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## The Ascent from Modernity: Solzhenitsyn on "Repentance and Self-Limitation in the Life of Nations"

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## Chapter 7

# The Ascent from Modernity: Solzhenitsyn on “Repentance and Self-Limitation in the Life of Nations”

Daniel J. Mahoney

Repentance, not Utopia, is the greatest revolutionary force in the moral world.

—Max Scheler

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn clearly believes that Christianity ought to assume a significant place in the public life of contemporary societies. In his 1973 *Letter to the Soviet Leaders*, he pleaded with the Soviet leadership to abandon a “decrepit and hopelessly antiquated” ideology that, he argued, was the basis of the most mendacious tyranny in human history, and that had proved to be neither scientific in its empirical claims nor capable of addressing the real dilemmas of modern society.<sup>1</sup> He called for nothing less than competition “between all ideological and moral currents, and in particular between *all religions*,”<sup>2</sup> confident that Marxist-Leninism would collapse of the weight of its own falsehood if it were deprived of its ideological monopoly. On that occasion, he stated that he wished for no special privileges for Christianity despite his belief that it was “the only living spiritual force capable of undertaking the spiritual healing of Russia.”<sup>3</sup> Despite the modest character of Solzhenitsyn’s hopes for a Christian role in the regeneration of Russia, the legend grew about his supposedly theocratic propensities. He was even accused of wanting “new Gulags, new Ayatollahs” by certain émigré writers such as Eftim Etkind, in a move that Solzhenitsyn angrily labeled “the Persian trick.”<sup>4</sup>

Few of Solzhenitsyn’s critics have bothered to subject his writings to serious analysis. They did not take the time to carefully examine the call for a “national rebirth” that Solzhenitsyn and six other writers had put forward in the 1974 collection *From Under the Rubble*.<sup>5</sup> How could Russia escape from under the

“dank and dark depths”<sup>6</sup> of communist totalitarianism without descending into social chaos, ethnic conflict, or new forms of tyranny? these writers asked. How could she recover her national soul as well as her liberties after decades of ideocratic rule? Solzhenitsyn and his collaborators proposed nothing less than a peaceful moral revolution made possible “by traveling [the] path of repentance, self-limitation and inner development.”<sup>7</sup> These themes would resonate in all of Solzhenitsyn’s subsequent political essays and programmatic statements over the next twenty-five years. Of Solzhenitsyn’s three contributions to *From Under the Rubble*, the essay “Repentance and Self-Limitation in the Life of Nations” is the most synoptic in character and the one that best captures his hopes for Russia’s future.<sup>8</sup> It is also one of his most philosophical statements, combining a critique of philosophical and political modernity, including the social sciences, with an analysis of the place of repentance and self-limitation in natural human experience and in the Christian religion. In 1998, Solzhenitsyn told his biographer, Joseph Pearce, that he still considers it to be “one of his most important articles, expressing one of his key thoughts.”<sup>9</sup> This chapter consists of a detailed exegesis of and commentary on Solzhenitsyn’s essay. Its aim is nothing less than a philosophical exploration of Solzhenitsyn’s recommendation of the path of repentance, self-limitation, and inner development for a Russia emerging from under the rubble and, more generally, a modern world in the midst of a profound intellectual and spiritual crisis.

### The Transference of Value Judgments

Part 1 of “Repentance and Self-Limitation in the Life of Nations” begins with a quotation from book 19 of St. Augustine’s *City of God*: “What is the state without justice? A band of robbers.” Solzhenitsyn is less interested in analyzing the truth of a judgment with which he concurs (“Even now, fifteen centuries later, many people will, I think, readily recognize the force and accuracy of this judgment”) than in examining the human propensity to apply “ethical judgments about a small group of people” to “larger social phenomena and associations of people, up to and including the nation and the state as a whole.” Solzhenitsyn upholds the naturalness and necessity of the “transference” of ethical judgments from the individual to the social and political sphere—and, in the process, criticizes the social sciences for their methodological asceticism, their strict prohibition against “extensions of meaning” to larger social phenomena (105’).

Solzhenitsyn implicitly criticizes the “fact-value” distinction at the heart of the modern social scientific enterprise. The “fact-value” distinction is itself a radicalization of Immanuel Kant’s argument in his *Critique of Judgment* for the

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\*All references to “Repentance and Self-Limitation in the Life of Nations” will henceforth be cited parenthetically in the text. (See bibliographical information in note 8.)

absolute independence of the cognitive, ethical, and esthetic spheres. Solzhenitsyn affirms the human need to evaluate political life by ethical criteria, however "provincial" (105) or old-fashioned such an endeavor may appear to the positivist cast of mind. Delba Winthrop has rightly noted that Solzhenitsyn's confrontation with the ideological lie somehow led him to an ancillary confrontation with the dogmatism at the heart of the social scientific enterprise.<sup>10</sup> In "Repentance and Self-Limitation in the Life of Nations" Solzhenitsyn confronts the dogma, sacrosanct in social scientific circles, that reason as such can tell us nothing about how human beings ought to live, that true science is incompatible with value judgments.

Solzhenitsyn attacks the "arrogant insensitivity of the modern trend in the social sciences" for ignoring the naturalness and necessity of transferring "age-old human impulses and feelings" from the realm of personal and interpersonal relations to larger social phenomena (106). Solzhenitsyn seems to ignore or abstract from the fact that the separation of fact and value as articulated by Max Weber and his epigoni forbids the application of value judgments to *individual phenomena* as well as to larger social aggregates<sup>11</sup>—at least value judgments that claim any reasonable as opposed to idiosyncratic or arbitrary foundation. But Solzhenitsyn would not be deterred by this objection. He takes for granted that human beings are evaluative beings precisely because they are moral agents responsible for conducting their individual and collective lives honorably. "The transference of values"—the application of the "laws and demands which constitute the aim and meaning of individual human lives" to human society at large—is "entirely natural to the religious cast of mind." But, Solzhenitsyn tellingly adds, "even without a religious foundation, this sort of transference is readily and naturally made." For Solzhenitsyn, religion provides powerful reinforcement for what is natural to human beings. Solzhenitsyn's defense of repentance and self-limitation does not depend on prior religious commitments—although these natural goods clearly point beyond themselves and are compatible with the truth of faith.

The application of ethical criteria to the realms of personal and interpersonal life is integral to what it means to be human. For example, the transference of moral judgment to "the biggest social events or human organizations, including whole states" is entirely natural in Solzhenitsyn's view. Human beings instinctively apply the full range of "spiritual values," of human virtues and vices, to the social and political spheres, freely speaking of the "noble, base, courageous, cowardly, hypocritical, false, cruel, magnanimous, just, unjust" traits of men and communities. Solzhenitsyn wryly notes that "even the most extreme economic materialists" write this way "since they remain after all human beings." To be a human being is to be a person who evaluates the qualities intrinsic to human actions and institutions. The moral and evaluative character of individuals and societies is a given of our nature and it cannot be wished away in the name of scrupulous adherence to scientific or ideological criteria. Without a clear-cut adherence to and thoughtful analysis of the moral dimensions of social life, society risks being "brutalized by the triumph of evil instincts, no matter where the pointer of the great economic laws may turn" (106). To resist the moral examination of

social phenomena in the name of science or adherence to moral or cultural relativism is to “evade” a primordial and fundamental human responsibility. In parts 2-5 of the essay under examination, Solzhenitsyn turns to a thoroughgoing examination of social life with reference to two essential categories of individual ethics: repentance and self-limitation. These are the touchstones of Solzhenitsyn’s reflection and the place where his philosophical, spiritual, and political concerns most clearly and fruitfully converge.

### The Gift of Repentance

Solzhenitsyn calls repentance a “gift” that “perhaps more than anything else distinguishes man from the animal world” (107). He leaves open the question of whether this gift is given by nature or by God. Repentance is coextensive with the human condition but it does not come easily to *modern* man, who has “grown ashamed of this feeling” (107). Solzhenitsyn highlights a central feature of modernity: it sets out to liberate or emancipate man from conventional restraints, but, in profound ways, it estranges him from his nature. “The habit of repentance” is increasingly “lost to our callous and chaotic age” (107). In light of modern man’s resistance to any settled notion of limits, his refusal to bow down before a divine or natural order that is responsible for the “givenness” (110) of his nature, Solzhenitsyn asks if his article is not in fact “premature or altogether pointless” (107). But he resists this conclusion because he is confident that modernity’s rejection of limits is untenable and unsustainable; a “hollow place in modern man” makes him “ready to receive” (107) repentance and self-limitation in both the personal and social spheres of life.

