

## Siberian Exile, 1590–1863

By overseeing the mass deportation of Polish insurrectionists Alexander II followed a longstanding penal tradition in Russia, one that predated the establishment of the House of Romanov itself. Exile, or banishment from the community, is a nearly primordial punishment that appears in the myths and epic tales of cultures around the world, and is certainly not peculiar to Russia. Adam and Eve were banished from Paradise thanks to the latter's taste for a particular apple; Oedipus the King blinded himself and wandered as an exile through foreign lands. England, France, China, and other countries used exile and deportation for both penal and colonial ends. In Russia, prior to criminals and others being deported to Siberia, monasteries, towns, and rulers banished opponents to the far north and other border regions. In addition to many other chosen punishments, Ivan the Terrible used exile to cleanse his realm of both actual and suspected opponents. The history of pre-Soviet Siberian exile can be divided between the Muscovite Era and the Petersburg Era, based simply upon the transfer of the capital from Moscow to St. Petersburg. The following contextualizes the mass deportation of Poles and demonstrates that Alexander II, far from breaking with Russia's penal traditions, perpetuated and built upon them.<sup>1</sup>

### THE MUSCOVITE ERA (1590–1700)

Soon after the Don Cossack warrior Ermak Timofeevich led his small army across the Urals to invade Sibir Khanate in 1582, exile began to play a central role in Russia's eastward expansion. Russian authorities used exile

to both banish offenders from the interior and facilitate imperial expansion. Moscow deported its first group of exiles—consisting of peasants owned by the powerful Stroganov merchant family—to Siberia in 1590. Following the defeat of Sibir Khanate, officials used these peasants to populate territory around the Tobol River in western Siberia, where they functioned as food producers supplying the soldiers and fur collectors who soon flooded the region.

Three years later, in 1593, Tsar Boris Godunov deported what by some accounts were all the inhabitants of the northern city of Uglich. This punishment came in reprisal for their having rioted two years earlier in the wake of the murder of the young heir to the throne, Dmitrii. Godunov sent the Uglichians to the Pelym *ostrog* (fort) on the Tavda River, not far from modern-day Tobol'sk, where they labored as craftsmen and agricultural peasants. These deportees may be regarded as Siberia's first "political exiles." Yet both they and the Stroganov deportees before them also exemplify Russian rulers' persistent efforts to derive service from all their subjects, even those banished from the interior. Within the context of Siberian exile, the nature of this service varied according to time and place. From the late sixteenth until the late nineteenth century—when the exile system would collapse in complete disorder—Russia's disposition and treatment of exiles was conditioned by this service-state ethos. Hence, Boris Godunov deported this early group of Uglichians as much for statist purposes as to punish them for political opposition.

During the Muscovite Era the state mainly used exiles in one of two capacities, as either Cossacks or peasants. The practice of exiling offenders "to the Cossacks" was not unique to Russia: the use of criminals as soldiers likely dates from the formation of the world's first armies. Muscovy also followed pre-established conventions by using war captives to serve as soldiers. The principality was constantly at war during this period, and captive Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Germans actually figured more prominently in the Siberian host than did Don Cossacks. Exiles assigned to the Cossacks lived nearly the same as non-exiles. They manned the forts whose construction marked Russia's rapid expansion eastward, and routinely conducted sorties to collect fur tribute from local tribes. Prior to the mid-1600s, by which time large numbers of indigenes had succumbed to a combined onslaught of disease, alcohol, and firearms, these sorties relied on a terroristic repertoire of murder, torture, and kidnapping to wrest from them the tribute known as *iasak*. Later, *iasak* became a transaction to which all but a few tribes peacefully submitted. The "black gold" of sable

and other pelts that flowed westward into the coffers of the Romanovs (whose dynasty began in 1613) probably rendered them the richest royal family in Europe. This fur trade helped finance Muscovy's unparalleled territorial expansion.

When not peering through wooden stockades or butchering natives, many Cossacks engaged in farming. So many, in fact, that at least within the Siberian context, the distinction between state servitor and peasant was a largely nominative one as far as the Muscovite Era is concerned. Indeed, Muscovy often paid Cossacks and other servitors with land grants from which they were expected to derive their subsistence. Prior to 1700, agriculture accounted for the livelihoods of 22% of Tobol'sk's servitors. In Tomsk District, this figure was as high as 40%.

Agriculture accounted for the second major role exiles performed for the state. Despite the link between Cossacks and farming, Siberia's large proportion of non-food-producing servitors remained primarily engaged in the fur industry. The supply lines linking them to European Russia were tenuous and fraught, and so Moscow had a keen interest in developing local food production. Finding a sufficient number of agricultural laborers was a problem, however, because the beginning of exile coincided with that of the enserfment of Russia's peasantry. Serfdom throttled any voluntary migration to Siberia before it could begin.

