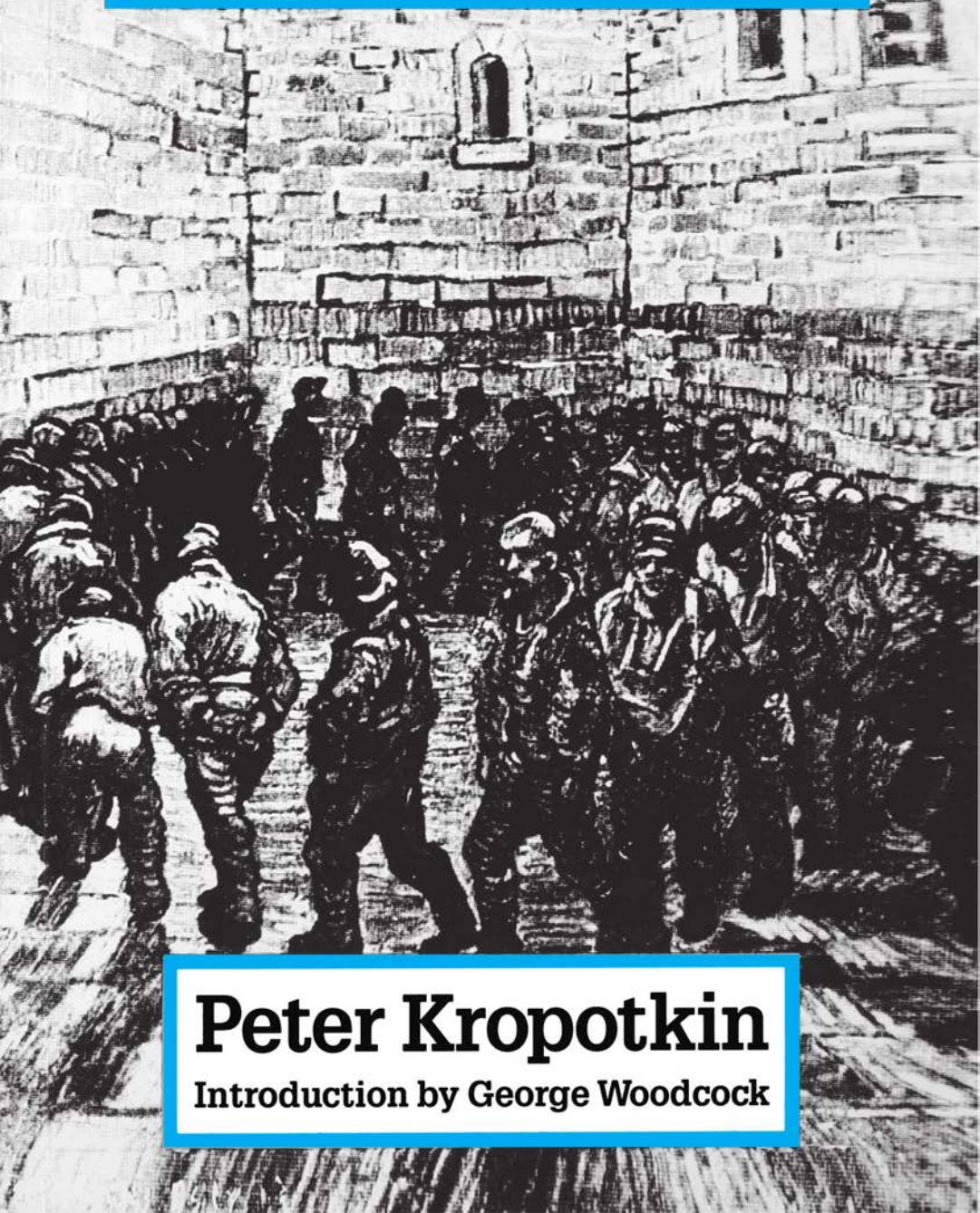


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# In Russian and French Prisons



**Peter Kropotkin**

Introduction by George Woodcock

**In  
RUSSIAN  
and  
FRENCH  
PRISONS**

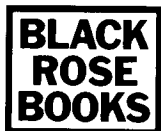


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PETER KROPOTKIN**

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**Introduction by George Woodcock**



**Montréal/New York**

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Reprinted in 2017

BLACK ROSE BOOKS No. U157

Paperback ISBN-13: 978-0-921689-98-0

Hardback ISBN-13: 978-0-921689-99-7

eBook ISBN-13: 978-155164-534-6

**Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data**

Kropotkin, Petr Alekseevich, kniaz, 1842-1921  
In Russian and French prisons

Includes index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-921689-99-7 (bound) —

ISBN-13: 978-0-921689-98-0 (pbk.).

1. Prisons—France—History—19th century.
2. Prisons—Soviet Union—History—19th century.
- I. Title.

HV9712.K2 1991 365'.947'09034 C91-090080-9

Library of Congress Catalog No. 91-71473

Cover Illustration: Painting by Vincent van Gogh, after the engraving  
"Newgate — Exercise Yard," by Gustave Doré.

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE 1991 EDITION

Towards the end of *In Russian and French Prisons*, when he is describing his experiences in the relatively “enlightened” French prison of Clairvaux, Kropotkin draws a sharp and unexpected comparison with what he has seen in his Russian childhood, when serfdom still existed and his family were among the serf-owners.

In fact, each time I saw at Clairvaux the prisoners lazily crossing the yards, lazily followed by a lazy warden, my imagination always transported me back to my father’s house and his numerous serfs. Prison work is slavish work.

