

Novel Club – One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, Reflections

Catherine LaCroix, December 2022

Let's start with the jacket blurbs from the 1963 Bantam paperback edition, which is how I first read this book. "This is the terrifying story of an almost unbelievable man-made hell – the Soviet work camps – and of one man's heroic struggle to survive in the face of the most determined efforts to destroy him – a scathing indictment of Communist tyranny that has shaken the whole Soviet world."

As I read the 1963 translation, this description seemed overblown. Ivan Denisovich Shukhov's life seemed to be a daily grind, with misery and suffering, and constant vigilance to avoid irrational and potentially life-threatening punishments by the guards. There were also moments of humanity, cooperation, and decency among the inmates. I would call his life "corrosively stressful," not "terrifying." The 1963 version doesn't sound much worse than the boarding school in *Jane Eyre*.

Then I read the recommended Willets translation, and it was a different book. The 1963 version had seemed sanitized or censored – and that, it turns out, is exactly what it was. It omitted certain details that Solzhenitsyn added to later editions. For example, the 1963 edition offers no reason for Shukhov's confession; the later text says he was beaten until he confessed. It also explains that Baptists were sentenced to prison simply for being Baptists – something not mentioned in the 1963 version.

Other aspects of the Willets translation were the choices of the translator. The 1963 version has fewer adjectives; Willets adds them. E.g. the bunk mattresses aren't just filled with sawdust; they are "bug-ridden." The soup doesn't just have cabbage; it has "blackened cabbage." Shukhov doesn't wear foot cloths; he wears "foot rags."

Overall, in both versions, the book is an example of "show me, don't tell me." We don't hear Ivan saying "I am terrified." Instead, we learn his thought process: this is what I need to do to avoid punishment. This is what I need to do to stay alive. This is how I eke out a little more nutrition, a little more warmth, this is how I quietly manipulate the people around me to help myself survive. And – as part of a community – this is how all of the prisoners develop habits and practices to work together, for mutual protection and support.

From the outside, the prospect of being sentenced to such an existence would be terrifying. From the inside, it is a dull daily grind of survival.

Another reaction: In some ways, the environment depicted isn't as awful as life in a prison in the United States. Even the more graphic depiction of the Willets translation suggests that the worst horrors came from the cold climate, the work, the scarcity of materials. There is no apparent sexual abuse, and the recent killings of some prisoners by other prisoners appears to be a new phenomenon. Overall, it is a tale of decent people arrested for thought crimes, doing their best to cope.

Possibly even the Willets version pulls some punches. Recent news coverage of the women's basketball star Brittney Griner has included predictions of the life she is likely to face in today's Russian version of the prison work camp.

In a report earlier this year by NBC news we find this description of modern Russian prison camps: "*Conditions in prisons and detention centers varied but were often harsh and life threatening,*" a [2021 State Department report](#) on Russian human rights abuses said. "Overcrowding, abuse by guards and

inmates, limited access to health care, food shortages, and inadequate sanitation were common in prisons, penal colonies, and other detention facilities.”

The article goes on to say: *“The [State Department] report notes that “physical and sexual abuse by prison guards was systemic,” that torture of prisoners was pervasive — at times resulting in death or suicide — and that discriminatory protections against women and people of color were not often enforced. The law also does not prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation.”*

Solzhenitsyn, you told us a lot, but I think there are features of the Soviet camps that even your tale does not describe.

This leads to a different topic. Ivan is in prison for a political crime. Totalitarian regimes are obsessed with keeping people under control. Recall the Ohio student Otto Warmbier, imprisoned in North Korea for trying to take a poster off a wall to take home as a souvenir. This granular effort to keep tabs on every single person, to stamp out even the most minor expressions of individuality and possible resistance to the regime, must be necessary to retain totalitarian control. But, ubiquitous as this behavior seems to be across repressive cultures, still we should not accept it with resigned cynicism. Here are some interrelated features worth remarking.

First, totalitarianism is highly labor-intensive; many watchers are needed to watch, many brutes are needed to dole out brutality. How can people do this? Hannah Arendt and many others have tried to explain it. Recently we heard reports of what happened under Russian control in the Ukrainian city of Kherson – even more cruel, even more single-mindedly focused on rooting out even the possibility of resistance, than in Ivan’s tale. Today, as Covid lockdown-era China is showing, much government control of everyday life can be done with technology, but still the regime needs willing people to be enforcers.

Second, why? Why do regimes feel compelled to be totalitarian? Historically, in Czarist Russia or other monarchies, iron control expressed a system that didn’t value individual rights and freedom at all, with no sense of democratic norms. But many of our ideology-based totalitarians of the 20th and 21st centuries profess to speak on behalf of the people, even as they brutally repress the people. They express a theory of government and behavior to guide the state, but it seems possible (or even likely) that some of the leaders aren’t animated by ideology, but by a desire for power and the good things that power can bring.

One simple, tautological response is that there is a lamentable human tendency to be a bully, when the bully thinks he can get away with it. Thomas Hobbes certainly had that view in *Leviathan*. *The Lord of the Flies* is premised on the notion that when released from civilization people (boys) become brutes. The Me-Too movement, various scandals in traditional churches, and tales of toxic workplaces all tell us that people feel enabled to be their worst when they have power. If that is so, although we should be dismayed, arguably we should not be surprised that conditions are awful in a Soviet prison camp, where there is not even a suggestion that the inmates have rights.

On another note, lest we get too self-righteous about the Soviets, here is another thought. The article about Brittney Griner offers this description: *“The type of penal colony Griner ... will be sent to is most likely a repurposed Soviet gulag, a brutal system of labor camps and prisons that incarcerated millions of people from the 1920s to the 1950s. Prisoners were used for farming, mining or logging in sparsely*

populated areas of the country or worked in sweatshop conditions.”

