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PRISON LIFE IN THE EYES OF BEDIÜZZAMAN SAID NURSI AND ALEKSANDER SOLZHENITSYN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Ismail Albayrak*

Abstract: Christian and Islamic cultures of old abound with examples of atrocities committed against faithful people. Even in the modern era, many people have been unjustly imprisoned and deliberately subjected to persecution by authoritarian regimes. Said Nursi and Aleksander Solzhenitsyn are prominent examples of such poor treatment, even though each fought for their country and produced outstanding works, as long as breath was in them, for the welfare of their fellow citizens and co-religionists. By acting positively, despite every setback, they both fought against ignorance, sedition and lawlessness within the putative legal framework of their respective nations. One of the most important points this article argues is that these two scholars' spiritual qualities allowed them to discern a hidden beauty, kindness and goodness even behind all kinds of injustices, however much pain and distress was inflicted on them during their incarceration. Thus, Nursi and Solzhenitsyn turned prison experiences into seeing every phenomenon as a reflection of God's manifestations, exploration and rediscovering a religious and moral life. For Nursi and Solzhenitsyn, the sharp difference between sadness, distress, sickness and old age, on the one hand, and joy, peace, youth and health, on the other, almost disappears in their thinking after converting the prison into paradise.

Keywords: *Prison, spirituality, Risale-i Nur, gulag, Said Nursi, Aleksander Solzhenitsyn*

INTRODUCTION

This article focuses mainly on the prison life of two distinguished figures who suffered profoundly under authoritarian regimes: Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1877–1960) from the Islamic tradition and Aleksander Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008) from the Russian Orthodox Christian tradition, who lived during times of significant spiritual, social, political and intellectual upheaval in the 20th century. Both men suffered enormous hardships on account of their respective beliefs. Nursi, for instance, experienced 35 years of exile, grim isolation, surveillance and prison sentences, while Solzhenitsyn underwent imprisonment, forced exile, labour camp and silencing. Despite their difficulties, they led exemplary lives, confirmed, continued and retained their faith in God in their darkest hours and continued with their

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outstanding scholarly and literary works. They are beacons for all who endure hardship for their faith in the modern period.

Of course, there are differences in the ways that religious traditions approach prison lives and spirituality, but I believe significant commonalities exist between them. Both scholars translated their prison life and exile into paradise. The main subject of this article is the reasons for the overlap of the views of these two different personalities regarding prison. I will begin by summarising the lives of these two heroes: Nursi and Solzhenitsyn. After briefly mentioning the difficulties they went through, I will touch on the importance and striking features of the works they wrote in chronological order. The question of why these two personalities with different backgrounds (one theologian and a literary man) are compared is one of the important subheadings of this section. This article explains how the two important figures produced their works in similar and difficult conditions and how they met their large audiences.

SAID NURSI (BEDIÜZZAMAN: WONDER OF THE AGE)

Said Nursi was born in Bitlis (the eastern province of the Ottoman State) in 1877. When young, he went to various traditional madrasas for training, but was not satisfied with them. In 1891–2, he studied intensively under Shaykh Muhammad Jalālī and was awarded a diploma, *ijazah*. In the following years, he memorised many classical texts, studied modern sciences and recognised the importance of teaching religious disciplines and modern sciences together. Nursi is one of the foremost reformers to recognise the importance of education in tackling the main issues facing the Muslim world. He travelled among Kurdish tribes in the eastern part of Turkey and visited Istanbul to lobby Sultan Abdulhamid in support of his university project. At this time, in 1907, he was first imprisoned, although only briefly.¹

On proclamation of the Second Constitution in 1908, Nursi supported freedom and constitutionalism. In 1911, in the Umayyad Mosque, he gave his famous Damascus sermon where he dealt extensively with what he considered to be the major sicknesses of Muslim communities: ignorance, disunity and poverty. In mid-1911, he travelled to the Balkans with Ottoman Sultan Reşad and, upon returning to Van, established a madrasa. When World War I began in 1914, he joined the Turkish army and led a militia force in the eastern provinces against the Armenians and Russians. In 1916, he was captured by the Russians and sent to the camp at Kostroma on the Volga River. After his escape in 1918, he came to Istanbul where he started working in the House of Islamic Wisdom (a literal translation of *Dār al-Hikmat al-İslāmiyya*, an educational institution), which provided scholarly solutions for Muslims' problems. Here he produced many articles, wrote scores of letters and made public speeches that explored the contemporary illnesses of the Muslim community, recommending also how these might be cured. After World War I, Nursi eagerly supported Turkish independence² and

¹ Şükran Vahide, "A Chronology of Said Nursi's Life," in *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), xvii.

² *Ibid.*, xviii-xix.

at this time was heavily involved in social and political affairs. In the final Ottoman years, his aim was to reach out to people to renew religious sentiments in their lives. This socially and politically active time he called the “Old Said” period.

During his stay in Ankara in 1922–3, Nursi realised the danger of atheism and became convinced that society could not be changed through political engagement, top-down elitist design or working with the current government. The years of independence coincided with the emergence of the “New Said” period.³ Nursi withdrew into solitude and underwent profound personal, mental and spiritual transformations, based on the Qur’ān and free from the influence of any external ideological or philosophical trends. After the establishment of the Turkish Republic under the leadership of Atatürk, he witnessed the abolition of the sultanate, caliphate and office of *Shaykh al-Islām*, closure of madrasas and Sufi lodges (*takka* and *zāwiyah*), disbanding of Sufi orders (*tarīqāt*), adoption of the Swiss civil code, banning of the Arabic alphabet and the Arabic call to prayer, strong secularisation and Westernisation; in short, the newly created state was not willing to tolerate religio-spiritual sacred symbolism and the masterminds of this state were determined to eliminate Islam and its major institutions from the public sphere.⁴

After staying eight months in Ankara, he went to Van. He retired from politics and active engagement with society to a life of seclusion. After Nursi started teaching again with a few students in Van, in 1925 the Shaykh Said Piran revolt broke out. Despite his opposition to this revolt, Nursi was sent into exile to Western Anatolia, Burdur, Isparta then Barla (a small town) where he stayed until 1934. These years were productive for Nursi; although the authorities exerted great pressure on him because they feared the spread of his works, he attracted many students. Interestingly, in contrast to his life as the Old Said, he did not during this period participate in any public activity, accept any official position or even read the newspapers. Nevertheless, he was arrested with his 120 students and sent to prison in Eskişehir (a city in central Anatolia). Nursi was accused of exploiting religion for political ends and affiliating with a secret organisation. He was exiled to Kastamonu where he stayed until 1943. He was then transferred from Kastamonu to Denizli prison. In 1944, he moved to Emirdağ (a small province) for a short while and was then sent to a prison in Afyon (for 20 months). He was eventually released from prison in 1949, and in 1950, when the Democratic party won the national election, a general amnesty was declared. Although Nursi was still occasionally under serious surveillance, there was a relative relaxation during this period.

