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Chapter 13

AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANA SHEETS: BULGAKOV AND SOLZHENITSYN— TWO SOVIET WRITERS IN THE SHADOWS OF TOLSTOY AND DOSTOYEVSKY

Keywords: Bulgakov, doubling, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn, *The Days of the Turbins*, *The First Circle*, *The Gulag Archipelago*, *The Master & Margarita*, *The White Guard*

MFS: While it would take a book of about 1,000 pages to compare and contrast Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, we are going to examine briefly two extraordinary 20th century Russian writers—Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940) and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008)—both of whom wrote pioneering literature and resisted Soviet tyranny. But before discussing their work in detail, let's begin with the literary concept of doubling. How does it apply to these two writers?

DS: Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, two Russian literary giants, are celebrated for having published some of the world's greatest fiction. Nevertheless, we would be amiss not to extol the tremendous accomplishments of Bulgakov and Solzhenitsyn who managed to create pioneering literature, despite the nearly overwhelming oppression of Soviet totalitarianism. The arts, generally, and literature, particularly, were subject in the Soviet Union to extensive scrutiny. Any effort to write against the prescribed dictates often meant death, consignment to labor camps, or simply being made invisible—one's work withdrawn from public view, one's reputation erased, and one's economic future in peril.

What doubling characteristics unite these writers? First, they refused throughout their lives to submit to the yoke of Soviet tyranny. Second, their moral integrity had deeply spiritual and philosophic foundations. Third, their literature was innovative, and they wrote fully cognizant that their work might never be published. Fourth, while resisting Soviet despotism, they remained deeply committed to Russia. Fifth, the importance of Russian Orthodox Christianity ultimately shaped the moral disposition of both writers.

How do their doubling traits differ? Bulgakov came of age in the era preceding the Russian Revolution. His worldview was shaped by the values of Imperial Russia, by the spiritual and intellectual beliefs nurtured in his family, as well as by the Ukrainian sympathy for the White Russians who opposed the Bolsheviks and their proletarian ethos.

Solzhenitsyn was born in 1918, a generation later than Bulgakov and immediately after the two Russian Revolutions of 1917 that led, initially, to the abdication of Tzar Nicolas II, and, subsequently, to the Bolshevik Revolution. Solzhenitsyn was twice decorated while serving as a commander in the Red Army during World War II. However, he criticized Stalin's war conduct in his private correspondence during the waning days of the war, which led to Solzhenitsyn's conviction for treason and his internment in the Gulag labor camps for eight years. This sentence and its repercussions shaped not only his resistance to Soviet despotism but also supplied the subject matter of his books for the remainder of his life.

The temperament and the writing styles of these two men were markedly different. Bulgakov's literary maturation was a solitary journey of an artist committed to aesthetic literary truth. Solzhenitsyn, drawing heavily from his personal experiences, relentlessly published literature exposing Soviet oppression, aided through his network of literary allies, friends, and personal connections abroad. He was able to publish *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, his first and greatest novel, in 1962, thanks to the "Khrushchev Thaw" following Stalin's death in 1953. Sadly, the "thaw" never came to Bulgakov during his lifetime. His celebrated novel *The Master and Margarita*, published in 1966, appeared some 26 years after his death. Solzhenitsyn's nonfictional masterpiece, *The Gulag Archipelago*, exposed the mass incarceration and murder by Soviet authorities. His revelations ultimately helped undermine the Soviet Union. By contrast, Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* is more literary and artistically more inspiring than Solzhenitsyn's fiction. It is an allegorical tale drenched in satire and comprising multiple narratives that extend back in time to the biblical days of Jesus Christ and Pontius Pilate and forward to the Soviet Union under Stalin where the devil makes his appearance in Moscow. Over the years it has come to be celebrated as one of the more memorable novels of the 20th century.

MFS: Today, Bulgakov is best remembered for his novel *The Master and Margarita*. How did Bulgakov's life influence his creative efforts?

DS: Bulgakov was born in Kiev in the Ukraine, a Christian city dating back to 988. Bulgakov's resistance to Soviet tyranny in some sense must be traced back to his early years in Kiev and his family's Russian Orthodox Christianity. During the Russian Revolution, the Ukrainian government briefly declared its independence and was a center for White Army resistance to the Bolsheviks. However, by 1922 the Red Army assumed control and the Ukraine was institutionally incorporated into the Soviet regime.

Mikhail Bulgakov, one of seven children, was the eldest son. Bulgakov's father, Afanasiy, was a faculty member at the Kiev Theological Academy while his grandfathers both served as clergymen in the Russian Orthodox Church. Mikhail's father died at a young age due to a kidney disorder that would later also kill his eldest son. Mikhail attended a European-style gymnasium beginning in 1901, which gave him a strong foundation in Russian and European literature. He attended medical school in Kiev and served during the First World War as a medical doctor on the front where he sustained major injuries. He subsequently became addicted to morphine before weaning himself off the drug. As a

physician in private practice in Kiev in 1918 and a portion of the following year, he witnessed the battles between the Ukrainians, the “Reds”, the Germans, and the “Whites”. He served as a physician in the White Army in the Caucasus in 1919 where he contracted typhus. A number of family members immigrated to the West following the Civil War, although because of his diagnosis of typhus, Bulgakov was at that time denied permission to travel to Europe. He began writing and publishing full time by 1920, composing short pieces for newspapers and writing plays. His decision in 1921 to move to Moscow to pursue his literary career ultimately committed him to remaining in the Soviet Union.

