

Solzhenitsyn

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

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Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who died recently, was a great writer. For my generation he symbolized the emergence of a Russian protest movement from within Russia itself. Initially he was welcomed by anti-Stalinist Nikita Khrushchev, but in the anti-Khrushchev reaction he was suppressed. His books about the Russian prison camps, the gulags, were required reading for anyone who claimed to be interested in either culture or politics.

He also blamed the Jews for everything that went wrong in Russia before, during, and after communism. It was no accident that he became a passionate member of the Russian Orthodox Church. His distaste for Jews illustrated once again, as if we needed reminding, that often great art goes hand in hand with great hatreds. We so desperately want to believe that our “personalities” are also good human beings that we delude ourselves into denying that nasty aspect of humanity that many artists tap into.

[Roald Dahl](#) is another example that comes to mind, or [Jose Saramago](#), the Portuguese Nobel Prize winner, famous writers but seriously flawed human beings. And, of course, [the archetypal Richard Wagner](#) whose disgraceful book, [Jews in Music](#), describing Jews as infecting and degrading pure culture, seems to have been the inspiration of Solzhenitsyn’s two-part book about Russia and its Jews, [Two Hundred Years Together](#), published in 2001 and 2002.

Solzhenitsyn blames the Jews almost exclusively for the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917. True, he does not use the terminology of a “Jewish conspiracy”, but he does accuse the Jews of wartime cowardice and evasion of active duty. (Incidentally, my grandfather served for many years in the Russian army and ended up fighting the Japanese in 1904.)

Of course, Jews were heavily represented in the anti-Czarist movements. Marx was a nominal, if negative, Jew, and lots of Jews joined the Communist party and rose up its ranks. Trotsky is the obvious example. There were just as many Jews, proportionally, amongst the Nihilists. But then, the Russian intelligentsia in general was heavily invested in all these revolutionary movements. Of course, the really evil men were Lenin and Stalin, and even Solzhenitsyn did not try to pretend they were Jewish. Besides which, Solzhenitsyn says nothing about the horrific conditions and constant oppression heaped upon the Jews for hundreds of years by the Czars and the Church, which were good enough reasons for so many Jews to want to see a change.

His anti-Semitism is clearly there, and reiterated in interviews and articles after his return to Russia, where he notably failed to support modern dissidents and democrats. His primitive desire was to see Russia return to a mythical, earlier, purer state of Christian orthodoxy and devoid of malign

Jewish influence.

Coming at a time of increasing anti-Semitism in Russia and the rise of Russian neo-Nazis and extreme nationalists, this was grist to their mill. It just helped revive all those ancient antagonisms, the medieval libels of Jews poisoning wells, killing little children and drinking their blood, fifth columnists, in league with the Devil, and all the other sick rubbish that distilled itself into that notorious forgery, [The Protocols of the Elders of Zion](#). (It is a bestseller today in most Muslim countries.) Yes, indeed, Solzhenitsyn was revealing his and the Russian sickness for all to see. He looked and tried to present himself as a prophetic figure, but he was a false one.

As always, [he has his defenders](#). So too do [T.S. Eliot](#) and [Ezra Pound](#), both of whom have written enough revolting lines insulting to Jews to warrant the label anti-Semite.

Life has been better in the West for us Jews in general (rather than just for a few favored ones) these past 50 years that at any time since our exile began, with perhaps the exception of [the Golden Age of Spain](#). But one just has to look at the number of the most pernicious sites on the internet to realize that anti-Semitism is as virulent a disease as ever and lurking beneath the surface, even in the USA, whose liberal laws on free speech allow almost anything. I suppose you know, for example, that Judaism encourages the rape of children under the age of 5. (And I'm not going to give you the URL to check it out, because the more who do [the higher it goes up the Google ranking](#)!!)

We have focused recently perhaps too much on Muslim anti-Semitism and have underplayed a lot of other hatreds. And, sadly, almost all fundamentalist religions, be they Muslim or Orthodox Christian, still think in medieval terms. Their Gospels still encourage the view of Jews as the antichrist, and the evil is constantly perpetrated amongst the millions of their poorly educated faithful. Their Pope John has not yet arrived. The exceptions prove the rule. Even those who profess to love us usually have an agenda which involves either our conversion or destruction. Take your pick.

The price of freedom is eternal vigilance, as we know. We need to remember, too, that even great artists can be grubby, nasty little men.