

A black and white close-up portrait of an elderly man with a full, dark beard and mustache. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of his skin and the details of his facial hair. The background is dark and out of focus.

REMEMBER THE OLD DAYS

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Not many writers could claim that they had introduced new words into the vocabulary of other nations. The word „Gulag“ is firmly associated in every modern language with the name of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. The grim fate of political prisoners in the USSR and the horrors of the Soviet corrective labour camps had been described in detail in many books long before Solzhenitsyn's The Gulag Archipelago was smuggled to the West in 1974. Since the 1920s, numerous memoirs, confessions and testimonies have reached Western shores, written by refugees, emigres, defectors and former employees of the Soviet penitentiary system. But they were published in limited editions and preached to the converted – mainly Kremlinologists. These publications never reached a mass audience, never had a devastating effect on the reader comparable to that of Solzhenitsyn's masterpiece. The Gulag Archipelago differed fundamentally from those personal horror stories or sociological insights not only because the book incorporated hundreds of vivid testimonies from people from disparate walks of life that mirrored the life of practically the whole nation; what was even more impressive was the fact that Solzhenitsyn set their (and his own) prison camp experience in the context of the history of the country, its religion and ideology; he exposed the mechanism of state oppression from top to bottom, the overall complicity of the whole population in a criminal enterprise of dimensions that had until then been associated only with the Nazi regime. The Gulag Archipelago is also innovative stylistically: it constantly switches narrative points of view, it travels in time, the documentary passages are interspersed with imaginary dreamlike sequ-

ences, it renders Gothic horrors in a matter-of-fact tone of voice and allows religious insights to become part of day-to-day reality.

Published at the height of the confrontation between the Western powers and the Soviet Union, when – in the face of the growing threat of nuclear war – the prevailing mood among the Western intelligentsia was encapsulated in the motto „Better red than dead“, The Gulag Archipelago undermined any hope of having faith in the good intentions of the totalitarian monster. There was hardly anyone left inside Russia who was not aware of the Stalinist crimes. The book, therefore, amounted to a testimony of the Russian people, a public condemnation of the evil regime exposed in front of the nations of the Western world and aimed at a Western audience.

The book was also written as a treatise on the subject of survival. The tone had been set in Solzhenitsyn's first published masterpiece, One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich (not included in *The Solzhenitsyn Reader*). Unlike another genius writing in this genre, Varlam Shalamov (a kind of Russian Primo Levi), who had exposed the prison camp as an unmitigated hell where man is stripped of any vestige of humanity, Solzhenitsyn's narrative is a moral fable of the condemned soul seeking, in the gruelling experience of prison life, the light of spiritual rejuvenation. It gave hope. This was another reason why his writing was such a huge success in the West. The Gulag Archipelago became an international best-seller, together with his earlier, more traditional political melodramas, The First Circle and Cancer Ward, whose style and mode of thinking were not so different – according to Shalamov – from the canonical works of socialist realism. Solzhenitsyn won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1970, but didn't go to Stockholm for fear of not being allowed back into Russia.

Gradually Solzhenitsyn became convinced of his God-given powers to bring down the Soviet regime and secure the renaissance of a Russian nation that would renew its commitment to the Russian Orthodox Church. His open „Letter to the Soviet Leaders“ was followed by addresses and encyclicals to the Russian people (sometimes beginning in a Stalinist fashion with „Dear Compatriots . . .“) on a variety of subjects: from urging people to boycott the mendacious Soviet state institutions to reviving obsolete and archaic Slavic vocabulary uncontaminated by the influence of the Latin world. Shalamov detected this moralistic, pedagogical streak in Solzhenitsyn quite early, refusing cooperation with him in writing about the Gulag, and later accused him of being a political manipulator, exploiting the horrors of the Gulag to fulfil personal ambitions.

But could the work of such an epic dimension as The Gulag Archipelago have been created by an objective apolitical chronicler? Could it have reached the mass audience in the West without a certain degree of political manoeuvring? Does the creator of such a seminal work need to be defended against his detractors? The editors of The Solzhenitsyn Reader firmly believe that he does: „Solzhenitsyn is ritualistically dismissed as a Slavophile, romantic, agrarian, monarchist, theocrat, even anti-Semite. There are few major intellectual figures who have been so systematically misunderstood or have been the subject of as many wilful distortions“.

