

The next two chapters, by Natalia Karakulina and Olga Sobolev respectively, center on Vladimir Maiakovskii and Aleksandr Blok and the competing outcomes of their inclusion within the Soviet canon and especially school curriculum. Karakulina argues that there's a continuity between Soviet and post-Soviet evaluations of Maiakovskii, which pays little attention to Maiakovskii's avant-garde roots and the complexities of his biography. If canonization dumbed Maiakovskii down, it created an alternative space for Blok: the intelligentsia was drawn to Blok not because of the revolutionary ethos of *Dvenadtsat'*, but because "he essentially remained a lyric poet in the Romantic tradition" (143). Blok's place within the current canon draws on these two vacillating tendencies.

Andrew Cahn is similarly interested in how canonization resists complexities in the case of Osip Mandel'shtam both in Russia and the west. The debates about his "Oda" to Stalin, which began in the 90s, both complicate Mandel'shtam's relationship with the Soviet regime and the heroizing of the poet in the US and Great Britain during the Cold War.

A number of chapters turn to the poets who were left out of the Soviet canon, and introduced into the post-Soviet one: from Ivan Bunin to the émigré figures of the interwar period and 1920s to the later Elena Shvarts. As Alexandra Smith concludes in her chapter on the first-wave émigré poets and Marina Tsvetaeva, in particular, "a desire to construct an image of Russia without borders appears to be indicative of the emerging Russophone poetic canon" (392). The question is again how this tendency will play out in the current retrograde Russian political climate.

Emil Lygo and Katharine Hodgson examine how the Soviet poets grow in complexity once out of the strictures of the Soviet canon. Using Boris Slutskii as a case study, Hodgson stresses how "the changing canon reveals Slutskii as a figure who demonstrates the inadequacy of simplistic divisions between official and unofficial poetry . . . and the power of poetic innovation" (288). Lygo argues something very similar in regard to the Thaw generation of poets, from Evgenii Evtushenko, Bella Akhmadulina, Andrei Voznesenskii, and Robert Rozhdestvenskii to some of the less official figures. There is a clear waning of interest in the poetic stars of the Thaw, which, Lygo claims, can be explained by their association with the Soviet regime. There's a greater interest, therefore, with the poets of the 1970s underground, "who were . . . cut off from and in opposition to the authorities" (354). Yet, as Slutskii's biography suggests, the official can hardly be separated from the unofficial. A piece on the underground poets would have been therefore welcome.

Stephanie Sandler's chapter on some of the most promising contemporary poets and trends provides a fitting coda for the collection. She emphasizes how we need to "see canon creation as the work of culture, as a process that is open-ended . . ." (393). In this spirit, this excellent volume both answers the questions it poses and leaves them productively open. No scholar of Russian poetry and culture should bypass it.

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***Gulag Letters***. By Arsenii Formakov. Ed. and Trans. Emily D. Johnson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017. ix, 294 pp. Appendixes. Index. Photographs. \$85.00, hard bound.

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Arsenii Formakov, a Russian-Latvian poet, educator, novelist, journalist, and cultural figure was arrested on July 30, 1940 in Daugavpils, Latvia. The "anti-Soviet

character” of some of his writings made him a target for repression in the sweep that followed the Soviet invasion. He confessed in exchange for a visit with his pregnant wife, after which he was sentenced to eight years of hard labor and deported to Kraslag (Krasnoïarsk). Formakov was released in 1947, and allowed to return to his family if he promised to serve as an informer. His freedom was short-lived. Like so many other Gulag returnees—automatically suspect by virtue of having been in the camps—Formakov was re-arrested in the 1949 wave of terror. This time he ended up in Omsk, where he stayed until his 1955 release. Emily Johnson shares Formakov’s journey with us through his Gulag correspondence with his family, providing informed context critical to our understanding of this inmate-writer.

In a solid introductory essay, she probes a number of fundamental questions raised by this collection. For example, in a letter to his wife on the fourth anniversary of his arrest, Formakov states, “if they had told us then what we would have to bear, I would have committed suicide . . . and I would have been a fool” (59). Most of his correspondence before and after this does not nearly so candidly address the deprivations to which he alludes here. Rather, it attests to Formakov’s supreme survival skills (manifest in the optimistic latter lines).

