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## History and Modernity in the Works of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

### Introduction

When parts of the magnum opus *The Red Wheel* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008) were being translated and published in the 1980s, the author learned from a number of interviews that he was regarded as both a novelist and a historian. That he should have assumed this dual role in *The Red Wheel*, as he had previously done in *The Gulag Archipelago*, he readily admitted.<sup>1</sup> On numerous occasions he also declared that as for his great work, he considered it his duty to “relate the true history”, in this case, that of the Russian Revolution, which had been withheld from the Russian people.<sup>2</sup> Solzhenitsyn began his novel in an era when the image of the Revolution was still heavily censored and manipulated: not even professional historians working in the USSR at that time had access to all source material. He worked with historical sources of varying kinds, ploughing through extensive portions of the material that was at that time available.<sup>3</sup> Solzhenitsyn has even been called a “historiophage” – a devourer of history.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, he stressed that in reality it was only the artist who, through his intuition, could accomplish the task that he had set himself in *The Red Wheel*.

Solzhenitsyn admitted that like his literary figures, he was himself obsessed with history, claiming

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<sup>1</sup> See Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “Interv’iu s Bernarom Pivo dlia frantsuzskogo televideniia” (October 31, 1983), 175; Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “Interv’iu s Danielem Rondo dlia parizhskoi gazety ‘Libération’” (November 1, 1983), 207-208, in idem, *Publitsistika v trekh tomakh*, (Jaroslavl’: Verkhne-Volzhscoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo 1997), vol. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Solzhenitsyn, “Interv’iu s Bernarom Pivo dlia frantsuzskogo televideniia”, 175. Cf. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “Interv’iu s Devidom Eikmanom dlia zhurnala ‘Time’” (May 23, 1989), in idem, *Publitsistika v trekh tomakh*, (Jaroslavl’: Verkhne-Volzhscoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo 1997), vol. 3, 334, where Solzhenitsyn comments on his portrayal of Lenin: “I believe, I present a true picture of who Lenin was, what he said, what he did and how he related to people and his country.” Cf. also Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “Interv’iu nemetskomu ezhenedel’niku ‘Die Zeit’. Interv’iu vedet Stefan Zattler” (October 8, 1993), in idem, *Publitsistika v trekh tomakh*, (Jaroslavl’: Verkhne-Volzhscoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo 1997), vol. 3, 453-454. Cf. the Nobel Lecture: “It [literature] thus becomes the living memory of a nation. What has faded into history it thus keeps warm and preserves in a form that defies distortion and falsehood. Thus literature, together with language, preserves and protects a nation’s soul”. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Nobel Lecture*, trans. F. D. Reeve (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1973), 19. Newspaper and periodical titles that appear in the Russian sources are reproduced with the spelling used in their respective language.

<sup>3</sup> See the monograph of Mikhail Geller, himself a professional historian: Mikhail Geller, *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. K 70-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia*, (London: Overseas Publications Interchange 1989), 97.

<sup>4</sup> See Zherzh Niva (Georges Nivat), “Zhivoi klassik”, in Nikita Struve & Viktor Moskvín (eds.), *Mezhdú dvumia iubileiami. 1998–2003. Pisateli, kritiki, literaturovedy o tvorchestve A. I. Solzhenitsyna*, (Moskva: Russkii Put’ 2005), 542.

that as an eighteen-year-old he had already considered writing a novel about the Revolution. His depictions of the period from 1914 to 1917 are at least as vivid and incisive as those of the Gulag, of which he himself became a part. At the same time, there was also an underlying cause behind his obsession with history: he was convinced that through an awareness of the past, the mistakes of previous generations could teach a nation to avoid further pitfalls. Indeed, his writings address the future as much as they do the present and the past. As well as being an author of such works as his most significant *The Gulag Archipelago* and *The Red Wheel*, both of which transcend the boundaries of fiction, he was at least equally prolific as a polemicist and publicist.<sup>5</sup> His best known pieces of journalism, including those which appeared during *perestrojka* and in the 1990s, dealt with contemporary problems and choices, those which the author claimed were crucial to the path that Russia was to choose, at a time when the country stood at a historical crossroads. Furthermore, in Solzhenitsyn's eyes, contemporary Russian history and the history of the Russian Revolution were matters not only for his compatriots, but also for the entire world: the Revolution, he claimed, was crucial to the historical development of the world throughout the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup>

