“Tuk, tuk, tuk!”
A History of Russia’s Prison Knocking Language

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The Fortress slept. The walls spoke.
O. V. Aptekman, “Iz vospominanii zemlevol'tsa (Petropavlovskai Krepost’)”

In the center of St. Petersburg, on a small island in the Neva River, stands the Peter and Paul Fortress.

This is the founding site of the imperial Russian capital: a citadel and cathedral complex that served as both symbolic heart of the Romanov autocracy as well as its most notorious political prison. In its cells the empire’s most illustrious rebels—Bakunin, Chernyshevsky, Kropotkin, Figner, Trotsky—not only suffered in solitude but also wrote novels and treatises, planned future political activities, and reimagined what it meant to be a revolutionary actor in tsarist Russia. Over the course of the nineteenth century, generations of radicals developed a set of practices and narratives that fundamentally contested the space of the fortress, gradually transforming the regime’s most notorious carceral site from a realm of mute discipline into a stage of revolutionary politics.

This article tells the story of one element in this larger history of subversion: Russia’s prison knocking language (perestukivanie). From 1870 to the fall of the tsarist autocracy, the political prisons of the Romanov regime were filled with the sound of tapping. This was the famous knocking language that allowed political prisoners in solitary confinement

In putting together this piece, I have many people to thank. Research for this article was supported by the Social Science Research Council, the Cornell Institute of European Studies, and the Cornell Society for the Humanities. Great help was given by Ray Craib, Tom Newlin, Camille Robcis, Enzo Traverso, and Claudia Verhoeven; the organizers and participants of the 2019 workshop “Tracing the Agency of Sound” at the University of Bern; Erik R. Scott and Kurt Schultz at The Russian Review; and the journal’s two anonymous reviewers. Finally, all of my gratitude belongs to Valeria Dani, whose patience, love, and support assures that our parallel scholarly tappings are never truly solitary.

The Russian Review 81 (July 2022): 491–510
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to communicate with one another through their cell walls. Invented in the Peter and Paul Fortress in the 1820s, after a short hiatus the code circulated around tsarist Russia’s carceral archipelago, becoming a key technique through which imprisoned revolutionaries undermined the disciplinary regimes of the autocratic state.

This is the first scholarly history of the development and use of Russia’s prison knocking language. Part of a wider project in the cultural, intellectual, and spatial history of political incarceration in prerevolutionary Russia, which itself is grounded in the extensive use of imperial prison archives and the analysis of over one hundred fortress memoirs, this article explores how sound was regulated, and these regulations in turn subverted, in the solitary cells of the tsarist regime. In this fashion, it is in conversation with recent scholarship that has sought to move beyond an older Foucauldian consensus in carceral studies (which explored the prison spaces of modernity as sites for the complex reproduction of state power) through more multifaceted accounts of incarcerated actors and agencies. In this new wave, depictions of disciplinary interpellation are nuanced by accounts of the autonomy of the imprisoned: histories of how arrested individuals have fought to “produce politics in the cell.”

A study of the origins, development, practice, and circulation of perestukivanie will contribute to this new “turn to agency” in our histories of carceral modernity. This is the goal, specifically, of the first half of the present article.

But let us be careful here. As we craft more nuanced stories of imprisoned politics, I believe that we should not be content with simply assembling examples of carceral subversion: using revolutionary Russia’s prison knocking language to build formalist binaries of “dominated bodies” and “free subjects,” or abstract, under-historicized understandings of “resistance.” For agency itself—the ways in which individuals and social groups understand and enact political power—always possesses a history. Many communities, in many different temporal, geographical, and political contexts, have sought to contest the discipline of the state. Our studies of carceral politics should aim to not merely catalogue these instances of dissent but also ask how particular subversive repertoires have been embedded, understood, and reproduced within larger political cultures (which fundamentally shape these practices as well as the types of efficacy conceived within them). Muffled taps on tsarist prison walls should be approached not just as a neutral medium through which specific radicals “spoke,” but as a practice which developed within and itself speaks to a particular revolutionary community’s self-conception of dissent.

1In the literatures on Russian radicalism and global prison politics there are remarkably few works that devote more than a passing word to this significant practice. Three exceptions are the excellent Sarah J. Young, Writing Resistance: Revolutionary Memoirs of the Shlissel’burg Prison, 1884–1906 (London, 2021); Lynne Ann Hartnett, The Defiant Life of Vera Figner: Surviving the Russian Revolution (Bloomington, 2014); and Padraic Kenney, Dance in Chains: Political Imprisonment in the Modern World (New York, 2017) 145–48, this last containing a discussion of the use of this “technology of the cell” by early-twentieth-century Polish radicals (itself evidence of the geographical diffusion of revolutionary Russia’s carceral practices).


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Following this line of thought, the second half of this article asks how *perestukivanie* functioned within the political-semiotic landscape of the nineteenth-century Russian revolutionary tradition. For, as my larger project argues, the cells of the Peter and Paul Fortress were contested and transformed just as much through new cultural-intellectual models (the *Ursprung* of imprisonment narratives in the 1850s as a modality of the Left Hegelian *Bildungsroman*; the articulation of a robust image of political martyrdom in the 1860s; the circulation of a reproducible model of incarcerated selfhood in the 1870s and 1880s) as they were through concrete subversion. And for revolutionaries, knocking language resonated along both planes: as a technique of prison survival, and as a practice encoded within and itself reinforcing a historical tradition of radical self-narration.

For this second aim, prison memoirs also comprise the key source base. I treat them, however, not as a clean mimetic inheritance but rather as a particular “technology of the self” through which the radical nineteenth-century intelligentsia constituted itself as a community of self-narration and gave new political legibilities to its sites of struggle. By reading ego documents through this lens, I aim to show the precise position that knocking language occupied within a certain radical semiosphere, an approach indebted to scholarship on both nineteenth-century memoir practices as well as Russian revolutionary life as a constructed, fluid hermeneutic object.

