In Search of Mutual Understanding: Solzhenitsyn on Russia’s “Jewish Question”

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“The Jewish question,” the thorny problem of the place of the Jewish people in universal history, is at the heart of a great deal of modern political, philosophical, and theological reflection. For some contemporary liberals, the Jewish question is simply one more manifestation of the refusal to accept the “other” and is reducible to the larger problem of racism or discrimination. In this view, anti-Semitism is a form of “prejudice” indistinguishable from “homophobia” or any other form of opposition to diversity or difference. For ideological anti-Semites, the Jew is responsible for the discontents inseparable from modernity—and from the human condition simply. If only the Jewish people did not exist the evils that help characterize the human condition would somehow be manageable. This ideological manicheanism locates evil in the perversities of a single people and leads, willy-nilly, to totalitarianism and genocide. These fanatics and ideologues have nothing to teach us about “the Jewish question” except what to avoid. For other infinitely more serious and discerning thinkers, the Jewish people are either a sign of the divine presence in human history or of the undesirability and impossibility of creating a “universal and homogenous state” where human differences are effaced altogether. For the Catholic novelist Walker Percy, the Jewish people are a salutary obstacle to the triumph of “theory” or ideology with its plans to create a world that can be manipulated by the human will. For the political philosopher Leo Strauss, the unsolvability of the Jewish problem is a source of both tragedy and hope, the definitive sign that there can never be an “end of history.” Into this territory, necessarily wrought with controversy, steps the Russian Nobel Laureate Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn with the publication of the first volume of Two Hundred Years Together, an anticipated two-volume work on Russian-Jewish relations over the past two centuries.

The first volume of Two Hundred Years Together was published in Russia in the summer of 2001 and in French translation in February 2002. Unfortunately, “this vigorous and insightful book,” as the historian of Russia Geoffrey Hosking called it in a recent review in the TLS, has yet to be published in English. One hopes that a major publisher will have the good sense to make this important work available soon to an English-language audience. The first volume is subtitled “Jews and Russians Before the Revolution.” It deals with Russian-Jewish relations between 1795 to 1916, from the incorporation of about one million Jews into the Russian empire as a result of the partitions of Poland in the late eighteenth century, until the eve of the collapse of the Russian old regime in 1917. While the final volume of Two Hundred Years Together, dealing with the Bolshevik and post-communist Russian experiences has yet to appear,
the nearly six hundred pages of the first volume allow us to come to terms with Solzhenitsyn’s broad approach to the “Jewish question” in its Russian form. While some of Solzhenitsyn’s specific arguments in this volume are undoubtedly open to dispute, this humane and balanced work ought to put to rest the egregious charge of anti-semitism that has been leveled against Solzhenitsyn by a few of his more irresponsible critics. Throughout the work, Solzhenitsyn expresses critical admiration for the Jewish people and repeatedly rebukes those Russian nationalists who identify Russian patriotism with hostility to Jews. The book makes clear just how firmly opposed Solzhenitsyn is to the anti-semitic theories espoused by his onetime friend and collaborator Igor Shafarevich who identifies the Jews as the ultimate source of “Russophobia”, as well as to the demagogic nationalism of Vladimir Zhirinovsky, a figure whom Solzhenitsyn has aptly called “the evil caricature of a Russian patriot.”

**Beyond Mutual Reproaches**

Solzhenitsyn is fully cognizant of the “prickly” character of the problem of Russian-Jewish relations. Instead of providing much needed measured historical analysis, those who have addressed the question have typically succumbed to polemics and “one-sided rebukes.” Many Jewish commentators have condemned Russia and Russians *tout court* while “from those Russians who did write about this mutual dilemma, we see mostly agitated tendentious accounts that refuse to see any merit on the other side.” In the Foreword to the book, Solzhenitsyn writes that he would have preferred to leave this contentious issue to others. But his hesitations were overcome by his appreciation of the pressing need to find a new, sounder basis for the future of Russian-Jewish common life. Only an equitable historical examination can overcome “the acrimony of the past” and point the way toward mutual understanding.

Solzhenitsyn’s work is a significant contribution to such mutual understanding. It is also a concrete historical application of the principles of his 1974 essay “Repentance and Self-Limitation”: each people must come to terms with its own sins in a spirit of humility and generosity. Some readers will inevitably be offended by his suggestion that Jews also need to come to terms with their sins, that the story of Russian-Jewish relations is more than a tale of one-sided exploitation and victimization. Solzhenitsyn nonetheless hopes that historical understanding and mutual repentance can replace self-defeating historical conflict. His book is an act of statesmanship that aims to overcome “the anger of implacable extremists.” He wishes “to find benevolent interlocutors among both Jews and Russians.”