Russian society, in Kropotkin’s youth, and long afterwards (until the late 1980s in fact) was essentially a servile society. Even its inhabitants who were no longer serfs and did not find their way into prison or exile, lived lives subject to constant restriction; they could not move freely over Russia, it was difficult to go abroad, the censorship weighed heavily on literature whether published at home or abroad, and one was always subject to arbitrary arrest or search by the dreaded Third Section, the political police of which the NKVD is the lineal descendant.

In such circumstances it is not surprising that prisons and that great land of penal suffering, Siberia, to which dissi-



dents and criminals had been sent since the seventeenth century, usually never to return, should assume such a symbolic role in the Russian mind. Indeed, the symbolism spilled over into the non-Russian world, where even today to be "sent to Siberia" means in business and political circles exclusion from the inner rings of control, and being "sent to the salt mines" (the Salt mines were the worst penal establishments in Siberia and few survived them) has the connotation of demotion to some position where the work is exacting and unrewarding.

Russian literature is studded with notable works connected with the experience or observation of prison and exile, which is hardly surprising, since so many of the best minds of Tsarist Russia, whether religious sectarians like the Old Believer Avvakum in the seventeenth century or writers like Dostoevsky and scientists like Kropotkin in the nineteenth, found their way into prison or exile or both. In fact one of the great early works of Russian literature outside the realm of folk epic is the *Life*, describing his sufferings endured in fortitude, which Avvakum wrote in prison after he had endured, like many thousands of convicts after him, the terrible foot march in chains, lasting literally years, which the prisoners made to their distant Siberian destinations, often in the Arctic circle.

Two other notable Russian books relate to Siberia and its prison life. One is Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead*, a piece of pseudo-autobiography based on his own experiences during his four years in a prison at Omsk. The other is Anton Chekhov's *The Island of Sakhalin*. Unlike many other Russian writers, Chekhov did not use his often darkly realistic fiction to transmit political messages, but even he could not remain unmoved by the sufferings he knew so many Russians were enduring in Siberia, and in 1890 he set off, as a free man, to

make the gruelling journey across the whole of Asian Russia to the most remote — and reputedly the worst — of all the penal settlements, those on the island of Sakhalin in the North Pacific. The book he wrote — his only important non-fictional and non-dramatic work — complements the intense and emotional tone that underlay the descriptive element in *The House of the Dead* with the combination of compassion and objectivity one might expect of this doctor turned writer, and it remains one of the best descriptions and one of the strongest implicit indictments of a Russian prison system that was the true ancestor of the Gulag empire of our own day.

Dostoevsky wrote from experience; Chekhov from observation. When Kropotkin came to write *In Russian and French Prisons* he combined the two, for he had been involved in the observation of the Russian prison system long before he found his way as a prisoner into one of its establishments. When he left his military school, the Corps of Pages, Kropotkin had astonished his friends and family by choosing to be assigned as an officer, not to one of the prestigious Guards regiment, but to the Mounted Cossacks of the Amur, a Siberian regiment. He already felt that attraction towards remote places that would make him a geographer and an explorer. And he hoped that in the far eastern frontier regions he would perhaps be able to play a significant part in the reforms that in 1862 everyone still expected of Alexander II, the Tsar who had freed the serfs.

When he reached Irkutsk, Kropotkin joined the staff of General Kukel, a Baltic German of liberal inclinations who had been appointed temporary governor of Transbaikalia; Kukel, who rather demonstratively — and dangerously — as it turned out — showed his sympathy for the political exiles, was as eager as Kropotkin to take part in the movement of reform which he foresaw. Short of staff, he welcomed the

arrival of Kropotkin with his enthusiasm and energy, and though Peter Alexandrovich was not yet twenty, he gave him the responsibility for co-ordinating two inquiries, one into the reform of municipal institutions and the other on the penal system as it operated in Siberia.

Kropotkin set to work with the collaboration of Colonel Pedashenko and a number of civil officials. As becomes evident in the text that follows, he gathered opinions from many people in various ways involved in the Siberian penal system. Only among the managers of the gold and silver mines, which extracted precious metals for the benefit of the imperial family and were responsible to St. Petersburg and not to the Siberian authorities, did he encounter persistent obstruction, though their operations were among the most brutally conducted. He himself visited the hard labour prisons, and the local lockups where prisoners often stopped on their way when the weather was severe, overcrowding already inadequate facilities, and found that they "All answered literally to the well-known description" of Dostoevsky in *The House of the Dead*. He saw the tramping "trains" of convicts making their way in all weathers over the Siberian roads, loaded with chains and brutalized by their guards, heard the *miloserdnaya* — the traditional song for charity that they raised as they passed through the villages where the Siberian people always gave generously of what they had, and visited the crowded and decaying lockups in which they slept at the end of each day's march. He saw the even more terrible salt mines where Polish rebels worked and usually died within a few months.

