

**The Russian Revolutionary in Solitary Confinement:
Isolation, Community, and Meaning**

Eric Johnson

Summer 2012

Eric Johnson is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History at the University of California, Berkeley.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Prof. Yuri Slezkine and all of the participants in his research seminar on Soviet History in fall 2012. Their comments and criticisms added greatly to this paper. I would also like to thank Prof. Irina Paperno for pointing me towards some of my sources.

I implore you, Sire! If it is permissible under the law and if the request of a criminal can touch the heart of Your Imperial Highness, Sire, do not order me to rot in eternal imprisonment in the fortress. ... May the heaviest manual labor be my lot; I will accept it with thankfulness, as a mercy. The heavier the labor, the more easily I will forget myself in it. In solitary confinement you remember and remember everything to no avail. Thought and memory become an inexpressible torment. And you live long, live against your will, and, never dying, die every day in inactivity and despair.¹

- Mikhail Bakunin to Nicholas I

It's an old truth that only in prison can you know a person in all his most intimate details. Prison is something that reveals a person to his very core—at every step it shows him from all angles. And he who is a coward deep down, no matter how much he pretends and hides it—his cowardice will be discovered. And he who is brave, who is courageous, who is noble—this will be revealed of him, for prison is a great scalpel... It shows a person as he really is, in all his depth, tearing off the most cunning of masks.²

- Andrei Sobol'

Introduction

What happens when an individual whose entire life has been oriented towards community is forced to be alone? This was the situation members of the Russian revolutionary movement found themselves in when, arrested and torn away from their comrades, they were shut up in solitary confinement cells in tsarist prisons. These individuals sought to retain their revolutionary identities even when unable to actively continue the struggle against the autocratic regime. They did so by reaching out to form communities in prison, preparing themselves for service to the revolutionary cause upon release, and, in the most dire straits, simply trying to remain sane.

¹ Quoted in M. N. Gernet, *Istoriia tsarskoi tiur'my* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo iuridicheskoi literatury, 1960-63), 2:428.

² Andrei Sobol', "Otryvki iz vospominanii," *Katorga i Ssylka* 13, no. 6 (1924): 153. Hereafter *Katorga i Ssylka* will be referred to as *KS*.

Russian radicals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were essentially communitarians. Whether agitating among factory workers or conspiring to commit terrorist acts, they felt themselves to be part of a community unified through dedication to “the cause”—the overthrow of the unjust autocratic order. Radicals from Social Democrats to Socialist Revolutionaries embraced ideologies that exalted the communal over the individual. They organized themselves into study circles and conspiratorial cells in which each person had to submit to the collective to avoid detection by the tsarist authorities. But these radical groups were continually being exposed and their members imprisoned, often for possession of illegal literature or simply for belonging to a revolutionary party. Those arrested were forced to rethink their identities when they found themselves in the belly of the beast: how could they remain revolutionaries when cut off from the struggle behind prison walls?

They tried to do so by maintaining a sense of revolutionary community behind bars. For many prison became a “school of revolution,” where inexperienced newcomers mixed with older comrades in large, communal cells and prepared to carry on the struggle upon release. Taking advantage of an environment where they had plenty of time to devote to reading, political prisoners assisted each other in studying Marx and other socialist classics. These communities of inmates constantly renewed their revolutionary identity by struggling against the prison administration. By insisting on better living conditions and demanding that guards address them using the polite “vy”—two frequent complaints—radicals felt part of a united front against the tsarist autocracy.

But while most prisoners became part of a community of comrades by sharing large cells with other politicals, many radicals were isolated in solitary confinement. Cut off from their comrades by stone walls, forbidden all interaction with fellow inmates, these prisoners were

deprived of the community those in shared cells enjoyed. This essay examines how radicals dealt with solitary confinement by looking at how they created communities through illicit communication and how they coped with isolation when communication was not possible. It argues that maintaining a sense of community was of central importance for being a revolutionary in penal isolation.

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The system of solitary confinement experienced by imprisoned radicals spread to Russia from Western Europe. In early eighteenth-century Britain, theorists discussed isolating criminals in order to prevent them from corrupting one another. At the end of the century, Jeremy Bentham and John Howard developed these ideas into comprehensive plans for morally reforming prisoners by controlling their activities. Howard's efforts to ensure a more humane environment for rehabilitating prisoners led to the restructuring of Gloucester prison in the 1790s and the eventual building of one of the quintessential modern penitentiaries, Pentonville, in London in 1842. Both institutions isolated prisoners in solitary confinement to prevent their mutual corruption and to facilitate an almost monastic introspection.³

If the idea of solitary confinement was pioneered by British theorists, it was implemented in two American prisons in the early nineteenth century, which became models for penal reform throughout Europe. In the famed Pennsylvania system, based on Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary, prisoners were kept in total seclusion from one another for the duration of their terms. They had personal walking-areas attached to their cells to eliminate communal exercise

³ Michael Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

and interacted only with prison staff. The competing Auburn system tempered this strict solitary confinement model. In this New York prison, inmates were isolated at night to minimize moral corruption, but worked together during the day in the penitentiary's factory areas. They were restricted to total silence, however—all communication was forbidden. European reformers weighed these models against one another and against the increased financial costs of building solitary cells. In France, prison reformers experimented with the use of solitary confinement under the July Monarchy, and then in 1875 passed a law to enforce day and night isolation of all inmates in departmental prisons. In practice, though, this law was not fully implemented.⁴

Scholars have seen solitary confinement as a unique space where the power of the state shapes the individual will. Ignatieff characterized solitary confinement as the “perfect reconciliation of humanity and terror,” which “epitomized the liberal utopia of a punishment so rational that offenders would punish themselves in the soundless, silent anguish of their own minds.”⁵ Michel Foucault saw isolation as a key aspect of the disciplinary institutions of the modern state:

“Disciplinary space tends to be divided into as many sections as there are bodies or elements to be distributed... Discipline organizes an analytical space. And there, too, it encountered an old architectural and religious method: the monastic cell. Even if the compartments it assigns become purely ideal, the disciplinary space is always, basically, cellular. Solitude was necessary to both body and soul, according to a certain asceticism: they must, at certain moments at least, confront temptation and perhaps the severity of God alone.”⁶

Although they were by and large atheists, Russian radicals imprisoned in solitary confinement faced just such a challenge to their resolve.

⁴ Patricia O'Brien, *The Promise of Punishment: Prisons in Nineteenth-Century France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 23-6.

⁵ Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain*, 213.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1995), 143.

When Alexander II introduced his great reforms, statesmen sought to modernize the Russian penal system along Western lines. The tsar tasked the Ministry of Internal Affairs with reforming the empire's prisons, but its difficulties in doing so caused Alexander to transfer responsibility in 1872 to the first in a series of commissions which wrestled with the intractable problems of penal reform. The conclusions of the last of these, the Grot Commission, were signed into law in 1879. Its debates on the advisability of solitary confinement reveal the commissioners' mixed feelings. On the one hand, they believed that isolation alone could not reform criminals, European experience with solitary confinement over the past few decades had shown the dangers of its excessive use, and it was extremely costly to build prisons with solitary rather than communal cells. On the other hand, the commissioners agreed that isolation could prevent the traditional criminal societies in Russian prisons from contaminating newcomers and reduce disorders among inmates. In the end, the Grot Commission endorsed the partial adoption of solitary confinement, but for financial reasons isolation was applied slowly and unevenly in the Russian penal system.⁷

Nevertheless, solitary confinement became widespread enough to become a major part of the revolutionary experience. Spending time in prison was a rite of passage for many fighters against the tsarist regime, who felt that it established them as bona fide revolutionaries, and many experienced this trial in solitary confinement. Still, this quintessentially atomizing experience led to the creation of a tight-knit community of those who had undergone the tribulations of the tsarist penal system. After the revolution, in 1921, an institution was founded to bring together this community: the Society of Former Political Prisoners and Exiles (*Obshchestvo byvshikh politkatorzhan i ssyl'noposelentsev*). It provided material assistance to

⁷ Bruce F Adams, *The Politics of Punishment: Prison Reform in Russia 1863-1917* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996). On the Grot Commission, see 97-120.

former political prisoners and exiles, operated special apartment buildings and resorts for veterans of the tsarist penal regime, and collected personal documents, such as letters, diaries, and memoirs, to illuminate the history of the revolutionary struggle. The Society published a journal, *Katorga i Ssylka* (“Prison and Exile”), which contained memoir fragments describing the experiences of revolutionaries in the penal system. It is a unique source that brings together the reminiscences of Social Democrats, Socialist Revolutionaries, and others, shedding light on how radicals coped with the challenges of prison and exile.⁸

A study of the *Katorga i Ssylka* issues published between 1921 and 1935, when the Society and its journal were shut down amidst Stalin’s repressions, yields a picture of how political prisoners preserved their identity as revolutionaries while behind bars. They continued the struggle by challenging the prison administration in little ways: by refusing to denigrate oneself before the warden, for example, or by insisting that a bedbug infestation be wiped out. Whether the prisoner in question succeeded in gaining a concession from the administration or was thrown into a punishment cell for his impudence, he—and the vast majority of the memoir-writers in question were men—could be sure that he had not capitulated before the authorities. While the theme of struggle is a salient characteristic of this genre of memoirs, an exclusive emphasis on prisoners as fighters against the regime ignores the importance of community for revolutionaries behind bars. Scholars who have characterized Russian radicals as “men of conviction” with little concern for flesh-and-blood human interaction have overlooked the central importance of community in the life of the revolutionary.⁹

⁸ Ia. Lent’ev and M. Iunge, eds., *Vsesoiuznoe obshchestvo politkatorzhan i ssyl’noposelentsev: obrazovanie, razvitiie, likvidatsiia, 1921-1935* (Moscow: Zven’ia, 2004). For a brief history of the Society, see pp. 14-17, Al’bert Lur’e, “Vremia i liudi.”

