

The First Circle Short Guide

The First Circle by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

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Characters

The First Circle is a populous novel, crowded with zeks (prisoners), Party functionaries, and ordinary citizens whose lives become intertwined within a Mavrino, sharashka (special prison) which uses convicted engineers for research. The novel weaves a rich tapestry as Solzhenitsyn attentively develops many detailed characters.

Two of them emerge as central characters, one inside the first circle of the prison, and the other inside the first circles of Party leadership and Soviet family life.

Gleb Nerzhin is a thirty-one-year-old mathematician and zek at Mavrino. Life in the sharashka surpasses life at slave labor, but Nerzhin fears he pays too high a moral price by cooperating with the government. Various options available to Gleb are embodied in his fellow zeks. Lev Rubin remains a dedicated Communist despite imprisonment on false charges. Convinced that the system will someday correct its mistake, Rubin ceaselessly petitions Soviet courts for release. Dmitri Sologdin has no such naive belief. Accepting the inevitability of serving his full sentence, Sologdin cooperates with authorities. He is content to pass his time incarcerated but comfortable. Rushka Doronin, on the other hand, refuses to cooperate; he prefers to fight the system, finding its power a stimulating challenge. Doronin constantly plots to expose informants among the zeks and to escape. Spiridon Yegorov attempts to transcend the system he can neither work with nor flee from. He obeys when forced, accepts punishment stoically, and clings to the life-giving memories of his village, his family, and his work upon the land. Rather than betray others or surrender his dignity, Spiridon would return to the hell of the camps. In the end, Gleb chooses Spiridon's path.

The primary character outside Mavrino is Innokenty Volodin, about Nerzhin's age, a diplomat married to a state prosecutor's daughter. Volodin's life is safe and serene as long as he does not deviate from Party policies or ask embarrassing questions. Innokenty's pleasant life is upset when he learns that a prominent Russian doctor will be arrested for a harmless contact with Western physicians. Troubled by the injustice, Innokenty attempts a warning. His phone call is overheard by the secret police who eventually identify and arrest him. Quickly Innokenty's naivete is shattered. The police expose him to the full humiliation of arrest and interrogation. Within days he runs the gamut of options: to cooperate cowardly, resist uselessly, or transcend stoically. When Innokenty realizes that no choice will save him physically, he must decide which one will save him spiritually.

Social Concerns

Like *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1963), *The First Circle* takes place in a Siberian labor camp. This camp, Mavrino, is different: It is a sharashka (literally "a sinister place"), a special facility where inmates with engineering or scientific skills work on secret research projects.

Mavrino sits on the outskirts of Moscow. Its prisoners have the occasional chance to visit with family, and they work daily beside free employees. They interact with nearby government agencies overseeing the research. The novel juxtaposes prison society and Soviet society to more closely observe the authoritarian mentality that incarcerates innocent people. It studies the stress of enduring imprisonment, either the comfortable imprisonment of the sharashka's inhabitants or the invisible imprisonment of all Soviet citizens.

Techniques

The First Circle is narrated by an omniscient third-person narrator aware of each character's history, thoughts, and sensations. Like *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, this novel occurs over a short time: the weekend of December 24-26, 1949. At first the book recounts three separate stories: the zeks' life at Mavrino, Innokenty's warning phone call, and the security forces' attempts to track down the telephone traitor. Eventually these plots come together: Teams of zeks work on rival voice identification systems as the fate of Stalin's lieutenants — as well as of Innokenty — depends on which team succeeds.

Although the plots intersect, none of the important characters interact. This structure creates the "polyphonic novel" in which the novelist creates several three-dimensional characters independently. Because their paths do not cross directly, they are equals. They are not subordinated to each other as protagonist, antagonist, or foil.

Most of the novel is conversation, debate, and interior monologue. Solzhenitsyn pays little attention to setting or action. The most gripping passages are the scenes of Stalin's grim chats with his henchmen, a philosophical argument among zeks, and a peasant's memory of his family's struggle to survive the German invasion.



Themes

The title suggests the major themes of the novel, deriving from the epic spiritual poem of the medieval Italian poet Dante, *The Divine Comedy* (c.1320), whose hero visits Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. Dante's hell is a tapering funnel of ten circles or levels. Its first circle, the abode of good pagans, lacks the fiery tortures of the other nine circles which entrap various kinds of sinners. Mavrino is the first circle of the hell of the labor camp system, inhabited by zeks leading relatively easy lives in exchange for being good prisoners and cooperating with the State.

