

# Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Hero of the Spirit

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***Solzhenitsyn and the Modern World***,  
by Edward E. Ericson, Jr., *Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1993. 433 pp. \$24.00*

## I

DURING THE PAST twenty years, ever since the publication of *The Gulag Archipelago*—the first of three volumes in English translation appeared in 1973—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (born 1918) has been subjected to sharp criticism in the West. The intelligentsia frequently brands him as a moral fascist. These denigrators can best be described, to apply his own words, as “advanced people,” “smatterers.” For the most part, they are the liberal ideologues who are deeply, but not surprisingly, disturbed by Solzhenitsyn’s savage indictment, in *The Gulag Archipelago*, of Marxism-Leninism. His nonfictional, or publicistic, writings in particular—for example, his *Letter to the Soviet Leaders* (1974) and *A World Split Apart* (1978)—and his world view in general are early examples of what we now designate as not being politically correct. He has chosen to reject what the liberal mind finds requisite and sacrosanct in the doctrine of unlimited material and social progress, in Enlightenment thought and absolute reason, in utopian and millennial dreams of a worldly paradise.

Solzhenitsyn has chosen, that is to say, to embrace the religious idea, the moral life and the ethical life, in their Christian contexts and ramifications. His indictment of Communism is inherently a metaphysical indictment of the modern secular world itself. It is an indictment of a totalitarian system, of a political process, that reduces human beings to things and, in effect, disinherits them morally and spiritually. Communism crystallizes, for Solzhenitsyn, a crisis of modernism in which “men have forgotten God.” As such Communism is emblematic of an inclusive Titanism that, Solzhenitsyn insists, has its origin in “the flaw of a consciousness lacking all divine dimension.” Modernism signifies imprisonment of mind and spirit in uniform ideology, of which the Marxist-Leninist system is the overarching model. Solzhenitsyn belongs to that small and brave band of visionaries who find in political and social disorder the absence of spiritual principles and religious belief. Above all, he exposes the dangers and consequences of modern socio-political ideology in an “era of systems, institutions, mechanisms and statistical averages,” as Vaclav Havel expresses it.

Consistently and courageously, Solzhenitsyn has focused on the evils of ideology in the modern world; has shown how ideology violates the laws of a moral

universe. This defiance, this "dissidence," has made him an enemy not only of the Soviet Union but also of liberal and radical groupings in the West. The culmination of a modernism that negates man's moral and spiritual meaning, the Soviet system epitomizes for him the modern world in all of its extremisms. In the Soviet system, in short, Solzhenitsyn was to discern a modernism adrift—an unchecked modernism triumphantly proclaiming the death of God, of the soul, of all moral categories and criteria, and of human uniqueness. As Solzhenitsyn indicates in his critical writings, Communism is the apex of a modernism beginning in the Renaissance and developing in concrete forms from the Enlightenment of positivism and scientism. The Russian Revolution of 1917 was to continue and to consummate, in the most dramatic historical ways, the French Revolution of 1789, as the "Red Wheel," in Solzhenitsyn's words ". . . rolls onward, lit by the conflagration, / unrestrained, / unstoppable, / crushing everything in its path."<sup>1</sup>

What the liberal mind in the West has found so objectionable in Solzhenitsyn is not so much his diagnosis of the bankruptcy of the Soviet system *per se*, but rather his total rejection of the modern liberal *Zeitgeist* that Communism enacts at the most inhumane levels. Solzhenitsyn ultimately exposes the debasement of modernism, of the modern myths of unlimited experimentation and advances. His *oeuvre* reveals the Soviet face of modernism in all of its intrinsic terror and cruelty. The liberal mind, especially as it is embodied in the "terrible simplifiers," denies the sovereignty of any absolute standards, choosing as it does to travel on the road to ease and expediency and to chase unceasingly the illusion of an earthly paradise. His metaphysics—his insistence on the needs of the soul, on repentance and self-limitation, on the moral virtues—are to the

liberal mind an abomination. It can neither tolerate nor in any way accept Solzhenitsyn's stress on a transcendent realm of reality.

