New Europe College Yearbook
Pontica Magna Program
2018-2019

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Pontica Magna Fellowship Program is supported by VolkswagenStiftung, Germany.

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ISSN 1584-0298

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WOMEN OF THE GULAG IN LIZIKO KAVTARADZE'S MEMOIR: "WIVES", URKAS AND POLITICAL PRISONERS

Abstract

The article deals with the memoir of gulag survivor and political prisoner Liziko (Elisabed) Kavtaradze. It discusses the hierarchies and power relations within the camp system by drawing boundaries between the inmates and functions as a successful medium for the author to reconstruct herself as an intellectual.

Keywords: memoir, gulag, women, Liziko Kavtaradze, hierarchies, political prisoners

Introduction

In Russia, the first gulag memoirs appeared during the Thaw and their number significantly increased through Perestroika,[1] though the same did not happen in Georgia, even after gaining its independence in 1991. The reasons why gulag survivors, some of them still alive in the 1990s, remained silent, with very few exceptions, require separate in-depth analysis; However, political and economic turbulences, unavailability of the archives, the reluctance of those in power to enact lustration law or to work on the politics of memory, the cult of Stalin as ethnically Georgian,[2] all played a considerably obstructive role.

Most part of Georgian KGB archives were intentionally destroyed during the civil war of 1991 or retrieved to Russia at the very beginning of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The surviving 20% of the documents are still hard to acquire due to the complicated archival bureaucracy, ambiguous and hindering legal regulations, bad working conditions at archival spaces and inadequately high service prices.[3]

Moreover, neither were the victims of the great terror (proportionally one of the highest among the Soviet republics[4]) appropriately mourned and commemorated, nor was psycho-social trauma dealt with on micro

and macro levels.[5] For a long time there was no organization, similar to Memorial in Russia, for instance, that would collect the memories of the survivors on a national level. Respectively, their narratives did not become a leading medium for the facilitation of public knowledge about the great terror.[6]

Only from the mid-2000s onwards did some NGOs, funds or civil initiatives become active in this respect[7] and directed their efforts towards revising and reevaluating the Soviet past. By then it was too late to work with the survivors, but the efforts made with the descendants were fruitful. For instance, Soviet Past Research laboratory (Sovlab), a team of young, dedicated intellectuals, intensively collected the stories of the survivors' descendants using different kinds of media to create a valuable database.[8] However, these efforts have not necessarily been followed by big public discussions.

Liziko and Her Memoir

In this context the very rare cases of survivors' memoirs gain special importance. Among them is the one written by Liziko (Elisabed) Kavtaradze (1905-1988), the only woman survivor whose memoir, 30 years after her death, was released as part of a selected volume of her works. Apart from her memoir, the book also includes her essays, articles and short stories. *28 Years in Gulag: Through the Path of Martyrdom* was published in 2008 under the edition of the author's nephew, film director and intellectual Ghia Chubabria. Although the collection consists of the texts of different genres, the lines are quite blurred – the memoir, the short stories or articles are written almost in the same manner and structure.

In this article I primarily deal with her memoir *Through the Dark Path of Our Lives* written in 1964, as it is the only text of this volume that largely deals with her experience as a political prisoner and an inmate of several labor camps in different parts of the Soviet Union.

Liziko (Elisabed) Kavtaradze was born in 1905 in Tbilisi, Georgia, in a family of upper middle-class intellectuals. In 1922, soon after entering Tbilisi State University at the Faculty of Law, she became a member of a secret organization of young social democrats. She was a supporter of one of the biggest national uprisings against the new Bolshevik government in 1924 and took active part in spreading anti-Soviet proclamations.[9]

In 1928 she was imprisoned for her Anti-Soviet campaign and a year later was exiled in Tomsk, Russia. In 1936, upon her release, she returned to Georgia, but had to live her life under constant surveillance. Liziko was re-arrested in 1940 and was sent to Karaganda, Kazakhstan. In total, she spent 28 years of her life in exile as a political prisoner.

After her final release and rehabilitation in the 1950s, she worked as an economist, wrote intensively, translated literary pieces from Georgian to Russian and developed close ties with the young emerging leaders of the newly formed nationalist movement who called her "the grandmother of the organization".[10]

Through the Dark Path of Our Lives is the author's historical testimony of the gulag experience, which undoubtedly was a gendered space with manifold power relations. Gulags, the network of camps and places of punishment scattered across the Soviet Union, made an economic empire based on forced labor. Best estimates indicate that 11 million people passed through Soviet labor camps and colonies (1934-1947) and almost 1/3 of them died. Women constituted around 30% of prisoners in 1945. They lived in the same conditions, had the same food and shelter, as well as the same work norms as men.[11] Women and men who mostly lived and worked in segregated camps under inhuman conditions unavoidably became a part of complicated prison hierarchies. Power relations within the camps took place not only between the inmates and guards/administration, but also among the prisoners themselves. These hierarchies within the women's camps are very well described in Liziko Kavtaradze's memoir requiring a special attention especially from the gender and class perspective.

