached -70° Fahrenheit (-57° Celsius). One of the film's major
strengths is in its delicate balance between testimonies from experts in the field with the
individual experiences of those like Fr. Walter Ciszek, S.J. and Arkady Berdichevsky,
among other victims of the Gulag.

Confronting Amnesia serves an important purpose in an era when many in Russia
choose to overlook such atrocities. While introducing groups like Memorial and the Perm-
36 labor camp, dedicated to remembering those who suffered in an effort to prevent further
human rights abuses, the documentary also highlights the government's attempts to erase
"the Unmanageable Past" from Russia's collective consciousness. The amnesia succeeds,
due in large part to a certain nostalgia for the glory days of Russia, including for Stalin,
credited with making the Soviet Union a world power.

Above all, however, Confronting Amnesia examines the question of collective
identity and the need to address the tragedies of the past in order to move into the future.
While given in the context of the Russian Gulag, the lessons offered here speak to uni-
versal themes that are indispensible for the global advancement of human rights, making
it an excellent resource for scholars, activists or simply those looking to explore one of
the greatest atrocities of the twentieth century.

SCRIPT

Joshua Rubenstein (Regional Director of Amnesty International, Boston)
Putin is trying to nurture a sense of nostalgia for that period and overlook the
more negative aspects of that period. So even when we marked the 50th
Anniversary of Stalin’s death in 2003, there was no official statement about the
victims of Stalin.

Anne Applebaum (Historian)
But I think there's also a question of pride. Many feel, "Well we used to be
a great country. Now we're not a great country. But we don't want to hear
anything bad about when we were a great country. We'd like to maintain the
illusion that it was a good system." They don't want to disturb that image, and
they don't want to disturb that memory.
Narrator: This impenetrable land…This "riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enig-
ma," as Churchill famously categorized it…This extraordinary state of mind, equally
unconquerable and inexplicable…. This is Mother Russia on the brink of a new era in
the twenty-first century. Will she, however, ever acknowledge her dark past?
Russia, late in the first decade of the twenty-first century, has recently passed through
another revolution following the openness to change in glasnost and perestroika in the
1990s. It was all about making sure it would never happen again. It was edifying to some
for a time, but did the Russian government ever really sign on?
Fear grows that the current government now would prefer to see a certain "moral amne-
sia" re-imposed on Russia's collective memory, shunting aside lingering remorse over
such painful experiences as the infamous persecutions of the fifty-year Gulag experi-
ence. It would be a matter of convenience…better for business…better for the political
order…better for those who find guilt cumbersome…better for the determined drive to
make glorious Mother Russia again what she rightfully ought

be, a giant among nations.
That has been the government agenda. There is neither time nor place for remorse, for
any return to the Gulag era.
A Russian history scholar, Joshua Rubenstein, is Regional Director of Amnesty Interna-
tional in Boston.
Joshua Rubenstein (Regional Director of Amnesty International, Boston)
Stalin's forced labor camps system, the Gulag, was one of the worst examples
of human rights violations of the twentieth century. First in scale, that it en-
gulfed millions of people, that it was a significant part of the Soviet economy,
that it left a terrible legacy that took decades and decades to overcome.
Narrator: Professor Mark Kramer, specialist in Cold War Studies at Harvard's Davis
Center, lost twenty-seven members of his family from Riga, Latvia and knows the power
of the Gulag to engulf the citizens of Russia and its satellites.
Marc Kramer (Specialist in Cold War Studies, Harvard's Davis Center)
Gulag is a combination contraction and acronym of the Russian term. It's
Glavnoe Upravlenie Ispravitel'no-Trudovykh Lagerei i kolonii. Forced labor
camps would have been perhaps more accurate, but this term became equiva-
lent over a time with the whole penal system, this whole enormous sprawling
system of camps and colonies in which both criminals and political prisoners
were incarcerated.

Narrator: Anne Applebaum is the author of the definitive work on the history of the Gulag.
Anne Applebaum (Historian)
There were camps—there were Gulag camps really from the very beginning
of the Soviet Union. Lenin and Trotsky founded the first camps in 1918. And
they were a very important part of Soviet policy in the 1920s. But in 1929, Sta-
lin launched the first real industrialization of the camp system. In other words,
he began to see that the Gulag could play an important function in the Soviet
economy, and he expanded their numbers, and he expanded what they did, so
they were no longer just a few little logging camps. They were chemical fac-
tories, they used prisoners to open up mining districts, and they used prisoners
to build roads and railroads and so on. And this system of mass forced labor,
through which millions of people passed, lasted from about 1929 until Stalin's
death in 1953. And, at that point, it really was not ended, but it was dismantled
as a production system.
Narrator: Marshall Goldman, senior scholar at Harvard's Davis Center, has studied
closely the economic development of Russia.
Marshall Goldman (Senior Scholar, Harvard's Davis Center)
Well, for a time, Stalin, when he particularly began to promote and increase
the Gulag camps, he was doing it in part for economic reasons because he was
sending people up into the far North; places, up until then, were not attract-
ing workers. So, for a while, he was developing metals,

industry and timber,
and they thought that this would pay for itself. Other subsequent calculations
had found that financially it was not a profit-making operation. But, in the
beginning, for sure there was the notion that we could use this free labor to
develop resources, which would have a value for industry and even for the
export sector.

