

Chain Gangs in Palestine

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COMPARED to the victims of modern British imperialism, Jesus Christ was no martyr. He was beaten and then crucified, but all of this lasted only a few hours—less than twenty-four. Roman imperialism, which inflicted these tortures, was comparatively merciful.

But today there are chain gangs in the Holy Land for those who raise either voice or hand against exploitation. There are ghastly city prisons that resemble a medieval chamber of horrors; there are hard-labor camps where prisoners are beaten ruthlessly without cause; there is a jail where similar tortures are inflicted upon women; there are chain gangs. And perhaps worst of all, the only difference made between the status of criminals and political prisoners is that the latter are treated worse. If possible.

A few months ago, a group of Communist prisoners in a Jerusalem jail rebelled against the order which placed them in the same class with depraved criminals. They refused to wear the odious prison garb, and went on a hunger strike. An eighteen-year-old youth, who did propaganda work in their behalf, was seized and thrown into the hard-labor camp at Nur Semesh, where he was forced into prison clothes. He and another man were the only political prisoners among 340 hardened criminals.

The prisoners in this camp work for the railroads. Before six o'clock in the morning they are on the job, boring holes in stones for dynamite sticks, carrying rocks and loading them in railway cars, throwing boulders down from the mountain, splitting huge rocks. Each man is given an almost superhuman quota of work, and when he fails to fulfill it, he is forced to work late, he gets nothing to eat and heavy chains are fastened to his ankles. It is a common sight—but not for tourists—to see the majority of the prisoners working in chain gangs under the broiling afternoon sun. To escape this torture, many overtax themselves by running with the heavy stones, in order to complete their quota by two in the afternoon, when work is supposed to cease. It is common for at least three or four men to be seriously injured every day as a result.

But it is not necessary to visit a chain gang to witness the almost unbelievable prison conditions maintained by the British in Palestine. The jails are usually mud-and-rock barracks, partitioned into cubicles by thick stone walls. The ceilings are low; the floor is rock and the small single window is covered, in addition to the usual gratings, with wire nets and an upward-slanting steel plate to prevent prisoners from even looking out.

There are no beds. Prisoners sleep on the rocky floor with nothing under them but one or two mats. Lice abound, and almost without exception the cells are so overcrowded that there is scarcely space in which to turn from one side to the other. To make matters worse, a plain bucket, open of course, is the only toilet facility provided. It is forbidden to remove it from 3 p.m. until 7 a.m. As a result it overflows, the contents saturating the lice-infested mats. The cells are converted by the tropical sun into furnaces by day, and are damp and cool at night; they stink day and night.

Pitah is the chief article of diet—or rather, of indigestion. It is a curious unleavened loaf composed of two thin round cakes. Even the iron-stomached Bedouin get sick from it. It is usually either burned or raw, and sometimes it is only a nest for insects. Rotten dates, vermin-infested, complete the noon meal.

In the afternoon the prisoners are fed Caravana—a thick soupy mixture of vegetables, sand and worms. Adding insult to injury, the prison authorities allow the inmates no spoons, on the theory that spoons might make the prisoners feel they have a little human dignity left. They have to dig into the slimy mess with their fingers.

Three times a week "meat" is served. The quotation marks mean that any sensible dog would spurn it; and there are only 30 grams at that. The meat is garnished with cheese and olives, which seem to have been gathered from city garbage dumps.

There is an enormous profit made on prison food. The British administration allows only 3 pence per day per prisoner (about six cents in American money). Contracts are awarded to favored merchants. The number of prisoners is so large, and the food supplied so rotten, that tidy sums are put aside by these middlemen who deal in human agony.

Many of the inmates of city prisons are given no work, and the cruel monotony drives some insane. Early in the morning they are awakened, driven outside with their mats in their arms, and counted. There was a time when they were allowed to stand upright, like men, and face their guards during this process. But today they are forced to squat on one knee, with their backs parallel to the ground, in line. Before this degrading position can be assumed, many are brutally beaten and taunted by the lumpen-proletarian elements who serve as jailors. These sadists count the prisoners by flogging them on the back with a thick rod. Often the guards make "mistakes," and then the entire painful and humiliating process of counting must be repeated.

There follows the morning "walk"—for fifteen minutes the prisoners move in a circle around the small yard. Then breakfast: one rotten pitah and a little salt!

