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Steven A. Barnes. *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011. 368 S. ISBN 978-0-691-15108-3; ISBN 978-0-691-15112-0.

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S. Barnes: Death and Redemption

Steven Barnes's "Death and Redemption" revisits the fundamental question of the nature of the Gulag and its role in the Soviet system. Barnes defines the "Gulag" broadly to include not only the Stalinist forced labor camps and colonies, but also the settlements of forced exiles and prisons, as well as the repressive policies that affected their development. While his book does not cover all these institutions and policies in equal measure, his main argument is sweeping: a "total institution" (p. 16), the Gulag served as a mechanism of purification within the Soviet endeavor to reshape society along socialist lines. Inside the camps, "violence and reform" did not contradict each other, but went hand in hand to engineer "a total human transformation" (p. 27). Societally, the Gulag thus acted as an ideologically calibrated filter. For its inmates, it was a "crossroads" (p. 255) where they could either achieve "redemption" and rejoin Soviet society, or perish.

After having expounded his views on the Gulag, Barnes strides through its history in four chronologically ordered chapters, each of which has several thematic emphases. Integrated into the narrative is a case study of one camp complex, Karlag in the Karaganda region of the Kazakh SSR - the same camp on which Wladislaw Hedeler and Meinhard Stark have presented a voluminous study. Wladislaw Hedeler / Meinhard Stark, Das Grab in der Steppe. Leben im GULAG: Die Geschichte eines sowjetischen "Besserungsarbeitslagers" 1930-1959, Paderborn 2008; Wladislaw Hedeler / Meinhard Stark (eds.), KARLag. Das Karagandinsker "Besserungsarbeitslager" 1930-1959. Dokumente zur Geschichte des Lagers, seiner Häftlinge und Bewacher, Paderborn 2008. Barnes does not refer to these works. But whereas Hedeler and Stark document in great detail the actions of the camp administration and the experiences of inmates, Barnes's approach is more focused and selective. Constantly shifting back and forth between the conditions in Karlag and broader developments, Barnes argues that the Gulag should be understood in terms of the Soviet system's relentless drives to categorize, sort, but also transform individuals.

In a first step, Barnes considers a number of practices, including labor, propaganda and re-educational activities, punishment, and the circumstances of release, all from the perspective of the "corrective" function that the camps were supposed to perform. While authors studying the Soviet system's intention to reform and resocialize convicts have often focused on the 1920s and early 1930s, Barnes emphasizes that many practices informed by the notion of redeemability endured through later years and that the rhetoric of correction never fell silent. The Second World War serves as a case in point: while it subjected the camp system to extreme scarcity and stress - with fatal consequences for hundreds of thousands of inmates -, it also prompted authorities to summon prisoners to work wholeheartedly for the victory of the socialist fatherland, an appeal to which many responded.

Nonetheless, as the narrative unfolds, there is a perceptible shift away from the theme of reeducation and correction towards that of exclusion and isolation. For one, Barnes rightly draws attention to the indiscriminate punishment of ethnic and national groups which began in the late 1930s and became increasingly prevalent during and after the war. He also assigns a central place to the creation, from 1948 onwards, of the strict-regime "Special Camps", where more than 200,000 of the allegedly most "anti-Soviet" prisoners were isolated and forced to perform particularly hard labor. While changes in the categorization of "enemies" thus contributed to the Gulag's development into an ever more rigid and entrenched system in the postwar years, camp administrators' heavy-handed attempts to keep the more assertive and defiant (and also marginally better fed) prisoner contingents in check did not always produce the desired results. Barnes leaves no doubt, however, that only

Stalin's death led to fundamental reforms, mass releases, and the eventual dismantling of the camp system. In the last chapter, he discusses the 1954 uprising in the Special Camp in Kengir, arguing that striking prisoners formulated their demands for reviews of their cases and a relaxation of penal conditions in a way that shows their, at least situational, adaptation to Soviet language and values.

