

Readers Group Guide to Forty Days at Kamas

1. Read the chapter entitled "The Forty Days of Kengir" in Volume III of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago, Volume III and compare the events in it to those in Forty Days at Kamas. Is the story of Kengir uniquely Russian or could it happen wherever such camps exist?
2. How did Paul Wagner's attitude toward rebellion develop over time and which of his experiences at the Kamas camp might account for the change?
3. Judging from their behaviors and comments, what attitudes and beliefs among the Corrective Labor Administration officials at Kamas appear to have driven them to treat the prisoners as they did?
4. Compare and contrast the characters of Glenn Reineke and Fred Rocco and the qualities that made each of them an effective leader during the Kamas revolt?
5. In what ways did Martha Chambers's feelings toward her husband Doug change after Claire Wagner's arrival in the Chambers household and to what do you attribute those changes?
6. What traits or values might be responsible for the division among Kamas political prisoners between rebels and loyalists? Do you detect any resemblance here to the division between rebels and loyalists during the American Revolution?
7. Why do you suppose Paul Wagner decided against selling his company and emigrating when he had the chance to do so? Would he have been justified in choosing his family's safety and wellbeing over his civic duty to remain and support democratic government?
8. What do you suppose impelled some prisoners to inform against their fellows or otherwise compromise their integrity under pressure from the camp bosses while others refused even under the threat of reprisal?
9. Upon arrival in Utah, Paul Wagner sought to repress memories of his family and former life in the interest of survival. Later, he sought to revive those memories. What was the effect of the revolt on his change of heart?

10. Early in the story, Glenn Reineke and other leaders of the political prisoners were focused on identifying and eliminating informants ("stool pigeons"). What made Col. Jack Whiting's ("The Wart") informant network so dangerous to the prisoners that they were prepared to murder their fellow prisoners to stop it?

11. What might account for the highly decorous, even chivalrous, relations between male and female prisoners at Kamas during the revolt? Why do you suppose those relations did not sink into debauchery as government officials expected?

12. Using Jack Whiting's prisoner interrogations as an example, why do you suppose totalitarian regimes are so determined to wring confessions of wrongdoing by political prisoners? If they appear to be willing to do whatever is necessary to extract such confessions, is it futile to resist? If not, why not?

13. What is your appraisal of the government officials who ran the Kamas camp and plotted to quell the revolt? Before the Unionist Party came to power, many of these men had served honorably in the U.S. military or in the intelligence and security services. Under a future American tyranny, do you think there would be any shortage of men like Rocco, Chambers, Whiting, Cronin and Hardesty to run the corrective labor camp system?

14. The story of Kamas was told through two different points of view: that of Claire Wagner and that of her father, Paul Wagner. In your view, how did the two differing perspectives contribute to your understanding of the events and characters in the book?

15. In your view, what legitimate public purpose might have been served by operating the Kamas camp? What circumstances, if any, might justify a government in sending political dissidents to serve extended terms under harsh conditions in remote and secret camps?

16. Recall Chapter 18 of Kamas, in which Al Gallucci delivers words of encouragement to his barracks mates after a particularly discouraging day. In what ways were Gallucci and other clear-minded prisoners able to find purpose and meaning in their lives at the Kamas camp?

17. How do you explain the apparent paradox that, under Unionist rule, the Kamas prisoners arguably had greater freedom of political expression in captivity than their supposedly free fellow citizens living outside the camps?

18. Wherein lies the power of the isolator cells at Kamas, or solitary confinement in general? Is solitary confinement likely to have the same effect upon someone with a clear conscience and a strong spiritual life as upon someone in the grip of guilt, fear or despair?

19. How would you explain the failure of the government's plan to neutralize rebel elements at Kamas by transferring large numbers of violent common criminals into the camp? Why do you suppose the Unionist regime tended to treat common criminals more favorably than political detainees throughout the penal system, as the Soviet regime did in the Gulag?

20. How would you describe Warden Rocco's reasons for releasing Wagner from Kamas after the revolt and how do they differ from his reasons for releasing Wagner into protective custody on the eve of the government assault?

21. What is your opinion of Wagner's actions when ordered at gunpoint to ride into camp with the government assault and help to identify rebel leaders?

22. Was Paul Wagner's escape from Kamas an honorable one? Can it be honorable to be saved by grace or good fortune when your best efforts come up short?

23. All things considered, do you consider the Kamas revolt to have been worthwhile or was it a terrible mistake?

24. The "Events" that led to the Unionist Party takeover are not spelled out in Forty Days at Kamas. What sort of events, whether natural or man-made, might be sufficient to open the door to a future American tyranny?

25. Did you find Forty Days at Kamas to be hopeful or pessimistic? Depressing or uplifting? Why?