



BACKGROUND FILE

Solzhenitsyn's Russia

Georges Nivat

1 990 will enter the history of our literature as the “year of Solzhenitsyn”. These are the words of the writer Sergei Zalygin, chief editor of the well-known journal *Novy Mir*, a journal which has returned to the liberal tradition it had in the 1960s. This means first of all that Russian periodicals are literally swamped by the prose of the exiled writer (and still in exile up to date).

The West has discovered and read his works in the last twenty years—from the publication of *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, to *October 1916* in its French translation, and to *March 1917* in the imposing Russian edition which was published in Paris by the YMCA Press, albeit prepared by Solzhenitsyn in his home in Cavendish, Vermont (USA). Now these works, in a matter of few months, have suddenly been devolved onto the Soviet reader. *Novy Mir* has published *The Gulag Archipelago* and now *The First Circle*, the journal *Friendship among People* has offered extracts from *March 1917*, as well as my own small work, *Solzhenitsyn*, which had been published by Seuil and which was published this summer by *Friendship among People*).

The nationalist journal *Our Contemporary Times* has published another section of *March 1917*, and the journal *Cuban*, well-known for its rather extreme “patriotic” positions, has published a vademecum on the works and the life of Solzhenitsyn, written by the young writer Palarmarchuk. The large publishing house “Khudojestvennaia Literatura” (in other words “new letters”, formerly “Goslitzdat”) has published *The First Circle* and other novels in numerous copies. People are still waiting for *The Oak and the Calf*, which has been announced by the journal *Novy Mir*, but the book being rather polemical, Solzhenitsyn himself has delayed its publication, because he wanted Russia to get to know his creative work first and then his more reflective moods.

On current television news, amongst raging polemics, Solzhenitsyn's name is often invoked; the journalists of *Vremia*, the 9 p.m. news programme, draw from his works aphorisms and reflections on the destiny of Russia; one often comes across his effigy:

the large caricatured head drawn by American cartoonist Levine was recently on the pages of the weekly magazine *Literaturnaya Gazeta*. At the beginning of June, the first conference on Solzhenitsyn's work took place in the large hall of the House of Literature on Gorky Street. This meeting was organized by the so-called left-wing writers' association "April". The general theme was "Solzhenitsyn and us"—in other words, what can and must Solzhenitsyn contribute to Russia, in these times of crisis, of excited debates and with the country rushing ahead as it is?

It must be said that the main hall of the Writers' Union was not filled, a sign perhaps of the times: everything is accelerating. Two years ago, this theme would have been taboo and the subject of near conspirative meetings. A year and a half ago, there had been the timid publication of Solzhenitsyn's manifesto "Live Not by Lies" in the small journal of the Soviet Peace Movement.

In autumn 1988, it could still frighten the Politburo, which through its ideological representative, Vadim Medvedev, had sabotaged the announcement of the publication of *The Gulag Archipelago* at the printers. Can all of this be already relegated to history, or must one conclude that on that day the Moscovites had other concerns, above all the economic emergency?

In fact, the first day of the first conference ever held in the USSR on Solzhenitsyn was also, and foremost, the day of introduction of the internal passport for shopping in Moscow. The "passportization of the buyers" that day overshadowed the debate on "Solzhenitsyn and us". Nevertheless, the meeting was extremely interesting, and in particular the presentation of a young critic from the province, Vassili Potapov, who, starting from the great description of the "forty days revolt of Kenguir" in *The Gulag Archipelago*, dealt with the "sword and the hand", i.e. Solzhenitsyn's position on violence. Natalia Ivanova presented an almost complementary paper on "Solzhenitsyn and the Empire", in which Solzhenitsyn was the object of a careful and worried scrutiny of what he had to say on the violence which is rampant in the USSR today...

And to understand the upheaval of mentality which has taken place in two years, one must recall the chronology of hesitations in giving *glasnost's* green light to Solzhenitsyn's works, one has to have participated in the first conference on Solzhenitsyn in the USSR, one has to have read the *Book Observatory* appeal to all its readers to try and elaborate a bibliography of the numerous publications of Solzhenitsyn which have invaded all the journals and newspapers of the country over the last year, and one has to have seen the publication of the new "Solzhenitsyn bomb", the pamphlet *How do we reorganize Russia?* at the end of September. Today, the idea of censoring Solzhenitsyn would make people laugh. It is simply no longer possible, and the whole country is reacting to the new proposals of the solitary man from Cavendish. The master of the Kremlin answers with rage from the tribune of the Soviet Parliament, and a regular column of reactions from all sides has been established in the weekly *Literaturnaya Gazeta*.

What has happened? Freedom of press as well as freedom of expression have been unfurled over Russia and today it seems as if no one can stop them. No more limits, no more taboos, in spite of the law on offenses to the presidential function which Gorbachev had voted. One has to witness a television programme on the day of Lenin's anniversary, 24 February last, a face-to-face between the writer Vladimir Solukhin with a Party historian, to realize how far the taboos have been destroyed. What could the historian answer to this malicious and secure writer who right from the start raised his flag, by declaring that "Lenin was the greatest catastrophe of our history"?

Freedom through the radio

In fact, not only have the taboos been broken, not only has free speech become a new fact of public life, and political differences appear in all their strength, but the working class itself, depicted as silent, has spoken out through the rugged and determined faces of the improvised leaders of the Donbass and Vorkuta strikes; those who demanded the abolition of article 6 of the Constitution, even before Sakharov.

Recently, in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, a former religious dissident, Felix Sviatov, referred to a discussion with the writer Yuri Dombrovsky, who died in 1986, the author of a romanced witnessing of the interiorized terror of the period of Stalin: *The Faculty of the Useless*. This "Faculty of the Useless" was the Law; the USSR under Stalin did not need it, or rather it had elaborated a false facade of the Law which was even worse than the traditional arbitrary manner of tyrants, since it imprisoned all the actors of the "totalitarian show" in a general simulation. Dombrovsky stated to Sviatov: "One need only announce freedom on the radio, for Russia to be free tomorrow!" It may have been a bit hasty, but fundamentally Dombrovsky was not all that wrong: the freedom conceded from above has been taken from the bottom with an energy and determination which only few observers believed the Russian people capable of. Among those who had predicted this possible and even necessary upheaval of things, was Solzhenitsyn.

