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## **The Chistopol Prison as a Space of Political Repression (1978-1990)**

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### **Abstract**

The importance of the problem lies in the need for a deep, consistent and comprehensive study of the history of political repressions in the USSR as an integral part of the Soviet past. Although the history of political repression of the Stalinist period has been studied in-depth in Russian and foreign historiography, it does not cover the late Soviet period. The article discusses the history of the infamous "special" prison in Chistopol (Tatarstan), which functioned as a prison for political prisoners in 1978–1990. There has been performed the analysis of the prison's social composition, detention regime, and daily practices of subsistence and survival. The basic approach to the problem was the method of complex analysis of different types of sources of official and personal origin and their comparative analysis. The results of the study include the characteristics of such an unexplored form of punishment of dissidents in the late Soviet Russia as imprisonment of "special purpose." It is proved that the regulatory "corrective" practices of the government and the actual practice of the prisoners' everyday life were at times directly contrary to each other, which resulted not only in the lack of "re-education" of the "political" prisoners, but also in the growth of their number through joining of former criminal elements.

**Keywords:** History, Dissidence, Repressive politics, Political prison, Daily life, The USSR, the 1970s – 1980s.

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## **Introduction**

By the mid-1970s the USSR had formed a new, clearly structured system of punishing dissidents, which was fundamentally different from the system of the Gulag. The death of Stalin and the beginning of a discussion about the inadmissibility of state terror forced the government to reform the penitentiary system. In place of the Gulag, the institution of free labor force, there appeared a new model of prisons as places for rehabilitation of unreliable representatives of the Soviet society. Large-scale amnesties were held in 1953 and 1957; by 1960 the prison camps were replaced by the colonies and prisons, and the detention regime became more humane.

In the new edition of the RSFSR criminal code of 1960 the infamous article 58, counter-revolutionary activities, which became a symbol of Stalinist political repression, was abolished. However, the category of "especially dangerous state crimes" included treason and anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda, which provided for long-term imprisonment. Instead of the special institutions of the Gulag of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the USSR, liquidated in 1954, the new ones were created in the 1960s and 1970s. Since 1963 all the especially dangerous state criminals had to serve their sentences in Institution ZHKH-385 in Mordovia (the former special camp No. 3 – Dubravny labor camp), which included the colonies in the villages of Lesnoy, Sosnovka, Ozerniy, as well as a women's colony in the village of Barashevo (Camp, 1973), and also in the Vladimir prison (which had a political status even in 1948-1954).

In the early 1970s, "politicians" from Mordovia were transferred to a colony in the Perm region, arranged especially for them (in the villages of Tsentralniy, Kuchino and Polovinka), and in 1978 the prisoners from the Vladimir prison were transferred to the prison in Chistopol, TASSR. In addition to the establishment of special institutions for the execution of sentences, a range of special measures to suppress anti-Soviet manifestations were developed.

In 1966, the criminal code introduced a new article 190.1. – "Distribution of knowingly false fabrications discrediting Soviet state and social system", which carried a punishment of up to 3 years of imprisonment (on introduction, 1966). In December 1972 the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR approved the KGB's use of official warning as a measure of preventive influence on politically hostile persons (Signs, 1972). In case of continued anti-Soviet activities one could be charged with the dissemination of deliberately false fabrications and sentenced to imprisonment serving a sentence in a standard regime penal colony. Those obstinate to rehabilitation and particularly hostile anti-Soviet persons were tried for especially dangerous state crimes and subjected to isolation in special colonies and prisons. The

detention in a closed prison was the most severe punishment. In 1978 the prison in Chistopol became such a prison for political prisoners.

### **Literature Review**

Active study of the Soviet penitentiary heritage became possible after the collapse of the USSR and disclosure of the archives. Up until that time the understanding of the penal policy of the Bolsheviks was limited to samizdat - and - tamizdat pages (Solzhenitsyn, 1973). In the 1990s, scientific interest was directed primarily on the analysis of Stalinist repression and functioning of the Gulag. Both the collections of documents (History of the Stalinist Gulag, 2004-2005; the GULAG, 2002), and studies of a monographic nature (Borodkin, 2005; Kotek, 2003) were published. The functioning of the post-Stalin penal system is poorly studied. Some aspects of the system of punishment of dissenters in the period are covered in studies of the dissident movement (Lukin, 1992, Queen, 1995). In her work "the GULAG. The Web of Big Terror", A. Applebaum, sought to justify the thesis on the functioning of the Gulag after Stalin's death (Applebaum, 2015). Special studies on the history of the Chistopol prison have not been carried out, except for a few articles in collections on the history of the penal system in Tatarstan (Abramov, 2004).

