

Solzhenitsyn's Letter

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The now famous “Letter to the Soviet Leaders” by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, written before his exile, is undoubtedly a remarkable, even historic, document. It deserves to be read along with, say, Dostoevski's “Address on the Unveiling of the Pushkin Monument” as a witness to the human spirit and to Russia. One Soviet leader, upon the occasion of Solzhenitsyn's celebrated expulsion, remarked to the effect that now he will be out of our hair and you Westerners will soon find him a bore, a nuisance and a neurotic, just as we did. The remark was not entirely unperceptive. It recognized that much of the novelist's news value was based precisely upon his being inside of the Soviet Union. Once out, he might soon have as little impact on public opinion as did Kerensky during his declining and obscure years in America.

The eventual impact of the “Letter to the Soviet Leaders” remains to be seen. It can be said now, however, that it is the most powerful critique of the Marxist ideology written in our time. The Russians, together with Marxist parties elsewhere, are trying hard to ignore it. The rest of us ignore it at our peril.

My immediate interest in the letter stems from the quality of its political thought. First, we should recall that rhetoric is at the heart of all practical politics. People need to be convinced about what is to be done and what is not to be done. On this level the letter is simply devastating. Were it by some miracle to be published on the front page of *Pravda*, the nation would be shaken. The Kremlin tacitly admits it cannot withstand such an analysis of its performance and belief. It is also clear that there is today no Soviet political leader—or even intellectual—who is a match for Solzhenitsyn. None has his grasp of

facts, his moral passion, his courage, his intelligence, his candor. What the official Soviet press and rhetoric call “history,” Solzhenitsyn bluntly and with authority calls “lies”—a brutal word, a brutal truth. This is why the Soviet leaders had to resort to the ancient device of ostracism.

Greek political thought recognized that when a man happens along who is so obviously superior in courage, honesty, eloquence and intelligence to the existing political leadership of a city he must either be killed (Socrates), expelled, or made king. Solzhenitsyn evidently recognized something of these alternatives: “I too [like the Soviet Union] am fifty-five, and I think I have amply demonstrated that I set no store by material wealth and am prepared to sacrifice my life. . . .” The Soviet leadership has long recognized that it could not afford the blood of a Socrates on its hands, so it was forced to expel Solzhenitsyn, with the suggestion that he was a fool and an eccentric, that is, a nonperson about whom no one need take account.

Solzhenitsyn is, in many ways, more like an Old Testament prophet. His concern for the world is seen first through his concern for his homeland. Like Amos, Samuel and Nathan he takes his charge directly to the king. The Russian political bureaucracy makes it marvelously simple to find out who is in charge. He accuses this leadership of violating the observances of the people of Russia, of hankering after the fleshpots of Egypt (and quite a few other places). He can speak this way because he has nothing to lose. He professes to have nothing, so no earthly power can touch him except at the terrible political cost of martyrdom.

He [the writer of the letter] is one who does not stand on a ladder subordinate to your command, who can be neither dismissed from his post, nor demoted, nor promoted, nor rewarded by you. He is therefore one from whom you are almost certain

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to hear an opinion sincerely voiced, without any carcerist calculations, such as you are unlikely to hear from even the finest experts in your bureaucracy. . . .

The prophet was always someone who told the truth of the Lord to the king when no one else would—a role Solzhenitsyn seems deliberately to have taken upon himself. What he warns about, moreover, is the salvation of the people—"Holy Russia," a phrase he does not actually use, except to say that Russia has "suffered" more than any other country in the twentieth century. No one familiar with Russian literature can fail to note the messianic implications of this observation. ". . . I shall try . . . to set out what I hold to be for the good and salvation of our people to which all of you—and I myself—belong."

The prophets demanded acknowledgment of sins, repentance and amendment of life. Solzhenitsyn does the Soviet leaders (whom he addresses again and again as "absolute realists") the honor of treating them as human persons, capable of understanding facts, acknowledging errors and changing. There is no room for historical determinism or escape behind current ideology, which, in his phrase, is absolutely dead. The Russian political system is a chosen system and exists because powerful men choose to keep it the way it is. His address to them, therefore, allows no cover-up. They are responsible, and they can change.

In one of the most poignant passages of the letter Solzhenitsyn reminds these powerful men that they have never treated any of their opponents, fellow citizens or prisoners from a precisely humane motive. Everything has been calculated, plotting, owing to outside pressure when they did seem humane; they were completely oblivious to the meaning of mankind and kindness. In telling them this he was recognizing that they did not have to be brutal as persons. They were usually so because of an outdated ideology, Marxism. He then goes on to a long list of Marxist propositions and predictions that have been simply wrong—its agricultural policy, its theory of colonialism, its analysis of war. He contends that the main difficulty such leaders have is in admitting that all this constitutes a spiritual problem. Almost at a stroke Solzhenitsyn has shown that even the greatest totalitarian power exists entirely on a moral basis.