With the Democrats assuming power, the “Third Said” period commenced. In 1952, Nursi returned to Istanbul after being away for 27 years. During his stay, he visited the Greek Orthodox Patriarch and discussed with him the importance of Muslims and Christians combining their efforts to combat aggressive atheism. In 1956, he was finally cleared of all

³ The New Said period covers from 1920 to 1950.

⁴ Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, “Ghurbah as Paradigm for Muslim Life: A *Risale-i Nur* Worldview,” in *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 246.

accusations by the Afyon high court.⁵ His treatises were republished in the Latin alphabet. During 1958-1960, as his health was deteriorating, he made farewell visits to his students in Ankara, Konya, Istanbul, Emirdağ and Isparta. He went from Isparta to Urfa (a city in south-eastern Turkey, the old Edessa) where he arrived on 21 March 1960. Only two days later, on 23 March, he died. His burial place is near where Prophet Abraham was thought to be buried. However, on 12 July 1960, two months after a military coup overthrew the Democrat Party government (on 27 May 1960), Nursi's body was removed from this honoured place and transported somewhere unknown to be reburied.⁶ Throughout his long life, Said Nursi was known for his self-sufficiency. He remained single throughout life and had no descendants; he accepted no gifts and owned virtually nothing.

ALEKSANDER SOLZHENITSYN (LITERARY PROPHET)

Solzhenitsyn was born in Kislovodsk (now in Stavropol Krai, Russia) on 11 December 1918. His father was killed in a hunting accident shortly after his mother's pregnancy had been confirmed. Although his earliest years coincided with the Russian civil war, his educated bourgeois mother encouraged him to study literature and science. He was raised in the Russian Orthodox faith and his mother, who lived until 1944, bequeathed him a penetrating and extensive appreciation of the realities of truth, goodness and beauty, and respect for the ethical imperative, all of which had no place in the Soviet Union at that time.⁷ Solzhenitsyn studied mathematics at Rostov State University. During his university years, he was a devoted communist and, according to his wife's account,⁸ Lenin was his idol. In 1940, he married Natalia A. Reshetovskaya⁹ and the following year joined the army. During the war, he served as the commander of a sound-ranging battery in the Red Army. While in combat as an artillery officer in East Prussia, he witnessed war crimes committed against local German civilians by Soviet military personnel. In 1945, he was arrested by a Russian counter-intelligence organisation for making derogatory and critical remarks in a private letter to a friend, concerning the way the war was being conducted by Stalin, whom he referred to as the boss and master of the house.¹⁰

Solzhenitsyn was accused of anti-Soviet propaganda and founding a hostile organisation. In July 1945, he was sentenced in absentia by a special council to an eight-year term in a labour camp. He was taken to the famous Lubyanka prison in Moscow, then in 1950, he was sent to a

⁵ On Nursi's court process, see Sabri Zengin, "Bediüzzaman'ın Hapishanede Yazdığı Mektuplarla Talebelerinin Cemaat Şuurunu Takviyesi" [Bediüzzaman's Strengthening of his Students' Community Consciousness with the Letters he Wrote in Prison], *Katre International Human Studies Journal* 11 (2021): 143.

⁶ Vahide, "A Chronology of Said Nursi's Life," xx-xxiv.

⁷ Daniel Mahoney, "The Moral Witness of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn," *First Things* 196 (2009): 48.

⁸ Travis Kroeker and Bruce K. Ward, "Gulag Ethics: Russian and Mennonite Prison Memoirs from Siberia," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* special issue (2012): 257; Edward Ericson and Alexis Klimoff, *The Soul and Barbed Wire: An Introduction to Solzhenitsyn* (Wilmington: ISI Books 2008), 179.

⁹ He divorced his first wife in 1952 before his release because the spouses of *gulag* prisoners faced loss of employment or their residence permit. At the end of his internal exile, they remarried in 1957 and divorced a second time in 1972.

¹⁰ Kroeker and Ward, "Gulag Ethics," 252.

gulag for political prisoners. During his imprisonment at the camp in the town of Ekibastuz in Kazakhstan, he worked as a miner, bricklayer and foundry foreman. In 1953, after his sentence ended, he was sent into internal exile for life at Birlík, a village in the Baidibek district of the south Kazakhstan region. His undiagnosed cancer spread and he was close to death. In 1954, he was given permission to be treated at a hospital in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. During these decades of imprisonment and exile, he abandoned Marxist ideology and, in his later life, developed a philosophical and religious worldview and position.

After Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956, Solzhenitsyn was freed from exile and exonerated. Following his return from exile, he was, while teaching at a secondary school during the day, spending his nights secretly engaged in writing and documenting all his terrible experiences.¹¹ In 1960, he secretly approached Alexander Tvardovsky, a poet and the editor-in-chief of *Novy Mir* magazine, with the manuscript of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*,¹² which brought the Soviet system of prison labour to the West's attention. This work also caused a huge sensation in the Soviet Union. In 1958-1967, Solzhenitsyn composed *The Gulag Archipelago*, a work of three volumes and seven parts on the Soviet prison camp system. After the removal of Khrushchev from his post in 1964, the regime became progressively more repressive for Solzhenitsyn. Even though he was awarded the Nobel prize in literature in 1970, he was unable to receive it personally. Then, in 1971, the KGB allegedly attempted to assassinate him using an unknown biological agent and he became seriously ill.¹³

In 1973, Solzhenitsyn married his second wife, Natalia D. Svetlove, with whom he had three sons. In 1974, he was again arrested and deported to Frankfurt, West Germany, and lost his Soviet citizenship. He moved to Zurich, Switzerland, then finally to Vermont, USA, in 1976. In 1990, his citizenship was restored and in 1994, he returned to Russia with his wife.¹⁴ A year later, his famous book, *The Gulag Archipelago*, was made compulsory reading by the new Russian national curriculum body.¹⁵ He died of heart failure in 2008 at the age of 89 and was buried in a monastery at a spot he had chosen.¹⁶

¹¹ Jordan B. Peterson, forward to *The Gulag Archipelago*, by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (Random House, 2018), 1, Kindle edition.

¹² This is the only work he was allowed to publish in the Soviet Union.

¹³ Ericson and Klimoff, *The Soul and Barbed Wire*, 27.

¹⁴ As noted before, Nursi visited the Greek Orthodox Patriarch in Istanbul and sent some of his works to the Pope in Rome. Solzhenitsyn also went to Rome and met Pope John Paul II just before his return to his homeland. For many, this meeting had symbolic importance: their lives, works and words clearly showed the human spirit will always win against totalitarianism. Ian Hunter, "Solzhenitsyn: The Last Prophet," *Catholic Insight* (March 2003): 12.

¹⁵ Peterson, forward, 2.

¹⁶ Right after his exile began in 1974, he said to this friend Nikita Struve "I see the day when I will return to Russia, and I am convinced that the communism will go like an eclipse." Although nobody believed him, even his friends at that time, his two prophesies were realised during his lifetime. Edward Ericson, "The Gulag Archipelago a Generation Later," *Modern Age* 44, no. 2 (2002): 152.

