

INFORMAL PRISON HIERARCHIES IN THE 21 CENTURY: SUBCULTURE, TRENDS AND SOCIAL CONTROL

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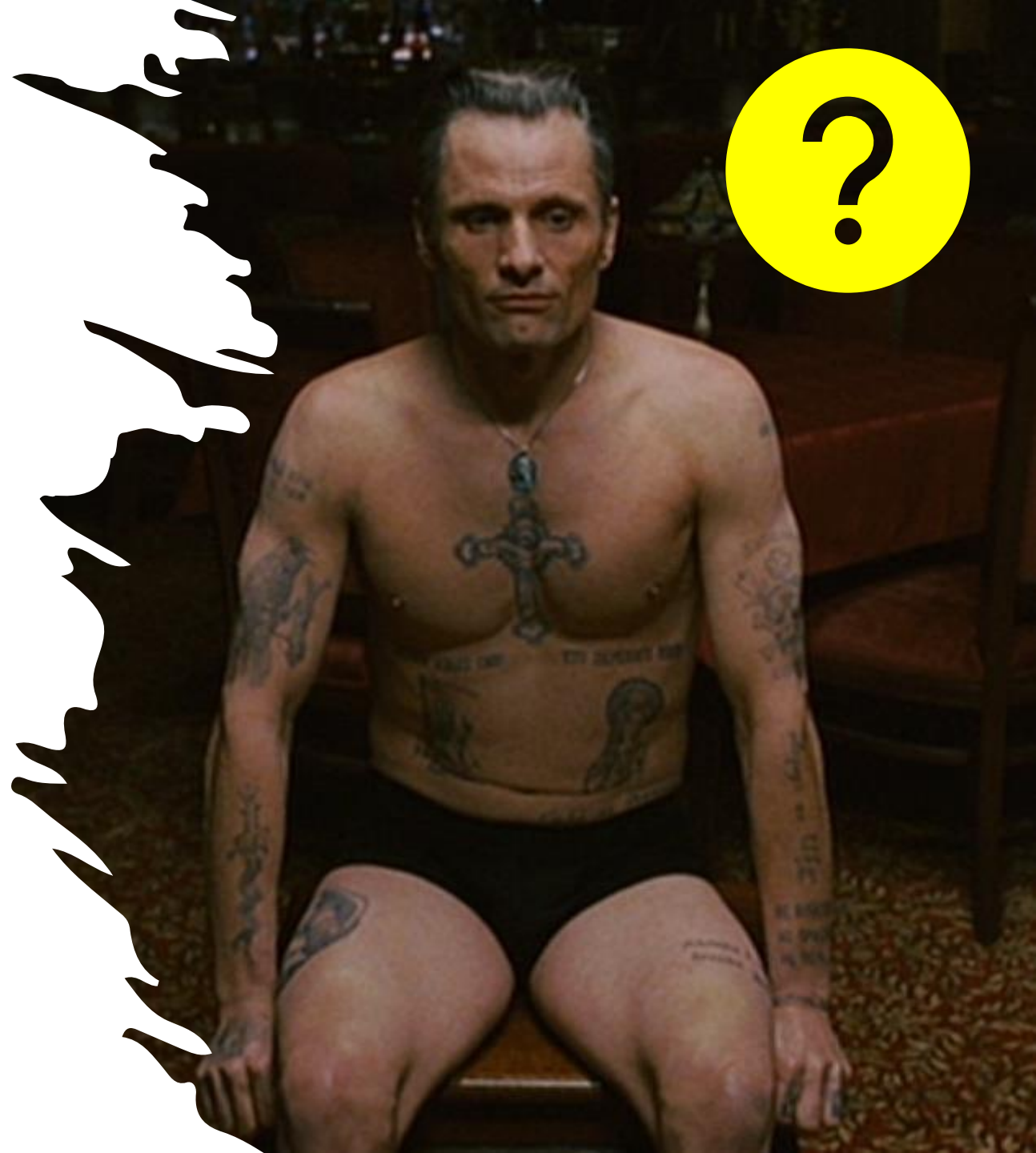
EUROCRIM 2025
LOGOS OF CRIME AND PUNISHMENT



**RUSSIAN
CRIMINAL AND
PRISON SUBCULTURE**

or

**RUSSIAN NATIONAL
CRIMINAL AND
PRISON CULTURE**



INTRODUCTION

- **O**rigins and preconditions for the formation of the Soviet criminal and prison subculture
- **C**urrent situation in post-Soviet states
- **I**nformal prisoner hierarchies
- **I**mportation of the Soviet criminal and prison subculture as part of its neo-colonial policy



**‘If the American
colonialisation of the West
was based on free people
armoured with revolvers,
the Russian colonisation of
the East was based on
convicts ‘armoured’ with
heavy handcuffs and
prison chains’**

Yagunov 2025



HYPOTHESIS

Exile and *the katorga* in the context of imperial administration of the huge conquered territories

- Territories and distances
- Isolation from the metropolis
- Big proportion of convicts in the general structure of the population
- No funding for prisons
- Self-administration by prisoners
- Development of criminal and prison subculture



HYPOTHESIS

- The Russian criminal and prison subculture became a **national culture** – a culture **in its own right**
- Having shed the prefix ‘*sub*’, Russian criminal and prison **culture** became a valuable instrument of cultural import from Russia, performing purely political tasks of a neocolonial nature



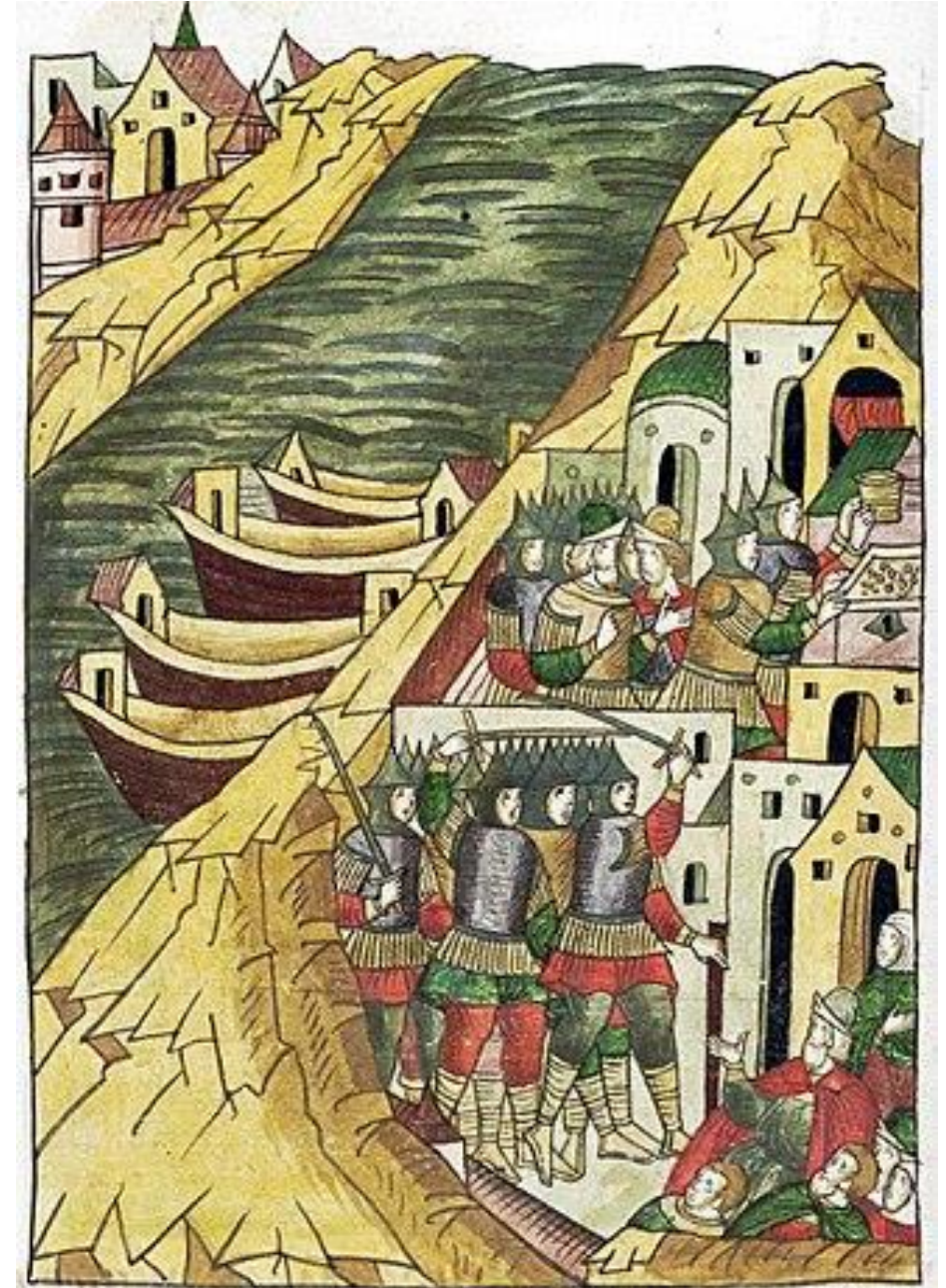
AN OLD RUSSIAN 'ISLA TORTUGA'

