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# Between Earth and Hell

Arkhipelag GULag 1918-1956

Parts I and II

by Alexander Solzhenitsyn.<sup>1</sup>

YMCA Press, Paris, 606 pp.

George F. Kennan

The nineteenth-century traveler and writer, George Kennan (1848-1924), whose namesake and relative I happen to be, on arriving at the 400th page of his well-known study of *Siberia and the Exile System* (first published in 1888), tells of sitting "on one cold raw autumnal day, in a dirty post-station on the great Siberian road," watching the passage of a miserable party of guarded convicts, who were making their laborious way, on foot and in leg-fetters, over the 1,040-mile stretch from Tomsk to Irkutsk. As they moved through the village they sang, by permission of the convoy, the so-called "begging song"—the *miloserdnaya*—in the hope of eliciting mercy, in the form of small donations of food, from the villagers. When they had passed, Kennan was overcome, he wrote, by "a strange sense of dejection, as if the day had suddenly grown colder, darker, and more dreary, and the cares and sorrows of life more burdensome and oppressive." This was one of the rare points at which he allowed a touch of subjective feeling to burst the crust of cool restraint that covers his otherwise factual and very Victorian book.

It is with a similar feeling that the Western reader, and particularly one who has himself had some experience of Russia, lays down the 600-page volume containing the first two parts of the multi-part study which Alexander Solzhenitsyn has addressed to the judicial, penal, and forced-labor systems created and operated, over the decades, by the Tsar's successors. True, the Western reader experiences this moment of disheartenment not, like Kennan, in the midst of a harrowing journey that has carried him thousands of miles from anything resembling European civilization, but rather in the comfort of his own living room, himself devoid of either hardship or danger. He is aware, on the other hand, that what Solzhenitsyn is here describing is a phenomenon not only much worse (Kennan would have found this hard to believe) in degree of inhumanity but also greater in scale, by a factor of several hundred times, than

the comparable phenomenon that presented itself to Kennan's view.

The initial reaction to Mr. Solzhenitsyn's account is less indignation against the authors of these horrors and injustices, though of course there is that, too, than discouragement, great sadness, and no small measure of puzzlement over the fact that such things could have taken place in our own time in a country sharing the Christian tradition, a country that has been the source of some of the greatest literature, and the greatest moral teaching, of the modern age, a country with which we were in effect allied during the recent war, and with which we fancied ourselves to have in common at least certain standards of decency and humanity that would set us off against our common enemy.

One shrinks from the task of attempting to describe this—the most heavy and relentless book of our time. It is like no other. Part reminiscence, part history, part sociological study, part folklore, it is a leisurely and exhaustive examination of that vast "other Russia"—the Russia of involuntary confinement and servitude—which, growing from small beginnings in the early 1920s, rose to monstrous dimensions in the 1930s and 1940s, developing ultimately into an empire-within-an-empire, indeed into something more than an empire: into a specific culture, complete with language, customs, legends, mythology, hierarchies of authority, overt and otherwise—everything, in fact, except hope. It is the culture of a territory populated by people of the most disparate origins, tastes, and natures, united only by their common obligation, one way or another, to live in it, and by the fact that while they have not yet been compelled—or permitted—to enter the next world, they have been obliged—most of them, at any rate—to leave behind them every hope of happiness or self-realization in this one.

Solzhenitsyn likes to think of this territory as an archipelago. He uses this term to designate the entire police empire of prisons and forced-labor camps with which he is concerned. To me it seems more like some species of Atlantis, situated not between Heaven and Earth, but somewhere on the borders between Earth and Hell, known to the outside world only

through remote and implausible rumor and knowing of the outside world almost nothing at all. But let us accept Solzhenitsyn's image of the Archipelago as the algebraic designation.

