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TOTALITARIANISM

Operation Keelhaul Exposed

Jeffrey Rogers Hummel

At 5:00 A.M. on Sunday, the sleepy prisoners of war were abruptly surprised by the glare from searchlights mounted on tanks surrounding the compound. Soldiers barged in, followed by a convoy of trucks. The prisoners were lined up, searched, and loaded lying face downward onto the trucks. With well-armed guards beating any of the prisoners who moved, the trucks drove to the railhead where the prisoners were unloaded into waiting cattle cars. The empty trucks returned and picked up load after load. When all 3000 prisoners had been stuffed aboard, the train carted them off for eventual transfer to slave-labor camps or to be executed. The date was February 1946. The location was Plattling, a town in Bavaria, Germany. The prisoners were Russian, but the soldiers were not German. They were Americans of the 101st Airborne Division who were engaging in an operation that became commonplace in Europe at the close of World War II. For the Russian prisoners were refugees from Stalin's dictatorship, remnants of the Second KONR Division of Vlasov's anti-Communist army. They were being repatriated, by force, to the Soviet authorities as part of what was officially labeled, after one of the most severe forms of torture ever used aboard sailing ships, OPERATION KEELHAUL!

Smith Hempstone, in his review of Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956,* estimates that "Not one American in 100,000 has heard of 'Operation Keelhaul' . . ." So far as I know, until the publication of Julius Epstein's volume, information on Operation Keelhaul could only be found in this country in a few scattered articles from newspapers and magazines and also in three books: *Our Secret Allies,* Eugene Lyons' history of Russian opposition to Communism; *The East Came West,* Peter J. Huxley-Blythe's account of the Cossacks during the War; and *The Politician,* Robert Welch's treatise on Eisenhower. During the fervor that accompanied the Second World War, the United States Government assumed dictatorial and awesome powers, even by today's standards, and that is perhaps why no other period offers so many undisclosed skeletons in the closet—scandals covered-up or glossed over. The case of Tyler Kent, the Sedition Trials, the provoking of the Pearl Harbor attack, the concentration camps for Japanese-Americans, and many others that might be mentioned; all are events involving raw and brutal state power or perfidy, and yet the details of none of them are even today generally known. But of all the shocking and yet unknown crimes perpetrated by the U.S. Government during World War II, Operation Keelhaul was undoubtedly the most massive. Its victims were the thousands of refugees, both soldiers and civilians, fleeing to the West from the successful advance of the Red armies through Eastern Europe. They were hoping to escape Communist tyranny and find asylum, but instead they were all collected by the Allied armies and *forcibly* repatriated into the anxious arms of the Soviets.

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OPERATION KEELHAUL. By Julius Epstein. Old Greenwich: The Devin-Adair Co. 1973. 255 pp. $8.95.

THE LESSER EVIL

Like the prisoners at Plattling, many of those forcibly repatriated were Russians who had fought in German uniforms. When the German armies had first invaded the Soviet Union, many Russians considered the event a golden opportunity for overthrowing Stalin and liberating Russia. Even after Hitler disillusioned them by implementing Rosenberg's cruel and insane *Ostpolitik,* there were still a good number who felt that German oppression was the lesser of two evils. Further, many officers of the *Wehrmacht* disagreed with the *Ostpolitik,* and it wasn't very long before OKH headquarters was silently tolerating the employment of Russian deserters and prisoners of war, first as support troops, where they came to be known as *Hilfsfreiwillige,* and later as combat troops, who were called *Osttruppen.*