The first few years in Moscow were enormously productive for Bulgakov. Of all his early fiction, *The White Guard*, partially serialized in 1925 before Russian authorities suppressed the literary journal in which it appeared, is, perhaps, the most revealing about his literary interpretation of the Russian Revolution. The story is about the impact of the October Revolution in Kiev on the Turbin family as the Red Army, the White Army, the Imperial German Army, and the Ukrainian nationalists battled for dominance. It concludes with the Red Army preparing to lay siege to Kiev.

The Moscow Art Theater commissioned Bulgakov to provide a theatrical adaptation. Entitled *The Days of the Turbins*, it premiered in October 1926. The reviews were brutal. Orlinsky, one of Bulgakov’s most vocal critics, argued he was one of the “new ideological agents” serving the interests of the bourgeoisie and called for the rejection of “Bulgakovism”. Lunacharsky, who served as the people’s commissar for education and who had authorized the production, objected to Bulgakov’s treatment of the revolution “in a Philistine manner”, that is, without an ideological “class basis” (Orlinsky & Lunacharsky citations in Natov, 1985, p. 10).

The critics’ hostility was prompted by Bulgakov’s sympathetic and humanizing treatment of the White Guard officers. For many reviewers this depiction bordered on treason given the White Guard’s resistance to the Bolshevik Revolution. Nor were these attacks by Orlinsky and Lunacharsky isolated. As Ellendea Proffer has suggested, “all of the critics reviewed the play negatively” and the smears directed against “Bulgakovism” became so frequent, so automatic, and so pervasive that they became, in effect, “self-generating” to the extent that “some of the critics made careers out of attacking him” (Proffer, 1972, pp. xiv-xv).

Nevertheless, the play “was the greatest success the Moscow Art Theater had in the era after the Revolution” and that gave Bulgakov a measure of artistic freedom (Proffer, 1972, p. xv). Indeed, Stalin praised it: “The main impression that the audience is left with”, he suggested, is one “beneficial for Bolsheviks”, namely, that “if even people like the Turbins are forced to put away arms and bow to the will of the people, admitting their cause is completely lost, that means the Bolsheviks are unbeatable”. He concluded emphatically, “*The Days of the Turbins* is a demonstration of the crushing power of Bolshevism” (Stalin cited by Volkov, 2008, p. 270). Stalin was reputed to have seen the play 15 times.

Bulgakov’s theatrical career was at its apex between 1926 and 1928 during a period when Russian theater was artistically and creatively thriving, influenced by events relating to the Bolshevik Revolution and the associated Civil War. Nevertheless, with the death of Lenin in 1924 and the increasing consolidation of Stalin’s power in the years that followed, Bulgakov had greater and greater difficulty having his plays performed. By 1929 it became nearly impossible. Nor was Soviet resistance to his plays particularly surprising given the subversive nature of his work. *Zoyka’s Apartment*, a comedy about the duplicitous nature of Soviet society, cut close to the bone since the premise was that individuals and their businesses never

operated entirely according to Soviet dictates. The play was conceived in 1925 and opened at the Vakhtangov Theater late in 1926. While there were some 200 performances, attacks from the critics were harsh and production was suspended in 1929, at which point Bulgakov's work was entirely banned from theaters.

While the Moscow Art Theater entered into an agreement with Bulgakov to produce his play *Flight* in 1928, it was never performed in his lifetime, despite Maxim Gorky's strong support. The play was about the White Army's resistance to the Red Army. Members of the Main Repertory Committee, which decided what plays should be permitted or censored, were highly critical of *Flight* since they felt it glorified the plight of traitors as tragic figures while exposing "the agony of great heroes, legendary generals". Indeed, Stalin saw it as an effort to extol "White Guardism". Undeterred, Bulgakov's satirical play *The Crimson Island* opened at the Kamerny Theater in December 1928. This satirical burlesque parodied theatrical censorship, leading one critic to suggest that Bulgakov was a "frustrated philistine" and his work was a "mockery of the entire Soviet theater system". Stalin criticized the "really bourgeois" taste of the theater for having agreed to stage the play (citations in Natov, 1985, pp. 11-12).

