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Alexander Solzhenitsyn: A World Split Apart Study Guide

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ALEXANDER SOLZHENITSYN: A WORLD SPLIT APART

STUDY GUIDE, 2009

Steven Alan Samson

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/solzhenitsyn/harvard1978.html>

Study Questions and Notes

Solzhenitsyn introduces the motif of a split in the very first paragraph and notes the various worlds that are divided from one another. At the time of his address in 1978, Spain and Portugal had both veered sharply to the left and had only recently divested themselves of their African colonies. A powerful Third World bloc was emerging in the United Nations and a "Zionism Is Racism" resolution had been approved. Solzhenitsyn raises the possibility of future demands for reparations from the former colonial powers of the West. Soviet-style revolutions and coups were seizing the high ground. By then, countries like Ethiopia, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, South Yemen, Angola, and Mozambique had recently fallen into the Communist orbit. Others were teetering on the brink. Solzhenitsyn castigates the "blindness of superiority" he believes characterizes "Western incomprehension," noting that the 20th century revealed its "fragility and friability" [easily reduced to powder]. The theory of **convergence** as propounded by Andrei Sakharov and others was influential in American intellectual circles around 1970. Even earlier, world federalists, like George Brock Chisholm, a psychiatrist and director of WHO, were promoting a one-world government.

1. Why does Solzhenitsyn focus on the West in this address? Where is the decline of "civil courage" in the West most evident? Perhaps he had in mind the appeasement of what Roger Scruton called "the culture of repudiation."
2. What is his chief criticism of the modern West? What psychological detail was overlooked? What does he mean by "active and tense competition?" What is lost in the process? These remarks provide the basis for the bill of indictment that follows. The word that comes to mind here is **decadence**. In fact, a major national magazine devoted one issue to the subject of decadence at the end of the decade.
3. What point does he make about the letter of the law?" (Perhaps he had 2 Cor. 3:6 in mind). His remark that "the tissue of life is woven of **legalistic relations**" appears implicate the social contract theory and subsequent legal positivism that are part of the West's intellectual endowment. Concern was already widespread over a rise in litigation. The country had also been undergoing a social revolution at least since the 1950s as deviant social and sexual practices moved from the bohemian fringes into the mainstream of American life. Solzhenitsyn's complaint about a lack of self-restraint reflects, in his judgment, a displacement of community standards by an overemphasis on individual rights.
4. What do you think of his charge that the West misuses its liberty and leaves society little defense against "the abyss of human decadence?" The political context of his remarks would have included both the rapidly changing social mores and political unrest of the 1970s as well as the evident weakness of the Ford and Carter Administrations in the face of aggressive Soviet offensives.
5. In singling out the leniency of "public opinion" with regard to terrorism, it might be asked whether is conflating the "ruling groups" and "intellectual elites" with the general public. Is softheaded "public opinion" still a problem since 9/11? Solzhenitsyn criticizes the "humanistic and benevolent concept according to which there is no **evil** inherent to human nature." This idea resembles Rousseau's view, which indicts society for binding people in chains. Solzhenitsyn then states that

there is more criminality in the West, which has “the best social conditions,” than in the “pauper and lawless Soviet society.” Certainly rising crime statistics raised serious questions on this score, but given the rapid rise of the Russian mafia after the collapse of the Soviet state, does his conclusion ring true?

