



Book Review

History They Cannot Entirely Possess

Davoliūtė, Violeta and Tomas Balkelis, eds. *Maps of Memory. Trauma, Identity and Exile in Deportation Memoirs from the Baltic States*. Vilnius: Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, 2012. ISBN: 9786094250897.

My initial encounter with deportation memoirs, ironically enough, happened through the only newspaper for children and young adults available in Soviet Lithuania. I forget what it was called at the time, but it was the renamed successor of *The Lithuanian Pioneer*. Shortly before the restoration of Lithuania's independence, it ran a series of deportation memoirs that came in many installments; and I remember waiting for them excitedly, reading them fervently and going through intense emotions, while being extremely confused as to how to take it all in. I had the impression of being initiated into secret knowledge, learning about a forbidden truth, and finding it hard to integrate into my understanding of the world. It was only later that I learned about my own family's experiences of the Soviet repressions.

Twenty odd years later, on the occasion of the eightieth anniversary of the deportations from Lithuania, I reread the collection of former deportees' memoirs *Amžino įšalo žemėje* (In the Land of Permafrost. Vilnius: Vyturys, 1989). In 2011, the experience was every bit as moving as the earlier one; but this time around, it was not only the knowledge of the historical context that caught up with me, but also the echoes of my readings over the years in theory and literature. The combination of the altered circumstances of the reading experience meant that all the way through the text I could not shake off the idea that the deportations experienced by fellow Lithuanians all those years ago were profoundly and inextricably linked not just with the soaring suicide rates, extensive alcohol abuse, and domestic violence in contemporary Lithuania, but also with Lithuania's ever-growing emigration numbers. I could not stop thinking of Cathy Caruth, who wrote: "If PTSD must be understood as a pathological symptom, then it is not so much a symptom of the unconscious, as it is a symptom of history. The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess." (Cathy Caruth, ed. *Trauma. Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. 5) The experience of the Gulag is the history Lithuanians do not seem to be able to possess, no matter how many memoirs are published, read, shared, or reiterated, and no matter how many commemorative events are held. It remains overwhelming, elusive, and painful. While reading *Amžino įšalo žemėje*, I also thought of the likes of James Olney, who wrote: "Memory reaches towards the future as towards the past and balance demands a poised receptiveness in both directions." (*Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing*. University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 343) This suggests that trying to understand and explain the past is actually a step towards the future and societies that have not fully considered their past, nor given it an appropriate meaning, are unable to fully invest in their futures.

The book *Maps of Memory. Trauma, Identity and Exile in Deportation Memoirs from the Baltic States* is a mature and, I think, successful attempt to intellectualize the trauma of the past in relation to the present and even the future. The book originated in a historical conference, entitled *Maps of Memory: Trauma, Identity and Exile in Gulag Testimonies*, held at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore in Vilnius in 2012.

The introduction by Violeta Davoliūtė and Tomas Balkelis initiates the reader into the existing body of work on the Holocaust and the Soviet deportations, thus providing a theoretical and contextual background to the essays that follow. Among other things, the editors carefully explain the difference between the Holocaust and the Soviet terror: "The first was a premeditated genocide, and the second was a highly repressive and often murderous system of forced labor. Yet it is impossible to understand the trauma of Baltic societies in the cauldron of WWII without an awareness of both." (p. 14) They thus situate the research presented in the book within the current theoretical framework and point out the uniqueness of the Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian experience.

In a similar way, Aldis Purs contextualizes the deportations from Latvia and, by extension, from the three Baltic States: "Essentially, Latvian historians and much of the public understand Soviet repression and deportations as part of a genocidal project against the Latvian nation. Soviet specialists disagree. They draw attention to the differences between Gulag sentences and administrative exile, and place Baltic deportations into the larger framework of Soviet terror and the forced displacement of populations that include similar actions in the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s." (p. 34-35) This point of view, if adopted widely by the contemporary societies of the three Baltic States, may help them better understand their historical situation and could even prove to have a healing effect.

