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Terror and Resilience: One Day in the Life of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Abstract: During 2017 numerous events related to the centenary of the Russian Revolution took place. December 2018 also marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of one of the most relevant figures in the understanding of totalitarianism: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Placed between these two centenaries, this article provides a contribution to the understanding of the way in which the narrative, based on a biographical and autobiographical background, of Solzhenitsyn's works allows the phenomenon of terror to be faced.

Keywords: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, autobiographical narrative, totalitarianism, Russian Revolution

Introduction

Throughout 2017 numerous academic events commemorating the Russian Revolution took place. In Spain, for example, we can highlight three international congresses. The Center for International Historical Studies of the University of Barcelona organized the "Centennial of the Russian Revolution (1917–2017)" in October. The CEU Institute of Historical Studies at CEU San Pablo University in Madrid and the University of Granada organized two international congresses of the same title, "100 Years Since the Russian Revolution", in October and November respectively. This anniversary was also the occasion for the release and

re-release of many publications related to the Russian Revolution from different approaches and specialties.¹

The contrast between the relevance given to the anniversary of the Revolution and the general institutional silence regarding its catastrophic results was notable, despite the praiseworthy efforts of many critics. Even more striking was the contrast between that centenary and that of one of the greatest critics the revolution ever encountered and the system that was born out of it: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, born December 11, 1918.

In this article, we present a number of aspects of the biography of the famous Russian writer, including elements of an autobiographical root within his literary productions, which contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon of terror.²

Childhood and youth

Aleksandr's father, who died when he was only six months old, served as a volunteer in the Grenadier Artillery Brigade. Aleksandr's childhood and early youth were thus spent with his maternal family in Rostov. The course of political events meant that they did not boast of the decorations received by his father for his services at the front during the war

¹ See for example: Andrade, J., Hernández Sánchez, F. (Eds.) (2017). *1917. La Revolución rusa cien años después*. Madrid: Akal. Courtois, S. (2017). *Lénine, l'inventeur du totalitarisme*. Paris: Perrin. Dell'Asta, A., Carletti, M., Parravicini, G. (2017). *1917. Russia. Il signo infranto di 'un mondo mai visto'*. Seriate, BG: La Casa di Matriona. Jevakhoff, A. (2017). *La guerre civile russe. 1917-1922*. Paris: Perrin. Lamsdorff, V (2017). *La herencia de la Revolución rusa (1917-2017)*. Barcelona: Digital Reasons. Milosevich, M. (2017). *Breve historia de la Revolución rusa*. Madrid: Galaxia Gutenberg. As an example of reissue of a classic work on the subject: Pipes, R. (2016). *La revolución rusa*. Barcelona: Debate [1990].

² The role of the intellectual in the face of Soviet terror has already been the object of our attention in an article about Vassili Grossman: Belmonte, M. Á. (2016). Libertad y vida intelectual en *Vida y destino* de Vassili Grossman. In Kazmierczak, M., Signes, M. T. (Eds.) *Lengua, literatura y práctica educativa. Reflexiones actuales sobre la palabra en la educación* (pp. 59-74). Vigo: Academia del Hispanismo.

before the Revolution. This is why one of Aleksandr's few memories of his father was the moment in which he helped his mother to bury his father's medals. At school in Rostov, the boy Aleksandr quickly integrated into the Pioneers and other usual activities of the new Soviet education system. Not very much was able to reach the youngest students regarding the controversies between the Bolsheviks and the Russian Teachers' Union. The Soviet educational system, with Lunacharski in charge, was advancing inexorably. The indoctrinating urgency of the Revolution, the need to build the new *Homo sovieticus* and its totalitarian character elevated school work and linked it with a massive cultural educational task. The Bolsheviks, experts in the field of mass indoctrination, based their actions on three fundamental points: political ideology; repression through the *cheka* and the *gulag*; and the absorption of intermediate societies – municipality, family and school – under political control.