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/griner-russian-penal-colony-difficult-prisoners-say-rcna54180>

Wow, who would do that to people? Again from the news, a story from the BBC. The headline is “Why Five States have Slavery on the Ballot in 2022.”

“It's 157 years since the US constitution banned chattel slavery - in which one person is the legal property of another - but left in place an exemption for convicted prisoners.

Throughout most of the US, slavery or involuntary servitude are still legal as punishment for a crime.

But on 8 November, voters in five states - Alabama, Louisiana, Oregon, Tennessee and Vermont - will decide whether to remove these exemptions from their state constitutions and ban slavery entirely.

The outcome could enable prisoners to challenge forced labour. Some 800,000 currently work for pennies, or for nothing at all. Seven states do not pay prison workers any wage for most job assignments.

Supporters of change say it's an exploitative loophole that must be closed.

But critics argue that the move is unaffordable and could lead to unintended consequences in the criminal justice system.” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-63338784>

On November 8, most of these measures were approved; the one in Louisiana was not. In subsequent coverage, I learned that about 20 states use the slavery exception for prison labor. And apparently the federal prisons rely on prisoners to manufacture such items as federal office furniture, body armor, and combat helmets.

There is room for a nuanced discussion of labor in prison. In our system we at least assume that people are in prison for a good reason. What is a prison for? Punishment, rehabilitation, simple warehousing to keep violent offenders off the street?

(https://repository.law.umich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?params=/context/mlr/article/4234/&path_info=Article:FromPillorytoPenitentiary,UMichiganLawReview.) Maybe “paying your debt to society” includes making furniture while an involuntary guest of the state. The “best” prisons are those that offer some form of job training, including skills training. Is that “forced labor”? Might some form of occupation assuage the crushing boredom of incarceration? But there are clear opportunities for abuse. Prisoners have no control over their work environment. A study by the ACLU paints a bleak picture of exploitation and wage confiscation. <https://www.aclu.org/news/human-rights/captive-labor-exploitation-of-incarcerated-workers>

[SKIP THIS: Here is a quote about a former prisoner:

“ Mr Davis held a variety of jobs at the notorious Louisiana State Penitentiary - nicknamed Angola after the country from which many of the African slaves in the area were brought.

"I worked for 25 years and came home with 124 dollars," says Mr Davis, who was never paid more than 20 cents per hour for his work, which he says was "against my will and at gunpoint".

In the interview, Mr. Davis offers the view that the availability of free labor gives the state an incentive to send people to prison.

And here is the counter:

A vote in the California legislature to remove slavery references from the law failed this summer after Democrats, including the governor, warned that it would cost more than \$1.5bn (£1.3bn) to pay prisoners the state's \$15 per hour minimum wage.

The Oregon State Sheriffs' Association [opposes](#) the measure there, saying it would lead to "unintended consequences" and the loss of all "reformative programs", which include low-paid tasks like working in the library, kitchen and laundry.

The group says these give prisoners something to do and "serve as an incentive for good behaviour" - which is a factor during parole hearings."

As a veteran of political campaigns and messaging, I can say that the Sheriffs are cherry-picking their concerns, without a doubt. At most their argument offers a reason to carefully consider the best policy, after a state abolishes the prison exception to involuntary servitude.]

Now, I am taking us far afield from the book we read for tonight. But this is a reflective paper, not a critical essay.

Getting back to Ivan, or rather to the author, I will offer another tale. Alexander Solzhenitsyn was the speaker at my college graduation in 1978. The speech he gave that day attracted national headlines, as – among other criticisms -- he excoriated the softness and self-indulgence of the people of the West. <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/06/09/archives/solzhenitsyn-in-harvard-speech-terms-west-weak-and-cowardly.html> , <https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/a-world-split-apart> Surely very few of we pampered Westerners, he might suggest, would be able to survive as Ivan did.

I know what Solzhenitsyn said in his speech, because I read about it later. At the time, he spoke in Russian to an outdoor audience, his voice a mere clatter beneath the louder voice of the female translator. As it began to rain, listeners raised their umbrellas, obscuring my view of the stage. As time went on, I realized that my grandparents a few rows back were probably getting wet and uncomfortable, so I quietly departed and took them back to the living room of my nice dry college suite, where we were shortly joined by my roommates and their families. We could not even wait in the gentle rain to hear from this intellectual giant.

I found Ivan's tale engrossing and moving. I cannot offer any nuanced literary views because I read the book in translation, the author's voice obscured behind the words of the translator. Notes on both translations say that, in Russian, the book speaks in the voice of a peasant. This doesn't come through in either translation. The language is simple and direct, colloquial. But, to American eyes, not clearly "peasant." So, in our discussion, let's focus on what we learn about humanity.

Discussion Questions:

1. What about the book did you find most horrifying? What features of the prison community did you find most surprising? There are small bits of humor in Ivan's life, as when he dumps his bucket of wash water in the path used by prison officials.
2. Is Ivan an admirable character? He's proud of not being a scrounger, but at the same time he manages to get the best of things around him. Is this even a relevant question?
3. Does Solzhenitsyn intend his book to reflect on both the life in prison, and the perhaps-comparable conditions of the life outside? Consider the letter from Ivan's wife. In what ways might her experience in the Soviet system resemble Ivan's life in the gulag?
4. Is brutality in a hierarchical setting inevitable?
5. Reflect on prison systems. What about them is universal, what about the Soviet gulag was unique, what is the proper role of a prison in a civilized country?