Solzhenitsyn thus affirms the primacy of the Good—he has confidence in the permanence of the Permanent Things—in the ultimate solidity of a natural order. The undeniable *progress* of science and technology in the modern world cannot change the fact that man’s freedom and dignity reside more in his capacity for inner development than in his ability to transform the external world. Progress is an undeniable necessity capable of bringing great benefits to the human race. But it is also a chimera if it claims to provide the key to understanding the mystery that is man. And *infinite progress* risks contributing to environmental catastrophe—even to “*the end of the world*” (107) foretold by the prophets of old.

It is not appropriate on this occasion to subject Solzhenitsyn’s “green” presuppositions to detailed scrutiny. For now, we must be content with some necessarily cursory remarks. Suffice it to say that Solzhenitsyn accepts the most pessimistic, “Malthusian” analyses of the global ecological crisis, drawing in particular on the hyperbolic claims of the Club of Rome from the late 1960s and early 1970s about imminent global catastrophe as a result of uncontrolled economic development, galloping population growth, and continued polluting of the planet (137, 143). For Solzhenitsyn, self-limitation has thus become a practical necessity if mankind is not to “perish as a result of the total exhaustion, barrenness and

pollution of the planet" (108).

Solzhenitsyn's ecological vision is rooted in deep reservations about the human adequacy of unfettered external development or unlimited progress, development that turns human beings away from the cultivation of their souls, genuine concerns about the effects of industrial civilization on the integrity of nonhuman nature, as well as in a profound revulsion against totalitarian communism's Promethean contempt for any limits to the conquest of nature. His green proclivities are an inherent element of his philosophical and political critique of modernity and should not be dismissed as romantic or reactionary longings. Solzhenitsyn, a scientist by training, does not oppose the legitimacy of modern progress or the importance of technological development (he even recognizes that technology provides a crucial way out of the approaching abyss of ecological catastrophe). His writings are also free of the pantheistic worship of "Gaia" or mother earth that is an increasingly important part of the "theology" of radical or deep ecology. But Solzhenitsyn could be faulted for too readily accepting suspect empirical claims of radical environmentalists, for underestimating the crucial role that the market can play in encouraging ecological responsibility, and for adopting a quasi-apocalyptic rhetoric that understates the very real progress that has been made, especially in the liberal democratic nations of the West, in addressing pollution and other environmental dangers.<sup>12</sup> And as Nicholas Eberstadt has recently highlighted, the pressing problem facing the "developed" world in the next half century is likely to be depopulation, with its attendant consequences for sustaining a welfare state, civic peace, an ever graying population, and the political rank or influence of once dominant Western nations.<sup>13</sup> Solzhenitsyn himself has expressed deep concerns about depopulation in the former U.S.S.R.<sup>14</sup>—although the causes of that demographic disaster are decidedly different from the changing population patterns of the prosperous West.

Solzhenitsyn surely wishes to stress the practical urgency of a turn to repentance and self-limitation for modern peoples who are all too prone to dismiss advice they see as moralistic or hortatory in character. But the deepest argument for repentance is, according to Solzhenitsyn, a "fact, which has been made plain, especially by art, a thousand times before" (109). This fact is perhaps the central moral message of Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*—and is at the heart of his rejection of every form of religious or ideological manicheism. Human beings have a propensity to localize evil in others and resist the appeal of religion to "censure, denounce and hate" (108) the evil in themselves. Modern man is increasingly estranged from the dramatic character of the human condition and the "mixed" character of the human soul. Solzhenitsyn reiterates a central "fact" obscured by sophisticated currents of contemporary philosophy and social science: Good and evil are not some arbitrary constructions of language or culture but vital qualities of soul that pulsate through every human being. The ideological construction of a surreal world "beyond good and evil" dehumanizes men and turns them away from the arduous but eminently human task of inner spiritual development and self-limitation. In words almost identical to those used in *The Gulag Archipelago*<sup>15</sup> Solzhenitsyn writes:

But obvious though it may be, we are even now, with the twentieth century on its way out, reluctant to recognize that the universal dividing line between good and evil runs not between countries, not between nations, not between parties, not between classes, not even between good and bad men: the dividing line cuts across nations and parties, shifting, constantly yielding now to the pressure of light, now to the pressure of darkness. It divides the heart of every man, and there too it is not a ditch dug once and for all, but fluctuates with the passage of time and according to a man's behavior. (108)

Repentance is a gift available to human beings who have come to know themselves. It provides an opportunity for civic concord and spiritual growth, which, alas, human beings are all too prone to resist. Human beings wish to blame other parties, nations, and races for the imperfection of the world or even for their own imperfections and faults. This process of attacking *the other* is easier than searching "for *our own* errors and sins" (108). In a particularly powerful passage in part 3 of the essay, Solzhenitsyn suggests that communist ideology intensified the intractable human resistance to the gift of repentance, locating evil and evildoing in distinct social and ontological categories. Such an obfuscation of the mixed character of all individuals and social bodies is at the heart of the communist *lie* and is an essential reason for its intrinsically coercive character. Solzhenitsyn writes:

For half a century now we have acted on the conviction that the *guilty* ones were the tsarist establishment, the bourgeois patriots, social democrats, White Guards, priests, émigrés, subversives, Kulaks . . . anyone and everyone except you and me! Obviously it was *they*, not we, who had to reform. But they dug their heels in and refused to. So how could they be made to reform, except by bayonets, revolvers, barbed wire, starvation? (117)

Solzhenitsyn, then, does not consider his appeal to repentance to be in any way quixotic or utopian. Repentance provides "the first firm ground underfoot, the only one from which we can go forward not to fresh hatreds but to concord" (108). It provides "the only starting point for spiritual growth" (108) for individuals and social bodies alike. Yet Solzhenitsyn is cognizant of the many objections that will be raised to the transference of repentance to the social and political realm. A critic of the partisan character of modern representative government, Solzhenitsyn does not expect political parties ("utterly inhuman formations") to repent for their misjudgments or misdeeds. The same cannot be said of politicians, who do not necessarily "lose their human qualities" and thus are open, in principle, to the call of repentance (109).

Nations, in contrast to partisan movements, are "vital formations, susceptible to all moral feelings, including, however painful a step it may be—repentance" (109). Solzhenitsyn cites the authority of Dostoyevsky, who in his *Diary of a Writer*

affirms the indebtedness of every nation to a prior ethical idea. Political foundings are simultaneously theological and ethical as well as political events (Dostoyevsky gives the example of Moses and the Hebrew polity and the various Muslim nations "founded after the appearance of the Koran"). Neither Dostoyevsky nor Solzhenitsyn is willing to draw the Machiavellian conclusion, reiterated by Rousseau, that sees in such foundings the manipulation of a godlike legislator who provides the subsequent horizon of a people's corporate existence. Solzhenitsyn draws on Dostoyevsky to stress the inescapably spiritual dimension of national life and hence the "right" of a people to repent, to cultivate and preserve its national soul.

Solzhenitsyn ends part 2 of "Repentance and Self-Limitation" by raising three doubts that naturally arise in considering the application of repentance to the nation as a whole. The first concerns the legitimacy of "talking about the qualities or traits of a whole nation." Doesn't the expectation of repentance for an entire people presuppose that "the sin, the vice, the defect is that of the whole nation" (109)?

Second, doesn't the call for national repentance presuppose collective responsibility for wrongdoing? But under authoritarian or totalitarian governments, the mass of people "can neither obstruct nor contribute to the decisions of its leaders." Solzhenitsyn tellingly asks, "What should it repent of?" (109).

Finally, Solzhenitsyn asks how a nation as a whole can express its repentance. Isn't repentance the work of singular individuals who take responsibility where most refuse to act? How then can a people as a whole repent?

In the first half of part 3, Solzhenitsyn systemically responds to these fundamental obstacles to the idea of national repentance.

### A "Community of Guilt" and Common Repentance

In his "Nobel Lecture on Literature," Solzhenitsyn affirmed the indispensable place of the nation in "God's design." The disappearance of national forms "would impoverish us not less than if all men should become alike, with one personality and one face."<sup>16</sup> And elsewhere in *From Under the Rubble*, in the opening essay "As Breathing and Consciousness Return," he dissects Andrei Sakharov's "Saint-Simonian" vision (in *Progress, Coexistence and Intellectual Freedom*) of world government and scientific management of the international economy, guided by spiritually sensitive experts and administrators.<sup>17</sup> Solzhenitsyn is among those who "set the highest value on the existence of the nation, who see in it not the ephemeral fruit of social formations but a complex, vivid, unrepeatably organism not invented by man" (110). He goes so far as to speak of "the profoundest similarity between the individual and the nation," a similarity that "lies in the mystical nature of their 'givenness'" (110). What are we to make of these remarkable "mystical" or metapolitical claims made on behalf of the nation?

