


## **The First Circle**

*Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn , Thomas P. Whitney (Translator)*

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Set in Moscow during a three-day period in December 1949, 'The First Circle' is the story of the prisoner Gleb Nerzhin, a brilliant mathematician.

At the age of thirty-one, Nerzhin has survived the war years on the German front and the postwar years in a succession of Russian prisons and labor camps.

His story is interwoven with the stories of a dozen fellow prisoners - each an unforgettable human being - from the prison janitor to the tormented Marxist intellectual who designed the Dnieper dam; of the reigning elite and their conflicted subordinates; and of the women, wretched or privileged, bound to these men.

A landmark of Soviet literature, 'The First Circle' is as powerful today as it was when it was first published, nearly thirty years ago.

## The First Circle Details

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ISBN : 9780810115903

Author : Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn , Thomas P. Whitney (Translator)

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## From Reader Review *The First Circle* for online ebook

### Gary says

Difficult to know where to begin with this one. If you don't know who Solzhenitsyn is then I'll provide a quick explanation. A Russian who fought in WWII, returned, and was promptly put into political prison. For 11 years. This is the guy who brought the word 'gulag' into the English lexicon through sneaking his writing out to the West. Hard to imagine, but nobody really knew what was going on behind the Iron Curtain before this man popped up.

That out of the way, *The First Circle* (Intro... in Russian) is a work of fiction set over 3 days in a prison. It's not as physically torturous as the labour camps were because it's populated by former engineers and scientists working on various projects at the behest of Stalin.

However, don't think for a minute that the prisoners got away with anything. The mental torture inflicted on every prisoner is as hideous as it is subtle – uncertainty.

Men taken at night without any warning; letters to and from families intercepted and destroyed; lights switched on in the middle of the night; meals not turning up; books taken away – Solzhenitsyn shows us how the human spirit can be crushed by taking away the smallest thing we take for granted. He shows how the prisoners' identities are slowly sapped away and how, despite the walls and the barbed-wire fences and the lack of communication, this leaks into the prisoners' families.

Never mind Orwell and his boot on the neck – in this case fascism is a man forced to sleep with his arms hanging outside of his blanket – an action that goes against every instinct in one's body.

But like those other great Russian masters, Solzhenitsyn never sinks into immature black and white bad vs good. Oppressor and victim merge, and this is perhaps stretched to its fullest realisation when he goes on to get into Stalin's head. How Solzhenitsyn must have toiled over this part of the book!

I have always found myself attracted to artistic expression that concerns itself with isolation, misery, and loneliness. Not because I feel that this is what life is about, but because I think that it's among these feelings that what we truly are is exposed and can therefore be examined. As a result I have often found myself blinking tears away as I have read/listened/gazed at whatever is in front of me – but always in a fuzzy melancholic knowledge that it's all a simulation. This is different. I had to steel myself before reading it, I had to be careful that I didn't read it on the commute to work (because doing so would have resulted in me walking in and putting my fist through my monitor), and I had to have at least an hour of uninterrupted quiet in front of me. For days afterwards I had to fight the temptation to slap whatever bullshit my fellow commuters were subjecting themselves to out of their hands and shoving a copy of this book at them instead.

I have never read anything so menacing, so malicious and – most importantly – so real. *The First Circle* sometimes makes Dostoyevsky and Kafka look like simpering children – and the former was no stranger to prison and death sentences himself. This is the most affecting book I've ever read. The most sad and damning examination of humanity I've come across. But at the same time it's as celebratory towards the human spirit as the end of *Crime and Punishment* is. It just has something more to it that's only possible due to its subject matter – it also celebrates the triumph of freedom and warns how we should never lose sight of what this means to us.

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## Sarah Furger says

A brilliant novel that leaves the readers heart trembling in fear and sadness for each character. Solzhenitsyn transports the reader into the world of the Gulag so fully that when the novel is done, one will hug one's family, eat something out of the fridge just because it's there, and cherish the freedom given them. Not only does Solzhenitsyn describe the Gulags, sharashkas (special prisons), and life in the Soviet Union more eloquently than is possible in non-fiction, he also thoroughly examines morality; from several political angles (Marxism, Socialism, Democracy) as well as a religious one, each of the zeks (prisoners) presents his case for the most moral society and leaves the reader with mixed thoughts. Solzhenitsyn's zeks reference Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and Marcus Aurelius (albeit indirectly and without citation) in their discussions of politics and morality. All in all, a brilliant novel that I would recommend to anyone.

