

Ivan Denisovich: Towards the Repossession of History

by Francis Barker

The view of Alexander Solzhenitsyn projected in the press, both popular and literary, in the bourgeois countries is of some kind of embattled Western liberal, who, amid the severities of 'totalitarianism', continues resolutely to articulate the values that underpin the Free World. We do not see him treated as a Russian socialist who after decades of official dogma is conducting a genuine struggle to come to terms, artistically, with recent Soviet history, to deal with real problems of common life and its valuation in a transitional society. Nor is he even shown to be the author of a certain kind of typically Russian social novel discernibly in the tradition of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky—but always as the Scourge of Communism.

Naturally, it is easy for the champions of the Western bourgeoisie to appropriate Solzhenitsyn to their own ideological purposes (along with many other 'dissident intellectuals'): do not, after all, the demands most often raised by the 'cultural opposition' such as those for freedom of speech and of publication—the civil rights most cherished by the intelligentsia—have the very appearance of 'liberal' demands? This mystification is easy to dispel. Noticeably, the Western press *only* reports the activities of the intellectuals: widespread factory occupations, food riots, work stoppages, street demonstrations, and the storming of the party headquarters in Novocherkassk by local factory workers (all of which took place when Khrushchev announced rises in meat and dairy prices in 1962, the year of Solzhenitsyn's first publication) are not reported in the West with such alacrity.¹ And in any case, as Harding remarks, freedom of speech is by no means a liberal call in the Russian context: by raising demands which the state bureaucracy dare not satisfy, the intellectuals must eventually consider the abolition of the bureaucracy itself and a means of achieving this, and thus their dissent falls within the dynamic of permanent revolution.²

Solzhenitsyn has also been used from the other side as a pawn in the ideological conflicts of the Cold War. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was published at the express decision of Khrushchev,

¹Inherent in this selectivity is a concealed and erroneous universalisation of the class system of Western Europe. The apologist for capitalism mistakenly sees the face of his own class in the dissident intellectuals, whereas 'working class' militancy he finds understandably repugnant.

²See *Opposition Currents in the U.S.S.R.* by Ted Harding in *International*, Vol. 2, No. 1.

and became a landmark in the 'liberalisation' which followed the secret denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Party Congress. Books about life in the labour camps suddenly became very popular in the Soviet Union, and even the most puppet-like of official authors leapt onto the self-critical bandwagon. Solzhenitsyn, a retiring man by nature, remained markedly silent throughout this, sensing no doubt that his book was being used in what amounted to a mere orchestration of public opinion—the liberalisation being more a change in official vocabulary intended to facilitate a modification in the rigidly isolationist pattern of early Cold War relations with the West than a real restructuring of Soviet society. And by 1967 the ideological tide had turned and Solzhenitsyn became the tool of American imperialism, accused of conspiring with foreign publishers to malign the Soviet Union.

In this article I want to examine the one text, *Ivan Denisovich*, not as a document to be appropriated by one side or the other in the ideological warfare between state bureaucracy and Western bourgeoisie, but rather as a literary production, which is nonetheless based in the history of a particular society at a specific point in its development. The experience which forms the immediate subject matter of the book is that of life in one of the Beria's 'special' labour camps for political prisoners—the epithet 'political' being more an indication of the article of the Soviet penal code under which they were accused and convicted rather than a description of their crimes. More often than not the inmates of the special camps were merely prisoners of war liberated from the Germans, repatriated and then imprisoned for desertion. This was Solzhenitsyn's experience—he was arrested in 1945 and released into exile in 1953 when Stalin died—and clearly this book (like *Cancer Ward*) draws heavily upon the writer's biography. But one of the book's great strengths (and, as I shall show later, one of Solzhenitsyn's weaknesses) is that its method of indictment of Stalinism through the realistic portrayal of its repressive machinery depends upon the absence of explicitly critical valuations. It is not written in a tone of bitter recrimination, but rather in an unemotional, understated manner. The novel stands close to its material, leaving the reader to draw his own conclusions about the nature of Stalinism, and indeed, to reconstruct by inference those of Solzhenitsyn. Obviously we are dealing here, to a certain extent, with a reflection of the immediate conditions out of which the author wrote: we do not know how many more outspoken books have been burned by the K.G.B. Yet Lukács'³ endorsement of the realism of *Ivan Denisovich* as in itself progressive after so many years of officially optimistic literature, while no doubt forming a part of Lukács' general case for socialist realism, is surely valid. An attempt to portray the Stalinist and immediately post-Stalinist period even with a merely empirical