Narrator: The camps, later focusing on punitive measures, then extended into Eastern
Europe during the Iron Curtain era after World War II. They were re-invented as work
farms and as detention centers for political dissenters in the 1960s and 1970s like Ana-
toly Sharansky and Nobel Peace Prize activist Andrei Sakharov.
And the camps lingered in dwindling numbers and intensity until Mikhail Gorbachev,
the grandson of an egregiously wronged Gulag victim, pardoned the last political dis-
senters and closed the remaining penal colonies in 1987.
While the camp gates have closed, the history annals are opening. Yet, throughout this
tragic period, as is the case with all of the Gulag's vital statistics, there is no official
count. But it is believed there were close to 500 distinct camp complexes in the Soviet
Union alone consisting of thousands of individual stations, pockets of despair scattered
in Russia's most forlorn wastes.
Nina Khrushcheva, the great-granddaughter of Nikita Khrushchev, notes the irrelevance
of the individual in a larger collective enterprise like the Soviet state.

Nina Khrushcheva (The New School)

Forced labor was an important thing. Stalin was a great leader for the Soviet
Union at the time because he made it a great nation, and so, yes, well, you
know a couple of millions got killed in the process, but so what? Since the
Russian system, or the Kremlin or whatever the power structure is, has never
any respect for an individual human life. I mean, we really do count people
by the millions. So a million here, a million there didn't really make much of
a difference.

Narrator: But during Stalin's reign, in short order, the all-powerful dictator twisted
the concept of economic reform to make it serve his own soaring paranoia, obliterating
every shred of dissent. So the camps proliferated in the mid-thirties, bulging with politi-
cal prisoners and the merely luckless, and soon multiplied twelve-fold. And then came
"the Great Terror" of 1937-38, when one of every twenty people in the Soviet Union
was arrested. Those who were not executed were condemned to a hellish existence in
the Gulag. Besides the starvation and exhausting labor that accounted for the deaths,
countless prisoners were executed.

Marc Kramer (Specialist in Cold War Studies, Harvard's Davis Center)
In the period of just 1937-1938 alone, there are over seven hundred thousand
shot in that one year. One year. You think about that, that was in the lead up to
World War II and they need people to be able to help defend the country and
instead they kill close to a million of them. The total number

shot during the
Stalin period was probably about one and a half million.
Anne Applebaum (Historian)
It’s very difficult to talk about precise numbers. We know that between 1929
when Stalin first started to expand the camps and 1953 when Stalin died that
about 18 million people passed through them, which was about fifteen percent
of the Soviet population.
Joshua Rubenstein (Regional Director of Amnesty International, Boston)
It took on massive scales after Stalin consolidated power, so it was an ex-
traordinary quarter century of violence and persecution. And the fact it en-
gulfed whole categories of people, not only the obvious political opponents of
the regime within the Communist movement or political movements per se,
but religious believers, writers, people accused of undermining the economy,
people accused of subversion… often falsely accused, of course.
Anne Applebaum (Historian)
The Gulag went through different phases. You know, there were phases when
the commanders were more interested in economic production and, because
they were interested in that, they tried to treat prisoners relatively well in order
to get them to produce more. There were also phases—notably at the height
of the Great Terror in 1937 and 1938—when the Gulag became harsher and
crueler and the commanders became less interested in production and minded

less when more people died.
Narrator: Millions were sent into exile, consigned to Eastern European camps after
World War II or were simply executed. Most historians regard the accepted semi-official
"numbers" as mere minimums while Alexander Solzhenitsyn, sentenced to eight years
of hard labor, put a human face on the tragedy for the West in his personal and collective
history, Gulag Archipelago.
Marc Kramer (Specialist in Cold War Studies, Harvard's Davis Center)
Relatively little was known about the Gulag outside the Soviet Union; even
within the Soviet Union the term Gulag was almost never used. That changed
in 1961 with the publication of One Day in the Life of the Ivan Denisovich,
which was published with official permission in the Soviet Union.
Joshua Rubenstein (Regional Director of Amnesty International, Boston)
This took the country by storm and it opened the floodgate of manuscripts
coming in to publishing houses. Very few, if any, were actually published of-
ficially in the Soviet Union. And, pretty soon the regime grew weary and ap-
prehensive of this kind of literature, and it wasn't permitted. His subsequent
books about the Gulags, and his novels—The Cancer Ward and The First
Circle – were not published in the Soviet Union.
Marc Kramer (Specialist in Cold War Studies at Harvard's Davis Center)
So his monumental work, The Gulag Archipelago, which appeared in the West in

