



Padraic Kenney. *Dance in Chains: Political Imprisonment in the Modern World.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Illustrations. 344 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-937574-5.

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Recent years have seen an uptick in studies that seek to situate East European history in global networks of exchange. Perhaps the most prominent line of this trend is the challenging of the primacy of nationalism, destabilizing the notion that the nation, and specifically the political story of the nation, is the principal way to understand the region. While a number of these texts highlight the problems associated with the concept, Padraic Kenney's study *Dance in Chains: Political Imprisonment in the Modern World* offers us a different way of conceptualizing our field that stretches beyond nationalism. By situating Polish history in a framework that links political imprisonment in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to contemporary experiences in South Africa and Northern Ireland, *Dance in Chains* examines the development of the political prisoner in connection to the rise of the modern state. It is a comparative take that allows us to see connections across these sites, and one that contributes to a larger understanding of the dynamics of political imprisonment, and mass politics in general, in and outside Poland.

One of Kenney's main arguments is that the political prisoner is a decidedly modern phenomenon. Unlike previous "imprisoned politicals," to use Kenney's phrasing, political prisoners emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century as part of the advent of collective politics. Incarceration,

in this rendering, facilitates oppositional politics, and Kenney's analysis extends more familiar theoretical takes on imprisonment to consider the political dynamics of control that define the modern prison system. The "dance" he refers to—which comes from the socialist Ludwik Waryński's description of his time in prison as a mazurka—suggests a relationship between the state and its agents and political prisoners. Far from total control, Kenney approaches the prison as a place where politics are shaped and social differentiation occurs across a number of boundaries (between political prisoners and guards, political and lay prisoners, and prisoners and non-prisoners). The result is a nuanced depiction of the interactions involved in articulating state power—a power that is compelling but never absolute. The dance, moreover, facilitates political ambitions and claims for humanity as much as it serves as a tool for repression. The prison thus emerges as a site of both enabling oppositional politics and of subjugation. Kenney posits, in this regard, "Whereas the regime, through prison, seeks to assert control, deny agency, and erase even the possibility of redemption or transformation during or after incarceration, political prisoners ultimately overturn this with their own narratives; this is the power of political imprisonment" (p. 6).

Important for Kenney is the selection of sites that reach beyond specific regimes to include broader swaths of time, and he accordingly organizes chapters around thematic phenomena rather than lock-step chronology, though he also emphasizes in significant ways—for instance, in his discussions of the use of torture—that political prisoners are not a static category. By zeroing in on aspects of communication and experience, he arguably is not interested in examining ideological similarities and differences across regimes as much as in addressing the dynamics of control at play in political incarceration. This bird’s-eye view of imprisonment, in other words, helps us gain a larger understanding of state power and its mechanisms. Lest we have the impulse to distance ourselves

from the story by focusing on failed regimes—the system of apartheid in South Africa, British colonialism in India, or Nazi occupation in Poland—which is nonetheless key to Kenney’s ability to locate archival sources, he bookends the study with an epilogue on political imprisonment at Guantanamo Bay.

Chapter 1 situates the history of political imprisonment as one in which the articulation of oppositional politics became central to the experience of incarceration. If in the past politics were disconnected from the prison yard, Kenney argues that the late nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of collective politics inside the institution that paradoxically enabled prisoners to clarify and promote their causes. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 introduce readers to the dance—how state actors seek to dehumanize inmates and institute chaos and confusion and, conversely, how inmates develop communication methods and learn a particular political toolkit in response to their experiences. In so doing, Kenney shifts the axis of discussion from repression and resistance to one of knowledge production, communication, and refining of the cause. Chapter 5 traces the development of political imprisonment from a global vantage by examining the networks at the heart of human

rights institutions, and here Amnesty International takes center stage. This change fomented new connections between the political prisoner and communities of support and advocacy, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. The final chapters detail the politics of the prison cell at different levels, from the tactics of confusion that political prisoners employ to subvert state authority to the destabilizing dynamics of the hunger strike.

What emerges from *Dance in Chains* is thus a clearer picture of the prison system as a political institution, as well as a growing recognition that we take seriously the prisoner as a political actor. Those in and of themselves are worthy contributions to be sure, but the study’s strength lies in the examination of the relationship between states and prisoners—a demasking of absolute control that reveals a more fragile foundation of state power.

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