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Two Critics of the Ideological “Lie”: Raymond Aron and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

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Daniel J. Mahoney

December 19, 2015

The incomparable force of Solzhenitsyn is connected with his person, to what defines his message: the unconditional refusal of the lie. It can happen that one cannot tell the truth, he repeats, but one can always refuse the lie. The Soviet regime appears to him to be perverse as such because it institutionalizes the lie: despotism calls itself liberty, the press subjugated to a party pretends to be free, and at the time of the Great Purge, Stalin proclaimed the Constitution to be the most democratic in the world. Solzhenitsyn’s voice carries far and high because it does not weary of calling us back to the intrinsic perversity of totalitarianism. — Raymond Aron, *Le Figaro*, June 12, 1975.¹

Raymond Aron and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn are two authors who have been very important to me over the years. The first is a French philosopher turned political scientist or political sociologist who helped shape moderate and conservative opinion in France—and Europe—in the years after WWII. He showed the greatest lucidity in confronting the unique evil that is totalitarianism and was a model of balanced or equitable political reflection. The second, as we have seen, is a world historical figure, a writer of unsurpassed talent who dissected the Lie that is coextensive with ideology like no one else in the twentieth century. While both men were proud and principled opponents of Communist totalitarianism, at first glance they do not appear to be natural interlocutors. Aron was a secular, self-described “de-Judaized” Jew, although one who displayed no hostility to revealed religion. He was an adherent of the moderate enlightenment, preferring Montesquieu and Tocqueville to the theoretical and practical radicalism of the *philosophes* and the Jacobin tradition. He was a French patriot who carefully balanced liberal universalism with a rational and affective attachment to his *patrie*. Solzhenitsyn, too, was a patriot who did not feel obliged to lie for his country. In contrast to Aron, Solzhenitsyn combined an attachment to self-government with a sweeping condemnation of the “anthropocentricity” at the heart of enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought.² Yet he, too, was a “liberal” of sorts as Aron fully appreciated. In fact, in the ten years before his death in October 1983, Aron wrote extensively, and always intelligently and sympathetically, about Solzhenitsyn. At a time when American liberals and leftists (and many Europeans, too) were turning vehemently against Solzhenitsyn—accusing him of authoritarianism and worse—Aron remained an unqualified admirer of the Russian writer.

For Aron, Solzhenitsyn was more than a political figure. The Russian *zek* represented an unconditional “spiritual” commitment to truth and liberty. Solzhenitsyn was the critic par excellence of the modern ideological “lie” that human nature and the laws of social existence could be “engineered” out of existence. Like

Solzhenitsyn, Aron denied that some “super-reality” divined by ideology could replace the real world in which human beings live, breathe, and struggle. He understood that Communism had to create a fictive world ruled by ideological clichés, an *ideocracy* or *logocracy* dominated by lies, if it was to obscure the gap between social reality and the pretensions of ideology to remake human beings and society at a stroke. Aron wrote extensively about historical consciousness and endorsed a moderate version of modern “progress.”³ But fundamentally he did not believe that human nature could be changed. He adamantly refused to replace the primordial human distinction between good and evil with the pernicious ideological distinction between Progress and Reaction. He refused to subordinate human beings to ideological abstractions.

Aron was not a religious believer, at least not in any conventional sense, but he profoundly admired the spiritual witness of Solzhenitsyn. He never turned on the Russian writer or allowed their differences to undermine his admiration for him. He did not share Solzhenitsyn’s religious faith, or some of his core ideas, such as the “critique of the whole body of modern civilization since the Renaissance,”⁴ or his adherence to the theses of the Club of Rome (from 1973) on the immanence of ecological catastrophe and degradation.⁵ He also did not share Solzhenitsyn’s view from the mid-1970s that the West had lost WWII in the years after 1945, and was then in danger of losing WWIV.⁶ At the same time, he shared Solzhenitsyn’s misgivings about détente especially when it was accompanied by ideological illusions about Communism. But Aron never caricatured Solzhenitsyn or attributed to him positions that he did not hold. His treatment of the Russian writer is equitable from beginning to end.

