Prisons and Criminals in 19th Century France

- It wasn’t until the beginning of the 19th century that the concept of using prisons as punishment began to catch on in Europe. Until then, they were only used as holding places for people awaiting trial or execution.

- Typically, prisons had cells that held men, women, and children all in the same cell. There were no beds, and there were typically ten people to one cell.

- 80-86% of the prisoners in French prisons were male; the majority of the prisoners, male or female, were in prison for the crime of thievery.

- The French believed that convicts in prison should be required to work and be productive. There were no re-education programs, but mostly corrupt guards beating inmates, small confining cells, and strenuous labor.

- There were very few prison riots, as the normal reaction to prison life was nervous breakdown or suicide.

- In order to survive, the prisoners adjusted to their new life by forming new subcultures, such as:
  1. They formed their own language called Argot, the language of the underworld. It was a shortened version of French and could only be understood by the inmates. Argot was often used to convey a secret message and helped many prisoners escape.
  2. They voluntarily had their bodies tattooed as a way of social identification among the inmates. Some of the most popular tattoos were (in order of popularity): sexual images, metaphoric symbols, military figures, inscriptions, professional or occupational symbols, patriotic or religious symbols. Men used tattoos as a symbol of power, deviance, sex, or protest, while woman often had images of romance or motherhood on their bodies.
  3. The social hierarchy of the prison was based upon intimidation of rape. Those who were sold for sexual favors in the prison were low in status and those who bought them were of high status and power. The topic of sexuality led to a heated debate about living spaces within prison walls. Some prison authorities argued for large dormitory styled rooms where it would be harder to hide sexual acts, while others wanted solitary rooms or cells where prisoners could avoid the dangers and reflect on their fate and their future. Eventually, the single cells won out and did make a difference in reforming prisoners.

- In the years 1820-1840, France underwent what would be known as the Golden Age of reform for prisons. Here are some examples of the reforms they made:
  1. No longer take the property of convicted criminals.
  2. Reduce long term sentences to a maximum of fifteen years.
  3. Separate convicted criminals and those awaiting trial
  4. No more life sentences
  5. Solitary confinement took the place of the death penalty
  6. Education of prisoners
  7. Inprison convicts near the scene of the crime as a constant reminder of what they had done.
Until 1748, imprisonment meant usually being sentenced to be a galley slave in a ship where inmates would be chained to benches to row ships. This sentence was often used in place of the death penalty since most prisoners died within a few years.

Jean Valjean spent his 19 years as a prisoner in a famous prison in Toulon. Even though the book references him as being a galley slave, the galleys at Toulon did not operate after 1748 and thus had closed down before he would have been imprisoned there. Some facts about the prison at Toulon are:

1. The prisoner’s uniform consisted of a cap and a large shirt, which were different colors depending on their crime.
2. Prisoners were branded on the shoulder with a hot iron.
3. Each prisoner had a chain attached to an ankle with an iron ball attached to the chain. The most vicious criminals were chained to each other.
4. Convicts were used for digging earth and for construction work.
5. Their diet consisted of a small amount of meat and lots of dried vegetables, especially beans.