

# THE SHADOW OF TRUTH

## Ethical Concerns in the Writings of Alexander Solzhenitsyn

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**Abstract:** “One word of truth will outweigh the entire world.” These were the words of Alexander Solzhenitsyn while accepting the Nobel Prize in 1974. The twentieth century was the bloodiest century in human history, thanks largely to two ideologies – Fascism and Marxism. While there have been numerous studies on Nazi Germany, there have been relatively few on what transpired in Soviet Russia. This paper examines the contributions of the Russian writer and philosopher Alexander Solzhenitsyn to the understanding of the workings of totalitarianism. Solzhenitsyn wrote numerous works like *The First Circle*, *Cancer Ward* and *The Gulag Archipelago*. This paper will be examining his major work called *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. The main intention is to probe the ethical concerns that the writer raises in this work, along with his deep understanding of human nature. This paper also seeks to compare Solzhenitsyn’s views with that of thinkers like Jean Paul Sartre and Vaclav Havel. The key query here will be the essence-existence debate that Sartre initiated in his seminal work ‘Existentialism Is a Humanism’ and an attempt will be made to show how Havel and Solzhenitsyn would differ from Sartre. Finally there will be an attempt to establish how Solzhenitsyn reaffirms Lev Tolstoy’s theory of history, according to which history is a process where ‘great individuals’ play a minimal role.

**Key Terms:** Ethics, Politics, Totalitarianism, Solzhenitsyn, Sartre, Havel, Existentialism, Humanism, Lev Tolstoy, Human Nature

“If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

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### 1. Introduction

Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s intellectual life is replete with paradoxes. His demise in 2008 put an end to that extraordinary life, a life committed to ideals of truth and freedom as can be evinced by his prodigious literary writings. A small town high school teacher scaled the heights of world fame. This fame was well deserved considering the quality of his literary works, in which he proved beyond doubt that he was a worthy successor to those giants of Russian literature, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy.<sup>1</sup> However one suspects that his worldwide fame rested quite heavily on his unusual courage, which he displayed in standing up to a criminally unjust Communist regime in Soviet Russia. His convictions and his stubborn refusal to yield to a totalitarian regime changed the course of history. This conviction impressed no less than a leading scholar like Walter Kaufmann to write: “My final example exhibits the most awesome courage: Solzhenitsyn. Rarely has it been so difficult for any man to stand alone, utterly alone, without any prop of any kind.”<sup>2</sup> Yet his legacy today remains slightly clouded, as no writer in recent times has been so viciously attacked both home and abroad.

This paper seeks to examine the ethical concerns that Solzhenitsyn displayed in his writings as he fought against a political system that was totalitarian and had scant regard for individual freedom. The courage he displayed in resisting the brutal Marxist regime in Russia makes Solzhenitsyn one of the most important intellectuals in human history. His observations continue to inspire millions of individuals who lead terrible lives under totalitarian and undemocratic societies. The focus of this paper would be on Solzhenitsyn’s famous work *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and his world famous Nobel Prize speech. It is very important to recall and analyze very closely what Solzhenitsyn had to say on some of the most important philosophical questions of our times.

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1970. He was denied permission to visit Stockholm to receive the award. He was given his Nobel Prize in 1974 in a special ceremony. His Nobel citation read as follows: “The Nobel Prize in Literature 1970 was awarded to Alexander Solzhenitsyn “for the ethical force with which he has pursued the indispensable traditions of Russian literature.”

<sup>2</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Without Guilt and Justice: From Decidophobia to Autonomy*, New York: Peter H. Wyden, 1973, 45.

## 2. Truth, Faith and Power

Alexander Solzhenitsyn was born to parents of peasant stock on December 11, 1918; but was raised entirely by his mother, his father having died before he was born. He went on to major in mathematics at the University of Rostov-na-Donu and he learned literature from correspondence courses at the Moscow State University. He fought in WW II and became a captain of artillery; but was arrested in 1945 for writing a letter criticizing Josef Stalin’s totalitarian government. He spent eight years in a variety of labour and prison camps and three more years in enforced exile. After his release, he settled in central Russia where he wrote and taught mathematics.