MAIN FEATURES OF NURSI'S AND SOLZHENITSYN'S WORKS

Nursi produced some sophisticated theological works during his Old Said period. Many of these works were written in Arabic. However, when the New Said period started right after the establishment of the Republic and the environment became more anti-Islamic, he adapted writings to this new situation and focused mainly on serious engagement with intellectual, spiritual, moral and faith-related issues, such as creation, destiny, resurrection and the problem of theodicy. He also dealt with many social and psychological issues as, for example, in his treatise to the elderly, sick, parents who had lost their young children and those who suffered the loss of their spouse in old age. Altogether, he wrote around 135 treatises totalling nearly 5,000 pages. These works he called a spiritual exegesis, *al-tafsīr al-ma'nawī*. When one looks at the titles of this correspondence, such as *Words (Sözler)*, *Letters (Mektubat)*, *Flashes (Lem'alar)*, *Rays (Şualar)*, *Signs of the Miraculousness of the Qur'an (Ishârât al-I'jâz)* and *Staff of Moses (Asâyı Mûsâ)*, one sees that Nursi was developing serious proposals, revivals and innovations. As he noted, his treatises were not just repairing some minor damage to sundry insignificant structures nor were they simply cosmetic but seeking to undo the vast damage suffered by the all-embracing castle that shelters Islam, each stone of which is as large as a mountain.¹⁷

Despite many bans, restrictions and pressures, Nursi's works were welcomed by certain strata of society and rapidly grew into encyclopaedic volumes, although they had begun by being written down by many hands and copied to be distributed piece by piece, and manually, in small towns across the country. People who were deeply rooted in religious life and culture came together, read the treatises and derived from them lessons in accordance with their conditions. Because treatises were believed by Nursi to be inspired by an external source, i.e., God's guidance, he occasionally reminds the reader that, through re-reading these treatises, he tried constantly to gain Divine guidance.¹⁸ Thus, for himself and his pupils, dissemination of the treatises became an existential mission. Especially in prison, writing can become a way of transcending the deprivations of confinement. Many of his students put their lives in danger by copying the treatises, reading them together in study circles and disseminating them. Some even memorised them in case they would at some point be deprived of these writings.

Similarly, Solzhenitsyn produced his literary works under harsh conditions. He began to write very early and published his major works during the Soviet era, although he continued to write after the fall of communism. Even his declining health in the later stages of his life did not prevent him from writing.¹⁹ He used his literary skills courageously, with the intention of transforming society. His main desire in his novels, short stories, poems, public lectures and letters was to give meaning to life's events, trying to penetrate the mystery of death and speak

¹⁷ Haddad, "Ghurbah as Paradigm for Muslim Life," 240.

¹⁸ Ibid., 245. Like Nursi, Solzhenitsyn says "...it even seemed as if it were no longer I who was writing; rather, I was swept along, my hand being moved by an outside force...those weeks represent the highest point in my feelings of victory and isolation from the world" – Ericson, "The Gulag Archipelago," 151.

¹⁹ Daniel Mahoney, "The Continuing Relevance of Alexander Solzhenitsyn," *Society* November/December (2003): 68.

truthfully. As David Remnick remarks, “when I say that Solzhenitsyn is the dominant writer of the twentieth century, I do not mean the best literary writer...but as someone who was able to combine truth-telling with the literary project, he is unparalleled.”²⁰ His desire for truth-telling manifests clearly in his narration of the Russian revolution, the Stalinist era during World War II and his experiences of incarceration in a *gulag*. In an editorial of the *Journal of Church and State*, he is introduced as a “literary prophet.”²¹ When he heard the state apparatus had seized the manuscript of *The Gulag Archipelago*, which he had entrusted to a Leningrad woman,²² he was even more determined to take the serious risk of publishing it, because of his love for his country and commitment to truth-telling.²³ Interestingly, as was the case with many of Nursi’s letters, Solzhenitsyn also had no opportunity to revise or critically edit some of his works before their publication.²⁴ In addition, he secretly carried on producing literary works during the Soviet period. This is reminiscent of Nursi’s private postmen and postwomen, who, with utmost care and caution, disseminated the *Treatises* or preserved and protected them from external confiscation. If these had been seized, it would have been wasted effort and created great turmoil in his circle of friends. Producing written materials in prison was strictly prohibited.²⁵

Solzhenitsyn brings his spiritual and religious commitments, devotion and insights to his writings. Sometimes he may use Biblical references ambiguously, whereas at other times he cites clear textual evidence, with reference to a Christian framework.²⁶ Taken from the New Testament, *Candle in the Wind*, composed in 1960, and originally titled the *Light that is within Thee*, is a good illustration of this. Also, in 1962, he expresses his religious devotion by including a special prayer at the end of his work, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.²⁷ The meditative lyric, *Acathistus*,²⁸ marks his spiritual rebirth, while his short story, *Matryona’s Place*, directly focuses on morality and the notion of selflessness. In conclusion, it is also worth mentioning his famous novel *First Circle*, which, inspired by Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, shows how some *gulag* prisoners went through the spiritual processes – first, *Inferno* (the site of torment), then *Purgatorio* (the place of cleansing) and finally *Paradiso* (the realm of perfect

²⁰ For others, he is seen as a Slavophile, romantic, agrarian, monarchist, theocrat and even anti-Semitic. He is considered as not a true friend of human liberty – Mahoney, “The Continuing Relevance of Alexander Solzhenitsyn,” 67. Some go further and belittle his Christianity and consider him to be yesterday’s man – Ericson, “The Gulag Archipelago,” 155, 157.

²¹ Editorial, “Solzhenitsyn: Literary Prophet for the Human Conscience,” *Journal of Church and State* 16, no. 1 (1974): 5. Unfortunately, some others criticised him by saying the authority of the speech was weakened by a religious view of human nature – John Conway O’Brien, “Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn and the Evils of Soviet Communism,” *International Journal of Social Economics* 21 (1994): 24.

²² Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago (1918-1956): An experiment in Literary Investigation I-II*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (Sydney: William Collins, 1974), 617. Later, this woman, after hours of intensive questioning, depression and pressure, killed herself.

²³ What would Solzhenitsyn say today if he saw the atrocities committed by Russia in the Ukraine and Syria?

²⁴ Solzhenitsyn says, “I have never once seen the whole book together, never once had it all on my desk.” Ericson, “The Gulag Archipelago,” 151; Kroeker and Ward, “Gulag Ethics,” 259.

²⁵ In terms of God’s plan (fate), there are other similarities between them. For example, both are poisoned by the oppressive apparatus of the authoritarian regime. Interestingly, both were cleared of all charges in 1956.

²⁶ Ericson and Klimoff, *The Soul and Barbed Wire*, 179.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 179-80.

²⁸ A Lenten hymn.

knowledge and wisdom). These stages also mark Solzhenitsyn's journey and his realisation of the self by reaching the heights of spirituality.²⁹ Here one should recall his masterpiece, *Red Wheel*, where he highlights the tension between communism and its sister ideologies, and traditional Christian faith and life.³⁰ These two scholars' works are living proof that "the pen is mightier than the sword." As many have already noted, Nursi in Turkey and Solzhenitsyn in Russia contributed substantially to preparing their fellow citizens for the challenges of modernism, secularism, nihilism and communism.

