# ALEKSANDR ISAYEVICH SOLZHENITSYN
1918–2008

The whole purpose of the revolution was to make a man like him impossible. They were forging a new being from the pliable stuff of human nature, one which would fit seamlessly into the classless society of the future. That was the reason for the censorship, the propaganda masquerading as education, the coerced conformity, the prohibition on travel, the prison camps. He is said to have read *Das Kapital* on his honeymoon. But the eight years forced labor they gave the young Red Army captain for some unguarded remarks about Stalin seem only to have purged his vision of all ideological distortion, of all petty and merely personal concerns. He said in later years that he no longer felt his life to be fully his own, that he had been given a mission to speak the truth for the millions who had been silenced in the name of a lie.

In America, always apt to confuse the good man with the good fellow, such integrity sometimes met with incomprehension. When Gerald Ford declined to talk with him in 1975, a White House aide explained that the author's motive for seeking a meeting with the American President was presumably to increase sales of his books. His journalistic acclaim as a star of the Cold War evaporated overnight after an address at Harvard University. He informed his hosts that American society—weakened by prosperity, incapable of sacrifice, overly reliant on positive law, and lacking a mooring in the transcendent—was not an attractive model to Russians long schooled in suffering. His subsequent unpopularity was due to a refusal to compromise his vocation of telling the truth as far as it was given him to see.

For he understood this to be the proper task even of the artist. Rejecting the romantic view of the writer as creator of fictional worlds, he invoked, in his Nobel Lecture, an older vision of the writer as God's apprentice, attempting to capture in powerful images an order not of his own making. Realism, in this view, and particularly moral realism, is the highest achievement of human art. A genuine work of literary art, he said, cannot be constructed on an error or a lie, because artificial and forced concepts do not survive their trial by images. Per-

haps he had in mind the inane Soviet "production novels," in which strapping dullards win the love of the prettiest girl at the factory by overfulfilling the plan. His own recounting of *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, an ordinary peasant serving a ten year sentence in a Siberian prison camp, was a bombshell upon publication in the mendacious atmosphere of Khrushchev's USSR precisely because of its unpretentious truthfulness.

That first little novel is still what I would recommend as the best introduction to the author, preferably in the Willetts translation. One might then dip into *The Solzhenitsyn Reader*, an anthology published in 2006 (see my review in *TOQ* 6:3).

Despite the common perception, Solzhenitsyn has never described himself as a nationalist; and he has explicitly distanced himself from any form of nationalism which would "elevate one's nationality above a humble stance before Heaven." He merely considers it natural and decent to love one's homeland and national kin.

He has also admonished his countrymen that "a multinational country must rely in difficult moments of its history upon the support of *all* its citizens." Russians in the early Soviet period were a "dispossessed majority," demonized as oppressors by all the other nationalities of the former Empire and systematically taught to be ashamed of their own nation and its past. *A propos* of this subject, allow me to quote from the Nobel Lecture:

> Countries continually repeat each other's mistakes with a time lag. What one people has already endured, appraised, and rejected suddenly emerges among another people as the very latest word. Here once again the sole substitute for an experience which we ourselves have not lived through is art and literature. Both are endowed with the miraculous power to communicate the experience of the entire nation to another nation which has not undergone such a difficult, decades-long collective experience. In a fortunate instance, this could save an entire nation from a redundant, or erroneous, or even destructive course.

A few years ago, Solzhenitsyn surprised everyone by publishing, in his eighty-third year, a new thousand page work on the history of the Jews in Russia: *Two Hundred Years Together*. He had not lost his ability

to scandalize. The publisher of the *International Jewish Gazette* in Russia gravely assured an American interviewer that the author's real motive in undertaking this gargantuan project was "to draw attention to himself." The work has attracted great interest in the West, but English speaking readers may not be allowed to form their own opinion of it for some time yet. Yale University Press is known to have expressed interest in the work as early as 2001, only to drop it without explanation amid rumors that vehement protests from Jewish heavyweights had derailed the project.

But a few weeks ago Harper Collins did announce that they would be bringing out the new, uncensored translation of *The First Circle* in 2009—just forty-five years after its completion. So perhaps anything is possible.

Feeling that no review published hitherto had given readers a proper sense of *Two Hundred Years'* purpose and character, I undertook an account of it for an upcoming issue of this journal. I had just put the finishing touches to it when I was given the sad duty of preceding it with an obituary.

I do not feel especially alarmed at smug reports in the press that he has been forgotten already or that young Russians are more interested in rock stars now. It is the nature of the journalistic mind to treat publicity as more important than reality. Solzhenitsyn is unpopular with such men for the very reasons that insure his lasting importance.

We men of the West had better remember him, for we may never again behold his like. When *The Gulag Archipelago* was released for publication in 1974, the official Soviet press was reduced to telling its captive readers that the three volumes of horrifying revelations were a panegyric upon Hitler. In France, it was an event which changed history. A whole generation had just grown up thinking Communism was cool because it frightened their parents. Suddenly they saw party spokesmen, confronted with passages from Solzhenitsyn on television, helplessly babbling about "last year's record Soviet harvest." He had made the mighty communists contemptible. More than any other moment in the Cold War, this is when wise observers knew the game was up—the Soviet Union was living on borrowed time. If our children do not come to appreciate his importance, the fault will be ours, not Solzhenitsyn's.

*Requiescat in pace.*

*– F. Roger Devlin*