

HILLSDALE COLLEGE
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Political Science 446
Western Writers and Politics: Ideology and the Soul

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Seminar Description

This seminar examines the theme of ideology and the soul with an exploration of the writings of the Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Seminar participants will consider his fiction, first in a shorter story, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, and then in a novel, *The First Circle*, followed by Solzhenitsyn's three-volume work, *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956*, which introduced to the world the word "gulag" to describe the brutal prison system inspired and managed by Soviet Communism.

The subtitle of the 1,800-page *Gulag* describes the work as "An Experiment in Literary Investigation." Decidedly non-fictional, then, the book stands as a monument to Communism's ideological barbarity, and as a rebuke to all who ignore Communism's inherent cruelty. A toll of nearly 100 million lives lost to 20th century Communism attests to the ideological perdition of "organized mendacity." Solzhenitsyn's witness to this evil seeks to expose the systematic lies that animate Communism—and every ideology that afflicts human souls.

This seminar will in turn seek to understand the modern political phenomenon of ideology, and how it uniquely impacts the relationship of political regimes and the human soul. This is an inquiry broader than a consideration of Communism, as is Solzhenitsyn's quest. It seeks to understand what politics has to do with the soul.

Solzhenitsyn's work provides points of inquiry impossible in strictly analytic works of political writing. When governments become thoroughly corrupted, Solzhenitsyn teaches, a "second government"—one that is moral—must be established. Liberty in the West thus frequently has been found in works of fiction and "literary investigation." In this seminar we will explore the writings of Solzhenitsyn, along with a few selections from his friend and fellow Russian Varlam Shalamov, and the Czech writer Václav Havel, for what they might teach us about ideology and the soul.

Seminar Summary

The seminar's point of departure is Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's story of one day in the life of a Russian *zek*, or labor camp prisoner. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, published in the Soviet Union in 1962, opens our inquiry into the relationship of regimes and the human soul. We are prompted to ask whether the *ideological* enslavement suffered by millions of *zeks* like Ivan is unique in the history of civilizations. Is ancient tyranny the forerunner of the modern ideological "isms," mainly Communism and Nazism, or are the modern ideologies unique to modernity?

This important question is addressed throughout Solzhenitsyn's novel *The First Circle*, as the *zeks* in an engineering labor camp (with less severe working conditions than in most camps) engage in philosophical, theological, and political reflections befitting the philosophers—those lovers of wisdom—Dante placed in Limbo, the first circle of Hell. What is the relationship between philosophy (reason) and theology (revelation), and what does this relationship entail for the political realm? What is evil, and how does one's definition of evil dictate one's view of human nature? In answering this latter question, especially, we shall pay special attention to Solzhenitsyn's portrait of Joseph Stalin.

Part of the enormous task undertaken by Solzhenitsyn in *The Gulag Archipelago*, our third major work, was to establish the indissoluble link between the philosophical materialism of Karl Marx, the violent founding of the Soviet Union under V. I. Lenin, and the hardening of Soviet authoritarianism under Stalin into the most totalitarian regime in the history of the world. Against those who would argue that Stalin simply took a wrong turn in the progressive march towards freeing the proletariat, Solzhenitsyn insists that the history of the archipelago of brutality be accurately understood.

Solzhenitsyn's tour through the archipelago is a harsh experience for the reader, but his conclusion is far from despondent. Indeed, he is hopeful. In the words of a recent book on Solzhenitsyn by Daniel Mahoney, Solzhenitsyn's work offers an "ascent from ideology." This ascent, made possible with the possession of what Solzhenitsyn calls "a point of view," has important philosophical, political, and religious dimensions, all of which are woven together in the *Gulag* in a way that will shed further light on the questions we encountered in reading *One Day* and *The First Circle*.

In undertaking the writing of the *Gulag*, Solzhenitsyn originally asked the assistance of Varlam Shalamov. A prisoner himself in the worst of the labor camps, in the Siberian region of Kolyma, Shalamov published short stories based upon his experiences. Several of these short stories will be read in conjunction with Solzhenitsyn's works.

