

The First Circle

THE FIRST CIRCLE. By Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn. New York: Bantam Books. 1969. 675 pp. \$1.50 (pb).

In *The First Circle* there occurs a portrait of Josef Stalin in his final years—a portrait more unforgettable than any historian's biography. We see the dictator ensconced in a secret residence outside Moscow, reading and reflecting until dawn, justifying his place in history, ordering the arrest and imprisonment of others on the barest suspicion or no grounds at all except spite, and taking utmost precautions for his own safety.

The aging dictator's vanity, his elaborate justifications to himself of his own behavior, his suspicion of everyone, his paralyzing fear of death, his fear lest perhaps his rejected childhood religion be true after all, his growing forgetfulness and senility—all this is mercilessly portrayed, down to the last idiosyncratic detail of his mental processes and behavior. "The left side of his head," writes Solzhenitsyn (p. 134), "seemed to be tightening at the temple and pulling in that direction. His chain of thoughts disintegrated. With an empty stare he circled the room, hardly seeing the walls. Growing old like a dog. An old age without friends. An old age without love. An old age without faith. An old age without desire. He did not even need his beloved daughter any longer, and she was permitted to see him only on holidays. That sensation of fading memo-

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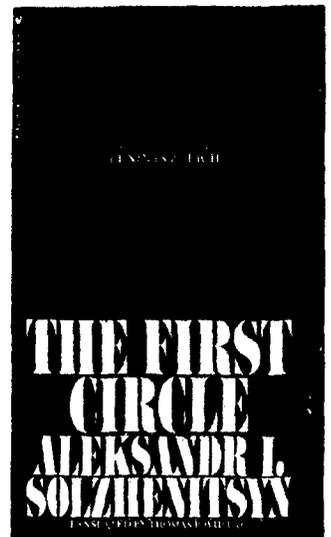
ry, of failing mind, of loneliness advancing on him like a paralysis, filled him with helpless terror."

He was haunted too by the memory of those whom he had killed, whose books were now on the shelves beside him. "Here they were, on these shelves—choked, shot, ground into manure in the camps, poisoned, burned, killed in automobile accidents or by their own hand . . . Every night they offered him their pages, they shook their little beards, they wrung their hands, they spat on him, they wheezed, they cried out to him from the shelves: 'We warned you! you should have done it another way!'"

Like Tolstoy, Solzhenitsyn has a remarkable ability to reproduce every relevant visual and auditory detail. Of all the things one has read about Stalin's life, only Solzhenitsyn's portrait remains vivid and compelling, seared into the reader's memory forever. If *The First Circle* had accomplished nothing but this, it would be well worth reading.

But the portrait of Stalin is only a very small part of the novel, no more noteworthy than any other. The novel is about the inmates of a large prison, Mavrino, on the outskirts of Moscow (time: Christmas season 1949), in which several hundred trained men, chiefly engineers and electricians, have been incarcerated for the purpose of making technological breakthroughs to be used by the Soviet government. The novel is about these men, their histories, their life in prison, their interactions with one another.

The prison rules are highly restrictive, and yet this is among the best of all Soviet prisons: it is, in the language of Dante's *Inferno*, the first (uppermost) circle of hell—hence the title of the book. Here the prisoners labor day after day, without compensation, under constant threat of deportation, guarded carefully day and night, re-



ceiving only censored mail (at infrequent intervals), able to visit their wives only once a year for a half-hour period in the presence of a guard, condemned to a life of constant labor during their entire prison sentence—a sentence that is usually 25 years. The men have no hope at all of rejoining their families during their most fruitful years; their children will grow up never seeing them; and in many cases their wives divorce them in order to have some kind of life before old age comes.

The First Circle is a tale of lost youth, wasted energies, life under senseless and innumerable regulations and pointless tyranny. The only way Stalin comes into the story is that one of the inmates discovers a process for whose approval a higher officer is needed, who in turn needs the approval of Abukamov, the assistant to Stalin, who in turn must clear it with "the boss" himself. And thus, for some pages, the moving finger of the narrative turns to Stalin, and then away again.

The structure of the novel is a thing

of wheels within wheels. There are at least 30 *major* characters, whose histories cross and criss-cross throughout the novel. Solzhenitsyn does not, as Dostoyevsky often does, introduce a character by devoting a whole chapter to his background and history and then (as often as not) hardly bothering to reintroduce him again. Solzhenitsyn usually introduces a character quite off-handedly through conversation with another, already familiar, character. He shows him in action for some time, and then he will devote a chapter to him (usually on his life before prison) that makes the character come alive before us and brings all his actions previously depicted into sharp and sudden focus. Each character is a continuing strand in the novel; once introduced, he is usually not heard of again for some time, during which other actions and characters are portrayed.

