

## Madeleine Reeves

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

**Jehanne M. Gheith and Katherine R. Jolluck.** *Gulag Voices: Oral Histories of Soviet Detention and Exile.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 276 pp. ISBN 978-0-230-61062-0.

**Olga Ulturgasheva.** *Narrating the Future in Siberia: Childhood, Adolescence and Autobiography Among the Eveny.* Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012. 210 pp. ISBN 978-0-85745-766-0.

*Madeleine Reeves. Address for correspondence: Department of Social Anthropology, Arthur Lewis Building, 2.054, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK. madeleine.reeves@manchester.ac.uk.*

A short documentary film produced in Germany in 2009 shows young people in Karaganda Oblast of Kazakhstan being asked about their knowledge of the vast Karlag labor camp that spanned much of the region between 1930 and 1959. The film,<sup>1</sup> made under the auspices of the joint Russian-German-Kazakh project “Traces of Forced Labor in Post-Soviet Towns,” reveals a young population seemingly indifferent to the regime of incarceration that contributed to the construction of their city. “No, never heard of it,” says one young Karaganda resident categorically when asked if she knows about the Karlag labor camp. “Karlag ... I don’t know where it was, but somewhere around here, in this oblast,” says a teenager evasively to the camera, gesturing around him. One young man, quizzed on a park bench, points out that the Central Department Store, TsUM, was built by Karlag prisoners, along with the House of Culture and several other city landmarks. His friend, sitting alongside him, turns his gaze away from the camera, seemingly embarrassed by this admission. Few young people seemed entirely comfortable answering questions about their knowledge of the past, traces of which lie all about them in the architecture of the city and the surrounding landscape. The documentary film and the project of which it forms a part, funded by the German Foundation EVZ (which stands for “Remembrance, Responsibility, and Future”), raise questions about how individuals, communities, and states deal with what Sharon MacDonald calls “difficult heritage.” For MacDonald, a difficult heritage is defined as a “past that is recognized as meaningful in the present but that is also awkward and contested for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity” (2009:1). As the three texts reviewed here reveal, the heritage of the Soviet Gulag, a vast network of “corrective” facilities that stretched into the most unforgiving extremes of Soviet geography, is difficult not just because it attests to a decades-long regime of incarcera-

<sup>1</sup> *Sledy prinuditel’noi raboty v postsovetskikh gorodakh (Traces of forced labor in post-Soviet towns)*, 4 parts, 2009, created, filmed, and produced by Götz Burggraf, Anastasiia Frolova, and Iuliia Vaserchuk (available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1KXAh-2vZc>).

tion and organized state-sponsored violence. It is also difficult because traces of that past live on in the present: in the lonely barracks and watchtowers that haunt Gulag landscapes; in the demographic composition of former Gulag towns, where many current residents are descendants of former prisoners and former guards; in the spontaneous memorials and state-sponsored museums; and in the memory of Gulag survivors, many of whom were instructed upon their release never to speak about their experiences. As Steven Barnes notes in the conclusion to *Death and Redemption*, the Gulag was thoroughly integrated with the minutiae of Soviet society, and as such touched the lives of “nearly every Soviet citizen, whether directly, or through the fate of a friend, colleague, or family member” (2011:254).

At its apogee in 1953, according to Jehanne Gheith and Katherine Jolluck, more than five million people were either living in the camps or exiled as part of the regime of collective labor. Even after the disbanding of the Gulag administration in 1957 the camp “as a phenomenon, as a system of detention and degradation, continued” (Gheith and Jolluck 2011:3). Many of those incarcerated were rehabilitated only in the 1990s, following the 1991 Law on the Rehabilitation of the Victims of Political Repression (7). This is a past that is recent and raw. As Gheith and Jolluck found, several of those whom they interviewed about their experiences of incarceration had never spoken about their past, even to close family members. In a context where remembering can be dangerous, the effect can be a kind of collective amnesia or an uncertainty about how to address a past that continues to haunt the present.

