

## **West's Betrayal of Civilisation**

by Isayevich (Aleksandr) Solzhenitsyn

### **FOREWORD**

An outstanding feature of history is that all great prophets are initially shunned, particularly when the Truth they bring is unpopular. The greatest of all prophets was crucified. When Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Russian literary genius and Christian martyr, was first exiled to the West early in 1974, he was big news. Journalists fell over themselves to interview this towering moral and intellectual figure. But Solzhenitsyn quickly ceased to be news when he warned the West that it was gliding into the same totalitarian abyss which had engulfed the unfortunate Russian people.

And when he charged in his dramatic New York address on July 9, 1975, that the West had financed the economic blood transfusions which had sustained Communism, it was predictable that he would soon be consigned to a non-person status. And that the smearers would start a campaign to denigrate this remarkable man. However, before being banned from the public stage, Solzhenitsyn was interviewed by Michael Charlton on the B.B.C., March 1, 1976. This interview caused such widespread interest that Solzhenitsyn was invited to address the West in general, and the British in particular, on the B.B.C. on March 26, 1976. This was a moving appeal to the British to re-discover their soul while there was still time to avoid complete disaster.

The address had a tremendous impact at the time, but subsequently every attempt was made by the pseudo-intellectuals to show that Solzhenitsyn was out of touch with the realities of the West. Unfortunately, events continue to confirm Solzhenitsyn's warnings. That is why those warnings must be given widespread circulation in permanent booklet form. Solzhenitsyn is essential reading for those who call themselves educated and cultured. This booklet contains both the Solzhenitsyn B.B.C. interview and address. Ensure that the voice of one of the greatest prophets of this century is not stilled at this time of deepening peril.

### **ALL OF US ARE STANDING ON THE BRINK OF A GREAT HISTORICAL CATACLYSM**

Solzhenitsyn 's B.B. C. address on March 26, 1976.

The B.B.C. has been kind enough to invite me to give my opinion, as a foreigner and an exile, on the West as it is today, and in particular on your country. An outside view, perhaps, may be able to contribute something fresh. My only hope is that you will not find what I have to say too tedious. I admit I am not all that well acquainted with the internal affairs of your country, but like so many Russians I have always followed Britain's foreign affairs with the keenest interest.

I intend to speak frankly and I shall not try to please you or to flatter you in any way. I would ask you to believe me when I say nothing could give me more pleasure than to express only admiration.

A quarter of a century ago, in the labour camps of Kazakhstan, as we braced ourselves for our hopeless task of stemming the Communist tanks, the West represented for us the light of freedom. For us the West was not only the stronghold of the spirit but also the depository of wisdom. In that very year one of your ministers, Herbert Morrison, somehow or other managed to persuade the newspaper *Pravda* to devote an entire page to his utterances - and without any censorship. My God, how eagerly we rushed to where the paper was displayed - a crowd of convicts with shaven heads, filthy, tattered jackets, clumsy prison-camp boots.

## **HOPES DASHED**

This was it! At last our subterranean kingdom was about to be pierced with the diamond-bright, diamond-hard, ray of truth and hope! At last Soviet censorship, held for forty years in the grip of a bulldog's jaws, was to be relaxed. Now he'd make them see the truth! Now he'd stand up for us! But as we read and re-read that feeble, insipid article, so our hopes subsided slowly with it.

These were the superficial words of someone who had not the slightest idea of the savage structure, the pitiless aims of the Communist world - and of course this was precisely why *Pravda* so generously agreed to print them.

We had endured forty years of hell - and this British minister could find no word of hope to say to us.