In his epic-historical cycle *The Red Wheel*, subtitled *A Narrative in Discrete Periods of Time*, the author attempts to explain the Russian February Revolution. The events depicted in this work, that despite its some six thousand pages remained unfinished, are divided into sections that the author terms *uzly* (knots or nodes): there are four such *uzly*, each devoted to those historical moments that, according to the author, culminated in the coup of October 1917. (In his view, the entire revolution did not end until after collectivisation and the First Five-Year Plan.) Those historical events and specific periods of time that Solzhenitsyn highlights are, according to him, the very moments that explain how the Revolution and the subsequent Bolshevik assumption of power were able to take place. This thus refers to key moments that in the author's opinion foreshadowed and sealed forever the fate of Russia and all humankind. To accomplish his task, Solzhenitsyn employs at least eight literary genres, alternating between distinct formats, materials and narrative styles.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For the fictional element in *The Red Wheel* and its characteristics, see Nelli Shchedrina, "Priroda chudozhestvennosti v 'Krasnom Kolese' A. Solzhenitsyna", in Nikita Struve & Viktor Moskvín (eds.), *Mezhdú dvumia iubileiami. 1998–2003. Pisateli, kritiki, literaturovedy o tvorchestve A. I. Solzhenitsyna*, (Moskva: Russkii Put' 2005), 478-496.

<sup>6</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Radiointerv'iu o Krasnom Kolese' dlia 'Golosa Ameriki'. Interv'iu vedet Mark Pomar" (May 31, 1984), in idem, *Publitsistika v trekh tomakh*, (Jaroslavl': Verkhne-Volzhskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo 1997), vol. 3, 251. Cf. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Radiointerv'iu o 'Marte semnadsatogo' dlia BBC. Interv'iu vedet Vladimir Chugunov" (June 29, 1987), in idem, *Publitsistika v trekh tomakh*, (Jaroslavl': Verkhne-Volzhskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo 1997), vol. 3, 271.

<sup>7</sup> For further details on this, see Pavel Fokin, "Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Iskusstvo vne igry" in Nikita Struve & Viktor Moskvín (eds.), *Mezhdú dvumia iubileiami. 1998–2003. Pisateli, kritiki, literaturovedy o tvorchestve A. I. Solzhenitsyna*, (Moskva: Russkii Put' 2005), 519-528. He is also just as much of an innovator in *The Gulag Archipelago*. See Geller, *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. K 70-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia*, 14-39.

It has been claimed that it is actually Russia itself that constitutes the major theme of the novel and all his works, and that Solzhenitsyn was constantly pre-occupied with two questions: when did the decline and fall of Russia begin and how is the country to be saved?<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, he himself states that *The Red Wheel* depicts the fate of Russia. Solzhenitsyn argues that the Revolution and its subsequent events are a catastrophe that was unfolding throughout the nineteenth century and that was still in progress by the end of the twentieth.<sup>9</sup>

Solzhenitsyn's mission to chart the entire February Revolution may be perceived in one sense as didactic; his belief was that an awareness of the events that he analysed and brought to life was crucial if Russia were to be set on a new historical path. Moreover, the same has been observed with respect to his essays and political writings. It has been stated that he judged, reflected and prophesied, focusing exclusively on the future state of Russia.<sup>10</sup>

Solzhenitsyn's ambition to be both a writer and a historian at one and the same time raises the question about his overall view of history. He seems to be as concerned with the movement of history, history in its own right, as he is about the individual and the empirical. For example, he claimed in an interview that his cycle was aimed at those who "seriously want to understand the course of history, indeed the course of history as such, and not just the history of Russia. In actual fact, the events in *The Red Wheel* mark the turning point in the world situation."<sup>11</sup> The theme of history in its own right also relates to the author's view of modernity.