⁹ Vladimir C. Nahirny, *The Russian Intelligentsia: From Torment to Silence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1983). Nahirny asserts that the “ideologization of the intelligentsia” produced “men of conviction” more devoted to abstract ideas than to concrete human beings.

The Solitary Cell

The solitary confinement cell was a simple space filled with a few simple objects. But for someone imprisoned within it, the cell and its objects took on a significance out of all proportion to what they would hold in life in the outside world. Cells varied in size; while V. N. Katin-Iartsev reports his cell being as large as nine by six paces, V. Vorob'ev's cell was only three paces long.¹⁰ Very small cells predominated. Each surface of the cell took on its own associations, different for different prisoners. The floors were usually asphalt, sometime concrete, and the prisoner needed to clean them scrupulously every day, although some prison administrations enforced this rule more zealously than others. The stone or cement walls could be a malign presence when they oozed liquid in damp underground cells. But they could also be used to communicate a human presence, as when prisoners found the scrawlings of former inmates on the walls or engaged in the near-universal practice of tapping in a sort of Morse code with those in neighboring cells. The door itself was thick and iron. Aleksandr Voronskii notes how he felt its presence: "In prison the most unpleasant thing is the door. You need to constantly make a special effort to stifle your natural tendency to walk in and out freely. And then it gets annoying, miserable, and tedious."¹¹ This feeling only left him after three months.

Inside the cell, prisoners found a bunk, which often had to be folded up against the wall during waking hours. There was also a table and chair. These were often no more than flat squares of iron bolted to the wall and jutting into the room, but some were made of wood and could be moved by the prisoner (who could thus stand on the table to get a better look out of the window). There was usually a wash-basin and mug, perhaps also a pitcher for water, on the

¹⁰ V. N. Katin-Iartsev, "V tiur'me i ssylke," *KS* 15, no. 2 (1925): 185; V. K. Vorob'ev, "Po tiur'mam i v ssylke," *KS* 31, no. 2 (1927): 109.

¹¹ A. Voronskii, *Za zhivoi i mertvoi vodoi* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1970), 145.

windowsill or a small shelf; when not in use these items had to be set upright on the shelf in a strict order so as to be clearly visible to a guard looking in. Last, there was a pail for waste, usually with a lid, which was emptied once a day. While some complained about the foul smell emanating from the pail, this was more of a problem in the large, communal cells.

Prisoners' first impressions on entering the cell varied considerably. S. Mitskevich, for example, found his cell tolerable. "They led me into the cell and locked the door. I looked over the cell: it was a big enough room, clean; the bunk was raised and locked against the wall; the window was big, but high up from the floor; near it stood a small table; there was a shelf on the wall, on it a copper wash-basin, pitcher, and mug; in the corner a pail, a wooden vessel with a lid... It's nothing, I thought, I can live here."¹² Not everyone could preserve their sangfroid, however, particularly under miserable material conditions. A. Lokerman described his solitary cell as,

"a sort of stone box in a regular rectangular form, without a window. Instead, that opening, usually found in stone barns for ventilation, and which was situated above the door just below the ceiling, was transformed into something like a tiny window. The miserable amount of light that could penetrate that window-crack [*okonnaia shchel'*] was still lessened by the iron grating, the coarse frame of the *fortochka*,¹³ and by the fact that the dim glass, which was never wiped off, was covered with dust and a spider web. ... Here, in this iron-and-stone grave, there reigned an eternal half-darkness accompanied by a deathly silence, oppressive and dispiriting. Located in this cell, one couldn't tell if it was winter or summer, morning or evening, rain or shine."¹⁴

As Lokerman's account indicates, the line between physical privation and mental suffering could be difficult to draw. The most oppressive aspect of solitary was separation from one's fellows and the outside world, which for Lokerman was exacerbated by the lack of a window and consequent dismal lighting.

¹² S. I. Mitskevich, *Na grani dvukh epokh: ot Narodnichestvo k Marksizmu* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoe izdatel'stvo, 1937), 196-7.

¹³ The small, hinged window-pane used for ventilation.

¹⁴ A. Lokerman, "Po tsarskim tiur'mam. V Rostove i Novocherkasske," *KS* 22, no. 1 (1926): 176.

It is worth noting, however, that the physical conditions endured by many prisoners were abysmal. E. Samoilenko was unlucky enough to spend three months in a (normally) temporary holding cell. He dealt with “unbearable heat” and lack of fresh air, and saw that “in the cracks of the walls’ plaster there swarmed bugs and other parasites of all ages and sizes. They multiplied in my beard, on my head, not to mention their nesting in and under my clothing.”¹⁵ While this was not the norm in solitary cells, Samoilenko was not alone in dealing with vermin of all types. More common was Ia. Grunt’s experience of cold in a punishment cell. “In *kartser* there was an unbearable cold... I could thus expect to spend a whole month freezing, freezing without end. I started to get sick. I’d already spent a few sleepless nights, as there was no way to fall asleep in that cold. As soon as you lay down on the hard boards the frost would spread throughout your body.”¹⁶

However horrible the physical conditions in tsarist prisons were, the experience of solitary confinement was most of all defined by the emotional state of long-term isolation. As Vorob’ev noted, “Full isolation, being torn away from the entire external world, the lack of contact with people—all this acts amazingly oppressively on a person’s psyche.”¹⁷ On being thrown into solitary in Kherson prison, Leon Trotsky wrote that his “isolation was absolute and hopeless.”¹⁸ G. Taran reported feeling so depressed by his solitude that he demanded that the Irkutsk prison administration transfer someone into his room as a cellmate. When his written requests were categorically denied, Taran went on hunger strike, which he continued for ten days. On the tenth day another prisoner was transferred into his cell.¹⁹ Although this is the only instance I have found in which a prisoner actually escaped isolation through pressuring the

¹⁵ E. Samoilenko, “Tiflisskii zastenok,” *KS* 4 (1922): 165.

¹⁶ Ia. Grunt, “V tiur’mе i na katorge,” *KS* 5 (1923): 99

¹⁷ V. K. Vorob’ev, “Po tiur’mam i v ssylke,” *KS* 31, no. 2 (1927): 110.

¹⁸ Leon Trotsky, *My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 115.

¹⁹ G. Taran, “Svetlaia godovshchina,” *KS* 32, no. 3 (1927): 158

authorities, it shows something of the seriousness of the loneliness that these prisoners experienced.

Community Inside the Cell

A prisoner in solitary confinement was of course neither completely solitary nor totally confined. Every inmate had some contact with other human beings. But that contact was restricted and controlled in ways almost unimaginable for someone in normal society. Prisoners routinely interacted with guards and also managed to illicitly communicate with their fellow political prisoners. Even under the most stringent constraints on human interaction, isolated within their cells' four walls, inmates were able to keep in touch with their comrades and feel a part of a greater community. In fact, the constraints on communication made what interaction that did occur all the more meaningful.

The only individuals who entered a prisoner's cell on a daily basis were the guards. While for many inmates they represented the autocratic system of power that extended up to the tsar, guards' day-to-day duties were normally restricted to the quotidian. They brought meals and emptied the waste pail; they handed over items such as letters and books, and relayed petitions to the warden. They normally fulfilled their official duties with little display of animosity or affection for the prisoner. At times, however, they strayed towards one or the other extreme.