In the Jaffa prison, where men awaiting trial are confined, they are herded back into their cells after breakfast and locked up until 10:30 a.m. The broiling Palestinian sun cooks the night stink of the cell into a choking gas, after which it soon is converted into an almost liquid state. Many prisoners faint outright during this period. At 10:30 there is another count, followed by "lunch"—a pitah and a few rotten olives or a piece of cheese. Again they are herded into the cells; cracking lice is their only occupation. At 2:30 they are again taken outside and "counted," for the last time. Then they are given another pitah, a small portion of the sickening caravana and back to the cell for the night, that is from 3 p.m. until morning.

This regimen is followed day by day, week by week, year by year, by many prisoners. Nothing to do all day but sit on the warm stone floor in a stinking cell and crack lice.

But special tortures are reserved for political prisoners. They are given the smallest cells in the place. Their one window invariably opens towards the outside latrine. Guards are told to use their own discretion when it comes to beating savagely political prisoners. And finally, there is the "zinzana." As though the ordinary prison cell were not bad enough, the authorities have had special ones built, chiefly for political prisoners. The zinzana is a very narrow, windowless cell, swarming with rats, lice and insects. Ordinary murderers and thieves must first be sentenced to "strokes" before being beaten, but political prisoners are at the mercy of the guards at all times.

It is not unusual for a Communist prisoner to be thrown into cells with degenerates, who have one standing order: "Abuse him!" Several of the men who refused to wear prison garb were stripped naked and had to spend the bitter nights without protection in the stone cells. Needless to say, a sufficient quantity of drinking water is rarely given, and as for water for washing purposes, the guards usually drink it on the rare occasions when it is supplied. The regulations in the Jerusalem Central Prison, for example, provide for a bath every ten days, but the men are lucky if they can bathe once in three weeks.

Prisoners who are put to work in gangs on the countryside are treated savagely. Overseers lash them furiously with heavy whips when it suits their fancy to do so, and there is no recourse possible to any authority.

In the Central Prison, the one "rest day" each week is spent by working in the yard. For the slightest offense, prisoners are whipped and placed in zinzana.

If Christ, upon his second coming, would revisit Bethlehem, he would see little children, whom he especially loved, confined in the Women's Prison with their mothers, because there is no other provision for them. The children range from one month to twelve years of age. Recently there were thirty such children there, but only two of them received any milk—a half-glass each day. While their mothers do hard work, the little ones roll around in the dirt of the prison yard. Nearly all of them are sick with a variety of diseases. Women prisoners are fed smaller portions than the men.

Had Christ visited this hell-hole of Bethlehem during the past year he would have seen a woman forced to stop nursing her baby in order to be marched off to the fields for work; an old woman beaten and thrown into the zinzana for six days for the crime of talking to her husband through a window; a woman removed from the prison in a dying condition because the guards refused to believe her when she said she was ill; a pregnant woman who miscarried in her fifth month because she was forced to carry heavy pails of water.

In 1931 the political prisoners conducted a successful hunger strike against intolerable prison conditions. Several concessions were won, such as separate quarters, slightly better food and books. But it was not long before the administration regretted its outburst of humanitarianism. When the political prisoners sang the "International" on the anniversary of the October Revolution, the incident was seized upon as an excuse to withdraw the "privileges." Those who protested were beaten into unconsciousness.

Early last year another repressive step was taken. Up to that time the officer in charge of the prison had the power to grant "special treatment" to well-behaved prisoners and then it was actually possible for a political prisoner to be treated half-decently. In January, 1935, the "Special Treatment Ordinance" of 1921 was amended. Today only the courts may grant "special treatment." Needless to say, such treatment is granted rarely to radicals and then only in an effort to play favorites in order to split the solid ranks of the politicals.

This led to the great hunger strike of last year. Toward the end of March, the administration suddenly notified the politicals in the Central Prison of Jerusalem "that they would have to wear the prison uniform and do prison labor. When the politicals threatened a hunger strike, the administration was frightened into postponing the order—but not for long.

On July 16 the authorities arrested Mohammed Mograbi, an Arab worker who had devoted most of his life to the liberation-of-the-masses movement, and Dr. Marcus Bilinsky, a Jew. When they resisted the

guards who tried to clothe them in prison uniforms, they were cruelly beaten and thrown naked into the rat-infested zinzana. The fifteen other politicals in the same institution—Jerusalem's Central Prison—joined them in a hunger strike.

