

# Reviews

## The Gulag Archipelago (Vols. 1 and 2)

by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Collins, 1974 and 1975. 600 pp. and 712 pp.  
£3.50 and £4.95.

## Arkhipelag Gulag (Vols. 1, 2 and 3)

YMCA Press, Paris, 1973, 1974 and 1976,  
606 pp., 657 pp. and 581 pp. No price.

The third and last volume of the *Gulag Archipelago* is already published in Russian in Paris, and Collins have published translations of the first two volumes. A new translator specially chosen by Solzhenitsyn is believed to be working on the third volume. I make no comment on the translation of the first two volumes, since I read them in Russian, but I testify to the extreme difficulty of translating this work. Solzhenitsyn uses an enormous vocabulary. Every word is chosen for a reason and some of the language of the camps is not yet in any dictionary. It is hardly possible for the West to reach a measured judgment of this remarkable work, until there are adequate translations of the whole. Nonetheless, even in a less than perfect translation the author's moral strength and his power of description come through. Yet there are moments when I wish he would let his facts speak for themselves without exclamation marks, italics and capitals.

Solzhenitsyn is an exceptionally truthful writer. He may not know the Manchester *Guardian's* famous principle, "facts are sacred; comment is free", but he acts on it. His enemies on both sides of the iron curtain are waiting to catch him out, but any mistakes they may have found in the Gulag trilogy are trivial. No book but the Bible is essential reading and no one need feel obliged to read *The Gulag Archipelago*, but everyone ought to know what picture it paints. And if anyone doubts the

truth of this terrible story, then he or she should read all three volumes or hold his peace.

Solzhenitsyn's concern is for the moral regeneration of his people and he knows that without confession there is neither forgiveness nor healing. First the Russians and other Soviet peoples and then the rest of us must face the full truth. The roots of these crimes go deep. Stalin perfected a system whose main lines were already laid down by Lenin.

So far there is really no room for differences of opinion among honest and informed people. But Solzhenitsyn also gives his views freely on a number of other topics and no one is required to take them on trust. To my mind his comparisons of the iniquities of Tsarism with Soviet iniquities are in general fair, though Tsarism comes out of the comparison distinctly better than many would expect. That other classic of its kind, the elder George Kennan's *Siberia and the Exile System*, describes the corresponding state of affairs at the end of the 19th century. It was bad, and often bad in the same way as the Gulag, but by comparison with Stalin's camps it was mild and humane. Solzhenitsyn's asides about the West sometimes miss the target, but it is dangerous to ignore anything that he says. Like Dostoevsky he makes mistakes, but like him he hits the target inconveniently often.

The story told in these three volumes was already well known in outline and sometimes in detail to all who wanted to know. But here it is told with special power. So this is the form in which it will be remembered. The first two volumes are almost more than one can bear. Even if one knew most of it before, the build up of horror is too great. Again and again one reaches what surely must be the limit of misery, but again and again there is something worse in store. The third volume is more varied and there are rays of hope.

Even before the death of Stalin the system was beginning to change. Life inside the camps has always to some extent reflected life outside. When there was starvation outside, the camps were indeed death camps and those who survived did so at the expense of others. But by 1951 the war wounds were beginning to heal and though the Soviet Union was a hungry land it was not starving. Moreover, at this time the authorities made the strange mistake of putting the political prisoners in separate camps. This put an end to the abominable rule of criminals over political prisoners and made it possible for informers to be quietly murdered by their victims, thus opening the door to a freedom of speech among political prisoners which has lasted to this day.

After Stalin's death there was a glimmer of hope that things would change. Sometimes there were camp strikes and protests. On the surface these were not notably successful. Generally they were suppressed with sly brutality, but sometimes the authorities parleyed with the prisoners. Concessions promised were not fulfilled and the revenge was fearful. Yet

the authorities had learnt that there were limits beyond which it was dangerous to go. Even Solzhenitsyn can get no reliable account of what happened in the camp revolt at Norilsk after the death of Beria, but he gives full accounts of the desperate trial of strength at Ekibastuz, in which the prisoners lost, and the heroic Forty Days of Kengir when the prisoners seized the main part of the camp, including the stores, and set up a miniature free republic. In the end it was destroyed by heavy tanks crashing through the buildings and crushing to death everyone who happened to be in their way. Nonetheless this chapter is a story of hope, if only because for the first time humanity rose to its full height in the Soviet camps.

