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The Gulag Archipelago Book Review

In his book, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn recounts the systematic imprisonment of “waves” of the Russian people into Gulag labor camps by the Soviet government. Solzhenitsyn argues that the institution of imprisoning people in gulags, which mainly started in the 1920’s and continued well into the 1950’s and occurred in a multitude of waves, was already an essential part of the economic and political system of Russia and the Soviet Union, including during Lenin’s rule. He asserts that the Soviet prison system was not a singular incident by itself, but rather reflected the entire morally corrupt Soviet system. Solzhenitsyn effectively presents his argument by detailing the process of imprisonment entirely, by attempting to discuss the reasons why this period of corrupt mass imprisonment went on as long as it did, and by constantly showing his contempt towards the Soviet government and its ideology through the use of metaphor and irony.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was a captain in the Russian Army during World War II. He was in the gulag system from 1945, when he was arrested for writing derogatory remarks about Stalin in a letter to a Ukrainian childhood friend, to his exoneration from imprisonment and exile in 1956. Solzhenitsyn asserts that the institution of imprisonment into forced labor camps started with Lenin’s initial decrees after the October Revolution that allowed for the establishment of the legal and practical framework for a series of camps where both political and normal prisoners were subjected to forced labor. Solzhenitsyn discusses the people who made up the different waves of those imprisoned, as well as explicitly detailing the process and general experiences of the prisoners, from their arrest to their ultimate release. He describes the superficial end of the

major purges as the period after Nikita Krushchev's Secret Speech in 1956, in which Krushchev denounced Stalin's autocratic power and personality cult, and the surveillance of the Stalin era. Solzhenitsyn argues that the gulag imprisonment system could be reinstated and expanded in the future because the outlines of the system still remained. Solzhenitsyn's primary argument is that the gulag imprisonment system was a significant flaw of the Soviet political system and culture, and so was an inexorable outcome of the Bolshevik and Soviet political project.

The main sources of Solzhenitsyn's statements concerning the experiences of a prisoner were his own experiences as a prisoner, as well as letters and stories from other fellow *zeks*, or inmates. By taking the reader through the entire experience of imprisonment, Solzhenitsyn did what no other writer of the gulags had ever done before: he effectively shattered the world's ignorance surrounding arguably the world's largest alienation of human rights by the process of unlawful imprisonment, torture, and slave labor, and he did so by creating the most accurate historical depiction of the imprisonment system at that time. The most significant part of Solzhenitsyn's descriptions of a prisoner's life is the completely cold, calculated, and impersonal way in which the government actually imprisons people. In every city, "every military unit was assigned a specific quota of arrests to be carried out by a stipulated time."¹ In the transport of *zeks* to the gulags and in the actual daily life at the gulag, every thing was determined by a schedule: the railroads that transported the prisoners all ran on tight, efficient schedules, the punishments given out at the gulags were all done as efficiently as possible, and in so doing, the wrongful imprisonment of millions of people was efficient.² By including these details, Solzhenitsyn was able to show how meaninglessly the prisoners were treated brutally under the guise of efficiency and revolution, and since no one had been able to provide such an intense,

¹ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 29.

² Pg. 167.

personal view of imprisonment, it made Solzhenitsyn's argument that much more effective. He also points out that the economy and infrastructure mainly depended on this efficient productivity provided by the forced labor of the gulags.³ However, Solzhenitsyn also points out that, ultimately, the gulags were actually a detriment to the Soviet state because the cost of the gulags themselves outweighed any advantage to the state. This allows Solzhenitsyn to effectively argue against claims that the gulags helped Russia and were an advantage. Solzhenitsyn's efforts were not the sole reason of the decline of the Soviet Union, but he had a major part in showing that Soviet communism should no longer be a political ideal to strive towards, and since the system originated under Lenin, even western communists could no longer point to him as the communist ideal.

