

Czech Political Prisoners: Recovering Face. By Jana Kopelentova Rehak. Lanham: Lexington Press, 2013. 157 pp. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. \$80.00, hardbound.

Karen Kapusta-Pofahl Ph. D. Washburn University

Czech Political Prisoners opens with a series of twenty photographs of elderly men and women, sitting portrait-style, gazing straight into the camera lens with expressions that range from proud to weary to demure. With this introduction, anthropologist Jana Kopeletova Rehak delves into the oft-overlooked experiences of the victims of the Stalinist-era Show Trials in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s. The political prisoners (*Mukls* and *Muklyněs*) experienced the highly publicized trials for alleged treasonous behavior in the wake of the Soviet-backed Czechoslovak Communist party consolidation of power in 1948. In this period, hundreds of men and women were arrested, tried, and sentenced to time in work camps, or even death. Then, in the wake of de-Stalinization in the early 1960s, they were released back into society—freed, but still stigmatized. After the events of 1989, *Mukls* continued to commemorate their experiences and searched for state acknowledgement of their suffering.

Rehak's data comes from a variety of sources collected between 1995 and 2004. While the backbone of the ethnography consists of the life histories of sixty-seven *Mukls*, Rehak also incorporates participant observation of commemorative events and informal meetings, interviews with *Mukls*' spouses and children, archival sources; *Mukls*' own published reflections, and a set of intriguing photographic portraits of *Mukls* and *Muklyněs*¹ she took herself. The author's attention is focused on *Mukls* living in Prague. As the *Mukls*' narratives unfold, sites in and around the city take on a sinister cast as they become places of disruption of the fabric of social life and sites of what Rehak calls "state violent ritual" (2013:14). State violent ritual, such as imprisonment, torture, and scripted, self-incriminating public trial, Rehak argues, is a rite of passage from ordinary citizen to *Mukl*, which entails new subjectivity and new social connections.

The book is organized thematically into two parts: Losing Face and Reclaiming Face. In the first section, Rehak frames the process of becoming a *Mukl* through three stages: arrest, interrogation, and trial. The second section includes recollections of life in the labor camps in the 1950s, experiences of return to society in the 1960s, and the post-1989 politics of reconciliation, interwoven with ethnographic accounts of the annual commemorations of the Confederacy of Political Prisoners at a former labor camp site. In addition to analyzing the creation of *Mukl* subjectivities, Rehak also argues for the centrality of the concept of kinship to *Mukls*' experiences and identities—in both the ties that are severed within the nuclear family through arrest, interrogation, and imprisonment, and those that are created through the forming of solidarity among *Mukls* who survived torture and life in the labor camps, which was maintained long after being released.

The narratives evoke the brutality and betrayals of being designated as a threat to the state in deeply personal ways. *Mukls*' accounts tell of being taken away, held in isolation, and

tortured until their captors were satisfied that they were sufficiently broken to stand trial. Rehak makes connections between *Mukls*' social and physical isolation, within which prisoners were held with the notion of "nakedness and loss of the sense of vision" on multiple levels (2013:46). She argues that while the prisoners experienced Giorgio Agamben's notion of "bare life" in the camps, they also recount having had a kind of freedom to associate with intellectuals and artists among their fellow prisoners that was ironically revoked upon their release.

In the wake of the events of 1989, Rehak discusses *Mukls*' attempts to have their suffering recognized by the post-socialist state, as well as their continued working to maintain and define *Mukl* kinship. One element of this process that I found particularly fascinating was the use of the state police archives to define the criteria for official *Muklhood* as represented by membership in the Confederacy of Political Prisoners. Rehak presents abundant information demonstrating that many *Mukls* were forced to confess to activities they did or did not commit while being interrogated. In addition, they recount instances of their interrogators writing up falsified accounts and confessions to be placed in prisoners' files. Despite this, and despite a general sense of society-wide distrust for the Communist party, when archives were opened after 1989, people looked to those files for the truth about who had collaborated with the regime and who had stood firm. Rehak writes, "The archive, materialized in written form, remained the location of fictive political power in the 1990s, understood by the general public as a place of moral truth" (2013:43). As a result, Rehak demonstrates, some *Mukls* who had been considered part of the *Mukl* family before 1989 were not recognized in the post-socialist era.

In this work, Rehak manages to weave the theories of heavy-hitters like Giorgio Agamben, Michal Taussig, and Alan Feldman into elements from *Mukl* narratives in a way that both elucidates their experiences and lends depth and clarity to complex concepts. Beside her ability to present *Mukls*' stories in a vivid and compelling way, this ability to engage ethnographically with these theories is a significant strength of this work.

Several themes introduced by Rehak would have benefitted from further development. For instance, the concept of "gendered pain" (2013:51) addresses gendered approaches to coping with pain, gendered humiliation during torture, and sympathy for the pain of the opposite sex. The author presents descriptions of interrogation as de-feminizing and hyper-sexualizing, but an analysis that is more detailed would shed more light on these intriguing phenomena.

While her approach to theory could make this work accessible to advanced undergraduate students, her organizational approach decentralizes information about political and social circumstances of the 1950s in a way that may make it difficult for a novice to follow. This makes the work less accessible to general readers and more geared toward an expert audience. Anthropologists of politics, law, conflict, and post-socialism will find this ethnography to be a thought-provoking, empathetic, and poignant contribution to scholarship on political prisoners, suffering, and identity.

¹ Per author's usage, I will employ the term *Mukl* when referring to political prisoners of both genders collectively.