

INTERVIEW: Alexander Solzhenitsyn

'Time to stand up for Britain'

By Bernard Levin



Alexander Solzhenitsyn talks to Bernard Levin about the need for spiritual regeneration in both East and West

In your Templeton Address you said that the tragedy of the modern world is that man has forgotten God. When and how did this begin to happen? This is something that has been happening for a long long time. In the West it has already been happening for over three centuries. In Russia it began later but there, too, it began before the revolution. Our educated classes have been part of such a process for nearly two centuries, whereas the uneducated classes were affected for only about ten years before the revolution. And this was the greatest single factor that produced the revolution. It really began perhaps in the wars of religion which began undermining religion and faith. The Renaissance is another period; it is an enormous process which really stretches over several centuries. And even at the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment it still hadn't clarified itself fully. But it was a process that accelerated, that went ever forward to that goal and which certainly became much more pronounced in the 20th century.

When I speak and when I support and praise the activity of the Pope in our contemporary world, what I mean by that is that he is constantly guided by an awareness of the Divine. In other words, yes, he considers it proper to speak of this or that question, but he is always aware of the Divine. Whereas those priests of whom you have spoken who are active in South America and Central America have in fact fallen to one of the temptations that socialism spreads before us. Socialism, which in its very root is totally opposed to Christianity, loves to pretend that it has taken much from Christianity and given it some concrete form, concrete shape. The ironical thing is that even atheist literature in the Soviet Union uses this very same argument, saying look, look, our socialist programme is in effect a Christian programme.

But may not a priest resist oppression without himself being in any way a supporter of communism? Yes, yes, they can, but what I am saying is that they are caught within the net of this temptation, this trap. The trap consists in the fact that involvement in such work takes place on a totally worldly level. They are entirely absorbed by the social struggle which the Pope is not because he is always aware of the Divine dimension and the Divine dimension is in fact the governing criterion.

Some of them would argue that being involved in the social struggle is, in fact, carrying out Christ's teaching. No, they are wrong there. One must take part in social struggle in the name of the soul of every other person and the soul of every organization. Whereas if we are involved simply in a struggle for material rights, that has nothing to do with Christianity.

Nine years in the West have made me into a pessimist

You have drawn attention to the fact that in the oppressed lands of the East spiritual regeneration is growing; are oppression and suffering necessary for people to turn to things of the spirit?

I would like to divide the question, the question of suffering and the question of oppression. Yes, suffering is essential for our spiritual growth and perfection. But suffering is sent to the whole of humanity and to every living being; it is sent in sufficient measure so that if man knows how to do so he can use it for his growth. Now, if a person doesn't draw what has to be drawn from suffering but instead is embittered against it he is really making a very negative choice at that moment. Now, if one speaks of oppression, the horrible oppression that we see for example in the USSR it really goes beyond the possibilities of human endurance. It is an experience that really goes beyond common suffering. Millions are simply crushed, physically and spiritually crushed, annihilated; but those who have passed through that oppression are then spiritually so strong, so mature, that they become really our hope in the communist countries. And I'll add to that. Nine years in the West have made me into a pessimist; looking from the East I used to ascribe to the West far more strength, far more determination and steadfastness whereas now I would no longer guarantee that the West would withstand invasion by communism, withstand being taken over, subverted, by communism. It is possible that the whole struggle of humanity against communism will take far longer than we originally believed and my greatest hope is in those who have already gone through the horrible decades of totalitarian oppression and have not been broken and have survived.

How do you explain the fact that for years and years some of the greatest scientists, and also artists and professors, were convinced, and some still are, by Soviet communism?

Those in whom the intellect has taken precedence over the spiritual, the heart, they are the ones who are gullible, who fall for the temptation of the clever wiles of Marxism. I am sure that Isaac Newton, for example, if he were alive today would certainly not be deceived by Marxism! I have always believed myself that it will not be the leaders of thought who save us but the ordinary man. Do you agree? I would see the dilemma not in such simple terms. Those people who could turn around humanity or a society, we see them, so to speak, on a vertical line, and perhaps quantitatively we find more of them at the bottom simply because they are more numerous, but one certainly can't leave out of that scheme the people at the top of the ladder. The whole of history shows that any turn around, historical or social, in any important turn around the forefront of it are always one or two or three people who perhaps are forerunners of that process by a century or more. We can't do without these forerunners, these leaders. But it is not the false leaders who have followed the lure and call of Marxism who are the genuine leaders. They will find themselves in a laughable and humiliating situation and many of them will repent but it will be too late and they shall weep.

