

De los controles disciplinarios a los controles securitarios



Pedro Oliver Olmo
M.^a Carmen Cubero Izquierdo
(coords.)



Ediciones de la Universidad
de Castilla-La Mancha

**De los controles disciplinarios a los controles securitarios.
Actas del II Congreso Internacional sobre la Historia de
la Prisión y las Instituciones Punitivas**

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Isolation, Control and Resistance: Political inmates in the Shlissel'burg fortress, 1884-1906

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ABSTRACT

Between 1884 and 1906, a total of 69 inmates were incarcerated in the new prison at the notorious Shlissel'burg Fortress near St Petersburg. Traditionally used to isolate those deemed by the state to be the most dangerous criminals, after the 1881 assassination of Alexander II it held Populist revolutionaries and publicists. Several convicts, including Lenin's elder brother, were executed immediately upon or shortly after arrival at the fortress, others committed suicide, and a significant proportion died of natural causes, but many endured sentences of 20 years or more in conditions of near total solitary confinement. Of the 30 long-term survivors, 17 – who served sentences averaging 15 years – produced memoirs. These form a collective biography of the institution that elucidates both its harsh, isolationary regime, and the prisoner behaviour developed to overcome that. Emphasizing modes of resistance to the fortress authorities, the descriptions of prisoners' collective, created through communication networks, and the techniques they developed for maintaining physical and mental health, as well as intellectual capacity, also allows us to understand how the prison itself operated. For the subsequent generation of political prisoners in the Stalinist Gulag, texts by Shlissel'burg inmates such as Vera Figner became a manual for both prison conduct and memoir writing. For researchers, they represent a unique source that enables us to construct a sociology of an exemplary political prisoner community and of their space of incarceration.

SHLISSEL'BURG FORTRESS AND ITS PRISONERS, 1711-1870

Shlissel'burg Fortress, on Orekhovets (Nut) Island, stands at the mouth of the Neva river on Lake Ladoga, 35km to the east of St Petersburg. The original wooden fortress, known as Oreshek or Orekhov, was built in 1323 by Prince Yuri of Moscow in his capacity as Prince of Novgorod, following the capture of the island from the Swedes. A location of strategic importance, the fortress changed hands several times over the subsequent four centuries. In the late fifteenth century under the Novgorod Republic, its wooden fortress was replaced by a stone citadel that occupied practically the entire island. Its final capture by Peter the Great took place

in 1702 and, renamed Shlissel'burg, the fortress's military function was quickly superseded by the carceral role for which it became infamous. Between 1711 and the February revolution of 1917, for all but very short periods Shlissel'burg Prison was used to hold primarily political prisoners, including "top-secret state prisoners" (VENEDIKTOV-BEZIUK, 1928: 13), as well as some of the most serious criminal prisoners (GERNET, 1960: 222).

In the eighteenth century, Shlissel'burg Prison operated on a small scale, generally holding fewer than five inmates at any one time, with normally relatively short periods of incarceration. Only four of the known prisoners from the 18th century were imprisoned there for terms of over fifteen years, including Ernest Iogannovich Biron, regent to Ioann Antonovich (Emperor Ivan VI), imprisoned 1741-62; and the economist and alchemist Filipp Belikov, incarcerated 1746-64 (GERNET, 1960: 233-5). A significant proportion of the prisoners were perpetrators (perceived or actual) or victims of political conspiracies, with a small number of writers and publishers of seditious material, independence fighters from Russia's colonial borderlands, and occasionally religious sectarians. Notable political prisoners included Maria Romanova, the half-sister of Peter the Great (imprisoned 1718-21), as well as his first wife, Evdokiia Lopukhina (1725-7). Most tragically, Ioann Antonovich, who was deposed by Empress Elizabeth of Russia in 1741 at the age of one and spent his entire life in prison, was incarcerated in secret in Shlissel'burg Prison from 1756 to 1764, when he was murdered on Catherine the Great's orders during an attempt to release him. Following Ioann Antonovich's death, no further convicts were sent to the fortress until 1775. In the 1790s, the prison came into increased use to house a small number of intellectuals previously tolerated by Catherine the Great, their arrest reflecting fears of the spread of revolutionary ideas from France (the most famous of these prisoners, the Enlightenment writer and journalist Nikolai Novikov, was, however, incarcerated ostensibly for his activities as a freemason).

Novikov's four-year imprisonment, like that of others in the eighteenth century, was the subject of Imperial decree; no judicial process or formal sentencing was in place at this stage. In the early nineteenth century, while court intrigues among branches of the Imperial family no longer played a significant role, Shlissel'burg continued to be used occasionally to incarcerate by administrative fiat members of the nobility who intervened in politics, as in the case of Baron Timotheus von Bock, who spent ten years in the fortress for sending a letter to Tsar Alexander I calling for a constitution. From the mid-1820s, and specifically following the trials in 1826 of the Decembrist conspirators, more regular judicial processes were employed to send prisoners to Shlissel'burg. Administrative sentences remained in use throughout the nineteenth century, however, as they did elsewhere in the Russian penal system, notably as a speedy means of sending a wide variety of perceived undesirables – often irrespective of whether they had actually committed any crime – to Siberian exile (BEER, 2016: 23-5). Of the 102 prisoners known to have spent time in Shlissel'burg between 1800 and 1870, 57 were incarcerated for political reasons, including 13 Decembrist revolutionaries and 6 independence fighters, mainly from Poland.¹