Can one receive "freedom through the radio" in one go? Obviously not. Two stages were needed. The first, almost invisible one was dissidence. Without the muffled voices of the dissidents who expressed their total refusal to enter this abnormal order, contrary to the laws of nature so dear to the 18th century, would the Russian society have been so shaken? This can hardly be believed. In many ways, the dissidents and the defenders of human rights have drawn the programme for the return to the *natural man* which has taken place in Russia, and which continues today in all fields, including the right to private property. They were the prophets who saw and heard what their society could not see and hear yet; they were, as Bergson wrote in *The Two Sources Of Moral and Religion*, the strong and isolated personalities who in the midst of a closed totalitarian system, designed the framework of an open society, open on humanity.

It is thus not "on the radio" that the Russians heard that they were free: prophetic voices had well before announced what seemed so totally unconceivable in the midst of this

the terrible waning of souls which it has caused in the Soviet army—were its detonators. Today advisers of the power structures have said and published, in two or three years, reports of economic, social, moral, demographic and health catastrophes, which go far beyond what for twenty years the “prophets of doom” of dissidence had said, isolated and derided as they were, immobilized in the chemical strait-jackets of the psychiatric institutes of Sniejnisky.

Svietov is certainly right to remind readers in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, about the relative current neglect which dissidents are suffering from, and to diagnose that without the right honor given to the dissidents which had predicted it in the desert of Brezhnev days, this liberalization process would not be moral. “The problem of dissidence, the history of what has been called the democratic movement, which has opposed over two and half decades the monstrous pressure of the socialist State, which has fathered its heroes and martyrs, its provokers and broken victims, its repentants as also, this resistance which is unique in our life is still waiting for its historians. For me, it is evident that only the prisoners of conscience could become the authentic moral base of *perestroika*.”

Condemnation

Svietov, it seems, is wrong or a bit too despaired if he does not see that, against the will of power, this base is alive and kicking. True, the government obliged certain prisoners two and-a-half years ago, to solicit its grace, which was a humiliating measure contrary to moral justice, but a very long road has been covered since then. Sakharov was treated with disdain by Gorbachev during last summer’s session of the Soviet Supreme, but in December, he was buried with a procession perhaps never seen since the funeral of Dostoevsky in 1881, and his programme was almost entirely taken over by the head of the Kremlin two months after he disappeared. Authors such as Dombrowsky, Grossman, Evgenia Ginsburg, Yuri Daniel, Vladimir Bukowsky and Vladimir Maximov see their works devolved on to the public of Russia and the other provinces. Alexander Ginsburg, the author of the *White Book* on the Daniel-Siniavsky trial, responsible for the Solzhenitsyn fund for aid to political prisoners, has been the object of a double-page interview in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*. Anatoly Marchenko is quoted, published and honored, although his death in the camps in December 1988 tragically marked the beginning of the *perestroika* process (and, probably, convinced the head of the Kremlin to make his famous telephone call to the exiled figure in Gorky).

But above all there is Solzhenitsyn. I quote Svetov again: “In this context, as in all others, the most interesting phenomenon is Solzhenitsyn. There is no doubt that there is currently an attempt to hash his work in the usual manner, to render trivial even *The Gulag Archipelago* by presenting it as a “historical work”, as if it were the chronicle of events of a distant past, and the simple fact of its publication as the result of the new thinking. Moreover, in the back of *The Gulag Archipelago* there is a clear attempt to hide the psychiatric hospitals of the KGB which still subsist, the “zones”, the political

prisoners still in jail in the name of articles 64 and 70, the organs of repression still flourishing as if they now had "clean hands"... But *The Gulag Archipelago* is not a work that one can leave on the market in the hope of reaping a profit, it is our common destiny, it is the condemnation of the regime."

Condemnation of the regime, written black on white in a widely distributed weekly magazine. "We have missed the 20th century", says Solzhenitsyn in a pamphlet which has been printed in 28 million copies in the USSR, "we are witnessing a moral, industrial, atomic and genetic catastrophe...". Condemnation: this is the deep meaning of Solzhenitsyn's work; and this condemnation is so much more effective in that it was not expressed in an outburst of rage. On the contrary, it matured from a difficult birth and journey in the conscience of the writer himself.

In the beginning, there is a small stubborn hero—honest, hard-working, humble, but in his own way inflexible: Ivan Denisovitch. ("Chtch 528": let us not forget that this was the title of the story before the intervention of Tvardovsky, and that this purposefully unpronounceable serial number, full of phonetic catch, symbolizes the numbered identity of the "new man" in the Gulag). The condemnation takes on further shape passing through the hero of the *Cancer Ward*, Oleg Kostoglotov, a virulent and rancorous "zek", who has such difficulties returning to life after the jungle of the camp, to the heroes of *The Gulag Archipelago*, the little "Joan of Arc" tortured by a tyrannic Kapo, or the moving poet Boris Gammerov tortured to death by Matronina, the torturer chief surveillant in her unforgettable "red coat". Step by step, this condemnation grows, takes strength from an adult consciousness, first marked by vengeance, then by a triumphant irony, and finally by humility in front of the saints of the camp.

Without this long existential progression, *The Gulag Archipelago* could in fact be co-opted into the system. But it is impossible precisely because it teaches a progression of revolt and that it reaches—through cries, admissions, anger and repentance—a mature and controlled force of judgement, which Tolstoy himself had not even reached in *Resurrection*, where he fights against another prison system, but a quite lesser one. Let us recall the great moments of dereliction in the *Archipelago*: "Our eyes open wide look towards the black ceiling, towards the black sky. Oh God, oh God! Under the missiles and the bombs, I begged you to keep me alive. And now I beg you: oh God, send me death!"

Repentance and hatred

It is first and foremost because of this existential journey that Solzhenitsyn is so vital for contemporary Russia. From revolt to contempt, from bitter irony to condemnation and from condemnation to the discovery of true values, this journey is unescapable for the young Russian of today, and he undertakes it in the company of Solzhenitsyn. The second reason is that the unbelievable denouncement of the past which we are

Georges Nivat

witnessing now in Russia must be accompanied by an act of contrition and absolution—if not, the country is threatened by despair and suicidal behaviour. This suicidal behaviour can be seen in the rapid evolution of delinquency, drugs, and in the confessions, shocking at times, of the guilty who do not find the way to absolution.