WHY NURSI AND SOLZHENITSYN ARE BEING COMPARED

Nursi is a well-known systematic theologian, versatile scholar and religious reformer, who is well acquainted with various Islamic disciplines, whereas Solzhenitsyn, while not a trained theologian, is considered by some to have produced literary works that may be considered theological treatises.³¹ Nursi's and Solzhenitsyn's works shed light on the condition of imprisonment. If one reads them carefully, they have similar contemporary feelings. Solzhenitsyn's works, for example, in some respects inhabit the similar thought-world as Nursi's treatises. Their prison experience is a basic common factor. In addition, both men share the context of revolutionary activity and tried to bring religious faith to their society by casting away the illusory promises of communism and hardcore laicism. In other words, Nursi's treatises are intended to protect the Turkish people from Marxist and communist revolutionary ideas, while Solzhenitsyn's literary works are believed to have helped undermine, and subsequently bring down, the Soviet regime.³²

THE REASON FOR NURSI'S AND SOLZHENITSYN'S IMPRISONMENTS

It is worth discussing why Nursi and Solzhenitsyn were put in prison and their proactive and positive responses to their unjust imprisonment. First, it should be reiterated, when undemocratic regimes declare a state of emergency, the law is invariably left aside. Then, during this extraordinary situation, as Solzhenitsyn aptly summarises, all legal procedures

²⁹ In Solzhenitsyn's case, as David Matual points out, if Dante's *Divine Comedy*, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* are depicted as well-defined places, they appear as states of mind or stages in Zek's spiritual development. The most decisive of these stages is the second. In *Purgatorio*, sinners are cleansed of their offenses and prepared for the ultimate joy of *Paradiso* or Heaven. The principal difference is, in Solzhenitsyn's version, the emphasis is less on expiation and considerably more on intellectual growth and spiritual transformation. David Matual, "The Gulag Archipelago: From Inferno to Paradiso," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* 7, no. 1 (1982): 35-7.

³⁰ Daniel Mahoney, "Solzhenitsyn's Red Wheel," *First Things* May (2015). His novel *August 1914* is also in similar line. See Ericson, "The Gulag Archipelago," 153.

³¹ He is considered to be a philosopher, theologian, Christian writer, novelist and poet. See Matual, "The Gulag Archipelago," 39; "it is said that he has not indulged in speculative theologizing, however, some Russian theologians view Solzhenitsyn as a Christian writer whose rendered work and thought emerge quintessentially from Biblical and Christian revelation and whose perception of the world, man, and life contains the triune intuition of creation, fall, and redemption... it is the revival of a religious consciousness" – Ericson and Klimoff, *The Soul and Barbed Wire*, 133, 179; George A. Panichas, "Review of Solzhenitsyn: The Moral Vision by Edward E. Ericson Jr," *Christianity and Literature* 31, no. 1 (1981): 70.

³² Panichas, "Review of Solzhenitsyn," 155; Hunter, "Solzhenitsyn," 11; Mahoney, "The Moral Witness," 44.

(investigation, arrest, interrogation, prosecution, trial and execution of the verdict) are taken into the hands or under the control of the ruling elites.³³ The undivided nature of legislative and executive power readily remind us of the Urdu couplet *wahī qatil, wahī shahīd, wahī munsif thehre; agraba mere karen qatl ka daawa kis par* (They are the killers, witnesses and judges all rolled into one. Who do you think my relatives should appeal to on the murder?).³⁴ Like many people, these two admirable men were arrested for no good reason. Based on the assignment of quotas and planned allocations, they went to prison. The regime needed to find just one anonymous informant to initiate the case.³⁵ Of course, in both instances, the reasons for the imprisonment and exile by the totalitarian regimes were based on groundless and paranoiac suspicions and possibilities instead of facts.³⁶ As mentioned above, the charges in Solzhenitsyn's case were based on a letter and some so-called critical remarks about Stalin, whereas Nursi's case was instigated for reasons such as exploiting religion for political ends and organising a group that might disturb the public order or destroy the newly established state's stability.³⁷ Obviously, the driving forces behind the imprisonment of these two great figures were not legally based but a matter of illusory fear in relation to the revolution and state; in other words, the preservation of certain groups' self-interest. Both scholars frequently refer to this aspect of their imprisonment in their works.

Although they do not accept the unjust accusations levelled against them by the state apparatus, they explicitly mention the reasons for their detention, imprisonment and exile. In Nursi's eyes, there is no doubt that the main reason for his imprisonment is *qadar* and *adli ilahi* (Divine destiny and justice). Nursi constantly reinterpreted important Islamic concepts and dogmas in tune with the context of his socio-political and ethico-religious perspectives. In this situation, he says "divine determining looks to the true causes and acts justly. Human beings construct their judgements on causes which they see superficially and fall into error within the pure justice of divine determining."³⁸ Similarly, world events have a system they follow, set by God, and the events are driven by God. Such a realisation leads to submission to Divine determining and decree that arises from belief, and this, according to Nursi, leads to worldly

³³ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 28.

³⁴ See <https://www.rekhta.org/couplets/vahii-qaatil-vahii-shaahid-vahii-munsif-thahre-unknown-couplets>. Solzhenitsyn quotes a meaningful statement from Derzhavin, "a partial court is worse than banditry, judges are enemies, there sleeps the law" – Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 295. On another occasion, he narrates a proverb "do not fear the law, fear the judge" – Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 298. Apparently, failure to divide legislative and executive powers causes serious violation of human rights.

³⁵ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 97. Solzhenitsyn tells an illuminating story about a man's imprisonment. A Soviet citizen was in USA and, on his return, he told people that in the USA they have wonderful roads. The KGB agents arrested him and demanded a term of ten years. But the judge said, "I do not object, but there is not enough evidence; could not you find something else against him?" Consequently, the judge was exiled to Sakhalin because he dared to argue, and they gave the other man a ten years' jail sentence – Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Detente Democracy," *Society* November/December (1976): 21.

³⁶ Zuleyha Keskin, "Attaining Inner Peace According to the Risale-i Nur Collection" (PhD diss., Australian Catholic University, 2015), 217.

³⁷ Nursi was seen by the Kemalist elite as a counter-revolutionary participant, who spent great efforts to convert secular Turkey into a religious state.

