

# George Kennan's Photography Collection of Political Exiles in Labor Camps of Late Imperial Siberia

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Well before the start of the Soviet era, Siberia was infamous for its association with exile and forced imprisonment. Though many of the camps have been dismantled since, the archival photographs of life in incarceration remain. What then, do we do with these photographs and their difficult legacy? These photographic records carry many meanings and relate in complex ways to conceptions of bodies, politics, history, and memory. In the archive, photographs transcend their original context to be given a new meaning through their institutional preservation. The traces of meaning that they hold are multifaceted, and it is this tension between the state institution and the personal object that needs further critical inquiry.

This article examines an album of photographs collected and assembled by the American explorer and scholar George Kennan (1845-1924), taking into consideration the album's historical, photographic, and archival history—that is, both what the album meant to Kennan and the album's place within the larger history of Siberian penal colonies and efforts of maintaining their memory for political ends. A century after its creation, the collection still contains unexplored insights into the relationship between photography and political exile in Imperial Russia. Although many of those pictured in the album had a personal connection with Kennan, the collection was a way for him to create a historical record out of his memories and experiences. Kennan's collection forms an archive of criminal photographs, but one that is different from a state police archive. While the archive depicts exiled prisoners, it does not operate as an institutional police archive would. It was an album of assorted people, ranging from friends, acquaintances, and strangers Kennan came to know through his travels.<sup>1</sup> For him, it fulfilled the dual function of a personal archive of memories and a source for historical research to support his scholarly publications and lectures. This article shows how photography enabled the archiving of political prisoners in institutional archives through collections like Kennan's album and interprets the album as an object of

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1. As described in George Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System, Volumes I and II* (New York: The Century Co., 1891).

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Kennan's personal history, a photographic index of people, and an important key for understanding Kennan's politics and activism.

Without the captions, these portraits might resemble a personal album of one's family, friends, and acquaintances, as was commonly done with *carte de visite* portrait photographs in the nineteenth century. Elizabeth Siegel has argued that early photograph albums have an immense social and cultural significance which has been under-examined in the history of photography.<sup>2</sup> She states that "the codified poses of cartes de visite—the small, inexpensive, and widely reproduced portrait photographs that filled albums in the 1860s—and the repetitive formats of albums themselves reveal a trend, in even these most personal of images, toward standardization and assimilation."<sup>3</sup> Certainly, the photographs in Kennan's collection exhibit these same traits. Siegel continues by explaining that no individual photograph within the album could be representative of the whole, since "as collections of photographs, albums performed many more functions and possessed wider meanings than any single picture could alone."<sup>4</sup> This also applies to Kennan's album. Each photograph and its caption tell an individual story that's unrelated to any other, but they are all unified through the album's coherent presentation format which links them together through the numbered index system. However, there is a major difference between this album and what would commonly at this point constitute a vernacular portrait album of family and friends. One of the key distinctions is that the photographs are organized alphabetically by last name and numbered sequentially. Thus, it does not fit with the characteristics of personal albums of the time since they were not usually structured this way. Another feature is that a typed table of contents listing the names of those pictured (alphabetized by the order of the last name followed by the first name) precedes the pages with photographs.

Although Kennan's passion for exposing the injustices of tsarist prison camps was genuine, his activism was limited in scope. His interest in prisons did not extend beyond the ones he visited in Russia, despite his extensive travel throughout the United States and the world. He avoided placing his studies of Russian prisons within a broader context of abolition or reform, and the entirety of his interest in this area was limited to prisons he visited in Russia. That is, Kennan was not a prison abolitionist in a broad sense.<sup>5</sup> In general, his politics were more progressive in foreign affairs than in domestic ones. He did not publicly support progressive political reform in the United States and in his later years became outspokenly conservative in his views on domestic politics.<sup>6</sup> Viewing his political activism in this context is useful for understanding the limitations of his scholarship on the injustice of the exile experience. It seems that Kennan felt that the political exiles in Russia were especially undeserving of such punishment, as

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2. Elizabeth Siegel, *Galleries of Friendship and Fame: A History of Nineteenth-Century American Photo Albums* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 1.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 7.

5. Travis, 169.

6. *Ibid.*, 364-365.



**Figure 1.** Richards of Medina, N.Y., *G.K. i.e., George Kennan in Siberian Exile Dress, Each Piece Given by an Exile from the Dress He Had Worn*, between 1886 and 1890, Photograph. Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/99615539/>.

though the Imperialism of the tsars were somehow exceptionally cruel when in fact such torturous practices of incarceration were not unique to Russia.

After his return back home to the states, in 1891 Kennan became a founding member of the American branch of an American and British anti-authoritarian organization called the Society of the Friends of Russian Freedom.<sup>7</sup> Among its membership, the organization included such famous public figures as the writer Mark Twain. Kennan served as the vice president of the organization's American branch to fundraise in support of anti-tsarist exiles.<sup>8</sup> However, Kennan's anti-imperialist stance became a double-edged sword when it came to his reputation. He was chiefly responsible, through his books and public lectures, for influencing the largely-negative late nineteenth-

century American public opinion of the tsarist government in Russia.<sup>9</sup> As an anti-Imperial activist, he gave several hundred lectures in 1889-1900 on the topic of Russian prison camps.<sup>10</sup> Dressed in the camp uniform and shackles worn by the prisoners in Siberia (Figure 1), he appeared before audiences in the North American Northeast, Midwest, and South on his transcontinental tours.<sup>11</sup>

The title of the photograph is "G.K. [i.e., George Kennan] in Siberian exile dress, each piece given by an exile from the dress he had worn." It is attributed to Richards of Medina, New York (the same city where Kennan lived), and dated between 1886 and 1890.<sup>12</sup> Certainly, Kennan's desire to have himself photographed dressed as a prisoner is remarkable. I argue that it was not only a form of political activism on behalf of political prisoners. We can interpret the

7. Laura Ruttum, "Biographical Note," George Kennan Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division (New York: The New York Public Library, 2008), vi.

