

Solzhenitsyn

The **GULAG**
Archipelago
TWO

*The Destructive-
Labor Camps*

*The Soul and
Barbed Wire*

Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn

THE GULAG
ARCHIPELAGO

1918–1956

An Experiment in Literary Investigation

III-IV

Translated from the Russian by Thomas P. Whitney

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PART III

The Destructive-Labor Camps*



“Only those can understand us who ate from the same bowl with us.”

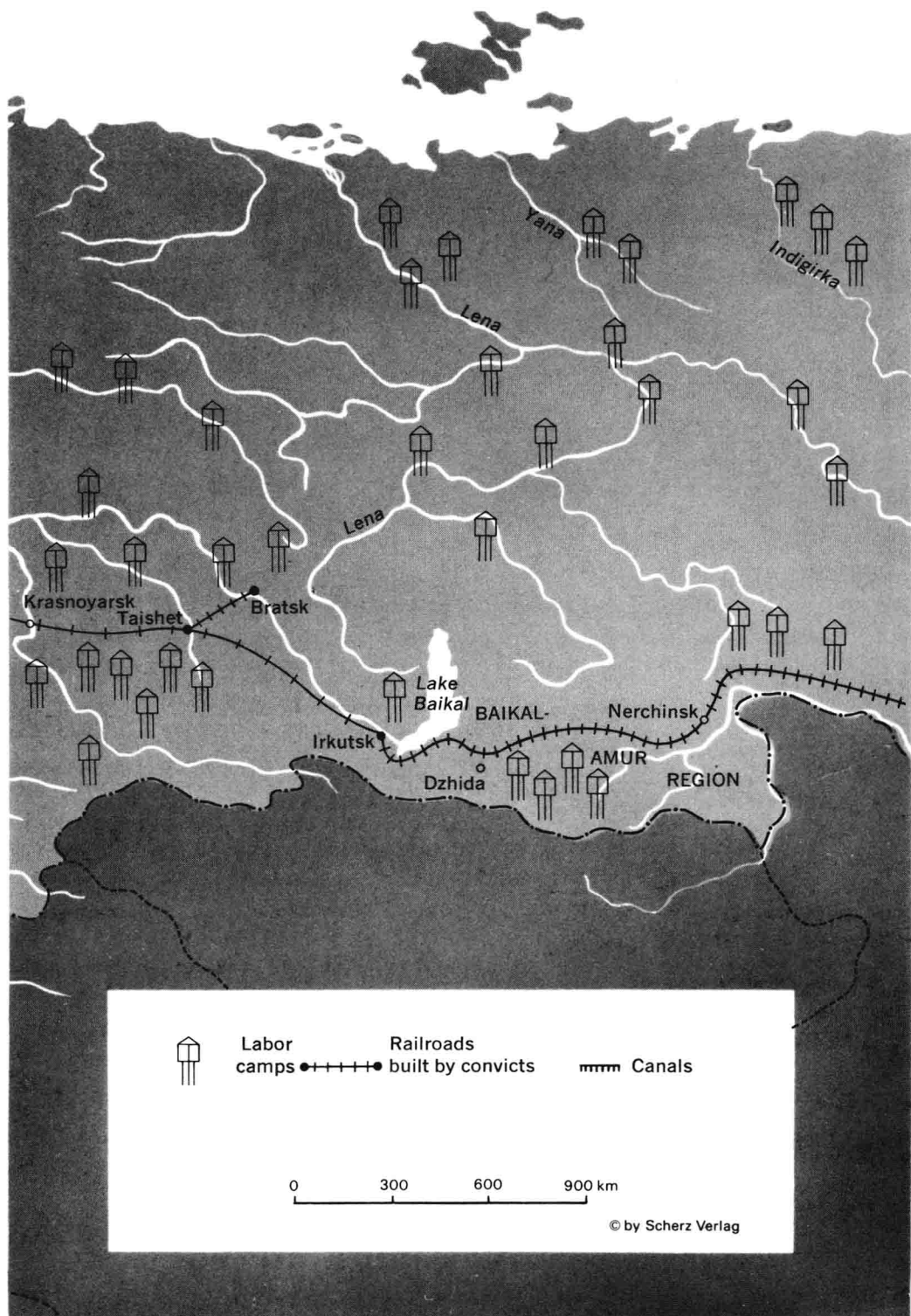
Quotation from a letter of a Hutzul girl, a former zek*