³⁸ Said Nursi, *The Words*, trans. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözlür Pub., 2008), 487; Keskin, "Attaining Inner Peace," 186.

happiness and a Paradise-like state in place of terror.³⁹ In contrast to many others, Nursi never looks only at the outer face that sees this manifest world (*mulk*), but especially at the inner face, that of reality (*malakut/haqiqat*), which looks to the Creator, where everything is transparent and beautiful.⁴⁰ For example, Nursi writes:

Just at that point, when in those freezing conditions I was in most need of rest and not catching cold and not thinking of the world, I was overcome with anger and vexation at those who had sent me into this intolerable exile, isolation, imprisonment, and oppression, in a way that spelt out their hatred and ill-intentions. Divine grace came to my assistance, and the following was imparted to my heart: Divine determining, which is pure justice, has a large part in the wrongful oppression which these people are inflicting on you. You have food to eat in this prison; that sustenance of yours called you here. It should be met with contentment and resignation. Dominical wisdom and mercy have a large part, which is to illuminate those in this prison and console them, and to gain you reward. This share should be met with endless thanks and patience. Your soul has a part in it, due to its faults which you did not know about. In the face of this, you should tell your soul by repenting and seeking forgiveness that it deserved this blow...⁴¹

This spiritual approach can be seen in Solzhenitsyn too. It is not enough for him to know that his sufferings will enhance his appreciation of happiness, as Silin's *quatrain* (poem) implies. At this stage, he is more interested in ultimate causes than possible consequences, a remark made by Kornfel'd on the subject of evil makes a lasting impression on him:

You know, in general I have become convinced that no punishment in this earthly life comes to us undeserved. Apparently, it can come for something of which we are not truly guilty. But if we go over our lives and think them through carefully, we will always find a crime of ours for which the blow has now fallen upon us.⁴²

Considering his life, Solzhenitsyn finds ample confirmation of Kornfel'd's contention. To deal with the difficulty of evil and guilt, he turns, as his friend has done, to religion. He begins to understand that the truth of religion is predicated on its ability to combat evil in humans. Revolution, on the other hand, especially the Bolshevik revolution, strives to eradicate

contemporary carriers of evil (and also in their haste the carriers of good). Only religion that is for Solzhenitsyn Christian religion can effectively contend with the evil of the world and with the present evil of the *gulag* archipelago. If it is the path to the city of God, which is truth and salvation. Purely human contrivances designed to uproot the expressions of evil lead to the city of man, a realm of falsehood and destruction.⁴³

³⁹ Mehmet Aydın, "The Problem of Theodicy in the *Risale-i Nur*," in *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁴¹ Nursi, *Lemalar* [Flashes] (Istanbul: Şahdamar, 2013), 26th Flash 15th Request, 315-316.

⁴² Matual, "The Gulag Archipelago," 39.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

HOW DO NURSI AND SOLZHENITSYN SEE LIFE IN PRISON?

Despite the harsh conditions, torture, psychological humiliation and many other negativities – in sum, the dark face of prisons – both scholars emphasise the positive aspects of prisons and imprisonment. As a matter of fact, both in some way fall in love with the life of prison and, after their release, frequently mention they miss the life they experienced there. Why were they happy in prison? Although not directly stated in their writings, it can be deduced that the main reason is their love of true freedom. Both make it clear that they preferred unjust imprisonment to a despotic life of freedom outside. Solzhenitsyn's anecdote in this regard is stimulating. He says that one of the priests (Father Irakly) in 1934 went to Alma Ata to visit some believers in exile. During his absence, police came three times to his Moscow apartment to search for and arrest him. When he returned, a member of his congregation met him at the train station and dissuaded him from going home. His people hid the priest for eight years in one apartment or another. However, because of the constant fear and harried life, he suffered so painfully that, when he was finally arrested in 1942, the first thing he did was sing hymns of praise to God.⁴⁴

Solzhenitsyn's anecdote is multiplied by Nursi in detail. He, in contrast to Solzhenitsyn, frequently explains the reasons and wisdom behind his and his students' frequent incarceration. First and foremost, for Nursi, prison has a significant role in protecting believers from irreligious ambiences and negative cultural influences. Paradoxically, the spiritually sterile environment of prison never allows one to commit or even attempt to commit sin.⁴⁵ Nursi says, when he was in exile in Russia during World War I, he decided to live in isolated caves rather than enter other people's social and political lives. He had enough in himself, he continues, and would live alone. As in ancient times, like the *tārik al-dunyā* (people who left the world and everything related to it) and the companions of the cave,⁴⁶ he would live as if he had been in a Sufi lodge.⁴⁷

On his imprisonment, Nursi's desire to live alone or in confinement came, as it were, to fruition. In other words, he now believed his wish and prayers to live in isolated places had been accepted by God in a better way. Because of his old age, out of compassion, God had replaced for him the caves, Sufi lodges and *çilehâne* (place in which a Muslim mystic undergoes a period of retreat, trial and suffering) with prisons. Nursi's optimistic reading of incarceration and prison life reached its climax with his description of prison as nothing other than the grace of God (*inâyet-i ilâhî*). In his view, prison was the best place to be during this socially, politically and spiritually hectic time; it would be virtually impossible to lead a better life outside. According to Nursi, prison was a unique place to keep his disciples safe from internal and external spiritual and material enemies. He also notes that eminent people of the past, such as Imām A'zam (d. 150/767) and Imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), spent time in prisons. He tells his students, therefore, that they should be proud of God's plan.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 14-15.

⁴⁵ Said Nursi, *Sözler* [Words] (Istanbul: Şahdamar, 2009).

⁴⁶ See the Qur'ān 18:9–26; in Christian traditions, they were called the “seven sleepers.”

⁴⁷ Nursi, *Lemalar*, 325.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 222-223.

Besides being a place to purify the soul, another aspect of prison, according to Nursi, is pedagogical. As Colin Turner explains, Nursi used his imprisonment period as an occasion for the learning and spiritual growth of the other inmates.⁴⁹ Nursi advised his students that they should convert the prison into a school (*terbiyahâne*) where other inmates (our brothers) can benefit from the solace of the *Risale-i Nur* (Treatises of the Light).⁵⁰ Significantly, Nursi named prison “the school of Prophet Joseph” (*medrese-i Yusûfiye*), with Prophet Joseph being understood as the leader of all people who find themselves in prison, past and present. Thus, in relating his and his pupils’ incarceration with the experience of the figure of Joseph,⁵¹ who was imprisoned unjustly, he was able, like Joseph, to understand the time he spent in prison as a handsome investment for himself and others.⁵² Similarly, Nursi tried hard to maximise his and his students’ spiritual gains by leading ordinary inmates, with the permission of God, to the road of salvation. For Nursi and his students, the prisons were effectively spiritual retreat centres focused on religious education. The reward of any religious or spiritual act under the harsh conditions of the prison is, for Nursi, multiplied in terms of the Godly reward. He described each fleeting hour passed in jail as the equivalent of eternal hours passed in worship.⁵³ Spiritually speaking, this was reassuring for Nursi and his students. On the one hand, it gave them the strength to patiently endure hardship, while extending help to others increased their spiritual reward. In one of his addresses, Nursi addresses the inmates:

O you, the unfortunate people who are experiencing the misfortune of prison! Since your world is weeping and your life is bitter, strive so that your hereafter will not also weep, and your eternal life will smile and be sweet! Benefit from prison! Just as sometimes under severe conditions in the face of the enemy, an hour’s watch may be equivalent to a year’s worship, so in the severe conditions you are experiencing, the hardship of each hour spent as worship becomes the equivalent of many hours, it transforms that hardship into mercy.⁵⁴

Thus, Nursi frequently reminds his students and other detainees of the fact that a limited span in jail, when it is accompanied by sincere worship, will be transformed into a limitless time in the next world. He mainly suggests the inmates recite the Qur’ân, learn its meanings from others, reflect on it, perform the prescribed prayers, compensate for missing prayers, repent for their crimes and sins that may have caused their imprisonment, thank God with gratitude in patience, act wisely and prudently pay attention to etiquette, learn good manners and become beneficial citizens. For Nursi, the real purpose of their stay in prison is to train and prepare the inmates for Paradise.⁵⁵ Everyone, even the people responsible for the prisons,

⁴⁹ Colin Turner, *The Qur’an Revealed: A Critical Analysis of Said Nursi’s Epistles of Light* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2013), 497.