Moscow, therefore, turned to exile to create a Siberian peasantry. In contrast to Siberia's Cossacks, few of those deported to serve as peasants originated as prisoners of war. Nonetheless, many of Siberia's earliest peasants originated in the Ukraine, where Muscovy was extending its control during the seventeenth century. Many of those Ukrainians deported to establish villages at the headwaters of the Lena River in eastern Siberia were victims of what would today be called ethnic cleansing. For Tsar Alexis (r. 1645–1676) and his successors, deportation satisfied three goals: it removed ethnic Ukrainians from the rich black steppe southwest of Moscow; allowed this same area to be settled and farmed by ethnic Russians; and established a peasantry indigenous to Siberia. Muscovy used exile for similar reasons against other regions' inhabitants. These three goals would animate St. Petersburg's deportation of Poles from the Western Provinces in particular.

Strictly speaking, Muscovy forcibly removed two categories of peasants to Siberia. The first were called *perevedentsy* (those-transferred-between-jurisdictions). The Stroganov peasants exiled in 1590 were *perevedentsy*. The distinction is a fine one, but *perevedentsy* were technically distinct from

the second category of peasants the state labeled *syl'nye* (exiles). *Perevedentsy* were neither charged with nor convicted of criminal offenses. Instead, the state used these innocents to populate Siberia as they would livestock. The Crown designated these subjects to found the agricultural peasantry it desperately needed there. Nonetheless, the period during which *perevedentsy* were deported did not last long, and by the late 1630s had pretty much come to an end. By then, self-reproducing agricultural communities were sufficiently established in western Siberia so as to render the costly removal of villagers from European Russia unnecessary, though agricultural development in eastern Siberia would lag far behind that in the west.

Within eastern Siberia, prior to Catherine the Great's reign (1762–1796) the only stable agricultural communities created using exile were those in Ilimsk District, near the headwaters of the Lena River. Ilimsk's success owed itself to a consistent and coordinated effort by state officials combined with the region's very remoteness. Exiles sent there recognized that fleeing into the surrounding wilderness meant either starvation or death at the hands of hostile natives, and so had little choice but to remain and become productive farmers. But Ilimsk was an exception to the state's overall failure to transform exiles into productive peasants. Those assigned to till the land in other districts from which escape was more feasible did not, by and large, remain in their assigned locations; and with so many servitors assigned to the fur industry, there were few officials to prevent exiles from leaving.

This tradition of easy escape is as old as Siberian exile itself. Some escapees “went native,” intermarried with local indigenes, and produced a social stratum colloquially known as *sibiriaki*, who for the most part dressed, lived, and spoke like the Buriats, Tungus, or whatever other people accepted them. Most fugitives, however, either became vagabonds or joined the fur trade. Early accounts refer to these fugitives as *guliashchie liudi* (wandering people); but by the early nineteenth century, these folks simply became known as *brodiagi* (vagabonds). Like those non-exiles pursuing the same vocation, fugitives who joined the fur trade were called *promyshlenniki*. *Promyshlenniki* were supposed to pay the state a tithe consisting of a certain percentage of the furs they collected, but they often ignored this and, in so doing, laid the foundations for Siberia's bevy of wealthy merchant and goldmining families. A *promyshlennik* could acquire as many furs as weapons and mercenaries allowed. Consequently, Siberia's natives were subject to demands far beyond quotas established by the Crown. Despite involving

only a few thousand fur collectors, the *iasak* system was so ruthlessly efficient that, by the late seventeenth century, Siberia's fur-bearing animals were nearly extinct and the fur trade's heyday over.

Despite Siberia's rapidly growing importance to Muscovy, it exiled only several thousand people there prior to 1649. Two major factors limiting the number of exiles were the nearly uninterrupted wars on Muscovy's western borders and the state's relative weakness vis-à-vis the Church and the boyars. But that year, Tsar Alexis promulgated a Law Code (*Ulozhenie*) that became the first official document to identify Siberia as a destination for exiles. Created in the aftermath of a popular uprising that incinerated much of Moscow and nearly toppled the throne, the *Ulozhenie* denoted a momentous development in Russian statecraft. Among other things, it had the effect of assigning every individual within the realm to a fixed social category, or *soslovie*. This document's other key provision was its codification of serfdom. After 1649, serfs could not legally gain freedom without the permission of their owners—whether these owners were private individuals, the Church, or the state.

Less noted is that the *Ulozhenie* similarly defined exiles as among those social categories meant to serve the state. Henceforth, Tsar Alexis's servitor-state apparatus began using exile to create a new stratum of forced laborers and settlers. The *Ulozhenie* immediately raised the numbers of those annually deported to Siberia. Moreover, many of the 1535 legal acts appended to the *Ulozhenie* between 1649 and 1696 broadened the applicability of exile as a punishment. In the words of one historian, the *Ulozhenie* “officially turned Siberia into a land of exile.”<sup>2</sup> It also hastened the autocratic state's expanding police power. Several of the law code's passages paired the punishment of exile with the phrase “to where the Sovereign chooses” (*kuda Gosudar ukazhet*). The state was the autocrat, and the autocrat the state. Russian law therefore became not a collection of standards, practices, and citizens' rights, as law was then becoming in other European countries, but instead a tool within the ruler's arsenal to be used however he deemed fit.