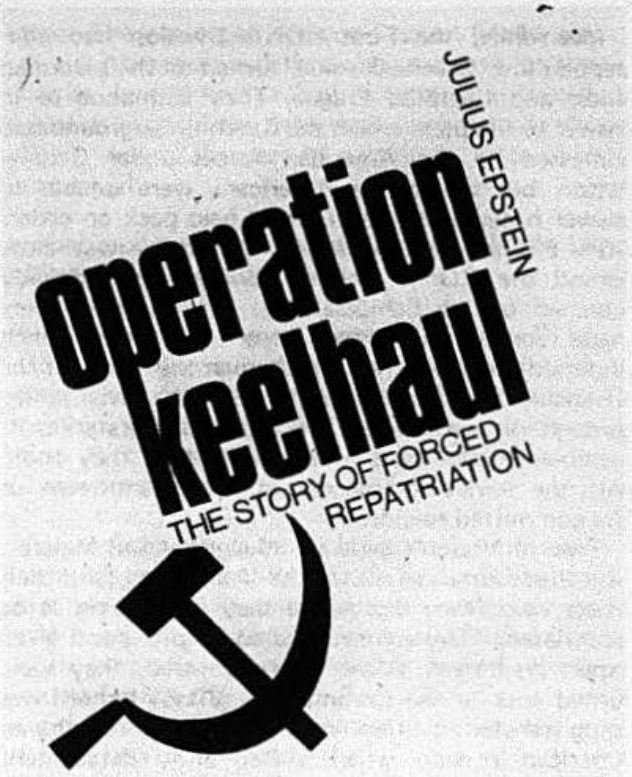
In July of 1942, the Germans captured General Andrei A. Vlasov, a Soviet war hero who had been awarded the Order of the Red Banner for his successful defense of Moscow from the initial German onslaught. By the time of his capture, Vlasov had become so disenchanted with the Soviet system that he proposed to the Germans that they help him recruit and lead a *Russkaya Osvoboditelnaya Armia* (ROA), Russian Army of Liberation. Vlasov's proposals did succeed in gaining a few concessions from the *Ostpolitik:* the *Osttruppen* were given official sanction, recruited until they totaled nearly one million

men, and even issued ROA insignia. However, the ROA was never allowed to organize above the battalion level and, for the most part, was humiliated and shoved around by being subordinated and submerged within larger German units. Vlasov was given no real authority; instead, he was subjected to unceasing but mostly unsuccessful attempts to use him for propaganda purposes and to get him to glorify Hitler and his racist doctrines. Finally, most of the ROA units were transferred to the Western Front, where they never wanted to fight in the first place.

By 1944, however, the Germans had become desperate, and they were prepared to give Vlasov free rein. A *Komitet Osvobozhdenia Narodov Rossii* (Committee for the Liberation of the Peoples of Russia) was formed, and three KONR divisions totaling 50,000 troops were organized. They saw some action against Stalin's armies, but unfortunately not before Germany was in the final stages of collapse and the situation beyond hope. Vlasov, to save his men from annihilation, concentrated them toward Austria in order to surrender to the Americans.[1]

The position the Allies should have taken toward Vlasov's men and the ROA generally, the position demanded by the Geneva Convention, was made clear by Undersecretary of State Joseph Grew in a note to the Soviet Attache in Washington just before the Yalta Conference opened:

> In regard to the status of the Soviet nationals under discussion, I feel I must in all sincerity remind you that they were not captured by American forces while they were detained in German prisoners of war camps but were serving Germany in German military formations in German uniforms. . . .
>
> We cannot repatriate these people because this would be a gross violation of the Geneva Convention. They were captured in German uniforms, and the Geneva Convention does not permit us to look behind the uniform. . . .
>
> It appears to the appropriate American authorities who have given most careful consideration to this situation, that the clear intention of the Convention is that prisoners of war shall be treated on the basis of the uniforms they are wearing, and . . . the containing powers shall not look behind the uniforms to determine ultimate questions of citizenship or nationality. . . .
>
> There are numerous aliens in the United States Army, including citizens of enemy countries. The United States Government has taken the position that these persons are entitled to the full protection of the Geneva Convention and has informed the German Government over a year ago that all prisoners of war entitled to repatriation under the convention should be returned to the custody of the United States regardless of nationality. . . .[2]



Whoever these "appropriate American authorities" were, the historical record shows that other authorities prevailed, while Grew himself was soon eased out of the State Department by Dean Acheson. The Second KONR Division, which surrendered to the Americans at Landau in Bavaria, was forcibly repatriated from Plattling in the manner described above *after* they had been repeatedly assured by Col. Gillis, camp commandant, that such would not be their fate. When one of the American officers at Plattling accused the Russians in the ROA of being collaborators, he was answered as follows:

> It was pure chance that during the war we found ourselves on territory held by the Germans and took up arms against the Soviet regime with German help. We wore German uniforms because we had no others, but our shoulder emblems of rank and the badge on our sleeve, the Russian St. Andrew Cross, are all part of our country's age-old tradition. Our men are Russians. We fought for a democratic ideal against the Communist tyranny now gripping our country. We are fighting for a political idea and are not traitors or mercenaries. We had only one aim. The sacred aim of saving Russia. Had the Zulus fought against Stalin instead of the Germans, we would have joined them because only one thing matters—to destroy Stalin and Communism.[3]

Meanwhile, the First KONR Division had sidestepped into Czechoslovakia, turned on their German allies, and liberated Prague. They had done so in answer to the pleas which the Czech underground had addressed to the American forces under General Patton but which the Americans were unable to answer because they were being held back on orders from Eisenhower. Since the Red army was close behind the KONR troops, however, they quickly marched off to Schlüsselburg, Austria. Here they made contact with the American forces, which disarmed them and then left them at the mercy of the advancing Red army, refusing to let the division flee through American lines. The unit disintegrated as its members either tried to escape as best they could with the Soviet commandos hunting them down, or else committed suicide.

