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Daniel J. Mahoney
Assumption College, dmahoney@assumption.edu

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Judging Communism and All Its Works: Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* Reconsidered

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Daniel J. Mahoney

March 15, 2017

Macbeth's self-justifications were feeble—and his conscience devoured him. Yes, even Iago was a little lamb, too. The imagination and the spiritual strength of Shakespeare's villains stopped short at a dozen corpses. Because they had no *ideology*.

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Ideology—that is what gives villainy its long-sought justification and gives the villain the necessary steadfastness and determination...

Thanks *to ideology*, the twentieth century was fated to experience villainy on a scale calculated in the millions.

– Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's writings remain the greatest scourge of the ideological justification of tyranny and terror. The amplification of violence in the twentieth century, and the soul-numbing mendacity that accompanied it, cannot be blamed on purely accidental or contingent considerations. Nor can it be explained away as a mere product of the "Russian tradition" or the residues of an "Asiatic despotism" alien to modernity and modern "progress." Truth be told, the ideological justification of "utopia in power" is part and parcel of philosophical and political modernity, rooted in the unfounded belief that human nature and society can be transformed at a stroke.

The allure of a revolution that inaugurates a radically new human dispensation, of 'progress' that leaves human nature behind in its wake, are illusions at the heart of what Eric Voegelin aptly called "modernity without restraint." The ideological justification of evil haunts modernity and modern progress. They are not distinctively Russian phenomena. In opposition to them, Solzhenitsyn appealed to basic verities such as an unchanging human nature, and an order of grace that is capable of elevating human souls that are also capable of great evil.

Solzhenitsyn's critique of ideological despotism is at the service of a more fundamental reaffirmation of the drama of good and evil in the human soul. Shorn of every utopian illusion, his work finally points toward catharsis and spiritual ascent. There is not a trace of nihilism or despair to be found in his writings: Light is ontologically prior to darkness, despite the persistence of evil in the human soul. The contrast between Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* and Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*, with its dark and unmitigated view of human nature, could not be more striking.

Central to Solzhenitsyn's moral and political vision is the non-negotiable distinction between truth and falsehood. Solzhenitsyn's target was precisely the ideological Lie that presented evildoing as a historically *necessary* stage in the fated "progress" of the human race. He always asserted that the ideological Lie was worse than violence and physical brutality, ultimately more destructive of the integrity of the human soul. After returning to Russia in May 1994 after twenty years of involuntary exile, he never wavered in telling the truth about Communist totalitarianism and the lies that undergird it. As he never tired of pointing out, the only way forward was through repentance and telling the full truth about Communism and all its works.

During a talk at the University of Saratov on September 13, 1995, Solzhenitsyn took aim at those who saw the Soviet regime as some kind of "paradise." Pained by how deep illusions ran and how resilient the Lie still was, he made clear that "since the middle of the 1920's I have forgotten nothing." The atmosphere in Lenin's Russia was "already full of cruelty." To those of his interlocutors who whitewashed Stalin, he bore witness to the "nightmarish beginnings of the 1930's, when the entire edifice of the universe seemed ready to collapse." "Everything we knew of human relations was destroyed." The "best among the peasants" were hurled onto wagons in freezing snow, with their young children receiving no mercy, no display of elementary human decency. Such was the human meaning of the "class struggle."

Millions were killed and deported in what was the greatest crime of the Soviet regime, the great Catastrophe for Solzhenitsyn (many of the victims of the Great Terror of 1937 were morally sullied by their participation in previous waves of terror and collectivization against so-called "enemies of the people"). Some of Solzhenitsyn's interlocutors blamed the destruction of the independent peasantry, the flower of the Russian nation, on the impending war. However, Solzhenitsyn remained unimpressed by this transparently mendacious argument. But what of after the war, he asks? He told almost every group he met with after his return to an ailing Russia about a "secret decree" promulgated by Stalin in 1948 that sentenced those on the kolkhozes who failed to live up to impossible work norms (almost all women since men had largely left the collective farms) to deportation to Siberia. No one had heard of this—absolutely no one. Solzhenitsyn had published this notorious decree in 1993 in the collection "The Peasantry and the State" in his book series "Research on Modern Russian History." Such was Solzhenitsyn's retort to those who saw nothing but unadulterated progress in the seventy-year experience of Sovietism: "Ah, the paradise that was: extraordinary." One hears Solzhenitsyn's voice in its sardonic mode (well known to readers of *The Gulag Archipelago*), a tried and true way of piercing through the veil of ideological mendacity.