- The phenomenon of **'Ushkuyniki'**
- An **'ushkuy'** – a sailing and rowing vessel used in northern Russian territories in the 11th-15th centuries
- **Vyatka Peoples' Republic** as a criminal state



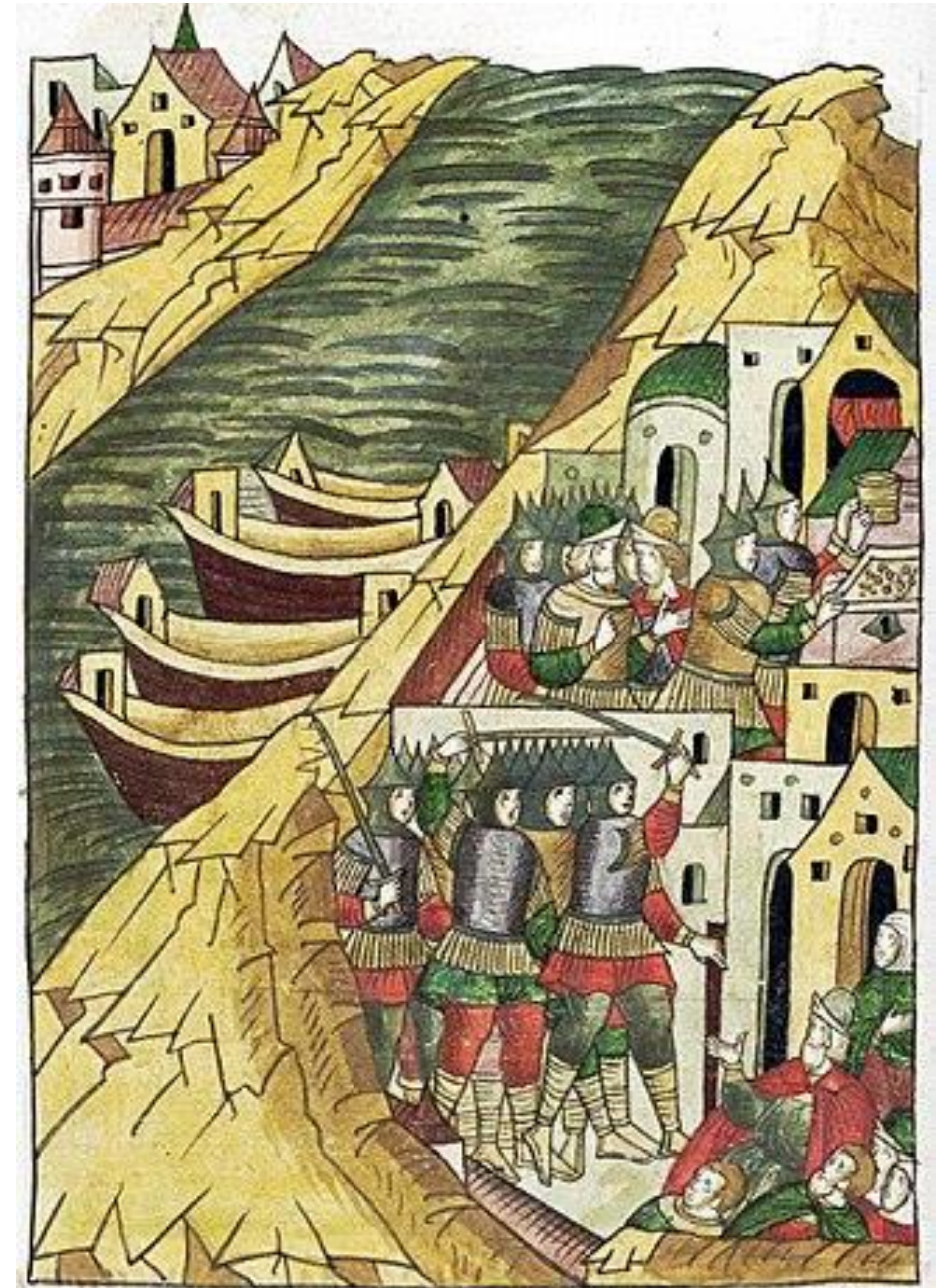
THE USHKUYNIKI

- Free men who belonged to an armed militia equipped by Novgorod merchants and noblemen
- River members of the organised criminal groups
- Contributed to the expansion of Novgorod's pirate trade and colonies
- Their raids benefited to Novgorod, as they undermined the economy of its trading competitors on the Volga River



THE USHKUYNIKI

- The descendants of *the Ushkuyniki* went east: some settled in the Vyatka and Perm forests, while others went to the Don and Volga rivers.
- Adoption of the *Ushkuyniki*'s traditions by the Russian Cossacks
- The social and cultural impact of the **criminal society** and the **pirate state** on the further criminalisation of Russian society
- **Promotion of criminal behaviour** as socially acceptable, tolerable and even desirable





THE GRAND PRINCIPALITY OF MOSCOW

- **AGGRESSIVE COLONIAL POLICY**
- State institutions in the colonised and conquered lands were weak or non-existent
- Support for the professional and organised criminal activity by **private individuals**
- Substitution of the state with **private individuals**
- Impact of the criminal behaviour on the socialisation strategies in the context of the Russian criminal colonisation of the East





SIBERIAN KHANATE

MOSCOW STATE

Tatars

Kalmuks

NOGAI HORDE

Kazakhs



*The Conquest of Siberia by Ermak
(Vasily Surikov)*

THE GRAND PRINCIPALITY OF MOSCOW



- **The epoch of exile**
- By 1645, approximately 1,500 people were sent beyond the Urals for imprisonment and exile
- According to the first census in Siberia (1662), exiles and convicts made up approximately 8,000 out of 70,000 people in the region
- **More than 11,5 % of the population of Siberia consisted of exiles**

STEPAN RAZIN'S UPRISING

- **1660**: the population of the Tsardom stood at 11 million
- **The Peasant War of 1667-1671**
- **200,000 people took part**
- The uprising was suppressed with unprecedented cruelty
- Being already **'criminals'**, they brought more social preconditions in shaping a national Russian criminal culture



PETER I: 'THE KATORGA'



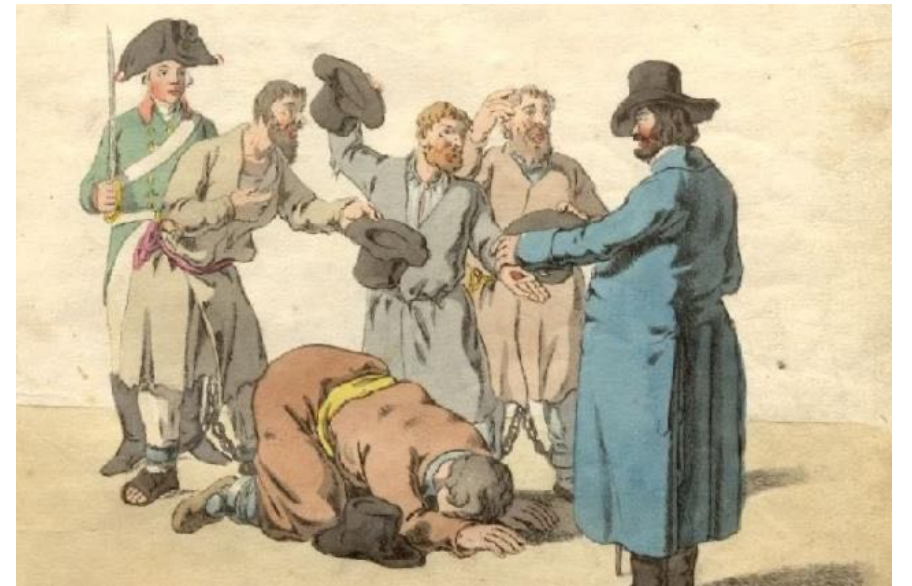
PETER I: 'THE KATORGA'

- **Colonial and military ambitions**
- The Northern War (1700-1721)
- Criminals were not sent to Siberia, but rather to build canals and row galleys in the Baltic Sea
- Exile to Siberia was imposed in exceptional cases, giving way to exile to other places



