

# Philosophical and Theological Historiography in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Red Wheel*<sup>1</sup>

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*This article provides an overview of Solzhenitsyn's historical novel, The Red Wheel, in the context of a philosophy and theology of history. For his philosophical categories used in analysing the novel, Purcell draws upon philosopher of history Eric Voegelin's understanding of Homer and Greek tragedy, along with his diagnosis of Nazism. Purcell then turns to the Italian theologian Piero Coda's reading of Sergei Bulgakov for a theological interpretation of the Russian tragedy in the light of the forsakenness of the Crucified Christ.*

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1. This article is based on a paper read at the conference "Life and Work of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: The Way to *The Red Wheel*," Moscow, December 7–9, 2011, at the Alexander Solzhenitsyn House of Russia Abroad.

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Eric Voegelin referred to Nietzsche's *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* in order to convey how his approach to the Nazi experience differed from current historiography. Nietzsche had classified history as monumental, antiquarian, or critical. Monumental history aimed at inspiration from the past and antiquarian history at restoring it. But, for Nietzsche, "only one who in a present emergency is in imminent danger of being crushed, and who seeks relief at any cost, has the need for critical, that is, evaluative and judgmental history." For Voegelin, what Nietzsche meant by critical history involves:

the judgment of a past epoch that arises from a new spirit. In order to pursue critical history, therefore, it is not enough to *speak* differently—one must *be* differently. *Being* differently, however, is not something which is brought about by foraging in the horrors of the past; rather, on the contrary, it is the revolution of the spirit which is the precondition for being able to judge the past critically.<sup>2</sup>

Voegelin understood the major historiographies of ancient Israel, classical Greece, and ancient China as emerging from such a revolution of the spirit in answer to the cultural destruction wreaked by world-empires.<sup>3</sup> He lists a series of those he called spiritual realists whose fate was not even to be *misunderstood* in their own

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2. Eric Voegelin, "The German University and the Order of German Society," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 12: Published Essays, 1966–1985*, ed., Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 3–4.

3. Eric Voegelin, "World Empire and the Unity of Mankind," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 11: Published Essays 1953–1965*, ed., Ellis Sandoz (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 134–55.

time—figures like Plato, Dante, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche.<sup>4</sup> *The Red Wheel* is Solzhenitsyn's immense historiographic response to the Soviet ideological empire—an empire whose top party ideologist, Vadim Medvedev, Mikhail Suslov's successor, as late as 1988 could say: "to publish Solzhenitsyn's work is to undermine the foundation on which our present life rests."<sup>5</sup>

It is not the first time a historiographic work has tried to make sense of a civilizational catastrophe. We recall here a few historiographic quests for the meaning of a historical epoch that are in some sense equivalent to Solzhenitsyn's. These will not add anything to *The Red Wheel* but may enrich our appreciation of its implicit philosophical and theological density. From the Greek classical experience I will suggest equivalents to *The Red Wheel* in Homer, Aeschylus, and Euripides. I then look at how Eric Voegelin's historical reflections on Hitler and the Germans may yield some relevant historiographical insights into *The Red Wheel*. Finally, as a theological profile for Solzhenitsyn's work, I will draw on the central Christian insight into the meaning of history as embodied in the forsakenness of Jesus on the cross, that agonized expression in space and time of the inner life of the Trinity.<sup>6</sup>

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4. Voegelin uses "spiritual realism" "to designate the attitude of the political thinker . . . who has to detach himself intellectually, and sometimes also practically, from the surrounding political institutions because he cannot attribute to them representative function for the life of the spirit that he experiences as real within himself." *History of Political Ideas*, Vol. III: *The Later Middle Ages*, ed., David Walsh (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 71.

5. John Dunlop notes how "Medvedev singled out *The Gulag Archipelago* and *Lenin in Zurich* for particularly scathing comments," in "The Solzhenitsyn Canon Returns Home," *Stanford Slavic Studies* 4 (1992): 429.

6. In his "Note on August 1914," Roman Jacobson described Solzhenitsyn as "the first modern Russian novelist, original and great" and has pointed to the unique fusion of Greek (epic-tragic-dialogic) and Christian (Russian hagiographic) genres in his

## Homer's Epic Etiology of the Suicide of a Civilization and *The Red Wheel*

Since both Achaeans and Trojans spoke the same language and invoked the same gods, Voegelin reads the Homeric work as an etiology of the civilizational disaster of a common Greek-speaking world at war with itself. He shows how Homer diagnosed the source of the disaster as the vices of its aristocratic antiheroes. In terms of later Platonic categories, we can see these heroes as radically disordered through, for example, Achilles' anger, Paris' lust, and the stupidity of the Achaean King Agamemnon and the Trojan King Priam. The point of the diagnosis is that these failings are not merely occasional but express deep-rooted refusals to engage with reality.

