



*A Threatening Geography: Forced Displacement and Convict Labour in Western Siberia, 1879–1953*  
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## Summaries

### Summary (English): *A Threatening Geography: Forced Displacement and Convict Labour in Western Siberia, 1879–1953*

The Gulag is one of the key symbols of the mass state violence in the twentieth century. This camp system, like other forced labour camp systems globally, relied on three interconnected repressive practices: internment, forced displacement, and forced labour. In this thesis, I analyse these elements prior to the emergence of the camps, and trace the conditions under which they were welded together to lay the foundations for the gargantuan labour camp system of the Gulag. This research is situated at the crossroad of Russian studies and labour history and proposes a critical history of punishment in the Russian Empire and Soviet Union from the start of the prison reform until the death of Stalin. As I demonstrate, this history is full of continuities, slowly formed predispositions, as well as shocks and ruptures. Emergence of the Gulag cannot be fully understood without a study of the early attempts to modernise the penal system, as some of the ideas and practices first articulated and probed by the Imperial prison officials were later appropriated by Gulag officials. In this dissertation, I underline the importance of regional developments in transformations of punishment and highlight the tensions between various groups of actors who shaped the repressive system over the years. By adopting a regional perspective, I was able to explore in detail the connections between how punishment was deployed in Western Siberia and the state-wide repressive system. Identifying various groups of actors who impacted the penal system was not the chief task of this work, though throughout the text, the policy-makers, theoreticians of punishment, prison administrators, political leaders, and camp bosses do make their appearance.

The main goal of this dissertation was to trace the emergence of the Soviet system of labour camps in the long historical perspective,

with a particular focus on regional developments. There were two sets of questions that I sought to answer here. The first group of questions dealt with the process of state building. How were various types of punishment used in this process? Which state agendas shaped various penal practices, such as exile or *katorga*? How did penal practices reinforce, or maybe, on the contrary, challenge the power balance between the regions? How did the strains of political tumult, social instability, and wars transform state penal policies?

The second group of questions is related to the continuity and change in penal policies and institutions. For instance, forced labour of convicts was the mainstay of the penal system since the late nineteenth century, but the types of work and the institutions where the work had to be performed were frequently changing. How was the forced labour conceptualised by state actors? Which goals did they seek to achieve by implementing various policies, and what were the limits of their intervention? How did the definitions of crime change over time?

The first chapter is dedicated to exile, the foundational penal practice of the Russian Empire. This chapter also introduces the reader to the punitive repertoire of the imperial authorities and defines Western Siberia as the nexus of flows of convicts and exiles. Along with exile, I discuss *katorga*, a punitive regime created by Peter I in the early eighteenth century. *Katorga* combined incarceration, life-long exile, and forced labour, and for many years remained the harshest punishment for non-state criminals in the Russian empire. Despite the fact that the central authorities could not maintain the *katorga* sites in Eastern Siberia and prevent their decay, this penal regime did not lose its importance, and neither did exile. In this chapter, I elucidate how the imperial capital's agenda of colonisation shaped the penal system and made forced displacement such a crucial penal practice. Moreover, by providing a close-up analysis of the establishment of a *katorga* prison in the Western Siberian city of Tobolsk, I demonstrated the limits of control of the central government and the ways in which the prison reform was slowed down precisely by the persistent reliance on exile.

In the second chapter, the focus of investigation moves from the "traditional" Russian penal practices – exile and *katorga* – towards the attempts to create a modern centralised penal system where incarceration would become the chief type of punishment. Fascination

with prisons as the instrument for reformation of criminals was the common trope of the nineteenth-century criminological discussions in Europe and beyond, and I trace the attempts to make incarceration the dominant punishment in the Russian Empire. Here, I delved into the specificities and limits of prison reform in imperial Russia. As the reform attempted to create a rational penal system, ‘knowing’ the convicts and the places of confinement became one of the chief tasks of the newly created Main Prison Administration. Collection of information and the development of the discipline of penology were documented in professional press. The backbone of this chapter is an analysis of the collective production of knowledge about prisons, convicts, and their labour. In particular, I highlighted the role of the Main Prison Administration in introduction of obligatory labour for convicts and explained why it did not truly gain momentum until three decades later.

In chapter three, I reviewed the limits of this reform and investigated the transformations of the penal system that were prompted by the growing social and political unrest and the war. I addressed the numerous tensions and conflicts in imperial society and discussed how they impacted penal policies. During this time, certain types of punishment that were losing their significance during the prison reform, namely exile and *katorga*, were once again mobilised by the central government in an attempt to fight political dissent. The challenges faced by the tsarist government were not coming only from the internal unrest: as the First World War began, geopolitical concerns started to shape the penal policies stronger than ever before. In particular, I demonstrated the impact of war on the organisation of forced labour of convicts and analysed how large-scale infrastructural projects became the main sites of forced convict labour.

