

One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich

A Study Guide



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Introductory Materials — *Why teach One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich?*

One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich is a Nobel Prize winning novel based on the real-life experience in the Soviet gulags of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. The book was released under the premiership of the (relatively) liberal Nikita Khrushchev in an effort to discredit Stalin as part of his “destalinization” efforts in the Soviet Union.

The book is plainly written and remarkable for the fact that the day described, according to the prisoner, is unremarkable — or maybe even good. It is a beautiful, but sad story that allows students to ask questions about the nature of freedom, happiness, and what governs our relationships. Students may be struck by the banality of subject matter that proved to be so controversial.

This book also opens the door to talk about important instances in history of the use of internment and work camps even in Canada. Students are encouraged to ask questions about what allowed those camps to form in our past, and whether it could happen again. And, naturally, an opportunity exists to talk about the role of art in political opposition and social change.

A note on translations:

Although the top listing for this book on Amazon.ca is a translation by Max Hayward, the translation by H.T. Willetts (available in the Kindle version) is the only one to be made from the original text and is the only translation given Solzhenitsyn’s blessing. This guide provides passages for Socratic discussion with the wording from both versions, but if the choice is available, the Willetts translation is not only likely closest to the meaning in the original Russian, but it is a clearer and richer read.

Curriculum Connections

- Intermediate/Senior Level English
- Intermediate/Senior Level History
- Senior Level Canadian & International Law
- Senior Level Challenge & Change in Society
- Senior Level Canadian & World Issues

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Reading the Book

We suggest exploring this text through discussion based inquiry. A few guidelines:

Students will read the books and prepare their own questions, or explore the reading beginning with questions introduced for the class.

Possible points for discussion are outlined in the chapter breakdown below, but students should guide the discussion during Socratic seminars.

Students should be marked on participation in the discussion, respect for differing opinions, and evidence that they've read the book.

If using Socratic seminars, periodic journals on class discussions should be kept by students for evaluation.

Teaching material for the classes leading up to Socratic seminars and in line with the points for discussion outlined below follow the chapter-by-chapter breakdown. (Bookmark links will take you between the chapter breakdown and the suggested lessons.)

As the material in this study guide is based on student-led discussion questions, it may be necessary to experiment with different formats for the discussions. Literature Circles can work quite well, for example. Also worth considering: timed debates, Think/Pair/Share, Word Walls or role playing.

Reveille and March

Discussion questions:

- Why do you think that Ivan Denisovich (Shukhov) says that not working is the harshest punishment?
- If not working is punishment, why does Shukhov wish he could be sick in bed for a few weeks?
- What do you think is the purpose of the morning routines that the guards enforce at the camp?

Passages for Socratic Discussion

Willetts Translation (WT): “Shukhov never overslept. He was always up at the call... A stoolie will always get by, whoever else bleeds for him.”

Hayward Translation (HT): “Shukhov never slept through reveille but always got up at once... They got away with it and it was the other guys who suffered.”

WT: “Washing the floor was a job of the hut orderly, a zek who wasn’t sent out to work... ‘Think they’d hang it where we can see it if did?’”

HT: “Mopping the floor in the warders’ room was the job of a special prisoner — the HQ orderly, who worked outside the camp... ‘They’d never put in one that works here.’”

WT: “Shukhov knew what to do this time: he stepped nimbly out of his felt boots, stood them in a corner... the camp commandant had given strict orders to pick up stragglers and shove them in the hole.”

HT: “Now Shukhov had an idea. He quickly kicked off his felt boots, stood them in a corner... The Commandant had given strict orders to pick up any stray prisoners and put them in the cells.”

WT: “Shukhov drew his spoon from his boot... Shukhov licked his spoon clean and returned it to his boot, then put on his cap and made for sick bay.”

HT: “Shukhov pulled his spoon out of his boot... He licked his spoon, pushed it back in his boot, put on his cap, and went to the hospital block.”

WT: “Pavlo raised his head. ‘Didn’t land in the hole, then, Ivan Denisovich?’... His fingers were wonderfully nimble, and his mind raced ahead, planning his next moves.”

HT: “Pavlo raised his head. ‘Didn’t they put you in the cooler, Ivan Denisovich?’... Shukhov’s fingers moved like lightning while his mind was running ahead thinking what he had to do next.”

WT: “There was no worse moment than when you turn out for work parade in the morning... it was that or perish.”

HT: “This was the toughest moment — when you lined up for roll call in the morning... That was the only way you could live.”

WT: “In frosty weather, body searches were usually less strict in the morning... But they did have. They did know. It’s you, brother, who don’t know anything yet!”

