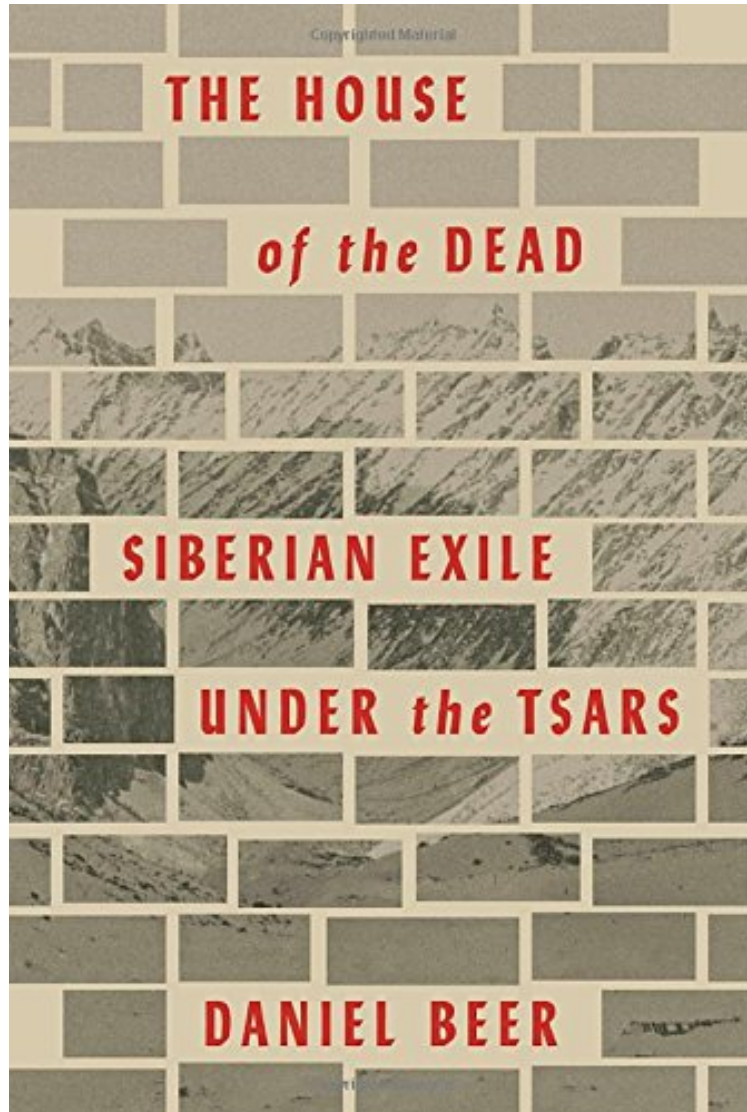


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The House of the Dead: Siberian Exile Under the Tsars

Daniel Beer

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A visceral, hundred-year history of the vast Russian penal colony. It was known as 'the vast prison without a roof.' From the beginning of the nineteenth century until the Russian Revolution, the tsars exiled more than one million prisoners and their families beyond the Ural Mountains to Siberia. Daniel Beer illuminates both the brutal realities of this inhuman system and the tragic and inspiring fates of those who endured it. Here are the vividly told stories of petty criminals and mass murderers, bookish radicals and violent terrorists, fugitives and bounty hunters, and the innocent women and children who followed their husbands and fathers into exile. Siberia was intended to serve not only as a dumping ground for criminals but also as a colony. Just as exile would purge Russia of its villains so too would it purge villains of their vices. In theory, Russia's most unruly criminals would be transformed into hardy frontiersmen and settlers. But in reality, the system peopled Siberia with an army of destitute and desperate vagabonds who visited a plague of crime on the indigenous population. Even the aim of securing law and order in the rest of the Empire met with disaster: Expecting Siberia also to provide the ultimate quarantine against rebellion, the tsars condemned generations of republicans, nationalists and socialists to oblivion thousands of kilometers from Moscow. Over the nineteenth century, however, these political exiles transformed Siberia's mines, settlements and penal forts into a virtual laboratory of revolution. Exile became the defining experience for the men and women who would one day rule the Soviet Union. Unearthing a treasure trove of new archival evidence, this masterly and original work tells the epic story of Russia's struggle to govern its prison continent and Siberia's own decisive influence on the political forces of the modern world. In *The House of the Dead*, Daniel Beer brings to light a dark and gripping reality of mythic proportions.

