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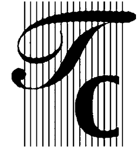

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Prison order through the hyperopticon, collectivism, and atomisation: The surveillance and disciplining of Ukrainian prison officers

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Abstract

Bentham's idea of the panopticon has long influenced the theorisation of prison order. However, this model of control has been applied almost exclusively to prisoners. Drawing on ethnographic work in Ukraine, I argue that the disciplining of prison officers through institutionalised mutual surveillance was just as important to the maintenance of prison order. Broadening the theorisation of prison order by introducing the concept of hyperopticon, I argue that prison order in a Ukrainian prison hinged on two opposites: collectivism of prisoners and atomisation of prison officers, both depending on the system of multifaceted and excessive surveillance.

Keywords

Hyperopticon, polyopticon, prison management, Ukraine, prison officers, penal culture

Introduction

The distinctive feature of post-Soviet prisons is their collectivist nature (Azbel et al., 2022; Piacentini and Slade, 2015; Symkovych, 2018d). Emerging from the communist ideological insistence on the collective and from a practical need to manage the work and housing of incarcerated people on an industrial scale, the Soviet prison system

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created a model in which prisoners lived in large barracks among the people with whom they worked during the day. Combined with a deeply institutionalised underworld prisoner society, these shared lives of constant intimate proximity meant that the informal order depended on mutual surveillance and subjugation of the individual to the collective good of predictable life. Owing to chronic understaffing and the centrality of the Soviet prison's industrial production, the formal authorities accommodated – and largely depended on – this informal prisoner self-organisation (Cressey and Krassowski, 1958; Karklins, 1989; Piacentini, 2004). This model of negotiated order has survived the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite continuously evolving, prison order in most post-Soviet states continues to depend on the collectivist prisoner underworld (Azbel et al., 2022; Oleinik, 2003; Slade and Azbel, 2022; Symkovych, 2018a).

The second party to this negotiated social order in the post-Soviet prison worlds – uniformed prison staff – has largely evaded scholarly attention. To fill this gap, drawing on a larger ethnographic study in a men's medium-security prison in Ukraine,[1] I explain the peculiarities of the organisation and management of uniformed prison officers. I argue that role separation, institutionalised interdepartmental rivalry, and mutual surveillance made the prison governable, despite critical understaffing, modest pay, and low staff morale. I refine the theorisation of the concept of the polyopticon (Piacentini and Slade, 2015) by demonstrating that this multifaceted surveillance applies not only to prisoners, but also to staff, culminating in what I term the hyperopticon – a system of total, excessive surveillance, wherein the watchers are simultaneously watched – even the autocratic and omnipotent prison commander himself. I argue that despite carceral collectivism, prison order also depends on staff atomisation.

The article first explains the nature of prisoner involvement in the generation of order in non-western prisons, and more specifically, the centrality of carceral collectivism as the distinctive feature of post-Soviet penality. After briefly explaining the methodology, I outline Ukrainian penality in flux: the interaction of continuous reforms and the resilience of Soviet legacies, including carceral collectivism, militarism, and a fear of negative visibility. Next, I explicate the organisational structure of the Ukrainian Penitentiary Service (UkrPS) and its struggles. I then sketch the role of the prisoner underworld in prison order. I go on to explain the 'divide-and-rule' practice that rendered the prison governable by institutionalising staff fragmentation and mutual surveillance. I conclude by discussing the resilience of the Soviet governance model through the hyperopticon that continues to underpin the production of prison order in Ukraine three decades after the fall of Soviet communism.

The prisoner collective and negotiated prison order

Developing Bentham's idea of the panopticon, Foucault (1975) famously contended that the perception of constant surveillance generates regulation in even the minutest aspects of everyday prison life. Mindful of this surveillance, prisoners develop self-censorship and regulation in ways that effectively extend and embody official monitoring, controlling, and disciplining power. Contrary to this imposed *individualised* self-discipline in the West, order in many non-western prisons depends on prisoner *collective* self-regulation and mutual dependency. Highlighting the exceptionality of post-Soviet penality, Piacentini and Slade (2015) demonstrate that prison order in this region works through the

polyopticon – an institutionalised totalitarian peer surveillance that enables collective self-control. They argue that in contrast to the panopticon model in the West (the few watching the many), order in Soviet and post-Soviet prisons predicates on the polyopticon – the many watching the many. The polyopticon, they say, constitutes one of three arms of carceral collectivism – a regional model of the social (cultural) and physical (architectural) organisation of prison life and governance. The communal living of prisoners and their co-optation in self-regulation ('self-governance') through the formal administration devolving some disciplinary power to prisoners are the other two arms that simultaneously enable and depend on the polyopticon. This Soviet version of a collective (*kollektiv*) works through peer pressure, fear, and discipline centred on the polyopticon.