8. *Ibid.*, vi.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, v.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Richards of Medina, N.Y., *G.K. i.e., George Kennan in Siberian Exile Dress, Each Piece Given by an Exile from the Dress He Had Worn*, between 1886 and 1890, photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/99615539/>. (Accessed April 10, 2022.)

act of putting on the exile uniform as a way for Kennan to remember his time in Siberia. Wearing the uniform on stage may have helped him feel that he was part of the exile community and its supporters. Although Kennan hadn't been an exile in Russia, he felt a connection to the prisoners there. On a certain level, perhaps he also identified with their experience of dispossession when he could no longer return to Russia. Putting on the uniform metaphorically transported him back and memorializing that feeling in the portrait helped to cement the memory and his connection to Russia.

The drama of his presentation shocked and delighted the large crowds who turned out to see him, and he received positive reviews from critics.<sup>13</sup> The success of these public lectures made Kennan famous and helped further his cause, but his public criticism of exile and his antagonism toward the Russian monarchy led to his banishment from Russia. Despite his efforts, Kennan's activist campaign did not result in the abolition of either the tsarist government or the exile system, but only in his own expulsion. The Russian government would not allow him to return after his last trip there in 1901.<sup>14</sup> Even after he was banned from Russia, Kennan's interest in Russia continued. In his later years, he completed lecture tours around the United States, actively corresponded with Russian revolutionaries, and published opinion pieces in American newspapers on the topic of Russian politics.

### George Kennan in Russia

Since the origins of the album are closely tied with Kennan's biography, a brief overview of how the American's interest in Russia developed is necessary. Between 1865 and 1868, Kennan traveled to Russia for the first time. This was the inaugural trip of his many expeditions to Russia. In fact, at the time of his first trip, he was not yet established as the famous explorer and historian of Russia that he would become in later years. Even his first trip there happened almost by chance. According to Kennan's biographer Frederick Travis, the young Kennan had been working at an office as a telegraph operator when he was invited to join an expedition to Russia.<sup>15</sup> He was asked to be part of the Russian-American Telegraph Expedition to Siberia, an invitation that he eagerly accepted.<sup>16</sup> The opportunity to work for Western Union as a surveyor for a potential telegraph route through the northeastern portion of Siberia was both a way to explore the world and a career prospect that would take Kennan away from his native Cincinnati, Ohio. Though the multi-year expedition proved to be an unexpected emotional, physical, and financial hardship for Kennan, he used his journal entries to later publish a personal account of his travels through Siberia entitled *Tent Life in Siberia* (1870).<sup>17</sup> It was an ethnographic account of the people he encountered in Northern Siberia while on the telegraph expedition as a member of their Asiatic

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13. Travis, 179.

14. *Ibid.*, 254.

15. Frederick Travis, *George Kennan and the American-Russian Relationship, 1865-1924* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1990), 13.

16. *Ibid.*

17. George Kennan, *Tent Life in Siberia and Adventures Among the Koraks and Other Tribes in Kamtchatka and Northern Asia* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1870).

Division. As a result, he developed a lifelong interest in Russia that occupied him for the remaining decades of his life. His second trip to Russia occurred in 1870 when he traveled through the Caucasus.<sup>18</sup> In the coming years, Kennan would go on to become a seasoned traveler, prolifically writing, publishing, and lecturing about his experiences. In the time since, the Kennan family name has become associated with American and Russian foreign affairs because the senior Kennan was the first cousin twice removed of the American foreign policy expert George Frost Kennan (1904-2005), who would, decades later, shape US and Soviet relations in a very significant way through his Cold War strategy of “containment.”

Throughout his long career, the elder Kennan’s views of Russian politics changed as they were shaped by increasing degrees of exposure to its people, society, and culture.<sup>19</sup> During the first two trips through Russia, Kennan’s outlook on the Imperial government remained favorable and he was not yet critical of the regime. At that time, Kennan was deeply committed to his travels and embraced the role of an explorer, traveling widely throughout Imperial Russia and documenting his encounters with indigenous Siberians. Over time his fame grew with subsequent trips, and his reputation as an expert on Russia was well-established before the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> Through his public lectures and popular publications, his political views on Russia became widely influential in the American media sphere.<sup>21</sup> The articles, books, and lectures he produced on the topic of Russia were aimed at an American audience unfamiliar with the intricacies of the Imperial penal system. After the first two initial trips, his area of scholarly focus became Siberia and its prison camps. His methodological approach also became more developed beginning in the 1880s. At that time, he began to organize his trips to Russia as research expeditions for gathering information for subsequent publications.<sup>22</sup>

Although Kennan was initially sympathetic to the Imperial regime in Russia, continued exposure to the exile system in Russia changed his opinion.<sup>23</sup> According to Travis, Kennan was aware as early as 1870 that political exiles and criminal exiles received distinctly different types of punishment.<sup>24</sup> Although both types of exiles were subjected to cruel working conditions of daily hard labor, political exiles were typically exiled for life, while criminal exiles usually served a set term after which they were allowed to return to their previous lives.<sup>25</sup> During his initial period of sympathy with the Imperial regime, Kennan often downplayed this important difference for his American audience in order to make a sweeping

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18. Travis, 43.