A poignant testimony of this “mortal fatigue” is the article of the writer Victor Konetsky, who is also a seafaring captain. I quote: “Such a terrible mood, our country has never known. It is being compared to the years 1905 and 1917... But I tell you: we are in the midst of an extreme situation, and what is happening is happening to us for the first time in the history of the world. Maybe we are in a state comparable with that of Germany in 1932. We can not rely on any previous experience.”

Konetsky sees the violent crumbling of Marxism, and he announces that he is retiring from the Party. He sees the triumph of nationalisms, and he announces civil war. Not only the one which is already taking place in the South of the country and which has caused quite a few deaths (and especially 600,000 refugees whom nobody wants, surviving in camps and who are a potential for future unrest), but also and especially in the Republic of Russia itself. “The hungry Yakut in his disgusting *isba* will see rock



Rebel horse

'n roll or bared-ass girls on television, and filled with rage, he will reach for his pitchfork or his rifle..." And this is not only an inextricable problem of the nationalities within Russia, national groups who will discover the plundering which they have been and are still to subject, but it is Russian society itself which is laden with violence: "For me, to leave home has become a very serious trauma each time. It paralyzes me even when I write. When I go out into the Leningrad streets that I love so much, I fall into a real ocean of hatred. We are nothing anymore but hatred."

It is of little importance to check the validity of Konetsky's reflections with the social and moral reality of the country: his state of mind reflects that of a large part of society. With the breakdown of values more or less linked to Marxism, to the idea of revolution and transformation of man into a "new man", it is evident that a particularly dangerous spiritual void has been created in Russia.

Everywhere else nationalism has taken over, helping nations like Lithuania and Georgia to live spiritually and politically. The problem for those nations is to adapt the nationalist dreams to their reality (the Georgians have to learn tolerance towards their own minorities like the Abkhazes, the Lithuanians have to learn to deal with the economic complexities of the contemporary world). But in Russia, it is a question of the end of an empire; an explicit trial is being held from all sides a country which has no experience on decolonization and, furthermore, where the empire was formed by the inclusion of peripheral countries that were richer than the metropolis and where standards of living have always been higher than that relatively poor one of Central Russia. And the trial which the periphery is holding is compounded by the trial which the Russians are holding on themselves, i.e. the strong act of self-accusation which is being evidenced in many forms and which corresponds to the disclosure of the vast crime which the nation has committed to itself in the shape of a semi-genocide.

In a certain way Russia is similar to the family of the Atrides in Homer's *Iliad*, and it is tearing itself apart, eaten up by remorse. The orthodox tradition does not suffice to explain the importance of the omnipresent theme of "repentance", which has been occupying the cinema screens (beginning with the film of Abuladze, which has this exact title), the TV debates, and the articles printed in various journals. This "repentance" corresponds to an oppressing sense of guilt which expresses itself either by a real self-laceration, or by hateful and xenophobic attitudes, even antisemitism. Here again the moral presence of Solzhenitsyn or other dissidents, can play a very beneficial role, as they are the proof that there has always been a Russian "resistance" and because they themselves have overcome this self-laceration complex.

Solzhenitsyn in fact has slowly reached a religious attitude, close not so much to the official orthodox church as to that of the Old Believers, for whom he has a particular veneration, as they were also victims of official persecutions starting in the 18th century (Pierre Pascal, a French specialist on Russia, in his monumental work on the

“beginnings of the *Raskol*”, i.e. the schism, compares them to the Jansenists), and he also admires the Baptists, who have taken a strong hold within the Russian working class. The whole work of Solzhenitsyn represents the quest for absolution for Russia’s sins, a slow rise to the light of forgiveness, and also a return to religious symbols which, today, are about the only things which survive in the ideological upheaval. The end of *October 16* in this sense is stunning: a women sinner runs on the frozen river where the upheaval has started, and hops from ice block to ice block to reach the banks of salvation.

In the political debate

It must be noted that Solzhenitsyn has given exclusivity of representation in the USSR to the journal *Novy Mir* and in particular to his former collaborator in dissidence Vadim Borissov, who is one of the authors of the 1973 underground collection *From Under the Rubble*. Borissov is in charge of distributing equitably the publication rights among the main periodicals and publishing houses of Moscow and province, and also to strictly prohibit the early publication of all polemical articles of the writer (two volumes in the Russian edition of Paris), as well as his memoirs *The Oak and the Calf*. However in Russia these days, there is a general practice of pillage in the publishing of texts written by those who have emigrated, shamelessly taking texts without respecting the will of the authors, or even by taking advantage of the juridical freedom which is allowed by the USSR’s late adhesion to the Geneva convention on authors’ rights (from 1973 on).

The instructions he left with Borissov have thus often been disregarded, and the most blatant case has been that of the weekly *Arguments and Facts*, directed by V. Starkov, which is nevertheless a champion of *perestroika* and of the “legal State” (*Arguments and Facts* has seen its production reach 33 million copies). The weekly has in fact published a shortened extract of *The Oak and the Calf* regardless of any copyright of the author, thus provoking a fierce protest not only by Solzhenitsyn, but also by Zalygin, chief editor of *Novy Mir*. This is witnessed by a telegramme of Solzhenitsyn published by Zalygin: “I am shocked to see that one after the other, and precisely on the territory of my own homeland, there are publishers such as those of *Slovo* or *Dialog* who treat me like a dead person. Having been torn apart for too long from my natural reader, I had expressed the will to come back towards him, in a first moment, only through my books, and not through polemical articles written over the past decades. Editors who have kept a sense of honor can not go against my will.”

All this is easily explainable by the desire to exploit Solzhenitsyn in a political debate from which he is still absent, a debate which we will come back to later. Above all, there is a drive to prevent Solzhenitsyn from playing a role of catharsis which he is bound to play, and which he does play, in spite of these manoeuvres. It is also an attempt to prevent an alliance between Solzhenitsyn and the liberal wing, of Christian-Democrat tendencies, which is clearly appearing in Russia today, and of

which Solzhenitsyn is evidently one of the possible inspirers, undoubtedly representing one of Russia's current hopes.