Before the report was completed, with its sweeping recommendations for the reform of both the prisons and the penal system itself, the situation, which in 1862 had seemed so favourable to change, had deteriorated. A swing to the right in

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St. Petersburg was encouraged by a new revolt in Poland, suppressed with notable brutality, and even in remote Siberia those with liberal inclinations became suspect and suffered for their inclinations; one of the victims was General Kukel, denounced for showing sympathy to the poet M.L. Mikhailov, who had been exiled for his political views and from whom Kropotkin gained his first taste of anarchist ideas through the writings of Proudhon which Mikhailov loaned to him; Kukel was dismissed from his position, and saved from being himself imprisoned only by the great efforts of his sympathisers in St. Petersburg. The report Kropotkin had compiled was indeed signed by Kukel's successor, and sent on to St. Petersburg. In the meantime, after the Polish insurrection, the situation in the prisons became even more urgent, for 11,000 new exiles, many sentenced to hard labour, were sent to Transbaikalia alone. But the report lay unacknowledged and perhaps unread in St. Petersburg, and apart from the building of a few show prisons in European Russia, nothing was done to change the bad old system.

Looking back over the past when he wrote *In Russian and French Prisons*, Kropotkin remarked:

I must confess that at that time I still believed that prisons could be reformatories, and that the privation of liberty is compatible with moral amelioration...but I was only twenty years old.

Experience was to teach him better a decade or so later.

Disillusioned with the regime of Alexander II, which had promised so much and had now been captured by the reactionaries, he resigned his commission in the Mounted Cossacks of the Amur, and, having made some notable exploratory journeys in the far eastern regions, returned to St. Pe-

tersburg an acclaimed geographer, resolved to follow his scientific vocation. At the same time, Proudhon's radical criticisms of society worked in his mind. He joined a mildly socialist group led by Nicholas Chaikovsky, the composer's brother, and there he began to work with young people who later became famous revolutionaries and martyrs for the cause, like Sergei Stepniak and Sophia Perovskaya.

In 1872 he made his first journey to Europe, and headed for Switzerland, then a Mecca for Russians, both the students — largely women — who found education more available and informative there, and the revolutionaries for whom it became a pleasanter place of exile than Siberia. Kropotkin tended to avoid the Russian political exiles; he did not even visit Bakunin, who was still alive in Locarno. Instead he sought out the native Swiss militants, the members of the Jura Federation which in the 1870s was the heart of the anarchist wing of the First International. There, among hospitable craftsmen — mainly watchmakers — who were the devoted followers of “le grand Michel” as they called Bakunin, he learnt of the workers' movement in Europe and returned to Russia a convinced anarchist, the only one in the Chaikovsky circle, which mainly consisted of constitutionally inclined social democrats. It was largely because of his urging that the Chaikovsky circle began to proselytize among skilled workers — engineers and weavers — in St. Petersburg, and Kropotkin led a strange double — even triple — life, associating with the scientists of the Russian Geographical Society for whom he was preparing reports on his travels in Siberia and later in Finland and on his theories of the glaciation of northern Europe and the dessication of central Asia, often visiting the Winter Palace where some of his old friends from the Corps of Pages were installed as courtiers, and even more often going, disguised in sheepskin coat and high boots as the peasant Borodin, to address the groups of workers.

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Inevitably the Third Section got on his trail, and in the spring of 1874, when he had already planned to hide out in southern Russia, he was arrested, and taken straight to the grim fortress of St. Peter-and-St. Paul — the Peter-and-Paul that had held such a sinister repute ever since Peter the Great had personally murdered his son Alexis in one of its dungeons. Bakunin, Chernshevsky, Pisarev and other Russian radical intellectuals, had already been immured there, and even when Kropotkin was installed in a casemate of the Trubetskoi ravelin, the terrorist Sergei Nechaev was slowly dying in one of the oubliettes of the notorious Alexis ravelin. After two years of solitary confinement in the fortress, Kropotkin was transferred to a new show prison, the St. Petersburg House of Retention, which was so badly designed that he almost died as a result of the bad air. As a result he was transferred to a small prison attached to the St. Petersburg military hospital, and it was from here — and not from the Peter-and-Paul as many accounts have claimed, that he made his famous escape and reached freedom in western Europe. All this time, it should be noted, he was uncondemned and unsentenced — what we would call a suspect on remand.

His prison experience was in many ways better and in some ways worse than that which Dostoevsky had undergone decades before. Instead of the promiscuous environment of the barracks prison where Dostoevsky lived for four years, he always had a cell or a special hospital room to himself. While this sheltered him from Dostoevsky's situation of a gentleman among suspicious and often hostile peasant convicts, it often involved intolerable periods of loneliness, particularly in his early months when he suffered the reverse of hard labour — day after day with nothing to fill his time or his mind.

But, unlike that modest writer and member of the lower gentry Dostoevsky, Kropotkin belonged to the highest

aristocracy, with excellent court connections, and was already a rising and admired younger scientist. The arrest of a member of a princely family with pretensions to more ancient title than the reigning Romanovs created a sensation in St. Petersburg, and there were many people of influence, within and outside the court, who were ready to do what they could to ameliorate his condition. At first the regime of solitude and silence persisted, though, unlike Dostoevsky, Kropotkin was allowed to read, both books from the prison library and those his friends and fellow scientists brought him. At first he was out of communication with other prisoners because there were so few in the Trubetskoi ravelin, but gradually the cells around him filled, and he kept up a lively pattern of tapped out conversations, among them with a close friend who arrived in the next cell. Then the Russian Geographical Society, supported by the Academy of Sciences, appealed for him to be given writing facilities so that he could complete the report on the glacial deposits of Finland on which he had been engaged when he was arrested.