The freeing of most of the political prisoners after 1955 is well described, but, as usual, there were snags. Only those who confessed guilt were released. Those who were too truthful to confess to what they had not done, served out their sentences. Nonetheless, the concentration camp system was shaken to its foundations. But Khrushchev, as Solzhenitsyn reminds us, never carried anything through to the end. So the KGB adapted themselves to new circumstances and succeeded in bending the law to their purposes. The numbers of those behind barbed wire were fewer. But they were still far too many; and the great majority of the prisoners of conscience – to say nothing of those guilty of “economic crimes” – had done nothing that a normal system of law would regard as criminal.

Solzhenitsyn gives on the whole an extraordinarily full description of the system, of how it worked and how it now works, and even of the horrors of liberation, which strangely led some to wish themselves back in camp, where there was at least a roof over one's head and a minimum of food. But there are strange gaps in the story. There is very little about women, though there were women's camps and it is not hard to hear stories about them. Solzhenitsyn appreciates women but most of his best characters are men. After all, he spent much of his youth behind barbed wire and before that there were the war years. Has this made it hard for him to see life as women see it? Only during the Forty Days of Kengir do women come fully into the picture. Then the barriers between the men's and women's camps were broken down and couples went about hand in hand, behaving it seems, with complete decency. It astonished the KGB that after the Forty Days many of the girls were still virgins.

Again the ordinary criminals and the offenders against Soviet economic laws are seen entirely through the eyes of the political prisoners, that is as enemies. Only at Kengir was there an alliance between criminals and politicals, an alliance that held without a break throughout the Forty Days. Yet there is another side to the life of the criminals which is well described in Vladimir Maximov's *Goodbye from Nowhere* (not yet translated).

The *Gulag Archipelago* is the work of a Christian writer and it is firmly based on Christian values, but it does not tell one as much as might be expected about the religious life of the prisoners. The second volume has more than the third on this subject but what there is in the third volume is of great interest. In the canteen at Kengir there was a daily schedule of services of different churches throughout the Forty Days. To confess to Christian faith was the one thing in the Archipelago that could make a KGB examiner relent in his attempt to force a false confession. The KGB know that some believers simply cannot be made to lie, whatever the pressure on them. But there were also perils from false brethren, such as the odious informer Archdeacon Rudchuk who had formerly been in the entourage of the Patriarch of Moscow. Jewish faith is not much in evidence, perhaps because its revival had not begun until after Solzhenitsyn was released. But there is an interesting story of a Jewish Party member who swore that he would in future observe the ordinances of the law, if he survived a moment of great peril in the war.

This third volume is the most varied of the three and therefore the most readable, but to get the full perspective one must read the other two volumes first.

JOHN LAWRENCE

### A Marxist Looks at Jesus

by Milan Machovec, Darton Longman & Todd, 1976, 220 pp. £2.95.

As Peter Hebblethwaite notes in his introduction, it is a remarkable fact in itself that a confessing Marxist should write respectfully and intelligently about Jesus. Hebblethwaite believes that Machovec's book "can stimulate and challenge Christians and open the eyes of Marxists". One hopes indeed that it will do this. It will not convince Brezhnev or Ian Paisley or Monsignor Lefebvre. But it deserves to be read by as many people as possible who claim to be either Marxist or Christian.

The title, however, may prove misleading. Milan Machovec is by no means a run-of-the-mill Marxist. In spite of his Catholic background he became sufficiently convinced of the relevance of Marxism to become in 1953 Professor of Philosophy at Charles University in Prague, a post which he held until 1970. Apparently, however, he never lost his interest in Christianity. In the mid-60s, well before the "Prague Spring", he organized a series of seminars at which he invited Christians, both Czech and foreign, to take part in discussions with eminent Marxist thinkers. Dr. Machovec's book is essentially a result of these discussions. It was first published as a series of articles in Czechoslovakia itself during