

# Solzhenitsyn: An Appraisal



**[In *One Day*] there are no horrors against which the reader unconsciously mobilizes his inner defenses; there is instead the “terrifyingly . . . unchanging routine year after year. . .” “The horror is in forgetting that your life—the only life you have—is destroyed.”**

ONE OF THE CHARACTERS in Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward* exclaims in a voice muffled by fear: “These literary tragedies are just laughable compared with the ones we live through. . . . Children write essays in school about the unhappy, tragic, doomed . . . life of Anna Karenina. But was Anna really unhappy? . . . She was a free, proud human being. . . . So why should I read *Anna Karenina* again? Maybe it's enough what I have experienced. Where can people read about us- *US*? Only in a hundred years' time?”

Solzhenitsyn's three major works (*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, *Cancer Ward*, and *The First Circle*) deal precisely with the true, the real tragedies of contemporary Russia.

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Born in 1918, Alexander Solzhenitsyn belongs to the generation which grew up and came to young manhood in the darkest years of the Stalinist era. He was only 15 or 16 when Kirov's assassination became the pretext for wholesale deportations, murders, and purges. He now tells us that (unlike the great majority of his contemporaries, he reacted sharply against the deafening vociferations of Stalinist propagandists and against the multitudes who joined them in cursing the myriads of “Kirov's assassins” on their way to the sub-Polar regions or Siberian wastes. Very early on he began to doubt the wisdom, the justice, and the omniscience of the Father of the Peoples.

Like his counterpart in *The First Circle*, Gleb Nerzhin (in Russian the name is suggestive of *nezhnyi*—gentle, tender), he graduated from the University just before the German attack on Russia, in June 1941, and in the first months of the war, because of ill-health, served in the uninspiring role of a “driver of horse-drawn vehicles.” Later on, as a mathematician, he was transferred to an artillery school, went through a short course, and in November 1942 was already put in command of a battery with which he stayed in the front line without a break until the beginning of 1945. He was twice decorated for bravery.

In January or February 1945 Captain Solzhenitsyn was suddenly arrested, stripped of his rank, and a few months later sentenced to eight years of imprisonment in corrective labor camps. After serving his sentence, he was sent into exile “in perpetuity” which, mercifully, ended in 1956. The basis of his arrest? “Disrespectful remarks” about Stalin in letters to an old school friend, and some “stories and reflections” found subsequently in his bag.

Years of various camps, prisons, and exile provided Solzhenitsyn with the warp of his three major novels. He first “burst” upon the Soviet Union

with his *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, published in the literary magazine *Novyi Mir* in 1962. The publication was “officially authorized” by no less a person than Khrushchev, not because of his love of literature, but because the novel was of use as a political weapon in his battle with the old Stalinist bureaucrats, by that time beginning to lift their heads again after their temporary defeat at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956.

Solzhenitsyn handles his raw material with the utmost delicacy. His novel (or memoir) is highly realistic, yet there are no scenes of cruelty, no atrocities. The greyness, the monotony of that one day are even relieved by some fleeting good humored jokes, by some pleasurable moments like opening a parcel from home, or savoring a bite of sausage. The impact of the story is all the greater, because there are no horrors against which the reader unconsciously mobilizes his inner defenses; there is instead the “terrifyingly . . . unchanging routine year after year. . . .” In another of his books Solzhenitsyn says: “The horror is in forgetting that your life—the only life you have—is destroyed.” Ivan Denisovich ends his day, “A day without a dark cloud. Almost a happy day,” and goes to sleep “fully content,” without apparently giving a thought to the fact that in his stretch “there were three thousand six hundred and fifty-three days like that.”

In the narrative of Ivan Denisovich's day Solzhenitsyn gives proof of his great power of observation: of his fellow prisoners, of their guards, and last but not least, of the nature which surrounds them. He holds up a mirror to reality, yet he knows how to handle that mirror so that it moves unerringly from detail to detail, never staying a moment too long in one place or at the same angle. He also possesses the gift extremely rare in the apprentice to literature; the art to sketch a portrait by means of a very few light strokes so that not only the outward appearance but a full personality emerges.

