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Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and the Modern Russo-Jewish Question

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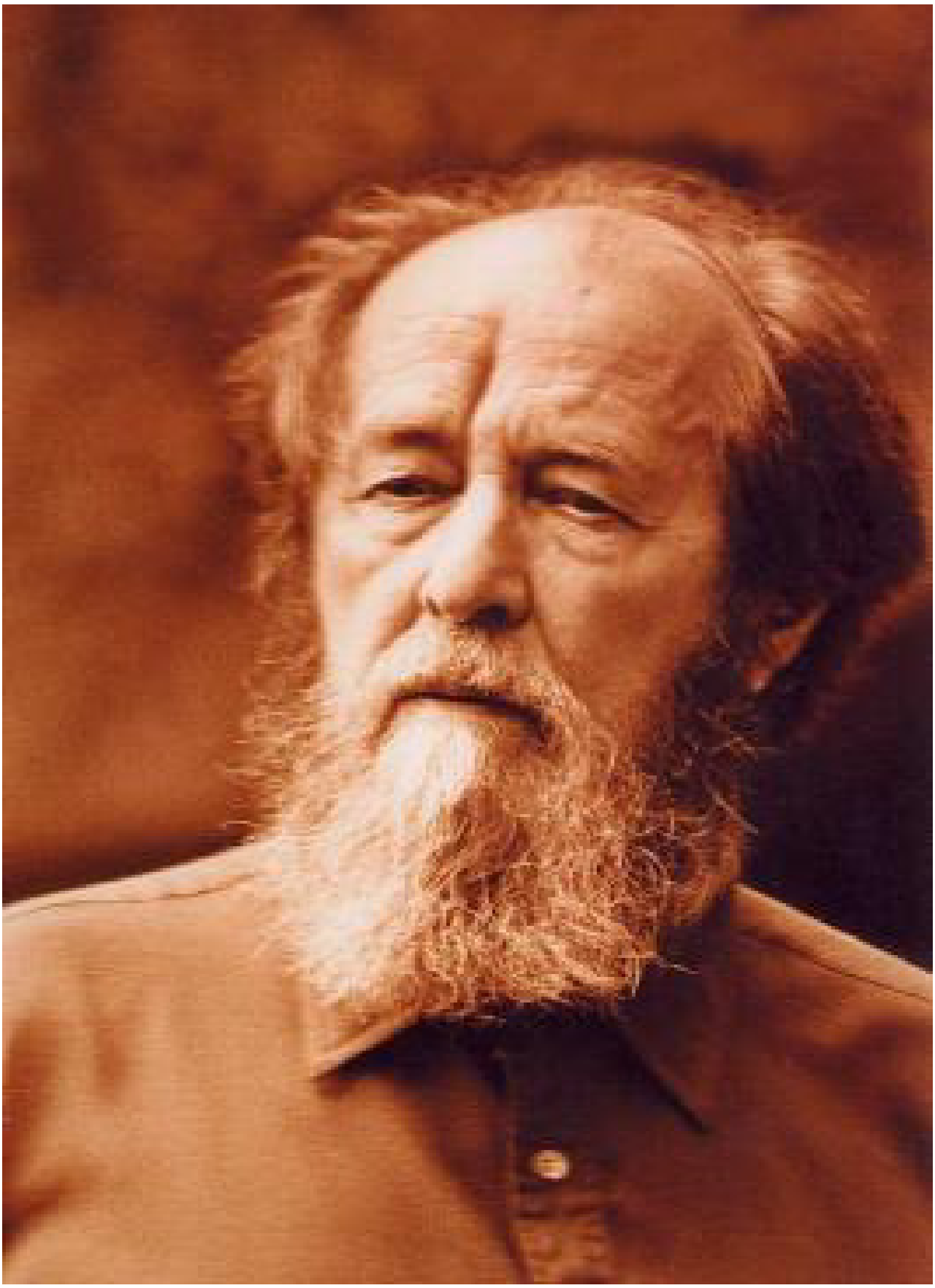
List of Contents



