

An Interview With Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

In Great Britain, on the first of March, the BBC broadcast an interview with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn conducted by Michael Charlton of BBC. The impact of that interview upon the British public made news around the world. In late March the interview was shown in this country by the Public Broadcasting System on its program "Firing Line." We are pleased to publish, with permission, the full text of the BBC interview.—Eds.

Aleksandr Isaech, when Mr. Brezhnev and the Politburo took the decision to exile you abroad rather than send you once more to a concentration camp, they must have believed that you would do less damage to the Communist state outside the Soviet Union than inside it. So I wonder if you believe time will prove that judgment to be correct?

In the way you put that question there is a certain false assumption. If one puts the question in this way, we assume that the Politburo is all-powerful and independent in the decisions it makes, that it was free to decide one way or another. I must say that at the time of my exile the situation was very unusual. I wrote about this some time ago. In the autumn of 1973 the support of Western public opinion for Sakharov and myself in our head-on confrontation, as I have called it, was so powerful, so unyielding, support such as the West had not demonstrated for a long time, such firmness, such steadfastness, that the Soviet Politburo simply took fright. It did not have complete freedom of choice either to keep me in prison or to exile me; they simply took fright at this anger, this storm of indignation in the West, and were forced to give way. This was a forced concession. For that reason I think that now, even if they regret it—and I imagine they do regret it—we must remember that they, in effect, had no choice. That was a rare moment when the West demonstrated unprecedented firmness and forced them to retreat.

On the other hand, they would be right, wouldn't they, if you felt that your warnings, or your beliefs, fell upon deaf ears in the West. You would then cease to be relevant, and that presumably is what they hope?

Yes, if one looks at it from this point of view, you are right. My warnings, the warnings of others—Sakharov's very grave warning directly from the Soviet Union—these warnings go unheeded, most of them fall, as it were, on the ears of the deaf, people who do not want to hear them. Once I used to hope that experience of life could be handed on nation to nation, and from one person to another....But now I am beginning to have doubts

about this. Perhaps everyone is fated to live through every experience himself in order to understand.

Well, you are in the unique position to watch, now, a debate in both East and West, which to a large extent has been inspired, or has been focused, by your own experiences and your writings. How important is the experience of the Russian people for the West?

In actual fact, our Russian experience—when I use the word "Russian" I always differentiate it from the word "Soviet"—I have in mind here even pre-Soviet experience, prerevolutionary experience. In actual fact, our Russian experience is vitally important for the West, because by some chance of history we have trodden the path the West is taking seventy or eighty years before the West. And now it is with a rather strange sensation that we look at what is happening to you when many social phenomena are repeating what happened in Russia before its collapse. Our experience of life is of vital importance to the West, but I am not convinced that you are capable of assimilating it without having gone through it right to the end yourselves.

Give me an example of what you mean by the Russian experience being repeated in the West.

You know, one could quote here many examples, for example, a certain retreat by the older generation, yielding their intellectual leadership to the younger generation. It is against the natural order of things for those who are youngest, with the least experience of life, to have the greatest influence in directing the life of society. One can say then that this is what forms the spirit of the age, this current of public opinion, when people in authority, well-known professors, scientists are reluctant to enter into an argument even when they hold a different opinion. It is considered embarrassing to put forward one's counterarguments lest one become involved. And so there is a certain abdication of responsibility, which is typical here where there is complete freedom. Let us take the press, writers, journalists, who enjoy great freedom (and incidentally Russia enjoyed

great freedom, the West has a completely false view of Russia before the Revolution). While enjoying such great freedom the journalists and writers lose their sense of responsibility before history, before their own people. Then there is now this universal adulation of revolutionaries, the more so the more extreme they are! Similarly, before the revolution we had in Russia, if not a cult of terror in society, then a fierce defense of the terrorists. People in good positions, intellectuals, professors, liberals, spent a great deal of effort, anger, and indignation in defending terrorists. And then the paralysis of governmental power. I could give you many more analogies.

Well, as you say, though, it is this West that has made it possible for people like you to survive, and you acknowledge that. But how would you say that your two years in the West now, in view of what you have just said, has reshaped your views? You are obviously more pessimistic now than you were when you came.