The request had to go to the Tsar, who unexpectedly agreed, and Kropotkin received pens and paper, and enough books on loan to fill a whole wall of his cell, so that through the hours of daylight he could spend all his time writing and working on his charts. Now he was neither entirely lonely nor, like so many other prisoners, without meaningful occupation. But this only increased his sense that imprisonment itself was evil, and that there were no real ways of reforming it. It was still liberty that he wanted most of all, and when the chance came to plot his escape from the prison hospital, and the elaborate plans he and his friends concocted looked like succeeding, he was glad to abandon even his beloved geographical work and to make a break for the freedom he could enjoy beyond the power of the Tsar.

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Kropotkin went first to England, and when he came out of his first few months of precautionary anonymity, he was welcomed by his fellow scientists of *Nature* and of the Royal Geographical Society, and also by some of the leading figures of liberal England. One of these was James Knowles, the editor of *The Nineteenth Century*, who became a close friend and published Kropotkin's contributions over a period of more than three decades, including, in essay form, the greater part of major works like *Fields, Factories and Workshops* and *Mutual Aid*. It was Knowles who encouraged Kropotkin to write a group of three essays on the Russian prison system, of which the first appeared in January 1882.

But before he actually wrote *In Russian and French Prisons* Kropotkin was to have another spell as a famous convict. After his escape from Russia, he found England and its tame radical circles rather dull; soon he crossed the channel and made contact with his old associates in Switzerland, and became one of the most active militants in the anarchist movement that was beginning to define itself in the later 1870s after the breakup of the First International into its libertarian and authoritarian fragments. Living in Switzerland until he was expelled at the insistence of the Russian authorities, he moved to France and continued his tasks of agitation and revolutionary journalism.

Kropotkin chose an unfortunate time to take up residence in France, for the anarchists in the mining areas around Lyon (where Kropotkin actually had few connections) had recently been carrying out acts of violence, which spread to Lyon itself. The authorities decided to embark on a show trial, and Kropotkin seemed an obvious target. He and sixty-four other anarchists were arrested in December 1882 and accused of belonging to an illegal organization, the International, though in fact, as prosecution witnesses admitted, the



organization was no longer in existence. Before he was found guilty, as the French government intended, and sentenced to five years in prison, Kropotkin was kept on remand in the St. Paul prison in Lyon, where he had a "pistolet" to himself, a large clean cell with a coke-stove which he described as a "a tolerably comfortable dwelling place, provided the incarceration does not last too long." He refused to appeal the verdict against him, and while his fellow prisoners awaited the results of their appeals he remained in Lyon, being transferred in the spring of 1883 to the prison for long-term convicts at Clairvaux, situated in the original abbey of St. Bernard, which had been secularized during the Revolution.

In France during the nineteenth century a civilized convention existed by which political prisoners were detained rather than imprisoned in the full sense. The special conditions they enjoyed were accorded to Kropotkin and his associates, whose imprisonment had aroused protests from French and international scientists and intellectuals that highly embarrassed the government in Paris. So, once again, he was privileged in comparison with ordinary convicts, and did not endure the full extent of their hardships and humiliations as we have learnt of them from the writings of Jean Genet and others who describe life in French prisons. He and his fellow anarchists were given a suite of large, airy rooms, with a fine view of the countryside, and a little garden where they could play games and cultivate their vegetables; it was here that Kropotkin had the first experience of intensive horticulture that led the way towards later writings like *Fields, Factories and Workshops*. He was able to write for French and English journals, which he did throughout his imprisonment, and to organize courses for teaching his companions languages and sciences. Finally, thanks to her persistence in coming to live in Clairvaux, his wife Sophie was eventually allowed to see him

everyday. Thus Kropotkin did not lack either company or interesting work, and perhaps the main trouble he encountered while at Clairvaux was caused by a kind of ague that was endemic in the region and by a return of his Russian scurvy that between them made him temporarily ill. Yet in the end he was just as glad to be liberated as he had been to escape from his Russian prison in 1876.

He was actually set free in January 1886, after repeated votes in the Chamber of Deputies and growing criticism from abroad had forced the French government at last to ignore the urgings of its new-found ally, Tsarist Russia, and to free its by now celebrated prisoner.

Since he was *persona non grata* in both Switzerland and France, liable to arrest and deportation if he remained, Kropotkin took refuge in England, where he stayed until his return to Russia after the revolution in 1917. During the few weeks he spent in Paris before crossing the channel, he wrote a further piece for *The Nineteenth Century*, this time on his prison experience in France. His first important task in settling in his little suburban home in Harrow was to weld the various pieces into a book.

*In Russian and French Prisons* was the first of Kropotkin's books to step outside the purely anarchist context of his earlier books and pamphlets, like *Paroles d'un Révolté* (1885). It had implications for the whole field of penology, with its uncompromising rejection of imprisonment even in its most benevolent forms. Prison, Kropotkin concludes, cannot be an environment that reforms the criminal. To the contrary, it encourages him in crime as a revolt against the system that has punished him. "The man who is shut up in a prison is so far from being bettered by the change, that he comes out more resolutely the foe of society than when he went in." At the end of his book Kropotkin devotes considerable space to sugges-

ting libertarian ways of dealing with people who act anti-socially.

The publishing history of *In Russian and French Prisons* is a curious and in its own way a dramatic one. The whole of the edition had been bought up by Russian agents to prevent an exposure in western Europe of the evils of the Tsarist prison system. Only two or three copies remained, in Kropotkin's possession, and from one of these a new edition was immediately printed and precautions were taken to prevent its disappearing in the same way as the first. Eventually, after the Russian revolution in 1905, it would published in Russian in 1906.

