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THE ROLE OF THE PRISON SYSTEM IN SHAPING PEACEFUL ATTITUDES: A HISTORICAL STUDY OF PENAL INSTITUTIONS AND INMATES IN THE KINGDOM OF POLAND (1815–1918)

ROLA WIĘZIENNICTWA W KSZTAŁTOWANIU POSTAW POKOJOWYCH. STUDIUM
HISTORYCZNE INSTYTUCJI KARNYCH I LOSÓW SKAZANYCH W KRÓLESTWIE
POLSKIM (1815–1918)

Streszczenie: W więzieniach Królestwa Polskiego panowały nieludzkie warunki bytowe. W artykule omówiono sytuację skazanych oraz obowiązujące wówczas przepisy prawne, w tym „Kodeks Karzący z 1818 roku” i późniejszy „Kodeks Kar Głównych i Poprawczych”, wzorowany na rosyjskim kodeksie karnym z 1845 roku. Przedstawiono również próby reform systemu penitencjarnego oraz działania podejmowane na rzecz resocjalizacji osób dorosłych i nieletnich. Zarysowano także regulacje dotyczące opieki medycznej w zakładach karnych oraz ogólną sytuację sanitarną w więzieniach.

Słowa kluczowe: więzienie, Królestwo Polskie, system penitencjarny, resocjalizacja, prawo karne

Abstract: The prison system of the Kingdom of Poland was characterised by inhumane living conditions. This article discusses the situation of prisoners and the legal regulations in force at

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the time, including the “Penal Code” of 1818 and the later “Code of Principal and Correctional Punishments”, modelled on the Russian criminal code of 1845. The text outlines attempted reforms within the penal system and presents efforts aimed at the rehabilitation of both adult and juvenile offenders. It also highlights legal provisions concerning prison healthcare and the overall sanitary conditions in correctional facilities.

Keywords: prison, Kingdom of Poland, penal system, rehabilitation, criminal law

Introduction

The period between 1815 and 1918 marked a time of national subjugation in Poland, characterised by the ongoing struggle for freedom and peace. It was also a period of widespread economic, educational, and moral neglect, which had catastrophic consequences for the entire society. Recurrent repression, property confiscations, arrests, death sentences, and deportations to Siberia left many families on the brink of poverty. In such circumstances, poverty and lack of access to education often gave rise to social tensions and violence. Prisons quickly filled with individuals whose degrading living conditions contributed to their criminalisation. However, not only common offenders were imprisoned – those who resisted the loss of national independence and actively participated in the struggle for freedom were also incarcerated.

The conditions in these prisons represented an affront to human dignity, regardless of the inmates’ offences. Yet dignity is among the core values that underpin lasting peace. In such times, not only in Poland, peace was elusive and fragile. The 19th century, however, witnessed a notable transformation in the penal systems across Europe, which also reached the Kingdom of Poland. Prevailing views on punishment began to shift, with increasing emphasis on the rehabilitation of offenders. Corporal punishment, including the death penalty, came to be seen as both morally problematic and economically unproductive.

Prisons of the Kingdom of Poland

Upon its establishment, the Kingdom of Poland inherited a severely neglected prison system from the Duchy of Warsaw. Within its territory, there were 21 prison buildings, irregularly distributed and often inadequate. Some of these facilities had been constructed by the Prussian authorities before the formation of the Kingdom. Notably, eight prisons were housed in former monastery buildings, including those in Płock, Brześć Kujawski, Kalwaria Augustowska and Pызdry. Additional prisons had been built in Janów Lubelski (then Ordynacki) and in Łomża during the Duchy of Warsaw’s existence. Warsaw was home to the two largest prisons: the House of Correction and Punishment, located in a former Franciscan

monastery, and the so-called Powder House, situated in a repurposed arsenal (Demidowicz 1999).