If we assume that there is no war, how do you see the future of the West?

I rest even to consider such a perspective because I consider a war - not a nuclear war, but a war - as inevitable. In other words, I include in this all the explosions from within, all the so-called national liberation wars, and I think quite a lot of countries in Europe are very close to such explosions. And this kind of situation is frequently favoured by the very leaders of those countries. We have seen how Brandt weakened Western Germany how Palme really went out to help North Vietnam, and what Papandreu is now doing to Greece, and there are many, many other examples. War doesn't necessarily come from the outside, it comes also from the inside and not even necessarily in the form of an actual insurrection; it comes in the form of the political blindness of the political leaders. And so it seems to me totally unreal to think in terms of a status quo in the world; there won't be a status quo - not for one year can we see a status quo.

Do you believe that socialism must in time inevitably degenerate into communism? I am absolutely of the same opinion as our wonderful scientist Orlov, the Orlov who has been in a prison-camp for many years now. He published an article shortly before his arrest, an article in which he shows that any socialism, even the softest form, the most "democratic" form, socialism, if it is consequential, logical, if it moves forward, if it doesn't stray to one side or another but if it follows its own inner logic, will inevitably come to communism.

What causes such a condition? Lacking a consciousness of God, of the Divine, they lack an awareness of reality. The West is full, it's brimming over, with information, you would have thought everything and anything could be understood, but in the eyes of our Russians who live under the Soviet regime the thing that amazes them, that we simply cannot understand, is why doesn't man in the West understand this?

Is it possible in the real world for a modern advanced society to live by spiritual and religious precepts? For a well-developed, economically well-developed society, that is the most difficult thing of all. But there is simply no other way.

And we see absolutely everywhere, in any country where this happens, the socialist will always give way to the communist. They will not stand their ground.

I want to talk now about nuclear disarmament. The campaign in this country is now very powerful for unilateral disarmament. What do you think that implies?

First of all, let's look at it at the universal level. I consider nuclear armament, chemical armament, bacteriological armament as utterly repulsive and horrific. I would never sit in judgment over anyone who condemns nuclear armament. But we have got another problem. The West carries the moral responsibility of a decision taken 40 years ago to manufacture and use nuclear armaments. Now the West without nuclear armament has nothing at all. Everything is put simply into nuclear armament. The fault lies at the inception, at the moment when the decision was taken to rely on nuclear armament, to stake everything on nuclear armament. That decision has kept the West safe for twenty, thirty years but now it is really like a boomerang - it comes right back at it.

Now the second aspect is, at the personal level, the extraordinary blindness of society and young people. For half a century you have had the chance to open the eyes of society and of the young, and Western young people simply have no idea of the real situation. Try asking them why isn't there such a movement for nuclear disarmament

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in the Soviet Union. Either they won't even understand the question or they won't care. What they say is we shall disarm unilaterally and then the communists will follow suit. Now here we see not so much disinformation as a complete blindness of understanding; there is also a weakening, a total erosion, of will. Go to these young people and ask them. All right we agree to have unilateral disarmament but will you go into the army tomorrow in order to die - into an ordinary conventional army - and if they are truthful they will say oh no. Today, resistance to nuclear armament is really a very convenient pretext to disguise, to hide, if not their moral cowardice at least their moral weakness. In fact, they don't want any kind of armament, any kind of work, they just simply do not want to resist at all.

Finally, the third level of all this, there is of course the active participation of Soviet money and Soviet participation and Soviet organization. The communists have enormous experience here. Already in 1917 Lenin gave five or ten roubles to every person for participation in demonstrations against the provisional government. Stalin organized a so-called movement for peace in those days when he didn't have an atomic bomb and he, too, had money to spend on this. And, of course, the principle continues. But just to finish answering this question I want to underline one thing: the problem isn't really reducible just to Soviet organization and participation. If only the West had not relied for several decades on nuclear arms and if the young were steadfast of will and well-informed, no Soviet action would achieve anything.