19. *Ibid.*, 88.

20. Frith Maier, Introduction to *Vagabond Life: The Caucasus Journals of George Kennan*, ed. Frith Maier and Daniel Clarke Waugh (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 8-9.

21. *Ibid.*, 3.

22. Travis, 89.

23. Maier, 10.

24. Travis, 40.

25. *Ibid.*, 39.

generalization that cast the Imperial regime in a positive light.<sup>26</sup> However, he eventually came to emphasize the distinction as being important. In what would become a highly influential experience, Kennan traveled through Siberia again in 1885 as part of a year-long trip through Russia. A special confluence of factors made this journey different from the ones that came before. Kennan had carefully planned with a particular purpose in mind, setting out to learn more about the exile system in Siberia in order to write a detailed study for an American audience. This time he was writing on assignment for the publisher Roswell Smith of *The Century Magazine*, a popular illustrated monthly magazine with a large readership among the American public of the late-nineteenth century. Upon the completion of the journey, he planned to publish his reflections in a series of articles in the magazine.<sup>27</sup>

This trip became pivotal to Kennan's relationship with the Imperial system in Russia and changed both his personal politics and the course of his career. The 1885-1886 trip through Russia marked a turning point in his opinion of exile as a method of punishment in Russia.<sup>28</sup> Now writing for a new publisher and their magazine audience, he reversed his previous views and became a critic of the Imperial government and its penal system. Kennan published his second book about Russia, detailing what he had seen. The 1891 two-volume, anti-tsarist text, *Siberia and the Exile System*, is a damning exposé of the living conditions of exiles in Siberia.<sup>29</sup> Its lasting effect was to solidify Kennan's reputation as a crusader against the Russian penal system. It was based on his earlier articles for *The Century Magazine* and published by Century Company, also the publisher of the magazine.

### Photographs of Exile

The legacy of George Kennan lives on in the archives of The New York Public Library (NYPL), which houses a photograph album of a collection of late-nineteenth-century photographs which belonged to him. Located within the Slavic and East European Collections, it is part of the Kennan collection and

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26. Ibid.

27. Another aspect that set this trip apart was the planned addition of a pictorial element to go along with Kennan's writing. Unlike on previous journeys, for the length of the expedition Kennan planned to be accompanied by an artist as his traveling companion. He invited his friend, the American artist George Albert Frost (1843-1907). The two had previously travelled to Russia together years earlier on a different voyage, during Kennan's first trip to Russia as part of the telegraph expedition. Kennan commissioned Frost especially for the journey so that Frost could create illustrations of the places that they planned to visit, including forced labor camps in Siberia. Frost's illustrations of their trip were intended to accompany the text that Kennan planned to write for *The Century Magazine*. In his later published account, Kennan periodically refers to Frost sketching scenes of notable local buildings seen during the trip. He also refers to Frost taking photographs, although it is only a brief reference in the published text without much detail. George Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System, Volume II* (New York: The Century Co., 1891), 1 and 223.

28. Maier, 10.

29. George Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System, Volumes I and II* (New York: The Century Co., 1891).

labeled “Portraits of Russian Political Exiles and Convicts, with some Additional Photographs Depicting the Life of both Political and Common Criminals in Siberia, Collected and Presented to the New York Public Library by George Kennan.”<sup>30</sup> It contains two hundred and forty-six mounted yellowed, two-tone albumen photographs accompanied by a typed table of contents and captions. The subject matter ranges from landscape photographs, group photos, and individual portraits, all of which are pasted onto blank paper pages, with several to a page. The entire collection was compiled by Kennan and given by him to the library in 1920, just four years before his death in 1924.<sup>31</sup> The photographs were just one part of the sizable archival donation, which included pictorial, printed, and manuscript materials. This archive is the culmination of the materials Kennan had collected during his expeditions and subsequent research on Russia and its political system over the course of his lifetime.

Within the album, the photographs are sequentially numbered by hand and labeled underneath with typed captions (Figures 2). Most of the captions are typed on a piece of paper pasted underneath a photograph, and some contain handwritten corrections. In general, the labels are inconsistent in the degree of detail that they provide (Figure 3). For example, some of the photographs are not labeled, while others are only labeled with a name. Others provide a more complete biographical history, such as the subject’s name, the crime they were charged with, and the location of their exile (Figure 4).<sup>32</sup>

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30. George Kennan, “Portraits of Russian Political Exiles and Convicts, with some Additional Photographs Depicting the Life of both Political and Common Criminals in Siberia, Collected and Presented to the New York Public Library by George Kennan,” *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1920. Accessed March 10, 2020. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/portraits-of-russian-political-exiles-and-convicts-with-some-additional/#/?tab=about>.

31. Hee-Gwone Yoo, “Holdings of Rare Photographs and Plate Books at the Slavic and Baltic Division of The New York Public Library,” *Rosia Yongu (Russian Studies)* 12, no. 1 (2002): 323-332.

