

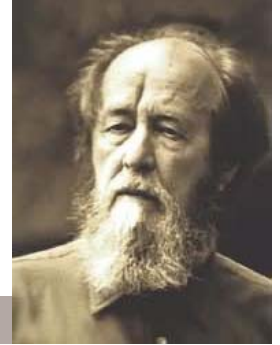
PROFILES IN FAITH

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (b. 1918)

Russian Author & Nobel Laureate

A World Split Wider Apart: *Solzhenitsyn's Harvard Speech Twenty-four Years Later*

by David Aikman, *Author & Speaker*



Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn was born December 11, 1918, in Kislovodsk in the mountainous region of southern Russia known as the Caucasus. His father Isaaki was a philosophy student at Moscow University but abandoned his studies to fight against Germany in WW I. He became an artillery officer and remained on the front until the Treaty of Brest. Tragically, it was a hunting accident which ended his life—six months before Aleksandr's birth.

Aleksandr's mother, Tassia, never remarried and reared her son on her own despite economic hardships. An educated woman, Tassia was fluent in French and English, and earned a living as a stenographer and typist.

In 1924, the two moved to the town of Rostov on the Don where Aleksandr completed grammar school. Wanting to be a writer from early in his teen years, Aleksandr longed to attend Moscow University as had his father and study literature, but financially this was not possible. A discovered aptitude in mathematics led him to enter Rostov on the Don University to study in the Physics and Mathematics Department. He was later to say that his training in mathematics spared his life: "...on at least two occasions, [my abilities and training in mathematics] rescued me from death. For I would probably not have survived the eight years in camps if I had not, as a mathematician, been transferred to a [research center], where I spent four years; and later, during my exile, I was allowed to teach mathematics and physics, which helped to ease my existence and made it possible for me to write. If I had had a literary education it is quite likely that I should not have survived these ordeals but would instead have been subjected to even greater pressures..."

While studying mathematics, Solzhenitsyn was able to enroll in correspondence courses in literature at Moscow University. Some of his writing during this time period contributed to later novels. In 1940 while still in school, Aleksandr married a fellow student, Natalya Reshotovskaya. In 1941, Aleksandr graduated from Rostov University and was hired to teach physics at a

secondary school in the Rostov region. However, his new position came to a sudden end with the outbreak of war.

Due to health reasons, his initial position in the Red Army was as the driver of horse-drawn vehicles. He remained in this duty for a year before being sent to artillery school owing to his mathematical training. After a very brief schooling, he was sent to the front in charge of an artillery-finding-position company, soon gaining the rank of captain. He then served with the artillery at the front until his arrest in February 1945.

Solzhenitsyn's arrest came as a complete surprise to him. For days afterward he was convinced that there had been some misunderstanding and that, given the opportunity to explain himself, all would be cleared up. He was arrested, he learned, on the basis of things he had written in his letters: references to Stalin that were considered disrespectful by government censors and political ideas viewed as subversive. Elements from other writings were used to build the government's case against him, and despite inadequate evidence to support charges of anti-Soviet propaganda and subversion, he received an eight-year sentence which he served in prisons and labor camps. After completing his sentence, he was notified that he was to be exiled for life. Happily, his exile ended after three years.

Like most of pre-Soviet Russia, Solzhenitsyn had been born into a Christian tradition and was baptized as a child. However, as Marxism took hold throughout the country, atheism became Aleksandr's world view. It was in the prison camp when undergoing treatment and surgery for cancer that Solzhenitsyn came to turn from atheism to fully embrace Christianity. A poem recorded in his book *The Gulag Archipelago* reflects his new faith:

I look back with grateful trembling
At the life I have had to lead.

Neither desire nor reason
Has illumined its twists and turns,

But the glow of a Higher Meaning
Only later to be explained.

And now with the cup returned to me
I scoop up the water of life.
Almighty God! I believe in Thee!
Thou remained when I Thee denied...¹

In 1956, Solzhenitsyn's exile ended, and he settled in Ryazan in central Russia where he once again worked as a mathematics teacher. His remaining time and energies were poured into his writing, and in 1961 he took a daring step by offering for publication his short novel, *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, based on his own experiences in prison camps. Official criticism grew toward Solzhenitsyn as he published further works such that by 1963, he was no longer allowed to publish his work through public means. He then turned to underground publishing, which also allowed his works to be read outside the Soviet Union. In 1968, he published *The First Circle* and *The Cancer Ward*. In 1970, Solzhenitsyn was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, but was unwilling to travel to Stockholm to receive his reward for fear that he would not be allowed to re-enter the country on his return.

