

GARY KERN

## Solzhenitsyn's Portrait of Stalin

Alexander Solzhenitsyn's novella *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* contains only one reference to Iosif Stalin: "In the room someone was yelling: 'So the old man with the moustache will have mercy on you! He wouldn't believe his own brother, let alone slobbs like you!'"<sup>1</sup> Despite these disrespectful words, the novella's condemnation of Stalin and the society controlled by him is basically an indirect one. As Georg Lukács observes: "Solzhenitsyn's achievement consists in the literary transformation of an uneventful day in a typical camp into a symbol of a past which has not yet been overcome. . . . Although the camps epitomize one extreme of the Stalin era, the author has made his skilful grey monochrome of camp life into a symbol of everyday life under Stalin."<sup>2</sup> Understated, allusive, and deceptively simple, the novella, published with Khrushchev's personal approval in December 1962, marked the crest of the party's anti-Stalin campaign. Within months Khrushchev called for a brake on prison-camp literature, and Solzhenitsyn began to encounter increasingly severe and decisive critical opposition.

The novel *The First Circle* (*V krughe pervom*, 1955–64), published abroad in 1968 four years after Khrushchev's removal, takes a different tack. Here Solzhenitsyn retains the central symbol of his novella (prison life as a reflection of the social structure), but he relies far less on hints, allusions, and subtle relationships between the characters to enliven this symbol. Instead, he depicts life both in a prison and in the outside society, he names and details the crimes of the Stalin era, and far from limiting himself to mere references to Stalin (as in all his other works), he presents him as one of the main characters of the book. Unlike the other characters, Stalin is not seen throughout the novel, but appears only in a block of four chapters out of eighty-seven. Nevertheless, these chapters (chaps. 18–21) are sufficient to establish him as the center from which all the evil in the novel flows.

1. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh* (Frankfurt am Main: Possev, 1969–70), 1:116. Cf. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, trans. Ronald Hingley and Max Hayward (New York: Bantam, 1969), pp. 176–77.

2. Georg Lukács, *Solzhenitsyn*, trans. William David Graf (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p. 13.

This change in approach—from an indirect attack on Stalinism to a direct attack—involved new problems, both artistic and political. The present article attempts to explore some of these problems.

### *Preparation*

Many readers of *The First Circle* regard the portrait of Stalin as a crude caricature. The satire is so bitter, the authorial comments so sarcastic, that one feels the author vents his personal rancor and loses control of his craft. Without attempting to prove the success or failure of the portrait, we can direct attention to some of its less striking features and observe its complex artistic structure. Solzhenitsyn does not introduce Stalin immediately, but prepares for his entrance in subtle ways. In chapters 1 to 18, party officials are presented in an order of ascending power, which culminates with Stalin. At the same time, references to Stalin occur with increasing frequency as the chapters containing the portrait approach. To appreciate the complexity of this preparation we must briefly consider the structure of the novel as a whole, and then we can examine the portrait itself.

In its formal structure *The First Circle* provides a pattern of shifting perspectives. The first chapter portrays State Counselor Innokenty Volodin on December 24, 1949, as he telephones his childhood doctor to warn him against a dangerous collaboration with foreigners. The phone call is cut off by a third party, and Volodin worries whether his voice can be identified. The second chapter introduces the reader to the inmates of the Mavrino Special Prison, where qualified “zeks” (convicts) have been gathered from concentration camps to work on Stalin’s project of voice coding—and later, voice identification. In this way Volodin’s act motivates the remainder of the novel: his fate is to be decided by the success or failure of the project. Accordingly, he appears only as an occasional figure, a reminder, until the final chapters of the book (chaps. 82–84), which describe his arrest and induction into Lubyanka Prison. Within the frame of Volodin’s fate, the bulk of the novel concerns the thoughts and activities of the Mavrino zeks. However, when the zeks come into contact with their superiors or people from the outside world, the novel devotes a block of chapters to these characters as well (for example, chapters 44–47, which center on Nerzhin’s wife Nadya after her visit to the prison). Since the thread of the narrative passes from character to character in a manner incomprehensible to any one character, it is obvious that an omniscient author is recording the fates of diverse people. And by presenting each character within the context of a problem and revealing his thoughts through interior monologues or omniscient ap-

praisals, the author orchestrates a composition of shifting perspectives on the society at large.<sup>3</sup>

From the first chapter to the block of chapters on Stalin, the perspective passes from Volodin (a person wary of the society's secret workings) to the Mavrino zeks (the enlightened heathens of Dante's first circle) to the director of the Mavrino project (Yakonov, chap. 10) to Yakonov's immediate superiors (Oskolupov, Sevastyanov, and Ryumin, chap. 15) to their superior—the Minister of State Security Abakumov (chaps. 15, 16, 17). This arrangement, well modulated by the interaction of these characters, permits the author to uncover the illusory nature of each man's power, ultimately dependent on Stalin's whim. For example, as they enter Abakumov's office for a decisive meeting, Sevastyanov, Oskolupov, and Yakonov advance "Indian-file, in order of seniority, down the pattern of the carpet, almost on each other's heels—and only Sevastyanov's steps were audible."<sup>4</sup> In chapter 15, entitled "A Troika of Liars," these three wheedle and scrape before the all-powerful Abakumov, who spends the better part of chapter 20 wheedling and scraping before Stalin. But over Abakumov (and, we are told, even his superior Beria) there stands Poskrebyshev, the personal secretary of Stalin, a veterinarian prized by Stalin because "he considered himself a nonentity before the Boss" (chap. 18, p. 116). It is Poskrebyshev who admits the trembling Abakumov (chap. 20). After the chapters on Stalin, the author devotes two chapters to Yakonov (chaps. 22, 23), picking up the thread of his story after his meeting with Abakumov (chap. 15). This step down in rank, from Stalin to Yakonov, prepares the reader for a return to the Mavrino Prison and its zeks, who occupy most of the chapters which follow.

Simultaneous with this movement of ranks and perspectives, a curious and equally ironic verbal movement takes place. From the very beginning Stalin is not referred to by name, but by epithet. On the first page we read: "Knowing the nocturnal habits of the Sovereign, the three score ministers sat up like schoolboys in expectation of a summons" (pp. 1–2). Subsequent pages contain a series of mock-heroic epithets: "the Leader of the Peoples" (chap. 3), "the Plowman" (chaps. 5 and 8), "He's the Robespierre and Napoleon of our Revolution wrapped up in one" (says Rubin, chap. 8),

3. The very high incidence of interrelationships between the characters suggests, as in *Doctor Zhivago*, that the novel concerns the life of a whole people. For example, Nerzhin's wife Nadya is courted by Shchagov, who seeks marriage with Liza, whom he meets at the home of two sisters—Clara, who works at Mavrino and is courted by Nerzhin's companion Doronin, and Dotnara, who is the wife of Volodin.

4. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Bantam, 1969), pp. 82–83. Subsequent citations in English are taken from, or based on, this translation.

“the Leader of Nations” (chap. 9), “the Boss,” “the Father of the Western and Eastern Peoples,” “the Father of the Peoples” (all from chap. 10). At this point Stalin’s actual surname (an alias), previously mentioned only once (chap. 2) and twice used as an adjective (for example, “the Stalin Prize,” chaps. 6 and 10), is directly linked with the epithets:

It happened that *the Leader of All Progressive Humanity* once talked with Yenan Province and was dissatisfied with the squeals and static on the telephone. He called in Beria and said in Georgian: “Lavrenty! What kind of an idiot have you got as head of communications? Get rid of him.”

So they got rid of Mamurin; that is, they imprisoned him in the Lubyanka. . . . But, mindful of the saying, “It’s you today, me tomorrow,” his former colleagues stood by Mamurin. When they were convinced that *Stalin* had forgotten him, they sent him without interrogation and without sentence to the suburban country house at Mavrino. (p. 54, my italics—GK)

Having established the surname, the author is ready to state the given name and patronymic. In so doing, he adds a nuance of greater familiarity and consequent irony:

Mamurin confessed to Rubin that it was not the prison food that was so awful (his was prepared specially); nor was it the pain of being parted from his family (once a month they took him secretly to his own apartment, where he spent the night); it was not so much his primitive animal needs—but it was bitter to have lost the confidence of *Iosif Vissarionovich* . . . (p. 56, my italics—GK)

This quotation illustrates another aspect of these references to Stalin: they do not always represent the voice of the omniscient author (who speaks in the parentheses of the quotation), but sometimes the direct statements, indirect statements, and mental perspectives of the characters. It is the author who calls Stalin “the Sovereign” on page 1, but the free-thinking zeks Gleb Nerzhin (an autobiographical figure) and Ruska Doronin both call him “the Plowman” (direct quotations, chaps. 5, 8, 14), and the former official Mamurin—speaking to the Communist Rubin—calls him Iosif Vissarionovich. The remaining epithets are extremely sarcastic: “the Wise Teacher,” “the Best Friend of the Communications Workers” (chap. 10), “the Greatest Genius of Geniuses” (chap. 11), “the Plowman” (chap. 14), “the Great Generalissimo,” “the Most Brilliant Strategist of All Times and Peoples,” “the Best Friend of Counterintelligence Operatives,” “Stalin” (note the progression), “the Coryphaeus of Sciences” (all from chap. 15). Once again the author mentions Stalin by name, but this time with a special touch of irony:

It [Abakumov's office] was so spacious Pryanichikov did not even realize at once that it was an office, nor that the individual with gold shoulder boards at the far end was its owner. Nor did he notice the fifteen-foot tall Stalin [that is, the painting of Stalin] behind his back. (chap. 16, p. 91)

In the last preparatory chapter (chap. 17), the name "Stalin" is used freely (four times), and the stage is set for the entrance of the hero. After his departure, it should be noted, Stalin's name occurs less frequently (chaps. 27, 34, etc.) and the epithets even less frequently (chaps. 29, 45, etc.).

Such an elaborate preparation for the portrait of Stalin emphasizes his position of power within the novel. Just as in Dante's *Inferno*, in which the magnitude of sinfulness increases as one passes through the circles of hell toward Satan, so the scale of ranks and epithets leads us to the pinnacle of evil in *The First Circle*. It is from Stalin that all actions radiate and upon his personal caprice that the whole machine operates. He is the "Absolute Ruler" (chap. 20), the peak of the power pyramid, and he dreams of such titles for himself as "Emperor of the Planet" and "Emperor of the Earth" (chap. 21). In the four chapters on Stalin, Solzhenitsyn draws a portrait of a man with unlimited power, a man whose squint can mean death and whose every word must be hailed as genius. Such a mind inevitably has no foundation, dwells in megalomaniac fantasies, and begins to eat away at itself. It is this process that Solzhenitsyn delineates, again by a careful use of shifting perspectives.

In such a large novel as *The First Circle* certain patterns of construction naturally repeat themselves. The typical chapter in this work begins by presenting a character in the midst of a problem or situation. His conversation with another character or his interior monologue follows. Next, the author offers background information on the character (omniscient author) or a flashback (interior monologue). Then there is a return to the present moment, and a new development occurs. The chapter concludes with a final statement, often ironical. This pattern is dynamic in that it depicts a change in the situation and lays the groundwork for a new situation. Its inner tension derives from the conflict or interaction between the characters involved.

The four chapters on Stalin generally retain this pattern, but only in the third is there any extended dialogue. Since Stalin is alone for the most part, the tension in these chapters derives almost entirely from the conflict between the perspective of the author and that of the character. At least four such perspectives or "voices" can be distinguished: (1) *The omniscient author*. Statements are made from a point of view or with a knowledge inaccessible to the character. Example: "He [Stalin] noticed, but was afraid to admit it,

that his health was getting worse and worse every month" (p. 100). (2) *Stalin's interior monologue*. Statements are made exclusively from Stalin's point of view. Since these statements lack quotation marks and occur in the second or third person, they are properly considered "indirect interior monologue."<sup>5</sup> Example (which follows the one above): ". . . In the Caucasus a man of seventy was still a young fellow! Up the mountain, up on a horse, up on a woman. And he had been so healthy!" (3) *The ironic author*. Statements are made from Stalin's point of view, but are not part of his interior monologue. In these statements a great distance is felt between the viewpoints of (1) and (2). In short, the omniscient author is ironizing. Example: "The exile of whole nationalities was both his [Stalin's] major theoretical contribution and his boldest experiment, but now nothing else remained to be done" (p. 109). The irony here derives from what Evgenii Zamiatin called "a falsely positive statement." The reader rebels against the logic of the example above, just as he rebels against the conclusion of Zamiatin's *We*: "And I hope—we will conquer. More: I am certain—we will conquer. Because reason must conquer." This statement is made by the hero D-503 after the "organ of fantasy" has been cut out of his brain and he has betrayed the heroine I-330 in the name of "reason": the reader (who has not lost this organ) cannot agree with him. Likewise, Solzhenitsyn elicits the reader's disagreement when he presents Stalin's most depraved deeds and repugnant thoughts as a positive achievement. (4) *Direct quotations*. These may be of various types: a character's thought (direct interior monologue), his speech, a dialogue, his written words, a printed text, and so forth. Example: "Stalin crossed out 'rarely' and wrote in 'not always'" (p. 114). In addition, Solzhenitsyn often titles a chapter with a quotation drawn from the chapter itself. This gives the quotation a significance or nuance it would not ordinarily have in context.

