

# **The Captive Mind Study Guide**

## **The Captive Mind by Czesław Miłosz**

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## Plot Summary

The Captive Mind by Czeslaw Milosz discusses life in the Eastern European countries during the years of Stalinism. The book was written during this era and earned the author a Nobel Prize for Literature. The author lived and wrote in Poland during the years of the Nazi occupation and then under the socialist regime. He became a supporter of socialism since he did not want to go into exile. Milosz watched as his own philosophical views were replaced by those of the Soviet regime until he could no longer tolerate the situation and broke with the regime. He could no longer tolerate the doctrine which was forced on him. In a sense, he obtained his freedom when he rejected the doctrine.

Milosz's purpose in writing the book is to explain how the mind functions in a socialist society. For example, the individual basically sells out to the State in order to survive. He follows the prescribed method even if it is under the facade of Ketzman, which is the practice of hiding one's true beliefs. The writer can no longer be creative. The writer must portray the class struggle in a manner that is acceptable to the Party. If not, the individual will not find work. The individual that cannot accept the doctrine is branded as a reactionary and an enemy of the people.

Milosz uses four writers as examples of writers that were active at the time the people's democracies came into being. Alpha is described as the Moralizer, Beta is the Disappointed Lover, Gamma is the Slave of History and Delta is the Troubadour. The author, who knew these people, describes their careers and what kind of adjustment each made to be a writer in the people's democracies. Adherence to the Method stifles creativity as it did in each of these authors. Some made the adjustment and were successful. One did not and was basically out of favor with the regime. Milosz relates the kind of internal conflict the writer undergoes in adapting to the Method and how it is reflected in their writing.

Milosz relates what happens to a nation when socialism is imposed. He not only talks about Poland but also about the Baltic States. The country that is taken over must be made to conform to the Soviet model, which involves deportation of thousands to labor camps, collectivization of agriculture and the organization of labor.

The author does a good job in portraying life under socialism. The book, although short in length, is rather slow reading in that the reader needs to think of the implications of what the author is saying. Some familiarity with Marxian terminology is also helpful. The book is well worth the time spent reading it, especially for those with an interest in the Soviet bloc countries and life under socialism.



# Chapter 1, The Pill of Murti-Bing

## Chapter 1, The Pill of Murti-Bing Summary and Analysis

Marxian philosophy affected many people in Europe. Since there had been hundreds of philosophers over the centuries, Marx could have been considered one of many, and passed with time. A two volume book called *Insatiability*, written by Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz, was read in Warsaw in 1932. The book portrayed the decay in society through its main characters who had no meaning in their life. They begin ingesting Murti-Bingo pills, which changed their lives and gave them a sense of meaning and happiness. Then war broke out and the Eastern army based on Murti-Bingism, won. But the people found they could not overcome their past personalities and as a result they became schizophrenic. The author committed suicide when he learned that the Red Army had entered Poland.

Milosz makes many comparisons between the situation in *Insatiability* and life in the people's democracies. Many writers accepted Socialist doctrine, or what Milosz calls the New Faith. Some were true revolutionaries, but many just adapted themselves to the situation. In Witkiewicz's novel, there was no religion. According to Milosz, religion gives society a meaning and a direction. This is one of the things missing in the people's democracies which united the various elements of the society. Individuals feel alienated and want to belong to something. They are bound together through dialectical materialism. Metaphysical concepts can change the political motives of individuals. A new man emerges, one that hopes to be saved from the practices of the New Faith, while at the same time working for the good of all.

The New Faith results in an individual that is afraid of thinking for himself. The writer submits to the censorship of the regime. Dialectical materialism results in the writer writing what is necessary rather than thinking. They produce what is expected of them. The writers close themselves to the work of others not from the people's democracies, no matter how good the work is. The only authors they recognize are from within the people's democracies. The writers now belong to the new world even though it isn't everything the people think it is.

Moscow is the center of this new world that is based on terror and fear. The state is run by the dialecticians, who believe they will eventually conquer the world. Reality for the individual must shift to the realism of socialism. The individual who was at first asked to criticize has now reached the point where he must accept and approve of the New Faith which causes guilt for the individual. The individual must let go of the past and his dreams of political freedom.

While the dreams continue, Eastern Europe moves towards a culture of monolithic uniformity with Moscow at its center. If the writer looks to Western Communists for support, he finds that they offer nothing different. They also view Moscow as the center.



Despair is the next stage for the writer. The individual experiences many difficulties because of the conflict with the past. Both old and new exist within him and the result can be schizophrenia.

It is hoped that the new generation will not experience the same split and inner turmoil, but the Church would have to be totally eradicated for this to take place. This is why the schizophrenic is not expected to quickly disappear. Murti-Bingism realizes that the elimination of the old is a slow process. It is believed when the new generation exists that is free of the past, then everything will change but this is at some point in the future. Much of the, according to Milosz, is also true of life under Marxism.



