

# Let Us Listen to the Silence of the Dead

Aleksander I. Solzhenitsyn: *The Gulag Archipelago*, Volume III, Parts V-VII; Harper & Row; New York.

by Leo Raditsa

We have to learn we do not know how to read. This is a good book to start with. It is hard to read. It has to be read at its own pace like Nadezhda Mandelstam's *Hope Against Hope* or not at all. You cannot lose yourself in it and forget. You keep asking yourself questions when you read it—it asks you questions: What kind of person are you? Are you a person at all? It is a long book and finishes not because the author has said all there is to say, but because he has said enough. It breaks off but what it writes of still continues. According to Sakharov there are at present a million and a half prisoners in the Soviet camps (reported by Solzhenitsyn on French television on March 9, 1976). In fact the problem for Solzhenitsyn in the third volume of *The Gulag Archipelago* is to end the book without inspiring the illusion that because the book ends and he is outside, the camps have disappeared into the past.

Like the other volumes of *Gulag*, this volume (finished in 1968) was written in the period after the publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in 1962 when government officials tried to tell Solzhenitsyn his experiences were out of date. "You are confused, or else your own experiences have given you a peculiar way of looking at things," the Minister for the Protection of Public

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Order told him.

In some sense *Gulag* is the child of *Ivan Denisovich*. The publication of that book put Solzhenitsyn in correspondence with individuals from all over Russia, with former *zeks* (prisoners), with jailors, warders, convoy guards and *zeks* still in the camps who pleaded and demanded that he speak out for them too. Because he had started to put the continued existence of the camps out of his mind, these pleas surprised and embarrassed him: "Just as they (the former prisoners) used to think that *everyone was inside*, they now think that no one is inside." For the camps during the time he was outside writing this book, Solzhenitsyn uses these letters from *zeks* and accounts from survivors of the camps in the sixties like Anatoly Marchenko's *My Testimony* (London, 1969). He also gives an important account of the strike in Novocherkassk where Soviet soldiers murdered something like seventy or eighty people on June 2, 1962.

And for us, too, keeping the Soviet camps in our minds is a problem. The world it describes has only just begun to live in our consciousness and even that has taken a long time. Before *The Gulag Archipelago*, there were something like thirty books on the Soviet concentration camps (one was published in English in 1934) but they did not succeed in putting the knowledge of the camps in our breasts where we cannot deny it. And how one wishes to deny this book, desires to destroy it when one reads it, wishes it had never been thought or written or published!

Why has Solzhenitsyn succeeded in making us know in a way we cannot deny? I do not know. Perhaps, because he wrote the book in Russia and for Russians, because he did not write in exile. He never intended it to be published while he lived. But the author lives and the book is published—not in the Soviet Union, though it must circulate there too (of this I have no definite information). It teaches that we are still entangled

in a past we wish away, that Stalin is a part of our world, of us in a way Hitler (whom Solzhenitsyn calls Stalin's disciple) is not. Hitler destroyed in war is in the past—we are conscious of him; he haunts us. But the crimes of Stalin's time are still so much a part of us that we do not know them. They are in our minds even if we do not know them—especially if we do not know them.

In this final volume, Solzhenitsyn speaks both like a *zek* and like himself so his voice is more living and quickening than in the other volumes. In the other volumes he tends to speak either as a *zek* or as a person on the outside but never so deeply for himself as he does in the third volume (and the last chapters of the second). But even in the strength of Solzhenitsyn's voice the work maintains its choral character. Towards the end the dialogue between Solzhenitsyn and himself as a *zek* and the reader deepens—but there are still other voices. There is no problem in this work with the narrator (that is, with his narcissism); he is there, you can hear his voice—but he does not get in the way of other voices which speak for themselves. (Sinyavsky in *A Voice from the Chorus* [New York, 1976] uses the same form, even more sparingly; he has no narrative, only voices.)

It is just these different voices, speaking freely for themselves which allow you to hear the absence of the voices of the millions of dead in the camps who did not speak, because they could not or who spoke and were not heard. Solzhenitsyn's ability to make you hear the silence of the dead, of the unmourned, unburied dead, explains why this book excites fright but not guilt, why it strengthens rather than weakens, why it spurs you to take more responsibility for your life rather than to blame others for it. Surviving *zeks*—and by that he means *zeks* who survived without doing others in—do not pity themselves. This book teaches you something of that kind of self-respect.



and state laws that outlaws discrimination on the basis of sex, not to mention an entire library of interpretative regulations daily enforced in every nook and cranny of the American actuality.