The interplay of these four voices varies in each of the chapters on Stalin. Chapter 18, entitled "The Birthday Hero" (ironic author), details Stalin's reflections on the occasion of his seventieth birthday (interior monologue). These reflections are contrasted with the truth (omniscient author). Chapter 19 is entitled "Language Is a Tool of Production," words written down by Stalin as he feebly attempts to compose an essay on linguistics. These and other words from the essay (direct quotations) are contrasted with

5. This term is favored by G. Schaarschmidt, "Interior Monologue and Soviet Literary Criticism," *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 7 (1966): 143–45. The term "quasi-direct discourse" is preferred by R. Luplow, "Narrative Style and Structure in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*," *Russian Literature TriQuarterly*, no. 1 (1971), p. 400. The term "represented discourse" is defended by Vladimir J. Rus, "*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*: A Point of View Analysis," *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 13 (1971): 167. Each term has its merits.

Stalin's mental reactions to them (interior monologue). The title of chapter 20 quotes Abakumov's words to Stalin within the chapter: "Give Us Back Capital Punishment, Iosif Vissarionovich." The chapter adds the dimension of quoted dialogue to the portrait. Chapter 21, the final one of the block, returns the reader to Stalin's interior monologue after Abakumov's exit, but in this instance the monologue is framed by the perspective of the omniscient author. This chapter is entitled "Old Age" (omniscient author) and begins with the words: "The Immortal, stirred by great thoughts, paced his night office . . ." (p. 130). There follow Stalin's intimations of his own death, his inclinations toward religion, and his secret longing to be recognized as a Russian (interior monologue). The chapter ends with the omniscient verdict: "Death had already made its nest in him, and he refused to believe it" (p. 134). In each instance the interplay of voices produces a single impression: Stalin is false, hypocritical, and diseased.

### *The Portrait*

We are now prepared to look closely at the portrait of Stalin. Even here Stalin does not step forward immediately, but appears after a brief description of the setting:

The room was small and low. There were two doors and no windows, but the air was fresh and pleasant. A special engineer was responsible for its circulation and purity. Much of the room was taken up by a low, dark ottoman with flower-patterned pillows. Twin light bulbs with light-rose glass shades burned on the wall above it. (p. 98)

The setting is first described by what it lacks—the absence of windows, as in a painting, producing an enclosed, isolated atmosphere. The third sentence emphasizes the hermetic nature of the room, its removal from the normal world of open space and fresh air. Attention then turns to the main piece of furniture in the room, a few details being taken in at a glance. These details (the *low, dark* ottoman occupied *much* space) reinforce the feeling of confinement.<sup>6</sup> Now the reader is ready to observe the single presence in the room:

На оттомане лежал человек, чье изображение столько раз было изваяно в статуях, писано маслом, акварелью, гуашью, сепией, рисовано углем, мелом, толченым кирпичем, сложено из придорожной гальки, из

6. Later, in chapter 19, the author connects the absence of space with a psychological motivation: "He [Stalin] himself had described *space* as the basic condition for material existence. But having made himself the master of one-sixth of terrestrial matter, he had begun to be afraid of space. That was what was good about his night office: there was no *space*" (p. 113).



морских ракушек, поливанной плитки, из зерен пшеницы и соевых бобов, вырезано по кости, выращено из травы, выткано на коврах, составлено из самолетов, заснято на кинолентку—как ничье никогда за три миллиарда лет существования земной коры.<sup>7</sup>

On the ottoman reclined the man whose likeness had been sculpted in stone; painted in oil, water colors, gouache, sepia; drawn in charcoal, chalk and crushed brick; formed out of wayside pebbles, sea shells, glazed tiles, grains of wheat and soy beans; carved from ivory, grown in grass, woven into rugs, formed by airplanes, photographed on motion picture film . . . like no other likeness during the three billion years of the earth's crust. (p. 99)

Here, it would seem, the author finally portrays his subject, but on second look we discover something very curious: we do not see Stalin at all. Rather, we are blinded by his fame. An immense, parasitic structure, consisting of one inflated dependent clause, attaches to the simple and neutral word *chelovek* (man). The headpiece of the structure (*ch'e izobrazhenie*) introduces a series of past-participle parallels (*izvaiano . . . pisano . . . risovano . . . slozheno . . . vyrezano . . . vyrashcheno . . . vytkano . . . sostavleno . . . zasniato*), which contain their own mini-paragraphs of prepositions (*v . . . iz . . . iz . . . po . . . na . . . na*) and are framed by the hyperbolic tailpiece (*kak nich'e nikogda za tri milliarda let*). The interaction of verbal prefixes and prepositions (*vy-rezano po . . . vy-rashcheno iz . . . vy-tkano na . . .*) infuses the structure with great energy, demonstrating that the likeness (*izobrazhenie*) has been extracted from or forced into nearly every material in existence. Confronted with this structure, the reader views the man as he might anyone of overwhelming fame: in a shocked state, aware of the identity and presence of the man, but unable to perceive anything else.<sup>8</sup>

Only now does the author offer a description—but merely a surface one. He concentrates on Stalin's clothes while divesting him of the spellbinding aura of his fame. The result is clearly deflating:

А он просто лежал, немного подобрав ноги в мягких кавказских сапогах, похожих на плотные чулки. На нем был френч с четырьмя большими карманами, нагрудными и боковыми,—старый, обжитый, из

7. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *V krughe pervom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 80. All Russian citations are taken from this text. There are two additional chapters said to exist in *samizdat*—"In the Open" (chap. 44) and "Dialectical Materialism: An Advanced World View" (chap. 88)—but these were not available for the present study.

8. Solzhenitsyn did not avail himself of all the ways in which Stalin was represented. On the occasion of Stalin's seventieth birthday, his image was projected onto a low cloud over Red Square. A photograph of the event is reproduced in *Problems of Communism*, 16, no. 6 (1967): 80.



тех серых, защитных, черных и белых френчей, какие он усвоил носить с гражданской войны и сменил на маршальский мундир только после Сталинграда.

