

One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich (1961)

By **Alexander Solzhenitsyn**

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I. A Historico-Literary sketch

1917- Communist Revolution

Downfall of Tzars after several centuries of absolute power.

The **Bolsheviks** storm to power led by **Lenin** (1860-1924). Formation of Soviet Russia, the **USSR** (1921) (Union of Socialist Soviets of Russia)

1918- Birth of Solzhenitsyn in Rostov-on-Don. Studies Maths, Physics at University of Rostov and Literature by correspondence at Moscow University.

1924- Stalin (1879-1953) succeeds Lenin, establishes a totalitarian State with its apparatus of censorship and oppression (prisons, concentration camps, gulags, mental asylums for free thinking writers, artists, men and women of science, etc...)

1928-1933- Stalin's Five-Year plan. Literature should be at the service of the communist ideology or not be. Rigid Russian Association of Proletarian Writers-Political dogmatism-Social Realism. Literature should be a propaganda tool. It should portray man and society as the Communist state wishes them to be or as they will be tomorrow. It should glorify the ruling party and its head "sublime", "heroic" Stalin.

1941- German invasion of Russia during World War II. Solzhenitsyn is drafted into the Red Army. Decorated several times.

1945- Arrested in Russia. Condemned without a trial to 8 years in a concentration camp (the subject of One Day in the Life of...) and three years of exile during which he taught maths and physics.

1953- Death of Stalin, succeeded by Krutchev (1894-1971)

1956- A pivotal year- Krutchev in a public speech denounces Stalinist repression. A thaw period follows oscillating, however, between severe censorship and more lenient attitudes (Thaw and Freeze)

1957- Solzhenitsyn is rehabilitated.

1958- Pasternak (Doctor Zhivago) is awarded the Nobel Prize for literature but is compelled to renounce the prize.

1961- S. publishes One Day in the Life of... in Novy Mir (prestigious Moscovite journal, see its editor Tardovsky's Forward in our edition). Krutchev supported fully this publication which knew an immediate success.

1967- Open Letter to the fourth Soviet Writer's Congress (read it at the end of your hand-out)

1968- S. publishes The first Circle and Cancer War, two novels which quickly circulated in Russia and the West.

1970- S. is awarded the Nobel Prize for literature but was not allowed to go to Stockholm to receive it. S. sends his speech "One Word of Truth" to the Swedish committee 2 years later.

1973- S. is forced to leave the country. This man alone had defied a whole system. A 20- year-exile follows mainly in USA. The Gulag Archipelago... appears in the West "A collective Russian Monument" (see end of your hand-out)

1978- The Harvard Commencement Address entitled "A World Split Apart" (see excerpt at the end of your hand-out)

1993- S. returns to Russia with a 7000 –page-history of Russia The Red Wheel. Follows a 3-volume-Memoir entitled Memoirs from Exile (20000 pages!)

II. Analysis of the novel One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich

1) The Time:

- One day in a concentration camp in Siberia
- One day like any other day in the life of convicts –Zeks-sentenced to 10-25 years of hard labor for reasons they didn't know:

A man can survive 10 years, but 25, who can get through alive?
(p.58)

- From reveille till lights off.

As usual, at five o'clock that morning reveille was sounded by the blows of a hammer on a length of rail hanging up near the staff quarters. The intermittent sound barely penetrated the windowpanes on which the frost lay two fingers thick, and they ended almost as soon as they'd begun. It was cold outside, and the camp-guard was reluctant to go on beating out the reveille for long. (p.7)

There is nothing as bitter as this moment when you go out to the morning muster- in the dark, in the cold, with a hungry belly, to face a whole day of work. You lose your tongue. You lose all desire to speak to anyone. (p.26)

And he buried his head in the thin, unwashed blanket, deaf now to the crowd of zeks from the other half as they jostled between

the bunk-frames, waiting to be counted. (p.142)

- Ivan has been in the Gulag for 8 years. He was forced to sign a false “confession” and sentenced to 10 years of hard labor.

2) The Setting:

The Snow

The Ice

The Steppe

The steppe was barren and windswept, with a dry wind in the summer, and a freezing one in winter (p.63)

A whole day in the freezing cold. The Zeks were already chilled to the marrow (p.101)

How can you expect a man who is warm to understand a man who's cold? The cold stung...The temperature out there was -17°; Shukov's temperature was +99°. The fight was on. (p.23)

3) The characters:

*The convicts divided into squads carry numbers not names:
Their numbered backs were passing through the door (p.26)*

And the team followed him...through the snow. Shuffle, shuffle, squeak, squeak (p.26)

And the prisoners, in ranks of five, separated from the rest and marched ahead so that they could be watched from front and behind: five heads, five backs, ten legs (p.33)

Notice the highly visual impact; the cinematographic technique.

Notice the dehumanization of the prisoners. And yet, individual characters stand out:

- Tiurin: Ivan's squad leader, a true leader. Ivan would do anything to please him for his survival is in the hands of Tiurin.(see p.40 for example)

In camp the team-leader is everything: a good one will give you a second life, a bad one will put you in your coffin. Shukhov had known Andrei Tiurin since the time they met at Ust-Izhma, though he hadn't been in his team then..... Tiurin had immediately picked him out for his team. Shukhov had no dealings with the camp commandant or the P.P.D., with foremen or engineers- that was the team-leader's job: he'd protect him with his own chest of steel. In return, Tiurin had only to lift an eyebrow or beckon with a finger- and you ran and did what he wanted. You can cheat anyone you like in camp, but not your team-leader. Then you'll live. (p.40)

- Buinovsky: an ex-navy commander. Bent double, he never loses his sense of honor

- Alyosha: the illuminated Baptist in a long Russian tradition of religious eccentricity.