In particular, I uncover that not only is there a continual recurrence of *perestukivanie* descriptions in the Russian prison memoir literature, but that these descriptions possess a shared logic. Persistently encoded as “narratives of initiation,” revolutionaries staged their induction into knocking language as a dramatic moment where the immanent experience of incarceration first achieves an alternate political legibility. These tales possess, in fact, the same trajectory from mute suffering to radical voice that sits at the heart of the wider genre tradition of the revolutionary memoir itself. Thus, descriptions of initiation into *perestukivanie* became moments where one’s initiation into the shared “code” of narrated revolutionary life was reaffirmed—as well as moments where the underlying logic of this larger representational landscape was synecdochally reconstituted. It is in this fashion that knocking language should be seen as a noteworthy phenomenon for understanding how the experience of political incarceration was discursively reworked in this period; a discursive

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5My project’s focus on the dialectical entwinement of revolutionary political movements and historical regimes of self-narration is indebted to both the cultural semiotics of the Tartu School (Ginzburg, Lotman, Uspensky) as well as the historical epistemology of Koselleck. With these progenitors, I find myself in good company: there is a small yet vibrant contemporary literature which also approaches the nineteenth-century Russian revolutionary tradition as a “collective representation” and a mythogenic community (a line of analysis that holds important affinities with, yet which has developed autochthonously from, Soviet Subjectivity Studies). See, in particular: Lynn Patyk, “Dressed to Kill and Die: Russian Revolutionary Terrorism, Gender, and Dress,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 58:2 (2010): 192–209; Claudia Verhoeven, *The Odd Man Karakozov: Imperial Russia, Modernity, and the Birth of Terrorism* (Ithaca, 2009); Nathaniel Knight, “Was the Intelligentsia Part of the Nation? Visions of Society in Post-Emancipation Russia,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 7:4 (2006): 733–58; Marina Mogil’ner, *Mifologiia podpol’nogo cheloveka: Radikal’nyi mikrokosm v Rossii nachala XX veka kak predmet semioticheskogo analiza* (Moscow, 1999); Susan K. Morrissey, *Heralds of Revolution: Russian Students and the Mythologies of Radicalism* (New York, 1998); and the classic Irina Paperno, *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism: A Study in the Semiotics of Behavior* (Stanford, 1988).
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reworking of the types of radical agencies and radical life stories capable of being staged in the cells of the tsarist regime.

Thus, this article is a history both of Russia’s prison knocking language, as well as of how this subversive carceral code was developed, transmitted, enacted, and comprehended within a particular political culture. We will find that these knocks on granite walls reach out not only with concrete messages to incarcerated comrades, but also with a percussive picture of the nineteenth-century Russian revolutionary community’s conceptions of self and struggle.

A “TRULY GRAVE-LIKE SILENCE”

To begin, what were these Peter and Paul Fortress prison walls that knocking language would soon make so porous? What was the prison regime that these taps would work to erode?

Founded by Emperor Peter I in 1703, the walls and ramparts of the Peter and Paul Fortress never faced the invasion from the Baltic Sea that they were designed to repel. In the absence of overt conflict, the central citadel of the imperial capital was soon made to host a series of improvisatory functions, including that of a political prison. Here the tsarist regime’s most feared opponents were immured in solitary confinement: first in various storerooms and casemates, and later in the secret house of the Alekseevskii Ravelin (1797) and the Trubetskoi Bastion prison (1870–71).6

It is important to highlight the will to mute isolation that characterized the life of this prison fortress. One of the most common features accorded the modern prison space, from the nineteenth century to the present day, has been silence—a negative trait, the absence of sound. This derives from both the acoustic discipline of prison regulations, as well as the political silencing and physical isolation of the incarcerated. Exurban sites of confinement are deliberately placed outside the hum of everyday life; urban prisons rise as breakers against which the noise of the city crashes but cannot penetrate.

The prisons of the Peter and Paul Fortress were no different. To be fair, in one sense the great citadel of the tsars was quite loud. As a politically sacred space of the Romanov dynasty, the fortress itself spoke plenty: from the grand artillery salutes that punctuated high holy days, to the noonday cannon fire and hourly cathedral bells that set the capital to the temporal rhythms of the autocracy.7

6Documents on the late-eighteenth-century construction of the Alekseevskii Ravelin are held at Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv drevnikh aktov (RGADA), f. 7, op. 2, d. 2290 ("Ob ustoistve dlia sekretnykh arestantov poneshchenii v Alekseevskom raveline S. Peterburgskoi kreposti"), ll. 22–23, 26–28ob., 31–31ob., 63–67. Primary sources related to the building of the Trubetskoi Bastion prison can be found at Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv (RGIA), f. 1280, op. 1, d. 294 ("O priem v Komendantskoe vedomstvo vnov’ otstrannogo v Trubetskom bastione zdaniia dlia politicheskikh arestantov"), ll. 14, 14ob., 15–20ob.

7A mid-century inventory of the fortress’ semi-ceremonial artillery (with its dozens of 24- and 12-lb cannons) can be found tucked away in RGIA f. 1280, op. 2 (dopolnitel’naia opis’ [d.o.]), d. 1 ("Instruktsii, prikazy i pravila: Plats Maioru i Komendantu S. P. B. Kreposti"), ll. 177–177ob. For information on the cathedral bells in this period see D. I. Florinskii, Sobor vo imia sviatykh pervoverkhovnykh apostolov Petra i Pavya v S.-Peterburgskoi kreposti (St. Petersburg, 1869), 4–13. For a stimulating analysis of the historical soundscape of St. Petersburg see V. Lapin, Peterburg: Zapakh i zvuki (St. Petersburg, 2007).
However, for prisoners kept in solitude within its walls, the fortress was designed to hold nothing but an unbearable silence. A host of regulations existed to preserve the empire’s most notorious political offenders in extreme physical and aural separation. A set of guard instructions distributed in the spring of 1870 spends much of its twenty pages on enforcing inmate isolation. Not only were the most important prisoners (held in the Alekseevskii Ravelin) forbidden meetings or any form of communication, but their cells could only be accessed by “the Commandant, the Head Gendarme, the Head of the Third Section, a priest from the Peter and Paul Cathedral, and the fortress doctor.” The very fact of their imprisonment itself was suppressed: outside the fortress grounds, the fates of these individuals could only be discussed with the head of the secret police or with the emperor himself.

Political prisoners of the second order, who were held in the casemates of the fortress (and, after 1871, in the Trubetskoi Bastion prison), were “to be placed in solitary confinement [and] deprived of any possibility of knowing about other prisoners in the fortress or seeing them.” In their spartan cells, the incarcerated were expressly forbidden from possessing “any sort of metal, glass, or simply unnecessary things, as well as paper, ink, quills, pencils, and tobacco, unless the commandant has given permission to smoke.” The monotony of the prison day was only interrupted by a few well-regulated events, such as receiving the “normal soldier’s fare” of tea twice a day, with a lunch and dinner of two to three courses prepared in the prison kitchens (“roasts, beef, etc., are to be served pre-cut into small pieces, as the use of forks and knives by prisoners is strictly forbidden”). Inmates could request a catalogue and order volumes from the prison library (limited to “spiritual-moral, historical, and pedagogical works”), and at certain periods receive approved books from family members. Correspondence and visitations (with immediate family only) required official permission. At regular intervals of about a month the barbers of the fortress commandant’s staff would go from cell to cell to give shaves and haircuts, while trips to the prison bathhouse were conducted twice monthly. And, dependent on the weather and the relative crowding of the prison, solitary walks in the yard occurred once a day. Arrestees who flouted prison regulations could be deprived of tobacco, books, walks, and the right to correspondence, and in extreme cases they would be taken to an isolation cell (kartser).

