

# Solzhenitsyn Was Right

Aleksander Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008), was one of the most impressive Russians of the past century. He was born into a family committed to the Russian Orthodox Church but became a Marxist as a young man. He welcomed the revolution initially. But came to realize that it had turned into a cruel and repressive, regime. He recorded his experiences throughout his life in fiction and fact.

He fought in the Second World War. Then he was arrested by the Secret Police and exiled to the Gulags for criticizing Stalin. Stalin died and Khrushchev ushered in a more liberal regime and released him. His best-known work *The Gulag Archipelago* was based on his experiences of his imprisonment in the Gulags. It sold tens of millions of copies. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970. He was the most widely read of those writers who explicitly condemned the evils of the Soviet regime. But more than that, he blamed a certain corrupted Russian mentality, for the crimes of the country before the revolution and after it.

When Khrushchev was replaced by Brezhnev the Soviet regime returned to its Stalinist ways. The authorities tried to suppress his work. In 1974 they stripped him of his citizenship, and he was exiled from the Soviet Union. He wandered and then In 1976 settled in the USA. But he found America a dissolute, unspiritual, and materialist society. When the Soviet Union fell, he returned to his beloved Russia in 1994 and continued to write there.

The latest *New York Review of Books* has an important review by Gary Saul Morson of new translations of parts of his early work *The Red Wheel* which Solzhenitsyn constantly revised and updated by adding archived documents and reportage to support his fictional characters. Well worth reading.

He was a proud Russian. A nationalist, but not in the fascist sense of the term. He shared with Tolstoy a deep sense of Russian identity that rejected political extremes. He deplored the betrayal of so many Russian leaders of what he considered to be the ideals of true Russian spirituality. He blamed the liberal intelligentsia in Russia for betraying their ideals and being blinded by their self-righteousness and naivete, which paved the way for the murderous, violent Lenin-Stalinist regime that took control of Russia and destroyed it morally.

He saw this failure of the liberals as the reason the Kerensky government collapsed after the Czar was overthrown in Russia. And again, when the Weimar Republic in Germany after the First World War. Both ushered in violent dictatorships. Similarly, years later, he accused the Gorbachev and Yeltsin governments of failing through weakness to prevent the slide into totalitarianism. Meanwhile, he attacked the so-called liberal democracies that refused to stand up to bullies.

His years in the USA were not happy ones. He was accused of religious fanaticism and betraying the left whom he excoriated for deluding themselves

by refusing to confront the extremism and dogmas of the radicals. The left-wing press did not like being ridiculed. He was accused of being antisemitic because he criticized those Jews who supported Stalinism as he did everyone else as individuals who supported or participated in his crimes, regardless of ethnicity. His loyalty to the Russian Orthodox Church with its record of antisemitism did not help. But Elie Wiesel completely rejected these charges and pointed out how much Solzhenitsyn had supported Jewish refuseniks. He was no more antisemitic than anyone who excoriates those Jews who turn their backs on their Jewish identity and values even today. Ironically the Russian emigre press accused him of selling out to the Jews.

He strongly objected to the mischaracterization of his views by the same western intellectual and journalistic circles that had previously praised his courage in criticizing the USSR. But turned against him when he began to dismiss the vapid, armchair intellectual hypocrisy of Western societies which failed to offer viable moral alternatives. He felt alienated by the disregard and rejection of a serious spiritual dimension in American life. He spoke out against the way most of the media in the West, distorted facts just as much as the Soviet censors had and still do.

In defending himself, he wrote

"I was accused by a television commentator who presumed to judge the experience of the world from the viewpoint of my own limited Soviet prison camp experience. Indeed, how true! Life and death, imprisonment and hunger, the cultivation of the soul despite the captivity of the body, how very limited compared to the bright world of political parties, yesterday's numbers on the stock exchange, amusements without end, and exotic foreign travel."

All of us who are loyal to a particular way of life or culture must be prepared to stand up and declare its failures wherever they are. And any political authority that fails to confront tyranny, mass murder, financial or political blackmail is an affront to humanity.

The prophets of the Bible condemned the failures of their societies and were often imprisoned for it. Solzhenitsyn was a prophet too. I see no one standing in his shoes today. There will be consequences. And for confirmation of how right he was, just look at the sort of Russian Putin is and what he is doing to human beings in Ukraine. Solzhenitsyn saw what was good and what was barbaric in Russian culture.