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Katorga: Penal Labour and Tsarist Siberia

Introduction

In imperial Russia, *kátorga* (penal labor) signified a discrete penologico-administrative regime ostensibly designed to punish criminals. Peter I inaugurated *katorga* when, in 1696, as part of the Azov campaign against the Ottomans, he assigned convicts to the lower Don to help build and possibly man Russia's first fleet. Until 1767 the state assigned most penal labourers (*katorzhnye* or *katorzhane*) to sites outside Siberia, using them to construct St. Petersburg and Port Rogervik as well as fortresses along the Baltic littoral and in Orenburg territory; but that year Zabaikal'e's Nerchinsk Mining District displaced Rogervik as *katorga*'s epicentre. Relying mainly upon penal labor, the Nerchinsk metallurgical industries would go on to provide the empire much of its silver and lead, as well as lesser proportions of iron and gold. Besides Nerchinsk, Petersburg also assigned penal labourers to such state-owned Siberian industries as the Okhotsk and Irkutsk saltworks, the Aleksandrovsk and Troitskii distilleries, and the Tel'minsk linen factory outside Irkutsk. Nerchinsk embodied 'mine (*rudnaia*) *katorga*' and these latter sites 'factory (*zavodnaia*) *katorga*', whereas 'fortress (*krepostnaia*) *katorga*' involved the use of convicts assigned to penal labour battalions within a military environment. Dostoevskii served his sentence in the Omsk fortress between 1850 and 1854 under a regime of 'fortress *katorga*' — a category abolished in the 1860s.

Dostoevskii does not, however, typify *katorga* convicts. Like those Decembrists and *narodovoltsy* sentenced to *katorga* before and after him, he performed almost no manual labour.¹ Historian Pavel L. Kazarian has argued that, beginning with the Decembrists, a special regime for political exiles came into existence. His argument requires

¹ M. M. Gromyko, "'Zapiski iz mertvogo doma' F. M. Dostoevskogo kak istochnik po istorii sibirskoi katorgi 50-x godov XIX v." in Leonid M. Goriushkin, et al., eds, *Ssylka i katorga v Sibiri (XVIII—nachalo XX v.)*, (Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1975), 131–52.

qualification,² but is useful here to point out that the tsarist government generally treated political exiles like Dostoevskii, whether or not they were explicitly convicted of state crimes (*gosudarstvennye prestupleniia*), much better than other exiles, even when the former were assigned to *katorga*. This is important given that Soviet historiography's exclusive focus on 'the political' unduly privileged them over the bulk of the exilic population. In fact, prior to 1905, political prisoners (even broadly defined) never amounted to more than two percent of tsarist Siberia's total exilic population, and no more than ten percent thereafter.³ For the most part, exile to Siberia took the place of a large-scale prison network, and so it is misleading to characterize it as having been essentially a system of political oppression. Whereas the government did use exile to combat political opponents, the system's primary function was penal incarceration (in a manner of speaking). Within this function, *katorga* was designed to capitalize upon the labour of the most serious criminals.

Information on tsarist Russia's early exilic population is virtually non-existent. By contrast, several important sources exist for the nineteenth century. Evgenii Anuchin's study shows that males accounted for 84 percent of the nearly 160 000 persons exiled to all categories during 1827–46.⁴ More precise statistics compiled by ethnographer-historian Sergei Maksimov show that 44 904 men and 7 467 women were exiled to Siberian *katorga* during the period 1823–60.⁵ A government report published in 1900 indicates that males made up 95 percent of the more

² Cf. Pavel L. Kazarian, *Iakutiia v sisteme politicheskoi ssylki Rossii. 1826–1917 gg.* (Iakutsk: GP NIPK 'Sakhapoligrafizdat', 1998); and my review of same in *Kritika* 3, n. 1 (2002): 140–51.

³ These figures are based on rather complex calculations best described in A.A. Gentes, 'Roads to Oblivion: Siberian Exile and the Struggle between State and Society in Russia, 1593–1917' (Ph.D. dissertation; Brown University, 2002), 521–24.

⁴ Evgenii Nikolaevich Anuchin, *Izsledovaniia o protsente soslannykh v Sibir' v period 1827–1846 godov: materialy dlia ugolovnoi statistiki Rossii* (S.-Peterburg: Tipografiia Maikova, 1873), 22.

⁵ Sergei Maksimov, *Sibir' i katorga*, 3 vols. (S.-Peterburg: Tipografiia A. Transhelia, 1871) 2: table, p. 320.

than 100,000 persons exiled during 1887–98.⁶ However, this report excludes those sentenced to *katorga* and so should be read alongside others which show, for example, that in 1877, women comprised 308 of the 2,213 penal labourers assigned to locations (mostly *zavody*) in Irkutsk *guberniia*,⁷ or that 7,068 male and 914 female penal labourers were on Sakhalin as of 1895.⁸ Anuchin's data further indicate that most penal labourers were at the time of their sentencing between the ages of twenty-one and thirty. Of all persons exiled during 1827–46, 36.6 percent were state peasants, 43.1 percent were privately-owned serfs, while much smaller numbers originated among the military estate, *meshchane*, and other *sosloviia*.⁹ In short, prior to 1917 the average penal labourer was not unlike the average subject of Imperial Russia: a male peasant in his twenties.

Beginning in the early nineteenth century *katorga* entered a period of crisis, due primarily to the exhaustion of Nerchinsk's silver and lead mines, though the lack of metallurgical work reflected a larger trend whereby the state was generating more penal labour convicts than it could employ. The influx into Siberia of thousands of Polish insurrectionists exiled as a result of the 1863–64 uprising further taxed the exile system's physical plant beyond endurance.¹⁰ To deal with what it acknowledged was the 'collapse of *katorga*' the autocracy implemented a three-pronged solution. First, it relocated the majority of Nerchinsk's penal labourers to the Kara Valley, 100 miles northeast of Nerchinsk zavod, albeit still within both the district's boundaries and the mining

⁶ *Ssylka v Sibir': ocherk eia istorii i sovremennago polozeniia* (S.-Peterburg: Tipografiia S.-Peterburgskoi Tiur'my, 1900), prilozheniia, table, pp. 6–13.

⁷ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv irkutskoi oblasti (GAIO), f. 32, op. 1, d. 258, l. 9.