The government, under the direction of the Popular Commissariat of Instruction or Narkompros (...) led by Anatoli Lunacharski, did not take long to start up different *agit-prop* initiatives (...) mass festivals, trains [with] library, cinematograph and information tables (...) they had political posters in their windows (...). In 1920, to commemorate the third anniversary, a great theatrical representation – *The taking of the Winter Palace* – was held, a show of the masses with six thousand participants – including professional actors, theater students, soldiers and workers – and an audience of more than one hundred thousand people who, at the culminating moment of the taking of the palace, joined the representation (...). As Lunacharski himself said (...), the masses must openly demonstrate and that is only possible when, in the words of Robespierre, they themselves become part of the show. (Ferré, 2017, p. 157)

Of course, not all educators shared the enthusiasm for indoctrination. In December 1917, some 4,000 members of the Russian Teachers' Union went on strike. Regarding them, Lunacharski himself wrote: "We are obliged

to banish forever from school activity these honorable gentlemen who, despite our appeal, prefer the role of right-handed politicians to the role of teachers" (Fitzpatrick, 1977, p. 55). The Union was definitively suppressed in the same month of December 1918 in which Solzhenitsyn was born.

When he was eleven years old, Aleksandr joined the Young Pioneers and gradually abandoned the religious influence of his family. For example, as a child he had prayed with his aunt Irina before icons and had received from her a confused but enduring notion of the connection between Russian history and the orthodox faith. With her, he also discovered the value of the great figures of Russian literature: he first read *War and Peace* at the age of ten. At 18, he conceived the idea of writing an epic work in which the theme was the history of the Revolution, inspired by the great work of Tolstoy. At primary school, his vocation as a writer began to flourish. However, at the time of choosing his higher studies, he opted for physical and mathematical sciences, in which he was also a brilliant student, due to the fact that in Rostov there were no adequate universities for literary studies. Thus, as the 1930s passed, with its great purges, Solzhenitsyn quietly delved into the study of Marxism and sketched drafts of his projected epic work.³

In April 1940 he married Natalia Reshetovskaya, without ceremony and behind his family's back. His biographer Joseph Pearce draws attention to the hierarchy of values that at that time moved Solzhenitsyn,

³ During the exemplary trials, Soviet newspapers were full of mocking versions of the defendants' confessions and flattering praises from the secret police for their "perpetual vigilance". The press was plagued with insulting rhetoric against the "enemies of the people" and their continuing plots to undermine the party's work through "ideological and economic sabotage". Pavlik Morozov became an overnight hero for denouncing his father to the secret police and was set as an example to be imitated by the Soviet youth. Throughout the country, armies of party spokesmen were mobilized to explain to the nation's students why purges were necessary and to brainwash them so that they would accept their explanations (Pearce, 2007: 55). George Orwell perfectly captured the perversion of the totalitarianism that turned children against their parents, with their consent, in the character of Parsons. Cf. Belmonte, M. Á. (2013). *La búsqueda fracasada de un modelo antropológico en 1984*. In Belmonte, M. Á. (Ed.) (2013). *El Gran Hermano te vigila*. Barcelona: Scire.

whose deepening Marxism was surprisingly a priority: “He must have been one of the few newlyweds in history that took *The Capital* to a honeymoon (and who read it). Waking up in the morning, Natalya used to find her husband already on the porch, with his head bowed over an annotated version of Marx’s masterpiece” (Pearce, 2007, p. 73). According to Michael A. Nicholson (2017), the title that Solzhenitsyn was considering at that time for his great epic project was *Liubi Revolutsiyu*, that is, “Love the Revolution”, which was inspired by the end of a typical Soviet novel titled *Marina*, written by Lavreniov in 1923, the last words of which were: “Love the Revolution, the rest – fame, money, women – is not worth it”.

From the war to the gulag

In 1941, when the USSR entered the Second World War, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was initially assigned to the rear. However when the war became more prolonged, he was sent to the front in East Prussia, where he soon rose to the rank of captain and received various decorations. As an officer, he was a privileged witness of the horrors of looting, which were encouraged by the Soviet leaders themselves. In the poem *Prussian Nights*, he mixes fiction with real experiences of the inconceivable evils he observed at the beginning of 1945.