### Anger

The *Iliad* opens with the phrase "The Wrath of Achilles," as if to underline just how much Achilles' vice is central to the near destruction of the Achaean army. Achilles has been insulted by King Agamemnon and, although he heads the Achaean army's most powerful fighting force, no apology from the king will satisfy him. Only when his best friend, Patroclus, is killed due to his inaction does Achilles admit how much he has *enjoyed* being angry (*Iliad*, XVIII, 108–109). The obvious equivalent for Achilles' anger is Lenin's massively self-indulgent and self-righteous hatred—not only of the Tsarist regime but also of anyone who in any way stands in the way of his own will. Even Himmer, with only a short

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work: "His books, and among them especially *August 1914*, exhibit the unprecedented creative alloy of a cosmic epopee with tragic catharsis and latent homily." See John B. Dunlop, Richard Haugh, and Alexis Klimoff, eds., *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Materials* (New York: Collier, 1975), 326.

spell in jail to complain of for signing the Vyborg Manifesto, allows himself to be overtaken by this hatred—and let us presume that Lenin enjoyed his anger-fuelled hatred just as much as Himmer did.<sup>7</sup> And there is always the educated classes' mind-numbing and unremitting hatred for the Tsarist government.<sup>8</sup>

### Lust

Another profoundly destabilizing vice is conveyed by Paris' lust for Helen. As with Achilles, Paris refuses to consider that this lust will lead to the continuance of the civil war; nothing can stand between him and his desire for sexual fulfilment (*Iliad*, III, 437–447). Especially in *November 16*, we can see how Zina's love affair symbolizes an infidelity at the heart of Russia, as does Vorotyntsev's with Olda. But perhaps here too we can group the disastrous priority the Tsar gave to family relationships over his responsibility both to the seven million soldiers at war and to all the Russian people. We can also include here the Tsarina's indulgence of Rasputin, and Crown Prince Michael's preference to be with his wife rather than resolve the abdication crisis. All of these, while surely not falling under the category of lust, can be seen as irresponsible preferences for one's intimate sphere over against the fate of Russia, both in 1917 and for the next seventy-five years.<sup>9</sup>

7. Amazed at finding himself sitting at a massive desk, deciding on the freedom or imprisonment of high-ranking members of the Tsarist regime, Himmer, recalling his three months in prison, muses: "Revolution, that is revenge too! Revenge above all! The feeling of omnipotence filled him with revolutionary pride: how everything has changed!" *März Siebzehn, Zweiter Teil*, trans., Heddy Pross-Weerth (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1990), 257.

8. Briefly, in Alexandre Soljénitsyne, *Réflexions sur la révolution de Février* (Paris: Fayard, 2007), 109.

9. See Soljénitsyne, *Réflexions sur la révolution de Février*, 56.

### Stupidity

Stupidity in an ordinary citizen or soldier is not too serious a matter. But as Solzhenitsyn has remarked in *August 14*, it can destroy a society when it occurs at the level of leadership.<sup>10</sup> It is this suicide of an entire society due to the stupidity of its rulers that Homer wants to highlight in his depiction of Kings Agamemnon and Priam. Agamemnon allows a "false dream" (what a psychoanalyst would call "wish fulfilment") to seduce him into thinking he can overcome the Trojan army without Achilles and his men. This earns him the cautious rebuke of Nestor, one of his advisers (*Iliad*, II, 76–83). Only later does he rue this wilfulness, and yet he still blames the gods for it (*Iliad*, XIX, 78–144). And King Priam of Troy too, instead of urging Helen to end the conflict, "addresses her as his 'dear child,' nowise to be blamed for the war" and prefers to conclude that "it is all the fault of the gods" (III, 146–170).<sup>11</sup> Perhaps no vice is focused on more in *The Red Wheel* than stupidity, a stupidity that is lethal when again and again it shields from reality the leading personalities both in the Court, in the Duma, and in public life.<sup>12</sup>

10. "We may feel pity for the novice soldier when, caught in the evil toils of war, he first faces bullets and shellfire; but the novice general, however dazed and nauseated he may have been by the fighting, we can neither pity nor excuse." *August 1914*, trans. H. T. Willetts (London: Bodley Head, 1989), 302.

11. Eric Voegelin, *The World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), 95. All my Homeric analogies are drawn from Voegelin's perceptive reading of Homer in the light of a philosophy of politics.

