

REPENTANCE AND SELF-LIMITATION IN THE LIFE OF NATIONS
Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1973) *

Selected excerpts:

I

“It is in our human nature to ... apply ordinary, individual, human values and standards to larger social phenomena and associations of people, up to and including the nation and the state as a whole.”

“Whatever feelings predominate in the members of a given society at a given moment in time, they will serve to color the whole of that society and determine its moral character. And if there is nothing good there to pervade that society, it will destroy itself, or be brutalized by the triumph of evil instincts.”

II

“The gift of repentance, which perhaps more than anything else distinguishes man from the animal world, is particularly difficult for modern man to recover. We have, every last one of us, grown ashamed of this feeling; and its effect on social life anywhere on earth is less and less easy to discern. The habit of repentance is lost to our whole callous and chaotic age.”

“We start from what seems to us beyond doubt: that true repentance and self-limitation will shortly reappear in the personal and the social sphere, that a hollow place in modern man is ready to receive them. Obviously then the time has come to consider this as a path for whole nations to follow.”

“Add to this the white-hot tension between nations and races and we can say without suspicion of over-statement that without repentance it is in any case doubtful if we can survive.

“It is by now only too obvious how dearly mankind has paid for the fact that we have all throughout the ages preferred to censure, denounce and hate others, instead of censuring, denouncing and hating ourselves. But obvious though it may be, we are even now, with the twentieth century on its way out, reluctant to recognize that the universal dividing line between good and evil runs not between countries, not between nations; ... it cuts across nations and parties, shifting constantly, yielding now to the pressure of light, now to the pressure of darkness. It divides the heart of every man, and there too it is not

a ditch dug once and for all, but fluctuates with the passage of time and according to a man's behavior.”

“Repentance is the first bit of firm ground underfoot, the only one from which we can go forward not to fresh hatreds but to concord. Repentance is the only starting point for spiritual growth.

“For each and every individual.

“For every trend of social thought.”

“How can the nation as a whole express its repentance? Surely only through the mouths and by the pens of individuals?”

III

“The nation is mystically welded together in a community of guilt, and its inescapable destiny is common repentance. We all bear responsibility for the quality of our government, for the campaigns of our military leaders, ... for the songs of our young people.”

“The man who takes it upon himself to express the repentance of a nation will always be exposed to weighty dissuasions, reproaches, and warnings not to bring shame upon his country or give comfort to its enemies. ... But it can happen that repentance is expressed not just once and momentarily by a single writer or orator, but becomes the normal mood of all thinking society. ... The repentance of a nation expresses itself most surely and palpably in its actions. ... This article is written for posterity with faith in the natural proclivity of Russians to repent, in our ability to find the penitential impulse in ourselves and set the whole world an example. ... Repentance is among the most prominent Russian national characteristics. ... But will it be easy for us honestly to remember all that when we have lost all feeling for truth?”

“If we now long to go forward at last into a just, clean, honest society—and there is a glimmer of hope that we do—how else can we do so except by repentance? We cannot convert the kingdom of universal falsehood into a kingdom of universal truth by even the cleverest and most skillfully contrived economic and social reforms; those are the wrong building blocks. ... Only through the repentance of a multitude of people can the air and the soil be cleansed so that a new, healthy national life can grow up.”

“Unless we recover the gift of repentance, our country will perish and will drag down the whole world with it.”

V

“Repentance is only a clearing of the ground, the establishment of a clean basis in preparation for further moral actions—what in the life of an individual is

called 'reform.' And if in private life what has been done must be put right by deeds, this is all the more true in the life of a nation. ... After repentance, self-limitation comes into its own as the most natural principle to live by. Repentance creates the atmosphere for self-limitation. ... So far as I know, no state has ever carried through a deliberate policy of self-limitation or set itself such a task, but when it has done so at a difficult moment in some particular sector (rationing, for example), self-limitation has paid off handsomely."

"The turn toward inward development, the triumph of inwardness over outwardness, if it ever happens, will be a great turning point in the history of mankind, comparable to the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. This revolution will not be like earlier ones; it will be a moral revolution requiring both courage and sacrifice. The examination of all this does not lie within the scope of this present article...."

* Alexander Solzhenitsyn et al., *From Under the Rubble* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975). From the Foreword: "It is from out of dank, dark depths, from under the rubble, that we are now putting forth our first feeble shoots. If we wait for history to present us with freedom and other precious gifts, we risk waiting in vain. History is us—and there is no alternative but to shoulder the burden of what we so passionately desire and bring it out of the depths."

THE SCHISM BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD

Yevgeny Barabanov (1973) *

"Those who see in Christianity the affirmation of an absolute truth about man and human society are undoubtedly right. And it is only on the basis of this higher truth that it is possible to warrant the exceptional value of man, the value of his life and what he creates. Christianity alone holds the key to the deepest meaning of social life, culture and husbandry."

"Looking back we realize that Christian ideas and ideals lay beneath even those aspects of life and culture which it would seem were not related to them on the surface."

"Our civilization is dual in its foundation and history. And now, in spite of a secularization that aspires to universal dominion, Christian principles continue to influence its life. The energies of Christian culture, not directly but obliquely and through mysterious channels, continue to penetrate through to our world. They reveal themselves in the experience of making a moral choice, in the quest

for genuine humanity, in the aspiration for higher things, in the impossibility of making do with compromises.”

“Russian literature has unfailingly borne witness to the profound malady of our secularized culture, to the tragic absurdity of an existence without God, to man’s indestructible urge to find the true light. ... The process of psychologically casting off the dominating idols and temptations of modern civilization is bringing us back to that spiritual center in which culture first originated.”

“Today, as never before, a Christian initiative is needed to counter the godless humanism that is destroying mankind. ... We are too passive. ... We do not carry our own religious will. ... We seem to have forgotten that we have been entrusted with the great task of transforming the world. ... We need new creative efforts, we need a new language. We must speak of what is beyond modernity, of what is eternally living and absolute in this world of the relative, of what is simultaneously both eternally old and eternally young. It must mean not only a breakthrough into eternity but the presence of eternity in our own time. ... It must lead not to a reformation but to a transformation of Christian consciousness and life, and through it to a transformation of the world.”

* In 1997, Barabanov (b. 1943), an art historian, was director of the Institute of European Culture in Moscow.