By the late 19th century, under Tsar Alexander III, prisons in the Kingdom of Poland were among the most neglected and brutal in Europe in terms of their treatment of inmates, surpassing even Russian and Western European standards in severity (Kaczyńska 1989). The Penal Code of 1818, the first of its kind in Polish legal history (Hube 1830), classified offences into three categories: major crimes, correctional offences (including misdemeanours), and police offences. Major crimes were punishable by death, hard labour, or confinement in fortified prisons, where inmates could be held for 10 to 20 years. Those sentenced to fortified prisons endured exceptionally harsh conditions: they wore heavy shackles and inadequate clothing, received minimal rations, had their heads shaved, and were forced to sleep on bare planks without bedding. Their bodies were often branded, and they were subjected to gruelling labour and public punishment such as the pillory. Inmates in “heavy prisons” experienced similar conditions, though the shackles were slightly lighter and meals consisted of meatless food served only once daily (Senkowska 1960, p. 80).

A shocking report emerged in early 1818 following a visit by Tsar Alexander I to Warsaw prisons. He found inmates – regardless of offence – half-naked or entirely unclothed due to the complete lack of garments. Hygiene was non-existent, and there was no separation between political and criminal offenders, between men and women, or between adults and minors. All prisoners wore iron shackles. Moved by the appalling conditions, the Tsar instructed the Minister of Justice to introduce reforms, beginning with basic hygiene improvements (Demidowicz 1999; Czołgoszewski 2019; Wybicki 1819).

The 1818 Code, alongside regulations issued in the 1820s, also detailed the minimal equipment of prisons. Beds were to consist only of wooden planks; for those in heavy imprisonment, straw replaced bedding. Correctional prisons offered somewhat better conditions, including pallets and blankets.

At the time, detention facilities in the Kingdom of Poland included several types: prisons and penal groups for serious offenders (often called “houses of examination” or inquisitorial prisons); temporary detention centres for those awaiting trial or held for misdemeanours; and civil prisons, used to compel individuals to comply with judicial obligations (ZPA, 1868)

Attempt to reform the prisons of the Kingdom of Poland

Following the aforementioned visit by Tsar Alexander I to the Warsaw prisons, two reform proposals were drafted concerning the reorganisation of public penal institutions. The

first was submitted by Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, who published a brochure entitled “On Public Prisons, or Houses of Penance: A Brief Remark”. In this short treatise, Niemcewicz drew upon his experiences of imprisonment practices in the United States, which he wished to adapt for use in the Kingdom of Poland. In his view, punishment should aim not only at retribution but primarily at the moral improvement of the offender, which he considered the most effective guarantee of social safety (Senkowska 1961).

Although Niemcewicz’s proposals were never implemented, they offer insight into how prison reform might have developed. According to his account, American prisons were typically two-storey buildings, with an infirmary located on the upper floor. Ill inmates were referred to this facility by prison doctors, who worked under favourable conditions and received substantial remuneration – 1,600 Polish zlotys annually. Each doctor was assisted by an on-site pharmacist, who resided within the prison. Sick prisoners were examined at least twice daily and were prescribed not only appropriate medications but also tailored diets. Medical staff could recommend a change of labour duties if an inmate's health required it. In addition, all prisoners were entitled to cold or warm baths and daily walks in the courtyard. Separate kitchens served the ill, preparing full meals according to dietary guidelines established by B. Rumford (Markiewiczowa 2010; Niemcewicz 1818).

Such modern reforms, however, were not accepted in the Kingdom of Poland. Soon after, another proposal was prepared under the direction of Ksawery Potocki, an extraordinary state councillor. This document, titled “Project for the General and Specific Improvement of the Condition and Administration of Prisons in the Kingdom of Poland”, was presented on 6 March 1819. It outlined the essential conditions that prisons should provide, focusing on hygiene, nutrition, and the treatment of ill prisoners. Separate infirmaries, or "lazarets," were proposed for men and women, each equipped with wooden bunks with mattresses, a small pillow, and a blanket. Each patient was to receive suitable clothing, including two long shirts, a linen gown, two caps, and towels. If a woman gave birth while imprisoned, the child was to be placed in the care of relatives or, in the case of the mother’s death, entrusted to a wet nurse or sent to an orphanage. Despite these provisions, the proposed reforms were never implemented, as they were rejected by the Sejm in 1820 (Senkowska 1960).