What is most immediately needed for this profoundly challenging task is painstaking historical and political analysis rather than metaphysical or theological speculation. In a revealing statement on “The Scope of Examination,” Solzhenitsyn states that he fully appreciates the “metaphysical” and “mystical” dimensions of the Jewish question. Solzhenitsyn even suggests that in the end, “some even say that the Jewish question can be comprehended exclusively in the religious and mystical plane.” Solzhenitsyn thus
admires the efforts of religious thinkers such as Jacques Maritain or Vladimir Soloviev to reflect on “the mystery of Israel,” on the mysterious and indispensable place of the Jews in God’s plan for humanity. But the first step on the path toward mutual reconciliation is judging the question “by earthly measures.” Solzhenitsyn thus refuses to wear the hat of the prophet and instead writes as a morally and civically serious historian and political thinker. He explicitly leaves ultimate judgment about the “mystical connections and influences” within human history to God Himself. So much for the mantle of prophet too indiscriminately attributed to Solzhenitsyn by admirers and critics alike.

Solzhenitsyn’s moral-political approach to the problem of relations between Russians and Jews requires a detailed examination of the historical record and a sincere effort to do justice to the claims and concerns of both parties. For this reason he draws on the widest array of sources, including the multi-volume *Jewish Encyclopedia* published in Saint Petersburg between 1906 and 1913. He tells the reader that he had to “delve into events” in order to achieve equitable judgment and to avoid the debilitating effects of one-sided polemics. A balanced narrative of events is the precondition for civic reconciliation between Russians and Jews. Solzhenitsyn’s effort is all the more impressive because he writes not as a neutral observer but as a committed Russian patriot. He believes that a painstaking investigation of the evidence does not support the claim that pre-Revolutionary Russia was despotism of the Asiatic sort, “a prison of peoples” that viciously persecuted the Jewish people. On the other hand, his humane conception of patriotism requires a genuinely penitential coming to terms with the manifold injustices committed against the Jewish people. His approach will assuredly not satisfy all of the partisans, especially the passionate extremists on both sides.

**An Uneven Record**

The first volume of *Two Hundred Years* allows us to more fully appreciate the twists and turns of official policy toward the Jews under the Russian old regime. That policy was by no means monolithic. As one might expect under an autocratic regime, the attitude of the state saw many permutations, with sometimes abrupt and unpredictable shifts of policy from Tsar to Tsar. Nicholas I tried to “modernize” the Jewish population by encouraging the introduction of secular education and by introducing the Jews to a settled agricultural life (without enduring success). But he also introduced some severe new restrictions against the Jews and only his death in 1855 saved the Jewish population from more repressive measures.

Tsar Alexander II (who reigned from 1855-1881) was a liberal and forward looking ruler. He initiated far-reaching reforms, abolished serfdom, established trial by jury, and presided over the establishment of self-governing zemstvo councils. He and his ministers were on the whole well disposed toward the Jews and acted to alleviate the worst restrictions against them. He also continued his predecessors’ somewhat ineffectual efforts to introduce a tradition-minded Jewish community to secular education and modern agriculture. Like the great reformist Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin at the
beginning of the twentieth century, Alexander appreciated that the peasant and Jewish problems were the two festering wounds in the body politic that must be healed if Russia was to become a genuinely modern society. But in 1881 the revolutionary People’s Will assassinated the Tsar-Liberator. This act of revolutionary terrorism inaugurated a period of reaction marked by increased autocratic restrictions from above and by anti-Jewish pogroms from below.

Solzhenitsyn argues that with one crucial exception pogroms in Russia were not government-sponsored but instead were instigated spontaneously from below. In his view, they were evidence less of the oppressive character of the Russian state than of the weakness of an increasingly sclerotic government in defending the lives, civil liberties, and property of its citizens, especially its Jewish ones. The ostensibly all-powerful Russian state responded ineffectively to the lawless mob.

Solzhenitsyn also dedicates some fascinating pages to a discussion of left-wing anti-Semitism. He chronicles what he elsewhere calls “the incendiary activity” of the revolutionary People’s Will in encouraging peasants to take violent action against Jews in the early 1880’s. Like Marx in “On the Jewish Question”, these ideologues held rapacious Jews responsible for the injustices of commercial society. Solzhenitsyn’s discussion helps illuminate the phenomena of left-wing anti-Semitism, a sensibility and point of view that would flourish under totalitarian communist regimes in the twentieth century.

