Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Russia | Literature, 1970

Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn was born into a Cossack family in Kislovodsk, Russia, in 1918. He never saw his father, an artillery officer, who died in an accident in the last months of WWI. Aleksandr dreamt of being a writer but studied mathematics at Rostov University – a skill that helped in the Gulag and while he was writing in exile. He has written that if he had only had a literary education, it is likely that he should not have survived these ordeals. In 1939–41, he did a correspondence course at the Institute of History, Philosophy and Literature in Moscow.

During the war, he led an artillery-spotting company until his arrest in February 1945. Censorship officers had found veiled criticism of Stalin in his letters and in July he was sentenced to eight years in a work camp. In 1946, thanks to his education in mathematics, he was transferred to a research institute, but in 1950 was sent to a 'special camp' for political prisoners, performing manual labour. Having served his sentence, Solzhenitsyn was released into exile in Kazakhstan. He had developed stomach cancer in prison and almost died in 1953, before being cured. In exile, he taught maths and physics and wrote in secret until, in 1961, he sent *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* to the literary journal *Novy Mir* (New World). The novel was a hit in Russia and abroad.

With Khrushchev's fall from power in 1964, Soviet rule hardened and Solzhenitsyn's works were banned, so he resorted to self-publication of his semi-autobiographical works of fiction. In 1970 his success was recognised with the Nobel Prize. Solzhenitsyn didn't attend the ceremony, fearing he would not be allowed to return to Russia, but smuggled an acceptance speech to Stockholm. Many of his manuscripts were also smuggled out and published, but Solzhenitsyn was arrested and charged with treason on February 12, 1974. He was exiled the following day.

He lived first in Switzerland and in 1976 moved to the US, settling in Vermont. While critical of Soviet rule, Solzhenitsyn was no more impressed with western consumerism and Cold War paranoia, he wrote *The Mortal Danger* (1980) about American misconceptions about Russia.

Under glasnost in the 1980s Solzhenitsyn's work became available in the USSR. His citizenship was restored in 1990 and he returned with his wife in 1994. Their sons remained in the US. Solzhenitsyn has since published several works including a memoir, *The Grain Between the Millstones*, and a two volume work on Russian-Jewish relations, *Two Hundred Years Together*. The Solzhenitsyn Prize for Russian writing was established in 1997. He twice married and divorced Natalia Reshetovskaia (1940–50 and 1957–72). In 1973 he married Natalia Svetlova; they had three sons, plus one from Svetlova's first marriage.