The structure of the book is like that of the later novels of Dostoyevsky (*The Possessed*, *The Brothers Karamazov*) except that it is more carefully organized: the fabric is just as complex, but less given to character details that are irrelevant to the thrust of the action. Every detail in Solzhenitsyn counts, and all the apparently loose ends are tied together in the end. But in his manner of description and characterization he is much more like the Tolstoy of *War and Peace*, the novel that this one most closely resembles.

In Dostoyevsky we get a vivid portrayal of the inner life of the characters, but very little conception of external details—the look, the feel, and the smell of the Russian earth in winter and in spring, the facial and gestural details of the various characters, a feeling of the Russian landscape and the changes of the seasons. Both Tolstoy and Solzhenitsyn have a vivid eye for this kind of detail. Solzhenitsyn is, indeed, a 20th-century Tolstoy; that is the quickest way to summarize him with any accuracy.

Just as Tolstoy's subject matter in his greatest novel was the impact on Russian life of the Napoleonic invasion of 1812, so Solzhenitsyn's in this novel is the impact on Russian life of the Stalin era, including the war, the collectivization of the land, and most of all the secret police—the arrests in the night, the incarcerations and interrogations, the prisons and the labor camps strung out like an archipelago of islands ("The Gulag Archipelago," to which Solzhenitsyn makes frequent reference in this novel) throughout the 5,000-mile breadth of the Russian north. His picture of it is devastating

and unforgettable.

From it, we know not only the historical facts of what happened but how it felt to the people involved in it—from the dictator who ordered it and the bureaucrats who administered it to the millions of victims whom it left lifeless or homeless. We learn how it feels to be imprisoned for a 25-year sentence and never to see one's family again, to fear every knock at the door of one's home, to be thrown into the Lubyanka, into months of solitary confinement under blazing lights, one's personality gradually stripped away, leaving only a feeble organism who will do anything, tell anything, just to receive a single bowl of thin soup or a promise not to be tortured for a single day.

The novel opens with a dramatic incident in which a young diplomat, Volodin, makes a telephone call to a university professor warning him that he will soon be arrested. The connec-

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tion is cut off, and Volodin suspects that the secret police have tapped the line. The fear of it dogs his steps from that moment on, but we hear no more of him for many pages. Fourteen chapters later, we learn that the principal new project at the Mavrino prison is the phonetic separation of recorded sounds so that each individual's voice pattern can be isolated. Volodin does not reappear as a character in the drama until some 400 pages later, when he is shown trying to drown his fears in alcohol at a large diplomatic party.

In the next chapter, when the scene switches back to Mavrino and the speech-pattern project, we learn that among five suspects in the case of the phone call to the professor, two voices (of which Volodin's is one) may belong to the guilty person. The prosecutor in charge says that in that event both will be arrested and executed. "But one of them is not guilty!" says the project's engineer. "What do you

mean, not guilty?" is the reply (p. 592); "not guilty of anything at all? The security organizations will find something." A couple of chapters later, Volodin is arrested and taken to the Lubyanka, and there in a few horrifying chapters we learn of the techniques used, in windowless, airless cells, to force compliance of prisoners and extract confessions from them before their execution. Any reader could be challenged to read these chapters and still be able to fix his mind on anything else during the next few days, so shattering is the impact of Solzhenitsyn's description. And quite incidentally we learn that the other suspect, who is innocent, has also been arrested and executed.

In following through the many interrelated threads that constitute the tapestry of this great novel, we learn many things about the Soviet Union that cannot help but shock us, though they are mentioned only in passing. For example: (1) Prisoners were supposed to protest the conditions of political prisoners in Greece (p. 162), who were sending telegrams from their cells about their sufferings to the parliaments of the world and the United Nations, while even in the best prison in Russia ("the first circle") the prisoners were not permitted to send so much as a postcard to their wives.

(2) We learn (p. 387) how one of the prisons was suddenly sterilized, carpeted, and otherwise sanitized, ikons put on the wall, and the prisoners returned to this refurbished cell for one day only, while an American representative of the United Nations came to visit. Much-impressed by the religious freedom she concluded existed in Russia from seeing the ikons and impressed also by the cleanliness of the cells and the lack of complaints by prisoners (they had been threatened with Siberia if any of them dared complain), she returned to America to give a glowing account of Soviet prison conditions—after which the prisoners were returned to the cell, 60 to a cell made for 20, meanwhile uncarpeted again, with the ikons removed.

(3) One of the engineers at Mavrino is called in by the warden on account of his wife's letters. The wife, being married to a prisoner, can obtain no legal employment; her diet and that of her children consists of a few potatoes a day; there is no fuel for the winter ("coal doesn't go to the people but to the bosses"). The commandant's advice to the engineer, after demanding that he keep his wife from complaining, is: "Tell her she should believe in God. Why not? Otherwise what is all

this? Where is it leading? Calm her down, tell her you'll be coming soon."

