

THE CONSERVATIVE DISSIDENT: THE EVOLUTION OF ALEXANDER SOLZHENITSYN'S POLITICAL VIEWS

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On December 14, 2008, in the Manezh building just outside the Kremlin, an exhibit dedicated to Alexander Solzhenitsyn's life was hosting its last visitors. The writer's widow Natalia led one of her grandsons around and narrated for him the films and photographs of his famous grandfather. Usually latecomers flock to exhibits the day before they close, but the Manezh was eerily empty that Sunday, demonstrating what a controversial legacy Solzhenitsyn had left in his own country. Having fought against the Soviet regime, he returned to Russia in 1994, but his views soon made him unpopular with his own countrymen. Socrates once described himself as the "gadfly" of Athens because he questioned popularly-held assumptions relentlessly in pursuit of a higher wisdom. While Solzhenitsyn avoided the ultimate fate of his ancient predecessor, his criticism of Soviet, Western, and post-Soviet Russian society also made him an outcast. His transcendence of the Cold War trope that pitted the "good" West against the "evil" East is perhaps the most provocative aspect of his thinking. Solzhenitsyn played the double role of a dissident in the Soviet Union and a critic of Western materialism, which made him equally unpopular with the Soviet government and the Western liberal media. The socio-economic experimentalism of Russia's post-Soviet governments appalled Solzhenitsyn, as did the rampant materialism that the new democratic culture cultivated in the 1990s.

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Solzhenitsyn's thinking coevolved with his moral conviction, which took place in seven overlapping stages, but originated in his family history that intertwined with the revolutions of 1917. The first stage witnessed Solzhenitsyn's confusion about his background and place in Soviet society as he struggled with his communist sympathies. His experiences during the Great Patriotic War formed the second stage of his evolution by undermining his commitment to Soviet ideology. His arrest became the last blow against youthful illusions. The camps and exile constituted the third stage that made him a staunch anti-Communist. His experiences convinced him of the value of individual freedom, but also ignited his spiritual search, which directed him away from individualism towards Christian humanism. The fourth stage witnessed the climax of his popularity in the Soviet Union as *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* became the symbol and high point of Khrushchev's thaw. The rollback of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization reforms introduced the fifth stage, during which state persecution forced Solzhenitsyn to oppose the Soviet authorities uncompromisingly and imparted to his works and conduct the aura of an unrelenting moral crusade. His exile from the Soviet Union (the sixth stage) witnessed the development of his definition of individuality in opposition to materialistic and legalistic individualism. He crystallized his opposition to all forms of ideology, communist as well as liberal, because of its neglect of the individual. Although his anti-communism made him a favorite with American and British conservatives, his definition of conservatism had no economic components, but emphasized instead personal spiritual development within the Christian tradition. He also developed a strong Russian patriotism abroad, which he opposed to Soviet communism. The final (seventh) stage closed out his life as he returned to Russia after the Soviet collapse and became an ardent critic of post-Soviet reforms as well as the lost voice of spiritual revival.

Although many Russians accused Solzhenitsyn of becoming an ideologist and a nationalist and believed that his ideas had lost their value after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a closer reading of his works demonstrates the shortsightedness of such judgments. To his last days, Solzhenitsyn remained a defender not only of democratic freedoms, but also of the obligations that

they entailed. He believed that no government could grant democracy from above, but that people had to earn self-government through spiritual improvement and personal effort. This uncompromising emphasis on individual responsibility –versus rights– made Solzhenitsyn’s views inaccessible to those who expected that Russia’s democratic transition would resemble a market transaction.

Stage One: Family Roots and Early Beliefs

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 shaped the fate of Solzhenitsyn’s family and laid the foundation for his outsider status from the beginning. This also formed the leitmotifs of his literary works, which are autobiographical. His father’s experiences formed the center of *Love the Revolution* and part of *The Red Wheel*. The poem *The Trail* is also about his parents, as is the autobiographical *The Little Grain*.

His father Isaac was an officer in the tsarist army, but died in June 1918 in a hunting accident six months before Alexander Solzhenitsyn was born on December 11, 1918. Isaac’s background as a Tsarist officer became a risk during the civil war, so his widow Taisia threw away all of his pictures, except for the student ones, and buried his medals. In 1927, Taisia enrolled Alexander in an elementary school in the southern Russian city of Rostov, but continued to take her son to church, for which his peers derided him. Her father fit the definition of a kulak and was arrested in 1930, which Alexander witnessed. Solzhenitsyn modeled Oleg Rozhdestvensky’s confusion in *The First Circle* on his own tangled loyalties. In the search for himself, he hatched the idea of writing a major work about the revolution (*The Red Wheel*) after he read Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* in 1936. The same year, he entered Rostov State University’s Department of Mathematics and Physics, joined the Communist Youth Organization, the Komsomol, and would remain a convinced Marxist until his arrest in February 1945.

As most of the Soviet youth in the 1930s, Solzhenitsyn came under the influence of romantic revolutionism, which glorified the Soviet experiment.

He arrived in Moscow to take the entrance exams to the Moscow Institute of Philosophy, Literature, and History on June 22, 1941 and heard Molotov's speech over the radio that day announcing the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. In *Love the Revolution*, Solzhenitsyn described through Gleb Nerzhin how happy the youth were about their chance to contribute to the revolutionary cause. Having missed the events of 1917 and the civil war, many Soviet students became eager to lay down their lives for the world revolution in 1941. The war would also allow the youth to wash away the shame of the 1930s –the searches, arrests, and interrogations– that had become routine and noticeable.

Stage Two: Disillusion and Arrest

Solzhenitsyn was drafted in October 1941 and brought with him a copy of Friedrich Engels to the front for which, however, he found neither time, nor application. By late 1943, his artillery battalion began to follow the Red Army as it pushed west. Military service exposed him to many social groups and ethnicities that made up the Soviet population and forced Solzhenitsyn to reconsider many of his prejudices as well as idealizations. He feverishly wrote down his impressions in copious notebooks. Of the thirty-two officers in his battalion, thirty were communists, except for a photographer and himself. By 1943, however, he no longer associated the Komsomol and the Party with Marx, Engels, and Lenin, but rather with the NKVD and SMERSH (counter-intelligence), members of which repeatedly asked him why he had not joined the Party during their regular visits to his battalion.

In 1943, Solzhenitsyn and his friend Koka Vitkevich struck up a correspondence reinforced by personal meetings in which they debated the “war after the war.” Ignoring the military censorship, they criticized the conduct of the war as well as Lenin and Stalin personally whose names they barely masked as “Vovka” (the diminutive of Vladimir) and “Pakhan” (a slang term for kingpin). By January 3, 1944, Vitkevich and Solzhenitsyn had articulated the “Resolution No. 1,” which would become the prosecution’s

main incriminating piece of evidence. The friends copied this document and carried it with them at all times. The resolution predicted that the war would only reinforce the competition between capitalism and socialism, which the Soviet state would attempt to win by mobilizing still greater sections of the population thereby precipitating a further decline in the standard of living. The state would monopolize historical narrative and explain the war from the perspective of its leaders' speeches and non-classified decrees. The party would force literature to articulate a cult of leadership and embrace "pseudo-patriotic rhetoric and political self-quiescence." The resolution therefore proposed to deal "a blow against the post-war reactionary ideological superstructure." The friends also made it their goal to identify sympathizers and create an organization of "active socialist builders." Indeed, both remained convinced communists who aimed to reverse the corruption of the revolutionary ideals (Saraskina, 2008:244). Moreover, they were not the only ones who anticipated the resumption of terror after the war. Dmitrii Shostakovich's similar fears manifested themselves in the tragic and solemn mood of his eighth (1943) and ninth (1945) symphonies despite the state's emphasis on "'optimistic' celebration rather than 'pessimistic' tragedy" (Wilson, 1994:174).