The prophets too were men who warned against the worship of alien gods. It is astounding really to grasp that Solzhenitsyn not only understands the contemporary weakness of the United States and Europe to be a predominantly spiritual one (he seems to feel China's strength is a kind of puritan rigorism), but that Marxist ideology is precisely atheist and rooted in hatred of the gods. In a lone

footnote he cites Bulgakov with approval as showing that ". . . atheism is the chief inspirational and emotional hub of Marxism and that all the rest of the doctrine has been simply tacked on. Ferocious hostility to religion is Marxism's most persistent feature."

Solzhenitsyn then uses essentially the argument of Augustine's *The City of God*—namely, that Christians are good, simple, hard-working, loyal citizens, the best support of the true state. When such elements are persecuted, the state must become weaker. ". . . Religious persecution, which is very important for Marxism, [is] but senseless and self-defeating for pragmatic state leaders—to set useless good-for-nothings hounding their most conscientious workers, innocent of all cheating and theft, and as a result to suffer from universal cheating and theft. For believers faith is supremely important. . . ." As he sees Russia's tradition and morality to be essential to its salvation, he concludes, again remarkably: "I myself see Christianity today as the only living spiritual force capable of undertaking the spiritual healing of Russia." Were this said by a Christian pastor or bishop, he would be accused of mere self-interest. Coming from a Solzhenitsyn, it may be the greatest challenge to Christianity in modern times, as well as a severe judgment upon the faith of the entire West insofar as it has rejected its own religious heritage.

There are long, perceptive passages devoted to the dignity of women, private property, initiative, agriculture. In a sense these are almost verbatim translations of Aristotle's criticisms of Plato's communality of wives and property, but placed in the context of contemporary Russian experience. Like Aristotle, he simply says that those who ignore the different functions and dignities of women, who attempt to make everyone own everything, are ignorant of human nature. If there is no mine and thine, all will be abused. There will be universal cheating and stealing—something he suggests is the major fact in the everyday economic life of Russia. Nothing can be done about it, he asserts, until communal and state ownership is abandoned and people are taught that stealing is wrong. He sees the tremendous alcoholic problem in Russia as a sign of escapism from the dull and spiritless life the people have been forced to live.

The principal cause of the ills of Russia is ideology—Marxism—and beyond this, a belief in "progress" which Marxism borrowed and adapted from the rest of modern industrial society. This ideology has forced Russia to ignore its own problems while constantly butting into the lives and liberties of other peoples. Solzhenitsyn says, almost cruelly, that this is both false and a dead-end street that will end with a war against China, a war Russia cannot possibly win. The only reason China and Russia are



enemies is because of this ideology alien to them both. The solution is to give up this alien ideology and return to the task of saving the homeland. "The people who have created empires have always suffered spiritually as a result." Russia is no exception.

Solzhenitsyn betrays a clear anticity, antitechnology bias. There are traces of early Genesis, of Jefferson, of Rousseau; cities are the cause of human evil. Though he recognizes some obligation to others, he is isolationist, very much against any effort outside his own country. Leave the Balkans, leave East Europe, leave the Arabs to themselves; likewise the South Americans and the Africans. They are all of them none of our business. "And let's leave Africa to find out for itself how to start on an independent road to statehood and civilization and simply wish it the good fortune not to repeat the mistakes of unenlightened development." Rather turn inward, develop Siberia, the Northeast, the vast unsettled lands of Mother Russia. Forget space, forget the cosmos, forget development. War? Nobody threatens Russia, nobody has the slightest designs on her, except China, and that only because of ignorant ideology.

And what do you think will happen? That when war breaks out, both the belligerents will simply fly the purity of their ideology on their flags? And that 60 million of our fellow-countrymen will allow themselves to be killed because the sacred truth is written on page 533 of Lenin and not on page 335 as our adversary claims?

There are elements of Solzhenitsyn that are disturbing. He has evidently and rather uncritically bought the dubious thesis of the

Club of Rome and other lobbies that we must kill economic growth or all be killed in goop and machinery. We must give up advanced technology. "The construction of more than half our state in a fresh new place will enable us to avoid repeating the disastrous errors of the twentieth century—industry, roads and cities, for example." Asia and Africa will save themselves from pollution and consumption only if they forget advanced development and adopt small-scale, indigenous techniques and lower their expectations. Land, earth, countryside are the only real wealth. The Russian novelist sounds at times like nothing so much as a nature mystic.