32. The caption text was composed by Kennan with the help of library staff, as described on the typed note pasted at the beginning of the album, which reads:

“The text of the legends placed below the photographs or on the opposite page consists of a copy of the inscription on the back of the photograph, coming in most cases from Mr. George Kennan’s pen, with additional notes supplied by Mr. Konstantin Oberuchev and the Slavonic Division. Mr. Kennan’s and Mr. Oberuchev’s notes are followed by letters K and O respectively.”

Konstantin M. Oberuchev was a Russian revolutionary living in New York as an émigré at the time. It is unclear exactly how Kennan and Oberuchev came to work on the project together, but they likely had a personal connection since Kennan was eager to befriend Russian activists. On the whole, captions signed with the letter K are more predominant throughout the album, with the “O” inscriptions appearing less frequently.





Mines of Kara, eastern Siberia; Prison, barracks in 1885. Katorga for both common criminals and political offenders. (K)

**Figure 2.** George Kennan, *Mines of Kara; eastern Siberia; Prison, barracks in 1885. Katorga for both common criminals and political offenders.* (K), Slavic and East European Collections, The New York Public Library. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-415c-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.



A Siberian "etape" or exile station house 1885. (K)

**Figure 3.** George Kennan, *A Siberian "etape" or exile station house 1885.* (K), 1920. Slavic and East European Collections, The New York Public Library. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-41d3-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.





**Figure 4.** George Kennan, *Exiled bell in Uglich; Fialka, Izmailova, Spiridonova, Yaros, Bitzenko, Yezerskaya; Political exiles in Chita, Trans-Baikal (Lazaref, Shishko, Fanny, and others). For names see "Siberia & the exile system. (K), 1920. Slavic and East European Collections, The New York Public. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-41a4-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.*

One of the most interesting and valuable features of the album is its multimedia presentation, combining images and text in a bound book form. The album is both photographic and textual, and meaning is conveyed through the juxtaposition of text and image together. The photographs that make up the collection are mounted to the paper pages of a red cloth hardcover album in a standard library binding. Inside the album, a variety of photographs show different scenes from forced-labor prison camps and include individual portrait photographs of political prisoners in Russia. In addition to the studio photographs which make up the majority of the album, there are landscape photographs taken outdoors of rivers, exile barges,

prisons, houses, and mines. There are also several postmortem photographs. The formats and styles of the photographs differ throughout the album. Some portraits are within an oval shape centered on a blank white rectangle, while others are printed to the edge of the photographic paper (Figure 5). Though the individual poses differ, most of the subjects sit facing the camera in either a frontal or three-quarter view from the shoulders up.

Many of the photographs are from the Kara Katorga (*Kariyskaya katorga* in Russian), a forced-labor prison camp. Located in a geographically remote area in Transbaikalia, the Kara camp was near the Shilka River and the city of Nerchinsk, in Eastern Siberia. Kennan described traveling through this region and stopping



**Figure 5.** George Kennan, *Lesevich, Lewandowska, Lobanovski, Legkii, Logovski*, 1920. Slavic and East European Collections, The New York Public Library. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-41b5-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

in Nerchinsk in *Siberia and the Exile System*. For a time, Kara functioned as a destination for exiled prisoners from Western Russia. It was shut down a few years after Kennan's visit. Like other such camps, it was a self-contained settlement with permanent structures, as shown in Figure 3. Many of the prisoners depicted in the album were exiled to the camps from their homes in Western Russia between the 1860s through 1880s, to work as punishment for their crimes. The camp was situated at the site of Imperial gold mines where many of the prisoners worked daily from sunrise to sunset and in all seasons. Due to the political nature of their persecution, their prison sentences were of varied—sometimes indefinite—duration. On some of the captions, Kennan noted the criminal charge after the person's name. As described by the captions, several of the prisoners identified in the album never left exile, tragically dying during their sentence.<sup>33</sup>

A closer look at the history of the album reveals unpublished information about the subjects pictured and Kennan's relationship with them. Studying the history of the album as an object also provides insight into Kennan's motivations as a scholar and collector. In a library article published in February 1921, the next year after the collection was given to the NYPL, the then-chief of the Slavonic Division, Abraham (also known as Avrahm) Yarmolinsky, extolled the value of the acquisition and described in detail the voluminous contents of the Kennan collection. Praising the scholarly breadth of the donated materials and their value to future researchers in his article, Yarmolinsky paid special attention to the pictorial materials in the collection.<sup>34</sup> Though Yarmolinsky establishes that Kennan brought the photographs from Russia in 1886,<sup>35</sup> it is difficult to know under what circumstances Kennan acquired the photographs in the collection. No mention of them is made by Kennan in *Siberia and the Exile System*. Yarmolinsky argues that at least some of the photographs were made by either Kennan or his associate George Frost in the 1880s.<sup>36</sup> He notes that "others were given [to] them by political exiles, while others the donor [George Kennan] purchased while he was in Siberia."<sup>37</sup> Although we know that Frost had a camera and photographed on the trip,<sup>38</sup> the majority of the photographs do not bear a visible date, studio stamp,

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33. For example, see photograph number 121, which identifies Dmitri Mikhailovich Rogachov as having "died of prison consumption at the mines." Also see photograph number 128, which says, "Semyanovski, Yevgeniy Stepanovich. Committed suicide at mines of Kara. (K)." Other similar examples appear throughout the album.

