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Sakhalin Island (Alma Classics)



Synopsis

In 1890, the thirty-year-old Chekhov, already knowing that he was ill with tuberculosis, undertook an arduous eleven-week journey from Moscow across Siberia to the penal colony on the island of Sakhalin. Now collected here in one volume are the fully annotated translations of his impressions of his trip through Siberia and the account of his three-month sojourn on Sakhalin Island, together with his notes and extracts from his letters to relatives and associates. Highly valuable both as a detailed depiction of the Tsarist system of penal servitude and as an insight into Chekhov's motivations and objectives for visiting the colony and writing the exposé, Sakhalin Island is a haunting work which had a huge impact both on Chekhov's career and on Russian society.

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Customer Reviews

Obviously, Anton Chekhov is a good writer, and this lesser known of his works gives a good picture of how life was under czarist Russia.

Always loved Chekov. Even though its not a story, it is very interesting and gives a detailed look at a

Russian penal colony during tsarist times

One of Anton Chekhov best material. Even the description of what he calls "dull" is interesting.

Terrific service. Hard to find book arrived quickly in mint condition. Would go to vender again. Chekhov's journey, at the height of his fame, to report on prison conditions in the far East is extraordinary.

As you'd expect from Chekhov it is wonderfully written. His descriptions of people and places are straightforward and without embellishment. The trip along the trans-Siberian highway is hair-raising at times, and filled with unique characters. It definitely reads like a travel diary, and when he gets into the descriptions of the various villages and prisons on the island, it becomes repetitious, reflecting the lives of the prisoners and those who served their sentences - the ones who cannot return to European Russia. I wish he had written about his journey home.

Chekhov is a classic. I am fascinated with Russia and his glimpse into society of the time is so very interesting.

Very interesting history

I've recently read a number of Anton Chekhov's plays. This, coupled with C dric Gras' excellent *L'hiver aux troussees* (Essais - Documents) (French Edition), which concerned, in part, his modern day travels on Sakhalin Island, proved to be the impetus for me to read Chekhov's classic travel and ethnographic study of the island, based on his extensive visit in the summer of 1890. Gras found Sakhalin to be a very grim place, in 2014-15. Chekhov also found the island to be a grim place. The fundamental problem is that it is simply too cold for reasonable habitation. It is never warm enough for wheat to ripen properly. The mean temperature is colder than Archangel, on the Arctic Ocean. A place that could only benefit from global warming. Chekhov was both a physician and a writer. He was a keen observer of the human condition who would die far too young, at 44, from tuberculosis, in 1904. His motive for undertaking such an arduous journey to such a grim place is unclear. Speculation covers a range, from the classic "getting one's mind off one's domestic problems" to knowing that he was in the early stages of TB, and may not be able to go to such a cold wet climate at a later

day. The annoyance of many a modern-day traveler "jet lag" would not be a problem, though he crossed seven time zones to get there. He would travel slowly. The Trans-Siberian railroad was still just a "twinkle in the Czar's eye." Chekhov would have to do it the hard way, by horse and coach, across the vast Siberian forest called, in Russian, the taiga. He commenced his travels in April, 1890. Muddy roads, flooded meadows and marshlands, and swollen rivers would impede and slow his progress. It would take two and a half months to cross those seven time zones. The first 50 pages cover this trip, with the period June 20 to July 05 inexplicably missing. When Chekhov crossed the Yenisey (which I recently saw in Werner Herzog's excellent movie "Happy People: A Year in the Taiga") Chekhov proclaimed that the river was more beautiful than the Volga. From the Amur River basin, he would cross to the village of Alexandrovsk, the principal administrative center on Sakhalin, with approximately 3000 residents, in mid-summer. Earlier explorers had not realized that Sakhalin truly was an island, since the mouth of the Amur extends into the sea, making it shallow with its fluvial indenture. Indentured servants, slaves, and convicts were the designation given to humans who were involuntarily used to settle (and provide that essential cheap labor) in distant lands. Australia, famously, commenced its European settlement as a British penal colony. Sakhalin, which had been explored in the 1860's, witnessed some efforts at voluntary settlement, all of which failed. The Russians had there only one form of Manifest Destiny, and decided the best way to fulfill it was to turn Sakhalin into a penal colony. Chekhov quickly dismisses the northern third of Sakhalin as uninhabitable. (Interestingly, that is where Gras found most of the people, since that is where the oil is!). The middle third, centering on Alexandrovsk, is called "the north." The south, which Chekhov dismisses as not very "southlike," are the villages on the southern shore that face Japan's northernmost island, Hokkaido. Chekhov travels all over the inhabited parts, seemingly attempting to visit every village, during his less than three months stay. Chekhov carefully notes the census and status of the residents, with the latter ranging from convict to "peasant-in-exile." Aside from the officials themselves (who were in their own form of exile, compensated for by generous early retirement benefits), "peasant-in-exile" meant that you were essentially free to leave, and return to the mainland, yet one was never permitted to return to their native district in European Russia. I always noted the varying imbalances between men and women. Some of the women were convicts; others had freely accompanied their husbands to prison. Many turned to prostitution to survive. Chekhov faithfully chronicles the depressing filth, poverty and disease. There were two native tribes on the island, the Gilyak in the north, the Ainu in the south. As in other parts of the world, most were wiped out, often by disease,

primarily smallpox. There were a high percentage of convicts who attempted escape, including fake escapes, meaning they would collude with someone who would capture them, and they would split the reward! Chapters 20 and 21 were censored in the first publications. They provide vivid descriptions of the floggings that were administered as punishment, and how much the sadist attendants enjoyed watching them. There were detailed descriptions of hangings, which included how one person was still alive when the other bodies were taken down. The last chapter, fittingly, Dr. Chekhov describes the medical conditions, and means of treatment on the island. There are over a hundred pages of notes, which I found a fascinating read also, and would usually read ahead, covering 10 or so pages of the primary text. There is also a succinct biography of Chekhov's life. There seemed to be at least a couple inconsistencies in the author's account. He states that it was too cold for wheat to ripen, yet he does details it being cultivated. Also, the salmon run on the Tym River seemed to be improperly described as to its purpose. Nonetheless, overall, the book is a remarkable achievement by a remarkable man who has inspired the desire for travel to at least one more remote place for a (brief) visit. 5-stars.

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