THE POLITICS OF SOLZHENITSYN

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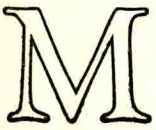

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In memory of past sufferings, this book is
dedicated to Russia's future in a peaceful world

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Preface

My main reason for writing this book is simple: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is saying something which is important, not only for Russia and the USSR but also for us in the West. At the same time he has been very widely misunderstood and misrepresented, particularly by political scientists. It is always unwise, and often dangerous, to misunderstand those who are saying something important.

In writing this book, I have been aware of Solzhenitsyn's bitter protest to the editorial board of *Literaturnaya Gazeta* in which he stated: 'I know your paper will not publish a single line of mine without attributing to it a distorted, erroneous meaning.'* I have made efforts to avoid bias and distortion, in so far as this is humanly possible. I have therefore concentrated on a textual analysis, giving quotations from Solzhenitsyn's prose works to substantiate my general conclusions. Since a great deal of Solzhenitsyn's work has been hurriedly, poorly and insensitively translated into English, often without adequate consultation with the author, I have checked most of the extracts quoted with the equivalent passages in Russian, using (largely) texts in English which are listed in the bibliography. I have not been as thorough in this field as I should have been, and the seasoned eye will see from my notes at the end of each chapter where my work could be improved. But I have tried to serve the truth, and therefore, despite patchy scholarship, I believe the true outlines have emerged.

This raises the question of the accuracy and authenticity of the Russian texts. I am aware that many 'pirate' editions of Solzhenitsyn's works exist. I decided to work from the six-volume *Sobranie Sochinenii* of Solzhenitsyn, published by Possev (Frankfurt), and for later works, I relied on the YMCA press in Paris (*Gulag Archipelago*, Parts I–VII, *The Calf and the Oak*, *Lenin in Zürich* and *From Under the Rubble*). Some important primary sources were contained in the *Herald of the Russian Christian Movement* and in *Continent*, among which were some of the missing chapters from *The First Circle*. I worked on *August 1914* from an edition published in 1971 by Flegon Press, but I regret to say that this is a pirated version. I have not been able to obtain the screen play *The Tanks Know the Truth*, nor *The Feast of the Victors*, but this last has in any

* *Russkaya Mysl'* (22 May 1969).

case been repudiated by the author. Finally, we have yet to see *Decembrists without December*, *The Republic of Labour*, *October 1916*, *March 1917*, and *April 1917* if this is complete.

However, I feel justified in writing this book now because it seems to me that there is some considerable demand for clarification. In order to help the reader through, I have provided summaries at the end of each chapter: this will aid those who are less than familiar with Solzhenitsyn's works or the names of his characters.

I realise that there is a problem of *attribution* in much of the literary analysis. For example, are the ideas expressed by Varsonifiev in *August 1914* those of Solzhenitsyn? Does Kostoglotov in *Cancer Ward* exactly mirror the author's views at that time? And what are we to say of such characters as Shulubin in *Cancer Ward*, who advocates a philosophy of 'ethical socialism'? I have tried to solve this problem by attempting to locate themes which are in some sense pervasive; and I trust that the reader will allow me to rely on occasions on plausibility and the application of commonsense. Nevertheless, I quote the required passages in the text so that the reader may judge for himself or herself.

My thanks are due to Professor L. B. Schapiro, Ellen de Kadt and Peter Reddaway of the London School of Economics and Political Science, and to John B. Dunlop of Oberlin College, who read some of my chapters and made valuable critical comments. However, I take personal responsibility for all the opinions expressed here, and for any errors. I would like to thank Xenia Howard-Johnston for her tolerant custodianship of the Russian Reading Room at the LSE, and her helpful attitude which persisted even at late times on Fridays. My thanks go to my former fellow students Linda Aldwinkle and Joe Winogradoff for their invaluable help in translation and criticism. I gratefully acknowledge the encouraging attitude taken towards me this academic year at the City of London Polytechnic, Unit of Political Studies, and in particular I am grateful to Mrs Renée Gerson for releasing me temporarily from my administrative duties, and to Dr René Saran for carrying out those duties in my mental and often physical absences. The patience, accuracy and sheer hard work of Mrs Lynda Andaloussi and Mrs Elizabeth Ellis in producing the typescript to time deserve the highest praise. I would like to thank the Macmillan Press for their help in producing this work in the United Kingdom and Holmes & Meier for their contribution in the United States. Last, but not least, I acknowledge my debt to a tolerant and supportive wife and family.