The title also connotes the first circle of the Communist Party leadership, General Secretary Josef Stalin and his chief lieutenants. This circle is not as far removed from Hell as power and privileges suggest. One false step by a lieutenant — an unfulfilled assignment, a hint of ingratitude — sends him plunging down into the camp system.

This circle is also a prison of its own: For safety, Stalin lives in a small bunker encased by iron walls, as powerless to get out as potential assassins are to get in.

A third connotation of the title is the first circle of any individual, the family circle. As long as a Soviet citizen avoids prison, life is good in this circle.

Yet if any family member plunges into a sharashka (or worse), the bonds of blood or marriage torture the imprisoned and the free alike. Like life in the first circle of the party, life in the family can be materially and spiritually pleasant but precarious.

The ultimate implication of the title is that all elements of Soviet society are perched dangerously on the rim of the infernal camp system, the notorious Gulag.

Adaptations

Polish director Aleksandr Ford made a film of *The First Circle* in 1972. Faithful to the book, the movie builds upon the conversations and debates of the characters. Most reviewers found the film too "talky" as a result, and it never achieved popular success. The plight of the Mavrino zeks symbolized the situation of many intellectuals under the Soviet regime: They could savor the good life as long as they pleased their jailers. Ford headed the Polish film industry under Soviet control for almost two decades before emigrating to Western Europe. Solzhenitsyn thought the film poorly made.



Key Questions

1. Solzhenitsyn takes the novel's title from Canto IV of Dante's *The Inferno*, where the first circle is Limbo. Read the canto and describe Limbo physically and spiritually.
2. How does a sharashka differ from a penal labor camp like the one in *Ivan Denisovich*?
3. How is the sharashka an image of all Soviet society?
4. Each chapter possesses an intriguing title. Describe how a title creates anticipation for the narrative to follow.
5. The chapter at the middle of the novel is entitled "The Ark." Describe how it forms a pivot (or turning point) for the plot.
6. Chapters 18-21 present an extended portrait of Josef Stalin. How has Stalin made Russia into his own image and likeness?
7. The novel contains both fictional characters and historical personages. What are the advantages and the disadvantages — or opportunities and limitations — of mixing them in a novel?
8. Gleb Nerzhin, a reflective man by nature, is generally considered to be Solzhenitsyn's alter ego and a spokesman for the author's ideas. What are the similarities in their experiences that have brought them into the prison system? What are the ideas that Nerzhin wrestles with the most?
9. Innokenty lived an unreflective life until his friend is in danger. What prompts Volodin to risk his life and fortune to warn a friend? Is his gesture futile or heroic?
10. Spiridon lives an unreflective but good life. What is the basis of his moral strength?

Literary Precedents

The term "polyphonic" was first coined to describe Dostoevsky's novels, like *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), which follow several protagonists through multiple narrative viewpoints.

Dostoevsky's technique created long and complex novels. Like Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn needs several hundred pages to explore his numerous characters and investigate multiple themes.

The First Circle also recalls the lengthy novels of Leo Tolstoy. In *Anna Karenina* (1877), for instance, Tolstoy posits several protagonists who move in distinct worlds and whose stories develop separately. Like Tolstoy, Solzhenitsyn senses the critical influence of social environment upon character.

The novels of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Solzhenitsyn have in common a serious, philosophic purpose. These novelists share a tragic vision of human life. Each sees the baleful effects of modern physical environment and intellectual milieu upon humanity's spiritual nature. The soul's effort to live with dignity and autonomy is constantly undercut by the selfish flesh, the confused intellect, and the sinful world.

Related Titles

Candle in the Wind (1973) is also set in a research facility, although this one has an unspecified, international location. The scientists here are pursuing biocybernetics, the study of relaxation techniques for individuals under great stress. While such research may seem beneficent to Westerners, in the Soviet context it is fraught with danger. Like the research in *The First Circle*, biocybernetics has the potential to turn people into robots and make them easier for the government to control. The play depicts the spiritual struggle of Alex, the project mathematician. Freed from prison after a long but unjust sentence, Alex is attracted to Alda, a woman of deep spirituality whose soul is tormented by the life in a materialistic, technocratic society. Alex persuades her to undergo a "neurostabilization" treatment to help her be happy. To his dismay Alex finds that the treatment kills Alda's capacity for emotional experience. So Alex refuses to participate even as his fellow scientists see in the development of a powerful treatment the path to a successful career in the state's scientific elite.



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