Nevertheless, a significant legal development occurred with the adoption of the Penal Code of 1818, which introduced important changes in the treatment of convicts. This was the first legal act in the Kingdom of Poland modelled on the Austrian Penal Code of 1803. Under the new code, the death penalty began to be viewed as inhumane and counterproductive, as it deprived the offender of the possibility for moral reform and restitution. In its place, prison

sentences were introduced, offering convicts the opportunity for self-improvement and societal reintegration through labour. Imprisonment was thus redefined not only as punishment but as a means of rehabilitation and social restitution (Kaczyńska 1989; Śliwowski 1958).

The Penal Code classified offences into felonies, misdemeanours, and police infractions, with three corresponding categories of penalties: capital punishment (death, life imprisonment, or temporary confinement in fortified prisons), correctional punishments (custodial sentences, monetary fines, and corporal punishments), and police penalties (fines, administrative detention, home arrest, and flogging) (Kodeks Karzący dla Królestwa Polskiego 1817). Within a decade, however, prisons once again became severely overcrowded.

A more comprehensive reform was initiated by Count Fryderyk Skarbek in 1828. Following an inspection of several prisons, Skarbek described the conditions as shocking: "The sight of these penal and correctional facilities was appalling, for the punishments inflicted therein were an affront to humanity and, despite their severity, failed to deter repeat offences. There could be no talk of rehabilitation" (Skarbek 1878, p. 218). In 1829, he was appointed as referendary to the Council of State of the Kingdom of Poland. His efforts led to the establishment of new prisons in Płock, Kalisz, Sieradz, and Siedlce, as well as the creation of the Main House of Research in Warsaw, which at the time was considered a model facility throughout Europe (Skarbek 1878).

Despite his efforts, only minor improvements were implemented in 1829. Inspired by Western European standards, bunk beds were replaced with canvas-covered beds fixed to the walls (Skarbek 1878). Regulations stipulated that cell temperatures should be maintained at 12 degrees Celsius in winter, that no lighting was permitted after dark, and that cell walls were to be whitewashed twice annually. Cells were cleaned every three months. Windows were opened only during summer, and in winter they were wiped with vinegar or juniper solution. Daily washing was permitted, and each prisoner was entitled to their own set of clothing (Senkowska 1959).

The prison regime also specified that breakfast was to be served at 5:00 a.m. in summer and 7:00 a.m. in winter, with the main meal (dinner) served at noon. Drinking water was provided throughout the day. During religious fasting periods, inmates received only bread and water for dinner. Each prisoner had their own wooden bowl and spoon. They were meant to be served so-called Rumford soup, a thin gruel made from food remnants, but this was often omitted or so poorly prepared that it contributed to widespread illness and exhaustion (Kaczyńska 1982).

The situation after the November Uprising

The reform efforts of the early 19th century were abruptly interrupted by the outbreak of the November Uprising in 1830. Following its suppression, the political autonomy of the Kingdom of Poland was effectively dismantled. All prior initiatives aimed at improving the penitentiary system were halted by the Russian authorities. Prison conditions quickly deteriorated, and overcrowding became a pressing issue, leading to a series of systemic problems. Prisoner classification and segregation were abandoned, and mortality rates among inmates increased dramatically. The prison staff often consisted of untrained individuals, and their low wages made them susceptible to bribery and participation in escape schemes (Kaczyńska 1989).

In 1847, the “Code of Capital and Corrective Penalties” was introduced, modelled on the Russian Penal Code of 1845. This development marked the definitive end of previously initiated reforms in the Kingdom of Poland (Kalisz 2020). Many prison guards were former soldiers, and as such, frequently used physical violence against inmates. According to regulations from 1823, prison wardens were authorised to punish prisoners by imposing solitary confinement with bread and water for 48 hours or by placing them in heavy shackles (Piątkowski 2015). Such punishments subjected inmates to further abuse and stigmatisation by prison personnel.

