

The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956

Author: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008)

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Type of work: Memoir

Type of plot: Historical

Time of plot: Twentieth century

The Story:

A string of prisons and labor camps scattered throughout the Soviet Union is called the gulag archipelago because its administrative title, the Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps, forms the acronym “gulag” in Russian and because its far-flung prisons and camps, with their own laws and their oppressed population of *zeks* (prisoners), resembles a separate country made up of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of islands. Vladimir Ilich Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the first head of the Soviet state, established this extensive prison system in 1918, ostensibly to detain and “rehabilitate” Soviet citizens suspected of anti-Soviet or counterrevolutionary activity. The system was greatly expanded by Lenin’s successor, Joseph Stalin, the ironfisted ruler of the Soviet Union from 1924 until his death in 1953. Under Stalin, the secret police arrested millions of people, nearly all of whom received either the death sentence or lengthy prison terms in the gulag archipelago.

A decorated captain of artillery in the Soviet Red Army during World War II, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is arrested for anti-Soviet activity in 1945 because he criticized Stalin in letters to a friend. Solzhenitsyn’s “guilt” was already established in his letters, so the secret police interrogators try to persuade Solzhenitsyn to implicate other anti-Soviet “conspirators” rather than to confess. The interrogators use only sleep deprivation, the mildest of their thirty-one documented methods of torture. He refuses to sign the fabricated “confession” but relents when investigators threaten to begin the interrogation all over again. Sent to Butyrki prison in Moscow, he begins his eight years as a *zek*.

At Butyrki, Solzhenitsyn watches in horror and sadness as thousands of repatriated Soviet soldiers, liberated from German prisoner of war camps, are imprisoned as traitors by their own country. In need of scapegoats, Stalin blames them for his own enormous wartime blunders, including surrenders at Kerch (120,000 prisoners) and Kharkov (150,000 prisoners). Stalin also fears that returning prisoners of war

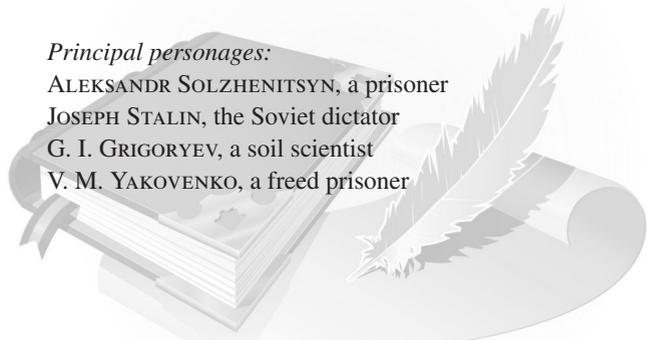
Principal personages:

ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN, a prisoner

JOSEPH STALIN, the Soviet dictator

G. I. GRIGORYEV, a soil scientist

V. M. YAKOVENKO, a freed prisoner



might sow unrest among their countrymen by describing the relatively high standard of living they had seen in Europe and the greater degree of personal freedom enjoyed by the Germans, even under the wartime rule of the dictator Adolf Hitler. Reasoning that anyone who could survive a German prisoner of war camp must have collaborated with his captors, Stalin has many of the returning prisoners charged with “aiding and abetting the enemy” and given “tenners” (ten-year sentences).

In 1945, Solzhenitsyn is sent to a hard labor camp, from which he is miraculously saved in 1946 when he lies on a camp registration form; he lists his civilian occupation as nuclear physicist. He is removed to a special prison, a scientific research institute, or *sharashka*, near Moscow, one of the gulag archipelago’s “paradise” islands, legendary among the *zeks*, where prisoners are well treated because of their value to the state.

Successfully impersonating a scientist, Solzhenitsyn remains there until 1950. From this special prison, he is taken to a camp for political prisoners in Ekibastuz, Kazakhstan. At Ekibastuz, Solzhenitsyn becomes part of a team of laborers building a new disciplinary barracks, a prison within a prison. He also witnesses a number of failed escape attempts. Some of the escapees are shot, and many are imprisoned in the unfinished disciplinary barracks even while Solzhenitsyn and other prisoners are still building it.

His sentence completed, Solzhenitsyn is released from Ekibastuz in March, 1953; he is sent into permanent exile in the Kolk-Terek district, a desert region in central Kazakhstan. There he seeks work as a teacher of mathematics and physics, but he is rebuffed by the district education department, even though he is the only available teacher in the district with a university degree. On March 6, his second day in Kolk-Terek, he hears the news that Stalin—the man who had murdered millions of Soviet citizens and imprisoned millions more—is dead. Astonished by the grief of the free peo-

ple around him, Solzhenitsyn realizes the extraordinary success of Stalin and his minions in keeping their barbarism secret. He begins editing what little he managed to write in the camps, and he writes what he can remember, burying his work every evening in order to hide it from the secret police. In the spring of 1956, he applies for a review of his case. The sentence of exile is lifted in 1957, and Solzhenitsyn returns to Russia as a teacher.