The years went by. The decades went by. In spite of the Iron Curtain, views about what was happening in the West, what people were thinking about, kept coming through to us, thanks mainly to the BBC's Russian broadcasts, even at the time when they were being most vigorously jammed. And the more we learned, the more the state of your world perplexed us. Human nature is full of riddles and contradictions; their very complexity engenders art - and by art I mean the search for something more than simple linear formulations, flat solutions, over-simplified explanations. One of these riddles is: how is it that people who have been crushed by the sheer weight of slavery and cast to the bottom of the pit can nevertheless find strength in themselves to rise up and free themselves - first in spirit and then in body - while those who soar unhampered over the peaks of freedom suddenly lose the taste of freedom, lose the will to defend it, and, hopelessly confused and lost, almost begin to crave slavery? Or again - why is it that societies which have been benumbed for half a century by lies they have been forced to swallow, find within themselves a certain lucidity of heart and soul which enables them to see things in their true perspective and to perceive the real meaning of events; whereas societies with access to every kind of information suddenly plunge into lethargy, into a kind of mass blindness, a kind of voluntary self-deception? This is precisely what we have found to be the correlation between the spiritual development of the East and that of the West.

And, alas, the process of your development is five, if not ten times swifter than ours, This is what almost robs mankind of any hope of avoiding a global catastrophe.

For years we refused to believe this. We hoped that our vision of the West was such, because the information which reached us was inadequate, A few years ago I spoke of this with considerable alarm in my Nobel lecture. And yet, until I came to the West myself and spent two years looking around, I could never have imagined to what an extreme degree the West actually desired to blind itself to the world situation, to what an extreme degree the West had already become a world without a will, a world gradually petrifying in the face of the danger confronting

## **WEST'S COURAGE LOST**

There is a German proverb which runs *Mut verloren - alles verloren!* - 'When courage is lost - all is lost,'

There is another Latin one, according to which loss of reason is the true harbinger of destruction.

But what happens to a society in which both these losses - the loss of courage and the loss of reason - intersect? This is the picture which, I found, the West presents today. There is of course a perfectly simple explanation for this process - not the superficial one, so fashionable in our day, according to which man himself is irreproachable and everything is blamed on a badly organised society. The explanation I have in mind is a purely human one.

Once it was proclaimed and accepted that above man there is no supreme being, and that instead man is the crowning glory of the universe and the measure of all things, then man's needs, desires - and indeed his weaknesses - were taken to be the supreme imperatives of the universe. Consequently the only good in the world - the only thing that needs to be done - is that which satisfies our feelings.

It was in Europe that this philosophy came to life several centuries ago; at the time its materialistic excesses were explained away by the previous excesses of Catholicism. But in the course of several centuries it inexorably swamped the whole of the Western world, and led it confidently on to colonial conquests, to the seizure of African and Asian slaves. And all this side by side with the outward manifestations of Christianity and the flowering of personal freedom.

By the beginning of the twentieth century this philosophy seemed to have reached the height of civilisation and reason. And your country, Britain, which had always been the core, the very pearl, of the Western world, gave expression to this civilisation in both its good and its bad aspects with particular brilliance.

## **110 MILLION LIVES**

In 1914, at the beginning of our ill-fated twentieth century, a storm broke over this civilisation, a storm the size and range of which no one at that time could grasp. For four years Europe destroyed herself as never before, and in 1917 a crevasse opened up on the very edge of Europe, a yawning gap enticing the world into the abyss. The causes of this crevasse are not hard to find: it came about as the logical result of doctrines that had been at large in Europe for ages and had enjoyed considerable success. But the crevasse has something cosmic about it, too, in its unplumbed, unsuspected depths, in its unimaginable capacity for growing wider and wider and swallowing up more and more people.

Forty years previously Dostoevsky had predicted that Socialism would cost Russia one hundred million victims. At the time it seemed an improbable figure. Let me recommend the British press to acquaint its readers with the impartial three-page report of the Russian statistician, Professor Ivan Kurganov. It was published in the West twelve years ago, but, as is so often the case with matters of social significance, we only take cognizance of things that do not run counter to our own feelings. From Professor Kurganov's analysis we learn that if Dostoevsky erred, he erred on the side of understatement.

From 1917 to 1959 Socialism cost the Soviet Union a hundred and ten million lives!

When there is a geological upheaval continents do not topple into the sea immediately. The first thing that happens is that that fatal initial crevasse has to appear in some place or other. For a variety of reasons it so happened that this crevasse first opened up in Russia. It might have been anywhere else. And Russia, which people considered a backward country, had to leap forward a whole century, overtaking all the other countries in the world. We endured inhuman experiences, experiences of which the Western world - and this, includes Britain - has no real conception and which the West is frightened even to think about.