In some prisons the guards beat and tortured the inmates, often for minor infractions of prison discipline, sometimes for no reason at all. Whether or not beatings occurred seems to have had more to do with the regime established from above by the warden than the proclivities of individual guards. Thus in some institutions beatings (which were of course officially

prohibited) did not take place, while in others, such as the notorious Orlovskii Central, no prisoners avoided beatings.²⁰ Aside from the physical aspects of such procedures, the psychological pressure they created was intense. Listening to the yells carrying into his cell in Orlovskii Central, Biblibin recalled that “Those being beaten cried out, wheezed, and moaned. And the others in their solitary cells waited their turn. And you even wanted to get beaten, knowing that the physical pain would drown out the moral torture of helplessness and powerlessness.”²¹ At times beatings became institutionalized into a schedule. L. Gol’dman recalled that in the punishment cells of the *Nikolaevskie rotty* “the beatings were given at night on working days, and in the afternoon on Sundays and holidays.”²² That prisoners in solitary were more or less denied friendly human interaction must have exacerbated the trauma of these encounters with guards.

Even when not beaten, memoirists recorded suffering from the lack of normal human interaction. Recalling her stay in Moscow’s main prison, Z. Klapina noted that, “Nowhere does one value every attentive ‘human’ word like in prison. And here, in Butyrki, I don’t remember anyone from the administration who in any way, even once acted like a human being... A profession which gives free reign to every base instinct turned these people into tormentors by vocation.”²³ Interestingly, guards’ acting like normal people created a new problem. For individuals whose every social interaction became immeasurably more meaningful than in the outside world, friendly relations with guards could pose a major threat to one’s equilibrium. Mikhail Ol’minskii found any questions beyond the official routine extremely unpleasant, even the seemingly innocuous “Who are you?”, “How long are you in for?”, or “How are you?” He

²⁰ See Gernet, *Istoriia tsarskoi tiur’mi*, 5:265-9. Gernet asserts that the top prison officials were responsible for the abuse.

²¹ Biblibin, “V orlovskom tsentrale,” *KS* 1 (1921): 22.

²² L. I. Gol’dman, “Nikolaevskii zastenok,” *KS* 15, no. 2 (1925): 228.

²³ Z. Klapina, “Zhenshchiny-katorzhanki v Butyrkakh,” *KS* 4 (1922): 151.

tried to reply in monosyllables, but occasionally forgot himself and answered normally (*po-chelovecheski*). This opening up then left him vulnerable to an acute feeling of disappointment if the guard showed any lack of interest or sign of hurrying on to his other duties. Ol'minskii eventually adopted a policy of complete silence in response to such questions.²⁴ Once, a guard on the night shift asked if he could borrow a book to help him pass the hours of darkness. Ol'minskii reluctantly gave him a work on Nansen's polar expedition with which he felt an intimate connection: "To give or not to give? Too much of me is connected to that book..." The following morning, the guard returned it with the laconic verdict: "It's a good book. But there aren't many animals. African journeys are more interesting."²⁵

While contact with guards was problematic at best, political prisoners in solitary cells found ways to communicate with their comrades and maintain a sense of revolutionary community despite all restrictions. At the most primitive level, loud sounds carried through stone walls, and shouts could be heard by many other prisoners on the corridor. It was common practice for those condemned to death to shout out farewells to their comrades while being hauled off to the executioner. In order to prevent this and the resultant unrest among the other prisoners, guards began to gag prisoners being led to their executions. P. Kantor recalled hearing his friend Andrei shout out his last words. An eerie silence followed his initial piercing cry of "comrades!" Then, when his gag was removed for him to confess to a priest, Andrei succeeded in shouting, "Farewell comrades! Long live freedom! Death to the hangmen!"²⁶ In response to such moments of crisis prisoners often began singing revolutionary songs. A. Izmailovich recalls how she awoke from a half-slumber to the strains of the revolutionary "Varshavianka"

²⁴ M. Ol'minskii, *V tiur'me* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1956), 28-9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 37-8.

²⁶ P. M. Kantor, "Smertniki v tiur'me," *KS* 6 (1923): 121. For similar episodes, see Iv. Znamenskii, "Smertniki," *KS* 1 (1921): 71-2; Grunt, "V tiur'me i na katorge," 116.

resounding through the prison walls; “The song finished. Another began: song after song, and all so light, energetic, strong. I’d heard them hundreds of times at student evenings in Petersburg and among tight circles of close comrades... but nowhere did they say so much to me as then behind those walls and bars.”²⁷ Songs allowed political prisoners to establish a sense of communal solidarity and raise their spirits.

Prisoners could use occasional outbursts of sound to overcome barriers and unite in a common sentiment, but for the most part they were condemned to a regime of overwhelming, if not complete, silence. While prisoners were prohibited from making noise, the guards themselves often wore felt boots to avoid detection while walking the corridors and spying on prisoners through the doors’ peepholes. Vorob’ev describes his experience of this silence: “For hours you eagerly try to catch some sort of sound. The prison silence in solitary can drive a prisoner to depression, to gloomy despair.” Many inmates, he says, “sang or talked loudly with themselves just to hear the sound of their voice.”²⁸ Perhaps this was why, after Grunt was thrown into a punishment cell, he heard his neighbor behind the wall drawing out an “endless, despondent, and monotonous song: e-o-o-e...” This mindless singing continued for days, he reports, “and the sound was one and the same, and the idea, it seems, was one and the same, and in it you could sense endless longing and despair... That sound pierces you to the core.” In the end it got on his nerves, and he asked his neighbor to stop, but the latter either did not hear or did not understand, and continued his melancholy song until he was released from *kartser*.²⁹

It was often possible to talk to one’s comrades through the cell’s outer window or the *fortochka* in the door. This allowed for more normal conversation and more effective exchange

²⁷ A. Izmailovich, “Iz proshlogo,” *KS* 7 (1923): 149. As the narrator is grammatically female in the text, “Izmailovich” is presumably a penname.

²⁸ Vorob’ev, “Po tiur’mam i v ssylke,” 109-110.

²⁹ Grunt, “V tiur’mе i na katorge,” 113.

of information than an isolated shout or song but limited the range of one's communication and made prisoners vulnerable to discovery by guards. When Semen Kanatchikov was isolated in Saratov Prison, for example, he could occasionally speak through the window with his comrades in the exercise yard. He once managed to swap a few tips on handling interrogations before two guards rushed up and forced his interlocutors away from the window.³⁰ While inmates communicated through the existing gaps in the cell walls, there is at least one recorded instance of a prisoner creating his own gap in the wall so as to speak with his neighbor. Reading on his bunk, Kanatchikov heard a strange rustling sound; it seemed as if "a giant rat was scraping away and gnawing at a rotten brick behind the wall." Having put the matter out of his mind, he was later startled by a faint, disembodied voice calling to him and wondered if he was hallucinating. In fact, his neighbor had bored a narrow hole through the wall, and the two prisoners could converse easily by putting their heads up to the opening—until, that is, their device was discovered by the guards and filled up with wooden plugs.³¹

The most sophisticated and versatile method of prison communication did not rely on projecting one's voice. Inmates tapped out letters on the wall in a sort of Morse code, the so-called "prison alphabet" (*tiuremnaia azbuka*). The basic idea was that a slightly shortened, 28-letter version of the Russian alphabet was arranged in six rows of five letters each (the last row containing only three). Two quick sequences of taps would indicate a letter, the first referring to the row, the second to the column. In this way prisoners could spell out words through taps that could carry through the stone walls separating their cells.³² But there were a number of problems surrounding tapping, the first of which was how a new prisoner was to learn the

³⁰ Semen Ivanovich Kanatchikov, *A Radical Worker in Tsarist Russia: The Autobiography of Semen Ivanovich Kanatchikov*, trans. and ed. Reginald E. Zelnik (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 328-9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 250-1, 253.

³² For diagrams of the prison alphabet, see Katin-Iartsev, "V tiur'me i ssylke," 202; Ol'minskii, *V tiur'me*, 114.

alphabet. On hearing tapping the new prisoner quickly discerned the existence of the alphabet, but without any verbal communication with other inmates it often proved quite challenging to crack the code. Kanatchikov was lucky enough to find a scrap of paper in the exercise yard which explained the alphabet, and on returning to his cell began tapping on the wall with a pencil to communicate with his neighbors.³³ N. Bukh was one of many who had a much harder time. In response to his neighbor tapping on the wall, Bukh banged on the wall to indicate he was listening but did not understand the message. After failing to comprehend the persistent taps, he came up with an idea: to teach his would-be interlocutor his own personal tapping alphabet, in which the latter would then be able to explain the standard prison code. Bukh constructed a six-by-six grid of letters that included all 36 letters of the (then) Russian alphabet. After several failed attempts to teach his version to his neighbor by tapping the letters in alphabetical order, he eventually decoded the word “understand?” (*ponial*) which ended each of his neighbor’s phrases, thus unlocking the prison alphabet.³⁴

Even after mastering the system of numerical tapping prisoners were faced with a number of obstacles. For one thing, tapping limited one’s communication to the individuals in the cells on either side of one’s own. Sometime messages could be relayed from cell to cell down the corridor to reach those further off, but one inmate ignorant of the alphabet or unwilling to cooperate, not to mention an empty cell, was enough to break the chain—the so-called prison “telephone.” To combat this technique, some prison administrations assigned common criminals (who were often illiterate and did not tap) to cells between the political prisoners to act as a buffer for communication. It was also possible to tap on the building’s outer wall to relay a message to a higher or lower floor, or to a cell further down the corridor, bypassing intermediate

³³ Kanatchikov, *A Radical Worker*, 126.

