



**Individual Advanced Research
Opportunities Program**

Research Report

The opinions, recommendations, and conclusions of the grantee are his/her own and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IREX or the US Department of State.

1. Title of Research Proposal:

The Polish Political Prisoner in the Twentieth-century

2. Topic of Research

This project compares the experience of political prisoners across seven regimes in Poland in the 20th century, from 1905 through 1990. Using four major archives, newspapers, and interviews, I will explore accommodation and resistance in the prison cell, the problem of prisoner identity, and the public roles states intended prisoners to play. In this broad study of the place of the political prisoner in modern state-society relations, the first of its kind, I will use concepts of guilt, innocence, honor and faith to consider basic continuities across time and across the political spectrum.

3. Relevance and Contribution to Field

When I began this project, I noted in my proposal that the scholarly literature on political prisoners is remarkably thin. Great interest in the causes espoused by political prisoners, in the conditions they endure, and in the message their sacrifice conveys, has not translated into scholarship of any depth, with very few exceptions. One of the primary tasks of this year of research has been to recognize the obstacles to the study of political prisoners, and to find a way

around those obstacles: in other words, to lay the groundwork for a new field of historical study.

The topic is one of great significance today, not least because of the increased visibility of politically-motivated prisoners/imprisonment: in Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo, but also in the recent Israeli-Lebanese conflict, which began with demands for release of prisoners. On the other hand, the presence of former political prisoners at the head of so many states, especially in Africa and Eastern Europe, is a reminder of the long-term impact of political incarceration. Yet the scholarship, again, is in its infancy.

There are two basic problems one faces in encountering the political prisoner. The first might be called the problem of cliché: the injustice of imprisonment, and the depth of suffering endured, is generally so great that it seems to obviate any further interpretation. Thus Aryeh Neier's chapter on political prisoners in the *Oxford History of the Prison* (eds. Morris and Rothman, Oxford, 1995), for example, simply enumerates modern repressive regimes and their captive opponents. What, after all, can one ask, beyond: 'How many?' and 'How do they suffer?'

The second major problem I have had to confront in this research is that of definition. I now realize, in fact, that the paucity of research in this field is most likely the result of the difficulty in framing the topic. At one end of the spectrum (that exemplified by Aryeh Neier's essay), political prisoners are people incarcerated for their beliefs – beliefs expressed in non-violent ways. These are the "prisoners of conscience" championed by Amnesty International, for example. Yet beyond this friendly core group, categorization becomes more difficult. Many of those imprisoned – such as partisan fighters in World War two, imprisoned by the Nazi occupation and/or by the Polish Communist regime, called themselves "prisoners of war", and sometimes were treated as such. Others (some in this group, or some imprisoned by the Russian government prior to 1914) had committed acts of violence (bombings, assassinations); they might call themselves "freedom fighters", while the regime would call them terrorists. Another difficult category includes those arrested neither for deeds nor words,

but because of their identity: shopkeepers arrested during the Stalinist period, or Jews during the Holocaust. Finally, of course, the widest definition of “political prisoner” includes *all* prisoners, captives of a state that presumably has political motivations behind all of its laws. Even as we dismiss this idea (as utterly unworkable, for example), it draws our attention to those who might land in prison for standard criminal reasons, but then undergo a political awakening.

This definitional problem is not insignificant: it hinders, I believe, our appraisal of the current cases mentioned above. If “political prisoner” is a category comprising only those who fight peacefully for justice, it is too loaded to be used freely. If it is something broader – well, then what is it? One important goal of this research, then, is to arrive at a more useful understanding of the term that can help us see what Adam Michnik, Nelson Mandela, Adolf Hitler, IRA paramilitaries, and the prisoners of Guantanamo do (or do not) have in common.

4. Approach and research methodology; list of research sites

The state-prisoner relationship, inherent in the first problem discussed above, has proven to be very difficult to understand. I have tried, as I worked in the archives, to strip away all assumptions I had about prisoners and to ask a quite heretical question: “Why bother?” First, regimes: why should states even bother to keep political prisoners (as opposed to executing them summarily)? For example, the Pawiak Prison in Nazi-occupied Warsaw housed as many as 90,000 prisoners over the course of four years. The vast majority were killed, either in the ruins of the adjacent ghetto, or after deportation to Auschwitz, Ravenbruck, or other camps. Yet a resistance structure in the prison, centered on the hospital, saved dozens of prisoners. Doctors and nurses, themselves prisoners, could, for example, rescue a prisoner undergoing difficult interrogations by infecting her or him with typhus, thus enabling a week or two of rest in the hospital (and, possibly, an escape opportunity). The Gestapo knew that the hospital staff could not be trusted, and that the search for information was thus hampered; yet it did not simply liquidate the hospital, even until the end. No less surprising is the willingness of less repressive regimes to house, and transport, and monitor thousands of opponents.