In the following, I shall try to trace a couple of the main features of Solzhenitsyn's conception of history. The question that I consider in this article refers to his view of history as such, its driving forces and its actors, and the ability of human beings to influence it. The answer to this question will be formulated with reference to the novels of the tetralogy *The Red Wheel* as well as *The First Circle* and his articles, speeches and interviews. The author's thoughts on history do not change dramatically

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<sup>8</sup> See Aleksandr Shmeman, "Otvét Solzhenitsynu", *Vestnik Russkogo Khristianskogo Dvizheniia*, no. 117, 1976(1), 124. Cf. Zherzh Niva (Georges Nivat), *Solzhenitsyn*, (London: Overseas Publications Interchange Ltd 1984), 197-198.

<sup>9</sup> Solzhenitsyn, "Interv'iu s Bernarom Pivo dlia frantsuzskogo televideniia", 191. Cf.: "Every great revolution is always an event that has repercussions on the entire century. Its consequences extend over one hundred years." Solzhenitsyn, "Radiointerviu o 'Marte semnadtsatogo' dlia BBC. Interv'iu vedet Vladimir Shugunov", 277. Compare this with the following quotation from the novel *April 1917 (The Red Wheel. Knot IV)*: "What is happening now is greater than the French Revolution. Mankind will be dealing with its consequences for more than a hundred years." Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Uzel IV: April' semnadtsatogo*, in idem, *Krasnoe Koleso. Povestvovaniie v otmerennykh srokakh*, vol. 10, (Moskva: Voennoe izdatel'stvo 1997), 551.

<sup>10</sup> Zherzh Niva, *Solzhenitsyn*, 45.

<sup>11</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Interv'iu s N. A. Struve ob 'Oktia bre shestnadtsatogo' dlia zhurnala Express" (September 30, 1984), in idem, *Publitsistika v trekh tomakh*, (Jaroslavl': Verkhne-Volzhs кое knizhnoe izdatel'stvo 1997), vol. 3, 271.

over time in his texts. This, therefore, makes it possible for me to move between different periods. My interpretation should be seen as a first attempt to distinguish between fundamental patterns that have so far not attracted the attention of researchers. It would have been possible to add greater depth and complexity to the discussion.

My analytical approach was inspired by the discussion of German historian Reinhart Koselleck on the characteristic features of the conception of history and of time during modernity. In several of his works he demonstrates how the modern age, from the French Revolution onwards, is characterised by a new experience and understanding of the historical dimension of existence.<sup>12</sup> His analyses have influenced my entire thesis, but their explicit importance does not become apparent until the end of the text, where I conclude with a number of reflections on Solzhenitsyn's relationship to modernity. My hope is that these reflections can shed new light on Solzhenitsyn's view of history and that they may even be relevant to the general conditions for thinking in historical terms in our present age.

#### The Irrationality of History

Two different conceptions of history, two separate trends, are discernible in Solzhenitsyn's writings. The first states that from a human viewpoint, history is irrational, the second that it is a graspable progression that one can relate to in a variety of ways. Let us start with the first, one of the most illuminating examples of which can be found in the novel *August 1914 (The Red Wheel. Knot 1)*. One of the work's arguably most mysterious figures, Pavel Ivanovich Varsonofiev, discusses social order and history with two young student volunteers in the Russian Army. When these two young men ask him to define the best form of government, Varsonofiev claims that human beings are unable to venture an opinion as to which form is best. Admittedly, one social order must be better than all the bad ones, he concedes, but "we cannot by our own deliberate efforts devise this best of social systems".<sup>13</sup> Nor can it be "a *scientific* construction", even if humanity constantly strives to be strictly scientific; no, says Varsonofiev, "history is not governed by reason".<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, on the question as to what in this case determines history, he replies "History is *irrational*". In addition to its being irrational, Varsonofiev also believes that "it has its organic fabric which may be beyond our understanding".<sup>15</sup> This image of history as something organic is then elaborated. Varsonofiev illustrates his view using two similes that refer to the organic world. He states the following:

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<sup>12</sup> For further details, see Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1985).