But he simply lay there with his feet up, wearing soft Caucasian boots which were like heavy stockings. He wore a service jacket with four large pockets, two on the chest, two on the sides—old, well worn, one of those grey, camouflage, black and white service jackets which he had taken to wearing since the Civil War and had changed for a marshal's uniform only after Stalingrad. (p. 99)

The most damaging thing about this description is its context. Elsewhere, for example in the official biography of Stalin or in the eulogistic fiction written about him (to be mentioned below), the picture of the First Secretary lying on a low ottoman in an old service jacket might bear witness to human qualities or might be connected with an endearing anecdote. But here, after such an impressive display of his fame, it suggests smallness, fatuity. This suggestion is abetted by a few unobtrusive words: "*But he simply*" (which indicates a letdown); "*old, well worn . . . camouflage . . . jackets*" (ludicrous in civilian life); "*which he had taken to wearing*" (as though it were an eccentricity); "*and had changed for a marshal's uniform only after Stalingrad*" (as though Stalingrad had permitted him to raise his own rank). Solzhenitsyn is much subtler than Philip Roth, who straightaway describes President Nixon in a blast-proof locker room under the White House, wearing his old football uniform and stealing a glance at his big shoulders in a mirror, but the effect he achieves is about the same.<sup>9</sup>

Having given the reader only a superficial, satiric description of Stalin, the author returns to his subject's colossal prestige. Again a Tolstoyan structure of parallels is erected, the whole paragraph—based on the man's name (*imia*)—forming a parallel to the paragraph on his likeness. Note that both paragraphs end in hyperbole:

Имя этого человека склоняли газеты земного шара, бормотали тысячи дикторов на сотнях языков, выкрикивали докладчики в началах и окончаниях речей, выпевали тонкие пионерские голоса, провозглашали во здравие архиереи. Имя этого человека запекалось на обмирающих губах военнопленных, на опухших деснах арестантов. По имени этому во множестве были переименованы города и площади, улицы и проспекты, школы, санатории, горные хребты, морские каналы, заводы, шахты, совхозы, колхозы, линкоры, ледоколы, рыболовные баркасы, сапожные артели, детские ясли—и группа московских журналистов предлагала также переименовать Волгу и Луну.

9. Philip Roth, *Our Gang* (New York: Bantam, 1972), pp. 24–25.

This man's name filled the world's newspapers, was uttered by thousands of announcers in hundreds of languages, cried out by speakers at the beginning and the end of speeches, sung by the tender young voices of Pioneers, and proclaimed by bishops. This man's name was baked on the lips of dying prisoners of war, on the swollen gums of camp prisoners. It had been given to a multitude of cities and squares, streets and boulevards, schools, sanatoriums, mountain ranges, canals, factories, mines, state and collective farms, battleships, icebreakers, fishing boats, shoemakers' artels, nursery schools—and a group of Moscow journalists had proposed that it be given also to the Volga and to the Moon. (p. 99)

As in the preceding instance, the great bubble of prestige is immediately punctured, the point of the needle consisting of almost the very same words:

А он был просто маленький старик с усохшею на шее кожной сумочкой (ее не изображали на портретах), со ртом, пропахшим листовым турецким табаком, с жирными пальцами, оставлявшими следы на книгах. Ему нехорошо было вчера и сегодня. Спиною и плечами он в теплом воздухе ощущал холодок и прикрыл их бурой верблюжьей шалью.

But he was simply a little old man with a desiccated double chin (it was never shown in his portraits), a mouth permeated with the smell of Turkish leaf tobacco, and fat fingers which left their traces on books. He had not been feeling too well yesterday or today. Even in the warm air he felt a chill on his back and shoulders, and he had covered himself with a brown camel's-hair shawl. (p. 99)

Thus, at this point in the chapter, we have a brief description of the setting, a paragraph on Stalin's likeness (I), a paragraph on his clothes (IA), a parallel paragraph on his name (II), and a parallel paragraph on his physical appearance (IIA). Solzhenitsyn's method here is distinctly reminiscent of Tolstoy's *smiatie pokrov* (tearing off the veils). He first presents the veil, the bubble, the illusion (I, II), and then he deftly whisks it away, punctures it, tears it to shreds (IA, IIA). The same method is evident in chapter 20, where the question of Stalin's wise distrust of others is raised:

. . . Distrust was Iosif Djughashvili's determining trait. Distrust was his world view.

He did not trust his mother. . . . And he did not trust God. . . . He did not trust his party members. . . . He did not trust his classmates. . . . He did not trust the muzhiks. . . . He did not trust the workers. . . . He did not trust the intelligentsia. . . . He did not trust the soldiers and generals. . . . He did not trust those close to him. . . . And he did not trust his wives and lovers. And his children he did not trust. And he always turned out to be right!

And then he trusted just one man. . . .  
That man was Adolf Hitler. (p. 122)

The initial presentation of Stalin is completed in the following paragraph. As in the elaborate preparation, the name of Stalin has been withheld until the last moment. Once again a seemingly objective account is lightly laced with acid. I have taken the liberty of italicizing the more acerbic words (save the book title):

He was in no hurry to go anywhere, and he leafed *with satisfaction* through a small book in a hard brown binding. He looked *eagerly* at the photographs and here and there read the text, which he knew *almost by heart*, then went on turning the pages. The little book was all the more convenient because it could fit into an overcoat pocket. It could accompany people *everywhere in their lives*. It contained two hundred and fifty pages, but it was printed in large stout type so that both *the illiterate and the old* could read it *without strain*. Its title was stamped on the binding in gold: *Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin: A Short Biography*. (pp. 99–100)

The external portrait is finished. Now Solzhenitsyn moves in on Stalin's mind. As Stalin's fat fingers eagerly turn over the pages of the little book, his eyes alight on the extra-large lettering so convenient for the illiterate, and his mind speaks to itself. Solzhenitsyn quotes actual words from the text of the biography (first published in 1948) and places Stalin's mental reactions to them in parentheses:

. . . His strategic genius. His wise foresight. His powerful will. His iron will. From 1918 on he had for all practical purposes become Lenin's deputy. (Yes, yes, that was the way it had been! . . .) The Commander of the Revolution found at the front a rout, confusion; Stalin's instructions were the basis for Frunze's plan of operations. . . . (True, true.) It was our great good fortune that in the difficult days of the Great War of the Fatherland we were led by a wise and experienced leader—the Great Stalin. (Indeed, the people were fortunate.) All know the crushing might of Stalin's logic, the crystal clarity of his mind. (Without false modesty, it was all true.) His love for the people. His sensitivity to others. His intolerance of noisy and showy acclaim. His surprising modesty. (Modesty—yes, that was very true.) (p. 100)<sup>10</sup>

Stalin's final response drives home the point that all the praise in the biography is false. The reader sees him completely unmasked: a little man with a big name, lying in an old war jacket he did not earn, skimming a

10. Solzhenitsyn's quotations are very close to passages on pp. 83, 73, 77, 242, and 239, in I. V. Stalin, *Kratkaia biografia*, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1950). Unfortunately, the first edition was not available for this study.