⁸ In addition to 9,146 other convicts who had graduated from penal labour status to either exile-settler (*ssyl'no-poselenets*) or peasant-formerly-exiled (*krest'ianin iz ssyl'nykh*) status. *Sakhalinskii kalendar' i materialy k izucheniiu ostrova Sakhalina* ([Aleksandrovsk Post:] Tipografiia na ostrove Sakhaline, 1895), table, p. 109.

⁹ Anuchin, *Izsledovaniia*, 41, 71.

¹⁰ As described in A.A. Gentes, "Siberian Exile and the 1863 Polish Insurrectionists According to Russian Sources," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 51, n. 2 (2003): 197–217. See also Ninel' P. Mitina, *Vo glubine sibirskikh rud: K stoletiiu vosstaniia pol'skikh ssyl'nykh na Krugobaikal'skom trakte* (Moskva: Nauka, 1966).

administration's jurisdiction; second, it launched what proved to be a protracted effort to establish a penal colony on Sakhalin; and third, it built or designated as 'temporary *katorga* prisons' several facilities, half of which were located in European Russia, to incarcerate convicts until they could be absorbed by Kara or Sakhalin. Kara's insufficient quantities of gold soon dispelled Petersburg's high hopes for it, and so most convicts sent there faced only idleness and the torpor of prison life. Amidst this debacle, and despite recommendations and limited efforts to create a Western-style prison system to replace exile,¹¹ decision-makers fastened onto Sakhalin to solve the penological crisis. The Romanovs especially remained wedded to a penology of banishment, even after it became known that conditions on Sakhalin would not allow for the autarkic and escape-proof colony originally envisioned. I detail this particular tsarist folly elsewhere,¹² but mention the Sakhalin colony here so as to emphasize its relationship to Nerchinsk *katorga*. Suffice to say that *katorga*, as implemented either in Nerchinsk or on Sakhalin, was symptomatic of the old regime's failure to embrace the fundamental reforms necessary for its survival.

Because of the dearth of studies in English about Nerchinsk *katorga*, and because of Soviet studies' focus on Nerchinsk's comparatively small number of political prisoners, this article is designed to fill a yawning gap in the historiography not only of Siberia but Russia itself. It also serves to complement and in some ways complete the narratives of my other articles on tsarist exile and *katorga*.

Nerchinsk

Situated along the Shilka River in Zabaikal'e, the Nerchinsk Mining District occupied a region known before the eighteenth century as Dauriia. Metallurgical operations at Nerchinsk zavod (a *zavod* was a fortified industrial township) began in 1704, though negligible amounts of silver and lead were produced before Catherine II's reign. Following

¹¹ On the legislative background to these efforts see Bruce F. Adams, *The Politics of Punishment: Prison Reform in Russia, 1863–1917* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996).

¹² A.A. Gentes, 'The Institution of Russia's Sakhalin Policy, from 1868 to 1875,' *Journal of Asian History* 36 (1) (2002): 1–31.

the appointment of General Vasilii I. Suvorov as *zavod* commandant in 1763, production increased rapidly, which in turn stimulated the demand for larger numbers of penal labourers. Like the Altai's Kolyvansk District,¹³ Nerchinsk was a Romanov *votchina*, or fiefdom, one that soon began supplying the family much of the wealth it so ostentatiously spent. Because the Imperial Cabinet exerted direct control over the Nerchinsk Mining Administration (*Gornoe pravlenie*), the district's mines and smelteries became known as 'cabinet industries'. Under Suvorov's direction, these cabinet industries produced a total of 5 057 *pudy* silver (almost 83 metric tons) between 1763 and 1774. However, silver production declined sharply after 1774, as did that of lead and iron.¹⁴

Various sources provide a rough sketch of convict life at Nerchinsk. An anonymous contributor to the journal *Sibirskii vestnik* (Siberian Herald) described in 1823 a population of 1,500 penal labourers in the district. The cabinet industries then consisted of seven mine complexes (*distant'sii*) and affiliated *zavody*, including the Petrovsk *zavod* iron-works which, despite its distant location in Verkhneudinsk *okrug*, nevertheless fell under the mining administration's jurisdiction. The writer ascribed the need for penal labourers to an 'insufficiency of service peo-

¹³ See Zinaida G. Karpenko, *Gornaia i metallurgicheskaia promyshlennost' Zapadnoi Sibiri v 1700–1860 godakh* (Novosibirsk: Izdatel'stvo Sibirskogo otdeleniia AN SSSR, 1963); V. B. Borodaev, et al., eds., *Guliaevskie chteniia. Vyp. 1: Materialy pervoi, vtoroi i tret'ei istoriko-arkhivnykh konferentsii* (Barnaul: Upravlenie arkhivnogo dela administratsii Altaiskogo kraia, 1998).

¹⁴ Innokentii Bogoliubskii, *Istoriko-statisticheskii ocherk proizvoditel'nosti Nerchinskago Gornago Okruga s 1703 po 1871 god* (S.-Peterburg: V Tip. V. Demakova, 1872), 4–8, 16–17; S. V. Maksimov, *Sibir' i katorga*. 3rd ed. (S.-Peterburg: Izdanie V. I. Gubinskago, 1900), 446. V. I. Suvorov (1705–75) was the father (not first cousin, as LeDonne writes) of the famous war hero A. V. Suvorov-Rymnikskii. Contrary to other sources, it does not seem he ever served as Siberia's governor. Cf. John P. LeDonne, *Ruling Russia: Politics and Administration in the Age of Absolutism, 1762–1796* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 283; Valerii I. Fedorchenko, *Imperatorskii Dom. Vydaiushchiesia sanovniki: Entsiklopediia biografii*, 2 vols. (Krasnoiar'sk: BONUS, 2001) 2: 410–16; 'Suvorov Vasilii Ivanovich', *O proekte Oglavlenie Rossii Portrety Gerby Zvuki Disk Avtory*, <http://kolibriy.astroguru.com/01180558.htm>

ple [*sluzhitel'i*] and labourers for mining and factory work. . . .¹⁵ As with other metallurgical sites, non-convict labourers were assigned to Nerchinsk as well. Late nineteenth-century ethnographer-historian Vasilii I. Semevskii identified them as 'the *masterovye*, subordinate to military discipline and working in the industries, not according to their own decision, but removed there for obligatory service, initially without a time-limit and then after 1849 for a term of 35 years. . . .'¹⁶ Similar in legal status to factory serfs, *masterovye* were skilled artisans, hand-picked by the government and assigned to state-owned works in the Urals, Altai, and Zabaikal'e. Nerchinsk officials also assigned penal labourers' sons to the *masterovye*, whose emancipation coincided with that of state serfs in 1863.

