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[What Do You Stand For?: An Appreciation of Aleksandr Solzhenytsin](#)

I think I was 16 or 17 or so when I picked up the first volume of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. I ultimately read all three volumes, but it took me several years to do so, thick as the writing was. I still have the yellowed paperbacks in my library. I picked up that first volume after my high school literature class read *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch*. I don't remember exactly what the attraction was, though it was clear from *Denisovitch* that concentration camps did not die with the Nazis. I thought it was unbelievable that gulags or labor camps could exist at the same time I did. It also had something to do with the fact that at around that time, I was madly in love with a Russian girl, Irina, whose family escaped Odessa; she loved blue jeans and Pink Floyd. I was interested in why she would want to leave her country as I could never believe that I would have to leave mine for the same reasons. I became fascinated with the fatalistic sense of humor that she had, and which I found out later that most Russians shared and which, I determined, I, too, shared. After all, it was my grandfather Mandel Shiner who had fled Eastern Europe (Galicia) to avoid being conscripted (they were in for 25 years, thank you very much) into the czar's army, so I wanted to see for myself what kind of society had taken the place of the one that was so hostile to Jews in particular. We shared a disaffection for large organizations such as, for example, the KGB. As Jews, we are a "low church", which is to say that our religion is very decentralized, unlike, for example, the Catholic Church, whose base is located in the Vatican. Jews are by and large free thinkers, even if all the thought that comes out isn't of the highest quality.

Thus began my love affair with Russian literature and life in the Soviet Union in general. I remember reading loads of Dostoyevsky - *The Idiot* - Prince Myshkin haunts me still - as well as *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Crime and Punishment* as well as accounts of life behind the iron curtain by Hedrick Smith, who wrote a book entitled, aptly enough, *The Russians*. There was Chekov's "Uncle Vanya" and "The Cherry Tree" and Pasternak's *Dr. Zhivago*, all of which I am sure contributed mightily to my sense of social melancholy and appreciation of irony and love of contradiction that I carry with me to this day.

I was obsessed with the *Gulag Archipelago*. There was

something slightly revolutionary about reading a memoir that had to be smuggled out of the country of its origin. It was forbidden fruit, if you want, and this fact gave it an aura of immediacy and intensity. I read with horror at the things for which Stalin and his successors, Krushchev and Brezhnev could send social misfits on a permanent vacation in Siberia or worse. While I'd studied the Holocaust, it hadn't occurred to me that, in its own way, the Russians had endured their own holocaust, too; and what was so frightening is the feeling I had that it was still going on - people being sent away for speaking their minds, doing what they wanted - all the things that we Americans took (and still very much take) for granted.

Solzhenitsyn was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970, but did not go to Stockholm because he was afraid that the Soviet authorities would refuse him re-entry into the country that he adored and which consumed him. His acceptance address was widely circulated (a feat in pre-internet days) smuggled out no doubt in false bottomed suitcases or cleared through exit inspections with not a little bribery. As part of his acceptance, 'he wrote that while an ordinary man was obliged "not to participate in lies," artists had greater responsibilities. "It is within the power of writers and artists to do much more: to defeat the lie!"'
<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/04/books/04solzhenitsyn.html?ref=europe#>

Solzhenitsyn died at the age of 89. He knew well personal tragedy that was of his own making. He could not abide the lie. He paid dearly for principle. Which is why his life and his death, whose nearness he was not afraid of, is so remarkable and speaks so loudly to me today. Deported from the Soviet Union in 1974, he moved to the US and established a residence in Vermont, as I recall, but never stopped, not for a minute, "trying to defeat the lie." As much as he was a thorn in the side of Soviet Authorities, he was likewise as brutally honest at what he perceived to be the lies that the West was and remains possessed of and which continues to feed us today: materialism, narcissism, nihilism and the rest of the usual suspect isms. Through it all, he remained a Russian and in 1994 he left the US to return to Russia after the fall of Communism. He was a Russian.

This was a man who stood for something: as a man, he did not want to participate in the lie. As an artist, he fought and was punished horribly for trying to defeat them.

What are we Americans of whatever persuasion to learn from Solzhenitsyn's life and death? We need only review the

catastrophe of a government and social structure that we in the US have allowed to exist in this country to see that we have all collectively participated in the lies and the actions based on them.

I am currently reading a general history of the events of 1968 by Mark Kurlansky, entitled, aptly enough again, *1968*. To imagine that young people in this country were so enraged against what they correctly viewed as a racist, imperialistic society and government that they would take to the streets seems impossible today to even think about. Sure, there have been protests, but they have been muted. To imagine students in Paris and across Europe protesting their societies and governments from behind and in front of barricades, fighting with police seems quaint in today's world. To imagine that the Prague Spring could occur today is an absurd notion, is it not? Americans in 1968 drove Lyndon Johnson out of the White House, but caused the rise of the paranoid right, embodied in Richard Nixon and his intellectual progeny. In 1968, there were, according to some quick research, about 35,000 American dead in Vietnam. Over the course of the next five years, until the last helicopter left the US Embassy in Saigon, another 23,000 Americans would die.

<http://www.archives.gov/research/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html>

It's evident that in 2008, too many Americans are afraid to stand for anything out of fear of being "politically incorrect". Or a fear of being branded as "unpatriotic" or "un-American". Or who are so deeply invested in lies that to fight them means self-destruction. Those who do stand up are as ostracized as much as is possible in a country that thankfully runs only one set of detention facilities, that being in Guantanamo, Cuba. The lies that we have become too comfortable living with arise out of fear not of being politically incorrect, but what political incorrectness means to our lives if words spur action: the loss of business opportunities, income and social standing. Look around you: how are people who question the system in this country treated? With disdain, hatred and derision. Look at what happened to Cindy Sheehan some years back when she went very public in her condemnation of the war in Iraq before that, too, became politically correct. She was painted as a psychiatric patient. There are other examples, but hers pops to mind immediately. We have, all of us, become participants in the lie; we are all "Good Germans", as I wrote in this space some time ago.

We can look back on Solzhenitsyn's life and body of work and see clearly what he stood for. I do not know where you stand in

your life's chronology, but in mine, I've come to the age where, unlike some of my contemporaries who have given up or who are just bored or who think that they do not matter any more, it is thanks in some consciously inexplicable part to my love affair with Russian literature and history that I do what I can to stand for something other than the notion of "getting along" just to get along. What that something is is a work in progress, but it is, I hope, not nothing as with too many people I am too well acquainted with these days. Character traits and actions demonstrating commitment, honor, loyalty, integrity, kindness, trustworthiness or dare I say faith, are not things that any of us should be afraid of but which, unfortunately owing to the social consequences of doing so to the extent we might in our daily lives, we are. Which is not to say that I am perfect, and if I seem as though I am lecturing, rest assured that the lecture is largely self-directed and aspirational.

It is a waste of a person's life to not stand for anything. Too many people go through the motions of life, standing for nothing, running on a tank empty of meaning, caring not a whit if they leave a legacy of which they can be proud, a legacy that is larger than they are as mere humans. Inside all of us is the ability to transcend ourselves in order to give meaning to the world and to truth and then only incidentally yet naturally to ourselves. It is the striving for meaning in a world that defies it that gives us what we call our humanity, and without it, we are not fully human.

If there is one thing that I want to leave my son, it's the notion that, like Solzhenytsin, you cannot participate in the lie. And because he is an artist, it's his responsibility, according to Solzhenytsin, to defeat those lies wherever he can and to be proud to know that there is a truth out there somewhere that everyone knows; it's just a matter of how we individually and collectively choose to distort it that makes the lies possible. On second thought, I will have to differ somewhat with Solzhenytsin: to the extent that living is itself an art - G-d knows it is not science - we all have an obligation to put the truth out there for all to see; we all have an obligation to defeat the lies that we know are lies but which, in the battle, might somehow inconvenience us or cost us money or worse. Is that too high a price for our souls? How much does personal integrity cost?

As Shakespeare wrote in Hamlet: "to be or not to be - that is the question". Will we choose to "be" like Solzhenytsin or will we choose to "be" participants in the lie? That is the question of our age.

Randy Shiner

Posted by Randy Shiner at 12:42 PM  

Labels: [Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn](#), [Randy Shiner](#), [Randy Shiner Opinion](#)

Text of Address by

Alexander Solzhenitsyn

at Harvard Class Day Afternoon Exercises,

Thursday, June 8, 1978

I am sincerely happy to be here with you on this occasion and to become personally acquainted with this old and most prestigious University. My congratulations and very best wishes to all of today's graduates.

Harvard's motto is "Veritas." Many of you have already found out and others will find out in the course of their lives that truth eludes us if we do not concentrate with total attention on its pursuit. And even while it eludes us, the illusion still lingers of knowing it and leads to many misunderstandings. Also, truth is seldom pleasant; it is almost invariably bitter. There is some bitterness in my speech today, too. But I want to stress that it comes not from an adversary but from a friend.

Three years ago in the United States I said certain things which at that time appeared unacceptable. Today, however, many people agree with what I then said...

A World Split Apart

by Alexander Solzhenitsyn

The split in today's world is perceptible even to a hasty glance. Any of our contemporaries readily identifies two world powers, each of them already capable of entirely destroying the other. However, understanding of the split often is limited to this political conception, to the illusion that danger may be abolished through successful diplomatic negotiations or by achieving a balance of armed forces. The truth is that the split is a much profounder and a more alienating one, that the rifts are more than one can see at first glance. This deep manifold split bears the danger of manifold disaster for all of us, in accordance with the ancient truth that a Kingdom -- in this case, our Earth -- divided against itself cannot stand.

Contemporary Worlds

There is the concept of the Third World: thus, we already have three worlds. Undoubtedly, however, the number is even greater; we are just too far away to see. Any ancient deeply rooted autonomous culture, especially if it is spread on a wide part of the earth's surface, constitutes an autonomous world, full of riddles and surprises to Western thinking. As a minimum, we must include in this category China, India, the Muslim world and Africa, if indeed we accept the approximation of viewing

the latter two as compact units. For one thousand years Russia has belonged to such a category, although Western thinking systematically committed the mistake of denying its autonomous character and therefore never understood it, just as today the West does not understand Russia in communist captivity. It may be that in the past years Japan has increasingly become a distant part of the West, I am no judge here; but as to Israel, for instance, it seems to me that it stands apart from the Western world in that its state system is fundamentally linked to religion.

How short a time ago, relatively, the small new European world was easily seizing colonies everywhere, not only without anticipating any real resistance, but also usually despising any possible values in the conquered peoples' approach to life. On the face of it, it was an overwhelming success, there were no geographic frontiers to it. Western society expanded in a triumph of human independence and power. And all of a sudden in the twentieth century came the discovery of its fragility and friability. We now see that the conquests proved to be short lived and precarious, and this in turn points to defects in the Western view of the world which led to these conquests. Relations with the former colonial world now have turned into their opposite and the Western world often goes to extremes of obsequiousness, but it is difficult yet to estimate the total size of the bill which former colonial countries will present to the West, and it is difficult to predict whether the surrender not only of its last colonies, but of everything it owns will be sufficient for the West to foot the bill.

