



# Solzhenitsyn and the Radical Cause

*(We are devoting a significant portion of this issue of RAMPARTS to a discussion of the exiled Soviet writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and to a review of Solzhenitsyn's book The Gulag Archipelago by the Soviet Marxist and historian Roy Medvedev. We are doing so because we believe that the efforts of Solzhenitsyn, Medvedev and other Soviet "dissidents" to reveal and document the truth about the Stalin terror, and to challenge the system of political imprisonment and repression that remains as its legacy, is not a secondary issue, peripheral to the Left, as has often been suggested or assumed. Rather, this article makes the case that it is one of the most important struggles in the world today, and that supporting this struggle is one of the first and most pressing responsibilities of radicals and revolutionaries everywhere. --The Editors)*

Jean-Claude Francolos/Gamma

Although almost 20 years have elapsed since the famous Khrushchev Report on the crimes of Stalin, it is clear that many radicals still do not understand either the significance of the events described, nor their continuing impact on revolutionary politics not only in the Soviet Union, but internationally as well. This is evident not only from the puzzled silence which has been the response of large sections of the Left to the exile of the Soviet writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, but in the letters RAMPARTS has received criticizing Marcus Raskin's defense of him and his fellow dissidents. (RAMPARTS, March 1974)

Part of the problem is that there is a radical reflex which seeks to relate Solzhenitsyn and the other dissenters to the parameters of the cold war, before listening to what they are saying, let alone defending their right to say it. For a variety of reasons, not all of them bad, radicals are susceptible to the Kremlin's argument that any discussion of Soviet repression and injustice helps to intensify cold war animosities and injures the spirit of detente. This attitude, which is most consistently put forward by American Communists but which has more than a few adherents among the old New Left, creates some intriguing ironies. It suggests that these radicals really give credence to the cold war myth that America's hostility towards the Soviet Union is based on the plight of the individual under Communist rule. Or, less baldly, that American public outrage at Soviet crimes, alleged or real, determines policy directions in Washington.

This is hardly in accord with the facts. America's pre-cold war honeymoon with Stalin in the 1930s took place *after* the violence of the collectivization, and reached its warmest heights *after* the purges and the terror. Prior to these events, the *New York Times* had expressed pleasure at the outcome of the inner party struggle that followed Lenin's death, when the cynical but practical Stalin won out over the revolutionary hothead Trotsky.

The shifts in American policy towards the Soviet Union have never been a simple reflection of American popular attitudes to Moscow or its treatment of individuals, and are not determined by such factors today. The same issue of *Time* magazine which featured the story of Solzhenitsyn's exile and called him a hero for the age reported a U.S. official's comment that the expulsion had caused relief in the State Department. "Kissinger was rescued from a terribly difficult situation. He would have had to deplore the arrest or lose a great deal of stature. From his standpoint, he was very lucky." In his own official statement on the Solzhenitsyn case, Kissinger himself was "cool" according to *Time*. He said that Solzhenitsyn would be welcome in the U.S. but added that "our constant view has been that the necessity for detente does not reflect approbation of the Soviet domestic structure." The conscience of U.S. policymakers is pragmatically selective.

Practically speaking, those radicals who want to put the lid on the discussion of Solzhenitsyn and the Soviet dissidents for the sake of detente are saying little more than that they want to make it easier for Nixon and Kissinger to conduct the foreign policy which they would pursue in any case. One might as well argue for an end to the Watergate investigations because they are tying the hands of the diplo-

by David Horowitz

matic architects of peace with Russia and China.

Another reflex of radicals is to want to know the politics both of the people they are being asked to defend and of the forces which are joining in the defense. In some contexts this is a reasonable and even shrewd position, because high principles embodying free speech and other human rights have not infrequently been used by those in power for less noble political objectives. Official U.S. policy in the early cold war years was bent on utilizing the specter of Soviet "totalitarianism" to justify a program of massive military rearmament, economic expansion in the Third World, and counterrevolutionary aggression in defense of an oppressive global status quo. In those years, the crimes of Stalin were selectively trotted out, to inflame the passions of the anti-Communist crusade. But in the present international context, when Washington is playing a subtler, but equally self-serving diplomatic game, the chief orchestrator of America's imperial policy is even made uncomfortable by the difficulties his counterparts in the Kremlin experience with recalcitrant writers and uncontrollable dissidents who command a wide and sympathetic audience in the West.