### **Methodological Framework**

Taking into account that the research of the problem is insufficient it is very important to use traditional and modern methods of searching and selection of sources with the aim of obtaining a complete and representative set of documents required to fully investigate the subject matter. Special attention should be given to the development and application of methods of reading, transcription and verification of sources of personal origin, coming from the political prisoners, given the special conditions of their creation and the specifics of authorship. The development and application of special methods of analysis require unpublished materials from special penitentiary record keeping of the late Soviet period because the topic is practically undeveloped in the modern source studies.

Methods used in such advanced areas of modern Humanities as history of emotions and history of everyday life will help to explain and understand the complex social-psychological processes that occurred in the political prison, and fit them into the context of the late Soviet era.

## **Results**

### **Chistopol prison as a prison of a special type**

Prison No. 4 in Chistopol, Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic received a special status just before the 1980 Olympic Games. The issue of the "political" criminals' movement from the Vladimir prison No. 2 was raised in 1977. Vladimir was part of the "Golden ring" of Russia, and the KGB was afraid of possible provocations from tourists and Western intelligence agencies, therefore it was decided to send "politicians" as far as possible from Moscow. The choice fell on Chistopol located on the left bank of the Kama river, away from the main highways (RGANI, fond 89, opis 18, delo 72).

The first contingent of political prisoners arrived there in the morning of 10 October 1978, Among them there were Hillel' Butman and Joseph Mendelevich – the defendants in the famous "aircraft case"; Natan Scharansky – "Zionist", the future Minister of Internal Affairs of Israel; Victor Petkus – Lithuanian "nationalist"; Sergey Verkhov, Fedor Trufanov, Vasil' Fedorenko, Gennadiy Shelud'ko and others. All of them were convicted of committing especially dangerous crimes: treason, anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda, illegal foreign trip. Later Natan Scharansky recalled: "October the 8<sup>th</sup> in 1972 is a significant date in the long history of the Vladimir prison: it is the day when it lost the sad status of the "political" prison. We, being especially dangerous state criminals, were taken away from Moscow, away from the center of Russia, isolated from household offenders, among whom there always were people ready to help us, either selfishly or unselfishly" (Scharansky, 1991).

From October 1978 to November 1990, when the last political prisoner Mikhail Kazachkov was released (Archive, Kazachkov), about 72 people went through the Chistopol prison, according to our calculations made on the basis of registration cards of prisoners.

### **Political prisoners in Chistopol prison**

The researchers of the dissident movement and dissent in the Soviet Union distinguish several typological groups of the Soviet "others": the national opposition, religious groups, Marxist unions, the human rights movement (Alekseeva, 1992; Vaissie 2015). Among the "political" prisoners in the Chistopol prison there were representatives of all these groups, and they all shared the common idea aimed at protecting civil rights and liberties. For example, Natan Scharansky, a Zionist activist, was one of the founders of the Moscow Helsinki group. Victor Petkus, a supporter of independent Lithuania, participated in the founding of the Lithuanian Helsinki group. Valeriy Senderov, who was transferred to the Chistopol prison from colony 35 in the Perm region in 1985 because he required to carry the Bible with him, was convicted

of having a self-published book "Intellectual genocide" about the limitations of admission of the Jews to Soviet universities.

Forced psychiatric treatment was a special extralegal form of punishment of dissidents. Those who dared to publicly declare the use of psychiatry for punitive purposes were deprived of freedom for a long time. In the summer of 1981 a psychiatrist Anatoly Koryagin was taken to the Chistopol prison. He was sentenced for an article about the use of punitive psychiatry in the Soviet Union, published in the British medical journal "The Lancet" (Koryagin, 1981). Viktor Nekipelov was sentenced for his book on coercive psychiatry (Nekipelov, 2005).

Another manifestation of the protest activity was illegal emigration from the Soviet Union by refusing to return from foreign trips and tourist trips, and unauthorized crossing of the border. In case of detention illegal immigrants were tried for treason. Vladimir Balakhonov – translator of the Soviet delegation in Switzerland, became a defector in 1972. One year later when he returned to the USSR for family reasons, he was arrested by KGB and accused of treason (Archive, Balakhonov). In 1970 a group of Jews who refused to go to Israel, tried to hijack a plane and go to Palestine. Their actions were prevented, and the persons named in the "aircraft case" were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment (Mendelevich, 2002).