"The cities of today are cancerous tumors. . . ." Solzhenitsyn wants small towns, decentralization, silence, gardens. Now these on some proportionate scale may be well enough, but we are made for the city too, and much of what is best for our kind can only happen there. In some way Solzhenitsyn seems to be a true political romantic, who has found in the attack on industrial society itself a way to achieve his vision and to abandon Marxism (the main justification of Marxism in recent times is the contention that it is the fastest way to technical and political modernization). The origin of evil is in "the city." The word seems to have only pejorative meanings in Solzhenitsyn; one wonders just what cities he has seen.

To come to terms with this isolationist, antitechnological tendency in Solzhenitsyn is not easy. His solution to the problems of the Third World is simply to let them alone and wish the poor nations well—an intelligible enough attitude from his point of view, since he argues, in general correctly, that Marxist interference and theory in these areas has had only

catastrophic results. He wishes other nations god-speed and tells them, as did Plato, to curb their desires rather than try to satisfy them. People who want little need little. And yet one wonders if this solid state that is proposed for man is really his dignity and destiny. Or is it a global cop-out caused by pursuing a false ideology and false values for so long that any vision outside the quiet garden in the Steppes seems almost diabolical?

For Russia herself Solzhenitsyn ends on a pragmatic note. The best that can immediately be hoped for is a passable absolutism, one that will declare its official dogma no longer state-protected, one that will no longer be brutal or arbitrary to its citizens and neighbors. He believes this is feasible because he believes men can change. The real enemies and the real problems are those of Russia and within Russia. He thus makes the classic appeal of medieval political thought—the instruction to the prince or the tyrant on how to rule well so that in following these guidelines absolutism might benefit the people.

Paradoxically, Solzhenitsyn's letter suggests an exchange of one ideology for another—Marxism for nationalized ecology. He seems quite oblivious to the implications of the new ideology he is espousing. He seems equally unappreciative of the more positive side of Marxism, namely, the mission that man does have on the earth. Deformed and distorted as it is, Marxism stands for the belief that man is something more than a cultivator of a rather primitive garden with birds and silence. Furthermore, the vastness of Russia has a role to play, a vital place in the task of helping other nations. And yet perhaps Solzhenitsyn is right for the moment. Russia's ideology has made her touch lethal for others. Perhaps she needs one hundred years to herself.

There is no doubt that Russia—and not only Russia—needs a "spiritual healing." "For no external reason, the victorious powers [Europe and the United States] have grown weak and effete." What Solzhenitsyn says, then, is that political power is at bottom a spiritual problem. In a sense, all modern political thought has been an effort to deny this. We should not forget that this modern political thought has been of a piece. Marx presupposed what went before. We follow what has come after. Solzhenitsyn is proof that this absolute divorce between the political and the spiritual dare go no further. We have created the disaster. But he believes that this is also something that can heal—in this sense he bears a hope that comes out of no other land today or in the same terms and depth. In this he is surely Dostoevski's spiritual heir.

The legitimate worry we must have, however, is that this new ideology of the finite earth, in which he places his political hope, does not become basically antihuman in its consequences. "We must renounce, as a matter of urgency, the gigantic scale of modern technology in industry, agriculture, and urban development. . . ." It is odd, in a way, that the concern which "official" Christianity, Protestant and Catholic, has been demonstrating in recent years has been in the direction of development, aid for the poor, for the weak; it is the outlook Solzhenitsyn most reacts against. He assumes that on the world scale his nation is somehow poor and need not use its riches for others. I wonder if he does not portend a new kind of clash, already begun to be sure, in which our spiritual effort will have to contend with a political isolationism based on ecology dogma; it is yet another conflict between what man can be and what he is content to be. The history of both politics and religion is filled with such ironies: we finally discover that the evils we reject are replaced by other evils, so that we must search ever again for vision. There are many kinds of prophets, and Solzhenitsyn is no doubt one. But visions are seldom given fully or clearly.

The last paragraph in my edition of *Notes from the Underground* reads as follows:

Dostoevski planned to return to this subject in a continuation of *The Brothers Karamazov*, but less than three months after finishing his masterpiece he died (January 28, 1881). Shortly before his death, at the unveiling of the Pushkin statue in Moscow, he delivered an impassioned speech, in which, among other things, he proclaimed Russia's mission of regenerating the world through the universal service of its people and the brotherly love of its Orthodox faith. A distinguished audience of enraptured listeners shouted "genius!" "saint!" "prophet" (Ernest J. Simmons, "Introduction," Dell-Laurel, 1959).

Solzhenitsyn's project for the regeneration of the world restricts the service of his people to his people. In this sense Marxism remains more Christian than Solzhenitsyn's vision, even though he is quite right in his analysis of its performance, its institutions and its procedures. In preserving the earth we must still transform it. Preservation is not our only or highest task. The poorer part of the world recognizes this. It would be a pity were Solzhenitsyn's letter to be ignored by the Kremlin because it gives a frank and honest view of Soviet deficiencies, and not because it seems oblivious to the real needs of the rest of mankind.