"Impressive...a history with the sort of granular details that make the terror of the 'very name 'Siberia'' so vividly, so luridly clear." —Steven Lee Myers, *The New York Times Book* "The definitive work in English on this enormous topic...Mr. Beer devotes 80 pages to a fascinating new account of the Decembrists that soberly delves into their tensions and personal weaknesses...[and he] argues persuasively for a direct line between their story and the role played by the exile system in the eventual fall of the czars...As a result of his work deep in Siberian archives, there is much that is new here." —Bartle Bull, *The Wall Street Journal* "[A] thorough and sober history of the tsars' brutal 19th-century penal colonies." —Bob Blaisdell, *The Christian Science Monitor* "Beer gracefully brings to life the immensely rich and tragic history of Siberia...In this lush mosaic laced together with fluent prose, [he] profiles prisoners of all sorts, narrating their ordeals and the stomach-turning punishments they endured." —Robert Legvold, *Foreign Affairs* "An elucidating study of Russia's far-flung penal system...Beer ably shows how educated dissidents...transformed Siberia from a political wasteland into a crucible of the nascent Russian revolutionary movement. An eye-opening, haunting work that delineates how a vast imperial penal system crumbled from its rotten core." —Kirkus "Enlightening...meticulously researched...dense with memorable anecdotes and images...Beer details the systemic incompetence of the penal administration and the brutal physical punishments inflicted on exiles, as well as the violence that escaped convicts unleashed on the indigenous population...[and] shows that populating and cultivating the resource-rich expanse east of the Ural Mountains was a test that the czars failed spectacularly." —*Publisher's Weekly* Praise from the United Kingdom: "[A] masterly new history of the tsarist exile system...Mr Beer's book makes a compelling case for placing Siberia right at the centre of 19th-century Russian—and, indeed, European—history. But for students of Soviet and even post-Soviet Russia it holds lessons, too. Many of the country's modern pathologies can be traced back to this grand tsarist experiment—to its tensions, its traumas and its abject failures." —*The Economist* "Beer's fascinating book teems with human detail...By bringing the voices of the million-plus victims of katorga vividly to life...*The House of the Dead* tells the story of how modern Russia was born among the squalor, the cockroaches and the casual violence of the world's largest open-air prison." —Owen Matthews, *The Spectator* "A superb history of the [Russian] exile system...a splendid example of academic scholarship for a public audience. Though [Beer] is an impressively calm and sober narrator, the injustices and atrocities pile up on every page." —Dominic Sandbrook, *The Sunday Times* "Ground-breaking...moving...[A] deeply humane account of the way the tsars used Siberia as a giant open-air prison. Beer's account uses both the telescope and the microscope. He sketches out the broad parameters of tsarist policy, as well as detailing the lives of individual exiles. Although Beer's subject is grim, his writing is not. Grace notes of metaphor elevate *The House of the Dead* above standard histories." —Oliver Bullough, *The Telegraph* "An expansive work that neatly manages to combine a broad history of the Romanovs' Gulag with heart-rending tales of the plights of individual prisoners. With admirable insight and sensitivity, [Beer] has rescued from the obscurity of archives in Tobolsk and Irkutsk a number of remarkable individual stories." —Douglas Smith *Literary About the Author* DANIEL BEER is senior lecturer in the Department of History at Royal Holloway, University of London. He has written widely on nineteenth-century Russia and is the author of *Renovating Russia: The Human Sciences and the Fate of Liberal Modernity, 1880-1930*. Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Prologue *The Bell of Uglich* In 1891, a group of Russian merchants successfully petitioned Tsar Alexander III to allow them to transport a 300-kilogramme copper bell from the Siberian town of Tobolsk to its native town of Uglich, 2,200 kilometres to the west. The bell travelled up the Volga River in the late spring of 1892 and arrived by steamship at a jetty erected in front of the Uglich cathedral. There, it received a