the mid 1970s, came out strictly in the outside world not within the Soviet Union.
The impact of this book is hard to overstate because there were still illusions in
the West at that time that somehow the Soviet Union may have had a bad period
during the Stalin era, but it was basically moving in the right direction.
Joshua Rubenstein (Regional Director of Amnesty International, Boston)
But there's no question that Solzhenitsyn played a principal role in initiating
this type of literature in the Soviet Union even if it couldn't be circulated
freely, but also alerting the West to the scale of this repression.
Narrator: The West was thus awakened in the 70s to the continuing horrors of the
camps. Into this litany of statistics and collective tragedies comes the individual. The
cruelty and crime visited upon Russian citizens was monumental. In his monstrous para-
noia, Stalin grimly cast a dark shadow over his own people.
Joshua Rubenstein (Regional Director of Amnesty International in Boston)
There seemed to have been a quota at different times, that the police in dif-
ferent communities had to arrest so many people. And so, this was not only a
form of intimidation of the population, which I think was its primary purpose,
but it also reflected a certain paranoia on the part of Stalin, that if he knew
there were certain obvious opponents in a city or community, he would arrest
a hundred to make sure he got those three people.

Narrator: The intrigues were endless; usually beginning with a whisper, a suspicion,
an errant comment, a note, a touch of treachery, even a foolish prank leading suddenly
to an arrest.
Anne Applebaum (Historian)
Almost anybody at any time knew there could be a knock on the door in the
middle of the night and they could be taken away, and, in fact, at the height of
certain waves of terror in the late thirties and again in 1948, there were many
people who feared arrest, who simply kept a little packed bag by their beds be-
cause they knew that, you know, if somebody came to the door to take them to
prison, they would want to have certain things with them. They would want to
have a change of clothes. They would want to have a little bit of money. They
would want to have some soap. Things like that. It was a very prevalent fear.
Narrator: Anyone and everyone could be snared in this dragnet…a clergyman, a poli-
tician, a businessman, or thief, a naïve student carried away with his own bombast, a
pathetic peasant of absolutely no power or no influence. Everyone was vulnerable. The
government was truly a "Ministry of Fear."
Anne Applebaum (Historian)
The appearance of legality was terribly important to the Russian state. There
were trials held, even if they were one minute trials or thirty second trials.
Every prisoner had a trial and every prisoner was sentenced. This was part of
the way the Gulag was justified to the people who were charged

with carrying
it out. Every guard was told, ‘these prisoners are criminals. They’ve had their
trial. They’re enemies of the people; its been proved!’
Narrator: And then came what may have been the worst ordeal of the entire experi-
ence: the transport by train to one’s penal destination …from Moscow to the Arctic
Circle, or some parched Siberian wasteland, or barren Khazakstan, or the Far, Far East,
ten times zones distant, in the remote corner of the Soviet Union. The experience getting
there was usually horrific.
Anne Applebaum (Historian)
Prisoners were put into cattle cars, often with nothing, it would just simply be
an empty car, handed a loaf of bread and effectively told that’s all they were
going to get for a week, or two weeks. The doors were shut and the guards
would have no further communication with the prisoners during the trip. So
these trains became terrible death traps. In the summer they were incredibly
hot. In the winter, they were incredibly cold. Prisoners literally died of thirst.
They fought with one another. They murdered one another inside these cars.
There were no toilets obviously, so the stench was unbearable.
Narrator: The gold mines of Kolyma are silent now. Called “The Land of White
Death,” the ruins of Kolyma cannot recount the damage done to millions of Russian
souls and bodies. It could be called the “Auschwitz of the Soviet Union.” Stalin’s inter-
est in the region was keen. Production was monitored closely. Conditions were horrible.

Marc Kramer (Specialist in Cold War Studies, Harvard's Davis Center)
The worst place of all, at least both in reputation among Gulag prisoners, as
well as in general by those who had escaped from the Gulag, was Kolyma,
which is in the area now known as Magadan. It's one of the coldest areas in
which people have ever lived, but the people who were brought there were not
living there voluntarily. No one would endure those types of temperatures—
you're talking about sixty below zero, seventy below zero at times—and the
idea of putting the camp there was in part to be able to exploit the gold, min-
eral and other resources in that area.
Narrator: So high was the attrition, a highway built by the laborers at Kolyma became
known as the "Road of Bones." A poet and survivor of Kolyma, Yuri Lvovich Fidelgolts
talks about the harshness of these conditions at Kolyma and other locales in the remote
area of Magadan.

Yuri Fidelgolts (Poet and Survivor of Kolyma)
After Ozerlag, they transferred me to Kolyma. I met there a doctor, who man-
aged to stay there at a medical station, avoiding transportation further up north.

The doctor saved my life, taking me as an assistant, although I had no medical education at all. I
spent about two or three months at the transfer camp in Magadan. Magadan was a deadly place,
a most scary place for me. All works there were hard, manual labor and, considering prisoners’
weak health condition, it was impossible to fulfill our daily job quotas. I got thin very quickly,
or, using the camp slang, turned into a dokhodyaga, “one walking the last steps to the end.” I was not able to
do anything at all. Death was waiting for me. However, I preferred to die at the
punishment block, rather than die at work as a slave. That is why I refused to
work. That is how I became an otkazchik, a prisoner refusing to work.

