

DANCE



**POLITICAL IMPRISONMENT
IN THE MODERN WORLD**

IN CHAINS



PADRAIC KENNEY



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Nearly thirty years ago, during what turned out to be the last days of communist rule in Poland, I was living in the city of Wrocław, then a center of youth opposition to the regime. Politics were less on my mind than my impending wedding, but the signs of anti-communist opposition were everywhere. I frequently spotted posters and graffiti calling for freedom for Sławomir Dutkiewicz, an activist on a hunger strike. I learned later that he and I were the same age, both twenty-five that summer. He was from a Pomeranian village and had a small farm. At university, he joined a student-based human rights movement called Freedom and Peace, which staged protests against the military draft and the oath to the Soviet Union that soldiers were required to take. As a farmer raising a family, Dutkiewicz was exempt from the draft, according to Polish law. But he was a peace activist, so they drafted him anyway; he refused to serve and was jailed, tried, and sentenced to three years' imprisonment. Almost immediately, he began a hunger strike (and a shaving strike too, thrashing around in the prison barber's chair so violently that the razor would have decapitated him). He was force-fed, so his hunger strike lasted the better part of a year. To say the least, we spent that summer of 1988 in different ways.

Nine years later, I finally met Dutkiewicz, in his auto-body shop in Sopot on Poland's Baltic coast, as I was researching a book on the social movements that brought down communism in Central Europe (*A Carnival of Revolution*, 2002). The political prisoner began to occupy my thoughts precisely because the experience was so alien. I conducted dozens of interviews with people who had, at one time or another, been in prison for their opposition to the regimes of the Soviet bloc. The more I learned about opposition movements and their protest strategies, the more I realized just how much harder it is to imagine or understand the experience of imprisonment for a political cause. Political imprisonment pervades the memories of so many families in Poland; my mother-in-law (whom I introduce in Chapter 9) twice went to prison as a Solidarity activist in

the 1980s, and her father, a fighter in the resistance to Nazi occupation, perished in Auschwitz.

This book seeks to demystify the political prisoner, posing and answering new kinds of questions about those who spend time in prison for political reasons, whether interned for a few weeks or for decades; in the dark basement cell of a fortress prison, a makeshift barrack, or a modern prison facility; as a communist, a pacifist, a guerrilla fighter, a priest. I am not interested, here, in whether the causes they have fought for or the methods they have chosen are right or wrong. My purpose is not to chronicle either abuses of human rights or any political struggle. Perhaps this book will be of use to the would-be political prisoner searching for models of action; perhaps, too, it might help political leaders understand why they do what they do—though I hope they will not find any “best practices” here. Indeed, one conclusion is that political incarceration is likely to fail to achieve its goals.

So many friends and colleagues in Poland, South Africa, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Great Britain, and the United States have contributed in some way to this research that I cannot possibly acknowledge them all. One of the great pleasures of this research has been discovering a network of prison historians, who understood the hazards and joys of this research better than anyone: Anna Muller, Will Murphy, Neo Legkotla laga Ramoupi, Anna Bryson, Stuart Finkel, Jeff Hardy, Steve Soper, and Alex Lichtenstein. I treasure the many conversations with patient and thoughtful friends: Bob Blobaum, Maria Bucur, John Connelly, Marek Czapliński, Max Paul Friedman, John Hanson, Róisín Healy, Darek Jarosz, Bill Johnston, Lara Kriegel, Marcin Kula, Ed Linenthal, Rick Lippke, Ethan Michelson, Andrzej Paczkowski, Wayne Reeves, Rebecca Spang, Kacper Szulecki, Mary Werden, Marcin Zaremba, and especially my father, Michael Kenney; so many other colleagues at the University of Colorado and at Indiana University have been steadfast in their interest and wise counsel at every stage. Two colleagues who have themselves been political prisoners, Hamid Ekbia and Kaya Şahin, offered perspective and encouragement. Verne Harris, Łukasz Kamiński, Laurence McKeown, Krzysztof Persak, Mirosława Pałaszewska, Oleh Razyhraev, and Richard Whiteing provided crucial advice and assistance with sources. I have learned so much from the students in my undergraduate seminars on political prisoners, too. Thank you all! I have presented this research to dozens of audiences and received valuable suggestions and advice from so many. I must mention the one group whose warm support meant a great deal: the former prisoners who now work as guides at the Robben Island Museum, with whom I spoke at an early stage in my research.

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At Oxford University Press, Susan Ferber has been the best and hardest-working editor I could have wished for. Anonymous readers delivered extremely thoughtful reviews, and the book is much the better for it. Any shortcomings are of course my own.

Many a family vacation over the last decade has included detours to visit a prison museum. Netflix sent a few too many prison movies in the mail. And I’ll admit that torture and hunger strikes are difficult topics of conversation at the dinner table or while running errands around town. Through it all, Izabela has been more than patient, not to say indulgent. Thank you for sharing this history with me.

Dance in Chains

Introduction

Where a Free Man Can Abide with Honor

You have done nothing wrong—though to be honest, perhaps that’s a matter of perspective. You marched in a demonstration, or you attended a meeting, or you wrote an essay that appeared in an underground journal, or you merely possessed a copy of that journal. Or maybe you really did break the law. You planted a bomb, carried a weapon, plotted an assassination, managed secret funds, advocated revolution—but you know this was in the service of a just cause, a struggle so that others could live more freely and have the rights they deserve. Perhaps you were just a sympathetic bystander, or perhaps an officeholder who became a victim of regime change. Regardless, what you did or did not do had political meaning and a higher purpose. Surely that puts your deeds, your words, and your allegiances in a different light. One thing is for sure: you aren’t a criminal.

And yet you are fingerprinted, examined, interrogated, and stripped by armed officers. Perhaps you are beaten, taunted, threatened, bound. You have lost mastery of your life and must wear a uniform that marks your helplessness. You might face execution or merely a short detention, but you do not control your fate. And the regime you oppose, or merely disapprove of, is no longer an abstraction; it has you under its control. The terms of that control are both brutally explicit—guards might laugh that your life is now in their hands and that the only way to leave is “feet first”—and terrifyingly uncertain.

On the other hand, you can’t be surprised. Imprisonment is one of the known consequences of opposing this regime. Objectively, you could even say that the state is acting in accordance with its established principles. These are the terms of political conflict. And you are a political prisoner.

Is there any figure in the contemporary world who inspires greater respect than the political prisoner? The women and men who are such prisoners have been locked away for professing their ideals or for demonstrating disagreement with a regime, and their suffering transcends their particular beliefs. They mark the limits of modern states’ willingness to tolerate difference of opinion or belief.

Henry David Thoreau's claim that "prison is the only house in a slave state where a free man can abide with honor" has echoed for prisoners and their supporters around the world.¹ Prison, according to this line of thinking, ennobles the "free man." And yet, how can someone spend months, years, even decades locked away from family, friends, and supporters for no personal gain? It is one thing to fight for one's beliefs, but how can suffering in forced passivity be worth it? How could the experience not destroy one's spirit, body, and sanity?