The third reason for the fascination which Solzhenitsyn currently emanates, is that his novel *The Red Wheel* which appears at the same time as his previous works, appears to many people as of astonishing topicality: the debates at the *Douma* (the name of the Parliament between 1905 and 1917), debates which fill entire chapters of the novel, are seen as a premonition of the endless debates of the Congress of people's Deputies, the Soviet Supreme, the Soviet of the RSFSR which have been going on for over a year before the eyes of the Soviet television viewers.

It is not only cabaret singers who are making fun of these debates, asking ironically, as it could be heard at the recently reopened *Bats' Cabaret* in Moscow: what amendment will we have reached in 2010...? All of Russia is tuned to the second channel and to these debates where freedom of speech was born, which had been at the beginning only jealously and sparsely granted, and limited to certain subjects, but which has in one year touched on the whole country and on all subjects. But inevitably, anxiety has grown in front of the gap between these debates and the stagnant realities: where will this flood of words end?

It is surprising what vivid interest surrounds *The Red Wheel*, a novel which in the West we have a tendency to classify as "historical" and to leave on the bookshelf among those books which require leisure time, for example the summer vacations. In fact, it is their current history, their differences, their questions which the Soviets decipher today in this novels-documentary, which does not provide a key of understanding (in fact as time goes by, Solzhenitsyn's novel becomes less evident in its interpretation), but it is a clinical portrayal of this wild race to the unknown, where the participants themselves had no idea where they were going. It is the chapters in small characters, those which the author himself seems to allow the reader to skip over (as in former history textbooks), which are the most keenly followed, because they give wide quotations of the official records of the parliamentary debates of the time.

Landmarks from the past

In *October 16*, everything is centered around the capacity or incapacity of the country to come out of its state of neglect, to chase the old irresponsible dignitaries, to favour closer contact between society and government, until then separated, both because of the latter's incompetence as because of the anger with which it is followed by society. And the central figures which Solzhenitsyn has chosen are the constitutional monarchist Chipov, a man full of nobility but incapable of any real political battle and thus rejected by history, then the "Octobrist" Gutchkov (from the name of the October 5 Manifesto which gave Russia a semi-parliamentarian regime), a man full of energy, who hates prejudices, who believes only in the publicity of the debate (*glasnost* is the Russian word for publicity), and who for a period has been the ally of Stolypin.

Georges Nivat

Stolypin, whose star is constantly and retrospectively rising in Russia today, and whose energy is noted by many journalists, was a man of the center who was attempting to do what Gorbachev is doing today: tracing back the links with a market economy, especially by putting an end to the old farm commune, the famous *mir*, so dear to all schools of slavophiles. (Note that this point of capital importance prevents classifying without nuances Solzhenitsyn as a slavophile).

Gutchkov's dream of the reconciliation between society and government, and of a parliament which, through balanced behaviour, "would exercise a deep educational influence on the Russian society", is really very close to that of many people in Russia

**Georges Nivat, Professor at the University of Geneva,
is one of the Editors of the journal *Slavica Helvetica* (Bern),
a foreign consultant with the Social Sciences Research Center of New York,
and member of the European Academy (London).
His most recent books are *Vers la fin du mythe russe* (Lausanne 1988),
and *Solzhenitsyn* (Moscow 1990).**

today. All the problems of the time, "power—a prisoner of its servants", the "misery and the loss of honour in the army" are subjects on the current agenda. When Solzhenitsyn's novel was published in the West, some saw in the masterful portrayal of Stolypin proof of his reactionary side, wanting only to see Stolypin's fight against terrorism, and the unjust surname of "Stolypin's neckties" given to the hangman's noose because of the hangings decided by the exceptional military courts of the time.

Recently the work of a French journalist and historian of the times, Pierre Polejaieff, has been reprinted. The book first came out in 1912, and has now a foreword by Patrick de Laubier, who has retitled it *The Experience of Stolypin or Perestroika Assassinated*, and underlines at least two main parallels: that of legislative reform and that of agrarian reform. In the USSR this parallel is made by several analysts, and in particular by the essayist Seliunin. This is not to seek in Stolypin the key to the current situation (the assassination of Stolypin at the Grand Theater of Kiev in presence of the Emperor,—an assassination which is at the centre of the second part of *August 14*—would then be a sinister premonition we would receive from history), but to underline how the parallel with the crisis of 1905 and the decade that followed, seems instructive today to those Russians who are anxious to find points of reference. If

Solzhenitsyn's romanced world does bring solutions, then they are those of short steps, and translation into concrete action (his praise of the engineers of the new industrious Russia and of the Union of Russian engineers; as well as farmers' cooperatives—the cooperator Plujnikov): a Russia made up of cooperatives, of mutual associations, of medium-scale enterprises, of free speech and free enterprise, and of a democracy dominated by “moral maturity”.

“The magnetic needle of the moral idea whose point of origin is religious conscience” serves as a compass to some of the characters who are obviously well liked by the author, but one must not think that he presents us with a moralizing picture: Chipov, one of his favourites, suffers a great failure; Gutchkov is not spared, the Bolchevik Chliapnikov, who will die in one of Stalin's great purges, outside of the novel, is one of his favourites, probably because he has kept a taste for good deeds which came from his parents, Old Believers...

In the current picture of literary and journalistic “civil war” which is raging in Russia, one can try to introduce a kind of classification in relation to the jump back to the past, of which different trends of thought are trying to retrieve their “features”. Some liberals think that Russia is going back to the 1960s, i.e. to a reform of the regime which was started by the first thaw, symbolized by the politics and the personality (the subject today of many publications) of Nikita Khrushchev. As Alla Latynina says, we go back to the “credo of the XXth Congress”: antistalinism, faith in socialism and in revolutionary ideals. One of the most bitter and unfair critics of Solzhenitsyn, because according to him he has slandered the sacred memory of Tvardovsky, is indeed a “Khrushchevian”, Vladimir Lakshin, but one also finds Roy Medvedev in the rather under-populated field of this wing.

Some see a return to the 1920s, or rather to the NEP of Lenin, a sort of ideological coexistence, a definite return to the market, but a kind of market of both ideas and goods where the socialist government would maintain its controlling hand: it is more or less the position of the essayist Koriakin. Further come those who go back to the parties of the third and fourth *Douma*: the “Cadets”, liberals in fact, “centrists” like Gutchkov, tempered monarchists such as Chipov, anarchists, and even the hideous Alliance of Saint Michael, which favoured the pogroms. The most significant return is that of the intellectuals towards idealist and religious Russian philosophy of the turn of the century and towards the positions, bitterly scorned by Lenin, of the famous book *Landmarks*, published in 1909, with its Nicholas Berdiaeff, Sergei Bulgakov, and Piotr Struve: jurists and philosophers, most of them coming from Marxism and going either towards philosophical idealism or towards Christian commitment, as in the case of Bulgakov, who became an orthodox priest.

These various journeys towards political, philosophical and religious positions have already been undertaken by Solzhenitsyn's characters, and the author along with them. This also helps explain the popularity of *The Red Wheel* and *The First Circle*; they are

Georges Nivat

a guide through the complicated landscape of the Russia preceding the "catastrophe", and preceding the arrival of reductive simplification. The book *Landmarks*, which denounced above all the decadence of the Russian intelligentsia of the 19th century, offers if not a key at least a starting point to the reflection: too many "justice-truths" have killed the "absolute truth" in us, Berdiaeff and Bulgakov proclaimed, while rejecting the science-seeking positivism of that time.

A scene from *The First Circle* is often quoted and can in fact help as initiation for all those who are looking for a way out of the ideological labyrinth: it is the visit of Innocent Volodin, the Soviet diplomat who will fall into the Gulag trap, to his uncle Tver, an aristocrat who has in the past, in January 1918, marched in favour of the Constituent, rept back by the bayonets of the red sailors, on the orders of Lenin. "Our march was not gay, we were silent, no songs. We were well aware, or rather not aware of the seriousness of that day. We did not know that it would be the only day that the only Russian parliament would exist, after five centuries, and waiting for another century. Who did worry about this parliament, anyway? How many were there of us, who had come from all over Russia?"

It is possible that the next Russian parliament, which the uncle of Tver did not believe in, will be elected according to a genuinely pluralistic party system. Will Solzhenitsyn in the meantime have returned to Russia? And will he participate more actively in the great renewal of today? The government has just given him back his nationality, long after having given it back to Vladimir Maximov or Alexander Zinoviev, two dissidents who had emigrated, whereas Solzhenitsyn had been exiled. The ex-dissidents are participating in the Soviet debate each in his own way: Maximov defends a moderate nationalistic point of view, whilst, Zinoviev, in line with his paradoxes, defends the popular character of Stalinism and negates the democratic evolution of the country, pursuing his vision of a sort of Soviet zoo as in Orwell's tale *Animal Farm*. The former intervenes in the *perestroika* process, whilst the other one makes fun of it with cruel mockery in his *Katastroika*. Sinavsky, who has been published in the USSR far a year, is creating scandals by taking positions that are more provocative than political. Bukowsky, although he is published there, in a sharp and biting book announces that the same causes will have the same effects. Russia had two providential figures: one, Sakharov, is dead; the other, from his stronghold in Cavendish, has just fired his pamphlet "How to reorganize Russia". I believe that the latter is the only man capable of rising up above the crowd as Sakharov had.

In an article which appeared last March, the critic Chrupinin depicts the dialogue which the two men had had with each other in the beginning of the 1970s as the model of constructive and respectful polemics which the two existing wings in Russia should emulate. The one (to come back to Bergson's categories) reveals its more closed and national approach, and the other which reveals an open, more "world-oriented" conception. In this nice dispute among Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov there was a partial opposition between the "open" and the "closed", but we must not forget that

Solzhenitsyn was fighting against a false internationalism, which was hiding the real imperialism of his own country. His preaching of the renunciation of the empire, the retreat to the seemingly “unpleasant” parts of the country, far from the Mediterranean, and far from the opulence of Europe, actually proposes a national mystical exaltation which has an universal value. That is to say that it is also oriented towards what Bergson called “openness”, but it is a spiritual kind of “open”, not social or political; in no way has he given up the idea of sending an universal message.

Of course Solzhenitsyn has very serious opponents in Russia, but to date they are not very numerous, and a kind of sacred consensus is maintained around his work. One of his opponents is the brilliant literary critic Benedikt Sarnov, who has written many times against the cult of Solzhenitsyn, to the point of quipping that this cult was just as bad as the cult of Stalin; others have spoken of the “Solzhenitsynization” of the country, aimed at a kind of strong orthodox power. But all this is contrary to the reality of Solzhenitsyn’s thinking. He has in fact no faith in orthodoxy as it is expressed today especially by its hierarchy.



Fallen horse

In fact, the only profound objection which has been aimed at Solzhenitsyn has come from a man who has an extreme admiration for him, the writer Wiatcheslaw Kondratiev, who objected that Solzhenitsyn had too much faith in the people, that his diagnosis was not severe enough, and that there actually did not exist a people any longer. It is possible that in his heart Solzhenitsyn agrees, but he will not say so; he belongs to the lineage of "conditional prophets": he foresees a catastrophe, except if the people resurge. As to the argument against a cult of Solzhenitsyn, Zalygin has already answered: "In principle, the cult of a great writer is not such a bad thing..." Today, in extreme spiritual scarcity, the only one to stand out is Solzhenitsyn, especially since the death of Sakharov.

The Russian idea

The problem today is to know whether the "return" of Solzhenitsyn through his books (and through the pamphlet which we will come back to later), will help the country to stop on its road to the abyss and to the blind call of violence. Solzhenitsyn helps his country because he gives a psychological cure, he is a living confessor of sins and hopes. All the questions which are being asked today with anxious acuteness, he has dealt with painfully (the Russians would say "suffered"...), from his meditation on the work of the good and the evil in the souls locked up in the Gulag (book 5 of *The Gulag Archipelago*) to his great questioning of the damages of excessive industrialization, passing through his stubborn research (through tons of archives), into the point at which the Russian society went off course before 1917.