12. Almost any chapter of *The Red Wheel* will provide examples of what Voegelin calls "criminal stupidity," occurring whenever a political leader's stupid orders or instructions lead to the deaths of millions of human beings, "even if he himself does not understand this at all." See his *Hitler and the Germans*, eds. and trans., Detlev Clemens and Brendan Purcell (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 106. Just one example would be the Provisional Government's non-arrest of Lenin and its do-nothing

### *Irresponsibility as Underlying all the Disorders*

In the first pages of the *Odyssey*, Homer focuses on the disordering belief that underlies all of these vices: the characters invariably blame the gods for their misdeeds. This belief is so common that Homer has Zeus “reflecting that men, through their own folly, create sorrow for themselves ‘beyond their share’” (*Odyssey*, I, 34).<sup>13</sup> A modern version of blaming the gods would be Tolstoy’s fatalism, strategically expressed in his conclusion to *War and Peace* and opposed by the author of *The Red Wheel*.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, there’s the ideological determinism most clearly expressed by Himmer or the meaning Marxists imposed on the revolutionary events that did not fit into their categories.<sup>15</sup> Whether any ideologists, progressivists, or Marxists actually believe in historical determinism is of course another matter.

Precisely through its diagnosis of the Greek disaster, Homer’s epic leads beyond itself to make way for a universal philosophy for the whole of humanity.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, *The Red Wheel* is not only

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response to the armed workers’ murder of three soldiers. See *Avril dix-sept I*, trans., Anne Coldefy-Faucard and Geneviève et José Johannet (Paris: Fayard, 2009), 586.

13. Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, 109.

14. Briefly in the famous declaration against Tolstoyan determinism in Ch. 40 of *August 1914* (1989), a rejection expanded in the long discussion between Sanya and Varsonofiev in Ch. 5 of *November 1916*, trans., H. T. Willetts (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).

15. “Himmer explained: firstly there must be bourgeois rule, for the proletariat is incapable of taking over political rule without preparation.” *März Siebzehn: Erster Teil*, trans. Heddy Pross-Weerth (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1989), 519.

16. Voegelin writes of Homer: “In the fall of Achaean society the poet found more than a political catastrophe. In the action and passion of the heroes he discovered the touch of divinely ordained fate, the element of tragedy which lets the events ascend into the realm of Mnemosyne. From the disaster he wrested his insight into the order of gods and men, from the suffering grew wisdom when the fall became song.” He

the great epic of the twentieth-century catastrophe of the Russian people. Through the contrasting light, shadow, and darkness of its immense cast of characters—good, flawed, mediocre, and downright evil—there can be discerned the moral and spiritual foundations not only of Russia but of every twenty-first-century society faced with the same ideologies, progressivist or ideological, still exercising powerful appeal today.

### *Greek Tragedy and The Red Wheel*

On the tragic import of his work, Solzhenitsyn has said that:

I wanted to be a memory; the memory of a people doomed to tragedy. It all fitted into the collective epic which I carried in my head. . . . The immense advantage of all these key-moments is that everything mysteriously coalesces: the things that are brewing in darkness or broad daylight, and those that are to flow from them. Central figures suddenly materialize, act, dominate an event or are dominated by it. Take Lenin: he is my principal protagonist, really.<sup>17</sup>

Nowhere more than in the protagonists’ choices or refusal to choose does *The Red Wheel* re-enact the tragic truth of history, those climactic moments when Russia’s fate was being decided. Perhaps a glimpse into the world of Greek tragedy will illuminate

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continues noting that Homer transformed the tragedy of a society tearing itself apart by creating a new symbolic form. “We can speak of it as the style of self-transcendence, corresponding to the Israelite style of exodus from civilization and ultimately from itself. For with its past the new society had acquired its future.” Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, 76.

17. *Encounter*, April 1976, Interview with George Suffert, 10, 12.

Solzhenitsyn's tragic epic. Voegelin writes that "the disintegration of Athenian democracy was faithfully reflected in the work of the great tragedians."<sup>18</sup>

### *Aeschylus' "to act or not to act"*

In his *Suppliants*, Aeschylus for the first time in Greek culture focuses on the drama of personal responsibility. Faced with a dilemma—to protect the suppliant maidens, thus triggering a war with the Egyptians, or to ignore their pleas and risk their dishonouring the divine shrine—King Pelasgus has to dive into the depths of his soul to bring up the correct decision in accordance with justice. He must consider whether "to act or not to act" (376–380). The decision "to act" will be the morally correct one, while the decision "not to act" will be unjust. In the world of Aeschylus, such a decision is not taken alone; the king says he can decide "nothing without the people" (398), and through his persuasion, they too rise to the same level of justice and fortitude and prepare to confront the Egyptian army.