Some nuclear disarmers in this country say that since they can do nothing about Soviet arms, the only way they can do it is by arguing against our arms, since it has to start somewhere. It looks very good for them simply to protest against nuclear arms which are horrific, yes. And what they are, what they forget, what they disguise behind that, what is so peddled, is their own unwillingness to defend their own country. The Soviet leaders in this situation don't even need to use nuclear arms. They will simply take conventional arms and will simply capture everyone with conventional arms and no resistance. And these young people who are so brave in their demonstrations and who join hands over a distance of miles, they will be told you cannot assemble in numbers more than three, even more than two. If they are told, right, no assembly in numbers of more than two or three, they will obey.

Some say that since a nuclear war would be a catastrophe for the whole planet, surrender, even for those who hate communism, would be preferable to a nuclear war.

I shall only say about the famous axiom "Better to be red than dead" that there is no alternative in it because to become red is really in fact to die a slow death. The free people of the West have missed sixty-five years. They have stood there fully armed and not struggled. When they give in to communism they will find themselves as slaves, and what is more moribund slaves. That's when they will begin to fight but in different conditions. And what is so amazing is that the West appears not to hear the absolutely explicit condemnation to death which has been pronounced. In 1919, the Comintern was created and its leaders, Lenin and Trotsky, who at that point had absolutely no nuclear arms, they hardly had any rifles or bullets to put into them, but none the less they declared a condemnation to death for the Western world; and the West laughed. Sixty years ago, the whole of educated Russia, the cream of Russian intellectual development, the whole intelligentsia, everybody, said "look, this is something quite unlike anything you have seen before"; the West turned a totally deaf ear. Fifty years ago the logs of wood from the camps with things written in the blood of those who were imprisoned up in the north, those logs of wood somehow came to the West. Forty years ago millions of Soviet people again told of the horrors. They were not only not listened to but in their hundreds of thousands and millions were simply given back and betrayed to captivity and certain death in the Soviet Union. Thirty years ago, Kravchenko in the famous trial hearing in Paris revealed the true nature of the Soviet regime and he wasn't listened to either. History does not forgive such multiple mistakes.

Although we were sentenced to death sixty-five years ago, we have still survived. Why should we not go on doing so? Because there is no comparison between the situation when the Kremlin didn't even have enough rifles and today's situation where it has got the best rocket stations in Cuba, in Nicaragua, the best naval bases in Angola, Mozambique, South Yemen. We see that this process is not only a constant process but one that is accelerating with terrific speed.

Do you think that the emergence of Solidarity is a sign that there is real hope or is the fact that there is no hope?

In this whole phenomenon, there is more hope than disillusion. It is a movement which gives us hope first of all by its scope and by its spiritual direction which rests not in socialism but in Christianity. Poland was able to manifest this thanks to the strength and force of its church but it is certainly a sign of what could happen in the other communist countries. But as regards Poland, the West really behaved as though it was seeing a stage performance, and there is some similarity with the Western attitude towards Afghanistan; for the West is constantly hoping that there will be some kind of a miracle in the East, which will relieve the West of the need to defend itself. Maybe instead of Brezhnev, we will have the good liberal Andropov or some other dove; maybe the Polish Solidarity movement will change things absolutely in Poland, then in Lithuania, then in the whole of the Soviet Union. But these events must not be looked upon as a spectacle; they must be looked upon as a call, an appeal to mobilize inner forces. For example, in Poland the Western creditors need not have wiped out the Polish debt. There is this psychology in the West - we are helping the people - it dates back to the time of Roosevelt when whole factories were sent in kit form to be assembled in the Soviet Union. Since then the West has always been in fact strengthening the communist governments.