Convergence

But the blindness of superiority continues in spite of all and upholds the belief that vast regions everywhere on our planet should develop and mature to the level of present day Western systems which in theory are the best and in practice the most attractive. There is this belief that all those other worlds are only being temporarily prevented by wicked governments or by heavy crises or by their own barbarity or incomprehension from taking the way of Western pluralistic democracy and from adopting the Western way of life. Countries are judged on the merit of their progress in this direction. However, it is a conception which developed out of Western incomprehension of the essence of other worlds, out of the mistake of measuring them all with a Western yardstick. The real picture of our planet's development is quite different.

Anguish about our divided world gave birth to the theory of convergence between leading Western countries and the Soviet Union. It is a soothing theory which overlooks the fact that these worlds are not at all developing into similarity; neither one can be transformed into the other without the use of violence. Besides, convergence inevitably means acceptance of the other side's defects, too, and this is hardly desirable.

If I were today addressing an audience in my country, examining the overall pattern of the world's rifts I would have concentrated on the East's calamities. But since my forced exile in the West has now lasted four years and since my audience is a Western one, I think it may be of greater interest to concentrate on certain aspects of the West in our days, such as I see them.

A Decline in Courage [. . .]

may be the most striking feature which an outside observer notices in the West in our days. The Western world has lost its civil courage, both as a whole and separately, in each country, each government, each political party and of course in the United Nations. Such a decline in courage is particularly noticeable among the ruling groups and the intellectual elite, causing an impression of loss of courage by the entire society. Of course there are many courageous individuals but they have no determining influence on public life. Political and intellectual bureaucrats show depression, passivity and perplexity in their actions and in their statements and even more so in theoretical reflections to explain how realistic, reasonable as well as intellectually and even morally warranted it is to base state policies on weakness and cowardice. And decline in courage is ironically emphasized by occasional explosions of anger and inflexibility on the part of the same bureaucrats when dealing with weak governments and weak countries, not supported by anyone, or with currents which cannot offer any resistance. But they get tongue-tied and paralyzed when they deal with powerful governments and threatening forces, with aggressors and international terrorists.

Should one point out that from ancient times decline in courage has been considered the beginning of the end?

Well-Being

When the modern Western States were created, the following principle was proclaimed: governments are meant to serve man, and man lives to be free to pursue happiness. (See, for example, the American Declaration). Now at last during past decades technical and social progress has permitted the realization of such aspirations: the welfare state. Every citizen has been granted the desired freedom and material goods in such quantity and of such quality as to guarantee in theory the achievement of happiness, in the morally inferior sense which has come into being during those same decades. In the process, however, one psychological detail has been overlooked: the constant desire to have still more things and a still better life and the struggle to obtain them imprints many Western faces with worry and even depression, though it is customary to conceal such feelings. Active and tense competition permeates all human thoughts without opening a way to free spiritual development. The individual's independence from many types of state pressure has been guaranteed; the majority of people have been granted well-being to an extent their fathers and grandfathers could not even dream about; it has become possible to raise young people according to these ideals, leading them to physical splendor, happiness, possession of material goods, money and leisure, to an almost unlimited freedom of enjoyment. So who should now renounce all this, why and for what should one risk one's precious life in defense of common values, and particularly in such nebulous cases when the security of one's nation must be defended in a distant country?

Even biology knows that habitual extreme safety and well-being are not advantageous for a living organism. Today, well-being in the life of Western society has begun to reveal its pernicious mask.

Legalistic Life

Western society has given itself the organization best suited to its purposes, based, I would say, on the letter of the law. The limits of human rights and righteousness are determined by a system of laws; such limits are very broad. People in the West have acquired considerable skill in using, interpreting and manipulating law, even though laws tend to be too complicated for an average person to understand without the help of an expert. Any conflict is solved according to the letter of the law and this is considered to be the supreme solution. If one is right from a legal point of view, nothing more is required, nobody may mention that one could still not be entirely right, and urge self-restraint, a willingness to renounce such legal rights, sacrifice and selfless risk: it would sound simply absurd. One almost never sees voluntary self-restraint. Everybody operates at the extreme limit of those legal frames. An oil company is legally blameless when it purchases an invention of a new type of energy in order to prevent its use. A food product manufacturer is legally blameless when he poisons his produce to make it last longer: after all, people are free not to buy it.

I have spent all my life under a communist regime and I will tell you that a society without any objective legal scale is a terrible one indeed. But a society with no other scale but the legal one is not quite worthy of man either. A society which is based on the letter of the law and never reaches any higher is taking very scarce advantage of the high level of human possibilities. The letter of the law is too cold and formal to have a beneficial influence on society. Whenever the tissue of life is woven of legalistic relations, there is an atmosphere of moral mediocrity, paralyzing man's noblest impulses.

And it will be simply impossible to stand through the trials of this threatening century with only the support of a legalistic structure.

The Direction of Freedom

In today's Western society, the inequality has been revealed of freedom for good deeds and freedom for evil deeds. A statesman who wants to achieve something important and highly constructive for his country has to move cautiously and even timidly; there are thousands of hasty and irresponsible critics around him, parliament and the press keep rebuffing him. As he moves ahead, he has to prove that every single step of his is well-founded and absolutely flawless. Actually an outstanding and particularly gifted person who has unusual and unexpected initiatives in mind hardly gets a chance to assert himself; from the very beginning, dozens of traps will be set out for him. Thus mediocrity triumphs with the excuse of restrictions imposed by democracy.

It is feasible and easy everywhere to undermine administrative power and, in fact, it has been drastically weakened in all Western countries. The defense of individual rights has reached such extremes as to make society as a whole defenseless against certain individuals. It is time, in the West, to defend not so much human rights as human obligations.

Destructive and irresponsible freedom has been granted boundless space. Society appears to have little defense against the abyss of human decadence, such as, for

example, misuse of liberty for moral violence against young people, motion pictures full of pornography, crime and horror. It is considered to be part of freedom and theoretically counter-balanced by the young people's right not to look or not to accept. Life organized legalistically has thus shown its inability to defend itself against the corrosion of evil.

And what shall we say about the dark realm of criminality as such? Legal frames (especially in the United States) are broad enough to encourage not only individual freedom but also certain individual crimes. The culprit can go unpunished or obtain undeserved leniency with the support of thousands of public defenders. When a government starts an earnest fight against terrorism, public opinion immediately accuses it of violating the terrorists' civil rights. There are many such cases.

Such a tilt of freedom in the direction of evil has come about gradually but it was evidently born primarily out of a humanistic and benevolent concept according to which there is no evil inherent to human nature; the world belongs to mankind and all the defects of life are caused by wrong social systems which must be corrected. Strangely enough, though the best social conditions have been achieved in the West, there still is criminality and there even is considerably more of it than in the pauper and lawless Soviet society. (There is a huge number of prisoners in our camps which are termed criminals, but most of them never committed any crime; they merely tried to defend themselves against a lawless state resorting to means outside of a legal framework).

The Direction of the Press

The press too, of course, enjoys the widest freedom. (I shall be using the word press to include all media). But what sort of use does it make of this freedom?

Here again, the main concern is not to infringe the letter of the law. There is no moral responsibility for deformation or disproportion. What sort of responsibility does a journalist have to his readers, or to history? If they have misled public opinion or the government by inaccurate information or wrong conclusions, do we know of any cases of public recognition and rectification of such mistakes by the same journalist or the same newspaper? No, it does not happen, because it would damage sales. A nation may be the victim of such a mistake, but the journalist always gets away with it. One may safely assume that he will start writing the opposite with renewed self-assurance.

Because instant and credible information has to be given, it becomes necessary to resort to guesswork, rumors and suppositions to fill in the voids, and none of them will ever be rectified, they will stay on in the readers' memory. How many hasty, immature, superficial and misleading judgments are expressed every day, confusing readers, without any verification. The press can both simulate public opinion and miseducate it. Thus we may see terrorists heroized, or secret matters, pertaining to one's nation's defense, publicly revealed, or we may witness shameless intrusion on the privacy of well-known people under the slogan: "everyone is entitled to know everything." But this is a false slogan, characteristic of a false era: people also have the right not to know, and it is a much more valuable one. The right not to have their divine souls stuffed with gossip, nonsense, vain talk. A person who works and leads a meaningful life does not need this excessive burdening flow of information.

Hastiness and superficiality are the psychic disease of the 20th century and more than anywhere else this disease is reflected in the press. In-depth analysis of a problem is anathema to the press. It stops at sensational formulas.

Such as it is, however, the press has become the greatest power within the Western countries, more powerful than the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. One would then like to ask: by what law has it been elected and to whom is it responsible? In the communist East a journalist is frankly appointed as a state official. But who has granted Western journalists their power, for how long a time and with what prerogatives?

There is yet another surprise for someone coming from the East where the press is rigorously unified: one gradually discovers a common trend of preferences within the Western press as a whole. It is a fashion; there are generally accepted patterns of judgment and there may be common corporate interests, the sum effect being not competition but unification. Enormous freedom exists for the press, but not for the readership because newspapers mostly give enough stress and emphasis to those opinions which do not too openly contradict their own and the general trend.

A Fashion in Thinking

Without any censorship, in the West fashionable trends of thought and ideas are carefully separated from those which are not fashionable; nothing is forbidden, but what is not fashionable will hardly ever find its way into periodicals or books or be heard in colleges. Legally your researchers are free, but they are conditioned by the fashion of the day. There is no open violence such as in the East; however, a selection dictated by fashion and the need to match mass standards frequently prevent independent-minded people from giving their contribution to public life. There is a dangerous tendency to form a herd, shutting off successful development. I have received letters in America from highly intelligent persons, maybe a teacher in a faraway small college who could do much for the renewal and salvation of his country, but his country cannot hear him because the media are not interested in him. This gives birth to strong mass prejudices, blindness, which is most dangerous in our dynamic era. There is, for instance, a self-deluding interpretation of the contemporary world situation. It works as a sort of petrified armor around people's minds. Human voices from 17 countries of Eastern Europe and Eastern Asia cannot pierce it. It will only be broken by the pitiless crowbar of events.

I have mentioned a few trends of Western life which surprise and shock a new arrival to this world. The purpose and scope of this speech will not allow me to continue such a review, to look into the influence of these Western characteristics on important aspects on [the] nation's life, such as elementary education, advanced education in [?...]

Socialism

It is almost universally recognized that the West shows all the world a way to successful economic development, even though in the past years it has been strongly disturbed by chaotic inflation. However, many people living in the West are dissatisfied with their own society. They despise it or accuse it of not being up to the

level of maturity attained by mankind. A number of such critics turn to socialism, which is a false and dangerous current.