How often in *The Red Wheel* do its protagonists fail to act! Again and again, confronted with a painful responsibility, they decline to act in the Aeschylean sense: not only most obviously in the Tsar's moral impotence in giving in to the pressure to abdicate but also in the military and ecclesiastic leadership's failure to support him and in the Petrograd authorities who—with brave exceptions—refuse to confront the mutineers on the streets. Symptomatic of irresponsible inaction is Rodzianko's shameful omission to say a word in Shcheglovitov's defense as the former minister of justice is being led away by decree of new Minister of Justice Kerensky's

"revolutionary justice."<sup>19</sup> Shulgin's gloomy reflections on the government's total vacuum of power and responsibility sum up *The Red Wheel's* diagnosis of the inaction leading to its downfall: "The Provisional Government is suspended in the air with no one above or below it, it is suspended in the void as if power had been seized by force or even usurped."<sup>20</sup>

### *Euripides' Bacchae: The Death-Knell of Athenian Culture?*

What makes the Euripides of *The Bacchae* so relevant to an understanding of the historiography of *The Red Wheel* is that he is trying to communicate a society on its last legs. Neither the traditional myth nor the new rationality has been sufficient to give a soul to an Athenian society about to commit spiritual suicide. In fact, *The Bacchae* ends without any sign of hope that a new beginning can be made. Some reviews of *The Red Wheel* comment on the unremitting hopelessness of the mood of *March 17*, when, just as in Euripides and in many historical periods, we are left with a need for action in the Aeschylean sense, requiring what Voegelin speaks of as "a certain human stature." But "there may arise a tragic situation without a tragic actor."<sup>21</sup> And that is precisely the problem with the March 1917 period: No one has the moral character and political effectiveness to seize the degenerating situation and turn it around. Nicholas II is not Alexander II, nor do any of the civil leaders approach the calibre of Stolypin.<sup>22</sup>

19. *März Siebzehn: Erster Teil*, 665.

20. *Avril dix-sept I*, 588.

21. *Ibid.*, 251.

22. This is Shulgin's conclusion: "Year in year out support was drummed up in support of those famous men who had the people's confidence, those worthy, honourable, gifted men—but where are they?" *März Siebzehn: Zweiter Teil*, 35.

18. Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, 264.

## Voegelin's Philosophical Understanding of History

As with his *Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn's approach to history has always been at the level of critical history in Nietzsche's sense. But there is more to critical history than even Nietzsche saw. In *Hitler and the Germans*, Voegelin applied Plato's and Aristotle's insights into philosophical anthropology, wherein they understood human existence as occurring within the space-time universe and yet as intrinsically oriented beyond it. This transcendent orientation is due to our participation in the divine ground of our existence. Our principal task, then, as Aristotle put it, is "to immortalize as much as possible," to live our earthly existence simultaneously in and toward eternity.<sup>23</sup>

History then is the flow of this mortal/immortal existence, what Voegelin calls the flow of our existence in the eternal presence of the divine, quoting T. S. Eliot's phrase from his *Four Quartets*, "the intersection of the timeless with time," where history is "a pattern of timeless moments."<sup>24</sup> In fact, Solzhenitsyn comes very near to this formulation in *The Red Wheel*, where Peter Struve is aware of the need to live simultaneously in the past, present, and future, a temporality grounded in the trans-temporality of divine being, as represented symbolically in the text by image of the noonday sun: "The people live simultaneously in the present, the past and the future. And we are bound by our great past. . . . Otherwise there would be no freedom, but a vandalization of Russian culture.' . . . And radiantly this feast day was blessed with a rejoicing sun."<sup>25</sup>

23. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, vii, 8.

24. In *Hitler and the Germans*, 71, Voegelin speaks of the "presence" of human existence lived in openness to God's judgment, where "the meaning of the past and the future will become generally interpretable only when starting out from this presence. For otherwise everything would proceed irrelevantly in an external stream of time."

25. *März Siebzehn, Erster Teil*, 220.

However, Solzhenitsyn's interest is less in a theoretical articulation of the meaning of history than in how the meaning of history unfolds in the ensemble of his protagonists. Voegelin's understanding of history in relation to the Hitler period, then, may clarify one aspect of *The Red Wheel*: How was the October coup d'état possible?

