



SOLZHENITSYN'S HISTORY OF RUSSIA

In *The Red Wheel*, a novelistic history of the Russian Revolution, the fictional Colonel Georgi Vorotyntsev speaks for Solzhenitsyn or, better put, *is* Solzhenitsyn. We know this because “in childhood he had been obsessed with Russia’s history and felt a premonition that his own future life would be bound up with it”. From his youth on, he “had craved one thing above all else: to influence his country’s history for the good, to drag or hustle uncouth Russia along the road to better things”. That effort, he believed, could succeed only if his country repented of its sins.

There was a time, according to Solzhenitsyn, when Russia remained true to the Orthodox Faith that endowed her with the gift of repentance, “which more than anything else distinguishes man from the animal world”. Not for nothing is Forgiveness Sunday (the final Sunday before Great Lent when all ask forgiveness from all) a high point on the Orthodox calendar. Dostoevsky put it this way: “We are each responsible to all for all.”

In the seventeenth century, however, “our capacity for repentance began to wither and dry up” due to the schism occasioned by Tsar Alexei and Patriarch Nikon’s church reforms. Only sixteen when he ascended the throne, Alexei was known for his spiritual devotion—and his Graecophilia. In the belief that Moscow was the “Third Rome”, he sought to unify the Orthodox world with Russia its center. That would require, he reasoned, a reform of the liturgical books that would bring them into conformity with the Greek; to advance that project he chose the intelligent, if domineering, Nikon.

The tsar believed that the new editions would be based on ancient Greek and Slavic books, but they actually relied on the Greek *Euchologion* of 1602, published in Venice. Not that it mattered to Nikon, who had come to embrace the Tsar’s Graecophilia and was interested primarily in rituals, particularly the manner of making the

sign of the Cross. The reform dictated the Greek three fingers (for the Holy Trinity) instead of the Russian two (for the two natures of Christ).



As prisoner on a construction site near Kaluga Gate.

Because of this and other changes, Archpriest Avvakum and other dissenters believed that the reforms transformed Orthodoxy into a foreign and heretical faith. Their protests in that regard were, however, in vain. At the Moscow Sobor, or Synod, of 1667, the Church mandated the reforms and anathematized the resisters as *raskolniki* (schismatics), though refusing to submit to the ecclesiastical authorities was their real sin. Subsequently, and to Solzhenitsyn’s ire, the Church subjected the so-called “Old Believers” (who preferred “Old Ritualists”) to punishments such as having a tongue cut out or being impaled on meat hooks. Avvakum himself was burned at the stake.

“I cannot bring myself”, Solzhenitsyn observed, “to call these sturdy, faithful, ancient-orthodox Christians by the name

of ‘schismatic’ because they did not possess sufficient spiritual agility to accept the hasty and dubious recommendations [of the Nikonian reforms]; we condemned them to punishments just as harsh as those dealt us by atheists under Lenin and Stalin. And yet our hearts have never quivered with repentance!” In *A Course in Russian History*, a work to which Solzhenitsyn referred often, the renowned historian Vasili Kliuchevsky pointed out that “the religious beliefs and feelings of every community are inextricably interwoven with the rituals and formulas that have helped to form them”.

So great was his respect for the Old Believers that Solzhenitsyn reserved praise for Aleksandr Shlyapnikov, a Bolshevik born to a family of Old Believers. Shlyapnikov’s happiest days, he reported, were spent not “on committees, at strike meetings, in demonstration”, but in the workplace. He never lost his concern for living, breathing workers (rather than what Martin Malia called “a metaphysical proletariat”). While working in factories in Western Europe from 1908 to 1916 he met Aleksandra Kollontai, a revolutionary and advocate of “free love”. Together they organized the “Workers’ Opposition” that called for trade union control of the Soviet economy. The Party rejected the idea out of hand, and although Kollontai managed to survive as a diplomat, Shlyapnikov remained under suspicion; in 1937, Stalin ordered his execution.

Russia’s original sin, in Solzhenitsyn’s view then, was her persecution of the Old Believers, but that was not all. On his reading, Russian history from the seventeenth to the twentieth century is a spiritual story of sin without repentance, sin ultimately paid for by the Bolshevik Revolution and the long years of Soviet rule.

Of Peter I, the first child of Tsar Alexei by his second wife, Solzhenitsyn had little good to report. Because his first teacher, Theodore Sokovnin, was an Old Believer

whose brother involved himself in a plot against him, he imposed heavy taxes on all members of their faith, including one on the wearing of beards. “To him,” Kliuchevsky wrote, “the beard worn by an Old Believer was not a detail of masculine appearance, but . . . the mark of a political attitude, the spirit of opposition.”

