The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956 Study Guide

The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956 by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956 by Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn describes in detail the physical and psychological horrors inflicted on millions of political prisoners in the Soviet era.

Soviet State Security prefers to arrest people when they are disoriented, preferably at night using massive force, but one never knows who one's captor will be, when or where it will happen. However it does, one enters a great human "sewage disposal system." There have been various waves of arrests, but those in 1929/30 and 1944-46 are usually overlooked in light of Khrushchev's revelations about "abuses of the cult" and the purges of 1937/38. Neither the 15 million peasants who disappear in 1929/30 nor the entire nations and POWs that vanish 1944-46 leave written records, but those who perish in the era of the great show trials leave plenty.

After a brutalizing arrest comes a more brutalizing interrogation, which is not intended to determine guilt or innocence, but to prepare the captive for inevitable incarceration. The inflictors of physical and mental torture are known as "Bluecaps." Except for the splash of color that dates back to Tsarist security police, they have nothing in common. Their brutality harkens back to the Inquisition and shares the same kind of ideological focus to achieve desired results. After being disoriented and broken in solitary confinement, prisoners are happy to enter their first cell, thereafter remembered as their "First Love." Here friendships are formed, stories heard, and survival skills learned. In the spring of 1945, as the Red Army crushes the Nazi empire, prisoners hope for amnesty, but instead, POWs and émigrés pour into the Gulag system.

Freed of Western concepts of justice and truth, Soviet law struggles to find a proper socialist footing in which motive and action are equally criminal. OSO tribunals bypass formal trials to expedite getting political prisoners into the system—or shooting them. The Criminal Code of 1926 makes "big, coordinated, well-organized" show trials possible, and Vyshinsky and Krylenko deal with "wrecking" engineers, churchmen, non-Bolshevik rivals, and finally Stalin's real and perceived enemies by purging the Communist Party. Social and political expediency alone determine guilt. Capital punishment experiences ups and downs, but is exponentially more common than under the Tsars—some 1.7 million executions by 1 Jan. 1939. After the war, Stalin leans towards more socially useful 25-year sentences. Early in the Soviet era, the prisons that are emptied of political prisons in 1917 re-fill with inmates who know the humane pre-revolutionary "prison regime" and battle to keep its privileges. Allowing themselves to be crushed dooms all later political prisoners to the horrors of the Gulag, which begins in 1923, as former monasteries in the isolated Solovetsky Islands on the White Sea become camps.

The Gulag is in perpetual motion, as millions of inmates are whisked about in Black Marias and "Stolypin" train cars between interrogation and staging for transportation to a camp. Red cattle trains crisscross the USSR bringing unfortunates to camps—or they arrive, equally miserable, by water or on foot. The 80% given general assignment jobs

inevitably perish. Common criminals prey on the naïve political prisoners. Still, zeks enjoy each other's company and stories, as a postwar generation emerges, unwilling to be swallowed in the system.

Part 1, Chapter 1

Part 1, Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

"Arrest" describes the many ways in which arrests occur in the USSR and how the author falls into the "clandestine Archipelago." The Gulag is always close at hand, unnoticed until one is grabbed. For the first day, one hopes they will fix the mistake. Those left behind remember the insolent invasion with cowed civilians forced to witness. Relatives frantically pack supplies, the victim is hauled away, and the apartment is ransacked. After half a year or more, relatives learn the victim has no right to "correspond"—meaning he or she has been shot.

Every machine reaches the point of overload, and this occurs in the Gulag in 1945-46, as trainloads of victims pour in from Europe. Some delude themselves that they are too valuable to be arrested, but most assume they will be taken. Few run and fewer commit suicide. The majority goes along quietly, assuming the error will be set straight and suspecting those around them are guilty of something. Few are inwardly prepared for what they endure.

Solzhenitsyn has the chance to cry out, but does not. Three "SMERSH bums" escort him to Moscow as they carry loot home from Germany. Not knowing the city, they need him to find Lubyanka Prison. Solzhenitsyn already knows about the system and that he will get a "tenner"—a ten-year sentence, but for four days he travels ostensibly as a free man, keeping silent even in the crowded Muscovite stations, hoping one day to cry out to 200 million. His arrest is unemotional, because he is torn away not from family but from command of an artillery battery in the last months of the war.

Part 1, Chapter 2

Part 1, Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

From the start, it is clear that Russia is not suited for socialism. The Cadet Party (Constitutional Democrats), deemed by the tsar as the most dangerous revolutionaries, are evaluated similarly by the Bolsheviks and members arrested. Prisons fill with the wealthy and prominent, officers, and former officials. Foreseeing anarchy, Lenin demands "merciless suppression" and purging of "harmful insects," including class enemies, malingerers, and intellectuals. This "hygienic purge" would have been impossible had the Soviets not adopted the new form of "extrajudicial reprisal" carried out by the "Sentinel of the Revolution," the Cheka, the first body in history to handle in total investigation, arrest, interrogation, prosecution, trial, and execution.

In 1918, the Soviets ransack the churches to speed their cultural victory. Many of those who protest are eliminated on the spot and the rest arrested. In 1919, returning officers of the Russian Expeditionary Force are arrested, and people whose names are on lists are shot. Being "close to the Cadets" is fatal to 80% of the intelligentsia: those in science, university, art, literature, and engineering. In May 1920, the Central Committee's decree on "Subversive Activity in the Rear" results in widespread arrests. Until 1922 there is no criminal code, so infallible revolutionary justice guides the purging. Habitual criminals and non-political offenders also fill the system and eventually economic crimes—particularly speculation—take on a political character. Many in later generations look on the 20s as a holiday of freedom, but non-Party students who are arrested for demanding autonomy, right of assembly, and the dropping of political indoctrination would disagree.

While many look back on 1927 as a "careless, well-fed year," it is a tense time as worldwide revolution is anticipated. Poland averts war by apologizing for the assassination of the Soviet ambassador, but the "Voikov draft" (named after him) begins, with surviving "former people" being arrested. A new term is invented, "social prophylaxis," for the removal of any "unreliable fellow travelers" before war erupts. In Moscow, the terror goes block-by-block and the prisons are clogged.

As economic planning proliferates, overlaps, and conflicts, engineers are seen as "wreckers" and "limiters" in a host of industries, some pretending to be devoted to the new economy. In 1931, Stalin finally ends the destruction of the technical elite and defendants are freed. In 1931, Stalin also reverses himself, ending prosecutions of the Mensheviks and 200,000-member Working Peasants Party (TKP), perhaps figuring everyone is about to starve anyway. In 1927-29, thousands of Trotskyites are tried with the approval of other parties whose time is coming. Beginning in 1928, the NEPmen are taxed to the point of bankruptcy, arrested for that crime, and have their property confiscated.

A false myth says only "big Communists" suffer in 1937, while the hordes are diverse, being produced under geographic quotas. When Tashkent falls short of quota, they scour surrounding areas, reclassify normal offenders. Among those seized are Soviet spies lured home, employees of the Chinese Eastern Railroad and their families, exiled Koreans, Leningrad Estonians, and Latvian Chekists. Academics, schoolteachers, and Soviet-trained engineers are weeded out.

By the autumn of 1941, the defenders are encircled. As they fight their way out, they are interrogated. Some return to duty but others are sentenced as traitors. Since someone other than Stalin must be accountable for the retreat, some 50 generals are transported. Punishment is meted out to those who remain in Moscow and those who evacuate but talk about the horrors or praise German technology. From 1943, all civilians freed from occupation are liable for tenners but only a small number go, lest the countryside be depopulated. Those conscripted as Nazi slaves or otherwise get a taste for Western life —and talk about it—are punished stiffly.

The Army helps whisk off Kalmyks, Chechens, Ingush, and Balkars in 1943 and Crimean Tatars in 1944. Select German war criminals go to the Gulag, Japanese POWs go to construction projects in Siberia and Central Asia, and elderly Russian émigrés are dragged off from the Balkans and Central Europe, with others from Manchuria. The Allies forcibly repatriate a million émigrés, the Red Army eliminates nationalist Poles, Romanians, Hungarians, and Ukrainians, and Soviet girls who date foreigners and the children of refugees from the Spanish Civil War are "socially dangerous." In 1947, a brief reverse wave of clergy revives the church.

In 1948/49, survivors step into freedom and are re-arrested. Knowing the system, "the repeaters" do not resist. The Organs finds children of Stalin's enemies, purged commanders, alleged spies, believers, geneticists, "thinking people" not properly afraid of the West, and Ukrainians suspected of supporting partisans. The standard Stalinist sentence is a quarter; tenners are for juveniles. Jews get a taste of Stalin's mania in the "doctor's case" and a great massacre appears likely had the dictator not died.

