

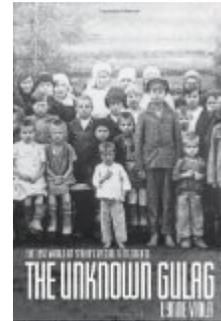
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lynne Viola. *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin's Special Settlements*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 320 S. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-518769-4.

Reviewed by Clementine Fujimura (Language and Culture Studies, United States Naval Academy)

Published on H-Childhood (November, 2007)



Just when we thought all atrocities of the Soviet era had been documented, analyzed, and revealed, Lynne Viola reminds us that more work is to be done. With her latest book, *The Unknown Gulag*, Viola lists the events in the 1930s that led to the liquidation of an entire group of peasants, the kulaks. In this careful documentation, Viola offers a rich source not only for historians, but also for all those interested in the Soviet period, as it depicts the interactions between personalities and power struggles, which ultimately caused the suffering and deaths of nearly two million people.

The book is comprised of two parts: part 1 documents the destruction of the kulaks and part 2 looks at life in the special settlements. In both sections, Viola painstakingly lists various events, found in archives and remembered by the few survivors, that led to the resettlement. As she uncovers the mistakes and miscalculations, vying political agendas of government officials, and even misconceptions and vague definitions of the term “kulak,” she reveals the arbitrary and inhumane nature of the entire process.

In the first part, “The Destruction of the Kulaks,” Viola describes the policies and radical actions taken to liquidate these peasants. The author takes great care to expose the horrors endured by the kulaks during resettlement and expulsion from their villages, including not only the listing of official statements, but also the incorporation of some personal accounts. Overall, this section focuses on the officials’ documentation and accounting of kulak exiles. Scattered throughout this part is the constant reminder of children’s experiences, as perhaps the greatest victims of all, along with the elderly. In her lists of mortality rates and illnesses, she portrays children and

the elderly as suffering the most and ultimately dying at the highest rates. Viola also paints a picture of chaos and doom, as kulak families suffered both physically and mentally at the hands of overzealous and power-hungry officials. Starvation, brutality, harsh climates, forced labor, and disease characterized kulaks’ lives.

Another theme of this part, but especially of the second part, is the disconnection between what was officially supposed to take place and what, in fact, did. Rules, such as those affecting children, minors, and women, were “routinely violated” (p. 98). Viola’s conclusion is clear. She argues that Stalinism was a period of contradiction and hypocrisy, that the plans did not match reality, and that the idealistic official visions contrasted the brutal life of the people. As Viola states: “Stalinism was lawlessness constrained and empowered by ideology” (p. 113).

Overall, Viola meets her goals of the book. She depicts the policies, their executions, and consequences regarding kulaks, in an attempt to “restore the voices of a people that Stalin and the Communist Party attempted to silence” (p. 10). As is the case with most history, the voices often come secondhand, in translation. One is left with a desire for more voices, more stories coming firsthand from survivors. Stories of brutality and confusion, along with power struggles and poor planning abound in this volume, but the actual experiences of the children, as may be documented in personal accounts, are fewer and shorter. During the Soviet period, there existed a notion of an ideal childhood. It is clear from Viola’s book that this ideal was not realized for many children. Her documentations of official descriptions of brutal conditions in which children lived demonstrate that kulak children

were not part of the development of the New Soviet Man—a person with certain qualities that were said to be emerging as dominant among all citizens of the Soviet Union, regardless of the country’s cultural diversity. We can assume that childhood under Stalin was varied and often contradicted the value placed on childhood by many Soviet pedagogues, such as Nadezhda Krupskaya and Anton Makarenko. Not all children were seen as equal. What was childhood for the kulaks under Stalin? Was this another lost childhood? How did this period affect

future generations?

Perhaps Viola’s book can be seen as a springboard for future studies that will look more deeply into how concepts of childhood, the family, and education were, in fact, played out among kulaks through a study of relationships among kulaks, within families, and among peers. As time passes, these may be harder and at one point impossible to find. Yet, Viola’s study makes clear the significance of such research as we continue to uncover the history and complex layers of the Soviet period.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-childhood>

Citation: Clementine Fujimura. Review of Viola, Lynne, *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin’s Special Settlements*. H-Childhood, H-Net Reviews. November, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13836>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.