Creation of the first institutions of mass confinement in Western Siberia, the prisoner of war camps, is at the heart of chapter four. Internal political destabilisation was only exacerbated by the onset of the First World War. Already in the first years of the war, the overflow of captive soldiers created the need for mass confinement and the entire infrastructure related to it. Managed by the imperial military, these POW camps formed the first large-scale network of concentration camps. This system rapidly disintegrated during 1917, but some of its remnants were used during the civil war as well. I contrast the large-scale network of the POW camps to the

small, decentralised places of confinement that were created in the aftermath of the revolution as the first experiments of Soviet penal policy. After the October 1917 revolution, this system was replaced by a multitude of small, decentralised, scattered camps and prisons. These penal institutions could rarely organise forced labour on any significant level, though they would sometimes supply labourers to the local Soviet authorities, thus providing an early example of participation of de-convoyed prisoners in the local economy. As documents show, however, this use of convict labour remained informally organised and extremely limited.

Chapter five is focused on how the penal policies were developed in the core of the nascent socialist state. I analyse these revolutionary penal policies against the backdrop of the growing reliance of labour coercion and the emergence of the the Soviet political police, an ever more intrusive and controlling force in the post-revolutionary society. Coercion, especially labour coercion, became pervasive during the years of war communism. Despite the fact that many other war communism policies were abandoned shortly after the introduction of the New economic policy, political leadership's reliance on labour coercion continued to grow. I demonstrate, in particular, that the movement towards a greater reliance on forced labour was supported by a variety of actors who disagreed on other issues. I analyse the struggles that surrounded the creation of new post-revolutionary penal policies, and limits and failures of the early Soviet experimentation in the penal sphere. This experimentation was intended to fill the penal vacuum by proposing socialist alternatives to the tsarist penal system, but the more progressive suggestions, such as the introduction of obligatory labour without imprisonment, remained marginal or even were overrun by the more repressive practices of the political police.

The ever increasing significance of the political police is even more visible in the chapter six, where I focus on Stalin's policy of collectivisation and the fight against the peasantry. I analyse how a new type of penal institutions, the "special settlements", was created. The installation of the special settlements in the course of dekulakisation marks a rupture in Soviet repressive policies. These settlements were the nexus of forced displacement and the forced labour, and produced the first blueprints of truly mass deportations that would later be replicated multiple times, especially in the Western

and Southern borderlands of the Soviet Union. Tracing the developments of the special settlements system makes clear the extreme interconnectedness between the free and unfree spheres of labour and extensive reliance on forced labour both in rural and urban contexts. For the Soviet political leadership, coercion was a legitimate tool for fulfilling the state's goals of colonisation and industrialisation. As crucial instruments in the dekulakisation campaign, the special settlements were also used to achieve the goal of brutal large-scale social engineering: undermining the peasantry and its ways of life and production.

In the final chapter, I turn to the experiences of inmates in order to provide a glimpse of how it was possible to live through this succession of deportation, incarceration, forced labour, quotidian violence, and physical and mental suffering, and how the inmates attempted to deal with the constant uncertainty about their future, separation from their families, and disillusionment with the Soviet system. The life stories I highlight also allow us to reconnect deportation, internment, and forced labour, rather than to see them as separate occurrences, and help us to account for the regional differentiations and the variety of conditions within the Gulag. This final chapter also investigates the radicalisation of the Stalinist repressive policies during and after the Second World War: in particular, how *katorga* came back into the punitive repertoire as an instrument of fighting those deemed by the Soviet power to be war criminals and traitors, and how this extremely strict regime was later implemented in a new type of repressive institutions, the "special camps". Here, once again, a testimony of a former *katorga* convict, Elena Markova, powerfully challenged the narratives of official documents.

Together, these chapters highlight numerous developments in the political, ideological, scientific, and social spheres that contributed to the emergence of a large-scale labour camp system, and show how the Russian and Soviet penal policies were embedded with in a wider sociopolitical context. I analysed how forced labour of convicts came to play the central role in the penal system, and how tightly it was connected with forced displacement. Penal practices and institutions were instruments of governmental control over the population and the territories, and in tumultuous time of war and revolution their only grew. The emergence of the camp system was rooted within this habitual use of punishment as a tool of control not only over the

convicts, but also wide groups of population. As I demonstrate, a double movement prompted the establishment of the camp system: on the one hand, coercion, and labour coercion in particular, became more ubiquitous in the young Soviet society, and the infringement of labour legislation was punished with great severity. On the other hand, ever more population groups came to be perceived as political enemies, and were punished as such.