³See Georg Lukács, *Solzhenitsyn*, London, 1970.

truth paves the way for literary work more authentically radical than Solzhenitsyn's; unfortunately the author's own later books have failed to fulfil this promise. My case about *Ivan Denisovich*, then, is that it marks a turning point for Russian literature, but the very qualities which establish it as the precursor to a real repossession of history preclude Solzhenitsyn from this achievement. This contention will only be validated in a close analysis of the text.

The very title of the book initiates one of the main ways in which the experience of the labour camps is portrayed; we are offered one day, a temporal fragment, in one man's biography. And this day is itself atomised. It begins with a guard hammering on the iron rail to signal reveille, followed immediately by the ninety minutes before work which, Ivan Denisovich reflects, 'belonged to him, not to the authorities'; and it proceeds through a series of fragmented periods punctuated by bells, hooters and numerous roll-calls, all of which are signals that the prisoners must adopt some new posture, must begin or stop work, must eat or sleep. Time is reduced to a merely repetitive successiveness. And these fragmented periods are divided into three types: those such as working hours which belong to the authorities, those which are the prisoners', and the marginal ones which are negotiable, to be seized by one side or the other. Meal times, for example, belong to the prisoners:

The only good thing about skilly was that it was hot, but Shukhov's portion had grown quite cold. However, he ate it with concentration. No need to hurry, not even for a house on fire. Sleep apart, the only time a prisoner lives for himself is ten minutes in the morning at breakfast, five minutes over dinner and five at supper (p. 17).⁴

And the offhand 'sleep apart' is significant; the only extended period of time which belongs to the prisoners is when time, for the conscious mind at least, is reduced even from successiveness to a kind of stasis. And in a wider sense stasis is the typical experience of time for the prisoners, for:

The days rolled by in the the camp—they were over before you could say 'knife'. But the years, they never rolled by: they never moved by a second (p. 56).

Time is a barren element, composed of sequence without development, in which the prisoners are stranded, deprived even of the means of its simple arithmetical computation. As Shukhov muses in the sick-bay:

No clocks or watches ticked there—prisoners were not allowed to carry watches, the authorities knew the time for them (p. 21).

⁴Quotations are from the Penguin Modern Classics edition of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, trans. Ralph Parker, 1963.

Solzhenitsyn presents time, then, as dehistoricised. The sketchy accounts of pre-prison existence, usually included to demonstrate the arbitrary nature of the arrest and imprisonment, recount a common history; the memory of the revolution and the war gesture towards a sense of history which is now missing and from which the prisoners are completely estranged. Tiurin, as he relates his experiences in the army and the period of vagrancy which led up to his arrest 'spoke calmly, as if he were telling someone else's story'. And once inside the camp history ceases and is replaced by a sterile chronology, which, without verticality, has meaning only through the linear juxtaposition of its component fragments. The final statement of this closes the book when Shukhov at the end of the *day* lies on his bunk and ponders just what a good day it has been (analysed by negatives; he didn't fall ill, he wasn't thrown into the lock-up). His final thought before sleep, offered as an authorial statement in the impassive tone of voice which dominates the book :

There were three thousand six hundred and fifty three days like that in his stretch. From the first clang of the rail to the last clang of the rail.

The three extra days were for leap years (p. 143).

And even this chronology of shallow minutes and days is not a certain framework, for not only has history been frozen, but even the residual temporality can be distorted or reshaped at the whim of the authorities. When Shukhov and the ex-sea captain banteringly debate whether the sun stands highest at dinner-time or at one o'clock, the last remark of the exchange shifts the dialogue into a chilling seriousness :

'What do you mean'? Shukhov demurred.