³⁴ N. Bukh, “V Petropavlovskoi kreposti,” *KS* 68, no. 7 (1930): 116-18.

rooms. Ol'minskii recalls that removing his shoe and tapping on the floor with his heel produced a dull thud audible through almost the entire building.³⁵ Clearly, tapping audible to multiple listeners could produce a confused conversation. Those on Bukh's corridor tapped on the glass peepholes in their doors to produce a sharp sound; the resulting overlapping conversations sounded like the "buzzing of bees."³⁶ But in addition to simply ensuring the sound of the taps reached your intended listener, prisoners had to assimilate the ad hoc systems of abbreviations used to shorten messages. Bukh recalls that a phrase like "Yesterday I had a visit from my sister," would be translated into taps as "Yst-i-h-vs-f-m-sr"—incomprehensible to one uninitiated into the code.³⁷ Thus concentric circles of knowledge separated the ignorant prisoner from those who knew the (standard) alphabet and those who used (non-standard) jargon.

What did these prisoners talk about? L. Freifel'd stresses the personal need to find out about your comrades and say something of yourself: "Every former 'solitary prisoner' (*odinochnik*), especially in a prison like Peter and Paul Fortress, knows how agonizingly you think about establishing relations with your neighbors, learning something about them and your other comrades, determining whether you know anyone among the prisoners, letting them know about yourself, and so on."³⁸ In a more professional vein, inmates discussed news about revolutionary activities on the outside and current events in the life of the prison—executions, hunger strikes, etc. In addition, prisoners often tried to propagate their radical views when faced with a non-political neighbor. When A. Stanchinskii was once thrown into *kartser*, he realized that his neighbor was not an actual prisoner but a soldier assigned to guard prisoner convoys being punished for bad behavior. What is more, the soldier's fellows frequented his cell due to

³⁵ Ol'minskii, *V tiur'me*, 114.

³⁶ Bukh, "V Petropavlovskoi kreposti," 119.

³⁷ Ibid. See also Ol'minskii, *V tiur'me*, 114.

³⁸ L. Freifel'd, "Iz proshlogo," *KS* 41, no. 4 (1928): 68.

lax discipline. Having found a (literally) captive audience, Stanchinskii indulged his propagandistic urge and tapped to the soldier and his friends about the ideology and goals of socialism, the need for land reform, etc. Once, however, the soldier was called out of his cell on some business, and Stanchinskii tapped out his messages for the better part of an hour to an empty room; another time the soldier's commanding officer entered the cell, caught the gist of the taps, and responded with abundant cursing.³⁹ This situation could also be reversed. Grunt found himself neighbor to a zealous Tolstoyan who tried to convert him, tapping out biblical passages day and night and insisting: "I want to save your soul. Evil cannot resist." The Tolstoyan was not put off by an irate Grunt telling him to take his bible and go to the devil.⁴⁰ But while efforts to spread news and propaganda figure prominently in memoir accounts of prison communication, some passages betray tapping's less utilitarian uses. Grunt played chess with his comrade Sol'ts by tapping his moves through the floor and moving figurines made out of bread on a paper board. He quickly tired of the game as Sol'ts kept winning.

In addition to communicating directly through speech or tapping, prisoners were able to smuggle things from cell to cell using a variety of methods. Vorob'ev describes how, under cover of darkness, he lowered a note affixed to a thread weighted down by a small bread ball. His neighbor on the floor below, informed ahead of time through tapping, would catch the note and send a reply. It was possible to smuggle tobacco and even contraband newspapers in this fashion.⁴¹ While in the Odessa prison, Trotsky developed a more sophisticated technique, based on the same basic principle, to pass his notebook—in which he was assiduously writing a study of freemasonry—to friends in other cells. As prearranged by tapping, the intended recipient would swing a weighted string in a wide circle outside his window. Trotsky would catch the

³⁹ A. P. Stanchinskii, "V Algachakh," *KS* 3 (1922): 85.

⁴⁰ Grunt, "V tiur'me i na katorge," 102.

⁴¹ Vorob'ev, "Po tiur'mam i v ssylke," 112-13.

string by sticking out his broom and tie on his manuscript, which could then be reeled in. To pass it to those further away, the hand-off had to be broken down into several stages.⁴² While riskier, it was also possible to smuggle something through the exercise yard. Bukh arranged for his neighbor Evgeniia Figner to get him some cigarettes, which he craved wildly but could not buy from the prison store for lack of funds. On her daily walk she buried a pack at the corner of a bench by the *bania*, tapped their location to Bukh, who managed to retrieve them on his walk under the nose of a guard distracted by pigeons. He had no matches, but lit them from his lamp.⁴³

Many prisoners felt the urge to leave their mark for future inmates as well as communicate with their current fellows. In search of a lasting form of expression, inmates scrawled their names on the furniture or walls. Although Freifel'd's cell had been repainted white to cover up traces of previous inhabitants, he could still make out notes etched into the walls "testifying to sufferings undergone" and noticed someone's last name carved into the table. He was even more surprised to discover that the handkerchief he had been given had the number "4" surreptitiously inked in under the hem. Struggling to decode this message, he decided to order book number four from the prison catalogue—sure enough, in its margins someone had written detailed practical advice for new arrivals, which Freifel'd reports putting to good use.⁴⁴

Sometimes the urge to write was less about actually communicating with others than about finding an outlet for otherwise stifled creative energy. Lokerman relates the story of a neighbor who did not let lack of paper stop him from composing an artistic work. This N. Matveev,

⁴² Trotsky, *My Life*, 121.

⁴³ Bukh, "V Petropavlovskoi kreposti," 120-1.

⁴⁴ Freifel'd, "Iz proshlogo," 68.

“could not handle inactivity at all. At first he had neither books nor papers. And then, having got hold of a bit of pencil, Matveev began to write some sort of novella on whatever came to hand—he wrote all over his desk, table, windowsill, then started on the walls... For whole days he stood at the walls and, burning with inspiration, filled up one patch of space after another. Having covered all the walls at the level of his height, he stood on the table and wrote out a second story, one could say, to his work.”⁴⁵

Surely such a work would not be preserved in the cell for the next inhabitant to read, and it is surprising that the guards did not put an immediate stop to an activity that would have been impossible to conceal. Straying dangerously close to madness, Ol’minskii invented a writing game that he would play with himself. In the dark of the night he pressed a sheet of newspaper against the wall and scrawled letters across it without being able to see what he was writing. In the morning he “deciphered these odd and capricious (*prichudlivye*) characters: the letters ran in all directions, lines overlapped each other—it was amusing.”⁴⁶ Eschewing the rational, Ol’minskii found some meaning in this process of writing and reflecting on the unintelligible.

Entering the Mind

If prisoners went to great lengths to talk to each other behind the backs of the guards, they were often simply unable to communicate. Even when they could, every prisoner in solitary spent the bulk of his or her time totally alone. They relied on their mental resources in a number of ways. First, prisoners dealt with space and time by exercising in their cells and conceptualizing their sentences. Second, they read and studied to occupy their time and achieve a sense of productivity. Third, beyond the bounds of structured activities like reading, prisoners escaped the cell through daydreams or began perceiving reality differently than they had in the outside world. In each case those imprisoned managed to find some meaning in their minds that

⁴⁵ A. Lokerman, “Po Kievskim tiur’mam v 1904-1905 g.g.,” *KS* 19, no. 6 (1925): 190-1.

⁴⁶ Ol’minskii, *V tiur’me*, 91.

they could not realize in their day-to-day existence, whether through conscious discipline or the abandon of dreams.