By September of 1929 all of Bulgakov's plays were no longer performed and his work essentially banned. This led Bulgakov to request exile abroad in a letter sent to several authorities in 1929, including Stalin, because of restrictions against his work being performed or published. In 1930 he then sent another letter, this time to seven officials, Stalin among them, asking to emigrate given that the prohibitions against his work made his position as an artist untenable. The outcome of these two letters was that Stalin called Bulgakov and that conversation ultimately resulted in the playwright obtaining an appointment at the Moscow Art Theater, although the restrictions against most of his plays remained in effect. In 1932 his adaptation of Gogol's *Dead Souls* appeared and "ran throughout Bulgakov's lifetime", becoming a staple in the repertoire at the Moscow Art Theater for years to come (Milne, 1990, p. 2). His play on Molière, directed by Stanislavsky, was performed in 1936, but only seven times before it too was banned. Indeed, following the shuttering of *Molière* only *The Days of the Turbins* and *Dead Souls* were performed during his lifetime and "from 1927 until his death Bulgakov published nothing in the Soviet Union" (Milne, 1990, p. 2).

Nevertheless, it wasn't just the content of Bulgakov's fiction or his plays that antagonized people. His attire, his posture, his demeanor, and his manner conveyed a direct challenge to the prevailing Bolshevik ethos, as E. Mindlin, a colleague who worked with him at the newspaper *On the Eve* shortly after he arrived in Moscow, noted.

Everything about Bulgakov—things we couldn't get like the dazzlingly fresh collars, hard as plaster-of-Paris, and the carefully knotted tie, a suit that was not modish but finely tailored, the pressed crease in the trousers, the special forms of address to his interlocutors and the appending of old-fashioned particles like the ending "-s" ["sir"], as in "if you please, sir" or "as you wish, sir", the kissing of women's hands, and the almost regal ceremony of his bows—absolutely everything made him stand out in our society and environment. And also, of course, the long fur coat, in which he came, full of dignity, to the editorial office, invariably holding his hands inside the sleeves! (Proffer, 1972, p. xiii)

For writers resistant to the Soviet regime, Bulgakov became a legendary figure. Thus, Boris Pasternak, his contemporary who would later win the Nobel Prize for Literature and

would himself become a target of Soviet literary oppression, particularly when Khrushchev was premier, proposed at a gathering in 1935 that the guests formally toast Bulgakov. When the hostess suggested they first pay homage to Veresaev, the writer whom the party was intended to honor, Pasternak insisted upon Bulgakov because of his exalted stature as literary outlaw: “No, I want to toast Bulgakov! Veresaev, of course, is a very major figure, but he is a lawful phenomenon. Bulgakov is an unlawful one!” (Haber, 1998, p. 239).

In the months preceding Bulgakov’s death, he knew that he was terminally ill with the same kidney disorder that killed his father. His funeral was well attended, although there were few literary writers. As Proffer emphasized, “Bulgakov died as he had lived, among people of the theater” (Proffer, 1972, p. xxv).

MFS: When we consider Solzhenitsyn’s fiction, we think, of course, of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, as well as *The First Circle*, *The Cancer Ward*, and, perhaps, his multi-volume historical saga *The Red Wheel* series. Why are these works important?

DS: If the reader wants to understand the overwhelming yoke of oppression experienced by Russians during the Soviet Union, no writer captures this tyranny more effectively than Solzhenitsyn. My three-part essay “Solzhenitsyn, Truth, and the Dismal Fate of Literature in the 21st Century”, posted on Literary Gulag, is, I feel, the single best summary of the man in relation to his times, so my answers will be drawn from the first two parts of this essay (Sheets, 2009a; Sheets 2009b).

Of all Solzhenitsyn’s novels, none captures the plight of an ordinary man consigned to the Gulag better than *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. The story is based largely on Solzhenitsyn’s personal experiences in the Ekibastuz camp located in northeastern Kazakhstan. However, the protagonist, Ivan Denisovich, unlike Solzhenitsyn, is no political prisoner, even though he has been sent to a camp designated for political prisoners. No, Ivan Denisovich is just an ordinary man caught up in the totalitarian bureaucracy who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and, consequently, is serving a 10-year sentence for treason. The novel unfolds over the course of a typical day in his life in the camp. No great tragedy occurs: Ivan Denisovich is neither beaten by authorities nor attacked by fellow prisoners. In fact, he receives a food parcel mailed from his family, and, thanks to odd jobs that have earned him a little money, he is even able to buy a cigarette. For Denisovich, the day’s conclusion is “the end of an unclouded day. Almost a happy one” (Solzhenitsyn, 1995, p. 159).

But if *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* appears to understate the hardships of the Gulag camps, the immersive experience for readers is revelatory. They witness the difficulty of surviving in the camps, the constant scrounging for just a bit more food, and the threat of punishment for the slightest infraction. They see the willingness of Ivan to steal a scrap of steel at the construction site in the hope of making a tool—one that might marginally improve his life even at the risk of discovery that would certainly result in 10 days in solitary. The mean circumstances of this superhuman struggle to survive, as well as the revealing portrayal of Denisovich and his fellow prisoners humanizes for readers the prisoners’ dignity and inspires their compassion for how the prisoners face seemingly insurmountable odds. Clearly, the day-by-day intent of authorities was to undermine the individual identities of the

prisoners, thereby rendering them as mere beasts of burden, all of whom faced the threat of annihilation every day of their lives.

