

# INFORMAL PRISON HIERARCHIES IN THE 21st CENTURY: SUBCULTURE, TRENDS AND SOCIAL CONTROL

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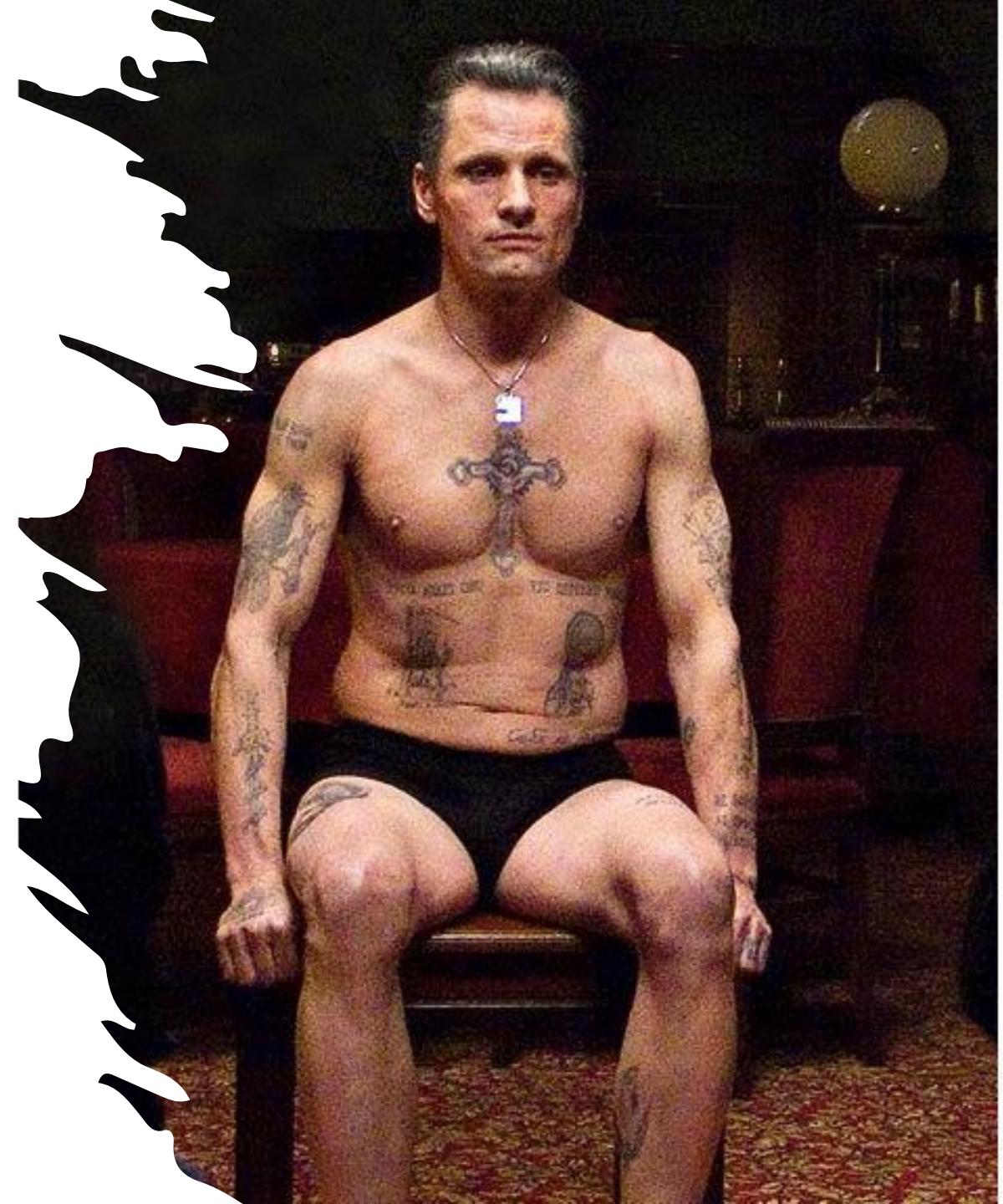
**EUROCRIM 2025**  
LOGOS OF CRIME AND PUNISHMENT