Letter to the Soviet Leaders

Aron was one of the few commentators in the Western world to appreciate the fundamentally “libertarian” character of Solzhenitsyn’s 1973 *Letter to the Soviet Leaders*. Where others wrongly attributed to it a theoretical endorsement of authoritarianism, Aron saw an admirable effort to free the people of the Soviet Union from the stranglehold of ideocracy. Aron fully appreciated the subtlety of Solzhenitsyn’s *Letter*. The carefully crafted *Letter* aimed to persuade men shaped by fifty-five years of ideological despotism that it was in their interest, and in the interest of the Russian people, to begin the long descent from the “icy cliffs”⁷ of totalitarianism. Aron saw that Solzhenitsyn was asking for nothing less than “ideological surrender”⁸ on the part of the Soviet leaders. When he told them that they could hold on to political power as long as they jettisoned the official ideology, respected private property, allowed freedom of thought and speech, decollectivized agriculture, and stopped persecuting religious believers, many thought they had discerned a weakness for authoritarianism.⁹ They did not read the *Letter* with care or with the slightest sense of the rhetoric one might use in speaking to the morally unscrupulous caretakers of an ideological despotism. In contrast, Aron knew that Solzhenitsyn was striking at the very foundations of the ideocratic regime. He appreciated that Solzhenitsyn was writing for the future, when a new generation of pragmatic and public-spirited leaders might be willing to make a clean break with ideocracy. As Aron astutely observed in *In Defense of Decadent Europe*, “By inviting the Soviet leaders to give up militant atheism, Solzhenitsyn is asking—and knows he is asking—for ideological surrender.

The leaders would gain millions of good citizens, but not good *Soviet* citizens. There cannot be two metaphysics of salvation. Stripped of its atheism, Marxism- Leninism would lose the principle of authority on which its visionary super-reality rests and on which it relies for its judgments upon profane reality.”¹⁰ By becoming one ordinary regime among others, the Soviet regime would make its peace with profane reality and thus prepare the way for the definitive end of totalitarian- ism and a return of basic human liberties.

Aron also noted that Solzhenitsyn preferred “liberalization” to revolution for wholly humane reasons—in the multinational U.S.S.R. violent revolution risked tearing the nation apart, setting one nationality against another, and creating the possibilities of a new despotism.¹¹ But Aron saw what few readers of the *Letter* appreciated: Solzhenitsyn nowhere endorsed authoritarianism as choice-worthy in itself. Aron even compared Solzhenitsyn’s choice for liberalization over revolution to Friedrich Hayek’s well-known preference for liberalism over democracy.¹² Aron acknowledged Solzhenitsyn’s dislike for the “lack of restraint, the exhibitionism, and the vulgarity of Western electoral warfare”¹³ but he never confused that dislike for a systematic condemnation of political liberty.

In his critique of Marxist “prophetism” in the opening pages of *In Defense of Decadent Europe*, Aron draws on the *Letter*’s denunciation of a “decrepit” and “hopelessly antiquated doctrine,”¹⁴ Marxism-Leninism, one which does not begin to speak to the needs of modern men and women. In Aron’s view, Solzhenitsyn’s *Letter* had powerfully exposed the bankruptcy of “two pseudoscientific myths: Marxism (the destruction of capitalism by its internal contradictions) and Marxism-Leninism (the transformation of society—or even *la condition humaine*—by the abolishment of private ownership of the means of production.”¹⁵ Solzhenitsyn pointed out that “even during its best decades ... [Ideology] was totally mistaken in its predictions and was never a science.” It was terribly mistaken when it forecast that the “proletariat”—a mythical or ideological category in itself—would be endlessly oppressed in capitalist society. It “missed the point when it asserted that the prosperity of the European countries depended on their colonies.” Its prediction that the state would “wither away” under the auspices of Communism “was sheer delusion, ignorance of human nature.”¹⁶

In the great debate between Solzhenitsyn and his fellow dissident Andrei Sakharov over “the function of ideology”¹⁷ Aron sided with Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn had argued in the *Letter* that it was the “same antiquated legacy of the Progressive Doctrine” that endowed the Soviet leadership “with all the mill- stones” that were dragging them—and the country—down. Solzhenitsyn argued for the systematic de-ideologization of the Soviet state and subtly showed how ideological tyranny and ideological skepticism coexisted in the Soviet Union of the 1970s. Ideology did nothing but “sap the strength of the Soviet people.” It “clogs up the whole life of society—minds, tongues, radio and press—with lies, lies, lies.” Solzhenitsyn brilliantly highlighted the paradox at the center of decayed Sovietism: “everything was steeped in lies and *everybody knows it*.”¹⁸

The distinguished Soviet physicist and human rights activist Andrei Sakharov shared Solzhenitsyn’s opposition to Communist ideology—to the institutionalized lie—but believed that ideology was merely a cover for the cynical self-interest of the Soviet leadership. Aron believed