It is with a strange feeling that those of us who come from the Soviet Union look upon the West of today. It is as though we were neither neighbours on the same planet, nor contemporaries - and yet we contemplate the West from what will be your future, or look back seventy years, to see our past suddenly repeating itself. And what we see is always the same, always the same as it was then: adults deferring to the opinion of their children; the younger generation carried away by shallow worthless ideas; professors scared of being unfashionable; journalists refusing to take responsibility for the words they squander so profusely; universal sympathy for revolutionary extremists; people with serious objections unable or unwilling to voice them; the majority passively obsessed by a feeling of doom; feeble governments; societies whose defensive reactions have become paralysed; spiritual confusion leading to political upheaval.

What will happen as a result of all this lies ahead of us. But the time is near, and from bitter memory we can easily predict what these events will be.

## **MORAL DECLINE**

In the years which followed the world-wide upheaval of 1917 that pragmatic philosophy on which present-day Europe was nourished, with its refusal to take moral decisions, has reached its logical conclusion: since there are no higher spiritual forces above us and since I - Man with a capital M - am the crowning glory of the universe, then should anyone have to perish today let it be someone else, anybody but not I, not my precious self, nor those who are close to me.

The apocalyptic storm was already raging over the land which used to be Russia when Western Europe speedily extricated itself from that terrible war in its haste to forget it and to bring back prosperity, fashions and the latest dances.

Lloyd George actually said: 'Forget about Russia. It's our job to ensure the welfare of our own society.'

In 1914, when the Western democracies needed help, they were not averse to appealing to Russia. But in 1919 those Russian generals, who for three years, straining Russian resources to the very limit, had fought to save the Marne, the Somme and Verdun, were refused either military aid or even an alliance by their Western allies. Many a Russian soldier lay buried in French soil; others who had gone to Constantinople were charged for their rations and even had their underwear confiscated in lieu of payment. They were then cajoled into returning to Russia, only to be dealt with by the Bolsheviks, or into embarking for Brazil, only to become semi-slaves on the coffee plantations.

Unseemly deeds are usually accompanied by high-sounding, even brilliant, justifications. In 1919 no one said openly: 'What have your sufferings got to do with us?' Instead people said: 'We have no right to support even the authority of an ally against the wishes of the people.' (Note, however, that in 1945, when millions of Soviet citizens had to be handed over for despatch to the Gulag Archipelago, this argument was conveniently twisted: 'We have no right to carry out the wishes of these millions,' it was said, 'and to ignore our obligations towards the authorities of an allied country.' How easily one's egosim can be satisfied by a

handy formula!)

But there were even nobler justifications than these: what was happening in Russia was nothing more than a continuation of all that had happened in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe, a repetition of the general transition from liberalism to Socialism. This tendency of ideas to continue on their natural course made people admire them. And so all the aggressive elements, all the influential elements in society - and this was especially the case in Britain - admired what they called the 'unprecedented progressive experiment taking place in the USSR,' while we were being strangled by the cancerous tentacles of the Gulag Archipelago, while millions of hardworking peasants were being sent to die in Siberia in mid-winter.

Not very far from where you live, in the Ukraine and the Kuban, some six million peasants, including children, old men and women, died of famine - and this was in peacetime - swollen with hunger and writhing in agony.

### **BERNARD SHAW**

And not a single Western newspaper printed photographs or reports of the famine - indeed, your great wit Bernard Shaw even denied its existence. 'Famine in Russia?' he said. 'I've never dined so well or so sumptuously as when I crossed the Soviet border.' For whole decades your rulers, your members of Parliament, your spokesmen, your journalists, your writers, your leading thinkers managed not even to notice the fifteen-million-strong Gulag Archipelago!

Up to thirty books on the Gulag were published in Europe before mine and hardly one of them was even noticed.