HT: “When it was freezing, the frisking routine was not so tough in the morning... They had the right and they knew the article. You’ve still got a lot to learn, brother.”

WT: “The zeks stood near the gate buttoning and belting themselves... Once again the convoy mixed the teams together and re-counted the Power Station column by fives.”

HT: “The prisoners were standing in front of the gate buttoning and tying their coats... And once again they were lined up by five and re-counted by the escorts.”

WT: “When it was a bit warmer, they all talked on the march, however much they were yelled at... Not so much as a sapling could be seen on the steppe, nothing but bare white snow to the left or right.”

HT: “Everyone talks in the column when it’s warmer, no matter how much they’re shouted at... Bare white snow lay as far as the eye could see and there wasn’t a tree in sight.”

WT: “But his wife told him they’d given up hiring themselves out ages ago... Only — would they ever let him go? Maybe they’d slap another ten on him, just for fun?”

HT: “His wife told him they’d given up seasonal work a long time ago... So maybe it would have to be those carpets after all.”

Exercises

Stalin’s purges and cults of personality:

Choose some resources on the Great Terror and other cults of personality from LiberalStudiesGuides.ca to share with your students. Include a reading about **One Day in context**, which explains why Khrushchev allowed the book to be published, and how it became controversial later on.

- What do you think is the danger of creating a cult of personality?
- Do you think this book helped to end the personality cult around Stalin?
- Why do you think Khrushchev’s decision to allow the publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* created such trouble?
- Do you think the prisoners in the camp are all political prisoners? If so, why? If not, why not? What does your answer imply about the state of the Soviet Union?
- Do you think that personality cults necessarily mean that the leader is popular?
- What safeguards do we have in Canada against a leader using a personality cult to seize powers that would allow them to imprison their opponents?

The Work Site

Discussion questions:

- What is the difference in the atmosphere of the work crew on the site when they are under supervision of the gang and not the guards at the camp?
- How much control do the men have over their time on the work site? Is it more or less free than the camp?
- Why do you think so many men are in the camp for treason?
- Why do you think Shukhov says that the days passed faster with work, but not your sentence?
- What is the difference between the authority of Tyurin and the authority of the guards?

Passages for Socratic Discussion

WT: “But neither Tyurin nor his deputy, Pavlo, rejoined 104... The team knew that there was work to be done and quickly.”

HT: “You know there hasn’t been a blizzard for a long time!” the Latvian Kilgas said... The men say that they’d have to get down to work, and right away.”

WT: “‘Right, then.’ Tyurin looked around. ‘All here, 104?’ ... he had color in his cheeks and didn’t look like a convict at all. He could afford to see the funny side.”

HT: “‘Now then!’ Tyurin looked around. ‘Are you all here, 104?’ ... He looked kind of healthy, just like he wasn’t in a camp at all. It was easy for him to make jokes.”

WT: “Why, you may wonder, will a zek put up with ten years of backbreaking work in a camp?... your life can depend on those two hundred grams. Two-hundred-gram portions built the Belomor Canal.”

HT: “You might well ask why a prisoner worked so hard for ten years in a camp... And all you got out of it was six ounces of bread in the evening. Your life depended on them.”

WT: “According to his dossier, Shukhov was in for treason... There’d never been anything like it in ordinary criminal camps. But then it never used to happen in this one.”

HT: “In his record it said Shukhov was in for treason... It never happened in the ordinary camps. And it was something new here too.”

WT: “The gang made little noise. Those who had tobacco took a few sly drags... Because it’s the foreman who feeds you. And besides, he won’t make you do it unless it’s necessary.”

HT: “The gang was quiet. The guys with tobacco were smoking it on the sly... Why the hell should he kill himself with work in this place? But there’s nothing you wouldn’t do for your boss.”

WT: “The carriers sounded like cart horses out of breath. The captain’s gray in the face... Looked as if the guard had turned out, too, to count them all again.”

HT: “The fellows bringing the mortar were winded like horses. The Captain looked kind of gray... From the looks of it the escort had begun counting them.”

Exercises

Internment and work camps in Canada and the United States:

Choose resources on internment and work camps in Canada and the United States to share with your students from those available at LiberalStudiesGuides.ca.

- What are some similarities between the camps that were formed in Canada and the United States and the gulag in which Ivan Denisovich is serving time?
- What are some differences between the camps that were formed in Canada and the United States and the gulag in which Ivan Denisovich is serving time?
- Were the camps in Canada and the United States always allowed, or were they specially established? If you believe they were specially established, what stops these camps from being formed again? If you believe they were always allowed, explain why.
- What ended the camps in Canada and the United States?