The story of Ivan Denisovich, of the camp, and of its inmates bears the imprint of an authenticity which needs no literary effects to transmit the author's “feel of prison [that] only comes

by Tamara Deutscher

from having been inside for long, long years on end . . . ,” that unmistakably:

*He was there.*

*He himself with his human air.*

The two volumes of *Cancer Ward* and *The First Circle* do not possess the same degree of directness.

When still in camp, Solzhenitsyn developed cancer of the stomach. After an operation, which did not improve his condition, he was on the brink of death until he was sent to a Tashkent cancer hospital, where he recovered completely. In 1967 the Soviet Establishment gave proof of boundless stupidity when it prevented the publication of *Cancer Ward* already set up in print for *Novyi Mir*.

It has been alleged that in *Cancer Ward* there is “not a single word of warmth,” that it is “gloomy,” that “everyone [in it] is a former prisoner . . . ,” that it is “anti-humanitarian” (whatever that may mean), that it is “downright nauseating,” and, of course, that Solzhenitsyn is “slandering the Soviet Union.” Needless to say, none of these reproaches contains even the slightest grain of truth. The subject may be “gloomy,” but the strength of the book lies precisely in Solzhenitsyn’s transmutation of his material. He refrains from stunning us by a display of festering sores; he is much more concerned with the patients’ state of mind and qualities of heart than with the state of their bodies. In the one hospital ward he assembles a whole gallery of people, young and old, of various ethnic groups, from different walks of life, different social backgrounds and education, of different occupations, preoccupations, and ambitions. What binds them together is illness, suffering, and fear of death. One may see in this cancer ward a microcosm of Soviet life. Or, one may be tempted—as some critics were—to see it as a symbol of a whole society ravaged by a malignant tumor.

Solzhenitsyn himself stresses in the novel that in the conflict of good and evil, of life and death, it is life that ultimately triumphs: his main character, Kostoglotov, is cured and goes out of the murky hospital into the bright and dazzling sunshine of Tashkent. True, he does not yet return to full freedom, but he returns to life, savor-

ing his own vitality as he delights in the ice-cream bought from a stall, or in the *kvass* or in the smoky *shashlik*, and in all the odors and colors of the southern city.

But even in the ward now left behind, not all was gloom and darkness. In it was a microcosm of the Soviet world not only of former prisoners—though they formed a fair proportion of the inmates—of wretched *muzhiks*, cynical blackmarketeers, or petty Stalinist bureaucrats, but also of devoted nurses who could not be bribed, of heroic doctors whose lives in their entirety were dedicated to science, and who gave their patients much more than their professional skill, and much more than “a single word of warmth”—they all were, after all, the product of a society so deeply eaten into by Stalinist poison and which yet preserved some healthy body cells.

IF *CANCER WARD* may be viewed as the microcosm of “free” Soviet society, with *The First Circle* we return to a world enclosed by high prison walls. Mavrino is an exceptional labor camp where the highest intellectual elite of the Soviet prison population is engaged in secret scientific work. To any man transferred there from the sub-Polar regions, Mavrino seems a real heaven, but “all the same, it is hell, just as before, but it is hell’s best and highest circle” to which Dante consigned the sages of antiquity.

At Mavrino physicists, mathematicians, radio and telephone engineers, chemists, technicians, and philologists are all engaged in the urgent task of “scrambling” the human voice in order to construct a device which, like fingerprints, would help in identifying anyone speaking on the telephone. The search for this is an obsession of Stalin himself, of whom Solzhenitsyn gives a highly suggestive though somewhat demonological picture. The action of the novel is compressed into three days at the end of 1949, but within that short span of time the reader is introduced to over 70 *dramatis personae*: Lev Rubin, the philologist, who remains a faithful Stalinist; Adamson, one of the giants of the 1920s who “wanted the revolution to remain pure”; Sologdin, forever scaling the Olympian heights of unblemished mor-

al perfection; Doronin, the *Hochstapler*, trickster, the artful dodger, the overclever informer who finally slips up badly; Spiridonov who had “ploughed the land and forged the steel” and therefore possesses “the wisdom of those who work with their hands” and who is, in some ways, modelled on Tolstoy’s Karatayev. We also have administrators and supervisors—jailers of the camp to whom a bureaucratic career was more congenial than a scientific one. Outside the great wall, in nearby Moscow, life goes on “as usual.” Although we see not a single worker, we meet the long-suffering and despairing wives of the prisoners, the big Party and State Security bosses, and the lesser Stalinist informers and careerists; there is also the opulent, demoralized, thoughtless family of the State Prosecutor, his wife and his children, whose fate becomes curiously entwined with Mavrino prisoners.