From the first, Peter interested himself almost exclusively in the technical achievements of Western civilization, not least because of their importance to his Great Northern War with Sweden (1700–1721). “He could not”, according to Solzhenitsyn, “grasp that one cannot transfer specific results of Western culture and civilization without the psychological atmosphere in which these results had ripened.” He stamped out “in quite a Bolshevik fashion . . . [Russia’s] sense of history, her people’s beliefs, soul, and customs, for the sake of accelerated industrial development and military might”.

Peter may have thought St. Petersburg a paradise, but for those forced to build the city on the swamps and thus open a “Window on the West” it was a mass grave. “All the great and not-so-great undertakings of this Tsar were carried out with no concern whatsoever for the waste of national energy and flesh.” In sum, Solzhenitsyn agreed with the sentence Kliuchevsky passed on Peter: he was not a reformer but a revolutionary.

Solzhenitsyn thought little better of Empress Elizabeth (ruled 1741–1761), Peter’s daughter by his second wife, Catherine I. Although she honored her vow not to impose capital punishment, she did nothing to alleviate the “senseless and cruel persecutions of the Old Believers, who responded by setting themselves on fire”. Just as bad, she “threw Russia into European quarrels and dubious ventures, so alien to us”. This is a theme that runs through Solzhenitsyn’s history of Russia—opposition to foreign entanglements and adventures that were not in the national interest and took the country’s eye off internal sins such as serfdom, which kept “the greater part of our own people in a slavery which robbed them of all human dignity”.

After the mercifully brief reign of Peter III, Elizabeth’s demented nephew, his wife, born to a minor German prince, carried out a coup d’état in 1762 and assumed the throne as Catherine II. While conceding that the Empress lessened the persecution of the Old Believers, Solzhenitsyn criticized the fact that under her authority the

serfs (“souls”) became the private property of the landowners. The landowner “had the right to deport his serf to Siberia (later, even to hard labor) without providing any reason. Moreover, he could trade him as a live commodity, not only selling him without the land . . . but tearing him away from his family”. It is true that the laws were indefinite and incomplete, but “on the whole,



they tended to benefit the landowners” (Kliuchevsky).

Nor did Catherine’s foreign policy, guided from 1763 to 1781 by Count Nikita Panin, commend itself. She thought of little but conquest and conjured up the “Greek Project”, a chimerical plan to restore the Byzantine Empire on the anticipated ruins of the Ottoman Empire—with her grandson Constantine (appropriately enough) as the first emperor. Worse, hers was a sanguinary reign; she conducted six wars and before her death was preparing for a seventh, against revolutionary France.

Together with serfdom, these wars created a climate of resistance that, after more than a hundred local insurrections, exploded in a vast rebellion led by Yemelyan Pugachev, an illiterate Don Cossack who convinced his followers (fifty thousand at one time) that he was Peter III and promised an end to serfdom. After having fought in the Seven Years’ War and the Russo-Turkish War, he was invalided out of the army. During his recovery he wan-

dered among settlements of Old Believers, the members of which strengthened his resolve to depose Catherine.

After citing bloodthirsty words from a Pugachev manifesto, Solzhenitsyn conceded that what the rebel leader said of the gentry (“having nothing Christian in them”) was true. In a similar vein, he quoted a famous line from Aleksandr Pushkin’s novel *The Captain’s Daughter*: “God save us from seeing a Russian revolt, senseless and merciless.” To which he reported that Ivan Solonevich, the Gulag escapee, “fairly countered”: “Why all that ‘senseless?’ Eleven years after the decree on gentry freedoms [from mandatory state service] and with Catherine’s rule waxing oppressive, was there truly no reason to rise up”, especially when his followers believed they were acting for the true tsar. The author of *Russia in Chains* may have been thinking of his own war against the Soviet rulers.

Be that as it may, the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (July 1774) ended the Turkish war and allowed the Empress to commit more troops to the struggle against the fearsome pretender. Under the command of General Aleksandr Bibikov and Lieutenant-Colonel Ivan Mikhelson the government forces turned the tide and as Pugachev’s reverses began to mount, he was betrayed by confederates—in return for pardons.

