

Mass Incarceration in the Soviet Union and the United States

HUMS 286, ER&M 279, HIST 295, PHIL 433

Spring 2023

(as of 18 November, subject to revision)

Tuesdays 9:25-11:15

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Incarceration is central to the understanding, if not perhaps usually to the self-understanding, of a society. It is an aperture into basic questions of values and practices.

What does mass incarceration mean? For the incarcerated, for those who anticipate incarceration, for those who believe they will be spared, to localities that are sites of prisons and camps, for everyone? How does it come about? In what sense do the initial physical structures of incarceration (the prison, the camp) relate to later forms of policy that involve the incarceration of millions of people? In what way can incarceration, and then mass incarcerations, be related to ideologies, such as racism? If so, are the ideologies constant over time, such that they can be treated as a constant, or does the institution of mass incarceration alter or reproduce them?

Is mass incarceration to be understood as a form of mass politics? A result of mass politics? Of the anticipation of mass politics? Of the failure of mass politics to take a certain anticipated form? As revenge upon those who are seen to spoil mass politics by their own inclusion? Given that some combination of these questions must certainly be answered in the affirmative, mass incarceration is certainly political from the perspective of its makers and its supporters. But what about the incarcerated themselves? Is a political prisoner someone whose aims are explicitly political at the moment of arrest? Or might a political prisoner be someone whose incarceration is better understood through political and historical analysis rather than through jurisprudence or criminology? And if a prisoner comes to understand their own case as evidence of a larger politics, is that person a political prisoner? Does it matter when dissent begins, and on which side of the bars or the barbed wire? What are we to make of the radically different and clashing evaluations of communism?

To answer such questions, we must take some account of the facilities of incarceration, the experience of incarceration, and the political history at the (distinct) moments when Soviet and American incarceration crossed into the millions. Brief account is taken of important comparative cases, such as Nazi Germany and communist Poland.

You will be evaluated on the basis of class participation (25%) and three written assignments (25% each). Class participation involves close reading of assigned texts before each seminar meeting. Due dates of assignments will be given in class. Your first written assignment is *individual*. You are to identify an incarcerated person, living or dead, and accumulate the sources that permit you to write a two-thousand word portrait. In this assignment you may use a variety of methods -- philosophical, historical, social scientific -- to be further discussed in seminar. Your second assignment is *structural*. On the basis of course readings, discuss (at the length of two thousand words) an institution (broadly understood) of one (or more) carceral system(s). Your third assignment is a *review*. Make sure to take careful notes on the books you are assigned. At the end of the class, write a book review (two thousand words) on the basis of what you have learned throughout the semester. We will discuss all of these assignments during the first seminar meeting.

Please complete the reading and make your notes by hand (or print them out) before seminar. We will not use digital gear in the classroom.

The following books are available for purchase at the Yale book store.

Stanislav Aseyev, *The Torture Camp on Paradise Street*, trans. Zenia Tompkins and Nina Murray, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2022.

Tadeusz Borowski, *Here in Our Auschwitz and Other Stories*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021, trans. Madeline Levine.

Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016.

Julius Margolin, *Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back: A Memoir of the Gulag*, trans. Stefani Hoffman, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Anna Müller, *If the Walls Could Speak: Inside a Women's Prison in Communist Poland*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Winfred Rembert (as told to Erin Kelly) *Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South*, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.

The other readings are posted on Canvas or available on line following links below.

Introduction to Class (January 17)

Review of theoretical issues.

Review of historical chronology.

Philosophical Foundations (1) (January 24)

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York, Pantheon Books, 1977, part four (Canvas).

Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *The Gospel and the Sacred: Poetics of Violence in Mark*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, 129-152 (Canvas).

René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1989, chapter three (Canvas).

Timothy Snyder, "Live Free," selections (Canvas).

Philosophical Foundations (2) (January 31)

Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013, chapters 5, 8, 9, ([on line](#) or Canvas).

Angela Davis, "Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation," *If They Come in the Morning*, ed. Angela Davis, New York, The Third Press, 1971, 19-36. (Canvas)

Cecil Williams, "A Conversation with Angela," *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 3, Nos. 7-8, 1972, 36-48 (Canvas), see also [this clip](#).

