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### From Villains to Victims: Experiencing Illness in Siberian Exile

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# From Villains to Victims: Experiencing Illness in Siberian Exile

SARAH BADCOCK

## *Abstract*

This essay presents the subjective experience of life and sickness for the punished in late Imperial Siberia, and the distinctions the punished made between legitimate and illegitimate forms of punishment. The essay also explores state policies towards the sick punished, and explores how different levels of the Tsarist administration and local Siberian society dealt with the challenge of sick and decrepit exiles. It argues that conditions in Siberian prisons were, in general, worse than those in European Russian prisons in the post-1906 period, and that the experience of exile in eastern Siberia placed it among the most difficult locations for exile. Though neither the state nor the punished regarded illness as an integral part of their punishment, the prevalence of illness and disease compounded the cruelty of sentences.

DID ILLNESS TURN VILLAINS INTO VICTIMS? SIBERIAN EXILES of every hue provide the villains of this piece. These individuals were punished for a broad spectrum of crimes, from mass murder, serial robbery and arson, to the distribution of political leaflets at a factory. Clearly, the term ‘villain’ is pejorative. For the purposes of this essay, though, these many hued exiles are united, not by their crimes, but by their punishment. This letter from a criminal prisoner written in 1910 epitomises the victimhood of villains:

Request. I humbly request that I, Komolov, 60 years old, as a result of weak health and illness am not fit for physical labour, so I do not have any means for living. In view of this I humbly appeal to you to authorise me [to be moved] from my place of settlement to Khatyn Yadrinsk almshouse (*bogadel’no*); I have a hope that my request will be satisfied. I submit my petition through the prison captain. This request has been written at my personal request by Andrei Chipachev.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay I try to present the subjective experience of life and sickness for the punished in late Imperial Siberia, and the distinctions the punished made between legitimate and

I would like to thank the British Academy for financing the archival research that made this essay possible, participants in the ‘Villains and Victims’ conference held at the University of Nottingham in April 2010, and the anonymous reviewers of this essay for their excellent suggestions.

<sup>1</sup>Letter to the Yakutsk governor from transfer prisoner Mikhail Komolov, 2 April 1910. See Natsionalnyi Arkhiv Respubliki Sakha (hereafter NARS), fond 12, Yakutskoe oblastnoe upravlenie, opis 2, delo 5279, line 21.

illegitimate forms of punishment. I also explore state policies towards the sick punished, and how different levels of the Tsarist administration and local Siberian society dealt with the challenge of sick and decrepit exiles. The chronological framework for this work is the last years of the Tsarist period, from 1900 to 1917, and the case studies are drawn from the regions of Yakutsk and Irkutsk in eastern Siberia. I start by providing an overview of Siberian exile, before going on to present a profile of the exile population, and an evaluation of the prevailing types of illness. I then go on to assess the environmental factors that influenced sickness and health for Siberian exiles. Treatment and care for the punished is assessed, looking particularly at a case study of the almshouse established in Yakutsk province. Finally, the experiences and treatment of voluntary followers is evaluated.

This essay refers throughout to 'the punished', in an attempt to encapsulate the grey areas between imprisonment and exile. The sentences and categories of individuals sent to eastern Siberian exile were very varied. One could be sentenced to exile, to prison followed by exile, or to *katorga* (hard labour) followed by exile, depending on the perceived severity of one's crime. All *katorga* prisoners were sent to exile on completion of their term. Some of the punished were not convicted at all, having been given their terms of exile administratively, without recourse to the courts. All those sent to exile, on whatever grounds, spent at least some time in prison, usually in transfer prisons *en route*. Though they cannot be included in the definition of the punished, the experiences of voluntary followers, who accompanied spouses and parents to Siberia, will be discussed in this essay. The state explicitly sought to minimise followers' sufferings, and recognised them as 'innocents'. Despite this, they shared all of the privations of exile with their partners or parents.

Political prisoners, that is, state criminals and those exiled administratively for political unreliability, are considered here alongside 'common' criminals. Studying the punished population more generally allows this study to explore the impact of and interactions between the native population and the punished population more effectively. The state, and prisoners themselves, were keen to distinguish those convicted of political crimes and those convicted of criminal offences. Their subjective experience of punishment, however, particularly after 1905 when there was a dramatic increase in the numbers of those punished for 'political offences', was often hard to distinguish, as crowded prisons and poor conditions in exile affected all prisoners, regardless of their category. The political prisoners are those about whom most is known, but the vast historiography they have generated tends to focus on the privileged political aristocracy. The predominantly young, lower class people, usually without private means, who made up the bulk of political prisoners in exile after 1905, have been largely neglected. Similarly, the criminal element has been almost entirely ignored in the historiography.

The source materials for this study include local government records and correspondence drawn from regional archives in eastern Siberia, memoirs, prison journals and prison inspectors' reports. We face some fundamental challenges in studying Siberian exiles in this period. The state did not 'know' its exile population. Official publications revealed startling uncertainty about the numbers and location of exiles and their followers. I found only fragmentary evidence on the medical treatment, illness and mortality rates of exiles, and significantly more information on sickness and treatment in prisons. The statistical information presented here is drawn mainly from prison inspectors' reports and the official, published statements of the Main Prison Administration. These statistical sources are problematic, as both could be charged with trying to present the state of the prisons in the

best possible light. The prison inspectors' reports do acknowledge multiple failings of the system, however, and stress the need for reform, which indicates that they did not present an entirely unrealistic representation of the prisons. Where statistics are utilised in this essay, they are used as indicators of what we might be able to infer about exile illness.

This essay intersects with three key historiographical fields. The first is related to the penal history of Russia. Whilst there have been some studies in recent years on the penal policies of the Tsarist state and their intentions in the use of Siberia, there has been relatively little work on the implementation of state policies, and the impact of state policies both on Siberian society and on individual convicts (Adams 1996; Geifman 1993; Gentes 2008, 2010). Adams concluded that Russia's penal system has been unfairly denigrated, and that conditions were rapidly improved and comparatively good in the late Imperial period (Adams 1996, pp. 9–11). While prison conditions undoubtedly improved in general, after 1906 prison conditions deteriorated significantly and worsening sanitary conditions due to increased prison numbers were widely acknowledged (Otchet 1911). This paper will argue that material conditions and support from the state were actually even worse for exiles than for those in prison. Abby Schrader's important work on corporal punishment focused on the process of reform, and on rhetorical representations of punishment up until 1867 (Schrader 2002). This essay, by focusing on the lived experiences of the punished, indicates that the policies of differentiation through punishment demonstrated by Schrader were not really visible in the treatment and care of the sick and infirm punished.

The second key area of historiography is work relating to sickness and healthcare in late Imperial Russia. Whilst there is a substantial and growing body of literature in this field, it has focused more on epidemiology, and on the experiences of healthcare workers as professionals, as activists and their relationship with the state (Hutchinson 1990; Solomon & Hutchinson 1990; Frieden 1992; Conroy 1994; Henze 2011). Adele Lindenmeyr's work on charity and welfare provision in late Imperial Russia focused on public welfare and private giving, and dealt only in passing with the recipients of this welfare (Lindenmeyr 1996). The third area of historiography is the relationship between the centre and the periphery in late Imperial Russia. This aspect taps into a rich and well developed historiography on centre–periphery relationships in late Imperial Russia (Starr 1972; Weeks 1996; Brower & Lazzerini 1997; Geraci 2001; Sunderland 2004; Remnev 2007; Evtuhov 2011). My focus on local experience indicates that, in accordance with this literature, there was a gulf between policy direction and proclamation at the centre, and its implementation in the regions.

### *Siberia and exile*

Siberia provided the most important location for internal exile in the Russian Empire. Though exile was formally abolished in 1900, in practice the courts and administration continued and in fact increased their use of exile in the Russian penal system, particularly after 1906. Exiles usually had their destinations specified by region (*oblast'*) or province (*guberniya*). Those considered likely to attempt escape, or who were considered to be a danger to the regional populations, were allocated to particularly remote locations. The regions focused on in this paper, Irkutsk and Yakutsk, were considered to represent the most stringent punishment available, except perhaps for the island of Sakhalin (Kazaryan 1999, p. 68). Irkutsk was an important penal location. It housed the Empire's largest *katonga* prison, Aleksandrovsk, and was an important exile destination for those perceived to be a

threat to the state. Yakutsk, on the other hand, had no *katorga* prison, and was an altogether more marginal destination for exiles. It received little attention from the centre, and figured as a destination for those criminals considered most dangerous by the state. Before 1905, Yakutsk was named as a place of settlement mainly for recidivists and *brodyagi* (vagabonds), and those considered at high risk of escape. After 1905, it became a notable destination for politically suspect individuals. The numbers sent were small, but were relatively large in comparison to the region's tiny population. Its status as one of the Empire's most remote locations allows us to focus on the relationship between the centre and the periphery, illuminating through often extreme examples the challenges of punishment in Siberia.

Supervision over exiles once they had been transported to their place of exile was of the most nominal sort. The main disincentive to escape was the expense and difficulty of extended travel, not state-imposed boundaries. The corollary to this lack of supervision from the state, however, was a corresponding lack of support. Administrative exiles were entitled to small stipends from the state, but exile settlers were not (Nikitina 1927, p. 21). Even those receiving means from the state did not receive enough to eke out daily life. Exile was a materially and often physically very demanding experience for those exiles without independent means, because of the difficulties of finding any sort of work in eastern Siberia. For the aged and infirm exile population, the absence of established community and family networks heightened the pains of old age and decrepitude.

For the state, the care of decrepit (*dryakhlyi*) prisoners and exiles presented something of a conundrum. The state sought to punish criminals, yet also to make use of their productive potential through forced labour and settlement in some of the harshest and most forbidding regions of the Empire. A significant proportion of the punished were, however, rendered unfit to look after even themselves, far less provide a cohort of settlers. The state was forced to expend time and resources providing care to the very individuals it punished. By the early twentieth century, a range of measures had been brought in to try and restrict the numbers of decrepit prisoners and exiles sent to eastern Siberia. Convicts had to be passed fit to come, and after 1904 those over 70 were excluded from *katorga* labour, and those over 60 excluded from exile in settlement (Gol'shukh 1910). These measures to exclude the elderly and infirm from Siberian exile were motivated by pragmatic, rather than humanitarian considerations (Schrader 2002, p. 185). These measures had limited success, since the travel to and conditions in eastern Siberian exile were themselves conducive to the creation of broken bodies.

### *Profiling the punished*

Before 1905, the punished sent to eastern Siberia were overwhelmingly individuals convicted of serious, usually violent crime. This changed significantly after the 1905 revolution, when the proportion of those sent for political activities increased substantially. Between 1882 and 1898, 148,032 people were sent to Siberian exile. Of these, only 4,794 (6%) were sent for political offences (Margolis 1995, p. 33). After 1905, however, the proportion of Siberian exiles sent for political offences increased dramatically to around a third of the annual Siberian exile intake. The social profile of political prisoners also changed significantly. Before 1905 political exiles were predominantly from the privileged classes, but afterwards, large numbers of urban workers, soldiers and sailors were sent to

eastern Siberia. In the period 1905–1908, 40% (6,411) of political exiles were workers, 24% (3,970) were peasants and 34% (5,502) were intelligentsia. Around 10% of the political exiles between 1905 and 1908 were women (Nikitina 1927, p. 16).

The profile of convictions for prisoners sent to Siberia in 1910 provides an overall snapshot of the types of crimes committed. More than 60% of the punished were exiled for serious violent crimes including murder, rape and aggravated robbery, and nearly a third were sent for political crimes of various kinds. The criminal convicts were overwhelmingly from the peasant class. Most were young. Of the 7,968 exiles sent to eastern Siberia in 1910, 64% were under 30 (Otchet 1912, p. 36). The profile for exiles overall was significantly older than for prisoners, as some served long or life terms of exile, or completed lengthy *katorga* sentences before going to exile. Of all exiles sent to Siberia between 1892 and 1898, less than 5% were women (Margolis 1995, p. 32). Of the 6,837 people in Irkutsk prisons in 1913, just over 2% (152) were women (Anon 1914, p. 17). The voluntary followers, however, were overwhelmingly women and children, and their numbers were significant. For the period 1892–1898, 81,043 people followed exiles to Siberia, including 24,584 women and 56,459 children (Margolis 1995, p. 32). Other sources estimate that around 10% of political exiles were accompanied by spouses and children into exile.

Mortality rates were high for the punished population. Anecdotal evidence indicates that prison conditions worsened dramatically after 1906 as a result of overcrowding and a hardening of the regime (Eikhgol'ts 1916; Krivorukov 1928, pp. 89–90). We have some statistical information for the punished in prisons, but there is no such information for those in exile. Using mortality rates in different types of prisons, and comparing them to an adjusted national mortality rate, one study showed that, while there were very significant improvements made in prison mortality from the 1880s to 1906, after 1906 mortality rates rocketed. Mortality rates were worse for *katorga* prisoners than for any other category of prison. This was partly a reflection of the longer terms that *katorga* prisoners usually served. Between 1906 and 1914, mortality rates in all prisons were between three and four times higher than mortality rates among the general population. In *katorga* prisons, mortality rates peaked at 67.4 per thousand in 1911 (Wheatcroft 2002, p. 41). To put this figure into context, mortality rates for men between the ages of 20 and 40 in the period 1908–1910 were 38.8 per thousand (Rashin 1956, Table 155). Mortality rates in Siberia during 1926 were 25.6 per thousand (Lorimer 1946, Table 30).

We can infer from prisons' high mortality rates that the punished experienced relatively high rates of sickness and disability. The proportions of prisoners fit to work confirm this picture of high levels of illness among prisoners. In Nerchinsk in 1896, only 42% of the 1,159 prisoners were medically fit to work, mainly because of poor food and conditions (Malinovskii 1900). This figure had not improved substantially by 1909, when 30% of the prisoners in the Nerchinsk complex were either too weak to work, or in the almshouse. Of a total of 3,767 prisoners, 1,133 were deemed weak and unfit to work, or actually resided in the almshouse, as unfit to care for themselves (Khrulev 1910, pp. 49–50). The rate of traffic through the outpatients section of Irkutsk *katorga* prison gives a further indication of the incidence of illness among prisoners. In 1908 alone, the prison outpatients section recorded a total of 53,138 outpatients and 945 inpatients. The average number of resident patients in the hospital on any day was 138, out of a total *katorga* population of 2,140 (Khrulev 1910, p. 13). Women prisoners were more likely to be ill than men. Among the prison population in 1908, it was reported that 7% of the male prison population were sick, compared to 11%



of the female prison population. This was accounted for by the incidence of ‘women’s conditions’, in particular, childbirth and illnesses arising from childbirth (Otchet 1910, p. 93).

What kinds of illness predominated amongst the punished? There is some patchy evidence on the types of illness prevalent among the punished in Siberia, but the absence of *zemstva* in Siberia means that there are little comparative data available for the free Siberian population. Figure 1 shows the incidence of illness among all Russian prisoners in 1914, and Figure 2 shows reported illness in Irkutsk prisons between 1905 and 1913. Figure 2 gives some clear indicators about the prevalence of different conditions, though the amalgamation of multiple conditions into the catch-all of ‘general infectious diseases’ limits the extent of our knowledge. Two-thirds of deaths came from this category (918 of 1,367 reported deaths), and around one-third of illnesses (10,262 of 29,070 reported illnesses). This category included deaths from epidemics including typhus, malaria and cholera. The most common illnesses, and those illnesses causing most deaths, were respiratory illnesses and gastro-intestinal illnesses (Anon 1914, pp. 17–27, 83–87). Despite some improvements to diet, scurvy continued to be a significant disease among prisoners, with around 5,000 cases annually in 1909 and 1910 (Otchet 1912, p. 82).