As for the penal labourers themselves, 'they receive[d], depending on quality, diligence, and behaviour, from 24 to 60 roubles [per year], as well as victuals for themselves and family. . . .'¹⁷ Convicts lived in all respects like the other labourers: for example, bachelors lived in barracks while men with families received private izbas. The *Sibirskii vestnik* correspondent's description of Nerchinsk zavod suggests the quality of this housing: '[O]ne descends six versts, as if into a deep pit. Inside this pit dilapidated structures are scattered chaotically along the slopes, so that when you get to the main street, it is impossible to see [beyond them].'¹⁸ The nature of work and settlement in Nerchinsk made 'it impossible that these criminals . . . be kept apart from other people. They work in groups with young service people, [non-convict] mine labourers, and boys, and tell them about their own criminal escapades.' Under their teachers' influence these boys supposedly turned to crime with enthusiasm, so that neither '[r]ewards nor punishments [did] little for these ruined children. . . .'¹⁹

¹⁵ *Sibirskii vestnik* (15 February 1823): 41n. On the number of Nerchinsk industries see *Sibirskii vestnik* (15 September 1823): 127–144.

¹⁶ Vasilii I. Semevskii, *Rabochie na sibirskikh zolotykh promyslakh: istoricheskoe issledovanie*, 2 vols. (S.-Peterburg: Tipografiia M. Stasiulevicha, 1898) 1: xxxi–xxxii.

¹⁷ *Sibirskii vestnik* (15 February 1823): 41.

¹⁸ *Sibirskii vestnik* (15 March 1823): 107.

¹⁹ *Sibirskii vestnik* (15 February 1823): 42–43.

What is known of escape rates undermines *Sibirskii vestnik's* suggestion of a casual lifestyle for prisoners, however. Each year 300 to 400 convicts fled the Nerchinsk District *zavody*, as did an equal number of soldiers and state peasants, the latter having been assigned to local villages to produce food for the workers. Causes of escape were various. One was disease. Smallpox ravaged Zabaikal'e in the 1730s and 40s and again under Catherine II. A typhus epidemic struck in 1786–89. Syphilis was common among Nerchinsk labourers, spread probably more by homosexual than heterosexual sex. The Nerchinsk *zavody* were assigned their first doctor in 1741, and in 1767 a pharmacy was established in Nerchinsk *zavod* itself. But convicts would have benefited little from either. Contrary to claims by Soviet historians, starvation does not seem to have been a major cause of flight prior to the 1860s.²⁰ A more likely factor were the corporal punishments to which convicts were subject under military justice. Even minor offences earned up to 200 lashes of the birch rod or twenty-five lashes of the knout, either of which could prove fatal. Dostoevskii details both the physical and psychic effects of corporal punishment in his *Notes from a Dead House*. He describes one convict who died two days after being punished, and another who went insane at the very prospect of receiving 2,000 lashes.²¹

That escape was a major problem for Nerchinsk administrators is demonstrated by their efforts to curb it. In 1777 the mining administration formed a detachment of 260 Tungus cossacks specifically to cap-

²⁰ Aleksei P. Okladnikov, et al., eds., *Istoriia Sibiri s drevneishikh vremen do nashikh dnei*, 5 vols. (Leningrad: Nauka, 1968) 2: 339–40; Mark A. Braginskii, *Nerchinskaia katorga: Sbornik nerchinskogo zemliachestva* (Moskva: Politkatorzhan, 1933), 9–11, 14. Braginskii argues that “[c]hronic starvation was one of the causes of massive flight by exiles from *katorga* sites.” But economic historian Arcadius Kahan found that prior to Catherine II’s reign, the treasury budgeted 18 r. 85¾ k. per annum per convict, from which each man received 6 k. cash plus a ‘monthly ration of 1 pood and 32.5 pounds of rye flour’. Such rations would seem to have been sufficient, and were in any case increased under Catherine (see below). Cf. Braginskii, *Nerchinskaia*, 9; Arcadius Kahan, *The Plow, the Hammer, and the Knout: An Economic History of Eighteenth-Century Russia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 372 n. 14.

²¹ F.M. Dostoevskii, *Zapiski iz mertvogo doma*, as reproduced in volume 4 of *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972), 136–37, 152–55, 160.

ture fugitives. In 1783 it tried prophylactic measures, increasing to 24 r. and in some cases 30 r. the yearly amount budgeted for each convict; establishing a twelve-hour workday; and ordering that every two weeks of continuous daily labour be followed by one full week of rest. These measures coincided with others aimed at easing convicts' and exiles' conditions generally, and suggest the influence on Catherine II of such Enlightenment penal theorists as Beccaria and Montesquieu. Yet, as with so many other projects, penal reform held Catherine's attention only fleetingly. Another hindrance to effective reform was the disjuncture between legislation and practice. To her credit, Catherine issued *ukazy* that limited the number of lashes to which criminals were subject as part of their sentences; abolished the use of the knout against women; replaced the traditional slitting of the nostrils with branding; and provided that prisoners who became injured or sick during the march to Siberia be hospitalised. But executioners, guards, and administrators largely ignored these regulations. For example, despite the 1783 reforms at Nerchinsk, its commandants transformed the week set aside for rest into a kind of extended *subbotnik* (Soviet working holiday) by making convicts repair barracks and other prison buildings. Facing interminable labours, convicts continued to flee this pitiless regime. Out of desperation, the administration in 1785 offered a bounty of 5 r. for each captured fugitive. But seven years later Commandant Barbot de Marni cancelled the bounty, recognizing as he did the futility of reducing the escape rate.²²

As a barometer of penal labourers' living conditions, escape rates show these had worsened by the 1850s, by which decade silver production had plummeted and gold mining was already failing to meet expect-

