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Dobson, Miriam (2005) Contesting the paradigms of de-Stalinization: readers' responses to 'One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich'. *Slavic Review*, 64 (3). pp. 580-600. ISSN: 0037-6779

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Slavic Review*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (Autumn, 2005), pp. 580-600

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Contesting the Paradigms of De-Stalinization: Readers' Responses to *One Day in the Life* of Ivan Denisovich

Miriam Dobson

"In Khar'kov I have seen all kinds of queues—for the film 'Tarzan,' butter, women's drawers, chicken giblets, and horse-meat sausage," wrote a certain Mark Konenko, describing urban life under Nikita Khrushchev. He continued, "But I cannot remember a queue as long as the one for your book in the libraries. . . . I waited six months on the list and to no avail. By chance I got hold of it for forty-eight hours."¹ The author he addressed was Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn; the book was *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha* (One day in the life of Ivan Denisovich), published in the November 1962 issue of the literary journal *Novyi Mir*.² A former prisoner himself, Konenko perhaps had vested interest in the work, yet his comments suggest that his fascination was far from unique. According to Konenko, the urge to read about life in Iosif Stalin's prison camps proved stronger than even the usual hunger for sausage and American movies. The struggle to obtain a copy of the coveted text required stamina, luck, and connections. Another of Solzhenitsyn's correspondents wrote: "I am only a nurse, and there were professors and university teachers in the queue for the book. But because I know someone in the library, and because I was there myself, I was given it for the New Year without waiting in the queue."³

In the winter of 1962–63, citizens across the Soviet Union voraciously read Solzhenitsyn's bleak depiction of life in one of Stalin's labor camps. Whether incensed by Solzhenitsyn's audacity or by the horrors he revealed, few could respond with indifference. Many felt compelled to set their reactions down on paper. As established writers, literary critics, and leading party members wrote reviews for a variety of Soviet newspapers and journals, the pages of *Novyi mir*, *Ogonek*, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, *Izvestiia*, *Literatur-*

A grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Board supported the research and writing of this article. I would like to thank those who commented on earlier versions of this paper presented at the AAASS 34th National Convention in Pittsburgh and at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (University College London) in November 2002, in particular Geoffrey Hosking, Pete Duncan, Wendy Slater, Maya Haber, Bettina Weichert, and Sheila Fitzpatrick. Especial thanks go to Susan Morrissey who read and commented on this article in several earlier forms. I am also grateful to the two anonymous referees at *Slavic Review* for their helpful suggestions.

1. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "How People Read *One Day*: A Survey of Letters," in Leopold Labedz, ed., *Solzhenitsyn: A Documentary Record* (Harmondsworth, 1974), 50. While many readers addressed letters to the editors of *Novyi mir* (now preserved at the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art), others wrote directly to the author himself. Small snippets of these letters are printed in Labedz's collection.

2. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha," *Novyi mir*, 1962, no. 11: 8–74.

3. Solzhenitsyn, "How People Read *One Day*," 50.

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naia Rossiia, *Oktiabr'*, *Don*, and *Pravda* became the site of a major polemic between what Ivan Lakshin, a contemporary critic, dubbed the “friends and foes of Ivan Denisovich.”⁴ The nation’s leading literati and politicians may have battled it out publicly in the Soviet press, but ordinary citizens were no less opinionated. The journal *Novyi mir* received an unprecedented number of letters from readers who wished to articulate their views on the controversial new work. As readers sought to understand its significance, they discussed not only the text itself but also the important political and social changes that had occurred in the decade since Stalin’s death. Although other pieces of fiction on the “camp theme” were being published, Solzhenitsyn’s novella became the focal point for broader debates about Soviet politics and history.⁵

Scholars of the Khrushchev era have long paid particular attention to literature. Released from some of the constraints of the Stalinist era, the intelligentsia used fiction as a vehicle to discuss political and social change. According to received wisdom, “the story of Thaw politics is about culture. The story of Thaw culture is about politics.”⁶ The polemic that followed the publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* has generated particular interest in the west. Anna Krylova recently claimed that when he appeared on the literary scene in 1962, Solzhenitsyn was eagerly greeted as the “long awaited rebel.”⁷ Arguing that throughout the post-war period the American academic and political community yearned for the rebirth of the “liberal man” in Soviet Russia, Krylova maintains that the west seized on Solzhenitsyn so enthusiastically because he seemed to prove that “disbelief” was possible within the Soviet world. Indeed, the fact that his first work engendered such passionate responses from the cultural and political elite seemed to suggest that Solzhenitsyn was not alone in his capacity to challenge the Soviet system. It encouraged western observers to think that there were significant numbers of Soviet citizens who condemned the Stalinist past and desired—at the very least—liberalization.

As early as 1964, Max Hayward wrote in *Slavic Review* that the discussion of Solzhenitsyn’s work “has now become the main arena for the ever

4. See for example Konstantin Simonov, “O proshlom vo imia budushchego,” *Izvestiia*, 18 November 1962, 5; “Vo imia pravdy, vo imia zhizni,” *Pravda*, 23 November 1962, 7–8; N. Kruzhkov, “Tak bylo, tak ne budet,” *Ogonek*, 2 December 1962, 28–29; Lidiia Fomenko, “Bol’shie ozhidaniia,” *Literaturnaia Rossiia*, 11 January 1963, 6–7; “V redaktsiiu Literaturnoi gazety,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 22 January 1963, 3; Fedor Chapchakhov, “Nomera i liudi,” *Don* 7, no. 1 (January 1963): 155–159; N. Sergovantsev, “Tragediia odinochestva i ‘sploshnoi byt,’” *Oktiabr’* 40, no. 4 (April 1963): 198–206; V. Lakshin, “Ivan Denisovich, ego druž’ia i nedrugi,” *Novyi mir*, 1964, no. 1:223–245.

5. A year earlier, *Novyi mir* had already published Viktor Nekrasov’s *Kira Grigorievna*, a tale recounting the difficulties encountered by a gulag survivor upon returning home. Viktor Nekrasov, “Kira Grigorievna,” *Novyi mir*, 1961, no. 6:70–126.

6. Nancy Condee, “Cultural Codes of the Thaw,” in William Taubman, Sergei Khrushchev, and Abbott Gleason, eds., *Nikita Khrushchev* (New Haven, 2000), 160.

7. Anna Krylova, “The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eastern European Studies* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 119–46.

more bitter feud between the ‘conservatives’ and the ‘liberals.’”⁸ Hayward viewed the polemic as a conflict between two well-defined factions, those advocating change and those defending the status quo. This binary model became dominant in Sovietology, explored most fully in an article written by Stephen Cohen in the late 1970s. Borrowing terms from Lakshin’s 1964 article “The Friends and Foes of Ivan Denisovich,” Cohen followed Hayward in suggesting that after Stalin’s death Soviet political life coalesced around the “two poles” of reformism and conservatism, but he now extended the scope of this model to include not only literary experts and political figures, but also the ordinary Soviet citizen. At this time Cohen could, of course, only base his argument on published sources largely produced by members of the artistic or political elite, but he suggested both “trends are expressed below, in society, in popular sentiments and attitudes.”⁹

Access to unpublished citizens’ letters now allows us to probe popular opinion more fully. The *Novyi mir* mailbag contains letters from lawyers, teachers, party members, purge victims and their relatives, self-confessed thieves, prisoners, camp workers, pensioners, an army captain, a collective farmer, a worker in a chemical laboratory, and simply “young people.” These letters reflect a broad spectrum of opinion. On the one hand, jubilant readers lavished praise on Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr Tvardovskii, and all that seemed to truly promise a “new world”;¹⁰ on the other hand, skeptical voices remained convinced that the camps had been populated by inveterate enemies of the Soviet people.¹¹ Yet in the extant corpus of citizens’ letters, such stark positions appear relatively rare.¹² Without denying

8. Max Hayward, “Solzhenitsyn’s Place in Contemporary Soviet Literature,” *Slavic Review* 23, no. 3 (September 1964): 433.