### *From Hitler and the Germans to Lenin and the Russians*

The point of Voegelin's title to his lectures was that Hitler could never have gained and maintained his position without the cooperation of many others.<sup>26</sup> He draws on Hesiod's and Aristotle's categorization of three types of persons: (i) those who are wise, (ii) those who while not wise themselves have the sense to follow the advice of the wise, and (iii) those who are neither wise themselves nor are prepared to follow the wise. When this third group achieves a critical mass in a society, that society is ruined. Noting that while Aristotle referred to the third type as "slaves by nature," Voegelin points out that in Germany, this third type "exists at all levels of society up to its highest ranks, including pastors, prelates, generals, industrialists, and so on." Instead of Aristotle's class-bound name for this third category, Voegelin uses the word "rabble," "in the sense that they neither have the authority of spirit or of reason, nor are they able to respond to reason or spirit, if it emerges advising them or reminding them."<sup>27</sup> Without this rabble

26. Voegelin introduces his *Hitler and the Germans* lectures as an attempt to answer "the central German experiential problem of our time: Hitler's rise to power. How was it possible?" (*Hitler and the Germans*, 52). It could be said that *The Red Wheel* is Solzhenitsyn's attempt to answer a similar question about Lenin's rise to power.

27. See *Hitler and the Germans*, 88–9. Voegelin's comments on the well-educated Polus, belonging to the generation that enabled tyrannical figures like Callicles in the *Gorgias*, can surely be applied to the educated "rabble" who enabled, through inaction

of educated Germans (by no means the majority), the phenomenon of Hitler would have been impossible.

Although Solzhenitsyn does not use Voegelin's language, *The Red Wheel* can certainly be read as "Lenin and the Russians." Just as Voegelin indicts the elite rabble for providing Hitler with his support base, Solzhenitsyn too lists the range of leading members of Russian society who, in fact if not in intention, facilitated Lenin and the Bolsheviks' seizure of power. Again and again he highlights the entire Russian educated class's inbuilt and ineradicable sympathy with the Left as one of the major factors in their inability to oppose either the street riots that became a revolution or the Soviet of Soldiers and Workers Deputies in the eight months before the Bolshevik coup d'état. Olda enumerates a range of the elites who failed Russia in 1917: "We were given three hundred years. And we were given the last twelve years. We have wasted them. Our dignitaries. Our writers. And our bishops. And today—they are nowhere to be seen."<sup>28</sup>

### A Theological Profile for *The Red Wheel*—Piero Coda on Sergei Bulgakov's Kenotic Theology:

#### *Christ's Descent into Hell*

In his study of Sergei Bulgakov, Piero Coda discusses how in his *The Lamb of God* Bulgakov speaks of what Paul in his Letter to the Philippians 2:7 describes in terms of Christ's self-emptying

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or action, Lenin's seizure of power: "He is the type of man who will piously praise the rule of law and condemn the tyrant—and who fervently envies the tyrant and would love nothing better than to be one himself. In a decadent society he is the representative of the great reservoir of common men who paralyze every effort at order and supply mass-conivance in the rise of the tyrant" (*Plato and Aristotle* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957], 26–7).

28. *März Siebzehn: Zweiter Teil*, 192.

or *kenosis* on the Cross. In that self-emptying, "Christ undergoes the punishment for our sins. Such a punishment, as was his taking on of sin, was equivalent to what awaited humanity, that is, the suffering of hell." Coda quotes Bulgakov as seeing this to be "the greatest kenotic concealment of the divinity."<sup>29</sup>

#### *The Trinitarian Meaning of Kenosis*

For Bulgakov, according to Coda, "the divine mystery . . . is that the Father receives the Son in the emptying of his death and keeps him until the resurrection." Nor does this self-emptying occur only in the Son: "This forsakenness of the Son is an act of the Father, which means that he both accepts the death of the Son and participates in it. Because to allow the Son to suffer on the cross is certainly not death for the Father, yet it is a kind of spiritual co-dying in the sacrifice of love."<sup>30</sup>

And the Holy Spirit is deeply involved in the event of the Son's forsakenness and death: the Son's devastation and death mean that he is also forsaken by the Spirit. . . . The Holy Spirit returns, so to say, to the Father when the Son's death is accomplished in the intensity of the divine forsakenness. . . . So this aspect of the Holy Spirit's participation in the Son's kenosis . . . in some way extends the Son's kenosis to the third Person. Because this is the kenosis of Love in Person (the Holy Spirit): not to be manifested to the Well-Beloved (the Son).<sup>31</sup>

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29. Piero Coda, *L'altro di Dio: Rivelazione e kenosi in Sergei Bulgakov* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1998), 140.

30. *Ibid.*, 140.

31. *Ibid.*, 140–41.

This means for Bulgakov that “the sacrifice of the Son presupposes the reciprocal sacrifice of the entire Holy Trinity.”<sup>32</sup>

### The Red Wheel’s Implicit Theology of History

I am not saying that Solzhenitsyn is consciously drawing on Bulgakov’s understanding of the relationship between Jesus Forsaken on the Cross and the Blessed Trinity, but Bulgakov’s approach will, I think, illuminate various moments in *The Red Wheel*. Coda shows how, for all his limits, Hegel was perhaps the first of the moderns to assert the centrality of the Trinity and of Christ’s death out of self-sacrificing love to an adequate comprehension of history.<sup>33</sup> And Solzhenitsyn’s implicit Christianity has led him to an understanding of the Russian tragedy as in some way a participation in the forsakenness, death, and resurrection of Christ; where that event is also an irruption of the inner life of the Trinity into history, and indeed into Russian history.

*The Red Wheel* is full of hints of a theology of history, many of them already well commented upon. David Walsh has noted that General Samsonov’s redemptive significance in the story far outweighs his military incapacity. And Bulgakov’s kenotic theology in *The Lamb of God* encourages us to see Samsonov as the sacrificial lamb, representing both the dying Christ and the dying, if not suiciding, Russia. Not only is Christ, the incarnate Son, forsaken, but in their losing the Son, the Father and the Holy Spirit are also forsaken. This is what I have been calling the explosion of the unlimited interpersonal Love into our world of space and time. In the Trinity, each of the Persons “loses,” “becomes nothing” for the

sake of the other, and it is this eternal life of Love that the self-emptying of Jesus brings into our world.

And of course, the Trinitarian conclusion to *November 1916* could be seen as the therapeutic center to the whole *Red Wheel* cycle.<sup>34</sup> It is enacted by Zina’s slow pilgrimage through the Church of Our Lady of Tambov, where her soul unites as Trinity her separate iconic encounters of God the Father, Christ the Savior, until finally, in receiving absolution, “another Breath, the Spirit, hovered over her and stole tremulously into her.”<sup>35</sup> In his “Repentance and Self-Limitation in the Life of Nations,” and later in *Rebuilding Russia*, Solzhenitsyn focuses on the need for purification and repentance across the whole society if Russia is, like Zina, to be able to free itself from the great rocks weighing its soul down, one by one.<sup>36</sup>

### Russia’s Descent into Hell

If we move on to chapter 430 of the third volume of *March 1917*, “The Presentation of the Cross,” we get some more theological clues. Vera is attending the church service with her nanny, whose preferred spot is beside the icon of Christ’s Descent into Hell, again reminding us of Bulgakov’s understanding of Christ’s Holy Saturday in Hell. This is what Paul calls Christ’s becoming sin for us (2 Cor 5:21), his in some way identifying with us in our own willed forsaking of God. Piero Coda clarifies this with a comment

34. I was first alerted to the importance of this passage by David Walsh in his *After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Freedom* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 168–69.

35. Solzhenitsyn, *November 1916*, 988–99.

36. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *From Under the Ruins* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 105–143; *Rebuilding Russia: Reflections and Tentative Proposals* (London: Harvill, 1991), 45; *November 1916*, 997.

32. Ibid., 141.

33. Piero Coda, *Il negativo e la trinità: Ipotesi su Hegel* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1987).

from the International Theological Commission: “However far sinful man is from God, this is always less than the distance of the Son from the Father in his kenotic emptying . . . and in the misery of the ‘forsakenness.’”<sup>37</sup>

The chapter finishes with a magnificent promise of endurance, an endurance oriented toward the resurrection of Jesus, and we can say, of Russia too. The congregation’s chant, “we prostrate ourselves before Thy Cross, O Lord,” seems to have “a unifying power which nothing on Earth could shatter.” As with the inner life of the Trinity, where there is both the utter oneness of perfect Communion and the utter freedom of Persons in Love, there is “a fraternal rushing together where each one yields to the other”: “a space was left which allowed one to fall face down on the ground, then to kiss the great silver cross surrounded by flowers without thorns. By Thy Cross the power of death will be destroyed.”<sup>38</sup>

Dreams are taken as prophetic messages throughout *The Red Wheel*.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps none more so than Varsonofiev’s dream in chapter 641 of *March 1917*, which might be an answering dream to Ras-kolnikov’s frightening vision of a horde of terrorists tearing itself apart, itself an anticipation of the unleashing of Dostoevsky’s *The Devils* on Western civilization. Varsonofiev dreams he is in a stock exchange, with a huge crowd of people all looking in different directions, quite unlike the united congregation Vera had been part of. “A young boy whose face glowed with a wonderful light” came

before the crowd, and “Varsonofiev understood that the boy was Christ and that he held a bomb!—to blow up the entire planet!” Unable to bear the tension, Varsonofiev woke up, but “The horror of that cosmic explosion still gripped him.”