In March 1944, Solzhenitsyn sent Vitkevich a very long letter promising that seven people would support their "Resolution." The thick envelope caught the sensors' eye and SMERSH began to monitor the correspondence, while SMERSH officers began to interview Solzhenitsyn's fellow soldiers.

SMERSH arrested Solzhenitsyn on February 9, 1945 in East Prussia where his father had served during the Great War. Solzhenitsyn described his personal experiences in Lubianka –the central Soviet political prison– through Innokentii Volodin in *The First Circle*. Interrogations started in late February 1945 with the obligatory sleepless nights, bright lights, the box, and total isolation from other human beings. On the day of Stalin's general amnesty on July 7, 1945 –which did not extend to political criminals, although rapists, thieves, and deserters were set free– a Special Council sentenced Solzhenitsyn to eight years of labor camps and permanent exile for anti-Soviet agitation aggravated by an attempt to create an organization. From

this moment, as he admitted years later, his real education began as he joined thousands of other victims of the infamous “political” Article 58 of the Criminal Code.

As Joseph Pearce wrote, “Solzhenitsyn’s military career had begun as farce and ended in tragedy. Yet the tragic end was really only the beginning. It was the crucifixion preceding the resurrection, labour [sic] pains preceding birth. The arrest was the real beginning of the Passion Play of Solzhenitsyn’s life, in which the pride and selfishness of his former self were stripped away like unwanted garments” (Pearce, 1999:70).

Stage Three: Camps and Exile

Solzhenitsyn’s eight-year camp experience opened his eyes to the reality of the Soviet Union’s economic foundation, of which prison labor made up a third. As a prisoner, he constructed housing for employees of the Interior (MVD) and Security (MGB) ministries; worked in secret labs that translated trophy documents from German in the search for technological innovations; and worked on developing a secure telephone line, which NKVD chief Lavrentii Beria had ordered after the war. The conditions in the research facilities were relatively humane and success promised early release and employment in prominent research institutions. Solzhenitsyn’s work left him sufficient free time to start writing, but this calm would not last. His colleague and friend Lev Kopelev was ordered to identify the voice of a caller to the US embassy tipping the Americans off about a leak of nuclear development information from the US. Once Solzhenitsyn realized that his research became beneficial to the Soviet state, he refused to cooperate. In 1950, the authorities transferred him to Ekibastuz, a special camp in northern Kazakhstan, where in August of the previous year the Soviets had successfully tested their first atomic weapon. The camp contained five thousand prisoners whose purpose was to mine the rich coal reserves. Ekibastuz offered none of the amenities of the “research camps.” Paper was scarce and writing dangerous.

His experiences in Ekibastuz formed the basis of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Solzhenitsyn's letters from Ekibastuz to his first wife Natalia Reshetovskaia demonstrated a changed man. He began soul-searching and the first religious overtones appeared in his correspondence, which he achieved by experiencing the total alienation that the camps enforced. He developed a motto: "Do not believe, do not fear, do not ask," which reflected the general principal of camp life for those who attempted to maintain their dignity. Along with Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* (1957), Solzhenitsyn's *One Day* has become one of the best known descriptions of camp life with its basic worldview – defensive indifference – which mirrored Levi's description of *Häftlinge* wisdom as "not trying to understand" (Levi, 1996:116). This experience, however, taught him what it meant to love one's neighbor, in Christ's sense, and to share spiritual intimacy. "It was precisely in slavery," he wrote in *The Gulag Archipelago*, "that we first learned what true friendship was" (in Scammell, 1984:302).

Solzhenitsyn's term ended in February 1953 after which his exile from the European part of Russia began. He began to teach mathematics in a local school in southern Kazakhstan when in April 1956, two months after Nikita Khrushchev delivered his famous "Cult of Personality" speech at the Twentieth Party Congress, political exiles received an amnesty.

Stage Four: Khrushchev's Thaw and the Conservative Restoration

In 1956, Solzhenitsyn returned to European Russia having survived the camps, cancer, and exile. From this moment, he dedicated every minute of his time to writing. In the town of Riazan, Solzhenitsyn found a job as a teacher and a home with a garden where he began his underground work. He never allowed anyone to see him writing and cleared all papers off his table after working. Having learned his lesson in 1945, he never referred to his work in his correspondence except with the code phrase "rereading Dante," which signified work on *The First Circle*. Reunited with his wife, Solzhenitsyn avoided making friends and discouraged visits to his home. His self-imposed exile ensured his literary productivity.

Khrushchev's thaw initiated change in the Soviet literary world. At the Twenty-second Party Congress in 1961, Khrushchev mounted a new attack on Stalinism, while Alexander Tvardovsky, the new editor-in-chief of *Novyi mir* (*New World*), one of the most respected and popular literary journals, called for literature to contribute further to the de-Stalinization of society. Following the debates in the press, Solzhenitsyn wrote, "I couldn't remember when I had read anything as interesting as the speeches at the Twenty-second Congress" (Taubman, 2003:525). He submitted *One Day* to Tvardovsky and the manuscript eventually reached Khrushchev who circulated it among members of the Politburo. "I think that this is a life-affirming piece," Nikita Sergeevich said to Tvardovsky. "And it is written, I believe, from the Party's position" (Saraskina, 2008:494). The journal gave Solzhenitsyn the go-ahead to make corrections, which he did while listening to the news about the Cuban Missile Crisis.

On the day that the November 1962 issue of *Novyi mir* went out to subscribers and appeared in stores, it sold 100,000 copies. Cultural critic Sergei Volkov wrote, "I was eighteen then, and I remember the general shock caused by *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, both because it had been published at all and for its enormous artistic power. Its first readers encountered narrative mastery, amazing in a literary debut: without melodrama or stress, with deliberate restraint it told the story of just 'one day,' and far from the worst, in the life of one of the millions of Soviet prisoners, the peasant Ivan Shukhov, depicted through his peasant perceptions, his colorful but natural language, which elicited associations with Tolstoy's prose. This publication created in the intelligentsia a sense of unprecedented euphoria, which lasted, alas, just over a week" (Volkov, 2008:205).

The story's appearance was a bittersweet victory, however, as it marked the climax of Khrushchev's thaw. *Matrena's Home* was the next in line for publication in *Novyi mir*. Lenfilm studios asked for the rights to Solzhenitsyn's short story *Krechetovka*. Someone from Novosti press agency (APN) called to ask his opinion about the Missile Crisis. Dmitri Shostakovich wrote to Solzhenitsyn that he was planning to write an opera based on *Matrena's Home*.

The thaw began to founder, however, with Khrushchev's visit to the Manezh art exhibit on December 1, 1962 at which he flew into a rage and

condemned expressionism. Fearing a further backlash, Solzhenitsyn agreed to publish part of *Krechetovka* in *Pravda* in December 1962 as a personal safety policy. The contradictions of Khrushchev's thaw were becoming apparent. For example, the new *History of the CPSU* volume did not recognize Stalinism as an aberration and in March 1963, Khrushchev sounded the retreat himself when he announced that the Party was beginning to cleanse itself of excessive liberalism. Soon thereafter, the Soviet press found *Matrena's Home* excessively pessimistic and uninspiring.

