CHEKHOV’S THE ISLAND OF SAKHALIN AND DOSTOEVSKY’S NOTES FROM A DEAD HOUSE AS PENOLOGICAL STUDIES

The Island of Sakhalin: From Travel Notes (Ostrov Sakhalin: Iz putevykh zapisok), Chekhov’s longest work and, according to D. S. Mirsky, “an important historical document, remarkable for its thoroughness, objectivity and impartiality,” and Notes from a Dead House (Zapiski iz mertvogo doma), in Mirsky’s words “Dostoevsky’s most famous and most universally recognized book during his lifetime,” occupy a significant place in the vast corpus of Russian penological literature. Published approximately thirty years apart, Zapiski and Ostrov form a diptych, two narratives telling the story of prison life from two different points of view: the former offers a view from within by a writer-convict; the latter provides a broad picture of prison life as seen from without by a writer-physician. Despite their contrasting elements, the two works are complementary portrayals of the painful and shocking story of exile and penal servitude in nineteenth-century Tsarist Russia.

The setting of Dostoevsky’s work is the Omsk fortress-prison surrounded by a man-made wall in Western Siberia while Chekhov’s story is set 2,500 miles farther east in a complex of five prison colonies enclosed by the natural wall of the surrounding sea in the Russian Far East, on the Island of Sakhalin. The former depicts the state of penal servitude before, and the latter, after the Emancipation of 1861 and the Great Reforms. The two writers became acquainted with prison life through completely different circumstances.


2. Notes from a Dead House was serialized in Vremia, 1861-1862 and published in book form in 1865; ibid., p. 269.

Twenty-eight-year-old Dostoevsky's first hand experience was the result of a four-year term of penal servitude, followed by an additional four years as a private soldier in a Siberian regiment, for his activities in the Petrashevsky Circle. He returned to St. Petersburg ten years after his original exile. Thirty-year-old Chekhov's "sentence" was quite self-imposed. Before departing for Sakhalin, he indicated to A. N. Pleshcheev that he had been conducting intensive research relating to Sakhalin and that he was experiencing Mania Sakhalinosa (15.II.1890).\(^4\) The arduous trip took three-months and he spent another three months investigating the penal colony.

Chekhov expressed conflicting motives for undertaking this expedition, among them literary, scientific, humanitarian, and personal ones. In a letter to I. L. Leont'ev-Shcheglov (22.III.1890) he stressed the importance of the scientific research he was undertaking.\(^5\) In reality, it appears that a number of motives coalesced and compelled him to travel to Sakhalin, but perhaps the overarching reason for his odyssey grew out of an incipient feeling of profound dissatisfaction with his life and art. He confessed to A. S. Suvorin: "Over the past two years I've grown sick of seeing my works in print... There is... a stagnation in my soul. I explain it by the stagnation in my personal life" (4.V.1889). He realized that he consciously had not waged a battle for social change in his writings. In a letter to V. M. Lavrov he attributed his spiritual pain to the complaints of critics about the lack of purpose in his art and life (10.IV.1890).\(^6\) Preoccupied with thoughts of great feats accomplished by previous Russian explorers of Sakhalin and emulating his hero, N. M. Przhevalsky, the Russian geographer and explorer of Central Asia who died in 1888 and for whom Chekhov published an obituary full of lavish praise for his clearly defined purpose in life and extraordinary deeds,\(^7\) Chekhov undertook an expedition of his own to "the end of the world," to Russia's coun-

---

4. A. P. Chekhov, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v tridsatii tomakh, ed. N. F. Bel'chikov et al. (Moscow: Nauka, 1974-83). All references to Ostrov Sakhalin are to this edition, volumes 14-15, and will be noted in the text by page number. References to Chekhov's letters are also to this edition and will be cited in the text by date.

5. In a letter to A. S. Suvorin, March 9, 1890, Ch PSSP, Pis'ma 4: 31, Chekhov stated that the purpose of his trip to Sakhalin was "to write at least one or two hundred pages to pay off my debt to medicine...."

6. Chekhov also defends himself against a charge of unprincipled writing made by Lavrov.

7. "[N. M. Przhevalskii]", Ch PSSP 16: 239, published originally Oct. 26, 1888 in Novoe vremia, Nos. 45-48. See also letter to Elena Lintvareva, Oct. 27, 1888, Ch PSSP, Pis'ma 3: 44, full of praise for Przhevalskii. Donald Rayfield, Anton Chekhov: A Life (London: Harper Collins, 1997), pp. 183-84, points out, however, that in praising Przhevalskii, Chekhov was unfamiliar with the explorer's last book in which he advocated questionable policies such as "exterminating the inhabitants of Mongolia and Tibet and replacing them with Cossacks." Chekhov's enthusiasm would certainly have been tempered in view of his attitude expressed in Ostrov toward the genocidal policies of Sakhalin authorities relating to the Giliaks and the Ainus.