Prisons have changed in detail and have been "improved" in various ways since Kropotkin wrote *In Russian and French Prisons*. But no amount of "reform" has changed the harm done by the penal system to individuals and to society in general by institutionalizing crime as well as punishment and in this sense the book remains as timely as it ever was.

*George Woodcock, 1991*

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE RUSSIAN EDITION

*In Russian and French Prisons* consists for the most part of articles which I wrote for the English journal *Nineteenth Century* at the beginning of the 1880s. In England at that time there was an awakening of interest in the Russian liberation movement, and the press, long under the influence of agents of the Russian government, began at last to carry accurate information regarding the horrors to which arrested or condemned revolutionaries were being subjected while in prison. I was thus asked to write about Russian prisons, but I took the opportunity to describe the frightful state of prisons in general.

"The revolutionaries," I reasoned, "are waging a war against the government, and however their enemies may be treating them, to lament over their fate can only harm them. They know what they are fighting for and ask no mercy. Right is on their side, and they believe in the success of their struggle.

"But there are hundreds of thousands of ordinary men who lose every year in vain and for naught, who languish in jails, are banished to Siberia, and are tormented by whoever puts on a uniform. It is about them that one must write," I thought, and I set out to describe to the English and the Americans the terrible system of Russian jails, central prisons, deportation

centers, way stations, and labor camps in Siberia and on Sakhalin Island.

It was necessary, of course, to do this in brief compass, since foreign readers could have only a tangential interest in Russian prisons. There was no lack of materials at that time. For the Russian press, taking advantage of the monetary freedom under Loris-Melikov,\* published many startling facts.

Yet most probably I would have said nothing in my essays of how political prisoners are treated in Russia if the agents of the Russian government had not compelled me to do so. Alarmed by the reports that began to penetrate the English press, they undertook to deny the most well-established facts about brutalities committed in the central prisons, and began to depict the Peter and Paul fortress as a model of efficient, humane treatment for the wicked revolutionaries—and this at the very time when in the Alexis Ravelin were taking place the horrors recently described in the press by Polivanov.

But what particularly compelled me to act was a certain English priest, Lansdell (Tolstoy superbly characterized him in *Resurrection*), who dashed about Siberia at top speed, seeing of course nothing, yet writing an abominable book about Russian prisons. Our prisons were at that time under the direction of a certain Galkin-Vrassky, an ambitious bureaucrat who tried to summon an international congress on prisons in St. Petersburg in order to strengthen his influence in the Anichkov Palace, and who found in Lansdell a useful source of praise for his "penal reforms."

The Minister of the Interior, Tolstoy, also took this

\* For this and other references see explanatory note at end. (P. A.)

flatterer under his wing, and even allowed him to be shown the Peter and Paul fortress—not the dungeons, to be sure, but the Trubetskoy Bastion. When I exposed Lansdell's book in the English press, the answer to my remarks was written, as I subsequently learned, in St. Petersburg. Mr. Galkin-Vrassky himself sent the reply, which the English priest published under his own signature in the *Contemporary Review*. My answer to this article makes up Chapter VII of this book.

A few words in passing about this answer. I wrote it in the Lyons prison. A reply to Lansdell—to this Russian agent—was essential. Sergei Kravchinsky was no longer in England, and I hastened to draft my reply before going to trial, immediately after which I would surely be sent off to some central prison. My article was ready. But the French government was concerned at all costs to prevent anything I wrote against the Russian government from leaving a French prison. I was therefore told, when I tried to send my article to London, that this was impossible, that it had to be sent for inspection to the ministry in Paris, where it would be held if it was against the Russian government.

Fortunately, however, the doctor of the Lyons prison was M. Lacassane, a writer on anthropology who had twice visited my cell to talk about anthropological questions. His wife knew English well, and he proposed that she be the one to censor my article. The prison director consented, if only to shirk his own responsibility. Mme. Lacassane, of course, saw at once that the article was precisely one of those which should not be allowed to leave the prison, yet, assuming the risk, hastened the next day to send my article to London. If only I could now thank her in person. There are good people everywhere.

It is well known that the Russian ministers sought to make the same use of the Americans Kennan and Frost, who were sent by an American journal to check the condition of Russian prisons on the spot. But they were foiled. For Kennan learned Russian, got acquainted with the exiles in Siberia, and truthfully recorded what he learned.

And now banishment to Siberia—at least through the courts—has been abolished, and at certain places inside Russia “reformatory” prisons have been established. Thus, with regard to Russian prisons, my book would seem primarily of historical interest. Yet let it serve then as historical testimony to the unimaginable ferocity with which our bureaucrats treated the Russian people for thirty or forty years after the abolition of serfdom. Let everyone know what they upheld, how they resisted even the pettiest changes over thirty years, how they trampled on all the most fundamental rights of humanity.

Besides, is it really true that Russian prisons have changed for the better? That more has been spent in various “reformatories” and model prisons to white-wash old bricks is beyond dispute. But the essence remains the same. How many hundreds of horrible antiquated jails, deportation centers, and lockups remain to this day in the hands of uniformed scoundrels! How many thousands are banished as before to Siberia, and a bit farther, by administrative decree! How many atrocities are being perpetrated now, at this very moment, in impossibly crowded jails! The floors perhaps are cleaner, but the Arakcheev system remains, or has even grown worse, having been made more cunning, more malicious than before. Who, after all,

administers these prisons if not the worst enemies of the Russian people?