Solzhenitsyn had the good fortune to complete the novel and submit it to the literary magazine *Novy Mir* not long after Khrushchev came to power and was sympathetically disposed to implementing “de-Stalinization” measures. Recognizing this opportunity, Aleksandr Tvardovsky, the editor, submitted the book directly to the Premier, and it was approved and published in 1962. While the style is deceptively simple and, arguably, adheres to the dictates governing Soviet realism—simple moral tales about worker uplift—the story, of course, exposes the totalitarian brutality of the Soviet system. Solzhenitsyn’s biographer Michael Scammell has explained its mesmerizing impact upon him.

What I most remember from my first reading of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* . . . isn’t just the feeling that its author had miraculously circumvented the censors, but the thrill of confronting an astonishing stylistic tour de force. Here was a realistic story of labor camp life, based on Solzhenitsyn’s own eight years in various camps, that leapt off the page in a living idiom that in places was racy to the point of obscenity, an unheard-of-phenomenon in published Soviet literature and rare in Russian literature of any period. The language was rich in folk idioms and allusions, and laced with ingenious neologisms. Their effect . . . can be summed up in a probably apocryphal remark attributed to Anna Akhmatov: “Oh my God, socialist realism has found its genius”. (Scammell, 2008, p. 23)

Two years later when Solzhenitsyn’s second novel, *The First Circle*, was submitted to *Novy Mir*, the political thaw was over. When Tvardovsky approached V. S. Lebedev, Khrushchev’s cultural advisor, he was told emphatically, “Keep this novel well hidden. Don’t let anybody see it”. He added, “If only you knew *who* has now taken a dislike to *Ivan Denisovich* and regrets that it was ever published” (Scammell, 1984, p. 506). Indeed, in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Khrushchev resigned in October 15, 1964.

The title *The First Circle* was named after the first circle of hell, limbo, where Dante consigned many of the greatest thinkers in their afterlife. Solzhenitsyn’s novel presents the story of one of the scientific *sharashkas*—those secret research and development laboratories where prisoners facilitated work considered instrumental to Soviet authorities. These “elite” labor camps conferred a measure of comfort and freedom not found in the other camps. The one featured in *The First Circle* was modeled after the Marino *sharashka* located on the periphery of Moscow where Solzhenitsyn had worked. It was focused on scientific research related to speech recognition, which potentially could be used to monitor all citizens who were perceived as a threat to the regime.

Solzhenitsyn’s third novel, *Cancer Ward*, was about cancer patients living and being treated for their illness in Uzbekistan in the period immediately following Stalin’s rule. The story also examines the complicity of citizens during Stalin’s “Great Purge” (1936-1938), a political “cleansing” of the party and associated governmental officials that is estimated to have resulted in the deaths of possibly more than a million people. As I note in my essay on Solzhenitsyn, “the metaphor of malignancy—intentionally or not—is extended to all of Soviet society” (Sheets, 2009a). Again, the author drew from personal experience since he underwent medical treatment for cancer initially in Ekibastuz, the Gulag labor camp, and later, while in exile, in Uzbekistan.

Both *The First Circle* and *Cancer Ward* were distributed clandestinely to readers by means of the *samizdat* underground, which circulated prohibited manuscripts furtively from reader to reader. When it became evident to Solzhenitsyn that neither book was likely to be accepted for publication in the Soviet Union, he smuggled them to the West in 1968 where they were published and critically acclaimed. In 1970 he received the Nobel Prize in Literature. In 1971 an attempt was made to poison him with ricin. That year he smuggled his novel *August 1914* out of the country. It was the first of four books he would refer to as *The Red Wheel* series. That title for the series was selected, according to Solzhenitsyn, because “Revolution is an enormous cosmic Wheel, like a galaxy . . . that begins unfolding—and all the people, including the ones that started it turning, become grains of sand. And they die there in multitudes” (Solzhenitsyn cited in Volkov, 2008, pp. 281-282).

By 1972, when he wrote the “Lenten Letter to the Patriarch” challenging the Russian Orthodox Church’s hypocritical stance in preaching observance to *émigrés* abroad while placing no spiritual demands upon believers at home, his own Christian faith was becoming pronounced and that spiritual devotion persisted throughout the remainder of his life. Thus, when the family moved to Cavendish, Vermont they bought a farmhouse and then constructed an adjacent “three-story ‘working house’ next door” for Solzhenitsyn that included on the first floor “its own Russian Orthodox chapel” complete “with skylights and icons” (Remnick, 1994).

The four novels *August 1914*, *November 1916*, *March 1917*, and *April 1917*, completed over the course of eighteen years, present the circumstances surrounding the end of Imperial Russia and the rise of the Soviet Union. The treatment is military and historical and provides a deeply immersive experience into the events giving rise to the seismic shift in Russian society. For many readers in the West used to Solzhenitsyn’s previous novels and *The Gulag Archipelago* where he emphasized the human drama driving historical events, *The Red Wheel* cycle appeared saturated in military minutia and devoid of artistic sensibility. Thus, Norman Podhoretz, although sympathetic to Solzhenitsyn’s nonfiction, was dismissive of *August 1914* and, indeed, all of the author’s fiction. The novel, he argued, “is, to put it plainly, dead from beginning to end. Neither the fictional nor the historical personages are truly realized, and though the combat scenes are scrupulously rendered, they remain staged set-pieces with no power to arouse the emotions or draw the reader in”. He concluded emphatically, “Solzhenitsyn is not a true novelist” (Podhoretz, 1985, pp. 20-21).