²² Okladnikov, *Istoriia* 2: 339–40; Braginskii, *Nerchinskaia*, 9–11, 14. On Catherine's penology see Evgenii Anisimov, *Dyba i knut: politicheskii sysk i russkoe obshchestvo v XVIII veke* (Moskva: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 1999); Mikhail N. Gernet, *Istoriia tsarskoi tiur'my*, 3rd ed., 5 vols. (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo iuridicheskoi literatury, 1960–63), *passim*; Adams, *Politics of Punishment*, intro. and ch. 1; Tatiana Cizova, 'Beccaria in Russia', *Slavonic and East European Review* 40, n. 95 (1962): 384–408; Isabel de Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 155ff.; LeDonne, *Ruling Russia*, 184–201 *et passim*. Unfortunately, it has so far been impossible to locate biographical details on de Marni.

tations. Insufficient employment kept convicts idle and cooped up in their barracks, contributing to what one journalist was told was a fateful rupture within prison society, which in many regards mirrored that of the *mir* with its periodic dividing of spoils.²³ In 1849, Eastern Siberia's Governor-General Nikolai N. Murav'ev appointed the mining engineer Ivan E. Razgil'deev to be Nerchinsk's commandant. Until his removal thirteen years later, Razgil'deev reigned over a veritable hell-hole of inhumanity and malfeasance, degradation and despair. Overcrowding, poor sanitation, lack of provisions and medicines led to a typhus epidemic that may have killed over a thousand labourers and a scurvy epidemic several years later that was just as deadly. Reviving a practice abandoned during Alexander I's reign, Razgil'deev ordered convicts branded with a Cyrillic 'C' on one cheek, an 'O' on the forehead, and a 'K' on the other cheek, thereby indelibly marking them as *ssyl'no-katorzhnye* — 'exiled penal laborers'. 'Razgil'deev was very severe,' understated Semevskii. 'It is said that as a simple administrative punishment he ordered 300 lashes of the birch rod be applied using both hands.'²⁴ Maksimov calculated that a total of 3,104 exiles (*ssyl'nye*) and penal laborers (*katorzhnye*) successfully fled the Nerchinsk *zavody* between 1847 and 1859. Including the 508 *masterovye* who also escaped during this period, altogether these fugitives (*beglye*) represented a quarter of the cabinet industries' labour force.²⁵ Even after the so-called *Razgil'deevshchina* ended, Nerchinsk experienced large numbers of escapes.

²³ This rupture furthermore led to the evolution of a caste of hardened convicts called 'Ivans' who terrorized fellow prisoners, and therefore is roughly analogous to the class disparity which developed among the peasantry between 1861 and 1928 and created the *kulaki*. See Vlas M. Doroshevich, *Sakhalin. Katorga*, 3 vols. (1903; rpt. Moskva: Zakharov, 1998) 2: 30 *et passim*.

²⁴ Semevskii, *Rabochie* 1: 314–24.

²⁵ Maksimov, *Sibir' i katorga* (1900), 474–75; Maksimov, *Sibir' i katorga* (1871) 1: 102 *n*, 182. A report by the Nerchinsk command dated 10 February 1859 similarly shows that 3,458 exiles were present in the Nerchinsk *zavody* (including the Petrovsk ironworks); 531 were on 'temporary dismissal'; and 4,000 were 'at large' (*v begakh*). Leonid M. Goriushkin, ed., *Politicheskaia ssylka v Sibiri. Nerchinskaia katorga, Tom 1* (Novosibirsk: Sibirskii khronograf, 1993), doc. no. 74, p. 139.

High escape rates characterized other *katorga* sites as well, and so it would be mistaken to assume Nerchinsk was exceptional in this regard. An 1833 investigation revealed that less than half the penal labourers assigned to fortresses and distilleries in Western Siberia could be accounted for, and that a quarter of the nearly 3,000 penal labourers assigned to two distilleries in Tomsk *guberniia* had escaped since 1823. During roughly the same period, 259 of 285 penal labourers assigned to the Kamenskii distillery in Eniseisk *guberniia* escaped.²⁶ In 1843 Irkutsk's *guberniia* administration issued a stern warning holding factory directors, the Nerchinsk Mining Bureau, and local police chiefs personally responsible for escapes by convicts under their control,²⁷ but this did nothing to stem the tide. The following year, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) reported almost 200 fugitives arrested in Siberia and neighbouring Perm' *guberniia*. But this was just the tip of the iceberg. More indicative were the arrests of 3,323 passport-less vagrants, or *brodiagi*.²⁸ Because a fugitive exile typically refused to identify himself, this latter figure is a more accurate indication of the number of escapees.

Moreover, huge numbers of *brodiagi* eluded arrest altogether. Journalist and Siberian activist Nikolai M. Iadrintsev estimated that as many as 50,000 were roaming the Siberian *taiga* at any one time.²⁹ So plentiful were they and so common their association with crime, the Perm' *guberniia* administration deemed it fit to publish a handbook entitled *Homilies to Convicts and Those Being Deported to Siberia as Criminals*. Approved by one Archimandrite Fomii in his official capacity as Spiritual Censor, the book was specifically intended for exiles who had escaped or were contemplating doing so. Couching his advice in an

²⁶ Findings reported in *Ssylka v Sibir'*, 29 n.

²⁷ GAIO, f. 435, op. 1, d. 227, l. 11.

²⁸ *Zhurnal Ministerstva vnutrennykh del* (hereafter: *ZhMVD*), nn. 8–10 (1844–45): Table(s) B. Data is missing for Tobol'sk *guberniia* during November–December, suggesting that arrest figures were actually higher. *ZhMVD* published comparable figures throughout the years of Nicholas I's reign.