# **RUSSIAN CRIMINAL AND PRISON SUBCULTURE**

*or*

# **RUSSIAN NATIONAL CRIMINAL AND PRISON CULTURE**





**The Russian  
colonisation of the  
East was made by  
convicts and criminals  
with handcuffs**

**The American  
colonialisation of the West  
was made by free people  
with revolvers**



# SIBERIA

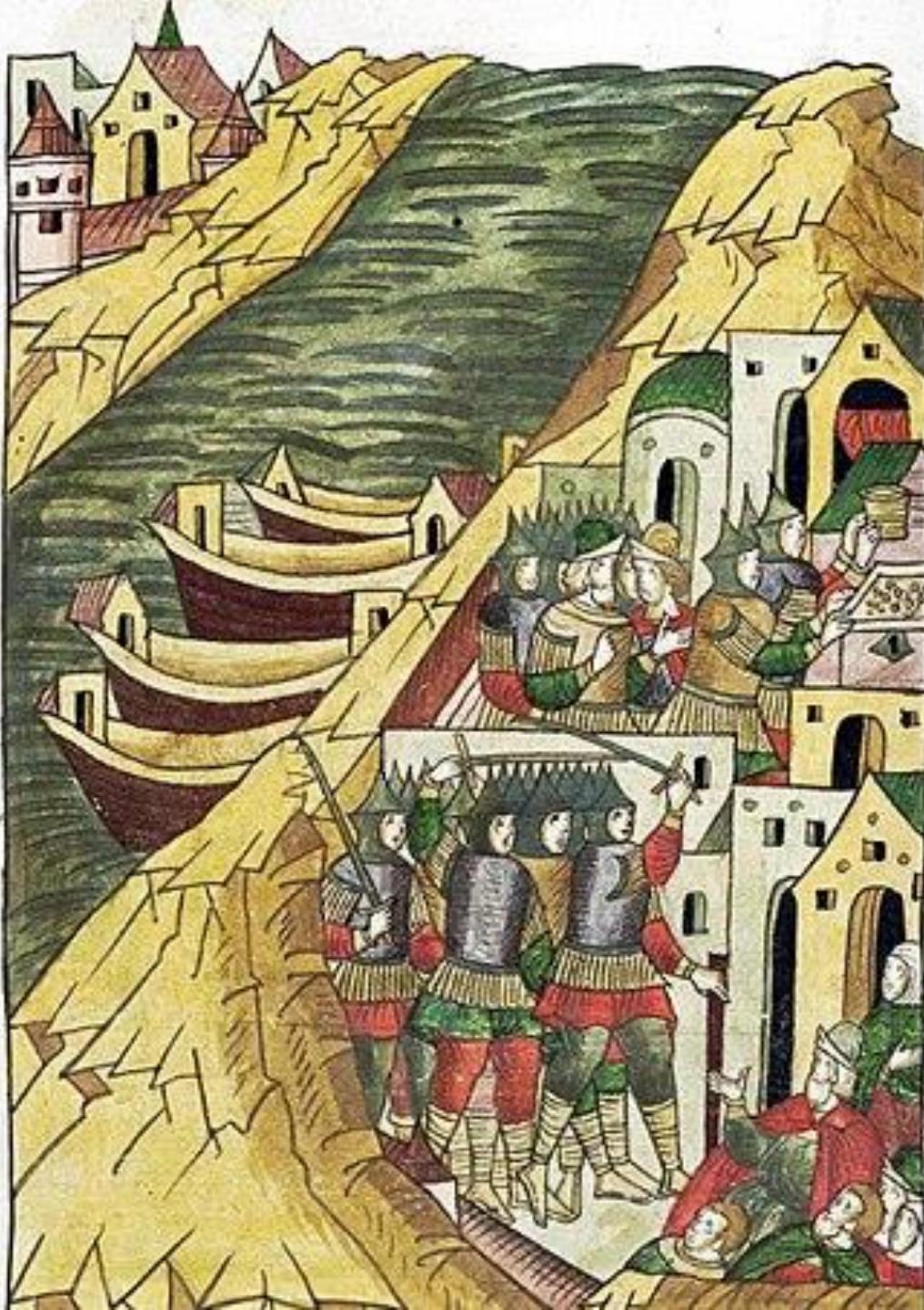


- In the result of the colonial policy, the Russian criminal and prison subculture became a **national culture** – a culture **in its own right**
- Having shed the prefix ‘sub’, **Russian criminal and prison culture** became an instrument of cultural importation from Russia, performing purely political tasks of a neocolonial nature



