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The consequences of Solzhenitsyn

So Solzhenitsyn has been deprived of his citizenship and unceremoniously bundled out of his fatherland in the same way that Lenin was nearly seventy years ago. We have to be grateful, presumably, that the Soviet government did not choose to exact a more loathsome penalty, such as banishment to a work camp in Siberia. We must also be thankful that his family are to be allowed to follow. The fact that worse has not befallen him physically should not, however, diminish our sense of shock that charges of treason should be brought against a man who, from a standpoint of undoubted patriotism, chooses to criticise his country. For if not patriotic (and heaven knows it shines through his novels) why did he not leave his homeland years ago for the comforts of the western world?

He knew that his voice was essentially a Russian one, and he must have known that banishment was the only sanction which could wound his spirit.

The action that the Soviet government took shows the way in which it had allowed itself to become boxed in by one man. In the end, by taking Solzhenitsyn so desperately seriously, it found itself having to use all the state machinery to destroy one single citizen. Yet, at any time in the last year, there was the opportunity to bow out of the conflict and let him make all the running himself. After all, his writings were little known in the Soviet Union, so there were slim prospects that he would be able to gather together any sort of populist following among the Russian public that could ever form a physical threat to internal security: not that he had ever given any indications of a leaning in this direction. Furthermore, there had been sharply divided opinion in the west on the efficacy of his many messages. Many have accepted his observation on the situation in the Soviet Union without too much hesitation, but fewer have been able to go along with his conclusions for political remedy—particularly his calls on western countries to take a tough line in their dealings with the Soviet government.

The way had thus been open simply to isolating and ignoring Solzhenitsyn, merely on the grounds that he had a small constituency at home, and was not being effectively harmful to Soviet interests abroad. Instead, the persecution has undoubtedly done this very harm. A most effective way to create a majority is to attempt to destroy a minority by heavy handed means: many who up to the present have been prepared to accept Solzhenitsyn as a great writer but have thought him naive politically are now ready to take him, or rather the political system that he exposes, much more seriously.

And is Sakharov next?

Once more we shall be swept up in a debate amongst western intellectuals about institutional and individual attitudes to the Soviet Union. If the Solzhenitsyn incident teaches us one thing, it is that ways of thinking in East and West are utterly different on questions of political freedom. It seems that a Hungary, a Czechoslovakia, a Solzhenitsyn is periodically necessary to remind us of this gulf, although, lest we become too arrogant it must be said that there are many calamities attributable to the western political system. Nevertheless, the point is that the difference in character is not something which is likely to be changed by the chilling of diplomatic relationships, by bitterness at Geneva or by the breaking of ties between learned institutions. The official links are all operated by men with seniority and a weight of tradition behind them. These men are unlikely to be susceptible to persuasion.

It is a change in human nature which is being sought by many westerners. Is it foolish and impertinent even to think of wreaking such a change? Probably not. Western attitudes are not what they were ten, a hundred or a thousand years ago, and there is no reason to believe that eastern attitudes cannot change likewise. Indeed, the relative lack of change in recent times makes the potential for future change greater.

This is unlikely to be effected at an institutional level—a parliament or learned body is rarely able to trigger a revolution in patterns of thought. It has to be done by allowing every possible channel of human contact to be exploited. What is needed now is not boycott but more flow, particularly amongst the young.

100 years ago



A Lecture Experiment

THE condensation of liquid in the form of vapour into minute globules, and the production of a shower of rain, may be very well illustrated for class purposes in the following manner:—

Place about an ounce of Canada balsam in a Florence flask, and let it boil. At the top of the flask clouds of globules of turpentine will be seen hovering about, altering in shape very much like sky-clouds, and the globules are large enough to be visible by the naked eye. If a cold glass rod be gradually introduced into the flask, these clouds may be made to descend in showers. By the adaptation of a lime-light the whole process could be shown on a screen.

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