My thinking on this question presently is heading in two directions. First, it seems clear that prisoner and regime (in the immediate guise of the prison administration and prison guards) are locked in a relationship, in which prisoners become necessary to their captors: they are a justification for existence – evidence, in other words, that the prison bureaucracy has important work to do. At the same time, they are a vital source of information. A banal observation, perhaps, but I have become interested in the different ways in the regime seeks to extract information from prisoners. The regimes I am studying (within the Polish case) vary greatly as to the level of information they possess about political opponents' activities before they are arrested; in their ability to use informers within the prison; in their vigilance in preventing communication among prisoners.

The second direction has to do with performance. By holding political prisoners, the regime demonstrates its ability to manage/control opposition, in a way that summary execution or forced exile would not. I had planned to get at this question through daily newspapers; for the moment, I am looking at it on the micro level, in the way that prison regimes treat prisoners themselves.

There is another “why bother” question to consider: what purpose does it serve to become a political prisoner? Aside from becoming a martyr for a cause, what can one achieve in prison? Most political prisoners do not go to prison willingly, of course (though there are notable exceptions); however, if we leave aside for a moment the role of honor and commitment to a cause (which are important, and which I have been studying): what does a political prisoner do?

The political prison cell, in all the regimes I have been looking at, is a place of diffusion of knowledge. This means several things: first, I have encountered numerous cases in which neophytes become committed activists while in prison. In the Piotrkow prison in the late 1920s, for example, a group of young communist textile workers, all women imprisoned after a recent strike, decided they needed to teach themselves to be better comrades. They set themselves tasks: each comrade had to give a speech as if to a crowd gathered outside the factory gates, or to her fellow strikers. They then critiqued each others' speeches

– and sent letters to their Party leaders asking for further advice, and for literature. In stalinist prisons twenty years later, new cellmates began by presenting a resume of their knowledge and abilities, ranging from foreign languages to ornithology to plots of famous novels. A senior cellmate might then organize this knowledge base into a lecture series: English lessons at a certain hour, followed by science lectures, followed by storytime.

At the same time, some knowledge is more tightly guarded. Cellmates usually avoided discussing their cases, because of uncertainty about possible informers. While in their memoirs political prisoners profess the ability to identify informers, reports by such informers suggest they could often fool even the most suspicious prisoner. The prison cell became a site of struggle over knowledge. While the regime tried to listen in on prisoners (sometimes with electronics, more often through informers), and to intercept communication (written or through coded knocks) between cells or between the prison and the outside, prisoners tried to figure out who was in the next cell; who else from their organization or circle had been arrested; and what the interrogators really knew.

A single definition of a political prisoner – and thus a clearly delineated field of study – appears impossible. Sometime, we can let the deed (such as the writing of a manifesto) define the prisoner as political. Other times, we can allow the regime to define its political opponents through incarceration. At other times (especially in the Czarist and Stalinist periods), it is necessary to ignore the regime's labelling of prisoners as ordinary criminals, and allow prisoners to identify themselves as political. Still, the definitional problem throws up roadblocks. One path through this thicket is offered by a concept I have already employed above: that of performance. Through interaction with predecessors, with cellmates/neighbors (both political and criminal), with guards and with interrogators, the prisoner acquires a toolkit, learning the role and the survival strategies of a prisoner in political opposition to the incarcerating regime.

Much of this learning takes place within the cell, of course. Thus I return to the physical space of the political prisoner's cell as key to the prisoner-state relationship – more central than the ideology of the regime, or the political beliefs

of the prisoners. The cell is the focus of the prisoner community (at times extremely attenuated, at others quite clearly defined), and the site of identity formation and of individual or collective resistance.

Let me now turn to the work I accomplished this year in the Polish archives. I will start by saying that, with one small exception, I saw everything I hoped to see, and more; I can say that my work in the Polish archives is complete.

