

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF ALEXANDER SOLZHENITSYN

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Sources: Wikipedia and Biography by Michael Scammell, 1984

Solzhenitsyn was born in Kislovodsk in 1918. His father was of Russian descent and his mother was Ukrainian. While pregnant with him, his father was killed in a hunting accident. Aleksandr was raised by his widowed mother and his aunt during the Russian Civil War. By 1930 the family property had been turned into a collective farm. Later, Solzhenitsyn recalled that his mother had fought for survival and that they had to keep his father's background in the old Imperial Army a secret. His educated mother encouraged his literary and scientific learnings and raised him in the Russian Orthodox faith. He studied mathematics and physics at Rostov State University. At the same time, he took correspondence courses from the Moscow Institute of Philosophy, Literature and History, which by this time were heavily ideological in scope. **He did not question the state ideology or the superiority of the Soviet Union until he spent time in the camps.**<sup>[16]</sup>

During the WW2, Solzhenitsyn served as the commander of a sound-ranging battery in the Red Army, was involved in major action at the front, and was twice decorated. He was awarded the Order of the Red Star on 8 July 1944 for sound-ranging two German artillery batteries and adjusting counterbattery fire onto them, resulting in their destruction.

In February 1945, while serving in East Prussia, Solzhenitsyn was arrested for writing derogatory comments in private letters to a friend, Nikolai Vitkevich, about the conduct of the war by Joseph Stalin, whom he called "Khozyain" ("the boss"), and "Balabos" (Yiddish rendering of Hebrew *baal ha-bayit* for "master of the house"). They knew their letters were censored, but they thought that was for the purpose of censoring military information and weren't concerned about their veiled criticisms of Stalin.

Solzhenitsyn was accused of anti-Soviet propaganda under Article 58, paragraph 10 of the Soviet criminal code, and of "founding a hostile organization" under paragraph 11. This referred to what Solzhenitzyn and his friend called "Resolution 1", in which they wrote out their hypothetical plan to solve the problems of the existing Soviet state. It was sort of a private joke between them. Solzhenitsyn was taken to the Lubyanka prison in Moscow, where he was interrogated. On 9 May 1945, it was announced that Germany had surrendered and all of Moscow broke out in celebrations with fireworks and searchlights illuminating the sky to celebrate the victory in the Great Patriotic War. From his cell in the Lubyanka, Solzhenitsyn remembered: "Above the muzzle of our window, and from all the other cells of the Lubyanka, and from all the windows of the Moscow prisons, we too, former prisoners of war and former front-line soldiers, watched

the Moscow heavens, patterned with fireworks and crisscrossed with beams of searchlights. There was no rejoicing in our cells and no hugs and no kisses for us. That victory was not ours." On 7 July 1945, he was sentenced to an eight-year term in a labour camp. This was the normal sentence for most crimes under Article 58 at the time.

The first part of Solzhenitsyn's sentence was served in several work camps; the "middle phase", as he later referred to it, was spent in a *sharashka* (a special scientific research facility run by Ministry of State Security). In 1950, Solzhenitsyn was sent to a "Special Camp" for political prisoners. During his imprisonment at the camp in the town of Ekibastuz in Kazakhstan, he worked as a miner, bricklayer, and foundry foreman. His experiences at Ekibastuz formed the basis for the book *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. One of his fellow political prisoners, Ion Moraru, remembers that Solzhenitsyn spent some of his time at Ekibastuz writing. While there, Solzhenitsyn had a tumor removed. His cancer was not diagnosed at the time.

In March 1953, after his sentence ended, Solzhenitsyn was sent to internal exile for life at Birlik a village in South Kazakhstan.<sup>[33]</sup> He taught young children which he enjoyed and continued his writing secretly. His undiagnosed cancer spread until, by the end of the year, he was close to death. In 1954, Solzhenitsyn was permitted to be treated in a hospital in Tashkent, where his tumor went into remission with radiation treatment. He was also self-medicating with an alcohol extract of Mandrake root. This root is the source of a chemotherapy agent in use today called VP16 and likely did contribute to his cure. Although his diagnosis has never been explicitly stated, medical experts have concluded he probably had a testicular tumor called seminoma, which likely would have responded to this herbal treatment and radiation. His experiences became the basis of his novel *Cancer Ward*.