34. He noted that the collection contains photographs of "over 200 of early Russian political exiles and convicts. Most of the pictures the donor brought back from Siberia in 1886. Some are probably the only portraits in existence of the early revolutionists. 'When the complete history of the Russian revolutionary moment comes to be written,' says Mr. Kennan in a letter to me, 'these portraits of the early revolutionists will be of great interest and value. I doubt whether there is a larger collection of them in existence.'" Abraham Yarmolinsky, "The Kennan Collection," *Bulletin of The New York Public Library* (February 1921): 7.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, 8.

37. *Ibid.*

38. George Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System, Volume II* (New York: The Century Co., 1891), 223.

or any other type of distinguishing mark identifying a photographer.<sup>39</sup> As Tatiana Saburova has argued, many political exiles became photographers because it was one of the few occupations available to them and provided a reliable source of income.<sup>40</sup> It is likely that many of Kennan's photographs in the album were taken by political exiles in the labor camps of Siberia.

We might also continue to wonder how Kennan conceptualized the collection and what he intended to do with it. For example, some photographs did appear in *Siberia and the Exile System*, but many did not. In a quote from a correspondence with Kennan published in Yarmolinsky's article, Kennan stated that only he had used the materials in his collection for research, and that he estimated that he only used less than a quarter in *Siberia and the Exile System*.<sup>41</sup> Even today, the photographs remain mostly unpublished, except for the ones that appeared in Kennan's book.

### Visualizing Imprisonment

Who then is represented in the album? Kennan's close connections with dissident political figures fueled his passion for anti-tsarist activism. After the 1885 journey to Eastern Siberia, he continued to keep in touch with them through overseas correspondence, as evidenced by the many personal letters in his archive.<sup>42</sup> He was friends with the famous Russian revolutionaries Catherine Breshkovskaia, Peter Kropotkin, and Sergei Stepniak-Kravchinskii.<sup>43</sup> According to Kennan, it was the trip to Kara that facilitated his introduction to the imprisoned friends and acquaintances of Leo Tolstoy.<sup>44</sup> As Kennan later recounted in an 1887 article about the experience published in *The Century Magazine*, it was then that he made a promise to them to try to meet Tolstoy.<sup>45</sup> Kennan described touring the estate and meeting Tolstoy's family and quotes the conversations he had with Tolstoy. In the article, Kennan also references his earlier trip to Kara and the dissidents he met there,<sup>46</sup> and described his conversation with Tolstoy about the sixteen-day hunger strike undertaken by four women in December 1884 at an Irkutsk prison.<sup>47</sup> Although those he met at Kara made a strong impression on Kennan, he traveled widely to meet others connected to the revolutionary movement. The album also includes a photograph of the anarchist Peter Kropotkin, whom Kennan met in London in 1886 following his trip to Russia, and photographs of the revolutionary

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39. According to Yarmolinsky, "each portrait, except for a few unidentified pieces, has on the back a biographical note penned in most cases by Mr. Kennan." *Ibid.*, 7.

40. Tatiana Saburova, "Geographical Imagination, Anthropology, and Political Exiles: Photographers of Siberia in Late Imperial Russia," *Sibirica* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 77.

41. Yarmolinsky, 6-7.

42. Laura Ruttum, "Series I. Correspondence, 1866-1924, n.d.," George Kennan Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division (New York: The New York Public Library, 2008), 1.

43. Maier, 10.

44. George Kennan, "A Visit to Count Tolstoi," *The Century Magazine* (June 1887): 252.

45. *Ibid.*, 252-265.

46. *Ibid.*, 252.

47. *Ibid.*, 258.

Vera Figner, who was at the time of Kennan's 1885-1886 trip serving a sentence at the Shlisselburg Fortress near St. Petersburg in Northwestern Russia.<sup>48</sup>

Overall, the table of contents lists two hundred and forty-six entries, the last one written in by hand. The first photograph in the album is a portrait of Kennan, followed by a page with two group photographs and a photograph of a church bell from the city of Uglich (Figure 4), and then on the third page appears the first individually listed portrait, which is of Aleksandrov, at number six (Figure 6). After Aleksandrov the names continue in alphabetical order with some entries duplicated, such as numbers fourteen and fifteen and seventeen and eighteen (Figure 7), until they reach the entry of Zundevich at number one hundred and ninety. Following that are several group photographs, with the last entry being Maria Spiridonova at numbers two hundred forty-five through two hundred forty-six. Despite these differences, the album has an undeniable memorial, even sentimental, quality due to Kennan's treatment of the materials. This is suggested by aspects such as the careful arrangement of photographs and written captions, and the placement of Kennan's portrait at the beginning.



**Figure 6.** George Kennan, *Exiled People*, 1920. Slavic and East European Collections, The New York Public Library. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-41a5-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

48. Also known as *Schlüsselburg Fortress*. See Book 2, Chapter 3, "Execution and Suicide," in Vera Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, ed. Alexander Samuel Kaun, trans. Camilla Chapin Daniels (New York: International Publishers, 1927).



