



## **One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich**

*Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn , H.T. Willetts (Translation)*

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**One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich** Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn , H.T. Willetts (Translation)  
**The only English translation authorized by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn**

First published in the Soviet journal *Novy Mir* in 1962, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* stands as a classic of contemporary literature. The story of labor-camp inmate Ivan Denisovich Shukhov, it graphically describes his struggle to maintain his dignity in the face of communist oppression. An unforgettable portrait of the entire world of Stalin's forced work camps, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* is one of the most extraordinary literary documents to have emerged from the Soviet Union and confirms Solzhenitsyn's stature as "a literary genius whose talent matches that of Dosotovsky, Turgenev, Tolstoy"--Harrison Salisbury

This unexpurgated 1991 translation by H. T. Willetts is the only authorized edition available and fully captures the power and beauty of the original Russian.

## One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich Details

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Author : Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn , H.T. Willetts (Translation)

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### **TK421 says**

Dear Mr. Solzhenitsyn,

I am not a Russian scholar, not even in the armchair variety. But you have done something magical in ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF IVAN DENISOVICH that eclipsed this reader's ignorance: you have transmuted what it was like to live a life day-in and day-out in much the same fashion. Think about it: Morning, the same as yesterday. Afternoon: the same as yesterday's afternoon. The night: yep, the same. And this made me yearn for a day when Ivan would awaken and see that it would be different.

This ability to create (which you lived for a time) a life of perpetual recycling was heartbreakingly real that it made me think of not only Russian dissidents (political or otherwise), but of all the people incarcerated now in prisons, relationships (marriages, dating), loneliness, jobs, or, to a certain degree, aimless lives. To think that every morning is going to be bleak when one awaits sleep, mortified and numbed and haunted my thoughts as I read this novel.

Add in the fact that Ivan never knew if more time was going to be added on his sentence or if he was going to die in this desolate gulag, I had a real hard time distancing myself from this character. I live a very happy life. I have a wife I love and adore and two beautiful children, a house, a career (at times I would trade this), always a full stomach, clothes, cable, thousands of books, and countless friends. But even with all these pleasures, the thought of being isolated in a world were insubordination was met with violence or, worse, disappearance, became my mental reality, trapping me in this world that you created.

Dark thoughts permeated throughout my mind like a giant shark searching for prey and ate my happiness. Rarely has such a deft, short novel made such an emotional impact on me.

This, sir, is why you are one of my favorite authors.

**VERY HIGHLY RECOMMENDED**

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### **Sara says**

The real significance of this novel lies in its exposure of the political system that fostered and supported the gulags of Soviet Russia. The writing is stark and matter-of-fact, just like the life of the gulag. It is weighty and yet there is no despair in the character of Shukhov. He brims with hope and appreciation. He is grateful when the weather is warm enough that the mortar doesn't freeze. "It is a good day for bricklaying" he says.

What offence lands a man in such a prison? Very small infractions or none at all can draw a ten years sentence, and frequently that is extended, again without any explanation or reason. The injustice of the system is paled against the suffering inflicted in the camp, being worked at hard labor in freezing conditions, without proper clothing, with little food, and without any possibility of escape or rescue.

Perhaps the saddest thing is that prisoners become used to this life and come to value the small bits of joy

they can squeeze from a crust of bread or a tobacco butt passed to them by a more fortunate inmate. And yet, that is what speaks to the spark of humanity that even these kinds of conditions cannot stifle...where there is hope there is life, without it how could any of them endure even a "good" day.

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**mai ahmd says**

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**Diane says**

*"The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons."* -- Fyodor Dostoevsky

This book was a good way to take my mind off of my own problems. Reading about the grueling conditions of a Soviet gulag made my daily worries seem trivial.

The novel is set in Stalin's Russia of the 1950s and follows the prisoner Shukhov from the moment he wakes up at 5 a.m. to when he finally goes to bed after laboring all day. Shukhov was sentenced to 10 years of hard labor, even though he was innocent. While fighting for Russia in World War II, he was captured by the Germans. He managed to escape and return to his own lines, but then he was accused of being a spy. Faced with being shot or doing hard labor, he signed a confession to spare his life.

Shukhov has already served eight years and knows how to survive in prison. He stays out of trouble and tries to do small favors for people who can get him a little extra food each day. He is a hard worker and believes that prisoners have to help each other to stay alive. He learned this lesson from his first squad leader, who told the new inmates: "Here, men, we live by the law of the taiga. But even here people manage to live. The ones that don't make it are those who lick other men's leftovers, those who count on the doctors to pull them through, and those who squeal on their buddies."