Nevertheless, to be on the state's list of those considered sufficiently dangerous to be removed from society confirms one's commitment to a cause. In the spring of 1982, as the Polish communist regime interned nearly 10,000 members of Solidarity, Warsaw personages who had not yet achieved this badge of honor began to wonder how they might, with minimal physical risk, provoke the police into detaining and interning them, too. Some, according to legend, began carrying around a toothbrush and a change of underwear, displaying them to friends to prove that they mattered enough to fear the unmarked car or the midnight doorbell.

For some prisoners, the ongoing contest with the regime and the camaraderie with their fellow prisoners inspired a kind of joyful irony. Ludwik Waryński, the founder of the first socialist party in the Polish lands, inspired the title of this book with a song he composed in Warsaw's Citadel in 1885:

Rise joyfully to the dance, you of rebellious faith.
 Turn and turn again, with joy. O Warsaw, O Kara!
 The enemy has for us chains and fortresses aplenty,
 But we are joyful, as our chains ring out a *mazurka*.²

The "Mazurka in Chains" became an anthem for Polish socialists, both in the exercise yards of prisons close to home and in the Kara Mines of Siberia; other songs, dances, and marches would break out in other prisons over the years. The positive emotions of the political prisoner—admiration, desire, and joy—stem from the belief that one can pursue politics in the prison cell. The confrontation with the state and its carceral institution is complex and multisided. Guards and interrogators, prison administrators, and prisoners, both political and criminal, all negotiate the rules that bind the political prisoner and the roles that the prisoner plays.

Opposition movements vary widely in their level of organization, their resources, their ideology, and their aims. Modern states also advance a range of ideologies and differ in their capacities and their willingness to use instruments of force against opponents. Where the two collide emerges the political prisoner, who exemplifies what the state can do and what the opposition is willing to do. In the terms of Irish revolutionary lore, the political prisoner demonstrates

who can endure (or inflict) the most. As states and their employees confine and handle their opponents, prisoners and their supporters try to make sense of confinement and relate it to the cause or struggle that has put them behind bars. Together, they produce politics in the cell. To understand that politics beyond simple terms like “repression” and “resistance,” this book investigates the multifaceted social and political relations enacted in this grim and hidden space.

In all but the cruelest of regimes, opposition movements have seen prison as a valuable part of the struggle. Political prisoners have inspired fervent campaigns domestically and around the world, beginning well before Peter Benenson launched Amnesty International in 1961. The image of the steadfast prisoner enduring privations and injustice behind bars with dignity crystallizes the twentieth-century struggle for social change and human rights. Yet thinking of political prisoners as “good people held by bad regimes” tells us nothing interesting, or even true; this book does not ask the reader to identify with the politics of any of its protagonists. Plenty of men and women imprisoned for their political actions—like Slobodan Milošević, Saddam Hussein, and Adolf Hitler—do not inspire esteem. Yet they too are a reminder that in any intense political struggle—for or against democracy, independence, human rights, civil rights, a civilization—some protagonists play their roles behind bars. With increasing regularity since at least the 1920s, prison years have become a useful qualification for high office. The resumés of John Vorster and Nelson Mandela in South Africa, Éamon de Valera and Martin McGuinness in Ireland/Northern Ireland, and Józef Piłsudski, Józef Cyrankiewicz, and Tadeusz Mazowiecki in Poland, among other state leaders, include this designation.

Given the great diversity of regimes and of oppositional ideologies, is it possible to reach general conclusions about the experience of political prisoners? Are there common practices and repertoires that they share? What can political incarceration accomplish, for the state or for its opponents? What does the political prisoner, alone or with others, do in the prison cell, and how do those actions matter? This book explores each of these questions. It argues that the political prisoner is neither necessarily heroic nor mere collateral damage but a potent figure in modern contentious politics.

The topic of political incarceration in the modern world is a huge one, and this book examines it through three large cases rather than by a global survey of prisoners. The latter approach might have turned the book into a superficial catalog of woe, in which numbers and names substitute for any sustained argument. The three cases—Poland, Ireland (and Northern Ireland), and South Africa—share several traits and yield a broad range of experiences. Each has seen a number of generations of political prisoners under a variety of regimes over the course of a century or more. These regimes range from Nazi rule in occupied Poland through the Apartheid state in South Africa to the democratic,

though militarized, United Kingdom during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Each country, indeed, has seen frequent regime change. In the 1860s, where this book begins, none of these countries even existed: Ireland was part of the United Kingdom, Poland was mostly part of the Russian Empire, and South Africa was subject to the British Empire. The spectrum of those imprisoned is equally broad; sometimes bitter opponents might be found in the same prison, as when white South African communists encountered extremist nationalists, Polish nationalists were jailed with Nazis, or Irish Republicans shared space with Ulster Loyalists.

As all of these countries are now open democracies, documents on their political prisoners are largely accessible. This book is based on research in two dozen archives and libraries in five countries, including prisoners' letters, diaries, petitions, and memoirs; the reports of informers and police; assessments by prison officials and by representatives of central government; and the documents of social movements. These perspectives build a collective portrait of the modern political prisoner—a figure who has not receded into the past, as analysis of a fourth case, the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, will show.

To choose a set of cases is to exclude others. Most societies have at least some political prisoners. In many of them, the practice of political incarceration is as long and as widespread as in the cases examined here. Broadly, cases can be divided along a few axes. First, European regimes developed the necessary ingredients for identifying political prisoners earlier than regimes elsewhere. This is not to say that societies in Africa or Asia did not both generate and repress opposition. But political prisoners as such are produced by modern states and by oppositions with access to media and party structures.³ Thus, the story in what would become South Africa picks up only in the first decade of the twentieth century. A parallel to this is the case of Vietnam where political prisoners began to act as a group within prison only in the early 1900s.⁴ The same is true in Iran, where prisons really became centers of political activity when communists organized in the 1920s and 1930s.⁵ While a system of state prisons developed somewhat earlier in Argentina, the story of political prisoners there appears to have developed only in the early twentieth century, as anarchists and communists—both prevalent among European migrants—organized.⁶

Within the European context, political prisoners emerged roughly in the mid-nineteenth century in a number of cases. Political prisoners have been chronicled, though not placed at the center of analysis, in France.⁷ Scholars examining the topic have generally asked how states, police, and prisons have operated rather than exploring the category of prisoners themselves.⁸

A second way to categorize cases of political incarceration is to consider how sensitive regimes are to societal pressures. Authoritarian regimes are very likely to incarcerate a broader set of opponents than liberal or democratic governments

and also to think differently about them. The prison guard may not be any less cruel in a “liberal” prison, but the mechanisms of sentencing, release, and information likely vary between authoritarian and more liberal governments.⁹ This book draws attention to similarities by focusing on experiences inside prison. One distinction that is not fully captured in this book is that some authoritarian regimes—China certainly, and perhaps North Korea—make it more difficult for political prisoners to differentiate themselves from ordinary prisoners. Political prisoners act separately even when the “political” category is not recognized, but this appears from the fragmentary evidence to have been much harder to accomplish in the prisons and camps of Mao’s China.¹⁰ As historians broaden the study of political prisoners, each national history will no doubt contribute new perspectives to the arguments presented here. This book aims to illuminate the relations in which political prisoners everywhere are enmeshed.