I hope that no one present will suspect me of offering my personal criticism of the Western system to present socialism as an alternative. Having experienced applied socialism in a country where the alternative has been realized, I certainly will not speak for it. The well-known Soviet mathematician Shafarevich, a member of the Soviet Academy of Science, has written a brilliant book under the title *Socialism*; it is a profound analysis showing that socialism of any type and shade leads to a total destruction of the human spirit and to a leveling of mankind into death. Shafarevich's book was published in France almost two years ago and so far no one has been found to refute it. It will shortly be published in English in the United States.

Not a Model

But should someone ask me whether I would indicate the West such as it is today as a model to my country, frankly I would have to answer negatively. No, I could not recommend your society in its present state as an ideal for the transformation of ours. Through intense suffering our country has now achieved a spiritual development of such intensity that the Western system in its present state of spiritual exhaustion does not look attractive. Even those characteristics of your life which I have just mentioned are extremely saddening.

A fact which cannot be disputed is the weakening of human beings in the West while in the East they are becoming firmer and stronger. Six decades for our people and three decades for the people of Eastern Europe; during that time we have been through a spiritual training far in advance of Western experience. Life's complexity and mortal weight have produced stronger, deeper and more interesting characters than those produced by standardized Western well-being. Therefore if our society were to be transformed into yours, it would mean an improvement in certain aspects, but also a change for the worse on some particularly significant scores. It is true, no doubt, that a society cannot remain in an abyss of lawlessness, as is the case in our country. But it is also demeaning for it to elect such mechanical legalistic smoothness as you have. After the suffering of decades of violence and oppression, the human soul longs for things higher, warmer and purer than those offered by today's mass living habits, introduced by the revolting invasion of publicity, by TV stupor and by intolerable music.

All this is visible to observers from all the worlds of our planet. The Western way of life is less and less likely to become the leading model.

There are meaningful warnings that history gives a threatened or perishing society. Such are, for instance, the decadence of art, or a lack of great statesmen. There are open and evident warnings, too. The center of your democracy and of your culture is left without electric power for a few hours only, and all of a sudden crowds of American citizens start looting and creating havoc. The smooth surface film must be very thin, then, the social system quite unstable and unhealthy.

But the fight for our planet, physical and spiritual, a fight of cosmic proportions, is not a vague matter of the future; it has already started. The forces of Evil have begun their

decisive offensive, you can feel their pressure, and yet your screens and publications are full of prescribed smiles and raised glasses. What is the joy about?

Shortsightedness

Very well known representatives of your society, such as George Kennan, say: we cannot apply moral criteria to politics. Thus we mix good and evil, right and wrong and make space for the absolute triumph of absolute Evil in the world. On the contrary, only moral criteria can help the West against communism's well planned world strategy. There are no other criteria. Practical or occasional considerations of any kind will inevitably be swept away by strategy. After a certain level of the problem has been reached, legalistic thinking induces paralysis; it prevents one from seeing the size and meaning of events.

In spite of the abundance of information, or maybe because of it, the West has difficulties in understanding reality such as it is. There have been naive predictions by some American experts who believed that Angola would become the Soviet Union's Vietnam or that Cuban expeditions in Africa would best be stopped by special U.S. courtesy to Cuba. Kennan's advice to his own country -- to begin unilateral disarmament -- belongs to the same category. If you only knew how the youngest of the Moscow Old Square [1] officials laugh at your political wizards! As to Fidel Castro, he frankly scorns the United States, sending his troops to distant adventures from his country right next to yours.

However, the most cruel mistake occurred with the failure to understand the Vietnam war. Some people sincerely wanted all wars to stop just as soon as possible; others believed that there should be room for national, or communist, self-determination in Vietnam, or in Cambodia, as we see today with particular clarity. But members of the U.S. anti-war movement wound up being involved in the betrayal of Far Eastern nations, in a genocide and in the suffering today imposed on 30 million people there. Do those convinced pacifists hear the moans coming from there? Do they understand their responsibility today? Or do they prefer not to hear? The American Intelligentsia lost its [nerve] and as a consequence thereof danger has come much closer to the United States. But there is no awareness of this. Your shortsighted politicians who signed the hasty Vietnam capitulation seemingly gave America a carefree breathing pause; however, a hundredfold Vietnam now looms over you. That small Vietnam had been a warning and an occasion to mobilize the nation's courage. But if a full-fledged America suffered a real defeat from a small communist half-country, how can the West hope to stand firm in the future?

I have had occasion already to say that in the 20th century democracy has not won any major war without help and protection from a powerful continental ally whose philosophy and ideology it did not question. In World War II against Hitler, instead of winning that war with its own forces, which would certainly have been sufficient, Western democracy grew and cultivated another enemy who would prove worse and more powerful yet, as Hitler never had so many resources and so many people, nor did he offer any attractive ideas, or have such a large number of supporters in the West -- a potential fifth column -- as the Soviet Union. At present, some Western voices already have spoken of obtaining protection from a third power against aggression in the next world conflict, if there is one; in this case the shield would be

China. But I would not wish such an outcome to any country in the world. First of all, it is again a doomed alliance with Evil; also, it would grant the United States a respite, but when at a later date China with its billion people would turn around armed with American weapons, America itself would fall prey to a genocide similar to the one perpetrated in Cambodia in our days.

Loss of Willpower

And yet -- no weapons, no matter how powerful, can help the West until it overcomes its loss of willpower. In a state of psychological weakness, weapons become a burden for the capitulating side. To defend oneself, one must also be ready to die; there is little such readiness in a society raised in the cult of material well-being. Nothing is left, then, but concessions, attempts to gain time and betrayal. Thus at the shameful Belgrade conference free Western diplomats in their weakness surrendered the line where enslaved members of Helsinki Watchgroups are sacrificing their lives.

Western thinking has become conservative: the world situation should stay as it is at any cost, there should be no changes. This debilitating dream of a status quo is the symptom of a society which has come to the end of its development. But one must be blind in order not to see that oceans no longer belong to the West, while land under its domination keeps shrinking. The two so-called world wars (they were by far not on a world scale, not yet) have meant internal self-destruction of the small, progressive West which has thus prepared its own end. The next war (which does not have to be an atomic one and I do not believe it will) may well bury Western civilization forever.

Facing such a danger, with such historical values in your past, at such a high level of realization of freedom and apparently of devotion to freedom, how is it possible to lose to such an extent the will to defend oneself?

Humanism and Its Consequences

How has this unfavorable relation of forces come about? How did the West decline from its triumphal march to its present sickness? Have there been fatal turns and losses of direction in its development? It does not seem so. The West kept advancing socially in accordance with its proclaimed intentions, with the help of brilliant technological progress. And all of a sudden it found itself in its present state of weakness.

This means that the mistake must be at the root, at the very basis of human thinking in the past centuries. I refer to the prevailing Western view of the world which was first born during the Renaissance and found its political expression from the period of the Enlightenment. It became the basis for government and social science and could be defined as rationalistic humanism or humanistic autonomy: the proclaimed and enforced autonomy of man from any higher force above him. It could also be called anthropocentricity, with man seen as the center of everything that exists.

The turn introduced by the Renaissance evidently was inevitable historically. The Middle Ages had come to a natural end by exhaustion, becoming an intolerable despotic repression of man's physical nature in favor of the spiritual one. Then, however, we turned our backs upon the Spirit and embraced all that is material with

excessive and unwarranted zeal. This new way of thinking, which had imposed on us its guidance, did not admit the existence of intrinsic evil in man nor did it see any higher task than the attainment of happiness on earth. It based modern Western civilization on the dangerous trend to worship man and his material needs. Everything beyond physical well-being and accumulation of material goods, all other human requirements and characteristics of a subtler and higher nature, were left outside the area of attention of state and social systems, as if human life did not have any superior sense. That provided access for evil, of which in our days there is a free and constant flow. Merely freedom does not in the least solve all the problems of human life and it even adds a number of new ones.

However, in early democracies, as in American democracy at the time of its birth, all individual human rights were granted because man is God's creature. That is, freedom was given to the individual conditionally, in the assumption of his constant religious responsibility. Such was the heritage of the preceding thousand years. Two hundred or even fifty years ago, it would have seemed quite impossible, in America, that an individual could be granted boundless freedom simply for the satisfaction of his instincts or whims. Subsequently, however, all such limitations were discarded everywhere in the West; a total liberation occurred from the moral heritage of Christian centuries with their great reserves of mercy and sacrifice. State systems were becoming increasingly and totally materialistic. The West ended up by truly enforcing human rights, sometimes even excessively, but man's sense of responsibility to God and society grew dimmer and dimmer. In the past decades, the legalistically selfish aspect of Western approach and thinking has reached its final dimension and the world wound up in a harsh spiritual crisis and a political impasse. All the glorified technological achievements of Progress, including the conquest of outer space, do not redeem the Twentieth century's moral poverty which no one could imagine even as late as in the Nineteenth Century.

An Unexpected Kinship

As humanism in its development became more and more materialistic, it made itself increasingly accessible to speculation and manipulation at first by socialism and then by communism. So that Karl Marx was able to say in 1844 that "communism is naturalized humanism."

This statement turned out not to be entirely senseless. One does see the same stones in the foundations of a despiritualized humanism and of any type of socialism: endless materialism; freedom from religion and religious responsibility, which under communist regimes reach the stage of anti-religious dictatorship; concentration on social structures with a seemingly scientific approach. (This is typical of the Enlightenment in the Eighteenth Century and of Marxism). Not by coincidence all of communism's meaningless pledges and oaths are about Man, with a capital M, and his earthly happiness. At first glance it seems an ugly parallel: common traits in the thinking and way of life of today's West and today's East? But such is the logic of materialistic development.

The interrelationship is such, too, that the current of materialism which is most to the left always ends up by being stronger, more attractive and victorious, because it is more consistent. Humanism without its Christian heritage cannot resist such

competition. We watch this process in the past centuries and especially in the past decades, on a world scale as the situation becomes increasingly dramatic. Liberalism was inevitably displaced by radicalism, radicalism had to surrender to socialism and socialism could never resist communism. The communist regime in the East could stand and grow due to the enthusiastic support from an enormous number of Western intellectuals who felt a kinship and refused to see communism's crimes. When they no longer could do so, they tried to justify them. In our Eastern countries, communism has suffered a complete ideological defeat; it is zero and less than zero. But Western intellectuals still look at it with interest and with empathy, and this is precisely what makes it so immensely difficult for the West to withstand the East.

Before the Turn

I am not examining here the case of a world war disaster and the changes which it would produce in society. As long as we wake up every morning under a peaceful sun, we have to lead an everyday life. There is a disaster, however, which has already been under way for quite some time. I am referring to the calamity of a despiritualized and irreligious humanistic consciousness.