Two of Vlasov's generals, Meandrov and Maltzev, who had surrendered to the Americans, slit their wrists when they discovered they were going to be repatriated. They were rushed to hospitals and given expert treatment. After they recovered, they were turned over to the Communists. Vlasov himself was being transferred to an American headquarters by an American convoy when a Red army detachment intercepted the convoy and removed Vlasov and his staff. The fact that the American escort offered no resistance lends credence to the charge that the rendevous was prearranged. One year later, *Izvestia* announced that Vlasov and all his major subordinates had been hanged.

FATE OF THE COSSACKS

The victims of Operation Keelhaul included not only soldiers wearing German uniforms, but also civilians, as the fate of the Cossacks illustrates. During the War, the German high command took a much more enthusiastic attitude towards enlisting the support of those U.S.S.R. nationalities that it did not consider Slavic, and therefore *Untermenschen.* Among these were Georgians, Turkomens, Caucasians, etc., but the primary beneficiaries were the Cossacks.[4] Some 250,000 Cossacks joined the German armies fighting Stalin, including 80,000 organized into the XV Cavalry Corps. When the German forces were slowly pushed out of Russia, not only did the Cossack troops withdraw, but large numbers from the Cossack nation went with them. The trek was long and arduous, but at the end of the war nearly 30,000 Cossacks—families, with many women, children, and old men—had put themselves under the protection of the 11th British Armored Division near Leinz, Austria. They had been joined by many old Cossack *emigres* who had left Russia during the Civil Wars from 1917 to 1920 and had since lived in Yugoslavia or Germany. Most of the troops of the XV Cossack Cavalry Corps had already been repatriated at Judenburg, but the Cossacks at Leinz did not know this when, on May 28, 1945, the British ordered all the Cossack officers, military officials, and physicians to attend a special conference with higher British officials. Over 2000 Cossack officers, including the very aged Peter Krasnov, who had led the White armies allied with the British during the Civil War but had not been in Russia since, boarded a convoy of over 75 vehicles escorted by 25 Bren gun carriers, and then were taken, not as they had been told to a conference, but to the waiting Soviets at Judenburg. Even the Communists were surprised to see among their prisoners General Krasnov and so many old *emigres,* and were very pleased at the unexpected opportunity to take vengeance on their old enemies. Krasnov and his associates, like Vlasov, were subsequently hanged.

Back at Leinz, word of the fate of their officers and of the XV Corps had filtered back to the remaining Cossacks, who organized a passive resistance in which the soldiers and cadets would link arms and form a protective chain around the older men, women, and children. That is what they did at dawn on June 1st, when the camps were surrounded by British Bren gun carriers and armed troops. At a signal, the troops advanced into the crowds and began clubbing the Cossacks with rifle butts and batons. Those who tried to run away were shot in the feet and legs. The victims were thrown onto a convoy of waiting trucks, which took them to the nearby railroad siding. As each cattle-car was filled, it was bound shut with barbed wire and another car was loaded. Many tried to commit suicide along the banks of the Drava river. One woman, who was dragged out downstream and revived, turned out to be a doctor who had earlier killed her daughter and mother with overdoses of morphine rather than let them suffer repatriation. Her second attempt at suicide succeeded. Isolated British troops, fearing for their lives in the *melee,* opened fire. The Bren gun carriers advanced to compress the crowds, and one woman threw her baby and then herself under the tracks to be crushed. Two Cossack men approached a British officer and addressed him in Russian. As the officer asked his interpreter for a translation, both men slit their own throats and slumped to the ground, twitching and dying. "Our blood is on you and your children," was the translation of their statement. An engineer from Novotcherkassk shot his twelve-year-old son, his one-year-old daughter, his wife, and then himself. Hundreds killed themselves in various fashions.