9. Stephen F. Cohen, “The Friends and Foes of Change: Reformism and Conservatism in the Soviet Union,” in Stephen F. Cohen, Alexander Rabinowitch, and Robert Sharlet, eds., *The Soviet Union Since Stalin* (Bloomington, 1980), 14.

10. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva (RGALI), f. 1702 (*Novyi mir*), op. 9, d. 109 (Readers’ letters about works published in the journal), l. 123.

11. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. 560 (Special *fond* of manuscript materials relating to the violation of legality in the years of Stalin’s cult of personality), op. 1, d. 44, l. 1. Having worked as a prison guard for fifteen years, this party member wrote to the Central Committee, convinced that in the camps where he had served there were indeed significant numbers of “inveterate [*ot’iavlennnye*] enemies of Soviet power, traitors, German collaborators [*nemetskie posobniki*], henchmen [*karateli*], bandits,” and not only the innocent victims he found in Solzhenitsyn’s work.

12. This article primarily uses three *dela* from the *Novyi mir* *fond* at RGALI, f. 1702 (*Novyi mir*), op. 9, d. 107–109, which contain letters from the very end of 1962 through to the summer of 1963. Letters continued to be received in the second half of 1963, but these were often more general responses to Solzhenitsyn’s publications and reputation, rather than specifically related to his first work, “*Odin den’ Ivana Denisovicha*.” In the three *dela* explored, about twenty letters were copied. Of these twenty, only two supported the work unequivocally, while one questioned the necessity of publishing such works at all (the sister of a purge victim, Comrade Spasskaia was distressed to read of the horrors her brother had endured, d. 107, ll. 34–35). The majority, however, were more equivocal. The other seventeen letters examined all claimed to accept the process of de-Stalinization, whilst challenging certain important aspects of Solzhenitsyn’s work. At least eight of the letters criticized Solzhenitsyn’s use of language. Five letters came from men still serving prison sentences for nonpolitical crimes.

that potential for conflict along the lines suggested by Cohen existed within Khrushchev's society, I argue that the reformer/conservative paradigm imposes excessively fixed identities onto its subjects. The beliefs held by any one individual cannot always be so neatly categorized. Individuals might welcome some of the changes occurring in the post-Stalin years while opposing others. Although Lakshin had maintained that an individual's attitude towards Ivan Denisovich was a reliable gauge of his political attitudes more broadly, close examination of readers' letters suggests that those who embraced reform in other areas did not always praise Solzhenitsyn's work. The discussion that followed the publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was in fact part of a rather more complex dialogue about the nature of change in the post-Stalin era.

Solzhenitsyn's tale of life in a labor camp led many readers to reflect not only on the crimes of the past but also on current issues, in particular the changing status of the gulag since Stalin's death. Between 1953 and 1959, the Soviet government had introduced a raft of measures intended to radically scale down the gulag. By 1960 the camp population was little more than a fifth of its 1953 size.¹³ Contrary to traditional understandings of de-Stalinization, repressed party members were by no means the only returnees.¹⁴ In addition to those legally rehabilitated, many made it home as a result either of one of the amnesties decreed in these years or of the new measures introduced to allow early release.¹⁵ The enormous exodus from the camps taking place in the first seven years of de-Stalinization thus included prisoners who had served time for the entire spectrum of offences, including not only anti-Soviet activity but also hooliganism, theft, and murder. Although the downsizing of the gulag was already being reversed by the early 1960s, massive releases had generated significant anxiety amongst citizens who worried that the Soviet collective was under threat from highly destructive elements, hitherto contained and isolated in the camp zone.

By the time the censors allowed Solzhenitsyn's work to be published in 1962, readers had established clear ideas about how these former exiles were to be regarded. This article first explores how victims of 1937–38 were able to craft effective narratives of their suffering and martyrdom

13. The camp population was 2,466,914 on 1 April 1953, falling to 781,630 by January of 1956 and as low as 550,000 in 1960. See Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. 7523 (Supreme Soviet), op. 89 (Documents relating to the review of pardon appeals), d. 4408, l. 82; and GARF, f. 7523, op. 95 (Group for the preparation of pardon appeals), d. 109, l. 27.

14. In the Secret Speech, Khrushchev depicts the returnees almost exclusively as high-ranking party members victimized by Stalin's terror. Western observers have tended to follow his example, focusing predominantly on the rehabilitation of political prisoners and paying only fleeting attention to the millions of nonpolitical *zeks* (*zakliuchennyye*: prisoners, slang) allowed to return in the first post-Stalin years. For a recent example of this focus, see Nanci Adler, *The Gulag Survivor: Beyond the Soviet System* (New Brunswick, N.J., 2002).

15. Amnesties were passed in 1953, 1954, 1955, 1957, and 1959. In addition, the "work-day" system, established in 1919 but abandoned under Stalin, was reintroduced in July 1954, allowing prisoners who met their targets to win early release. On the "work-day" system, see GARF, f. 7523, op. 89, d. 4403, ll. 12–17.

that—far from threatening the status quo—in fact served to confirm the righteousness of the party and the Soviet cause. The right of *Ezhovshchina* victims to rejoin the Soviet collective was rarely contested in the letters preserved. Other returning prisoners faced a rather less warm homecoming, however. In their objections to the “vulgarity” of Solzhenitsyn’s characters, I suggest Soviet readers voiced a deep fear of former *zeks*, in particular those they associated with the criminal underworld. Their texts articulate a determined opposition to the policies that had allowed such large numbers of the camp population to be set free. Exploring letters written by prisoners themselves, moreover, we find that by 1962 *zeks* had become bitterly aware of this resentment and understood the deeply unpopular nature of the releases. Recognizing the intractable nature of Soviet attitudes towards the criminal population, *Novyi mir* readers corresponding from within the gulag had come to realize how strongly this aspect of de-Stalinization was being contested on the outside.

From Enemies to Heroes?

One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich was published almost exactly one year after the Twenty-Second Party Congress. Held in the autumn of 1961, the Congress had made Khrushchev’s earlier condemnation of the cult of personality public and sanctioned the removal of Stalin’s body from the Mausoleum on Red Square. Claiming that the moment had come to tell the truth about the past, Khrushchev promised that past miscarriages of justice had now been corrected. In his concluding speech at the Congress, he pronounced: “The time will come when we will all die, for we are all mortal. Until then we must do our work, and we can and must tell the party and the people the truth. We need to do this so that nothing like this can ever be repeated.”¹⁶ Truth was the byword of the moment. Disclosing the errors of the past was not to be a source of shame but was instead embraced as a return to the true revolutionary path.¹⁷ Former “enemies of the people” were now praised for their revolutionary heroism and hailed as martyrs to the Bolshevik cause. One was even invited to speak of her ordeal at the Congress. A Leningrad party member since 1902, D. A. Lazurkina explained that she had “shared the lot” of many old Bolsheviks. As she retold her life story, she created the narrative of a heroic martyr to the revolutionary cause. Imprisoned as a political enemy under both tsarism and Stalinism, she ascribed her survival to an unshakeable belief in the party. Her ordeals, she maintained, had only served to confirm her faith in the communist creed.¹⁸

16. Cited in Aleksandr Tvardovskii’s preface to “Odin den’ Ivana Denisovicha,” *Novyi mir*, 1962, no. 11:8.

17. Two Russian émigrés later wrote that “the undoubted bestseller of the Soviet press of the 1960s was Khrushchev’s concluding speech at the Twenty-Second Party Congress, which drew on the dramatic conflict between his desire to tell the truth and the intention of Molotov-Kaganovich to hide it.” Petr Vail’ and Aleksandr Genis, *60-e: Mir sovetskogo che-loveka* (Ann Arbor, 1988), 139.

