

REVIEW ESSAYS

A Nation in Exile: New Studies of Polish Exile to Siberia during the Nineteenth Century

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Blake, Elizabeth A. *Travels from Dostoevsky's Siberia: Encounters with Polish Literary Exiles*. Studies in Comparative Literature and Intellectual History. Academic Studies Press, Boston, MA, 2019. xi + 226 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Index. \$39.95 (paperback).

Gentes, Andrew A. *The Mass Deportation of Poles to Siberia, 1863–1880*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2017. xiv + 262 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Tables. Notes. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. £69.99 (paperback).

DESPITE their close association with Siberian exile in the popular imagination, the experiences of Polish deportees under the tsarist regime have, for the most part, escaped close examination in the scholarly literature. The two volumes under review here go some way towards correcting this oversight, although neither is without its faults.

The aim of *Travels from Dostoevsky's Siberia: Encounters with Polish Literary Exiles*, writes Elizabeth Blake, is to 'introduce new avenues for understanding Fedor Dostoevsky's experience of incarceration and exile' (p. 1) by bringing the memoirs of his Polish fellow prisoners to a wider audience. How far it succeeds in this ambition is open to debate. The book consists of a lengthy introductory essay, followed by a slightly abridged translation of Józef Bogusławski's *Wspomnienia Sybiraka* (*A Siberian Memoir*, written in the late 1850s shortly before the author's death and published in the 1890s), some excerpts from Rufin Piotrowski's *Pamiętniki z pobytu na syberii* (*Memoir of a Stay in Siberia*, written in the early 1860s), and an essay on Polish exiles in Orenburg written by Bronisław Zaleski

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(the only non-autobiographical text of the three). All three authors served hard labour (*katorga*) and exile terms in Omsk and, in Zaleski's case, Orenburg around the same time as Dostoevskii and Taras Shevchenko (that is, late 1840s to early 1850s). None is especially well known outside Poland, with the possible exception of Piotrowski, whose memoirs were published in Europe and did quite well commercially around the time of the 1863 uprising. Despite its title, *Travels from Dostoevsky's Siberia* tells us a lot more about these individuals and their compatriots than about Dostoevskii, who features only in passing. Some of the contextual information provided on the genesis of *Notes from a Dead House* is certainly useful: Bogusławski's description of Dostoevskii as 'a Moskal [i.e. Russian] in the entire sense of the word' (p. 103), for instance, further confirms what is already generally known about his antagonistic relations with the Polish inmates. On the whole, however, anyone picking up this book in the hope of learning more about Dostoevskii's time in exile is likely to be disappointed. Indeed, the most interesting text of those included here is perhaps Zaleski's essay on Orenburg, which remains little-known as an exile destination in comparison to Siberia.

Common to all three texts (and to Bogusławski and Piotrowski in particular) is the trope of Poland as a 'nation in exile'. The authors emphasize the ways in which their nationality shaped their experiences within the tsarist penal system, their marginalization as Poles and as Catholics and (conversely) their fraternal relations with other imprisoned and exiled nationalities. Despite this framing, however, the reader with some prior knowledge of the subject may conclude that Polish exiles' experiences ultimately had more in common with those of their Russian counterparts than not, inasmuch as they were dictated not just by socio-economic status — prisoners from the gentry or intelligentsia, irrespective of their nationality, almost always had a better time of it than did peasants — but by variations in time and place and by the patronage of friendly Russian officials (and, just as often, their wives), who could improve convicts' lives to the same degree that petty tyrants such as Dostoevskii's nemesis Major Krivtsov could blight them. Thus Piotrowski, for instance, seems to have had a better experience overall than Bogusławski or Zaleski: he was treated kindly by Prince P. D. Gorchakov and his gendarme escorts, allowed to travel to Siberia in a covered carriage (*kibitka*) and assigned to a relatively lenient factory *katorga* term near Tobol'sk (pp. 139–47), a decision on the part of the authorities that doubtless contributed to his escape from Siberia in 1846, a mere two years into his sentence. Much

else besides in these narratives will be familiar to readers acquainted with Russian revolutionaries' penal memoirs from later decades: Bogusławski, for instance, emphasizes the Polish exiles' contempt for and rejection of the sham legal procedures to which they were subjected, and notes the special importance of forwarding prisons (*peresyl'nye tiur'my*) as sites of political resistance and networking.