The prisoners are forced to work in brutally cold weather and have very little food. This book makes you appreciate being warm and well-fed, to be sure. When Shukhov is refused a favor from a guard who works indoors and who sits near a heater, he wonders, "How can you expect a man who's warm to understand a man who's cold?"

In other sections, we see how important it is to eat slowly and to treasure each bite: "More than once during his life in the camps, Shukhov had recalled the way they used to eat in his village: whole pots full of potatoes, pans of oatmeal, and, in the early days, big chunks of meat. And milk enough to bust their guts. That wasn't the way to eat, he learned in camp. You had to eat with all your mind on the food -- like now, nibbling the bread bit by bit, working the crumbs up into a paste with your tongue and sucking it into your cheeks. And how good it tasted -- that soggy black bread!"

While reading "One Day," I was reminded of some other great books about work camps, such as "Escape from Camp 14," which was about a North Korean prison, and several about the Holocaust: Viktor Frankl's "Man's Search for Meaning," Elie Wiesel's "Night" and Art Spiegelman's "Maus." Each of those books has their own insights into how people survive in subhuman conditions.

I appreciated the spare, straightforward language of Solzhenitsyn. According to the introduction, Solzhenitsyn himself had served eight years in a Russian concentration camp, reportedly for making a derogatory remark about Stalin. The book was published in 1962 during Khrushchev's reign, and was considered an attack on Stalin's human rights violations. I admired Solzhenitsyn for having the courage to tell this story.

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### **Fabian says**

Moral of the tale: No matter your socioeconomic position in life, or the degree of happiness in it, hard WORK is just the thing to let the hours sift on by...

The book that caused such a general sensation back then is but a significant albeit very tiny beep on the literature radar now. The smallness made big by elegant & overexpressive prose is a sight to behold, but not, alas, a true wonder to read.

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### **Lyn says**

Totalitarian communism could produce some harsh results.

Such is the succinct message sent by Soviet writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his 1962 publication One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich. First published in the Soviet journal Novy Mir, and then later translated into

many, many languages including English, Solzhenitsyn uses severe realism to describe conditions in a Soviet political prisoner camp.

Literally telling a twenty-four hour period in the life of the camp, we follow various characters throughout the brutally cold day. These are hard men taking care of business. Many were assigned a sentence of hard labor and we see them building and working and surviving on the unforgiving Russian steppe.

Only a few are actual criminals, having committed some crime against persons or property; by far most are there because they had run afoul of the Soviet system. Ten years is a lighter sentence, most have been sent to the camp for a twenty-five year sentence of cruel and inhuman servitude. Speaking out against the government or like-minded open and obvious political malfeasances are also rare; most “confessed” to some ridiculous treason after a period of ruthless and senseless interrogation. Many were prisoners of war during and after World War II, escaping the Germans only to find themselves back home amidst suspicious circumstances and then jailed for being Nazi spies. Some were incarcerated because they were Baptists.

The enduring significance, though, and high praise for Solzhenitsyn in pulling the literary achievement off, is a sense of perseverance and obdurate humanism. These men live day to day, scrounging and surviving and striving and all with a distant hope that someday, years in the future, they will be free.

No doubt the years of press have diluted the stern message exposed in 1962, but this remains a difficult but important work.

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### **Lisa says**

Some Nobel Prizes in Literature resulted in more trouble than glory for the laureates. Little did it matter to Harry Martinson that his genius epic poem *Aniara: An Epic Science Fiction Poem* spoke for his worthiness as a Nobel Laureate, the bad press that followed the announcement ruined his mental health.

In the case of Solzhenitsyn, the attention he received internationally after the award quite literally threatened his physical well-being and his ability to live and write in the country he considered his home, despite its oppression and cruelty.

His most well-known work, describing one single day in the life of an inmate in a Soviet Gulag, quite miraculously was approved for publication in the Soviet Union in 1962, and played a major role in the decision to award Solzhenitsyn the Nobel Prize in 1970.

As a harrowing, cold, sharp witness account of the suffering of Gulag prisoners, it is a document of universal importance. It does for Soviet history what *All Quiet on the Western Front* does for the history of World War I, depicting the experience of one protagonist in a sharp realism that makes the reader shudder.

I felt cold, I felt hungry, I felt scared, I felt harassed, I felt helpless, I felt hopeless, I felt powerless, I felt humiliated.

