

Book review

## Survival as Victory: Ukrainian women in the Gulag

*By Oksana Kis, 2020, Harvard University Press, vii+640 pp., £75.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9780674258280*

Reviewed by Olga Khrushcheva (Manchester Metropolitan University)

Oksana Kis's book adds to the growing body of literature on the questions of gender and women's experiences in the Gulag forced labour camps. Kis collected over 150 memoirs and testimonials of women who were imprisoned in the Gulag camps between 1939 and 1956 for political reasons. This is not the only recent publication that is using autobiographical accounts of Gulag prisoners, but it is unique in its focus on the experiences of Ukrainian women. The questions of ethnicity and national identity are as central to the study as those of gender. The vast majority of women represented in Kis's study were sentenced to the camps for belonging to the nationalist underground movement.

Over the seven chapters of the book, Kis examines different aspects of female experiences of the camps from daily life and living conditions to sexuality and motherhood behind the bars. The main aim and the purpose of the book are to show how Ukrainian women managed to maintain their identity and to survive the dehumanising conditions of Gulag. Kis wanted the book to be not the story of suffering and misery of the camps, but also about hope and survival.

The book shows how in the face of hard labour, hunger, poor living conditions, rape, sexual violence and loss, prisoners have maintained hope, and how their survival became their way

of defiance of the Soviet state. Kis argues that the normative femininity in the camp system, was not a limitation as it is sometimes seen in the feminist studies, but the source of strength for these women. In the isolated and distorted reality of the Gulag, traditional gendered norms of maintaining feminine appearance, taking care of others, and knowledge of traditional female crafts helped women to restore the sense of normality that helped them survive the numerous daily struggles.

Kis highlights how important it was for Ukrainian women to preserve their national and religious identity. Women came together to collectively sing folk songs, do traditional embroidery and to stage classic Ukrainian plays. The book describes the enthusiasm the women had for such amateur play productions, how they tried to create costumes with traditional elements. This feeling of solidarity consolidated through their national identity and language was the source of strength for prisoners. Despite the fact that the religion was strictly forbidden, the book demonstrates how the incarcerated women continued to celebrate major Christian holidays and prepared and led weekly liturgies. Kis presents these practices as not only essential for boosting morale, but also as a way of continuous defiance of the Soviet regime.

The final chapter of the book paints the bittersweet picture of motherhood behind bars. Many accounts of mothers depict the inhumane conditions of childbirth and living in the camps with the infants, but the book also looks into the psychological aspects of motherhood in imprisonment. For many women in the book the story of motherhood was one of tragedy: the stories of separation and loss are hard to read. At the same time, Kis concludes that for many

women their children were the reason to keep fighting, to withstand all the hardships of the imprisonment in hope of being reunited with their children in the future.

To conclude, the book provides a valuable contribution to the field. Oksana Kis's book gives a voice to more than 150 female prisoners of Gulag and allows these women to tell their stories to wider public, to show how their identities as women, Ukrainians, Christians, mothers, and wives helped them to survive the horrors of the Soviet forced labour camps. How their ability to stay true to themselves was seen by them as a triumph over the oppressive regime.