8"Pravila o poriadke soderzhaniia v SPeterburgskoi kreposti arestovannykh lit.," RGIA, f. 1280, op. 2 (d.o.), d. 1, ll. 186–95.
9Ibid., l. 188ob.
10Ibid., 188ob.–189. Some prisoners were also permitted to purchase additional food and tobacco, based on the commandant’s discretion.
11While the regulations quoted here are from 1870, prisoner isolation was constantly enforced across the nineteenth century. We can see the same intent in a letter from the Commandant of the Peter and Paul Fortress to the State Senate from January 1878: “Political prisoners and other important types kept in the St. Petersburg fortress, held on a stricter regime compared to [other tsarist] prisons, are not allowed to pursue any sort of occupation. They are not permitted to possess knives or any metal objects and are held in solitary cells under individual lock and key, and have forfeited the right to not only visit and see one another, but even to enter into communication with one another either by letter or through the prison staff.” See RGIA, f. 1280, op. 1, d. 450 (“Ob arestovannykh lititsakh chislashchikhsia za Ministerstvom iustitsii”), ll. 168–168ob.
12This was constantly stressed in all nineteenth-century guard regulations. See, for example, RGIA, f. 1280, op. 1, d. 620 (“O politicheskikh arestantakh soderzhashchikhsia v kreposti”), ll. 218–218ob.
The rigidity of the prison regime was not limited to the arrestees; guards, too, were strictly controlled to prevent any sympathy arising between the jailors and the jailed.\textsuperscript{13} Precautions were taken to prevent them from being alone for any length of time with secret prisoners, and guard duties were rotated every two weeks to snuff out familiarity. Regulations from this period expressly stipulate that “the lower ranks of the fortress guard responsible for prisoner care, supervision, and food preparation must be the most honest, capable, reliable people, and by no means born in the Kingdom of Poland.”\textsuperscript{14}

These guards coordinated all cleaning and feeding among themselves and escorted prisoners on any activities that brought them outside of their cells. They were also responsible for continual supervision of the various wings and the halls of the Trubetskoi Bastion prison, where they frequently gazed through the peepholes of the cells (nicknamed “Judases”) to make sure no prisoners were singing, shouting, knocking, or “committing any illegal actions.”\textsuperscript{15} The overriding goal of the Peter and Paul Fortress prison regime of this period was thus to enforce absolute separation among its prisoners.

Alongside the state’s desire to physically isolate its opponents, we could also understand these practices within a larger trans-European history of sensory politics. By the mid-nineteenth century (a time of the rise of revolutionary challenges to the tsarist state and attendant rise in fortress incarceration), an earlier Enlightenment politics of vision had been significantly displaced by a conceptual language of sound. The people (\textit{narod}) as the new subjects of history were hard to see, hard to encompass with the gaze. Against this difficulty, social movements often cast their projects as a particular type of political acoustics. The Russian intelligentsia envisioned their task as one of “hearing” the \textit{demos}, of giving it voice, of awakening it from its slumber (perhaps through a \textit{Nabat}, or a \textit{Kolokol}).\textsuperscript{16} In this fashion, to be imprisoned in a solitary cell of the tsarist regime, without voice, was both an actual and a figurative silencing.

Almost all Peter and Paul Fortress prison memoirs are deeply sensitive to this heavy fact. Upon entering the citadel, the first impression was most often of its “truly grave-like silence” (\textit{voistinu mogil’noi tishiny})—a space filled with “the silence of the dead.”\textsuperscript{17} This was a site devised to dampen and remove transgressive voices, and those imprisoned seemed fated to an entombment where “no living sound comes to break the grim silence

\textsuperscript{13}See the above instructions, as well as RGIA, f. 1280, op. 2 (d.o.), d. 1, ll. 196–200.
\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., 194–194ob. This last provision, dating originally from 1827, reflects the social volatility in the Kingdom of Poland in the nineteenth century and official perceptions of the Poles’ political unreliability. We can note that while the staff of the Peter and Paul Fortress would be almost entirely Russian (with infrequent individuals of Baltic German descent), the prison population was far more varied. Various examples of this “pervasive cosmopolitanism” of the tsarist cell are reflected throughout the documentary record: in the multilingual prison libraries, the foreign currencies seized after each arrest, and the diverse confessional needs of incarcerated individuals.
\textsuperscript{15}RGIA, f. 1280, op. 2 (d.o.), d. 1, l. 199ob.
\textsuperscript{16}These two terms refer, respectively, to the radical journals of P. N. Tkachev and A. Herzen. For more on trans-European shifts in the sensory language of politics in the long nineteenth century see Sophia Rosenfeld, “On Being Heard: A Case for Paying Attention to the Historical Ear,” \textit{American Historical Review} 116:2 (2011): 316–34.
\textsuperscript{17}Chudnovskii, \textit{Iz davnikh let: Vospominaniia} (Moscow, 1934), 125–27; Vera Figner, \textit{Memoirs of a Revolutionist} (London:, 1929), 185.
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that hangs over this place of desolation” except cannon fire and the “lugubrious canticle” of the cathedral bells.18

However, for all of its precautions the fortress administration was never able to assure complete silence or isolation. Over the course of the long nineteenth century, radical actors displayed a remarkable resourcefulness in speaking illicitly with their neighbors. As a personal activity, these lines of dialogue served to break through the terrible monotony of the solitary cell: rendering imprisonment more existentially bearable. As a political practice, prison communications worked to subvert tsarist disciplinary regimes: allowing revolutionaries to plan dissident activities, forge new bonds of solidarity, and to reimagine the Peter and Paul Fortress as a stage of revolutionary development. Let us briefly survey a few of these carceral techniques, before turning to an exploration of Russia’s prison knocking language.

SCRAPS AND MESSAGES IN THE TSARIST CELL

Contacting other inmates was a primary concern for prisoners brought to the Peter and Paul Fortress. Memoirs and archival documents hold many accounts of secret communication methods. Speaking between cells was always forbidden and could be easily policed by the prison guards. Thus, efforts were often channeled through texts.

Arrestees frequently attempted to take advantage of the books that were circulated through the prison library. While guards were charged with checking all returned volumes to prevent inscriptions, those incarcerated would often surreptitiously mark individual letters to form messages for future readers. Imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress as part of the “Trial of the 193” in 1876 and 1877, the populist S. L. Chudnovskii recalled stumbling upon just such a missive from S. G. Nechaev in an issue of the journal Delo: “Having traced and selected letters underlined by fingernail on different pages, I received a mournful tale of an extraordinarily harsh imprisonment, bound hand and foot, in the awful Alekseevskii Ravelin.”19

When not using the circulating books themselves to smuggle messages, prisoners would rip small scraps from the margins of their pages to write secret texts. In March 1878 the Commandant of the Peter and Paul Fortress forwarded nineteen miniscule notes to the head of the Third Section. These had been written in a tiny hand by political prisoner Ippolit