It is quite clear that Solzhenitsyn was inclined towards literary and philosophical pursuits from a very early age. At the age of ten he began keeping a journal containing his literary writings. He called it, rather ambitiously, *The Twentieth Century*. By the time he was in his late teens, he had ambitions to write on the events leading up to the Bolshevik Revolution. This would become his lifelong project, which he would pursue into his seventies, by then named *The Red Wheel*.<sup>3</sup> In his early youth he experienced ideological conflicts between his family’s deep Christian faith and values and his professor’s Communist indoctrination. This was in the least unusual in Russia at that time. He gravitated towards Marxism-Leninism and like any idealistic youngster joined Communist youth organizations. He would say much later “I did change internally and from that time I became a Marxist, a Leninist and believed in all these things.”<sup>4</sup> However this ideological conflict was hardly resolved and would later become the seminal quest of his life.<sup>5</sup>

The Communists’ idea of social justice appealed to his consciousness. He was also an ‘October child’ – born just after the Bolshevik Revolution. This generation were special targets of the regime and were expected to become the ‘new Soviet men,’ on whose shoulders rested the future of Marxism. As Solzhenitsyn would recount later “The Party had become our father and we – the children-obeyed ... I banished all my memories, all my childhood misgivings. I was a Communist. The

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *November 1916: The Red Wheel/Knot II*, London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> David Aikman, *Russia’s Prophet in Exile: Interview with Alexander Solzhenitsyn*, Time, July 24, 1989, 59.

<sup>5</sup> Edward E. Ericson and Alexis Klimoff, *The Soul and Barbed Wire: An Introduction to Solzhenitsyn*, Delaware: ISI Books, 2008, 6.

world would be what we made of it.”<sup>6</sup> Later his firsthand experience of Soviet reality would cause him to reverse his attitudes towards the Bolshevik Revolution. He believed that it must be resisted on an ethical platform, on behalf of the human spirit.

Solzhenitsyn’s transition from an idealistic communist to a prisoner of the notorious GULAG<sup>7</sup> system is a journey of great suffering and great courage. Gulag camps existed throughout the Soviet Union, but the largest camps lay in the most extreme geographical and climatic regions of the country from the Arctic north to the Siberian east and the Central Asian south. Prisoners were engaged in a variety of economic activities, but their work was typically unskilled, manual, and economically inefficient. The combination of endemic violence, extreme climate, hard labour, meagre food rations and unsanitary conditions led to extremely high death rates in the camps. While the Gulag was radically reduced in size following Stalin’s death in 1953, forced labour camps and political prisoners continued to exist in the Soviet Union right up to the Gorbachev era.<sup>8</sup> Solzhenitsyn described this transition in his words.

In 1941, a few days before the outbreak of the war, I graduated from the Department of Physics and Mathematics at Rostov University. At the beginning of the war, owing to weak health, I was detailed to serve as a driver of horse-drawn vehicles during the winter of 1941-1942. Later, because of my mathematical knowledge, I was transferred to an artillery school, from which, after a crash course, I passed out in November 1942. Immediately after this I was put in command of an artillery-position-finding company, and in this capacity, served, without a break, right in the front line until I was arrested in February 1945. This happened in East Prussia, a region which is linked with my destiny in a remarkable way. As early as 1937, as a first-year student, I chose to write a descriptive essay on “The Samsonov Disaster” of 1914 in East Prussia and studied

<sup>6</sup> John B. Dunlop, Richard Haugh, and Alexis Klimoff, *Alexander Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Materials*, New York: Collier, 1975, 537.

<sup>7</sup> The term “GULAG” is an acronym for the Soviet bureaucratic institution, *Glavnoe Upravlenie ispravitel’no-trudovykh LAGerei* (Main Administration of Corrective Labour Camps) that operated the Soviet system of forced labour camps in the Stalin era.