Western European legal systems began to limit autocrats' sovereignty as early as 1215, with the signing of the Magna Carta. The next four centuries witnessed steady development in this direction, with the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia that ended the Thirty Years' War marking a watershed in legality's supersession over sovereignty. In Russia, the fetishization of autocratic power emerged later than in Western Europe, and as such, was *inclining* at the very time it declined elsewhere. What makes Russia so

remarkable and unique is that this incline coincided with the rise of its state apparatus as Russia came into increasing competition with other European polities. This combination of rising autocratic power with an emerging state apparatus gave Russia's post-Westphalian sovereigns far greater power than their peers in England or France ever possessed. Synchrony between a ruler who increasingly answered to no one and a state apparatus so efficient it conquered and exploited Siberia in little more than a century resulted in a hybrid autocrat-state that deemed any crime to be a crime against the personhood of the tsar.

The existence of such an anthropomorphized state helps explain why no Russian autocrat ever acceded to exile's complete abolition: all considered exile to be a form of personal protection. Ivan the Terrible was the prototype, banishing his enemies to monastic dungeons along the White Sea. Tsar Alexis followed in his footsteps, turning Siberia into a massive dungeon where some prisoners were literally kept underground. Under him the number of crimes punishable by exile (including "evil thoughts directed toward the sovereign") expanded exponentially. Tsar Alexis personally banished the Old Believer archpriest Avvakum and the Catholic missionary Juraj Križanić to Siberia, the latter for having uttered "a stupid word" about the tsar.

The 1649 *Ulozhenie* was, therefore, a turning point in the development of both Siberian exile and Russia's autocratic system. It crystallized long-brewing ideas about the sovereign, the state, and their relationship to society, and unequivocally stated that the latter should serve the former. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that the *Ulozhenie* also marks Russia's de facto abolition of the death penalty. After all, an executed offender could no longer serve the state, and service had come to matter more than almost anything. Criminals and other undesirables were now deemed more valuable alive than dead, as long as a use could be found for them. Exile provided that use. As the *Ulozhenie* put it, exile was a "reprieve" from execution, a "gift" from tsar to evildoer, who would then serve his or her penance by toiling in Babylonian captivity somewhere beyond the Urals. The *Ulozhenie*'s institutionalization of Siberian exile in the same year that Parliament beheaded Charles I highlights exile's role in pushing Russia down a unique and distinct path—a path that, in contrast to those taken by Western Europe and the United States, increasingly subordinated society's interests to those of the state. And because the state could terrorize all of society through Siberian exile's very existence, it became a fulcrum upon which tyranny hinged.

## PETER THE GREAT AND PENAL LABOR

As mentioned, the history of pre-Soviet Siberian exile is divided into the Muscovite and Petersburg eras. However, there is an interstitial development that originated outside Siberia but nonetheless exerted enormous influence on exile's subsequent development. This was the establishment of *kátorga*. The word comes from the Greek for "galley." Peter the Great (r. 1689–1725) first assigned convicts to *kátorga* in 1696, as part of his military campaign to take the Ottoman fortress of Azov, located on the Don River near the Azov Sea. The military apparently used these first penal laborers (collectively known as *katorzhnye* or *katorzhane*) to build the docks for Peter's eventual Black Sea fleet, but may also have used them as oarsmen for the ships themselves. Peter went on to use penal laborers to construct his new capital of St. Petersburg, the Kronshtadt Fortress, the Baltic port of Rogervik, the fortresses of Riga and Reval, and the Urals' first metallurgical works, among other projects.

How many were condemned under Peter to *kátorga* is unknown, but the numbers seem to have totaled several thousand. It was said that on any given day, 500–800 penal laborers could be found building St. Petersburg, which Nikolai Karamzin later described as being built on "tears and corpses." Rogervik was said to be the destination for 600 penal laborers per year between 1722 and the beginning of Catherine the Great's reign. A foreign observer reported that 10,000 laborers were constructing Rogervik in 1730, many of them prisoners. Several state agencies exercised exilic authority and used penal laborers throughout the eighteenth century. The Admiralty College (i.e., the navy) possessed the largest number of penal laborers. James Cracraft concludes that its shipyards, factories, mines, and timber forests made it Russia's largest industrial enterprise at the time. "Between 1712 and 1721," he writes, "an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 workers passed through its [Baltic Fleet] yard."<sup>3</sup> What proportion consisted of convicts is unknown, but the Admiralty is known to have punished sailors who tried to escape by sending them to its mines at Azov.