Perhaps it is best to begin by analyzing Solzhenitsyn's notion of the givenness of individual and national life. This claim is not in and of itself mystical and is open

to rational and philosophical examination. In asserting the givenness of individual and collective life, Solzhenitsyn reiterates his long-standing criticism of "anthropocentric humanism," of modernity's confidence in what Aurel Kolnai has called the "self-sovereignty" of man. In Solzhenitsyn's view man "participates" in an order that he neither creates nor is able to negate.<sup>18</sup> Solzhenitsyn joins a long and venerable tradition that sees man above all as "a debtor" (Bertrand de Jouvenel)<sup>19</sup> who owes everything to an order of things finally beyond human control and manipulation. Modern political philosophy is replete with an unfounded confidence in the capacity of human beings to conquer fortune (Machiavelli, *Prince*, ch. 25) and sees man as the matter and maker (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 29) of an immense project of social and individual self-creation. Without denying the importance of the political regime (most of Solzhenitsyn's political polemics of the 1970s and 1980s centered on a desperate effort to remind an intellectually senescent Western world that Russia was not the same thing as the ideocratic "U.S.S.R."<sup>20</sup>), Solzhenitsyn sees in the nation, the eternal nation, the incubus of civilization and the social embodiment of the moral inheritance of man. Solzhenitsyn believes that nations are spiritual entities as much as political ones, and "can soar to heights and plunge to the depths, run[ning] the whole gamut from saintliness to utter wickedness (although only individuals ever reach the extremes)" (110). Solzhenitsyn's ethical/spiritual conception of the nation is alien to the civic republican, creedal, and contractual understandings of national identity that are indebted to the American and French revolutionary experiences.<sup>21</sup> But it is also distinct from ethnic and even merely cultural explanations of national identity. It has something in common with Charles Péguy's notion that politics in the narrow or specific sense of the term must always be undergirded by a *mystique*, a spiritual vivacity that gives it energy and purpose, or to Charles de Gaulle's notion that beyond passing regimes are the *fatum* of nations and peoples who endure despite the best efforts of revolutionaries or ideologues.<sup>22</sup> And Pierre Manent has exposed the dependence of even the democratic polity, with its grand ambition for collective self-government, on national forms that give territorial and historical expression to what is otherwise an inhuman abstraction. Democratic peoples, too, are indebted to inheritances, including the nation itself, that precede their constitutional foundings or their belief in the principle of individual and collective consent.<sup>23</sup> Some things cannot be consented to—they need to be accepted in a spirit of humility, even piety. Patriotism is a constant reminder of the sacral dimension of any civic community, however secular in inspiration. Even today, many ordinary citizens of the Western democracies remain old-fashioned patriots. They instinctively reject the abstract "constitutional patriotism" put forward by intellectuals such as Jürgen Habermas, who reduce national loyalty to the acceptance of procedural political forms.

Relying on "intuitive perceptions" rather than "positivist knowledge" (110), Solzhenitsyn asserts that the "shifting boundary between good and evil" of which he previously spoke "oscillates continuously in the consciousness of a nation" (110). Nations, like individuals, can "change beyond recognition in the course of

their lives" (110). "Because of the mutability of all existence, a nation can no more live without sin than an individual" (110). In a manner reminiscent of the arguments of the neo-Augustinian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, Solzhenitsyn insists that "every nation" is under judgment, that whatever the tragedies of a particular country's national experience, it "has certainly at one time or another contributed its share of inhumanity, injustice and arrogance" (111). Solzhenitsyn criticizes all forms of nationalism that abstract from the properly penitential aspects of authentic patriotism. But if it is necessary to avoid manichean judgments or one-sided national antipathies, it is also necessary to reject the cool, scientific asceticism that tries to transcend the evaluation of national experience. Whether we like it or not, we cannot understand social phenomena without appreciating the virtues and vices that are inherent to all human action. Solzhenitsyn's defense of the transference of value judgments to social and political phenomena is inseparable from his recognition of the givenness of human life. Nations, like individuals, have an obligation to acquit themselves responsibly, recognizing an ethical order that transcends individual or collective willfulness. And it is natural for human beings to judge nations "as a whole," as long as that judgment is balanced by a genuine recognition of the intrinsic imperfection of all things human.

Solzhenitsyn responds to the second objection, that not every individual or citizen is responsible for the crimes of their governments, by arguing that our inheritance includes the crimes of our forbears—"the sins of the fathers" (113). Each generation does not begin anew. The great contract of the living, dead, and yet to be born—what Chesterton famously called the "democracy of the dead"—unites a nation "in a community of guilt" that requires "common repentance" (113). Nations are "integrated organisms" (113) and cannot avoid responsibility by passing things off as the product of other men, or times, or regimes. Solzhenitsyn chooses his cases ecumenically—giving examples of wrongdoing in liberal, authoritarian, and totalitarian regimes and from the developed and developing world.

The peoples of western Europe (e.g., the British, French, and Dutch), for example, did little to obstruct the adoption of colonial policies by their respective governments even though "their system of government allowed for considerable obstruction to be placed in the way of colonialism by society" (111). They share guilt for the wrongdoings associated with colonialism. About this particular wrong, there has certainly been a lot of posturing and some genuine regrets, although repentance does not seem to describe the West's doubts in this regard.

The next example is near and dear to Solzhenitsyn's heart—and recurs in many of his works from the first volume of *The Gulag Archipelago* to the Address to the International Academy of Philosophy in Liechtenstein on September 14, 1993.<sup>24</sup> Solzhenitsyn highlights the British and American complicity in the forcible repatriation of hundreds of thousands of civilian refugees to the U.S.S.R. immediately after World War II in the infamous "Operation Keelhaul." The action of Allied governments contributed to the deaths and imprisonments of tens of thousands of people. Writing in 1974, Solzhenitsyn indignantly protests that no one

has raised a finger to bring those responsible to punishment or even to hold them accountable in the court of public opinion. Worst of all, "the voice of repentance has still not been heard" (112). Yet in the years since the publication of *From Under the Rubble*, and in no small part due to the efforts of Solzhenitsyn himself, this "last secret"<sup>25</sup> (as Solzhenitsyn has called it) of World War II has been the subject of excellent books by Julius Epstein and Nicholas Bethell, among others.<sup>26</sup> If there has not been collective repentance on the part of Britain and the United States, these books represent an effort to come to terms with the shame of events still too little known by the ordinary public in the Western democracies.

Solzhenitsyn's last two examples come from tyrannical regimes—from the bloody tyranny of Idi Amin Dada in Uganda and from Enver Hoxha's fanatically totalitarian regime in postwar Albania. Ugandans may not have been directly responsible for the bloody incidents that characterized Amin's rule. Nonetheless, they gave tacit backing to his expulsion of the productive and law-abiding Asian minority in 1971. "There is no doubt that [Amin] had the self-interested approval of a population which battens on the spoils of the deported." As Ugandans embarked on the path of nationhood, "repentance is the very last feeling they [were] about to experience" (112). It is much harder to hold ordinary Albanians responsible for the crimes of Hoxha's fanatical Marxist regime (a regime that executed parents for the "crime" of baptizing their children). But Solzhenitsyn adds, "the enthusiastic layer of the population which keeps (Hoxha) in orbit must surely have been recruited from ordinary Albanian families" (113). Solzhenitsyn has insisted that post-communist societies, such as Albania or the former republics of the U.S.S.R., must punish those who were principally responsible for the crimes of the totalitarian regime. Otherwise, the new generation is taught that evil goes unpunished in this world, that, in the end, "might makes right." But more fundamental than judicial punishment is the need for collective responsibility and repentance for the crimes of the past. It is not merely a question of *us*—the victims—and *them*—the guilty, although that distinction is pertinent to the reality of the totalitarian or ideocratic state. But no one is wholly without guilt. In a totalitarian society, everyone, to some extent or another, has "taken part in the lie" even if only by refusing to display civic courage or by unintentionally reinforcing the ideological claims of the regime.<sup>27</sup> Even in the totalitarian state, then, the "community of guilt" is real. Only public and collective repentance can begin to purge the sins of the past and allow society to pursue a healthy path of development.