On 7 April 1940, while at the university, Solzhenitsyn married Natalia Reshetovskaya. They had just over a year of married life before he went into the army, then to the Gulag. They divorced in 1952, a year before his release because the wives of Gulag prisoners faced loss of work or residence permits. After the end of his internal exile, they remarried in 1957, divorcing a second time in 1972. In 1973, Solzhenitsyn married his second wife, Natalia Svetlova, a mathematician who had a son, Dmitri Turin, from a brief prior marriage. He and Svetlova had 3 sons.

After Khrushchev's Secret Speech in 1956, in which he denounced Stalin and the "cult of personality" around him, Solzhenitsyn was freed from exile and exonerated. **In 1960, when he was 42, he approached Novy Mir Magazine, the liberal journal of the Soviet Writer's Union, with the manuscript of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.** It was published in edited form in 1962, with the explicit approval of Nikita Khrushchev, who defended it at the presidium of the Politburo hearing on whether to allow its publication, and added: "There's a Stalinist in each of you; there's even a Stalinist in me. We must root out this evil." The book quickly sold out and became an instant hit. The details about how the manuscript was submitted to Novy Mir by a proxy, under a pseudonym, passed up the editorial chain at the magazine to the chief editor Tvardovsky, who was a personal friend of Khrushchev's and Tvardovsky gave it to Khrushchev's secretary, Lebedev, who read it, loved it and asked for several edits and how he ultimately got Khrushchev to read it and get it approved was very exciting to read.

According to the biographer, Lebedev was really excited about getting Krushchev to read it but requested some edits, such as:

- He wanted Buinovsky portrayed more positively as a hero and less comically;
- He wanted less dirty language and curses
- insert a condemnation of Ukrainian nationalists (Banderites)
- the prisoners should be shown as having some hope of freedom (Solzhenitzen didn't agree to this edit)
- remove mention of God by a Tiurnin (he didn't agree to this either because he felt this was too important to the story)
- mention that Stalin was responsible for all these crimes (He did this in a very mild way)

Typed copies of the book were circulating around Russia even before it was officially published. People were stunned by the quality of the writing - it rang so true and a main reason for its overwhelming positive reception was that unlike traditional Russian literature that was told from the point of view of the intellectuals, this book was in the voice of a peasant - the voice of the People.

Solzhenitzen was reviewing the final proofs just as the Cuban missile crisis was unfolding. Once published, he was catapulted to instant fame and fully embraced by the Party, which made him their darling boy, because he was proof that the Soviet Union could be honest about its past and tell the full truth!!

In the 1960s, while Solzhenitsyn was publicly known to be writing *Cancer Ward*, he was simultaneously writing *The Gulag Archipelago*. During Khrushchev's tenure, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was studied in schools in the Soviet Union, as were three more short works of Solzhenitsyn's, including his short story "Matryona's Home", published in 1963. These would be the last of his works published in the Soviet Union until 1990.

Solzhenitsyn made an unsuccessful attempt, with the help of Tvardovsky, to have his novel *Cancer Ward* legally published in the Soviet Union. This required the approval of the Union of Writers. The book was ultimately denied publication because of anti-Soviet insinuations.

After Khrushchev's removal in 1964, the cultural climate again became more repressive. Publishing of Solzhenitsyn's work quickly stopped; as a writer, he became a **non-person**, and, by 1965, the KGB had seized some of his papers, including the manuscript of *The First Circle*. *One Day...* was removed from libraries and curricula. Meanwhile, Solzhenitsyn continued to secretly work on *The Gulag Archipelago*, a *documentation of the prison camps by survivors and his own research*. After the KGB had confiscated Solzhenitsyn's materials in Moscow, during 1965–67, the preparatory drafts of *The Gulag Archipelago* were hidden and sent out of the country on microfilm.

In 1967, he wrote a letter in advance of the Writer's Congress that he sent to 250 writers and party officials, including Brezhnev, in which he denounced censorship and lack of artistic freedom in the Soviet Union. The letter was not presented or officially discussed at the Writer's Congress, which pretended to ignore it, but everyone there had read it and was talking about it. The letter found its way to the West and caused a sensation in the press and brought him widespread attention. This forced the Soviet Union to try to deal with him. This attention gave him the upper hand and now he pushed hard to get *Cancer Ward* published. Meanwhile, other works of his were widely circulating in Samizdat (underground press).