<sup>13</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *August 1914. The Red Wheel. Knot I. A Narrative in Discrete Periods of Time*, trans. H. T. Willetts. (London: The Bodley Head, and New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1989), 322.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

History grows like a living tree. Reason is to history what an axe is to a tree. It will not make it grow. Or, if you prefer, history is a river, it has its own laws which govern its currents, its twists and turns, its eddies. But then wiseacres come along and say that it is a stagnant pond, and that it must be drained off into another and better channel, that it is just a matter of choosing the right place to dig the ditch. But you cannot interrupt a river, a stream. Disrupt its flow by a few centimetres—and there is no living stream.<sup>16</sup>

These similes culminate in a discussion to the effect that “the bonds between generations, institutions, traditions, customs, are what keep the stream flowing uninterruptedly.”<sup>17</sup> In the quotations cited, we see two key features that characterise history: one, that it cannot be comprehended through reason and two, that it is a type of organism with its own inherent structure and internal laws. In the conversation, the question arises as to where these laws are to be found. “Another riddle”, is the answer.<sup>18</sup> “They may not be accessible to us at all. They certainly aren’t to be found on the surface, for every hothead to snap up.”<sup>19</sup>

I would go so far as to claim that the view of history depicted in the novel is representative of the author’s own, since we find a similar reasoning in statements made by Solzhenitsyn to his interviewers.<sup>20</sup> The clearest example is possibly in David Aikman’s interview from 1989. The interviewer began by stating there to be at least two distinct ways of viewing history: the Marxist and the Christian. Solzhenitsyn was asked to state his interpretation to the audience. His response was as follows:

Yes, according to the Christian view, history results from the interaction between the Divine will and the free will of individual humans. Obviously, God’s will makes itself known, but not in any fatalistic manner, and the free will of individual humans also makes itself known. It is this interaction between them that gives us history. However, in general, history is difficult to understand. For us, it is irrational and we cannot plumb its depths. However, what we must inevitably recognise is that life is organic and develops as a tree grows or a river flows. Every disruption to its course is harmful and

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 323. Cf. with the next “knot”, the novel *November 1916*, where the same character Varsonofiev reflects on his former political activities. “Impatiently labouring in vain, trying to change the course of such a vessel, without fully understanding its nature. But its course is beyond our comprehension, and we have no right to anything more than the slightest adjustment of the wheel. With no sudden jerks.” Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *November 1916. The Red Wheel. Knot II*, trans. H. T. Willetts (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1999), 976.

<sup>20</sup> Georges Nivat is of the opinion that Solzhenitsyn’s view of history as an organic, slow flow of time can be traced back to the Russian Slavophiles’ philosophy of history. See Zherzh Niva, *Solzhenitsyn*, 217. However, one could point to a number of examples where Solzhenitsyn differs radically from the Slavophiles, especially in view of the Russian *obshchina* (rural community). Furthermore, one could analyse to what extent the Slavophiles allowed themselves to be inspired in their view of history by the German idealist philosophers.

unnatural. Revolution is such a disruption.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time as we once more recognise in this interview the same similes and view of history as in *The Red Wheel*—that being that history is inaccessible to our reason—the context is complicated by the fact that Solzhenitsyn seems to be stating that history is moreover subject to an external force, namely God’s will. Indeed, there is actually a contradiction here in that it is suddenly both Man and God, who each from their own side, *create* history, at the same time as history is seen to be irrational. Formulations of this kind about God as an active subject in history are, however, unusual in the case of Solzhenitsyn.

As can be seen from the quotation, one aspect that complicates the image of history as being irrational is Solzhenitsyn’s view of revolution. The title of the tetralogy *The Red Wheel* is more than merely an apt image for the Russian Revolution, since the wheel is also a multi-faceted symbol: it can be seen as representing the destruction of the country, but can also be interpreted as being a reference to the increasingly accelerating and inexorable course of the Revolution and history. The author further claims that the title expresses the unwritten law that applies to all revolutions, including the French Revolution. This unwritten law states that a revolution can be likened to a gigantic wheel, and if one starts to turn it, then it draws the entire country into itself, including those who set it in motion. Those who trigger a revolution are always doomed to circle helplessly around the wheel and in most cases also ultimately perish.<sup>22</sup> In interviews during the 1980s, Solzhenitsyn was repeatedly questioned about his choice of the wheel as a metaphor and its significance. Perhaps his most poetic and also most precise explanation is as follows:

Revolution is a gigantic cosmic Wheel that resembles a galaxy, a twisted spiral galaxy. An enormous Wheel that when it has begun to roll turns everyone including those who set it in motion, into specks of dust. And there they perish in their multitudes. This is a grandiose process that nobody can halt once it has started.<sup>23</sup>

However, a revolution is not only a revolving wheel but also a break in continuity. In the tetralogy *The Red Wheel* Solzhenitsyn is pre-occupied with what he sees as the greatest Russian historical cataclysm, the First World War and the subsequent political changes. Right at the beginning of the cycle he writes as follows:

Only this narrow brotherhood of General Staff officers, and perhaps a handful of engineers, knew that the whole world and

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<sup>21</sup> Solzhenitsyn, “Interv’iu s Devidom Eikmanom dlia zhurnala ‘Time’”, 325.