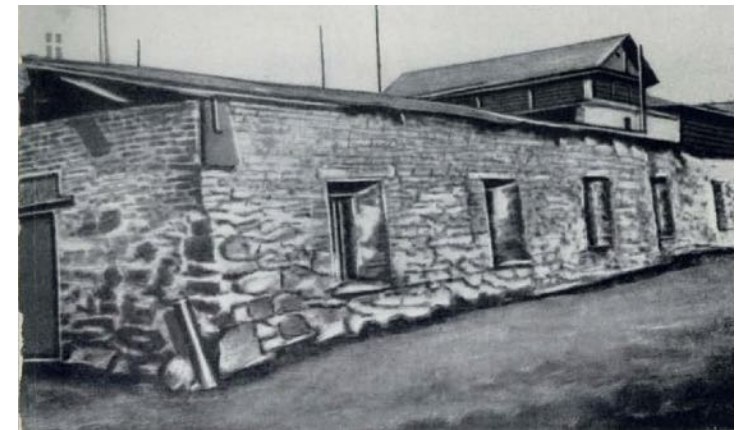
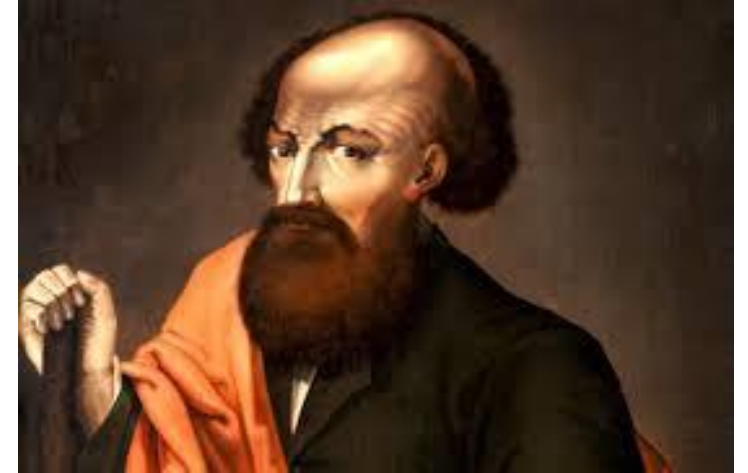
THE KATORGA

- The peasants and Ukrainian Cossacks were replaced by exiles convicted of criminal offences
- By decree of 15 July 1729, vagrants began to be sent to Siberia
- The exile received another boost with a decree of 1754, which replaced the death penalty for criminals with their removal beyond the Ural Mountains
- Among the exiles there began to prevail people who were far removed from free peasant labour
- Accordingly, among the exiles there began to prevail people with the criminal subculture



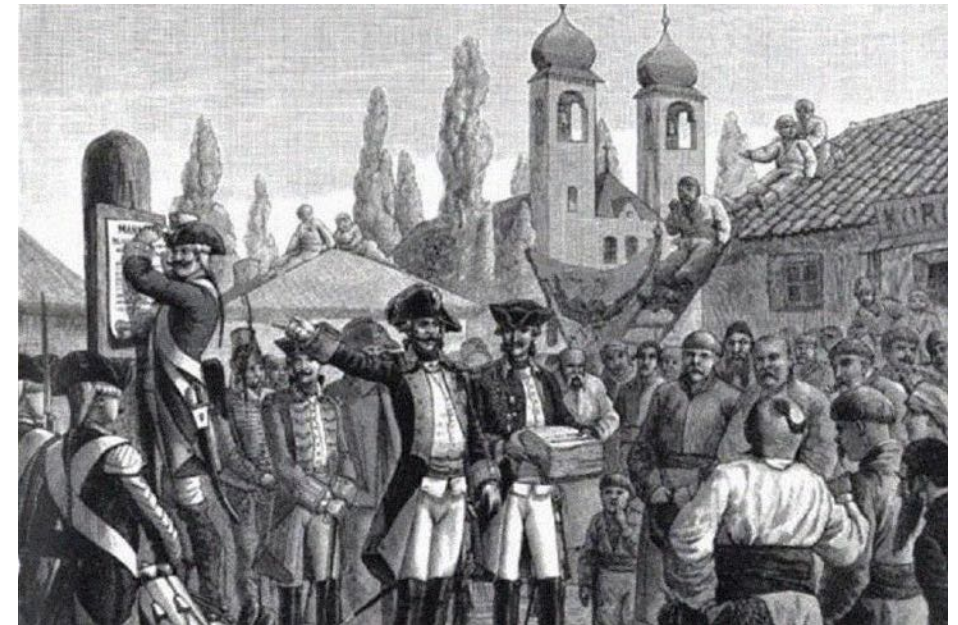
THE DEMIDOV FAMILY

- **Nikita Demidov** (1656-1725), a blacksmith
- During the reign of Peter I, he received vast tracts for the construction of metallurgical plants
- **Akinfiy Demidov** (1678-1745) owned 25 factories at the end of his life
- In the mid-18th century, the Demidov brothers owned 33 factories, land, and over 13,000 male serfs
- The total number of workers employed by Akinfiy Demidov reached 38,000 men
- **Cruel punishments**
- **Private (factory) prisons**



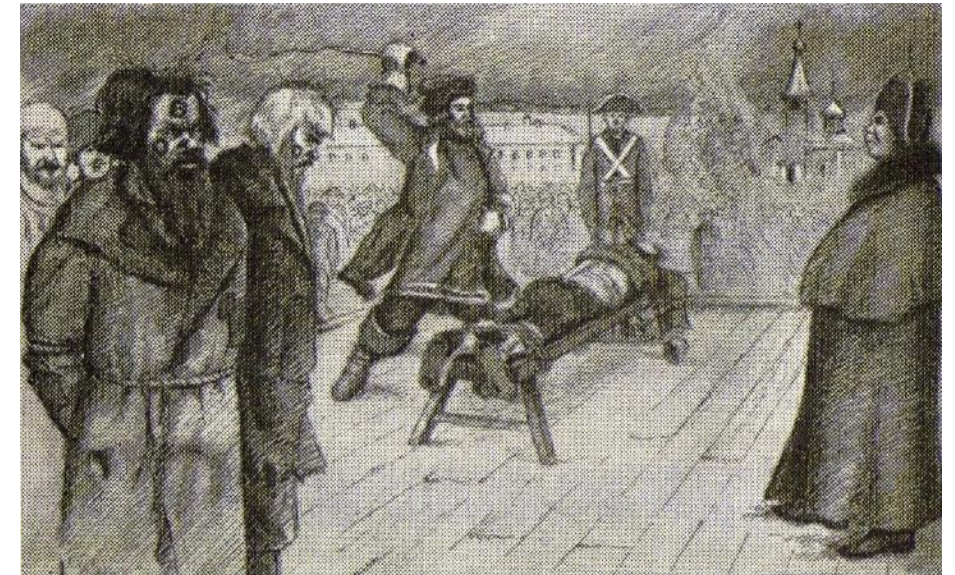
THE SECOND HALF OF THE 18th CENTURY

- **Katherine II (1729-1796)**
- Developed rules for admission to the gangs, stability in thieves' communities, mutual assistance among criminals, a developed jargon, and the use of criminal nicknames
- All the signs characteristic of professional criminal activity were obviously visible
- At the same time, the informal 'laws' of the criminal world were still weak



