In this regard, the original title of the Russian volume (reconstituted as the subtitle of the English translation) — The Gulag in the Soviet Totalitarian System — clearly states the essence of Ivanova’s historical viewpoint. The Stalinist prison camps from this perspective must be seen as an organic outgrowth of the Soviet state, reflective both of policy and intent throughout the early years of the USSR. For Ivanova, the barbed wire created a prison empire that was separate yet interconnected with the larger society that produced it and was entirely consonant with the culture of violence spawned by the Bolshevik Revolution. At the same time, the author makes clear the lines of authority throughout the Gulag hierarchy and the motive force for camp policy that emanated from the Kremlin. Bolstered by its very terseness, the narrative calmly describes the pivotal bureaucratic decisions within the Stalinist chain of command that ushered in one of the most painful phenomena of the twentieth century.

The only shortcomings of this valuable work concern its scope. For a monograph on such a major subject as the Gulag, the book is surprisingly short. While this succinctness helps clarify its interpretive focus, it cannot help but result in the omission of important references. For example, Ivanova cites well-known state resolutions on the camps while ignoring others no less important. Similarly, the author fails to utilize crucial archival records now available that could supplement the material cited in the text. Given the immensity of the topic, however, it is understandable that Ivanova limited her investigation so as to produce a brief yet cogent summary for both the specialist and general reader.

In terms of production, this volume from “The New Russian History Series” has perpetuated the series’ high standards of editorial review. Labor Camp Socialism has been rendered very effectively in English, with a consistent style and flow throughout the text. The copyediting is also of very high quality. Although there are a few factual inaccuracies, they are not significant and refer in substance to the chronology of specific camp regions. What they reveal is that the author, based in Moscow, is more adept dealing with issues of central rather than provincial administration. But given the sweep of this work and the wide variety of materials consulted, this is not surprising and does not detract from a monograph that will prove to be instrumental in laying the groundwork for future studies of the Gulag. Considering the constraints of time and space, this volume must be praised for raising the most essential issues relating to the Stalinist prison camps in a tight and concise format.

David J. Nordlander

The Library of Congress


How does one portray a tragedy of the magnitude of the Gulag — a tragedy that is personal and political, individual and inter/national? How, in particular, does one por-
tray these stories in a way that is useful historically, and yet ensures that readers do not become numbed to the shock of the information simply because it is repeated? 

Till My Tale Is Told, edited by Simeon Vilensky, largely accomplishes this goal. This collection of documents, first published in 1989 in Russia, adds a body of lively writing, new information (for example about prison theaters), and corroborating evidence to our knowledge of the Gulag. These are fragments of memoirs, anthologized, with the purpose, as Vilensky puts it, of stimulating interest in further publication of memoirs. This is a worthy goal and probably a wise choice, as the brevity of the selections helps to avoid the danger of too much repetition of information. The sixteen excerpts are all by women; this is intended as the first volume in a series where subsequent books would include the writings of men. It is unclear whether these other memoirs will be published, though it seems that, if they are, it will not be soon.

The accounts reflect varied personal circumstances. The authors range from those of peasant stock (Yelena Sidorkina), to a mixed nobility/cossack inheritance (Tatyana Leshchenko-Sukhomlina), from priest's child (Nadezhda Grankina) to Yagoda's niece (Veronica Znamenskaya). Several of the authors were born in Ukraine. The volume represents, then, a broad social mix, focusing primarily on the middle ranks (daughters of tailors, teachers, doctors, government officials). In general, the selections underline the path of radical disillusionment that so many traced, first believing in the system and thinking that their own innocence was a protection against punishment, but in the end, understanding that innocence could be fiercely punished and that the revolutionary society in which they had placed terrific hopes had become a nightmare — but all too solid — world. However, there are some exceptions: Nadezhda Surovtseva, for example, who refused to become an OGPU agent, was conscious of a threat before entering the world of the camps. More frequently, though, the authors were surprised by their own arrests and had no foreknowledge of the purges.

Most of the accounts focus primarily on others' pain and on those who did not survive. Thus, the excerpts consciously serve as a witness and memorial to those who died in the camps. This way of telling, though, also makes the author's own story more powerful and provides a perhaps necessary distance to the narrative.

The poems of Anna Barkova, in Catriona Kelly's translation, are a high point, as is the account by Hava Volovich. In discussing prison theaters, Volovich evokes a world of illusion in which prisoners could gain some privilege and also move in imagination beyond the walls of the camps — a world, that, in some ways, mirrors the structures of the camps themselves. Theater is important in many of the other selections as well — Znamenskaya and Vera Schulz both discuss theater, especially Bulgakov's plays.

Volovich also discusses sexuality and having children in the camps; this is a departure from the famous and now normative memoir of Evgenia Ginzburg, who makes the camps a nearly asexual realm. Another place where these memoirs provide new insight is that several of the authors (Bertha Babina-Nevskaaya, Zoya Marchenko, Galina Zatmilova) either describe or hint at the "fellowship of Kolyma" after returning from the camps. Others add to our understanding of the psychology of the camps: Olga Adamova-Sliozberg in her evocative account discusses the formation of protest at pre-conscious levels and the need to "create a kind of shadow life out of . . . prison existence" (p. 36) as a way of survival.