*“[H]e was now at the height of his powers and had every reason to feel pleased with himself. He had entered into a single-handed duel with the strongest and most ruthless government in the world and had more than held his own. His losses had been the confiscation of his archive, the public attacks on him, the refusal to publish *Cancer Ward* and *The First Circle* in the Soviet Union and poor translations in the West. His victories had been his letter to the 4th Writers Congress, his completion and the safe dispatch abroad of *The Gulag Archipelago*, and the publication of his two major novels abroad....”*

Things got worse as other writers and scientists (Sakharov among them) were persecuted, arrested, or sent to mental institutions. Solzhenitsyn used code language to communicate with supporters in the West who held his manuscripts in secret while he hid away and continued writing. One of his hide-outs was the dacha of Slava Rostropovich - they became good friends. A quote from this period: “During my time in the camps I had got to know the enemies of the human race quite well: they respect the big fist and nothing else. The harder you slug them the safer you will be.” His best defense against the SU became a strong offense.

In 1969, Solzhenitsyn was expelled from the Union of Writers. In 1970, while hiding out at Rostropovich's dacha, he was called to the phone by the cleaning lady and received the news that he had been awarded the **Nobel Prize in Literature**. He could not receive the prize personally in Stockholm at that time, since he was afraid he would not be let back into the Soviet Union. Instead, it was suggested he should receive the prize in a special ceremony at the Swedish embassy in Moscow. The Swedish government refused to accept this solution because such a ceremony and the ensuing media coverage might upset the Soviet Union and damage Swedish-Soviet relations. Instead, Solzhenitsyn received his prize at the 1974 ceremony after he had been expelled from the Soviet Union.

*The Gulag Archipelago* was composed from 1958 to 1967, and has sold over thirty million copies in thirty-five languages. It was a three-volume, seven-part work on the Soviet prison camp system, which drew from Solzhenitsyn's experiences and the testimony of 256 former prisoners and Solzhenitsyn's own research into the history of the Russian penal system. It discusses the system's origins from the founding of the Communist regime, and Vladimir Lenin's responsibility for it. I read it and found it and the biggest impression it made on me was the unimaginable cruelty that this government inflicted on its own people.

On 8 August 1971, the KGB attempted to assassinate Solzhenitsyn using an unknown chemical agent. This didn't become known until 1992 when 2 former KGB agents admitted to it and it was reported by the *Washington Post*. In the biography, which was written in 1984, this incident was described as possible sun-poisoning with whole body blistering when he was traveling in the Crimea with a friend to visit his elderly aunt. The attempt left him seriously ill but he survived.

Although *The Gulag Archipelago* was not published in the Soviet Union, it was extensively criticized by the Party-controlled Soviet press. An editorial in *Pravda* on 14 January 1974 accused Solzhenitsyn of supporting "Hitlerites" and making "excuses for the crimes of the Vlasovites (Russians who joined the Nazis to fight against Soviet Union) and Bandera **gangs** (Ukrainian nationalists)." (This is very interesting in light of the current war in Ukraine and Putin's accusations against Ukrainian government, whom he calls Nazis and Banderists.)

In a discussion of its options in dealing with Solzhenitsyn the members of the Politburo considered arrest and imprisonment or expulsion to a capitalist country willing to take him. Guided by KGB chief Yury Andropov, and following a statement from West German Chancellor Willy Brandt that Solzhenitsyn could live and work freely in West Germany, it was decided to deport the writer directly to that country.

On 12 February 1974, Solzhenitsyn was arrested and deported the next day from the Soviet Union to Frankfurt, West Germany and stripped of his Soviet citizenship. In West Germany, Solzhenitsyn lived in Heinrich Böll's (a journalist) house in Langenbroich. He then moved to Zürich, Switzerland before Stanford University invited him to stay in the United States. He stayed at the Hoover Tower, part of the Hoover Institution, before moving to Cavendish, Vermont, in 1976. He was given an honorary literary degree from Harvard University in 1978 and on 8 June 1978 he gave a commencement address, condemning, among other things, the American press, and the lack of spirituality and traditional values of Western culture.

On 19 September 1974, Yuri Andropov approved a large-scale operation to discredit Solzhenitsyn and his family and cut his communications with Soviet dissidents. They harassed him psychologically by sending images of car crashes and other terrible accidents. The KGB also sponsored a series of hostile books about Solzhenitsyn, most notably a "memoir published under the name of his first wife, Natalia Reshetovskaya, but probably mostly composed by Russian Secret Service. His influence and moral authority for the West diminished as he became increasingly isolated and critical of Western individualism. KGB experts finally concluded that he alienated American listeners by his "reactionary views and intransigent criticism of the US way of life", so no further active measures would be required.