18. “Rech’ tovarishcha D. A. Lazurkinoi,” *Pravda*, 31 October 1961, 2.

In the wake of the Twenty-Second Party Congress, no one publicly contested the desirability of “fighting against the cult of personality and its consequences” nor openly challenged the right of *Ezhovshchina* victims of 1937–38 such as Lazurkina to full rehabilitation. As Nanci Adler recognizes, the thick journals “propagated ‘heroic epoch’ tales which extolled the virtue of victims of the terror who, despite it all, ‘returned home having preserved the flame of their devotion to the revolution.’”¹⁹ Former political prisoners were thus invited to think of themselves as shining examples of the Bolshevik spirit.

In response to the publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, many purge victims contributed their memoirs to the editors of *Novyi mir*. When one purge victim, a certain Aleksandr Zuev, sent off a copy of his recollections to the journal, he received a response from Tvardovskii in which the editor explained that the journal was simply inundated with such memoirs.²⁰ Boris Olikier received a similar reply from Tvardovskii’s deputy in which he was told that the journal had received “hundreds” of such memoirs over the past year.²¹ This urge on the part of purge victims to recollect and recount appears widespread, and in the Institute of Marxism-Leninism a special repository (*fond*) was created for “manuscript materials relating to miscarriages of justice committed during the cult of Stalin’s personality.” Having spent much of the 1950s composing petitions for release, rehabilitation, housing, and work, many purge victims were not ready to lay down their pens. As they wrote, they hoped to bring meaning to their distressing ordeals, linking their own resurrection with the re-birth of the party. They wrote not to indict or condemn the party for its errors but to prove its courage in righting the wrongs of the past.²²

No longer considering themselves outsiders to society, the memoirists added their voices to those celebrating the restoration of “truth” from the tribune of the Twenty-Second Party Congress and on the pages of the So-

19. The main thrust of Adler’s work is to demonstrate the ongoing difficulties endured by “the Gulag survivor,” but she admits that in the early 1960s, the Soviet press was ready to print returnees’ memoirs. The texts chosen for publication invariably showed a communist who had never lost faith in the party that had rejected him. See for example the memoirs of Boris D’iakov, published in the March 1963 issue of *Zvezda*. He began by saying, “My chief aim is to show true communists always remain communists no matter what terrible experiences are thrown at them.” The recollections of A. V. Gorbатов, published in 1964 in *Novyi mir*, embody a similarly heroic martyrdom. A Red Army general briefly repressed at the height of the purges, Gorbатов had returned to take up a leading position in the Soviet Army. Adler, *Gulag Survivor*, 215; Boris D’iakov, “Perezhitoe,” *Zvezda*, 1963, no. 3:177; A. V. Gorbатов, “Gody i voiny,” *Novyi mir*, 1964, no. 3:133–56; no. 4:99–138; no. 5:106–53.

20. Arkhiv “Memoriala,” Moscow, f. 2 (Memoir collection), op. 1, d. 68 (personal file of Aleksandr Nikonorovich Zuev), l. 2.

21. Aleksei Kondratovich wrote to Boris Olikier, a rehabilitated party member from Minsk, in May 1963. RGALI, f. 1702, op. 9, d. 109, l. 20.

22. The *fond* mentioned is now housed at RGASPI, f. 560, op. 1. For a fuller exploration of these memoirs, see Miriam Dobson, “Refashioning the Enemy: Popular Beliefs and the Rhetoric of Destalinisation, 1953–1964” (PhD diss., University of London, 2003), 225–41.

viet press.²³ Both Oliker and Zuev were uncertain whether their memoirs were publishable, but neither had any doubt that their work was in keeping with the party line. They firmly believed that the pariah status they had endured for so long was now unequivocally revoked. Oliker recounted how a leading party official in his hometown of Minsk had invited him in for a “free and friendly chat,” even encouraging him to seek out a publisher. *Novyi mir* encouraged this impression. Although they rejected the manuscripts, the editors were insistent that the victims’ experiences were not being disregarded: Oliker was told that even if it remained unpublished, “the manuscript was worth writing,” while Zuev was assured it was still “correct and necessary” that “these pages” had been written.

Significantly, there is little in surviving letters to suggest that the revived status of these former “enemies of people” was a source of conflict for a broader public. Following Khrushchev and the party leadership, they regarded their rehabilitation as a necessary step on the revolutionary journey. Documents preserved in the *Novyi mir* archive do, however, indicate that the question of readmission might prove controversial in other ways. Some seemed to suggest that not all Stalin’s outcasts could be welcomed home and exonerated in this way. Did everyone who had been banished under Stalin deserve the same kind of privileged status, they queried. Could *all* former enemies become heroes?

With relatively few characters fitting the profile of the noble party victim, Solzhenitsyn’s work brought such issues to a head. In her letter to *Novyi mir*, E. A. Ignatovich, a worker in a chemical laboratory in Tula oblast, put the case trenchantly: “With regard to Solzhenitsyn, I want to ask the question: Why? Why did you write in the introduction to *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* that it was about 1937 people? No, there wasn’t even one 1937 person here. From my point of view they were wartime deserters, criminals, and cowards. To my mind, the story was well written but the heroes are trash [*drian’*].”²⁴ Ignatovich, it seems, might have welcomed a story detailing the ordeals of those repressed in 1937, but she found any rewriting of the war myth problematic. Her letter continued, “I will say one thing—these prisoners were enemies [*vragi*], and they still are. The man who became the captain of English ships doesn’t arouse any kind of sympathy in me. Why didn’t he go to the Soviet embassy and return to his motherland? On the English front they fed him up and there was little danger to his life—that’s why he stayed in the West. The captain is trash.”²⁵ In the final paragraph of her letter, we begin to glean some understanding of why Ignatovich took such a hostile position towards the characters arrested for their wartime “crimes.” Ignatovich concluded with a few lines from her own autobiography: “I was a fourteen-year-old girl when I was taken to Germany. I ran away three times, and I got to know all

23. “Doklad N. S. Khrushcheva,” *Pravda*, 18 October 1961, 9; “Doklad N. S. Khrushcheva,” *Pravda*, 19 October 1961, 1; “Rech’ tovarishcha G. D. Dzhevakhishvili,” *Pravda*, 31 October 1961, 2; “Rech’ tovarishcha P. N. Demicheva,” *Pravda*, 20 October 1961, 2; “Rech’ N. V. Podgornogo,” *Pravda*, 20 October 1961, 4.

24. RGALI, f. 1702, op. 9, d. 109, l. 152.

25. *Ibid.*, l. 153.

of the prisons. As a result of this I was eventually taken to the concentration camp at Ravensbruck in 1943. Because I was a stupid girl, the Germans were able to catch me, but if I had been able to escape to a friendly country, I would have asked to be returned to my motherland. The captain on the other hand didn't do this. He's simply a coward."²⁶ While she seemed to accept the rehabilitation of Ezhovshchina victims, Ignatovich found the readmission of wartime prisoners far more problematic, for it implicitly undermined her own heroic status. If failure to be repatriated was no longer considered a crime, then Ignatovich's own fight to resist captivity perhaps began to seem less impressive. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* raised the question of who, in this new de-Stalinized world, might be considered heroes. For those whose own life story and self-esteem were so firmly rooted in their wartime experience, the threat that established myths might change—and with them the recognized cast of heroes and enemies—could be highly disturbing.