In addition, we will consider several speeches by Václav Havel, a Czech playwright, dissident, and current president of the Czech Republic who writes as an intellectual heir of Solzhenitsyn's work even as departs from the Russian in important ways worth considering for the future of Western democracy.

Office Hours

If you would like to arrange a meeting time, please e-mail me at david.bobb@hillsdale.edu.

Academic Integrity

As stated in the *Hillsdale College Catalog*, all students are expected to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. I encourage you to discuss the readings with your friends and classmates. However, all work submitted must be your own and must have been prepared exclusively for this course.

It is essential to academic and intellectual inquiry to learn from others. Thus, in writing papers, you will appropriately draw upon the work of others. Nevertheless, you must give credit where credit is due. Failure to give proper attribution to words, concepts, and evidence borrowed from others constitutes plagiarism, which is a serious academic offense. If you have questions about proper attribution, please consult the instructor prior to turning in academic work.

Required texts

Required texts for the seminar include the following:

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, trans. H. T. Willetts, forward by Alexis Klimoff (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1991).

Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997).

Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (Parts I-IV) and Harry Willetts (Parts V-VII), abridged by Edward E. Ericson, Jr. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002).

Handouts

Dante Alighieri, Canto IV, *Inferno*, in *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Books, 1980): 31-39.

"Chronology," in Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, trans. H.T. Willetts (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995): xviii-xxvii.

Václav Havel, "Post-modernism: the Search for Universal Laws," *Vital Speeches of the Day* LX 20 (August 1, 1994): 613-615.

Varlam Shalamov, "Condensed Milk," in *Kolyma Tales*, trans. John Glad (New York: Penguin Books, 1994): 80-85.

Varlam Shalamov, "Major Pugachov's Last Battle," in *Kolyma Tales*, trans. John Glad (New York: Penguin Books, 1994): 241-256.

Varlam Shalamov, "Prosthetic Appliances," in *Kolyma Tales*, trans. John Glad (New York: Penguin Books, 1994): 388-391.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Men Have Forgotten God," trans. A. Klimoff, in *National Review* (July 22, 1983): 872-876.

Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, "A World Split Apart," in *Solzhenitsyn at Harvard: The Address, Twelve Early Responses, and Six Later Reflections*, ed. Ronald Berman (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1980): 3-20.

Seminar Assignments

Class participation	10%
Reading questions	10%
Mid-term oral examination	20%
Writing assignments	40% (10% each paper)
Final exam	20%

Class participation (10%)

A seminar requires active participation of all seminar members. Students should come to class having read the assigned texts attentively. Students should be ready to engage the assigned readings, other students, and the instructor in seminar discussion. Because the seminar meets only once per week, attendance is essential. For some seminar sessions participation in Blackboard discussion boards will be required.

Reading questions (10%)

Three questions of each student's creation will be submitted on the weekly seminar readings. The questions should incisively explore a core issue raised by the author studied. Each student will submit questions for at least *five* seminar meetings; there will be no questions accepted for the second week of class; instead, a short, two-page paper is assigned. The top five grades (1-10 scale) will be averaged; if a student wishes to submit more than five sets of questions the top five will be counted. Questions are due by 5 p.m. each Wednesday prior to the seminar session (which starts at 6 p.m.) in which the readings will be discussed. Please e-mail the questions to the instructor. Reading questions submitted late will not be accepted. Excellent questions will be considered in our seminar discussions.

Mid-term oral examination (20%)

Students will choose one major theme or question selected from a list provided by the instructor at least one week prior to the exam. In addition, the instructor will choose a second major theme or question on which the student will be examined. Any seminar readings are fair game. Exams will be approximately 20 minutes in length. No notes or

books may be used during the oral examination. Mid-term examination will include material studied from Weeks 1-7. Exams will be administered during appointments suitable to the student's schedule.

Writing assignments (40%: 10% each paper)

Four short papers will be submitted, two prior to the mid-term oral examination, and two after the mid-term examination. Papers are due at the beginning of the class.