Still, in 1963 *One Day* was one of the nineteen nominations for the prestigious Lenin Prize. Made up of members of the Soviet intelligentsia, however, the Committee of judges voted against Solzhenitsyn in April 1964. Later in his life, he wrote that the vote was a rehearsal for the coup against Khrushchev. Indeed, *One Day* became the symbol of the thaw through which Leonid Brezhnev's supporters targeted Khrushchev himself. By the fall of 1964, rumors spread that Solzhenitsyn had served in the Gestapo, that his real name was Solzhenitzer, and that he was Jewish. When Khrushchev fell on October 14, 1964, Solzhenitsyn expected to follow. Some of his friends to whom he had entrusted manuscripts burned them, expecting police searches. Solzhenitsyn decided to lie low and began work on the *Gulag Archipelago*.

Brezhnev's regime began to roll back Khrushchev's de-Stalinization policies and arresting dissident writers, such as Yuri Daniel and Andrei Siniavsky. However, Solzhenitsyn remained untouched because, as Michael Scammell has argued, the former First Secretary had raised him to eminence and he "retained a vestigial respectability as the member of the 'loyal opposition'" deriving "the benefit of the doubt even in the face of overwhelming evidence of his political unreliability" (Scammell, 1995:xxv). However, in 1966 the KGB seized his manuscripts from two of his friends and began informing the Central Committee about the damage that Solzhenitsyn's works could do to the Soviet Union's reputation abroad. Openly joining the ranks of the opposition, Solzhenitsyn refused to meet with Jean-Paul Sartre who had lobbied for Mikhail Sholokhov to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature.

By March 1967, Solzhenitsyn had completed the main draft of the *Gulag Archipelago* for which he gathered 227 personal accounts of arrests, interrogations, and camp life. He also wrote a letter to the Fourth Congress of Soviet Writers wherein he criticized the use of terms such as “anti-Soviet” and “ideologically malignant” in reference to literary works and condemned the arbitrariness of the Soviet state’s involvement in the literary process. He called for the rehabilitation of Boris Pasternak, Sergei Yesenin, Anna Akhmatova, Mikhail Bulgakov, Marina Tsvetaeva, Osip Mandelstam, and others. He demanded the end of censorship and argued that socialist realism had lost touch with reality. He also accused the Union of Writers of failing to defend its members from state persecution. The plenary session never heard the letter, but *Le Monde* published it on May 31, 1967 and from then on, the Western press began to pay attention to Solzhenitsyn.

In 1969, the Union of Writers of the Russian Federation expelled Solzhenitsyn without a hearing, which forced him to write an angry and courageous rebuttal. “What would you do without ‘enemies?’” he addressed his former colleagues. “Your very survival would not be possible without them, since you have chosen for your barren atmosphere –hate, a genuine hate that yields nothing to racism.” Solzhenitsyn also reminded the Union members that their “first allegiance lies to the human race” whose dignity only the freedom of thought and speech can preserve. “Glasnost, forthright and total glasnost –this is the first condition of the health of any society, including our own,” he concluded anticipating Mikhail Gorbachev’s sentiments by almost thirty years (Solzhenitsyn, “Open Letter”, 2006:510-511). Without consulting his friends and supporters, he sent the letter out to multiple members of the Union, which enraged Tvardovsky because this act crossed the line between loyal opposition and personal rebellion, which *Novyi mir* had tried desperately to maintain.

Solzhenitsyn’s expulsion caused a storm of protest from the West. The French National Writers’ Committee released a statement signed by sixteen prominent writers including Louis Aragon, Michel Butor, and Jean-Paul Sartre. It called the expulsion a “monumental mistake which not only does harm to the Soviet Union but helps confirm the view of socialism as propagated

by its enemies.” A group of prominent Western intellectuals including Arthur Miller, Charles Bracelen Flood, Harrison Salisbury, John Updike, John Cheever, Truman Capote, Richard Wilbur, Jean-Paul Sartre, Carlos Fuentes, Yukio Mishima, Igor Stravinsky, Gunter Grass, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Heinrich Böll, Kurt Vonnegut, and Mitchell Wilson sent a letter expressing their solidarity with Solzhenitsyn’s championing of fundamental rights that all civilized people shared (Pearce, 1999:189). The line in the sand had appeared.

Stage Five: Path to Exile

By 1970, Solzhenitsyn was firmly on the warpath. When in May 1970, the authorities placed historian Zhores Medvedev into a psychiatric ward, Solzhenitsyn wrote an angry letter in his defense, which he distributed to the public through friends. “The incarceration of mentally healthy people in insane asylums is a spiritual murder, a form of the gas chamber that is even crueler.... These crimes will never be forgotten, just like the gas chambers, and all those involved in them will be judged without statutes of limitation, for life and posthumously” (Saraskina, 2008:637). Meanwhile, the Nobel Committee outmaneuvered the Soviet government’s attempts to prevent Solzhenitsyn’s nomination by announcing it two weeks ahead of schedule on October 8, 1970. However, under the threat of losing his citizenship and never again seeing his beloved Natalia Svetlova who was carrying his child at the time, Solzhenitsyn refused to travel to accept the Nobel Prize because the Soviet government would refuse him reentry.

The publication of *August of 1914* abroad in 1971 became a *cause célèbre* not only because Solzhenitsyn avoided all reference to the Bolshevik Party, but also criticized the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia. The reaction split his contemporaries between the supporters of Russia’s revolutionary tradition that had evolved from Alexander Herzen and Vissarion Belinskii on the one side, and those who were shocked by Solzhenitsyn’s nationalism and wholesale condemnation of radicalism. The KGB placed him under surveillance referring to him by the codename “spider.” In August 1971, the agents tried to poison

Solzhenitsyn by injecting him with ricin –which is what the KGB used in the infamous “umbrella assassination” of Georgii Markov in 1978– but the attempt failed as his body overcame the poison. In the fall of 1971, the interior minister’s daughter warned Solzhenitsyn of plans to kill him in a car accident at which point he drafted a will, which he gave to his friend Heinrich Böll who took it with him to West Germany. The will pledged profits from Solzhenitsyn’s foreign publications to help families of political prisoners, establish the “Russian Thought” literary prize, reconstruct the Solovki Monastery cathedral, publish Russian memoirs, and establish monuments to the victims of political prisons and labor camps. “This was more than a will,” Solzhenitsyn wrote, “it was an important step in the future struggle, a priceless fortification of my defense” (Saraskina, 2008:664).

