

“Russian Romantic or Raving Lunatic?”

The Solzhenitsyn Reader:
New and Essential Writings 1947–2005
Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn
Edited by Edward E. Ericson, Jr., and
Daniel F. Mahoney
Intercollegiate Studies Institute
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by Jeff Bursey

In the early 1990s, when a conversation with Russian émigrés turned to their country’s literature, they would invariably declare little interest in two writers: Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn. The former they said dwelt too much on the soul, while the latter was an adherent of the Orthodox Church who chided countrymen for not reforming their homeland. In *Pushkin’s Children* (2003), Tatyana Tolstaya relates that Russians abroad tell a joke: “The Solzhenitsyn in Vermont is not the ‘real’ one, that there has been a switch, that the KGB sent a double and the ‘real’ Solzhenitsyn rotted somewhere in the Gulag.”

In August 1989 the New York Times reported the following:

“Conservative Russian nationalists consider Mr. Solzhenitsyn a martyr to the worldly ideology of Marx and Lenin, and an icon of ancient Russian values of faith and discipline they now see threatened by the Westernizing influence of Mr. Gorbachev.

“It would be in the spirit of glasnost to discuss Solzhenitsyn,” said the novelist Andrei Bitov. “But the very second we begin, we become hostile camps - liberals and chauvinists, Russophiles and Russophobes.”

That same animosity is present in Zinovy Zinik’s 3,300- word one-sided rehash of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s life presented in the TLS in March 2007, occasioned by the publication of this Reader (to which he devoted approximately 300 words). He starts badly. The very first sentence, about *The Gulag Archipelago*, reads: “Not many writers could claim that they had introduced new words into the vocabulary of other nations...” Thus, this towering work that lays history bare, that addresses what could only be whispered about throughout the /12/ entire Soviet Union for decades, and that exploded naïve beliefs held by the Left everywhere concerning the USSR’s Communism is reduced to something that is barely more than a novelty product.

Solzhenitsyn’s reputation started sinking in the West with his June 8, 1978 Harvard Commencement Address, “A World Split Apart,” which Eric Ericson and Daniel Mahoney state in the Reader “was the most controversial and commented upon public speech” he gave outside his homeland. In that speech Solzhenitsyn declared:”

“A decline in courage may be the most striking feature that an outside observer notices in the West today... Such a decline in courage is particularly noticeable among the ruling and intellectual elites, causing an impression of a loss of courage by the entire society... Must one point out that from ancient times a decline in courage has been considered the first symptom of the end?”

He continued, to the dismay of the cream of America’s student population, “But should I be asked, instead, whether I would propose the West, such as it is today, as a model to my country, I would frankly have to answer negatively.”

Pierre Hart wrote in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Russian Culture* (1999): “the critical tone of his analysis of Western culture left many in his audience nonplused...” Solzhenitsyn’s adoption by America’s Right (in publications like the *National Review* and by those around Ronald Reagan) determined, to some extent, the reception of his later writings.

In a polarised environment shaped by commentaries like those of Tolstaya and Zinik, and the *National Review*, it’s worth asking what purpose this Reader is meant to serve, and why it is coming out now. Of course since the author will be turning ninety in 2008, it’s certainly an appropriate way to celebrate his life’s work. However, additional reasons given by the editors are entirely practical: they felt there needed to be one book that would represent every genre Solzhenitsyn wrote in, and that would place his thought in context, especially the impetus for his later controversial works, *Russia in Collapse* (1998) and *Two Hundred Years Together* (vol. 1, 2001; vol. 2, 2002). These books address Russia’s current state and the country’s “Jewish question” respectively. Ericson and Mahoney know that it is an uphill battle to get Western readers, outside certain academic circles, to read Solzhenitsyn with an open mind; his religious, cultural, and political beliefs tend to stigmatize him. Still, it is odd that some writers from Russia, who may have benefitted from Solzhenitsyn’s daring, have essentially exiled him in their minds because he believes that the conservative Orthodox Church is a means to Russia’s salvation, and because he wishes to revitalize the Russian language, which he thinks has been adulterated or impoverished under Lenin, Stalin, their successors and acolytes. What ought to be remembered by his critics—though there is certainly much to argue with in Solzhenitsyn’s thought—is that they, like him, benefit from freedom of speech.

In a lecture included in the Reader, Solzhenitsyn speaks very clearly about the importance of religion, and says that the “main cause of the ruinous Revolution that swallowed up some sixty million of our people” is that men forgot God. “For tens of millions of laymen access to the Church was blocked, and they were forbidden to bring up their children in the faith: Religious parents were wrenched from their children and thrown into prison, while the children were turned from the faith by threats and lies.” Yet it should be pointed out that totalitarianism inevitably results in mass murder, and that millions of people can be killed with or without the invocation of religious belief. As for the many arguments made to rescue or preserve a language—now reminiscent of Orwell’s writing on English, and the French Academy’s pronouncements—they are sometimes overly nostalgic and melodramatic. From *Russia in Collapse* comes this diagnosis:

“Our national consciousness has fallen into lethargy. We barely live, wandering from a past bereft of memory toward the menacing specter of our very disappearance.