To such consciousness, man is the touchstone in judging and evaluating everything on earth. Imperfect man, who is never free of pride, self-interest, envy, vanity, and dozens of other defects. We are now experiencing the consequences of mistakes which had not been noticed at the beginning of the journey. On the way from the Renaissance to our days we have enriched our experience, but we have lost the concept of a Supreme Complete Entity which used to restrain our passions and our irresponsibility. We have placed too much hope in political and social reforms, only to find out that we were being deprived of our most precious possession: our spiritual life. In the East, it is destroyed by the dealings and machinations of the ruling party. In the West, commercial interests tend to suffocate it. This is the real crisis. The split in the world is less terrible than the similarity of the disease plaguing its main sections.

If humanism were right in declaring that man is born to be happy, he would not be born to die. Since his body is doomed to die, his task on earth evidently must be of a more spiritual nature. It cannot be unrestrained enjoyment of everyday life. It cannot be the search for the best ways to obtain material goods and then cheerfully get the most out of them. It has to be the fulfillment of a permanent, earnest duty so that one's life journey may become an experience of moral growth, so that one may leave life a better human being than one started it. It is imperative to review the table of widespread human values. Its present incorrectness is astounding. It is not possible that assessment of the President's performance be reduced to the question of how much money one makes or of unlimited availability of gasoline. Only voluntary, inspired self-restraint can raise man above the world stream of materialism.

It would be retrogression to attach oneself today to the ossified formulas of the Enlightenment. Social dogmatism leaves us completely helpless in front of the trials of our times.

Even if we are spared destruction by war, our lives will have to change if we want to save life from self-destruction. We cannot avoid revising the fundamental definitions

of human life and human society. Is it true that man is above everything? Is there no Superior Spirit above him? Is it right that man's life and society's activities have to be determined by material expansion in the first place? Is it permissible to promote such expansion to the detriment of our spiritual integrity?

If the world has not come to its end, it has approached a major turn in history, equal in importance to the turn from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. It will exact from us a spiritual upsurge, we shall have to rise 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.

This ascension will be similar to climbing onto the next anthropologic stage. No one on earth has any other way left but -- upward.

Notes

[1] The Old Square in Moscow (Staraya Ploshchad') is the place where the [headquarters] of the Central Committee of the CPSU are located; it is the real name of what in the West is conventionally referred to as "the Kremlin."



Alexandr Solzhenitsyn

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1970

Nobel Lecture

English

Russian

Nobel Lecture in Literature 1970*

1

Just as that puzzled savage who has picked up - a strange cast-up from the ocean? - something unearthed from the sands? - or an obscure object fallen down from the sky? - intricate in curves, it gleams first dully and then with a bright thrust of light. Just as he turns it this way and that, turns it over, trying to discover what to do with it, trying to discover some mundane function within his own grasp, never dreaming of its higher function.

So also we, holding Art in our hands, confidently consider ourselves to be its masters; boldly we direct it, we renew, reform and manifest it; we sell it for money, use it to please those in power; turn to it at one moment for amusement - right down to popular songs and night-clubs, and at another - grabbing the nearest weapon, cork or cudgel - for the passing needs of politics and for narrow-minded social ends. But art is not defiled by our efforts, neither does it thereby depart from its true nature, but on

each occasion and in each application it gives to us a part of its secret inner light.

But shall we ever grasp the whole of that light? Who will dare to say that he has DEFINED Art, enumerated all its facets? Perhaps once upon a time someone understood and told us, but we could not remain satisfied with that for long; we listened, and neglected, and threw it out there and then, hurrying as always to exchange even the very best - if only for something new! And when we are told again the old truth, we shall not even remember that we once possessed it.

One artist sees himself as the creator of an independent spiritual world; he hoists onto his shoulders the task of creating this world, of peopling it and of bearing the all-embracing responsibility for it; but he crumples beneath it, for a mortal genius is not capable of bearing such a burden. Just as man in general, having declared himself the centre of existence, has not succeeded in creating a balanced spiritual system. And if misfortune overtakes him, he casts the blame upon the age-long disharmony of the world, upon the complexity of today's ruptured soul, or upon the stupidity of the public.

Another artist, recognizing a higher power above, gladly works as a humble apprentice beneath God's heaven; then, however, his responsibility for everything that is written or drawn, for the souls which perceive his work, is more exacting than ever. But, in return, it is not he who has created this world, not he who directs it, there is no doubt as to its foundations; the artist has merely to be more keenly aware than others of the harmony of the world, of the beauty and ugliness of the human contribution to it, and to communicate this acutely to his fellow-men. And in misfortune, and even at the depths of existence - in destitution, in prison, in sickness - his sense of stable harmony never deserts him.

But all the irrationality of art, its dazzling turns, its unpredictable discoveries, its shattering influence on human beings - they are too full of magic to be exhausted by this artist's vision of the world, by his artistic conception or by the work of his unworthy fingers.

Archaeologists have not discovered stages of human existence so early that they were without art. Right back in the early morning twilights of mankind we received it from Hands which we were too slow to discern. And we were too slow to ask: FOR WHAT PURPOSE have we been given this gift? What are we to do with it?

And they were mistaken, and will always be mistaken, who prophesy that art will disintegrate, that it will outlive its forms and die. It is we who shall die - art will remain. And shall we comprehend, even on the day of our destruction, all its facets and all its possibilities?

Not everything assumes a name. Some things lead beyond words. Art inflames even a frozen, darkened soul to a high spiritual experience. Through art we are sometimes visited - dimly, briefly - by revelations such as cannot be produced by rational thinking.

Like that little looking-glass from the fairy-tales: look into it and you will see - not yourself - but for one second, the Inaccessible, whither no man can ride, no man fly. And only the soul gives a groan...

2

One day Dostoevsky threw out the enigmatic remark: "Beauty will save the world". What sort of a statement is that? For a long time I considered it mere words. How could that be possible? When in bloodthirsty history did beauty ever save anyone from anything? Ennobled, uplifted, yes - but whom has it saved?

There is, however, a certain peculiarity in the essence of beauty, a peculiarity in the status of art: namely, the convincingness of a true work of art is completely irrefutable and it forces even an opposing heart to surrender. It is possible to compose an outwardly smooth and elegant political speech, a headstrong article, a social program, or a philosophical system on the basis of both a mistake and a lie. What is hidden, what distorted, will not immediately become obvious.

Then a contradictory speech, article, program, a differently constructed philosophy rallies in opposition - and all just as elegant and smooth, and once again it works. Which is why such things are both trusted and mistrusted.

In vain to reiterate what does not reach the heart.

But a work of art bears within itself its own verification: conceptions which are devised or stretched do not stand being portrayed in images, they all come crashing down, appear sickly and pale, convince no one. But those works of art which have scooped up the truth and presented it to us as a living force - they take hold of us, compel us, and nobody ever, not even in ages to come, will appear to refute them.

So perhaps that ancient trinity of Truth, Goodness and Beauty is not simply an empty, faded formula as we thought in the days of our self-confident, materialistic youth? If the tops of these three trees converge, as the scholars maintained, but the too blatant, too direct stems of Truth and Goodness are crushed, cut down, not allowed through - then perhaps the fantastic, unpredictable, unexpected stems of Beauty will push through and soar TO THAT VERY SAME PLACE, and in so doing will fulfil the work of all three?

In that case Dostoevsky's remark, "Beauty will save the world", was not a careless phrase but a prophecy? After all HE was granted to see much, a man of fantastic illumination.

And in that case art, literature might really be able to help the world today?

It is the small insight which, over the years, I have succeeded in gaining into this matter that I shall attempt to lay before you here today.

3

In order to mount this platform from which the Nobel lecture is read, a platform offered to far from every writer and only once in a lifetime, I have climbed not three or four makeshift steps, but hundreds and even thousands of them; unyielding, precipitous, frozen steps, leading out of the darkness and cold where it was my fate to survive, while others - perhaps with a greater gift and stronger than I - have perished. Of them, I myself met but a few on the Archipelago of GULAG¹, shattered into its fractionary multitude of islands; and beneath the millstone of shadowing and mistrust I did not talk to them all, of some I only heard, of others still I only guessed. Those who fell into that abyss already bearing a literary name are at least known, but how many were never recognized, never once mentioned in public? And virtually no one managed to return. A whole national literature remained there, cast into oblivion not only without a grave, but without even underclothes, naked, with a number tagged on to its toe. Russian literature did not cease for a moment, but from the outside it appeared a wasteland! Where a peaceful forest could have grown, there remained, after all the felling, two or three trees overlooked by chance.

And as I stand here today, accompanied by the shadows of the fallen, with bowed head allowing others who were worthy before to pass ahead of me to this place, as I stand here, how am I to divine and to express what THEY would have wished to say?

This obligation has long weighed upon us, and we have understood it. In the words of Vladimir Solov'ev:

Even in chains we ourselves must complete
That circle which the gods have mapped out for us.

Frequently, in painful camp seethings, in a column of prisoners, when chains of lanterns pierced the gloom of the evening frosts, there would well up inside us the words that we should like to cry out to the whole world, if the whole world could hear one of us. Then it seemed so clear: what our successful ambassador would say, and how the world would immediately respond with its comment. Our horizon embraced quite distinctly both physical things and spiritual movements, and it saw no lop-sidedness in the indivisible world. These ideas did not come from books, neither were they imported for the sake of coherence. They were formed in conversations with people now dead, in prison cells and by forest fires, they were tested against THAT life, they grew out of THAT existence.

When at last the outer pressure grew a little weaker, my and our horizon broadened and gradually, albeit through a minute chink, we saw and knew "the whole world". And to our amazement the whole

world was not at all as we had expected, as we had hoped; that is to say a world living "not by that", a world leading "not there", a world which could exclaim at the sight of a muddy swamp, "what a delightful little puddle!", at concrete neck stocks, "what an exquisite necklace!"; but instead a world where some weep inconsolable tears and others dance to a light-hearted musical.

How could this happen? Why the yawning gap? Were we insensitive? Was the world insensitive? Or is it due to language differences? Why is it that people are not able to hear each other's every distinct utterance? Words cease to sound and run away like water - without taste, colour, smell. Without trace.

As I have come to understand this, so through the years has changed and changed again the structure, content and tone of my potential speech. The speech I give today.

And it has little in common with its original plan, conceived on frosty camp evenings.

4

From time immemorial man has been made in such a way that his vision of the world, so long as it has not been instilled under hypnosis, his motivations and scale of values, his actions and intentions are determined by his personal and group experience of life. As the Russian saying goes, "Do not believe your brother, believe your own crooked eye." And that is the most sound basis for an understanding of the world around us and of human conduct in it. And during the long epochs when our world lay spread out in mystery and wilderness, before it became encroached by common lines of communication, before it was transformed into a single, convulsively pulsating lump - men, relying on experience, ruled without mishap within their limited areas, within their communities, within their societies, and finally on their national territories. At that time it was possible for individual human beings to perceive and accept a general scale of values, to distinguish between what is considered normal, what incredible; what is cruel and what lies beyond the boundaries of wickedness; what is honesty, what deceit. And although the scattered peoples led extremely different lives and their social values were often strikingly at odds, just as their systems of weights and measures did not agree, still these discrepancies surprised only occasional travellers, were reported in journals under the name of wonders, and bore no danger to mankind which was not yet one.