This initial volume, written—it would seem—between 1958 and 1967, deals only with the preliminary phases of the life of a victim in the Archipelago: the experience of arrest; the first days; the "investigation," including all the various forms of pressure and torture; the reaction to the first common cell, shared with others; the penal boxes; the death cells; then, transportation in all its forms: in Black Marias, in box cars, in barges and ocean-going vessels, the noncriminal prisoners (I hesitate to call them political) being everywhere delivered up to the savage tyranny of the criminals. But it also treats of the preliminaries in time: the origins of the system itself; the original Cheka; the development of Solovetski Island as a place of confinement; the early trials of the Socialist-Revolutionaries and the engineers and technicians; then the full flowering of the system, in the 1930s. Each subject is treated in depth, with a wealth of illustration and detail, most of it drawn from identified individual experience.

The book has its faults. Considering the circumstances under which it must have been written, the only occasion for surprise is that it does not have more of them. The historical parts are heavy. That some inaccuracies should occur, and some statements be open to challenge, was inevitable in a work of this size and nature. The treatment of the great public purge trials of the 1930s is particularly inadequate. Here, as in the *First Circle*, Solzhenitsyn, incomparable in his treatment of the ordinary victims of the system, shows himself curiously helpless when it comes to picturing the senior figures of the regime: they emerge as caricatures, not as real human beings.<sup>2</sup> For many,

<sup>1</sup> An English translation will be published later this year by Harper & Row.

<sup>2</sup> Particularly inadequate is the treatment, in this connection, of Bukharin. Solzhenitsyn had, of course, no possibility of seeing the recent work on Bukharin by Stephen F. Cohen (*Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, reviewed in *The New York Review of*

no doubt, the book will seem too long, too detailed—too much of everything. Solzhenitsyn has seen no reason to spare the reader, any more than experience has spared him, the full burden of what he has learned and now has to say. Not only that, but the language in which it is written—intensely compact, often twisted and involved, laced with camp slang, abbreviations, initials, and words built of initials—is such as to place the heaviest of demands even on readers of the original Russian text,<sup>3</sup> not to mention translators. Not many, I fear, will have the fortitude to read it all, from beginning to end.

The book is already being attacked in Russia, and will no doubt be attacked elsewhere, for what may be interpreted as a defense of the Vlasovites, i.e., the Russian force, under General A. A. Vlasov, that allowed itself to be armed and used by the Germans (although in the end it fought briefly against them too), eventually surrendered to the American command in Bavaria, and was finally delivered up by the latter to the Soviet authorities for such retribution as they might see fit to inflict. It is the impression of this reviewer that what Solzhenitsyn was concerned to do here was not to justify or condemn the behavior of Vlasov and his men but to reveal the cruel and hopeless dilemmas by which they were confronted, and the extremes of despair to which they had been reduced, by the senseless orders they received from the Soviet high command, by their disgust with the Stalinist regime, by the cruel circumstances of their experience as war prisoners in Germany, and, finally, by the knowledge that they would, if returned to Russia, be punished as criminals for the mere fact of having been taken prisoner, even if they had not in any way collaborated with the Germans.

The reviewer can find in these passages of the book no hint of anything resembling sympathy for the Nazis—only pity for the Russians involved, a reproach to the Western allies for the heartlessness and thoughtlessness of their handling of this problem, and a determination to raise the question: what had to be wrong with a political regime in order that “several hundred thousand young men in the ages of twenty to thirty should take up arms against their fatherland in alliance with its most bitter enemy?”

as a series of “revelations.” There is not much of what is told here that was not, generally speaking, already known or strongly suspected—usually assumed, in fact—by those who had followed closely the available record of Soviet realities as it has developed in recent years. Solzhenitsyn’s book will have to take its place on the shelf alongside many other fine works of Soviet origin, of which those of Nadezhda Mandelstam and Roy Medvedev are only two of the finest and most recent, not to mention a number of Western studies, devoted to the same subject.

But the book, aside from the talent with which it is written, gives confirmation to a great deal that was, heretofore, only strongly suspected or poorly documented. Even if only a fraction of what is told here were accurate, the force of the condemnation would not be diminished; whereas actually, in the opinion of this reviewer, the inaccuracies or exaggerations are of negligible dimensions and significance.<sup>4</sup> The work thus achieves, in its massiveness, its fierce frankness, and its compelling detail, an authority no amount of counterpropaganda will ever be able to shake. And it emerges before world opinion not only as an act of immense courage and stoutness of heart on the part of its author, and not only as a political event of major importance in the development of Soviet power, but as the greatest and most powerful single indictment of a political regime ever to be leveled in modern times.