that Solzhenitsyn had a much more profound grasp of the coexistence of faith and skepticism in the minds and hearts of the Soviet leadership and *homo sovieticus* more broadly. Marxism-Leninism was much more than a superficial and cynical cover for despotism of a traditional sort. It had created a web of mendacity about the past, the present, the future, and the human condition itself, that was the key to unraveling the Soviet enigma. The *Letter to the Soviet Leaders* was for Aron the clearest and most penetrating analysis of the mixture of violence and lies that defined ideological despotism. Aron was sensitive to Solzhenitsyn's "art of writing"—his seemingly modest "pragmatic" advice to the old men of the Politburo to abandon ideology even as they held on to power masked his genuinely radical intentions—and his fundamentally "libertarian" aims as a writer and thinker. At the end of part 1 of *In Defense of Decadent Europe* ("Europe Mystified by Marxism-Leninism") Aron attacks the conformism of intellectuals who had already begun to murmur about Solzhenitsyn's conservatism and his suspicious attachment to Old Russia and to the religion of his forebears. Citing the distinguished political theorist Claude Lefort, a man of the anti-totalitarian Left who admired Solzhenitsyn, Aron comments on the "anti-authoritarianism" evident in Solzhenitsyn's writings such as *The Gulag Archipelago*.¹⁹ Reading the *Letter* in continuity with the broader anti-totalitarian vision of Solzhenitsyn, Aron rightly saw in it the same love of liberty and intense but moderate and humane patriotism that informed Solzhenitsyn's other writings. Aron's reception of the 1973 *Letter* still stands out for its lucidity and for its rare willingness to understand Solzhenitsyn on his own terms.

A Parisian Encounter

I will now turn to three articles from 1975, 1976, and 1980 respectively, that reveal the extent of Aron's admiration for and agreement with Solzhenitsyn. The first is a beautiful text on "Solzhenitsyn's Message"²⁰ that appeared in the Parisian *Le Figaro* on April 18, 1975, two days after Solzhenitsyn had appeared on Bernard Pivot's *Apostrophes* program with the ex-communist Pierre Daix, the conservative-minded essayist and novelist (and *Figaro* contributor) Jean d'Ormesson, and Jean Daniel, the editor-in-chief of the left-of-center newsmagazine *Le nouvel observateur*. Aron notes in his *Mémoires* that the personality of the *zek* had touched him deeply: "coming from another world," he found in Solzhenitsyn "an extraordinary man, whose like would be difficult to find anywhere in the world."²¹ Aron comments that neither Daix nor d'Ormesson had made much of an impression that evening precisely because neither had tried to. But Daniel adopted a confrontational stance toward Solzhenitsyn, comparing his own "fights against French or American imperialism to the struggle Solzhenitsyn carried out against the Kremlin."²² Daniel also lamented the absence of a representative of the French Communist party on the *Apostrophes* panel, thus reinforcing his ideological fidelity to his Communist "comrades." Aron concedes in his *Mémoires* that he was irritated and even embarrassed by Daniel's performance. But he denied, quite rightly in my view, that he had exceeded "the bounds of legitimate controversy" as Daniel would suggest a few years later in his book *L'Ere des ruptures*. In that work, Daniel suggested that Aron had "abandoned reasoned argument and waxed indignant, with uncharacteristic violence, because I had not bowed before an exceptional man."²³ An examination of Aron's column tells another story.

Aron begins by saying that if Dostoevsky had come back from the *House of the Dead*, from his years in a Tsarist prison camp, no one would have “proposed a tsarist bureaucrat or a lackey of this bureaucracy as an interlocutor.” But by “regretting” the absence of a French Communist on the *Apostrophes* panel, Daniel had “condemned himself to a thankless role.” He had reduced Solzhenitsyn to the status of a mere politician or political partisan. Aron did not deny that Solzhenitsyn’s “intentions, works, and life constitute political realities possessing all the weight of suffering and genius.” But Daniel had failed to see that Solzhenitsyn’s convictions ultimately “transcend politics because they animate an exceptional personality, because in the last analysis they are spiritual.” Eschewing every reductive or materialist explanation, Aron saw at work in Solzhenitsyn nothing less than a spiritual “faith in liberty and an unconditional devotion to the truth.” “By asking the author of *Cancer Ward* to express opinions on the events of the day, the editor-in chief of *Le nouvel observateur* lowered the dialogue to the level of ordinary political debates.”

Aron also denied that anyone in the West was fighting the *same battle* as Solzhenitsyn. No one on the Right or Left in the West had taken “the long journey through the concentration camp world and drawn from these same trials the invincible strength to resist the infernal machine.” Aron did not regret writing books and articles on Algerian independence. But he could not compare his struggles and sacrifices with the author of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. When Daniel put himself on the same plane as Solzhenitsyn, he falsified reality and failed to recognize the terrible uniqueness of totalitarianism. Such moral equivalence was possible only among those who benefited from the unfettered freedom of the Western world and mistook that freedom for oppression.

Aron did not deny that Solzhenitsyn’s judgments about current events (for example, his views about Vietnam, Portugal, or Chile) were open to challenge. “Salazar’s regime has left a population that is half illiterate; the Chilean generals use and abuse repression and torture... The Communists of North Vietnam will at least end the war.” But Solzhenitsyn is right about the essential point. He challenges the “lie” that allows ideologues in the West to excuse the “huge Gulags” of the totalitarian East while expressing indignation about the smaller ones in right-wing dictatorships. He reminds us of the immutable truth that “camps remain camps whether they are brown or red.” Solzhenitsyn challenges the self-satisfaction of “progressive” intellectuals who found reasons to excuse the “good camps” that were sanctified by the socialist cause. For decades, they saw in the homeland of the gulag archipelago the most “humane” political order in the world.