For political prisoners and others, periods of incarceration in Shlissel'burg in the nineteenth century were typically short. The most common term served was one year or less (41 prisoners). 81 of the 102 prisoners from this period served terms of ten years or less. Among those who served five years or less in Shlissel'burg, 40 were sentenced for political activities, four for criminal acts, and four for heresy and sectarianism; the reason for imprisonment is unknown in 21 cases. The very short-term political prisoners included all but one of the Decembrist revolutionaries, who spent between three and seven months at the fortress, before being transferred to Eastern Siberia for long terms of hard labour. Of those who served over 15 years, six were political pri-

¹ Data on prisoners is taken primarily from GERNET 1960: 222-65; GERNET 1961a: 397-403; and KONIAEV, 2017: 529-603.

soners, two were convicted for fraud, and two were incarcerated for religious reasons (heresy and conscientious objection). No information is available on one of the long-term prisoners. Of the political prisoners, political and republican deeds were more likely to result in short than long terms of imprisonment (26 served 5 years or less, 11 served more than this). Seditious words (including unpublished writings) were generally, but not always, punished with shorter terms: five years or less in 14 cases; of the six longer terms, two served over ten years.

Conditions in the prison varied, but were generally harsh. Food in many cases was extremely poor. Gernet ascribes differential treatment to class difference, with peasants receiving much worse food than the nobility (GERNET, 1961a: 388). O'Meara notes the luxury foods brought in for von Bock – not to mention the grand piano installed in his cell in 1820! (O'MEARA, 2012: 114-5). Yet Mikhail Bakunin – also a member of the nobility, albeit one who had long since eschewed its privileges – was allocated a much smaller sum for food (18 kopeks per day compared to 30) than other prisoners in the 1850s (BAKUNIN, 1935: 567). Prisoners were kept in solitary confinement, with a regime of total silence. Cells in the old prison building were badly affected by damp and a lack of light, with detrimental effects on the health of the inmates (SZWARCE, 1893: 78, 118-9). This was exacerbated by the lack of exercise space (GERNET, 1961a: 224) and enforced inactivity. No work was provided, inmates were generally not permitted writing materials, and were only allowed access to books as a reward for good behaviour – and then, solely prayer books. Before 1849, prisoners' treatment was dictated by individual instructions. For “secret prisoners,” instructions not only stated that guards were not to know who their prisoners were, but forbade even official acknowledgment of the prisoners' existence. Yet in practice levels of secrecy were inconsistently maintained. The deposed emperor Ioann Antonovich was taught to read by a sympathetic guard despite orders not to speak to him (PRUGAVIN, 1907: ix). Von Bock's wife did not know of his whereabouts for his several years, although they were permitted to exchange letters, via a German Baptist pastor who was allowed to visit the prisoner (O'MEARA, 2012: 114). The Polish freedom fighter Walerian Łukasiński spent 38 years in almost total isolation at the fortress until his death in 1868, but was seen during walks by both Bakunin and, later, Bronisław Szwarc, and the former even managed to speak to him briefly on one occasion (GERNET, 1961a: 439; KONIAEV, 2017: 235; SZWARCE, 1893: 102). The almost complete absence of reference to Łukasiński in the memoirs of the next generation of prisoners, however, suggests that in his case, secrecy was maintained to the extent that outsiders knew nothing about him. Figner (1964), the only memoirist to refer to him, notes that, “The secret about Łukasiński was kept so strictly that in 1850 an administrator from the Third Section [the Tsarist secret police department] approached War Minister Chernyshev to ask who the old Pole locked up in Shlissel'burg was” (p.40). Ioann Antonovich is instead usually referred to as the most famous “secret” prisoner by the Populist revolutionaries (IUVACHEV, 1907: 173-85; FROLENKO, 1927: 232, 245).

In 1849, conditions were regularized with two set of instructions, for ordinary and secret prisoners. These primarily concerned tightening up security at the prison, and established a harsher regime overall, for example, depriving inmates of all communications, both with each other and beyond the fortress (GERNET 1960a: 382-6). Secret prisoners “died for the outside world from the moment they stepped over the threshold of the Secret House” (GERNET 1960a: 382). They were to be kept under constant surveillance, and not allowed any form of communication, even with their own jailers. At the same time, the picture in the nineteenth century is one of gradually decreasing use of the prison, albeit with increased length of incarceration for those who ended up there. From 1812 (when the fortress welcomed its first inmate for over 10 years) to 1829, 45 prisoners were sent to Shlissel'burg, but more than half of these spent less than two years there. From 1830 to 1848, 40 prisoners arrived, including those who

served the longest sentences. 11 of those prisoners were still incarcerated in 1849, but in the 18 years from that point (the last prisoner of this era arrived in 1866), there were only 15 new inmates, and the prison gradually emptied out.

