

# The Gulag Archipelago: History Betrayed II

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## *Individual History*

Both the technological and the organic in Solzhenitsyn's organising imagery seem to propose structures and processes independent of human agency or control; and for Solzhenitsyn's idea of history, control is a crucial question. The role of the individual within history, the extent to which he can be held responsible or can change his situation, is left unexplained. The imagery of the Great Machine perhaps presupposes a Great Mechanic who originally constructed the device, and indeed when Solzhenitsyn's technocratic ideology issues into prescriptive injunctions its very substance is a belief in an individual or collective elite who should run society and its institutions; but the technological and structural images are not used in this way. Although one of the intentions of *The Gulag Archipelago* is to demonstrate a continuity between Lenin and Stalin, to prove the former an architect of later repression, the emphasis in the technological images of history is upon mechanical operations which take place over against the activity of individuals, including that of those people who apparently administer them. Yet the individual is for Solzhenitsyn the absolute subject of history:

The Universe has as many different centres as there are living beings in it. Each of us is a centre of the Universe . . . (*G.A.*, p. 3).

The individual is consequently expected to have moral responsibility and, in Solzhenitsyn's phrase, 'civil valour' (*G.A.*, p. 462), a concept upon which he puts much emphasis although it is ill-defined. He assigns to each of the Russian people some share in blame for allowing the Stalinist crimes to take place. He chides the passivity of the arrestees (including himself) and paradoxically, in view of categorical condemnations of violence he has issued, Solzhenitsyn advocates—or at least speculates on the efficacy of—armed resistance:

And how we burned in the camps later, thinking: What would things have been like if every State Security operative, when he went out at night to make an arrest, had been uncertain whether he would return alive and had to say goodbye to his family? . . . The Organs would very quickly have suffered a shortage of officers and transport and, notwithstanding all of Stalin's thirst, the cursed machine would have ground to a halt.

. . . We didn't love freedom enough. . . . We spent ourselves in

one unrestrained outburst in 1917, and then we hurried to submit. We submitted with pleasure. . . . We purely and simply *deserved* everything that happened afterward (*G.A.*, p. 13, n. 5).

This tendency to see historical processes in individual-moral terms, as questions of desire and deserving, is deeply embedded in Solzhenitsyn's historical understanding: for him it is in the 'history of morals' that 'everything else originates as well' (*G.A.*, p. 435). This idealism permeates the ideology thoroughly and yet co-exists uneasily with structural and organic forces simultaneously at work. The precise status of individual agency and accountability is ambiguous and this is exemplified by Solzhenitsyn's attitude to Stalin. His general view is that Stalinism was criminal—as distinct from, say, Sholokhov's view of it as tragic—and Stalin, with a few individuals around him, was principally culpable, a criminal, and in some sense a personal initiator of that historical nexus which bears his name.<sup>1</sup> And yet:

I . . . had long ago come to the conclusion that Stalin had set the course of the Soviet state in a fateful direction. But then Stalin died quietly—and did the ship of state change course very noticeably? The personal, individual imprint he left on events consisted of dismal stupidity, petty tyranny, self-glorification. And in all the rest he followed the beaten path exactly as it had been signposted, step by step (*G.A.*, p. 613, n. 4).

'Events' exist in an objective sense and Stalin (whom Solzhenitsyn also sees as their author—as in the reference to his 'thirst' in the passage quoted above) can only make an external and marginal 'imprint' on them. Stalin is either an author of history or merely a functionary of a degenerative process already set in motion.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Sign-posted Path from the Bolshevik Era*

The last image of this passage, that of a sign-posted path which the individual follows, is significantly connected with the teleology characteristic of Solzhenitsyn's attempts to perceive Stalinist repression in the very first months and years of the revolution. Solzhenitsyn's account of *Bolshevik* repression is prejudiced and imaginative. He resorts, for example, to enumerating the categories of people who *could* have been arrested according to various quotations from Lenin which he tears from their context. Working from the published speeches of Krylenko, chief state prosecutor from 1918 to 1931, he itemises (in another 'technological' rather than inherent structuring of his material) a number of trials which he uses to illustrate the arbitrary and unjust nature of Soviet courts. Yet, almost in spite of himself Solzhenitsyn tells us that under the Bolsheviks the accused were able to defend themselves freely, confessions were not extracted by

<sup>1</sup>Medvedev points out (*On Gulag Archipelago*, trans. Tamara Deutscher, *New Left Review* 85, 1974) that while Solzhenitsyn speaks of 'Stalinists' he has no concept called 'Stalinism'. Most of his references to Stalin are dropped out of the main text into footnotes; this obliqueness points the ambiguity.