Scandalous Restrictions

Solzhenitsyn expresses genuine sympathy for the predicament of Jews in Russia at the turn of the (twentieth) century. Jews were still officially confined to the so-called “Pale of Settlement” in the western provinces although growing numbers of them lived in major Russian cities such as Saint Petersburg and Moscow. Many urban Jews thrived in the commercial sector and helped propel Russia’s economic and social development. Solzhenitsyn writes that “the capitalist system in the economic and commercial field, the democratic system in the political field are much indebted to the constructive contribution of the Jews, and these systems, in return, are more favorable to the blossoming of Jewish life and culture.”

This was undoubtedly the case with Russia under the old regime. But during the years of reaction that followed the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, Jews experienced an erosion of the many civil rights that had made their situation increasingly tolerable. It became more difficult for them to attain administrative positions in the state apparatus. In 1890 Jews were barred from participating in some of the activities of the rural zemstvos and in 1892 they lost the right to hold municipal offices.

Solzhenitsyn laments these restrictions but does not believe that “persecution” is an adequate term for these unfortunate policies. “It was not persecution properly speaking. It was a series of restrictions, of vexations. Vexing certainly, distressing, scandalous even.” In Solzhenitsyn’s view, the measures directed against the Jewish population were morally
acceptable and at odds with the goal of establishing a lawful and self-respecting Russian political order. David Remnick is undoubtedly right to suggest that Solzhenitsyn “puts Jewish suffering into a wider context of Russian suffering; there is an insistent effort to point out that the vast majority of the population, especially the serfs and then the peasants, were deprived of their rights just like the Jews.” As Remnick observes there is nothing anti-semitic about this position. Yet despite Solzhenitsyn’s firm rejection of anti-semitism and his evident admiration for the Jewish people, a small but vocal number of critics resent Solzhenitsyn for what they see as his Russian-centered treatment of the “Jewish question.” Some go so far as to suggest that Solzhenitsyn’s refusal to make the “Jewish question” the primary criteria for evaluating Russian history is evidence of a subtle and residual anti-semitism on his part. In my view, this judgment is lacking in all generosity. It is also at odds with both logic and good sense.

Solzhenitsyn’s position is clear and devoid of any anti-Jewish prejudice. He believes that the old regime wasted precious resources harassing a people who had much to contribute to Russia’s development. The restrictions placed upon the Jewish people were unjust and “patriots” who identified Russian greatness with hostility to the Jews were thoroughly deluded. A Russia in tune with the requirements of modern civilization needed to respect the liberties of all of its people, from the majority peasant population to the small but energetic Jewish minority. But despite its manifest imperfections and its excessively hesitant steps toward constitutional rule, the old regime looks like a golden age compared to the totalitarianism inaugurated by the Bolshevik revolution. To make this point Solzhenitsyn quotes the Jewish émigré D.O. Linsky: in comparison with the complete destruction of human liberty under the Bolsheviks, “the inequality in rights of the Jewish population before the revolution appears as an inaccessible ideal.”

**The Revolutionary Temptation**

Any adequate treatment of the Russian “Jewish question” must sooner or later confront the difficult question of Jewish involvement in the various revolutionary movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Solzhenitsyn rightly insists that this question cannot remain “taboo” for the serious historian of Russia and the modern world. But it is necessary for the historian to tread carefully, displaying scrupulous respect for the facts and doing nothing to inflame already overheated passions. Solzhenitsyn condemns those extremist elements on the Right who have irresponsibly blamed the Jews for the Bolshevik plague—even as he cannot ignore the fact that a disproportionate number of Jews participated in various leftist revolutionary movements.

Solzhenitsyn confronts this delicate issue equitably and forthrightly. As already noted, he praises the Jewish people for their positive contributions to capitalist economic development and democratic politics. He praises the commitment of many responsible Jewish leaders to the path of political moderation. But he also laments the “unreasonable” choice of some de-Judaized Jews for totalitarian and revolutionary politics. This choice
for revolution was unreasonable but understandable: the revolutionary intelligentsia welcomed educated Jews to their ranks and offered an easy path to assimilation for those Jews who had broken with the traditional Jewish community. The old regime, in contrast, vacillated between enlightened efforts at accommodation between Russians and Jews and imposing humiliating restrictions that could only feed revolutionary discontent. The revolutionaries not only welcomed Jews to their ranks but provided a messianic secular religion—a universalist political mission—to those who rejected the seemingly provincial and antiquated traditions of their fathers.