Up to 1870, therefore, Shlissel'burg was used as both a standard prison and an exceptional space of "secret" incarceration. Although renowned for its harsh environment, the fortress's fearsome reputation rested primarily upon its role as a secret prison, and on the very long sentences that a small number of prisoners endured. Despite its frequent use to hold more regular prisoners, it remained in the eyes of the authorities an exceptional institution. When plans (ultimately unrealized) for reforming the Russian penal system were advanced in the 1840s, for example, the model of single-cell imprisonment envisaged was based on Pentonville Prison, which Tsar Nicholas I had seen during a visit to London, rather than Shlissel'burg (ADAMS, 1996: 10, 39). With the failure of that plan, the norm of sending convicts and exiles to Siberia, including political prisoners, was re-established. It is notable the prison was *not* used to incarcerate members of the Petrashevskii circle, including the writer Fedor Dostoevskii, arrested in 1849. Their sentences of hard labour (commuted from death sentences) were served in Siberian prisons, such as the Omsk stockade. During the 1870s – when the revolutionary movement was gaining momentum and arrests of activists were increasing – Shlissel'burg was used instead to house a penal battalion (PRUGAVIN, 1904: 10-11).

THE NEW SHLISSEL'BURG PRISON, 1884-1906

The exceptional role of Shlissel'burg came back into play in exceptional circumstances, following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II by Populist terrorists from the "People's Will" in March 1881. Those directly involved in the assassination were executed, but the apprehension of other members of the organization (175 members were tried between 1880 and 1890 (DALY, 2018: 67)) renewed the need for a high-security penal institution beyond existing provision. This was deemed particularly necessary in the context of the porous nature of Russia's carceral system. The authorities were not only faced with high-profile escapes such as that of Prince Petr Kropotkin from the Peter and Paul Fortress in St Petersburg in 1876. Although generally prison security was tighter by 1884 (DALY, 1998: 46), Russian prisons and Siberian hard labour colonies had far higher escape rates than English and Welsh prisons, and French penal colonies, respectively, as Daly (2000) has established for the 1890s (pp.353, 359). The determination at the highest levels to institute to truly exceptional space of incarceration can be seen from the proposal discussed at State Council on 14 February 1884 to remove the word "State" (*gosudarstvennaia*) from the prison's name, thus enabling it to operate outside the rule of law (GERNET, 1961b: 220), and become a true space of exception (AGAMBEN, 2005: 32-40). That option was not taken, but as Shlissel'burg was returned to its carceral role with the building a new prison to house 40 inmates, its exceptionality was nevertheless enshrined in three distinct, but connected ways.

In the first place, the decision not just to build a new prison at the fortress, but to adopt the most expensive of three proposed plans for new capacity at Shlissel'burg, was unprecedented. It cost 150,000 rubles, when the other plans would have cost 14,000 or 30,000 rubles (GERNET, 1960b: 217-8), at a time when the Russian penal system was otherwise chronically underfunded, stymying all attempts at reform (ADAMS, 1996: 58). This lavish spending resulted in a building with small, cramped cells of less than 3 by 3.5m (ASHENBRENNER, 1906: 58; FROLENKO, 1927: 202). Cells were, however, very clean, and had modern facilities, including sanitation – a standard that remains elusive in the prison service of the Russian Federation even today – and limited outside space for exercise. On the one hand, this represented a considerable impro-

vement in conditions for inmates by comparison with the old prison, suggesting progressive motivations. On the other hand, the aim of these individual facilities in cells and single-person exercise yards was to enable strict isolation of the prisoners.

This isolationary aim, in turn, relates to the second extraordinary element of the new Shlissel'burg regime: the normalization of exceptional standards of silence, secrecy, and surveillance for all inmates. Prisoners were to be deprived of all communications within and beyond the prison. Work and access to books would be granted only as rewards for good behaviour, and at the behest of the prison governor. Infractions of the prison rules would be severely punished, escalating from deprivation of mattresses to incarceration in punishment cells (the new use for the old prison building), to corporal punishment (up to 50 lashes),² and finally the death penalty (NOVORUSSKII, 1920: 32-3). As I shall show, the extremity of the regime quickly proved unsustainable, leading to tensions that the fortress authorities struggle to resolve.

The emphasis on the constant surveillance of inmates, meanwhile, ties in with the third exceptional feature of the new prison: the level of oversight established in its administration. The routine of inspections by high-level government officials, including ministers, is recorded by practically every memoirist, and represented a radical break from the norm; in 1879, oversight was so lacking that neither the Main Prison Administration nor the Ministry of Internal Affairs had information on the number of prisoners in the penal system (ADAMS, 1996: 123). The decision to reuse the fortress at this point doubtless hinged at least partly on its proximity to the Imperial capital, which facilitated close supervision. This in itself was contrary to the established use of Siberian hard labour prisons, which relied on distance to isolate and silence prisoners. Indeed, eight convicts transferred from hard labour sentences in Kara, 1,000 kilometres to the east of Lake Baikal, were among the first prisoners to arrive at Shlissel'burg in August 1884. This suggests a move towards a model of greater surveillance and control than the Siberian paradigm of punishment could manage. The introduction of official oversight was in itself far from a negative development, as it was an attempt to combat the mismanagement and corruption that was the normal state of affairs elsewhere in the penal system (BEER, 2016: 13-14). Yet that same system of supervision ultimately came into conflict with the prison's own regulations and its local administration, which further undermined the severe regime envisaged.