Gal'chenko and Petrov, party members from Zagorsk, also objected to the characters Solzhenitsyn created. The pair recoiled not only at the invidious depiction of prison guards ("who are shown to be worse than the SS commanders in a fascist concentration camp"), but also at the prisoners' personalities.²⁷ They produced a blistering tirade: "Can they really be Soviet people who simply fell into the camps as a result of Stalin's cult of personality? Where are their organization, ideas, culture, and humanity? Ivan Denisovich Shukhov—the main hero of the 'story'—is supposed to be seen as a good person, but in actual fact he is shown to be a petty crook/odd-jobber [*mel'kii zhulik/masterok*] who swindles two extra bowls of soup from hungry comrades, a glutton, a toady (in his relations towards Tsezar'), who doesn't have a single friend or a single honest thought. Is this really a 'hero,' is this realism? This is in fact an alien [*chuzhak*]!" Like Ignatovich, Gal'chenko and Petrov were anxious to define who could be considered "heroes." Where Ignatovich had challenged the life stories of Solzhenitsyn's protagonists, these two party loyalists chose to attack the moral traits Solzhenitsyn ascribed to his characters. In their eyes, Shukhov was so lacking in positive attributes he could not even be identified as a Soviet person. He should remain an outsider and an alien, belonging not to the Soviet collective but to some unnamed "other" (*chuzhoi*).

In both letters, the authors worried that Khrushchev's de-Stalinizing rhetoric was being applied too broadly. Criticism of the "cult of personality," they maintained, should not be used to revise the status of all those cast out during the Stalinist era. Readmission into Soviet society should be granted only to party members victimized at the height of the Terror. Setting themselves up as defenders of Soviet moral values, the letter writers intimated that many who "fell into the camps" were indeed there for a reason—they were not truly Soviet people.

The publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* invited Soviet readers to think more fully about the transformation of social bound-

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., d. 107, ll. 97–100.

aries that had occurred in the first post-Stalin decade. As formulated by Gal'chenko and Petrov, key issues included: Who was Soviet, and who was "alien"? How were such identities to be decided? In the corpus of letters preserved, such questions appeared frequently. Fearful of the impact of recent changes, some citizens continued to regard the majority of the gulag inhabitants as individuals who had failed to meet the profile of the "new Soviet man," and who, as such, were unfit to be included in the Soviet collective.

The Threat of *Poshlost'*

One of the defining aspects of Stalinism was the state's drive to mold its subjects into new Soviet men and women. Current work on the Stalinist era stresses the centrality of this "civilizing mission."²⁸ In the late 1930s, the Terror was not only a means to destroy perceived enemies within the political elite but also to cleanse society of those who failed to meet with the regime's strict demands for "cultured" behavior. According to Paul Hagenloh, "The Terror was also the culmination of a decade-long radicalization of policing practice against 'recidivist' criminals, social marginals, and all manner of lower-class individuals who did not or could not fit into the emerging Stalinist system."²⁹ Through education and propaganda, Soviet people were encouraged to turn themselves into cultured and respectable citizens, while the gulag became an outpost for those who failed, for those who remained uncultured and dissolute.³⁰ The effect of the mass releases from the gulag was to erode the fixed boundaries between these two worlds, a process that some found disturbing. Rising crime levels in the 1950s seemed to substantiate their anxieties.³¹ The publication of Solzhenitsyn's story provided anxious readers with an op-

28. See David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917–1941* (Ithaca, 2003).

29. Paul M. Hagenloh, "'Socially Harmful Elements' and the Great Terror," in Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed., *Stalinism: New Directions* (London, 2000), 286–87.

30. The gulag had initially been imagined as a site of redemption. Katerina Clark identifies the years 1931 to 1935 as the period in which this vision of the gulag prevailed. Under Maksim Gor'kii's tutelage, there appeared several accounts of how social aliens were dispatched to hard labor within the camp system, given intensive reeducation, thereby "re-forged" as decent citizens. *Belomor*, the literary work edited by Gor'kii, contained the bold claim that "as the result of twenty months of work, the country has a few thousand skilled builders who have gone through a hard but formative experience and have been cured of the creeping infection of petty bourgeois society." The motif of redemption was to recede, however, with the escalation of terror in the second half of the decade. See Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History As Ritual*, 3d ed. (Bloomington, 2000), 118–19; Maksim Gor'kii, L. Auerbach, and S. G. Firin, *Belomor: An Account of the Construction of the New Canal between the White Sea and the Baltic Sea*, trans. Amabel Williams-Ellis (London, 1935), 338.

31. Statistics from the Ministry of the Interior suggest increased criminal activity in the years following Stalin's death. As a result of the March amnesty, 1953 witnessed a particularly grave crime wave, and though 1954 saw a brief lull, there was a steady rise in crimes recorded over the coming years. By 1957, the overall number of crimes registered was 39 percent higher than in even 1953. The figures for murder are particularly startling, with the number doubling between 1953 and 1957. GARF, f. 7523, op. 89, d. 7494, l. 54.

portunity to reassert a collective identity as respectable and cultured citizens, an identity that they considered threatened by the allegedly uncivilized contingent returning from the gulag.

Introducing Solzhenitsyn's work in the November 1962 issue of *Novyi mir*, the journal's editor, Aleskandr Tvardovskii, seemed to predict some aspects of this forthcoming debate. In the opening paragraph of his preface, he encouraged readers to approve the work as a necessary part of breaking with the past, citing from Khrushchev's speech at the Twenty-Second Party Congress: "[W]e can and must explain all and tell the truth to the party and people. . . . This must be done so that nothing similar can ever be repeated."³² Extolling Solzhenitsyn's work as a necessary contribution to the party's quest for "truth," he appeared unable to countenance any fundamental opposition to the work. No one, he seemed to claim, could deny the necessity of speaking openly about the horrors of Stalin's gulag. Yet in the closing words of his preface, Tvardovskii did acknowledge that some might be shocked, and even angered, by Solzhenitsyn's text. Some overly "persnickety" [*priveredlivi*] people, he feared, would object to some words and expressions taken from the "milieu" in which the story takes place. Tvardovskii already realized that the issue of language would be central.

Though initial reviews had been positive, dissenting voices emerged by the new year, and the question of language did indeed prove important.³³ Writing in the literary journal *Don* in January, the critic Fedor Chapchakhov criticized Solzhenitsyn's use of "convict slang," or literally "convict music" (*blatnaia muzika*).³⁴ Nevertheless, none of the published critics focused on the problem of language with quite the tenacity shown by ordinary readers. In the letters located in the *Novyi mir* archive, language appears to be the single most distressing aspect of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. One pensioner described how he almost laughed at the made-up criminal (*blatnoi*) words, but was then overcome with confusion as to how this kind of "concoction" came to be published.³⁵ A Russian teacher complained that in all sixty-five pages the reader would not find a single phrase written in the literary language he had been taught.³⁶ Meanwhile, a captain in the Soviet army expressed his indignation that someone who had received higher education, served as an officer, and was now a teacher and novice author, should use words that most readers would take "years to learn."³⁷ For him, Solzhenitsyn's status identified him as a respectable member of Soviet society, and this fact should have been reflected in the language the author employed.

Even readers who passionately denounced the atrocities committed under Stalin were nonetheless aghast at the author's use of slang and profanity. Such a response is best illustrated by a letter from a certain Z. G.

32. Tvardovskii's preface to "Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha," *Novyi mir*, 1962, no. 11:9.

33. Fomenko, "Bol'shie ozhidaniia."

34. Chapchakhov, "Nomera i liudi."

35. RGALI, f. 1702, op. 9, d. 108, ll. 10–12.

36. *Ibid.*, d. 107, l. 71.

37. *Ibid.*, l. 65.