<sup>8</sup> “GULAG-Many Days, Many Lives,” Online Exhibit, Centre for History and New Media, George Mason University, 2013.

material on this; and in 1945 I myself went to this area (at the time of writing, autumn 1970, the book *August 1914* has just been completed). I was arrested on the grounds of what the censorship had found during the years 1944-45 in my correspondence with a school friend, mainly because of certain disrespectful remarks about Stalin, although we referred to him in disguised terms. As a further basis for the ‘charge,’ there were used the drafts of stories and reflections which had been found in my map case. These, however, were not sufficient for a ‘prosecution,’ and in July 1945 I was ‘sentenced’ in my absence, in accordance with a procedure then frequently applied, after a resolution by the OSO (the Special Committee of the NKVD), to eight years in a detention camp (at that time this was considered a mild sentence).<sup>9</sup>

Wartime experiences had exposed him to the viciousness of the Soviet regime but it had not demolished his faith in Marxism. The Gulags did. The first prison camps were located near the Moscow region. He found the psychological humiliation and the mortifying moral compromises unbearable. He began to gain hitherto unimaginable insights into the Soviets’ systematic brutalization of innocent people. He discovered the nobility of spirit amongst the so-called ‘enemies of the people.’ Many of them were Christian believers and the deep sense of faith he saw in them began to influence him. His training in mathematics ensured his transfer from a labour camp to a Soviet *sharashka*, where scientific research was carried secretly in laboratories in the Soviet Gulag labour camp system. After a few months of transfer from various *sharashka*’s in the Volga region, he was consigned for three years to the *sharashka* at Marfino (just a few miles from Moscow).

It is very important to understand the significance of the *sharaska* and its impact on Soviet life to understand Solzhenitsyn’s writings on the subject. From the very beginning of the Bolshevik era, the relationship between the political elite (both in the Party and state hierarchies) and the scientific and technical elite was fraught with tension. On the one hand, Party leaders such as Lenin, Bukharin, and Trotsky recognized that scientists and engineers would be indispensable in modernizing Russia. On the other hand, there was a deep suspicion of the scientific and technical intelligentsia because they represented all that the Revolution promised to

<sup>9</sup> Sture Allen, *Nobel Lectures-Literature 1968-1980*, Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co., 1993, 9.

destroy: bourgeois culture, elitism, and a proclivity for academic concerns removed from the practicalities of the day. Such tension also produced in Bolsheviks a feeling of vulnerability as more and more scientists and engineers became entrenched in key positions in the Soviet economy. As Kendall Bailes has underscored in his classic works, the Soviet leadership used two strategies to resolve this tension, first, they threw the ‘old’ specialists into jail, and second, they trained a new generation of so-called ‘red’ specialists, i.e., a younger generation who would be more loyal to the demands to the Bolshevik era. In the former case, the attack on the old scientific and technical intelligentsia was embodied most famously in the Shakty and Industrial Party trials of 1928 and 1930, respectively. Thousands were accused of ‘wrecking’ the tempo of industrial production; many were sentenced, a few to death.<sup>10</sup>

The years at Marfino would provide a lot of material for *The First Circle*, which many considered as Solzhenitsyn’s best work. This work, composed between 1955 and 1968, has characters that are literary doubles of his fellow ‘zeks’ at Marfino.<sup>11</sup> Two of the key characters, Lev Rubin and Dimitri Sologdin, are based on Solzhenitsyn’s closest friends in the *sharashka* Lev Kopelev and Dimitri Panin. Both of them have written memoirs that vouch for Solzhenitsyn’s own descriptions in his novel.<sup>12</sup> Gleb Nerzhin, the main protagonist of the *First Circle*, is based on the author himself. Panin considers this fictional character to be “an extraordinarily truthful and accurate picture” of Solzhenitsyn.<sup>13</sup> Kopelev states that he was then a committed Marxist, Panin was a devout Christian and Solzhenitsyn was a sceptic, who would constantly challenge the positions of the other two. Kopelev writes “Solzhenitsyn said that he used to believe in the basic tenets of Marxism, but then began having more and more doubts. Because he could not believe in the historical analyses of those whose prognoses turned out to be wrong.”<sup>14</sup> Solzhenitsyn would

<sup>10</sup> Kendall E. Bailes, *Technology and Society under Lenin and Stalin: Origins of the Soviet Technical Intelligentsia*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978, 69-158.

<sup>11</sup> Zek – a Russian slang term for a prison or forced labour camp inmate.

<sup>12</sup> Lev Kopelev, *Ease My Sorrows: A Memoir*, New York: Random House, 1983, 93.

<sup>13</sup> Dimitri Panin, *The Notebooks of Sologdin*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973, 263.

