



**Your on the  
Street Reporter**



**Uyless Black**

**Gucci and the Gulag**

## Gucci and the Gulag<sup>1</sup> Report One

February 21, 2008

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter, reporting from Palm Springs, California, also known as Gucci Gulch. Recently I re-watched the film, *The Hunt for Red October*. Many years ago, Reporterette and I attended this movie with friends. We returned to their home to feast on Russian caviar and vodka, while we praised the movie and lambasted Communism.

For the next few decades, I did not think about this movie. But as I watched it the second time, I thought about the scene between the Soviet submarine commander (a noble Sean Connery) and the Communist Party agent (a sniveling no-gooder). This man was assigned to the boat to make sure the crew toed-the-line in practicing Bolshevik dogma. For the second go-around, I paid more attention to this part of the movie because I had recently read biographies on Stalin,<sup>2</sup> and had begun to re-read Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* (this time, an abridged edition of his three volume epic).<sup>3</sup>

During their conversation, it occurred to me the Red party member could have accused the sub commander of disloyalty to the Soviet Union for his practical retort of *I am in charge here*. (A military person, regardless of rank, had to kowtow to the resident Communist Party agent.) In addition, the Skipper asserted his wife's intimate thoughts, written inside the cover of one of the Skipper's books, were a private matter, and not a violation of Soviet law. To the Stalinists, the people's party had access to *anything* dealing with the people. That is to say, *other* people, but not themselves.

It occurred to me the agent's report to the Communist Party bureaucracy about the Red October captain could have consigned the sub commander to a Russian prison for ten to twenty years. He could have been stripped of his rank and his possessions---just for asserting he was in charge of his own boat and that private correspondence stowed in his stateroom was indeed private.

It came to mind that Solzhenitsyn was stripped of his rank in WWII as a decorated artillery captain, dispossessed of his belongings, then sent to a Gulag camp for eight years, followed by three more years of exile---all because he had been corresponding with a school friend who was, "...on the First Ukrainian Front."<sup>4</sup> Without appeal, without a scintilla of due process, Solzhenitsyn was declared an enemy of the Soviet State.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The photo on the cover of Stalin's face in the thought cloud is sourced from Montefiore, cited below; inserts between pages 366-367. Original source quoted by Montefiore is RIA Novosti.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Young Stalin* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), and *Stalin: Court of the Red Tsar* (New York: Random House, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Solzhenitsyn does not elaborate on the nature of this specific correspondence and accusation, See *The Gulag Archipelago* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 14.

<sup>5</sup> Some writers state Solzhenitsyn was imprisoned because of his private criticisms of Stalin. In this essay, I use his own explanation of his arrest. See *The Gulag Archipelago* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 14.

I've been thinking about this movie, the Stalin biographies, and the Gulag books during the past couple weeks. They came to mind as I read President Bush's assertion that Congress' failure to pass a Senate bill has placed the nation at greater risk. (The law would have extended a procedure making it easier for the government to monitor phone calls and emails passing through the United States.) I've also reflected on the miserable lot of the Soviet citizens during the reigns of Lenin and Stalin, and how so arbitrarily the Soviet government took away their liberties--- even their lives.

In spite of my current pleasant habitat in Palm Springs, I've been dwelling on the fate of people in the world today. Many are starving. Many are subject to the same brutalities the Soviet citizens were subjected to during the last century. During these ruminations, I've also dwelled on how bountiful our liberties are; on how the Bill of Rights has helped preserve these liberties; on how fitting and symbolic it is for our President and Congress to be fighting over our liberties and our security.

And during these reflections, I cannot help but be thankful I am in Palm Springs, California. A place so remotely different from the (past) Gulags and (present) Darfurs of the world that they are almost beyond comparison. But let's give it a go.