In the Archiwum Akt Nowych in Warsaw, I found that the largest collections dealt with the interwar period. These can be divided into two types: those collected by Communist Party historians after 1945, and those collected by the interwar state. In the former category were the files of "Red Assistance" (Czerwona pomoc) and the League for Defense of Civil and Human Rights. Both were more-or-less tied to the Communist Party, and worked to publicize the plight of political prisoners; to help prisoners materially and politically, and to defend them in court and in parliament. The files also contained some material from prisoners themselves (open letters and the like). During most of the interwar years, communists made up the bulk of political prisoners; in the 1930s, there were many Ukrainian nationalists in prison, too.

Of particular interest were documents relating to campaigns for prisoner amnesty (in 1926 and in 1936, though smaller campaigns occurred at other times). I focused especially on the language used by these organizations, and on the ability of prisoners themselves to organize.

The largest collection of materials consisted of transcripts of interviews conducted in the early 1960s by the Party History Workshop. These interviews are organized thematically, covering topics in Communist history from the 1920s to the end of the war; a number of them focused on Party organization within the prisons. None of these interviews have been published, as the political crises of 1968 and 1970 made them suspect. The interviews were done, moreover, at a time when stability appeared to have arrived, and most interviewees speak frankly about torture; about informers; and about the difficulties of maintaining Party presence in the prisons of the 1930s. This material was so rich that I

ordered microfilms of five interview sets (about 800 pages), and will be continuing to use them over the next few years.

The state materials are much weaker, due to destruction suffered in 1944-45. The files of the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Chief Prosecutor (and provincial prosecutors), and the courts are quite fragmentary. Moreover, what material remained was often simply copies of Communist material; only rarely could I find documents created by state agencies. These do give at least a picture of the regime's concerns about political prisoners. For example, ministry officials warn in circular letters of the influence of Stefania Sempolowska, a renowned human rights activist. Policy statements, however, were utterly absent. I contacted several provincial archives, in hopes of finding traces of state policy there; it appears, however, that their collections are no more complete. My initial reading of work on other countries (Ireland and Nazi Germany) suggests that such documents may not generally have existed. I am still working on this problem of explaining the documentary drought.

The Archiwum Akt Nowych also contains a few files on the Czarist period, in the form of brief memoirs by ex-prisoners of the Warsaw Citadel. From the Nazi occupation, the files of the underground state and of the Home Army contained such things as instructions on how to behave in prison (or when writing to colleagues in prison); reports on prison conditions; and some letters smuggled from prison. Finally, the postwar period appeared promising, yet the one major collection: the Prison Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, contained almost no material relating to political prisoners. One unexpected find, however, was a file of daily reports on Stalinist Poland's most famous political prisoner, former Party leader Wladyslaw Gomulka. The reports were collected for the benefit of Gomulka's successor, Boleslaw Bierut; they reveal quite clearly a regime fearful of prisoners' knowledge, and a prisoner obsessed with obtaining even the slightest bit of information on his whereabouts and fate.

I spent some time in fruitless searches in the Archiwum Akt Dawnych, which contains state records to 1918. Eventually, I realized that relevant records of the Czarist Russian administration had been moved to the Warsaw City Archive; that

archive, in turn, having run out of room, moved less-popular collections (including those of prison-related bureaucracies) to a converted church in the town of Pultusk, an hour away. In February, I spent several days there collecting material. Documents include petitions by prisoners and some reports by prison officials.

I made use of two museum archives, neither of which I had expected to find. A brief visit to the Wladyslaw Broniewski Museum yielded a few letters sent to that great poet by Party comrades in prison. The Museum of Independence, formerly the Museum of the History of the Polish Revolutionary Movement, has a huge collection of letters written by prisoners in the 1920s and 1930s. These were, again, mostly communists; their letters – and some diaries or exercise notebooks - were confiscated by the prison administration and then recovered by Party historians in the 1950s. Some three thousand letters have been preserved, and have never been used by scholars. To give just two examples of the remarkable discoveries I made: exercise notebooks from the 1920s show that non-Jewish prisoners were learning Yiddish from their cellmates; and, in 1937, a group of Communist women in Fordon prison staged a clothing strike, going naked for some five months in protest at being made to wear ordinary convict uniforms.

