

Solzhenitsyn and His Critics

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What can be said about Solzhenitsyn that has not already been said by the officers of the Soviet Writers' Union, authors of articles in *Commentary* magazine, Georg Lukacs, Rosalynn Carter? The literature about him has become enormous. It exists in myriad languages, so many that 30 different romanizations of his name have been counted in languages using the Latin alphabet alone, the result being librarians' nightmares, which are to be regretted, and computer absurdities, which may be less upsetting to those who prefer human beings to machines. Most studies seem to have focused on his belletristic works, their style, structure, plot, and characterization; or his ideas, religious, political, or other; and finally whether he is a Good Thing or a Bad Thing, with thus far a pretty fair edge to those who hold he is a Bad Thing. I shall attempt something slightly different: to place him in history—recognizing of course that he is still very much alive, talking and writing, and perhaps still developing and changing—and to assess how he is currently being treated by his critics in the West.

During the last two decades the post-Stalin thaw has produced two notable figures in the so-called dissident camp: Andrei Sakharov and Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Using the term "thaw," I disregard for the moment the successive lengthening and shortening of the icicles that remain on the Soviet intellectual scene not because I am unaware of them but because even with Sakharov exiled to Gorky that scene has not lost all its vitality and remains more active than, say, is the case with post-Mao China. As far as we know, twenty years ago both men were Marxist-Leninists, ready to criticize Stalin but retaining the basic Marxist-Leninist analysis and

commitments. In the ensuing two decades both men evolved in a way no one I know has yet studied; we must wait until someone is asking them questions who is more interested in how things come to be the way they are then, say, Walter Cronkite. Sakharov emerged as a Western-style liberal; Solzhenitsyn as an Eastern-Orthodox Christian.

I shall trace, first, the phases of Solzhenitsyn's life to date; second, the relation of his writing and thought to that of his predecessors; third, his message to the West and the response of his Western critics thereto.

The Phases of His Life

Solzhenitsyn's life thus far may be divided into three parts.

(1) 1918~1962: He was born in Kislovodsk, over a year after the October Revolution that brought the Bolsheviks to power. His father was killed in an accident six months before Alexander was born. At the age of six he was taken by his mother to Rostov-on-Don, where he attended school. He studied mathematics and physics at Rostov University, but also took a correspondence course in history, philosophy, and literature from the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences in Moscow. He was graduated in 1941 and taught mathematics for a few months in a secondary school near Rostov. In actuality he wished to go on to the stage as an actor but seems to have been prevented from doing so by respiratory problems. In October 1941, a few months after Hitler's invasion of the USSR, he was called up for military service. He was sent to the front in 1942 and was decorated twice in 1944. But in February 1945, his own division commander turned him over to SMERSH (army counterintelligence) for criticizing Stalin in private letters, though not by name—"the man with the mustache." He was taken to the most fearsome of Soviet prisons, Lubianka, forced to confess, and in July was sentenced to 8 years' forced labor plus 3 years' exile. The first part of his sentence was spent in and near Moscow; he worked in a *sharashka*, the kind of establishment described in *The First*

Circle. In 1950 he was sent to a camp near Karaganda, the background of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Here he developed cancer; in the summer of 1952 he was operated on, an experience reflected in *The Cancer Ward*. In early 1953, shortly before Stalin died, he completed his labor sentence and was sent to the area near Lake Balkhash where he spent his 3 years of exile, teaching mathematics and reporting to the police twice a week. In the autumn of 1953 the cancer recurred but was checked by X-ray treatment. In 1956 his sentence came to an end and he was released.

He returned to European Russia, living for a time in Vladimir province and then in the city of Riazan. He wrote "Matryona's Home," a short story some believe to constitute his very best work; he then completed *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. It was submitted to Tvardovsky, editor of *Novyi Mir* (*The New World*), as close to being an unorthodox journal as legal Soviet literature then boasted. We have the account of how Tvardovsky found the manuscript. It was in a stack of submissions that he had piled by his bedside, as was his habit, to read in bed. When he got a few pages into it, he became so excited that he got out of bed and got fully dressed to sit down at a desk to continue to the end, feeling that the quality of the manuscript demanded such respectful conduct on his part. *One Day* was published after Khrushchev himself had approved. It was 1962; Solzhenitsyn became a celebrity overnight.

