

Jean Lévesque

Alain Blum, Marta Craveri, and Valérie Nivelon, eds. *Déportés en URSS: Récits d'Européens au goulag*. Paris: Éditions Autrement, 2012. 311 pp. + CD. ISBN 978-2-7467-3146-2.

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This collection brings together the accounts of Europeans deported to the Soviet Gulag, understood both as labor camps and forced relocation settlements. It is the result of a wonderful multimedia project that draws on the expertise of a dozen scholars from eight countries. Thanks to their work, we have the testimony of more than 160 individuals who were victims of the Soviet practice of forced deportation from 1939 to 1950. The project is multimedia in that it stems from a Radio France Internationale series that presented the interviews of deportees and an outstanding website. The latter allows the general public to trace the experience of deportees with the help of excerpts from filmed interviews, personal papers like photographs and diaries, as well as maps and official documents. This allows viewers to appreciate the individual experiences of deportees in their wider historical context. The volume under review is a companion to the radio series.

As a pedagogical resource and a medium to promote better public understanding of this historical question, the website is first in its class. To anyone teaching the Stalinist period or any topic linked to forced deportations in the twentieth century, the website, *European Memories of the Gulag* (museum.gulagmemories.eu), will be of great service, and it is easily one of the best multimedia experiments I have encountered, like the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University (www.gulaghistory.org) or the Moscow-based Memorial Society (www.memo.ru/museum), despite the fact that they have their own objectives. It is well documented, includes many photographs, and is easy to navigate. Yet it includes three or four times more narratives than contained in the companion volume under review here, and users can choose to follow a life story summarized by a quote from the interviewee, like the Lithuanian Antanas Seinkalis who states sarcastically: “Thanks to Stalin, I visited the USSR!”

As for the companion volume per se, its purpose is the same as the general project: to convey the experience of deportation to the general public by bringing scholarly guidance to a multimedia presentation. The general tone of the volume, the moderate use of specialized jargon and literature, the emphasis on the narrated experiences, and, perhaps most importantly, the series (*Mémoires/Histoires*) in which the volume is published testify to this scholarly endeavor in popularization. The book provides a selection of the accounts hosted on the website, along with the original recordings from the radio series on CD-ROM with a French trans-

lation. The result is a journey into human lives broken and recast by a Stalin-era experience that affected close to a million Europeans, alongside millions of Soviet citizens.

Since the book is destined for a wide public, the introduction is fairly short and is not overly burdened by historiographical debates. It provides the context for the interviews and explains the process, which took up to three years, which gathered over 160 accounts. A few notions such as life construction are subtly brought in to play. The editors' intention is to present the experience of deportation as a wide-ranging phenomenon and to show how many deportees' trajectories intersected. Equally important, it provides clear and meaningful examples of the ways deportation profoundly shaped its victims, sometimes radically altering their lives by moving them to distant parts of the Soviet Union where they had to adapt to stark new conditions. They were marked with a social stigma that would hinder their return home. In a certain way, deportation forced many into a Soviet mold, one that otherwise they would have been reluctant to adopt.

The basics of Gulag history are provided, including the differences between types of forced relocation, but without delving into the intentions of the Stalinist state that carried them out. The collection concludes with a chronology of the Gulag, a glossary, and a short bibliography of scholarly works, memoirs, and websites devoted to the deportation experience. Yet it is the individual stories that explain the human impact of forced deportation.

The book is divided according to thematic sections, like environment, labor, childhood, and community life. There are 11 chapters, each one organized around an individual's account, often crossed with that of another person from the same national or ethnic origin, except for a few chapters, including the last two. These include the story of the Lithuanian-born peasant Rimgaudas Ruzgys, who could not return home after being liberated from the Gulag. There is also the incredible story of Bohdan Klimtchak, the last Ukrainian nationalist liberated from the penitentiary system in 1990, after a life of resistance to the Soviet system and to the forced Russification it imposed on many non-Russian nationalities.

The majority of the accounts come from Poles and Balts who represent more than half of the contributors. The collection begins with the story of a Ruthenian peasant, Jan Bohdan, who along with four local comrades attempted to cross the Soviet border in 1939 as they fled the invading Hungarian army. He described how his view of the Soviet Union was filtered through rose-tinted glasses. This owed much to tales of the Czech Legion that was detained in Bolshevik Russia and its fight to establish an independent Czechoslovakia. While this case from the borderlands may not be easy for the general reader to grasp, it makes for an interesting introductory chapter. It is followed by stories of Poles from what was considered in interwar Poland to be the "Eastern marches," or the ethnically mixed Eastern borderlands of the new Polish state. Some of these accounts deal with their virtual transplantation into Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia as a form of colonization and Polonization of these areas. They would become obvious targets when the Soviet Union annexed the areas following the Hitler-

Stalin pact. There are also two fascinating reminiscences, from Polish and Lithuanian Jews who were deported in 1939 on the basis of their "bourgeois origins." There is also the case of Ecaterina Szas, a young Saxon (German) from Transylvania who was expelled to the Soviet Union by the Romanian authorities in 1944 and is probably the last witness to this lesser-known episode of wartime and postwar ethnic cleansing (Naimark 2001). It is difficult not to mention the deportation of two Hungarians, the young orphan Klara Hartmann and the Benedictine monk Karoly Placid Oloffson. The latter was a German linguist by training who fell victim to the early postwar purge of Hungarian elites and intellectuals potentially harmful to the new socialist regime.

All these accounts stress the important variations in the way deportees were treated and the conditions to be found in the camps. Some were sent to collective and state farms, others to mines, and yet others to lumber camps in the North or to labor camps. Many experienced multiple camps and are able to draw revealing comparisons. Relationships with locals also varied greatly and were marked by suspicions, overt hostility, and solidarity. All the deportees displayed a stunning capacity for adaptation, sometimes to the point of their deep integration into local society and the decision to stay after their status was "normalized" after Joseph Stalin's death.

To anyone teaching this history, the volume, along with the interviews from the CD-ROM and the remarkable resources available on the website in English, French, Polish, and Russian, provides a welcome pedagogical tool for any class dealing with the history of the Soviet Union or state-led repression in the twentieth century. It should make non-Francophones jealously await its translation.

In spite of the volume's numerous outstanding qualities it nonetheless raises a few questions. First, the notions of "Europe" and "European" need clarification, as almost all the deportees interviewed come from countries that now form the European Union, with the noticeable exception of the Ukrainian Bohdan Klimtchak. Second, when Soviet authorities deported citizens from newly annexed territories, they were engaged in social engineering. They focused on groups of the population that they perceived as potentially hostile and practiced something close to ethnic cleansing when social and political categories overlapped with ethnic ones. Was it so with citizens from outside of newly annexed areas? And if it was so, did it change anything about the conditions of relocation? It is implied that origins did not affect much the treatment of deportees, but this should be made clearer especially for a wide readership. The website contains narratives of Soviet citizens that can provide some basis for comparison, but the companion volume does not. This leads also to another question, that of the state's political objectives behind these waves of deportation that varied from one campaign to another and from one region to another. Finally, will the general public grasp the nuances between life in a formal Gulag labor camp and special resettlement villages? Perhaps not, but the volume under review will do much to spark interest among the general public for these tragic episodes of population management that affected millions of Europeans.

REFERENCES

Naimark, Norman M. 2001. *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.