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## Mike says

As a child of the Cold War who spent many years studying our great potential superpower opponent, I found this book just as powerful now as I might have many years ago. The Soviets certainly knew how to efficiently destroy anyone with a sentence to the *Gulag*. The thought of fighting the Nazis from '41-45 only to wind up in the gulag for 10 or 25 years is just horrific to contemplate. This story takes place about 4.5 years after the WWII victory. Many of the "zeks" in the camp have been condemned for no reason other than spite (or envy):

*...he was particularly timid these days in front of the authorities. More than anything he dreaded getting a second term. He had seen many prisoners get them during the war years.*

*Even the way he was first sentenced was absurd. He was imprisoned at the beginning of the war for "anti-Soviet propaganda," the result of a denunciation cooked up by some neighbors who wanted his apartment and afterward got it. It became clear subsequently that he had not engaged in any such propaganda, though he could have, since he listened to the German radio. Then it turned out that he didn't listen to the German radio, but he could have listened to it since he had a forbidden radio receiver at home. And when it appeared that he didn't have any such radio receiver, it was still true that he **could** have had one since he was a radio engineer by profession. Also, following the denunciation, they found two radio tubes in a box in his apartment.*

This story remains relevant today. This is the inevitable destination of socialism and way too many uneducated in the population believe socialism is the way to go. There are reports that China has its own version of the gulag with a very large population. Likely to grow as the Chinese implement their scheme to construct a social media rating for everyone in their country. Too low a score, off to the gulag? Just imagine how pervasive and oppressive the Soviet gulag system would be with the technology of today! **Five Red Stars**

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## Jason Pettus says

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com:]. I am the original

author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

As an American who didn't do too much academic reading before opening CCLaP, there are of course numerous entire sections of the literary world that I could stand to learn a whole lot more about; take Russian literature for a good example, not just its beginnings with Pushkin and the like but also its heyday of the late 1800s and early 1900s (the time period of such famed authors as Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Chekhov), all the way through to both the sanctioned and underground writers of the Soviet period of the 1920s through '80s. And that's why I was so excited to find out that last fall, Harper Perennial ended up putting out a brand-new edition of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's 1968 *In The First Circle* (originally known as simply *The First Circle*, one of the hundreds of details that have been put back in the book for this 2009 edition), because this gave me a good excuse to sit and finally read the thing; after all, Solzhenitsyn is one of the most important writers of the entire Soviet era, essentially the first intellectual to break the news to the Western world of what Stalin's prison camps (or *gulags*) were actually like, a fact which earned him a Nobel Prize in 1970 even as he was still a Soviet prisoner.

And the irony, of course, is that less than ten years before *In The First Circle*, he had been able to publish the first of this highly anti-Stalinist work in the actual Soviet Union itself -- namely, 1962's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, which is what first gained him an international following; and this was because of Nikita Khrushchev's campaign of de-Stalinization in that country then, which came as news to me when first studying this book, which gives you a good idea of just how much about Russian history I still have to learn. Even though that book went well, Solzhenitsyn knew that the original 96-chapter version of his much more expansive follow-up would never pass the muster of Soviet censors, which is why he voluntarily cut almost a dozen of those chapters from the original *In The First Circle* before submitting it, and radically changed a dozen more; then when he later became critical of Khrushchev himself and was once more sent back into the camps, it was this trimmed-down version that was snuck out of the country, and published in the West in 1968 to huge infamy. But like many former dissidents, Solzhenitsyn made peace with his homeland again after the fall of communism in the early '90s, moving back there in his old age and for the first time in his life going back comprehensively over his entire oeuvre; and apparently at the end of his life, he decided it was important to get the original 96-chapter version out finally to the public, the project he was working on all the way up to his death in 2008, just a year before the completely uncensored version came out.

For those who don't know, the book is a highly autobiographical look at a special kind of work camp that existed during the "Stalinist Purge," the period of the 1930s and '40s when that Modernist leader and World War Two overseer had several tens of millions of his fellow citizens imprisoned and/or killed in order to keep himself and his supporters in power; because with that many people in the camps, you could of course fill entire prisons with nothing but scientists and artists if you wanted to, which is exactly what Stalinist authorities did, called "sharashkas" and actually more like college dorms than traditional prisons, where intellectuals were treated decently and fed well in exchange for them continuing to work on various cultural and scientific projects, like the space program or nuclear weapons or Bond-style spy devices. This is where the title *In The First Circle* comes from, in fact, inspired by Dante's concept in *The Inferno* of there being nine circles of Hell, the first one not actually that terrible and designed for only light sinners; because when all was said and done, except for the lack of free movement, these sharashkas actually weren't all that bad, or at least compared to the nightmarish conditions of the Siberian hard-labor camps, where said intellectuals were shipped off to if refusing to voluntarily work on these state projects. That's a major theme of the book, the philosophical argument over which of these options is better -- to remain ideologically pure yet pay a high price for it, or to do what is simply going to be done by someone else anyway, and in the meanwhile living to fight another day.