Every single emotion described in the book immediately transferred to me, and made me live through this one particular day in the gulag. Very much like the soldier in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the prisoner

does not have time to be worrying about the political system that placed him in his living hell. His sole focus must be to get through the day, and then wake up the next morning and face it again, constantly fighting the biological needs of his body. The repetition of the suffering is the hellish part of the story, made crystal clear in the heartbreaking final sentence:

“The end of an unclouded day. Almost a happy one. Just one of the 3,653 days of his sentence, from bell to bell. The extra three were for leap years.”

For the reader, suffering through the ONE SINGLE DAY in a reading chair, with a cup of hot tea and shortbread and a warm blanket, was hard. The unimaginable reality of the real prisoners is summed up in the accurate account of how many of those days they LIVED through, not forgetting the three extras for leap years. Imagine reading this story 3,653 times. And it would still be much more comfortable than living it. And don't forget that you only have to deal with one of the unclouded, almost happy days! And you don't have to die in the end, after years of suffering, like the hero of All Quiet on the Western Front, who lived through the trench warfare reality only to die in October 1918, a completely unimportant, random detail in the big schemes of things.

One day in one life, but there were so many days, and so many lives!

Solzhenitsyn received the Nobel Prize "for the ethical force with which he has pursued the indispensable traditions of Russian literature".

This was already perfectly outlined in "One Day", and then shown in a magnificent parable in the Cancer Ward, where different individuals from a variety of political and social backgrounds find themselves with a disease that destroys them from within, and there is nothing they can do to prevent it from happening. The gulag was one symptom of the symbolical illness that spread in the Soviet Union!

A must-read for people interested in the connection between literature and history. Put on a warm jacket, though, it is going to be freezing cold!

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### **Horace Derwent says**

that day, some people drink their first beer or have their first kiss kissed

that day, some people wreck their car on some road and some of them tear it all to pieces

that day, people lose cherry or goes banana

that day, some people find jesus sitting on their bedroom wall and whispering to them "it's alright, kiddo"

that day, some junkies swallow their pain and a bullet down together into their throat, meanwhile, some human flesh stuffed wolves feel joy under the warm bright sunlight with their naked eyes open wide

...

on that day i see the devil, he tells me that violence has made good friends with lie

...i live in china...born and raised

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### **Jan-Maat says**

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn had two huge strokes of luck with *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

Firstly Khrushchev allowed its publication in the journal *Novy Mir*. This is something that should make readers cautious. It was the first story published in the Soviet Union set in the Gulag system, it wasn't a a searing indictment of the soviet system it was something that was considered fit for publication in the context

of a society which was making tentative steps into de-Stalinisation.

Secondly it was published during the Cold War and was seized upon as a searing indictment of the soviet system by the wider world. This provided Solzhenitsyn with an excited international readership and funding for translation which was only to dry up midway through his Red Wheel cycle because the Cold War was over at which point the mysterious agencies that were keen to have him translated into English during the Cold War unaccountably ran out of interest.

In retrospect it strikes me that Ivan Denisovich's life in the Gulag is pretty good compared to what I have heard of life in British prisons. He gets to work on a building site, he's with people all day long, he isn't locked up in a single cell for maybe twenty hours a day with nothing meaningful to do. The regime is mild in comparison with Ginzberg's *Into the Whirlwind* (view spoiler), probably a fair reflection of the differences between winding up in that system in the post war period rather than in the 1930s but above all this is a book that needs to stand along side *Notes from the House of the Dead* as a stage in the self creation of a writer. Curiously both writers end up as nationalists (view spoiler), the question for every reader to find their own answer to is whether that is despite or because of their prison experiences?

One of my old lecturers, a gloriously opinionated old woman who would occasionally wear horse brasses as though she was the embodiment of the rural response to the Beastie Boys, was of the opinion that *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was not only the best work of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn from a literary point of view but also one that had been much improved in the process of being translated into English.

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### **Brad says**

I want to appreciate life the way Ivan Denisovich Shukov does.

I want to take pride in my work; I want to taste every bite of sausage, suck the marrow out of every fish bone, enjoy every puff of every cigarette, bask in a sunset, watch the moon cross the sky, fall asleep content; I want to focus on the necessities of living; I want to focus on life, but I have too much. It's not much compared to most everyone I know, but it is still too much.

And because it is too much I can't appreciate life the way Ivan Denisovich Shukov does. Reading about it is not enough, but right now it is what I have.

I'll keep trying.

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### **Mostafa Galal says**

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### **Mohammed Ali says**

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### **Anna says**

My copy of the 1963 novel that won Alexander Solzhenitsyn the Nobel Prize is thirty-six years old, and it looks it--not just because it is dog-eared and the pages tinged yellow, but because the jacket copy is thick with Cold War fever.