In the three volumes of *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973-1976, although largely written in utmost secrecy in the winters of 1965 and 1966), Solzhenitsyn had already slain the dragon of ideology. He did so with the rhetorical gifts of a world-class writer. He had sifted through the accumulated experiences of 256 collaborators, witnesses to the Soviet camps who had sent him narratives, letters, memoirs, and other eyewitness accounts of applied ideology at work (he, of course, also drew widely on his own first-hand experience of prison, camp, and exile). Beginning with the 2007 Russian edition of *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn provided a

complete list of these hitherto “invisible allies” who made the writing of *The Gulag Archipelago* possible. In this work, he draws widely on their experiences, so much so that the book has been characterized by the Russianist John B. Dunlop as a “personalistic feast” since it gives human form to the millions of souls who were unjustly imprisoned or killed by the Bolsheviks. In a crucial chapter in the third volume (“Poetry Under a Tombstone, Truth Under a Stone”), Solzhenitsyn observes how in prison “all are depersonalized” with “identical haircuts, identical fuzz on their cheeks, identical caps, identical padded jackets.” He adds that “the face presents an image of the soul distorted by wind and sun and dirt and heavy toil.” The task of the philosophical poet is that of “discerning the light of the soul beneath the depersonalized and degraded exterior” of human beings in the camps. But “the sparks of the spirit” have a power of their own that literature alone can truly incarnate. *The Gulag Archipelago* is an “experiment in artistic/literary investigation,” in Solzhenitsyn’s description of it, in no small part because of its power to illustrate the sparks of the spirit that miraculously survived the assaults of ideology. Human nature is more powerful than ideology. God’s grace is more powerful than imperfect human nature.

The Gulag Archipelago will be best remembered through two deftly prepared abridgments of that great work. The first was prepared by Professor Edward E. Ericson, Jr. in collaboration with Solzhenitsyn and was published in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom in 1985. The first abridgment, coming in at 472 pages (a third of the original), did justice to the essentials of the work, and gave equal space to the elements of light and catharsis that are so evident in the latter half of the work. Since 2007, that edition has been introduced by the journalist and historian Anne Applebaum. In 2003, she published *Gulag: A History*, an excellent work indebted to both Solzhenitsyn and archival research. The second abridgment, prepared by Natalia Solzhenitsyn and published in Russia in 2010 for use in Russian high schools, is equally well done. It comes in at 510 pages in the Russian edition and at 899 pages in the French translation of the 2010 Russian abridgment. The integrity of the whole is scrupulously respected as are the special needs and interests of a Russian readership. This abridgment has been available in French since 2014, along with the Natalia Solzhenitsyn’s bracing introduction to the work, suggestively titled “The Gift of Incarnation” (English-language versions of Mrs. Solzhenitsyn’s essay have also appeared in *The New Criterion* in September 2012 and as an “Appendix” to my own 2014 book *The Other Solzhenitsyn: Telling the Truth about a Misunderstood Writer and Thinker*). Drawing on Natalia Solzhenitsyn’s wonderfully insightful introduction to *The Gulag Archipelago*, I will highlight features of the work that get to the heart of its enduring achievement.

As Natalia Solzhenitsyn notes, Solzhenitsyn expertly tells the story of the “history of our (that is, Soviet) sewage disposal system.” This system was fueled by “Lenin’s decrees” and by “Stalin’s edicts,” which tried precisely to efface the “sparks of the spirit” about which we have spoken. Notice the reference to Lenin. Solzhenitsyn rightly insists that Lenin is the initial architect of Soviet terror and totalitarianism: it was Lenin who spoke in his essay “How to Organize the Competition” (January 7 and 10, 1918) about the great ideological task of “purging the Russian land of all kinds of harmful insects” (Solzhenitsyn’s cites this essay early in volume 1 of *The Gulag Archipelago*). These insects (notice the rhetorical dehumanization of

“enemies of the people” that precedes their actual imprisonment or execution) include workers malingering at their work, people in the self-governing zemstvo councils, nuns, priests, and monks, members of cooperatives, suspect teachers, eccentric Tolstoyans, and those of bourgeois class origin.