And besides this, the thousand-page tome is also of course a highly detailed look at what daily Soviet life

was like during the Stalinist years of the late '40s; and in fact that may be the biggest surprise about this manuscript, is that its details regarding the real Soviet Union in those years are so eerily similar to the speculative fancifulness of George Orwell's anti-Stalinist *1984* to not even be funny. Because let's not forget, Orwell wrote *1984* in 1948 (which is how he came up with the title, by simply switching the last two numbers), while Solzhenitsyn's book is set just a year later, during Christmas week of 1949, retroactively backing up many of the most outrageous suppositions of Orwell's original, including the Soviet invention of a "Newspeak" type official new language, designed to be reductive so to literally remove from dictionaries the very words themselves that stood for subversive ideas, as well as the very real endeavor back then to officially erase the very existence of state enemies, including airbrushing them out of old photos and re-writing archived newspaper articles that once mentioned them. If nothing else, this might be the most important lasting legacy of *In The First Circle*, is that it dutifully chronicles many of the absurdly comedic yet horrifying things that took place during the Stalinist years, shows us just how right we in the West were to be terrified back then by the idea of a Stalinist planet, even if that did lead to some pretty horrible things on their own, like McCarthyism and book burnings.

But this isn't the only thing about *In The First Circle* to enjoy; there's also the inventive cyclical nature of its very structure, which like Richard Linklater's *Slacker* is told in a "vertical storytelling" style, where the different main characters of each chapter are introduced causally in the end paragraphs of the previous chapter. So in other words, one chapter might be about a prisoner in an electronics lab inside the camp, who at the end of the chapter has a conversation with the 21-year-old girl who's been hired to oversee them; the next chapter then might be about that girl now at home that evening, ending with her talking to her husband, a mid-level bureaucrat who works in the personal offices of Joseph Stalin, with the next chapter after that perhaps being about Stalin himself, one of the hundreds of both real and fictional people featured in this doorstep of a book. And then of course is the sly humor found throughout, the fascinating details about life inside one of these "intellectual prisons," the history lessons provided through the cynical discussions of the older "zeks," the ones old enough to remember the original 1917 communist revolution and who sit around endlessly debating what's gone wrong in the thirty years since, a big reason they're in the camps to begin with.

Now, just so we're on the same page, let me confess that there are problems as well with *In The First Circle*; for example, like so many other Russian novelists, Solzhenitsyn tends to be in love with the sound of his own voice, turning what could've been a truly mindblowing 400-page book into a merely important yet highly digressive thousand-page one. Despite its limitations, though, it's a highly rewarding book to actually make one's way through and eventually finish, and I applaud Harper for spending the time, energy and money needed to put out this restored version in the first place, when commercially speaking it is obviously only going to appeal to a small niche audience. This single book alone filled a huge chunk of that gaping hole in my life when it comes to Russian history and culture, and it comes highly recommended to those who are looking to fill such a similar hole in their own lives.

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## **Biblio Curious says**

Review after my 1st reading:

Reading this in conjunction with *Cancer Ward* made it all the more emotional for me. It's like *Cancer Ward* is the conclusion to *In the First Circle*. In some ways, what is not spoken *In the First Circle* is completed in *Cancer Ward*. It's very interesting how Solzhenitsyn made these 2 books so compatible with each other. One is the cold, hard prison legal system and the other is what's left of humanity because of a cold, hard legal

system. This becomes even more noticeable in the 2nd half of these 2 books and by the time the 'climax' or conclusion comes around, the endings of these books are inseparable.

I chose to read them together because Solzhenitsyn wrote them or began them at the same time. They were published in the same year or very close together. If you'd like a powerhouse experience, read them together but start one before the other so you can get your bearings on the huge cast of characters. (If you're a little familiar with Russian novels, or are familiar with dusty old books, it'll be easy to keep the world & characters of these 2 books separate.) Then begin the other book and get to know that world. I began Cancer Ward first, then In the First Circle.

With all that said, In the First Circle just by itself is an amazing read and one I plan to re-read many times in the future. Solzhenitsyn blends all aspects of humanity into a single narrative, what he can't contain in this book, naturally spills over into Cancer Ward and it's brilliant how he kept his themes together while letting them expand into each other.

The main theme of In the First Circle I think is community within a human made prison. Cancer Wards is community and looking within yourself while in naturally imposed prison.

Read one or both of these books, together or separate, they can each stand alone and reading either one before the other is alright too.

My Original Review:

Dear Mr. Solzhenitsyn,

Those were the best 38 pages I've ever read in my life. Truly. So with great sadness, I'll return this book, unread, to the library. I'm astounded that in 38 pages, I've been moved so deeply and so permanently. I'll never forget those words and I'll revisit this book at the end of the year, after I've read more Russian Lit and Western Classics.

I'm not breaking up with you, I just need to see other books first. I'm so not ready for this masterpiece. It needs to be savoured and I can only read it the 1st time once. I sincerely look forward to re-reading this book for many years in the future. Can there be such a thing as a book marriage? Or some kind of long-term bookish re-reading?

I'll invest in this very same translation at the end of the year. The Whitney translation, it'll be the purchase of the decade!