The mind's workings relied to a great extent on body's activities: for many prisoners exercise took on a significance beyond the purely physical. In addition to their daily half-hour walks in the prison yard, many inmates exercised in their cells. Pacing back and forth across one's cell could become a ritual that allowed one to feel a measure of control over space while confined within narrow walls. Voronskii walked back and forth down the length of his cell—five paces there, five paces back—until his head spun from the constant turning.⁴⁷ Katin-Iartsev would pace several versts each day, during which time he would be “thinking or building castles in the air,” escaping the prosaic reality of the cell.⁴⁸ Trotsky assiduously paced the diagonal of his cell, counting out one thousand, one hundred and eleven steps. When he was “sick with loneliness” Trotsky would seek refuge in discipline and pace out another one thousand, one hundred and eleven steps. Like Katin-Iartsev, Trotsky's mind was busy while his legs were moving—he composed verses in his head that he later related to his comrades. Some, he says, became popular and were later included in revolutionary song-books.⁴⁹

Besides walking back and forth, some prisoners practiced gymnastics. Katin-Iartsev mentions doing gymnastic exercises but says that they became boring and that he preferred walking back and forth.⁵⁰ Perhaps this was because pacing better lent itself to forming and achieving concrete goals, such as Trotsky's one thousand, one hundred and eleven paces, in much the same way as prisoners imagined their sentence ticking down day by day. Voronskii got up every morning and did the exercises he was taught in seminary, the so-called “left leg

⁴⁷ Voronskii, *Za zhivoi i mertvoi vodoi*, 147.

⁴⁸ Katin-Iartsev, “V tiur'me i ssylke,” 189.

⁴⁹ Trotsky, *My Life*, 115-16.

⁵⁰ Katin-Iartsev, “V tiur'me i ssylke,” 189.

lunge with the jutting out of the corresponding arm.” “I did ‘lunges,’” he writes, “with diligence and concentration. The expression on my face was manly and unflinching. I stared at the wall firmly and sternly, jutting my arm out in front as if piercing and killing my foe, pulling back my legs in a military manner, huffing and sputtering, commanding myself: ‘one, two, one, two.’”⁵¹ The martial element in Voronskii’s mental state is significant: it connects his practice of physical discipline to a struggle larger than himself, a sort of military community of revolutionaries, and allows him to indulge fantasies of power over his enemies in a situation where he had no power over anyone. But the undercurrent of humor comes to the surface when he describes how a guard walked into his cell and he, awakened to reality, quickly ceased his exercises.

Inmates record experiencing time differently in prison than in the outside world, as serving a sentence of a given length made them highly conscious of time’s passage. Katin-Iartsev remarked that,

“Prison time passes extremely slowly, but when it passes that which happened a few months ago seems just like yesterday. As if it was a journey through an uninhabited, monotonous, desert plain. A journey that seems endless due to the dismal monotony, and due to the lack of landmarks by which one could note the space already passed through it seems less than it really is—the desert conceals space. A year, full of diverse life, flies by imperceptibly, and as you’re living it you don’t notice. But look back and it seems incredible that you lived so much in that year; it seems like several have passed.”⁵²

His use of a spatial metaphor to describe the passage of time recalls the way he and Trotsky counted paces while traversing the space of their cells.

Few memoirists were as conscious of time as Ol’minskii, who distinguished between small, discrete units of time and larger more qualitative units. “When you imagine only days,” he said of the start of his stay in solitary, “then the remaining one thousand twenty nine days do not seem like so long a time. But when you remember that they make up three summers, three

⁵¹ Voronskii, *Za zhivoi i mertvoi vodoi*, 145-6.

⁵² Katin-Iartsev, “V tiur’me i ssylke,” 195.

autumns, three winters, and two springs, then the length of the sentence begins to weigh on you.”⁵³ While the passage of large chunks of time such as seasons and more abstract conceptions like “half a year” or “a third of the sentence” were a cause for celebration, they could also disturb one’s tranquility with the thought of how much time remained. Ol’minskii became extremely agitated and had trouble sleeping as his “anniversary” drew near: he would have only one year left in solitary of the three of his sentence. But once it passed he became elated and began thinking about how incomparably better it was to have finished two thirds of your sentence than just half. Given the turmoil of celebrating landmark dates, it should come as no surprise that Ol’minskii concentrated on counting the (more manageable) days. He gave a selection of his mental calendar as follows: “September 6: 870 days will pass, only 870 left; November 15: 800 days left...”⁵⁴

Meeting Minds: Reading and Study

Beyond taking some basic measures to come to terms with the spatial and temporal boundaries of their prison existence, radicals in solitary devoted much of their time to reading. In his article on literacy and reading in Aleksandrovskaia prison, Irkutsk province, P. Fabrichnyi notes how reading could take the place of human contact: “If reading is a necessity on the outside (*na vole*), then it is far more necessary in prison, with all the monotony and uniformity of prison life, where with the lack of people in, say, solitary confinement, a book often replaces a comrade.”⁵⁵ Isolated from people and deprived of fresh impressions, says Fabrichnyi, forced to stare at the same four walls and patch of sky, almost every literate prisoner chose to read something. Voronskii describes how he once got a glimpse of what it would be like to

⁵³ Ol’minskii, *V tiur'me*, 21.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵⁵ P. Fabrichnyi, “Gramota i kniga na katorge,” *KS* 3 (1922): 189.

experience solitary without books. Because his iron table and chair were fastened through the wall to those of his neighbor, and the bolts had loosened over time, Voronskii's table and chair would rise up slightly whenever his neighbor sat down. This neighbor made it his habit to jump up and down on his table and chair, jolting and rocking Voronskii as he tried to study. After trying unsuccessfully to communicate with him through taping, Voronskii found out from the guard that his neighbor was illiterate and in for robbery. "Glancing at my books," he recalls, "my notebooks and textbooks, I realized that I was very happy. To think, from six in the morning till night he didn't know what to do with himself—he languished, got annoyed, and annoyed me... He envied that I could sit calmly and work."⁵⁶

Prisoners got books in one of two ways. They could be sent books from friends and family on the outside, or they could borrow them from the prison library. Without anything more to their tastes, many prisoners were forced to fall back on the abundant religious literature stocked in these libraries. S. Kovalik regretted the dearth of books in his prison, where he was given the gospel and could only borrow issues of religious journals. He sated his desire for news by pouring over the meager lines devoted to political events in *Tserkovnyi Vestnik* (The Church Herald). Trotsky, perhaps the most intellectual of the memoirists surveyed, embraced this religious literature with enthusiasm and a sense of humor. Imprisoned in Odessa and with no way to get reading material from the outside, he "studied [religious journals] insatiably, and learned through them to know all the sects and heresies of ancient and modern times, all the advantages of the orthodox church service, and the best arguments against Catholicism, Protestantism, Tolstoyism, and Darwinism."⁵⁷ Trotsky disputed theology with his hymn-

⁵⁶ Voronskii, *Za zhivoi i mertvoi vodoi*, 147.

⁵⁷ Trotsky, *My Life*, 117.

humming jailor and became particularly absorbed in a detailed description of heaven, which ended melancholically with, “The precise location of paradise is not known.”⁵⁸

Despite the restrictions on reading material, it was sometimes possible for prisoners to satisfy their cravings for news of the outside world. Of course, major events could become known by word of mouth, but sometimes prisoners got their hands on actual newspapers—which were strictly forbidden in Russian prisons. Mitskevich remembers how one of his comrades received a dish of milk wrapped up in an issue of *Russkie vedomosti* (Russian Gazette): it was passed from hand to hand, and all the politicals started furiously tapping news to one another.⁵⁹ Ol’minskii succeeded in receiving what “a political prisoner in a Russian prison could normally not even dream of: a daily newspaper”—under an administrative regime, moreover, which even banned most journals. He heard that another prisoner had once received the official publication of the Ministry of Finances, “The Herald of Finance, Industry, and Trade,” which the prison officials apparently deemed too dry and innocuous to prohibit. Invoking this precedent, he petitioned the administration for the journal, “with all supplements (*prilozheniiami*),” knowing that a daily newspaper, the “Trade and Industry Gazette,” was attached to the journal. The administration approved Ol’minskii’s request before learning of the newspaper supplement’s existence; not wanting to admit their oversight, they delivered the newspaper along with the journal. Along with getting detailed information on his country’s economic life, Ol’minskii gained unprecedented access to political news.⁶⁰

For those in solitary confinement language study often took the place of actual communication and provided a goal towards which prisoners could work. Some of the less educated used their new-found leisure time to teach themselves to read and write. Entering

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Mitskevich, *Na grani dvukh epokh*, 212.