By the early 1970s, the persecution reinforced and crystallized Solzhenitsyn’s uncompromising determination to fight the Soviet regime on his own terms. As David Remnick noted, he “viewed his writing life as a war waged against tyranny, and he viewed himself, he always said, as a soldier” (Remnick, 2006:211). This contributed to a form of intransigence that impressed and shocked some of his interlocutors. In 1972, two American journalists, Hedrick Smith and Robert Kaiser, met with Solzhenitsyn for an interview. Although the warm reception pleasantly surprised Smith, Solzhenitsyn’s prepared statement in the form of an interview –he composed the questions and the answers to them– shocked both journalists. “It was a reflection of the myopia of Soviet dissidents,” wrote Smith, “who were as ignorant of the ways of the West and as unprepared for the untidiness of democracy and the awkward probing questions of the Western press as Soviet authorities themselves”. Furthermore, Solzhenitsyn insisted on the interview appearing in full, although he understood that it would encourage a strong Soviet reaction. “The crucible of the camps,” wrote Smith, “had given him not only immense moral courage and authority as a writer but had forged, diamond-hard, the single-mindedness of an autocrat”. Kaiser whispered to Smith: “He thinks the world is hanging on his every word.” The men spent the next two hours wrangling over the language of Solzhenitsyn’s statement instead of conducting an actual interview –Solzhenitsyn refused editorial

excisions and any changes to the original wording (Smith,1976:562-566).

In 1972, Solzhenitsyn's Nobel Prize acceptance speech leaked to the press, although he would not read it until 1974 after his forced exile. In the speech, Solzhenitsyn began to criticize the proclivity towards materialism in the West. Echoing Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he called the West's docile response to the 1972 tragedy in Munich a "malady of the will of an affluent people" that made material well-being "the principal goal in life" (...) "Courage and victory," Solzhenitsyn reminded his audience, "come to us only when we are resolved to make sacrifices". Meanwhile, the "blockage of information flow" between knowledge and sympathy has empowered rationality to trump the moral rights of nations under illegitimate governments. No writer has an excuse for ignoring this state of affairs for he is "an accomplice to all the evil committed in his country or by his people." Art's moral obligation was "to defeat the lie" through uncovering the truth relentlessly ("Nobel Lecture", 2006:519-526).

In this speech, Solzhenitsyn articulated clearly for the first time the connections between individual responsibility and national character. Disagreeing with "universalist" philosophies and defending Russia's historical traditions, he laid the foundation for his profound disagreement with the famous Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov who believed that Russia could only overcome its historically determined tendency towards autocratic government by embracing Western values wholesale. When the speech became public knowledge, the Soviet government expressed alarm over Solzhenitsyn's overt criticism of state-sponsored literature. With its emphasis on personal responsibility and national character, the speech became the first landmark in Solzhenitsyn's reevaluation of western cultural trends.

In 1972, a Soviet court granted Solzhenitsyn a divorce from Reshetovskaia and the next spring, he married Svetlova, but Moscow authorities refused to grant him the right to reside in the capital with his family. Meanwhile, the state blacklisted his friends Mstislav Rostropovich and Galina Vishnevskaja who had given him sanctuary at their *dacha*. When in September 1973, the Solzhenitsyn scandal appeared in newspapers across the globe and began to generate negative press, KGB Chief Yuri Andropov informed the Politburo

that it had to make a decision whether to place Solzhenitsyn on trial or instruct the Soviet ambassadors in Paris, London, Rome, and Stockholm to ask those countries to provide asylum for him.

After the divorce, Solzhenitsyn met Reshetovskaia in Moscow and when she tried to make peace between him and the authorities, he realized that the state was using her against him. His suspicions proved correct. Within months, the Soviet news agency APN was disclosing a different narrative of his life. The story of a lover and a forsaken wife threw a shadow across Solzhenitsyn's image as a crusader for moral truth and justice. APN edited, promoted, and assisted in publishing Reshetovskaia's memoirs, which appeared in France, England, the US, Italy, and other countries (Reshetovskaia, 2004:67-68).

In December 1973, the YMCA Press in Paris published the first volume of the *Gulag Archipelago* in Russian. The book aimed to convince readers that communism deserved the same universal opprobrium as Nazism. Moreover, Solzhenitsyn argued that it was Lenin, not Stalin, who established the first labor camps and began to exterminate people and that Stalinism became a logical development of the Bolshevik revolution. For Solzhenitsyn, as well-known American Sovietologist Adam Ulam wrote, "the source and prime cause of political repression lies in the excessive and unnatural politicization of the life of a nation: once we overlook or minimize the sufferings of a human being because he happens to be a reactionary priest or a rich peasant, we prepare the way for the persecution of 'political deviationists,' then of the 'people's enemies' then of the people as a whole" (Ulam, 1976:316). Solzhenitsyn could not have articulated a severer accusation of the Soviet system than his meticulously researched book.

In Europe, and especially in France, the publication of the *Archipelago* (followed by the exile) changed the intellectual landscape. Many former Marxist thinkers such as André Glucksmann and Bernard-Henri Levy became strongly anti-Communist. François Furet reportedly said that the French Revolution ended with the publication of the *Archipelago*. American intellectuals did not undergo such a drastic change because fewer of them lived under the spell of Communism. Nevertheless, the American leftist

intelligentsia was not convinced of the accuracy of all that Solzhenitsyn had reported. For example, Susan Sontag only began to believe in Solzhenitsyn's accuracy after Joseph Brodsky persuaded her in January of 1976 (Remnick, 2006:171).

By 1974, Brezhnev had sided with the Politburo members who argued for exiling Solzhenitsyn to Verkhoiansk in north-central Siberia. Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin argued that “no foreign journalist will stick his nose into such cold” (Saraskina, 2008:689). However, in February, German Chancellor Willy Brandt mentioned in a speech that he was ready to offer West Germany as a haven for Solzhenitsyn and Andropov quickly dispatched an agent to conduct unofficial negotiations. On February 12, 1974, the police arrested Solzhenitsyn and escorted him to Lefortovo Prison where the authorities accused him of betraying his country, which carried a death sentence. On the same day, Solzhenitsyn released a short essay entitled “Live Not by Lies!” through the *samizdat*—an informal network of privately copied banned works. The letter urged Soviet citizens to take a personal stand against the regime: “Never knowingly support lies!” (Solzhenitsyn, 2006:558). Solzhenitsyn was kept in prison overnight before being informed of the state's decision to expel him. On February 13, KGB operatives escorted him onto an airplane and accompanied him to Frankfurt where they released him alone onto the tarmac. His exile had begun.

Stage Six: Exile in the West

Members of the Western media flocked to Heinrich Böll's house to interview the most famous Soviet exile. The journalists were justified in expecting Solzhenitsyn to provide them with sensational details given that so many of them had risked their posts by interviewing him and smuggling out materials, but the love affair failed from the very beginning. “I spoke enough while I was in the Soviet Union. Now I will be silent,” he explained himself (Saraskina, 2008:702). The media attention repelled him and he became afraid that his literary productivity would suffer from public exposure. In Zurich, he muttered

into one of the microphones undiplomatically: “You are worse than the KGB operatives” (Saraskina, 2008:705).

Solzhenitsyn’s thinking about Russia took a new step with the appearance of his essay “Repentance and Self-Limitation in the Life of Nations,” part of a collection of pieces by different writers entitled *From Under the Rubble* (1974). He defined the nation not as an “ephemeral fruit of social formations,” but as “a complex, vivid, unrepeatable organism not invented by man” that has “a full spiritual life”. The object of the essay was to demonstrate that nations have consciences and that national repentance is a necessary cathartic act that all healthy societies must undertake. Russia was no exception, of course, but the difference was that Russians had committed massive crimes “in our own country, not abroad, not to *others*, but at home to our own people, to ourselves” (Solzhenitsyn, “Repentance”, 2006:531-537). To the end of his life, Solzhenitsyn maintained that Russians at all levels should repent “for the lies and crimes of the communist period in which every inhabitant played some part” (Mahoney, 2001:10).