S. K. C.

Contents

1 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn as a Political Writer

What are the politics of Solzhenitsyn? By this I mean, what are his political views? What significance do these views have for us in the West, or for the Soviet Union? These are important questions, since Solzhenitsyn is no longer merely a great Russian writer but also a man who has had some considerable influence on public opinion, legislatures and governments. And yet few understand his proposals as a coherent whole and the political content of these proposals often seems obscure. Solzhenitsyn himself is reluctant to make explicit the nature of his political programme: indeed, he has frequently denied that he is a political figure at all. He has stated that

> it is not the task of the writer to defend or criticise . . . one or another mode of government organisation. The task of the writer is to select more universal and eternal questions [such as] the secrets of the human heart and conscience, the confrontation between life and death, the triumph over spiritual sorrow, the laws in the history of mankind.[1]

In June 1967 he was questioned by Soviet officials about the appearance of *Cancer Ward* in the West, and about his open letter to the Fourth Soviet Writers' Congress. In answer to the charge made by G. Markov that the open letter, although legal, was unprecedented, an attempt to form a 'fraction', and at the least a dishonest kind of politics, Solzhenitsyn replied, 'What politics? I am only an artist.'[2]

It is important ro realise that Solzhenitsyn believes his message to be primarily moral, aesthetic and religious, rather than political. He repeatedly criticises politics and politicians. He believes that political programmes are likely to be untrustworthy, less than the truth. In this he resembles the Russian philosopher N. Berdyayev who made a distinction between the (relative) truth of the political intelligentsia, and the (absolute) truth of philosophy.[3] But it would be absurd to say that Solzhenitsyn has *no* political proposals and no political influence. How then are we to resolve this paradox? What do these political proposals amount to?

In answer to the first question, it seems to me that we must try to see the work of Solzhenitsyn in its correct, Russian context, and not from a Western point of view. In the Russian tradition, the open clash and conflict of political views (which are typical of a parliamentary democracy) have been extremely uncommon historically. In a totalitarian state, any form of opposition politics is dangerous, and under Stalin it was mortally dangerous. Within the traditions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union since at least 1921, any form of 'fractionalism' has been banned. However, another Russian tradition, the moral and political role of the writer, acts as a countervailing force to these tendencies. As Solzhenitsyn's character Innokenti Volodin says in *The First Circle*, 'Aren't writers supposed to teach, to guide? . . . And for a country to have a great writer . . . is like having another government.'[4] Thus it is that in Russia, a non-political figure, a writer or an artist, may have profound political influence. Finally, some important traditions of Russian political thought, Slavophilism of the 1840s, the 'Native Soil Movement' of the 1860s, and N. A. Berdayayev in the early decades of the twentieth century, have sought to replace politics with a moral or religious approach, and it seems to me that Solzhenitsyn has some affinity with these intellectual trends, and has been influenced to some extent by them.

I hope to elucidate the content of Solzhenitsyn's political thought in two stages. Part One is a largely literary, textual analysis including a discussion of the *Gulag Archipelago*. Part Two is a textual analysis based on Solzhenitsyn's more recent, more directly political works and speeches.

