

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Kis, Oksana. *Survival as Victory: Ukrainian Women in the Gulag*. Translated by Lidia Wolanskyj. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021, p. 640, \$118 Hardcover. (9780674258280).

Translated from the 2017 Ukrainian edition, Oksana Kis' *Survival as Victory: Ukrainian Women in the Gulag* is an empirically rich, theoretically grounded, and rigorous study of Ukrainian women's experiences in the Gulag – the notorious Soviet prison system designed to supply cheap, forced, labor and punish political resistance. Though Kis is an anthropologist and historian, the book has significant relevance for sociologists and criminologists, especially those who study prisons/prison camps, gender, nationalism, material culture, and their intersections. I would emphasize that this book can also be read as a powerful contribution to the sociology of everyday life, though as Kis herself points out, everyday life under “extreme conditions” (90). Kis argues that to survive the horrors of the Gulag, Ukrainian women prisoners used traditional, gendered, cultural practices to create solidaristic communities. Such communities helped the women to preserve dignity and selfhood in the face of forces (e.g. malnutrition, lack of privacy, physical and sexual abuse, threadbare uniforms, limited communication with home) dedicated to annihilating their identity.

The book, which runs to 640 pages (including appendices, notes, and references), is based on the analysis of 150 memoirs and autobiographies written by women, largely from central and western Ukraine, imprisoned between 1939 and 1956. Typically, they served sentences of 10 or 11 years in work camps scattered across the Soviet Union. As Kis points out, Ukrainians comprised a significant portion of the Gulag population, only second in number to Russian prisoners: “by 1 January 1955 every fifth prisoner in the Gulag was a Ukrainian” (6). Nevertheless, there are few studies dedicated to the Ukrainian Gulag experience, and in particular, to women's experiences. In this respect, Kis' book fills a central gap. Though the book focuses on detailed description and analysis of Ukrainian women's everyday experience, as context, Kis provides demographic information about prisoners and describes the camps' institutional, legal, and structural features. For those unfamiliar with the Gulag, the book is a solid introduction.

Kis describes how her study of Ukrainian women compares to previous studies on women's experience of the Gulag (largely written from the perspective of Russian and Polish prisoners). The Ukrainian memoirs are distinct in three ways. First, they feature the "pervasive motif of confrontation with the Soviet system and resistance to the camp regime" (81). Kis attributes this to the fact that many of these prisoners were connected to the Ukrainian nationalist underground that actively resisted Soviet rule. Second, a common theme in the Ukrainian memoirs is solidarity and friendship: "Gulag memoirs by Ukrainian women are full of stories about sister prisoners whom the memoirists met in captivity" (85). Third, even though sexual violence was a part of life in the camps, the Ukrainian memoirs, unlike some of the Russian ones, only briefly describe this violence. Indeed, even though the Gulag was a dark and horrific place, most of the memoirs emphasize moments of hope and creativity: "Overall, their remembrances are not so much about how the Gulag was a death-dealing machine, as about how life overcame death in the Gulag" (29).

Conceptually, Kis frames her study through feminist theories, especially those that emphasize women's historical agency. Women, she argues, and convincingly demonstrates, are not subjects of history, determined unilaterally by larger-than-life social forces, especially those found in totalitarian societies. Rather, drawing on historian Joan W. Scott, Kis posits: "the central concept of my study is the idea of women's agency, which sees women as proactive, effective subjects in this historical process, and proper participants in History whose experience happens to have a gender aspect" (91). Citing cultural theorist Lauren Berlant, she defines agency not as the activity of a "hypercognitive historical actor" (93), but as a practical, embodied, everyday engagement with the world. In an interesting twist, Kis argues that in the camps this agency was largely expressed through *normative femininity*. Rural Ukrainian women were socialized as good Christian, housewives and caretakers, "adept at female crafts" (98). In much feminist literature, Kis points out, traditional virtues are thought to constrain women's agency. In the context of the camps, they were "transformed into a means of resisting dehumanization..." (98). It was precisely because of their "rigidity, persistence, and conservative nature" that these gender norms could serve as tools of resistance (98).

This brings me to the empirical materials, introduced over 5 chapters and addressing themes such as community, creativity, humanization and dehumanization, women's bodies, and motherhood. The strength of Kis' book is her expert arrangement and interpretation of the memoirs. Kis foregrounds the voices of the women, and she pairs her extensive use of

quotations with full-colour images of the many material objects made and used by women in the camps. Among others, these include embroidery, handmade postcards and journals, and letters to and from home. The inclusion of these images adds a remarkable texture to the book. Indeed, Kis highlights the importance of these objects to her understanding of the camps: “While working on this book, I realized that, at times, these personal items say more about what the women felt and experienced than their stories, because these things make tangible life and creativity in the camps and help us to understand more deeply what life in captivity meant for these women” (23).

As an example of the richness of the analysis, I want to draw attention to two themes that capture some of the book’s most important arguments. First, Kis explores the techniques that Ukrainian women used to establish solidarity and community (chapter 3). Ukrainian women built community by establishing communication networks between Ukrainians within and across camps. The women strengthened these connections by regularly engaging, together, in cultural practices. These connected them to each other and to their homeland. Strikingly, Kis frequently points out that community was formed by reproducing, in the camps, “ersatz” versions of their far-away homes.

Second, in describing these cultural practices, Kis emphasizes women’s creativity (chapter 4). Many such activities were undertaken under threat of punishment. Of note were the women’s religious practices. The Ukrainian women engaged in joint prayer and song and celebrated Holy Days through liturgy and “celebratory feasts.” Song created a community that drew together not only Ukrainians but other prisoners. In one of the many moving and evocative passages shared by Kis, she quotes Barbara Skarga, a Polish prisoner: “They sing as easily as they breathe... These songs float, and in them, the human voice and language return to their real meaning” (261). In addition to singing and praying, the Ukrainian women made art, postcards, performed theatre, and told stories. It is remarkable that the materials used to engage in these activities were rarely provided by the camps, but rather came as occasional gifts from home, or were found around the camps. Figurines and rosaries were made from “wet black bread” (251) and embroidery used scraps of thread pulled from different camp sources. This creation of something out of nothing speaks, of course, to the central theme of agency in the face of an empty and threatening environment.

Though a rich source of empirical detail for scholars and students, the book is likely too large to assign in a single class. Nevertheless, the introduction and chapter 1 provide a good overview of the main arguments and give readers a taste for the memoirs. The conclusion, at nine

pages, is an especially succinct summary of Kis' main findings. Alone, or together, these chapters would be invaluable additions to courses on prisons (especially for a comparative perspective), and gendered experiences within prisons. Of course, the book would be perfect for a standalone course on the Gulag or, more generally, courses on total institutions.

Finally, the book is an important reminder of the history of oppression suffered by Ukrainians under the Soviet Union, and for that alone is worth reading. Most recently, independent since 1991, Ukraine has been invaded by neighbouring Russia, an attack which threatens a return to the totalitarian systems Ukraine has sought to escape. In the face of this, the English publication of Kis' excellent book draws to the attention of a new readership the distinct and unique social science being produced, as it has for over a century, by Ukrainian scholars.

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