# AN OLD RUSSIAN 'ISLA TORTUGA'

- The phenomenon of '**Ushkuyniki**'
- An '**ushkuy**' – a vessel used in northern Russian territories in the 11th-15th centuries
- River members of the organised criminal groups equipped by Novgorod merchants and noblemen
- Contributed to the expansion of Novgorod's pirate trade and colonies
- **Vyatka Peoples' Republic** – the early Russian state based its economy on the professional and organised crime



## РУССКИЕ ЗЕМЛИ В КОН. XIV В.

# NOVGOROD

# MOSCOW

# NOVGOROD

VYATKA

# Livonian Order

# MOSCOW

# КНЯЖЕСТВО

# GRAND DUCHY OF LITHUANIA

# GOLDEN HORDE

## Bashkirs

# Teutonic Order

# THE GRAND PRINCIPALITY OF MOSCOW



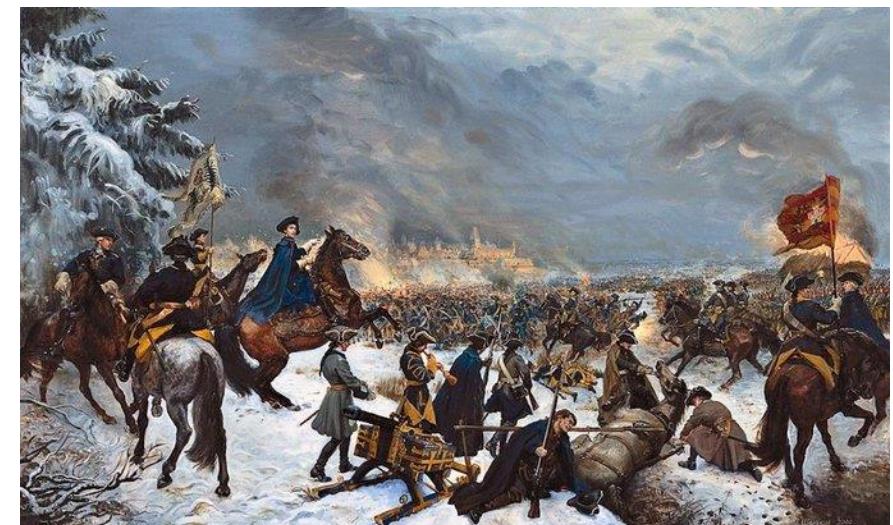
- **AGGRESSIVE COLONIAL POLICY**
- State institutions in the colonised lands were weak or non-existent
- Support for the professional and organised criminal activity of **private individuals**
- Substitution of the State with **private individuals**
- Impact of the criminal behaviour on the socialisation strategies in the context of the Russian criminal colonisation of the East



- **THE EPOCH OF RUSSIAN EXILE**
- **1645:** approximately 1,500 people were sent beyond the Urals for imprisonment and exile
- **1662:** exiles and convicts made up approximately 8,000 out of 70,000 people in the region
- **11,5 % of the population of Siberia consisted of exiles**

# PETER I: 'THE NORTHERN KATORGA'

- **Colonial and military ambitions**
- **The Northern War (1700-1721)**
- Criminals were not sent to Siberia, but rather to build canals and row galleys in the Baltic Sea
- Exile to Siberia was imposed mostly in political cases



