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Recommended Citation
Chirkova-Holland, Alisa, "Raising the Iron Curtain: Healing Collective Oppression through Literature" (2023). *Student Works*. 4.
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Raising the Iron Curtain: Healing Collective Oppression Through Literature

One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich is a short protest novel by Russian author and former gulag prisoner Alexander Solzhenitsyn. The novel recounts an ordinary day for Ivan (known as Shukhov) and his fellow prisoners at a Siberian gulag. As he trudges through his day, themes of spirituality, repression, human dignity, and survival emerge—themes that post-Stalinist Russians could deeply identify with. Published in 1962, the novel received great acclamation from both post-Stalinist readers and Western readers, impacting both the trauma-ridden reader and the oppressive totalitarian system that had exiled Shukhov. Through terse but tender writing style and deft use of literary elements such as language peculiarities, represented discourse, and use of different idioms, Solzhenitsyn strays from the typical Russian literary conventions. By diverging from Russian literary tradition, Solzhenitsyn depicts the small moments of joy, the atrocities of camp life, and the Stalinist regime the prisoners functioned under. Through the lens of trauma theory, Solzhenitsyn's novel expands on the idea that the Soviet people desperately needed literature that spoke truth (*glasnost*) about Stalin's oppressive regime.

Before Solzhenitsyn published his revolutionary novel, many Russian authors implemented the narrative form known as *skaz*. In his novel, Solzhenitsyn utilizes the *skaz*, defined as "when the 'language of the narrative is the same as that of the main characters and of the particular milieu in which they live' (Rus 167). *Catcher in the Rye* shares similar features to the *skaz* form by including spontaneous prose and personal slang throughout. Prior to *One Day*, Russian literature in the 1920's was used as a mouthpiece for propaganda and became "one of the mass production tools of Soviet 'soul engineering'" (Koehler 176). The government directed the production of Russian literature prior to *One Day*, causing a stray from the *skaz.*

One Day returns to the nineteenth century Russian literary tradition of *skaz*. However, Solzhenitsyn diverges from the form by including popular Soviet camp slang and language peculiarities (Koehler 177). He uses colloquialisms in *One Day* such as "*zek*," "*kulak*," "*oprichniki*," "*kasha*," etc. to establish a sense of community and togetherness in the setting of the gulag. Although the English translation of the novel does not distinguish between the language peculiarities of different social groups within the camps, Soviet readers would have recognized the different idioms. Creating a setting with distinguishable dialects and idioms allows Solzhenitsyn's characters to experience both solidarity and otherness within the camp community, feelings that were deeply embedded in Russians under the Stalinist regime.

Within the language systems Solzhenitsyn creates between characters, he includes obscene but also simple language. In the novel, Shukhov explains his routine as it unfolds: waking up, going to the infirmary, scrubbing the guardhouse floors, marching to the worksite, laying bricks and mortar, and eating dinner. However, the use of obscenities and brusque language allows Solzhenitsyn to characterize the prisoners' work. The harsh language matches both the mundane and the brutal work that the prisoners did in the camps. The prisoners keep each other in check by barking, "You're loafing, you bastard—do you think I'm willing to go hungry just because of you?" (Solzhenitsyn 25). According to Reeve, Solzhenitsyn's argot opens Russian literature to the "world of 'obscenity,' of slang, of the semi-private vocabulary by which a group defines itself…" (359). Therefore, the prisoners define themselves with suitable obscenities that match the gulag's environment.

In addition to his linguistic innovations to *skaz* literature, Solzhenitsyn also utilizes represented discourse in the novel. Represented discourse is a type of speech that contains input

from both the hero and the narrator (aka third-person limited), a type of speech very few authors utilized in socialist-realist fiction. Vladimir Rus explains that within the discourse "there are two, not opposing but converging and complementary points of view…" (168). The result is "two different voices toward a common final aim—the expression of the theme of the novel" (Rus 173). *One Day*'s represented discourse is established as the narrator describes the setting and action. Meanwhile, Shukhov intrudes into the narrator's third-person narrative with his own commentary. Rus's claim that the discourse expresses the theme of the novel proves true in *One Day*, since most of the novel concerns Shukhov's survival in the camp.

While Solzhenitsyn provides new innovations to the *skaz*, he stays within the lines of literary convention by writing in a rhythmical style. Instead of joining the traditional Remizov school of thought, which involves complicated sentences and a plethora of parenthetical words and clauses, Solzhenitsyn leans more toward Leskovian tradition (after Nikolai Leskov). The tradition opts for short, concise, and elliptical sentences (Koehler 178). Shukhov's use of diminutives and participles in the original Russian text creates a "lyrical quality common to folktales" (Koehler 181). For example, Shukhov questions, "How can you expect a man who's warm to understand a man who's cold?" (Solzhenitsyn 13). The lyrical quality and cadence of such sentences are lost in translation. However, the original Russian text is reminiscent of *skaz* form. The Leskovian qualities of the novel allows Solzhenitsyn to capture the proverbial thoughts of Shukhov.