More than portraying particular prisoners, this book is about political relations within prisons, among prisoners, and between prisoners and the regimes that confine them. The prison figures prominently in the literature on the modern state, but that literature tends to leave these relations hidden or assumed. Four important theorists dominate thinking about the prison. Erving Goffman described it as a “total institution,” in which a variety of people are brought together under “a system of explicit, formal rulings and a body of officials” and required to follow “a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfill the official aims of the institution.”¹¹ This definition accurately describes the modern prison and helps elucidate how the prison is like a camp, a hospital, or an army barrack. But it inhibits analysis of the experiences of a group that seeks to exploit the institution.

More recently, the field of prison studies has been heavily influenced by Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. The concepts they offer, however, have proven of little use in illuminating the specific experience of the political prisoner. The scholarship on prisons does not generally make a distinction between criminal and political prisoners, so Foucault’s work in particular is often generalized.¹² Both Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, and Agamben, in *Homo Sacer*, portray worlds in which prisoners are closely observed (Foucault explores the prison as a “panopticon”) and acted upon, with little or no agency of their own. They are examined, measured, and reduced, in Agamben’s powerful phrase, to “bare life.”¹³ This approach helps enormously to explain the prison as the instrument of a modern regime that seeks to control its human resources, but not to make clear what political prisoners do and how their community acts. The prison Foucault and Agamben explore is one that sentences, punishment, and observation have rendered dead certain, yet for political prisoners, uncertainties outweigh certainties. Consider how much may be unknown to the political prisoner, in contrast to the typical criminal convict: Does law apply to me? Will

I be charged, or tried, or sentenced? How long will I be here? What do “they” still want to know about me? Does the cause still live on outside, or have arrests revealed that we were infiltrated and corrupted? Can I trust my cellmates or the person tapping on the wall from the next cell? These uncertainties shape, and in fact constitute a central purpose of, political incarceration.

Complementary to the total institution of the watchful state is an all-encompassing concept of resistance. Pushing back against the pessimistic view of total control, scholars like James Scott offer insight into the ways that even the “weak” can resist the hegemonic power of those above them.¹⁴ The state, for Scott, desires that its people, like other assets, be “legible,” their actions and characteristics easily accessible and able to be counted and utilized. The subject—a landless peasant, a citizen of an authoritarian state, an inmate—follows a “hidden transcript” that subverts the visible relations of power. Scott restores agency to his subjects, but the concept of resistance needs to be used with caution. This book will focus more on the idea of control—over the space one inhabits, one’s body, one’s relations with others and, finally, over the narrative of one’s incarceration. Whereas the regime, through prison, seeks to assert control, deny agency, and erase even the possibility of redemption or transformation during or after incarceration, political prisoners ultimately overturn this with their own narratives; this is the power of political imprisonment.

This book begins by situating the political prisoner in the modern world, a new development in the history of incarceration. Chapter 1 argues that political prisoners appear in the second half of the nineteenth century. Earlier “imprisoned politicals” regarded prison as a hindrance to their politics; the new political prisoners in British, Russian, and African prisons were among the first to make the place of their incarceration a site of struggle in their campaigns. In the half-century before World War I, states showed some uncertainty about how to treat their incarcerated opponents whom previously they had exiled or summarily executed. In petty conflicts over roll calls, over a fork for one’s dinner, or over the wearing of handcuffs in public, individual prisoners as well as regime officials and prison administrators worked out what it meant to be a political prisoner and developed a modern understanding of incarceration.

Political prisoners, of course, exist because a regime has put them behind bars. Chapter 2 explores the mechanisms of control that this institution exerts upon its inmates. Regimes subjugate their captives and seek to isolate them from politics by immersing them in uncertainties. Prison personnel constantly disrupt prisoner routines and impose their own seemingly arbitrary order; they foster mistrust among inmates and both brutalize and infantilize them. The chapter concludes by examining the practices and intended effects of torture. The regimes of a second period of political incarceration, stretching from World

War I through the 1950s, exhibited little of the hesitancy that their predecessors did; torture is one manifestation of this.

Chapter 3 tackles the question of who is a political prisoner. The answer depends in large part on subjective perception. Separating prisoners into “terrorists,” “criminals,” and “prisoners of conscience,” for example, is an exercise in political preference, not definition. Instead, this chapter examines how political prisoners themselves have shaped and defended the term. The ways of initiation into the cell community and its practices, and the ways that future prisoners think about and prepare for prison, reveal the outlines of a political category. The chapter introduces two groups against whom political prisoners define and defend themselves: criminal prisoners and guards. Associating political prisoners with criminals allows regimes to make them indistinguishable, so political prisoners have to maintain the line of defense vigorously. One might expect that political prisoners would try to indoctrinate criminals, but political prisoners more often perceive criminal prisoners as diluting the community and undermining its character. Guards, in turn, provide a positive opportunity: by fooling, humiliating, or educating the daily face of the regime, political prisoners affirm and develop their identity.

In addition to the regime and the prisoners themselves, political movements outside the prison shape political prisoners’ behavior and identity. The political prisoner and the movement draw strength from one another: the prisoner needs human interaction, comfort, and material support; the movement values the symbolic power of its living martyrs and the experience they gain inside. Chapter 4 considers how prisoners interact with the movements that claim to represent them and how communication works across a supposedly impenetrable boundary. Letters to comrades outside, and the occasional escapes, bind movements together as surely as do actions undertaken outside to assist those inside. Chapter 5, in turn, examines the role played by international movements of prisoner aid, from the Irish-American groups of the nineteenth century, through the “Red Help” movement that assisted communists in the interwar years, to Amnesty International today. Such movements are an important factor in the third era of political incarceration, beginning in the 1960s, in which ideas of rights become more visible both outside and within the prison. As they assist and defend political prisoners, rights movements shape the way others see political prisoners.

The last four chapters investigate how political prisoner communities produce new political realities as they organize and protest the rules of the prison and the politics of the regime. Chapter 6 offers a genealogy of prison organization, including prisoner-of-war camps and military structures, showing how these shaped new kinds of prisoner organization that emerged during and after World War I. The interwar years saw the development of extensive social structures,

such as food-sharing communes, study groups, and creative circles. These groups manage elaborate forms of communication and distribution of goods.