The ultimate goal of national repentance was to clear the ground for a new process of self-limitation, which Solzhenitsyn expected all nations to practice on the international stage. He juxtaposed the Western ideal of unlimited freedom to the Christian one, which he defined as follows: “Freedom is *self-restriction!* Restriction of the self for the sake of others!” (Solzhenitsyn, “Repentance”, 2006:551). His emphasis on inward over outward national development echoed the inclusive and tolerant liberal nationalism of the post-Napoleonic era. Preferring individuality to individualism, he blended nationalism with Christian morality that assured its introspective and penitent nature.

Based in Zurich for the time being, Solzhenitsyn began to search for a place to settle. He considered the coast of Norway, but decided that it was too close to the Soviet Union, which could easily target him in case a war broke out. In 1975, Natalia Dmitrievna joined him abroad with their family. US Senator Jesse Helms proposed making Solzhenitsyn an honorary citizen, which the Senate approved unanimously in March 1975 –an honor extended only to Lafayette and Churchill until then. This offer opened the way to the

United States where he ended up living for eighteen years, but it did not mollify Solzhenitsyn's criticism of Western civilization.

As Solzhenitsyn began to speak out on the subject, the chasm between Western expectations and his own worldview became apparent. In an interview for British radio, he criticized the Brits' apathy towards their own liberties, although he claimed that he was not a critic of the West, but of its weakness (Conquest, 1985:19). In Paris, he reiterated these concerns, "It is not your liberty I am criticizing, but the way you surrender that liberty step by step" (in Conquest, 1985:19). In a speech he gave to Italian journalists, he argued that the problem with the world was not its division into two camps, but the profound materialism that characterized both of them. He also spoke critically of the famous Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov whose Westernism, Solzhenitsyn believed, threatened Russia's cultural and spiritual traditions.

He described his exile from Russia as "spiritual castration." His *Letter to the Supreme Leaders* (1974) articulated clearly his patriotism, although he remained opposed to the Soviet regime. "Like Leo Tolstoy, he spoke with the voice of a mystical apostle of Holy Russia, a religious fundamentalist, a back-to-the-unspoilt-village Russian patriot," wrote Smith, who met Solzhenitsyn again in Zurich (Smith, 1976:567-572). Solzhenitsyn accused the West of an obsession with technology and exposed its evil influences on Russia, none more so than Marxism. He referred to the US as a "democracy run riot" without a moral center. Russia would do better to shed its Eastern European Empire as well as its non-Russian Soviet republics, he argued, and turn inward to develop its historical core. "Let it remain authoritarian," Solzhenitsyn argued in his letter, "as long as Marxism was scrapped as the state creed and Orthodox Christianity became the moral foundation of a new order" (Smith, 1976: 567-572). The arguments mirrored those of the Slavophiles during the nineteenth century, who rejected the blind imitation and puerile adulation of the West and urged the Russian Tsars to focus on the Orthodox peasant culture as a source of national identity. Solzhenitsyn's rural romanticism was also in tune with a rising trend in the Soviet Union in the 1970s. Authors such as Fyodor Abramov, Vasiliï Belov, and Viktor Astafiev and filmmaker Vasiliï Shukshin also praised the rural life and subtly

criticized the state's interference in the village as well as the disastrous legacy of collectivization. Editor of *Inostrannaia literatura* (*Foreign Literature*) magazine and former Soviet representative to the UN Nikolai Fedorenko complained in his articles about the importation of foreign words, such as *eskalatsiia*, *kheppening*, *isteblishment*, among others, into the Russian language (Smith, 1976:567-572).

Solzhenitsyn's close friends among the émigré community Father Alexander Schmemann and Nikita Struve noted that his public statements were becoming increasingly ideological, doctrinaire, and preachy. While accompanying Solzhenitsyn through Ontario, Canada, as he searched for a place to settle in 1975, Schmemann noticed that Solzhenitsyn the writer was at odds with Solzhenitsyn the public figure. His ideal of Russia rested on the Christian tradition and the love of nature, which he opposed to the twin danger of Marxism and the intelligentsia. Solzhenitsyn's nationalism began to show signs of "self-isolation" and "self-suffocation," according to Schmemann (Saraskina, 2008:720). Even Solzhenitsyn's writing style reflected his ideological position. He consciously avoided foreign words that entered the Russian language over the centuries, which made his language archaic and often difficult to read.

In 1975, Solzhenitsyn gave a speech to the members of the American Labor Unions at the Hilton Hotel in Washington DC, in which he criticized Presidents Herbert Hoover and Franklin Delano Roosevelt for cooperating with the USSR. He also condemned Gerald Ford's and Richard Nixon's appeasement of the Soviet government and asked the US to become more actively involved in Soviet affairs to help the "Soviet people who had been abandoned to their fate." In his report on the American reaction to this speech, Andropov wrote that the audience was shocked at what it perceived were Solzhenitsyn's attempts to provoke a war between the superpowers. People questioned his sanity and called him a fanatic. Andropov argued that Solzhenitsyn's "immoderate ambitions, arch-reactionary views, [and] elementary political ignorance" alienated both Western political leaders and the educated elite (Saraskina, 2008:723). He was right about this. As Volkov wrote, "The real reason for American wariness of Solzhenitsyn was that they did not see any real alternative to negotiating with

the Soviet Union, while the writer denounced such dealings as useless and even harmful. In the eyes of Western pragmatists, Solzhenitsyn was acting beyond his area of competence” (Volkov, 2008:283).

After Solzhenitsyn’s autobiographical *The Oak and the Calf* appeared in 1975, Schmemmann wrote that the book was impressive and at the same time alarming due to the power of its convictions. “The constant calculation, tactics, the presence of a cold and cruel mind” reminded Schmemmann of “Bolshevism turned inside out.” The author’s intransigence resembled that of the revolutionaries themselves. Was this sort of inverted Leninism, Schmemmann wondered, the only thing capable of “killing Lenin?” (Saraskina, 2008:725). Reflecting on his personal experience in an interview that he gave to the French *Le Point*, Solzhenitsyn argued that a man’s first encounter with communism “always” ended in the ideology’s victory, but the second “inoculated” the mind against it for life. Nevertheless, Solzhenitsyn drew a clear line between the communist government and Russia’s historical traditions and, by 1976, began to accuse the West of confusing Russia with the Soviet Union (Saraskina, 2008:728).

Solzhenitsyn’s commencement speech at Harvard University in 1978, the centerpiece of his theosophical worldview, became a milestone in his standoff with the American intellectual elite. Irina Ilovaiskaia-Alberti who translated the speech into English begged Solzhenitsyn to temper his language and said to Natalia in tears, “They will not forgive him for this.” On June 8, Solzhenitsyn read the speech before twenty thousand people. He opened by questioning the belief that all cultures should converge towards the Western ideal of a “pluralistic democracy,” which was “a fruit of Western incomprehension of the essence of other worlds, a result of mistakenly measuring them all with a Western yardstick.” Simultaneously, Solzhenitsyn argued, the Western democracies were experiencing a “decline in courage” as technical and social progress produced welfare states that offered their citizens every form of material comfort (“Harvard Address”, 2006:563-565). Indeed, Solzhenitsyn echoed José Ortega y Gasset who bemoaned “the radical demoralization of mankind” brought on by advances in material comfort (Ortega y Gasset, 1993:125).