Notwithstanding the exceptionality of post-Soviet penality, the devolution of disciplinary power to prisoners and a reliance on their self-regulation in the generation of prison order are prominent in many severely understaffed non-western jurisdictions (Akoensi, 2014; Birkbeck, 2011; Jefferson et al., 2014; Narag and Jones, 2017; Nunes Dias and Salla, 2017; O'Donnell, 2019; Oleinik, 2003; Symkovych, 2018a, 2018d). Birkbeck (2011) argues that, unlike those in the Global North, authorities in the rest of the world mostly leave prisoners to their own devices, with staff playing a minimal role in the generation and maintenance of internal order. The few staff available are largely concerned with controlling the external boundary. Consequently, prison order in these jurisdictions constitutes a tenuous product of explicit and implicit negotiations, mutual accommodations, and compromises between prisoners (their groups or leadership) and officers (senior command).

Despite foregrounding the complex machinations of prisoner societies and their central role in the production of prison order[2] in non-western jurisdictions, scholars interested in prison order outside the West have overlooked the role of the organisation of staff. Most pay little attention to prison officers, either presuming their homogeneity and unity, or disregarding them altogether.[3] This article, by contrast, highlights the role of staff organisation in shoring up complex and tenuous order in a Ukrainian men's prison. In so doing, it expands on the concept of the polyopticon by showing the *centrality of mutual surveillance of officers by officers* in the maintenance of prison order.

Before turning to the discussion, I briefly describe the ethnographic work on which this article draws. I then explain how Ukrainian penality retains many Soviet vestiges, including carceral collectivism and militarism, while undergoing important reforms. Following this, I outline the division of uniformed officers in Ukraine. I argue that this division, along with the formalised polyopticon, were instrumental in the maintenance of order. The system of the hyperopticon enabled senior managers to control frontline officers and dilute their collective power, while also reducing opportunities for staff collusion and the endangering of prisoners' well-being. I conclude by discussing the repercussions of this governance model based on multifaceted, dystopian surveillance and control.

An ethnographic study: A methodological note

This article draws on an ethnography in a medium-security prison for sentenced men in the Kyiv region of Ukraine. Whilst severely understaffed, the prison housed about 800

sentenced repeat offenders. One third of uniformed positions were vacant. On an average day, about 20 officers worked inside the secure prison compound comprising a residential zone and a vast industrial zone with different workshops, such as sewing, welding, stone-splitting, and woodcarving. The prison is divided into squads (officially 'a unit of resocialisation' or, colloquially, *otryád*) – the inherited main site of carceral collectivism – of about 50 people each, and each squad sleeps, eats, works, lines up for roll calls, and rests together. Communist ideology promoted the 'collective' idea in general, and collective labour in particular. Hence, housing prisoners in large groups and organising their labour in a semi-industrial fashion was not only economically sound, but also culturally and ideologically appropriate (Cressey and Krassowski, 1958; Piacentini and Slade, 2015). Unlike in remand prisons, and apart from those in the segregation block, prisoners scattered themselves across numerous workshops, offices, dormitories, and the kitchen during the day.

The fieldwork involved five months of observation of all aspects of prison life, including daily staff briefings (*planyórka*), adjudications, as well as life in dormitories, workshops, yards, the trans-zone checkpoint, and segregation block. Combining snowball and purposive sampling, I selected 21 staff and 20 prisoners for extended, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These interviewees included prisoners from all tiers of the informal hierarchy (discussed in Symkovych, 2018d) and officers from all departments (discussed below), reflecting the range of reputations, personal histories, and orientations (for more on sampling see Symkovych, 2017, 2018b, 2018c, 2019). During the five months of my fieldwork, I resided in the nearby training academy of the UkrPS. There, I shared dormitory accommodation with officers from all types of prisons across Ukraine, who stayed in the academy for several weeks during their refresher training. This co-habitation allowed me to discuss my emerging findings and to compare them with Ukrainian prisons of different security levels, reputations, and populations – including women and minors. All data underwent thematic analysis, and in this article, I draw on the themes pertaining to staff divisions and control (for an expanded discussion of the research design, access, data analysis, and the prison under research see Symkovych, 2018a, 2018c, 2019, 2020, 2022).

Ukrainian Penitentiary Service

Since restoring independence in 1991 and becoming a signatory to most international human rights instruments,[4] Ukraine has undertaken multiple legal reforms, abolishing the death penalty, outlawing torture, and expanding prisoners' rights. Despite these actions, observance of human rights in prisons remains inconsistent, and prison conditions do not often meet legal standards (European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment [ECPT], 2020, 2021; United Nations Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture, 2017).

