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Nathan D. Larson, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and the Modern Russo-Jewish Question, Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2005, 164pp., EUR 27.90, ISBN: 3-89821-483-4 (pbk).

Reviewed by Nikolai Butkevich (Washington D.C.)

Nathan D. Larson has written a well-balanced survey of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's writings on Russian-Jewish relations. Larson characterizes this relationship as one of the great love-hate relationships in history, replete with contradictions and mutually exclusive narratives of victimization, many of which are reflected throughout Solzhenitsyn's work.

Larson traces Solzhenitsyn's perceptions of Jews from his childhood, when some Jewish Young Pioneers mocked him for wearing a cross, to his camp experiences, when a Jewish prisoner disabused him of the atheism he acquired in early adulthood. Larson examines his benevolent and malevolent Jewish literary characters, giving a useful summary of the polemics and accusations they inspired among literary critics and Jewish activists.

Larson persuasively characterizes Solzhenitsyn as a moderate nationalist, contrasting his views on the Jewish Question favorably with the writers and politicians of the Russian extreme right. He cites Walter Laqueur's dichotomy between extreme and moderate nationalists—the extremists blame Russia's problems on 'fifth columns and foreigners', while moderates are willing to 'engage in introspection, self-criticism, and, where called for, penitence'.

On the other hand, the writer has committed literary faux pas in sensitive Jewish areas such as publishing photos in *The Gulag Archipelago* of Jewish camp administrators only, while ignoring the ethnic Russians there who were just as complicit. Solzhenitsyn's earlier writings largely ignored Jewish suffering during the Tsarist period, which he at times glorified, especially in contrast to the horrors of the Soviet period. Larson sees this as Solzhenitsyn's reaction to the world's indifference towards Russian suffering under Communism. His emphasis on Russianess being defined not by blood, as the extremists see it, but by the Russian spirit is also problematic, since while it is more tolerant than the alternative, it also smacks of a desire for assimilation rather than respect for Russian Jewish culture.

Finally, Larson shows Solzhenitsyn at his most controversial in his call for Jews to repent for their role in the Soviet system. Jews and Russians, he argues, worked together under an evil system, but while Russians have recognized their guilt (a stunning assertion to make in Putin's Russia), Solzhenitsyn argues that it is time for Jews to do the same.