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Alone Together: Solzhenitsyn and the Jews, revisited.

By Richard Pipes

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Recently Alexander Solzhenitsyn published a long book called *Dvesti let vmeste*, or *Two Hundred Years Together*, the first of two volumes devoted to the history of Jews in Russia from the third partition of Poland in 1795, when Russia, until then effectively without Jews, suddenly acquired one million Jewish subjects. It covers the years between 1795 and 1916. The follow-up volume will bring the story up to the year 1995.

One cannot help but marvel at the intellectual energy of a novelist who in his seventies undertakes research on a vast and tangled historical theme with which he has only the most superficial familiarity. In his introduction, Solzhenitsyn says that during his work on the Russian Revolution he had frequently run into the problem of Russo-Jewish relations but found no history that illuminated the subject in a balanced matter. His book is an attempt to remedy this lacuna. He makes a conscious effort to show empathy for both sides, calling on Jews and Russians to display "patient mutual understanding and an acknowledgment of their share of

sin"--the ultimate sin being the 1917 revolution that brought Russia untold miseries.

Someone familiar with Solzhenitsyn's treatment of Jews in his historical novels cannot escape the feeling that, at least in some measure, this undertaking is an effort to rid the author of the reputation for anti-Semitism. Although Solzhenitsyn has always indignantly rejected this accusation, it was not entirely unmerited. In *Lenin in Zurich*, he depicted the Russian Jew Alexander Parvus-Helphand as a slimy, sinister, almost satanic figure as he attempted to hire the exile Lenin to work for the Germans. In *The Red Wheel*, when dealing with the assassination of his hero Peter Stolypin by Dmitry Bogrov (whom he named "Mordka" or Mordechai, lest anyone miss his nationality), Solzhenitsyn attributed to the assassin, without any historical warrant, a desire to prevent Stolypin from reforming Russia, since what was good for Russia was bad for the Jews. In fact, Bogrov came from a thoroughly assimilated family--his grandfather was a convert and his father

a member of the Kievan Nobles' Club--and he had no Jewish interests in mind.

Solzhenitsyn's new book (which is not yet available in English) helps to clarify the writer's attitude toward Jews. He draws a sharp distinction between religious Jews and assimilated Jews, notably those assimilated Jews who joined the revolutionary movement. For the former he has admiration that verges on mystical reverence. "The preservation of the Jewish people for more than two thousand years in diaspora," he writes, "arouses amazement and respect": "The role of the small but energetic Jewish nation in the vast and expansive history of the world is undeniable, powerful, persistent, and even salient. Russian history included. But it remains an historical mystery for all of us. For the Jews as well. This strange mission by no means brings them happiness either." He also respects Zionists and expresses esteem for Israel. But his attitude toward assimilated Jews is ambivalent, and he seems uncertain about whether or not they contributed to Russia's well-being. His difficulty is due to the fact that he is a nationalist; nationalism in general--and Russian nationalism in particular--is not readily compatible with tolerance toward Jews, partly for religious reasons, partly because they refuse to dissolve without a trace in the ethnic community in the midst of which they live.

This ambivalence is apparent in Solzhenitsyn's treatment of the Jewish contribution to the pre-revolutionary Russian economy. He describes in considerable detail the important functions that Jews performed in the country's economy, thanks to their industry and their ability to put capital to its most effective use. They were prominent in banking, and they launched Russia's sugar and timber industries.

They financed much of the country's railroad construction. At one time they controlled the bulk of its grain trade. These activities helped Russia to attain a spectacular rate of economic growth at the end of the nineteenth century. Still, the czarist authorities tended to regard the Jews as engaged in "unproductive" work, and on more than one occasion they attempted to settle Jews forcibly on the land. Solzhenitsyn recounts these economic activities, but in a manner intended to convey how good Russia was to the Jews rather than how good the Jews were for Russia.

To his credit, he disposes of the canard, widespread in late czarist Russia, that the Jews exploited the peasants. He cites the historian I. Orshanskii to the effect that Jewish traders opened markets for peasants by transforming articles of consumption into commodities, in this manner enriching the peasantry. The historical evidence indeed indicates that Russian peasants fared better in the regions populated by Jews--that is, the so-called Pale of Settlement--than in other parts of the empire where legal residence was forbidden to Jews.

