

ADVENTURES OF THE MIND

Solzhenitsyn Reconsidered

By MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE

Ever since Alexander Solzhenitsyn's address at Harvard University, the changed attitude of the media pundits in the West toward him has become manifest. Old media hands like myself get to know the signs—the casual innuendo, the throwaway line (“not the liberal we would like him to be”), the tone more in sorrow than in anger, the barking in unison as the consensus pack moves collectively toward the kill.

It was in the Harvard address that he deviated most drastically from the basic liberal orthodoxy that freedom consists in being allowed and provided with the means to do whatever anyone has a mind to, and that a free society is one in which this is possible and the means readily available, the supreme example of such a society being, of course, the United States. What magnified his offense from the consensus point of view, making it quite intolerable, was that, on his own admission, Solzhenitsyn derived his view of freedom from the New Testament rather than from such

impeccable sources as the American Declaration of Independence and the judgments of the U.S. Supreme Court, in effect repeating to his Harvard audience what he had already written in his “Letter to the Soviet Leaders”: “*I myself see Christianity today as the only living spiritual force capable of undertaking the spiritual healing of Russia.*” (emphasis added)

In his Gulag Archipelago books, Solzhenitsyn established once and for all the role and extent of forced labor camps as an instrument of terrorism in the USSR. Thenceforth, thanks to him, apologists for the Soviet regime will have to take due account of the Gulag Archipelago rather than seeking to deny its existence, or dishing it up as part of an essentially humane penal system. Then, in his autobiographical work, *The Oak and the Calf*, he deals with the pains and penalties of being a writer in the USSR, describing his own experiences as a dissident between his release from the labor camps and his expulsion abroad in 1974.

◀ About the Author

Malcolm Muggeridge—prolific author, playwright, journalist, humorist, television personality and educator—has been called the finest writer of English prose of his generation. Seemingly a man of many contradictions, he has been both a supporter of Soviet communism and, later, its bitter opponent. He was a spy for British intelligence in World War II, editor of *Punch* humor magazine and a TV film writer. In his religious life, Muggeridge

has gravitated from atheism to an avid non-denominational Christianity. He has prepared many documentaries on religious themes for the British Broadcasting Company and Columbia Broadcasting System and has published numerous books on the same subject. Now, at age 78, he is engaged in the completion of the eagerly awaited third volume of his autobiography, *Chronicles of Wasted Time*.

Photography by Bern Schwartz

In a sense, of course, all serious writers are in some degree dissidents; but whereas in the so-called free world their concern is to earn a living, in the USSR conformity with the party line is obligatory, and to deviate from it in word or even in thought can involve not just penury and obscurity, but a one-way ticket to the Gulag Archipelago as well. As a sometime political prisoner (in Soviet slang, a Zek), Solzhenitsyn was not allowed to come to Moscow. So, on his release, he worked as a teacher of mathematics in the provinces, devoting all of his spare time and abundant energies to writing.

In ordinary circumstances the procedure would have been to submit his work to some local or national publication or publishing setup. In Solzhenitsyn's case, this was precluded because the subject of his writings has been precisely the terrorism and mental chicanery whereby a Marxist oligarchy has ruthlessly imposed its will and ideology on a subservient population. Being a Zek himself, Solzhenitsyn felt a duty to the others he had left behind in the Gulag Archipelago to speak up for them, telling his fellow countrymen and the world about their suffering and privations and the monstrous injustice of their treatment. In all that he has written and spoken and done, he has been true to his duty. And, let it be remembered, he could perfectly well have settled, as, for instance, Maxim Gorky did, for being a distinguished Soviet author, free to travel abroad, well provided with foreign currency and honored at home and abroad. All that would be required of him would be to keep off a few sensitive themes. But this was what he was in no circumstances prepared to do.

Solzhenitsyn has the honesty to admit that his self-imposed duty has proved arduous and often frustrating. When he completed the first draft of *The Oak and the Calf* in the spring of 1967, he entertained a hope that he might be re-

leased from the agonizing role he had chosen for himself. Six years later, when he prepared the text for publication, he asked himself more urgently than ever when the din of battle would cease for him. "If only," he writes, "I could go away from it all, go away many years to the back of beyond with nothing but fields and open skies and woods and horses in sight and nothing to do but write my novel at my own pace." Now, in enforced exile, he has the additional anguish of observing how, in the West, where the means to be free still exist, people have wearied of freedom, finding it an intolerable bur-



"Swanson here is a born leader—when I trim the staff next week, he's going to be the first to go..."

den, and are all unconsciously sleepwalking into the very servitude Solzhenitsyn has so valiantly and faithfully resisted and denounced.

In the circumstances in which he was placed on his release from the labor camps, he had no choice but to hide away his writings as he completed them, in the expectation that they would one day be published and fulfill their purpose. In every moment away from his teaching, he tells us, he wrote and wrote, diligently, day after day and sometimes night after night. When, as a veteran free-lance practitioner, I think of the difficulty of producing commissioned copy to meet a deadline, I marvel at the

books he produced in this manner, so brilliantly, so conscientiously and so nobly disinterested in their purpose. Take the case of the Gulag books, very dear to his heart and not just a literary feat of the highest order, but, as well, an integral part of the history of our time and, for that reason alone, forever memorable. They were no mere exercise in writing; he had to collect in the greatest secrecy the testimonies on which the books are based, at the same time scrupulously protecting his sources in the knowledge that the consequences for them would be ruinous if it came out that they had provided him with information. Nonetheless, the books were completed while he was still living in the USSR; and in due course, a copy of the manuscript was sent abroad, so that whatever might happen to him, the peoples of the West would know what the Gulag Archipelago was like and what it signified to Russians and others forcibly absorbed into the Soviet sphere of influence.