Between 1884 and 1906, 68 or 69 prisoners, mainly members of the revolutionary terrorist organization, the "People's Will," and later of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, were subject to the exceptional regime at Shlissel'burg.³ 13 of the prisoners were brought to the fortress for secret execution, the sentences being carried out hours or occasionally days after their arrival. This in itself represented a departure from the previous practice of public executions (as in the case in 1881 of those directly responsible for the assassination of Alexander II), pointing to the new role of Shlissel'burg Fortress in establishing a policy of concealment as a major aim

2 Although memoirs record male prisoners being beaten by guards for failure to obey the rules, they note that flogging was never used as a formal punishment, suggesting a degree of squeamishness about applying the rules even in the harshest period of the new prison's existence. On the history of corporal punishment in Russia, see SCHRADER, 2002.

3 There is some uncertainty about whether one prisoner, Nikanor Kryzhanovskii, was ever incarcerated at Shlissel'burg. Venediktov-Beziuk (1928) denies that he was present (p.86), but the normally reliable Gernet (1961b) includes him as an inmate (p.242). Volkenshtein (1902) does not refer to him in her list of fellow prisoners (p.14-17), but Novorusskii (1920) does (p.214). Frolenko (1927) notes that, "so many people I didn't know were brought in, and their cells were so far from me, that I didn't find out about other deaths" (p.208).

of penal institutions (ENGELSTEIN, 1993: 339). Of the remaining 56 longer-term inmates, 28 were originally given death sentences, commuted to perpetual hard labour in 24 cases, with specified sentences of between ten and 20 years in the other four. Nine were sentenced to life-long hard labour, and ten to 20 years or more (sentences over 20 years were the result of increases to the original tariff), while another six had sentences of between ten and 19 years. Only one prisoner (Vasilii Karaulov) received a sentence of less than ten years, and one other (Ivan Iuvachev) was transferred significantly before the end of his sentence. Of the rest, 30 survived their sentences with their mental capacities intact, to be freed or transferred to exile or hard labour. Nine transfers took place between 1895 and 1898, after 8–14 years' incarceration, while 14 prisoners served sentences of 18 years or more. Two prisoners were executed for infractions of the prison regulations, and three committed suicide. At least four suffered total mental breakdown and were ultimately transferred to psychiatric hospitals. 17 prisoners died of natural causes, mostly from scurvy and tuberculosis, 11 of them within the first 18 months of the new prison's operation. Including suicides and executions for breaking prison regulations, the mortality rate reached one third between the opening of the new prison in August 1884 and the end of March 1886. These numbers speak to the extremity of both the regime, particularly in its initial phase, as well as of the terms served. Daly (2002) emphasizes Shlissel'burg's notorious reputation, and his data indicates the severity of these sentences by comparison with those served elsewhere (p.90).

Of the survivors, 17 wrote about their own and others' experience of the prison, with ten longer memoirs, plus short reminiscences, letters, biographies, obituaries, and poems. These texts provide primary data on the prisoners. Liudmila Volkenshtein (1902: 14–17) and Mikhail Novorusskii (1920: 214–5) record in tabular form details of all the prisoners they knew of at the time of writing (Volkenshtein's memoir was written during her transfer to exile on Sakhalin island after her release from the fortress in 1896; Novorusskii's work, written a few years later, and originally published in serial form in 1906, is more complete). Vasilii Pankratov (1906: 102–3) ends with a list of the prisoners remaining in the fortress upon his transfer in 1898. The memoirs also played a crucial role in documenting details of the Shlissel'burg regime. As Volkenshtein (1902) states, "these notes may give a certain understanding of Shlissel'burg prison and may serve as material for a future historian" (p.8). As the survivors chart their resistance and eventual victories over the worst aspects of the prison regime, they reveal the unsustainable nature of the controls envisaged. In the following analysis, I will argue that the exceptional regime instituted at Shlissel'burg contained a series of contradictions that contributed significantly to its failure. And I will show how survivors used the concept of exceptionality in their memoirs to overcome the authorities' attempts to silence and isolate them.

CONTROL, ISOLATION AND SURVEILLANCE

As suggested by the prevalence of commuted death sentences, extremely long, and life sentences, incarceration in the fortress was perceived by the authorities as a place for the revolutionaries to die. Vera Figner (1964) understood on her arrival that "there would be no way out" (p.7) and refers to her cell as "a coffin" (p.13). The primary aim of the regime was absolute isolation of the prisoners: from the outside world, from each other, and even from ideas. Not only was any communication beyond the fortress or with other prisoners forbidden, but officials, including the prison doctor, were only permitted to speak face-to-face with inmates with two guards as witnesses (POLIVANOV, 1906: 275). As a consequence of the decision to isolate prisoners, no work was provided, despite the fortress being designated a hard labour (*katorga*) prison. The absence of books and writing materials imposed complete inactivity on the inmates. The

enforced silence of the prison, described as “deathly” (FIGNER, 1964: 28; PANKRATOV, 1906: 7) and “like the grave” (IANOVICH, 1907: 43), was intensified by this lack of activity. But it also facilitated constant surveillance; any attempt at communication could be heard, and guards wore soft boots so they could monitor the spy holes in the cell doors without being noticed by prisoners. (GERNET 1961b: 250) At some point in the first two years (memoirs differ as to the exact moment), cells were altered, making them even smaller: the corners nearest the door were blocked off to ensure the whole cell could be seen from the spy hole.

