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Alexander Solzhenitsyn: The Passing of a Titan

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Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008) was a titan of 20th century Russian literature and politics. He survived the Stalinist purges, World War II, eight years in the Gulag, communist denunciation, and even a battle with cancer. After spending 18 years exiled in America, he made a triumphant return to his homeland.

Solzhenitsyn's life reflects the tragedy of 20th century Russia, which suffered the turmoil of wars and revolution. Sixty million people were killed by the Communist Soviet regime. Twenty-seven million died in World War II. A scion of educated and once-prosperous Russian and Ukrainian families, a teacher of math by profession, and a second generation artillery officer, Solzhenitsyn suffered through loss and pain, but died famous and internationally recognized, surrounded by his adoring wife and children, yet largely disregarded by his fellow Russians. Many of his contemporaries fared far worse.

Solzhenitsyn's literary calling was so strong that he wrote on cement and tiny pieces of paper while jailed in Stalin's camps, memorizing thousand of lines of his own prose by heart. He lived to work, eschewing entertainment and socializing. His influence was both literary and moral. He stood up to the Soviet regime with the same tenacity with which he had fought the Nazis—and his cancer.

His classics demolished the legitimacy of Communism, even in the eyes of the Left. Icons such as Jean Paul Sartre, Günther Grass, and Heinrich Böll rallied to his defense. Yet, he embraced Russian Orthodoxy and authoritarianism.

Solzhenitsyn's best books were written in Russia and were autobiographical. As a child, I read his *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, a short novel about Ivan Shukhov, a simple bricklayer incarcerated in the Gulag. As a teenager, I read *The Cancer Ward*, a harrowing book about the author's experiences as a cancer patient in Stalinist USSR, and *The First Circle*, a novel about the hard moral choices in a penal research lab, where Solzhenitsyn worked on voice recognition. These were hefty autobiographical works that recalled the masters of 19th century Russian literature, such as Leo Tolstoy and Fedor Dostoyevsky. Illegal in the USSR, Solzhenitsyn's works were available as hand-typed underground *Samizdat* copies, or were printed overseas on thin paper in tiny type and smuggled into Russia at great risk. Distribution was punishable by a stint in the labor camps or Siberian exile. Solzhenitsyn was my great boyhood hero and I, along with many others, smuggled his books within the Soviet Union.

Not a Life in Black and White. Solzhenitsyn's life was full of contradictions. Together with another intellectual giant, Russian Nobel Prize winning physicist Andrey Sakharov, and other fellow dissidents, he contributed greatly to the exposure of

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totalitarian socialism's moral bankruptcy. However, Solzhenitsyn was also a harsh critic of liberal democracy, and of America, despite the fact that the United States gave him shelter and protection during his difficult years in exile. A Harvard commencement speech in which he accused Americans of hedonism and cowardice became a scandal. While his family became U.S. citizens, he refused to do so.

In many respects, modern Russia reflects Solzhenitsyn's idyllic motherland. No longer Communist, the country is now staunchly nationalist and, with a revived Orthodox Church that has become almost an appendage of the state, Russia is respected by all and feared by its neighbors.

Additionally, today's Russia has grown to embody Solzhenitsyn's czarist ideal. While he praised elected non-partisan participatory local government and has invented a convoluted system of indirect democracy, Solzhenitsyn rejected the notion of political parties. In contemporary Russia, Vladimir Putin's party is dominant, while regions and cities have lost what little freedom they had under Yeltsin.

Solzhenitsyn was also strident in promoting ethnic Russian nationalism, and advocated border revisions to annex parts of Ukraine and Kazakhstan to Russia. His writings on the Jews of Russia are historically inaccurate and grating.

Paradoxically, Solzhenitsyn embraced Putin and other KGB officers who rule today's Russia, even though their predecessors tormented him and millions of other Gulag victims. He refused top awards from Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, yet accepted the prestigious State Award from the hands of Vladimir Putin. He blasted the U.S. and NATO for military engagement in the Balkans and Iraq, parroting the Kremlin party line. He did not criticize the recent strangulation of freedom in Russia presided over by its current regime.

Yet, Solzhenitsyn is bigger than all such inconsistencies. His books and his life had the effect of a thermonuclear explosion, scorching the remnants of Communist legitimacy. Gorbachev recognized his great role in bringing the Soviet empire to an end. We who lived through those momentous developments, and who benefited from the man's

literary gifts, should acknowledge and remember his talent, moral stature, and courage.

The Legacy of Solzhenitsyn. There are important contemporary lessons to be learned from Solzhenitsyn's life and work, which transcend Russia and communism. These lessons are overdue for today's American diplomacy.

Thus far, the West has failed to find a comparable titan for the War of Ideas we need to wage against Islamist radicalism. There is no PEN Club award, no Nobel Prize, for an anti-Islamist Solzhenitsyn. There are no celebrations or invitations to lunch at the White House. Leaders around the world need to hail those writers, artists, and intellectuals who are willing to fight for freedom and be voices for moderation in their own countries.

Championing anti-authoritarian moderates and freedom fighters should take priority over pushing through hasty elections and calling the process "democracy promotion." A new U.S. public diplomacy and strategic communications agency would be instrumental in accomplishing such goals, as are non-profit organizations around the world. Such organizations need to boost their expertise and training in languages, cultures, history, and politics of the countries upon which they focus.

Like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Solzhenitsyn is a great model of the power of ideas, as well as the power of the intellect. During the Cold War, the West—aware of the Soviet threat—hailed and lionized him. His genius was recognized with the Nobel Prize (1970), and the Soviet rulers and the peoples of Russia had to face his message. Today, we should learn from his example, even if some of his ideology is unpalatable.

The world—and Russia—should forever remember Alexander Isayevich Solzhenitsyn, while looking to his spiritual heirs and successors for guidance in the upcoming battles for hearts and minds.

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