Now let's look at Afghanistan. The war has been on for three years. During all this time, the West, apart from a kind of generalized sympathy, has not done anything concrete for the country. If the West really understood that all the communist governments of the world are its mortal enemies and no kind of change, no kind of smiles, will ever change this situation, but that on the other hand all the subjugated peoples are its allies, the West could long ago, by its actions in Afghanistan have brought about a very different situation. You would by now have had two, three, four regiments of ex-Soviet soldiers ready and willing to fight this way. But the Western governments, including the

American government, are terrified of the Kremlin's anger. Secondly, at the end of the Second World War the West undermined the faith and trust of all our people's in the East. We believed that the West was our ally whereas the West gave up those who had fought communism, gave them up to sure death and destruction. This story must not be forgotten.

Suppose that Jaruzelski could improve matters for the Poles to the extent that Kadar has done for the Hungarians, would you welcome this or would you argue that things must get worse before they can get better? No, I wouldn't put it in that way. I would certainly welcome any improvement in the situation of the Poles but, first of all, I would not overestimate what Kadar has done for the Hungarians. When Czechoslovakia had to be invaded Kadar invaded it quite cheerfully. Every communist leader has certain limits, within which he can achieve very little. If, for example, Jaruzelski worked to prove himself a patriot and really did try to improve the conditions of the Poles, if he really were doing that then in no time at all he would be removed and somebody else would be put in his place.

The Soviet leaders can see that the system doesn't work, they can't feed their people, they have to maintain a gigantic system of oppression, they know they are hated by millions, why do they go on with it? They see that their system works very well indeed, because it has such geopolitical successes to its credit that no conqueror in all history has ever had such a good record. Yes, all right, the domestic economy is falling apart, but when crisis comes the capitalist world will always help them. But how the people live, what the people have, is really not their aim or their goal. It is a government which has no thought of how the people live. The people are dying, well let them die. But they will have other peoples to rule over.

A society like that, based on lies, surely cannot exist for ever. "A house built upon sand" Do you agree with that, and if so, how do you envisage the disintegration beginning? Of course, it can't exist for ever and ever. Of course, future historians will say that communism existed from year X to year Y. But because, for two-thirds of a century, the West has been making mistake on mistake in its relations with communism, I have now come to the very pessimistic conclusion that communism still has quite a chance of spreading over the world. And viewed from the outside, one could use the image of a lunar eclipse, when the shadow covers the earth and then moves across. That shadow has covered the USSR, China, they actually it will move away from those parts and start covering others and eventually will leave the earth.

Is it possible to say when you might expect this to start happening? No, neither the form nor the time are open to human understanding or conception - we don't know. From the very moment when communism was installed, became a power in the Soviet Union, ever since that very start, that very moment, the most intelligent Russian people have always been saying "this is for five years, this is for ten years; this can't go on... this is so horrifically absurd that it can't go on." And the West looks like a fortress, like a rock, but we have seen that this absurdity has gone on and on, and the West is weakening and weakening. So, I will not say anything about the possible time or the possible form. But I am absolutely convinced that communism will go like the eclipse that I

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spoke of. Even our culture which has been under communism for sixty-five years, we have seen that with all its armaments and weapons, communism has not been able to crush Christianity out of our country. I personally am convinced that in my lifetime I will return to my country.

The leaders of the Hungarian revolution in 1956 and the Czech spring in 1968 all came from within the Communist party. Do you think it is possible that there are such men in the Soviet Union who are biding their time and working their way up through the hierarchy? First of all, I want to distinguish between your Hungarian example and your Czech example. The Czech model has no future, no perspective; this was an attempt by people who considered themselves totally and fully communist, to give communism a so-called human face, which is impossible, even if the Warsaw Pact hadn't invaded Czechoslovakia, or even if Dubcek and his group had utterly lost all influence.