²⁹ *Vostochnoe obozrenie* (3 September 1887). Iadrintsev edited this newspaper. He gives somewhat lower figures in Nikolai M. Iadrintsev, *Russkaia obshchina v tiur'me i ssylke* (S.-Peterburg: Tipografiia A. Morigerovskago, 1872), 363; and idem, *Sibir' kak koloniia v geograficheskom, etnograficheskom i dopolnennoe* (S.-Peterburg: Izdanie I.M. Sibiriakova, 1892), 268.

idiom combining Biblical phraseology and earthy colloquialisms, the anonymous author, convinced that his readers have turned to crime due to a lack of faith, nonetheless offers the worldly advice that ‘confession of the crime before the civil court should be early and full’, as this might result in a lighter sentence. He addresses those *brodiagi* who have adopted the common pseudonym *Nepomniashchii* (as in Ivan ‘Origins-not-remembered’) by, on the one hand, taunting them that only those born in a forest would not know their names, and, on the other, by imploring: ‘Stop this cunning, good men [*liubeznye*], this insincerity which so dishonours you!’³⁰

Despite the government’s designation of vagabondage (*brodiazhestvo*) as a serious crime punishable by a brief sentence to *katorga*, it must be emphasized that what really existed in imperial Russia was an enormous homeless population virtually ignored by the government. That many homeless persons resorted to crime to survive helps to account for a large proportion of both criminals and exiles. Modern historians have also ignored this homeless population, and so conclusions made here upon a narrow evidentiary base are tentative. Nonetheless, whereas most Siberian *brodiagi* would have been fugitive exile-settlers (*ssyl’no-poselentsy*) and not fugitive penal laborers (*katorzhnye*), given that the formers’ numbers were far larger,³¹ *brodiagi* as a whole almost certainly bore primary responsibility for Siberia’s extraordinary crime rates, even if most individuals were resorting to petty crime simply to survive. Although evidence does not always exist to identify perpetrators, statistics compiled by the MVD for the period 1836–55 show that Siberia consistently had the highest violent crime rates of any region in the empire. In 1836, for example, Siberia’s murder rate was *eight and a half times* that of the empire as a whole.³² Siberia experienced twenty-

³⁰ *Poucheniia k podsudimym i k peresylaemym v Sibir’ prestupnikam* (Perm’: V gubernskoi tipografii, 1859), 23, 38–39.

³¹ Soviet historian M.N. Gernet estimated a population of 14 000 penal labourers for 1891; in 1898 the Main Prison Administration (GTU) arrived at a total of 100 571 exile-settlers *present and accounted for* in Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East (by this time almost no exile-settlers were assigned to Western Siberia). See Gernet, *Istoriia* 3: 380; *Ssylka v Sibir’*, prilozheniia, table, pp. 14–18.

³² *ZhMVD*, n. 8 (1836): Table n. 2.

one murders in June 1845 alone — nearly 25 percent of imperial Russia's murders that month, despite Siberians comprising only 5 percent of its population.³³ Violent crime rates remained appallingly high throughout the second half of the century as well. Items such as the following appeared regularly in Siberian newspapers:

From Alzamai. Robbery and brigandage continue with all energy in our region; indeed, a gang of scoundrels has formed under the leadership of a fugitive from Nizhneudinsk Prison, the penal labourer O—v, who acts without any restraint, unhindered by our *zemskii* police.³⁴

This and similar anecdotal sources are generally corroborated by official records. For example, a Kara police registry from the early 1870s lists as quotidian murders, assaults, and robberies among the local population of convicts and former convicts.³⁵

Although fugitive penal labourers comprised but a minority of Siberian *brodiagi*, their sheer numbers help explain what happened to many of the 50,000 convicts known to have been exiled to *katorga* between 1823 and 1860,³⁶ but who are unaccounted for by the documentary record. Similarly suggestive of the threat *katorga* fugitives posed for Siberia's inhabitants is the fact that on average, half of Nerchinsk's convicts were 'at large' at any given time. The threat was very real indeed, given the insignificant police presence in Siberia. For instance, besides a handful of village deputies, all of twenty mounted constables patrolled the Irkutsk *guberniia* countryside in 1898.³⁷ Hence the 'war' that Iadrintsev writes existed between Siberian peasants and fugitive exiles, and the formers' reliance upon 'lynch law' (*zakon Lincha*).³⁸

This exile-crime nexus helped spark the Siberian separatist movement led by Iadrintsev, Grigorii N. Potanin, and other Petersburg stu-

³³ *ZhMVD*, n. 12 (1845): Table B.

³⁴ *Sibir'* (1 February 1887). Alzamai was a village 600 km northwest of Irkutsk on the Toporok River.

³⁵ Rossiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Dal'nego Vostoka (RGIA DV), f. 1395, op. 1, d. 4. The registry comprises the entire *delo*.

³⁶ Maksimov, *Sibir' i katorga* (1871) 2: table, p. 320.

³⁷ *Ssyłka v Sibir'*, prilozheniia, table, p. 51.

³⁸ Iadrintsev, *Russkaia obshchina*, 488–99.

dents during the 1860s.³⁹ Iadrntsev, who was charged with ‘separatism’ (*oblastnichestvo*) and exiled to Arkhangel’ *guberniia*, later devoted a chapter of his magnum opus *Sibir’ kak koloniia* (Siberia as a Colony) to describing exiles’ crimes in gruesome detail.⁴⁰ The Irkutsk newspaper *Sibir’* shared his outrage at Petersburg’s use of Siberia as a dump for human detritus, editorializing in 1878 that

. . . Siberia, suppressed in its moral, economic, civilian, and even political development by the exiling here of all Russia’s societal excrement, should unceasingly announce its protest until that time when the issue of exile has passed through its final phase of development.⁴¹

This was nothing less than a call for exile’s complete abolition. Unfortunately for Siberians, abolition never came.

Kara

Prior to 1850 the Nerchinsk administration assigned few, if any, penal labourers to Kara. However, that year Razgil’deev, newly installed as Nerchinsk commandant and with Governor-General Murav’ev’s approval, shifted the focus of *katorga* mining operations to the nearby Kara Valley. The Decembrist Dmitrii I. Zavalishin, still serving out his exile in Eastern Siberia, wrote that this operation destroyed both human lives and the efficacy of mining operations:

In such manner began without any gradualness the complete destruction of the mining department. In March, people were torn away from their livelihoods [*khoziaistva*] and without any preparatory measures transferred to new places, in the Kara gold fields. Is it strange that during this, food and housing were insufficient, work was unfamiliar and exhausting, various illnesses developed which then commingled into a single typhus epidemic, carrying off a thousand people, but the gold, irregardless of all the efforts, stretchings of the truth, and false-

³⁹ Vladimir G. Mirzoev, *Istoriografiia Sibiri (Domarksistskii period)* (Moskva: Mysl’, 1970), 295 ff.

