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Hero of a Dark Century

Daniel J. Mahoney

Assumption College, dmahoney@assumption.edu

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Hero of a Dark Century

DANIEL J. MAHONEY

WITH the death of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn the world has lost one of the great souls of this or any age. His story was beyond improbable: A former prisoner or “zek” in the vast system of Soviet prisons and labor camps who had also miraculously survived a bout with abdominal cancer, an “underground writer” who never expected a single word of his to be published in his own lifetime, Solzhenitsyn was catapulted to world fame with the November 1962 publication of his novella *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Nikita Khrushchev, the most “humane” of Soviet leaders, mistook Solzhenitsyn for a Soviet loyalist whose movingly understated account of a single day in the life of a simple peasant unjustly incarcerated in a Soviet labor camp would be useful to his own efforts at “de-Stalinization.” Khrushchev, who never completely lost touch with his own peasant roots, was undoubtedly also genuinely moved by this powerful testament to the human spirit. The soon-to-be-deposed Soviet leader may have been the first to misunderstand and underestimate Solzhenitsyn.

Solzhenitsyn was a writer in the grand 19th-century Russian literary tradition who was supremely confident in the power of literature, rooted in truth and the best ethical traditions of Russia and

Mr. Mahoney is professor of political science at Assumption College. He is the author of *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: The Ascent from Ideology* and editor (with Edward E. Ericson Jr.) of *The Solzhenitsyn Reader: New and Essential Writings, 1947–2005*.

the West, to defeat violence and lies, the twin pillars of 20th-century totalitarianism. And he was right. *The Gulag Archipelago*, his monumental three-volume “experiment in literary investigation,” as he suggestively subtitled that remarkable work, did more than any other piece of writing or political act in the 20th century to delegitimize the entire Communist enterprise.

Solzhenitsyn traced the origins of totalitarian repression and the gulag concentration-camp system to Lenin himself. He showed beyond doubt that Leninist Communism was beyond redemption and that the distinction between a “good” Lenin and a “bad” Stalin was untenable on both moral and historical grounds. In a voice that was at once sardonic and graceful, the former zek mocked the “Progressive Doctrine” (Marxism-Leninism) and showed that it did not contain a single truth about the nature of man, society, or the human soul.

The publication of *The Gulag Archipelago* in Paris on December 28, 1973, led to Solzhenitsyn’s forced exile from the Soviet Union, an exile he neither sought nor welcomed. In the West he faced a new set of challenges, including the incomprehension of Western elites who mistook this brave if sometimes prickly anti-totalitarian writer and moral witness as an advocate for new forms of authoritarianism. His return to Russia brought a different set of challenges and burdens as Solzhenitsyn faced the initial apathy of a public that did not want to come to terms with the crimes of the Communist past and the rise of a new “oligarchy” (as he was the first to call it in his speech to the Duma in October 1994) disguising itself as a democracy. In the West (and in Russia, too, at least among the Left-liberal Muscovite intellectuals) Solzhenitsyn continued to be lied about as no great writer or public figure has been lied about in modern times. He responded to these terrible distortions (“theocrat,” “anti-

Semite,” “a new Russian Ayatollah”) for the first and last time in a masterful 1983 essay called “Our Pluralists.” He was above his critics’ pettiness and, in any case, preoccupied with his two great moral and literary “missions.”

I.

The first mission was to tell the truth about Communism and all its works, as he did in *The Gulag Archipelago* and so many of his speeches and writings until the day he finally left this earth. The other mission was to recover the full truth about Russia’s past, a past that had been distorted beyond all recognition by the Soviet

propaganda machine. This Solzhenitsyn attempted to do particularly in his great multi-volume chef d’oeuvre *The Red Wheel*, consisting of four “knots”—*August 1914*, *November 1916*, *March 1917*, and *April 1917*—in ten volumes. That work, coming in at no fewer than 6,000 pages in Russian, combined fiction, dramatized history, and a full array of modernistic literary devices (including innovative “screen sequences” and newspaper and newsreel reports). Its thesis was that there was nothing inevitable about the Bolshevik Revolution, that human action, agency, and statesmanship could have put Russia on the path to rational and humane liberty.