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I Introduction

The Jewish nation is thought by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn to be the catalyst for all humanity.[1] This dynamic race has created an indelible mark in the history of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and it will undoubtedly continue its courtship with post-Communist Russia. As we cast our minds back to the eighteenth-century partition of Eastern Poland, the annexation of which integrated roughly a million Jews into the Russian Empire, we peruse pages of history depicting the good and malevolent rendered by Russian and Jew alike to one another throughout generations. What has come to be known as the "Jewish Question"—the enigma of Jewish place in world history—is a contemporary reality in the eyes of many Russians and has assumed renewed color since the dissolution of the Soviet regime in 1991. Likewise, many Jews struggle to discover an identity amidst the new socio-political landscape of post-Communist Russia. This is one of the great love-hate relationships of history, neither race being unaffected.

As a part of his historical prose, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn has written prolifically on the Jewish Question and has been both venerated as a prophet and castigated as an anti-Semite for so doing. The significant and at times reprehensible events surrounding prominent Jewish figures in Solzhenitsyn's novels have raised suspicious eyes ever since the writer's fame began escalating in the 1970s. Whilst the rich character development of the Jewish revolutionary Dmitri Bogrov in *August 1914* bears witness of the importance of the Jewish Question in Russian history, the attributes ascribed to Parvus from *Lenin in Zurich* certainly raise the question: is Solzhenitsyn anti-Semitic? Nevertheless, in Solzhenitsyn's canon there is an array of Jewish character types, some ignoble and others benevolent. Whether or not the writer's heart is free of prejudice, accusations of anti-Semitism have been profuse for decades and continue to the present day.

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1 Viktor Loshak, „Raskalennyi vopros," *The Yonge Street Review* 149 <http://www.newcanada.com/149/vopros.htm> (as of 28 Jun. 2001).

Nowhere does the Jewish Question of Russia receive more attention than in response to the overtures of extreme right-wing nationalist groups. By virtue of Solzhenitsyn's advocacy of national rebirth he is deemed ethnically chauvinistic, even harboring prejudice towards Jews as many fanatical nationalists do. Notwithstanding, a close examination of the writer's taxonomy of nationalism reveals a patriot quite unlike radicals of inveterate xenophobic outlook.

In his years of imprisonment Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn came to believe that the struggle between good and evil cannot be resolved among parties, classes, or doctrines, but is waged within the individual human heart. This Tolstoian view and search for Christian ethics could not but seem heretical in the ideological environment of the Soviet Union. Ultimately, Solzhenitsyn emulates the great nineteenth-century Russian writers whose sense of literary truth rested on an absolute moral imperative. Out of this concern grew the exigency to discover the truth about Russo-Jewish historical relations.

Hoping to elucidate the volatile Russo-Jewish historical relationship and to exonerate himself of the anti-Semitic stigma, Solzhenitsyn dedicated nearly ten years to a two-tome work entitled *Двести лет вместе* (*Two Hundred Years Together*). This publication also prompted the appearance of a 1966 article, *Евреи в СССР и в будущей России* (*Jews in the USSR and in Future Russia*), attributed to Solzhenitsyn but condemned by the writer as a "falsification." Literary commentators have expressed bemusement at the time and ardor the writer has dedicated to this incendiary topic. Nevertheless, in the twilight of his life Solzhenitsyn has embarked on an historical work which traces the erratic relations between Jews and Russians in both the Imperial and Soviet eras.

Thus far, quite limited research has been undertaken of both the 1966 article and the two-volume series *Two Hundred Years Together*—most likely because neither has been entirely translated into English, only French. In response to such a need, this work seeks not to answer, but to illumine the present-day Jewish Question of Russia by analyzing these two newly-published works of Solzhenitsyn within the context of the writer's past work, his critics, Russian nationalism, and Russo-Jewish history.

As the analysis will show, Solzhenitsyn reflects his country's perpetual enigmatic nature. He is permeated by the metaphysical notion of the "Russian

soul," representing the oscillating sentiments of his compatriots. As a writer, political thinker, and emblem of uprooted Russian spirituality, he is a symbol of his nation's volatile, ambivalent relationship to the Jewish Question.

