

A Prison Without Walls: Eastern Siberian Exile in the Last Years of Tsarism

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Sarah Badcock has made a name for herself as, alongside the likes of Aaron Retish, one seeking to spread and deepen our understanding of the Russian Revolution in hitherto under- or little-explored regions – both geographical (the Volga provinces) and social (the peasantry of European Russia’s periphery).⁽¹⁾ She has now moved both eastwards and backwards to explore the experiences of exiles ‘beyond the rock’, as Russians used to say – of the lands east of the Urals, in Siberia, during the late-tsarist period (roughly from 1905 to 1917). The work also touches upon new topical territories: the histories of emotions, punishment, pain and illness. This is a timely supplement to other recent works on the earlier exile system – for example, the articles in *Kritika* (2013 and 2015) by Daniel Beer and his acclaimed new monograph (*The House of the Dead: Siberian Exile under the Tsars*) and the magisterial two-volume study by Andrew Gentes (*Exile to Siberia, 1590–1822* and *Exile, Murder and Madness in Siberia, 1823–1861*).⁽²⁾ Badcock’s concerns, though, are rather different in their subject matter (she is still more interested in the people than the state), their chronology, and, importantly, their geographic scope, for this is exclusively a study of the exiles in the Irkutsk and Yakutsk regions of eastern Siberia, rather than of the exile system as a whole. But it is the author’s finest achievement to date, being based upon her adventurous forays into her own periodic academic exile in the alternatively chilly and over-heated archives of those intriguing provinces (including the National Archive of the Saka Republic, the State Archives of Irkutsk *Oblast*? and the State Archive of the Russian Far East), and opening new vistas into the experiential shaping of the revolutionary mind and the network of radical-socialist communities that suffered the disappointments of 1905 and the mixed legacy of the fall of tsarism and the triumph of Bolshevism in 1917. As such, it offers also a nice sidebar to a second recent trope of scholarship on the revolutions and the revolutionaries’ familial and comradely networks that is best exemplified in studies by Katy Turton.⁽³⁾ One wonders what the 19th-century pioneer of studies of *Siberia and the Exile System* (1891), George Kennan, might have made of all this new-fangledness, but he would surely have had some sympathy. After all, he approvingly recorded a remark of the ‘grandmother of the Russian revolution’, E. K. Breshko-Breshkovskaia, to the effect that ‘We may die in exile and our grandchildren may die in exile, but something will come of it at last’, which neatly encapsulates one of the key points that Badcock makes very successfully in this book: that the experience of exile and networks

forged in exile had important impacts upon the revolutionary movement.

More than that, however, the author is at pains to foreground the experiences of non-political exiles (i.e., criminals), whose stories, for obvious reasons (their own illiteracy and the monopoly over the publication of prison memoirs enjoyed by political parties) have generally been neglected in earlier Russian/Soviet and western accounts of the tsarist exile system. She also offers some telling insights into another neglected subject – one that has not really been assayed since the writings of the Siberian regionalists (*oblastniki*) of the late 19th century (N. N. Iadrintsev, G. N. Potanin, *et al.*): that is, the impact upon Siberia itself of a massive convict population, almost two-thirds of which by, 1910, had been sent there for having committed serious violent crimes (including murder, rape, robbery and grievous bodily harm). This was a central concern of the *oblastniki*, and one might have expected Badcock to have made more use of their contributions (Iadrintsev and his seminal *Sibir? kak koloniia* of 1882 is cited only once, on pp. 9–10, and with its title misspelt); but, in fairness to the author, the regionalists were centered around Tomsk, in Western Siberia, and their focus was on that region.

