



PRISON REFORM IN RUSSIA

Religion, psychology and the task ahead

If any single episode can encapsulate the complex uncertainties of prison reform in Russia it took place during a brief visit to Zagorsk Remand Prison on 24th November 1992. Built in 1872 to house a hundred prisoners, the capacity of the prison had recently been re-defined - albeit without any modification, or even repair, to the fabric - to accommodate 340. On the day in question there were 634 prisoners, including 14 women and 31 minors in custody, not counting the 72 who were at court but who would be back by the weekend. So far that may sound not too unlike the average English local prison of the 1970s and 80s - except that the larger 'cells' were some 5 metres by 5 metres intended to offer 2.5 square metres each for their original 10 inhabitants, but now up to forty or more prisoners were squeezed into them. Not all the cells were so squalid: one smaller (Pentonville-sized) cell contained four prisoners who had created a homely environment with a sleeping area with

British criminologist, and his equally atheist British interpreter, (not to mention our Jewish mentor from the Ministry of the Interior Research Institute) were not so much invited as compelled to participate in prayers. Over lunch the priests asked whether I agreed that the fact that so many young prisoners committed suicide in custody (proportionately about the same numbers as in England and Wales, so far as can be calculated from the limited available statistics) demonstrated the work of the devil; and did I also agree that a woman who had already had multiple, self-induced abortions (not an uncommon event given the lack of contraception and the pressure on housing in Russia) was unfit to be released on grounds that she had shown so little respect for life that she would almost certainly commit murder? It would all have seemed like having a debate with the ghost of Whitworth Russell - except for the fact that these discussions took place beneath the watchful gaze of Dzerzhinsky whose marquetry portrait still adorned the wall of the governor's office.

The trip to Zagorsk was primarily a recreational occasion, and the visit to its remand prison an extra, not part of my formal programme of research.¹ Zagorsk, of course, occupies an important place in the history of the Russian Orthodox church. Given the welcome advent of new religious freedoms in Russia, it is not surprising that close links are being forged between the monastery and the prison. But western visitors to any Russian prison or corrective labour colony are likely to be first shown the chapel - usually converted from existing cells but sometimes, as at Reinforced Regime Colony No 5 outside St Petersburg, built by the prisoners themselves. They will certainly find it hard to avoid the flood of religious literature targeted at prisoners by born again evangelists, including the former Watergate conspirator Chuck Colson. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that senior officials at the Ministry of the Interior are prone to ask whether religion might offer the panacea they seek to fill the void left by Marxism.

It would not quite be true to say that religion is all that is available to fill those hours formerly occupied by uplifting lectures on Marxism-Leninism and the importance of meeting production quotas from detachment heads, for which the 100 or so prisoners in their residential block regularly had to assemble. Western visitors will also be invited to spend time

observing the work of psychologists, mostly teachers with a one year postgraduate qualification in psychology. In a small number of laboratories which have been developed over the last ten to fifteen years they are engaged in psychological profiling and diagnosis of prisoners using western computer programmes. In adjacent small theatres prisoners in induced states of relaxation and well being, are persuaded through auto-suggestion techniques of the benevolent intentions of staff and the possibility of a future life free of crime. Thus far these techniques are used only in institutions for women and minors, adult male criminals being seen as already too hardened to be reached, but in at least one institution for women the relaxation tapes were piped into every dormitory before lights out. When the chief psychologist was asked whether it was possible for prisoners to opt out, she at first said that they did not wish to, and then that they could put their heads under the bedclothes if they really did not want to listen.

The Russian prison system currently contains about three quarters of a million prisoners, of whom about 600,000 are convicted and the remainder on remand. There is a determination to live down a gruesome past and there is a genuine process of reform under way with important changes in regimes introduced on 12th June 1992. There is also much to commend in a system which at least pays its prisoners wages which are close to those outside and, so long as there is work available, allows them to pay for their keep, compensate their victims, support their families and save for their release. But it is a system that has been dependent for resources on the profits from prison industry, and there is now a great shortage of work. At a time when the prison population is probably set to expand hugely from levels which are already comparable to those in the United States, and when it is difficult to feed the prisoners they have now, neither religion nor psychology seems appropriate to the enormity of the task.

1. For a fuller account of this research see Roy D King, *Russian Prisons After Perestroika: End of the Gulag?* *Brit. J. Criminol. Special Issue: Prisons in Context*, edited by Roy D King and Mike Maguire, Vol 34, 1994.

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Large cell converted as chapel, Vladimir Prison

two double bunks along one wall, a rudimentary toilet and sink curtained off in one corner, and a small daytime space where they could sit, eat and watch a television provided by a relative. Since one of them claimed to be awaiting an outcome of his case after three years in custody - during which time, like most remand prisoners, he had been permitted no visits - some home comforts were surely not misplaced. In any case, I had already seen worse crowding and conditions in the huge remand prisons at Butyrka in Moscow and Kresty in St Petersburg. What was so extraordinary about Zagorsk was that throughout the visit the governor effectively abdicated any responsibility for the proceedings in deference to the more senior of two visiting priests.

During the 'tour' we spent most time in the makeshift chapel converted from one of the larger cells where an atheist