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One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich: A Response to Repression

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Occasionally a book is written which immediately commands the attention of a people or touches especially well a responsive chord in the minds and hearts of readers. Such a book is One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich by Alexander Solzhenitsyn. (Hereafter it will be referred to as One Day.) It is my thesis in this review that Solzhenitsyn is striking at the basic premise of inhumanity that dominates the totalitarian Soviet regime; furthermore, that he is motivated by the fundamental presupposition of relativistic, optimistic humanism. In a time when one hears complaints of the irrelevancy of much academic work, this topic emphasizes the pertinancy of the study of literature as it affects one's world-and-life view and the political-social structure in which he lives.

One Day traces the activities of prisoner Ivan Denisovich Shukhov, in a Soviet work camp over a period of twenty-four hours. Shukhov, an ex-carpenter, had been arrested while serving during World War II. His only crime was becoming separated from his unit. Condemned to ten years of hard labor on a trumped-up charge of spying, Shukhov's prison routine consisted of 5 A.M. reveille, a thin gruel for all meals, constant fear of frisks, guards, squealers and demanding construction work in the sub-zero temperatures of the Siberian plain.

Solzhenitsyn writes as one who has experienced camp life, which lends reliability and an atmosphere of authenticity to his work. The author, born in 1918 into a family of Cossak intellectuals, graduated from the University of Rostov with a degree in mathematics. Later he took corres-

pondence courses in literature from the University of Moscow. Solzhenitsyn fought throughout World War II as an artillery captain, twice being awarded medals for valor. In 1945 he was arrested while stationed in Germany and sentenced to eight years in prison; later, this was extended three more years. His crime was writing of Stalin in a letter as an inept military planner and referring to him as "the whiskered one." Solzhenitsyn was released in 1956, rehabilitated the next year, and was allowed to work as a mathematics teacher. Immediately he began to write.

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One Day is Solzhenitsyn's first published work. Although it was written between 1956-1958, he made no attempt to have it published until 1961, since he thought its chances were nil. The Twenty-Second Congress of the Soviet Communist Party indicated a new policy of condemning the now-dead Stalin in 1961, which provided Solzhenitsyn with the opportunity to publish his work. First printed in the Novy Mir, a relatively liberal literary magazine in Russia, One Day had previously been personally approved by Khrushchev.

Solzhenitsyn's first novel met with widespread acclaim in Russia. He appeared to be introducing a new laxness on the part of government censors and greater freedom for writers and intellectuals. Solzhenitsyn became the rallying point for his country's dissident intellectuals. Pravda, the official news voice of the Soviet government, carried this review:

But why is it that upon reading this remarkable story not only is one's heart wrung with grief but a light penetrates one's soul? It is because of the story's profound humanity, because in it people remained people even in an atmosphere of mockery.¹

Solzhenitsyn has continued the tradition of Chekhov with his sharp prose and of Tolstoy with his bleak realism. Solzhenitsyn has come to attention at a time when Russian literature is in danger of being forgotten in its homeland and obscured by mediocre, government-approved writers. He utilizes the Russian literary symbol of "the simple heart" to convey his message. The main character, Shukhov, is such a symbol. He represents all common men. Solzhenitsyn thus broke the Soviet standard by not portraying the hero as proud and glorified by socialism, but rather as a "humble, utterly bewildered plain man who wants nothing more than to live out a normal working life as best he can" (preface, p. x).

Solzhenitsyn works well with his main character, giving him a depth and personality which are becoming a rarity in modern fiction. Although the plot lacks developed action to reveal the main character, the reader comes to know and identify with him through his daily activities, opinions, and personal responses to harsh regimentation. Other strong characters, like Alyoshka the Christian and the Captain, balance the plot and give the author opportunity to express his philosophy of life.

A very laudable technique of Solzhenitsyn, and one that Christian writers and readers should appreciate, is his method of bringing violence to the forefront without actually demonstrating it in gruesome detail. The author doesn't have to concentrate on certain acts of violence and force. He just takes one day in a plain worker's life to show the arbitrary brutality and the injustice of the Stalin era. By implication the author draws a parallel between life in the camp and those on the outside. The camp wasn't an exception, it was a "micro-

cosm of that society as a whole" (preface, p. x).