'Every greybeard knows that the sun stands highest at dinner-time'.

'Greybeards, maybe', snapped the captain.

'But since their day a new decree has been passed, and now the sun stands highest at one'.

'Who passed that decree'?

'Soviet power' (p. 57).

The draining of historical meaning from time is only one element in a complex structure of experience which Solzhenitsyn identifies, through the image of the labour camp, with Stalinism. Another important element is the treatment of material existence as a kind of 'dialogue manqué' with human valuations. In *For the Good of the Cause*, a book vitiated by its schematic crudity, Solzhenitsyn considers the problems of the priorities and value judgements which must be admitted in the cause of material development. The students and teaching staff of a technical school, frustrated by the delay in the

preparation of new premises, construct the new building themselves, only to be disappointed at the last minute when a local careerist bureaucrat appropriates the building for a government research institute, thereby accruing personal profit and prestige. The crux of the book is an encounter between the town party official who champions the school and the area committee secretary who sides against them. The confrontation is, however, posed in terms of the personal qualities of the two officials: one is a patriot with a distinguished war record and a kindly manner, the other speaks in a voice which is 'metallic', his words fall 'like steel girders'.

There is a divorce in Solzhenitsyn's portrayal of this problem between the injustice inherent in the hardworking students being deprived of 'their' building and some understanding of the genuine material and social needs involved—both the school and the research institute have weighty claims for the allocation of resources. It is thus arguable that Solzhenitsyn sees no fruitful dialectic between values and material needs, but only a rigid antagonism. In *Ivan Denisovich* only one side of this polarity is given—the severe materiality of the prisoners' existence. For Shukhov the acquisition of a piece of smuggled hacksaw blade can mean the difference between earning a few roubles making shoes or a further sentence if it is discovered; the filching of an extra two hundred grammes of bread the difference between merest survival and starvation. Such objects as a length of blade or a lump of bread tyrannise the thoughts and values of the prisoners:

The thoughts of a prisoner—they're not free either. They keep returning to the same thing. A single idea keeps stirring. Would they feel that piece of bread in the mattress? (p. 36).

Given the material severity of existence in the camps, objects become values, they fill men's horizons, at the same instant as values disappear, when the prisoners' historical life is reduced to biological necessity. And in that values are only historically possible, shaping a coherent perspective out of linear time, the dichotomy between fact and value is a consequence of the fragmentation of history. It is, however, the informing technique of the book, as I described earlier, to present this as itself a mere fact, a necessary precondition of the phenomena described. The realistic account is offered without explicit criticism and Solzhenitsyn leaves the other end of the (false) object-value polarity to be supplied from somewhere beyond the book by the reader.⁵

If a length of hacksaw blade becomes a value, not merely the instrument of survival but its moral sign also, it is no less true that *individual* values are involved, and this, in a wider sense, is repeated in the social atomisation enforced upon the prisoners: the camp is so

⁵The converse of this is the official literature of 'revolutionary romanticism'—all value and no fact.

organised that a ruthless individualism is obligatory and solidarity impossible. For the purpose of work, feeding and sleeping, the prisoners are divided into teams upon the productivity of which depends the amount of food allotted to the work-team as a whole. But beneath this guise of collectivity an insidious divisiveness is concealed—the rates of pay are so fixed that one weak or poorly man or one slacker inevitably deprives his team-mates of the means of subsistence and the prisoners are constantly turned against each other; the individual must goad others to work harder and longer in order that he may survive :

Who's the zek's⁶ main enemy? Another zek. If only they weren't at loggerheads with one another—ah, what a difference that'd make! (p. 105).

Even here the merest gesture towards a potentially transforming solidarity amongst the prisoners remains subdued (characterised by a wishful 'ah') and what remains dominant is the immutability of enforced division.

That relativism, which is the necessary consequence of atomisation, controls the prisoner's sympathies—as, for example, when the teams returning late from the building site to the camp see in the distance the column from the machine works. Late arrival can mean missing a meal or forfeiting some of the precious 'free' time before the final roll-call of the day, so, the two columns break into a run, fiercely competing to arrive first at the camp. In the process of this the normal pattern of allegiances is subverted :

Things were so lumped together, the sweet and the sour, that the prisoners saw the escort itself, now, as friend rather than foe. Now the enemy was the other column (p. 103).