## Chapter 2, Looking to the West

### Chapter 2, Looking to the West Summary and Analysis

In the people's democracies, many people looked to the West for hope, but they have basically been let down by the West. Most people feel that the world they live in has a natural order. When something happens, like a war, it destroys one's belief in such a natural order. The result is changes in the individual's behavior and habits. He now does things differently. Where he once might have reported in a body lying in the street, he now ignores it and minds his own business. People can be rounded up and sent to concentration camps or crammed into apartment buildings in segregated sectors. Records become falsified and people come to care less about formalities. What then is natural, the world of war or the world that existed before the war.

Those in the East cannot completely trust Americans because of the differences in their experiences. They were raised in a different social order with different values so anything else is unnatural. To the Eastern European, what happened in Europe from 1933-45 can happen anywhere, even in America. The prosperity of America will be overcome by violent change just as in Eastern Europe. Why should the American escape what the Eastern European has had happen?

Thus, dialectical materialism appeals to the Eastern European because it explains his own experience. The natural order will crash due to a crisis and the result will be fascism to stave off the proletariat revolution and fascism must, of course, be defeated. Propaganda tells the individual that Nazism is the same as Americanism, and he has no basis or way to gauge the West. In his society, the law is used as a tool by the Party so the individual cannot understand how anyone would believe in the law. The law under both the Nazi and Communist regimes defined a crime as any act against the interests or the doctrine of the state.

Progress and new technologies are the product of the West. Russia copied the Western designs. The old timers know this but the younger generation does not. They believe the propaganda, and the propaganda itself is an indication of the importance that Moscow places on science. Even art in the East represents a mass culture and not individualism. Western societies and cultures are viewed as decadent. The artist in the East gains recognition for following the Party line. It is easier for the artist in the East to earn a living than the artist in the West. The Eastern artist and intellectual are distrustful of the West.

The West offers them nothing that can replace the dialect and materialism of the East. There is still an interest in Christianity even though its practice is forbidden for the most part. The individual is required to combat cosmopolitanism, which is defined as an admiration of anything in Western culture.



If the New Faith experiment is to spread throughout the world, then Eastern Europe will be important since they were the first countries outside the Soviet Union to follow the New Faith model. If the experiment fails, then these countries will develop their own identities and cultures. Why should they want to imitate the West? The fight against cosmopolitanism means the artist isn't supposed to be individualistic or mimic the West. They were expected to conform to the Method. The Method is basically used as a tool by the ruler to gain conformity and obedience. An individual that didn't conform found his career ruined.

# Ketman

## Ketman Summary and Analysis

Citizens in the people's democracies do not express their opinions or questions openly. They act in an appropriate manner consistent with what is expected of them. Their comments are always guarded, unlike those of Westerners. They do not speak freely. They are basically actors, according to Milosz. Milosz finds an analogy in Islam in the character of Ketman, which he learned about from *Religions and Philosophies of Central Asia* written by Gobineau.

Gobineau felt that people should not reveal their true beliefs unless silence is taken as assent. The individual is allowed to go to any lengths to deceive his adversary. This is Ketman. Rulers and successful people practice Ketman, and it also must be practiced in the people's democracies. It is a way of hiding one's true feelings and beliefs. They outwardly support the Russian regime.

Many of the Eastern Europeans supported socialism but not Russia. Their countries were more economically advanced than Russia was and they opposed the Russian model and dictatorship. If they revealed these feelings, they would be branded as traitors, as Tito was. The practice of Ketman was more prevalent in the urban areas of Russia than in Eastern Europe. This practice basically destroyed Russian literature, art and theater. Even science was at the directives of the Party. They all became yes men to the dictates of the Party.

The Russians developed their own version of Ketman. The despair felt by the Russian resulted in an aesthetic Ketman. The intellectual is prepared to make the sacrifices that are necessary to maintain his position. In spite of this, they long for the richness of the past. The result is escapism, which takes different forms such as writing children's books, which give them a little more freedom in expressing their creativity. Work in academia allows them to explore the literature of the past. Aesthetic Ketman also takes the form of the establishment of the various institutes for the arts. Following Marxian methods and principles resulted in safety for the individual and his funding and livelihood. This is the price the individual pays to practice his profession. The State uses this to obtain the necessary number of practitioners for the various professions.

Another kind of Ketman is called metaphysical Ketman. This form is found in countries having a past history of Catholicism. The people continue to believe in some sort of metaphysical being or principle that the New Faith does not satisfy. The example given is the Catholic who becomes a member of the security police. The writer must be careful not to have any metaphysical leanings in his poetry or writings. Art must serve a social end or it will be held in contempt.

Ethical Ketman is another form which comes into being when ethics clashes with Party doctrine. Ethics interferes with the development of the new man, which is required by





Communist doctrine. People report on one another which is how they maintain their own good standing with the Party. This is expected of them and it results in fear in all relationships. One person gets ahead at the expense of the others.