In short, even though the Solzhenitsyn case is a *cause célèbre* in the West, that in itself is not a sufficient reason for concluding that it is an unworthy one. In the last Indo-Pakistani war, the plight of Bangladesh gained popular sympathy and large-scale media attention in the United States, while Washington's policy was one of "tilting" the other way. The Watergate parallel is also instructive. The fact that a southern racist like Sam Ervin or a rightwinger like James Buckley has taken stands against Nixon is not a sufficient guide for radicals as to what their own attitude towards the investigation and impeachment ought to be. Sometimes a given issue will cause antagonistic forces to converge. That was, after all, how the United States and Russia wound up as allies in the Second World War.

[ON FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS]

The politics of Solzhenitsyn himself are complex and do not fit any simple equation of the cold war. Indeed, it may almost be doubted that they have any immediate reference to left/right politics as they exist in the West. In part, this is because of the censored intellectual and political environment in which Solzhenitsyn and his compatriots have been compelled to form their ideas. In part, it is because of the peculiar, contradictory and hybrid nature of Soviet society itself, which combines elements of a progressive Marxism with the attitudes and practices of a Russian despotism that was overthrown but not uprooted in the course of the revolutionary struggle.

The impact of Solzhenitsyn's views, as expressed in his 15,000-word letter to the Soviet government, is often jarring and sometimes even bizarre. He both calls for a restoration of power to the soviets, for example, and complains that Lenin was not patriotic; he praises the Soviet Union's growth in military strength and power under Communism, but complains about Soviet support for Cuba and Vietnam; and he offers the view that the Soviet people are not yet ready for democracy and may never be. What has to be understood is that the strangeness and even repulsiveness of

many of Solzhenitsyn's views are no more bizarre or repulsive than significant aspects of his life experience under 55 years of Soviet rule. It need hardly be said that much of what is noble in Solzhenitsyn's effort and struggle, his courage and service of an ideal, also draws its energy and character from the Soviet revolutionary experience and tradition. In sum, the paradoxical character of his thought, mixing elements that are both reactionary and progressive, humanistic and obscurantist, reflects in a painfully honest mirror the paradoxical and contradictory history of the Soviet Union since 1917.

Solzhenitsyn was born one year after the Bolshevik Revolution, and was a Marxist and a Communist until he was sent to Siberia in 1945. He was an officer in the Red Army and was even considered at one point as recruitment material for the NKVD secret police. It was in Siberia that his views underwent a sea change from Marxism to a deeply religious and conservative view of human nature and society. The defense of Solzhenitsyn is not a defense of some White Guard remnant of the Czarist era, as some leftists seem to be suggesting. It is the defense of a child of the Revolution and a witness to its trials. Radicals have much to learn from his suffering, even though it may not be precisely the same lessons that he himself has learned.

But the defense of Solzhenitsyn involves more than that. There are times when a principle like the right to speak out and publish becomes fundamental in itself, a ground beyond which there can be no retreat. The Soviet regime is 57 years old and now governs the second most powerful state in the world. Political democracy was an integral part of the original Bolshevik program, and the democratic rights which it guaranteed were suspended during the Civil War only as a temporary measure in the interests of the survival of the infant and invaded Soviet state. Yet they have never been restored. At what point is one forced to recognize that the fulfillment of these rights has been *permanently* deferred by the present rulers of the Soviet Union, and that they will never be instituted without a struggle that will mean real changes in power? Is it not a pressing responsibility of the Left to support this struggle? What could be of more vital concern to the international Left than the directions that power will take in a state as important as the Soviet Union, and with as deep historical and ideological connections to the world socialist movement? And yet, there are radicals who, like Kissinger, regard the struggle for democratic rights in the Soviet Union as an unfortunate embarrassment and as low on the priority scale of radical concerns.