Narrator: Eventually Fidelgolts was freed and returned to Moscow, afflicted with a
serious case of tuberculosis, brought on by his physical ordeals in the frigid regions of
Magadan. It was in the Gulag short story collection, Kolyma Tales that poet- survivor
Varlam Shalamov fittingly states, “A human being survives by his ability to forget.”

Mikhail Rogachev works for Repentance, a Russian organization which researches re-
cords and documents the fate of prisoners particularly in Kolyma.

Mikhail Rogachev (Repentance)
The prisoners were not tortured on purpose, but they were subject to constant
cold, hunger and hazing by the guards. It was completely permissible to kill a
prisoner with no punishment for it, just by claiming he was trying to escape.
You could put them in cold incarceration, and this was not considered torture.
This is a room with a concrete floor, concrete walls, and no heating. And this
is where the temperatures reach thirty or forty below Celsius. That is torture.
Narrator: The fabled White Sea Canal Project, dearest of all to Stalin's black heart,
was its own type of Death Camps. Slave laborers worked with primitive tools in abomi-
nable conditions to construct 141 miles of waterways with 19 locks. It was to have been
Stalin's masterpiece.
Marc Kramer (Specialist in Cold War Studies, Harvard's Davis Center)
There had been proposals to build a canal from the White Sea to connect to the
Baltic Sea for many, many years. This went back far before the Soviet regime,
almost to the time of Peter the Great. What was different in the early 1930s
when this was done is that Stalin was willing to commit the resources and the
human lives to do it. So, this canal was completed in 1933, using prisoners
from the newly formed Gulag. You're talking at the height there were more
than a hundred thousand prisoners working on this canal.
Narrator: But it didn't work, which surprised few experts. It was insufficiently deep

and was frozen over for six months of the year. At least 25,000 workers died on the
project, which, in the end, proved to be nothing more than a colossal waste of time and
especially of lives.
Evgenia Khayarova works on human rights issues in the region of Komi.
Evgenia Khayarova (Memorial)
Work went throughout the daylight hours. In the morning they ate balanda, a
type of gruel, and, if they had fulfilled their quota, they received 400 grams of
bread. They weren’t fed any dinner, so they would drink the gruel or stash the
bread or divide it and keep a part of it for dinner. And for supper, after they had
worked twelve to fourteen hours, there was again a thin gruel.
Narrator: It was a matter of luck where you landed, but, no matter where you were or
when, if you resisted or protested or fought back you were in trouble. Solitary confine-
ment was the least of the censures, and it was none too pleasant.
Vladimir Osipov, a Gulag survivor, knew this first hand.
Vladimir Osipov (Gulag Survivor)
There were concrete walls, essentially concrete floors, covered only with
planks. It was horribly cold. You’d be in your underwear and undershirt. There
was nowhere to take shelter. You’d tremble from the cold. That was the way
the KGB and bosses of the camp would act.

Anne Applebaum (Historian)
Very early on, the Soviet secret police made a decision to mix criminal and po-
litical prisoners. That meant that the camps were, in effect,

run by the criminal
prisoners. You know, there would be a kind of Mafia boss of the camp and he
would have people who did his bidding and, sometimes literally by murder or
rape, they would control the other prisoners.
Narrator: Leonid Borodin found himself in several prisons and camps because he saw
the light following Stalin’s death.
Leonid Borodin (Gulag Survivor)
Becoming a dissenter, I didn’t recognize it until it happened. Our reality in
those times, the sixties and late fifties, it gave a lot of reasons to ponder and
to doubt, and the deciding factor here was the Twentieth Party Congress with
its denouncement of the cult of personality. I grew up surrounded by love for
Stalin. I was a loyal and dedicated “Pioneer” and member of the Komsomol. I
believed myself to be living in the happiest country in the world, and the most
just country, where injustice did not exist and where everyone got exactly
what they deserve. The Twentieth Party Congress, with the denouncement of
Stalin, the idol of my childhood, came as a great shock to me. It forced me to
reevaluate my reality, and that re-evaluation propelled me into dissent.
Narrator: Some unfortunate individuals found themselves in some remote camps for
their religious beliefs alone. Josef Stalin and his government wanted no competition, be
it from God or any internationally connected religion.
Joshua Rubenstein (Regional Director of Amnesty International, Boston)