In this same chapter, Varsonofiev’s reflections continue on what is one of his central themes: “that all the events of our own life and also those of others, are connected to us and between them, not only by the clear connections of cause and effect seen by the whole world, but also by secret connections . . . which we do not even suspect—not only their existence but that they have a determining effect, they form souls and their destinies.” Returning to the contents of the dream, he wonders which stock exchange it was, not Petersburg, not Moscow, maybe not even in Russia, or at any rate, “not only Russia. The meaning was universal.”

Now his thoughts move indistinctly in the direction of the redemptive effect of the cosmic explosion: “It wasn’t only annihilation, it was Light too, the boy’s face shone with too great a radiance.” And “these unknown forces are at work! In a dimension we are unaware of something great is coming about—and perhaps the whirlwinds that have passed through the streets of Russian towns these last few weeks are only a dim reflection of this.”

Another dream of Varsonofiev is about a mysterious ceremony where a small group of twelve—priests and laypeople—are sealing up a church, aware they will be imprisoned when they have done this. Again he thinks that “the explosion at the hands of the luminous young boy has even wider dimensions” than this symbol of imminent and dire persecution. And he concludes with an apocalyptic insight into the revolutionary upheaval that in some way matches the paradoxical resurrection through destruction being brought about by the young Christ. Speaking of the empty

37. Quoted in Coda, *Il negativo e la trinità*, 408.

38. *Mars Dix-Sept, III* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), 276, 280.

39. Other prophetic or dream messages are Kuzma’s dream of the old man weeping uncontrollably—for Kuzma, but he realizes perhaps also for Russia, in *März Siebzehn: Erster Teil*, ch. 69. Or the prophecy of the old man of Uglitch, in *März Siebzehn: Zweiter Teil*, ch. 236, where Vsevolod hears of the terrible times awaiting Russia, which will last through seven generations from the present.

celebrating of the crowds in the streets he notes, “The people did not see that their rejoicing only concealed the great Disaster. . . . Everyone was amazed at the colossal upheaval which occurred without any force whatever. Yes, without any earthly force.”<sup>40</sup>

*The Battle for Russia’s Soul Between  
Utter Hatred and Utter Love*

Solzhenitsyn has nothing of the Tsarina’s pietistic religiosity, which, not unlike the Homeric antiheroes, conveniently ascribes all causation to the gods. Rather, for Solzhenitsyn, “God does not intervene so simply in human affairs. He acts through us and means us to find a way out for ourselves.”<sup>41</sup> And Voegelin warns against a demonizing of Hitler that would avoid the real mystery of human evil<sup>42</sup>—that famous line between good and evil we are told about in *The Gulag Archipelago* that every human heart can wander across. Instead of portraying Lenin as a satanic figure, *The Red Wheel* allows him to speak and think for himself in a way that approaches Voegelin’s preferred characterization of Hitler, drawing on the words of English historian Alan Bullock:

To achieve what he did Hitler needed talents out of the ordinary which in sum amounted to political genius, however evil its fruits . . . mastery of the irrational factors in politics . . . insight into the weakness of his opponents . . . gift for simplification . . . sense of timing . . . willingness to take

40. *Mars Dix-Sept, IV* (Paris: Fayard, 2001), 563–66.

41. *Times Literary Supplement*, Interview with Solzhenitsyn, May 23, 1975.

42. See his *Hitler and the Germans*, where he criticizes historians who employ Goethe’s term “demonic” to characterize Hitler, 147.

risks . . . considerable consistency and an astonishing power of will in pursuing his aims. . . . [But] these remarkable powers were combined with an ugly and strident egotism, a moral and intellectual cretinism.<sup>43</sup>

Still, behind and beyond as well as in and through Lenin, it is possible to envisage a cosmic battle between Jesus Forsaken on the Cross and the Evil One, enacted on the battlefield of Russian humanity. The implications of that battle have scarred humankind since it was fought out in Russia from the second decade of the twentieth century. Solzhenitsyn quotes Sergei Bulgakov, writing at Constantinople in 1922 after his expulsion from the USSR: “Why has Russia been rejected by God, condemned to putrefy and die? Our sins are grave, but not sufficient to explain this historically unique destiny. Russia has not deserved this destiny, it is like the lamb that bears the sins of Europe. It is a mystery we have to accept in faith.”<sup>44</sup>

Partly answering Bulgakov’s anguished question, *April 1917* gives at least an echo to Vera’s experience that “By Thy Cross the power of death will be destroyed.” In chapter 91, Xenia meets Sanya at a Moscow students’ party and notices his cross of St. George. In her brilliant performance of the czardas “she came to see, with clarity, how he would be in the future. Towards the meeting with the Future! Ours!” Later, “He was orthodox, and not for a joke. (We will definitely get married in church).” It is not surprising she dreams of a kind of love that mirrors the Love of the Trinity: “With all her being, Xenia felt another love, where, while

43. *Ibid.*, 151.

