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Review of 'Rethinking the Gulag: Identities, Sources, Legacies'

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Alan Barenberg and Emily D. Johnson, eds. *Rethinking the Gulag: Identities, Sources, Legacies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022. 310 pp. $85 hardback/$35 paperback.

On one side of the gulag, there is oblivion — the records purged, the archives closed. On the other, there are the distortions that the topic has been subjected to, particularly in the last couple decades in Russia. And in between these twin dangers stand all those attempts—scholarly, artistic, and personal—to make sense of what happened, to put the scale and horror of the camp system into comprehensible terms, to resist the falsehoods.

These circumstances mean that gulag studies are inextricably linked to moral questions and carry very real consequences within these debates. Not surprisingly, then, the editors of *Rethinking the Gulag* frame their excellent volume in similar terms. "Comparison also suggests that while societies can and do make progress in coming to terms with past injustices," write Alan Barenberger and Emily D. Johnson in their afterword, "the goal of such efforts should not be an artificial endpoint but rather a continuous process of reexamining the past" (291). Fortunately, *Rethinking the Gulag* does even more than that.

The collection is made up of nine chapters and three response pieces divided into the three titular sections: identities, sources, and legacies. While the editors and all the contributors emphasize the variability of the gulag experience, these remain productive unities for their wide-ranging materials and disciplinary approaches. The first section, with fascinating essays from Jeffrey S. Hardy, Emily D. Johnson, and Gavin Slade, analyzes religious identity, non-Russian language use in gulag correspondence, and the criminal reputation system. Each chapter provides novel insights that challenge what has often been taken for granted. As Slade demonstrates in his examination of criminal identity and community structures, for example, it is worth empathizing with political prisoners' fear "on coming into contact with a society of hardened criminals that had developed intricate cultural codes," but one must go beyond that initial impression and consider the "practical and instrumental purposes the criminal culture served" (85).

The danger with carceral studies, of all kinds, is often a flattening of perspective. What Slade, along with his sections' other contributors, does is grant nuance to our understanding of what it might mean to define oneself in a situation of extremity. What parts of your former life must be shed for survival? What might remain? Johnson describes in her study of a small corpus of camp correspondence how an Estonian mother and son seem to have suffered from "linguistic amnesia, perhaps partly as a result of trauma" in their communication (59). Her turn to non-Russian materials in this intervention against the notion that inmates were unable to write in non-Russian languages is also most welcome.

Section 2, "Sources," is no less innovative. In her chapter, Susan Grunewald uses GIS tools to reconfigure our mental map of German POW camps in the Soviet Union, showing that while "Germans associated the GUPVI camp system with Siberia and snow […], mapping shows that most of the GUPVI camps operated outside of Siberia." (141). The striking maps, paired with strong historical analysis, make the nature of these POW camps clearer.

Likewise, Sarah J. Young employs distant reading to draw conclusions about texts housed in the Sakharov Center's archives. Young responsibly considers potential pitfalls of this digital

humanities method—treating such brutal works as "data," overgeneralizing from a limited corpus—even as she ably demonstrates its benefits in spotlighting trends in the texts (themes, narrative strategies, authorial framing decisions) for more "traditional" close(r) reading. Her conclusions about these camp narratives' thematics align with those of Leona Toker, who in her *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors* did much to draw out the contours of what makes up a gulag text.

The final section, devoted to gulag "legacies," features an essay on how encounters with the natural world during captivity altered the poetics of Varlam Shalamov and Nikolai Zabolotsky; another on the debates between Shalamov and Georgy Demidov over how one should (or must) write about the gulag; and, finally, an explication of the Necropolis of the Gulag, Irina Flige's term for the complex system of graves and burial ceremonies associated with the gulag. Here, perhaps, is a clear example of how the divisions between sections are rather arbitrary on one level. Barenberg's analysis of Demidov and Shalamov's polemics is just as much about legacies as it is about identities: "each saw his experience in the camps as fundamental to his identity and self-presentation" (231). Similarly, Josephine von Zitzewitz's chapter contributes to a sharper understanding of Zabolotsky's poetic self-identity in relation to the turbulent world around him and nature's role in it. And Mikhail Nakonechnyi's analysis of camp administrators' use of medical release to distort mortality rates in part 2 surveys the dangerous legacies of these historical records. As debates over numbers continue to rage, his chapter offers a solid reframing of the questions involved.

I mention all this boundary crossing not as a critique but as an acknowledgment of two important aspects of the book. First — its deeply interdisciplinary nature. In her "review chapter," Judith Pallot observes that the "use of more than one method to collect data on the same topic has acquired near talismanic status in the social sciences" (192). But it's also true, as Pallot notes, that this buzzword can yield real results. In the case of the gulag, we are dealing with a topic so massive that the deployment of multiple disciplines' tools is called for. It is, after all, at the heart of gulag studies, whose historical foundations, often rested on memoirs, an at least half-literary genre. In approaching the gulag as a constantly shifting system of plans and expectations, and as both a concept and a reality, *Rethinking the Gulag*'s multi-/trans-/interdisciplinary basis paints a fuller picture of the gulag's effects and produces a sense of how the field has shifted in recent years.

Second, the connections across sections speak to the volume's clever structure. The interstitial "commentary" chapters by Pallot, Lynne Viola, and Alexander Etkind effectively function as conference panel discussant responses. Even in their approaches, they resemble this genre: some introduce new ideas, while others focus more on drawing threads and contextualizing. Rather than serving as a distraction from the heart of the volume, this structuring principle adds depth through collaboration. Similarly, the editors' introduction and afterword are far from perfunctory, as can sometimes happen with such volumes; instead, they, respectively, contextualize the rise of gulag studies and situate the contributions' places in debates surrounding the gulag under the present Russian regime. There's a lot of ground to cover between these pages, but the reader remains in excellent editorial hands with this volume that will be of use to both scholars familiar with these issues and undergraduates in courses on a variety of topics.

As many of *Rethinking the Gulag*'s contributors note, the gulag is far from exhausted. Pallot mentions a missing study of gender (96). Johnson emphasizes a much-needed turn to sources beyond those found in Russian and in Russian archives. New technologies also open up opportunities for unearthing other aspects of Flige's "Necropolis" or unmasking false notions of how the gulag worked. As a whole, *Rethinking the Gulag* masterfully chips away at those barriers—technical, epistemological, and, indeed, moral—that overwhelm the student of the gulag.

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