The current debate in Russia conceals many dangers. One is a kind of "victimism": by thinking too much that 20th century Russia has, with its suicidal political choice (i.e. to have given itself to Lenin and to the intolerant totalitarianism of the Cause), in some way saved the rest of the world, one runs the danger of seeking refuge in obtruse Messianic sophisms. In other words, Russia is supposed to have sacrificed seventy years of its national existence to demonstrate to the world the disaster of the violent communist road that had tempted it, and which had tempted others as well. This "victimism" is passive and negative. Another danger is the almost total disappearance of the notion of *natural man*. One can not go back to the *natural man*, that of 18th century philosophers, because he has drowned in the political utopia of socialism. One can go back to it only through the catacombs, by questioning Kafka and Freud, both largely published, by studying the "anti-utopians" who are highly valued—both Andrei Platonov and Eugene Zamiatin, as well as Huxley and Orwell.

And on this road one meets the "Russian idea": an idea which is above all emotional, since the idealist Russian philosophers have never built closed systems, as have the western metaphysicians. This idea of Russia aspiring to the Kingdom of God here on earth is nothing but the nationalist equivalent of the universalist utopia which has already brought the country to disaster. Another kind of universalism must absolutely be found, probably through religion.

Today Russia is desperately seeking the means to come back to a culture and a spirituality which it had “before the violence”; which explains its passion for the first wave of Russian exiles, for the culture of the beginning of the century, for the evangelical spirits, filled with all the gracefulness of old Russia, such as the writer Boris Zaitsev, whose works are being constantly republished. But this desperate search can not really replace a deeper reflection on violence, and its empire in the 20th century.

We know now that Shostakovich carried his whole life long in his heart—like the “Memorial” that Blaise Pascal had sewed to his garment—the 1935 Pravda article entitled “Cacophony instead of music”. And in fact it is perhaps the real “memorial” of the totalitarian man, the “ideologized” man as Fazil Iskander says: always remember the intimate humiliation suffered in order not to assimilate it, not to make it one’s second nature. The “fire” which burns inside this subject of totalitarianism is his own decadence. One should de-ideologize the Soviet man, says the dark humorist Iskander.

But it is no easy thing, and it hides another danger: massive intolerance. It trickles up in the field of patriotic nationalisms, which find their expression in such journals as *Young Guard* and *Our Contemporary Times*, and the weekly *Soviet Culture*. Their Brunhild, as she is called, is Tatiana Gluchkova. I do not refer here to the verbal or other extremes of *Pamiat*, a tiny group about which it is difficult to get an idea (twenty thousand all over Russia and not all fanatics), but which does not count much in the debate on ideas. It is rather the nationalist writers and journalists who are making themselves heard. Their manifesto last March was the famous *Letter of 74*. The main fault of their argumentation is the idea that Russian culture or language are of their exclusive property, thereby reducing the universalism which this language and culture had already acquired in the 19th century: an universalism which they will find again, one could be almost certain, at the end of the current phase of change.

The return of Kitovras

By wanting to react against the excesses of rhetorical internationalism which has for so long helped to degenerate Russian into a sort of “pidgin-Russian”, they want to make Russian fall back into its own courtyard in the racial, geographic and cultural sense. Naturally this attempt is bound to fail after three centuries of Russian imperialism: Russian, whether it wants or not, has become the cultural language of a mass of non-Russian nations. In his *Monument*, Pushkin was proud that his memory would survive with the Kalmuks or the Finns. Today, perhaps the most lively part of Russian literature is due to bilingual writers who have come from the periphery of the empire and who have first translated their works by themselves, and then adopted Russian as their creative language: the Bielorrussian Bykov, the Kirguiz Aitmatov, the Kazakh Suleimenov, the Georgian Okudjava, the Moldav Drutse, the Abkhaz Iskander, and many others. This plurinationalist refusal of the cultural area of Russia is as

Georges Nivat

absurd as if a Roman of the Constantinian period had requested to limit Latin to the natives of Latium.

Furthermore, a kind of anti-Semitism accompanies it, often disguised as anti-Sionism, which is making a comeback as in the best days of the “doctor’s plot”. This abcess momentarily appeared in the city of Leningrad, where the liberals have taken control of the local Writers’ Union, in the person of writers such as Gordin, a remarkable historian of ideas in 19th century Russia, or Kuchner, one of the most subtle poets of the Russian language today. Both of these, as various others, are Russian by language, culture and spirit, but have mention of their Jewish “nationality” in their passport. The abolition of the distinction between “citizenship” and “nationality”, i.e. point 5 of the identity card forms, is being demanded by many people; but in the present inextricable complexity of the national problems, it is difficult to see how the government can implement it. The great “nationalistic” writers like Valentin Rasputin have hesitating behaviour, as they are torn by allegiances which are by nature hybrid, and a national ideal which they know can not be contaminated by exclusion. Rasputin did give his signature to the Letter of 74, but then took his distances, declaring that the nation should not be led towards discord, but should be uplifted by spiritual inspiration (a declaration which provoked the reprimand of Tatiana Gluchkova).

Here again, with the problem of the nation, its definition, its limits, a problem which is only starting to take shape in the USSR, Solzhenitsyn will play a role in bringing about solutions that are more spiritual than political, and this because one can not solve the empire’s problems, with its inextricable mixture of peoples, without a new vision of what is a nation, a cultural area, a linguistic area, and even a spiritual ecumene. Solzhenitsyn will certainly play a role, more intellectual than political, in solving this problem. Not everybody agrees, however. Many say this is expecting too much from Solzhenitsyn. Maria Rozanova, the wife of Andre Siniavski, has said in Leningrad that one of her French friends wants to give Russia a providential man, whom he himself would not want for his country.

The problem of course is that one calls on providential men only in tragic circumstances. In normal times, no one needs them. One can compare Solzhenitsyn to the prophet Jonas, who following the order of God, and proclaimed his word to the impious people of Nineveh. It then happened that God took pity of the Ninevians because of Jonas; but then Jonas resented this because he had announced to them that God would not return on his tracks, and he retired to the desert in a hut... Through his recent pamphlet, Solzhenitsyn has proven that he is not Jonas in his hut... It would already be very useful to be the prophet who was listened to but rejected. The country still very much needs its Jonas...