The practice of Ketman causes internal conflict in the individual but is something the individual must do in order to survive. This was the society that was imposed in the people's democracies.



# Alpha, the Moralist

## Alpha, the Moralist Summary and Analysis

In the people's democracies, an individual's fate depends on how well he conforms to the Method and Party doctrine. Milosz used as an example a friend of his, a writer whom he calls Alpha, whose main interest was tragic moral conflicts. Alpha sought for purity in his writing as a counter-balance to the disorder in his life. His novel brought him acclaim as the most gifted Catholic writer in Poland, and he received a national award and large sum of money for it. In spite of his success, Alpha felt there was something wrong with his writing. He did not feel he was truly a Catholic writer.

When WWII began, Poland was a part of the Nazi empire. An underground developed for literature written in the country's own language. Alpha followed the rules of the regime and functioned as a moral authority and leader of writers. He also was active in the literary underground and spoke out against the treatment of Jews.

One day, in the early years of the war, Alpha and Milosz return to Warsaw from a day in the country. They hear screaming as they are walking through the street's and find the authorities conducting a man-hunt. They were rounding up people to send to Auschwitz. Alpha wrote several short stories and a book about the event. They are published after the war.

During the war, many members of the literary underground were shot or sent to concentration camps. People asked why and could find no logical answer. It was clear at this time that the Red Army would liberate Poland, and Socialist and Communist undergrounds were forming. Alpha felt himself trapped and began to write satires of the intelligentsia. Alpha escaped to the country during the uprising and in 1945, the Red Army arrives.

The Russians planned to establish their own form of government in Poland. Fascism was fighting Communism with the Poles caught in the middle with neither side caring about the Polish people.

Alpha was welcome by the new government. He and Milosz went to Krakow after the destruction of Warsaw and were there when Berlin fell. Many members of the London sponsored underground were now considered to be enemies. Milosz blames much of this on Alpha's actions during the war.

After the war Alpha wrote another novel about a communist who had been released from a concentration camp and found his country in a state of moral decay. The Party considered the book to be very important and Alpha won a state prize and was given a villa. He began lecturing and serving on committees. When the time came for writers to publicly avow acceptance of the New Faith, Alpha, as the top writer in the country, had no choice. He became a Party member.

Alpha wrote an article about himself full of self-criticism which was taken by the Stalinists as a renunciation of the past and the acceptance of the New Faith. He credited the Method for his being able to see the flaws in his previous writings. Alpha went on to write a book about how the only way to be truly free was to be a citizen of the Soviet Union.

By accepting the dialectics, Alpha conformed to the wishes of the State.



# Beta the Disappointed Lover

## Beta the Disappointed Lover Summary and Analysis

Beta, another friend of Milosz, was twenty years old in 1942, when they first met. He was a young, aspiring poet, who attended the underground university and supported himself by performing odd jobs. Like others, he had no beliefs in democracy or religion, as he made known in his poems. He used a mimeograph machine to publish his works. His works captured the realism of life in Warsaw at the time. Arrested by the Gestapo in 1943, he survived Auschwitz and Dachau to be liberated by the Americans.

After the war, he wrote of his experiences in the concentration camps. He explains the social structure that develops in the concentration universe in terms of camp authorities, trusted prisoners, strong prisoners and weak prisoners. Beta belonged to the strong and healthy group, and his publications tell of life in the camp and the various incidents that occurred. It was a society in which people tried to save themselves. As the narrator of the book, he relates and emphasizes the cleverness and ingenuity it took to survive.

Beta chose to return to Poland after the war. He began writing when he returned to a war-devastated Warsaw. The new regime supported writers. Beta was hailed as a good writer and received royalties for his work. His works did not conform to the Soviet realism but conformity was not yet expected, although he faced some criticism as a result of his non-conforming writings. They felt he could develop into a good Communist writer. Beta was full of hatred and this was something the Party felt it could use.

Beta accepted the doctrine of the New Faith and felt that the end of Nazism represented the end of capitalism in Europe. The Revolution began with the collapse of Nazism. Beta's writing style began to change. He joined the Party and his writing became a form of propaganda as he attacked America and capitalism. His writing style changed to suit the authorities as he wrote news articles that did not require any of his passion or creativity. They were no longer artistic. Beta chose to be a journalist saying that it was more useful to the authorities.

Eventually Beta could no longer write novels or stories. He felt a need for journalism and it didn't matter to him that his writing was the same as other Party journalists of the time. Beta believed in the new order and in his part in it. Beta eventually committed suicide.



# Gamma, the Slave of History

## Gamma, the Slave of History Summary and Analysis

Milosz first met the character he calls Gamma in his hometown of Vilna in a building of the University in 1931. Gamma was an anti-Semite and their first meeting involved a discussion of the subject. Gamma had a sense of superiority. Milosz saw Gamma again in 1949, when he was the Polish ambassador to a Western nation. He was living in an ornate palace and enjoyed the nightlife of the Western capitol. Inside, Gamma was not happy.