This volume, with a comprehensive preface and informative introductions to each part, was compiled with the full approval and cooperation of Solzhenitsyn and his family. Its aim is clearly to correct what they see as the gross misrepresentation of Solzhenitsyn's views, especially in the West. To achieve this aim, the editors have concentrated on those

samples of his fiction, as well as non-fictional writings, that elucidate his ideas. Solzhenitsyn emerges from this book as a moderate conservative, a religious but tolerant old-fashioned thinker, with views not so very different, as the editors concede, from those of many blue collar workers. Soviet ideology was bent on the destruction of those spiritual and literary traditions that were detrimental to egalitarian, atheist and populist notions in art and culture. Paradoxically, from a Western liberal point of view, this encouraged Russian dissidents to preach conservative values and attitudes in life, politics and religion. Solzhenitsyn insists on religion as the foundation of morality, of the social fabric of life, and repudiates the predominance of the rational over the spiritual approaches in modern thinking; he condemns excessive consumerism and legal machinations that replaced the sense of social justice in the Western world.

What the editors do not show in their introductory essays is that the trouble had been not with his views as such, but rather with the way these were applied by Solzhenitsyn to the political reality of Russia. For twenty years of his life in Vermont (following the publication in the West of The Gulag Archipelago), he noticed only the uglier manifestations of mass culture, overlooking the revolutionary social forces of American democracy. Temperamentally, he tends to see the life of a country as that of a commune that achieves harmony by reaching a collective consensus on social issues. He cannot comprehend the political value of the right to disagree, of agreeing to disagree, an attempt (quite successful) at cohabitation of those with opposing views. He didn't learn in the West that political ideas have no spiritual value without practical application. And in practice, his views on patriotism, morality and religion attracted the most reactionary ele-

ments of Russian society – from top to bottom.

With the years, Solzhenitsyn ceased to be a writer and became a preacher and politician. He would deny the charge because he had always insisted that the division between people was founded not on class distinctions, religion or party ideology, but „went through their hearts“. This is why he instinctively judges people by their intentions, not their actions. This theocratic principle is sound, perhaps, in friendship but destructive when applied to modern life. He made a similar crucial mistake in the most controversial of his recent writings, Two Hundred Years Together (reviewed in the *TLS*, March 1, 2002), dedicated to the history of Russian Jewry and their part in creating the Soviet system. It is preposterous to accuse Solzhenitsyn of anti-Semitism, but the reason why such accusations were aired could be found in his notion of the „collective responsibility“ of the peoples of Russia. Not collective „guilt“, he stresses, but „responsibility“. For him, the Jews of Russia embraced the Revolution en masse, as if following a roll call. Statistics apart, nobody would deny that Leon Trotsky or Lazar Kaganovich entered the Russian Revolution with the burden of ethnic grievances in their hearts. What is surprising is the conclusion that Solzhenitsyn draws from it: that every Jew in the world should now feel responsible for Jewish participation in the Soviet catastrophe, should remember it, contemplate it privately, repent of it and denounce it publicly – otherwise he or she would not be fit for being properly accepted into the fold of the new Russia. This pattern of wishful thinking on the part of a fiction writer in the guise of a moral philosopher can be traced throughout his life. Solzhenitsyn used to be a good listener; he is evidently a great writer when he records other people's voices; the trouble starts when he tries to speak in his own voice.

The task of writing the The Gulag Archipelago and, later, The Red Wheel required monumental endeavour. Solzhenitsyn subjected his personal and social life to the rigorous discipline and daily routines of a monk. The pursuit of his literary aims was conducted with the determination and ferocious tenacity that could be traced back to his experience in prison camps. For an outside observer, his way of life both in Russia and in exile looked like a mirror image of the seclusion of a prison cell. At the same time, in his confrontations with the Soviet authorities he managed to out-maneuvre their propaganda moves, through the Western press, foreign broadcasts in Russian or open letters to Western political leaders. In short, he was a brilliant and sometimes ruthless tactician in defending his literary legacy (as he has dutifully recorded in The Oak and the Calf, 1975).

