

Soviet GULags as Described by Solzhenitsyn and Ginzburg

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After the 1917 Revolution, the haggard, oppressed citizens of Russia finally dared to embrace optimism. Trusting Bolshevik revolutionaries, many anticipated an egalitarian future, perhaps out of their reach but open for their children. But as leaders of the Bolshevik Party traded their high ideals for popular support, that future grew distant. Children of the revolution would come of age not in a classless, humanitarian society, but in an intense hierarchy defined by fear and controlled by death. Society was split between “party members” and “non-party members,” with members of the Communist Party receiving advantages in every arena of life, from special access to goods to prioritized admittance to universities. Joseph Stalin, the head of the Soviet Union since 1929, organized a system for expelling—or “purging”—members from the party who expressed anti-party sentiment. Following the assassination of Sergei Kirov in 1934, the stakes grew exponentially higher; with rumors circulating that Kirov’s killer was a fellow communist, distrust and paranoia grew rampant.

Between 1934 and 1935, roughly half of the Party’s delegates were removed, and in 1936, the first Moscow Show Trial took place. Sixteen of the oldest and most trusted Bolshevik leaders were executed, having been found guilty of running a subversive sub-organization. A witch-hunt began to weed out the treacherous party members who supported these betrayers. Rather than one’s membership being revoked, those charged with supporting this group—or otherwise disrespecting the Party—now faced death or life in the GULags: the Soviet Union’s infamous labor

camp. Throughout the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, the GULags were home to millions. Criminals, victims of the Great Purge, and prisoners of war all found themselves contained in these inhumane prisons. Although many Soviet citizens lived in terror of arrest, the public knew few concrete facts regarding the camps. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, author of *The GULAG Archipelago*¹ and Yevgenia Ginzburg, creator of *Journey Into the Whirlwind*,² were two of the GULag’s captives who sought to spread knowledge through their first-hand experiences. Although neither author was infallible, their works provide priceless insight into life in the GULags. Respectively they each told their own story of a soldier and a Party intellectual, an enemy of communism and a staunch advocate, and a man and a woman. When read side-by-side, these two sources equally highlight the personal and shared experiences of GULag prisoners, as well as the way these experiences shaped their life-long beliefs.

Solzhenitsyn, a soldier during World War II, wrote about the GULags from the perspective of one who has lived through hardships before. Having experienced the German battle front, many of the horrors of imprisonment are softened by comparison. In the second chapter of *The GULAG Archipelago*, he lovingly details the “clean linen” and “cots with springs” in his prison cell, declaring that he “could not remember having slept like this during the whole war.”³ More tellingly, Solzhenitsyn celebrates the simple fact that “no shells were falling;” merely being out of the direct line of fire was a blessing, regardless of the circumstances.⁴ But Solzhenitsyn’s service not only affected his perspective on the GULag’s conditions, but on the political structure that placed him there.

Although he entered captivity with devout reverence for Lenin—going as far as to decree it “sacrilege to... call anyone on earth “Ilyich” except that one man”—, he was quickly losing faith in the Soviet Union.⁵ While others (Ginzburg included) remained loyal despite the way the system had wronged them, Solzhenitsyn presents the idea: “AMotherland that betrays its soldiers—is that really a Motherland?”⁶

Unlike Solzhenitsyn, prior to her arrest Ginzburg had experienced little trauma. Married to “a leading member of the Tatar Province Committee”⁷ and working as the “assistant head of the cultural department”⁸ at an editorial office, Ginzburg had a comfortable life on the inside of the party. Although she had some doubts about Stalin, she “carefully concealed it even from [her]self.”⁹ Solemnly swearing that she would “die for the Party... without the slightest hesitation,” Ginzburg was the picture of a perfect party member.¹⁰ Yet, she too would become a victim of the GULags. Arrested in 1937, she was one of the many Party members senselessly targeted during the Great Purge. A faithful party member to the end, despite having been forewarned of her arrest, Ginzburg refused to go into hiding. She explained, “How can a communist run away from the party?”¹¹ Yet, once in the GULags, Ginzburg’s perspective shifted. Although she held onto the “Great Leninist Truths” throughout her 18-year sentence, she began to see the party as fallible.¹²