Finally, I worked in the archives of the Institute of National Memory (IPN), in Warsaw, the repository for all secret-police files of the communist period. During the first half of my fellowship year, the archive was essentially closed to new users, a response to the recent pilfering of data by Polish journalists. The Institute devised a Catch-22: new users could request access to specific files, but only if they had the file numbers – and the catalog was off limits. Fortunately, copies of the catalog were circulating on bootleg CDs (!); I was also fortunate in that a long-time colleague took a position in the archive in January. My requests for access were then granted. However, months of waiting yielded just 15 files. Most of these turned out to be useless for my research: they consisted of investigative reports generated before arrest, or of transcripts of interrogations. Contents of the files was impossible to determine from the catalog; nor could the guardian assigned to my “case” (who vetted each file before allowing me to see

it) help me find useful files. Fortunately, in a few files there were reports of cell agents – informers who pretended to be prisoners in order to collect information that might be useful in interrogation. These reports proved invaluable in constructing a picture of the struggle for knowledge in the Stalinist prison. Thus, while I found work with the IPN quite frustrating, I do not think that further work there would greatly change my perspective.

The archival record itself leaves large holes in my understanding of each period. I thus collected information from memoirs covering all of those periods, from the Czarist period through Solidarity. This year, the University of Colorado has purchased a large microfilm collection of prisoner memoirs from the KARTA Center in Warsaw – a collection I began to work in before discovering that a microfilm was now available (from Gale-Thomson). This contains hundreds of typescript memoirs, particularly from the Stalinist period and the period of martial law (1981-83). Published memoirs are particularly strong on World War Two, on the 1905-07 period, and on the Stalinist years. I have by now read over a hundred such memoirs – ranging from short articles to lengthy books – and have several dozen more to read.

There is one type of resource whose absence in the above summary may be glaring: interviews. Through much of the year I changed my mind several times regarding interviews, and ultimately decided against them. There are several reasons for this: first, while I can easily interview prisoners from the 1950s or 1980s, I cannot interview those incarcerated in 1905, for example. Second, imprisonment carries with it a number of painful or even shameful aspects. Some prisoners were (or are suspected of being) informers, placed in a cell only as a ruse: would I feel comfortable in the investigative-journalist mode, trying to unmask my contacts? Others were harshly interrogated, even tortured, and may be ashamed of breaking under that treatment: do I gain much by scratching those wounds? Finally, as I noted above, the memoir literature is massive, as is the body of interviews done with some prisoners (though these are more common in other cases, as I note below); the first few interviews I did before this research year showed me that ex-prisoners tend to tell rather expected stories,

and have difficulty, in a general interview, deviating from familiar scripts. I leave myself the option of embarking upon an interview program should I realize, much later in the project, that certain vital aspects of life in a prison cell are closed to me, but for the moment I will leave this approach aside.

5. Future research agendas

It is probably clear that this project has thrown up many unexpected obstacles. As I reported at the beginning of the year, I have realized that I really need to expand the project beyond Poland, as rich as that case is. I have therefore added the cases of Ireland and South Africa, and have already begun preliminary research on the former. By looking at political prisoners in situations quite different from those in Poland – for example, in a modern democracy (Northern Ireland) or in a racialized setting (South Africa) – and by taking advantage of quite different primary and secondary source bases (Irish archives are in some ways much richer than those in Poland, while the scholarly literature is rather more developed; both Northern Irish and South African ex-prisoners have been extensively interviewed), I hope to be able to understand the political prisoner much better than if I were to limit myself to the Polish case. But this process, I recognize, will take several more years yet.

6. Policy recommendations

While I believe this research will have significance for policymaking, I am reluctant to make specific suggestions at the moment. It is clear that my findings could help the human rights community and legal community to think about those politically-motivated prisoners in American-run prisons (not only those in Guantanamo, but those, for example, imprisoned for civil disobedience). As I look at how such prisoners think of themselves; how they relate with prison administration, with one another, and with their home communities; how torture, interrogation, surveillance and informers work (or do not work); how prisons and the regimes they represent are shaped by prisoners; and how advocacy groups (from Amnesty International to political parties) affect the lives of prisoners, I would like to be able to contribute to a clearer understanding of the prisoners in our midst.

For the same reasons, the project should contribute to the way we understand current political prisoners in other states. Americans in general, and the policy community in particular, have a gut reaction to political prisoners (in China, for example, or Belarus) as people whose rights should be supported (through pressure from the government and/or independent human-rights groups); we have less understanding of why political prisoners are important to political change in their own societies. We also pay less attention to how prison shapes opponents of peaceful or democratic change (such as terrorists). Again, I cannot be sure what kind of recommendations may result from this research. In fact, I may find that I will need the input of policy experts in order to make sense of some of my findings.