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Empire-Slayer

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and disappointment at best. No matter: The bright-eyed rationalist will soon have another analysis, and another project, and off we go again in hot pursuit of a perfect world.

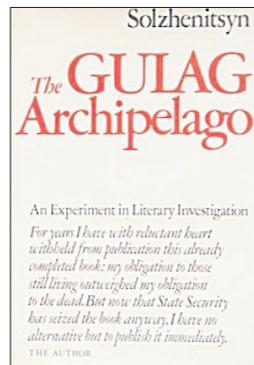
Oakeshott found the source of rationalism in a false theory about knowledge. If I am engaging in some activity—such as cooking a meal, driving a car, or learning the rules of Scrabble—I can find out quite a lot from a book telling me the appropriate rules, quantities, and moves to be made. This is what Oakeshott called “technical” knowledge, and the essence of rationalism was the belief that nothing more was needed to succeed than an open mind and a grasp of this technical knowledge. And what a rationalist means by an “open mind” is thought that has been purged of prejudice, superstition, habit, or any other component of the real world.

In that real world, however, something more is needed to succeed, something much harder to define. Oakeshott called this thing “practical knowledge”; it is often what we refer to as “common sense.” The dominant form taken by rationalism today can be studied in the American vogue for practical handbooks explaining how to succeed, which is perilous unless the reader has some “feel” for the skill in question. One of the great rationalist masterpieces of earlier times was Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends & Influence People*. Marvelous! What more do you need in life? All you have to do is follow Carnegie’s rules. But beware: If you lack common sense in following these rules, you come across as some dreadful kind of creep or sycophant. Modern politics often replays this cycle of bright idea followed by disappointment.

Rationalism in Politics is a profound and witty account of Oakeshott’s thought in the form of essays written when his work (never actually obscure) was at its most accessible. He has remarkable things to say about the character of education, the history of political philosophy, the human condition, and much else. None of this will change the world, because Oakeshott held, on impeccable logical grounds, that philosophy never entails a practical conclusion. We can, however, learn a saving skepticism toward much of the nonsense of the world. NR

ALEKSANDR
SOLZHENITSYN

Empire- Slayer



DANIEL J. MAHONEY

SOLZHENITSYN’S massive *Gulag Archipelago* was published in English in three volumes between 1974 and 1978. It is one of the indispensable books of the last fifty years not least because it undermined the moral and political legitimacy of the entire Communist enterprise. This unique “experiment in literary investigation” brilliantly wove together Solzhenitsyn’s personal experience and the testimony of 256 former prisoners with historical research and spiritual reflection. It allowed readers on both sides of the Iron Curtain to encounter totalitarian oppression as though for the first time, “to hear and see what it was all like: search, arrest, interrogation, prison, deportation, transit camp, prison camp . . . hunger, beatings, labor, corpses,” to cite the words of the Russian writer Lydia Chukovskaya. Moreover, Solzhenitsyn’s multifaceted, often sardonic authorial voice served as a powerful instrument for indicting

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Communism and all its works.

At their root was mankind’s and Solzhenitsyn’s nemesis: ideology. Unlike the conventional analyses of academic historians and political scientists, Solzhenitsyn’s understanding never treated the Soviet Union as merely one tyranny among others. Rather, it was an *ideological regime* built upon the twin pillars of violence and lies. It was “thanks to ideology” that the 20th century experienced “evildoing on a scale calculated in the millions.” Ideology allowed tyrants and intellectuals alike to justify the unjustifiable and to amplify violence to nearly unimaginable levels.

This central focus of Solzhenitsyn’s work made it much more difficult to blame the Soviet tragedy on Stalin’s “cult of personality” or on local conditions that were somehow peculiar to an “authoritarian” Russia. As the late Martin Malia argued in an analysis profoundly indebted to Solzhenitsyn, every Communist regime has manifested a nearly identical “genetic code.” Despite important cultural differences between Russian, Asian, and Caribbean Communism, every Communist experiment has been marked by a single-party regime based on a mendacious ideology that demonizes real or imagined enemies of socialism. Solzhenitsyn’s insight was to highlight the insidious nature of ideology, and to make its absurdities fully visible to the Western imagination.

Gulag takes aim at the Manicheism inherent in every project for the revolutionary transformation of man and society. The ideologist denies the permanence of the imperfection inherent in the human condition. Using the full force of his artistry Solzhenitsyn defends the timeless distinction between good and evil against its pernicious replacement by the ideological dichotomy between Progress and Reaction. The bitter experience of the Soviet camps led Solzhenitsyn to recover the age-old insight that “the line between good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart.” More broadly, Solzhenitsyn returned to the wisdom of philosophical Christianity through reflection on his personal experience of human nature *in extremis*.