⁶⁰ Ol’minskii, *V tiur’me*, 44-5.

prison as an illiterate worker, B. Breslav taught himself the alphabet and practiced reading over one and a half years in solitary. Many of the more educated taught themselves foreign languages: Kanatchikov, for example, began to study French out of a self-instruction manual, but reports that he forgot what he had learned after leaving prison. In order to improve his French and German, Mitskevich read Rousseau and Goethe in the original. Through his sister Trotsky managed to get four bibles, in French, German, English, and Italian. Relying on a basic knowledge of the former two languages, he slowly progressed through the gospel by reading all four books side by side. Katin-Iartsev started English from scratch but eventually could read it fluently—he set himself the rule that he would only read belles lettres in English and German. Apart from novels, he practiced his German by reading through the third volume of Marx’s *Capital*—a common choice for those who sought to burnish their socialist credentials while honing language skills.⁶¹

It should come as no surprise that radical political prisoners devoted their time to studying the classics of socialism and reading in the social sciences more broadly, which allowed them to feel that they were improving themselves for future service to “the cause.” When Kanatchikov was in solitary in Tsaritsyn Prison, he mastered the first volume of Marx’s *Capital* and read “Aulard’s *History of the Great French Revolution*, the Webbs’ *Trade Unionism* and *History of the Labor Movement in England*, Buckle’s *History of Civilization in England*, Mill’s *Logic*” and other works.⁶² For Voronskii reading Marx and Kropotkin was as natural an adjustment to solitary confinement as learning how to tap the prison alphabet and lie to one’s interrogators.⁶³ Mitskevich reproduced a list from one of his surviving prison notebooks of the

⁶¹ B. A. Breslav, “Chtenie Gor’kogo v tiur’mе,” *KS* 41, no. 4 (1928): 120; Kanatchikov, *A Radical Worker*, 343; Mitskevich, *Na grani dvukh epokh*, 202; Trotsky, *My Life*, 118; Katin-Iartsev, “V tiur’mе i ssylke,” 200-1, 189.

⁶² Kanatchikov, *A Radical Worker*, 343.

⁶³ Voronskii, *Za zhivoi i mertvoi vodi*, 138.

books he read in solitary; the names Marx, Kautsky, Lamprecht, Darwin, and Kovalevskii appear particularly prominently. He noted that his “reading in history, economics, statistics, and law laid a fairly strong factual base for Marx’s theory, which we had assimilated before coming to prison. This education served many of us Marxist-Leninists throughout our lives.”⁶⁴ Some prisoners even made attempts at producing original scholarship. Aside from his other academic pursuits, Trotsky researched and wrote a Marxist analysis of Freemasonry (in that same notebook he passed from window to window for his comrades to read). He based his research on books he managed to get through relatives and friends in the town.⁶⁵

But prisoners’ intense interest in Marxism could verge on or lead to madness. Lokerman recalls that a certain “Girshberg or Girshfel’d,” a Social Democrat in charge of transporting forbidden literature, mentally snapped under the pressures of solitary. He stopped sleeping and doing anything but walking up and down his cell in ecstasy over Marx’s genius; from time to time he would clap his hands and shout out in awe and delight: “Ka-a-arl Marx! Ka-a-arl Marx!” On one occasion this Girshberg went to the bath house accompanied by a guard who, recognizing his condition, made every effort to help the unwell prisoner. But despite the guard’s gentle efforts to get him to take a shower, Girshberg insisted on proving to him that Petr Struve had completely distorted Marx’s theory of the value of labor. The other prisoners witnessed a somewhat frightened guard backing out of the bath house: “behind him followed the near-sighted Grishberg, without glasses, completely naked, holding [the guard] by the buttons of his uniform and leaning in almost to his chest—he was excitedly and ironically exposing and demolishing all of Struve’s cunning sophisms (*khitrospleteniia*).” Late one night, under the influence of Marx’s greatness, Grishberg decided to stage a revolution (*perevorot*, literally a “turning over”) in his

⁶⁴ Mitskevich, *Na grani dvukh epokh*, 201, 202.

⁶⁵ Trotsky, *My Life*, 119-21.

own cell. To this end he physically *turned over* his bed, table, chair, and waste pail, turned his clothes inside out, and triumphantly announced to the guard that their positions were now reversed. When Grishberg demanded to be let out of his cell so that he could begin issuing orders, the guard suggested that he wait till morning, and the ensuing argument ended with the prisoner breaking down in tears.⁶⁶

Aside from works on socialism and various more or less related nonfiction texts, nearly every literate prisoner read literature. Mitskevich illustrates the dual nature of most prisoners' reading by dividing his list of books into two parts: "Academic Works" and "Belles Lettres" (*belletristika*). Whom did prisoners in solitary read? The latter half of Mitskevich's list mentions Rousseau, Byron, Uspenskii, Grigorovich, Shakespeare, Shelgunov, and Zola, along with a number of biographies.⁶⁷ Voronskii reports reading Homer, Dickens, Ibsen, Tolstoy, and Leskov.⁶⁸ The former worker Kanatchikov, less educated than many of our other memoirists, appreciated the opportunity prison provided for reading; he enjoyed Turgenev, Uspenskii, Dostoevsky, Spielhagen, and Shchedrin. The last became his favorite writer for life.⁶⁹ But Kanatchikov was far from the only prisoner who adored Shchedrin, who is mentioned in a number of accounts. Ol'minskii undoubtedly showed the greatest enthusiasm for the writer; laboring for months over a dictionary to Shchedrin's works, he compiled a work composed of four notebooks of four hundred pages each. Among poets, however, Ol'minskii preferred Lermontov, whose verses were for him "the poetry of the downtrodden, the fugitive's wail and

⁶⁶ A. Lokerman, "Po Kievskim tiur'mam," 193-5.

⁶⁷ Mitskevich, *Na grani dvukh epokh*, 201-2.

⁶⁸ Voronskii, *Za zhivoi i mertvoi vodoi*, 147.

⁶⁹ Kanatchikov, *A Radical Worker*, 125.

the prisoner's groan."⁷⁰ Of course the emotional experience of such intense reading was magnified for inmates deprived of life's usual stimulations.

Nearly every memoirist who discusses reading literature also comments on its dangers. While nonfiction and language study proved to be good ways to discipline a mind under the strains of solitary confinement, literature gave free reign to the imagination in a situation where this was both necessary and hazardous. "Literature (*belletristika*) affected me unusually strongly in prison," said Mitskevich, "Because of my complete separation from the outside world, when I read a novel I was completely transported into that milieu and the protagonist's experiences became like my own—I lived through the experiences of the novel's characters." He would read from early morning until his lamp was taken away at eleven at night. Then he would get headaches and become too exhausted to look at a book. Consequently Mitskevich tried to avoid reading too much fiction.⁷¹ Katin-Iartsev noted that literature destroyed his "mental equanimity" through overstimulating his imagination.⁷² For this reason Ol'minskii described literature as a "narcotic poison" that ravages your consciousness. After emerging from reading, he says, "solitude is felt all the more" and "despair grips your heart."⁷³ There was a certain circularity to reading and drifting into thoughts of freedom: while fantasies of life in the wider world could prevent one from concentrating on reading in the first place, those who concentrated too deeply on their novels found that it itself led to thoughts of freedom.

⁷⁰ Ol'minskii, *V tiur'me*, 40-1, 22.

⁷¹ Mitskevich, *Na grani dvukh epokh*, 202.

⁷² Katin-Iartsev, "V tiur'me i ssylke," 188.

⁷³ Ol'minskii, *V tiur'me*, 102.

Withdrawing into the Mind

When alone without books, or when they could not concentrate on the books they had, prisoners drifted into reveries. The lack of external stimulation in solitary made concentrating more difficult than in the outside world. Lokerman reported that frequently his “thoughts wandered to the past and jumped chaotically from theme to theme as various memories came to mind.”⁷⁴ While wary of the dangers of this daydreaming, prisoners needed to escape from reality in order to deal with the reality around them. They flirted with insanity in order to remain sane. Remarking that he dreamed too much in his first year of solitary and later began to discipline his mind, Ol’minskii admitted that: “I did not fully free myself from dreaming; that would be a completely hopeless endeavor. Figuring out how to live in solitary without dreaming is itself just as fantastical a dream as the cap of invisibility.”⁷⁵

What did prisoners dream about? Many evaded the present by daydreaming about the past and the future. Envisioning faces from his earlier life, Ol’minskii was suddenly transported to thoughts of what lay ahead: “And future, where are you? A shore beyond a distant fog. And yet prison lives only in the future, only in the thought of freedom,” which he imagined as “movement, air, and space.”⁷⁶ More concretely, prisoners thought of their family and friends. Kanatchikov, for example, would stand every evening in the middle of his cell and loudly declaim Gorky’s “Song of the Falcon.” Although prisoners sometimes spoke or sang to themselves just to hear a human voice, Kanatchikov also “dreamed about how, once I was free, I would recite the song to comrades at our evening gatherings. How it raised my spirits! My austere, uninviting cell was transformed into a bright, cozy room.”⁷⁷ In his fantasy Kanatchikov

⁷⁴ A. Lokerman, “Po Kievskim tiur’mam,” 190.

⁷⁵ Ol’minskii, *V tiur’me*, 53.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 58-9.