One of the chapters of this book is devoted to a description of what I saw in French prisons—in both the Lyons provincial prison and the central prison at Clairvaux. To those who may feel that what I say is an exaggeration, I would only note that when this essay appeared in *Le Temps* it was considered in France so objective that it was used in the Chamber of Deputies as a document in the debates on prison reform. In France, as elsewhere, the whole prison system rests on a false foundation and demands a total reexamination, an honest, serious, thoughtful reexamination, from the social standpoint.

The last two chapters of my book are thus devoted to an analysis of the profoundly harmful influence which prisons everywhere exert on social morality, and also to the question: Must contemporary humanity support these undeniably pernicious institutions?

If I had now to write afresh about this last question, I would describe conditions much more fully, on the basis of a whole mass of new observations and materials and new studies which have enriched the literature. But this very abundance of materials compels me to abandon any thought of reexamining this exceedingly important question. It is so urgent, however, that it will doubtless find young forces that will undertake the task along the lines indicated herein. In America such work has already begun.

*Bromley, England*  
*February 1906*





# IN RUSSIAN AND FRENCH PRISONS.

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## INTRODUCTORY.

IN our busy life, preoccupied as we are with the numberless petty affairs of everyday existence, we are all too much inclined to pass by many great evils which affect Society without giving them the attention they really deserve. If sensational "revelations" about some dark side of our life occasionally find their way into the daily Press; if they succeed in shaking our indifference and awaken public attention, we may have in the papers, for a month or two, excellent articles and letters on the subject. Many well-meant things may then be said, the most humane feelings expressed. But the agitation soon subsides; and, after having asked for some new regulations or laws, in addition to the hundreds of thousands of regulations and laws already in force; after having made some microscopic attempts at combating

by a few individual efforts a deep-rooted evil which ought to be combated by the combined efforts of Society at large, we soon return to our daily occupations without caring much about what has been done. It is good enough if, after all the noise, things have not gone from bad to worse.

If this remark is true with regard to so many features of our public life, it is especially so with regard to prisons and prisoners. To use Miss Linda Gilbert's—the American Mrs. Fry's—words, “After a man has been confined to a felon's cell, Society loses all interest in and care for him.” Provided he has “bread to eat, water to drink, and plenty of work to do,” Society considers itself as having fulfilled all its duties towards him. From time to time, somebody acquainted with prisons starts an agitation against the bad state of our jails and lock-ups. Society recognizes that something ought to be done to remedy the evil. But the efforts of the reformers are broken by the inertia of the organized system; they have to fight against the widely-spread prejudices against all those who have fallen under the ban of the law; and soon they are left to themselves in their struggle against an im-

mense evil. Such was the fate of John Howard, and of how many others? A few kindhearted and energetic men and women continue, of course, amidst the general indifference, to do their work of improving the condition of prisoners, or rather of mitigating the bad effects of prisons on their inmates. But, guided as they are merely by philanthropic feeling, they seldom venture to criticize the principles of penal institutions; still less do they search for the causes which every year bring millions of human beings within the enclosure of prison walls. They try to mitigate the evil; they seldom attempt to grapple with it at its source.

Every year something like a hundred thousand men, women, and children are locked up in the jails of Great Britain alone—very nearly one million in those of the whole of Europe. Nearly 1,200,000*l.* of public money are spent every year, in this country alone, for convict and local prisons; very nearly ten millions in Europe—not to speak of the expenses involved by the maintenance of the huge machinery which supplies prisons with inmates. But, apart from a few philanthropists and professional men, who cares about the results achieved at so heavy an expenditure? Are our prisons

worth the enormous outlay in human labour yearly devoted to them? Do they guarantee Society against the recurrence of the evils which they are supposed to combat?

Having had in my life several opportunities of giving more than a passing attention to these great questions, I have thought that it would be useful to put together the observations which I have been enabled to make on prisons and the reflections they have suggested.

My first acquaintance with prisons and exile was made in Siberia, in connection with a committee for the reform of the Russian penal system. There I had the opportunity of learning the state of things with regard both to exile in Siberia and to prisons in Russia, and then my attention was attracted first to the great question of crime and punishment. Later on, in 1874 to 1876, I was kept, awaiting trial, nearly two years in the fortress of Peter and Paul at St. Petersburg, and could appreciate the terrible effects of protracted cellular confinement upon my fellow-prisoners. Thence I was transferred to the newly-opened House of Detention, which is considered as a model prison for Russia, and thence again to a military prison at the St. Petersburg Military Hospital.

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When in this country, I was called upon, in 1881, to describe the treatment of political prisoners in Russia, in order to *tell the truth* in the face of the systematic misrepresentation of the matter by an admirer of the Russian Government. I did so in a paper on the Russian Revolutionary Party, which appeared in the *Fortnightly Review*, June, 1881. None of the facts revealed in this paper have been contradicted by the Russian agents. Attempts were, however, made to circulate in the English press accounts of Russian prisons, representing them under a somewhat smiling aspect. I was thus compelled to give a general description of prisons and exile in Russia and Siberia, and did so in a series of four papers, which appeared in the *Nineteenth Century*. Refraining as much as possible from complaints of the treatment undergone by our political friends in Russia, I preferred to give an idea of the general state of Russian prisons, of exile to Siberia, and of its results; and told the unutterable sufferings which scores of thousands of common-law prisoners are enduring in the jails throughout Russia, on their way to Siberia, and in the immense penal colony of the Russian Empire. In order to complete my own experience, which

might have been out of date, I consulted the bulky Russian literature which has been devoted of late to the subject. The perusal of this literature convinced me that things have remained in very nearly the same state as they were five-and-twenty years ago; but I also learned from it that although the Russian prison authorities are very anxious to have mouthpieces in West Europe, in order to circulate embellished accounts of their humane endeavours, they do not conceal the truth either from the Russian Government or from the Russian reading public, and both in official reports and in the Press they represent the prisons as being in the most execrable condition. Some of these avowals will be found in the following pages.