<sup>2</sup>It could be argued that Stalin is *both* author and functionary of history, but the oppositions in Solzhenitsyn's ideology are mechanistically rigid and not dialectically mutual.

torture, and sentences were lenient. Corrective labour was often arranged so that the convicted person lived at home and worked on some public project. The cases themselves also militate against Solzhenitsyn's argument. The 'Case of the Three Prosecutors (*G.A.*, p. 311) recounts the prosecution of three corrupt *state* officials *by the state*; and in a further case to which Solzhenitsyn refers another official, Kosyrev (*G.A.*, p. 314), this time a member of the Control and Auditing Commission of the Cheka itself, was shot for his part in various corrupt dealings. Far from indicating gratuitous repression these cases indicate that the workers' state was carefully regulating the activities of its officials. The clearest example of Solzhenitsyn's effort to identify *Stalinist* arbitrariness under the Bolsheviks is the trial he calls 'The Case of the Suicide of Engineer Oldenborger' (*G.A.*, p. 336). As Mandel points out (*New Left Review* 86, 1974), it is not until the reader is deep into Solzhenitsyn's account of this trial that it becomes clear that the state is prosecuting three *communists* who had persecuted to the point of suicide an a-political and efficient engineer in the Moscow water supply system who had been elected by the workers. What emerges from this is Solzhenitsyn's readiness to distort the earlier period so that it resembles the absence of legality under Stalin in order to prove that Stalinism followed inevitably and without break from the rule of the Bolsheviks! The argument is perfectly circular, presupposing its conclusions in order to prove them, as Solzhenitsyn makes explicit when, in mock surprise at the lightness of a sentence imposed in March 1918, he remarks:

It is not so shamefully lenient, however, if one stops to think that it was only 1918! (*G.A.*, p. 311).

To return to the image of the sign-posted path and the ambiguity this reveals in Solzhenitsyn's attitude to individual agency we can now see that this image reflects the historical prejudice in his account of the Bolsheviks. The following of a path implies those who travelled it earlier and marked the route. Yet Solzhenitsyn does not tell us who those agents were. Like the machine of Stalinist repression the initiator is not identified. The point is emphasised by a further image of ambiguous agency which Solzhenitsyn uses to describe the path from revolution to Stalinism:

And just as a foresighted painter proceeds from his first few brusquely drawn, angular strokes to create the whole desired portrait, so, for us, the entire panorama of 1937, 1945 and 1949 becomes even clearer and more visible in the sketches of 1922 (*G.A.*, p. 364).

Solzhenitsyn imagines the process of history as the work of a painter, an over-all authorial agent sketching in 1922 what he will paint fully later on. But the painter is not present in history. He is not Lenin, nor even Stalin; and, crucially, the linearity of his work has to be perceived by 'us' for whom it '*becomes* even clearer' as if 'we' through our perception (or divination) of history create rather than discover its immanent pattern. The idea of an individual author of history (who

nevertheless remains unknown) and the necessity of an audience whose expectations modify the painter's work is a reflection of Solzhenitsyn's own authoritarian subjectivism.

When Solzhenitsyn wants to assess the agency of those directly implicated in Stalinist illegalities he inverts a Russian proverb:

For several centuries we had a proverb: 'Don't fear the law, fear the judge'.

But in my opinion, the *law* has outstripped people, and people have lagged behind in cruelty. It is time to reverse the proverb: 'Don't fear the judge, fear the *law*'.

Abakumov's<sup>3</sup> kind of law, of course (*G.A.*, p. 298).

It is no longer the individual judge who is the author of an unjust sentence but an objective structure, the law itself, the Great Machine; and yet the proverb is reversed again—it is Abakumov's law. Is there individual agency or not? When pleading mitigating circumstances for the Vlassovites who joined the German armies against the Soviet Union Solzhenitsyn is prepared to cite absolute *social* determination of the actions of individuals:

Who was more to blame, those youths or the gray Fatherland? . . .

It has to have had a social cause (*G.A.*, p. 262).