Aron’s column ends by contrasting Jean Daniel’s obsession with the “unity of the Left” with the moral grandeur of Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn’s greatness crushes, overwhelms, all who confront it. Moreover, Aron observes that the millions of Frenchmen who viewed *Apostrophes* could not help but hear a “message of charity, faith and hope,” a message that was also illumined in Solzhenitsyn’s face and eyes. Aron, the unbeliever, freely acknowledged the *theological virtues* that were displayed by Solzhenitsyn. What the reader confronts is not an Aron overcome by indignation but rather one who faithfully describes spiritual greatness as it appears before him. The capacity to admire is a capacity that tends to wither in a democratic

age. Aron's column of April 18, 1975 is impressive not only for its lucidity about Solzhenitsyn's message, one that is ultimately more spiritual than political, but for its ability to describe "greatness of soul" in an age that denies the soul's power or very existence. It is my surmise that Aron reproduced the column on "Solzhenitsyn's Message" verbatim in his *Mémoires* to convey the "phénomène Soljenitsyne" as he first encountered it rather than to simply score points with a French intellectual still in the grips of the "myth of the Left." In his *Mémoires*, Aron notes that Daniel could see in the North Vietnamese only a David fighting the goliath of American imperialism. Solzhenitsyn, in contrast, "saw in Vietnam in addition a new communism and new Gulags, and he was right."²⁴ Solzhenitsyn was the witness from the East who testified to the power of the ideological Lie to distort the ability of intellectuals to see the world clearly.

Solzhenitsyn and Sartre

A year after the publication of "Solzhenitsyn's Message" Aron published a powerful reflection ("Solzhenitsyn and European Leftism"²⁵) on the encounter between Solzhenitsyn and the figure the Russian writer disparagingly calls in *The Oak and the Calf* the "ruler of minds" in the West, Jean-Paul Sartre. Written for a festschrift for his friend Manès Sperber, the Austrian-born anti-Communist novelist and essayist, this piece is Aron's most insightful tribute to Solzhenitsyn and arguably his most scathing critique of Jean-Paul Sartre.

Aron begins by noting that Solzhenitsyn had refused to meet the "Sartres" when they were guests of honor of the Writer's Union in the Soviet Union in the mid-1960s and requested a meeting with him. In *The Oak and the Calf*, Solzhenitsyn wonders "whether Sartre discerned in my refusal the depth of our aversion to him."²⁶ Later on, Simone de Beauvoir could only speculate that Sartre knew Solzhenitsyn better than Solzhenitsyn knew Sartre, a claim that Aron adamantly rejects. Sartre, the itinerant philosopher who led the life of a student loafer, could not possibly begin to understand or appreciate the moral witness of Solzhenitsyn.

Nor could Sartre and Beauvoir, "litterateurs" who put their works on the same level as people, begin "to understand Solzhenitsyn's rebuff."²⁷ "As a personality Sartre embodies everything which Solzhenitsyn loathes: the rejection of moral guidelines, the refusal to accept the age-old distinction between good and evil, the sacrifice of men's lives and the justification of crimes by appeals to an indefinite future ('indefinite' in all its senses), in short, the evil of ideology—a kind of evil which in Sartre's case takes on a pure form—indirect, delegated evil."²⁸ For Sartre, "Marxism is the unsurpassable philosophy of our era," a dogmatic and even "stupid"²⁹ affirmation that allowed him to justify the unjustifiable. Sartre defended the Soviet Union during the darkest days of Stalinism before heading off to Cuba to befriend Castro in the early years of the Cuban revolution. His heart and head always leaped to the Left. In Aron's pungent formulation, the Sartres "justify Evil by justifying the justification of it."³⁰

The "Sartres" were not dogmatic Marxists so much as "philosophers of ideological thinking"³¹ who embodied the unthinking "Leftism" that Solzhenitsyn pilloried in his major writings. For them, "anti-Communists are blackguards"³² and the only people who have the right to criticize Marxism "are those who become involved in the movement." To attack Soviet concentration

camps or repression is to side with the camp of the “rightists,” to doom oneself to the cause of reaction. Sartre, the “philosopher of freedom,” had committed himself to a “categorical imperative of Revolt” which was all too often coextensive with the “categorical imperative of violence.” In a work such as the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre justified violence in the name of human emancipation and as a liberating end in itself.