<sup>22</sup> Solzhenitsyn, “Interv’iu s Bernarom Pivo dlia frantsuzskogo televideniia”, 173.

<sup>23</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “Interv’iu s Devidom Eikmanom dlia zhurnala ‘Time’”, 324. See also Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “Cherty dvukh revoliutsii”, in idem, *Publitsistika v trekh tomakh* (Jaroslavl’: Verkhne-Volzhscoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo 1997), vol. 1, 505, 536.

Russia with it had slid without noticing it into a New Age, in which everything, even the atmosphere of the planet, its oxygen supply, the rate of combustion, the very clockwork were new and strange. All Russia, from the imperial family to the revolutionaries, naïvely thought that it was still breathing the same air as before and living on the same earth—and only those few engineers and soldiers were aware of the changed zodiac.<sup>24</sup>

This initially invisible disruption thus stands in opposition to the natural, organic, historical flow that is inaccessible to the rational intellect.

Revolution is, however, not merely a kind of force that impedes this natural, yet by human standards, irrational flow, but it is itself irrational. Solzhenitsyn's view embraces several aspects; revolution is actually not external to history but rather comprises a kind of historical current that moves at an accelerating pace within the historical flow – indeed it constitutes a specific historical interval. Such a view of revolution can be traced in *The Red Wheel*: “Once it has begun its march, can such a mighty force as History really be halted so easily?” wonders Varsonofiev in *March 1917*. This question is motivated by the belief held by the liberal forces that events could be controlled and guided in the right direction. According to Varsonofiev, this is not possible during the general euphoria and the chaotic developments, and against the background of the grandiose yet short-sighted political plans that followed the abdication of the tsar.<sup>25</sup> The February Revolution is the specific focus of those deliberations, as is revolution as such.

#### History as Progress

The aforementioned view of history as a discrete, closed organism, the internal structure of which is inaccessible to human beings and human intellect, seems to differ, however, from another kind of conception of history that Solzhenitsyn also reveals. It is linked to his critique of the modern ideology of progress, termed technological progressivism, which is a principal theme in his works. This critique is most prominent in his speeches and articles, yet also finds place in his literary texts.

Solzhenitsyn rejects the notion that scientific and technical progress in itself could ever bring about an improvement and development of human spiritual potential or allow for true freedom. He considers it erroneous to believe that one only has to follow the movement of material and technical progress to be able to create a better society and improve human nature. On the contrary, this ideology of progress has brought people in the West as well as in Russia to the brink of the abyss; indeed, according to Solzhenitsyn, the future of humankind is now in peril. The very idea of eternal progress is actually

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<sup>24</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *August 1914*, 91.

<sup>25</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Mart semnadsatogo*, in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 18 (Vermont, Paris: Ymca-Press 1988), 10.

nothing more than a nonsensical myth, he claims.<sup>26</sup> Our pursuit of material and technical progress has obscured the purpose of our existence, while progress has resulted in a virtual exhaustion of our limited natural resources. Furthermore, technocentric progress, he believes, has resulted in moral regression. His critique of the doctrine of progress occupies a prominent place in his best-known speeches, namely the Harvard Address from 1978 and the Liechtenstein Address from 1993.<sup>27</sup> The latter contains, for example, an expanded reflection on the consequences of this ideology.