The number and kinds of “insects” to be “purged” would expand considerably under Stalin in the 1930’s. “Kulaks,” the most intelligent and industrious peasants, became the dreaded class enemies and 85,000 priests and nuns were executed in 1937 alone. And terror soon turned against the source of terror itself, with the purges and the show trials in Moscow and elsewhere against loyal Communists. This was not a matter of “violations of socialist legality,” “but was the inevitable outcome of the System itself, because without its inhuman cruelty it would not have been able to hold on to power.” The System was what Martin Malia called in *The Soviet Tragedy* an “ideocratic partocracy,” a monopolistic rule of a “party” (more an active conspiracy) defined by the ideological justification of its own tyranny. Solzhenitsyn unmasked the fictive claim that Leninism and Stalinism could finally be separated—putting the lie to those efforts that tried to save the purported honor of the Revolution and its animating ideology: the “System” was inseparably Leninist and Stalinist. Indeed, as Leszek Kolakowski liked to say, Stalinism is one possible (and perfectly legitimate) interpretation and appropriation of Lenin’s legacy.

The remarkable opening sentence of volume 2 of *The Gulag Archipelago* makes this eminently clear: “Rosy-fingered Eos, so often mentioned in Homer and called Aurora by the Romans, caressed, too, with those fingers the first early morning of the archipelago.” As Solzhenitsyn demonstrates with force and clarity, the first camps on the Solovetsky Islands and elsewhere (often, perversely enough, in monasteries) took form under Lenin’s direction. In other words: “the Archipelago was born with the shots of the cruiser Aurora” that inaugurated Red October. Ideological justification of terror and tyranny began with Lenin as did the gulag archipelago, the ubiquitous system of forced labor camps, itself. Stalin built on his work, much as collectivization built on the War Communism of an earlier period (and even replicated its terror famines).

Mrs. Solzhenitsyn also makes clear that *The Gulag Archipelago* is much more than a historical treatise or even a great Homeric work of literature telling the story of the imperiled zeks. This remarkably capacious book includes historical discussions, personal reminiscences of Solzhenitsyn’s time in the camps, political reflections, and philosophical meditations (see the central section, “The Soul and Barbed Wire”). It is, she suggestively adds, “an amalgam combining each of these genres, with the resultant product being more significant than the sum of its constituent parts.” At its heart, she finds an “epic poem,” one that recovers the great and enduring drama between good and evil in the human soul. Solzhenitsyn has rightly been compared by Alain Besançon to St. George, fearlessly subduing the dragon of ideology. This image conveys a central dimension of the work. But Mrs. Solzhenitsyn quotes that central line in *Gulag* 1 where Solzhenitsyn tells readers who expect his book “to be a political exposé” to “slam it shut right now.” Solzhenitsyn is no counter-ideologist. “The line dividing good from evil runs through the heart of every human being” and never remains static in any heart or soul.

One must not fight Communism in the spirit of ideological Manicheanism. All of us must struggle with evil. Solzhenitsyn calls on us to avoid the twin extremes of moral relativism (the bane of our age) and self-righteousness and ideological fanaticism. No one can deny that *The Gulag Archipelago* is the most powerful anti-totalitarian book ever written. It is political in the most noble and dignified sense of that term. But ultimately “the book is about the ascent of the human spirit, about its struggle with evil. That is the reason why, when readers reach the end of the work, they feel not only pain and anger, but an upsurge of strength and light.”

Every reader of *The Gulag Archipelago* must come to terms with the luminous chapter on “The Ascent” (where Solzhenitsyn powerfully discusses his own spiritual ascent from the world of the Lie) and the gripping account of “The Forty Days of Kengir” where 8,000 revolting prisoners, politics and criminals alike, put a desire for truth and justice above the concern for self-preservation. (Both are available in the two excellent abridgments under discussion). In these chapters, centered respectively on the recovery of self-knowledge about good and evil in the human soul and the spirited love of liberty, Solzhenitsyn demonstrates that totalitarianism never truly succeeded in subjugating the human spirit. This gives every reader ample and reasonable grounds for hope.