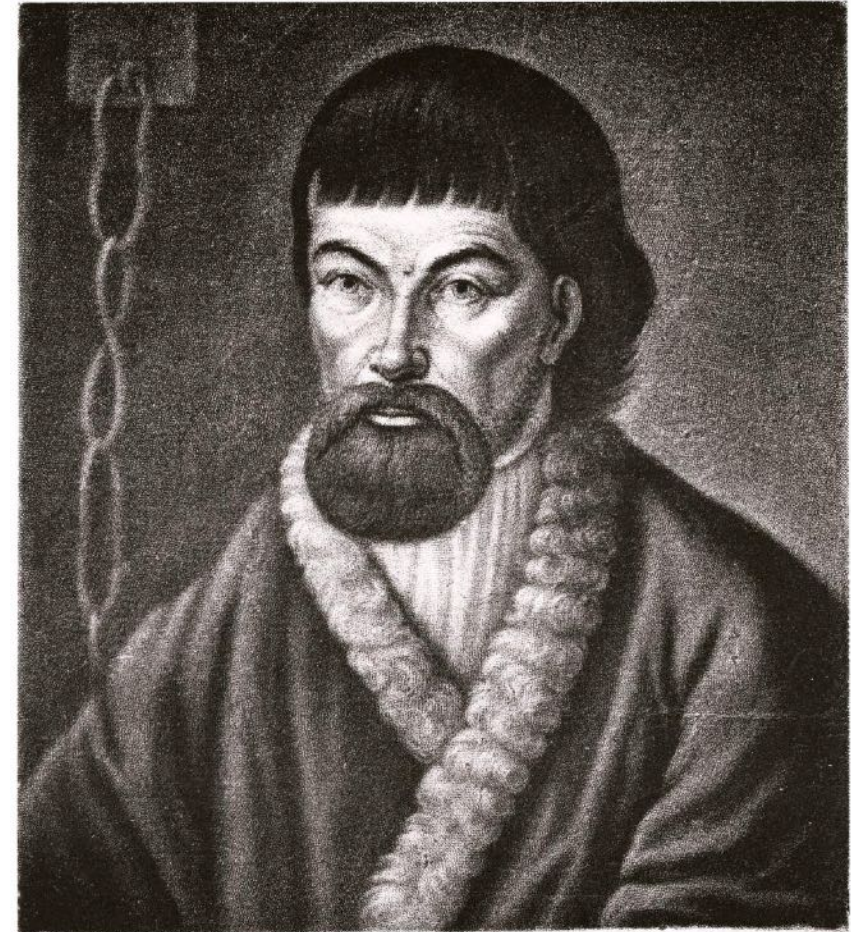
THE SECOND HALF OF THE 18TH CENTURY

- **Imprisonment as a military service, military service as an imprisonment**
- Between 1719 and 1742, more than 500,000 peasants were listed as wanted
- An average of over 200,000 serfs fled from landowners each year
- By the beginning of the 18th century, there were about 25,000 prisoners and exiles in Siberia
- About 10% of the Russian population east of the Urals



PUGACHEV'S REBELLION

- Peak of the uprising (January 1774) – about **120,000 people**
- More than **20,000 rebels** were killed
- More than **35,000 rebels** were captured
- Mass executions, public corporal punishments, and mass confiscation of the property of rebels
- Mass deportation of rebels and their families to remote areas of the Empire



Подлинное изображение бунтовщика и обманщика ЕМЕЛЬКИ ПУГАЧЕВА. Wahre Abbildung des Rebellen und Betrügers IEMELKA PUGATSCEW.

Betrachtet dieſes Bild u. lerret wohl bedencken wie mancher Menſch auf Erd ſich laßt vom Teufel lencken. Drum laßt Euch Pugatschew jetzt zur Entangott u. ſeine Wör d. zu u. wer den kein Rebelle. Daß er ſelbſt Teufel wird die menſchliche Geſchlechte. Die bleibt die Str' nicht aus bey Menſche auf Erdd. So muß der Schöpfer ſelbſt welt hängen ſich er zeig. Schaut aber nur auß End der groß u. klein Rebelle damit das G. Schöpfer lernt ſich vor ſein Richter bauen u. dieſes wohl bedenkt daß der ſo andern ſchade am muß ſich ſelbſt ſchadt mit jeder boß' thac.

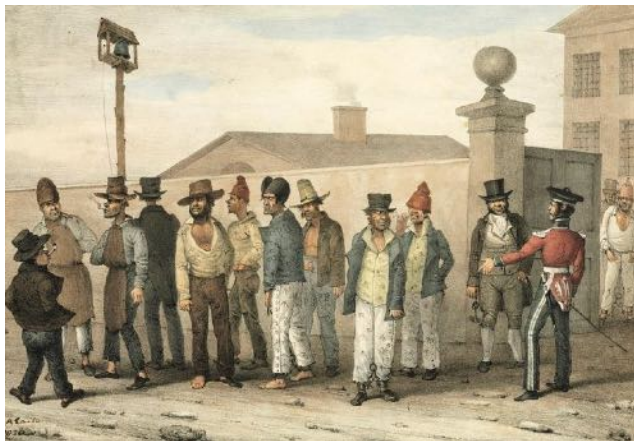
THE FIRST HALF OF 19th CENTURY

- After the Napoleonic Wars, the number of Siberian ‘**convoys**’ increased sharply
- July 1822, **Alexander I**: Formalisation of penal labour, the systematisation of existing legal norms on penal labour and exile, and the introduction of new laws
- Uncertainty in legal regulation, compounded by staff shortages and a lack of adequate funding, has led to the rapid development of criminal subcultural norms and the establishment of informal prisoner hierarchies
- 8,000 per year of exiles during the reign of **Nicholai I**



THE SECOND HALF OF 19th CENTURY

- In total, for 1823–1888, **781,901** convicts were exiled
- In total, for 1807–1898, **864,823** convicts were exiled
- **To compare:** between 1788 and 1868 the British penal system transported about **162,000** convicts from Great Britain and Ireland to various penal colonies in Australia



RUSSIA

**THE SIBERIAN ROUTE
(THE GREAT PENAL
ROUTE)**

CHINA

MONGOLIA



Москва

Муром

Козьмодемьянск

Казань

Пермь

Оса

Кунгур

Тюмень

Тобольск

Екатеринбург

Ялutorовск

Ишим

Тару

Енисейск

Омск

Каинск

Томск

Колывань

Ачинск

Красноярск

Иркутск

Верхнеудинск

Кяхта

Нерчинск

Пекин

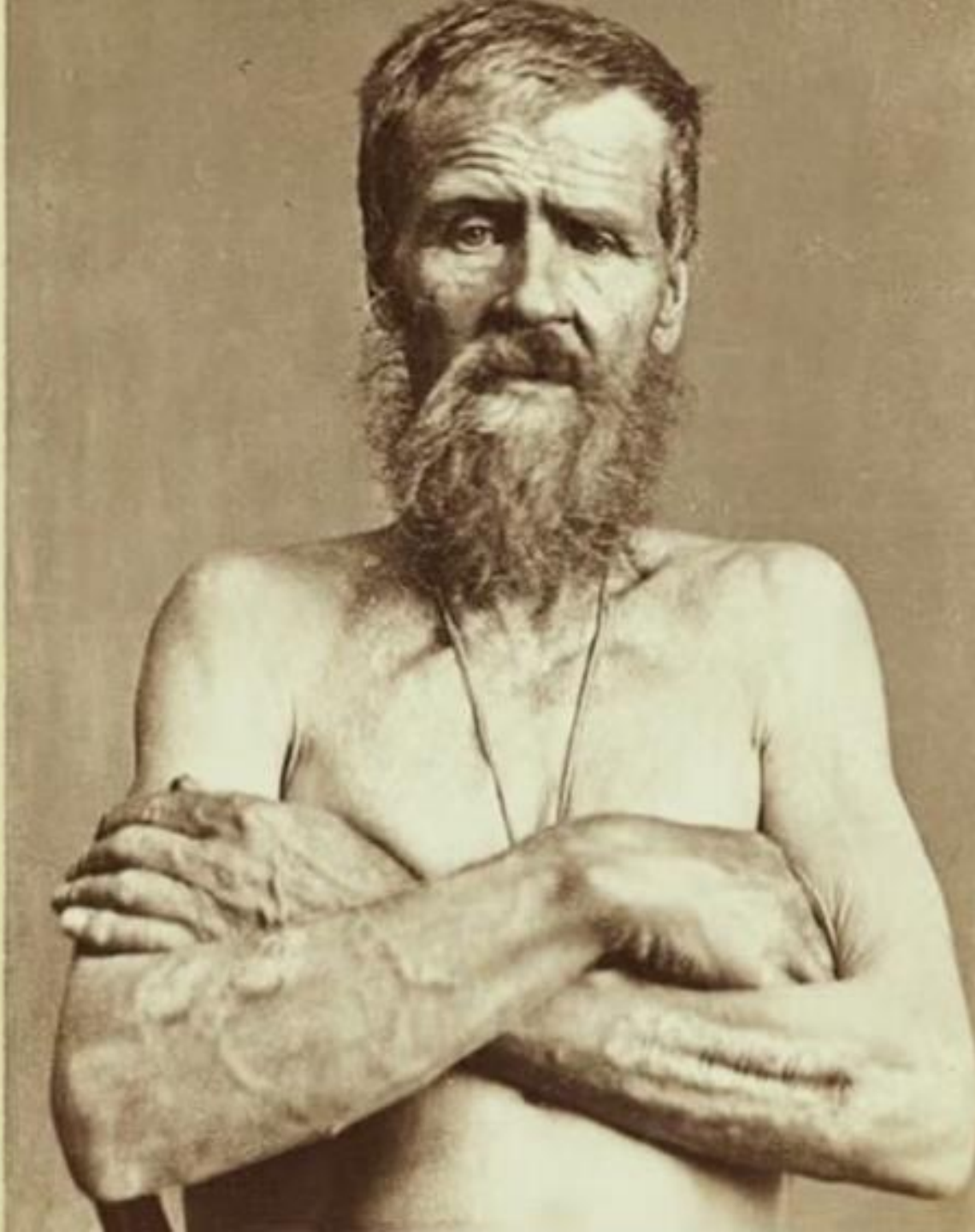
Калган

500 км или 500 м

500 miles







Типы и виды Мерчинской каторги.



