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# Cartographies of Pain: A Study of Chronotopes and Contested Bodies in Solzhenitsyn's Early Novels

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts.

Johannesburg, 2013

# Keywords

Alexander Solzhenitsyn; panopticism; memorialisation; humanity; trauma theory; dehumanisation; forced labour camp; totalitarianism; ideology; disease

# Declaration

I declare this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.

_____

Natalie Paoli

10 June 2013

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# Glossary of Terms

- **Butyrki.** A major prison in Moscow both before and during Communism, also known as *Butyrka*.
- **Cheka.** (*Chrezvychaynaya komissiya*: "Extraordinary Commission"). The first name given to the Soviet secret police, 1917–1922.
- **FSB.** (*Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsyi*: "Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation"). The main successor of the KGB. The current domestic security agency of the Russian Federation.
- **GPU.** (*Gosudarstvennoye Politicheskoye Upravlenie*: "State Political Directorate"). The Soviet Intelligence Service and Secret Police, February 1922 – December 1922.
- **Gulag.** (*Glavnoye Upravlenie Ispravityelno-Trudoykh Lagerey i Koloniy*: "Chief Administration of Corrective Labour Camps and Colonies"). The main penal system of the Soviets. A colloquial name for a forced labour camp popularised by Solzhenitsyn.
- **KGB.** (*Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti*: "Committee for State Security"). The name given to the Soviet secret police, post 1953.
- **Kulak.** (Meaning "tight-fisted"). Category of supposedly wealthy/influential farmers in the USSR who were considered "class enemies."
- **Lubyanka.** Secret police headquarters and prison in central Moscow, named for the square.
- **MGB.** (*Ministerstvo Gosudarstevnnoy Bezopasnosti*: "Ministry of State Security"). The name given to the Soviet secret police, preceding the KGB, 1946-1953.
- **NKGB.** ("People's Commissariat of State Security"). The name given to the Soviet secret police, 1943-1946.
- **NKVD.** (*Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del*: "People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs"). The name given to the Soviet secret police, 1934-1943.
- **Samizdat.** A self-published manuscript.
- **Sharashka.** Russian prison slang for a "special prison," a special research centre in which the researchers (technicians, scientists, engineers) are all prisoners.
- **Zek.** (From *zaklyuchenny*: "prisoner"). Russian prison slang for a prisoner.

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# Introduction

*"Literature becomes the living memory of a nation."*

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Nobel Prize Speech*[1]

## Russia under Communism: A Brief Overview

*"The dictatorship means – learn this once and for all – unrestrained power based on force, not on law."*

Vladimir Lenin[2]

Lenin's statement was to become a dystopian prophecy of life under Communism in what Stéphane Courtois referred to as the "century of human catastrophe," a "bloodstained century of violence."[3] In response to this, Alexander Solzhenitsyn maintained that unlimited "power in the hands of limited people always leads to cruelty."[4] In *The Gulag Archipelago* (1974), Solzhenitsyn quoted from Lenin's essay, "How to Organise the Competition" (January 1918), attending to the fact that Lenin had proclaimed his intention to purge '"the Russian land of all kinds of harmful insects."'[5] Solzhenitsyn went on to explain that the "forms of insect-purging which Lenin conceived of in [the] essay were most varied: in some places they [those who have been persecuted] would be placed under arrest […] in some, 'after having served their time in punishment cells, they would be handed yellow tickets'; in others, *parasites would be shot*" (Solzhenitsyn, 1974: 27). At the time of the Russian Revolution, the Marxist Rosa Luxemburg warned that what Lenin and his party were doing had a grave parallel with the actions of the Jacobins during the French Revolution.[6] Similarly, Robert Gellately explains

[1] Wesley D. Camp, *What a Piece of Work is Man: Camp's Unfamiliar Quotations from 2000 B.C. to the Present* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1989), p. 181

[2] Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii (Complete Collected Works)*, 41, Moscow, 1961 – 1965, p. 376

[3] Stéphane Courtois, 'Introduction: The Crimes of Communism', in *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, trans. by Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kramer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 1

[4] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918 – 1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, trans. by Thomas P. Whitney (London: Book Club Associates, 1974), p. 560. All other reference to this text will appear in parentheses, in text.

[5] Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *Sobranie Sochinenii (Collected Works)*, 35, p. 68, as quoted in *The Gulag Archipelago*, p. 27

[6] Niels Christian Nielsen, *Solzhenitsyn's Religion* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1975), p. 113

that as early as 1905, following the uprising on the ninth of January known as "Bloody Sunday," Lenin was already actively advocating "'armed insurrection' and 'mass terror' and disdained any form of liberal democracy."[7] Throughout this study, I am concerned with critically examining a particular kind of reality as lived under the Stalinist era as portrayed in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's early novels, particularly *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962), *The First Circle* (1968), and, *Cancer Ward* (1968). In order to better understand the Stalinist backdrop against which these texts are set, it is important to briefly consider the role that Lenin played in the making of Soviet Communism. Jonathan Glover explains that "Stalin did not start Soviet terror," but that it "went back to the earliest days of the Revolution."[8] In addition, Gellately emphasises that it was Lenin who "introduced [the specific brand of] Soviet Communism, complete with new secret police and concentration camps," and that he was the one responsible for "suppressing all liberal freedoms and for ridding the country of a Constituent Assembly that might have led toward democracy" (Gellately, 2008: 580). As Glover highlights, however, it was Stalin who "brought the terror to a new pitch and made it universal."[9] Therefore, both Lenin and Stalin were accountable in various ways for the violence that occurred during the Communist years. As Solzhenitsyn saw it, one of the reasons Soviet Communism may have turned out as it did was because of an illusory belief that any political ideology based on class struggle could lead to a "more humane world." For him therefore, "Marxism-Leninism is [actually] something which proves to be the antithesis of humanism."[10] For Solzhenitsyn this was because, as Stephen Carter explains, the "original ideas of Marxism-Leninism can easily disappear [and in the case of Communist Russia, they did] as a result of the methods used to achieve the aims of a revolution, so that such a revolution will always tend to degenerate into an unfree, terrorised society."[11] It is significant that even before the outbreak of World War II some intellectuals, such as Jan Smuts, in a South African context, took notice of ideological trends around the world and saw that some dangerous beliefs were taking hold. Smuts stated the following in his address as Rector of Saint Andrew's on the 17th of October 1934:

[7] Robert Gellately, *Lenin, Stalin and Hitler: The Age of Social Catastrophe* (London: Vintage Books, 2008), p. 27. All other reference to this text will appear in parentheses, in text.
[8] Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the 20th Century*, Second Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 241
[9] Ibid., p. 242
[10] Stephen Carter, *The Politics of Solzhenitsyn* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1977), p. 92
[11] Ibid., p. 93

> discounting the serious risk of war in the near future, there still remain other grave dangers facing our civilisation. There is a decay of principles, which is eating at the very vitals of free government, and to me that appears to be a far more serious danger to our future than the risk of war. There is today a decay of the individual's responsibility and share in government which seems to strike at the roots of our human advance.[12]

With regards to Communist Russia, Martin Amis maintains that "those accused of political crimes were almost invariably innocent," and that the "interrogators needed confessions because these had been demanded from above *by quota* – that cornerstone of Bolshevik methodology."[13] Slavoj Žižek, in an interview with Dianna Dilworth, had the following to say about Communist Russia: "Under Stalinism most were on trial for false accusations; most of them were not traitors. Nonetheless, there is one interesting feature: that they were tortured or through some kind of blackmail forced to confess to being traitors."[14] Solzhenitsyn likened the arrest and imprisonment of these hundreds and thousands of mostly innocent people to that of a sewage system: "[The] prison sewers were never empty. The blood, the sweat, and the urine into which we were pulped pulsed through them continuously" (Solzhenitsyn, 1974: 25).

In this study, I will make use of *The Gulag Archipelago* to provide an historical framework for and backdrop to Solzhenitsyn's fiction. This text is more than just a simple inventory of what happened to countless people living in the Soviet Union. As with his earlier works of fiction, and in addition to exposing the physical crimes of the state, Solzhenitsyn was also concerned with illustrating how these crimes were perpetrated due to some form of ideological justification and the "Lie" it represented. Raymond Aron provides an enabling description of Solzhenitsyn's primary focus in this regard:

> Solzhenitsyn's message can be summarised, it seems to me, in two fundamental sentences: There is something worse than poverty and repression and that something is the Lie; the lesson this century [the twentieth century] teaches us is to recognise the deadly snare of

[12] Jan C. Smuts, *Plans for a Better World: Speeches of Field-Marshal the Right Honourable J. C. Smuts* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1945), p. 93
[13] Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), p. 61
[14] Dianna Dilworth, "Interview with Slavoj Žižek", *The Believer*, 4 July 2011

> ideology, the illusion that men and social organisations can be transformed at a stroke.[15]

The "Lie", or the underpinning ideology of the Stalinist regime, is inherently dangerous to both the future of humanity and the future of the individual, as it is "invariably intertwined" with violence. Solzhenitsyn explained that "violence cannot conceal itself behind anything except lies, and lies have nothing to maintain them save violence."[16] As numerous commentators have argued, the ideological foundations erected by the fathers of the Bolshevik Revolution were rooted in the eradication of people's "individuality and [their] capacity for action."[17] As Hannah Arendt put it in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, "total power can be achieved and safeguarded only in a world of conditioned reflexes of marionettes without the slightest trace of spontaneity."[18] In addition, Arendt also went on to explain that total domination achieves this by organising "the infinite plurality and differentiation of [human] beings as if all of humanity were just one individual."[19] In significant ways, this was what Solzhenitsyn felt had happened to Soviet citizens during the years of Communist reign in the USSR; the majority were turned, through terror and indoctrination, into "marionettes." To gain a greater understanding of certain aspects of the Bolsheviks' mission, one need only look at an article published in the first issue of the Cheka newspaper (published in Kiev in August, 1919):

> For us there do not, and cannot exist the old systems of morality and "humanity" invented by the bourgeoisie for the purpose of oppressing and exploiting the "lower classes". Our morality is new, our humanity is absolute for it rests on the bright ideal of destroying all oppression and coercion. To us all is permitted, for we are the first in the world to raise the sword not in the name of enslaving and oppressing anyone, but in the name of freeing them from all bondage […]. Blood! Let there be blood, if it alone can turn the grey-white-and-black banner of the old pirate's world to a scarlet hue, for only the complete and final death of that world will save us from the return of the flag of the old jackals![20]

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[15] Raymond Aron, 'Alexander Solzhenitsyn and European "Leftism"', in *In Defence of Political Reason: Essays by Raymond Aron*, ed. by Daniel J. Mahoney (Lanham: Rowman& Littlefield, 1994), p. 123

[16] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 'The Nobel Lecture on Literature', in *East and West*, trans. by Alexis Klimoff (New York :Harper & Row, 1980), p. 20

[17] Jonas R. L. Miranda, 'Totalitarian Banality of Evil in Hannah Arendt's Thought', in *IAMURE: International Journal of Literature, Philosophy and Religion*, 1 January 2012, p. 36

[18] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: George Allen &Unwin Ltd, 1967), p. 457. All other reference to this text will appear in parentheses, in text.

[19] Miranda,'Totalitarian Banality of Evil in Hannah Arendt's Thought', p. 35

[20] *Krasnyi mech (Red Sword)*, 18 Aug. 1919, as cited in George Leggett, *The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 203

It is quite clear then that from early on, even before Stalin had attained full control, the Soviet state's intentions were deeply entrenched in revolutionary violence. This happened because, as Arendt put it, wherever "totalitarianism possesses absolute control, it replaces propaganda with indoctrination and uses violence not so much to frighten people as to realise constantly its ideological doctrines and its practical lies" (Arendt, 1967: 341). In addition, she went on to say that

> Terror continues to be used by totalitarian regimes even when its psychological aims are achieved: its real horror is that it reigns over a completely subdued population. Where the rule of terror is brought to perfection, as in concentration camps, propaganda disappears entirely […]. Propaganda, in other words, is one, and possibly the most important, instrument of totalitarianism for dealing with the nontotalitarian world; terror, on the contrary, is the very essence of its form of government (Arendt, 1967: 344).

For the purposes of this study, Arendt's work on totalitarian power is crucial. Similarly, Michel Foucault's critical preoccupations with panopticism, most notably foregrounded in *Discipline and Punish*, provide an enabling lens through which to view Solzhenitsyn's early oeuvre. For Foucault, it was not enough to simply replace the supervisor in the panopticon/tower with another supervisor as the effect of the surveillance itself would continue. He believed that in order to destroy the system of constant surveillance, one had to dismantle the tower from which it functioned. Through his works, Solzhenitsyn offered a scathing exposition of Leninism-Marxism, which he saw functioning as an ideological tower within a panoptic Soviet Russia. The panopticon represents "a key spatial figure in the modern project" and is an essential device in "the creation of modern subjectivity, in other words in the remaking of people (and society) in the image of modernity."[21] In his novels, Solzhenitsyn makes it explicit how and why surveillance was an integral part of the Soviet government. There were informants in both the labour camps and the *sharashki*, prisoners who spied on and betrayed their fellow inmates. In relation to this, in the panopticon, according to Foucault, "each person, depending on his place, is watched by all or certain of the others. You have no apparatus of total and circulating mistrust, because there is no absolute point. The perfected form of surveillance consists in a summation of

[21] David Wood, 'Editorial: Foucault and Panopticism Revisited', in *Surveillance and Society*, 1 (2003), p. 235

'malveillance.'"[22] The greatest effect (and perhaps goal) of panopticism is to "induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power."[23] Furthermore, Foucault explained that he who is "subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle in his own subjection" (Foucault, 1991: 202-203).

Dmitri Panin, a close friend of Solzhenitsyn's on whom he modelled the character of Sologdin (from *In the First Circle*), stated the following: "A huge country, basically Christian, had been made over into a nursery for rearing a new breed of men under conditions of widescale terror and atheism […]. The young Communist state proceeded to mutilate and crush whatever opposed it, secular or sacred, to bury human life under atrocities."[24] As with the tsarist regime, Solzhenitsyn argued, Leninism and then Stalinism made use of the same systems of incarceration – the forced labour camps and exile. In fact, the new revolutionary government went as far as making use of the same buildings the tsarists had employed. Anne Applebaum explains that the

> Gulag had its antecedents in tsarist Russia, in the forced-labour brigades that operated in Siberia from the seventeenth century to the beginning of the twentieth. It then took on its modern and more familiar form almost immediately after the Russian Revolution, becoming an integral part of the Revolution from the very beginning – and by the summer of 1918, Lenin […] had already demanded that "unreliable elements" be locked up in concentration camps outside major towns.[25]

At this point it is useful to recall Foucault's concept of "heterotopia." In essence, heterotopian spaces are "spaces that present an order which is completely different – even opposite – to that of real spaces."[26] It can be argued that these heterotopian spaces became a vital part of

[22] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings,1972-1977*, trans. by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Nepham, and Kate Soper, ed. by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 158
[23] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 201. All other reference to this text will appear in parentheses, in text.
[24] Dmitri Panin, *The Notebooks of Sologdin*, trans. by John Moore (London: Hutchinson, 1976), p. 11
[25] Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History of the Soviet Camps* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), p. 4. All other reference to this text will appear in parentheses, in text.
[26] Fátima Vieira, 'The concept of utopia', in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. by Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 18

the Soviet state. However, unlike the tsarists, Lenin (and after him, Stalin) intensified the system, making surveillance the foundation upon which the society of the time rested.

On the 24th of January 1918, it was decreed by the Soviet Commissariat of Justice that "all able-bodied prisoners should work."[27] As Gellately explains, the new criminal code, drawn up by 1922, removed the word "punishment" and instead stated that criminals would be "rehabilitated" through labour, thereby reducing the prevalence of criminality (Gellately, 2008: 54). However, this plan was undermined by the fact that there was pervasive "social breakdown" and that "completely new aspects of life" were criminalised by the new government (Gellately, 2008: 55). In addition, Lenin wanted to ensure that terror became an integral part of the new law. In a letter to Dmitri Kursky, the Commissar of Justice, Lenin stated: "The courts must not ban terror – to promise that would be deception or self-deception – but must work out the motives underlying it, legalise it as principle, in straightforward language, without any make-believe or embellishment."[28] It is precisely the incorporation into legislation of this principle that Arendt had in mind when she spoke of the "banality of evil." This concept holds that the unthinkable is committed by ordinary people who accept what the state requires of them and that they regard these actions as "normal." This means that the act of doing "terrible things in an organized and systematic way rests on 'normalisation,'" and this is a process "whereby ugly, degrading, murderous, and unspeakable acts become routine and are accepted as 'the way things are done.'"[29]

In the context out of which Solzhenitsyn was writing, one comes to understand that the atrocities committed under Stalinism became the norm of the state. In the circumstances created by the regime under this norm, individuals did have the choice between succumbing and surviving. Due to the nature of the Soviet state, however, the vast majority did not realise that the choice was there for them to make. This was because, as David Satter points out, repression

> conditioned millions of Soviet citizens to think and react according to the rules of the imaginary world of communist ideology. [During the Communist years] Soviet citizens had performed their obligatory roles – acting out the part of members of a classless society who,

[27] Michael Jakobson, *Origins of the Gulag: The Soviet Prison Camp System, 1917 – 1934*.(Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1993), p. 152
[28] Lenin, *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii*, pp. 190-191
[29] Edward S. Herman, *Triumph of the Market: Essays on Economics, Politics, and the Media* (Boston: South End Press, 1999), p. 97

> guided by infallible rulers, were creating heaven on earth at home and striving to bring the benefits of their paradise to the outside world.[30]

For Solzhenitsyn, however, it was ultimately this choice that determined whether one remained truly "human." This was because, in his mind, to succumb was to become complicit by accepting that the wrongs being committed against humanity were the norm of the day. This is something the German philosopher, Karl Jaspers, also had in mind when exploring the question of "metaphysical guilt."[31] Referring to Nazi Germany, he stated "[that] the spiritual conditions of German life provided an opportunity for such a regime is a fact for which all of us are co-responsible" (Jaspers, 1961: 78-79). It is necessary to note here that what Jaspers referred to was not collective guilt, *per se*, but rather a "metaphysical guilt", and by this he meant the "unconditional political surrender to a leader as such," the "kind of leader surrendered to," and, lastly, he held that the "atmosphere of submission is a sort of collective guilt" (Jaspers, 1961: 78-79). In significant ways, this notion of metaphysical guilt is applicable to the USSR. In the Stalinist system, the role of complicity is known as "habituated anticipatory conformity."[32] Solzhenitsyn was deeply concerned with the ways in which an individual might maintain their humanity even while the state coerced the majority of the population to participate in the "Lie." As Arendt explained, "totalitarianism uses its power precisely to spread this complicity through the population until it has organised the guilt of the whole people under its domination" (Arendt, 1967: 407-408). This, then, is the background against which Solzhenitsyn's works were produced.

After the revolution of October 1917, the country once again returned to a kind of oppression, what Nielsen calls "a tyranny worse than that of the tsars," a time of "arbitrary political arrests, interrogations, exile and death."[33] Applebaum explains this situation in the following terms:

> By 1921, there were already eighty-four camps in forty-three provinces, mostly designed to "rehabilitate" these first enemies of

[30] David Satter, *It was a long time ago, and it never happened anyway: Russia and the Communist Past* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 34. All other reference to this text will appear in parentheses, in text.
[31] See Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (New York: Capricorn, 1961). All other reference to this text will appear in parentheses, in text.
[32] Gary Armstrong and Clive Norris, *The Maximum Surveillance Society: the Rise of CCTV (*Oxford: Berg, 1999), p. 6
[33] Nielsen, *Solzhenitsyn's Religion*, p. 114

> the people. From 1929, the camps took on a new significance. In that year, Stalin decided to use forced labour to speed up the Soviet Union's industrialisation and to excavate the natural resources in the barely habitable far north. In that year, the Soviet secret police also began to take control of the Soviet penal system, slowly wresting all of the country's camps and prisons away from the judicial establishment. Helped along by the mass arrests of 1937 and 1938, the camps entered a period of rapid expansion. By the end of the 1930s, they could be found in every one of the Soviet Union's twelve time zones (Applebaum, 2003: 4).

At the outset of this study, it is important to consider the particular regime under which Solzhenitsyn was writing. This period followed Stalin's death in 1953, specifically when Nikita Khrushchev (leader of the Soviet Union from 1955 to 1964) came into power. It is crucial to emphasise that, as was the case with Lenin and Stalin, Khrushchev also had what may be termed his "reign of terror." In what is known as his "Secret Speech" of 1956, Khrushchev denounced the crimes of Stalin and Stalinism whilst ensuring the validity of Leninism. During this speech, he maintained,

> We have to consider seriously and analyse correctly [the crimes of the Stalin era] in order that we may preclude any possibility of a repetition in any form whatever of what took place during the life of Stalin, who absolutely did not tolerate collegiality in leadership and in work, and who practiced brutal violence, not only toward everything which opposed him, but also toward that which seemed to his capricious and despotic character, contrary to his concepts. Stalin acted not through persuasion, explanation, and patient cooperation with people, but by imposing his concepts and demanding absolute submission to his opinion. Whoever opposed this concept or tried to prove his viewpoint, and the correctness of his position, was doomed to removal from the leading collective and to subsequent moral and physical annihilation. This was especially true during the period following the XVIIth Party Congress [1934], when many prominent Party leaders and rank-and-file Party workers, honest and dedicated to the cause of Communism, fell victim to Stalin's despotism […].[34]

Khrushchev's condemnation of Stalin is cast in a highly ironic light when one considers his own history. In 1937, during the great party purges, when Khrushchev was Party Boss of Moscow, he removed a significant amount of party leaders and secretaries in the Moscow district (Gellately, 2008: 279). In addition, he "happily exceeded the quota of 35 000"

[34] From the *Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 84th Congress, Second Session* (May 22, 1956 – June 11, 1956), pp. 9389 – 9403. <www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1956khrushchev-secret1.html> [accessed June 2012]

[amount of people who had to be arrested] which had been set by the Politburo, telling Stalin that "he had already picked up 41 305 'criminal and kulak elements'" within two weeks (Gellately, 2008: 279). Of these, he "personally assigned 8500 'to the first category,'" in other words, "they were to be executed" (Gellately, 2008: 279). Khrushchev justified the use of terror, stating: "In destroying one, two, or ten of them, we are doing the work of millions. That's why our hand must not tremble, why we must march across the corpses of the enemy toward the good of the people."[35] This is the man who, two decades later, would speak of Stalin's practice of "brutal violence" as an atrocity committed against the Communist system. To a large extent, Khrushchev would also ultimately be responsible for the future of writers in the Soviet Union, like Solzhenitsyn.

## Realism and the Nineteenth-Century Russian Literary Tradition

As numerous commentators have suggested, Solzhenitsyn followed in the footsteps of the nineteenth-century founding fathers of Russian realism, most notably Fyodor Dostoevsky and Lev Tolstoy. Whilst "realism" is a problematic concept to define in absolute terms, one may understand it to refer to a literary style whereby "life as it is" is portrayed; a literary representation of people and their lives. This definition, however, is often considered too narrow and restrictive. In part, this is because realism is a literary form that, as Ernest J. Simmons explains, "grapples with, assimilates, and interprets reality, the subjective element plays an enormous role, to say nothing of the subjective element in the reader […] reacting to the [writer's] reactions to reality."[36] With this in mind, it may be argued that realism is in fact the impression of "life as it is" as *perceived* by both the author and reader. Fredric Jameson provides a useful explanation of realism, referring to it as "essentially an epistemological category framed and staged in aesthetic terms."[37] He proceeds to explain that such "is then the way in which all the great realists have thought of their narrative operations as an intervention of the 'superstitious' or religious, traditional, conceptions of life […]. But in each historical situation, the claim for truth will be a somewhat different one […]."[38] It would appear then that whilst realism is a problematic term, it is at the same time a flexible concept,

[35] As quoted by William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and his Era* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), pp. 99-100
[36] Ernest J. Simmons, *Introduction to Russian Realism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), pp. 3-4
[37] Fredric Jameson, 'Afterword: A Note on Literary Realism', in *A Concise Companion to Realism*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010),p. 279
[38] Jameson, 'Afterword: A Note on Literary Realism', p. 280

one which to some extent shares a common thread throughout different types of literature, but one which is also dependent on the writer and, to some extent, the reader. For Solzhenitsyn, there simply was no other meaningful form of literature than that which is used to portray the "real," with its foundation in the socio-political life of the author (and the readers he was writing for). Similarly, Albert Camus believed that "real literary creation […] uses reality and only reality with all its warmth and its blood, its passion and its outcries. It simply adds something which transfigures reality."[39] This is a significant point with regards to Solzhenitsyn's work as he too was deeply concerned with representing what he perceived to be the truth, whilst also being committed to surpassing the Soviet notion of the "real" in literature.

Nineteenth-century Russian realism had come to mean something specific in literary discourse, even though it may be argued that the most famous Russian realists, such as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Turgenev, varied significantly in their conception of realism. Dostoevsky, for example, "distinguished his 'realism' from that of his contemporaries," stating that he "was a 'realist in the higher sense' precisely because he described the 'depths of the human soul.'"[40] Despite these differences in their realist style, these writers had the same objective in mind – namely, to represent the society of the time as they saw and experienced it. Literary critic, Vissarion Belinsky, had the following to say about literature in nineteenth-century Russia: "One must be able to pass the facts of reality through one's imagination and endow them with a new life."[41] This then establishes some of the dominant elements within the tradition of nineteenth-century Russian realism. One may argue, therefore, as Alexis Klimoff does, that Russian realism adhered to the belief "that the writer's God-given talent must not be wasted on idle fancies at a time when he is a witness to the pains and sorrows of his society."[42] The authors of the time considered literature to be "one side of a dialogue with life, a response that would in turn elicit responses" and because "artistic truth and the truth of experience – psychological, social, or religious – were deemed

[39] Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. by Anthony Bower (London: Vintage Books, 1984), p. 269

[40] Richard Haugh, 'The Philosophical Foundations of Solzhenitsyn's Vision of Arts'. in *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Records*, ed. by John B. Dunlop, Richard Haugh and Alexis Klimoff (London: Collier Macmillan, 1975), p. 171

[41] Vissarion Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1948), p. 171

[42] Alexis Klimoff, 'Introduction', in *'One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich': A Critical Companion*, ed. by Alexis Klimoff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), pp. 10-11

to coincide, either was testable against the other."[43] Solzhenitsyn followed this tradition of Russian realism in his commitment to memorialisation – bearing witness to the fate of twentieth-century Russia. However, it is also important to emphasise that he was the first author in the USSR to offer an explicit exposition of the ruthless nature of the country's legal and penal system in both his works of fiction and in his non-fictional tome, *The Gulag Archipelago*.

## What is the Meaning of (Soviet) Socialist Realism?

As is the case with realism, the concept of Socialist Realism is a problematic one. C. Vaughan James explains that those who defend Socialist Realism consider it a "world-wide development, though with local peculiarities, associated with the rise of a politically conscious, i.e. Marxist, industrial proletariat," and therefore, it is "the reflection in the arts of the battle for the creation of a socialist society."[44] Whilst this may be true of other countries, Socialist Realism came to mean something very specific in the USSR. Andrei Aleksandrovich Zhdanov, Second Secretary of the Communist Party (1941 – 1948), attempted to define the Soviet version of it, stating:

> Socialist Realism, the basic method employed by Soviet artistic literature and literary criticism, demands from the writer an authentic, historically specific depiction of reality in its revolutionary development. This authenticity and historical specificity in the depiction of reality should be combined with the task of ideologically reshaping and educating the toilers in the spirit of socialism. Socialist Realism guarantees the creative artist exceptional opportunities for the manifestation of his creative initiative, for the choice of various forms, styles and genres.[45]

However, far "from being a new system foisted on the cowed and unwilling artist," as James continues to explain, Soviet Socialist Realism was "in fact an interpretation, within the context of Marxist-Leninist ideology, of artistic developments throughout the proletarian period of the revolutionary movement," and, in addition, it was "an attempt to codify those

[43] Klimoff, 'Introduction', pp. 10-11
[44] C. Vaughan James, *Soviet Socialist Realism* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1973), pp. x-xi
[45] From Zhdanov's speech given at the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1934, as found in *Problems of Soviet literature: Reports and Speeches at the First Soviet Writers' Congress*, ed. By H. G. Scott (London: Martin Lawrence, 1935), pp. 21-22

developments and project them into the future, transforming the artist's 'tendency' into a conscious programme."[46]

It must be emphasised, however, that Socialist Realism depicts reality, as Zhdanov put it, "in its revolutionary development." This meant that an artist or writer was required to portray a reality that did not contradict "ideological orthodoxy," but rather provide an image of "reality as it will be," thereby supporting the Soviet state's ideology. [47] "Reality as it will be" may be taken to signify that no work considered to make use of Socialist Realism accurately portrayed the reality of life under the Soviet regime as it truly was. "Realism" in this sense came to epitomise a "comprehensive reflection and interpretation of life from the point of view of social relations, and 'Socialism' meant "in accordance with the policy of the Communist Party."[48] Geoffrey Hosking provides a summation of how exactly the Soviets defined Socialist Realist works:

> The Socialist Realist work is described as being *narodnyi* (loosely: "popular"), both in the sense that its subject-matter reflects the life of ordinary people, and in the sense that it is readily comprehensible to them. It is *ideiniy*: that is, it reflects a mature, correct and fully formed ideology on the part of the author, for otherwise it could not play its educative role. And it is *partiinyi*: it is imbued with the ideals of the party and accords with the party's current policy, for art is not an autonomous activity, but has civic responsibilities to fulfil, and works closely with the party in order to achieve this. Lenin formulated this requirement as early as 1905 in a much-quoted article, "Party organisation and party literature." Above all, though Socialist Realism is a realist method, it does not reflect reality *tout court*, but in "its revolutionary development."[49]

As such, much of this work was saturated with Party propaganda. Therefore, any literary works that criticised or reflected negatively upon the Party were summarily censored. In some cases the authors were sent in to exile or sentenced to time in detention. With de-Stalinisation, however, came the (brief) relaxation of political interference in literature. For the first time, authors of the Soviet Union were permitted to write about themes such as the harsh conditions of the penal system and the arbitrary nature of the Stalinist regime. Despite this change in

[46] James, *Soviet Socialist Realism*, p. 84
[47] Robert A. Maguire, *Red Virgin Soil: Soviet Literature in the 1920s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 188-259
[48] James, *Soviet Socialist Realism*, p. 88
[49] Geoffrey Hosking, *Beyond Socialist Realism: Soviet Fiction since Ivan Denisovich* (London: Granada, 1980), pp. 3-4

censorship laws, this relaxation was in itself restrictive and, consequently, when "the Party felt that the writers [had] overstepped the limits of the permissible, it [initiated] a critical campaign against faulty works."[50] Khrushchev saw writers as "faithful assistants of [the] Party in the building of Communism."[51] Indeed, Soviet censorship differed from that of previous governments in that it "not only censor[ed] a writer, it dictate[d] what he [would] say,"[52] despite the illusion that all writers voluntarily produced Socialist Realist texts. Many commentators have argued that Solzhenitsyn was only able to publish his first work, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, due to the period of political instability which had taken hold in the USSR. As Satter points out, with the end of Stalinist rule, the Soviet Union entered its first "period of 'normalcy'" (Satter, 2012: 34). Despite this, and whilst fear of arrest receded, the public still did not dare to criticise the government. The situation began to change when, in 1965, the authors Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel were put on trial for publishing their works abroad (September 1965 – February 1966). This period can be seen to mark the end of Khrushchev's liberal turn. As Satter explains, it was this "medieval spectacle of writers being put on trial for their work [that] led to the first political protests and gave rise to the Soviet dissident movement" (Satter, 2012: 34). This was because many intellectuals feared a return of the 1930s show-trials, the period known as the "Great Purge" or "Great Terror." Solzhenitsyn himself faced significant opposition when it came to publishing his other early works. When he was ready to publish *In the First Circle* and *Cancer Ward*, "freedom of speech" had been reined in, leaving him to face many challenges. Despite this, he was intent on seeing his works published, in order to undermine the deadening ideology perpetrated by Soviet Socialist Realism.

## Solzhenitsyn's Early Works as "Realism" and the Question of Humanity

In an essay entitled "Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature", Italo Calvino stated:

> What we ask of writers is that they guarantee the survival of what we call *human* in a world where everything appears inhuman; guarantee the survival of *human* discourse to console us for the loss of humanity in every other discourse and relationship. And what do we mean

[50] Herman Ermolaev, *Censorship in Soviet Literature, 1917 – 1991* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), p. 141
[51] Nikita S. Khrushchev, *Vysokoe prizvanie literatury i is kusstva* (Moscow: Pravda, 1963), p. 111
[52] As quoted by Q. D. Leavis, 'Solzhenitsyn the Creative Artist, and the Totalitarian State', in *Modern Critical Views: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publications, 2001), p. 137

> by *human?* Usually, whatever is temperamental, emotional, ingenuous, and not at all austere.[53]

While Calvino was specifically referring to the author Pier Paolo Pasolini, this description can be applied more broadly to the role that writers might be expected to take up. It can also be seem as a reflection of Solzhenitsyn's own views on literature. Solzhenitsyn declared: "I can see no task higher than serving reality, that is, re-creating a reality trampled, destroyed, and maligned in [my] country. I do not consider invention as such to be my task or goal, and I never seek to dazzle my readers with my fancies. For a writer, invention is simply a means of concentrating reality."[54] Similarly, Albert Camus, during his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, emphatically stated that it is the writer's duty to fulfil two "tasks that constitute the greatness of his craft: the service of truth and the service of liberty. Because his task is to unite the greatest possible number of his people, his art must not compromise with lies and servitude." He continued that the writer has two critical commitments, "the refusal to lie about what one knows and the resistance to oppression."[55] In his own Nobel Prize speech, Solzhenitsyn confirmed that he wholeheartedly agreed with Camus, and that it was his own sincere belief that an artist or writer could not ignore or escape the "real world precisely because an artist is first of all an organic member of society."[56] Antonio Gramsci explained the following with regards to the "organic members of society":

> Every social class, coming into existence on the original basis of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates with itself, organically, one or more groups of intellectuals who give it homogeneity and consciousness of its function not only in the economic field but in the social and political field as well: the capitalist *entrepreneur* creates with himself the industrial technician, the political economist, the organiser of a new culture, of a new law, etc.[57]

For Gramsci, these intellectuals emerge "in 'response to particular historical developments,' as opposed to 'traditional intellectuals' whose 'organic' purpose is over as society enters a different stage of development."[58]

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[53] Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature: Essays*, trans. by Patrick Creagh (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), p. 95

[54] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Sobranie Sochinenii (Collected Works),* 10 (Moscow: Terra, 1999 – 2000), pp. 519-520

[55] *Nobel Lectures: Literature 1901 – 1967*, ed. by Horst Frenz (London: Elsevier, 1969), p. 525

[56] Haugh, 'The Philosophical Foundations of Solzhenitsyn's Vision of Arts', p. 172

[57] Quoted by Peter Mayo, *Gramsci, Freire and Adult Education: Possibilities for Transformative Action* (New York: Zed Books, 1999), p. 41

[58] Ibid.

