

“Prison Camp Followers” in Contemporary Russia

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21st-century *Dekabristki*

My parents? My father is a prisoner in his genes; he was involved with the prison system for 45 years. Mum waited for him for thirty years, also. Like a dekabristka she followed him, all over Siberia.

(Klara, 39, widow. Her husband served two sentences. The first of 10 years and he died 3 years into his second sentence)



Decembrist Women: The Gates of Fate

Zurab Tsereteli, 2008.



I think that feelings of love, kindness to man, exist outside of any timeframe and dimension don't they? Katya is one of those. I didn't expect that she would have so much strength, so much courage, so much decency ... Everybody, well perhaps not everyone, but many think "Why does she need all that?" when she could marry again ... She could abandon him and lead a worldly lifestyle. Yet she has dedicated her life just to him. She used to have everything ... but she doesn't complain now about suffering, she doesn't see what she is sacrificing to save Igor.

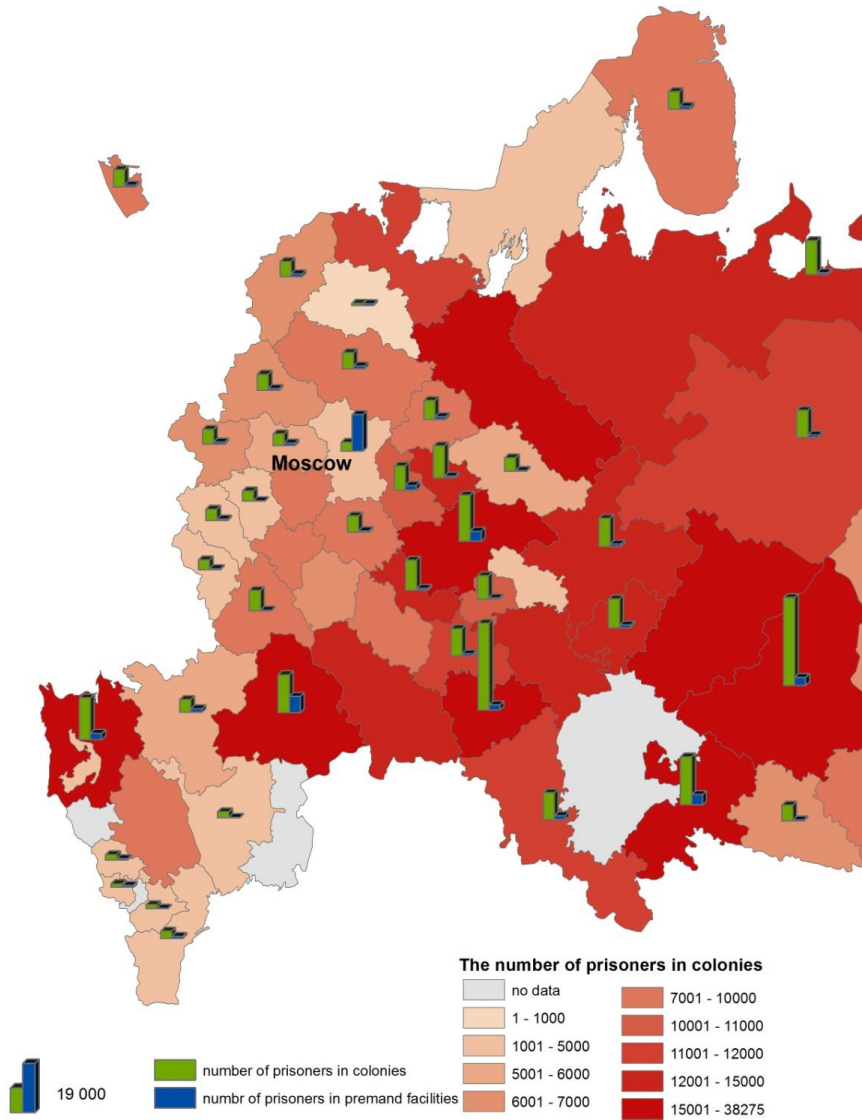
(Larisa Petrovna, mother of Katya married to 'career criminal' serving his third sentence)



In addition to the rights you have as the relatives of the convicted person, you have a moral obligation to help your loved one to find the right path that will lead him to a correct and normal life after release. In this respect, much depends on you, in that you have a moral, and often material, responsibility to support the prisoner

(www.fsin.su: Prison service advice to prisoners' relatives)

The number of prisoners in Russia by regions



PRISONER TRANSPORTATION IN RUSSIA:

TRAVELLING INTO THE UNKNOWN



The Etap



You are absolutely unsettled; you do not have any stability; you are in motion [and] you have these searches ... always these searches ... on the etap you can't access any of your own food ... you have to eat what they provide or what they don't provide - that's all suffering. At the same time you are surrounded by people you don't know. So it's a very nerve-racking environment. After all you never know where you'll end up - so that's why it's punishment. (Interview with male, ex-prisoner, 2012)

Patterns of prisoner/relative contacts



% of prisoners <i>not</i> taking up their rights to receive:	1999			2009		
	Men	Women	Juveniles	Men	Women	Juveniles
Parcels	30.4	43.7	28.8	18.4	33.1	31.9
<i>Banderoli</i>	53.7	61.2	55.6	56.5	90.5	93.6
Telephone conversations	98.0	85.3	82.1	56.9	26.0	35.0
Short visits	49.4	71.7	39.9	53.0	63.6	53.5
Long visits	61.1	79.2	55.6	62.1	73.7	66.9

The Journey



The first time I went was probably 2008, it was August and very hot. I think to myself, 'where on earth am I going?' ... I had to stay one night in a hotel, then take a bus, then trolleybus, then another bus. Then it was on foot right to the zone. But I got there somehow or other.

(Saima on the last stage of the two day trip to visit her husband in Kharp in the Arctic circle, which included a 27-hour train journey)



To get there was complicated, actually unrealistic [once you arrive at the penal region] you have to get a pass for the train to the regime zone ... the station is a small room without glass in the window, no heating and one bench. ...it isn't a train at all, just a single wagon of the old prison design, but with the cells removed. The track isn't the normal sort – it's narrow gauge. Sometimes the train comes off the track. [A] prison vehicle waits at the destination to take you to the visiting room in the colony ... On maps this place is shown as uninhabited

(Mariya describing the last leg of her journey to visit her partner in a colony in Yangory, Arkhangel'sk oblast)

The Arrival





A few days before the visit the temperature was above zero but then it dropped to minus 15 [centigrade]. We stand in this waiting room but it's as cold as outside. Thank God they've opened a cafe. There were three little pies on sale and we bought two, someone had grabbed the other one (Gulya, visiting husband 8 years into 13-year sentence)

[You have to stand] in the snow, the rain, the hot sun ... You have to protect your bags, so you can't go off somewhere (smiles). It doesn't matter whether you arrive early or late because they let the short visit people in first and you have to wait until they have left before they deal with the long, family visits.

(Olya, visiting partner 6 years into 8-year sentence)



When I arrived for our first residential visit, they searched me all over. They really humiliated me, making me remove my underclothes and squat [...] and they examined every photograph I had brought with me, sniffed every cosmetic cream and I had a lot of cosmetics. So they took a long time over me (Lyuba, zaochnitsa, visiting future husband 4 years into 15-year sentence.)

Domesticating Penal Space



How can I explain it? The first day is a celebration. It's the meeting, tea and cake, love, cooking something, continuous tactile contact. It's not, as you probably think, naked, unadorned sex, but simply a person, you understand, who wants all the time to touch you. To take your hand, to blow on your neck, to caress your hair, to touch your face with his fingers. That sort of thing. You know, all the time trying to get a little closer. So I go into the kitchen, and he follows me, That's what it's like, just like when we first got to know one another. So he looks at me, notices what I'm wearing, how I move.

(Valya: 42, on the visit to husband 8 years into a 12 year sentence)

Romantic Fantasies



But, you know, we just sat for ten minutes, in silence and looked each another straight in the eye. You know the majority of zeks have empty eyes – but Daniel’s eyes were the deepest blue. I don’t know what I had been hoping for but it was obvious that he loved me; his eyes were burning with love ... He looks at me and it sends a shiver down my spine and the next we know it’s, “Time, everyone”. I remember how all the time he talked about how much he loved me. I wasn’t able to say I loved him back – I’d not seen him before [...] But then by the end ... “Daniel, I love you”.