The present importance of defending the principle of dissent, *qua* principle and without regard for the political specifics of the individuals under attack, is made clear by the witchhunters themselves in the current wave of Soviet repression. They have suppressed the works of a committed Communist and Marxist like Roy Medvedev, with the same crude hand as they have Solzhenitsyn's, who has renounced Marxism, and they have labeled both men "anti-Soviet."\*

\* The very term "anti-Soviet" is a witchhunting and chauvinist epithet, but neither Medvedev, nor even Solzhenitsyn, fits the charge. Solzhenitsyn is far too patriotic, from the perspective of a Marxist internationalism—indeed his hostility to Marxism seems to be because it is not patriotic—and too reconciled to the present authori-

When men as disparate in their views as Solzhenitsyn and Medvedev are lumped together in the process of repression, the issue is obviously not their analyses or programs or even allegiances, but the facts which they are attempting to bring to light. As Andrei Sakharov and nine other prominent dissenters declared in a statement protesting Solzhenitsyn's exile, "His treason consists of his disclosure to the whole world, with shattering force, of the monstrous crimes committed in the USSR not very long ago." The Soviet government is afraid of the truth. Since it cannot refute the facts, its only feasible strategy is to outlaw all efforts to publish truths not sanctioned by the official apparatus. The "universal, obligatory force-feeding with lies" writes Solzhenitsyn in his appeal to the Soviet government, "is now the most agonizing aspect of existence in our country—worse than all our material miseries, worse than any lack of civil liberties." In such circumstances, the defense of the principles of freedom in the Soviet Union, of the right to speak and disseminate unauthorized versions of what is true and real, is an absolute necessity, a *precondition* of general political and moral progress, and not a mere luxury of intellectuals—as some misguided American radicals have claimed.

#### [STALIN'S CONTINUING LEGACY]

**T**he glacier underlying the present structure of Soviet politics, which makes it impossible for the Soviet leadership to tolerate historical candor, and leads to such crudities as the exile of a world famous writer, and the incarceration in psychiatric hospitals of many of its leading scientists and intellectuals, is the unresolved legacy of the Stalin era. It is this legacy, and its continuing consequences, that the historical works of Solzhenitsyn and Medvedev force into political consciousness; it is the issue of Stalinism's survival that the Soviet dissenters raise.

Many radicals in the West do not understand the urgency or importance of this struggle. Some seem to think of Stalin as an exemplar of revolutionary pragmatism who was not afraid to crack heads in a revolutionary cause. They acknowledge that he may have been responsible for some excesses, but regard these as inevitable in a class war, where any crimes he may have committed were more than likely balanced by the crimes of the oppressor he opposed. It seems evident that this is a view now widely held among the youth of the Soviet Union themselves, who have not been able to read Medvedev's *Let History Judge*—the first attempt by a Soviet Marxist and Communist to document the Stalin purges and analyze the Stalinist system—or Solzhenitsyn's more personal memoir, the *Gulag Archipelago*.

The hard fact, however—the fact that every serious revolutionary has to look in the face—is that Stalin killed the cream of the Bolshevik Party: the best, the most idealistic, the most revolutionary cadre in the Soviet Union (and in several other Communist parties as well). In *Let History Judge*, Medvedev estimates that more than a million cadre out of a total Communist Party membership of two and a half million disappeared in the purges of 1937-1939.

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tarian structure of Soviet society. He explicitly opposes revolution in present-day Russia, and everywhere else as well.

*In short, the NKVD arrested and killed, within two years, more Communists than had been lost in all the years of the underground struggle, the three revolutions, and the Civil War. The oldest members were special victims, as the composition of the [Party] Congresses shows. [At the 17th Congress in 1934] 80 percent of the delegates had joined the Party before 1920; the figure was only 19 percent at the 18th Congress [in 1939]. The losses among the young intelligentsia, the Party's hope for the future, were also enormous. . . . In 1936-1939, on the most cautious estimates, four to five million people were subjected to repression for political reasons. At least four to five hundred thousand of them—above all the high officials—were summarily shot; the rest were given long terms of confinement. In 1937-1938 there were days when up to a thousand people were shot in Moscow alone. These were not streams, these were rivers of blood, the blood of honest Soviet people. The simple truth must be stated: not one of the tyrants and despots of the past persecuted and destroyed so many of his compatriots.*

For Medvedev, Stalin's crimes against the Revolution's cadre is the orienting axis of the analysis; for Solzhenitsyn it is Stalin's crimes against the nation. In the second half of 1937, when the Soviet Union was preparing for the coming war with Germany, the NKVD began its assault on the core of the country's military command. "Almost all the most outstanding Red Army commanders who had risen to prominence during the Civil War perished," writes Medvedev. According to one apparently conservative Soviet estimate by the Bolshevik A. I. Todorskii, whom Medvedev quotes, in the years just before the war with Hitler, those arrested included 3 of the 5 marshals, 3 of the 4 first-rank army commanders, all 12 of the second-rank army commanders, 60 of the 67 corps commanders, 136 of 199 division commanders, and 221 of 397 brigade commanders; both first-rank fleet admirals, both second-rank fleet admirals, all 6 first-rank admirals, 9 of the 15 second-rank admirals, both first-rank army commissars, all 15 second-rank army commissars, 25 of the 28 corps commissars, 79 of the 97 division commissars, and 34 of the 36 brigade commissars. There were also huge losses among the field-grade and junior officers. "The shocking truth can be stated quite simply: never did the officer staff of any army suffer such great losses in any war as the Soviet Army suffered in this time of peace."

