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Enemies of the State: Personal Stories from the Gulag

Donald T. Critchlow, Agnieszka Critchlow

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Long before Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962) shocked the Western world with its frightening description of a typical day in a forced-labor camp during the Stalin era, some readers in the West already knew of prison life in the Soviet Union, the Eastern bloc, and other Communist countries. A powerful genre of gulag literature had emerged in the late 1930s and developed throughout the cold war. Books by survivors revealed in graphic detail the systematic implementation of a totalitarian police state that induced terror in its citizens through torture, imprisonment in slave labor camps, and death. In *Enemies of the State*, Donald and Agnieszka Critchlow have selected excerpts from nine of the most widely read books from this gulag literature. The stories are riveting and inspiring. They are dramatic by their nature and illustrate humanity at its heroic best. But they have historical value too, because in addition to providing a ghastly record of Communist terror, they also explain why Western readers developed such deep mistrust of “peaceful coexistence” with any Communist nation. Memoirs from survivors of Communist prisons confirmed beliefs that the Communists could not be trusted. They told readers that Communist regimes operated through deception and denial, and that sympathetic visitors to the Soviet Union, China, North Vietnam, and Cuba were too often misled by the carefully staged performances of Communist officials. In short, gulag literature reinforced among American anti-Communists the idea of an apocalyptic struggle between communism and Western Christendom.

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