(Lyuba: 25, *zaochnitsa*, on her first visit to prisoner, Daniel, 4 years into a 15 year sentence, whom she later married in the colony)

The Return home



Interviewer: *On the return trip did you talk about it?*

Svetlana: *Practically not at all. It had been so traumatic for her, she just closed in on herself. But then later she recovered, because for her after all, she was with her father. She talks about him but not about the visit to the prison because it was so hard for her. It affected her a lot.*

(Grandmother talking about taking a 14-year old to see her father serving a 15 year sentence in a colony 1000 kms from Moscow)



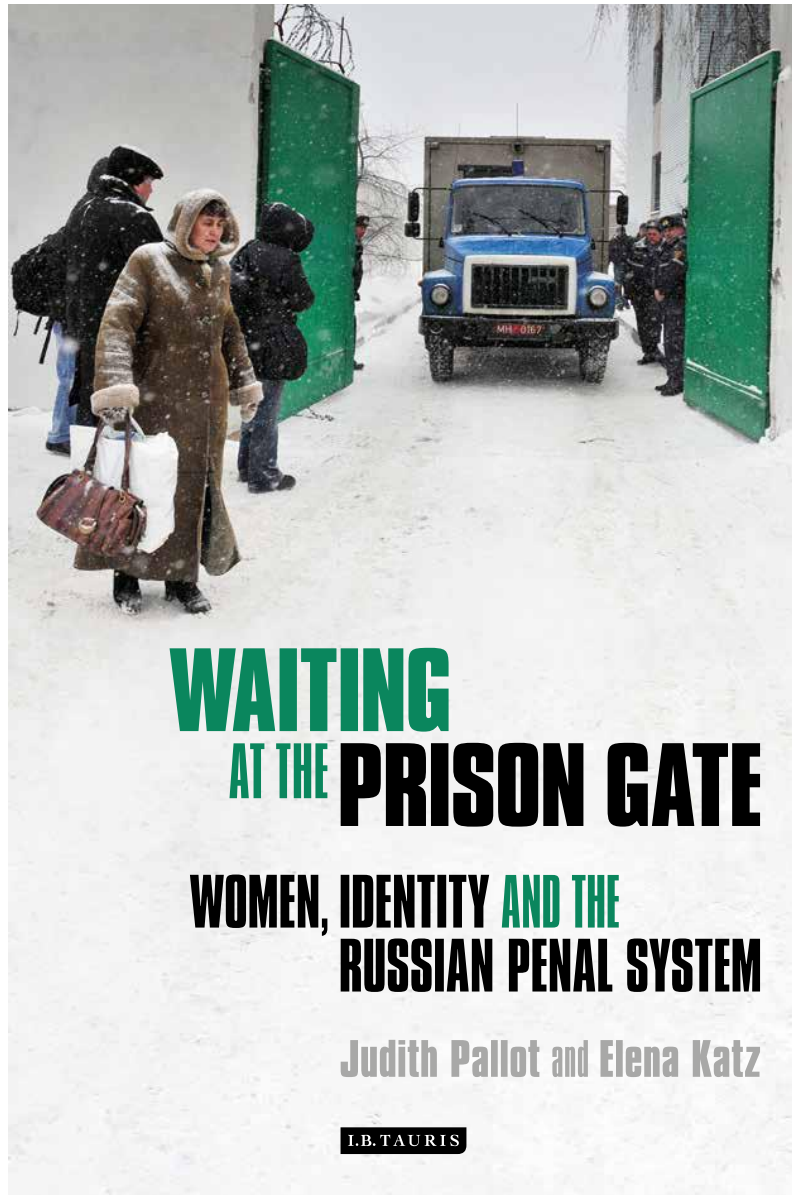
When you come on a visit for those three days, you put worrying behind you and you forget about the bad side of the business. But then suddenly you remember it all. Can you imagine what you feel like when you leave that place? [...] After visits, you feel that they have torn away a bit of your flesh, you understand? It leaves a huge hole which nothing can fill.

(Valya who visits her husband, serving a 12-year sentence)



If you cultured lady [...] doubt, suffer – you are a dekabristka are you not? [...] but women who come from the auls, leave children behind at railway stations, speak hardly any Russian, know nothing and don't understand, but make their way into the devil's prison and there by hook or by crook try to find out something about their husbands, but all of them are interrogated, demeaned ... talk to them about romantic love. (Olga Romanova, prison reform activist)

“What's so surprising about it? Five thousand women do the same every year” (Princess Mariya Volkonskaya)



WAITING AT THE PRISON GATE

WOMEN, IDENTITY AND THE
RUSSIAN PENAL SYSTEM

Judith Pallot and Elena Katz

I.B. TAURIS

OXFORD GEOGRAPHICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES



Gender, Geography, and Punishment

The Experience of Women in
Carceral Russia

Judith Pallot

and Laura Piacentini

With the assistance of Dominique Moran

