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## Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

1918-

**Also known as:** Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn, Alexander Isayevich Solzhenitsyn

Entry updated: 08/09/2006

**Nationality:** Russian

**Birth Place:** Kislovodsk, Russia

**Genre(s):** Autobiographical fiction; Essays; Journalism; Novels; Plays; Poetry; Protest literature; Short stories

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**Personal Information:** Surname is pronounced "sohl-zhe- *neet*-sin"; first name sometimes transliterated as "Alexander" or "Alexandr"; born December 11, 1918, in Kislovodsk, Russia; immigrated to United States, 1976; return to Russia, 1994; son of Isaaki (a military officer) and Taissia (a typist and stenographer; maiden name, Shcherbak) Solzhenitsyn; married Natalya Reshetovskaya (a professor and research chemist), April 27, 1940 (divorced), remarried, 1956 (divorced, 1972); married Natalya Svetlova (a mathematics teacher), April, 1973; children: (third marriage) Yermolai, Ignat, Stephan, Dmitri Turni (stepson). **Education:** Attended Moscow Institute of History, Philosophy, and Literature, 1939-41; University of Rostov, degree, 1941.

**Avocational Interests:** Photography, bicycling, hiking, gardening. **Military/Wartime Service:** Soviet Army, 1941-45; became captain of artillery unit; decorated twice (stripped of rank and decorations, 1945).

**Memberships:** American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Hoover Institute on War, Revolution and Peace (honorary), Russian Academy of Sciences. **Addresses:** Home: UI Tverskaya 12 kv 169, Moscow 119 121, Russia. Agent: c/o Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 19 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003.

**Career:** Writer. First Secondary School, Morozovka, Rostov, USSR (now Russia), physics teacher, 1941; arrested and imprisoned at Greater Lubyanka Prison, Moscow, 1945, Butyrki Prison, Moscow, 1946, Marfino Prison, 1947-50, and Ekibastuz labor camp, Kazakhstan, USSR, 1950-53; mathematics teacher in exile, Kok-Terek, Kazakhstan, mid-1950s; teacher of mathematics and physics in Ryazan, USSR, until early 1960s; banned from teaching and exiled from Moscow; arrested and imprisoned at Lefortovo Prison, 1974; exiled from USSR, 1974. Lecturer; moderator of *A Meeting with Solzhenitsyn* (talk show), No. 1 (Russian state television channel), 1994-95.

**Awards:** Nominated for Lenin Prize, 1964; Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger (France), 1969, for *The First Circle* and *Cancer Ward*; Nobel Prize for Literature, 1970; Freedoms Foundation Award, Stanford University, 1976; Templeton Foundation prize for "progress in religion," 1983; Medal of Honor for Literature, National Arts Club, 1993. Honorary degrees from various institutions, including Harvard University, 1978, and Holy Cross, 1984.