Chapter 7 shows how prisoners respond to the illegibility that prison regimes impose upon them. They seek scraps of normal existence, engage in clandestine communication, deny or subvert their identity, and even destroy that identity—feigning madness or attempting suicide, for example. This search for control thus makes the prisoner illegible to the regime and forms the basis for the survival of political movements in prison. Indeed, political prisoners are most visible to the world outside when they engage in collective action. Some protests aim to confuse or deny control over the prison, such as by storming the prison gates to be let in or refusing to wear prison clothing. Chapter 8 details the best-known type of prisoner protest, the hunger strike. This is the most dramatic protest in which prisoners engage and also represents the height of prisoners' efforts to remove themselves from the authorities' reach, asserting control through an action that is both incomprehensible and unpredictable.

Many of the movements whose activists and supporters have been imprisoned have subsequently taken power, including nationalists, communists, and democrats in subsequent regimes in Poland; nationalists in Ireland and in Northern Ireland; and the African National Congress in South Africa. Chapter 9 turns to a crucial link between the prison cell and political change. Through basic education, discussion circles, and other forms of self-organization among prisoners, the prison experience can become a crucible of commitment to the cause, what has been dubbed the "prison university." The cell experience creates not only political activism but also activism of specific kinds, such as negotiated and nonviolent responses to repressive regimes.

An epilogue considers the present and future of political incarceration and tests the framework this book offers against the notorious case of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp. It compares the experiences and actions of prisoners and guards at Guantanamo to others in modern world history, while asking what is implied by calling Guantanamo a political prison.

Even the select settings chosen here, followed over the last century and a half, yield an account crowded with different stories. If the commonalities have any purchase at all, the details of individual biographies and national histories should be less important—but they nevertheless help to make the experience of imprisonment more palpable. That, too, is a purpose of this book. Political opponents of all stripes are still going to prison, all over the world, in the name of causes that may inspire admiration or scorn. Shedding light on their cells should make them recognizable and make it possible to see more clearly the ever-proceeding dance in chains.

“But I Have No Wish to Be Discharged”

When Imprisonment Became Political

On her first encounter with the Warsaw Citadel, in 1893, Zofia Grabska felt no fear of being imprisoned in the famed dungeon; she expressed only “embarrassment that by such a stroke of luck I had come to the Tenth Pavilion, where so many genuine heroes had spent time, and from which Traugutt and his comrades had gone to their deaths.” The twenty-one-year-old found herself on sacred terrain, inheriting a space occupied by true Polish patriots like Romuald Traugutt, leader of an uprising in 1863. In vain she searched the walls for any graffiti left by her predecessors. “Gradually, I fell into a mood appropriate to the place. This mood satisfied the hunger of my soul. I had been worn out by everyday concerns and didn’t have a clear knowledge of what I desired and in what direction I should go. Now, I began to fear that the mistake would be swiftly uncovered and they would release me too quickly from the Citadel.”¹

Grabska came from a noble family active in social causes and politics. She was in some ways a typical detainee of the time, a young recalcitrant from a good home, imprisoned by the Russian state to be taught some manners. The soldier who escorted her to her cell lit the lamp and made the bed for her, using sheets Grabska had brought from home. Soon, General Brok of Warsaw’s Russian command paid a visit. As Grabska learned, the Citadel offered three different meal plans for peasants, townspeople, and nobility. She had no objection to belonging to the last category and didn’t mind watching a soldier perform household tasks for her. Prison proved quite agreeable—but when the first dinner was brought, she refused it on the grounds of being given a spoon as her only eating utensil. Instead, she opened her suitcase, removed the dinner and flatware her mother had packed for her at the manor house that morning, and ate this meal instead.

The old and the new collided in this encounter of a young, well-born socialist with one of the Russian Empire’s legendary places of incarceration, as

established traditions of resistance and repression began to slip away. Grabska was a member of the Polish Socialist Party, founded less than a year before. She was a modern political activist in a premodern cell. Looking into her first cell, she glimpsed a heroic past; her gentle treatment echoed social traditions against which she and her comrades fought outside. Prison was but a temporary sequestering, with home life not too far away. By the time she wrote her memoirs decades later, political prisoners were no longer the stuff of legend but a standard feature of the political landscape, and the prison was no longer a place for picnic dinners.

The hospitality afforded Grabska did not herald great leniency. Although she was not executed, she was sent on to St. Petersburg, far from her mother's parcels and the intervention of friends. A second arrest soon after her release the following year resulted in a two-year Siberian exile. Yet—characteristically for the not-quite-modern political prison—her class meant nearly as much to the regime as did her crime. Both the punishment and the attendant amenities signified the state's evaluation of her position in Polish society. Like exile, that punishment reflected how a state could be policed and kept ordered. Until the last third of the nineteenth century, those incarcerated for engagement in political activities generally shared several basic characteristics: they were nobles, or at least well born; they were treated individually, because they rarely represented any organization; and they found themselves quickly on the way out of prison: to freedom, to exile, or to the gallows or guillotine.

The history of the incarceration of individuals for beliefs or actions against the state or comparable authority stretches far back before the modern era. Jesus Christ, Saint Peter, and Socrates—to take examples from just the ancient world—are sometimes described as political prisoners.² Attention to commonalities across time can be useful, not least because modern prisoners themselves are aware of the parallels and have found comfort, for example, in reading of the Passion of Christ. But such exemplars do not help to pinpoint what changed in the modern era. Consider instead the so-called Age of Revolution. In Britain, members of the London Corresponding Society were widely persecuted in the 1790s for their advocacy of radical ideas. These prisoners, and their freethinking successors through the Chartists of the 1840s, knew they were different from other prisoners in the nature of their transgressions and in their comportment under lock and key. They often expected and demanded treatment appropriate to their station in life.³ The state, too, recognized that difference. For example, it allowed such prisoners to conduct business or entertain their friends in their cells. Many familiar elements, such as a common ideology, experience of collective action, and awareness of the state (as opposed to a single tyrant), appear in this prisoner–regime relationship. Yet to imagine that a continuum of slowly evolving experiences links all those who would speak truth to power or exercise

their human rights and freedoms is to miss what makes the modern political prisoner something new.

The fundamental difference is between a politics *against* the prison and a politics *of* and *in* the prison. Before the mid-nineteenth century, prisoners incarcerated for political acts or ideas sometimes accepted their fate and sometimes protested it, but the prison itself appeared to them as a hindrance to their activities or as a representation of what was wrong in the political and social order. They could be called simply "imprisoned politicals," for their incarceration posed an obstacle to their political work. The political prisoner, in contrast to the imprisoned political, imposes his or her politics onto the prison, using it as an instrument of political activity. Some can act with impunity, while others, suffering severe restrictions, isolation, and hardships, can conduct but the barest outlines of a political struggle. Still, they aspire to a politics in and of the prison rarely if ever essayed by detained opponents of earlier eras.⁴

This chapter outlines what changes in the nineteenth century introduced the modern political prisoner. How was Zofia Grabska, in short, different from those whose graffiti she sought?