But now during the past few decades, imperceptibly, suddenly, mankind has become one - hopefully one and dangerously one - so that the concussions and inflammations of one of its parts are almost instantaneously passed on to others, sometimes lacking in any kind of necessary immunity. Mankind has become one, but not steadfastly one as communities or even nations used to be; not united through years of mutual experience, neither through possession of a single eye, affectionately called crooked, nor yet through a common native language, but, surpassing all barriers, through international broadcasting and print. An avalanche of events descends upon us - in one minute half

the world hears of their splash. But the yardstick by which to measure those events and to evaluate them in accordance with the laws of unfamiliar parts of the world - this is not and cannot be conveyed via soundwaves and in newspaper columns. For these yardsticks were matured and assimilated over too many years of too specific conditions in individual countries and societies; they cannot be exchanged in mid-air. In the various parts of the world men apply their own hard-earned values to events, and they judge stubbornly, confidently, only according to their own scales of values and never according to any others.

And if there are not many such different scales of values in the world, there are at least several; one for evaluating events near at hand, another for events far away; aging societies possess one, young societies another; unsuccessful people one, successful people another. The divergent scales of values scream in discordance, they dazzle and daze us, and in order that it might not be painful we steer clear of all other values, as though from insanity, as though from illusion, and we confidently judge the whole world according to our own home values. Which is why we take for the greater, more painful and less bearable disaster not that which is in fact greater, more painful and less bearable, but that which lies closest to us. Everything which is further away, which does not threaten this very day to invade our threshold - with all its groans, its stifled cries, its destroyed lives, even if it involves millions of victims - this we consider on the whole to be perfectly bearable and of tolerable proportions.

In one part of the world, not so long ago, under persecutions not inferior to those of the ancient Romans', hundreds of thousands of silent Christians gave up their lives for their belief in God. In the other hemisphere a certain madman, (and no doubt he is not alone), speeds across the ocean to DELIVER us from religion - with a thrust of steel into the high priest! He has calculated for each and every one of us according to his personal scale of values!

That which from a distance, according to one scale of values, appears as enviable and flourishing freedom, at close quarters, and according to other values, is felt to be infuriating constraint calling for buses to be overthrown. That which in one part of the world might represent a dream of incredible prosperity, in another has the exasperating effect of wild exploitation demanding immediate strike. There are different scales of values for natural catastrophes: a flood craving two hundred thousand lives seems less significant than our local accident. There are different scales of values for personal insults: sometimes even an ironic smile or a dismissive gesture is humiliating, while for others cruel beatings are forgiven as an unfortunate joke. There are different scales of values for punishment and wickedness: according to one, a month's arrest, banishment to the country, or an isolation-cell where one is fed on white rolls and milk, shatters the imagination and fills the newspaper columns with rage. While according to another, prison sentences of twenty-five years, isolation-cells where the walls are covered with ice and the prisoners stripped to their underclothes, lunatic asylums for the sane, and countless unreasonable people who for some reason will keep running away, shot on the frontiers - all this is common and accepted. While the mind is especially at peace concerning that exotic part of the world about which we know virtually nothing, from which we do not even receive news of events, but

only the trivial, out-of-date guesses of a few correspondents.

Yet we cannot reproach human vision for this duality, for this dumbfounded incomprehension of another man's distant grief, man is just made that way. But for the whole of mankind, compressed into a single lump, such mutual incomprehension presents the threat of imminent and violent destruction. One world, one mankind cannot exist in the face of six, four or even two scales of values: we shall be torn apart by this disparity of rhythm, this disparity of vibrations.

A man with two hearts is not for this world, neither shall we be able to live side by side on one Earth.

5

But who will co-ordinate these value scales, and how? Who will create for mankind one system of interpretation, valid for good and evil deeds, for the unbearable and the bearable, as they are differentiated today? Who will make clear to mankind what is really heavy and intolerable and what only grazes the skin locally? Who will direct the anger to that which is most terrible and not to that which is nearer? Who might succeed in transferring such an understanding beyond the limits of his own human experience? Who might succeed in impressing upon a bigoted, stubborn human creature the distant joy and grief of others, an understanding of dimensions and deceptions which he himself has never experienced? Propaganda, constraint, scientific proof - all are useless. But fortunately there does exist such a means in our world! That means is art. That means is literature.

They can perform a miracle: they can overcome man's detrimental peculiarity of learning only from personal experience so that the experience of other people passes him by in vain. From man to man, as he completes his brief spell on Earth, art transfers the whole weight of an unfamiliar, lifelong experience with all its burdens, its colours, its sap of life; it recreates in the flesh an unknown experience and allows us to possess it as our own.

And even more, much more than that; both countries and whole continents repeat each other's mistakes with time lapses which can amount to centuries. Then, one would think, it would all be so obvious! But no; that which some nations have already experienced, considered and rejected, is suddenly discovered by others to be the latest word. And here again, the only substitute for an experience we ourselves have never lived through is art, literature. They possess a wonderful ability: beyond distinctions of language, custom, social structure, they can convey the life experience of one whole nation to another. To an inexperienced nation they can convey a harsh national trial lasting many decades, at best sparing an entire nation from a superfluous, or mistaken, or even disastrous course, thereby curtailing the meanderings of human history.

It is this great and noble property of art that I urgently recall to you today from the Nobel tribune.

And literature conveys irrefutable condensed experience in yet another invaluable direction; namely, from generation to generation. Thus it becomes the living memory of the nation. Thus it preserves and kindles within itself the flame of her spent history, in a form which is safe from deformation and slander. In this way literature, together with language, protects the soul of the nation.

(In recent times it has been fashionable to talk of the levelling of nations, of the disappearance of different races in the melting-pot of contemporary civilization. I do not agree with this opinion, but its discussion remains another question. Here it is merely fitting to say that the disappearance of nations would have impoverished us no less than if all men had become alike, with one personality and one face. Nations are the wealth of mankind, its collective personalities; the very least of them wears its own special colours and bears within itself a special facet of divine intention.)

But woe to that nation whose literature is disturbed by the intervention of power. Because that is not just a violation against "freedom of print", it is the closing down of the heart of the nation, a slashing to pieces of its memory. The nation ceases to be mindful of itself, it is deprived of its spiritual unity, and despite a supposedly common language, compatriots suddenly cease to understand one another. Silent generations grow old and die without ever having talked about themselves, either to each other or to their descendants. When writers such as Achmatova and Zamjatin - interred alive throughout their lives - are condemned to create in silence until they die, never hearing the echo of their written words, then that is not only their personal tragedy, but a sorrow to the whole nation, a danger to the whole nation.

In some cases moreover - when as a result of such a silence the whole of history ceases to be understood in its entirety - it is a danger to the whole of mankind.

6

At various times and in various countries there have arisen heated, angry and exquisite debates as to whether art and the artist should be free to live for themselves, or whether they should be for ever mindful of their duty towards society and serve it albeit in an unprejudiced way. For me there is no dilemma, but I shall refrain from raising once again the train of arguments. One of the most brilliant addresses on this subject was actually [Albert Camus'](#) Nobel speech, and I would happily subscribe to his conclusions. Indeed, Russian literature has for several decades manifested an inclination not to become too lost in contemplation of itself, not to flutter about too frivolously. I am not ashamed to continue this tradition to the best of my ability. Russian literature has long been familiar with the notions that a writer can do much within his society, and that it is his duty to do so.

Let us not violate the RIGHT of the artist to express exclusively his own experiences and introspections, disregarding everything that happens in the world beyond. Let us not DEMAND of the artist, but - reproach, beg, urge and entice him - that we may be allowed to do. After all, only in part

does he himself develop his talent; the greater part of it is blown into him at birth as a finished product, and the gift of talent imposes responsibility on his free will. Let us assume that the artist does not OWE anybody anything: nevertheless, it is painful to see how, by retiring into his self-made worlds or the spaces of his subjective whims, he CAN surrender the real world into the hands of men who are mercenary, if not worthless, if not insane.

Our Twentieth Century has proved to be more cruel than preceding centuries, and the first fifty years have not erased all its horrors. Our world is rent asunder by those same old cave-age emotions of greed, envy, lack of control, mutual hostility which have picked up in passing respectable pseudonyms like class struggle, racial conflict, struggle of the masses, trade-union disputes. The primeval refusal to accept a compromise has been turned into a theoretical principle and is considered the virtue of orthodoxy. It demands millions of sacrifices in ceaseless civil wars, it drums into our souls that there is no such thing as unchanging, universal concepts of goodness and justice, that they are all fluctuating and inconstant. Therefore the rule - always do what's most profitable to your party. Any professional group no sooner sees a convenient opportunity to BREAK OFF A PIECE, even if it be unearned, even if it be superfluous, than it breaks it off there and then and no matter if the whole of society comes tumbling down. As seen from the outside, the amplitude of the tossings of western society is approaching that point beyond which the system becomes metastable and must fall. Violence, less and less embarrassed by the limits imposed by centuries of lawfulness, is brazenly and victoriously striding across the whole world, unconcerned that its infertility has been demonstrated and proved many times in history. What is more, it is not simply crude power that triumphs abroad, but its exultant justification. The world is being inundated by the brazen conviction that power can do anything, justice nothing. Dostoevsky's DEVILS - apparently a provincial nightmare fantasy of the last century - are crawling across the whole world in front of our very eyes, infesting countries where they could not have been dreamed of; and by means of the hijackings, kidnappings, explosions and fires of recent years they are announcing their determination to shake and destroy civilization! And they may well succeed. The young, at an age when they have not yet any experience other than sexual, when they do not yet have years of personal suffering and personal understanding behind them, are jubilantly repeating our depraved Russian blunders of the Nineteenth Century, under the impression that they are discovering something new. They acclaim the latest wretched degradation on the part of the Chinese Red Guards as a joyous example. In shallow lack of understanding of the age-old essence of mankind, in the naive confidence of inexperienced hearts they cry: let us drive away THOSE cruel, greedy oppressors, governments, and the new ones (we!), having laid aside grenades and rifles, will be just and understanding. Far from it! . . . But of those who have lived more and understand, those who could oppose these young - many do not dare oppose, they even suck up, anything not to appear "conservative". Another Russian phenomenon of the Nineteenth Century which Dostoevsky called SLAVERY TO PROGRESSIVE QUIRKS.

The spirit of Munich has by no means retreated into the past; it was not merely a brief episode. I even venture to say that the spirit of Munich prevails in the Twentieth Century. The timid civilized world has found nothing with which to oppose the onslaught of a sudden revival of barefaced barbarity, other

than concessions and smiles. The spirit of Munich is a sickness of the will of successful people, it is the daily condition of those who have given themselves up to the thirst after prosperity at any price, to material well-being as the chief goal of earthly existence. Such people - and there are many in today's world - elect passivity and retreat, just so as their accustomed life might drag on a bit longer, just so as not to step over the threshold of hardship today - and tomorrow, you'll see, it will all be all right. (But it will never be all right! The price of cowardice will only be evil; we shall reap courage and victory only when we dare to make sacrifices.)

