

The Gulag Archipelago

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The book made a deep impact when it arrived on the scene in the mid-seventies. I bought it back then, in fact it and its sequel (there would all in all be three of them) back when they were just published (first edition paperbacks as a matter of fact). I read the first, I doubt I read the second, and I never bothered to get the third. With this I am typical, as pointed out by Martin Amis in his book on Koba¹, the first volume made the bestseller list, with subsequent ones the sales plummeted, although he assures us, the books kept getting better. Now why did the books and the concomitant revelations cause such a stir?

In my childhood Soviet Union represented the Dark power, in which unspeakable acts against its citizens were perpetrated. This bad reputation was also confirmed by Swedish history, where Russia was portrayed as the powerful enemy threatening to engulf Sweden. There was a Cold War going on, in which Sweden thanks to its proximity to the dangerous enemy, was felt to be placed in a particularly precarious position. Were those fears unfounded? Where they not universally shared in the West? One explanation for them was that they were political. They were simply the expression of a bourgeois sentiment, a fear of the working classes and their righteous power to deprive them of unearned and undeserved privileges. Of course when I was a child I had no ideas about Socialism and Communism, in fact I became suspicious of them because they somehow were connected with the Soviet Union (or more deeply - Russia) and then they had to be bad. In fact when I later heard about Marxism and that Marx was a German, I was greatly surprised that the Russians would acknowledge a German, a foreigner; did they not always champion their own? I grew up in a fairly liberal, if ostensible conservative home, first generation academic and definitely non-working class. With the advent of Socialism in Swedish politics, much was made of class differences, but unlike more socially advanced countries with longer traditions, class divisions do not go very deeply in Sweden, at the time of my childhood you only needed to go back three or at most four generations, and the great majority of people would be indistinguishable in social standing. It is quite possible that there would be a sizable minority of Swedes, say some five to ten percent, who would actually see in the Soviet Union something positive, if not a paradise, at least not yet. And on the continent, such as in France and Italy that minority would be much more sizable. The fifties flowed into the sixties, and socialism and anti-Americanism became much more prevalent, partly because of the Vietnam war that dominated the decade. The West now became the great enemy, be it in a much more abstract way, just as all other forms of self-hatred and self-abuse. The thirties had been such a time, when the great crash and the ensuing depression fueled severe disappointment with capitalism and encouraged the emergence of authoritative regimes becoming more and more fascist. The sixties on the

¹ Actually one of the first reviewed in my series

other hand was a period of unprecedented prosperity and the first postwar generation were about to come into their own. The thirties was a time of a profound crisis which the War miraculously had solved, while the sixties were a time of frivolity, most notably so called sexual liberation, and possibly the first time in modern history of truly non-historical consciousness. While the thirties was a time of genuine desperation, the sixties was one of an excess of comfort, when the basic problems of quotidian life had been solved (and we are of course talking about the West) and there was time and energy for cultural introspection. The sixties was the time of the initiation of the mass-movements - mass-consumerism, mass-tourism, mass-education, and what had previously been the privilege of a thin elite could now be enjoyed on a much greater scale. In a way the prosperity that Socialist propaganda had once promised, now actually had been achieved, a wealthy welfare society, as a result not of Revolution but of a pragmatic cooperation between Socialism and Capitalism. The situation in Western Europe and the one in the US was different, but until the eighties not that different, the States too had had its 'socialist welfare' period under the New Deal, with support both from Democrats and Republicans, until their later divergence, as the century was approaching its close. Thus it is tempting to see the sixties as a farcical repeat of the tragic thirties. The thirties had the Civil War in Spain, which was a formative experience for the generation young at the time; while thirty years later it was the Vietnam War; but the engaged protesters of the past actually served as volunteers, not seldom paying with their lives, while thirty years later there were no volunteers, and just as well.

So while by the early seventies an apologetic attitude towards the Soviet Union had taken hold of liberally minded people pointing out that the USA had forfeited its moral capital through its ill advised adventure in South-East Asia (which was in many ways a natural extension of the Korean war a decade earlier). The revelations of Solzhenitsyn put these people in a quandary. One could of course reject it all as fabrications (but the opening up of the archives after the implosion of the Soviet Union twenty years late, not only confirmed the picture painted by Solzhenitsyn, but added more detail and deepened it, showing that this would not have been a viable reaction²) or come to terms with the fact that the Stalin's terror rivaled that of Hitler, in fact exceeding it in scale if not necessarily in cruelty. Stalinist terror was of course not unknown, the spectacle of the staged trials of the late thirties had already given Stalin a tarnished image; but that was just the very surface of the terror, involving at most a few hundred of the party elite, and could easily be explained as the necessary ruthlessness of a strong man at the helm, to crush threats to State Security through class enemies. The absurd propaganda was forgiven, especially in view of Russia's victory over the undefeatable German war machine. Stalin was our ally after all (who also took the brunt). In leftist circles, loyal and committed to the building of Socialism, the Revolution was betrayed by Stalin, the outcome would of course have been quite different had Lenin lived longer and Trotsky prevailed. This is also the impression one gets reading about the Russian revolution today. It was a necessary step in a chaotic situation following the collapse of a rotten state when there really were