It is perhaps because of these difficult traces that the afterlives of the Gulag have received comparably little scholarly attention from historians and anthropologists. A growing body of literature has sought to understand the founding, organization, and administrative structure of the camps themselves (Afnas’ev et al. 2004–2005; Khlevniuk 2004), and a number of public initiatives have sought to document the experiences of Gulag survivors, including the Sakharov Center and the Memorial Society in Russia. However, the lived legacy of the Gulag, for former prisoners, for camp employees, for those forcibly resettled to make way for its barracks, and for society at large, has been much less studied. There is little published research, for instance, on how the camp network is memorialized in diverse post-Soviet settings; how violent landscapes have or have not been erased, transformed, or reappropriated; how the Gulag is taught (and taught differently) in different post-Soviet school curricula; or how the camps are remembered today by the children and grandchildren of those whom it directly affected. The books reviewed here, therefore, mark an important, if still rather isolated, contribution to initiating such a debate.

The three texts considered here have been chosen less for being immediately comparable, than because they provide three distinct modes of approaching Gulag legacies: through conventional archival history (Barnes), through oral narrative (Gheith and Jolluck), and through ethnographic fieldwork among a community of Siberian Eveny who are living in a landscape literally haunted by the ghosts of past incarceration (Ulturgasheva). They thus provide a counterpoint to the existing memoir literature, dominated to this day by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago*. Each poses distinct kinds of question about the legacy of the Gulag beyond the for-

mal closure of the camps: for former prisoners, for reindeer herders living amidst a dilapidated camp architecture, and for the perimeter villages from which many of the camp's employees hailed. Each also takes a different historical moment as its primary focus: Barnes, for instance, ends his historical narrative shortly after the closing of the camps in the 1950s; Olga Ulturgasheva's ethnography was conducted in Russia's second postindependence decade; the oral histories compiled by Gheith and Jolluck were conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s with a cohort of former prisoners whose number is rapidly declining. This variation allows us to pose as an empirical question the ways that different modes of scholarship can capture different kinds of trace—and what might be gained by reading ethnography, oral history, and conventional archival history together.

Barnes's *Death and Redemption* focuses on the Karlag labor camp in the Kazakh SSR from the 1930s to its closure in the 1950s and beyond. "Camp" here suggests something far more territorially contained than the sprawling network of corrective facilities that, by the 1930s, covered 1.7 million hectares of Karaganda Oblast and included eight collective farms (*sovkhoz*). Barnes draws on an extensive body of archival and published sources, including documents on internal camp surveillance that were still classified in Moscow but which were made available to him in Karaganda, to reassess the place of the Gulag in Soviet society. Three key arguments emerge from the text. First, the Gulag needs to be understood as continuous with Soviet society and marked by the same hierarchies of class, status, and nationality. Barnes shows how Gulag society was marked by differences of gender and generation—and by a strict social hierarchy between political and nonpolitical inmates. Second, he suggests that singular explanations that see the rationale for the camp as exclusively political, economic, or ideological are inadequate. Camps were often spectacularly economically inefficient, but efficiency of output was not necessarily the primary goal. The index of success that mattered was that of "labor utilization": for camp authorities work itself was both the means and measure of rehabilitation.

Third, and related to this, the Gulag needs to be seen as continuous with the broader ideological project of social reengineering through labor. Where some have seen the Gulag simply as a giant death camp, in which all human life was equally disposable, Barnes highlights the way in which "the Gulag and its inmates were an integral part of the Soviet project—the revolutionary creation of a polity without margins" (2011:13). Barnes does not deny the shocking human losses and arbitrary violence that characterized camp life. In 1933 alone, at the height of the famine, he notes, 15 percent of the Karlag population died from cold, hunger, and disease. It is no surprise that many of those who survived to write memoirs of their experiences of the Gulag had found ways to be excused from hard physical labor. Many prisoners died a slow death by starvation: unable to meet their labor quotas, they had their rations cut, reducing their physical strength and capacity for "redemptive" work even further. But Barnes argues that it would be misplaced to see slow death through incarceration as the singular goal of the Gulag. Camp regimes, rather, were characterized by a belief in the redemptive capacity of physical toil that was continuous with

the broader Soviet project. Barnes (2011:60) quotes Solzhenitsyn, writing of the White Sea–Baltic Sea Canal, to illustrate this perspective: “In order to get the title of shock worker it was not enough merely to have production successes! It was necessary, in addition: (a) to read the newspapers; (b) to love your canal; (c) to be able to talk about its significance.” Redemption, in other words, was seen to entail a psychic and attitudinal transformation, self-refashioning so that one not merely labored, but *loved*. The remarkable reality, as Barnes notes in a brilliant final chapter, is that it seemed to work: even during the forty-day uprising in the Kengir labor camp that occurred in 1954 in the wake of Joseph Stalin’s death the nationalists who led the uprising continued to “speak Bolshevik.” Once granted amnesty, some camp survivors actively sought to join the Communist Party as soon as they were able.