Solzhenitsyn reserves his hostility for those assimilated Jews who, from the 1860s onward, in large numbers joined the revolutionary movement. He cites name after name, and he conveys the impression that Jews supplied the leadership as well as the rank and file of this movement, adding naively that his stress on Jewish radicals "does not mean, of course, that there were not many and important revolutionaries among the Russians."

The subject is very complicated. Although Jews, especially converts, did play a significant part in radical subversion, the ranks of the revolutionaries were certainly dominated

by Russians. At one point Solzhenitsyn asserts quite wrongly (citing a Jewish writer) that Jews imported Marxism to Russia. In reality, this was the work of Russians such as George Plekhanov, who organized in Switzerland Russia's first Marxist party, and Peter Struve, who popularized Marx's ideas inside the country. Statistics on this controversial subject are scarce, and most of the evidence is impressionistic and anecdotal.



Alexander Solzhenitsyn by Jack Coughlin for The New Republic

Still, it cannot be doubted that the proportion of Jews in the ranks of Russian revolutionaries significantly exceeded the proportion of Jews in the population at large. This fact, previously played down by Jewish historians, was confirmed a few years ago by Erich Haberer in his study *Jews and Revolution in Nineteenth-Century*

Russia. But what sort of criterion is this by which to measure the role of an ethnic group in public life? If Jews were prominent in socialist ranks, they also stood out in capitalist circles: in the judgment of the German historian Werner Sombart, they actually invented capitalism. They were also over-represented among physicists, chemists, mathematicians, medical doctors, chess players, university students, and the many other occupations that called for intellectual distinction. Indeed, if the standard is to be the share in the population at large, then it must also be noted that Jews were disproportionately attracted also to fascism. "In Italy there were innumerable Fascist Jews," Zeev Sternhell observed in *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*. "Their percentage in the movement was much higher than in the population as a whole." Conversely, they were under-represented among Russia's murderers and arsonists.

So what are we to make of all this? Only that, as Solzhenitsyn likes to stress, Jews are a highly dynamic nation: as such, they are over-represented in most fields of endeavor in which they participate. Just to set the record straight, let it be noted that in 1917, when they got their chance to vote freely in national elections, the majority of Russian Jews cast ballots not for the Socialists or the Communists but for the Zionists: thus, in the All-Jewish Congress, they cast 60 percent of the vote for the Zionists. The Communist Party census of 1922 revealed that less than one thousand Jews had joined the party before 1917.

There is another aspect to this vexing issue. Virtually all the Jews who joined the revolutionary movement broke with their religion and community: they were apostates. Typical was the attitude of Trotsky when he was approached by

the chief rabbi of Moscow during the Civil War with a plea to help fellow Jews victimized by the pogroms. "I am not a Jew," he angrily replied. "I am an Internationalist." The high percentage of Jews in the ranks of the revolutionaries only serves to demonstrate that Jews who abandon their religion and turn their backs on their people become uprooted and hence capable of the wildest excesses--which does not detract from Judaism, but redounds, on the contrary, to its credit.

To be fair, for all his emphasis on their participation in radical ranks, Solzhenitsyn absolves Jews of responsibility for the revolution: "No, in no way can it be said that Jews 'made' the revolution of 1905 or 1917 as it was not made by another nation taken as a whole." If there is a bias in this book, it is in favor of the czarist government, which Solzhenitsyn strives to acquit of its reputation for persistent hostility toward its Jewish minority, and its subjecting the Jews to no end of discrimination and persecution. Up to a point, he is right. The czarist government's treatment of its Jewish subjects was inconsistent. It vacillated between the desire to draw Jews out of their seclusion and have them assimilate and the contrary desire to isolate them. The former trend prevailed in the first half of the nineteenth century, the latter in the second half, when Jewish involvement in the revolutionary movement persuaded the government that the Jews' assimilation was dangerous. The result of these inconsistent policies was a legal nightmare: in essence, Russian Jews could do nothing that they were not specifically permitted to do, which necessitated the creation of a distinct branch of jurisprudence. Constant exceptions were made to discriminatory

rules; and even when they were in force, such rules were overcome by bribing the police.