Many writers, Solzhenitsyn included, think that this wholesale destruction of the military leadership of the Red Army virtually invited Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union, and was responsible for the terrible losses the Soviets sustained before turning the tide. Stalin's subsequent vindictiveness against the battered survivors of the Soviet armies, especially those who had the misfortune to be taken prisoner, is in Solzhenitsyn's view, the gravest of his crimes. Solzhenitsyn himself fought with distinction for four years on three fronts, was decorated for bravery several times, and rose to the rank of captain, only to be arrested in East Prussia in the middle of a battle in 1945, and sent to Siberia for having criticized Stalin in a letter.

His own eight years in the Gulag Archipelago marked a turning point in Solzhenitsyn's life and consciousness. Ap-

parently before that, his views were those of a rising member of Stalin's newest elite, a fact about which he is as searingly honest as he is about everything else: "I ate my officer's butter with pastry without giving it a thought as to why I had the right to do it, while rank and file soldiers did not. . . ." (In a bid for national support, after the purges of the officer cadre, Stalin had restored the ranks, orders and ceremonial privileges enjoyed by the Czarist army.) "This is what happens when you put epaulets on people's shoulders; they begin to feel like little gods."

One final response prevalent among radicals to the Solzhenitsyn exile (and the expulsions which have followed) needs to be dealt with. That is the response that dismisses all this as a media event with no more, and most likely even less, significance than that of persecuted writers in many countries around the world. Some go so far as to suggest that the interest is even concocted. The "mistakes of the past" cannot be resurrected as contemporary politics, writes one reader of RAMPARTS and leader of the old New Left, who should know better. (How inadequate and even repulsive the expression "mistakes of the past" seems when applied to the Soviet tragedy and its crimes.) As though the political heart of a country could sustain such a succession of blows without feeling the consequences for generations, as though the very effort to silence Solzhenitsyn and Medvedev did not indicate in itself that this is a crucial contemporary issue in the Soviet Union. *To this day*, the Soviet people are not permitted to know the true extent and nature of the crimes that were committed in the Stalin years, and to this day the guilty go unpunished. ("Given the widespread and unrestrained lawlessness that has reigned in our country for many years, and an eight-year campaign of slander and persecution against me," Solzhenitsyn declared in ignoring a court order before his exile, "I refuse to recognize the legality of your summons. Before asking that citizens obey the law, learn how to observe it yourselves. Free the innocent, and punish those guilty of mass murder.")

#### [REBIRTH OF SOVIET DEMOCRACY?]

**T**he contemporary implications of the struggle in behalf of the Soviet Union's dissenters and political prisoners has been eloquently summarized by the Soviet physicist Andrei Sakharov, in the introduction to his new book, *Sakharov Speaks*.

*In the course of 56 years our country has undergone great shocks, sufferings, and humiliations, the physical annihilation of millions of the best people (best both morally and intellectually), decades of official hypocrisy and demagoguery, of internal and external time-serving. The era of terror, when tortures and special [courts] threatened everyone, when they seized the most devoted servants of the regime simply for the general count and to create an atmosphere of fright and submission—that era is now behind us. But we are still living in the spiritual atmosphere created by that era. Against those few who do not go along with the prevalent practice of compromise, the government uses repression as before. Together with judicial repressions, the most important and decisive role in maintaining this atmosphere of internal and external submission is played by the power of the*

*state, which manipulates all the levers of economic and social control. This, more than anything else, keeps the body and soul of the majority of people in a state of dependence.*

What is at stake in the struggle for the rights of Soviet dissenters and political prisoners is nothing less than the revival of politics in the Soviet Union, and the birth of a true Soviet Left. In the dialogue between Medvedev and Solzhenitsyn (see page 49), we can already see the outlines of the kind of debates that might characterize a Soviet politics liberated from the terror and lies of the Stalinist system and its less destructive but still despotic successors. The present state of affairs is morally corrosive and politically dangerous, as the growing conflict with China reveals. For one of the especially corrosive effects of the suppression of politics in the Soviet Union has been the growth of nationalism as a solidarizing social force. (Ironically, Solzhenitsyn, an almost religious nationalist, provides a healthy dissent from the official Soviet chauvinism towards China. He devotes the major portion of his appeal to the Soviet government to urging the avoidance of war with China—a possibility which he mistakenly attributes to a clash of Marxist ideologies.)