And on top of this we are threatened by destruction in the fact that the physically compressed, strained world is not allowed to blend spiritually; the molecules of knowledge and sympathy are not allowed to jump over from one half to the other. This presents a rampant danger: THE SUPPRESSION OF INFORMATION between the parts of the planet. Contemporary science knows that suppression of information leads to entropy and total destruction. Suppression of information renders international signatures and agreements illusory; within a muffled zone it costs nothing to reinterpret any agreement, even simpler - to forget it, as though it had never really existed. (Orwell understood this supremely.) A muffled zone is, as it were, populated not by inhabitants of the Earth, but by an expeditionary corps from Mars; the people know nothing intelligent about the rest of the Earth and are prepared to go and trample it down in the holy conviction that they come as "liberators".

A quarter of a century ago, in the great hopes of mankind, the United Nations Organization was born. Alas, in an immoral world, this too grew up to be immoral. It is not a United Nations Organization but a United Governments Organization where all governments stand equal; those which are freely elected, those imposed forcibly, and those which have seized power with weapons. Relying on the mercenary partiality of the majority UNO jealously guards the freedom of some nations and neglects the freedom of others. As a result of an obedient vote it declined to undertake the investigation of private appeals - the groans, screams and beseechings of humble individual PLAIN PEOPLE - not large enough a catch for such a great organization. UNO made no effort to make the Declaration of Human Rights, its best document in twenty-five years, into an OBLIGATORY condition of membership confronting the governments. Thus it betrayed those humble people into the will of the governments which they had not chosen.

It would seem that the appearance of the contemporary world rests solely in the hands of the scientists; all mankind's technical steps are determined by them. It would seem that it is precisely on the international goodwill of scientists, and not of politicians, that the direction of the world should depend. All the more so since the example of the few shows how much could be achieved were they all to pull together. But no; scientists have not manifested any clear attempt to become an important, independently active force of mankind. They spend entire congresses in renouncing the sufferings of others; better to stay safely within the precincts of science. That same spirit of Munich has spread above them its enfeebling wings.

What then is the place and role of the writer in this cruel, dynamic, split world on the brink of its ten

destructions? After all we have nothing to do with letting off rockets, we do not even push the lowliest of hand-carts, we are quite scorned by those who respect only material power. Is it not natural for us too to step back, to lose faith in the steadfastness of goodness, in the indivisibility of truth, and to just impart to the world our bitter, detached observations: how mankind has become hopelessly corrupt, how men have degenerated, and how difficult it is for the few beautiful and refined souls to live amongst them?

But we have not even recourse to this flight. Anyone who has once taken up the WORD can never again evade it; a writer is not the detached judge of his compatriots and contemporaries, he is an accomplice to all the evil committed in his native land or by his countrymen. And if the tanks of his fatherland have flooded the asphalt of a foreign capital with blood, then the brown spots have slapped against the face of the writer forever. And if one fatal night they suffocated his sleeping, trusting Friend, then the palms of the writer bear the bruises from that rope. And if his young fellow citizens breezily declare the superiority of depravity over honest work, if they give themselves over to drugs or seize hostages, then their stink mingles with the breath of the writer.

Shall we have the temerity to declare that we are not responsible for the sores of the present-day world?

7

However, I am cheered by a vital awareness of WORLD LITERATURE as of a single huge heart, beating out the cares and troubles of our world, albeit presented and perceived differently in each of its corners.

Apart from age-old national literatures there existed, even in past ages, the conception of world literature as an anthology skirting the heights of the national literatures, and as the sum total of mutual literary influences. But there occurred a lapse in time: readers and writers became acquainted with writers of other tongues only after a time lapse, sometimes lasting centuries, so that mutual influences were also delayed and the anthology of national literary heights was revealed only in the eyes of descendants, not of contemporaries.

But today, between the writers of one country and the writers and readers of another, there is a reciprocity if not instantaneous then almost so. I experience this with myself. Those of my books which, alas, have not been printed in my own country have soon found a responsive, worldwide audience, despite hurried and often bad translations. Such distinguished western writers as Heinrich Böll have undertaken critical analysis of them. All these last years, when my work and freedom have not come crashing down, when contrary to the laws of gravity they have hung suspended as though on air, as though on NOTHING - on the invisible dumb tension of a sympathetic public membrane; then it was with grateful warmth, and quite unexpectedly for myself, that I learnt of the further

support of the international brotherhood of writers. On my fiftieth birthday I was astonished to receive congratulations from well-known western writers. No pressure on me came to pass by unnoticed. During my dangerous weeks of exclusion from the Writers' Union the WALL OF DEFENCE advanced by the world's prominent writers protected me from worse persecutions; and Norwegian writers and artists hospitably prepared a roof for me, in the event of my threatened exile being put into effect. Finally even the advancement of my name for the Nobel Prize was raised not in the country where I live and write, but by Francois Mauriac and his colleagues. And later still entire national writers' unions have expressed their support for me.

Thus I have understood and felt that world literature is no longer an abstract anthology, nor a generalization invented by literary historians; it is rather a certain common body and a common spirit, a living heartfelt unity reflecting the growing unity of mankind. State frontiers still turn crimson, heated by electric wire and bursts of machine fire; and various ministries of internal affairs still think that literature too is an "internal affair" falling under their jurisdiction; newspaper headlines still display: "No right to interfere in our internal affairs!" Whereas there are no INTERNAL AFFAIRS left on our crowded Earth! And mankind's sole salvation lies in everyone making everything his business; in the people of the East being vitally concerned with what is thought in the West, the people of the West vitally concerned with what goes on in the East. And literature, as one of the most sensitive, responsive instruments possessed by the human creature, has been one of the first to adopt, to assimilate, to catch hold of this feeling of a growing unity of mankind. And so I turn with confidence to the world literature of today - to hundreds of friends whom I have never met in the flesh and whom I may never see.

Friends! Let us try to help if we are worth anything at all! Who from time immemorial has constituted the uniting, not the dividing, strength in your countries, lacerated by discordant parties, movements, castes and groups? There in its essence is the position of writers: expressers of their native language - the chief binding force of the nation, of the very earth its people occupy, and at best of its national spirit.

I believe that world literature has it in its power to help mankind, in these its troubled hours, to see itself as it really is, notwithstanding the indoctrinations of prejudiced people and parties. World literature has it in its power to convey condensed experience from one land to another so that we might cease to be split and dazzled, that the different scales of values might be made to agree, and one nation learn correctly and concisely the true history of another with such strength of recognition and painful awareness as it had itself experienced the same, and thus might it be spared from repeating the same cruel mistakes. And perhaps under such conditions we artists will be able to cultivate within ourselves a field of vision to embrace the WHOLE WORLD: in the centre observing like any other human being that which lies nearby, at the edges we shall begin to draw in that which is happening in the rest of the world. And we shall correlate, and we shall observe world proportions.

And who, if not writers, are to pass judgement - not only on their unsuccessful governments, (in some

states this is the easiest way to earn one's bread, the occupation of any man who is not lazy), but also on the people themselves, in their cowardly humiliation or self-satisfied weakness? Who is to pass judgement on the light-weight sprints of youth, and on the young pirates brandishing their knives?

We shall be told: what can literature possibly do against the ruthless onslaught of open violence? But let us not forget that violence does not live alone and is not capable of living alone: it is necessarily interwoven with falsehood. Between them lies the most intimate, the deepest of natural bonds. Violence finds its only refuge in falsehood, falsehood its only support in violence. Any man who has once acclaimed violence as his METHOD must inexorably choose falsehood as his PRINCIPLE. At its birth violence acts openly and even with pride. But no sooner does it become strong, firmly established, than it senses the rarefaction of the air around it and it cannot continue to exist without descending into a fog of lies, clothing them in sweet talk. It does not always, not necessarily, openly throttle the throat, more often it demands from its subjects only an oath of allegiance to falsehood, only complicity in falsehood.

And the simple step of a simple courageous man is not to partake in falsehood, not to support false actions! Let THAT enter the world, let it even reign in the world - but not with my help. But writers and artists can achieve more: they can CONQUER FALSEHOOD! In the struggle with falsehood art always did win and it always does win! Openly, irrefutably for everyone! Falsehood can hold out against much in this world, but not against art.

And no sooner will falsehood be dispersed than the nakedness of violence will be revealed in all its ugliness - and violence, decrepit, will fall.

That is why, my friends, I believe that we are able to help the world in its white-hot hour. Not by making the excuse of possessing no weapons, and not by giving ourselves over to a frivolous life - but by going to war!

Proverbs about truth are well-loved in Russian. They give steady and sometimes striking expression to the not inconsiderable harsh national experience:

ONE WORD OF TRUTH SHALL OUTWEIGH THE WHOLE WORLD.

And it is here, on an imaginary fantasy, a breach of the principle of the conservation of mass and energy, that I base both my own activity and my appeal to the writers of the whole world.

*Delivered only to the [Swedish Academy](#) and not actually given as a lecture.

1. The Central Administration of Corrective Labour Camps.

From *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1968-1980*, Editor-in-Charge Tore Frängsmyr, Editor Sture Allén, World Scientific Publishing Co., Singapore, 1993

22. Αυγούστου 2007 || 17.15

SPIEGEL INTERVIEW WITH ALEXANDER SOLZHENITSYN

In an interview with SPIEGEL, prominent Russian writer and Nobel laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn discusses Russia's turbulent history, Putin's version of democracy and his attitude to life and death.

SPIEGEL: Alexander Isayevich, when we came in we found you at work. It seems that even at the age of 88 you still feel this need to work, even though your health doesn't allow you to walk around your home. What do you derive your strength from?

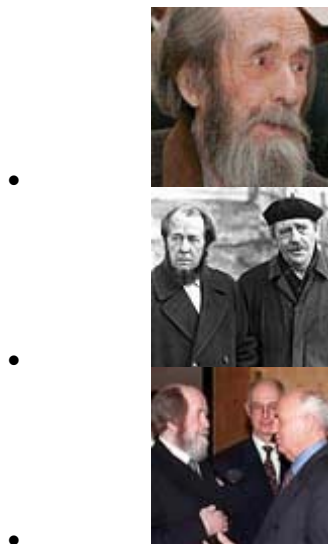
Solzhenitsyn: I have always had that inner drive, since my birth. And I have always devoted myself gladly to work -- to work and to the struggle.

SPIEGEL: There are four tables in this space alone. In your new book "My American Years," which will be published in Germany this fall, you recollect that you used to write even while walking in the forest.

Solzhenitsyn: When I was in the gulag I would sometimes even write on stone walls. I used to write on scraps of paper, then I memorized the contents and destroyed the scraps.

SPIEGEL: And your strength did not leave you even in moments of enormous desperation?