With the national budget in chronic deficit, Ukraine has been reducing the number of prisoners, prisons, and prison staff over the past 20 years. In 2021, it housed roughly 49,000 prisoners in 109 prisons, including 10,863 unsentenced detainees (Ukrainian Penitentiary Service, 2021).[5] Most prisons are understaffed, with vacancy rates as high as 30%, especially for lower-rank custodial positions. As a result, at a typical medium-

security prison – the type that houses the vast majority of sentenced prisoners – an average of 15–40 officers from across all departments are in charge of 400–800 prisoners (ECPT, 2018, 2020). The ECPT reports that staffing levels are 'too low to allow effective control, at least without relying on certain inmates' (2018: Para 97). This ongoing and severe understaffing means that informal, negotiated order often supplants formal rules (see Symkovych, 2018a, 2020). Indeed, within this context, carceral collectivism retains its centrality despite continuous transformations within the prisoner underworld (Symkovych, 2018c, 2018d).

Ukraine is similar to many other jurisdictions in that its prison system developed from a paramilitary organisation (Thomas, 1972; King, 1982). Despite the official rhetoric of demilitarisation, which has included moving the UkrPS from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of Justice, the prison service remains militaristic in all but name. The Disciplinary Code for Law-Enforcement Personnel (2006) formally regulates the conduct and relationships between uniformed prison staff (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2006). All uniformed personnel have military-style ranks, including psychologists and social workers – called squad supervisors – although psychologists are permitted to wear civilian clothes (Ukrainian Penitentiary Service, 2007: Para 14.8; Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2005: Article 14.6). Female officers do not work face-to-face with male prisoners in Ukraine. Uniformed staff cannot go on strike. The service employs 24,143 people, of whom 14,420 (60%) are uniformed personnel (ECPT, 2019). A Soviet legacy of surveillance and scapegoating engenders a local managerial culture of a fear of visibility. A possibility, and a resultant fear, of external attention from even distant superiors – that always entails negative consequences – looms large in operational decision-making by prison managers. This external gaze and hierarchical displacement of blame render a precarious position for even locally powerful functionaries (see Symkovych, 2020 on negative visibility). With the setting laid out, in what follows I explain the organisation of uniformed prison staff in the prison under research. This reflects the picture across all prisons for sentenced men, women, and children in Ukraine.

Staff organisation

Today, in most western systems, the role of the prison officer combines custody and care (Crawley, 2004; Liebling, 2004; Pogrebin, 1978; although see Schoenfeld and Everly, 2022). By contrast, Ukrainian prison officers perform narrowly defined roles with specialised duties: guards, patrols, social–psychological, and security.

Guards department

The guards department (*Víddil Okhoróny*) in Ukrainian prisons maintains a secure perimeter, checking visitors in and inspecting incoming parcels addressed to prisoners. Guards did not enter the secure compound and their only contact with prisoners was as escorts during transfers. Those stationed in watchtowers on the perimeter could use lethal force to prevent escapes or to repel an external attack on the prison. Watch shifts lasted 10–17 h, with no more than 3–4 h at a time on the watchtower itself. Chronic understaffing meant that, as an exception to the rule, some women were employed as

guards to search parcels and check visitors in. However, no women worked on the watch-towers, perimeter security or as escorts.

Patrols department

The patrols department (*VNiB*, literally, the Department for Surveillance and Security) dealt with internal policing. Their duties involved searching for and confiscating illicit items, detecting signs of tunnelling and hiding places for unauthorised items, as well as intervening in disruptive prisoner behaviour. They documented all transgressions, such as being late for or sleeping at work, inadequate dormitory cleanliness or 'improperly' made beds. However, dispensing privileges or punishments was beyond this department's remit.

This department employed about 20 basic-grade officers, called 'junior inspectors', 2 line managers, 4 officers who acted as the duty officer (*ChPNK*) on a 24-hour rotation, and the overseeing head of the patrols department.[6] As with most officers in other departments, patrols were working class and most had previously served in the military. Many ex-military officers joined the UkrPS because it allowed them to qualify for early retirement with a state pension after a combined 15 years' service in a military or paramilitary government organisation, such as police and border force. The head and line managers mostly carried out desk-based work both inside the compound and in the main administrative building. On a regular day, one basic-grade patrol officer was in charge of the adjacent open section of the prison (*posyólok*), another was in charge of the segregation block, and a third supervised a trans-zone checkpoint (*vákhta*), monitoring movement between the residential zone and workshops in the industrial zone. The remaining two to five junior inspectors on duty policed the industrial and residential zones, each containing hundreds of prisoners. The vacancy rate for the patrols department was about 40%. Such understaffing and subsequent staff-to-prisoner ratios meant that policing was ineffective because prisoners on lookout (*sharý*) alerted other prisoners to the imminent arrival of staff. As I detail elsewhere, most internal policing, dispute resolution, and running of daily tasks – from cleaning to organising official prison production – relied on the rigid, hierarchical prisoner underworld structure (Symkovych, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c).