The merits of this book are clear enough. It makes available to a wider readership, and moreover to Russianists and historians who may not read Polish, some intriguingly obscure sources on nineteenth-century Siberia that shed light on the tsarist exile system during a transitional and, Dostoevskii's writings aside, little-known period (i.e. between the system experienced by the Decembrists in the early nineteenth century and that which existed from the 1860s onwards). The translated authors also provide valuable, if sometimes hearsayish, insights into notorious episodes in the history of the exile system, including the Omsk affair of 1832–33 (Bogusławski pp. 94–98, Piotrowski pp. 148–54), and vivid depictions of stock characters ranging from Krivtsov to the ubiquitous fugitive Ivan Nepomniashchii. There are also some drawbacks. Despite *Travels from Dostoevsky's Siberia* not really being about Dostoevskii, Blake does try to centre him wherever possible, sometimes to the detriment of the book's coherence (it ends, for instance, with some translated correspondence on the Petrashevskii affair which is not obviously connected to the other contents). Both specialist and non-specialist readers would have benefited from the inclusion of a bibliography, the more so since several archival references in the footnotes are incomplete, i.e. do not divulge which archive the documents in question came from. The writing is at times convoluted: in reference to Bogusławski's relations with his fellow exiles, for instance, we learn that 'this Siberian camaraderie remains a period detached from the present of the remembering self of the author' (p. 38). Such impenetrable turns of phrase recur throughout the introduction and in the translations themselves. In all, then, the reader is left with the impression of a rather hastily produced, but nevertheless valuable, piece of work.

Whereas Blake's protagonists were all exiled to Siberia in the middle of the nineteenth century, Andrew Gentes's monograph, *The Mass Deportation of Poles to Siberia, 1863–1880*, focuses on the next major milestone in the history of Polish opposition to the Russian imperial yoke: the failed uprising of 1863. Gentes is, by some distance, the most prolific English-language historian of the tsarist exile system. Most of his earlier books and articles on the topic advance, in effect, variations on the same

argument: that exile to Siberia represented a quintessentially pre-modern form of punishment that was always retributive as much as rehabilitative, survived into the late-imperial period against the odds and, in the process, undermined the efforts of the tsarist regime to reform itself. Readers familiar with his earlier work may therefore feel that they have read this book, or at least parts of it, already, since the central thesis here (as outlined in the introduction) is much the same: in essence, that the deportation of Polish insurrectionists to Siberia after 1863 represented a pivotal moment not just in the collapse of the exile system on a bureaucratic and infrastructural level, but in the failure of the Great Reforms as a whole, and thus can be seen as the beginning of the end for the Russian monarchy just as plausibly as the botched serf reform of 1861. This is an ambitious and far-reaching argument, albeit one that is not entirely borne out by what follows.

