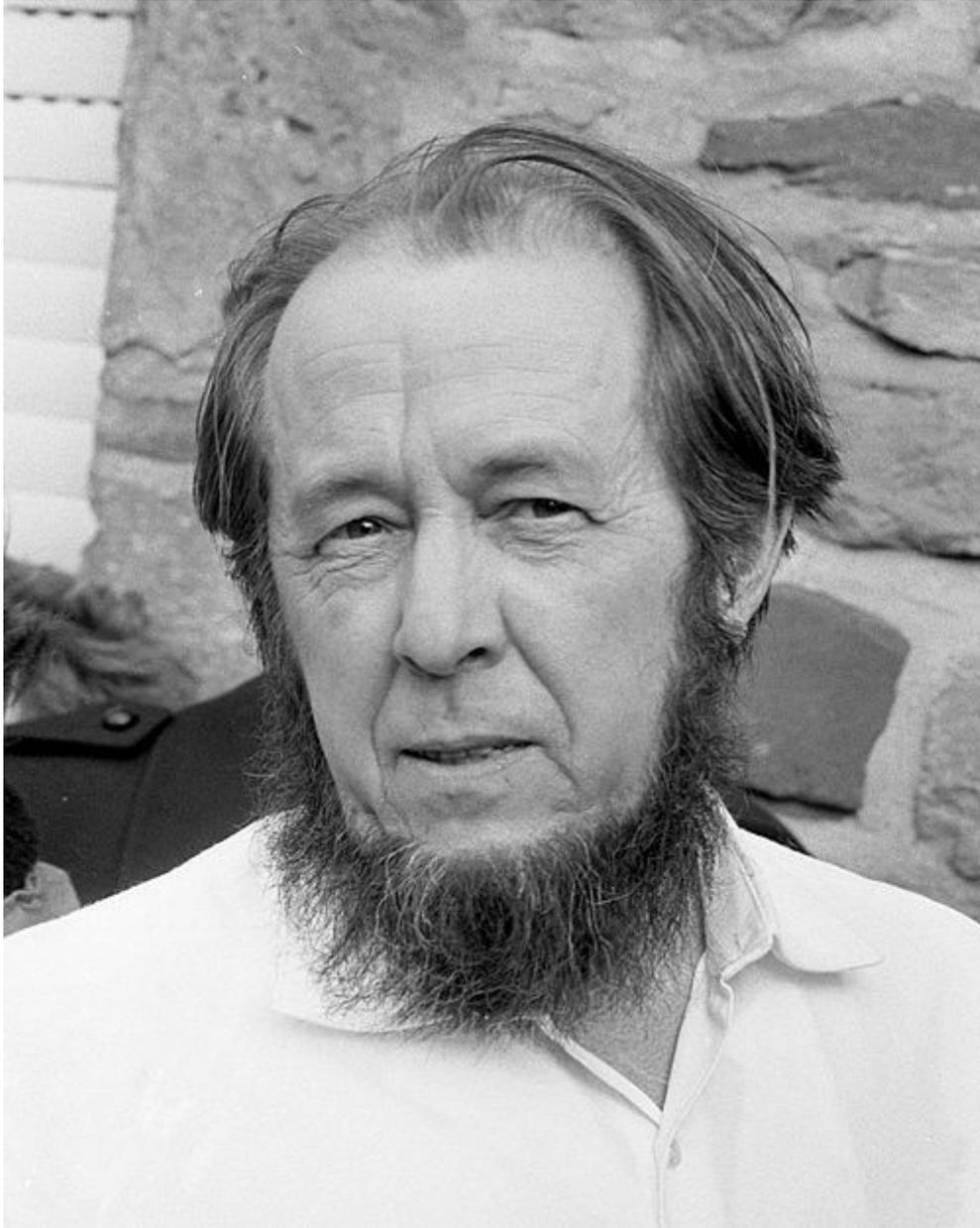


The Gulag Archipelago and The Wisdom of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn



Communism/Socialism

- Nothing is easier than stamping your foot and shouting: “That’s mine!” It is immeasurably harder to proclaim: “You may live as you please.” (The Gulag Archipelago)
- No Genghis Khan ever destroyed so many peasants as our glorious Organs [Soviet state institutions], under the leadership of the Party.
 - Take for instance, the Vasyugan tragedy. In 1930, 10,000 families (60,000-70,000 people, as families then went) passed through Tomsk and from there were driven farther, at first on foot, down the Tom although it was winter, then along the Ob, then upstream along the Vasyugan – still over the ice. (The inhabitants of villages on the route were ordered out afterward to pick up the bodies of adults and children.) In the upper reaches of the Vasyugan and the Tara they were marooned on patches of firm ground in the marshes. *No food or tools were left for them.* The roads were impassable, and there was no way through to the world outside, except for two brushwood paths, one toward Tobolsk and one toward the Ob. Machine-gunners manned barriers on both paths and let no one through from the death camp. They started dying like flies. Desperate people came out to the barriers begging to be let through, and were shot on the spot. Rather late in the day, when the rivers unfroze, barges carrying flour and salt were sent from the Tomsk Intergral soyuz (Producers’ and Consumers’ Cooperative), but they could not get up the Vasyugan.
 - They died off – every one of them.
 - We are told that there was at least an inquiry into this business, and even that one man was shot. I am not much inclined to believe it. But even if it is so – the ratio is an acceptable one! The ratio with which we are familiar from the Civil War. For one of ours – a thousand of yours! For sixty thousand of yours – one of ours!
 - There’s no other way to build the New Society. (The Gulag Archipelago)

- It sometimes happened that they transported ex-“kulaks” out into the tundra or the taiga, let them loose, and forgot about them. Why keep count when you’d take them there to die? They didn’t even leave a rifleman – the place was too remote, too inaccessible. Now that the mysteriously wise leaders had dismissed them – without horses, without plows, without fishing tackle, without guns – this hard-working and stubborn race of men, armed perhaps with a few axes and shovels, began the hopeless fight for life in conditions scarcely easier than in the Stone Age. And in defiance of the economic laws of socialism, some of the settlements not only survived, but became rich and vigorous!
 - In one such settlement, somewhere on the Ob, but on a backwater, nowhere near the navigation channel, Burov had landed as a boy, and there he grew up. He tells the story that one day before the war a passing launch notice them and stopped. The people in the launch turned out to be the district bosses. They interrogated the Burovs – where had they come from and how long ago? The bosses were amazed at their wealth and well-being, the like of which they’d never seen in their collectivized region. They went away. A few days later plenipotentiaries arrived with NKVD troops, and once again, as in the year of the Plague, they were ordered to abandon within an hour all that they had earned for themselves, all the warmth and comfort of their settlement, and dispatched with nothing but a few bundles deeper into the tundra.
 - The things that could’ve been done with such people if they had been allowed to live and develop freely!!! (The Gulag Archipelago)
- Shall we sum up the whole history of Russia and single phrase? It is the land of smothered opportunities. (The Gulag Archipelago)
- The Communist system is a disease, a plague that has been spreading across the earth for many years already, and it is impossible to predict what peoples will yet be forced to experience this disease firsthand. My people, the Russians, have been suffering from it for 60 years already; they long to be healed. And the day will come when they are indeed healed of this Soviet disease. On that day I will thank you for being good friends and

neighbors, and will go back to my homeland. (From a Speech at a Cavendish Town Meeting in 1977)

- For us in Russia, communism is a dead dog, while, for many people in the West, it is still a living lion.
- Human beings are born with different capacities. If they are free, they are not equal. And if they are equal, they are not free.

Politics/Power

- But political genius lies in extracting success even from the people's ruin. (The Gulag Archipelago)
- No, the old proverb does not lie: Look for the brave in prison, and the stupid among the political leaders! (The Gulag Archipelago)
- Unlimited power in the hands of limited people always leads to cruelty. (The Gulag Archipelago)

Evil

- If only it were so simple! 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?
 - During the life of any heart this line keeps changing place; sometimes it is squeezed one way by exuberant evil and sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish. One and the same human being is, at various ages, under various circumstances, a totally different human being. At times he is close to being a devil, at times to sainthood. But his name doesn't change, and to the name we ascribe the whole lot, good and evil. (The Gulag Archipelago)
- To do evil a human being must first of all believe that what he's doing is good, or else that it's a well-considered act in conformity with natural law. Fortunately, it is in the nature of the human being to seek a justification for his actions.