I must say that in relation to the West my generation—I am not going to speak only about myself personally, and when I say my generation, I have in mind people who shared my fate, that is to say, the soldiers of the Second World War and then the prisoners; this was, after all, the common fate of so many. As I was saying, my generation went through several stages. In the fifties, after the end of the war, we literally worshipped the West. We looked upon the West as being the sun of freedom, a fortress of the spirit, our hope, our ally. We all thought it would be difficult to liberate ourselves but that the West would help us to rise from slavery. Gradually in the course of decades, and years, this faith began to waver and to fade. We received information about the West only with difficulty, but we even learned to listen through the fiercest jamming to, for example, your BBC. We realized with bewilderment that the West was not showing that firmness and that interest in freedom in *our* country as well. It was as if the West was separating its freedom from our fate, and before I was exiled I had already strong doubts whether it was realistic to look to the West for help. It is precisely on this that my opinions differ from those of Sakharov. Sakharov considers that help from the West is of decisive importance for our liberation, while I believe that we can obtain freedom only by relying upon ourselves and that one can place practically no hopes on the West. And when I came here my doubts unfortunately increased very rapidly. But the point is, of course, that during these two years the West has become much weaker in relation to the East. The West has made so many concessions that now a repetition of the angry campaign that got me out of prison is practically impossible. I would say that the campaign to get Sakharov to Stockholm was almost as strong, but it didn't help because the West itself has become weak over this period. Its position has become weaker. Moscow now takes infinitely less note of the West.

May I suggest that perhaps one of the difficulties in your own case is this—you've become a controversial figure in the West. You are no longer the quiet tourist in the West.

You are in some respects an impassioned critic. And I think that the people in the West who criticize you—and of course not all do—believe that you are asking for a return to something in Russia that is plainly impossible, a return to a patriarchal kind of Russia, a return to Orthodoxy. Are those criticisms you accept?

You know, that is one of the consequences of the weak sense of responsibility of the press. The press does not feel responsibility for its judgments, it makes judgments and sticks on labels with the greatest of ease. Mediocre journalists simply make headlines of their conclusions that suddenly become the general opinion throughout the West. You have just enumerated several propositions, and practically all of them are not true. First, I am not a critic of the West. I repeat that for nearly all our lives we worshipped the West—note the word “worshipped.” We did not admire it, we worshipped it. I am not a critic of the West. I am a critic of the weakness of the West. I am a critic of a fact, which we can't comprehend, how one can lose one's spiritual strength, one's willpower, and, possessing freedom, not to value it, not to be willing to make sacrifices for it. A second label—just as common—was pinned on me, that I wanted to return to a patriarchal way of life. Well, as I see it, apart from the half-witted, no normal person could ever propose a return to the past, because it's clear to any normal person that one can only move forward. That means that choice lies only between those movements that go forward and not backward. It is quite easy to imagine that some journalist writing mostly about women's fashions thought up this headline, and so the story gets around that I am calling for a patriarchal way of life. I'll just cite one more example. Take the word “nationalist”—it has become almost meaningless. It is used constantly. Everyone flings it around. But what is a “nationalist”? If someone suggests that his country should have a large army, conquer the countries that surround it, should go on expanding its empire, that sort of person is a nationalist. But if, on the contrary, I suggest that my country should free all the peoples it has conquered, should disband the army, should stop all aggressive actions—who am I? A nationalist! If you love England, what are you? A nationalist! And are you not a nationalist? When you *hate* England, then you are not a nationalist.



“I am not a critic of the West. I am a critic of the weakness of the West.”

Well, you make very eloquently the point that you're not going back in the sense of a return to the old Russian imperialism, but I'm not sure how you go forward as you claim you would. What is the way out of this world of tensions and oppression in the Soviet Union that you so eloquently describe? If the West cannot help, what is the way forward for the Russian people? What will happen?

You have just used the expression "for us," by which you mean the Soviet Union—do I understand you correctly? You know, two years ago and three years ago this question was topical, that is to say, it was possible to believe that we inhabitants of the Soviet Union could sit down and consider our future. The Soviet leadership was experiencing so many difficulties, so many failures, that it had to seek some way out, and indeed I thought the way out was to seek the path of evolution, certainly not the *revolutionary* path. Not an explosion. And this time, this is where Sakharov and I agree. An evolutionary smooth path that would offer a way out of this terrible system. However, today all these suggested solutions have lost their practical value. Over the last two years terrible things have happened. The West has given up not only four, five, or six countries, the West has given up all its world positions. The West has given everything away so impetuously, has done so much to strengthen the tyranny in our country, that today all these questions are no longer relevant in the Soviet Union. Opposition has remained, but I have already said many times that our movement of opposition and spiritual revival, like any spiritual process, is a slow process. But your capitulations, like all political processes, move very quickly. The speed of your capitulations has so rapidly overtaken the pace of our moral regeneration that at the moment the Soviet Union can only move along one path: the flourishing of totalitarianism. And it would be more appropriate if it were not you asking me which way Russia—or rather the Soviet Union (let us not get the two mixed)—will go, but if I were to ask you which way the West is going. Because at the moment the question is not how the Soviet Union will find a way out of totalitarianism, but how the West will be able to avoid the same fate. How will the West be able to withstand the unprecedented force of totalitarianism? That is the problem.