Grinberg, a *Novyi mir* reader from the city of Ukhta in the republic of Komi. Grinberg identified himself as a keen follower of both Khrushchev and of the journal's liberal editor, Tvardovskii.³⁸ He welcomed the repudiation of the cult of personality and believed that the new openness was valuable: he expressed admiration for the recent film *Chistoe nebo* (Clear skies), in which an innocent victim of repression endured all his suffering without losing faith in the party.³⁹ He also praised a short story recently printed in *Izvestiia*, in which the heroes—communists consigned to one of Stalin's prison camps—displayed great fortitude and “moral cleanliness.”⁴⁰ Grinberg had good reason to appreciate Khrushchev's policies: once a leading party cadre, he had been repressed in 1937 and endured eight years in the camps.

A purge victim himself, Grinberg hardly fits the profile of a conservative pro-Stalinist, but he was, nonetheless, deeply concerned by the publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. For him, the work represented a distortion of Khrushchev's new rhetoric: “N. S. Khrushchev did not mean in any way for all this dirt to be raked up under the guise of truth.” Though a “foe” of Solzhenitsyn and Ivan Denisovich, Grinberg presented himself as a friend of Khrushchev and a defender of the “truth.” He believed that Solzhenitsyn had exploited the current quest for truth in order “rake up” dirt, and, as Tvardovskii had predicted, it was indeed the language of the text that he contested. The whole tale, wrote Grinberg, was composed in the jargon of the “thief, the recidivist, and the bandit.” He cited various examples of this slang, which, he claimed, “makes you sick.” Why, he asked, do we need to make a cult out of thieves' jargon? In addition to labeling Solzhenitsyn's language “the lexicon of thieves and bandits,” he also repeatedly designated it as vulgar (*poshlyi*) and called the terms vulgarities (*poshliatina*). *Poshlost'*—derived from the Russian word *poshlo*, originally meaning “traditional” or “ancient”—represented a direct challenge to the “new” Soviet values.⁴¹ Grinberg's dread of vulgarity revealed both the significance he attached to the new mores of Soviet society and his deep anxiety that they were now under threat.

Grinberg feared the appearance of bad language as a threat to Soviet *kul'turnost'*, especially as this “vulgarity” was now apparently condoned by the nation's cultural luminaries. Throughout the Soviet era, literature had been one of the prime sites for the promotion of “cultured” behavior and language. “The culture of speech derived from good literature,” writes Vadim Volkov in his study of the campaigns for *kul'turnost'* in the 1930s, and “reading was also directly connected with the acquisition of cultured-

38. *Ibid.*, ll. 58–61.

39. Grigorii Chukhrai, director, *Chistoe nebo* (Moscow: Mosfil'm, 1961).

40. Georgii Shelest, “Samorodok,” *Izvestiia*, 6 November 1962, 6. In the story, four purged party members sent to the Kolyma gold mines exhibit true communist behavior. Having unearthed a huge nugget of gold, they are tempted to hide it in order to then sliver off small pieces each day, thus meeting their targets with less exertion. They resist, however, and hand it all in immediately in order to help the war effort.

41. Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), 42, 64.

ness.”⁴² It was no surprise then that Grinberg was so aghast to discover examples of the criminal jargon promoted in a leading literary journal. He asked the editors of *Novyi mir*, “Do you really have to be a ‘persnickety’ person to disapprove of an approach to literature that flaunts the most vulgar [*samye poshlye*] examples of the thieves’ lexicon in our high-minded Soviet literature?” A few lines later he again questioned why Tvardovskii encouraged “actual vulgarity” (*nastoiashaia poshliatina*) in literature.

Grinberg’s linguistic quibbles reflected the broader anxieties engulfing Soviet society in the 1950s. Many feared that if the millions of prisoners released from the gulag spoke and thought in the same way as Ivan Denisovich, the cultured behavior that the party had fought so hard to inculcate was now under threat. Grinberg apparently believed the boundaries between respectable Soviet society and the dirty underworld of the criminal should remain sealed. Expressing his concerns that “this jargon and vulgarity [*poshlost’*]” would reach “the lexicon of callow youths,” he argued that *poshlost’* represented the “harmful influence of an alien ideology [*chuzhaia ideologiia*].” If the jargon spoken within the camp was “alien,” its use—according to Grinberg—exposed Soviet youth to dangerously foreign influences. Soviet respectability was thus at risk from a foreign culture that had been fostered within the segregated zone of the gulag and that the process of de-Stalinization was now allowing to filter back into society.

Such anxieties were even more explicit in a letter addressed to the Chairman of the Supreme Court by a certain A. Mel’nikov. Mel’nikov opened fire on Solzhenitsyn’s use of “criminal words” (*blatnye slovechki*), words that he found shameful and disgusting. With echoes of Grinberg, he wrote: “This kind of vulgarity [*poshlost’*] is clearly only permissible abroad, but here in the USSR the man of the future is being raised, and not the man of the obsolete past, when the older children taught the younger ones to say disgusting swear words to their own mothers. . . . Why then is the journal *Novyi mir* not pulling the reader towards the good, but instead dragging him towards the mire [*boloto*]?”⁴³ Mel’nikov structured his text on certain oppositions, between the good and the “mire,” here and abroad, the new and the old. Abroad “vulgarity” might flourish, but there was no place for it here in the Soviet Union. Similarly, in the “old” Russia children had been raised in the uncouth and vulgar ways of their older brothers and sisters, but now, according to Mel’nikov, they were raised as citizens of the communist future.⁴⁴ Believing the nuclear family

42. Vadim Volkov, “The Concept of *Kul’turnost’*: Notes on the Stalinist Civilizing Process,” in Fitzpatrick, *Stalinism: New Directions*, 223.

43. RGALI, f. 1702, op. 9, d. 107, l. 76.

44. In his work on swearing in late imperial Russia, Steve Smith has suggested that for “conscious” workers striving to acquire *kul’turnost’*, swearing was so strongly associated with a perceived “lack of culture” it came to serve as a “recognised marker of Russian ethnicity.” It is revealing that half a century after the revolution, Mel’nikov associated bad language with a hangover from the past, an unsavory kind of behavior that was Russian and not Soviet. See S. A. Smith, “The Social Meanings of Swearing: Workers and Bad Language in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia,” *Past and Present*, no. 160 (August 1998): 181.

was no longer able to pass on unsavory behavior to the new generation, Mel'nikov cherished the Soviet state's interest in child rearing. For him, the publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was thus at odds with the official commitment to raising this new man. He found it contradictory that, even as it struggled to combat the problem of hooliganism, the state allowed this work full of foul words, written by a "malicious hoodlum" (*zlostnyi khuligan*), to be published. In choosing to address his letter to the Supreme Court, Mel'nikov intimated that this was not a matter only for the literary experts at *Novyi mir* but also one for the government bodies responsible for maintaining law and order.⁴⁵

In another letter, this time addressed to the editors of the satirical journal *Krokodil*, a lawyer praised Solzhenitsyn for "telling the truth," but condemned his use of bad language, writing graphically: "Some phrases in the book are disgusting, like typhus lice on the human body."⁴⁶ With Soviet citizens fearful that the immoral behavior of the gulag was set to contaminate society, criminal argot was repudiated as the means by which this dreaded contagion might spread.

The publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* ignited a passionate debate in which the most aggressive attacks came not from unrepentant "Stalinists" as such, but from citizens convinced that Soviet society was experiencing a major social crisis. The polemic points to a "moral panic." In the late 1950s and early 1960s, citizens were highly concerned about the erosion of key Soviet values, fearing that the emptying of the gulag endangered the purity of Soviet society. Anxiety about the "blatnoi" lexicon in Solzhenitsyn's novel played into broader fears about the gulag releases and rising levels of crime, and the letters addressed to the editors of *Novyi mir* were part of a more general letter-writing practice. Over the course of the 1950s, central bodies such as the Supreme Soviet were inundated with correspondence from ordinary citizens who railed against the criminals allegedly terrorizing the city streets and pleaded for the authorities to take more punitive measures when dealing with the culprits.⁴⁷ Solzhenitsyn's apparent infatuation with "blatnaia muzika" enraged a community already deeply fearful that criminal culture might soon drown out their own respectable voices.

