

The Gulag Archipelago
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What do you get when you combine a lively sense of humor, keen literary imagination, linguistic skill, exhaustive research, and a cosmic outrage borne of living through the most barbaric political regime in the history of the world? Alexandr Solzhenitsyn. To those of us who lived through the years when Solzhenitsyn immigrated to America and wrote here, and who have already read two of his famous books together, Solzhenitsyn and *The Gulag Archipelago* need no introduction. But I will make a brief general comment, a few comments about his topic in the first chapter, and then read one of my favorite paragraphs.

The general comment is about Solzhenitsyn's consummate writing style. Not only is he a skilled and meticulous craftsman in his reportage, he makes this book a gripping page-turner by his casual and nearly continuous sarcasm, which shows the Bolshevik regime to be not only unbelievably cruel, mendacious, and tyrannical, but also stupid, inconsistent, absurd, bombastic, and self-defeating beyond measure. This feature alone is enough to make me want to go ahead and read volumes 2 and 3.

Next, an important feature of the first chapter, "Arrest," is his frequent comment to the effect that people should have resisted arrest, en masse, by making noise to expose incognito Chekists and by armed violence to put fear into the hearts of the arrestors to compel the arrestors to cease cooperating with the regime. As much as I try to commit in my mind to a philosophy of nonviolent resistance, persuaded by Gandhi and King both, it seems that with a regime this tyrannical and cruel Solzhenitsyn's advice is hard to refute. If the people had resisted in this way, Solzhenitsyn writes, perhaps the gulag archipelago would never have come to be.

Early on, Solzhenitsyn writes that no honest man could expect not to be arrested. Given this, and given his comments about resistance, one wonders if—should such a totalitarian state come into existence here, and given the events of the last few years it no longer seems impossible—one should prepare for arrest by attempting to wreak as much havoc as possible, including, if possible, the maiming if not killing of the arrestors. In a regime like the Soviet Union under Stalin, serious consideration of such action as a duty seems to me now to be unavoidable.

This book is full of many take-home lessons. Here is a long, favorite paragraph containing one of them:

And how can you bring it home to them? By an inspiration? By a vision? A dream? Brothers! People! Why has life been given you? In the deep, deaf stillness of midnight, the doors of the death cells are being swung open—and great-souled people are being dragged out to be shot. On all the railroads of the country, this very minute, right now, people who have just been fed salt herring are licking their dry lips with bitter tongues. They dream of the happiness of stretching out one's legs and of the relief one feels after going to the toilet. In Orotukan the earth thaws only in summer and only to the depth of three feet—and only then can they bury the bones of those who died during the winter. And you have the right to arrange your own life under the blue sky and the hot sun, to get a drink of water, to stretch, to travel wherever you like without a convoy. So what's this about unwiped feet? And what's this about a mother-in-law? What about the main thing in life, all its riddles? If you want, I'll spell it out for you right now. Do not pursue what is illusory—property and position: all that is gained at the expense of your nerves decade after decade, and is confiscated in one fell night. Live with a steady superiority over life—don't be afraid of misfortune, and do not yearn after happiness; it is, after all, all the same: the bitter doesn't last forever, and the sweet never fills the cup to overflowing. It is enough if you don't freeze in the cold and if thirst and hunger don't claw at your insides. If your back isn't broken, if your feet can walk, if both arms can bend, if both eyes can see and if both ears hear, then whom should you envy? And why? Our envy of others devours us most of all. Rub your eyes and purify your heart—and prize above all else in the world those who love you and who wish you well. Do not hurt them or scold them, and never part from any of them in anger; after all, you simply do not know: it might be your last act before your arrest, and that will be how you are imprinted in their memory!

(I hope the similarity between this paragraph and the Sermon on the Mount is obvious to everyone here.)

Now to conclude:

In the extensive labors required to research, compile, and write *The Gulag Archipelago*, and with the obvious fervor he displayed in constructing this narrative, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn performed a service for the world that literally goes beyond all value. We learned that the revolution contained the seeds of Stalin from the very beginning. We were vividly shown that the result was not only all the cruelty and death for so many people in the country, but the brutalization of the entire country. He exposed to us human evil in its most intense form, and in so doing, he equipped us to resist that form of evil, should such an evil lunatic ever emerge again.