<sup>14</sup> Kopelev, *Ease My Sorrows*, 15.

constantly evolve during his years of confinement. This would provide material for all his major works. He was later shifted to a labour camp in Kazakhstan, which would provide the inspiration for his work, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

The next part of the paper will deal with some of Solzhenitsyn’s major works. His idea of ethics can be understood only if all his major works are analyzed deeply. This paper seeks to examine one work of his as it is symptomatic of his other works. His first major publication was *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. This work totally focuses on depictions of prison life in the gulag. The idea of writing such a novel came to him on a typically hard day in a prison camp located in central Kazakhstan. This was the same camp he would describe in *The Gulag Archipelago*.

### 3. Solzhenitsyn’s Vision: Closer to Havel Than Sartre

*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* is a very powerful work of fiction and while it does possess similarities with his other works in terms of ethical concerns, it differs in the form and focus. In his longer works he examines the inner life of multiple characters, while in this work he crystallizes his attention on a single central character. This character is a simple peasant and not an alter ego of the educated author. Solzhenitsyn had originally sought to name his novel ‘Shch-854,’ the depersonalizing number on the protagonist’s prison uniform. Ivan Denisovich Shukhov was a German prisoner of war, who escapes to return back to Russia. On his return home, he is falsely accused of being a Nazi spy. Though this is a fictional account, Solzhenitsyn was merely representing the predicament of multitudes who shared the same fate. In this book he attempts to narrate the experiences of a man in the Gulag, in one single day. The narrative is in third person, which conveys the protagonist’s innermost thoughts. Yet the objective descriptions are akin to a first person narration. This mode of narration almost collapses the distinction between the protagonist and the narrator. His subjectivity is expressed in an unmediated form.

Life in the prison camp was a terrible ordeal for anyone. Ivan being a simple person, however, does not react to the terrible humiliation that the ‘zeks’ are subjected to. The descriptions of the living conditions tend to evoke a very strong reaction in the reader’s mind. However the perplexing aspect is that Ivan himself is rather stoic about the whole thing. He is remarkably understated in his reactions to his brutal surroundings. The understatements are deliberate, a mode by which Solzhenitsyn drives home

the book’s central concern – Can a man who is warm understand one who is freezing?

Ivan possesses a deep ethical core, which shines through all the misery and squalor. He is part of a brigade whose job is to lay cinder blocks all day long in the terrible and bitter cold. Though he has no affection for his political masters (Stalin is always an unseen presence), he rather strangely takes pride in his work.<sup>15</sup> This could be interpreted as a case of existence not affecting the true human ‘inner essence.’ Solzhenitsyn’s own life can be seen an excellent example of this principle.<sup>16</sup>

Ivan’s essence is what makes him feel ‘content’ and he almost comes close to declaring this work day as ‘a happy one.’ The savage conditions have not brutalized his inner ethical core. He in fact remains overtime to finish his task of bricklaying. The political system cannot wipe out his humanism towards his fellow zeks. The book also showcases many other characters who share a similar worldview, especially Alyoshka the Baptist for whom a deep sense of faith is the solution to political tyranny.

He is a selfless and honest man whose deep faith in God provides him with answers to how the human spirit can overcome such terrible and unjust suffering. Ivan does not possess this ability. What makes Alyoshka’s suffering even more unjust is the fact that he and other Baptists have been handed out severe twenty five year prison terms for no other reason than for merely being religious. While Ivan agrees with Alyoshka that divine providence matters, he disagrees with him when the Baptist states that he is glad to be in prison because “here you have time to think about your soul.”

The focus of the writer remains Ivan Denisovich. There appears to an unarticulated life force that allows him to retain his humanity, even under the most degrading conditions. This is an unexplained essence that renders him humane even in unbearable situations. The book ends with Ivan thinking about this single day in his life. He ruminates over the day’s events and calls it “an unclouded day.” This would probably shock the

<sup>15</sup> Born on December 18, 1879, in Gori, Georgia, Joseph Stalin rose to power as General Secretary of the Communist Party, becoming a Soviet dictator upon Lenin’s death. Stalin forced rapid industrialization and the collectivization of agricultural land, resulting in millions dying from famine while others were sent to camps.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx was of the view that one’s social and economic material conditions affect and shape one’s inner consciousness or ‘essence.’ This clearly opposed Hegel’s viewpoint that the essence shaped human existence. Marx had supposedly inverted Hegel.

reader because Ivan has been subject to so many humiliations during the day that one would rationally expect him to lash out violently against the system that has rendered him servile. However he refuses to do any such thing. His essence is unchanged and he does not transform into a violent creature, like the state that is punishing him.

