

# Exile, Murder and Madness in Siberia, 1823-61

Andrew A. Gentes



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## Exile, Murder and Madness in Siberia, 1823–61

*Also by Andrew A. Gentes*

EXILE TO SIBERIA, 1590–1822

RUSSIA'S PENAL COLONY IN THE FAR EAST: A translation of Vlas  
Doroshevich's "Sakhalin"

*Dedicated to my teachers,  
Tom, Pat, Wilfred, and David;  
and to the victims of the so-called  
War on Drugs*

# Preface

This book continues the history of tsarist Siberian exile I began with *Exile to Siberia, 1590–1822* (2008). Whereas it is desirable that readers be familiar with this previous work, such is not necessary to understand the present work on its own terms. All dates conform to the Julian, or Old Style, calendar, which during the period covered here was 12 days behind the Gregorian calendar. This book uses a number of terms and acronyms with which readers may not be familiar, and so I have provided both a glossary and a list of acronyms' definitions. The transliteration of Russian terms accords with the Library of Congress system, except that in the body of the text I have deleted any diacritical mark that comes at the end of a word so as to facilitate use of the possessive case. Nonetheless, some idiosyncratic transliterations remain because I have quoted other scholars' translations. Finally, I have attempted to convert from Russian to their original Latinate spellings the names of, especially, Polish actors. This has proved rather difficult at times and admittedly involved some guessing, and there are some exceptions to this rule for reasons explained in footnotes. I apologize ahead of time for any errors.

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Congress. Without librarians' and archivists' dedication to their professions this book would not have been possible. I would also like to thank Maney Publishing for permission to use in Chapters 3 and 4 material from an article that appeared in *Slavonica* in 2007. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the good spirit that helps me in all things.

AAG  
*Washington, DC*

# Acronyms

EOGU	Eniseisk General Provincial Administration ( <i>Eniseiskoe obshchee gubernskoe upravlenie</i> )
GAIO	Irkutsk District State Archive ( <i>Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Irkutskoi oblasti</i> )
GARF	Russian Federation State Archive ( <i>Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii</i> )
GUVS	Main Administration of Eastern Siberia ( <i>Glavnoe upravlenie Vostochnoi Sibiri</i> )
GUZS	Main Administration of Western Siberia ( <i>Glavnoe upravlenie Zapadnoi Sibiri</i> )
IGP	Irkutsk Provincial Administration ( <i>Irkutskoe gubernskoe pravlenie</i> )
MVD	Ministry of Internal Affairs ( <i>Ministerstvo vnutrennykh del</i> )
OPT	Prison Aid Society ( <i>Obshchestvo popechitel'nago o tiur'makh</i> )
RGIA	Russian State Historical Archive ( <i>Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv</i> )
TobPS	Tobol'sk Exile Office ( <i>Tobol'skii Prikaz o ssyl'nykh</i> )
ZhMVD	Journal of the Ministry of Internal Affairs ( <i>Zhurnal Ministerstva vnutrennykh del</i> )

# Glossary

<i>Arshin</i>	unit of measurement equal to 71 cm or 28 in
<i>Assignats</i>	paper rubles with a value less than for silver rubles
<i>Bezpopovtsy</i>	schismatics who abjured priests
<i>Brodiagi</i>	vagabonds, usually fugitive exiles and penal laborers
<i>Brodiazhestvo</i>	the crime of "vagabondage"
<i>Desiatina</i>	unit of measurement equal to 1.09 hectares or 2.7 acres
<i>Dobrovol'nye</i>	"voluntaries," term for family members who accompanied exiles
<i>Gimnaziia</i>	high school
<i>Guberniia</i>	province
<i>Katorma</i>	penologico-administrative regime; penal labor; collective noun for penal laborers
<i>Krai</i>	unorganized territory
<i>Meshchane</i>	category of petty urban dwellers
<i>Narodnost'</i>	"nationality-ness"
<i>Narod</i>	the (common) people
<i>Obrok</i>	peasant dues
<i>Okrug</i>	"district"
<i>Ostrog</i>	Siberian fort
<i>Plet'</i>	three-tailed whip
<i>Popovtsy</i>	schismatics who used priests
<i>Raznochintsy</i>	persons without clearly defined class status
<i>Shliakhta</i>	Russian term for Polish gentry class
<i>Shliakhtichi</i>	members of the Polish gentry
<i>Sibiriaki</i>	Siberian Russians
<i>Skopchestvo</i>	crime of castration, or belonging to the <i>Skopty</i> sect
<i>Skopty</i>	self-castrating religious sectarians
<i>Soslovie</i>	social estate
<i>Starozhily</i>	"long-term residents," i.e., Siberian Russian peasants
<i>Uezd</i>	"district" (in use before 1822)
<i>Ulozhenie</i>	Law Code
<i>Volost'</i>	canton
<i>Zavod</i>	industrial township