Solzhenitsyn explicitly states that Jews cannot be blamed for organizing the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 any more than Russians and Ukrainians can be held responsible “as a whole” for organizing pogroms. In a vitally important discussion at the conclusion of Chapter Nine of the book, Solzhenitsyn calls on Russians to reject “simplistic explanations” for the disasters that have marked their national history. It is all too easy “to explain everything by one, unique cause; the Jews.” In this deluded view, “Russia would be for a longtime at the zenith of her glory and her power if it weren’t for the Jews!” Solzhenitsyn remarks that this “superstitious belief in the historical force of conspiracies” ignores the “human weaknesses” that are “the principal cause of the setbacks” that confront individuals as well as states.

He goes on to argue that the weaknesses that have determined the course of Russia’s “sad history” have nothing to do with the Jews. The schism provoked by Patriarch Nikon’s liturgical reforms, Peter the Great’s “insane” use of violence, the waste of Russia’s resources on “causes that are not our own,” bureaucratic petrification and the “inveterate self-importance” of the nobility, as well as the failure of the governing class to address the misery of the peasants, “are not the effect of a plot hatched from the outside.” Nor was the failure of Russia’s Tsars to “understand the evolution of the world and to define true priorities” a result of some Jewish-Masonic machination.

Jews can simply not be held responsible for the revolution and hence for the totalitarian tragedy of the twentieth century as elements of the extreme Right continue to assert to this day. What can be justly said, in Solzhenitsyn’s view, is that revolutionary Jews ignored the wise counsel that Jeremiah addressed to the Jews deported to Babylon: “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile: pray to Yahweh on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jeremiah, 29-7). But the irresponsibility of a minority of radicalized Jews neither caused the revolution nor explains the moral weaknesses and the dearth of enlightened statecraft that led to the ultimate demise of old Russia. Instead of engaging in mutual reproaches, Russians and Jews both need to confront uncomfortable facts and to take responsibility for the mistakes that were made on both sides. And Russians can only begin to take responsibility for their national destiny when they reject the temptation to blame their problems on everyone except themselves.

*Stolypin’s “Middle Line of Development”*
In *Two Hundred Years Together*, Solzhenitsyn paints a devastating portrait of a regime that was more sclerotic than oppressive, led by tsars and ministers who lacked the good sense to appreciate that balanced reform is the only sure means of conservation. The one genuine statesman of the final period of the old regime was Pyotr Stolypin, Russian Prime Minister from 1906 until his assassination at the Kiev opera house in September 1911 at the hands of a double agent of the secret police and the revolutionaries. In Chapter 10 of *Two Hundred Years*, “The Time of the Duma,” Solzhenitsyn provides a fascinating addendum to his masterful account of Stolypin’s statesmanship in *August 1914*. It is undoubtedly the most compelling and rewarding chapter of *Two Hundred Years Together*. Solzhenitsyn’s Stolypin pursued an exiguous “middle line” between reactionaries who opposed essential reforms and revolutionaries who aimed to completely destroy the existing order. He was sincerely committed to constitutional government but often resorted to emergency powers granted by the constitution (Article 87) to introduce much needed reforms against the determined opposition of the Left and Right.

Stolypin’s abiding concern was to promote far-reaching agrarian reform that would lead to the creation of a “solid class of peasant proprietors” in Russia. He hoped that a property-owning peasantry would provide the social foundation for a revitalized monarchy. But Stolypin was also determined to put an end to the “wasteful” policy of discrimination against the Jews. He was convinced that Russia’s constitutional charter, the Manifesto of October 1905, logically implied “equality of Jews in all civil rights.” He was a sensible man who understood the “absurdity” and arbitrariness of the Jewish disabilities. He believed that Jewish talent and resources could help fuel Russia’s social and economic development. His enlightened approach to the Jewish question met with vociferous opposition from both the Left and the Right. Left liberals in the Duma were too interested in assaulting authority to promote the kinds of practical reforms that would improve the condition of the Jews—or of any other Russian citizens for that matter. For its part, the nationalist right was wedded to the truly stupid belief that the defense of the Russian state demanded multiplying prohibitions against Jews. An “inner voice” even told Tsar Nicholas II that supporting Stolypin’s efforts to improve the situation of Jews in Russia was incompatible with his obligations as a Christian monarch.