There is a border line, beyond which the natural cause of 'progressive principles', of 'the dawn of a new era' becomes nothing more than calculated conscious hypocrisy; for this makes life more comfortable to live. There was, however, one great exception over the last hundred years or so, and that was your struggle with Adolf Hitler, when Britain cast overboard the philosophy of pragmatism, or utilitarianism - the philosophy of recognizing any group of gangsters, any puppets, as heads of a country so long as they were in control of its territory.

With Hitler, Britain assumed a moral stance and it was this that inspired her to one of the most heroic acts of resistance in her history. A moral stance, even in politics, always safeguards our spirit; sometimes, as we can see, it even protects our very existence. A moral stance can suddenly turn out to be more far-sighted than any calculated pragmatism. Your war with Hitler, however, was not tragic in the Aristotelian sense of the word. Your sacrifices, sufferings and losses were justified; they did not run counter to the aims of the war. You defended - and successfully defended - precisely that which you intended to defend. But for the peoples of the USSR the war was a tragic war. We were forced to defend our native land with all the strength we could muster (and with infinitely greater losses: Kurganov's figures are indisputable: forty-four million), and in so doing to strengthen all the things that we most loathed - the power of our own executioners, our oppression, our destruction and, as we can see today, ultimately your destruction too. And when those millions of Soviet citizens dared to flee from their oppressors or even to initiate national liberation movements, then our freedom-loving Western allies - and not least among them your British - treacherously disarmed them, bound them, and handed them over to the Communists to be killed. They were sent to the labour camps in the Urals where they mined

uranium for the atom bombs to be used against you yourselves!

## **"FREE" PRESS**

Nor did you shrink from using the butts of your rifles on seventy-year-olds, those very men who had been Britain's allies in the First World War, and who were now being hastily handed over to be murdered. From the British Isles alone one hundred thousand Soviet citizens were forcibly repatriated while on the Continent the number was more than a million. But the most remarkable thing of all was that your free, independent, incorruptible press, your famous *Times*, *Guardian*, *New Statesman* and all the rest of them, all wittingly shared in the covering up of this crime and would have kept silent to this very day had not Professor Epstein from America so tactlessly started his investigations into the Fascist techniques which democracies are capable of employing.

The conspiracy of the British press was only too successful: indeed there must be many people in Britain today who have not the faintest idea about this crime committed at the end of the Second World War. But it was committed, and it has left a deep and painful mark on the Russian memory. Twice we helped save the freedom of Western Europe. And twice you repaid us by abandoning us to our slavery.

It is clear what you wanted. Once again you wanted to extricate yourself as quickly as possible from this terrible war, you wanted to rest, you wanted to prosper. But there was a price to pay. And the noble philosophy of pragmatism laid down that once again you should close your eyes to a great many things: to the deportation of whole nations to Siberia, to Katyn, to Warsaw - in that same country for whose sake the war had started; you should forget Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; you should hand over six more of your European sisters into slavery and allow a seventh to be cut in two; at Nuremberg you should sit amicably side by side with judges who were every bit as much murderers as those on trial, and never let this disturb your British sense of justice.

Whenever a new tyranny came into existence, however far away - in China, say, or Laos - Britain was always the first to recognise it, eagerly pushing aside all competitors for the honour. All this required great moral fortitude - and your society was not found lacking. All one had to do was to repeat again and again the magic formula: 'The dawn of a new era'. You whispered it. You shouted it. And when you grew sick of it and decided to reaffirm your valour in the eyes of the world and recover your self-respect, then your country manifested incomparable daring - against . . . Iceland, against . . . Spain, countries which could not even answer you back.

## **DEATHLY SILENCE**

Tank columns in East Berlin, Budapest and Prague declared that they were there 'by the will of the people', but not once did the British Government recall its ambassadors in protest from any of these places. In South East Asia unknown numbers of prisoners have been killed and are still being killed in secret; yet the British ambassadors have not been recalled. Every day in the Soviet Union psychiatrists murder people with their hypodermic syringes merely because they do not think along accepted lines or because they believe in God - again the British ambassador is never recalled. But when five terrorists - who had actually committed murder - were executed in Madrid, then the British ambassador was recalled and the din reverberated throughout the world. What a hurricane burst forth from the British Isles!