At one time largely receptive to and even admiring of Solzhenitsyn's mythopoetic genius, his fictive imagination and forms, the liberal mind instinctively rejects his world view, his principles of order, his spiritual affirmations. At that point of his witness when Solzhenitsyn was to speak out on the eternal questions of human destiny, openly challenging ideologues of modernity who spurn religion and metaphysics, he was to seal his fate in terms of how liberals reacted to his "warning to the West." In the beginning they were willing to accept the genius of his art, but in time they would reject the "living principle" of his vision in its totality: the wonderful fusion of art and thought that pushes the imagination beyond style and technique—that, in short, activates the full powers of vision in their full moral thrust and pertinence. "To create today," Albert Camus tells us, "is to create dangerously. And publication is an act, and that act exposes one to the passions of an age that forgives nothing."<sup>2</sup> Solzhenitsyn exemplifies Camus' perception of the artist who heeds a higher calling and speaks to the human condition judgmentally, morally, spiritually.

In essence, then, Solzhenitsyn addresses himself to the ideology of modernism—of disease, decadence, disorder. Ideology, Russell Kirk reminds us, "is the politics of passionate unreason," which is precisely what Solzhenitsyn condemns. Inevitably he has had to pay the price of his challenge to the liberal mind-set as the reigning ideology in modern times. In Solzhenitsyn we have not only a poet but also a prose writer, a man of letters, a visionary, a *Dichter* who assays the crisis of values as a crisis of consciousness at all levels. His vision is so piercing and troubling, so censorial of

modern secular society and culture, of "a world split apart," that inevitably a challenged liberal power-center strikes back, angrily and desperately. Clearly Solzhenitsyn has unsettled the liberal mind more than any other writer in this century. His is an absolute censure of the liberal superstructure—its sacred texts, doctrines, agents, architects. "In the end, his kind of conservatism, like that of his ancien régime predecessors, strikes me as unconvincing."<sup>3</sup> Thus writes the Harvard historian Richard Pipes, his words representative of the animosity against Solzhenitsyn among liberal American intellectuals, who doubtlessly view him as one of their sternest critics and judges.

## II

To correct the recurring misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the Russian writer's work and thought is the major aim of Professor Edward Ericson's *Solzhenitsyn and the Modern World*. To re-appraise and re-validate his reputation and influence is still another, ancillary aim. As such this is a worthy book, with a worthy subject and a worthy purpose. It is a singularly comprehensive book, painstakingly researched and argued with courage and conviction, as one would expect from the author of an earlier, well-received study, *Solzhenitsyn: The Moral Vision* (1980),<sup>4</sup> and who, with Solzhenitsyn's cooperation, also abridged *The Gulag Archipelago* (1985) in one volume. This new book is characterized by critical strenuousness and discrimination. Its exposition and commentation show an acuteness of insight that emerges from concentrated reflection and analysis. Clarity of expression and lucidity of thought are reciprocating qualities that empower its style and content. Solzhenitsyn could not have a more gifted American commentator.

Especially admirable is the sense of devotion to critical and historical truth that Ericson brings to his book and that

engages the reader's attention. Here we have a critic who has uncompromising principles and values, as well as sincerity and fortitude. His book helps to restore Solzhenitsyn's meaning to the modern world, even as it becomes for readers who are subjected to ideological brain-washings in the house of intellect an uncommonly restorative critical experience. In fact, the book should occasion rejoicing among those readers who care about principles and values incessantly derided in liberal intellectual circles. To these readers Ericson's book will convey the stimulus and the courage to endure in the face of a monolithic liberal establishment that shapes public opinion and policy. Ericson's portrayal of Solzhenitsyn vindicates the Russian's relevance to our civilization. By the time one has reached the last page of the book one knows that the liberal mind does not have the last word concerning either Solzhenitsyn's prophetic vision or his prophetic importance. Surely we owe a great deal to Ericson for what he has done in this timely book and also for providing us with an inspiring example of authorial integrity and critical perspicacity. No less than Solzhenitsyn himself, Ericson gives us hope that the human spirit cannot be made a permanent prisoner in the gulag, political or intellectual.