(2) 1962~1974: For that period he was an important public figure in the USSR. At the outset he was lionized. A play of his was scheduled for production; in January 1963 *Novyi Mir* published "Matryona's Home" and another of his stories. Publication of other stories followed. In October 1964 Khrushchev fell from power; for more than a year Solzhenitsyn had encountered bans and attacks, but as long as he was able, Khrushchev protected him from anything worse. Then in September 1965 the two dissidents, Siniavsky and Daniel, were arrested, and the atmosphere was changing. In January 1966 a short story of his, "Zakhar-Kalita," was published again in *Novyi Mir*; it was the last work of his to appear in

the USSR. Alexander Isaevich now attempted to publish his novel *The Cancer Ward*. Tvardovsky referred the manuscript to the Prose Section of the Soviet Writers' Union. After discussion, the Section recommended publication, but in vain. It was published instead in the West; there followed *The First Circle*, August 1974, and *The Gulag Archipelago*. He also wrote and sent open letters to the "Soviet leaders" and to Patriarch Pimen of the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1970 he was awarded the Nobel Prize. He became a world figure, too famous to kill or jail, too dangerous to leave at liberty. The publication of *Gulag* is thought to have forced the issue for the Politburo. Solzhenitsyn was forcibly placed on a plane and sent abroad; he did not even know where until he saw the signs at the Frankfurt airport. It was February 13, 1974.

(3) 1974 to date: After spending some time in Europe, he went to the U.S., and has since become the recluse of the Cavendish compound in Vermont. Though denied official reception in Gerald Ford's White House (it was rumored that there was a secret agreement not to notice his arrival officially if he were not harmed), he was honored in various ways. He became an honorary citizen of the U.S., along with Winston Churchill; he was made an Honorary Fellow of the Hoover Institution, along with Ronald Reagan.

The Relation of His Thought to That of His Predecessors

It is easiest to begin with literature. He has been compared with the two greatest Russian prose writers, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky; he is basically unlike Tolstoy and like Dostoevsky, though qualifications and reservations must be made. *August 1914* is a sort of anti-*War and Peace*, a novel (or part of one) built on the same model but with a quite different message. In both cases the theme is a war crucial to Russian history in which the central character is a bystander to decisive events, a war which is the last big one before the maturity of the author, not the war he himself fought

in (the latter being the Crimean War for Tolstoy, World War II for Solzhenitsyn). The twentieth-century author is indebted to the nineteenth-century one for aspects of style and composition, but not for his thought. Tolstoy was a nihilist in the sense that he rejected categorically all government, art, history, culture, the church, property, and even science (which other nihilists of the 60's made virtually into their religion); Solzhenitsyn affirms, with qualifications, the value of institutions, historical traditions, the church, and God. In contrast, he is like Dostoevsky in important ways, though once he called his predecessor hysterical and said they were quite different in temperament, as is doubtless true. But the way in which religion forms a basis for a view of life is similar in the two cases; despite differences, Nerzhin, the Christ-like figure of *The First Circle*, has important features in common with Alyosha Karamazov; Stalin as depicted by Solzhenitsyn and Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor have resemblances, since both want to suffer for the sake of humanity and represent a debasement of an originally higher doctrine. Thus Solzhenitsyn has literary connections with both earlier writers, connections in thought with Dostoevsky, but his antecedents are broader and deeper than any one figure. We may find a key to Solzhenitsyn's ideas in a passage from *August 1914* (published in 1972), singled out for attack by several Soviet critics; speaking of "Sanya Lazhenitsyn," a character whose name is clearly intended to suggest Alexander's own father but most likely a paternity that is ideological rather than physiological, the author writes:

He regarded himself as a Tolstoyan. But then he was given Lavrov and Mikhailovsky to read and—how true they seemed to be. Then he read Plekhanov, and there was the truth again—and so beautifully consistent. Kropotkin also went straight to his heart and was no less true. But when he came to read *Vekhi* he shuddered—it was the complete reverse of all he had read before yet true, piercingly true!

The Soviet attackers are right; Solzhenitsyn is not a Tolstoyan but a

vek'lovets, that is, a writer inspired by the collection of essays called *Vekhi* (*Signposts*, 1909), in which several leading Russian intellectuals, most of whom had been Marxists earlier, had repudiated their earlier radicalism and called for a renewed attachment to the national and religious values of the Russian past, at the same time as they affirmed the continuing cultural link with the West. Thus they belong to the category I have called syncretist, that is, a person who admires certain aspects of the West and yet is proud of aspects of his own (non-Western) heritage.