Embattled on all sides, Stolypin persevered in his efforts to bring Russians and Jews together. Like Solzhenitsyn, he was a patriot who did not confuse love of country with hostility to the Jews. He wanted to avoid destructive revolution at all costs and was confident that a majority of Jews would turn against revolution if they were truly admitted to the political community. In *November 1916*, Solzhenitsyn beautifully articulates the nobility and difficulty of Stolypin’s “middle line” of development:

Nothing is more difficult than drawing a middle line for social development. The loud mouth, the big fist, the bomb, the prison bars are of no help to you, as they are to those at the two extremes. Following the middle line of development demands the utmost self-control, the most inflexible courage, the most patient calculation, and the most precise knowledge.
Solzhenitsyn reflects on this remarkable “irony of history”: “The first head of the Russian government to honestly tackle the issue of Jewish equality, implementing it in spite of the Tsar”, was assassinated by a Jew. This is admittedly a delicate matter but one which, he believes, must not remain a “forbidden” topic. In Solzhenitsyn’s view, Stolypin’s assassin, Dmitri Bogrov, did not have the intellectual maturity to grasp the “full consequence of Stolypin as statesman.” He somehow thought that his violent act would ameliorate the condition of Kiev’s sizable Jewish population. Bogrov’s brother has testified to as much. Yet some of Solzhenitsyn’s more fevered critics have suggested that his straightforward presentation and discussion in August 1914 of Bogrov’s motives is somehow evidence of anti-semitism on Solzhenitsyn’s part. But surely Solzhenitsyn is right to reject the view that a friend of the Jewish people must dissimulate the facts regarding Bogrov’s motives for killing Stolypin.

Bogrov “murdered Stolypin to shield the Jews of Kiev against repression.” But Stolypin’s death was good for neither Russians nor Jews. Solzhenitsyn believes that the Tsar would have been forced to turn to Stolypin “amidst the revolving door of nonentities at the helm of state in 1914-1916.” Had Stolypin lived, the country might not have “lost its nerve in war” or have “succumbed to the Bolshevik boot.” And a generation later, a legitimate Russian government might not have so quickly given up 1/3 of the country to the Nazis who “marched into Kiev and annihilated Kiev’s Jews.”

Solzhenitsyn also suggests that are “strong reasons to suppose” that Stolypin would never have allowed the disgraceful Beilis case to go forward to trial. Menahem Mendel Beilis, a 37-year-old Jew, was falsely accused (and eventually acquitted) of an unsolved and particularly gruesome murder in the Ukraine, a murder that was fantastically attributed to Jewish “ritual murder.” The trial was extensively covered by the international media and did much to damage Russia’s reputation. Again, Solzhenitsyn reflects on the ‘capriciousness’ of history:

Beilis was acquitted by peasants--from among those same Ukrainian peasants who had to their count the Jewish pogroms at the turn of the century, and who would soon know the collectivization and famine of 1932-33—a famine not placed in that regime’s ledger of accountability.

Here too the strides of History.

Conclusion

Solzhenitsyn has written a fascinating, gripping, and above all morally serious account of Russia’s “Jewish Question.” Some western liberals may well be perplexed by a book that takes religion and patriotism so seriously. Solzhenitsyn’s analysis may strike others as unfamiliar or idiosyncratic since it moves far beyond such familiar and dominant categories as “human rights,” “ethnicity,” and “victimization.” Some readers will be put off by its decidedly Russian orientation. Still others may have difficulty
coming to terms with a perspective that combines moral judgment, deep-seated Russian patriotism, and genuine, if critical, admiration for the Jewish people.

The latter point is of capital importance. The reader cannot help but be moved by Solzhenitsyn’s indignation at the unjustified and inept expulsion of Jews from the Russian front in 1915 in what he doesn’t hesitate to call a government-sponsored pogrom. “It is so easy to throw back all the responsibility for all the defeats on the Jews!” What was missing during the war was the principled statesmanship that could have formalized an alliance between Russians and Jews. “Only Stolypin,” Solzhenitsyn tells us in Chapter 12, “would have had the intelligence and courage” to bring this about. Once again, as in *The Red Wheel*, one is presented with the fragility and greatness of Stolypin’s “middle line” as well as the consequences of his absence after September 1911 for Russia, the Jews, and the world alike. This very Russian book does not draw any grandiose theoretical conclusions about “the Jewish question.” But it reminds its readers of those universal traits of soul that are essential in every time and place: moderation, repentance, courage, balanced judgment, and statesmanlike dedication to the public good.