A final underlying theme of the book is the gender imbalance among the overwhelmingly male exile population in particular and the surrounding Siberian population in general: ‘Of the 190,000 people in prison on 1 January 1913, not even 1 per cent (12,408) were women’ (p. 53). Unsurprisingly, although, as the author explains, many of the women voluntarily followed their husbands and partners into exile – the case of the Decembrist wives is only the most celebrated of a much larger phenomenon – this added to the violence (much of it sexually orientated) that was all too often a feature of life in Russia’s ‘Wild East’. Here she might have made use of the brilliant piece by Alan Wood, ‘Sex and Violence in Siberia: Aspects of the Tsarist Exile System’, as well as that author’s marvelous *Russia’s Frozen Frontier: A History of Siberia and the Russian Far East*.⁽¹⁾ These are unexpected oversights in a bibliography that documents the author’s otherwise very comprehensive trawling of the secondary literature. And perhaps we should not carp at gaps in the reading of an historian who, when not trawling the archives in Iakutsk, Irkutsk and elsewhere, seems to have read just about everything else available on her subject in English and Russian, notably absorbing (through an intelligent and critical eye, regarding its limitations as a source) the contents of every available issue (all 116 of them) of the chief journal devoted to the exile system in the Soviet period, *Katorga i ssylka* (1921–35).

Badcock certainly packs a lot in to such a comparatively slim volume. Her aim is neatly summarized in the passage that closes a brief but insightful review of the historiography of the exile system (pp. 21–5):

This book is structured in a broad narrative arc, that moves from travel to exile and communities in exile, work and escape, and finally illness in exile. Throughout, I try to draw out individual stories and reimagine the lived experience of exile. I try, despite the limitations of the sources, to focus on how individuals perceived and represented their own lives, and to give my reader a sense of how it might have felt to experience exile.

Thus, following an introduction that sets out the place of Siberia in Russian thought, imagination, economy and politics, the number and categories of exiles in Eastern Siberia, the impact of exiles on Siberia, the comparative context of the Russian exile system, and its historiography, the reader is taken (in chapter two) through the experience of travel into exile and the features of the first destination of many (the notorious Aleksandrovskaia prison, near Nerchinsk), the varying experiences of political and criminal exiles, and the fortunes of women and children. The book then moves on (chapter three) to examine the nature of various final destinations of exile and aspects of life in exile (among both prisoners and, again, women and children), as well as the exiles’ relations with the native Siberian population. Chapter four then discusses work (including road and rail construction and agricultural labour) and escape from exile. A final main chapter (chapter five) then focuses on ‘Illness and death in Siberian exile’, including an innovative section on mental health. This seems to be a sensible schema, allowing for the recreation of the general experience of exile, from deportation from European Russia to the grave in the *taiga* that awaited so many: although

Badcock is careful to point out the problems with statistics, we are told that ‘Between 1906 and 1914, mortality rates in all prisons were three to four times higher than mortality rates among the general population. In *katorga* [forced labour] prisons, mortality rates peaked at 67.4 per thousand in 1911’ (p. 150). All this is achieved through the aggregation of snippets of information regarding hundreds of prisoners, interlarded with some more extensive case studies, where the sources allow. However, it might have been more appropriate to have ended the body of the text with the very revealing section on ‘Escape’ (pp. 130–7) that herein concludes the penultimate chapter, as escape was a much more common feature of exile life than was death. In fact, it was extremely common. Of course, it is widely known that revolutionaries, utilizing party support networks and finances, frequently escaped from exile – Stalin famously managed it on four occasions – but escape was clearly also the last chapter in the exile of many other, non-politicals. In fact, as Badcock makes clear, in an under-administered and under-policed region the size of Eastern Siberia, ‘Escape from exile was endemic’: she notes that ‘Of the 72,136 exiles sent to Irkutsk region by 1913, an extraordinary 43 per cent (31,043) had run away or were absent without explanation’ (p. 130)! The author also notes, though, that many of these escapees were not making a real bid for flight back to European Russia or abroad, but became something like the *otkhodniki* (itinerant workers) that were such a prominent feature of the labour market in European Russia in the late-tsarist period, but she might also have brought out the seasonal nature of this phenomenon: exiles and prisoners might leave their place of detention in the summer, in search of work, but then return before winter for shelter.