⁵⁰ Said Nursi, *Asayî Musa* [The Staff of Moses] (Istanbul: RNK Pub., 2018), 16; Said Nursi, *Şualar* [The Rays] (Istanbul: Şahdamar Pub, 2013), 264.

⁵¹ Keskin, “Attaining Inner Peace,” 225.

⁵² One should remember that Joseph’s spiritual gifts were unveiled by others in prison. This then gave him the opportunity to exert enormous spiritual influence on people when he was released. Ayize Jamat-Everett, “Prison is a Hell for the Unbeliever,” in *Islam at the Crossroads*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’ (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 116.

⁵³ Said Nursi, *The Rays*, trans. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözlür Pub., 1995), 478; Keskin, “Attaining Inner Peace,” 225.

⁵⁴ Nursi, *Words*, 163.

⁵⁵ Nursi, *Asayî Musa*, 18.

should be proud of this outcome.⁵⁶ Nursi's focus is on the heart rather than the mind. He aims to satisfy the hunger of these hapless people in prison by redirecting their attention to the Hereafter and allowing them to forget their current pains. He asks the inmates to take revenge by converting the crying of imprisonment into the laughter of their future life.⁵⁷ In short, for Nursi, prison is not in the first place to be considered a form of confinement but a class for teaching the Qur'ān and the *Treatises of Light*. It becomes a place where one could save oneself from individual weaknesses and learn how to resist every kind of temptation.

Nursi also considers prison a rest house and manifestation of real Divine grace,⁵⁸ like a dormitory in which one can stay away from every kind of trouble and distraction. He also compares prison to a guest house. By the same token, prison is also a place where new people constantly come in while others go out. As Bensaïd notes, besides looking to the cognitive instruction of the inmates, Nursi also addresses the physical and emotional effects of external actions on the human soul. In brief, the effects of hostility are devilish, but the effects of compassion are fruitful and cause great pleasure.⁵⁹ Thus, he encouraged inmates to re-evaluate their lives from a positive angle and see all that befell them from an optimistic perspective. Even so, prison is no lasting abode; it is temporary, just as no one stays in a guest house their whole life long. After his third imprisonment, Nursi wrote to his students, "I offer you not my condolences but my congratulations."⁶⁰ This betokens an indescribably positive view of prison and what imprisonment can mean. Nursi also approaches the life of the believers in prison from a psychological perspective, to mitigate their burdens. As Keskin notes, the most important aspect of Nursi's imprisonment is the meaning he gives to the situation; if one is bitter about it, the time in prison would be painful and tormenting, whereas, if one sees the opportunities, as described above, being imprisoned provides peace and comfort in a situation that would otherwise cause inner turmoil. According to Nursi, through this change in perspective, prison can be transformed into a blessed garden that raises seedlings of good character. He canalised inmates' thought of instant pleasure to the most rewarding aspect of their lives, namely the Hereafter. Thus, inmates would feel no real loss because of their stay in prison.⁶¹ Nursi's insistent emphasis on faith in God and the Hereafter provides an awareness of limitless comfort and consolation to the inmates. Nursi's moral and spiritual teachings, however, also go beyond the walls of the prison and he always considers the complete personal and communal meanings given to the prisoners' situation.⁶²

⁵⁶ Nursi was deprived of his basic rights in prison by the directors and guards. He was constantly in contact with many inmates who had committed serious crimes and he continued to spread the faith among them, but the authorities could only respond with anger and upset to these activities.

⁵⁷ Nursi, *Asayî Musa*, 16.

⁵⁸ Benaouda Bensaïd, "Spiritual and Moral Reform of Muslim Inmates: The Model of Said Nursi," in *The Companion to Said Nursi Studies*, ed. Ian S. Markham and Zeynep Sayılğan (Oregon: Pickwick Pub., 2017); Nursi, *The Words*, 162.

⁵⁹ Bensaïd, "Spiritual and Moral Reform," 307.

⁶⁰ Nursi, *Rays*, 478; Nursi, *Asayî Musa*, 11; Keskin, "Attaining Inner Peace," 225.

⁶¹ Bensaïd, "Spiritual and Moral Reform," 309; Keskin, "Attaining Inner Peace," 222.

⁶² Keskin, "Attaining Inner Peace," 224-25; Bensaïd, "Spiritual and Moral Reform," 310.

While there is obviously suffering in prison, Nursi and Solzhenitsyn became used to life there and developed intimate inward relations with their conditions. As time passed, prison became their home and home is always precious. In response to one of his friends who avoided being put in prison, Solzhenitsyn says “how sorry I am that you did not get arrested then. How much you lost!”⁶³ Symbolically speaking, he is aware of what kind of contribution life in prison made to his spiritual development. Furthermore, he implies a person cannot be fully free even outside prison during the demonic and crazy Stalinist period. Prison is, thus, the sole place where one can intimately feel true freedom. A tragic story, Solzhenitsyn narrates, supports this assumption and belief: “one man hanged himself on the very day he was to be released because he could not face deceptive life in freedom.”⁶⁴

Nursi also strongly criticises the freedom provided by a despotic authoritarian government, which is based only on words, not on reality. Hence, he prefers prison life for the reason that it is more rewarding to be there than to live in illusory freedom.⁶⁵ As Viktor Frankl argues, although people are not always free to choose the conditions in which they find themselves, they are always free to choose their attitude towards these conditions.⁶⁶ Similarly, in many places, Nursi unambiguously claims that even being consigned to the grave or put in prison is a hundred times more beneficial than living freely in a tyrannical world. For example, he expresses his feelings by saying, “during my stay in Emirdağ under severe surveillance I became fed up with life and regretted my release from prison and desired eagerly to be sent back to Denizli prison.”⁶⁷ Nursi even thought to fabricate a crime, so he would be sent back to prison where he could focus on his spiritual life, religious instruction and pastoral care work. Similarly, his students were also eager to go back to prison, especially when their mentor was there. With this end in view, they went to the prosecutor’s office and accused themselves.⁶⁸ As mentioned above, for them, prison functioned as a school for their spiritual training, purification and ultimate salvation. When I think of Turkey in the 1940s, I am sure the prisons’ physical conditions were many times worse in than today, but Nursi’s students’ desire for prison is a remarkable proof that, in their experience, a different, better life could be lived there.