Trauma, (Semi)-Silence, and…?

Similar to other numerous cases of gulag survivors, Liziko Kavtaradze's narrative belongs to a traumatized author. Almost all aspects of trauma can be identified here: incoherent narrative structure, silence on certain events and situations, absence of any emotional response to them, etc.[12] She also remains silent on certain issues but it is more a semi-silence rather than complete absence of speaking about sexual violence against women, for instance, which was a part of the everyday life in the Soviet labor camps. Elsewhere she recalls the arrival of new female prisoners from Georgia who, as she states, were recognized by their forcefully

shaved heads and adds: "One has to mention that much evil happened in Georgia [to women] and it was taken for granted".[13]

Unlike her semi-silence on rape, homosexual relationships or same sex intimacies are completely absent in her memoir. Unlike famous Russian authors like Evgeniya Ginzburg or Varlam Shalamov, she does not use extra disgust towards criminal inmates by relying on a homosexual stigma to draw the boundaries between them.[14]

Liziko's memoir is a fragmented story with lots of distractions, but these are mainly her intellectual reflections on certain events which are more or less related to the gulag experience. Switching back and forth to her life in camp, she discusses almost every political or philosophical issue she finds important. For instance, the memoir starts with the detailed description of the deportation process (Etap), unexpectedly shifting to an analysis of the "bloody politics" of Russia. Hence, from the very beginning, the author positions herself as an anti-Bolshevik and anti-imperialist thinker. Further on, from a philosophical, ethical and even literary perspective she discusses "human nature", the challenges of dehumanization in camps, gives a brilliant critical analysis of the prison system and its evil in the Soviet empire and even extends her discussion to the evaluation of international politics – at the interplay of great powers harshly criticizing both Hitler and Stalin, calling the latter "a big traitor of the world's progressive democracy".[15]

Throughout the incoherent narrative of this traumatized survivor one can still recognize an intelligent woman with brilliant analytical skills and advanced political thinking. For this reason, her memoir cannot be seen only through the trauma perspective, but also through her consistent attempts to rebuild, reconstruct and even rehabilitate herself as an intellectual. Her efforts become more comprehensible if we take into account the general context of the gulag itself – labor camps were to a large extent a corporal experience, with heavy and intensive physical work, with constant hunger, cold, filth and humiliation. With the struggle for everyday survival occupying so much time, there was no space left for "spiritual" insights or any kind of intellectual life which she later retrieved through writing her memoir as a survivor.

Women and Hierarchies in Gulags

Reconstructing herself as an intellectual is not done only through intellectual reflections in Kavtaradze's memoir – it is also produced by drawing special lines with other prisoners, for instance, with urkas – criminal inmates and with the "wives" - women married to party, military or intelligentsia elite, who were imprisoned and exiled mainly during 1937-38 under a special decree, as they were considered the family members of "traitors of homeland". Similar to other intellectuals, Liziko Kavtaradze creates these boundaries first and foremost by positioning herself as a political prisoner.

It is noteworthy that the early Bolshevik state recognized only three categories of criminals: common, political and counterrevolutionaries. Political criminals had many advantages but by 1930 all their privileges were altogether abolished[16] after which political prisoners found themselves in a very vulnerable position. As Liziko recalls:

> In Soviet Russia of the 1920s we, the political prisoners, had different living conditions. Forced labor was not imposed on us… We had books, all kinds of periodicals, separate "politcells", better food, right to correspondence and take long walks… and many other advantages. [17]

According to her, no prison reform took place in the Soviet state, which, in turn, increased the rates of crimes and violence. In the beginning political prisoners could maintain status quo by paying high prices - sometimes with their own lives[18] but from 1937 onwards, the situation drastically changed. Most of the political inmates were eliminated, "traditions were abolished and all the prisoners had to live the same regime". Liziko states that:

> It was a barbaric act of Bolshevism to equal political prisoners and criminals… Soviet penitentiaries completely abolished [our] unwritten rights and threw [us] in the mouth of the legions of Urkas.[19]

As a political prisoner from the late 1920s, she was well experienced in all her privileges which were hard to lose. From 1937, like many other "politicals", she had to navigate within new, highly challenging hierarchies, where common criminals – urkas appeared to be on the top.