а

*Закованная с-каторжная
въ ручныя и ножныя кандалы.*



б.

*Закованный с-каторжный
въ ручныя и ножныя кандалы.*









Крикованские и тарканы

EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PENAL SYSTEM AND CULTURAL DIFFUSION

As of 1 January 1898, the following numbers of exiles were **‘missing without leave’**: in the Yenisei Province – 11,556 (22.65%); in the Irkutsk Province – 29,403 (40.95%); in the Transbaikal region – 3,374 (23.44%); in the Yakut region – 1,277 (24.66%); in the Amur region – 484 (71.27%); in the Primorsky region – 1,817 (85.82%).



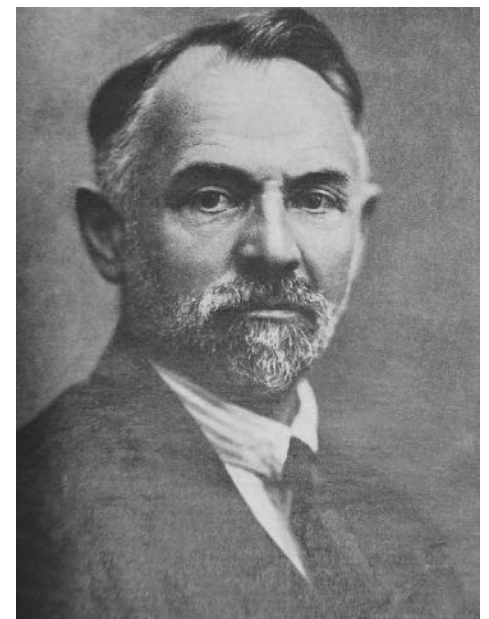
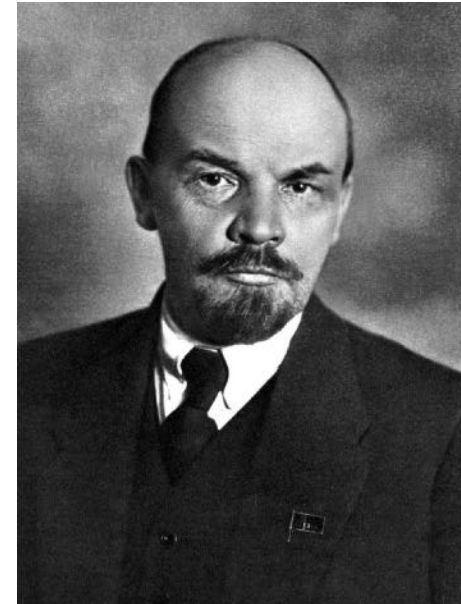
NICHOLAS II

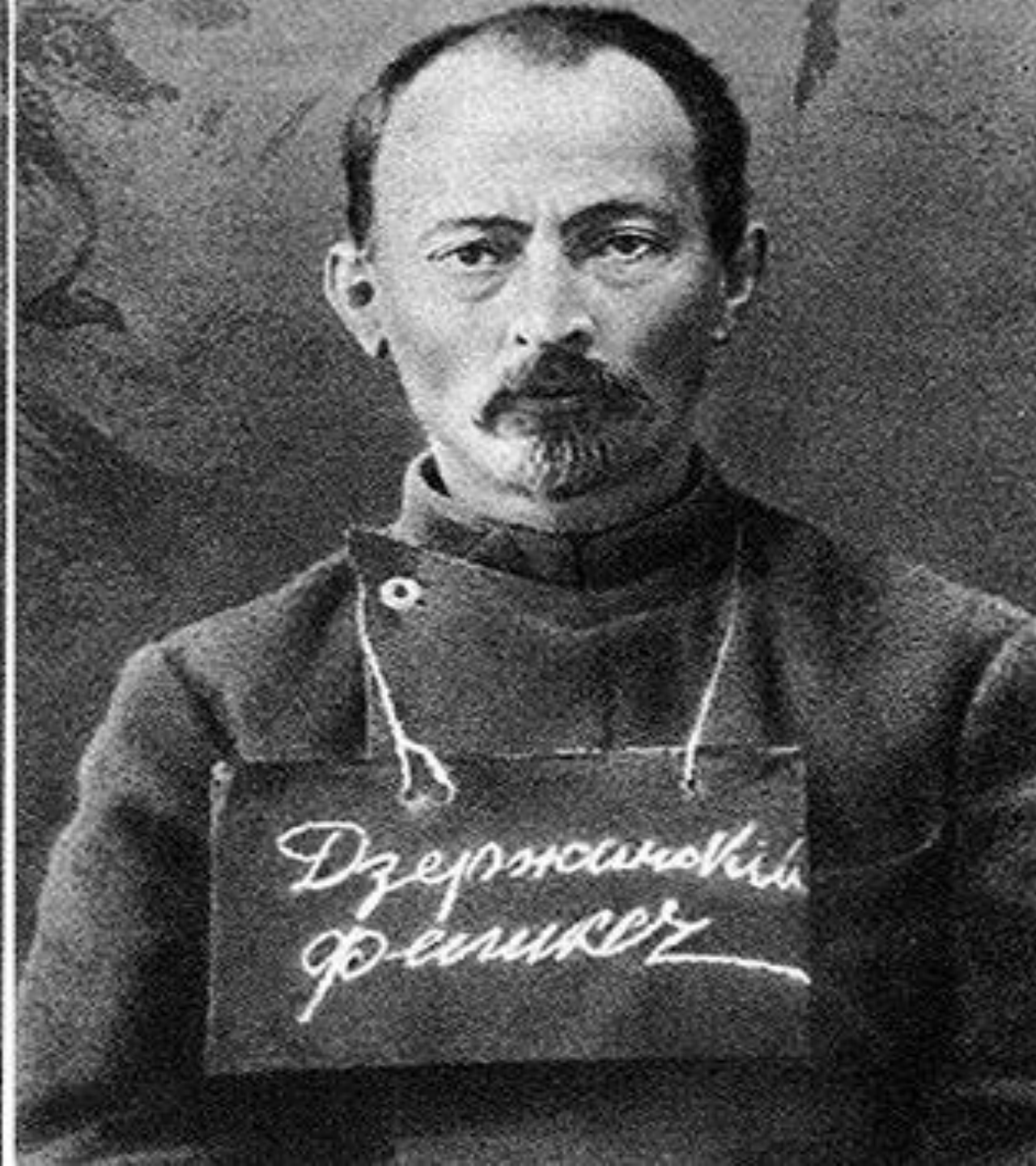
- The First World War influenced the further evolution of the prison sociocultural complex
- Initially, the central government prioritised the war itself, but later attempts were made to curb growing discontent among the population due to economic problems caused by the war
- The lack of adequate funding, material resources and delays in salary payments led to mass dismissals of prison staff by February 1917
- Prisons began to evolve on their own, which inevitably affected both the state of the prison subculture and the degree of penetration of subcultural norms into society



SOVIET POLITICAL LEADERS, ORGANISED CRIME AND PRISON SUBCULTURE

- The first leaders of the Soviet state and officials at all levels of government had gone through the prison system
- Even as ‘political’ prisoners, they acquired the skills of prison life what were applied to the management of the Soviet state
- Many of them were professional criminals before their imprisonment, having committed common crimes





SOVIET PERIOD

- *The thieves'* category completely freed itself from political influence, believing that a thief should only steal and not interfere in the affairs of the state
- Those who adhered to the thieves' rules of conduct were called **'thieves-in-law'**
- It is quite difficult to determine with certainty when the group emerged and why it came to be called **'thieves-in-law'**
- The power struggle continued in the 1920s and 1930s and led to radical changes in the criminal world



SOVIET PERIOD

- The lower ranks of the criminal hierarchy (**'urki'**) stopped obeying their leaders, and a real war broke out between them for the redistribution of power
- After several bloody clashes, the **'urki'** emerged victorious and began to establish new rules of conduct for the criminal world based on pre-revolutionary and new traditions
- The result of this synthesis was the creation of an informal **'thieves' code'** governing the rules of conduct in the criminal milieu, which adequately reflected the realities of the existing social system
- **'DIE TODAY, AND I WILL DIE TOMORROW'**