1. The first paper is due the second meeting of the seminar. One to two pages in length (do not hand in three pages, or else the paper will be returned to you ungraded; do not cause the instructor to squint in order to read the font), this paper will focus on a particular question about *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, to be assigned by the instructor. The paper does not require research.
2. In the second paper students will focus on *The First Circle*. Three to four pages in length, the paper's topic will be assigned by the instructor. The paper does not require research.
3. In the third paper students will concentrate on the first part of *The Gulag Archipelago*. Three to four pages in length, the paper's topic will be assigned by the instructor. The paper does not require research.
4. The topic of the fourth paper will be determined by students in consultation with the instructor. Between eight and ten pages in length, the paper may explore any theme in the course, and include a focus on any work or works of the student's choosing. The paper may include outside research, but is not dependent upon such research.

Final exam (20%)

The written final exam is cumulative, and may be given as a take-home exam.

Explanation of Grading

The following are the standards of judgment for work done in this seminar:

“A”: Excellent

Work meriting an “A” grade is excellent. It demonstrates unusually thorough preparation, genuine comprehension and synthesis, insight, and even originality. Work is written with great clarity and attention to detail. The grade signifies not simply very good work but exceptionally fine work. An “A” grade is rare.

“B”: Good

Work meriting a “B” grade is good. It demonstrates thorough preparation, a grasp of the subject matter and a command of the materials of the seminar. It may not show any special insight or originality, but it demonstrates clear understanding of the material with comprehensive answers presented in a clear and logical manner.

“C”: Average or Acceptable

Work meriting a “C” grade is average or acceptable. The work demonstrates an adequate, though not comprehensive, grasp of the subject matter. Significant information may be overlooked, and the work may not display a full appreciation of the meaning or implication of a question. Answers may be too brief to allow sufficient development. An essay may appear to be derived wholly from lecture or discussion material, ignoring relevant readings or reference to readings.

“D”: Poor

Work meriting a “D” grade is poor. The student demonstrates some knowledge, but the work is shoddy and shows lack of careful preparation. Most information has been overlooked, and the meaning or implication of a question largely has been overlooked. An essay barely covers the assigned topic, and almost completely neglects to address the most significant issues involved.

“F”: Unacceptable

Work meriting an “F” grade is unacceptable for academic credit, and denotes failure. Many facts or references are missing or are misunderstood entirely. There is little or no analysis, and the style is poor, confused, or incomprehensible. A student may attend classes and submit assignments and yet earn an “F” if the product does not reflect some minimal command of the materials of the seminar.

Seminar Schedule**Week 1: Seminar Introduction: Ideology and the Soul**

Varlam Shalamov, "Prosthetic Appliances," in *Kolyma Tales*, pp. 388-391 (handout)

"Chronology," in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, pp. xviii-xxvii (handout)

Week 2: Liberty and Liberation in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, pp. 3-182

Week 3: Reason, Revelation, and Politics in the First Circle

Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, in *The Divine Comedy*, Canto IV, pp. 31-39

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*, Chapters 1-14, pp. 1-69

Week 4: Stalin, Absolute Evil, and Aristotle’s Hierarchy of Being

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*, Chapters 15-27, pp. 70-161

**Week 5: "Life is No Love Story":
Ideology, Eros, Friendship, and Family**

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*, Chapters 28-48, pp. 161-294

**Week 6: "You Have Only One Conscience":
Personalism and the "Point of View"**

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*, Chapters 49-68, pp. 294-425

**Week 7: "Abandon Hope, All Ye Who Enter Here":
Nature, History, and Hell**

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*, Chapters 69-87, pp. 426-580

Oral mid-term exam

Week 8: *Gulag*, Part I: The Prison Industry

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Part I, pp. 3-145

**Week 9: *Gulag*, Parts II-III: Perpetual Motion; The Destructive-
Labor Camps**

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Parts II and III, pp. 149-296

Week 10: *Gulag*, Part IV: The Soul and Barbed Wire

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Part IV, pp. 299-327

Week 11: *Gulag*, Part V: Katorga

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Part V, pp. 331-418

Varlam Shalamov, "Condensed Milk," in *Kolyma Tales*, pp. 80-85 (handout)

Varlam Shalamov, "Major Pugachov's Last Battle," in *Kolyma Tales*, pp. 241-256 (handout)

Week 12: *Gulag*, Parts VI-VII: Exile; Stalin Is No More

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Part VI-VII, pp. 421-472

