

State Power, Gendered Repression, and Labor Exploitation: A Feminist Political Economy of the ALZHIR Camp

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Abstract

This paper analyzes gendered political repression in Stalin's USSR through the case of the female-only Gulag camp ALZHIR, established specifically for women related to so-called "traitors to the Motherland". While Gulag camps have been widely studied in academic literature, women's experiences within these labor camps remain critically understudied. This paper addresses this gap by analyzing archival and historical data gathered from field research at the ALZHIR Museum, combined with feminist theoretical frameworks to examine the topic of women's oppression under Stalinist repression. The paper draws on Angela Davis's gendered carceral feminism, Lise Vogel's social reproduction theory, and Carole Pateman's critique of patriarchal political structure to present three interlinked arguments: (1) the Soviet government imprisoned women not for individual actions but for their familial ties to men, reflecting the state's deep-rooted patriarchal structure; (2) the camp operated as a site of gendered carceral violence, which placed women in positions of physical danger and risk; and (3) it also functioned as a form of generational punishment through bodily control, familial rupture and societal rejection, leaving long-lasting psychological and physical marks on women. The paper concludes that ALZHIR was not only a place of political repression, but also a gendered mechanism of labor exploitation and familial punishment embedded in the broader logic of Soviet state power.

Keywords: carceral feminism; Gulag labor camp; political violence; Soviet Union; women's imprisonment