



Historical narrative and emotional paradigms: The case of Solzhenitsyn's *The Red Wheel* and his other works



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ABSTRACT

It is not the collection of data but emotional axioms which defines the nature of the narrative. Alexander Solzhenitsyn's view on the 1917 Revolution demonstrates this clearly. Working on his monumental history of the Russian Revolution, he collected enormous amounts of material which indicated that Russia experienced the complete meltdown throughout 1914–1917 and the brutal Bolshevik dictatorship was among the few viable options to stop the country's complete destruction. Still due to his visceral hatred of the regime, Solzhenitsyn was unable to understand the nature of the events when the outcome was in sharp contrast to his views.

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Writers, as social scientists often assumed, should construct their narratives following available information. Still their narratives are mostly constructed by emotional axioms which often blind them to see the obvious. Alexander Solzhenitsyn's view of the Russian Revolutions in *The Red Wheel* could be a good example. Solzhenitsyn, who deeply hated the Soviet regime, was unable to make logical conclusions from the data that he collected during his lifelong research. The data indicated that Russian society was in the process of continual meltdown throughout 1914–1917 and the tough power was the only antidote for anarchy. Thus the Bolsheviks were not just the force driven by Utopian paradigm but the force which, in way, was organic to Russian reality.

1. Introduction

Solzhenitsyn's relationship with the regime has already been complicated from the beginning of his life, for he seems to have never embraced the regime completely, but since his imprisonment after World War II he has become the regime's sworn enemy. He was of course hardly alone in his views, and American archives provide plenty of evidence of the views of Russians who suffered from the regime's brutality and were even ready to accept nuclear war as the price of its destruction. This profound alienation requires an explanation of the regime policies, its relentless repression against Russians as well as other ethnic groups of the USSR. At the beginning of his creative life, Solzhenitsyn saw the rise and brutality of the Soviet regime mostly as a result of "wrong" ideology. Regime founders were inspired by dreams of creating a harmonious society. These utopian dreams were absolutely alien to the life of the majority of the people who could care less about the creation of the ideal society. They want not Utopia but the improvement of their standard of living. And since the majority resisted the abstract dictums of the Soviet rulers, the latter engaged in despicable brutality and created a totalitarian regime that had nothing to do with the people or with the Russian history. Such an explanation of the regime's origins appears in Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. This model fits some of the ideological currents in the West in the 1960s and 1970s. Elaborating on them will help grasp the theoretical underpinning of Solzhenitsyn's narrative.

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1.1. Solzhenitsyn and political debate in the West on the character of the Bolshevik Revolution

During his work on *Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn was exposed to Western intellectual and political debate. The book's publication and translation into most European languages was a truly seminal event, and its major ideas were immediately incorporated into Western political thought, mostly due to the considerable interest in anything Russian and/or Soviet. By the time of Solzhenitsyn's exile and his arrival to the West at the height of the Cold War, Russian/Soviet studies, including the Revolution and Soviet regime, in general were hot topics in Western academia, especially in the USA. The leading roles were played by those who viewed the Bolshevik Revolution, the regime created by it, and socialism in general, in a positive light, albeit there were some major differences in the assessment of the revolutionary experience in Russia and the USSR.

For some, the great ideas of socialism could have been materialized by Mensheviks. They were proponents of "socialism with a human face." For them, the Bolsheviks were usurpers whose ideology and especially its practice had nothing to do with real socialism.¹ Some authors stressed that the revolution took place in a backward, semi-Asiatic society, additionally causing the new economic and political systems to develop in the wrong direction. For others, the Bolshevik Revolution was a legitimate phenomenon and New Economic Policy (NEP), introduced in 1921 and abruptly abandoned by Stalin in 1928, was almost a materialization in Russia of "socialism with a human face." Nikolai Bukharin emerged as an alternative to totalitarian Stalin, who "perverted" the "true spirits" of socialism and revolution (Cohen, 1973).