On February 9, 1945, while still serving in his military unit in Prussia, he was arrested. The reason was his criticism of Stalin in private correspondence sent to a friend from the front. Solzhenitsyn then began to discover a new life: the first transfers, the first cell, the first four-day interrogations... Everything was kept by the young idealist in his memory with the intention of incorporating his experiences into his future great epic work. The sentence he received, in application of the famous Article 58 against counterrevolutionary activities, was one of the mildest: eight years. It was enough to learn the main “transit prisons” of the gigantic prison system the Soviet Union had become. The first prison camps to which he was assigned, first in Rybinsk and then in Marfino, were of the type called the *sharashka*, which was the least harsh type of penitentiary

establishment; in them, the prisoners were engineers and highly qualified workers whose skills were used for the design and construction of canals, dams, etc. Years later, he collected these experiences in his novel *The First Circle*.⁴ From 1950 he served his sentence in the “special field” of Ekibastuz in Kazakhstan. Between one field and another, during the endless transfers in freight trains, hidden from the eyes of the outside world, Solzhenitsyn was deep in conversations with prisoners of all types. Given the difficulty of getting hold of paper and the impossibility of keeping his writings in a lasting condition, he devoted himself to memorizing thousands of verses. Writing, memorizing, destroying. Such was the way in which his vocation as a writer was forced to develop during his prison years.

It was in Ekibastuz that he first conceived the idea of narrating an ordinary day of an ordinary prisoner in one of these “special fields”.⁵ Years later, the story *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* would become the key that would open the door to a tortuous writer’s path.

The contact with prisoners who held religious beliefs was very important for his return to the faith he had abandoned so many years previously. However, the decisive event was the cancer he contracted while still in Ekibastuz. In January 1952 he was treated there for a tumor from which he unexpectedly recovered. The experiences of other patients and many of the conversations he had with them were brought years later to

⁴ In the film *The Lives of Others* (Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006), set in the GDR of the 1980s, the playwright Georg Dreyman has a copy of *The First Circle* published in the FRG. During a search, a Stasi policeman asks him why he has “Western literature” and Dreyman replies that the book in question was a personal gift from Margot Honecker. This fictional anecdote is, however, representative of the way in which the communist authorities considered themselves capable of a certain level of self-criticism, provided that the extreme of a massive questioning of the system itself was not reached.

⁵ “It was a normal day in the country, hard, as usual, and he was working. I helped carry a wheelbarrow full of cement when I thought that was the way to describe the world of work camps. I could have described the ten years I spent in them, of course; I could have told all the history of the camps in that way, but it was enough to gather everything in a single day, all the previous fragments ... and describe a single day in the life of a normal prisoner from morning to night” (Pearce, 2007: 192).

fiction through his novel *Cancer Ward*, which highlights conversations between patients about the transcendental issues of human life.

Already healed but still a prisoner, his religious conversion was a fact. Simultaneously, his project of a great epic work was advancing under one principal directive: to trace a genealogy as exhaustive and truthful as possible of the historical process that had led to the Revolution and the consequent development of the Soviet system.

At the beginning of 1953, Solzhenitsyn was released but was confined to internal and perpetual exile in a small town in Kazakhstan to work as a science teacher in a rural school. Three days after arriving at his new destination, the news of the death of Josif Stalin also arrived there, in the far reaches of distant Kazakhstan.

Thaw, rehabilitation and publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*

The period known as the “thaw” brought about the quashing of numerous sentences, official rehabilitations and the revocation of permanent exiles. This included the case of Solzhenitsyn, who decided to travel to Moscow and meet with Natalia Reshetovskaya in Riazan.

Their relationship had been practically broken by the years of captivity. Natalia probably thought that Aleksandr was never going to return from captivity and, in fact, had lived as a couple with a fellow scientist. In spite of this, Aleksandr and Natalia tried to recover a married life that, with the passage of time, proved to be unfeasible. At the beginning of his return, he thought that his cancer, not fully cured, would prevent him from living for more than another few years. However, the great couple’s estrangement came from the spiritual transformation of Solzhenitsyn, which made both see the little foundation on which his youthful and immature union had settled.

For several years, Solzhenitsyn continued to appear in public as a mere schoolteacher in the provinces, keeping his intense work as a writer secret. Only a few trusted friends were asked by him to read a manuscript from

time to time. Publishing in the Soviet Union was reserved for members of official associations controlled by the party. The excessive dissemination of manuscripts could easily ruin the rehabilitation he had been granted. His great epic work, dedicated to the Revolution, went ahead, but no longer with a title that exhorted to love the Revolution; instead, it took the title *The Red Wheel*. This is, in fact, the great epic work of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, although, incomprehensibly, it has only been partially translated and published in the West. Through this work, Solzhenitsyn clarifies what the Revolution was in itself and what its causes were.