II A Concise Biography of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

To readers of this book, Solzhenitsyn's name and literary achievements will likely be familiar. However, a brief outline of the writer's biography will provide an historical backdrop to understand the pivotal events and publications of Aleksandr Isaeivich's creative life, as well as his role in contemporary Russo-Jewish history.

In 1918 Aleksandr Isaievich Solzhenitsyn was born in Koslovodsk, a resort town in the northern Caucusus. Thereafter, his middle-class family moved to the southern Russian port city of Rostov-on-Don, where he spent his adolescent years. The writer's father, an office worker, died before Aleksandr's birth; his mother, a schoolteacher, brought up the young boy. Solzhenitsyn's mother never remarried. She was an educated woman, fluent in French and English, and supported the small family as a typist and stenographer. They were obliged to rent rooms and huts from private owners because the state did not provide them with living space. After fifteen years, they were finally issued a modest room in a reconstructed stable.

From boyhood Solzhenitsyn desired to become a writer. As a young author, he submitted stories, all of which were rejected by the journal *Znamia*. Though he longed to study literature as his father had at Moscow University, his mother could not afford to send him to the capital. Thus he embarked upon a course of study in the Department of Physics and Mathematics at the University of Rostov-on-Don in 1937. Though mathematics was not his true love, it proved beneficial in future teaching capacities both in prison and following his sentence in exile. Ultimately, Solzhenitsyn was able to continue his literary studies concurrently with his mathematical education. To his great joy, by 1939 he was enrolled in a correspondence program of Moscow's Institute of History, Philosophy, and Literature. At this time, while still at the university, Solzhenitsyn married chemistry student Natalia Alekseevna Reshetovskaia.

In 1941 Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Hitler's three-million strong assault on the Eastern Front would ultimately drain the greater part of his resources. As a result of this colossal offensive, Solzhenitsyn found him-

self called to duty in the Red Army. Here, for the first time, his mathematical education truly shaped his destiny; he was transferred to artillery school and completed an abridged artillery training program in November of 1942. After his commissioning, he served for two weeks in the Gorky region before being made commander of a reconnaissance artillery battery on the Leningrad front. Serving continuously until 1945 in the battle of Kirks, in White Russia, in Poland, and in East Prussia, Solzhenitsyn was promoted to Captain and received the Order of the Patriotic War Class II and the Order of the Red Star.

During these years Solzhenitsyn corresponded with school friend N. D. Vitkevich, and criticized Stalin in his letters, albeit referring to the dictator under a pseudonym—"the man with the mustache." Unfortunately, Captain Solzhenitsyn's letters were intercepted and he was summoned to the office of brigade commander Colonel Travkin, where he was arrested. Drafts of stories were used to support a charge of anti-Soviet propaganda against Solzhenitsyn. He was beaten and interrogated at the infamous Lubianka Prison in Moscow, as well as sentenced in absentia (a common practice for the Soviet government) in 1945.

In all, Solzhenitsyn spent eight years in labor camps and internal exile. In the first five months he was confined to correctional camps near Moscow. Later in 1946, because of his mathematical expertise, the writer was relocated to a scientific research institute also in the capital where he would spend four years. During the three years remaining in his sentence Solzhenitsyn was sent to Ekibastuz, a new camp for political prisoners in Kazakhstan. He would later transform his experiences at that camp, working as a bricklayer, laborer, and smelter, into *Odin den' Ivan Denisovicha* (*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*). While imprisoned, he underwent surgery for a malignant tumor but was not told the diagnosis. He subsequently developed a recurrence, received radiotherapy in Tashkent, and recovered. This experience provided the setting for *Rakovy Korpus (Cancer Ward)*. The hero, not unlike Solzhenitsyn himself, was a recently freed inmate of the Gulag. Solzhenitsyn tasted freedom from the labor camp nexus in early 1953, just prior to Stalin's death, and was exiled to rural Kazakhstan.

Rehabilitated in 1956 as a result of Khrushchev's reforms, he was allowed to settle in Riazan, a city in central Russia, where he found employ-