Cahiers du
MONDE RUSSE

Cahiers du monde russe

Russie - Empire russe - Union soviétique et États
indépendants

43/4 | 2002
Intellectuels et intelligentsia

Aleksandr Solženicyn, Dvesti let vmeste (1795-1995)

Jeffrey Veidlinger

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/4055>

DOI: 10.4000/monderusse.4055

ISSN: 1777-5388

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 December 2002

Number of pages: 788-792

ISBN: 2-7132-1796-2

ISSN: 1252-6576

Electronic reference

Jeffrey Veidlinger, "Aleksandr Solženicyn, Dvesti let vmeste (1795-1995)", *Cahiers du monde russe* [Online], 43/4 | 2002, Online since 18 June 2009, connection on 02 September 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/4055> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.4055>

This text was automatically generated on 2 September 2022.

All rights reserved

Aleksandr Solženicyn, Dvesti let vmeste (1795-1995)

Jeffrey Veidlinger

REFERENCES

Aleksandr SOLŽENICYN, **Dvesti let vmeste (1795-1995)**. Moscou, Russkij Put', 1^{re} partie, 2001, 508 p. (Issledovanija novejšej russkoj istorii)

- 1 In the first volume of *Dvesti let vmeste (1795-1995)* (*Two hundred years together*) Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn purports to present the first history of Russian-Jewish relations that is not clouded by biases in favour of one side or the other. Solzhenitsyn claims to have immersed himself in the literatures of both sides in order to write this book. Yet both his sources and his conclusions are uneven and subjective. Indeed, without having looked at even one book in the languages used by the vast majority of the pre-revolutionary Jewish population of Russia (Yiddish and Hebrew), Solzhenitsyn believes that "in this book, Jewish voices are heard more often than Russian." (p. 5) This may be so, but the only Jewish voices we hear speak in Russian.
- 2 The book is not really about two hundred years together, but rather about two hundred years apart. Solzhenitsyn laments that Russian Jewry never fully assimilated into Russian Orthodox society, and for this he blames mostly Jewish separateness. The Jewish population, he believes, never accepted tsarist offers of equality because they wanted to retain their national separateness as well: "by *equal rights* the Jews understood something *more*" (474). Despite repeated attempts by the Russian government to integrate the Jewish population into its fold, he argues, steady Jewish resistance to integration led to a radicalisation of the Jewish population. The basic structure of Solzhenitsyn's argument, together with many of its fallacies, is evident already in the first chapter. In this chapter, which deals mostly with the eighteenth century, Solzhenitsyn argues that Russia under Catherine the Great was one of the first European countries to give Jews "equal civil rights," before even France and the German lands (37-38). This assertion is based on

Catherine's declaration that Jews enrolled as merchants or townsmen in the newly annexed territories would be given the same rights as Christian members of these estates. Yet Solzhenitsyn neglects to mention that Catherine's granting of the legal right to participate in municipal elections, although well-intentioned, was subverted by local authorities. Towns where there was a large Jewish population, such as Vitebsk, used electors to ensure that not one Jew was elected to office. Further Solzhenitsyn asserts that the rights extended to Jews were greater than those extended to Russian serfs, merchants and townsmen, making the Jews actually a privileged class. That Jews had greater rights than serfs is an accurate and often overlooked point, although it was made by Salo Wittmayer Baron half a century ago. However, Solzhenitsyn's assumption that Jews were more privileged than Russian merchants and townsmen since Jews who did not actually live in towns were permitted to register as townsmen is mistaken. First of all, there were also many Christians who for various reasons were registered as townsmen but did not actually live in towns. More importantly, though, the "right" for non-urban dwellers to register as townsmen was hardly a blessing. For soon after the law was promulgated, B. D. Passek, the governor-general of Belorussia, began forcibly relocating Jews from the rural *shtetls* in which they had resided for generations into towns.