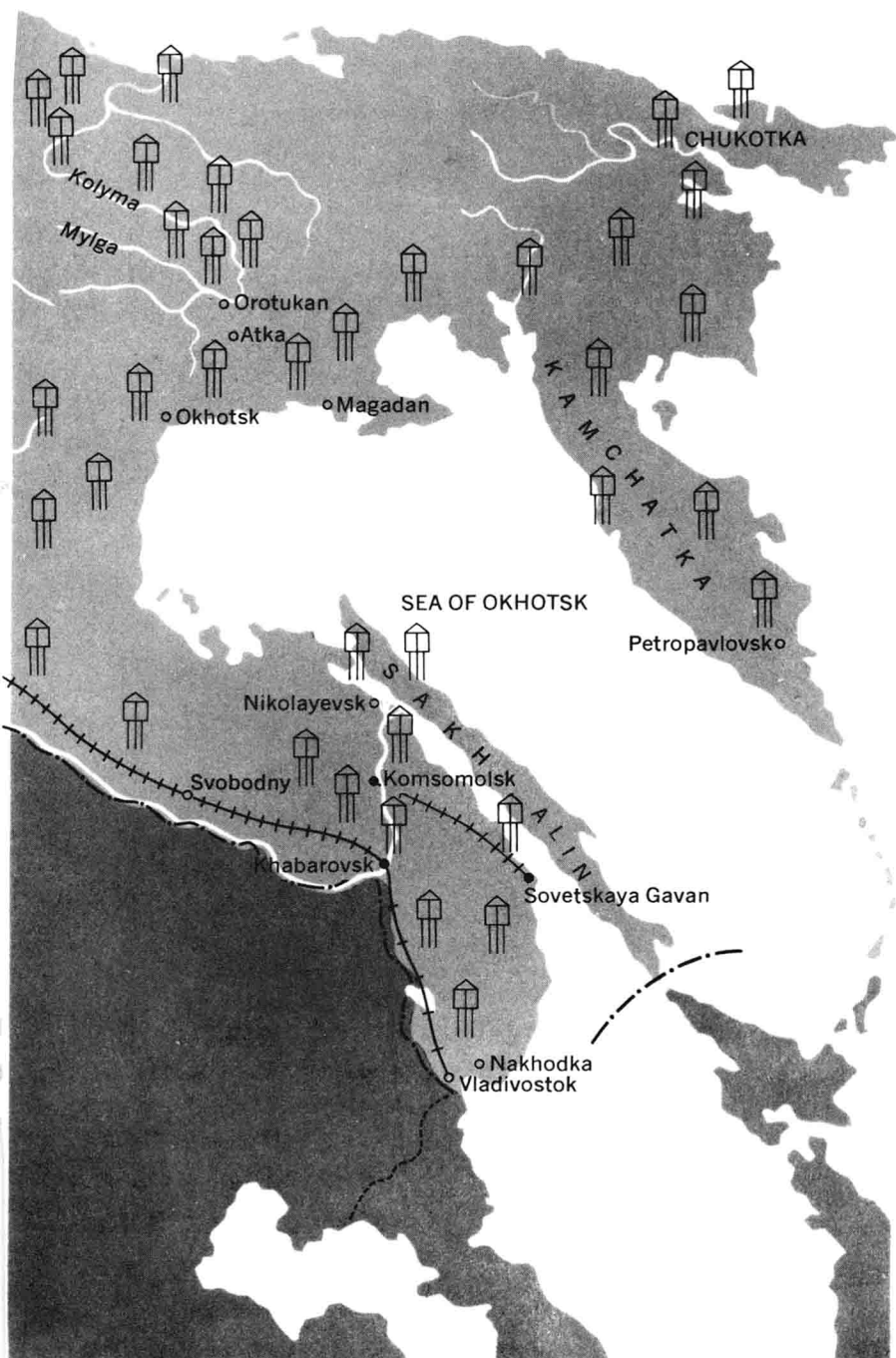
* See Translator's Notes, page 673.