ceremonial homecoming exactly three centuries after having first been exiled to Siberia. The bell's fate had been sealed in the spring of 1591, when the nine-year-old son and designated heir of Ivan the Terrible, Tsarevich Dmitry, was found in Uglich with his throat slit. Dmitry's mother and her family believed that the tsarevich had been murdered on the orders of a potential rival to the throne, the tsar regent, Boris Godunov. They rang Uglich's bell to summon the townspeople in revolt. The Uglichans formed a mob and went on the rampage, murdering both the presumed assassins and an official from Moscow. The unrest attracted the Kremlin's wrath. Godunov ordered forces to Uglich to quash the rebellion, and the following spring, he dispensed justice. He had some 200 townspeople executed and others imprisoned; about 100 were flogged and had their nostrils torn out; the more eloquent lost their tongues as well. Scourged and mutilated, the rebels were banished to Siberia. In addition to inflicting retribution on the insurgents, Godunov punished the symbol of their political unity. He had the bell lowered, subjected to twelve lashes, relieved of its "tongue" and then exiled to Siberia. The Uglichans were made to drag the mutinous bell across the Urals before finally bringing it to rest in Tobolsk, where the town's military governor registered it as "the first inanimate exile." Silenced and banished, the bell became a testament to the power of Russia's rulers both to drive their turbulent subjects beyond the Urals and to strike them dumb. Yet in the centuries that followed it also became a rallying point for opponents of the autocracy who viewed Godunov's punishment of the Uglichans as the cruel act of a usurper. In 1862, one nobleman exiled to Tobolsk, Ippolit Zavalishin, discerned in the Uglich Bell an "unquelled accuser who bears eloquent testimony to . . . the punishment of an entire blameless town!" By the middle of the nineteenth century, then, the bell had come to symbolize not only the supreme authority of the sovereign but also the vengeful power on which it relied. Tobolsk played a central role in the development of Siberian exile in the centuries after the banishment of the Uglich Bell. This legacy is still visible today in the jumble of decaying wooden houses and neoclassical buildings that make up the old town. Tobolsk's central square sits atop a plateau that rears 50 metres above the muddy waters of the great River Irtysh and the lower town that sprawls to the south. It commands distant views of the surrounding countryside and the barges inching their way upstream. Two large buildings bestride the square. One is the stone kremlin, a fortified complex that projected the power and splendour of the imperial state. Its massive white walls, above which soar the blue and gold cupolas of the Sofia Cathedral, were built by exiles: Swedish soldiers taken prisoner by Peter the Great in 1709 at one of the decisive battles of the Great Northern War (1700–1721). The second building, whose imposing neoclassical façade spans the length of the square's western edge, is the Tobolsk Central Penal Labour Prison. Built in the early 1850s, the prison was the second of its kind in the town, adding much needed capacity to the existing ramshackle jail. Convoys numbering hundreds of exiles would be marched up into the town, across the square and through its gates, to be held in the prison while the Tobolsk Exile Office, the administrative centre of the entire exile system, determined their final destinations. Distributed into new convoys, the exiles would then set off on the roads and waterways of Siberia, bound for distant villages and penal settlements. Tobolsk was the gateway to a continental prison. The exile system played a central role in the colonization of Siberia. Towns grew up around Siberian penal forts and colonies to house their officials and military personnel. Rare was the Siberian village left untouched by the exiles who either officially settled almost every district in every Siberian province or unofficially roamed through them as itinerant labourers, thieves and beggars. Siberia's roads were dotted with the squat ochre waystations in which the marching convoys of deportees would overnight on their long and gruelling journey. The forwarding prisons, city jails, mines, industrial enterprises and exile settlements resembled sinews of state power that stretched eastwards from St. Petersburg. When, in 1879, a devastating fire consumed three-quarters of the centre of Irkutsk—then a thriving city of 30,000 inhabitants—one of the few stone buildings to survive the flames was the central prison. Its significance as a major transit point for exiles was laid bare as it suddenly loomed above the smouldering