Solzhenitsyn, in contrast, made no subtle distinction between Marxism and Marxism-Leninism. Marxism was “quite simply the doctrine in whose name the Bolsheviks seized power, destroyed first political parties, then the peasantry, set up concentration camps and murdered millions upon millions of ordinary citizens.”³³ For Solzhenitsyn, far from being the “unsurpassable philosophy of our era” Marxism was the “root of all ill, the source of falsehood,”³⁴ the principle that justified and thus amplified terror and tyranny, making them “necessary” instruments for the transformation of human beings and the world. It is Marxist ideology that “gives the criminal a clear conscience.” In Solzhenitsyn’s memorable phrase from the first volume of *The Gulag Archipelago*, “thanks to ideology the twentieth century was fated to experience evil-doing on a scale calculated in the millions.” Solzhenitsyn did not deny that other doctrines besides Marxism (e.g., nationalism, colonialism, even the political use and abuse of Christianity) could provide ideological fodder for tyranny. But Marxism has a special place in the catalogue of ideological evil because the “quantitative” difference brought about by its extermination of tens of millions marks a “qualitative” change in the nature of despotism itself.³⁵ Marxism is ideology *par excellence*. “Evil needs an ideology before it can operate in the millions”³⁶ and Marxism-Leninism provides the social theory which, in Solzhenitsyn’s words, “gives evil-doing its long-sought justification.”

Aron suggests that if they had ended up meeting, the dialogue between Solzhenitsyn and Sartre would have amounted to nothing. Solzhenitsyn rightly emphasized the intrinsic perversity and mendacity of Communist totalitarianism. Compared to Lenin’s or Stalin’s (or even Brezhnev’s) Soviet Union, Franco’s Spain was a liberal order where men could breathe freely and speak their minds. Sartre, in contrast, continued to identify “progressive” forms of despotism with liberation, emancipation. In the conclusion of his essay, Aron unapologetically sides with Solzhenitsyn. He endorses his “message” which can be summarized in “two fundamental sentences”: “there is something worse than poverty and repression— and that something is the Lie; the lesson this century teaches us is to recognize the deadly snare of ideology, the illusion that men and societies can be transformed at a stroke.”³⁷

Aron understood that compulsory lying defined the Soviet regime in its Stalinist and post-Stalinist forms. The myriad lies that were demanded in the workplace, schools, press, and what passed for public life—the demand that one say what one knew not to be true—was rooted in a more fundamental “ontological” or “meta-physical” Lie—the illusion that men and societies can be transformed at a stroke.” This was the Big Lie that gave rise to the suffocating tyranny of ideological clichés, to what Solzhenitsyn called in “Our Muzzled Freedom” “the lie as a form of existence.” Soviet ideocracy was a soul-numbing despotism that was far more insidious and inhuman than a mere authoritarian order with its restrictions on political liberty and human rights. Even more than violence, the Lie was the principle that set in

motion the totalitarian regime. This is why Solzhenitsyn insisted that “non-participation in lies”³⁸—the refusal to spout official slogans, repeat mendacities, or denounce colleagues—was the *sine qua non* for both self-respect and for the return of something resembling normal civic life. Only when the flower of the nation had jettisoned the Lie could “breathing and consciousness return.”³⁹ Solzhenitsyn fought less for democracy, which he hoped would come in due time, than for an end to ideocratic despotism which not only oppressed men’s bodies but demanded of them their souls as well.

Writing in 1976, Aron identifies with the “vast silent mass” who side with Solzhenitsyn (and his friend Manès Sperber) against unrepentant ideologues in the academy and mass media. They do so by recognizing that mankind has no future except by rejecting “ideological knavery” and respecting “moral laws.”⁴⁰ Against the categorical imperative of violence, against the nihilism inherent in both radical voluntarism (existentialism) and radical determinism (Marxism-Leninism), Aron asserts freedom within nature and a moral law which provides a compass for thinking and acting man. Something after all has come from the dialogue between the Russian *zek* and the French existentialist *cum* Marxist. One might say that Aron’s own liberalism has been given greater moral depth by his sympathetic encounter with the Russian *zek* and by his adamant repudiation of the quasi-nihilism of his youthful friend from the *École normale supérieure*. In the encounter that he has sketched between Sartre and Solzhenitsyn, the Russian “dissident” and the European leftist, Aron finds wisdom.