Tuberculosis was the main disease causing adult death among the town and village free population. There were 35,808 cases of TB in the general population of Russia in 1913 (Kaganovich 1952, pp. 64–65). Tuberculosis was also overwhelmingly the most prevalent

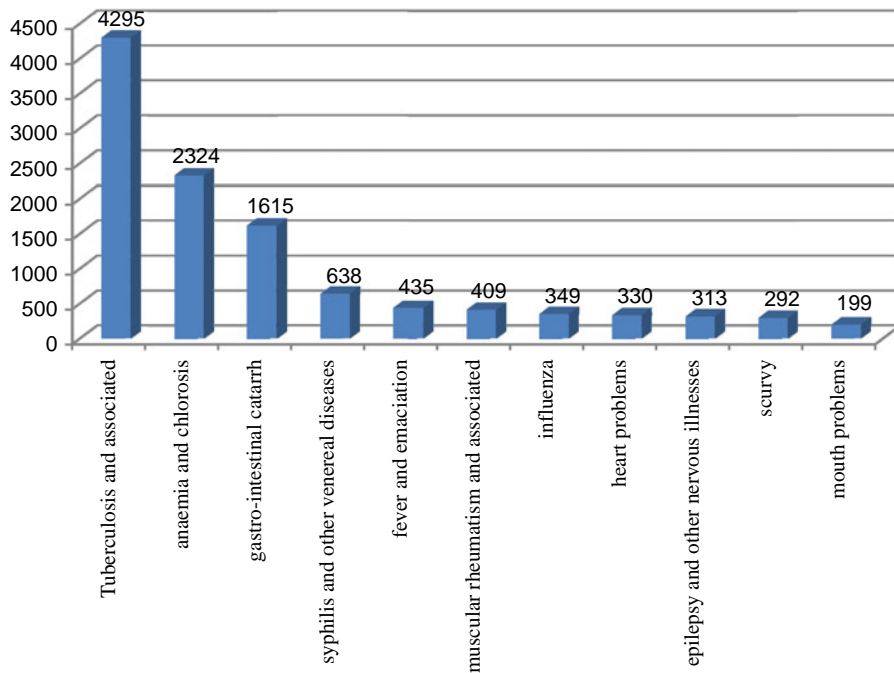


FIGURE 1. AVERAGE DAILY NUMBER OF PATIENTS IN RUSSIAN PRISONS IN 1914, BY ILLNESS.

Source: Data from Otchet (1912, p. 36).



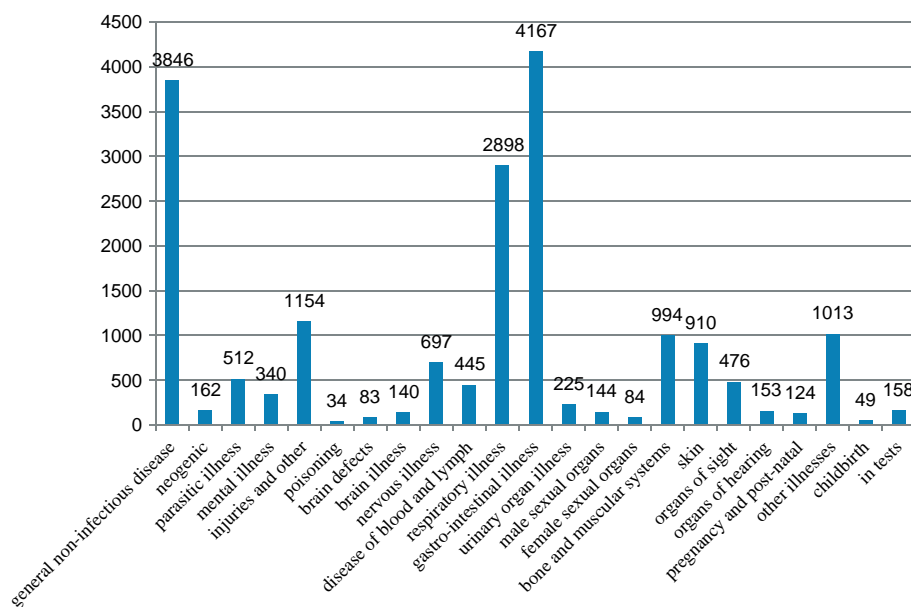


FIGURE 2. ILLNESS IN IRKUTSK PRISONS, 1905–1913, EXCLUDING GENERAL INFECTIOUS DISEASES.

Source: Data from Anon (1914).

condition in prisons, with an average of 4,000 patients daily in Russian prisons in 1914 (Otchet 1911, p. xiv). Tuberculosis was believed to be hereditary for much of the nineteenth century. We can infer that a substantial number of the deaths and illnesses reported in non-infectious diseases would have been accounted for by tuberculosis. A significant proportion of the illnesses listed in Figure 2 can be linked to prison conditions. Overcrowding, poor ventilation, weak nutrition and repeated prison transfers all facilitated the spread and development of tuberculosis, and other infectious diseases.<sup>2</sup> The prevalence of gastro-intestinal illnesses and respiratory illnesses both indicate that poor ventilation and weak nutrition were significant factors in prisoners' illness.

#### *Environmental factors influencing sickness and health*

There are a number of factors that explain high rates of illness among the punished. First, life in eastern Siberia was in itself detrimental to health for the whole population, whether free or punished. Data from the 1920s indicate that, in general, levels of health deteriorated as one moved across the Russian Empire from west to east, north and south-east, and levels of health tended to be worse in areas occupied by non-Russian nationalities (Lorimer 1946, p. 86). Irkutsk and Yakutsk accounted for some of the Russian Empire's most distant eastern and north-eastern outposts. Extreme cold, isolation, very limited medical facilities, dampness, a short growing season and tough fieldwork conditions provided serious

<sup>2</sup>For a comment on TB in prisons in a contemporary context, see 'Tuberculosis in Prisons' (World Health Organisation), available at: [www.who.int/tb/challenges/prisons/story\\_1/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/tb/challenges/prisons/story_1/en/index.html), accessed 9 July 2013.

challenges to maintaining a healthy body and mind. Whilst there was a severe shortage of medical personnel in prisons nationally (Gran 1913, pp. 13–14), Siberia as a whole suffered from a paucity of medical support (Zhukovskaya 2001, p. 212). The shortage of healthcare facilities was particularly acute in Yakutsk. By 1903 there were seven hospitals and 17 doctors serving the whole region. Each doctor's practice covered a massive territory of between 143,000 and 947,000 *versts*. There were periodic epidemics of smallpox, bronchial typhus, malaria and measles. Moreover, the shortage of doctors was accentuated by World War I as medical staff were mobilised for the war (Ivanov 2007, p. 314).

As well as these general factors that affected health in Siberia, a number of features particular to the exile community made them particularly susceptible to ill health. First, the process of travel to eastern Siberia was, in general, long, arduous and injurious to health. The reforms of transportation, particularly the use of the railroad instead of barges and long forced marches, had improved conditions significantly. The huge distances to be covered by barge, train, on foot, sledge and wagon still posed significant physical challenges to the punished. Because of the lack of other means of transport in much of Siberia, prisoner parties still went on foot, often for hundreds of miles, moving from one town to the next. This means of transport necessitated long periods of time set aside for journeys, and long periods in prisons along the way. A baggage train followed every party, carrying baggage, invalids, prisoners from the privileged classes, the sick, women with young children and children under the age of 12 (Otchet 1910, p. 132).

