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## August 1914: The Red Wheel

Walter C. Uhler

Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn

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JOSEPH GIBBS  
 Newtonville, Massachusetts

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Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr I. *August 1914: The Red Wheel*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989. \$29.95

In February 1974, at the time of Aleksandr Isaevich Solzhenitsyn's expulsion from the Soviet Union, I was studying Russian history under the tutelage of an endearingly eccentric polymath named Sergei Vasilievich Utechin. Saddened, but not surprised, by Solzhenitsyn's eviction, Professor Utechin nevertheless predicted that future historians would come to regard the era not as "the Brezhnev period" but as "the period of Solzhenitsyn"—so profound would his impact upon the Soviet Union prove to be. One can appreciate the prescience of Utechin's assertion when one considers that in 1990: (1) the Soviet leaders ceased referring to "the Brezhnev period" and replaced that designation with the opprobrious "period of stagnation"; (2) many of Solzhenitsyn's works appeared in the Soviet Union (as well as others since then); and (3) periodicals such as *Novy Mir* ("Solzhenitsyn and Us," January 1990) featured articles about the important lessons to be learned from this great writer.

Solzhenitsyn's impact upon the Soviet Union is difficult to assess, or to overemphasize. When in late 1962 *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* appeared in *Novy Mir*, it generated enthusiasm, hope for the future of Russian literature, and critical acclaim. Its controversial theme—the inhuman treatment endured by a simple Russian peasant during the

course of an average day in one of Stalin's notorious labor camps—made publication dependent upon the personal authorization of Nikita Khrushchev. Although Khrushchev eventually regretted this decision, he and Solzhenitsyn became linked inextricably in the history of the reform movement in the Soviet Union. *Glasnost* and *perestroika* were inspired by the limited "thaw" in Soviet culture, and de-Stalinization was permitted by Khrushchev and made real by Solzhenitsyn.

Khrushchev was ousted in 1964. In the period of stagnation that followed, the attempts to silence Solzhenitsyn prompted him to send his novels abroad. Publication of *Cancer Ward* and (especially) *The First Circle* in England and the United States in 1968 elicited rave reviews from both sides of the Atlantic. Two years later, Solzhenitsyn was awarded the Nobel Prize.

Acclaim in the West brought increased Soviet pressure upon the author, and in late 1973, upon receiving word that the KGB had obtained a copy of his *Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn authorized Western publication of this scathing expose of the *Glavnoye upravlenie lagerei* (Main Camp Administration). Excruciating to both human sensibilities and Soviet pretense, its publication was soon followed by the writer's expulsion from his native land.

The three-volume *Gulag* and the events surrounding its release caused many intellectuals in the West to reevaluate their thoughts about the Soviet Union. In France, for example, the "new philosophers" (most prominently Andre Glucksmann and Bernard-Henri Levy) claimed to be "children of Solzhenitsyn"

and excoriated the abuse of state power. The disaffection of many on the intellectual left created an opening for the neoconservatives on the rise in both England and the United States. Solzhenitsyn's efforts thus undermined the Stalinist system by reducing the reservoir of sympathy abroad while enspiriting the reform movement at home.

Unlike the works mentioned above, *August 1914* was not based upon the author's personal experience. The battle of Tannenberg, its subject, occurred during the early days of World War I (and four years before Solzhenitsyn's birth). He became fascinated with the subject at age eighteen and considered it to be a turning point in the history of the October Revolution—a history that he intended to write. During those early years, Solzhenitsyn believed that the encirclement and rout of General Aleksandr Samsonov's 2nd Army was a consequence of the incompetence, corruption, and decay afflicting tsarist Russia, which in turn made the glorious revolution inevitable. More than thirty years would pass before Solzhenitsyn would complete the first volume of this history. Some of those years were spent in the Gulag, an experience that changed him and his views about the revolution. He no longer believed that the revolution was either glorious or inevitable.