**WRITINGS:**

- *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha* (novella; first published in *Novy Mir*, 1962), Flegon Press (London, England), 1962, translation by Ralph Parker published as *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Dutton (New York, NY), 1963.
- *Dlya polzy'dela* (novella; first published in *Novy Mir*, 1963), Russian Language Specialties, 1963, translation by David Floyd and Max Hayward published as *For the Good of the Cause*, Praeger (Westport, CT), 1964.
- *Sluchay na stantsii Krechetovka [and] Matrenin dvor* (novellas; titles mean "An Incident at Krechetovka Station" and "Matryona's House"; first published in *Novy Mir*, 1963), Flegon Press (London, England), 1963, translation by Paul W. Blackstock published as *We Never Make Mistakes*, University of South Carolina Press (Columbia, SC), 1963.
- *Sochininiia* (selected works), Posev (Frankfurt, Germany), 1966.
- *V krughe pervom* (novel), Harper (New York, NY), 1968, translation by Thomas P. Whitney published as *The First Circle*, Harper (New York, NY), 1968.
- *Rakovyl korpus* (novel), Bodley Head (London, England), 1968, translation by Nicholas Bethell and David Burg published in two volumes as *Cancer Ward*, Bodley Head (London, England), 1968-69, published as *The Cancer Ward*, Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1969.
- *Olen'i shalashovka* (play), Flegon Press (London, England), 1968, translation by Nicholas Bethell and David Burg published as *The Love Girl and the Innocent*, Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1969.
- *Svecha na vetru* (play), Flegon Press (London, England), 1968, translation by Keith Armes and Arthur Hudgins published as *Candle in the Wind*, University of Minnesota Press (Minneapolis, MN), 1973.
- *Les droits de l'écrivain* (title means "The Rights of the Writer"), Éditions du Seuil (Paris, France), 1969.
- *Krokhotnye Rasskazy*, Librairie des Cinq Continents (Paris, France), 1970.
- *Krasnoe koleso* (novel; title means "The Red Wheel"), Volume 1: *Avgust chetyrnadtsatogo*, Flegon Press (London, England), 1971, translation by Michael Glenny published as *August 1914*, Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1972, revised edition, YMCA Press (Paris, France), 1983, translation by Harry Willetts, Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1989, Volume 2: *Oktyabr' shestnadtsatogo*, YMCA Press (Paris, France), 1984, translation by Willetts published as *November 1916: The Red Wheel, Knot II*, Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1999, Volume 3: *Mart semnadtsatogo*, YMCA Press (London, England), 1986, Volume 4: *Aprél' semnadtsatogo*, YMCA Press (Paris, France), 1991.
- *Stories and Prose Poems by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*, translated by Michael Glenny, Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1971.
- *Six Etudes by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*, translated by James G. Walker, College City Press, 1971.
- *Nobelevskara leksira po literature*, YMCA Press (Paris, France), 1972, translation by F. D. Reeve published as *Nobel Lecture by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*, Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1972.
- *A Lenten Letter to Pimen, Patriarch of All Russia*, translated by Theofanis G. Staurou, Burgess, 1972.
- *Arkhipelag Gulag, 1918-1956: Op 'bit khudozhestvennopa issledovaniia*, YMCA Press (Paris, France),

1973, translation published as *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, Harper (New York, NY), Volume 1, translated by Thomas P. Whitney, 1974, Volume 2, translated by Whitney, 1976, Volume 3, translated by Harry Willetts, 1979.

- *Mir i nasilie* (title means "Peace and Violence"), [Frankfurt, Germany], 1974.
- *Prusskie nochi: pozma napisappaja v lagere v 1950* (title means "Prussian Nights: Epic Poems Written at the Forced Labor Camp, 1950"), YMCA Press (Paris, France), 1974.
- *Pis'mo vozhdram Sovetskogo Soruza*, YMCA Press (Paris, France), 1974, translation by Hilary Sternberg published as *Letter to the Soviet Leaders*, Harper (New York, NY), 1974.
- (And photographer with others) *Solzhenitsyn: A Pictorial Autobiography*, Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1974.
- *Bodalsra telenok s dubom*, YMCA Press (Paris, France), 1975, translation published as *The Oak and the Calf*, Association Press, 1975, translation by Harry Willetts published as *The Oak and the Calf: Sketches of Literary Life in the Soviet Union*, Harper (New York, NY), 1980.
- *Lenin v Tsiurikhe*, YMCA Press (Paris, France), 1975, translation by Harry Willetts published as *Lenin in Zurich*, Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1976.
- *Amerikanskie rechi* (title means "American Speeches"), YMCA Press (Paris, France), 1975.
- (With others) *From under the Rubble*, translated by Michael Scammell, Little, Brown (Boston, MA), 1975, published as *From under the Ruins*, Association Press, 1975.
- (With others) *Detente: Prospects for Democracy and Dictatorship*, Transaction Books, 1975.
- *Warning to the West*, Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1976.
- *Rasskazy* (short stories), Posev (Frankfurt, Germany), 1976.
- *A World Split Apart* (commencement address), Harper (New York, NY), 1979.
- *The Mortal Danger*, Harper (New York, NY), 1981.
- *P'esy I kinostsenarii*, YMCA Press (Paris, France), 1981.
- *Publitsistika: Stat'i i rechi*, YMCA Press (Paris, France), 1981.
- *Victory Celebrations: A Comedy in Four Acts [and] Prisoners: A Tragedy* (plays), translated by Helen Rapp and Nancy Thomas, Bodley Head (London, England), 1983.
- (Editor) *Russkii slovar' iazykovogo rasshireniia*, [Russia], 1990.
- *Kak nam obustroit' Rossiuu*, YMCA Press, 1990, translation published as *Rebuilding Russia: Reflections and Tentative Proposals*, Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1991.
- *Les Invisibles*, Fayard, 1992, translation published as *Invisible Allies*, Counterpoint, 1995.
- *The Russian Question toward the End of the Century*, Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1995.

