

Miriam Dobson. *Khrushchev's Cold Summer: Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform After Stalin*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009. VIII, 264 S. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4757-0.

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## Gulag Returnees and the Post-Stalin Thaw

In March 1953, only weeks after Joseph Stalin's death, interim Soviet leaders granted a wide-reaching amnesty to Gulag prisoners. Miriam Dobson has taken this momentous event, and the subsequent waves of releases in the next few years, and crafted an engaging, rigorous, and important study of Soviet legal categories, cultural anxieties, and ultimately the search for new (or old) revolutionary principles after Stalin. Working with a rich base of archival sources, Dobson approaches the issue of prisoner release from a number of angles; as a result, readers hear multiple voices and encounter issues that mattered to a variety of publics—from earnest citizens confused by the end of informant culture and youth seduced by the “criminal activities,” of ex-prisoners, to former prisoners themselves who petitioned the government for services, and to government officials struggling to define a new political lexicon (p. 113). Throughout, Dobson challenges the traditional chronological boundaries of the “thaw” era and offers an innovative way to reframe Soviet social anxieties in this period.

Drawing from a broad context of “postconflict regimes,” Dobson uses the Gulag amnesties—which released both political and nonpolitical prisoners—to address the challenges to post-Stalin society and leadership in confronting the violence of the previous regime without renouncing the system itself (p. 5). Dobson charts the ways in which leaders after 1953 replaced discourses on punishment with reeducation; individual policing with community mobilization; and above all, arbitrary terror

with rule of law (*zakonnost'*), establishing legality as the defining principle of Soviet life after Stalin.

Beyond the particular case study of the title, this book engages the social history of the Nikita Khrushchev era as a whole. Dobson treats this period as one in which “political agendas were fluid,” arguing that an uncertainty and ambiguity that defined the post-Stalin years is missed if one tries to declare Khrushchev either supportive of change or opposed to it (p. 157). In Dobson's trajectory, 1953 saw the beginnings of the new discourse on legality, 1959 the peak of optimism regarding the abilities of a just Soviet society to rehabilitate criminals, and 1961 the turning point with the Twenty-Second Party Congress—by which time elements of the previous decade's destalinization were already waning. She fills in key events from 1953 to 1956, in particular, showing that prisoners were released in waves during this period, not after 1956 as might be expected. Khrushchev's 1956 Secret Speech, the usual checkpoint for change in this era, comes halfway through the book, in fact, and is treated not as a signal of changes to come, but as an explanation for reforms already happening. Ending with case studies of the conversations surrounding the publication of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's Gulag novel, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962), and the persecution of poet Iosif Brodskii in the early 1960s, Dobson finds that the rule of law promised in 1953 had stuttered, and the concept of internal enemies was again being promoted. The offenders were portrayed as obstacles to Soviet society's ability to

fulfill the dream of full communism that the leadership insisted was finally within reach.

One of the most satisfying elements of this project is the sophisticated way Dobson has read and theorized the large part of her source base consisting of letters and petitions to authorities. Positioning these sources slightly apart from both Stephen Kotkin's "Bolshevik-speak" and Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck's diarist subjectivities muted under layers of performance, Dobson asks how such performativity accrues different meaning when done imperfectly, or when the state has not provided the proper "interpretive tools" to the performers—leaving the historian with a citizens' vernacular that highlights pulses of anxiety in the social body (pp. 12, 78). The individual stories she uncovers are fascinating. Working from such a rich archival source base, Dobson makes the stories come to life and tells them with an engaging narrative that matches her analytical rigor.

While Dobson does an admirable job of bringing several strands of analysis together to create a compelling portrait of post-Stalin society and the ways its needs changed under Khrushchev, the one strand I would have liked to see more of is gender analysis. There are no statistics given as to the sex breakdown of the camps, but from her evidence I assume the vast majority of her archival subjects were men. Concern about bandits, impressionistic youth seduced by a life of crime, and prison tattoos in public visibility suggest anxieties about masculinity. The demographic disruptions brought on by

the war are well known in Soviet history; I wonder how much these discussions about criminal elements are also tied to concern about a lack of "proper" men in society at all. To watch a lost population of men return in the 1950s from what in many cases was a death sentence would, I imagine, have had particular resonance for the war generation. These were the wrong sort of men, however, as expressed in Dobson's evidence, and the disappointment in—and in some cases anger toward—the ex-prisoners underscores anxieties about the kind of men now available for public viewing, participation, and debate. For those men, moreover, Dobson's petitions show that many of them used their personal narratives to challenge the standard script of salvation in the Gulag. She might also have read this as a challenge to standardized scripts for Soviet manhood.

The prisoners' release triggered "a complex, sometimes troubled, dialogue about key themes within the Soviet lexicon, and—by extension—about identity, politics, belief, and community in the post-Stalin world" (p. 13). With *Khrushchev's Cold Summer*, Dobson has taken an innovative body of evidence and used it to broaden our understandings of conversations about post-Stalin society—including its vocabulary, its methods, and especially its very goals. In doing so, she deftly uncovers and analyzes layers of ambiguity about "correction" discourses, the status of the enemy, and the responsibilities of both government and citizens in a collective trying to repudiate a culture of terror.

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