Is this a matter of intellectual and ethical fairness? Far from it. And this unfairness is at the heart of the liberal concept of American pluralism. America is now more than ever a pluralistic society. But a dangerous myth has been deceptively sustained that the American culture is still open to the diversity of philosophical and ideological propositions, and that they all have an equal chance of being argued for and listened to. In point of fact, the more society, honoring its initial promise of equal human rights and opportunities, opens up to various ethnic groups, their traditions and folkloric paraphernalia, the more pluralism is expelled from the culture. American culture, once the haven of free consciences and religious variety, has become monopolized by one ideological formation—"enlightened" and "progressive" liberalism.

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**L**iberalism's perennial merit is that it early and forcefully endorsed human rights and privileges, and was ready to pick any fight in their defense. However, at some point, it confused the necessities of moral order grounded in reason, and opted for social order structured on speculative theories.

Professor Irving Howe, a distinguished liberal but by no means a libcultist, who is not shy to call himself a social-democrat, wrote not long ago that the foundation of American liberalism is reason. To my mind, the foundation of American liberalism, at least over the last 30 years of its dizzying career, is the blatant abuse of reason. It fought for a welfare state as the *economic* solution to the ills of a *capitalistic* economy. It propagated Big Government as the defender of freedoms and civil rights—a rather unreasonable supposition. In foreign policy, since World War II, liberalism has informed America that it has no right, and even less moral title, to tell the rest of the world how it should behave; until a few years ago, every staunch liberal insistently demanded an attitude of reverence toward Russia—toward the same Russia that emerged from the last war as the only imperialistic power, enslaving free nations and enlarging its territory at others' expense. At the same time, the West began to disassemble colonialism under America's pressure. Every objection to unconditional love for Russia has been branded by American liberalism as Cold War tactics and American leaders of all stripes were burdened with the blame. Even now this is taking place as Russia begins to colonize Africa. If this is proof of the liberal obedience to

reason, we may be losing a crucial tool which, since man's dawn, has warranted his very existence.

The *Chicago Tribune*, a chameleon of a newspaper, flannel-grey on its editorial pages and liberal-pinkish in its cultural sections, not long ago ran another of its advertisements for pro-communist books in the form of a review of *The Great Fear*, examined by Mr. Levine in this journal. As in its reports on Mitford and Gornick, the *Chicago Tribune* reviewer stated that the clear-cut anti-communism of the '40s and '50s was sinful, calamitous, repulsive, and, basically, an assault on innocent people and socially valuable organizations. It thus represented an ugly treason of American humanism and pluralism. The review was entitled: "A Painful Record that Illuminates a Dark Age." Why an epoch that brought America social stability, economic prosperity, flourishing of arts and crafts, and all-out progress in social mores, all of which became the entire planet's envy, can be called a "dark age" remains a mystery. Why the galactic American civilization should be characterized solely by its vigorous rejection of communism is another puzzle. The *Chicago Tribune's* review says that "the period was characterized by, above all, a suspension of due process of law," but does not mention the Rosenberg trial, considered even by America's foes a model of judiciary propriety unattainable even by the oldest European democracies. "Was there a viable Communist Party in America during the '30s and '40s? Did it present a legitimate threat to U.S. security?" asks the *Chicago Tribune* reviewer.

**W**ell, I am from Eastern Europe. Whenever I read about the tribulations of Mr. Hiss and his adversaries, who still do not believe what he has been repeating for 30 years, I find them peculiarly irrelevant. If he lied, or passed state secrets, which it seems he did, it is not very nice, and he should have been punished for it. But what matters to me is the fact that, according to quite reliable Polish intelligence sources in London (during six years of war, it saved the allied command a lot of trouble), Mr. Hiss had telephone extension No. 3 within the American delegation at Yalta. No. 1 was Roosevelt, No. 2 was Harry Hopkins. Mr. Hiss instructed them both in how to negotiate with Stalin.

All the Soviet objectives for the post-war global order were attained at Yalta. Entire populations were slaughtered in Gulags. Old nations with flourishing cultures went into slavery. This is why Mr. Alger Hiss, in keeping with my sense of reason and conscience, deserves a life term, if not more.