Conditions in the transit prisons and transfer buildings were notoriously vile. Poor quality food, exposure to vermin, infectious diseases, extreme cold, emotional dislocation and exceptionally unsanitary conditions in transit accommodation, all took their toll on even the hardiest of constitutions. A. Dobrokhotin-Baikov, a Social Democrat worker arrested in 1911 and exiled administratively for five years to Yakutsk, vividly recalled his journey from Moscow to Irkutsk:

We left from Butyrka prison (in Moscow) on a hot day in June, and in a 'protected' prisoners' wagon started for Siberia. After a long and distressing journey in sealed dirty wagons, with stops for several days in prisons of towns en route . . . we arrived in Irkutsk in the middle of August, where we were imprisoned in the regional prison. Sitting in the dirty, wooden, relatively large general barrack, together with criminal trash, was a nightmare. Filth, stench, the appalling swearing of the criminals—all this acted on us badly. After two weeks we were directed on foot, a party of 200, to Aleksandrovskaia central. The journey around the hills was an absolute Golgotha. Physically exhausted by sitting and bad food, several of us, me included, could not walk far and fell from incapacity. Rough handling and blows from the soldier convoy forced us up and moving again. And then again we fell, and again gun butts. Somehow we dragged ourselves forward. (Dobrokhotin-Baikov 1927, pp. 182–83)

An official report in 1909 noted drily that in general the transfer buildings were 'dilapidated, small, badly equipped, and conducive to escape'. There were no transfer buildings at all between many Siberian towns, so the punished slept either in the open air or under canvas (Otchet 1910, p. 131). Many of the exiles arrived at their point of settlement already in very poor health.<sup>3</sup> A significant proportion of new batches of exiles arriving in Yakutsk had to be

<sup>3</sup>For example, NARS, f. 12, op. 21, l. 119, p. 87: regarding the illness of part of the party of political exiles, which prevented them from continuing on their journey with the rest of the party, 1907.

sent to the ever-expanding almshouse, as they were not fit to work or even to care for themselves.<sup>4</sup>

The physical outcomes of *katorga* on the bodies of the punished provided another important factor explaining the high rate of illness among the punished in Siberia. Most of the punished sent to this region had a term of *katorga* included in their sentence. Apart from road and rail work, *katorga* labour was used in the gold and coal mines of the region. Numbers of *katorga* sentences increased dramatically after 1907, from 7,779 in 1907, to around 32,000 in 1912 (Gran 1913, p. 4). The steadily rising prison population after 1906 meant that prisons became increasingly overcrowded, and Siberian prisons were disproportionately affected. In 1909, there were 6,646 *katorga* prisoners in Siberia, split between Aleksandrovsk transfer and *katorga* prisons, Tobolsk and Nerchinsk (Otchet 1911, p. 39). By 1914 the number of *katorga* prisoners in Siberia had risen to 7,452, leaving Siberian *katorga* prisons 58% over capacity. In January 1914, for example, Aleksandrovsk central *katorga* prison had 1,975 inmates, but was meant to hold a maximum of 1,500 inmates. Nerchinsk was the most acutely crowded of all the prisons, with 3,560 inmates in a complex designed for 1,572 inmates. Of the 23 *katorga* prisons distributed around the Russian Empire in 1913, the vast majority had fewer inmates than they had places for. Moscow transfer prison and Orlovsk provisional *katorga* prison were the only oversubscribed prisons outside Siberia, and their level of overcrowding was much lower. The gross overcrowding indicates that conditions in Siberian *katorga* prisons were worse than elsewhere in the Empire (Otchet 1914, p. 32).

The sources are emphatic on the physical outcomes of *katorga*, particularly if it took place in the mines. The bodies of the punished were often irredeemably broken by these experiences. Ivan Ivanovich Kraft, the governor of Yakutsk, commented that: ‘Those who go into the gold mines are quickly turned from workers into invalids by the difficult working conditions and extremely adverse sanitary conditions. This is the reason that such a high proportion of exiles require charity and care. These places strain them to death’.<sup>5</sup> *Katorga* work was widely recognised to be inefficient and expensive, not least because *katorga* workers were ‘bad workers’ due to their poor health and lack of vigour. The exception to this was the use of *katorga* labour on the Amur, Transbaikal and Priamur railroads, especially after 1905, where *katorga* prisoners cherry-picked for health and reliability proved to be a cost-effective and efficient workforce. Prison and exile labour had been used to good effect in the earlier section of railway construction since 1891 (Borzunov 1965, p. 32). Indeed, prisoner labour on the Amur and Transbaikal railways was considered such a success that in 1914 suitable prisoners were transferred to Siberia from European *katorga* prisons for this work (Otchet 1916, p. 36). Exile *katorga* labour was most often employed in the hardest unskilled labour, like wood cutting, land clearance and rock breaking (Borzunov 1965, p. 35). The state asked the prison authorities to screen all workers carefully so that only the morally and physically fit were selected for work. Significant categories of the punished population were meant to be excluded from this work, including those convicted of serious, primarily political crimes.<sup>6</sup> In practice, these exclusions were not always maintained.

<sup>4</sup>NARS, f. 15, Yakutsk region police administration, op. 18, d. 191, ll. 313–14: list of exiles arriving in Yakutsk town in the party of 12 September 1909. There were 41 names, five to be sent straight to almshouse.

<sup>5</sup>Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Irkutskoi oblasti (hereafter GAIO), f. 25, op. 6, d. 3136, p. 11: report from Governor Kraft to the Irkutsk military governor, 18 June 1907.

<sup>6</sup>NARS, f. 12, op. 2, d. 5169, p. 1: circular from the Ministry of Justice to all *guberniya* commissars, 18 November 1910.

F. Drozhzhin, a political *katorga* prisoner, was sent to the Amur railroad construction site in 1907 in a party of 150. He recalled that the work was heavy manual labour, and that they often could not finish their assigned tasks. He described hellish working conditions, with intense heat, constant thirst, and a plague of blackflies day and night, alongside intensely crowded sleeping quarters. He was allocated to a convoy of ten men. They had to walk eight *verst*s to their work site. Because of a leg injury, Drozhzhin was unable to walk, so was carried by his convoy. He continued to work despite a problem with his hand. The medical assistant (*feldsher*) supervising the camp carried out two operations on his hand, but without success. Drozhzhin was no longer able to work because of the problem with his hand, so he stayed at the camp and did domestic work. He recalled that

there wasn't a single doctor for the whole section. The doctor came once a year to look over the workers. Each section was looked after by a *feldsher*. The *feldshers* split sick from healthy according to a high temperature, (though they never believed the first reading) ... many workers had bloody diarrhoea, but they were never exempted from work. (Drozhzhin 1921)

The authorities were inundated with requests from prisoners and exiles for permission to work on the railroads. This was because work on the railroad offered a one-third reduction in sentence. Also, for prisoners, any outdoor work was appealing, and for exiles work of any sort was extremely difficult to come by in eastern Siberia.<sup>7</sup> The numbers of exiles requesting permission to work on the Amur railroad were such that the Yakutsk governor Kraft asked the Irkutsk military governor to send a clarifying order stating that 'only those prisoners sent for general crimes and considered fit for hard work with excellent conduct will be sent'.<sup>8</sup> Many of those punished who applied for work on the railroads were turned down on the grounds of their weak health. A prison doctor in Shisselburg recalled the vetting process:

A large party of healthy prisoners was collected for sending to work on the Siberian, Amur and Transbaikalian railroads. The doctor must select only the healthiest, youngest and strongest element for this work. Those selected by a doctor are verified by a commission and sent to work on the roads, cutting wood ... the doctor must be very careful, in order that mistakes are not made. The thing is, the majority of prisoners are unacquainted with the difficult conditions of labour in Amur, but they try to get there in order to shorten their term [of punishment]. Thanks to this, those with pulmonary illnesses throw out their chests and take big breaths in order to hide their defects and try everything to hide their flaws. Even just as the inspection ends, those that are rejected make a request to the captain of the prison to be looked over again, and if the doctor refuses their request, the prisoner regards this as a great injury. (Eikhgol'ts 1916, pp. 64–65)

Finally, high levels of illness and mortality among the punished cannot be explained solely by the physical challenges of life in Siberia, travel to exile and conditions of *katorga* labour. A prison doctor noted that despite sanitary improvements, despite the absence of alcohol and venereal risks, and despite prison conditions that in some cases were 'significantly better than in the ordinary life of a proletarian', prison mortality rates were significantly higher than among the free population (Eikhgol'ts 1916, p. 103). The

<sup>7</sup>NARS, f. 12, op. 2, d. 5169, pp. 4–6: lists of those sent for medical inspection from Yakutsk prison for work on the Amur railroad, January 1911; pp. 24–63: further requests from exiles to work on Amur railroad, and medical reports.