All day long the trucks drove between the camps and the railroad, and load after load was locked into the train. Toward evening, 60 freight-cars full started their journey to the U.S.S.R. Still more remained in the camps, but the British decided to cease efforts for the day. The following day the Cossacks received a respite, but on June 3rd the repatriations commenced again. There was a slight change of policy as this time the British finally decided to segregate those who had been Soviet citizens on September 1, 1939, from the old *emigres* and only repatriate the former. By the

end of the 4th, the entire valley had been cleared of refugees; the repatriations were complete.

EUROPEAN REPATRIATES

Citizens of Eastern European countries (other than Russia) coming under Communist subjugation were also victims of Operation Keelhaul. The anti-Communist Croatian Utashi, fleeing from Tito's partisans, were disarmed by the British at Bleiburg in Austria and turned over to the Yugoslav dictator.[5] Several thousand Hungarians who had fought the advance of the Soviet armies retreated and surrendered to the Americans. They were repatriated to Budapest where many were publicly executed.[6]

As the dust settled on defeated Germany, the Allied armies started the huge task of herding together all the prisoners of war and refugees and concentrating them in DP (Displaced Persons) camps. Many had in their possession Allied leaflets dropped from the air which branded as a lie the Nazi charges that prisoners would be shipped to Russia. Nevertheless, special repatriation teams of Allied and Soviet officials went through the camps questioning and screening in order to sort out all who might have been residents of the Soviet Union or the Eastern European countries. Those to be repatriated were sent to special camps which were policed by British and American troops under the supervision of Soviet officials, who insured that any anti-Communist propaganda or activity was suppressed. In July 1945, the operation of the DP camps was transferred from the G-5 of SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force) to UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration). Herbert Lehman and later Fiorella LaGuardia, as heads of UNRRA, assumed the task of forced repatriation with the same enthusiasm that they displayed when using UNRRA funds to finance the solidification of the Lublin Gang's hold on Poland.

Ghinghis Guirey, an American on one of the screening teams, reported:

> The most unpleasant aspect of this unpleasant business was the fear these people displayed. Involuntarily one began to look over one's shoulder. I heard so many threats to commit suicide from people who feared repatriation that it became almost commonplace. And they were not fooling.[7]

Another observer, a priest, confirmed the attempts at suicide when the day for repatriation came at the DP camp at Dachau:

> In Dachau, where there were no prisoners of war but just ordinary deportees, *Ostarbeiter,* Americans ordered them handcuffed in order to turn them over more conveniently. The unfortunate men, driven to desperation, smashed window panes with their heads and cut their throats with glass. They managed somehow to set fire to one of their barracks and threw themselves into the flames, having first soaked themselves in spilled gasoline. Ten of the men were burned to death. There were 275 cases of suicide or attempted suicide.[8]

Another report about Dachau was carried in the *Stars and Stripes* for January 26, 1946:

> "It just wasn't human," one guard said. "The G.I.'s quickly cut down those who hanged themselves from rafters. Those who were still conscious were screaming in Russian, pointing first at the guns of the guards and then at themselves, begging to be shot."
>
> "Even when we were trying to help and send them to hospitals they refused to live. One had stabbed himself in the chest and seemed almost out when we put him on a litter and loaded him onto a truck. Every time he moved blood spurted from the wound. Two MP's could not subdue him. Two of them broke their billies hitting him on the head."[9]

Such horror scenes were the rule in hundreds of other DP camps all over Germany, Italy, France, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. In fact, Operation Keelhaul even reached the United States. Many Russians were brought as prisoners of war to camps chiefly in Idaho. At the end of the war, they were all boarded on Soviet ships at Seattle and Portland except for almost 200 who had put up the most violent resistance and were instead moved to Fort Dix, N.J. There, another attempt was made to repatriate them in which the MP's used tear-gas. The three who committed suicide are buried in the National Cemetery at Salem, N.J. The remainder, when forced aboard the Soviet vessel, rioted and dismantled the ship's engines with their bare hands. The ship could not leave port, so the Russian prisoners were returned to Fort Dix. Finally, the American authorities made a third attempt at repatriation by surreptitously mixing barbiturates into the prisoners' coffee and loading them on a Soviet ship while they were unconscious. The third attempt succeeded.

The many Polish officers serving in Italy with Polish units loyal to the Mikolajczyk government in exile in England committed suicide when they realized that they would be repatriated to the authority of Stalin's Lublin Gang.