One of the most critical issues was prisoner nutrition. Authorities significantly reduced the cost of inmate meals, favouring the cheapest and least nutritious food available. Typical rations included rye bread, simple soups, groats, potatoes, and cabbage. No fruit, eggs, or milk were provided. Across all prisons in the Kingdom of Poland, the diet was uniformly austere: rye-based sour soup (*żurek*), diluted soups such as *wodzianka*, cabbage with peas, potatoes with groats, and coarse wholemeal bread. During the pre-harvest period, meals consisted of rye borscht and barley groats (Archiwum Państwowe w Radomiu 1850; Piątkowski 2015).

Warm beverages were not served, and convicts rarely received visits or food parcels from relatives. According to prison regulations, contact with family members was permitted only under exceptional circumstances (Piątkowski 2015). Only inmates housed in infirmaries were entitled to slightly improved meals.

Prisoners commonly suffered from serious health conditions, including tuberculosis, pneumonia, oedema, rheumatism, scabies, eye infections, syphilis, ulcers, typhus, and persistent fevers accompanied by lice infestations (Piątkowski 2015). Treatment was often prolonged and ineffective due to medical negligence and lack of basic medications. Prison medical care was minimal, and drugs were obtained from the cheapest available sources. There

was a chronic shortage of medical staff willing to work in prison institutions; those who did were employed full-time in major cities. The most essential personnel were surgeons and paramedics, for whom such assignments were typically unwelcome duties (Piątkowski 2015).

After the November Uprising, convict labour became an instrument of correctional practice. Labour was perceived as an educational tool enabling prisoners not only to reform but also to acquire vocational skills. A resolution by the Administrative Council dated 19 July / 10 August 1832 mandated the establishment of factories and workshops in prisons, provided conditions allowed, and identified which prisoners could be employed there (Migdał, Raglewski 2005; ZPA 1868). The regulations stated that convict labour could not be forced; participation required both the prisoner's consent and a court decision. Inmates held in solitary confinement were to be assigned individual tasks suitable for completion within their cells (Senkowska 1961).

From the authorities' perspective, penal labour had financial advantages. Prisoners working in workshops produced cloth, quilts, woollen garments, denim, canvas, and straw hats. Despite their hard labour, inmates received meagre compensation – between 3 and 9 roubles per year – which was returned to them upon release (Piątkowski 2015).

Beginning on 1 July 1886, compulsory labour for all prisoners was implemented under the regulation of 6 January 1886, approved by the administrative authorities of the Kingdom of Poland. The purpose of this measure was to reduce the overall cost of prison maintenance (Gretkowski, Krydziński 2007).

The Administrative Council's 1832 resolution also authorised the establishment of spinning and weaving workshops within prisons. These facilities produced materials exclusively for institutional use, such as cloth, canvas, and denim. Equally important, however, was the objective of equipping prisoners with vocational training to facilitate honest work upon release. Six such workshops operated within the Kingdom of Poland (Senkowska 1961; Gretkowski, Krydziński 2007).

Attempts to educate prisoners in the Kingdom of Poland

In the early decades of the 19th century, prisoner education in the Kingdom of Poland was virtually non-existent. The "Prison Instruction" issued in 1823 by the Government Commission for Internal Affairs and the Police made no mention of educational provisions for inmates of any age. At that time, the focus remained on punitive measures and repression rather than rehabilitation (Czerwicz 1958)

The first formal reference to the education of adult prisoners dates to 1833. A regulation issued by the Government Commission for Internal and Spiritual Affairs on 4/16 May 1833 mandated the establishment of Sunday schools in penal institutions. Inmates were required to attend these schools after religious services to learn basic literacy and arithmetic. The earliest known implementation of this initiative occurred in 1850, when Franciszek Maternicki, the supervisor of the Kielce prison for juvenile offenders, organised such a school (ZPA 1868). Similar institutions were subsequently established in Radom and Sandomierz in 1853. However, reliable information about their actual operation, instructional staff, or outcomes remains scarce. It is likely that, despite official directives, the economic value of inmate labour continued to outweigh educational ambitions.

Prominent figures such as Count Fryderyk Skarbek (1822), Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz (1818), Ksawery Potocki (1819), and Aleksander Koźuchowski (1825) advocated for a more humane approach to imprisonment. They emphasised the importance of education, productive labour, and the inculcation of religious and moral principles in the reformation of inmates (Zarzycki 1883).