A-13

O-38

O-292

Ж-224

O-837

H-38

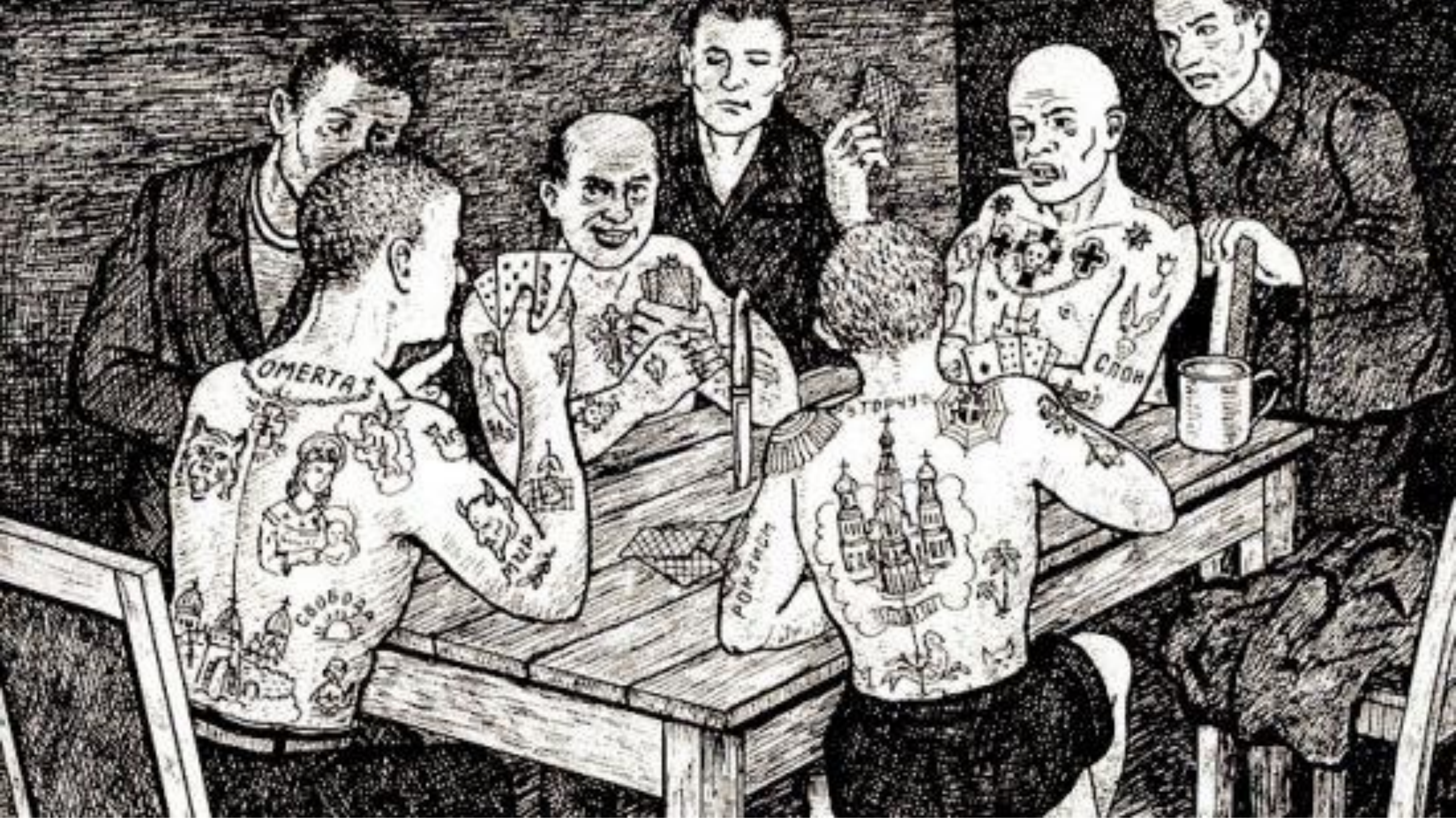
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O-37

A-817





OMERTA

СТОП

СЛОМ

ПОРЯДОК

СВОБОДА





INFORMAL PRISONER HIERARCHY

THE CPT STANDARD ON INFORMAL PRISON HIERARCHIES

- In April 2024, the CPT presented the 34th General report together with a **Standard on informal hierarchies in prison**
- The CPT reiterated its call to European states **put an end to informal hierarchies**

CPT

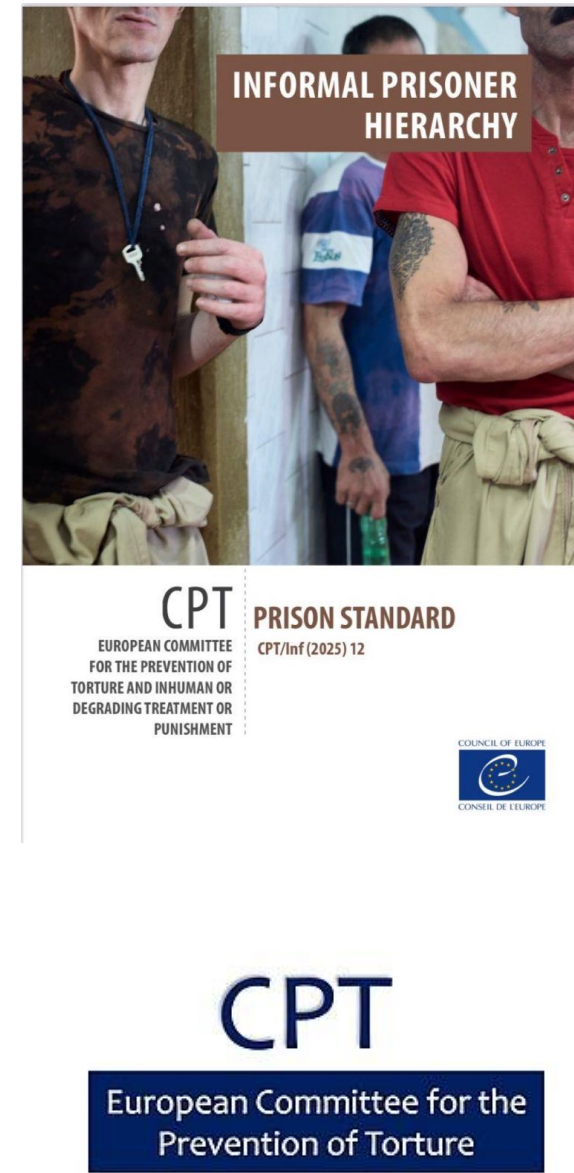
EUROPEAN COMMITTEE
FOR THE PREVENTION OF
TORTURE AND INHUMAN OR
DEGRADING TREATMENT OR
PUNISHMENT

PRISON STANDARD

CPT/Inf (2025) 12

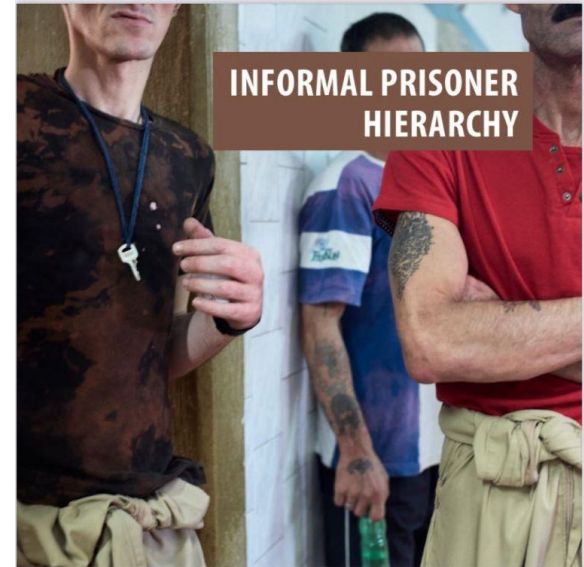


- The Report explains the nature of the informal prison hierarchies in the post-Soviet states
- The main idea that a traditional informal prisoner hierarchy in the national prison systems is founded on **the caste system**
- **Belonging to a particular caste is determined by several factors** (the crime committed, connections to organised crime, a person's financial situation, previous imprisonment, debts, and conflicts in prison or outside, sexual orientation and experience before prison, or even the accidental violation of one of the many unwritten rules of the informal prisoner hierarchy)



THE THREE MAIN CASTES:

- ✓ **informal leaders**
 - ✓ **ordinary prisoners**
 - ✓ **untouchables**
- The lowest caste are the **untouchables**, both literally and figuratively
 - They are not allowed to have an opinion in relation to prison life and higher castes, to raise their voice, or to physically resist when being hit by an inmate from a higher caste
 - They have to stand guard outside a unit for hours every day and inform other inmates when they see prison staff approaching