Edit: I bought the Uncensored Version, translated by Willetts.

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## **Paula says**

"Yes, what awaited them was the taiga and the tundra, the Cold Pole at Oymyakon, the copper mines at Dzhezkazgan. What awaited them yet again was the pickax and the wheelbarrow, a starvation ration of half-baked bread, hospital, death. They could look forward to nothing but the worst.

Yet in their hearts they were at peace with themselves.

They were gripped by the fearlessness of people who have lost absolutely everything-such fearlessness is difficult to attain, but once attained, it endures."

This book. This book.

I. Have. No. Words.

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### **rmn says**

This has to be one of the five best books written in the 20th century.

Solzhenitsyn is able to bring to life with unbelievable clarity and insight (unlike the review I am writing) a few days in a late 1940s Russian gulag located outside of Moscow which is a special prison for engineers. He follows multiple storylines involving the lives of the prisoners, their families, the prison guards and officials, and even the government (Joseph Stalin manages to make a too brief appearance). He also describes in great detail the prison system and the communist bureaucracy that ruled the country at the time.

If you've read One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch, I would say this is like that only on steroids or this is like that meets War and Peace (as it is phenomenally long, uses historical facts and figures, follows multiple characters, and is completely engrossing. The main difference would be that there isn't much of a plot in The First Circle, though one kind of breaks out after about 150 pages, but it's not clear that a consistent plot is all that necessary).

Solzhenitsyn excels as a writer in making every character so real and in portraying the nuances and details of Russian prison life (of course his time as a prisoner makes him superbly qualified to do that, but his writing is so concise, descriptive, and simple that he illuminates the Russian prison system like no one else can. Though a lot of credit has to go to the translation I am sure.).

Here's the deal, if you like Russian literature, this is a 100% must read. If you liked One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch this is a 100% must read. If you haven't read much Russian literature, start with One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch and if you like it, read this.

This isn't the easiest book to get through but it is rewarding and it works as both a historical novel a novel on the human condition. So put down the Michael Crichton, put down the Jane Austen, and give this a chance.

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### **Manny says**

I work with speech understanding: making computers understand what people say. Oddly enough, this is the only novel I know which is centered around that technology. It's very credible, as one would expect from Solzhenitsyn.

I'm not sure how much of it is based on his own experiences. The main character, who's serving time in the



Gulag, has technical skills. Because of this, he gets assigned to work on a speech recognition project. To be exact, it's not speech recognition *per se*; it's what we call speaker ID, identifying a person by the sound of their voice. This technology is now quite good, and many of the key ideas were developed at SRI International while I was there, though I wasn't involved in that particular project. The SRI techniques have been commercialized in the Nuance speech recognition platform, which I use all the time. At the time of *The First Circle*, however, the field was at a very early stage of development.

The team in Solzhenitsyn's book are given a specific task to solve. A compromising phone call has been recorded, and the authorities have narrowed it down to a handful of suspects. They need to determine who it was; not easy, since the person in question was trying to disguise his voice. The engineers work flat out to try and crack the problem. Needless to say, they don't feel too good about it, but what are they supposed to do? If they refuse, they'll be back in hell. Well, they're in hell now, but, as the title suggests, this is the most comfortable part of Stalin's Inferno. Here, they aren't swimming in boiling blood, or, more likely, stuck in the ice lower down. So they do their best, but in the end they're forced to admit defeat. They can eliminate most of the suspects, but they still have two names left, and the machines can't determine which one the recorded voice belongs to.

But their bosses are happy; they simply arrest both guys. After all, this is Stalin's Russia. It must be the grimmest and most profound shaggy dog story ever written.

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### **Blair says**

I read this novel when a student of Russian language and literature back in the day. At the time I realized that Solzhenitsyn was one of the masters of Russian literature, on equal footing with Tolstoy et al.

Solzhenitsyn's great strength (one of them, at any rate) is his portrayal of people striving to maintain their integrity and dignity under a soul-destroying and punitive totalitarian system.

A New York Times review from 1968 describes *The First Circle* as "an astounding piece of political journalism as well as a literary work of art".

Highly recommend.

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### **Ibrahim Niftiyev says**

The book is the picture of the dark clouds in the sky named humankind. This book is the romanticism of torture, harshness of utopia and cruelty against all and everybody who meant to be just equal citizens. This book is about the Soviet regime. The regime which ignored souls and individualism. The Regime which tried to get everything from everybody. Solzhenitsyn is simply genius in terms of delivering these ideas of the darkness of the red empire. He is the voice of the groups outnumbered by mass. It is the direct window from your room to the historical drama of individuals - wasted lives, unborn dreams and forgotten identities.

Overall, the book's plot is too scattered and the character balance is way more rich from optimal.

Nevertheless, it is worth it if you are truly interested how the Regime treated true leaders, intelligence and simply the persons who used to think independently from the silly ideology dominated.