You have to know how to protest. It's got to be done with a great deal of anger - but only so long as it does not run counter to the spirit of the age, and presents no danger to the authorities of those protesting. If only you could make use of your British scepticism for a moment - it can't have deserted you entirely - and put yourselves in the position of the oppressed peoples of Eastern Europe - then you can view your unseemly behaviour through our eyes!

The Prime Minister of Spain was murdered and all cultured Europe was delighted. Some Spanish policemen, even some Spanish hairdressers, were murdered - and the countries of Europe went wild with joy, as if their own police were insured against the Terrorist International.

Not a single family driving to an airport can be sure that it won't be gunned down by some 'fighter' for someone or other's 'freedom'. No one can be sure that he'll get to the end of the street safe and sound. But terrorists can be sure public opinion guarantees that their lives will be safe, that their cause will be given publicity and that they will be held in decent confinement - until such time as other terrorists come and rescue them.

A society for the protection of terrorists indeed!

There was such a society in Russia before her collapse: we too have trodden this fatal path.

## **FALSE SECURITY**

Meanwhile the crevasse grows ever wider, spreads even further across the globe, shifts into other continents. The most populous country in the world has plunged headlong into it. So too, have numerous defenceless tribes - Kurds, Northern Abyssinians, Somalis, Angolans - without the British with their great tradition of freedom showing the slightest anxiety over such petty matters. Even today you are lulled into thinking that these fine islands of yours will never be split in two by that crevasse, will never be blown sky-high. And yet the abyss is already there beneath your very feet.

Every year several more countries are seized and taken over as bridgeheads for the coming world war, and the whole world stands by and does nothing. Even the oceans are being taken over - and need one tell you British what that means or what the seas will be used for? And what of Europe today? It is nothing more than a collection of cardboard stage sets, all bargaining with each other to see how little can be spent on defence so as to leave more for the comforts of life.

The continent of Europe, with its centuries-long preparation for the task of leading mankind, has of its own accord abandoned its strength and its influence on world affairs - and not just its physical influence but its intellectual influence as well. Dynamic decisions, major movements have now begun to mature beyond the frontiers of Europe. How strange it all is! Since when has mighty Europe needed outside help to defend herself? At one moment she had such a surfeit of strength that while waging wars within her own boundaries and destroying herself she was still able to seize colonies.

At another - she suddenly found herself hopelessly weak without even having lost a single major war.

However hidden it may be from the human gaze, however unexpected for the practical mind, there is sometimes a direct link between the evil we caused to others and the evil which suddenly confronts us. Pragmatists may explain this link as a chain of natural cause and effect. But those who are more inclined to a religious view of life will immediately perceive a

link between sin and punishment. It can be seen in the history of every country.

The generation of today has had to pay for the shortcomings of their fathers and grandfathers who blocked their ears to the lamentations of the world, and closed their eyes to its miseries and disasters.

## **SPIRITUAL CONTEMPT**

Your newspapers may be famous for their traditions, yet they print a number of articles containing analyses and commentaries which are shamefully shallow and short-sighted. What can one say when your leading Liberal paper compares the contemporary development of the Russian spiritual regeneration...with pigs trying to fly? This is not just contempt for the spiritual potential of my people. It is broader than that. It is a kind of fastidious contempt for any kind of spiritual regeneration, for anything which does not stem directly from economics but which is based on moral criteria. What an inglorious end to four hundred years of materialism!

The decline of contemporary thought has been hastened by the misty phantom of Socialism. Socialism has created the illusion of quenching people's thirst for justice. Socialism has lulled their conscience into thinking that the steam-roller which is about to flatten them is a blessing in disguise, a salvation. And Socialism, more than anything else, has caused public hypocrisy to thrive; it has enabled Europe to ignore the annihilation of sixty-six million people on its very borders.

There is not even a single precise definition of Socialism which is generally recognised: all we have is a sort of hazy shimmering concept of something good, something noble - so that two Socialists talking to each other about Socialism might just as well be talking about completely different things. And of course, any new-style African dictator can call himself a Socialist without fear of contradiction.