Social–psychological department

Theoretically, social–psychological officers undertook social work and were responsible for the psychological care of prisoners. The department comprised 18 squad supervisors, 2 psychologists, the deputy head of the department (*pasportýst*, or inspector), and the head of the department, who was *ex officio* the commander's deputy (*zampolít*). Squad supervisors, known colloquially as *otryádniki*, and officially as heads of 'resocialisation units' (squads), performed tasks similar to those of personal officers and residential governors in England and Wales.

All social–psychological staff were uniformed and belonged to middle and senior ranks, from lieutenant to lieutenant colonel, because the rank semi-automatically transferred from any previous military service or paramilitary education.[7] Most had tertiary degrees in military craft, education, law or psychology: the latter two gained mainly through the UkrPS's

own college.[8] At the time that I undertook my fieldwork, the majority of these staff members were former military officers. Most had recently joined the UkrPS and some had not received a uniform or undergone initial training, even several months after joining. Ages ranged from mid-20s to late 50s, and the turnover was high. During my fieldwork, each squad supervisor had to cover at least one additional squad because of understaffing, annual or sick leave, as well as absence due to professional training.

Security department

I spent multiple weeks with officers in other departments, but the prison commander forbade me from shadowing security staff (*operatývnyky* or *operá*) or spending time in their offices; still, I managed to converse with them throughout my fieldwork. Staffed by three officers and the head of department, the security department (*Operatývny Víddil*) was at the heart of power relations in the prison (Symkovych, 2023b). As is often the case across jurisdictions, security was the prison commander's paramount priority (Hepburn and Albonetti, 1980; Schoenfeld and 2022; Sparks et al., 1996). Any decision made by a staff member was weighted against potential security problems and external attention.

As I explain elsewhere in detail (see Symkovych, 2018d on collaborators), gathering information on the daily activities and plans of fellow prisoners, and relaying it to the security department was among the responsibilities of prisoners-trustees. Carceral collectivism facilitated their intelligence-gathering because concealing anything when living with 50 people, sharing a dormitory, a communal toilet, and a workshop, proved next to impossible. Furthermore, the prison operated in such a way as to make it almost requisite for prisoners to interact with security officers. However, whereas dynamic security in the West presumes information-gathering through sustainable, almost friendly relationships, with a degree of trust between wing/unit officers and prisoners, often in the form of a random chat – thus masking power inequality – post-Soviet intelligence-gathering is bluntly coercive. For example, a family visit or a job-related request had to be approved by security officers after a 'chat' with a prisoner. Having the power to deny a prisoner's application on 'security grounds', security officers effectively gathered and triangulated even minute details of prisoners' and officers' behaviour and plans. Non-cooperation entailed the administration's concerted attention towards refusing prisoners, inevitably making prisoners' lives harder (Symkovych, 2018a, 2023b). Apart from such coercion, security officers occasionally induced poor prisoners with cigarettes and tea – which were an informal prison currency – in exchange for information. The role of the security department resembled too closely the place of the security apparatus in the former Soviet Union. The 'cult of Chekism' (Waller, 1994) – an elevation of political police (security service) to a supra-government and extra-judicial agency – seemed to survive the collapse of communism and continued, albeit in a localised form in the Ukrainian prison, decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The 'gods'

At the pinnacle of the governing structure were the prison commander (who was 30 years old) and his first deputy (who was 28 years old). As graduates of the UkrPS in-house

college, they flew through the ranks by briefly working in the social–psychological, patrol, and security departments. Despite stints in different departments, both were known as 'security' people (*operatývnyky*) based on their priorities. Like the Hobbesian Leviathan, the duo exhorted absolute power. They ensured they were kept abreast of the most minute details of prison life: from a cigarette butt found on a staircase to a prisoner missing a mandatory morning exercise or incurring debt while gambling with other prisoners. With this information, as I explain later, they tightly controlled every aspect of the prison's daily operation through autocratic micromanagement. The prison commander chaired the disciplinary commission, adjudicating prisoners' formal transgressions and dispensing formal punishments, such as placement in a segregation block. He also chaired a committee that decided on prisoners' early release, essentially making a decision that the local court subsequently rubber-stamped. All other major decisions, such as the number of days a prisoner spent with his family during a quarterly long visit, were also the commander's prerogative. The military model gave the commander immense powers over his officers too. He effectively controlled officers' promotions, bonus payments, and time of leave (Morris and Morris, 1963). The commander had the power to recall officers during their days off and annual leave, as well as to order the gates' guards not to allow officers out after their shift until he was satisfied officers had completed their allocated tasks.