But absent such efforts, the revolution took on the character of a profound and unstoppable movement, a “gigantic cosmic wheel” in which “everybody, including those who turn it, becomes a helpless atom.”

Solzhenitsyn’s beau ideal of a statesman was Pyotr Stolypin, the remarkably capable prime minister of Russia between 1906 and 1911. Before he was assassinated in the Kiev opera house in the fall of 1911, Stolypin worked assiduously to create a regime of citizen-proprietors in Russia, one that would hew to a “middle line” between reaction and nihilistic revolution. But as Solzhenitsyn wrote mem-



orably in *November 1916* (with Stolypin's "greatness" clearly in mind), "nothing is more difficult than drawing a middle line for social development. The loud mouth, the big fist, the bomb, the prison bars, are of no help to you, as they are to those at the two extremes. Following the middle path demands the utmost self-control, the most inflexible courage, the most patient calculation, the most precise knowledge." Contrary to legend, Solzhenitsyn saw himself as a "true liberal" who saw through the "false liberals" who persisted in seeing no enemies to the left. In literature and politics, he defended what he called in a January 19, 1993, address to the National Arts Club in New York a "healthy conservatism" that was "equally sensitive to the old and the new, to venerable and worthy traditions, and to the freedom to explore without which no future can ever be born."

II.

Serious readers of *The Gulag Archipelago* will already be familiar with the broad outlines of Solzhenitsyn's remarkable odyssey from Marxism to what might fittingly be called "philosophical Christianity" (Solzhenitsyn was an adherent of Orthodox Christianity but his religious affirmations were more philosophical and less narrowly sectarian than many of his admirers and critics appreciate). Paradoxically, it was only as a result of his time in prison and the camps that the scales completely fell from Solzhenitsyn's eyes concerning the crimes of Communism. Before his arrest in February 1945 he had been a "true believer" in Marxism-Leninism. From time to time he felt doubts stirring in his soul, but he always found a way to retain his underlying confidence in the justice and necessity of the revolutionary project.

In an unfinished semi-autobiographical novel, *Love the Revolution*, dating from the late 1940s, Solzhenitsyn's alter ego Gleb Nerzhin hears an account of the horrific conditions in slave-labor camps

and copper mines of the Russian North-east. A momentary chill comes over Nerzhin/Solzhenitsyn as he is confronted by the "icy wind" of this "incomprehensible world." "But thanks to a sort of internal flexibility" his convictions are never definitively shaken by these revelations. He is still able to shunt to the side discomfiting truths that reveal the Marxist

appeal to "historical necessity" to be the monstrous chimera that it is.

Solzhenitsyn's arrest and incarceration changed everything. Lying on "rotting prison straw," he felt "the first stirrings of good" within his soul. In the famous words of *The Gulag Archipelago*, it was "gradually disclosed" to him "that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts." But Solzhenitsyn's was not a simple or unmediated return to the faith of his childhood. His recovery of belief was above all made

possible by rational reflection on his experience of human nature *in extremis*. The story is told with luminous clarity in the fourth of the seven parts of *The Gulag Archipelago*, "The Soul and Barbed Wire," from which the previous quotation is taken.

In that section of *Gulag* Solzhenitsyn highlights the spiritual "ascent" that is made possible by rejecting the pernicious, soul-destroying idea of "survival at any price." Only fidelity to conscience and to the wellsprings of goodness within the soul allows one to affirm the true goodness of life and the essentially moral character of human existence. These spiritual and philosophical insights never led to "quietism" on Solzhenitsyn's part. He believed that evil must be resisted, especially an inhuman totalitarianism that mutilates the soul and demands active participation in the "lie." Solzhenitsyn himself participated in major camp revolts in the early 1950s (those at Kengir and Ekibastuz are powerfully recounted in the third volume of *The Gulag Archipelago*). In that same volume he paid

tribute to all those who resisted Bolshevik tyranny. These lovers of liberty redeemed the honor of the Russian people by defending the right of the human soul to breathe freely.

