

AlbertMohler.com

“One Word of Truth Will Outweigh the Whole World” — The Death of Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Monday, August 4, 2008



“One word of truth shall outweigh the whole world.” Alexander Solzhenitsyn cited that Russian proverb in his 1970 acceptance speech as he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. He did not deliver that speech in person, for he knew that if he left the Soviet Union he would never be allowed to return. Even after he was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1974, his great wish and absolute determination was to die in Russia, the land and people of his birth.

Solzhenitsyn died in Moscow on Sunday, ending a life of 89 years — one of the monumental lives of the twentieth century.

Few writers have exerted so great an influence on contemporary events. David Remnick of *The New Yorker* described Solzhenitsyn as “the dominant writer of the 20th century.” As he explained, “Who else compares?”

He was born in 1918, the very year following the Soviet Revolution. That same year the Communist Party began to create an extensive system of political prisons and concentration camps known as “gulags.” Solzhenitsyn would bring the reality of Soviet oppression to the world’s attention through his writings, including a 300,000-word history of the camps, published as *The Gulag Archipelago*. As author Joseph Pearce reflected, “Thus it was that Alexander Solzhenitsyn and the Gulag Archipelago were born within weeks of each other, children of the same revolution.”

Solzhenitsyn knew the Gulag Archipelago from first hand experience. He had been sent to the prison camp system after service as a Captain in the Soviet Army during World War II. In 1945 the Soviet spy system uncovered a letter in which Solzhenitsyn had criticized “the man with a moustache” — Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. He served eight years in the system, and those years of political, physical, and spiritual oppression became the foundation for Solzhenitsyn’s great literary and historical achievement.

A term spent in one of the most brutal prisons became the basis for his short novel. *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Solzhenitsyn revealed not only the physical deprivation and spiritual degradation that marked the camps, but the coldly calculated methods by which the Soviet authorities sought to break the spirits of the prisoners.

Solzhenitsyn was released from the gulag system the very day of Stalin’s death. He then became a teacher and used his time to write the books that would change the world. Some of these works had actually been written in prison, though Solzhenitsyn was forced to memorize his composed passages until he could write them down only after his release from the gulags.

Stalin’s successor as dictator and First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, led a process known as “De-Stalinization” that provided a temporary opening in Soviet culture. Khrushchev wanted Stalin’s

murderous abuses to come to light and, when Solzhenitsyn's novella *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* came to his attention, he led the Soviet Presidium to allow its publication in an official literary journal. Other works by Solzhenitsyn then followed in print.

He quickly became an international literary sensation, compared to great Russian authors such as Dostoyevsky, Chekov, and Tolstoy. Writing in *The New York Times*, Michael T. Kaufman remarked, "Mr. Solzhenitsyn had been an obscure, middle-aged, unpublished high school teacher in a provincial Russian town when he burst onto the literary stage in 1962 with *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*."

In 1970 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. In his undelivered acceptance speech, leaked to the world by friends, Solzhenitsyn defined the role of the author or artist as that of truth-teller against lies. The responsibility of the courageous author, he argued, "is not to partake in falsehood, not to support false actions." The Nobel committee cited his "ethical force" as the power of his literary achievement.

Nevertheless, when Khrushchev was toppled by Kremlin hardliners in 1964, the opening in the culture quickly closed. From this point onward, Solzhenitsyn was under constant threat and his writings were banned within the Soviet Union. In 1973, Solzhenitsyn allowed the publication of *The Gulag Archipelago*. The massive work had been smuggled out of the Soviet Union, but the KGB, the Soviet spy service, was closing in. Solzhenitsyn's typist, Elizaveta Voronyanskaya, hung herself shortly after her interrogation by the KGB. Solzhenitsyn then unleashed the work, which was quickly published around the world.

The Gulag Archipelago is a work of non-fiction, revealing the massive and murderous nature of the Soviet regime. The work could not be refuted. Soviet propagandists attempted to label Solzhenitsyn a "traitor" to the Soviet Union — a move that only served to demonstrate the veracity of Solzhenitsyn's central claims. The Soviet Union was embarrassed before the watching world, but Soviet authorities had reached the breaking point and Solzhenitsyn was expelled in 1974, soon followed by his wife and three sons.

In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn explained why the story had to be told:

"We have to condemn publicly the very idea that some people have the right to repress others. In keeping silent about evil, in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the surface, we are implanting it, and it will rise up a thousandfold in the future. When we neither punish nor reproach evildoers, we are not simply protecting their trivial old age, we are thereby ripping the foundations of justice from beneath new generations."

American diplomat George Kennan, himself one of the chief architects of American policy during the Cold War, would describe *The Gulag Archipelago* as "the greatest and most powerful single indictment of a political regime ever to be leveled in modern times." *The Times* of London went so far as to speculate, "The time may come when we date the beginning of the collapse of the Soviet Union from the appearance of *Gulag*."

Solzhenitsyn would outlive the Soviet Union by seventeen years. He died on Sunday of complications from heart disease at age 89. As he had declared when he was expelled from his homeland in 1974, he died on Russian soil.

He was a man of contradictions or, as Joseph Pearce argues, a man of paradox. In any event, he was a man of great moral vision who revealed the brutality of the Soviet regime and contributed greatly to its collapse. Edward E. Erickson, who wrote two major works on Solzhenitsyn, argues that the key to understanding Solzhenitsyn is Christianity — the Russian Orthodox faith that framed Solzhenitsyn's worldview. Erickson argued that "in a day when secular humanism flourishes among the cultural and intellectual elite, he holds fast to traditional Christian beliefs."

Indeed, Solzhenitsyn railed against the secularism and spiritual weakness of the West, even as he took refuge in Cavendish, Vermont for the years of his exile. In his famous 1978 Harvard University commencement address, "A World Split Apart," Solzhenitsyn pointed to the moral and spiritual crisis in the West. He declared that America's experiment with democracy was being undermined by secularism:

However, in early democracies, as in the American democracy at the time of its birth, all individual human rights were granted because man is God's creature. That is, freedom was given to the individual conditionally, in the assumption of his constant religious responsibility. Such was the heritage of the preceding thousand years. Two hundred or even fifty

years ago, it would have seemed quite impossible, in America, that an individual could be granted boundless freedom simply for the satisfaction of his instincts or whims. Subsequently, however, all such limitations were discarded everywhere in the West; a total liberation occurred from the moral heritage of Christian centuries with their great reserves of mercy and sacrifice. State systems were — State systems were becoming increasingly and totally materialistic. The West ended up by truly enforcing human rights, sometimes even excessively, but man's sense of responsibility to God and society grew dimmer and dimmer.

He was a man of massive courage and literary ability — a central character of the twentieth century. He was a moralist to the core, affirming human dignity against Communist oppression and Stalin's murder of millions. Even so, he carried on an affair with the woman who became his second wife and the mother of his sons. He seemed ungrateful to America, but he also saw what many Americans, blinded by historical optimism, could not or would not see in the weakness of the West.

He returned to Russia a prophet, but also a man who seemed strangely out of his times. In his case, a great life of the twentieth century lingered awkwardly into the twenty-first. Nevertheless, his great courage and his literary achievement remain a tribute to the human spirit. Even more, Solzhenitsyn's moral vision serves as a reminder that Christianity alone provides an adequate grounding for human dignity.

When asked once about the force of his writings, Solzhenitsyn explained: "The secret is that when you've been pitched head first into hell you just write about it." The world was changed because he did just that.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