This copy, for example, is "THE COMPLETE, UNEXPURGATED TRANSLATION BY RONALD HINGLEY AND MAX HAYWARD." One Day is "A SHATTERING PORTRAIT OF LIFE INSIDE STALINIST RUSSA." It is also:

"the terrifying story of an almost unbelievable man-made hell--the Soviet work camps--and of one man's heroic struggle to survive in the face of the most determined efforts to destroy him--a scathing indictment of Communist tyranny that has shaken the whole Soviet world."

My edition also, conveniently, includes Solzhenitsyn's "now-classic letter of protest against censorship." The author himself spent eight years in these labor camps, and three more years in exile, all for the crime of making derogatory comments about Stalin in a letter to a friend.

I was bemused by the shrieking of the book cover, but you understand that I began the story of Ivan Denisovich with the understanding that I would be led to dark places. I anticipated something depressing. Probably somebody, or many bodies, would die. There would be no color. It would be a Tragedy, fitted into a narrative understanding of Hope and Human Possibility.

I happen to be a big lover of big old Russian books. I was ready for it all.

But something strange happened, something that turned my expectations around and made me admire Solzhenitsyn all the more.

This one day of Ivan Denisovitch Shukhov's life is actually a rather good one. Check out one of the last paragraphs:

Shukhov went to sleep, and he was very happy. He'd had a lot of luck today. They hadn't put him in the cooler. The gang hadn't been chased out to work in the Socialist Community Development. He'd finagled an

extra bowl of mush at noon. The boss had gotten them good rates for their work. He'd felt good making that wall. They hadn't found that piece of steel (he'd hidden on his body) in the frisk. Ceasar had paid him off in the evening. He'd bought some tobacco. And he'd gotten over that sickness.

Nothing had spoiled the day and it had been almost happy.

This is the author's brilliant move. In a short novel in a dreary and unjust landscape, he gives us a protagonist who we come to like, and who sleeps happily at the end. It is the dissonance of what makes Shukhov so happy, and what we readers hope for him--it is that gap in between--that makes this novel sing.

Solzhenitsyn takes readerly expectations--like the ones I had--and turns them on us. We keep waiting for something to go terribly wrong for Shukhov that breaks that day up. But of all the things that happen--the scenes--things turn, if any way, in his favor. That "Tragedy" catharsis is never fulfilled; it's just an ordinary. But the narrative makes clear that this--only this--is the best Shukhov can hope for. He falls asleep at the end, and we know soon he will wake up, and the morning will look exactly like it did on page one.

I think it's a wonderful narrative strategy, and its couched in plain speech--short paragraphs, lots of dialogue, few adjectives and adverbs, zero lyricism--that is absolutely appropriate.

Another terrific narrative strategy: naming. From the title, you open the book ready to meet "Ivan Denisovich." Rather, you start following around "Shukhov," and it takes a bit to realize they are one and the same. The few times when Shukhov is called by his title name are significant. Again, Solzhenitsyn reveals impressive ability to manipulate reader expectations. When we come to meet the protagonist, we're looking for his dignified, formal, public name--full first name and patronymic, classic traditional Russian. Who we find in his stead is a man reduced to the blunt two syllables of his last name. He is at first unrecognizable to us, who've never met him, as he might be also unrecognizable to his former self, or to the family he is forgetting.

But there is a thing about the language. With all due respect to Mssrs. Hingley and Hayward, I didn't like my translation. It can be hard to parse out responsibility for the language of a translated book, but I feel pretty confident in laying this one in the hands of the H-H team.

First of all, I was frustrated by the rendition of the work camp slang and swearing, which is posited as being hard-edged. Some of the awfully dated 1970s slang is worthy of eye-rolls, but forgivable. Other times it wasn't so much the old-timey insult that threw me off, but an awkwardly worded phrase construction that is intended to spit out or shouted, but comes off as formal and ridiculous. It did pull me out of the story. Often, actually, in this heavily voiced novel.

Second, the translators chose a weird strategy for--well, you can't call them endnotes or footnotes, because they appear in the beginning of the book, all of them, before chapter one. None of them are numbered; they are marked in the text as an asterisk that alerts the reader to turn back to the beginning of the book and run her finger down the list to find the word that appears after the last word she looked up. It's bizarre. I didn't like how it made me move through the book. On the bright side, the explanations were simple and clear and few.

But if Solzhenitsyn can survive Soviet labor camp, he can survive a poor translation.

