

SOLZHENITSYN

A B I O G R A P H Y



Michael Scammell

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Solzhenitsyn during his first months as a prisoner (Sevil)

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**IN MEMORY OF MY FATHER AND MY MOTHER,
FREDERICK AND CONSTANCE SCAMMELL,
WHO DID NOT LIVE TO SEE
THIS BOOK COMPLETED**

Solzhenitsyn speaks from another tradition and this, for me, is impressive: his voice is not modern but ancient. It is an ancientness tempered in the modern world. His ancientness is that of the old Russian Christianity, but it is a Christianity that has passed through the central experience of our century—the dehumanization of the totalitarian concentration camps—and has emerged intact and strengthened. If history is the testing ground, Solzhenitsyn has passed the test. His example is not intellectual or political or even, in the current sense of the word, moral. We have to use an even older word, a word that still retains a religious overtone—a hint of death and sacrifice: *witness*. In a century of false testimonies, a writer becomes the witness to man.

—Octavio Paz, "Polvos de aquellos lodos"
(Dust after Mud), *Plural*, no. 30 (March 1974)

Rien ne vous tue un homme comme d'être obligé de représenter un pays.

—Jacques Vache, letter to André Breton

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PREFACE

Writing the biography of a living man is sufficiently hazardous an undertaking as to call for some explanation. The very word "biography" provokes expectations of candour and disclosure that are often precluded when one writes about a contemporary. It is simply not feasible to exercise that close scrutiny of private emotions, subconscious desires, and deep-seated motives that are the stock-in-trade of the post-Freudian biographer. Nor is it possible to inspect any but a tiny fraction of the letters and private papers that can throw light into obscure corners of the subject's life. It is a story that is still continuing and therefore incomplete: there is always the possibility that some new event, some new work, or some new revelation will occur to modify or perhaps transform our perception of what has gone before. Or that the subject may turn, in old age, to reveal a facet of his character that had been completely unremarked till then. For these reasons, the present work aspires to being little more than a biographical chronicle, a portrait "from the outside," relying less on psychological analysis than on an examination of the biographical and historical facts available to me.

This simple caveat would apply to the biography of any contemporary, and the adjustment the reader needed to make would not be very great. But there are special problems encountered in writing about a person who has lived the greater part of his life in the Soviet Union that immensely complicate the task of the biographer and that the reader needs to understand to avoid certain types of frustration. Though these problems are general, they take on an extra dimension in the case of such a controversial figure as Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

The first great difficulty to be contended with is that for sixty-five years

the Soviet government has laboured systematically to destroy all notions of objective truth. This is not at first sight surprising: nowhere and at no time have governments been addicted to the truth. But nowhere in the modern world has such a prolonged and determined assault been carried out by so powerful a government, and nowhere is the divorce between observable reality and the picture of that reality presented by the authorities greater and more striking than in the Soviet Union. The ferocity of this assault has a dual purpose: to distort or destroy the individual's perception of reality, and to conquer that perception and remould it according to the government's wishes. But since the exigencies of politics are inevitably short-term and changeable, whereas reality and our perception of it are (or should be) long-term and more or less durable, there is a permanent conflict between observable reality and the need to distort it, which leads to such demonstrable Soviet absurdities as doctored photographs of the changing leadership, where faces are erased one by one, or the distribution of substitute pages for the Large Soviet Encyclopedia, to be pasted in over articles about individuals who have fallen into disgrace.

One will not find Solzhenitsyn in that or any other Soviet reference work today, for in his case, the Soviet mania for rewriting history has reached absurd heights. At the time of his literary debut (with Khrushchev's express approval), he was hailed as "a true helper of the Party" and "a writer with a rare talent" in the tradition of Tolstoy. In printing the bare facts of his biography, the newspapers emphasized his distinguished war record and played down the facts of his imprisonment and exile, pointing out that he had suffered from "groundless political accusations" from which he had since been exculpated. A year later he was nominated for the Soviet Union's most prestigious literary award, the Lenin Prize, and only narrowly missed winning it. When the attitude of the authorities began to change, so did "history." Solzhenitsyn became "a mediocre writer with an exaggerated view of his own importance," who had "abandoned his conscience" and was socially dangerous. This later escalated to "corrupt self-seeker" and "internal *émigré*, alien and hostile to the entire life of the Soviet people," and culminated in accusations that he had "surrendered to the Germans," had "fought with Vlasov against Soviet forces," and had even "worked for the Gestapo." More recently, since being expelled from the USSR, he has been accused of having worked (from the beginning of his career) for the CIA.

Much of this is patently absurd and can be dismissed as the inevitable consequence of the fluctuations of the Party line. But it also presents some special problems, not all of which can be overcome by even the most assiduous biographer, especially if he is working in the West. For example, one is obliged to resort to Soviet sources, while knowing that little credence can be given to printed information without a careful verification of the facts. But they cannot be simply discounted or "reversed" either, for they quite often turn out to be correct, or correct in part. Generally speaking, working in a subject area affected by Soviet propaganda is like working in a mighty blast

of wind. You learn to lean into it in order to stay upright, but there is an ever-present danger that you will lean too far—and, if the wind should stop blowing for a moment, fall flat on your face.