Nevertheless, Podhoretz’s judgment was harsh. The series is a polyphonic narrative in which characters each convey their distinctive stories with the result that each of the four novels have multiple narratives and each internal story is generally independent from the others. It’s an innovative approach that Solzhenitsyn utilized in *The First Circle*, *Cancer Ward*, *The Red Wheel* series, and his nonfictional masterpiece *The Gulag Archipelago*. For Volkov, Solzhenitsyn succeeded in *The Red Wheel* in maintaining “the narrative rhythm, constantly changing it, juxtaposing contrasting sections and small episodes”. The result, he suggested, “is musical prose, comparable not to *War and Peace* . . . but to the operas of Mussorgsky or Rimsky-Korsakov” (Volkov, 2008, p. 282). Or as one reader noted about *August 1914*, “The best thing about the novel is the language—extraordinarily vivid, condensed, full of surprises, new word formations that enrich our literature and go to make up Solzhenitsyn’s unique style”. He emphasized, “Whatever else you may say about the novel, Solzhenitsyn takes the Russian language further forward than any other writer has managed to do this century” (cited in Scammell, 1984, p. 789).

MFS: Why should we read Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*?

DS: Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* is an extraordinary work. When we read it, borrowing from Harold Bloom, the sensation is that of "adding strangeness to beauty" (Bloom cited in Sheets, 2010, p. 168). The novel is familiar—we recognize its continuity with other great works—and strange—there is something uniquely different about this book that startles and delights. In short, it has the capacity to profoundly move us as only a great work of fiction can.

So let's explore this novel and the context in which it was written.

Bulgakov began writing *The Master and Margarita* in 1928 and continued working on it until shortly before he died in 1940. Bulgakov viewed it as his magnum opus, a work that would brilliantly depict Soviet society and its devastating impact upon the soul of a tortured literary artist. He burned much of the manuscript in 1930. However, as Woland—who is actually Satan—states in *The Master and Margarita*, "Manuscripts don't burn" (Bulgakov, 2016, p. 287). That is, the novel continued to occupy Bulgakov's imagination until his death. It first appeared in the Soviet Union in a serial publication between 1966 and 1967, and in 1967 the book was published. Both versions were censored.

The narrative takes place over the course of four days in Moscow. It concludes with the Master—our persecuted and vanquished writer—having been reunited with his lover, Margarita. They die but are granted an eternal spiritual sanctuary akin to Dante's limbo where great artists, having never fully embraced God's sacraments or the devil's entreaties, are confined for eternity.

The story begins with Berlioz, a literary functionary, engaged in a conversation with the poet Bezdomny, who has written a deeply flawed poem about Jesus—at least in Berlioz's estimation. What was its failing? Rather than mocking Jesus's nonexistence, Bezdomny has created an all-too-human and life-like, if deeply flawed, character with which readers might emotionally identify. In the midst of this spirited discussion between the critic and the poet that addresses grand questions about the metaphysics of God and godlessness enters Voland, who is, of course, Satan. Voland makes a case for good (Christ) and evil (the devil), a blasphemous concept in the then atheistic Soviet Union. He emphasizes the cruel hand of destiny—fate—as the inexorable determinant of our lives, rather than the exercise of free will and informs Berlioz that his head will be severed by a Russian woman. Sure enough, Berlioz dies almost immediately when a streetcar driven by a woman runs over him and his head, decapitated, goes rolling down a cobbled slope on to a cobbled street.

There follows a series of black magic occurrences throughout Moscow over the course of the next few days as amorality seemingly trumps morality at every turn. Thus, a theater director goes mysteriously missing and his apartment is subsequently occupied by Voland and his henchmen. To accomplish this, the chairman of the house committee in the building is bribed with rubbles that magically become illegal foreign currency (dollars). Naturally, authorities are surreptitiously contacted and they show up almost instantaneously. Of course, they locate the stashed cash and then proceed to haul the committee chairman unceremoniously off to jail. And so the black magic incidents go, one after the other, each accumulating its own distinctive flavor of villainy and woe.

We watch as Margarita, in order to be reunited with her love, the Master, sacrifices her soul to the devil. She agrees to preside as the Queen at the "Great Ball at Satan's" where the guests from Hell are greeted by Woland's demonic black cat, Behemoth, who shrilly

welcomes them as they emerge spewing from a fireplace by means of coffins, gallows, and other sundry forms of conveyance. They include “kings, dukes, cavaliers, suicides, poisoners, gallowsbirds, procuresses, prison guards and sharpers, executioners, informers, traitors, madmen, sleuths, seducers” (Bulgakov, 2016, pp. 269-270). The ball takes place on Good Friday with a spring full moon, a replication of the very same spring full moon years ago on that biblical Good Friday when Pontius Pilate had Jesus crucified in Jerusalem.