- Fetiokov: the jackal.

- The Tartar: a cruel man
 - Tsezar: the “rich” convict, generous when he wants.
 - Volkovoi: a wolf.
 - Der: a swine, a coward and a spy
 - Kilgas: a wonderful worker. Forms a good team with Ivan.
 - Ivan Denisovich Shukov: the central character of the novel through whom all events, perceptions and impressions are narrated.
- A peasant in a long Russian tradition of the peasant as the “natural”, “simple”, “forbearing” creature. Ivan is wise, crafty, industrious, content with very little, naïve, has his own self-pride and has learned how to survive (notice the realistic details about food, smoking, the boots, the spoon, the small wire he finds, etc...).

4) The Values, the code of Ethics as incarnated by Ivan:

- The affirmation of Life even in the gulag; yes life is sacred so is food which keeps you going; witness one such passage amongst a few others at meal time:

*The sacred moment had come...
 He set to. First he only drank the liquid drank and drank.
 As it went down filling the whole body with warmth, all
 his guts began to flutter inside him...
 Goo-ood. There it comes, that brief moment for which a Zek lives (p.121)
 And now Shukov complained about nothing; neither about the
 length of his stretch, nor about the length of the day, nor about
 swiping another Sunday.
 This was all he thought about: we'll survive. We'll stick it out, God
 willing, till it's over...
 [He] chew every bone, every fin, to suck the juice out of them, for the
 juice is healthy... everything else could wait. (p.122)*

- *[Eating] is the moment that demands complete concentration (p.67)*

- Ivan is enduring and thrifty:

Eight years in a camp couldn't change his nature. He worried about anything he could make use of, every scrap of work he could do. Nothing that must be wasted without good reason. (p.91)

*Slap on the mortar. Down with the blocks. Press it home. See it's straight. Mortar. Block. Mortar. Block...
 Wasn't it enough that Tiurin had told them himself not to bother about the mortar? Just throw it over the wall and bugger off. But Shukhov wasn't made that way: eight years in a camp couldn't change his nature. He worried about anything he could make use of, about every scrap of work he could do- nothing must be wasted without good reason.
 Mortar. Block. Mortar. Block... (p.91)*

- The value of work well done:

*And now Shukov and the other masons felt the cold no longer.
 Thanks to the urgent work...they didn't stop for a moment... Thank*

God for the man who does his job and keeps his mouth shut (p.82)...

- **The basic peasant's wisdom:**

...Alright it's a "special" camp. So what? Does it bother you to wear a number? They don't weigh anything those numbers (p.60) says Ivan.

5) The Esthetic Dimension:

- The stark realism of the story
- Narrowed down to one day as lived and felt and fought out by one man, Ivan- The great visual impact on the reader.
- The use of the vernacular (the common, spoken peasant's language) mixed with irony, understatement and humor.
- The vividness of the narration.
- The amazing poetic dimension that comes out of such stark realism. See, for example, how the movements of the moon in the last few pages punctuate the tension of the count and re-count of the convicts. And it leads the reader to the totally unexpected brilliant last paragraph.

A day without a dark cloud. Almost a happy day

*There were three thousand six hundred and fifty-three days like that in his stretch. From the first clang of the rail to the last clang of the rail.
The three extra days were for leap years. (p. 143)*

Yes, a very fine novel.

III. Concluding CS questions:

- Freudian psychological malaise vs. the cruelty of the Stalinist regime. And yet, Ivan's life affirmation.
- Beckettian man? Too much of a luxury for an Ivan Denisovich.
- Any spirituality in the novel? Where does it stem from if you feel it?
- Would the Gulag tale be relevant at all to your experience, your education, your political vision?
- Would you want to live without your basic freedom?

End Notes

- From Solzhenitsyn's Open Letter to the Fourth Soviet Writer's Congress of 1967:

Literature that is not the breath of contemporary society, that dares not transmit the pains and fears of that society, that doesn't warn in time against threatening moral and social dangers -such literature does not deserve the name of literature; it is only a façade-such literature loses the confidence of its own people...

- From the Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956; an Experiment in Literary Investigation (Harper & Row, 1973):

This is our common collective monument, writes Solzhenitsyn, to all those who were tortured and murdered in the many gulags- concentration camps which form an "archipelago" across Russia- The author recorded in this harrowing book the life memories of 227 witnesses who survived the gulag and how he, himself, was arrested and thrown into one such gulag. The time has come, he says, when his cry out would be heard by the 200 million individuals living in Russia. Indeed, it was heard by the world at large.

- Invited to give the Commencement speech at Harvard in June 1978, Solzhenitsyn entitled it "A World Split Apart" in which he was highly critical of the weakness of the USA system. The speech infuriated the public and here is the author's reaction as expressed in an interview (I am including parts of the interview so that you notice how timely such remarks remain!):

...This was especially saddening, because the main idea of the Harvard speech – "A World Split Apart"- which is very important for the US and Western thought, is that the world is not nonlinear, not made up of homogeneous parts that all follow the same course. The mistake of the West... is that everyone measures other civilizations by the degree to which they approximate Western civilization. If they do not approximate it, they are hopeless, dumb, reactionary and don't have to be taken into account. This view point is dangerous.

From an Interview in Time magazine (July 24,1989)