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# Alexander Solzhenitsyn - political importance and literary genius

By Michael Scammell  
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The story of Solzhenitsyn's meteoric rise to fame with the unexpected publication of *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in Tvardovsky's *Novy Mir* has entered the annals of Russian literature, creating a new and potent legend akin to the story of Belinsky's discovery of Dostoevsky a century earlier. And deservedly so, for the novel exploded in the literary and spiritual vacuum created by the Soviet censorship with the force of a virtual atomic bomb. It was a bomb heard round the world as well. The book was translated into English and other languages with unprecedented speed and became an instant bestseller, spawning articles, television programs, and even discussions in Western parliaments about the prospects for Soviet reform.

With one short book Solzhenitsyn had entered both the literary and the political arena, raising questions about the history, nature, and viability of the Soviet system and its impact on ordinary Russians. *Ivan Denisovich Shukhov* was a Russian Everyman, the victim of an arbitrary tyranny who had to endure every possible hardship short of death, with no hope of mercy although he was totally innocent. Among electrified Russian readers there were rumors that censorship had been abolished, and abroad there were hopes for a real relaxation of the Stalinist dictatorship and a detente between East and West.

But these hopes were quickly dashed, and Solzhenitsyn himself managed to publish only three more short stories (including the Tolstoyan *Matrona's Place*) before censorship was strengthened again, and officially published literature returned to its gray and lifeless condition.

But the genie had been let out of the bottle. Solzhenitsyn demonstrated his stature by producing in quick succession two major novels, *The First Circle* and *Cancer Ward*, both of them replete with discussions of Soviet history and politics, and tackling the "accursed questions" that had tormented Russian authors and thinkers before him: how then should we live? What then should we do? Even: who is to blame? Unlike *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* they also had tangled plots, a cast of full-blooded characters, and romantic interest in the great tradition of the Russian novel. Neither book was published in the Soviet Union, but both appeared abroad to worldwide acclaim, and as Solzhenitsyn's battle with the authorities (still the stuff of legend) was approaching its climax, he exploded his hydrogen bomb, *The Gulag Archipelago*, his three-volume saga of the labor camps, which did more to discredit and weaken the Soviet regime than any single other work of literature.

By then, Solzhenitsyn's expulsion to the West was virtually inevitable, and he himself had also reached a crossroads in his work. He had started on a series of lengthy historical novels designed to illuminate and explain the genesis of the Soviet Union in detail and depth, unlike the elliptical way he had approached this subject in his earlier works. The result was *The Red Wheel*, in four "knots," each as long as *War and Peace*, totaling over 5,000 pages, of which only two knots have appeared in English. He also published several works of an overtly political character, starting with *Letter to the Soviet Leaders* and continuing with *A World Split Apart*, *Rebuilding Russia*, and other essays, and a monumental history of the Jews in Russia, *Two Hundred*

Years Together, along with a fascinating memoir of his years as an underground author in Russia, The Oak and the Calf.

Inevitably it is Solzhenitsyn's undoubted political and historical importance that has attracted the most comment in recent Western obituaries, along with an examination of his steadily more conservative views, his increasing hostility toward the West, and a subordination of his talent to politics and literature.

What seems to have got lost, however, or overlooked, is an appreciation of the literary genius that guaranteed his voice a hearing in the first place. The existence of the gulag had been known to Westerners since the 1920s, the repressions of collectivization since the 1930s, the executions of party leaders since the 1940s, and the arrests of millions after World War II since the 1950s. It's surely true that the Cold War made Western readers more receptive to this information - and other dissident writers contributed to the change in atmosphere - but it was Solzhenitsyn who, through dedication to his craft, wrested a powerfully colloquial style from the dead language of socialist realism to create a voice that plumbed the depths of human experience.

It was a voice from underground, from the nether world of the gulag - the hoarse, vulgar, hectoring voice of the zek, alive and passionate, smoldering with righteous anger, filled with a burning thirst to be heard, a hunger for justice to be done, and impossible to ignore. Muted, but still powerfully present in A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, it came through clearly in Cancer Ward, was only slightly muffled by intellectual discourse in The First Circle, and burst into full-throated glory in The Gulag Archipelago, bearing echoes of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Gorky, and also, perhaps of Rabelais, but uniquely Solzhenitsyn's own. Among other things it turned "gulag" into an internationally familiar word, but it's the Russian title that unmistakably signals Solzhenitsyn's linguistic genius: archipelag gulag, betokening a sinister, slimy, slithering, insatiable creature that devours its victims whole, leaving them no way out and with no hope of escape.

Of course there was more to Solzhenitsyn, not least the moral urgency and search for spiritual consolation in his work, but though the message and the matter of Solzhenitsyn's books are extraordinarily important, it is their literary qualities that guarantee his immortality.

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