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Twentieth-Century Russia in the Mirror of Solzhenitsyn's Fiction

Whatever the ultimate critical judgment will be of Solzhenitsyn the writer, whatever his countrymen in future generations will think of him as a social thinker or prophet, there is little doubt that they will read his novels and stories with fascination and that they will search them for clues to Russia's fate and history.

The historical impulse—it would not be wrong to call it a compulsion—is strong in Solzhenitsyn; it dominates his work and his life. There is the testimony of his words and his books to show this. Literature, he has said, is "the living memory of the nation," it "preserves and kindles within itself the flame of her spent history, in a form which is safe from deformation and slander."1 In the service of that memory he has not merely, and most obviously, chosen to devote his creative energies to a "multivolume research work about Soviet prison camps from 1918 to 1956, which contains only true facts, places, and the names of about 200 persons still alive."2 He has also written a book about the first great Russian battle of the First World War which is as much a work of scholarly reconstruction as it is a work of the imagination, a book, moreover, which he considers only the beginning of a series which is to explain "the course of events."3

In the rest of his fiction too, and most especially in First Circle4 and Cancer Ward5, history is a pervasive, concrete, and recognizable presence. It is not only the background against which individuals are portrayed or the setting in which they are tested. The history of Russia and the histories of individual Russians are of equal importance and are treated throughout his novels as being in intimate and fateful relationship with one another.

Explicitly or implicitly, Solzhenitsyn himself has asked that his works be read as history; he has himself brought the proof that they are in large measure historical in inspiration, character, and intent; and he has suggested that not too much of a distinction be made between the fictionalized and the factual record. Thus, he has carefully avoided calling August 19146 a novel, although it is in formal terms a work of fiction, and he has subtitled his history of the GULag archipelago "an experiment in artistic investigation."7

3. Ibid.
6. Avgust chetyrnadtsatogo (Paris, 1971); August 1914, Michael Glenny, tr. (New York, 1974). Translations from the three major novels are my own and were facilitated by reference to the translations listed.
There is warrant, then, for asking what Russian readers—who are, after all, Solzhenitsyn's chosen audience—are likely to learn from his fiction about their unknown or neglected past; what parts of it he has thought it his duty to resurrect and preserve for them; in what light he wishes them to see and remember it; what warnings, inspiration, or instruction they are to draw from it.

Born in 1918, Solzhenitsyn has written (in a postscript to the Russian-language edition of *August 1914*) that it was in 1936, when he finished secondary school, that he conceived the idea of his life's work: to take up what he called “the main theme of our modern history,” and that since then he never stopped thinking about and preparing for this, the main task of his life. He was, he has said, deflected to the writing of other books only by an overabundance of first-hand experiences of more recent history: the Second World War, in which he served as a captain of artillery; his arrest in 1945 for a few careless comments about Stalin in private letters; imprisonment in camps and a prison research institute, followed by exile in Central Asia, a battle with cancer, the death of Stalin, the Thaw, and his restoration to life and his life's work eleven years later. 8

Solzhenitsyn has not told us just what in 1936 propelled him, to all appearances a normal Soviet youth untroubled by doubt or unusual misfortune, to delve into the prehistory of the Revolution, to go back to 1914 to look for the origin and meaning of Russia's subsequent tragedy. Perhaps, as its translator, Michael Glenny, has suggested,9 he wished in *August 1914* to honor the memory of his father, a student of literature, a follower of Tolstoi, and an officer in the First World War, who died six months before his son was born and is portrayed in the book as Isaakii Lazhenitsyn, a university student and son of a prosperous farmer. Such an act of filial piety must have been connected with (perhaps it was motivated by) the first stirrings of distaste for a system which made a son reject a father who had fought bravely and patriotically in a war that had come to be disavowed as stupid and imperialist, a father whose beliefs and social status it was best to conceal along with the medals he had won.

If this is so, it explains the underlying unity of Solzhenitsyn's major works, a unity which makes all of them part of a grand inquiry into the nature and origins of the Soviet regime—what made it possible, how it came about, how Russia and her people came to be where they are. Indeed, the novels written after 1953 and before the conception formed in 1936 could be realized even partially, are not so much distractions or deflections from the “main theme” as treatments of it at later points in time. Although less historical in structure and intent than *August 1914*, both *Cancer Ward* and *First Circle* pose and attempt to answer the question how so evil a despotism could be fastened upon Russia, and they do so with an immediacy, power, and concreteness that are certain to evoke readier responses than the narrative which deals largely with military events in East Prussia.
