Dance in Chains: Political Imprisonment in the Modern World. By Padraic Kenney. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. xii, 330 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. $29.95, hard bound.
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A history of modern political imprisonment rarely figures on my preferred reading list during the summer months. But with a couple of exceptional sentences early on in the introduction, Padraic Kenney had my pure and undivided attention. I quote: "more recently, the field of prison studies have been heavily influenced by Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. The concepts they offer, however, have proven of little use in illuminating the specific experience of the political prisoner" (5). A scholar, who has the confidence to summarily dismiss not just one, but two of the most sacred cows in the modern intellectual pantheon, in my mind, merits a very careful reading.

Kenney does not dispute Foucault's important observation that the modern state has the ability to surveil, oppress, imprison, torture, and kill opponents with impunity and that its powers are growing exponentially with each passing decade. But, without actually saying so, he specifically objects to the depiction of the political prisoner as a mere site of the application of power, knowledge, and techniques. Instead of further de-humanizing the humanities, Kenney uses the identity and the everyday experiences of political prisoners as the starting point of his exceptional monograph. Based on extensive research in multiple archives across two continents, Kenney argues that the modern political prisoner, whether located in the prisons of the British Empire in Ireland or South Africa, apartheid South Africa, Nazi or socialist Poland, or Northern Ireland, is a trans-political and in certain cases supra-political figure. As such he rejects Agamben's depiction of the prisoner as a *homo sacer*, condemned to a "bare life" outside the bounds of society, bereft of all rights, and beyond juridical status.

The mere existence of a political prisoner exposes the crisis that is inherent in all modern forms of statehood. More importantly, the very term, political prisoner, or, the prisoner of conscience, implies that the person behind bars is not a criminal who is being punished for breaking the rule of law. The political prisoner, as a supra citizen, rejects the right of the existing state to imprison him or her and as such challenges the rule of law. By refusing to acquiesce to the terms and conditions of their imprisonment, prisoners question the legitimacy of the state that seeks to silence them. Their resistance and defiance are based on an alternate vision of the future, on an ideology that seeks to destroy the present and construct another political order. Kenney shows that although too many political prisoners perished in jail, some were successful in destroying the empires and states that incarcerated them. Perhaps, the decrease in numbers of political prisoners in the present is a result of the successful fight waged from behind the bars of prisons in the last two centuries.

In his detailed and nuanced account, Kenney argues that the experience of imprisonment neither erases the identity of the prisoner nor dilutes

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the potent ideology that lands him or her in prison in the first place. Torture, interrogation, de-humanization, rape, daily violence, excruciating prison routines, and in extreme cases even the use of execution are the weapons used by the strong state. The canny political prisoner appropriates these violent measures, and as Kenney demonstrates through numerous examples, turns it with devastating effect against the prison regime and by extension the state. Although Kenney is cautious about using the grossly over-used word, resistance, prisoners in his book continually challenge the terms of their imprisonment. They improvise creative anti-routines that introduce unexpectedness into the daily life of the prison complex, acts that serve to unsettle the prison administrators and guards. Kenney argues that Nelson Mandela's very mode of address towards prison authorities, inflected in equal measure with cold rationality and assumptions of racial and civic equality, created uncertainty among the prison authorities about how best to treat him, even though he, Mandela, was an incarcerated prisoner in the infamous Robben Island prison.

Prisoners build complex social networks and communities within the prison walls, some equal and others very hierarchical and deferential, as in the case of Gandhi's entourage. They imbue each other with courage and fortitude even when their politics compels them to separate themselves from common criminals. Kenney is particularly insightful on the role that class differences play in the construction of social and political relations within prisons. As most political prisoners tend to be educated, they create universities to disseminate knowledge and propaganda. Knowledge becomes a tool of self-fashioning, even as the state uses it to further its reach. Compelling prison narratives written by prisoners create global audiences, who then agitate for the release and for the humane treatment of these individuals. When prisoners physically challenge the prison guards, and/or refuse to submit to the rules of behavior, it is an ominous warning to the ruling authorities that the erstwhile prisoner may, like Lech Walesa or Václav Havel, soon be the head of a new state. In one graphic chapter, Kenney even describes the imaginative ways that Irish Republican Army prisoners used their own fecal matter to challenge the brutal regimen in the HM Prison Maze in the 1980s.

A prison is a theater of improvisation where both prisoners and authorities learn from their experiences. The hunger strike that was used by suffragettes in British prisons to protest against their lack of civil rights in a liberal England became a master weapon in the hands of Mahatma Gandhi in British South Africa. Gandhi used the hunger strike to protest against institutionalized racism in British South Africa and to call for independence in British India. He became fascinated with the philosophical implications of the fast: as a technique to create moral perfection within himself and as a means to build a political movement around his spiritual experiments. Bobby Sands' famed hunger strike in the HM Prison Maze resulted in his death but also led to an upsurge in IRA activity at home and international support for their cause abroad. Finally, by comparing the carceral experience of a Nelson Mandela with that of the Polish revolutionary, Zofia Grabska, who was imprisoned in the Warsaw Citadel prison in 1893, Kenney critiques our tendency to treat race and gender as an over-determining category. I think that the analyses of comparative human experiences across multiple locations are a powerful way to

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bring Slavic Studies into the fields of world and global history, where we have much to contribute to the conversation.

Ultimately, this is a story of how both liberal and totalitarian empires crumbled in the twentieth century in the face of determined opponents. By putting both kinds of political formations within the same analytical frame, Kenney has performed an invaluable service for our field. More than fifty years ago Hannah Arendt, Aimé Césaire, and Jawaharlal Nehru, among others, called for an investigation of authoritarian and extra-judicial practices in both liberal and totalitarian empires.[1] But for the most part, their insights went unheeded as we continue to conceptually divide the twentieth-century world between a free west and an unfree east. Moreover, many of us continue to believe that political incarceration is a peculiarly Soviet and Nazi invention that was rarely used by the liberal empires and western nation-states. By bringing in examples of incarceration from the British Empire and the United Kingdom as a counter-point, Kenney has subtly challenged some of the fundamental beliefs that have constituted Slavic Studies as a unique field unto itself.

In the epilogue, Kenney uses a brilliant pen picture of the Guantanamo Bay prison to illustrate the commonality of prison experiences in various types of regimes. *Dance in Chains* is a covert assault on our long-standing obsession with the peculiarities of national characteristics, the philosophical underpinning of imperial thinking as well as Cold War Area Studies scholarship. While Kenney has performed a signal service by broadening the scope of inquiry, I wished that he had also included a chapter comparing the political ideologies of the four states and the differences and similarities between incarceration in different kinds of political regimes. Such a chapter, going beyond the theories of comparative modernization that were pursued in the 1960s and 1970s, would have clarified the reach as well as the limits of political opposition in a modern state. For example, would a Mandela or a Gandhi have survived the Belomor Canal or the Auschwitz complex? Conversely, how do we account for the brutal prison practices on Robben Island, Andaman Islands, Abu Ghraib, or Guantanamo Bay, despite the existence of liberal constitutions that safeguard civil liberties? Finally, as a Russian historian, I was saddened to see that Kenney had used very sparingly of the rich literature generated by prisoners in the Russian and Soviet prison systems, especially since it serves as a benchmark for our collective understanding of political incarceration. But these are minor quibbles with a significant book that will spark conversations, stir up historiographical controversies, and hopefully make us re-think the way that we practice history in our field.

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1. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 2004); Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York, 2001); and Jawaharlal Nehru, *Toward Freedom: The Autobiography of Jawaharlal Nehru* (Boston, 1941).

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