- 3 Although Solzhenitsyn is right to point out that Catherine's early legislation regarding the Jews was not discriminatory in intent, he errs in neglecting the implementation of the law. Further the sheer number of laws relating to the Jews, complete with contradictions and inconsistencies, is simply too complex to warrant the type of sweeping judgments made by Solzhenitsyn. It is ironic that Solzhenitsyn, who spent eight years in penal labour camps for expressing his opinions yet lived in a state with a constitution that provided for freedom of speech and freedom of conscience, would accept Catherine's enactments at face value. Surely he would not expect his readers to be swayed into believing that the Soviet Union provided for fundamental freedoms with a citation guaranteeing these rights from Article 125 of the 1936 Soviet Constitution. Yet, he expects his readers to do just that in regard to tsarist promulgations.
- 4 The Jews, Solzhenitsyn argues, repeatedly frustrated governmental efforts to integrate them by clinging to their own separateness, whether through the *kahal* (Jewish communal council), the revolutionary movement, Zionism, or the establishment of Jewish self-help organizations. Most often they accomplished this by using various cunning techniques to evade the law, but in some cases they actively thwarted officialdom. For instance, when Stolypin became the first prime-minister to work honestly toward granting the Jews equal rights, his fate was to be assassinated "at the hands of a Jew" (440). Solzhenitsyn spends five pages discussing the effects that a Jew assassinating the prime-minister had on Russia. This event, notably, also plays a significant role in Solzhenitsyn's *The red wheel*. Yet the question of whether or not Dmitrii Bogrov, Stolypin's assassin, was actually a Jew has yet to be conclusively answered. Certainly his roots were Jewish, but his grandfather was a convert, and some historians have claimed that both he and his father converted as well. Further, despite reports of his generally benevolent attitudes toward the Jews, Stolypin did little to actually alleviate the restrictions imposed upon them.
- 5 In Solzhenitsyn's opinion, it was not the Russians who excluded the Jews, but the Jews who rejected the Russians. This is most evident in his chapter on Zionism, where he chastises the Zionists and other Jewish nationalists for excluding themselves from Russian society (264). Yet after the Zionist movement decided in Helsingfors to take an

active part in domestic Russian politics, Solzhenitsyn seems to support Plehve's condemnation of the movement for interfering in domestic affairs (266). Despite his admiration for certain aspects of Zionism, Solzhenitsyn condemns the movement first for distancing itself from Russian politics and then for interfering in Russian politics.

- 6 One of the reasons Solzhenitsyn believes that Jews did not merge with their Russian co-inhabitants was because they were able to profit from their separateness. In fact, Solzhenitsyn condemns the Jews for repeatedly profiting from the misfortunes of their neighbours, from the Tatar yoke of the thirteenth century to the First World War. Jews not only profited from Russia's wars, but also from serfdom, court intrigues from Biron to Rasputin, and peasant drunkenness. For instance, he writes: "But the greatest of Alexander's reforms, the most historically important, a turning point in Russian history – the liberation of the peasants, the abolition of serfdom in 1861 – was for Russian Jews entirely disadvantageous and for many also ruinous" (147). Although he does not go so far as to blame the Jews for these ills, thereby distancing himself from radical anti-Semitism, the implication that Jews were not only immune from these ills but actually profited from them sets up a binary model of Russians on one side and Jews on the other.
- 7 Another ill for which Solzhenitsyn believes the Jews bear special responsibility is the revolutionary movement. As he begins his discussion of the Jewish role in the revolutionary movement, he is careful to note that many Russians were also revolutionaries (213), but he implies that Jewish revolutionaries were of a different genus. For instance, why is it "interesting to note that almost none of the Jewish revolutionaries of [the 1870s] came to the revolution from poverty and destitution; the majority were from prosperous families" (216)? Was this not the case for Russian revolutionaries as well? Further, his only evidence for this statement is that "in the three biographical volumes of the Russian Jewish Encyclopaedia there are more than a few examples" (216). The implication is that whereas Russian revolutionaries came to the revolution out of poverty and destitution, Jewish revolutionaries had ulterior motives. Similarly, he writes that "it is not without interest that in Jewish families the departure of youth to the revolution rarely or never saw a schism between fathers and sons... Jewish fathers often were not antagonistic at all toward the children" (217). As evidence for this statement, Solzhenitsyn gives the example of one individual, Hertz Lure, whose "entire family participated in the revolutionary movement of the 1870s" (217). Does Solzhenitsyn truly believe that the thousands of Jews who abandoned the *yeshivas* for revolutionary politics did so with the blessings of their parents? Here Solzhenitsyn implies that the Jewish community as a whole supported the revolutionary movement whereas within the Russian community it found support only among isolated individuals acting against the will of their elders. Thus it is not only individual Jews who are responsible for the revolution, but the Jewish community as a whole. Even the first sentence of the book implies an intimate connection between the revolution and the Jews: "Through a half-century of working on the history of the Russian revolution, I have many times come into contact with the question of Russian-Jewish relations" (5). Why does he choose to emphasize the revolution, instead of simply noting Jewish involvement in Russian history as a whole? Certainly Jews played a special role in the Russian revolutionary movement (as they did in most intellectual and cultural developments within Russia), but Solzhenitsyn's analysis of

this role provides little new information on the subject and many misleading assumptions.