All of this reveals the multiple ways in which Solzhenitsyn embodied, in thought as well as deed, the two great moral wellsprings of European civilization: humility and magnanimity, humble deference to an "order of things" and the spirited defense of human liberty and dignity. Solzhenitsyn told the German novelist Daniel Kehlmann in an interview that was published in *Le Figaro* in December 2006 that while he had deep sympathy and admiration for simple, decent souls such as Matryona of his 1959 short story "Matryona's House" and the peasant hero Ivan Denisovich, his greatest admiration was reserved for those noble souls who stood up to "radical evil." Solzhenitsyn's soul was sufficiently capacious to do justice both to "the ascent of the soul"—which finally transcends the political sphere—and the pressing requirements of resisting political evil.

Solzhenitsyn's poems from prison, camp, and exile that were published in Russian in 1999 (three of them, expertly translated by his son Ignat Solzhenitsyn, can be found in 2006's *The Solzhenitsyn Reader*) and the original, uncut, 96-chapter edition of *The First Circle* (finished in 1962 and to be published in a complete English translation, at long last, by HarperCollins in 2009) are indispensable for understanding how the Russian writer arrived at his mature intellectual and spiritual convictions. The rejection of Marxism came early, and the return to Christianity rather later, in the process of self-discovery and spiritual ascent. The autobiographical Gleb Nerzhin of *The First Circle* is best described as a skeptic (in the Socratic and not the modern, relativistic sense) and an adherent of the moral law. In a heated exchange with the Marxist Rubin in chapter 47 of *The First Circle*, Nerzhin rejects the idea that phrases like "inviolability of the person" and "moral self-limitation" are merely "class-conditioned ideas." In a liberating affirmation, he proclaims that "justice is the cornerstone, the foundation of the universe. . . . We are born with a sense of justice in our souls; we can't and don't want to live without it!" Nerzhin has no time for "blasted fanatics" who sacrifice



living, breathing human beings to inhuman abstractions. When Rubin shouts back that Nerzhin was never a Marxist, Nerzhin ruefully responds, "Alas, I was." That sad acknowledgment, laden with self-knowledge, is crucial for understanding Solzhenitsyn's own remarkable *metanoia*.

Justice, conscience, and self-limitation are the great pillars of Solzhenitsyn's moral vision from the late 1940s onward. In the beautiful camp poem "Prisoner's Right," written at Ekibastuz in 1951, Solzhenitsyn is content to invoke the fatalistic view that "all will go as 't will go." The prisoner can find solace in an "illuminated interior suffering core" and fidelity to "all those fallen, extinguished, without guilt or trace." His only "right" is to be a "rancorless" son "of our luckless and sad Russian land." Shortly thereafter, in February 1952, Solzhenitsyn made the decisive spiritual turn. In his great poem "Acathistus," he proclaimed his renewed faith in "purpose-from-High's steady fire / Not made plain to me till afterward."

Having succumbed to false "bookish wisdom" (he clearly has in mind Marxism), Solzhenitsyn now looks back with "gratitude, trembling / On the meaningless life I have led." He proclaims his faith in the Living God, and draws sustenance once again from the "water of being." But it should never be forgotten that Solzhenitsyn's Christian affirmation builds upon and deepens but never repudiates the previous moral and philosophical turns at the heart of his rejection of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Solzhenitsyn's vision is first and foremost a *moral* vision available to thinking and acting man on the basis of reason and experience. In Solzhenitsyn's view, Christianity gives the most compelling and self-conscious account of the drama of good and evil in the human soul that the deprivations of totalitarianism brought to the forefront.

III.

