

A new alliance between the intellectuals  
and the common people may fundamentally  
change Russian history

# Solzhenitsyn and the Merger of Dissent

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Easter comes in Russia later than in the West. The Russian Orthodox Church, conservative to its depths in so many respects, has never relinquished its ancient loyalty to the Julian calendar—and, indeed, twice in this century it has forcefully resisted efforts to abolish the embarrassment of the thirteen-day lag in that out-of-date schema. Easter of 1972, for peculiar reasons connected with the lunar cycle, came only a week after the Western churches had celebrated the feast, but if 1972 is to be signaled out for any particular note when the histories of our times are written, it will not be for this. Instead, a single letter, circulated from hand to hand and reaching the West in April, 1972, will mark this particular Lenten season as worth remembering.

For in 1972 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn addressed a Lenten Letter to His Holiness Pimen, Patriarch of Moscow and All the Russias, a letter which couched deep misgivings in the artistry of style for which its author has become known throughout the world. It was duly noted in the West and published. An interesting letter. Perhaps important. But more important than one might think, for in that letter Solzhenitsyn for the first time transgressed a boundary between intellectual and religious dissent, and it is in this innovation, this melding of the streams of dissent, that the letter becomes a significant document of our times.

The Western audience by now needs little introduction to the subject of dissent—in the USSR. With no especially remarkable exception, every period and event of Russian history for the past two centuries has harbored an undertone of dissent. From Radishchev to Sakharav, through reform, regression and revolution, a vocal minority, sometimes large but usually not, has talked and written and schemed in advo-

cacy of a closer approximation of some vision of greater freedom. Even during the darkness of the Stalin era the voices of dissent, if silenced fairly effectively, did not wither away, and the Pasternaks and Akhmatovas and Mandelshtams continued to produce not for publication or wide distribution but “for the desk drawer.”

In 1953 Stalin died, and little by little the dissenters began forays, cautious at first, into the bright light of publicity. Ilya Ehrenburg coined the title *The Thaw*, and Vladimir Dudintsev wrote his *Not by Bread Alone*, and, if these pleas for relaxation in Soviet literary policy were realized more in promise than in fact during the middle fifties, a trend had begun. Soviet society was beginning a long, tortuous struggle to break free of the bonds of the neo-medieval scholasticism that Stalin had imposed. All through the Khrushchev era the advocates of non-conformity continued to make themselves heard. Although the vacillating and contradictory policies of the Khrushchev government toward literature and the arts scarcely permitted a smooth, uninterrupted increase, the stream of dissent nevertheless was broadening during those years. Boris Pasternak was denied the Nobel Prize for *Doctor Zhivago*, but Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was published, while Yevtushenko was reprimanded but not silenced for “Babi Yar,” and illegal manuscripts were circulated by groups like SMOG (an acronym for “Daring, Youth, Community, Publicity,” or perhaps “The Youngest Society of Geniuses”), which in retrospect seem saturated with the shallow conceit of juvenilia. Dissent had visibly carved out for itself a niche in the scheme of things Soviet and was not disposed simply to disappear.

The celebrated trial of Siniavsky and Daniel in 1966, produced and directed by the post-Khrushchevian regime with the obvious intent of writing *finis* to this annoying, iconoclastic trend in Soviet society, served instead to galvanize the dissent. Hitherto an

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isolated—and often aberrational—recrudescence within the literary élite, dissent now began to spread far and wide among the country's intelligentsia. Scientists and engineers began to join the writers and artists in common cause, and if the rubric "Human Rights Movement" that dissenters applied to themselves was perhaps somewhat grandiose (the dissent still had not effectively escaped the confines of the educated élite), a certain coherence began to appear, as witness the bimonthly journal *Chronicle of Current Events*, which has been produced and circulated illegally since 1968.

Through most of its history the secular dissent has operated largely in isolation, giving little attention to problems not directly affecting its adherents. This is particularly true of its attitude toward religious dissent, which was endemic in the Russian land for centuries before the intelligentsia was even aware of its own existence. Since 1961 some small hints of a recognition of this more venerable, and certainly more widespread, dissent have appeared, with the occasional notice of the imprisonment of Baptists or Lithuanian Catholics in the pages of the *Chronicle*. But by and large the secular dissent has remained unconcerned with the dissatisfactions and injustices in the institutional churches.