Skarbek, in particular, strongly opposed practices that degraded human dignity, such as shackling and branding. He urged the authorities to establish schools for young offenders, where instruction in religious and ethical values would form the core of their moral rehabilitation (Ryś 2006). One example of such an initiative was the establishment of a school in the House of Punishment and Correction in Warsaw. Surviving documentation indicates that the teaching staff included a former cashier imprisoned for financial offences and a Bernardine monk serving as the prison chaplain. However, little else is known about the operation or effectiveness of this school (Skarbek 1878).

Similar educational efforts were undertaken in Sandomierz and Radom, where young prisoners received basic instruction in reading and writing (ZPA1868). Despite these efforts, documentation remains fragmentary, and the topic has received limited scholarly attention. It is known that, by 1859, four schools for juvenile offenders were established in Warsaw, Kielce, Płock, and Lublin. Instruction was reportedly provided by literate prisoners and, possibly, by qualified teachers from nearby schools. In the Płock prison, for instance, one teacher was reportedly paid 120 silver roubles per year (ZPA 1868).

Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz supported the idea of compulsory labour within prisons, which allowed inmates to sustain themselves and learn vocational skills. However, he opposed forcing prisoners to perform public labour in shackles, arguing that it was deeply humiliating and increased the risk of escape (Niemcewicz 1818).

Ignacy Potocki also advocated for the establishment of prison workshops where inmates could learn trades. He envisioned this labour not as punishment but as a relief and constructive outlet. Ideally, prisoners themselves would serve as instructors if suitably qualified; otherwise, external professionals were to be hired (Senkowska 1960). Similarly, Aleksander Koźuchowski stressed that penal labour should be vocationally meaningful, enabling convicts to acquire skills necessary for an honest life upon release (Koźuchowski 1825).

Following the January Uprising, prisons became overcrowded with insurgents. During the period between the November and January Uprisings, penal institutions in the Kingdom of Poland functioned more as "houses of vengeance" than as facilities oriented toward rehabilitation.

Conclusion

Following the collapse of the January Uprising, the prison system of the Kingdom of Poland was placed under the administration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in St Petersburg in 1878. Two years earlier, a revised Penal Code had been introduced, which proved even more draconian than its predecessor. Under its provisions, convicts were stripped of all rights, subjected to corporal punishment and branding, and sentenced to forced labour in Siberia or the Caucasus (Kodex kar głównych i poprawczych 1847, arts. 18–62). These measures led to a marked increase in the prison population: in 1886, 8,119 individuals were incarcerated, rising to 9,815 by 1913 (Kaczyńska 1989; Czołgoszewski 2019).

By 1882, the prison system in the Kingdom of Poland comprised 20 institutions, with the principal ones located in Warsaw – the Main Penal Prison and the Warsaw Prison in Brześć Kujawski. Other facilities were established in Płock, Kalisz, Kielce, Łęczyca, Sieradz, Chęciny, Pułtusk, Lublin, Janów, Łomża, Radom, Piotrków, Sandomierz, Kalwaria, Siedlce, Biała Podlaska, and Kalwaria Augustowska (Czołgoszewski 2019).

Imprisonment often resulted in serious, irreversible physical and psychological trauma, sometimes leading to death. Harsh transport conditions, forced labour beyond physical capacity, moral and emotional suffering, isolation from family, lack of clothing, starvation-level rations, monotony, the constant distrust of guards, a repressive and dehumanising prison regime, and the absence of hygiene – these factors collectively contributed to the deterioration and dehumanisation of the incarcerated. Rehabilitation through education, as discussed earlier, remained largely theoretical and sporadically implemented. Upon release, former prisoners were often irreparably damaged, left without support, dignity, or prospects for reintegration into society.

The period of Poland's national captivity was thus marked not only by the resilience and resistance of its people but also by the systemic disregard, on the part of the occupying authorities, for fundamental human values. Among those values – essential for the establishment of peace – are truth, justice, love, freedom, and respect for human dignity (Piwowarski 1985).

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