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## El says

In Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, the first circle of Hell represents Limbo, where non-Christians reside as they were born before Christ, therefore unbaptized. It's not their fault! But there are no free passes, so sorry. So they were put in the first circle where they are *so* close to Heaven, but, derp, not close enough to get in. They have a smidge more freedom than the wieners in the circles below them, but they still can't get Heaven-status because it's all in who you know, and they don't know the right people because they went and were born too early, like a bunch of jag-offs.

(This is a highly simplified version of Hell. Don't go quoting me and stuff.)

In Solzhenitsyn's novel, his characters are prisoners in a special sort of prison, kinda like Limbo. They are all engineers and nerdy sorts who got busted for stuff like talking on the phone and writing letters ("letters" are those things people used to write before e-mail, btw) about stuff Stalin didn't approve of whose skills benefit Papa Stalin in one way or another.

The story takes place in only three days, though you really wouldn't know it to read this book because a) it's almost 700 pages (and that's not even the uncensored version which was released in 2009), b) Solzhenitsyn includes so much back-story of every character that you don't realize aren't the main focus of the story as a whole, and c) did I mention it's almost 700 pages?

It took me a long time to read because *Life*, but also because for a long while I had trouble getting into the story. I normally enjoy everything I have read by Solzhenitsyn, but I couldn't help but compare this to his *Cancer Ward*, probably because I got them around the same time. I thought *Cancer Ward* was strong all the way through and I cared about the characters. I had difficulty empathizing with all the characters in *The First Circle*, or maybe because I knew the story spanned three actual days, I thought more should be happening at a quicker pace. I think an early complaint of mine to someone was that it didn't seem like a whole lot was happening, and I worried it would be an entire almost-700 pages of not a whole lot happening.

Stuff does happen, but it's a slowly unfolding story. It's worth it, if Russian novels about GULAGs are your schtick. This one is, like a lot (all?) books written by Solzhenitsyn, autobiographical. Has anyone ever written prison stories as powerfully as Solzhenitsyn?

Now that I am finished, I do wish I had gotten my paws on the uncensored version, because I am a glutton for punishment and now feel like reading the censored version was akin to reading an abridged version of something. Did I just cheat? I fail at reading Russian literature. It all came down to this moment.

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## Feliks says

It is unfathomable in my mind why Alexandyr Solzhenitsyn is not more widely remarked upon as perhaps the premier novelist of his age. This is a writer against whom a Thomas Pynchon could be measured and even he might fall short. [*As for Cormac McC-what? Chuck Pahluki-what? Please..!*] But nevermind. The main point I wish to make in this review is this: any society, culture, or timeperiod is most accurately described by the recounting of its worst outrages. Just as with a single man--you assess him best by discovering what he hates--so it is too, with governments. It is their 'black marks' which are the most telling.

We come to know a people best, by learning how they *treat their own*. Every nation has its museums and treasures, its palaces--but these do not describe national character. Instead, look to the prisons if you wish to see the inner disposition of a culture revealed. This famous insight comes from Fyodor Dostoevsky.

Solzhenitsyn, with his nonfiction juggernauts (*vols I & II of 'Gulag Archipelago'*) is of course, simply towering in this realm. Scathing. There is no one who ever sounded to-the-bottom of a penal system deeper than did this author. But his talent was obviously not limited to documentary reporting. What this novel, *'First Circle'* reveals to the first-time reader will be a major surprise, too.

For, not only did Solzhenitsyn write the most gripping true-to-life indictments to emerge from his culture; not only was he one of the most gifted historians since WWII--but with works like this, he *dominates* the sphere of Slavic fiction. It is one of the most penetrating modern novels yet written. Sustained power, force, and discipline are all on display, throughout. Sure, you might say that Solzhenitsyn is an "old-hand" at prison memoirs, going all the way back to, *'One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch'*. But--believe me--that was just him 'warming up'. *'First Circle'* is a massive, in-depth, intellectual watershed. Solzhenitsyn takes everything he gathered up in *'Gulag Archipelago'* and condenses it into literary form.

Ostensibly a story of falsely-incarcerated Russkie intellectuals all struggling against the inexorable prison regime--striving to hang on to their souls--while at the same time, unwilling to admit that they even possess souls...the plot itself is indescribable. It is a novel of imprisonment and solitude, after all; and one might criticize that 'nothing ever happens in it'. But that's an impoverished view of such a work as this. The topics and themes treated here, are boundless. Hope, despair, misery, ambition, abandonment. Everything that tortures man's spirit is to be found here. Solzhenitsyn deals with the cosmic and the microscopic of individual human lives. Smooth, polished, confident, expert prose delivery...the man is completely-in-command-of-his-narrative. Razor-sharp in its vision and imagination.