Two categories of *kátorga* existed during these early years. The first comprised convicts with life sentences. Those in this category were knouted, had their nostrils slit and property confiscated, and were declared legally dead. The state worked them to death in a manner the Stalinist Gulag would later emulate. Peter regarded these convicts' wives to be widows and granted them the right to remarry or take monastic vows.

The second category comprised offenders with labor terms as brief as two or three years. Officials treated these convicts, who seem to have resembled indentured servants, much better than those in the first category: they subjected them to neither corporal punishment nor loss of property, permitted contact with relatives, and let them resume their former lives upon completion of their sentences. From its infancy, therefore, *katorga* had both a retributive and a rehabilitative function. Retribution served the interests of the autocrat, insofar as it demonstrated his awesome, god-like power to send an offender to Hell; rehabilitation supported the normalizing process that characterizes the modern state and its desire to mold society to its uses. As we shall see, the tension between these two functions was particularly evident when Russia sentenced thousands of Polish insurrectionists to *katorga*.

During the interregnum between exile's Muscovite and Petersburg eras *katorga* largely replaced exile (*ssylka*) as the state's favored method of punishment. If its need for a slave labor force offers one explanation for this, another was the turmoil in Siberia. Between 1695 and 1700 numerous Cossack garrisons in Transbaikalia and elsewhere mutinied. After local exiles, peasants, and indigenes joined, these mutinies transformed into full-scale rebellions. The most serious one, centered on Krasnoiarsk, took the government five years to suppress. While this distant region was raging beyond the center's control, closer to home, Peter was using his mighty mailed fist to hammer his subjects into shape.

Peter's undermining of legality and demand for penal laborers helped solidify the autocracy's attitude toward convicts as state property. Indeed, he regarded all his subjects as property to one extent or another; but for those sentenced to *katorga* or Siberian exile, this conceit could prove especially dire. The humanitarianism beginning to influence Western penology during the eighteenth century faced especially large hurdles in Russia, and retribution characterized its penology for much longer than in Western Europe and North America. The absence of a strong humanist influence meant that Russian penology, if it can be so called, continued to evince a disregard for criminals as human beings. Influenced primarily by the ceaseless demands of the autocrat, this penology situated criminals within a larger utilitarian matrix whose beneficiary was the state, not society.



## THE ST. PETERSBURG ERA (1700–1863)

Information on Siberian exile during the eighteenth century is sketchy due to poor record-keeping and the destruction of many official records by fire. Nonetheless, studies written during the nineteenth century by Russian historians agree that Peter's successors relied more heavily on exile than on *katorga* as a punishment, though they continued to sentence large numbers of subjects to *katorga*.

During Empress Anna Ivanovna's reign (r. 1730–1740) the state began deporting convicts to particularly remote locations, often for the purpose of providing support for naval expeditions. The first known instance occurred in 1731, when the navy delivered 153 debtors to the Pacific coast to support the Great Northern Expedition then mapping the Bering Straits and points north. Under the direction of Grigorii Skorniakov-Pisarev, a foreign-trained engineer and former procurator-general of the Senate who had been exiled under Catherine I, these debtors were assigned to mining and farming. But the soil proved too salty and the navy was unable to supply them, and so most either ran off into the taiga or became subsistence fishermen. Two years later, the Senate ordered those exiles still remaining transferred to Kamchatka, again to support a naval expedition, this time led by Vitus Bering and others. Once more, these exiles failed to provide the services demanded of them. Despite this, St. Petersburg continued to assign exiles to southern Kamchatka as late as 1744.

Empress Elizabeth Petrovna's reign (r. 1743–1760) witnessed the establishment of exile settlements (*poseleniia*). These settlements represented a qualitative and quantitative increase in the military's administration of exile. Prior to Peter's reign, Muscovite servitors had simply delivered exiles to their assigned locations and, for the most part, left them to fend for themselves, returning only when it was time to collect fur tribute or foodstuffs. Under Elizabeth Petrovna, there emerged for the first time exilic agricultural settlements guarded by soldiers (who were themselves little more than exiles). The regime established *poseleniia* in Eniseisk Province, which it hoped to turn into a Siberian breadbasket akin to the Ukraine, and in the Altai region, where Siberian metallurgy boomed under both Elizabeth Petrovna and Catherine the Great, with the Kolyvansk District being a major center of iron production. Exiles served primarily as food-producers rather than as industrial laborers in both the Altai and Eniseisk.

