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K. Hignett, M. Ilic, D. Leinarte and C. Snitar, *Women's Experiences of Repression in The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, Routledge, London, 2018

"I am still afraid that someone will come to my house to take me away", says Elisabeta Rizea, a political activist and a symbol of Romanian anti-communist resistance. Czech prisoner Lola Skodova's statement echoes Rizea's: "Several times a year, I dream of being imprisoned again... I wake up terrified". *Women's Experiences of Repression in The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, a timely study of how state-organised terror influenced women's lives, gives voice to numerous such testimonials, organised in four chapters that focus on different regions. Direct quotations from interviews and memoirs of female survivors feature in all four of the book's chapters and make for, at times, truly harrowing reading. As this book attests, even when placed in different locations – the Soviet Union, Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania – the female experience of repression is invariably that of physical and mental suffering, humiliation and indelible trauma.

This comprehensive study, put together by historians of Russia and Eastern Europe based in the UK and in the region itself, examines an impressive amount of both generally available and archival material. Aiming to analyse the articulated female experience of suffering and repression, it is published by Routledge in its History of Russia and Eastern Europe Series but engages with issues that are not contained by the disciplinary boundaries of historical research. It concentrates almost exclusively on women's experiences and thus addresses an observed imbalance in a number of fields such as history, and studies of repression, that for years had focused on more widely accessible accounts of male suffering from state-sponsored terror.

The conceptual scope of the study is intentionally wide: as the authors note, their book adopts a wide definition of repression that allows them to include accounts of both direct and collateral victims. As a consequence of this approach, the book features a chorus of distinct – sometimes dissonant – female voices, belonging not just to female political activists and dissidents, but also to wives, mothers and daughters of those who have been arrested or subjected to state repression. A wide

geographic scope allows the authors to present each case study in a comparative context and this juxtaposition is one of the book's strongest points. When viewed together, the women's accounts of their experiences showcase both the commonalities of the gendered experience of terror and the differences in how it is processed in the cultural memory of these – alarmingly recent – events. The immediate, everyday experience of terror is analysed in this study alongside later, perhaps historically even more complex processes of reintegration into society, dealing with trauma and overcoming consequent structural inequality.

In the first case study, an account of women's lives in the Soviet Union of the 1930s, Melanie Ilic focuses mostly on female relatives left behind by those who were arrested and executed during the Soviet purges and the Great Terror. Burdened with a 'tainted biography' from the moment of their loved ones' arrest, millions of women had to adapt to the new, harsh life as sole bread-winners for their families. They also found themselves in a new world order in which they were banned from certain professions and often exiled from their home towns. Ilic offers a thorough examination of various aspects of women's experiences in the immediate aftermath of the arrests, from their struggles to gain access to their own apartments, sealed off the by the police officers, to later attempts to locate children left in the care of relatives and friends. Ilic's sources include memoirs, such as Ludmila Petrushevskaja's famous *The Girl from the Metropol Hotel: Growing Up in Communist Russia* (2006) and Maiia Plisetskaja's *I, Maiia Plisetskaja* (1994), biographies and autobiographies, fictionalised narratives, collected and published interviews, and data from the *Leningradskii martirolog*. Presented alongside each other, these accounts, sharply contrasting in tone and style, offer a glimpse into the everyday life and experiences of terror in different strata of Soviet society in 1937 across the usual divides of class and education.

In the second chapter, Dalia Leinarte examines the survival tactics of Polish and Lithuanian women in exile and in labour camps during the period of mass Soviet terror in the region in the 1940s. Most interestingly, in this chapter Leinarte presents her observations on the changing nature of social and sexual mores in regards to gender identity and suggests that there were concrete historical reasons behind these important cultural shifts. In some cases, it was precisely the women's experiences of hard labour and incarceration that made them reassess the validity of traditional distinctions between 'men's' and 'women's' jobs and the acceptability of 'male' behaviour such as smoking. This chapter

does not only analyse the testimonials of female deportees, but also showcases the women's own reflections on how their traumatic experiences changed their ideas on gender roles, contrasting the Polish and the Lithuanian women's attitudes to their ordeal.

Kelly Hignett's contribution to this volume uses published memoirs and private testimonies to re-create a full picture of women's experience of repression in Czechoslovakia in the twenty years between 1948 and 1968. Thanks to the book's focus on both direct and collateral victims, this chapter succeeds in offering a panoramic view of the impact of political terror in the region. Hignett pays equal attention to the women's accounts of physical suffering, with illuminating descriptions of the sanitation and medical arrangements in the camps, and to the mental pressure the prison system exerted on its inmates. This chapter presents an analysis of the varied ways in which power was used in the camps by the direct agents like guards, interrogators and medical personnel. Based on a comparative reading of numerous testimonies, it examines not just accounts of physical harm, but also of the mental trauma of sexual humiliation of female prisoners, their forced isolation and the resulting erosion of kinship and family ties. Almost as a counterpart to this bleak narrative, the author then moves on to describe the prisoners' strategies of resistance and coping. With its final account on the consequences of terror for the lives of both direct and collateral victims, this chapter succeeds in emphasising the state's concerted and unrelenting efforts of thoroughly destroying the 'undesirable' people's lives.

The final chapter of the volume, Corina Snitar's study of student protesters and partisans in Romania, focuses on the female participants in these events who were arrested, detained and interrogated, and then later subjected to professional and social exclusion. Archival material from the Romanian National Archive and the records of the Romanian Secret Police investigations allow Snitar to reconstruct the victims' experiences using the information provided from both sides of the interrogator's table. Importantly, this chapter challenges the preconception that women suffered less than men during these events and offers a comprehensive account of the Romanian student resistance movement that finally includes and acknowledges the voices of its female members.

Engaging with historical, literary, and archival sources, this book is of interest to any member of the scholarly community concerned with

how gender studies is reshaping our understanding of the Terror and could prove to be an invaluable aid in teaching those subjects.