Thus although physical conditions were ostensibly better than in other prisons, due to the modern facilities, the fundamental problem facing the prisoners were isolation and the inactivity that entailed (IANOVICH, 1907: 43). Volkenshtein (1902) notes that “Sitting all day in one’s cell without anything to read or any work seemed tantamount to death” (p.18). The detrimental effects of the regime can be seen in the extremely high mortality rate and the number of prisoners who suffered from nervous conditions and worse. To be sure, several of the prisoners were already sick upon their arrival, due to the terrible conditions at the Peter and Paul Fortress in St Petersburg and at the Kara Hard Labour Prison in Eastern Siberia, while one prisoner, Ignatii Ivanov, was brought to the fortress from Kazan’ Psychiatric Hospital. But with the lack of fresh air in the cells, the poor quality and quantity of food (ASHENBRENNER, 1906: 59), limited exercise, and inadequate medical care, matters quickly worsened. According to Pankratov (1906), in the months after arrival at least five prisoners were suffering from physical illnesses, notably tuberculosis, and eight were enduring various stages of mental breakdown (p.11). Several memoirs record in harrowing detail the suffering of the dying prisoners, who remained in total isolation, frequently without any medical attention, and, as Volkenshtein (1902) says, with nobody even to change their bedding or help them to the toilet (p.32). The sounds of the dying prisoners, and the shrieks of the mentally ill, amplified by the otherwise silent regime, further affected the mental health of the other inmates. Gernet (1961b) records that isolation in the old prison in adjacent cells to two insane prisoners (Vasilii Konashevich and Nikolai Shchedrin) drove new arrival Sofia Ginsburg to suicide in January 1891 (p.259).

While the authorities may have envisaged the eventual demise of the prisoners under their supervision, they evidently did not anticipate the consequences of the regime they had instituted, or how rapidly its fatal effects would be felt. As the Lithuanian-Polish revolutionary Liudvikas Janavičius observes, if the original conditions had been maintained, the prison would soon have been empty (IANOVICH, 1907: 44) which Grigorii Gershuni (1908), leader of the terrorist “Battle Organization” of the Socialist Revolutionaries, and one of the later arrivals, reiterates (p.119). Far from being an achievement of the authorities’ ultimate aims, the high mortality rate introduced a paradox. Volkenshtein (1902) indicates that “the authorities . . . were alarmed by the huge number of people dying, because it was all too obvious evidence of the conditions in which the prisoners were being kept at Shlissel’burg Fortress” (p.39), and emphasizes their fear of this sort of news leaking out of the prison (p.32). The consequence of attempting to cut the prisoners off from society so completely was that *any* breach of the official silence surrounding the fortress, represented a threat. As Mikhail Ashenbrenner (1906) says, “they wanted to isolate us so that young Russia would forget our names” (p.76), but scandal would bring the prisoners’ names back to public attention, no longer as terrorists or revolutionaries, but as martyrs. Events such as the horrific suicide in October 1887 of Mikhail Grachevskii, who used a kerosene lamp to set fire to himself in a locked punishment cell in the old prison, put the secret regime at particular risk of exposure. Yet the possibility of news leaking *into* the prison was also a problem. Isolating the prisoners completely from the outside world meant that any new addition to the cohort of inmates would effectively breach the walls of the prison, reconnecting its inhabitants to the life of the country, and the revolutionary movement – as

eventually happened with the arrival of Petr Karpovich in 1901 (ASHENBRENNER, 1906: 87). It was precisely such unresolved contradictions that the prisoners ultimately were able to exploit.

RESISTANCE AND REFORM

The suicide of Grachevskii became a turning point, leading to the realization that the Shlissel'burg regime was unsustainable (IANOVICH, 1907: 66). A new administration and superintendent of the guards were brought in to institute reform (FIGNER, 1964: 58-9). Yet by this time the system had already come under considerable pressure as a result of the inmates' resistance, which had garnered numerous concessions and chipped away at the absolute severity of the regime.