Critical Evaluation:

The Gulag Archipelago is a modern epic. It is not a scholarly history and it is not fiction, though it is to an extent fictionalized. Denied the tools of the historian (he was forbidden paper and pencil during his entire sentence, and he had no access to libraries or government archives), Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was forced to rely on his memory to store nearly all the material that makes up this massive, eighteen-hundred-page work. Accepting Solzhenitsyn's metaphor of the gulag as its own nation of islands within the Soviet Union, one might say that he single-handedly constructed the literature of the gulag.

Using his own experiences as a narrative thread tying together the stories he heard from other *zeks*, he manages to weave a tapestry depicting the cruelty and sorrow of the Soviet penal system. That tapestry is vast and filled with horrors. Few people in the West realize that Stalin's victims, perhaps as many as thirty million, far outnumbered Hitler's. In addition to the innocent millions murdered in the camps and in the prisons, fifteen million peasants died as a result of a single national program: the brutal resettlement that established the Soviet Union's network of collective farms. Solzhenitsyn's own story seems innocuous by comparison. He was but lightly tortured during interrogation; other prisoners were starved, beaten, or shot. Many women prisoners were raped. He served a single eight-year sentence; other prisoners had extra "tenners" given them for minor infractions of camp rules. He hoodwinked his captors and so spent half his sentence in the relative comfort of a *sharashka*; other prisoners served ten, fifteen, or even twenty years—though few survived that long—in Siberian hard labor camps. Nevertheless, his story is the thread by which the others are bound. All the political prisoners in the gulag suffered under a penal code that was administrative rather than legislative. The People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs established three-person Special Boards throughout the Soviet Union, with the power to imprison and execute "socially dangerous" people without trial. These Special Boards, abolished after Stalin's death in 1953, applied their own criminal code containing eleven indictable offenses ranging from "anti-Soviet

agitation" to "nurturing anti-Soviet feelings" to merely being a "member of the family" of an indicted person. Under such a code, no one was safe.

The evil of such a system is Solzhenitsyn's target. Through the testimony of 227 fellow prisoners, he pieces together a comprehensive history of the gulag, explaining various methods of arrest and interrogation, the often incongruous modes of transport between prisons—*zeks* sometimes traveled on the public railways with unarmed escorts, mixing with free citizens who frequently had no inkling that there were "enemies of the state" among them. Solzhenitsyn describes the character of his interrogators (the blue-caps), the endless variety of brutality practiced by the guards, and the seemingly inadvertent psychological torture built in to the system. The banality of evil reveals itself in the details involved in running such a far-flung empire of prisons and labor camps. For example, arrests and interrogations nearly always took place at night, partly to heighten the terror of the victims and partly to exploit the vulnerability of arrestees deprived of sleep. Another reason for night arrests: The police and interrogators were paid extra for night work. Mixed among the horrifying statistics of death—forty thousand prisoners died from overwork, exposure, and disease at a single camp during the winter of 1941-1942—are the depressing statistics of life. Throughout the gulag, women prisoners were routinely forced into prostitution by the guards, and their tens of thousands of children were sent to state orphanages.

Solzhenitsyn observes all these horrors and more, expressing outrage at the unfeeling brutality of the system, wonder at the strength and courage of the *zeks*, and immense sadness for the tragedy that has befallen his country. A Marxist, Solzhenitsyn revered Vladimir Ilich Lenin, although he hated Joseph Stalin. Still, rather than blame Stalin alone for the inhuman gulag, Solzhenitsyn explores his idol's part in its creation. Rather than make scapegoats of the thousands of policemen, interrogators, guards, and bureaucrats responsible for the day-to-day running of the gulag, Solzhenitsyn recognizes that they were not monsters; instead, they were Soviet citizens molded by his beloved Soviet state. In their arrogance and conviction, he can recognize traits he himself developed as an officer in the Red Army. Despite the pain and humiliation suffered at the hands of his captors, he retains the humanity that allows him to admit that in different circumstances he—or anyone—might have become one of them.

There are stories of courage, as well. Some *zeks* were never defeated by the system. G. I. Grigoryev, a soil scientist, was captured by the Germans during World War II, and he