One of the characters in *The First Circle* derides the inveterate Russian fashion “to write like Tolstoy,” and yet *The First Circle* itself, Solzhenitsyn’s most ambitious work, is truly Tolstoyan in scope, though it lacks the leisureliness and the epic quality of Tolstoyan writing. Solzhenitsyn’s master is Tolstoy, not only in the literary form, but also in a deeper philosophical sense: Nerzhin paraphrases Tolstoy when he says: “I draw my conclusions not from the philosophers I have read, but from stories you hear about people in prisons.” Or when he brushes aside “intellectual interests” because, “There’s a lot of cleverness in the world, but not enough goodness.” He rejects, of course, the “communist” Rubin and involves him in a debate with Sologdin, in which the brilliant philologist is driven into casuistry, gets entangled in the most contradictory and illogical arguments and ends by pushing the whole principle of dialectics into an impasse of absurdity. Nor has Solzhenitsyn much feeling for Adamson, the member of the old Bolshevik guard, imprisoned in the first phase of Stalin’s fight against the opposition. True, now and again, Solzhenitsyn brings to the forefront a representative of the old generation and makes him reiterate his “faith in socialism” or utter some edifying but long forgotten Leninist principle. Per-

haps with an excess of Christian forgiveness, he places on the same level the time-servers who applauded Stalin's purges with those who either faced the firing squad or lingered to death in hard labor camps. To Kostoglotov, who most often speaks with Solzhenitsyn's voice, it was all a matter of "the number you happen to draw. If the position had been reversed, it would have been just the opposite: you'd have been the martyrs, we'd have been the time-servers." Shulubin, one of those who had applauded, even in a bout of remorse, still absolves himself: it was not he, "a small man," but others who had not acted resolutely enough. Why didn't Lenin's widow raise her voice against Stalin? Or Ordjonikidze, "a real eagle of a man"?

At this point for all his professed devotion to truth Solzhenitsyn falters. In the whole body of his work there is not a single mention of Trotsky, Stalin's most powerful protagonist. He cannot plead ignorance. Like his chief character in *The First Circle*, Nerzhin, all through his youth he "vowed that he would get at the truth" of the Great Purges. And he did, though in tragic circumstances. In prison he met a few survivors of the holocaust, the only ones who could enlighten him: "They were not surprised at how much he had pieced together, but were able to add a hundred times more." And so he learned about the deportees of 1929 on the Yenissei river and about the heroic strike at the Vorkuta camp. He must have learned also that the strike was led by the most active, most recalcitrant, and most numerous of the Vorkuta inmates—the Trotskyists and their sympathizers. (Trotsky's elder son perished at Vorkuta.) Yet for Solzhenitsyn, Stalin's anathema on Trotsky still seems to remain in force. (For understandable reasons he might have omitted Trotsky's name from *Cancer Ward* as the book was scheduled for publication; but *The First Circle* does not mention Trotsky either, though it had no chance to appear in Russia. Stalin's musings on his victory over "those loud-mouthed quibblers with their little pointed beards" who were all "shot, ground into the soil of Siberia . . ." may be construed as an oblique and ambiguous reference to Trotsky.)

Solzhenitsyn's philosophy is certainly not that of a revolutionary fighter. His is Tolstoyan "non-resistance to evil." It is meek submission to God that he preaches. When the young Dyoma, whose leg is eaten up by cancer, asks; "Why is it that there's such rank injustice in fortune itself?" the saintly Aunt Styofa answers: "It depends on God . . . God sees everything. You should submit to him." Alyosha, the Baptist, guileless and unable to fend for himself, whose bunk adjoins that of Ivan Denisovich, is paying the highest price for his faith—he is slowly dying from exhaustion. Yet he is ever ready to help others and is the one on whom everybody else can count. His beautiful and sweet face, his "eyes glowing like two candles," leave no doubt that he was speaking the truth: he was happy in prison. Note that the first meaningful scene in *The First Circle* is the one in which the Jew Rubin joins five Germans, former officers, at an improvised Christmas meal and stands up with bowed head as one of them recites a prayer.