In part, Solzhenitsyn's goals in writing the book included a kind of reflection into why there was not a larger resistance to the gulag system of wrongful imprisonment. In fact, when Solzhenitsyn addresses the arrest of a prisoner, he ponders why people did not simply resist the police, even in his own case. While Solzhenitsyn as the author could possibly not be seen as objective, since he himself was a gulag prisoner, it is important to note that he did use a multitude of different firsthand, primary sources from other *zeks*. Also, the reason Solzhenitsyn's arguments are so effective is actually because he was actually a prisoner himself, and no one had previously been able to provide such a in-depth account of the gulag experience. One of the possible reasons he gives is that since the person did not believe themselves to be guilty, they obviously would believe their arrest was a mistake. They were not aware that their guilt, or lack thereof, was entirely irrelevant. Solzhenitsyn claims that "a person who is not inwardly prepared for the use of violence against him is always weaker than the person committing the violence."⁴

³ Pg. 291.

⁴ Pg. 11.

In this statement, Solzhenitsyn argues that resistance would have been futile and irrelevant anyways, and simply improbable for most of the arrests. This emphasizes his argument that political prisoners accounted for much less of the total arrests than widely believed, as most of the waves of purges were of generally ordinary people. As for the “confessions” of the prisoners, most would understandably rather confess to a crime they did not commit rather than be subjected to continuous torture by the Chekists or the KGB.

Solzhenitsyn employs the use of multiple types of figurative language, especially metaphor and irony, to stress his disgust towards the Soviet system. The initial significant metaphor used by Solzhenitsyn is his comparison of the scattered gulags to an “archipelago” of islands.⁵ He makes this comparison to emphasize that the gulags were completely isolated from other parts of the country as well as the rest of the world and that the gulags had their own laws and rules and were effectively like their own separate countries. This isolation is an important reason that the gulag system lasted so long; People simply were not aware of the facts concerning imprisonment. The use of this metaphor effectively stresses the ignorance surrounding the gulags and supports Solzhenitsyn’s overall argument. The other important metaphor Solzhenitsyn uses is the comparison of the gulag imprisonment system to a sewage disposal system. He describes the “waves” of prisoners by saying:

Through the sewer pipes the flow pulsed... The blood, the sweat, and the urine into which we were pulped pushed through them continuously. The history of this sewage system is the history of an endless swallow and flow; food alternating with ebb and ebb again with flood; waves pouring in, some big, some small;

⁵ Pg. 3.

brooks and rivulets flowing in from all sides; trickles oozing in through gutters; and then just plain individually scooped-up droplets.⁶

Through this passage, Solzhenitsyn's disgust towards the gulag imprisonment system becomes obvious, and his continual use of disgusting fluids like sewage, urine, vomit, and gruel to characterize the imprisonment experience throughout the book. This helps forcefully emphasize the immoral and disgusting nature of the imprisonment system, which was one of his primary goals. Solzhenitsyn also describes certain situations concerning both the Soviet state and the gulags with a sense of irony and through sardonic speech. While describing the different waves of prisoners, Solzhenitsyn sympathetically describes the imprisonment of religious peoples, and reveals that "they sent prostitutes to the Solovetsky Islands along with the 'nuns' ... And three years later they would return with laden suitcases to the places they had come from. Religious prisoners, however, were prohibited from ever returning to their children and their home areas."⁷ This highlights the fact that in Russia under the Soviet regime, even prostitutes, who are generally considered immoral, were treated better than religious prisoners. In another passage, Solzhenitsyn explains that the maximum sentence was lengthened to twenty-five years, and was introduced to "replace the death penalty, which had been abolished as a humane act."⁸ This statement, which would be laughable if it weren't so serious, really stresses that the Soviet government was already so morally corrupt that the death penalty, which to this day is still highly controversial in many countries, was too humane.

Overall, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn effectively argued that the gulag imprisonment system was a significant flaw in the Soviet communist political system and culture. He did this by

⁶ Pg. 20.

⁷ Pg. 24.

⁸ Pg. 35.

proving that the guise of efficiency the gulags operated under was actually inefficient by detailing the entire process of imprisonment. He also uses the primary accounts of other *zeks* to describe the process of arrests and show trials to claim that resistance was not commonplace because of the actual innocence of most *zeks* and the futility and irrelevance of that resistance. Finally, Solzhenitsyn uses figurative language to show how disgusting and immoral the Soviet system was, which led to the downfall of the concept of the Soviet communist system as an ideal system. The mere fact that the gulag imprisonment system lasted for so long and was even attempted proves that if an ideology is powerful enough and is able to spread, it can and will be used by evil people to justify their actions.