**Figure 7.** George Kennan, *Exiled people; Butzinski, Bukh and others*, 1920. Slavic and East European Collections, The New York Public Library. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-41a6-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

In volume one of *Siberia and the Exile System*, Kennan mentions photographs being used for identification purposes in the camps, saying, “since my return from Siberia, an attempt has been made to secure certainty of identification in criminal parties by means of small photographs of the convicts attached to their *stateini spiski* [police files], but I do not know how it has resulted.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, based on Kennan’s account, we know for certain that during this period, photographs of the prisoners (what are typically called “mugshots”) were used for identification purposes by the government officials of the camp. According to Aglaya Glebova, after the 1881 assassination of Tsar Alexander II, the government relied on photographic

49. *Stateini spiski* were the documents which constituted the official file of the prisoner. In *Siberia and the Exile System, Volume I*, (Russell & Russell), pages 290-291, Kennan describes how *stateini spiski* were used by the officials of the camp for ensuring that prisoners did not switch names in order to assume each other’s sentences, which was a common practice.



archives to identify political dissidents.<sup>50</sup> At least some of the photographs in this collection fall within that category. For example, the photograph numbered 174 in Figure 8, of the prisoner Pyotr Filippovich Yakubovich, is identified in the caption as a police photograph.



**Figure 8.** George Kennan, *Yakimov, Yakubovich, Yatzevich, Yokhelson, Yonov*, 1920. Slavic and East European Collections, The New York Public Library. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-41c2-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

50. Aglaya Glebova, “A Visual History of the Gulag,” in *The Soviet Gulag: Evidence, Interpretation, And Comparison*, ed. Michael David Fox (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016), 163.

Kennan's description of the small photographs attached to the *stateini spiski* is consistent with the way that late nineteenth-century police photographs are described by Mary Warner Marien, who states that due to differences in format and distribution, police photography was only standardized in the 1880s.<sup>51</sup> Certainly, the photographs in Kennan's collection also show a lack of unifying consistency, varied as they are in style and format, some featuring people dressed in their own civilian clothing and others in a prison uniform (Figure 9). Though the individual appearance of the subjects sometimes differs, the style of the portraits meant that they could easily be used for police identification. In particular, the single portrait photographs show a large portion of the upper half of the person's body from the shoulders to the top of the head. Certainly, this was done intentionally. Taking the photograph in this style made for an aesthetically pleasing portrait of the subject, but it also clearly showcased individual features. This created a possibility for the photograph to be used for identification purposes by the police.



**Figure 9.** George Kennan, *Preobrazhenski, Prikhodko, Revitzki, Rogachov, Rubanchikova, Sadovnikov*, 1920. Slavic and East European Collections, The New York Public Library. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-41bc-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

51. Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2011), 70.

In his account of his travels through Siberia and the political prisoners he encountered, Kennan describes the administrative process by which exiles were sent to Siberia, which at the time was still considered a land of opportunity for the quickly expanding empire. Regarding the injustice of the sentencing system, Kennan observes that,

The person may not be guilty of any crime, and may not have rendered himself amenable in any way to the laws of the state, but if in the opinion of the local authorities, his presence in a particular place is “prejudicial to public order,” or “incompatible with public tranquility,” he may be arrested without a warrant, may be held from two weeks to two years in prison, and may then be removed by force to any other place within the limits of the empire and there be put under police surveillance for a period of from one year to ten years.<sup>52</sup>

He further explains that in such an instance, the accused is without any means for self-defense, because they may not be informed of the charge, cannot cross-examine the witnesses who have testified against them, cannot summon their own witnesses, and cannot demand a hearing nor a trial.<sup>53</sup> Regarding the failure of the administrative system to verify the identity of the arrested person, Kennan writes,

In the years 1877, 1878, and 1879, no attempt was made, apparently, by the Government to ascertain whether an arrested person was deserving of exile or not, nor even to ascertain whether the man or woman exiled was the identical person for whom the order of banishment had been issued. The whole system was a chaos of injustice, accident, and caprice.<sup>54</sup>

As described by Kennan, the system was mired in administrative issues with prisoner identification and record keeping. Many people went through this broken system, and in the Siberia of the late-nineteenth century, exile was a fact of life for many. There was no single unitary type of prisoner, either by gender, class, or criminal act (Figure 10).

According to Daniel Beer, in tsarist Russia, “exile was an act of expulsion” by which those perceived as politically and socially dangerous could be disposed of.<sup>55</sup> It is through these associations with cleansing the undesirable that Siberia became a repository of convicted bodies, whether “guilty” or not. Due to the cruel nature of exile, photographs were an important evidentiary marker of an individual’s identity, and, at times, humanity.<sup>56</sup> Exile involved a multiplicity

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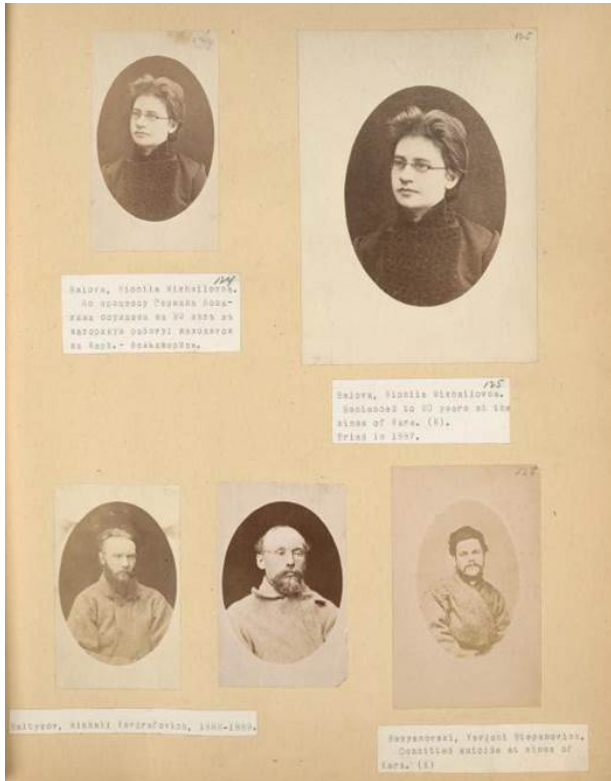
52. Kennan, *Siberia And The Exile System, Volume I* (Russell & Russell), 242.