Solzhenitsyn's warnings about the dangers of Communist aggression and the weakening of the moral fiber of the West were generally well received in Western conservative circles (e.g. Ford administration staffers Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld advocated on Solzhenitsyn's behalf for him to speak directly to President

Gerald Ford about the Soviet threat). Solzhenitsyn also harshly criticised what he saw as the ugliness and spiritual vapidness of the dominant pop culture of the modern West, including television and much of popular music: "...the human soul longs for things higher, warmer, and purer than those offered by today's mass living habits... by TV stupor and by intolerable music." Despite his criticism of the "weakness" of the West, Solzhenitsyn always made clear that he admired the political liberty which was one of the enduring strengths of Western democratic societies. In a major speech delivered to the International Academy of Philosophy in Liechtenstein on 14 September 1993, Solzhenitsyn implored the West not to "lose sight of its own values, its historically unique stability of civic life under the rule of law—a hard-won stability which grants independence and space to every private citizen."

In 1990, his Soviet citizenship was restored, and, in 1994, he returned to Russia with his 2nd wife, Natalia, who had become a United States citizen. Their sons stayed behind in the United States. From then until his death, he lived with his wife in a dacha in Troitse-Lykovo in west Moscow between the dachas once occupied by Soviet leaders Mikhail Suslov and Konstantin Chernenko. A staunch believer in traditional Russian culture, Solzhenitsyn expressed his disillusionment with post-Soviet Russia in works such as *Rebuilding Russia*, and called for the establishment of a strong presidential republic balanced by vigorous institutions of local self-government. Solzhenitsyn became a supporter of Vladimir Putin, who said he shared Solzhenitsyn's critical view towards the Russian Revolution.

All of Solzhenitsyn's sons became U.S. citizens. One, Ignat, is a pianist and conductor. Another Solzhenitsyn son, Yermolai, works for the Moscow office of McKinsey & Company, a management consultancy firm, where he is a senior partner.

Solzhenitsyn died of heart failure near Moscow on 3 August 2008, at the age of 89. A burial service was held at Donskoy Monastery, Moscow, on 6 August 2008. He was buried the same day in the monastery, in a spot he had chosen. Russian and world leaders paid tribute to Solzhenitsyn following his death.

### **Post Script - Selected remarks on Post-Communist Russia and the U.S.**

Solzhenitsyn refused to accept Russia's highest honor, the Order of St. Andrew, in 1998. Solzhenitsyn later said: "In 1998, it was the country's low point, with people in misery; ... Yeltsin decreed I be honored the highest state order. I replied that I was unable to receive an award from a government that had led Russia into such dire straits." In a 2003 interview, Solzhenitsyn said: "We are exiting from communism in a most unfortunate and awkward way. It would have been difficult to design a path out of communism worse than the one that has been followed."

In 2008, Solzhenitsyn praised Putin, saying Russia was rediscovering what it meant to be Russian. Solzhenitsyn also praised the Russian president Dmitry Medvedev as a "nice young man" who was capable of taking on the challenges Russia was facing.

Delivering the commencement address at Harvard University in 1978, he called the United States "Dechristianized" and mired in boorish consumerism. The American people were also suffering from a "decline in courage" and a "lack of manliness." Few were willing to die for their ideals, he said. He also condemned the 1960s counterculture for forcing the United States federal government to accept a "hasty" capitulation in the Vietnam War.

He accused the Western news media of left-wing bias, of violating the privacy of celebrities, and of filling up the "immortal souls" of their readers with celebrity gossip and other "vain talk". He also said that the West erred in thinking that the whole world should embrace this as model. While faulting Soviet society for rejecting basic human rights and the rule of law, he also critiqued the West for being too legalistic: "A society which is based on the letter of the law and never reaches any higher is taking very scarce advantage of the high level of human possibilities." Solzhenitsyn also argued that the West erred in "denying [Russian culture's] autonomous character and therefore never understood it".

Solzhenitsyn was critical of NATO's eastward expansion towards Russia's borders. In 2006, Solzhenitsyn accused NATO of trying to bring Russia under its control; he claimed this was visible because of its "ideological support for the 'colour revolutions' and the paradoxical forcing of North Atlantic interests on Central Asia". In a 2006 interview with *Der Spiegel* he stated "This was especially painful in the case of Ukraine, a country whose closeness to Russia is defined by literally millions of family ties among our peoples, relatives living on different sides of the national border. At one fell stroke, these families could be torn apart by a new dividing line, the border of a military bloc."