Sakhalin Island

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Sakhalin Island, the 30,000 square-mile, sturgeon-shaped island located directly north of Japan, served as a maximum-security tsarist prison between 1868 and 1905. It was the last prison constructed by the Romanov dynasty, and as such was also its last failed attempt at penal reform during the imperial era. During the nineteenth century, the spread of Enlightenment-based ideas regarding the rehabilitation of criminals and the sanctity of the human body had resulted in the formations of new kinds of prison environments throughout Europe, Africa, and parts of Asia. Russia’s delegates had been party to discussions regarding prison reform, and had subsequently attempted reformatory projects in European Russia and in the Far East. Indeed, numerous Russian penologists, such as V.I. Vlasov, enthusiastically envisioned that a prison constructed on virgin soil, on Sakhalin Island, might well become another Mettrey.

Alexander II’s approval in 1851 of Sakhalin as a new penal location had also rested on the hope that a Far Eastern Russian prison settlement would serve several practical, imperial aims. First, the island’s remote location might prove ideal for the separation of dangerous criminal elements from Siberia’s fledgling colonists. It might also facilitate Russia’s presentation as a viable trading partner within Asian markets. Sakhalin’s geopolitical proximity to Japan, China, and Manchuria seemed uniquely suited to helping the country retain an economic presence within the rapidly expanding trade arenas of the Far East.

Sakhalin as a Carceral Space

During the course of its 40-year existence, however, the penal colony on Sakhalin Island did little to serve either of these imperial goals. The way in which the settlement was administered had little to do with preserving Russia’s reputation as a nation or as a trading partner, and was even less relevant to the rehabilitation, education and reform of criminals. The pursuit of humanity, rehabilitation and education, which had inspired France’s construction of Mettrey and Great Britain’s abolition of the death penalty, were terms that were mocked on Sakhalin, according to interviews with inmates conducted by the Russian journalist Vlas Doroshevich, who visited the island in 1898 and interviewed many of its prisoners.

The accounts of Doroshevich, Anton Chekhov, and others, characterize the island as a punitive space within which corrupt prison officials administered criminals with little concern for justice, and forced colonists struggled to survive despite the lack of housing, food, or other supplies. Such observations, in the form of articles and monographs, were widely circulated throughout Russia and Europe, contributing to Sakhalin’s reputation as the most dreaded prison within the Russian empire.

Chekhov and others observed that Sakhalin’s geographical position relative to the rest of the Russian Empire contributed to its dubious status as most dreaded prison in the empire. The Sea of Okhotsk carried creeping fogs, snowstorms, and nearly constant rain to island’s shores that suggested a melancholy isolation from Russia. Prisoners and administrators alike felt that they had been sent to inhabit a forgotten, rejected space. Prisoners in Siberian gaols told the American scholar, Benjamin
Howard, that they felt fortunate to have not been sent off the edge of the earth to their inevitable graves, to Sakhalin.

The Journey to Sakhalin

Convicts reached the island by way of lengthy, overland marches, or via sea voyage. The overland trip to Sakhalin from European Russia, which followed the route of the Amur Cart Road through Siberia, took between 18 to 24 months. Marching prisoners were often shackled together at the ankle in groups of 8 to 10, which slowed travel while causing extreme pain. Convoys marched under guard for several days before stopping to recover at transit prisons, etapes, along the route. They were often followed by groups of family members, or voluntary exiles, who desired to follow their prisoners into exile, and also endured the arduous journey. Etapes were far from restful environments. Groups of voluntary settler women and children slept in heaps amongst murderers, sexual predators, thieves, and the dying on lice and vermin-infested wooden platforms. Large wooden tubs served as common toilets for all. The etapes were rife with sexual abuse and disease. Often more prisoners perished during the journey to Sakhalin than reached the island’s shores.

The transportation of convicts to Sakhalin by sea voyage began in 1879. Prisoners boarded steamers of the Volunteer Fleet in Odessa; the ships passed through the Suez Canal with stops in Ceylon, Singapore, and Nagasaki before reaching the island. Although the voyage lasted only about 9 months, as opposed to the 2 years required for the overland journey, it was far from comfortable. Prisoners were housed in steel cages below deck in insufferably high temperatures, without toilets, and with insufficient food and water. Many suffered terribly from disease or died of heatstroke. Nevertheless, in case of prisoner mutiny, the ships’ staff kept hoses of boiling water at the ready on the uppermost deck.