- *Po minute v den'*, Argumenty i Fakty (Moscow, Russia), 1995.
- *Russia Is Falling*, 1998.
- *Rossiia v obvale*, Russkii Put' (Moscow, Russia), 1998.
- *Proterevshi glaza*, Nash Dom (Moscow, Russia), 1999.
- *Sobranie sochinenii: v deviati tomakh*, Terra (Moscow, Russia), 1999.
- *Dvesti let vmeste (1795-1995)* (history), Russkii put' (Moscow, Russia), 2001.

Also author of unpublished works, including plays.

Contributor to periodicals, including *New Leader*.

**Media Adaptations:** *The Love Girl and the Innocent* was adapted for the stage by Paul Avila Mayer as *A Play by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*, 1970.

### "Sidelights"

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is a notable Russian writer who first drew worldwide attention in 1962 with *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, his novella recounting the arduous existence of prisoners in the system of concentration camps devised under Soviet dictator Josef Stalin. According to Ludmila Koehler, writing in *Russian Review*, Solzhenitsyn's literary debut "swept into the world like a gust of fresh wind." In the ensuing twelve years Solzhenitsyn continued to produce esteemed works, including an ambitious study, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, and two novels, *The First Circle* and *Cancer Ward*. Such writings, while winning acclaim in the west, further aggravated his notoriety in the USSR, and in 1974, four years after receiving the Nobel Prize for literature, Solzhenitsyn was summarily expelled from his homeland.

Solzhenitsyn first ran afoul of communist authorities in 1945 while serving in the Soviet Army. Accused of transmitting questionable correspondence to a fellow officer, Solzhenitsyn was sent to a Moscow prison, where he became a regular patron of the prison library and absorbed the works of writers ranging from Yevgeny Zamyatin, a Soviet master of the 1920s, to John Dos Passos, the celebrated American novelist. After being transferred to a research prison populated by scientists and technicians, Solzhenitsyn regularly occupied himself by imagining poems and committing them to memory. "Solzhenitsyn had done some writing during both World War II and his imprisonment thereafter," confirmed Edward E. Ericson, Jr. in *Solzhenitsyn: The Moral Vision*. "We cannot be sure how much of this work . . . he committed to memory before he felt it necessary, for safety's sake, to destroy the manuscripts." Solzhenitsyn continued to produce poetry in this unlikely manner after transferring to a concentration camp in 1950. Three years later, after receiving his release from the prison system, Solzhenitsyn was banished to central Asia, where he taught mathematics and science and began writing plays.

After his exile ended in 1956, Solzhenitsyn moved to Ryazan, where he continued to work as a teacher. He eventually shared his writings with friends, who proved sufficiently impressed to recommend their submission to *Novy Mir* editor Aleksandr Tvardovsky. Solzhenitsyn initially resisted the temptation to publish, but he eventually sent a short story, "Shch-854," which impressed Tvardovsky as a compelling portrait of a prisoner in the Soviet camps. Solzhenitsyn ultimately developed the tale into *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, his understated novella--rendered in spare, plain prose--of one prisoner's typical activities. "Ivan Denisovich," affirmed Shirley J. Paolini in *Reference Guide to Short Fiction*, "represents the common individual incarcerated in a Soviet camp for an insignificant crime; his energies are devoted entirely to survival under brutal conditions." Lauren Livingston, writing in the *English Review*, summarized *One Day in the Life of Ivan*