The essays in the first part of the book focus on the experiences of different groups of deportees. Tomas Balkelis looks at child deportees and argues that they are a particularly interesting group because, at the time of deportation, their personalities were still emerging and the traumatic experience was instrumental in shaping their individual personas. As a group, what children and young adults experienced was quite distinct from what adults experienced, because children often attended school, learned the local language, and integrated into local society, while their parents and other members of the family were subjected to hard labor on collective farms. Balkelis concludes that lack of experience, among other things, led child deportees to adopt some survival strategies inaccessible to adults, strategies that proved to be rather subversive.

Dalia Leinartė focuses on gender roles in deportation and argues that they were transplanted from interwar Lithuania to Siberia unaltered and stayed curiously unchanged, even though women and men were often separated in their locations of imprisonment and displacement. It is striking that women as a group emerge as self-effacing and self-sacrificing, often risking their lives to save their sons and husbands, who might have been hundreds or thousands of miles away. On the other hand, men as a group appear to be weak and fragile: "There are incomparably more frequent references to tears, eternal sorrow, and starvation in men's accounts" (p. 83), writes Leinartė. Conversely, both genders seem to have found it hardest to come to terms with a certain effacement of gender roles in the face of overwhelmingly hard labor, inhumane living conditions, and violence. Dovilė Budrytė's essay discusses the oral memories of two female resistance fighters who worked as personal assistants and messengers for resistance leaders. Their work was just as dangerous as that of male resistance fighters, but was, of course, considered much lower in rank. However, when it came to imprisonment and torture at the hands of the Soviet army officers, both women felt they suffered as much as men did.

The second part of the book features essays that bridge the temporal gap between then and now in an attempt to clarify the sway that deportation narratives still hold on the contemporary Lithuanian psyche. Violeta Davoliūtė's essay, aptly entitled "We are All Deportees," is central to the volume because it does exactly that. She focuses on the reception of deportation narratives when they were first published, read, and interpreted in Lithuania in 1988-1991 and considers them in the larger context of displacement in Lithuania during the early Soviet period, including general features of Soviet reforms, such as collectivization, land reclamation, urbanization, and mobilization. She argues that the theme of traumatizing displacement featured in deportation narratives was combined into the myth of "universal" deportation and appropriated by the Soviet Lithuanian intelligentsia. Davoliūtė's argument is well summarized here: "The myth of universal deportation and the discourse of cultural genocide were key to transcending the social divisions of Soviet Lithuanian society and to welding the people together in the heat of the popular movement, but only for a short time." (p. 109) She then goes on to paint a rather disturbing picture of the lasting legacy of the Soviet deportations and the Holocaust in Lithuania. Davoliūtė explains how Soviet Lithuania was painfully split by the different experiences of displacement into two "nations": one, if not supported, at least created and sustained by the Soviet regime and the new lifestyle it imposed, and the other, crushed and persecuted by the regime during and after the actual repressions. The first took and held the position of discursive and sometimes actual power during the run-up to the restoration of independence and partly kept it thereafter, while the other was marginalized. It is a very interesting and complicated take on the lasting and accumulative effects of the Soviet occupation in Lithuania, which, I am sure, will spark a debate. Whatever its true origins, the traumatic divide still holds contemporary Lithuania in its powerful grip, contributing heavily to the negative psychological climate in the country and possibly driving thousands of Lithuanians toward not always stable and fulfilled existences elsewhere.

Eglė Rindzevičiūtė's and Aro Velvet's essays look at the deportation narratives offered by state and private museums in the three Baltic States. This is also a stimulating part of the book, especially considering that Lithuanian museums are often criticized for one-sidedness in their interpretation of history. Both authors argue that museum collections are often not shaped by nationalist or state ideology, but rather by limited resources, meager funding, lack of staff, and dependence on private donations.

The volume is closed by two beautiful and moving autobiographical pieces that provide a different kind of background to the preceding academic essays. The first one, by Modris Eksteins, recreates the circumstances of one deported family from a very personal point of view. The second one, by the writer Julija Šukys, documents her trans-Siberian, trans-generational journey into the long gone, but still unpossessed, past of her own family.

Although the essays vary in quality, and there are some spelling and editing mistakes, this is an engaging book that deserves to be widely read.

Eglė Kačkutė