—Leopold Tyrmand

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I feel like an intruder when I read this book. This has to do with its "secrecy," with the fact that Solzhenitsyn wrote it without intending to publish it. It is also because in some important sense it is written not for the whole world, but for Russians and the other nationalities subjected to the Soviet regime. When he wrote this work, Solzhenitsyn did not think of audiences living in freedom beyond Soviet frontiers. In this his work contrasts with Nadezhda Mandelstam's *Hope Against Hope* and perhaps also with Andre Amalrik's *Involuntary Voyage to Siberia*. Mandelstam somehow writes for the whole world. As a result when you read her you do not doubt that her story is part of Western history, not merely of Soviet history—and the moral sense is deeper. It is deeper because she knows what goes on within the Soviet Union is a part of Western history. It might be, in fact, merely "an internal affair" as the Soviet regime asserts if there were agreed upon frontiers in Europe and a peace treaty. But the point about history in the twentieth century is that it neither respects frontier, nor the distinction between foreign and domestic affairs: if it would, the KGB would do abroad exactly what it does at home.

But there is another, perhaps deeper reason, for the sense of intrusion I experienced in reading *Gulag*. Solzhenitsyn really doubts whether anybody who has not been in the camps can understand. In part he doubts anybody can understand, because he himself did not understand until he was arrested at the front in Prussia in February 1945 and sent to the camps. Only then did he discover the other Russia. As a youth in the late thirties, he had seen through the trials of 1937 and 1938 (he was interested in politics). But he had not understood their relation to everything else going on before his eyes, to the students and teachers disappearing from the university. He saw them go but he did not wonder where they went; he had continued dancing and having loving affairs, as if nothing had happened. He says of himself and his wife in 1941: "We had

just lived through the thirties—and we might as well not have been alive in that decade at all." "And young men are so eager to believe that all is well."

This doubt that you can know anything before it hits you runs through the whole work, but in the last volume it grows overwhelming and turns into a question, a terrible question: did the *zeks* not resist enough, were they in some sense complicit with their tormentors? Reviews of *Ivan Denisovich* in the Soviet press which in reckless arrogance argued Denisovich's docility spurred Solzhenitsyn to ask this question of himself and his reader.

Were the *zeks* submissive? Yes, generally. Solzhenitsyn speaks in baffled admiration and with something like envy of those rare individuals in the camps who were naturally independent, who breathed an inner confidence and never suffered any abuse. But why was there almost no protest or defiance? Because in contrast to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century under the Tsars, in Soviet Russia there is no longer any public opinion. "The prolonged absence of any free exchange of information within a country opens up a gulf of incomprehension between whole groups of the population, between millions and millions. We simply *cease to be a single people*, for we speak, indeed, different languages."

Solzhenitsyn rightly considers his work and action and the work and action of the other "dissidents" the rebirth of public opinion in Russia. And new groups and new individuals keep springing up and works keep appearing in self-publication—even though in the free West some observers somehow expect things to stop.

In the fifties, before the death of Stalin, however, something happened in the camps. Those who were in the camps for no special reason (he calls them political) but in the second volume he has made it clear that they were not political prisoners in any "legal" sense but simply prisoners who had not committed crimes) were separated from the thieves and murderers and put into special

camps. No longer kept apart from each other by criminals who robbed them they began to experience something like community. They began to realize that they were not merely a collection of individuals and became in some sense a whole. They realized that there were things more important than survival if the price was the life of another. This awareness inspired defiance—not violence.

There was a strike in which prisoners refused to go to work and refused to take food from the camp administration (something he later came to consider a mistake). Even prisoners who were near death, "goners," refused food. The people in charge were baffled.

For the first time they treated the prisoners with some regard and asked them politely to return to work. The prisoners continued to strike. They did not ask to be released because they were innocent—but they asked for better treatment, for no bars on the windows, for a review of cases. In this defiance even though they were starving even more than usual there was energy and even a kind of joy. They were no longer ashamed because they knew they would no longer undergo any humiliation to survive. They also fashioned a kind of government. (More than the other two this volume meditates on what distinguishes society from a crowd. More than once it reminded me of Hobbes, except that Solzhenitsyn is less afraid than Hobbes—and he does not write of human beings but of Russians and not of society but of prison camps in a country which is in the state of nature but denies it—something Hobbes did not dream of in his philosophy.) Their leaders made it clear to the stool pigeons that they would kill them if they continued to inform on them. Some innocent men were killed (and Solzhenitsyn does not take any of the killing lightly) but their readiness to rid themselves of the prisoners who betrayed them made it possible for them to trust each other, to experience something like community for the first time. But they did not know what to ask for (beyond their few demands.) That is, they did not ask for freedom. When the people



in charge appeared to yield to their demands, they were crushed with gratitude. They grew gullible. When commissions came from the outside to ask them where they would like to go upon their release, they were astonished but they trusted. They believed things had actually changed. When they grew off their guard, the "authorities" turned on them and took their leaders away to punishment cells or to death and brought back the informers and the thieves and the murderers. (Diplomats should study these negotiations.) Although the defiance failed, it changed the camp permanently:

"On the surface, we were prisoners living in a camp just as before, but in reality we had become free—free because for the very first time in our lives, we had started saying openly and aloud all that we thought! No one who has not experienced this transition can imagine what it is like!"

The defiance drew the distinction between a community and a mob which exists in terror of itself. It also made it clear that such a community could not live without courage and that the readiness to risk one's life did not guarantee survival—but that without courage one could not survive to live a life worth living. It also taught that a courageous death has its own honor. All this seems like classical patriotism rediscovered in a concentration camp, but it is not, for the courage to stand alone of one's own choice contrasts with the soldier's courage. In the camps Solzhenitsyn saw to his surprise that officers and soldiers who had withstood the terrors of battle were often as servile as the other prisoners:

"Oh, how difficult it is, how difficult it is, to become a human being! Even if you have survived the front and bombing and been blown up by land mines, that's still only the very beginning of heroism. That is still not the whole thing."

What is innocence—that is the subject of this volume. This word innocence is very precious to Solzhenitsyn. He uses it rarely as if he would not use it up. He leaves it to the reader to pronounce. And we pronounce it hesitatingly. How hard it is to say it! The prisoners themselves, when they defied the camp "authorities," did not dare say it: "In the foul fog of terror that hung thickly over the land, the cases brought against most of us, and the sentences passed seemed to our judges fully justified—and they had almost made us believe it ourselves."

In the Tsarist camps there were one or two men who were innocent—in the Soviet camps there were millions. Solzhenitsyn's story is not of the guilty who repented in prison but of some of the innocent who came to experience their innocence in the camps and to stand alone in their own defense and the defense of their peers, the other innocents: "And it was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of Good." This meant also experiencing the evil, the destructiveness within them.

In free countries, or in Tsarist Russia, the establishment of innocence depended on the perception of others, on public opinion, on judges and juries, not on the accused's experience of his innocence—and his guilt. But in the Soviet Union, where there is no public opinion only organized opinion, and where there is no law (independent of political expediency), every accused and condemned individual is driven to accuse himself

and to be judge in his own case. As a result these individuals face only the most unsparing judges, themselves. For everybody is severest on himself, most of all those who imagine they are not.

No regime which commits the murder reported in this book can survive unless it can bring the governments of the rest of the world, especially the free world, to assert things that they know are not true: "Ours is the only country in the world to pamper perjurers."

But our governments do not appear to have realized that something has started in the Soviet Union which cannot be stopped even if the West caves in and thereby prolongs the force of the Soviet regime. They think and talk as if the Soviet regime will last forever. Like most of those who think otherwise, Solzhenitsyn knows the changes in Russia are going to have to come slowly from the Russians themselves. That is why he criticizes the attack on Stalin and the cult of personality as evasive: it feeds the illusion that only "Whiskers" is responsible for the murder:

"But let us admit: if under Stalin this whole scheme of things did not come into being on its own—and if, instead, he himself worked it out all for us point by point—he really was a genius!"

Just this assumption of their own responsibilities by Russians makes the responsibilities of the West more clear, because not limitless: to take actions in foreign policy that will strengthen the brave individuals in Russia who are fighting for respect for law and constitutional liberties—and not to mince words. □

*"As to this country's relations with the Communist states, we fear that Mr. Solzhenitsyn does the world no favor by calling up a holy war. The weapons are far too formidable, the stakes in human life far too high. But there is something else as well. Much as we have been instructed and inspired by Mr. Solzhenitsyn, his willingness to set aside all other values in the crusade against Communism bespeaks an obsession that we are happy to forego in this nation's leaders. A certain amount of self-doubt is a valuable attribute for people who have charge of nuclear weapons."*

—From an editorial on Solzhenitsyn's Commencement Address at Harvard University  
*The New York Times*, June 13, 1978