

Laboratories of Modernity. Carceral statehood in Russian, Prussian, and Habsburg Prisons

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The project re-examines the history of incarceration as a tool of imperial rule in Central Europe. It offers a new perspective on how, throughout the 19th century, Russia, Prussia, and the Habsburg Empire incorporated the lands of the Polish crown and the Lithuanian Grand Duchy and established new prisons as spaces of carceral statehood. By comparing the modernization of prison regimes in three different imperial contexts, the project gives an insight into the relationship between imperial rule and incarceration. The comparison aims to show a hybrid of practices used in establishing new penal regimes through state coercion, practices that also confronted and responded to regional, linguistic, and religious differences within the partitioned lands.

A close look into the changing everyday practice of incarceration reveals not only the dilemmas of modernization policies in Poland and Lithuania, but also a story of multiple failures. Both the contemporary public critique of the status quo and later government reform plans formulated a vision to overcome the structural problems of prison regimes. These problems included a lack of resources, a constantly growing number of inmates, and the unintended consequences of bringing together men and woman with various sentences in a limited space. The project asks to what extent those who were in charge of managing and improving incarceration realised the actual shortcomings of their institutions. Despite their in-depth knowledge, they upheld the discourse of reform in regards to the prisoners as individuals and the prison as an institution. Hence, modernization was presented as an ambiguous process that aimed to implement progress, and was reflected by the actors as utopian, incomplete, and problematic.

Laboratories of Modernity includes the Polish and Lithuanian lands in a global history of reform thought. As the carceral regime was based initially on religious practice, the partitioning empires had to acknowledge the diversity of their holdings as they redesigned prisons. The project examines architectural ideas, and how Russian, Prussian, and Habsburg bureaucrats addressed the religious otherness of their new subjects inside prison walls. It also discusses, for the first time, the broad variety of practical options for managing religious differences within prisons, such as the division of a chapel into two separate floors to allow Roman-Catholics and Russian-Orthodox to pray concurrently in Vilna prison. Other ideas included the reappropriation of monastic complexes as multi-religious spaces. The project shows how the simultaneous use of the same church by various congregations created numerous conflicts inside and outside the prison.