If the primary focus of Barnes’s text is the working of the Karlag labor camp until its closure following Stalin’s death—a moment marked by a “paroxysm of mass disobedience” (2011:203)—his narrative also provides fascinating insight into the way that the camp relations continued to inflect social life in Karlag’s vicinity long after the gates were closed. After release, for instance, many former prisoners remained in the vicinity of the camp. Some had no home to return to, others were promised early release if they took up positions in the local mining industry (246). To this day, as anthropologist Eeva Kesküla has noted (personal communication), the history of Karlag is often referenced by contemporary mine workers in Karaganda as a reason for both the social diversity and characteristic ethnic harmony of the area: helping each other, after all, was the only way to survive.

The question of individual and collective legacies is one that comes to the fore in Gheith and Jolluck’s remarkable collection of oral histories, *Gulag Voices*, the first published collection of interviews with Gulag survivors to appear in English. They encompass a wide variety of social groups: intellectuals and political prisoners, peasants and members of the so-called punished nationalities; Russians, Germans, Jews, and Tatars; those who have written publicly of their Gulag experiences and those who have rarely mentioned it; politically active adults and the children whose formative years were spent in camp orphanages. By eschewing the focus on published memoirs (another volume, with the same title of *Gulag Voices*, was published by Anne Applebaum the same year as Gheith and Jolluck’s text and focuses on written sources), the authors are able to capture a far wider range of voices—including nondissident and nonintellectual ones—that are usually absent from the memoir literature.

In so doing, they also allude to the emotional complexity and psychic ambivalence of surviving the Gulag. Instead of righteous anger at the suffering of the past, the dominant emphasis in many of the narratives is one of pragmatic getting on, making do, and making peace with the past. Many interviewees come across as sympathetic to the Soviet project, some even sought to join the Communist Party after their rehabilitation. In one remarkable case, an ethnic German former prisoner, Robert Ianke, now lives in the same village and the very same apartment block in Perm’ Oblast where the commander of the special settlement in which he was held also lives. “So what’s it like, do you speak to him?” the interviewer asks. “How would we not speak to each other? We see each other: ‘hello’” (Gheith and Jolluck 2011:41).

Several of the interviewees are no longer alive, and the book is therefore a valuable documentary resource, as well as providing in its entirety a poignant and insightful reminder of the ways that the trauma of past incarceration lived on well beyond the end of the Soviet Union. The interviews, carefully edited so that narrative and analysis flow back and forth in the text, are coupled with a collection of letters and photographs that provide remarkable insight into Gulag life and the process of survival in conditions of extreme suffering. The introduction to *Gulag Voices* provides a detailed and reflective insight into the challenges of conducting oral history in the Soviet context and beyond—how public histories of the Gulag become incorporated into individual memories, for instance—and the risks of seeing oral history as somehow more “pristine” and unmediated than that which is penned in memoirs. It is clear that often the process of recounting can itself be emotionally charged and that practices learned in the Gulag persist long after the moment of rehabilitation (as one interviewee put it, “I would die, but I wouldn’t tell anyone that I wanted to eat” [Gheith and Jolluck 2011:107]).

The final text reviewed here, Ulturgasheva’s *Narrating the Future in Siberia*, is at first glance a very different kind of book from the other two texts considered above. Written by an anthropologist rather than a historian and focused on the cosmology of Eveny children and youth in northern Siberia, Ulturgasheva’s study does not primarily focus on the Gulag. Yet her ethnography, conducted among a community of reindeer herders in an Eveny-majority village in the far north of Yakutia and its surrounding forest, provides a unique insight into the way in which past realities of incarceration continue to haunt the present lives of those who live among the ruins and into what it means to make a life and imagine a future in an “accursed” landscape.

The current village center, located several hundred kilometers from the district (*raion*) administration, is situated right on the site of one of the former YanStroi labor camps. Until the 1970s, the major Eveny village here was located some twenty-five kilometers away. Yet in a characteristic act of postwar “consolidation” of geographically dispersed groups (*ukreplenie*), the indigenous population was forcibly resettled on the site of the former camp beginning in the 1960s. For the Soviet authorities, this was a “rationalizing” move, one that would propel the indigenous population into a gridded socialist modernity. This relocation of indigenous populations, however, had powerful and consequential effects for the local Eveny population, who knew the new location for their village to be a place of state violence and death.