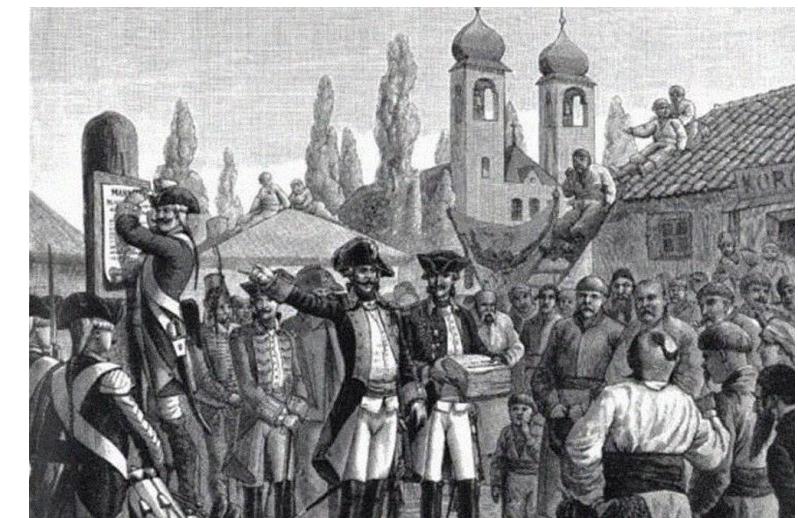
# THE EASTERN KATORGA

- The peasants and rebellious Ukrainians were replaced by exiles convicted of criminal offences
- **1729:** vagrants began to be sent to Siberia
- **1754:** the death penalty was replaced for criminals with their removal to Siberia
- Among the exiles there began to prevail **professional criminals**



# THE 18TH CENTURY

- **1719 – 1742:** more than **500,000 people** were listed as ‘**wanted**’
- Over **200,000 people** fled from landowners each year
- **Beginning of the 18th century:** about **25,000** prisoners and exiles in Siberia (10% of the population)
- Development of criminal subculture by criminals and general population



# THE 19th CENTURY

- After the Napoleonic Wars, the number of Siberian '**convoys**' increased sharply

## ■ **Alexander I:**

- Formalisation of penal labour
- The rapid development of criminal subculture and the establishment of stable informal prisoner hierarchies

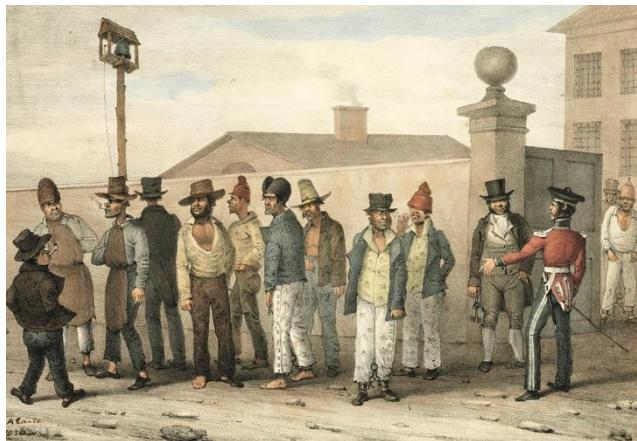
  

## ■ **Nicholai I: 8,000 exiles** per year



# THE 19th CENTURY

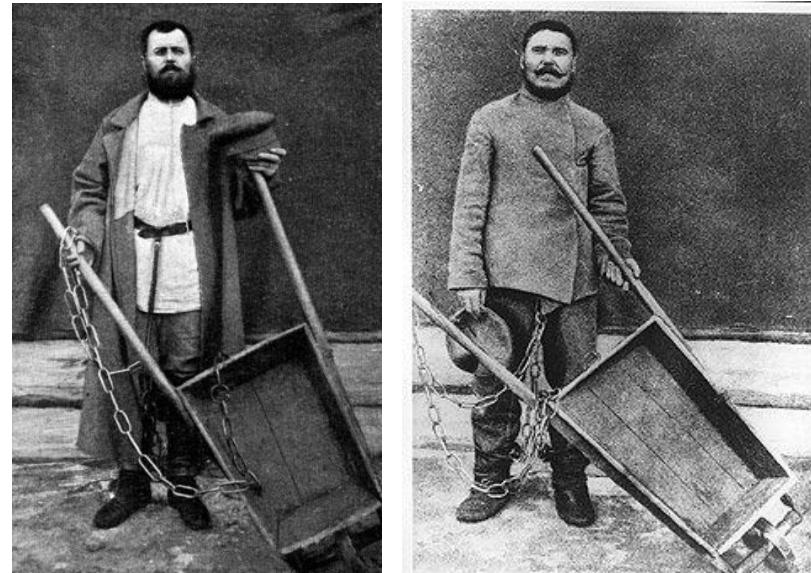
- **1823-1888: 781,901 exiles**
- **1807-1898: 864,823 exiles**
- **To compare:** Between 1788 and 1868 the British penal system transported **162,000** convicts from Great Britain and Ireland to penal colonies in Australia