THE DESTRUCTIVE-LABOR CAMPS











Solzhenitsyn, July, 1946, as a prisoner in the Kaluga Camp, Moscow

There is no limit to what should be included in this part. To attain and encompass its savage meaning one would have to drag out many lives in the camps—the very same in which one cannot survive for even one term without some special advantage because they were invented for *destruction*.

And from this it follows that all those who drank of this most deeply, who explored it most fully, are already in their graves and cannot tell us. No one now can ever tell us the *most important thing* about these camps.

And the whole scope of this story and of this truth is beyond the capabilities of one lonely pen. All I had was a peephole into the Archipelago, not the view from a tower. But, fortunately, several other books have emerged and more will emerge. In the *Kolyma Stories* of Shalamov the reader will perhaps feel more truly and surely the pitilessness of the spirit of the Archipelago and the limits of human despair.

To taste the sea all one needs is one gulp.

Chapter 1



The Fingers of Aurora

Rosy-fingered Eos, so often mentioned in Homer and called Aurora by the Romans, caressed, too, with those fingers the first early morning of the Archipelago.

When our compatriots heard via the BBC that M. Mihajlov claimed to have discovered that concentration camps had existed in our country as far back as 1921, many of us (and many in the West too) were astonished: That early really? Even in 1921?

Of course not! Of course Mihajlov was in error. In 1921, in fact, concentration camps were already in full flower (already even *coming to an end*). It would be far more accurate to say that the Archipelago was born with the shots of the cruiser *Aurora*.*

And how could it have been otherwise? Let us pause to ponder.

Didn't Marx and Engels teach that the old bourgeois machinery of compulsion had to be broken up, and *a new one created* immediately in its place? And included in the machinery of compulsion were: the army (we are not surprised that the Red Army was created at the beginning of 1918); the police (the militia* was inaugurated even sooner than the army); the courts (from November 22, 1917); and the prisons. How, in establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat, could they delay with a new type of prison?

That is to say that it was altogether impermissible to delay in the matter of prisons, whether old or new. In the first months after the October Revolution Lenin was already demanding "the most

decisive, draconic measures to tighten up discipline.”¹ And are draconic measures possible—without prison?

What new could the proletarian state contribute here? Lenin was feeling out new paths. In December, 1917, he suggested for consideration the following assortment of punishments: “confiscation of all property . . . confinement in prison, dispatch to the front and forced labor for all who disobey the existing law.”² Thus we can observe that the leading idea of the Archipelago—*forced labor*—had been advanced in the first month after the October Revolution.

And even while sitting peacefully among the fragrant hay mowings of Razliv* and listening to the buzzing bumblebees, Lenin could not help but ponder the future penal system. Even then he had worked things out and reassured us: “The suppression of the minority of exploiters by the majority of the hired slaves of yesterday is a matter so comparatively easy, simple and natural, that it is going to cost much less in blood . . . will be much cheaper for humanity” than the preceding suppression of the majority by the minority.³

According to the estimates of émigré Professor of Statistics Kurganov, this “comparatively easy” internal repression cost us, from the beginning of the October Revolution up to 1959, a total of . . . sixty-six million—66,000,000—lives. We, of course, cannot vouch for his figure, but we have none other that is official. And just as soon as the official figure is issued the specialists can make the necessary critical comparisons.

It is interesting to compare other figures. How large was the total staff of the *central* apparatus of the terrifying Tsarist Third Department, which runs like a strand through all the great Russian literature? At the time of its creation it had sixteen persons, and at its height it had forty-five. A ridiculously small number for even the remotest Cheka provincial headquarters in the country. Or, how many political prisoners did the February Revolution find in the Tsarist “Prison of the Peoples”? All these figures do exist somewhere. In all probability there were more than a hundred such prisoners in the Kresty Prison alone, and several hundred returned from Siberian exile and hard labor, and

1. Lenin, *Sobrennye Sochineniya* (Collected Works), fifth edition, Vol. 36, p. 217.

2. *Ibid.*, Vol. 35, p. 176.