53. *Ibid.*, 243.

54. *Ibid.*, 247.

55. Daniel Beer, *The House of the Dead: Siberian Exile Under the Tsars* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), 15.

56. As Beer notes, “if the individual fates of famous writers and revolutionaries in Siberia became widely known and discussed both in Russia and abroad, the same could not be said of the vast majority of Siberia’s exiles. For every banished radical, thousands of unknown common criminals and their families were marched off to Siberia and into oblivion. Their fates survive only in the police reports, petitions, court records and official correspondence that were compiled and retained by the apparatus of an increasingly developed and sophisticated police state.” *Ibid.*, 6.



**Figure 10.** George Kennan, *Salova, Saltykov, Sazhin, Semyanovski*, 1920. Slavic and East European Collections, The New York Public Library.  
<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-41bd-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

of documentary evidence created from within the government system, but that information remained locked away in the archives. For every photograph that survives, we can imagine that there are many more that have been lost through time. Kennan’s outsider viewpoint helped to create an alternative record of the exile system separate from the government archive. The photographs in Kennan’s collection were a way for him to preserve the memory of those he met through an indexed system. The collection represented a reference catalog of people Kennan wanted to remember for historical, scholarly, and personal value. By linking the photograph with a person’s name, he created a visual record that could be referenced to remember individual faces, making the album an essential object of memory. This system of categorization allowed Kennan to cross-reference the names of people in the album with their portrait photographs.



**Figure 11.** George Kennan, *Sukhomlin, Sukhomlina*, 1920. Slavic and East European Collections, The New York Public Library. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-41c2-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

One of the most striking photographs in the collection shows a seated man looking directly at the viewer and dressed in prominently visible leg shackles (also called “leg-fetters”). He is labeled by the caption as Vasili Ivanovich Sukhomlin (Figure 11). The photograph is numbered 145 in the upper right-hand corner. In the portrait, Sukhomlin reclines on a chair against an ornate backdrop and next to a carved piece of furniture. His clothes are simple in style, and he wears a side-buttoned shirt, pants, boots, a tilted beret-like cap, and metal shackles that are attached just above his boots and connected to a belt worn around his waist. In the first volume of *Siberia and the Exile System*, Kennan mentions such leg fetters as being commonly worn by prisoners. In a description of exiles trekking southeast across Siberia from Tomsk to Irkutsk, he states, “The bodies of marching convicts,

kept warm by the exertion of walking in heavy leg-fetters, steam a little in the raw, chilly air, but a large number of the men have lost or removed their shoes, and are wading through the freezing mud with bare feet.”<sup>57</sup> In the portrait, a long and voluminous coat is draped over his right shoulder and behind his back. The label describes him in English as a “(landed proprietor) sent into penal servitude at the mines of Kara for 15 years with exile for life. (A police photograph in convict dress and leg-fetters.)” (Figure 11). The caption then continues in Russian and identifies him as a *narodovolets*. A *narodovolets* was a member of the political organization *Narodnaia Volia*, the People’s Will, the same group whose members assassinated Tsar Alexander II in 1881.<sup>58</sup> This caption is perhaps the most descriptive of any of the captions that accompany the photographs. Its detailed information provides ample insight into the person pictured, allowing for cross-referencing with other published sources and further research on the subject in the portrait. Exceptionally, the photograph of Sukhomlin is duplicated on the page, with one print slightly smaller than the other, though outwardly they are identical.

After leaving exile, Sukhomlin was one of the founders of the Society of Former Convicts and Exiles. It existed between 1921 and 1935, when it was suppressed by the Soviet government. The group published a journal about exile titled *Katorga i ssylka* (Penal Servitude and Exile), about their memories and experiences being imprisoned under the Imperial regime.<sup>59</sup> Also on the page in Figure 11 are two duplicate photographs labeled “Madame Sukhomlina” with no other information given. The convention of applying the French term “madame” to women was Kennan’s way of designating married women, usually those who took their husband’s last name. She was Sukhomlin’s wife, who voluntarily accompanied him to exile in 1888,<sup>60</sup> as many free women did when their husbands were charged, rather than face a lengthy and uncertain forced separation. A relationship between the subjects is implied through the pairing of the photographs on the page and the shared last name, although there is no direct connection made via the caption text. Though Kennan wrote about her in his book *Siberia and the Exile System* and used the same photograph of her as an illustration that accompanied the text,<sup>61</sup> he did not include those details in the caption analogous to her photograph in the album. By positioning them this way, he probably intended for them to be viewed together.

Another photograph in the collection appears to have been taken in the same location as the portrait of Sukhomlin, because it features the same backdrop and furniture. As mentioned earlier, the photograph is numbered 174, and the label describes the subject as Pyotr Filippovich Yakubovich and lists his occupation as being a poet (Figure 12). Like Sukhomlin, he wears leg shackles that connect to a belt worn around the waist. He also wears the same pants, shirt, coat, and cap as Sukhomlin, an indication, perhaps, that this was a standard uniform worn

57. Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System, Volume 1*, (Russell & Russell), 399.