Part 1, Chapter 3

Part 1, Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

As early as 1921, interrogations take place at night, shining car lights in prisoners' faces, changing cells from freezing to stifling, cooking people in airtight cells, and burning them with cigarettes. If charges must be brought, torture is inevitable and the more drastic the charge, the more ferocious the interrogation. There are at least 31 useful methods. Solzhenitsyn knows none of this in February 1945, when he and a fellow officer are arrested for stupidly joking about Stalin while corresponding at the front. Solzhenitsyn acts naïve, humble, and honest to keep the interrogator from examining his handwritten notebooks, which contain everything he has heard during the war—easily taken out of context to condemn friends. To prevent this, Solzhenitsyn repents abjectly.

Interrogators are themselves not trusted and often drag in a defendant as a cover for personal business. Prosecutors must review interrogations continuously to see that procedures are being followed, and facing the prosecutor personally usually means the questioning is nearly over. When he undergoes his "206" procedure in May, the final review before signing the indictment, Solzhenitsyn sees a printed text stating he has the right to complain in writing about procedural errors. He initially refuses to sign, but figures that starting the procedure over is a fate worse than prison. He is not told that that Section 11 consigns him to hard labor and "eternal exile" after "liberation."

Part 1, Chapter 4

Part 1, Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

"The Bluecaps" examines the psychology of the Organs who, in continuity with Tsarist political police, wear the color of heaven to cover their black deeds. Solzhenitsyn recalls his third year in university, 1938, when the Komsomol Committee summons students to enter NKVD school and serve the Motherland. When SMERSH strips him of his officer's insignia and march him to headquarters in the company of six former POWs and a German civilian, Solzhenitsyn has the German carry his suitcase, for he is an officer. When the German tires, the others without being asked and without complaint take turns. Men stare with malice at his uniform, relishing his fall and calling for his death, assuming he is a "Vlasov bastard" (traitor). Solzhenitsyn smiles, infuriating them, knowing is innocent of crimes, having understood Stalin's evil secrets and wanting to change Russian life. Solzhenitsyn now imagines how much more those with blue shoulder boards feel entitled as the "salt of the earth," and wonders what he would have been like after NKVD school.

It is amazing that Russian Security forces have for 200 years used the "color of the heavens" in their uniforms to cover black deeds. One might prefer to think that such people cannot exist and that Shakespeare, Schiller, and Dickens inflate evil in their writings, but this is not so. To do evil, human beings must justify their actions. Shakespeare's evildoers simply lack the ideology that fuels the Inquisition, Imperialism, Nazism, Jacobins, and the Archipelago. Physics provides examples of "threshold magnitudes" (e.g., photoelectric effects and the liquefaction of oxygen), to which human morality may have analogous points at which evil becomes so dense or extreme that the evildoer cannot return to humanity.

Part 1, Chapter 5

Part 1, Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

After "dueling" with his interrogator for four days, Solzhenitsyn is taken to Cell 67. Solzhenitsyn thinks of prison not as an abyss, but as an important turning point in his life. Sixteen-hour days in the cell contain no events worthy of note but pass too quickly nonetheless. The first two hours are the hardest when investigators are still asleep but the turnkeys are making sure prisoners jump off their cots, make them, and sit down to think about their ruined lives. Prisoners may also write applications and petitions twice a month. Returning from walks is like being arrested again. It and watching a prisoner gobble up food parcels from outside—or reading about food in Gogol—require self-control. Lunch, consisting of soup and gruel, arrives with "cheery clatter."

It takes time before new inmates' stomachs shrink and they get used to being chronically famished. At Lubyanka those who have signed depositions enjoy a two-hour rest after lunch. Dinner is more gruel, the last food until morning, followed by the toilet visit for which they yearn all day. Evenings they argue, read, or play chess. After the evening check-up and confiscation of glasses, inmates fight fear of interrogation. As the war ends, blackout shades come down, interrogators celebrate, prisoners on 9 May receive dinner at the same time as lunch, hear 31- and 40-gun salutes, watch fireworks —and know the victory has nothing to do with them.

Part 1, Chapter 6

Part 1, Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

Governments imprison or kill people not for what have they done, but to keep them from doing something else—in the POWs' case: talking about Europe. Survivors must have collaborated to some degree, so the punishment for rotting in camp and for working in one's profession in captivity are identical: a tenner plus five-year "muzzling." Those who have never starved cannot understand the appeal of a bellyful of food at the price of joining a White battalion or working in construction.

In the spring of 1945, Solzhenitsyn studies émigrés old and young attentively. Seeing two tsarist officers, Capt. Borsch and Col. Mariyushkin, looking during medical examinations like living mummies, Solzhenitsyn is amazed to hear they are being interrogated about struggles in 1919. Solzhenitsyn becomes friends at Butyrki with an émigré his own age, Igor Tronko. Tall and emaciated, they walk together like old men and discuss their parallel lives. He pictures members of his generation who grow up outside the USSR, in meager circumstances but still well educated, not knowing fear or repression or becoming dissipated like most European youth. Wherever they live, they look to Russia as their Motherland, and are dismayed at the distortions in the small amount of Soviet literature that reaches them. In 1941, they are ready to return home and join the Red Army, having broken with the old White leadership over prejudging the USSR. Solzhenitsyn sees in Tronko that Russia loses much spiritual power when the émigrés flee. Russian culture needs the two streams to come together again and dreams of living to see it.

Part 1, Chapter 7

Part 1, Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

A typical military case occurs in Mongolia in 1941 when a medical assistant realizes the Organs must justify its existence. He asks a lieutenant (his love rival) loaded questions: why is the Army retreating from the Germans and will the Allies help? The positive answers are turned into defeatism in a denunciation. Chulpenyev is arrested, held a month, convicted, and Lozovsky still believing it matters, explains his answers, refuses to incriminate anyone, and asks to be shot to prove his patriotism—along with his accuser. He is rubber-stamped a tenner plus three years' disenfranchisement.

Everyone knows it is a farce but pretends to be serious. A transit guard asks a prisoner why he gets 25 years and, receiving the expected answer, corrects him: the sentence for "nothing" is ten years. Trials last as long as it takes to walk in and out, unless a judge feels like giving "a psychological twist." Speaking in one's own defense brings a worse sentence and earns beatings for other prisoners to head off further defiance. In 1963, Solzhenitsyn goes to that courtroom to confront the 70-member Military Collegium of the Supreme Court. They claim that those who put millions away have retired or been removed. Khrushchev abandons his reprisals before they can harm the system. The judges are human, smiling, well-intentioned, and there is not enough time to collect all the stories the judges would have told. Clearly, courts and prosecutor's offices have been State Security pawns. They talk about how Ivan Denisovich eases their consciences—by portraying the camps as less evil than they know them to be. Solzhenitsyn hopes the "tiny droplet of truth" will become a waterfall.

Part 1, Chapters 8-9

Part 1, Chapters 8-9 Summary and Analysis

"The Law as a Child" examines how the Soviet legal system works in the early revolutionary years, a subject largely forgotten by Russians. In telling it, Solzhenitsyn's cynicism rises to a level such that parsing the text becomes difficult. Solzhenitsyn has an intact copy of speeches delivered by N.V. Krylenko, initially a fierce revolutionary and the organizer of the early courts. Stenographic records have been heavily redacted, even for such important trials of the Left SRs—the third great turning point in 20th-century Russian history. The "Military Plot" of 1919 requires thousands of sentences, far too many to hold trials, so the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK)—or Chairman Sverdlov alone—pardons and punishes at will and corrects sentences. The bourgeois concept of guilt is uprooted and replaced by decisions about the "desirable results" for the working class. People die when they become inexpedient. Whatever a defendant may have done in the past is unimportant, compared to what he might do in the future.

In August 1920, 28 members of the intelligentsia (plus others in absentia) are tried in the case of the "Tactical Center." At this time, Lenin is telling Gorky that the intelligentsia are not the nation's "brains, but shit." Educated people are rotten, pious, slovenly, and shortsighted. This attitude becomes widespread; they must be eliminated as allies of black generals and hired agents of "European imperialism."

"The Law Becomes a Man" continues Solzhenitsyn's survey of the development of Soviet law, looking at the big and famous cases. Progressive Europe watches the trials except those involving the church, which the Bolsheviks from the start regard as no more than the collection of believers. The Bolsheviks turn on the church, demanding their riches: if the Christians refuse, they are blamed for the famine and destroyed; if they agree, the churches are cleaned out. Either way, the State replenishes its wealth.