Another problem that cannot be wished away is the difficulty of access to places and sources. The Soviet Union, as Solzhenitsyn has graphically shown, is still run more or less along the lines of a giant concentration camp. The borders are sealed, foreign visitors are grudgingly admitted under the most stringent conditions, and travel is restricted to a tiny proportion of the country. To understand what this means for the foreign biographer, one should try to imagine writing the biography of a Hemingway or a Graham Greene while restricted to travelling within a radius of twenty-five miles of the capital cities of the countries in which they lived and along rigidly defined corridors to specified resorts and places of interest, but with no access to their birthplaces and the various towns or villages in which they lived and were brought up, or to the people who might have known them during their formative years. In my own case, even these restricted possibilities have been closed to me since 1973, when I was detained at Moscow airport, my notes on dissident writers confiscated as contraband, and my activities used as a pretext to vilify the Soviet writer Lydia Chukovskaya.

Unfortunately, the problem of access to sources that this creates cannot be resolved simply by staying away and communicating at a distance. The Soviet mails are closely watched, and telephones are often tapped: it takes more than ordinary courage and ingenuity for a Soviet citizen to communicate with a foreigner. Worse still, many of Solzhenitsyn's friends and relatives in the Soviet Union—or even those who simply supplied him with information for his books—have been subjected to systematic harassment and their lives made unbearable. The official campaign to discredit Solzhenitsyn has also scored some notable successes. Two of the closest friends of his childhood and youth, Nikolai Vitkevich and the now deceased Kirill Simonyan, were induced to speak out against him after his expulsion. His aged aunt, Irina Shcherbak, was persuaded to part with some of her memoirs and make disparaging remarks about Solzhenitsyn's family in her dotage. And the natural grief and resentment of his first wife, Natalia Reshetovskaya, after her acrimonious divorce from her husband, were exploited by the authorities when they obtained her memoirs, carefully edited them, and published them in a tendentious and distorted form.

Partly as a result of this unremitting pressure—and partly because it answered to certain psychological imperatives—Solzhenitsyn made it a rule, while still in the Soviet Union, to maintain an almost complete silence about his past, and when he did release certain facts, to do so only when he regarded them as "safe" or when they furthered his struggle with the authorities. In this sense, the facts of his biography became a weapon in that struggle, to be described or passed over depending on where the advantage lay. This emerged with great clarity from Solzhenitsyn's revealing (but also misleading) memoir, *The Oak and the Calf*, where one was struck by the abundance of military

metaphors employed in the narrative. His life was described in terms of constant attack and retreat, bridgeheads, flanking movements, cavalry charges, and artillery bombardments. There was little room (or desire) for objective analysis and dispassionate debate, and the biographer who tries to follow him is in danger of being swept off his feet. After his expulsion to the West, Solzhenitsyn did not significantly change his attitude to these matters and still attempted to exercise some control over discussion of his biography; but, of course, the immediate danger to himself had receded and the intensity of his concern was somewhat diminished.

In the light of these obstacles, it is natural to ask whether the attempt is worth making at all and what the attitude of Solzhenitsyn himself is to such an enterprise. There have been a number of attempts to write his biography before, most notably by David Burg and George Feifer in 1970. At that time Solzhenitsyn was still in the Soviet Union, and his struggle to manage the facts of his biography was at its height. After initially seeming to favour their plan, he turned against them and denounced them, pronouncing an anathema on biographies of him generally that has maintained its force to this day. Burg and Feifer went ahead and published their book in 1972. It was an adequate summary of what was known at that time and certainly did not cause Solzhenitsyn any harm, but it suffered from the crippling limitations that applied to anyone writing about Solzhenitsyn's past as early as 1972, and inevitably was padded with speculation and superfluous detail.

Since then, the situation has changed considerably. In 1971 Solzhenitsyn published *August 1914*, with much information about his mother and his mother's family, and rather less about his father's family. After this came an attempt by the Soviet authorities to exploit this information for their own ends, to which Solzhenitsyn replied with further details in a series of interviews with Western correspondents. Then came the three volumes of *The Gulag Archipelago*, containing many pages and even chapters of autobiography; *The Oak and the Calf*, which is all autobiography; and more recently the publication of Solzhenitsyn's early plays in Russian, in which there is again a significant autobiographical element. Meanwhile, two of his closest associates from his labour-camp years, Lev Kopelev and Dimitri Panin, have emigrated to the West and published memoirs that cover their time spent with Solzhenitsyn; and Natalia Reshetovskaya's memoirs, though captured and doctored by the Soviet authorities, contain a mass of valuable information, especially when juxtaposed with some of the other sources just mentioned.

There is thus no comparison now with the situation as it obtained when Solzhenitsyn was still in the Soviet Union, but the key to writing a successful biography has nevertheless lain, all along, in his attitude and his willingness to co-operate. Without that willingness, many key sources, even in the West, would still refuse to talk. Fortunately, Solzhenitsyn's attitude to a biography did change after his arrival in the West, though not at once, not without considerable misgivings and hesitations, and not without regrets after the work had started.