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# Introduction: Geography, Penalty, Power, and Resistance

Siberia dwarfs European Russia. Nearly 5,000 miles east to west, over 2,000 miles north to south, and covering over six million square miles, it is immense. Its western and eastern halves are distinct from one another. The Enisei River marks the division between the Western Siberian Plate, a geologically young platform of sedimentary rock, and the much more ancient Siberian Platform. Stretching from the Krasnoïarsk-Novokuznetsk-Rubtsovsk line east to Irkutsk and south of Lake Baikal, the mountains from which the Enisei springs date back 700 million years and are Siberia's second oldest geological formation. The geology east of Lake Baikal and the Lena River is more recent. The so called Russian Far East is Siberia's youngest and most active region: at 230,000 square miles Kamchatka is one of the world's largest peninsulas and has several volcanic mountains over 10,000 feet; Sakhalin—589 miles long and covering nearly 48,000 square miles—is one of the world's largest islands.

Most of western Siberia is flat and marshy, except for the Altai Mountains. The region's low elevation and the fact that its rivers remain frozen in the north long after they thaw in the south, together transform its southern steppe into possibly the world's largest springtime bog. The waterlogged, spongy soil spawns hordes of insects that plague residents in summer. The landscapes of eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East are more variegated. A combination of mountains and marshy lowlands characterizes the topography north of the 60<sup>th</sup> parallel between the Lena and Enisei rivers. Rugged mountains dominate the landscape east of the Lena. Along the lower Pacific coast, weather and temperatures resemble those in the coastal regions of Oregon and Washington.

Siberia contains the largest river systems in the world. Moving from west to east, the first is the Ob and its basin, which includes the Irtysh, Tobol, Ishim, Tom, and other rivers. Considered as a single river, the

Ob-Irtysh is 3,361 miles long and drains a territory of nearly two million square miles. The next mighty river is the Enisei, fed, all from the east, by the Upper Tungus, Lower Tungus, Chuna, and the swift-flowing Angara. The Enisei basin is nearly as extensive as the Ob's and the Enisei River, though 1,200 miles shorter than the Ob-Irtysh, still ranks as one of the world's longest. At 2,800 miles, the Lena is regarded by geographers who refuse to consider the Irtysh and Ob as one river to be, in fact, the world's longest river. Draining the heart of eastern Siberia, it culminates on the Arctic coast in an enormous delta of some 19,000 square miles. Its major tributaries are the Kirenga, which originates in the mountains west of Lake Baikal; the Vitim and Olëkma, which drain the huge Vitim Plateau east of the lake; and the Aldan, which meets the Lena just north of Irkutsk and is itself fed by the Amga and Maia, both of which drain the Aldan Plateau south of Irkutsk. The basins of these three major rivers—the Ob, Enisei, and Lena—cover a combined area larger than Western Europe. Siberia's fourth major river is the Amur. It originates southeast of the Vitim Plateau and flows for 1,800 miles before emptying into the narrow Tatar Straits that separate Sakhalin from the mainland. Its basin is smaller than those of the other rivers (1,500,000 square miles) and includes only two main tributaries, the Argun and Shilka, the former originating across the border in China, the latter near Nerchinsk, east of Chita. Since 1860, the Amur-Argun has demarcated nearly the entire length of the Russo-Chinese border.

There is only one lake in Siberia that need be mentioned here, yet what a marvelous lake it is! Containing almost 15,000 cubic miles of water, or 20 percent of the world's surface fresh water, Lake Baikal forms the centerpiece of the surrounding region's unique natural environment. Almost 400 miles long and 30 miles at its widest point, it covers 20,000 square miles. At its deepest are 5,314 feet of water to fathom before reaching a bottom that is itself thousands of feet thick due to the silt collected in what is actually one of the world's oldest canyons. Twenty-seven islands dot its surface, though the largest one by far is Ol'khon—Asia's Avalon where, legend has it, Chinggis Khan lies buried. A total of 336 rivers—the major one being the Selenga, which originates in Mongolia—feed the lake from surrounding mountains and plateaus. The Angara is the only major river that drains Baikal, drawing its waters through Irkutsk, 40 miles west of the lake. Given its central location, length, and the invisibility of the opposite shoreline at most points, it is no wonder that during the nineteenth century locals called Baikal "The Sea." But its water is so pure that three feet of ice can be seen through like glass.