In chapter 25, “Intro to Butyuki,” Ginzburg recalls a day when she and a group of other women were searched before entering a new prison. A young member of the Komsomol looked to her for guidance after correctly identifying her as a Party member. She asked Ginzburg if she should expose a German inmate who had “hidden some gold things in her hair”—her dilemma being that she “d[idn’t] like to give her away” unless she was “a real class enemy.”¹³ Ginzburg responded that she “should be guided by the instinct that is generally known as your conscience,” admitting that what the Party would want is not always the moral choice.¹⁴ Further, Ginzburg juxtaposes herself against the “orthodox Stalinist” she shared a cell with.¹⁵ This woman—whom Ginzburg depicts using unflattering words like “shrill,” “pale,” and “contorted,” glorifies the Party to such an extent that she grew outraged at the other inmates for laughing at their warder.¹⁶ While Ginzburg points out the problem with this point of view, her own stance on the Party remains a far cry from Solzhenitsyn’s, who “sees the purges as simply the

most extreme manifestation of the amorality of the Marxist vision.”¹⁷

More meaningful than their contrasting occupations, more fundamental than their split in opinions, is one underlying fact: the authors are different sexes. Coloring all facets of their experience, Solzhenitsyn’s manhood and Ginzburg’s womanhood influence their respective outlooks, their treatment in the camps, and the groups of people that they interact with. While Solzhenitsyn describes his fellow prisoners in a variety of costumes from “soft black helmets,”¹⁸ to an “aviator’s cap,”¹⁹ to “an expensive tunic,”²⁰ Ginzburg points out a group of inmates wearing “absurd, low-cut evening dresses and high-heeled shoes,” who she has to be assured are “not tarts,” but “Party members.”²¹ While men were dragged into the GULags in a range of clothing, none named had to face the discomfort and indignity of wearing heeled shoes and an impractical dress for months on end. Small details like this, compounded with the attitudes relayed (particularly in Solzhenitsyn’s writing), support the return of patriarchal attitudes under Stalin.²² Early in his account, Solzhenitsyn describes one of his cellmates as being “accustomed to” “grabb[ing] women, mess[ing] them up, and then throw[ing] them away” as someone would eat “boiled crayfish”—a practice he neither supports nor condemns.²³ He also blatantly paints three soldiers guilty of sexual assault as mere victims of circumstance, explaining that these “honest, open-hearted soldiers” mistakenly pursued “the property” of the Chief of Counterintelligence in a bathhouse.²⁴ Had they chosen another woman, they could have either “raped and then shot” her (if she had belonged to the enemy), or at the very least “chased [her] naked... and slapped on the behind” (had she been a Pole or a Russian).²⁵ Solzhenitsyn also insinuates the likelihood of rape within the GULags. He suggests that the Lubyanka chief may have hired an especially “repulsive” woman—a “blond spinster with a horsy build”—in the role of librarian as a safeguard against her assault.²⁶ Along a similar, yet opposite vein, Ginzburg writes about one of her overseers, a man named Kostik. She described that if he “wanted any fun” he would have to go elsewhere, as all the incarcerated women were either “criminal types who might have venereal disease,” “cracked” religious women, or “walking skeletons.”²⁷ In the male prison it is the staff who must be protected from the inmates, while in the female prison it is the

inmates who must be protected from the staff. Yet, despite their perceived womanly failings keeping them safe, even within the walls of prison societal standards reign; two of Ginzburg's cellmates were often found "lying on their backs on the floor and pedaling in the air, anxious to preserve their figures."²⁸

With differing backgrounds, political views, and of course, sexes, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Yevgenia Ginzburg represent a breadth of experience in the Soviet GULags. While both began their sentences as believers in Lenin's dream for the Soviet Union, their wrongful imprisonment and inhumane treatment exposed them each to the harsh reality of the Party and the government's corruption under Stalin. But although the GULags sought to strip away their captives' individuality—even their humanity—the internal world of the camps did not exist discretely from the rest of the world. One's life before imprisonment and perspective upon entering had substantial bearing, and, further, the prevailing rules of society maintained their power, even in the most obscure corners of Siberia. Through Solzhenitsyn's and Ginzburg's accounts, these authors shed light on this suppressed chapter of history.

Endnotes

¹ Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation* (Westview Press, 1997).

² Yevgenia Semyonovna Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, transl Paul Stevenson and Max Hayward (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace, ND).

³ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 188.

⁴ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 188.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁷ Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, 3.

⁸ Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹² *Ibid.*, 417.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 21.

¹⁹ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 185.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 196.

²¹ Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, 149.

²² Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, 273.

²³ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 21.

²⁴ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 21.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 214.

²⁷ Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, 403.

²⁸ Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, 156-57.