The language of One Day is that of the common Russian working man. It is a combination of local idiom and prisoner slang -- consequently, including much profanity. Although the Hayward and Hingley translation is recommended by reviewers, its attempt to remain true to the spirit and tone of the original Russian text includes many vulgar phrases and words. It was Solzhenitsyn's intent to use such language, and in my estimation it is a flaw in an otherwise praiseworthy work.

Another criticism is that One Day is unnecessarily devoid of emotion. One suspects that the author wrote as if anticipating totalitarian censorship. The excessive control and self-denying restraint by American standards seems to demand Solzhenitsyn's extreme realism and limits his imaginative power. Russian literature traditionally, however, has been less emotionally dominated than American literature. As citizens of a democracy, Americans are accustomed to expressing their feelings and opinions at will. Living in an authoritarian state has conditioned its authors toward caution and discipline, and has produced a distinctive style of writing.

The main theme of One Day is the dignity and inherent goodness of the nature of the common man. Solzhenitsyn describes many types of men who adapt to the cruelty of a prison camp, but he also shows that an undeniable line of humanity and virtue remains common to all those under duress. Even in the camp mess hall there were some things a man with any kind of pride would not do, like eating with one's cap on, spitting fish bones from the watery soup onto the floor, or eating hurriedly. As an old gang boss of the camps said, "It's the law of the jungle here, fellows. But even here you can live. The first to go is the guy who licks out bowls, puts his faith in the infirmary, or squeals to the screws." Solzhenitsyn portrays his characters as ordinary people with such strength of character that the camp could not defeat them, could not humiliate

them to the extent that no action would be unthinkable or below them. Shukhov once observed an old prisoner at his meal, and commented:

You could see his mind was set on one thing--never to give in. He didn't put his eight ounces in all the filth on the table like everybody else, but laid it on a clean little piece of rag that'd been washed over and over again. (page 178)

Shukhov repeatedly demonstrated that a prisoner had not been really captured and controlled by the state until all

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sense of decency was destroyed. Tobacco was one of the rare amenities allowed in the camp, and those who possessed some of that precious leaf were the object of jealousy and conniving. But Shukhov would never beg for a cigarette: "...he wouldn't stoop as low as Fetyukov and look straight at the guy's mouth."

All these little defense mechanisms were important for preserving the prisoner's self-esteem, and consequently reaffirmed that the integrity and dignity of each individual was his most prized and essential possession. Once it was gone, all was lost. With this point of view Solzhenitsyn evinces a strong faith in mankind. And what kept them [Gang 104] going? Their empty bellies were held in rope belts. The cold was fierce. There was no shelter and no fire. But they'd come and so life began again. (page 68)

No matter what the conditions or adversi-

ties, man can overcome his obstacles. Solzhenitsyn proclaims that civilized man can overcome evil by his own inner strength. In his Nobel prize lecture he wrote:

The salvation of mankind lies only in making everything the concern of all...Literature, one of the most sophisticated and sensitive instruments available to human beings, has been one of the first to pick up and to join in expressing this feeling of the growing unity of mankind.²

cerning the inhumane nature of totalitarianism. Shukhov explains, for example:

Even a prisoner's thoughts weren't free but kept coming back to the same thing, kept turning the same things over again. Will they find that bread in the mattress? Will the medics put me on the sick list this evening? (page 45)

To the prisoners, the laws of the Soviets seemed to encompass everything. After being told that the government had de-

"Solzhenitsyn has inadvertently claimed one of God's truths as his own. In respecting the common man, and recognizing his need for dignity and integrity, Solzhenitsyn has hit upon certain elements of the image of God in man. Although his response is a disobedient one, one can see the effect of common grace in his defense against the degradation and manipulation of individuals."

Solzhenitsyn's response to the oppression of the Communist system could easily have been one of despair and hopelessness. Instead, his romantic faith in the goodness of the common man leads him to write, to encourage free discussion, to defy government censors. Solzhenitsyn has inadvertently claimed one of God's truths as his own. In respecting the common man, and recognizing his need for dignity and integrity, Solzhenitsyn has hit upon certain elements of the image of God in man. Although his response is a disobedient one, one can see the effect of common grace in his defense against the degradation and manipulation of individuals. The interplay of sin can also be perceived in Solzhenitsyn's absolutization of man's abilities and the reductionism involved in denying a power larger than man.

