Cathy A. Frierson

_Silence Was Salvation: Child Survivors of Stalin’s Terror and World War II in the Soviet Union_ (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2015), 288 pp., $65.00 (hb), ISBN 9780300179453.

The most recent volume in Yale’s Annals of Communism series, Cathy Frierson’s _Silence Was Salvation: Child Survivors of Stalin’s Terror and World War II in the Soviet Union_ is a collection of ten edited interviews with “survivors of childhood trauma during the Soviet era . . . who were still living in Russia in 2005–2007” (1). Terror and, especially, war in the 30s and 40s devastated many children in the Soviet Union, but Frierson’s subjects endured a special sub-category of this hell as some of the ten million children of repressed parents, whether “enemies of the people” or “traitors to the motherland.” Further, these ten witnesses are part of a unique sub-sub-category: they are survivors of the aforementioned.

Broadly inquiring into the fates of those children whose parents had been arrested by Soviet authorities, _Silence Was Salvation_ is not an oral history proper, but a book of excerpted oral testimonies. Frierson conducted, edited, translated, and introduces them, making the evidence she collected accessible to a wide audience. A thorough introduction covers Soviet law and legal procedures affecting children (three of which, the 1934 “summary justice” Amendment to the Criminal Code, NKVD Operational Order No. 00447, and NKVD Operational Order No. 00486 are reproduced in three appendices), the author’s methodology, individual and collective memory (particularly in the Soviet context), the memoir as historical source, and survival and resilience, after which ten chapters – one per interviewee – follow.

Acknowledging the impossibility of representing ten million voices, Frierson chose to include the life stories of five men and five women of three national identities (Russian, Polish, Jewish) born between 1925–1941 whose parents had fallen into a variety of “enemy” categories (from SRS to Old Bolsheviks to wartime deportees); at the time of interviews these ten lived in a variety of urban and rural locations and expressed varied feelings towards the Soviet era and its ideology. Further delimiting her interview pool, she categorizes as “children” those under sixteen, a serviceable definition based on the Soviet age of legal majority. A brief introduction accompanies each chapter, providing biographical details of the interviewee and contextual details about the setting of the interview itself, as does a map, used to “illustrat[e] the geographic aspects of political victimization in the Soviet Union” (xvi). As promised in the book’s introduction, Frierson is transparently and intentionally present in these interviews and makes no attempt to retroactively interpret: these are essentially
edited transcripts of the conversations she held with each person. Bracketed explanatory notes indicate non-verbal responses of her subjects, from weeping to silence to hand gestures, and ellipses denote her editorial hand. Frierson lays a few crumbs to mark a trail or two to follow in the chapter introductions, but for the most part allows the interviews to speak for themselves.

And speak they do. Ranging from ten to forty-five pages, these oral histories lay bare the life experiences of those who somehow lived through often unimaginably difficult circumstances initiated by Soviet repression of one or both parents. Not only are we given glimpses of “ordinary” (read: life before arrest) Soviet childhood as well as the trauma of orphanhood and concomitant interactions with NKVD institutions, but also the effects of such events on the adult lives of Frierson’s interviewees and their families. Fascinating details emerge about everything from school admissions policies to wartime theft to family dynamics to housing to childhood coping mechanisms. We gain great insight on Soviet daily life, culture, and bureaucracy. Even more significantly, the transcript format and Frierson’s fruitful questioning allow us to observe how these child survivors perceived those experiences, infused certain events with meaning, and responded in the wake of trauma in (predictably) diverse ways. Some tried to conceal their parents’ fates while others did not. Some expressed the importance of community with persecuted peers while others only felt isolated. When asked about the ongoing consequences of repression, one survivor replied, “they broke my life, of course” (249) while another answered, “we never felt like victims” (28). As Frierson sapiently observes, these interviews “are most trustworthy as evidence of how these survivors of childhood trauma remembered episodes in their lives . . . and how they expressed their memories and the lessons they had taken from them on how to live as citizens of the Soviet state” (15).

Frierson’s volume begins with an epigraph of the biblical parable of the Good Samaritan. She tracks the theme of the ‘good Samaritan’ throughout the volume, suggesting that there were plenty of people who helped children among the many who did not and thus providing one explanation for the survival of some children of political repression. This emphasis is thought-provoking. First, it is clearly true. Good Samaritans, in the form of teachers, nannies, or family friends, intervened in many survivors’ lives in positive ways. This is evident in several interviews (i.e., chapters 2 & 3), and especially prominent in Frierson’s longest chapter (chapter 9), an interview with Maya Rudolfovna Levitina, whose story launched Frierson’s interest in this topic. Second, and perhaps conversely, the epigraph heightened my awareness of children’s agency as I read. Not all these children were as helpless as the parable’s beaten victim; thus, the actions interviewees took to cope with, respond