Why, though, do you think that people in the West have begun to feel uneasy with you? And it brings me to ask, in view of what you've just said, to this question of spiritual regeneration, moral regeneration, What is the central point for which you stand? After this enormously varied experience you've had—you've been a teacher, a decorated war hero, an officer in the Soviet Army; you've been a cancer patient, you've been a political prisoner in concentration camps—what is the central point, in all you say, that you stand for?

Maybe, if one is to speak of my life experience, then I would say that my outlook on life has been formed largely in concentration camps—that part of my life that is reflected in the *Gulag Archipelago*. I don't know whether, as you put it—Western listeners would find my words embarrassing—it is difficult for me to judge this kind of reaction, but I would put it like this: Those people

who have lived in the most terrible conditions, on the frontier between life and death, be it people from the West or from the East, they all understand that between good and evil there is an irreconcilable contradiction, that it is not one and the same thing—good or evil—that one cannot build one's life without regard to this distinction. I am surprised that pragmatic philosophy consistently scorns moral considerations—and nowadays in the Western press we read a candid declaration of the principle that moral considerations have nothing to do with politics. They do not apply, and should not, so to speak, be applied. I would remind you that in 1939 England thought differently. If moral considerations were not applicable to politics, then it would have been quite incomprehensible why on earth England went to war with Hitler's Germany. *Pragmatically*, you could have got out of the situation. But England chose the moral course and experienced and demonstrated to the world perhaps the most brilliant and heroic period in its history. But today we have forgotten this, today the English political leaders state quite frankly that they not only recognize *any* power over *any* territory regardless of its moral character, but they even hasten to recognize it, even try to be the first to do so. Somewhere, in some place, freedom has been lost in Laos, China, or Angola. Tyrants, bandits, puppets have come to power, and pragmatic philosophy says that doesn't matter, we *have* to recognize them. And what is more, one should not consider that the great principles of freedom finish at your own frontiers, that as long as *you* have freedom, let the *rest* have pragmatism. No! Freedom is indivisible, and one has to take a moral attitude toward it. Perhaps this is one of the main points of disagreement.

You mention Gulag Archipelago—your famous document of life in Stalin's prison camps. Those books are so full of an overwhelming anger and bitterness. Is the aim of them simply the destruction of the Communist ideology, the destruction of at least its myths, or are they meant to be something else than that? Do you want to go beyond that?

A work of art always consists of many parts, it has many facets, it has many sides, and that means many aims. The artist cannot set himself political aims, the aims of changing a political regime. It may come out as a by-product of it, but to fight against untruth and falsehood, to fight against myths or to fight against an ideology that is hostile to mankind, to fight for our memory, for our memory of what things were like—that is the task of the artist. A people which no longer remembers has lost its history and its soul. Yes, the main thing is to re-create. When I sit down to write this book, my only task is to re-create everything as it happened. That's my main aim. And naturally many deductions follow. If today the three volumes of *Gulag Archipelago* were widely published in the Soviet Union and were freely available to all, then in a very short space of time no Communist ideology would be left. For people who would have read all this and understood it would simply have no more room in their minds for Communist ideology.

In one of your most recent books—the portrait you paint of Lenin in Zurich—many people, I think, have noted perhaps a similarity between the two of you. The portrait you paint of a powerful character, Lenin, powerless to influence events inside the Soviet...inside Russia as it was. Cut off, isolated, impatient. That does sound rather like you. A powerful figure, living in the same city today, in the West, perhaps powerless to intervene, cut off from your friends in the Soviet Union. Would you, like Lenin, be surprised, as he was, at a profound change in the Soviet Union taking place in your lifetime?

You know, I have been working on the image of Lenin for forty years. From the moment when I conceived this series of books, I thought of Lenin as one of the central characters, if not *the* central character. I gathered every grain of information I could, every detail, and my only aim was to re-create him alive, as he was.