<sup>8</sup>NARS, f. 12, op. 2, d. 5169, p. 67: letter from Governor Kraft to the Irkutsk military governor, undated.

psychological impact of social dislocation and the loss of free will are impossible to quantify but certainly significant. For longer term exiles, facing old age apart from extended family and community networks that might have provided support accentuated the pains of ageing.

*Treatment and care of the punished*

This survey of causes for illness shows that much of the ill health suffered by the punished was a direct result of the conditions of their punishment. The state sought to punish criminals, and to make economic use of their labour in a region that was short of working hands. The state also recognised a duty of care to those made ill by their punishment. Siberia's small but lively civil society and a reluctant native population also played a role in ministering to the needy. The poor conditions facing the punished in Siberia were not so exceptional in their Russian context. Despite some attempts at reform, a comprehensive poor relief system failed to develop in Russia, and there was a heavy reliance on private charitable organisations, and on individuals' almsgiving in Russian poor relief. The Russian Imperial government recognised as late as 1911 that public poor relief was inadequate, chaotic and obsolete (Lindenmeyr 1996, p. 95). Poor relief across Russia for the free population was patchy, and conditions in almshouses were routinely dismal (Henze 2011, p. 121).

The influx of sick prisoners and exiles into eastern Siberia placed significant further pressure on local resources. Provision of care for the sick was more forthcoming for prisoners than for exiles. The larger prisons had their own hospital wings. Aleksandrovskaia prison hospital had a dedicated tuberculosis section, which was meant to be a destination for all tuberculosis-afflicted prisoners in the region (Gran 1913, pp. 13–14). Exiles did not have access to these prison hospitals. For prisons without dedicated sick beds, as in Yakutsk, the town hospital was used for the treatment of both prisoners and exiles. The records of Yakutsk town civilian hospital give some indication of the burden placed on the town's hospital. In 1909, a broadly representative year, every month there were between 14 and 30 exiles resident in the civilian hospital, staying for a total of 4,364 days over the course of the year.<sup>9</sup> Some of these criminal patients presented a risk to the other patients, and required special supervision. In October 1909, the Yakutsk governor had to request a military guard for the hospital to oversee two criminals being treated in the psychiatric section.<sup>10</sup> In March 1910, the prisoner Petr Terentev Alekseev, being treated in the psychiatric section, was judged to be so dangerous that he was to be placed in a specially adapted building, as he presented a danger to the safety of those around him.<sup>11</sup> Prisoners who were chronically sick and decrepit remained in prison alongside healthy prisoners, increasing the pressure on beds for the acutely sick. Some chronically sick patients in prisons or hospitals had actually finished their terms, but remained in prison as there was nowhere else for them to go. Five of the Yakutsk hospital patients were long term residents, and two had been admitted in 1884.<sup>12</sup>

There was a gulf between the principles laid out in the state's proclamations, and practice on the ground. The prison report for 1909 noted that former *katorga* prisoners in exile who

<sup>9</sup>NARS, f. 12, op. 6, d. 2914, ll. 2–67, figures for 1909. See also NARS, f. 12, op. 12, d. 881, ll. 2–3, for figures on 1908.

<sup>10</sup>NARS, f. 12, op. 2, d. 4693, l. 147. See also NARS, f. 12, op. 2, d. 4820, ll. 2–3, 6–7; NARS, f. 12, op. 2, d. 8077, l. 38.

<sup>11</sup>NARS, f. 12, op. 2, d. 4693, l. 274.

<sup>12</sup>NARS, f. 12, op. 6, d. 2914, l. 63.

were decrepit or unfit were to be taken into an almshouse (*bogadel'no*) or other similar institution, where they would be maintained from capital earmarked for exiles. After ten years, or in some cases six years, of being categorised as exiles the settlers were to be transferred to the peasant estate, with permission to join peasant or townsmen communities in Siberia, subject to the community's invitation (Otchet 1910, p. 32). In practice, sick and decrepit exiles were often left to fend for themselves as a result of inadequate provision of almshouses, and the lack of incentive for village communities to take on decrepit exiles. While the State Treasury was committed to paying for one Siberian almshouse, in practice there was no official almshouse in Irkutsk until 1909. The care of invalid exiles was left largely to the village communities that harboured them. It was rare for invalid exiles to reach the town hospitals where they were meant to be cared for, because of the expense and difficulties of travel. Some communes allocated a small sum for the maintenance of decrepit exiles, and others set up unofficial almshouses, using bath-house buildings in the summer and fire-fighters' depots in the winter. These facilities were rudimentary, and were notorious for their high death rates (Gol'shukh 1910, p. 1601). This exile's letter gives a sense of the hopeless position decrepit exiles were left in:

To the inspector of Irkutsk *guberniya* prison, from *katorzhan* Peter Rybalkin. REQUEST. I am due to finish my term on 22 February 1904, and from there I will be sent to one *volost'* or another. I am old, 66 years old, and furthermore from illness I always lie in the prison hospital. And so when I am freed, I cannot walk and cannot work, and I must be put in a country far from my homeland, not known to me. In view of this I humbly ask if you can find a possibility to place me in an almshouse, where I can live part of my life, not subject to hunger and cold, I ask you like my father not to refuse the request of an old man. 15 January 1904.<sup>13</sup>

For men like Rybalkin, the exile that faced him at the end of his hard labour term seemed to be a fate beyond endurance. While in prison, though he may have experienced difficult conditions, he was at least provided with a place to sleep and food to eat. In exile, he was vulnerable and exposed. Lindenmeyr notes that the sparseness of almshouses in European Russia reflected the role of family in caring for the decrepit, and that the needy did not congregate in ways that shocked 'respectable citizens' (Lindenmeyr 1996, p. 67). The network of family and community support was absent for exiles, and the presence of large numbers of decrepit and disabled exiles in urban centres attracted attention from the state and from local residents.

Regional governors in Irkutsk and Yakutsk were emphatic about the need for almshouses to service decrepit prisoners and exiles, but struggled to obtain financial support and approval from central authorities. In 1903 Irkutsk's regional administration proposed the building of six village almshouses for exiles, with places for up to 215 residents, but the scheme was not approved. The Minister of Justice wrote in 1907 to the Irkutsk military governor proposing a number of reforms to Siberia's prison systems, including the establishment of almshouses for the decrepit.<sup>14</sup> Many of his proposals were briskly rebuffed by Irkutsk's military governor, but on the question of almshouses, all seemed agreed that

<sup>13</sup>GAIO, f. 32, op. 5, d. 8644, l. 43, 1904. This letter was written in a neat hand by a scribe, signed in a very wobbly hand by Rybalkin himself. On p. 45 of the same file, an official note confirmed that Rybalkin had done six years of *katorga* work, and that he was now ill and not fit for work.

<sup>14</sup>GAIO, f. 25, op. 6, d. 3104, l. 1: letter from the Ministry of Justice to the Irkutsk military governor, 10 November 1907.



these were urgently needed.<sup>15</sup> Eventually the Main Prison Administration agreed to build an almshouse in Irkutsk, though it specified that places would only be available to *katorga* prisoners unfit to work. The almshouse was opened in the village of Tel'min, using the buildings of a disused stage post, and received its first residents in February 1910. By September 1910 it had 85 residents. While this facility took pressure off the prison hospital by removing the chronically infirm, it did nothing to resolve the problem of care in the community. By 1913, it had between 30 and 40 residents, indicating that its role in taking pressure off the prison hospitals and the community was extremely limited (Anon 1914, p. 22). Reading between the lines here, we see a struggle between the regional administration, which sought to open almshouses for decrepit exiles in order to take pressure off the local population, and the national administration, which was unwilling to provide funds for such ventures.