book about his phony exploits and talents and trying to convince himself that they are true. To achieve this effect Solzhenitsyn has juxtaposed fact (the fawning biography) and fiction (Stalin's thoughts), but a look at historical materials will reveal that the fictional element is solidly grounded on fact. In his "secret speech" to the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU (1956), Nikita Khrushchev reported that Stalin personally approved and edited the *Short Biography* and even made additions in his own hand to the draft text of the book. As an example of Stalin's additions, Khrushchev quotes the following passage:

Although he performed his task of leader of the party and the people with consummate skill and enjoyed the unreserved support of the entire Soviet people, Stalin never allowed his work to be marred by the slightest hint of vanity, conceit or self-adulation.<sup>11</sup>

In the following paragraphs of the portrait we learn that Stalin is seventy, failing in health, having trouble remembering, feeling nauseous. Still he continues to lie to himself, ruminating about days both near and far. In every instance his rumination touches on historical names and events which underscore the mendacity of his mind. Thus he rages against Traicho Kostov, the Bulgarian leader who repudiated his forced confession at a trial ten days earlier in December 1949. Stalin contentedly recalls watching the films, Virta's *Battle of Stalingrad* and Vishnevsky's *Unforgettable 1919*—two Stalin Prize winners. The author immediately unmaskes the lies in both. Stalin remembers correcting the "rash and too easily trusting" Lenin. Stalin pauses to think of the national holiday—his birthday—which took place just three days before, and also of his boredom on receiving countless gifts and accolades. Stalin reflects on his flight from Moscow in October 1941—and on the execution of all the witnesses to that panic. Stalin again recalls Lenin and his April Theses, which "overturned what had already been done." All these signs of Stalin's duplicity are posted in a fictional setting (Stalin's interior monologue), but they are also verifiable historically. We do not know if Stalin ever pondered these events in this sequence or manner, but they necessarily form part of his record and cannot fail to condemn him.<sup>12</sup>

11. T. H. Rigby, ed., *The Stalin Dictatorship: Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" and Other Documents* (Sydney, 1968), p. 71. Milovan Djilas also describes Stalin in much the same way Solzhenitsyn does. Compare the following passage: "Poets were inspired by him, orchestras blared cantatas in his honor, philosophers in institutes wrote tomes about his sayings, and martyrs died on scaffolds crying out his name. Now he was the victor in the greatest war of his nation and in history. His power, absolute over a sixth of the globe, was spreading farther without surcease. This convinced him that his society contained no contradictions and that it exhibited superiority to other societies in every way." Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin* (New York, 1962), pp. 106-7.

12. Roy A. Medvedev's *Let History Judge* (New York, 1971) might be listed as

Midway in chapter 18, Stalin's interior monologue is interrupted by a scraping at the door. Poskrebyshev enters, and the following snippet of dialogue ensues:

—Есть Сарioniыч! Вы сегодня на полтретьего Абакумову назначили. Будете принимать? Нет? . . .

—Па-смотрим,—устало ответил Сталин и моргнул. —Нё знаю.

—Ну, пусть себе едет. Подождет! . . . Какие распоряжения еще, Ё-Сарioniыч?

—Иды-пока, Саша,—сказал он из-под усов. (Harper ed., p. 84)

"Yos Sarionych! You scheduled Abakumov for two-thirty today. Will you be receiving him? No?" . . .

"We'll see," answered Stalin wearily and blinked. "Dunno."

"Well, let him come anyway. He will wait! . . . Any further instructions, Yo-Sarionych?"

"Run along fer now, Sasha," he said from under his moustaches. (p. 105)

This exchange sets the scene for chapter 20 (Abakumov's interview), but also emphasizes the defective speech of "Yo-Sarionych" (Iosif Vissarionovich), who will write a tract on linguistics in chapter 19. The second half of chapter 18 gives a mirror reflection of the first half. Stalin picks up a second book—*Tito, the Traitors' Marshal* by Renaud de Jouvenel, which sets off a string of reflections on Tito (expelled from the Cominform in 1948), André Marty (to be expelled from the French Communist Party for defending Tito in 1952), Arso Jovanovich (Tito's chief of staff, recruited by Stalin and shot by Yugoslav border guards while trying to escape to Rumania in 1948), Branko Petrichevich (a colonel who fled with Jovanovich, captured and sentenced to twenty years), Béla Kun (liquidated by the purge in 1939), and, once again, Traicho Kostov (executed after the trial). The chapter ends as it began, in a cramped room: Stalin's low-ceilinged, windowless, air-conditioned, armor-plated bedroom. Here Stalin pours himself a glass of liqueur and stares sternly into a mirror. While the mirror reflects an image now familiar to the reader, the ironic author echoes the lying words of Stalin's biography: "His iron will. His inflexible will" (p. 108).

Chapter 18 depicts Stalin in flesh and spirit: an old, flabby body and a flatulent, vicious mind. The remaining three chapters add the finishing touches—the highlights and shadings, as it were, to the portrait. We shall inspect just a few of these details.

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the nonfictional counterpart of Solzhenitsyn's attack. Lacking fiction's means of winning assent, however, Medvedev must argue every point. Solzhenitsyn's *Arkhipelag Gulag* appeared after the present study was completed.

One of Solzhenitsyn's favorite methods has already been exemplified by his use of epithets: he first anticipates a subject, then places it at the center of attention, then refers back to it sometime later.<sup>13</sup> Such a setting is provided for chapter 19. On the evening of the first day (chap. 7) the zeks Nerzhin and Rubin engage in a friendly debate on the etymology of the word "happiness" (*schast'e*). When Rubin, the conscientious Communist, begins to expatiate, Nerzhin cuts him off with a sardonic allusion to Nikolai Marr's attempt to trace all words to the word for "hand" (*ruka*). That night (chap. 19) Stalin begins the essay which will rout the Marrist school of linguistics, previously kept afloat by Stalin himself. The next evening (chap. 45) Rubin reappears with an odd assortment of dictionaries, testifying to the fact that for the past two years he has indeed been trying to confirm Marr's hypothesis—unaware, as the omniscient author remarks, that the "previous night the Coryphaeus of Philology had raised the ideological guillotine over Marr's head" (p. 344).

Solzhenitsyn's "intellectual mimicry" of Stalin's famous article—"Concerning Marxism in Philology" ("Otnositel'no Marksizma v iazykoznanii")—has already been studied by E. J. Brown.<sup>14</sup> At no point does Solzhenitsyn take its thought seriously; rather, he concentrates on the style of certain passages, suggesting very strongly that there is no thought at all. The interminable lists of languages, the superfluous repetitions, the forced teleology, the hedging on small but important words ("not always" instead of "rarely")—all these stylistic infelicities betray a shaky foundation of thought. Solzhenitsyn selects only a few key passages as the germinal ideas of the article. When these fall to pieces, the reader may safely assume that the rest is worthless padding.