But in attacking Lenin, of course, you attack the legitimacy of the whole Soviet Government, of the Bolsheviks themselves. So I just ask you whether you feel perhaps yourself...you, in turn, as he did for revolution, will become a focus for this moral, spiritual regeneration inside the Soviet Union. I mean, are you saying that there will be this kind of spiritual revival that will in time overthrow the Communist system?

I don't attack Lenin. I describe him as he is and what he is worth. So much incense has been kindled around him, in your country as well. He has been raised to such summits....I show how in reality he was often shortsighted, how he treated his allies, collaborators, how weak were his ties with his own country. I don't attack *him*, but this ideology; to this ideology I am of course hostile. And the spiritual renaissance of our country lies in our liberation from this deadening, killing ideology.

I'm trying to paint, or say, Is it valid to suggest a strong comparison between yourself and Lenin? There was he, waiting in Zurich, can't do anything about the internal situation and is quite surprised when the change comes. He, the great revolutionary. Would you be surprised if the change came?

He was surprised because of his shortsightedness. You can see from my book that because of the narrowness of his party view he had lost sight of the simplest facts, he didn't know that the war was about to start, he was taken unawares by the World War, and in the same way by the revolution. Two years ago I didn't expect any explosion in the Soviet Union. I expected a slow process, and it was already taking place. Today, yes, I would be surprised, but I wouldn't be surprised at something else. I wouldn't be surprised at the sudden and imminent fall of the West. I would like to make myself clear. The situation at the moment is such that the Soviet Union's economy is on such a war footing, that even if it were the unanimous opinion of all the members of the Politburo not to start a war, this would no longer be in their power. To avoid this would require an agonizing change from a monstrous war economy to a normal peace economy. The situation now is such that one must think not of what might happen unexpectedly in the Soviet Union, because in the Soviet Union nothing will happen unexpectedly.



“Freedom is indivisible, and one has to take a moral attitude toward it.”

One must think of what might happen unexpectedly in the West. The West is on the verge of a collapse created by its own hands. This quite naturally makes the question one for you and not for us.

And you say this from the moral standpoint of a devout Christian, I know, and truth for you is more important than consequences. But you are asking people to say that in the nuclear age...because the sword that hangs over everybody's heads is the electronic threat of the nuclear weapons. And I think this is one of the problems you face when you are criticized now as being an enemy of détente. What alternatives are there to treating with the devil, as you would say, if the purpose of that is to avoid nuclear catastrophe?

You know, there was a time at the beginning of the fifties when this nuclear threat hung over the world, but the attitude of the West was like granite, and the West did not yield. Today this nuclear threat still hangs over both sides, but the West has chosen the wrong path of making concessions. Nuclear war is not even necessary to the Soviet Union. You can be taken simply with bare hands. Why on earth, then, should one have nuclear war? If you have raised your hands and are giving in, why have nuclear war? They take you simply like that without nuclear war. The most important aspect of détente today is that there is no ideological détente. You Western people, you simply can't grasp the power of Soviet propaganda. Today you remain British imperialists who wish to strangle the whole earth. All this is hidden beneath the thin crust of détente; to remove this crust will take only one morning, one single morning. *You* can't be turned away from détente so simply. To turn you away from your present position one would need a year or two. But in the Soviet Union one morning, one command, is enough! Newspapers come out with the news that the British imperialists have become so brazen that the situation has become intolerable. And nothing that is being said against you every day will contradict this. And détente—there is no détente, it's just gone.

One can't raise the question of détente without ideological détente. If you are hated and hounded throughout the press, in every single lecture, what sort of détente is that? You are shown up as villains who can be tolerated, well, maybe, for one more day. That is not détente. As for the spirit of Helsinki, may I ask a