There are certain salient facts about this great system of punishment to which attention has indeed been called, in almost every instance, by earlier writers, but which emerge with particular force and authority from Solzhenitsyn’s work, and which deserve emphasis to the foreign reader.

The Archipelago was, in the first place, not the work of any single man. Of course, Stalin had an outstanding responsibility. Not for nothing was he the most powerful figure in the regime in the years when the system reached its greatest development. It was he who, presumably knowing well what he was doing, removed most of the rods from the infernal human reactor, during the years of the Thirties, and permitted it to burn with an intensity not known before or since. But he did not create it; its existence did not depend entirely upon him. It had

existed before his autocratic power was established; and it continued, as Solzhenitsyn repeatedly points out, to burn, albeit at much reduced intensity, after his death.

Khrushchev, who was interested only in the excesses committed against Party members, tended to blame exclusively Stalin, under whose power those excesses for the most part occurred. Solzhenitsyn, interested not in Party members *per se* but in human beings, finds himself obliged to widen the spectrum and to consider as well the non-Party masses. In such an examination the figure of Stalin, while by no means absolved of responsibility, necessarily takes a less prominent place.

What flows most impressively from Solzhenitsyn’s work is that one had to do here, in this Archipelago, with something greater and more terrible than any single individual could have created and maintained: with some sort of monstrous human misunderstanding—a Frankenstein creature that grew over the heads of its creators and of those who were ostensibly its commanders, gained an inner momentum of its own, and ended by carrying relentlessly along in its tentacles all those connected with it: prisoners, guards, investigators, torturers, and executioners alike. One may charitably believe that the men of Lenin’s time created it almost accidentally, not fully aware of what they were doing, believing they needed something of this sort as an instrument of the Party, but failing to understand what it could some day become.

Stalin, who knew full well what they had done, pressed it into service, without compunction, as an instrument of his own fears and diseased suspicions. His successors have retained it in a subdued form, sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker, presumably feeling that they needed it for the security of *Books* February 7, 1974), and cannot be blamed for not knowing all that was in it; but his treatment of Bukharin would have benefited from an acquaintance with it.

<sup>3</sup>This review is based on the original Russian text; the reviewer has not seen a translation.

<sup>4</sup>In so far as the challenges to Solzhenitsyn’s integrity and veracity raised by Vikteich and others are concerned, it can only be said that anyone who would take seriously such statements by people who are effectively at the mercy of the police has not really read

their own rule, but also, one senses, because it was hard to know how to get rid of it. To abolish it entirely would have meant to invite increased attention to it and to spotlight the awkward question of the Party's responsibility for its creation in the first place, and for the tolerating of it over the decades.

The second point that flows with great force from Solzhenitsyn's book is the fact that this phenomenon, contrary to an impression widespread elsewhere, by no means represented just, or even mainly, the oppression of political opponents by a group of men holding dictatorial power. Only a tiny percentage of those who were made victims of the system can be said to have been in any sense political opponents of the regime. People were arrested and consigned to this terrible half-world not as individuals—not, as a rule, for anything they themselves had individually done—but as members of categories. "Prophylactic" considerations—i.e., the reflection that certain categories of people might be theoretically more capable than others of making trouble for the regime in future—no doubt had something to do with the identification of the categories from which arrests were to be made. But other considerations were predominant.

This great reactor had to have fuel. Without fuel it could not exist. Its appetite had to be appeased. The only fuel it could accept was human beings—their lives, their happiness. But there were not remotely enough of the guilty ones to satisfy this hunger. One had, therefore, to reach primarily for the innocent. This was not difficult. "Give us the body," was the watchword of the system. "We will produce the case against it."<sup>5</sup> This situation is best described by Krylov's fable of the wolf who first offered a series of pretexts for attacking and eating the lamb, all of which the lamb was easily able to refute; whereupon the wolf lost patience and said: "Your guilt lies in the fact that I greatly desire to eat"—and at once consumed him.