When the news leaked through the strict prison censorship, demonstrations of sympathy with the strikers took place throughout Palestine. On July 24, the eighth day of the strike, more than a hundred workers demonstrated in front of Zion Hall, in the center of Jerusalem. Police and detectives attacked and fired on them. Three were injured, six were arrested.

The shots were heard throughout the country. Jewish workers demonstrated in Tel Aviv; Arab workers in Jaffa. The number of hunger strikers in the prison grew to 59; sympathy hunger-strikes began in the prisons of Haifa and Acre. Prominent people vainly protested to the High Commissioner. A delegation of physicians, sent by the Tel Aviv Medical Association to examine the strikers, was refused admittance. Most of the strikers were Arabs and the Arab masses began to grow restive.

The authorities again took fright because some of the strikers were tuberculous. On the fifteenth day, forced feeding of a few of the strikers was resorted to. But, outside, the mass pressure grew. Even petty shopkeepers and workers never before interested in politics were drawn into the struggle. They circulated a petition demanding restoration of the prisoners' rights, before death should claim them. A group of Haifa intellectuals, headed by the author Arnold Zweig, sent a telegram to the High Commissioner.

Even the reactionary Histadruth executives were forced to make a feeble gesture in behalf of the strikers. Deaf and dumb to the normal, day-by-day horrors of the prison system, they were forced, by the mass pressure, to add their hypocritical voices to the rising clamor.

But the colonial regime, neither elected by the people nor responsible to them, remained unmoved. Placed in Palestine by Great Britain to safeguard the interests of British imperialism, what did it concern the authorities that a handful of political prisoners perished in a fight for their own rights?

The reign of terror increased. Those even slightly suspected of having participated in any demonstration were thrown into jail. Homes were raided.

The pressure finally caused the High Commissioner to attempt a trick. Counting upon mass ignorance of English law, he made a public statement denying that "the law of the United Kingdom" discriminates between "so-called political and other prisoners." A special edition of Ha'Or (Light) immediately exposed this lie.

The authorities then resorted to the expedient of releasing Dr. Belinsky and granting special privileges to Mograbi. But the prisoners were not fooled by this maneuver. The strike continued.

Suddenly, on the nineteenth day it mysteriously ended, with the central issue not clearly decided. What had happened?

The leading conservative Arab newspapers, which certainly lose no love on Communists, had printed editorials during the strike demanding, *as a matter of principle*, that political prisoners be treated as such. But what did the supposedly liberal Hebrew labor press do?

Davar is the official organ of the Histadruth, the Jewish Labor Federation of Palestine and a bona fide member of the Second International. *The Histadruth, through Davar, sold out the strike!*

At first, because of the mass pressure, it hypocritically expressed sympathy for the strikers. A little later, although completely understanding the issue at stake, Davar demanded that the government permit the hunger strikers to have—books! Political-prisoner status was not mentioned, civilian clothes were not mentioned, special treatment was not mentioned. Only books. Davar's heart bled because the Communists were denied books.

The High Commissioner joyfully took the hint. Books, he declared, would not be denied the political prisoners, and therefore the strike must end. But continued angry mass protest showed Davar that the masses were not yet fooled. It therefore began a series of atrocity stories about G. P. U. in the Soviet Union, the mistreatment of Zionists there, the subversive activities of the Palestine Communist Party, etc.

After this "education," Davar came out openly with an appeal to the public not to support the strikers and an appeal to the government not to grant their demands. It resorted to the lying claim that the Communists had demanded special privileges for themselves, but that since the government had made it clear that all prisoners are treated alike, there was no further cause to support the strike. It had all been a rascally trick of the Communists to get publicity, said Davar.

But even this new tack did not work. Renewed protests forced Davar to change its tune. It suddenly discovered that the strikers were all "pogrom makers" and "inciters" and undeserving of special treatment!

Meanwhile, the British Colonial government, taking advantage of Histadruth support, made a hazy promise to "facilitate" the granting of special treatment for political prisoners. This promise was kept in a vague sort of way for a month and a half. Then, on October 30, it was suddenly and ruthlessly scrapped. Since then every political prisoner has been forced into prison garb, made to do prison labor, beaten, discriminated against.

It is clear that the Palestinian puppets of British imperialism will not likely be moved by sacrifices on the part of the prisoners, nor even by public mass protests, unless those protests, coming from labor and liberals everywhere, are overwhelming.