As a separate branch of this project, the idea he had conceived in Ekibastuz of relating a day in the life of a prisoner came to life in May 1959. The title he assigned to the story was "S-854" and he wrote it in less than two months. With a title like this, the depersonalization of the concentration camps and the reification of their prisoners were underlined. Despite six years having passed since the death of Stalin, no work had yet been published whose theme was about life within the camps. Millions of Soviets had spent years in them, had worked to exhaustion in them. Those who had not died in them or were still there had been transplanted to a new life in which it was very difficult to integrate. However, no literary account that echoed their experiences had seen the light of publication. The tone of Solzhenitsyn's account was quite moderate compared to many of the real stories he had known years previously. Even so, the mere idea that "S-854" could be published through official channels was unthinkable. The manuscript was kept in a secret place with many others. In 1958, Boris Pasternak had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, but the Soviet authorities did not authorize him to collect the prize and, in addition, banned the publication of *Doctor Zhivago*. However, in 1961, the director of the literary magazine *Novyi Mir*, Aleksandr Tvardosky, addressed a speech to the XXII Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR, in which he called for the memories of the victims of the arbitrary power of the Stalin era to be remembered. Solzhenitsyn was strong enough to send him the manuscript of "S-854". Tvardosky was immediately enthusiastic about the story. As he knew of the difficulties involved in proposing the publication of such a work, he managed a few months

later to send a copy directly to Khrushchev himself, who was in the midst of the process of “de-Stalinization”, including the removal of Stalin’s embalmed body from the Red Square mausoleum. Khrushchev’s direct and favorable intervention gave the authorization for *Novyi Mir* to publish, in November 1962, the story titled *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. A few days later, Khrushchev sent a copy to each attendee of the Plenary Session of the Central Committee. Tvardosky enjoyed the success of his discovery, convinced that Solzhenitsyn’s work was linked to the best of the Russian literary tradition in terms of understanding the simple peasant soul. The work was received with great enthusiasm. Literary magazines were filled with letters sent from all over the Soviet Union by former prisoners or relatives who had found some consolation for their years of suffering in the publication of the story. Other writers were encouraged to discuss a taboo subject. The institutional support, nevertheless, was as ephemeral as it was unexpected.⁶

The effects of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*

It is understandable that the Soviet authorities backed down in their support of such a work. Despite the moderate tone that was perceived in its first reading, the realities to which the story refers resulted in a remarkable unmasking not only of Stalinism but also of a large part of the Soviet system. For example, in a casual conversation between prisoners, several characters talk about the official regulation of the hours and end

⁶ Solomon Volkov remembers the sensations that he experienced, which were surely very common among the intellectuals of that time: “I was eighteen then, and I remember the general shock caused by *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, both because it had been published at all and for its enormous artistic power. Its first readers encountered narrative mastery, amazing in a literary debut: without melodrama or stress, with deliberate restraint it told the story of just ‘one day’, and far from the worst, in the life of one of the millions of Soviet prisoners, the peasant Ivan Shukhov, depicted through his peasant perceptions, his colorful but natural language, which elicited associations with Tolstoy’s prose. This publication created in the intelligentsia a sense of unprecedented euphoria, which lasted, alas, just over a week.” (Volkov, 2008: 205)

up concluding that even the sun obeys the Soviet regime. At another time, the prisoners compare the duration of their sentences and assume that it does not depend on the “crime” committed but on the date of the sentence. As for the tricks used by prisoners to simulate the productivity demanded in their tasks, it was obvious to everyone that analogous tricks were used throughout the Soviet production system. The memory of the way in which Ivan Denisovich Shukhov had been tried, including the interrogations, the false confession to avoid execution, etc., with the only real crime being having fallen into the hands of the Germans and having managed to escape to join his battalion, was familiar to many readers and called into question the prestige of the Soviet authorities in a matter as “sacred” as the “Great Patriotic War”. Finally, the intention considered by Shukhov to dedicate himself, at the end of his sentence, to painting tapestries and leaving the *kolkhoz*, which was more a desire of his wife than his own initiative, was a lack of affection for the regime that was as patent as it was innocently manifested. In addition, Shukhov’s last thoughts, at the end of his days, revealed the inconsistency of that intention. Shukhov knows that, after serving their sentence, the prisoner would be kept in exile. The last conversation of the story is with the prisoner Aliosha, a Baptist, who encourages Shukhov to ask God for spiritual goods. Shukhov adopts an ironic position in the face of such a suggestion, with a final mixture of despair and acceptance of his destiny that arouses a complex and bittersweet feeling in the reader. For all this, the work offered a portrait of Soviet terror under the guise of a casual and tender description of the everyday life of a naive prisoner, as well as the way in which the individual can cope, can resist without falling apart inside or rebelling outside.