CPT
EUROPEAN COMMITTEE
FOR THE PREVENTION OF
TORTURE AND INHUMAN OR
DEGRADING TREATMENT OR
PUNISHMENT

PRISON STANDARD
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CPT

European Committee for the
Prevention of Torture

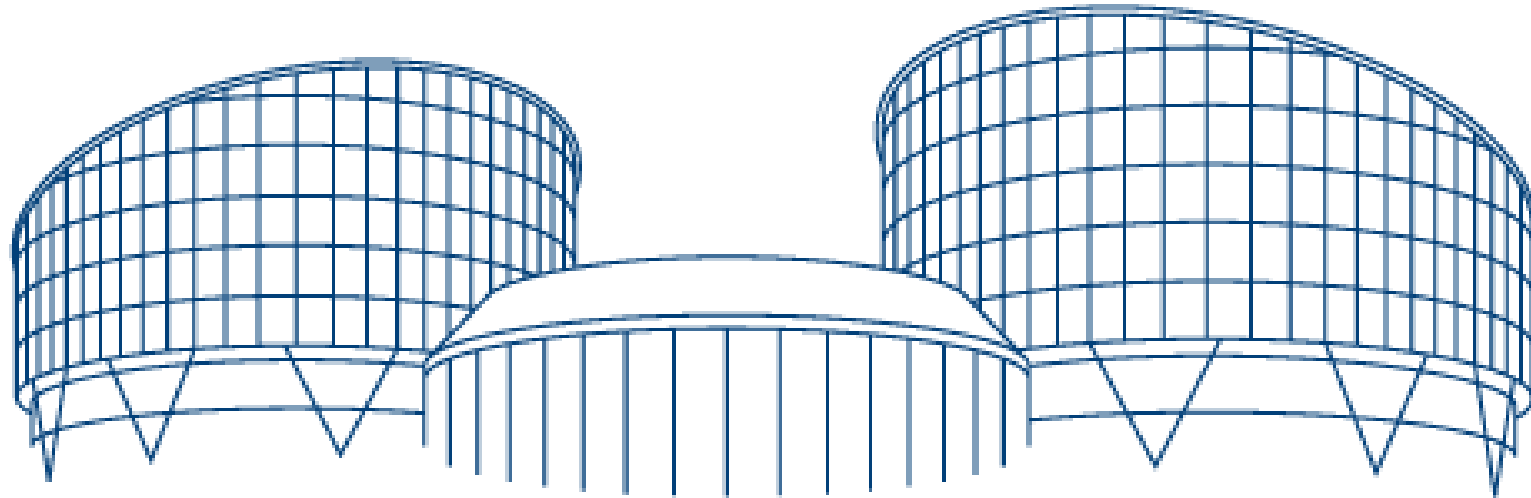
- **Untouchables** have their own separate cells or dormitories, or their separate place in the dormitories and cells (usually next to the door or the toilet)
- **Untouchables** must use separate sanitary facilities, eat at separate tables at the canteen using marked tableware, exercise in a separate gym (or use a sports field only when it is not being used by the higher castes), and be the last to go to the prison shop
- In some prisons, **untouchables** are not allowed to use the kitchen in the unit, and in others, they must use a separate cooker, separate fridge, and separate table



CPT

European Committee for the
Prevention of Torture

THE CASE LAW OF THE EUROPEAN COURT



EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS
COUR EUROPÉENNE DES DROITS DE L'HOMME

Two recent judgments of the European Court of Human Rights are particularly important when discussing the informal prisoner hierarchy in post-Soviet countries

- **S.P. and Others v. Russia (no. 36463/11) of 2 August 2023**
- **D. v. Latvia (no. 76680/17) of 11 January 2024**

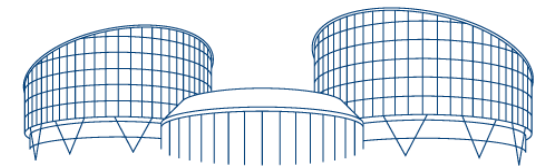


- In **S.P. and Others v. Russia**: the applicants have been subjected to humiliating treatment and physical abuse as a result of being **‘outcast’ prisoners**
- The applicants were segregated, both socially and physically, with separate beds, tables, cutlery with holes, different visiting times for the bathroom and television room, lower quality food, and restricted access to medicine
- All the applicants, without exception, were forced to perform **‘dirty work’**, such as cleaning latrines, shower rooms
- The segregation and the work they were forced to perform were enforced by physical violence and threats of violence and even sexual violence in respect of some applicants

- The studies documented **the hierarchy system** and the existence of **‘outcast’ prisoners** and the treatment to which they were subjected as a **widespread practice** in Russian prisons that had been in place for decades and had affected a considerable number of inmates
- **The informal hierarchy was an entrenched feature of Russian prisons**
- The domestic authorities have been aware of the informal hierarchy
- While not all the applicants were subjected to physical violence in connection with their status as ‘outcast’ prisoners, some of them did suffer physical attacks, while another one was forced to provide sexual services to a member of the **‘criminal elite’**

- The separation the **'outcast'** prisoners from the other inmates took place on physical and symbolic levels
- They were allotted the least comfortable places in the dormitory and canteen and prohibited from using any other areas under threat of punishment
- Their access to prison resources, including showers and medical care, was limited or excluded; they could only use what was left over from the other groups of inmates
- They were also forbidden to come into proximity with, let alone touch, other prisoners because of the risk that that person would become **'contaminated'**
- Denial of human contact is a **dehumanising practice** that reinforces the idea that certain people are inferior and not worthy of equal treatment and respect
- The resulting social isolation and marginalisation of the **'outcast'** applicants must have caused serious psychological consequences

- In **D. v. Latvia**, the Court also found that life in such a hostile environment often resulted in a continuous accumulation of stress, particularly for individuals subjected to inequity, and not solely from immediate or chronic threats. The mere anticipation of such threats could also cause enduring mental harm and anxiety of an intensity exceeding the level of stress caused by detention under normal conditions
- The case of **Ashlarba v. Georgia** relates to the criminalisation of membership of *the thieves' underworld* ('*vorovskoy mir*') in Georgia. In the judgment, the Court briefly presents the key functions of the *thief-in-law* ('*vor v zakone*')



THE WAGNER PHENOMENON

IMPORTATION
OF RUSSIAN
CRIMINAL
AND PRISON
SUBCULTURE



THE WAGNER PHENOMENON

- The issue of Russian criminal and prison subculture and its spread is by no means historical or criminological in nature
- Having shed the prefix '*sub*', Russian criminal and prison **culture** has become one of the most important instruments of the Russian neocolonial policy
- As it was many centuries ago, the Russian state is a mixture of colonialism, imperialism, and vast yet uninhabited territories conquered in past centuries as a result of brutal wars against the local population, followed by its destruction or assimilation
- The modern Russian Empire needs two things to survive: an **External Enemy** with a corresponding war against the Enemy, and a **total fear** within the country, combined with the isolation of the population from alternative sources of information, similar to the isolation of prisoners

THE WAGNER PHENOMENON

- The Russian prison system has proven to be **much more instrumental** than it was during Stalin's rule
- On the one hand, the prison system is necessary for intimidating its own population
- On the other hand, the prison system is a constant source of soldiers who, in terms of their status, are little different from slaves
- To create **slave soldiers**, an extremely repressive state apparatus of criminal justice is needed, which punishes citizens with imprisonment even for isolated pickets and peaceful protests, and reposts on social networks
- The criminal and prison subculture plays the role of the **social cement**, with its characteristic and established language, preserved for centuries



THE WAGNER PHENOMENON

1. The creation and successful existence of this *de facto* **military order**, which directly influences Russia's foreign and domestic policy
2. The involvement of this military order in the mass recruitment of Russian prisoners to participate in the war against Ukraine
3. Addational import of Russian criminal and prison subculture from the military order

THE WAGNER PHENOMENON



- Russia is the most radical example of a **prison state**, not because it has many prisons and prisoners, especially since the number of prisoners in Russia has decreased due to their mass mobilisation
- Russia is the most radical example of a **prison state** because the army and society function according to the informal prison law formed over the last five centuries

THE WAGNER PHENOMENON



- The 2023 rebellion of the Wagner Private Military Company is a modern-day uprising of Stepan Razin or Yemelyan Pugachev – an uprising against the authorities, but **not against** the tsar, and **with faith** in the tsar
- Unlike the large-scale Russian rebellions of past centuries, which were uprisings of relatively free people, the 2023 Wagner rebellion demonstrated that it was a rebellion by people who consciously live by the informal prison laws, which seem natural and comfortable to them