The Master’s work, as we have learned, is unpublishable. Yet he has persevered in writing his forbidden novel about Yeshua’s (a.k.a. Jesus’s) tragedy and what would ultimately prove to be the redemptive sin of Pontius Pilate. The Master and Margarita are reunited. They read the final chapters of the Master’s book before they are poisoned and die having drunk the very same wine Pontius Pilate gave to Jesus. Their spirits are transported to their limbo-like sanctuary, but not before the Master, with Satan’s prompting, allows his character Pilate to be free of the torment that revisits him with every full moon and allows him to walk the moonlit path of his dreams to Yeshua. There, reconciliation, salvation, and eternity await. The epilogue to Bulgakov’s novel features Bezdomny, now in the role of the elder historical sage who alone remembers and can recount the Master’s narrative about Pontius Pilate.

The Master and Margarita, as Nadine Natov has suggested, “gave free rein to fantasy combined with observation of real life and metaphysical meditations. The result is a multileveled work in which realistic, satirical, fantastic, and mystical elements are closely intertwined” (Natov, 1985, p. 92). Again, quoting Natov, “The novel is pervaded with a generally mysterious atmosphere, where the most unbelievable events prove to be realistic, while the seemingly most realistic facts turn out to be phantasmagoric” (Natov, 1985, p. 94). This blend of realism and the fantastical, the grotesque and tragic, drenched in metaphysics and moral reasoning anticipates elements of magical realism while avoiding the perils of postmodern relativism.

Here’s a telling passage from the “Great Ball at Satan’s”.

Now people were coming in a solid wall from below, as if storming the landing where Margarita stood. Naked women’s bodies came up between tailcoated men. Their swarthy, white, coffee-bean-coloured, and altogether black bodies floated towards Margarita. . . . On the stage behind the tulips, where the waltz king’s orchestra had been playing, there now raged an ape jazz band. A huge gorilla with shaggy side-whiskers, a trumpet in his hand, capering heavily, was doing the conducting. Orang-utans sat in a row blowing on shiny trumpets. Perched on their shoulders were merry chimpanzees with concertinas. Two hamadryads with manes like lions played grand pianos, but these grand pianos were not heard amidst the thundering, squeaking and booming of saxophones, fiddles and drums in the paws of gibbons, mandrills and marmosets. (Bulgakov, 2016, pp. 268 & 271)

What should our readers know? That Margarita is a barely concealed portrait of Bulgakov’s third wife, Yelena Shilovskaya, the love of his life. A staunch advocate of Bulgakov’s, she fought for years after his death to restore his literary and theatrical reputation.

While *The Master and Margarita* illuminates the atheistic tenor of Soviet society, there is a subtle spirituality coursing through the novel that suggests Bulgakov cannot entirely dismiss the Christian theological foundations of his father and his grandparents. By having the Master write a story about Jerusalem, Pontius Pilate, and “the entry of Jesus into history”, Milne

suggests, “what Bulgakov has presented is a historically and psychologically plausible Man with a capital M, Man who turns those around him into human beings first and foremost” (Milne, 1990, pp. 231-232).

While Bulgakov might have questioned “the attribution of divinity to the founder of Christianity”, nevertheless, she suggests, “what he does present in the Jerusalem chapters of *The Master and Margarita* is the possibility that behind this ‘most ordinary myth’ there might stand in fact the most extraordinary truth”, namely, “a moment when a new concept of humankind entered history” (Milne, 1990, p. 233). Indeed, the parallels between biblical society then and Soviet society under Stalin become evident: “Pilate confirms the death sentence on a man whom he knows to be perfectly innocent” while in Stalin’s Soviet Union “Pilate’s crime was replicated throughout the state machinery”. The result was that “the enduring myth that warned against fanaticism and betrayal and moral cowardice was trampled underfoot”. In its place arose “other mythologies—of tribes and patriarchs, of purifications and exterminations” (Milne, 1990, p. 233).

What significance does *The Master and Margarita* have in recent times?

“The publication of *The Master and Margarita*”, as senior researcher Dmitry Ravinskij at the National Library of Russia noted, “was a great event in the life of my generation”. When it first appeared in *Moscow* magazine in 1966, it seemed a wild departure from officially sanctioned Soviet literature. He added, “Many people began to speak by sentences from this novel”. The distinction between those who had read *The Master and Margarita* and those who had not became “a cultural difference, and at some point it became a political difference” (Ravinskij citations in Parker, 2013).

As Roman Yerikalov, director of the Bulgakov House Cultural Center located in Moscow, suggested in 2005, shortly before a film adaptation of the novel was released, “For the Soviet or Russian person, meeting with Bulgakov’s novel in 1966 was a taste of freedom. It was a contact with an unknown world”. He added, “No one had written like he did, and the reader found himself in a world that no one before Bulgakov had dared to enter” (Yerikalov cited in Sonne, 2005).