# DISFUNCTIONALITY OF THE PRISON SYSTEM, ESCAPES AND SUBCULTURAL DIFFUSION

## Missing without leave (Jan 1898)

- the Yenisei Province – **11,556** (22.65%)
- the Irkutsk Province – **29,403** (40.95%)
- the Transbaikal Region – **3,374** (23.44%)
- the Yakut Region – **1,277** (24.66%)
- the Amur Region – **484** (71.27%)
- the Primorsky Region – **1,817** (85.82%)



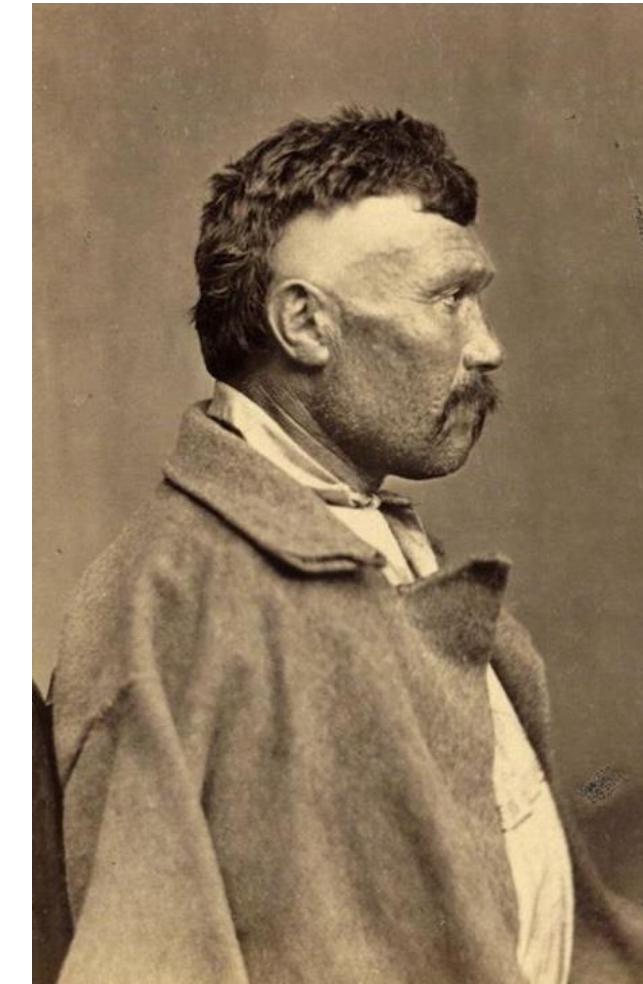
# NICHOLAS II

- The impact of the the World War I on the prison sociocultural complex
- The government prioritised the War itself and economic problems caused by the War
- Mass dismissals of prison staff
- Prisons began to evolve on their own
- Blurring of boundaries between the ‘criminal’ and the ‘non-criminal’



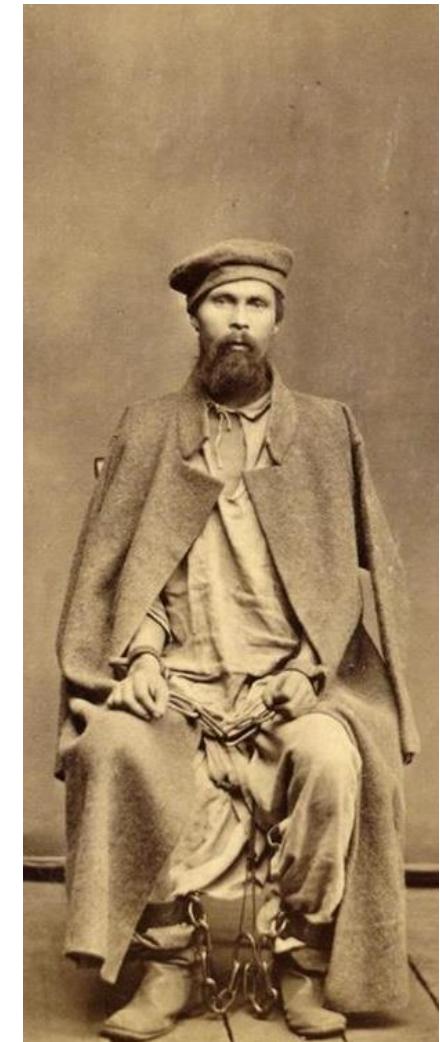
# ORIGINS OF MODERN RUSSIAN CRIMINAL AND PRISON CULTURE