At her death in 1796, Catherine was succeeded by her son, Paul I. Educated by Panin, he won respect from crowds that regarded him as Peter III’s legitimate heir. Once in power, however, he exhibited a despotic streak and it was not long before a conspiracy to overthrow him enlisted leading military and political figures. Solzhenitsyn credited him with lifting burdens from the serfs’ backs but took a dim view of his foreign policy, characterized as it was by quixotic shifts (two years of war against France, then a treaty with Napoleon against England). After his assassination in 1801, Paul was succeeded by his son Alexander, whom Catherine had raised to rule and who knew, to say no more, of the plot to overthrow his father.

The central event of Alexander I’s reign, as readers of *War and Peace* can testify, was war with The Little Corporal. According to Solzhenitsyn, that “*Patriotic War could have been avoided!*—all its glory, but all its losses, too—if not for the missteps of Alexander.” After Field Marshal Mikhail Kutuzov repelled the French invasion, the Tsar lost interest in Russia; any “thought

of Russian interests drowned in [his] self-styled mission to bring about world peace". This in reference to the "Holy Alliance" of Russia, Austria, and Prussia that Alexander formed in the hope that international affairs would be guided by Christian principles—an unrealistic notion inspired by the Baroness von Krüdener, a Baltic German mystic under whose spell he had come for a brief time.

Although Nicholas I, Alexander's brother, had hoped to pursue a realist foreign policy, he became known as the "Gendarme of Europe", using Russia's military might to suppress liberal revolutions in Europe. In 1848–1849, he sent troops "on a mission both harmful and alien to us: rescuing the Habsburgs from the Hungarian revolution". That was not the only example of his "failing to act strictly in Russian interests. He had to mind everyone else's business".

At the root of Nicholas's interventionism was the Decembrist uprising of officer-conspirators who seized the opportunity offered by his unexpected and confused accession to the throne. It was the opening shot in the revolutionary war against the tsarist government and gained the almost religious support of the Russian intelligentsia, most of the members of which seemed not to know or care "that certain aspects of the Decembrists' program promised Russia a revolutionary tyranny, and that some Decembrists insisted during their inquests that freedom could only be built upon corpses". In a word, they were Bolsheviks *avant la lettre*.

Nicholas died during the Crimean War that Solzhenitsyn judged to be madness. He was succeeded by Alexander II (the "Tsar Liberator"), who, having witnessed his country's weakness during the war, issued the Emancipation Manifesto (1861) that granted serfs personal freedom and promised them land, for which, however, they had to pay the landlords with government loans that had to be repaid. This led to widespread dissatisfaction on the part of the peasants, many of whom were better off before the reform.

Foreign policy under Alexander II was, in Solzhenitsyn's judgment, "myopic", as shown by the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878. In April 1877, the Emperor went to war with the Ottoman Empire with the aim of supporting independence for peoples living under Turkish rule. The Russians prevailed and the Treaty of San Stefano (March 3, 1878) registered their success; it ended the Ottoman Empire's effective con-

trol of the Balkans. Serbia, Montenegro, and Romania gained their independence and a Greater Bulgaria was to be occupied by Russia for two years.

Fearing Russian expansion in the Balkans, Britain and Austria demanded treaty revision that would nullify many of Russia's gains, and they achieved it at the Congress of Berlin in the summer of 1878. "Such a 'victorious' war", in Solzhenitsyn's opinion, was "worth no more than a lost one; cheaper yet—to not start it at all." Public spirit weakened and the revolutionary movement gained momentum, leading to Alexander's assassination by members of the terrorist *Narodnaya Volya* ("Peoples' Will").

Had he lived, Solzhenitsyn believed, Stolypin might have spared Russia the agonies of war and revolution.

For Alexander II's son and successor Alexander III Solzhenitsyn had words of praise; he "understood the ruinous effect of both Russia's service to the interests of others and her pursuit of new conquests, understood that rule should be focused on the inner health of the nation". His, that is, was a restrained, realist policy. Internally, he took some praiseworthy steps, including lowering the taxes on the peasantry, but his father's murder discouraged any far-reaching reform plans he may have entertained. His death in 1894 brought the ill-prepared Nicholas II to the throne.

Unlike his father, whose reign was free of war, Nicholas allowed himself to be drawn into a losing war with Japan in 1904–1905. Having fought in what he called the "almost suicidally waged Patriotic War" (World War II), Solzhenitsyn opposed most wars; he described the conflict with the Land of the Rising Sun as "distant, unpopular, and inexplicable". Worse in his judgment was Nicholas's agreement to the Anglo-Russian

Convention of 1907 that completed the Triple Entente (Britain, France, and Russia); "the alignment of Powers in the First World War was thus fatally determined". "Fatally", because Solzhenitsyn believed Russia would have been better served if she had allied herself with Germany.