Solzhenitsyn next turns to an examination of the third objection—Is it possible for a nation as a whole to express its repentance? He readily admits that "individual expressions of this common repentance are dubiously representative for we cannot know when those who make them speak with authority" (113). An added difficulty is that those who take it upon themselves to "pronounce words of repentance on behalf of society as a whole" must "inevitably *distribute* the blame, indicating the various degrees of culpability of various groups—and that necessarily changes the spirit and tone of repentance" (113). It is only in retrospect that one can "unerringly

judge to what degree one man has expressed a genuine change of heart in his nation" (114). The reader cannot but help be reminded of Solzhenitsyn himself, who since his return to Russia in May of 1994—and long before, as the essay testifies—has tirelessly pleaded for common national repentance for the crimes of the Soviet period. For the most part, his calls have gone unheeded—ignored by a political class and society that both have ample reasons for forgetting their complicity in the perpetuation of communist rule. Only time will tell if Solzhenitsyn's calls for repentance are the first step toward public healing and a harbinger of a fuller societal confrontation with the past or merely an eccentric protest against a complacent society that refuses to come to terms with the totalitarian past.

But, Solzhenitsyn insists, repentance can become "the normal mood of all thinking society" (114). A good example is the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia, which was filled with genuine "repentance" for the injustices that plagued tsarist society. For the first time Solzhenitsyn even raises the possibility that the gift of repentance can be misused—and that penitents can cease "to acknowledge any good in themselves or any sin in the common people" (114)—a clear reference to the nihilistic hatred of the existing order and the populist adulation of the people that characterized the attitude of educated nineteenth-century Russian "society." This moralistic or one-sided repentance had "incalculable—and even counterproductive—consequences" (114)—consequences that are a principal theme of Solzhenitsyn's *Red Wheel*. Solzhenitsyn believes that the nihilistic contempt for Russia and Russian national consciousness is a pernicious inheritance of prerevolutionary Russian political culture—one that continues to dominate major currents of Russian liberal thought, as our analysis of part 4 of "Repentance and Self-Limitation" will make clear.

The next example of collective repentance that Solzhenitsyn discusses is much more promising. He turns to a discussion of the "powerful movement" of repentance in Germany for the crimes of the Hitler period. (He adds that this was true only of West Germany—in the so-called German Democratic Republic [GDR] communist ideology stood "like an impregnable concrete wall in the way of repentance" [114].) West Germany's repentance entailed "real actions," even "large concessions" and reached its apex in Chancellor Willy Brandt's "*Canossa-Reise*" to Warsaw, Auschwitz, and Israel. It also found "further expression" in the policy of *Ost-Politik*—the policy of détente with the communist regimes in the east (a policy that was far from prudent given the ideological nature of communist regimes). Solzhenitsyn's aim, of course, is not to judge the political wisdom of *Ost-Politik*, about which he has real doubts, but rather to show that "ethical impulses" can give rise to efficacious political action and can begin to transform the moral character of a people. But the two examples discussed show that repentance needs to be linked with balanced judgment if it is not to degenerate into a mere display of good feelings or a moralistic disdain for the complexity of social and political arrangements. Solzhenitsyn does not disregard the importance of prudence to political life—or simply collapse political and ethical judgment. But it is fair to say

that in "Repentance and Self-Limitation" he is not always sufficiently careful in distinguishing the two. In his 1993 Lichtenstein address he freely admits that "moral criteria applicable to the behavior of individual, families and small groups cannot be transferred on a *one-to-one basis* to the behavior of states and politicians; there is no exact equivalence, as the scale, the momentum and tasks of governmental structures introduce a certain deformation" (emphasis mine).<sup>28</sup>

But Solzhenitsyn's principal aim is to show that repentance is a living possibility of social life, and that "the penitential impulse" is a natural one conducive to the healing and spiritual growth of the Russian people. Russians used to freely affirm the truth that, in the words of a proverb, "God is not in might but in right" (115).

This natural ("or partly natural") truth was "powerfully reinforced" by the widely shared Orthodox faith of the Russian people (115). The practical effect of decades of communist rule was to undermine the confidence of human beings in the primacy of the Good, a confidence upheld by natural reason and religious faith. Marxism, with its utter disregard for a universal or categorical morality that transcends the exigencies of "the class struggle," in practice creates a nihilistic order in which the mass of people comes to believe that "'might is right' and act accordingly" (115). Marxism radicalizes the emphasis on individual and collective willfulness inherent in modernity, and paradoxically helps create a world where Nietzschean "will to power" is triumphant.

### The Russian Case

Solzhenitsyn does not romanticize prerevolutionary Russia and has no illusions about its despotic or unjust features. But he does remind his readers that pre-Petrine Russia, in particular, experienced "religious penitence on a mass scale" (115) and that repentance was considered "among the most prominent Russian national characteristics" (115). Solzhenitsyn suggests that imperial Russia, even at its most despotic, never lost the sense that human beings and institutions are under the judgment of God: "Ivan the Terrible's terror never became as all-embracing or systematic as Stalin's, largely because the tsar repented and came to his senses" (115).

Solzhenitsyn, however, criticizes both the Petersburg (or Petrine and Post-Petrine) and Muscovite (or Bolshevik) periods of Russian history for estranging Russians from their natural and Orthodox proclivity to repentance. The Petersburg period saw the radical political subordination of the Church, the continuation and consolidation of the monstrous persecution of the Old Believers (who resisted the liturgical reforms introduced by Patriarch Nikon in the seventeenth century), and an emphasis on external grandeur and "imperial conceit" that "drew the Russian spirit even farther from repentance" (116). This period also saw the preservation and perpetuation of serfdom long after it had become "unthinkable." The blindness of the regime contributed to the one-sided and ideologically corrupt "repentance" on the part of society of which we have already spoken. This new moralism,

disguised as repentance, "came too late to appease angry minds, but engulfed us in the clouds of a new savagery, brought a pitiless rain of vengeful blows on our heads, an unprecedented terror, and the return, after seventy years, of serfdom in a still worse form" (116). Despite his adamant refusal to confuse communist totalitarianism with traditional autocracy, Solzhenitsyn has no illusions about the partial responsibility of the old regime for the revolution. He knows that Russia's estrangement from her best traditions had begun centuries before the onslaught of revolutionary nihilism or Bolshevism.

Under communism, Russians "have not merely lost the gift of repentance . . . but have ridiculed it." They succumbed to the worst kind of ideological manicheism, one that led to "evil on a massive scale and mainly in our own country." Solzhenitsyn does not deny the imperial oppression that accompanied communism but he rightly insists that Russians, Ukrainians, and Byelorussians bore the principle brunt of communist criminality. And every Russian bears some responsibility for communism since those of "the present older and middle generations have spent our whole lives floundering and wallowing in the stinking swamp of a society based on force and fraud." Very few have managed to escape any defilement. Almost everyone learned to live by the lie, to accommodate themselves in one way or another to the ideocratic regime. Solzhenitsyn writes in a particularly incisive passage:

This realm of darkness, of falsehood, or brute force, of justice denied and distrust of the good, this slimy swamp was formed by *us*, and no one else. We grew used to the idea that we must submit and lie in order to survive—and we brought up our children to do so. Each of us, if he honestly reviews the life he has led, without special pleading or concealment, will recall more than one occasion in which he pretended not to hear a cry for help, averted his indifferent eyes from an imploring gaze, burned letters and photographs which it was his duty to keep, forgot someone's name or dropped certain widows, turned his back on prisoners under escort, and—but of course—always voted, rose to his feet and applauded obscenities . . . how, otherwise, could he survive? How, moreover, could the great Archipelago have endured in our midst for fifty years unnoticed. (118)

This passage helps explain why Solzhenitsyn believes that the introduction of political and civil liberties is not a sufficient basis for beginning the ascent out from under the rubble of communism. When people concentrate too much on the infringement of their rights, it draws them away from the painful imperative of repentance and makes them forget that "*we, all of us*, Russia herself were the necessary accomplices" (119) of Bolshevik tyranny.

## National Bolshevism: The Ideological Defilement of Patriotism

In the final section of part 3 of "Repentance and Self-Limitation in the Life of Nations" Solzhenitsyn turns to a dissection of National Bolshevism—a current of thought first articulated in the 1920s and increasingly influential in the Soviet Union from the late 1960s and 1970s onward. The proponents of National Bolshevism are uncritical patriots who believe that "tsarism and Bolshevism are equally irreproachable"; in their view, "the nation neither erred nor sinned either before 1917 or after" (119). They defend the purity and "Russianness" of the Petersburg and neo-Muscovite or Soviet periods of Russian history alike, and scorn the penitential state of mind that, according to Solzhenitsyn, is integral to authentic Russian national consciousness. They deny any "nationality problem" within the U.S.S.R., freely celebrate Greater Russian and Soviet imperialism, and affirm what Solzhenitsyn elsewhere calls an unnatural "Commie-patriotic motley,"<sup>29</sup> singing the praises of both October 1917 and the Orthodoxy that the revolution set out to expurgate. They share a narrowly racist or ethnic view of what it means to be Russian in contrast to Solzhenitsyn's own capacious emphasis on the spiritual, cultural, and political preconditions of Russian national identity. Solzhenitsyn explicitly rejects racialist definitions of Russian identity. In "*The Russian Question at the End of the Twentieth Century*," he writes: "But when we say 'nationality' we do not mean *blood*, but always a *spirit*, a *consciousness*, a person's orientation of preferences."<sup>30</sup> It is clear that Solzhenitsyn considers the temptation of National Bolshevism to be one of the fundamental obstacles to the recovery of a healthy national life rooted in repentance and self-limitation.