- o Ideology – that is what gives evil doing its long-sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination. That is the social theory which helps to make his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and others’ eyes, so that he won’t hear reproaches and curses but will receive praise and honors. That was how the agents of the Inquisition fortified their wills: by invoking Christianity; the conquerors of foreign lands, by extolling the grandeur of their Motherland; the colonizers, by civilization; the Nazis, by race; and the Jacobins (early and late), by equality, brotherhood, and the happiness of future generations.
 - o Thanks to *ideology*, the 20th century was fated to experience evildoing on a scale calculated in the millions. This cannot be denied, nor passed over, nor suppressed. How, then, do we dare insist that evildoers do not exist? And who was it that destroyed these millions? Without evildoers there would have been no archipelago. (The Gulag Archipelago)
- We have to condemn publicly the very *idea* that some people have the right to repress others. In keeping silent about evil, in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the surface, we are implanting it, and it will rise up a thousandfold in the future. (The Gulag Archipelago)
- This is surely the main problem of the 20th century: is it permissible merely to carry out orders and commit one’s conscience to someone else’s keeping? Can a man do without ideas of his own about good and evil, and merely derive them from the printed instructions and verbal orders of his superiors? Oaths! Those solemn pledges pronounced with a tremor in the voice and intended to defend the people against evildoers: see how easily they can be misdirected to the service of evildoers and against the people! (The Gulag Archipelago)
- It was granted me to carry away from my prison years on my bent back, which nearly broke beneath its load, this essential experience: *how* a human being becomes evil and *how* good. In the intoxication of youthful successes I felt myself to be infallible, I was therefore cruel. In the surfeit of power I was a murderer and an oppressor. In my most evil moments I was convinced that I was doing good, and I was well supplied with systematic arguments. And it was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not

through states, not between classes, not between political parties either – but right through every human heart – and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains. . . an unuprooted small corner of evil.

- Since then I have come to understand the truth of all the religions of the world: They struggle with the evil inside a human being (inside every human being). It is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to constrict it within each person.
- And since that time I have come to understand the falsehood of all the revolutions in history: They destroy only those carriers of evil contemporary with them (and also fail, out of haste, to discriminate the carriers of good as well). And they then take to themselves as their heritage the actual evil itself, magnified still more. (The Gulag Archipelago)

Truth

- One thing is absolutely definite: not everything that enters our ears penetrates our consciousness. Anything too far out of tune with our attitude is lost, either in the ears themselves or somewhere beyond, but it is lost. (The Gulag Archipelago)
- And the lie has, in fact, led us so far away from a normal society that you cannot even orient yourself any longer; in its dense, gray fog not even one pillar can be seen.
 - Moreover, even if they offered us the chance to learn the truth, would our free people even want to know it? Y.G. Oksman [who served time in the gulags] returned from the camps in 1948, and was not rearrested, but lived in Moscow. His friends and acquaintances did not abandon him, but helped him. But they did not want to hear his recollections of camp! Because if they knew about that – how could they go on living? (The Gulag Archipelago)

- You can resolve to live your life with integrity. Let your credo be this: Let the lie come into the world, let it even triumph. But not through me. (The Gulag Archipelago)
- It is not because the truth is too difficult to see that we make mistakes... we make mistakes because the easiest and most comfortable course for us is to seek insight where it accords with our emotions - especially selfish ones.

Happiness/Suffering

- You should rejoice that you're in prison. Here you have time to think about your soul. (One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich)
- You only have power over people as long as you don't take everything away from them. But when you've robbed a man of everything, he's no longer in your power—he's free again. (The First Circle)
- And now the rule of your life is this: Do not rejoice when you have found, do not weep when you have lost. (The Gulag Archipelago)
- It is already late. All the [prison] hospital is asleep. Kornfeld [a fellow prisoner in the gulag hospital with Solzhenitsyn] is ending up his story thus:
 - “And on the whole, do you know, I have become convinced that there is no punishment that comes to us in this life on earth which is undeserved. Superficially it can have nothing to do with what we are guilty of in actual fact, but if you go over your life with a fine-tooth comb and ponder it deeply, you will always be able to hunt down that transgression of yours for which you have now received this blow.”
 - I would have been inclined to endow his words with the significance of a universal law of life. However, one can get all tangled up that way. One would have to admit that on that basis those who had been punished even more cruelly than with prison – those shot, burned at the stake – were some sort of super evildoers. (And yet. . .the innocent are those who get punished most zealously of all.) And what would one then have to say about our so evident torturers: Why does not fate punish *them*? Why do they prosper?

- (And the only solution to this would be that the meaning of earthly existence lies not, as we've grown used to thinking, in prospering, but. . . in the development of the soul. From that point of view our torturers have been punished most horribly of all: they are turning into swine, they are departing downward from humanity. From that point of view punishment is inflicted on those whose development. . . *holds out hope.*) (The Gulag Archipelago)
- No human being can know the future. The greatest of disasters may overtake a man in the best of places, and the greatest happiness may seek him out in the worst. (Page 412)
- Satiety depends not at all on how much we eat, but on how we eat. It's the same with happiness, the very same...happiness doesn't depend on how many external blessings we have snatched from life. It depends only on our attitude toward them. There's a saying about it in the Taoist ethic: 'Whoever is capable of contentment will always be satisfied. (The First Circle)
- ... 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 illusionary -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 for 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, 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 may be your last act before your arrest, and that will be how you are imprinted on their memory. (The Gulag Archipelago)