The Gulag Archipelago established beyond any doubt that 20th-century totali-

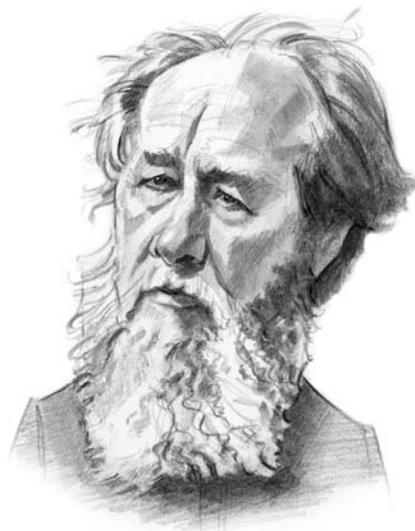
tarianism originated with Lenin, the founding father and spiritual icon of the Bolshevik party-state. Faithful to his Marxist inspiration, Lenin initiated a nihilistic project for (in his words) “purging Russia of all sorts of harmful insects.” In this, he was faithfully followed by Stalin. In *Gulag* Solzhenitsyn shifts the attention away from the high-profile Communists who were victims of Stalin’s purges and terror to those ordinary Russians and Ukrainians who perished by the millions as a result of the insane effort to create a new man and a new society. Solzhenitsyn provides a riveting account of the “metastasization” of Soviet terror from its beginnings in Lenin’s “Red Terror” and the first concentration camps on the Arctic Solovetsky islands. He rightly deems collectivization and the war against the independent Russian and Ukrainian peasantry to be the most terrible crime of the Soviet regime. The targeting of the “kulaks” was the first experiment in mass totalitarian democide—“one that was repeated by Hitler with the Jews and again by Stalin with nationalities that were disloyal to him or suspected by him.”

The second and third volumes of *Gulag* are animated by an invigorating and instructive tension between Solzhenitsyn’s appreciation of the prospects for spiritual “ascent,” even amidst the degradation of prison and the camps, and his equally profound recognition that ideological tyranny mutilates the bodies and souls of most human beings. Solzhenitsyn does justice to both the rare experience of spiritual growth through redemptive suffering and the pressing need to defend human dignity against every device of soul-destroying tyranny. Political liberty is by no means the most important thing for Solzhenitsyn. But, in his view, it is a crucial precondition for the moral development of human beings.

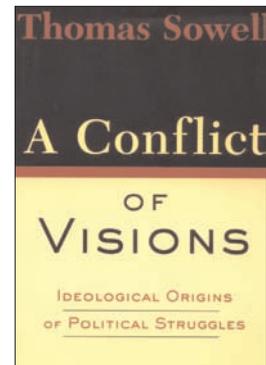
For this reason, *Gulag* has an indestructible place in our political, moral, and human self-understanding. To be sure, from the early 1920s through the late 1960s, there had been no shortage of books written about totalitarianism or the Soviet camp system. But none had come close to moving hearts and minds the way *The Gulag Archipelago* did upon its publication. *Gulag* is replete with facts and con-

tains many instructive passages of historical, legal, and philosophical import related to the rise of the Soviet “sewage-disposal system.” But it took a great work of art to capture precisely what was entailed in the ideological deformation of reality.

There is every reason to welcome new works of historical scholarship that draw on previously inaccessible material from the Soviet archives. Solzhenitsyn has certainly done everything to encourage and support such endeavors. But an excellent work of recent scholarship such as Anne Applebaum’s *Gulag: A History* (2003) will never displace *The Gulag Archipelago* because they serve different, if complementary, purposes. Because Solzhenitsyn brought beauty as well as philosophical reflection to bear upon the truth, *The Gulag Archipelago* was able to convey the monstrosity of the ideological lie. It illuminated the truth about “the soul and barbed wire” precisely because it transcended the concerns of historical scholarship, narrowly understood. To his great credit, Solzhenitsyn understood that the elaborate ideological fictions that defined Soviet Communism were vulnerable to a truly artful rendering of “the soul of man under socialism.” With the publication of *The Gulag Archipelago* on December 30, 1973, Solzhenitsyn could plausibly maintain that this was the moment foretold by the “foul midnight hags” of *Macbeth*, the fateful moment “when Birnam Wood shall walk.” Having done its initial work, *Gulag* continues to be of much more than historical interest since it illumines enduring truths and serves as our best antidote against the recurrence of the totalitarian temptation. **NR**



THOMAS SOWELL
Seeing Clearly



CHARLES MURRAY

ONE mark of a great book is a thesis so powerful that after a few years people take it for granted. Thomas Sowell’s *A Conflict of Visions* (1987) is such a book. Its thesis: The policy arguments between liberals and conservatives, socialists and libertarians, do not arise just from differences in priorities regarding freedom, equality, and security. At root, they draw from different conceptions of the nature of man. The Left holds an unconstrained vision: Given the right political and economic arrangements, human beings can be improved, even perfected. Success is defined by what people have the potential of becoming, not by people as they are. The Right holds a constrained vision: People come to society with innate characteristics that cannot be reshaped and must instead be accommodated. Success in political and economic policy must be defined in light of those innate characteristics.

Once you have this framework in your head, the history of the great political debates of the 20th century coheres in a new way. The expansion of the welfare state, how to deal with crime, how to conduct the Cold War, the feminist revolution, color-blind policies versus affirmative action, who should control the schools—whatever the topic, the positions held by Left and Right make sense in terms of each side’s underlying vision of the nature of man.

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