Aleksandr Isaevich Solzhenitsyn was born on 11 December 1918 at Kislovodsk in the Caucasus. He is thus a 'child of the revolution', having lived all his life under Lenin and his heirs. As Kostoglotov in *Cancer Ward* says, 'I'll always be younger than this society. What do you expect me to do, keep silent all my life?'[5] Solzhenitsyn was a mere boy as Stalin rose to power, and his talents in the fields of mathematics, physics and literature began to develop as the Great Purges of 1934–8 reached their climax. Unable to pursue his talents beyond graduation at Rostov University and at the Moscow Institute of Philosophy, Literature and History (a course completed by correspondence), on account of the call-up for army service, Solzhenitsyn served his country in a war in which strategy was often most ineptly conducted, over the heads of his generals, by Stalin. Solzhenitsyn, the hardened soldier twice decorated for gallantry as an artillery officer, was 'rewarded' with incarceration in a series of prisons, because of minor criticism of Stalin in a private letter to a friend.

Solzhenitsyn's talents were useful to the state in so far as his knowledge of physics and electronics could be used. Sometimes these talents were called upon by the security organs for the surveillance of private

conversations and telephone calls, in the special prison near Moscow (called 'Mavrino' in *The First Circle*). But when Solzhenitsyn's ability had been utilised to some extent, and he refused further cooperation, he was transferred to the Karlag concentration camp in Dzezkazgan (Karaganda), which perhaps provided some of the background for *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Solzhenitsyn managed to survive here, finding happiness not only in his literary compositions but also in such simple tasks as building a wall, or in simple comforts such as an extra bowl of skilly and a little tobacco (like Ivan Denisovich Shukhov). And at the end of *One Day* in such a camp, Shukhov was able to say, 'Glory be to Thee, O Lord.'[6] By contrast Stalin's days and nights are represented in *The First Circle* as a twilight world of isolation, paranoia and imagined plots, perhaps on the borders of madness.[7]

On Stalin's death, Solzhenitsyn too was incurably ill. He was banished to exile 'in perpetuity' near Dzambul in southern Kazakhstan, but recovered miraculously after treatment for cancer in Tashkent. With the change of atmosphere after Stalin's death, Solzhenitsyn was released from exile and rehabilitated in 1956. On moving to Riazan, he was eventually joined by his (first) wife Reshetovskaya.

Khrushchev's consolidation of power, and the process of de-Stalinisation which led hesitantly to the removal of Stalin's body from the Red Square mausoleum after the XXII Congress, saw Solzhenitsyn's abrupt rise to fame after the publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in November 1962. However, after this, only a few more of Solzhenitsyn's works appeared officially in the Soviet Union, including *Matryona's Home* and *For the Good of the Cause*, in Tvardovskii's literary magazine *Novyi Mir*. Solzhenitsyn's personal account of this period, *The Oak and the Calf*, clarifies much about his literary fortunes, his tactics and strategy, the conditions under which he and his friends worked. More than this, *The Oak and the Calf* tells us of a political evolution which may prove instructive to others opposing the authorities in the USSR.

After the appearance of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn compared himself to some kind of 'deep water fish' which did not know what to do after it had found itself suddenly at the surface, exposed to public view.[8] What, then, was this fish doing in its lower depths? Earlier, Solzhenitsyn referred to his 'literary conspiracy', his 'cunning threads',[9] showing a dedication of an unusual kind over a long period of time to a definite aim. For many years in the 1960s commentators both West and East tried to depict Solzhenitsyn as a socialist-realist writer, such as Georgi Lukács,[10] while others seized on the phrase of Shulubin in *Cancer Ward* which referred to 'ethical socialism'. Robin Blackburn dismissed Solzhenitsyn as a populist, a plebeian–peasant writer,[11] and some Western communists approved of him because he had been sanctioned by Khrushchev and the XXII Congress of the

CPSU. However, after the appearance of *August 1914* and the *Letter to Soviet Leaders* in the 1970s, a chorus of equally erroneous but this time hostile analysis emerged in particular from left-wing commentators, such as Alan Myers.[12] In fact Solzhenitsyn's aims and beliefs have exhibited a consistency and purpose, over a period of decades, which has only been matched in modern times by Lenin.