PHOTO GALLERY: THE AUTHOR WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD



Solzhenitsyn: Yes. I would often think: Whatever the outcome is going to be, let it be. And then things would turn out all right. It looks like some good came out of it.

SPIEGEL: I am not sure you were of the same opinion when in February 1945 the military secret service arrested Captain Solzhenitsyn in Eastern Prussia. Because, in his letters from the front, Solzhenitsyn was unflattering about Josef Stalin, and the sentence for that was eight years in the prison camps.

Solzhenitsyn: It was south of Wormditt. We had just broken out of a German encirclement and were marching to Königsberg (now Kaliningrad) when I was arrested. I was always optimistic. And I held to and was guided by my views.

SPIEGEL: What views?

Solzhenitsyn: Of course, my views developed in the course of time. But I have always believed in what I did and never acted against my conscience.

SPIEGEL: Thirteen years ago when you returned from exile, you were disappointed to see the new Russia. You turned down a prize proposed by Gorbachev, and you also refused to accept an award Yeltsin wanted to give you. Yet now you have accepted the State Prize which was awarded to you by Putin, the former head of the FSB intelligence agency, whose predecessor the KGB persecuted and denounced you so cruelly. How does this all fit together?

FROM THE MAGAZINE

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Solzhenitsyn: The prize in 1990 was proposed not by Gorbachev, but by the Council of Ministers of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, then a part of the USSR. The prize was to be for "The Gulag Archipelago." I declined the proposal, since I could not accept an award for a book written in the blood of millions.

In 1998, it was the country's low point, with people in misery; this was the year when I published the book "Russia in Collapse." Yeltsin decreed I be honored the highest state order. I replied that I was unable to receive an award from a government that had led Russia into such dire straits.

The current State Prize is awarded not by the president personally, but by a community of top experts. The Council on Science that nominated me for the award and the Council on Culture that supported the idea include some of the most highly respected people of the country, all of them authorities in their respective disciplines. The president, as head of state, awards the laureates on the national holiday. In accepting the award I expressed the hope that the bitter Russian experience, which I have been studying and describing all my life, will be for us a lesson that keeps us from new disastrous breakdowns.

Vladimir Putin -- yes, he was an officer of the intelligence services, but he was not a KGB investigator, nor was he the head of a camp in the gulag. As for service in foreign intelligence, that is not a negative in any country -- sometimes it even draws praise. George Bush Sr. was not much criticized for being the ex-head of the CIA, for example.

SPIEGEL: All your life you have called on the authorities to repent for the millions of victims of the gulag and communist terror. Was this call really heard?

Solzhenitsyn: I have grown used to the fact that, throughout the world, public repentance is the most unacceptable option for the modern politician.

SPIEGEL: The current Russian president says the collapse of the Soviet Union was the largest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century. He says it is high time to stop this masochistic brooding over the past, especially since there are attempts "from outside," as he puts it, to provoke an unjustified remorse among Russians. Does this not just help those who want people to forget everything that took place during the country's Soviet past?

Solzhenitsyn: Well, there is growing concern all over the world as to how the United States will handle its new role as the world's only superpower, which it became as a result of geopolitical changes. As for "brooding over the past," alas, that conflation of "Soviet" and "Russian," against which I spoke so often in the 1970s, has not passed away either in the West, or in the ex-socialist countries, or in the former Soviet republics. The elder political generation in communist countries was not ready for repentance, while the new generation is only too happy to voice grievances and level accusations, with present-day Moscow a convenient target. They behave as if they heroically liberated themselves and lead a new life now, while Moscow has remained communist. Nevertheless, I dare hope that this unhealthy phase will soon be over, that all the peoples who have lived through communism will understand that communism is to blame for the bitter pages of their history.

SPIEGEL: Including the Russians.

Solzhenitsyn: If we could all take a sober look at our history, then we would no longer see this nostalgic attitude to the Soviet past that predominates now among the less affected part of our society. Nor would the Eastern European countries and former USSR republics feel the need to see in historical Russia the source of their misfortunes. One should not ascribe the evil deeds of individual leaders or political regimes to an innate fault of the Russian people and their country. One should not attribute this to the "sick psychology" of the Russians, as is often done in the West. All these regimes in Russia could only survive by imposing a bloody terror. We should clearly understand that only the voluntary and conscientious acceptance by a people of its guilt can ensure the healing of a nation. Unremitting reproaches from outside, on the other hand, are counterproductive.

Part 2: 'The October Revolution is a Myth'



DPA

Alexander Solzhenitsyn chats with Mikhail Gorbachev during a reception in honour of Solzhenitsyn at the Swedish embassy in Moscow.

SPIEGEL: To accept one's guilt presupposes that one has enough information about one's own past. However, historians are complaining that Moscow's archives are not as accessible now as they were in the 1990's.

Solzhenitsyn: It's a complicated issue. There is no doubt, however, that a revolution in archives took place in Russia over the last 20 years. Thousands of files have been opened; the researchers now have access to hundreds and thousands of previously classified documents. Hundreds of monographs that make these documents public have already been published or are in preparation. Alongside the declassified documents of the 1990's, there were many others published which never went through the declassification process. Dmitri Volkogonov, the military historian, and Alexander Yakovlev, the ex-member of the Politburo -- these people had enough influence and authority to get access to any files, and society is grateful to them for their valuable publications.

As for the last few years, no one has been able to bypass the declassification procedure. Unfortunately, this procedure takes longer than one would like. Nevertheless the files of the country's most important archives, the National Archives of the Russian Federation (GARF), are as accessible now as in the 1990's. The FSB sent 100,000 criminal-investigation materials to GARF in the late 1990s. These documents remain available for both citizens and researchers. In 2004-2005 GARF published the seven-volume "History of Stalin's Gulag." I cooperated with this publication and I can assure you that these volumes are as comprehensive and reliable as they can be. Researchers all over the world rely on this edition.

SPIEGEL: About 90 years ago, Russia was shaken first by the February Revolution and then by the October Revolution. These events run like a leitmotif through your works. A few months ago in a long article you reiterated your thesis once again: Communism was not the result of the previous Russian political regime; the Bolshevik Revolution was made

possible only by Kerensky's poor governance in 1917. If one follows this line of thinking, then Lenin was only an accidental person, who was only able to come to Russia and seize power here with German support. Have we understood you correctly?

Solzhenitsyn: No, you have not. Only an extraordinary person can turn opportunity into reality. Lenin and Trotsky were exceptionally nimble and vigorous politicians who managed in a short period of time to use the weakness of Kerensky's government. But allow me to correct you: the "October Revolution" is a myth generated by the winners, the Bolsheviks, and swallowed whole by progressive circles in the West. On Oct. 25, 1917, a violent 24-hour coup d'état took place in Petrograd. It was brilliantly and thoroughly planned by Leon Trotsky -- Lenin was still in hiding then to avoid being brought to justice for treason. What we call "the Russian Revolution of 1917" was actually the February Revolution.

The reasons driving this revolution do indeed have their source in Russia's pre-revolutionary condition, and I have never stated otherwise. The February Revolution had deep roots -- I have shown that in "The Red Wheel." First among these was the long-term mutual distrust between those in power and the educated society, a bitter distrust that rendered impossible any compromise, any constructive solutions for the state. And the greatest responsibility, then, of course falls on the authorities: Who if not the captain is to blame for a shipwreck? So you may indeed say that the February Revolution in its causes was "the results of the previous Russian political regime."

But this does not mean that Lenin was "an accidental person" by any means; or that the financial participation of Emperor Wilhelm was inconsequential. There was nothing natural for Russia in the October Revolution. Rather, the revolution broke Russia's back. The Red Terror unleashed by its leaders, their willingness to drown Russia in blood, is the first and foremost proof of it.

SPIEGEL: Your recent two-volume work "200 Years Together" was an attempt to overcome a taboo against discussing the common history of Russians and Jews. These two volumes have provoked mainly perplexity in the West. You say the Jews are the leading force of global capital and they are among the foremost destroyers of the bourgeoisie. Are we to conclude from your rich array of sources that the Jews carry more responsibility than others for the failed Soviet experiment?

Solzhenitsyn: I avoid exactly that which your question implies: I do not call for any sort of scorekeeping or comparisons between the moral responsibility of one people or another; moreover, I completely exclude the notion of responsibility of one nation towards another. All I am calling for is self-reflection.

You can get the answer to your question from the book itself: "Every people must answer morally for all of its past -- including that past which is shameful. Answer by what means? By attempting to comprehend: How could such a thing have been allowed? Where in all this is our error? And could it happen again? It is in that spirit, specifically, that it would

behoove the Jewish people to answer, both for the revolutionary cutthroats and the ranks willing to serve them. Not to answer before other peoples, but to oneself, to one's consciousness, and before God. Just as we Russians must answer -- for the pogroms, for those merciless arsonist peasants, for those crazed revolutionary soldiers, for those savage sailors."

SPIEGEL: In our opinion, out of all your works, "The Gulag Archipelago" provoked the greatest public resonance. In this book you showed the misanthropic nature of the Soviet dictatorship. Looking back today, can you say to what extent it has contributed to the defeat of communism in the world?

Solzhenitsyn: You should not address this question to me -- an author cannot give such evaluations.

SPIEGEL: To paraphrase something you once said, the dark history of the 20th century had to be endured by Russia for the sake of mankind. Have the Russians learned the lessons of the two revolutions and their consequences?

Solzhenitsyn: It seems they are starting to. A great number of publications and movies on the history of the 20th century -- albeit of uneven quality -- are evidence of a growing demand. Quite recently, the state-owned TV channel "Russia" aired a series based on Varlam Shalamov's works, showing the terrible, cruel truth about Stalin's camps. It was not watered down.

And, for instance, since last February I have been surprised and impressed by the large-scale, heated and long-lasting discussions that my previously written and now republished article on the February Revolution has provoked. I was pleased to see the wide range of opinions, including those opposed to mine, since they demonstrate the eagerness to understand the past, without which there can be no meaningful future.

Part 3: 'Putin Inherited a Ransacked Country'



Solzhenitsyn (left) together with the German writer Heinrich Böll in 1974 after Solzhenitsyn had been expelled from the Soviet Union.

SPIEGEL: How do you assess the period of Putin's governance in comparison with his predecessors Yeltsin and Gorbachev?

Solzhenitsyn: Gorbachev's administration was amazingly politically naïve, inexperienced and irresponsible towards the country. It was not governance but a thoughtless renunciation of power. The admiration of the West in return only strengthened his conviction that his approach was right. But let us be clear that it was Gorbachev, and not Yeltsin, as is now widely being claimed, who first gave freedom of speech and movement to the citizens of our country.

Yeltsin's period was characterized by a no less irresponsible attitude to people's lives, but in other ways. In his haste to have private rather than state ownership as quickly as possible, Yeltsin started a mass, multi-billion-dollar fire sale of the national patrimony. Wanting to gain the support of regional leaders, Yeltsin called directly for separatism and passed laws that encouraged and empowered the collapse of the Russian state. This, of course, deprived Russia of its historical role for which it had worked so hard, and lowered its standing in the international community. All this met with even more hearty Western applause.