If chapter 18 exposes Stalin's debilitated brain and chapter 19 demonstrates the nullity of his theoretical contribution to history, chapter 20 reminds us that Stalin's power was very real. Just before Abakumov's entrance, the author informs us of the stakes involved:

Stalin was terrifying because one mistake in his presence would be that one mistake in life which sets off an explosion, irreversible in effect. Stalin was terrifying because he did not listen to excuses, made no accusations; his yellow tiger eyes simply brightened balefully, his lower lids closed up a bit—and there, inside him, sentence had been passed, and

13. This method is a key compositional device of *One Day*, where nearly every item in Ivan Denisovich's three-part day (morning, work, night) takes on a triple existence: his sickness, his hunk of bread, his spoon, the piece of metal he finds, and so forth.

14. Edward J. Brown, "Solzhenitsyn's Cast of Characters," *Slavic and East European Journal*, 15, no. 2 (1971): 162–63.

the condemned man didn't know: he left in peace, was arrested at night, and shot by morning. (p. 117)

Once again, the fictional detail is factually grounded. In his "secret speech," Khrushchev reported:

Stalin was a very distrustful man, morbidly suspicious; we knew this from our work with him. He could look at a man and say: "Why are your eyes so shifty today?" or "Why are you turning so much today and avoiding looking me straight in the eyes?" The morbid suspicion created in him a general distrust even toward eminent party workers whom he had known for years. Everywhere and in everything he saw "enemies," "two-facers" and "spies."<sup>15</sup>

In the ensuing interview Abakumov's interior monologue confirms the author's previous judgments on Stalin, while the dialogue gives further evidence of Stalin's Georgianized Russian. After questioning Abakumov on the plot to murder Tito, the arrest of Gomułka, the level of dissatisfaction in the country, and the "vacation-resort conditions" of political prisons, Stalin plays a little joke: perhaps Abakumov himself, hints Stalin, may deserve capital punishment. As the reader is aware, this joke eventually became serious.

The final chapter on Stalin returns to the interior-monologue technique of the first. The impression of a mental structure falling to pieces is intensified. Yet it is this chapter which contains the most important plot development of the four. Repeatedly in his mental ramblings, Stalin has tried in vain to recollect one small but nagging problem. On this small problem—the voice coding project at Mavrino—depend the continuation of the novel and the fate of all its characters. Only after Abakumov has been dismissed does Stalin glance at his telephone and remember. The hideous, senile tyrant, despite massive proof of his ineptitude, nevertheless keeps the country firmly in his grip. This great irony—both of the novel and Russian history—concludes the portrait of Stalin. The first day of the novel ends; Christmas day dawns.

### *Stalin's Evil*

All of the artistic devices outlined above (the omniscient author who unmasks and judges, the interior monologue which betrays its own inner contradictions, the ironic author who ridicules, the quotations and historical references which testify) are united by a single purpose: to reveal the enormity of a moral monster. Within *The First Circle* Stalin's evil cannot be redeemed by a single fact or rationalization. Volodin, whose act motivates the plot of the novel, is no enemy of the state—he is guilty only of an act of

15. Rigby, *The Stalin Dictatorship*, p. 50.



friendship. The zeks are all victims of circumstance—talented men deprived of social usefulness, forced to turn their talent against humanity. Their relatives suffer deprivation, mental anguish, and social persecution—only because they love. Even the prison guards are trapped by circumstance. They act more out of fear than conviction. And Stalin himself is trapped—by his own unfounded suspicion and distrust.

The reader of the novel naturally asks himself: what is the source of Stalin's evil? Solzhenitsyn offers no easy answer. At no point in the work does the omniscient author indicate a turning point in Stalin's life, a signal event or influence, an ideological mistake or miscalculation. Indeed, he distinguishes the old "Stalin" from the teenage seminarian "Koba" only by the "number of bullet-torn heads" (chap. 20). The portrait does not dissect Stalin's brain in order to isolate a wrong idea or principle, but rather to expose the paucity—perhaps the complete absence—of ideas and principles.

Nevertheless, Stalin's evil is defined in at least three ways. First, it is compared to Satan and given mythic significance. Second, it is contrasted to Lenin and set in historical perspective. And third, it is opposed by certain zeks, who stand before the reader as moral paragons. We shall consider each of these aspects in turn.

Connections between Dante's *Inferno* and Solzhenitsyn's *First Circle* are made early in the novel (chap. 2). The Communist and literary scholar Lev Rubin explains to zeks brought into Mavrino from hard-labor camps that they have ascended from the depths of hell to its highest circle. The title of the chapter, "Dante's Idea," refers to the fact that Dante, concerned for the fate of virtuous pagans, expanded the orthodox doctrine of Limbo to include these souls within this most enlightened circle. At the foot of a "noble castle, encircled seven times with high walls and defended round about by a fair stream," he locates Socrates, Plato, Cicero, and other great Greeks and Romans.<sup>16</sup> In the novel this castle is transformed into the Mavrino Prison, described in chapter 10 ("The Enchanted Castle"). The seven walls of the "noble castle" are represented by the prison's laboratory of clipped speech, called "Number Seven" (the title of chapter 11). In both the poem and the novel, the brilliant minds of the first circle dwell in a spot of light enclosed by outer darkness.

The position of Satan in the poem matches that of Stalin in the novel. Dante describes the monster at the end of *Inferno*, concluding the first part of his trilogy. Solzhenitsyn describes Stalin at the end of the first day in a novel comprising three days (Dante's journey through hell takes three days).

16. *Dante's Inferno*, trans. and commentary by John D. Sinclair (New York, 1968), p. 65. Sinclair points out that the "fair stream" may signify eloquence (p. 69).