The tributes and reflections that have been published on Solzhenitsyn in the Western press since his death have generally been respectful, and many have been evenhanded. But quite a few obituaries and retrospectives have repeated hoary distortions that just won't go away. It has been repeatedly asserted that

Solzhenitsyn hated Communism *and* Western democracy equally despite the fact that he had repeatedly praised the *civic* experience of the West. This is to confuse his critique of the deeply troubling subjectivist and relativistic trends in its cultural, moral, and intellectual life with a total critique of the West. As Solzhenitsyn put it in a fascinating July 2007 interview with *Der Spiegel*, "I have always insisted on the need for local self-government for Russia, but I never opposed this model to Western democracy. On the contrary I have tried to con-

NIGHT WIND

What the heart believes is never lost:
though sometimes
to give it up
seems the relief
for which we would be
most grateful.

And as time passes by,
one belief,
or another,
and still another,
and the pain of the loss
intensifies,
then diminishes;
the sense that
there is something more
arrives from the stillness
that centers the suffering,
as it recasts identity.

And somewhere
the seeds
from the dead flowers
have been cradled
on the wind,
as we can feel—
without knowing.

And that awareness
is followed through,
even across
the open car
that passes by—

And its music
that extends
far beyond,
in the way of aspirations
of which no one
may yet be aware.

—WILLIAM W. RUNYEON

vince my fellow citizens by citing the examples of highly effective local self-government systems in Switzerland and New England." This theme has been developed at great length in all his political writings over the last 20 years. But the legend of Solzhenitsyn's opposition to democracy—and penchant for authoritarianism—is endlessly recycled in even otherwise friendly accounts of his life and legacy.

Solzhenitsyn repeatedly affirmed three broad moral and political desiderata after returning to Russia in May 1994: the importance of patiently building democratic self-government from the bottom up, the need for repentance for the crimes and lies of the Communist period, and the need to put the "preservation of the people" (wracked by seven decades of Communist totalitarianism and a decade of rapacious oligarchic corruption and manipulation) above all ideological considerations. Solzhenitsyn did, it is true, welcome a certain "social" restoration under the Putin regime. He believed that the very existence of Russia was threatened, not by a market economy but by a criminal kleptocracy that promoted spurious "reforms" in the top-down spirit of Bolshevism. After his return to Russia, the author of *The Gulag Archipelago* continued to speak out for the "humiliated and injured." He was pained that so many in the West mistakenly saw the Yeltsin years as a model of true "democratic" and "capitalist" reform. But as he told German television in 2005, the task of building self-government in Russia still lies *in the future*. Solzhenitsyn never confused Putin's Russia with a liberal or democratic regime. And he argued that it was unhealthy for Russia to have no real opposition to speak of, except for the shamelessly unrepentant Communists.

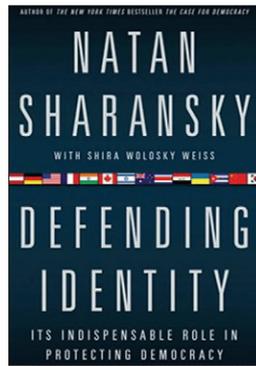
To his last breath the greatest Russian writer of the 20th century remained a critic of the false patriots who "preferred a small-minded alliance with our Communist destroyers," as he strikingly put it in 1998's *Russia in Collapse*. In the same work he excoriated radical nationalists who elevated "one's nationality above our higher spiritual plank, above our humble stance before Heaven." Contrary to legend, he also despised those on the lunatic fringe who blamed Russia's troubles on "Jews" and "Freemasons." He believed it was "quite wrong to say that the Jews

‘organized’ the revolutions of 1905 and 1917.” In his best-selling two-volume historical work on Russia’s “Jewish question,” *Two Hundred Years Together* (2001–02), Solzhenitsyn pleaded for mutual understanding between ethnic Russians and Jews. Both must take responsibility for their “renegades” who broke with the faith of their fathers and promoted violent, nihilistic revolution and totalitarian tyranny.

IV.