Mostly diverging from Russian *skaz* traditions, Solzhenitsyn accentuates the reality of gulag life during the Stalinist Holocaust. While the novel is filled with an unsettling amount of minutia, the mundanity allows readers to catch every moment of joy that Shukhov experiences.

The represented discourse also allows readers to experience the suffering and the joy that Shukhov feels in the camp. Solzhenitsyn revived an old narrative form to tell a true and horrific account of the gulags, connecting readers to the horrors they faced. Instead of a simple historical telling, Solzhenitsyn opts for a *skaz*, or a story. In reading *One Day* as a novel, rather than a historical account of the gulags, post-Stalinist Soviets could remain at a safe distance from the traumatic event, while addressing the truths of the regime.

By addressing and reviving the true horrors of the Stalinist holocaust in the realm of traumatic literature, *One Day* successfully initiated one of the literary "thaws" after the Soviet Union's public de-Stalinization. Before the thaws, dissenters copied and distributed government-banned literature by means of an underground press consisting of "typewritten and carbon-copied scripts circulated among friends"—an activity known as *samizdat* (Diegel 77). While *samizdat* allowed dissent pieces concerning totalitarianism, human rights, power, and abuse to be shared, the first literary thaw in 1961 pushed the dissent movement further. For the first time, works like *One* Day were published and read by all in the post-Stalinist culture.

After the thaw periods in Soviet prose, the literary "freezes" followed. In spite of the freezes, the thaws bore fruit that still hold great influence today. In the first thaw of 1953 to 1956, Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* was published—although published in Italy, the novel received lots of praise abroad. In the height of the second thaw of 1959 to 1962, *One Day* was published, receiving immediate success in Russia (Diegel 78). While both authors were exiled after publishing their respective novels, the novels still circulated and gained popularity. The growing body of "highly credible literature that painstakingly chronicles both the specific experiences and the broader historical narratives underpinning the fate of millions of Soviet

citizens killed, imprisoned, deported, sent to Gulag…" (Tumarkin 1048) allowed readers to remember the horrors and to acknowledge the truth of the regime.

As more works were published and more horrors were confronted in literature, the truth eventually came to light. Russians desperately sought *glasnost*, meaning "openness and transparency." They could find the truth in literature. In the post-Stalinist era, virtually no public monuments were erected. In the absence of monuments, memorials, and museums, what historian cultural scientist Alexander Etkind calls "hard memory," Russia's sense of memory in regard to their holocaust laid only in the textual domain of soft memory. Soft memory includes "poetry, imaginative literature, popular history, biographies, memoirs, historical studies, and political debates" (Etkind 43). Solzhenitsyn's novel acted as a source of memory to Russians, affirming to them that others understand and share their trauma of the gulags.

Solzhenitsyn's revival of the *skaz* allowed him to speak on camp life in a way that Russians were accustomed to; moreover, it enabled him to open the door of traumatic literature during an oppressive regime. Michael Rothberg, an American Holocaust historian and memory studies scholar, developed a theory about traumatic literature like that of Solzhenitsyn's. Engaging with the new study of Traumatic Theory, Rothberg proposes a mode of representation called traumatic realism. In an interview, Rothberg defines this component of trauma theory as a "mode of representation that, on the one hand, tries to meet the demand for documenting history…and, on the other hand, attempts to represent that history in a self-reflexive way that marks the absences, the traumatic losses, and the gaps in attempt to write about the Holocaust or other traumatic histories" (Mesnard 27). Thus, simply reading about the harrowing experiences in the gulag forces a Soviet reader to remember and mourn their experiences post Stalinism.

The instances of traumatic realism in *One Day* are expressed through the humdrum of the novel. Viewing *One Day* through the lens of traumatic realism reveals the trauma hidden in Shukhov's everyday actions. Rothberg's definition of traumatic realism is the presence and operation of an extreme and traumatic event in the quotidian continuum of everyday reality (Mandel 241). Considering his definition, Shukhov processes the "extremes," the horrors of camp life, through the everyday things he looks forward to. He copes with the extremes by cadging cigarettes, sucking on crumbs of bread, savoring his *kasha*, and making conversation with the prisoners. Thus, Shukhov has survived the mental trauma of the gulag through mundanity, through the minutia of each day.