² Solzhenitsyn has been accused of his historical work not measuring up to professional standards. This might be correct but it is unjust nevertheless. How could he have conducted impeccable research in the circumstances he was caught in? And as noted his work was vindicated when archives were opened.

no alternatives. Necessary in retrospect maybe, but hardly at the time. Russia, with its primitive agricultural economy and a negligible urban industrial Proletariat was hardly prime material for a classical Marxist vision of a Revolution. In fact the Bolsheviks dithered and the taking of the decisive step was a gamble pushed by Trotsky and supported by Lenin (and Stalin played no rôle whatsoever). The Revolution was high on moral sentiment, the building of a just and prosperous state, guided by the will of the Proletariat, easily confused by the People at large. Solzhenitsyn claimed that this was but a myth. The Revolution was after all a brutal thing (crushing eggs to prepare an omelet) and the seeds of terror was sown from the very beginning. Of course not at the same scale as the one practiced by Stalin, but Rome was not built in one day. To claim that Stalinist-type terror would also have been the case, had Lenin lived on and Trotsky prevailed, is of course a non-falsifiable counter-factual statement, but to document abuses during the early Revolutionary phase is something quite different, and then it us up to the readers to draw their individual conclusions. The Bolshevik take over, was not so much a Revolution but a cleverly staged coup d'état supported by the most fickle of allies, namely luck. As such it was, as already noted, brutal and meant a rejection of democracy. The Bolsheviks were not interested in such bourgeois compunctions they wanted a dictatorship of the Proletariat, which meant in practice a dictatorship of its self-appointed representatives. The fragile democratic plant, that had been planted during the failed revolution of 1905, which had led to a backlash (but not necessarily a permanent one if left to itself), had not been able to grow strong enough to stand on its own twelve years later. Kerensky is seen by most historians, irrespective of of political color, as a bumbler. Had he been replaced, or not come to the fore, the outcome may have been different, but once again counter-factual speculation is as seductive as it is meaningless. In fact what Solzhenitsyn documentation shows is that the hated Tsarist regime was in comparison with what would come later an idyllic part of Russian history. True it persecuted its enemies, of whom there were admittedly more than a handful (but not much more), and even executed some of them; but its scale was strikingly modest, and the punishment, mostly in form of exiles, it meted out surprisingly humane. To be a revolutionary was 'sexy' and to be banished a badge of honor, and it did, if anything, provide a time of rest and recuperation, such a striking contrast to the Gulag-experience. The Soviet period easily comes across as the darkest period of Russian history, and Stalin and his regime stands out to be almost Medieval, Joseph a worthy successor of Ivan the terrible. He might not have been as cruel as his infamous predecessor, on the other hand his cruelty affected many more people. It is with relief many of us saw the end of the Soviet era, a period of isolation and stagnation, that set back the course of Russian history a couple of generations. Lost years if any. Yet the end of it proved to be as chaotic as the end of Tsardom, and extended over time as well. Stability was only returned by the advent of a classical 'strong man' to whom the populace shows surprising loyalty (the same phenomenon could be seen with Trump, who however was imprisoned in a constitutional democracy with an extended tradition, hampering him from fully flowering out). Having been a KGB man, he grew up in the Soviet system of surveillance and suppression, which must have formed him, which no repudiations of the former, supposedly Communist system can undo. Would it have been better if the monarchical rule had been preserved, if modernized and made constitutional?

Once again a counter-factual question. However, this, as well as my remark above of a closed dark chapter in Russian history, belies an implicit faith in progress, similar to the one when we believe that increased complexity, in particular the emergence of intelligence, is the inevitable consequence of evolution. The liberal Western democracies may rather than being inevitable outcomes of maturing societies, be a fluke of history, and there is no guarantee that they will spread and remain. One may naively believe that extended trade and cultural contacts will have a civilizing effect, but the case of China seems to prove that this is not necessarily true.

