

Punishment as a Crime? Perspectives on Prison Experience in Russian Culture.

Ed. Julie Hansen and Andrei Rogachevskii. Uppsala Studies on Eastern Europe, no. 5. Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2014. 196 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Tables. \$79.95, hard bound.

While acknowledging the specificity of the Russian penal experience, this valuable volume also deals with the universal aspects of punishment that undermine the possibilities of rehabilitation, as well as with the ways in which the regularities of prison and camp life interpenetrate with the culture of society at large. The collection is up to date and includes previously under-researched material.

The opening article is Igor Sutyagin's first-hand account of Russian penitentiaries of the 2000s: the new and old camp semiotics, taboos, and types of socialization. Indeed, "the camps" exist to this very day, though in comparison with Stalin's times, they are less deadly, as well as less ramshackle, and more like prisons. The author notes that in the hierarchical self-categorization of the inmates, the top spot is still accorded to professional criminals, including the *élite* known as "thieves-within-law" (*воры в законе*). Apparently, this part of the criminal underworld is not extinct, despite its defeats in repeated clashes with those who had crossed the lines into collaboration with the authorities. However, its laws must have changed since the 1940s: Sutyagin makes no mention of their refusal to work in camp enterprises, whereas self-exemption from work used to be a distinctive mark of this group. Before discussing the issue of reforms, the author analyzes the effect of long sentences in reducing the chances of prisoners' readaptation to regular social life after release.

Martin Kragh's "Free and Forced Labor in the Soviet Economy" deals with the fluidity of structural boundaries between the "small zone" of the camps and the "large zone" outside them in terms of the coerciveness of labor. The short-term benefits of forced labor in the Bolshevik "race against time" (58) came at the price of "repressive machinery," costly in itself: Kragh regards the Politburo's speedy dismantling of its main parts after Stalin's death as evidence of its recognition of the ultimate wastefulness of forced labor (62).

Sarah J. Young's article "Criminalizing Creativity" contrasts the fascination with inmates' creativity in Dostoevskii's *Notes from the House of the Dead* and in Andrei Siniavskii's *A Voice from the Chorus* with attitudes taken in Vlas Doroshevich's 1903 *Sakhalin: Hard Labor* and Varlam Shalamov's works. The reports of Doroshevich began to appear in the press in 1897 but were not reprinted in the USSR and are not well known: foregrounding his book, as well as that of Terz-Siniavskii, is among the important contributions of the article; its statement that Shalamov's representation of professional criminals betrays his fear "that anyone forced to exist in such conditions, himself included, risks becoming like the thieves" (83) involves a controversial generalization.

The bulk of Andrea Gulotta's essay constitutes a periodization of Gulag humor, the avenues of its expression, its genres, and sources for its study—including the turns in the literary "career" of Iurii Kazarnovskii (92–94), witness of the last days of Osip Mandel'shtam. To explain the psychological mechanisms of camp humor, Gulotta enlists theories of humor ranging from Plato and Aristotle, through Herbert Spencer, Freud, and Bergson, to contemporary research, without reducing the phenomenon to a single etiological line. He links the relative unpopularity of in-camp humor in present-day Russia to the fact that the effectiveness of humor depends on the semiotic proficiency of the addressee, whereas "the semiotics of life within the camps," in contrast to "the semiotics of Soviet repression in general," are not well known in today's Russia (106). Indeed, the proliferation of camp memoirs, a major source for understanding camp semiotics, has apparently not been matched by a growth of their readership.

This observation is partly contradicted in Helena Goscilo's article "Complicity in the Illicit? Liube's Rock Band Bond with the Criminal *Zona*," which discusses the 1994 film *Zona Liube*, a would-be musical drama set in prison, with the songs of the band resonating with the emotions of the inmates. Actually, however, this essay, which associates the early success of *Liube* with the Zeitgeist of Russia's "lawless transition to an unannounced market economy" in the unruly 1990s (114), discusses the prison lore adopted by that band as a matter of a stylized image rather than a complex of signs. The fascination with criminality reflected by the band amounts to "Romancing the *Zone*" (113), partly akin, one may add, to the romanticization of criminal life in Russian literature of the 1930s, which Shalamov criticized in "On One Mistake of the Belle-Letters" (Об одной ошибке художественной литературы).

A recurrent motif of Inessa Medzhibovskaya's essay, "Punishment and the Human Condition," is reversals: observers or perpetrators of confinement eventually are, or imagine being, confined themselves. The article deals with a number of works that represent the human condition as a trap. From the springboard of the author's study of Stalin's derisive handwritten comments in a copy of Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, through reflections on West European thought on the role of prison, the essay moves to the discussion of Tolstoy's critique of punishment as a social institution.

Andrei Rogatchevski's closing article "Non-Totalitarian Imprisonment" compares the prison narratives of writer-politicians Lord Archer of Weston-super-Mare and Eduard Limonov, imprisoned, in England and Russia respectively, in 2001–2003. Based on Abraham Maslow's theory of motivation, it shows how the prison survival of both was "about engaging in intense self-actualization, despite the acute deficit of gratification of the lower-level needs" (169).

Rogatchevski accepts Maslow's privileging of analogies over differences (181). This preference intermittently transpires throughout the collection, which is part of the concerted scholarly effort to understand developments in post-Soviet Russia in terms of certain continuities with preceding socio-cultural phenomena. A side effect is a downplaying of a distinctive feature of *totalitarian* imprisonment—namely, that in addition to serving variously combined purposes of deterrence, retaliation, isolation, exploitation, or rehabilitation, it also facilitates extermination, at times a precariously inhibited yearning and at times a mandated goal.

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Russian Irrationalism from Pushkin to Brodsky: Seven Essays in Literature and Thought. By Olga Tabachnikova. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. xi, 270 pp. Notes. Index. \$107.99, hard bound.

Olga Tabachnikova's book examines a venerable myth (or cliché) exploited both by Russians and those outside of Russia: that Russia cannot be understood by the mind. This inscrutability in the guise of a positive designation, irrationalism, is the thread tying together the book's seven finely variegated essays, each attempting to discern the distinctively Russian aspect of the irrational. There is a tension between generalization and faithfulness to the particular throughout the book characteristic of the difficult task the book takes on: to give a rational account of what is by definition counter to reason, its Other. Before addressing this difficulty, I will describe briefly the structure of the book.

Tabachnikova offers an introduction that pins down in broad strokes what she means by irrationalism. She then proceeds to describe irrationalism in the Russian