The first part of *The Gulag Archipelago* was published in 1973. This massive work brought to light the extensive network of prison camps throughout the Soviet Union that had begun following the Russian Revolution in 1917 and expanded rapidly during Stalin's rule. Solzhenitsyn wrote about the experiences that he and many other prisoners endured during their arrests, interrogations, and imprisonments. The publication of this book led to Solzhenitsyn's being charged with treason and being exiled in February 1974. After claiming his Nobel Prize, Solzhenitsyn eventually settled in the United States, leading a reclusive life until in 1989 his Russian citizenship was restored, and he returned to Russia in 1994.

In 1978, Solzhenitsyn was invited to give the commencement address at Harvard University. His address, entitled "A World Split Apart," received both extreme criticism and high praise at the time of its delivery, and the conflicting perspectives debate the speech's content to the present day.

In 2002 – nearly one quarter century after the speech – noted journalist, author, and speaker David Aikman reflected on this remarkable man and his commencement address in his foreword to a reprinting of the address by The Trinity Forum. The first portion of David Aikman's foreword appears in this issue of Knowing & Doing; the second portion will appear in the coming issue.

A World Split Wider Apart: Solzhenitsyn's Harvard Speech Twenty-four Years Later

IT WAS TWENTY-FOUR YEARS AGO that a Harvard commencement speech by the most famous Russian then living in the U.S., Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, created a furor in the American media establishment and generated a debate in American cultural and intellectual circles quite unprecedented as a response to a mere commencement address. Solzhenitsyn's "A World Split Apart"* seemed to fall uncomfortably upon the ears of most journalists and many academic observers who heard it or read it. (The speech was delivered by Solzhenitsyn in Russian, with consecutive English translation to the listening audience.) But out among philosophically more conservative minds in the hinterlands of American life, "A World Split Apart" was received almost rapturously. The Russian exile had delivered a piercing critique of much of the weakness of American society, many readers of the speech seemed to feel, with the authority of an Old Testament prophet (whom he, rather conveniently, physically resembled to a degree).

Today, on the daybreak not just of a new millennium, but of a major new challenge to Americans in the wake of September 11, 2001, it is a good time to revisit the speech. What does it have to say to us? How accurate were Solzhenitsyn's warnings about the perils facing the U.S. and the West? Do the severe-sounding criticisms of the weaknesses of American life and culture still apply? Have some of his warnings actually been taken to heart?

Back in 1978, the U.S. was at a point in its Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union when things looked as though they were approaching a climax. The U.S. had suffered a major strategic defeat when the nations of South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia all succumbed to military assaults launched from Hanoi with the vigorous support of Moscow. In Southern Africa, Angola, and Mozambique had been taken over by Communist regimes. Ethiopia was already in the hands of a brutal dictatorship massacring its opponents and in alliance with the Soviet Union. Many in the West were pessimistic about its chances of surviving the expansion of Soviet-supported global communist presence. Solzhenitsyn clearly targeted such pessimists in his Harvard address.

But the Harvard speech by Solzhenitsyn stands out as more than simply a period-piece commentary on international relations. As its admirers believed at the time, it was a document of major philosophical and religious significance in its own right. This is in itself remarkable because of the usual fate of commencement speeches. Generally they seldom rise far above the level

of banal pieties offered by the aged to the young about the commonplace challenges of living life when Mom and Dad are no longer (in most cases) paying the bills. Occasionally, original turns of phrase or snatches of pleasant rhetoric linger in the mind after the applause has died down and the graduating class members have collected their diplomas. But for the most part, the content of commencement speeches is recalled less vividly than the celebrity quotient of those who give them. It is probably not unfair to say that, at Harvard today, graduating students would rather hear a commencement address from the most recent winner of the Oscar Best Actress award than from the Librarian of Congress or the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Commencement speeches are generally expected to be light in content, funny in delivery, and above all, uncontroversial.

“A World Split Apart” was none of these. It may have been a measure of Solzhenitsyn’s relative isolation from ordinary American life since his arrival in the U.S. in 1976 from Zurich (and before that, in 1974, when he had been forcibly expelled from his homeland, the Soviet Union) that he had never even witnessed an American college commencement prior to his own appearance at Harvard. He was surely unaware of the usual expectations of a commencement speaker (i.e., humor, grace, and brevity). His ideas thus clanged in Harvard Square even more loudly than they otherwise might have done; they were delivered nakedly unwrapped.