Imprisonment, Exile, and the Political

Few imprisoned politicals in early nineteenth-century Britain achieved as much fame from prison as did Henry Hunt, who was locked up at Ilchester in 1819 for advocating parliamentary reform during the so-called Peterloo demonstration. Defying the privations of the Ilchester "Bastile," as he called it, Hunt smuggled out a pamphlet, "A Peep into the Prison," that exposed the conditions he and his fellow prisoners endured. The pamphlet enjoyed wide circulation and had some impact on prison reform. Yet Hunt, as he describes the food, the furnishings, the sufferings of other inmates, and the petty cruelties of the wardens, gives no hint of a community of like-minded prisoners, nor any evidence that imprisonment contributed to his political struggle. Indeed, Hunt's repeated references to the limits placed on visits by his friends make it clear that prison interrupted his politics.⁵ The prison, for Hunt and other radicals, exemplified what was wrong in England; William Cobbett could thus argue that the politicians and their cronies, and not the incarcerated debtors and petty thieves, were the real criminals deserving of a prison cell.⁶ This politics against the prison, in varying degrees of radicalism, characterized not only the imprisoned political but also his comrades outside prison. Of course, the prison was intended by the state precisely to hinder the actions that provoked arrest and internment; the imprisoned political could not yet see a way beyond the boundaries set by the regime.

A quarter century later, John Mitchel, a barrister from Ulster, was drawn into the ferment of Irish nationalist politics in Dublin and became the movement's leading journalist. A grand jury charged him with sedition in April 1848; the charge was amended to treason. Mitchel was sentenced to fourteen years' transportation (forced exile). The crime for which he was convicted was manifestly political, and the sentence was among the harshest that could be exacted—and yet he was not truly a political prisoner. Mitchel's *Jail Journal* became a classic of Irish nationalist literature, making its author one of Ireland's iconic martyrs. The title, however, is a misnomer: Mitchel devotes barely a paragraph to his time in a prison cell and begins with the morning he leaves Newgate Prison. En route to the Dublin quay to be shipped to Bermuda, Mitchel travels alone, under special surveillance. Once aboard the ship that was to take him into exile, he quickly effaces his status as captive by engaging the ship's captain in learned conversation.⁷ Mitchel's writings from abroad, for newspapers read by thousands, made him a category of one, either a treasonous individual or a tragic-heroic martyr, depending upon the reader's perspective.

Exile like Mitchel's effectively sundered the ties between the individual and the sentencing state. The state manifestly exerted its power over the individual in the courtroom, on the transport ship, and at the border; it often dictated how the exile would live. Siberian exiles were often restricted to one village or required to report regularly to a local police chief. Australian exiles arrived with papers that might send them to prison or to hard labor.⁸ Yet though the chain of command typically led to the same ruler, prisoners were effectively removed from the state against which they had acted and could thus no longer hope to inspire unrest in the societies they had left.⁹

Political exiles might not have to cross their country's borders. Tens of thousands of Poles and Russians endured transport to Siberia, especially after the Polish uprisings of 1830 and 1863; toward the end of the century members of nascent anarchist and socialist groups joined them.¹⁰ Exiles generally lived freely where they were assigned and reported regularly to local authorities.¹¹ By contrast, convict laborers in Australia, especially those sentenced for ordinary crimes, were virtually enslaved on farms and plantations.¹²

Transport did not differentiate between political and ordinary crimes. George Rudé, in his study of those transported to Australia from the British Isles over the eight decades that system was in effect, estimated that just over 2 percent of 162,000 individuals transported could be placed in a category of "social" protesters, ranging from participants in local insurrections to arsonists and maimers of wealthy landowners' cattle.¹³ Suppressing a wave of insurrectionary violence in Ireland in 1822–23, for example, British courts tried some 4,000, convicting just over 500; of these, 90 percent were transported.¹⁴ Leaving aside whether such men and women, who took oaths, attended meetings, or were found carrying

arms, were really political offenders, the state clearly had little interest in keeping them around, whether for reformation or as cautionary examples. The prison, in this process, was a temporary stage in the course of punishment, lumping political offenders together with criminals in their removal from society. Having imposed severe punishment on them, the state had no long-term interest in their persons.

Exile of protesting individuals might appear to be the logical outcome of a modernizing state's efforts to manage nascent social and national revolt, a pruning of disorderly growth in society's garden.¹⁵ The nineteenth century was indeed the century of exile, as states acquired, at about the same time, both the power to suppress rebellion or conspiracy (with standing armies and police forces) and extensive territories (colonies or remote hinterlands) to which they could send vanquished foes. However, a practice in which the state relinquished direct control over its opponents was inadequate to the concurrent expansion of state power and aspirations. At the same time, target territories no longer wished to receive boatloads of societal rejects, and states questioned whether exile was an efficient use of transport and of land. Not that exile disappeared as a form of social control: when the British were phasing out the practice, beginning in the 1850s, France was just beginning to implement it, and the French would continue to use penal colonies until after World War II; British India would soon transport Indian rebels to the remote Andaman Islands; and Siberia would remain a destination for Russian and Soviet convicts until the late twentieth century. However, considering the tens of thousands of individuals whom Britain had transported to distant lands in the nineteenth century, the decline of exile signifies a crucial shift in the way political prisoners were regarded and treated. The prisoner kept close to home in a state institution would be able to serve some use for the modern state.

The early modern prison, unlike its modern counterpart, was locally controlled, loosely regulated if at all, and privately run. In Britain through the early nineteenth century, the jailer derived his income from any fees he could extract from those placed in his charge.¹⁶ Russia, meanwhile, had much less use for prisons at that time, as the serfs were tied to landowners and subject to their idiosyncratic systems of justice. Prison, it seems, was a place avoided not only by the offender but even by the courts, which mostly issued either a sentence of corporal punishment or immediate release.¹⁷ In Asia and Africa, prisons were often decidedly temporary institutions.¹⁸ As a means of sequestration, banishment was preferable to prison for both the prisoner and the state.

No neat dividing line exists in the history of political incarceration. Modernizing European states gradually developed and expanded institutions to house, discipline, and reform criminals. The prison as a centrally controlled state institution emerged globally over a century and a half, spreading from

northeastern Europe in the eighteenth century to Asia and Africa in the early twentieth century. By the mid-nineteenth century, all countries in Western Europe and North America boasted a network of state-run institutions employing a variety of techniques to control and transform their residents.¹⁹

The prisoner-state relationship was concurrently shaped by the emergence of political parties and organizations. The modern political organization, hierarchical and united by common ideas and tasks, matured around the world between the 1860s and the 1910s in the context of dynamic urban centers, increasingly literate communities, and rapid communication technologies. Parties, associations, trade unions, and the like espoused relatively coherent ideologies that they could use to challenge the state. Socialist and nationalist organizations developed by the 1870s into mass movements with a permanent place in the political landscape, even where they were illegal. New kinds of political organizations forced liberal and autocratic regimes alike to reexamine policy toward their opponents.²⁰ This era would see the first concentration camps, the first genocides, and the first civilian refugees. It is not surprising that political prisoners would take their place on stage at the same time.