58. Travis, 115-117.

59. Glebova, 164.

60. Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System, Volume II* (Russell & Russell), 270.

61. *Ibid.*





**Figure 12.** George Kennan, *Yakimov, Yakubovich, Yatzevich, Yokhelson, Yonov*, 1920. Slavic and East European Collections, The New York Public Library. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-41c2-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

by male prisoners. The subject has his head turned to the side in a three-quarter view, looking outside the frame of the photograph, unlike Sukhomlin, who gazes straight ahead directly and defiantly.

Overall, the subjects are positioned and framed similarly and even have their hands resting in the same place on their respective upper thighs. Obvious similarities in the composition suggest that consistency was a goal for the photographer. The subjects were directed on where to sit and how to pose for the photograph in the studio. In their style, and appearance the photographs are consistent and similarly ordered from one to the next. Furthermore, the many similarities between the two photographs suggest that they were taken in a studio setting where the lighting

and setup were consistent. Specifically, the background against which they were photographed remained unchanged from one photograph to the next, suggesting that the photographs were likely taken a short time apart in a highly controlled environment. The uniforms, shackles, and similar compositions emphasize the disciplinary regimes that govern both portrait photography and imprisonment.

Both photographs resemble the one of Kennan dressed in the same uniform worn by the two subjects, though the photograph has a different history than the two photographs from the album (Figure 1). In this full-length photograph, which is part of the George Kennan papers in the collection of the Library of Congress, Kennan also wears pants, a shirt, coat, cap, and shackles that are the same style as the ones worn by Sukhomlin and Yakubovich.

### Memory and the Archive

Now a common tool of mass surveillance and social control, the government archive of identification photographs first came into existence in the nineteenth century as a criminal archive. However, the criminal archive exists as more than a database of photographs used by the police for identification. As Allan Sekula argues in "The Body and the Archive,"<sup>62</sup> the criminal archive exists as a social construct of deviance.<sup>63</sup> Within the archive of surveillance, the photographs exist as both accomplices and opponents of the subject. In Sekula's words, they exist within a "double system: a system of representation capable of functioning both *honorifically* and *repressively*."<sup>64</sup> This is especially true in the case of portrait photographs. Their honorific function "is that of providing for the ceremonial presentation of the bourgeois *self*."<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, the repressive function of the photographic portrait is how it "came to establish and delimit the terrain of the *other*, to define both the *generalized look*—the typology—and the *contingent instance* of deviance and social pathology."<sup>66</sup> This repressive function is particularly applicable to the instance of the police photograph, because "criminal identification photographs are a case in point, since they are designed quite literally to facilitate the *arrest* of their referent."<sup>67</sup> Thus, although the photographs from Kennan's collection give us a glimpse of the internees as they looked when alive, the very photograph that speaks of their humanity is also the mechanism that the state apparatus used to systematically and brutally eradicate them since many did not survive imprisonment due to the harsh living conditions, insufficient medical care, and punishment through hard labor.

The album had a strong personal significance for Kennan, and he took pains to make sure that the collection would be preserved. He invested time in writing the captions and assembling the album with NYPL librarians, a process that took place about 35 years after he initially acquired the photographs. Since the album

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62. Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 3-64.

63. *Ibid.*, 14.

64. *Ibid.*, 6.

65. *Ibid.*

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Ibid.*, 7.

included photographs of political prisoners from Siberia and those imprisoned elsewhere, it provided a way to recall his connection not just to the prisoners in Siberia, but to all those he knew who were part of the broader revolutionary struggle in Russia. Though it connected him to Kara, it also functioned something like a conceptual index of his radical friends, acquaintances, and experiences in Russia at a time when he was, in a sense, exiled from them. This is also evident in Kennan's desire to dress in the prisoner shackles and exile uniform as a way to identify with that community. Putting together the album through the process of arranging the photographs and writing the captions gave Kennan the opportunity to trace the personal connections and political genealogies of a close-knit collective of dissident prisoners in Imperial Russia. Inasmuch as the album wove together a historical narrative, it also reflected on Kennan's personal history as an explorer and scholar.

The mistakes and omissions in the album's written captions testify to the faults and fluidity of memory. Certainly, not all the contents of the album are factually accurate or complete, which challenges a straightforward interpretation of the album as a secondary source historical document. While Kennan may have intended the album to read like a monumental history of Russian exiles, it does something different. In fact, it operates on multiple registers of memory, history, and the archive. Accepting its flaws requires an understanding of the album's value as being a primary source document, one with the natural fissures, faults, and inaccuracies native to memory. Its particular mix of photographic and textual material gestures to the documentary impulse that pervaded Kennan's work on exile in Russia. In this way, the album remains poised on the edge of unrealized potential as a way to see into the past. It is imperfect, but nevertheless powerful, evocative, and symbolic. This project shows just some of the ways that Kennan's methodological practice affected the structure and content of the album and how we interpret the photographs within it.

When Kennan donated the album to the NYPL, he did so with his future legacy in mind. Just as he had dressed in a prisoner costume to raise awareness across the United States about injustice half a world away, while remaining mostly uninvolved in political struggles domestically, this gesture was somewhat self-serving. At the end of his life, he sought to present the photographs in his collection as valuable historical tools for the scholarly study of the past, partly through the radical political histories of the Russian revolutionaries. Nevertheless, these photographs offer valuable insight into Kennan's role in shaping the memory of Imperial forced labor camps in the West and the legacy of his effect on Russian American relations.

### **About the Author**

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