One final reason for the love of prison in Nursian theology is simply being together. Nursi missed life in prison so much because he could be together with his students. In normal conditions, under constant surveillance and pursuit, it was difficult for him to come together with or visit more than one or two other people. However, staying in prison would bring together a large number of students and so facilitate duplication of the *Treatises of Light*. As

⁶³ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 135.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 587; Matual, “The Gulag Archipelago,” 42.

⁶⁵ Said Nursi, “Tarihçe-i Hayat,” *Risale-i Nur Enstitüsü*, 55, accessed April 12, 2023, <http://www.risaleinur.enstitusu.org/kulliyat/tarihce-i-hayat/birinci-kisim-ilk-hayati/55>.

⁶⁶ For Frankl, “one may retain her or his human dignity even in a concentration camp...the last inner freedom cannot be lost” – Iddo Landau, “Viktor Frankl on all People’s Freedom to Find their Lives Meaningful,” *Human Affairs* 29 (2019): 379-80. Frankl says “everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” – Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1985), 86.

⁶⁷ Nursi, “Tarihçe-i Hayat,” 524.

⁶⁸ Nursi, *Sözler*, 817.

Nursi points out, visiting him in prison was costly for his followers and immensely time-consuming. Besides, those who came to visit were frequently prevented from seeing him when they arrived. He fell in love with the burden of prison because he was able to see his pupils without any effort or expenditure. For Nursi, prison was experienced as a blessing from God in His compassion and providence.⁶⁹

HARD CONDITIONS IN PRISON AND TORTURE

Both scholars witnessed the pain and bitterness of life and conditions in prison. They experienced brutal torture⁷⁰ and saw many innocent people killed unjustly in custody, under severe torture,⁷¹ hunger and starvation. When it comes to their descriptions of life in prison, Solzhenitsyn, in contrast to Nursi, gives many details and vivid examples, which make his well-known book, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation I-II*, a specific genre of *zindannāma* or *ħabsiyyāt*.⁷² He observes the conditions these people faced in prison. Solzhenitsyn summarises up to 52 methods of torture carried out in the Soviet state.⁷³ Moreover, to sense the scale of atrocities committed in the *gulag*, it is enough to look at the figure given by I. A. Kurganov, a former professor of statistics in Leningrad. According to Kurganov, 66 million people were destroyed in the *gulag* between 1917 and 1959.⁷⁴ This is a

⁶⁹ Nursi, *Lemalar*, 416.

⁷⁰ “The simple definition of torture is the act of a person who deliberately inflicts severe physical or psychological suffering on another as a punishment or to satisfy some desire of the torturer or force some action from the victim. Unfortunately, torture has been carried out or sanctioned by individuals, groups and states throughout history, from ancient times to the modern day, and forms of torture can vary greatly in duration, from only a few minutes to several days or longer. Reasons for torture can include punishment, revenge, extortion, persuasion, political re-education, deterrence, coercion of the victim or a third party, interrogation to extract information or a confession irrespective of whether it is true or false, or simply the sadistic gratification of those carrying out or observing the torture. Alternatively, some forms of torture are designed to inflict psychological pain or leave as little physical injury or evidence as possible while achieving the same psychological devastation. Although torture is prohibited under international law and the domestic laws of most countries and considered a serious violation of human rights, it has been observed that widespread use of torture is condoned by states in many regions of the world. Amnesty International estimates at least 81 world governments currently practice torture, some of them openly” – <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torture>.

⁷¹ To understand the torture, Solzhenitsyn’s description is sufficient: “Interrogators were allowed to use violence and torture on an unlimited basis...the types of torture used were not regulated and every kind of ingenuity was permitted...” – Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 99. He goes further and says, “If there is no night interrogation, it was as if we had been lifted up to the heights of Sinai and there the truth manifested itself to us from out the fire” – Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 225. This second evaluation acutely indicates the gravity of the situation. Solzhenitsyn also notes, when prisoners returned to their ordinary cells, they felt as if they were in Paradise – Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 113. In sum, the types of imprisonment and stages of torture differ greatly from each other.

⁷² Apart from *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn also gives detailed information about conditions in prison in his first novel, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, which portrays a single day, in 1951, in the life of a peasant prisoner in Siberia. The novel unmasks the pervasive informing, cruelty, bribery, dishonesty, physical hunger, cold and suffering, as well as the alignment of guards against prisoners, and of certain prisoners against other prisoners, which was common in such camps. It also reveals the condemnation and imprisonment of entire blocs of people identified by categories, whether religious, ethnic or economic – Editorial, “Solzhenitsyn,” 6.

⁷³ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 116.

⁷⁴ O’Brien, “Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn,” 18. These numbers seem to refute the saying that “destruction is a secondary power in human existence” – Erich Fromm, *Barışın Tenkiği ve Stratejisi* [Technique and

frightening number. In light of this figure, Solzhenitsyn is right when he says that “in this century, no people have suffered more than our people.”⁷⁵

Solzhenitsyn makes clear that people’s health seriously deteriorated in prison and gives reasons to explain this. One of them is that many prisoners suffered systematic malnutrition, which created great hardship and was life-threatening. Solzhenitsyn and Nursi depict prisons as characterised by stuffy cells, overcrowded barracks and inadequate clothing. Inmates are deliberately kept awake, blocked from access to water, stacked together in cells with limited facilities and deprived of basic hygiene.⁷⁶ These deprivations, together with exposure to cold,⁷⁷ led to every kind of disease. Toilet use was restricted and depended on the guards’ mood. For Solzhenitsyn, the timing of toilet visits was generally calculated by reference to the water rations the prisoner received. If they had water due twice a day, they could go to toilet twice. If water was due only once, prisoners were restricted to going to the toilet just once a day.⁷⁸ Withholding water and food is a classic type of torture, designed to lead prisoners to become informants. It is also worth noting another classic type of torture that Solzhenitsyn mentions: leaving prisoners in solitary confinement with harsh lights so their eyelids become inflamed, causing grave pain.⁷⁹ At times, as in the past, prisoners were cast into a dark dungeon and deprived of light and movement for long periods so, in the end, when they were allowed out, they would be forced to feel their way with their hands like blind people.

When Nursi was imprisoned for the last time, in 1948, he was around 72 years old. This third period of imprisonment was the most catastrophic for Nursi and his students. He remained interned in solitary confinement for 20 months in a cell with broken windows, which were never repaired during two very harsh winters. According to Nursi, there were two centimetres of ice on his window. He was also poisoned, with severe continuing effects on his health.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, many times, both scholars approached these inhumane conditions positively and optimistically. On one occasion, Nursi said,

I had been wondering if this winter would be very cold and I did not know what I should do to stay warm. With the blessing and grace of God I was sent to prison cell in Denizli which housed seventy people. This was the warmest winter I had ever seen.⁸¹

On the other hand, there were many hot days, causing serious disturbances for the inmates.⁸² Many times, Nursi and Solzhenitsyn stayed in cells where there were no windows, no

Strategy of Peace], trans. Fezi Emir-Kaan H. Ökten (Istanbul: Arntan Pub., 1996), 22. At the least, it is useful to rectify that destruction has become the primary nature of some people.