Concurrently with the prison, movements arose to aid prisoners and to expose the conditions they suffered. Agitation or organization on behalf of prisoners emerged at the intersection of two trends. On the one hand, the humanitarian impulse, deeply rooted in traditions of religious charity, acquired secular form in the era of liberal civic association.²¹ Prisoners were a riskier group to assist than, say, orphans or the poor, but they fascinated liberal society, both as a spectacle and as a wayward citizenry who could be reformed. Offering food and clothing to prisoners became an acceptable avocation for the urban middle class in cities like London and Antwerp. Prison visiting boards, unpaid civic organizations that monitored prison conditions and received prisoner complaints, usually reporting to a judge or magistrate, flourished in the early nineteenth century.²²

The story of prison reform began with advocates like John Howard, whose 1777 treatise *The State of the Prisons*, based upon visits to prisons around Britain, set the parameters of debate: what is the prison for, and how should it achieve these aims? These questions animated liberals in Northwest Europe and North America to experiment with systems of discipline and punishment for the wayward and the transgressor.²³ While some focused on how the institution could remake the criminal, others concerned themselves with the experience of the inmate. Groups like the Society for the Moral Improvement of Prisoners in the Netherlands, inspired by religious faith and civic impulse, publicized the dire straits of common prisoners and sought to ameliorate their suffering.²⁴ Occasionally a former prisoner—likely an imprisoned political, not a typical debtor or common criminal—might join such campaigns, but this work was overshadowed by the greater program of making the prison achieve the state's objectives.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, campaigns on behalf of prisoners were unlikely to advocate freeing them except to alleviate suffering. But in the Italian States and France after the 1848 revolutions, and in Ireland after the Fenian Rebellion, supporters demanded freedom for their incarcerated comrades, drawing on the accumulated knowledge and rhetoric of the prison reformers. A new word entered the lexicon of prison campaigners: amnesty. This cause allowed defeated revolutionaries a secondary goal and eventually brought some victories. Famous early examples were the amnesties of French emperor Napoleon III. In several decrees from 1852 to 1859, he offered freedom to thousands of participants in the 1848 revolution. Six years later, the emperor offered amnesty to insurgents in Algeria.²⁵ These acts of clemency resonated across Europe, where political causes were becoming organized movements. Thus, amnesty emerged as a theme among Fenian supporters. The Reverend John Spratt issued a cautious appeal to Queen Victoria in a speech at Dublin's Temperance Hall in October 1869. Careful to disavow any association and abjuring any untoward "language of defiance," he nevertheless offered pointed praise for Napoleon III and decried the "bitter sufferings the Political Prisoners have already undergone."²⁶ The defiance Spratt deplored was much in evidence elsewhere, as the movement for a Fenian amnesty divided between radicals and moderates, attracting police attention.²⁷

Thus, imprisoned political could be the object of a campaign to free them. Such figures could be cast as martyrs for their causes, around whom the movement could coalesce. While prisoners in general had already become an object of charity in the eighteenth century, the era of revolutions in the early nineteenth century brought fame and attention specifically to political. The earliest such campaign on behalf of a group of imprisoned political was likely that for imprisoned Italian revolutionaries in the 1840s (assisted by the publication in many languages of Silvio Pellico's memoir of imprisonment), followed soon after by French opponents to Louis Napoleon in the 1850s. These drew international support, especially from the British public.²⁸ Paradoxically perhaps, prisoners became more interesting politically when they became less accessible. Celebrity prisoners of the early nineteenth century did not need anyone to call attention to their plight, in the way that lesser figures hidden away in state prisons needed to be remembered. For some movement activists, prisoners were another marginalized or forgotten group in need; for others, they symbolized a struggle for one kind of liberation or another.

In the eyes of the state, the modern movement-based political looked very different from their predecessors. The individual pamphleteer or the cattle rustler might be easily neutralized. A few months in jail awaiting trial, a miserable berth on a ship bound for Melbourne, a set of leg irons in a carriage headed beyond the Ural Mountains, or a hangman's noose would bring a swift end to

the problem. Behind every such troublemaker the regime might suspect a conspiracy, but one with shallow roots. Late nineteenth-century civil society presented new challenges less easily vanquished.

States responded unevenly at first, as prosecution was constricted by what historian Seán McConville calls the dilemma of the “chivalrous state.”²⁹ Lawmakers recognized prominent political dissenters as being of the same class and even disposition as themselves, and so politicians often tended toward leniency, even in cases of violent opposition. Regimes considered the inherent qualities of the well-born prisoner to outweigh their deeds or ideas. “It is difficult,” observes Otto Kirchheimer in one of the first studies of political crime, “to prosecute a heretic while explicitly recognizing the purity of motivation which triggered this action.”³⁰ His phrasing makes clear that the regime is responding to an individual, not a movement. But as much as a ruler might grant leniency for—or, conversely, inflict exceptional, sadistic punishment on—a noble gadfly, the repressive apparatus of a modern state would hardly be likely to treat the members of a political party in personal terms.³¹

The rise of constitutional liberalism after 1848 also hemmed in European states, which hesitated to punish political transgressors seriously. Kirchheimer cites the case of Paul Déroulède, whose right-wing Patriots’ League plotted the overthrow of the French Third Republic in 1899, leading to his arrest. Even as he demanded to be tried for treason, Déroulède was acquitted merely of a misdemeanor before a high court banished him from the country.³² That leniency of European rulers in the nineteenth century, an era of national uprisings and anarchist plots, was as much the product of confusion as of benevolence or class solidarity. The abilities of the police to monitor and arrest suspected subversives outstripped, for a time, the interest that the legal and executive apparatus had in prosecuting those whom the police put at their disposal. This had little to do with popular pressure; rather, states prioritized order and thought it sufficient to try (and execute or banish) a leader or remove miscreants from sight.

Premodern incarceration looks in some ways like exile, even when it was not a first step toward exile. The premodern imprisoned political could simply be forgotten. Walerian Łukasiński suffered this fate. An army officer linked to the Freemasons and other secret organizations in Warsaw during the reign of Russian emperor Nicholas I, Łukasiński was sentenced in 1824 to fourteen years’ imprisonment, with the proviso that he could not be released without personal approval from the governor general of the Kingdom of Poland. In fact, he died in the Shlisselburg Fortress outside St. Petersburg in 1868. Over the decades, he was occasionally glimpsed by other prisoners, but he was as distant from subsequent generations as if he had been exiled.³³ Though Łukasiński ostensibly represented a movement of disaffected, liberal nationalists, he was really a personal captive of the ruler, held indefinitely. He was not on public display, nor was he of

any interest to the sovereign.³⁴ Why Alexander I kept Łukasiński in Shlisselburg rather than exile him to Siberia or have him hanged remains obscure; given the utter isolation of his sentence, the location made no significant difference.