Later on, that is, in 1882 to 1886, I spent three years in French prisons; namely, in the *Prison Départementale* of Lyons, and the *Maison Centrale* of Clairvaux. The description of both has been given in a paper contributed last year to the *Nineteenth Century*. My sojourn of nearly three years at Clairvaux, in close neighbourhood with fourteen hundred common-law prisoners, has given me an opportunity of obtaining a personal insight into the results

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achieved by detention in this prison, one of the best in France, and, as far as my information goes, in Europe. It induced me to treat the question as to the moral effects of prisons on prisoners from a more general point of view, in connection with modern views on crime and its causes. A portion of this inquiry formed the subject of an address delivered in December last, before the Edinburgh Philosophical Institution.

While thus reprinting some review articles, I have completed them with more recent information and data, mostly taken from official Russian publications; and whilst eliminating from them the controversial element, I have also eliminated all that cannot be supported by documents which can be published now without causing harm to anybody of our friends in Russia. The newly-added chapter on exile to Sakhalin will complete the description of the Russian penal institutions. I take advantage of this opportunity to express my best thanks to the editor of the *Nineteenth Century* for his kind permission to reprint the articles published in his review.



## CHAPTER I.

## MY FIRST ACQUAINTANCE WITH RUSSIAN PRISONS.

My first acquaintance with Russian prisons was made in Siberia. It was in 1862. I had then just arrived at Irkutsk—a young Lieutenant of Cossacks, not fully twenty years of age,—and a couple of months after my arrival I was appointed secretary to a committee for the reform of prisons. A few words of explanation are necessary, I suppose, for my English readers.

The education I had received was only what a military school could give. Much of our time had been devoted, of course, to mathematics and physical sciences; still more to the science of warfare, to the art of destroying men on battle-fields. But we were living, then, in Russia at the time of the great revival of thought which followed in our country the Crimean defeat; and even the education in military schools felt the influence of this great

movement. Something superior to mere militarism penetrated even the walls of the *Corps des Pages*.

The Press had received some freedom of expression since 1859, and it was eagerly discussing the political and economic reforms which had to shake off the sad results of twenty-five years of military rule under Nicholas I.; and echoes of the intense intellectual activity which was agitating the outer world reached our class-room. Some of us were reading a good deal to complete our education. We took a warm interest in the proposed rebuilding of our institutions, and lively discussions on the emancipation of Serfs, on the reforms in administration, were carried on between lessons on tactics and military history. The very next day after the long-expected and often delayed emancipation of Serfs had been promulgated, several copies of the bulky and incoherently-worded *Polozhenie* (Emancipation Act) were busily studied and briskly commented upon in our small sunny library. The Italian Opera was forgotten for guesses as to the probable results and meaning of the emancipation. Our teachers, too, fell under the influences of the epoch. History,

and especially the history of foreign literature, became, in the lectures of our professors, a history of the philosophical, political, and social growth of humanity. The dry principles of J. B. Say's "Political Economy," and the commentaries upon Russian civil and military law, which formerly were considered as a useless burden in the education of future officers, became endowed with new life in our classes, when applied to the present needs of Russia.

Serfdom had been abolished, and a series of reforms which were to culminate in constitutional guarantees, preoccupied the minds. All had to be reformed at once. All had to be revised in our institutions, which are a strange mixture of legacies from the old Moscow period, with Peter I.'s attempts at creating a military State by orders from St. Petersburg, with the depravity bequeathed by the Courtiers of the Empresses, and Nicholas I.'s military despotism. Reviews and newspapers were fully devoted to these subjects, and we eagerly read them.

It is true that Reaction had already made its appearance on the horizon. On the very eve of the liberation of the Serfs, Alexander II. grew frightened at his own work, and the Reactionary Party gained some ground in the Winter Palace.

Nicholas Milutine—the soul of the emancipation of the Serfs in bureaucratic circles—had been suddenly dismissed, a few months before the promulgation of the law, and the work of the Liberal Emancipation Committees had been given over, for revision in a sense more favourable to the nobility, to new committees chiefly composed of Serf-proprietors of the old school,—the so-called *kryepostniki*. The Press began to be muzzled; free discussion of the Emancipation Act was prohibited; the paper of Aksakoff—he was Radical then and advocated the summons of a Zemskoye Sobranie, and was not opposed to the recall of Russian troops from Poland—was suppressed number after number. The small outbreak of peasants at Kazan, and the great conflagration at St. Petersburg in May, 1862 (it was attributed to Poles), still reinforced the reaction. The series of political trials which were hereafter to characterize the reign of Alexander II. was opened by sentencing our poet and publicist, Mikhailoff, to hard-labour.

The wave of reaction, however, had not in 1862 yet reached Siberia. Mikhailoff, on his way to the Nertchinsk mines, was fêted at a dinner by the Governor of Tobolsk. Herzen's

*Kolokol* ("The Bell") was smuggled and read everywhere in Siberia; and at Irkutsk I found, in September, 1862, a society animated by the great expectations which were already beginning to fade at St. Petersburg. "Reforms" were on all lips, and among those which were most often alluded to, was that of a thorough reorganization of the system of exile.