As Solzhenitsyn further stated in his Nobel Prize speech, "One word of truth outweighs the world. On such a seemingly fantastic violation of the law of the conservation of mass and energy are based both my own activities and my appeal to the writers of the whole world."[59] Donald Fanger points out that Solzhenitsyn never "acknowledged a literary world separate or separable from the larger world of human experience."[60] For Solzhenitsyn, literature in Russia after the Revolution was akin to a forest "in which a few trees were left after all the devastation;" the stories that needed to be told could not because of the people's unwillingness to acknowledge them, as well as the harsh censorship laws in place, and Solzhenitsyn mourned for the thousands whose tales died with them in the Gulags.[61] It may be argued that he was in fact possessed by his search for the truth. Robert Boyers stresses that Solzhenitsyn "has shown us not only how reporting may well be a precondition of struggle, he has also shown us that the affirmation of the free individual may itself be a radical gesture having as little to do with petit bourgeois pieties as with Marxist imperatives."[62] In addition, Boyers explains that Solzhenitsyn wanted to "get at a situation so as to make criticism not only possible but inevitable," and the "object of that criticism is neither a tendency nor a general inheritance nor a set of ideas, but a system."[63]

It is precisely because of Solzhenitsyn's concern with this difficult term "humanity," and the complex issue of life under totalitarianism, that it is vital to consider his works in light of trauma theory (with regards to literature). According to Jenny Edkins, the "testimony of survivors can challenge structures of power and authority," and this is precisely what Solzhenitsyn did by providing the reader a testimony of life under the Soviet regime in order to undermine the tradition of Soviet Socialist Realism and to reveal to the world the regime's crimes against humanity.[64] Victor Erlich emphasises that Solzhenitsyn was greatly concerned with "naming the unnameable," and in his works "the speechless have found a voice, the

[59] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Nobel Lecture (Bilingual Edition)* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972), pp. 33-34
[60] Donald Fanger, 'Solzhenitsyn: Art and Foreign Matter', in *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Materials*, ed. by John B. Dunlop, et al, p. 157
[61] Kathleen F. Parthé, *Russia's Dangerous Texts: Politics Between the Lines* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 15
[62] Robert Boyers, *Atrocity and Amnesia: The Political Novel since 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 93-94
[63] Ibid., p. 100
[64] Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 5

dispossessed a home."[65] Solzhenitsyn was preoccupied with the question of humanity, in both his fiction and non-fiction, and in *Warning to the West* he stated:

> The primary, the eternal concept is humanity, and Communism is anti-humanity. Whoever says 'anti-Communist' is saying, in effect, anti-anti-humanity. A poor construction. So we should say: That which is against Communism is for humanity. Not to accept but to reject this inhuman Communist ideology is simply to be a human being. Such a rejection is more than a political act. It is a protest of our soul against those who would have us forget the concepts of good and evil.[66]

This then summarises Solzhenitsyn's main argument; that Communism, is a grave evil and a danger to humanity. In writing these early novels, he was intent on undermining this danger to humanity and memorialising those who had already lost their lives in the struggle.

## The Early Texts

In the following chapters of this dissertation, I offer an in-depth study of Solzhenitsyn's early works, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, *In the First Circle*, and *Cancer Ward*. These texts are centrally preoccupied with the Soviet institutions of the forced labour camp, the special prison and the hospital (specifically the cancer ward, which was only to be found in certain hospitals). Whilst all three works were modelled on the author's own experiences (and therefore are highly autobiographical), they are fictional tales created with the intention of keeping the past and memory alive; to provide testimony of the horrors that occurred under Stalinism in the USSR. These three critical works reveal the foundations of Solzhenitsyn's thought, and may be considered, to borrow from Francis Barker, as his "democratic novels," precisely because they deal with those issues of freedom and compassion that are inextricably linked to the question of humanity.[67]

One way in which Solzhenitsyn was able to look at this question of humanity was through his use of polyphony, an important feature of his works, specifically to be found in *In the First Circle* and *Cancer Ward*. In an interview with the Slovak journalist, Pavel Ličko, Solzhenitsyn had the following to say about his use of polyphony:

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[65] Victor Erlich, 'The Writer as Witness', in *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Records*, ed. by John B. Dunlop, et , p. 27

[66] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Warning to the West*, trans. by Harris L. Coulter and Nataly Martin (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), pp. 58-59

[67] Francis Barker, *Solzhenitsyn: Politics and Form* (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 14-44

> Which genre do I consider the most interesting? A polyphonic novel strictly defined in time and space. A novel without a main hero. If a novel has a main hero the author inevitably pays more attention and devotes more time and space to him. How do I understand polyphony? Each person becomes the main hero as soon as the action reverts to him. Then the author feels responsible for as many as thirty-five heroes. He does not accord preferential treatment to anyone. He must understand every character and motivate his actions. In any case, he should not lose the ground under his feet. I employed this method in writing […].[68]

As has already been suggested with regards to Soviet Socialist Realism, there is an underlying world-view to be found in certain homophonic literature which Mikhail Bakhtin termed "ideological monologism."[69] Bakhtin believed that Socialist Realism was the "most monological form of art", and that it managed to establish "an exclusive monopoly on Soviet art."[70] This form of art "would tolerate neither polyphony nor even any monologism other than [its] own" (Krasnov, 1980: 7). In this sense then polyphony posed a danger to the propaganda of Soviet Socialist Realism, threatening to undermine it. As such, Solzhenitsyn's use of polyphony enabled him to contest the propaganda of the Stalinist regime.

In addition to his use of polyphony, Solzhenitsyn also employed chronotopes in all his works of fiction. The chronotope is another term defined by Bakhtin. Although another slippery concept, the following description is useful for the purposes of this dissertation:

> In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. The intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. In sum, Bakhtin's basic assumption is the idea that narrative texts are not only composed of a sequence of diegetic events and speech acts, but also – and perhaps even primarily – of the construction of a particular fictional world or chronotope.[71]

[68] From Pavel Ličko, "One Day with Solzhenitsyn", *Kulturny Zivot*, 31 March 1967 as found in *Solzhenitsyn: a Documentary Record*, ed. by Leopold Labedz (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 4

[69] Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) p. 80

[70] Vladislav Krasnov, *Solzhenitsyn and Dostoevsky: A Study in the Polyphonic Novel* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1980), p. 7. All other reference to this text will appear in parentheses, in text.

[71] Nele Bemong and Pieter Borghart, *Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives* (Eekhout: Academia Press, 2012), pp. 3-4

James Clifford condenses this by defining the chronotope as a "setting or scene organizing time and space in representable whole form."[72] The "forced labour camp," "special prison," and "cancer ward" all function as chronotopes of a highly provocative and political nature in Solzhenitsyn's texts. Therefore, in the following chapters, I pay particular attention to the chronotopes Solzhenitsyn used throughout these three fictional works. In addition, in my conclusion, I consider the implications and potential impact of reading Solzhenitsyn's early works in the context of contemporary Russia.

### *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*

*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, along with Solzhenitsyn's first two novels, *In the First Circle* and *Cancer Ward*, can be viewed, as Nielsen puts it, as "an inventory of the victimization of innocence."[73] In the same interview with Pavel Ličko quoted above, Solzhenitsyn stated: "I know that the easiest thing for a writer is to write about himself. But I have always felt that to write about the fate of Russia was the most fascinating and important task to be performed. Of all the drama that Russia lived through, the fate of Ivan Denisovich was the greatest tragedy."[74] *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was integral to Solzhenitsyn's development as an author. Sheila Fitzpatrick explains that, on publication, it was "a sensation," and that for a few years thereafter Solzhenitsyn was "the toast of the Soviet literary world, fêted and courted by the intelligentsia, hailed by the media as the harbinger of a rebirth of Soviet literature, elected to the Union of Writers without formal application, introduced to Khrushchev, offered a Moscow apartment (he turned it down), nominated for a Lenin Prize."[75] The novella was also fundamental in revealing to the world the little known truths about the treatment of prisoners under the Gulag system. As Georg Lukács stated:

> Solzhenitsyn's achievement consists in the literary transformation of an uneventful day in a typical camp into a symbol of a past which has not yet been overcome, nor has it been portrayed artistically. Although the camps epitomise one extreme of the Stalinist era, the author has made his skilful grey monochrome camp life into a symbol of everyday life under Stalin. He was successful in this precisely because he posed the artistic question: what demands has this era made on

[72] James Clifford, *Routes – Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), P. 25
[73] Nielsen, *Solzhenitsyn's Religion*, p. 17
[74] Pavel Ličko, "One Day with Solzhenitsyn", p. 4
[75] Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Like a Thunderbolt", *London Review of Books*, 30 (17), 11 September 2008, p. 14

> man? Who has proved himself as a human being? Who has salvaged his human dignity and integrity? Who has held his own and how? Who has retained his essential humanity? Where was this humanity twisted, broken, destroyed? His rigorous limitation to the immediate camp life permits Solzhenitsyn to pose the questions simultaneously in quite general and quite concrete terms. The constantly changing political and social alternatives which life places before free human beings are in the nature of the case eliminated, but resistance or collapse are treated so directly in terms of concrete being or non-being of living people that every solitary decision is raised to the level of a true-to-life generalisation and typification.[76]

Solzhenitsyn's "protest against the turning of the Soviet Union into a prison camp regime by Stalin [as exposed in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*] and the other betrayers of the Revolution has implicit [sic] within it most of the major themes of his writings."[77] This will be a central preoccupation throughout the remainder of this dissertation.

### *In the First Circle*

*The First Circle* appeared in English, with its titled altered, in 1968. Its complete title only appeared in English when the uncensored version was posthumously published in 2009. The initial dropping in English of the preposition "in," as explained by Edward E. Ericson, "subtly shifts the novel's focus from people in a place to the place itself."[78] This novel differs from *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in that in the novella, as Krasnov emphasises, the "reality of Stalinist Russia is portrayed chiefly from the viewpoint of poorly educated Ivan Denisovich, who represents the Russian people rather than the Russian intelligentsia," but "the very setting of *First Circle* allow[ed] Solzhenitsyn to show reality from a number of intellectual vantage points" (Krasnov, 1980: 19). Solzhenitsyn's core concern in *In the First Circle* remained the same as in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*: the issue of humanity. However, with this novel Solzhenitsyn was able to illustrate to the reader a more in-depth picture of the Soviet world under Communism and the bureaucracy upon which it relied. In particular, Solzhenitsyn was able to show the arbitrary nature of the Stalinist regime. Crucially, however, as Victor Erlich points out, despite the seemingly arbitrary image of evil that is presented to the reader, the "picture of the Soviet system which emerges…is as

[76] Georg Lukács, *Solzhenitsyn*, trans. by William David Graf (London: Merlin Press, 1969), pp. 13-14
[77] Nielsen, *Solzhenitsyn's Religion*, p. 17
[78] 'Foreword' to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *In the First Circle*, trans. by Harry T. Willetts (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), p. xiii

credible as it is terrifying. It is a bureaucratic spiral of fear: everybody, from the boss of the secret police through the head of the 'research institute' and its divisional directors down to the prison guard, is terrorized."[79]

### *Cancer Ward*

In a similar vein to *In the First Circle*, *Cancer Ward* is characterised by its artful use of polyphony. Once again the reader is faced with a plethora of characters, each offering a unique point of view. However, the polyphony in this text does not quite function in the same way as it does in *In the First Circle*. The main themes of the novel relate to that of *In the First Circle*; however, in this case the questions posed revolve specifically around concerns of life and death, as well as the value of life itself. The setting, a cancer ward almost in the middle of nowhere (a non-descript town in an Asiatic province of the Soviet Union), allows for these questions, as in such a place death is ever present and the manmade hierarchies of people can make little difference. Foucault is once again enabling in this regard. He argued that medicine and the structure of the hospital "becomes an essential element for the maintenance and development of collective life, for society."[80] As a chronotope, the cancer ward, as Krasnov points out, represents "not only a cross-section of Soviet society but also a microcosm of modern mankind that sooner or later, whether it becomes Communist or not, will have to face the ultimate question of life and death" (Krasnov, 1980: 159). The time frame in which the novel is set is also of significance as it was a period of political change. Barker explains that the phrase "History is on the march" recurs "refrain-like, in the book," and, a "sense that the end of the Stalinist period is near coincides with the book's other recurrent theme of Kostoglotov's return to 'life'."[81]

Having provided outlines of the texts with which I am principally concerned in this study, I proceed with a more substantial discussion of the significance of Solzhenitsyn's first work, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

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[79] Victor Erlich, *Twentieth Century Russian Literary Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 23
[80] Stuart Elden, *Plague, Panopticon, Police* in *Surveillance and Society*, Vol. 1, No 3, p240. 2003. Retrieved June 2011 from surveillance-and-society.org.
[81] Barker, *Solzhenitsyn: Politics and Form*, pp. 17-18

# Chapter One – Man is Wolf to Man: *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*

*"What century are we living in? Numbers sewn on human beings? Tell me, Lev Grigorievich, is this what we call progress?"*

Valentin Pryanchikov, *In the First Circle*.[1]

*"Yes, we are behind barbed wire, they have stripped us of everything they could, they have torn us away from our friends and families, but unless we acknowledge this as their right, we remain free."*

Irina Ratushinskaya, *Grey is the Colour of Hope*[2]

## *One Day* in Context

The story behind the publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* involves a good deal of political intrigue. Numerous commentators have argued that, in order to gain greater public support at a time of uncertainty for the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev personally authorised the publication of the text in the magazine *Novy Mir*. However, as Max Hayward points out, Khrushchev did not realise what the repercussions of this decision would be:

> By exploding the limits of what, thematically speaking, had hitherto been possible for Soviet writers, and by giving the stamp of quasi-official approval to a work which implicitly questioned the legitimacy of all the Soviet regime's basic claims, Khrushchev prepared the ground for the opposition to the party's control of literature which spread among the Soviet literary intelligentsia during the following years.[3]

Significantly, the character of Stalin is conspicuously absent from the novella. Herman Ermolaev explains that "Solzhenitsyn did not want to single him out as the architect of the repressive system that was set up under Lenin," and, since the "party leadership promoted a

[1] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *In the First Circle*, trans. by Harry T. Willetts (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), p. 9. Primary material will be referenced in parentheses, in text.
[2] Irina Ratushinskaya, *Grey is the Colour of Hope* (New York: Knopf, 1988), p.40
[3] Max Hayward, *Writers in Russia: 1917 – 1978*, ed. by Patricia Blake (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), pp. 71-72

different version of events, Khrushchev's adviser Lebedev asked Solzhenitsyn to make an insertion which would blame Stalin for the calamities that befell Russia."[4] Solzhenitsyn refused to do so. Whilst Khrushchev had intentions of using the novella for his own political means, it is crucial to keep in mind that, for Solzhenitsyn, writing it was not simply a political endeavour. As Edward E. Ericson points out, a political approach "does not penetrate to the heart of *One Day*. The novel is not, in its essence, about Stalin's inhumanity to man; it is about man's inhumanity to man. Stalin is not some aberration in an otherwise smooth progression of humaneness in history. The evil of the human heart is a universal theme: this is Solzhenitsyn's approach."[5] The text is, in addition, a literary experiment aimed at memorialising what had befallen many people in the Soviet Union. The prison camp thus becomes a "microcosm of life in Russia."[6] It is true that those who were imprisoned in forced labour camps suffered a great deal more than those who were not. Crucially, however, there was as much terror occurring outside the camps as there was inside. In this way, the country itself became a type of camp, separated and cut off from the outside world as a whole. Judith Lewis Herman states that remembering and "telling the truth about terrible events [are] prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims."[7] Not only is the testimony of survivors important for the healing of the individual, as Jenny Edkins points out, it is also necessary to "challenge structures of power and authority."[8] In writing *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* then, Solzhenitsyn was taking the first steps toward challenging the power structures of Communist Russia.

When asked how he came to write *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn recalled:

> When I had hit upon the idea of describing a day in the life of a zek, it was of course clear that he would have to be the most ordinary of rank-and-file members in the Gulag army […]. The question was whom I should pick. I had rubbed shoulders with numerous prisoners in my time and could remember dozens and dozens of individuals I had known well, even hundreds. Then suddenly and for no apparent reason, the figure of Ivan Denisovich began to take shape in a most unexpected fashion. First the surname – Shukhov – forced itself upon

[4] Ermolaev, *Censorship in Soviet Literature,* p. 158
[5] Edward E. Ericson, 'Humanity in Extremis', in *Modern Critical Views: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publications, 2001), p. 4
[6] Nielsen, *Solzhenitsyn's Religion*, p. 20
[7] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 1
[8] Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, p. 5

> me without any conscious choice on my part; this was the family name of a soldier in my battery during the war. Then along with his surname, came his face and a few aspects of his biography: the region he was from, the way he spoke. And so this private from an artillery unit serving in the German–Soviet war began to enter into my tale, even though he had never done time in prison […]. It was as if he had clambered in of his own accord.[9]

Although this may well be what Alexis Klimoff calls Solzhenitsyn's "mysterious creative process," the reader should not underestimate the significance of the author choosing a peasant as the protagonist of his novella.

It should be pointed out, of course, that the labour camp theme is not unique to Solzhenitsyn. For example, a scene from Pasternak's seminal text, *Doctor Zhivago*, can be compared to *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. The following is from a conversation between Zhivago and one of his friends, a survivor of the 1930s purge, explaining what happened to the latter after being transported: "They told us: 'Here is your camp. Settle down as best you can.' […] We cut down saplings with our bare hands in the frost to build huts. And would you believe it, we gradually built our own camp. We cut down wood to build our own dungeons, we surrounded ourselves with a stockade, we equipped ourselves with prison-cells and watch-towers – we did it all by ourselves."[10] Despite the thematic overlaps between such texts, Solzhenitsyn differed greatly from these authors because, as Dariusz Tolczyk emphasises, they failed "to uncover the sources of human behaviour that could be revealed in this traumatic test of the limits of humanity."[11] In addition, what is particularly distinctive about some of these other authors, specifically those whose works were approved by the Soviet state, is that "the victim's point of view […] was in fact limited to only one type of victim, an ardent Communist for whom the main moral question raised by his imprisonment was not 'Why do human beings do this to other people?' but [rather] 'Why is this being done to me, a good and loyal communist?'"[12] Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* differed from others dealing with the prison topic in that it was centrally concerned with the issue of humanity. This theme, as I have suggested above and will demonstrate throughout this study, is something that is prevalent in most of his fictional works, especially in *In the First Circle* and *Cancer Ward*.

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[9] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, 10, pp. 520-521

[10] Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, trans. by Max Hayward and Manya Harari, (London: Fontana, 1961), p. 236

[11] Dariusz Tolczyk, 'Who is Ivan Denisovich? Ethical Challenge and Narrative Ambiguity in Solzhenitsyn's Text', in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich: A Critical Companion* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), p. 72

[12] Ibid.

As is emphasised above, Solzhenitsyn's choice of protagonist, Ivan Denisovich Shukhov, is highly significant. Here it is critical to emphasise that Shukhov is not an autobiographical character like Gleb Nerzhin from *In the First Circle* or Oleg Kostoglotov from *Cancer Ward*. The only character which may well be a fictional representation of Solzhenitsyn is the old man whom Shukhov spots eating in the mess-hall:

> He'd [Shukhov] been told that this old man had spent years without number in camps and prisons, and that he hadn't benefited from a single amnesty. Whenever one ten-year stretch had run out they shoved another on to him right away. Now Shukhov looked closely at the man. He held himself straight – the other zeks sat all hunched up – and looked as if he'd put something extra on the bench to sit on. There was nothing left to crop on his head: his hair had dropped out long since – the result of high living, no doubt. His eyes didn't dart after everything going on in the mess-hall. He kept them fixed in an unseeing gaze at some spot over Shukhov's head. His worn wooden spoon dipped rhythmically into the thin skilly, but instead of lowering his head to the bowl like everybody else, he raised the spoon high to his lips. He'd lost all his teeth and chewed his bread with iron gums. All life had drained out of his face, but it had been left, not sickly or feeble, but hard and dark like carved stone. And by his hands, big and cracked and blackened, you could see that he'd had little opportunity of doing cushy jobs. But he wasn't going to give in, oh no! *He* wasn't going to put his three hundred grammes on the dirty, bespattered table – he put it on a well-washed bit of rag (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 122–123).

Russian literary critic and children's author, Kornei Chukovsky, commented that Shukhov exemplifies "the character traits of a simple Russian man: steadfastness in life, feisty stubbornness, the ability to be a jack-of-all-trades, stamina, and a cunning blended with kindness."[13] He went on to say that Shukhov's speech was not "stylised," but rather "alive and organic, as free and natural as breathing itself, a marvellous popular speech with an admixture of prison-camp slang."[14] This is an essential aspect of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, as Solzhenitsyn was dealing with the theme of the "baneful spirit of torture that had become institutionalised in human relationships."[15] Similarly, by using the speech of a Russian "everyman," he could reach an audience of millions. Editor of *Novy Mir*, Aleksandr Tvardovsky, wrote in his foreword that "*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* is not a memoir in the documentary sense."[16] This was because the text does not "represent

[13] Kornei Chukovsky, *Dnevnik 1930 – 1969* (Moscow: Sovremennyi pisatel', 1994), pp. 308-310
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Cited in *Khrushchev and the Arts: The Politics of Soviet Culture, 1962 – 1964*, ed. by Priscilla Johnson and Leopold Labedz (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965), pp. 212-213

reminiscences or notes detailing the author's personal experiences, even though only personal experience could have given this story its sense of authenticity and verisimilitude," but rather that it needs to be looked upon as a "work of literary art, and precisely because it illuminates the given subject matter through art, it stands as testimony of particular significance. It is a document in art, one whose very existence […] had [previously] seemed quite improbable."[17]

*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* then may well be described as a form of testimony, a representation of what had been the fate of many (mostly) innocent people. Significantly, it is a text which is also an indictment of the actions of the Soviet Union. For Solzhenitsyn, Ivan Denisovich Shukhov's story had to be told because, as he said in an interview with Pavel Ličko, "[…] of all the drama that Russia lived through, [Shukhov's] fate was the greatest tragedy."[18] In all of Solzhenitsyn's works, when it comes to surviving any sort of horrific event, the question of how to maintain one's humanity is the first to be asked. Solzhenitsyn spoke of the peasants in *The Gulag Archipelago* as "a silent people, without a literary voice, nor do they write complaints or memoirs," and they made up the millions who were dumped down "the sewer pipes" of what he called "Our Sewage Disposal System" (Solzhenitsyn, 1974: 24). As V. Lakshin wrote:

> Were Solzhenitsyn an artist of smaller scale and less sensitivity, he would probably have selected the worst day in the most arduous period of Ivan Denisovich's camp life. But he took a different road, one possible only for a writer who is certain of his own strength, who realises that the subject of his story is of such importance and gravity that it excludes empty sensationalism and the desire to shock with descriptions of suffering and physical pain. Thus, by placing himself in apparently the most difficult and disadvantageous circumstances before the reader, who in no way expects to encounter a 'happy' day in the convict's life, the author thereby ensured the full objectivity of his artistic testimony, and all the more mercilessly and sharply struck a blow at the crimes of the recent past.[19]

The fact that the protagonist is a peasant adds to the feeling of the "everyday," the "ordinary," and this forces the reader to deal with the difficult material in a more unmediated way, without, as Klimoff points out, "escaping into intellectual rationalisations."[20] This is because Shukhov's view of the world, his view of the concentration camp, is considerably

[17] *Khrushchev and the Arts*, ed. by Priscilla Johnson and Leopold Labedz, pp. 212-213
[18] Solzhenitsyn's interview with Pavel Ličko, as quoted by Tolczyk, 'Who is Ivan Denisovich? Ethical Challenge and Narrative Ambiguity in Solzhenitsyn's Text', p. 76
[19] V. Lakshin, 'Literary Criticism: Ivan Denisovich, his friends and foes', *The Current Digest of the Russian Press*, 12 (1965).
[20] Klimoff, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich: A Critical Companion*, p. 13

narrower when compared to someone drawn from a more educated background – like the characters Captain Buinovsky and the team-leader Tsezar Markovich in the text. Klimoff explains that an important characteristic of the protagonist's particular peasant nature is that he has an "indestructibly firm grip on reality," which is "manifested throughout the text by his clear-eyed observations and sensible commentaries."[21] This is displayed by his small yet nonetheless important observations, for example when he states that within the prison camp, "you should never be conspicuous," and when he explains that there is "[n]o need to hurry, not even for a house on fire. Sleep apart, the only time a prisoner lives for himself is ten minutes in the morning at breakfast, five minutes over dinner and five at supper."[22] These "simple" observations contain important insights into life in a labour camp. The first, for example, points out the effect prison life has had on Shukhov, and how he has learned that being "invisible" was a necessary survival tactic. The second highlights the role of time in the camp and how valuable time to oneself is when you have been deprived of it. It is also important to note that, through these observations, Solzhenitsyn made his readers privy to Ivan Denisovich's inner thoughts, the workings of his mind. As Lukács noted:

> The detail in Solzhenitsyn's work has a peculiar function which grows out of the nature of his material: it renders conspicuous the suffocating restriction of everyday camp life, its monotony shot through with peril, the never-resting capillary movements, barely sufficient for the preservation of life. Every detail presents an alternative between survival and succumbing, every object is a trigger of a salutary or destructive fate. In this way the adventitious existence of individual objects is inseparably and visibly bound up with the curves of individual fates.[23]

Every detail in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, however small it may appear, is of great significance, and was used by Solzhenitsyn not to simply bolster the storyline, but to enforce his representation of a real day in the gulag. In addition, by using a peasant as the protagonist, Solzhenitsyn was emphasising that a man such as Shukhov existed and existed in such a place as a Soviet labour camp. Terrence Des Pres explains how this simple man, Shukhov, carried on even after being wrongfully accused and incarcerated:

> Surrounded by the combined inhumanity of man and nature, this small simple man has made a life for himself, with its grossly handicapped balance of pain and pleasure, risk and victory, deprivation and

[21] Klimoff, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich: A Critical Companion*, p. 13
[22] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, trans. by Ralph Parker (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 19, p. 17
[23] Lukács, *Solzhenitsyn*, p. 20

> fulfilment. And to a slight but all-important degree, it is *his* life; each act in violation of camp regulations, each moment of pleasure, lifts him anew above the sheer necessity which the agents of dehumanisation thought to impose on him.[24]

While it is important to understand that it is indeed *Shukhov's* life, it is also essential to look at it as a representation of Russia's tragic history under Soviet Communism. Shukhov represents the Soviet *everyman* and through him Solzhenitsyn was concerned with examining how far people in power were willing to go in achieving their view of a perfect Soviet-Communist future.

## The Importance of Space and Time

Space and time play vital roles in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, as they do throughout Solzhenitsyn's two other early works. As Richard Tempest highlights, most of Solzhenitsyn's texts are

> set within an enclosed, artificially constructed space – a prison, a peasant hut, a labour camp, a hospital – with its own topography, its own history, and occasionally its own fauna and flora. Each of these self-contained worlds is inhabited by a group of people, a little mankind with its own social hierarchies and personal relationships. The characters in *One Day*, *The First Circle*, and *Cancer Ward* suffer, feel, move, work, converse, argue, reminisce, and meditate within these […] geometrically regular […] spaces. Their lives are physically constricted and conditioned by space, which is a function of such constants of the human condition as loneliness, poverty, disease, prison.[25]

For Solzhenitsyn, the forced labour camp system was, as he put it in *The Gulag Archipelago*, "an almost invisible, almost imperceptible country inhabited by the zek people" (Solzhenitsyn, 1974: x). It was a *space within a space*, hidden away from the rest of the country. Through *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn wanted to reveal this space, and the micro-spaces related to it, to the outside world. Solzhenitsyn's use of a *space within a space* is illustrated in the novella when, for example, Shukhov remembers

> that this morning his fate hung in the balance: they wanted to shift the 104th from the building-shops to a new site, the 'Socialist Way of Life' settlement. It lay in open country covered with snow-drifts, and

[24] Terrence Des Pres, 'The Heroism of Survival', in *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Records*, ed. by John B. Dunlop, et al, p. 51
[25] Tempest, 'The Geometry of Hell', p. 54

> before anything else could be done there they would have to dig pits and put up posts and attach barbed wire to them. Wire themselves in, so that they wouldn't run away. Only then would they start building (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 9).

The countryside in the above extract represents an "open space" which stands in contrast to the "closed space" of the Special Camp. As Tempest maintains, the "dichotomy of closed space/open space always corresponds to important oppositions within Solzhenitsyn's fictive world: the lie versus the truth, corruption versus honesty, sickness versus health, unfreedom versus freedom."[26] The "closed spaces" are representative of the Lie; they are hidden away and kept secret. Most spaces within the Gulag are "closed." In addition, the construction of the "Socialist Way of Life" settlement has great symbolic significance in relation to the "building of socialism."[27] It useful to note at this point the role labour had to play in the "building of socialism." Satter explains that communism appeared to be apropos for Russia precisely because labour is the "main source of social participation for the majority of people in any society, and the Soviet regime, which treated labour as having sacred significance, was able to convince people that their apparently pointless existence actually had a higher purpose" (Satter, 2012: 101). This, as Satter continues to explain, was "particularly important for a nation that traditionally searched for holiness in life and longed to combine theory and practice" (Satter, 2012: 101). One needs to bear in mind, of course, that, under Soviet Communism, theory and practice often turned out to be two different things. Events and places therefore are both factual and allegorical in the novella. As Hayward points out: "Solzhenitsyn is no mere 'factographer'. The facts in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* are not self-contained – they are built into a compact symbolic pattern and prompt ironic reflections on all the cherished features of the Soviet 'image.'"[28]

The *zeks*' lives are closely linked to particular kinds of spaces and Solzhenitsyn emphasised this in the text. At the heart of the novella are the two main, incompatible worlds or spaces. As Svitlana Kobets explains, these are of "the *zeks* represented by the protagonist Shukhov, and […] of those in power."[29] These two spaces, however, are simply part of the greater chronotope of the forced labour camp. The first structure or space one encounters in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* is that of the barrack-hut. It is located within the greater

[26] Tempest, 'The Geometry of Hell', p. 54
[27] Hayward, *Writers in Russia: 1917 – 1978*, pp.142-143
[28] Ibid.
[29] Svitlana Kobets, 'The Subtext of Christian Asceticism in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich"', in *Modern Critical Views: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*, ed. by Harold Bloom, p. 192

chronotope, and this space of the labour camp which Shukhov finds himself in, as discussed above, may be seen as a representation of the Soviet Union as a whole. Solzhenitsyn drew a parallel between the world inside the camp and the world beyond it, illustrating the similarities between the two. Sophie Ollivier points out that the labour camp is the "allegorical image of daily life under Stalin" and the two worlds do not differ as "the same orders must be obeyed [both inside and outside the prisons] without knowing what they mean."[30] Lukács stressed, however, that Solzhenitsyn also presented "a genuine, realistic slice of life in which no single aspect obtrudes itself simply for the effect or exaggerated effect or for any symbolic motive."[31] Those who live on the outside are also subject to the often non-sensical, confusing rules of the regime that are present in the camps. The text is structured such that each event occurs within certain "sets of closed space."[32] An example of this can be seen when Shukhov is sent to the guard-room:

> Scrubbing the guard-room floor had been the job of a special prisoner who wasn't sent to work outside the camp – a staff orderly. The fellow had long ago made himself at home in the staff quarters; he had access to the offices of the camp commandant, the man in charge of discipline, and the security officer (the Father Confessor, they called him). When working for them he sometimes heard things that the guards didn't even know, and after a time he got uppish, and came to consider scrubbing the floor for rank-and-file camp-guards a bit beneath him. Having sent for him once or twice the guards discovered what was in the wind, and began to pick on the other prisoners for the floor-scrubbing (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 12 – 13).

This quote also serves to illustrate how a prisoner's survival is directly linked to the kind of space he works in. The "common" *zeks*, like Shukhov, work outside where they are at the mercy of the elements. In the above scene, Shukhov is fortunate to have been asked to clean the floor; such a task is considered a luxury in the camp for someone like him, who has to perform heavy labour on a daily basis. In addition, each space has its own regulations, even those "open" spaces. This is shown in the following excerpt as the prisoners march to and from their work sites:

> "Attention, prisoners. Marching orders must be strictly obeyed. Keep to your ranks. No hurrying, keep a steady pace. No talking. Keep your eyes fixed ahead and your hands behind your backs. A step to the right or left is considered an attempt to escape and the escort has orders to

[30] Sophie Ollivier, 'The World of Detention in Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn', in *Modern Critical Views: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*, ed. by Harold Bloom, pp. 168-169
[31] Lukács, *Solzhenitsyn*, p. 17
[32] Tempest, 'The Geometry of Hell', p. 54

> shoot without warning. Leading guards, quick march" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 35).