(4) We learn again and again about the actual grounds of imprisonment in Soviet Russia. One of the engineers in Mavrino had been "imprisoned for anti-Soviet propaganda, the result of a denunciation cooked up by some neighbors who wanted his apartment, and afterward got it. It became clear subsequently that he had not engaged in any such propaganda, though he could have, since he listened to the German radio. Then it turned out that he didn't listen to the German radio, but he *could* have listened to it since he had a forbidden radio receiver at home. And when it appeared that he didn't have any such radio receiver, it was still true that he *could* have had one since he was a radio engineer by profession." (p. 549.) And on the basis of this last allegation he was imprisoned for 25 years.

Even more than the mastery of a complex story, it is the gallery of characterizations drawn by Solzhenitsyn that is unforgettable. One aspect of his genius is that, in spite of the large number of characters and the absence of any one of them from the narrative for long stretches, each one is indelibly etched upon the mind of the reader by the time the story is over. It is impossible in a brief review to provide even a sketch of the important characters; but through them we learn of Russian life during World War II, of what happened to those in the path of the German armies who (believing anything to be better than Stalin's tyranny) joined the other side, of the grinding poverty and mass starvation, of the fear and dread of every family that one of them might at any moment be arrested and never heard from again.

One will not soon forget, for example, the janitor at Mavrino prison, Spiridon Yegorov, who weaves in and out of the narrative until (pp. 452 ff.) two chapters are devoted to him: intelligent, impervious to political propaganda, devoted totally to his wife and family, he does anything he is told, to keep his family together. At last he is separated from his family: he and his wife and two children are sent in separate railway cars to various Arctic labor camps; he never hears from any of them again. Because of his engineering background he is transferred to Mavrino, where in "the first circle" he escapes the death that presumably overtakes the rest of his family.

Unforgettable also is Ruska Doronin, at 23 the youngest inmate of Mavrino, who spent part of his adolescence in Arctic labor camps and is

only reprieved to Mavrino in order to become an informer within the prison. Ruska is supposed to report all conversations that could be construed as anti-Soviet, but, being a warm, outgoing human being, he is unable to inform on them other than with tales so preposterous that the authorities see through them. At last he announces to his fellow prisoners that he is an informer, and his usefulness to the commandants is at an end. Finally he is taken from Mavrino, interrogated, beaten, and shipped back to Vorkuta, on a labor detail guaranteed soon to end his life through starvation or freezing or exhaustion, in spite of his tremendous energy and zest for life.

Most tellingly portrayed of all, perhaps, is the mathematician Gleb Nerzhin, 31, one of the most talented among the prisoners at Mavrino. We first see him, interwoven among the other characters, a reservoir of enormous energy, determined to keep his mind and body functioning at full ca-

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capacity even under prison conditions. Gradually we learn of Nerzhin's intense love for his wife, of the depth of his silent despair at his 25-year sentence.

"Nerzhin had since adolescence been hearing a mute bell—all the groans, cries, shouts of the dying, carried by a steady insistent wind away from human ears At the age of 12 he had gone through an enormous pile of *Izvestiya* as tall as he was, and he had read about the trial of the saboteur engineers. From the very first, the boy did not believe what he read. He did not know why . . . but he could clearly see that it was all a lie. He knew engineers in his friends' families, and he could not imagine them committing sabotage." (p. 234.) And so the main purpose of his life becomes to understand why—why it should be like this, why it had happened, and how to stop it. "He went about dreaming of the day he would sort everything out"

A person of tremendous energy and intelligence, Nerzhin tries to keep his mind alert and uncorrupted through the prison years, to survive as a full human being under the most impossible conditions. He helps other prisoners to the limit of his ability. But in the end he too is defeated, shipped off to a slave labor camp in the Arctic, where death in a short time is a virtual certainty. "Writel" entreats one of the prisoners as Nerzhin leaves. But "they both laughed In prison this request was a mockery. Correspondence between the islands of Gulag did not exist." (p. 660.) "We shall meet again!" cries another, for whose rights as a prisoner Nerzhin had fought, even at the price of hunger and punishment. "Where shall we meet again?" Nerzhin sighs. "At the Kotlas transit prison? At the Indigirika mines? I can hardly believe we'll run into each other strolling along a city sidewalk, can you?"

And so it is goodbye forever. "Yes," writes Solzhenitsyn (p. 673), "the taiga and the tundra awaited them, the record cold of Oymyakon and the copper excavations of Dzhezkazgan; pick and barrow; starvation rations of soggy bread; the hospital; death. The very worst. But there was peace in their hearts. They were filled with the fearlessness of those who have lost *everything*, the fearlessness which it is not easy to come by, but which endures."