The establishment and history of the Yakutsk almshouse confirms this reading of a tussle between regional administrators and the centre. Ivan Ivanovich Kraft was appointed the new governor of Yakutsk province in 1907. He set about his new post with gusto, making a survey of conditions in the region, and identifying possible problems. He regarded the plight of unfit exiles as one of the primary burdens on the region. In a telegram to his immediate senior, the Irkutsk military governor, received on 6 April 1907, Kraft wrote in his characteristically forthright manner:

By journeying around the *oblast* I personally saw that the decrepit and maimed criminal exiles based in the villages of Yakutsk nomads place a heavy burden on the local population who have to support them in turn; exiles move from house to house, from *yurt* to *yurt*; the three rouble payment provided for them is not sufficient in local conditions for those exiles needing an almshouse, I personally established that there around 100 [exiles in need of an almshouse place], but the current almshouse cannot accommodate more than 15 people; it is impossible to further burden the local population; it is unlawful as the responsibility to give means to exiles lies with the state, in agreement with statute 373. I find it necessary from 1 May 1907 to broaden the current almshouse to 100 places.<sup>16</sup>

Kraft's statement was beyond his jurisdiction, and demarcated the boundaries of his power and authority. Both the military governor of Irkutsk and the Ministry of Justice chastised him for his direct action, and refused to authorise the funds that he had peremptorily requested.<sup>17</sup> Despite these teething problems, the almshouse he proposed was established. A former *skoptsy* village, Khatyn-Yadrinsk, was bought on 25 April 1907.<sup>18</sup> Preparations were made quickly, and the almshouse was opened on 15 May 1907, with all residents moved from Yakutsk by steamer on 25 May.<sup>19</sup> In its first year, from 1 June 1907 to January 1908, it had 65 residents, which was full capacity. Numbers quickly expanded, however, with 93 residents by September 1908, and 101 by October 1908.<sup>20</sup> There was no

<sup>15</sup>See GAIO, f. 25, op. 6, d. 3104, ll. 35–39 for full details of the Irkutsk military governor's response; but pp. 10–12 sees the Irkutsk prison inspector emphatic on the need to build an almshouse.

<sup>16</sup>GAIO, f. 25, op. 6, d. 3136, pp. 4–5: telegram from the Yakutsk governor Kraft to the Irkutsk military governor.

<sup>17</sup>GAIO, f. 25, op. 6, d. 3136, pp. 25–26: letter of support from the Irkutsk governor to the Ministry of Justice regarding Kraft's plan; pp. 27–28: Kraft's letter to the Ministry of Justice and the Irkutsk military governor requesting funds, and their replies refusing funds.

<sup>18</sup>NARS, f. 15, op. 8, d. 41, l. 1.

<sup>19</sup>NARS, f. 15, op. 8, d. 41, l. 17.

<sup>20</sup>NARS, f. 206, op. 1, d. 563, ll. 1–2: information on the question of the transfer to Yakutsk guardians' prison committee on the management of Yakutsk settlers' almshouse.



accommodation for these extra residents, and the almshouse administration requested in September 1908 that no further residents be sent until the means for a new building had been secured.<sup>21</sup> The almshouse's existence did not ultimately resolve the problem of care for sick exiles. Numbers continued to escalate so that by 1911 the almshouse was severely overpopulated, with 133 residents, and conditions there deteriorated accordingly.<sup>22</sup> By 1915, the building had 'fallen into decay and almost unusable condition'.<sup>23</sup> While the problem of sick and disabled exiles had been removed from Yakutsk town, the almshouse did not resolve the burden, but rather shifted it. The peasants of the commune of Khatyn-Yadrinsk petitioned bitterly that the almshouse be moved away from their region, as the carelessness of its residents had led to a succession of very destructive fires breaking out.<sup>24</sup>

What human flotsam drifted up in these almshouses, which represented the last shores of exile? I have surveyed a number of the personal files of those convicts who ended their terms in Khatyn-Yadrinsk. These case studies offer us small insights into the lives of these men and their families. Many were older men, and most were recidivists whose original sentences had been increased exponentially by their repeated attempts to escape from Siberia. Abram Pinson's records give some indication of the path to the almshouse for convicts. A member of the townspeople (*meshchanstvo*) class in Vitebsk town, he was exiled without rights to a village in Verkhoholensk. He escaped from exile and ran to Vyatka in 1895, where he was sentenced for his escape from Siberia to 40 lashes and three years of *katorga* work. He was considered fit to work at the time of this sentence. He left his family behind in European Russia. Pinson's *katorga* term ended in June 1896, and he was sent to Aleksandrovsk in October 1896. He benefitted from the amnesty of 1894, and had his term reduced by a third. He received his 40 lashes on 28 December 1896. A persistent escapee, he was punished with a further 30 lashes in 1898, and another nine months of *katorga* work, for failing to go to his place of settlement in Yakutsk. From *katorga*, he was sent to Vilyuisk, one of Yakutsk's remoter regions, and from there he was settled in the almshouse.<sup>25</sup> Three years of bodily punishment, by the lash and by work, had clearly broken Pinson's body, and made him an invalid, and a financial burden on the region.

Another persistent escapee who ended up in the almshouse was Iskender, known as Mashadi. He was described as an illiterate Muslim Tatar peasant, who spoke no Russian. He was swarthy and strongly built, his face pockmarked and his black beard slashed with streaks of grey. His 25-year-old wife and their three small children did not follow him to Yakutsk, but remained behind in Elisavetpol'sk *guberniya*.<sup>26</sup> He arrived at the almshouse manacled and unable to walk. His initial crime had been in 1906, but his repeated attempts to escape condemned him to *katorga*, and settlement in Yakutsk region. Another case is that of Boris Ivanov Klimov, who arrived in the almshouse manacled but able to walk, and was slated for special observation. He was a literate peasant from Saratov, born in 1875, so was

<sup>21</sup>NARS, f. 206, op. 1, d. 604, l. 1: letter from Katyn Yadrinsk almshouse to the prison committee, 28 September 1908.

<sup>22</sup>GAIO, f. 25, op. 6, d. 3136, l. 71: letter from the Yakutsk governor to the Irkutsk military governor, 7 December 1911.

<sup>23</sup>GAIO, f. 25, op. 6, d. 3136, l. 73: letter from the Yakutsk governor to the Irkutsk military governor, 23 September 1915.

<sup>24</sup>NARS, f. 206, op. 1, d. 604, l. 4.

<sup>25</sup>NARS, f. 15, op. 10, d. 2445: this *delo* is about the settling of exile-settlers in Khatyn-Yadrinsk settlers' almshouse, 1913, ll. 35–36.

