Prison islands. Their history and present situation

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ABSTRACT

The specific character of penitentiary total institutions being created in places that use existing natural barriers accompanies the authority’s belief in maximum effectiveness when using these barriers in rehabilitation activities. Such places include, among others, prison facilities located on islands. Both the examples from history and modern times given below make such perception of the prison islands to be treated with great caution.

Keywords: prison, total institutions, physical barriers, island, penitentiary isolation

1. INTRODUCTION

The functioning of penitentiary institutions, which themselves carry a specific isolating potential, in places being naturally isolated from the outside world is not a new phenomenon. The specific character of the functioning of total institutions of that category involves minimising the participation of third parties and public opinion in the current functioning of rehabilitation facilities. Regardless of the form and degree of the state authority’s legitimacy, it has the right to manage and establish the scope of totality in the subordinate penitentiary institutions. Both in the colonial era and now, prison facilities situated on islands are considered by state authorities favourable for rehabilitation purposes in an optimal way.
2. SELECTED PRISON ISLAND

Bastøy Island (Norway)

Bastøy Prison – a prison on the island of the same name in Norway, located about 75 kilometres south of Oslo. It is characterised by ecological upkeep and housing, lowest reoffending rates in Europe and gentle treatment of prisoners. It occupies an area of 2.6 km². It hosts 115 inmates. The prison employs 69 persons, of which 5 remain on the island overnight at work. Only half of the prison staff are security department guards. The prison is about one hour commuting from the Norway’s capital. The facility is being called “the first ecological prison in the world” because it is solar powered, produces food for its own needs,
recycles everything possible, attempts to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, and has wood-fired stoves for heating. It is one of the busiest prisons in Norway. After leaving the facility, only 16% of prisoners relapse into crime (for comparison, the European average is around 70%). It is the lowest rate of recidivism in Europe. The only access to the island is from a ferry that departs from Horten which is operated by the prison’s inmates. In the facility, there are convicts from 20 countries, including Poles, Ethiopians and Pakistanis. It is the least expensive to maintain prison in the country. All prisoners are males. Earlier, in the years 1900-1953, a juvenile correctional centre for boys operated on the island. On 21 May 1915, it was a site of a rebellion by boys, as a result of which the regime ruling in the centre was softened. The facility was opened in 1982 as a prison for adult men. The inmates live now in wooden cottages and work on the prison farm, growing poultry and tending sheep, cows and horses. They are also engaged in berry picking, bicycle repair, work in a laundry or woodworking shop. They work 7 hours a day each. Criminals serving their time in other prisons may apply for a transfer to Bastøy Prison five years before the end of the sentence. There is no monitoring in the prison and the guards do not use guns or batons against inmates. In return, the convicts can not drink alcohol, use drugs or violence. Throughout the facility’s history, there has never been a murder or beating here. One of the prisoners escaped from the facility and left the island but was quickly captured and locked up in another prison. There has been also a case that one of convicts escaped on the way to prison.

Côn Sơn Island (Vietnam)

On the largest island of Côn Đảo Islands archipelago, i.e. on Côn Sơn Island (also known as Côn Lôn), one of the toughest prisons in Vietnam is located. It was established in the second half of the 19th century, in 1862, as a prison for the biggest and most dangerous
enemies of the French colonisation. In 1954, when the French left Vietnam, it was turned over to the South Vietnamese government. However, little changed in the functioning of this facility. During the US intervention, the Vietnamese theoretically managed the prison but in fact the facility became a testing ground for CIA, especially at the end of the 1960s when the Americans started the Phoenix Programme, the aim of which was to identify and eliminate the South Vietnamese communists. Nearly 10,000 prisoners passed through the prison on Côn Sơn Island, both men and women. The facility was known for its ruthlessness and cruelty – the prison was primarily overcrowded. It was closed in 1975, shortly after the unification of Vietnam. Today, the prison is open to the public.
Phú Quốc Island (Vietnam)

We are all aware of the atrocities of the Vietnam War. This war was a hell taking place on the area of today’s Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. In the days of the war itself, called by the Vietnamese the American War, a prison operated on Phú Quốc Island to 1973 where the Americans deported tens of thousands of war prisoners. The Phú Quốc Prison, known as Coconut Tree Prison, was built by the French in 1949 on the area of 40 hectares, and during the Vietnam War it was taken over by the Americans. Inconvenient political prisoners were held in there. Its name comes from the village where the prison was constructed: Coconut Tree Village (about 5 kilometres north of An Thoi town). It is estimated that in the prison in total there were detained 40,000 Vietnamese prisoners and political enemies opposing initially the French troops and then the American ones.
Christmas Island (Australia)

