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***Prisoner mortality in late Imperial Russia (1885-1915) and the Soviet Union (1930-1953) in international comparative context”***

Death rate in the penitentiary system is considered to be one of the most fundamental statistical indicators in penology, directly connected to convict forced labour exploitation. Russian convict labour system, both of the tsarist and the Soviet period, has an extremely negative reputation in historiography, especially in terms of sanitary conditions and mortality. But how extraordinary prisoner mortality of both regimes really was in comparison with similar prison indexes of contemporary developed and under-developed countries? That vital question never has been explored so far. Although many historians claim that Soviet GULAG was simply a continuation of pre-revolutionary convict labour (*katorga*) practices in a new social and economic circumstances (Pipes 1977; Gentes 2002), there are those few who, on the contrary, strongly object to such an assertion. Positive interpretation of the developments of late Russian imperial prisons, with strong emphasis on the shared "Western" tendency, was first introduced by Bruse F. Adams (1996) and continued by J. Daly (2005). Somewhat in between those extremes exists a middle position taken by Wheatcroft (2002). While accepting the positive trend before 1905, he insists that the major crisis of penal system in 1907-1910 was part of radical "*first wave of increased repression as the modern police state made its first incursions into a semi-modern and rapidly modernising society*". I intend to add to this long-running debate through international comparative analysis of prisoner mortality, creating, so to say, a system of coordinates. I plan to introduce several prisoner death rates charts of several major European countries, some colonial prisons and the USA in 1880-1953. I intend to compare that data with late Imperial Russian and Soviet mortality prison figures to put them in international context. Numerous factors are taken into account. My chief goal is to define what was the precise place of Russian prison system in the hierarchy of several advanced countries and their colonies in the aspect of convict mortality. Moreover, I will discuss major reasons of Russian and Soviet penitentiary mortality trends connected with labour exploitation.