### **Gucci, Palm Springs, and Eating**

Palm Springs<sup>6</sup> is so affluent---so abundant in material wealth---that a driver can leave his Rolls Royce parked on a public street and not worry about someone stealing the hood ornament. Of course, most folks who can afford a Rolls will not opt to park on a public street, as their chauffeur will drop them off at the local Gucci store. Nonetheless, today I saw two Rolls Royces parked---unmolested---in downtown Palm Springs. Passers-by paid them no attention.

Palm Springs is teeming with restaurants, and we discovered several fine ones during our stay here. Eating is one of the greater pleasures in life. Therefore, a striking but logical aspect of repressive regimes is to deny this primal need and super-primal pleasure to their enemies. In this essay, we examine starvation in relation to the people caught in Stalin's Gulag---and satiation in relation to the Gucci Gulch.

I cannot shuck the miserable images Solzhenitsyn describes, or the needless wanton, immoral acts of Lenin and Stalin (encouraged by the misreading of human behavior by Marx and Engels). My body is in Gucci Heaven, but my mind is in a Soviet prison camp.

A few nights ago, I took Reporterette and her sisters to Mr. Parker's Restaurant in the Parker Hotel, located a few miles south east of downtown Palm Springs. Aside from the heavy subjects in this report, if you are in the area, don't miss the opportunity to walk through this hotel and take-in the restaurant. Both are funky and art-deco beyond belief. Once owned by Gene Autry, then later Merv Griffith, it was recently renovated by a famous renovation person. Figure 1 shows some décor at this hotel.

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<sup>6</sup> And especially surrounding suburbs.

**Figure 1. Scenes from Parker's.**



I was informed by one hotel person that many of the artifacts in the hotel were taken from Gene's and Merv's Inventory of Ugly Stuff. Another hotel person told me the present owners started from scratch. I decided not to pursue the matter further because I did not care if Gene or Merv had an interest in drugs, fuzzy chairs, or phony knight's armor. However, I was impressed with the Baby Ruth picture, a subject for another report. To other matters:

### **Abundance and Starvation**

At Mr. Parker's restaurant, we dined on Oysters on the half-shell, Caesar Salad, New Zealand Style lamb, prime beef, New England Halibut, Kansas City style ribs, as well as wines and cheeses from regions of Napa Valley and France.

I ate these delicacies, along with hot, freshly backed sourdough bread...during which (damn it!) I thought about Stalin's generosity to his falsely-accused slaves: "Bread is not issued in equal pieces, but thrown into a pile---go grab! Knock down your neighbors, and tear it out of their hands! The quantity of bread issued is such that one or two people have to die for each who survives."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Solzhenitsyn, p. 315.

The waiter at Mr. Parker's asked us about our water preferences, "Sparkling or still?" Who cares? Water is water. Well, not necessarily, as it might have bubbles in it, or to the Bolshevik enemies of the people, it might have other stuff: "...only one bowl of gruel was cooked a day, and they also gave out a ration of two cups of turbid salty water."<sup>8</sup> The definition of turbid includes words such as muddy, cloudy, opaque, dirty, murky, and thick. Its antonym is clear.

My imagined Clint Eastwood response to our waiter was "We prefer Perrier—sparkling, yet not turbid." That would have been too cool for my slow wit. I responded, "Still, please," assuming we would be given tap water. Nope--- too common for Mr. Parker's clientele. Out came *bottled* still water. No tap water here. It might be turbid.

I left this fine, highly-priced place and tried to walk-off the results of a one-hour intake of 2,000 calories. Try as I did, I could not shake the notion that Stalin's patrons subsisted on much less than half of that intake per day. Small wonder so many of them starved to death.

Truth is, I was in a funk while milling about in sunny, happy Palm Springs, California. Solution? Eat and drink! The following evening our party decamped at a fancy Japanese steak house---one of those places where ten people sit around a grill and watch the cook prepare the meal while he tells jokes. No complaints, we loved his barbs.

We awaited the arrival of our cook. In he came, a brown-skinned man, thus of suspicious origins, "Good evening, everyone. My name is Maha-Shen-Ra. But you can call me Chuck."