3. *Ibid.*, Vol. 33, p. 90.

how many more were languishing in the prison of every provincial capital! But it is interesting to know—exactly how many. Here is a figure for Tambov, taken from the fiery local papers. The February Revolution, which opened wide the doors of the Tambov Prison, found there political prisoners in the number of . . . seven (7) persons. And there were more than forty provinces. (It is superfluous to recall that from February to July, 1917, there were no political arrests, and after July the number imprisoned could be counted on one's fingers.)

Here, however, was the trouble: The first Soviet government was a coalition government, and a portion of the people's commissariats had to be allotted, like it or not, to the Left SR's, including, unhappily, the People's Commissariat of Justice, which fell to them. Guided by rotten petty bourgeois concepts of freedom, this People's Commissariat of Justice brought the penal system to the verge of ruin. The sentences turned out to be too light, and they made hardly any use at all of the progressive principle of forced labor. In February, 1918, the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, Comrade Lenin, demanded that the number of places of imprisonment be increased and that repression of criminals be intensified,⁴ and in May, already going over to concrete guidance, he gave instructions⁵ that the sentence for bribery must be *not less than* ten years of prison and ten years of forced labor *in addition*, i.e., a total of twenty years. This scale might seem pessimistic at first: would forced labor really still be necessary after twenty years? But we know that forced labor turned out to be a very long-lived measure, and that even after fifty years it would still be extremely popular.

For many months after the October Revolution the prison personnel everywhere remained Tsarist, and the only new officials named were *Commissars* of prisons. The brazen jailers went so far as to create their own *trade union* ("The Union of Prison Employees") and established an *elective basis* for prison administration! (The only time in all Russian history!) The prisoners were not to be left behind either—they, too, had their own internal self-government. (Circular of the People's Commissariat of Justice, April 24, 1918: prisoners, wherever possible, were to be brought into self-verification and self-supervision.)

4. *Ibid.*, Vol. 54, p. 391.

5. *Ibid.*, Vol. 50, p. 70.

Naturally such a free commune of convicts (“anarchical licentiousness”) did not correspond to the needs of the dictatorship of the progressive class and was of sorry help in purging harmful insects from the Russian land. (And what could one expect—if the prison chapels had not been closed, and our Soviet prisoners were willingly going there on Sundays, even if only to pass the time!)

Of course, even the Tsarist jailers were not entirely a loss to the proletariat, for after all theirs was a *profession* important to the most immediate purposes of the Revolution. And therefore it was necessary to “select those persons of the prison administration who have not become totally calloused and stupefied in the patterns of Tsarist prisons [And what does ‘not totally’ mean? And how would you find that out? Does it mean they had forgotten ‘God save the Tsar’?] who can be used for work at the new tasks.”⁶ (Did they, for example, answer precisely, “Yes, sir!” and “No, sir,” or turn the key in the lock quickly?) And, of course, the prison buildings themselves, their cells, their bars and locks, although in appearance they remained exactly as before, in actual fact had acquired a *new class content*, a lofty revolutionary meaning.

And nevertheless, the habit of the courts, right up to the middle of 1918, of keeping right on, out of inertia, sentencing “to prison, to prison,” slowed the breakup of the old machinery of state in its prison area.

In the middle of 1918, to be exact on July 6, an event took place whose significance is not grasped by everyone, an event superficially known as the “suppression of the revolt of the Left SR’s.” But this was, in fact, a coup d’état, of hardly any less significance than October 25. On October 25 the power—the government—of the Soviets of Workers’ and Peasants’ Deputies was proclaimed, whence the name *Soviet power*. But in its first months this new government was very much beclouded by the presence in it of other parties besides the Bolsheviks. Although the coalition government consisted only of the Bolsheviks and the Left SR’s, nonetheless, in the membership of the All-Russian Congresses (the Second, Third, and Fourth), and of the All-Russian Central Executive Committees (VTsIK’s) which they elected, there were still included some representatives of other

6. *Sovetskaya Yustitsiya* (a collection of articles, *Soviet Justice*), Moscow, 1919, p. 20.