*Denisovich* as a "haunting read," and Gleb Zekulin, writing in *Soviet Studies*, recommended it as "a mine of information." Still another enthusiast, Vladimir J. Rus, wrote in *Canadian Slavonic Papers* that "Solzhenitsyn has given the world a moving picture of . . . a genuine joy in one's own existence, even when so limited in time, space, and one's own consciousness." Abraham Rothberg, meanwhile, acknowledged in *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: The Major Novels*, that in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* Solzhenitsyn "explored new terrain in the use of language, exploiting a combination of prison slang, peasant and pornographic slang," and Christopher Moody, in *Solzhenitsyn*, deemed the story an "eloquent protest." Similarly, Robert L. Yarus observed in the *Explicator* that *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* concerns "man's irrepressible instinct for freedom."

*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* proved an immense success with Soviet readers, and Solzhenitsyn readily followed it in *Novy Mir* with short stories, including "Matryona's House," in which a former prisoner befriends an aging peasant woman who serves as his landlady. Andrej Kodjak, in his study *Alexander Solzhenitsyn*, noted that "Solzhenitsyn draws on his own experience to create the narrator, Ignatich." John Clardy, in a *Cimarron Review* essay, expressed particular praise for Solzhenitsyn's handling of characterization in "Matryona's House," declaring that "Matryona, like Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, stands out in our minds as a real personality." Leonid Rzhnevsky, meanwhile, quoted another reader, in *Solzhenitsyn: Creator and Heroic Deed*, who considered Matryona "the most brilliant image of the peasant woman in all of the Russian literature I have read." Still another critic, Stephen S. Lottridge, wrote in *Russian Literature Triquarterly* that "Matryona's House" relates "the trials and loss and endured by an innocent and righteous person," while Robert Louis Jackson, in a piece featured in *Solzhenitsyn: A Collection of Critical Essays*, summarized the tale as "significant art." Sheryl A. Spitz, meanwhile, described the short work in a *Russian Review* essay as "the story of one individual's moral maturation."

1968 saw the western publication of *The First Circle*, a lengthy novel--described by an essayist in *Encyclopedia of World Biography* as "harshly satiric"--about life in the Soviet prison system. Here an idealistic diplomat suddenly finds himself arrested and consigned to prison, where he soon meets an ardent communist, an engineer, and a scientist who longs to produce literature. In the novel--according to David M. Halperin, in an essay included in *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Materials*--Solzhenitsyn "examines both the omnipresence of lying as a demonstrable feature of Soviet society and as a metaphysical, demonic device." Furthermore, Solzhenitsyn, in his characterization of Stalin, emphasized that the dictator, however monstrous, however powerful, was nonetheless human. "In his portrait of Stalin in *The First Circle*," wrote Paul N. Siegel in *Clio*, "Solzhenitsyn, in cutting the towering figure of the Stalin of Stalinist myth-making down to size, showed him to be a human being at ironic variance with the image."

Like *The First Circle*, *Cancer Ward*---which also appeared in the west in 1968--takes place in an isolated community. But unlike either *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* or *The First Circle*, which both occur in a prison, *Cancer Ward* unfolds in a hospital and charts the experiences of two patients: a bureaucrat who anticipates preferential treatment and a former prisoner with no tolerance for elitism. Jeffrey Meyers, writing in *Twentieth-Century Literature*, noted Solzhenitsyn's use of cancer as a metaphor for Stalinism. "There is no escape from cancer, despite periods of remission," declared Meyers, "just as there is no escape from the legacy of Stalinism, despite the political thaw."

While writing his ambitious novels, Solzhenitsyn also generated various literary sketches, some of which arrived in the west. John B. Dunlop, writing in *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Materials*, described these works as "prose poems of a powerful lyric intensity," and he added that "they are primarily concerned with the spiritual inadequacy of modern life."

In 1970, amid increasing recognition as the USSR's foremost writer, Solzhenitsyn received the Nobel Prize for literature. Unfortunately, communist authorities, having confiscated his papers three years earlier, refused to let him attend the awards ceremony in Stockholm.

