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Changing symbolic and geographical boundaries between penal zones and rural communities in the Russian Federation

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A B S T R A C T

The article examines the processes involved in the integration of the USSR's secret places into mainstream rural society in the Russian Federation. Taking the example of one rural district in the Volga-Ural region that has been the site of a large prison complex over a period of ninety years, the article examines how economic changes and local government and penal reforms have eroded the boundary that marked off the penal region from the rural district in which it was located. Using interviews and social surveys conducted among the local population, the article examines the extent to which the opening of the penal sub-region has led to changes in the symbolic boundary between the communities in the rural *raion*. The article concludes that although new spaces of active government are being produced in rural Russia, these are not necessarily the basis for the emergence of new common identities among the people living in them.

1. Introduction

On a research trip to Kizel in the Urals in 2004 I asked the head of a rural administration about his relationship with the boss of the penal colony visible on the horizon. The administrator, the son of an ethnic German exiled in the 1940s to this part of the Urals, looked embarrassed and muttered that talking about the correctional labour colonies could get him into trouble. When he did open up a little, he prefaced all his remarks with the explanation that, of course, we had to understand that the prisons on his doorstep constituted 'a state within a state' and so the local authority had little to do with them. The same observation was made three years later by a local government executive in the south-west corner of the Republic of Mordoviya, home for 90 years to what is today the largest spatially discrete penal complex in Europe (Pallot and Piacentini, 2012).

The 'state within a state' epithet was the customary way the agencies that stood above and outside the normal institutions of the state were described in USSR. They included the so-called power ministries – the armed forces, security services and border agencies – and organizations responsible for the research and development of strategic and nuclear industries (Rowland, 1999). Their physical presence was marked on the ground by securitized boundaries that were subject to controlled access. There are such restricted places, many in extra-urban, remote locations, in other countries but the combination of Cold War paranoia, and socialist realist ideology made the USSR's secret spaces both quantitatively and qualitatively distinctive. Arguably, 'the rural as hiding place' should be included in the dominantly productivist definitions of Soviet rurality (Shubin, 2006). In this article, I examine how the boundaries that enclosed one type of secret territory – the territories effectively occupied by the prison service and known generically as 'the zone' – have been challenged by the socio-political and economic change in the Russian Federation that we refer to as the post-Soviet transformation.

In the West, we are not accustomed to thinking of prisons or the territories surrounding them as secret places, although they are subject to restricted access – there are notices on US highways warning motorists not to stop near penitentiaries. Rather, prisons together with nuclear power stations, waste dumps and refugee asylums, are most commonly categorized as 'negative social institutions' for which rural locations have preferentially been selected on grounds of availability of space, sparse populations and low land prices. Where prisons are concerned, a growing tendency towards punitiveness in societies such as the USA and the UK has led to an expansion of the already large prison populations (Gilmore, 2007; Christie, 1993). The unprecedented expansion of the prison estate has focused academic interest on the reception of, and impact upon, rural host communities of the arrival of prisons. One strand of research has problematised

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societal support for an expansion of the use of custody simultaneously with the strong opposition mounted to prison and asylum siting, in what is know as the nimby (not-in-my-back-yard) effect (for example, Gilmore, 2007; Crime and Deliquency, 1992). The reasons for opposition to prison siting are unsurprising – personal and reputational risk, the reduction of property values and increased pressure on court systems and social services, but as Philip Hubbard's (2005) investigation of the reception of asylum centres in the UK has shown, opposition is underpinned by the challenge asylum seekers pose to predominantly middle-class constructions of rurality as unsullied, sexually-pure and white. The second strand of work analyses the real costs and benefits of prison location to depressed rural communities. Many small towns and rural counties in the USA actively lobbied state legislatures for prisons, counting on expansion of employment opportunities in construction and prison guard jobs and on the commercial benefits from a regular stream of prison visitors. But recent scholarship has questioned some of these supposed benefits citing, for example, the fact that employment mainly goes out-of-county (Williams, 2011; Huling, 2002; King et al., 2004; Beale, 1993).