The analysis of the documents from the Chistopol prison archive shows that many political prisoners were not dissidents in traditional understanding of the word, but had been repeatedly convicted of criminal offences. The operational prison officer A. V. Burenkov recalled about the criminal past of some of them: "... sometimes among the dissidents there were the real criminals. For example, I remember a robust 60-year-old Trufanov – he had had a bunch of escapes from the prison. Trufanov was sentenced as a dissident for sticking anti-Soviet leaflets in the colony. Another dissident and a repeat offender, Shmelev, having 9 previous convictions, became a dissident, after he had written an insulting letter to the first Secretary of the Vladimir regional Committee of the party" (Abramov, 2004). Closed space of the prison was a favorable backdrop for the spread of the protest of the anti-Soviet sentiment. That is why the decision to isolate political prisoners from the criminals was made.

### **The regime and incarceration conditions**

The regime and incarceration conditions played the key role in prisoners' re-education. For those convicted of particularly dangerous state crimes the regime of detention was strict in a colony and standard in a prison. According to the "Correctional-labor code of the RSFSR" of 1970, general prison regime included: three short visits (4 hours), one long visit (3 days) and four parcels per year. Sanctions for a breach of discipline included the transfer to solitary

confinement, banning visits, limiting the number of parcels to one in six months; placement in a punishment cell or solitary confinement (Corrective labor code, 1970).

In 1978–1990 "political" prisoners of the Chistopol prison took eleven wards on the second floor in the right wing of the old regime building. There were the wards for two, three, four and six prisoners. Furnishings included an iron bench, dining table, radio reproducer, toilet; every prisoner had a chair and a bedside, which they carried with them when were transferred to another ward.

A day in the prison began at 5 am. Breakfast was at 6 am. At 7.00 prisoners had an hour walk in the prison courtyard. The dinner was at eleven o'clock, dinner at five, bedtime was at nine. The prisoners had to work for the rest of the time: they wove meshes for vegetables or collected items for watchcases made at the Chistopol watch factory "Vostok". To prevent negative effects and eliminate possible contacts the "anti-Soviets" and "traitors" were not allowed in the factory shops, they worked in the wards. For refusal to work they were punished by solitary confinement and less food.

The investigation and punishment execution for political prisoners were in charge of the 5th Directorate of the KGB. Two state security officers were attached to the Chistopol prison. N. Scharansky wrote in his memoirs: "Formally, Malofeev (the warden – ed.) was the main boss, but in fact, it was the KGB which overlooked the political prisoners. One day I frankly told him about it: "You're the boss, but you cannot resolve even simple issues, for example, which ward to place the prisoners in". "Yes, in this part of the corridor, my power is limited," he admitted honestly" (Scharansky, 1991).

One of the traditional ways of protest in prisons was a hunger strike, including the collective hunger strike. Political prisoners took to it quite often. The means of communication in a closed prison were extremely limited. However, the prisoners managed to throw notes from one yard to another during a morning walk, or talk through the pipe by means of a mug. Another means of communication was the toilet: "All you needed for it was to pump water out of the toilets with the help of a floor cloth, and the drain of toilets became a real auditory tube" (Rivkin, 2014). One of these hunger strikes ended tragically. In December 1986 Anatoly Marchenko died in the Chistopol hospital after a long hunger strike. According to some versions, it was the death of Marchenko, that caused the global public outcry, and induced Mikhail Gorbachev to begin the process of political prisoners' release. In November 1990, the last Soviet political prisoner Mikhail Kazachkov was released, and in October 1991, due to the adoption of the RF law "On rehabilitation of the victims of political repression", the Chistopol prison lost its special status.

## **Conclusion**

This article is the first historiographical attempt to outline the history of one of the main institutions of the late Soviet prison system for the "political" prisoners, i.e. the Chistopol prison that operated in the period from 1978 to 1990 as a special prison. On the one hand, a wide range of sources of different origin and content covered in the study, allow to identify and trace the specificity of punitive measures against opponents of the political regime in the USSR in the late Soviet period, and on the other hand, to determine not only the means of survival of the "politics" in these extreme conditions, but also ways to confront the system, which they used, being free or jailed. The unique materials of special prison documentation, archived in the Chistopol prison, are first introduced to scientific circulation and have exceptional value. These documents helped to clarify the social composition of political prisoners held in the prison in the given period of time, characterize their views, and determine "the path to dissent" (including those from the criminal community). The study proves the viability and the prospects of further study of the history of Soviet punitive agencies as an integral part of the state mechanism of re-education of the political opponents of the regime, especially at the end of the Soviet system, before its collapse, and future fundamental transformation.

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