Moreover, Solzhenitsyn criticized the West's legalistic approach to human action that neither cultivated "self-restraint", nor called for "sacrifice and selfless risk." "Everybody strives toward further expansion to the extreme limit of the legal frames," he argued. A former prisoner of the Soviet camps, Solzhenitsyn condemned societies without objective legal scales, but also argued that societies that live by nothing but such principles also prevent man from taking "advantage of the full range of human possibilities." Solzhenitsyn also argued that the defense of individual rights in the West had reached such an extreme level that it threatened society as a whole. "It is time, in the West," he said, "to defend not so much human rights as human obligations." Uncontrolled freedom encouraged licentiousness manifesting itself in the prevalence of "pornography, crime, and horror" in popular culture. "Life organized legalistically has thus shown its inability to defend itself against the corrosion of evil," Solzhenitsyn suggested.

Coming from a country where the state controlled the press, Solzhenitsyn nevertheless criticized the Western media for its self-imposed conformity to "accepted patterns of judgment" and "common corporate interests," the sum effect of which was "not competition but unification." This produced "strong mass prejudices" and a form of "blindness" that Solzhenitsyn considered "perilous in our dynamic era." Having criticized the West, however, Solzhenitsyn made it clear that socialism was by no means a cure for this state of affairs leading as it did "to a total destruction of the human spirit and to a leveling of mankind into death" (Solzhenitsyn, 2006:566-569). Indeed, few people were more competent to judge the Soviet system than the speaker. The famous Czechoslovak dissident Václav Havel wrote of his own country, "Order has been established. At the price of a paralysis of the spirit, a deadening of the heart, and devastation of life" (Havel, 1991:62).

However, in the Harvard Address Solzhenitsyn made clear that the Western model of development was not appropriate for Russia, whose society had undergone "a spiritual development of such intensity that the Western system in its present state of spiritual exhaustion does not look attractive" (2006:570-575). Western consumerism was already losing in the physical and spiritual battle against "the forces of Evil." The American withdrawal from Vietnam,

for example, showed that the American intelligentsia had “lost its nerve” and become an accomplice of bloody Asian regimes. Western democracies had shielded themselves with allies more powerful than themselves in the twentieth century: the USSR against Hitler and China against the USSR by the 1970s. This, Solzhenitsyn predicted, would eventually undermine the West itself. With the loss of willpower, the Western democracies could offer the world nothing but “concessions, attempts to gain time, and betrayal.”

At the root of this malady lay “rationalistic humanism or humanistic autonomy” that produced a suicidal form of “anthropocentricity.” By championing this ideology, the Renaissance had ignored the intrinsic evil in man while simultaneously making him the universal point of reference. Even the American Founding Fathers’ moral assumptions disappeared under the pressure of state secularism, producing materialist legalism, Solzhenitsyn argued. The twentieth century’s technological achievements did not redeem its “moral poverty.” The next great disaster was already upon humanity, Solzhenitsyn maintained, in the form of “autonomous, irreligious humanistic consciousness.” The goal that humanity now had before it was an upward ascent, Solzhenitsyn concluded, to “a new height of vision, to a new level of life, where our physical nature will not be cursed, as in the Middle Ages, but even more importantly, our spiritual being will not be trampled upon, as in the Modern Era” (2006:570-575).

Expecting to hear praise for the United States, which granted him asylum and the opportunity to express himself freely, the audience was shocked. In the words of Ulam, the mainstream American press and the liberal establishment targeted Solzhenitsyn “as a reactionary whose praiseworthy struggle against communist oppression was not matched by an understanding and attachment to the democratic principles of the twentieth century” (Ulam, 1976:178). It did not help that Solzhenitsyn also considered Western pop-culture manure, unlike Havel, for example, who reveled in it and welcomed its penetration of the Iron Curtain. Several days after the Harvard Address, First Lady Rosalind Carter spoke at the National Press Club in Washington DC challenging Solzhenitsyn’s argument that America was experiencing a spiritual decline (Saraskina, 2008:179).

Solzhenitsyn gained an unusual ally, however, among the conservative press, which embraced his speech and compared him to Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Savonarola. Conservative American columnist George F. Will of the *Washington Post* argued that Solzhenitsyn's ideas were in a venerable tradition of Western conservative philosophy, which included Cicero, Edmund Burke, and G. W. F. Hegel. He argued that "compared to the long and broad intellectual tradition in which Solzhenitsyn's views are rooted, the tradition of modernity or liberalism is short and thin" (in Mahoney, 2001:19). According to Solzhenitsyn biographer David Mahoney, the liberals had overreacted since the speech contained "not a single criticism of the idea of republican self-government or democratic political institutions. Nevertheless, his critics nearly uniformly confused his criticism of modern or 'anthropocentric' humanism with a criticism of political democracy" (Mahoney, 2001:20). The mood of the US administration changed when Ronald Reagan became president in 1981. By the spring of next year, he was quoting copiously from Solzhenitsyn's address. Solzhenitsyn even received an invitation to the White House, but when he found out that he would be one of several dissidents having breakfast with the President, he turned it down, arguing in his letter to Reagan that he was neither "an émigré politician, nor a dissident." The press reacted by calling him a "radical Russian nationalist." In his response, he referred to himself as a patriot and accused both the Soviet and American governments of "Russophobia". Solzhenitsyn was making enemies on all sides - the "third wave" of Soviet immigrants, i.e. the dissidents, felt slighted by someone they considered one of their own (Saraskina, 2008:760). As Volkov wrote, "The Western press began referring to Solzhenitsyn as an outsider, an old-fashioned moralist, anti-Semite, monarchist, and religious fanatic, and even compared him to the Ayatollah Khomeini. (Many of these arguments came from recent immigrants from Russia.)" (Volkov, 2008:284).

In 1983, Solzhenitsyn received the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion (his predecessor in 1982 was the American preacher Billy Graham). He collected it in London in May and gave a speech reiterating his belief that evil existed because "Men have forgotten God." "Faced with cannibalism," he maintained, "our godless age has discovered the perfect anesthetic—trade!

Such is the pathetic pinnacle of contemporary wisdom” (“Templeton Lecture”, 2006:577-584). Militant atheism, which acted as “the central pivot” of Bolshevik ideology, had led not only to the destruction of national consciousness and mass murder, but also to ecologically disastrous policies. Nevertheless, in the process of suffering under the Soviet yoke, the Russian people has “attained great acuteness and profundity” in its awareness of God from which the West could profit. While in the Soviet Union God and art became victims of state ideology, in the West “the destructive spirit of secularism” undermined both from below. Solzhenitsyn complained that the Christian churches have failed to “present a common front against atheism” while paying undue attention to the success of “revolutionary movements in the Third World” instead of condemning open persecution in the USSR. The responsibility for the world, however, lay ultimately with each individual whose goal should be to redirect his “consciousness, in repentance, to the Creator of all.” This was the only way out of modernity’s crisis of faith, Solzhenitsyn concluded, for “the combined vision of all the thinkers of the Enlightenment amounts to nothing” (“Templeton Lecture”, 2006:577-584).