Penal self-governance and compromised order

As in many other non-western jurisdictions with limited state involvement in the operational running of their understaffed and materially deprived prisons, much of the social order in Ukrainian prisons stems from the informal prisoner organisation and its strict code of conduct. Undergirded by carceral collectivism, this underworld structure operates through rigid stratification, intense peer surveillance, and swift and harsh punishment for transgressing the informal rules. Characteristic of totalitarian regimes, including the former Soviet state, the informal prisoner society relied heavily on denunciation (Arendt, 1973). Not only was privacy almost unattainable because of the typical post-Soviet prison architecture and organisation, but prisoners' failure to report a witnessed transgression of informal rules to prisoner informal adjudicators resulted in beating or ostracism (for a detailed discussion of the operation of a Ukrainian prisoner society see Symkovych, 2017, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d). It is important to remember that withholding information about an 'enemy of the people' (a loose term that could apply to entire groups, as well as any individual deemed a threat to the communist regime) was a criminal offence in the Soviet Union. Thus, historically 'mutual denunciation [was posed as] an obligation as well as virtue' (Fitzpatrick and Gellately, 1996: 756).

Notwithstanding the official discourse of disapproval, the Ukrainian authorities accommodated and benefited from this co-governance model and carceral collectivism more generally. For example, in the prison site in this study, the prison commander explicitly acknowledged a 'Mephistophelean contract' with prisoners (Sparks et al., 1996) and the centrality of their cooperation and self-regulation in the reproduction of prison order:

> Fieldnote. Morning briefing. The duty officer reads out a shift report. He starts with, 'No incidents during the shift were permitted'. The prison commander corrects him: 'Nothing has happened not because of you, but because prisoners decided not to do anything'.

Maintaining a semblance of order constitutes the lowest common denominator of prison officers' work across jurisdictions (Bandyopadhyay, 2010; Sparks et al., 1996). Owing to regular inspections, the administration needed prisoners to appear compliant and observant of prison regime regulations, even if in reality many rules were habitually violated or ignored. Failure to demonstrate this would make the prison commander appear incapable of governance (see Symkovych, 2020 on negative visibility). Although they relied on carceral collectivism to regulate interpersonal relations among prisoners as well as to ensure the smooth running of the regime routine and prison production, the formal authorities nonetheless held the upper hand in power relations, engendering a co-governance model rather than the prisoner self-rule found in penal systems of state abandonment in Latin American countries (Symkovych, 2018a, 2023b; cf. Antillano, 2017; Darke, 2013; Nunes Dias and Salla, 2017). Similarly, despite devolving, albeit mostly informally, considerable power to the prisoner underworld to self-regulate, the prison commander was nonetheless informed, engaged, and visible in the most minute, if not mundane, aspects of prison daily operation, as I explain next.

Divide-and-rule: Centralised micromanagement, interdepartmental rivalry, and the hyperopticon

Roy D. King once quoted a reference to post-Soviet prison commanders as being 'Gods and the czars rolled into one' (1994: 80). Despite expansive reforms, including greater transparency (Symkovych, 2020), in this and most other Ukrainian prisons, prison commanders continue to wield enormous power decades after the dismantlement of the Gulag.

The prison operated in a centralised manner, with even the smallest details being reported to the prison commander and his first deputy. Both involved themselves in the most trivial operational issues and knew most prisoners personally. Even the state of the light on the prison farm or the supply of cucumbers to the kitchen did not escape their attention (cf. Morris and Morris, 1963). Staff and prisoner recollections about the previous commander, as well as accounts from officers in the training academy, suggested that such micromanagement is the norm across Ukrainian prisons. The physical presence of the commander and first deputy was well established. On a regular day, both spent a minimum of 2–3 h inside the compound and a further 4–6 h in the main administrative building. Unlike in many western prisons, front-line staff did not complain about the commander being distant and unaware of the realities of their jobs (cf. Crawley, 2004; Liebling, 2004; Morris and Morris, 1963). On the contrary, his presence through the constant centralised gaze proved unavoidable. Staff felt that not only their line supervisors, but also the commander himself personally closely monitored their performance.