Ulturgasheva recalls how, in the 1970s and 1980s, when there were still a few living survivors from the Gulag, elders would share stories of a populated past, when military convoys would pass with Gulag prisoners building the so-called “road of bones” to Magadan. Today, by contrast, Eveny children in the relocated village understand their home to be literally accursed: haunted by *arinkael*, spirits originally found in the forest but which are now abundant in the village’s abandoned buildings. These ghosts undermine Soviet conceptions of progressive time, “since the very phenomenon of a ghost, let alone its message, defies the Soviet temporality of progress and linear development.” Crucially, moreover, the spaces of the former Gulag con-

tinue to haunt the present, “because although these events happened in the past they remain irredeemable today” (Ulturgasheva 2012:134). Indeed, if anything, the Gulag ghosts have proliferated in the post-Soviet moment of depopulation, out-migration, and social devastation wrought by the withdrawal of state support and the cutting of former transport links. When Eveny herders felt themselves to be held within a connected Soviet state, stories of ghosts were less apparent, and the ghosts that roamed the village were not seen as malevolent. Today, however, the ghosts seem to speak back to a present that is entrapped: the sinister nature of a place that it was impossible to leave made the ghosts a kind of dormant trace “waiting to be actualized” (135).

Ulturgasheva situates this metaphor and its social salience within an Eveny cosmology concerned with the sentient engagement with place, on the one hand, and visible traces of invisible spirits, on the other. When a local person dies, for instance, fellow villagers can ensure that the present is not disturbed by conducting small rituals of care (such as feeding the spirit of the deceased). The spirits of Gulag prisoners continue to haunt the present, by contrast, precisely because they cannot be located and known—and thereby contained (Ulturgasheva 2012:138). A dismembered arm, for instance, found by a child in a bag leaning against the wall of the school, is both a “real” event from a violent past (hunters, we learn, were instructed to round up escapees and to produce the severed arm as evidence) *and* a collective trauma that is repeated in the recurrent appearance in the school building of a ghost with a severed arm.

Ulturgasheva’s ethnography speaks powerfully of the ways that the present of remote Siberian village is—in a very visceral and material sense—haunted by the past. The ghosts who inhabit village buildings are not just reminders of a past that was violent then but is now long gone (the past, perhaps, of official memorialization and state narrative). Rather, ghosts serve as a constant evocation, in the present, of the suffering on which the village was originally built, fostering the “spatial and social perception of the village as an accursed place—*ningichapche tor*” (Ulturgasheva 2012:12).

This kind of ethnography has much potential to sit in critical dialogue with the insights of conventional narrative history that can, through its very form, reinforce the perception that past and present are worlds apart, that we can study the Gulag only *as history*. Ulturgasheva demonstrates not just how legacies of state violence continue to be relevant in the present but also the degree to which experiences of haunting can proliferate in particular post-Soviet moments—in spaces of social abandonment and times of diminishing hope. There is much to be gained from bringing this kind of ethnographic sensibility to the study of the Gulag in other parts of the former Soviet space. There are, perhaps, some encouraging signs of this: the German-funded project “Traces of Forced Labor in Post-Soviet Towns” alluded to above seeks to understand the social, material, and architectural legacies of the Gulag in diverse Kazakh and Siberian sites in the present. Ethnographic research in Kazakhstan by Kesküla and others promises to illuminate how forced resettlement is narrativized as contributing to the ethnic heterogeneity and social tolerance that characterizes contemporary Karaganda. But

such initiatives remain, still, few and far between. Enormous intellectual strides have been made in recent years in bringing research on the Gulag out of “solitary confinement,” as Kate Brown puts it in a 2007 essay, situating the camps within a constellation of disciplinary practices that “contributed to a legally bounded welfare state” (2007:201; see especially Alan Barenberg’s masterful *Gulag Town, Company Town: Forced Labor and Its Legacy in Vorkuta* [2014], published after this review was written). As the texts reviewed here suggest, there is much to be gained from situating the Gulag in a second sense—as part of the history of the present, as a violent past that erupts into the present—in ghost-sightings and hushed kitchen stories, in embarrassed silences and spontaneous memorials.

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