- 8 Throughout the book, Solzhenitsyn portrays the Jew as the oppressor and the Russian as the victim. Not only does he amplify Jewish blame for Russian suffering, but he also belittles Jewish suffering within Russia. In some of these cases, Solzhenitsyn's revisions are not without merit. For instance, it is often overlooked that the Pale of Jewish Settlement, to which most Jewish residence was restricted, actually encompassed a huge swath of land in a country in which the majority of the population was not even permitted to leave the estate on which they were born. While it is true that the Pale was hardly impermeable, Solzhenitsyn emphasizes the exceptions at the expense of the norm. Solzhenitsyn is also correct to question the long-held belief that the tsarist government was responsible for inciting the pogroms, although he is by no means the first historian to do so. More troubling is his depiction of the effects of the 1881 pogroms and the resulting 1882 May Laws. In both cases, he argues that the number of affected individuals was actually quite small. On this basis he questions, again as others have done before him, the widespread belief that the pogroms were a turning point in Jewish history. For instance, when discussing the effects of the 1881 pogroms on the European Zionist movement, he rhetorically asks, "Was the experience of pogroms in the south of Ukraine extended to the entire European Jewish experience?" (254) In several places he points out that the pogroms were limited in geographic scope. Although it is true that popular memory has often conflated the pogroms of 1881 with the much more severe and widespread pogroms of the early twentieth century, one cannot measure the historical impact of violent outbreaks solely on the basis of the number of people directly affected. For instance, the fact that the attacks of September 11, 2001 were aimed at only two cities and only affected some 3 000 people has hardly belittled their historical impact. Further, it was not only the experience of the pogroms that had such a large effect on Russian Jewry, but it was also the ambivalent reaction of the Russian liberal intelligentsia that was an awakening for Jewish society.
- 9 Solzhenitsyn employs numerous techniques to distance himself from some of the more anti-Semitic implications of his work. The first is to find Jewish sources to quote when treading on controversial ground. Thus, the book is punctuated with phrases such as "in the writings of Jewish authors," or "as the Jewish Encyclopaedia explains" wherein Solzhenitsyn airs his starkest criticisms of Jewish behaviour. Certainly many Jewish intellectuals whom Solzhenitsyn chooses to cite did believe that a reform of Jewish behaviour was imperative, but many of these thinkers also believed that the responsibility for these faults lay with the Russian authorities, a fact glossed over by Solzhenitsyn. Another technique is to use parentheses to enclose snide comments and insinuations. For instance, in a segment in which Solzhenitsyn congratulates the Russian people for not reacting to the murder of Stolypin "at the hands of a Jew" with a pogrom, he parenthetically remarks "(although it is often written with insistence that the tsarist authority only sought and dreamt of one thing: organizing a Jewish pogrom)" (442).
- 10 The most conspicuous fault of Solzhenitsyn's newest exploit is its lack of academic norms. The book is based overwhelmingly on a handful of sources: Iulii Gessen's 1925 *Istoriia evreiskogo naroda v Rossii*, the memoirs of the late nineteenth-early twentieth-century lawyer and Jewish activist Genrikh Borisovich Sliozberg, and encyclopaedia articles (mostly from the *Evreiskaia entsiklopediia* edited by Brockhaus and Efron between

1906 and 1913). Repeatedly, Solzhenitsyn holds back his own eloquence, preferring to allow these sources to articulate ideas in his place. As a result, much of the book consists of a stringing together of quotations that Solzhenitsyn has garnered from these sources. But my criticism is not simply that the book is based on secondary sources; indeed, a useful synthetic work for mass audiences would be a welcome addition to Russian-language literature on Russian-Jewish history. Solzhenitsyn, though, does not present a synthetic account of either traditional or recent scholarship on Russian Jewish history. Instead, he selects only a handful of sources drawn exclusively from a small group of assimilated, liberal, Russophilic, Jewish intellectuals. These activists all sought some variety of Russian-Jewish integration, and expressed their frustrations with both the Russian government's failure to expedite Jewish assimilation and the Jewish masses' failure to fully embrace Russia. On the other hand, primary sources more grounded in the Jewish side are completely neglected. Even contemporary Russian-language histories accessible to Solzhenitsyn, such as the pre-revolutionary journal of Jewish history, *Evreiskaia starina*, or the numerous writings of Simon Dubnov hardly warrant mention in Solzhenitsyn's book. More curious is Solzhenitsyn's failure to consult the vast scholarship on the topic that has been conducted in English, French, German, and Russian since the 1920s. As a result, many of what Solzhenitsyn seems to believe are his most original arguments have already been extensively researched and debated elsewhere. Despite his declared effort to remain even-handed in his history, Solzhenitsyn's unfamiliarity with the topic and unwillingness to utilize all sources, have resulted in a fundamentally one-sided and partial work.