*August 1914* has been compared with Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. The appearance of Tolstoy in Solzhenitsyn's novel is an indication that the latter seeks such comparisons. Both novels juxtapose tranquility behind the lines with violence and chaos at the front. Both possess an epic grandeur, though

Solzhenitsyn's less so. But whereas Tolstoy wrote his novel to examine the Russian attributes that defeated Napoleon, Solzhenitsyn wanted to explain the flaws that led to Russia's defeat by Germany. Unlike Tolstoy, Solzhenitsyn subscribes to the "great man" theory of history. His novel is a plea for one great man.

Substantial sections of *August 1914* are solid, unadulterated history, included, I suspect, to establish the factual foundation for Solzhenitsyn's objective—to demonstrate that the Russian elite during the years prior to World War I suffered a wholesale loss of character. According to his biographer, Michael Scammell, Solzhenitsyn came upon a famous collection of essays (*Landmarks*, published in 1909) when he was hard at work on this novel. The essayists concluded that the Russian intelligentsia, to quote Scammell, "were anti-religious, unpatriotic, and materialist, in thrall to so-called scientific socialism and contemptuous of the spiritual values that were a necessary condition of the nation's intellectual, cultural and moral health." This idea figures prominently in Solzhenitsyn's novel.

The character flaws of the intelligentsia were hardly the entire story. *August 1914* features a weak-willed, inept, but well-meaning tsar; a military high command populated by unseasoned, pencil-pushing, social-climbing careerists; turf-conscious and otherwise incompetent bureaucrats; and short-sighted politicians. Solzhenitsyn's Russian peasants possess character, as do some "young turks" in the officer corps. He writes the following about the fictional

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Colonel Vorotyntsev: "From his youth on, Vorotyntsev had craved one thing above all else: to influence his country's history for the good, to drag or hustle uncouth Russia along the road to better things. But no individual was granted such power and influence unless he stood in the shadow of the throne." Only after the publication of the first edition of *August 1914* would Solzhenitsyn discover one such historic figure, in the library stacks of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.

While at the Hoover Institution, Solzhenitsyn became quite familiar with prime minister Pyotr A. Stolypin's efforts to save tsarist Russia. He had found his one great man. Thus, a revised and significantly expanded edition of *August 1914* was published in Russian in 1983. The English translation by H.T. Willetts did not appear until mid-1989. The new edition, of course, devotes much attention to the work of Stolypin.

One reads Solzhenitsyn's account of the steadfast, honorable character and promising policies of Stolypin and comes away believing, as the author did, that had the prime minister not been assassinated in 1911 by a member of the intelligentsia (Mordko Gershevich Bogrov), his policy of providing private property to the peasants would have been better implemented, thus rendering revolution improbable. Solzhenitsyn also believes that had Stolypin survived, his advice to the tsar would have averted the debacle at Tannenberg. It is fair to ask Aleksandr Isaevich what Stolypin would have done to prevent war, given that Germany intended to attack Russia.

Regarding the actual conduct of the war, Solzhenitsyn accurately portrays the incompetence of generals Zhilinsky, Klyuev, Artamonov and, more sympathetically, Samsonov, as well as the abysmally poor systems of communication and intelligence. But many of the mistakes made during August 1914 were committed by Russians and Germans alike. Both continued the cult of the offensive. Both engaged in suicidal cavalry charges. More to the point, certain failures by German officers (notably Francois, Mackensen and Below) paradoxically contributed to Germany's victory. According to the historian Norman Stone (*The Eastern Front, 1914-1917*), had Francois attacked the left flank when ordered, or had Mackensen and Below not quarrelled before attacking the right, Samsonov probably would have slowed, halted, or reversed his advance through the center. Instead, the unwarranted delays by German officers allowed Samsonov to overextend in the center and thus provided General Ludendorff the opportunity for encirclement.

The battle of Tannenberg suggests that fate, as much as men, plays a role in shaping events during war. In other words, Tolstoy has as much to say about the conduct of war as Solzhenitsyn. Nevertheless, the imagery of the "red wheel" of revolution, gaining momentum as a consequence of August 1914, remains accurate and vivid.

WALTER C. UHLER  
 Defense Contract  
 Management Command  
 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania