

Lennart Samuelson, SITE
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New Insights Concerning the 1970 Nobel Prize in Literature to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

The recently declassified proceedings of the Swedish Academy shed new light on why it awarded Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn the literature prize in 1970. His novels reflected unique experiences of many prisoners. The Academy characterized his work as a renewal of the great Russian literary tradition. On the other hand, Soviet authorities prohibited publication of his novels, however, they were widely circulated underground or published abroad. We now know that his novel *In the First Circle* as it was published in 1968 was only a shortened version that Solzhenitsyn had hoped would pass the censorship. The complete version, published recently in many languages, gives an even better inside picture of the Soviet state, its leaders and ordinary citizens, and thus strengthen the Academy's motivations for the award.

The decisions by the Nobel prize committees are declassified after fifty years. Therefore, we recently got a better insight on the motivations by the Academy for giving the 1970 prize in literature to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. The proceedings of the Academy add to what was known at the time, from leakages to the press and rumours by initiated persons. Remarkable Western journalists and scholars could describe the main events in the Soviet cultural life surrounding Solzhenitsyn and the Nobel prize. (Saraskina 2008; Scammell 1984). What has now been revealed from the Academy archives are the opinions of the Academy members and in particular the motivations in the propositions submitted in 1969–70 from entitled personalities.

The decision to award Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn the 1970 Nobel Prize in literature was preceded by his own struggle in the USSR to make his novels available to a wider public. In the last year of the Second World War, he was sentenced for allegedly subversive correspondence with another officer in the Red Army. Solzhenitsyn was sentenced to a long term in the camps. However, much of this time he spent in a special design bureau operated by MGB, the secret services' so-called "sharashki". After his release, Solzhenitsyn worked as teacher in a distant province. Here, he managed to write novels and short stories, based on what he had himself experienced or heard from other prisoners. He must, of course, keep his writings secret.

With the "thaw" under Nikita Khrushchev in the early 1960s, an opening was found for Solzhenitsyn to get his short story "A Day in the life of Ivan Denisovich" published in the renowned journal *Novyi Mir*. It seemed that he would then get his novels published; a contract was given for the novel *The Cancer Ward* (Rakovyi korpus). However, the literature climate changed as Khrushchev was ousted in 1964. The authorities stopped all plans to publish Solzhenitsyn's works. In those days, there circulated many transcripts of unpublished works, in the so-called *samizdat*. It is even today an open question, for researchers, just

how many hundreds or even thousands of readers throughout the Soviet Union were in those days familiar with literature that the censorship authorities would not allow to be printed.

These hardened attitudes of the Communist authorities only spurred Solzhenitsyn to have his works published abroad. He managed to organize a solid network for smuggling his manuscripts abroad, and to have responsible publishers contracted. In the late 1960s, *The Cancer Ward* – based on his observations during treatment in a Soviet hospital – and *In the First Circle* (V krug pervom) – describing a design bureau where sentenced scientists were to develop high-technological equipment – were published in the USA and many countries in Europe.

His books were not only best-sellers, but highly esteemed by literary critics. Already in 1969, the Swedish Academy received applications from their authorized contributors, that the Nobel prize in literature be awarded to Solzhenitsyn. The Academy member and author Lars Gyllensten formulated a detailed analysis of Solzhenitsyn's books. He emphasized Solzhenitsyn's talent for psychologically pertinent portraits of a plethora of individuals in the most extreme conditions. However, in 1969, the Swedish Academy decided to award its literature prize to Samuel Beckett, as a dramatist with a much longer career. The next year, Francois Mauriac (Nobel laureate in 1952) jointly with a group of influential French authors formulated a proposition concerning Solzhenitsyn to the Academy. It had also received an anonymous Prize proposition written by a dozen members of the Soviet Union of Authors who emphasized the pathbreaking character of Solzhenitsyn's novels. After deliberations within the Swedish academy, with only one dissenting member, it was announced that the 1970 prize in literature was awarded to Solzhenitsyn.

The Soviet authorities had a dilemma. In 1965, the appraised Soviet novelist Mikhail Sholokhov had received the prize in Stockholm and lectured here on his renowned novel *And Quiet flows the Don* (Tikhii Don). On the other hand, in 1958, the



equally famous Boris Pasternak was nominated for his novel *Doctor Zhivago*. However, Pasternak was forced, under humiliating circumstances, to renounce the prize. The situation in 1970 for Solzhenitsyn thus presented several dilemmas. He rightly feared, as the nowadays available documents also confirm, that if he would go to the Nobel prize ceremony in Sweden, the Communist party leaders would most probably withdraw his citizenship and thus force him into exile. Consequently, he informed the Academy that he was honored and would accept the prize, but that he was not prepared to travel to Stockholm. Discussions with Swedish diplomats in Moscow concerned the alternative to arrange a ceremony at our embassy. Finally, this option was cancelled in 1971 when the chairman of the Swedish academy Karl Ragnar Gierow was denied a visa to the USSR.

Solzhenitsyn's Later Path-breaking Contributions

In the meantime, Solzhenitsyn would continue his writing of the multi-volume historical novel *The Red Wheel* (Krasnoe Koleso) on the last period of Imperial Russia and his interpretation of the 1917 February revolution. He was also more engaged than before in publishing manifestoes and letters to the authorities, in a struggle against the oppressive regime. Much changed as more dissident voices in the Soviet Union manifested themselves in the early 1970s. A new landmark in Soviet literature would come in early 1974, with the publication of the first parts of *The Gulag Archipelago*. Although concerned Western readers had a vague notion of the Soviet camp system, Solzhenitsyn had managed to assemble hundreds of eye-witness stories from former prisoners that really shocked the public. In France and several other countries, the intellectual climate changed dramatically as *The Gulag Archipelago* made its imprint. In the 1980s, it was not yet possible to undertake serious historical research on the Soviet penitential, prison and camp system. Only with

glasnost and Gorbachev's *perestroika* was the seal on the secret archives opened and many of Solzhenitsyn's originally earth-shaking revelations could be put into a solid factual framework. We now know who the more than two hundred personalities were who had sent Solzhenitsyn their stories in the early 1960s, as they had read his "Ivan Denisovich" short story. Solzhenitsyn's guesswork, in the absence of statistics, concerning the economic significance of the GULAG camp system can instead be analyzed by the solid documentary collections from the archives (Jesipov 2018). A major contribution was made by the French historian Nicolas Werth and his colleagues, who jointly with archivists in Russia, assembled and wrote commentaries to the exhaustive, seven volumes *Istoriia stalinskogo GULAGa*. Solzhenitsyn's original work undertaken under the direst possible circumstances stand out as pioneering. He could not even dream of having his manuscript fact-checked by experts, let alone read in wider circles. It deserves emphasis therefore that President Putin took the initiative to have an abridged version of *The Gulag Archipelago* edited for the Russian school. Solzhenitsyn's widow, Natalia Dmitrovna accomplished this careful selection and added commentaries as necessary for young readers.

The 1970 Nobel Literature Prize Reconsidered in Hindsight

Finally, a reflection on how Swedish opinions on Solzhenitsyn has changed over time – from the enthusiastic reception in the 1960s of his novels to the skeptical attitude in the 1990s and early 2000s to Solzhenitsyn's allegedly nationalistic worldview. It cannot enough be emphasized under how horrible circumstances he wrote classical contributions to the world literature. To take only one example. If the Swedish Academy – hypothetically – had known the original version of *The First Circle*, and not only the abridged version



published in the late 1960s, with its far less political implications, they could with *even greater emphasis* have nominated him for the Literature Prize. It demands a lot from contemporary readers to imagine how one man like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who even in his early age in the late 1930s dreamt of writing novels on the Russian revolution, after much suffering in the camps managed to vividly describe, in the novels here presented, the many-faceted Soviet system from inside its prisons, camps and deportation cities.

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Lennart Samuelson

Stockholm Institute of Transition Economics (SITE)

Lennart.Samuelson@hhs.se

www.hhs.se/site

Lennart Samuelson is an affiliated researcher at the Stockholm Institute of Transition Economics (SITE) since 2008. He earned his Ph.D. at the Institute for Research in Economic History at the Stockholm School of Economics, in 1996. He was a guest researcher at the National Defence College in 1996-2001 and Waern visiting professor at the Institute for Studies in History at the University of Gothenburg, in 2011-2012.

Samuelson's research in Russian economic history re-started when the archives opened in 1992. His major research topic is the development of the Soviet military-industrial complex from the 1930s onwards. He has participated in several research projects on Soviet agrarian history of the 1930s, on the Great Terror 1937-38 and the Gulag camp system, and also on Sweden's relations with the Soviet Union in the Cold War period. His research results have been rewarded by several institutions.

The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities rewarded its prestigious Rettig Prize in 2014 to Samuelson for his fundamental

research and innovative grasp of the Russian archival materials.

On 4 November 2014, for organizing Swedish-Russian economic-historical workshops and conferences at Stockholm School of Economics and Gothenburg university, for arranging study visits for Russian archivists in Stockholm and for Swedish scholars in Moscow, as well as for his spreading knowledge on Russian history to the Swedish public, he was awarded Orden Druzhby (the Friendship Order) by President Vladimir Putin at the National Day ceremony in the Kremlin.

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