This book comprises eight chapters. Following the introduction (chapter 1), chapters 2 and 3 provide useful overviews of the history of Siberian exile from its Muscovite origins and the events surrounding the January 1863 uprising itself. Chapter 4 attempts to quantify the scale of repression visited upon Congress Poland and the Western Provinces in the immediate aftermath of the uprising (Gentes arrives at a provisional figure of 40,000 deportees, which he identifies as ‘the largest forced migration of Europeans prior to World War I’, p. 79), and shows that the mass banishment of the insurgents dovetailed with an ongoing surge in Russia’s carceral population in the aftermath of 1861 as the government sought to reassert control over the newly emancipated peasants. Approximately half of all those deported from Poland were sent to Siberia (the others, predominantly, to Orenburg and the steppes). Chapter 5 details their journeys into exile, while chapters 6 and 7 focus, respectively, on the most common forms of punishment to which they were assigned: forced settlement (variously *ssylka na vdvorenie/zhit’el poselenie*) and *katorga*. Those exiles used as agricultural colonists had, on average, a miserable time of it, since most had no experience of farming, let alone in Siberian conditions. Those sentenced to *katorga* (some 4,000) fared little better, although their presence caused a serious headache for Siberian officials, who had neither sufficient prison places for them nor sufficient penal labour to keep them occupied. The consequences of thousands of deportees being assigned to gruelling and largely improvised labour tasks at short notice are detailed in chapter eight, which explores the Baikal Circle Road rebellion of 1866, an event Gentes erroneously

describes as the 'most famous imperial-era prisoner rebellion in Siberian history' (p. 177). Finally, chapter nine examines the series of amnesties and repatriations that began in the late 1860s when the tsarist regime, under pressure from both international opinion and resentful Siberian officials intent on billing the treasury for every last kopeck, elected to change course. Having suddenly decided that it wanted the Poles gone from Siberia, the state, Gentes concludes, 'had as much difficulty managing the departure of insurrectionists [as] it had with sending them there' (p. 218).

Like all Gentes's books, *The Mass Deportation of Poles to Siberia* is intensively researched, with a great deal of archival evidence assembled. Since it is more a study of the tsarist bureaucracy in a time of crisis than a study of the Polish exiles themselves, much of the ground it covers will be more or less familiar to Russian imperial historians, from perpetual bureaucratic chaos (e.g. the revelation that, in the summer of 1865, officials in Eastern Siberia knew the whereabouts of, at best, half their newly arrived exiles) to the inevitable disconnect that existed between policy made at the centre and implemented on the periphery. As Gentes shows, those on the periphery, exiles and officials alike, often pushed back against the whims of the centre with considerable success, whether by means of an 'epistolary deluge' of petitioning (p. 140), the agency of liberal-minded officials such as the wonderfully if misleadingly named A. I. Despot-Zernovich (pp. 80–82), or straightforward disobedience. The degree to which Siberian exile showcased not so much the infinitude as the limitations of autocratic power (a theme also explored by Sarah Badcock and Daniel Beer) is also made clear: from the beginning, Gentes shows, Alexander II's desire to settle scores with his rebellious subjects was at odds with the instincts of certain of his ministers and many Siberian officials, who feared the consequences of such large-scale reprisals. In short, there are few major surprises here, at least for those familiar with the literature, but the inherent interest of the subject matter helps sustain the reader's interest to the end (as well it should, since there is no recent or comparable study, at least in English).

This being said, Gentes's study has two shortcomings worth mentioning. Firstly, he is prone to hyperbole, writing, for instance, that Russian culture during the nineteenth century was 'characterized by a fundamental belief in the inherent evilness of human nature' (pp. 11–12), that by 1863 the tsarist regime was 'at war with the society over which it ruled' (p. 33). Secondly, there is a certain lack of clarity in the argument. Gentes repeatedly claims that the Siberian exile system 'collapsed' in the aftermath of 1863, but it is

not clear what this means, since *katorga* and exile remained the autocracy's primary method of criminal punishment and political repression right up to 1917. More generally, the supposed connection between the deportation of the Poles and the overall failure of the Great Reforms is never fully explained (beyond the obvious point that both showed autocratic rule to be the blunt instrument it always was and became sources of disappointment to radical and, to varying degrees, liberal opinion). That 1863 and its aftermath was an event of great importance is not in doubt, but some of the claims Gentes makes for it seem a stretch.

To conclude, both these books, flaws notwithstanding, are welcome additions to the literature, since Russian specialists interested in Polish exile to Siberia have little else to go on.