James Baldwin, "An Open Letter to My Sister Miss Angela Davis," *New York Review of Books*, 7 January 1971 (Canvas).

George Jackson, "Towards the United Front," in *ibid*, 141-147 (Canvas).

Caleb Smith, "Civil Death and Carceral Life," and "Cadaverous Triumphs," in *The Prison and the American Imagination*, New Haven: Yale UP, 2009, 27-77. (Canvas)

Philosophical Foundations (3) (February 7)

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Communist Manifesto," 1848 (Canvas)

Eugenia Ginzburg, *Into the Whirlwind*, trans. Paul Stevenson and Manya Harari, London: Persephone Books, 2014 (1967), 129-151 (Canvas).

Gustaw Herling-Grudzinski, *A World Apart*, London: Penguin, 1951, 152-173 (Canvas).

Richard Wright, in Richard Crossman, ed., *The God That Failed*, New York, Harper and Row, 1-11, 115-164 (Canvas).

W.E.B. Du Bois, Letter to CPUSA, October 1961 (Canvas).

Neal Ascherson, "Angela Davis: A Puzzle for E. Europe," *London Observer*, 11 October 1972 (Canvas).

Historical Foundations (1): Post-Reconstruction United States (Feb. 14)•

Khalil Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019, (Canvas, chapter 2).

Frederick L. Hoffman, "The Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro," Publications of the American Economic Association, 1896, (Canvas, parts 1 and 5)

W. E. B. Du Bois, *Study of the Negro Problems*, 1898, (Canvas).

Ida B. Wells, [Southern Horrors](#) (online)

Historical Foundations 2: Revolution to Gulag (Feb. 21)

Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, New York: Basic Books, 2010, 59-118 (Canvas).

Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, New York: Doubleday, 2003, 27-40, 59-72, 148-158, 261-306, 414-427, 471-491 (Canvas)

Golfo Alexopoulos, *Illness and Inhumanity in the Gulag*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017, "Introduction," "Exploitation," "Illness," "Epilogue," (Canvas).

Excursus 1: Nazi Germany (Feb. 28)

Tadeusz Borowski, *Here in Our Auschwitz and Other Stories*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021, trans. Madeline Levine, Snyder preface, 3-169.

Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 3-19, 289-318, 626-627 (Canvas).

"Those Who Were There: Episode 2, Leon Bass," [podcast](#), Fortunoff Video Archive.

Encounter with the Gulag (March 7)

Julius Margolin, *Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back: A Memoir of the Gulag*, trans. Stefani Hoffman, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, xix-il, and tk.

Józef Czapski, *Inhuman Land: Searching for the Truth in Soviet Russia, 1941-1942*, New York: New York Review Books, 2018, vii-xxiii, 92-118 (Canvas).

American Mass Incarceration (1) (March 28)

Loic Wacquant, "From Slavery to Mass Incarceration," *New Left Review*, Jan-Feb 2002, [on line](#).

Vesla Weaver, "Frontlash" (Canvas).

American Mass Incarceration: (2) (April 11)

Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016, [selection](#)

Excursus 2: Polish Stalinism and Contemporary America (April 4)

Anna Müller, *If the Walls Could Speak: Inside a Women's Prison in Communist Poland*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

"[A conversation](#) between Irena Grudzińska-Gross and Dwayne Betts," ed. Marci Shore, mod. Jeffrey Goldfarb, December 2020.

The 1970s: Political Prisoners Redux (April 18)

Tommie Shelby, "Army of the Wronged," *The Idea of Prison Abolition*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2022.

Winfred Rembert (as told to Erin Kelly), *Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South*, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.

Myroslav Marynovych, *The Universe Behind Barbed Wire: Memoirs of a Ukrainian Soviet Dissident*, trans. Zoya Hayuk, ed. Katherine Younger, Rochester: University Press, 2021, ix-24, 218-324 (Canvas).

Timothy Snyder, "Live Free," selections, tk.

Contemporary Russia (April 25)

Stanislav Aseyev, *The Torture Camp on Paradise Street*, trans. Zenia Tompkins and Nina Murray, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2022.

Short articles tk: Russian prison, Russian psychiatric prison, Russian incarceration in Ukraine, filtration, deportation.