Urkas: Controversial Feelings and Blurred Boundaries

> You cannot be vulnerable with an urka. You don't have to argue with her- she will win. Everything is acceptable for her. If you lose, she will remember it and make fun of it. Self-confidence is the best weapon, you have to be calm, non-hesitant... If she does not frighten you, then she becomes frightened herself. Like every coward, she is rude and impudent.[20]

This is how Liziko describes the relationship to a common criminal inmate. As she is an experienced prisoner, she is well aware how to navigate through the complicated hierarchies of the camp system. For instance, when she arrives in one of the pre-gulag prisons full of all kinds of inmates, what she does first is to take a sit on her own bundle, to take out a cigarette and smoke. When the whole cell starts asking for one, she takes a bunch out and throws them around keeping only two cigarettes for herself. The cell is impressed with her self-confidence and calmness; criminals realize that she is not one that can be put down easily.

The hierarchy among the inmates is visible in the cell. As the author mentions, "declassed scums" dominate the space and dwell on the upper cell beds whereas "intelligentsia" takes the prison floor "as sheep among the "wolves" and then continues by saying that "antagonism among the prison floor and the cell beds was the hypertrophic reflection of the spirit and power relations of the outside world". [21]

She also knows well how to gain the trust and sympathy of the criminal inmates. She gives one of the urkas her bundle to keep and later finds her place "up", nearby the window, where it is too cold but she can afford it as she managed to keep her coat and hat. Urkas take her bundle as "a deed" and call her auntie. [22]

Urkas, similar to many other political prisoners are "polluted bodies" for her too; they "murmur like worms". In order to gain their trust, she breaks physical boundaries with them but later she has "to pay" for it.

> Friendship with urkas does not go in vain. All my head itches, I take the comb. Timofeeva [another political prisoner] helps me armed with her glasses.

There are some cases when urkas even share their past histories with her. "They tell me how they ended up here, in this life. It is their favorite fairy tale", remarks Kavtaradze, as criminal women depict their past as

something they wished they had had rather than the one they had actually lived, believing their own false stories.

It is mostly disgust that Kavataradze experiences towards criminal inmates but she is not coherent in this feeling either.

> They are either degenerates or mostly talented hyperactive people with high soul energy. Their biographies rest on their resistances to families, to society. The power that cannot find its creative way to be expressed destroys everything, including its own self. Hunger and the prison made most of them dangerous recidivists. Millions of young people became the victim of the Soviet prison and terror.[23]

In the end, it seems that she can at least partly free herself form the disgust of criminal inmates, drawing a rational conclusion that neither urkas, nor generally "human nature" have to be blamed for the evil and misdeeds of labor camps, but rather the Soviet totalitarian system itself.

Bonds with Other Political Prisoners

Gulag was not merely a place of hierarchies and power relations. It also made room for close emotional (and sometimes sexual) bonds and friendships among women. According to Kavtaradze's memoir, these bonds apparently were developed mainly along the class lines. For instance, "politicals" befriended only political inmates.

In a pre-gulag cell Liziko joins other political prisoners: Timofeeva, Grevenitz and Krukowska. It is noteworthy that their boding develops through the intensive scholarly disputes they immediately start after introducing themselves to each other. The author gives a very detailed description of their extended intellectual talks about revolution, reforms, war, capitalism, socialism and totalitarianism, political and economic effects of industrialization, etc.

Liziko expresses special sympathy towards a Polish political prisoner named Nika Krukowska. She admires Nika's deep intellectual insights and also fancies her because of her ethnicity. She mentions some other Polish women as well, in a very positive and respectful manner, and feels huge solidarity towards them, regarding their situation as similar to that in Georgia, considering Poland to be a victim of Russian (and Soviet) empire.

But lives in camps were not peaceful and predictable. Due to many reasons the prisoners were moved from camp to camp and one never knew where and how she would carry on. It also meant the separation from dear friends. According to Liziko, this separation was the hardest part of the gulag life. It was very difficult for her to break up with Krukowska whom she could not find later after her release and rehabilitation.

Wives as "Others"

In 1937 a new category of criminals appeared – the wives of the traitors of the motherland. They were mostly wives but, in some cases, also sisters or daughters of imprisoned or shot men - party, military or intelligentsia elite. The logic behind their arrests was that family members of the traitors could not have been unaware of the "bad deeds" of their husbands and they had to be punished for not reporting.

Even though they were mostly elite women, political prisoners still despised them. For instance, one of Liziko's friends, also a political prisoner, calls the wives "vanyuchki" – the stinking. The author herself compares them to a specific insect that issues a heavy smell to protect itself when sensing danger.