In the race for food and sleep the normally feared and despised guards become allies, and other prisoners must be beaten down. But here again, just when Solzhenitsyn identifies a significant element in a pattern of experience which readers have felt to inhere not merely in prison life but more centrally, as I shall argue, in the very social meaning of Stalinism itself, the punch is pulled and the phenomena subsumed under a 'timeless' admixture of the sweet and the sour.

This basic unadventurousness, which includes such features as the wishful 'ah' above and the book's pragmatic method as a whole, also describes the characteristic attitude of the prisoners to experience. When Buinovskiy finishes his midday meal he remains in his seat warming himself, 'occupying a place he had no right to', and through this he is learning a mode of behaviour :

⁶'zek' is an abbreviation of the Russian word for prisoner.

He was a newcomer. He was unused to the hard life of the zeks. Though he didn't know it, moments like these were particularly important to him for they were transforming him from an eager, confident naval officer with a ringing voice into an inert, though wary, zek. And only in that inertness lay the chance of surviving the twenty-five years of imprisonment he'd been sentenced to (p. 68).

A watchful inertness equips the prisoner for survival, whereas any more aggressive posture such as pride or stubbornness entails destruction:

'Better to growl and submit. If you were stubborn they broke you' (p. 45).

And only marginally is it the case that this inertness is a tactical disguise. Shukhov prides himself that eight years in the camps have not 'changed his nature'—he still has not learned to eat with his hat on. But in all central matters passivity actually becomes the prisoner's 'nature'.

What I have tried to do in the preceding analysis is to identify the important elements of what I have called a structure of experience—the dehistoricisation of time, the tyranny of materiality over value (with a false polarisation of the two), which results from enforced atomisation, and a consequent individualism, relativism and passivity. It is through this structure that *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* embraces more than its immediate subject matter. Despite its matter-of-fact refusal to evaluate explicitly⁷ the experience it describes (a failing I shall deal with presently) it is, nonetheless, an indictment of Stalinism. Its method of operation is not, as Lukács would have it, symbolic—the very 'flatness' of the writing denies that—but rather that the structure of experience which it embodies in the account of one day in a labour camp is also in important ways the structure of general social life under Stalin. Dehistoricisation is the key point of contact. Stalinism was, amongst other things of course, an artificial 'clamping' of historical development, an imposition of arbitrary bureaucratic structures upon the genuine, historically generated patterns of the ongoing revolution. What was ideologically the devaluation of the concrete vocabulary of marxism to a sterile official rhetoric, amounted politically to an expropriation from the Russian people of power expressed through democratic control in favour of a reified professional bureaucracy. This resulted inevitably in fragmentation and a loss of perspective. And for a rigidly repressed people passivity is the necessary posture when the penalty for dissent may be

⁷There is, perhaps, a useful connection to be made here between the impassive style of *Ivan Denisovich* and the 'neutral writing' which Barthes identifies in a writer like Camus. In both apparent negativity is itself a very definite ideological stance. See Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Lavers and Smith, London, 1967.

imprisonment or death, administered by a police and military machine which 'penetrates society, isolates the individual and fragments his socio-political existence'.⁸

Yet, having recognised the centrality of the issues with which *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* deals, it is also necessary to identify its limitations; and of these the main one is the closeness of the book to its subject matter. What are the valuations which the reader must supply? What is the distance, if any, between the structure of experience of the book and the consciousness of its author? We are given hints, although they are deeply submerged in the text of *Ivan Denisovich*. For example, the emphasis given to the eating of meals, as fragments of time which are somehow retrieved from the arbitrariness of camp life, connects the prisoners through the mediation of their food with the more fundamental rhythms of nature. They are able to tell the month of the year by the vegetables floating in their gruel, and when Solzhenitsyn gives one of his rare 'total' characterisations of the camp it is done in similar terms:

The steppe was barren and windswept, with a dry wind in summer and a freezing one in winter. Nothing could ever grow in that steppe, less than nothing behind four barriers of barbed wire (p. 63).

