Pre-reading: *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*

**Who was Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn?**

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn knew firsthand the power of the state to suppress writers. He risked imprisonment or worse punishments to reveal to the world the tyranny of the Soviet government under Joseph Stalin. His first published novel, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, did more than expose the horrors of a vast system of labor camps for political enemies; it also revealed the author’s belief in the common man’s ability to survive with dignity and integrity.

Born in Kislovodsk in 1918 and educated in Rostov-on-Don, Russia, Solzhenitsyn served in the Soviet army at the beginning of World War II. His difficulties with the government began in 1945, when he was arrested for having written critical remarks about the dictatorial ruler Joseph Stalin in a letter to a friend. After the letter was intercepted by army censors, Solzhenitsyn was sentenced without a trial to eight years in prison. He served part of that term in a forced-labor camp. Ironically, he was released in 1953, on the day that Stalin died. Under the horrendous conditions of the prison camp, Solzhenitsyn managed to write on tiny scraps of paper, which he destroyed as soon as he had memorized their contents.

Exiled after his sentence was completed to a rural area in Kazakhstan, he taught physics and wrote surreptitiously, knowing he was being watched. When *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was published, in 1962, Solzhenitsyn turned to writing full time. He was admitted to the Union of Soviet Writers and hailed by critics in the official newspapers. Solzhenitsyn’s official government favor proved to be short-lived. Before he could publish his second novel, *Premier Nikita Khrushchev*, who had allowed publication of the first novel, was removed from power. Khrushchev’s successors confiscated Solzhenitsyn’s writings, and government officials criticized and harassed him.

In 1967, Solzhenitsyn responded by writing a scathing letter about censorship and repression to the Fourth National Congress of Soviet Writers. Although his manuscripts were eventually returned, Solzhenitsyn continued to be denounced by Soviet officials; and his works, barred from publication. He published his own short stories, poetry, and plays and circulated them illegally. His novels were published outside of the Soviet Union in both Russian and English. Solzhenitsyn was expelled from the Union of Soviet Writers in 1969.

On the international scene, Solzhenitsyn was awarded the 1970 Nobel Prize in literature. However, the more he was admired in Europe and the United States, the less he was tolerated by his own government. In 1974 Solzhenitsyn was arrested and then expelled from the Soviet Union. While living first in Switzerland and then in the United States, Solzhenitsyn spoke out on what he considered to be the shortcomings of Western democracy and its institutions. In the late 1980s, when the Soviet Union adopted a policy of glasnost, or openness toward the West, the Russian government restored Solzhenitsyn’s citizenship. He ended his exile and returned to Russia in 1994. Since then, he has published a number of political essays and books.

**Meet Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn**

When you’ve been pitched head first into hell you just write about it.
—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Although Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn earned his university degree in mathematics and physics, his passion was literature and writing:

“The desire to write, and the unconscious idea (unprompted by anyone) that I ought for some reason to become a writer, arose in me at a very early age, at nine or ten, when I was not even capable of understanding what it was like to be a writer or why one wrote. From that time on, throughout my youth, I wrote a great deal of nonsense in various genres. But for a long time I did not come to know either my linguistic or my natural environment. It was only just before the war, having visited Central Russia, that I
discovered for myself this unique region, where I could become not just a writer in general but a Russian writer."

When Solzhenitsyn won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1970, he quoted a Russian proverb in his acceptance speech: "One word of truth shall outweigh the whole world." Solzhenitsyn’s goal has been to preserve the truth of his nation’s history against what he sees as attempts by Soviet authorities to distort or obliterate it. "Literature transmits . . . condensed experience from generation to generation," he has observed. It "becomes the living memory of a nation."

In the Soviet Union in the early 1960s, the government placed heavy restrictions on the subjects that writers could deal with. The truth about many of the central events in Soviet history—World War II, the collectivization of agriculture (that is, the combining of small farms into large government-supervised units), and the vast network of prison camps—remained off-limits. Because One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich concerned itself to some degree with all of those taboo subjects, the novel’s publication in 1962 was a ground-breaking surprise. However, even as the Soviet government began to permit some criticism of the Stalinist era Solzhenitsyn was writing about, the author still had to tone down some of his opinions in order to get the first version of the novel published. In the version you are about to read, Solzhenitsyn’s original ideas have been restored.

One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich not only illustrates the horrors of the totalitarian repression of human rights but also makes the universal observation that “freedom is found only when a [person] has been stripped of everything.” Once again, Solzhenitsyn says it best: One can build the Empire State Building, discipline the Prussian army, raise the official hierarchy above the throne of the Almighty, yet fail to overcome the unaccountable spiritual superiority of certain human beings. [The task of the writer]is to treat universal and eternal themes: the mysteries of the heart and conscience, the collision between life and death, [and] the triumph over spiritual anguish.