Misconceptions About Russia

Aron’s last major treatment of Solzhenitsyn occurred in a column he wrote for *L’Express*, dated May 17–23, 1980.⁴¹ The column was occasioned by the French publication of Solzhenitsyn’s *L’Erreur de l’occident*, a lengthy essay that had originally been published in *Foreign Affairs* under the title “Misconceptions about Russia Are a Threat to America.”⁴² In this thoughtful and spirited essay, Solzhenitsyn argued that even many who opposed Communism did not appreciate the extent of its hostility to mankind as a whole. He argued that “there exist no ‘better’ variants of Communism” and “that it is incapable of growing ‘kinder,’ that it cannot survive as an ideology without using terror, and that, consequently, to coexist with Communism on the same planet is impossible.”⁴³ The bulk of the essay was directed against a “second and equally prevalent mistake” that assumed “an indissoluble link between the universal disease of Communism and the country where it first seized control—Russia.”⁴⁴

It is the second point that Aron takes up in his column. Like Solzhenitsyn, he challenges the “spontaneous explanation of Sovietism by the Russian past.” Both Aron and Solzhenitsyn insist on the “specificity of Communism,” an ideological movement and political order that are “unprecedented in human history.” Aron endorses Solzhenitsyn’s suggestive claim that as long as Communism was admired in the West, “it was preferred as the unquestionable dawn of a new era; as soon as it was condemned, people hastened to explain it by the traditional servility of the Russians.” General de Gaulle may have been right that *in the long run* “ideologies pass but nations remain.” But he was wrong to see in Stalin merely a new Tsar who loved Russia in his own way. And he failed to appreciate the extent to which the body and soul of historic Russia had been mutilated beyond recognition by Communist ideology. Aron does not deny “a

certain continuity between tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union: administrative forms persist, old traditions have not suddenly disappeared.” But on the crucial question, he sided with Solzhenitsyn: Bolshevik despotism was not an epiphenomenal expression of “eternal Russia.” One saw the “repetition of the specific traits of totalitarianism in all the countries conquered by a Marxist-Leninist party.” Stalin, a Georgian, was no more an expression of eternal Russia than Pol Pot was an expression of eternal Cambodia.

Aron also endorsed Solzhenitsyn’s rejection of certain “fictions current in the West.” Compared to the Soviet regime, the Tsarist regime was indeed comparatively liberal. There were no camps, political prisoners were small in number and prisoners were well treated. Universities “enjoyed an intellectual freedom comparable to those of Western universities.” The *Okhrana*, the Tsarist secret police, was an amateur organization compared to the *Cheka-GPU-KGB* established by the Bolsheviks in 1917. Most importantly, “the enslavement of thought to the truth of state, of civil society in its entirety to the decrees of an omnipresent power, represents neither an extrapolation nor a perfecting of the prerevolutionary regime.” Aron insists that such an enslavement of the human spirit belongs to the twentieth century and “constitutes its cancer, its permanent threat.” It cannot plausibly be blamed on the Russian old regime.

Like Solzhenitsyn, Aron believed that the Soviet leaders found legitimacy in the ideology they professed. Ideology was the anchor of Soviet life and it and it alone vouched for the truth of the “super-reality” supposedly inaugurated by the October revolution. The sheer recalcitrance of human nature and society made terror and lies inevitable. Only through them could the party-state “fictively reconcile ... words and reality.” Aron did not deny that the Soviet Union was a modern industrial society that needed to “integrate individuals into organizations.” As Aron laconically observes, “Sovietism is born of the conjunction of a party resolved to acquire total power and the tendency to bureaucratization which is typical of technical civilization.” But neither bureaucratic theory nor the concept of industrial society provided the key for understanding an ideological despotism of the Soviet sort. That secret lay in the dialectic of reality and ideological super-reality that defined the drama of Soviet life from its creation in 1917 until its self-destruction at the end of the 1980s. Near the end of his column, Aron endorsed Solzhenitsyn’s judgment that Communism was everywhere “anti-national” and that the function of ideology was to “kill the national body in which it develops.” There was no *essential* connection between the Russian old regime and the Soviet Union, between the Russian nation and ideocratic despotism.

Aron’s—and Solzhenitsyn’s—approach allows one to understand the restoration of a non-ideological Russian state after 1991 as the victory of the national “body” over the ideological cancer which had dominated and sickened it for so long. Of course, post-Communist Russia is far from a developed democracy and some important residues and habits of Sovietism persist. But the basic liberties that existed in Russia before the October 1917 revolution have all been restored. Thought is no longer enslaved to the truth of the state. Rather than lamenting the eternal servility of Russians, Westerners ought to welcome the return of Russia to a relatively normal form of national and political life. We should not be surprised that it is taking considerable time for Russia to descend fully from the “icy cliffs” of totalitarianism. Soviet

despotism was no ordinary dictatorship. In a negative way, the Soviet regime succeeded in creating a *homo sovieticus* whose habits of servility are indeed incompatible with the enterprise, initiatives and self-government characteristic of a free society.