Demanding Reeducation

Despite the concerns of the Soviet public, the party had spent much of the 1950s loudly proclaiming its commitment to transforming all criminals

45. The Supreme Court simply forwarded the letter to the *Novyi mir* editors.

46. RGALI, f. 1702, op. 9, d. 109, l. 66.

47. Many citizens set pen to paper to contest the regime's commitment to "correction" and "reeducation." The growing tide of letters was frequently noted in reports from government officials. In March 1961, Kalinychev and Savel'ev, senior figures within the Supreme Soviet, wrote to its chairman, Leonid Brezhnev, voicing concerns not only about rising crime but also the outcry it had generated. They noted that the number of crimes reported had again risen steeply in 1960 and with it the influx of letters. See GARF, f. 7523, op. 107 (Documentary materials from the structural subdivision of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet), d. 189, l. 73; GARF, f. 7523, op. 95, d. 99, ll. 49–53.

into decent Soviet citizens. In 1959, in a speech made at the Third Writers' Congress, Khrushchev went so far as to claim that "we believe that no such thing exists as a person who cannot be corrected."⁴⁸ In this high-profile forum, Khrushchev recounted at the length the story of one criminal's conversion from criminal to good family man and respected colleague. He told how a certain Konstantin Nogovitsin had come under the influence of a criminal gang after losing his father at a young age (presumably as a result of war), falling into a cycle of repeat offending and prison sentences, until Khrushchev's recent reforms had enabled him to start a new life. Khrushchev's story referred to the 2 March 1959 decree "On the participation of workers in the maintenance of public order," which promoted the use of noncustodial sentences to allow the reeducation of prisoners within society.⁴⁹ A "collective"—such as a workplace or housing block—could now save an offender from incarceration by offering to become his guardian;⁵⁰ likewise, a prisoner might be granted early release if a collective guaranteed to take responsibility for his "probation." This repudiation of prison sentences in favor of the reeducation and correction of offenders *within* society meant that the emptying of the gulag, begun in 1953, accelerated greatly in 1959. When the total number of prisoners dipped to 550,000 in 1960, the population was at its lowest since 1935.⁵¹

Yet by 1962 when *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was published, this policy was already being reversed. In a matter of just two years, the party had sanctioned a return to a more severe approach to criminal justice. Aside from the more notorious "de-Stalinizing" aspects of his speeches at the Twenty-Second Party Congress, Khrushchev had also articulated a new intolerance for those who refused work, lamenting that "some people seem to think that under communism, man won't have to sow or reap, but just sit about eating pies." In a break with his speeches of 1959, he no longer claimed that all could be saved, but instead called for a more aggressive "battle against idlers and parasites, hooligans, and drunkards." Instead of wishing to see them reformed within the Soviet community, he now advocated their banishment, affirming that "there is no place for these weeds in our life."⁵²

With the tide already turning against the notion of reeducation, the responses to *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* are all the more noteworthy. Mel'nikov for one welcomed the changes, admitting that there had recently been some successes in the fight against crime and that "you don't see the rampant hell-raisers who spew out foul language [*razbushevavshikhsia deboshirov izvergaiushchikh skverno sloviia*] on the streets any

48. "Rech' N. S. Khrushcheva na III s'ezde pisatelei 22 maia 1959 goda," *Pravda*, 24 May 1959, 1–3.

49. "Voluntary Militia and Courts," *Soviet Studies* 11, no. 2 (October 1959): 214–17.

50. The "community organization" could apply for "guardianship" of an offender during the police investigation, or if the matter came to trial, the judge could decide on this as a form of social rehabilitation.

51. GARF, f. 7523, op. 95, d. 109, l. 27.

52. "Doklad N. S. Khrushcheva," *Pravda*, 18 October 1961, 11.

more. Now they quickly take them off to sober up at the police station.”⁵³ However, the state’s volte-face did not receive support from all quarters. Several prisoners wrote to the editors of *Novyi mir* over the course of 1962–63, perhaps inspired by a letter published in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, allegedly from a former recidivist thief named Minaev.⁵⁴ Yet where Minaev was full of disgust for the criminal world he had once inhabited, the prisoners who dispatched letters to the editors of *Novyi mir* sought some kind of vindication. Seizing on the publication of Solzhenitsyn’s novella as an opportunity to express their own views on the subject of crime and punishment, they railed against their renewed exclusion from Soviet society. Of the five prisoners whose letters survive in the *Novyi mir* archive, only one believed that the Soviet system might still welcome him home. Singularly optimistic, Aleksandr Sergachev asked the editors to find him a ghostwriter willing to transform his experiences—which included a series of sentences for theft and hooliganism—into a publishable autobiography.⁵⁵ All serving time for nonpolitical crimes, the four other prisoners no longer believed that the Soviet regime would engage in the rewriting of their life stories. Unlike a purge victim such as Lazurkina, whose autobiography ended triumphantly with full rehabilitation, these prisoners recognized their chances of a new life to be slim. Increasingly convinced that their readmission to society had become impossible, they knew the days when reintegration and rehabilitation was promised to *all* were now over. One prisoner, a certain Mikhail Fadeev, commented pointedly that prisoners were now “doomed not to correction, but to physical destruction by means of hunger, calculated deprivation, and suffering in the camps of the USSR.”⁵⁶

A fellow prisoner, V. A. Lovtsov, firmly believed that the government now lacked any kind of commitment to its erstwhile goal of reeducation. Describing in detail the barbarity of life in the camps, he was highly critical of the Soviet penal system for failing to “correct” prisoners. According to Lovtsov, prisoners in 1951—the year in which *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was set—would commonly say that as soon as they were free they would try to steal a little bit more money, commit a robbery, or even kill someone. “Neither reeducation nor correction had touched them,” averred Lovtsov. While the gulag allowed them to become master card-players, it denied them access to newspapers, study, or training. Penal reform was still painfully slow in the post-Stalin years, he said, and not until Khrushchev’s speech at the Third Writers’ Congress in 1959 did the prisoner begin to hope for change. Hearing Khrushchev’s promises of “faith in man” (*vera v chelovek*), every prisoner felt that he too “could become a human being” (*stat’ chelovekom*).⁵⁷ Soon, however, this too became another broken promise. Commenting on the failure of the amnesties and the high levels of repeat offences, he argued that the authorities had betrayed

53. RGALI, f. 1702, op. 9, d. 107, l. 76.

54. “V redaktsiiu Literaturnoi gazety,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 22 January 1963, 3.

55. RGALI, f. 1702, op. 9, d. 107, ll. 49–51.

56. *Ibid.*, l. 79.

57. *Ibid.*, d. 108, l. 5.

their own pledge to “correct” prisoners. Applied only to petty offenders, the amnesties ignored those serving longer terms, effectively suggesting that the more dangerous criminals could not in fact be “reforged.” Denouncing this approach, Lovtsov emotionally claimed that the criminal should be “forgiven,” however grave his first offence had been. “If you believe in him once, if you forgive him, he will never be a criminal again.” According to Lovtsov, Khrushchev’s promises of “faith in man” had never materialized, and the practices of the gulag remained sharply at odds with the advertised rhetoric of 1959. Lovtsov had grown despondent, and at one point wrote: “I am a son of the Gulag, if you can put it that way.”⁵⁸ Although the reforms of the early Khrushchev era had promised “reforging,” it seems Lovtsov thought of himself as an innate outsider, his membership to the other world of the gulag almost a birthmark, a part of his identity that he would never be allowed to shed.