One can explore more deeply the ethical dimensions that Solzhenitsyn raises by examining the writings of the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre.<sup>17</sup> In his famous essay “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” Sartre proposes the idea that “existence precedes essence” meaning that a personality is not built over a previously designed model or a precise purpose, because it is the human being who chooses to engage in such enterprise. Therefore, to Sartre an oppressive situation is not intolerable in itself, but once regarded as such by those who feel oppressed the situation becomes intolerable. So by projecting my intentions onto my present condition, “It is I who freely transform it into action.” When he said that “the world is a mirror of my freedom,” he meant that the world obliged me to react, to overtake myself. It is this overtaking of a present constraining situation by a project to come that Sartre names transcendence. He added that “we are condemned to be free.”

When it is said that man defines himself, it is often perceived as stating that man can ‘wish’ to be something – anything and then be it. According to Sartre’s account, however, this would be a kind of bad faith. What is meant by the statement is that man is (1) defined only insofar as he acts and (2) that he is responsible for his actions. To clarify, it can be said that a man who acts cruelly towards other people is, by that act, defined as a cruel man and in that same instance, he (as opposed to his genes, for instance) is defined as being responsible for being this cruel man. Of course, the more positive therapeutic aspect of this is also implied: You can choose to act in a different way, and to be a good person instead of a cruel person. Here it is also clear that since man can choose to be either cruel or good, he is, in fact, neither of these things *essentially*.<sup>18</sup> To claim that existence precedes essence is to assert that there is no such

<sup>17</sup> Born on June 21, 1905, in Paris, France, Jean-Paul Sartre was a pioneering intellectual and proponent of existentialism who championed leftist causes in France and other countries. He wrote a number of books, including the highly influential *Being and Nothingness*, and was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1964, though he turned it down.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph S. Catalano, *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's Being and Nothingness*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

predetermined essence to be found in humans, and that an individual’s essence is defined by him or her through how he or she creates and lives his or her life. As Sartre puts it in his “Existentialism Is a Humanism”: “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards.”<sup>19</sup>

This framework was challenged by the Czech writer, philosopher and statesman Vaclav Havel.<sup>20</sup> Havel in speaking of life under a Communist type of totalitarian system, proclaimed that “The specific experience I’m talking about has given me one great certainty: Consciousness precedes Being, and not the other way around, as Marxists claim,” thus showing the philosophical and spiritual importance of a political issue, arguing that the communist totalitarianism as such ran contrary to any and all intuitions of the general population, who held steadfast to their beliefs, customs and traditions, even in secret, despite the measures taken against them, who in effect continued to identify themselves as indigenous Slavic populations, and not as communists. Thus Havel argues that, indeed, essence (consciousness) *precedes* existence (being), and not the other way around, since human nature as such, i.e. the *conscious* act of self-reflection and – identification, embedded in, conditioned and cultivated by a traditional foundation will always remain present; even after having been ‘liberated’ from such ‘superstition’.<sup>21</sup>

Solzhenitsyn’s position would be very similar to Vaclav Havel’s. Havel would say in “The Politics of Hope”: “In my own life I am reaching for something that goes far beyond me and the horizon of the world that I know; in everything I do I touch eternity in a strange way.” With this grounding, politics becomes “the universal consultation on the reform of the affairs which render man human.”<sup>22</sup> Solzhenitsyn in this work as well

<sup>19</sup> “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” by Jean-Paul Sartre, translated by Bernard Frechtman, was originally published in 1945, and reprinted in *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, New York: Philosophical Library and Carol Publishing Co., 1985.

<sup>20</sup> Václav Havel was a prominent participant in the liberal reforms of 1968, and, after the Soviet clampdown on Czechoslovakia, his plays, which explore the self-delusions and moral compromises that characterize life under a totalitarian system, were banned. Havel was elected president of Czechoslovakia in July 1990, becoming the country’s first noncommunist leader since 1948.