Joseph Pearce has rightly noted that "Repentance and Self-Limitation" is a response to both liberal and neo-Marxist disparagements of Russian tradition and the National Bolshevik identification of all things Russian and Soviet.<sup>31</sup> In *The Oak and the Calf* Solzhenitsyn dedicates no fewer than twelve pages to the Chalmayev affair that engulfed the Soviet intellectual world in the late 1960s.<sup>32</sup> Victor A. Chalmayev, an "obscure and mediocre journalist,"<sup>33</sup> had published two bombastic articles in *Molodaya Gvardia* that laid out the National Bolshevik worldview. Solzhenitsyn deplored the "illiteracy" of these articles, their hyperbolic disdain for all things Western, their "inordinate praise of the Russian character" and their incoherent exaltation of "the bloodstained Revolution as 'a joyous sacramental act.'"<sup>34</sup> But he discerned in the midst of this hybrid of "Russianness" and "Redness"<sup>35</sup> an effort, albeit incoherent, to come to terms with the spiritual poverty of contemporary Soviet society and to affirm the dignity of Russian national and spiritual traditions. Solzhenitsyn recounts his disappointment and anger that Aleksandr Tvardovsky's *Novy Mir* (the publisher of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*) chose to run a "Marxist-Leninist" response to Chalmayev's ramblings, one that heaped scorn on religion and traditional Russian patriotism and repeated the most shameless Soviet propaganda about the revolution and collectivization.<sup>36</sup> Solzhenitsyn had no sympathy for the National Bolshevik amalgam but felt equally

distant from the doctrinaire Marxism of *Novy Mir*'s editors. Solzhenitsyn deftly locates their mistake through an adaptation of a proverb:

Don't call in a wolf when dogs attack you. However viciously hostile the dogs, don't look to the Marxist wolf for help. Beat them with an honest stick, but don't call in the wolf. Because the wolf will end by gobbling up your liver.<sup>37</sup>

The Chalmayev affair helped clarify Solzhenitsyn's opposition to both the dominant currents of Russian nationalism and the real and residual "leftism" of oppositional intellectuals in Brezhnev's U.S.S.R. "Repentance and Self-Limitation" is Solzhenitsyn's "honest stick" for warding off the dog of National Bolshevism while avoiding the desiccated atheism and antitraditionalism of Russia's "westernizing" intellectuals.

In a beautiful passage in the midst of his critique of National Bolshevism, Solzhenitsyn presents his own alternative understanding of patriotism properly understood:

As we understand it patriotism means unqualified and unwavering love for the nation, which implies not uncritical eagerness to serve, not support for unjust claims, but frank assessment of its vices and sins, and penitence for them. (120)

This capital passage is crucial for understanding Solzhenitsyn's much maligned and misunderstood call for a renaissance of Russian national consciousness. Again and again, Solzhenitsyn has insisted that Russia's future lies in "recuperation" grounded in "repentance and self-limitation" (see 139-140). He told Jan Sapiets in an important 1979 BBC interview that Russia must "renounce all mad fantasies of foreign conquest and begin the peaceful, long, long, long period of *recuperation*."<sup>38</sup>

In his latest and perhaps final overtly political work, *Russia in Collapse* (1998), Solzhenitsyn continues his two-pronged assault on National Bolshevism and liberal antinational currents. In chapter 26 of that work, simply entitled "Patriotism," he admits that patriotism is capable of "deviations" and "perversions"<sup>39</sup> like all other human sentiments. But he reminds his readers that the modern concept of liberty, too, is capable of great corruption. It is not for that reason rejected, even though its partisans tend to forget that "we are human beings only in the measure where we constantly feel in us, and above us, that which is our duty."<sup>40</sup> For Solzhenitsyn, then, patriotism is a necessary accompaniment and qualification of modern liberty. It takes us out of ourselves and reminds us of the givenness of our individual and collective existences. But Solzhenitsyn defends a dignified patriotism that is "charitable" and "creative": He rejects an "extremist patriotism . . . which elevates nationality above all imaginable spiritual summits, above our humility faced with Heaven."<sup>41</sup> Solzhenitsyn no more accepts the idolatry of blood or any form of particularity than he does the idolatry of class or revolution. He never forgets the unity of the human race (beautifully articulated in his "Nobel Lecture on

Literature”)<sup>42</sup> nor God’s judgment toward all excessive national self-assertion. He freely criticizes those ultranationalists who fulminate about the nefarious deeds of Masons and Jews, who applaud aggressive chauvinism, and who promote the deadly “union of nationalism and Bolshevism.”<sup>43</sup> In *Russia in Collapse* he bitterly exposes the fraudulence of the newly discovered patriotism of Russia’s Communist party in a passage brimming with prophetic judgment:

the current Communist party of the Russian Federation . . . claims to be a popular and patriotic movement, and one favorable to orthodox religion! And *not one* of its current leaders will repent, nor even mention how many of these patriots and Orthodox they have drowned, shot, or reduced to ashes. What indecency, today, of putting between quotation marks “the horrors of Bolshevism,” . . . No, these cosmic crimes will remain an indelible stain on communism.<sup>44</sup>

Solzhenitsyn is Russia’s most articulate defender of moderate and responsible patriotism and is a continuing scourge of aggressive, right-wing nationalism and of the enduring National Bolshevik temptation. His thirty-year effort to root patriotism in repentance and self-limitation is among the least understood and appreciated intellectual projects in the modern world, as evidenced by the widespread identification of Solzhenitsyn’s political vision with tsarist imperialism, anti-Semitism, pan-Slavism, and even National Bolshevism itself (a ludicrous charge made by hack émigré scholars such as Alexander Yanov<sup>45</sup>). The root of this systemic misrepresentation of Solzhenitsyn’s position is clear enough: contemporary intellectuals and journalists will tolerate no serious challenge to the enlightenment or progressivist assumptions underlying modern liberty, however moderate, restrained, or inspired by a love of human liberty this challenge might be. The political and philosophical alternatives are strictly binary: human beings must choose between an implicitly atheistic humanitarianism on the one hand and religious authoritarianism on the other. Liberal intellectuals will not seriously consider the possibility that “anthropocentric humanism,” the rejection of the givenness of the human world, creates the preconditions for totalitarianism. In his recently translated 1939 essay, *The Political Religions*, the political philosopher Eric Voegelin brilliantly goes to the heart of the matter:

There is no distinguished philosopher or thinker in the Western world today who, firstly, is not aware and has not also expressed this sentiment—that the world is experiencing a serious crisis, is undergoing a process of withering, which has its origins in the secularization of the soul and in the ensuing severance of a consequently purely secular soul from its roots in religiousness, and secondly, does not know that recovery can only be achieved through religious renewal, be it within the framework of the historical churches, be it outside this framework.

It is precisely in this respect that the politicizing intellectuals fail completely. It is dreadful to hear time and time again that National Socialism is a return to barbarism, to the Dark Ages, to times before any

new progress toward humanitarianism was made, without these speakers suspecting that precisely the secularization of life that accompanied the doctrine of humanitarianism is the soil in which such an anti-Christian religious movement as National Socialism was able to prosper. For these secularized minds the religious question is a taboo, and they are suspicious of bringing it up seriously and radically.<sup>46</sup>

Solzhenitsyn belongs to the small camp of distinguished philosophers or thinkers who truly discern the nature of the modern spiritual crisis. He will continue to elicit the scorn of politicized intellectuals who can see in totalitarianism only an atavism of the unenlightened past that precedes the liberation of the human race from irrational restraints.

### Repentance vs. Self-Hatred

Solzhenitsyn does not hesitate to defend the “transference” of repentance from the individual to the social and political realms. But we have already seen that the path of repentance is strewn with dangers—in part 3 of the essay Solzhenitsyn presented striking examples of repentance severed from political moderation and balanced historical judgment. In part 4 of “Repentance and Self-Limitation” Solzhenitsyn warns against efforts to repent that are tied to self-hatred and rejection of the Russian “national idea” itself. In part 3, Solzhenitsyn dissects the crude “National Bolshevik” adulation for all things Russian and Soviet, the synthesis and celebration of everything “Red” and “Russian”; in part 4 he takes on the liberal or pseudoliberal claim that “the Russian idea is the main content of Bolshevism”(125) and the source of Russia’s (and the world’s) travails in the twentieth century.