Christmas Island is a place where the Australian government created a closed detention centre for immigrants trying to get to this country. The immigrants intercepted in the Australian territorial waters are the largest group of those seeking asylum, who were placed on this remote island on the Indian Ocean, located almost 1600 kilometres away from the northernmost coast of Australia. These people apparently come from the Middle and Near East, less frequently from the African countries.
Built at the final cost of $400 million, this Australian centre, compared to Alcatraz and determined by the defenders of human rights as “being like a prison”, can accommodate 800 people. Realising that this place was notorious since the beginning of its operation, the Australian government decided that women, children and families would not be sent in there. The Australian authorities were forced to create this facility by successive waves of immigrants. The centre gained critical opinion of the defenders of human rights. They viewed its buildings in August and they considered the security measures adopted there as “those resembling a prison”.

Rikers Island (USA)

It is New York City’s main jail complex. This complex consists of 10 prisons and jails. There are also women among the convicts. But as it turns out, the initial hell, which was supposed to be staying in prison, become over time an opportunity to experience the mystical catharsis. It turns out that imprisonment, which often means sentencing to brutality and violence inside the jail, does not bring the expected results. This complex bears the name of the island on which it is situated. It is located on the East River between Queens and the mainland Bronx. The prison can accommodate even 20 thousand prisoners, with a staff to 9,000 officers working on its premises. This prison is characterised by stabbings, beating, and brutal treatment by the guards. It is a breeding ground for violence and aggression. Most of
the detained are those accused who await a trial. Only 10% of prisoners attended a secondary school, 20% of them are HIV positive, and 70% were imprisoned for drug-related offences. The Rikers Island prison complex consists of several facilities. One of them houses the prisoners convicted of particularly cruel crimes, pregnant women are placed in another facility, while homosexuals in yet another one. The cost of the whole facility maintenance significantly burden the state budget: $570 are spent per one detainee a day. The whole penal system is not perfect. 70% of the prisoners who have served their sentences return on Rikers Island within two years after release.

Île Sainte-Marguerite (Sante-Marguerite Island) – Fort Royal (France)

The Fort Royal is a fortification on to the Île Sainte-Marguerite near Cannes on the French Riviera. The island is located on the former trade route between Italy, Provence and Spain, and the fort built in the mid-17th century served, among others, as a protection for the route. It held its military role up to the 20th century. It was abandoned in 1944. Most of the time, there was also a prison on its premises where the Man in the Iron Mask was incarcerated. The fort’s inhabitants did not have easy access to drinking water because there are no its natural sources on the island. Therefore, there were underground storage tanks built at the fort where rainwater was collected. At present, water is supplied to the island by the submarine water pipeline. The forts consists of several buildings, including barracks, an ammunition depot, a prison, a chapel, and of course the thick walls surrounding the whole complex. Currently, the complex houses a museum and a youth hostel. The Man in the Iron Man is an authentic person and the most famous prisoner in history. Unfortunately, his identity is not known, which of course awakens the imagination of all those being interested in this figure. We only know that he was imprisoned a total of 34 years, including 11 years in the Fort Royal. He died in 1703 in Paris and all his personal belongings and mask were burnt. Who was this man and what he did to deserve such a life? More than 60 names appear on the list of suggested persons, and the most popular is the theory that it was purportedly King Luis XVI’s twin brother who was encased in the iron mask. Also Victor Hugo wrote about this mysterious figure. The Museum of the Sea (Musée de la Mer) is located in the biggest building of the
fort, called the Old Castle. It was built in the 17th century. Immediately after entering it, on the left, there are prison cells, including that of the Man in the Iron Mask.
In the second part of the facility, museum exhibitions are arranged presenting, among others, the objects being dragged up of the Mediterranean Sea near the island. It is mostly the well preserved ceramic pots from a Roman wrecked ship sunken in the 1st century B.C. They are interestingly presented and definitely are worth seeing but the most impressive in this place is the story about the legendary prisoner anyway. This makes it difficult to direct thoughts to other objects.