⁷⁷ Kanatchikov, *A Radical Worker*, 129-30.

replaced his current solitude with a future community of friends, linking the dream with the real by projecting his voice in a song of defiance. In a similar way, but with a more complex effect, Breslav describes visions of familiar faces as less consoling than haunting:

“The faces of those close to you rise up in your mind like old half-faded portraits, and the past is like a weak, far-off, and scarcely audible echo. Like the pitiful cry of an abandoned child calling its mother for help, this echo constantly disturbs a prisoner’s heart and worries his soul. Where are they, these near and dear ones? How are they? Are they sad, despairing, pained in their hearts, or have they forgotten about us?”⁷⁸

Memoirists have left few vivid accounts of remembering family and friends, despite the fact that such daydreams must have been quite common. Perhaps this is because these memories were in some sense “half-faded,” more emotionally palpable than easily expressible.

Prisoners also fantasized about nature, contrasting the organic flow of life in wide-open spaces with their own artificially constrained existence. Gazing into the garden outside his window, Kanatchikov let his mind transport him “far beyond the high, thick walls of the prison out to the vast green fields, sparkling in the rays of the sun, and to the meadows, with their fragrant smell of clover and chamomile, near the village I had abandoned so long ago.”⁷⁹ Looking at pigeons flying over the Neva, Ol’minskii imagined himself sprouting wings and soaring off into the sky. In another escape fantasy, he envisioned himself donning a cap of invisibility and slipping out of the prison. Following the course of the Neva, Ol’minskii escaped the noise of the city and found himself in a spring landscape. When he began to tire of his pastoral reverie, he imagined using his invisibility to free his comrades from their cells and together renew the struggle against the tsarist order.⁸⁰ Interestingly, nature seems to be something that these prisoners experienced alone, not communally—Ol’minskii leaves the fields to rejoin the community of his fellows. But Ol’minskii recognized the danger of daydreaming,

⁷⁸ B. Breslav, “Na voliu,” *KS* 4, (1922): 154.

⁷⁹ Kanatchikov, *A Radical Worker*, 254.

⁸⁰ Ol’minskii, *V tiur’me*, 21, 23-4.

just as some of his fellow prisoners realized the hazards of letting novels replace reality. “With each step forward,” he says, “returning to reality becomes more unpleasant. It’s an enthralling high (*eto prosto zapoi*).”

Projecting the Mind Outward

In an environment where external stimulation was kept to a minimum, looking out of the window became a crucial way for prisoners to maintain some connection with the outside world. Ol’minskii demonstrates how gripping these outside impressions could be. When transferred to a different cell in *Kresty*, he spent the whole day looking out the window, intoxicated by the new view: the Neva, the Liteinyi bridge, and beautiful houses on the other bank.⁸¹ Yet prison administrations banned looking out the window, although some prisons and guards enforced this rule more strictly than others. Prisoners caught gazing out would be reprimanded or dispatched to a punishment cell. Nevertheless, as Vorob’ev noted, for prisoners the window “beckoned... with an irresistible force”⁸²

Inmates were caught looking out the window by guards spying into the cell through the peephole in the door, known as the *glazok* (“little eye”). Thus the prisoner’s field of vision out through the window towards freedom was counterbalanced by the ever-present threat of the authorities’ inward gaze. When the cell window was high up in the wall prisoners needed to stand on the table to get a good view, or, like Kanatchikov, pull themselves up by a towel thrown round a hook.⁸³ This of course made one’s intentions obvious to a guard looking in at the *glazok*. Prisoners like Mitskevich carefully followed the guard’s footsteps in the corridor,

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 72-3.

⁸² Vorob’ev, “Po tiur’mam i v ssylke,” 113.

⁸³ Kanatchikov, *A Radical Worker*, 123.

slipping down off the table as he approached.⁸⁴ But many guards wore felt boots that scarcely made a sound, and prisoners like Vorob'ev, with no way to sense a guard's approach, avoided protracted gazing out the window and confined themselves to occasional glances.⁸⁵ Frustration with the *glazok*'s intrusiveness prompted little rebellions. Kanatchikov amused himself by hiding to the side of the door, out of the peephole's field of vision, for which he was severely reprimanded.⁸⁶ Annoyed that the *glazok* concealed the observer's identity—only an eye was visible through the glass—Bukh put his face up to the hole, met the eye's gaze, and scrutinized it back. Closing the *glazok*'s outer cover, the guard retreated. Bukh had won his battle over perception, at least for the moment.⁸⁷

When they looked out the window, prisoners felt a connection to life in the outside world. What they saw could trigger daydreams, much like reading novels could, or it could become the substance on which prisoners imposed some sort of meaning. In short, it became the nexus for “withdrawing into mind” and “projecting mind out.” For Ol'minskii, one of the most introspective of our memoirists, the view of St. Petersburg from his window in *Kresty* took on a multilayered significance that helped him feel part of a community. Every day he would watch the black smoke rising from factory smokestacks in the distance, the “black breath” of the city's proletariat that promised future revolution. During workers' strikes in the city he felt connected to the events by observing the lack of rising smoke.⁸⁸ But beyond any sense of politics or class-based community, Ol'minskii was captivated by the everyday city life that he observed from afar: “Beyond the fence, at liberty, figures in red shirts moved about on a barge stocked with wood. Are they people or are they dolls? What are their joys? Do they have goals? If one of

⁸⁴ Mitskevich, *Na grani dvukh epokh*, 197.

⁸⁵ Vorob'ev, “Po tiur'mam i v ssylke,” 109.

⁸⁶ Kanatchikov, *A Radical Worker*, 123-4.

⁸⁷ Bukh, “V Petropavlovskoi kreposti,” 115-16.

⁸⁸ Ol'minskii, *V tiur'me*, 36, 38-9.

those figures disappeared into the waves I would remain calmly indifferent. But that's freedom; they're free people."⁸⁹ On the one hand, Ol'minskii felt an emotional distance from the red-shirted figures that reflected not only their physical separation—they were as small as “dolls”—but also the fact that they were at liberty while he was imprisoned. On the other, he tried to put himself in their place and understand their joys and goals, thus vicariously tasting freedom. While Ol'minskii's sympathy with the workers and their “black smoke” was straightforward, his more complex attitude towards the figures on the barge indicates, perhaps, that maintaining a certain distance from freedom was necessary to remain sane in solitary confinement.

Prisoners could feel intimately connected to forms of nonhuman life as well. Plants were important for Ol'minskii, who grew flowers and a few vegetables in a pot in his cell with soil he collected on one of his daily walks. He carefully tended his phloxes and asters, delightedly watching them grow and bloom, until they were discovered by the warden and removed. When temporarily transferred out of his cell for disinfecting, he looked out of his new window at a cluster of trees:

“Only the birches whisper to one another. It seems like they're also prisoners, that they're remembering a happier time when, at liberty, they grew on the edge of a forested field where a stream babbled with the breath of a resinous wind about the secret deeps of the woods, about carefree birds and timid beasts. When the birches fell forlornly silent, sunken in their own thoughts, I still envied them. They are not completely alone.”

While Ol'minskii grew attached to the plants he tended in his own cell, he identified strongly with these personified birches. He saw them as prisoners like himself, who, like him, yearned for a past time of freedom in another place. But unlike him, they enjoyed a community in their grove. Approximately two years later, Ol'minskii witnessed birch saplings being planted in the exercise yard and returned to the same image of trees as prisoners: “The birches planted today are thin and puny. It makes me sad to look at them: they're just arrested children with little naïve

⁸⁹ Ibid., 59.

eyes—their leaves.”⁹⁰ When prisoners like Ol’minskii were deprived of human community in solitary, they could feel a sort of fellowship even with plants and birch trees.

Similarly, many prisoners felt an increased affinity for animal life. Watching animals connected them to other living beings, beings not bound by the strictures of confinement. As Katin-Iartsev noted, “it gave pleasure to see some sort of non-prison life.”⁹¹ This was true even when those animals were usually regarded as repulsive. When Stanchinskii was thrown into *kartser*, he expressed no aversion towards the rats that became his only cellmates. “Under the floorboards,” he recalls, “there was a rustling and a scratching sound. I wasn’t alone—there were rats. Soon I felt something run across my legs and disappear into the corner.” But there were no creatures on earth that he loathed, as he put it, except for some of the two-legged variety. His trust in the rats was justified, as they did not once bite him in his time in *kartser*.⁹² In one of his contemplative night moods standing by the window, Ol’minskii began feeling a bond with a spider on his windowsill: “But I’m not alone. Hi there little spider. How diligently you’re working on the window bars... The fly easily broke your cunning web. But there’s a dead gnat, get it!” As the spider enjoyed its repast a mosquito settled on his hand. Ol’minskii calmly let it drink his blood and fly off into the night, thinking about the last time his hand had felt a human touch.⁹³

No animals seem to have meant as much to prisoners as pigeons. Breslav called pigeons the “only friends” of a prisoner in solitary, and even allowing for some exaggeration, pigeons do seem to be some of the only creatures—undeniably more appealing than rats or spiders—to visit

⁹⁰ Ibid., 66-8, 31, 103.