19See S. L. Chudnovskii, Iz davnikh let: Vospominaniiia, 127–28. Interestingly enough, it appears that Chudnovskii was not the only Russian revolutionary to decipher a message from Nechaev in a volume from the fortress library. Similar occurrences are also recorded in S. I. Martynovskii, “Na katorzhnom polozhenii,” Katorga i sylka 12 (1924): 189; N. A. Golovina, “Moi vospominaniiia (70 i 80 gody),” Katorga i sylka 6 (1923): 37; and S. F. Kovalik, “Avtobiografii revoliutsionnykh deiatelei russkogo sotsialisticheskogo dvizheniia 70-kh i pervoi poloviny 80-kh gg. (Prilozenie k st. ‘razvitie sotsialisticheskoi mysli v Rossii’),” in Entsiklopedicheskii slovar’ russkogo bibliografich. instituta Granat 40:6 (Moscow, 1927), 163–88. For similar practices continuing in a later period see the 1905 official correspondence regarding a note written by an anarchist in a volume of the Trubetskoi Bastion library at RGIA, f. 1280, op. 1, d. 918 (“Perepiska o politicheskikh arestantakh po raznym predmetam i prepovozhdenie ikh pisem”), ll. 36–36ob., 37.
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Myshkin and “found in the yard of the political house [Trubetskoi Bastion], embedded in soft black bread and affixed to the building’s drainpipes, and others in Myshkin’s bed.”

Cigarette papers also proved useful for secret correspondence, and the common spaces of the Fortress grounds afforded the opportunity to circulate them. In the autumn of 1880 the fortress commandant received a letter from the Ministry of Justice warning that a note had been found on political prisoner L. A. Kobylianskii in another St. Petersburg prison, the House of Preliminary Detention. Having been formerly held in the Peter and Paul Fortress, and anticipating being sent back to its solitary cells, this People’s Will member sought to inform a comrade of the best means for secretly communicating within the citadel: “Save a pencil to write notes and hide these notes near the bathhouse—under the corner, on the south side.” These future messages were to be written on cigarette paper, as was the one confiscated at the House of Preliminary Detention. Thus, with a bit of persistence and luck, texts could be circulated around the citadel. However, by far the most common method for illicit communication between tsarist political prisoners did not involve writing at all. For in the Peter and Paul Fortress, radicals taught the walls to speak.

KNOCKING LANGUAGE: USES AND ORIGINS

Knocking language (perestukivanie)—also referred to as the “wall alphabet” (stennaia azbuka) or “prison alphabet” (tiuremnaia azbuka)—was the most widespread form of subversive communication in the political prisons of the tsarist regime. Prisoners would speak to individuals in neighboring cells through a system of knocks, in which patterns of taps would correspond to individual letters of the alphabet. The exact code varied: it could be as crude as a system whereby each letter was represented by a number of knocks corresponding to its position in the alphabet (that is, \(a=1, b=2, v=3\), and so on), or as complex as sequences of alternating short and long signs. By far the most common technique involved setting the Russian alphabet into a grid of five or six rows. To signal a letter, an inmate would tap out two numbers: with the first indicating the column, and the second the row, of its position within the table (see figs. 1–3).

These knocks were often simply made with the palm or knuckles of one’s hand against the walls of a cell. At times, prisoners used metal bedframes, buttons, manacles, and other materials to amplify the knocks. The stone of the Peter and Paul Fortress’ casemates and


21See the official correspondence surrounding this secret message, as well as the original note itself, held at RGIA, f. 1280, op. 1, d. 482 (“Perepiska komendanta Peterburgskoi kreposti s raznymi litsami o zakliuchenii v krepot’, vydachi zakluchenikh iz krepot’ dlia prizvodstva sudebnogo sledstviia i po drugim voprosam po soderzhaniu politicheskikh zakluchenikh”), ll. 252–252ob., 253–253ob., 256, 256ob., 257.

22Knocking with stools and bedframes is attested to in RGIA, f. 1280, op. 1, d. 482, ll. 9, 9ob., 10. M. A. Bestuzhev, the inventor of this knocking language (discussed below), used his manacles and hands to tap at first, before later wielding a burnt broom bristle (upon leaving the prison, Bestuzhev passed this stick to his sister, saying “prenez, c’est ma langue”). See M. A. Bestuzhev, “Zapisiki M. A. Bestuzheva. I. Brat’ia Bestuzhevy. II. Stennaia azbuka v Petrop. Krepot,” Russkaia Starina 1 (1870): 273. One revolutionary recalled splitting his knuckles “almost to the bone,” before removing a button from his prison jacket to tap with more ease. See A. I. Faresov, V odnochnom zakliuchenii, 3d ed. (St. Petersburg, 1905), 53.
Trubetskoi Bastion prison proved particularly conductive to light sounds, allowing inmates to communicate both horizontally (through the walls to adjoining cells) and vertically (through the floor and ceiling). If enough prisoners were familiar with the “wall alphabet,” this permeability could allow wide swaths of the prison to speak with one another, with messages moving across floors and cells. although knocking language was especially tied to the space of the Peter and Paul Fortress, from the 1870s onward accounts of this code would appear in the vast majority of Russian prison memoirs, and its emergence fundamentally altered the experience of political incarceration.

At its most basic level, knocking language served as a medium of human recognition: a way to break the dreadful isolation of solitary confinement. Before learning this prison grammar, inmates would often rap mutely to one another as a way of asserting their own existence. For initiates, acquaintanceship between prison walls often began with an exchange of names and personal biographies. This lifeline within the isolation of the tsarist prison cell fostered remarkable levels of intimacy: the narodovolets N. Bukh recalled knocking with his neighbors in the informal “you” (ты): “In freedom, we would have spoken with ви, as we were very little acquainted with one another. ... [But] it seemed to me that this sort of intimacy between those struggling for a united cause, held in the same prison, was sincere.”

The health of one’s neighbors, especially during times of particularly harsh prison regimes, was always a concern: Chudnovskii recalled talking a fellow radical back from the brink of suicide through a long knock-based conversation.

Alongside acts of care, this illicit language also allowed individuals to engage in social activities forbidden by the prison regime. Tapping out poetry to one another—either

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23 Held in a central cell of the Trubetskoi Bastion, Chudnovskii described taking on the role of a “transmission point from one corner of the prison to the other” (Iz davnykh let, 127).
25 Chudnovskii, Iz davnykh let, 130.
original works or revolutionary classics—was a common creative outlet. More complex diversions were feasible as well. In 1874, Faresov used knocking language to play chess and checkers in his Saratov prison. Social pasttimes could also be given a political and pedagogical weight: during the brief period in which he was held in the House of Preliminary Detention in 1876, P. A. Kropotkin tapped out the entire history of the Paris Commune to a young neighbor. Finally, the ability to subvert the isolation of tsarist prison regime through knocking language was often used for tactical political purposes. As revolutionary circles were swept up in tsarist investigations, those apprehended often found themselves sharing prison wings with their co-conspirators: knocking language allowed them to maintain their bonds after arrest. For radicals brought from the provinces to the larger detention sites of St. Petersburg, lines of new solidarity between revolutionary circles were formed through tapped conversations. Furthermore, this wall language could be used to directly subvert the judicial process: a means to coordinate approaches and trade strategies on how to conduct oneself during interrogations.

