

THE SOLZHENITSYN AFFAIR: A MINORITY VIEW

Paul W. Blackstock

Eight years ago an obscure algebra teacher, Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, was introduced to the Soviet public by the publication of his gripping story of life in a Stalinist labor camp, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in *Novy Mir* (New World), a distinguished liberal literary journal then edited by the poet, Aleksander Tvardovsky. The release of this sensational work was personally approved by both the Party Central Committee and former Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev. It followed Khrushchev's famous "Secret Speech" which denounced the evils of the Stalinist regime and blamed them on "the cult of personality." For the brief period of cultural thaw which accompanied de-Stalinization, Soviet writers were able to protest vigorously against the political and social injustices of the Stalinist regime. But in doing so they inevitably drew either explicit or implicit parallels with the continuing problems of social injustice which remained unsolved during the Khrushchev era and which persist today. A ground swell of social protest was set in motion which appeared irreversible and irrepressible to optimists in the West, some of whom prematurely predicted the triumph of "liberalism at last." A reaction was inevitable and was not long in coming. The liberal poet, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, had written a famous poem warning that although the dictator himself was dead, "Stalin's Heirs" were still very much alive and ready to revert to his totalitarian methods of control by repression and terror. As if to prove him right, Khrushchev himself, in a long and vitriolic harangue to the Soviet Writers Conference in March, 1963, denounced the liberal trend in art and literature, which he had himself encouraged, and called for a retreat under the politicized slogan, "There can be no peaceful coexistence in the realm of ideology." A new freeze was on, and the pendulum has been swinging back and forth ever since—as indeed it had for years before. There has been a tendency to interpret these alternating moves in the direction of tolerance or repression in black and white

Paul Blackstock, an intelligence and research specialist, is a member of the Department of International Studies at the University of South Carolina.

terms, as either harbingers of a liberal spring or ominous signs of a return to "Stalinist totalitarianism." That both interpretations overstate the case should be obvious from a brief comparison of the way in which the Soviet regime reacted to the earlier Pasternak affair.

The reader will recall that in the fall of 1958, the Nobel prize for literature was offered to the late Boris Pasternak for his novel, *Dr. Zhivago*. The fact that Pasternak insisted on rejecting the prize was widely interpreted as due to official pressure. Vicious Soviet criticism of both the novel and its author was heavily publicized abroad and was counterproductive from a public relations standpoint.

Possibly as a result of the negative image produced by the regime's handling of the Pasternak affair, the next two years were characterized by relative moderation in Party control over Soviet writers. Authors who had been castigated by Khrushchev or by Party critics continued to be published (with frequent delays) in the pages of *Novy Mir*, which brought out three additional short novels of Solzhenitsyn, *An Incident at Kretchetovka Station*, *Matryona's House*, and *For the Good of the Cause*. Meanwhile, the regime found itself faced with a growing underground literature of social protest. This class of literature (which includes poetry, novels and even news sheets) is called *samizdat*, meaning literally "self-published." Typewritten copies of works that editors rejected or would not dare to publish began to circulate widely through informal channels. Two recent Solzhenitsyn novels, *The Cancer Ward* and *The First Circle*, for which he has been offered the Nobel prize, are known to the Soviet public only in this form. To add to the regime's problem, certain authors began sending works abroad for publication that could not be printed in the USSR. The most notable case is that of Andrei Siniavsky (Abram Tertz), whose biting satire on contemporary Soviet life, *The Trial Begins*, was widely acclaimed in the West. As a result, early in 1966, Siniavsky and a co-defendant, Julii Daniel, were condemned to five and seven years hard labor respectively. Their trial itself became a *cause célèbre* and was widely criticized, even by Communist Party leaders abroad, as a trav-

esty of justice and a flagrant example of harsh repression. To further complicate the Solzhenitsyn case, in 1968-69, both his *Cancer Ward* and *The First Circle* were published abroad, apparently without his permission, based on *samizdat* texts smuggled out of the USSR. The regime reacted severely. Solzhenitsyn was expelled from the Writers' Union and has been subject to continuous abuse by Party critics. His response to such pressure has followed the line which he set for himself in a letter addressed to the Fourth National Congress of Soviet Writers in May, 1967: "My work has thus been finally smothered, gagged and slandered. . . . No one can bar the road to truth, and to advance its cause. I am prepared to accept even death."

In contrast to the angry spate of abuse heaped on Pasternak under similar circumstances, the present Soviet regime has been noticeably circumspect since the Nobel prize was offered to Solzhenitsyn in October, 1970. The official line is apparently one of "no comment," and the author himself has been unavailable. This deep-freeze treatment is apparently designed to avoid the kind of unfavorable repercussions abroad of the Pasternak affair. The formula, "neither acceptance nor rejection," which was apparently imposed on Solzhenitsyn, is reminiscent of Trotsky's famous "neither war nor peace" prior to the signing of the treaty of Brest-Litovsk by which the USSR withdrew from the first world war during the fledgling days of the Soviet regime. In late November, in a letter to the Academy made public by friends, Solzhenitsyn said he would be happy to receive the prize in Moscow at the Swedish Embassy.