That "we should develop our soul" before we do anything else in life is ultimately Solzhenitsyn's basic premise. And it is the one that most antagonizes the liberal mind. If, therefore, Solzhenitsyn is fundamentally an "anti-ideologist," his work, as Ericson shows, has the final virtue of taking us "beyond ideology": beyond, that is, the oppressive borders of secular, gnostic, and progressivist ideologies seeking to substitute a political religion of immanentism for a super-temporal religion of transcendence. In striving to preserve "unspoiled, undisturbed and undistorted the image of eternity with which each is born,"

Solzhenitsyn defies the anthropocentrism that is at the center of the liberal faith. This defiance inevitably invites the liberals' hostility to Solzhenitsyn, and to all others who question anthropocentric postulates. And it has led to the politicizing of Solzhenitsyn criticism and to the consequential distortions of his thought. His critical fate echoes that of Simone Weil (1909-1943) and of T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), two earlier conservative visionaries who dared to champion a religious and spiritual perspective. Thus, Simone Weil's Christian Hellenism and her unrelenting allegiance to "the supernatural power of the sacraments" have long ignited liberal critics' trivialization of her metaphysical views, as any look at, say, Robert Coles's *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage* (1987) will confirm. In T. S. Eliot's case, one sees no end to liberals' mauling of his sociological writings—e.g., *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) and *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948).<sup>5</sup> Clearly the "enemies of the permanent things" are notorious for their wrath, and their attack on "the dark side of Solzhenitsyn" as "reactionary, authoritarian, and charismatic" is both typical and symptomatic of how "the men of the Enlightenment" react to any criticism of the liberal credo.

Ericson meets head-on the attacks on Solzhenitsyn with irrefutable arguments. He is no apologist but a defender who looks at the total record with critical and historical astuteness. His documentation, both notes and works cited, encompasses fifty printed pages, and he makes no accusations or claims without the support of his sources. Ericson conclusively debunks some of the bad myths that have been concocted regarding Solzhenitsyn's opinions. That he is "a reluctant democrat" rather than an anti-democrat is a point that Ericson also makes with considerable argumentative force: "Solzhenitsyn laments the weakness of the modern West, but never does

he attribute the cause of it to democracy. To secularism, atheism, materialism—yes. But not to democracy." That, in addition, Solzhenitsyn is a militant "Russian nationalist" is, as Ericson reveals, an unfounded charge, and one that ignores (or flagrantly misconstrues) the moral foundation of Solzhenitsyn's insistence on "self-limitation as the supreme principle for every individual and nation." Robert Conquest rightly remarks that *Solzhenitsyn and the Modern World* is the "most definitive" work on the Russian writer's impact and views.

For Solzhenitsyn the condition of the soul is the key to some of the major problems with which the Russian people must wrestle: "The healing of our souls!" he declares in his *Letter to the Soviet Leaders*. "Nothing now is more important to us after all that we have lived through, after our long complicity in lies and even crimes." An extremely impressive section in Ericson's book is his analysis of Solzhenitsyn's *Rebuilding Russia: Reflections and Tentative Proposals* (1991). Here he carefully clarifies what Solzhenitsyn is saying and also argues that his remedies for Marxist-Leninist disasters are both realistic and pragmatic. The following paragraph is worth quoting in full, for it underscores the special qualities of Ericson's critical insight and orientation:

Solzhenitsyn's article to reject the party system of politics is not the only point on which his ideas are akin to those of the American Founding Fathers . . . He has often spoken with open admiration about early American democracy, particularly because he discovers there a recognition that human beings are morally responsible before God to order a good society. Post-Enlightenment ideologies have led societies away from this fundamental condition of the moral universe . . . Clearly, Solzhenitsyn believes that Russia today can learn more about a wholesome democracy from early America than from contemporary America. It would be a curious provincialism of present-minded-

ness—or, perhaps, a zealotry for the doctrine of progress—to hold that every single deviation in American democracy from its original pattern marks an unquestionable improvement.