Smart move. Chuck was foreign-looking, but we Caucasian patrons accepted the adopted name of Chuck as being All-American. His moniker put us at ease. He was not going to poison our egg roll. Speaking of which, as we were eating our appetizers: first, soup; second, salad; third, grilled shrimp, Chuck began to prepare our fried rice. He rolled an egg down his spatula onto the grill, and then offered, "The origin of 'egg roll.' "

I was already full---my stomach stretched far beyond Stalin's Gulag specifications---yet the main course was yet to come. I was finished eating, but I had yet to eat.

I marveled at the abundance of my bounty and (damn it!) I kept thinking about the plight of Solzhenitsyn and his fellow Gulag convicts, "It was impossible to try to keep nourished on Gulag norms anyone who worked out in the bitter cold for thirteen or fourteen hours. And it was completely impossible once the basic ration had been plundered (by the camp keepers)."<sup>9</sup>

Back to Chuck and our fantastic meal. After polishing-off the fried rice, we moved to the main course. Mine was steak and (more) shrimp. But once served to me, I couldn't eat it. I was no longer hungry, "Doggy bag, please."

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<sup>8</sup> Solzhenitsyn, p. 223.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Damn it! Solzhenitsyn again. I thought about his description of an inmate rebellion at one of the Gulag camps. After years of abuse, deprivation, and torture, after prolonged periods of desperate *hunger*, the inmates staged a *hunger* strike. Yes, a hunger strike.<sup>10</sup>

This was a hunger strike called not by well-fed people with reserves of subcutaneous fat, but by gaunt, emaciated men, who had felt the whip of hunger daily for years on end, who had achieved with difficulty some sort of physical equilibrium, and who suffered acute distress if they were deprived of a single 100-gram ration. Even the goners starved with the rest, although a three-day fast might tip them into irreversible and fatal decline. The food, which we had refused, and which we had always thought so beggarly, was a mirage of plenty in the feverish dreams of famished men.

As Chuck flipped a huge chunk of butter onto the grill for our steaks, he offered, “The origin of the word, *butterfly*.” As he cut-up the orders for beef fillet, he asked, “What do you call a cow with no legs?” Answer, “Ground beef.”

We sat back in our chairs, sipping our wine while savoring Chuck’s jokes and food, marveling at his dexterity with a spatula and his rhythmic beats on the grill. What a guy! A Gene Krupa drummer, spouting Johnny Carson jokes, while serving-up heart attack heavens: Clank, clank, denk! Flip that meat! Clank, clank, wallop! Toss that scallop! Such fun!

Damn! I could not shuck Solzhenitsyn’s images of humans being treated as fodder; of Montefiore’s descriptions of Stalin’s depravity; of the sickness of the Bolsheviks. To assuage my funk, I ordered another glass of wine as I mulled-over what I had read a couple hours ago:<sup>11</sup>

You are reduced to a frazzle by intense envy and alarm lest somewhere behind your back are right now dividing up that bread which could be yours, that somewhere on the other side of the wall a tiny potato is being ladled out of the pot which could have ended up in your own bowl.

### **So What?**

I could go on---as does Solzhenitsyn---but these reports are designed to be a few pages in length. To conclude this report, it is reasonable to ask, so what? We know about the USSR. We know about Stalin. Why revisit the past? I suspect some of you will say, “Uyless, your comparisons are between a system, the Gulag, which existed over 50 years ago, to the present-day state of affairs in Palm Springs. They don’t correlate. That past is not pertinent to the present. Things have changed. The Gulag is gone. Stalin is dead. The Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall are history.”

Anon says the opposite, “The past *is* pertinent to the present.” And things have not changed all that much. They’ve just shifted their venues.

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<sup>10</sup> Solzhenitsyn, p. 397.

<sup>11</sup> Solzhenitsyn, p. 315.