In Stalin's mind and in the ideology he was promoting, religion was the opiate
of the people, to echo Marx's famous phrase. And it perhaps served as an alter-
nate ideology to the State and it gave the people an alternate sense of loyalty to
something beyond the state and, of course, religion at its best nurtures a sort of
personal conscience. And the regime was trying to destroy that, to squash that.
Narrator: In Stalin's world, all religions were enemies of the State—with the Christian
Orthodox at the top of their list. Right behind, surprisingly, were the Jehovah's Wit-
nesses, a relatively new sect hardly steeped in power. The Witnesses nonetheless gave
the regime major concern with their staunch allegiance to their beliefs and dignified
acceptance of the consequences.
One would not realize this history of severe persecution in the Jehovah's Witnesses
pastoral center outside of St. Petersburg, yet Vassily Kalin and Nikolay Dubovinsky can
testify to the hardship they suffered for their faith. The family of Vasili Kalin was offered
amnesty if they would renounce their faith. They refused.
Vassily Kalin (Gulag Survivor)
Of course, at this point, there was nothing else to do but carry out the orders.
They were given two hours to gather their things. It was a thorough search.
They took away all our literature and like all the others we ended up in Siberia.
Nikolay Dubovinsky (Gulag Survivor)
For six months, they investigated me. They questioned me and everything.
The materials I had with me they brought into evidence and, in

August of
1957, I was put on trial. I was sentenced to execution. There were two of us
—no, four of us—who were sentenced to capital punishment, and then it was
commuted to twenty-five years.

Narrator: All of that for declining to renounce one's faith. Viktor Chevyaku, now liv-
ing in Vancouver, British Columbia, managed to escape this pressure on the Jehovah's
Witnesses. He relived the persecution of his family while visiting the Gulag Exhibition
at Boston University.

Viktor Chevyakuv (Gulag Survivor)
There was nothing not to like about them as a people, because they were hard
working, honest people. They got along with their neighbors well. But, the
Soviet Government had an intention to establish the worldwide Communism,
and Jehovah's Witnesses were preaching about worldwide kingdom of God,
heavenly kingdom, and the idea of heavenly kingdom did not fit the Soviet
ideology. Therefore, Jehovah's Witnesses unwillingly became ideological en-
emies of the Soviet regime.

Narrator: On the other end of the religious spectrum was a Roman Catholic priest.
Father Walter Ciszek was a Jesuit missionary arrested in Russia in 1941 as a Vatican Spy.
He was imprisoned and tortured for five years in the infamous Lubyanka Prision, where
Russians sarcastically joked that Lubyanka had the best view in Moscow, since, from it
you can see all the way to Siberia.
Fr. Richard Blake is a Jesuit from the New York province where

Fr. Ciszek sent his last
two decades of freedom before his death in 1984.
Richard Blake, S.J. (Boston College)
His mission in 1937 was to find out the condition of the Catholics who were
further into the Soviet Union, in the Ukrainian Soviet Union, but that was
enough for the government to give him a sixteen-year jail sentence in the
Gulags, the work camps.
Narrator: In the camps near the Artic Circle, Fr. Ciszek continued his ministry, living
with threats all the time.
(Voice-Over) Father Ciszek (Gulag Survivor)
I was in a place where I was always threatened, they did not have to threaten
me, I was wounded. It was such a place that, at any moment, they would call
you out and shoot you. And I thought I was going to be shot. I mean, I was
under that impression; that's what they insinuated.
Richard Blake, S.J. (Boston College)
While he was an ordinary laboring man, he worked in the labor camps—that
was part of his disguise, that he was just an ordinary worker—but he had some
extraordinary adventures in trying to minister to people in terrible conditions,
trying to serve and minister to the people that were there. The story was that
he would never be allowed to leave the country because he knew too much
about the prison camps and interrogation techniques. The Soviet government
released a statement that he had died, and it was only later that he was able to
smuggle some documents out that the family realized that he

was still alive
and the United States government went to work on it to try to get an exchange
of prisoners, which they did in 1963. So two convicted Soviet spies in the US
were sent back to Russia and Father Ciszek was sent back to the United States.
Narrator: Secular or religious, ideological or politically naïve, all fell victim to a
heartless regime that continued on for years during the Cold War.
There is little accounting and no role call for the "legion of the lost"' in the failed and
discredited Soviet Union's wretched Gulag experience. And so, the massive scale of the
human suffering has almost been lost to history. But some can speak for the many de-
parted. Arkady Berdichevsky is such a man. His saga survives over the years because of
the persistence of a loving wife, and the dedication of the admiring son he hardly knew.
At the age of 72, Jon Utley embarked on a journey to discover the fate of his father, lost
to the Gulag, which would lead him to the edge of the Arctic Circle. Jon Utley was born
in Moscow in 1934. His father, Arkady Berdichevsky, was a distinguished man of af-
fairs; a Russian diplomat and former member of the government's Arcos Trade Mission
in London. Jon's mother, Freda Utley, was London-born and educated, an accomplished
scholar and writer steeped in Russian economics and fired by the idealism that character-
ized the young British Communists of the period. Her experiences are vividly set down
in her memoir The Lost Illusion.
Jon Utley (Son of Gulag Victim)

