

I'm afraid I can no longer remember exactly when it was—it was certainly some time in the seventies—that I myself watched, with a fury I couldn't explain back then, as the Solzhenitsyn plague quickly replaced all the other books in the bookshelves nearest my seat at the dining table. Soon there was nothing left but Solzhenitsyn and so-called Russian dissident literature, the cult literature of conservative Western European families. Families in the seventies would either sit silently at the dinner table or have screaming arguments. While eating, each person averted his or her gaze in embarrassment, and when they were finished, each one rushed upstairs to his room as quickly as possible. From my place at the table, I could barely see out the window to the row of dark fir trees. The only point I could fix my gaze on was the Solzhenitsyn shelf—which I had despised from the start—behind the door in the next room. One day, the rest of the family was downstairs packing the car for our vacation, and, in an act of self-torture, at the very last minute, I tore several Solzhenitsyn books out of the shelf and took them along as my sole reading material on the annual, weeks-long summer stay in the cold mountain cottage on the lake near Berchtesgaden and I really did read them in those weeks on vacation. And although I was only about twelve years old, I knew then that I was fully justified in hating the Solzhenitsyn shelf.

*Solzhenitsyn's object language, his merciless reduction to a few objects, usually wood, iron, metal plates, gruel, ice-cold camp huts and so on—all locked up in an inescapable Siberian internment camp—convinced me that, for the reader in the decades that followed the Nazi state, the toned-down aesthetics of Solzhenitsyn allowed the reports of Nazi concentration camps—still unbearable in the 1970s—to be pushed into the bearable other world of the Russian camp, several thousand kilometers away. It meant that history could perhaps gradually be made tolerable in what was really an unacceptable way by replacing one set of images with another. Long after the shock caused by photos from Auschwitz, the incriminating image was projected to another country, and for a while a comforting maneuver of literary evasiveness transported it to behind the incredibly secretive Iron Curtain, giving the horror of the camps a place on the family bookshelves. Maybe on the Solzhenitsyn shelf some sectors of society could assimilate the horrifying reality of the recent past by embedding it in comforting literary elements.*

My reaction to my early experience of Solzhenitsyn was a knee-jerk one and fairly silly. I wanted to be on the side of the Soviet Union and obtained Soviet novels from the communist bookstore, and much to the disappointment of my family, for the next one or two years the literature of Soviet heroism replaced all the children's and young people's books—at least in the bookcase upstairs in my room.