His novel *In the First Circle* also offers a critique of progress, one example being when the author's alter ego, the physicist and mathematician Gleb Nerzhin, states the following in his conversation with the engineer Illarion Gerasimovich:

If I only believed that there is any backward and forward in human history! It's like an octopus, with neither back nor front. For me there's no word so devoid of meaning as 'progress'. What progress, Illarion Pavlovitch? Progress from what? To what? In those twenty-seven centuries, have people become better? Kinder? Or at least happier? No, they've become worse, nastier, and unhappier! And all this thanks to beautiful ideas!<sup>28</sup>

When Gerasimovich objects by pointing out that it is nonetheless impossible to deny scientific inventions that have given humanity entirely new means of improving its material conditions, Nerzhin replies as follows:

Plenty doesn't mean progress! My idea of progress is not material abundance but a general willingness to share things in short supply! But you won't achieve any of that anyway! You won't warm Siberia! You won't make the deserts bloom! It'll all be blown to bloody hell by atom bombs!<sup>29</sup>

Thus far, the criticism of the concept of progress accords well with the idea of history as irrational, but, upon closer examination, one finds that Solzhenitsyn's repudiation of the myth of history as a progressive movement is not absolute. In his Liechtenstein Address, he concedes that human "knowledge and skills continue to be perfected; they cannot, and must not, be brought to a halt."<sup>30</sup> "Progress cannot be stopped by anyone or anything", Solzhenitsyn also says, although he adds that "it

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<sup>26</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Letter to the Soviet Leaders*, transl. Hilary Sternberg (New York: Harper & Row/Perennial 1975), 24.

<sup>27</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Rech' v Garvarde" (The Harvard Address), in idem, *Publitsistika v trekh tomakh*, (Jaroslavl': Verkhne-Volzhskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo 1997), vol. 1, 309-328, in particular 323-328; Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Rech' v Mezhdunarodnoi Akademii Filosofii" (The Liechtenstein Address), in idem, *Publitsistika v trekh tomakh*, (Jaroslavl': Verkhne-Volzhskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo 1997), vol. 1, 599-612.

<sup>28</sup> Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *In the First Circle*, trans. Harry T. Willetts (New York: Harper 2009), 670.

<sup>29</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *In the First Circle*, 670.

<sup>30</sup> Solzhenitsyn, "Rech' v Mezhdunarodnoi Akademii Filosofii", 602.

is up to us to stop seeing it as a stream of unlimited blessings and to view it rather as a gift from on high, sent down for an extremely intricate trial of our free will”.<sup>31</sup> Solzhenitsyn further claims that human beings must make progress serve a different purpose, namely their inner development. “We must not simply lose ourselves in the mechanical flow of Progress, but strive to harness it in the interests of the human spirit, not to become the mere playthings of Progress, but rather to seek or expand ways of directing its might towards the perpetration of good.”<sup>32</sup>

This critique of the concept of material and technical progress in history is linked to Solzhenitsyn’s thinking about the present day. Furthermore, he is careful to stress that this is the principal target of his critique and not the West as such, an accusation that many of his critics outside Russia have tried to make. His view of the modern age also assumes increasing progress but a progress of the *spiritual* kind. For him it is a question of a sort of spiritual progress, one that admittedly can be seen in the past but that above all can acquire great importance in the future. The solution to the deep crisis of our modern age he sees as being the building of new types of communities based on spiritual or ethical progress. This assumes that people must stop striving for material and technological growth and instead begin striving towards mere preservation of what has already been achieved.<sup>33</sup> Individual human beings and entire communities must submit to a voluntary self-limitation.<sup>34</sup>

Let us take a closer look at one concrete example where the concept of progress that I describe is appears in his writings. Spiritual progress is intended to lead to better forms of human coexistence. The question arises as to the state that he proposes as an alternative to those that exist, and, in particular, what kind of state should develop in Russia. In several keynote articles Solzhenitsyn presents a political program with proposals as to how Russia ought to develop, which measures ought to be taken and which form of government ought to be adopted. However, for him, state structure is of secondary importance in relation to the spirit that should pervade interpersonal relationships. This is linked to his plea that humankind must choose a new path of regret, self-examination and self-limitation, without which, he writes, a new and just society cannot be built.<sup>35</sup> This is also the only way for us to discard the heavy burden of our past.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 605.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 605.

<sup>33</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Letter to the Soviet Leaders*, 24-25. Cf. the discussion of this in Edward E. Ericsson, Jr. *Solzhenitsyn and the Modern World*, (Washington, D. C.: Regnery Gateway 1993), 227-230.