<sup>21</sup> Václav Havel, “*Politics and Conscience*” in *Open Letters: Selected Writings*, ed. Paul Wilson, New York: Random House, 1985, 249-71.

<sup>22</sup> Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvizdala*, trans. Paul Wilson, New York: Vintage Books, 1990, 189.

as his other major works like *Cancer Ward* and *The First Circle* has protagonists like Oleg Kostoglotov and Gleb Nerzhin who while being intellectually superior to Ivan, share a similar worldview. Their inner essence remains unchanged, no matter what the political system tries to do to them both physically and mentally.

Havel exemplified this point in his lecture at the Stanford University. Havel referred to ‘unconscious experience’ as well as to ‘archetypes and archetypal visions.’ His point was that cultures formed thousands of years ago, quite independently of one another, nevertheless employ the same basic archetypes. This suggests that “there exist deep and fundamental experiences shared by the entire human race.” Further, “traces of such experiences can be found in all cultures, regardless of how distant or how different they are from one another. . . . the whole history of the cosmos, and especially of life, is mysteriously recorded in the inner workings of all human beings. This history is projected into man’s creations and is, again, something that joins us together far more than we think.”<sup>23</sup>

The idea is extended even further: “After thousands of years, people of different epochs and cultures feel that they are somehow parts and partakers of *the same integral Being*, carrying within themselves a piece of *the infinity of that Being*.” In the final take, Havel asserts that “all cultures assume the existence of something that might be called the *Memory of Being*, in which everything is constantly recorded.”<sup>24</sup> The guarantees of human freedom and personal responsibility lie neither in programs of action nor in systems of thought, but in “man’s relationship to that which transcends him, without which he would not be and of which he is an integral part.”<sup>25</sup> Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* as well as his later writings would also emphatically endorse this view of Havel.

#### 4. The Responsibility of Writers: Evolving a Common Scale of Values

Alexander Solzhenitsyn always understood himself to be above all a writer rather than an activist. However the extraordinary range of his philosophical concerns, especially with ethics and the protection of human liberties and the long standing impact of his works on the human rights

<sup>23</sup> Vaclav Havel, “The Spiritual Roots of Democracy,” retitled and published as “Democracy’s Forgotten Dimension,” *Journal of Democracy* 6, 2 (1995), 3-10.

<sup>24</sup> Havel, “The Spiritual Roots of Democracy,” 3.

<sup>25</sup> Havel, “The Spiritual Roots of Democracy,” 7.

discourse make him something of an extraordinary figure. No other writer has had such an impact on the twentieth century. Which other writer could claim to have brought down the ‘evil empire’ built upon what Solzhenitsyn himself called as the twin pillars of violence and ‘the lie.’ The lie refers to the ideology of Marxism, which promised people a utopia on earth and gave them untold misery instead. He can be equated with Lev Tolstoy, who was considered by his countrymen as the ‘second government,’ a defender of humanism.<sup>26</sup>

Solzhenitsyn embodies multiple roles, that of writer, historian and philosopher. In this he willingly adheres to a Russian literary tradition which has always refused to make distinctions between the concerns of literature, ethics and politics. This is sometimes in contradiction to the Western literary traditions where the categories of fiction and non-fiction are seen as very distinct categories. Russian literature, especially of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, did not perceive literary excellence as merely being the ability of a powerful creative mind to produce a fictional world. The more seminal responsibility was to make sense of the real world with its social and moral problems. Solzhenitsyn prefers to depict the real world of communist Russia with its brutal Gulag system and its notorious secret police. It was a dystopian world where the free will of citizens was crushed beyond recognition.