The third group of the authors, the "revisionists," emerged in the 1960s when left wing intellectuals completely dominated Western and particularly American political/intellectual life. Their rise coincided with the dramatic expansion of American academia. This led to the marginalization of more conservative Cold War warriors. "Revisionists" provided complete legitimization for all periods of the Soviet regime, including the Stalin era. For "revisionists" such as Sheila Fitzpatrick and J. Arch Getty, Stalin was not a totalitarian ruler but he rather followed the will of the majority. The repression was the manifestation of the will of the masses and quite limited in scope. Emphasis was on the regime's achievements in education and social mobility (Fitzpatrick, 1970, 1979, 1994).² This group insisted that most of those stricken by terror were corrupt bureaucrats who deserved their fate. "Revisionists" also emphasized achievements in industrial development and other spheres of life. For them, Solzhenitsyn was utterly biased and should be dismissed as a source. "Revisionists" were often skeptical toward Soviet émigrés – mostly Russian Jews – whom they saw as unable to comprehend either the society they left, or master the craft of Western social science.

On his part, Solzhenitsyn dismissed the "revisionists" completely. His relationship was more complicated with conservative Russia specialists who had formed their views in the 1940s and 1950s. These people knew and appreciated Solzhenitsyn, and he knew them. One of the most important of these figures was Richard Pipes of Harvard University. Pipes did not deny that communist ideology and the Bolshevik Party played an important role in shaping the Soviets. But he emphasized that the regime was not completely foreign to the Russian tradition of Oriental-style monarchy and serfdom (Pipes, 1974). Bolsheviks reinforced traits of Russian political culture. Some observers reduce the rise of the regime completely to Russia's cultural makeup. In addition, many immigrants from the USSR who arrived in the 1970s and late 1980s–1990s, mostly Russian Jews, were deeply alienated not just from the regime but from the country and people due to the strong anti-Semitic current among the ethnic Russians. For them, Russia has been the same throughout history – brutal, despotic, and nationalistic, with hatred of minorities in general and anti-Semitism, exhibited as a pastime for masses and elite alike. Many of these would deride Solzhenitsyn as a man who presented the regime as imposed on the people. Solzhenitsyn, acquainted with these views, hardly agreed with them. Closer to his views were the people who could be called "conservative post-modernists." They were strongly influenced by Solzhenitsyn, and he was, at least indirectly, aware of their ideas and in general appreciated them.

2. French intellectual thoughts on socialism and revolution

Postmodernism, mostly a French intellectual product, was originally leftist. According to postmodernists, the capitalist West was the true totalitarian society. Societal life was shaped by what they – especially Michel Foucault, one of the best known – called an "episteme." Foucault was prolific and influential, but some of his works had especially strong impacts, for example, his major work, *Discipline and Punish*. It was not a cohesive set of postulates, but the relationship between cultural segments that really mattered. These sets of behavioral and cultural paradigms were subtle and not clearly visible, but they were deeply internalized by the majority and shaped the framework of the interactions that determined the course of societal life. This capitalist "episteme" made Westerners unfree without their cognizance of it. It drove them to "great confinements" of workshops, factories, bureaucratic bodies, and schools, regimenting their lives and transforming them into docile and easily manipulated zombies.

By the 1970s, this postmodernism manifested itself in a more conservative way. In France, these views were shared by "New Philosophers" for whom *Gulag Archipelago* was a book of revelation (Spivak and Ryan, 1978). For them it was not modern Western capitalist society, but rather socialist societies that have become the symbol of despotism. The great danger

¹ The works on Mensheviks in Western historiography were quite significant (Brovkin, 1987; Garcia, 1989; Ascher, 1976).

² After the end of the USSR, the change of intellectual climate in the West and opening of Russian archives led Fitzpatrick to change or at least modify her views, and her more recent work (1994) paid considerable attention to the repressive aspects of the regime.

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