


Penal mental health and Soviet psychiatric abuses in *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973) by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008)

Alexander Smith , Robert van Voren and Michael Liebreuz

Authored by the Russian dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008), *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973) exposes the brutalities inherent within the Soviet judicial and prison camp systems. Intertwining secondary and autobiographical accounts from his own term in the gulag (Fig. 1), Solzhenitsyn illustrates abuses in interrogations, detention settings and beyond, akin to other repressive regimes. In doing so, his writing explores the extreme psychological pressures of authoritarian penal models and the mental health of affected individuals.



Fig. 1 Image of Solzhenitsyn upon his release from a Soviet prison camp in 1953 following an 8-year sentence. Original photo titled 'Solzhenitsyn exhibit at meeting 2008, Rimini 2' by Sharon Mollerus. Reproduced under a CC-BY license.

Solzhenitsyn begins by outlining methods employed by Soviet 'butcher-interrogators', such as violence and intimidation, which 'worked beautifully on those who had not yet been arrested' and who were 'frightened of everything'. To that end, authorities threatened loved ones, simulating suffering through psychological torture: 'you can actually hear a woman weeping and screaming [...], you're under terrific strain and not in a state to play the expert on voice identification'. Such experiences inevitably induced psychiatric symptoms. The narrator concedes 'my first weeks were characterised by a mental blackout', 'all of us [...] were deeply depressed' and 'your mind, still shocked by your arrest, in the grip of fear, muddled by sleeplessness and hunger, seeks a way out'.

Later, Solzhenitsyn portrays the dehumanising conditions of Soviet detention, including purposeful sleep deprivation and arbitrary punishment. We learn that 'air was rationed' in cells, as was light, because darkness was considered 'an important factor in causing depression'. The narrator posits: 'that was the purpose [...] to leave the prisoner not a single moment for sleep, not a single stolen moment for privacy. You were always being watched and always in their power'.

Again, these environments engendered significant distress ('there we suffered, and we thought, and there was nothing else in our lives'), with psychopathological consequences. For one inmate: 'his cellmate went insane from frequent imprisonment in the punishment cell, and [he] was kept locked up with an insane man for more than a year'. Reminiscent of the so-called death row phenomenon, certain people in 'death cells' could not 'speak intelligibly' and 'were left there to await their fate anyway. Anyone who went insane in the death cell was executed insane'.

Within the text, Solzhenitsyn also reveals state-sponsored psychiatric abuses and the pathologisation of dissent, itself deemed a 'malicious violation'. During a hunger strike, a prosecutor asks an inmate 'Why are you torturing yourself?'. Stunning the prosecutor with its 'irrelevance', the inmate replies: 'Justice is more precious to me than life'. This individual is subsequently transferred to a psychiatric facility, where a doctor flatly affirms: 'We suspect you may be a schizophrenic'; notably, purported 'sluggish schizophrenia' diagnoses were used to suppress political opposition in the Soviet Union.

Today, 50 years after its publication and with democracy eroding around the world, the moral lessons of *The Gulag Archipelago* could become increasingly timely for modern dialogues on authoritarianism, psychiatric ethics and human rights. Poignantly, Solzhenitsyn underlines this sense of generational responsibility and the necessity of heeding historical warnings: 'Our generation would return [...] And our younger brothers would only look at us contemptuously: Oh you stupid colts!'.

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Royal College of Psychiatrists