Solzhenitsyn is a spokesman today for a renewed Russian national consciousness, but on the basis of something deeper—his recovery of Orthodox Christian commitment. In his Nobel lecture, he declared his total disagreement with an age that believes "there are no stable and universal concepts of justice and good, that all values are fluid...." In an essay in a symposium edited by John Dunlop and others, Father Alexander Schmemmann writes that Solzhenitsyn is a Christian writer, not in the sense that he writes about religious problems, but because he has a pervasive "although possibly unconscious perception of the world, man, and life" in Christian terms, terms Schmemmann has used to summarize the Bible in five words: man is created, fallen, redeemed. The theme of creation, the view that it is good, despite the evil in the world, may be illustrated by the moment when Kostoglotov is released from the cancer ward: "The world was being created anew for this alone, to be given back to Oleg: Go! Live!" and he walks out in the "early-springtime, early-morning joy that floods the old and the sick...." As for the Fall, evil is of course to be found everywhere and in all men, and yet evil actions are the result of choice, free will, even the most senseless and appalling ones. Kostoglotov visits a zoo, and is haunted by a sign he meets that explains that a monkey has been blinded. The very last words of *The Cancer Ward* are: "an evil man threw tobacco in the rhesus monkey's eyes. Just like that...." Finally, redemption is the message. Every man can be regenerated, no straightening of what is crooked is impossible; therefore Solzhenitsyn asks much of

people though only what he thinks they could do. He asks of Soviet leaders that they give up not their power but their Marxism; he adjures Soviet intellectuals not to attack the regime but simply not to tell lies; and so forth.

Alexander Isaevich comes out of an ancient Christian heritage, one almost a thousand years old in Russia, one almost exclusively religious and based on Eastern Orthodoxy without benefit of Byzantine literary and philosophical articulateness and therefore out of what Father Georges Florovsky calls a "silent" culture. Lost, or nearly so, for a couple of centuries, this heritage was the object of efforts to restore it by the Slavophiles, Dostoevsky, and others in the mid-nineteenth century, Vladimir Soloviev toward the end of it, the gifted cultural innovators of the so-called Silver Age at the beginning of the twentieth century, the symposium *Vekhi* already discussed. The message is: recover religious insights, support the values of justice and the good, renounce the demonic endeavor to "reshape life" (as Boris Pasternak, repudiating the notion, formulated the aim of Marxist-Leninists).

Solzhenitsyn's Message to the West and the Response

After a few months in the West he undertook to speak to it in several memorable utterances. He addressed his Western neighbors from an experience in four worlds, overlapping, distinct, opposed and not opposed: Communist, Soviet, Russian, and, most fundamentally, Christian (in particular Orthodox Christian). He made four speeches—two to the AFL-CIO in 1975, in the same year one to the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives, in 1978 at the Harvard commencement, which led to a nationwide discussion and brought Rosalynn Carter to advise Solzhenitsyn not to be so negative and to think positively, perhaps on the basis of observing Boy Scouts helping old ladies cross the street. In those speeches it is a mistake to look for the usual conservative themes from this man sometimes called a conservative. Before the AFL-CIO he congratulated the

free labor of America for its long-time perception of the evils of the Soviet system and indicted business for collaborating with the USSR ever since Armand Hammer (mentioned by name) developed cozy relations with Lenin. He pointed out that in the 80 years before the revolution in Russia, on the average slightly over 1 person per month was executed; at the height of Stalin's rule, 40,000 per month were executed. The U.S., he declared, did much to strengthen this regime. Invoking the Russian proverb, "The yes-man is your enemy, but your friends will argue with you," he professed friendship and said that because he was a friend he was pointing out unpleasant facts. But, he continued, the U.S. was the least guilty, had done the most to prevent the spread of Communism, and had been the most generous nation on earth; its reward was for the Third World to spit in its face.

At Harvard, again he spoke as a friend, but said he would concentrate on the weaknesses of the West. He mentioned three as the chief ones: (1) the loss of civic courage, especially among the "ruling and intellectual elites," (2) the welfare state, in which material goods lead to such loss of courage, (3) legalistic life: no one asks whether law is enough or whether the good is being served. Freedom reaches a destructive and irresponsible extent; decadence, pornography, "TV stupor and intolerable music" mark the "spiritual exhaustion" of the West. He traces such phenomena to the notion that man is the center of all things, a notion born in the Renaissance and given political expression in the Enlightenment. (It is not true to say, as a commentator did immediately after the talk, that he is fond of the Middle Ages; indeed, he termed them the "intolerable despotic repression of man's physical nature in favor of the spiritual one," which is certainly not an expression of fondness—whether it is an adequate description of the Middle Ages is another matter.)