ruins of the city. The Tobolsk Central Penal Labour Prison continued to serve as a penal institution until 1989, when the authorities finally shut it down. Like many of the tsarist-era prisons, it had been refurbished after 1917 and eventually become part of what Alexander Solzhenitsyn would call the "archipelago" of penal facilities that formed the Stalinist Gulag. Both in Russia and abroad, the Gulag has overlaid memories of the tsars' use of Siberia as a place of punishment. Long before the Soviet state erected its camps, however, Siberia was already a vast open prison with a history spanning more than three centuries. Siberia—the Russian name ?????? is pronounced Seebeer—dwarfs European Russia. At 15,500,000 square kilometres, it is one and a half times larger than the continent of Europe. Siberia has never had an independent political existence; it has no clear borders and no binding ethnic identity. Its modern history is inseparable from Russia's. The easily surmountable Ural Mountains have acted less as a physical boundary than as the imaginative and political frontier of a European Russia beyond which lay a giant Asiatic colony and a sprawling penal realm. Siberia was both Russia's heart of darkness and a world of opportunity and prosperity. The continent's bleak and unforgiving present was to give way to a brighter future, and Siberia's exiles were intended to play a key role in this vaunted transition. For the imperial state sought to do more than cage social and political disorder within its continental prison. By purging the old world of its undesirables, it would also populate the new. The exile system promised to harness a growing army of exiles in the service of a wider project to colonize Siberia. In theory, Russia's criminals would toil to harvest Siberia's natural riches and settle its remote territories and, in so doing, they would discover the virtues of self-reliance, abstinence and

hard work. In practice, however, the exile system dispatched into the Siberian hinterland an army not of enterprising settlers but of destitute and desperate vagabonds. They survived not by their own industry but by stealing and begging from the real colonists, the Siberian peasantry. The tensions embedded in this dual status of “prison colony” were never reconciled over the more than three centuries separating the banishment of the Uglichan insurgents and the implosion of the tsarist empire in 1917. Contrary to the ambitions of Russia’s rulers, penal colonization never became a driving force behind Siberia’s development. Rather, as the numbers of exiles grew, it became an ever greater obstacle to it. Over the nineteenth century, the scale and intensity of Siberian exile increased so significantly that it easily surpassed the exile systems of the British and French empires. The British transported around 160,000 convicts to Australia in the eight decades between 1787 and 1868; the French state meanwhile had a penal population of about 5,500 in its overseas colonies between 1860 and 1900. By contrast, between 1801 and 1917, more than 1 million tsarist subjects were banished to Siberia. Among those exiles were generations of revolutionaries from towns and cities in European Russia and Poland. Some fought for a liberal constitution, some for national independence and still others for a socialist utopia. Siberia became a desolate staging post in the overlapping histories of European republicanism and the Russian revolutionary movement. By the end of the nineteenth century, the tsarist government was deporting thousands of dedicated revolutionaries to prisons, mines and far-flung settlements in Siberia. Amid the isolation and claustrophobia, they bickered, plotted and published political tracts to inspire and to coordinate the revolutionary underground in Russia’s major cities. Their dreams of impending revolution, undiluted by the compromises of practical politics, filled the yawning Siberian skies. Siberia had become a gigantic laboratory of revolution and exile, a rite of passage for the men and women who would one day rule Russia. When revolution finally erupted in 1905, these exiled radicals transformed Siberia’s towns and villages into crucibles of violent struggle against the autocracy. Scaffolds were erected in the courtyards of prisons while, beyond their walls, warders were assassinated in the streets. No longer a quarantine against the contagions of revolution, Siberia had become a source of the infection. The biographies and writings of a few luminaries dominate historical memory of Siberian exile before the Russian Revolution. Some, such