Today, literature in Russia—and here in the West as well—no longer confers sanctity to forbidden or prohibited texts. In part, this is because there are few, if any, prohibitions on what might be written or published. Literature, once celebrated for its exalted truth-telling properties in Russia—and elsewhere around the globe—no longer retains its exalted status. Ravinskij, for example, noted that now “Reading for me is not as fascinating as when I would read a forbidden book at 2 a.m. because I would have to return it in the morning” (Parker, 2013).

Indeed, as Solomon Volkov acknowledged, “Russian literature in the 1990s ceded its former central role” (Volkov, 2008, p. 291). In place of the underground manuscript secretly passed hand-to-hand “readers were bombarded by formerly banned and ‘subversive’ books” and, consequently, became “restless and inattentive”. Their attention was increasingly diverted by “the pitched battle in politics, covered round the clock by television” (Volkov, 2008, p. 285). These days, suggests Russian journalist and political writer Oleg Kashin, “the Internet is more important for the opposition and for society in general”. Not surprisingly, the novelist and short-story writer Ludmila Ulitskaya emphasized that today it’s difficult to imagine “any one book that could unite this Noah’s ark” (Kashin & Ulitskaya citations in Parker, 2013).

But when Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* was published, it soon achieved the coveted stature of a cult phenomenon. Mick Jagger of The Rolling Stones reputedly wrote "Sympathy for the Devil" (1968) with *The Master and Margarita* in mind. When a minor planet was discovered in 1982 it was named by a Soviet astronomer "3469 Bulgakov". Salman Rushdie has suggested that his novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988) was inspired by *The Master and Margarita*.

During the period of liberalization known as *glasnost* initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s before the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, the homage to Bulgakov "exploded into the open". Thus the apartment where Bulgakov first lived in Moscow where "the devils in *The Master and Margarita* took up residence" was designated "a virtual shrine—its walls covered with Bulgakovian graffiti" (Haber, 1998, p. 2). Today, the building hosts two museums—one private, the other a government initiative—dedicated to Bulgakov. Additionally, his family home in Kiev is now designated as the Bulgakov Museum.

The fascination with Bulgakov and *The Master and Margarita* in the immediate post-Soviet era was so great that a "Satan's Ball" was held by the "nouveaux riches" in which attendees paid an admission price of \$100 to attend (Haber, 1998, p. 3). Today, the interest in Bulgakov seems unquenchable with annual festivals devoted to the writer, as well as restaurants and cafes named after the novel's characters.

MFS: Solzhenitsyn's most memorable work of nonfiction is *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956*. In this three volume compilation, eyewitness accounts, historical analysis, and philosophical assessments are interwoven with personal accounts of his own experience in the forced labor camps in the Soviet Union where agony, horror, crime, and the specter of death coningle with quiet acts of heroism buttressed by hope. Is it instructive or useful to compare *The Gulag Archipelago* with *War and Peace*?

DS: Certainly, *The Gulag Archipelago* resembles *War and Peace* in that it's a tragic epic and the narrative scope is panoramic. But *The Gulag Archipelago* is ultimately not about the devastating consequences that ensure as a consequence of a war with another nation or nations. Rather, it's a heart-wrenching story of an internal civil war and the catastrophic outcome that results from the ill-fated decision by Soviet authorities to turn upon its own population in order to shore up a faltering regime.

Even today, the Stalinist legacy of authoritarian rule persists in the practices of Vladimir Putin, Russia's current president. Journalists and other individuals who challenge Russia's oligarchical style of governance potentially risk their lives. We have only to read Bill Browder's recent autobiographical narrative *Red Notice* (2015) of the perils of establishing the most successful hedge fund in Russia and being deemed "a threat to national security" because of his efforts to stench the money flow to "corrupt bureaucrats and their businessmen accomplishes" ("Red Sky in the Morning", 2015).

The Gulag Archipelago resembles the fiction of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky in that it is a philosophical work deeply engaged with moral ideas. In some respects, however, it's closer to *The Brothers Karamazov* than to *War and Peace*, particularly given the examination in Dostoyevsky's novel of free will with respect to faith, reason, doubt, and how these concepts are to be reconciled with respect to a modernizing Russia. Although, of course, by the 20th century we witness in *The Gulag Archipelago* the extent to which that the Soviet Union has

veered from modernism to totalitarianism, and we are privy to the tragic consequences that ensue.

Dostoyevsky and Solzhenitsyn also share a literary approach that shapes much of their fiction, as well as Solzhenitsyn's investigative style utilized in *The Gulag Archipelago*. As I've discussed in my essay on Solzhenitsyn, "Dostoyevsky's fiction does not present a single narrative interpreted from a variety of perspectives by his characters. Rather, his novels of ideas contain simultaneous narratives peaking at different junctures, reflecting the social complexity of the world in which we live". So it is with Solzhenitsyn's most important works with the notable exception of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. The goal of both authors, I've suggested, "is to present narratives featuring a polyphonic chorus that, in effect, mimics a symphonic worldview, thereby providing the reader with a panoramic depiction of society" (Sheets, 2009a). It is for this reason that Volkov likens Solzhenitsyn's literature—as I've noted earlier in this Q&A—not to *War and Peace* "but to the operas of Mussorgsky or Rimsky-Korsakov".