Although Tolstoy, with his own personal vision of Christianity and his rejection of philosophers' wisdom, is clearly Solzhenitsyn's master, there are Dostoyevskian strands too in his writing. There is, first of all, the intense Slavophile patriotism. It is not the recent past, not the Soviet victory over the Nazis, not even the saga of 1812, but a more remote ideal of the XII century, or of the XIV century battle of Kulikovo in which the Russians heroically repulsed the Tartar hordes that quickens Solzhenitsyn's imagination. He exhorts his countrymen to guard this precious "glorious heritage" and devotes a short story to Zakhar, the hot-tempered *muzhik* who with humble piety and boundless dedication watches over the historic ground as a kind of "guardian angel."

In another story Solzhenitsyn exposes the silly hooliganism of youngsters who try to disrupt an Easter religious procession. We come across a curious patch of Dostoyevskism here: "Among the believers I catch a glimpse of one or two Jewish faces. Perhaps they are converts, or perhaps they are just onlookers. . . . We all curse the Jews, they are a permanent nuisance. . . ." From the Jewish faces

Solzhenitsyn turns his glance to the shrieking boys and girls whom he calls "the builders of the new society" and notices that they are tall: ". . . at least *our race* gets no shorter" he remarks with satisfaction (my italics). Is it pedantic to recall in this context that while Nerzhin refuses to join the cryptographic unit knowing only too well that he will be hurled into the real hell of the ordinary camp, Rubin co-operates with his jailers, and, at their behest, finally identifies the voice of Innokenty Volodin, delivering him into the clutches of the Security Police; that the Jew Roitman, Major of the KGB, spent the war years far from the front devising first systems for "scrambling" telephone conversations; that among other informers—Russian and Latvian—there is also Isaac Kagan who had the trust and confidence of other inmates?

**S**OLZHENITSYN'S ROOTS AS A writer reach deep down to the rich traditions of the XIX century Russian literature. Like his predecessors, he is a profoundly committed author, and considers himself as such. In this he is even more explicit than Byelinsky whose maxim was: "Art without ideas [philosophical and socio-political] is like a man without a soul; it is a corpse." "Literature," says Solzhenitsyn, "that is not the breath of contemporary society, that dares not transmit the pains and fears of that society, that does not warn . . . against threatening moral and social dangers . . . does not deserve the name of literature; it is only a facade." Talent imposes certain duties, he adds, and above all the duty to watch over the health of society.

Is Soviet society really one huge and doomed Cancer Ward or has it enough vitality and strength to get rid of the Stalinist tumors? In spite of the cruel persecution of a galaxy of writers, in spite of the crass stupidity and brutality of the rulers, Soviet society still seems to possess a great deal of regenerative power. Solzhenitsyn was expelled from the writers' union, but not without a bitter struggle in which some of his colleagues showed tremendous courage. They proclaimed the end of the old "reptile-like crawling literature" (Kaverin); they told other mem-



bers; nine-tenths of you will be forgotten, while Solzhenitsyn's name will long be remembered. "You have spoken out against freedom of the press, against creative freedom, and have thereby gone over to the camp of obscurantism. . . ." wrote the old Bolshevik convict Kosterin to the celebrated Stalinist writer (and Nobel Prize winner) Sholokhov.

The old quacks like Brezhnev, or Kosygin, or Sholokhov, or Fedin will never cure Russia, but only those who pass from hand to hand, from reader to reader, typed copies of forbidden books read in thousands and thousands of copies: "Organize mass . . . raids, seize all the tapes, all the copies, arrest their authors and those responsible for their circulation—even so, at least one copy will escape . . . and will be duplicated in ever greater quantities," wrote G. Vladim to the Presidium of the Writers' Congress.

The young Vladimir Bukovsky, sentenced recently to 12 years of prison and exile, defiantly and prophetically proclaimed: "The process of spiritual enlightenment of [Soviet] society has already begun and it cannot be stopped."

Here perhaps lies hope.