The first and most critical stage of this resistance lay in establishing a network of communication between the prisoners, using the "wall alphabet" to tap messages to their neighbours. Originally invented by the Decembrist Mikhail Bestuzhev, during his own two-month imprisonment in Shlissel'burg in 1826, this consisted of tapping out each letter of a simplified Cyrillic alphabet, according to its place on the horizontal and vertical axes of a grid:

	I	II	III	IV	V
1	А	Б	В	Г	Д
2	Е	Ж	З	И	К
3	Л	М	Н	О	Р
4	Р	С	Т	У	Ф
5	Х	Ц	Ч	Ш	Щ
6	Ы	Ю	Я		

Fig. 1. Russian prison "wall alphabet" (VENEDIKTOV-BEZIUK, 1928: 43)

Figner (1964) describes taking a month to learn the alphabet from her friend Nikolai Morozov in the neighbouring cell (p.140). Like the other prisoners, she became an expert and never lost the habit; Gernet (1961b) records her demonstrating the alphabet perfectly 20 years after her release (p.251). At first, the small number of prisoners, spread among the 40 cells, meant communication in this way was impossible; it only began properly when the next group of inmates arrived (PANKRATOV, 1906: 8). While some of the sick did not participate, ultimately enough of the prisoners were able communicate for messages to be able to travel from one end of the prison to the other, and across both storeys (NOVORUSSKII, 1920: 79-80). Conversations conducted in this way were of necessity laborious; it could take five minutes to tap out two or three phrases, and many found it irritating rather than useful at first (ASHENBRENNER, 1906: 54; IANOVICH, 1907: 42). Nevertheless this mode of communication was used for extended discussions, including Iosif Lukashevich tapping out the entire Socialist Revolutionary programme to the listening Fedor Iurkovskii (NOVORUSSKII, 1920: 74-5). In addition, it allowed prisoners to share their poetry, and after Dmitrii Butskinskii and Mikhail Shebalin had taught their compatriots the rules of chess, they conducted whole tournaments (ASHENBRENNER, 1906: 69-70).

After a cautious start, wall communications quickly increased. Janavičius is one of several memoirists who records that even before Grachevskii's death and the relaxation of some of the regulations, knocking between cells was so embedded that the guards made little attempt to stop them (IANOVICH, 1907: 61). Paradoxically, the main reason that the prisoners were able

to flout the rules in this way was the severity of the regime itself. In a situation where nothing was permitted, removing all reason to live, punishment was in effect no longer punishment: prisoners such as Ippolit Myshkin and Mikhail Popov, “realized that there was no way out from here, that they had been brought here to die, consequently, why should they keep a low profile, why should they fear punishment?” (FROLENKO, 1927: 206). In fact, punishment was itself co-opted as a form of resistance. The two prisoners who were executed for violating the fortress’s regulations, Egor Minakov and Myshkin, on 21 September 1884 and 26 January 1885 respectively, deliberately chose this as a means of suicide. After a singing protest, and a hunger strike of 5-6 days, Minakov threw a cup at the prison doctor who was attempting to force feed him (in other versions of the story, he spat in his face or slapped his face), at which point he was taken away to the old prison, court martialled, and executed by firing squad. (POPOV, 1906: 263). Myshkin tapped to his neighbour: “Can our stagnation in this torture chamber be called life? And yet, I tell you sincerely, I don’t have the strength to commit suicide.” He subsequently threw a plate at the superintendent of the guards, Sokolov, to attract the same fate as Minakov (POPOV, 1906: 266-8).

Initially the two men planned their deaths in the service of their comrades: “Myshkin and Minakov knocked to their neighbours that they no longer wished to live, but wanted to die in a way that would not be useless to their comrades, so they would demand books, journals, meetings with comrades, correspondence with family, workshops” (ASHENBRENNER, 1906: 55). Although these more elaborate aims were ultimately replaced by simply seeking death by any means, their executions nevertheless benefitted the other prisoners, because they placed a limit on punishment at the fortress. Within six months of the new prison opening, it was established that execution for assaulting officials was no longer a viable option, because it had been proven to be so easy to achieve by comparison with other forms of suicide. Prisoners who subsequently attempted the same method were only confined to the old prison (GERSHUNI, 1908: 117). When Grachevskii attacked the prison doctor, he was declared insane so that his punishment would be restricted to incarceration in the punishment cells (IUVACHEV, 1907: 76). While this was not to be underestimated, it was nevertheless originally specified as a punishment for minor infringements (NOVORUSSKII, 1920: 32). Its use for the most serious offence defined by the instructions was clear evidence of the limits to the authorities’ willingness to adhere to their own rules. Ultimately, even the punishment cells ceased to be used in this way; in 1902 when Vera Figner tore off the prison commandant’s epaulets in protest at his treatment of her, she was merely denied the right of correspondence for six months (FROLENKO, 1927: 249-50).

Once restrictions to punishment had been established in this way, the process of pushing against the regulations began in earnest, enabled by the communication between cells that allowed the prisoners to organize. Forms of protest included banging loudly on doors to disrupt the silence of the prison, refusing to leave cells for exercise, refusing to accept concessions that were not offered to all prisoners, and hunger strikes. Demands ranged from access to reading materials and work, to permission to exercise with other prisoners, care for sick comrades, and exchange letters with family. To some extent these were successful, gradually leading to improvements in conditions at the fortress. From 1895 limited correspondence with family members was permitted (POPOV, 1917: 261). Books and notebooks to write in were provided, enabling intellectual activity. Workshops were opened in the cells of the old prison, and ultimately allotments were established in the exercise yards. Most crucially, the decision to allow some prisoners to exercise in pairs was transformative. As Figner (1964) states, “Anyone who has been in prison knows the influence that the sympathetic tenderness of a comrade has on one’s life while in confinement.” (p.26). Ashenbrenner (1906) affirms that access to books and journals, exercise and company were what saved the prisoners (p.55).