Once again, the purpose of these rules is to dehumanise the prisoners, transforming them into nothing more than a mere "column": "Hands clasped behind their backs, heads lowered, the column of prisoners moved on, as though at a funeral. All you saw was the feet of two or three men ahead of you and the patch of trodden ground where your own feet were stepping" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 35). In such a scene, the prisoners are only a group of anonymous beings. It is through this image of the column that the reader is introduced to more spaces:

> The column passed the wood-processing factory, built by prison labour, the workers' settlement (the huts had been assembled by the prisoners too, but the inhabitants were civilians), the new club (convict-built in entirety, from the foundations to the mural decorations – but it wasn't they who saw the films there), and then moved out into the steppe, straight into the wind, heading for the reddening dawn. Bare white snow stretched to the horizon, to the left, to the right, and not a single tree could be seen on the whole expanse of the steppe (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 36).

This quote reveals several other significant points. Firstly, it is painfully ironic that it is the *zeks* who construct these specific spaces. The spaces constructed *by* them are not *for* them. Secondly, the "bare white snow" points out that the labour camp is situated in the steppes of Kazakhstan where winters are particularly severe. This highlights the point that the cold is a dominating theme in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*: "[…] it wasn't surprising that [Shukhov had] felt cold in the night. That ice on the window-panes! And the white cobweb of the hoar-frost all along the huge hut where the walls joined the ceiling!" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 8). It stands to reason then that, as a man who had himself experienced such extremes, Solzhenitsyn could speak with some authority on this matter; the extreme cold would have left a lasting impression. As the narrator states in the text, there "is nothing as bitter as this moment when you go out to the morning muster – in the dark, in the cold, with a hungry belly, to face a whole day of work. You lose your tongue. You lose all desire to speak to anyone" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 8). Ericson points out that the "inhospitably cold climate becomes a symbol of the inhumane setting for human life in general, and the reader comes away feeling moral outrage rather than mere vicarious physical pain."[33] This is seen when the character Vdovushkin does not allow Shukhov to stay off from work, and the narrator asks a highly significant question: "How can you expect a man who's warm to understand one who's cold?" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 23). This question is "one of those microcosmic remarks from

[33] Ericson, 'Humanity in Extremis', p. 6

which ray out large symbolic meanings. The warm man is the one open to perpetrating injustice. Solzhenitsyn devote[d] his life to making warm men feel the cold."[34] It is interesting to note that the idea of trial by cold is reminiscent of Milton's hell, as well as the inner circle of Dante's hell.[35] As Tempest points out, hell is a "frequent image, metaphor, and theme in both Western and Russian literature."[36] Although one may well liken the Special Camp to a kind of hell, it is important to recognise it as "peculiarly a Soviet one, with all the corruptions, absurdities, and inefficiencies characteristic of the Soviet system."[37] In fact, a space that makes up this hell would be easily recognised by any visitor to the Soviet Union, which is the "construction site, with its shabby workforce, ramshackle sheds, and abandoned industrial parts."[38]

A space of great importance to the prisoners is the mess-hall; it may well be considered their sanctuary as it is here that they receive both mental and physical nourishment, and is where food plays the greatest role. As with the cold, food – sustenance – is an important feature in the novella and is mentioned frequently. As Jackson highlights, it is in the realm of food/eating that the small satisfactions in the camp are shown to be of major significance: "For the half-starved Shukhov, as for the other convicts, even the meagre rations are a feast. These momentary pleasures are experienced slowly in the midst of haste."[39] Within the space of the mess-hall, eating is a ritualised process, as is displayed when Shukhov sits down to eat. This ritual is described in great detail and spans almost three pages of the novella:

> Shukhov pulled his spoon out of his boot. His little treasure. It had been with him his whole time in the North, he'd cast it with his own hands out of aluminium wire and it was embossed with the words 'Ust-Izhma 1944'. Then he removed his hat from his clean-shaved head – however cold it might be, he could never bring himself to eat with his hat on – and stirred the cold skilly, taking a quick look to see what kind of helping they'd given him. An average one. They hadn't ladled it from the top of the cauldron, but they hadn't ladled it from the bottom either. Fetiukov was the sort who when he was looking after someone else's bowl took the potatoes from it. The only good thing about skilly was that it was hot, but Shukhov's portion had grown quite cold. However, he ate it with his usual slow concentration. No need to hurry, not even for a house on fire. Sleep

[34] Ericson, 'Humanity in Extremis', p. 6
[35] Tempest, 'The Geometry of Hell', p. 59
[36] Ibid., p. 60
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Robert Louis Jackson, 'The Mask of Solzhenitsyn: Ivan Denisovich', in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich: A Critical Companion*, p. 47

> apart, the only time a prisoner lives for himself is ten minutes in the morning at breakfast, five minutes over dinner and five at supper (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 17).

From his spoon to his hat, Shukhov places a ritualistic value on these items as they are associated with the act of eating. Shukhov views his helping of food as an "average" one, considering that prisoners in the labour camps were severely underfed. A crucial point is that, in this space, the significance of time is once again raised. Shukhov eats his meal slowly as he knows how valuable this allotted time is.

It is during this first scene in the barrack-hut that the reader is also introduced to the importance of time: "He always got up at once, for the next ninety minutes, until they assembled for work, belonged to him, not to the authorities […]" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 7). For Mikhail Bakhtin, time was intrinsically connected to space in literature. In *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, time is relative to the space in which the characters find themselves. Time is also considered a valuable commodity, as, in the given quotation above, Shukhov points out that the ninety minutes in the morning are so precious precisely because they do not belong to the authorities. In fact, one may argue that, within the text, time is the *only* commodity. Tempest stresses that time is the "currency of camp life," and that the reader, like the prisoners, is not given time in the proper sense, but must deduce it from "reference[s] to the camp routine."[40] Time is so precious to the prisoners that when a fellow inmate who is missing from the headcount keeps them from returning to their barracks, they are ready to tear him apart. The narrator observes that if "they handed him over to the zeks they'd tear him apart, like wolves with a lamb, [because it is] no trifle to rob five-hundred men of over half an hour" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 97 – 99). The consequences of the missing Moldavian prisoner's behaviour are dire for the rest of the group: "A whole day in that freezing cold! The zeks were already chilled to the marrow: and now to stand about another shivering hour, when work was over! Yet it wasn't so much the cold and the fact that they'd lost an evening that infuriated them: the point was, there'd be no time now to do anything of their own in the camp" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 101).

While time may be a valuable commodity in the camp, it leads nowhere and Shukhov is "preoccupied with the same pressing concerns at all hours of the day: food, warmth, physical security, frenzied work schedules, and so on."[41] Critically, as Shukhov points out, the

[40] Tempest, 'The Geometry of Hell', pp. 64-65
[41] Jackson, 'The Mask of Solzhenitsyn: Ivan Denisovich', p. 44

"thoughts of a prisoner – they're not free either. They keep returning to the same things. A single idea keeps stirring. Would they feel that piece of bread in the mattress? Would he have any luck at the sick-bay that evening?" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 36). While the prisoners may value time, they have no access to clocks. They have no right to possess or even to see one: "No zek ever saw a clock or a watch. What use were they to him anyway? All he needs to know is: Will reveille sound soon? How long to muster? How long to dinner? To the last clanging of the rail?" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 135). It here becomes clear that time for the prisoners was all about routine. The *zeks* are well aware of the fact that time belongs to the authorities, and they take advantage of what little time is theirs whenever they can, as, for example, when they are at the work-site: "Now there was not a soul in sight. Only the six sentries on their watch-towers were visible[42] – and some people bustling around the office. The moment belonged to the prisoners […]. While the authorities were sorting things out you stuck to the warmest place you could find. Sit down, take a rest, you'll have time enough to sweat blood" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 42). To rest where, when and how you can was something that Solzhenitsyn learned early on in the labour camp. In addition, when the *zeks* are at work, time seems to pass quickly, and yet, at the same time, it does not feel to the *zek* as if his sentence is getting any shorter: "Wonder of wonders! How time flew when you were working! That was something he'd [Shukhov] often noticed. The days rolled by in the camp – they were over before you could say 'knife'. But the years, they never rolled by: they never moved by a second" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 56).

## The Banality of Evil

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault stated that society has shifted the right to punish "from the vengeance of the sovereign to the defence of society," and that "it now [found] itself recombined with elements so strong that it becomes almost more to be feared" (Foucault, 1991: 90). In addition, Foucault added that the "malefactor has been saved from a threat that is by its very nature excessive, but he is exposed to a penalty that seems to be without bounds. It is a return to a terrible 'super-power'. It brings with it the need to establish a principle of moderation for the power of punishment" (Foucault, 1991: 90). In a totalitarian state, not only is there no such "principle of moderation," there is no way of monitoring who

[42] This is an importance reference to panopticism, to the notion of prisoners being watched all hours of the day.

is arrested and why they are arrested. For example, in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the charges brought against Shukhov are explained by the narrator as follows:

> According to his dossier, Ivan Denisovich Shukhov had been sentenced for high treason. He had testified to it himself. Yes, he'd surrendered to the Germans with the intention of betraying his country and he'd returned from captivity to carry out a mission for German intelligence. What sort of mission neither Shukhov nor the interrogator could say. So it had been left at that – a mission. Shukhov reckoned simply. If he didn't sign he'd be shot. If he signed he'd still get a chance to live. So he signed (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 58 – 59).

The system of arrest and interrogation was such that Shukhov had no choice but to accede to guilt. As Solzhenitsyn explained in *The Gulag Archipelago*, the interrogators of the Soviet Union utilised a specific kind of persuasion; the

> interrogator says to [the victim] in a lazily friendly way: "Look, you're going to get a prison term whatever happens. But if you resist, you'll croak right here in prison, you'll lose your health. But if you go to camp, you'll have fresh air and sunlight […]. So why not sign right now?" Very logical (Solzhenitsyn, 1974: 103).

On this basis, it is reasonable to argue that a man such as Ivan Denisovich did not even understand what was happening to him. Nonetheless, his fate was in fact the fate of thousands of soldiers, fighting during World War II, who were taken prisoner by German forces. Upon their escape and subsequent return to the Soviet side, they were arrested once again by their own people, and charged with being traitors to their countries. After having confessed, Shukhov regretted not resisting, as the narrator laments on his behalf: "Had they been wiser they'd have said they were escaped P.O.W.s, you fuckers! If five of them had got through, their statements could have been found to tally and they might have been believed. But with two it was hopeless. You've put your bloody heads together and cooked up that story, they were told" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 59).

In *In the First Circle*, Solzhenitsyn also referred to the issue of the Second World War and soldiers returning to find that they had been betrayed and their country changed. He illustrated this through the character Engineer Captain Shchagov:

> Like many soldiers returning from the front, Shchagov did not recognise the country he had spent four years defending. Young memories still preserved the mirage of equality, but at home its last pink wisps had disappeared. The country had become callous, utterly unscrupulous, and a great gulf had opened between abject poverty and brazenly rapacious wealth. Soldiers returning from the front were, for

> a time at least, better men than they had been. They came back cleansed by the proximity of death, and they were hit harder by the changes at home, changes that had matured far from the battle zones (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 375).

It is clear from the above quotation then that not only were wrongfully arrested soldiers aware of how their country had changed; men like Shchagov noticed this too. Men like Shukhov, who were arrested after escaping captivity or after being present when military equipment failed, suffered a double victimisation; firstly, the victimisation that comes from experiencing warfare, and secondly, that of being betrayed by their own country. However, it was a betrayal which most of those experiencing could not begin to understand themselves. In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn discussed this issue of prisoners of war returning to the Soviet side as "traitors." He explained that very "few of the war prisoners returned across the Soviet border as free men […]. Some were arrested at assembly points in Germany. Others weren't arrested openly right away but were transported from the border in freight cars, under convoy, to one of the numerous Identification and Screening Camps scattered throughout the country" (Solzhenitsyn, 1974: 248). He went on to discuss the interrogation process, stating that the "interrogation [as was usual during the Soviet reign] began with the hypothesis that you were obviously guilty. And you, without going outside the barbed wire, had to prove that you were *not* guilty. Your only available means to this end was to rely on witnesses who were exactly the kind of POWs as you" (Solzhenitsyn, 1974: 249). An example of this sort of arbitrary arrest can be found in the memoir, *Man is Wolf to Man: Surviving the Gulag*, in which Janusz Bardach explains his own experiences as a soldier, specifically a member of a tank crew, during World War II.[43] When the tank he was driving stopped functioning, Bardach was arrested and charged with being a wrecker, as a counterrevolutionary intent on helping the German side by providing them access to Soviet military technology. It was by a stroke of luck (if it is even appropriate to talk in such terms) that he was not executed, but rather shipped off to the Gulag Archipelago.

Contrary to what one may believe at first glance, the perpetrators – prison guards, interrogators and the like – were not out and out "sociopaths." Using the example of Adolf Eichmann to illustrate this, Hannah Arendt stated that the "trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and our moral standards of judgement, this normality was much more terrifying

[43] See Janusz Bardach, *Man is Wolf to Man: Surviving the Gulag* (London: Scribner, 1999).

than all the atrocities put together."[44] As Solzhenitsyn put it, if only "there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?" (Solzhenitsyn, 1974: 168). This "normalisation" has to do with the nature of the totalitarian government itself. As Tiurin tells Shukhov in the novel:

> "Incidentally, in '38, at the Koltas deportation point, I met my former platoon commander. He'd been given ten years too. I learned from him that the regimental commander and the commissar were both shot in '37, no matter whether they were of proletarian or kulak stock, whether they had a conscience or not. So I crossed myself and said: So, after all, Creator, you do exist up there in heaven. Your patience is long-suffering but you strike hard" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 74).

The point here is that the "enemies of the state," or, as Arendt put it, the "objective enemies" do not really exist. They are simply a construct, created so that men in positions of power could fulfil the quotas given to them by the Great Leader. As Arendt explained, the idea of the

> "objective opponent," whose identity changes according to the prevailing circumstances – so that, as soon as one category is liquidated, war may be declared on another – corresponds exactly to the factual situation reiterated time and again by totalitarian rulers: namely, that their regime is not a government in any traditional sense, but a *movement*, whose advance constantly meets with new obstacles that have to be eliminated. So far as one may speak at all of any legal thinking within the totalitarian system, the 'objective opponent' is its central idea (Arendt, 1967: 425).

The fact that the identity of the "objective opponent" changes at the whim of those who are in control highlights the arbitrary nature behind the regime's reasons for arresting these faceless people. It is after the "real" class enemies have been eradicated that terror becomes a reality within a totalitarian state. This is because it leaves anyone open to becoming an "enemy of the people," as is seen with the characters of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. As Giorgio Agamben put it, "the enemy has come to be excluded from civil humanity and declared a

[44] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 276

criminal from the first; at that point it becomes legitimate to annihilate the enemy through a 'police operation' that is not in any way subject to the rule of the law […]."[45]

The arbitrary nature of the state is echoed in the bureaucracy of the day-to-day activities in the prison as when, for example, the camp commandant in the novel issues another, unnecessary and rather pointless order: "[The] teams were to enter the mess-hall in double file. To this he added: on reaching the steps they were to stay there and not climb on the porch; they were to form up in fives and remain standing until the mess-orderly gave them the go-ahead" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 115). This arbitrariness has to do with the punishment of the inmates and, as such, it may be considered as part of the systematic process of dehumanising them. Absurdities in the camp system were supposedly part of the "rehabilitation" process. In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn gave one such example, explaining that the prison warders would demand written confessions from those who had violated the rules. What was absurd about this was that pens were forbidden inside the prison and that the prisoners had no paper to write on.[46] However, the point that Solzhenitsyn was making was that the arbitrary rules governed the *zeks*' lives. An illustration of this is seen when Shukhov goes to the sick-bay and the medical assistant greets him with these words: "'Why've you come so late? Why didn't you report sick last night? You know very well there are no consulting hours in the morning. The sick-list has already been sent to the planning department'" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 20). The camp dictates set out when a prisoner, and how many prisoners, are allowed to be ill per day, and the "planning department" is responsible for ensuring that this is done. And, when ill prisoners are taken in, they are made to work. All this on the decree of one doctor:

> A new doctor had arrived with one of the latest replenishments – Stepan Grigorych, a fussy, loud-voiced fellow who gave neither himself nor his patients any peace. He invented jobs in and around the infirmary for all the patients who could stand on their feet […]. Work, he said, was a first-rate medicine for any illness (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 22).

These regulations and rules have the effect of breaking the prisoners' spirits, thereby further dehumanising them. The arbitrary nature of the *zek's* life in the labour-camp is, as Des Pres holds, "all-governing" and the prison guards are not "allowed to recognise the diversity and

[45] Giorgio Agamben, 'The Sovereign Police', trans. by Brian Massumi, in *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, ed. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 63

[46] As cited in Richard Tempest, 'The Geometry of Hell: The Poetics of Space and Time in "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich"', in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich: A Critical Companion*, p. 60

unpredictability of life," therefore only "two zeks may be sick per day; only two letters per zek may be mailed out per year. 'Soviet power', Solzhenitsyn [satirised], has decreed that the sun stands highest in the sky not at noon but an hour later. Being dehumanised entails being denatured."[47]

The brutality of the system is also seen when its henchmen yet again deprive the prisoners of their only day off:

> Again, there wasn't going to be a Sunday this week; again they were going to pinch one of their Sundays. He, like everybody else, had expected it, for if there happened to be five Sundays in a month, they gave them three and made them work the other two. Shukhov had expected it, but when he heard it a spasm of pain caught his heart: who wouldn't begrudge the loss of the sweet day? Though what they were saying in the queue was right: they knew how to chivvy them even on Sundays (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 112).

In addition, since many of the prisoners were fighting at the front precisely for love of their country, being imprisoned for treason afterwards entrenches their sense of betrayal by the "motherland." This can be seen when Shukhov recalls "the hospital on the banks of the River Lovat where he'd been taken with a smashed jaw, and then – what a chump he was! – volunteered for the front again, though he could have lain there in bed for five days" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 22). Shukhov was willing to fight for his country even when severely injured. To be arrested later as a counterrevolutionary would have come as shock to him, to the extent that it traumatised him. This corresponds with Edkins' sense that what we "call trauma takes place when the very powers that we are convinced will protect us and give us security become our tormentors," and "when the community of which we consider ourselves members turns against us."[48] This is precisely what happened to men (and women) like Shukhov. They are betrayed by both the state and their fellow men who, out of fear, come to view political prisoners as pariahs.

## The Question of Humanity and Shukhov's Work Ethic

With a "peculiarly Soviet" setting comes, as I have already mentioned the cold and, within the space of the labour camp, the only way to survive the severe freezing temperatures is to work. As the narrator in the novella points out: "Warm up with work, that was your only salvation" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 9). The punishment that is meant to "rehabilitate" the *zeks* therefore

[47] Ericson, 'Humanity in Extremis', p. 7
[48] Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, p. 4

becomes a tool for their survival. Shukhov is a carpenter by trade and because of this, he, to a certain degree, enjoys the work he has to do in the camp. One of the reasons may be, as Klimoff highlights, that a "deep involvement in practical tasks serves Shukhov as a way of temporarily escaping the consciousness of his environment."[49] As the narrator asks, how could "Ivan Denisovich get through ten years if all he could do was curse his work day and night? [In] that case he would have had to hang himself on the first handy hook!" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 258). Solzhenitsyn's point here, I argue, is that the peasants who ended up in the labour camps were more fortunate in that their fatalistic attitudes toward life saved them from constantly despairing over the hand they had been dealt. Shukhov sees no point in constantly lamenting his fate. However, despite his being forced to do the work in the camp, Shukhov possesses a work ethic which has been both praised and criticised for being characteristic of socialist realism. The scene which gives rise to this issue concerns Shukhov at work with his team:

> And now Shukhov was no longer seeing that distant view where sun gleamed on snow. He was no longer seeing the prisoners as they wandered from the warming-up places all over the site, some to hack away at the pits they hadn't finished that morning, some to fix the mesh reinforcement, some to erect trusses in the work-shops. Shukhov was only seeing his wall – from the junction where the blocks rose in steps, higher than his waist, to where it met Kilgas's. […] He worked with zest, but his thoughts were elsewhere. His thoughts and his eyes were feeling their way under the ice to the wall itself, the outer façade of the power-station, two blocks thick. At the spot he was working on, the wall had previously been laid by some mason who was either incompetent or had scamped the job. But now Shukhov tackled the wall as if it was his own handiwork (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 79).

I suggest that this scene can in no way be (and should not be) connected to a positive reinforcement of the image of Soviet Socialist Realism. Solzhenitsyn was concerned with presenting a picture to the reader that was real; he drew from his own experiences and the experiences of others whom he spent time with in the labour camp. Therefore the above extract has nothing to do with representing Socialist Realism, but rather life in prison *as it was*. As Nielsen emphasises, Solzhenitsyn's achievement is "one of realism – Russian realism as against socialist realism."[50] For Shukhov, work, more than salvation, becomes a source of mental self-preservation, a source of pride and self-esteem.[51] This is seen when he admires his work after a long, cold day. As the narrator comments: "But Shukhov […] ran to the back and

[49] Klimoff, 'Introduction', p. 19
[50] Nielsen, *Solzhenitsyn's Religion*, p. 25
[51] Klimoff, 'Introduction', p. 20

looked about. Not bad. Then he ran and gave the wall a good look over, to the left, to the right. His eyes were as accurate as a spirit level. Straight and even" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 92). As Klimoff highlights, immersing himself in work "serves Shukhov as a way of temporarily escaping the consciousness of his environment," and it "helps him forget the aches and pains that troubled him in the morning."[52] As such, work in some way aids the retention of the prisoner's humanity.

Solzhenitsyn provided great depth of detail in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* despite it being a novella, and this can particularly be seen in his descriptions of food in the labour-camp:

> The skilly was the same every day. Its composition depended on the kind of vegetable provided that winter. Nothing but salted carrots last year, which meant that from September to June the skilly was plain carrot. This year it was black cabbage. The most nourishing time of year was June: then all vegetables came to an end and were replaced by groats. The worst time was July: then they shredded nettles into the pot. The little fish were more bone than flesh; the flesh had been boiled off the bone and had disintegrated, leaving a few remnants of head and tail. Without neglecting a single fish-scale or particle of flesh on the brittle skeleton, Shukhov went on champing his teeth and sucking the bones, spitting the remains on the table. He ate everything – the gills, the tail, the eyes when they were still in the sockets but not when they'd been boiled out and floated in the bowl separately – great fish-eyes! Not then. The others laughed at him for that. This morning Shukhov economised. As he hadn't returned to the hut he hadn't drawn his rations, so he ate his breakfast without bread. He'd eat the bread later. Might be even better that way. After the skilly came the magara porridge. It had grown cold too, and had set into a solid lump. Shukhov broke it up into pieces. It wasn't only that the porridge was cold – it was tasteless when hot, and left you no sense of having filled your belly. Just grass, except that it was yellow, and looked like millet. They'd got the idea of serving it instead of cereals from the Chinese, it was said. Not much of a porridge but that was what it passed for (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 18).

The forensic detail of the above extract corresponds with the kind of narration found throughout the text. Klimoff holds that *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* provides "virtually uninterrupted commentary on the camp experience from what might be called a generically peasant perspective. In this sense, Shukhov's individual voice is simply a particularly expressive form of a modality that dominates the text."[53] At this point, the reader

[52] Klimoff, 'Introduction', p. 19
[53] Ibid., p. 11

may note that Solzhenitsyn's artistic style is a unique and innovative one. Whilst his narration in the novella is consistent with that of a third-person narrative, the manner in which he rendered this reveals Shukhov's thoughts to the reader. Therefore, the usual "distance between protagonist and narrator [that is found with third-person narrative] disappears almost entirely. With virtually everything filtered through the protagonist's mind and peasant idiom, his subjective outlook is expressed in unmediated form. This subtle, sophisticated narrative technique is particularly effective in transmitting Shukhov's astonishingly understated reactions to his brutal environment."[54] As such, the reader is constantly aware of Shukhov's train of thought.

Solzhenitsyn's main concern in the novella is illustrated when Shukhov recalls the advice offered to him by his first team-leader in the labour camp, a prisoner named Kuziomin: "'Here, lads, we live by the law of the taiga. But even here people manage to live. D'you know who are the ones the camps finish off? Those who lick other men's left-overs, those who set store by the doctors, and those who peach on their mates'" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 8). This is what Des Pres terms the "heroism of survival."[55] It is important to realise that, for Solzhenitsyn, life in the labour camps was a question of survival. Crucially, however, it was not survival *at any cost*. Rather, it was about how to survive while maintaining one's essential humanity. Des Pres holds that a survivor becomes a hero because "as soon as he chooses not only to live, but to live humanely, he takes upon himself the burden of an extraordinary enterprise, an action requiring enormous will, courage, capacity to bear pain, and an unshakeable faith in the value of life and human decency – requiring, in fact, an assertion of the self that by any standard ought to be considered heroic."[56] Shukhov is such a survivor, who displays the tension "between the will to live and the will to remain pure."[57] He lives by the law of the taiga, yet he does not compromise himself in doing so. He will not betray another man to gain a foothold in the camp, and he will not stoop to begging either. An example of this occurs when Tsezar is having a cigarette and Shukhov has no tobacco left. As the narrator explains, "Every nerve in his [Shukhov's] body was taut, all his longing was concentrated in that fag-end – which meant more to him now, it seemed, than freedom itself: but he would never lower himself like that Fetiukov, he would never look at a man's mouth"

[54] Edward E. Ericson and Alexis Klimoff, *The Soul and Barbed Wire: An Introduction to Solzhenitsyn* (Delaware: ISI Books, 2008), p. 93
[55] Des Pres, 'The Heroism of Survival', p. 45
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid., p. 47

(Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 28). Here, Shukhov does not allow his desire – more than desire, in fact his *need* – for a cigarette to undermine his humanity. The continuous exposure to extremities, such as in a forced labour camp, eventually leads to a "despairing abdication of courage and self-respect" and a "readiness to condone and remain silent," turning a blind eye when other people were murdered.[58] Here, it is important to note that it was not only those exposed to the extremities of the gulags who turned on their fellow men, but also those citizens *outside* who succumbed to the pressures of the state and turned in people around them as traitors in order to save themselves. It was, for Solzhenitsyn, people like Shukhov, who refused to part with their humanity and refused to compromise themselves, who became survivors in the true sense of the word As Des Pres puts it: "The survivor is a hero in that by staying alive he becomes an effective agent in the fight against extremity," and this is what held Solzhenitsyn's attention, the "spiritual and transcendent dimensions of the survivor's experience."[59] Having said that, whilst Shukhov is unwilling to part with his humanity, he may well be considered an opportunist of sorts. He is very much concerned with his own survival in prison; a thought that occupies all *zeks'* minds. He volunteers to do certain chores for the team-leader, which secures him an extra meal. Critically, however, tasks such as these do not make Shukhov compromise his principles of humanity. Rather, they ensure his continued survival.

## Conclusion

The end of the novella reaffirms that Solzhenitsyn had presented a "good day" in the forced labour camp to the reader. The final episodes are fundamental to the message which the author was trying to foreground. It is at this stage in the text that religion is addressed, specifically through the Estonian Baptist character, Alyosha. Alyosha wants to convince Shukhov that he needs to pray, to which Shukhov replies: "'Well, Alyosha,' he said with a sigh, 'it's this way. Prayers are like those appeals of ours. Either they don't get through or they're returned with "rejected" scrawled across 'em'" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 138). In response to Shukhov's objections, Alyosha reveals a crucial point. I argue it is one which Solzhenitsyn was centrally concerned with:

> "Oh, you mustn't pray for that either," said Alyosha, horrified. "Why d'you want freedom? In freedom your last grain of faith will be

[58] Des Pres, 'The Heroism of Survival', p. 53
[59] Ibid., p. 46

> choked with weeds. You should rejoice that you're in prison. Here you have time to think about your soul. As the Apostle Paul wrote: 'Why all these tears? Why are you trying to weaken my resolution? For my part I am ready not merely to be bound but even to die for the name of the Lord Jesus'" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 140).

Although Alyosha's response is a highly religious one, there is an underlying ethical message to be found. It has to do with what can be learned from imprisonment. In *In the First Circle*, Solzhenitsyn made this issue explicit; the point is that imprisonment affords the individual the time to think about the fundamental, meta-physical issues in life. As Edward J. Brown highlights, Solzhenitsyn's

> prison characters are actually much happier: they *know* they're *innocent*; they recognise clearly the features of the Law that violates them, and know they abhor it; and for them salvation is ready at hand: a prisoner can be true to himself, refuse to cooperate, *not* work on a device that will ensnare innocent people,[60] preserve his own mortal nature against the massive pressures of the Stalinist system – indeed the fact of incarceration itself offers evidence that the man at one time had a measure of courage and inner integrity.[61]

Alyosha's response also allows Shukhov the space to think about his own freedom:

> Now he didn't know either whether he wanted freedom or not. At first he'd longed for it. Every night he'd counted the days of his stretch – how many had passed, how many were coming. And then he'd grown bored with counting. And then it became clear that men of his like wouldn't ever be allowed to return home, that they'd be exiled. And whether his life would be any better there than here – who could tell? Freedom meant one thing to him – home. But they wouldn't let him go home. "You see, Alyosha," Shukhov explained to him, "somehow it works all right for you: Jesus Christ wanted you to sit in prison and so you are – sitting there for His sake. But for whose sake am *I* here? Because we weren't ready for the war in '41? For that? But was that *my* fault?" (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 140).

For Shukhov, like all the other millions of *zeks* who did not perish in the labour camps, there was no "true" freedom to be had after their sentences had been served. Instead, they were exiled, and, as Shukhov emphasises (echoing Solzhenitsyn), the only freedom is the freedom to return home. Exile, therefore, was just another form of incarceration, a key point I return to in my analysis of *Cancer Ward*.

[60] A reference to *In the First Circle*.
[61] Edward J. Brown, *Major Soviet Writers: Essays in Criticism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 355

Despite this sobering fact, Shukhov's day ends on a seemingly positive note, as the final paragraph illustrates:

> Shukhov went to sleep fully content. He'd had many strokes of luck that day: they hadn't put him into the cells; they hadn't sent the team to the settlement; he'd pinched a bowl of kasha at dinner; the team-leader had fixed the rates well; he'd built a wall and enjoyed doing it; he'd smuggled that bit of hacksaw-blade through; he'd earned something from Tsezar in the evening; he'd bought that tobacco. And he hadn't fallen ill. He'd got over it. A day without a dark cloud. Almost a happy day (Solzhenitsyn, 1963: 142-143).

Crucially, however, whilst Shukhov considers his day an "almost happy day," the reader is left shaken. This is because, while Solzhenitsyn downplayed the horrors of the labour camp, the reader is still taken aback by just how horrifying life in the camp is. In portraying an "almost happy day" Solzhenitsyn was concerned with presenting the reality of life in the labour camps. As I have argued throughout this chapter, he did not want his readers to be distracted by the horrific depictions of torture and the like that could be found in the works of other authors. Lukács emphasised that Solzhenitsyn's writing broke "new ground in its treatment of the problems of survival or going under."[62] In addition, he went on to say that the labour camp "is a symbol of everyday Stalinist life," and that Solzhenitsyn's achievement was "to make the representation of camp life itself a mere episode in the universality in which everything of significance for individual and social *praxis* in the present will be represented as the indispensable prelude to that present."[63] *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, therefore, set a precedent for Solzhenitsyn's fictional works to follow. Through it, he explored the question of what it is to remain human. In so doing, Solzhenitsyn revealed to the world what Soviet Communism had done to a large number of citizens in the USSR. Once again, this is crucial when it comes to exploring both *In the First Circle* and *Cancer Ward*. *In the First Circle* was Solzhenitsyn's first long novel and, as will be illustrated in the following chapter, differed from *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in that, above and beyond its interest in the physical life of political prisoners, Solzhenitsyn also wanted to delve into the psychological and metaphysical aspects of this type of incarceration.

[62] Lukács, *Solzhenitsyn*, p. 16
[63] Ibid.

# Chapter Two – *In the First Circle*: From Limbo to Hell

*'Written: 1955 – 58*

*Distorted: 1964*

*Restored: 1968'*

"Author's Note" to *In the First Circle*

## Publication and Intent

Following the release of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn attempted to have his first major novel published in the Soviet Union. His desire to publish *In the First Circle* in his motherland in 1964 was so great that he even resorted to self-censorship, reducing the ninety-six-chapter novel into one containing only eighty-seven chapters, thereby ensuring that it did not come into conflict with Party ideology. At the time, having had to deal with considerable political opposition after the publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Khrushchev warned writers to "put an end to the flood [of works depicting life in prisons and exile]," and all editors to "treat prison camp writings with extreme caution so as not to damage the work of the Party."[1] As a result, a ban was imposed on any publications that dealt with this highly sensitive subject matter. Having no other choice, Solzhenitsyn allowed the shortened version of the novel to be published in the West, in both English and Russian, in 1968 (*Cancer Ward*, too, was published in the West in 1968, within weeks of *The First Circle*). At the time, Solzhenitsyn offered the following reflections:

> Such is the fate of Russian books today: They bob up to the surface, if ever they do, plucked down to the skin. So it was recently with Bulgakov's *Master*[2] – its feathers floated over only later. So also with this novel of mine: In order to give it even a feeble life, to dare show it, and to bring it to a publisher, I myself shortened and distorted it – or, rather, took it apart and put it together anew, and it was in that form that it became known. And even though it is too late

[1] Rosalind J. Marsh, *Soviet Fiction since Stalin: Science, Politics and Literature* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), pp. 45-46

[2] Mikhail Afansyevich Bulgakov was a Russian writer who died in 1940. He wrote the famous novel, *The Master and Margarita*, a critique of Soviet society and the role literature played in it. It was only published twenty-five years after his death.