In Chapter 30 of the *Cancer Ward*, Solzhenitsyn reports an old Russian legend, the myth of Kitovras, a monster who could walk only along a straight line. King Solomon caught him through a cunning trick, had him chained up, and led to cut stones. “But

Kitovras could only go straight and when they made him go through Jerusalem, the houses had to be destroyed to make way for him. It happened that there was a small house on his way that belonged to a widow. The widow started begging Kitovras not to destroy her small hut, and she managed to convince him; Kitovras bent over, made himself as small as possible, broke a rib, but he left the house intact. He then said: a harsh word calls anger, but a soft word can break a bone. "Russia will have to break more than one bone to leave the widow's little house intact. But Kitovras is not dead, and will probably accept to have his ribs broken to break his rib, with the help of Solzhenitsyn.

The blueprint for Russia

It was in 1966 that the last article Solzhenitsyn wrote especially for a Soviet publication was published. A long parenthesis has just been closed when, at the end of September, the *Komsomolskaia Pravda* and the *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (all in all 28 million copies) published the fifteen page text which we have already mentioned, the text that all were waiting for: the advice and reflections of Solzhenitsyn on his country. Once again Solzhenitsyn did not let the media dictate the moment of his intervention: he decided it by himself and his taste for military tactics against the powers that be has not finished surprising us it seems. As all great strategists, he knows how to wait...

Having been accused of remaining silent, he is now accused of speaking. Pierre-Henri Lévy, in the French newspaper *Libération*, bids him "farewell" with disdain. But Solzhenitsyn does not care: his fellow citizens have heard in him an unmistakable sound, that of the independent prophet. The great text, which he has just provided Russia with, could be considered the "first really post-communist text", the first text not to locate itself in relation to the 1917 revolution, in relation to socialism (triumphant or shameful depending on the moments) a text which offers a future, which tries to exorcise the past definitely. And this bears a great healing quality in itself.

The pamphlet is first of all an inspired text, a great writer's text, and not just a political manifesto. There is the impetus, the "fury" so typical of his style: a division into short inspirations, elliptic sentences, full of energy through its anacolutha and concentrated syntax, the doubling of adjectives as in popular songs, borrowing energy from Russian proverbs. One finds again the gift of ferocious, fast and definitive irony, for example in the nicknames given to Lenin and Brezhnev: Ilic I and Ilic II. The two leaders had in fact the same patronym, but this "dynastization" of the two leaders rebuts—with much more cruelty than many long demonstrations—those who refuse to admit that Leninism begat Brezhnevism.

As always, Solzhenitsyn's discourse follows a path far away from the track of the usual debates, and consequently it is considered with suspicion. For example, people keep repeating that he is a nationalist and chauvinistic grumbler. Yet, the first thesis of



Adam and Eve driven from Paradise

his pamphlet, the most important one, is that Russia must free itself of its Empire. One must decide: either the empire and the spiritual death of Russia, or carnal and spiritual salvation without the empire. One must let the twelve non-Slav republics go. "Through the separation from these twelve republics, by what seems a sacrifice, Russia on the contrary will liberate itself for a much more precious internal development, it will finally channel its attention and its zeal to itself. In any event in the current mixture, what hope do we have of preserving and developing Russian culture? Everything is being mixed in, hashed up." Solzhenitsyn's irony thus attacks all the myths of a "one and indivisible" Russia; it will easily survive without Poland and Finland, it can let go of the Baltic countries, the trans-Caucasian republics, the Asian republics, and Moldavia, if the latter prefers Romania. Who needs old imperial common places, ideological formulas, what is urgent is to "become aware of our people in the abyss of its extenuating illness."

Solzhenitsyn had not spoken up thus for years, and there were calculations being made on whether this would be the approval or the rejection of *perestroika*. Of course,

neither one nor the other! How would he not recognize change? Isn't he the one who has shaken the avalanche which today is sweeping everything? But almost nothing has been done to purify the country: not only chasing the collaborators of an old criminal regime, but an act of contrition for this colossal suffering imposed on all of Russia, and for this failure just as great: "We have lost the 20th century". The communist episode is literally swept away by this simple statement, which summarizes in one sentence what the intellectuals of *perestroika* are developing every day in long articles and television programmes.

In 1973, Solzhenitsyn had published his *Letter to the Leaders*: today no one leader has in his hands the reins of Russian destiny, and thus Solzhenitsyn speaks to his brothers, to all the children of Rus, from the great Kievia of the Middle Ages, which gave birth to the three sister families: Great Russia, Little Russia and White Russia, or Bielorrussia.

In North America, Solzhenitsyn has clashed with Ukrainian nationalism, but he hopes that feelings of brotherhood will win out, by arguing: so many mixed families, so many indivisible links! But he also begs: "Brothers! We have no need for this cruel division! It is a darkening of the minds due to the communist years. Together we have gone through the sufferings of the Soviet period, together we fell into that ditch—together we will climb out of it." Whoever is even slightly familiar with the problems of the Ukraine knows that it will be difficult to separate Kiev from Russia. Nationalism comes mostly from the Western part. Far saying so, Solzhenitsyn, is being badly treated by the Ukrainian nationalists, who forget the essential thing: "Of course, if the Ukrainian people really want to separate, nobody can prevent them with the use of force." As De Gaulle in France, as a great and real nationalist, Solzhenitsyn says what no other political leader has said yet: Russia must separate from its empire, and even maybe from the Ukraine...

Democracy of small spaces

There is the moral, civic, political and economic programme, but especially political. Here as well, Solzhenitsyn is being continuously suspected of monarchism (which in itself, incidentally, is not a sin), or of theocratism (which would in fact be a bit more frightening), when actually the important event is his conversion to democracy: the years of *perestroika* have convinced Solzhenitsyn that democracy is after all feasible in Russia, whereas in 1973, he thought that the best thing, the most realistic thing, was an authoritarian regime which would concede the essential freedoms of conscience. "In the course of our times, we will undoubtedly have to choose democracy." Solzhenitsyn is thus proposing his fellow citizens a democracy which is slow, wise, decentralized to the extreme, both Athenian and Swiss, but in its first stages supported by a strong presidency, elected by direct universal suffrage. A major concession, the only one, to Gorbachev, on the condition that he is really elected by universal suffrage (which is not yet the case).