How can we who live in a post-totalitarian age begin to honor Solzhenitsyn’s legacy? A good starting point would be to move beyond reducing Solzhenitsyn to the level of an opiner on current events, the habitual approach of almost all journalistic commentaries on his work. Now that his life and work are complete we are called to confront him openly, honestly, critically, as a writer, historian, and moral and political philosopher (in the highest, non-academic sense of that term). Solzhenitsyn is a writer of considerable talent, skill, and grace, a historian who has helped recover the memory of Russia and the sources of the totalitarian temptation, as well as the great analyst—and scourge—of the ideological manipulation of the bodies and souls of human beings. Solzhenitsyn the philosopher teaches us never to confuse technological progress—however necessary and welcome—with the definitive transformation of the moral constitution of human beings. There can never be an “end to history,” only the slow and patient moral growth of the human soul. More provocatively, the zek turned writer and historian has deepened our self-understanding by showing that the ultimate roots of totalitarian repression lie in “anthropocentricity,” the mad illusion that human beings can take the place of God. In a thousand ways his writings show that the effort to deify man leads to nothing less than self-enslavement. Far from being yesterday’s news, Solzhenitsyn remains a teacher and moral witness for today and tomorrow. His writings will continue to speak to the hearts, souls, and minds of all those who cherish human liberty and dignity, as we work to free ourselves from contemporary if milder versions of the “lie.” **NR**

Staying Power



Defending Identity: Its Indispensable Role in Protecting Democracy,
by Natan Sharansky
with Shira Wolosky Weiss
(PublicAffairs, 304 pp., \$26.95)

VICTOR DAVIS HANSON

WHAT kept Natan Sharansky alive in the Soviet gulag, he tells us in his moving, against-the-grain new meditation on democracy, were two constants. One was his Jewishness: his notion of spiritual transcendence that he shared with other Jewish dissidents, his family, and his ancestors. Such distinctions made Sharansky a unique, rooted, and confident individual—a man with responsibilities to family and community beyond himself, a man capable of withstanding torture. But the other touchstone was his belief that there is a shared human desire for liberty: his intuition that in every man rests an innate need to express himself freely, protected by democratic institutions and constitutional government.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, Sharansky became a member of the Israeli Knesset and sometimes a government minister—but he also became increasingly depressed at the course of contemporary Western society. Identity and democratic freedom, far from being complementary in serving universal human aspirations, were

Mr. Hanson is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution.

greatly misunderstood, and seemed to be at greater odds than ever before: “What I did not know then and could not foresee was that even after the Soviet Union collapsed, this tension would remain. I could not imagine that these two forces, identity and freedom, which were allies in the struggle to resist the world of fear that the Soviets had built, would become the bitterest of enemies in the free world.”

In this sequel to *The Case for Democracy* (2004), Sharansky revisits his imprisonment in the Soviet Union and recounts his subsequent political career in Israel, attempting to explain why his own maverick stances so often have angered his former supporters in the liberal West, who have turned on him as much as they once did on the late Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. He argues that his opposition to Yasser Arafat’s primordial Palestinian Authority is perfectly consistent with his fight against the shapeless, valueless uniformity of the Soviet Union: Democracy can be destroyed when subjected to tribalism of the Middle Eastern sort, just as it cannot survive unless human beings transcend their own place and time and believe in freedom as a universal virtue. Sharansky defines identity as “a sense of life beyond the physical and material, beyond mere personal existence. It is the sense of a common world that stretches before and beyond the self, of belonging to something greater than the self, that gives strength not only to community but to the individual as well.”

For all the political punditry about what went wrong over the last decade in the Middle East, Sharansky sees this antithesis of identity and democracy as fundamental to the conflict and a key to fathoming the dimensions of the struggle. The Israelis are increasingly giving up on their distinct Western-Israeli-Jewish identity that makes them endure and sacrifice for their principles, while the Palestinians cannot evolve beyond loyalty to the tribe, and thus perennially fail to channel their ethnic, religious, and national pride into a shared commitment to democratic government:

The so-called Oslo peace process took place between two societies moving in directly opposite directions in terms of identity. Israeli society was being pushed in the direction of cosmopolitanism. Palestinians, under Arafat’s corrupt dictatorship, were going through a crash course in hatred of Jews, Israel, and Zionism and