But Socialism defies logic. You see, it is an emotional impulse, a kind of worldly religion, and nobody has the slightest need to study or even to read the teachings of its early prophets. Their books are judged by hearsay; their conclusions are accepted ready-made. Socialism is defended with a passionate lack of reason; it is never analysed; it is proof against all criticism. Socialism - especially Marxist Socialism - uses the neat device of declaring all serious criticism 'outside the framework of possible discussion', and one is required to accept ninety-five per cent of Socialist doctrine as a 'basis for discussion' - all that is left to argue is the remaining five per cent.

There is another myth here, too, namely that Socialism represents a sort of ultra-modern structure, an alternative to dying capitalism. My friend, Academician Igor Shafarevich, has shown in his extensive study of Socialism that Socialist systems - systems, that is, which are being used today to lure us to some halycon future - made up the greatest portion of the previous history of mankind - in the Ancient East, in China; and were to be repeated later in the bloody experiments of the Reformation. As for Socialist doctrines, he has shown that they emerged far later but have still been with us for over two thousand years; and that they originated not in an eruption of progressive thought as people think nowadays, but as a reaction - Plato's reaction against Athenian democracy, the Gnostics' reaction against Christianity - a reaction against the dynamic world of individualism and a return to the impersonal, stagnant system of antiquity.

And if we follow the explosive sequence of Socialist doctrines and Socialist Utopias



preached in Europe - by Thomas More, Campanella, Winstanley, Morelli, Deschamps, Baboeuf, Fourier, Marx and dozens of others - we cannot help shuddering as they openly proclaim certain features of that terrible form of society. It is about time we called upon right-minded Socialists calmly and without prejudice to read, say, a dozen of the major works of the major prophets of European Socialism and to ask themselves: is this really that social ideal for which they would be prepared to sacrifice the lives of countless others and even to sacrifice their own?

## **COMPULSORY EQUALITY**

Socialism begins by making all men equal in material matters only (this of course requires compulsion: the advocates of all brands of Socialism agree on this point). However, the logical progression towards so-called 'ideal' equality inevitably implies the use of force. Furthermore it means that the basic element of personality - those elements which display too much variety in terms of education, ability, thought and feeling - must themselves be levelled out. The English saying 'My home is my castle' stands in the way of Socialism. And again, there is that attractive-sounding formula 'Socialist Democracy' which is about as meaningful as talking about 'boiling ice': for it is precisely democracy that the dragon (of Socialism) is about to devour.

And as democracy grows weaker and weaker, loses more and more ground in the two continents it partially covers, so the force of tyranny spreads throughout the globe. Let me remind you that 'forced labour' is part of the programme of all prophets of Socialism, including Communist Manifesto.

**There is no need to think of the Gulag Archipelago as an Asiatic distortion of a noble ideal. It is an irrevocable law.**

Modern society is hypnotised by Socialism. It is prevented by Socialism from seeing the mortal danger it is in. And one of the greatest dangers of all is that you have lost all sense of danger, you cannot even see where it's coming from as it moves swiftly towards you. You imagine you see danger in other parts of the globe and hurl the arrows from your depleted quiver there. But the greatest danger of all is that you have lost the will to defend yourselves.

## **STRENGTH SAPPED**

And Great Britain - the kernel of the Western world as we have already called it - has experienced this sapping of its strength and will to an even greater degree, perhaps, than any other country. For some twenty years Britain's voice has not been heard in our planet; its character has gone, its freshness has faded. And Britain's position in the world today is of less significance than that of Romania, or even . . . Uganda.

British common sense - so lucid, so universally acknowledged - seems to have failed her now. Contemporary society in Britain is living on self-deception and illusions both in the world of politics and in the world of ideas. People build rickety structures to convince themselves that there is no danger and that its irrevocable advance is nothing more than the establishment of a stable world.