The creators of the modern prison vigorously debated the correct approach to social control and the best means to create what Michel Foucault called "docile bodies." The debate about means contained a debate about purpose: could criminals really be transformed by prisons into useful, respectable citizens, or should they simply be confined as punishment and a prophylactic measure? Were the oft-invoked principles of moral improvement and compassion real or a smokescreen for the vengeful exercise of state power?³⁵

Such debates relate only indirectly to the question of how to deal with political opponents, some of whom a state might choose to tolerate. Imprisonment of a political opponent obviously promises a different sort of security from that afforded by locking up a murderer, and the beneficiary of this security is as much the state or the sovereign as it is the people. Political prisoners were also unlike debtors, common denizens of nineteenth-century prisons, for there is no obvious way for the political prisoner to make amends. The modern political prisoner challenges, both implicitly and explicitly, the very ideas of discipline and reform. By the last third of the century, prisons had become a place to keep political offenders as well as criminals; the question was in what sense they were separate or different.

The Bold Fenian Men

In January 1868, the frigate *Hougoumont*, the last convict ship from Britain, arrived in Western Australia carrying nearly 300 convicts. As states turned from expulsion toward monitored, proximate incarceration of political offenders, the age of the modern political prisoner subject to the legal and punitive apparatus of the total institution began. The category could be seen even in law. In 1880, the Russian authorities in Warsaw, establishing guidelines for the Citadel (and subsequently other prisons), acknowledged the category of "political prisoner." The rules were somewhat ad hoc and were in any event superseded by a comprehensive regulation five years later. However, the 1880 regulation recognized, both in permitting and in forbidding certain rights, a collective identity. On the one hand, political prisoners were to be separated from criminals and allowed to walk on the prison grounds together. On the other hand, they were forbidden from submitting petitions as a group, an action they were likely to attempt.³⁶

Whether the state was lenient, chivalrous, or simply ill-prepared, it experienced socialists, nationalists, and other organized political movements as new challenges. Among the first movements furnishing political prisoners in the modern sense were the Fenians, who succeeded Mitchel's Young Irelanders in the

struggle for Irish freedom in the 1860s. The Fenian movement—formally the Irish Republican Brotherhood—resembled other late nineteenth-century movements across Europe in its emphasis on conspiracy, organization, and armed struggle. In cooperation with comrades in the United States, the Fenians planned an uprising in Ireland for 1865, but their plans were discovered and most of the principals arrested. James Stephens, one of the founders, was detained in November and held in Richmond Bridewell prison in Dublin with a few of his comrades. Less than two weeks later, he escaped with the help of his guards and friends outside and left the country. The cells of the forty or so left were reinforced with iron, and trials before Special Commissions took place within a month. The trials—which featured Fenian leader Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa defending himself with incendiary speeches—convicted many movement leaders.³⁷ By the end of 1866, more than 750 Fenians were imprisoned, most in England; hundreds more followed over the next two years as further Fenian plots were uncovered. More than a hundred received sentences ranging from several years to life incarceration.³⁸

The Fenian prisoners, Seán McConville argues, “did not grasp the opportunity to continue their fight within the prison walls Prison had yet to be viewed by the militant as a theatre of revolutionary war.”³⁹ Yet the Fenians did forge a new collective political identity in British prisons, becoming more than imprisoned politicals. Some came to see the prison itself as a place in which one acted as a political; for them, as McConville puts it, “captivity became an opportunity as well as an incapacity.”⁴⁰ Prison proved an arena for the contest with the British government. If the Fenians did not continue an active campaign against the regime from within their prison cells, their incarceration was nonetheless something more than the lonely martyrdom it had been for their predecessors. In small ways, they reformed a political community within the English prisons.

For the British, this bounty of captives far exceeded those from earlier protest movements such as the Chartists. The incarceration of an entirely homegrown, mainly English, movement like the Chartists would likely have been uncomfortable for the British regime and public, but the Irish could more acceptably be arrested, tried, and imprisoned en masse. The option to transport them, though, was rapidly disappearing. So the British authorities devised novel restrictions, as they clearly expected the Fenians to conspire in prison. Even when sharing cells, therefore, detainees were not allowed to speak with one another. Contact during exercise was similarly restricted. Newspapers were forbidden, and prisoners could only write letters intended for delivery outside the prison.⁴¹ Fenian actions inside and outside prison reinforced British fears that they posed a danger even when incarcerated. These prisoners, authorities decided, were a dangerous group in and of themselves, wherever they were.

Less than two weeks before the *Hougoumont* sailed for Australia, an armed attack on a police van freed two Fenians recently arrested in Manchester. The

Fenian campaign of prison rescues culminated in an amateurish plot to free Richard Burke from Clerkenwell Prison in December 1867. Burke, a prominent member of the Brotherhood, had helped to plan the Manchester rescue. His comrades planned to rescue him by blowing up (from the outside) a wall of the prison's exercise yard. The explosion, on the afternoon of December 13, killed and wounded a number of people in the prison's vicinity, but rescued no one. The attempt unleashed rumors that a wave of Irish terror would engulf Britain with assaults on other prisons. The police began to round up anyone of whom they were suspicious, and they increased surveillance; guards in prisons where Fenians were held began carrying arms.⁴² Thus for the British public and authorities, just as for the Fenians, the prison became a focus of political relations.

As a group, the Fenians seemed far more dangerous than had John Mitchel. Exile would not make them disappear from public memory; besides, their attacks had challenged state institutions directly. Thus incarceration became the method not only to contain political unrest but also to attempt to erase the cause. Yet the British met their match in Fenian leader Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, who well understood the propaganda value of prison. Offered passage to Western Australia, Rossa refused, recalling later: "I felt a kind of pleasure in seeing them treat us brutally in England, and I could not enjoy this feeling under similar treatment in the Antipodes."⁴³ Proximity to one's own community, in



Fig. 1.1 The Fenian bombing of the Clerkenwell Prison, December 13, 1867. From *Illustrated Police News*, December 21, 1867. Courtesy of the British Library.

other words, allowed the prisoner to furnish a spectacle of repression and suffering that would not be visible in distant exile. To be a prisoner on one's home turf, or close to it, afforded some political benefit from the regime's treatment. O'Donovan Rossa's prison memoirs, unlike those of Henry Hunt, keep the collective always in view.