As we have seen, the guards of the Peter and Paul Fortress were tasked with constant vigilance against prisoner communications. Cells would be searched during inmates’ walks and visitations. Any violations would be brought to the attention of the fortress commandant, who forwarded reports on these infractions to the Third Section or the official body responsible for the prisoner’s case. However, the tsarist state was slow to pick up on the emergence of knocking language. It was only at the beginning of the 1880s that these illicit acoustics began to be seriously discussed in the correspondence of the Peter and Paul Fortress administration. On June 8, 1880, in a secret report to the head of the High Administrative Commission (an organ formed to preserve public order after the Winter Palace explosion in February of that year), the fortress commandant noted that ten political prisoners in the Trubetskoi Bastion had been caught banging their stools on the floors of their cells “with the goal of communicating by means of a code previously arranged among political criminals.” A response from the Third Section later that month saw tsarist officials attempting to understand how this code was learned and transmitted. The secret police official proposed that, since “the arrestees in the fortress surely draw on the wall or somewhere else the alphabet for this method of communication, as has been noted in other

26 See, for example, Vera Figner’s account of Schlissel’burg transformed into a literary “Parnassus” (Memoirs of a Revolutionist, 213–16).
27 Each player would scratch out a chessboard with bootnails, make figures from matches or bread, and tap out moves on the game grid to one another through their cell walls (Faresov, V odinochnom zakluchenii, 59–60).
29 The young Pavel Miliukov, imprisoned in 1901, recalled learning through tapped messages in the House of Preliminary Detention “how interrogations are conducted, the tricks of investigators, and how the accused can avoid them.” See P. N. Miliukov, Vospominaniia (Moscow, 1990), 1:209.
30 The commandant affirms that these individuals were duly punished for their attempts at knocking: denied tobacco, books, visitations, and even isolated in the kartser (RGIA, f. 1280, op. 1, d. 482, II. 9, 9ob., 10).
sites of incarceration,” the commandant should search the cells of any prisoner caught using knocking language to find and destroy such markings.31

By the middle of the decade, awareness of the subversive potential of this communication method had risen to the point where tsarist officials took special precautions to prevent its use.32 When Vera Figner was imprisoned in the Trubetskoi Bastion from 1883 to 1884, the room beneath her and the two cells adjoining her own were kept purposefully empty “with the goal of isolating her from other arrestees and eliminate any possibility of secret communicating with prisoners by means of knocking on the walls or floor.”33

Thus, by the 1880s tsarist officials had begun to ask a question that is also of great interest to historians: How was this prisoner code developed, learned, and transmitted?

Russia’s prison knocking language was invented in the Peter and Paul Fortress. Its first attested use is from 1826, when the Decembrist M. A. Bestuzhev used a complex system based on naval bells to communicate with his brother in an adjoining cell of the Alekseevskii Ravelin prison (see figs. 4 and 5).34 Curiously, however, this Decembrist code appears to have been an outlying phenomenon. There is a hiatus after the 1820s, when accounts of knocking language disappear, only to resurface in memoirs and official documents in the last third of nineteenth century. This interruption is surely due to the particular publication history of the Russian prison memoir genre.

1870 saw the founding of a new historical journal in St. Petersburg, Russkaia starina. Headed by historian M. I. Semevskii, who had once printed with Herzen’s Free London Press, the journal’s goal was to provide primary documents on the Russian past to an increasingly historically minded (and politicized) urban public. The very first number of the journal contained selections from the Bestuzhev’s memoirs and constitutes one of the

| Ibid., ll. 49–49ob. Indeed, a few months later just such a code would be discovered in a prisoner’s fortress cell: “on the wall above the wash basin [was found] some sort of alphabet, with the signature ‘Maluitin’ [the prisoner’s name] underneath, and on another wall a code in this order: 1//, 2///, 3////, etc. …” (ibid., d. 497, ll. 58–56ob., 57–57ob.).
| 32In this regard, several period memoirs describe layers of felt being affixed to cell walls in order to hamper knocking. However, I have been unable to find evidence for this practice in the commandant’s archives—it is just as likely that this insulation was installed to guard against the cold Petersburg climate. See F. V. Volkovskii, Druz’ya sredi vragov (Iz vospominani starogo revoliutionera) (St. Petersburg, 1906); Faresov, V odinochnom zakluchenii, 149; and Kropotkin, In Russian and French Prisons (New York, 1977), 93–94.
| 33This is detailed in a letter from the fortress commandant to the director of the Department of Police from April 19, 1884 (RGIA, f. 1280, op. 1, d. 620, ll. 308–308ob.).
| 34After learning that he shared a wall with his brother Nikolai, Mikhail attempted to pass him a physical copy of a rough code, to no avail. It was only when each received an identically-phrased letter from their mother that they were able to use it as a Rosetta Stone to formulate a shared knocking language. Mikhail’s attempts to teach this code to his other neighbor—the Decembrist A. I. Odoevskii—were thwarted by the fact that this Francophile prince did not know the proper order of the Russian alphabet (!). See M. A. Bestuzhev, “Zapiski Bestuzheva,” 262–74. Note that in locating the origins of perestukivanie in the Peter and Paul Fortress—evidence for which I find both in M. A. Bestuzhev’s 1870 published reminiscences as well as in related materials compiled by the USSR Academy of Sciences in 1951—I respectfully differ from the version given in Young, Writing Resistance, 10. See N. Bestuzhev, “Vospominania o Ryleevê,” M. Bestuzhev, “Moi tiur’my: Ocherki i otvety 1869 g.,” and “Rasskazy M. i E. Bestuzhevykh v zapisikh M. Semevskogo,” all in Vospominaniia Bestuzhevykh, ed. M. K. Azadovskii (Moscow, 1951), esp. 48, 117–24, 395–96, and 715.
first instances of Decembrist materials being legally printed in Russia. “The Notes of Bestuzhev” consists of two sections. The first is a conventional biography of the five Bestuzhev brothers, while the second, titled “Wall Alphabet (стенная азбука) in the Peter and Paul Fortress,” describes the invention of their knocking language.35

![Image of the system of knocks first wielded by the Bestuzhev brothers in the Alekseevskii Ravelin of the Peter and Paul Fortress in 1826. M. A. Bestuzhev, “Zapiski M. A. Bestuzheva,” 272 and 276.]