⁹¹ Katin-Iartsev, “V tiur’me i ssylke,” 189.

⁹² Stanchinskii, “V Algachakh,” 84.

⁹³ Ol’minskii, *V tiur’me*, 60-1.

prisoners' cells and inspire them with a sense of the freedom of flight.⁹⁴ To attract pigeons Katin-Iartsev sprinkled bread crumbs on his windowsill, which he had to stand on a pile of books to reach. They built a nest there and laid two small eggs, which the prisoner hoped to see hatch and grow. But on returning one day from his walk in the exercise yard, he noticed that the nest was gone—destroyed by guards who told him that “It isn’t allowed” (*ne polagaetsia*). For Katin-Iartsev the relationship between pigeon society and the human society of the prison was an antithetical one. He notes that “These pigeons were the only free beings which we saw. Our guards seemed just as much prisoners as we were ourselves.” He explained the destruction of the nest by thinking that the prison world could not tolerate any non-prison intrusion on its life, however harmless. In this sense the pigeons represented human society outside of the prison better than the human beings did themselves.⁹⁵ Ol’minskii supports Katin-Iartsen’s assertion that pigeons were seen as alien to the prison world. Although he says that most prisoners loved pigeons, a handful gave in to the prison environment and attacked them much as the guards did Katin-Iartsen’s visitors, although with more sadistic intent. These inmates, Ol’minskii notes, “shaved half of the pigeons’ heads [to make them look like prisoners] and fastened cotton shackles around their legs.”⁹⁶ The pigeons, unable to take flight, would die.

In the most detailed description of pigeon life among our memoirists, Ol’minskii devotes eight pages of his memoir to the birds who visited his windowsill. He used Marxist categories to understand his winged visitors: “That the pigeon is bourgeois is evident from its passion for expanding its property...” he wrote, “It tries to take over ever more space and desperately defends what it recognizes as its own. During this defense it becomes visibly stronger—

⁹⁴ Breslav, “Na voliu,” 154.

⁹⁵ Katin-Iartsev, “V tiur’me i ssylke,” 189.

⁹⁶ Ol’minskii, *V tiur’me*, 77.

obviously indicating its consciousness of its property rights.”⁹⁷ At the same time, Ol’minskii paid great attention to each bird that came to his windowsill. He gave them names like “The Rogue,” “The Cop,” “Long-legged,” “Nose-less,” and “The Fool,” and attentively observed their struggles over breadcrumbs. The Rogue, for example, grew fat on breadcrumbs and lorded it over The Cop, who helped protect their ledge and was rewarded with food. Long-legged persistently courted The Rogue, until their “platonic idyll” was shattered by Nose-less, who viciously conquered the ledge. In disgrace, The Rogue flew off to seek her fortunes elsewhere, driven by her pride, Ol’minskii suggests, to sacrifice the material benefits of a subordinate position. When one day Nose-less disappeared for no discernible reason, The Fool came to take his place.

As in other cases with prisoners in solitary, animals in some sense took the place of human community. Beyond that, however, Ol’minskii tried to understand his pigeon friends in much the same way as he tried to understand human society. He adopted a blanket ideological explanation for their behavior—pigeons are bourgeois—but found that a different mode of observation was necessary to appreciate their day-to-day dynamics. “Bourgeois” is a category he drops in his narrative of their power struggles. The pigeons’ motives seem varied, not even purely pragmatic: Long-legged’s courtship is based on some sort of real affection, Ol’minskii suggests, as he ignores other birds, and The Rogue had pride when defeated by Nose-less. Ol’minskii combined the ideological and the personal in an analysis as involved as that often applied to human societies. One has no difficulty imagining him sitting in his cell and writing a sociological tract, or a Shakespearean drama, based on his feathered friends.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 76.

Epilogue: Leaving Solitary

Leaving life in solitary was a joyous occasion. Not truly understanding what was happening as a guard led him to the main office, Kanatchikov rejoiced at the news of his release. He joined his friends in the Nevsky Gates neighborhood of St. Petersburg amid embraces and general exultation. But prisoners' joy at leaving solitary was often mixed with some feelings of remorse. Kanatchikov regretted that the time he could devote to study had come to an end when released from his second stint in solitary. Defining his time in prison in relation to the cause of revolution, he had mixed feelings about losing the free time he could devote to self-improvement but was glad he could now actively renew the struggle.⁹⁸

Ol'minskii's thoughts on leaving solitary were more personal and more brooding. For one thing, his release was more gradual: he was given a cellmate for a time, then sent into exile in Siberia. But leaving prison was not always easy; Ol'minskii testifies that the tension increased as one's sentence wound down: "The last days of prison are the most frightening days. Not long ago a seemingly healthy inmate died here in the prison office, just one minute before his release. His heart couldn't take it." After three years in solitary confinement, Ol'minskii worried more than anything else about whether he would have anything to say to the new cellmate who was being transferred in with him. Would he quickly tire of making conversation with the newcomer? Would he be up to it? Should he meet the new arrival warmly, or try and remain reserved? His cellmate turned out to be a certain Sniatkov, who came from a hospital for the mentally ill. Conversation was difficult at first, as the two awkwardly paced back and forth across the cell—Ol'minskii blamed this on his comrade's slightly abnormal state as much as his own time in solitary. Eventually conversation became easier.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Kanatchikov, *A Radical Worker*, 132-5, 254, 347.

⁹⁹ Ol'minskii, *V tiur'me*, 60, 134-9,

When sent into Siberian exile Ol'minskii noted how difficult it was for him to readjust to life on the outside:

“I’d almost forgotten how to use everyday objects. Knives broke in my hands, dishes flew to the floor, furniture tipped over—my ability to orient myself in an environment more complex than a prison cell was destroyed. Just like a child, I had to get used to many everyday movements all over again. ... I couldn’t take the initiative. They amiably drove me out of the house: ‘go and take a walk!’ In a quarter of an hour I returned—the space, the strangeness of the situation was frightening and oppressing. It was easier and calmer to walk about the room...” But it was the habit of “seeing work only as a way to kill time” that for him was “the mental effect most harmful and most difficult to cure after several years living in conditions contrary to all the demands of the human species. This unique disease leaves its mark on all one’s behavior, on all of one’s future life.”¹⁰⁰

Kanatchikov’s joyous reunion with his fellows and renewed service to the cause stands in contrast to Ol’minskii’s more sober evaluation of rejoining society. Better educated, more introspective by nature, and having spent more time behind bars, Ol’minskii better reflects the difficulties of this process. Still, after his release in 1898 he took an active part in Social Democrat literary journals and newspapers, and was from 1922 to 1931 chairman of the Society of Old Bolsheviks.¹⁰¹ As the existence of his memoir suggests, Ol’minskii communicated something of his experience of solitude to his fellows and again became a part of the revolutionary community.

Conclusion

Russian radicals reached out to form communities even under the most extreme strictures. They went to great lengths to communicate with one another under the noses of the guards, tapping out news and chitchat letter by letter. When cut off from their comrades, prisoners fell back on the resources of their minds to gain some control over a prison term in a

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 165-6.

¹⁰¹ *Deiateli SSSR i revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia Rossii. Entsiklopedicheskii slovar’ granat.* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia, 1989), 565-7.

very small space that would last a very long time. They read books and studied languages, interacting with imaginary others through practicing speech and imagining life in the wider world by engaging in a mental dialogue with nonfiction works and novels. When other stimulation was absent, or they were simply too listless to do anything else, prisoners lapsed into dreams of better times populated by those whom they were unable to see in reality. And, emerging from these reveries, they looked at the world around them with new eyes, bestowing metaphorical life on inanimate objects and embracing the society of personified living things. Maintaining a sense of community was centrally important for these imprisoned radicals.

But while this perspective on revolutionary prisoners answers some questions, it poses still others. To what extent, for example, was this preoccupation with community shared by non-political or non-radical prisoners? Of course a researcher is constrained by his or her sources, and a study of this kind is limited to those inmates well-educated enough to describe their experiences in memoirs, diaries, or the like. Beyond that, it seems that the main characteristic which set these members of the revolutionary movement apart from non-radical prisoners was their faith that they were part of a just cause, and that good would triumph over evil, sooner rather than later. This feeling would have been shared by many religious sectarians imprisoned for their beliefs, whether in Russia or around the world. But unlike most sectarians, these radicals believed that the apocalyptic revolution—in a sense, the end of times—would not come of its own accord, or at least would not come quickly. Only the actions of the revolutionary community could push history towards that conclusion, and perhaps for this reason their sense of community was stronger and more central to their lives. For materialist socialists bent on toppling a great Eurasian empire, individual salvation was not an option: they stood or fell together.

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