

and strategy between Russia's two most important post-Soviet presidents, El'tsin and Putin, a much-needed addition to our current understanding of Russia today.

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(Hi-)Stories of the Gulag: Fiction and Reality. Ed. Felicitas Fischer von Weikersthal and Karoline Thaidigsmann. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2016. 382 pp. Appendix. Index. Photographs. €48.00, hard bound.
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What significance does today's culture of remembrance accord the Stalinist camps? We already know the high stakes being accorded this question in Russia 25 years after the Soviet Union's demise. Yet, unsettling answers are also coming from the west these days, reflected for example in the musical comedy *Muppets Most Wanted* (2014), part of which takes place in a Gulag camp. The dancing *tseki* might be just an extreme—and extremely tasteless—example. Yet they also mark a phenomenon currently no less prevalent in Russia: the adoption and interpretation by popular culture of this chapter in Russia's history of violence, which thereby stands alongside the scholarly research of the Gulag and the memories of its victims, and competes with both for the public's already limited attention. This observation yields the two core issues examined in a new volume edited by Felicitas Fischer von Weikersthal and Karoline Thaidigsmann, *(Hi-)Stories of the Gulag: Fiction and Reality*—"which 'stories' from and about the Gulag are in fact shaping our current understanding of the Soviet labor camps?" (9). The exploration of the second issue, regarding "inherent relationships between reality and fiction . . . found in the various forms of Gulag narratives" (11f) is equally stimulating.

With its ten English and seven German essays, *(Hi-)Stories of the Gulag* presents the results of an international conference held in 2012. "To discuss the validity, significance, and impact of existing narratives about the history of the Gulag and the prisoners' experience there . . . on the public perception," von Weikersthal and Thaidigsmann invited historians as well as literary and cultural researchers, film specialists, and musicologists. The broad disciplinary approach was more than a successful bid to scrutinize as many of the media's representations of the Gulag as possible. It was also an exhilarating appeal for grasping memory studies as an interdisciplinary and perhaps even post-disciplinary enterprise. Moreover, the assemblage of diverse approaches and methods immediately demonstrates just how vibrant scholarly exchange in the field has become. Several authors present under-researched topics, for example Andrea Gullotta on Gulag poetry and Inna Klause on *russskii shanson*. Others confront various sources together. Lukasz Neca compares the memoirs of two Polish authors, only one of whom was actually held in the Gulag. Dan Healey's examination of malingering, on the other hand, is based on official camp documents, former prisoners' testimonies, and the documentary fiction of Varlam Shalamov. Writing about early Gulag memoirs published in Nazi Germany, von Weikersthal examines the problems surrounding translation, political censorship, and propaganda. Others, meanwhile, turn to post-millennium fictional accounts. These include essays by Karoline Thaidigsmann on Martin Amis' *House of Meetings* (2006) and Ruta Sepetys' *Between Shades of Grey* (2011), as well as Irina Gradinari on the TV miniseries *Poslendniy boy mayora Pugacheva* (2005). Yet even re-readings of supposedly familiar narrators such as Shalamov offer fresh insights—see Leona Toker's remarks on his stories *June* and *May* (both 1959).

With high academic rigor, all authors endeavor to map out the tensions between fact and fiction. The editors have subdivided the diverse approaches into three

topical fields: “Competing Realities: Statistics, Memoirs and the History of the Gulag;” “Fiction and Reality: Literary Testimonies Between Document and Fictionalization;” and “Inventing the Gulag: Approaches in Contemporary Literature, Music and Film.” These lend the volume its persuasive structure, which forms the backdrop against which variously fictitious patterns of narration and memory are discussed, authentication strategies are introduced, and narrative positions and stylistic means are explained. This way, the significance of former prisoners’ works of memory for contemporary accounts—which in many cases remains undiminished—is illuminated just as brightly as are the challenges for memorial culture posed by their passing. The book repeatedly highlights the importance of traumatic experiences written into the testimonials. We should not assume, however, the existence of any automatic processes or relationships here. This is the point driven home in an engrossing essay by Manuela Pütz on the memory-based texts of political prisoners from the 1960s to the 1980s. Without discarding the modes and topographies of memoir literature on Stalin-era repression, these texts managed to recast violence and detainment into heroic narratives of political struggle.

Questions surrounding reception are covered mainly in the book’s third part, “Inventing the Gulag.” Inna Klause’s analysis of *russkii shanson* and *blatnye* songs passed on in the Gulag stands out here especially. Using online forums on the topic, she collects and analyzes the commentaries of dedicated fans of this thoroughly popular musical genre in Russia. Klause finds that, although the songs do keep memories of the Gulag alive, these memories degenerate into something like a veneer for present-day experiences of incarceration in Russia. Nina A. Frieß also focuses on online commentaries in her examination of Stalinist repression and the Gulag in contemporary crime fiction by writers including Tom Rob Smith, who represents western authors for a (mostly) western readership. That Smith’s books are generally viewed positively by English-speaking readers is about as expected as the mainly negative comments by native Russian speakers. What matters instead is the question that Frieß poses in light of this observation: What conditions must be met for a text dealing with the past to become a medium of memory and thus part of a memory culture?

With their remarks, Klause and Frieß provoke an additional question, one that the other essays in this volume touch upon but do not systematically pursue: by watching films, listening to music, or reading books, why would subsequent generations or detached spectators want to become co-witnesses of bygone acts of violence in the first place? Why would they—as Russians or, equally intriguingly, as non-Russians—expose themselves to these violent experiences? After all, this is nothing to be taken for granted, and should be reflected on all the more when scrutinizing the validity, significance, and impact of these narratives. This is just one of the inspirations that this insightful and enriching collection has in store for readers.

Translation of the review by Nicolas Kumanoff.

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In a classic example of the diffusion of law, Russia agreed to pass anti-trafficking legislation when it became a signatory to the Transnational Organized Crime Convention