Thus, the first printed description of this prison alphabet—with a detailed story of its creation and two tables displaying variants of the code—appeared in 1870, at the same historical juncture when the language began to reappear in the memoir literature and in the archives of the tsarist prison regime.36 This chronological accordance suggests that “The Notes of Bestuzhev” played a pivotal role for Russian radicals in this period, who read, absorbed, and then put to extensive use the subversive technique detailed in this article. This hypothesis is also supported by another curious fact. The first half of the 1870s was a period of relative laxity for the flow of published texts into the Peter and Paul Fortress. The commandant at the time widely approved prisoner requests for outside books and journals, including Russkaia starina. Indeed, I have found that the journal’s first issues entered the prison on at least two separate occasions in 1870.37 It is thus highly probable

36We can note that Bestuzhev’s account soon became an integral part of Decembrist histories, appearing in new studies as early as the following year, a fact that surely also contributed to the resurgence of knocking language in the 1870s. See, for example, S. V. Maksimov, Sibir’ i katorga (St. Petersburg, 1871), 1:431–35.
37That is, in March and June of this year. See the booklists held at RGIA, f. 1280, op. 1, d. 330 (“O litsakh soderzhashchikh sva v kreposti arestovannym i chislashchikhsya za III otd.”), l. 483; and d. 347 (“O litsakh
that prisoners within the fortress itself read Bestuzhev’s text, and that across a gap of nearly fifty years adapted his knocking language to their own confinement in the same citadel.

This fractured chronology speaks to a particular break in the larger history of Russian cultures of incarceration. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Decembrist “grandfathers” were taken as prototypes of the heroic political prisoner. But this image, scholars recently have shown, was an invented tradition constructed by a radical community in search of a galvanizing historical lineage for its own carceral experiences. And, just as Russian revolutionaries in the age of the mass imprisonment of the populist movement rediscovered the Decembrist Revolt as an originary moment in the history of political incarceration, so too did they rediscover a Decembrist technique for subverting tsarist disciplinary regimes.

Reflecting on this fragmented inheritance—with its chronological rupture, invented tradition, and reinvestment of the past—leads us to the second goal of the present article. Knocking language was a fundamental technique used in the radical subversion of state incarceration in tsarist Russia. However, while the present section has presented a new empirical history of this practice, the significance of perestukivanie cannot be fully grasped through the story of its development and a catalogue of its various manifestations. Political agency, especially in such fraught scenarios as the prison cells of an autocratic regime, is not a binary affair, a state either abstractly present or absent. Subversive voice is always understood, attained, and achieves effect within a particular historical moment’s cultural and material horizons. The fortress’ knocking language must be grasped alongside the political narratives that were both its conditions of possibility and its realm of activity.

Thus, let us supplement our empirical history of this carceral code with a discussion of its discursive existence. This will come across most clearly through an exploration of how knocking language was learned and transmitted. In the burgeoning prison memoir genre of the time, knocking language functioned beyond its concrete uses as a generative vehicle for conceptions of revolutionary initiation. Grasping this role is central to understanding this technique’s subversive power as well as its place within radical cultures of confinement.

Knocking Language: Revolutionary Initiation

How did individual revolutionaries learn knocking language? Highlighting the Decembrist origins and eventual rediscovery of this practice can only take us so far. Even if the first number of the journal Russkaia starina was fundamentally responsible for the reemergence of perestukivanie, this code does not appear to have been widely studied outside the cell, nor primarily circulated through texts. Indeed, I have only been able to locate a handful of

chislashchiksha za III otdeleniem sobstvennoi ego Velichestva Kantselierii i za senatorom Chemodurovym, proizvodashchim po Vysochashchemu povelen, sledstvie”), ll. 195–195ob.

accounts of encounters with knocking language outside of prison spaces. One of these involves Bukh, who recalled how in his youth a formerly incarcerated comrade tried to teach him a “prison alphabet” (tiuremnaja azbuka). But Bukh neglected this instruction: “I did not engage with his explanation, believing that there was no great wisdom in doing so and that I wouldn’t have to use it in the near future.” He would go on to regret this lack of attentiveness when he later found himself in the Peter and Paul Fortress.39

Furthermore, while published guides to prison knocking language do exist, these only began to be printed in émigré presses at the start of the twentieth century, long after the code’s widespread circulation.40 It seems that the vast majority of Russian revolutionaries did not learn knocking language outside the prison, either in discussion with comrades or from written sources.41 Instead, knowledge of the code was circulated within spaces of tsarist confinement, a fact made evident in the robust Russian prison memoir literature that constitutes a major source base for this study.

It is worth sparing a few further words on the nature of these texts. If we seek to understand the prerevolutionary Russian intelligentsia as the producer and product of a particular cultural-semiotic landscape, then autobiographies of incarceration should not just be treated as mere funds of empirical information or self-aggrandizing dissident statements. Rather, like all ego-documents, these texts arise from and speak to a certain moment’s historical understanding of the individual. In particular, as I explore elsewhere, the Russian prison memoir tradition possesses a fundamentally Left Hegelian structural logic. These are Bildungs-narratives of the self, developed in the mid-nineteenth century, which inscribe an individual’s own political struggles within a larger dialectic of personal and the world-historical development. It was this new “technology of the self” that first allowed radicals to give political legibility to their experiences of solitary confinement. Peter and Paul Fortress imprisonment was cast as a badge of honor, a martyr’s crown, a natural stage in the story of a revolutionary and the story of revolutionary history, as well as a stage upon which a model of heroic endurance against a hated autocracy was performed and made re-performable within a larger political community.42

Tales of first learning knocking language within the tsarist prison constantly recur in this genre of political life-writing, and many of the same formal elements are often repeated. The presence of a common structure is so striking that I believe this “narrative of initiation” demands recognition as a sub-genre unto itself, located within the larger corpus of the prison memoir.

39Bukh, “V Petropavlovskoi kreposti,” 116. Likewise, a young I. Jugashvili held a similar attitude when the technique was raised in a Tiflis kruzhok: “Why bother to tell them this, they will soon learn this themselves in prison.” Quoted in Ronald Grigor Suny, Stalin: Passage to Revolution (Princeton, 2020), 109.
40For examples of knocking language guides (designed so that “political prisoners can continue their sacred struggle” even in their cells), see V. Bakharev, O shifrakh (Geneva, 1902); and [anon.], Obysk, tiur’ma, i ssylka (Geneva, 1903), 34–38.
41See N. A. Morozov, Povesti moei zhizni: Memuary (Moscow, 1961), 2:49. “Not once in Russia nor abroad in our many evening and afternoon conversations was knocking language mentioned in my presence, and none of my comrades from Moscow or abroad, evidently, thought about this method of communication [until our incarcerations].”
42A discussion of the central role played by the political prison memoir genre in both the radical contestation of the autocratic cell and the discursive formation of the revolutionary self can be found in Bujalski, “Narrating Political Imprisonment in Tsarist Russia.”
In this model, the political arrestee’s first encounter with knocking language usually occurs soon after entering the prison, often on their first day or night. After exploring the environment of the cell, the memoirist’s solitary musings are intruded upon by a series of incomprehensible noises: “separate, intermittent, obscure sounds”; “precise strikes, with breaks and pauses”; “a light chirping, like the knock of a woodborer”; “some sort of knocks on the wall.” The most overwhelming account of this initial state of ignorance is found in the memoirs of Chudnovskii, who after being transported from Odessa to St. Petersburg’s House of Preliminary Detention in 1876 is persecuted by the noise:

Even though I was exhausted from the road, I was completely unable to sleep that first night: an incomprehensible, rhythmic, unceasing, muffled rumble (ритмический беспрерывный глухой гул), resounding from all directions, acted extremely painfully on my nerves. It seemed to me that all the walls themselves were knocking, all the ceilings, all the windowsills, that everything around me had transformed into a continuous, tormenting knock.