Solzhenitsyn addresses a series of articles on the theme of Russian national repentance that appeared in the émigré Russian Paris journal *Vestnik RSKhD*, (*Herald of the Russian Student Christian Movement*) no. 97. The authors of these articles called for nothing less than a thoroughgoing self-examination and self-condemnation on the part of the Russian nation. Solzhenitsyn certainly has no principled objection to that call. But he is repulsed by the tone of these reflections—especially their lack of empathy for the fate of Russia. “There is not the slightest hint that the authors share any complicity with their countrymen . . . there is nothing but denunciation of the irredeemably vicious Russian people and a tone of contempt for those who have been led astray” (122). These articles, in Solzhenitsyn’s view, aim not to rekindle a responsible and penitential Russian patriotism but to “bury” (122) Russia once and for all. Solzhenitsyn particularly objects to the claim that “more Evil has been brought into the world by Russia than any other country” (122) and to the accompanying assertion that “overcoming the national messianic delusion is Russia’s most urgent task” (124). The liberal critics of the Russian national idea show an unacknowledged complicity with their National Bolshevik enemies: both refuse to distinguish Russia’s imperfect

precommunist past from the unprecedented crimes committed in the name of an anti-Christian, antinational, and antiliberal ideology.

Solzhenitsyn states explicitly that his article "has not been written to minimize the guilt of the Russian people" (127). But neither will he tolerate the heaping of scorn on a people who have been the first and principal victim of the Bolshevik plague. He adamantly rejects the idea that totalitarianism is somehow Russian in its essence or that "the idea of the Third Rome suddenly surfaces again in the guise of the Third International" (124). Russia and the Russian national idea are not responsible for the prototalitarianism of the French Revolution, for the evils of the Third Reich, or for the coercive propensities of Marxism itself, an eminently Western current of thought. Solzhenitsyn particularly objects to the claim that "the class hatred" and atheism integral to communist ideology are somehow secretly indebted to Orthodoxy, the "faith by which Russia lived so long." The "main content" of Bolshevism is the decidedly un-Russian ideas of "unbridled militant atheism and class struggle" (125). These ideas have intellectual origins and political antecedents outside of Russia (European millenarian movements of the late Middle Ages and the Reformation, Jacobinism, and Marxism itself) and cannot reasonably be blamed on an inherently messianic "Russian idea." Proletarian messianism was first and foremost an ideological movement that took on a blatantly *Russophobic* character, assaulting the Church and destroying the "flowers of the Russian people" (125), the gentry, clergy, intelligentsia, and peasantry. Undoubtedly as time went on, efforts were made by the authorities to co-opt Russian patriotism by promoting its self-destruction. "Once it was victorious on Russian soil the movement was bound to draw Russian forces in its wake and acquire Russian features" (126). But Solzhenitsyn rightly insists that communism in the U.S.S.R. remained an essentially antinational ideology. It had, especially in the first decades of Soviet rule, "some of the characteristics of a foreign invasion" (126). Communism had the same ideological profile wherever it was applied: a single-party dictatorship, militant atheism, the forcible imposition of a pseudo-scientific ideology as the key to understanding every aspect of life, and an abusive and "wooden" rhetoric that demonized real or imagined enemies. Can the indulgence of intellectuals for Marxism throughout most of this century, Solzhenitsyn asks, be blamed on the Russian national idea (127)? Is communist totalitarianism in Cuba or Asia "an organic outgrowth of Russian life," to quote the authors in *Vestnik* (127)? Does the totalitarian nightmare derive "from the unwashed monk Filofei" (128), that is, from the obscure medieval author of the theory of Moscow being the "Third Rome"? To ask these questions is effectively to answer them.

Solzhenitsyn's attack on the false repentance promoted by liberal, antinational intellectuals is not intended to whitewash the Russian past. Solzhenitsyn has gone as far as reasonably possible in advocating a thorough reconsideration and reevaluation of the unsavory dimensions of the Russian and particularly the Soviet past. But, in his view, this process must be guided by a deep and abiding love of Russia if it is not to degenerate into nihilistic self-hatred or to lose a sense of

historical and political proportion. He freely admits that Russians "were not vaccinated against the plague" and "lost [their] heads" (127). Russians must forthrightly confront their past while maintaining their self-respect. Crucial to that task is maintaining a firm separation of things Russian and Soviet, a distinction collapsed by both liberals and National Bolsheviks.

Solzhenitsyn concludes part 4 by reiterating that the path of repentance "will bristle with . . . insults and slanders." Partisans of genuine repentance "must expect predators in the guise of penitents to flock around and peck your liver." Still he insists "there is no way out, except that of repentance" (quotations drawn from 128). Solzhenitsyn limns a principled middle path between the cultured despisers of patriotism, the advocates of repentance without patriotism, and the fevered advocates of National Bolshevism, nationalists who disdain both self-knowledge and all penitential impulses. Solzhenitsyn's is a lonely path but one that resonates with that section of the Russian public that yearns for a Russian national rebirth shorn of nostalgia for despotism or for irresponsible dreams of foreign conquest and imperial domination.

### **Repentance and Self-Limitation: The Path of Inner Development**

In the fifth and final section of "Repentance and Self-Limitation" Solzhenitsyn finally turns to an analysis of "self-limitation." In the process, he clarifies the relationship between these two principles. It might be said that while repentance is absolutely indispensable for "a clearing of the ground, the establishment of a clean basis in preparation for further moral actions" (135), self-limitation is the "crown" of the moral virtues for Solzhenitsyn.

Repentance for internal and external sins (128) is self-limitation's necessary but "always difficult" precondition. "And not only because we must cross the threshold of self-love, but also because our sins are not so easily visible to us" (129). A detailed analysis of Russo-Polish relations over five centuries (129-33) reveals a "tangle of crimes" (129), which can only be overcome by "mutual repentance" and "magnanimity" (133) on both sides. Solzhenitsyn freely admits Russia's unsavory role in the partitions of Poland as well as the terrible Soviet crimes against Poland, which cry out for repentance. These include the "stab in the back for dying Poland" on September 17, 1939, the Katyn forest massacre, and the "heartless immobility on the banks of the Vistula in August 1944" (130) when Soviet troops stood idly by as Hitler crushed the nationalist uprising in Warsaw. But Solzhenitsyn makes clear that even prostrate Poland is not without historic blame. Writing as a spirited Russian as well as a penitential one, Solzhenitsyn discusses the imperialism of Poland in the prime of its power (an imperialism freely accepted by educated society). He also painfully recalls Poland's assault against Russia in 1920, an assault aimed not at undermining Bolshevism or helping the Whites in the Civil War but at plundering and carving up Russian territory during her time of crisis. Solzhenitsyn also laments the "relentless Polonization" carried out in Poland during

the interwar period (132-33). In Solzhenitsyn's view, only repentance can provide a way out of this morass, allowing Poles and Russians to overcome historic animosities and begin a "new relationship" rooted in "mutual forgiveness" and self-restraint (133).

Solzhenitsyn appeals to the natural gift of repentance, a virtue with clear Christian resonances and antecedents. But he explicitly ties repentance to magnanimity or greatness of soul, suggesting that a great and self-respecting people ought to welcome the path of mutual repentance and forgiveness among nations. This natural coexistence and mutual reinforcement of humility and magnanimity is at the heart of Solzhenitsyn's reflection.<sup>47</sup> (It might even be said to describe the man himself, a spirited Christian who combines immense personal courage and authoritative moral witness with measured patriotism and a profound sense of natural and divine limits.) The humble acceptance of a nation's responsibility for its internal and external sins is powerfully reinforced by a sense of national honor that allows a people to take responsibility for their collective life.

The dialectic of humility and magnanimity is further reflected in the fact that the Christian virtue of repentance is completed and deepened by a classical appeal to moderation in personal and political life. But Solzhenitsyn also understands the "moral revolution," the "turn toward inner development" (137) made possible by self-limitation, in explicitly Christian terms. Just as repentance depends on magnanimous self-regard to gain a foothold in the human world, so self-limitation or moderation needs to be "for the sake of others" (136). Solzhenitsyn juxtaposes "the true Christian definition of freedom"—"self-restriction"—with the "Western ideal of unlimited freedom" and "the Marxist concept of freedom as acceptance of the yoke of necessity" (136).