The record of Nicholas's government would have been even worse were it not for Pyotr Stolypin, who became Prime Minister in 1906 and issued a decree that granted the Russian peasant the right to leave the commune, consolidate his allotment as a private holding, or, if he pleased, separate himself completely from the village and set up a farm with its own house. He granted the Old Believers equal rights with the Church and did not hesitate to hang terrorists, having told himself that excessive leniency at the beginning would only increase the number of victims later. Above all, Solzhenitsyn admired Stolypin for his love of Russia. "You", the prime minister once told a defiant Duma, "are after great upheavals, we are after a great Russia."

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In *November 1916*, the second volume of *The Red Wheel*, Russia has been at war for two years, and those who serve are weary of it. One of them, the fictional Sanya Lazhenitsyn, was modeled after Solzhenitsyn's father, who fought in the war. In a discussion with a priest who defends the Orthodox Church against its critics, Sanya argues that the laws of individual lives and those of large associations are similar. "An individual cannot escape paying for a grave sin, sometimes in his own lifetime, and still less can a society, or a people—they will pay in time. Everything that has happened to the church, from Peter to Rasputin. Maybe it's a punishment for our treatment of the Old Believers."

From the beginning, Colonel Vorotyntsev recognized that the war could only lead Russia to disaster and after two years at the front he does everything in his power

to promote the cause of peace on any honorable terms. "Russia needs peace. Peace above all!" Entering the war was a fatal error; what was needed now was not to win it but to get out of it as quickly as possible.

"From 1917 on", Solzhenitsyn wrote on the eve of his return to Russia, "we began to pay, and pay in full, for all the mistakes of our history." For a century, the idea of revolution had held Russia's intelligentsia in its thrall, and beginning on February 23 of that year their utopian dreams reached the streets. "Revolution! The magic word! Barricades! The taking of the Bastille! Revolution was greater than happiness, brighter than the daily sun; it was the explosion of a red dawn!"

On March 2, Nicholas abdicated for himself and his son Alexei, a hemophiliac, in favor of his brother Mikhail, who, fearing for his life, declined the honor. When he learns of the Tsar's hasty decision, Vorotyntsev is in Kiev, caught up in a mob about to topple a statue—of Stolypin. One revolutionary throws a rope around the statue's neck and yells "we're tying a Stolypin tie", mocking what revolutionaries of an earlier day had called "Stolypin Neckties"—hangman's nooses. As an admirer of the murdered prime minister, Vorotyntsev, never sympathetic with the revolution, now detests it.

Solzhenitsyn regarded the tsar's abdication as unforgivable, especially because he did so without a fight. During the French

Revolution, he reminded his readers, "the French monarchy resisted for three years, while ours—all of three days." The revolutionaries were largely untrained and poorly armed, and because of the relative calm then existing at the front, up to a million soldiers would have been available to retake Petrograd.

Two centers of power emerged from the collapse of the Tsar's government—the Provisional Government appointed by the Duma (parliament) and the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. From the first the latter wielded greater power. In the West, the February Revolution was regarded as a tragically aborted attempt to create a democratic Russia. In fact, it unleashed chaos and violence in the streets, brought the incompetent Aleksandr Kerensky to power, prolonged the war, and prepared the way for the Bolshevik coup d'état.

In March 1994, as he prepared to end his twenty-year exile in the West, Solzhenitsyn penned "*The Russian Question*" *At the End of the Twentieth Century*. In the preface, he told his Russian readers that if they hoped for a better future, they could not lose sight "of the numerous blunders in our past". The book recounts wrong turns he believed his country had taken since the seventeenth century. An expert on the history of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet regime, he relied for earlier times on the work of two distinguished historians: Kliuchevsky (1841–1911) and Sergei Solovyov (1820–

1879), author of the twenty-nine volume *History of Russia from Ancient Times* and tutor to the future Alexander III.

The history of Russia that Solzhenitsyn set forth in "*The Russian Question*" and other works taught lessons for his nation—and all nations ("It is impossible to imagine a nation which throughout the course of its existence has no cause for repentance. Every nation without exception . . . has at one time or another contributed its share of inhumanity, injustice and arrogance.") The spiritual life of a people is far more important than its political life. The inner health of a nation must always take precedence over external ambitions, especially conquest and empire building. Foreign policy should be informed by the national interest and "prudent self-restriction". Patriotism means "unqualified and unwavering love for the nation", while at the same time acknowledging its sins. A people's national consciousness is essential to its life. Most important perhaps: History is radically contingent. Nothing except change itself is inevitable in human affairs.

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