

Solzhenitsyn: 'The next war may well bury Western civilization forever'

In 1978, Alexander Solzhenitsyn was invited to give [the commencement address](#) at Harvard University.

What he offered to the students and faculty some forty years ago was not your typical graduation speech filled with banal platitudes. Instead—in a perhaps unsurprising move for a Russian who spent 11 years in labor camps and exile—he offered them one of the most sobering and penetrating diagnoses of the West in recent history.

And what was his diagnosis?

That the West is in decline.

Among other things, he noted the West's "decline in courage"—its loss of self-confidence in its history and ideals—which "from ancient times... has been considered the beginning of the end":

"A decline in courage may be the most striking feature which an outside observer notices in the West in our days. The Western world has lost its civil courage, both as a whole and separately, in each country, each government, each political party, and, of course, in the United Nations."

Much of Solzhenitsyn's critique is reserved for the West's obsession with increasing material comfort and "well-being" for its citizens. As he recognizes, "Even biology knows that habitual, extreme safety and well-being are not advantageous for a living organism." Suffering humanizes, and according to Solzhenitsyn, continual attempts to eradicate suffering in people's lives will lead to their gradual weakening, and has

in fact led to the West's welfare state, its "loss of willpower", and its "psychological weakness".

With the love of comfort and the loss of willpower also comes a fearful desire to preserve the status quo, and this fearful warning from Solzhenitsyn:

"Western thinking has become conservative: the world situation should stay as it is at any cost; there should be no changes. This debilitating dream of a status quo is the symptom of a society which has come to the end of its development. But one must be blind in order not to see that oceans no longer belong to the West, while land under its domination keeps shrinking. The two so-called world wars (they were by far not on a world scale, not yet) have meant internal self-destruction of the small, progressive West which has thus prepared its own end. The next war (which does not have to be an atomic one and I do not believe it will) may well bury Western civilization forever."

To avoid such a calamity, Solzhenitsyn believed that Western man must once again learn to exercise temperance with the material and rediscover the spiritual:

"If the world has not come to its end, it has approached a major turn in history, equal in importance to the turn from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. It will exact from us a spiritual upsurge: We shall have to rise to a new height of vision, to a new level of life where our physical nature will not be cursed as in the Middle Ages, but, even more importantly, our spiritual being will not be trampled upon as in the Modern era.

This ascension will be similar to climbing onto the next anthropologic stage. No one on earth has any other way left but upward."

Image: Christian Richter