Rejecting "the concept of infinite progress" (137) dear to both Western liberalism and Marxist historicism, Solzhenitsyn recommends a "turn toward inner development" (137) marked by "prudent self-restriction" (138). He has the good sense to appreciate the revolutionary character of this recommendation. The rejection of the modern faith in progress would "be a great turning point in the history of mankind, comparable to the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance" (137). This moral revolution will require "both courage and sacrifice" although it must eschew every element of "cruelty" (137). Solzhenitsyn is not a partisan of bourgeois liberalism but rejects every totalitarian effort to overcome it through specious appeals to History or collective self-assertion. His attack on the politics of cruelty firmly distinguishes his thought from the atheism of the Nietzschean or post-Christian Right.

Solzhenitsyn accepts the essential elements of a free society, noting that "the fundamental concepts of private property and private economic initiative are part of man's nature, and necessary for his personal freedom and his sense of normal well-being" (138). But he also laments that "no incentive to self-limitation has ever existed in bourgeois economics, yet the formula would so easily and so long ago have been derived from moral considerations." Solzhenitsyn is undoubtedly right that prudent self-restriction uneasily coexists with the "pursuit of wealth, fame, and

change" integral to bourgeois or commercial society. But private property and economic initiatives depend on what Bertrand de Jouvenel has called "the essential freedom . . . the freedom to create a gathering, to generate a group, and thereby introduce in society a new power, a source of movement and change."<sup>48</sup> The stable economy of the kind endorsed by Solzhenitsyn, developed only through "improved technology," could be sustained only by serious limitations on individual initiative. As I have suggested elsewhere, self-limitation can provide, at best, a salutary corrective to the relentless dynamism of the modern society and economy. But if human beings are free to initiate, a commercial economy will be by definition anything but stable. As Jouvenel suggests, the task of statesmanship in the modern context is not to undermine the essential freedom to initiate, but to sustain institutions and attitudes that counterbalance the disruption inherent in a "progressive" society.

More recently, Solzhenitsyn seems to have confronted this basic conundrum. In the Liechtenstein Address, he writes that "human knowledge and human abilities continue to be perfected; they cannot, and must not, be brought to a halt." The fundamental task is not to confuse technical with moral progress: Solzhenitsyn rightly asserts, against all forms of progressivism, that "there can be only one true Progress; the sum total of the spiritual progresses of individuals; the degree of self-perfection in their lives."<sup>49</sup> There is some evidence for thinking that Solzhenitsyn has come to moderate his expectation that self-limitation could become the animating principle of a transformed political order. In 1998 he commented to his biographer, Joseph Pearce, that "the idea of self-limitation is not successful if you try to propagandize it. Mostly, I think, only highly religious people are willing to accept the idea. For instance, if you try to propagandize the idea of self-limitation to governments or states and say that they should learn not to grab what belongs to others, this does not have an effect."<sup>50</sup> Solzhenitsyn has, of course, in no way abandoned his recommendation of repentance, self-limitation, and inner development as the path for renewal in Russia and the West. He has never stopped insisting that "self-limitation is the fundamental and wisest step of a man who has obtained his freedom."<sup>51</sup> But Solzhenitsyn has fewer expectations for fundamental moral reform, especially at the political level. Perhaps because of a mellowing that accompanies age, perhaps in response to Russia's present discontents, Solzhenitsyn has a fuller sense of the limits of politics than he articulated in the 1974 essay. That said, there has been no fundamental change in his support for the "transference" of repentance and self-limitation to the political and social spheres. Today, however, Solzhenitsyn seems more prudent and patient—and less confident that an ascent from modernity is an immediate or likely political possibility.

### **Self-Limitation: The Key to Russia's Future**

Solzhenitsyn suggests near the end of his essay that Russia "perhaps more than any other country [is] in need of comprehensive *inward* development" (139). Rejecting

all imperial conceits, whether put forward in the name of Pan-Slavism<sup>52</sup> or Marxist "Theory" (139), Solzhenitsyn argues that Russia must "concentrate on its *inner* tasks, on healing its soul, educating its children, putting its own house in order" (140). The healing of souls is all the more necessary given the "long complicity" of the Russian people in "lies and even crimes" (130). Russia's first and most arduous task is freeing herself from the tutelage of the ideological lie—and education is indispensable to this task.

Solzhenitsyn suggests that "the school . . . is the key to the future of Russia" (140), a theme that he reiterated in greater detail in his 1990 essay *Rebuilding Russia*. There he noted the lamentable character of Russia's schools outside "select institutions of larger cities," the reduction of the living standards of teachers to subsistence levels, the need to replace ideologically driven textbooks and to eliminate atheistic indoctrination. He also gave his qualified endorsement to the establishment of tuition-charging private institutions as long as they do not "institute irresponsibly arbitrary curricula."<sup>53</sup> As Delba Winthrop has observed, Solzhenitsyn prudently emphasizes education (and not the Church) as the crucial factor in determining Russia's future.<sup>54</sup> He recognizes that the deplorable character of Russia's educational system "cannot be solved in one generation" and "will require immense efforts" and resources made available by the jettisoning of "vainglorious and unnecessary foreign expenditure" (140). Part of Solzhenitsyn's deep aversion to the "oligarchy" that rules the new Russia lies in his conviction that they have squandered an opportunity to redress the human devastation inherited from communism. Not only have they failed to repent but they have also neglected education, failed to pay teachers and other civil servants, and continued to ignore the provinces and villages. Above all, they have been bereft of a sense of public responsibility for the rebuilding of Russia.

Solzhenitsyn also believes that Russia will need a project to occupy her "national and political zeal" (141) once she has turned away from the paths of imperial and ideological self-aggrandizement. He reiterates the call for the full development of the Russian *Northeast*—including parts of the north of European Russia and all of Siberia north of the railway line—that he developed in greater detail in his *Letter to the Soviet Leaders*.<sup>55</sup> In that work, he cited Stolypin's "prophetic" words to the State Duma in 1908: "The land is a guarantee of our strength in the future, the land is Russia."<sup>56</sup> The cultivation of a Northeast "left stagnant and icily barren for four centuries" (141) will demand patriotic devotion and sacrifices as well as the prudent use of modern technology. A Northeast brought to life will certainly entail the definitive rejection of the camp society of the past, of a Northeast coextensive with *Gulag*. It will also be a palpable sign "that Russia has resolutely opted for *self-limitation*, for turning inward rather than outward" (142). In addition, its great expanses "offer (Russians) a way out of the worldwide technological crisis" (142) chronicled by the likes of the Club of Rome (143). If Solzhenitsyn too readily accepts the Malthusian calculations of ecologists, he nonetheless recognizes that the prudent use of technology is an essential ingredient in addressing the ecological challenges that confront modern societies.

Characteristically, Solzhenitsyn ends on a note of qualified hope. The future need not be catastrophic if modern societies rethink their commitment to *infinite progress* (137) and rekindle a sense of prudent self-restriction.

## Conclusion

"Repentance and Self-Limitation" is Solzhenitsyn's clearest and most comprehensive articulation of his constructive response to the crisis of modernity. It is also one of his crucial statements about the path he envisions for a postcommunist Russia that builds on its precommunist traditions while rejecting the imperial delusion common (to radically different degrees) to the Petersburg and neo-Muscovite periods of Russian history. Its call for repentance and self-limitation gives concrete expression to Solzhenitsyn's claim in the Harvard Address that there is no place to go but "upward" from modernity, in a great anthropological ascent comparable to the movement from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era.<sup>57</sup>

We have seen that some of Solzhenitsyn's empirical claims are questionable; that he sometimes comes close to collapsing the crucial distinction between moral and political judgment; and that his often penetrating analysis of the modern crisis tends to be meandering and impressionistic in character. But the 1974 essay reveals a deep philosophical attentiveness to the moral resources without which individual and collective life are deeply impoverished. It also clarifies Solzhenitsyn's relations to the great traditions of reason and revelation, of humility and magnanimity, which form the Western soul in the broadest sense of the term. And nothing in our experience, not even the West's victory in the Cold War, has disproved Solzhenitsyn's provocative claim that "a society with unlimited rights is incapable of standing up to adversity."<sup>58</sup> Solzhenitsyn joins a distinguished tradition of Western thought, from Aristotle to Burke and beyond, that rejects the idea that consent can be the sole foundation of a properly human order.<sup>59</sup> He does not reject human rights so much as place them within their proper ontological and political context: "if we do not wish to be ruled by a coercive authority, then each must reign himself in. . . . Human freedom . . . includes voluntary self-limitation for the sake of others."<sup>60</sup> The systematic misrepresentation of Solzhenitsyn's position over the years reveals how little our contemporaries are prepared to accept the insight that "human rights" can never be what Burke once said of prudence, "the god of this world below."