It is true that in his incriminating letter of 1945 to his friend Vitkevich, Solzhenitsyn spoke of the 'correctness of Marxism–Leninism'. It need hardly be argued today that Solzhenitsyn is strongly opposed to Marxism–Leninism, but the evolution of his thoughts from 1945 remains obscure in some respects. Perhaps one crucial episode was his conversion, or reconversion, to Christianity, which took place some time in his camp and exile years. Many concurrent influences must have been present, but the episode of one B. N. Kornfeld's influence on Solzhenitsyn during his recovery from an operation, and Kornfeld's astonishing death, as recorded in *Gulag Archipelago*, Book II (Part 4), seems particularly important.[13]

Solzhenitsyn seems to have been determined to interpret the post-revolutionary experience of Russia as an (instructive) disaster, stemming from Marxism and Lenin, as well as from Stalin. He believes that he has a binding duty to represent all those who were murdered and oppressed by Soviet rule, and to oppose communism everywhere. He says,

> However, I did not have the right to take my personal point of view into account, nor to consider what Novyi Mir would think about me, but instead I had constantly to bear in mind, that my literary destiny was not just my own affair; it was also that of those millions who did not write, whisper, or even gasp out the story of their imprisonment, their last testament from the camps.[14]

He claims that this feeling of duty and of destiny affected him as early as 1945, when after his arrest he had a presentiment that just *because* of this arrest he would be able to influence the fate of his country.[15] Only once since 1945 has this idea become weak, and that was in 1965 after the confiscation of his archive by the KGB on 11 September. He failed at the time to see how he could recover from this blow, and he contemplated suicide for the first and last time in his life.[16] Most characteristically, however, he is positive and hopeful, saying for example that

> familiarity with Russian history might well have long ago killed any wish to discover some hand of justice, some higher cosmic meaning in the story of Russia's sufferings; but during my life, since my years in camp, I had become accustomed to being aware of this guiding hand, this meaning which was full of light, and which did not depend on me.[17]

Even in his darkest days, while he and Sakharov were under heavy attack in late 1973, and Sakharov experienced a deep depression, Solzhenitsyn did not give up hope; 'for my whole life, despite logic, I have never experienced this depression, but on the contrary some kind of absurd belief in victory.'[18]

After his arrest in February 1974, he even believed that it was just possible that he would be taken before the Politburo.[19]

The Oak and the Calf reveals a picture of a determined and self-disciplined man, deeply and almost unshakably convinced of his duty and high purpose, whose strategy was consistent throughout the period dealt with, but whose tactics varied over time. At first, he tried the approach of cautious education of public opinion through limited and selective publication of his literary work, beginning with *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. He accepted some revisions to his works, especially from the editorial board of *Novyi Mir* under Aleksandr Trifonovich Tvardovskii, and he planned to publish *The First Circle* in an 87-part version, withholding nine chapters which he thought would not be accepted by the censor. Similarly, he withheld part of *August 1914* relating to Lenin, in the hope that the rest might be published in the USSR. The fall of Khrushchev in October 1964 signalled the start of a new phase. Solzhenitsyn realised that the revelations about Stalin at the XX and XXII Congresses of the party, developments which Khrushchev had set in motion, were being slowed down, even reversed. (Solzhenitsyn remarks that this was inevitable because the revelations had not gone far enough and that Khrushchev, like Tvardovskii, had been held captive by the accepted ideology.) The fall of Khrushchev also released Solzhenitsyn from a debt of honour;[20] now he felt that he owed the establishment nothing.

After the emotional and spiritual nadir of September 1965, and the trial of Sinyavskii and Daniel, he became tougher, more self-reliant and more uncompromising. He remarked at the time of the seizure of his archive that the help of Western opinion could not be relied on: Russians would have ultimately to rely only on themselves.