And if this is not enough one can resort to fatalism and the operation of chance:

Most of them got into Vlassov military units through that same blind chance which led their comrades in a neighbouring camp to get into the spy thing—it all depended on which recruiter had gone where (*G.A.*, p. 261).

To be a Marxist is an abdication from personal moral responsibility—'Ideology—that is what gives the evildoer his long-sought justification. That is the social theory which helps to make his acts seem good' (*G.A.*, p. 174) whereas to join a fascist army is to be the puppet of social forces or blind chance.

For all his attack on Marxism Solzhenitsyn does not reject the concept of laws of history. He cites, for example, the Chinese cultural revolution as an instance paralleling Stalin's 1937 of increased repression in the seventeenth year after the final victory of a revolution, which he regards as a 'fundamental law of historical development'! (*G.A.*, p. 68, p. 35). But Solzhenitsyn offers no theoretical principle which would make these laws uniform and predictable—characteristics he demands of Soviet legality in order to guarantee its objectivity. He invents a 'law' of history as a convenience to his argument bringing out the point that both his technocratic and organic explanation of history are fundamentally and opportunistically ideological. Not only are they internally contradictory but they bear *per se* a mystified relationship to real history. Both the facts of Solzhenitsyn's 'investigation' and the conceptual structure within which they are displayed are mobilised not in the service of objective analysis but in pursuit of right-wing ideological objectives.

<sup>3</sup>Victor Semyonovich Abakumov, Minister of State Security, 1946-1952; executed under Khrushchev, 1954.

### *Democracy or Social Cybernetics*

For all the concern in Solzhenitsyn's earlier peasant-orientated positions for 'common humanity', his elitism and authoritarianism in *The Gulag Archipelago* are explicit. He rejects the possibility of genuine democracy not only in the present conjuncture of bureaucratic dictatorship but also as an historical possibility:

How could the *engineers* accept the *dictatorship* of the workers, their subordinates in industry, so little skilled or trained, and comprehending neither the physical nor the economic laws of production, but now occupying the top positions from which they supervised the *engineers*? Why shouldn't the engineers have considered it more natural (sic) for the structure of society to be headed by those who could intelligently direct its activity (*G.A.*, p. 390).

The class prejudice latent in a statement like this hardly needs comment. Solzhenitsyn asks approvingly: 'Is not this (technocracy) precisely where all social cybernetics is leading today?' (*G.A.*, p. 391). And 'social cybernetics', he implies, is a desirable alternative to democratic politics, for: 'Is it not true that professional politicians are the boils on the neck of society that prevent it from turning its head and moving its arms?' (*G.A.*, p. 391). What is probably a just judgement of the parasitic bureaucracy that rules the Soviet Union now, when erected into a statement for all time only reinforces the explicitness of Solzhenitsyn's advocacy of the replacement of the dictatorship of the bureaucracy with that of the technocrats. 'After all, politics is not even a science, but an empirical area not susceptible to description by any mathematical apparatus' (*G.A.*, p. 392). Not only is Solzhenitsyn attacking straw men—no Marxist holds that *politics* is a science—but he betrays a desire for precision in the running of society which is surprising in one whose understanding of its history and structure is so impressionistic.

As in other matters the organic element of Solzhenitsyn's ideology parallels the technocratic, his religious positions evincing a *moral* authoritarianism. *The Gulag Archipelago* is not only an account of the apparatus of repression, it also charts Solzhenitsyn's passage from Marxism to religious ideology. When arrested his position was, as he tells us himself, one of advocacy of 'purified Leninism' (*G.A.*, p. 135): he had decided that Stalin was responsible for the development of repression and Solzhenitsyn in prison defended Marxism. It is important to notice, however, that Solzhenitsyn's Marxism was itself ideological, a version of Stalinist dogmatism:

I was committed to that world outlook which is incapable of admitting any new fact or evaluating any new opinion before a label has been found for it from the already available stock (*G.A.*, p. 613). This places Solzhenitsyn firmly in the centre of that alienated ideological Marxism which appears in the Soviet Union as a state religion.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Ticktin (*Political Economy of the Soviet Intellectual, Critique* No. 2). This reinforces the point Mandel makes about Solzhenitsyn's technocratic positions: while his ideology is anti-Stalinist it remains within the Stalinist problematic.

And thus Solzhenitsyn was prepared for a retreat into mysticism before his personal confrontation with the state provoked it.