“A World Split Apart” created such a clamor at least in part because it was a highly complex speech that seemed to address several different issues at the same time. To some critics, it wasn’t even very well organized. University of Chicago historian William H. McNeill complained that he saw in Solzhenitsyn’s text “only incoherence and confusion.”¹ New York Times columnist James Reston, obviously offended by much of what Solzhenitsyn said, grumbled that “it sounded like the wanderings of a mind split apart.”² These criticisms are not without substance.

That said, Solzhenitsyn’s several propositions were perfectly lucid in themselves, even if not set out in an order that led naturally from one to the other. They are too detailed to be examined separately with equal attention, but they essentially consist of some 15 propositions, usually defined under specific headings in the text as originally written. They are as follows:

1) The world has become dangerously “split” culturally, economically, and philosophically. It is wrong for Westerners to assume that all global cultures are simply lining up to follow the example of the West’s own pathway. “The deep manifold splits,” Solzhenitsyn said, “bear the danger of equally manifold disaster for all of us, in accordance with the ancient truth that a kingdom — in this case on Earth — divided against itself cannot stand.”

- 2) In the West there has been a palpable decline in civic and political courage, especially among intellectual elites.
- 3) America’s “pursuit of happiness” has degenerated into a selfish search for ever-higher living standards that is beginning to have serious consequences for the stability and health of the U.S.
- 4) The West in general, and the U.S. in particular, has developed an unhealthy reliance on legal processes for solving social problems and coping with examples of injustice.
- 5) Freedom in the U.S. has deteriorated from a good concept—freedom conjoined to a sense of moral responsibility—to a bad one—freedom as a hedonistic self-indulgence that leaves society defenseless against evils like pornography and crime. Solzhenitsyn believes that this turn of events is the consequence of a world-view that refuses to recognize the existence of evil within all human beings.
- 6) The American press corps has abdicated moral responsibility by its general trivialization of important events, its relentless invasion of privacy, and its refusal to acknowledge errors of judgment or commentary.
- 7) A uniformity of trendy editorial judgment has prevented important new ideas from making their way into the public marketplace where they can be openly discussed.
- 8) Western intellectuals are still dazzled by the promises of socialism when, in those countries ruled by “socialist” regimes, no ordinary person still believes them.
- 9) The West has become spiritually exhausted and thus cannot provide a legitimate model for Russia to pursue once the country is no longer ruled by communists.
- 10) The issue at stake for all humankind is nothing less than a fight for the future of Earth. Battle has already been joined. “The forces of Evil have begun their decisive offensive.”
- 11) The West, and especially the U.S., has lost its moral clarity. One consequence of this had been the triumph of communists in South-East Asia at the end of the Vietnam War.
- 12) The West has lost its will to resist evil aggression.
- 13) The primary reason for humankind’s woes and the West’s current weakness is a consequence of ideas that came to the fore at the Renaissance: that man is independent of God and has responsibility to no one but himself.
- 14) A humanist world-view without God is much more closely related to the communist world-view than most people realized. The failure of Western intellectuals to understand this makes it very hard for them to understand the East.
- 15) Because of the pervasive materialism in both East and West and the broad abandonment of belief that man is subordinate to God, the human race is approaching a major crisis. Only a return to true (Christian) spirituality will produce a way out of this crisis. “No one on earth has any other way out—but upward,” Solzhenitsyn said.



David Aikman is an author, journalist, and foreign policy consultant working in Washington in several different areas. A Senior Fellow of the Trinity Forum, he was during 1998-2002 a Senior Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington D.C. Before that, he was a freelance writer and author. Before that, he was Senior Correspondent and foreign correspondent with TIME Magazine.

He is a commentator on the editorial board of Salem Communications and a frequent participant on Voice of America's weekly foreign affairs program, Issues in the News. He has been a commentator on various international topics on ABC's Nightline, Fox News, CNN, the BBC and VOA's On the Line. His most recent books are A Man of Faith: The Spiritual Journey of George W. Bush (April 2004, a best-seller) and Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Balance of Power (October 2004).

Aikman was born in Surrey, England, and received his Bachelor's Degree from Worcester College, Oxford. He earned his Master's and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Washington, Seattle. He and his wife, Nonie, have two daughters and live in Gainesville, Virginia.

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