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In 1953, following the death of Stalin, thousands of Gulag prisoners were released. Many more, who had been living in exile, banished from returning to the cities, were able to do so by the beginning of the 1960s. The decade after Stalin’s death, then, was the decade of exodus and return. What happened to the returnees, their families, and the „Soviet society” they returned to? Miriam Dobson’s „Khrushchev’s Cold Summer” offers fascinating insights into these questions. Beautifully written, dense with archival information and also well theorised, Dobson’s book is particularly interesting in two aspects. Firstly, the book focuses on de-Stalinisation and the years of „return” as a complex and multidimensional social phenomenon. Secondly, the book is interesting in its use of sources: among the wealth of primary and secondary archival material, and together with examining political speeches (in particular, Khrushchev’s famous Secret Speech), Dobson’s main focus is on „ordinary” documents: paperwork generated by law-enforcement agencies, returnees’ letters to newspapers and petitions to party members and the government, and political flyers.

The first part of the book takes a close look at the first years after Stalin’s death, exploring various aspects of this transitional period. Chapter 1, describes a whole cluster of events, emotions and social upheavals: public mourning, but also pain, confusion, and moral panic, as well and the changes in the lexicon that began developing then, to deal with the shift in the political regime; the amnesty and subsequent mass exodus from the camps; and the change in social status of those who were only yesterday seen as the enemy of the people. The next chapter follows the initial years after the amnesty, looking more closely at the experiences of former prisoners themselves by focusing on letters and petitions that prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their family members wrote to state and party organisations, bureaucrats, and Khrushchev himself. The aim of these letters was to find help in returning to civilian life, in the absence of clear legislative and practical mechanisms of former prisoners’ rehabilitation. These were not one-off acts, as Dobson notes: „The necessity of petitions did not stop with release, or even rehabilitation. To re-establish any kind of normal existence, the returnee often had to ask for help with employment, pensions, housing, or even the return of belongings confiscated at the time of arrest.“ (p. 54) However, what is particularly interesting in Dobson’s analysis are the narrative structures of the letters themselves – from claims of wrong imprisonment and self-sacrifice, to life stories of transformation and redemption in the camps, and many more – and the various interpretative frameworks they utilised.

The final chapter in this section moves once again away from the returnees, into a closer examination of Khrushchev’s famous speech of 1956, which addressed the fate of Stalin’s victims, charting political visions of truth, purity, and transformation.

The second part of the book presents a detailed discussion of the returnees and their effect on the broader society. Dobson examines the ways in which the mass exodus of Gulag prisoners were perceived as a threat to social order, both in terms of a rise in criminal behaviour and in terms of the impact of Gulag ideas and beliefs – of what she broadly describes as Gulag subculture – on the minds of the others, in particular young people. From the discussion of the cult of criminality Dobson moves on to the analysis of what she coins „the redemptive mission – rhetoric and practice of ‘nursing’ and ‘gardening’ the Soviet people“. She focuses on the brief moment at the end of the 1950s when repressive and punitive logic gave way to different representations of and policies towards criminality. Dobson sees here an attempt to „recapture this brief moment of optimism in Soviet criminal justice policy, when alternatives to Stalinist repression were embraced not as a retreat from evolution but as the correct way to reach the promised communist paradise“
The final chapter in this section follows the evolution of rhetoric and policy towards crime between the end of the 1950s and early 1960, skilfully demonstrating shifts and turns in discourse, practice and collective feelings towards criminality, deviation, correction, and banishment.

In the final section of the book, Dobson follows the period of the early 1960s, by showing how in the midst of the de-Stalinisation process many of the important reforms and changes were being undone. Chapter 7 examines materials as diverse as pamphlets, posters, speeches, and literary publications of former political prisoners, and focuses on contested relations between past and future that emerged in these years. On the one hand, horrors of the Stalinist terror began to be commemorated, however partially and with limitations. Dobson shows, for example, how literary journals were flooded with memoirs of Gulag survivors, only some of which were published; many were rejected if the narratives did not fit the ideal image of the purge victim. Nevertheless, this points to the creation of possibilities to talk and write openly about the camps. On the other hand, this period is characterised by intense hope-making and visions of a great future – technological, political, and social. This ambiguity is further explored in chapter 8 which discusses the polemic around the works of Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Iosif Brodskii, showing the public anxieties brought on by the proximity of the Gulag experience through literature. Dobson suggests that the debates, provoked by the two authors, "testify to a sense of crisis, with some citizens fearful that certain aspects of their civilization were under threat from uncultured, vulgar, or nonconformist behaviour" (p. 218).

A fascinating journey into the first decade after Stalin’s death and the transition from political terror to what later became known as "the Thaw", "Khrushchev’s Cold Summer" is not simply an excellent piece of scholarship. It is a very important contribution to understanding the aftermath of the Gulag and the encounter of the returnees with the rest of society – including those who had imprisoned them as well as those who stood by silently – as a multi-faceted social process, a lot more complex and messy than was envisioned by the artistic intelligentsia. The memoirs and writings of the intelligentsia focused almost exclusively on the suffering of political prisoners from the country’s intellectual and political elite. Whereas in reality, as Dobson reminds us, "the return included a whole contingent of prisoners, including recidivist criminals, petty thieves, one-off offenders as well as those wrongfully convicted (of both political and nonpolitical crimes). [...] Not all the returnees were noble martyrs to the cause found in much of the memoir literature, nor sincere artists [...] some were broken men, drunk and violent; some had come to hate the regime that had so destroyed their lives" (p. 238). Dobson maps this complexity beautifully, without diminishing the role of the intelligentsia’s cultural production – films, literature, etc. – in shaping our perceptions of political terror, de-Stalinisation and the aftermath of the camps.