Solzhenitsyn's reputation, meanwhile, continued to grow, particularly with the appearance of *The Gulag*

*Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, a formidable history of the Soviet prison system. This diverse work, which numbers three volumes, includes autobiographical material, straightforward history, and details on specific methods of interrogation and confinement. Writing in *Month*, Alla Braithwaite declared that *The Gulag Archipelago* "is not only a report, a record for history" but a volume in which the writer's "mood is one of reflection . . . but also of confession."

In 1974, one year after *The Gulag Archipelago* appeared in the West, Soviet authorities, who had previously denied Solzhenitsyn permission to leave the country, decided that he could no longer remain there, and after briefly imprisoning him, they sent him into an exile that would last until 1994. Solzhenitsyn settled in Vermont and continued to write, meanwhile condemning the West for its materialism and dearth of spirituality. Notable among his projects from this period of exile is *The Red Wheel*, a multi-volume saga that recalls Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* in both its scope and its plethora of both fictional and real characters. In 1972 the first volume of *The Red Wheel* appeared in English translation as *August 1914*. Geoffrey A. Hosking, in a *Times Literary Supplement* analysis, described *August 1914* as Solzhenitsyn's attempt to illustrate "why [the Soviet Union's] economic growth took place in a lopsided and debilitating manner, why Siberia remained underdeveloped, and . . . why Russians started disemboweling each other in great numbers." Irving Howe, though, came to regard *August 1914*, in the *New York Times Book Review*, as a "swollen and misshapen book."

Perhaps Solzhenitsyn agreed with Howe's appraisal, for in 1983 he produced a revision of *August 1914*. The next year he published a sequel, *November 1916*, which features over 2,000 pages delineating the activities of historical figures in St. Petersburg--then known as Petrograd. Philippe D. Radley, writing in *World Literature Today*, contended that "the tremendous size is . . . off-putting," and he cast it in "that curious genre . . . of fictionalized history." Michael Spinella, however, acknowledged *November 1916*, in his *Booklist* assessment, as a "distinguished tome," and M. Anna Falbo described it in *Library Journal* as Solzhenitsyn's "magnum opus." In 1986 Solzhenitsyn issued, in Russian, a third volume, *Mart semnadtsatogo*, and in 1991 he continued *The Red Wheel* with a fourth part, *Aprel' semnadtsatogo*.

In 1994, following the fall of the communist regime in the Soviet Union, Solzhenitsyn left the United States and settled in Moscow. The next year he issued *The Russian Question toward the End of the Century*, wherein he proposes a reaffirmation of compassion and peculiarly Russian fatalism. In addition, he calls for the reunification of Russia, the Ukraine, and Belarus. Tatyana Tolstaya, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, dismissed Solzhenitsyn's political views as outdated and denounced his writing as egoistic. "Solzhenitsyn's fundamental approach to [Western civilization's] clumsy, myriad lords is that they are bad, improvident imperialists," Tolstaya declared. "And he himself is provident, that's the whole difference." Hugh Ragsdale, however, reported in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* that "a recent poll in Petersburg found far more sympathy for [Solzhenitsyn] than for anyone in Russia's present leadership," adding: "we cannot say of him--as of the Bourbons returned from exile--that he has learned nothing and forgotten nothing."

Solzhenitsyn's publications since his return to Russia include *Dvesti let vmeste (1795-1995)*, a history of the Jewish experience in Russia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Geoffrey A. Hosking, in a *Times Literary Supplement* review, lauded *Dvesti let vmeste* as a noteworthy volume and described it as a "vigorous" account.

In October, 2005, a suspected electrical fire destroyed Solzhenitsyn's dacha in the village of Rodzhestvo, near Moscow. A large number of the author's papers were lost in the accident.

#### **FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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- *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, summer-fall, 1971, Vladimir J. Rus, " *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*: A Point-of-View Analysis," pp. 165-178.
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- *Explicator*, spring, 1982, Robert L. Yarup, "Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*," pp. 61-63.
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