Putin inherited a ransacked and bewildered country, with a poor and demoralized people. And he started to do what was possible -- a slow and gradual restoration. These efforts were not noticed, nor appreciated, immediately. In any case, one is hard pressed to find examples in history when steps by one country to restore its strength were met favorably by other governments.

SPIEGEL: It has gradually become clear to everyone that the stability of Russia is of benefit to the West. But there is one thing that surprises us in particular: When speaking about the right form of statehood for Russia, you were always in favor of civil self-government, and you contrasted this model with Western democracy. After seven years of Putin's governance we can observe totally the opposite phenomenon: Power is concentrated in the hands of the president, everything is oriented toward him.

Solzhenitsyn: Yes, I have always insisted on the need for local self-government for Russia, but I never opposed this model to Western democracy. On the contrary, I have tried to convince my fellow citizens by citing the examples of highly effective local self-government systems in Switzerland and New England, both of which I saw first-hand.

In your question you confuse local self-government, which is possible on the most grassroots level only, when people know their elected officials personally, with the

dominance of a few dozen regional governors, who during Yeltsin's period were only too happy to join the federal government in suppressing any local self-government initiatives.

Today I continue to be extremely worried by the slow and inefficient development of local self-government. But it has finally started to take place. In Yeltsin's time, local self-government was actually barred on the regulatory level, whereas the state's "vertical of power" (i.e. Putin's centralized and top-down administration) is delegating more and more decisions to the local population. Unfortunately, this process is still not systematic in character.

SPIEGEL: But there is hardly any opposition.

Solzhenitsyn: Of course, an opposition is necessary and desirable for the healthy development of any country. You can scarcely find anyone in opposition, except for the communists, just like in Yeltsin's times. However, when you say "there is nearly no opposition," you probably mean the democratic parties of the 1990s. But if you take an unbiased look at the situation: there was a rapid decline of living standards in the 1990s, which affected three quarters of Russian families, and all under the "democratic banner." Small wonder, then, that the population does not rally to this banner anymore. And now the leaders of these parties cannot even agree on how to share portfolios in an illusory shadow government. It is regrettable that there is still no constructive, clear and large-scale opposition in Russia. The growth and development of an opposition, as well as the maturing of other democratic institutions, will take more time and experience.

SPIEGEL: During our last interview you criticized the election rules for State Duma deputies, because only half of them were directly elected in their constituencies, whereas the other half, representatives of the political parties, were dominant. After the election reform made by president Putin, there is no direct constituency at all. Is this not a step back?

Solzhenitsyn: Yes, I think it is a mistake. I am a convinced and consistent critic of "party-parliamentarism." I am for non-partisan elections of true people's representatives who are accountable to their regions and districts; and who in case of unsatisfactory work can be recalled. I do understand and respect the formation of groups on economical, cooperative, territorial, educational, professional and industrial principles, but I see nothing organic in political parties. Politically motivated ties can be unstable and quite often they have selfish ulterior motives. Leon Trotsky said it accurately during the October Revolution: "A party that does not strive for the seizure of power is worth nothing." We are talking about seeking benefit for the party itself at the expense of the rest of the people. This can happen whether the takeover is peaceful or not. Voting for impersonal parties and their programs is a false substitute for the only true way to elect people's representatives: voting by an actual person for an actual candidate. This is the whole point behind popular representation.

SPIEGEL: In spite of high revenues from oil and gas exports, in spite of the development of a middle class, there is a vast contrast between rich and poor in Russia. What can be done to improve the situation?

Solzhenitsyn: I think the gap between the rich and the poor is an extremely dangerous phenomenon in Russia and it needs the immediate attention of the state. Although many fortunes were amassed in Yeltsin's times by ransacking, the only reasonable way to correct the situation today is not to go after big businesses -- the present owners are trying to run them as effectively as they can -- but to give breathing room to medium and small businesses. That means protecting citizens and small entrepreneurs from arbitrary rule and from corruption. It means investing the revenues from the national natural resources into the national infrastructure, education and health care. And we must learn to do so without shameful theft and embezzlement.

Part 4: 'Faith is the Foundation of One's Life'

SPIEGEL: Does Russia need a national idea, and what might it look like?

Solzhenitsyn: The term "national idea" is an unclear one. One might think of it as a widely shared understanding among a people as to the desired way of life in their country, an idea that holds sway over the population. A unifying concept like that can be useful, but should never be created artificially or imposed top-down by the powers-that-be.

Over the latest historical periods these concepts have been developed in France, for example after the eighteenth century, in the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, Poland etc. When the whole discussion of "developing a national idea" hastily began in post-Soviet Russia, I tried to pour cold water on it with the objection that, after all the devastating losses we had experienced, it would be quite sufficient to have just one task: the preservation of a dying people.

SPIEGEL: But Russia often finds itself alone. Recently relations between Russia and the West have gotten [somewhat colder](#), and this includes Russian-European relations. What is the reason? What are the West's difficulties in understanding modern Russia?

Solzhenitsyn: I can name many reasons, but the most interesting ones are psychological, i.e. the clash of illusory hopes against reality. This happened both in Russia and in West. When I returned to Russia in 1994, the Western world and its states were practically being worshipped. Admittedly, this was caused not so much by real knowledge or a conscious choice, but by the natural disgust with the Bolshevik regime and its anti-Western propaganda.

This mood started changing with the cruel NATO bombings of Serbia. It's fair to say that all layers of Russian society were deeply and indelibly shocked by those bombings. The situation then became worse when NATO started to spread its influence and draw the ex-Soviet republics into its structure. This was especially painful in the case of Ukraine, a country whose closeness to Russia is defined by literally millions of family ties among our peoples, relatives living on different sides of the national border. At one fell stroke, these families could be torn apart by a new dividing line, the border of a military bloc.

So, the perception of the West as mostly a "knight of democracy" has been replaced with the disappointed belief that pragmatism, often cynical and selfish, lies at the core of Western policies. For many Russians it was a grave disillusion, a crushing of ideals.

At the same time the West was enjoying its victory after the exhausting Cold War, and observing the 15-year-long anarchy under Gorbachev and Yeltsin. In this context it was easy to get accustomed to the idea that Russia had become almost a Third World country and would remain so forever. When Russia started to regain some of its strength as an economy and as a state, the West's reaction -- perhaps a subconscious one, based on erstwhile fears -- was panic.

SPIEGEL: The West associated it with the ex-superpower, the Soviet Union.

Solzhenitsyn: Which is too bad. But even before that, the West deluded itself -- or maybe conveniently ignored the reality -- by regarding Russia as a young democracy, whereas in fact there was no democracy at all. Of course Russia is not a democratic country yet; it is just starting to build democracy. It is all too easy to take Russia to task with a long list of omissions, violations and mistakes.

But did not Russia clearly and unambiguously stretch its helping hand to the West after 9/11? Only a psychological shortcoming, or else a disastrous shortsightedness, can explain the West's irrational refusal of this hand. No sooner did the USA accept Russia's critically important aid in Afghanistan than it immediately started making newer and newer demands. As for Europe, its claims towards Russia are fairly transparently based on fears about energy, unjustified fears at that.

Isn't it a luxury for the West to be pushing Russia aside now, especially in the face of new threats? In my last Western interview before I returned to Russia (for *Forbes* magazine in April 1994) I said: "If we look far into the future, one can see a time in the 21st century when both Europe and the USA will be in dire need of Russia as an ally."

SPIEGEL: You have read Goethe, Schiller and Heine in the original German, and you have always hoped that Germany would be something of a bridge between Russia and the rest of the world. Do you believe Germans can still play this role?

Solzhenitsyn: I do. There is something predetermined in the mutual attraction between Germany and Russia. Otherwise, this attraction would not have survived two ghastly World Wars.

SPIEGEL: Which German poets, writers and philosophers have influenced you the most?

Solzhenitsyn: Schiller and Goethe were very much present in my childhood and adolescence. Later I was drawn by Schelling. I highly appreciate the great German musical tradition. I can't imagine my life without Bach, Beethoven and Schubert.

SPIEGEL: The West knows nearly nothing about modern Russian literature. What is, in your opinion, the situation in Russian literature today?

Solzhenitsyn: Periods of rapid and fundamental change were never favorable for literature. Significant works, not to mention great works, have nearly always and everywhere been created in periods of stability, be it a good or a bad stability. Modern Russian literature is no exception. The educated reader today is much more interested in non-fiction -- memoirs, biographies, and documentary prose. However, I do believe that justice and conscience will not be cast to the four winds, but will remain in the foundations of Russian literature, so that it may be of service in brightening our spirit and enhancing our comprehension.

SPIEGEL: The idea of the influence of Orthodox Christianity on the Russian world can be traced throughout your works. What is the moral qualification of the Russian church? We think it is turning into a state church today, just like it was centuries ago -- an institution that in practice legitimizes the head of Kremlin as the representative of God.

Solzhenitsyn: On the contrary, we should be surprised that our church has gained a somewhat independent position during the very few years since it was freed from total subjugation to the communist government. Do not forget what a horrible human toll the Russian Orthodox Church suffered throughout almost the entire 20th century. The Church is just rising from its knees. Our young post-Soviet state is just learning to respect the Church as an independent institution. The "Social Doctrine" of the Russian Orthodox Church, for example, goes much further than do government programs. Recently Metropolitan Kirill, a prominent expounder of the Church's position, has made repeated calls for reforming the taxation system. His views are quite different from those of government, yet he airs them in public, on national television. As for "legitimizing the head of Kremlin," do you mean the funeral service for Yeltsin in the main cathedral and the decision not to hold a civil funeral ceremony?

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SPIEGEL: That too.

Solzhenitsyn: Well, it was probably the only way to keep in check public anger, which has not fully subsided, and avoid possible manifestations of anger during the burial. But I see no reason to treat the ceremony as the new protocol for the funerals of all Russian presidents in the future. As far as the past is concerned, our Church holds round-the-clock prayers for the repose of the victims of communist massacres in Butovo near Moscow, on the Solovetsky Islands and other places of mass burials.

SPIEGEL: In 1987 in your interview with SPIEGEL founder Rudolf Augstein you said it was really hard for you to speak about religion in public. What does faith mean for you?

Solzhenitsyn: For me faith is the foundation and support of one's life.

SPIEGEL: Are you afraid of death?

Solzhenitsyn: No, I am not afraid of death any more. When I was young the early death of my father cast a shadow over me -- he died at the age of 27 -- and I was afraid to die before all my literary plans came true. But between 30 and 40 years of age my attitude to death became quite calm and balanced. I feel it is a natural, but no means the final, milestone of one's existence.

SPIEGEL: Anyhow, we wish you many years of creative life.

Solzhenitsyn: No, no. Don't. It's enough.

SPIEGEL: Alexander Isayevich, we thank you for this interview.