The author won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970 "for the ethical force with which he has pursued the indispensable traditions of Russian literature." He was not able to speak at the prize ceremony--it seems that

his acceptance speech was smuggled out of the USSR. But this is what he said (and it is, in full, really quite something):

"But woe to that nation whose literature is disturbed by the intervention of power. Because that is not just a violation against 'freedom of print,' it is the closing down of the heart of the nation, a slashing to pieces of its memory. The nation ceases to be mindful of itself, it is deprived of its spiritual unity, and despite a supposedly common language, compatriots suddenly cease to understand one another. Silent generations grow old and die without ever having talked about themselves, either to each other or to their descendants. When writers such as Achmatova and Zamjatin--interred alive throughout their lives--are condemned to create in silence until they die, never hearing the echo of their written words, then that is not only their personal tragedy, but a sorrow to the whole nation, a danger to the whole nation.

"In some cases moreover--when as a result of such a silence the whole of history ceases to be understood in its entirety--it is a danger to the whole of mankind."

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### **Sidharth Vardhan says**

"“Can a man who's warm understand one who's freezing?”

What I have to say might spoil the book. And so here are two quotes from two other Nobel laureates, the first describes the book well enough and the second is in case you feel depressed after on condition of humanity after reading it:

Writer " cannot put himself today in the service of those who make history; he is at the service of those who suffer it."

-Albert Camus

"You can cut all the flowers but you cannot keep Spring from coming."

? Pablo Neruda

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### **Ahmad Sharabiani says**

?Odin den Ivana Denisovicha = One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn  
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## **karen says**

it's all about perspective.

yeah, ivan denisovich shukov is in a soviet labor camp, where he is freezing and has to work at bullshit tasks and is being punished for something he didn't even get to do (because being a spy is cool, while being punished for being a spy when you didn't even get to have the fun of being a spy is lame), and it's all terrible with no end in sight, but come on.

he got to sleep late. his punishment for oversleeping is he had to wash some floors - indoors - instead of working out in the russian subzero nightmare. he got extra food time and time again, he didn't get caught with his secret contraband, he networked and got some karma for future favors in his karma bank, he got some smokes and was recognized for his hard work, and he had a fever, which had to be good for keeping him a little warmer than those people who didn't have fevers.

pretty good day all around.

me, i am not in a russian gulag, but i didn't get to sleep late. it is nearly 7 pm and i have not had any food today, nor any cigarettes, i have not been praised for my hard work, even though i did indeed work very very hard today (you try keeping your composure when someone yells "hey" at you from across the floor and with no preamble thrusts his sweaty cell phone at you so you can talk to his friend who wants books about russian icons, but doesn't have any titles, but commands you to just "type it in" and he will "memorize" the list. this man has very optimistic ideas about the search capabilities of the computers at barnes and noble) after work i had to go to staples because my power strip exploded, then to the hardware store and the organic market, even though all i wanted to do was go home to have the pleasure of working on my ALA presentation for the rest of my friday night. i did not network. i have no future karmic payload coming. as for the contraband... well, that's my little secret.

still and all - i feel like karen brissetova's day was more exhausting and less rewarding overall.

and i don't even get to see any snow.

snow, sausage, and cigarettes sound pretty good to me, man.

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**Paul Bryant says**

this was like the last couple of holidays i have been forced to go on with my family. they make you do all this crap and then they make you pretend you are having a good time doing it as if just doing it is not enough for them you have to keep saying you are having a good time and grinning like a babboon. so i could see where the guy in this book was coming from. but that didnt make it suck less. they made me go in a zoo which is gross the animals are not really like on tv and some of them resent you you can see it. the guy in this book is in prison for some stuff he probably didn't do and I can relate to that because i probably didn't do all the shit they say i did all the time. you know what i'm saying. this world is a giant prison i think. thats called existentialism. its tough ivan dennisovitch didnt' live in a time when there are ipods because at least you can listen to your stuff whn you are in your cell waiting to get raped . anyway this was better than gullivers travels like how could it be worse anyway, that would just not be possible unless its by dickens, but it wasn't as good as Chained Heat, Barbed Wire Dolls and Bare Behind Bars, which are movies about prisons which are better than this book because the weather is a lot better which means that the ladies in the prisons have clothing that falls off a lot lol.

also just a little thing but guys if you are going to write a novel have a name you can pronounce, even if i liked this i couldnt tell anyone he should have called him self Alex Sol that would have been a good cool name so that will be wy this book is unknown to any person that is not a teacher

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