One of Gamma's functions was to turn in Poles who he felt were not loyal to Warsaw. He would act like he sympathized with them and convince them to return to Warsaw with him to settle their differences. As soon as he delivered the individual to the authorities in Warsaw, Gamma would leave.

Back in Vilna, Gamma was one of the group of budding writers that included Milosz. They all considered themselves to be products of the intelligentsia and like all students, they considered themselves to be in revolt against the existing environment and had dreams of changing the world. At this time, most university students had little hope of finding employment, so radicalism was more or less the order to the day. In Gamma, it took the form of intense nationalism; whereas, in others it was an interest in socialism. The government's interest was in the left, who they tried to cultivate by promising reforms, but it didn't work.

Even though the Soviet border was within one hundred miles of Vilna, they knew little about the Soviet system, but given the situation in Germany, they viewed Russia as the solution to their problems. Polish Communists made it clear that Moscow's intentions were to include their area as part of the Soviet Union, but that was a higher price than most were willing to pay. Gamma, however, became a Stalinist even though membership in the Communist Party was illegal. He wrote for Party publications and took part in Party activities. He was soon arrested with others but was acquitted.

When Hitler attacked Poland, the Russians took over the area around Vilna, which then became a part of Lithuania. Gamma sided with the Soviets and is quickly put to work. Many thousands of people were sent to labor camps, including Gamma's family, who denounced him. Gamma continued to support the new regime. The Russians did not trust the Polish Communists and liquidated or imprisoned many of them. Gamma became very frightened when they began arresting members of his group.

When Hitler attacked Russia, Gamma fled to Russia. There he and others formed the government that would rule Poland after the war. In 1944, Gamma entered Poland with the new Polish Army, then under Russian leadership. He had a Russian wife who was a soldier. One of the top priorities was to put the writers to work to gain control of the country, and Gamma wrote according to the socialist realism. He was sent to Krakow.

The writers there knew who Gamma was as the Soviets began to Establish their regime. Gamma had Milosz appointed as cultural attache to the United States.

Gamma wrote a novel and traveled through the West. He claimed that his career as a diplomat kept him too busy to write. Soon he was called back to Warsaw to help impose the socialist realism on the writers. His job was to make sure they conformed.

# Delta, the Troubadour

## Delta, the Troubadour Summary and Analysis

Delta was a famous poet in the first half of the twentieth century. He wrote unlike any other poet, due to his problem with alcoholism and would have made a good living if he didn't spend his money on alcohol. Many times he wrote his poems on the spot in coffee-houses for money. In one poem he has the unemployed selling butterflies at a ball. One characteristic of his poetry is that there was no sadness or despair in it, and it had never been political, but in 1937, everything changed when he became intensely nationalistic.

He was recruited into the army as a private when WWII began and captured by the Russians. Delta was turned over to the Germans and spent five years in a POW camp. In 1945, he was freed by British troops and went to France and Brussels where he supported himself by writing. Since he couldn't earn much, he returned to Poland where his wife had survived the war. He went to Krakow where his wife was and found a patron in the State. He resumed his writing.

His writing was not a favorite of the pure Marxists, but the Party felt Delta was needed at this stage in Poland. They weren't yet ready for serious writings according to the Method. When the time came, he became a serious writer who followed and promoted the Party line. Delta was given a Soviet passport and spent time in Moscow about which he wrote glowing reports. When the time came for socialist realism, his opponents began to move against him but they could prove nothing.

When the time came for writers to write in a prescribed manner, Delta began to have problems. Then the state hired him to translate *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Delta's existence becomes one of having work when he is in favor and being out of work when he is not in favor.



# Man, This Enemy

## Man, This Enemy Summary and Analysis

The Communists had to deal with each class as they established their system. The displaced propertied class were no problem because they would die off. The petty bourgeoisie were a different matter. These were the small merchants and craftsmen who were more ingrained in the society. Many small businesses were hidden. The long wait for goods and services in a people's democracy creates a demand for private goods and services. The biggest concern for the new regime are the peasants because they are so attached to the land. This group will require decades of education and Moscow requires quick compliance. There was always a fear that they would band together and cause trouble during the process of collectivization.

The working class was always a problem They now have norms to fill. The worker who doesn't cooperate finds he does not receive the training and courses or vacations that he wants. There is no unemployment in a people's democracy. The emphasis on rapid industrialization results in labor shortages and a lack of consumer goods. Most of what is produced flows to Russia. Workers do not dare complain about their living and working conditions. If they strike, they are arrested. In the Marxian framework, workers are the only class capable of any organized action so they are strictly controlled.

Workers are educated in Party dialectics and moved away from religious activities. Soon the workers sing the Party songs and recite the Party jargon. This is the purpose of the worker's clubs. Students are also educated along these lines. A new set of values is promoted. The more people are subjected to this indoctrination, the less the threat to the rules. Those who don't conform are considered to be rejects of society and reactionaries. The reactionary is considered to be mentally deficient since he cannot grasp the concepts of the dialectics.