*Tamara Deutscher is a journalist who has contributed to the London Times, the Times Literary Supplement, The Economist and the New Left Review.*

## Records

### MANFRED MANN'S EARTH BAND [Polydor]

**M**ANFRED MANN has been found around for a long time by rock standards (first on the charts in 1964), has played a lot of kinds of music with a lot of musicians in a series of bands, and had always hovered around the edges of my musical consciousness, mainly via a series of AM radio singles from the brainless "Do Wah Diddy Diddy" to a fine version of Dylan's "Mighty Quinn."

There have been a lot of Mann albums too, but I never paid any attention to them until their last-but-for-one, *Chapter Three*, which struck me as just another drab entry in the BS&T-Chicago brass sweepstakes.

So when *Earth Band* came along I was prepared to ignore it except for a pleasant-sounding single, "Living Without You," of which I heard crackly fragments on my car radio between savings and loan commercials and passing snatches of talk shows.

"Living Without You" is a pleasant single, but *Earth Band* is a positively GREAT album, one that sounded astonishingly good on first hearing, that stood up on repetition, and that has now established itself as a ready favorite that bears playing over every day or two—a status achieved by few if any albums in recent months; surely none that come to mind very easily.

The Earth Band is a new organization; the brass is gone and just four musicians carry the bulk of the work (although seven more receive a quick thanks on the cover).

The album opens with a laid-back, insinuating piece, "California Coastline," that features a synthesizer in use as a legitimate band instrument (a rare phenomenon as yet, although increasing in frequency as more musicians gain an understanding of the Moog), weaving in and out with a guitar to produce a steady instrumental base for two completely separate vocal lines that run in and out of the foreground.

"Captain Bobby Stout," a slow prison blues, develops the mood and continues the technique of musical layers: a hypnotic, repetitious bass line overlaid with long, tantalizing lead instrumentals and periodically appearing and disappearing vocals ("Brother, why are you here?").

There's a short electronic-sounding track, the radio single (a Randy Newman ballad that's pure "pop" done up with a delicious drop of Manfred Mann brand latter-day psychedelia), and then the incontestible finest track of the album, Mann's "Tribute." It's a five-and-a-half minute piece of pure music, not overtly program music but so powerfully evocative that pictures rise unavoidably before the listener: for me, sound images of the sea, cool, a dark yellow-green with white birds, black or yellow-trimmed, skimming across white foam combers; dark granite cliffs beyond a cold beach, spare green vegetation clings to the top of low peaks while damp moss climbs their angles from the salt water; the

sound of surf roaring, of breakers, the still lapping of cove water on stone. . . .

And a rousing "Please Mrs. Henry" to open the second side—an energetic, solid interpretation of Dylan; for my money, of all the people who have done Dylan, from the folk interpretations of Joan Baez or Peter, Paul & Mary to the overwhelming white blues of Joe Cocker to the vapid saccharine of Rick Nelson, there must be a special place reserved for Manfred Mann. The whole boisterous rock-and-roll sound is there, with just enough wryness to communicate the feel of Dylan.

There's another fine long Mann track and there are three more songs, but the one that requires most attention is "Part Time Man," with a rendition that sounds incredibly like the Kinks at the top of their form: a long, ballad-like lyric delivered in a gentle, sneaky way sounding like Ray Davies on reds, with the words spinning out a good-natured cynical picture of that poor job-hunter. "All I wanted to be was a part-time man."

The way the band works is a sheer joy to the ear: the rhythm lines established by bassist Colin Pattenden and drummer Chris Slade, with complex lead lines by guitarist Mick Rogers and Mann on organ and synthesizer. Certainly this album will be a landmark in the assimilation of new technology into rock without yielding to any impulse to make it a gimmick; what the simpler, sweeter country rock of the late '60s was to loud rock and roll, this may be to the excessively abstracted psychedelic/hard rock school.

### RECENT AND NOTEWORTHY:

**FANNY HILL**, Fanny [Reprise] My first thought was Oh, another all-girl rock and roll band; second was Hey, this is worthwhile; third was Maybe I should ask a woman to review it; fourth was No, never mind that, this is simply a great middle-ground rock album, good material, solid musicianship, fine singing, and the musicians just happen to be all women.

**HAPPY JUST TO BE LIKE I AM**, Taj Mahal [Columbia] Just super goodtime, laid-back funky music with easygoing joyous vocals and a roomful of instruments ranging from a penny whistle to a tuba chorus! Don't miss