question in my turn? How do you explain that, for instance, over the last few months there has been hardly any news coming out of the Soviet Union of the continuing persecution of dissidents? If you will forgive me, I will answer this myself. The journalists have bowed to the spirit of Helsinki. I know for a fact that Western journalists in Moscow, who have been given the right of freer movement in return for this and because of the spirit of Helsinki, no longer accept information about new persecutions of dissidents in the Soviet Union. What does the spirit of Helsinki and the spirit of détente mean for us within the Soviet Union? The strengthening of totalitarianism. What seems to you to be a milder atmosphere, a milder climate, is for us the strengthening of totalitarianism. Here, for instance, I would like to give you a few examples, a few fresh examples that you will not have heard about over the radio or read in the papers. Someone went to visit Sakharov, he went home by train and was killed on the way. No, it *wasn't* you, *he* was killed, it was a Soviet citizen. Someone knocks at the door of Nikolai Kravkov, they have come to fix the gas. He opens the door. They beat him nearly to death in his own house because he has defended dissidents and signed protests. All this happens in a flat. But on a street at five o'clock in the afternoon on Lenin Prospect (Lenin!) Malva Landa is seized and dragged into a car. She screamed, "Citizens, I'm being kidnapped!" Hundreds of people heard, passed by, they were afraid because anybody can be seized like that. Under the very eyes of passersby, they shoved her into a car and took her to prison. That's the situation, that's the spirit of Helsinki and détente for us. And so it goes on. In Odessa, Vyacheslav Grunov has been arrested, possessing illicit literature, and put into a lunatic asylum. They've released Plyushch, but continue to lock up others. There you have détente and the spirit of Helsinki.

Aleksandr Isaech, that's a very powerful feeling in the West, throughout the fifties and sixties, and perhaps now—in fact, a great British philosopher, Bertrand Russell, gave his support to the view "Better Red than dead." But are you saying that this policy of détente was formulated by the Soviet Government expressly for the purpose of preventing internal liberalization in the Soviet Union? In other words, the Soviet Union was falling behind economically. In order to catch up, it had to import American and West German technology. Otherwise it would have to scrap the whole system. And so it can only catch up by importing its technology from abroad and clamping down internally.

Here, forgive me, there are several questions. Yes, it is the import of technology that is saving the Soviet Union. That's true. But I return to that terrible statement of Bertrand Russell: I don't understand at all why Bertrand Russell said "Better Red than dead." Why did he not say it would be better to be brown than dead? There is no difference. All my life and the life of my generation, the life of those who share my views, we all have one standpoint: better to be dead than a scoundrel. In this horrible expression of Bertrand Russell there is an absence of all moral criteria. Looked at from a short distance these words allow one to maneuver and to

continue to enjoy life. But from a long-term point of view it will undoubtedly destroy those people who think like that. It is a terrible thought. I thank you for quoting this as a striking example.

But you are asking as an alternative for a return to something like the cold war tensions. And most people, of course, welcome détente as a respite from that, a break, something different. But would you agree that the alternatives you propose are likely to be a return to something like the tensions of the Stalin-Khrushchev period?

I would like to emphasize...you *think* that this is a respite, but this is an imaginary respite, it's a respite before destruction. As for us, we have no respite at all. We are being strangled even more, with greater determination. You recall the tension of the fifties, but despite that tension you conceded nothing. But today you don't have to be a strategist to understand why Angola is being taken. What for? This is one of the most recent positions from which to wage world war most successfully. A wonderful position in the Atlantic. The Soviet armed forces have already overtaken the West in many respects and in other respects are on the point of overtaking it. The navy: Britain used to have a navy; now it is the Soviet Union that has the navy, control of the seas, bases. You may call this détente if you like, but after Angola I just can't understand how one's tongue can utter this word! Your defense minister has said that after Helsinki the Soviet Union is passing the test. I don't know how many countries have still to be taken; maybe the Soviet tanks have to come to London for your defense minister to say at last that the Soviet Union has finally passed the test! Or will it still be sitting the exam? I think there is no such thing as détente. Détente is necessary, but détente with open hands. Show that there is no stone in your hands! But your partners with whom you are conducting détente have a stone in their hands, and it is so heavy that it could kill you with one single blow. Détente becomes self-deception, that's what it is all about.

Can I ask you, finally, as a great Russian patriot, what view you take of your own future?

My own future is closely linked with the fate of my country. I work and have always worked only for it. Our history has been concealed from us, entirely distorted. I am trying to reconstruct this history primarily for my own country. Maybe it will also be useful for the West. My future depends on what will happen to my country. But quite apart from this, the Moscow leaders have of course particular feelings toward me, so that my own destiny may be decided before that of my country. It is of course possible they may try to get rid of me completely before the fate of my country changes for the better. I sometimes get news of that sort. When I came here, I counted on returning very soon, because the Soviet Union *then* was much weaker and the West was much stronger. But over these two years mutual relationships have changed greatly in favor of the Soviet Union.

Mr. Solzhenitsyn, thank you.