The more I come to know about the Stalins of the world; the Hitlers, the Maos, the Saddams, and other perverse mandarins, the more I come to believe civilized societies have a moral obligation to eradicate them. But my wisdom comes in hindsight, which is the fundamental problem we “decent” humans face: Whom do we displace? Which regimes do we eliminate? Is there a sliding scale we use to decide to hold-back or launch America’s Armada?

And once launched, how do we replace a centuries-old milieu---festered with deeply-embedded religious dogma, hatred for women’s rights, animosity toward toleration, and abhorrence of change--with a republican democracy?

The answer to my quandary is, “I don’t know.” I am not wise enough to have the answers.

I suspect my hero Mark Twain would say that Darwin did not stop at the doorstep when we humans put on wing tips. Darwinism is still out there. I suspect Twain would observe that we humans might preach the goodness of a religion or greatness of a political creed till our tongues run dry. But in the end...in the final countdown...we will go with what gives us the best chance to survive.

I agree. But I also believe that in the end, democracy and republicanism will prevail. Why am I optimistic? Because I think this way of living offers our species more opportunities to survive and improve itself than do the alternatives.

Thanks for reading. I’ll return to more frivolous subjects in the next report. Hmm. No, I’m writing a second report about how Stalin died. If you believe in retribution, in poetic justice, I think you will like this second essay.

One more thought for this report: The Cold War was a good war, one we had to fight. If you have doubts, read about Solzhenitsyn’s Gulag and Montefiore’s Stalin.

## **Gucci and the Gulag Report Two**

**February 22, 2008**

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter, reporting from Palm Springs, California, a cornucopia of wealth---highlighted in this report by a breakfast at the Parker Hotel.

The chef took almost an hour to cook our waffles at the Parker Hotel Coffee Shop, but upon delivery, Holly and I understood why: My two waffles were stacked almost five inches high, sculptured to resemble a work of art. They were covered with fresh blueberries, strawberries, and unknown berries. I pushed piles of these delicacies off to the side of the dish in order to saturate my food with syrup. Mother Nature's natural sweeteners were not up to the task of irrigating the waffle's canals.

### **Damn! The Gulag Again**

Reporterette is an understanding mate and partner. She recognizes and accepts my inclinations toward *Foreign Affairs* and *International Relations* (the periodicals, of course), and often listens to my diatribes about world events. On this occasion...the fantastic breakfast at the Parker Hotel...I was still ruminating about Gucci Gulch and the Gulag.

As I chomped-down on my waffles, I asked Holly why the Gulag system and Stalin's programs became so vast? By the 1950s, their camps housed hundreds of thousands of inmates and spanned across the entire Soviet Union. Then, I recalled passages in the Gulag books: To a great extent, the number of arrests was based on a quota system. Yes, quota! The Communist prison apparatus operated on a "specific quota of arrests carried out by a stipulated time."<sup>12</sup> What were the reasons for an arrest? Almost anything: Irritating your neighbor, who reported you to the local Communist unit. Belief in a religion. Belief in Mendel's genetic theories. Praise of American democracy or technology.

How bizarre can a situation be? Rounding-up *productive* citizens to deprive them of a life because a jailor had to meet a quota? Orwell's *1984* is small potatoes when compared to Stalin's *1937*. Orwell's ruminations were a deadly dream. Stalin's practices were a deadly nightmare.

If one wants productivity, it's a good idea to keep the producers actually producing. Locking them up in a prison camp is somewhat counter-productive to productivity. Time and again, the Gulag slaves sabotaged projects designed to transform the Soviet Union into a Communist state.

Stalin was an ideologue. He was an intelligent, well-read man who believed fervently in Communism. He assumed entire classes of citizens had to be eliminated to move Russia forward to Communist Nirvana. His underlings came to understand they had to "perform" to meet his approval: Elimination of capitalistic Kulaks. Killing-off entrepreneurial peasants. Collectivization for the good of the Mother State. Lop off a head here. Cut off a breast there. Meet the quota. All for the good of a classless society.

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<sup>12</sup> Solzhenitsyn, p. 29.