Did this extra-curricular activity rub off on the character of the author? His persona became the subject of literary parodies and personal innuendos – such as the poisonous memoirs of his first wife Reshetovskaya, or a hilarious anti-utopian spoof by Vladimir Voinovich, in which he ridiculed Solzhenitsyn's social projects and propensity for folksy earthly wisdoms. But his public gestures didn't require any fictional elaboration. Edward E. Ericson and Daniel J. Mahoney, the editors of this volume, mention the tragic fate of Solzhenitsyn's Moscow typist, who cracked after a week of severe interrogations and handed over to the KGB a copy of the manuscript of The Gulag Archipelago. So acute was her sense of betrayal of Solzhenitsyn's cause that she committed suicide. This was the most tragic but not the only instance when fear of incurring Solzhenitsyn's disapproval made people act against their better judgement, and those who had fallen foul of him were ostracized.

He banished from his life everyone whom he suspected of disloyalty, including the most insightful and trustworthy of his biographers, Michael Scammell. For Solzhenitsyn and his defenders it was the only way to preserve the memory of the horrors of Stalinism for future generations; for his detractors, his civic zeal was just a cover for megalomaniacal vanity.

After his involuntary move to the West in 1974, his influence on the ranks of the exiled Russian intelligentsia was catastrophic. One of his first political actions was an attempt to disseminate through the Western mass media the list of those dissident figures who in his opinion could, in one way or another, be suspected of collaboration with the KGB. The libellous and whimsical character of such allegations prevented newspapers from publishing this absurd list. But the damage had been done. He unsuccessfully tried to tarnish the reputation of the most prophetic literary thinker and novelist of the epoch, Andrei Sinyavsky, because Sinyavsky had ridiculed Solzhenitsyn's simplistic view of Russian history and the patriotic role of literature.

Solzhenitsyn's fund for helping ex-prisoners of the Gulag had a considerable impact, but the most prominent emigre periodicals under his guidance became bastions of stale traditionalism – in style as well as in politics – which gradually made them look like a mirror image of their Soviet counterparts.

His own return to Russia in 1994 was like a time-machine journey from the Russian past into the present with some embarrassing celebratory stopovers on the way. He had followed the cataclysmic events in the Russia of the late 1980s closely but from a distance – geographical as well as temporal. The turbulence of American life never distracted him from his work on the monumental epic about the causes of the Russian Revolution, *The Red Wheel*, which he

had started (as a journal with the modest title „The Meaning of the Twentieth Century“) when he was only a ten-year-old schoolboy.

Solzhenitsyn re-emerged in Russia as someone from the era when the role of the writer in society (disillusioned with the moral orthodoxy of the establishment) had replaced that of a priest. He must have vividly remembered how in 1958, a few years before he himself was embraced by the Soviet literary establishment, a crowd of 14,000 was bused by the authorities to Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow to denounce Pasternak as an enemy of the people after he had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. One could describe this event as a paranoid manifestation of totalitarianism; but it also demonstrated how important the role of the writer was in the eyes of the ruling elite at that time. In the same year 14,000 had gathered (this time voluntarily) at a New England stadium to listen to T. S. Eliot. Poets ruled the world. In the 1960s, meanwhile, Andre Malraux became the first Minister of Culture in France. Albert Einstein was invited to become President of Israel. In those times the status of the intellectual was comparable to that of the grand statesman.

It was clearly a shock for Solzhenitsyn to discover that his role had ceased to be regarded as that of a spiritual leader of his people. Initially, his well-publicized comeback to the motherland was clouded by his admirers' disappointment with their prophet's outdated political wisdoms and Solzhenitsyn's own disapproval of the way the country had liberated itself from the shackles of Communism. For a short time, he had a weekly fifteen-minute television programme called Meetings with Solzhenitsyn. It was dropped after a few months owing to a lack of audience response, to be replaced by a programme featuring the Italian parliamentarian and porn queen, La Cicciolina.