These literatures have limited relevance to the situation in the Russian Federation today. The predominantly rural locations selected for prisons mean that the overall distribution of penal institutions is not dissimilar to recent trends in the West but this is where the similarity ends. Firstly, Russian penal institutions have been a feature of rural peripheries for much longer and as the chosen vehicles for the mobilization of resources needed for socialist industrialisation, they were often region- and place-forming. Secondly, since the unprecedented prison expansion under Stalin, the story has been one of the withdrawal from the rural peripheries, the greatest contraction taking place in the 1960s coinciding with the dismantling of the Gulag (see http://www.gulagmaps.org). Since 1991, the Russian prison service has retained the framework of prisons it inherited from the Soviet Union but under current reforms another round of rural prison closures is in prospect (Pallot, 2005; Kontsepstiya, 2010). The current issues with respect to the relationship between rural communities and prisons are different from in other jurisdictions, therefore. These issues include the extent to which, and on what terms, previously neighbouring rural communities that developed in opposition to one another can reach accommodation, and how they might position themselves in relation to possible future prison closures.

In this paper, I use the example of a penal region to address these issues by examining the interactions across the boundaries that, until the present time, have separated carceral and civilian spaces in Russia's rural peripheries. Administrative reform has enhanced the power of local government and extended its reach into places from which it was previously excluded. As Brenner (2004) reminds us, state spaces are 'actively produced' through socio-political struggles articulated in diverse institutional sites and at a range of geographic scales. The production of such new spaces has been actively taking place since the collapse of the Soviet regime at the level of the rural municipality (*munitsipal'nii raion*) and settlement (*sel'skoe poselenie*). In the case of rural administrations that have been host to penal facilities, it has often meant creating new spaces of action amenable to effective governance practices in places that were previously off limits to all but prison service insiders. At the same time as governance reform has been eroding the formal boundaries between different levels of state administration, the incorporation of rural places into the neoliberal economy has begun to blur the structural differences between neighbouring but distinctive communities through migration and the interpenetration of economy, society and culture - changes that potentially could disrupt existing place identities.[1] The exploration of the impact of these changes begins with a short historical introduction to the chosen case study to provide a backdrop for discussion of the how local people have responded to, accommodated and resisted administrative and economic changes that would have them re-imagine the place in which they live.

2. The zone and Zubovo-Polyanskii *raion*

Zubova-Polyanskii *raion* lying in the south–west corner of the republic of Mordoviya was the site of the research that is presented in this paper. In the Soviet period it was a typical forest-industrial region in the rural hinterland of European Russia. Its principal economic activity, prisons aside, was timber harvesting and processing, supported by mixed farming and a small amount of industry. The *raion* benefited from centralized resource allocation to support public services and infrastructure, but this was not sufficient to overcome its peripherality. In the crisis that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the *raion*'s economy suffered immediate decline. To survive, the population turned to their small plots and the forests to grow or forage for the food they needed to survive. Twenty years on, there are signs of recovery; the district has attracted investment for a former transistor plant to reopen, timber harvesting has resumed albeit on a smaller scale than before, and pared-down farms have started producing again for the market. Zubova Polyana, the district centre, has a population today of 10,000 and it has recently acquired new housing estates, a market place, sixth form college and sports complex. Nevertheless, with its weakened primary sectors, only a smattering of industries and a declining population – in 2011, 59,000 down nearly 5000 since 2006 (http://zubova-poliana.narod.ru; FSGS, 2006: 50) – the district manifests the characteristics of a depressed rural periphery or *glubinka* and its prospects have not improved since the 2008 crash (Pallot and Nefedova, 2007; Nefedova et al., 2010).

SW Mordoviya is in many respects typical of other places in the rural periphery that were chosen for the location of activities the USSR preferred to keep out of metropolitan centres and away from the public gaze. In addition to prisons, one of the 'polygons' of the Soviet nuclear arsenal was located nearby and Zubovo-Polyanskii *raion* was the site of an institution for severely mentally and physically handicapped children, a facility for ex-prisoners and a dumping site for nuclear contaminants from the Chernobyl accident. Typically for the USSR, the resident population had no input into the plans to use their district as a site for a labour camp complex and, once the decision had been made, they had to accept that the land containing the forest stands designated for exploitation by prison labour had become the prison service's fiefdom.

The first prisoners were brought to the region in the late 1920s to harvest timber for the construction of the Moscow metro. During the following two decades, the number of labour colonies expanded and SW Mordoviya grew to be one of the many islands of Stalin's Gulag. At its maximum extent, it had 25 sub-divisions (*otdeleniya*) – that is, separate penal labour colonies together with their outliers (*lagpunkti*) deep in the forest – and a prisoner population of 25,000–30,000 (Spravochnik, 1998: 479; Vremya i zhizn', 1995, 8th July: 2, 4). The camp's timber harvesting operations spilled over into all four rural *raiony* in this part of Mordoviya, occupying a vast area. After Stalin's death SW

[1] See also Ruzicka's paper in this volume on changing mechanisms producing rural varied rural contexts in Slovakia.