

Maria Alyokhina, *Riot Days* (London: Allen Lane, 2017); Judith Pallot and Elena Katz, *Waiting at the Prison Gate: Women, Identity and the Russian Penal System* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2017)

These two new books approach an old subject from very different viewpoints, but combine to offer a unique insight into contemporary women's experience of prison in Russia.

A series of outsider perspectives informs both books. Maria Alyokhina's *Riot Days* charts the fate of the performance art collective Pussy Riot. From Alyokhina's arrest alongside Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Ekaterina Samutsevich, their trial on charges of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred, and her subsequent imprisonment in a penal colony near the city of Perm in the Urals, the story that emerges is one of women understanding their position as outsiders and being subject to persecution for challenging the status quo. In prison Alyokhina is further outcast, as the penal authorities encourage other prisoners to turn against her. Her fragmentary, poetic writing includes extracts from her prison diary as well as her subsequent impressions as she charts her battles to force the authorities to observe the law and treat the inmates as human beings. She demonstrates acute awareness of the political, cultural and historical context of her incarceration, and brings both humour and intensity to a traumatic subject.

Judith Pallot and Elena Katz's sociological study, *Waiting at the Prison Gate: Women, Identity and the Russian Penal System*, represents the latest research from the growing field of contemporary Russian penal studies, in which Pallot has been a trailblazer for many years. It observes from the outside the women who are themselves nominally outside the prison walls: the wives, mothers and other female relatives who support prisoners. Yet, as Pallot and Katz show, these women – and supporting inmates is in practice overwhelmingly

women's work in Russia – also experience degrees of unfreedom and separation from the mainstream of Russian society. Based on interviews with twenty-four women performing a range of roles in relation to prisoners, the study combines impartial analysis with evident sympathy for the extremely difficult lives many of the subjects lead. The authors' decision to include so many direct quotations from the interviews brings the women's perspectives on their own situation clearly to the fore. Valya's description of the occasional long visits that allow her to spend three days at her husband's prison reveals the emotional complexity of sustaining these relationships: 'The first day is like a celebration. Tea and cake, love, cooking something, non-stop tactile contact. It's not, as you probably think, naked, unadorned sex, but simply a person, you understand, who wants all the time to touch you, to take your hand, to blow on your neck, to touch your face with his fingers ... After visits, you feel that they have torn away a bit of your flesh, you understand? It leaves a huge hole which nothing can fill.'

Both books share a sense that the experience of incarceration – from either side of the prison walls – and the discourses surrounding that experience have significant historical and literary antecedents. Alyokhina makes frequent reference to the Soviet Gulag and the literature its survivors produced. She quotes from Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* – the most powerful of all Gulag writing about incarceration under Stalin – and, from the post-Stalin era, Vladimir Bukovsky's memoir of punitive psychiatric treatment, *To Build a Castle*. There are also many less overt allusions. References to reciting verses by heart recall a common practice for prisoners in solitary confinement that features in many memoirs of the Soviet period and earlier. The description of the vans transporting prisoners, and the people on the streets who are oblivious to their contents, recalls the final lines of Solzhenitsyn's *In the First Circle*. Alyokhina clearly sees continuities between the infamous Soviet labour camp

system, especially in its persecution of artists, intellectuals and non-conformists in the later Soviet period, and her own incarceration. In the connection she makes with the Gulag, and in the descriptions of her treatment in prison, Alyokhina confirms Pallot and Katz's characterization of Russian penal culture as consistently harsh, whatever the nature or ideology of the state behind it.

Pallot and Katz show that Alyokhina's framing of her own place in Russia's penal system – and the literary expression it has given rise to – is part of a wider understanding of the role of prison in Russian society. The range of responses available to the female relations of inmates is heavily conditioned by an earlier stage in Russia's carceral history, namely the actions of the wives of the Decembrist revolutionaries who were sentenced to Siberian hard labour and exile following the failed uprising of 1825. With their wealthy backgrounds in the nobility, these women gave up their children and lavish lifestyles in Russia's European capitals to follow their husbands to Siberia. In supporting their husbands during their sentences, Princesses Maria Volkonskaya and Ekaterina Trubetskaya, among others, became icons of Russian womanhood, celebrated in verse and contributing significantly to the powerful Decembrist myth within Russian culture. The same idea of the self-sacrificing wife or mother, committed to her duty often at great personal cost, shapes the behaviour and self-perception of the vast majority of Pallot and Katz's subjects. In almost every case their commitment appears sincere and indeed is truly admirable. The Decembrist narrative may give their roles the meaning they seek in difficult circumstances, but many of today's ordinary "Decembrist wives" also come across as having limited choices in their responses to the incarceration of loved ones. It is very telling that the only instance of a woman leaving the imprisoned partner she was supporting involves a lesbian couple to whom such historical paradigms do not apply.

If *Waiting at the Prison Gate* reveals how little expectations of gendered behaviour seem to have changed in Russia in the last two hundred years, *Riot Days* depicts female incarceration as the result of rejecting those expectations. From the chants of “burn the witches” outside the courtroom to body searches in prison that do not simply resemble but are deliberately designed to perpetrate sexual assault, Alyokhina associates punishment more with failure to conform to traditional notions of womanhood than with the specifics of the “crime” the members of Pussy Riot supposedly committed. She emphasizes conformism and the suppression of difference and dissent as the primary tools of control in the penal colony. Her prison experience confirms Pussy Riot’s diagnosis of Russian society’s treatment of women, while Pallot and Katz’s study shows how women’s role within the Russian penal system reflects their position in society more generally. Both are essential reading.