I was nominated aide-de-camp to the Governor of Transbaikalia, General Kukel, a Lithuanian, strongly inspired with the Liberal ideas of the epoch; and next month we were at Tchita, a big village recently made capital of Transbaikalia.

Transbaikalia is the province where the well-known Nertchinsk mines are situated. All hard-labour convicts are sent there from all parts of Russia; and therefore exile and hard-labour were frequently the subject of our conversations. Everybody there knew the abominable conditions under which the long foot-journey from the Urals to Transbaikalia used to be made by the exiles. Everybody knew the abominable state of the prisons in Nertchinsk, as well as throughout Russia. It was no sort of secret. Therefore, the Ministry of the Interior undertook a thorough reform of prisons

in Russia and Siberia, together with a thorough revision of the penal law and the conditions of exile.

“Here is a circular from the Ministry,” the Governor once said to me. “They ask us to collect all possible information about the state of prisons and to express our opinions as to the reforms to be made. There is no one here to undertake the work: you know how fully we are all occupied. We have asked for information in the usual way, but receive nothing in reply. Will you take up the work?” I objected, of course, that I was too young and knew nothing about it. But the answer was: “Study! In the Journal of the Ministry of Justice you will find, to guide you, elaborate reports on all possible systems of prisons. As to the practical part of the work, let us gather, first, reliable information as to where we stand. Then we all, Colonel P., Mr. A., and Ya., and the mining authorities also—will help you. We will discuss everything in detail with people having practical knowledge of the matter; but gather, first, the data—prepare material for discussion.”

So I became secretary to the local committee for the reform of prisons. Needless to

say how happy I was to accept the task : I set to work with all the energy of youth. The circular of the Ministry filled me with joy. It was couched in the most elegant style, and the Ministry incisively pointed out the chief defects of Russian prisons. The Government was ready to undertake the most thorough reform of the whole system in a most humane spirit. The circular went on to mention the penitentiary systems in use in Western Europe ; but none of them satisfied the Ministry, and it advocated a return “to the great principles laid down by the illustrious grandmother and grandfather of the now happily reigning Emperor.” For a Russian mind this allusion to the famous instructions of Catherine II., written under the influence of the Encyclopedists, and to the humanitarian tendencies professed during the earlier years of Alexander I.’s reign, conveyed a whole programme. My enthusiasm was simply doubled by the reading of the circular.

Things did not go, however, so smoothly. The mining authorities under whom the exiles are working in the Nertchinsk mines did not care so much about the great principles of Catherine II. and were, I am afraid, of the opinion that the less things were reformed, the

better. The repeated demands for information issued by the Governor left them quite unmoved—they depend directly upon the Cabinet of the Emperor at St. Petersburg, not upon the Governor. Obstinate silence was their answer until they finally sent in a pile of papers, covered with figures, from which nothing could be obtained, not even the cost of maintenance of convicts, nor the value of their labour.

Still, at Tchita there were plenty of men thoroughly acquainted with the hard-labour prisons, and some information was gladly supplied by several mining officers. It appeared that none of the silver-mines where exiles were kept could be worked with any semblance of profit. So also with many gold-mines. The mining authorities were anxious to abandon most of them. The arbitrary despotism of the directors of prisons had no limits, and the dreadful tales which circulated in Transbaikalia about one of them—Razghildeeff—were fully confirmed. Terrible epidemics of scurvy swept away the prisoners by hundreds each year, that a more active extraction of gold was ordered from St. Petersburg, and the underfed convicts were compelled to overwork. As to the buildings and their rotten condition, the



overcrowding therein, and the filth accumulated by generations of overcrowded prisoners, the reports were really heartbreaking. No repairs would do, the whole had to undergo a thorough reform. I visited a few prisons, and could but confirm the reports. The Transbaikalian authorities insisted, therefore, on limiting the number of convicts sent to the province; they pointed out the material impossibility of providing them not only with work, but even with shelter.

Things were no better with regard to the transport of exiles. This service was in the most deplorable condition. An engineer, a honest young man, was sent to visit all *étapes*—the prisons where the convicts stop to rest during the journey—and reported that all ought to be rebuilt; many were rotten to the foundation; none could afford shelter for the mass of convicts sometimes gathered there. I visited several of them, saw the parties of convicts on their journeys, and could but warmly advocate the complete suppression of this terrific punishment inflicted on thousands of men, women, and children.

As to the local prisons, destined to be lock-ups, or houses of detention for the local

prisoners, we found them overcrowded to the last extent in ordinary times, and still more so when parties of convicts were stopped on the journey by inundations or frosts—Siberian frosts. They all answered literally to the well-known description of Dostoievsky in his “Buried Alive.”

A small committee, composed of well-intentioned men whom the Governor convoked from time to time at his house, busily discussed what could be done to improve affairs without imposing a new and heavy burden on the budget of the State and the province. The conclusions unanimously arrived at were: that exile, as it is, is a disgrace to humanity; that it is a quite needless burden for Siberia; and that Russia herself must take care of her own prisoners, instead of sending them thither. For that purpose, not only the penal code and the judicial procedure ought to be revised at once, as promised in the Ministerial circulars, but also within Russia herself some new system of penal organization ought to be introduced.

The committee sketched such a system where cellular imprisonment was utterly condemned, and the subdivision of the prisoners into groups of from ten to twenty in each