Many of the Church's top thinkers and writers are won over by the Party. When this occurs, they stopped attracting the workers. The Party functions to take the place of the Church, which is its biggest enemy since it emphasizes individual merit instead of viewing things in terms of historical process. Many of the people's democracies had to tolerate the Church, even in a diminished form.

The proponents of Leninism-Stalinism will always have enemies in reactionaries, even if they rule the world. There will always be people who will not accept the doctrine. Anyone with less than one hundred percent acceptance is considered reactionary. In this world, the writer is expected to view reality in terms of the class struggle. Anything that is new must be identified with the proletariat and the Communist Party. The writer must conform.





# Chapter 9, The Lesson of the Baltics

## Chapter 9, The Lesson of the Baltics Summary and Analysis

In this chapter, Milosz focuses on Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Each has their own language and culture. They became independent countries after World War II and were agricultural countries with about six million people in 1939. They had no military. Under the terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop treaty, the Russians established military bases in these countries in 1939, and in 1940, took over the countries. The inhabitants now were citizens of the Soviet Union.

The Russians set up elections which consisted of their candidates only. If the people didn't vote, their passport wasn't stamped and they were considered enemies. There were mass deportations to labor camps. In 1941, the Nazis invaded and there were more arrests and deportations to labor camps, this time Nazi camps. The Nazis remained in control until 1944, when the Red Army captured the area. The Russians imposed collectivization of agriculture. There was a great deal of opposition from the prosperous farming economy. There were man-hunts and massacres. The first years of World War II peace were not peaceful for the people of the Baltic States. Foreigners were sent to take the place of the missing natives.

Since the Baltic States had a higher standard of living than that of the Soviet Union, its standard had to be lowered. Many were killed or sent into an exile from which they never returned. The class struggle was against the millions of small farmers and artisans who were considered to be the enemy of the new regime. The people lived in terror.

Against this background is the Revolutionary poetry, which preaches the virtues of the future. But eventually the poetry, like other forms of literature, are tested by reality. Much of the extolling of the glories of the future were written out of fear and denial of the present. The poetry and literature are artificial. The societies were based on fear, and literature was a way of overcoming this fear. This will eventually lead to the development of the new man that the Communists envisioned.

Nationalism is viewed as the enemy of the Soviets, and as such, it must be destroyed by any method. The Soviets felt that anything they did was justified from the perspective of historical necessity. The citizens learned to compromise in order to survive.

In terms of writers, those who seek truth are viewed as reactionaries and enemies of the proletariat. The people are conditioned to this point of view. Milosz existed in this regime even though he didn't agree with the goals or tactics.



# Characters

## Czeslav Milosz

Czeslav Milosz is a writer who is the author of this book. He was born in Vilna, which was a part of Poland but now is a part of Lithuania. He began his studies at the University in Vilna and completed them in Paris and then returned to Poland. He lived under regimes of capitalism, Nazism and socialism. The author says he could have chosen to leave Poland during the Nazi occupation, but he chose to stay and he does not regret his decision.

Milosz says he did not have any strong political preferences in those days. He did not believe in anti-Semitism so he probably leaned toward the left, but did not favor Russia. He worked as a free lance writer in Poland from 1945-1951. Milosz also served as a cultural attache in Washington and Paris. But he did not wholeheartedly accept socialism and eventually broke with Poland at the time when socialist realism was imposed. He could not accept the control and the giving up of his own morals, ethics and ability to engage in critical thinking. In the end, his hatred of tyranny won.

## Karl Marx

Karl Marx wrote Das Capital and used a method called dialectical materialism, which he borrowed from the German philosopher, Hegel, as a means of analyzing capitalism and showing how labor was exploited. He formulated no plans for the post-revolutionary society except what was given in the Communist Manifesto, which he wrote with Engels. The Soviet Union tried to design a system consistent with Marxian principles. The Soviet Union devoted all resources to the development of industry at the expense of consumer goods and promoted a society based on following the Method, or strict adherence to Party doctrine, even though there was nothing in the writings of Marx that recommended this practice.

## Beta

Beta is twenty years old in 1942 when he first meets Milosz. He was a poet who began writing during the war. Beta attended the underground university and performed odd jobs to support himself. His poetry reflected the realism of life in wartime Warsaw. In 1943, he was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to the concentration camp of Auschwitz and then to Dachau, where he was liberated by the Americans. After the war, he published his experiences in a series of stories. He lived in Munich for a while after being liberated but opted to return to Poland. Eventually he worked as a journalist for the socialist regime. He committed suicide.



## Gamma

Gamma is a character who came from the country around Vilna. His father, a farmer, was a retired Polish Army officer. His mother was Russian and raised him in the Orthodox faith. He became a Stalinist while at the University, was arrested, tried and acquitted. During World War II, he worked as a literary researcher. When Vilna was acquired by Lithuania, Gamma's parents and sisters were sent to forced labor camps, where his father died, but Gamma supported the new regime. He became an official of the new Polish government serving as an ambassador to a Western country and then was in charge of the Writer's Union.