O'Donovan Rossa's defiance of authorities, and his sense of his position within the prison community, steadily escalated. At Portland prison, he and his comrades found no Roman Catholic priest, nor an appropriate place of worship; their protest yielded permission to choose one among them to read prayers and scripture in the cellblock corridor on Sundays. This exercise in self-organization became a protest, as the reader, Denis Mulcahy, took care to choose texts with "denunciations of tyrants and oppressors . . . and blessings for all who suffered persecution for justice sake [*sic*]."44 On the relatively limited ground of religious faith, the authorities granted the Fenian prisoners the right to govern themselves and thus to articulate a collective identity in incarceration.

Still, O'Donovan Rossa and the others had to work out what being a political prisoner entailed. The guards at Portland chose two prisoners to clean the out-house every three weeks. When O'Donovan Rossa's turn approached,

I told my companions I would refuse, and some of them remonstrated with me. Mr. Luby observed that obedience and subordination were more than anything else in accord with the dignity of the cause of our imprisonment, and in this I agreed with him. John Mitchell [*sic*] submitted to the prison discipline, he said, and did his work like any other convict, but I could never realize to my mind John Mitchell's shoveling the dung out of a privy.⁴⁵

Two questions were at issue here. First, does obedience or disobedience bring greater dignity to the prisoner? The Fenians came to agree on obedience; other groups of prisoners drew different conclusions. The second question concerns the individual prisoner's responsibility to his comrades. O'Donovan Rossa relented when another comrade pointed out "that some four or six of our party had cleaned the closet before me, and my refusing to do it would look as a reflection on their spirit or a presumption of my own superiority."⁴⁶ Both sides looked to Mitchell's experience, but in the end, the desire to maintain solidarity prevailed. Soon, O'Donovan Rossa was breaking stones in the prison yard at record pace, showing himself to be, he tells a prison officer sarcastically, "a gentleman convict." He would not remain so; when ordered to break stones in Chatham Prison in early 1868, he flung his hammer over the prison wall and was chained to the floor of his cell as punishment.⁴⁷

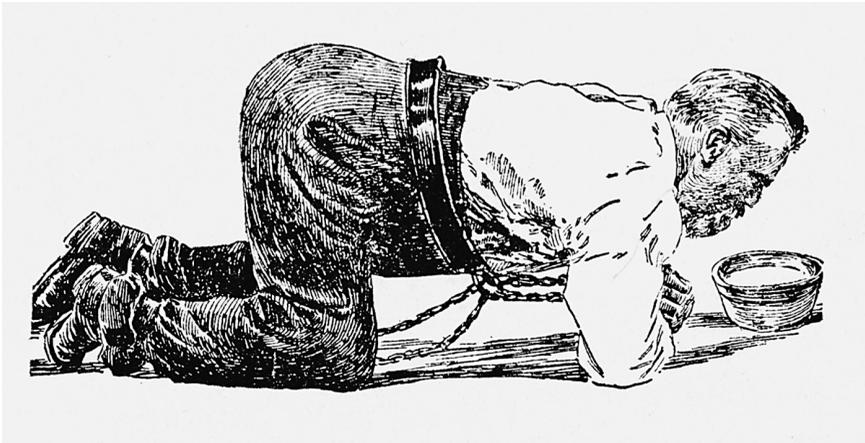


Fig. 1.2 Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa in Chatham Prison, 1868. From John McGuffin, *Internment* (Tralee: Anvil, 1974), plate 1.

One sure marker of political detainees—both imprisoned politicals and political prisoners—is that they are constantly wondering about, negotiating, or defending a status that is only partly visible. Whether it is the way they are detained, the charges laid (or not laid) against them, their station in life, or their views, something indicates to such prisoners, to the state, or both that they could be called political. Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa was not the first political captive, but he may have been the first to contest the incarcerating regime, together with a larger group, for an extended period of time, and to recognize how valuable his imprisonment was to him and his cause. The Fenians spent up to six years in prison, treated largely as a group even as they were frequently moved around the English penal system. Their incarceration delineated the boundaries of collective action within and without the prison cell. The British eventually succeeded in suppressing the movement, but O'Donovan Rossa would become a legend from the moment his prison memoirs appeared.

During these years, the British authorities discovered that the imprisonment of a large number of political opponents had led them into a trap. They recognized the group as distinct and worthy of special opprobrium. Yet in consigning them to prison, they aimed ostensibly to treat these men like any other convicts. This is the classic dilemma of the modern repressive regime: it wants to single out political offenders for punishment, but it also fears drawing attention to them. The British found it a difficult position to maintain. Seán McConville describes the British government's Fenian dilemma: "The doctrine of 'no political prisoners here' was the official line, but neither officials nor politicians believed or acted as though it were true." By 1870, he notes, the Fenians had won the category in all but name.⁴⁸ While O'Donovan Rossa's protests surely had

some effect, the authorities no doubt feared the publicity consequences of any mistreatment. To hold such prisoners was a necessary inconvenience, subject to constant pressure from the prisoners, from movements advocating freedom for the prisoners (or trying to free them), from sympathetic or hostile publics, and from political leaders. Prime Minister William Gladstone had little choice but to grant an amnesty; a first group of Fenians went free in 1869, followed by a second group, mostly expelled from the country, in 1871.

The patterns hammered out during the Fenian years were repeated in the next episode in Irish political incarceration, that of the so-called Dynamitards in the 1880s. The authorities' security concerns were much greater, and public opinion more severe, in the case of these men who set bombs in railway stations, on bridges, and in other public places in England. These men—six of whom were tried in 1883–84 and served about fifteen years—acted like and were treated as political prisoners. In Chatham Prison, they were the “Special Men” and were constantly harassed under the guise of security; for example, guards observed them hourly during the night and let the metal inspection flap on the door fall shut with a clang to prevent the prisoner from sleeping. The authorities even selected reading material—nursery rhymes and anti-Papist tracts—to further torture the Dynamitards.⁴⁹ They endeavored to treat them like ordinary dangerous criminals while also distinguishing them; this was made easier by the evident severity of the Dynamitards' actions. Though a number of the prisoners went mad, one, Thomas Clarke, carried on a constant correspondence with his fellow prisoners, even publishing a clandestine newspaper from the prison's print shop.⁵⁰ The Dynamitards' experience is a reminder, however, that the resourcefulness of the political prisoner was still set against a much more powerful state.

The Mazurka in Chains

In the Russian Empire, in the same decades, the balance also began to shift from exile toward political imprisonment. Socialists were central actors in this drama, slowly altering the political landscape of a society where political opposition had been so clearly identified with the nobility. As they sought explicitly to build alliances across classes and to remake the political and economic order, socialists undermined the ability of regimes to differentiate among oppositions on the basis of class.

Socialist parties emerged across Europe in the decade after the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871, another clear moment marking a transition toward the era of organization and ideology.⁵¹ In Poland, indeed throughout the Russian Empire, the first socialist party was Proletaryat, founded by Ludwik Waryński