Terror becomes a method of persuasion. When the People's Commissar of Justice, Kursky, seeks a clarification, Lenin wants terror legalized, "without self-deception or deceit" and used for "revolutionary righteousness." Soon afterwards, Lenin suffers his first stroke, and this document becomes part of his political legacy, underlying Article 58-4. The Criminal Code, compressing five years of revolutionary experience, is in effect a week when the Supreme Tribunal (Verkhtrib) hears the case of the leading SRs in June-August 1922. Since they are considered still dangerous politically, it is expedient to "finish them off." During the 20-year struggle to overthrow Tsarism, the SRs—not the Bolsheviks—carry out most of the terrorism and suffer punishment, but now they are charged with resisting the October Revolution, beginning the Civil War by standing up for the Constituent Assembly, rejecting the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, talking about preventing foodstuffs and gold from flowing to the Kaiser under the treaty, using Allied money to fund this, spying for the Entente in 1918, and collaborating with various White-

leaning groups. Prosecutor Krylenko speaks with a new, self-assured tone that plays on the defendants' revolutionary soft spot.

Unfortunately, all of these charges relate to 1918 and are under the 27 Feb. 1919 amnesty unusable. For two years, the SRs have not struggled against the Bolsheviks, and indeed have resisted Kolchak and Denikin. As the defendants have not yet learned to be sheep, they speak out against Bolshevik crimes and lament not having worked hard enough to defeat them. To Krylenko, they are dangerous because they see what they have done as a good thing. Lawyer/defendant Gendelman-Grabovsky argues with Krylenko about tampering with and torturing witnesses. Krylenko differentiates (for the first and last time) inquiry from investigation. He is doubtless resentful at spending so much time when the defendants should long ago have been dispatched by the Cheka. Knowing the world is watching, he asks (rather than dictates) death for all the defendants, but only 14 are ordered shot, while hundreds go to prisons, camps, and productive labor. Other tribunals use this as precedent. The VTsIK confirms the death sentences but postpones execution to use the condemned as leverage with émigrés.

Part 1, Chapter 10

Part 1, Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

"The Law Matures," dealing with the great show trials first notes that Savinkov is the only Russian crazy enough to return without authorization, but plenty go the other direction. Lenin secretly favors deporting bourgeois intelligentsia after framing them as military spies. When many of the émigrés regard this as a gift, Dzerzhinsky turns to using the Gulag. The Criminal Code of 1926 makes "big, coordinated, well-organized" show trials possible. The first is Shakhty, dealing with coal miners in the Donets Basin. It is tried before a Special Assize of the Supreme Court under A.Y. Vyshinsky, with Krylenko as chief accuser. There are 53 defendants and 56 witnesses. Sixteen confess, 13 wriggle, and 24 admit nothing.

When the "conflictless trial" ends, Krylenko uses Yagoda's OGPU to create and uncover a nationwide organization of engineers headed by prominent wreckers. The first is the mining engineer P.A. Palchinsky, an early revolutionary who directs war industries in World War I, becomes Deputy Minister of Trade and Industry under the Soviets, teaches mining, and consults for the Gosplan. With his companions in torture, N.K. von Meck and A.F. Velichko, Palchinsky stands firm and dies. Krylenko loses another year, destroying Khrennikov and Fedotov and learning that engineers are not pliable.

Krylenko chides the engineers to admit they are politically "illiterate" or anti-Soviet. Leading questions allow slips of the tongue that reveal what has really taken place. The pressures of War Communism sicken engineers and the majority does nothing until the coming of NEP, which they accept as a sign of government sanity. Unfortunately, the state is suspicious, underpays them, demands the impossible, and deprives them of authority to discipline. Fedotov recalls how Oldenborger dies voluntarily to attract attention to the engineer's plight; thousands more are killed. Engineers need to unite to restore their authority and prestige, but are not allowed. In 1927, NEP is abandoned and expectations are placed far too high. It is in the leaders' interests that engineers speak out against irrationality and defend quality over quantity. To utter such thoughts in 1930 is to invite being shot. Engineers are repainted as wreckers allied with interventionists. Fedotov unknowingly blurts out details about torture and GPU deals.

A Special Assize of the Supreme Court with N.M. Shvernik presiding hears the case against 14 defendants. Solzhenitsyn remembers reading the boring, pallid daily records at age 12, but now relies on a samizdat version of M.P. Yakubovich's petition for rehabilitation. When the GPU is told to prove there are Mensheviks in government jobs for counterrevolutionary purposes, it selects those it wants to try and spreads rumors, their actual political beliefs being of no account. Yakubovich is an early revolutionary, by 1917 chair of the Smolensk Soviet and a powerful orator, Sincere and absorbed, he is ostracized by the Mensheviks for pro-Bolshevik leanings, is honored by them, and given important posts. After his 1930 arrest, he accepts the role Krylenko insists he must play, but is tortured by him anyway. Yakubovich cannot reveal the falsehood without betraying

the Soviet government—and facing vengeful torture—so he repeats Stalin's lies. Yakubovich remembers his summation, an outburst of rage not at the GPU but at the Foreign Delegation of Mensheviks for enjoying a safe, easy life, unable to pity those on trial and needing to dissociate from them. He still sees them as traitors to the socialist revolution, but no longer recalls saying that they had called for wrecking activities. He recalls Krylenko branding him a fanatic counterrevolutionary and demands he be shot, but is grateful for not being humiliated, insulted, or ridiculed. In his final statement at the trial, Yakubovich acknowledges the sins to which he has confessed and does not plead for his life: a performance that must have encouraged Stalin to round up all his "loud-mouthed" enemies.

After a few big, expensive, hard-to-stage public trials in Moscow, Stalin toys with moving them to the provinces, before he abandons the notion altogether. In 1934, in remote, impoverished Ivanovo Province, new leaders are gathered in Kady village. Apparently not realizing this is sacrilege and rebellion, Smirnov and Stavrov petition the province for lower grain quotas, lest people starve. While Smirnov is on vacation, the District Party led by his deputy, V.F. Romanov, brands him a Trotskyite. Romanov is proved a liar and expelled, but Stavrov is arrested and dies under torture, ostensibly after confessing to being a Trotskyite and SR. Smirnov and others are arrested. V.G. Vlasov, the uneducated, eloquent, honest District Consumer Cooperative director, offends Romanov, who has become the Chairman of the District Executive Committee, and the local NKVD Chairman, N.I. Krylov. When the NKVD tries to bribe Vlasov into making peace, he calls a Party meeting to report wrecking activities and refuses to run away from danger.

By the time Vlasov is arrested, the open trial is ready to begin. He is interrogated twice and charged with initiating bread lines, having an inadequate assortment of merchandise, and procuring surplus salt. Ten carloads of defendants under heavy armed guard arrive in Kady. The whole village squeezes in to watch the Special Assize. The long, menacing indictment claims they form "an underground Rightist Bukharinite group." Stasov's forced testimony is allowed in evidence, but the defendants all repudiate everything they have said during interrogation. When rebuked by the judge, defendant Univer, as a Communist, declines to describe NKVD methods. During a recess, Vlasov is warned to admit his guilt and tell the truth, but emerges as the group's ideological leader. Defendant Smirnov admits to knowing about bread lines and shocks the Organs by revealing he instructed Vlasov to write Stalin about their inability to deal with starvation locally. They receive no answer. Vlasov agrees to tell the story if the prosecutor leaves the rostrum and sits beside him, for he is also a wrecker, since the prohibition on selling flour and baking rye bread are instituted by a committee on whose presidium he sits. Vlasov impudently declares the trial a farce staged by the NKVD. Some day they will be where he is and shot, as he is about to be. The court takes six hours to compose the verdict properly. Smirnov, Univer, Saburov, and Vlasov are condemned to death, others get 8-10 years, and new cases are opened against Komsomol members. Citizens refuse to applaud the sentence as expected. The convoy's guns are trained on the crowd, not the prisoners. Closed trials are clearly needed in Russia.

Part 1, Chapter 11

Part 1, Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

A "new era" of executions begins in June, 1918 as the Revtribunals kill more than 16,000 people in 16 months. Capital punishment is abolished for ordinary courts in January 1920, but retained for military and extrajudicial tribunals. The ban follows a cleaning out of the prisons and within four months is overturned. The death penalty is re-christened "the supreme measure," a temporary means of "social defense." For the 10th anniversary, it is abolished for all but military crimes and banditry (broadly interpreted), but for the 15th, to advance socialism, "seven-eights" is added. Among those shot are six peasants in Tsarskoe Selo, who dare mow collective fields a second time to feed their cows. Stalin should be drawn and quartered for this crime alone, but people beg not to expose him posthumously.