> now, and the past cannot be undone – here it is, the authentic one. By the by, while restoring the novel, there were parts that I refined: after all, I was forty then, but am fifty now.[3]

*The First Circle* became a best-seller in the West, and, as Edward E. Ericson points out, received some "glowing accolades."[4] Jeri Laber called the novel a "distinguished work, thoroughly contemporary, authentically Russian, yet so profound in its vision and its implications that it transcends both its locale and the specificities of its subject matter," and added that Solzhenitsyn is "the symbol and the embodiment of an undaunted creative spirit."[5] C. J. McNaspy stated that: "One puts down *The First Circle* with the unshakable assurance that here is something Tolstoy might have written, or Turgenev, or even, in one of his gentler moods, Dostoevsky, had they lived in the Stalinist era."[6] Julian Symons, writing for the *Sunday Times*, called it "a majestic work of genius," adding that "the mass of contemporary fiction dealing with this theme look trivial by comparison."[7] These are just a few of the reviews and commentaries that came out after the novel's publication. As such, they suggest the importance attached to *The First Circle* in the West.[8] Solzhenitsyn reconstituted the original (final) version of *In the First Circle* and had it published in 1978 in Paris.[9] It was not published in English until 2009, one year after Solzhenitsyn's death and half a century after its first appearance. The translator for the English version of the reconstituted novel, Harry T. Willets, was personally approved by Solzhenitsyn. In order to gain a greater understanding of the vision that Solzhenitsyn had in mind, it is necessary to look at the complete version of the novel, the one which he deemed to be final.

Referring specifically to *The First Circle*, the German author, Heinrich Böll, remarked that "Solzhenitsyn avoids 'interpretation.' He observes, notes, develops from elements he knows, from experiences and encounters," and, therefore, he "achieves a sobriety and dryness by which he shows himself superior both to the usual socialist realism, tailored into optimism,

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[3] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 'Author's Note', in *In the First Circle*, trans. by Harry T. Willetts (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).
[4] Edward E. Ericson, *Solzhenitsyn and the Modern World* (Washington: Regnery Gateway. 1993), p. 58
[5] J. Laber, "Indictment of Soviet Terror", *New Republic*, 19 Oct. 1968, pp. 32-34, as found in Ericson, Edward E., *Solzhenitsyn and the Modern World*, p. 59
[6] C. J. McNaspy, "Review of *The First Circle*", *America*, 5 Oct. 1968, p. 295, as found in Ericson, Edward E., *Solzhenitsyn and the Modern World*, p., 59
[7] As cited in Ericson, *Solzhenitsyn and the Modern World*, p. 59
[8] It is important to note, however, that at this time, whilst there was much praise for *The First Circle* and *Cancer Ward*, Solzhenitsyn was under a considerable amount of criticism for his non-fiction, political writings.
[9] Ericson and Klimoff, *The Soul and Barbed Wire*, p. 83

and also to the aims of the *nouveau roman*."[10] Böll's comments resonate with Solzhenitsyn's own reflections on habits picked up in the labour camp, as illustrated through the character of Gleb Vikentievich Nerzhin in the novel:

> [W]hat above all made him seem older was the economy of his movements: that economy by which nature conserves the flagging strength of prisoners in the camp. In the sharashka, with meat on the menu and work that overstrained no one's muscles, Nerzhin, with the length of his sentence in mind, was nonetheless trying to make a habit of minimal movement (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 23).

This "habit of minimal movement" is something Solzhenitsyn experienced for himself in a forced labour camp. As with the novella *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the wealth of detail evident in *In the First Circle* was in fact drawn from Solzhenitsyn's own experiences and the observations he made while imprisoned. However, unlike *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, this text is not concerned so much with the "physical aspect of the Stalinist hell," but rather is more focused on its "metaphysical, or ideological, content" (Krasnov, 1980: 22). *In the First Circle* provides a platform for discussing a variety of intellectual points of view. In his foreword to the English version of the restored novel, Edward E. Ericson states that the novel "fairly represents Solzhenitsyn's theory of literature."[11] Solzhenitsyn did not simply recount what he had experienced; he also had to delve "into the inner lives of the characters" and reconstruct the "motives behind their actions."[12] This allowed him to explore the core concerns relating to the situation in Russia as influenced by its history, and, as with *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn was most concerned with the question of humanity. With *In the First Circle*, he was preoccupied with the consequences the Soviet tenet, "The end justifies the means" might have for the fate of humanity.

Robert Boyers explains that through *In the First Circle* Solzhenitsyn provided the reader with a "material basis" for analysing both the physical and spiritual aspects involved in representing the Stalinist world.[13] Whilst it was crucial for Solzhenitsyn that the reader experienced the novel as *real*, it was also important to him that the more metaphysical questions, such as what it means to be human, could be explored. Therefore, the novel goes

[10] Heinrich Böll, 'The Imprisoned World of Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle*', in *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Records*, ed. by John B. Dunlop, Richard Haugh and Alexis Klimoff (London: Collier Macmillan, 1975), p. 222
[11] Edward E. Ericson, 'Foreword', in *In the First Circle*, p. xvi
[12] Ericson, 'Foreword', p. xvii
[13] Boyers, *Atrocity and Amnesia*, p. 97

beyond a simple description or analysis, of the "special prison." It offers the reader insight into various other aspects of life under Stalinism. An example of this is a portrait provided of the female free workers who worked alongside the *zeks*:

> They [the young women who worked in the *sharashka*] were told that they would be meeting the dregs of humanity, people unworthy of the Russian language that they so unfortunately spoke. They were warned that these people were especially dangerous because they never bared their fangs but invariably wore a false mask of politeness and good breeding. And if you questioned them about their crimes (which was expressly prohibited!), they would try by an ingenious tissue of lies to represent themselves as innocent victims. The girls were instructed that they in turn should not vent their hatred on these reptiles but make an outward show of politeness – without, however, entering into discussions of anything except the work at hand, never accepting messages for the outside world. And at the very first breach of regulations, suspicion of a breach, or possibility of suspecting a breach, they must hurry along to the security officer, Major Shikin (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 30 – 31).

In this excerpt, Solzhenitsyn aimed to demonstrate that the government system had grand plans to keep a tight control over the actions of everyone. Further on in the novel, however, he demonstrates that it was impossible for the state to do so. Humans are not static beings and even though the Soviet state managed to instil a mass terror that led to near total control, there were those who fought against this and undermined the government where they could. Klara Petrovna Makarygina, youngest daughter of a public prosecutor and free worker, is one such character who transgresses the rules by daring to get to know one of the prisoners, Rostislav Vadimovich Doronin, at Marfino. However, as Gleb Nerzhin explains to the optics expert Illarion Pavlovich Gerasimovich, "People are so stupefied that if you stood in the middle of the street right now shouting 'Down with the tyrant! Hurrah for freedom!' they wouldn't know who the tyrant was and what you meant by freedom" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 252). David Satter explains that "the purpose of the terror was to force individuals to live and react as if the precepts of the ruling idea actually reflected reality. In this sense, the Soviet terror can be seen as the attempt of political actors […] to liquidate the truth" (Satter, 2012: 31).

## Censorship and the Role of Literature

Unlike *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, *In the First Circle* caused greater controversy for its explicit indictment against Stalin and the Soviet government. Khrushchev's personal secretary, Vladimir Lebedev, told the editor Tvardovsky that he was against the publication

of the novel. He "claimed that Solzhenitsyn knew nothing about Stalin. He disliked Nerzhin's words that people were imprisoned for the way they thought and that the victims would decide whether they should forgive their oppressors. To Lebedev such statements bordered on anti-Sovietism."[14] In a letter to the presidium and the delegates of the Fourth Congress of Soviet Writers, the Soviet Writers' Union and several editorial boards of newspapers and magazines, Solzhenitsyn expressed his opinion concerning the censorship of literature.

> "Censorship," he [declared], "is illegal. There is no provision for it in the Soviet Constitution. Publicly unmentionable, censorship subjects the writer to the whims of individuals ignorant of literary art. The censors proscribe or distort works that could have a salubrious influence on the spiritual and social development of the nation. Due to censorship, Russian literature has lost the leading position it occupied at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth."[15]

Because Solzhenitsyn felt so strongly about censorship, it is also a topic in the novel itself, and is gestured towards at several parts in the narrative. The character Innokenty Artemievich Volodin, for example, questions the role of literature in the Soviet Union. He reiterates one of Solzhenitsyn's famous statements (not included in the reconstituted version of the novel), saying that for "a country to have a great writer – don't be shocked, I'll whisper it – is like having another government. That's why no regime has ever loved great writers, only minor ones."[16] This, as Kathleen F. Parthé, points out, is "the affirmation of a tradition that was already more than a century old."[17] Quoting Donald Fanger, she explains that there was

> a trajectory that ran from Nikolai Gogol's admonition about talent carrying a responsibility "to elevate Russian readers morally and inculcate a shared sense of the country's destiny," through Turgenev's "Hannibal oath" to oppose serfdom, Dostoevsky's changing, but always passionately espoused, ideological stances, Tolstoy's radical idea of transforming not just the government apparatus but every single person in Russia, through the serious political responsibilities and resulting perils faced by oppositional writers in the twentieth century all the way up to Solzhenitsyn.[18]

In a discussion about literature with his brother-in-law, Nikolai Arkadievich Galakhov, a famous young Soviet author, Volodin asks:

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[14] Ermolaev, *Censorship in Soviet Literature,* p. 146
[15] Ibid., p. 219
[16] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*, trans. by Michael Guybon (London: Fontana/Collins. 1969), p. 436
[17] Parthé, *Russia's Dangerous Texts: Politics Between the Lines*, p. 7
[18] Donald Fanger, 'A Sort of Second Government: Solzhenitsyn's Authority is Moral as well as Literary', *Boston Globe*, 5 June 1994, as quoted by Parthé, *Russia's Dangerous Texts: Politics Between the Lines*, p. 7

> "[Do] works of imagination really have to reproduce army regulations? Or newspaper articles? Or slogans? Mayakovsky,[19] for one, took pride in using an excerpt from a newspaper as the epigraph to a poem. In other words, he prided himself on not rising above the level of a newspaper. If that's how you think, what's the point of literature? After all, a writer exists to teach other people. Isn't that what was always expected of him?" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 462).

Here Volodin acts as a kind of mouthpiece for Solzhenitsyn, reiterating the author's beliefs regarding literature as an important tool for instruction. Galakhov responds by stating, "What you say is true only under bourgeois regimes," and Volodin takes this as a warning not to pursue such a dangerous topic. Solzhenitsyn was vehemently opposed to an "official literature" because "man has distinguished himself from the animal world by 'thought' and 'speech.' And these, naturally, should be 'free.' If they are put in chains, we will return to the state of animals."[20] As Carter highlights, the "concept of official literature also tends to kill literature itself."[21]

The issue of censorship also comes up in the novel when some of the prisoners have a discussion about certain Russian texts:

> [Sologdin to Nerzhin] "Don't forget that we live with our visors down. We have been forced to. And anyway, we are more complex than the people depicted in novels. Writers try to explain people completely, but in real life we never get to know anyone completely. That's why I love Dostoevsky. Stavrogin, Svidrigailov, Kirillov. What are they really like? The closer you get, the less you understand them." "Stavrogin? Which book is he in?" "*The Possessed*? Haven't you read it?" Sologdin was astonished. Nerzhin draped his damp, skimpy towel around his neck like a muffler and pulled on his officer's service cap, which was so old that it was coming apart at the seams. "*The Possessed*? Come off it. Where d'you think my generation could get hold of it? It's counterrevolutionary literature! Too dangerous!" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 177).

This passage gestures towards the censorship rules that were in place at the time. It was prohibited for people to read anything deemed "counterrevolutionary." However, perhaps the most important episode concerning censorship in the novel deals with the issue of prisoners' receiving letters from their loved ones. It demonstrates the arbitrary and dehumanising

[19] Vladimir Mayakovsky, born 1893, was a prominent Soviet poet and supporter of Communism, who, having become disillusioned with the government under Stalin, committed suicide in 1930.
[20] Labedz, *Solzhenitsyn: A Documentary Record*, p. 220
[21] Carter, *The Politics of Solzhenitsyn*, p. 58

regulations that were set up by those in control, thereby illustrating the banality of evil once more. The *zeks* are told that all

> "are to submit to Major Myshin in the course of the next three days a list of their immediate relatives set out as follows: number of relatives in list, name of relative (surname, given name, patronymic), degree of affinity, place of work, home address. 'Immediate relatives' means mother, father, legal wife, sons and daughters of a legal registered marriage. Other relatives – brothers, sisters, aunts, nieces, grandchildren, and grandmothers – do not count as immediate relatives. As of January first, prisoners will be allowed to correspond with or receive visits from immediate relatives as defined in this list and no one else. Furthermore, as of January first, the size of a prisoner's monthly letter must not exceed one double page of an exercise notebook" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 550 – 551).

Such regulations were considered "doubly cruel" because it would be impossible to maintain "the tenuous lifeline to their loved ones without betraying them to the police" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 551). This was because many of those on the "outside had thus far managed to conceal the fact that they had relatives behind bars. Otherwise, their jobs and their homes would not be safe" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 551). In addition, the rule excluding "unregistered wives and children, as well as brothers and sisters" was just as cruel because, after the war, "the air raids, the evacuations, the famine – many zeks had no closer surviving relatives" left (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 551).

Solzhenitsyn went on to describe the process of the delivery of letters, and how they were scanned and checked before being given to the prisoner:

> In the world outside, you would simply entrust it to a peripatetic mailman, but nothing so crude was possible here. The prisoner's spiritual father – or godfather – having read the letter himself to make sure that it contained no treasonable thoughts, handed it to the prisoner behind closed doors, with a few edifying remarks. No attempt was made to disguise the fact that the letter had been opened, so that any illusion of intimate contact between the prisoner and his nearest and dearest was destroyed. A letter that had passed through many hands, been minutely examined for useful additions to a man's dossier, and received internally the censor's smudgy black stamp lost all personal significance. It had become a state document (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 587).

At Marfino, the rules went as far as not allowing the prisoners to keep their letters. They were only allowed to read their letters twice and then had to sign off as having read them. Even

photographs sent by family members were not handed over to the *zeks*, but were rather filed away in their dossiers.

## The Use of Polyphony

An important feature of *In the First Circle*, which marks a significant departure in style from that utilised in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, is Solzhenitsyn's use of polyphony. Francis Barker points out that both *The First Circle* and *Cancer Ward*

> mobilise a broad range of sharply differentiated characters who are made in varying degrees the bearers of historically significant ideologies. The relations between these characters, their debates and disagreements, create tensions between various world outlooks which are thus balanced and tested against each other and against the practical events of the novels. This "polyphonic" form, which involves not just the random coexistence of distinct elements…but also includes interconnection, parallelism and opposition among the elements, achieves its greatest fluency in *The First Circle*, where the intellectual characters are the most ideologically developed of Solzhenitsyn's cast, giving the novel a discursive as well as a dramatic dimension.[22]

In his analysis of the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Mikhail Bakhtin introduced the term for literary use. One may thus understand polyphony as "the autonomy of the characters' voices. The voices which make up the polyphonic novel are dialogic: they interact dialogically, and the language of which they are composed is dialogic."[23] The polyphonic novel is therefore in continual dialogue with things that have been said before, whilst also anticipating dialogue with things that will be said in response, or in the future. According to Bakhtin, the polyphonic novel is distinguished from the homophonic novel by the "strong presence of consciousnesses and voices other than the author's. Characters in such a novel are no longer objects manipulated by the author […] but subjects coexisting as autonomous worlds with the world of the author and contending with him for the reader's attention" (Krasnov, 1980: 5). Solzhenitsyn purposefully chose a broad selection of characters in order to present the reader with the different ideologies of the time as well as a general view of Soviet society as a whole. Staying true to polyphony, he did not enforce his main argument through a single protagonist; rather the characters, together with the structure of the novel, express his central

[22] Barker, *Solzhenitsyn: Politics and Form*, p. 21
[23] Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 112

concerns. As has been pointed out, polyphony "refers to the co-presence of independent but interconnected voices."[24] The polyphonic novel, therefore, is "a democratic one, in which equality of utterance is central."[25] *In the First Circle* is a dialogic novel and, as explained by Krasnov, it is constructed as a "macrodialogue" because it "abounds with dialogues and is distinguished by the bivocalism, or dialogism of its narrative tone" (Krasnov, 1980: 123). This is significant because all "the manifestations of dialogue are organically interconnected and help to achieve the effect of polyphony" (Krasnov, 1980: 123) which Solzhenitsyn was striving for. Boyers rightly points out that Solzhenitsyn's use of polyphony in *In the First Circle* is based on his "interest in social facts," meaning the "fundamental condition under which persons [lived] in the Soviet Union."[26] Furthermore, it "reflects [Solzhenitsyn's] desire to compel a particular response – the determination to resist – by recording the facts of the situation as truthfully as he can."[27] This implementation of polyphony also demonstrates that "no matter how valid different ideas may be in their own terms, no matter how intensely individuals may believe in this view or that of social and political reality, the essential facts – political, social, human – are available to all."[28] Polyphony allowed Solzhenitsyn to create fairly objective dialogues between his characters in order to critically examine the arbitrary rule of the Soviet government as well as other questions surrounding the issue of humanity.

An example of such a dialogue in the novel is one that takes place between the characters Lev Grigorievich Rubin and Dmitri Aleksandrovich Sologdin. Rubin believes that the Communist government is justified in doing whatever it needs to do in order to succeed in "progress." He says to Sologdin, "For the first time in human history, our aim is so lofty that we can say just that: The end justifies the means employed for its attainment" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 515). Sologdin opposes Rubin's belief, stating: "Just remember this, then – that the loftier your aim, the nobler must be your means. Treacherous means destroy the end itself!" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 515). Sologdin, in this situation, becomes a spokesperson for the author, speaking out against what Solzhenitsyn considered the most atrocious tenets of Stalinism. In this way, Solzhenitsyn could pose the important question, "why has a revolution which aimed at liberating man and developing science and technology in order to promote human

[24] Roger Fowler, 'Polyphony and Problematic', in *The Changing World of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Robert Giddings (Totowa: Vision Press, 1983), p. 93
[25] Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin*, p. 112
[26] Boyers, *Atrocity and Amnesia*, p. 109
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., pp. 109-110

happiness in fact produced a tyranny and untold human suffering?"[29] However, while some of the characters, like Sologdin, voice many of Solzhenitsyn's concerns, the author held true to polyphony and allowed the characters to have their own voices and thoughts. This can be seen, for example, in the intellectual sparring between Rubin and Sologdin where Sologdin's nature is revealed to the reader. Contrary to Solzhenitsyn's belief in the importance of all people as individuals, Sologdin maintains a kind of "self-centred individualism" and "spiritual elitism" (Krasnov, 1980: 47) which is equally dangerous in terms of the preservation of humanity. Importantly then, Solzhenitsyn's use of "dialogues in the novel [ensures] that each hero-ideologist speaks for himself," and, in this way, "challenges the official ideology's claim to be in possession of the absolute truth" (Krasnov, 1980: 126, 140).

## The Four Basic Plots as Polyphony

Polyphony in *In the First Circle* not only functions in the dialogism of the characters but can be seen to structure the novel. The novel can be divided into four basic plots which develop concurrently. Together, they play a "structural role" in the novel's "polyphonic unity" as, crucially, each plot "offers a field of action for a hero, or heroes, who would otherwise remain in the background" (Krasnov, 1980: 117-118). Indeed, Solzhenitsyn carefully chose these narratives as they "contribute to the impression of the unity of diversity," and provide the reader with a look inside different aspects of the USSR. The novel begins with the plot of Innokenty Volodin, a diplomat and a State Counsellor Grade Two in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; a man whose actions are the catalyst that brings the entire novel together. His tale resembles a type of crime story, with some detective work taking place as the *zeks* at the *sharashka* Marfino working on the secret telephone are tasked with identifying the voice of the "traitor" who had betrayed the country to the Americans. In some regards, Volodin acts as a mouthpiece for the author, allowing Solzhenitsyn to explore his central preoccupation with questions of humanity. It is in chapter one that Volodin asks himself, "If we live in a state of constant fear, can we remain human?" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 3). Reflecting upon this question leads Volodin to "betraying" his country by warning the American ambassador about the Soviets' intention to steal the atomic bomb. Indeed, Volodin's telephone call "sets in motion the whole Stalinist apparatus" (Krasnov, 1980: 110-111).

[29] Marsh, *Soviet Fiction since Stalin*, p. 267

Following from Volodin's story is the one involving the mechanism by which he is caught; this is the story of the "secret telephony." This plot brings to light the subject of the *sharashka*, or "special prison," an aspect of Stalin's penal code which, up until the publication of *In the First Circle*, had not been dealt with in literature.[30] The *sharashka* was a "special prison" in that, unlike the forced labour camps, the prisoners here lived in relative luxury without having to perform hard labour in sub-zero conditions. These prisons were in fact special research centres, forming part of an experiment conducted by the Stalinist government, where the prisoners were scientists who worked on covert projects, such as the secret telephone in the novel. Denied their freedom and with nothing else to do, the prisoners concentrated all their efforts on performing work in their field, with "the incentive of possible release if they invented something important."[31] The *sharashka* in the novel, Marfino (disguised as *Mavrino* in the censored version of the novel), is the same one located in Moscow, where Solzhenitsyn spent almost four years in imprisonment, from 1945 when he was arrested at the front, until 1949 when he was sent to a labour camp. In the novel, the author provides his readers with insight into the development and uses of the *sharashka*.[32] There are several points in the text where Solzhenitsyn contrasts labour camp experiences to those of the *sharashka*. He deliberately highlighted the horrors of the labour camps to provide a stark contrast with what occurred in the *sharashka*. For example, a major distinction is drawn between the food given to the prisoners in the gulags and those at Marfino. Food was highly prized in the camps and every meal was an almost sacred event, as Nerzhin remembers:

> "Remember that thin, watery porridge of oats or barley, without a single sparkle of fat. Do you just eat it? No – it's Holy Communion! You receive it with awed reverence, as though it were the life's breath of the yogis! You eat it slowly, eat it from the tip of the wooden spoon, eat it utterly absorbed in the process of eating – and the pleasurable feeling suffuses your whole body, like nectar; you are dizzy with the sweetness which you discover in these mushy boiled grains and the dishwater that holds them together. And – lo and behold! – you live six months, live twelve months on a diet of next to nothing! Pigging out on choice chops can't compare!" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009*:* 39).

In the *sharashka*, however, products like butter and other "luxury" foods are taken for granted. For many prisoners who had first experienced a labour camp and were subsequently

[30] Marsh, *Soviet Fiction since Stalin*, p. 47
[31] Ibid., p. 48
[32] Ibid.

transferred to the *sharashka*, it was as if they had entered heaven. In the following excerpt, the reader is granted insight into what *zeks* in the different prisons experienced:

> While prisoners in the camps gritted their teeth in the struggle for existence, those in the sharashkas lived in something like luxury. And the authorities had long ago made it a rule that if a project was successful, the zeks most closely concerned with it received all that they could desire – their freedom, a clean passport, an apartment in Moscow – while the others received nothing, not a single day's remission of sentence, not even a hundred grams of vodka in honour of the victors. There was nothing in between (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 58).

Yet, while many of those transferred to the *sharashka* believed they had set foot in heaven, the character Lev Grigorievich Rubin quickly points out that this was not the case:

> "No, my dear sir, you are still in hell, only you've ascended to its highest and best circle – the first. You were asking what a sharashka is. You could say it was invented by Dante. He was at his wits' end as to where to put the ancient sage. It was his Christian duty to consign those heathens to hell. But a Renaissance conscience couldn't reconcile itself to lumping those luminaries in with the rest of the sinners and condemning them to physical torment. So Dante imagined a special place for them in hell […]" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 12).

Solzhenitsyn offered a comparison between the *sharashka* and the first circle of Dante's hell, as indicated by the title of the novel as well as by Rubin's reference to Dante's text. However, as Krasnov points out, Solzhenitsyn's circle of hell was not wholly analogous with Dante's. Unlike Dante's "first circle of hell," the *sharashka* was born "out of malevolence rather than benevolence," and, in addition, was not a "place of eternal confinement," but rather one that acted as a "transit point" (Krasnov, 1980: 106). Indeed, most prisoners in the *sharashka* were sent away, mostly for arbitrary reasons, to the labour camps, and a select few (a tiny minority) managed to gain their freedom. In addition, the portrayal of hell differs from Dante's because the men at Marfino interact with one another rather than just simply coexisting (Krasnov, 1980: 107). It is pointed out in the novel that the *sharashka* is the only place where people can argue about taboo subjects and thus, as Krasnov points out, the "title image may also be seen as symbolic of polyphony itself" (Krasnov, 1980: 107).

The next plot deals with the more political elements of the novel and offers readers insight into Stalin's role. This narrative was particularly contentious owing to the issue of censorship

that Solzhenitsyn encountered. Chapter 20 of the uncensored version, titled "A Study of a Great Life," proved particularly problematic as it contained an "unflattering survey of Stalin's life and his detractive thoughts of Lenin."[33] It was on Tvardovsky's advice that Solzhenitsyn removed the chapter, thereby enabling its publication. It may be argued that, particularly in the final version, Solzhenitsyn produced a caricature of Stalin, exaggerating his mannerisms and thought-patterns in the novel. The following description seems to support this:

> Yet he was only a little yellow-eyed man with gingery (not pitch-black, as in his portraits), thinning (luxuriant according to his portraits) hair, with deep pockmarks in a grey face and a sagging dewlap (these last features were not portrayed at all), with uneven, blackened teeth, a mouth smelling of pipe tobacco, and fat, moist fingers that left marks on the documents and books (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 98).

This said, however, I maintain that Solzhenitsyn was more concerned with portraying "the rule of evil [as] the rule of arbitrariness" (Krasnov, 1980: 37). In addition, he wanted to show that Stalin was not a "man possessed by the idea of Communism," but rather one "who took the idea into *his* exclusive possession and prostituted it for his idealess lust for power" (Krasnov, 1980: 32). Communism, as it was practiced in the Soviet Union, was a mixture of "the teachings of Marx with revolutionary terrorism," and, having inherited the leadership from Lenin, Stalin further twisted and perverted this ideology to promote "his own political advantage" (Gellately, 2008: 134, 77). Robert Gellately points out that Stalin was "later only too delighted by the thought that he walked in the footsteps of Ivan the Terrible, by reputation the most ruthless of tsars" (Gellately, 2008: 580). He believed that his reign of terror was for the good of the people, and that he did what he did for their future.

Solzhenitsyn illustrated this when he described Stalin's train of thought in the novel as he considers a book that was written about his life:

> The honest and unpretentious words of this book sank irresistibly into the human heart, bringing peace. The strategist of genius. His wisdom and foresight. His iron will. From 1918 onward, he was in effect Lenin's deputy. (Yes, yes, I was!) When he became leader of the Revolutionary armies, he found chaos and panic at the front. Stalin's instructions formed the basis of Frunze's plan of operations. (True, true, that's just how it was!) It was our great good fortune that in the difficult years of the Fatherland War we were led by a wise and experienced Leader, the Great Stalin. (Yes, the people had been lucky!) Everybody knows the shattering power of Stalin's logic, the

[33] Ermolaev, *Censorship in Soviet Literature*, p. 158

> crystal clarity of his mind. (No need for false modesty, it's all true.) His love for the people. His sensitive concern for the people. His intolerance of pomp and publicity. His extraordinary modesty. (Modesty, yes, that's very true.) (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 99).

With Stalin's ascent to power came an intensification of terror. He perpetuated one of the most fundamental assumptions about human nature advanced by the totalitarian state; that an individual was a means to an end and not an end in him- or herself. As Satter explains, the notion that man has "no inherent value" was "nowhere better expressed than by Stalin in his famous toast after the end of the Second World War to Soviet citizens, whom he described as 'screws in the great machine of the state'" (Satter, 2012: 34). Indeed, it is precisely the "great machine of the state" that Solzhenitsyn was intent on exposing, undermining and resisting.

The final plot may be termed "Gleb's Passion" (Krasnov, 1980: 115) and follows the story of Nerzhin, his short-lived romance with the free worker Simochka, and the final meeting with his wife, Nadezhda Ilyinichna a graduate student, before he is transported to the labour camp. At first glance it appears to be a simple romance story of a man who experiences acute loneliness whilst incarcerated. The plot functions, however, as a "vehicle for revealing the man and his idea" (Krasnov, 1980: 117). Through this narrative, Solzhenitsyn was able to afford his readers insight into what it was like for a male prisoner to receive a visit from his wife. As Anne Applebaum emphasises, for a prisoner to meet his wife "could be worse than no meeting at all" (Applebaum, 2003: 239). Nerzhin reflects on this in the novel:

> But now he had been told that he would be seeing her around noon today, and suddenly his life was like a taut bowstring – a life that made perfect sense, in the round and in detail; a life in which his war service, his arrest, and all those years apart from his wife were simply the most unlooked-for episodes in his progress toward his goal. Outwardly he might seem unhappy, but Gleb was secretly happy in his unhappiness. He drank from it as from a fresh spring. In this place he had gained an understanding of people and of events not to be had elsewhere, least of all in the sheltered comfort of a quiet family home. From his early years what Gleb had most feared was getting bogged down in a life of humdrum routine. As the proverb says, "It's not the sea that drowns you, it's the puddle" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 201).

It was easier for prisoners to deal with their incarceration if they were not reminded of what they had lost. Being "secretly happy in unhappiness" meant that a *zek* had reconciled himself to the idea that he was imprisoned indefinitely and was at peace. However, at the point where the prisoner faces his wife, all that had been taken from him is thrown in his face:

> Nerzhin, who had not thought about children at all for years, suddenly saw clearly that Stalin had robbed him and Nadya of their children. Even if he was released after serving his sentence and they were together again, his wife would be thirty-six or perhaps forty years old. Too late to have a child (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 250).

This final sub-plot highlights a part of the trauma experienced by both prisoners and their family members during the Stalinist regime, having been deprived of all that humanity holds dear.

## The Role of "the Lie," Article 58 and Versions of the Truth

"The Lie," as discussed in the previous chapter, may briefly be summed up as the ideological justification given by the totalitarian state in order to perpetuate mass terror and incarceration. Ideology, in this sense, is false as it purports to have, as Arendt put it, "the total explanation of the past, the total knowledge of the present and the reliable prediction of the future."[34] David Halperin states that, in the text, the mechanism employed by what he terms the "demonic forces in the world of the novel" is represented by "a single thematic structure: the role of the Lie."[35] Similarly, Arendt explained how ideology in the Soviet State functioned as an illusion:

> Before they seize power and establish a world according to their doctrines, totalitarian movements conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself; in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and are spared the never-ending shocks of real life and real experiences dealt to human beings and their expectations. The force possessed by totalitarian propaganda […] lies in its ability to shut the masses off from the real world. The only signs which the real world still offers to the understanding of the unintegrated and disintegrating masses […] are, so to speak, its lacunae, the questions it does not care to discuss publicly, or the rumours it does not dare to contradict because they hit, although in an exaggerated and deformed way, some sore spot (Arendt, 1967: 353).

These "lacunae" were not spoken of by the people on the ground as they resulted in the arrest, interrogation and, in some cases, the execution of those who dared. There was the

[34] Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding: 1930 – 1954*, ed. by Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1994), pp. 469-470

[35] David M. Halperin, 'The Role of the Lie in "The First Circle"', in *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Records*, ed. by John B. Dunlop, et al, p. 260

determination to make ideology conform to reality within the Soviet Union, and, in this context, "guilt and innocence become senseless notions."[36]

Halperin identifies three levels of "the Lie" which are present in the novel. The primary level that relates directly to the problem of ideology is the "*empirical* lie."[37] This form of the lie is to be found in the "external order of society," "blatant propaganda," things like falsified newspaper articles, propaganda posters, and the like.[38] This form of "the Lie" is a product of a "*psychological* lie whereby a new, warped code of moral conduct undermines and replaces the individual's ethical system."[39] The "*psychological* lie" is the justification underpinning the actions of certain members of the population under Stalinism.[40] Finally, there is the "*metaphysical* lie" which perverts and twists the "general world view of individuals or of an entire nation; it affects the very way people *think* and so ultimately accounts for every man's value system – and the actions which derive from it."[41] The notion of the "metaphysical lie" can once again be linked to what the German philosopher Karl Jaspers referred to as "metaphysical guilt" (Jaspers, 1961: 32). Jaspers, writing in the context of Nazi Germany, explained that there

> exists a solidarity among men as human beings that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world, especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge, [and] if I fail to do whatever I can to prevent them, I too am guilty. If I was present at the murder of others without risking my life to prevent it, I feel guilty in a way not adequately conceivable either legally, politically or morally. That I live after such a thing has happened, weighs upon me as indelible guilt (Jaspers, 1961: 32, 71).

The question of "metaphysical guilt" is one that Solzhenitsyn was also concerned with. In the novel, it is vital to note that Volodin is motivated by a sense of "metaphysical guilt" when he betrays his government. At the start of *In the First Circle* he has already realised that the bureaucracy surrounding him is a lie. He tells Klara, his sister-in-law, that "'I'm supposed to represent Russia, you know, but my own re-present-ation of Russia is non-existent (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 303)." He continues to explain to her the state of the Soviet Union, drawing a circle on the ground:

[36] Miranda, 'Totalitarian Banality of Evil in Hannah Arendt's Thought', p. 39
[37] Halperin, 'The Role of the Lie in "The First Circle"', p. 260
[38] Ibid., p. 260
[39] Ibid., pp. 260-261
[40] Ibid., p. 261
[41] Ibid.