THE WAGNER PHENOMENON

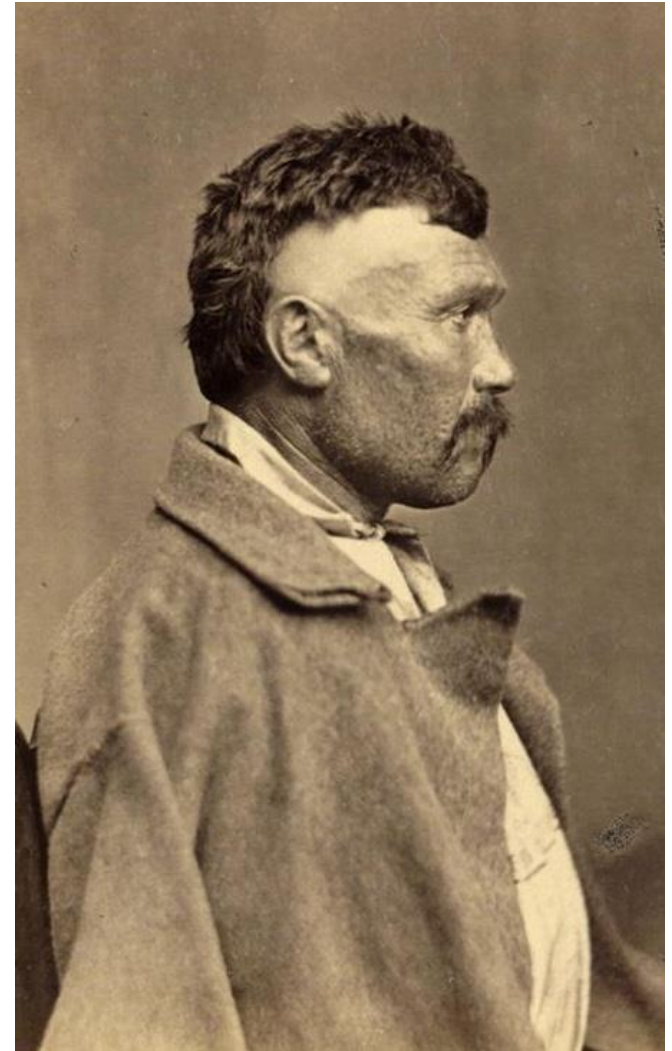
- The modern Russian **prison state** is not about the number of prisons, the number of prisoners, or the number of prison staff
- It is about **the Russian population's acceptance and internal perception** of the idea that **the state should be governed by informal prison norms**
- A minority plays the role of prison guards
- A second, sufficiently large group of citizens should be imprisoned
- The rest of the citizens are only **'temporarily and conditionally released'**

CONCLUSIONS

- The Russian criminal and prison subculture had developed within the Russian colonial policy starting from 16th century
- In the 17th century, the policy of **carceral colonization** changed dramatically: criminals, fugitives, rebels, and peasants rejected by their communities began to be exiled to Siberia
- Exile became more as a punitive measure, with the problems of settlement and development of the territories
- Exiles did not settle well in their new homes, did not engage in agriculture, and their presence only increased crime
- The presence of a large contingent of criminal elements effected negatively on the moral state of society as a whole

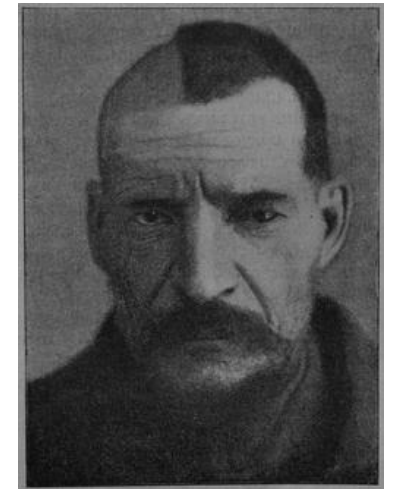
CONCLUSIONS

- By the early 1860s, the Russian criminal and prison subculture had finally developed in all prisons of the Russian Empire
- The prisoner community as an organised structure with self-government, its own primitive 'legislation', stratification, rudimentary governing bodies, and economic levers in the form of a common 'pot', served as a precursor to the emergence of organised crime in the Soviet period
- The Russian criminal and prison subculture remained almost unchanged until the beginning of the Soviet period, when it was transformed to meet the needs of Stalinist industrialisation



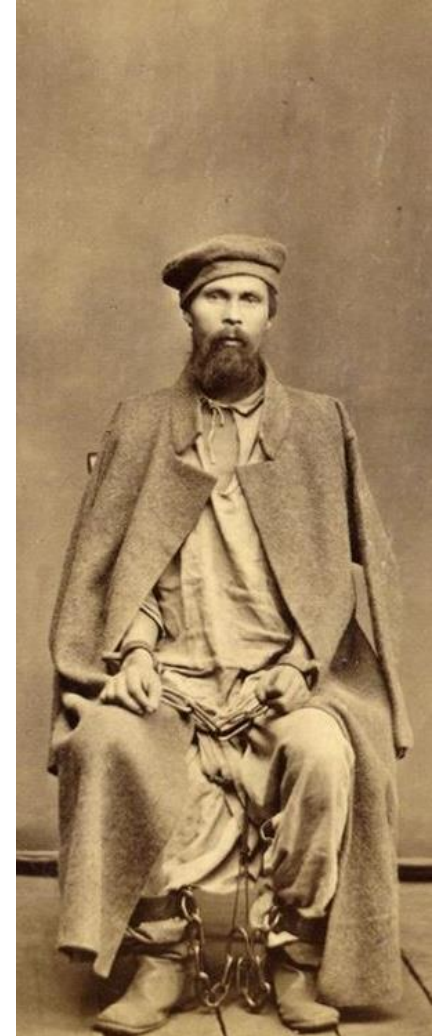
THE MODERN RUSSIAN CRIMINAL AND PRISON CULTURE IS BASED ON A MIX OF FACTORS THAT WERE NOT CHARACTERISTIC OF OTHER COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD:

- Huge geographical areas and distances
- The need to colonise new territories
- Harsh climatic and weather conditions
- The need to fill new territories with people who, under any other circumstances, would not have wanted to live there
- Lack of proper control over the new colonies and their populations by the central authorities
- Restricting the population of the colonies even in basic needs and, as a result, forcing a significant part of the population into begging
- Extreme cruelty of colonial and penal policies
- Introduction of self-control among prisoners and delegation of control functions to the leaders of prison hierarchies
- Mass and systematic escapes of prisoners
- Creation of new links between the criminal and non-criminal worlds and, as a result, the blurring of boundaries between the 'criminal' and 'non-criminal'



MODERN RUSSIAN CRIMINAL AND PRISON CULTURE IS BASED ON A WILD MIX OF FACTORS THAT WERE NOT CHARACTERISTIC OF OTHER COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD:

- Support for criminals by the local population, which in the past also belonged to the category of ‘convicts’, without the right or real possibility of returning to the metropolis
- Total corruption among prison staff
- Complete absence of social adaptation for ex-prisoners and the creation of conditions for their return to professional criminal activity
- Spread of criminal values and prison subculture among prison staff and other public servants
- Participation in organised criminal activity, acquisition of prison experience and accumulation of prison subculture by future leaders of Soviet Russia and later the Soviet Union, most of whom had been through tsarist katorga and exile





REPORT TO THE MOLDOVAN GOVERNMENT ON THE *AD HOC* VISIT CARRIED OUT BY THE CPT FROM 5 TO 13 DECEMBER 2022

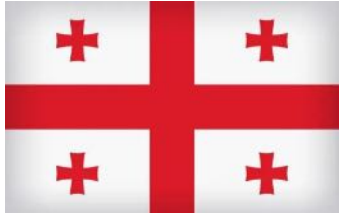


- There is a tacit acceptance of the informal hierarchy by prison staff and even tacit agreement between staff and informal prison leaders
- The informal prison leaders had a say in the initial ‘classification’ and placement in cells/dormitories of persons newly admitted to the prisons
- Informal prison leaders allegedly met newly admitted persons close to the admission area or in the quarantine cells

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- Informal prison leaders apparently also decided which persons held in prison were allowed to work
- Benefits earned by working prisoners, most notably the possibility of an early release, were recorded for the benefit of 'higher-ranking' prisoners
- There are striking differences in material conditions, in terms of state of repair and equipment, as well as the available living space, between informal prison leaders and their close circles on the one hand, and the general prison population, most notably those considered to be 'humiliated', on the other



‘THIEVES-IN-LAW’ IN GREECE

There are currently more than 100 ‘Thieves-In-Law’ in Greece, ‘each with their own territory of responsibility, each heading a “family” and having between 10 and 20 subordinates’

- **May 2010:** Russian thief-in-law died
- **April 2012:** A criminal boss from Kazakhstan was ‘crowned’
- **September 2017:** Three thieves-in-law sentenced
- **January 2020:** Thief-in-law was shot
- **May 2020:** Police operation against thieves-in-law in prisons
- **March 2021:** Thieves-in-law hold a secret gathering
- **July 2022:** Thief-in-law was arrested
- **April 2024:** Two thieves-in-law were arrested

ΣΑΣ ΕΥΧΑΡΙΣΤΩ

THANK YOU



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