## Delta

Delta was a poet. There isn't much known about his background since he changed it to fit the situation. He was knowledgeable of several different languages and had studied at the University. Delta had a problem with alcoholism, which accounted for the kind of poetry he wrote. He was known as the king of nonsense until he turned to nationalism. At the outbreak of war, he was a private who was captured by the Soviets but turned over to the Germans where he spent five years as a POW. When freed, he spends some time in Paris, then returns to Poland. From then on his career was on and off depending on if he was in favor or not.

## Alpha

Alpha is the name Milosz gives to a writer of prose. He was a friend of the author's. Before World War II, Alpha had his articles published in a weekly right-wing publication in Warsaw. It published his first novel in serial form, and the novel was later published as a book. Alpha's interest was tragic moral conflicts. His first novel brought him recognition as the most gifted Catholic writer in Poland. After the war, he continued to write, accepting the Method and doctrines of the New Faith.

## Stanislaw Ignacy Witiewicz

Witkiewicz is a writer of the 1930s. He wrote the two volume work called *Insatiability*, which basically describes how people took Murti-Bing pills to make themselves happy and give them some meaning in their lives. But they found that they weren't really happy because they still carried their past with them. All the characters who accepted Murti-Bingism become schizophrenic in the end.



## **Josef Stalin**

Stalin was the leader of the Russian Communist Party and of Russia during World War II and during the period of acquisition of the Eastern European countries. His brand of dictatorship was imposed on Poland and the other Eastern European countries.

## **Georg Hegel**

Hegel is a German philosopher who developed the concept of dialectical materialism, on which Marxism is based.

## **Vladmir Lenin**

Lenin was one of the early proponents of the Russian Communist Party. He formulated many of the rules with Stalin.



# Objects/Places

## Warsaw

Warsaw is the capital of Poland, a country in Eastern Europe.

## Moscow

Moscow is the capital of the Soviet Union and the center of power for the Eastern European countries.

## Cracow or Krakow

Cracow is the second largest city in Poland.

## Auschwitz

Auschwitz is a Nazi concentration camp.

## Dachau

Dachau is a Nazi concentration camp.

## Vilna

Vilna is a city in what is now Lithuania. The city was once a part of Poland.

## Paris

Paris, France is where Milosz completed his studies.

## The Baltics

The Baltics are a group of countries surrounding the Baltic Sea. They are Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia.



## **Eastern and Central Europe**

This is an area of Europe of the countries that border the Soviet Union. They were also known as the Soviet bloc countries.

### **London**

London is the capitol of England, where a Polish government in exile resided during World War II.

### **Estonia**

Estonia is a Baltic state that became a part of the Soviet Union.

### **Latvia**

Latvia is a Baltic state that became a part of the Soviet Union.



# Themes

## Suppression of Individualism

One of the underlying themes of the book is the suppression of individualism. This was a known part of the Soviet model, and as a result there was intense resentment on the part of the people who had their creativity and individualism suppressed. This is obvious on the part of the author. Free thinking was not encouraged or tolerated in the people's democracies. The free thinker was considered a reactionary and an enemy of the proletariat. He was considered to have mental problems and was treated as an outcast.

Writers were forced to write according to a prescribed method. They could not write about whatever they wanted in whatever way they wanted. The class struggle had to be promoted and portrayed in the proper way. This is why the beauty and the creativity of art and literature were destroyed by the Soviet model. Many writers chose careers in academia so they could still have access to the literature of the past and still write about it, even though they also had to follow the Party line.

The Soviet methodology was based on the suppression of the individual for the good of all. It did away with critical thinking and creativity. The result was much internal conflict for writers. The writer had to forgo his own values to promote the Party line. Those who did so were employed as writers. Those who would not compromise their own values and adhere to the method did not work as writers, and if they were too critical and vocal, they found their way to the labor camps of the Gulag.

## Emphasis on Dialectics

Another underlying theme of the book is the emphasis on dialectics. This is a term that represents the conflicts in a society and how they interact to create a new concept. The dialectical process originated with the German philosopher Hegel. It was adopted by Marx, who used it to explain history and class conflict within capitalism. Marx's writings were an analysis of capitalism, not a blueprint for a socialist society. Creating a blueprint for socialism was left to those who came after him, mainly during the regime of Stalin.

Marx viewed concepts like the exploitation of the proletariat and class struggle within the framework of history, which is why the terms historical process and historical necessity are used so often throughout the book. The Stalinist regime developed the Method or rules which they thought were consistent with Marxian doctrine. These were the rules, or Method, that writers like Milosz, Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Delta were expected to conform to in their writings. They were required to portray the class struggle in the accepted way. The result was internal conflict within the writer who was expected to give up his own individualism, creativity and critical thinking in order to follow the Party line. Some were able to do it. Others were not.