This is the first stage of the knocking language sub-genre: incomprehension.

Soon after this initial encounter—a moment provoking curiosity, annoyance, or dread—the political prisoner arrives at the second stage: illumination. The purpose of these noises, their secret logic, suddenly is revealed. In radical autobiographics, this moment of recognition occurs along one of two pathways, the first material, the second ideational.

For many memoirists, initiation comes about through a physical gift. Taking pity on this mute newcomer, the community of political prisoners writes out a knocking alphabet code on a piece of paper. This is then smuggled to the arrestee, usually in the prison yard or by a sympathetic guard. Thus was Faresov taught to communicate in his Saratov prison, and Chudnovskii aided in giving order to the tormenting noise of the House of Preliminary Detention. The circulation of these keys is evidenced in the archives of the Peter and Paul Fortress—on several occasions in this period, guard searches turned up written codes (fig. 6).

Other memoirists grasped knocking language independently. After a period of listening uncomprehendingly to tappings from a neighboring cell, patterns would begin to emerge from the static. In a moment of inspiration—“suddenly, an unexpected thought flashed through my head,” recalls Morozov—the imprisoned would ask themselves: what if the knocks correspond to letters of the alphabet? With this insight, the inmate had all the tools necessary to communicate with those around them. Their first attempts would often be hesitant and crude: “If, I thought, my neighbors have not guessed or lack the possibility to teach me this prison alphabet, then I will try to create my own alphabet, consisting of all

43Bukh, “V Petropavlovskoi kreposti,” 116; Faresov, V odinochnom zakliuchenii, 42; Morozov, Povesti moei zhizni 2:50; Miliukov, Vospominanitia 1:209.
44Chudnovskii, Iz davnykh let, 121–23.
45Faresov, V odinochnom zakliuchenii, 45–51; Chudnovskii, Iz davnykh let, 122.
46In another example, on February 10, 1884, the Commandant of the Peter and Paul Fortress reported to V. K. von Pleve that a new arrival from the House of Preliminary Detention was found with a written key for “an alphabet for criminal conversations by means of knocks” (RGIA, f. 1280, op. 1, d. 620, ll. 79, 80).
47Morozov, Povesti moei zhizni 2:50–51.
36 letters of the Russian alphabet, without abridgment.”48 Able to make first contact through these clumsy codes, those in nearby cells were able to instruct the newcomer in the less cumbersome row-and-column system.

Either way, after this moment of illumination, the memoirists would move toward mastery. With the key to knocking language, the experience of solitary political imprisonment would be entirely transformed. They were no longer surrounded by ghostly tappings; rather, the acoustic networks of the prison, as Chudnovskii recalled, “came to life for me and took on flesh and blood.”49 With practice came greater familiarity: many memoirs recall systems of abbreviations adopted to speed up the pace of knocking communiqués, which could quicken to the point of “coming out something along the lines of a grasshopper chirping.”50

It is with the slow-yet-sure mastery of this language that arrestees shaped the space and rhythm of prison life. In her memoirs, Vera Figner records immense gratitude “for those light tappings on the wall, which destroy the stone barrier separating person from person.”51 From this point onward in Russian revolutionary prison autobiographies, the experience of political incarceration changes. Tsarist cells, once marked by “the silence of

49Chudnovskii, Iz davnykh let, 121–23.
50Morozov, Povesti moei zhizni 2:53.
51Vera Figner, Memoirs of a Revolutionist, 196.
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the dead,” were now experienced as spaces of voice and agency: hosting all the chatter and discussion of a revolutionary circle.

INCOMPREHENSION, ILLUMINATION, MASTERY: thus we see the structure of the “knocking language initiation” sub-genre, a story common to so many memoirs of imprisonment from 1870 to 1917. This pattern of self-narration is presented here not only to give insight into how prison codes were encountered, learned, and wielded. For while the practice of knocking language was indeed a pivotal tool through which revolutionaries subverted an autocratic prison regime, the lasting power of this secret alphabet lay not solely in its concrete use.

Learning perestukivanie meant initiation into an illicit subtext that made the experience of political incarceration comprehensible. From darkness to light, from muteness to voice: this is the same dramatic (indeed, Goethian-Hegelian) arc by which the Peter and Paul Fortress itself was gradually made legible—as a stage for production of the radical self—in the Russian revolutionary tradition and its autobiographical texts. If an upward dialectic from mute immediacy to radical consciousness is the central mechanism of this regime of self-narration, then what we find here are components of this mechanism patterning, fractal-like, internal movements of the life stories it generated. Initiation into this prison alphabet was both one element of, and a synecdoche for, initiation into a revolutionary narrative community that over the course of the long nineteenth century claimed the carceral spaces of tsarism as sites for its own development.

Knocking language thus functioned as a crucial practice in the radical subversion and discursive experience of state confinement in tsarist Russia: it broke the silence of an autocratic disciplinary regime while buttressing a larger political culture of radical imprisonment that narrated the experience of confinement as one of ample voice. When the walls were taught to speak, they communicated not only tapped fragments but also rich tropes of the revolutionary self-in-becoming.

In this fashion, a history of perestukivanie adds to our picture of how Russian revolutionary cultures contested the tsarist cell and pushes us to think beyond abstract, accumulative models of “agency” or “resistance.” Knocking language was more than a concrete pathway of action in the autocratic prison; the very structural logic through which revolutionaries narrated the practice was a reaffirmation of a particular historical conception of the individual’s role in a struggle for a future beyond all autocracies and beyond all prisons. We thus encounter “political agency” here not as a formal quality, but as a phenomenon embedded within a particular discursive ecosystem. And just as a larger political culture of incarceration was carried out from the Peter and Paul Fortress across the Russian Empire, so too did perestukivanie circulate throughout the tsarist penal system.

Of course, the “initiation narrative” is only one of the ways in which knocking language echolocates the contours of a certain revolutionary epistemological-cultural field. Several further pathways of investigation suggest themselves: I am especially interested in how these taps sound out a particular relationship that the radical intelligentsia held with nineteenth-century regimes of interiority. The spatial interior, the subjective interior, the narrated interior: the interruption of a comrade’s knock was a call to a wider collective struggle that blasted open the false immediacy of individual cellular suffering (cf. Adorno: “It is not by accident that [Kierkegaard] readily compares inwardness with a fortress”).
and beyond. As this article comes to a close, let us briefly examine some of the variegated
cpathways taken by this radical alphabet.