Gernet (1961b) emphasizes the profound changes to the regime between 1884 and 1906. Unsurprisingly for a scholar writing in the Soviet context, he attributes the amelioration that took place solely to the prisoners' heroic actions in their war against an unjust and brutal administration (p.226-7). Undoubtedly the inmates' organized resistance played an important role. Yet the picture painted in their memoirs is rather more complex, in relation to the questions of how organized and cohesive they were as a group, what they achieved, and other factors governing their treatment. In the first place, organizing remained problematic. Different understandings made coming to any agreement, or achieving any aim, difficult (IANOVICH, 1907: 57). Moreover, there were the different views about the usefulness of and capacity for protest. Janavičius did not want to waste his strength; some were of the same mind, but others saw it as their duty to fight (IANOVICH, 1907: 45). German Lopatin refused on principle to join in group protests as he believed they were not feasible in prison, while others, including Ashenbrenner, feared their own weakness would undermine attempts at joint protest (FIGNER, 1964: 71). Pankratov (1906) also emphasizes disagreements about approaches (p.43-4). Yet both he and Figner point to the solidarity that existed even where there was no agreement; when a minority decide to begin a hunger strike, most of the remaining prisoners join in despite their reservations (FIGNER, 1964: 70). The strike was, however, a failure because of the lack of a common aim or plan. Subsequent attempts were more organized, with clear decisions being agreed prior to the start of hunger strikes and other collective actions (VOLKENSCHTEIN, 1902: 53).

Although total solitary confinement ceased to be the norm, there were limits to the gains made. Volkenshtein (1902) emphasizes that whatever concessions they achieved, even after five or six years many of the prisoners had never actually spoken to one another, while the two women, who were permitted to see each other during exercise periods, were forbidden to see anyone else (p.55). Increasingly bold efforts were made by the prisoners to congregate and communicate – even if separated by fences or doors – led to requests to limit their assemblies from an administration that gradually became more afraid of confrontation (VOLKENSCHTEIN, 1902: 81). The relaxation of the regime in the final years led to absurd situations, such as Gershuni openly conducting propaganda among the guards who were meant to be monitoring him (FROLENKO, 1927: 257). Despite these changes, however, the revolutionaries never managed to destroy the basic system of solitary confinement, and they remained aware that the local administration could return to proper enforcement of the regulations at any moment (VOLKENSCHTEIN, 1902: 79).

The fragility of improvements was felt acutely, because even when concessions were granted, they were neither universally applied nor necessarily permanent. The two women were forced to give up their exercise together for more than a year in protest, because the same privilege was not extended to all their comrades (FIGNER, 1964:32-5). Improvements were frequently reversed, and new prisoners did not benefit from concessions won by the original inmates (POLIVANOV, 1906: 276). Changes were dependent not only on the personalities within the fortress administration, but also on the identity of the incumbents at the highest levels of the Tsarist government:

One [inspector] would allow something, and another, coming into a cell and seeing an issue of a journal or sheet of newspaper, would be appalled and, without saying anything to us, would deliver a rebuke to the administration, and the journal would be taken away from us. ... It turned out that permission was given only verbally and remained in force while the one who granted it was Minister. Ministers changed often, and the new one would countermand the instructions of the old. (FROLENKO, 1927: 210).

External events such as a Russo-Japanese war had a major impact on the prisoners' lives (POPOV, 1917: 270). The meaning of changes was not always immediately clear, because of the inmates' isolation. But as Gershuni (1908) notes, in relation to the instability of the Russian Empire in the first years of the twentieth century: "this 'weakening' of the regime in

Shlissel'burg was all the more valuable because in general the regime there acted as a precise political barometer of the situation outside." (p.162-3). Thus although the instructions – which remained unchanged until 1897 (GERNET, 1961b: 229) – specified a severe regime at the fortress, the reality, particularly after the first extremely harsh years, was somewhat different. The code regulating prison conditions, and designed to condemn the prisoners to a slow death, ultimately proved less important than the vagaries of either human or political factors.

Within the constraints of a capricious system of governance, the achievements of the inmates were remarkable. Beyond the intense hardship of the early years of imprisonment, memoirs focus on the extraordinary range of activities ultimately undertaken, which enabled them to survive (FROLENKO, 1927: 258). From tending allotments and growing food to enhance their diet, to learning a wide variety of skills such as bookbinding and joinery in the workshops, physical activities improved the health and mental wellbeing of the inmates (PANKRATOV, 1906: 47-8). Exercise periods ultimately extended over practically the whole day, with free movement between cells, workshops and allotments (FROLENKO, 1927: 231). Not every enterprise was entirely wholesome: at one point the prisoners managed to install distillation equipment, to which the guards turned a blind eye, and illicitly grew tobacco (ASHENBRENNER, 1906: 84-5). Intellectual energies were directed towards not only reading, but learning languages, translating, and writing poetry, philosophical, scientific, and other academic works on a wide variety of subjects. The prisoners produced two journals, delivered lectures to each other, and conducted debates (PANKRATOV, 1906: 52-5). Although free association with their comrades remained elusive, many of these activities testify to the community the inmates nevertheless managed to construct, using innovative means to overcome the authorities' efforts to maintain their isolation.