In recent years *The Gulag Archipelago* has overshadowed Solzhenitsyn's literary fiction. Since 2009, in fact, it has been required reading in Russian high schools. The term "Gulag" is based on the acronym of the government agency responsible for overseeing the camps. The geographical reach of these labor camps extended from the Northwest to areas west of Kiev and reached south to Odessa and east to the Siberian coast adjacent to both China and the Japanese Kuril Islands. "Archipelago" is a literary metaphor for the chain of "islands", those 476 camps that spanned twelve time zones. The first Soviet camp of lasting permanence was, in fact, created on the island of Solovetsky, an archipelago island located in the White Sea.

In September of 1973 the Soviet authorities seized a copy of *The Gulag Archipelago*, one of only three still retained in the Soviet Union. The location of that particular copy had been divulged by his typist, Elizaveta Voronyanskaya, after five days of interrogation. Within days, she died, probably the result of a suicide. Solzhenitsyn, who had earlier smuggled the manuscript to Europe, came to the conclusion that the manuscript was almost certainly "in the hands of the KGB" and, consequently, signaled for its "speedy publication in the West" (Scammell, 1984, p. 815). Immediately after Christmas that year the Russian language edition of Volume 1 was issued by the French publisher Éditions du Seuil. By 1974 the first volume appeared in English and French with other volumes and other translations soon to follow. As I noted in my essay, "No historical document could have been more devastating to the Soviet regime" (Sheets, 2009a). The result was that Solzhenitsyn was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1974 and immediately thereafter charged with treason. He and his immediate family ultimately settled in Vermont. Solzhenitsyn and his wife only returned to Russia in 1994 after the collapse of the Soviet regime.

A precise determination of the numbers of people who died in the Gulag is almost impossible to determine. Solzhenitsyn's figures rely on Kurganov, an academic statistician, who estimated that 66 million died in the camps between the October Revolution and 1959 (Solzhenitsyn, 1975, citing Part III, Chapter 1, p. 10). Robert Conquest, a British-American Soviet historian, has indicated that the figure of 22.5 million provided by Russian historian Zemskov, which includes 14 million in the Gulag, 4-5 million relegated to the "colonies" and another 3.5 million relegated to "labor settlements" is "high" (Conquest, 1997, p. 1317).

Anne Applebaum, whose book *Gulag: A History* won the Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction in 2004, suggests that from 1929 until 1953 approximately 18 million were incarcerated, averaging around 2 million at any given time. This assessment does not include

those subject to forced labor who were not incarcerated. Nor did it include other incarcerated groups: prisoners of war, “postwar inhabitants of filtration camps”, “special exiles” who included not only “kulaks”, those relatively prosperous farmers or shopkeepers whose assets were seized and who were likely to be sent to other labor camps, as well as “Poles, Balts . . . Caucasians, Tartars, [and] Volga Germans”, among others (Applebaum, 2003, pp. xvii, 580). To give readers a sense of just how significant these “other” categories were, historian Lynn Viola has argued that “special exiles” accounted for some 12-14 million prisoners who passed in and out of these camps from 1934-1944 (Viola, 2007, p. 3).

The Gulag Archipelago was a compilation by Solzhenitsyn of “reports, memoirs, and letters by 227 witnesses”, and, as he noted, “what I myself was able to take away from the Archipelago—on the skin of my back, and with my eyes and ears” (Solzhenitsyn, 1974, p. xi). What follows is an extended passage by Solzhenitsyn taken from Chapter 6 in Part I: The Prison Industry.

It seemed to Stalin that the country was swarming with spies. All the Chinese who lived in the Soviet Far East were convicted as spies—Article 58-6—and were taken to the northern camps, where they perished. The same fate had awaited Chinese participants in the Soviet civil war—if they hadn’t cleared out in time. Several hundred thousand Koreans were exiled to Kazakhstan, all similarly accused of spying. All Soviet citizens who at one time or another had lived abroad, who at one time or another had hung around Intourist hotels, who at one time or another happened to be photographed next to a foreigner, or who had themselves photographed a city building . . . were accused of the same crime. Those who stared too long at railroad tracks, at a highway bridge, at a factory chimney were similarly charged. All the numerous foreign Communists stranded in the Soviet Union, all the big and little Comintern officials and employees, one after another, without any individual distinctions, were charged first of all with espionage. (Solzhenitsyn, 1974, p. 247)

George F. Kennan, “the father of containment”, who served as an American diplomat to Russia and has been acknowledged as the conceptual inspiration for the Marshall Plan, predicted that the publication of *The Gulag Archipelago* would lead to the unraveling of the Soviet Union. “It is”, he argued, “too large for the craw of the Soviet propaganda machine”. He added, “It will stick there, with increasing discomfort, until it has done its work” (cited in Ericson & Klimoff, 2008, p. 48).

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