In the final paragraph of his *L'Express* piece, Aron reports on an instructive exchange about Solzhenitsyn he had recently had with an Irish academic. In a presentation on Soviet foreign policy he had delivered to the Royal Academy of Ireland, Aron had invoked the debate between Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov and had sided with Solzhenitsyn. His respondent, a "charming" Irish professor of Gaelic, had summarily dismissed the testimony of Solzhenitsyn, coming as it had from an "Old Believer." The Irish professor was also adamant that ideology was "cynically employed" by the Soviet leaders and was of no fundamental importance. But it was precisely the jettisoning of that ideology that transformed the USSR into Russia and that offers hope for the future. However cynically employed, ideology was indeed *the* key to Soviet legitimacy as both Solzhenitsyn and Aron always argued. One is also struck by Aron's refusal to caricature Solzhenitsyn along the lines of the Irish professor. He does not dismiss or mock Solzhenitsyn's deeply felt Christian convictions nor does he confuse his patriotic attachments with a virulent form of nationalism. From beginning to end, Aron saw in Solzhenitsyn the scourge of ideological despotism, the advocate of a more humane future for Russia and the West. There is nothing in Solzhenitsyn's life or thought after 1980 that in any way demands a refinement of Aron's judgments about the Russian writer.

Two Spiritual Families?

What accounts for the remarkable affinities between the French political thinker, a liberal rooted in the secular traditions of the West, and the Russian writer who fought totalitarianism in the name of human dignity and the best spiritual traditions of his native Russia? Whatever their ultimate spiritual differences, Aron and Solzhenitsyn shared a common devotion to truth and liberty as well as a shared hatred of the ideological lie. Moreover, there are remarkable similarities between the "philosophy of history" affirmed by both men. In *The Red Wheel*, beginning with *August 1914*, Solzhenitsyn attacked historical fatalism whether in the form of Marxist determinism or Tolstoyan fatalism.⁴⁵ "*The Red Wheel*," the churning force of destructive revolution, only became "inevitable" due to the moral abdication of those responsible for Russia's fate. As we have emphasized throughout this work, Solzhenitsyn always defended the free will of human beings and saw it splendidly at work in a noble statesman such as Pyotr Stolypin, Prime Minister of Russia from 1906 to 1911, who heroically tried to steer a "middle line of social development" in the years before his assassination in September 1911. For Solzhenitsyn, human beings are never without choices and should never resign themselves to evil in the name of an alleged historical inevitability.

Aron, too, refused to bow before what he called "pseudo-fatality" and was a tireless critic of the "idolatry of History."⁴⁶ His philosophy of history emphasized both the limits or constraints of choice and the margins of liberty available to human beings. This agnostic paradoxically acknowledged a transcendent space above human action and the human will and experienced "horror" before the ideological breakdown of the distinction between the "sacred and the profane."⁴⁷ He was appalled by "progressive" Christians who succumbed to "secular religion"

and who placed all their hopes in an unfolding Historical Process.⁴⁸ These politicized Christians had lost faith in spiritual imperatives that give dignity to man and as a result confused “one class and the Messiah,” “one regime and the kingdom of God.”⁴⁹ With no other criterion than the truth of History or the pretenses of an ideological party, the militant, whether Marxist, existentialist, or Christian progressive, had succumbed to nihilism. Aron refused to reduce man to revolutionary political action or to subordinate the individual to the alleged requirements of History since both paths deprived men of “the means of rejecting the unacceptable.”⁵⁰ For Aron, “ethics judges politics as much as politics judges ethics.” As he eloquently stated in the concluding words of his English-language “Introduction” to *Marxism and the Existentialists* (1969), “the worst error would be to fail to recognize the dialectic which determines our condition and to totally surrender to nihilism or fanaticism, either by denying all spiritual imperatives or by trusting blindly in an alleged determinism of history.”⁵¹

These analyses confirm that Aron and Solzhenitsyn did not belong to completely different spiritual families after all. Both took aim at the dual specters of nihilism and fanaticism that haunted modern civilization. Both were sensitive to the “crisis” of modern civilization, to the decline of civic spirit when free peoples were confronted by the totalitarian challenge.⁵² Both eloquently and forcefully affirmed the free will and moral responsibility of human beings. Both refused to explain away natural justice as so many modern intellectuals are prone to do.⁵³ In Aron’s engagement with Solzhenitsyn, one witnesses a rare form of intellectual and spiritual communion, a spiritual encounter that is worthy of our admiration and that still has much to teach us today.

Notes

1 Raymond Aron, “Raymond Aron Dialogue Avec Alexandre Soljenitsyne,” *Le Figaro*, 12 juin 1975 in Aron, *Les articles du Figaro*, tome III: *Les Crises*, 1965–1977, p. 1542.

2 This theme is developed most extensively and thoughtfully in Solzhenitsyn’s Harvard address of June 8, 1978. See my discussion of Solzhenitsyn’s critique of “anthropocentricity” and the self-deification of man in Mahoney, *The Conservative Foundations of the Liberal Order: Defending Democracy Against Its Modern Enemies and Immoderate Friends* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2010), pp. 127–39.