My mother was active in the Socialist Party and was the chairman of the So-
cialist Party at London University. And she met my father who was with the
Russian trade delegation in Russia, and they fell in love.
Narrator: On April 10th, 1936, at two o'clock in the morning, there was a knock at the
door of Arkady and Freda's small Moscow apartment. Russian Secret Police officers en-
tered without explanation, arrested Arkady, and led him off into the interminable night.
Freda and Jon would never see him again.
Jon Utley (Son of Gulag Victim)
The police had been investigating his boss, my father was the – of what would
today be called the chief financial officer of a group called Promex Board, the

government import-export organization, and they were investigating for some
exports that should not have been done.
Narrator: Arkady's arrest brought him to the infamous Lubyanka Prison, where he
was interrogated and finally accused of subversive Trotskyite activities and sentenced to
five years imprisonment. Still holding a British passport, Freda was able to escape with
her son. Back in London, she worked feverishly to free her husband, or at least give him
the chance to defend himself.
Jon Utley (Son of Gulag Victim)
So when my father was arrested, she had managed to get a letter sent to Stalin
signed by George Bernard Shaw, Bertrand Russell, many of the top English
leftists at the time.
Narrator: Their letters to Stalin only resulted in silence.

Following his mother's death,
Jon Utley continued his quest. He later gained the help of George Krasnow, a Russian
educator and early defector, who petitioned the FSB, successor to the notorious KGB se-
cret police, for documents on his behalf. The new information finally led Jon and George
Krasnow to Komi, a desolate region in northern-most Russia the size of France, much of
it sprawling within the Arctic Circle.
Mikhail Rogachev (Repentance)
At the time, the Komi Republic was chosen by the Soviet government as one
of the principal regions where the camps were to be located. This is first of all
because it is a huge territory and sparsely settled. In the thirties, the population
totaled not more than 300,000 people. And this territory is very rich in natural
resources. There is timber here, there is coal, oil, natural gas here. But there
are no roads and no major cities. And it was decided that the populating of the
territory was to be accomplished through the work of prisoners.
Narrator: To this god-forsaken extremity of the imagination, the remote city of Ukhta,
Jon Utley unearthed the raw details of his father's bitter fate.
Evgenia Zelenskaya (Memorial)
I am Evgenia Zerenskaya, the chair of the Ukhto-Pechorsk organization Me-
morial. We are here in the city of Ukhta. This is where the Gulag began. From
here scores of prisoners were sent to Vorkuta, to Umta, to the Baibozh region.
The center of it all was here until 1938. The history of our

city could not have
happened without the labor of the prisoners. The prisoners created all of the
industry of the city, in our region, in our republic. Since 2001, Jon Utley is the
only American who came here and searched for his father.
Jon Utley (Son of Gulag Victim)
This is the building where I was given the file of my father—they showed me
the card, a five-by-seven card, showing his history in the camps and finally
that he was transferred to the third department which was a euphemism for
execution in Russia.
Mikhail Rogachev (Repentance)
Jon, I would like to show you the seventh volume published by us. These are
the lists of prisoners of the camps from Stalin's time and among them you
will find a familiar surname—Bedreshevsky, Arkady Yakolevich, a prisoner of
the Ukhta-Pechorsk Camp of the NKVD. Your father was executed by firing
squad on the 30th
of March 1938 in Vorkuta.
Narrator: And so it was that Jon Basil Utley was finally able to close the book on
his father, a senseless victim of Gulag atrocity some seventy years earlier. On that day,
hundreds upon hundreds alleged enemies of the State were executed with the sound of
gunfire reverberating in the relentless cold.
The new Russia will have to deal with confronting the ghosts of its past. Those who are
reluctant to do so are fiercely challenged by those who insist it is crucial to act now. Irina
Flige from the human rights group Memorial in St. Petersburg

works hard to restore the
collective memory of the Russian people. Her colleagues have helped to excavate the
remains of 30,000 people killed in the Stalinist purges.
Irina Flige (Memorial)
There is a legacy of the Gulag, but there is no memory of the Gulag in the
national consciousness. This paradox informs the current problem with soci-
ety’s dialogue with the past. The Soviet Terror, which accompanied almost the
entire history of the twentieth century, was directed toward the destruction of
people and the erasure of the memory of people.
Narrator: The forces brought to bear in that mad endeavor were awesome. But, in the
end, they failed because memory resisted.
Irina Flige (Memorial)
This memory was preserved for years, for decades. This memory was realized
in manuscripts written for the drawer, in the miracle of preserved photographs.
This memory was personal. This was memory without a voice – a whisper.
Such a secret memory was the basic form of resistance to the Terror.
Narrator: And when the Terror eased gradually in the 1960s and 1970s, and then
finally passed with the collapse of the old Communist order in the late 1980s, new hope
rose from the ashes. What resulted was a citizen crusade called Memorial.
Alexander Kalmykov (Memorial)
The Memorial is a movement which appeared among those repressed and
those who knew about it and those who sympathized. Their goal was to pre-