Not that the secular dissent is irreligious. So deep and pervasive is the Christian heritage in Russia that very few, perhaps no, Soviet citizens are completely free of its influence. To the contrary, the literary dissent has been marked by a pronounced concern—almost an obsession—with religious or quasi-religious matters. Prior to 1972, however, this was a rather formless quest and certainly displayed little indication of overt loyalty to the truncated, compromised, and seemingly atrophied Russian Orthodox Church. Religion was present in their writings, visibly present, but the Church was there almost never. Haunting remnants of the Christian past, noninstitutional and perhaps heretical in the eyes of the Church, would appear time and again; for example, the concluding verses of Joseph Brodsky's "Still Life" (1971):

Christ's mother speaks to him:  
"Art thou my God, or Son?  
Thou art nailed to the cross.  
How then can I go home?"

How can I find my way,  
uncertain and afraid?  
Art thou my dying son?  
Art thou my living God?"

Christ speaks to her in turn:  
"Whether I live or die,  
woman, it's all the same—  
son or God, I am thine."

(translated by George L. Kline, Professor of Philosophy, Bryn Mawr.)

## **"Should we or should we not foster in our own children a love for the church?"**

A secular humanism, to be sure, the offspring of a religious tradition, but not so pious as at first glance it seems. Or is there, perhaps, a deeper conviction than is apparent? Certainly Solzhenitsyn's "Prayer" (1962) expresses a depth of devotion that is inescapable:

How easy it is for me to live with Thee, Lord!  
How easy it is for me to believe in Thee! When my  
mind gives way to perplexity and is enfeebled,  
when the wisest people do not see beyond today's  
evening and do not know what should be done to-  
morrow—Thou sendest down to me a clear assur-  
ance that Thou art, and that Thou wilt see to it  
that not all the paths to the good have been closed.

On the mountaintop of the earth's glory I con-  
sider with wonder that path which I would never  
have been able to contrive myself, the wondrous  
path through hopelessness to here, from whence  
also I have been able to send to men the reflection  
of Thy rays. And as much as will be needed for me  
to reflect them, Thou wilt give me. But to the ex-  
tent that I do not succeed—it means that Thou hast  
ordained this for another.

(Russian text from *Russkaia Mysl'*,  
Paris, No. 2809, September 24, 1970)

Even here, however, there is no overt connection with institutional religion, and certainly no stated awareness of the deep streams of dissent which were developing within the churches during the 1960's. (For a detailed treatment of the Baptist and Orthodox dissenting movements, see Michael A. Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia*, London, 1968, and *Patriarch and Prophets*, London, 1970.)

In many respects the Russian Baptists are the pioneers of contemporary dissent in the USSR. Long before the Siniavsky-Daniel trial spawned widespread organized dissent among the intelligentsia, dissident Baptists had organized themselves in 1962 into a nationwide protest movement which to date has been impervious to the most concerted efforts of the regime to eradicate it. Reacting to the increasing restrictions

imposed during the rising antireligious campaign, these Baptists, who came to be known as the *Initsiativniki* (Action Group), directed their protests against the State for its illegal and unjust application of religious policies and against the denominational leadership for yielding to State interference in religious matters. Well before the secular dissenters awakened to such devices, the *Initsiativniki* were employing such tactics as mass meetings in public places, regularly appearing illegal journals and manuscripts, petitions and open letters with large numbers of signatories, and even such astonishing innovations as a "sing-in" at the entrance of the State parliamentary building in Moscow.

Considerable, and at times acute, repression was employed by the State in its reaction to this dissenting movement. Waves of arrests occurred in 1963, 1966, and again in 1970, which effectively decapitated the movement by removing most of its leaders, but the only noticeable results were the formation of an organization of prisoners (quite unique in Soviet history), and, if anything, an intensification of activity by the rank-and-file, who for the past half dozen years have been concentrating vigorous energies on the Christian education of Baptist children. (This is quite illegal, and from the beginning has been one of the sorest points in their dissent.)

Even if the secular dissent remained strangely ignorant of this widespread, organized protest movement among the Baptists for almost a decade, the Orthodox protest did not. Late in 1965 two priests, Eshliman and Yakunin, startled the Orthodox believers by writing open letters to the State protesting against its religious policies and to the Patriarch demanding an end to supine acceptance of interference by the State. These letters met with an immediate reaction in the Orthodox populace, with letters and protests from widely scattered parts of the country.