<sup>34</sup> Solzhenitsyn, “Rech’ v Mezhdunarodnoi Akademii Filosofii”, 610-612; Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “Raskaianie i samoogranichenie kak kategorii natsional’noi zhizni (1973)”, in idem, *Publitsistika v trekh tomakh*, (Jaroslavl’: Verkhne-Volzskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo 1997), vol. 1, 79-82. Cf. the discussion of the categories of “regret”, “repentance” and “self-limitation” in Daniel J. Mahoney, *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: The Ascent from Ideology*, (Lanham Md.: Rowman & Littlefield 2001), especially 99-134.

<sup>35</sup> Solzhenitsyn, “Raskaianie i samoogranichenie kak kategorii natsional’noi zhizni”, *passim*.

During the period that society, above all Russian society, requires to reach ethical maturity, Solzhenitsyn seems to be endorsing an authoritarian state.<sup>36</sup> The question is, in that case, what kind of state he wishes to see when society is ready for the next stage. His vision of an ideal state is one that might be termed the ethical state. His fundamental belief is that what is right for the individual is also right for society and for the state.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, it is also the conviction of Socrates in Plato's *The Republic*.<sup>38</sup> Along with Aristotle, Plato is an obvious point of reference for Solzhenitsyn in his discussion of possible types of state.<sup>39</sup> The author admits that the ethical criteria that we apply with respect to individuals, families and small circles cannot be so easily transferred to politicians and states.<sup>40</sup> States, however, are led by politicians, writes Solzhenitsyn, who are, despite everything, ordinary people whose actions have an impact on other ordinary people. Therefore, any moral demands imposed by us on individuals can also be applied to the politics of a state, government, parliament, and party. Solzhenitsyn goes so far as to assert that humankind has no future unless politics are based on ethics.<sup>41</sup>

Solzhenitsyn thus does not distinguish between politics and ethics. It was during the Enlightenment,

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<sup>36</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Letter to the Soviet Leaders*, 71-73. Cf. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Kak nam obustroit' Rossiiu: posil'nye soobrazheniia*, (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel' 1990), For Solzhenitsyn an authoritarian social system does not imply that there would not be laws that had real power and that these would not reflect the will of the people. Nor does this mean that the legislative, the executive and the judicial powers would not be independent: on the contrary. Furthermore, Solzhenitsyn makes a clear distinction between the concepts "authoritarian state", which he understands in a very broad sense, and "totalitarian state", which is a twentieth-century creation. For a discussion of these concepts in his work, see Vladislav Krasnov, "The Social Vision of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn", *Modern Age*, 28 (Spring/Summer 1984), 215-221. One may also add that Solzhenitsyn has a positive view of democracy even though he has certain reservations. In his articles and speeches he considers that Russia has no other choice than this form of government. This can be seen in his article "Rebuilding Russia". When he attempts to explain what he means by the term "democracy", he provides a number of important observations. He writes that there are a limited number of forms of government to choose from and that Russia does not have a wide choice; sooner or later the country will choose democracy. However, he adds "But in opting for democracy we must understand clearly just what we are choosing, what price we shall have to pay, and that we are choosing it as a means, not as an end in itself". Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Rebuilding Russia. Reflections and Tentative Proposals*, trans. Alexis Klimoff (Harvill: London 1991), 55.

<sup>37</sup> Solzhenitsyn reiterates this idea in a large number of texts. In *November 1916*, we find the following, for example: "I think that the laws of individual lives and those of large foundations are similar". Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *November 1916. The Red Wheel. Knot II*, 46. Cf. Solzhenitsyn, "Raskaianie i samoorganichenie kak kategorii natsional'noi zhizni", 49-51.

<sup>38</sup> See Plato, *The Republic, Book II*, 368e-369.

<sup>39</sup> See Solzhenitsyn, *Kak nam obustroit' Rossiiu*, 36.