serve and to transmit to future generations the memory of those events, of
those people.
Joshua Rubenstein (Regional Director of Amnesty International, Boston)
The Memorial Society was created in the Gorbachev years. Andrei Sakharov
while he was still alive was its first honorary chairman. So, it was meant to
be both a research institution and to create branches throughout the country
where survivors of the Gulag could meet, could collect their testimonies, and
they had in mind to create monuments.
Narrator: In October, citizens annually recall the victims at the Solvesky stone in front
of the Lubyanka Prison, with Memorial in the front ranks. Memorial was to become the
champion of human rights in the new order. Its first objective was to connect the “old”
with the ‘new’, thus preserving the memory of those who had so long endured the Terror
in a moving triumph of the human spirit.
Alexander Kalmykov (Memorial)
I feel responsibility for the connection. Much was suffered. I can imagine how
those people walked and how they were mocked and now I don’t want that
connection to be broken. People must know. People must bring closure to all
that happened here.
Narrator: As part of the new educational mandate of the Liberals, the PERM-36 labor
camp stands as one of the few surviving mementos of the Gulag era. Viktor Shmyrov
recounts the abuses of human rights via the history of Perm:
Viktor Shmyrov (Director, PERM-36)

In the history of the camp, there were three periods: the Gulag period, the period
of the zone for convicted workers of the security organs and its time as a politi-
cal camp. PERM-36 was a political camp. As for the generation that's growing
up now, it's not that they don't have information about this history. The books
aren't forbidden—be my guest, read the books, they're in the library. But this
reading is in no way encouraged. In the history textbooks, the word "Gulag,"
in the most recent textbook, was mentioned twice. Therefore, children simply
don't have the knowledge. But when they end up here, when they spend time
here, the high school students always experience exactly that feeling. They feel
ashamed and it causes them pain that this happened. In Germany, also, a new
generation came of age and admitted the criminality of Nazism.
Marc Kramer (Specialist in Cold War Studies , Harvard's Davis Center)
The Gulag itself, even though there are heroic groups like Memorial and oth-
ers that are doing their best to keep alive memories of what happened then,
there are also many including some in Putin's entourage and in the govern-
ment that succeeded Putin who want to do their best to whitewash that or
airbrush it from Soviet history.
Narrator: With the new liberalism of Glasnost came a "Moral Cleansing," which inevi-
tably sparked unsettling questions about the past, then unrest, and ultimately fear. All lib-
eral causes swiftly were discredited. The reformers and

dissidents had drifted too far out in
front of the great mass of the Russian body politic, which has always moved very slowly.

Marshall Goldman (Senior Scholar, Harvard's Davis Center)
They weren't comfortable with that…too much uncertainty, too much chaos,
too much unruliness, too much disorder. And, then again, we've got to tighten
up the ship. We can't have people on the extremes. We've got to conform
and behave. And anyone who is making too much noise, who's making too
many waves, we've got to put them in their place. Under the latter half of
Gorbachev, the society began to unravel. Under Yeltsin, it unraveled. It opened
the door for someone to come along and say, "We're going to restore order."
And that's where Putin, of course, excels.
Narrator: In retrospect, now Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, the rugged, iron-willed
ex-KGB man, seems to have been born for a major role in Russian politics, even if
briefly the American President warmly proclaimed him to be "a man the West can do
business with." That was never where Putin's heart was.
Marshall Goldman (Senior Scholar, Harvard's Davis Center)
Putin wants very much to restore Russia's role as a superpower. I've heard him
speak about this several times. And there is a sense that nobody paid attention
to us before. And we were a superpower. It was our great disgrace, our great
humiliation that we lost that status when the Soviet Union fell apart and we
want to build it up again.

Narrator: In building it up again, one has to gloss over the past.
Marc Kramer (Specialist in Cold War Studies, Harvard's Davis Center)
After Vladimir Putin came to power, there has been a steady… not full-scale
rehabilitation of Stalin, but certainly a revival of many official favorable refer-
ences to Stalin. In addition, the Communist Party in Russia has always admired
Stalin, and has never made any pretense otherwise. It has remained unabashedly
admiring of Stalin.
Narrator: Russia has changed. It is a different country. It is richer for its oil sup-
ply and steeped in consumer options to please a stronger middle-class…more finan-
cially stable and more secure than she's ever been in her entire history…much freer
and more open, too, though hardly the Democracy some had hoped for. The strong-
armed tactics of the old days appeared neither desirable nor necessary. Yet, the Russian
military show of force in South Ossetia in the summer of 2008 challenges that notion.
Marshall Goldman (Senior Scholar at Harvard's Davis Center)
The Governor of St. Petersburg gave this great speech in which he said, "Peo-
ple laughed at us, disregarded what we had to say, paid no attention to us. Now
we are strong again and they have to listen to what we say and they have to
pay attention."
Anne Applebaum (Historian)
It seems to me that it's very, very important for the Russians to understand
their past, and to discuss it and to keep the discussion of it