<sup>26</sup>NARS, f. 15, op. 10, d. 2445, ll. 70–71.

only 36 when he entered the almshouse. His wife and four small children were left behind in Saratov. He was first sentenced in 1905 and sentenced to four years of *katorga* work, but escaped in 1907, and was re-apprehended in 1910. He was then sentenced to a term of solitary confinement followed by a further six years of *katorga* work. He arrived in Yakutsk in 1913, and was transferred to the almshouse soon after.<sup>27</sup> The final case is that of Innokenty Sinitsyn, who was sentenced to a year of imprisonment in 1895 for a robbery in Irkutsk, and to the loss of all rights and property. When he completed his term of punishment, his village commune issued a declaration that they would not accept him back into their midst, which meant that instead of going home, he was sent to Yakutsk province to settle in 1897, along with his wife, Aleksandra, and his four young children. He suffered severe frostbite on both hands in 1905. In 1912, when he was only 45 years old, he was committed to the almshouse, unfit for any sort of physical work.<sup>28</sup>

These cases offer insights into the lives of these men on the margins of Tsarist society, and offer examples of the interactions between the state and the 'broken punished'. The punishments of these broken men went beyond their intended bounds as their physical health deteriorated. Their infirmities were apparently direct results of their punishment, through work, corporal punishment or frostbite incurred in Siberia's harsh climate. We have first-hand accounts of the attitudes of the punished towards their own health, in the form of their appeals to the region's governors. The petitions to regional authorities made by the punished often requested permission to reside in urban centres for health reasons.<sup>29</sup> Deafness, respiratory illnesses and tooth problems, among other things, were complained of by exiles. Illness was used to request what was, in effect, a mitigation of sentence. Settlement of exiles in non-urban areas was one of the explicit terms of most punishments. This indicates that the punished did not regard illness as an intrinsic part of their punishment, but rather as an additional and unrelated aspect of their being, which justified their requests for more lenient treatment. The punished regarded the suffering of their bodies as something which needed to be resolved, even if they accepted their punishment of exile for their crime. Overall, the impression gleaned from these accounts is that the punished regarded their illness as distinct, and not part of their punishment. They held up their illness as cause for leniency and special treatment from the authorities. For example, Andrei Donskoi, writing to the Yakutsk governor, Ivan Ivanovich Kraft, in 1910, complained that the conditions in transit to exile had ruined his health, and that this necessitated a milder location for his final point of exile. He suffered from chronic rheumatoid arthritis, but contracted scurvy in Aleksandrovsk because of the bad food. His letter emphasised the outrage and injustice done to his body, and even demanded that an investigation be made into the cause of his illness.<sup>30</sup>

Other prisoners appealed for support from the state, or for a change in their named place of residence, because of their state of health. Nikolai Perfilev wrote two letters to the governor in September 1908, one on his own behalf, and one for a cell mate, Nikon Tsytzarev. His formulations stressed their desire to avoid the almshouse, and an awareness of the redemptive power of labour:

<sup>27</sup>NARS, f. 15, op. 10, d. 2445, ll. 73–74.

<sup>28</sup>NARS, f. 15, op. 10, d. 2445, ll. 13–15.

<sup>29</sup>GAIO, f. 25, op. 6, d. 5385, karton 624: exiles' petitions for permission to leave their named places of residence and other matters, in 1912.

<sup>30</sup>NARS, f. 12, op. 2, d. 5135, l. 75: letter from Andrei Donskoi to the Yakutsk governor, 30 May 1910.

To Yakutsk governor, from exile settler currently in Yakutsk prison cell, Nikolai Perfilev. Request. Your highness, please be so good as to not refuse the humble request of this unfortunate exile, sent to such a distant and harsh region, without any means for existence, with weak and impaired health, weakened by the efforts of *katorga* labour. My term of hard labour ended ten months ago, at last the Zabaikal administration gave permission for me to be sent to settlement in Yakutsk *oblast'*, where I was sent from Algachinskii mines, Nerchinsk *katorga* in the beginning of May, and arrived in Yakutsk only on the fifth of September. The harsh northern winter is beginning, so they say, and I am left absolutely without means for existence. I don't know when or where I will be sent to settlement. Work is ending, and will be off for the whole winter, and I am excluded from the possibility of wages, however only in entering into work as a peasant [line illegible] there will be no harvest. As a result of all this I ask you to name for me a monthly or even one-off sum of means, and to name my place of residence. I do not want to be confined to an almshouse, but want to take a path of honourable labour for the satisfaction of my means of existence. Signed exile-settler Nikolai Perfilev, 19 September 1908.<sup>31</sup>

Perfilev's request indicates that he accepted his punishment *per se*, but sought to ameliorate its impact by appealing on the grounds of his health. Both this letter and the one he wrote for his fellow prisoner Tsytaev stressed the men's willingness to work and be productive, a common trope. They also emphasised that their health impeded their ability to settle successfully. We need to ask if these letters, and others like them, really reflected the men's thoughts and feelings, or if they were formulaic presentations of grievances, that used accepted modes of language and complaint in order to try and appeal for leniency (Verner 1995; Pyle 1997). Based on the examples I have seen, convict petitions were often extremely specific in their nature, and while they utilised some formulaic language, overall they expressed very real concerns.

#### *Voluntary followers*

For those exiles who had family with them in exile, the ill health of their spouses and children lent additional resonance to their punishment. When an exile was accompanied by his family, the family unit experienced the conditions of punishment, and contributed to the scale and impact of the punishment for the convict. A significant minority of the punished were accompanied by their family; between 1,000 and 2,000 'followers' were recorded annually for prisoners and exiles between 1900 and 1912. This figure excludes the significant numbers of individuals exiled on administrative grounds. The Tsarist authorities sought to ameliorate the suffering of these innocents; the exiles' punishment was not intended to encapsulate their families as well. The letters, appeals and requests of the punished to the authorities show that this emphasis on the unjust suffering of the family was a common theme in convict complaints. These requests focusing on amelioration of suffering for exile families were often received kindly by the authorities. Yankel Sokolov, a Jew exiled to Vilyuisk in July 1903, petitioned the governor for a postponement of his journey to Vilyuisk, because his wife and two small children would be unable to endure the arduous journey on horseback. This petition was granted, and it was decided that his departure should coincide with the opening of a sledge track to Vilyuisk, specifically because 'he is a family man, with a wife and two small children'.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup>NARS, f. 15, op. 18, d. 191, l. 176.

<sup>32</sup>NARS, f. 12, op. 2, d. 1972, l. 45, and response from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, l. 48.

The case of Aleksandr Novgitskii provides a further illustration of the authorities' willingness to take families into consideration. Novgitskii had been living as an exile in Kansk *uezd*, Zabaikal region, since 1909, along with his wife and children. He had appealed repeatedly to the governor of Eniseisk for permission to live in one of the urban centres of the region, as his wife was ill and he was unable to find suitable work outside urban areas. He was moved to appeal to the Irkutsk military governor, who oversaw the whole Siberian region. Novgitskii's letter articulated the importance of his family's plight in his unfortunate situation:

I do not know of any motives for my refusal, if in the course of all my years of exile I had in any way broken any of the laws governing exile, but I have not. Can the governor not see my hungry family? This is not stated in laws about exile, or even in any circulars. So, what is there left for me to do? I only know that for a long time I haven't been able to feed my hungry family. This summer I lost one of my children, as I could not provide either medicine or good food. So now I appeal to you to permit me to transfer either to Kansk or to Achinsk.<sup>33</sup>

Novgitskii clearly regarded the sickness and death of one of his children to be a direct consequence of his punishment, and his language here points up the injustice of this unreasonable punishment. He was willing to serve out his sentence, but argued that the punishment wreaked upon his family was disproportionate. Irkutsk's military governor agreed with him. He chastised the Eniseisk military governor on Novgitskii's case, pointing out in particular that exiles living peacefully, and with families to support, ought to be allowed opportunities to work and to support their families.<sup>34</sup>

Lia Gershevoi Eshtovich, an exile's wife, appealed to Irkutsk's military governor in 1912 that her husband be allowed to return from Turukhanskii *krai*, where he had been sent on suspicion of plans to escape. The language and justification that Lia Gershevoi used in her petition confirms the prevalence of the family narrative appeals about exile conditions:

... After the birth of our child, we were given permission in December 1912 to go to Mina village. My husband had work there, and sufficient wages to feed the three of us. But in February he was suddenly sent to Gaivkin village, Vybrinsk *volost'*, and from there over the course of a few days was sent to Turukhanskyi *krai*, where he is currently. I, with a baby in arms, and poorly too, remain almost without any means for existence. I could have petitioned the Eniseisk governor for permission to join my husband in Turukhanskii *krai*, but I could not take such a measure. Though I could go myself, I could not decide to take my sick child there, where the climate is harsh, there are no medical points, and there is no paid work for my husband. It would kill him [the child]. I hope that you will investigate this, and it will be confirmed that there was a misunderstanding, as my husband never prepared to escape. And once again, I hope that you will permit him to return to his family.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps the most conspicuous group of family followers were those who accompanied the men imprisoned in Aleksandrovsk *katorga* and transfer prisons. The families who had

<sup>33</sup>GAIO, f. 25, op. 6, d. 3585, p. 26: letter from Aleksandr Novgitskii to the Irkutsk military governor, 19 November 1912.