## Life Under an Oppressive Regime

The third theme of the book is life under an oppressive regime. Even though the main thrust of the book concerns life in the socialism of the people's democracies, the author and others also lived under the oppression and occupation of Nazi Germany. By definition of the term oppressive regime, the individual loses his basic freedoms. This was the result under both Nazism and socialism, and it is obvious throughout the book, but especially emphasized in the last two chapters.

Milosz was born in Vilna, which was a part of Poland at the time and later became a part of Lithuania. The Baltic states were prosperous agricultural economies until they were taken over by the Soviets. Before they could establish themselves, the Nazis invaded bringing five years of oppression, forced labor camps and concentration camps for the Jews. After the war Poland became a part of the Soviet Union, which meant the seizure of property and the collectivization of agriculture. Private businesses and free thinking came to an end. Hundreds of thousands were sent to forced labor camps and many were exterminated. Workers had to be re-educated according to dialectics. They lived in a society based on fear where people were encouraged to inform on each other. There was no such thing as freedom of speech or expression. There was no gay laughter or spontaneity. Life, in many ways, was bleak for citizens who lived in these regimes.



# Style

## Perspective

The book is written in a mixture of first and third person perspective with the narrator being the author, Czeslaw Milosz. The author is writing from his first-hand knowledge and events of life in the Soviet bloc countries. As a writer, he understands the process that took place in other writers under a regime that suppresses literary creativity and forces a style of writing that must conform to the Method, or Party line. If a writer wants to keep working at his chosen occupation and be published, he must write in the approved manner that supports the class struggle and Party doctrine.

Since the author experienced the conflicts and the pressures of writing in a socialist regime, the use of the first person is more than appropriate for this kind of book. The author, as the narrator provides all the necessary background about history, events and doctrine to provide the readers with a glimpse into what it is like to live and write in the people's democracies. Because he has lived the experience, he can adequately explain the turmoil of the four authors, Alpha, beta, Gamma and Delta and why they made the choices that they made and consequently what price they paid.

Usually, the first person is considered to be limiting for the reader because the knowledge of the reader is limited to events that occur in the presence of the narrator. But it works well for this kind of book, with the author interjecting his own views and opinions at various points in the book. In many ways, the author is telling his own story as well as the story of other writers. He has lived through the experience and knows what it is like.

## Tone

The tone of the book is set by the author and is not entirely objective. He tells of life under a socialist regime and what it is like for the writer and other people. It is clear he did not favor the suppression of creativity and the kind of writing and art that resulted from adherence to the Method. Portraying everything in terms of the class struggle and Marxian doctrine does away with the beauty of art and literature, which is the author's point of view.

The author presents the facts of history for what happened in Poland and the Baltic States. He also points out that he doesn't have to resort to history books because he, along with people he knows, were there. He talks about the liquidations, seizures of property and forced labor camps and how they are consistent with the Stalinist philosophy that the ends justifies the means. He also raises ethical and moral questions about the Soviet methodology and the Method. It was a society based on fear as people were encouraged to inform on one another. He is just as critical of Nazism, since he also lived under that regime.



In raising these moral and ethical issues regarding writers and their conformance to dialectics, he raises the issue of whether or not they sold themselves. If they did, they did it as a means of survival as not following the Party line meant not to write. The tone of the book is the result of the author's experiences under socialism and his own disagreements with and dislike of its methodology.

## Structure

The structure of the book is very simple: there is a Prologue and nine chapters, each with a title. The reader must be sure to read the Prologue because it provides much information about the author and his reasons for writing the book. In it, he talks about his life and experiences as he does in other parts of the book. It is the one place in the book where the readers gets to know the author and his views of his experiences under Nazism and socialism.

The nine chapters of the book are divided into clearly-defined topics, each contributing to the whole of the book. The chapter on Murti-Bing uses a fantasy literature piece to draw analogies to life in a Stalinist regime. The second chapter explains why it was hopeless to look to the West for help because they did not understand the gravity of the situation. The chapter on Ketman again uses an analogy with Arab literature to explain how people survived life in the people's democracy. The next four chapters on Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Delta present the lives of four writers and the choices they made. Chapter Eight discusses life in general under socialism and the last chapter relates the tragedy of the Baltic States.

The book is well written and well structured. There are many words that the reader may want to look up, as well as the use of Marxian and Soviet jargon. There are also some foreign language terms. It helps if the reader is familiar with Marxian terminology, but the reader will still be able to grasp the meaning of the book without this knowledge. The book, which was translated from Polish, does not contain any awkward sentence structures and the reader would not know the book is a translation if he hadn't been told.