Natalia Solzhenitsyn notes that a sure mark that Russia has changed is that *The Gulag Archipelago* is now widely available in that country. Solzhenitsyn could return home in May 1994 and he could publish freely until his death on August 3, 2008. Many, although not all, documents from the Soviet period have been declassified. These documents confirm the essential insights of Solzhenitsyn’s great work. To support this claim, Mrs. Solzhenitsyn cites the impressive foreword that Anne Applebaum wrote to the 2007 Harper Perennial Modern Classics re-editions of *The Gulag Archipelago*. Applebaum acknowledges that “various errors in Solzhenitsyn’s work have come to light.” But Applebaum emphasizes just “how much he does get right” despite having no access to “archival documents and government records.” His “general outline of the history of the Gulag...has proven correct. His description of the moral issues faced by the prisoners has never been disputed. His sociology of camp life...is unquestionably accurate.” Above all, Applebaum emphasizes *The Gulag Archipelago*’s “truthfulness,” a commitment to convey the truth about the camps that “continues to give the book a freshness and an importance that will never be challenged.” The archives tell an important part of the story about Soviet repression. But they cannot begin to convey the full truth about the soul’s encounter with barbed wire, or the human meaning of a regime dedicated to the twin pillars of violence and lies.

In an important note appended to the first chapter of volume 2 of *The Gulag Archipelago* (“The Fingers of Aurora”), Natalia Solzhenitsyn pays tribute to the seven-volume *History of the Stalinist Gulag*, published by the Moscow publisher Rosspen in 2004 and 2005. Prefaced by Solzhenitsyn and Robert Conquest, this work shows precisely what the official documents revealed about the camps during the Stalin period: between 1930 and 1952, 800,000 people were shot, twenty million people passed through camps, colonies and prisons during this period, “special populations” (kulaks and deported peoples) constituted not less than six million people. Over five million people were detained in camps or “special villages” under the

surveillance of the MVD at the time of Stalin's death in 1953. But this does not begin to tell the full truth about the extent of Soviet repression after 1917. As Oleg Khlevniuk documents in *Stalin: New Biography of Dictator* (Yale University Press, 2015), eight million people died in the Russian civil war. Five million people died in a famine largely caused by Lenin's draconian policy of "War Communism." Whole peoples like the Don Cossacks were subjected to what can only be called genocide. At least five to seven million peasants perished in southern Russia, the north Caucasus and the Ukraine (a war against the independent peasantry and not just ethnic Ukrainians) in 1932 and 1933. Another million or two starved to death in 1946 and 1947. And during the great Patriotic War, millions perished or were punished for retreating from the advancing German army. Khlevniuk writes that "On average, over the more than twenty-year span of Stalin's rule, 1 million people were shot, incarcerated, or deported to barely habitable areas of the Soviet Union every year." One does not turn to *The Gulag Archipelago* for precise numbers regarding the number of people killed or imprisoned during Leninist-Stalinist rule (Solzhenitsyn's estimates—and they were precisely that—are undoubtedly too high).

Nonetheless Solzhenitsyn rightly captures that this was a calamity of the first order, with millions, even tens of millions perishing at the hands of an ideological despotism. He dramatically chronicles what applied ideology can do to the bodies and souls of human beings. The latter point is crucial. As the great chapter in volume 2 on "Our Muzzled Freedom" shows, Solzhenitsyn is also interested in chronicling the lie and betrayal as "forms of existence." Soviet Communism was a calamity for the living as well as the dead. "With their reverse selection, their deliberate destruction of all that was bright, remarkable, of a higher level—the Bolsheviks set about changing the Russian character root and branch, ripping, pulling, and twisting it." This led to a "meltdown of the people's morals," a meltdown whose consequences the ex-Soviet peoples are still dealing with. Betrayal of friends, co-workers, and family were ubiquitous. Lying became a way of life: "It was unavoidable: If you want to survive, lie. Lie and pretend. In place of all the good that was dying away, ingratitude, cruelty, and a thoroughly rude self-centered ambition now rose and established themselves." Solzhenitsyn makes clear that systematic mendacity would survive the Stalin period, with the Lie—and small-minded concerns for self-preservation—at the center of Soviet life. As Solzhenitsyn told Janis Sapiets of the BBC in an interview in January 1979, it would take a very long time for Russia to fully *recuperate* from such a physical and spiritual calamity. What was needed was "inner development," not imperial expansion. The disastrous way in which Russia came out "from under the rubble" of Communism in the 1990s—with massive corruption and kleptocracy—only made matters worse, as Solzhenitsyn makes clear in *Russia in Collapse*.