A passage in the Gulag book came to mind while I was feasting on Mr. Parker's waffles. I didn't have it on the tip of my tongue because my tongue was engaged in transporting delicacies from mouth to stomach. Upon returning to my room, I looked-up the passage: Tanya Khodkevich wrote, "You can pray freely. But just so God alone can hear."<sup>13</sup> She was sentenced to ten years imprisonment for putting these thoughts on paper.

### **Poetic Justice**

To read about the terror of Stalinism is to enter a world of seemingly fictional tales of horrific deeds, a terrain of novelists' imaginations. But the deeds of this man and his regime are not fiction. Stalin was a Hannibal Lecter with credentials.

Fittingly, his sadism toward others rebounded. He ended-up suffering from the very affliction he had cast upon his innocent underlings: abject, helpless misery.

Anon advises: "Be careful of your practices, because what you practice on others might someday be practiced on you." Stalin fell prey to his own practices.

**Grovel in Your Own Gruel.** I'm also reminded of the old saying, "One reaps what one sows." For Joseph Stalin, the cliché surely rings true. On the evening of February 28, 1953, Stalin's guards became concerned the Boss had not emerged from his office/sleeping quarters. They discussed entering his rooms to check on their Tsar, but were afraid to do so:<sup>14</sup>

One, two, three, four hours passed but Stalin did not appear. Something was wrong. Colonel Starostin, the senior "attachment," tried to persuade (a fellow guard named Lozgachev) to go in to check on the old man. "I replied, 'You're senior, you go in!'" recalled Lozgachev.

"I'm afraid," said Starostin.

"What do you think I am? A hero?" retorted Lozgachev.

Imagine: The very men who were responsible for Stalin's well-being were so fearful of the man they would not check on his well-being.

Finally, around 10 PM, Lozgachev took the Central Committee mail into Stalin's quarters. There he found Joe lying on the floor, cold and semi-conscious. Other guards came in, but the security personnel would not call doctors!

Why not? Because Stalin and his staff were involved in the "Doctors' Plot," a scheme to purge Russia of a "...Jewish medical conspiracy to murder leaders... . This brought together Stalin's fears of ageing, doctors, and Jews." Stalin's bodyguards were afraid of Stalin's wrath if they called the "wrong" doctor, or for that matter if they called a "correct" doctor. Here's why:

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<sup>13</sup> Solzhenitsyn, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> Montefiore, *Stalin: Court of the Red Tsar*, p. 637.

Stalin had come to believe the U.S. had set up an intelligence network linked to the Zionists. He was so obsessed, he purged his personal doctor (Vinogradov) because the man suggested rest for the dictator. From this diagnosis, Stalin had his medical records destroyed and, “resolved to see no more doctors. Vinogradov was an enemy and sent to prison.”<sup>15</sup> You read correctly. Stalin’s doctor became a criminal because he issued a medical opinion whose intent was to help the patient.

As the yuppies would say today, “Joe was one sick puppy.” Yes, but in more ways than one. Again, imagine: the *personal* physician of Stalin became a victim of Joe’s orders on how to treat Jewish doctors.<sup>16</sup>

“Beat them until they confess! Beat, beat, and beat again. Put them in chains, grind them into powder!” Stalin offered Vinogradov his life if he admitted the “origins of your crimes... You may address your testimony to the Leader who promises to save your life.”

Eventually, on the evening of Joe’s stroke, word reached the Communist bigwigs of his illness. Persons such as Beria, Bulganin, Malenkov, and Khrushchev learned about his condition. Yet none of them entered Stalin’s quarters to check on him, as they (according to Khrushchev) did not want anyone to see Stalin “...in such an unseemly state. So we went home.”<sup>17</sup>

“We went home.”(!) In the meantime, their Boss lay on his sofa, semi-comatose and soaked in urine---without medical attention. Stalin slowly and painfully died, most likely from a stroke, then from choking to death. For many hours, not one single doctor was called-in to treat Stalin. Later, Stalin’s vermin took turns presiding over his death watch, while each of them jostled for power.