We are a people comatose.

While insistent nationalisms grow more abundant in the world, the coma of our national consciousness drains even our lifeblood, our instinct of self-preservation.

I fear that, after all the bitter things we have lived through and are living through now, a weakening, a decline, a fall is the fortune that awaits the Russian people...

Even if we survive physically, will we keep our Russianness, the whole of our faith, our soul, our character—our place in the worldwide firmament of cultures? Can we persevere with our spirit intact, speaking our language, conscious of our historical traditions?"

Many Canadians will recognize such concerns.

For Solzhenitsyn, retrieval of the Russian language is essential to his country's reformation. However, it's legitimate for anyone reading him to worry that such thinking could produce nationalism of the most unpleasant kind, despite Solzhenitsyn's desire for only

"a clean, loving, constructive Russian patriotism and not of a radical nationalist bent ('only our type!' or 'only our faith!'); not of the elevation of one's nationality above our higher spiritual plank, above our humble stance before Heaven."

The Reader comes along at a good time, reminding us of Russia's violent, chaotic history, of a past that is not past but which endures and is actively shaping its ongoing struggles, while showing us an engaged and committed mind and spirit at work. It is an excellent, book, comprehensive and reasonably priced, and it includes extracts from Solzhenitsyn's verse, short stories, novels, non-fiction, and speeches. Some of the contents have never before been accessible to those who don't speak Russian. Since the oeuvre is enormous in size, the editors have had to make hard choices. They have been helped by a host of translators, including Solzhenitsyn's sons. Arranged chronologically, starting with early verse, the selections can surprise one with their contemporary feel. The poem "Prisoner's Right" (1951) contains the lines: "Our right is but one: / To be rancorless sons / Of our luckless and sad Russian land." The acclaimed short story, "Matryona's Home", is a devastating and subtle depiction of peasant life in the Soviet Union of the late 1950s, while "No Matter What" effectively bridges the Second World War in Russia and life in post-Soviet Union present.

The Oak and the Calf is an autobiographical work that recounts how Solzhenitsyn emerged as a writer, and the strategies he employed to manoeuvre around the hostile Writers' Union and the government. The next section contains extracts from *The First Circle* (1968) and *Cancer Ward* (1968). The complete version of *The First Circle* was translated into English in 2005, and some chapters appear here for the first time. Next comes *The Gulag Archipelago*, "one of the most important books of the twentieth century." Here, as elsewhere, the editors' head notes situate the work and its author in aesthetic and political contexts, allowing one to trace Solzhenitsyn's maturation as an artist and spokesman for political change. Part of the astonishment one feels on reading this work comes from the recognition that it is principally one man who, working in strictest secrecy, was able to set down this impassioned account of the penal camps.

What comes next are segments from the four novels comprising the 6,000-page quartet *The Red Wheel*: the novels themselves are *August 1914* (1989, full version), *November 1916* (1999), *March 1917* (1989) and *April 1917* (1991). Neither the third nor fourth volume is scheduled to appear in English, unfortunately, so the extracts are particularly welcome. The first two works capture a history that might never have reached popular awareness without Solzhenitsyn. The editors tell us that according to some critics “the events that Solzhenitsyn describes are far removed from the concerns of contemporary Western readers, too alien or ‘Russian,’ their comprehension too demanding to be of real interest to the harried contemporary reader.” Those who are interested in gaining a full appreciation for how the Russian Revolution gained momentum will appreciate the scope of *The Red Wheel*. Its powerful, assured writing showcases the refinement of the multiple perspective method used to such stunning effect in *The Gulag Archipelago*.

The Reader proceeds with extracts from *Russia in Collapse* and *Two Hundred Years Together*, followed by “Essays and Speeches”, including the stirring and powerful, as well as arguable, Nobel and Harvard addresses. “Miniatures” closes *The Solzhenitsyn Reader*. These prose poems, a natural bookend to the verse written at the beginning of Solzhenitsyn’s artistic life, are couched in a gentle, ruminative tone. One piece, titled “Growing Old,” reads in part:

“There is warmth in watching little children at play, seeing them gain in strength and character. There is even warmth to be drawn from the waning of your own strength compared with the past—just to think how sturdy I once used to be! You can no longer get through a whole day’s work at a stretch, but how good it is to slip into the brief oblivion of sleep, and what a gift to wake once more to the clarity of your second or third morning of the day.”

This twilight mode is yet another aspect of Solzhenitsyn’s art and philosophy, which this commendable and worthy Reader presents with care and respect.

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