

One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich

Один день Ивана Денисовича (Oдин den' Ivana Denisovicha)

Presented by: Zvonimir Glavaš

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, first published in 1962, is unmistakably political, both by its sheer content (a harrowing account of life in a Soviet labor camp) and by the immediate context of its appearance (a brief moment of cultural "thaw", i.e., a temporary softening of state censorship under Khrushchev after the death of Stalin), and both aspects are anything but unambiguous.

In this seemingly simple narrative, Solzhenitsyn's narrator recounts a day in the camp life of the protagonist Ivan Denisovich Shukhov, a former soldier turned prisoner who was sentenced to ten years of forced labor in a Siberian gulag for alleged treason after being taken prisoner of war by the Germans during the Second World War. The novel begins a few moments before the first morning roll call and ends a few moments after the last evening roll call of the same day. Instead of significant personal turning points or major historical events, the novel focuses on everyday routine in the camp, meticulously detailing the daily struggle to survive - resisting the cold, enduring hard labor, scraping for food, avoiding punishment, and navigating the complex interpersonal relationships between guards and zeks (prisoners). In this way, it captures the psychological and physical toll of the labor camp, along with the only way to survive it – not by actively resisting, but through stifling of all hope, through adaptation, endurance and suppressing one's own pre-camp sense of dignity and belonging. Therefore, since its publication until today, this novel has remained one of the most famous and powerful literary depictions of the injustices and suffering endured by the victims of Stalinist purges.

The publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in the literary journal *Novy Mir* in 1962 was a seminal moment in Soviet literary history, as it was the first explicit account of Stalinist repression to be published in the USSR. Its publication was personally authorized by the First Secretary of the Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev, and was part of his efforts to denounce Stalinism. The fact that the novel was read to Khrushchev in person, as well as the (unconvincing) anecdote that he wept while listening to it (see Barker 7), may better convey the relative importance of Solzhenitsyn's text in this endeavor. The initial popularity of Solzhenitsyn's novel in the USSR is well illustrated by the fact that there were queues outside libraries (see Dobson 580), and comparable success followed in the West, where the novel was published only a year later. The initial similarity of reactions in the USSR and the West later diverged somewhat when Solzhenitsyn – having made his ideological positions clearer in subsequent writings, and after Khrushchev's political overthrow – became *persona non grata* in the Soviet Writers' Union (he was expelled in 1969), while in the West he was still read through the prism of liberalism and uncritically glorified. Nevertheless, the reception of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was never really

unambiguous; even immediately after its publication, it was criticized by many (professional and non-professional) readers in the readers' response sections of the magazine *Novy Mir*. The focus of criticism ranged from political-ideological issues to the aesthetic qualities of the plot, characters and language (crude, unrefined, sometimes vulgar) (Dobson), while critics in the West gradually became aware of other, less liberal aspects of Solzhenitsyn's writing in the light of his later publications.

As several contemporary critics have noted, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* does not espouse any explicit ideological values, apart from the seemingly indisputable absolutes such as justice, truth, and so on. However, these absolutes can serve as convenient empty signifiers that can be easily appropriated hegemonically by certain ideologies. In Solzhenitsyn's example, this was the case with the deeply conservative "peasant ideology" (see Barker 164), as the novel repeatedly displays elements of anti-intellectualism, anti-modernism, and reactionary vitalism that would become more prominent in Solzhenitsyn's later texts. However, these (predominantly conservative) ideological moments are partially undermined by the occasional presence of subtle irony and novelistic polyphony, which complicate the seemingly straightforward texture of Ivan Denisovich.

This ideological complexity of the seemingly very simple narrative goes hand in hand with the features that are decisive for its stylistic and literary-historical description and appraisal. In one of the earliest studies of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, György Lukács argued that this novel represented the pinnacle of socialist realism in terms of both its stylistic texture and its socio-historical dimension, and thus mainly aligned with the earlier official party position (see György Lukács). However, more contemporary critics pointed out that despite its ostensibly simple structure and semblance to socialist realist novels, *Ivan Denisovich* differs from the canon of socialist realism by several features, including language (dialectalisms, vulgarisms, crude language, visceral narration), traces of polyphony, a subtle intertwining of different modes of focalization, irony, skaz narrative frame etc. The most important device of realizing these features is the narrative technique of free indirect speech used extensively by Solzhenitsyn, which enables a hybridization of discourse that was not welcomed in socialist realism (see Rus). All critics agree, however, that *Ivan Denisovich* is an impressive prose miniature which, through the description of a single day, which - as the protagonist himself emphasizes - is in no way special, and through the depiction of the specific economy of time that prevails in the GULAG, which is completely excluded from historical time, through a web of subtle references, analepsis, conversational digressions, etc., tackles exceptionally successfully the spectrum of historical and metahistorical problems that overarch the situation in which the story is set.

The ideological and stylistic complexity of Solzhenitsyn's writing increased in the few texts that followed Ivan Denisovich, such as the novels *Cancer Ward* (1966) and *The First Circle* (1968), while in later texts the novelistic sophistication and complexity gave way to more explicit ideological reflections and advocacies. Although his image in the West was long distorted to fit the Cold War narrative that portrayed him as an anti-communist hero and champion of free expression (he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1970), the Western literary public gradually came to realize that, despite his anti-communist stance, Solzhenitsyn never espoused the values of Western liberalism and democracy. In fact, he vociferously opposed the alleged "materialism, secularism and moral decay" of the West, rejecting it as a desirable alternative for post-communist Russia and controversially sided with Russian nationalism, Orthodoxy and imperialism, aligning with figures such as Vladimir Putin. However, these biographical controversies cannot diminish the historical and literary significance of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, nor the manifold political impacts this text produced/s.

References

Barker, Francis. *Solzhenitsyn. Politics and Form*. The MacMillan Press Ltd, 1977.

Dobson, Miriam. "Contesting the Paradigms of De-Stalinization: Readers' Responses to 'One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich.'" *Slavic Review*, vol. 64, no. 3, 2005, pp. 580–600.

Lukács, György. *Solzhenitsyn*. MIT Press, 1971.

Rus, Vladimir J. "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich: A Point of View Analysis." *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 13, no. 2–3, Jan. 1971, pp. 165–78,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.1971.11091236>.

LANGUAGE: Russian/Русский

PUBLISHER: Znanje

This title was not censored before publishing