Beginning in 1760, at the very end of her reign, Elizabeth Petrovna launched an enormous project to construct a road that would link the city of Omsk to the upper Ob watershed, whose vast river network offered access to much of eastern Siberia. This section of what eventually became known as the Great Siberian Road cut across a marshy expanse called the Baraba Steppe. Siberia's growing role within the imperial economy necessitated the improvement of communications linking it to points west, and so the regime built settlements and forts along this road to secure the border against the Kazakhs and Manchus. That same year, Elizabeth Petrovna promulgated an ukase that granted landowners the power to turn their serfs over to the government for exile. By so producing these *posel'shchiki* ("little settlers"), serf owners not only earned credits against the required military levy that always siphoned off some of their human property, but also a remuneration of a few rubles per serf. The state then herded these hapless *posel'shchiki* to the Baraba Steppe and other remote locations in Siberia that it sought to colonize.

This 1760 ukase not only created a speculation in human souls but also established "deportation by administrative procedure" (*soslanie po administrativnomu*). Like the *perevedentsy* Muscovy sent to Siberia during the seventeenth century, these *posel'shchiki* (and those deportees who came afterward and were simply called "administrative exiles") were neither accused nor convicted of crimes. While it is true that owners used their newfound authority to rid themselves of serfs they considered problematic, the regime's primary reason for establishing administrative exile was to generate bodies for its goal of russifying Siberia. Administrative exile's widespread use from 1760 onward reflected the legacy of Peter's disregard for legal niceties and his functionalist approach to what can only be described as human capital. As we shall see, the state would use administrative exile to deport many of those associated with the January Uprising.

Catherine the Great (r. 1762–1796) broadened the authority of owners to exile their serfs. In practice, because owners typically relied upon rural associations (*obshchestva*) to regulate village life, it was these that typically chose those individuals who became *posel'shchiki*. Urban communal associations (*meshchanstva*) played a similar regulatory role among townspeople (*meshchane*), and under Catherine they, too, acquired exilic authority. In addition to using exile as a last resort to punish persistent petty offenders, these associations used it to rid their communities of the elderly and those mentally or physically disabled persons regarded as a drain on resources. The state did not condone such abuses of administrative exile, but it was

largely unable to prevent them. The consequent transformation of Siberia into an enormous almshouse became patently obvious when the MVD began collecting statistical data early in the nineteenth century.

Beginning with Elizabeth Petrovna, St. Petersburg used administrative procedures to uproot entire villages and remove them to the Baraba Steppe's mosquito-infested swamps. Construction of the Great Siberian Road continued during Catherine the Great's reign. Those few peasants drafted to serve as coachmen and road builders were best off, while the *posel'shechiki* assigned to establish agriculture in the steppe died by the thousands. Numbers remain elusive, but one source claims that the state deported 6000 peasants during 1771 alone.<sup>4</sup> Baraba also became a destination for convicts—i.e., those judicially convicted of crimes—though how many is again not known. Eventually, the road was built and permanent villages established. But so infamous was the Baraba project that an official account, published in 1900, reported that local residents were still telling “gloomy tales” about their predecessors' widespread mortality.

Figures on the numbers exiled between 1725 and 1796 are disparate and general but nonetheless telling, insofar as they demonstrate a regime increasingly relying upon Siberia to serve as both a prison and a colony for forced settlers. For example, some 20,000 nobles and state officials were exiled as a result of internecine power struggles during the period 1740–1750.<sup>5</sup> Anna Ivanovna reportedly exiled an average of 2000 people per year, and Elizabeth Petrovna exiled a total of 80,000 criminals.<sup>6</sup> A Soviet-era demographer concluded that between 1761 and 1781 as many as 35,000 males were exiled to Siberia.<sup>7</sup> By adding to this figure what would have been these exiles' wives and other accompanying relatives, historian Alan Wood has suggested that a total of 60,000 subjects were forcibly removed during that period.<sup>8</sup> During the 1770s—the decade that witnessed the Pugachëv Rebellion, which itself was partly a result of Siberian exile—the state exiled some 10,000 convicts per year. According to one historian, so many serfs were administratively deported to the Baraba Steppe and other locations in 1773 that the military lost between seven and eight thousand potential recruits.<sup>9</sup> Miscreant soldiers were themselves often punished with exile and forced to continue their service as involuntary colonists. Nearly four thousand were in Siberia as of 1782.<sup>10</sup> A final indication of the Crown's reliance upon exile is demonstrated by the fact that, during the first twenty years of Catherine the Great's reign, Siberia's non-indigenous male population grew from 261,000 to 389,000.<sup>11</sup> This occurred at a time when the expansion of serfdom

increasingly tied peasants to the land and limited their freedom of movement within Russia, so it is clear that exiles accounted for much of this growth.

Catherine the Great also deported large numbers of Old Believers, particularly those who fled across the border to Poland only to be reabsorbed into the realm when she annexed that country. Soon after the empress died in 1796, a traveler reported some 8000 Old Believer males living in Transbaikalia.<sup>12</sup> The American John Ledyard, who traveled through Siberia in 1787–1788, later insisted that exiles and former exiles accounted for most of the population of the city of Irkutsk and its environs.