Finally, this entire phenomenon was something much more complex than just a situation of bad guys vs. good guys. The corruption of understanding on which it rested was not confined to the regime itself and its servants. There was a widespread tendency among the innocent victims (Madame Mandelstam also comments upon it) to believe that their own case, or that of their

particular category, was an exceptional one, and that while they themselves were innocent, most of their fellow-sufferers were guilty of something. What you had, in reality, was a vast and sordid theatrical performance, in which thousands played the roles of the righteous dispensers of justice, while millions of others played, with sickening realism, those of the criminals, brought sternly to justice and now suffering deserved retribution for their crimes.

There was of course very little reality in either pretense. But of the two sets of actors, it was the latter—the victims—who took the whole procedure most seriously and tended to believe, if not in their own guilt, then in that of many of their companions in misery. The investigators and jailers, on the other hand, presumably knew only too well—could not help but know—what the score was. But even if these latter knew that the whole thing was a show, many of them (and many of the victims as well) were obviously brought to believe that it was a necessary show, that it served a useful purpose, that the interests of the Party were in some way promoted by it.

It was such reflections that led Solzhenitsyn to recall to memory with relentless honesty (and these are some of the most impressive passages in the book) the abuses of his earlier authority as a military officer (they were very minor ones) of which he felt himself guilty, and to ask how he would have behaved if, as might easily have happened, he had, at a certain point in his career as a student, elected to go to the secret police academy rather than to the university. Would not he, too, have succumbed to the pervasive moral and intellectual atmosphere by which he would have been surrounded in this great bureaucratic police machine? Would he ever have questioned it? Was there not, in fact, in the very air of this system of power a corruption that penetrated much of Soviet society as a whole, successful and influential society in particular, and made possible this monstrous distortion of human life?

Solzhenitsyn searched for the roots of this corruption, and found them in the ideology. I would suggest—and I doubt that he would disagree—that one could go a step further and say that the trouble lay not so much in the actual content of the ideology (all ideologies, after all, are imperfect and

inadequate, but not all are this sinister) as in the absolute value attached to it. The insistence, built into Bolshevik philosophy from the start, that there was no inhibition, no scruple—whether of decency, of delicacy, of compassion, of respect for the humanity of others—but literally none—that must ever be permitted to take precedence over the interests of the Party as interpreted by those momentarily in control of it: it was this savage and reckless absolutism that corrupted, in the end, the understanding of tens of millions of people and rendered them all, masters and slaves alike, vulnerable to the stupendous degradation that Solzhenitsyn describes.

It is impossible to believe that this book can have anything less than a major effect on the Soviet regime. This would be true even if no more of the total work were to appear than the two parts to which this review is addressed (and there are said to be several more parts already in the hands of Western publishers). This merciless indictment, coming as the climax to the large body of existing literature on the same subject, is too devastating to be ignored. The Soviet leaders cannot, just by ignoring it themselves or attempting to smother it with falsehood, consign it to oblivion of cause it to remain without consequences. It is too large for the craw of the Soviet propaganda machine. It will stick there, with increasing discomfort, until it has done its work.

And what is this work, as Solzhenitsyn perceives it? It is, surely, to restore the integrity of the Russian conscience; to compel the Soviet regime to come to terms, at long last, with its own history; to compel it to face that history frankly; to recognize Solzhenitsyn's Archipelago for what it is—a shame on the name of Russia and the name of Socialism; to ask how this could have happened; to identify the basic flaws in the system that permitted it to happen; and then to set about both to eradicate those flaws

<sup>5</sup>Solzhenitsyn tells of one occasion upon which a prisoner, in process of being transported from one place of confinement to another, was asked by a curious convoy officer for what offense he had been given the unusually heavy sentence of twenty-five years. "Why, for nothing at all," was the answer. "You're lying," charged the officer, angrily. "For nothing at all they only give ten years."

and to liquidate the unhappy remnants of earlier great abuses that are still present in the Soviet judicial and penal systems.