> "You see this circle? That's our country. That's the first circle. Now here's the second." A circle with a larger diameter. "That is mankind at large. You would think that the first forms part of the second, wouldn't you? Not in the least! There are barriers of prejudice. Not to mention barbed wire and machine guns. To break through, physically or spiritually, is well-nigh impossible. Which means that mankind, as such, does not exist. There are only fatherlands, everyone's fatherland alien to everyone else's […]" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 314).

In this sense, Solzhenitsyn was interrogating the issue of patriotism and what it meant in comparison with nationalism, as he did at several points in the novel. An example of this is when Volodin's uncle says to him: "Herzen asks what are the limits of patriotism? Must love for your native land extend to any and every government it may have? Must you go on abetting it in destroying its own people?" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 449). For Solzhenitsyn, being patriotic to one's country was of great importance. However, he believed in patriotism in "the form of a profound love for one's native country, as opposed to any militarist jingoism," and, significantly, Solzhenitsyn rejected the idea of "an all-embracing philosophy or ideology of society."[42]

Later in the novel, Sologdin also questions patriotism just before destroying the plan of the encoder he had put two "years of strict intellectual discipline" into:

> But should a man love such a bad country? This people estranged from God, a people that had committed so many crimes and shown no sign of remorse – was this nation of slaves worthy of sacrificial victims, geniuses who had laid their heads on the block unknown and unsung? For a hundred, for two hundred years to come, this people would be content with its trough. Should the torchbearers of human thought be sacrificed for them? Was it not more important to preserve and hand on the torch? You could deal a still heavier blow later (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 565).

Of crucial importance for Solzhenitsyn was the idea that, even in a "totalitarian state, where the actions of government are not closely related to public opinion, people are responsible for what the state does; and in practice we often pay for those actions, even if they were carried out in the distant past."[43] Therefore, some "individuals (such as writers) may (and should) take it upon themselves to express repentance on behalf of their nation."[44]

[42] Carter, *The Politics of Solzhenitsyn*, pp. 58, 68
[43] Ibid., p. 91
[44] Ibid.

Whilst these "every day" lies exist at Marfino, the purpose of the *sharashka* as represented by the state is itself a lie because "the intellectuals interned within it are supposedly working to benefit mankind in consonance with their professional ethics. In actuality, they have been accomplices to oppression and murder."[45] It is for this reason that Nerzhin refuses to work on the cryptography project offered to him even though it could guarantee him his freedom and perhaps even fame, stating that he does not want "any thanks from them, I don't want their forgiveness, and I'm not interested in catching minnows for them" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 50). He explains to Rubin why it was important to resist:

> "Listen Lev […] All these atom bombs and rockets, and your newly hatched phonoscopy" – he spoke haltingly, as though he wasn't sure how to answer – "it's the jaws of the dragon. People who know too much have been walled up in dungeons since the dawn of time. If only two members of the Council of Ministers – obviously Stalin and Beria – know about phonoscopy, plus two idiots like you and me, we will get our remission via the muzzle of a gun at the back of the head. I wonder, incidentally, why the Cheka-MGB makes a point of shooting people in the back of the head. A low trick, I call it. I'd sooner take a volley in the chest, with my eyes open! They're afraid to look their victims in the eye, that's what it is! And with so much work to be done, they want to spare the executioners too much nervous strain!" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 337).

Similarly to Nerzhin, the character Gerasimovich also refuses to sell his soul in the hope of gaining his freedom, when he is asked to join a project producing cameras that would capture people at night, as well as designing a tiny spy camera. He responds:

> Why not just keep quiet! Fool them! Take the job on, spin it out, get nothing done. But Gerasimovich rose, looked contemptuously at the barrel-bellied, flabby-cheeked, pig-faced degenerate wearing a general's hat, and said in a ringing voice: "No! It isn't what I was trained to do! Putting people in prison isn't my trade! I am no fisher of men! It's enough that we've been imprisoned ourselves…" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 633).

At this point it is necessary to consider Stalin's habit of eliminating people who proved themselves too ambitious in their field of work or daily life. For example, in the 1930s, before the advent of World War Two, Stalin had convinced himself that there was a "military" conspiracy; that senior and other officers in both the army and the navy were conspiring to overthrow his dictatorship. The only solution was to remove this threat. The result was that hundreds, if not thousands of men, (almost the entire command of the Soviet

[45] Halperin, 'The Role of the Lie in "The First Circle"', pp. 263-264

navy and the army) were executed. The repercussions of this act were immense. One need only look at the statistics that emerged after the war pertaining to the number of Soviet soldiers who needlessly died.[46] This practice was not restricted to the military; top Soviet scientists, engineers, and the like were also removed for fear of becoming more powerful than the Great Leader. Of course, there was also the period of the Great Terror, as referred to by the character Grigory Borisovich Abramson.

In chapter 55 of the novel, ""Prince Igor," serves as a parody of Article 58 and the Soviet judicial system. Stephen Carter emphasises that "Soviet judicial procedures [had] a grim element of hypocrisy about them."[47] In chapter 55, the prisoners of Marfino stage a mock trial involving a Russian historical figure, Prince Igor. Rubin announces Prince Igor's charges to the *zeks*:

> "On the basis of the facts here set out, Olgovich, Igor Svyatoslavich, born 1151, native of the city of Kiev, Russian, not a Party member, no previous convictions, citizen of the USSR, warlord by trade, having served as commander of a warrior band with the rank of prince, and having been awarded the Varangian Order, First Class, the Order of the Little Red Sun, and the Golden Shield medal, is charged as follows: that he committed a vile act of treachery to his motherland [sic], accompanied by sabotage, espionage, and collaboration over many years with the Polovtsian khanate, that is to say, that he committed the crimes envisaged in Article 58, subsections 1b, 6, 9, and 11 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Socialist Federation of Soviet Republics" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 391).

It continues: "The living conditions of both of them [Igor and his son] in so-called captivity show that they stood in high favour of Khan Konchak and *objectively* were being rewarded by the Polovtsian high command for the treasonable surrender of their warrior band" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 390). Carter points out that there is something particularly "ironic in the use of the word 'objectively' to describe the highly subjective and tendentious reasoning, namely that Prince Igor's easy captivity in the hands of the Polovtsians 'objectively […] was tantamount to accepting reward […] for the treacherous surrender of the troops under his command.'" This was a particular feature of the Soviet state, using the argument that the "fact that [a prisoner] confessed proves his guilt."[48]

[46] See Gellately (2008), and Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (London: The Bodley Head, 2010),
[47] Carter, *The Politics of Solzhenitsyn*, p. 16
[48] Ibid.

Prince Igor's punishment is the model for many men who were termed "enemies of the people":

> "There can be only one explanation: Prince Igor had been enrolled by the Polovtsian intelligence service and planted to disrupt the Kievian state! Comrade Judges! I, like you, am seething with noble indignation. I humanely demand that you sentence the son of a bitch to be hanged! Or rather, since capital punishment has been abolished, that you clobber him with twenty-five years inside, followed by five years' deprivation of civil rights" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 394).

In other words, men like these were stripped of their citizenship and would be treated, along with close family members and sometimes friends, as political pariahs until they could have their names rehabilitated after the fall of Communism. As Applebaum points out, in a "peculiarly Soviet twist on the process [after arrest], prisoners were deliberately 'excommunicated' from Soviet life [and] forbidden to refer to one another as 'comrade'" (Applebaum, 2003: 22). It is interesting to note that after the mock trial has taken place, Abramson, who is serving his second consecutive term for being a Trotskyite, reflects on the fate of the 1945 – 46 "stream":

> Abramson could acknowledge theoretically that the fate of former POWs was tragic, but they were only one stream, one of many, and not the most remarkable. Insofar as the ex-prisoners of war were interesting, it was because they had seen many foreign lands ("real live false witnesses," Potapov jokingly called them); but, all in all, their "stream" was an undistinguished one; they were merely helpless victims of war, not people who had voluntarily chosen political struggle as their way of life (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 397).

Abramson considers himself a titan among other prisoners who streamed into the NKVD pool, because he

> voluntarily chose banishment to the Yenisei when they could have retracted what they had said at Party meetings and gone on living comfortably. They were all given the choice. But these were people who could not bear the distortion and degradation of the Revolution and were ready to sacrifice themselves to sanitise it. This "youthful tribe unknown" had entered the cells thirty years after the October Revolution and simply repeated, with a sprinkling of peasant obscenities, the very things for which the Cheka's execution squads had shot, burned, and drowned people in the Civil War (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 397).

Abramson's comment betrays the author's own feelings about the Russian Revolution. Although in no way a supporter of Trotsky, Solzhenitsyn was concerned with what had happened during the Revolution. When Sologdin remarks that "treacherous means destroy the end itself," Rubin demands to know whether he is denying the legitimacy of the Revolution. Sologdin's response is revealing: "When did you ever have a Revolution? Mayhem isn't Revolution; axes dripping blood aren't Revolution! Who could begin counting those massacred or executed? The world would be horror-struck!" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 515). As Robert Conquest points out, Solzhenitsyn condemned "the very idea on which the Russian Communist revolution was built, namely, 'that some people have the right to oppress others.'"[49]

Alongside the issue of "the Lie," Solzhenitsyn presented the reader with several versions of the truth through his characters. For example, Rubin, as a consummate Communist and the "apologist for Stalinist orthodoxy," has an "absolutist brand of 'truth,'" which, as Halperin highlights, leads to "many dangers." [50] He "represented the ideology of progress," maintaining a blind allegiance to this ideology: [51]

> They baited him, little caring that every such attack tied his insides in knots. And in every cell, at each new encounter, in every discussion, it was his duty to try convince [sic] them, with unflagging enthusiasm and in disdain of their insults, that, overall and in the main, things were going as they should: industry flourishing, agriculture highly productive, science abubble with new ideas, the world of arts dazzling in its rainbow brilliance. Every such cell, every such argument, was a sector of the front, on which Rubin stood alone in defence of socialism (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 485).

Sologdin, on the other hand, is the antithesis to Rubin, although he too holds a belief in "absolute truth." For him, however, this truth "resides in himself: he is the bearer of Truth. The truth is important because *he* is important and in effect he embodies his own truth."[52] He practices what Halperin refers to as "Nietzschean individualism."[53] Finally, Nerzhin does not disavow "the existence of truth but the possibility of one man's grasping it in its totality

[49] Robert Conquest, *The Pasternak Affair: A Documentary Record* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962), pp. 110-111
[50] John B. Dunlop, 'The Odyssey of a Sceptic – Gleb Nerzhin', in *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Records*, ed. by John B. Dunlop, et al, p. 245; Halperin, 'The Role of the Lie in "The First Circle"', p. 266
[51] Halperin, 'The Role of the Lie in "The First Circle"', p. 266
[52] Ibid., p. 267
[53] Ibid.

without reducing it to an expression of his own personality."[54] In conversation with the peasant character, Spiridon Danilovich Yegorov, Nerzhin asks the following: "Can anybody on this earth possibly make out who's right and who's wrong? Who can tell us that?" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 511). This demonstrates his thoughts on the truth. Spiridon's response, however, shakes Nerzhin in a positive way: "'I can tell you: Killing wolves is right; eating people is wrong.' 'What? What's that you say?' The simplicity and certainty of Spiridon's answer took Nerzhin's breath away. 'Just that,' Spiridon said. 'The wolf killer is in the right; the man-eater is not'" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 511). As Carter explains, Spiridon's aphorism demonstrates Solzhenitsyn's belief in a conscience: "Man, says Solzhenitsyn, has a conscience, and a consciousness aware of its free will: this is a natural condition of mankind, but not, perhaps, of animals."[55] He continues to say that the "unique quality of man, when compared with the unreflective instinctual behaviour of animals, suggests that he has some kind of special value in the scheme of created nature; a special individuality and purpose," and that Solzhenitsyn identified this "unique quality of man with the possession of a 'soul', which cannot therefore be controlled by the authorities without consent."[56] Spiridon continues to explain the way he feels to Nerzhin, saying:

> "Gleb, if somebody told me right now there's a plane on the way with an atom bomb on board – d'you want it to bury you like a dog here under the stairs, wipe out your family and a million other people, only old Daddy Whiskers and their whole setup will be pulled up by the roots so that our people won't have to suffer anymore in prison camps and collective farms and logging teams" – Spiridon braced himself, pressing his tense shoulders against the stairs as though they threatened to collapse on him, with the roof itself and all Moscow to follow – "believe me, Gleb, I'd say 'I can't take it anymore, I've run out of patience,' and I'd say" – he looked up at the imaginary bomber – "I'd say, 'Come on, then! Get on with it! Drop the thing!'" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 511).

It can be argued then that while Nerzhin does not have a firm conception of what is the "truth," he does believe in a sort of "pragmatic truth," where man should act as "his conscience dictates, not as his circumstances imply or suggest."[57]

[54] Halperin, 'The Role of the Lie in "The First Circle"', p. 269
[55] Carter, *The Politics of Solzhenitsyn*, p. 17
[56] Ibid.
[57] Halperin, 'The Role of the Lie in "The First Circle"', p. 270

## What does it mean to be Human?

The novel's central thematic concern may be summed up as an indictment against inhumanity, particularly against the inhumanity of Stalin's reign, with a particular focus on what it means to be human. As I have discussed in the preceding chapters, this question of humanity was Solzhenitsyn's greatest concern. It is important to once again emphasise that the Soviet world as it was experienced under Stalinism was opposed to almost everything that made it "human," whether one was inside a prison or not. The question which Volodin voices, "If we live in a state of constant fear, can we remain human?" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 3), lays the foundation for the author's exploration of the reality of the Stalinist regime and how one could remain "human" whilst trying to survive. The concept of humanity is, of course, a problematic one. In essence, however, it is the quality of being humane, and in the novel the concept "functions as an ideal in the radically inhuman world depicted" by Solzhenitsyn, and is "understood to include both normal human desires and the kind of basic decency that needs no theoretical explanation."[58] The positive and negative characters in the novel are determined by their reaction to this ideal of humanity; the positive characters are drawn to it "instinctively," or "aspire to it consciously," while the negative characters "suppress it in themselves and wish to destroy it in others."[59] Since innocence in this world cannot be understood in terms of the law, it falls to this ideal to determine who are truly "innocent." Terrence Des Pres explains the intention of the totalitarian state as "control of man in the mass, and therefore destruction of individual autonomy, which is to say, elimination of the intractable human element from social organisation. Men are to live on schedule, and if the human spirit will not be programmed – not for the good of the cause, the war effort, or increased production – well, then it will have to be removed."[60] Des Pres' point about the human spirit being programmed is particularly relevant to *In the First Circle* as, in the context of the *sharashka*, the scientists/prisoners are required to invent and improvise for the state organ, whilst given impossible time limits in which to do so.

An important element in the novel with regards to humanity is the close personal attachments between characters. These relationships are destroyed because their existence threatens the regime's plan to de-individualise its citizens. For Solzhenitsyn, one of the most important elements of being human was the relationship between a man and a woman. The monastic

[58] Ericson and Klimoff, *The Soul and Barbed Wire*, p. 88
[59] Ibid., pp. 88 – 89
[60] Des Pres, 'The Heroism of Survival', p. 48

seclusion of imprisonment, which deprived men of this relationship, was perhaps the most painful thing for him to experience. In a moving passage that reveals Nerzhin's train of thought, Solzhenitsyn highlighted the crucial importance of a relationship:

> Year after year, you live deprived of what should be every man's right on this earth. You are left with your mind (if any), your beliefs (if you are mature enough to have acquired any), and you are chock-full of concern for the general good. You might be a citizen of ancient Athens, a complete human being. Only, the one thing needful is missing. That one thing, the love of a woman, of which you are deprived, seems more momentous than all the world besides. Those simple words – "Do you love me?" "Yes. Do you love me?" – unspoken except in looks or soundless movements of the lips, now fill your heart with quiet rejoicing (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 327).

Yet another example of the harsh, banal nature of the state is demonstrated in the novel when a new rule with regards to the visitation of wives is introduced:

> "Talking about your case is also forbidden. Judicial proceedings are an official secret. Inquire about your family, your children. One more thing. Starting today, shaking hands and kissing are forbidden." Nerzhin, who had been unmoved by the search and the stupid rules, which he knew how to circumvent, saw red when he heard that kissing was prohibited (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 242).

With a great deal of empathy, Solzhenitsyn describes each moment in a prisoner's life when it came to meeting a loved one. True to the absurd nature of the state's paranoia and obsession with secrecy, relatives were not allowed to pay visits to the *sharashka* itself. Instead, as is shown in the novel, prisoners were taken to the Butyrki prison for these visitations (as civilians were not supposed to know about Marfino's existence). The following passage provides insight into the state of mind of a prisoner whilst travelling to the meeting place:

> They said nothing more during the journey; travelling to see a relative is too great an event in a prisoner's life. It is time to awaken your forgotten soul from its slumber in the burial vault. Memories suppressed on other days now come to the surface. You rehearse the thoughts and feelings of a whole year, of many years, so that you can fuse them with those short minutes of union with someone dear to you (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 248).

This allows the reader to begin to understand the basic horrors the state succeeded in exerting. Throughout the novel the author made use of such "mental windows" to allow the reader to comprehend these horrors. Whilst these inner thoughts are not directly narrated as belonging

to a specific character, it is implied that they do. These inner thoughts are not the only thing Solzhenitsyn paid great attention to; he spared no details in describing the physical surroundings and trappings of his characters. For example, the description of the Butyrki Prison takes up several pages in the novel as Solzhenitsyn sought to paint a detailed picture of it. In keeping with the polyphonic nature of the narrative, he presented the reader with the perspectives of both the wives and the prisoners.

In an essential passage of the novel, Solzhenitsyn provided a view of Butyrki as seen through the eyes of the wives:

> They [the wives] saw a fortress wall four times the height of a man, stretching a whole block along Novoslobodskaya Street. They saw iron gates between mighty concrete pillars, and no ordinary gates at that, opening automatically in a slow yawn to admit prison trucks and automatically closing behind them. Women visitors passed on admission through an opening in a stone wall two metres thick and were conducted around the grim Pugachev Tower between walls several times a man's height. Ordinary zeks saw their visitors through two sets of bars, with a guard pacing between them as though he himself were caged, while zeks of higher category, "sharashka" people, and their visitors faced each other across a wide table with a solid partition underneath it so that feet could not touch and exchange signals, and with a guard standing like an unblinking effigy at the side of the table, listening to the conversation. But the most oppressive feature of Butyrki was that husbands seemed to materialise from the depths of the jail, exhaled by those thick, damp walls for half an hour to reassure their wives, like smiling ghosts, that they were comfortable and wanted for nothing, and then melting into those walls again (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 263).

Butyrki Prison was centrally located in Moscow. There were many such "central" prisons in the heart of cities across the USSR; the Soviets did not always send people far away as was the case during World War Two. In the early years after the Revolution, the Butyrki Prison was overcrowded, as Solzhenitsyn explained in *The Gulag Archipelago*: "[In] 1938 Ivanov-Razumnik found *one hundred forty* prisoners in a standard Butyrki cell intended for twenty-five – with toilets so overburdened that prisoners were taken to the toilet only once a day, sometimes at night; and the same thing was true of their outdoor work as well" (Solzhenitsyn, 1974: 124-125). In fact, as Solzhenitsyn went on to point out, "When, then, was the Butyrki not crowded?" (Solzhenitsyn, 1974: 125). In *In the First Circle*, the chapter entitled "The Buddha's Smile" (chapter 59), sees some men in the *sharashka*, such as Nerzhin, recall their experiences at Butyrki and how they were all crammed into one cell. Butyrki Prison plays a

significant role as a chronotope in the novel. The electrical engineer, Andrei Andreevich Potapov, explains to other inmates of Marfino the origins and use of Butyrki: "What can one say of that useful and smoothly functioning establishment? It traced its ancestry to the barracks of Catherine the Great. In the cruel age of that empress, bricks were not grudged for those fortress like walls and vaulted arches" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 420). The key point here is that the Soviet government simply took over the former tsarist prisons, to some extent perpetuating tsarist rule on a far larger scale. As Niels Nielsen explains, in spite of "all claims for a new era, the Communists continued and expanded the earlier Tsarist tradition of terror, concentrating potentially dangerous persons in special camps. There was no moderation of repression, on the contrary, it was multiplied a thousand fold."[61] The inclusion of Butyrki Prison in the novel allowed Solzhenitsyn to illustrate to his readers another aspect of the prison system of which most were unaware – the issue of the "model prison."

"The Buddha's Smile" is primarily a parody of Eleanor Roosevelt's visit to Butyrki. As Gellately explains, in order to "combat atrocity stories about the camps circulating inside and outside the Soviet Union, the regime opened 'model facilities' for the inspection of the curious, including foreigners" (Gellately, 2008: 178). This was because "Stalin wanted the public to believe that the [prisoners] were not convicts and worked freely. Supposedly, they had 'all the rights of voluntary labour'" (Gellately, 2008: 178). In this chapter, the prison is turned into such a "model facility" for the benefit of Mrs Roosevelt's visit:

> "Mrs. Roosevelt, widow of the president and as progressive and penetrating as her late husband, had done much in defence of human rights and had now made it her business to visit America's valiant ally and see for herself how UNRRA aid was distributed (noxious rumours had reached America that UNRRA's groceries did not reach the common people) and also whether in the Soviet Union freedom of conscience was in any way restricted. She had already been shown simple Soviet citizens (Party officials and MGB officers in disguise), who in their rough workmen's overalls thanked the United States for its disinterested aid. Now Mrs. Roosevelt had insisted on visiting a prison. Her wish had been granted" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 428).

For her visit, a specific prison cell was chosen and prepared, as Potapov explains. The cell was given a new coat of paint with streamers depicting the words "We are for Peace!" and "Peace to all the World!" the "bug-ridden" beds had been taken away, and shelves with books by Marx, Engels, Augustine and Aquinas had been brought in (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 426).

[61] Nielsen, *Solzhenitsyn's Religion*, p. 118

Ironically, and intentionally on Solzhenitsyn's part, the corner where the night bucket had stood had been cleaned and changed into a religious corner where several Christian icons stood, as well as copies of the Bible, Koran and Talmud. In addition, there was a small bust of the Buddha, hence "The Buddha's Smile" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 428). Once Mrs Roosevelt left the prison, however, all was taken away from the prisoners:

> "Dejectedly they returned to Cell No. 72, where they found their fifty comrades lying once more on the bug-ridden bed boards, burning with curiosity to learn what had happened. The windows were again blocked with 'muzzles,' the doves painted over with dark olive paint, and a four-gallon night bucket stood in the corner. Nothing had been forgotten, except the little bronze Buddha enigmatically smiling in his niche" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 431).

This episode aims to demonstrate the nature of the totalitarian government in maintaining the "Lie," the façade which the Stalinist regime wanted the world to see.

In the novel, the destruction of the relationship between Nerzhin and his wife, Nadya, is central to Solzhenitsyn's depiction of the brutality enforced by the system. Solzhenitsyn demonstrated what effects forced imprisonment had not only on the prisoners themselves, but also on the wives of said prisoners. Wives of political criminals were practically treated as criminals themselves; whenever they applied for work or registered to study, they had to declare who their husbands were and, if their husbands were imprisoned as "enemies of the state," this designation applied to the wives too. There existed a debilitating level of discrimination against such women. Solzhenitsyn emphasised this by providing the point of view of Nadya:

> Hers was the heavy lot of all political prisoners' wives, wives of "enemies of the people"; wherever they went, no matter to whom they turned, if their unfortunate marital status became known, they were branded with their husbands' indelible shame. In the eyes of the world such a woman shared the guilt of the double-dyed miscreant to whom she had rashly entrusted her future. Such women, indeed, often began to feel guilty as the "enemies of the people" themselves, whereas their hardened husbands did not feel guilty at all (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 197).

So incriminating was it to be the wife of an "enemy of the people" that Nadya lies about her husband's whereabouts to her roommates at the dormitory of the university where she is living:

> It wasn't the first time her roommates had used such wounding words, called her "old hag," "misery guts," "the nun." What hurt most was the unfairness of it. She used to be so cheerful! But five years of lying leaves its mark. Five years of continually wearing a mask that cramps and pinches your face, hardens your voice, and numbs your thought (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 368).

This passage is particularly potent as it is based on what Solzhenitsyn's first wife, Natalia Aleekseevna Reshetovskaya, had experienced during his imprisonment at Marfino (Applebaum, 2003: 239). Family members constantly had to think on their feet and falsify who they were related to, thereby undermining the relationships they had.

Another way in which Solzhenitsyn demonstrated the dehumanising nature of the state was by considering the role of language. He presented an interesting account of Stalin's view of language and how he attempted to make it fit in with his idea of Marxism:

> Strictly speaking, the mode of production consisted of "forces of production" and "relations of production." To call a language a "relation of production" was probably wrong. So, was a language a "force of production"? The "forces of production" were tools, materials, and people. And although people used language, language was not people. It was a hell of a problem, a blind alley if ever there was one. The most honest thing to do would be to recognise language as an instrument of production, like, say, machine tools, railways, the mails. And, of course, telecommunications. Lenin had said it: "Without the mails there can be no socialism." Nor, obviously, without language. But come straight out with the thesis that language is an instrument of production, and the giggling would begin. Not here at home, of course. There was no one he could consult about it. It could, of course, be put cautiously, something like this: "In this respect language, which is essentially distinct from the superstructure, does not differ from the instruments of production, from, say, machines, which are as indifferent to class as is language" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 152).

Ericson and Klimoff emphasise that language use "is, after all, the most basic attribute of the human condition," therefore, "it is profoundly symbolic that the inhuman state […] is bent on suppressing, distorting, and perverting all aspects of language."[62] Throughout the novel, language and speech is pointed to. For example, everyone "must be on constant guard against potential informers who might be listening in on their talk," and harsh "restrictions

[62] Ericson and Klimoff, *The Soul and Barbed Wire*, p. 90

concerning what is allowed to be discussed during spouses' prison meetings aim to reduce the conversation between man and wife to little more than an exchange of platitudes."[63]

Alongside these issues concerning humanity, Solzhenitsyn was also preoccupied with the problem of freedom. Through a dialogue between Nerzhin and Gerasimovich, Solzhenitsyn demonstrated that any kind of radical thought is highly problematic. Gerasimovich maintains that freedom should have its limits, for if it did not, "there [could] be no well-adjusted society." He proposes that instead of democracy, which would allow the "votes of a hundred or a thousand blockheads [to] set the course for the enlightened," there should be implemented a kind of "equitable inequality" based on "talent, natural or cultivated" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 665). He goes on to say that the time has come for them, "the Russian technical intelligentsia, to change the form of government in Russia" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 666). Echoing Solzhenitsyn's sentiments, Nerzhin, who is quite taken aback by Gerasimovich's proposal, replies: "To hell with revolution: Your elite would be the first to be massacred. Culture and beauty would be eliminated; everything good would be destroyed" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 667).

## ***Abandon Hope, All Ye Who Enter Here*: The Use of Terror and the Case of Innokenty Volodin**

It is through the character Innokenty Volodin that Solzhenitsyn demonstrated the "transformation of a member of the Soviet ruling elite into a conscientious rebel against the Stalinist system" (Krasnov, 1980: 75). The last chapters of *In the First Circle*, 91 through to 96, recount in graphic detail the very process of an arrest – from being fetched at your place of residence to the sleep deprivation and psychological torture that followed afterwards in prison. Volodin is arrested as one of two suspects who are possibly responsible for treason. Such was the way of Stalinism that all "suspects" had to endure interrogation and torture even before they were proven guilty. In these chapters, the reader is introduced to the Lubyanka, another important chronotope in the novel. This building was established by the Cheka in 1920 around the Lubyanskaya Square, and, aside from the prison (referred to as "the Lubyanka"), there was an "entire network of buildings" including "execution chambers" (Satter, 2012: 24). The prison was replaced by a cafeteria and, the headquarters of the KGB,

[63] Ericson and Klimoff, *The Soul and Barbed Wire*, p. 90

the Lubyanka building, is now the headquarters of the FSB, a rather painful irony.[64] Once again invoking Dante's *Inferno*, chapter 91 is aptly titled "Abandon Hope, All Ye Who Enter Here," as the Lubyanka was a kind of hell for those who were sent there. Volodin is arrested at night, a significant mechanism of terror employed by the state as Solzhenitsyn pointed out in *The Gulag Archipelago*: "Why is it that all the main work of breaking down human souls went on at *night*? Why, from their very earliest years, did the *Organs* select the *night*?" (Solzhenitsyn, 1974: 103). He went on to explain that "night" time was chosen as it was considered a time when the "suspect" would be most vulnerable, especially when asleep in their bed. Volodin's experiences in these final chapters mirror what Solzhenitsyn endured and wrote about in *The Gulag Archipelago*. For example, he recounted the sense of relief he felt when he was finally arrested. This is echoed by Volodin in chapter 91: "The arrest had been rough but not so terrifying as might be expected. He even felt a certain relief: no more need to fear, no need to struggle, no need to plot and plan. He felt the pleasurable numb relaxation that sometimes pervades the body of a wounded man" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 677).

Volodin's thought patterns are detailed throughout these chapters and several significant matters concerning interrogation are highlighted. One of these is the role that sound plays in the psychological torment of the prisoner/suspect. Solzhenitsyn is known for describing how "in Russia guards were trained to slam the door in as jarring a way as possible or close it in equally unnerving silence."[65] In the novel, for example, while Volodin is in an infamous car known as a "Black Maria," being driven to the Lubyanka, the driver keeps on making a "clicking noise with his tongue, as if he were calling a dog," but there was no dog (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 677). At the Lubyanka, Volodin is taken to a tiny cell. This was a significant feature of the Lubyanka, as recalled by Solzhenitsyn in *The Gulag Archipelago*:

> Prison begins with the *box*, in other words what amounts to a closet or packing space. The human being who has just been taken from freedom, still in a state of inner turmoil, ready to explain, to argue, to struggle, is, when he first sets foot in prison, clapped into a *box* […]. And he is held there for several hours, or for half a day. During those hours he knows absolutely nothing! Will he perhaps be confined there all his life? He has never in his life encountered anything like this, and he cannot guess at the outcome (Solzhenitsyn, 1974: 109).

[64] "Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation", the replacement of the KGB.
[65] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 40. All other reference to this text will appear in parentheses, in text.

Once in this tiny cell, Volodin notices a mechanical hum. His mind is in such a state of panic that he starts believing the sound must be coming from a "machine for grinding the bones of murdered prisoners" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 681). Later on, he thinks that perhaps the sound is actually that of a machine pumping gas in through the vent in his cell and that his warders keep looking at him through the peephole to see whether he is dead. Ironically, as the author explained, these thoughts of Volodin's were not improbable, especially for men "of the forties," who were aware of such mechanisations being used by the Nazis to destroy people. In addition, within the buildings surrounding the prison, executions did take place. At this point in the novel, the reader becomes aware that the room in which Volodin is being kept is, as Elaine Scarry explains, "itself translated into [a] weapon, into an agent of pain" (Scarry, 1985: 40). This is because, in torture, "the world is reduced to a single room or set of rooms" (Scarry, 1985: 40). In addition, as Foucault maintains, "disciplinary space," or the space of the prison

> tends to be divided into as many sections as there are bodies or elements to be distributed. One must eliminate the effects of imprecise distributions, the uncontrolled disappearance of individuals, their diffuse circulation, their unusable and dangerous coagulation; it was a tactic of anti-desertion, anti-vagabondage, anti-concentration. Its aim was to establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communications, to interrupt others, to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual, to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities or merits. It was a procedure, therefore, aimed at knowing, mastering and using. Discipline organises an analytical space (Foucault, 1991: 143).

Constant surveillance is another way in which the authorities can "discipline" the prisoners. In Volodin's case, it is a matter of the guard checking up on him every few moments: "Every minute the little disk over the glazed peephole was disturbed and a single inquisitorial eye observed Innokenty. The door was four fingers thick, and the spy hole ran right through it, a cone of which the optic was the apex. Innokenty surmised that it was made this way so that there was nowhere in this torture chamber for the prisoner to escape the guard's gaze" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 680). This was something that deeply concerned Solzhenitsyn and which preoccupies Volodin in the novel. He continues: "What a spectacle! The detached eye, the eye without a face, the eye that has concentrated all expression in itself!...now watching you die!" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 682). When Volodin is taken to the bathroom, he is relieved to finally have a break from the watchful eye. However, he soon realises that he cannot escape it: "Glad that here at least he would get a rest from

uninterrupted surveillance, Innokenty squatted. But he heard a click from the other side of the door, and saw that here, too, there was a conical spy hole and that the importunate eye was watching him closely, not at intervals but continuously" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 685). Panopticism here functions to unnerve, disturb, and to psychologically torture the prisoner. As Foucault put it, the

> theme of the Panopticon - at once surveillance and observation, security and knowledge, individualisation and totalisation, isolation and transparency found in the prison its privileged locus of realisation. Although the panoptic procedures, as concrete forms of the exercise of power, have become extremely widespread, at least in their less concentrated forms, it was really only in the penitentiary institutions that Bentham's utopia could be fully expressed in a material form (Foucault, 1991: 249).

Together with the mechanisms of the panopticon, the state also used humiliation as a form of psychological torture. This is illustrated in the novel when Volodin is given a full body search:

> As though Innokenty were a horse for sale, the guard's dirty fingers plucked at one of his cheek's, then the other, the pouch under one eye, the pouch under the other, reassured himself that nothing was hidden under the tongue, inside the cheeks, or in the eyes, tipped Innokenty's head back with a firm push, so that the light shone into his nostrils, inspected both ears, tugging at the lobes, ordered him to spread his fingers, ascertained that there was nothing between them, and made him flap his arms to check that there was nothing under his armpits either. Then, in the same unanswerable robotic voice: "Take your member in your hands. Turn back the skin. Farther. Right, that's enough. Move your member to the right and upward. To the left and upward. Right, let go. Stand with your back to me. Legs apart. Wider. Bend over and touch the floor. Legs wider apart. Part your buttocks with your hands. Right. Good. Now squat. Quickly! Once more!" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 686 – 687).

