The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

40 of Russia's 700 Penal Institutions Recall Soviet Concentration Camps, Rights Activists Say

By Paul Goble

June 14, 2009



About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

Forty of Russia's 700 penal institutions have features which resemble those of Soviet-era concentration camps, according to a leading Moscow human rights activist, who warns that "as long as concentration camps and torture exist, the specter of totalitarianism will continue to hang over the country."

In an article in today's "Yezhednevny Zhurnal," Lev Ponomaryev argues that Russian "society must finally understand that no democratic transformations are possible until a radical reform of the penitentiary system and of the law enforcement one as well takes place" and the government eliminates such institutions.

According to numerous human rights activists, he continues, "there are approximately 40 places of confinement in contemporary Russia which have the reputation as torture zones or 'press-zones,'" including colonies, "closed prisons," "investigation isolators" and some "internal sections of colonies."

And it is these "press zones," Ponomaryev continues, that he feels he can "with complete justification compare with the concentration camps" of the totalitarian past. Indeed, he

reports, "old Soviet dissidents and former prisons with Soviet experience" say that conditions in these institutions "is significantly worse than under Brezhnev or in the first post-Stalinist times."

The term "'press zone'," the rights activist says, "arose by analogy with the so-called press chambers or press huts in which specially selected criminals were kept to put pressure on those being investigated or already sentenced to confinement." Such zones don't exist everywhere, but their existence anywhere gives the jailors a powerful weapon to intimidate all.

Indeed, Ponomaryev insists, "their existence changes in a principled way the entire system of punishment. It is sufficient to have a single 'torture' colony in a region in order that every prisoner in any other colony will understand that in the case of a struggle for his rights, he will be immediately transferred to that 'torture' place and be subjected" to its features.

The current system did not arise immediately, he recounts. In the 1990s, "under the constant observation of rights activists, a humanization of the system of punishment took place and the number of 'torture' colonies was sharply reduced. But after 2000, with the coming to power of [Vladimir] Putin and others from the KGB," the situation changed fundamentally. On the one hand, rights activists lost much of their access to the prisons and to the media, reducing their opportunities to observe and expose torture. And on the other, the jailors, "sensing 'the winds of change'" in the country as a whole "began to introduce a militarized order in the camps."

And as a result, "if the Putin regime could not put up with a principled opposition" and did everything to subvert or destroy it, Ponomaryev continues, "then the jailers could not tolerate inmates who, living by 'the thieves' law,' sought in an archaic way to achieve justice for themselves.

"As soon as the struggle, or more precisely, real war of the jailers became ideological," he writes, "it began to be conducted according to all the rules of the struggle of a totalitarian empire with its opponents" as "some of 'thieves-in-law' were drawn into corrupt relations with the administration" which then deployed them against other prisoners trying to fight for their rights.

Special "Sections of Discipline and Order" were set up, Ponomaryev recounts, which were institutions that "by their organization and many of their functions recall the prisoner-overseers &mdash the 'kapos' — of Hitlerite camps."

All these actions violate Russian laws, but any prisoner who tries to bring a case against the authorities is likely to be punished. And consequently, the Moscow activist says, it is entirely appropriate to say "within the Russian penal system, these zones form an internal concentration camp system, a new gulag archipelago."

Over the last decade, thanks to "the rain of petrodollars," Russian officials have improved some aspects of the camps, providing prisoners with better food and in some cases better housing and even computers. "But this in no way reduces the cruelty of the regime," Ponomaryev says, however much nicer it makes some of these places appear.

And there is the risk that more Russians will experience these illegal arrangements in the future or will be intimidated into silent acquiescence to whatever the regime does. Today, Ponomaryev notes, Russian judges find less than one in 100 of those charged with a crime to be innocent, while Russian juries decide not to convict about 18 percent of those charged.

The Russian government has been seeking to reduce the number of people tried by juries as a result, because if jury trials were allowed in all cases, there would be "at a minimum,

200,000 fewer people'' in the penitentiary system, and the intimidating qualities of the latter would be reduced.
And to make his point about the world of Ivan Denisovich that Alexander Solzhenitsyn described so brilliantly almost 50 years ago, Ponomaryev devotes the remainder of his article to providing a composite picture of today's Ivan Denisoviches, whose experiences show ''the hell which the system of the reborn gulag'' constitutes not only for him, but for all Russians.

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