**We, the oppressed peoples of Russia, the oppressed peoples of Eastern Europe, watch with anguish the tragic enfeeblement of Europe. We offer you the experience of our suffering; we would like you to accept it without having to pay the monstrous price of death and slavery that we have paid.**

But your society refuses to heed our warning voices. I suppose we must admit, sad though it is, that experience cannot be transmitted: everyone must experience everything for himself. Of course, it is not just a question of Britain; it is not just a question of the West - it concerns all of us, in the East as well as in the West. We are all, each in his own way, bound together by a common fate, by the same bands of iron. And all of us are standing on the brink of a great historical cataclysm, a flood that swallows up civilisation and changes whole epochs. The present world situation is complicated still more by the fact that several hours have struck simultaneously on the clock of history. We have all got to face up to a crisis - not just a social crisis, not just a political crisis, not just a military crisis. And we must not only face up to this crisis but we must stand firm in this great upheaval - an upheaval similar to that which marked the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance.

Just as mankind once became aware of the intolerable and mistaken deviation of the late Middle Ages and recoiled in horror from it, so too must we take account of the disastrous deviation of the late Enlightenment. We have become hopelessly enmeshed in our slavish worship of all that is pleasant, all that is comfortable, all that is material - we worship things, we worship products.

Will we ever succeed in shaking off this burden, in giving free rein to the spirit that was breathed into us at birth, that spirit that distinguishes us from the animal world?

### **"I AM A CRITIC OF THE WEAKENING OF THE WEST"**

The text of Michael Charlton 's B.B.C. London, interview with Solzhenitsyn on March 1, 1976

Q. Aleksandr Isa'ich, 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. I wonder if you believe that time will prove that judgement to be correct?

A. In the way you put that question there is a certain false assumption. It assumes 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. 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, 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 warning of others - Sakharov's very grave warning directly from the Soviet Union - these 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 from nation to nation, and from one person to another . . . But now I am beginning to have doubts. Perhaps everyone is fated to live through every experience himself in order to understand.

Q. You are in a 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?

A. When I use the word "Russian" I always differentiate it from the word "Soviet" - I have in mind here even pre-Soviet experience, pre-Revolutionary 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.

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

A. 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 in 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 counter-arguments less one becomes involved. And so there is a certain abdication of responsibility, which is typical here where there is complete freedom.

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) 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 defence 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.

Q. It is this West, as you say though, which 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, in view of what you have just said, have reshaped your views? You are obviously more pessimistic now than you were when you came.

A. 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. 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, the fortress of the spirit, our

hope, our ally. We all thought that 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 learned to listen through even the fiercest jamming to, for example, your B.B.C.

We realised 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.

When I came here my doubts unfortunately increased very rapidly. But the point is, of course, that during these two years the West itself has gone through a good deal, it has become much weaker in relation to the East. The West has made so many concessions that now a repetition of the angry campaign which 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. Moscow now takes infinitely less note of the West.

Q. Can I suggest that perhaps one of the difficulties in your own case is this. You are no longer the quiet tourist in the West. You are in some respects an impassioned critic. I think that the people in the West who criticise 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 that you accept?

A. You know, that is one of the consequences of the weak sense of responsibility of the press. It makes judgements and sticks on labels with the greatest of ease. Mediocre journalists simply make headlines of their conclusions, which suddenly become the general opinion throughout the West. You have just enumerated several propositions and practically all of them are not true. Firstly, I am not a critic of the West. I repeat that for nearly all our lives we worshipped it - note the word "worshipped". 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 will-power, and possessing freedom not value it, not 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 forwards. That means that choice lies only between those movements which go forwards, and not backwards. 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 which 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 when are you not a nationalist? When you hate England, then you are not a nationalist.

Q. 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 describe? If the West cannot help, what is the way forward for the Russian people?

A. 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 that the way out was to seek the path of evolution, certainly not the revolutionary path. Not an explosion. And this is where Sakharov and I agree. An evolutionary smooth path which 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. 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.

Q. Why, though, do you think that people in the West have begun to feel uneasy with you? After this enormously varied experience that you've had - you've been a teacher, a decorated war hero, an officer in the Soviet army, you have been a cancer patient, you've been a political prisoner in concentration camps - what is the central point, in all that you say, that you stand for?

A. I would say that my outlook on life has been formed largely in concentration camps - that part of my life which 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 say 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 good or evil are not one and the same thing, that one cannot build one's life without regard to this distinction.

