



The empirical basis of the dissertation

The core sources used in my project are reviews, articles, and books written about Solzhenitsyn's main works. I focus on the reception of scholars and prominent publicists in the UK, US, and the Federal Republic of Germany. I restrict my study to published material due to the lasting influence of such material on subsequent reception.

About Elisa Ruiz Velasco García

Elisa Ruiz Velasco García is a comparatist with a background in cultural studies, sociology and history. She produced her PhD dissertation at the Department of Comparative Literature at Aarhus University, where she has been part of the research programme "Globalization, Migration and Memory". Her research focus is on the reception history of dissident Soviet Russian literature.

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COLD WAR ICON OR LITERARY HERO?

A STUDY OF THE WESTERN RECEPTION OF ALEXANDER SOLZHENIT- SYN

PhD dissertation by Elisa Ruiz Velasco García



AARHUS UNIVERSITET

COLD WAR ICON OR LITERARY HERO?

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Summary of the PhD dissertation "Cold War Icon or Literary Hero? A Study of the Western Reception of Alexander Solzhenitsyn" by Elisa Ruiz Velasco García, Department of Comparative Literature, Aarhus University.

In my dissertation I analyze the reception of the Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn in three Western countries: the US, the UK, and the Federal Republic of Germany. It is not a quantitative study of Solzhenitsyn's reception in its entirety, but a qualitative analysis under concrete perspectives. I investigate the role of the historical and political context in Solzhenitsyn's reception and its effect on the canonization of his works.

Assessing Politics in Literature and Criticism

The core of the thesis consists of an analysis of political readings of Solzhenitsyn's works. Finding the common denominator between different forms of political readings I analyze anti-communist, revisionist and political Christian views of the author's work. This approach brings forth a variety of results that depend on the contingent historical and political situation of the countries of my study.

"The Gulag Archipelago" – Synecdoche for an Era?

"Gulag" (publ. 1973-5) is Solzhenitsyn's most momentous work, as his reception clearly shows. In West Germany the circumstances of its publication - not its informative value - transform it into an "affair" that forced a coagulation of opinions on communism and the USSR. Hailed for its revelations about Soviet repression in the US and UK, it entered debates about Détente

there. It galvanized views both about the author and about the policy from the nuanced to the radical. In Gulag's reception the polarity of Cold War visions takes a palpable form.

Solzhenitsyn: Writer and Witness

Solzhenitsyn reached world fame with his literary work on the prison camp experience. The fact that he was a witness enhanced the perceived authenticity of his work. Paradoxically, both the endorsement of his early work by Nikita Khrushchev and later persecution through Leonid Brezhnev imbued it with authority. Although critics claim witness literature should be politically neutral, it was political aspects in and around Solzhenitsyn's work that made it stand out. However, beyond criticism of Soviet camps, other political nuances were overlooked.

The Complexity of Solzhenitsyn's Politics

The political content of Solzhenitsyn's work went beyond anti-communism and reaches over different realms, some of which have been largely ignored or ironed out by critics, others which have drawn the attention of fringe groups. Anti-Semitism and historical revisionism in Solzhenitsyn's work have found resonance among the German right-wing. This problematic aspect of the author's oeuvre is yet to be dealt with in a thorough and critical manner especially given the high moral standing of the author.

Emphasis on Political Aspects of Solzhenitsyn's Work - a Double-Edged Sword?

The heavy accentuation of the political content in Solzhenitsyn's oeuvre in his reception had the advantageous effects of enticing readers' interest and justifying its contemporary relevance. However, it had its downsides. Firstly, by anchoring its relevance to a specific situation, it was bound to recede once circumstances changed radically, as they did. Secondly, political emphasis led to a neglect of the analysis of aesthetic aspects of his work which might have secured the author a firmer place in literary history.

Revealing New Fields of Criticism

A contribution of my study on Solzhenitsyn's reception is the uncovering of new and potentially fruitful approaches to his work. One of the most promising would be through the prism of memory studies, due to the historical and memorial strand in most of his work. Furthermore, a feminist reading of the author would unravel the complexity of his portrayal of women and gender relations. These modern approaches are discussed in my work as possibilities that offer an outlook to future studies of Solzhenitsyn that are more in tune with current critical perspectives.