⁷⁵ O’Brien, “Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn,” 18.

⁷⁶ Solzhenitsyn resembles the barracks to a *Gulag zoo* – Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 36, 445, 542.

⁷⁷ To understand the cold weather in Siberia, one should read Solzhenitsyn’s description “Because of the cold, one could freeze to death while he was waiting to be shot” – Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 444.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 496.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁸⁰ Nursi, “Tarihçe-i Hayat,” 521.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 522.

⁸² On one occasion, his pupil Hüsrev had devised a way to visit Nursi in his solitary confinement. Nursi had been poisoned, which brought him close to death. He got a message to Hüsrev not to visit, as he was ready to sacrifice his life for his country and people, and would no longer be alive. Furthermore, he warned his friends never to attempt to take revenge on his behalf. When some of his pupils were caught visiting him

ventilation facilities, very high temperatures in summer and very cold temperatures in winter, no bunks, dirty floors and beds that were full of rodents, insects and lice.⁸³ As Solzhenitsyn notes, months in such a cell will ruin a human's health for their entire life.⁸⁴

Frequent transportation from prison to prison can cause psychological and many physical problems.⁸⁵ Nursi and Solzhenitsyn constantly refer in their writings to this chronic attitude of tyranny. On the one hand, it is difficult for prisoners to get used to a place that regularly changes; on the other hand, by transferring people, the authorities are also punishing the relatives. Psychological torture, as Solzhenitsyn points out, has an enormous and even annihilating impact on weak, anguished, faint-hearted and frightened people who are sensitive to pain and have never been able to prepare themselves for the sufferings prison brings.⁸⁶ Intimidation, humiliation, threats, frequent questioning or interrogation at night are common practices⁸⁷ employed by the authorities and the people they used as "cat's paws" to terrorise political prisoners and their relatives.⁸⁸ Who are these cat's paws who show no mercy or respect for the innocent victims and their family members? Be they police, secret agents, military, prison guards or undefined others, their ugly and inhumane treatment of prisoners provides vivid evidence of their hate-filled hearts. In Solzhenitsyn's words, they are specifically trained human beasts standing over millions of defenceless victims.⁸⁹ Of course, our two authors are restrained in their descriptions of these people. It is clear, however, that treachery and violence are their trademarks. Because their humanity is incomplete (in fact, they behave like wild animals), they torture innocent people physically and psychologically, curse them, beat them, slap or kick them and even assault the prisoners' relatives who come to visit. They refuse to meet prisoner's simple human needs and, if they are ordered to do so, they would be ready to kill innocent people.

In addition, one should remember how a despotic regime's political apparatus contaminates prisons by a never-ending stream of party propaganda, which is full of falsehoods and deceptions. According to Solzhenitsyn, this type of punishment is the most oppressive and burdensome.⁹⁰ Moreover, at least in the case of Solzhenitsyn, many criminal prisoners are

secretly, he recounts they were punished by being beaten on the soles of their bare feet with a stick or truncheon (bastinado). Nevertheless, this type of punishment (whipping them) encourages them to work harder to learn and disseminate the teachings of the *Epistles of Light* rather than disheartened them – Nursi, "Tarihçe-i Hayat," 522.

⁸³ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 180.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 542.

⁸⁵ Solzhenitsyn vividly describes this situation with the expression "and the invisible slaves of the archipelago, who have substance, weight, and volume, have to be transported from island to island just as invisibly and uninterruptedly" – Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 489.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 103, 130.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 103-105.

⁸⁸ David Matual draws attention to one of the most memorable passages in *The Gulag Archipelago*, which is devoted to the atrocities of prison camps on Solovetsky island, which Solzhenitsyn characterises as the prototype of the entire archipelago, a cancer that metastasises until it holds the entire nation in its power. Matual, "The Gulag Archipelago," 36.

⁸⁹ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 94.

⁹⁰ Matual, "The Gulag Archipelago," 36.

encouraged to humiliate political prisoners.⁹¹ This results in greater deprivation, traumatised and psychologically damaged personalities, who are adversely affected even long after their release. Another type of torture in prison is broadly related to religiously practice; that is, preventing people from engaging in faith-based activities, such as praying together, coming together to read religious texts or listening to sermons. If a religious person in prison is blocked from praying, they will experience unbearable pain and grief. One finds in Solzhenitsyn's and Nursi's works multiple examples of this kind.⁹² It is telling that both men complain about their limited access in prison to books and writing materials. The authoritarian regimes that confined them took away their natural rights in depriving them of any practice of literary activity.⁹³ They both note that the authoritarian regimes frequently isolate political prisoners and hold them incommunicado for long periods.

CONCLUSION

The similarities in Said Nursi's and Aleksander Solzhenitsyn's descriptions of life in prison are striking. Both scholars are prominent examples of such treatment, even though each fought for their country and produced outstanding works, as long as breath was in them, for the welfare of their fellow citizens and co-religionists. By acting positively, despite every setback, they both fought against ignorance, sedition and lawlessness within the putative legal framework of their respective nations. While Nursi and Solzhenitsyn were subjected to unspeakable persecution, it never occurred to either of them to respond with violence. They were convinced, with their whole heart, that their only recourse in the struggle for justice and humanity with civilised people could be by way of persuasion.

Nursi turned his prison experience into a school, seeing every phenomenon as a reflection of God's attributes,⁹⁴ and evaluating the visible and invisible (*mulk* and *malakut*) from the perspective of God's beautiful names. In short, whatever comes from God is good. More importantly, nothing is eternal in this mortal world; sadness and happiness are temporary. To put it in Nursi's words, "the absence of pleasure is pain, and the absence of pain is pleasure."⁹⁵ Solzhenitsyn's prison experience invited him to explore and rediscover the religious and moral education he received in his childhood, the truth of which had been obscured by brainwashing in the communist ideology of the Soviet Union. More specifically, we can define Solzhenitsyn's journey in prison in terms of restoring his Christian faith. Remaining faithful to the truth of faith that he rediscovered after a time when following other directions, he was tireless in emphasising that the human path is one of commitment, not to mortal phenomena,

⁹¹ Editorial, "Solzhenitsyn," 6; Solzhenitsyn connects the Soviet authorities' attitude to Pontius Pilate's actions to consciously humiliate Jesus by crucifying him between two thieves – Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 499.

⁹² Ibid., 567.

⁹³ Ibid., 203.

⁹⁴ Zeki Sarıtoprak, "Inner Peace Leading to Outer Peace," *American Baptist Historical Society* 31, no. 3 (2012): 329.

⁹⁵ The idea in this expression "zevâl-i lezzet elem olduđu gibi, zevâl-i elem dahi lezzettir" originally belongs to Imam al-Ghazzali and Said Nursi used it in many of his epistles – *Risale-i Nur*.

but to the eternal Creator: “Do not pursue what is illusory – property and position; all that is gained at the expense of your nerves decade after decade and is confiscated in one fell night.”⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 592.

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