Morning staff briefings comprised reports from department managers and duty officers. Based on collected intelligence, each morning the security department announced a list of 'troublemaking' prisoners whom officers had to 'watch'.[9] Usually, these were

prisoners whom other prisoners denounced for gambling, devising schemes to smuggle in drugs (including by corrupting officers or using illegal telephones), planning to settle scores or any other issues threatening order and security.[10] Often, the commander specifically ordered staff, mostly squad supervisors, to write up 'troublemaking' prisoners by 5 p.m., for unrelated rule infringement if necessary. This is because substantiating violations such as planning to smuggle drugs was next to impossible as witnesses feared peer retaliation (see Symkovych, 2018b, 2018c on the informal prisoner rules). Based on this paperwork, the commander then conducted disciplinary meetings that usually concluded by sending prisoners to a punishment cell (*DIZÓ*) for up to ten days (see Symkovych, 2023b on formal and informal coercion). Expedience versus justice constitutes a perennial prison problem globally (Sparks et al., 1996). This practice evoked uncomfortable parallels with Soviet times, when the application of laws was arbitrary and subject to political needs, manipulated, and used for repression (Khlevniuk, 2004; Solomon, 1996). The saying, often attributed to Stalin's henchman Beria, that 'all we need is a person, and we will not have a problem finding an article [of the Criminal Code to prosecute any person]'[11] became common sense and, to an extent, remains relevant even today.

However, these morning briefings were as much about controlling and disciplining staff as they were about managing prisoners. The commander interpreted many of the reported prisoner infringements as shortcomings of the staff's work, albeit predominantly that of the social–psychological officers. Another Soviet vestige of collective responsibility was that surveilling and coercing troublemaking prisoners also meant monitoring and reprimanding squad supervisors. Staff performance was assessed based on how disciplined their charges were: the commander castigated squad supervisors on the grounds of 'inadequate social–psychological work' with the prisoners on such intelligence reports, despite squad supervisors having little chance of success, given the limited tools at their disposal (see Symkovych, 2023b on staff power). The institutionalised peer control meant that the duty officer and patrol officers had to watch and report those squad supervisors who did not attend prisoners' meal services, morning exercises or the passing of prisoners *en masse* through the trans-zone checkpoint. To further pressure social–psychological staff, the commander ordered the guards department in charge of the gates to log the times when officers entered and left the prison compound. This control aimed to 'encourage' squad supervisors to spend more time doing 'individual' and 'educational' (*vykhovná*) work with prisoners. However, heavy administrative workloads meant that squad supervisors had to spend time in the administrative building outside the compound writing reports (*kharakterýstyka*) for prisoners' parole cases because the case department in turn had to control and report any squad supervisor whose paperwork was behind. Effectively, the system of the polyopticon merged with the panopticon. It created the hyperopticon (υπεροπτικόν): total and excessive surveillance of all, including of the watchers, with all the information streaming to the commander – who himself acted out of fear of negative visibility – that is, external attention and censure (Symkovych, 2020).

Despite the rhetorical insistence on correctional work and lip service to rehabilitation, the fieldwork made it clear that a prison commander's primary concern, along with their understanding of order, was an accident and emergency avoidance to minimise negative visibility. Thus, prison governance comprised two major tasks: preservation of prisoner

cooperation and disciplining largely unmotivated staff (on the former see Symkovych, 2018a). Feeling chronically undermined, demoralised, and misrecognised while receiving an average salary, many officers contemplated leaving the job. One of my interviewees explained:

> If they would pay decently, I would be responsible, I would care. But now, he [commander] wants me to do it right away. But why should I? I've already got more on my plate than I can handle. So now I'll delay doing what he demands for as long as I can. If he gets mad, he can go ahead and fire me. Big deal. The next day I'll be working in some security firm for the same pay and without all this bullshit, paperwork, and hours without pay. (Squad supervisor)

Even so, many stayed despite feeling bitter about the micromanagement and overwhelming demands. Those who chose to stay cited either passion about their work or – more pragmatically – job security, including the prospect of an early retirement with a state pension (Jefferson et al., 2014). Some staff had an unofficial second job, such as a taxi driver or watchman, to make ends meet. Perhaps because of their military background, apart from absenteeism and trivial delays in fulfilling orders, staff nonetheless were compliant overall (see King, 1982; also Morris and Morris, 1963 on staff cynicism and apathy). Some stated that being in the army had taught them to accept such treatment and prioritise duty and obedience over any personal grudge (see Foucault, 1975 on military drills; also Moran and Turner, 2022). Younger officers also feared that dismissal with a negative reference would jeopardise their future employment if they decided to transfer to another paramilitary government body because their record travelled with them. In turn, older officers feared that dismissal would cancel their early retirement for which they qualified through service in the army and UkrPS. Therefore, even though some officers refused to work on their days off, the majority would respond to the prison commander's order by working long hours – without extra pay due to the military organisation – or during their leave days or annual holiday.