Prisoner Life on Sakhalin

More than 30,000 political and criminal offenders served prison terms on Sakhalin between 1868 and 1905. The prisoner population was remarkably diverse, and represented most ethnic groups that inhabited the vast Russian empire as well as Europeans who had settled on Russian soil, such as the Volga Germans. Prisoners were both male and female, young and old, spoke over 25 languages and were free to observe their chosen religion. Some of the wealthier Muslim political exiles funded the construction of a Sunni mosque and a Shiite mosque; others helped build meetinghouses for the Russian Orthodox, Old Believers, Jews, and Protestants. During the nineteenth century, in fact, prisoners on Sakhalin were permitted more religion freedom than was the free population of European Russia.

Political exiles constituted a distinct category of prisoners on Sakhalin. Most had participated in movements against the Tsar, such as the Decembrists, the People’s Will, Polish insurrectionists, and Cossack uprisings. Political exiles were housed separately from criminal offenders and were very loosely supervised; often they lived in unguarded houses that they rented together. Exiles on Sakhalin also participated in book clubs, attended social events, and found their own employment. Political exiles who demonstrated good behavior and observed the colony’s rules were also generally permitted to move about the island at will, even from city to city. They received modest monthly living stipends, although most worked as well in order to make ends meet. Lev
Shternberg, one of numerous ethnographers to fulfill his sentence on Sakhalin, lectured, read, was invited to the most exclusive parties on the island, and even wrote and published editorials that criticized the prison administration.

Non-political, criminal offenders were classified into various groups according to the seriousness of their crimes and were housed accordingly. Prisoners considered to be very dangerous, such as cannibals and repeat murderers, had usually received lifetime sentences of hard labor, which meant mining, logging, and building fortifications for the military. They generally were incarcerated in prison cells for their first two years on Sakhalin before being allowed to work in the countryside and either commute to the prison at night or sleep at their labor site. Prisoners who had committed less serious crimes, such as theft, arson, assault, or the impersonation of a Russian Orthodox priest, worked as agricultural laborers, in fisheries, or in workshops where they constructed goods for use in the colony or for trade with Japan. They lived in huts in communities of between 12 to 25 families.

All criminal offenders on Sakhalin were free to work toward improving their living conditions. Those who lived by the established rules, maintained a positive attitude, and did not commit additional crimes could, after two years, graduate to the status of “convicts in exile.” Such individuals were free to choose a co-habitant, or living partner, obtain the right to run a business, and be employed according to his or her aptitudes and talents; some became clerks within the Russian prison administration.

In this way, a prisoner who upon arrival was classified as a hard labor convict could leave traditional prison life after two years, move to a small settlement, and try his or her hand at farming, animal husbandry, or other industries. Most convicts in exile lived in conditions of terrible poverty; still, they lived outside prison walls as autonomous individuals. Some convict settlers flourished, established their own companies, traded with the Japanese and Chinese, and hired employees. When the term of the prisoner’s sentence had been fulfilled, he or she was awarded the status of a free settler and could move back to the mainland, if desired, although none were permitted to return to European Russia.

As was true in Siberian prisons, most prisoners on Sakhalin were male. In an effort to foster colonization and the formation of families, during the 1880s, the Main Prison Administration sought to equalize the 16:1 male to female ratio on Sakhalin by sentencing not only “dangerous” female criminals to the island, but also those who had committed milder crimes. By 1897, the male to female ratio had fallen to 2.7 to 1 in the general prison population and 3.3 to 1 among the population of political exiles. Female prisoners usually worked as agricultural laborers, personal assistants to administrators, and as domestic servants, or concubines. Male prisoners in good standing with the administration were similarly allowed to select female “co-habitants” from among the shipments of new arrivals. As was the case in other penal locations, Sakhalin became a site of rampant sexual misconduct within which prostitution emerged as a profitable occupation for young women. Convict settlers frequently prostituted their children in order to make money or in exchange for provisions. During his visit to the island, Chekhov observed girls as young as 12 laboring as sex workers.

**Conclusion**

Although the prison on Sakhalin Island achieved great notoriety in its day as a high-security Russian prison, it proved no more successful at housing, providing labor and provisions for, and rehabilitating
its convict inhabitants than had been its failing predecessors in Tomsk, Kara, Kamchatka, and other Siberian locations. Prisoners on Sakhalin were not trained in how to best perform assigned labor and consequently completed their tasks poorly, undermining imperial hopes of a flourishing Russian colony in the Far East. Administrative dishonesty and disinterest also resulted in inconsistent policy-making, which in turn created an environment of accepted corruption. When, in 1905, Japan triumphed over Russia in the Russo-Japanese Conflict and the last prisoners were evacuated, many of them believed they were witnessing the demise of the empire’s most corrupt penal colony.

Further Reading