THE COLLECTIVE VOICE OF SHLISSEL'BURG

The prisoners' constant battles for the right of association were built on a determination to maintain responsibility for each other, in the face of the authorities' insistence on treating them as solitary individuals; as Figner (1964) notes, "Speak only about yourself" was the habitual comment when any of us used the word 'we'" (p.35). But the attempt to deal with the revolutionaries as if they were isolated inmates, rather than a group, was perhaps the most significant failing of the regime. What had functioned relatively efficiently in the case of one or two secret prisoners in earlier eras translated imperfectly onto a larger scale, with tens of inmates in close proximity, not least because many of them already knew each other. Thus they perceived themselves as "separated, yet united; separated, but our spirits were one!" (FIGNER, 1964: 39). Moreover, the previous experience of the prisoners in the revolutionary underground meant they were accustomed to acting as a disciplined collective, and sacrificing the personal for the sake of the group, in the fight against the authorities (ELY, 2016: 173-4). This potentially made the process of adapting to prison conditions a more viable possibility than would be the case in many other contexts.

Following the release or transfer of the remaining prisoners up to 1906, the community they had fought so hard to support was physically dispersed. Yet their collective efforts continued in the form of the memoirs they wrote. The perception of these texts as a joint enterprise is apparent in Ashenbrenner's (1906) comment: "if each [of us] when freed were to write their notes about the prison, then our collective work would, perhaps, add up to something significant", to which a footnote is appended: "The editors of *Byloe* [*The Past*] heartily endorse these words" (p.71). Indeed, aside from Ashenbrenner's own contribution, the 1906 issues of the journal *Byloe* alone feature pieces on Shlissel'burg and its inmates by Vera Figner, Ivan Manucharov, Nikolai Morozov, Mikhail Novorusskii, Vasilii Pankratov, Petr Polivanov, Mikhail Popov, and Mikhail Trigoni. This concentration of memoirs indicates a concerted effort to publicize their experiences, and bring to

public attention both the conditions of Tsarist prisons, and the memory of comrades who did not survive, as part of the on-going revolutionary struggle. In addition to memoirs, issues of *Byloe* for 1906 contains reports on the foundation of the Shlissel'burg Committee, and its plans to publish a book that would memorialize both its prisoners and, synecdochically, the entire system of Tsarist oppression (SEMEVSKII and BOGUCHARSKII, 1906: 315). The choice of Shlissel'burg for this role rested in part on the prison's imminent closure (albeit, as it turned out, temporarily⁴), which made this a suitable moment for establishing its history. Its function as a secret prison also brought the imperative to expose it through memoirs and other works. And the regime at Shlissel'burg represented not only the maximal oppression of the revolutionary movement, but also one of its greatest successes, as the prisoners' community overcame its worst excesses and enabled their survival. It is notable, in this context, that the survivors who wrote memoirs were among the most active prisoners, whose protests contributed significantly to the changes the regime underwent. As the individual texts gain additional authority from their place within the greater whole, they continue the revolutionary struggle in another form.

CONCLUSION

In the light of this vibrant picture of resistance, creativity, and community, in a space that was devoted to producing entirely the opposite, it is difficult to agree with Naimark's (1990) assessment that the Russian terrorists of this era were "surprisingly unremarkable, unexceptional characters," all the more so as he actually cites one of the Shlissel'burg prisoners, Petr Antonov, in support of his contention (p.172). The extraordinary regime at the new prison demanded an extraordinary response, and the organization of the inmates who survived its initial, lethal period ensured that they not only prevailed over the system, but also went down in history. Their names, far from being forgotten, became a byword for resistance to Tsarist oppression, as much as the fortress itself became Russia's "bastille," a symbol of the autocracy and its abuses. The community created by the prisoners turned into a community of authorship that demonstrated the qualities and behaviours needed to survive such a regime, while the exceptionality of the prison itself became a means of emphasizing the exceptionality of its inmates. Thus while Gershuni perceived his memoir as a form of "survival guide for newcomers to the revolutionary life" (VLADIMIROV, 2015: xii), these works collectively also act as a guide for future prisoners. Dozens of memoirs of the Stalinist Gulag refer to Shlissel'burg, the 1884-1906 group of inmates, and communication through the prison alphabet they learned from reading these memoirs (e.g., AVTORKHANOV, 1983: 490; SALAKHOV, 1991: 136). The final legacy of Shlissel'burg was not the total suppression of the revolutionary movement the Tsarist government intended, but becoming instead an intrinsic part of its mythologization.

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4 The prison quickly reopened with new buildings, and between 1907 and 1917 housed at least 132 political prisoners, including mutineers from the Black Sea Fleet and elsewhere, and revolutionaries from various parties.

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