In many respects Satan's setting, physical characteristics, and strength are matched by Stalin's: the confined space, his yellow eyes, his sensation of coldness, his working at night, his power on earth.<sup>17</sup> Thus Stalin's evil is elevated to mythic proportions and may be comprehended only within a universal philosophical or religious system. Yet we may note that just as Satan serves God's purpose, in that he shadows and therefore identifies the good, so Stalin provides the criterion for judging the moral integrity of his subjects. As in other works by Solzhenitsyn, most notably the play translated as *The Love-Girl and the Innocent* (*Olen' i shalashovka*), a man's guilt and sinfulness stand in direct proportion to his participation and rank within the prison system, while his virtue and purity stand in inverse proportion. Lukács writes: "Here [i.e., in the prison] every real compromise must lead to a loss of human dignity. A refusal to compromise in all human and social essentials thus forms a prerequisite for anyone wishing to remain really human in the camps."<sup>18</sup>

The bridge between the level of myth and that of history is made by means of another literary reference: Goethe's *Faust*. In his debate with Nerzhin on happiness (chap. 7), Rubin recalls Faust's scheme for making mankind happy by draining swamps and digging canals; instead, Mephistopheles, who has lost interest in Faust, orders the lemurs to dig Faust's grave.<sup>19</sup> In the Soviet context, the reference to canals cannot fail to evoke the forced-labor construction of the White Sea Canal during the First Five-Year Plan. Once this link has been made, it is not unreasonable to associate Faust with Lenin and Mephistopheles with Stalin, who—metaphorically at least—dug Lenin's grave.

### *Stalin vs. Lenin*

Throughout the novel Stalin is contrasted with Lenin—always to Lenin's advantage. Nerzhin remarks that after reading Lenin, he found that Stalin wrote a "sort of mush" (p. 41). Stalin, reflecting on his presumed greatness, pictures himself correcting Lenin, both in history and in theory. He exaggerates his own role in the Revolution to Lenin's detriment, and he repudiates Lenin's remark that "any cook should be able to run the state." To Stalin's mind, Lenin was impetuous and confused: the state requires the strong hand of one leader (chap. 19). Later in the novel, the Stalinist prosecutor Makarygin, who is living a soft, morally culpable life, is upbraided by his

17. The comparison is treated at length by Vladimir Grebenshikov, "Les cercles infernaux chez Soljénitsyne et Dante," *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 13 (1971): 154–58.

18. Lukács, *Solzhenitsyn*, p. 58.

19. Cf. *Goethe's Faust*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Anchor, 1963), pp. 468–69.

daughter and exhorted by an old friend to return to "Leninist purity" (chap. 58). The final contrast is the most brutal. Rubin recalls a scene from the Kharkov inner prison of 1929: a condemned man shouts out, "Down with the Stalinist executioners!" He is beaten to death, and three hundred men scream from their cells, "Long live Leninism!" (chap. 66).

This series of contrasts, though not necessarily representing the viewpoint of the author, is consistent with the party's initial move toward de-Stalinization: Stalinism was a deviation from Leninism, and Stalinists should return to "Leninist purity." Other points of contact between Solzhenitsyn's portrait and Khrushchev's "secret speech" have been indicated above; several more points have been noted by E. J. Brown. Both Solzhenitsyn and Khrushchev have documented Stalin's vainglory, his brutality, his military ineptitude, his trust in Hitler, and so on.<sup>20</sup> In one significant respect, however, the two differ. Khrushchev denounced the excesses of Stalin's methods, but did not reject the political process which brought Stalin to power: "We must affirm that the party fought a serious fight against the Trotskyites, rightists and bourgeois nationalists, and that it disarmed ideologically all the enemies of Leninism. This ideological fight was carried on successfully, as a result of which the party became strengthened and tempered. Here Stalin played a positive role."<sup>21</sup> In the eighty-seven chapters of *The First Circle* we find not the slightest glimmer of a positive role for Stalin. Indeed, there is no mention of the "Trotskyites" or the "bourgeois nationalists," and the "rightists" are recalled only for a moment in Stalin's interior monologue (the omniscient author speaks in parentheses):

But then it seems that someone from among the *rightists* (such "rightists" never really existed, Stalin himself lumped them together into this group so as to smash them with one blow)—someone from among them had warned that this problem would arise. (p. 110)

Whether the "leftists" or other "enemies of Leninism" really existed, the novel does not say. Stalin departed from Lenin, but the novel does not tell us what the historical conditions were, how Stalin gained control of the party and the country, and what this implies for the present. One is forced to agree with the conclusion of Robin Blackburn: "Solzhenitsyn is evidently less drawn to the more explicitly political rejection of Stalinism."<sup>22</sup>

In contrasting Stalin with Lenin, Solzhenitsyn does not draw a complete historical or political analysis, but rather focuses on the end result, marking off the distance between the pristine aims of the Revolution and the sordid

20. Brown, "Solzhenitsyn's Cast of Characters," p. 164.

21. Rigby, *The Stalin Dictatorship*, p. 29.

22. Robin Blackburn, "The Politics of *The First Circle*," *New Left Review* (London), September–October 1970, p. 61.

realization. For this reason, Stalin is shown at the peak of his career, long after any effective opposition to him is possible, when his violence and deceit continue of their own momentum, unprompted by any external crisis. Stalin's thoughts in the portrait do not issue merely from his "tired, overworked mood," as Lukács suggests.<sup>23</sup> They are the consummation of his being, the poison of his society, the epitome of evil on earth.

### *Stalin's Antitheses*

If Solzhenitsyn provides no simple explanation of Stalin's evil, he does permit us to understand it better by setting it against its antithesis: the moral paragon. Immediately after the portrait of Stalin and the step down in rank to Yakonov, we are introduced to a character who previously in the novel has managed to say only a few words: Dmitry Sologdin. The method of introduction is the same as that used for Stalin, but the words are exactly the opposite:

. . . He was an insignificant slave with no rights. He had been imprisoned for twelve years. . . . Long ago his name and future had been trampled into the mud. . . . He could breathe fresh air only at certain fixed hours permitted by the prison administration.

And there was an inviolable peace in his soul. His eyes shone like those of a youth. His chest bared to the frost rose with the fulness of life. (chap. 24, p. 151)

Sologdin's peace of soul derives from his intense effort to fashion moral principles out of his unfreedom. Whereas Stalin is characterized by absence of restrictions, inflation, and emptiness, Sologdin is associated with severe limitations, denial, and spiritual substance. Evidently a Platonist, he believes that one does not learn from books, but only finds in them confirmation of one's own ideas (p. 159); external resistance in one's work he deems "marvelous" (p. 160); great ideas are "born only in a single mind" (p. 199); the supreme task of every man is "to develop unwavering will power subject only to reason" (p. 210); the motto for social action is "The higher the ends, the higher must be the means" (p. 469). Sologdin even has his own explanation of Stalin's terror. It is some sort of ignorance, a faulty perspective:

"Morality shouldn't lose its force as it increases its scope! That would mean that it's villainy if you personally kill or betray someone; but if the One-and-Only and Infallible knocks off five or ten million, then that's according to natural law and must be appraised in a progressive sense." (p. 469)