Neither St. Petersburg's nor Siberia's administrators could marshal the forces needed to watch over these tens of thousands of exiles. The *poseleniia* originally established under Elizabeth Petrovna and continued by her successors did not in fact characterize conditions for most exiles. As Ledyard and other observers make clear, during the late eighteenth century the majority lived nearly indistinguishably from non-exiles. Their status did not necessarily reflect state policy but rather a simple practicality: there were insufficient numbers of officials to keep exiles in either their assigned locations or duties. At the same time, exiles fulfilled much-needed roles within Siberia's emerging, ethnically Russian, society. Many officeholders were indeed former exiles.

Whereas exiles contributed to the formation of Siberia's peasantry and helped lay the basis for its nascent urban society, the presence of what were in any case tens of thousands of convicts and social deviants served to undermine the region's integrity and security. On the one hand, the autocracy sought to secure its control over Siberia by establishing military governors and granting them considerable plenipotentiary powers, all for the sake of maximizing the extraction of natural resources and defending the border. On the other hand, through its growing use of exile, the state injected into Siberia a social stratum that countered these very goals. The autocracy's refusal to build in European Russia a series of prisons similar to those beginning to emerge in Western Europe and North America necessitated that its most dangerous criminals be exiled. Despite the economic value St. Petersburg placed on Siberia, it continued to view it as a colonial backwater whose inferior status legitimated its use as a massive carceral.

Catherine the Great's death in 1796 marked the end of a reign as significant as that of Peter the Great to Russia's geopolitical and penological development. Catherine's bastard son and successor, Emperor Paul (r. 1796–1801),

who despised his mother, immediately began reversing many of her policies. He nevertheless maintained her policy of colonizing Siberia through exile. Imitating his predecessors' choice of the Baraba Steppe, Paul chose Transbaikalia as the locus for his own colonization scheme.

Transbaikalia first acquired geopolitical significance when Peter the Great became aware of its large mineral reserves, primarily in the form of lead, silver, and iron. (Gold would later be mined there as well, though not in quantities comparable to those extracted from the Urals.) The presence of these metals, combined with the state's industrial and military needs, led to the establishment in Transbaikalia of a number of *zavody*. A *zavod* was an industrial township, usually heavily fortified and operated by a military administration, whose typical function was metallurgy, though some *zavody* served other types of industry. Nerchinsk, located at the confluence of the Nercha and Shilka rivers near Qing China's border, was Transbaikalia's first *zavod*. By the time of Paul's reign, the Nerchinsk Mining District embraced a total of nine *zavody*, each of which included smelteries fed by several mines. Penal laborers represented the majority of the labor force at these *zavody*.

Like the Altai's Kolyvansk District, the Nerchinsk Mining District was a Romanov *votchina*, or personal fiefdom. The Imperial Cabinet, rather than a state agency, controlled the Nerchinsk Mining Administration, and so the district's mines and smelteries were known as "cabinet industries." Between 1763 and 1774, Nerchinsk's industries added nearly eighty-three metric tons of silver to the Romanov treasury.<sup>13</sup> This enormous wealth played no small role in Catherine the Great acquiring the largest personal fine arts collection in the world, today housed in St. Petersburg's Hermitage Museum. Yet, by the time her son Paul took the throne, Nerchinsk was no longer producing anything approaching this amount of silver, or any other metal for that matter.

With Siberian metallurgy on the wane and *katorga*'s role declining alongside it, Emperor Paul fell under the spell of the Physiocrats. Originating in France, Physiocracy held that true wealth resided in agrarian production, rather than in gold bullion or international market relations. Paul accordingly planned to use exiles to establish agricultural settlements in Transbaikalia that would at one and the same time supply the cabinet industries, secure the region against possible invasion from China, and generate the kind of national wealth bruited about by the Physiocrats.

In October 1799, the fledgling emperor unveiled a grandiose plan to assign a total of 10,000 convicts, “fortress peasants,” and military recruits to build a series of *poseleniia* along the Qing China border. His use of the term “*poseleniia*” directly referenced the settlements established under Elizabeth Petrovna; however, Paul intended his to be much larger. The plan turned into a fiasco as soon as it began. Many of the deportees turned over to or shanghaied by the state were old or in poor health and died during their forced marches to Transbaikalia. Siberia’s corrupt governor and administrators embezzled the treasury funds sent for the operation and failed to employ as they should have those exiles who did manage to arrive in their jurisdiction. For instance, Irkutsk government officials used many of the deportees to build personal residences or city buildings, or impressed them into local military units. A Senate investigation later found that as of 1802, only 15% of the deportees were residing in their assigned locations, and almost all of these were scratching out subsistence existences from within overcrowded, ramshackle huts. In an act of poetic justice, Emperor Paul’s courtiers assassinated him before any of the exiles ever arrived in eastern Siberia.

