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Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors

Leona Toker

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"This is a ground-breaking book on a subject of capital importance, and I think [it] should start a debate about modern literature with a rich potential for further development." ?Michael Scammell

Return from the Archipelago is the first comprehensive historical survey and critical analysis of the vast body of narrative literature about the Soviet gulag. Leona Toker organizes and characterizes both fictional narratives and survivors' memoirs as she explores the changing hallmarks of the genre from the 1920s through the Gorbachev era. Toker reflects on the writings and testimonies that shed light on the veiled aspects of totalitarianism, dehumanization, and atrocity. Identifying key themes that recur in the narratives-arrest, the stages of trial, imprisonment, labor camps, exile, escapes, special punishment, the role of chance, and deprivation.Toker discusses the historical, political, and social contexts of these accounts and the ethical and aesthetic imperative they fulfill. Her readings provide extraordinary insight into the prisoners' experiences of the Soviet penal system. Special attention is devoted to the writings of Varlam Shalamov and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, but many works that are not well known in the West, especially those by women, are addressed. Consideration is also given to events that recently brought many memoirs to light years after they were written. A pioneering book on an important subject, Return from the Archipelago is an authoritative resource for scholars in Russian history and literature.

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