This body search is particularly upsetting for Volodin, because, as is explained in the following paragraph of the novel, when he had envisaged being arrested, he had not imagined undergoing something so crude and humiliating. Rather, he had visualised a "furious intellectual dual with Leviathan – the state" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 687), where he could argue for what he believes in and protest against what is happening with the Soviet Union. It is interesting to note Solzhenitsyn's description of the prison employees who are tasked with interrogating the suspects, and other duties of this nature. In the above passage one notes that the man performing the search on Volodin speaks with an "unanswerable robotic voice." The

author described these agents of the prison as "clockwork-doll people" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 700), as if they themselves are merely an extension of the Lubyanka. Volodin considers his experience "a cruel farce," because for him the procedures are "each more absurd than the last," and utterly pointless. However, as Solzhenitsyn emphasised, Volodin did not realise that the procedures "formed a logically calculated sequence: the preliminary body search by the operatives who arrested him; establishment of the prisoner's identity; receipt of the prisoner (not presented in person) acknowledged by the prison administration; initial prison body search on receipt; preliminary hygienic treatment; recording of marks on body; medical examination" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 692). Judith Herman states that fear is increased by "capricious enforcement of petty rules," and the final effect of this is "to convince the [prisoner] that the perpetrator [interrogator or prison guard] is omnipotent, that resistance is futile, and that [the prisoner's] life depends on winning his indulgence through absolute compliance."[66] In addition, their purpose, taken together, was "to break the will of the newly arrested prisoner" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 687) so that he would offer minimal resistance. Herman explains that in "situations of captivity, the perpetrator becomes the most powerful person in the life of the victim, and the psychology of the victim is shaped by the actions and beliefs of the perpetrator."[67]

One of the most effective ways in which the prison guards could torture the inmates without actually laying a finger on them was through the method of sleep deprivation. As Solzhenitsyn explained in *The Gulag Archipelago*, sleeplessness "was a great form of torture; it left no visible marks and could not provide grounds for complaint even if an inspection – something unheard of anyway – were to strike on the morrow" (Solzhenitsyn, 1974: 112). After keeping him up for most of the night, well into the early hours of the morning, Volodin is finally taken to a cell with a bunk where he can go to sleep. He has just drifted off to sleep when

> suddenly, the door crashed open and [the guard] said, "Take your hands from under the blanket!" "What for?" Innokenty exclaimed, almost weeping. "Why did you wake me up? I had such difficulty getting asleep!" "Get your hands out!" the guard repeated, unmoved. "Hands must be out in the open." Innokenty obeyed. But it proved to be not so easy to fall asleep with his hands above the blanket. This was diabolically clever! Human beings, without even noticing it,

[66] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p. 77
[67] Ibid., p. 75

> have an inveterate habit of concealing their hands, pressing them to their bodies, while they sleep (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 707).

Here, as Solzhenitsyn put it, lack of sleep "befogs the reason, undermines the will, and the human being ceases to be himself, to be his own *I*. A person deprived of sleep acts half unconsciously or altogether unconsciously, so that his testimony cannot be held against him" (Solzhenitsyn, 1974: 111-112). Scarry explains that even the "most small and benign of bodily acts becomes a form of agency" (Scarry, 1985: 48). She goes on to say that the "prisoner's body – in its physical strengths, in its sensory powers, in its needs and wants, in its ways of self-delight, and finally even, as here [in the case of Volodin], in its small and moving gestures of friendship toward itself – is, like the prisoner's voice, made a weapon against him, made to betray him on behalf of the enemy, made to be the enemy" (Scarry, 1985: 48).

A final, important comment Solzhenitsyn made with regards to Volodin's arrest, is the description he provides of the Lubyanka:

> The memoirs of émigrés would give you no idea of what it was like: the corridors, the stairways, the doors, doors, doors, the comings and goings of officers, sergeants, auxiliary staff – the Great Lubyanka was teeming with life in the middle of the night, yet there was no longer a single prisoner in sight; you could not possibly meet someone like yourself, could not possibly hear an unofficial word, and even official ones were few and far between. It was if the whole enormous ministry were going without its night's sleep just for your sake, exclusively preoccupied with you and your crime. During his first hours inside, a prisoner is at the mercy of a single murderous idea: The newcomer must be kept apart from other prisoners so that no one can encourage him, so that he feels in isolation the full weight of the brute force that sustains the whole many-tentacled apparatus (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 701).

This passage resembles something taken directly from Solzhenitsyn's diary, a memory of his own time spent at the Lubyanka.

## Transportation – A Conclusion

The novel ends on an ironic, yet terrifying note, and the entire episode contained in the final chapter titled "MEAT", portrays, as Halperin points out, "the Great Lie," as it represents, "in

a sense the source of all the other falsehoods revealed in the novel."[68] This part of the novel illustrates something that was, as Solzhenitsyn put it, "an event as momentous in the life of a prisoner as being wounded is in the life of a soldier," and, "just as a wound may be light or serious, curable or fatal, so transportation may be to somewhere close or somewhere distant; it may be a diversion – and it may mean death" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 714). Solzhenitsyn referred to the different forms of transportation as "the ships of the archipelago," and, in *The Gulag Archipelago*, he provided an in-depth account of what exactly transportation entailed. One of his many descriptions reads:

> The train starts – and a hundred crowded prisoner destinies, tormented hearts, are borne along the same snaky rails, behind the same smoke, past the same fields, posts, and haystacks as you, and even a few seconds sooner than you. But outside your window even less trace of the grief which has flashed past is left in the air than fingers leave in water. And in the familiar life of the train, which is always exactly the same…could you possibly grasp what a dark and suppressed horror has been borne through the same sector of Euclidean space just three seconds ahead of you? (Solzhenitsyn, 1974: 490).

Thousands of lives were lost in the transportation of prisoners as, more often than not, they were crammed into small "cattle carts" with no space for movement and very little food. And yet the prisoners being transported did not resist these conditions. The radio expert, Valentin Martynovich Pryanchikov, comments on this: "'It's incredible,' he said. 'We've lost all sense and feeling! We don't even kick up a fuss! We're 'transported,' 'shipped,' 'forwarded.' You can transport luggage, but what gives them the right to transport people?'" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 722). As the narrator indicates, "Valentulya's outburst found an echo in the prisoners' hearts:"

> Disturbed by news of the transfer, not one of those in the laboratory was working. A transportation was always a terrible reminder that "we may be next." A transportation made every prisoner, even if unaffected by it, reflect that his fate was in the balance and that the axe of the Gulag was poised to cut short his existence. Even zeks with no black marks against them were invariably sent away from the special prison two years or so before the end of their sentence, so that they would forget all they had done there and lose their skills before they were freed. Men serving twenty-five years would never see the end of their sentence, so the security services happily recruited them for the special prisons (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 722).

[68] Halperin, 'The Role of the Lie in "The First Circle"', p. 271

Whilst being taken to the station from where they would be "transported," the *zeks* imagine what awaits them, for, as Nerzhin points out to Khorobrov, ""No, Ilya Terentich, [Marfino] isn't hell. *That* is *not* hell! Hell is where we're going! We're going back to hell. The special prison is the highest, the best, the first circle of hell. It's practically paradise" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 740). This highlights the true horrors of the camps for Solzhenitsyn's readers. The novel ends on a particularly sinister note, with the episode of the "meat truck." As the narrator points out, some "genius had an inspiration: Police trucks would be designed to look exactly like food delivery trucks, painted with the same orange and light blue stripes, and bearing the legend in four languages: *Khleb, Pain, Brot, Bread: Myaso, Viande, Fleisch, Meat*" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 737). This reference to human beings as "meat" recalls Giorgio Agamben's notion of "bare life." For Agamben, this was the basic life that man is born with, but was also the "sacred life," the life of a person who had committed a crime against the state and therefore was put outside of the law in the sense that the state could now do absolutely *anything* to him.[69] Halperin emphasises how this episode may be a reflection of Solzhenitsyn's view of Soviet Marxism: "the familiar spectacle of Soviet Marxism masquerading under the guise of benevolent humanism," and "Communist food trucks rolling off to feed the hungry masses represent an ideologically powerful symbol, yet one that conceals the reality of monstrous crimes."[70]

However, while this "reality" may be evident to the reader, Solzhenitsyn demonstrated that this was not the case with society at large:

> Swinging the compressed bodies to and fro, the gaily painted orange-and-blue truck swished along the city streets, passed one of the stations, and pulled up at a crossing. A dark red car was held up by traffic lights at the same road junction. It belonged to the Moscow correspondent of the newspaper *Libération*, who was on his way to a hockey match in the Dynamo stadium. The correspondent read the words on the side of the truck: *Myaso, Viande, Fleisch, Meat*. He had made a mental note of several such trucks seen in various parts of Moscow that day. He took out a notebook and jotted down in dark red ink: "Every now and then, one encounters on the streets of Moscow food delivery trucks, spick-and-span and impeccably hygienic. There can be no doubt that the capital's food supplies are extremely well organised" (Solzhenitsyn, 2009: 740 – 741).

[69] See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 8

[70] Halperin, 'The Role of the Lie in "The First Circle"', p. 272

This final scene of prisoners being transported to the labour camps, which in some cases may mean death, emphasises what Halperin refers to as the "central metaphor of the novel: *a living death*."[71] In this way, *In the First Circle* is more maudlin, more tragic than *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. What ultimately can be said about the novel is that here Solzhenitsyn's concern about humanity had a lot to do with the fact that under Soviet Communist rule, people were not seen as people (once again evoking Agamben's notion of "homo sacer," the sacred man who is not a political body), and were in fact reduced to meat, to being the slave labourers for the great project of "building socialism," what Satter refers to as Russia's "Topography of Pain" (Satter, 2012: 4). This was allowed to happen because of the assumptions that sprang from the ideology of the Soviet state. The most important of these assumptions (for the state) was, as has already been mentioned, the notion that people are a means to an end and have little value in themselves, and the justification of this is the whole argument that utopia must be achieved no matter the cost. The validity and value of human life and individual agency is also critically examined in the following chapter, which deals with *Cancer Ward*. The novel is closer to *In the First Circle* than to *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in that, as will be shown, it is a long novel and demonstrates the use of polyphony. This said, however, I maintain that it is crucial to take all three texts as an indictment of the Soviet state and a memorial of sorts to those who were lost as a result of its dehumanising processes.

[71] Halperin, 'The Role of the Lie in "The First Circle"', p. 275

# Chapter Three – *Cancer Ward*: In the Shadow of Barbed Wire

*The hurricane swept by, few of us survived,*

*And many failed to answer friendship's roll call…*

Extract from a poem by Sergei Yesenin, as quoted in *Cancer Ward*[1]

*[Art] has two constant, two unending preoccupations: it is always meditating upon death and it is always thereby creating life.*

Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*[2]

## Expulsion

As with *In the First Circle*, the novel *Cancer Ward* was published in the USA in 1968, but without Solzhenitsyn's permission. It was published from a *samizdat* (meaning "self-published") copy which had been circulated in the Soviet Union and had been smuggled out to the West. Whilst Solzhenitsyn had nothing to do with this, the Soviet regime, as Paul Blackstock writing for *Worldview* pointed out, "reacted severely."[3] The events that followed became known as the "Solzhenitsyn Affair," and had dire consequences for Solzhenitsyn as both a writer and a citizen of the USSR. He had believed that the Soviet Writers' Union would allow the publication of *Cancer Ward* and that there would be less opposition than there had been when he had attempted to have *In the First Circle* published (before self-censoring it). Solzhenitsyn was called in to face the secretariat of the Union to defend his novel and to find out whether or not they would allow it to be published. Some of the comments made at this meeting capture the sort of criticism Solzhenitsyn was forced to endure. The following, for instance, is taken from the dialogue of the meeting:

> SALYNSKY [One of the members of the secretariat]: I shall speak of *Cancer Ward*. I believe that it should be printed – it is a vivid and powerful piece of work. To be sure it contains descriptions of disease in pathological terms, and the reader inevitably succumbs to the dread of cancer – a phobia that is already widespread in our

[1] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, trans. by Nicholas Bethell and David Burg (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 171

[2] Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, p. 427

[3] Paul W. Blackstock, 'The Solzhenitsyn Affair: A Minority View', *Worldview Magazine*, 13 (1970), 14-17 (p. 15).

> century. This should somehow be eliminated…And now a few words about moral socialism. In my opinion, there is nothing so very terrifying about this. It *would* be terrifying if Solzhenitsyn were preaching *im*moral socialism…
>
> KOZHEVNIKOV: *Cancer Ward* evokes revulsion with its excessive naturalism, its piling up of all manner of horrors…
>
> SURKOV: I don't mind admitting that I am a well-read man…I've even taken a sniff at Mikhailovsky and Vladimir Soloviev[4], with their naïve notion that economics can be made subordinate to morality…This is not a physiological but a political story, and its whole thrust is ideological…Of course, our reader is now so mature and so sophisticated that no silly little book is going to alienate him from communism. All the same, the works of Solzhenitsyn are more dangerous to us than those of Pasternak: Pasternak was a man divorced from life, while Solzhenitsyn has a bold, militant, ideological temperament, is a man with an idea. We represent the first revolution in the history of mankind that has kept unchanged its original slogans and banners. "Moral socialism" is philistine socialism. It is old and primitive, and I don't understand how anyone could fail to understand this, how anyone could see anything in it.[5]

Solzhenitsyn's response to this attack on his "silly little book" went as follows:

> I am being criticised for the very title on the ground that cancer and cancer wards are not a medical subject but symbols of some sort […]. The texture is too dense, there are too many medical details for it to be a symbol. I have asked some leading cancer specialists for their view of the story, and they have acknowledged that from the medical point of view it is impeccable, and abreast of modern knowledge […]. Some of those present may soon perhaps find themselves in a cancer ward and realise what sort of symbol this is. I absolutely do not understand why *Cancer Ward* is accused of being anti-humanitarian. Quite the reverse is true: life conquers death, the past is conquered by the future […]. In general, the task of the writer cannot be reduced to defence or criticism of one or another form of government. The tasks of the writer are connected with more general and durable questions, such as the secrets of the human heart and conscience […].[6]

In this statement, Solzhenitsyn was revealing some of the important themes present in the novel. However, the defence he offered did little to help its cause and, in addition to *Cancer Ward* not being published in the Soviet Union, he was expelled from the Writers' Union in 1969. As a result of this action, Solzhenitsyn was declared a "non-person" or "unperson."

[4] Russian religious writers.
[5] As cited in D. M. Thomas, *Alexander Solzhenitsyn: A Century in His Life* (London: Abacus, 1998), pp. 326-327
[6] Ibid.

Ronald Hingley explains that this meant that said "unperson's" name "ceased to appear in print, disappearing from the indexes of the library in which their writings have appeared."[7] In the West, by contrast, the novel was very well received and Solzhenitsyn became the "most celebrated of […] 'unpersons.'"[8] *Cancer Ward* is set two years after Stalin's death, a period when de-Stalinisation was slowly taking place. Towards the end of the novel, which covers a three-week period, there are rumours of amnesty in the air. This was an important turning point in the history of the Soviet Union. Despite Solzhenitsyn's insistence that the novel was not symbolic and not political, it is filled with symbolism and discussions surrounding Stalinism, especially how it was possible for such horrors to occur when the initial purpose of the Revolution was to free people from oppression.

However, it is important to bear in mind that Solzhenitsyn's use of symbolism in the novel is not reductive or uniform. Whilst he did make use of symbolism in the text, he was also very concerned with the *real* aspects of a patient's experience in a cancer ward as well as crucial questions around political reform in the Soviet Union following the Great Leader's death. Edward J. Brown emphasises this point, stating that in the novel

> we may find rich possibilities of symbolic interpretation, but we must not lose sight of the fact that the cancer ward is primarily and principally just that: a crowded medical facility in an outlying republic, the facts of which are given in faithful detail: clinical information in the form of symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment; the outward aspect of the patients, their essential gestures of pain and despair, the problems of the nurses and doctors, and the inner lives of all these people.[9]

In addition, Brown adds that one of Solzhenitsyn's roles as an author was to "provide knowledge of reality," specifically providing knowledge "moreover of a reality concealed from general observation," thereby "consciously break[ing] down the enforced segregation of the incarcerated and the cancerous."[10] One example of Solzhenitsyn's focus on the real in the novel is given when the narrator describes one of the patients in the cancer ward, an Uzbek man named Mursalimov:

> The dark-bronze skin of his skull-like head was tightly stretched. The small bones of his nose, the jawbone and the sharp chinbone behind his pointed beard were all clearly visible. His ears had

[7] Ronald Hingley, *Russian Writers and Soviet Society: 1917-1978* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1979), p. xvii
[8] Ibid.
[9] Brown, *Major Soviet Writers*, p. 356
[10] Ibid.

> thinned and become no more than flat pieces of cartilage. He had only to dry up a bit more and turn a little blacker and he'd be a mummy (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 42).

The description of the sick man's body is strikingly visceral. It is but one of many such portraits painted by Solzhenitsyn throughout the novel. Further justifying his intentions, Solzhenitsyn explained that, with regards to *Cancer Ward*, literature

> can never encompass everything in life. I will use a mathematical form [for example] and explain it: every work can become a pencil of planes. This pencil of planes passes through one point. One chooses this point by virtue of his interest, his biography, his superior knowledge, etc. My illness prompted me to choose a cancer ward as my point. I had to undertake a serious study of oncology in order to check my treatment. But I do not feel the necessity of describing the territory of the republic beyond the confines of the cancer ward. It is impossible to express everything, and that part of the whole which is necessary can be adequately expressed through this point.[11]

Once again, Solzhenitsyn was making it abundantly clear that in writing this novel he was drawing from his own experiences and the experiences of others he had witnessed. The point about literature not being able to encompass everything in life is echoed in the novel by Kostoglotov when Dr Dontsova says to him, "'You have to know everything, don't you?'" and the narrator comments on behalf of Oleg, "Of course he didn't really have to know everything. Oleg looked at the patch hovering on the ceiling. You can't know everything in the world. Whatever happens you'll die a fool" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 333). Susan Sontag also argued that "*Cancer Ward* contains virtually no uses of cancer as a metaphor – for Stalinism, or for anything else."[12]

There are significant similarities between *Cancer Ward* and *In the First Circle*, most notably in their use of polyphony. Krasnov holds that *Cancer Ward*, like *In the First Circle*,

> relentlessly challenges the Communist claim to the absolute truth, not by expounding another absolute truth, but by insisting that mankind, lest it descend to the level of hens, cats, and dogs, should practice what comes to it most naturally, that is, a say-and-listen, dialogic communication. Thus, while polyphony in general and ideological dialogues in particular are Solzhenitsyn's predominant artistic media, they are also his principle message (Krasnov, 1980: 158-159).

[11] "Delo Solzenicyna" in *Novy Zurnal*, 93, December 1968, p. 248
[12] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 82

Brown points out that polyphony functions in *Cancer Ward* in the sense that "attention shifts from the inward experience of one character to that of another, and as the viewpoint shifts, the style of thought and expression – the gestures of language – also change in keeping with the character."[13] However, as Francis Barker notes, *Cancer Ward* is "less polyphonic than *The First Circle*, reducing the ideological multiplicity to the duality of the prominent plurality between [the characters] Rusanov and Shulubin who pivot about Kostoglotov, the negative centre," and, the "formal tension [present in the novel] is less extreme because the ideological structure is more explicit."[14] I too believe that *Cancer Ward* does not display as great a use of polyphony as *In the First Circle*. This, however, does not invalidate its significance. The novel has different concerns than *In the First Circle* and the polyphony used in the latter would not have aided Solzhenitsyn in examining his concerns in *Cancer Ward*. With *Cancer Ward*, Solzhenitsyn placed his characters in the "context of imminent death" and, as Helen Muchnic explains, the novel is "a drama of mortality, a race with time, not for life but for an understanding of life, a drama played out by men in a state of enforced immobility."[15] She adds that the novel is concerned with several things, the "nature of truth, the place of the individual in Soviet society, the meaning of happiness, the value of life," and "the tragedy of guilt."[16] It is precisely the interactions between Rusanov, Shulubin, and Kostoglotov that allowed Solzhenitsyn to critically examine these concerns.

A significant difference between *Cancer Ward* and *In the First Circle* is that the time period in which the former novel takes place is a pivotal point in the history of the USSR; because it occurs after Stalin's death, there was a loosening of the rigidity of the Soviet state as it was being threatened by the antagonism between members of the state who wanted to take control.[17] Krasnov points out that in *Cancer Ward* the reader is "made witness to the first steps in the ritual 'dethronement' of the 'idol-king'" (Krasnov, 1980: 155). This brought forth the possibility of the rebirth of the Soviet Union, the possibility of breaking the long-standing "tradition" of rule by terror and dehumanisation of the individual. The novel also differs from *In the First Circle* in that, as Rosette Lamont explains, a "cancer ward is a political no-man's-

[13] Brown, *Major Soviet Writers*, p. 357
[14] Barker, *Solzhenitsyn: Politics and Form*, p. 29
[15] Helen Muchnic, '"Cancer Ward": Of Fate and Guilt', in *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Records*, pp. 279-280
[16] Ibid., p. 283
[17] In particular the rivalry between Nikita Khrushchev and Lavrenty Beria.

land."[18] This is significant because by "describing a hospital, and in particular a [cancer] ward where the contest between life and death is played out dramatically, Solzhenitsyn [forced the] regime to look at the very fact they refuse[d] to recognise: all men are equal because all men die."[19] The novel's main themes also differ to some extent from those of *In the First Circle* in that, while they are too concerned with the question of humanity, the primary focus is on the dichotomous relationship between life and death. In fact, the "broad question of how human beings should live is the thematic core of [this] novel."[20] Building on this, it is important to consider how and why Solzhenitsyn was once again offering an indictment of the Stalinist machine and the way in which it undermined the individual. In fact, I argue that it is precisely in *Cancer Ward* that Solzhenitsyn offered his readers what may be considered some of the most horrific aspects of the regime. In this text there are references to the "real" criminals who inhabited the Gulag Archipelago alongside the "enemies of the people"; references to the labour camps and the way in which they changed those who spent time in them; an in-depth explanation of life in exile for an ex-*zek* and a reference to the horrors that occurred before and during the Siege of Leningrad. When all these aspects are taken together, the novel paints a rather bleak picture. As such, whilst the text deploys symbolic elements at strategic points, it is also discomfortingly real.

An interesting point with regards to *Cancer Ward* is that while, as Brown explains, the "actual plot of the novel is bare of events, the life histories of the characters – each one a kind of sketch for a possible novel – are rich in every kind of vicissitude. These biographies reveal in terms of firsthand experiences the overwhelming tragedy of Russian life during the Stalin period."[21] As Brown maintains, it is vital to keep in mind that these "life histories" are not simply a product of Solzhenitsyn's creative mind. The "life histories" really happened and are the stories of many people, the unknown victims of the regime. As Sontag explains, modern "totalitarian movements […] have been peculiarly – and revealingly – inclined to use disease imagery."[22] This was because "revolutionary violence [was] justified on the grounds that society has a radical, horrible illness," which needed to be cured by the regime, and therefore disease "metaphors were a staple of Bolshevik polemics."[23] It becomes clear then that in

[18] Rosette Lamont, 'Solzhenitsyn's Nationalism', in *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Records*, ed. by John B. Dunlop, Richard Haugh and Alexis Klimoff (London: Collier Macmillan, 1975), p. 101
[19] Lamont, 'Solzhenitsyn's Nationalism', p. 101
[20] Ericson and Klimoff, *The Soul and Barbed Wire*, p. 103
[21] Brown, *Major Soviet Writers*, p. 353
[22] Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, p. 82
[23] Ibid.

writing *Cancer Ward* Solzhenitsyn was turning this tradition on its head, subverting it and using it to illustrate the inhuman nature of the Soviet regime.

Significantly, discussions around the issues of death and immortality have been, as James G. Walker explains, "taboo in Soviet artistic literature," yet Solzhenitsyn introduced them in *Cancer Ward* to "allow everyone to examine and test his personal philosophy against a new reality and to strip away the protective devices that he has created between himself and reality."[24] As a chronotope, the cancer ward becomes, as Terrence Des Pres highlights, "death's home ground, and those who find themselves there have no thought but to survive, to employ any medical tactic which may strengthen their defensive;" and, "since death will not retreat, to come to terms with their situation so as to live beyond fear and despair."[25] The overall trauma that is felt by the characters in *Cancer Ward* is clearly one caused by illness. However, one may argue that it functions similarly to the trauma experienced by, for example, wrongful incarceration. As Jenny Edkins states, events

> of the sort we call traumatic are overwhelming but they are also a revelation. They strip away the diverse commonly accepted meanings by which we lead our lives in our various communities. They reveal the contingency of the social order and in some cases how it conceals its own impossibility. They question our settled assumptions about who we might be as humans and what we might be capable of.[26]

These questions also have a lot to do with what might be expected from death and what "consciousness" is. Writing about *Cancer Ward*, Daniel Weissbort pointed out that the "imminence of death eliminates everything inessential, reveals people for what they are, strengthening some, destroying others."[27] It therefore becomes clear to the reader that this particular genre, what one may call the realism of illness and death, gave Solzhenitsyn the space to foreground important discussions around precisely these questions of life and death. Linked to this is the core issue of what it means to be human in the face of impending death. Although this marks a departure from the issue of demise as a result of wrongful incarceration, it is also closely related to it. Whether natural or unnatural, the threat of death allows for considerations around the meaning of life and the significance of the individual in society.

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[24] James G. Walker, 'Solzhenitsyn's "Cancer Ward": An Introductory Study' (Ph.D. thesis, Indiana University, 1971), pp. 20-21
[25] Des Pres, 'The Heroism of Survival', p. 59
[26] Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, p. 5
[27] Daniel Weissbort, 'Solzhenitsyn's "Cancer Ward"', *Survey* 68 (1968), p. 179

## The Rebel and the Bureaucrat

The former *zek*, Oleg Filimonovich Kostoglotov, is one *of Cancer Ward*'s most pivotal characters because he, as Krasnov points out, may well be considered the "embodiment of the idea of polyphony" (Krasnov, 1980: 150). This is because throughout the novel he is "engaged precisely in overcoming the natural limitations of his outside viewpoint. When he becomes acquainted with people he always tries to get inside them, underneath their skin, to see the world with their eyes, and to hear out their life stories" (Krasnov, 1980: 152). Importantly, as I explore in greater detail below, he does not simply accept anything at face value, but rather questions everything. As Muchnic emphasises, Kostoglotov is a "humanist who trusts reason and has faith in the validity of [individual] experience."[28] He becomes a mouthpiece in the fight against Stalinism, and his opposing counterpart in the novel is the bureaucrat Pavel Nikolayevich Rusanov, who may be called a champion for the state. As Muchnic explains, Rusanov is a "bureaucrat of a particularly vicious kind [who] has made his way in the service of Stalin's spying apparatus, devising elaborate methods to intimidate and entrap innocent people. He is enormously pleased with himself, delighted with his shrewdness and patriotism," and, "proud of his whole 'purposeful, vigorous and splendid' life."[29] Through him, Solzhenitsyn was providing the reader an in-depth picture of what an informant of the time would have been like. He committed what Martin Amis, quoting Solzhenitsyn, referred to as "murder by slander."[30] He explains that Russia has had a long history of denunciation, "going back at least as far as the sixteenth century and the testingly protracted reign of Ivan the Terrible. 'Spy or die' was, more or less, the oath you swore."[31] Rusanov is so certain of his convictions that he even has an argument to justify why he has all the personal objects he possesses:[32] "These weren't mere trifles, they were part of one's daily life and being, and 'Being determines consciousness.' A man's life had to be good and pleasant to give him the right kind of consciousness. To quote the words of Gorky, 'A healthy mind in a healthy body'" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 377).

Kostoglotov and Rusanov engage in a fierce argument about the notion of "bourgeois mentality" at a key point in the novel. Kostoglotov maintains that there is no such thing as

[28] Muchnic, '"Cancer Ward": Of Fate and Guilt', p. 278
[29] Ibid., p. 280
[30] Amis, *Koba the Dread*, p. 142
[31] Ibid.
[32] In light of the fact that communism, in theory, denounced collecting material wealth.

"bourgeois mentality," stating: "What else? Why, it's human greed, that's what it is, not bourgeois mentality. There were greedy people *before* the bourgeoisie and there'll be greedy people *after* the bourgeoisie" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 408). This comment angers Rusanov precisely because Kostoglotov is calling into question the validity of the tenets held by Soviet Communism. Kostoglotov goes on to further infuriate Rusanov when he suggests that the whole idea of people's "social origins" is mere propaganda, a lot of "nonsense that's been stuffed into [their] head[s]," and that it is, in fact, not Marxism, but "racism" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 408 – 409). Rusanov immediately accuses him of committing "ideological sabotage." Kostoglotov's response illustrates Solzhenitsyn's sentiments in relation to this matter:

> "Go and fuck yourself, you and your ideological sabotage! A fine habit you've developed, you mother-fucker. Every time someone disagrees with you, you call it ideological sabotage!" […] Now Kostoglotov was yelling so loudly his words could be heard by the whole ward, even in the corridor: "Why do you keep cackling on about social origins like a witch doctor? You know what they used to say in the twenties? 'Show us your calluses! Why are your hands so white and puffy?' Now that *was* Marxism!" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 409).

He goes on to defend his own social position as a worker in society:

> "All right, maybe I *am* the son of a merchant, third class, but I've sweated blood all my life. Here, look at the calluses on my hands! So what am I? Am I bourgeois? Did my father give me a different sort of red or white corpuscles in my blood? That's why I tell you yours isn't a class attitude but a racial attitude. You're a racist!" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 409 – 410).

This episode foregrounds debates around the whole issue of the validity of Leninist-Marxism. As is the case with the entire novel, Kostoglotov's arguments are, "one huge macrodialogue with the ideology that is essentially monologic and intolerant of any form of ideological dissent" (Krasnov, 1980: 158). He is a crucial character not simply because he is moulded from highly biographical material, but also because he, as Muchnic holds, "incites men to question their assumptions and now and then succeeds in showing them what they really are."[33]

Aside from Kostoglotov and Rusanov, there are other "rebels" and "bureaucrats" present in the novel. As I illustrate later in this chapter, the character Aleksei Filippovich Shulubin also questions key tenets of the Stalinist state in order to reveal its "true" nature. The character

[33] Muchnic, '"Cancer Ward": Of Fate and Guilt', p. 278

Yefrem Podduyev, a former overseer, begins to read Lev Tolstoy in his days at the cancer ward and experiences a reawakening of his conscience. As Lamont highlights, Podduyev "is the typical modern Russian, the uprooted Soviet man adrift in this epoch of the broken chain of history."[34] He is presented as a rather distasteful character at the beginning of the novel. Having realised that he has cancer, he cannot suffer alone and therefore feels the need to "push it home to all his neighbours in the ward that they [have] cancer too," to emphasise that "no one would ever escape, that they would all come back in the end" (Solzhenitsyn 1991: 98 – 99). However, the moment he picks up Tolstoy's *What Men Live By*, his manner and mindset changes. His role then, I argue, is to provide a platform for a discussion of this central question – "What do men live by?" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 102). His choice of literature sparks yet another debate between Kostoglotov and Rusanov. Rusanov believes that it is inappropriate for Podduyev to be reading Tolstoy, to which Kostoglotov replies:

> "But with my limited intelligence I understand that Lenin only attacked Leo Tolstoy for seeking moral perfection when it led society away from the struggle with arbitrary rule and from the approaching revolution. Fine! But why try to stop a man's mouth" – he pointed with both his large hands to Podduyev – "just when he has started to think about the meaning of life, when he himself is on the borderline between life and death? Why should it irritate you so much if he helps himself by reading Tolstoy? What harm does it do?" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 139).

Once again, Solzhenitsyn was addressing the issue of censorship. At the same time, he was presenting one of his main concerns in the novel, that of the argument concerning life and death. Rusanov suggests that Podduyev should be reading a Soviet writer by the name of Nikolai Ostrovsky whose most important character was still trying to be of use to the Party even as he lay dying. Kostoglotov's response is fundamental to the argument that Solzhenitsyn was making: "Why stop a man from thinking? After all, what does our philosophy of life boil down to? 'Oh, life is so good!…Life, I love you. Life is for happiness!' What profound sentiments. Any animal can say as much without our help, any hen, cat, or dog" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 140). This is a crucial conversation as it suggests there should be far more to life than the superficiality that was being promoted by the Stalinist regime. In an attempt to understand the question, "What do men live by?" Podduyev goes around the ward posing it to the other patients. He receives a variety of responses, including answers like, "Their rations. Uniform and supplies" (Ahmadjan); "In the first place, air. Then

[34] Lamont, 'Solzhenitsyn's Nationalism', p. 101

– water. Then food" (Dyomka); "Professional skill" (Proshka); "Your homeland" (Sibgatov), among others (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 105). Rusanov's response to the question is very predictable: "Remember: people live by their ideological principles and by the interests of their society" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 106). Tolstoy's novel itself suggests that love is precisely what men live by. For Solzhenitsyn this was crucial, as maintaining one's humanity would only be possible if and when people could sincerely love a fellow person. This idea of the "love of a man" is reminiscent of an extract from Albert Camus' *The Rebel*:

> He who loves his friend loves him in the present, and the revolution wants to love only a man who has not yet appeared. To love is, in a certain way, to kill the perfect man who is going to be born of the revolution. In order that one day he may live, he should from now on be preferred to anyone else. In the kingdom of humanity, men are bound by ties of affection; in the Empire of objects, men are united by mutual accusation. The city that planned to be the city of fraternity becomes an ant-heap of "solitary men."[35]

This is a remarkable comment in that the main concern of the Soviet state was the "perfect man who has not yet appeared." It is reminiscent of Socialist Realist literature in that it was concerned with what was yet to be rather than what already was. Ironically, in the setting of the Soviet state, the individual is destroyed and yet, at the same time, each person is an individual, a solitary one, who does not have any real "ties of affection." An isolated man or woman is easier to subdue. Stephen Carter points out that Solzhenitsyn firmly believed that "all individuals have an ultimate value in themselves," and he rejected the idea that "any materialist philosophy or any collective ethic can answer this final problem for the individual."[36] He adds that "modern society may try to forget about death […] but as the sudden danger of mortal illness strikes […] this confirms the opinion that 'modern man is helpless when confronted with death.'"[37]

Another character who epitomises the role of the bureaucrat is the head of the clinic, Nizamutdin Bahramovich, who is absent for most of the novel. He is responsible for the bureaucracy of the hospital and his opinion of himself reveals much about how many doctors in important positions at the time were mere puppets of the regime:

> The senior doctor viewed his position not as an unremitting, exhausting job, but as a constant opportunity to parade himself, to

[35] Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. by Anthony Bower (London: Vintage Books, 1984), p. 239
[36] Carter, *The Politics of Solzhenitsyn*, p. 64
[37] Ibid.