People instinctively picture those on death row as ill-fated loners, deserving their fate, but they are masses of ordinary, average people languishing for misdemeanors before getting the "super" (prison slang for execution). Mistaken grain analysis, accidental fires, "primordial commerce," and drinking too much on St. Nicholas Day and hitting a policeman's horse draw death sentences. Even while Leningrad is under siege, the Organs must execute people to prove it is not lying down on the job. Tens of thousands are shot and forgotten. Relatives of some now send victims' photographs to be published as wordless memorials. Does the death penalty have a hypnotic effect, that almost all allow themselves to be killed? After condemned prisoners steal jailer's guns and open fire in 1952, tactics are changed so the one to be shot is plucked from the cell by massive force, while cellmates watch silently. The condemned is tied and gagged with a child's rubber ball. Figuring they are already in the grave, they do not gang up on the guards.

Part 1, Chapter 12

Part 1, Chapter 12 Summary and Analysis

In 1923, socialists are sent to the isolated Solovetsky Islands and divided among three monasteries where the threat of a hunger strike is accepted, but within 15 days, morale plunges and it is called off. In the spring, the inmates are sent to Verkhne-Uralsk while their leaders go to Tobolsk. They lose all freedoms and in 1928, clubs and boots break their next hunger strike. By the 1920s, when this proven political weapon is used by "riffraff" like the KRs, officials segregate strikers and keep their condition secret from fellow prisoners and those outside. From the 1930s onward, hunger strikes are illegal. By 1937, forced feeding is widely used in total secrecy. Also in 1937, hunger strikes become counterrevolutionary activities punishable by new prison terms. A hunger strike by a few tired socialists in Yaroslavl in 1937 marks a last, desperate effort to get the old system back.

As the Archipelago spreads out, prisons for long-termers remain in use and the old traditions carry on. Foreigners, celebrities, secret inmates, and "purged gaybisty" are segregated from "natives" lest they cause "moral-political damage." Those too feeble for camp work are also housed in TONs. Tsarist prisons are made serviceable (install window "muzzles," fence courtyards, and pave ground areas) and former monasteries not turned into tourist museums are remodeled. In the 1920s, political prisoners enjoy good food, but this deteriorates in1931-33 and again in 1947, when hunger is widespread in the USSR.

Punishment cells are the scourge of TONs. One can get punished for coughing or walking loudly in oversized shoes. Every inmate spends time there to learn to avoid it. "Unruliness" (undefined) draws 20 days at the chief's discretion. Prisoners strip to underwear and sit on bare earth or in puddles, and quickly conclude they will freeze to death. Mugs of hot water make them drunk. Meager rations help count the days of one's sentence. Inmates learn to be submissive. Insanity is not rare.

This chapter should have begun by showing how light begins to shine in an inmate's soul, like a saint's halo. Being torn from the world absolutely, they get in touch with the Universe, are purged of imperfections, and grow transparent. They appreciate the forbidden earth and sky, the sight of a bird, and write down everything with surprising clarity (when paper is available). One wonders whether their souls are purified or perish completely, awakening each morning to an insane cellmate's eyes? The astronomer Kozyrev contemplates Time, the order of the Universe, and its "Supreme Spirit." Having done all he can, sitting in a solitary cell, he prays for God's help. A half-hour later, he receives a book on astrophysics and memorizes all he can. The book is confiscated, but he continues his work in the Norilsk camp, discovering a new field in physics. This chapter should have begun with the conflict between soul and bars. When prisoner transport arrives, one moves on.

Part 2, Chapter 1

Part 2, Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Through the late 19th century, prisoners go to Siberia by foot, horse cart, or third-class railway called Stolypins. They are ordinary passenger cars divided into nine compartments, four allotted to guards and five to prisoners. Gratings replace walls for easy inspection. With no exterior windows and a big sliding door, they look like baggage cars. Inmates eat preserved fish and bread rather than soup, causing intense thirst. Sometimes there are no rations, either because of accounting errors or because underfed guards "snag" rations. Zeks get so thirsty they will drink yellow, greasy water from the locomotive tender, sharing a common cup, with healthy inmates going first and those suffering tuberculosis and syphilis last. Withholding water also wards off toilet trips, which require two guards per prisoner, one at a time until all 120 have their turn (two hours). Sometimes, thieves are mixed in with political offenders, sorted by designation not offense.

Passengers on Stolypins do not know where they are headed or whence they depart. Inmates can spy signs or estimate direction from the sun. From new arrivals, they learn where they have passed. It is best to stop being a "sucker"—a greenhorn and victim. Time is measured in the Gulag in decades and quarter-centuries. One never goes home, so it is best not to think of loved ones. It is best to take along nothing one will miss, like suitcases, boots, and good clothing.

Part 2, Chapter 2

Part 2, Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

An enormous map of the USSR shows provincial capitals, railroad junctions, river routes, and countless flyspecks representing "The Ports of the Archipelago." Few zeks do not know 35 transit prisons and camps; many remember a dozen. True "sons of Gulag" can name 50. They blend together however, in illiteracy, ineptitude, waiting, body searches, unsanitary conditions, mold, crowding, dampness, and gruel that seems made of silage. Anyone with a sharp memory can distinguish them: Novosibirsk has strong barracks; Irkutsk has bricked-over windows; Vologda is ancient with leaking toilets; and Usman is lice-ridden. Every city and town has a transit prison or functional equivalent.

After being squashed into Stolypins, prisoners dream of resting and loosening up in transit prisons, going to the toilet leisurely, drinking water and hot tea, not having to ransom belongings to get rations, eating hot food, showering, and no longer itching. Some parts of the dream come true, but there are always surprises: women's hair shaved off; naked men barbered or steamed by women; men salving women's private parts; cold shower water being declared hot by a captain; having to run naked in the snow. Newcomers quickly realize they are at the mercy not only of jailers and officers, who are bound somehow by the law, but also by trusties performing as bath attendants, clerks, and instructors. They are the same thieves and crooks, putting on airs, checking suitcases with X-ray eyes.

Transit prison is a necessary step before camp life, as no one could endure stepping into it directly. Inmates write on scraps in pencil to say they are alive. Women go crazy receiving them and sometimes rush off to try to find husbands, although visits are forbidden and can only add to their burden. Krasnaya Presnya is the virtual capital of the Gulag, because passing through is easier than proceeding directly between any two points (like Moscow itself). During and just after the war, even the heads of the Gulag cannot predict routes and destinations.

It is pointless to talk about transit prisons, and this chapter too should have begun differently. Everything becomes bearable within a month in the Gulag. Kotlas is tenser and more aboveboard than other transit prisons, because it opens the way to Northeast European Russia and is deep enough into the Archipelago to need no camouflage. Peasants are scattered when it is established in 1930 and, in 1938, it remains a tarpaulin hung over scraps of lumber. Some 20,000 people live on the ground under the sky and are constantly counted. Later two-story log houses are built without a second-story floor; instead, weak prisoners climb ladders to their places on six-story bunks. In 1944/45, fifty a day die, a percentage of "shrinkage" that vegetable warehouses would consider intolerably high. Over several years, half a million people pass through Karabas, the transit camp near Karaganda. Artists daily whitewash the floor and paint carpets, which sleeping bodies overnight obliterate. The Knyazh-Pogost transit point

consists of shacks built over a swamp using poles for all construction. At Vogvozdino, 5,000 are housed at a time and are given a liquid diet—without bowls. Zaks eat communally out of washbasins.

Part 2, Chapter 3

Part 2, Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

"The Slave Caravans" describes the red cattle cars and barges that expedite carrying prisoners the final distance to camp. First, they must be prepared to transport prisoners—not necessarily swept clean, calked, and heated, but the floors, walls, and ceilings must be tested for strength and checked for faults, the windows barred, secure drains cut in the floor and access to the roof, and platforms installed for machine-gunners. Supplies of long-handled wooden mallets are laid in. Heated passenger cars are hooked on for staff. Finally, the sides of the red cars are chalked "Special Equipment" or "Perishable Goods.".

Loading involves a military-like process that conceals the operation from ordinary citizens, and terrorizes the prisoners. The prisoners climb into the cattle cars and onto splintery bunks, where they fall prey to the thieves who have claimed the upper bunks by the window in summer and nearest the stove in winter. Prisoners do not know where they will disembark. Some camps are accessible only by water, in ancient river galleys. Some prisoners are still transported to camp in carts and on foot, as in Tolstoi's Resurrection. In Minusinsk in the 1940s, prisoners who have been indoors for a year are marched in formation 15 miles to Abakan; dozens die along the way. No one will write a novel about this, because when one lives in a graveyard, one ceases to weep. Foot transport is now rare but occurs. Those who fall by the wayside are tossed into a truck, dead or alive, and stripped of their shoes. Trucks carry cooking utensils and food, which runs out if anything delays them. In 1940, a transport is herded through the taiga to Chibyu with no food; prisoners drinking swamp water get dysentery, drop, and are attacked by dogs. In Zihma they use trousers as nets to catch fish, which they eat alive. When prisoners walking towards Veslyana can go no further, a soldier stays behind for a while, but soon catches up—alone. Foot transport the 20-25 miles from Karabas to Spassk continues into the 1950s. It is a one-day for 1,000 prisoners, the feeble among them expected to die. They no longer fear bullets, but do fear clubs and many miraculously reach their destination. Why they are not taken by tractor or horse cart in the first place is not clear. Solzhenitsyn recalls, as a boy in Rostov-on-the-Don, hearing the 1920s version of the threat to open fire on prisoners without warning; in those days, the convoy carried only sabers, and the fear of being decapitated from the rear is chilling. In 1936, in Nizhni Novgorod, a transport of long-bearded men make way for Kalinin's motorcade; he drives through without interest in "Old Russia disappearing."