⁴⁰ See Iadrntsev, *Sibir’ kak koloniia*, ch. 8.

⁴¹ *Sibir’* (26 February 1878).

hoods, nonetheless siphoned out at no more than 65 *pudy*, along with the near total destruction of the silver mining [industry], so that the overall result of these horribly exacted costs was clearly that even less was obtained than in preceding years?⁴²

Ignoring Zavalishin's concerns, the administration had by decade's end assigned 2,200 penal labourers, including 146 women, to Kara (*karaiiskaia*) *katorga*. As of 1864, 2,608 convicts were divided equally among Kara Valley's four mines and the Shakhtaminsk mine, north of the valley but linked administratively. Each mine had a corresponding prison. Kara's convicts represented a quarter of the Nerchinsk District's combined convict and non-convict labour force.⁴³

Conditions worsened when the 3,500 Poles and fellow insurrectionists sentenced to *katorga* between the beginning of the uprising in January 1863 and December 1866 so overwhelmed the system it simply collapsed.⁴⁴ Escape rates among Nerchinsk's penal laborers approached 30 percent at the time.⁴⁵ Recognition of this collapse led Alexander II to convene in 1869 a Committee for the Organization of *Katorga* Labours

⁴² From Zavalishin's *Zapiski dekabrista* (first published in 1900, eight years after his death), as excerpted in Natal'ia P. Matkhanova, ed., *Graf N. N. Murav'ev-Amurskii v vospominaniakh sovremennikov* (Novosibirsk: Sibirskii khoronograf, 1998), 91.

⁴³ Maksimov, *Sibir' i katorga* (1871) 2: 106 *et passim*; Semevskii, *Rabochie* 1: lxvi, 296 ff; *idem*, 2: 565, 577; V. V. Sapozhnikov and N. A. Gavrilov, 'Zemli Kabinetna Ego Velichestva', in *Aziatskaia Rossiia: Tom pervyi: Liudi i poriadki za Uralom* (S. Peterburg: Izdanie Pereselencheskago upravleniia glavnago upravleniia zemleustroistva i zemledeliia, 1914), 433–35.

⁴⁴ Maksimov, *Sibir' i katorga* (1871) 2: table, pp. 336–37. This collapse of *katorga* is discernible from the following documentation: Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. 122, op. 5, d. 1, ll. 17–30; d. 3, ll. 38–51; GAIO, f. 24, op. 3, k. 41, d. 46; d. 47; Goriushkin, *Nerchinskaia katorga*, doc. nn. 86, 92, 93, 94. On the roles played by Poles in Siberian exile, see V. N. Ivanov, et al., eds., *Rossii i Pol'sha: istoriko-kulturnye kontakty (sibirskii fenomen). Materialy Mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii 24–25 iunია 1999 g. Iakutsk* (Novosibirsk: Nauka, 2001); E. A. Golubev and V. V. Sokolovskii, eds., *Poliaki v Buriatii: Nauchno-populiarnoe izdanie* (Ulan-Ude: Vostochno-Sibirskii gosudarstvennyi tekhnologicheskii universitet, 1996).

⁴⁵ Semevskii, *Rabochie* 1: lxvi.

(KUKR⁴⁶), on which sat representatives of the interior, justice, and finance ministries. In addition to ordering establishment of the aforementioned Sakhalin penal colony and temporary *katorga* prisons in Simbirsk, Vil'no, Tobol'sk, and elsewhere, KUKR decided to 'reconstruct' *katorga*, with Kara as its locus. Along with transferring the bulk of Nerchinsk's penal labourers to a series of new prisons to be built in the Kara Valley, the plan involved a curious arrangement whereby the Imperial Cabinet was to continue employing convicts yet cede management over them to Zabaikal'e's military government. An 1867 *ukaz* from the Imperial Cabinet's Mining Division baldly stated the reason for this: 'In the past five years Nerchinsk silver production has not only not given a return to the Cabinet, but has incurred losses. From 1858 through 1863 such losses were over 200,000 r. . . .'⁴⁷ This and other memoranda confirm that while Alexander II wanted to realize profits, he did not want the burden of feeding, clothing, or housing his *votchina* labourers. In December 1869 the State Council formalized this arrangement compromising the imperial treasury for the benefit of the royal family.⁴⁸

The following summer a chaotic transfer of penal labourers began, made so by a dispute between the mining administration and Kara's new *katorga* command over the number of transferees and who would pay for what. The transfer deprived Nerchinsk *zavody* of nearly all their penal labourers. By late 1870 only 487 of Nerchinsk District's 2,685 penal labourers were still in *zavody*; and by July 1871 only 183 were. Those who remained formed a pathetic assemblage of cripples, elderly, and the mentally ill. By mid-1871 40 percent of those left behind had died. Conditions at Kara began unpromisingly as well. In 1872 the Im-

⁴⁶ *Komitet ob ustroistve katorzhnykh rabot*. KUKR's activities are described in GARF, f. 122, op. 6, d. 648, ll. 8-29; and in V. [I.] Vlasov, 'Kopiiia s soobrazhenii predstavlenykh Kollezhskim Sovetnikom Vlasovym General-Gubernatoru Vostochnoi Sibiri, ob ustroistve katorzhnykh rabot na o. Sakhaline' (prepared c. autumn 1871), l. 38. This and all other documents authored by Vlasov and cited in this article were found in the 'Sakhalin' *delo*, cat. no. RUK. 345, in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, Biblioteka Irkutskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta (BIGU).