In short, the Allied armies tracked down everyone who could conceivably be construed as a Russian or Eastern European citizen—men, women, and children, soldiers and civilians, those who had fought with Germany and those who had fought against Germany —collected them together and brutally handed them over to Stalin and his minions. It is estimated that

between *two to five million* victims were involved! The excuse of those who participated in and executed Operation Keelhaul was that they were "acting under orders," that forced repatriation was required by the Yalta Agreement. However, as Epstein conclusively demonstrates, the Yalta Agreements, while calling for a system of repatriation, said absolutely nothing about the use of force, and furthermore, Operation Keelhaul was already in full swing in June 1944, eight months *prior* to Yalta.

WHO WAS TO BLAME?

Welch and Huxley-Blythe, in their previous accounts, have asserted that the individual bearing the primary responsibility for originating and implementing Operation Keelhaul was the commander of SHAEF, General Eisenhower. Epstein avoids making any final assessment of guilt, but much of his evidence supports and none of it contradicts those accusing Eisenhower. Whatever Eisenhower's initial culpability, it was certainly compounded by the distortions of the truth about the affair that he published in his book, *Crusade in Europe:*

> These policies and agreements [Yalta] we first tried to apply without deviation, but we quickly saw that their rigid application would often violate the fundamental humanitarian principles we espoused. Thereafter we gave any individual who objected to return the benefit of the doubt. [10]

Incidents at the DP camps in Rimini and Pisa in Italy indicate that Operation Keelhaul was still being enforced at least as late as 1947, long after Eisenhower had moved up from SHAEF to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The reason, of course, that the responsibility for Operation Keelhaul remains so obscure is that all the relevant documents still remain locked up and inaccessible. Three volumes of records, entitled "Forcible Repatriation of Displaced Soviet Citizens—Operation Keelhaul," were classified Top Secret by the U.S. Army on September 18, 1948, and bear the secret file number 383.7-14.1. Other documents are being held under wraps in the UNRRA Archives by the U.N. Secretariat and in the British Archives by the British Government. Epstein, who earlier was instrumental in uncovering the truth about the Katyn Forest massacre, has been attempting for 20 years, since 1954, to get the veil of secrecy removed from the Keelhaul documents. So far, his efforts, including a suit under the Freedom of Information Act of 1966, have proven fruitless.

Consequently, the account in Epstein's book is far from complete and even slightly disjointed. He has pieced together reports from participants, eyewitnesses, and surviving victims to give a few incidents and then fitted them into a narrative that brings forced repatriation through the policies of the Austrian, Italian, and West German Governments up to the 1970 incident involving Kudirka, the Lithuanian seaman, and relates the entire issue to international law and the Geneva Convention. He concludes that forced repatriation, under any circumstances, is a "crime against humanity, violating international law and humanitarian principles." [11] Although a truly comprehensive account of Operation Keelhaul will probably have to await the release of the official documents, Epstein has certainly performed a great service by publishing a book, the first exclusively devoted to the subject, that may finally bring Operation Keelhaul to the attention of the American public.

IMPLICATIONS

To libertarians, Operation Keelhaul is significant for two reasons. First, it represents an instructive case study of the fantastic power that even a supposedly democratic state can ruthlessly wield during wartime. Not only were the Allied governments able to perpetrate the crime, but afterwards, they were able to impose what Harry Elmer Barnes has appropriately called an "historical blackout" so effective that it lasted for nearly 30 years. Secondly, it is a chilling comment on the motives of those who ran the U.S. Government at the time and, by implication, on those who run it now. It is fashionable, even among libertarians, to laugh off explanations which ascribe evil and deceitful (as opposed to well-meaning but misguided) motives to our political masters in Washington as "conspiracy theory." However, no one has yet produced a satisfactory explanation of how Operation Keelhaul resulted from misguided idealism or liberal blindness. It seems, at least to me, that any explanation that falls short of including clandestine Soviet-American collusion at some level is obviously inadequate.