This will not be easy. It will shake the whole structure of Soviet power as heretofore known. It will require the abandonment of the absurd claim to omniscience and infallibility that the Party has heretofore always maintained. It will require, for the first time in fifty years, a critical examination of Lenin's political philosophy, as well as that of his successors. It will require a confession, on the part of the present leaders, that they, too, have made mistakes.

Does this imply the overthrow or collapse of the regime? Not, one would suppose, if this act of self-searching can be carried out with anything approaching the courage and integrity Solzhenitsyn has brought to the subject. There is, after all, no plausible possible alternative to this regime, today; and not even Solzhenitsyn has suggested that any effort should be made to create one. What is demanded here is, rather, an alteration in the nature of the Russian-Communist political system—a relative humanizing that would bring it into better accord with the needs of a great advanced society in the modern world. It is the ghost of Dubček that will hover, together with this book, over the towers of the Kremlin, so long as its lessons are not heeded.

But this process of humanization, as Solzhenitsyn has shown, is not just a matter of tinkering with present practices. It is a matter of introspection and self-understanding—a process which Khrushchev attempted, in his crude way, to put into motion within a limited area but which his successors, evidently thinking that life would be easier that way, attempted to stop. If the process can now be successfully resumed, one can see hope both for the Russian people and for their leaders. But if the leaders attempt to avoid or impede it, they will merely dig themselves in deeper. The Russia that will then ensue will be one where it will be, to use Solzhenitsyn's own words, "uncomfortable and terrible to live"—terrible and uncomfortable for everyone, and not alone for those, the non-Party masses, who have no share in the ruling of the country.

and grumbling about the lines at the filling station? What does this book mean for us?

The problem Solzhenitsyn poses is essentially Russia's problem. No outside force can solve it. No useful purpose would be served if any attempted to do so.

Yet there are ways in which people in the West can support, by their reaction, the purposes this book was written to promote.

They can, first of all, exert themselves to keep the course of events in Russia under the scrutiny of world attention. There is no greater discouragement that could be brought to the forces working for a more humane Russian society than the impression that their efforts are forgotten, or viewed with indifference, elsewhere.

Secondly, the West can see to it that the limited portion of Russian cultural activity—literature, scholarship, journalism—which exists in the Western world, beyond the control of Soviet censors, receives encouragement and support, and is not permitted to die from neglect and lack of understanding. Ever since the first appearance of Alexander Herzen's *Kolokol* in London, in 1857, the voice of the Russian-in-exile has been an important, sometimes almost a vital, factor in the struggle for greater liberality in the treatment of Russian cultural activity, and for political liberalization generally, at home. In recent decades, the United States has replaced Germany and England as the leading host, in the quantitative, if not the qualitative, sense, for this sort of Russian cultural life. But there is every reason to fear that if something does not happen soon to increase the support devoted to it, its present vigor will not be of long duration. And this Russian cultural activity is the atmosphere the exiles breathe.

To the extent it is permitted to decline—to the extent Russian-language publishing facilities and journals and the facilities for training and advanced research in Russian studies are allowed to go out of existence—the voices of those who, like Solzhenitsyn, are now compelled to live abroad will be stifled for lack of stimulus and of mediums of expression, and the influence exerted in Russia itself will be to that extent reduced.

But the most valuable contribution

Westerners can make by way of reaction to Solzhenitsyn's book is to recognize its direct relevance to themselves, their problems and their behavior. If they take it in a spirit of detached and smug superiority, pitying the poor Russians for the deficiencies of their system of government and congratulating themselves on the beauties of Western civilization, they will have missed the most important point Solzhenitsyn has to make. The supreme value of the work lies in its exemplary quality—its quality as an example of ruthless and fearless honesty in the exploration of the weaknesses in one's own personal behavior and in one's own society. If some of this honesty does not rub off on the Western reader (and when has he ever been more in need of it?), then the book may have helped people in Russia, but it will not have helped people here; and to the extent the West has remained deaf to its message, its effect in Russia, too, will have been weakened. Solzhenitsyn has scattered widely, and with generous hand, the summons to conscience that the work represents. The seeds should be allowed to sprout wherever, and however, they are needed. □

And what of us—of us Westerners, enjoying rights we scarcely value, wallowing in the physical luxuries