⁴⁷ GARF, f. 122, op. 5, d. 3, ll. 38-51.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, ll. 141-144. See also *ibid.*, ll. 66-140; RGIA DV, f. 701, op. 1, d. 14, ll. 5-6, 18, 40-43, 62-70, 71-76; d. 16, ll. 4-10, 263-269, 272-297.

perial Cabinet complained that the Kara command was not providing convicts sufficient food or clothing.⁴⁹

As 'old' Nerchinsk fell into desuetude new prisons sprouted like mushrooms through the Kara Valley. Seven were eventually built near correspondent gold fields; but the privately-owned industries of Urium and Zheltuga, 111 and 181 versts respectively from administrative headquarters at Ust'-Kara, represented a unique aspect of Kara *katorga*. Because Kara's cabinet industries could not provide enough work for penal labourers, the government allowed some to work at Urium and Zheltuga, where despite a 15 percent tax on their earnings they could earn up to 200 r. a year. Petr Kropotkin, always one to emphasize the worst aspects of tsarist penology, admitted that, in comparison to the cabinet industries, these private industries offered favourable working conditions.⁵⁰ Kropotkin's view is supported by V. I. Vlasov, an official for both the MVD and the Eastern Siberian administration, who during his 1871 inspection of *katorga* sites noted that convicts lived indistinguishably from free labourers also at Urium and Zheltuga — that is, without guards and sharing the same barracks, apartments, and artels. When these convicts' eleven-month contracts ended in late autumn they would return *en masse* to Ust'-Kara, unescorted by guards, most stopping in villages along the way to barter or buy 'vodka, delicacies, and especially decorous clothes. . . .' Vlasov learned that 'they go several versts into the *taiga* to meet [fellow] workers and there, congratulating them on the conclusion of work, try not to let their significant earnings slip through their fingers [through gambling, theft, etc.].' But these hardened men, who had worked like dogs throughout Zabaikal'e's sun-drenched summers and bitterly cold winters, inevitably gave in to 'every conceivable weakness' and, once in these villages, so availed themselves of the pleasures to be had that most were broke upon returning to Ust'-Kara.⁵¹

Another peculiarity is that most of these penal labourers even returned to Ust'-Kara. According to Vlasov's otherwise critical report, in

⁴⁹ RGIA DV, f. 701, op. 1, d. 14; d. 16.

⁵⁰ Peter Kropotkin, *In Russian and French Prisons* (1887; rpt. New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 159.

⁵¹ [V. I.] Vlasov, 'Kratkii ocherk neustroistv, sushchestvuiushchikh na katorge' (31 January 1873), pp. 7–8.

1870 only 4 of 404 convicts assigned to Urium and Zheltuga escaped. Given the lack of coercion, this suggests that what these ‘criminals’ really wanted more than anything — even freedom — were paying jobs. But these private industries’ escape rate rose to nearly 10 percent of 245 convicts the following year. Moreover, figures on the Kara prisons show convicts escaped in large numbers. In 1870, 314 of the command’s 2,478 assigned convicts were ‘at large’ (*beglye*); comparable figures for 1871 were 237 of 2,307. And these figures do not reflect what would have been the larger numbers of escape attempts.⁵² It would therefore appear that despite the freedom enjoyed by those working at Urium and Zheltuga, conditions at Kara were in no wise superior to those of the Nerchinsk *zavody*.

Indeed, escapes from Kara, successful or not, reflected deep-seated problems, such as those cited in a July 1871 report by *katorga* commandant Major Zagarin. Boasting that even convicts *not* assigned to Urium and Zheltuga were productive, he nonetheless confessed: ‘The percentage of those among the prisoners who are working and have died or are sick is significantly high. . . .’ It did not help matters that Zagarin and other officials were later found to have been embezzling money and supplies.⁵³ Kropotkin writes that Zagarin (whose first name remains unknown) was a brutal sadist, ‘the right place for [whom] would be a lunatic asylum.’⁵⁴ Hence Vlasov found malfeasance and incompetence to blame for the chaos he found at Ust’-Kara. Several ‘dilapidated, dark, and dirty’ barracks stood inside a stockade overcrowded with convicts and their families, most of whom wore rags, and several prisoners went about stark naked — reflecting not only officials’ peculation but convicts’ tendency to gamble away their clothes. Vlasov hints darkly that ‘games which could only exist in *katorga* are played in secret cells,’ and writes that the *maidan* — a criminal institution combining aspects of a black market with those of a gambling den⁵⁵ — was in full swing, its plentiful supplies of vodka made possible

⁵² Ibid.; Vlasov, ‘Kopiii s soobrazhenii’, ll. 39–40.

⁵³ RGIA DV, f. 701, op. 1, d. 16, ll. 66–69, 84, 93–99, 113–114, 138.

⁵⁴ Kropotkin, *In Russian and French Prisons*, 188.

⁵⁵ The *maidan* is mentioned in several of the sources already cited. For an analysis see A.A. Gentes, ‘“*Talan na maidan!*”: Tsarist Siberian Prison Culture

by arrangements between guards and the so-called *maidanshchiki*. As for the guards themselves, Vlasov found them ‘unfit for duty’.⁵⁶

As defined by the 1845 penal code, *katorga* consisted of two convict categories. When a convict first entered *katorga* he became a ‘probationer’ (*ispytuemyi*). At Ust'-Kara, probationers were restricted to the stockade compound. Officials assigned a few to work in the prison garden, and allowed others to pursue the artisanal trades for which penal labourers were renowned. Vlasov calculates that by manufacturing items on consignment for guards and officials, artisan-convicts earned after cabinet taxes an average of 67 r. per annum. After a certain number of years, and if well-behaved, probationers graduated to become ‘correctionals’ (*ispravliaiushchiesia*). Correctionals could live outside prison, marry, enjoy extra holidays, and had every ten months served count as a full year toward their sentences. The majority of Kara’s correctionals worked in the gold fields, though a small number served as domestic servants in officials’ homes, despite such employment having been forbidden decades earlier. Still other correctionals were allowed to live with their families in private izbas, in return for providing the administration with firewood.⁵⁷

Both convict and free women lived at Kara, but in what numbers is unclear. Vlasov describes female prisoners working inside the Ust'-Kara stockade, but says that most were left to their own devices. Comparison with conditions for women on Sakhalin suggests most at Kara relied upon prostitution to survive. A rare children’s shelter existed at Ust'-Kara, meagrely supported by a 2 r. tax on every convict working at Urium or Zheltuga. The building for it had been donated by a (presumably former) exile-settler named Makeev. When Vlasov visited, it

and its Negation and Replication of Ruling Culture’, *Proceedings of the University of Queensland History Research Group*. Forthcoming.

⁵⁶ Vlasov, ‘Kratkii ocherk’, pp. 3–9.