This book is not in my 'top-ten-works-of-all-time', (world-literature) for nothing. And that's really saying something. To sum up my feelings on the matter: as far as I'm concerned, the name of Solzhenitsyn should be the pre-eminent name in Slavic culture; if not the very foremost name. Certainly in modern times, he stands alone. Doyesteovsky for the 1800s and Solzhenitsyn for the 1900s and that's all you should need.

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## **Janet says**

A huge, multicharacter novel set in postwar Soviet Russia, 1949, when one would think the Russians would have got a break after winning the war, but there was a war that would not be over for another five decades, the war of the Soviet people to stay alive with a certain amount of human security and dignity. This takes place in three days, but it's a massive thing, yet it needs to be read in one big streak, not to get lost in its cast of thousands. It's too bad he's become so reactionary and 'anti-cosmpolitan' ie Great Russian nationalistic. But these works were fierce and real and spoke to the world. I need to reread it--this new translation includes all the camp slang and profanity. When I was learning Russian, back in the early middle ages, they had to assemble a little dictionary when Solzhenitsyn was first published in the west. Even Russian speakers had never seen this kind of profanity. it was called "the Little Book of Russian Profanity", it was small and green, stapled, and you fell out of your seat laughing.

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## Jonfaith says

Somewhere in the Stone Reader documentary, likely its bonus features, a critic named The First Circle as the last novel of the 19th Century. The isolation of Soviet themes was likely exaggerated by the critic but the novel itself doesn't appear to reveal self-awareness: perhaps such would also be a violation of Article 58. I read this in tandem with my wife and what a glorious experience that was. As tragic as this tale of a neutered Hell of sorts remains, it begs so many questions about the nature of penal system in the Soviet Union. Cross-purposes appeared to proliferate with exposure to air. If Guilt was endemic why have them work, especially around such sensitive areas of expertise? My naivety albeit bruised and riddled will likely cling for my life's extent. I still ponder motives.

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## Jessica says

Not an "easy" read like Solzhenitsyn's A DAY IN THE LIFE OF IVAN DENISOVICH, but intellectually much more rewarding if you can plow through the hundreds of different characters and intersecting plotlines. A wonderfully intimate portrait of Soviet intellectual society from within the elit "First Circle" of the Soviet Gulag. A single five-paged chapter about the lonely hallway patrol of Nikita, the red-headed prison warden told me more about the human condition than most of what I have experienced in my own lifetime. Solzhenitsyn's philosophy, social commentary, and desire to convey the true experience of the camps draws out the writing at times, but a very rewarding book. Pretty much built my senior thesis off the fascinating paradox between physical and intellectual freedom in the Soviet Union....me and my Russian lit, what can I say?

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## Bettie? says

**"And a great war  
must be preceeded  
by a great purge"**

Description: *Set in Moscow during a three-day period in December 1949, The First Circle is the story of the prisoner Gleb Nerzhin, a brilliant mathematician. At the age of thirty-one, Nerzhin has survived the war years on the German front and the postwar years in a succession of Russian prisons and labor camps. His story is interwoven with the stories of a dozen fellow prisoners - each an unforgettable human being - from the prison janitor to the tormented Marxist intellectual who designed the Dnieper dam; of the reigning elite and their conflicted subordinates; and of the women, wretched or privileged, bound to these men. A landmark of Soviet literature, The First Circle is as powerful today as it was when it was first published, nearly thirty years ago.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jg-kc...>

3\* One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich  
... The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956 (Unrated for a reason)  
3\* Cancer Ward  
CR The First Circle  
3\* Matryona's House And Other Stories  
4\* We Never Make Mistakes: Two Short Novels

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## **Moon Rose says**

*"The old seminary church (**sharashka**) was like an ark, with sides four bricks and a half, floating serenely and aimlessly through the black ocean of human destinies and human errors, leaving behind fading rivulets of light from its portholes...From here, from the ark forging confidently ahead through the darkness, the erratically meandering stream of accursed history was clearly visible---visible in its entirety, as though from an immense light, yet in detail, down to the last little pebble on the streambed, just as though they had plunged into its waves."*

The ravaging waves of the early 20th century rampaged with all its crushing weight upon Imperial Russia, clearing all the path in its wake as it destroys the historical past into a vacuum of desolate emptiness that robbed Russians with the true spirit of humanity.

This is *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's* searing view from atop his barb wired, non-floating Ark of Stone gripped in involuntary isolation and deprivation from where he depicts with visual realism, *The First Circle* of Hell in Russia that culminates under *Stalin's* dehumanization.