Every minute of every day or the year, trains and barges carry prisoners onward, and Black Marias make more arrests. People are being plundered, raped, and beaten nearly dead. The worst is yet to examine: the camps.

Part 2, Chapter 4

Part 2, Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

"From Island to Island" completes Part 2, talking about how prisoners at random meet others who help fill in the picture of their lives. The "special convoy," a rare form of transportation, which Solzhenitsyn enjoys three times, requires authorization from high officials. The special convoy is a taste of freedom, letting one hear the mundane matters over which the world squabbles—and makes one wants to weep or awaken them to reality: at any moment they could be dragged off. Pursuing property and position, fearing misfortune or yearning for happiness are senseless. It is enough not to freeze, thirst, or hunger, and to have healthy backs, legs, arms, eyes, and ears. They should not hurt loved ones or part in anger, lest that be how they are remembered after being arrested.

In prison, one learns that the world is small indeed. At any given time, there must be 12 million people in the camps and at least 6 million of those political. It is not odd that in any given cell one will discover common acquaintances. Solzhenitsyn loves the moment when a veteran zek enters a cell—or entering himself with unworried smile and expansive gesture. The prisoners' "telegraph system" works by attentiveness, memory, and chance meetings. Solzhenitsyn happily sleeps undisturbed under the bunks, up to 14 hours at a time, helping his sentence pass unnoticed. He stays in Cell 75 two months, gradually moving to the bunks and working towards the window. Mornings, he enjoys Society meetings, chess, and books, and the 20-minute walk outdoors. Mostly, he loves meeting people.

Solzhenitsyn meets others in the group, some of whom break down during interrogation, and others who depend on influential fathers getting them off. He meets Georgi Ingal, the eldest of the group, a budding writer, and candid speaker. When Gammerov catches up with them, Solzhenitsyn faces the fact that he depends on clichés. Gammerov and Ingal broadly criticize Tolstoi's views, read their own verses, and quote Pasternak, whom Solzhenitsyn dislikes. They quote Lt. Schmidt's last speech at his trial, which applies to them all. They are not languishing from imprisonment, but are proud of it. Their freedom is not constricted. They are separated from the average people of their generation, for arrest has helped them jump a chasm of indifference. Moscow students in Butyrki compose a song that they sing before twilight with uncertain voices, hoping to return from Siberia. How can those who have fought the war have missed the point that the young see? Younger brothers look at the veterans and call them dolts.

Characters

Nikolai Vasilyevich Krylenko

The Chief State Prosecutor (1918-31) and later People's Commissar of Justice, Krylenko plays a central role in Solzhenitsyn's analysis of how the Soviets' system of revolutionary "justice" develops. The author's antipathy for Krylenko comes out repeatedly in remarks and asides about his fall from Stalin's grace in 1938 and execution by the very system he puts together.

Solzhenitsyn works from an intact copy of Krylenko's speeches delivered at the hallmark public trials in which he is the "accuser" (prosecutor), which supplement the heavily redacted stenographic records. Krylenko is shown in action, prosecuting the major trials, consistently demanding severe sentences, and, when the court gives light ones, appealing to the newly formed All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK). Krylenko applauds the VTsIK as an expedient advance over Western "separation of powers," because the early Soviet courts are creating law on the fly and serving as political weapons. When Dzerzhinsky abolishes capital punishment, Krylenko obediently praises the revolutionary wisdom, but stipulates that this need not be a permanent measure.

Krylenko's first major "conflictless" trial, of the Shakhty has too many defendants and witnesses to be effective, so going forward, he concentrates on fewer, well rehearsed people. Preparing for the great Promparty trial of wrecking engineers, he loses time investigating men who refuse to crack under torture, until he finds a star in Leonid K. Ramzin. In court, Krylenko wears the defendants out by the volume of nonsense to which they must respond. However, wanting completely to "disembowel" the Promparty, he allows them too much opportunity to improvise, which humanizes the drama, and his leading questions allow slips of the tongue that reveal what has really taken place. Krylenko grows angry when defendants flub assigned lines.

After his death, the principles and methods Krylenko establishes remain a hallmark of Soviet justice and keep the Gulag Archipelago well-fed with victims.

Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin

The General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1922, the Georgian-born Stalin is the major point of focus for Solzhenitsyn's contempt for the cruel, arbitrary Soviet system. Solzhenitsyn rarely names the dictator, who gradually eliminates rivals after Vladimir Lenin's death in 1924, preferring instead to speak obliquely, using various terms of endearment applied to him by sycophants during his lifetime. He does not explain while, when pleading for his life in 1937, fallen Politburo member Bukharin writes letters to "Koba," using Stalin's party name from the old days.

Solzhenitsyn also speaks obliquely of Stalin as an "abuser of the cult," the deprecatory term Khrushchev uses while revealing Stalin's crimes after his death in 1953.

Solzhenitsyn's bitterness is natural. He is arrested at the front during World War II for cracking jokes about the dictator, and, while awaiting shipment to the camps, is teased with rumors of a general amnesty to celebrate the great victory. Instead, Stalin lengthens the traditional sentences for political prisoners and throws into the Gulag anyone who has had contact with Western culture. Throughout the book, the author mocks the great man's size, voice, and mannerisms. Stalin appears as an intensely suspicious and demanding man, inspiring his underlings to overachieve quotas for arrests and executions. He is also shown as a superb puppet master at the time of the purges, pictured toying with Bukharin at meetings and inviting him to stand with him at the Mausoleum on May Day, just before ordering his trial to begin. Solzhenitsyn does not even spare the dictator's final moments, intimating cynically that Stalin is helped to depart this life, thereby forestalling a massive persecution of Jews in the wake of the "Doctors' Case."

Solzhenitsyn is even bitterer that contemporary Russians want Stalin's self-crafted memory not to be soiled after his death and Khrushchev's revelations. Therefore, he dares to show Stalin in full control of life and death in the USSR, collectivizing the farms by brute force in the 1930s, repressing political rivals by the millions, and betraying the POWs during and after the war. Several times, Solzhenitsyn accuses Stalin of cowardice and mismanagement during the opening days of World War II. He calls the Order 227 "immortal," resulting in perhaps half a million POWs at Kerch and Kharkov alone. The Gulag Archipelago is Stalin's refection.

Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin

A prominent Communist Party official and economic theorist, Bukharin becomes a member of the Politburo in 1924 and General Secretary of Comintern after 1926. As his beautifully phrased but empty Constitution for the USSR is being adopted, he falls from Stalin's grace—although Stalin plays cat-and-mouse with him for months. Early in 1937, Bukharin begins a hunger strike to get a hearing and clear his name. Stalin treats it as absurd that they would expel him. When Bukharin writes a final "Letter to the Future Central Committee" pledging loyalty to everything that has been done to date, Stalin deems him ready for trial. Identifying intention and action proves him a traitor and he is shot. By the time of the "Kady Case," an "underground Rightist Bukharinite group" is imagined. Solzhenitsyn claims to be glad to serve time in the main political prison where Bukharin has served.

Feliks Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky

The first chief of the secret police, Dezerzhinsky inconveniently abolishes capital punishment during the "Churchmen" trial in 1920. During the first year of peace after the Civil War (1922), the Cheka's authority is narrowed and it is renamed the GPU.

Dzerzhinsky tells Pravda that it has strengthened its ability to watch for "anti-Soviet currents and groupings." Lenin secretly favors deporting bourgeois intelligentsia after framing them as military spies, but when many of the émigrés regard this as a gift, Dzerzhinsky turns to using the Gulag.

