

Russian prisons

Slave labour and criminal cultures

Russia's prison colonies resemble the old Soviet camps



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THE women of Pussy Riot may not have sparked much of a debate on the virtues of feminism and radical art in Russia. But one of them, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, has prompted a wide-ranging examination of abuses in the country's prisons by publishing an open letter describing how prisoners are routinely overworked and kept in inhumane condition. This has set off a storm of indignation.

Ms Tolokonnikova (pictured above) is serving her two-year sentence in a penal colony in Mordovia, a republic 500km (310 miles) south-east of Moscow. In their

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the gulag archipelago. Throughout history, Russia’s expansive territory and the decision to locate colonies far from urban centres has meant that a prison sentence was as much exile as imprisonment.

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Inmates are mostly housed in barracks in

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industrialisation and factored into five-year plans. Nothing was holier than a prisoner’s labour quota, says Steve Barnes of George Mason University in Washington. But labour often had a punitive, if not pointless, quality, such as digging trenches in frozen ground in winter, according to Mr Barnes. In 1941 the gulag system’s boss admitted that prison labour was only half as effective as normal labour.

Today roughly 43% of men and 60% of women incarcerated in Russia work some or all the time. Ilya Shablinsky, a member of the presidential human-rights council, visited Ms Tolokonnikova’s colony. He says he saw evidence of women working up to 14 hours a day and having just one day off a month. Conditions at the colony approached those of “slave labour”.

Also echoing the days of the gulag, when camp authorities relied on criminals to watch over the “politicals,” some inmates are given the job of instilling fear and maintaining order. In effect, says Laura Piacentini of Strathclyde University in Scotland, certain classes of prisoners are “involved in the administration of their own punishment.” Although the justice ministry nominally disbanded prisoner-discipline brigades as part of reforms in 2009, the practice continues. In her letter, Ms Tolokonnikova wrote of a woman allegedly beaten to death by a group of prisoners in a neighbouring barracks.

The process of reform, championed by the then president Dmitry Medvedev was

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prison population. It worked in part: since 2010 the country's prison population has fallen by 17.5%. (Russia keeps 475 in every 100,000 people locked up, the world's tenth-highest share.) But prisons are still divided between the "red", run by prison authorities, and the "black", de facto administered by inmates.

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Information about prison conditions rarely reaches the public. Most prisoners re-enter society as marginalised citizens. Anna Karetnikova, a member of a public commission monitoring prisons, says Ms Tolokonnikova's letter broke a taboo and "stirred up the swamp". When Ms Karetnikova visited Moscow jails recently, the letter was the main topic of conversation among both inmates and guards.

At least on the surface, the state has been forced to respond. Prison officials have announced they will raise inmates' wages and lower working hours. Deeper change would require reform of the police and the courts, which is unlikely to happen in the near future.

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