23. Lukács, *Solzhenitsyn*, p. 52.

Sologdin by no means speaks for the author, who often treats him ironically. He is an eccentric, he expects his wife to be faithful on the outside while he fails on the inside, and he lacks all humility, believing himself, no less than Rubin, to be "in firm possession of the absolute truth" (p. 488). It is this presumption which enables precisely Sologdin and Rubin to make the greatest moral compromise within the camp: Sologdin solves the riddle of voice coding, and Rubin identifies the "voice print" of Volodin. Because Sologdin fails in the final instance to apply his high principles to himself, the reader understands that reason alone cannot provide the standard for moral action. Nevertheless, Sologdin poses a stark contrast to Stalin, a life of constant spiritual struggle, where the words "iron will" and "inflexible will" acquire real meaning and pathos.<sup>24</sup>

Another moral paragon of the novel is the zek painter Kondrashev-Ivanov, so reminiscent of Tolstoy's Mikhailov in *Anna Karenina*. His beliefs are less systematized, yet remarkably similar to Sologdin's: a man is born with an essence, an "I," an image of perfection; this gives him something to measure himself against (p. 297); it is the task of the artist to portray "spiritual reality," the "I" within him; and this portrayal will help the viewer to discover his own image of perfection (p. 375). Quite naturally, it is Kondrashev-Ivanov who paints the spiritual antithesis to the "Enchanted Castle" (the Mavrino Prison): his painting captures the moment when Parsifal, on horseback before an abyss, catches his first glimpse of the Castle of the Holy Grail (chap. 42).

A third moral paragon, the janitor Spiridon, requires Nerzhin to make his moral dignity conscious, much as Ivan Denisovich requires the voice of an author for the same purpose. Both Spiridon and Ivan Denisovich are simple peasants who act more from unspoken humane impulses than from consciously formulated principles. Spiridon, in fact, is obviously symbolic of the people of twentieth-century Russia. Seventeen years old at the time of the Revolution, he fought for the Reds, the Whites, and the Greens; he helped suppress the Kronstadt mutiny; he became an "intense farmer," then a "kulak," then a collective farmer; he worked on the White Sea Canal; he fought the Germans, was imprisoned, was freed by the Americans; he returned to Russia and both hard-labor and special prison camps. Throughout it all, he remained dedicated to his family and absorbed the heavy blows that would have fallen on it. When Nerzhin asks him the most important question in life—How can one act, how can one tell who is right and who is wrong?—we listen to Spiridon's answer with profound attention. Spiridon replies:

24. There is said to be an early version of the novel in which Sologdin does not turn his discovery over to the authorities and is sent from Mavrino to a strict labor camp. According to Russian émigrés, such was the fate of Sologdin's real-life prototype.

—Волкодав прав, а людоед—нет. (end of chap. 63)

The usual English translation of this maxim—"The wolfhound is right, and the cannibal is wrong"—misses certain connotations of the Russian. A more literal translation would read, "The wolf-slayer is right, but the people-eater is wrong." In other words, it is right to slay a beast which oppresses you, terrorizes you, or threatens your existence, but it is wrong to harm your own family, neighbors, or people. In its own way, Spiridon's maxim restates the Lenin-Stalin contrast.

In the Stalinist society (both in the camps and outside) the inducement to become a people-eater is ever present. Even the lowly rank of a captive janitor is in jeopardy—Spiridon is prodded (but refuses) to condemn a fellow zek (the "case of the broken lathe" in chap. 77). Other characters face a similar test: Volodin is tempted to forget a friend in need (chap. 1); Nerzhin, to help in the cryptography aspect of voice coding (chap. 9); Muza, to spy on fellow university students (chap. 44); Kagan, to inform on fellow workers (chap. 49) and, later, on fellow zeks (chap. 74); Doronin, to inform on zeks (chaps. 43, 74); and Gerasimovich, to make bugging devices (chap. 79). Acceptance of the temptation brings material benefit and apparent security, but also involvement in evil and dangerous proximity to its source. Refusal brings punishment and possible annihilation, but also internal wholeness and an ability to face oneself. On the third day of the novel, the two who have given in to temptation remain in the first circle (Sologdin and Rubin), while those who have preserved their conscience, who have denied or thwarted the system, descend into the utter hell of the hard-labor camps (Nerzhin, Khorobrov, Doronin, Gerasimovich) or Lubyanka (Volodin).

Each character in the novel who attempts to answer Nerzhin's question honestly commends himself to the reader as a moral paragon. Of course, each one must work out his own answer, for the "essence of life will never be captured by even the greatest formulas" (p. 399). Volodin discovers that although you have only one life, you also have only one conscience (p. 399). Nerzhin, who draws wisdom from Sologdin, Kondrashev-Ivanov, and Spiridon, learns "to temper, to cut, to polish the soul so as to become a *human being*" (p. 452). He also develops his own method for grappling with the "riddle of the inflated, gloomy giant" (p. 49)—to record the truth for the future. Although he must burn his notes on the Stalin era before descending into hell, he believes that someday he will be able to resurrect them from memory (chap. 86).

Stalin's evil, then, remains an enigma. Its historical and political sources are not shown.<sup>25</sup> The portrait of Stalin is essentially a moral one: we see how

25. It would seem that Solzhenitsyn carefully excluded historical references which

an evil mind works, how it expressed itself in history, and how it was possible to combat it. Stalin's antitheses, taken together, constitute an entire moral system for anyone wishing to act for the good: a human being should remain true to his innate ideal of perfection, form principles and apply them to himself, protect his own kind and rebuff invaders, refuse to participate in any evil, and, when possible, spread the truth.

### *Conclusion*

The success or failure of a work of art ultimately depends on how people react to it. Readers in the West, who have not lived under Stalinism and who have easy access to the novel, may regard *The First Circle* chiefly as an aesthetic experience. We may observe that Solzhenitsyn's portrait of Stalin, so carefully prepared, so meticulously drawn, so full of mythical allusions and historical details, acts as the catalyst for the entire novel. It is Stalin's whim and his straining memory which activate the whole world of the characters. It is against his absolute evil that all of them are to be judged. And it is in relation to his historical existence that these fictional beings are understood to have lived, to be expressions of something real. And here we take leave of purely aesthetic feelings and become concerned with human suffering.

Yet it is primarily in countries which—to recall Lukács—have not yet “overcome” the Stalinist “past” that the novel might have a profound social and political impact. So long as it remains censored at home, *The First Circle*, no less than the Mavrino zeks, will exist in its own special limbo. Its name will be trampled upon, its flow of eloquence will sound only in secret, and it will await the great distant day of its release.

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might conceivably be used to justify Stalin's actions: the Chinese revolution, the atom bomb, the approaching Korean war. For a careful analysis of Stalin's departure from, and continuation of, Leninism see Lucio Colletti, “The Question of Stalin,” *New Left Review*, May–June 1970, pp. 61–81.