I am surprised that pragmatic philosophy consistently scorns moral considerations. 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 recognise any power over any territory regardless of its moral character, but they even hasten to recognise it - even try to be the first to do so. 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 recognise them.

One should not consider that the great principles of freedom finish at one's 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 towards it. Perhaps this is one of the main points of disagreement.

Q. You mention "*The 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. 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 byproduct of it, but to fight against untruth and falsehood, to fight against myths, or to fight against an ideology which is hostile to mankind, to fight for our memory, for our memory of what things were life - 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 recreate. When I sit down to write these books, my only task is to recreate 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 had read all this and understood it would simply have no more room in their minds for Communist ideology.

Q. In one of your most recent books you paint a portrait of Lenin in Zurich. Many people, I think, have noted a similarity between the two of you. The portrait you paint of a forceful character, Lenin, powerless to influence events inside Russia, cut off isolated, impatient - that does sound rather like you. Would you, like Lenin, be surprised at a profound change in your country taking place in your lifetime?

A. You know, I have been working on the image of Lenin for forty years. From the moment 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 that I could, every detail, and my only aim was to recreate him alive, as he was. But in attacking Lenin, of course, you attack the legitimacy of the whole Soviet government, of the Bolsheviks themselves.

Q. Are you saying that there will be this spiritual revival which will in time overthrow the Communist system?

A. I don't attack Lenin. I describe him as he is, and for 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 his ideology. The spiritual renaissance of our country lies in our liberation from this deadening, killing ideology.

Q. Is it valid to suggest a strong comparison between yourself and Lenin? There was he,

waiting in Zurich. He couldn't do anything about the internal situation and was quite surprised when the change came, he, the great revolutionary. Would you be surprised if change came?

A. He was surprised because of his short-sightedness. 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 First 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. The situation at the moment is such, 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 agonising 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. 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.

Q. You say this from the moral standpoint of a devout Christian, I know, and truth for you is more important than consequences. But what alternatives are there to treating with the Devil, as you would say, if the purpose of that is to avoid nuclear catastrophe?

A. 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? The most important aspect of detente today is that there is no ideological detente. You Western people, you simply can't grasp the power of Soviet propaganda: today you still remain "British imperialists" who wish to strangle the whole earth. All this is hidden beneath the thin crust of detente; to remove this crust will take only one morning: one single morning. You can't be turned away from detente 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.

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

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 detente 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 I would like to give you a few examples, a few fresh examples which you will not have heard 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 Kryukov, they have come to fix the gas; he opens the door. They beat him up 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 passers-by, they shoved her into a car and took her to prison. That's the spirit of Helsinki and detente for us. And so it goes on.

In Odessa, Vyacheslav Grunov has been arrested for possessing illicit literature and put into a lunatic asylum. They've released Plyusch, but continue to lock up others. There you have detente and the spirit of Helsinki.

Q. Aleksandr Isa'ich, there was 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". Are you saying that this policy of detente was formulated by the Soviet government expressly for the purpose of preventing internal liberalisation in the Soviet Union? In other words, the Soviet Union can only catch up by importing its technology from abroad and clamping down internally?

A. Here, forgive me, there are several questions. Yet, it is the import of technology which 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 have all had 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 as from a short distance these words allow one to manoeuvre and 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?

Most people, of course, welcome detente as a respite from that. I would like to emphasise that you think this is a respite, but it 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. Today you don't have to be a strategist to understand why Angola is being taken. What for? It is one of the most recent positions from which to wage world war 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. 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 detente if you like but after Angola I just can't understand how one's tongue can utter this word!



Your Defence 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 Defence Minister to say that the Soviet Union has finally passed the test! Or will it be sitting the exam? I think there is no such thing as detente. Detente is necessary, but detente with open hands. Show that there is no stone in your hands! But your partners with whom you are conducting detente have a stone in their hands, and it is so heavy that it would kill you with one single blow. Detente becomes self-deception, that's what it is all about.

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

A. 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 that 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 towards me, so my own destiny may be decided before that of my country; it is 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 favour of the Soviet Union.