Anatoly Ilyich Fastenko

Solzhenitsyn's cellmate in Lubyanka Prison Cell 67 and later 53, Fastenko is a youthful 63 years old with lively eyebrows, a keeper of the old prison traditions and revolutions. He puts things in perspective. He is first sentenced in 1904 but freed under the manifesto of 17 Oct. 1905, which he recalls brings riots of joy and the warden's humanity. In 1906, Fastenko is sentenced to four years in Sevastopol Central Prison in irons and four years in exile. He travels, including to Paris, where he works with Lenin and Lunacharsky, Canada, and the U.S., before heading home after the Revolution. After the Revolution, he works for Pravda and in the Moscow City Planning Office rather than the important positions his underground exploits deserve. He wants simply to live on his small pension, but is implicated by a loudmouthed neighbor, linked to French and Canadian intelligence, and de facto considered a terrorist as a former Social Democrat. Fastenko is loath to talk about Lenin, other than to warn against making any "graven image." Realizing he will probably not survive prison, he advises Solzhenitsyn to read Gorky and Plekhanov.

Georgi Kramarenko

Solzhenitsyn's cellmate in Lubyanka Prison Cell 67 and later 53, Kramarenko is constantly trying to obtain tobacco. Solzhenitsyn finds something "alien" about him and clams up. Later, he learns that every cell must have a "stool pigeon," who trips an innate alarm. This helps Solzhenitsyn survive 17 years of sharing dangerous thoughts with people without a misstep.

Viktor Semyonovich Abakumov

Stalin's Minister of State Security (1946-52), Abakumov is shown with his deputy, M.D. Ryumin, enjoying beating prisoners on the sciatica nerve with a rubber truncheon in Abakumov's opulent appointed office, taking care not to splatter the Persian carpets. Abakumov raises Ryumin rapidly and they become close, until the end of 1952, when they cross-examine the suspect Etinger (who dies overnight), reach opposite conclusions, and Ryumin is commissioned by Stalin to prosecute the "doctors' case." He arrests Abakumov, but when Stalin dies, the new government arrests and shoots Ryumin. Abakumov resents encroachment on the Organs, warns authorities against opposing him, and taunts them for not letting the Secret Police handle the Beria investigation. He fears poisoning in prison, reads Stalin's works for show, is rumored to have beaten Khrushchev's daughter-in-law to death in Stalin's time, and is finally tried and shot in 1954.

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin

A Russian revolutionary, leader of the October (Bolshevik) Revolution, and first head of the USSR, Lenin is sometimes referred to by his birth surname, Ulyanov, and by his patronymic, Ilyich. Solzhenitsyn never treats Lenin directly, but refers to events in his turbulent life, like his eldest brother's arrest and hanging for plotting to kill Tsar Alexander III, his imprisonment and light exile in Siberia, and travels in Russia and Europe. He alludes to Lenin's break with Social Democrats and split with the Second International. Elected to head the new Bolshevik government, he makes peace with Germany (Treaty of Brest-Litovsk), which sacrifices territory and remunerations, and is opposed by Social Revolutionaries (SRs) and other parties. Lenin begins a massive, bloody persecution, organizes the Cheka, and launches a "Red Terror." Solzhenitsyn alludes to unprecedented brutality of the Civil War, the extermination of the kulaks, War Communism, the famine of 1921, peasant uprisings, the Kronstadt revolt, and New Economic Policy (NEP). He refers to Lenin's first stroke in 1922, but not to his gradual decline or death.

Lavrenti Pavlovich Beria

By reason of common Georgian nationality, Beria is Stalin's close associate in 1938, in charge of the secret police and national security. After Stalin's death, Beria comes under investigation and is finally shot in 1953.

Arnold Susi

Solzhenitsyn's cellmate in Lubyanka Prison Cell 67 and later 53, Susi believes cruelty is invariably accompanied by sentimentality, as shown by the Germans. Susi needs eyeglasses all the time. He has studied at the Faculty of History and Philology at the University of Petrograd and later law in Tartu on the way to becoming Estonia's leading lawyer, called "kuldsuu" (golden-tongued). Susi knows Russian, English, Estonian, and German and is widely read. During walks, Susi teaches Solzhenitsyn much about patience and about the true nature of the Revolution. Susi teaches him about Estonian democracy and being caught between Teutons and Slavs. They hold out against the Russians in 1918, 1940/41, and 1944. The Allies are not interested in helping them stay independent and Stalin eliminates the leadership as the Red Army invades, shipping them to Lubyanka under 58:2—desiring national self-determination.

Andrei Andreyevicy Vlasov

A lieutenant general in the Red Army, Vlasov in 1942 surrenders to the Germans after his 2nd Shock Army penetrates the lines in trying to relieve Leningrad, but is not reinforced, forbidden to surrender, and is decimated. Vlasov switches sides to lead renegade Russian forces against the Soviets. He is handed over to the USSR by the Allies and executed in 1946. The name Vlasov becomes synonymous with traitor. When

Solzhenitsyn is arrested, passersby assume he is a captured Vlasov man and revile him. In the spring of 1945, only the Vlasovites fail to question why prison is their fate and anticipate a general amnesty.

Andrei Yanuaryevich Vyshinsky

A lawyer and diplomat, Menshevik turned Bolshevik, Vyshinsky is Chief State Prosecutor during the great show trials of 1936-38, which is where Solzhenitsyn primarily shows him, formulating a useful dialectic for interrogators and prosecutors: there is no such thing as absolute truth any more. Officials must use their own intellect, Party sensitivity, moral forces, and character to render a verdict. Solzhenitsyn observes that the executioner's bullet is absolute.

Objects/Places

Article 58

The Soviet criminal code of 1926 has 140 non-general articles, but one, Article 58, is through "extended dialectical interpretation," responsible for nearly all Organs activity. It deals with "crimes against public order" and "organized gangsterism" in 14 sections.

Butyrki Prison

Moscow's brutal central transit prison in Tsarist Russia, Butyrki is located in a grim red brick fortress. Muscovites cringe when its great maw opens to admit Black Marias. During the February Revolution, political prisoners are freed, but after the October (Bolshevik) Revolution, it fills again, serving as a transfer camp for convicts en route to the Gulag. Solzhenitsyn passes through 4-5 times and feels at home there. Butyrki has 70 cells, including those in the octagonal former church, where prisoners are treated like "stepchildren." Recalling that bowls are stamped "BuTyur"—as though it were a Health Resort—Solzhenitsyn muses that fat bigwigs who go to Kislovodsk spa to lose 4-6 pounds in a month should check into BuTyur and lose 17-18 in a week without exercise. He is happy to think about the founder of the KGB, Felix Dzerzhinsky, having been imprisoned there.

Cheka / GPU / OGPU / NKVD / NKBG / MGB / MVD / KGB

Tongue-in-cheek, Solzhenitsyn refers to the "Extraordinary Commission for Struggle Against Counterrevolution, Sabotage, and Speculation" ("Cheka") as the "Sentinel of the Revolution." It conducts the first Soviet "hygienic purge," using "extrajudicial reprisal." For the first time in history, one body handles investigation, arrest, interrogation, prosecution, trial, and execution of "enemies of the people" (bourgeoisie, clergy, and political opponents such as SRs). While the name changes frequently—in 1922 GPU ("State Political Administration"); 1923, OGPU ("United State Political Administration"); in 1934, NKVD ("People's Commissariat of State Security"); in 1943, NKGB ("People's Commissariat for State Security"); in 1946, MGB ("Ministry of State Security"); in 1953 MVD ("Ministry of the Interior"); and in 1953, KGB (State Security Committee)—its members are always called "chekists" (sometimes "gaybisty"). Saying he underestimates numbers, Solzhenitsyn quotes figures by Dzerzhinsky's deputy, Martyn Latsis, showing 12,733 executions in 1918-20 in 20 Central Russian provinces. The OGPU sets up the Gulag system. Lubyanka is the headquarters of the many-named security organizations, and its prison is dreaded.

Decembrists

A group of Russian officers who lead an unsuccessful uprising against Tsar Nicholas I in 1825, the Decembrists are pictured as prototypes of the political prisoners who fill the Gulag.

Gulag

The Soviet penal system under Stalin, GULag is the Russian acronym for "Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps." It is operated by the OGPU.

Kolyma

The region of Northeast Siberia where Stalin's labor camps are concentrated, Kolyma is a land of tundra and gold mines. Solzhenitsyn mentions the principal town, Magadan, and the orchestra that Dalstroy ("Far North Construction Trust") has greet new prisoners, primarily intellectuals. Kolyma is notorious for working inmates to death. Prisoners are drawn from everywhere in the Archipelago to exploit Kolyma's gold and to eliminate the problem with kulaks opposing collectivization.

Krasnaya Presnya

The transit prison in Moscow, Krasnaya Presnya is the virtual capital of the Gulag, as Moscow is of the USSR. It is more convenient to pass through it from anywhere than to go direct routes. It is, therefore, overcrowded to the point a supplementary building is erected.