Railing against his exclusion, Lovtsov realized the difficulty inherent in proving that he had reacquired the moral qualities needed to participate in Soviet life once more. He wrote: “Do you really think that I don’t want to be respectable [*chestnym*], that I don’t want to live well, like millions of Soviet citizens? But how to obtain this? How and to whom shall I prove that I want to live respectably [*chestno*], that I won’t commit any more crimes? . . . Nobody wants to deal with my case.”⁵⁹ Lovtsov repeatedly used the adjective “chestnyi” in his letter. As he understood it, *chestnost’* was the prime quality used to distinguish members of Soviet society from those banished as outcasts. Although *chestnyi* literally means honest or honorable, Soviet citizens invariably used the term to describe an upstanding member of the community more broadly. Indeed, anyone who worked hard, who spoke politely, and who abided by the moral codes governing Soviet society could readily be identified as *chestnyi*.⁶⁰ *Chestnost’* can perhaps be read as an antonym for *poshlost’*. With Soviet citizens loudly insisting on the *poshlost’* of gulag culture, those inhabiting this other world realized that their chances of being recognized as a “*chestnyi chelovek*” were increasingly remote.

The unobtainable nature of *chestnost’* was also a key theme for a prisoner named A. Makarov, who was serving a twenty-five-year sentence in the Komi ASSR. From the outset, he problematized the notion of “correction” and “reeducation”: “Having read [Solzhenitsyn]’s story, one can’t but help thinking not only about those who endured those TERRIBLE YEARS, but also about those who are now enduring the TORTURES [*MUKI*] of ‘Correction’ even now. In addition to this book, I have also

58. *Ibid.*, 1. 2.

59. *Ibid.*, 1. 7.

60. Jeffrey Brooks’s comments on the importance of honor (*chest’*) within Soviet culture are astute. He notes that “every society sets boundaries to identify insiders and outsiders” and considers *chest’* as a key marker in the setting of these social boundaries. However, Brooks goes on to interpret Soviet honor in rather exclusive terms, discussing the role of official honors such as state prizes and titles. I would like to suggest instead that the adjective *chestnyi* was often used in the Soviet context to denote ordinary, decent colleagues and neighbors, not those singled out for their achievements. Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton, 2000), 127.

read many books and brochures on moral education [*vospitanie*], and I have decided to use these brochures in writing this letter, so that with your help I can find answers to some of the questions which as a prisoner I somehow can't work out."⁶¹ Well-versed in Soviet theories on reeducation, he began by citing at length from a brochure by A. Kovalev entitled *Psikhologiya lichnosti zakliuchennogo i individual'nyi podkhod v protsess perevospitaniia* (The psychology and personality of the prisoner and the individual approach to the process of reeducation). Using the regime's own texts to condemn it, he noted its failure to live up to the grand claims of the 1950s. Having repeatedly read that Soviet justice was committed to returning prisoners to life within the Soviet collective, Makarov asked sardonically: "In a few years' time, will I really be working in some collective or other, if out of the forty-three years of my life, I've spent five and a half of them serving in the army and seventeen in prison?" Concluding that redemption was simply not possible, he dismissed the notion of correction as merely a "pretext" (*predlog*) that hid the gulag's true function as a site of infinite suffering. "I can't find any answer to the question," he wrote. "Who needs these camps, why do they exist? Are they really a method of 'reeducation,' or a means of spiritual and physical corruption?"⁶² By the end of the letter he came to the radical conclusion that he would never be allowed back: "There's only one way out: death! To die is far simpler than meeting the daily norms. The only pity is that so many still have to meet the norms and I have to ask: What is all this for, and who needs it? If I have still not become respectable [*chestnyi*] in the eyes of the people and atoned for my crime with seventeen years of imprisonment then are the people respectable [*chestnyi*] in my eyes?" Makarov had already reached the bitter conclusion that a return to Soviet society was impossible, the regime's promises of reeducation empty. He would never be recognized as *chestnyi*. And if readmission into the Soviet community was not possible, he renounced life.

One of the most astute writers, Makarov clearly realized that by the early 1960s two different approaches were being taken: one approach for criminals, another for party members. Later in his letter, he cited from a 1963 tract on crime that already embodied the regime's new course. In this work, entitled *V obshchestve, stroiashchem kommunizm, ne dolzhno byt' mesta pravonarusheniim i prestupnosti* (In a society building communism, there should be no place for law-breaking and crime), A. L. Remenson had even begun to undermine the notion of *vospitanie*, a fact which Makarov was quick to note. The passage identified by Makarov read: "Some prisoners claim that 'I'm not the one who's guilty: it was the war, my poor upbringing [*plokhoe moe vospitanie*], the wrong kind of teachers, and so on. Poor, unhappy old me—I'm not to blame.' We should say straight out to these people: 'Don't deceive yourself!' The war brought almost everyone unhappiness and there were shortcomings in the way millions of people were raised [*nedostatki vospitaniia vstrelis' milliony liudei*].

61. RGALI, f. 1702, op. 9, d. 109, l. 139.

62. *Ibid.*, l. 141.

But the absolute majority of Soviet people overcame [*peredolet'*] the difficulties, rather than bowing down before them."⁶³ Makarov went on to argue that the same line should logically be taken to purge victims. Reworking the passage cited above, Makarov suggested that even purge victims like Solzhenitsyn himself could be told: "Don't deceive yourself; not all communists ended up in camps under Stalin. In fact, many were able to 'overcome' these difficulties, rather than bowing down before them and so they didn't end up in a camp." Makarov was deeply bitter that political prisoners were vindicated [*opravdanyi*], while those sentenced under Stalin for nonpolitical sentences were still doomed to eternal incarceration. In dealing with the great body of Stalin's outcasts, the state was now making significant distinctions between different categories. As Makarov noted, the promise of readmission was no longer universal but restricted primarily to political prisoners such as Solzhenitsyn.

A. G. Baev took a slightly different approach, but the beliefs underpinning his letter were similar. Writing on 22 December 1962, whilst serving his fifth sentence, Baev opened his letter with a long description of conditions in a labor camp. In it he hoped to prove to his reader that the hardships and injustices endured by Ivan Denisovich had not yet been eradicated.⁶⁴ Rotten meat, neglect for the sick, and official corruption were still the staple of camp life. Such experiences led Baev to believe that no prisoner could emerge reformed. A prisoner was typically so corrupted by his ordeals in the camps and by the loss of his family and home, he wrote, that there was little chance he would do anything other than offend again upon release. Baev realized that a different narrative strategy must be fashioned for the new era. In recognition of the fact that the "conversion" story of the ordinary criminal had now lost its appeal, he instead sought to be reclassified as one of Stalin's victims. According to Baev, his errors—which he did not deny—had been grossly exaggerated by an unjust system that wanted to turn him into an "eternal 'zek.'" Denying that he was born a criminal, Baev sketched out his life story: "During the war, I lost my parents and became a street child at the age of twelve. While I was still a minor, I joined the army and received many awards. I was in the partisan forces. But after the war, a 'crack' [*treshchina*] appeared, and the stamp of Stalin's cult of personality was imprinted on my life. And so I served fifteen years in prison, experiencing all the 'joys' of a life without any happiness and without any hope for the future."⁶⁵ Where a few years earlier a tale of childhood suffering and of wartime loss might have received a sympathetic hearing, Baev seems aware that this was insufficient in itself to invoke official interest. In Baev's eyes, his only chance to rejoin the Soviet collective was to align himself with the regime's new priorities. In the wake of the Twenty-Second Party Congress, it seemed that the only credential for a successful readmission into Soviet society was to be a vic-

63. A. L. Remenson, *V obshchestve, stroiashchem kommunizm, ne dolzhno byt' mesta pravonarusheniim i prestupnosti* (Moscow, 1963), 19.