> gain rewards and a whole range of special privileges. "Senior doctor" was his title, and he believed that the name really made him the most important doctor, that he knew more than the rest of the doctors (well, not perhaps down to the last detail), that he was fully aware of every treatment his subordinates were administering and that only his guidance and corrections prevented them from making mistakes. This was why he had to spend so long presiding over his five-minute conferences, although of course everyone else seemed to enjoy them well enough. The privileges of the senior doctor were fortunately much greater than his duties, which meant he need not be over-particular about choosing administrative personnel, doctors or nurses to come and work in his clinic. He could hire people recommended by telephone calls from the regional health services or the city Party committee or the medical college where he hoped soon to be submitting his thesis, or people he'd promise to take in some moment of dinnertime bonhomie, or members of the same branch of his own ancient clan. Then when the heads of departments came and complained about some new man who knew nothing and was thoroughly incapable, Nizamutdin Bahramovich would be even more surprised than they were. "Well, teach them, comrades," he'd say. "What do you think you're here for?" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 357).

This extract emphasises the nepotistic nature of Soviet bureaucracy. George Saunders explains that bureaucrats such as Bahramovich should be likened to "a parasitic tumour" because this "malignant growth hampers and distorts Soviet life without changing the class of society."[38] To probe this key point further, it may be useful to employ a comment made by Trotsky about the bureaucracy of the state:

> The bureaucracy taken as a whole is concerned not so much with its function as with the tribute which this function brings in. The commanding caste tries to strengthen and perpetuate the organs of compulsion. To make sure of its power and income, it spares nothing and nobody. The more the course of development goes against it, the more ruthless it becomes toward the advanced elements of the population.[39]

According to Trotsky then, the bureaucratic Soviet state was merely concerned with power and wealth, and had no empathy for the "people." Rusanov is an example of such a state bureaucrat whose only desire was power and wealth, as well as being responsible for many (wrongful) arrests and even executions. Rusanov's defence of his actions illustrates the way many bureaucrats might have thought at the time:

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[38] George Saunders, *Rebels and Bureaucrats: Soviet Conflicts as Seen in Solzhenitsyn's "Cancer Ward"* (New York: Merit Publishers, 1969), p. 5

[39] Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed: What is the Soviet Union and Where is it Going?*, ed. by Saurobijay Sarkar (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2006), p. 258

> "I have not been the one to pronounce sentence. Nor have I conducted investigations. I have only signalled my suspicions. If I found a scrap of newspaper in a public lavatory with a torn-up photograph of the Leader, it was my duty to pick it up and signal it. It's the investigator's job to check it out. It may have been a coincidence or it may not. The investigating organs are there to discover the truth. All I did was carry out my duty as a citizen." This is what he would tell them: "All these years it has been vital to make society healthy, morally healthy. This can't be done without purging society, and a purge can't be conducted without men who aren't squeamish about using a dung shovel!" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 217).

In this way, Rusanov shifts his blame and refuses to accept it. As many commentators have noted, this was something that would become common practice in the Soviet Union.

## The Cancerous Patient and the Role of the Doctor

*"A cancer is a melancolye impostume, eatynge partes of the bodye."*

Thomas Paynell (1528)[40]

Susan Sontag explained that disease, in literature and the arts, has often been romanticised, owing to an established view that "illness exacerbates consciousness."[41] To substantiate her argument, she provided an example from history, explaining how, for the Ancient Greeks, "disease could be gratuitous or it could be deserved (for a personal fault, a collective transgression, or a crime of one's ancestors)."[42] Then, with the "advent of Christianity, which imposed more moralised notions of disease, as of everything else, a closer fit between disease and 'victim' gradually evolved. The idea of disease as punishment yielded the idea that a disease could be a particularly appropriate and just punishment."[43] In writing *Cancer Ward*, Solzhenitsyn was writing against this grain. In chapter one of the novel, titled "No Cancer Whatsoever," the reader is first introduced to the all-encompassing fear that accompanies the realisation that one has cancer. Rusanov's arrival at the clinic in Tashkent is used to illustrate this:

> Beginning with these slovenly dressing gowns, Pavel Nikolayevich found everything in the place unpleasant: the path worn by countless

[40] As quoted by Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, p. 10
[41] Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, pp. 31-36
[42] Ibid., p. 43
[43] Ibid.

> pairs of feet on the cement floor of the porch; the dull doorknobs, all messed about by the patients' hands; the waiting room, paint peeling off its floor, its high olive-coloured walls (olive seemed somehow such a dirty colour), and its large slatted wooden benches with not enough room for all the patients. Many of them had come long distances and had to sit on the floor. There were Uzbeks in quilted, wadded coats, old Uzbek women in long white shawls and young women in lilac, red and green ones, and all wore high boots with rubbers. One Russian youth, thin as a rail but with a great bloated stomach, lay there in an unbuttoned coat which dangled to the floor, taking up a whole bench to himself. He screamed incessantly with pain. His screams deafened Pavel Nikolayevich and hurt him so much that it seemed the boy was not screaming with his own pain but with Rusanov's. Pavel Nikolayevich went white around the mouth, stopped dead and whispered to his wife, "Kapa, I'll die here. I mustn't stay. Let's go back" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 2).

As Sontag maintained, as "long as a particular disease is treated as an evil, invincible predator, not just as a disease, most people with cancer will indeed be demoralised by learning what disease they have."[44] As the member of the Secretariat of the Soviet Writers' Union explained to Solzhenitsyn at their meeting in 1969, "the dread of cancer [is] a phobia that is already widespread in our century."[45] Throughout the novel, cancer is portrayed precisely as a dread disease, an insidious thing that silently infiltrates one's life until it is almost too late. Solzhenitsyn painted a terrifying picture of cancer, yet he did not exaggerate or fabricate his writing of the disease. As he argued in front of the Secretariat, he had properly researched cancer before writing the novel.

One striking example of the effects of cancer is shown in the case of the character Shulubin. Shulubin is suffering from what may well be considered the most humiliating of cancers – rectal cancer. As he explains to Kostoglotov:

> "Whatever you say there's cancer and cancer," Shulubin declared, looking straight ahead of him instead of at Oleg. "There's one kind of cancer beats all others. However miserable one is, there's always someone worse off. Mine's the sort of case you can't even discuss with other people, you can't ask their advice about it." [Kostoglotov] "Mine's the same, I think." "No, mine's worse, whichever way you look at it. My disease is something specially humiliating, specially offensive. The consequences are terrible. If I live – and that's a very big if – simply standing or sitting near me, like you are now, for instance, will be unpleasant. Everyone will do their best to keep two steps away. Even if anyone comes closer I'll still be thinking to

[44] Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, p. 7
[45] Thomas, *Alexander Solzhenitsyn,* p.326

> myself, 'You see, he can hardly stand it, he's cursing me.' It means I'll lose the company of human beings" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 436).

The reader is struck by the dehumanising nature of the disease, and, as Sontag explained, the "language used to describe cancer evokes [an image of] unregulated, abnormal, incoherent growth," and, interestingly, it is the tumour that "has energy, not the patient," because "'it' is out of control."[46]

Another example of the life of a cancer patient is given by Kostoglotov. In his letter to the Kadmins, a family which has befriended him in exile, he reveals a great deal about the inner workings of a cancer patient's mind. At one point in the letter he explains to them how being in the cancer ward is making him feel:

> So this is the life I've lived for five weeks in the cancer ward. There are moments when it seems I am back again in my former life. And there is no end to it. The most depressing thing is that I have no fixed term, I am in "at the pleasure of the state." (And the *komendatura*, you remember, gave me permission for only three weeks, so strictly speaking I'm already overdue and they could put me on trial for trying to escape.) They don't say a thing about when they are going to discharge me, they make no promises. Of course their medical instructions make them squeeze the patient of everything that can be squeezed, and they will not let him go till his blood can't take any more (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 296).

Here the reader is given insight into the life of not only a cancer patient, but also one who has first gone through the labour camp system. It becomes clear then that Kostoglotov is indeed a biographical character, representing what Solzhenitsyn himself had experienced.

Whilst Solzhenitsyn was interested in portraying the lives of cancer patients in a hospital in Tashkent, he was still very much concerned with issues of humanity and the nature of truth. In the space of the cancer ward the question of truth is a crucial one. There was almost a standard practice in place of not telling the patient everything about his or her disease, as the medical fraternity felt that those who were not knowledgeable about treatments and associated issues did not need to know the details. Whether it was in a labour camp or a hospital, the truth was, for Solzhenitsyn, something that each individual person deserved to know precisely because the lack of truth provided the conditions for oppression and suppression to flourish. Perhaps one of the most illuminating comments on this matter is given by Kostoglotov when he laments:

[46] Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, pp. 62-63

> "You see, you start from a completely false position. No sooner does a patient come to you than you begin to do all his thinking for him. After that, the thinking's done by your standing orders, your five-minute conferences, your program, your plan and the honour of your medical department. And once again I become a grain of sand, just as I was in the camp. Once again nothing depends on me" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 76).

What strikes the reader about this quotation is the obvious reference to the forced labour camps. Here, Solzhenitsyn wanted to emphasise that doctors acted just like other officials of the USSR, reliant upon their secrecy and lies. This is seen from the very beginning of the novel, when Rusanov first arrives at the hospital in Tashkent, frantically asking, "It isn't, it isn't cancer, is it, Doctor? I haven't got cancer?" to which Doctor Dontsova replies, "Good heavens, no. Of course not" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 1). This is an obvious lie. Once again the power is taken away from the victim who is rendered helpless. However Kostoglotov, like Solzhenitsyn himself, is not satisfied with simply trusting a doctor's word, and questions everything before accepting it as truth. As he explains to Rusanov:

> "There was this philosopher Descartes. He said, 'Suspect everything.'" "But that's nothing to do with our way of life," Rusanov reminded him, raising a finger in admonition. "No, of course it isn't," said Kostoglotov, utterly amazed by the objection. "All I mean is that we shouldn't behave like rabbits and put our complete trust in doctors. For instance, I'm reading this book." He picked up a large, open book from the window sill. "Abrikosov and Stryukov, *Pathological Anatomy*, medical school textbook. It says here that the link between the development of tumours and the central nervous system has so far been very little studied. And this link is an amazing thing! It's written here in so many words." He found the place. "'It happens rarely, but there are cases of self-induced healing.' You see how it's worded? Not recovery through treatment, but actual healing. See?" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 136).

Kostoglotov goes out of his way to gain as much information about his disease as possible. The patients themselves, however, are for the most part also complicit in the lies. They do not want to accept the reality of the situation and find it easier to simply believe what the doctors tell them is the truth. Once again it becomes a matter of complicity; people were so conditioned to comply with and be complicit in the state's ideology that it infiltrated every aspect of an individual's life. For example, Rusanov is adept at lying to himself:

> The day before, Pavel Nikolayevich had had his twelfth injection. He was now used to these injections and could take them without going into delirium, but he kept getting headaches and felt generally weaker. The main thing that had emerged was that there was no

> danger of his dying. Of course, the whole thing had been no more than a family panic. Half his tumour had already disappeared, while the part that remained straddling his neck had softened so that, although it still got in his way, it was not as bad as before. His head had recovered its freedom of movement. The only thing left was the weakness, and one can put up with weakness, there's even something agreeable about it – just lying there and reading, reading *Ogonyok* and *Krokodil*,[47] taking tonics and choosing some tasty thing he felt like eating (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 307).

Solzhenitsyn was not only offering the reader insights from the patients' perspectives. Holding true to the tenets of polyphony, he also provided the point of view from the doctors' side. For example, the head of radiotherapy, Doctor Dontsova is initially confident about her role as an oncologist: "She was there to save life, no more and no less. In their clinic it was nearly always life that was at stake, nothing less than that. Ludmila Afanasyevna was unshakably convinced that any damage to the body was justified if it saved a life" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 87 – 88). However, perhaps because she herself contracts cancer as a result of years of exposure to radiation, she becomes less sure of her convictions, and begins to question her position: "Was it possible? Could the question arise of a doctor's *right* to treat? Once you began to think like that, to doubt every method scientifically accepted today simply because it might be discredited or abandoned in the future, then goodness knows where you'd end up" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 90). Despite her uncertainty, she still does not tell her patients the complete truth, and continues to mislead them in their diagnoses.

Having had the experience of going through the labour camps, Kostoglotov knows enough to realise that he must question everything the doctors tell him. Because of this, he discovers that the hormone therapy which the doctors want to put him through would negatively affect his virility and rob him of the life of "a man":

> Looking up at the ceiling, he began slowly thinking aloud: "If my life is totally lost, if I can feel in my bones the memory that I'm a prisoner in perpetuity, a perpetual 'con,' if Fate holds out no better prospect, if the only expectation I have is being consciously and artificially killed – then why bother to save such a life?" Vega heard everything, but she was offstage. Perhaps it was better this way, it was easier to speak. "First my own life was taken from me, and now I'm being deprived even of the right […] to perpetuate myself. I'll be the worst sort of cripple! What use will I be to anyone? An object of men's pity – or charity?..." Vega said nothing. The patch on the ceiling – from time to time it seemed to quiver, to contract at the

[47] Translator's note: "*Ogonyok* is a Soviet illustrated weekly magazine; *Krokodil* is the leading Soviet satirical and cartoon journal."

> edges. It was as if a frown was passing over it, as if it too was thinking but couldn't understand. Then it would become motionless once more (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 337).

Kostoglotov's tirade highlights the issue of the "quality" of life and raises the question of whether it is simply enough to *live*, to be alive, or whether life should be more than that to really have any meaning. This is a crucial point for Kostoglotov because, as Brown points out, when they are "deprived of women, men are also deprived of humanity, of human warmth and human dialogue, and this is the tragic fate of Kostoglotov […] who has the grim choice of death by cancer, or emasculation by the hormone he must take to cure the cancer."[48] This is also a fundamental issue because, as Walker explains, there are "two different interpretations about the nature of man [in the novel]: either man is a creature of dignity, of individual worth who is capable of making his own choices in the complexity of life, or he is a simple animal, a cog in the machinery, a creature too stupid to make his own decisions and therefore in need of easy formulas, labels, instruction from 'gods' to show him how to live and act."[49]

Although cancer is not exactly a metaphor for something else in the novel, Solzhenitsyn did offer up a different metaphor of illness; that of leprosy. Rusanov believes that cancer is the worst possible thing that can befall a human being, but Kostoglotov opposes this saying: "What's worse than cancer? Leprosy" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 150). He goes on to explain why this is the case, "It's worse because they banish you from the world while you are still alive. They tear you from your family and put you behind barbed wire. You think that's any easier to take than a tumour?" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 150). As Sontag explained, in "the Middle Ages, the leper was a social text in which corruption was made visible; an exemplum, an emblem of decay."[50] Foucault too discussed the issue of the leper, explaining that whilst leprosy disappeared, the structures of confinement remained, and that often, "in these same places, the formulas of exclusion would be repeated."[51] In this particular case, Solzhenitsyn was highlighting the fact that political prisoners were treated as though they were suffering from leprosy, pariahs of Soviet society, and therefore "real" physical disease, such as cancer, was nothing compared to the kind of social (mental) suffering which the *zeks* had to endure.

The most crucial thing for Solzhenitsyn was that each person thinks *for him-/herself* and that one is not simply, blindly following the masses. After Shulubin's operation, Kostoglotov pays

[48] Brown, *Major Soviet Writers*, p. 359
[49] Walker, 'Solzhenitsyn's "Cancer Ward": An Introductory Study', p. 38
[50] Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, p. 58
[51] Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (Oxon: Routledge, 2005), p. 5

him a visit. Shulubin's dishevelled state initially shocks him. However, it is here that Solzhenitsyn explores the core question of the soul:

> "Not all of me shall die," Shulubin whispered. "Not all of me shall die."[52] He must be delirious. Kostoglotov groped for the man's hot hand lying on the blanket. He pressed it lightly. "Aleksei Filippovich," he said, "you're going to live! Hang on, Aleksei Filippovich!" "There's a fragment, isn't there?...Just a tiny fragment," he kept whispering. It was then it struck Oleg that Shulubin was not delirious, that he'd recognised him and was reminding him of their last conversation before the operation. He had said, "Sometimes I feel quite distinctly that what is inside me is not all of me. There's something else, sublime, quite indestructible, some tiny fragment of the universal spirit. Don't you feel that?" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 485 – 486).

Here, an extract from *Doctor Zhivago* asserts the point Solzhenitsyn was trying to make through Shulubin's words:

> "So, what will happen to your consciousness? *Your* consciousness, yours, not anyone else's. Well, what are *you*? That's the crux of the matter. Let's try to find out. What is it about you that you have always known as yourself? What are you conscious of in yourself? Your kidneys? Your liver? Your blood vessels? – No. However far back you go in your memory, it is always in some external, active manifestation of yourself that you come across your identity – in the work of your hands, in your family, in other people. And now look. You in others are yourself, your soul. This is what you are. This is what your consciousness has breathed and lived on and enjoyed throughout your life […]. And what now? You have always been in others and you will remain in others. And what does it matter to you if later on it is called your memory? This will be you – the you that enters the future and becomes a part of it."[53]

This resonates with Solzhenitsyn's thoughts about the soul and consciousness. It is also a vital indicator of how he felt about the issue of memorialisation. The memory of a person was very important to Solzhenitsyn precisely because it validated the role of the individual in the world. For even one individual to pass from the world without being remembered (as is the case now in Russia, with many people who perished as a result of the Communist regime being forgotten by society – see Satter (2012)), was for Solzhenitsyn the greatest of tragedies and undermined one's humanity. As he states in his dedication in *The Gulag Archipelago*: "I

[52] Extract from a Pushkin poem.
[53] Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, p.427

dedicate this to all those who did not live to tell it. And may they please forgive me for not having seen it all nor remembered it all, for not having divined all of it."

## The Role of Literature

As a result of Solzhenitsyn's great concern with the debates surrounding the role of literature, it is once again introduced in *Cancer Ward*. The issue is brought up when Rusanov's daughter, Aviette, shows him her published bundle of poems with her name typed in bold on the frontispiece. Although very proud, Rusanov is concerned for Aviette as he is well aware, quite ironically, that the world of literature in the Soviet Union is extremely hazardous. He cautions her, stating: "But have you considered this? The critics may start in on you. You know, in our world criticism is a kind of social reproach, it's dangerous!" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 286). The idea of "social reproach" as dangerous is an important consideration under Stalinism, where one's safety depended largely on one remaining anonymous, in the shadows. Aviette, however, reassures him, saying:

> "The fact is," [Aviette] said, "they'll never be able to criticise me *very* seriously because there'll be no ideological mistakes in my work. If they attack me from the artistic point of view – well, heavens alive, who *don't* they attack for that? Take the case of Babayevski. At first everyone loved him, then everybody hated him, they all renounced him, even the most faithful friends. But that's only a temporary phase: they'll change their minds, they'll come back to him. It's just one of those delicate transitions life's so full of. For instance, they used to say, 'There must be no conflict.' But now they talk about 'the false theory of absence of conflict.' If there was a division of opinion, if some people were still talking the old way while others were using the new style, then it would be obvious that there had been a change. But when *everyone* starts talking the new way all at once, you don't notice there's been a transition at all. What I say is, the vital thing is to have tact and be responsive to the times. Then you won't get into trouble with the critics […]" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 286).

Aviette's comments here illustrate the nature not only of the workings of Soviet literature, but also the nature of Soviet ideology in general. One is struck in particular by her comment explaining "they used to say, 'There must be no conflict,'" but now "they talk about 'the false theory of absence of conflict.'" Here Solzhenitsyn was specifically highlighting how Soviet ideology was not clear-cut or unified. As Arendt explained, Stalin "held out promises of

stability in order to hide [his] intention of creating a state of permanent instability" (Arendt, 1967: 391). She went on to explain that the totalitarian ruler

> is confronted with a dual task which at first appears contradictory to the point of absurdity: he must establish the fictitious world of the movement as a tangible working reality of everyday life, and he must, on the other hand, prevent this new world from developing a new stability; for a stabilisation of its laws and institutions would surely liquidate the movement itself and with it the hope for eventual world conquest (Arendt, 1967: 391).

This is seen in particular with regards to the role that literature had to play in the Soviet world. It is the character Dyomka, a young student who is afflicted with cancer in his leg, who raises an important point in this regard when he asks Aviette, "[Can] you tell me, please, what you think about the need for sincerity in literature?" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 288). This question initiates a significant conversation in the novel, thereby highlighting an important matter for Solzhenitsyn. Once again Aviette takes up the role of promoter and defender of the Soviet state:

> "Listen, my boy," she announced in powerful, ringing tones, as though speaking from a platform. "Sincerity can't be the chief criterion for judging a book. If an author expresses incorrect ideas or alien attitudes, the fact that he's sincere about them merely increases the harm the work does. Sincerity becomes *harmful*. Subjective sincerity can militate against a truthful presentation of life. That's a diabolical point" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 288).

The above extract suggests a clear critique of the way in which the Soviet state treated literature. Dyomka, however, does not understand this, so Aviette continues to explain to him: "It's the easiest thing in the world to take some depressing fact and describe it just as it is. What one should do, though, is plough deep to reveal the seedlings which are the plants of the future. Otherwise they can't be seen" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 288). Dyomka is rather confounded by the metaphor of seedlings, voicing his concern in the following terms: "'Seedlings have to sprout by themselves.'" Dyomka hurried to get his word in. 'If you plough seedlings over, they won't grow'" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 288).

Aviette's final response to him contains what may be considered the crux of Soviet state orthodox ideology:

> "Yes, I know, but we're not talking about agriculture, my boy, are we? Telling the people the truth doesn't mean telling them the bad things, harping on our shortcomings. On the other hand, one may

> describe the good things quite fearlessly, so as to make them even better. Where does this false demand for so-called harsh truth come from? Why does truth suddenly have to be harsh? Why can't it be radiant, uplifting, optimistic? Our literature ought to be wholly festive. When you think about it, it's an insult to people to write gloomily about their life. They want life to be decorated and embellished" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 288 – 289).

This point of Aviette's, holding that telling people the truth "doesn't mean telling them the bad things," is exactly why Solzhenitsyn was opposed to Soviet Socialist literature. For him, literature was about providing the *whole* truth and nothing less than that. The picture of the "happy worker" or the "contented Communist" was exactly what Soviet Socialist Realism required its authors to create, or rather, to re-create. When the geologist Vadim asks the question, "What exactly is literature for?" it is Dyomka's response that echoes the author's sentiments: "Literature is the teacher of life" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 289). For Solzhenitsyn, literature was the "teacher of life" precisely because its primary role was to represent the truth and question society. It is interesting to note that earlier in the novel the reader comes to see the problematic nature of Soviet literature through Dyomka's eyes. He is thinking about which authors he should be reading, becoming quite anxious in the process:

> Dyomka was rather frightened at the thought of how many writers there were. In the last century there had been about ten, all of them great. In this century there were thousands; you only had to change a letter in one of their names and you had a new writer. There was Safronov and there was Safonov, more than one Safonov apparently. And was there only one Safronov? No one could have time to read all their books, and when you did read one, it was as if you might just as well not have done. Completely unknown writers floated to the surface, won Stalin prizes, then sank back forever. Nearly every book of any size got a prize the year after it appeared. Forty or fifty prizes popped up every year (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 122).

Here, Solzhenitsyn makes the rather ironic point that there were so many authors vying for Stalin's attention that a large number of books were being written. However, and unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of these books were simply of a propagandistic nature and contributed nothing positive or truly valuable to the literary history of the USSR. Vadim, however, vehemently disagrees with Dyomka's view that literature has any sort of didactic function. He protests: "We manage somehow to sort our lives out all right without it. You're not implying that writers are any cleverer than us practical workers, are you?" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 289). He adds that the "role of literature in life is greatly exaggerated" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 289). In Aviette's concluding remarks on the matter, she once again

echoes a main tenet of Soviet Socialist Realism: "You must understand this. Describing something that exists is much easier than describing something that doesn't exist, even though you know it's going to exist. What we see today with the unaided human eye is not necessarily the truth. The truth is what we *must* be, what is going to happen tomorrow. Our wonderful tomorrow is what writers ought to be describing today" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 290). Once again, it becomes a matter of what is *going to be.* As such, it is a façade of dubious value.

## Bacon's "Idols" and Shulubin's "Ethical Socialism"

Arguably the most controversial conversation in the novel is the extensive one between Kostoglotov and the librarian Aleksei Filippovich Shulubin. This dialogue engages with several contentious issues, all of which are centred on the problem of Stalinism. Shulubin is an intriguing character in that he is, as Saunders explains, a "pre-1917 rank-and-file Bolshevik who as a party activist in the thirties went along with the majority, acquiescing in the purges and the show trials."[54] In addition, as Krasnov holds, he "epitomises the surrender of Soviet intelligentsia to the demands of the totalitarian state" (Krasnov, 1980: 149). The period known as the "Great Purge"[55] occurred between 1936 and 1938, and involved the arrest, show trials, and, in many cases, subsequent executions of those Party members Stalin deemed untrustworthy, Trotskyite, or (his favourite designation) *counterrevolutionary*. David Satter explains that the "meat grinder of arrests and executions was fed by denunciations," as people who were afraid "for their own lives inundated the authorities with false reports of wrecking, spying, and sabotage" (Satter, 2012: 81). He adds that at "every workplace, there were meetings to denounce Trotskyites, wreckers, and counterrevolutionaries" (Satter, 2012: 81). Amis holds that Stalin was following Lenin who "*had* purged the Party, and approved of purges"; however, Lenin's version of the purges had been "a paper purge, a 'quiet' terror, dealing only in expulsions."[56] Stalin, by contrast, revered the use of terror and, requiring some form of justification to inflict it, promoted the idea that he was perpetuating Marxist-Leninism in adherence to Lenin's teachings. Robert C. Tucker elaborates on this: "After 1917, when membership in what was now a ruling party grew attractive to careerists and the like, Lenin looked to the purge as a means of weeding out such people […] and on one occasion he even

[54] Saunders, *Rebels and Bureaucrats*, p. 27
[55] Also referred to as the "Great Terror," this period derives its name from the "Reign of Terror" during the French Revolution.
[56] Amis, *Koba the Dread*, p. 166

called for a 'purge of terrorist character' – specifically, summary trial and shooting – for 'former officials, landlords, bourgeois and other scum who have attached themselves to the Communists […].'"[57] Amis explains that such words appealed to Stalin, who stated the following to those Party members lucky enough not to be "destroyed": "Our party is a living organism. Like every organism, it undergoes a process of metabolism: the old and outworn moves out; the new and growing lives and develops."[58] Satter highlights the horrific nature of the Great Terror in the following terms:

> By the time the Great Terror was over, more than forty thousand persons had been murdered in the Leningrad oblast, which at the time included the territory of the current Pskov, Novgorod, and Murmansk oblasts, as well as part of the Vologda oblast. Originally, the NKVD[59] planned to shoot four thousand persons and send ten thousand to labour camps. But prisoners under torture named others including relatives, friends and co-workers. The NKVD then demanded that the quotas be raised. As a result, the number killed exceeded by many times the initial plan (Satter, 2012: 81).

In addition, as Amis points out, the Great Terror "continued until even the temporary prisons, the schools and the churches, were all full, and the courts were sitting twenty-four hours a day."[60] He continues, "It is often said that not a family in the country remained unaffected by the Terror. If so, then the members of those families were also subject to sentence: as members of the family of an enemy of the people. By 1939, it is fair to say," in a rather ironic twist, that "all people were enemies of the people."[61] This is but one example of the senseless killings and terror that occurred.

Part of the discussion between Shulubin and Kostoglotov raises the question of how one compares one's own troubles to those of another person suffering under the Stalinist regime. Solzhenitsyn used this particular part of their conversation to examine the role of the Lie in Stalinist society. Shulubin makes a significant statement, saying, "The people who drown at sea or dig the soil or search for water in the desert don't have the hardest lives. The man with the hardest life is the man who walks out of his house every day and bangs his head against the top of the door because it's too low […]" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 436). Shulubin is here distinguishing between the "innocents," those political prisoners who ended up in the camps

[57] From Robert C Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928 – 1941*, as quoted by Amis, *Koba the Dread*, p. 167
[58] Ibid.
[59] One of the many names of the Cheka, the Soviet secret police.
[60] Amis, *Koba the Dread*, p. 177
[61] Ibid., p. 178

and those "ordinary" Soviet citizens who, for the most part, were aware that the charges against the "enemies of the people" were arbitrary and false, but were too terrified and intimidated (and perhaps even too indoctrinated) to be other than complicit. Shulubin then continues to explain to Kostoglotov why his and not Kostoglotov's life thus far has been the worst owing to his participation in the Lie:

> "You haven't had to do much lying, do you understand? At least you haven't had to stoop so low – you should appreciate that! You people were arrested, but we were herded into meetings to 'expose' you. They executed people like you, but they made us stand up and applaud the verdicts as they were announced. And not just applaud, they made us demand the firing squad, *demand* it! Do you remember what they used to write in the papers? 'As one man the whole Soviet nation arose in indignation on hearings of the unprecedented, heinous crimes of…' Do you know what 'as one man' meant for us? We were individual human beings, and then suddenly we were 'as one man'! When we applauded we had to hold our big strong hands in the air so that those around us and those on the platform would notice. Because who doesn't want to live? Who ever came out in your defence? Who ever objected? Where are they now? I knew one – Dima Olitsky – he abstained. He wasn't opposed, good heavens no! He *abstained* on the vote to shoot the Industrial Party members. 'Explain!' they shouted. 'Explain!' He stood up, his throat was dry as a bone. 'I believe,' he said, 'that in the twelfth year of the Revolution we should be able to find alternative methods of repression…' Aaah, the scoundrel! Accomplice! Enemy agent! The next morning he got a summons to the GPU[62], and there he stayed for the rest of his life" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 436 – 437).

Here, one may return to Arendt's examination of the totalitarian state. The idea of the Soviet nation "as one man" fits into what Arendt had to say about such an entity: "Totalitarian movements are mass organisations of atomised, isolated individuals. […] their most conspicuous external characteristic is their demand for total, unrestricted, unconditional, and unaltered loyalty of the individual member," and, such loyalty "can be expected only from the completely isolated human being who, without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades, or even mere acquaintances, derives his sense of having a place in the world only from his belonging to a movement, his membership in the party" (Arendt, 1967: 323-324). This definition applies to Shulubin in this case as he was an actual Party member. However, as Roy Medvedev explains, perhaps one of "the most terrible features of the repression in the

[62] Yet another name for the Cheka.

thirties was that the masses, trusting the party and Stalin, were drawn into it."[63] He goes on to say that millions "were poisoned by suspicion," and "believed Stalin's story about a ubiquitous underground and were caught up in the spy mania."[64]

However, Shulubin does not accept that people really believed in what the state was doing and that they did not realise what was actually going on. As he rants to Kostoglotov:

> "Suddenly all the professors and all the engineers turn out to be wreckers, and he believes it! The best Civil-War divisional commanders turn out to be German and Japanese spies, and he believes it! The whole of Lenin's old guard is shown up as vile renegades, and he believes it! His own friends and acquaintances are unmasked as enemies of the people, and he believes it! Millions of Russian soldiers turn out to have betrayed their country, and he believes it all! Whole nations, old men and babies, are mown down and he believes it! Then what sort of man is he, may I ask? He's a fool. But can there really be a whole nation of fools? No, you'll have to forgive me. The people are intelligent enough, it's simply that they wanted to live" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 438).

This is precisely the point Solzhenitsyn wished to make: people were so terrified for their lives and the lives of their family members that they were willing to do whatever it took, including sending many others to their deaths. Solzhenitsyn's view was, a Muchnic explains, that all "men are responsible and all are guilty for the tyranny they endure, but most of them are neither conscious of their responsibility nor capable of recognising their guilt."[65] Shulubin goes on to make a crucial and rather horrific point: "When each of us dies and History stands over his grave and asks 'What was he?' there'll be only one possible answer, Pushkin's:

"In our vile times

…Man was, whatever his element,

Either tyrant or traitor or prisoner!" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 438).