**SETTING OF THE NOVEL: THE TIME AND PLACE**

After the violent overthrow of the last of the Russian czars in 1917, the new rulers of Russia dealt just as harshly with their political adversaries as the czars had done. Prison camps for criminals and political dissidents were built in sparsely populated Siberia and administered by secret police. One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich takes place in one of these camps. In order to move the Soviet Union from an agricultural society to an industrial nation, the Soviet rulers Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin introduced a series of five-year plans. In addition to abolishing the private ownership of land and nationalizing banks, these plans created heavy demands for workers.

Beginning about 1929, when workers were needed for the construction of canals, railroads, highways, factories, and cities, the government increasingly depended on forced labor. Criminals and political enemies worked side by side. Sentenced at first to three-year terms, prisoners found their sentences randomly increased at the whim of camp leaders or government officials. The first group of forced laborers consisted of farmers who had lost their land to collectivization, but religious believers of all denominations, members of minority groups, and anyone who failed to perform his or her assigned industrial tasks soon followed. During World War II, many soldiers accused of being responsible for the Russian army’s defeats were also sent to these camps, as were soldiers like Ivan Denisovich who had been taken prisoner. After the war, soldiers who had had any contact with the British or American forces were imprisoned. In the novel, Captain Buynovsky’s “crime” was that he had
been assigned as a liaison officer to the British navy and had received a commendation for his services.

Forced labor camps in the Soviet Union. Each dot represents a set of bearings, which in turn signifies dozens of camps

Who was Joseph Stalin?

Joseph Stalin (1879 -1953). He was the second political leader of the Soviet Union, after Vladimir Lenin. He was a totalitarian ruler, and stayed in power by removing anyone he thought might be a threat to him. His ideas and policies turned the Soviet Union into a powerful, modern, nation, the largest state on earth, but also led to the deaths of millions of people. This form of communism was later called Stalinism.

Stalin was responsible for setting up labor camps like the one in the novel, was one of the most controversial world leaders of all time. Ruling the Soviet Union for twenty-nine years, he was despised as a despot and revered as an infallible leader. He brought victory in war and pride in industrialization; he was also responsible for mass murder and famine.
Stalin’s effect on the Soviet Union was so enormous that destroying his legacy later became an official policy. De-Stalinization began in 1956, when Nikita Khrushchev denounced the cult of Stalin’s personality and the horrors of Stalin’s regime.

The end of de-Stalinization in the early 1960s marked a rise in the criticism of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and his work. In 1964 he was nominated for the Lenin Prize in literature but failed to win the award. Citing his first novel as unworthy of the prize, an editorial in the newspaper Pravda criticized the author for not distinguishing between “honorable and good people” on the one hand and “criminals and traitors” on the other.

What is the Gulag?

Gulag describes a vast network of slave labor camps operated by the Soviet Union from the 1930s to the 1950s. From the time that the Soviet Union was founded in 1917, it imprisoned people who disagreed and spoke out against it.

During the 1920s, the Soviet Union imprisoned more and more people that disagreed with it. It believed that it was better to put these people to work and make their labor and goods part of the national economy.

The Gulag system was officially created in 1930. During the 1930s there was a lot of fear of the Soviet government. Police officials were encouraged to round up and imprison many citizens for the most trivial offenses, even if they were innocent, and this caused the Gulag system to swell. Stalin used The Criminal Code and Article 58, a set of rules and laws, to put innocent people in the gulag who might have possibly been against him. By 1939 there were 1.3 million people in labor camps. The Gulag system died during the 1950s after the death of Stalin.

It is thought that as many as 20 million people had been in a Gulag camp at one time or another.
**Key Terms - One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich**

**Kolkhoz** - Russian “commune” or collective farm

**Kasha** - a cereal commonly eaten in Eastern Europe.

**kulak** – (n) wealthy independent farmers

**zeks** - a Russian slang term for a prison or forced labor camp inmate

**Russian money:**

- **kopecks**
- **Rubles**

**oprichinki** - The Oprichniki were responsible for the torture and murder of internal enemies of the Tsar.

**Taiga:** Large area of forest

**Tartar:** are an indigenous people of Russia

**Valenki** - Boots worn by prisoners
Pre-reading Questions:

Who was Alexander Solzhenitsyn?

Who was Joseph Stalin?

What was The Criminal Code and Article 58?

What was the Gulag?

What was the USSR?

What is communism?

What are the key terms?