Interrelated and woven throughout One Day are various subordinate themes which need to be briefly mentioned. Solzhenitsyn makes many observations con-

cerning the inhumane nature of totalitarianism. Shukhov thought, "Did the sun come under their laws, too?"

The oppression within the camp as well as in the outside society tends to disrupt human relationships. If a man's true nature were allowed to function unhampered, Solzhenitsyn feels sure men would enjoy more empathy with each other. But under Communist dictatorship Shukhov remarks, "...if you didn't help yourself, nobody else would" and "When you're cold, don't expect sympathy from someone who's warm." Shukhov's comments contain an element of truth, but it is equally unnatural for man in his sinful condition to act in a loving and considerate manner.

A peculiar characteristic of prison life is its emphasis on collectivism and denial of individuality. The camp commandant had ordered prisoners always to move and congregate in groups. A prisoner could never be alone, and always

worked in groups. Prisoners were known by number, and everyone dressed in prison garb. A significant response to this policy was Shukhov's rebellion in the symbol of a spoon. He had made it himself out of aluminum wire which had been cast in sand. He had inscribed on it "Ust-Izhma, 1944," which represented a camp that forced its prisoners to harvest timber. The spoon was always in Shukhov's boot, and was directly contrary to camp law. But this was something Shukhov had constructed himself, independently, and in defiance of the authorities. It was a symbol of creativity, originality, individuality--everything that the harsh regime of camp life tried to stamp out.

Solzhenitsyn's view of God is not the main theme, but it certainly pervades his work. Shukhov personifies the autonomy of man, but a Christian character is also included, named Alyoshka. This Christian is a baptist from Western Ukraine. Shukhov admired the Christians because the camp couldn't change their ways. Camp regulations were to them "like water off a duck's back." They prayed before meals, were polite, addressed prisoners by their full name, and rejoiced to spread their convictions to others. Once Shukhov prayed when in trouble, and he escaped punishment. Nonetheless, Shukhov refused to become a Christian. He acknowledged the existence of God, yet declared him impotent:

The thing is, you can pray as much as you like, but they won't take anything off your sentence and you'll just have to sit it out, every day of it, from reveille to lights out. (page 205)

Shukhov could tell that Alyoshka's faith was real and sincere. He says, "It was Christ told you to come here, ...But why am I here?" Solzhenitsyn never really gives Shukhov an answer.

In summary, One Day is a great literary work. Its popularity can not be attributed to Soviet politics and cold war tensions alone. Ernest Powell, reviewer for Nation, claims that such an opinion "to

regard Ivan Denisovich as merely another expose' of Soviet slave labor is vaguely akin to reading The Divine Comedy as a political tract."³

Solzhenitsyn was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1970 in recognition of his talent and courage. This international recognition has enabled him to defy his government to act against him. He verbally attacked Soviet leaders for their opposition to his writing, saying this shows "how tenaciously they cling to the bloody past and how they want to drag it with them, like a sealed up sack, into the future."⁴

In February, 1974, Solzhenitsyn was stripped of his citizenship and deported. He had challenged his government and suffered the consequences. Yet, in a sense he won the confrontation. His writings, which include The First Circle, Cancer Ward, and The Gulag Archipelago, have awakened the conscience of the West and that of some of his countrymen. Russian citizens were given a glimmer of hope that some freedom of expression would be allowed--although this limited freedom was short-lived.

I will conclude my review with Solzhenitsyn's own evaluation of his work:

I have fulfilled my duty to the dead, and this gives me relief and calmness. Once the truth seemed doomed to die. It was beaten. It was drowned. It had turned to ashes. But now the truth has come alive. No one will be able to destroy it.⁵

Footnotes

1. Zhores A. Medvedev, Ten Years After Ivan Denisovich. Trans. Hilary Sternberg (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973) p. 11.

2. Ibid., page 40.

3. Ernst Powell, Nation "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich" volume 190 February 2, 1963, page 100.

4. Time, January 28, 1974.

5. Ibid.