It is apparent that Formakov was a privileged prisoner who worked with the authorities, participating in propaganda in the camps. In return for these services, he received survivable assignments and appears to have been able to correspond more or less freely. Survival seems to have been a guiding force in Formakov’s development. In the thirties, he was co-owner and editor of a Daugavpils newspaper that managed to stay open under the Ulmanis regime, so already then, Formakov was well-versed in self-censorship and adaptation. This skill is intelligible in his letter-writing. Johnson points out that Formakov’s letters do not, for instance, mention the “full horror of the camp world” (10), the culture of violence, or the general terrorization of the camp population. That is not particularly surprising, nor unusual for prisoner correspondence. However, some of Formakov’s letters proceed a step further to suggest that those in camp fared almost better than those who were free during the war and 1946–47 famine. He regularly writes about being allotted considerable rations, for example in May of 1945: “two portions of cabbage soup and porridge, 1700 grams” (136), butter, honey, potatoes, pork fat . . . such information might be taken at face-value, especially given that Formakov was an over-achiever in camp.

In a 1944 letter, he tells his family that he fulfills norms by 200–300 percent, lives in a dorm, and everything is “fantastically good” (55). In January 1945, he writes that in his settlement the barrack doors are almost always open, and people can visit each other and the bathrooms freely. This description of the Gulag almost sounds like summer camp, or at least a text out of the pages of *Pravda*—such propaganda was good for the authorities and not bad for the letter-writers either.

*Gulag Letters* answers important questions regarding the policies and practices surrounding correspondence from the Gulag. Formakov’s settlement permitted mingling with free laborers, which facilitated (additional) smuggling of mail, so while some letters reached the camp censors, some did not. Johnson offers particularly revealing insight into the institution of camp censors, who could hardly serve as efficient gate-keepers, because they were so underpaid and overworked. She tells us, for example that in 1950 in Kraslag, one senior censor had a back-log of 1,844 letters (21).

A critical theme that Johnson addresses is the unabashed pro-Soviet tone and Formakov’s ability to “speak Bolshevik” (41). In June of 1945, after five years of confinement, he writes, “I have changed a great deal in this time, and I am thankful to the camp for much that I have learned here” (136). Elsewhere he instructs his son to be a “loyal son to our great motherland and serve it faithfully” (137). On the basis of these letters it is difficult to discern whether Formakov had merely accommodated to,

or actually assimilated these values. He seemed to exhibit sincere enthusiasm about his Cultural-Educational work in the camp. On the other hand, Johnson tells us that Formakov had written “anti-Soviet” novels, which were discovered in the search prior to his 1949 arrest. Moreover, Formakov provided eye-witness testimony to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn for his *Gulag Archipelago*. One wishes that Johnson had offered more analysis of the significant question regarding his attitude toward the Soviet authorities, which was at best, ambivalent. That caveat aside, this collection offers powerful testimony to the influence of the state on the individual, and is a notable addition to Gulag survivor accounts.

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***Besieged Leningrad: Aesthetic Responses to Urban Disaster.*** By Polina Barskova.

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This is an absorbing study of ways that the urban space of the Leningrad Siege was represented in texts produced by those who inhabited it. Polina Barskova identifies a distinctive aspect of the Leningrad Siege: “The inhabitants of Leningrad lost virtually everything in the disaster except their place, and this place served them as an inexhaustible source of contemplation and writing” (4). This book explores aesthetic responses to the catastrophic loss and destruction visited on the city, concentrating on representations of urban space. Barskova sets out to question the view that the Siege space, a site of mass death, was unrepresentable other than as dark and enclosed. Her study reveals multiple representations of Siege space, which include, alongside confinement and darkness, space endowed with light, color, beauty, and possibility. It explores the representational challenges faced by the authors of Siege texts and analyzes the means by which their aesthetic approaches enabled them to set their own pain at a distance.

The texts that are investigated range across genres, including prose fiction, poetry, and diaries, and across the line dividing texts approved by the censorship as fit for propaganda purposes and those which were not, and could not have been put forward for publication at the time they were written. The author states as one of her aims the wish to bridge the gap between these two categories of texts, and to explore what connects them as well as how they differ from one another. This aim is certainly achieved: what emerges is an unfolding panorama of the Siege space produced by texts that are united by the demands made on them by the site and the time of their creation. Crucially, Barskova shows that Siege spatiality, rather than being static, was constantly changing, often suddenly and radically as a result of enemy bombardment. Her analysis shows how the ruins served “as a metaphor for the trauma of the city’s inhabitants,” while writers who witnessed the distressing metamorphoses of the city, its inhabitants, and themselves, used aesthetics “as a way to anaesthetize the experience” (8).

Following an Introduction that lays out the book’s aims and scope with impressive clarity are six chapters which focus on ways that the representation of Siege space can be understood as aesthetic responses to the disaster of starvation, enemy bombardment, and cold. The first three consider representations of Leningrad citizens’ everyday relationship with space in terms of movement, corporeality, and visibility,