



Written by [James Heiser](#) on May 10, 2019
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Russell Kirk and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn – The Centennial of Two Conservative Giants

A century has passed since the Bolshevik Revolution announced that an age of new ideology was falling over the world.

Before the guns could fall silent on the battlefields of the First World War, the harbingers of a century of collectivization, concentration camps and gulags, planned economies, one-party states, and “death by government” announced the coming of this age of ideology. But even then, the origins of the burgeoning ideologies that would afflict the world lay generations in the past: the French Revolution in 1789 and the Year of Revolution throughout many European nations in 1848 were but a warning of what would soon come to pass.



The success of the dangerous ideas was documented. Richard Weaver, one of the fathers of post-World War II American conservatism, wrote *Ideas Have Consequences*. Weaver astutely demonstrated that even seemingly abstract philosophical doctrines can have a profound influence on the course of civilizations. And the seemingly abstract speculations of the philosophers all too often become the justification for the creation of ideological systems. The *Communist Manifesto* of Karl Marx and Frederich Engels, V.I. Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?*, and Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* — to name but a few titles — have claimed millions of victims in the causes of totalitarian ideologies. It has been a century of warfare across innumerable battlefields, with different ideological parties waging war on one another, and against all of the traditional nations and cultures of this world.

The warfare has also been waged in the realm of ideas, and in this battle the past year marked the centennial of the birth of two great writers in the conflict for the minds of men. The writings of Russell Amos Kirk (1918-1994) and Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008) are invaluable treasures at the heart of a rich inheritance of 20th-century conservative thought.

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Both men were shaped by immersion in their respective cultures, and it is precisely that foundation that helped establish their clear enunciation of the “Permanent Things” in their writings. As Russell Kirk observed in a letter from 1963:

The great line of demarcation in modern politics does *not* lie between the liberals on the one hand, the totalitarians on the other, but rather between the immanest [sic] sectarians on the one hand, and all those who believe in a transcendent order on the other....

Surely we have a hard row to hoe. And we may fail. But we are put into this world to do battle.



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“Things are in the saddle, and ride mankind,” more than ever before. I suspect, indeed, that the modern age will come to smash; and then we will have to build afresh upon old principles. Meanwhile, we guard what Mr. T. S. Eliot calls, “the enduring things.”

Or, as Solzhenitsyn stated more formally in his 1972 “Nobel Lecture on Literature”:

And who, if not the writers, are to express condemnation not only of their own bankrupt rulers ... but also of their own society, whether it be a matter of its craven humiliation or its complacent weakness, or the featherbrained escapades of youth, or young pirates brandishing knives?

People will ask what literature can do in the face of the pitiless assault of open violence? Well, let us not forget that violence does not have its own separate existence and is, in fact, incapable of having it: it is invariably interwoven with THE LIE. They have the closest of kinship, the most profound natural tie: violence has nothing with which to cover itself except the lie, and the lie has nothing to stand on other than violence.... Writers and articles have a greater opportunity: TO CONQUER THE LIE!

Writing in defense of The Truth — “the enduring things” — both men illuminated the lies that must be opposed. Thus, Solzhenitsyn’s writings swept around the globe and were soon translated into many languages, and continue to be translated for, and read by, a generation born after the “dissolution” of the Soviet Union in December 1991. Dr. Russell Kirk’s writings also continue to find a global audience, as recent Portuguese, Czech, and Italian translations of his works offer sufficient witness.

Both men were born in the year that the guns of the First World War fell silent, but their lives were marked by the aftermath of the war. Solzhenitsyn was born after the Bolshevik Revolution, and his entire life was shaped by life under communism, and, in time, the war waged against communism. Solzhenitsyn never knew his father: He was killed in a hunting accident months before Aleksandr’s birth. Although he studied mathematics at Rostov State University, Solzhenitsyn’s desire to write the history of the Bolshevik Revolution was already firmly in his mind by 1936. He fought in the Second World War, and earned the Order of the Red Star as an artillery officer — only to have that honor stripped away after Military Intelligence arrested him for criticizing Joseph Stalin in letters to a friend. He served eight years in the Soviet Gulag. After being released, he survived cancer and became a teacher, writing in secret. His early work, *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, was published during the post-Stalinist “thaw” under Khrushchev, but his continued writings — though popular in the underground and in the West, where translated editions began to appear — brought down the wrath of the Soviet regime. He dared not leave the USSR to receive his Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970, for fear he would be forbidden to return home. After the KGB discovered the manuscript of *The Gulag Archipelago*, he was threatened with a further sentence in the Soviet Gulag before being exiled to the West, where he eventually settled in Vermont. In exile, he continued to write and speak about the evils of communism, while the KGB continued to harass him in his exile. His Soviet citizenship was restored in 1990, and he returned to Russia in 1994, where he died in 2008.

Like Solzhenitsyn, Russell Kirk was also a university graduate before the onset of the Second World War, receiving his bachelor’s degree at Michigan State University and a master’s from Duke University before serving in the Army in Utah from 1942 to 1946 in the Chemical Warfare Service at the Dugway Proving Ground. Following his military service, Kirk began doctoral studies at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, earning the Doctor of Letters in 1953. His published doctoral thesis became one



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of the founding works of postwar conservatism: *The Conservative Mind*. From his home in Mecosta, Michigan, Kirk wrote a syndicated column for many years, founded and edited two journals (*Modern Age* and *The University Bookman*), lectured throughout the United States, and wrote dozens of books. He and his wife, Annette, hosted innumerable lectures and conferences at their home, which helped to shape several generations of conservative students. Kirk died at his home in 1994.

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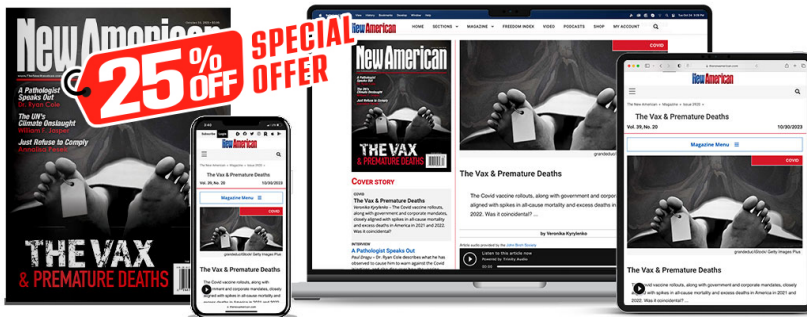
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