A writer on a tightrope: persecution, exile and return

Since the publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, and thanks to both the initial support of Khrushchev and the work’s quickly-achieved popularity, Tvardosky asked Solzhenitsyn to show him other writings. For Tvardosky, it was evident that someone capable of writing

that work had to have written many other pieces that were also of great literary value. Solzhenitsyn did not disclose all his projects, nor did he immediately show him all his secret productions. He chose as a second proposal *Matriona's House*, which was about a humble, generous, kind peasant of a sincere and demanding religiosity. So explicit was the portrait of the Christian virtues that Tvardosky himself hesitated long before promoting the publication, which took place alongside the publication of the story *An Incident at Krechetovka Station* in January 1963. "In many aspects *Matriona's House* is one of the most important works of Solzhenitsyn, a spiritual pump as much as *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was from the psychological point of view. According to the dissident historian Grigori Pomerants, Christianity began for millions of Russians with the reading of *Matriona's House*" (Pearce, 2007, p. 211).

Criticism of Solzhenitsyn from the regime's toughest sector, which at first had been offset by support, began to predominate. He was mainly accused of being a bad example to the youth, of losing sight of the objective of the communist paradise, and so on. Since 1964, the "thaw" had waned and Solzhenitsyn found it increasingly difficult to publish. Even his hardest manuscripts against Stalinism and against the Soviet regime in general were kept in secret places. The alternative to official publication was to circulate copies through a domestic copy system. However, that meant becoming a clandestine writer, with the risk that the rest of his productions would be found and destroyed. From 1968, the writer found his most faithful ally in his young collaborator Natalia Svetlova, whom he would later marry and have three children with. The tension between Solzhenitsyn and the Soviet authorities came to an end with the news of the Nobel Prize. At this point, the secret order to withdraw *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* from all libraries and bookstores was of little use. All official media – there were no other forms – unleashed a defamation campaign against Solzhenitsyn. In 1970, Tvardosky was dismissed from his position as director of *Novyi Mir*. The following year he died and Solzhenitsyn's attendance at the funeral caused quite a stir. Meanwhile, Solzhenitsyn's works were being translated into dozens of languages and disseminated abroad. The first volume of *The Gulag Archipelago* appeared

in Paris in 1973. In February 1974, Solzhenitsyn was arrested, accused of high treason, dispossessed of his Soviet citizenship and forced to leave the country on a plane to an unknown destination. It landed in Frankfurt. The first years of his exile were spent in Switzerland and, later (1976–1994), in a small town in Vermont, USA. He was always accompanied by his wife and children, who were given a fully Russian education while remaining respectful of the Western cultures that had welcomed them.

Solzhenitsyn was always convinced that he would return to Russia before he died. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the return of Solzhenitsyn had a marked symbolic aspect. Logically, the political elites tried to attract his favor, but the writer maintained a very critical attitude regarding the way in which their reforms were carried out. The decades-long resistance to Soviet totalitarianism had hardened him enough to miss the frivolity with which his proposals for the reconstruction of Russia were received. However, he never looked for an ounce of “success” if it meant giving up an iota of his conviction.

Solzhenitsyn lived the last years of his life without any desire for protagonism but with special attention to the associations of relatives of old prisoners and other similar initiatives. He dared, even, to publish a work, *Two Hundred Years Together*, in which he analyzed in detail the role of the Jews in the last centuries of the history of Russia, aware that hardly any other authors would dare to tackle such a thorny subject.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the biography of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is the biography of an authentic vocation as a writer. A vocation that, faced with the challenge of tremendous circumstances and conditions, he did not succumb to but instead the writer was able to integrate all the experiences that he had lived to the point of becoming the voice of millions of anonymous prisoners. Solzhenitsyn’s perseverance in his vocation as a writer became the best instrument of resistance against terror and totalitarian oppression.

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