At root, the Harvard speech was a religious speech. Solzhenitsyn's intended audience was probably not Harvard graduates, or American religious leaders (with many of whom he has little in common), but those

of the American people who are religious or come from a religious heritage of which they conserve some part. It is clear that he locates the basic weakness of our civilization in the spiritual area and finds hopeful elements in the spiritual life of the Soviet peoples, that he sees religion as the basic element in the entire human equation. Richard Pipes, in a retort to the Harvard address published in *Encounter* magazine, undertook to summarize Solzhenitsyn's "principal points" that are generally thought conservative, but Pipes does not once mention religion or Christianity; that is a feat, in the context in question. Solzhenitsyn is to be understood as fundamentally a religious prophet, who has written more than Jeremiah and the other Old Testament prophets but is probably as much of a nuisance to his contemporaries and no more fun to have around the house than Jeremiah was. No wonder the mass media of the U.S. do not know what to do with him, or he with them, so that today they simply ignore him, as the Soviet leaders probably and wisely expected when they sent him into exile.

In 1980 there was an interesting series of exchanges triggered by an article of Solzhenitsyn's in *Foreign Affairs*, in which several people criticized him and he replied. It might be well to single out a few particular points here for comment.

(1) The writer assumed the American system desires criticism and even appreciates it, but after the Harvard address that belief was shaken. There were no mistaking the cries of "mind your own business," "shut up," or even, "get out." He wished, he said, to share in words the experience of living under Communism; but it might be easiest simply to wait until others have the experience themselves. On this point his reply is telling.

(2) He quoted a certain Professor Kurganov, who wrote an article in 1964 declaring that the casualties of Stalin's rule were 60 million. Professor Alexander Dallin of Stanford University, without wishing to deny or minimize casualties, questioned this figure. Dallin is on sound ground in doing so.

(3) A former deputy minister in the Czechoslovak government, Eugen

Loebl, declared that in 1900 Russia was the "ally of all oppressive governments"—but Solzhenitsyn pointed out that Russia had only one ally, republican France, one of the least oppressive governments in the world. He is right, and the matter concerns fact, not opinion.

(4) Professor Robert C. Tucker of Princeton University quoted Nicholas Berdyaev to the effect that Russian Communism was Russian in its "fierce, utterly intolerant insistence on orthodoxy." Solzhenitsyn here makes fun of such assertions by quoting Berdyaev against himself, since he flip-flopped ideologically several times, and amuses himself by quoting "fierce, utterly intolerant" passages from Marx and Engels: for example, "there is only one way of shortening, simplifying, and concentrating the bloodthirsty death throes of the old society and the bloody birth pangs of the new—revolutionary terror." He doubts that the excesses of Tsarism tell us much about the USSR today—as he questions whether the early story of hard labor in New Caledonia tells us much about the Fifth French Republic or slavery in the U.S. before the 1860's reveals a lot about the U.S. in the 1980's. The point is that oppression is no monopoly of Russians. Here Solzhenitsyn comes out far ahead.

(5) Does Communism "serve as an instrument for the advancement of national...interests"? Dallin says yes, Solzhenitsyn says no—not in Estonia or Poland or Mongolia. They are good and persuasive examples. He adds, or anywhere else. That might take longer to show.

Alexander Isaevich finds it frustrating to talk to American academics, and closes his reply to his critics not with arguments but with a prophecy: "we are on the threshold of events which will themselves irrefutably convince the West of its own miscalculations." He may be right. Discussion, however, is scarcely invited by such forecasts.

The experience of Solzhenitsyn has been grim and the experiences of others that his writing has reflected are devastatingly horrible. His reaction, however, has not been merely negative; he has refused to be crippled or stifled, intellectually or spiritually. On this point I close with a quotation

from a seemingly unlikely source, the Dalai Lama of Tibet, who was not long ago interviewed by the *New York Times*. He expressed gratitude to the Chinese, who had plundered his country and tried to exterminate the Buddhist religion of which he is the chief figure. Why did he do that? Because "the enemy is very important. The enemy teaches you inner strength. Your mind by nature is very soft, but when you have troubles, your mind gets strong." That is what Solzhenitsyn believes, and he calls others to recognize the truth of that belief.