Regardless of this disaster, the government launched subsequent efforts to colonize Siberia with exiles. Despite his general aversion to his father Paul’s policies, Emperor Alexander I (r. 1801–1825) approved a plan to build exile settlements to the north, south, and east of Siberia’s then capital of Irkutsk, in districts then called Nizhneudinsk, Verkhneudinsk, and Nerchinsk. None of these was particularly well-suited for agriculture, but this had never stopped the autocracy before, especially when it came to using forced colonists. Abstract planning and geographical ignorance, combined with the supposed expendability of what were, after all, just convicts, apostates, and other social refuse, laid the basis for another ill-conceived state enterprise. The penal settlements eventually established and existing for some fifteen years formed, in the words of one nineteenth-century historian, a “huge prison.” In 1819 Alexander I’s most dependable administrator, Mikhail M. Speranskii, in one of his first acts as the last governor of an administratively-united Siberia, ordered them disbanded.

Tsarist Russia’s last major effort to establish exilic settlements on mainland Siberia took place under Nicholas I (r. 1825–1855).<sup>14</sup> These settlements differed from earlier ones in that they were *reactive* rather than *proactive*. That is, the settlements created between the reigns of Elizabeth Petrovna and Alexander I were intended to establish an agricultural peasantry to both supply Siberia’s non-food producers and protect against

foreign incursion. But Nicholas I's colonies were designed first and foremost to cleanse the interior by removing criminals and other undesirables to locations beyond European Russia's borders. What these exiles actually did beyond the Urals was of distinctly secondary importance. The mass deportation of Poles between 1863 and 1880 similarly denoted a reactive use of exile.

Under Nicholas I the use of exile as a social cleansing mechanism became particularly evident. As of 1825, Siberia no longer suffered from the shortage of settlers that had previously motivated government efforts to transform exiles into peasants. In 1858, three years into Alexander II's reign, greater Siberia (that is, including the central Asian districts of Orenburg, Semipalatinsk, and Kirgiz Territory) had a population of over four million people. True, half this population consisted of indigenes who generally led nomadic lifestyles. Nonetheless, four of Siberia's enormous administrative regions (Tobol'sk, Tomsk, Irkutsk, and Transbaikalia) had population densities of between 0.43 and 0.60 persons per square mile, and most inhabitants were farming peasants.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, in contrast to his predecessors, Nicholas I did not explicitly use exile to colonize Siberia. Rather, he oversaw the establishment of a series of exilic settlements that represented a reaction to the phenomenal increase in the number of exiles during his reign. Between 1807 and 1854, the number of Siberian deportees multiplied nearly five times, from 1606 to 7749 per annum. Between 1824 and 1828 alone, officials conveyed more than 55,000 exiles and their dependents across the Urals.<sup>16</sup> Both state and society were responsible for generating these numbers: half of all deportees were convicted by courts of criminal offenses, the other half were administratively banished by landowners or communal associations. Nicholas I's lieutenants, his Siberian governors-general in particular, faced the daunting task of administering these waves of exiles.

Most of the exile settlements constructed under Nicholas I were located in Eniseisk Province. Compared to those of Siberia's other provinces, its population density was low: only 0.09 persons per square mile as of 1858. Topography and climate were mainly to blame. Eniseisk's southern regions were swampy and its northern reaches especially frigid. Agriculture was virtually impossible in its northernmost sector of Turukhansk Territory, where the handful of Russians living there engaged instead in trapping, mining, and logging. In 1827, the emperor gave the Siberian Committee half a million rubles to build exile settlements in Eniseisk Province. The first exiles arrived in 1829, and despite the usual

organizational mishaps, somehow managed to lay the foundations for twenty-two separate settlements. Each had a so-called “overseer” and a detachment of Cossacks and operated according to martial rules. The exile-settlers were predominantly male, but the regime rounded up as many female convicts as it could and distributed them as a reward for good behavior. Also, officials purchased the daughters of local peasants and natives and forced them to marry exiles. Despite unprecedented efficiency and largesse, Nicholas I’s settlements proved no more successful than those of his predecessors. Between 1829 and 1840, St. Petersburg exiled a total of 31,264 men and women to Eniseisk Province. Yet only 3835 women and 5952 men remained in the original twenty-two settlements as of the end of this period.<sup>17</sup>

With the exception of the Sakhalin penal colony, the Eniseisk settlements were the last major penal colonies ever built by the imperial government. Every autocrat from Elizabeth Petrovna to Nicholas I had overseen their establishment in Siberia. With the qualified exception of the Baraba Steppe, none were successful, even by the government’s own estimate. Given this litany of failure, why did the Romanovs persist in building exile settlements?

