University of Pittsburgh’s Global Studies Center

Global Issues through Literature – Russia

­*And fate made everybody equal*

*Outside the limits of the law*

*Son of a kulak or a Red commander*

*Son of a priest or commissar…*

*Here classes were all equalized,*

*All men were brothers, camp mates all,*

*Branded as traitors every one…*

-Aleksandr Tvardovsky, ‘By Right of Memory’

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*

**GULag –** Main Camp Administration, *glavnoe upravlenie lagerei*

The Soviet Gulag stretched from its origins on a collection if islands in the White Sea to the Black Sea, from European Russia to the Pacific shores. It was the official camp system but over time came to represent the institutionalization of slave labor in the Soviet Union.

Numbers – Anne Applebaum has come up with the figure of 28.7 million prisoners passed through the system. Many were political prisoners, the minority were common criminals – thieves in law (­*vory v zakone*). Official archival sources point to 2,749,168 deaths in the camps. However, when Soviet power wanted to execute someone, they were not sent to the camps first – they were killed in forests outside cities, in the cells of Lubyanka and Butyrka prisons. Many historians point to all deaths on the orders of Stalin and the Soviets between 10-12 million; the French authors of *The Black Book of Communism* put the figure at 20 million.

**Historical Background**

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was first arrested during World War II and sent to the Gulag. Writing to his friend at home, Solzhenitsyn had included criticisms of Stalin in his correspondence. For this crime and some of the themes in his early writings, he was sentenced to eight years in a detention camp. In 1950, he was sent to a camp primarily created for political prisoners – it is this camp that served as the basis for his novella, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Solzhenitsyn was give his first glimpse of freedom after Stalin’s death in 1950. For his writings, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1970. The Nobel committee commented that Solzhenitsyn was given the honor ‘for the ethical force with which he has pursued the indispensable traditions of Russian literature.’

**The Decision to Publish?**

Why did the USSR and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) allow the publication of this work so critical of the system?

Why *One Day…*and not Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*?

How and why was that decision made? What was the role of Nikita Khrushchev and his cultural ‘thaw’ after the 20th Party Congress in 1956?

Khrushchev had personally delivered the so-called ‘secret speech’ at the 20th Party Congress in February 1956, laying bare the crimes of Stalin and speaking ill on the idea of the cult of personality. However, he did temper the speech because he and the new leaders of the USSR were more than accessories to Stalin’s crimes.

The decision and eventual publication of Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day…* came on the heels of another crisis for Khrushchev – the Cuban Missile Crisis. Khrushchev had consolidated his political power by 1962 and was ready to proceed again with a cultural thaw, one that was albeit managed from above. There was a sense of renewed de-Stalinization. This was short-lived and culminated with the publication of Solzhenitsyn’s work; the thaw was over by 1963 and Khrushchev was again ‘praising’ the policies of Stalin.

Most historians support the idea that Khrushchev’s personal role played in the publication of Solzhenitsyn’s work allowed the book to move forward, first serially published in *Novy Mir* in 1962. *Novy Mir*’s editor, Aleksandr Tvardovsky succeed in passing the manuscript to a Khrushchev aid, Vladimir Lebedev, who knew that he had to choose the right moment to discuss the work with his boss. On a rest vacation to the Black Sea, Lebedev read out loud *One Day…* to Khrushchev. He understood the work fit with his de-Stalinization and laying bare the crimes of Stalin.

Lebedev also realized that Khrushchev had to understand the work. According to dissident brothers Ray and Zhores Medvedev, Khrushchev would not have the time in Moscow and would have simply passed it on to the CPSU censorship committee, which would never have allowed the publication to go through. Thus, six months lapsed from the time Tvardovsky first mentioned the book to Lebedev and when it was finally presented to Khrushchev.

What are Khrushchev’s own thoughts on Solzhenitsyn and his work?

In his memoirs, Khrushchev writes that ‘the sector where relations are most strained [between the Party and the intelligentsia] and the ground is mostly slippery is in dealing with the ‘creative intelligentsia.’ By this he means creative artists and writers – men like Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn. Khrushchev spends a few pages out of three volumes on the decision to publish *One Day…*. Most of what Khrushchev wrote are reminisces; he is dictating his memoirs in 1971. In hindsight, he writes that he wishes to changes the decisions made on some works, such as *Doctor Zhivago*, and realizes that it was the Party that made the choice not to publish Pasternak’s work. He describes how well-written literature should stir the reader’s emotions, exactly what Solzhenitsyn had done according to Khrushchev. Nonetheless, for him it was a political decision to use the work to illustrate how poorly victim were treated in the past, under Stalin.

Writing about his father’s time at the helm of the CPSU and USSR, Sergei Khrushchev recounts his time spent with his father as major decisions were being made that affected domestic and international policies. He writes that it was one thing for his father to discuss the crimes of Stalin in speeches, yet another to read about the horrors in the words of Solzhenitsyn. Sergei states that *One Day…* ‘made a stunning and crucial impression on [him]: knowledge is one thing, emotion another.’ For the younger Khrushchev, Solzhenitsyn’s work laid bare the crimes of Stalin yet was an ominous warning of a coming storm – the criticism of the entire Soviet system. Sergei recounts his father heard the reading of the novel by Lebedev; he then had copies made and disseminated to the Party leadership – it was unanimously approved by the Party. None one was willing to argue against it; they were still all used to falling in line behind the leader.

**Suggestions for Further Reading**

Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 2009.

Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master and the Margarita*, 1996

Choi-hwan Kang and Pierre Rigoulot, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag*

Donald Filtzer, *The Khrushchev Era: De-Stalinization and the Limits of Reform in the USSR, 1953-1964*, 1993.

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd edition, 1995.

Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991*, 1993 (chapters 2,5,13)

*Memoirs of Nikita Khrushschev*, vol. 2 Reformer (1945-1964), ed Sergei Khrushchev, 2006.

Sergei Khrushchev, *Nikita Khrushchev and the Creation of a Superpower*, 2000.

Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, 2006.

Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, 2012.

Robert Strayer, *The Communist Experiment: Revolution, Socialism, and Global Conflict in the Twentieth Century*, 2007.

Roy and Zhores Medvedev, *Khrushchev, The Years in Power*, 1978.

Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America: Police and Prison in the Age of Crisis*, 2008.

Robert Perkinson, *Texas Tough: The Rise of America’s Prison Empire*, 2010.

Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, 2007.

Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales,* 1995.

Solomon Volkov, *The Magical Chorus: A History of Russian Culture from Tolstoy to Solzhenitsyn*, 2009.

Andy Worthington, *The Guantanamo Files: The Stories of the 774 Detainees in America’s Illegal Prison*, 2007 (especially chapters 15-16).

**Other Works by Solzhenitsyn**

*The Gulag Archipelago*, 3 vols.

*Cancer Ward*

*The First Circle*

*August 1914: The Red Wheel*

*November 1916: The Red Wheel II*