### **THE COLLOQUIUM IN THE ARK OF STONE: *The Sharashka and its Captive Russian Technical Intelligentsia***

The whirlwind of change immediately swept across Russia as Communism became its magisterial stronghold especially reinforced with the iron fist of the Man of Steel himself, *Stalin* during his reign of terror, overhauling the landscape of Russia with the ferociousness of his ideological fanaticism, which *Solzhenitsyn* fiercely conveys of what *Dostoevsky* can only envision with the atrocious presence of the culpable man himself in the novel, casting his dark shadow over the barren land of spiritless people without a God. To which, *Solzhenitsyn* endeavors to bring out the grim realities of his time through his own eyes as though peering into a *spy hole* that opens up to an ideology indifferent to human compassion, providing a much larger perspective of a debilitating suppression that is completely against the innate freedom bestowed to any human being as he ironically shows as well the resilience of man even amid the strictest prohibition.

This resilience appears as a silent cry of a benumbed spirit that seems to be an unobtrusive thematic trait of the novel as it circumvents all the characters in conquering fear against the very terror brought by their own wasted lives from an unjust imprisonment of indefinite time, becoming their only hold to go through their deathlike lives amid the severe isolation of the non-floating Ark of Stone, a haven compared to the hellish pit of the *Gulag* that awaits them all.

#### ***The Precursory Sanctuary of the Sharashka***

This haven of prison known as the *sharashka* referred to by *Solzhenitsyn* as *The First Circle* of Hell is a seeming prelude to the actual vortex of Satan's Hell in the *Gulag* labor camps. It is in contrast, an old

seminary church, which during the Tsarist regime used to be the vessel of the true Russian spirit in its conglomeration that represents the Orthodox Church. It is apparent that the decay of morality and the flamboyant display of injustice in the complete absence of compassion in retaining *Stalin's* authoritarian control in Russia coincide with *Solzhenitsyn's* poignant description of the degradation of the church that started to take place after the Fall of the Tsar, in which, three different churches appear separately in the silent background of his narrative that might easily go by unnoticed as the more blatant and violent alterations in conditions overshadow it, yet these churches, which represent the presence of God, either left in total ruins, or turn into prison/labor camps, are loud testament to the free reign of *Stalin* in accomplishing his evil schemes.

As this somehow exemplifies the essence of what *Dostoevsky* said, that "*without God, everything is permissible.*"

This *sharashka* is kept in vigilant secrecy by the government, making it even more isolated from its isolation as it houses the so called "*privileged*" prisoners of the *Stalinist* regime, the engineers, technicians and whatnots, keeping them in check and in constant surveillance, not just in ensuring the suppression of their opposition, but most significantly, it also includes an adamant pressure to yield in complete submission the fruits of their scientific creations to the utilization of the state, displaying the very alarming danger of science going to the wrong hands of the wicked.

In *Solzhenitsyn's* florid words, this research and development center of scientific pursuits cum forced labor camp breathes alive in flesh and bones as it materializes before the compassionate eyes of the reader in its most detailed form as though walking behind the writer himself on the pavement, pointing his bony fingers to all the crevices and niches on the walls of the *sharashka* as he introduces the forlorn characters individually from a point of view of the most intimate as if listening to their stories and arguments while lying down on one of their double bed bunkers.

### ***The Russian Technical Intelligentsia in Captivity***

The novel opens with a precarious air of suspense in the midst of the tension of the Cold War as it begins with the treacherous call of *Innokenty Volodin* to the US Embassy, a Soviet diplomat living a privileged life, whose conscience has overtaken his loyalty to his government in lieu of the imminent danger he foresees against the whole of humanity in case the technology of the atomic bomb falls on the hands of *Stalin*.

The deciphering of his recorded voice retrieved by the Soviet secret police leads *Solzhenitsyn's* narrative to zoom in inside the secretly guarded isolated fortress of the *sharashka*, where the brilliant Russian engineers and technicians are kept in vigilance as the state squeezes their gut in the procurement of technological advancement for their cause against the whole of the Western world.

From this catalytic tone of the prose stimulated by the character of *Volodin*, it disintegrates into several voices once in the *sharashka* as the plot of the novel takes its long and meandering course, breaking the stream of the narrative into many passages of either widened, or narrowed pathways as it is subjugated into one complex ocean of a story maneuvered by *Solzhenitsyn's* fecundity of style.

There is no character that dominates the scene, or no specific protagonist for that matter arising to save the day, yet they represent thoughts and experiences richly flavored for argumentative style in profoundly drawing *the white rose of the truth* from *Stalin's black crab of lies*. This is especially evident from the harangue expressed in vigorous fluidity, which nominally disrupts the narrative in between, depicting the inconsolable beliefs of the skeptic *Gleb Nerzhin*, the communist *Lev Rubin* and the designer with royal

sympathies *Dmitri Sologdin*, whose presence somehow symbolically represent *Solzhenitsyn's* life as it comes in *full circle* of realization that somehow draws them all in a conscious thread of a collective experience, contributing each of their individual stories for the benefit of one universal theme---*the insufferable uncertainties of the human lives under the Communist regime.* ??