What Solzhenitsyn almost entirely misses is the poisonous atmosphere that was created by anti-Semitic propaganda emanating from the Orthodox church and nationalist circles. Government censorship--which cracked down on liberal and socialist publications whenever they called for political reform--gave free rein to incitement against Jews in the daily and periodical press. If there is a discussion in Solzhenitsyn's book of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a Russian forgery that for a century now has been fomenting murderous anti-Semitism worldwide, including in Nazi Germany, I missed it. True, similar hate propaganda flourished in contemporary France and Germany, but in those countries, where there was freedom of speech and freedom of the press, the government's blessing was not implied. Solzhenitsyn dismisses the notorious Union of Russian People--which propagated the slogan "beat the Yids, save Russia"--as an unimportant marginal group, but he ignores the fact that it had hundreds of branches across the country, and incited pogroms, and received government subsidies for such activities. Nor does he mention that Nicholas II thought well enough of the Union of Russian People to accept its insignia.

Still, Solzhenitsyn properly exonerates the czarist government from responsibility for the terrible pogroms of the 1880s and the early 1900s. Hearsay notwithstanding, no evidence has come to light that the government instigated violence against Jews, let alone organized it. In not doing so, it acted in its own interest, for it realized that riots against Jews could readily turn first against

Christian landlords and then against its own officialdom. As he points out, the socialists/ revolutionaries of the People's Will welcomed the pogroms for the same reason, seeing in them a manifestation of "class consciousness." He himself interprets the pogroms as spontaneous outbursts, which he blames, rather vaguely, on the "tragic quality" of Russians and Ukrainians, "in moments of anger, to succumb to blind passion ... unable to distinguish the guilty from the innocent."

For all his insistence that the record of czarism in its treatment of Jews is much better than it has been customarily depicted, Solzhenitsyn shows understanding for the hardships inflicted on Russian Jews. The Pale of Settlement, introduced under Catherine the Great as a kind of Jewish reservation, "cast a somber shade" (in his words) on Jewish existence up to the very eve of revolution: it became increasingly unbearable as its population exploded. Describing attempts to force Jews to turn to agriculture, he acknowledges that farming is not a skill that can be learned overnight: "agriculture is high art, inculcated in generations, and it is futile to settle people on the land against their wishes or without their cooperation." He describes the restrictions imposed on Jews as "vexing, painful, even appalling." The coincidence between pogroms and the celebrations of Christian Easter fills him "with bitterness and anxiety." The Beilis trial of 1913, in which a Jew was accused of ritual murder (though subsequently acquitted), he characterizes as a "debasement of justice." "How not to understand their grief?" he wonders compassionately when Jews were singled out for deportation from the frontier regions during World War I. He notes that Jews who converted to Christianity

enjoyed all the rights of Russians of equal status, but asks whether it was "acceptable, morally as well as practically, to give Jews access to life's bounties on condition that they change their religion." (In this connection he makes an astonishing error in asserting that Count Egor Kankrin, the finance minister of Nicholas I, was the converted son of a rabbi, and Count Karl Nesselrode, Nicholas's long-serving minister of foreign affairs, a convert from Judaism. In fact, the former was born in the family of a German mining engineer, and the latter's father was a Protestant count of the Holy Roman Empire.)

The source base of Solzhenitsyn's book is thin. He relies heavily on a few secondary works, such as the sixteen-volume *Evreiskaia Entsiklopediia*, or *Jewish Encyclopedia*, that was published on the eve of World War I, and Iurii Gessen's standard two-volume *Istoriia evreiskogo naroda v Rossii*, or *History of the Jewish People in Russia*, published in 1925 and 1927. Ignorance of foreign languages has placed beyond Solzhenitsyn's reach the rich literature on his subject in English, German, and French (not to mention Hebrew). These lacunae, combined with his forceful interventions at each stage of the narrative, make his history something more than a personal statement yet less than a work of scholarship.

Still, Solzhenitsyn's book is a notable achievement in its attempt to place the "problem" of Russian Jewry in political and social perspective, and one that does credit to its author's reputation. If Solzhenitsyn does not quite succeed in exonerating pre-revolutionary Russia of responsibility for subjecting its Jewish citizens to uncivilized discrimination--after all, it was the only Christian country that in the nineteenth century still

subjected its Jewish citizens to medieval disabilities--and even if he does not fully understand the latter's predicament, at

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least he absolves himself of the taint of anti-Semitism.

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