The myth that all Siberia is permafrost and covered year-round in snow is still popular. However, the *tundra*, a permafrost landscape of limited vegetation, exists only north of the 60<sup>th</sup> parallel. Most of Siberia is instead covered by the *taiga*, a belt of coniferous and deciduous forests ranging between 600 and 1,200 miles wide and stretching from European Russia to the Pacific coast. South of the taiga, in the west, lies the *steppe*—large, flat, treeless; whereas Zabaikal'e and the southern half of the Russian Far East resemble northern North America in terms of climate, vegetation, and soil. Although Siberia's average daily temperature is 32° F, its population is predominantly settled far south of the 60<sup>th</sup> parallel, so that most Siberians live at nearly the same latitudes as European Russians. This was even more the case during tsarist times, before the Soviet government built several large cities in the north. St Petersburg and Moscow are actually farther north than most of Siberia's largest cities. Summer is balmy: July temperatures average 65° F in Irkutsk and 75° F in Vladivostok. Yet if Siberia is warmer than might be expected, winter spares no part of it. Coastal regions benefit from the Pacific jet-stream, but are nevertheless punished by Arctic gales that push the wind chill factor dangerously low. However, nothing compares to the interior's temperatures, which are life threatening. Irkutsk averages 5° F in January, though the temperature can easily drop to -30° F, at which point atmospheric moisture freezes to form a kind of spectral fog and you must constantly blink your eyes to keep them from congealing. Yet even these temperatures pale beside those of Yakutsk, located at the 63<sup>rd</sup> parallel on the banks of the Lena, where January temperatures average -45° F (were it not for the river they would be even colder). The enormous Sakha Province, for which Yakutsk today serves as capital, warms up as might be expected in summer, with July temperatures averaging between 35° F and 66° F depending on location. Nonetheless, Sakha's northern city of Verkhoyansk holds the record for the coldest temperature ever in a continuously inhabited city or town: -90° F.<sup>1</sup>

Siberia's size, geography, and weather significantly limited the tsarist government's ability to administer the exile system. The very remoteness of the places to which convicts were sent was part of their appeal to punishers, yet northern flowing rivers, dense taiga, mountains, and featureless steppe hampered efforts to move guards, supplies, and convicts from west to east. Huge ice floes during spring thaws made the crossing of rivers a suicidal enterprise. Few and poor roads, long distances between settlements, and murderous bandit gangs played havoc with communications. The distance from St Petersburg to Tobol'sk,



Omsk, Irkutsk, and Yakutsk extends to 3,500 nautical miles, yet the topographical miles that needed to be traversed were at least three times as long. People and supplies took months, sometimes years, to reach destinations. Orders disappeared along with their couriers; and if finally received by their nominated executors, they were often no longer relevant. Haphazard communications allowed Siberian officials to routinely ignore orders from the capital or regional superiors and to embezzle goods and monies they later claimed never to have received. “There is not a country in the world where words correspond less to the reality,” complained Mikhail M. Speranskii, Siberia’s governor-general from 1819 to 1822.<sup>2</sup>

In 1839 Siberia’s adult male population totaled nearly 600,000.<sup>3</sup> As of 1858 its male/female population totaled nearly three million.<sup>4</sup> Within an empire of nearly 70 million people<sup>5</sup> Siberia was sparsely settled, though like European Russia most inhabitants were peasants. The climate made daily life more difficult for them than for their European counterparts. Shorter growing seasons necessitated that more land be cultivated and that harvesting be done more quickly. The ever-present threat to Siberian peasants’ existences rendered them desperate and ruthless yet also hard-working and independent. The absence of a landed gentry who in European Russia sometimes assisted their serfs in times of need, and the sparseness of government officials and institutions that might have provided similar assistance made for a thin line separating *Sibiriaki* (Siberian Russians) from starvation or cannibalism. The state officially owned all land but managed it poorly, and so what fertile land there was acquired a value greater than elsewhere in the empire, a value measured not by its salability but what individuals did with it. As early as the late seventeenth century *starozhily* (“long-term residents,” also designating Siberian Russians) complained about a lack of good land and petitioned the tsar to abolish exile. They did not want to give up cleared parcels to convicts who would not cultivate them. As Siberia’s exile population grew its countryside became increasingly violent. Exiles shunned by villagers or who chose not to remain in assigned locations fled to join an expanding population of vagabonds known as *brodiagi*. Brutalized by inhumane treatment and the natural environment, *brodiagi* begged from, robbed, and murdered *Sibiriaki*, who responded with lynch mobs and murder. By the early nineteenth century Siberia was a Wild East where the will to survive rendered another’s life easily dispensable.

\* \* \*

While it is important to bear in mind the conditional factors imposed by nature, nature is no substitute for human volition in explaining the