> If we too are to become free, then we must free ourselves. If the twentieth century has a lesson for mankind, then we will give it to the West, but not the West to us: As a result of too much complacent well-being, the will and the reason (of the Western world) have become weak.[21]

By 1966, he realised that he might as well give talks and interviews, because he felt that what he had done up to that time was insufficient and that he had nothing to lose.[22] In November 1966, Solzhenitsyn read some chapters from *Cancer Ward* in public, and gave a speech at the Lazarevskii Institute of Oriental Studies. He recalls that every

comment seemed to go off in the hall like gunpowder, for people there were so desperately in need of truth. 'It seemed, for the first time – for the first time in my life, I felt, I saw, that I was making history.'[23]

Following this new line, in the spring of 1967, he took one of the biggest decisions of his life, namely to protest and carry on his public activities rather than quietly writing his major work on the first revolutionary month of 1917. The immediate result of this decision was the famous Open Letter to the Fourth Soviet Writers' Congress. This gave him a feeling of being on a solid foundation.[24] When later Solzhenitsyn was called upon to explain the widespread 'samizdat' reading of *Cancer Ward* and its appearance in the West, as well as the Open Letter, he and Tvardovskii took a firm stand against the Soviet officials. Tvardovskii attributed the publication of *Cancer Ward* in the West, among other things, to unwarranted delays in publication at home. At the end of the meeting, two of the officials, G. Markov and K. Voronkov, actually thanked Tvardovskii and Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn remarks:

> On that day for the first time in my life I was aware of what I had formerly understood only obliquely: what it means to display strength. And how well they understood that language! *Only this language!* One language only – from the very day of their birth![25]

Solzhenitsyn compares his subsequent grilling (22 September 1967) before the Secretariat of the Union of Writers, in which he manfully answered all criticisms, to the battle of Borodino.

This new orientation to open opposition did not preclude Solzhenitsyn from working hard at his writing. He found that he had gained the strength to 'write, what three years before seemed mortally dangerous. My direction became all the clearer – to victory or death.'[26] In April 1968, *Cancer Ward* appeared in the West under somewhat mysterious circumstances, apparently through the mediation of a KGB agent. The aim of this tortuous procedure was apparently to implicate Solzhenitsyn as a 'class enemy' according to the Brezhnev thesis put forward at a meeting of Moscow Party activists in March 1968 (crudely put, this doctrine states that those 'slandering' the Soviet Union abroad are class enemies). This hectic period was however followed by a period of relative calm. Solzhenitsyn apparently finished his *Gulag Archipelago* on the very day that his 87-part *First Circle* appeared in the West, in June 1968. He tried immediately to revise the real, 96-part *First Circle*, but 'it fell from my hands, I could not work'. He sought his refreshment in prayer and the June countryside, feeling that his duty before the dead was overwhelming: 'They died and you lived – carry out your duty so that the world shall know *everything*.'[27]