- Huge distances and harsh climatic conditions
- The need to colonise new territories
- Forced settlement of new territories
- Lack of proper control over the new colonies by the central authorities
- Restricting the population of the colonies in basic needs and forcing the population into begging
- Delegating the control to the leaders of prison hierarchies
- Mass and systematic escapes of prisoners



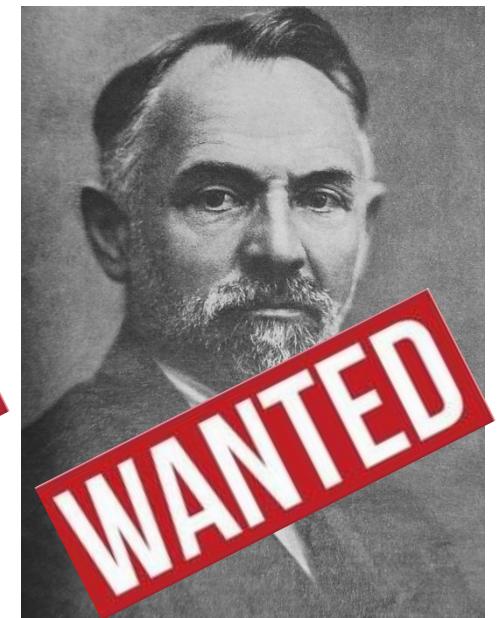
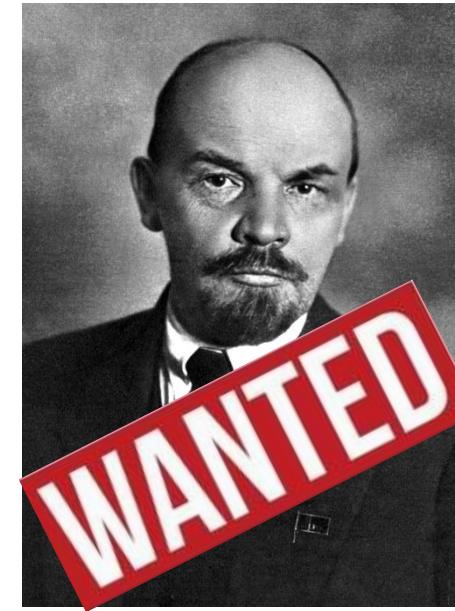
# ORIGINS OF MODERN RUSSIAN CRIMINAL AND PRISON CULTURE

- Total corruption among prison staff
- Absence of social adaptation for ex-prisoners
- Support for criminals by the local population, which in the past also belonged to the category of ‘convicts’
- Spread of criminal values and prison subculture among prison staff and other public servants
- Blurring of boundaries between the ‘criminal’ and the ‘non-criminal’
- Acceptance of prison subculture by future leaders of Soviet Russia and later the Soviet Union



# SOVIET POLITICAL LEADERS, ORGANISED CRIME AND PRISON SUBCULTURE

- All first leaders of the Soviet state had **prison experience**
- Many of them were professional criminals before their imprisonment, having committed **common crimes**





