

Resisting Dehumanization: Female Experience of Stalin's Gulag

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Abstract:

Survival as Victory: Ukrainian Women in the Gulag investigates the life of Ukrainian female political prisoners in Stalin's Gulag (1939–1956). Oksana Kis discusses the development of Gulag studies and focuses on the individual human experience rather than on the penitentiary system by engaging with 150 female testimonies. Seven chapters of the book are devoted to different aspects and strategies of imprisonment survival, such as feeling of belonging, creativity, faith, love, and motherhood.

Dehumanisierung zum Trotz: Weibliche Erfahrungen des Stalinschen Gulags

German Abstract:

Im Buch *Survival as Victory: Ukrainian Women in the Gulag* werden die Erlebnisse der weiblichen ukrainischen politischen Gulag-Häftlinge (1939–1956) untersucht. Im Mittelpunkt der Studie stehen nicht die institutionellen Aspekte, sondern die individuellen Erfahrungen der 150 Frauen, die von der Autorin analysiert werden. In sieben Kapiteln werden die unterschiedlichen Bewältigungsstrategien thematisiert wie das Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl, Kreativität, Glaube, Liebe und Mutterschaft.

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Kis, Oksana. *Survival as Victory. Ukrainian Women in the Gulag*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021. 652 pages, 84,50 EUR. ISBN: 978-0-674-25828-0.

Survival as Victory: Ukrainian Women in the Gulag is a study on female experience of living in the Gulag camps. The author Oksana Kis is a Ukrainian historian and anthropologist who works on Ukrainian women's history. The English translation from Ukrainian was published in 2020 by the Harvard University Press with the support of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute and the Ukrainian Book Institute. The book consists of an introduction, seven chapters, conclusion, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. Along with the official documents, Oksana Kis uses the testimonies (mostly published after Ukraine has become independent, because Soviet censorship was too strict) of 150 women who were political prisoners in Gulags between 1939 and 1956. Furthermore, the text is illustrated by the color photographs of the prisoner's personal belongings: handmade greeting cards, letters, photos, and embroideries.

In the acknowledgement, the author mentions that the English translation gives "the world a chance, possibly for the first time ever, to hear the voices of Ukrainian women who were political prisoners as they bear witness to their experience in Stalin's Gulag" (p. IX). Indeed, Oksana Kis's study closely engages with the very important but still underrepresented topic of female experience in the Gulag. In the introduction, Kis describes the state of Gulag studies across the world. According to the author, Gulag studies in post-Soviet countries generally concentrate on the Gulag as an institution. Recent Western studies, on the contrary, are focused on people and their experiences. However, most scientific works in English still do not contain any memoirs by Ukrainian political prisoners. Therefore, *Survival as Victory* is an important contribution to the field because it is the first anthropological study of Ukrainian female prisoners' experience published in English. Moreover, Kis focuses on the coping

strategies that helped women to survive the dehumanizing conditions: “[...] in the face of total control, disenfranchisement, and violence — [they] had created their own secret world, one that was not governed by the harsh laws of the internment zone” (p. 2).

In chapter one, the author describes the silencing of information about Gulags in the Soviet official discourse and the problematic memory politics in independent Ukraine. Consequently, even family members often do not know the truth about their relatives: “For now, the scattered histories of political prisoners do not provide a complete portrait that might speak to their descendants” (p. 44). From this perspective, bearing witness and testifying contributes to the reintegration of the former prisoners into society: “This study shows the fundamental capacity of these women, who were driven to the brink of annihilation, to act, and in this way to restore human dignity to both those who died and those who survived” (p. 30). Furthermore, the author emphasizes that the memoirs should be perceived as narratives, in which some topics (e.g. camp sisterhood and everyday life) are thematized and some (e.g. ethnical enmity and sexual violence) are silenced.

In chapter two, the author proceeds with the description of living conditions in prisons and camps: malnutrition, cold, hard work, diseases, and informational isolation push women to physical and psychological limits, and therefore many female prisoners survived only by developing adaptive mechanisms and with the help of sympathetic people. Chapter three discusses the variety of ethnic groups in the camps: Among Balts, Poles, Belarusians, Kazakhs, Georgians, Tatars, Volga Germans, and many other ethnicities, Ukrainians and Russians were the largest ethnic groups in the camps. There was solidarity inside and between ethnic groups, although tensions (e.g. between Ukrainians and Russians) were not excluded. In addition, Oksana Kis describes the role of the Christian faith and rituals in maintaining mental health among Ukrainian female prisoners. Chapter four introduces creativity and free time in the Gulag. Despite the exhausting work and unbearable living conditions, women were looking for inspiration, which they found in poetry, songs, embroidery, performances, and drawing, even though the “unsanctioned creativity” (p. 251) was prohibited and could lead to punishment.

In chapter five, Oksana Kis mentions that female prisoners, due to physical and psychological tortures, “were no longer seen as women, or even as human beings” (p. 327). Paradoxically, the shared experience of being dehumanized motivated some prisoners to develop friendship and solidarity (camp sisterhood) that lasted even after their release. Furthermore, even among the camp officials and the criminals (non-political prisoners) there were empathetic people at times. Chapter six touches upon the tabooed topics of body, sexuality, and love. As these topics are not mentioned in most of the memoirs, Oksana Kis assumes that they are too painful and traumatic for the female prisoners because of the feelings of shame, helplessness and vulnerability. Consequently, the author mentions that true love was perceived by the women as a kind of protest against the humiliating system. Finally, chapter seven introduces motherhood in captivity as a ‘cursed blessing.’ Women and their babies were exposed to extreme physical and psychological distress. Those infants who survived their first year were separated from their mothers and sent to orphanages. Some women did not give up and made the decision to survive at any cost in order to reunite with their children. After their release some female prisoners found their sons and daughters — but due to their early separation children could not recognize their mothers anymore. Thus, women had to invest a lot of love and patience into reestablishing family relations in their life after imprisonment.

Survival as Victory is a unique study on the female Gulag experience, now available for the broader circle of historians, feminists, psychologists, anthropologists, cultural and literary scholars across the world. For the first time a systematic analysis of Ukrainian female testimonies has been published in English. The study concentrates on both national-specific and transnational aspects of developing psychological and cultural resilience. The book has a clear structure, and the personal stories of Ukrainian women make it well-readable. However, it would be interesting for the reader to get some more information about the female prisoners — e.g. in the form of short biographies. In addition, this book could encourage further research in terms of postmemory: What was and is the life of the former prisoners and their descendants like? Taking into account the impact of such an experience, it is important to do more research, to publish books, to discuss, and to break the silence still present in the official discourses of many post-Soviet countries.

Author's note: I know the importance of memory work because I found, among the 150 names of the women whose testimonials are the subject of this study, the name of my great-aunt Dariia Poliuha (Masiuk) (1926–2017), who was a political prisoner in Intlag (Inta) from 1949–1956.