<sup>34</sup>GAIO, f. 25, op. 6, d. 5385, p. 31: letter from the Irkutsk military governor to the Eniseisk governor, undated.

<sup>35</sup>GAIO, f. 25, op. 6, d. 5385, p. 71: letter to the Irkutsk military governor from Lia Gershevoi Eshtovich, undated.

accompanied the punished into Siberian exile, and had no means to support themselves, were settled in Aleksandrovskaia village, about a *verst* from the prison itself. In October 1907 there were 249 women and children accommodated in the family barracks. The conditions in these buildings were horrible, and spoke volumes for the suffering of those associated with the punished. The barracks were extremely overcrowded and filthy, with a mass of parasites swarming the un-plastered walls, and children's faeces in the corners. The nearby village, Aleksandrovskaia, was small and poor and offered few opportunities for honourable paid work in the summer and absolutely nothing in the winter. The families were provided with food from the prisoners' rations, in half quantities to that given to prisoners (Otchet 1910, p. 31). The Main Prison Administration's report in 1909 noted that conditions for the families there were extremely poor (Khrulev 1910). In this context, it is hardly surprising that these women turned to prostitution, a moral concern that loomed large for the authorities and Siberian society alike:

... The situation for many of them [*katorga* wives], in particular those burdened with little children, is desperate. Singly, these women sometimes leave for work in Irkutsk town or in Usol'skoe village, in the match factory, or they earn a living by depravity. (Savitskii 1908, pp. 88–90)

Prison inspectors' reports repeatedly dwelled on the grim conditions for these families. In Nerchinsk *katorga* prison, the accompanying families that did not have private means were housed in buildings alongside the prison's outside barracks. It was noted in 1907 that the families, who were overwhelmingly women and children, were extremely impoverished, and that the majority of women 'under the influence of their needs, engaged in prostitution'.<sup>36</sup> Another official report in 1908 again stated that prisoners' families in both Nerchinsk and Aleksandrovskaia lived in great need, because of the lack of paid employment for them in the region (Otchet 1910, p. 31).

The suffering of innocents actively engaged both the state and local society in attempts to relieve conditions for the punished. The state issued a circular in 1906 clarifying that prisoners' children should be fed at the expense of the state.<sup>37</sup> An orphanage was established in Moscow in 1908 for the children of Siberian exiles.<sup>38</sup> Individual governors demonstrated human sympathy, in some cases, for the suffering families, and tried, again in certain cases, to limit their suffering. There is evidence of societal concern for the plight of the women and particularly the children subjected to such fates. As well as the state-sponsored prison committees, which were committed to the welfare of the 'followers', various charitable associations were formed by eastern Siberia's tiny civil society, forming orphanages and schools for the children of the punished.<sup>39</sup> A school for prisoners' children was founded in Aleksandrovskaia, which in 1909 had 121 students, paid for by the Ministry for People's Enlightenment. In winter, many of the children could not come because they did not have warm clothes and shoes. In Irkutsk in 1908 and 1909, fundraisers were held to build a maternity unit, which was housed in the prison building, along with a chemist and outpatient unit. The maternity unit was overseen by the prison doctor, and it oversaw 28 births in the

<sup>36</sup>Excerpt from Report of Main Prison Administration for 1907', *Tyuremnyi vestnik*, 8–9 (1909), pp. 839–61 at p. 859.

<sup>37</sup>Circular Regarding the Feeding of Prisoners' Children', *Tyuremnyi vestnik*, (1906), p. 121.

<sup>38</sup>Prizrenie detei ssyl'nykh v Moskve', *Tyuremnyi vestnik*, (1908), pp. 181–83.

<sup>39</sup>Reference to NARS, f. 15, op. 8, dd. 86, 87; NARS, f. 206, op. 1, d. 502; NARS, f. 505, op. 1, d. 18: material on local society's fundraising efforts for an orphanage for prisoners' children in Yakutsk.

course of 1908–1909, 24 of which were prisoners' wives. It was proudly reported that there were no fatalities, and no post-puerperal illnesses (Khrulev 1910, p. 43). Yakutsk town saw lively fundraising activities for the needs of the children of prisoners and exiles.<sup>40</sup> We can note here an overlap between the treatment of these innocent women and children, and their punished spouses. Though their plight attracted sympathy and financial support from regional authorities and local society, they were housed in buildings equivalent to prison barracks, fed prison food and treated medically in prison buildings.

### *Conclusions*

We can draw some conclusions from this study of illness among the exile community of eastern Siberia. First, conditions in Siberian prisons were in general worse than those in European Russian prisons in the post-1906 period. Second, we can speculate that the experience of exile in eastern Siberia placed it as among the most difficult location for exile. This question highlights one of the fundamental ambiguities of the system of Siberian punishment in late Imperial Russia. Ostensibly intended to provide Siberia with Russian settlers as well as removing undesirable elements from mainland Russia, in practice the process of punishment damaged many potential settlers to the extent that they were unable even to provide for themselves. The state's responses to the challenges raised by the damaged bodies and minds of the punished are ambiguous. The nature of the punishment in itself caused much of the physical damage to the punished. Two main responses can be identified. First, as with Kraft and his almshouse, the illness of the punished was responded to not in response to humane considerations, but because the illness of exiles was a major contributing factor to the burden that the exiles represented to the local population. Second, though, we also see in other examples of state responses, particularly in relation to the suffering of family followers, a basic humane response, as state representatives sought to ameliorate the suffering of wives and children. The gulf between often well meaning Tsarist policy and reality was often stark. The prison system provided adequate healthcare for sick prisoners, reflecting a range of reforms and improvements made in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Exiles, however, seemed to fall through the gaps of medical provision. The state, despite recognising some duty of care to these men, was reluctant to provide for sick and decrepit exiles. The almshouse in Yakutsk was only established as a result of a particularly intransigent and lively regional governor, who was willing to confront the centre for funds. There seems to have been no connection made between the costs incurred by the state in caring for the broken punished, and the conditions of their punishment which resulted in ill health.

Exile illness was a significant factor in making exiles more of a burden than a benefit to Siberia's native population. Individuals broken by the conditions of their punishment, sparse local facilities and inadequate support from the regional authorities combined to make Siberian exiles an onerous burden for the local community. While there is evidence of local sympathy for the plight of the women and children that accompanied the convicts, local charity towards sick exiles was limited. The position of exiles' families shows how categories of free and forced, convict and innocent, punished and unpunished, were profoundly blurred when face to face with the realities of daily life. Those families that

<sup>40</sup>NARS, f. 15, op. 8, d. 887: this *delo* is about voluntary collections to support an orphanage for the children of prisoners and exiles, 1906.



followed the punished into exile often lived in conditions as bad, or even worse, than their spouse. The provision of care for these families was often set up using prison buildings and facilities, ensuring that the distinction between convict and innocent was fundamentally undermined. The punished seemed in general to regard their state of health as distinct and not an integral part of their punishment. The body's physical suffering could be used to demand an amelioration of sentence. Neither the state nor the punished themselves regarded illness as an integral part of punishment. This evidence indicates, however, that illness did form an important component of the overall experience of punishment. We can conclude that the prevalence of illness and disease compounded the cruelty of sentences. The image of Siberian exile as a living death sentence can be supplemented by the notion of Siberian exile as a slow death sentence.

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