Strangely enough, for the remainder of the decade these streams of protest operated almost entirely in isolation from each other. The Baptists, with their pietism and evangelical zeal, had little energy to spare for seeking allies in their struggle, especially

allies drawn from outside the ranks of fellow-believers. The Orthodox quickly became aware of the activities of the *Initsiativniki*, and the titular head of the Orthodox protest, Archbishop Yermogen, called upon his followers to emulate them, but at no time was there any mention of cooperation or mutual support. Reaching out in the other direction, a few individuals in the Orthodox protest gave vigorous support to the secular dissenters. But their support was not reciprocated, and, indeed, their counterparts in the intelligentsia seemed, by and large, sublimely unconcerned with their plight, despite the fact that the cause pursued by both, the freedom of the individual to act as he sees fit without undue constraint, was precisely the same.

Until Solzhenitsyn's Lenten Letter. From the opening lines of his appeal to the Patriarch he rendered implicit support to the great concern of the *Initsiativniki* for Christian education:

I felt a pang at that point when, perhaps for the first time in half a century, you finally spoke about children, suggesting the following precept: that along with infusing their children with love for their country parents should foster in them a love for the church (and apparently for faith itself?) and they should strengthen that love by setting a good personal example. I heard this—and saw before me my early childhood, spent in attending many church services, and remembered that initial impression, exceptionally fresh and pure, which later could not be erased by any millstone or mental theory.

But what is the purpose of all this? Why is your earnest appeal directed only to Russian émigrés? Why do you call only on those children to be brought up in the Christian faith, why do you admonish only the distant flock to "discern slander and falsehood" and be strong in truth and justice? And we—what should we discern? Should we or should we not foster in our own children a love for the church?

Much more startling, and immensely more significant, was explicit identification with the Orthodox protest:

Almost seven years have passed since two honest priests, Yakunin and Eshliman, wrote their famous letter to your predecessor in which they demonstrated through personal sacrifice that the pure flame of the Christian faith has not as yet been extinguished in our country. They described in an extensive and convincing fashion the voluntary internal enslavement of the Russian Church which has reached the point of self-annihilation and asked that anything which was untrue be pointed out to them. But every word was true; none of the hierarchs took it upon himself to refute them. And how was their letter answered? In a most simple and crude manner: for telling the truth

***"the pure flame of the  
Christian faith has  
not as yet been  
extinguished  
in our country"***

they were forbidden to conduct services.

And up to this very day you have not corrected this. The frightening letter of the twelve believers from Vyatka has also remained unanswered; they were only put under pressure. And the only fearless Archbishop, Yermogen of Kaluga, is still in monastic seclusion. It was he who had forbidden the closing of his churches and the burning of icons and books, an accomplishment in which degenerate enraged atheism achieved great success up to 1964 in other dioceses.

*(translated by Ludmilla Thorne,  
New York Times, April 9, 1972)*

This is most astonishing. At least since the announcement of the Nobel Prize Solzhenitsyn is beyond question the most prominent representative of the secular dissent in the Soviet Union, a man with a vast and vigorous following. That he has given his unqualified support to the movements for reform within the institutional church is unprecedented, for prior to this Lenten Letter no secular dissenter, and certainly none with anything approaching his stature, has openly offered his aid to the religious dissent, taking their cause as his own. Given the immense influence of Solzhenitsyn, it will be strange if explorations in joining together in common cause do not ensue between the secular and the religious dissent.

The consequences of such an alliance would be enormous. For the past two centuries the intelligent-

sia has almost always been isolated from the rest of the population (the exception would be during 1917, when for a brief, critical period the people supported the Bolsheviks under such slogans as "Land and Liberty"). The members of the intellectual dissent make powerful and convincing cases for their position; but the people themselves do not listen. The masses of the rural population, and probably the majority of the urban workers as well, simply do not care what those strange poets and writers and all are doing in Moscow and Leningrad. Time and again in Russian history, and in the present as well, the appeals of the intelligentsia to the Russian masses fall on deaf ears.

But the people do care about their church, the religious people at least. While they will be little concerned about what the educated, privileged élite say, they will listen to their bishop, their priest. And now that Solzhenitsyn has himself identified with their church, they will listen to him, adding to his large literary following a potentially vast following of Orthodox believers. Solzhenitsyn's Lenten Letter thus provides a bridge joining the two distinct streams of secular and religious dissent.

Should these two forces in Soviet society succeed in merging their interests in common cause, then the religious dissent will gain spokesmen whose skills at stating a case are long since proven; and the secular dissent will gain what throughout its history has frustrated its effectiveness by its absence, an alliance with the common people of Russia.