44. Soljénitsyne, *Réflexions sur la révolution de Février*, 117.

you loved, you did not make war. Where, however, to abdicate your freedom didn't mean to give up freedom completely!"<sup>45</sup>

### *A Candle in the Wind*

In an illuminating essay, Andrey Nemzer focuses on how a young couple bear within them a hope for the future of Russia.<sup>46</sup> In *Апрель 17* the couple strolls in the Alexander garden, and she is telling him how, during the days of revolution while walking there, she saw children playing and dreamed of having a son. "But this is just what Sanya desired: exactly! Exactly a son! They were able to open up to each other, to speak of him as if he were already born." After praying at the Iverskaia chapel, they "set off and again passed by the Alexander garden. Again, they speak about him—our son. How they would live—for him. How they would bring him up. And how they would give him all the best."<sup>47</sup>

Nemzer remarks: "A son will be born—he will become that writer whose word will make his parents live again, their love, their Russia, which, plunged into darkness, will remain for him unique and forever beloved." He sees this occurring through a book (*The Red Wheel*), which will help to bring Russia back to life, and continues: "We can understand why it is indispensable that the future author should appear here."<sup>48</sup> He quotes Varsonofiev in *Апрель 17*: "Does anything in the world exist stronger than

45. Soljénitsyne, *Avril dix-sept*, I, 594, 596, 597.

46. André Nemzer, "Comment se termine *La Roue rouge*," in *Le phénomène Soljénitsyne: Écrivain, stratège, prophète* (Paris: François-Xavier de Guibert, 2009), 147–69. All references here to the second volume of *April 17* (using its Russian title) are taken from Nemzer's essay.

47. *Апрель 17*, II, 367, 369.

48. Nemzer, 164.

the line of life, exactly life, which binds the descendants to their ancestors?"<sup>49</sup>

We remember Solzhenitsyn's caution that "If we wait for history to present us with freedom and other precious gifts, we risk waiting in vain. History is us—and there is no alternative but to shoulder the burden of what we so passionately desire and bear it out of the depths."<sup>50</sup> Like King Pelasgus, faced with the life-imperilling decision "to act or not to act," he has indeed performed his own *De Profundis*—where at times it seems as if he alone expressed Russia's "One Word of Truth." He exemplified in himself the same revolution of the spirit he asked of his fellow Russians:

deliberate, voluntary sacrifice. . . . We shall have to "rediscover our cultural treasures and values" not by erudition, not by scientific accomplishment, but by our form of spiritual conduct, by laying aside our material well-being and, if the worst comes to the worst, our lives.<sup>51</sup>

49. *Апрель 17*, II, 369. Nemzer continues in a footnote: "It goes without saying that Varsonofiev does not know what will become of his visitors. And even less that he could suppose a son would be born to them who would write about the Russian revolution as he would probably have done. But it is just after this unexpected visit to the hermit—with good reason misunderstanding the restless political affairs, and (rightly) convinced that 'history isn't made in meetings'—that he admits to himself: 'it is only through earthly events that we can carry out cosmic battles.' He thinks about leaving his familiar house to go somewhere to seek his path, to act. 'This young couple, happy to be alive, had come to Varsonofiev for a purpose. It restored faith and compassion to him. And the spirit of decision.'" (quoting *Апрель 17*, II, 555–556). See "Comment se termine *La Roue rouge*," 165n46.

50. *From Under the Rubble*, 1974, x. See Walsh, *After Ideology*, ch. 4, "Ascent from the Depths."

51. Walsh, *After Ideology*, 271.

If, in *The Red Wheel*, “the true protagonist is Russia herself,”<sup>52</sup> then we can suggest that for Russia—and for all of humanity in this new century—few more than Solzhenitsyn have fulfilled Alex’s hope in *Candle in the Wind*: “I would like to help pass on to the next century one particular baton—the flickering candle of our soul.”<sup>53</sup>

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52. “Interview with Nikita Struve,” in *Solzhenitsyn in Exile: Critical Essays and Documentary Materials*, eds., John B. Dunlop, Richard Haugh, and Michael Nicholson (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1985), 312.

53. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Candle in the Wind*, trans. Keith Armes (London: Bodley Head, 1973), 134.