"Death and Redemption" thus broaches many key features of the camp system and Stalinist repression more generally. It argues convincingly that the camps remained highly politicized spaces throughout the Stalin period and illustrates how broader trends in Soviet policies often affected life inside them. Barnes's analysis of the rhetoric and practices pertaining to the ideological evaluation of inmates is compelling and buttressed with aptly chosen sources. In emphasizing this theme, Barnes illuminates an often neglected yet unquestionably important dimension of the Gulag and helps understand the startling coexistence in Stalinist camps of edifying rhetoric with cruel and inhumane conditions.

Another question is the suitability of Barnes's leitmotif as a general framework for understanding the purpose of the Gulag. One of Barnes's recurring arguments for this hinges on the observation that although death was common in the Gulag, so was release. Yet if this is to be viewed as evidence of a greater scheme to sort prisoners not just according to their dangerousness, but according to their worthiness to return to socialist society, why, then, did the Soviet system hardly ever treat camp returnees as if they had been "redeemed"? Why were they routinely forced, by formal and informal restrictions, to exist in marginal spaces - geographically, economically, socially, and politically? And why did the prospect of release recede ever farther for more and more camp inmates and forced exiles as the Gulag reached its apogee in the postwar years?

As for the modus operandi of the camps, Barnes himself acknowledges the existence of "counternarrative[s]" (p. 51) to the one that he emphasizes. Indeed, it is difficult to reconcile the intention of a "total human transformation" with the indoctrination of camp guards, as a former prisoner describes it, "with the idea that camp inhabitants were all dangerous criminals whom one could treat like the scum of the earth with complete impunity" (p. 50). And how to account for the camp administrators' notorious discourse, absent from Barnes's discussion, in which prisoners figured as anonymized 'rab(ochaia) sila' (labor force), a mere factor of production? Yet while Barnes occasionally mentions the presence of attitudes that run counter to his line of argument, often he skirts a more thorough discussion of their relevance.

Perhaps most questionable is Barnes's tendency to downplay the significance of the economic factors behind the exploitation of forced labor. Quoting inefficiencies and financial losses, as Barnes is wont to do, is weak support for this argument. On the one hand, inefficiencies plagued the entire Soviet economy. On the other, the goal of full cost recovery in the penitentiary was not only established by the Bolsheviks as early as 1918 and consistently pursued throughout the Stalin years (as Barnes acknowledges in passing: pp. 160, 200). At several points it was actually achieved, while in other periods the ratio of losses versus total operating costs was still extremely low by the standards of any penal system. Furthermore, when discussing the origins and nature of the Stalinist camp system Barnes never mentions that it owed its unique organizational and geographic structure to the leadership's choice and persistent commitment to exploit the forced labor of prisoners for large-scale industrial projects and economic tasks. Although Barnes describes the challenging economic mission of Karlag - making vast sways of steppe arable and use them for agriculture - he remains largely silent about the permanent pressure to fulfill economic plans which weighed heavily on its managers. Hedeler / Stark, Das Grab in der Steppe, chapters 2 and 7. According to the authors, most orders issued by the director of Karlag concerned production-related issues (ibid., p. 264). Discussing the forced labor of prisoners, Barnes even writes that "actual production was generally secondary" (p. 39), which runs counter to the experience of the millions of camp inmates whose food rations, and thus survival, depended on fulfilling production quotas during long and arduous workdays. Tellingly, when Barnes mentions this notorious scheme a few pages later, he presents it as another means of sorting those worthy of survival from those who were not. While this is a legitimate, though not unproblematic interpretation, it is certainly no reason to ignore this practice's immediate function, so blatantly obvious to the prisoners themselves, of using the threat of hunger to compel them to make a maximum effort to fulfill production quotas.

Such reservations notwithstanding, "Death and Redemption" is an important and original contribution to the literature on the Gulag, driven by an intriguing core argument. Evidently, greater consideration of practices and discourses other than those on which Barnes has focused would have shown his interpretation to apply not everywhere throughout the Stalinist camp system to the extent Barnes suggests. Nonetheless, his stimulating approach unquestionably enhances our understanding of

the camps as well as the "Gulag" as a whole and is likely to play an important role in debates about their place in Soviet history.

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