On the surface, the men closest to Stalin feared the man so much they let him die a painful, degrading death---all because they were afraid to intervene.<sup>18</sup> Or were they? Were they happily and secretly watching the perverse tyrant silently suffer for several days before he finally died? I think so, especially for Beria and those who had been targeted for “demotion.” Beria’s wife was at that moment locked-up in a near-by prison. Beria was next. Others, perhaps Khrushchev, may have liked the serpent and were grieved to see him go. But my reading is, aside from his daughter, son, and a couple of servants, the people who knew him were glad to see Joe dead.

What a fitting commentary about Stalin’s life. But then, what should we expect? He was personally responsible for the death of some 20 million people. In the end, he was the victim of his own ideological depravity. From the start, he misread history. From his youth, he became increasingly ruthless in practicing his misreadings.

Slowly, America learned about this man. It took a while: His pre-WWII pact with Hitler. His WWII Eastern European seizures. His post-WWII machinations of Communist parties in

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<sup>15</sup> Montefiore, *Stalin: Court of the Red Tsar*, p. 620.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 629-630.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 639.

<sup>18</sup> Eventually, non-Jewish doctors were brought in to administer to the patient.

Western Europe. The unfolding of his Gulag. Eventually, America came to understand it was locked into a battle for survival against...yep, an evil empire.

America won. In so doing, so did the world. We won because we as a people accepted the challenge. We drew together to defeat a sick philosophy and a pathological regime. We marshaled up the Marshall Plan, thus triggering the alignment of the Eastern and Western blocs and rescuing Europe.

### **What to do?**

I hope we Americans can keep the Cold War in mind as we transit the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I hope we can recall that much of the Cold War was won because of...not only guns...but billions of dollars of aid.<sup>19</sup> Not to mention a well-ordered propaganda machine. You have come to know my mantra. Today, we are waging three wars: Guns, Aid, and Ideas, which I nickname the three Bs: Bombs, Beans, and Bombast.

Anyway, in the end, America did not defeat Communism. Communism defeated Communism. And in the end, America will not defeat Militant Islamism. Militant Islamism will defeat Militant Islamism.

That said, it is vital we assist the Militant Islamics' defeat. We must accept we are engaged in three wars. We must remain committed to guns---accompanied with more beans and bombast. We might even have to...sacrifice!

And we must not abandon our Bill of Rights for expediency. But if absolutely necessary, any curtailments must be subject to sunset clauses.

As a final note, I'm coming to the view that we also need to establish an extensive debate in this country about the nature of our conflict with the bin Ladens of the world. Certainly, about their origins, but more about the potential consequences of their existence. From this debate, I hope America will "marshal up" another Marshall Plan, but one with broader strokes.

It's a noble idea and one in which I believe. But try as I do, here is where I am not optimistic. I am not sure we modern Americans are up to the task of making the sacrifices our WWII and Marshall Plan citizens made.<sup>20</sup> In regard to this issue, it appears: The left cares about beans. The right cares about guns. But most people don't care.

I thank you for sticking with me on this report. Some readers who sent me email took me to task for my "guilt" and "social consciousness" displayed in the first segment. In hindsight, I might have expressed myself more clearly, as I have no guilt whatsoever about former repressive regimes or America's affluence. My intent was to contrast two markedly different ways of approaching life, of approaching humanity.

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<sup>19</sup> Massive aid to Europe as part of the Marshall Plan, a subject for another report.

<sup>20</sup> Even after the rationings and sacrifices of WWII, during 1947-1948, Americans said they were willing to return to austere ways if such actions would restore a devastated Europe.

Anyway, in some circles, revisionists are attempting to “resurrect” Stalin and Hitler. In some places in Iraq, even Saddam. I suspect they are not on the distribution list for these reports. But if they are, my request is to ask them to learn more about the subject. It’s amazing what a bit of knowledge can do to change one’s views.