Lubyanka

The Lubyanka designates six-story headquarters of the Soviet state security (variously named Cheka, GPU, OGPU, and KGB) building located on Lubyanka Square in Moscow—and the most dreaded prison in the capital. Prisoners in the walled exercise yard on the roof can hear street noise but see nothing. The second floor, where the women are kept, is kept dark. The fifth floor is split-level. The biggest cell is on the fifth floor, No. 111. After "dueling" with an interrogator for four days, Solzhenitsyn is put in Cell 67 on the fourth floor and is later transferred to the more spacious Cell 53. In this first experience of prison, Solzhenitsyn learns that every cell has a "stool pigeon," knowledge that often saves his life in the Archipelago.

SMERSH

A Russian acronym for "Death to Spies," SMERSH designates the counter-intelligence departments in the Red Army after 1943, charged with investigating and arresting front-

line conspirators, mutineers, traitors, deserters, spies, and "criminal elements" both at the combat front and behind the lines. When Solzhenitsyn jokes about Stalin in letters to friends, SMERSH comes to the front and arrests him. SMERSH agents who do not know Moscow escort him to interrogation in Lubyanka Prison, needing him to lead the way.

Special Board (OSO)

The three-man boards of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, the OSO has the power to sentence "socially dangerous" people without a trial. Its members' names become famous in the camps, but they operate through pieces of paper to be signed. One member represents the Party's Central Committee, a second the MVD, and the third the Chief Prosecutor's Office. The OSO is abolished in 1953.

Sukhanovka Prison

The worst prison run by the MGB, Sukhanovka is hissed threateningly at prisoners to intimidate them. People emerge from it insane or dead. Sukhanovka is the worst, a former monastery, consisting of one building for housing prisoners and another for interrogations. It is a two-hour drive by Black Maria through beautiful countryside. Arrivals spend at least a day in a narrow punishment cell to break any resistance. They eat well, thanks to the Architects' Rest Home, but so little that prisoners are always hungry and irritable. Most prisoners live in double cells singly. Most nights, guards unlock shelves that serve as a bed—while interrogations are in progress—and fold them away during the day. Toilet time is 6 AM—when no one needs to go. Two guards for every seven cells assure no sleep or privacy.

Themes

Arbitrariness

The Gulag Archipelago shows, at every turn, the arbitrariness of Soviet life. The opening soliloquy about methods of arrest warns that it can happen anywhere, anytime, and anyone may be the agent; by the time one sees the State Security identification card, it is too late. Nearly everyone who is arrested asks, "Why me?" "What have I done?" There is no answer because in most cases, they have done nothing illegal. Arrests are made constantly to justify the existence of the State Security system. Thus. while laws require inventorying possessions and sealing the premises, individual investigators do as they please.

The root of this arbitrariness run as deep as the history of the Soviet State, to the formation of the Cheka, the "Sentinel of the Revolution," which conducts the first "hygienic purge" of the bourgeoisie, clergy, intelligentsia, and political opponents. It and special tribunals are allowed to exercise "extrajudicial reprisal" rather than public trials. For the first time in history, one body is empowered to handle in one fell swoop investigation, arrest, interrogation, prosecution, trial, and execution of "enemies of the people." As caseloads swell, inquiry and investigation blend: the Cheka skips the costly and time-consuming probable cause stage. Chief State Prosecutor Vyshinsky develops a useful prosecutorial premise: truth is always relative (unlike the executioner's bullet) and people live only so long as they remain expedient to society. The Soviet criminal code of 1926 then provides Article 58, which by "extended dialectical interpretation," allows almost any activity to be considered a political crime.

If anyone is potentially guilty of a political crime and the State Security system has swollen to massive size and is expected to produce, it is logical for the ultimate act of arbitrariness to begin: geographic quotas for arrests and executions are instituted. The proper number of bodies must be turned in, even if it means scouring the countryside to round up gypsies. The cagey official with scores to settle can, arbitrarily, turn this to his advantage. The Soviet system is versatile.

Terror

Noise, speed, light, massive force, violence, and disorientation characterize every step in the transformation of a normal Soviet citizen into a Gulag Archipelago "islander": arrest, interrogation, transport, transit prison, final voyage, and camp. It is meant to assault the prisoner's humanity and reduce his or her sense of personality. At some point, the powers that be need only hint at punishment or reprisal to gain obedience—not that many shrink from continuing to inflict terror for their own entertainment.

Night arrests and transport are preferred because the victims are already disoriented with sleep and the speed and light can best be dramatized. It also serves to heighten

fear in neighbors required to witness arrests and anyone in the public who happens by a station during transport. The most systematic use of terror is during interrogations, which are not intended to elicit facts that might condemn a prisoner; even the signing of an indictment is of secondary interest. The primary purpose is to break the prisoner's will, to prepare him or her for internment. Deprivation of food, water, and sleep are fundamental and are generally combined with any other forms of torture, which include horrific beatings and electric shock, for example. Everyone spends a few days in a narrow, suffocating, dank "punishment cell" in order to gain motivation never to return to one. Later, in the transit prisons, the threat of solitary is constant for the tiniest infractions.

For political prisoners, a major element of terror in the transit and camp phase is being mixed in with habitual criminals for the first time. To the thieves, whose sentences are generally shorter and whose treatment by the State is lighter, these "beavers" are a continually renewing resource to be plundered. The politicals are often elderly, and have lived by words not fists. Thieves become trustees in the transit prisons, handling office work, which includes assignment to camps. A portion of their plunder goes to the officials, who are thus spared having to shake down inmates personally. Having enemies on both sides of the bars is true terror.

Accountability

Alexander Solzhenitsyn repeatedly takes his fellow citizens in the Soviet Union for failure to hold accountable those who run the Gulag Archipelago. He begins writing the book in 1958, years after Khrushchev denounces Stalin's "cult of personality," and continues work into the 1960s. Terrorized for decades, the Soviet people want to avoid the subject, pretend there are no more arrests occurring, and let bygones be bygones.

Solzhenitsyn demands accountability for what he and millions of others have suffered since the year of his birth, 1918. He notes that since antiquity, civilized people have accepted that justice requires both a triumph of virtue and the punishment of vice. The 20th century cannot meet the first requirement, but it can realize the second. He commends West Germany on convicting 86,000 Nazi criminals, while Russians have convicted ten out of what, proportionally in the population, should amount to some 250,000. How can Russia root out putrification without purging the evildoers? Future generations will condemn "driveling do-nothings" who first allow themselves to be massacred, and then pamper the evildoers in retirement. The criminals may be too old for "equal retribution" and they need not be shot or tortured, but should at least be made to admit publicly that they are executioners and murderers. The former Nazis are accepting accountability and not whimpering for leniency. It is unthinkable not to stir up this past. Russians must condemn publicly the idea that some people have the right to repress others. Keeping silence implants evil in future generations.

Style

Perspective

Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn is a Nobel Prize-winning Russian author who in The Gulag Archipelago includes snippets of his own Gulag experiences in 1945-54, but insists it is not his autobiography. Instead, it contains memories of 237 eyewitnesses and the results of reading 36 Soviet authors. As he explains near the end of Part 2, in prison one learns that the world is small indeed. It is a treat every time a veteran zek (prisoner) enters a cell—or when one enters one oneself—with unworried smile and expansive gesture. The prisoners' "telegraph system" works by attentiveness, memory, and chance meetings. He makes clear that the book contains no fictitious people or events. He withholds the book for many years after completing it, but when State Security seizes the manuscripts, he authorizes its publication in the West—as an obligation to the dead for whom he speaks.

Nevertheless, inclusion of his personal stories makes for a raw, moving experience for readers. The subtitle, "an Experiment in Literary Investigation," suggests that this is not a book for casual readers. Solzhenitsyn frequently alludes to people and events in Russian and Soviet history, to authors and works in Russian and Western literature and art, and assumes brief mention will suffice. He writes primarily for post-Stalin Russians, hoping to awaken them from their cringing desire to keep the past buried. Solzhenitsyn writes as a typical Russian, baring his soul and confessing his sins, and demanding that others do likewise. The implicit warning to the reader is always present: this can happen, any moment, to you.

Tone

The Gulag Archipelago is harrowing reading almost from the start, massively detailed, heart-rending and mind-numbing at the same time. Alexander Solzhenitsyn writes in the first person, past tense, as a survivor of the brutal Stalinist penal system. In this sense, the book is objective: based on the people he has met, the stories he has heard, and considerable research he has undertaken after his release from prison. He emphasizes in the author's note that the book contains no fictional people or events. Because he is a survivor, however, he evidently feels free to write with the blackest of black humor about his and his comrades' experiences. This helps lighten the book, for he has a keen eye and ear for pouncing on the innumerable foibles of the high and mighty, but it also turns the tone subjective—nearly preachy at times.