The Soviet Government is undoubtedly embarrassed by the Nobel prize award to an author who has been one of the most outspoken and fearless voices of social protest in the USSR. Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward* and *The First Circle* paint a grim but absorbing picture of the political and social order in Stalinist Russia. They are written in the tradition of the great nineteenth-century novels of Turgenev, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. But Solzhenitsyn is primarily an artist and a humanist, not a polemicist. He is deeply concerned with the moral problems of evil and suffering of which his generation saw so much during the Stalinist purges of the late 1930's. Solzhenitsyn probes deeply into the eternal questions of the human condition which have always fascinated the greatest of the Russian authors—man's alienation, and his search for inner freedom and peace in the midst of a harsh, oppressive environment. What better setting could he find to probe the eternal questions of man's fate than a cancer ward or the first circle of Dante's *Inferno*!

AN ARTIST AND A HUMANIST, not a POLEMICIST.

Under these circumstances his work, from the regime's point of view, is necessarily tendentious. But here again, Solzhenitsyn is in the best tradition of Russian social protest literature of the nineteenth century. Toward the end of *Dead Souls*, Gogol ruefully predicted that he would be censured by so-called patriots who make sure of their own future at the expense of others but who, if a book appears in which some bitter truth is told, run out of every corner like spiders after a fly and raise an awful clamor.

Solzhenitsyn writes with such brilliance that the total effect is hallucinogenic: only the past seems real and the present a dream. His obsession, that the evils of the Stalinist past must never be tolerated again, is a noble one, and certainly both in Russia and elsewhere men should be reminded that eternal vigilance is indispensable to the preservation of whatever freedoms they have won.

Nevertheless, the net effect on the *Western* reader of Solzhenitsyn's preoccupation with the evils of the past is pernicious. While it lasts, the hallucinogenic effect of his writing is so powerful that the reader is virtually compelled to perceive Soviet reality today through lenses clouded with the mist of terror which hung like a pall over Stalinist Russia. For the politically unsophisticated reader the result is an unconscious reinforcement of "the worst possible image" or "totalitarian model" of Soviet society, a model already deeply impressed on his subconscious mind by two decades of cold war propaganda. Anyone reading *The First Circle* must make a real effort of will to realize that Stalin has been dead for seventeen years, and that Soviet society today bears as little resemblance to Dante's *Inferno* as does our own society to that of the McCarthy era.

It has taken a decade of strenuous intellectual readjustment on the part of Western students of the Soviet scene to abandon the totalitarian model ac-

ording to which all political and social change within the USSR was interpreted as imposed from above. With respect to foreign affairs, it has taken Western political analysts a similar effort to abandon the image of a Soviet leadership predestined by its ideology to impose everywhere an imaginary blueprint for World Domination by means of a mysterious "Operational Code of the Politburo." If it has taken scholars a decade to modify "the worst possible image" of the USSR (to which a minority still clings), the man in the street can hardly be expected to abandon the framework of cold war stereotypes through which he perceives the Soviet scene, especially when they are continually reinforced by such profoundly moving masterpieces as Solzhenitsyn's *First Circle*. Nevertheless, the effort must be made.

There is a growing consensus among such "revisionist" Soviet experts as William Mandel, Peter Viereck and Richard Lowenthal that the present Soviet regime is both post-revolutionary and post-totalitarian in the sense that (to quote Lowenthal), "the process of planned transformation of Soviet society, imposed on it from above by the dictatorial Party, has spent itself." The new regime "still wishes to control society, not in the totalitarian sense of imposing a preconceived pattern on it, but rather as an enlightened autocracy seeking to balance the need for reform with its own instinct for self-preservation."

In the revisionist view, the present Soviet regime is also post-ideological in the sense that the concept of a utopian goal—the Communist millennium—has been replaced as a guide to action by "belief in the indefinite progress of productivity and the standard of living, of science and general education." Although lip-service is still paid to Marxist-Leninist doctrine, "the combination of material incentives and patriotic pride" is enough to keep the system moving along an upward spiral of economic progress. But an unshakable faith in progress combined with material incentives and patriotic pride are basic tenets of Western liberalism. They are precisely the dynamic forces which, within a democratic or pluralistic framework, have produced the affluent societies of the West. As in other Russian-Western relationships since the time of Peter the Great, imitation has again proved to be the sincerest form of flattery.

Faced with the interrelated problems of a dissenting academy and a quasi-underground movement of social protest, the Soviet leadership has responded with harassment of selected intellectuals (at least four scientist-mathematicians were expelled from the Party in 1968), and heavy-handed bureaucratic cen-

sorship of its writers and artists. A few writers have been detained in mental institutions and others have been jailed. A significant indicator of "the end of ideology" is the fact that dissident writers have not been charged with doctrinaire "revisionism." Instead, they have been attacked on practical grounds of undermining respect for authority and for exposing the seamy sides of Soviet life—thus reinforcing the negative images already widely held abroad as a result of two decades of cold war propaganda reinforced by Khrushchev's own revelations of the crimes of the Stalinist era. In this regard, Lowenthal points out that "even in the case of Siniavsky and Daniel, the central charge was not ideological anti-communism, but an unpatriotic 'fouling of their own nest.' The whole campaign . . . has turned on the Party's interest in banishing the treatment of subjects considered detrimental to national and social discipline."