Solzhenitsyn's break with Marxism began shortly after his imprisonment; he describes a meeting with another prisoner, Borya Gamberov:

I don't remember why, but I recalled one of the prayers of the late President Roosevelt, which had been published in our newspapers, and I expressed what seemed to me a self-evident valuation of it:

'Well, that's hypocrisy, of course'.

And suddenly the young man's yellowish brows trembled, his pale lips pursed, he seemed to draw himself up, and he asked me:

'Why? Why do you not admit the possibility that a political leader might sincerely believe in God?'

And that is all that was said! But what a direction the attack *had* come from! To hear such words from someone born in 1923? I could have replied to him very firmly, but prison had already undermined my certainty, and the principal thing was that some kind of clean, pure feeling does live within us, existing apart from our convictions . . . (*G.A.*, pp. 611-12).

'Prison had already undermined my certainty'—he acknowledges that the experience of repression itself initiated the retreat from Marxism. But there is a more positive side also: as Mandel remarks, Solzhenitsyn, particularly where he deals with the show trials and the extraordinary confessions of the accused, generally confirms Trotsky's conclusions that the 'lack of a political perspective independent of Stalinism (that is the political capitulation of Stalin's unfortunate victims before the bureaucratic dictatorship) was the real basis for the confessions'. The belief that even their own arrest and possible execution was in some mysterious way furthering the cause of socialism in the Soviet Union, sometimes underpinned by Stalin's absurd theory that the class struggle *intensifies* under socialism, led even party militants to co-operate fully in their own destruction. Solzhenitsyn is able to remark with rich irony:

On the threshold of the classless society, we were at last capable of realising the conflictless trial—a reflection of the absence of inner conflict in our social structure—in which not only the judge and the prosecutor but also the defence lawyers and the defendants themselves would strive collectively to achieve their common purpose (*G.A.*, p. 374).

Yet the alternative to capitulation that Solzhenitsyn proposes is not a political one at all, but one of active religious propagandizing combined with an utterly passive inner resilience. He recounts an anecdote, clearly of great importance to him, of Vera Korneyeva who, when left in an office with several clerical employees of the MGB, began to deliver a sermon:

She was a luminous person, with a lively mind and a gift of eloquence, even though in freedom she had been no more (*sic*) than a lathe operator, a stable girl and a housewife. They listened to her

impressively, now and then asking questions in order to clarify something or other. People came in from other offices and the room filled up. She managed to work in all sorts of things including the question of 'traitors of the Motherland'. Why were there no traitors in the 1812 War of the Fatherland, when there was still serfdom? It would have been natural to have traitors then! But mostly she spoke about religious faith and religious believers. *Formerly*, she declared, unbridled passions were the basis for everything—'Steal the stolen goods'—and, in that state of affairs, religious believers were naturally a hindrance to you. But now, when you want to build and prosper in the world, why do you persecute your best citizens. . . ? (*G.A.*, p. 171).

Korneyeva's interrogator returns to the room and begins to interrupt her, but the others silenced him and she continued in his presence. While this anecdote represents in however mediated a way active opposition carried out at the very heart of the Organs, in the offices of the MGB itself, it is for Solzhenitsyn the infrequent manifestation of what is essentially an inner state. When the same Korneyeva manages to prevail upon her interrogator to let her sign depositions incriminating only herself rather than ones which would implicate others in her religious group, she experiences a 'feeling of spiritual victory' (*G.A.*, p. 107) and for Solzhenitsyn it is this feeling which is central:

Submissiveness to fate, the total abdication of your own will in the shaping of your life, the recognition that it was impossible to guess the best and worst ahead of time but that it was easy to take a step you would reproach yourself for—all this freed the prisoner from any bondage, made him calmer, and even ennobled him (*G.A.*, p. 560).