The speech ingratiated him further with British conservatives and he met for an hour with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher whom he respected greatly. Solzhenitsyn’s love affair with conservatives, however, did not impede his Russian patriotism. In 1983, he refused to show up for the appointed naturalization ceremony in Vermont, which demanded from him a pledge of allegiance to the US. Natalia, however, took the oath in order to facilitate travel to Europe, which was necessary for their philanthropic and business affairs.

Solzhenitsyn was suspicious of Mikhail Gorbachev’s initial policy of “acceleration,” which attempted to resuscitate Soviet socialism in 1985. Solzhenitsyn always promised that he would only return to Russia in the wake of his books and he remained true to his words. When a telegram from *Novyi mir* informed him that the journal was preparing *Cancer Ward* for publication, he insisted that only the appearance in print of the *Gulag Archipelago* would convince him that Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika were more than empty promises. Solzhenitsyn believed that Gorbachev had

started the reforms in order to consolidate control over the country and that these same reforms would sweep him and his colleagues out of power. He was correct. “If I am to return to Soviet printing,” he wrote, “it will only be with the red-hot iron of the *Archipelago*” (Saraskina, 2008:791). The first part of the book finally appeared in *Novyi mir* in August 1989. Solzhenitsyn gave Gorbachev no credit for the collapse of the Soviet Union, however. He told Remnick, “The Cold War was essentially won by Ronald Reagan when he embarked on the Star Wars program and the Soviet Union understood that it could not take this next step. Ending the Cold War had nothing to do with Gorbachev’s generosity. He was compelled to end it. He had no choice but to disarm” (Remnick, 2006:179).

Although Solzhenitsyn welcomed the break-up of the Soviet Union, he had misgivings about its consequences. He believed that Boris Yeltsin's first concern should have been to ban the Communist Party, which he failed to do thereby precipitating the violent clash with the Parliament in October 1993. More importantly, however, Solzhenitsyn urged Yeltsin to deal with Russia’s border issues and the twenty-five million Russian expatriates. “But he did not do this,” Solzhenitsyn complained in an interview. “He simply said, ‘I accept all the borders,’ and let it go at that. It was Lenin who established these false borders –borders that did not correspond to the ethnic borders. They were set up in ways to undermine the central Russian nation –as conscious punishment. The Donetsk and Lugansk regions supported the Cossacks in their fight with the Bolsheviks, and so Lenin cut those regions off from the Don as punishment. Southern Siberia rose up massively against the Bolsheviks, so he gave the region to Kazakhstan” (Remnick, 2006:180). Now - Solzhenitsyn continued - the new Ukrainian and Kazakh governments were pursuing nationalistic policies by banning the Russian language and closing down Russian schools.

Yeltsin failed to heed Solzhenitsyn’s advice, but he ordered the Procurator’s Office to annul the Soviet case against Solzhenitsyn, which eliminated the legal obstacle for his return. The unraveling of the Soviet Union and its effects on Russia pitted the dissident against the Russian patriot in Solzhenitsyn and the latter prevailed. He noted in his diary in November 1991, “Three

times of trouble have come together before my eyes: the Time of troubles of the seventeenth century; the time of Troubles of 1917, which reached the bottom; and the Third Time of Troubles of today.” He compared the collapse of 1991 to February of 1917 when the “democrats” did not know what to do with the power they wielded. The crucial difference, however, was that the Russian people faced the previous two crises in reasonably good national health, whereas in 1991, the population was “hungry, sick, desperate, and completely lost.” Solzhenitsyn called the chaos that engulfed Russia in 1992 “a gigantic historical catastrophe” (Saraskina, 2008:805-806). Counter to the economic vector of reforms that the Yeltsin government was planning at this stage, Solzhenitsyn urged the Russians to place morality above economic concerns.

In 1993, Solzhenitsyn prepared an acceptance speech for the National Arts Club Medal of Honor, in which he developed further the ideas he had expressed in his *Nobel Lecture*. By now, these ideas had direct bearing on the situation in post-Soviet Russia as Yeltsin’s government was aggressively pressing ahead with Western-inspired socio-economic reforms that Solzhenitsyn believed were incompatible with Russia’s historical traditions. The 1993 speech criticized the “raucous, impatient ‘avant-gardism’” of the twentieth century that had substituted “the empty pursuit of novel forms” for art’s profound moral and social crusade. In the Soviet Union, this feverish pursuit of novelty evolved into empty futurism, which then yielded to “the loathsome ceremonial forms” of socialist realism. Coming out of seventy years of Soviet rule, the young writers of the 1990s, however, chose to follow “the more accessible path of pessimistic relativism.” As a result, the Russian classics fell from favor, while denigrating the past became synonymous with progress in post-Soviet Russia. Post-modernism and the interpretation of the world as text, which the Russians imported from the West, resulted in solipsistic introspection –hence the title of Solzhenitsyn’s speech *Playing Upon the Strings of Emptiness*. Art had lost its moral precepts. “How clamorous it all is,” Solzhenitsyn wrote, “but also –how helpless” (“Playing”, 2006:585-590). He may as well have been speaking of the socio-economic experimentation of the early 1990s.

Solzhenitsyn delayed his return to Russia because it would interfere with the completion of what he considered his crowning achievement, *The Red Wheel*, to which he had dedicated twenty years of his life. In this monumental work of 5,000 pages, which examined the causes of the revolutions of 1917, Solzhenitsyn argued that the Bolshevik revolution unleashed man's worst instincts of primordial barbarism as well as envy, greed, and hatred. Instead of fulfilling its promises to the people, it destroyed its best representatives and benefited only a few shameless opportunists, while causing the long-term deterioration of Russia. He told Remnick, "I would not wish a 'great revolution' upon any nation. Only the arrival of Thermidor prevented the eighteenth-century revolution from destroying France. But the revolution in Russia was not restrained by any Thermidor as it drove our people on the straight path to a bitter end, to the abyss, to the depths of ruin." He added, "I condemn revolution because it undermines the strength of the nation instead of allowing evolutionary development" (Remnick, 2006:176-177).

As if preparing intellectually for his return to Russia, Solzhenitsyn further outlined his ideas on progress before the International Academy of Philosophy in the fall of 1993. Since the eighteenth century when progress became both a goal and a justification, Solzhenitsyn argued, humanity has achieved it only in the realm of creature comforts and technology. Marx's optimism that justice can result without God crowned the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which ignored the human soul, Solzhenitsyn argued. While material progress inspired a panic fear of death that earlier ages never knew, the nuclear threat during the Cold War also discouraged introspection by trivializing life as a whole. Nevertheless, Solzhenitsyn gave the Western world credit for "its historically unique stability of civic life under the rule of law." However, this was an exception to the majority of humanity, which faced an environmental crisis and approached the threshold of the twenty-first century without a clear concept of its spiritual destination. The first step towards a solution, Solzhenitsyn argued, was personal self-restraint, sacrifice, and self-denial. "There can be only one true Progress," he concluded, "the sum total of the spiritual progresses of individuals; the degree of self-perfection in the course of their lives" ("We Have Ceased...", 2006:592-600). This was as

clear a statement as Solzhenitsyn had ever made that political and economic issues were of secondary importance in his scale of values, which revolved around a moral and spiritual dimension of human existence. In favor of evolutionary social change guided by moral precepts, Solzhenitsyn was about to experience a rude awakening upon returning to Russia.

