

# OUR MUZZLED FREEDOM

Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008)

Even when all the main things about the Gulag Archipelago are understood, will there be anyone even then who grasps what our freedom was like? What sort of a country it was that for whole decades dragged that Archipelago like a tumor about inside itself?

Let us try to enumerate briefly those traits of life which were determined by the closeness of the Archipelago...

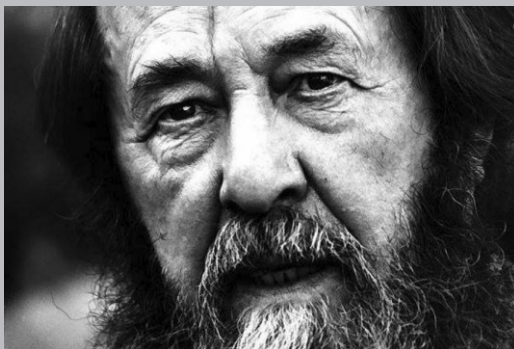
**1. Constant Fear.** Just as there is no minute when people are not dying or being born, so there was no minute when people were not being arrested. Any adult inhabitant of this country, from a collective farmer up to a member of the Politburo, always knew that it would take only one careless word or gesture and he would fly off irrevocably into the abyss.

Fear was not always the fear of arrest. There were intermediate threats: purges, inspections, completion of security questionnaires, dismissal from work, deprivation of residence, expulsion or exile. Peace of mind is something our citizens have never known.

**2. Servitude.** If it had been easy to change your place of residence, to leave a place that had become dangerous for you and thus shake off fear and refresh yourself, people would have behaved more boldly. But for long decades, no worker could quit work of his own accord. And the passport regulations also fastened everyone to particular places. And the housing, which could not be sold, nor exchanged, nor rented. And because of this it was an insane piece of daring to protest in the place where you lived or worked.

**3. Secrecy and Mistrust.** These feelings replaced our former openhearted cordiality and hospitality. These feelings were the natural defense of any family and every person. Every little detail was kept in sight and within earshot for years. The secretiveness of the Soviet person is absolutely necessary. (It was only during the times of Khrushchev that their tongues were loosed).

The moment someone began to speak up frankly, everyone stepped back and shunned him. Therefore



Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, himself a prisoner from 1945-53, wrote the first definitive work on the Gulag. In *The Gulag Archipelago*, published in 1973, he describes how living under Stalin's repressive government perverted all of life.

anyone who burst out with a sincere protest was predestined to loneliness and alienation.

**4. Universal Ignorance.** Hiding things from each other, and not trusting each other, we ourselves helped implement that absolute secrecy, absolute misinformation, which was the cause of causes of everything that took place – including the millions of arrests and the mass approval of them. Informing one another of nothing, neither shouting nor groaning, and learning nothing from each other,

we were completely in the hands of the newspapers and the official orators. Every day they pushed in our faces some new piece of incitement, like a photograph of a railroad wreck (sabotage) somewhere three thousand miles away. And what we really needed to learn about, which was what had happened on our apartment landing that day, we had no way of finding out.

**5. Squealing** was developed to a mind-boggling extent. Hundreds of thousands of Security officers in their official offices tirelessly recruited and summoned stool pigeons to give reports. In every group of people, in every office, in every apartment, either there would be an informer or else people would be afraid there was.

Secretiveness spread its cold tentacles throughout the whole people. It crept between colleagues at work, between old friends, students, soldiers, neighbors, children growing up.

**6. Betrayal as a Form of Existence.** It turned out that the least dangerous form of existence was constant betrayal...not to do anything bad directly, but just not to notice the doomed person next to one, not to help him, to turn away one's face. They had arrested a neighbor, your comrade at work, or even your close friend. You kept silence. You acted as if you had not noticed. But the person arrested had left behind him a wife, a mother, children, and perhaps they at least ought to be helped? No, no, that would be dangerous: after all, these were the wife, mother, or children of an enemy (and your own children had a long education ahead of them)!

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Every act of resistance to the government required heroism quite out of proportion to the magnitude of the act. It was safer to keep dynamite during the rule of Alexander II than it was to shelter the orphan of an enemy of the people under Stalin. Yet secret assistance to families did occur. There was someone who took the place of an arrested person's wife who had been in a hopeless line for three days, so that she could go in to get warm and get some sleep. And there was also someone who went off with pounding heart to warn someone else that an ambush was waiting for him at his apartment and that he must not return there. And there was someone who gave a fugitive shelter, even though he himself did not sleep that night.

**7. Corruption.** In fear and betrayal over many years people survive unharmed only in a superficial, bodily sense. And inside...they become corrupt.

So many millions of people agreed to become stool pigeons. If some 49 to 50 million people served long sentences in the Archipelago during the course of the thirty-five years up to 1953, then we can assume that at least every third or fifth case was the consequence of somebody's denunciation. All those murderers with ink are still among us today. Some of them brought about the arrest of their neighbors out of fear. Others did it for material gain. And still others, out of ideological considerations; after all, it was considered a service to one's class to expose the enemy! Traitors were advanced and mediocrities triumphed, while everything that was best and most honest was trampled underfoot.

**8. The Lie as a Form of Existence.** Every wag of the tongue can be overheard by someone, every facial expression observed by someone. There exists a collection of ready-made phrases, of labels, a selection of ready-made lies. Every conversation with the management, every conversation of any kind with any other Soviet person called for lies.

But that was not all; Your children were growing up! If they weren't yet old enough, you and your wife had to avoid saying openly in front of them what you really thought; after all, they were

being brought up to be Pavlik Morozovs, to betray their own parents. And if the children were still little, then you had to decide whether to start them off on lies instead of the truth; or to tell them the truth, with the risk that they might make a slip...which meant that you had to instill into them from the start that the truth was murderous...The choice was really such that you would rather not have any children.

**9. Cruelty.** How could one possibly preserve one's kindness while pushing away the hands of those who were drowning? Once you have been steeped in blood, you can only become more cruel. And anyway, cruelty ("class cruelty") was praised and instilled. And when you add that kindness was ridiculed, that pity was ridiculed, that mercy was ridiculed – you'd never be able to chain all those who were drunk on blood.

So there in that stinking damp world in which only executioners and the most blatant of betrayers flourished, where those who remained honest became drunkards, since they had no strength of will for anything else, in which the bodies of young people were bronzed by the sun while their souls putrefied inside, in which every night the grey-green hand reached out and collared someone in order to pop him into a box – in that world millions of women wandered about lost and blinded, whose husbands, sons, or fathers had been torn from them and dispatched to the Archipelago. They were the most scared of all. They feared shiny nameplates, office doors, telephone rings, knocks on the door, the postman, the milkwoman, and the plumber. And everyone in whose path they stood drove them from their apartments, from their work, and from the city.

And these women had children who grew up, and for each one there came a time of extreme need when they absolutely had to have their father back, before it was too late, but he never came.

Our whole country was infected by the poisons of the Archipelago. Whether it will ever be able to get rid of them someday, only God knows.



A sand sculpture entitled "Repression."