For the House of Romanov, the success of exile settlements was an apposite goal at best. The primary goal behind exile and settlement construction was demonstration of autocratic power. Each exile settlement, however impoverished and failing, symbolized the ruler’s power over his subjects. When combined with European Russia’s age-old regular settlements, these colonial outposts served as dots on a map that proved Russia to be the largest empire in the world. A wave of his scepter, and the autocrat could add more dots to the map. With hands on hips he hovered above this map, smug in the knowledge that all that stretched beneath him was his. And his subjects, even if they did not know about each of these dots, lived with the knowledge that at any moment, depending on His Majesty’s whims, they might be made to join a convoy and force-marched to one of them. In the abstract, the exercise of such power on such a grand scale must have seemed both majestic and godlike for the emperor, who would never have to lay eyes on the subjects he uprooted and sent thousands of miles from home. Concretely, the exercise of such power on such a monstrous scale caused suffering and death for tens of thousands of people, many of whom were never charged with nor convicted of crimes. Following the mass deportation of the Poles, the results of these abstract



and concrete exercises of sovereign power were particularly historically significant.

The Romanovs failed to learn that neither coercion nor largesse could transform deportees into productive peasants. They also failed to learn that they could not continue to use Siberia as a dump for society's ills. Between 1863 and 1880, Alexander II's and the imperial bureaucracy's treatment of the Polish insurrectionists would reflect the conflict between the sovereign's need to demonstrate retributive power and the state's need to rehabilitate and derive service from prisoners. The traditions of statecraft and penology that were embodied within Siberian exile dictated the Polish exiles' treatment. Having had no record of success with exile, St. Petersburg also had none of the institutional mechanisms that might have provided viable alternatives for dealing with the insurrectionists, and even with the uprising itself. By 1863, the regime was at war with the society over which it ruled and continued to insist that society was there to serve it, and not the other way around. It had learned practically nothing from nearly three centuries of exile to Siberia.

## NOTES

1. What follows is described in much greater detail in my books *Exile to Siberia, 1590–1822* (New York, 2008) and *Exile, Murder and Madness in Siberia, 1823–61* (New York, 2010).
2. F. G. Safronov, *Ssylka v vostochnuiu Sibir' v XVII veke* (Iakutsk, 1967), 19.
3. James Cracraft, *The Petrine Revolution in Russian Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 88.
4. M. N. Gernet, *Istoriia tsarskoi tiur'my*, 5 vol., 3rd ed. (Moskva, 1960–63) 1: 65.
5. S. Maksimov, "Gosudartvennyye prestupniki. Piataia chast'" *Otechestvennyia zapiski* 9 (Sept., 1869): 229–72 [here, p. 247].
6. N. M. Iadrintsev, *Russkaia obshchina v tiur'me i ssylke* (S.-Peterburg, 1872), 518, 546.
7. A. D. Kolesnikov, "Ssylka i zaselenie Sibiri," in *Ssylka i katorga v Sibiri (XVIII–nachalo XX v.)*, ed. L. M. Goriushkin, et al. (Novosibirsk, 1975), 51.
8. Alan Wood, "Siberian Exile in the Eighteenth Century," *Siberica* 1, no. 1 (1990): 38–63 [here, pp. 56, 59].
9. Gernet, *Istoriia* 1: 64–65.
10. V. M. Kabuzan and S. M. Troitskii, "Dvizhenie naselenie Sibiri v XVIII v.," in *Sibir' perioda feodalizma, vypusk 1*, ed. V. I. Shunkov, et al. (Novosibirsk, 1962), table 4, p. 150.

11. Ibid., 149.
12. [Anon.] "Zapiski o Sibiri. (Prolozhenie.) Kratkoe opisanie Zabaikal'skago kraia," *Zhurnal Ministerstva Vnutrennykh Del* 3 (1830): 165–82 [here, pp. 173–4].
13. Innokentii Bogoliubskii, *Istoriko-statisticheskii ocherk proizvoditel'nosti Nerchinskago Gornago Okruga s 1703 po 1871 god* (S.-Peterburg, 1872), 4–8, 16–17.
14. During the late nineteenth century, the autocracy established a penal colony on the island of Sakhalin. See Gentes, "The Institution of Russia's Sakhalin Policy, from 1868 to 1875," *Journal of Asian History* 36, no. 1 (2002): 1–31; *idem*, "No Kind of Liberal: Alexander II and the Sakhalin Penal Colony," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 54, no. 3 (2006): 321–344.
15. Based on figures in I. V. Shcheglov, *Khronologicheskii perechen' vazh-neishikh dannykh iz istorii Sibiri: 1032–1882 gg.* (1883; rpt. Surgut, 1993), table, p. 353. Iakutsk District had a very low population density; but the government assigned only a handful of exiles there.
16. *Sylka v Sibir': ocherk eia istorii i sovremennago polozheniia* (S.-Peterburg, 1900), appendices, table 1, pp. 1–2.
17. S. V. Maksimov, *Sibir' i katorga*, 3 vols. (S.-Peterburg, 1871) 2: table, p. 323; *Sylka v Sibir'*, 23–24.

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