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## **Michael says**

Moscow, Christmas Eve 1949; a man makes a phone call to the American embassy to warn them about the Soviet Atom Bomb project. This call was caught on tape and quickly disconnected by The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). A brilliant mathematician named Gleb Nerzhin, was taken as a sharashka (known as zeks) prisoner and ordered to help track down the mystery caller. The zeks know that they have it better than a "regular" gulag prisoners but they are faced with the moral dilemma; to aid a political system they oppose or be transferred to the deadly labour camps.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is a Russian author as well as a historian; he was also a critic of Soviet totalitarianism which found himself in prison much like Gleb Nerzhin. He was accused of anti-revolutionary propaganda under Russian SFSR Penal Code (Article 58 paragraph 10) which is a 'catch-all' criminal offence that could be used against anyone that might threaten the government. During the period of Stalinism, the crime of "propaganda and agitation that called to overturn or undermining of the Soviet power" jumped from a six month prison sentence to seven years of imprisonment, with possible internal exile for two to five years. On 7 July 1945, Solzhenitsyn was sentenced to seven years in a labour camp for comments he made in private letters to a friend. After his sentence ended, Solzhenitsyn was then internally exiled for life at Kok-Terek, which is in the north-eastern region of Kazakhstan.

The First Circle was self-censored before Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn even attempted to get it published in 1968. Originally the book was 96 chapters long but the censorship turned the novel into 87 chapters. Some changes included the man telling another doctor to share some new medicine with the French instead of warning the Americans about the atom bomb. All mention of the Roman Catholics and religion was also removed. It wasn't till 2009 a new English translation (not sure of the details on the Russian editions) saw the book restored and uncensored; now with the title *In The First Circle*.

The title alone is fascinating and it allows the reader to pick up on the whole metaphor before starting the novel. Looking at Dante's *Inferno*, it is easy to find that the first circle of hell is limbo. In the epic poem Virgil introduces Dante to people like Socrates, Plato, Homer, Horace and Ovid. The time between Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection is often referred to as the Harrowing of Hell, in which he descended into limbo and brought salvation to the righteous. However in Dante's *Inferno* this meant that Christ saved people like Noah, Moses, Abraham and King David, but a lot of the intellectuals were left. This is metaphor for the penal institutions, making reference to all the intellectuals and political thinkers arrested under Stalin's Russia.

This novel made me feel a lot smarter than I actually am, there is a lot of information within *In The First Circle* however Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn presented them in accessible way. Going into the book I knew a little about Solzhenitsyn's life and the metaphor in the title was explained in the Goodreads synopsis. So I was able to witness how everything came together without doing any research. The book sometimes goes into Russian history; I was fascinated with everything I learnt.

I have read so many books set in Cold War Russia but I don't think there have been many actually written by

a Russian. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn has lead an interesting life and I am keen to read more of his novels before attempting The Gulag Archipelago, his three volume book on the history of a gulag labour camp. If you have paid attention to my best of 2014 list you would have noticed that In The First Circle did make the list. This was a wonderful book that was both thrilling and educational, I would recommend it to anyone interested in Russian history, especially the Cold War era.

This review originally appeared on my blog; <http://literary-exploration.com/2015/...>

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### **Becca says**

Impossibly good. Given that the plot of this huge book stretches only through three days or so, and not a huge amount actually happens in this time (it's not a thriller) it's still totally captivating.

Solzhenitsyn's strength is his characters. Despite having dozens of different points of view which alternate chapter to chapter, it's not difficult to keep them straight. The really remarkable thing is that you like all of them, despite their myriad of perspectives, philosophies, and dogmas. Or, if not actually like, you at least understand and sympathize. The changes in this edition from the original version are mind-blowing... it's worth rereading if you've only had the older one.

On the down side, it's Solzhenitsyn so it's mostly about life in a Soviet-era prison camp. Which by definition is a monotonous, bleak and depressing. While not as harsh as A Day In The Life, In the First Circle is in some ways more terrible. Also, Solzhenitsyn loves to let his characters soliloquize about philosophy, but he avoids being preachy- it's actually nuanced and interesting if a bit tiresome. It also can be funny, which I wasn't expecting. Overall more than worth the read.

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### **Charles says**

While it is overtly a story of talented engineers and technical types in a "special prison" in the Stalin era Soviet Union, it is an apt allegory of the workplaces in which many of us have, at times, found ourselves.

While typically Solzhenitsyn in style, it is appreciably less "dense" than many of his works. His character development, always very good, is his best ever.

Those in a technical profession will recognize the dilemma and attitudes of the prisoners, as well as the nature of some of the fellow technical types with whom you have worked.

You will also recognize other characters with whom you have worked in the prison functionaries and administrators. Some of these are sympathetic characters who face their own challenges in dealing with their situation in life and work. Others are the clueless and unreflective or even consciously malevolent beasts who have made your work life hell.

This is one of the 2 or 3 books that, on any given day, I might describe as my all-time favorite. I have re-read several times.

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