Does the awful record documented in the *Gulag Archipelago* and *Let History Judge*, combined with the failure of de-Stalinization after 20 years of effort, mean that the critics of Bolshevism were right? That the Soviet experiment has failed? That the crimes of Stalin negate all the gains that the revolution has made? For when one gets down to the most fundamental layers of radical consciousness, this is the reason that most leftists remain reluctant to speak out against the crimes and injustices that distort Soviet life and politics at the present time. In short, there is a fear of providing credibility to such views and damaging the revolutionary cause all over the world.

Yet, it should be evident, that *this* is really the dead issue in the current debate, and if anything serves to keep the issue alive, it is the willingness of radicals to accept its terms. The Soviet regime is almost 57 years old. Its gains in the material realm, and in science, public education and health, have been vast—a still-powerful beacon to those in the Third World who have not yet broken the chains of imperialism and capitalist underdevelopment, and who still suffer the "natural" torments of poverty, ignorance, hunger and unnecessary disease.

No one, not even Solzhenitsyn, proposes turning back the clock to 1917 or even making significant changes in the system of social property in the Soviet Union. The Soviet experiment has survived. Its successes and its failures are monumental, but there is no practical scale in which they can be balanced against each other, or made to cancel each other out. The only live issue for the Soviet Union, and for radicals, is the future. Support for the Soviet dissidents, and for every move to establish democratic rights in the Soviet Union and fulfill the promise of October, are acts not of despair about the Soviet past, but of hope for the Soviet future. And hope—for a better society and a better life for humanity—is what radicalism and revolution are about.

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*David Horowitz is the author of Empire and Revolution (Vintage) and The Fate of Midas (Ramparts Press).*

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## *Gulag Archipelago*

In the many “waves” of Stalinist repressions, many of us have our own special tragedies. I know, for example, that for A. Tvardovskii it was the “de-Kulakification”—which claimed the life of his father, a hard-working peasant from the poor stratum of that class, a recent veteran of the Red Army, a defender of Soviet power, who was exiled to the other side of the Urals with his entire family. The only one to survive was his oldest son, who had happened to go into the city to study. That was the one who was to become our great poet, A. Tvardovskii. And he once had to deny his father. He wrote about all that in his last poem, “It Is Right to Remember.”

For my family, the tragedy was the repressions of 1937 and 1938, in particular the purge of the commanders and commissars of the Red Army. My father, a commissar of a division and a teacher in the mili-

tary-political academy of the RKKA [Red Army], was one of those who were arrested and perished. Those people were totally devoted to Soviet power, socialism, and the Bolshevik party. As participants in the Civil War, they were romantic heroes in my eyes, and I never believed that they were “enemies of the people.”

For Solzhenitsyn this deep, personal tragedy was not his own arrest but the cruel and terrible fate of millions of Soviet prisoners of war, Solzhenitsyn’s contemporaries, the generation of October, who made up a large part of our professional army in June of 1941.

This army was shattered and surrounded in the first days and weeks of the war because of the criminal miscalculations of Stalin, who was unable to prepare either the army or the country for war; because of Stalin’s absurd and stupid orders on the first day of the

war and then abandoning his post in the following days of the first week of the war; and because of the lack of experienced commanders and commissars, who had been liquidated by Stalin.

More than three million soldiers and officers landed in prison camps, and one million others were later imprisoned in “pressure cookers” near Vyazma, near Kharkov, on the Kerch Peninsula, and near Volkhov. But the Stalin government betrayed its soldiers even when they were in captivity, by refusing to recognize Russia’s signature on the international convention on prisoners of war. As a result of this, no aid went to Soviet prisoners through the International Red Cross, and they were condemned to die of hunger in the German concentration camps.

Those who survived were betrayed again by Stalin after the victory when they were all arrested