And so we say goodbye to the true heroes of Russia, their greatness lost forever through death in prisons, in mines, in labor camps. What grieves the reader most is the thought of what *could have been*. The tragedy of *The First Circle*, like all great tragedies from Aeschylus to the present, is the tragedy of *waste*—the needless waste of human energy, human potential, human life.

There is no doubt, however, where Solzhenitsyn places the blame. It is not with the bureaucrats who carry out the orders; it is not even with Stalin; it is with the intellectuals, the utopian theorists of socialism. In a little-noted passage (p. 267), Ruska Doronin declares: "If I cried about everything, I wouldn't have enough tears. I'm not the only one. They sent me to Vorkuta—and what a bunch of thugs they have there! . . . All Vorkuta depends on prisoners, the whole Northland. It's the fulfillment of Thomas More's dream."

"Whose dream? I'm sorry, there's so much I don't know."

"Thomas More, the old fellow who wrote *Utopia*. He had the conscience to admit that society would always re-

quire various kinds of menial and hard labor. No one would be willing to perform them. Who should? More thought about it and found the solution: obviously there would be people in a socialist society, too, who disobeyed the rules. They would get the menial and especially tough jobs. So the camps were thought up by Thomas More; it's an old idea."

As a final ironic touch, the prisoners are shipped from Mavrino to the various interrogation centers in Mos-

cow (for shipment to the labor camps), in large windowless cars. But, says Solzhenitsyn (p. 670), "the time had long since passed when lead-grey or black prison vans poked through city streets, creating terror among the citizens. After the war, the idea of building Black Marias exactly like the grocery vans had been born in some genius' mind, and they were painted the same orange and light blue, with a sign letter on the side in four languages," reading either "Meat" or

"Bread." At the very end of the novel, a correspondent for a French newspaper, on the way to attend a hockey match in a Moscow stadium, sees the car that is driving Nerzhin and the other prisoners to their doom. Having seen several such cars that day, he writes for his Paris newspaper: "On the streets of Moscow one often sees vans filled with foodstuffs, very neat and hygienically impeccable. One can only conclude that the provisioning of the capital is excellent." □

NATIONAL SUICIDE: MILITARY AID TO THE SOVIET UNION

James J. Martin

NATIONAL SUICIDE: MILITARY AID TO THE SOVIET UNION. By Antony Sutton. New Rochelle: Arlington House. 1973. 289 pp. \$8.95.

In 1937 and 1938 I was employed as a paper handler in a major magazine printing factory. The most interesting member of the gang could, over a glass or two of *grappa* when the shift was over, be induced to talk rather animatedly about his experiences in Soviet Russia a decade earlier, installing in Communist textile mills the famous knitting machines produced in a small New Hampshire city. It was my first near-direct contact with the subject involved in a more special fashion in Antony C. Sutton's *National Suicide: Military Aid to the Soviet Union*.

In one sense the supply of any product to someone construed as an enemy can be designated as of ultimate military consequence, as in the British blockade against Napoleon, for instance. It may therefore be rather sophistical to discriminate between the supply of machine guns as against prosaic foodstuffs, which can be even

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more crucial in determining the efficient staying power of an enemy's *entire* armed forces, or textile machinery, which makes possible the adequate clothing of his total population. Even toys may be defined as "war goods" as a consequence of their potential contribution to armament workers' morale and productivity via pacification of their children. The point in raising these matters is that Sutton's book provokes far more questions than it answers.

Sutton's account of the tidal wave of engineering genius and products from the United States to the U.S.S.R. is impressive, though one might become confused as to whose "suicide" he is suggesting—among those supplying the Soviets with military and naval muscle are most of the other industrial countries of the world as well.

He also is not clear anywhere as to which segment of the American system is responsible for this. At one place he charges the executive: "All presidential administrations, from that of Woodrow Wilson to that of Richard Nixon, have followed a bipartisan foreign policy of building up the Soviet Union." In other places he finds the State and Commerce Departments the key factors, and at still another the Congress is found to be making the basic decisions resulting in massive supply of strategic goods to the U.S.S.R.

Though he names scores of firms involved in this enterprise, Sutton is extremely gentle in dealing with Big Business and Big Finance, forces that

surely have more than casual impact on this program. (The entry of Big Agriculture into the picture is a recent development, though the pressure to engage in massive grain exports to the Communists is the most obvious of all the "special interests" in action.)

News that Americans were building the largest truck manufacturing plant in the world a few hundred miles east of Moscow on the Kama River was followed early this year by a release from the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, listing nearly 600 major firms now trading with Soviet Russia. The firms are fronted by a prestigious committee of 26 top figures in U.S. business and finance, including the heads of the U.S. Chamber