## Quotes

"If I should try to describe the reasons why a man becomes a revolutionary I would be neither eloquent nor restrained enough. I admit that I have too much admiration for those who fight evil, whether their choice of ends and means be right or wrong. I draw the line, however, at those intellectuals who adapt themselves, although the fact that they are adapted and not genuine revolutionaries in no way diminishes their newly acquired zeal and enthusiasm." (Chapter 1, pg. 6-7)

"The youngest generation in Eastern Europe, raised in the worship of Russia, is beginning to believe that she is taking the foremost place in the realm of science and technology. The older people consider such a belief absurd; but, given her untapped natural resources, a planned economy and the subsequent ability to allocate unlimited sums of money to scientific research and experimentation, they feel she may be well on the way toward supremacy". (Chapter 2, pg. 34)

"This constitutes one step in the direction of doubt about the dialectical method itself. Is it not based at times on an interpretation of signs in nature and in history where the interpreter carefully placed there himself? Dialectics is the 'logic of contradictions' applicable, according to the wise men, to those cases where formal logic is inadequate, namely to phenomena in motion. Because human concepts as well as the phenomena observed by men are in motion, contradictions contained in the concepts are but reflections, or translations into the language of thought, of those contradictions which are contained in the phenomena." (Chapter 2, pg. 49-50)

"The New Faith is a Russian creation, and the Russian intelligentsia which shaped it had developed the deepest contempt for all art that does not serve social ends directly." (Chapter 3, pg. 74)

"In short, Ketman means self-realization against something. He who practices Ketman suffers because of the obstacles he meets; but if these obstacles were suddenly to be removed, he would find himself in a void which might perhaps prove much more painful. Internal revolt is sometimes essential to spiritual health, and can create a particular form of happiness. What can be said openly is often much less interesting than the emotional magic of defending one's private sanctuary. For most people the necessity of living in constant tension and watchfulness is a torture, but many intellectuals accept this necessity with masochistic pleasure." (Chapter 3, pg. 80)

"It is not my place to judge. I myself traveled the same road of seeming inevitability. In fleeing I trampled on many values that may determine the worth of a man. So I judge myself severely though my sins are not the same as his. Perhaps the difference in our destinies lay in a minute disparity in our reactions when we visited the ruins of Warsaw or gazed out the window at the prisoners. It felt that I could not write of these things unless I wrote the whole truth, not just a part." (Chapter 4, pg. 109)



"The essential difference between the great writers who criticized the political institutions of their day and people of Beta's type seems to lie in the total non-conformity of the former. They acted in opposition to their environment; he, writing, listened for the applause of his Party comrades." (Chapter 5, pg. 130)

"But Communist intellectuals had too much work before them to have time to brood over the misfortunes of Warsaw. First of all, they had to set the printing presses into motion. Because Communism recognizes that rule over men's minds is the key to rule over an entire country, the word is the cornerstone of this system. Gamma became one of the chief press organizers in the city of Lublin." (Chapter 6, pg. 161)

"Thus he entered the realm of living shadows. Nothing should be wasted, however, in a socialist economy. Men who have fulfilled their role can find work enough for their capacities." (Chapter 7, pg. 190)

"Central and Eastern Europe produce in order to raise the military and economic potential of the Center and to compensate for the industrial backwardness of Russia. Workers and their needs have no influence on production plans. Most of the good produced ebb away to the East." (Chapter 8, pg. 196)

"Who is the reactionary? Everyone who opposes the inevitable historical processes, i.e., the Politburo police. The thesis of the 'sin of the reactionary' is argued very cleverly: every perception is 'oriented,' i.e., at the very moment of perceiving we introduce our ideas into the material of our observations; only he sees reality truly who evaluates it in terms of the interests of the class that is the lever of the future, i.e. the proletariat. The writings of Lenin and Stalin teach us what the interests of the proletariat are. Whoever sees reality otherwise than as the proletariat sees it falsely; in other words, his picture of reality is deformed by the pressure of the interests of classes that are backward and so destined to disappear. whoever sees the world falsely necessarily acts badly; whoever acts badly is a bad man; therefore the reactionary is a bad man, and one should not feel sorry for him." (Chapter 8, pg. 209)

"There must be, after all, some standard one dare not destroy lest the fruits of tomorrow prove to be rotten." (Chapter 9, pg. 225)

"The revolution of today cannot content itself with a moment of terror, necessary to the consolidation of the new power; the class struggle must continue until the economic bases for opposition have been destroyed. The class enemy consists of the millions of small producers, that is, of the peasants and artisans, as well as small businessmen. Their steady resistance, and the obstinacy with which they seize every opportunity to revive the old economic order, demand decisive punitive measures." (Chapter 9, pg. 235)

## Topics for Discussion

What is Murti-Bingism? What analogy is Milosz drawing in using this idea?

Explain what Ketman is and why it was necessary for survival in the Soviet dominated societies.

Explain what is meant by the Method or dialectics.

Why did the Soviets consider the writers to be such an important group?

Explain how Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Delta adapted to the new regimes.

Why is the Catholic Church the biggest enemy of the people's democracies?

Why is the title, The Captive Mind, an apt title for this book?