⁵⁷ Ibid. The relevant articles of the 1845 penal code were found in *Dopolnitel'nyia postanovleniia o raspredelenii i upotreblenii osuzhdennykh v katorzhnyia raboty. Polozhenie o ispravitel'nykh arestantskikh rotakh grazhdanskago vedomstva. Dopolnitel'nyia pravila k ustavu o soderzhashchikhsia pod strazheiu* ([n.p.: n.p.], 1845).

housed eighteen boys and seven girls, all apparently orphaned convict offspring.⁵⁸

American traveller and journalist George Kennan visited Kara in 1885, coincident with the transfer of most of its prisoners to Sakhalin. He found the Ust'-Kara men's prison to be the worst in the Kara Valley:

We ascended two or three steps incrustated with an indescribable coating of filth and ice an inch and a half thick, and entered [. . .] a long, low, and very dark corridor, [. . .] whose atmosphere [. . .] was very damp, and saturated with the strong peculiar odour that is characteristic of Siberian prisons. [. . .] [T]hat odour [. . .] is so unlike any other bad smell in the world that I hardly know with what to compare it. I can ask you to imagine cellar air, every atom of which has been half a dozen times through human lungs and is heavy with carbonic acid; to imagine that air still further vitiated by foul, pungent, slightly ammoniacal exhalations from long unwashed human bodies; to imagine that it has a suggestion of damp, decaying wood and more than a suggestion of human excrement — and still you will have no adequate idea of it.

The prison at Sredne-Kara was better: it was more recently constructed and less crowded. Nonetheless, like those in other prisons, Sredne-Kara's large communal cells (*kamery*) lacked any furnishings whatsoever, and their *nary*, or sleeping platforms, were bereft of government-issue bedding, while that which substituted for bedding ('thin patchwork mattresses improvised out of rags, cast-off foot-wrappers, and pieces cut from the skirts of [convicts'] grey overcoats') were filthy and vermin-infested. Kennan writes that scurvy, typhus, typhoid, anaemia, and tuberculosis threatened life at Kara.⁵⁹

During the period 1884–1905 Sakhalin eclipsed Kara as the locus of *katorga*. Political prisoner Petr F. Iakubovich writes that due to the manifesto ordering the transfer of healthy penal labourers to Sakhalin, 'The population of [the prison at] Shelaisk mine thinned out not by the

⁵⁸ Vlasov, 'Kratkii ocherk', pp. 3–9.

⁵⁹ George Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System*, 2 vols. (New York: The Century Co., 1891) 2: 148, 157–58.

day, but by the hour; not enough healthy penal labourers were on hand to carry out even the simplest functions that held together daily life.' The only prisoners left in the wards were 'the enfeebled elderly and the indubitably sick, syphilitic, and consumptive'.⁶⁰ Kara continued as a penal labour site, however. In 1885 it still had 1,800 penal labourers, who along with their families comprised an exilic population of 2,507. Despite what was still a significant convict population, that same year marked, at 52 *pudy*, the nadir of annual gold production, which between 1874 and 1895 averaged only 109 *pudy*. Kara never contributed more than a small percentage to Siberia's overall gold production,⁶¹ and as a result *katorga* operations there probably never paid for themselves. In 1873, Petersburg assigned the first political exiles to a special prison at Kara, but stopped doing so eighteen years later in response to what Soviet historians call the 'Kara tragedy' involving the suicides of Nadezhda Sigida and six other politicals. Between 1893 and 1900 the government assigned no exiles whatsoever to Kara, though small numbers seem to have been there between 1900 and 1917.⁶²

A Conclusion of Sorts

Due to the significance of penal labour and exile during the Soviet period, and because questions are invariably raised about the connection between tsarist and Soviet exile, this topic will be briefly addressed as a way to end this article. Continuities can certainly be seen linking tsarist *katorga* to the Soviet GULag. Both depended upon penal labour to achieve statist goals: Peter I established *katorga* coincident with his erection of a service state; Stalin used the GULag to amplify the power of his own version of that service state. However, bureaucratic malfea-

⁶⁰ Petr F. Iakubovich, *V mire otverzhenykh: zapiski byvshego katorzhnika*, 2 vols. (1896; rpt. Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1964) 2: 77, 78.

⁶¹ During the period 1874–89, 23 750 *pudy* of gold was mined in Eastern Siberia; Nerchinsk's and Kara's cabinet industries accounted for just over 7 percent of this. Semevskii, *Rabochie* 2: tables, pp. 847–53, 856–66, 911.

⁶² A. Dikovskaia-Iakimova and V. Pleskov, eds., *Kara i drugie tiur'my nerchinskoi katorgi: Sbornik vospominanii, dokumentov i materialov* (Moskva: Izd-vo Polit-katorzhan, 1927), 16, 287–88; Sapozhnikov and Gavrillov, 'Zemli Kabineta', 435.

sance and corruption under both the Romanovs and the Communists undermined *katorga*'s functioning and purpose. Siberian officials knew that the Tsar and, later, the Boss were 'far away', and so their distance from Petersburg and, later, Moscow, allowed them certain liberties impossible to officials elsewhere. These liberties came at the expense of Siberia's convicts.⁶³

Major differences also existed between the two penal systems. One difference is the scope: many more people suffered and died during a much shorter period in Soviet than in tsarist *katorga*. Another difference is abstract yet related. Whereas cruelty and inhumanity within tsarist *katorga* occurred primarily as *by-products* of a maladministered system, within the GULag they were intentional *end-products*. Sadistic guards and commandants certainly existed at Nerchinsk; but the GULag systematised and institutionalised sadism for the very purpose of dehumanizing not just those immediately subject to it, but everyone else potentially threatened by it. Yet it may be that tsarist *katorga* had a similar, if less widespread, effect — humbling a people, perpetuating an enslavement similar to that officially abolished in 1861, and, by doing so, contributing to the backlash against the monarchy. In light of this, the Bolsheviks can be seen as having mastered the lessons of their teachers. The malignancy of this ancient and destructive catechism is perpetuated today by Russia's inhumane treatment of its prison population.⁶⁴

⁶³ Corruption within Russia's penal institutions is a subject unto itself. Concerning guards' and administrators' treatment of prisoners in the GULag see Galina Mikhailovna Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism: The Gulag in the Soviet Totalitarian System* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), 147 ff.; Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 172 ff. et passim.

⁶⁴ See Amnesty International, *The Russian Federation: Denial of Justice* (London: Amnesty International, 2002).