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### **Gendering the Experience of Carceral Labor in the Soviet Union, 1930–1953**

#### Abstract:

Women constituted, at different times, between ten and thirty percent of the Gulag population, yet their specific experiences remain largely neglected in the historical literature. Coercion and direct violence defined much of everyday life in the Soviet camps and prisons, but the inmates did retain some agency, albeit very restricted. This constrained agency could prove decisive: avoidance of physical labor outdoors, for instance, was indispensable for survival. Some inmates dodged it due to pure luck, while others managed to avoid it by mobilizing their social networks or other resources. Some of these survival strategies were gendered: many women had to exchange sex for favours from camp leaders or influential prisoners. Fulfilling work norms, which were the same for men and women, was directly related to survival, as inmates' ratios depended on it; some types of work gave access to precious resources like food or fabric. Forced labor sites could also serve as places where inmates forged alliances, creating unlikely networks between the "common criminals" and the "politicians". Another type of labor that often remains invisible was child-rearing, although this was a very prominent topic in the memoirs of women inmates who had children in the camps. In this lecture, I will use labor as an entry point to approach the agency of women inmates, and discuss in detail the troubling ambivalence of labor in the Soviet carceral spaces and how women experienced it, basing my analysis on lesser-known memoirs of women inmates.

#### Bio:

Zhanna Popova is a postdoctoral researcher in the project "ZARAH: Women's labor activism in Eastern Europe and transnationally, from the age of empires to the late 20th century", based at the Central European University in Vienna, Austria. Her research interests include the social history of Russia and Eastern Europe, global labor history, as well as the history of punishment and forced migrations. Before coming to the CEU, she completed her doctoral dissertation at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. Her thesis explored continuity and change in the Russian and Soviet penal practices from 1879 to 1953, with a particular focus on the entanglements between forced labor and forced displacement.