Be that as it may, it is interesting in conclusion to observe that the Soviets do not share the U.S. Government's reticence about publicizing Keelhaul. When the U.S.S.R. Government released several hundred survivors of forced repatriation in 1955—after 10 years in Siberian slave-labor camps—a Russian newspaper carried the following:

> We have let "them" out [referring to the old Cossack *emigres*] and we have forgiven "our own" [referring to the Vlasov soldiers].
>
> Whether they were Vlasov men or prisoners of war who did not want to return to the motherland does not matter now. All their sins have been forgiven.
>
> But the English and American bayonets, truncheons, machine guns and tanks used against them will never be forgotten.
>
> No Russian will ever forget Lienz, Dachau,

Plattling, Toronto, and other places of extradition, including New York. And they must never be forgotten. It is a lesson all Russians must learn well. For it shows that you cannot trust the capitalist states in the future. [12]

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1] For accounts of the history of Vlasov and the ROA, see George Fischer, *Soviet Opposition To Stalin: A Case Study In World War II* (Harvard University Press 1952), Sven Steenberg, *Vlasov* (Knopf 1970), and Wilfried Strik-Strikfeldt, *Against Stalin and Hitler: Memoir of the Russian Liberation Movement*, 1941-1945 (John Day Co. 1973).
[2] The Grew note, although referred to in a footnote in the official Yalta papers, was suppressed until Epstein got John Foster Dulles to declassify it in 1955. Epstein first published the contents in *The Brooklyn Tablet* for May 28, 1955.
[3] Quoted by Peter J. Huxley-Blythe, *The East Came West* (Caxton Printers, Ltd. 1964), p. 190.
[4] A full history of the Cossacks during World War II is given in Huxley-Blythe, *ibid.*
[5] The fate of the Croatians, especially after they had been repatriated, is vividly described in Joseph Hecimovic, *In Tito's Death Marches and Extermination Camps* (Carlton Press 1962).
[6] Robert Welch, *The Politician* (Belmont Publishing Co. 1964), pp. 32-33.
[7] Quoted by Eugene Lyons, *Our Secret Allies: The Peoples of Russia* (Duell, Sloan & Pearce 1953), p. 263.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 264.
[9] As quoted by Huxley-Blythe, *op. cit.*, pp. 187-88.
[10] Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Doubleday 1952), p. 485.
[11] Julius Epstein, *Operation Keelhaul: The Story of Forced Repatriation from 1944 to the Present* (Devin-Adair Co. 1973), p. 211.
[12] Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 91.

SOLZHENITSYN'S TESTAMENT

John Hospers

George St. George opens his much publicized book *Siberia* (David McKay Co., 1969) with an account of his childhood in the central Siberian city of Irkutsk during czarist days. Among other things, he tells how political prisoners were shipped from European Russia to exile and sometimes imprisonment in Irkutsk, and he expresses relief that a far more humane regime has now replaced that of the czars, and that such things no longer take place. When I was in Irkutsk a few months after reading this book in 1971, I could see traces of czarist days, especially in the architecture, but of course I saw no caravans of prisoners; nonetheless, since I had also read other books (such as Dallin and Nikolaevsky's *Forced Labor in Soviet Russia)* I was far from convinced of the truth of St. George's account.

Solzhenitsyn's book *The Gulag Archipelago* (the archipelago being the "islands" of slave labor camps scattered across the length of Russia, and "Gulag" being the acronym for "Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps") explodes the St. George myth once and for all. Not that it hadn't already been exploded by such books as *The Great Terror,* a scholarly and extensively documented account by Robert Conquest; but Solzhenitsyn's work has a special authenticity: it was written within Russia itself, partly from his own experiences (he spent eleven years in Soviet labor camps, which he survived, as he says, only because most of the time was spent in a special place of detention for engineers, such as he describes in *The First Circle,* where conditions were better than in other prisons) but mostly from the experiences of others—accounts gleaned from other prisoners (usually cross-checked for accuracy) and some from underground publications and other sources which reached him, which he cannot yet reveal without incriminating the sources.

GULAG ARCHIPELAGO. By Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn. New York: Harper & Row. 1974. 660 pp. $12.50/$1.95.

His account is devastating. People and places and dates are named; he spares the reader no detail of horror, until from time to time one must lay the book aside in revulsion that such things actually occurred. But in addition to the relentless accumulation of factual details, we also learn firsthand what it feels like to be arrested, interrogated, tortured, sent off in the night to destinations unknown. The impact is overwhelming; and the upshot of the account is that conditions in the USSR have been far more terrible than even in the worst days of the czars.

> If the intellectuals in the plays of Chekhov who spent all their time guessing what would happen in twenty, thirty, or forty years had been told that in forty years interrogation by torture would be practiced in Russia; that prisoners would have their skulls squeezed with iron rings; that a human being would be lowered into an acid bath; that they would be trussed up naked to be bitten by ants and bedbugs; that a ramrod

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