**Bali Island – Kerobokan Prison (Indonesia)**

Hotel Kerobokan, ironically and affectionally nicknamed in such a way by Kathryn Bonella, an Australian, is in fact one of the most overcrowded prisons in the world. The author observed this world for many months. Situations described in the book is violence, rape and cruelty which are a key to Hotel Kerobokan, a prison into which both murderers and drug smugglers are thrown, and such people are never in shortage because foreigners from all over the world come to Bali Island willing to risk their freedom to smuggle the appropriate stuff. One of the female prisoners jailed in Kerobokan Prison, Schapelle Corby, an Australian beauty school student, tried to carry more than 4 kilograms of marijuana, and all TV stations followed her trial. The world reacted with disbelief when it turned out that she was sentenced to 20 years behind bars. Her fellow countrywoman and a journalist, Kathryn Bonella, decided then to write her biography. She was interested in this topic to such an extent that she quickly made a decision that a separate book should be dedicated to Kerobokan Prison.
Especially that many foreigners are among those serving their sentences, including a large group of Australian citizens. For drug smugglers, getting to the place where an absurdly cramped cell is shared with murderers was an absolute shock. Solitary confinement cells bring to mind a cramped cubby-hole from the labour camps, the number of bunks per square metre is beyond all expectations. This increases aggression, or the prisoners begin to suffer from depression, being cut off the world. In the cellblock for women, the picture of the penitentiary reality in this facility is no less brutal and riddled with corruption in the cellblock than in the male one. Many female inmates attempted suicide, were victims of harassment by both guards and cell mates. At the same time, Kerobokan Prison is a small supermarket. Trade and private production (e.g. baking cookies) flourishes, friendships are established – both those arising from the necessity and pure sympathy. Kerobokan Prison is the real world in miniature.
Norfolk Island was discovered by Captain James Cook in 1774. In 1788, the island was annexed by Great Britain and embodied into the Colony of New South Wales. After annexation, a penal settlement was established on the island which functioned to 1814. It was one of the harshest British penal settlements to which the most dangerous prisoners were sent. Due to its geographical isolation, the island worked very well as a “natural prison”. The situation improved in 1840 when Captain Alexander Maconochie came to the island. He devised a mark system that combined reform with reward and enabled convicts to earn their freedom after accruing a certain number of marks, or credits, for good behaviour. The Maconochie’s reforms were so successful that were implemented later in England, Ireland and the USA. It turned out, however, that their author fell into disfavour with some influential people because he rejected their methods. Therefore, he was finally removed from his position. After he had left the settlement, cruelty returned to Norfolk Island. In 1844, the island was transferred from the Colony of New South Wales to the Colony of Van Diemen’s Land (now Tasmania). In 1854, after strong complaints by the clergy, the island was abandoned as a penal settlement, and its convicts were shipped to Port Arthur in Tasmania.

A penal settlement functioned until the beginning of 1855 and then the island was abandoned again. In 1856, the next settlement began on Norfolk Island, this time these were the descendants of Tahitians and the HMS Bounty mutineers who were resettled form the Pitcairn Island. In memory of this event, the most important local national holiday called
“Bounty Day” is celebrated on Norfolk Island on 8 June each year. In November 1856, Queen Victoria established a distinct and separate settlement on Norfolk Island with its own authorities, only formally subordinate to the Governor of New South Wales. In 1896, the autonomy of the settlement was abolished, and an administrator appointed by the Governor of New South Wales was introduced in place of local authorities. In 1914, Norfolk Island was formally taken over from New South Wales by the federal authorities as an external territory of Australia. In 1977, inhabitants of the island opted in a referendum for maintaining this status, protesting against the projects of political integration with Australia. In 1979, Norfolk Island was granted wide autonomy thanks to the Norfolk Island Act passed then by the Parliament of Australia which became the legal basis for the functioning of the Territory as an autonomous entity within the external territory of Australia.

3. CONCLUSION

The functioning of prison facilities on islands brings about a considerably growth in the phenomena and situations being adverse for rehabilitation reasons. Increasing the degree of totality through the use of natural conditions induces aggressive behaviour among both those detained in these facilities and the staff serving them. The exception seems to be a Norwegian penal settlement on Bastøy Island, the administrators of which try to minimise the natural barriers of the island by making free movement of prisoners on its territory possible and reducing the guarding personnel to the necessary minimum. However, this is an element of the specific character of the penitentiary policy in the Nordic countries which are not applicable in other countries for cultural, legal and financial reasons.

References