Solzhenitsyn then sketches an interesting, although not very convincing, political structure for this "democracy of small spaces", which has his preference and of which he dreams. He suggests a structure made up of four degrees of parliaments: local, cantonal, provincial, and national; the raising of the voting age and the eligible age for office, a second chamber where the professional organisations would be represented, and endowed on some matters with veto power. In other words, he proposes a local democracy, indirect at higher levels, with a tendency to government by the wise and the elders. This part of the reflections of the master from Vermont seems rather illusory, but its inspiration is strong, clean and prophetic: without a profound change, without the realization of this "democracy of small spaces", Russia has indeed very few chances of recovery. Only, it is a programme for a whole generation.

However, nothing here is proposed like a medical prescription; nor is the tone conciliatory. For the important thing is not the order of politics, but the order of morals: the moral purge will help to create an independent citizen. Without him, nothing will be solid; Stolypin had already said that without this autonomous citizen, nothing could be built. Solzhenitsyn tells us that we must create a Russian citizen who has never actually existed. And in this sense, the rank and file of Russian society must be revitalised as well as the local communities, there must be small scales. An economic and political life, a cultural and moral life of "small spaces" must be created. The *zemstvos* of the end of the 19th century, the greatest reform of Alexander II, that of self-government, must be restored and new inspiration taken from the small founding Cantons of Switzerland: and why not the *Landsgemeinde*, as in *Appenzell*, which impressed Solzhenitsyn so much during his visit there in 1975. What a paradox, this "Swiss" vision of "greater Russia" whose immense spaces were celebrated by Gogol. All of Solzhenitsyn, all of his power is in that paradox. He wants to master space as he wants to master the influx of foreign capital or limit the purchase of land. God knows how in Russia today there are naive people who believe that wild capitalism without protection mechanisms will be the panacea: Solzhenitsyn warns them.

One must recover, he says, "concern for the people", and this is possible only in small communities. Admittedly there is here a sign of Solzhenitsyn's utopianism. But this utopianism nourishes reflections and suggestions very closely related to today's problems: the author is proposing the slow launching of a democratic system which would little by little bring about a revival of provincial Russia, a Russia which has been prosperous in the past, without really having the political culture or local diversity which make up the wealth of Europe.

For, it must be said, Solzhenitsyn is much more "European" than is often thought of him. He is European in his concern to recreate in Russia a diversity which it had known in the Middle Ages, and which, in spite of the unification process, is typical of Western Europe. Nationalist as he is, he requires the definite renunciation of empire in order to heal Russia of its centralism. "Authoritarian" as he is, he requires the "Helvetization" of the immense Russian territory in order to create a real independent citizen. Active

Christian as he is, (continuously suspected of the sin of theocracy) he does not give any role to the church in the political rearranging of Russia, and blames the spiritual and political lethargy of today's hierarchy.

Many Soviet commentators have been moved to see Solzhenitsyn use the "we" form to speak about the problems of Russia. After the banishment, after the weight of insults poured on him by Soviet propaganda, and after so many years spent abroad, people did not expect to see him enter so painfully in today's struggle. Of course this surprise showed how little he was known. Everyone would have understood just severity from the outside, but Solzhenitsyn—in the West—was only a visitor, an exile. In the West, he has worked on his great endeavour, which is the resurrection of the memory of his country. Because without this memory the very essence of the country vanishes, the citizen loses his independence.

Primacy of the moral sphere

Solzhenitsyn deals with many problems of great relevance to Western Europe as well; for example, philosophical indifference, erosion of memory, moral indifference and political absenteeism. He is one of those who have not lost the tenacious hope of giving a new lease of life to Christian civilisation, though not in the least through Christian politics, or a Christian party, but through the induction of values, by returning to a sense of life based in some way on a "natural right" of Christian origin.

Self-limitation, purification, a return to a sense of the divine creation—these are the moral concepts which once again establish the primacy of the moral over the political sphere. From a minister of the 18th century, Piotr Shuvalov, Solzhenitsyn borrows this formula: "one must spare and preserve the people". One must stop experimenting on people: decolonize, de-ideologize, give back the land in limited quantities, develop local private initiative and local political life. Whoever is quite familiar with his works can find in the chapters of *The Red Wheel* the utopia of the village of Blagodariov, the good peasant soldier, heroic companion of Colonel Vorotyntsev. Solzhenitsyn proposes to do away definitely with the Asian concept of Russia, according to which a "strong hand" would be mandatory, as it is in the Middle Empire. He wants to belie the Western "specialists" who are more or less hostile to Russia (and there has been a host of them since Michelet), who see in its history ever more concentration, ever more police, ever more constraints.

One of Solzhenitsyn's nightmares, is that Russia might go again along the same path it followed in 1917, that is to say the cacophony of parties, the impotence of the government, and the flight ahead. The current *noise*, like that which the West is making, seems excessive, and on this he links up with the writer Valentin Rasputin: "After our long ignorance and deafness, thirst is a natural thing. The thirst to learn ever more the truth, what really happened with us. But some are starting to see it, others will see it soon: the current exaggerated flood of excessive and fragmented information is

tearing our souls apart, and we have reached the point where it is important to start self-limitation in its regards.”

Self-limitation in the “noise”, as in economics, as in politics... The whole of Solzhenitsyn’s work is a sort of stylistic, literary, moral self-limitation. The greatness of his work depends on this creative self-limitation which has given us the masterpiece *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovic*. Having reached this stage in his life, after the genocides of social engineering, in the middle ferocious roaring of the all-pervading media “noise”, Solzhenitsyn believes that the time has come to think of self-limitation in the field of ideological and journalistic noise, the noise of our civilization. He does not propose any constraining measures, but he thinks that we must, in one way or the other, reduce the intensity of this parasitic tide.

Russia is currently swamped by an enormous noise, where the risks of deafness and violent reactions are rising. The historian and moralist from Vermont, armed with the wisdom gathered from his work on the history of Russia before 1917, compelled by his inner vision, wants to have his word at the time of the final crumbling of the communist building, which may still, according to him, crush everything under it. His controlled anxiety, tempered by faith in a natural order of divine origin, proposes a wise utopia, which is not a programme to found a party or to follow policies, but provides a new opportunity to the *natural man*. And this not only in the interest only of Russia, this in the interest of the whole of Europe.

It may be too late for that. None of us know. But this strong, European voice which rises from Russia, a country morally paralyzed and caught in a cloud of political and social smog, is a voice that can not be ignored, and so it remains for all of us.