The Siniavsky-Daniel show trial was such an obvious travesty of justice that it raised a storm of protest both at home and abroad. An unofficial transcript was sent abroad and published as a "white book." This in turn led to a second show trial of Aleksander Ginsburg, Yuri Galanskov and two aides who were charged with various subversive activities, including editing an underground magazine, *Fenix '66*, and smuggling out the "white book" previously mentioned. The high-handed manner in which the prosecution conducted both these trials resulted in literally dozens of *samizdat* protests which were signed by prominent intellectuals and circulated in Moscow and other major cities. Again, widespread unfavorable publicity abroad proved very damaging to the image of "Soviet legality," and comparison was made to the notorious show trials which preceded the bloody 1937-38 purges in Stalinist Russia. As in the United States and other Western countries, each miscarriage of justice further radicalizes the opposition and swells the ranks of the Social Protest movement which, like the New Left in the United States, has been spearheaded by a small but prophetic minority of intellectuals both on and off campus.

As we have seen, the regime has responded by a heavy-handed censorship across the board, combined with the exemplary punishment of a few selected intellectuals. But like open terror (which Khrushchev had denounced as a Stalinist crime), such repressive measures have their limits, and ultimately prove self-defeating. Too many bullets put an end to all cooperation. Similarly, artists and authors cannot fulfill their assigned tasks from jails or insane asylums. Some sort of compromise is called for and may take the already established form of what Spiro Agnew

would label "creeping permissiveness" up to a point beyond which further damage to the Soviet image is considered unacceptable.

The USSR has obviously made enormous scientific and technological progress in the last two decades, since lip service to dialectical materialism is no longer required of Russian scientists. This is an encouraging sign of growing intellectual honesty and maturity, and if the trend is extended to the humanities, the USSR may yet come of age and take its rightful

place among the truly civilized powers in the society of nations. Now that the Soviets have demonstrated that they are no longer "backward" in science and technology, they may seek to match the West in the liberal arts and humanities. A first step in this direction would be to show enough self-confidence in their much-vaunted "new Soviet society" to permit the free development of a literature of social protest. Obviously the present Soviet leadership lacks this self-confidence.

The Bible Becomes Politically Dangerous

Toward a Theology of Human Hope by Rubem A. Alves. Corpus Books. 195 pp. \$5.95

by **Monika Hellwig**

Discussions at CRIA seminars and in these pages, while concerned with religion and international affairs, frequently assume the legitimacy of the status quo and of the operational political criteria by which public decisions are generally made. This seems to falsify the claim that the Western, biblically based religions are real partners in the dialogue, for the commitment implied in biblical faith challenges the values of any status quo in the political arena. Further, it tends to limit discussion to questions of the accuracy or adequacy of facts and the practical feasibility of policies.

This, of course, is not a special CRIA problem, but a more widespread problem of our society; we have taken the political teeth out of biblical faith. Charles C. West, in *Ethics, Violence and Revolution* (CRIA Special Study No. 208), has given a penetrating analysis of the reason. On the one

Dr. Hellwig is a member of the theology department at George Washington University.

hand, he says, our culture has appropriated the language of revolution for the Establishment, and the language of the sacred for contingent events in our past history. In consequence, we lack the conceptual or symbolic leverage that would allow us to make a radical critique of the *status quo* in the light of an absolute demand. On the other hand, we in North America who theorize and discuss these matters have no true experience of social alienation from which to articulate this radical critique. We lack empathy for those who are the living negation of all the good things of the ordered society.

These two aspects of the problem are not unconnected. Our language formulates our experience, but it also shapes and screens the experiences we can have. If we speak of the American Revolution and of American democracy in more or less sacred terms—assuming that it was the great Exodus and that the oppressor has been left on the other side of the Atlantic while here, among us, American democracy assures forever the inevitable progress toward the best of all possible worlds—that surely is so because we are formulating our own experience. Our privileged economic position

leaves us convinced that God's in His (eternally unchanging) heaven and all's right with the (basically unchanging) world. On the other hand, precisely because we make this type of formulation, which equates relative progress achieved in the past with the ultimate and definitive goal, we set up a framework of expectations that effectively screens out of our experience that which lies behind the voices of radical alienation.

Every theology is written out of the concrete historical experience of its author, as Rubem Alves notes in introducing his book, *Toward a Theology of Human Hope*. In the wealthy capitalist "first" world, theologies are written with a sense of comfort, accepting a neat separation of religion (which we see as individual and private and concerned with what ought to be) and politics (which is social and public and limits itself to what is feasible in terms of vested interests). Alves dismisses this dichotomy with the unshakable assurance of his own life experience as a spokesman for the "third" world. He rediscovers the *political* and *public* immediacy of the biblical message for our time. In his reflections, the Bible becomes politically dangerous, as indeed it was intended to be—a