

BOOK REVIEW

The Gulag Doctors: Life, Death and Medicine in Stalin's Labour Camps *by Dan Healey*

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In *'The Gulag Archipelago'* Alexander Solzhenitsyn condemned the practice of medicine across Stalin's labour-camp system as being "born of the devil and the devil's blood". That comprehensive dismissal, published in the 1970s, has long been treated in the West as the definitive judgment on a major aspect of the Soviet penal empire under which some 18 million prisoners suffered and at least 2.5 million died. Even so, the central thrust of Professor Healey's first-rate study works towards presenting a more nuanced assessment, at least with regard to this medical domain.

This book, based upon wide-ranging archival research, spans the whole period of the Gulag from its origins in the aftermath of the 1917 Revolution through to the Great Terror of the late 1930s and on to World War II and the final years of Stalin's dominance. The geographical scope is also impressive, drawing on material explored not just in Moscow but in local holdings across the vast arc of enforced labour running from the Arkhangelsk region to Siberia and then towards the northern Pacific coast as well. Similarly, the mini-biographies through which the author builds most of his argument also have rewarding breadth, through covering the experience not simply of doctors but also of paramedics, nurses, pharmacists, and others working within a broadly medical context, whether doing so as prisoners or in the ranks of those 'freely hired'. Here the analysis is particularly interesting in its treatment of the evidential problems arising from 'memorialisation' as recorded only after Stalin's death. The book also captures well the central confrontation at the core of Gulag medicine between the two forms of 'authority' constantly operative: one involving a hierarchy of professional health expertise and another structured in penal terms through camp commandants and their subordinates, thus embodying in Foucault's terms a clash between 'disciplinary' and 'sovereign' power. Overall, Healey presents quite a few glimmers of light amidst the darkness, offering ample evidence that, despite the undeniable brutality at the heart of the system, the Gulag hospital or clinic could still sometimes manage to be 'a place of healing, compassion, and learning'. His findings certainly serve to remind us that the policy of using health workers towards maintaining an effective prison labour force as part of the quest for economic transformation and for the creation of 'New Soviet' men and women was far from identical with Hitler's deployment of doctors as a crucial feature of his entirely murderous campaign of racial annihilation at Auschwitz and the other Nazi death-camps.

While provision of a map or two would have been helpful to most readers, the book is otherwise well-equipped with illustrations together with a wealth of scholarly annotation and full bibliography

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