Dissident art:

One of the crimes that could get Soviet citizens sent to the gulags was the creation of art that was thought to be too different from “the Party line”. References to this in the book are the writing of the medic at the camp of things he couldn’t write outside, and the denunciation of the film by Eisenstein for only accomplishing what it was allowed to do by the censor.

Choose resources on dissident art to share with your students from those available at LiberalStudiesGuides.ca, as well as, if you wish, the handout on methods of social change.

- Do you think art can be a powerful way to criticize the people in power?
- Do you think political leaders are right to fear art? When should they be afraid of it, if ever, and why? If they should not be afraid of it, why not?
- What types of art do you think are the most effective?
- Do you think that art can be used to effectively change society? If so, why, and what does the art have to accomplish to do this? If not, why not?

From Evening March to Lights-Out

Discussion questions:

- What do you think is so significant about the time at supper?
- Why do you think Shukhov is so careful of Caesar/Tsezar? Do you think they are friends, or only that he wants to be treated well by someone with more than himself?
- Do you think there are many real friendships in the camp? Why or why not?
- What does it say that Ivan Denisovich sees this as a particularly good day? What do you think it teaches us about his life?

Passages for Socratic Discussion

WT: “Everybody laughed. Guards as well... nobody else he could have a heart-to-heart talk with.”

HT: “They all laughed, even the escorts... nobody else around he could have a heart-to-heart talk with now and then.”

WT: “Speed it up? The hell we will... Now, if ever, was the time to squeeze the others out!”

HT: “The hell they’d get a move on! ... They were bound to beat those others to it!”

WT: “Shukhov had received a couple of parcels back in Ust-Izhma... Nothing seemed to upset them more than a zek sleeping after breakfast.”

HT: “Back in the Ust-Izhma days Shukhov had gotten packages a couple of times... The thing that really got ‘em was if the prisoners slept after breakfast.”

WT: “Tzesar smiled at Shukhov and got talking to an odd-looking fellow in glasses who’d been reading a newspaper ... Tzesar gave him a little smile. ‘No, no, eat it yourself, Ivan Denisovich.’”

HT: “Caesar shot a smile at Shukhov and started talking right away with some crazy guy in glasses who was reading a newspaper in line... ‘No, no.’ Caesar smiled. ‘You eat it yourself.’”

WT: “Gopchik had the makings of a really good camp-dweller... We shall survive. We shall survive it all. God willing, we’ll see the end of it!”

HT: “Gopchik would go a long way in the camp and make a real old hand... ‘We’ll get through! We’ll get through it all! And God grant it’ll all come to an end.’”

WT: “Fetyukov passed down the hut, sobbing... ‘Look, butter!’ people were shouting, ‘Real butter! And white bread!’”

HT: “Fetyukov came through the barracks and he was crying... ‘All this luxury reminds me when I was in Archangel once...’”

Exercises

Prison camps today:

Choose some resources from LiberalStudiesGuides.ca on prison camps that still exist today to share with your students.

- What types of countries still have prison camps today?
- Were these camps always allowed, or were they created by special circumstances the way that they were in Canada and the United States?
- For what sorts of crimes do people end up in prison camps today?
- What would the punishment be in Canada for similar crimes?
- Why do you think these countries have not got rid of their camps? How are they different from Canada?
- Do you think Canadians should be trying to help end prison camps? If so, what should we do?
- Do you think Canadians should accept refugees from countries with prison camps, the way that we did from the Soviet Union with its gulags?

Final assignment/essay questions:

- Why do you think Ivan Denisovich, in the end, isn't sure if he'd be better off if he were free or in the camp? What would life be like for him if he went home? What was the countryside in the Soviet Union like in 1949? Support your claim both with the book and your own research.
- What do you think is the central message of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*? Use passages and events from the book to support your case.

Victor Frankl, an author who wrote about his time in Nazi concentration camps, wrote in his book:

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

- Do you think that he is right, or do you think that freedom can be totally taken from someone? Use the book *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* to support your case.

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Liberal Studies Guides help teachers engage their students when discussing literature through study guides and cross-curricular resources made freely available for classroom use. We also offer free workshops on using the Socratic method with secondary students of all levels.

Our study guides break down novels into lessons with ideas for discussion, exercises, and assignments. We tie our guides together with additional resources on our website, LiberalStudiesGuides.ca, including ready-to-use worksheets, to encourage the discussion of current events, history, music, philosophy, and economics to help tie the lessons to the real world.

Although our guides are aimed at English classrooms, the supplementary resources may be useful for history, music, drama, communications studies, economics, philosophy, and social studies.

Liberal Studies Guides is a project of the Institute for Liberal Studies, a non-partisan educational charity. We believe that encouraging discussion in the classroom helps to better equip students to discuss the problems facing Canadian society.



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