## Notes

1. See Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, "Letter to the Soviet Leaders," in *East and West*, trans. Hilary Sternberg (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 120-29.

2. Solzhenitsyn, "Letter," 138.

3. Solzhenitsyn, "Letter," 139.
4. See Solzhenitsyn, "I am no Russian Ayatollah," *Encounter* (February 1980): 34-35.
5. See Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn with Mikhail Agurksy, A.B., Evgeny Barabanov, Vadim Borisov, F. Korsakov, and Igor Shafarevich, *From Under the Rubble*, trans. A. M. Brock, Milada Haigh, Marita Sapiets, Hilary Sternberg, and Harry Willets under the direction of Michael Scammell (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1981). This is a reprint (with the same pagination) of an edition published by Little Brown in 1975. The original Russian version was published by YMCA Press in Paris in 1974.
6. Solzhenitsyn, foreword to *From Under the Rubble*, vii.
7. Solzhenitsyn, "Sakharov and the Criticism of *A Letter to the Soviet Leaders*," in *Kontinent*, English-language edition (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1976), 23.
8. Solzhenitsyn, "Repentance and Self-Limitation in the Life of Nations," in *From Under the Rubble*, 105-43.
9. Joseph Pearce, *Solzhenitsyn: A Soul in Exile* (London: Harper Collins, 1999), 209.
10. See Delba Winthrop, "Solzhenitsyn: Emerging From Under the Rubble," *Independent Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 4, 91.
11. See the discussion of this point in Winthrop, "Solzhenitsyn," 92.
12. Peter Huber, *Hard Green: Saving the Environment from the Environmentalists* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). Huber articulates a hardheaded environmentalism that emphasizes that wealth is "green" and provides the means to conserve the environment.
- For a thoughtful critique of Solzhenitsyn's ecological views, see James V. Schall, "Solzhenitsyn's *Letter*," *Worldview* 17, no. 7 (1974): 26-29.
13. See Nicholas Eberstadt, "World Population Implosion," *The Public Interest* (Autumn 1997).
14. Solzhenitsyn, *The Russian Question at the End of the Twentieth Century*, trans. Yermolai Solzhenitsyn (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995), 99-100.
15. Compare Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 2, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 615.
16. Solzhenitsyn, "The Nobel Lecture on Literature," trans. Alexis Klimoff, in *East and West*, 20.
17. Solzhenitsyn, "As Breathing and Consciousness Return," in *From Under the Rubble*, 3-15.
18. For a profound philosophical defense of the notion of "participation" as the proper foundation of human liberty, see Aurel Kolnai, "Privilege and Liberty," in *Privilege and Liberty and Other Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. Daniel J. Mahoney (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 1999), 19-61, esp. 42-46.
19. See Bertrand de Jouvenel, *Sovereignty: An Inquiry into the Human Good*, with a foreword by Daniel J. Mahoney and David DesRosiers (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1997), 316-17.
20. See especially Solzhenitsyn, *The Mortal Danger: How Misconceptions about Russia Imperil America*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).
21. See Dominique Schnapper, *Community of Citizens: On the Modern Idea of Nationality*, trans. Severine Ros e (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1998).
22. For P eguy's articulation of the place of *mystique* and *politique* in political life see *Notre jeunesse* (Paris: Gallimard - Folio, 1993). For an account of de Gaulle's reflection on nation and regime see my *De Gaulle: Statesmanship, Grandeur, and Modern Democracy*, 2d ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 2000), especially chs. 2 and 7.
23. See Pierre Manent, "Democracy without Nations?" in Manent, *Modern Liberty and Its Discontents*, ed. and trans. Daniel J. Mahoney and Paul Seaton (Lanham, Md.: Rowman

& Littlefield, 1998), 185-96, esp. 191-94.

24. See Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 1, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 85, and "Address to the International Academy of Philosophy," in *The Russian Question*, 113-14.

25. Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag*, vol. 1, 85. Solzhenitsyn writes that the "perfidious return" by Allied authorities to Soviet hands of "not less than one million fugitives from the Soviet government—civilians of all ages and both sexes" is "truly the last secret, or one of the last, of the Second World War."

26. See in particular Julius Epstein, *Operation Keelhaul: The Story of Forced Repatriation from 1944 to the Present* (Old Greenwich, Conn.: Devin-Adair, 1973), and Nicholas Bethell, *The Last Secret: Forcible Repatriation to Russia, 1944-1947* (London: Penguin, 1995).

27. See Solzhenitsyn, "The Smatterers," in *From Under the Rubble*, especially the concluding section, 274-78.

28. Solzhenitsyn, "Address to the International Academy of Philosophy," *The Russian Question*, 114-15.

29. Solzhenitsyn, *The Oak and the Calf*, trans. Harry Willets (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 245.

30. Solzhenitsyn, *The Russian Question*, 102.

31. See Pearce, *A Soul in Exile*, 209.

32. Solzhenitsyn, *The Oak and the Calf*, 245-56.

33. Solzhenitsyn, *The Oak and the Calf*, 245.

34. Solzhenitsyn, *The Oak and the Calf*, 245.

35. Solzhenitsyn, *The Oak and the Calf*, 248.

36. Solzhenitsyn, *The Oak and the Calf*, 249-52.

37. Solzhenitsyn, *The Oak and the Calf*, 248.

38. Jan Sapiets, "An Interview with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn," trans. Alexis Klimoff, in *East and West*, 143-82. The quotation is drawn from page 182.

39. No English-language edition of *Russia in Collapse* is yet available. I have drawn from the French translation, *La Russie sous L'Avalanche* (Paris: Fayard, 1998). The quotations are from page 260 of this edition.

40. Solzhenitsyn, *La Russie sous L'Avalanche*, 261.

41. Solzhenitsyn, *La Russie sous L'Avalanche*, 264.

42. See "Nobel Lecture," in *East and West*, especially 19-21 and 30-34. Solzhenitsyn highlights the role of literature in conveying human experience beyond national boundaries.

43. Solzhenitsyn, *La Russie sous L'Avalanche*, 252.

44. This devastating riposte to the Bolshevik appropriation of patriotism and orthodoxy is drawn from chapter 25 of *Russia in Collapse*, entitled "The Maladies of Russian Nationalism." (See page 253 of the French edition.)

45. Alexander Yanov's *The Russian New Right: Right-Wing Ideologies in the Contemporary U.S.S.R.* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California, 1978), claims Solzhenitsyn for the fascist Russian "New Right." See the excellent rebuttal by Edward E. Ericson Jr., "Should We Fear Solzhenitsyn?" *New Oxford Review* (December 1979): 8-10.

46. Eric Voegelin, *Modernity without Restraint: The Political Religions; The New Science of Politics; and Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, vol. 5, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Manfred Hennigsen (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri, 2000), 24-25.

47. For a subtle argument that modernity is defined by a relentless effort to escape from the conflicting demands of humility and magnanimity, and nature and grace, see Pierre Manent, *The City of Man*, trans. Marc A. LePain (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1998).

48. Jouvenel, *Sovereignty*, 363.
49. Solzhenitsyn, "Address to the International Academy of Philosophy," 128.
50. Solzhenitsyn as quoted in Pearce, *A Soul in Exile*, 211.
51. Solzhenitsyn, "Address to the International Academy of Philosophy," 125.
52. The critique of "Pan-Slavism" is implicit in this section of "Repentance and Self-Limitation." For Solzhenitsyn's explicit critique of Pan-Slavism see *The Russian Question*, 59-62.
53. Solzhenitsyn, *Rebuilding Russia: Reflections and Tentative Proposals*, trans. Alexis Klimoff (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991), 42-44.
54. See Winthrop, "Solzhenitsyn," 95.
55. See Solzhenitsyn, "Letter," 101-8.
56. Solzhenitsyn, "Letter," 103. Solzhenitsyn's appeal to the moral authority of Stolypin is particularly bold, coming as it does in a letter addressed to the Soviet leadership!
57. See the concluding section, "Before the Turn," of "A World Split Apart," trans. Irina Alberti, in *East and West*, 69-71, esp. 71.
58. Solzhenitsyn, *Rebuilding Russia*, 54.
59. The limits of consent or rights as the sole principle of human life is beautifully articulated by Pierre Manent: "We do not reflect enough on the singular fact that we are the first people who wish to submit all the aspects of the world to a single principle. Even though the principle is that of liberty, the project itself nonetheless has something tyrannical about it." See *Modern Liberty and its Discontents*, 193.
60. Solzhenitsyn, *Rebuilding Russia*, 54-55.