The 2010 abridgement of *The Gulag Archipelago* is still widely taught in Russian high schools. In fact, it is regarded as "required reading." Natalia Dmitrievna Solzhenitsyn regularly meets with teachers about how to approach the work. Teacher resources about how to teach *The Gulag Archipelago* are readily available on the internet. The present regime supports the inclusion of *Gulag* in the curriculum—though some Communists and "super-patriots" in the Putin camp, only want "good things" said about Russia and no "nasty things." As the author's son Stephan Solzhenitsyn recently told me, "Such people frequently call for *Gulag* to be

ousted from the curriculum, attack Solzhenitsyn (claiming he made it up or that he was the West's pawn sent to destroy our superpower, and attack Natalia Dmitrievna, too, for getting the book into the curriculum." Stephan Solzhenitsyn added that "they have not prevailed, and we hope they will not prevail."

The continuing presence of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag* in the Russian schools (along with *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and "Matryona's Home") is a sign of hope. October 30, 2017, will see the opening of Russia's memorial to the victims of political repression, co-funded by government and donations from civil society. These, too, are facts about Putin's Russia and signs that Leninist-Stalinism is not simply the subject of nostalgia or apologetics in contemporary Russia. Solzhenitsyn is still a force for truth in the Russia he loved so much. The availability of the *Gulag* provides hope that the terrible tragedies of the past will not be repeated and that the remnants of the ideological Lie will not go uncontested in post-Communist Russia. And in the West it remains an indispensable warning against the ideological deformation of reality.

Sources and Suggested Readings

I have consulted the Russian abridgement of *The Gulag Archipelago* (*Archipelag gulag*: Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 2010) and the French translation of that abridgment, *L'archipel du Goulag: version abrégée inédite* (Paris: Fayard/Points, 2014). See p. 187 of the Russian edition and pp. 326-327 of the French edition for Natalia Solzhenitsyn's note regarding what the archives reveal about the extent and scope of the Stalinist gulag. I have also consulted the three volumes of *The Gulag Archipelago* that were rereleased in the Harper Perennial Modern Classics series in 2007, including the Ericson abridgment with a new Foreword by Anne Applebaum (see pp. xiii-xx). The 2007 edition of the abridgement is the only English-language edition still in print.

I have drawn extensively on Alexis Klimoff's translation of Natalia Solzhenitsyn, "The Gift of Incarnation" in Daniel J. Mahoney, *The Other Solzhenitsyn: Telling the Truth about a Misunderstood Writer and Thinker* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2014), pp. 206-230, especially pp. 224-227. That luminous essay introduces the Russian and French abridgments.

See pp. 262-263 of Solzhenitsyn, *Une minute par jour* (Paris: Fayard, 2007) for the citations from his September 13, 1995 address at the University of Saratov.

I have also relied on Oleg Khlevniuk's thorough and balanced archival account of the human costs of Leninist-Stalinism in Khlevniuk's *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2015). See my review of the book ("Lenin's Faithful Heir") in *Modern Age*, Summer 2016, pp. 77-81.

My interview with Stephan Solzhenitsyn took place on October 9, 2016. I am grateful to Stephan and Natalia Solzhenitsyn for the helpful information they provided me on the reception of the Russian abridgment and its continuing place in the Russian high school curriculum. It is officially a work of "literature" but it is also taught by some history teachers.