Solzhenitsyn’s Nobel Prize lecture reveals the unity of his ‘social’ and ‘artistic’ concerns. The Nobel Lecture showcases the harmony between his literary and political concerns. It shows how one can write without overtly politicizing art or ignoring the obligation a writer owes to society. He talks about the social responsibility of artists and the role that ‘world literature’ can play in evolving a ‘common scale of values.’ He refers to how art is a gift that resists every human effort to master it. Art has been subject to various attempts by humans to “adapt it . . . toward transient political or limited needs.”<sup>27</sup> However, art transcends such ulterior motives. He then talks about two kinds of writers. The first he calls the one with the ‘modern’ view of his role. Here the writer “imagines himself the creator of an

<sup>26</sup> The publication of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* made Tolstoy so famous that one contemporary described him as Russia’s second Czar. He used that position against the state, as well as the police, the army, meat eating, private property and all forms of violence.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Nobel Lecture*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972.

autonomous spiritual world. He hoists upon his shoulders the act of creating the world and populating it, together with the total responsibility for it.”<sup>28</sup>

Solzhenitsyn opposes this kind of writer, because he believes that no human being, not even a ‘genius,’ can build a ‘balanced spiritual system’ upon the illusion that man is the ‘centre of existence.’ He rejects ‘anthropocentric humanism,’ as he feels that it becomes a wilful confusion of man with God. It is very similar to Nietzsche’s *Will to Power*, where man has declared the death of God and proclaims “We are the Gods.”<sup>29</sup> Solzhenitsyn rejects this Nietzschean tendency which seems amply evident in modern society.

According to him, there is the second kind of artist who recognizes above himself a higher power and works as a humble apprentice under God. This artist has a far greater responsibility than the first because he rejects every form of self assertion. This is the outcome of a self awareness that he did not create the world and hence has no right to even claim that he can control it. Here Solzhenitsyn introduces the concept of beauty. He is responding to the remark made by Dostoevsky that “Beauty will save the World.”<sup>30</sup> He is of the view that the modernist approach rejects the role that beauty can play in providing an existential verification of the natural order. Solzhenitsyn states in his lecture,

One day Dostoevsky threw out the enigmatic remark: “Beauty will save the world.” What sort of a statement is that? For a long time I considered it mere words. How could that be possible? When in bloodthirsty history did beauty ever save anyone from anything? Ennobled, uplifted, yes – but whom has it saved? There is, however, a certain peculiarity in the essence of beauty, a peculiarity in the status of art: namely, the convincingness of a true work of art is completely irrefutable and it forces even an opposing heart to surrender. It is possible to compose an outwardly smooth and elegant political speech, a headstrong article, a social program, or a

<sup>28</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Nobel Lecture*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche was born on 15 October 1844, in Röcken bei Lützen, Germany. In his brilliant but relatively brief career, he published numerous major works of philosophy, including *Twilight of the Idols* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In the last decade of his life he suffered from insanity; he died on 25 August 1900. His writings on individuality and morality in contemporary civilization influenced many major thinkers and writers of the twentieth century.

<sup>30</sup> This remark is attributed to Prince Myshkin in Dostoevsky’s work *The Idiot*.

philosophical system on the basis of both a mistake and a lie. What is hidden, what distorted, will not immediately become obvious. Then a contradictory speech, article, program, a differently constructed philosophy rallies in opposition – and all just as elegant and smooth, and once again it works. Which is why such things are both trusted and mistrusted. In vain to reiterate what does not reach the heart.

But a work of art bears within itself its own verification: conceptions which are devised or stretched do not stand being portrayed in images, they all come crashing down, appear sickly and pale, convince no one. But those works of art which have scooped up the truth and presented it to us as a living force – they take hold of us, compel us, and nobody ever, not even in ages to come, will appear to refute them. So perhaps that ancient trinity of Truth, Goodness and Beauty is not simply an empty, faded formula as we thought in the days of our self-confident, materialistic youth? If the tops of these three trees converge, as the scholars maintained, but the too blatant, too direct stems of Truth and Goodness are crushed, cut down, not allowed through – then perhaps the fantastic, unpredictable, unexpected stems of Beauty will push through and soar *to that very same place*, and in so doing will fulfil the work of all three?

In that case Dostoevsky’s remark, “Beauty will save the world,” was not a careless phrase but a prophecy? After all *he* was granted to see much, a man of fantastic illumination. And in that case art, literature might really be able to help the world today?”<sup>31</sup>

This idea is evident when one examines his *magnum opus The Gulag Archipelago*, which is very faithful to facts and contains profound discussions on historical and legal matters. However he subtitled the work as “an experiment in literary investigation,” evidently anointing it as a work of art. This is probably the reason why in spite of so many books on the workings of totalitarianism or the dreaded Gulag system, none has moved our hearts and minds like this work.