The next crucial phase for Solzhenitsyn was the invasion of Czecho-

slovakia.[28] It confirmed his undying hostility to the regime and seemed to kill any lingering hopes of reform from within. He says later that polycentrist ideas of Communism seem implausible: It is 'impossible to be communist AND Russian, communist AND French. It is necessary to choose.'[29] His convictions about the nature of the regime did not yet make him more openly hostile, for now he wished to preserve his completed *Gulag Archipelago* for the West, and he calculated that this would be a more damaging blow. Thus at this point he became once again more circumspect, failing to protest openly at the invasion. However, this more cautious approach did not save him in the following year from being expelled from the Writers' Union (12 November 1969). Hence he made what he describes as his first *overtly* political protest (his Open Letter to the Secretariat of the RSFSR Union of Writers). In doing this, he was influenced by the opinion of Lydia Korneevna Chukovskaya, who had said that while the 'arrow' was still embedded, one could do nothing, write nothing important. It was necessary to pull it out.[30] Having written it, he reported that it gave him 'great pleasure, freedom of spirit'.[31] At the same time, he had become convinced that he had to remain within the Soviet Union, not only because Russia (despite persecution) was conducive to his writing, but also because his close friend Alya (Natalya Svetlova) had persuaded him that his works and his influence would not penetrate the 'iron shell' of the USSR so well from abroad. Thus his position in this new phase was a complicated one: he was persecuted by the regime and could no longer hope to publish in the Soviet Union. He in his turn was confirmed and dedicated in his opinions about the regime after the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Yet he wanted to remain in Russia, and to work in secret on his literary conspiracy. He badly needed some outside help, and in 1970 this came in the form of the Nobel Prize for Literature. He says bravely that if that prize had not come in 1970, he 'would have started the battle without it', but he adds, it came, and put to rights 'all the mistakes of 1962, mistakes of sluggishness and concealment'.[32] The Nobel Prize thus confirmed Solzhenitsyn in his existing tactics, but it gave his cause an added boost in the form of massive Western interest and international support. This became especially strong after the Soviet authorities responded to the Prize as though it had been a deliberate political provocation by the West. They indicated quite clearly that if Solzhenitsyn were to leave in order to collect his prize, then he might not be allowed to return. Solzhenitsyn says of this episode,

> In spite of the seeming immovability of our state, the initiative did not pass from my hands: from first to last I behaved as though they (the authorities) did not exist, I ignored them: I myself made the decisions, announced that I would go, and they did not try to dissuade

me, then I myself took the decision that I would not go, and exposed our shameful police-state methods. . . .[33]

Although the Award of the Nobel Prize for Literature strengthened Solzhenitsyn's position, his domestic life at this time was emotionally disturbed. He mentioned that he was ready to go abroad in the winter of 1970 to receive his Nobel Prize, even though this would have coincided with the birth of his first son by Alya (Svetlova), namely Yermolai. There is surprisingly little information in *The Oak and the Calf* about Solzhenitsyn's personal relationships with Reshetovskaya or his second wife Svetlova. This lack of information shows Solzhenitsyn to be a man primarily dedicated to his work, seeing his family ties and personal relationships as quite separate from his literary goals. In early 1971, he says, 'For the last five years I endured a profound abyss of family discord and put aside all attempts at its resolution . . . every time because of a shortage of time for finishing work, or part of a work. . . .'[34] As a result, regular crises ensued. Any future biographer should try sympathetically to understand the effect of Solzhenitsyn's marital strains on his character and his work.

In 1971, he began to concentrate more on his historical studies which begin with *August 1914*. He refers to these as 'knots', crucial concurrencies of events and personalities on which the historian should concentrate his attention. He states that the main aim of his 'knots' has been to expose to our view the real Lenin. Solzhenitsyn had originally planned twenty such knots, which should have taken him 40–50 years to write. However, by the time that Lenin was firmly in control in Petrograd (Solzhenitsyn believes), his contribution to history became clear. Hence the first three knots, and complete research for a fourth, became Solzhenitsyn's immediate aim (*August 1914*, *October 1916*, *March 1917* and *April 1917*). He gave himself until spring 1975 to write these. Soon afterwards, he arranged for photocopies of all the 'missing' and unpublished parts of his work to be sent to the West, by the most ingenious means. For example, although his telephone at his country cabin (Rozhdestvo) was sometimes tapped, he would telephone a warmly solicitous 'good-night' to his wife, then leave a night-light burning in his bedroom window: after which he would leave on foot through woods and fields to a distant suburban station, and thence to his contact with the microfilm, returning by a different route to his bed in the small hours. 'Only from this moment [when his works were safely in the West] was I really ready for the battle and for death.'[35]

From now on, his real aims and beliefs became much clearer, especially after his Open Letter to the Patriarch Pimen and the appearance of *August 1914* in the West in 1972. Before this, the public and the censorship had thought that he was protesting only about the abuses of