64. RGALI, f. 1702, op. 9, d. 107, ll. 8–14.

65. *Ibid.*, l. 12.

tim of Stalin's cult of personality. But Baev's attempt at reclassification was not entirely successful. A reply from the *Novyi mir* editors noted pointedly: "It seems to us that you wrongly compare your life in the camps with the life of the prisoners in Solzhenitsyn's story *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Ivan Denisovich and his comrades were sentenced unlawfully, whereas you have been sentenced five times and you don't deny that you were guilty. What kind of victim of the cult were you? Did the period of the cult really lead people to commit crimes?"⁶⁶ Baev wrote a second angry letter.⁶⁷ Again he asserted that as someone born and raised under Soviet power, he should not have become a criminal; the fact that he did reflected the inadequacies of the Stalinist period. This time the editors did not reply. Having determined that Baev was a criminal and not a victim of political repression, the editors closed the dialogue.

These prisoners concurred that the promises of redemption blazoned across the newspapers in the 1950s had now been broken. None of them could really cherish any hope that they would emerge from the camps as new men or be taken on by a collective within Soviet society for reeducation. While the purge victims could share in the euphoric mood of 1961–62, the "criminal," who had been wooed with notions of correction throughout the 1950s, remained isolated and excluded.

Some prisoners even realized that it was not only the state that had rejected them, but also—and perhaps most vociferously—the Soviet public. One prisoner wrote to Solzhenitsyn: "We who are serving twenty-five years are the bread and butter for those who are supposed to teach us virtue, corrupt though they are themselves. Did not the colonizers make out that Indians and Negroes were not fully human in this way? . . . It takes nothing at all to arouse public opinion against us. It is enough to write an article in the paper called 'Man in a Cage,' or to describe how a degenerate criminal violated a five-month-old baby girl, and tomorrow the people will organize meetings to demand that we be burnt in furnaces."⁶⁸ The perceived dynamic here between the press and popular opinion is revealing. While acknowledging the role the media might play, the prisoner also appreciated the high levels of collective anger emanating from Soviet citizens. According to this prisoner-correspondent, the reluctance to view outcasts as fully human came not only from the state but also from deep within society itself. The identification and branding of outcasts was not just a state-led enterprise but one in which the newspaper-reading public also played an important part.

These letters provide an unexpected angle to the Ivan Denisovich debate. As the post-Stalinist world sought to redefine the boundary between insiders and outsiders, those cast out did not always remain silent. Instead of accepting their renewed exclusion, they used the notions of "reeducation" and "reforging" promoted during the 1950s in order to claim their rightful return to society. But with the state engineering a dramatic turn

66. *Ibid.*, I, 7.

67. *Ibid.*, II, 1–6.

68. Solzhenitsyn, "How People Read *One Day*," 56.

away from a rhetoric that had never successfully caught the public imagination, the prisoners built their protest on promises that were already being retracted.

In early 1963, a man named Kuterev submitted a short story to the editors of *Novyi mir*. Having served in the army since the age of seventeen, Kuterev was now the deputy commander of a labor camp and an active member of the party at the oblast level. He identified himself as an innovator deeply committed to the penal reforms introduced under Khrushchev. In the form of his protagonist, an “educator” (*vospitatel'*) named Denis Ivanovich, Kuterev created a shining example of how in the Khrushchev era a commander might transform his camp into a site of humane learning for those in need of special guidance. Naming his work *Odna noch' Denisa Ivanovicha* (One night in the life of Denis Ivanovich), Kuterev explicitly set up a series of oppositions to Solzhenitsyn's novella. Ivan Denisovich's name is reversed to become Denis Ivanovich, day becomes night, prisoner becomes camp official. Although he considered himself a reformer, Kuterev was evidently deeply hostile to Solzhenitsyn's tale, deliberately crafting his riposte as its mirror image and presenting his dialogue with Solzhenitsyn as a dualistic conflict between two antagonistic positions.⁶⁹

Kuterev's work returns us to the idea of the Khrushchev era as one of binary conflict, as suggested by Cohen. To describe this clash, Cohen drew on the words of the poet Anna Akhmatova, who poignantly wrote of “two Russias eyeball to eyeball—those who were imprisoned and those who put them there.”⁷⁰ Yet in the correspondence explored here, this does not appear such an important fault-line. Assigning guilt for the crimes of the past was not a high priority for *Novyi mir* readers. Nor did individuals readily identify themselves as either pro or contra change. The oppositions citizens constructed were rather different—between purity and contamination, respectability (*chestnost'*) and vulgarity (*poshlost'*), culturedness and criminality. Some Soviet citizens found the official sponsorship of a text that embodied the language and subculture of society's outcasts disturbing, for it threatened the civilized and cultured self-image that Soviet society pursued. Fearing that an important opposition within the Soviet belief system was being eroded, some citizens wrote letters to preserve an absolute partition between two Russias: a Soviet Russia where people spoke and behaved as citizens of the communist future and another where the ways and customs of “old” Russia still lingered.

By providing access to aspects of popular opinion, the sources used here suggest that the Khrushchev era did not simply witness a struggle between two clearly defined factions, as has so often been supposed. Indeed, individuals might embrace some aspects of de-Stalinization whilst fiercely

69. RGALI, f. 1702, op. 9, d. 109, ll. 10–17.

70. Cited in Stephen F. Cohen, “The Stalin Question since Stalin,” in Stephen F. Cohen, ed., *An End to Silence: Uncensored Opinion in the Soviet Union from Roy Medvedev's Underground Magazine “Political Diary”* (New York, 1982), 27.

contesting others.⁷¹ For many readers, it was the release of less “cultured” prisoners that proved the most distressing element of de-Stalinization. By introducing elements from the “alien” world of the gulag into the respectable realm of literature, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* had challenged what many readers considered core Soviet values.

Stalinism certainly left complex legacies. On the one hand, the Stalinist civilizing drive apparently penetrated the thinking of many Soviet citizens, creating vocal sectors of the population who stridently believed in the importance of maintaining “cultured” behavior. On the other, the punitive nature of the Stalinist regime brought into being the enormous gulag monolith, where those banished from society became part of a community with very different values and modes of behavior. (Indeed, later in his career Solzhenitsyn would suggest that the zeks became a separate nation, with their own economy, psychology, manners, and language: “*matiorshchina*.”⁷²) By releasing large numbers from the camps and reviving notions such as correction and reeducation, Khrushchev made a radical attempt to reconcile these two opposing worlds.

This enterprise ran aground, however. According to prisoners who composed letters in response to *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the public’s anxieties were already outdated. Still banished to the gulag for a variety of criminal offences, these men were increasingly convinced that the Soviet state had abandoned them once more, already reerecting insurmountable barriers between Soviet citizens and their undesirable outcasts. According to statistics from the archives, such claims were not unfounded. The year 1960 was already the last in the gulag’s decline, and between the end of 1960 and the beginning of 1962 the size of the gulag population had almost doubled, reaching a figure of almost a million once more.⁷³ With the number of prisoners already escalating dramatically, some of Khrushchev’s most daring policies were being reversed a full three years before he was ousted from power. Important aspects of the de-Stalinizing project were thus defeated, not by Khrushchev’s successors, but, at least in part, by the vehement resistance of a Soviet public resentful of any threats to their “imagined community” and deeply fearful of men like Ivan Denisovich, whom they still envisaged as embodiments of an uncultured, alien “other.”

71. Another key aspect of de-Stalinization was, of course, the revised status of Stalin himself. The year 1956 saw the Soviet public respond extremely passionately to his dethronement. Here too, however, reactions cannot be easily categorized as either pro or contra de-Stalinization. For a more detailed exploration of this, see Dobson, “Refashioning the Enemy,” 129–72.

72. Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney, 3 vols. (New York, 1974–78), 2:505.

73. GARF, f. 7523, op. 95, d. 109, ll. 25–27.