"Politicals" found "wives" to be conformists to the Soviet regime. For Liziko, the main dividing line also corresponds to the intellectual background:

> They [the wives] take no interest in anything – neither in a human being, nor in the outside world towards which we still strive. I don't know how to explain it – indifference of a philistine or detachment of a tortured, exhausted person. [unlike them] we met the new ones [the prisoners] enthusiastically, listened to them passionately, took care of them in every detail. We [the political prisoners] searched, doubted, thought, discussed - always keen to follow and feel the pulse of life.[24]

It seems there was a "counter-attitude" from the side of "wives" as well. For instance, during the deportation, the author meets an "aristocrat's wife" for whom all the other inmates, including political prisoners, were "worthless".

According to Shapovalov, most of the wives saw themselves as innocent victims and believed that their arrest was a mistake. With rare exceptions,

they obeyed the camp rules without questioning them and tried to prove they were worthy members of the Soviet society. They did what they could to win back the trust of the Soviet state.[25] Thus, political prisoners blamed them for conformism, whereas "wives" viewed "politicals" as guilty of crimes against the state. Apparently, this made it almost impossible to create any kind of bonding between "politicals" and "wives".

Conclusion

Liziko Kavataradze's memoir is a kind of self-hagiography where the survivor first and foremost constructs herself as an intellectual. She does it by writing from the perspective of a political prisoner defining (sometimes not that well-kept) boundaries with other inmates – mainly with criminals and "wives", thus giving a very good perspective of power relations and hierarchies within the camp system.

However, the main emphasis is on the need to reconstruct herself as a Georgian intellectual and work against the stigma of "enemy of the people" – the label with which many survivors struggled for a long time after their release. Therefore, this memoir can be interpreted as a successful medium for the rehabilitation and reintegration of the author at least in her late life, when she was proudly accepted and highly admired by the young leaders of the emerging national movement of Georgia.

NOTES

1 Irina Scherbakova, “Gulag Memory Map: Problems and Gaps” in *Laboratorium,* (7 (1). 2015):114.

2 The first anti-Soviet uprising in Tbilisi took place in March 1956, which actually was the strike against the new government of Nikita Khrushchev and its anti-Stalinist propaganda politics.

3 Anton Vacharadze, “Assessment of the Openness of State Archives in Georgia”, Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, 2018.

4 According to the data from the Soviet Past Research Laboratory, at least 80,000 Georgian citizens were arrested by the KGB in 1921-1991. Around 20,000 were shot during 1921-1951 and 11,000 – during the terror of 1937-38.

5 Darejan Javakhishvili, *totalitaruli represiebit gamowvveuli fsiqosocialuri tramvis gavlena da taobatashorisi gadacema saqartvelos magaitze,* Ilia State University, 2017:233.

6 Leena Kurvet-Kaosaar, “Voicing Trauma in Deportation Narratives of Baltic Women” in *Haunted Narratives: Life Writing in an Age of Trauma,* University of Toronto, 2013:133.

7 Among them South Caucasus Regional Office of Heinrich Boell Foundation, Institute for Development of Freedom and Information (IDFI) and Soviet Past Research Laboratory (Sovlab) are notable.

8 Collection of the oral histories “Portraits of the Prisoners of “Alzhir”: History of Stalinism” published in 2008 by South Caucasus Regional Office of Heinrich Boell Foundation is one of the first and a remarkable publication on this topic.

9 Giorgi Maisuradze, “aq vdgavar da sxvanairad ar zalmizs” in *28 celi gulagshi,* Liziko Kavtarade, 2008:27.

10 Ibid. p.30.

11 Ann Applebaum, *Gulag: A History,* Anchor Books, New York, 2003.

12 Leena Kurvet-Kaossar, “Creating a Habitable Everyday in Estonian Women’s Diaries of the Repressions of Stalinist Regime” in *The Unspeakable: Narratives of Trauma,* Stroinska, Cechetto, Szymanski (eds.) PL Academic Research, Frankfurt am Main, 2014:155.

13 Liziko Kavtaradze, *28 celi gulgashi,* Publishing House Pegas, 2008.

14 Ibid. p.129.

15 Ibid. p. 130.

16 Veronika Shapovalov, *Remembering the Darkness: Women in Soviet Prisons,* Rowman& Littlefield, 2001.

17 Liziko Kavtaradze, *28 celi gulgashi,* Publishing House Pegas, 2008:101.

18 Ibid. p.102.

19 Ibid. p. 79.

20 Ibid. p. 76.

[21] Ibid. p. 79.
[22] Ibid. p. 88.
[23] Ibid. p. 126.
[24] Ibid. p. 148.
[25] Veronica Shapovalov, *Remembering the Darkness: Women in Soviet Prisons,* Rowman& Littlefield, 2001.

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