The camp is judged through its barrenness; and this is not simply a metaphor but empirically accurate, containing a valuation in its concealed belief in the goodness of the soil and of organic growth. From this there can be extracted, I think, an assertion of the significantly peasant nature of Solzhenitsyn's consciousness. It is important in this context to notice that most of his books are in one way or another provincially located and every major character is a peasant. When a genuinely urban character is portrayed, such as Rusanov the secret policeman in *Cancer Ward*, the result is caricature: and in *For the Good of the Cause*, where the material is thoroughly urban, the entire book is mannered. Solzhenitsyn clearly has an imaginative engagement with the peasantry and this in part explains the laboured pragmatism of *Ivan Denisovich*: the unreflective Shukhov responds to his environment, the camp presented as *factum brutum*, with the grudging acceptance of the long-suffering Russian peasant. This is itself a caricature, condensing a complexly differentiated class into an insidious national archetype, but it is necessary to abbreviate what is, I think, a crucial element in Solzhenitsyn's work. He is involved with his society and his people, but the urban working classes are noticeably missing from his social typology, and with them, I would argue, a necessary *political* element is absent from Solzhenitsyn's thinking.

In the lecture which Solzhenitsyn wrote but never delivered for the presentation of his Nobel Prize there is much evidence to indicate the

⁸Ted Harding, article cited.

a-political character of his consciousness. The piece opens with an account of the ineffability of art and proceeds through much emphasis upon Dostoyevsky's maxim 'The World will be saved by beauty' to a statement of the impossibility of ever achieving objectivity:

Who will give the human race one united system of evaluation, for evil deeds and good deeds, for the unendurable and the endurable? How is the line to be drawn between them? Who will explain to the human race what is *really* terrible and unbearable, and what merely rubs our skin because it is so close?⁹

Solzhenitsyn eventually supplies the answer to these rhetorical questions with an assertion that it is art which will transcend the barriers between men and between nations. It is however the generality of this passage which is significant: problems are posed as *human* problems, neither located in time or space, and they demand some equally universal system of values for their solution. The portrayal of the labour camp as absolute fact solicits judgement by absolute values.¹⁰

There is a connection to be made here with the peasant elements of Solzhenitsyn's value-system. As the urban centres in the Soviet Union are still so thinly distributed, and the peasantry remains the largest social class, it continues to be capable of an all-embracing provincialism, so that in its own eyes it appears not as class but rather as nation, or in the extreme case as man. For Solzhenitsyn, with his desire for universal human values, it is the natural subject, obliterating in its spaciousness the needs for the co-ordinates of class and a political understanding of history.

The importance of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* is its realism, and by this I mean not a surface truth-to-life but an analytic truth-to-society, in that it artistically embodies a structure of experience central to the social conditions out of which it was written. This 'naming' of Stalinism was, and remains, a radical advance for Russian literature. Yet in many ways *Ivan Denisovich* is a blunt instrument. The very pragmatism which marks it off from previous, official, literature betrays its limitations. The judgements which are shifted out of the text and left for the reader to reconstruct can only be so universal as to be absent. In the refusal of a political attitude to his material, Solzhenitsyn, while doubtless, as it were, cleaning the slate for future writers to more fully repossess their history, must himself remain tied to a depiction of the past as timeless, terrifying fact.

⁹Solzhenitsyn, *Nobel Prize Lecture*, trans. Nicholas Bethell, London, 1973, p. 29.

¹⁰In light of the empirical, valueless, character of *Ivan Denisovich*, I think it is significant that Solzhenitsyn's latest book, *The Gulag Archipelago*—as yet unpublished in English—should be a work of straightforward historical reportage. As Ernest Harsch argues in *Intercontinental Press*, Vol. 12, No. 1, the new book (like *Ivan Denisovich*) 'is of first-rate importance in the struggle for proletarian democracy in the Soviet Union whatever political inadequacies or errors it may contain'.