Stage Seven: The Return

Solzhenitsyn stepped on native soil in May 1994, but instead of landing in Moscow, he entered through the Far East in order to pay homage to the victims of the Siberian camps and to travel the length of Russia to witness personally the state of the country. Upon arriving in Vladivostok, he declared, “I know that I am returning to Russia tortured, stunned, and altered beyond recognition, convulsively searching for itself, for its own true identity” (“Greeting”, 2006:609). Indeed, his two-month journey to Moscow, during which Solzhenitsyn listened to thousands of Russians who flocked to share their stories with him, uncovered the depths of the socio-economic and spiritual crisis that the collapse of communism left in its wake. The corruption and self-serving of the members of Yeltsin’s government appalled Solzhenitsyn. In his address to the Russian Duma in October 1994, he compared the perquisites of its members with the upright character, personal dedication, and patriotism of the pre-revolutionary parliamentarians. The deputies were not amused and gave him the cold shoulder.

He tried to offer guidance through a television program called “Meetings with Solzhenitsyn,” but its preachy tone no longer resonated with the Russian population as it reeled from the privatization scheme and became increasingly disoriented and apathetic. The central television channel ORT cancelled the program after twelve episodes in 1995. Solzhenitsyn was not invited to Yeltsin’s inauguration on August 9, 1996. When Yeltsin resurrected the Order of Andrei the First-Called as Russia’s highest honor for “faith and service” in 1998, he made Solzhenitsyn one of the first three recipients, but Solzhenitsyn refused to accept the medal from a government that had ruined Russia. “This

is not the time,” he declared (Saraskina, 2008:863). Indeed, he considered shock therapy reforms criminal. “So this is how this reform, which made no sense economically, began,” he told Remnick. “It showed no compassion toward people. The government never even asked what the people will do. Its own people live well, after all. Yeltsin said: ‘I congratulate the people for not rebelling.’ It’s as if I were to meet you in the street, rob you, strip you, and congratulate you for not offering resistance” (Remnick, 2006:181).

Solzhenitsyn articulated his criticism of Yeltsin’s government and also proposed a pragmatic solution to Russia’s problems, in *Russia in Collapse*, which reiterated his belief that spirituality and patriotism were organically connected. Solzhenitsyn criticized both domestic and foreign attempts “to erase Russians’ national identity” by grafting Western values and institutions onto the country. Most importantly, he also proposed the resurrection of local self-government to provide a link between the individual and the nation. He pointed to the Western democracies as examples of such arrangements “where each has the opportunity to participate in the decisions that most directly affect his existence” (Solzhenitsyn, 2006:480-481). Solzhenitsyn had read about this form of democracy in Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* and witnessed it in the New England town-hall meetings in Vermont. While the prime ministers were implementing shock therapy reforms and privatizing the spoils of the Soviet economy under the guidance of the IMF, Solzhenitsyn argued, the Russian government had squandered the chance to enable “the democracy of small spaces.” He called upon the Russian intelligentsia to “become the driving and working force of local self-government,” just as it had in the late imperial period. Solzhenitsyn thereby articulated a grass-roots democratic movement to challenge the top-down reforms of the Yeltsin era. “If we are not ready to organize ourselves,” he argued, “we have no one else to blame” (2006:480-481). The book called for a mixed system of constitutional government with a strong presidency and an energetic state balanced by social self-management through local self-government.

The Solzhenitsyns hosted President Vladimir Putin and his wife at their home outside of Moscow on September 20, 2000, after which Solzhenitsyn

admitted in a televised interview that the new president's "active mind and quick wit" impressed him. He also spoke highly of Putin's genuine concern with the country's fate instead of "his personal power". Sakharov's widow, Elena Bonner, called the meeting worthy of Dostoevsky's pen, as the former KGB colonel befriended a former victim of his former employer. The mind behind Russia's privatization, Anatoly Chubais, called Putin's enthusiasm for Solzhenitsyn's ideas "very dangerous" (Saraskina, 2008:871). This was an overreaction to a perceived friendship. Solzhenitsyn criticized Putin's reinstatement of the old Soviet anthem with new lyrics in December of 2000. He firmly opposed calls for a reinvigorated Russian Empire, which became popular during Putin's presidency, but also warned the West against triumphalism and complacency. Reflecting on Gorbachev's legacy, Solzhenitsyn argued that the West failed to reciprocate Russia's openness to engage the West in a genuine dialogue. "Gorbachev and then Yeltsin withdrew our troops from Europe without any conditions," he told Remnick. "I'm now reading a memoir about how Gorbachev told the West, 'Are you sure you won't expand NATO to the east?' And they answered, 'Oh, no, no, no.' It never occurred to Gorbachev to get a written document guaranteeing this. He just believed in their word and that was it. That was how we greeted the West. That's how things started, in that spirit. Then we became extraordinarily disillusioned when we began to understand the arrogance, the real policies, of the Western powers" (Remnick, 2006:207).

In June 2007, President Putin awarded Solzhenitsyn the Russian Federation Award for "Outstanding Achievements in the Humanities." After an hour-long personal meeting with Solzhenitsyn at his home following the ceremony, Putin said to the press, "Many steps that we are taking today in many ways harmonize with what Solzhenitsyn wrote about" (Saraskina, 2008:894). One may question the validity of this claim, but after Solzhenitsyn passed away in August 2008, the Russian government and the Moscow authorities renamed Large Communist Street in honor of Solzhenitsyn over the Communist Party's objections. President Medvedev pledged to see through the publication of Solzhenitsyn's collected works, which is now under way and promises to become the most enduring monument to his fight for freedom. In December

2008, when Solzhenitsyn would have turned 90, Moscow stores were full of books by and about Solzhenitsyn, including the first full biography in Russian by Liudmila Saraskina. Not far from Lenin's Mausoleum, the Manezh building hosted an exhibit dedicated to Solzhenitsyn's rich life and literary legacy.

Conclusion

Solzhenitsyn's political views stemmed from his belief that culture and personal responsibility, not political structures, ensured progress and stability. This emphasis placed him in the long tradition of conservative thought dating back to Edmund Burke, among many others. Solzhenitsyn's focus on Christian humanism and emphasis on gradual change pitted him against the post-Soviet project with its universalist mentality and expectation that all cultures will converge towards one liberal ideal. Instead of a universal political model, Solzhenitsyn believed in common spiritual values that encouraged an individual's moral growth, which he placed above legal rights and material well being, although he recognized their value also. He considered local self-government the only legitimate form of democracy. The same patriotic ideas that he expressed are making a comeback among the Russian intelligentsia and increasing in popularity with the wider population today. Russia's resurgent conservatism has yet to acknowledge him as a forerunner. However, contemporary Russian conservatives would profit greatly by embracing Solzhenitsyn's humanism and emphasis on local self-government in favor of the jingoism, naïve statism, and myopic anti-westernism that they champion today.

The difficulty that Russians have had with coming to terms with Solzhenitsyn stems from the tension between the artistic creativity and moral crusading that galvanized his mind. Although Solzhenitsyn's preaching cost him popular acceptance, the conflict between artist and moralizer also became the source of his art's power. His works demand a great effort from the reader, much as democracy demands a great effort from citizens. Solzhenitsyn fit perfectly into Russian literature's long tradition of combining soul searching

and social responsibility. However, his works addressed directly the rich and controversial canvas of modern Russian history. This relevance explains the wild fluctuations in opinions of his works and of him personally, but also guarantees him a prominent role in what promises to be Russia's long and torturous coming to terms with its historical consciousness.

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