**CODA**

Many of the accounts presented in this article occurred in peripheral locales—from district
police stations in St. Petersburg to Saratov’s jail on the Volga. Soon after its reemergence
in the Peter and Paul Fortress, knocking language diffused across the empire. In the
mid-1870s, inmates taken from the fortress to the House of Preliminary Detention during
the “Trial of the 193” constantly tapped to one another. When the empire’s most notorious
political prisoners began to be transferred from the Peter and Paul Fortress to Shlissel’burg
in the mid-1880s, they brought with them the practice of knocking language. In her memoirs,
Vera Figner recalls the profound moment when “the dumb walls of Schlüsselburg began
to speak.”

Notably, *perestukivanie* also spread outside of Russia’s imperial borders. The most
significant example I have found takes us to the summer of 1914 in a military prison in
Sarajevo, with Europe slouching toward war. As the co-conspirators of Black Hand (Crna
ruka) awaited trial for the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, they initiated one
another into a knocking code. They had learned this “strange correspondence” (chudnovata
korespondentsija) through published accounts of the Russian revolutionary movement, and
now used it to confer with one another before their interrogations and trial. Thus did a
powerful tool for the subversion of prison regimes fan out and traverse both geographical
and chronological boundaries.

Indeed, knocking language survived the autocratic regime it had been invented to
subvert, making several strange appearances after the revolutions of 1917. Let us conclude
by listening for these tappings during the first decades of the Soviet project. There are two
stories that can be told of knocking language after the October Revolution.

The first is a story of victory. On March 5, 1927, the keels were laid down for the very
first Soviet submarines. Three of these underwater vessels were constructed at the Baltic
Shipyard on St. Petersburg’s Vasil’evskii Island, just a few kilometers from the Peter and
Paul Fortress. Their names traced a chronology of the Russian revolutionary movement:

54Borivoje Jevtić, *Sarajevski atentat: Ćećija i uticaj* (Sarajevo, 1923), 54–56. Italian historian Luigi Albertini
recalled Vaso Ćubrilović telling him how “after the first days of their arrest the defendants began to communicate
among themselves by an alphabetical system made up of long and short knocks on the wall in a method they
had all learned from Stepniak’s *Underground Russia.*” However, let us note that nowhere in *Underground
Russia*—that celebrated account of the Russian revolutionary movement by the terrorist S. M. Stepniak-
Kravchinskii—is knocking language mentioned. What is surely intended here is a later work by Stepniak:
*Russia under the Tsars*, which narrates in detail the use of tapping to communicate in the House of Preliminary
Detention. In any case, the appearance of *perestukivanie* in Sarajevo is powerful evidence of the international
circulation of Russian political prison culture at the turn of the twentieth century. See Luigi Albertini, *The
Origins of the War of 1914*, translated by Isabella M. Massey (London, 1953), 2:59; and Stepniak [S. M.
Kravchinski], *Russia under the Tsars*, 80–85.
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*Dekabrist, Narodovolets, and Krasnogvardeets.* Hidden in the bellies of these submersibles was a strange fragment from the radical past. For while each possessed an early radio system, there was need of a means to communicate between compartments when the bulkheads were closed, or in event of an accident. The solution? Knocking language. A *tablitsa perestukivaniia* was mounted in each submersible, with the alphabet divided into five rows and six columns: a direct use of the code developed by revolutionaries in tsarist political prisons.55 On the date of the vessels’ commissioning, the commander-in-chief of the Soviet Naval Forces sent a telegram to Leningrad: “I am certain that in the hands of the revolutionary Baltic sailors *Dekabrist* will be a terrible weapon against our class enemies, and in the battles for socialism to come will cover its red flag with glory.”56

Thus, ten years after the fall of the Romanov autocracy, we see knocking language return in a strange guise. This is history, shuffled, repeating itself: first as tragedy, then as triumph. Here are “Decembrists” and “Members of the People’s Will” tapping to one another in isolated cells, not those of a prerevolutionary prison, but of a Soviet war machine. The knowledges and practices that had helped overthrow an autocracy are now put into the service of a new state. In this strange historical doubling, it is almost as if weaponized cells of the Peter and Paul Fortress—fully hijacked by the subversive practices of its radical inhabitants—had broken off from the tsarist citadel, dove into the Neva, and set out onto the high seas in pursuit of the enemies of the revolution.

Alongside this victorious, almost Gogolian narrative, we can trace another. The second story of knocking language after 1917 is a story of defeat. E. S. Ginzburg was swept up in the Terror of 1937. In her autobiography, she recalls how at the time “all I knew of such things [political imprisonment] was what I had read in the memoirs of old Bolsheviks or in books about the ‘People’s Will.’”57 It is these prison autobiographies that flash to mind when, held in a Kazan prison, she first hears tapping emanating from an adjoining cell. She immediately recalls the appropriate pages from Figner’s memoirs and rapidly learns how to communicate with her fellow prisoners. As she follows a treacherous pathway through the Gulag, Ginzburg soon finds herself “[bringing] to exquisite perfection the technique of wall tapping.”58

Indeed, *perestukivanie* thrived in the Soviet carceral system. Just a few decades after the overthrow of tsarism, a prison language invented for the revolutionary struggle returned in the cells of the revolutionary state. The cold irony of this development is a crucial component of Arthur Koestler’s novel *Darkness at Noon.*59 When its Old Bolshevik

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55See G. M. Trusov, *Podvodnye lodki v Russkom i Sovetskom flote* (Leningrad, 1963), 312–23; and V. I. Dmitriev, *Sovetsko podvodnoe korablie-stroenie* (Moscow, 1990), 32–63. One of these early submersibles (the *Narodovolets*) has been preserved as an affiliate of the Central Naval Museum in St. Petersburg; its knocking-language table is still intact.

56Quoted in Dmitriev, *Sovetsko podvodnoe korablie-stroenie*, 55.


58Ibid., 71–73, 211.

59In another cruel twist, Koestler’s deeply reactionary novel is today the most widely-known portrayal of *perestukivanie* in world literature.
protagonist is led to solitary confinement on the book’s first page, his first move is to investigate his cell’s acoustics with a studied hand: “The walls on both sides were of solid brick, which would stifle the sound of tapping, but where the heating and drain pipe penetrated it, it had been plastered and resounded quite well.”60 Throughout the course of his tale, knocked conversations are held with a motley collection of fellow prisoners. There is, however, a weary melancholy in its use—where once these taps had subverted the prison regimes of autocratic empires, they now echoed futilely in the belly of a revolution devouring its own.

**THUS DID KNOCKING LANGUAGE PERSIST AFTER 1917:** as a weaponized tocsin of the revolution triumphant, as a morbid death rattle of the revolution betrayed.

Both are true.

The vestigial survival of a radical prison language after October speaks to the larger contradictions of a revolution that both elevated and denied its heritage. However, this further component of revolutionary Russian carceral history—that is: its ambiguous, muted echoes in the first decades of the Soviet experiment—is a story for another day.

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