<sup>40</sup> Solzhenitsyn, "Rech' v Mezhdunarodnoi Akademii Filosofii", 600.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 601. Here Solzhenitsyn refers to Vladimir Solov'ev, who believed that ethical and political acts are, from a Christian standpoint, intimately linked and also that political activity cannot be anything other than a moral mission (*npravstvennoe sluzhenie*). Cf. similar ideas in Solzhenitsyn, *Kak nam obustroit' Rossiiu*, 47.

he states, that the view developed that it was inconceivable to speak in terms of ethical categories with regard to the state. Solzhenitsyn further expounds his thinking: the state, he maintains, is a living organism; for it not to collapse, the three independent powers, the executive, the legislature and the judiciary, must come together by means of an ethically more advanced, popularly elected supervisory body.<sup>42</sup> This model is once again highly reminiscent of Plato's ideal state. Solzhenitsyn writes that there must be morally advanced individuals whose authority is acknowledged even by the apparatus of the state bureaucracy. In the novel *In the First Circle*—in the aforementioned conversation between Gleb Nerzhin and Illarion Gerasimovich—we also find a detailed discussion about the construction of “a rational society” in which Nerzhin insists that the state should be run by people with moral authority.<sup>43</sup> What further distinguishes Solzhenitsyn's discussion of the state and its form is his belief that the choice of form of government must be based on a slow, organic development of the historical experience and the traditions that have been accumulated by a nation.<sup>44</sup> We can thus see here how history, despite the dangerous material and technical progress that characterises it, can provide material for spiritual progress.

#### Some Concluding Remarks on Solzhenitsyn's Critique of Modernity

Two different conceptions of history exist side by side in Solzhenitsyn's works. One acknowledges the existence of material and technical development but questions this by claiming that this development occurs only on the surface of history. At a deeper level history is irrational and incomprehensible in terms of human intellect. It is an organism that has its own incomprehensible laws of development and its own opaque internal structure. The second conception also recognizes material and technical progress but questions its role in a different manner. It stresses that history can be a spiritual progression and that humankind, aided by insights into the past, can achieve progress towards a higher spiritual goal, a notion based on history being comprehensible, something that human beings using their intellect can work out and attempt to realise. This notion also assumes that one employs one's own, and often negative, historical experiences as a means of avoiding mistakes in the future. Hence, humankind can learn from history.

We therefore see a view of history that points in two directions. From a human perspective, history is both an irrational organism and a process into which one can gain insight and for which one can have expectations. Both these views can be understood as criticising modernity, and the material and

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>43</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *In the First Circle*, 664.

<sup>44</sup> Solzhenitsyn espoused a gradual, non-violent and gentle transformation of the Communist regime as early as the 1970s in his “Letter to the Soviet Leaders”. In “Rebuilding Russia” (1990) he continued to stress the importance of creating a state based on historic traditions. Cf. with what Varsonofiev says in *August 1914*: “But the state does not like sharp breaks with the past. Gradualness is what it likes. Sudden breaks, leaps are fatal to it.” Solzhenitsyn, *August 1914*, 318.

technically oriented progress paradigm that finally came to the fore in earnest during the Enlightenment and that has been preeminent ever since. However, it is also clear that these two perceptions of history *are themselves* fruits of the modern age of which Solzhenitsyn is so critical; both are modern since they are inconceivable as anything other than reactions within material and scientific modernisation. The foundation of Solzhenitsyn's conception of history is thus not merely a Christian view of humankind, but also the modern history paradigm with which he perpetually appears to be locked in combat. His own resistance to the direction in which humanity has been moving over the past few centuries is in itself a result of modernity. Consequently, I would claim, Solzhenitsyn does not succeed in abandoning the progress paradigm: he views history in a modern way as constant change and renewal, which, according to Reinhart Koselleck, has been the normal pattern since the time of the French Revolution.<sup>45</sup> Even when it appears irrational, history for Solzhenitsyn is an incessant process of change, and the uncontrollable revolution is a break in continuity typical of the modern period.<sup>46</sup> The idea of spiritual progress is furthermore a mirror image of the notion of material and technical progress that has been dominant throughout the modern age, with its utopian thinking that looks towards the future. Solzhenitsyn can only argue against modernity; he treats as negative something normally viewed as positive. He wishes to delay this trend, slow its pace, and induce it to follow a different path. However, he thereby shows his conviction that history can constitute a progressive process and that humankind itself could plan and implement this progress. He may not count on or believe in a better future, but he *hopes* that a continuing process of human spiritual progress will bring this about. Such an expectation alone is typical, however, for the historical thinking of our modern age.<sup>47</sup> Hence, Solzhenitsyn's anti-modernism is essentially modern.

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, passim.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 278-279.

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