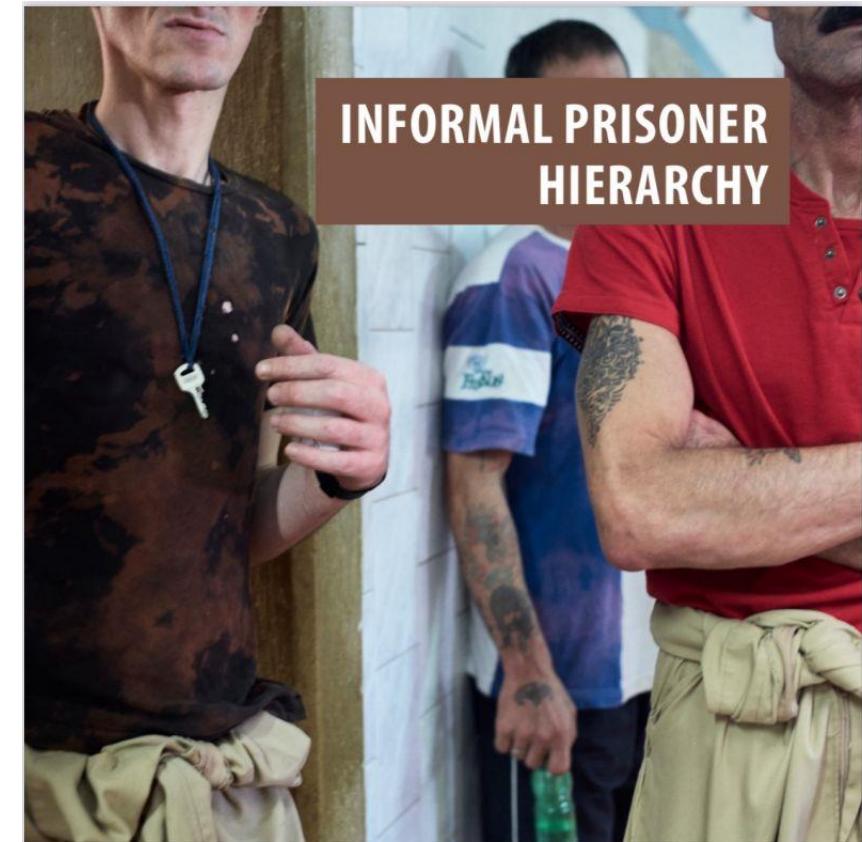
# THE STALIN'S RULE

- **More than 20 million people passed through the prisons**
- **1.7 million of them died (at least)**
  
- **1953: 1.7 million prisoners**
- **1953: Incarceration rate – 1810 prisoners per 100,000**
  
- **Turkey – 484 (2025)**
- **Belarus – 345 (2025)**
- **Russia – 300 (2025)**

- April 2024: The CPT Standard on informal prisoner hierarchy
- A traditional informal prisoner hierarchy in the post-Soviet prison systems is founded on **the caste system**

## ■ THE CASTES:

- ✓ **Informal leaders**
- ✓ **Ordinary prisoners**
- ✓ **Untouchables**

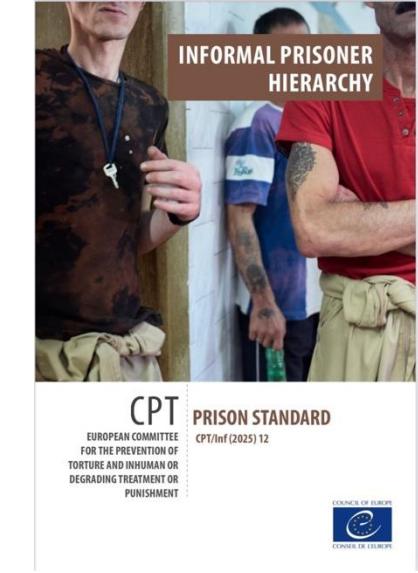


**CPT**  
EUROPEAN COMMITTEE  
FOR THE PREVENTION OF  
TORTURE AND INHUMAN OR  
DEGRADING TREATMENT OR  
PUNISHMENT

**PRISON STANDARD**  
CPT/Inf (2025) 12



- **Belonging to a particular:** the crime committed, connections to organised crime, financial situation, previous imprisonment, debts, conflicts in prison or outside, sexual experience before prison, any accidental violation of informal prisoner rules



- The lowest caste are the **untouchables**, both literally and figuratively
- **Not only sex offenders**
- They are not allowed to have an opinion in relation to prison life and higher castes, to raise their voice, or to physically resist when being hit by an inmate from a higher caste

CPT

European Committee for the  
Prevention of Torture

# UNTOUCHABLES:

- Have their own separate cells or dormitories, or their separate place in the dormitories and cells (usually next to the door or the toilet)
- Must use separate sanitary facilities, eat at separate tables at the canteen using marked spoons and plates
- Are not allowed to use the kitchen
- Must use a separate cooker, separate fridge, and separate table





EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS  
COUR EUROPÉENNE DES DROITS DE L'HOMME