as Fyodor Dostoevsky and Vladimir Lenin, were themselves exiles; others, like Anton Chekhov and Leo Tolstoy, penned vivid portraits of convict life in Siberia in their reportage and fiction. In 1861–2, amid the “thaw” of Alexander II’s Great Reforms, Dostoevsky published his acclaimed semi-autobiographical novel, the title of which is usually rendered in English as *Notes from the House of the Dead*, though the original Russian title translates more accurately as *Notes from the Dead House*, underlining Dostoevsky’s belief that, whatever their crimes, the exiles ultimately fell victim to a brutal and dehumanizing prison system: a house of the dead. Thereafter, the annual trickle of articles, memoirs and works of fiction on the exile system became a torrent that surged unabated through the final decades of the tsarist era. The Russian press carried anguished discussions of the horrors of the exile system and its disastrous consequences for Siberia itself. Other celebrated writers and artists followed in Dostoevsky’s footsteps. In Chekhov’s story *In Exile* (1892), the long years of banishment in Siberia have stripped an ageing ferryman of all compassion, hope and desire. The former exile is, his young companion exclaims, “no longer alive, a stone, clay.” By the time Ilya Repin painted his *Unexpected Return* in 1884, the hollowed-out stare of the gaunt young man entering his family’s dining room and the confused and shocked reaction of his relatives needed no explanation. Each and every one of Repin’s contemporaries understood that the scene depicted the homecoming of a political exile. Repin’s painting belonged to a shared imaginative canvas of the banishment, cruelty and suffering that were indelibly associated with Siberia. When, in 1892, Alexander III finally granted permission for the exiled bell of Uglich to be returned to its original home, the Russian press hailed the gesture as an expression of the monarch’s magnanimity. But in the glare of mounting public revulsion at the disastrous penal colonization of a continent, the return of the bell looked more like an acknowledgement of failure, even defeat. Abroad, too, exile was blackening the name of the autocracy. In 1880, the British satirical magazine *Judy* published a cartoon that neatly summarized the views of many Western observers. It depicts the Russian bear dressed as a gendarme, bearing a “torch of civilization” and leading a seemingly endless column of prisoners in chains to Siberia. The plight of Russian and Polish political prisoners in exile evoked outraged sympathy from audiences in Europe and the United States who denounced the tyranny of the autocracy. The most eloquent and well-informed foreign spokesman for the empire’s political prisoners abroad was the American journalist and explorer George Kennan. Originally sympathetic to the Russian government’s struggle with what he believed to be dangerous fanatics, in the late 1880s Kennan received permission from the Ministry of the Interior to travel unimpeded throughout Siberia and to report on what he found. What he discovered were thousands of men and women who were not, he argued, deranged and dangerous radicals, but rather martyrs to the cause of freedom. Across the world, Siberia was fast becoming a byword for the despotism of the tsars. Yet if the individual fates of famous writers and revolutionaries in Siberia became widely known and discussed both in Russia and abroad, the same could not be said of the vast majority of Siberia’s exiles. For every banished radical, thousands of unknown common criminals and their families were marched off to Siberia and into oblivion. Most were illiterate and lacked the resources required to record their experiences for posterity. Their fates survive only in the police reports, petitions, court records and official correspondence that were compiled and retained by the apparatus of an increasingly developed and sophisticated police state. These documents, stitched into bundles

and filed away in rough cardboard folders in the dusty and decaying collections of tsarist ministries, are today held in archives in Moscow, St. Petersburg and towns and cities across Siberia. It is from this body of archival evidence and from the welter of published memoirs and diaries that this book recovers the experiences of revolutionaries and common criminals in Siberia from Alexander I's coronation in 1801 to Nicholas II's abdication in 1917. Their voices tell the story of Russia's struggle to govern its prison empire as the tsarist regime collided violently with the political forces of the modern world.