going. Because
if they don’t, there is a danger that the past could, if not repeat itself exactly,
because that’s not going to happen, there are certainly elements of the police
state that could come back again and are beginning to come back again now.
Narrator: So, in effect, it became a battle of memories; the nostalgia for lost power
and glory held by some against the loathing for that same regime’s gruesome excesses
held by others. In the end, nostalgia appears to have won. If you agitate too much or too
loudly about human rights abuses, you can find yourself in deep trouble.
Irina Flige (Memorial)
Today one must speak of almost open opposition and open enmity. That mild
malevolence of the recent past has become open hostility, enmity, on the part
of the government toward Memorial.
Narrator: This open enmity was displayed to chilling effect on December 4, 2008
when elements of security forces stormed the Memorial offices in St. Petersburg. In a
raid lasting seven hours, these masked officers cut the phone lines and seized computers
and archival materials.
Russia today is at the crossroads and Memorial has helped significantly in pointing out di-
rections. As for the guilty, however, those who were the merchants of the Terror, the heart-
less abusers of human rights, are still around in significant numbers, yet they walk freely.
Vladimir Osipov (Gulag Survivor)
As for punishment, there is no one to punish. The entire government is made

up of those very people. They aren't going to punish themselves. There is no
one to punish.
Nina Khrushcheva (The New School)
I don't think that Putin's government, I don't know about Medvedev, but Pu-
tin's government doesn't think there's a problem with human rights, because
he truly believes, like a lot of despots in fact, that, whatever they do, they do
for the good of the nation. And they are the only ones who know what the good
of the nation is.
Narrator: Russia will bear on. She always has. But some wonder how this nation can
manage all the inherent contradictions she tolerates with that lingering stoicism shaped
by her painful history. Might, in the end, the illusion fail to suppress the reality?
Marshall Goldman (Senior Scholar, Harvard's Davis Center)
I can't understand how you can live next door to someone who may have
denounced you, and come back and just go about life without some kind of
punishment, without some kind of retribution. Almost every family had some
relative or some acquaintance who had been imprisoned or sent to the Gulag
or executed, so it wasn't exactly that it was a big secret that nobody knew
about. And how people can live with this kind of thing is something that I just
can't understand.
Narrator: And yet they can and do. The Russians evoke and discard what has been
often called "The Unmanageable Past" for the sake of the future. Yet, they can be com-

fortable with their somber history. Vigilance and moral conscience provided by human
rights groups like Memorial may eventually thaw out the iced-over memories.

In 2003, at the 50th anniversary of Stalin's death, Anne Applebaum wrote about the need
to uncover the truth about the Gulag:
Anne Applebaum (Historian)
[TEXT]: We need to know why—and each story, each memoir, each document is
a piece of the puzzle. Without them, we will wake up one day and realize that
we do not know who we are.

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS
1917 – October Revolution brings Bolsheviks to power.
1918 – "Red Terror:" Lenin orders wealthy peasants ("Kulaks"), priests, industrialists,
and anti-Soviets to be incarcerated and detained in concentration camps.
1920 – 107 registered concentration camps.
1924 – Lenin dies, Trotsky is pushed aside and Stalin rises to power, gaining full
power by 1928.
1925 – Soviet government decides to use camps for economic means; forced labor on
large construction projects begins.
1929 – Government decides to create mass camp system (Gulag) to industrialize the country
as part of the first Five-Year Plan.
1930-1933 – Two million Kulaks exiled to regions such as Siberia and Kazakhstan.
1932-1933 – White Sea Canal Project begins to build a waterway connecting Moscow
and the White Sea; a specific camp is set up to support this effort.
1937-1938 – The Great Terror: one in twenty people in the

Soviet Union arrested;
1,888,571 in camps, with many more people executed.
1939 – Camps in every time zone in Soviet Union; WWII breaks out and Berlin-Moscow
Pact signed promising non-aggression between Germany and the Soviet Union.
1941 – Germany invades Russia in Operation Barbarossa, breaking the Berlin-Moscow Pact.
1941-1944 – 975,000 prisoners granted amnesty and released into the Red Army.
1945 – Red Army captures Berlin, ending WWII.
1946 – The Cold War officially begins with Winston Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech.
1950 – The height of the Gulag population with 2,525,146 people registered in prison camps.
1953 – Stalin dies; months later, amnesty granted to prisoners with less than five year
sentences, pregnant women, women with children, and those under eighteen.
1,000,000 people released.
1956 – Nikita Khrushchev denounces the excesses of Stalin during the Twentieth Congress.
1950s – Continued arrests of dissidents; some are sent to camps, some to psychiatric hospitals.
1973 – Western world learns about the Gulag system through Alexander Solzhenitsyn's
book, Gulag Archipelago.
1978 – Solzhenitsyn's speech at Harvard University, criticizing both the United States
and the Soviet Union for creating political tension in the world.
1986 – Gorbachev issues a general pardon for political prisoners and shuts down the
camps in the Gulag system as a part of his new policy of glasnost.
1989 – Memorial Society founded to honor the memory of Gulag victims, educate oth-

ers about the truths of the system, and to form a national consciousness based on
democracy and law to promote human rights.
1989-1990 – Collapse of Communism; Warsaw Pact countries are liberated from Soviet control.
1995 – Gulag museum set up at site of PERM-36 prison camp.

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