Displaying their inner trauma in different manners, Soviet survivors yearned for collective healing. However, they could not have access to healing. Under the Stalinist regime, requesting psychological treatment meant that one was a dissident. Khrushchev considered dissidents involved in *inakomysliye* (meaning "other-thinking") mentally ill (Oustinova-Stjepanovic 32). The regime locked up such "dissidents" who sought mental help in institutions with the "criminally insane, drug addicts and other people suffering from "genuine" mental health illness…[S]ome dissidents conveyed their distress at sharing a room with convicted killers" (Oustinova-Stjepanovic 34). The regime would also exile dissidents or send them to labor camps. So, most survivors of the Stalinist regime opted not to receive psychological help, nor did they want to dissent. With no means of healing found in the government, many Russians turned to literature to heal themselves.

As one of the first influential writers in the literary "thaw," Solzhenitsyn's novel served as healing literature for many. *One Day* merely recounts a day of many (3,653) days Shukhov

has spent in the gulag so far. However, Solzhenitsyn also slips in themes of Christianity, human dignity, repression, and survival throughout the novel—themes containing truth. He writes of the inhumane conditions of camp life during the Stalinist era, whose image Khrushchev tried to blacken at that time (Diegel 79). The Khrushchev era allowed Russians to explore the realm of healing through literature. In fact, the liberal literary press of the Soviet Union asserted the following statement regarding healing: "'Old healed wounds do not pain. But a wound that still bleeds must be healed and not cravenly hidden from sight. And there is only one cure—truth.'" (Jones 359). With the prestige that came with *One Day*, the desire to read more and the desire to heal also came. Literature had become a means of therapy and was offered as a tool of healing.

One of the influential themes that the novel addresses is Christianity, specifically Christian asceticism, a theme that could be of help to post-Stalinist readers. Although subtle, *One Day* is filled with Christian topoi (or traditional themes) and religious discourse. For example, repainting the numbers on the prisoners' hats closely resembles a priest anointing with oil, and the outbreak of war aligns on the same day as Sunday Mass in Shukhov's hometown (Kobets 661-662). Although scattered with images of Christianity, asceticism is the prevalent theme in the novel. Through asceticism, Shukhov resists the totalitarian state daily and attains a higher level of spirituality throughout the day, escaping spiritual death (Kobets 662).

To demonstrate the contrast of asceticism and indulgence in the camp, Solzhenitsyn includes the undisciplined character, Fetuikov, in the novel. While Shukhov, Alyosha the Baptist, and other members of his group are devoted to the grueling work that comes with each day, Fetuikov opposes ascetic values. Slacking behind in his work, he falls into despair and yearns for the material world. Stealing food, cadging cigarettes, licking plates (which Shukhov says only

the lowest of men would do), and scavenging has chained Fetuikov to materialism. He has died spiritually. In fact, Svitlana Kobets asserts that unlike Fetuikov, Shukhov is an ascetic "freed from the yoke of the material world. This freedom gives him strength" (671). To Shukhov, asceticism is a tool of freedom, providing him the mental strength to survive the camp.

In a post-Stalinist culture, Russians needed a sense of strength. The point Solzhenitsyn stresses by including themes of spirituality is that the metaphysical dimension is where freedom lies. Although prisoners were confined in both space and time, they were not confined in mind and spirit. At the end of the book, Shukhov no longer knows if he wants to be released. While such a thought seems horrifying and unfathomable, this could only be understood if one has "[acquired] the meaning of spiritual survival…" (Kobets 674). Solzhenitsyn wants to show Russians that people like Shukhov, who carry ascetic values, can be freed spiritually and not fall prey to the totalitarian regime.

Although the book contains dehumanizing themes, like the stripping of human dignity and cruel repression, Solzhenitsyn's subtext to Soviet (and many Western) readers advocates spiritual freedom. In fact, his prescription for inner liberty calls for repentance and self-limitation (Baron 407). Shukhov displays both attributes in his time at the gulag, even when he joyfully sucks on the crumbs of bread he has stored in his cheek, getting the most out of his meal. He refuses to give up his integrity to the demoralizing regime by accepting the tiny moments of pleasantness.

Solzhenitsyn's themes and underlying suggestions to Soviet readers spurred on great acclamation; the novel successfully unmasked the brutality of the Stalinist regime and gave readers the *glasnost* they yearned for. Solzhenitsyn affirmed to his readers of his mission as a

writer to "speak for the human conscience" (J.L.G. 6). Not only did his readers recall the truth of their traumatic experiences, but they were also prescribed a different way of coping through ascetic ideals. Without proper memorialization of the Stalinist Holocaust, official publication of deaths, and proper burial sites, Solzhenitsyn's skillfully-written piece of traumatic literature offered (and still offers) a means of healing to post-traumatic Russians when none existed.

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