

***A Prison Without Walls?  
Eastern Siberian Exile in the***  
**by Sarah Badcock**  
Oxford, OUP (2016)

Reviewed by **Carrie Crockett**

*A Prison Without Walls?* is a social history that examines Russian exile life against the vast carceral space that shaped it: Siberia. The historian does justice to her guiding objective, which is to furnish readers with a 'snapshot of exile experience during the last years of the Tsarist regime' while positioning the region's development within historical currents of Russian politics and expansion eastward. In this reader's view, two factors render Badcock's work extraordinary. First, the author incorporates numerous types of personal accounts beyond those that are commonly cited in histories of Siberia (namely metropole-based policy makers, journalists, leading political dissidents, and the personal memoirs of foreign travellers). In addition to these, Badcock interlaces her prose with letters, memoirs, and other records of individuals who were the actual 'boots on the ground': exiles of all stripes, runaways, families who voluntarily followed loved ones into exile, local administrators and free settlers. Second, the writer consistently draws the reader's attention to important dissimilarities and divergences between exilic experiences, resulting in a history that genuinely approaches understanding the 'everyday quality' that she seeks to capture. Equally impressive is the fact that she accomplishes these two feats via prose so elegant that it is difficult to step away from. At more than one moment, during my reading of *A Prison Without Walls?*, I was struck by the way in which it felt like a cross between like Leskov's classic, *Enchanted Wanderer* (1873), and *Siberia and Hard Labour*, the monumental, detailed study created by Russian ethnographer S.V. Maksimov (1900).

Badcock succeeds in her aim to 'humanize the individuals who made up the mass exiles, and to give a personal, human, empathetic insight into what this punishment entailed', as stated in her introduction, by including a prodigious number of personal records that describe the lives of Siberian populations, both exile and free. As one who reads Siberian history, I am gratified that the author resists allowing official prison policy and discourse to guide the structure of her work. At certain points of the volume, I even found myself enviously speculating about how and under what circumstances the writer had unearthed the quantity of subaltern accounts that she cites; letters and personal accounts of the ilk that I myself have long sought—with limited success—in Russian archives.

Also worth nothing is the consistent manner in which Badcock includes important political shifts but is not held hostage by them. During the time period the volumes covers, 1905 to February 1917, sentences of exile to Siberia rose dramatically despite official suggestions to the contrary. In 1900, champions of Siberian free colonisation had called for an end to the 'prison without walls', arguing that Siberia had never fulfilled the requirements of a successful carceral space. Yet the number of sentences to Siberia continued to rise. Badcock discusses this disparity between policy and practice in her work but doesn't dwell excessively on it, allowing us to focus on ways in which prison overcrowding, the isolation of political prisoners, and housing shortages impacted the substance of exile life. For example, those who have always wondered what it would be like to be confined to a yurt in Yakutsk for twenty years need look no further. Highlighting the 'cosmic loneliness' and isolation that plagued those sentenced to regions so remote that they were not

even surveilled, she gives us the words of exile Alexander Dobrokhhotin-Baikov who draws us in immediately. 'Depression began to overwhelm me [. . .] to have no neighbours to chat to, nowhere to go; no work to do [. . .] unasked, unused thoughts in my head—there is no sun, the night goes long, long, and there is no end [. . .] I sank into a coma; for whole days I sat by the fireplace in a torpor' (156). Reading such an account (and Badcock gives us many more) is immensely useful, for it provides emotional context for the carceral space in question. Thanks to Dobrokhhotin-Baikov (and Badcock), we come closer to understanding the reasons why some prisoners (particularly those sentenced to 'penal yurts' and isolated dugouts) chose to end their own lives, and why others sought residence in psychiatric wards or had no option but to fall into pauperism.

Badcock also avoids generalizing about the Siberian experience. Instead of emphasizing the lawlessness that hampered free settler colonization, for example, she examines the theme regionally, analysing individual penal spaces, settlements, and rural geographies. I personally laud the writer for this feat of structural narrative engineering, for the layering necessary to such an approach seems considerably more complex than the alternative. It is also precisely what enables us to remember individuals and their stories, such as that of the convict clerk who was charged with engineering the rock bed of the Trans-Siberian railway, yet whose carceral space lacked sufficient light for him to work by. Letters written on his behalf by his carceral overseer provide a window into regional challenges in penal administration. Some of the most interesting reading involves the planning of systems and structures that developed across regions, such as the railroad, schools for convict children, the transmission of venereal diseases between certain factories and mines. Understanding Siberia as a geography of variations and dissimilar penal applications allows the inclusion of archival family documents as well, such as petitions written by wives who desired to be transferred to areas where more food might be available for their children.

Sarah Badcock's *A Prison Without Walls?* is unique among histories of hard labour in Siberia, for it offers an exploration into the multifaceted character of the exile experience while maintaining a comprehensive sweep. Unlike some studies, in which subaltern, non-noble, and exile voices are relegated to the footnotes, here they are kept in the spotlight. As we follow Badcock's prisoners from European Russia to settlements in the Russian Far East, we come closer to understanding just how insignificant, marginalized, and isolated they must have at times perceived themselves against the other currents of Siberian colonization and against the landscape itself. Given my own never-ending quest to uncover subaltern voices in Russian archives, I finished the work wishing that the author would write another volume that simply described her methods of excavating the past, one that would allow us to also enjoy the processes by which she found the individual accounts that now render Siberia's carceral past so tangible upon her page.

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