In his career as an undercover writer, Solzhenitsyn was greatly beholden to Samizdat, the clandestine publishing system established in the USSR, steadily growing in output and influence. Now it has spread through the whole country, and its productions are printed, not handwritten or cyclostyled as in the early days. All Solzhenitsyn's forbidden works have been circulated by Samizdat and have reached tens of thousands of readers despite the KGB's efforts to stop it. With one or two notable exceptions, it can be taken for granted that whatever serious literature is being produced by the so-gifted Russian people bears the Samizdat imprint. Some notion of the gap between what Samizdat published and the officially produced volumes displayed in the bookshops may be deduced from the recent award of the Lenin Prize for Literature to Brezhnev, whose

Continued on following page

flat-footed sentences in his speeches and addresses can scarcely be considered prizeworthy. If Western publishers wanted to retaliate for the fiasco of their efforts to hold a bookfair in Moscow, a good idea would be to mount a Samizdat exhibition in London or New York and ask Solzhenitsyn to open it. I can't, however, see them doing this.

The big break came for Solzhenitsyn when Nikita Khrushchev, while still the head man in the Kremlin, praised his book, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*—about life in the labor camps—and authorized its publication in the USSR. How exactly this came about remains obscure, and anyway, shortly afterwards, Khrushchev reverted to the worst kind of Stalinist censorship. Nonetheless, the book was duly published and widely acclaimed, so that Solzhenitsyn became a celebrity at home and abroad. Also—which was more important for him—he came into contact with *Novy Mir*, the leading literary magazine in the USSR, and its editor, Tvardovsky. Solzhenitsyn's account of this truly remarkable man and of the relationship between them makes fascinating reading.

Tvardovsky was torn between joy in his own literary talent and genuine appreciation of literature and of Solzhenitsyn's genius and his satisfaction at finding himself a member of the top Soviet elite with all the privileges that went therewith, including a *dacha* in a restricted area—an inner conflict that led him, like so many of his fellow-countrymen, to resort increasingly to vodka. The affection between the two men survived all hazards, and when, as a result of a stroke, Tvardovsky became helpless and incoherent, Solzhenitsyn sat patiently and lovingly at his bedside. At his funeral he mourned his passing, both for Russia's sake and on his own account. In a particularly venomous attack on Solzhenitsyn in *Harper's*

magazine, George Feifer alleges that in his account of his transactions with *Novy Mir* and Tvardovsky, Solzhenitsyn has vilified both. What Solzhenitsyn does show—and I am sure justly—is that *Novy Mir*, despite its good record in Soviet terms, has no choice when it comes to the crunch but to obey its political masters. Likewise Tvardovsky, despite the essential nobility of his character.

In retrospect, it is hard to make any sense of the vacillations of Soviet policy in dealing with Solzhenitsyn. After the fame he acquired from the publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*,



he soon found himself once again being trailed by the KGB, as well as excluded from *Novy Mir* and expelled from the Writer's Union, an organization wholly controlled by the authorities.

As the struggle to silence Solzhenitsyn went on, he fought back single-handedly and managed to hold his own for a time—until his expulsion abroad settled matters.

Running through everything Solzhenitsyn has written about his struggle to stand up to "them," the present masters and manipulators of the Russian people, there is the assumption of his Christian faith. He neither expounds nor stresses it; but the reader is conscious of it all the time—acquired

in the Gulag Archipelago, where, being totally deprived of freedom in earthly terms, he came to understand what constituted true freedom—the glorious liberty of the children of God about which the Apostle Paul speaks so eloquently. In the second Gulag book, in the wonderful chapter called "The Ascent," he even refers thankfully to his time in the labor camps as having brought him this illumination, and I truly believe that he would have found it more congenial to resume his old Zek existence rather than to watch, as he has had to do in his compulsory exile, the continuing surrender to "them" of what-

ever power, authority and influence still pertains to what we go on calling Western civilization.

Now, with the consensus pack after him and with his Western readers requiring variety and the crazed expectations of an illusory kingdom of heaven on earth such as he cannot possibly provide, his immediate worldly prospects must be considered uncertain. Yet there is no sign of his own courage and determination faltering. "In moments of weakness and distress," he writes, "it is good to tread closely in God's footsteps." He goes on:

"Where would I be in a few days' time—in jail or happily working at my novel? God alone knows. I prayed. I could have enjoyed myself so much, breathing the fresh air, resting, stretching my cramped limbs, but my duty to the dead permitted no such self-indulgence. They are dead. You are alive. Do your duty. The world must know all about it."

Well, thanks largely to Solzhenitsyn, the world now does know all about it, but his battle with "them" goes on. It is one man against the Kremlin, which might seem hopeless odds, but when that one man is Solzhenitsyn, against all the odds he must win. As he concludes his splendid Nobel Prize lecture: "One word of truth outweighs the world." ★