3 Raymond Aron, “For Progress,” *The College: The St. John’s Review* (January 1980), pp. 1–8.

4 Aron, *In Defense of Decadent Europe*, translated by Stephen Cox, with a new introduction by Daniel J. Mahoney and Brian C. Anderson (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996), p. 256.

5 *Ibid.* □

6 Raymond Aron, "Raymond Aron Dialogue Avec Alexandre Soljenitsyne," *Le Figaro*, 12 juin 1975 in Aron, *Les articles du Figaro*, tome III : *Les Crises*, 1965–1977, pp. 1539–43.

7 Solzhenitsyn, *The Mortal Danger: How Misconceptions About Russia Imperil America*, translated by Alexis Klimoff and Michael Nicholson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980), p. 59. This image is particularly apt for thinking about the difficulties of post-communist transition in Russia.

8 Aron, *In Defense of Decadent Europe*, p. 36.

9 Solzhenitsyn addresses this misunderstanding with great lucidity in □chapter 8 of *The Mortal Danger* ("What My Letter to the Soviet Leaders Attempted to Do"), pp. 55–62.

10 Aron, *In Defense of Decadent Europe*, p. 36.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 255–56.

□12 *Ibid.*, p. 255. □

13 *Ibid.*, p. 256.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 22. □

15 *Ibid.*

□16 Solzhenitsyn cited in *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23. □

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 33–40.

18 Solzhenitsyn as cited by Aron in *Ibid.*, p. 35.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 74–75.

20 Aron, "Le message de Soljenitsyne" in *Le Figaro*, 18 avril 1975.

21 Aron, *Memoirs: Fifty Years of Political Reflection*, translated by George Holloch, Foreword by Henry Kissinger (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1990), pp. 380–81.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 381.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 382.

24 *Ibid.*

25 Aron's article "Alexander Solzhenitsyn and European 'Leftism'" first □appeared in English in *Survey* 100/101 (Summer/Autumn 1976), pp. 233–41 and has been reprinted in F. Flagg Taylor IV, ed., *The Great Lie: Classic and Recent Reappraisals of Ideology and Totalitarianism* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2011), pp. 366–76. The French original appeared as "Soljenitsyne et Sartre" in *Commentaire*, hiver 1993–1994, Vol. 16, numéro 64, pp. 687–92. I will cite the text in *The Great Lie* throughout.

26 Solzhenitsyn as cited by Aron in *The Great Lie*, p. 367.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 368.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 374.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 368–69.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 370.

31 *Ibid.*

32 *Ibid.*

33 *Ibid.*, p. 369

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*, p. 370.

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*, p. 376.

38 See Solzhenitsyn's beautiful and profound dissection of the "Lie" in his 1974 text "Live Not by Lies!" The text can be found in *The Solzhenitsyn Reader: New and Essential Writings, 1947–2005* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), pp. 556–60.

39 See Solzhenitsyn, "As Breathing and Consciousness Return" in Solzhenitsyn et. al., *From Under the Rubble*, translated by Michael Scammell and a team of translators (Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1975), pp. 3–25. In this text Solzhenitsyn insists that "the absolutely essential task is not political liberation, but the liberation of our souls from participation in the lie forced upon us."

40 Aron in *The Great Lie*, p. 376.

41 Raymond Aron, "L'Erreur de l'Occident" in *De Giscard à Mitterand, 1977–1983*, Préface de Jean-Claude Casanova (Paris: Éditions de Fallois, 2005), pp. 420–21.

42 See note #7 for information on the book version of this article. The French text appeared in 1980 as *L'Erreur de l'Occident* and was reissued by Éditions Grasset in 2006 with a fine introduction by Claude Durand that takes aim at contemporary forms of "Russophobia."

43 Solzhenitsyn, *The Mortal Danger*, p. 2.

44 *Ibid.*

45 See Alexis Klimoff, "Inevitability vs. Will: A Theme and its Variations in Solzhenitsyn's *August 1914*," in *Transactions of the Association of Russian-American Scholars in the U.S.A.* vol. 29, 1998, pp. 305–12.

46 See Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (New York: Doubleday, 1957) and Aron, *Marxism and the Existentialists* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), p. 13.

47 Aron, *Marxism and the Existentialists*, p.15.

48 *Ibid.*

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

51 *Ibid.*

52 See Aron's analysis of the "crisis of civilization" in the penultimate chapter of *In Defense of Decadent Europe*, pp. 224–51. Aron's "active pessimism" became more pronounced in the years after 1968.

53 Pierre Manent tellingly observes that Aron was a natural Aristotelian who accepted the morality "immanent" in human life. Aron was never tempted to jettison natural justice in the name of a radical skepticism or a radical historicism that denied the experiences at the foundation of our sense of right and wrong, truth and falsehood. See Manent, *Le regard politique: Entretiens avec Benedicte Delorme- Montini* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), p. 54.

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