Hancock and Jewkes (2011) discuss how technological surveillance may allow freer movement for prisoners and reduce aggressive staff behaviour and contraband smuggling. By institutionalising the hyperopticon of mutual surveillance and interdepartmental rifts, the rigidly differentiated roles of the guard, patrol, security officer, and (proto) social worker in Ukraine eroded officers' collective power and reduced opportunities for staff corruption and collusion in prisoner abuse. As one officer stated: 'Even if you fart, the commander will know it – and sooner than you think'. Conscious of the hyperopticon, officers engaged in self-restraint. This did not mean illegal activities ceased, but, as I detail elsewhere (Symkovych, 2019), officers did not have a *carte blanche* in prisoner abuse. Like prisoners, these Ukrainian officers remained vigilant and mistrustful, as the hyperopticon – of which they were both instruments and objects – incited incessant self-regulation. As in Soviet times when bureaucrats were well aware of the ardent activity of 'whistle-blowers' (*stukachí*), a fear of possible disclosure and sanctions continued to act as a substitute for proper oversight (Kozlov, 1996). As we know from studies of the regimes of mass surveillance and domination, people commonly become more cautious, less trusting, and more individualistic under such conditions (Fitzpatrick, 1996). In turn, such an environment is hardly conducive to the purported aim of rehabilitation

(Schoenfeld and Everly, 2022). For officers, such plural, excessive surveillance made them not only subjects, but also objects of control, engendering feelings of alienation. For example, being continuously castigated for prisoners' endless infringements, social–psychological staff unanimously expressed feeling unappreciated and devalued as scapegoats (for similar feelings among officers in traditional prison cultures in the West see Crawley, 2004; Liebling, 2004; Morris and Morris, 1963). Only the institutionalised hyperopticon and the militaristic model allowed the prison commander to retain and control his staff to enable a co-governance model to continue – thus avoiding a breakdown in prison routine. This co-governance order relied on prisoner collectivisation and staff atomisation. The latter resulted from both objective understaffing, official role fragmentation and staff division, along with concerted surveillance of officers.

However, *contra* the Foucauldian assertion that militaristic drills and surveillance turn officers into docile automata, the prison officers in my study actively undermined the imposed mutual surveillance of the hyperopticon and resisted concerted atomisation (cf. Foucault, 1975). Staff relationships developed not only along departmental lines, but also through personal interactions (cf. Schoenfeld and Everly, 2022 on the cultural and communication abyss between custodial and treatment staff in a US prison). Therefore, depending on personal relations between officers from different departments, some 'shortcomings' were not logged, undermining the hyperopticon and subverting the 'divide-and-rule' governance model. I witnessed officers giving time to colleagues from 'rival' departments to address 'failures' before logging them and making reports to the commander. These actions resembled the resistance of street-level bureaucrats during the Stalin terror, whereby functionaries exercised discretion to circumvent the imposed repressive priorities and targets in the climate of totalitarian surveillance and domination (Khlevniuk, 2004).

Factors such as a sense of shared work ethic and reciprocity played a role in building and maintaining inter-officer relationships. For example, patrol officers would informally request that a line manager not pair them with a colleague they considered lazy (Crawley, 2004). Officers supported each other only when they could expect reciprocal help. For example, all disciplinary reports had to be 'endorsed' by a 'witness report' from another staff member. Everyone knew these were fabricated because understaffing meant that two officers witnessing the same transgression was unlikely. Thus, squad supervisors used morning briefings to write such reports before being subsumed by other duties and not seeing their colleagues for prolonged periods:

> Fieldnote. Morning briefing. [One squad supervisor] passes his folder with his disciplinary report asking a colleague to write a corroborating report. [Another officer] refuses with a hint of indignation: 'And now you want me to write this for you? Every time I've asked you to write a report for me, you were busy or came up with bullshit excuses. Go and find another fool – I am not helping you. Good luck!' An awkward silence drops, but other officers seem to approve of such reaction.

Although there was no overt antagonism between staff from different departments, mutual monitoring undermined officers' collective power, loyalty to peers, and professional solidarity, including in relations with managers. However, it also reduced their

corruption by prisoners, as well as staff collusion in abusing prisoners. The hyperopticon meant that through the net of informants, the security department could restrict unsanctioned abuse of prisoners by staff and control corruption and collusion, albeit doing it in morally and legally questionable ways, thus sustaining the Soviet-era 'cult of Chekism' and legal nihilism. The resultant order was a product of fear and apprehension rather than normative compliance. Despite the bombastic rhetoric of reform, prison governance was about control through the hyperopticon and semblance of orderliness rather than any pretence of rehabilitation, observance of human rights, or the rule of law.