As noted, I first read the book almost fifty years ago, and I remember very little of the details as opposed to the general drift. I remember a footnote, which shocked me at the time, that unlike its Soviet's counterparts Gestapo was actually interested to get to the truth during an investigation. I also was struck by so many victims were actual loyal Communists, and hence that the devotion to the ideology could be seen as praiseworthy and that the regime became doubly repulsive by betraying its devoted supporters. The author himself was a convinced Marxist at the time, part of the supporting, enabling and loyal public; and what changed his mind was not so much his imprisonment as such and the hardships it entailed, as getting in contact with fellow prisoners and learning through conversations. Solzhenitsyn himself got off rather lightly, which does not however mean that one should underestimate his ordeal. What made him survive was his own fortitude, after all he had been through a grueling war, and his curiosity and dedication to become a witness, always seeking out fellow prisoners to talk to and as a consequence to learn from and get human support, aided him; but that would probably not have been enough, as he admits, to survive his full sentence. The regime was cruel and capricious but also rational. Many of the victims had very useful qualities and possessed valuable skills which it would be wasteful not to exploit. The presence of special skills were looked for and the author wrote down in an inspired moment of hubris, that he was a nuclear physicist. Not that he knew any, except for some superficial knowledge he had picked up at the university before the war, but like a conman he thought that he might swing it anyway. And that was his luck, deserved or not, and he was moved to a special camp, the First Circle of his early work. Anyway he had had enough of a sniff of camp life to get his imagination going, and that is all what an author needs, if an experience is too literal it becomes a dead-end and is unable to rise from the purely personal (like a physical pain) to be shared with others. It simply does not stimulate the imagination, which, even when it deals with the horrible, has an element of joy in it.

Solzhenitsyn's 'Gulag' had two effects. The effect on the liberal, somewhat leftist segment, was one of slight shame and provoked a need to reconsider, if only gently so; this we have already alluded to; the more direct and uncomplicated effect was on the rightist and harsh Cold Warriors. Solzhenitsyn's revelations were grist to their mills and gave them reassurance and support in their views. And indeed Soviet-American relations would deteriorate during the eighties with the rise of Reagan and Reaganism, after having gone through a period of a tentative normalization with intermittent setbacks such as the invasions of Czechoslovakia in 68 and Afghanistan in 79. But Solzhenitsyn would disappoint them all. After his expulsion from the Soviet Union in 1974 and a shorter stay in West-Germany he moved to the States two years later and settled in Vermont where

he lived in isolation fully devoted to his work. Although praising the liberal democracies of the West, to whom he in one sense owed his life, he took exception to the Western lifestyle so centered on consumerism and so lacking in true spirituality. Having been a Marxist atheist in his youth he now embraced Russian Orthodox Christianity and rumors, justifiable or not, pictured him as a Russian Ayatollah would he achieve power. He did not achieve any power, and it is doubtful that he even thought of getting any, but he supposedly became a supporter of Putin, which may be surprising as he appears to the Western eye as the living fossil of a Soviet Apparatchnik. But Putin revived the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russian society (something Stalin also might have done, had he found it expedient) and did at least stand up to the West and returned to the Russians a modicum of self-respect. But whatever Solzhenitsyn's future development it has little if any bearing upon what he revealed, which should be judged on its merit, which is entirely different from that of the messenger.

It is a depressing book, and in fact as most readers concluded, 'enough is enough' and felt little motivation to subject themselves to more and more of the same. Western readers are after all outsiders, they may want to titillate themselves to some horror, but the horror does not concern them as much as they do Russian readers, who in spite of similar revulsion and fatigue still cannot help to want to find out more. But it is also a book which is fun to read as we enjoy the pleasures of vicarious suffering without having to be physically affected. Solzhenitsyn is a very good writer and he manages to hold your attention by sharing his indignation. This is of course done through his active imagination, which had been kindled but not killed by his experiences. And to imagine is a joyful activity, maybe the most joyful we know of, and that affects through contagion.

First, why is that which is reported on so horrible after all? We are all going to die sooner or later, so when and how it happens, what significance will it have to posterity, let alone the distant one? Life is a no ending sequence of suffering from cradle to the grave, why bother? This is the high-minded view, and no doubt eagerly adopted by people like Stalin. So let us be more specific. Is not war worse? War also entails death, pointless deaths of mostly innocents. There is of course a difference between the death of soldiers, even if exploited as cannon fodder, and the collateral death of civilians (the first we tend to accept, the second we cannot but regret, but shit happens). Solzhenitsyn had himself been involved in combat putting his life at risk, but its horrors seems to have paled in comparison with that of his arrest. Could it be that soldiers at least keep their dignity. Being sick is also a great misfortune, and the suffering of someone painfully mortally sick must rival the ordeals of a prisoner? But Solzhenitsyn had also been mortally sick, and even if this put a mark on him, it was not comparable to that of his imprisonment, even if that had been rather mild. Added to the debilitating pain of torture is the addition of the psychological aspect, namely that of humiliation and the awareness of evil and malicious intent directed against you. The combination if not killing you outright often made you insane. You can put up with a lot of pain and discomfort as long as you are convinced it is in your best interest; not intended to destroy you but help you. In the author's narrative there is little emphasis on torture, although there are of course indications of it, and from a literary point of view, that is the most efficient way of conveying its awfulness as it is also a gentle way to do it. Most of the account is taken up by the petty discomforts and

