

tween 1815 and 1850 that the historian today still feels the need to take sides."

What is refreshing is that Thompson is honest enough to admit it, and one must say that it is wiser to err his way than to go the other. But as I have said, his limitations pale beside the quality of his successes. It is a magnificent book, organised in a logical and lucid way which is remarkable in a book of such size. The Penguin blurb describes it as "probably the greatest and most imaginative post-war work of English social history." In this case, there is no reason to demur.

H. W. BROWNING

**THE FIRST CIRCLE, by
A. Solzhenitsyn. Collins and
Harvill, 582pp, \$5.35.**

THE BRONZE STATUES of Stalin were melted down. He was daubed out of paintings, chipped out of mosaics, and picked out of tapestries following the revelation of the 'personality cult' at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956.

But despite the bewildering denunciations and removals of the outward trappings of the 'Stalin era', a full analysis of the phenomenon of mass repressions taking place in a socialist country was not really entered upon. The result was that the thaw was not complete, and the climate remained such that despite improvements, icy winds could still return to chill some area of Soviet society.

Literature was one such area, and Solzhenitsyn's book *The First Circle* — itself an attempt to reveal and analyse some of the problems of Soviet society during the Stalin period — is one of the many works remaining unpublished in the USSR. (Such expressions as 'Stalin era' are inadequate to describe the period, but are used here for convenience.)

The First Circle introduces us to one of the extraordinary institutions of Stalinist repression. It is a prison de luxe — a walled and wired mansion at Mavrino, near Moscow, where political prisoners with scientific or technical qualifications work on special research projects on special orders from 'The Boss'. At Mavrino the soup is thick and meaty, the blankets are woolly and the prison heated. But the memory of the frozen camps, the hunger, the unbearably hard labor and the physical brutality is strong. The threat of returning is ever-present.

But this is not the main point. It is the deprivation of human dignity, the inhuman relationships between people, and between prisoners and their work, which freeze the soul more than the Siberian frost. Although the action described in the book spans only three days, the reader is introduced to a wide range of characters. For the most part, the prisoners owe their scientific and technical qualifications to Soviet power, and they serve their country and people well. Their sentences have been incurred because of foolish outspokenness, indiscretion, mistakes, or for no reason at all. With an insight that seems remarkably authentic, Solzhenitsyn reveals their attitudes to the society which has used them in this tragic way.

Most tragic of all are the prisoners who maintain an aloof attitude because they believe Soviet society to be completely healthy. Traitors, saboteurs, slanderers and enemies of the people deserve what they got, but a mistake has been made in their own cases.

Barbed wire, brick walls, and elaborate security measures cannot insulate Mavrino from the society 'outside'. The whole apparatus of investigation, prosecution, punishment, and forced labor pervades society through links visible and invisible. One is reminded of the words of Dostoyevsky in his *Notes from a Dead House*, based on ten years in

Omsk convict prison during Tsarist days. . .

"... Tyranny is a habit which grows on a man until it becomes a disease. I insist that the best of men can turn coarse and obtuse from force of habit until he becomes a brute. Blood and power intoxicate: they lead to coarseness and perversity; the most abnormal qualities develop in the mind and the senses until they become indispensable and even sweet. The man and citizen vanish forever in the tyrant, and a return to human dignity becomes almost impossible for him. Besides, the possibility of such perversion infects all society: such power is tempting. A society which looks upon such things with indifference is contaminated at its roots."

Solzhenitsyn represents the large number of Soviet citizens who are not indifferent, and who are a guarantee that their society, whatever its problems, was and is not contaminated at the roots. A former front-line soldier who received an eight-year sentence for a derogatory remark in a letter about 'the man with the moustache', his experiences in a labor camp, a special prison (he was a graduate in physics and mathematics) in exile, and in a cancer hospital gave him rich material for his works.

The world came to know of Alexander Solzhenitsyn in 1962 through his ice-breaking book *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* — an account of conditions in a concentration camp during the worst period of the 'Stalin era'. Publication of this book was said to have been sponsored by the then Soviet Premier Khrushchov. His two major works written since then, *Cancer Ward* and *The First Circle* remain unpublished in the USSR, although a story has it that the latter was set up in type for the progressive magazine *Novy Mir* before final rejection by the authorities.

Some will object to *The First Circle*

as "doing damage to socialism". Certainly the book will hurt those socialists who did not know or could not believe that such things were happening in the USSR during those years.

But what is really harmful to socialism — the actual perpetration of crimes, or the exposure and analysis of them? Does one defend or advance socialism by concealing or defending its distortions? More than one example shows that the honest and open discussion of distortions has the overall effect of restoring confidence and releasing initiative. Confrontation and analysis of the past is a pledge that the crimes will not be committed or permitted again.

How many people suffered under the repressions in those nightmare years under Stalin? Exact figures are hard to come by, but a labor camp population of ten million would not seem to be an exaggeration. Whatever the figure, it should be known from records and should be published. A leading Soviet scientist, A. D. Sakharov, has stated that in the years 1936 to 1939, no less than 1.2 million members of the Communist Party were arrested. The overwhelming majority of these were shot, or died in camps. Most of them were leading Party workers, such as members of city or regional committees. They included many old Bolsheviks who had taken part in the revolution, so the effect of the repressions was not marginal. In terms of lives they rank second only to World War 2, and in terms of influence on mass consciousness the effects are wider and deeper.

This magnificent book should not have needed to be smuggled to the West. It should have been published in a mass edition in Russian, and in English by Progress Publishers, Moscow. It would have earned foreign exchange in more senses than one.

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