Ericson's concluding chapter evaluates the extent and the depth of Solzhenitsyn's influence. The role of *The Gulag Archipelago* in the collapse of the Soviet Union is perhaps his greatest accomplishment. Yet, as Ericson emphasizes, his contribution has an influence of ascending magnitude: "Like a stone dropped in a pond, Solzhenitsyn's influence is seen first in the Gulag itself, then in Russia as a whole, then in the larger Communist bloc of nations, then rippling out through the whole world." Such is his achievement, Viktor Astafyev states, that this "greatest writer of our time" is also "a hero of the spirit."<sup>6</sup> Ericson's book vindicates this high praise. Hence, whether it is the religious revival now occurring in Russia, or the manifest ways in which Solzhenitsyn's life and work have, for instance, inspired Vaclav Havel, the Czech playwright and political statesman, the French "New Philosopher" Bernard-Henri Levy, and David Walsh, an American political scientist and author of a morally courageous book, *After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Freedom* (1990)<sup>7</sup>—in addition, of course, to his impact on those who are concerned with the moral breakdown and the massive dehumanization in the Western world—Ericson shows how profound Solzhenitsyn has been in his influence. As Ericson writes:

If many intellectuals have turned a deaf ear in his direction, he is not without influence upon his contemporaries. . . . Solzhenitsyn will leave the world better than he found it. Whether we have read him or not, whether we revile him or honor him, he has affected our lives. And he has affected them for good.

It is the supreme value of Edward

Ericson's book that it enables a reader to appreciate Solzhenitsyn not only as a moral thinker but also as a prophetic visionary writer—as one who, seeing more than he should see, speaks forth the deepest truths about human experience and destiny. The modern scientific world, which in Simone Weil's words is "perfectly compatible . . . with absolutely everything except what is authentically spiritual,"<sup>8</sup> too often ignores prophetic truths. Invariably a prophetic writer like Solzhenitsyn has to confront both the wall of indifference and the fury of rejection, as he tenaciously pursues his prophetic mission with an immediate and yet ultimate sense of involvement, attentiveness, concern.<sup>9</sup> Solzhenitsyn honors and continues that illustrious line of prophetic writers which, in the realm of poetry, includes Virgil, Dante, Milton, and Blake, and which, in the halls of fiction, counts Tolstoy as prophet of the flesh and Dostoevsky as prophet of the soul. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is a prophet of the modern world whose central warning cannot be ignored or silenced except at the greatest peril: "Nothing worthy can be built on a neglect of higher meanings and on a relativistic view of concepts and culture as a whole."<sup>10</sup>

1. Quoted from "Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn," *European Writers: The Twentieth Century* (New York, 1990), vol. 13, ed. George Stade, 3210a. Alexis Klimoff is the author of the concise and helpful entry on the Russian writer. 2. "Create Dangerously," *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York, 1951), 251. 3. This sentence appears in Professor Pipes's review of *A World Split Apart* in *Encounter* (June 1979), 52. 4. See my review in *Christianity and Literature* (Fall 1981), 68-71. 5. See my discussion, "T.S. Eliot and the Critique of Liberalism," *The Courage of Judgment* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1982), 85-108. 6. Quoted in *Solzhenitsyn and the Modern World*, 343. 7. See my review of *After Ideology*, under the title "To See Again the Stars," *Modern Age* (Fall 1992), 61-65. 8. Quoted from "Scientism—A Review" in the *Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (New York, 1977), 296-297. 9. See Abraham J. Heschel's outstanding study, *The Prophets* (New York and Evanston, 1962); and also, C. M. Bowra,