

Best Book in Slavic/Eastern European/Eurasian Women's Studies

Judith Pallot and Laura Piacentini, with the assistance of Dominique Moran, *Gender, Geography, and Punishment. The Experience of Women in Carceral Russia* (Oxford University Press, 2012)

Gender, Geography, and Punishment is a fascinating and disturbing chronicle of the world of penal colonies women confront when incarcerated by the Russian state. The analysis is a deft combination of theoretical engagement and empirical analysis that is sensitive to the historical and cultural specificities of the Russian prison system, and to the peculiar circumstances that arise when women commit offenses and must be isolated from society. Contemporary penal colonies, the authors argue, are shaped by the “distinctive spatiality” and “techniques of punishment and surveillance” of the past, pre-Soviet as well as Soviet. Valuable chapters on the historical geography and contemporary structures of the penal system are followed by heart-wrenching stories of women’s experiences as prisoners, articulated in their own words. We travel along with prisoners as they acquire a new legal status, are subjected to the rigors and uncertainties of long distance travel, and dropped off in the middle of nowhere with strangers they would just as soon avoid. We learn a great deal about what it is like to live in a prison barracks, to eat and work there, to adjust to isolation from friends and family, and negotiate the processes required to leave the prison walls behind. The authors confronted extensive difficulties in conducting their research; luckily for us they devised creative alternatives to circumvent barriers to access. We learn of these trials and tribulations in a useful chapter on doing research on penal colonies in Russia. We have been rewarded by their perseverance. This is an immensely rich, powerful, and thought-provoking account and has been awarded the Heldt Prize in the category of Best Book in Slavic/Eastern European/Eurasian Women’s Studies.