Solzhenitsyn then goes on to explore how literature can bridge the ‘yawning chasm’ that separates peoples and cultures in the world. What really inspired him to initiate this process is the difficulty people living in the Communist world had in making the Western world understand the totalitarian experience. The insensitivity and inability of people to

<sup>31</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Nobel Lecture*, 6.

understand suffering are linked, according to him, to how humans come to comprehend the world and forge their ‘scale of values.’

## 5. Conclusion

Solzhenitsyn has through his extraordinary works and his own exemplary courage inspired generations of writers and defenders of human rights. His works have exposed the ‘Lie’ that Marxism perpetuated in the Soviet Union by indoctrinating millions of citizens and banishing those who questioned the ethical foundations of the Soviet state. Sadly while being a highly respected figure, his legacy has remained undervalued in the opinion of the author. When the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War ended, leaders like Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher were praised to the high skies. The media extolled the virtues of the western political leaders who were credited for bringing down the ‘evil regime’ of communism. What about Solzhenitsyn and the millions of other ‘zeks’ like him? Did they not play an even more important role in bringing down the tyrannical communist regime from within? What would be the historical assessment of their contributions?

Historians almost always seem to be obsessed with ‘great individuals’ and they almost singularly focus on their achievements. Historical epochs are identified with kings and military leaders who appear to be solely responsible for great military victories. This narrative seems to miss out on the contributions of ordinary people who have also played a major role in transforming history. An alternative to this is the theory of history put forward by the great Russian writer and social reformer Lev Tolstoy. In his great work *War and Peace* he expounds his theory of history. Tolstoy shatters the concept of individuals single-handedly transforming history. He looks at the French invasion of Russia in 1812 from a very different perspective. Most historians focused on the military genius of either Napoleon or Alexander I (the then Tsar of Russia) and attributed to them extraordinary qualities that apparently enabled them to change the course of history. Tolstoy disagrees.

He argues: “In historical events so-called great people, are labels, giving a name to an event, who, like labels, least of all have a connection to the events themselves.”<sup>32</sup> For Tolstoy both Napoleon and Alexander I are ordinary men. *War and Peace* reflects these opposite tensions in the author’s own psychological make-up. It is a novel about aristocratic

heroes, who are allowed their stories and sense of rational control, whereas history itself is driven by the inchoate passions of the masses – that ‘unconscious life of the human swarm.’ Nevertheless, as Tolstoy says: “In history fatalism is unavoidable in order to explain irrational phenomena.” History appears to have its own inevitability, and this, along with the negation of the possibility of leadership, raises the philosophical question of free will; it also raises another important issue for Tolstoy himself, a concern shared by Solzhenitsyn – the role of God in human affairs.<sup>33</sup>

Tolstoy blames professional historians for making two seminal mistakes. They take one arbitrary strand of continuous events and examine them in isolation, and secondly they view the actions of one man, be he a tsar or a military general, as expressing the sum of the people’s arbitrary will. He ends the section by proposing his own historical method, which is to leave aside tsars, ministers and generals “but to study the similar, infinitely small elements, which guide the masses,” although he admits “No one can say to what extent it is possible for man to understand the laws of history by this means.” Nevertheless, the study of history in its present form is highly subjective, as he will later suggest: “With every year, with every new writer, we see that the view changes of what constitutes man’s good, so that, in ten years’ time what seemed good is presented as evil and *vice versa*.”<sup>34</sup>

Applying Tolstoy’s theory of history Solzhenitsyn’s legacy appears to take on a different hue. Solzhenitsyn and the millions of zeks who retained their sense of ethics by fighting the brutal communist system will be better represented by this approach to history. It was the effort of numerous individuals that changed history. As Solzhenitsyn would aptly put it “One word of truth will outweigh the entire world.”<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Lev Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Solomon Volkov, *The Magical Chorus: A History of Russian Culture from Tolstoy to Solzhenitsyn*, New York: Vintage Books, 2009, 5-7.

<sup>34</sup> Solomon Volkov, *The Magical Chorus*, 41.

<sup>35</sup> The conclusion of his Nobel Lecture speech.