Arsenii Formakov, *Gulag Letters*, Edited, Translated, and Introduced by Emily D. Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), ix+294pp.

Jeffrey S. Hardy, *The Gulag After Stalin. Redefining Punishment in Khrushchev’s Soviet Union, 1953-1964* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2016), viii+269pp.

Michael David-Fox (ed.), *The Soviet Gulag. Evidence, Interpretation, and Comparison* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016), xi+434pp.

From day one to its demise, the Soviet Union was engaged in a battle for production. This was to serve several ends: to overcome Russian backwardness; to overtake the advanced West; to lay the material foundations for communism. In pursuing these goals all was seemingly permitted. Above all the population was a material resource to be exploited. This held true for all citizens in and out of the Gulag. Experiences of repression and incarceration, however, varied considerably depending upon time and circumstance. The volumes under review offer some insight into this diversity.

Arsenii Formakov’s letters were not written for publication. They are not a memoir or a considered reflection of his two terms in the Gulag, 1941-47 and 1950-1955. The vast majority of the correspondence is from the earlier period, and in one direction, from Formakov to his family, chiefly his wife, Anna, but also his children, Dima and Evgenia. Formakov was a leading member of the Latvian intelligentsia, an Old Believer and anti-communist. He was a poet and novelist, an editor and translator. Despite the hardships he endured, Formakov must count as one of the Gulag’s more fortunate inmates. He did not die. He managed to avoid some of the more arduous labour and to take on cultural work that came with certain privileges – inside work, additional pay and rations, and travel. He had the opportunity to overcome restrictions on correspondence because he mingled with free labourers, who were able to post letters and parcels outside of the camp regime. Of course this was not perfect, and there is frequent frustration about gifts that go missing or correspondence that has not arrived. Letters are numbered so that some track could be kept of what might have gone astray.

The letters are above all about how the Gulag tore apart one family. The big events of Formakov’s family life, for good and ill, happen while he is in confinement. Formakov’s wife was pregnant at the time of his first arrest and he did not get to see his daughter before being sent to the Gulag. She would be eight by the time of his first release. Formakov’s son died in a tragic accident in the summer of 1951. His family withheld the news from him until the following year, explaining the sudden lack of correspondence to his father by illness. There is a letter dated January 2, 1952 in which the father writes unknowingly to a dead son: ‘I am constantly anxious about your health, about the cause and nature of your ailment, and, - forgive me! – as old people are want to do, I pray all the time that you will be healed.’ (p. 266). When he is told the truth, Formakov draws upon his religious faith to console his wife, Anna:

Your anchor of salvation and refuge is not a grave. That is just a symbol of our ties with the one who has gone ahead of us to the heavenly abode. Our tie to life is our daughter, our one and only. Dimusha will not help you raise her. Alas! This means that the tasks that he did not manage to complete also fall on you. You are raising our daughter for yourself, for me, and also for Dima…He lives, he is with us, he is in us and in her who is now our one and only. In his unforgettable name, I call out to you: turn your attention away from the past and from death’s captivity and toward the future of our second child. To life! (p. 269)

It is a call that she understandably struggles with: ‘My life goes on as it has without any big changes. Work, my cares, minor squabbles, tiredness, more tiredness … I haven’t cried in a long time … I cried out all my sorrow in the first year, and now the suffering of other human beings no longer touches me’ (p. 270).

Given what Arsenni and Anna went through it is remarkable that their relationship survives. At the time of his second incarceration, Anna divorced her husband at the insistence of her employer, but they remarried after his second release. In the earlier correspondence Arsenni repeats constantly the love for his family and his fidelity to Anna. Sometimes this is done obliquely, as when he mentions that women in the drama group with whom he is in contact ‘have husbands here and children elsewhere’ (p. 100); sometimes directly, ‘No one close to me has touched me in five years-not even with the side of their knee…In the mornings and evenings my heart is with you and I yearn for you’ (p. 107); and sometimes candidly and awkwardly:

I am proud that, since the day of our marriage, I have not been unfaithful to you in word, deed, or thought. Here in Siberia, after stays in various places where the food supply was meagre and after my first years of hard physical labor, I was so weakened physically (but not morally!!!), that I could not get an erection until the winter of 1944-45. Now I get one very rarely in my sleep, as adolescents do. So for this reason alone … well, I think you understand what I mean. (p. 110).

Formakov’s letters are published in the Yale Hoover Series on Authoritarian Regimes. As one reads the heartfelt cries of this family fractured by the cruelty and repression of the Stalinist USSR, it is clear why governments deal in statistics not individual life stories. This level of detail has to be ignored for the state to act as it does.