Conclusion

Even though penologists have long recognised the operational role of prisoner self-governance in non-western jurisdictions, they have tended to overlook the role of the organisation of uniformed staff in the production of prison order outside the Global North. This article fills this gap in two ways. First, it highlights the importance of officer division in making a severely understaffed Ukrainian prison governable. Second, it develops the concept of the polyopticon by expanding it to prison officers themselves. I demonstrate how the polyopticon fed into the system of total and excessive surveillance – the hyperopticon – of which the omnipotent prison commander himself was both the watcher and the watched. Although carceral collectivism with its architecture of communal living sustained the prisoner polyopticon, staff organisation and role division enabled the hyperopticon. Without either, given severe understaffing and low morale, the governability of the prison would be untenable.

The Ukrainian case presents a peculiar mechanism of prison governance. On the one hand, like in many non-western prisons, much of the internal order hinged on the self-governing prisoner society, one that capped internal conflicts while also ensuring prison daily routine and industrial production. On the other hand, like in western prisons, the administration had not abdicated its role in prison management. As was the case in many European countries following World War II, the militaristic organisation of the prison force ensured a degree of staff discipline. However, this discipline was as central to prison order and as tenuous as was prisoner cooperation. Major understaffing, micromanagement, constant criticism from the prison commander, and low pay produced minimal work commitment among officers. However, despite officer resentment and major understaffing, the prison operated quite smoothly, albeit with little pretence of doing anything beyond human containment.

Much of the prison order relied on the hyperopticon: the institutionalised system of total, vertical and horizontal surveillance. Whereas extant scholarship has theorised the role of prisoner peer surveillance, I expand the concept of the polyopticon by highlighting the centrality of mutual surveillance of officers by officers in the maintenance of prison order in a severely understaffed prison. Moreover, the central role of the security department suggested the lasting imprint of the 'cult of Chekism'. Mere jurisdictional transfer of the prison service from the paramilitary Ministry of the Interior to the civilian Ministry of Justice two decades ago hardly challenged the governance model. Gulag culture spilled far beyond the prison estate of the former Soviet Union and continues to affect the institutional arrangements, operational cultures, social norms, morals, and sensibilities of a

post-communist prison. Like in the former Soviet Union, fear was at the heart of governance, where the watchers were themselves watched and thus never secure in their position, regardless of their status, power, and displayed loyalty. Although Ukraine is no longer under Soviet rule, old practices and cultures persist in many important areas, such as imprisonment.

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Notes

1. Henceforth prisoners refer to male prisoners and prisons to men's prisons.
2. Although prisoner self-governance is typical of severely understaffed and neglected prisons in the poorer parts of the world, in the collective West prison order also relies on a degree of negotiations and prisoner co-optation in the daily running of prisons.
3. Important studies published in English shed light on prison staff in non-western jurisdictions but they generally do not deal with prison order (although see Akoensi, 2016; Akoensi and Tankebe, 2020; Jefferson et al., 2014).
4. Ukraine signed but has not yet ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, nor the optional protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The country has not joined the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.
5. Including 503 prisoners in 3 prison hospitals. Additionally, 34 prisons are situated on the occupied territories of Crimea and in the Donbas region and thus are excluded from the last available official statistics. Upon Russia's massive escalation of their war in February 2022, the website of the UkrPS became and remain unavailable.
6. Like the Head of the Guards Department, the Head of the Patrols Department, as well as all four Duty Officers, had the rank of major.
7. Institutions of tertiary education that train personnel for the Ministry of the Interior, the tax authority, border service, etc. are militarised; their students wear paramilitary uniform, have marching drills, learn to use firearms, and are usually created junior lieutenants upon graduation.
8. The reader should be aware of the low quality of higher education in Ukraine.
9. After just a few weeks and without being privy to the happenings of the Security Department, thanks to morning (sometimes followed up by afternoon) briefings, I knew quite specific details about the behaviour and issues of many prisoners, 'shortcomings' of individual officers, and other operational problems, such as industry contracts and debts, supplies, and wage delays.

10. However, sometimes staff were told to watch prisoners because of their suicide risk. Usually this concerned prisoners who had received upsetting news from close ones (through illicit telephones) or lost considerable money in illicit card games because non-payment of debt meant a downgrade in prisoner informal hierarchy and by extension, a downgrade in quality of life (Symkovych, 2023a).
11. In Russian: «Был бы человек — статья найдется».

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