humiliations which are imposed on the prisoners; sometimes maliciously but more often, one suspects, through sheer expediency considering the scale of the operation of running the Gulag. We are being privy to sleeplessness (something which is supposed to be one of the most painful means of torture, which surprise us who have never missed more than one nights sleep), to deprivation of food, dirty food, and all those petty issues of hygiene which arise when humans are overcrowded in small enclosures. Overfilled latrine buckets, and if those are present, that it is even a blessing, people forced to empty their bowels in their beds, shit dripping down to people below. Truly disgusting, and as it is closest to the experiences, or potential experiences, of readers, the one thing that their imagination most easily gets a purchase on. In fact this belongs to what sticks in your memory, when everything else have been forgotten. The 20th century was a terrible one, and lucky you are, that you were saved from it all (but are the horrors of the 21st century to descend upon us?). It might have prevented you from taking a more spiritual view of life, but maybe a spiritual view of life is to be considered a consolation not a goal.

Before leaving the topic of the book, there is yet another thing which stands out in my memory of my first reading and confirmed almost half a century later, and that is the presence of ordinary criminals mixed in with the political ones. Those are depicted as sub-human fiends, evil incarnate, pure devils, the purpose of whom (which?) is to append further humiliation and suffering to the poor political prisoners, the enemies of the state. (And of course it is far worse to attack the state than to murder mere individuals and/or relieve them of their property, after all, according to the saying of Proudhon, property is theft). The depiction of the criminals attacks, not necessarily intentionally, the notion so haughtily upheld nowadays of the equal value of all human beings, predominantly by people who consider those that do not hold such views, as of less than equal value to themselves.

But if the hapless criminals are subhuman, what should one think of the individuals which make up the whole machinery of repression? Are they also just victims of the system, stuck in rôles not of their making? The overlap between guards, interrogators, persecutors, and general bureaucratic support, and the victims is non-negligible (although should not be exaggerated). People at all levels were at risk, and in fact the higher and the more conspicuous, the greater. There is some poetic justice to this, but I suspect inevitable in any developed apparatus of repression. Another question is one of repressiveness. An individual murder has in general no consequences as to society but when murders are piling up, one may ask how it affects society. But by rephrasing it this way, we subtly change the standards of judging. The terror unleashed by Stalin did not destroy society (although the forced agricultural measures came close to it, resulting in the starvation of millions, maybe more than those that perished in camps, although their stories are mostly unsung), in fact industrial production increased and soared during the War enabling the ultimate victory, and by such measures Stalin can be judged similarly to Mao, as having been 30 percent wrong and 70 percent right. After all, the number of dead does not exceed the number of living. Why not concentrate on the fact that many more survived than died, and people are willing to claim, that Stalin was not all bad! (Similar claims on similar reasoning can of course also be made for Hitler or other people of your choice. When you victims become numerous enough, they cease to be individuals and become mere statistics, which of course

mean that we can take a more objective view.!)

How to strike a balance between the interests of the individual versus the collective? Can a collective be happy and content, when all its individuals are miserable? Was Stalin able to make a distinction between his own individual interest and the collective one, meaning a truly Communist Society? And what would happen if the interests of the individuals are paramount, as they are all contradictory? In our own individual lives we also need to strike a balance between our private and our social. Some of it belongs only to us, and make sense only to us, the other part of it belongs to society. It is that part which is called work. A life solely led for your own amusement becomes shallow, a life only led for society, becomes a drudgery. Many of your experiences are reserved for your own future, but as you get older and older, the future gets shorter and shorter and can no longer hold all those riches, and in that case those experiences become meaningless. But experiences which you can share and pass on to future generations, novels, pieces of art, mathematical papers, can testify that your life was not meaningless, that it was not just for yourself but also for others. To strike the right balance between the individual and the collective, never forgetting that the latter is an abstraction and consists in individuals, is at the heart of the problem of making a good society, and the failure to balance results in tragedy regardless of political positioning.

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