Shulubin argues that since he is neither tyrant nor prisoner, he must then be a traitor. It is at this point that Solzhenitsyn displays a wealth of sympathy for Shulubin's character in the form of Kostoglotov's response:

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[63] Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 608
[64] Ibid., p. 609
[65] Muchnic, '"Cancer Ward": Of Fate and Guilt', p. 292

> "No, Aleksei Filippovich, you're wrong, it's too sweeping a condemnation, it's too harsh. In my view, the traitors were those who wrote denunciations or stood up as witnesses. There are millions of them too. One can reckon on one informer for every, let's say, two or three prisoners, right? That means there *are* millions. But to write every single one off as a traitor is much too rash. Pushkin was too rash as well. A storm breaks trees, it only bends grass [sic]. Does this mean that the grass has betrayed the trees? Everyone has his own life. As you said yourself, the law of a nation is to survive" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 439).

The "law of the nation is to survive" is a direct reference to the issue of the "herd instinct," and, terrifyingly, this instinct is perpetuated by the masses themselves. As Arendt put it, the

> totalitarian regimes, so long as they are in power, and the totalitarian leaders, so long as they are alive, "command and rest upon mass support up to the end. […] Stalin could [not] have maintained the leadership of [a] large population, survived many interior and exterior crises, and braved the numerous dangers of relentless intra-party struggles if [he] had not had the confidence of the masses (Arendt, 1967: 306).

Kostoglotov's response provokes further discussion about this concern, and it is at this point that Shulubin enters into an explanation of Francis Bacon's "Idols." He explains to Kostoglotov, "All right, then, let's call it a more refined form of the herd instinct, the fear of remaining alone, *outside the community*. There's nothing new about it. Francis Bacon set out his doctrine of idols back in the sixteenth century. He said people are not inclined to live by pure experience, that it's easier for them to pollute experience with prejudices. These prejudices are the idols" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 439). In his *Novum Organism*, Bacon wrote about "The Four Idols," four human prejudices that influence scientific inquiry.

The essence of Bacon's argument was that he meant for people to question existing theories (or ideologies) using a method of scientific investigation that is completely unbiased. Shulubin's explanation of the "idols of the theatre" and the "idols of the market place" are the ones Solzhenitsyn deemed important in this discussion between the two characters. Shulubin starts by explaining the "idols of the theatre" to Kostoglotov:

> "The idols of the theatre are the authoritative opinions of others which a man likes to accept as a guide when interpreting something he hasn't experienced himself." "Oh, but this happens very often." "But sometimes he actually has experienced it, only it's more convenient not to believe what he's seen." "I've seen cases like that as well…" "Another idol of the theatre is our overwillingness to agree with the arguments of science. One can sum this up as the voluntary

> acceptance of other people's errors." "That's good," said Oleg. He liked the idea very much. "Voluntary acceptance of other people's errors! That's it!" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 440).

Next follows the "idols of the market place":

> "The idols of the market place are the errors which result from the communication and association of men with each other. They are the errors a man commits because it has become customary to use certain phrases and formulas which do violence to reason. For example, 'Enemy of the people!' 'Not one of us!' 'Traitor!' Call a man one of these and everyone will renounce him" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 440).

Shulubin then goes on to explain his position with regards to these "idols":

> "And over all idols there is the sky of fear, the sky of fear overhung with grey clouds. You know how sometimes in the evenings thick low clouds gather, black and grey clouds, even though no storm is approaching? Darkness and gloom descend before their proper time. The whole world makes you feel ill at ease, and all you want to do is to go and hide under the roof in a house made of bricks, skulk close to the fire with your family. I lived twenty-five years under a sky like that. I saved myself only because I bowed low and kept silent. I kept silent for twenty-five years – or maybe it was twenty-eight, count them up yourself. First I kept silent for my wife's sake, then for my children's sake, then for the sake of my own sinful body" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 440 – 441).

Leading up to the discussion of "ethical socialism," which caused so much controversy for Solzhenitsyn with the Soviet Writers' Union, Shulubin goes into an examination of how it was possible for Stalinism to take over the country after the Revolution. In response to the question of how it was even possible for things to turn out the way they did, he explains to Kostoglotov:

> "I wonder, what is the riddle of these changing periods of history? In no more than ten years a whole people loses its social drive and courageous impulse. Or rather, the impulse changes the sign from plus to minus, from bravery to cowardice. You know, I have been a Bolshevik since 1917. I remember how we charged in and dispersed the local council of Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks in Tambov, even though all the weapons we had were a couple of fingers to put in our mouths and whistle with. I fought in the Civil War. You know, we did nothing to protect our lives, we were happy to give them for world revolution. What happened to us? How could we have given in? What was the chief thing that got us down? Fear? The idols of the market place? The idols of the theatre? All right, I'm a 'little man,'

> but what about Nadezhda Konstantinova Krupskaya?[66] Didn't she understand, didn't she realise what was happening? Why didn't she raise her voice? How much a single statement from her would have meant to us all, even if it did cost her her life! Who knows, we might have changed, might have dug our heels in and stopped it from going any farther. Then what about Ordzhonikidze [Translator's note: An old Bolshevik, in charge of industrialisation in the Soviet Union during the thirties, who committed suicide in 1937]? He was a real eagle of a man, wasn't he? They couldn't break him by locking him up in the Shlisselburg fortress or by sending him to hard labour in Siberia. What kept him from speaking up once, just once, against Stalin? But no, they preferred to die in mysterious circumstances or to commit suicide. Is that courage? Will you tell me, please?" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 443).

Shulubin's question is a complicated one. He, however, provides his own answer by referring to one of the Soviet Communist practices, that of teaching schoolchildren "revolutionary" maxims. In this particular scene Shulubin refers to a poem by Georg Herwegh, a German poet who was a friend of Karl Marx. The specific extract from the poem reads as follows: "*Bis unsre Hand in Asche stiebt,*/*Soll sie vom Schwert nicht lassen?*/*Wir haben lang genug geliebt*/*Und woollen endlich hassen!*" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 445). Translated, it reads: "Until our hands turn to ashes,/Shall it let drop the sword?/We have loved long enough;/Now, finally, we wish to hate."[67] Shulubin vehemently opposes the idea that this extract was instilled in students at school, offering an alternative to what should have been taught: "That's right, you learned it at school, that's what's so terrifying. They taught you that poem at school when they should've taught you the opposite: *To hell with your hatred; now, finally, we wish to love!* That's what socialism ought to be like" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 445). This is the beginning of Shulubin's idea of "ethical socialism." Kostoglotov thinks of it as "Christian socialism," but Shulubin opposes this too and responds by saying that it is going too far to

> "[…] call it 'Christian.' There are political parties that called themselves Christian Socialists in societies that emerged from under Hitler and Mussolini, but I can't imagine what kind of people they undertook to build this kind of socialism. At the end of the last century Tolstoy decided to spread practical Christianity through society, but his ideals turned out to be impossible for his contemporaries to live with, his preaching had no link with reality. I should say that for Russia in particular, with our repentances, confessions and revolts, our Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Kropotkin, there's only one true socialism, and that's ethical socialism. That is something completely realistic" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 445).

[66] Lenin's widow.
[67] Translator's note, p. 445

He goes on to explain to Kostoglotov how "ethical socialism" would exist and function in society:

> He spoke very distinctly, like a master giving a lesson. "We have to show the world a society in which all relationships, fundamental principles and laws flow directly from ethics, and from them *alone*. Ethical demands must determine all considerations: how to bring up children, what to train them for, to what end the work of grownups should be directed, and how their leisure should be occupied. As for scientific research, it should only be conducted where it doesn't damage morality, in the first instance where it doesn't damage the researchers themselves. The same should apply to foreign policy. Whenever the question of frontiers arises, we should think not of how much richer and stronger this or that course of action will make us or of how it will raise our prestige. We should consider one criterion only: how far is it ethical?" "Yes, but that's hardly possible, is it – not for another two hundred years?" Kostoglotov frowned. "But wait a moment. I'm not with you on one point. Where is the material basis for your scheme? There has to be an economy, after all, doesn't there? That comes before everything else." "Does it? That depends. For example, Vladimir Soloviev[68] argues rather convincingly that an economy could and should be built on an ethical basis" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 446).

This episode is crucial because, as Krasnov emphasises, Shulubin is "the only man in the novel – and […] the only hero-ideologist in Solzhenitsyn's [early] fiction in general – who seems to offer an alternative to the […] form of socialism [that was present] in the USSR" (Krasnov, 1980: 149). It is important to keep in mind, however, that whilst "ethical socialism" is the only alternative to Soviet Socialism that is offered in Solzhenitsyn's fiction, it is not sanctioned by the author in any way in the novel. It is left up to the reader to decide whether or not it is the appropriate alternative and whether it could really function. What makes this alternative appealing though is that, if it were to be implemented, the primary concern of society would be the well-being of each individual person. There would then be a sense of mutual respect for human life, not as a collective entity, but on an individual basis. Karl Jaspers spoke of this idea of the centrality of the human soul and the importance of love for your fellow man, stating: "There is one point in which man touches the surface of Being itself – which merely appears to us in the form of our world – and that point is man's own freedom. The voice of the individual soul is more than man, more than the visible world. And conscience is fulfilled by love, whose lifelong will brings man to himself."[69] Shulubin makes

[68] Translator's note: A Russian religious thinker (1853-1900) whose ideas are an important influence on modern Russian non-Marxist thought.

[69] Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy and the World*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (Chicago: Regnery, 1963), p. 138

one further, important comment to Kostoglotov: '"So you see," he said, "that's what ethical socialism is. One should never direct people toward happiness, because happiness too is an idol of the market place. One should direct them toward mutual affection. A beast gnawing at its prey can be happy too, but only human beings can feel affection for each other, and this is the highest achievement they can aspire to"' (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 447). The image of a "beast gnawing at its prey" is significant in that it is once more reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno,* where, in the final circle of hell, Dante sees Satan for what he really is, a pathetic beast:

> At six eyes he wept: the tears
> Adown three chins distill'd with bloody foam.
> At every mouth his teeth a sinner champ'd,
> Bruised as with ponderous engine; so that three
> Were in this guise tormented […][70]

Solzhenitsyn was suggesting that by simply following what the state said and never fighting back, one was reduced to a mindless beast.

## Exile in "Ka-*zek*-stan"[71]

On the subject of exile, Solzhenitsyn had the following to say in *The Gulag Archipelago*: "Humanity probably invented exile first and prison later. Expulsion from the tribe was of course exile. We were quick to realise how difficult it is for a man to exist, divorced from his own place, his familiar environment," and described it as "emptiness," "helplessness," as a "life that is no life at all" (Solzhenitsyn, 1974: 421, 422). In addition to dealing with the issue of physical disease, *Cancer Ward* also differs from Solzhenitsyn's other earlier works of fiction in that it offers an in-depth examination of life in exile. Kostoglotov, as a former *zek*, cannot return home after he has lived out his sentence in the labour camps, as Solzhenitsyn explained:

> [At] the end of their sentences 58's, with minor exceptions, were to be *released into exile*. In other words, they were not to be thoughtlessly

[70] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, trans. by Henry F. Cary (Danbury: The Harvard Classics, 1980), Canto XXXIV, p. 141

[71] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918 – 1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, trans. by Thomas P. Whitney and Harry T. Willetts, abridged by Edward E. Ericson (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 438

> unleashed on a country which did not belong to them, but each individual was to be delivered under escort from the camp guardhouse to the commandant's office in an exile colony, from fish trap to fish trap. Since the exile system embraced only certain strictly defined areas, these together constituted yet another separate (though interlocking) country between the USSR and the Archipelago – a sort of purgatory in reverse, from which a man could cross to the Archipelago, but not to the mainland (Solzhenitsyn, 1974: 434).

Solzhenitsyn spoke from experience, having been sent to the Kok Terek (Ush-Terek for Kostoglotov in *Cancer Ward*) district in Kazakhstan after he had served his prison sentence. As Thomas explains, here he was given a brown document to sign, and, "now for the first time he learned officially, though without surprise, that his exile was to be 'in perpetuity.'"[72] It was whilst in exile here, on the 6th of March 1953, that Solzhenitsyn heard of Stalin's demise. In exile, like Kostoglotov, Solzhenitsyn befriended an old married couple, fifty-eight-year-old Nikolai Zubov and his wife, Elena. It was in Kok Terek that Solzhenitsyn was told he was terminally ill. He was later sent to a hospital in Dzhambul and from there transferred to a cancer clinic in Tashkent.

Through Kostoglotov, Solzhenitsyn was able to provide the reader with insight into what life in exile was like for a former political prisoner. In chapter 20, "Memories of Beauty," there is an important description:

> After the camps, the world of exile could not really be called cruel, although here too people fought with buckets to get water during the irrigation season, some of them getting their legs slashed. The world of exile was much more spacious and easier to live in. It had more dimensions. Nevertheless it had its cruel side. It wasn't easy to make a plant take root and to feed it. He had to dodge being sent by the *komendant* a hundred and fifty kilometres or more deeper into the desert. He had to find a straw-and-clay roof to put over his head and pay a landlady, although he had nothing to pay her with. He had to buy his daily bread and whatever he ate in the canteen. He had to find work, but he'd had enough of heaving a pick for the last seven years and didn't feel like taking up a bucket and watering the crops. Although there were women in the village with mud-wall cottages, kitchen gardens and even cows who would have been prepared to take an unmarried exile, he reckoned it was too early to sell himself as a husband. He didn't feel his life was nearly over; on the contrary, it was only beginning (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 265).

[72] Thomas, *Alexander Solzhenitsyn*, p. 215

Former *zeks* were sent into exile with nothing, hardly any money and no help for obtaining employment. As can be seen from the above extract, life in exile was not necessarily easier than life in a labour camp. Exile brought a whole new set of challenges for the former *zek*.

Solzhenitsyn goes on to explain exile through Kostoglotov in the novel:

> Oleg knew, as everyone had known, if not from experience, from books ever since Ovid, that exile was not simply oppressive (you are neither in the place you love best, nor with the people you most want to see), but he also perceived, as few have, that exile can also bring release – from doubts and responsibilities. The true unfortunates were not the exiles, but the ones who had been given passports with the sordid "Article 39" conditions. They spent their time blaming themselves for all the false moves they made, constantly on the move looking for somewhere to live, trying to find work and being thrown out of places. The prisoner, on the other hand, entered exile with all his rights intact. As he hadn't picked the place, no one could throw him out. The authorities had planned it all for him; he had no need to worry about whether he was missing a chance of living somewhere else or whether he ought to look for a better setup. He knew he was treading the only road there was, and this gave him a cheerful sort of courage (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 266).

This extract presents an insightful view on exile; whilst it was another way in which to rob a man of his rights, it was something that Kostoglotov could not change and so had to simply carry on. The point remains that exile was a painful experience; after having gone through all in prison to then be denied returning home was a harsh blow, but now that he is just an exile, Kostoglotov is allowed to "mingle" with those whom he never could while imprisoned. Exile was a particularly painful experience for Solzhenitsyn personally. He suffered greatly even when he was in self-imposed exile in Vermont.

## Conclusion

The final two chapters of *Cancer Ward*, "The First Day of Creation" and "…and the Last Day," reiterate Solzhenitsyn's deepest concerns. After having left the clinic and wandering around the city before returning to Ush-Terek, Kostoglotov enters one of the department stores to see what they are all about. What he sees there shocks him:

> What was this? There were men rotting in trenches, men being thrown into mass graves, into shallow pits in the permafrost, men being taken into the camps for the first, second and third times, men being jolted

> from station to station in prison trucks, wearing themselves out with picks, slaving away to be able to buy a patched-up quilt jacket – and here was this neat little man who could remember the size not only of his shirt but of his collar too! (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 501).

This illustrates the mentality of the majority of Soviet citizens who did not stop to think about those who had died and those who were still suffering at the hands of the Stalinist regime. This is something which Solzhenitsyn found deeply disturbing; it confounded him that people could be so selfishly individualistic and yet follow the state's instructions like beasts of burden. Kostoglotov's visit to the zoo is a fundamental scene in the novel as the zoo is a provocative chronotope in the novel as it can be considered a sort of metaphor for the Soviet state itself. Each animal Kostoglotov comes across has special significance for him. For example, when he studies a grizzly bear in his "cell": "It kept stamping the ground restlessly, longing to walk up and down its cell, but there was only room for it to turn round and round, because the length from wall to wall was no more than three times its own. So, according to a bear's measuring scale, it was a punishment cell" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 508). Kostoglotov likens the animals' living conditions to his own experiences. Another important example is that of the empty monkey house:

> The cage was empty but it had the usual notice reading "Macaque Rhesus." It had been hurriedly scrawled and nailed to the plywood. It said: "The little monkey that used to live here was blinded because of the senseless cruelty of one of the visitors. An evil man threw tobacco in the Macaque Rhesus's eyes." Oleg was dumbstruck. Up to then he had been strolling along, smiling with knowing condescension, but now he felt like yelling and roaring across the whole zoo, as though the tobacco had been thrown into his own eyes, "Why?" Thrown just like that! "Why? It's senseless! Why?" What went straight to his heart was the childish simplicity with which it was written. This unknown man, who had already made a safe getaway, was not described as "anti-humanist," or "an agent of American imperialism"; all it said was that he was evil. This was what was so striking: how could this man be simply "evil"? Children, do not grow up to be evil! Children, do not destroy defenceless creatures! (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 509).

Solzhenitsyn mourned this "senseless cruelty" and found it harrowing. Once again, he was profoundly concerned that those who had perished should not be forgotten.

The final episodes of the novel hint at a potentially brighter future. Because of the looming amnesty, the *komendant* whom Kostoglotov deals with before boarding the train for Ush-Terek is shockingly pleasant and even respectful, as the narrator explains: "[…] in blatant disregard of NKVD rules, he did not ask Oleg his first name and patronymic, but gave them

himself. 'Oleg Filimonovich?' 'Yes.' 'I see. You've been under treatment in the cancer clinic since January 23…' And he lifted his keen, kindly eyes from the paper. 'Well, how did it go? Are you better?' Oleg was genuinely moved; there was even a tightness in his throat. How little was needed. But a few humane men behind these vile desks and life became completely different. He no longer felt constrained" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 521 – 522). This captures another of Solzhenitsyn's key points – all that the world needed was a "few humane men" to make an enormous difference. When the *komendant* informs Kostoglotov that it will be over soon, he is rather confused and does not know what he is talking about: "'What do you mean? These registrations, of course. Your exile. *Komendants* too!' he said with a carefree smile. Obviously he had some more congenial job up his sleeve. 'What is there already […] an instruction?' Oleg hastened to extract the information. 'Not an instruction.' The *komendant* sighed. 'But there are certain signs. I'll tell you straight out, it's going to happen. Get better, and you will soon be going up in the world'" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 522). Significantly, in this quotation Solzhenitsyn was hinting at how difficult the lives of government officials could be. In response to this, the narrator makes a highly revealing comment: "It was long overdue. How could it be otherwise? A man dies from a tumour, so how can a country survive with growths like labour camps and exiles?" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 523).

The final paragraph of the novel is suitably ambivalent. Solzhenitsyn was deeply concerned about the future of Russia. Would amnesty and the death of Stalin be enough? Would people repent and remember? These were some of the questions he seemed haunted by. As the narrator puts it on Kostoglotov's behalf:

> The others hadn't survived. But he had. He hadn't even died of cancer. And now his exile was cracking like an eggshell. He remembered the *komendant* advising him to get married. They'd all be giving him advice like that soon. It was good to lie down. Good. The train shuddered and moved forward. It was only then that in his heart, or his soul, somewhere in his chest, in the deepest seat of his emotion, he was seized with anguish. He twisted his body and lay face down on his greatcoat, shut his eyes and thrust his face into the duffel bag, spiky with leaves. The train went on and Kostoglotov's boots dangled toes down over the corridor like a dead man's. An evil man threw tobacco in the Macaque Rhesus's eyes. Just like that […] (Solzhenitsyn, 1991: 536).

Kostoglotov is shaken and deeply traumatised by not only what he has experienced personally but also by bearing witness to what was being done to his fellow man. The final paragraph is a lamentation, almost a kind of requiem for those unknown people who had lost their lives to

the regime. Once again, Solzhenitsyn was making the point that until and unless the people of Russia, those who were spared death, incarceration, and exile, acknowledge and admit to what happened during the years under Communism, there would be no real change. Without this change, Solzhenitsyn maintained, life cannot properly be lived.

# Conclusion: Reading Solzhenitsyn Today

*...we have acted on the conviction that the "guilty" ones were the tsarist establishment, the bourgeois patriots, social democrats, White Guards, priests, émigrés, subversives, Kulaks…anyone and everyone except you and me! Obviously it was they, not we, who had to reform, except by bayonets, revolvers, barbed wire, starvation?*

Alexander Solzhenitsyn[1]

In his 2012 book, *It was a long time ago, and it never happened anyway: Russia and the Communist Past*, David Satter states that Russia today has "neither a national monument to the victims of Communist terror nor a national museum. In 2008, on the territory of Russia, there were 627 memorials and memorial plaques dedicated to the victims. This is fewer than the number of labour camps" (Satter, 2012: 3). He adds that besides the "lack of a national monument […], there has been a failure to punish the guilty. Instead, the Soviet Union's most criminal leaders, particularly Stalin, have been [recently] tacitly rehabilitated" (Satter, 2012: 4). It was precisely the absence of memorialisation and retribution that Solzhenitsyn feared when he first set out to write *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, *In the First Circle*, and *Cancer Ward*. Throughout this dissertation, I have emphasised that, in addition to examining the question of humanity and how to remain "human", Solzhenitsyn's greatest concern was the issue of memorialisation and the confession of human rights' violations committed by the Soviet government. For him, it was imperative that the Russian nation confess its guilt in order to start "healing" from the spiritual and physical inflictions wrought by totalitarianism. Leo Tolstoy's words are once more resonant in this regard:

> [To] cure a disease, you must first of all recognise it, and this is what we [as Russians] do not do. […] the disease does not pass but only changes its appearance, penetrating deeper in the flesh, in the blood, in the bones and in the bone marrow […]. We say, why should we remember? In fact, if I had a terrible and dangerous disease and I was cured, I would always with pleasure remember this […]. We don't understand only because we know that we are sick nonetheless and we want to fool ourselves.[2]

[1] Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, p. 117

[2] Lev N. Tolstoy, "Nikolai Palkin", in *Sobranie Sochinenii* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1984), p. 17

Whilst Tolstoy was referring to a time before the Russian Revolution, this quote is entirely apt for the context out of which Solzhenitsyn was writing. It also, of course, corresponds with some of the corporeal concerns I have attended to throughout this dissertation. In particular, one may recall that those characters with cancer (as described in *Cancer Ward*) were quick to convince themselves that they did not have the disease at all. This reflects the problem of Soviet citizens having been so used to denying, to turning a blind eye that it eventually extended to their own physical problems.

Max Hayward explains that the "essence of a totalitarian regime [such as Communist Russia], as opposed to a simple dictatorship, is that [it] forces the majority of the population to assist in running the machine."[3] The fact that the majority participated in "running the machine" for such a long period of time, from after the Russian Revolution up until the fall of the Soviet Union, is one of the reasons why in Russia today there is no real attempt to memorialise the dead. One might say that this "tradition" became so ingrained that people did not know how else to behave. However, there are other reasons why there has been comparatively little confession from the side of the Russians as well as why very few outside "observers" have commented on this. Several scholars have attempted to illustrate the extent of the crimes perpetuated by the Communist Soviet state by comparing them to those of Nazi Germany. Anne Applebaum, for example, argues that one of the reasons why the Soviet Union has not been forced to acknowledge its crimes against humanity, to the same extent as Nazi Germany for instance, is because Communist ideals

> are simply more attractive to most in the West [Americans and Western Europeans] than the Nazi advocacy of racism and the triumph of the strong over the weak. Even if communist ideology meant something very different in practice, it was harder for the intellectual descendents of the American and French Revolutions to condemn a system which *sounded*, at least, similar to their own. Perhaps this explains why eyewitness reports of the Gulag were, from the very beginning, often dismissed and belittled by the very same people who would never have thought to question the validity of Holocaust testimony written by Primo Levi or Elie Wiesel. From the Russian Revolution onwards, official information about the Soviet camps was readily available too, to anyone who wanted it […]. Ignorance alone cannot explain why Western intellectuals chose to avoid the subject (Applebaum, 2003: 8).

[3] Max Hayward, *The Soviet Censorship*, ed. by Martin Dewhirst and Robert Farrell (New Jersey: Metuchen, 1973), p. 84

In a rather controversial interview for *The New York Times*, Susan Sontag gave her opinion of the Soviet state: "I repeat: not only is Fascism (and overt military rule) the probable destiny of all Communist societies – especially when their populations are moved to a revolt – but Communism is in itself a variant, the most successful variant of Fascism. Fascism with a human face."[4] Slavoj Žižek, too, had a comparison to make between Communism and Fascism:

> It's appropriate, then, to recognise the tragedy of the October Revolution: both its unique emancipatory potential and the historical necessity of its Stalinist outcome. We should have to honestly acknowledge that the Stalinist purges were in a way more "irrational" than the Fascist violence: its excess is an unmistakable sign that, in contrast to Fascism, Stalinism was a case of an authentic revolution perverted.[5]

The refusal to acknowledge what happened in the Soviet Union also recalls Karl Jaspers' commentary: "We are sorely deficient in talking to each other and listening to each other. We lack mobility, criticism and self-criticism. We incline to doctrinism. What makes it worse is that so many people do not want to think. They only want slogans and obedience. They ask no questions and they give no answers, except by repeating drilled-in phrases" (Jaspers, 1961: 21-22). Satter provides another explanation for why those most responsible for the regime's crimes have not been punished:

> The failure to hold the leaders responsible for the Soviet regime's crimes was, in some respects, the defensive reaction of a compromised society. Widespread criminality and mass complicity meant that the guilty could be judged only by the relatively less guilty. Given the subtlety of the effort at moral judgement this required, it was easiest not to judge at all. This was all the more true in light of the fact that, in many cases, the worst surviving Stalin-era criminals, once out of power, began to behave with a semblance of normality (Satter, 2012: 161).

There was a saying at the height of Stalinism's reign that went: "[If] it is true that elephants never forget, Russians seem to us to be the very opposite of elephants […] Soviet Russian psychology seems to make forgetfulness really possible."[6] One may argue that there were some people who did acknowledge the role they had played in the terrors of the state, but they were few and far between. An example of one such man is the acclaimed Soviet writer

[4] "Susan Sontag Provokes Debate on Communism", in *The New York Times*, 28 Feb 1982
[5] Slavoj Žižek, "The Two Totalitarianisms", in *The London Review of Books*, 27 (p. 8), 17 March 2005
[6] F. Beck and W. Godin, *Russian Purge and the Extraction of Confession* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1951), p. 234

(incidentally Stalin's favourite), Konstantin Simonov, who, in his memoirs, acknowledged that he in fact had been complicit in the crimes of Stalin and the Soviet government because he had stood by while they had been committed. He stated the following:

> To be honest about those times, it is not only Stalin that you cannot forgive, but you yourself. It is not that you did something bad – maybe you did nothing wrong, at least on the face of it – but that you became accustomed to evil. The events that took place in 1937-38 [The Great Terror] now appear extraordinary, diabolical, but to you, then a young man of 22 or 24, they became a kind of norm, almost ordinary. You lived in the midst of these events, blind and deaf to everything, you saw and heard nothing when people all around you were shot and killed, when people all around you disappeared.[7]

Whilst there are several such memoirs (published well after Stalin's death, towards the end of the Soviet Communist state's reign), it has become clear that they do not have the power to push the current government towards acknowledging the reality of its past. This is why Solzhenitsyn was greatly concerned with rousing "his" people to action through both his fiction and non-fiction. It is significant to bear in mind that *The Gulag Archipelago* is more than just a biography or a memoir; it is an outright indictment against the USSR. As I have discussed throughout this dissertation, the issue of state guilt only arose when it suited a particular leader, and even then it was driven by propaganda. This was particularly true for Khrushchev when he attempted to make Stalin the scapegoat for the entire regime's crime in an attempt to boost his own profile.

As many commentators maintain, one of the most striking things about Russia today is that it shares many similarities with the Soviet Union that fell in 1991. Whilst the centralised economy of the USSR is gone and has been replaced by a new, capitalist one, the "conception of the individual as raw material and the conviction that nothing is higher than the goals of the state continues to prevail" (Satter, 2012: 111). Because of this, as Satter goes on to argue, it is "inevitable that the moral lessons of the Soviet experience [will] not be learned and […] Soviet habits [will] continue to influence the Russian population" (Satter, 2012: 111). This becomes clear when one takes a look at media coverage of Russia today. In November 2012, for example, *Time Magazine* featured an article entitled "Putin's Russia". In it, Simon Shuster explains that in the 1980s "Putin served as a low-level KGB agent in East Germany. A decade later, he was plucked from the ranks of the Kremlin bureaucracy to lead the FSB, and

[7] Quoted in Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia* (New York: Metropolitan, 2007), pp. 266-267

he made sure to hold on to his ties in the security services when he was promoted to the post of President."[8] Tellingly, the liberal Alexei Kudrin told Shuster that "Russia is heading down a scary road," because, in Kudrin's own words, "'the worst scenario has been chosen […]. The one of repression.'"[9] This trend has been brought into stark focus by recent events such as the much publicised persecution of the Russian band, "Pussy Riot." In protest against Putin's return to power in 2012, the band staged a performance which led to the arrest of three of its members. In an interview preceding these arrests, the group were asked how they saw Russia under a new Putin-led government. These are two responses:

> Serafima: How did you see Libya under Gaddafi? How do you see North Korea under Kim Jong-un, the 28-year-old "Brilliant comrade"? To us, Russia under Putin, aka "the National Leader," is no different.
>
> Tyurya: As a third-world dictatorship with all its nice and classy features: Horrible economy based on natural resources, unbelievable levels of corruption, absence of independent courts, and a dysfunctional political system. And under Putin we are up for another decade of brutal sexism and conformism as official government policies.[10]

Their arrests have fulfilled the grim prophecy they set out to Langston. In addition to them being charged with "hooliganism," the two women were sent to separate labour camps.[11] The band members Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina were sent to two different detention facilities, on the "edges of European Russia," of which one supporter tweeted, "'of all the possible options, these are the cruellest prison camps.'"[12] The whole manner in which this case was handled is reminiscent of the NKVD or MGB days. In no sense are these isolated incidents. The fact that there are still labour camps (gulags) in Russia today is multiply revealing. Even more disconcerting is the intense steps that have been taken towards the suppression of freedom of speech. This signals a resurgence of those forms of governmental censorship that Solzhenitsyn had to do battle with.

When writing about Russia's future, Solzhenitsyn was directly and presciently concerned with these issues. Although in his later years he was on good terms with Putin (something which he is often criticised for), I believe it is crucial to offer a counter balance by focussing on his early works and original concerns. For Judith Herman, in a statement of great

[8] Simon Shuster, "Inside Putin's Russia," *Time Magazine*, 180 (22), pp. 26-31, 26 Nov. 2012, p. 29
[9] Ibid.
[10] Henry Langston, "Meeting Pussy Riot", *Vice Beta*
[11] Bo Wilson, "Pussy Riot pair separated and sent to gulags", *The London Evening Standard*, 23 Oct 2012
[12] Ibid.

importance with regards to Solzhenitsyn's legacy, remembering and "telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims."[13] Significantly, during Boris Yeltsin's presidency, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was added to the list of required reading for school children in Russia. This issue has been raised again now that there are plans to bring out a two-volume book in Russian to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *One Day*.[14] Whilst this seems to be an encouraging move, the inclusion of Solzhenitsyn's novella in the curricula has ultimately done little to change the situation in Russia. The vast majority of the Russian population are still not discussing crucial issues concerning the nation's past. One may even argue that the inclusion of *One Day* in the curricula is merely a token gesture owing to its literary acclaim. As for making *The Gulag Archipelago* obligatory, or even just recommended reading, there have been concerns in the Russian government that this would constitute a threat to state security, though in what ways has not been made clear by Putin.

Satter explains that Russia today is "haunted by words that have been left unsaid, sites that have not been acknowledged and mass graves that have been commemorated partially or not at all" (Satter, 2012: 300). He continues that this owes a great deal to the fact that Russia differs from the "West in its attitude toward the individual. In the West, the individual is treated as an end in himself," whereas in Russia the "individual is seen by the state as a means to an end, and a genuine moral framework for political life does not exist" (Satter, 2012: 304-305). In his book, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, Timothy Snyder maintains that, "Each of the dead became a number," making the point that it is imperative that these numbers be remembered for the individuals they were if humanity is to redeem itself.[15] This was also Solzhenitsyn's belief. For him it would only be possible for Russia to move forward, to achieve true "perestroika" once the trauma of the regime's crimes had been properly acknowledged. Echoing Solzhenitsyn's words, Vladimir Krasnov states

> Russia herself cannot be healed until and unless she repents, and both her sinners and her victims come to realise that need. The miracle of self-healing and resurrection can take place only when Russia clears her conscience by telling the truth about the past, including the truth of *The Gulag Archipelago*; by confessing her sins and crimes against her own citizens and other nations; and by restoring her faith in her ideals, herself, and the world (Krasnov, 1980: 171-172).

[13] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p. 1
[14] Alex Steffler, "Putin Discusses National Security with Solzhenitsyn's Widow," in *Kommersant*, 6 Nov 2012
[15] Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (London: The Bodley Head, 2010), p. 379

For Solzhenitsyn, the only way for Russians who were complicit in the Soviet state's atrocities, whether directly or metaphysically, to reclaim their humanity would be for them to completely acknowledge and confess to the crimes. Fittingly, therefore, I conclude with the words of Natalia Solzhenitsyn. Speaking about the significance of her husband's works, she maintained that "[the] reason to publish these books is to preserve our collective memory. It's a remedy for memory loss, which is a weak person's, a weak society's and a weak state's disease."[16] As I have maintained throughout this study, reading Solzhenitsyn today provides an essential antidote to such diseases.

[16] Steffler, "Putin Discusses National Security with Solzhenitsyn's Widow"

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