## S.P. AND OTHERS V. RUSSIA

- The applicants were subjected to humiliating treatment and abuse as a result of being '**outcast**' prisoners
- **Informal hierarchy is an entrenched feature of Russian prisons**
- **Authorities *de facto* support the informal hierarchy**



EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS  
COUR EUROPÉENNE DES DROITS DE L'HOMME

## D. V. LATVIA

- The applicants were subjected to humiliating treatment and abuse as a result of being '**outcast**' prisoners



EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS  
COUR EUROPÉENNE DES DROITS DE L'HOMME

## ASHLARBA V. GEORGIA

- An issue of Criminalisation of membership of **the thieves' underworld**
- The Court presents the key functions of the '*thief-in-law*'

# REPORT TO THE MOLDOVAN GOVERNMENT ON THE *AD HOC* VISIT CARRIED OUT BY THE CPT FROM 5 TO 13 DECEMBER 2022



- A **tacit acceptance** of the informal hierarchy by prison staff and even a **tacit agreement** between staff and informal prison leaders
- The informal prison leaders have a say in the placement of prisoners in cells/dormitories
- Informal prison leaders decide which prisoners are allowed to work
- Benefits earned by working prisoners, most notably the possibility of an early release, are recorded for the benefit of informal prisoner leaders
- Striking differences in material conditions between informal prison leaders and the general prison population

# THE WAGNER PHENOMENON

## IMPORTATION OF RUSSIAN CRIMINAL AND PRISON SUBCULTURE





## THE WAGNER PHENOMENON

- As it was many centuries ago, Russia is a mixture of colonialism, imperialism, and uninhabited territories conquered in past centuries as a result of wars against the local population
- Having shed the prefix ‘*sub*’, **Russian criminal and prison culture** has become one of the most important instruments of the Russian neocolonial policy

# THE WAGNER PHENOMENON

- The Russian prison system is **more instrumental** than it was during Stalin's rule:
- Intimidating its population
- A source of **slave soldiers**
- To manage **slave soldiers**, there is a need to run the army according to the informal prison laws
- The criminal and prison subculture plays the role of the **social cement**, with its characteristics and established language, preserved for centuries





# THE WAGNER PHENOMENON

- Russia is the most radical example of a **prison state**, not because it has many prisons and prisoners, especially the number of prisoners and prisons has decreased due to mass mobilisation of prisoners
- Russia is the most radical example of a **prison state** because the army and the society function according to the informal prison law formed over the last five centuries



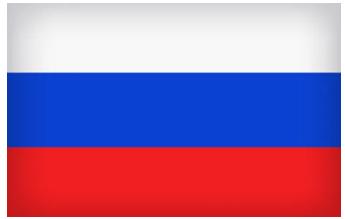
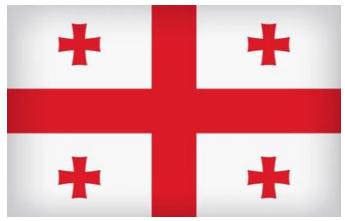
# THE WAGNER PHENOMENON

- The modern Russian prison state is not about the number of prisons and the number of prisoners
- It is about **the population's acceptance and internal perception** of the idea that **the state can be effectively governed by informal prison norms**
  - A minority plays the role of prison guards
  - A second, sufficiently large group of citizens should be imprisoned or are already imprisoned
  - The rest of the citizens are only '**temporarily and conditionally released**'

# Russia plans to withdraw from Europe's anti-torture treaty







# ‘THIEVES-IN-LAW’ IN GREECE

There are currently more than 100 ‘Thieves-In-Law’ in Greece, ‘each with their own territory of responsibility, each heading a “family” and having between 10 and 20 subordinates’

- **May 2010:** Russian thief-in-law died
- **April 2012:** A criminal boss from Kazakhstan was ‘crowned’
- **September 2017:** Three thieves-in-law sentenced
- **January 2020:** Thief-in-law was shot
- **May 2020:** Police operation against thieves-in-law in prisons
- **March 2021:** Thieves-in-law hold a secret gathering
- **July 2022:** Thief-in-law was arrested
- **April 2024:** Two thieves-in-law were arrested

ΣΑΣ ΕΥΧΑΡΙΣΤΩ

THANK YOU



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