6. Solzhenitsyn chastises the press for a lack of responsibility and alludes to the infamous Pentagon Papers that Daniel Ellsberg passed along to the New York Times, which published them. The rippling effects of that political dustup contributed to the 1972 Watergate break-in. The stridency and coarsening of political rhetoric was already reaching a fever pitch by the mid-1970s. Subsequently, even journalists like Bernard Goldberg have taken up the hue and cry against journalistic irresponsibility and bias. Both the trivialization of news and the problem of information overload (Alvin Toffler had already written *Future Shock* by then) have long been a common complaint. Does the public have a “right not to know?” Has the press become the greatest power in western countries? The term “Fourth Estate,” which may have originated with Edmund Burke, suggests the influence of journalists during and following the French Revolution, perhaps as an instrument of the “general will.” What should we make of the charge that political opinions being brought into conformity under a regime of “**fashionable trends of thought?**” The term “political correctness” had been coined much earlier but was not yet in general use. Cf. Oakeshott on telocracy. René Williamson made similar observations about academic conformity. Alexis de Tocqueville recognized what could be called an “iron law of conformity” at work in America. Solzhenitsyn's metaphor of a “petrified armor around people's minds” recalls the age-old danger complacency and forgetfulness.
7. This leads him into what is perhaps the most ancient politico-religious challenge: **socialism**, which in modern times tends ultimately toward the abolition of private property, the family, and Christianity. Solzhenitsyn's reference to Igor Shafarevich is to *The Socialist Phenomenon*, which was finally published in English in 1980. Shafarevich contends that “most socialist doctrines and movements are literally saturated with the mood of death, catastrophe, and destruction” (p. 275).
8. Solzhenitsyn rejects the West as unfit to be a model for Russia. What does he mean by saying: “A fact which cannot be disputed is the weakening of human beings in the West while in the East they are becoming firmer and stronger.” He may be speaking in terms of spiritual strength (which could be found among long oppressed Christians), but the final decade of the Soviet Union was also a period of terrible demoralization. Alcoholism was so rampant that life expectancy (particularly of men) plummeted as did the already low birthrate. In fact, as early as 1968, Andrei Amalrik had predicted the collapse of the Soviet system in his small book entitled *Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?* Once the Soviet Union collapsed, attempts to use “shock therapy” on the economy failed in the absence of a functioning civil society.
9. What are some of the “**meaningful warnings** history gives a threatened or perishing society?” Is the West paying attention to the signs of the times? The shortsightedness that Solzhenitsyn ascribes to George Kennan has roots that go back to the Enlightenment and, even earlier, the medieval Battle of the Universals. Man-made moral systems are part of the “fashionable trends” he criticizes. Solzhenitsyn now returns to the theme of **moral courage** and rebukes “the American Intelligentsia” for a loss of nerve. The question he asks is: Why does the West again and again “seek protection from a third power against aggression in the next world conflict?” [Not to mention a tendency to turn to “sugar daddies,” such as Japan and China, to make up for a failure to amass capital through savings]. What is his prediction?
10. Humanly speaking, what alone can help the West? What sacrifices must people be willing to make in order to defend themselves? **James Kurth** pinpoints the problem in his essay “One Child Foreign Policy.” Kurth ties the West's current reluctance to accept casualties to a protectiveness toward scarce offspring and heirs. This reluctance naturally figures into the political calculus made by the West's foes. **Gunnar Heinsohn** views this problem from the other side, attributing social unrest and war to the rise of “youth bulges” (an excess number of sons),

which he saw at work during the Crusades and 19th century colonization and now sees at work in much of the Third World. As for moral courage, Andrew Roberts in his book *Hitler and Churchill* sees the willingness “to accept stupendously high attrition rates” as a something that requires courageous leadership. Lee Harris similarly notes the peculiar moral courage of former colonists who fought for victory over the Axis: “the success of the modern liberal West is totally derived from the freakish nature of the Protestant libertarian communities of stubborn pioneers who left their homeland in the Old World in search of a place where they could start their life afresh. . . . Yet by abandoning the historical past of the Old World, these English-speaking colonies [the United States, Canada, and Australia] were subsequently able to rescue the Old World from plunging back into the rule of brute force and the Cosmic Process.” But he adds a warning: “There is no one, however, who will come to our rescue if we in the modern liberal West are plunged back into the universal struggle for existence” [*The Suicide of Reason*, p. 267]. The West has failed to heed Psalm 127:4-5.

11. Solzhenitsyn’s basic question, then, is “how is it possible to lose to such an extent the will to defend oneself?” What does he see as the root causes of the West’s **decline**? How does he summarize the consequences of Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment? What provided access for evil? What is the source of the freedom enjoyed by “American democracy at the time of its birth?” What does he mean by saying that “all such limitations were discarded everywhere in the West; a total liberation occurred from the moral heritage of Christian centuries with their great reserves of mercy and sacrifice?” What has taken their place? Can they redeem “the Twentieth Century’s **moral poverty**?”
12. Finally, Solzhenitsyn returns to the challenge of socialism and its kinship with “the calamity of a despiritualized and irreligious humanistic consciousness.” What does he believe to be the **real crisis**? If man “is born to die,” what must be his task on earth? This paragraph evokes a similar message set forth by another war veteran: J. R. R. Tolkien, who alone among his three companions returned from the killing fields of WWI to carry out the literary and scholarly quest they had shared. The *Lord of the Rings* is one of the fruits of this lifelong project.

Review

decadence
meaningful warnings

legalistic relations
moral courage

fashionable trends of thought
root causes of the West’s decline