Now the Hungarian model is one full of hope and perspective. Because in the Hungarian model we saw the rebirth of national feeling instead of self-defence and self-affirmation. (I must say, in my own life, the Hungarian uprising of 1956 and the total inaction of the West were profoundly shocking experiences for me. I lost my faith in the West.) So the Hungarian model shows that even within the communist system, even through its leaders, there can come a sense of national self-preservation. In the same way as a sick body can suddenly come up with the antibodies to fight the sickness. But what should be said is that at that moment, the moment of the Hungarian uprising, the communist system had only been in force for about eight years. Hungary had not yet been broken by the communists. Among the communist cadres there were still people who had not been totally broken, whereas we in the

Soviet Union have had that system for over 65 years. In other words, two or three generations had come and gone; moreover, in the communist hierarchy there is a constant process of selection. As soon as an honest man, a man of principle, appears, the system simply rejects him, and either he leaves it or he perishes. However, I have a firm conviction that our nation as an organism is not dead yet and, therefore, the young living shoots come out in the most unexpected places. It is instinct through which a nation saves itself. And through my work I know, I can sense, there are many many people who think as I do. I do represent people in Russia. If I didn't represent anyone, the authorities wouldn't fear me.

In the 1930s, the West only woke up when war broke out. We have to wake up before war breaks out now. What will wake us up? I wouldn't like you to be awakened by the ceiling falling on your heads. I would like the loud voices of outstanding people, writers, publicists, political leaders, to find the courage to say "look, the ceiling is cracking, it might fall". And they should not be afraid of being told "oh no this is too extreme, this is too ridiculous".

The time has come to limit our demands to learn about self-sacrifice

What about externally? What would the communists have to do, what would the Soviet leaders have to do, for us to resist?

I don't know. So far, we haven't seen a single country for which the West would actually stand up and fight. Maybe the United States would go to war for Israel. I don't know whether Europe would fight for its oil. It is not the degree of danger that will stimulate you, it is the degree of inner awareness. What could be more striking, what could be more evident, than the way in which the Khmer Rouge destroyed, annihilated, its own people? Or for example, the Vietnamese boat people who drowned? Will you find any compassionate feeling for that?

If you were advising President Reagan what would you tell him? I must say that President Reagan really doesn't need my recommendations and advice. On the contrary, he keeps on getting public advice from leading American publicists and various newspapers of such a nature that even the asses' ears would collapse. I don't think Reagan's problem is a lack of understanding, but he has to struggle against the blindness and the shortsightedness of public opinion. He can't even manage to get across to that public opinion that at the moment in Central America we see the creation of an actual front against the United States. When Reagan said that he was in a position of confrontation, extreme confrontation, with communism, he was jeered and hissed for having brought about the collapse of detente. Whereas, in fact, what he had done was probably to take only one small step in the direction of what he intended. American public opinion is such that - well I'll give you an example from navigation. Now when you hear an SOS signal you must ask: "Who are you, do you have a democracy?" All right, if they're a democracy, let's go and save them. If it's a communist SOS then we really must save them because we must avoid any unpleasantness. But if it is an undemocratic Western regime, they can go to the bottom and sink! This is madness. There are those who actually stand in the front line under fire, and what is demanded of them is democracy. In Salvador the elections took place under machine-gun fire and indeed, yes, the voters were mown down by machine-gun fire. The American Congress and American public opinion shout "there isn't enough democracy - start talks with the bandits, let's have more and more elections under machine-gun fire". And those are the sort of examples which really make me think of the West as a madhouse.

What would you say if you had the opportunity to broadcast to the Russian people? What would you tell them? I am a publicist really involuntarily, against my own will. If I could broadcast to my people I would read them my books, my novels, because in my interviews, my articles, I can't give even one hundredth of that which I have put into my novels.

Is there anything special that Britain, apart from the West in general, can do? I think British history has shown more than once that the British have a remarkable faculty, a remarkable ability, to mobilize themselves in moments of danger. Maybe it is Britain which could do one or two of the things I have talked about. But if there could be moral mobilization in Britain, now, before the ceiling falls down, then the standing up to be counted of Britain, even just Britain alone standing up to be counted against communism, would make an enormous impression on the communists. The communists in their greed to seize control of the world are, in fact, very clever in the way in which they discriminate and know perfectly well which are the weak bits which can be swallowed first. And where they find themselves confronted by steadfast will, they retreat. They even retreat in the face of their own prisoners, their very own prisoners who stand fast.

What final message in this interview would you like to give? I would just like to call the British to come to their senses before it is too late. The time has come to limit our demands, to learn about self-sacrifice and to learn how to sacrifice oneself for the salvation of one's country and for society. Thank you very much.

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