The reader feels emotionally a part of the Gulag and receptive to Solzhenitsyn's plea that one never leave loved ones in anger, lest that be what is remembered when one is arrested and vanishes. The impact, of course, is not as great in the West as in the former USSR, where everyone suspects everyone else. Westerners certainly can,

however, identify with Solzhenitsyn's insistence that the past, no matter how sordid, not be forgotten, glossed over, or altered.

Structure

The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956; an Experiment in Literary Investigation, by Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn is divided into two parts of unequal length, a brief preface, useful translator's note by Thomas P. Whitney, glossary of names and institutions and terms, and an index.

Part 1, "The Prison Industry," consists of 12 chapters: 1. "Arrest"; 2. "The History of Our Sewage Disposal System"; 3. "The Interrogation"; 4. "The Bluecaps"; 5. "First Cell, First Love"; 6. "That Spring"; 7. "In the Engine Room"; 8. "The Law as a Child"; 9. "The Law Becomes a Man"; 10. "The Law Matures"; 11. "The Supreme Measure"; and 12. "Tyurzak." Step-by-step, Solzhenitsyn helps readers, whom he assumes have not been "rabbits," to feel what it is like to fall afoul of the Stalinist system—the diversity of ways in which arrests occur, the singularity of the need to feed an insatiable system, the need to make them confess without regard to truth, and the new inmate's relief at settling into his or her first cell. Solzhenitsyn surveys political arrests and prison conditions in the Tsarist and Soviet eras, and details how the Soviet legal system develops. The story is told clearly and memorably.

Part 2, "Perpetual Motion," consists of four chapters: 1. "The Ships of the Archipelago"; "2. "The Ports of the Archipelago"; 3. "The Slave Caravans"; and 4. "From Island to Island." In these, Solzhenitsyn describes what happens after sentencing, again combining memories, stories, and history. The Black Marias mentioned frequently in Part 1, by context understood as vehicles used in arrests, are described in detail. He then describes the "Stolypin" train cars that take prisoners from the Black Marias to transit prisons, the special nature of those centers, the red cattle trains that run across the USSR to the end of the line, and finally the camps, established and new. The picture of the Archipelago is now clear and vivid.

Quotes

"This is not going to be a volume of memoirs about my own life. Therefore I am not going to recount the truly amusing details of my arrest, which was like no other. That night the SMERSH officers gave up their last hope of being able to make out where we were on the map—they never had been able to read maps anyway. So they politely handed the map to me and asked me to tell the driver how to proceed to counterintelligence at army headquarters. I, therefore, led them and myself to that prison, and in gratitude they immediately put me not in an ordinary cell but in a punishment cell," Book 1, Chapter 1, p. 20.

"Paradoxically enough, every act of the all-penetrating, eternally wakeful Organs, over a span of many years, was based solely on one article of the 140 articles of the nongeneral division of the Criminal Code of 1926. One can find more epithets in praise of this article than Turgenev once assembled to praise the Russian language, or Nekrasov to praise Mother Russia: great, powerful, abundant, highly ramified, multiform, wide-sweeping 58, which summed up the world not so much through the exact terms of its sections as in their extended dialectical interpretation.
"Who among us has not experienced its all-encompassing embrace? In all truth, there is no step, thought, action, or lack of action under the heavens which could not be punished by the heavy hand of Article 58." Part 1, Chapter 2, p. 60.

"In only one respect did Vyshinsky fail to be consistent and retreat from dialectical logic: for some reason, the executioner's bullet which he allowed was not relative but absolute..." Part 1, Chapter 3, p. 101.

"From childhood on we are educated and trained—for our own profession; for our civil duties; for military service; to take care of our bodily needs; to behave well; even to appreciate beauty (well, this last not really all that much!). But neither our education, nor our upbringing, nor our experience prepares us in the slightest for the greatest trial of our lives: being arrested for nothing and interrogated about nothing. Novels, plays, films (their authors should themselves be forced to drink the cup of the Gulag to the bottom!) depict the types one meets in the offices of interrogators as chivalrous guardians of truth and humanitarianism, as our loving fathers," Part 1, Chapter 3, p. 121.

"During the life of any heart this line keeps changing place; sometimes it is squeezed one way by exuberant evil and sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish. One and the same human being is, at various ages, under various circumstances, a totally different human being. At times he is close to being a devil, at times to sainthood. But his name doesn't change, and to that name we ascribe the whole lot, good and evil.
"Socrates taught us: Know thyself!" Part 1, Chapter 4, p. 168.

"Sometimes the spinster would fill our orders miraculously. But even when she was

careless about them, things could turn out interestingly. Because the library of the Big Lubyanka was unique. In all probability it had been assembled out of confiscate private libraries. The bibliophiles who had collected those books had already rendered souls to God. But the main thing was that while State Security had been busy censoring and emasculating all the libraries of the nation for decades, it forgot to dig in its own bosom. Here, in its very den, one could read Zamyatin, Pilnyak, Panteleimon Romanov, and any volume at all of the complete works of Merezhkovsky. (Some people wisecracked that they allowed us to read forbidden books because they already regarded us as dead. But I myself think that the Lubyanka librarians hadn't the faintest concept of what they were giving us—they were simply lazy and ignorant)," Part 1, Chapter 5, pp. 215-6.

"Everyone maintained a serious mien, but everyone understood it was a farce, above all the boys of the convoy, who were the simplest sort of fellows. At the Novosibirsk Transit Prison in 1945, they greeted the prisoners with a roll call based on cases. 'So and so! Article 58:1a, twenty-five years.' The chief of the convoy guard was curious: 'What did you get it for?' 'For nothing at all.' 'You're lying. The sentence for nothing at all is ten years,'" Part 1, Chapter 7, p. 293.

"If my readers and I were not already sufficiently informed to know what was important in every trial was not the charges brought, not guilt, so called, but expediency, we would perhaps not be prepared to accept this trial wholeheartedly. But expediency works without fail: the SRs, as opposed to the Mensheviks, were considered still dangerous, not yet dispersed and broken up, not yet finished off. And on behalf of the fortress of the newly created dictatorship (the proletariat), it was expedient to finish them off.
"Someone unfamiliar with this principle might mistakenly view the entire trial as an act of Party vengeance," Part 1, Chapter 9, p. 355.

"However, even the executioner doesn't know about everything right to the very end. While a motor roars its accompaniment, he fires his pistol bullets, unheard, into the back of a head, and he is himself stupidly condemned not to understand what he has done. He doesn't know about the very end! Only those who have been killed know it all to the very end—and that means no one.
It's true, however, that the artist, however obliquely and unclearly, nevertheless knows some part of what happens right up to the actual bullet, the actual noose.
"So we are going to construct—from artists and from those who were pardoned—an approximate picture of the death cell," Part 1, Chapter 11, p. 444.

"Their lonely prison struggle had been essentially undertaken for all of us, for all future prisoners (even though they themselves might not think so, nor understand this), for how we would exist in imprisonment and how we would be kept there. And if they had won out, then probably nothing of what happened to us would have happened, nothing of what this book is about, all seven of its parts.
"But they were beaten. They failed to protect either themselves or us," Part 1, Chapter 12, p. 475.

"Scattered from the Bering Strait almost to the Bosporus are thousands of islands of the spellbound Archipelago. They are invisible, but they exist. And the invisible slaves of the Archipelago, who have substance, weight, and volume, have to be transported from island to island just as invisibly and uninterruptedly," Part 2, Chapter 1, p. 489.

"Good Lord, how could we have missed the point of the whole thing? While we had been plowing through the mud out there on the bridgeheads, while we had been cowering in shell holes and pushing binocular periscopes above the bushes, back home a new generation had grown up and gotten moving. But hadn't it started moving in another direction? In a direction we wouldn't have been able and wouldn't have dared to move in? They weren't brought up the way we were.
"Our generation would return—having turned in its weapons, jingling its heroes' medals, proudly telling its combat stories. And our younger brothers would only look at us contemptuously: Oh, you stupid dolts!" Part 2, Chapter 4, p. 615.

Topics for Discussion

What part does Mikhail the Emperor play in the book?

What part does the German civilian who bears Solzhenitsyn's suitcase play in the book?

Has Solzhenitsyn succeeded in not making "graven images" as Fastenko advises?

How does the drawn-out story of Solzhenitsyn's arrest and trip to Lubyanka unify the book?

Can there be a defense for burying one's head in the sands of history, as Solzhenitsyn's opponents urge? How do the West German trials speak to this?

How does moral relativism underlie the Stalinist legal system?

Solzhenitsyn says a Romanian saboteur is the only true "hero" he has met in the Gulag. Do you agree? If so, what makes him heroic? If not, who else appears heroic?