### *Quietism and the Colonel*

This passage enacts Solzhenitsyn's willingness to spiritualise the experience of repression. From an important description of the way in which the prisoner knows himself to be at the mercy of forces external to and stronger than himself, forces which are sociologically and politically knowable but may appear in a mystified form as 'fate', it topples over into an endorsement of the psychological state of the prisoner; he is 'ennobled' by his total loss of freedom. For the authoritarian, the individual receives this aristocratic elevation at the precise moment when he loses all agency. In order to validate this seemingly (and actually) untenable belief that captivity—not the willing service of the traditional Christian understanding—is in fact a form of exquisite freedom, Solzhenitsyn has necessarily to invoke the familiar idealist dichotomy, historically an element of *bourgeois* ideology, between the corporeal and the spiritual:

My name? I am the Interstellar Wanderer! They have tightly bound my body, but my soul is beyond their power (*G.A.*, p. 595). The prisoners, because his will has been taken from him and, according to Solzhenitsyn, is freed by deprivation from material concerns,

can enter 'the heavenly kingdom of the liberated spirit' and is able to condemn as 'foolish' relatives in freedom who 'dash about . . . borrow money . . . and send you foodstuffs and things—the widow's last mite!' Such kindness is a 'poisoned gift, because it transforms you from a free though hungry person into one who is anxious and cowardly, it deprives you of . . . newly dawning enlightenment' (*G.A.*, p. 546). Not only does this mystificatory idealisation of repression contradict other descriptions Solzhenitsyn gives of prison behaviour, descriptions in which he emphasises the ruthlessly competitive individualism which the prisoners must adopt if they are to survive, but it reaches beyond the level of individual psychology; Solzhenitsyn gives the 'liberated spirit' a clear national and political environment. He describes admiringly a White colonel, Konstantin Yesevich, for whom 'the Civil War had not ended the struggle against Bolshevism' and who, in contrast to Solzhenitsyn's own 'spiritual confusion' (shortly after his arrest) and the 'chaotic concepts, the blurred and broken lines of vision in most of our heads', has a 'clear and exact view of everything, and as a result of this reasoned (sic) point of view on life, his body, too, exhibited a steady strength, resiliency and activity' (*G.A.*, p. 267). Solzhenitsyn confesses not to know whether this imprisoned paragon was amongst those White Guards who 'hung every tenth worker without trial and whipped the peasants' (*G.A.*, p. 266). And at the national level the spiritualised experience of the prisoner whom Solzhenitsyn, in the context of tireless vituperation against the professional criminals he encountered in the camps, compares to 'Christ crucified between two thieves . . . numbered with the transgressors' (*G.A.*, p. 498) becomes the *necessity* of defeat in war:

A people needs defeat just as an individual needs suffering and misfortune: they compel the deepening of the inner life and generate a spiritual upsurge (*G.A.*, p. 272).

It is here, in Solzhenitsyn's preparedness to mystify the experience of terrible repression—he says nothing, however, of the people who organised the Communist Party in Belsen—transforming it into a transcendency, that 'glimmering light which . . . the soul of the lonely prisoner begins to emit, like the halo of a saint', a state in which 'even counting the passing minutes puts him intimately in touch with the Universe', that we have travelled the full distance from *Ivan Denisovich*. Where once the prisoner was depicted as an isolated victim of state terrorism, alienated by the atomisation of Soviet society, now becomes one detached 'from the hustle-bustle of every day life . . . purged of every imperfection' whose 'head rises of itself towards the Eternal Heavens' (*G.A.*, p. 483). The 'critical empiricism' of the earlier work is replaced by the explicit ideological intention of *The Gulag Archipelago*, and where previously the structure of absolute valuations under which the 'facts' of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* were subsumed was left undisruptively external to the work itself, Solzhenitsyn now conscientiously articulates an ideology which is politically reactionary, socially and morally elitist, and in the end devoid of



artistic interest. At the very moment when the, as it were, non-fictive status of the first book is acknowledged by the historiographical form of the later, *The Gulag Archipelago* reveals itself as the greater fiction. *Ivan Denisovich* enacted a less articulated but less oblique relationship to objective history.

### FREEDMAN

Subjugated yearly under arches,  
Manumitted by parchment and degrees,  
My murex was the purple dye of lents  
On calendars all fast and abstinence.

*Memento homo quia pulvis es.*  
I would kneel to be impressed by ashes,  
A silk friction, a light stipple of dust—  
I was under that thumb too like all my caste.

One of the earth-starred denizens, indelibly,  
I sought the mark in vain on the groomed *optimi*:  
Their estimating, census-taking eyes  
Fastened on my mouldy brow like lampreys.

Then poetry arrived in that city—  
I would abjure all cant and self-pity—  
And poetry wiped my brow and sped me.  
Now they will say I bite the hand that fed me.

Seamus Heaney.