Formakov was a survivor and the letters offer many clues to how he survived, from living to be reunited with his family to parroting Soviet speak in the letters as evidence of his loyalty and adaptability to the system. Michael David-Fox’s edited collection, *The Soviet Gulag. Evidence, Interpretation, and Comparison*, contains several excellent reminders of why Formakov’s life story should not be taken as representative of the Gulag as a whole. Golfo Alexopoulos charts the growing brutality of Stalin’s labour camps from the 1930s to the 1950s, in which prisoners were exploited to the point of physical exhaustion. In order to keep mortality rates lower, these prisoners were then released to die outside of the Gulag. This brings Alexopoulos to a chilling conclusion: ‘Human exploitation—unrelenting, punitive, and increasingly brutal—constituted the defining feature of Stalin’s Gulag … Whereas the Nazi death camps sought total annihilation, the Stalinist labor camps pursued total exploitation… and this system of labor utilization was itself destructive’ (p. 63). Dan Healey illustrates the validity of this conclusion in his examination of weak and disabled prisoners in the Gulag. Here the emphasis was harshly concentrated on prioritising resources for those capable of work, and denying treatment to ‘hopeless cases’. Healey draws upon a range of sources, including memoirs that ‘testify to experience in invalid camps that taxed all endurance: invalid camps that were set up in a panic and shut down as quickly; a prisoner’s struggle, as manager of an invalid house, to haul food across snow-blasted steppes to save her charges; the ghastly ritual of distributing basket-weaving materials to bed-ridden tubercular patients near death’ (p. 80). Healy rightly notes that the invalid regime in the Gulag was a ‘criminally reduced version’ of what was in place outside of the camps. The connections between the Gulag and broader Soviet society are the subject of several essays. Oleg Khlevniuk provides an overarching interpretation in which ‘the boundaries between Gulag and non-Gulag reveal their conditional character and their permeability’ (p. 41). Wilson T. Bell illustrates how at the time of the Great Patriotic War in Western Siberia, ‘much of the Gulag was fully integrated into the local, regional, and national planned economy, and prisoners were well aware of what was going on and of their role’ (p. 114). Bell argues that economic imperatives were far more important than political factors in how Gulag labor was utilized during this period. Bell and Asif Siddiqi both point to how Gulag labor was ultimately understood to be unproductive and wasteful and this eventually fed into post-Stalin reform. Siddiqi’s examination of scientists and specialists in the Gulag also highlights the need to analyse the ‘birth, maintenance, and ultimate demise of the Gulag [as] deeply contingent episodes characterized by persuasive confusion about the very purpose of the system, its goals being constantly redefined to fit changing shortcomings that economic planners and security service administrators seemed to find in every nook and cranny of Soviet society.’ (p. 109).

The confusion about the exact role of the Gulag is evident in Jeffrey Hardy’s excellent study of the reform of the Gulag in Khrushchev’s USSR. Although primarily focusing on the debates that surrounded penal reform in the USSR, Hardy also draws useful comparisons with penal regimes across the globe. The contextualization is thereby two-fold, within the history of the USSR and across transnational penal structures. This produces a nuanced analysis of the limits and achievements of Gulag and penal change 1953-1964. Hardy in no way wishes to minimise the extent of incarceration and the survival of the Gulag post-1953. At the same time, he gives credit for the numerous ways in which the Gulag did change for the better.

It was clear that there was a consensus before and especially after Stalin’s death that the Gulag had to be reformed. Above all, socialist legality had to be restored. A strength of Hardy’s monograph is its illustration of how seriously the shift to socialist legality was taken. Under Khrushchev there were multiple bodies and agencies that had an input into penal reform, including key institutions of state (the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, the republics), the party (local organisations, the Komsomol), the Gulag administration, and society. There were debates about the extent to which incarceration was to meet economic needs, or to be focused on inmate re-education, or as form of control and deterrent. Hardy presents the range of views, actions, and impacts as the Gulag experienced liberalisation, counter-reform, and then a Khrushchevian synthesis between prison as punishment and prison as rehabilitation that lasted into the late Soviet period and beyond. Khrushchev did not hold a consistent line throughout this period, but threw his weight behind particular currents depending upon the political needs of the moment. Hardy, for example, points to the numerous conservative pro-punitive views expressed in society and how Khrushchev bowed to them in the search for popular appeal (p. 150).

Hardy’s study is not focused exclusively on Khrushchev. He gives voice to the many specialists and interest groups that were involved in penal policy and administration. This includes an exposition of a 22 May 1962 futuristic vision of what the Soviet correctional system would look like under the communism of 1980 promised by Khrushchev, penned by Vasilii Aleksandrovich Samsonov, head of the Procuracy’s department for oversight of places of confinement. Hardy in no way uses this as a standard against which to measure the ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of penal reform, but as an illustration of what utopian thinking looked like at this time. There are fascinating sections – the reception of Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day* in the Gulag, including a very interesting review in the camp newspaper *K novoi zhiizni* (pp. 174-175).

Ultimately the story of penal reform outlined by Hardy reveals: (a) ‘the fluid nature of reform in the Khrushchev era ... conducive to wide swings in policy (p. 199); and (b) the battle between punishment as retribution and labour power and as rehabilitation and re-education was resolved in a relative equilibrium of the reforms of 1963-64 that was confirmed in the ‘Principles of Corrective-Labor Law’ of 1969 (pp. 200, 205). The Khrushchevian reform of the Gulag was thus his most lasting achievement.

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