The exile system of the tsarist stamp came to an end, of course, with the abdication of Nicholas II in early March 1917. Subsequently, many of the exiles were released by the Provisional Government (among them, ironically, members of the Bolshevik party that would topple the Provisional Government in October); and on 6 April 1917 deportation to Siberia was removed from the options available as punishment under Russian law. Those of the released who returned to European Russia were celebrated as heroes and martyrs; those who chose to remain ‘beyond the rock’ often became key players in the revolutionary politics of 1917 and after in Siberia, especially in the urban nodes along the Trans-Siberian Railway (Krasnoiarsk, Irkutsk, Chita, etc.). That, however, was not the end of exile in Russia, for very soon the new Soviet government (whilst raising monuments to and naming streets, parks, etc. after famous pre-revolutionary exiles, notably the Decembrists) was building an exile system to meet its own needs that bore a strong resemblance, in some respects, to the tsarist system – not least, as Badcock notes in her ‘Afterword’, in that many of those released from exile in 1917 (including many Bolsheviks) found themselves back in exile within a few years, having fallen foul of the new rulers in the Kremlin. The author refrains, probably wisely, from a prolonged comparison of the tsarist and Soviet exile systems, but does interject one thought that is worth dwelling upon and would bear further investigation: that both systems had a dual aim – of punishment *and* settlement.

This work, then, is a notable achievement that will be of interest to scholars of tsarist and Soviet Russia, as well as historians of crime and punishment, and migration. It is lucidly written, contains a wealth of (often lengthy) revealing quotations from rare and hitherto unknown sources, is very thoroughly researched and is referenced in an exemplary manner. It contains some useful maps and many tables that are clear and easy for the non-expert to interpret. It is produced, as one would expect from this publisher, to a very high standard. For this reviewer, all that it lacks are photographs and/or contemporary paintings and sketches that would have added greatly to readers’ ability to identify with the often nightmarish stories it contains. Certainly, my own impressions of the experience of *katorga* were indelibly stamped by viewing an image of some anonymous and long-forgotten exile being chained to a wheelbarrow – not for his work shift, but for the entire duration of his sentence.

Notes

1. See alongside numerous articles and book chapters, Sarah Badcock, *Politics and the People in Revolutionary Russia: A Provincial History* (Cambridge, 2007). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Daniel Beer, *The House of the Dead: Siberian Exile under the Tsars* (London, 2016); Andrew Gentes, *Exile to Siberia, 1590–1822* (Basingstoke, 2008); *Exile, Murder and Madness in Siberia, 1823–1861*

- (Basingstoke, 2010).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. These include [Forgotten Lives: the Role of Lenin's Sisters in the Russian Revolution, 1864–1937](#) [2] (Basingstoke, 2007); 'The revolutionary, his wife, the party and the sympathizer: the role of family members and party supporters in the release of revolutionary prisoners', *Russian Review*, 69, 1 (2010), 73–92; 'Keeping it in the family: surviving political exile, 1870–1917', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 52, 3–4 (2010), 391–416; and a forthcoming monograph on the importance of family networks among the Russian revolutionaries.[Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. Alan Wood, 'Sex and violence in Siberia: aspects of the Tsarist exile system', in *Siberia: Two Historical Perspectives* (London, 1984); and Alan Wood, *Russia's Frozen Frontier: A History of Siberia and the Russian Far East* (London, 2011).[Back to \(4\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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[2] [http://pure.qub.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/forgotten-lives-the-role-of-lenins-sisters-in-the-russian-revolution-18641937\(6fac2253-bcf6-482e-9dc1-5448fdb5c8b\).html](http://pure.qub.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/forgotten-lives-the-role-of-lenins-sisters-in-the-russian-revolution-18641937(6fac2253-bcf6-482e-9dc1-5448fdb5c8b).html)