Solzhenitsyn’s century

by Edward E. Ericson Jr. in the June 17, 1998 issue

By D. M. Thomas, Alexander Solzhenitsyn: A Century in His Life. *(St. Martin's, 583 pp.)*

In 1994 Alexander Solzhenitsyn returned to Russia on a trans-Siberian whistle-stop tour. In one town meeting he heard this rebuke: “It is you and your writing that started it all and brought our country to the verge of collapse and devastation. Russia doesn’t need you. So for your own well-being and that of your loved ones, go back to your blessed America.” Solzhenitsyn replied that to his dying day he would keep fighting against the evil ideology that is capable of slaying one-third of the population. The meeting erupted with applause.

Had D. M. Thomas been there, he would have clapped too. Not because the angry citizen was wrong, but because his opening ten words were right. The premise of Thomas’s biography is that “Solzhenitsyn helped to bring down the greatest tyranny the world has seen, besides educating the West as to its full horror. No other writer of the 20th century has had such an influence on history.” This attitude goes against the grain of the Western consensus, especially strong in the U.S., that has consigned Solzhenitsyn to neglect. By allowing us to glimpse afresh the grandeur of his achievement, this book may unsettle the consensus.

It was far from obvious that Solzhenitsyn would end up playing his world-historical role. He grew up such an enthusiastic communist that his young bride was jealous of Lenin. He too suffered from “the willful self-blindness” that, Thomas notes, “was to become a hallmark of the intelligentsia in many countries.” Unlike the many who learned of Lenin’s terror and Stalin’s famine and still kept the faith, however, Solzhenitsyn lost the faith, saved his conscience, and took his solitary way to becoming a major player in and teller of the drama of his era. Thomas’s subtitle presses the claim that Solzhenitsyn is central to his age and that knowing his story will help us understand the larger story.

We have yet to come to proper terms with what the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova called the True Twentieth Century, that foreshortened epoch which she saw

beginning in 1914 and which we now can see ended in 1991. The young Solzhenitsyn logged in his notebook a grandiose title for a prospective novel: *The Twentieth Century*. In the end, this is the subject of his life's work. Along with only a few others, he came to see that the century's plot line was leading to a collapse of communism. This climax, generally so unexpected, imposes an enormous task of historical reassessment that not everyone is ready to embrace. As one survivor of the Gulag put it, "People are tired of the past." Václav Havel, trying to pinpoint our century's distinctive character, has called it the first atheistic civilization. In this description, he gives priority to culture over politics as historically decisive. Anyone who accepts Havel's sense of priorities will learn, as Havel has, from Solzhenitsyn.

This turbulent century has churned out sensational life stories with plots too improbable for fiction. Havel went from prisoner to president within months. Solzhenitsyn went from army camp to prison camp for privately criticizing Stalin's military blunders. In prison he moved from Marx back to the Jesus of his childhood. Eventually this unknown schoolteacher got a short novel published: One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, and the Soviet Union was never quite the same. Metaphorically speaking, the first crack had appeared in the Berlin Wall. Solzhenitsyn quickly fell out of favor and wrote on the run. Eventually he was shipped to the West, where the prickly fellow became a thorn in our side. Twenty years later he went home as he had always said he would. Solzhenitsyn wished for no biography during his lifetime. But how could we resist this spectacular story?

Solzhenitsyn (whom Thomas annoyingly calls Sanya) seems an unlikely subject for the author of The White Hotel. That novel was Freudian throughout and technically far removed from Solzhenitsyn's traditional realism. Despite this fundamental lack of consanguinity between Thomas and his subject, Thomas is a good biographer when it matters most. His sound intuitions, irenic spirit and lively style outweigh his gaffes.

Thomas's only serious predecessor as Solzhenitsyn biographer is Michael Scammell, and Thomas has leaned on Scammell's research. Thomas does draw new information from two recent publications: The Solzhenitsyn Files, hitherto secret reports on the writer prepared for presentation at the highest level of the Soviet government, and *Invisible Allies*, Solzhenitsyn's sketches of the protracted cat-and-mouse game between the KGB and himself, with lavish homage paid to his battalion of mostly women helpers.

Solzhenitsyn opened his home to Scammell, but the two soon found that they were an uncongenial match. (Scammell's book shows his increasing distaste for his subject.) After this unhappy experience, Solzhenitsyn refused to cooperate with Thomas. Thomas has not only accepted this rebuff with good grace but generally has exercised good judgment in following Scammell's facts even while departing from his interpretations. Briefly put, Scammell knows more, but Thomas understands better.

Nowhere is this difference better illustrated than in the two biographers' attitudes concerning Solzhenitsyn's motivation: his Christian faith. Here is Thomas on *The Gulag Archipelago*: "God had enabled him to achieve his great work. . . . His part in God's plan was to devote every moment, and all his strength, to writing." And here is Scammell's ironic comment on the same subject: "Solzhenitsyn is not above lending God a helping hand if there was a risk of His being late for his appointed time."

The greatest impediment to a proper reception of Solzhenitsyn's message has been the mistake of listening to his sad music of Russia with ears attuned solely to secular wavelengths. Thomas is not forbearing toward such people. About the West's initial lionizing of Solzhenitsyn, he astutely remarks, "The support he received from 'progressive society' was but a passing phase based on a misunderstanding."

As more of Solzhenitsyn's ideas became known, a strong negative reaction set in. The first major expression of displeasure was precipitated by the novel *August 1914* in 1972. Doubts about his liberal credentials were exacerbated by the "Letter to the Soviet Leaders" in 1974, were crystallized into cliché with the 1978 Harvard commencement address, and were reinforced by Scammell's 1984 biography. "It was not that [Solzhenitsyn] was trying to deceive anybody by a pretense of being liberal; the illusion came mostly from that peculiar complacent certainty, in liberal or left-liberal circles, that no other philosophical position is tenable."

Solzhenitsyn's religion scandalized Manhattan and Moscow. Thomas writes of "the instinctive shock" felt by a KGB officer "on seeing the great writer prostrate himself before God." Other "good children of the Enlightenment" reacted similarly: "To find that a writer believed passionately in Chairman Mao or Stalin or Ho Chi Minh was acceptable to the liberal mind; but if he believed passionately in God it caused a frisson of discomfort and doubt."

Solzhenitsyn came to believe that he had a God-given mission to tell the truth about the enormities that atheism had wrought in our world, especially upon his fellow denizens of the gulag. Surviving prison, cancer and even a KBG attempt on his life confirmed his sense of calling. For all his dealing with political matters, he is fundamentally a moral writer with spiritual impulses shaped by his Christian faith. Thomas is aware of all this. But his life-and-times approach attends more to characters and events than to ideas and beliefs. He leads us toward but not into Solzhenitsyn's mind and heart.

Thomas is unsparingly critical of the Soviet experiment. He emphasizes discontinuity between the czars and the Bolsheviks, continuity between Lenin and Stalin. He draws parallels between Nazi and Soviet malignities, categorizing the respective campaigns to liquidate Jews and kulaks as genocide in both cases: genocide of race in one case and of class in the other. He does not resist the evidence for a high number of deaths at Soviet hands--"at the lowest estimates, almost 60 million."

Thomas's evaluation of Solzhenitsyn is (for now) a minority report. He absolves the author of anti-Semitism, an easily dispensed canard. His Solzhenitsyn is "an anti-imperialist" and "far from being antidemocratic." Anything but "a 'nationalist' in the sense of wanting aggrandizement . . . he want[s] Russia to cast off its empire." Gulag is a "great work" that "overturned a religion--that Sartrean faith which for half a century had strained at every gnat that came from America while swallowing every camel from the Soviet Union." The 1990 essay on rebuilding Russia is "not a program of far-right politics," and the essayist is "a conservative 'green'" and "a defender of the less articulate and educated against the urban and urbane professional politicians."

Thomas even finds some virtue in Solzhenitsyn's unwise indulgence of a frequently peremptory tone. "His unequaled gift for savage vituperation is a major and glorious feature of *The Gulag Archipelago*, so we should be grateful for it. Sanya needed his powers of invective to awaken the West; for, as he potently observes, more than a mere factual account of the Soviet horrors was required to offset the exculpatory tendencies of Western intellectuals."

Along with offering many insights, Thomas makes many mistakes. While correctly observing that Solzhenitsyn's fiction is typically close to fact, he underestimates Solzhenitsyn's artistic shaping of the source material. Also, he imaginatively reconstructs scenes for which we have no evidence. This sometimes goes beyond

harmless fun. What is to be gained, for example, by speculating that Solzhenitsyn's father's death was a suicide, only to conclude that it probably was not?

More damaging is the effect of Thomas's love affair with Freud. When three female family members bend over the baby's crib "with a desperate love," Thomas espies "a pattern in his life": "the certainty that [Solzhenitsyn] could demand and expect adoring love and sacrifice from a circle of women." And it takes a Freudian's touch to transmute an icon remembered from happy childhood into "the maternal breast that had been lost." Of Solzhenitsyn's women helpers, who found fulfillment in joining a noble mission, Thomas judges that a man who is "uncertain and repressive in his emotions" toward women must have "used" them. Even Thomas's praise is delivered Freudian-style. After finding Solzhenitsyn "anal," Thomas adds, "and if, still in Freudian terms, he has sublimated Eros: sublimation be praised for giving the world The Gulag Archipelago." Would that the Freudianizer had imposed a little repression on himself.

One abiding area of controversy is the exceedingly vexed relationship between Solzhenitsyn and his first wife, Natalya Reshetovskaya. Blame for the tragic love story must be apportioned in three parts: the husband, the wife and a state that capriciously imprisons people and severely limits visits and letters. After Solzhenitsyn was incarcerated, he gave permission for his wife to divorce him. She remarried but did not inform Solzhenitsyn, who finally received a letter from her aunt saying merely, "Natasha has asked me to tell you that you may arrange your life independently of her."

The couple later reunited, but his outlook on life had been radically altered by his prison experience. Solzhenitsyn increasingly felt that his possessive wife was keeping him from fulfilling his mission in life. He fell in love with Natalya Svetlova, one of his helpers. The divorce was messy. Reshetovskaya took her revenge by writing hurt-filled memoirs that alternately honored him and blackened his reputation. The smudge marks of KGB fingers on these manuscripts were apparent.

Solzhenitsyn has never depicted himself as saintly. He tells us that he agreed to be an informer (though he never informed). We know that when his wife attempted suicide, his first thought was apparently for himself and his work. He obviously bears a load of guilt about the failed marriage. Thomas treats all of Solzhenitsyn's fallings-out with erstwhile friends fairly, not absolving him but also not taking his critics at face value. Unlike Scammell, however, Thomas trusts Solzhenitsyn more than he

trusts Reshetovskaya.

Nevertheless, Thomas pays an inordinate amount of attention to Reshetovskaya. He praises the second wife as “a rare woman, and one in whom there has never been any vainglory” and lauds her as the parent of the sons the couple reared. Yet the first wife is the focus of interest on the book’s final page. Why?

The answer has to do with Thomas’s view of literary art, which comes into clear focus when he discusses another point of controversy--the aesthetic merit of The Red Wheel. Thomas doesn’t like it. At the same time, it is not clear that he has read all of it. (He says that it stops with March 1917, when in fact the final volume is April 1917, which has a long appendix carrying events through the civil war ending in 1922.) In any case, The Red Wheel is Solzhenitsyn at his furthest remove from Thomas, and Thomas’s grasp falls short of the needed reach. Solzhenitsyn writes to reveal the truth of history--a history that has been deliberately falsified. Thomas writes to reveal the truth of the psyche. They exemplify the two different kinds of artists that Solzhenitsyn described in his Nobel lecture. For the sake of his kind of art, the Freudian prefers conflict to serenity: a bad marriage makes for good art and a good marriage makes for bad art. If this is universally so, then Thomas is warranted in his ratio of attention to the two wives. But is it so? In what is probably the book’s most abominable line, Thomas suggests that Solzhenitsyn’s art might have perked up if he had had a late-in-life one-nighter in some anonymous motel.

It takes time to digest a work as gargantuan as The Red Wheel. Of the part that has been around longest, August 1914, Thomas says he “was gripped” by it and praises its “Tolstoyan intensity.” If the next century adjudges the project a failure, then Solzhenitsyn will have blundered colossally in giving it the energies of his mature years. Maybe history will agree with Thomas that Solzhenitsyn had a great creative decade and then went into precipitous decline. But it is risky to say so about a man who has been so right about so much.

Solzhenitsyn is now back home, working as intensely as ever. He has angered all parties by scolding the new oligarchy as sharply as the old communists. He still proclaims that everyone must repent. If he is disappointed at being “the ultimate dissident,” he is not surprised. As Thomas aptly concludes, “Solzhenitsyn will not die disgraced . . . and I am sure he will believe this to be more seemly than popularity, in an age of conformity and spiritual dearth.”