Solzhenitsyn's status in Russia today wo-

uld have been deemed peculiar if it were not almost tragic. On the face of it, the outlook is good. He celebrated his eighty-eighth birthday at his private estate near Moscow, which was specially built as a replica of his retreat in Vermont. With the ascent of Vladimir Putin to power, his optimism and belief in the new Russian state grew. He granted an audience to Putin who came to his house to discuss the Russian nation's current problems; he has accepted state honours and honorary titles. The first parts of the multi-volume edition of his complete works are due to appear in the bookshops this year. Last year, a state television channel showed the ten-part serialization of his novel The First Circle which was narrated by Solzhenitsyn himself. According to witnesses he was moved to tears when he was shown the first episodes. After he endured eight years in labour camps (he was arrested on the front line in 1945 for criticizing Stalin in private correspondence with a friend), exile in Kazakhstan and the threat of cancer, his semi-underground existence in Moscow and fight with the literary establishment after Stalin's death and during the Khrushchev thaw – after all that, it looks as though the truth has triumphed. Has it?

I am old enough to remember how, as Soviet schoolboys, we were from time to time given a talk by a guest lecturer, an Old Bolshevik, on the horrors of the tsarist regime. The aim was to demonstrate how happy and bright our days in the Soviet paradise were. It is alarming to see that Solzhenitsyn's legacy is now being used by the new governors of Russia in a similar way. The country has not gone through the process of de-Sovietization, as did the other countries of Eastern and Central Europe after the fall of Communism. Nobody can give a clear answer why, during the period (short as it was) of the total collapse of the to-

talitarian state, the records of KGB informants were not made public, the main perpetrators of the Soviet genocide inside and outside the USSR were left in peace, the party apparatchiks were allowed to regain their political influence and financial affluence under the new regime. Some suggested that the scale of complicity in Soviet crimes was such that its exposure would have led to a civil war; others blamed Russian fatalism and lack of civic courage. Apart from all this, the new elite started early on adapting the parts of the former state security organs for their own private aims, thereby letting the most sinister elements of the defunct Soviet system take control of the new Russia.

Whatever the causes, we are now faced with a country once again under the thumb of a transformed state security apparatus, divided into warring factions and yet united in destruction of any semblance of political opposition – be it a politically active industrialist or charismatic journalist. The sense of impunity among criminals, old and new, is such that it has a demoralizing effect on the rest of the population: „Everything is permitted“ is the person on the street's opinion. And, since the origin and mores of the new Russian elite are transparent to the outside world, the new establishment is wary of foreigners and outsiders, whips up nationalistic feelings among the populace, and creates an atmosphere of deep suspicion of Western alliances. The West is for shopping, not for learning historical lessons. Russians are not to imitate the Western way of life blindly, we are told; instead they have chosen what is now called „controlled democracy“ for the „indigenous population“. In short, the country – with all its current wealth, feverish economic activity and cultural exuberance – might easily sleepwalk into a state which in the good old days was called fascist.

Solzhenitsyn once dedicated his life to

the fight against the regime in which the state security machine made everyone feel an accomplice in turning the country into a prison camp. He has now become part of a society where the mass media are reduced to self-censoring impotence, Soviet style; dissident artists and writers are regularly beaten up; journalists who expose corruption and the abuses of the centralized political power are murdered. And yet Solzhenitsyn is silent; silent even when his most cherished idea of saving Russia by strengthening the independence of local government, Swiss style, was first ridiculed in the press and then trampled over by a presidential decree that reinstalled the central authority of the Kremlin over the whole of Russia. On the whole, Solzhenitsyn avoids public appearances these days and refrains from public utterances. And

yet, he found the time and energy to express his approval of the recent cutting off of gas supplies to Ukraine for a discount price „because that country tramples over Russian culture and the Russian language and allows NATO military manoeuvres on its territory“. Oh well. My country, right or wrong.

To the amazement of the Western world, Russia (as well as Malaysia and China) has proved that capitalism and the pursuit of happiness are not incompatible with authoritarianism and nationalism. We shouldn't forget that the Gulag was also a Stalinist capitalist enterprise that used cheap slave labour for state projects. Solzhenitsyn wrote [The Gulag Archipelago](#) as a cautionary tale for the West. Perhaps it is the time for the Russians to reread it from their own historical perspective.