

**One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich**  
**From Dostoevsky (1821-1881) to Solzhenitsyn (1918-2007)**

On Censorship; Dissent; Imprisonment; Banishment;  
Hard Labour in Concentration Camps → Gulags  
Intelligentsia

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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. Versus the writer as witness of his epoch; as the conscience of his people.**

**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...*

**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 (see above)**

**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”

**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.*

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 Setting:

2) The characters:

- Tiurin
- Buinovsky
- Alyosha
- Fetiokov
- The Tartar
- Tsezar
- Volkovoi
- Der
- Kilgas
- Ivan Denisovich Shukov

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

4) The Esthetic Dimension:

## 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?